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J.-K. Huysmans

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Western Kentucky University

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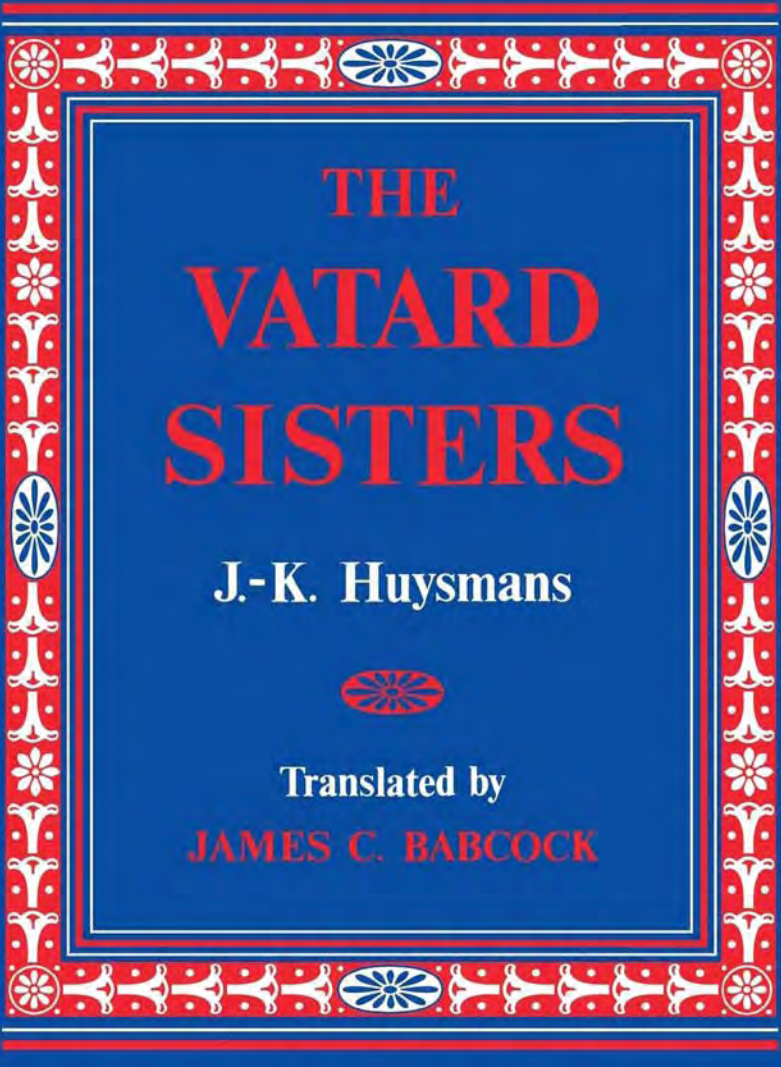
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THE
VATARD
SISTERS

J.-K. Huysmans



Translated by
JAMES C. BABCOCK

STUDIES IN ROMANCE LANGUAGES: 26

John E. Keller, *Editor*

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THE
VATARD SISTERS

J.-K. Huysmans

Translated by James C. Babcock

THE UNIVERSITY PRESS OF KENTUCKY

To professor Carl R. Phillips of the French faculty
at Vanderbilt University for his generous help and
encouragement during my first encounters with the
works of J.-K. Huysmans.

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Preface

My intent in this translation has been to present an accurate, readable English version of the French text, and, at the same time, to preserve something of the character and style of the original text. For this reason, in cases where problems of syntax and vocabulary make an English rendering less satisfying than one might have hoped, I have deliberately opted for the more literal approach, feeling it important to preserve, as much as possible, the weight of Huysmans' hand.

The French text used for this translation was that from the Crès edition of Huysmans' *Œuvres complètes* (1928-34) as reprinted by Slatkine Reprints at Geneva in 1972.

In extending thanks to all those who have assisted me in my efforts with this translation, I wish first of all to mention my family, my wife Nancy and our two children, Jimmy and Melanie, all of whom have been a very special source of strength and inspiration. In addition, I wish to make special mention of Western Kentucky University for its support and assistance over a period of years, including the use of the resources of the Margie Helm library, the help of Mrs. Elizabeth Cossey of the library staff, and the granting of release time and a sabbatical leave. My thanks also to Vanderbilt University for the use of the resources of its Joint Universities library. Finally, I wish to express my appreciation for the support and encouragement offered by my colleagues and associates here in the Department of Foreign Languages at Western Kentucky University.

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Introduction

Charles-Marie-Georges Huysmans was born of bourgeois parents in Paris on February 5, 1848. His father was of Dutch origin, and when the son began writing, he chose to use a Dutch equivalent of his Christian names, signing himself Joris-Karl Huysmans, or J.-K. Huysmans.

Huysmans' first literary contacts of any importance were made in Paris during the early 1870s at the "Dîners du Boeuf nature." At these gatherings he met and exchanged ideas with a small group of aspiring young French poets. The efforts of this short-lived coterie revolved around a single term—"modernité"—which for them took on the meaning of an attempt to capture something of the reality of the age, to form a verbal portrait of the contemporary world. This portrait, however, they generally limited to one small segment of their world—Paris and, in particular, to only the more seamy, less well-known parts of the city. Paul Bourget, a participant in the "Dîners du Boeuf nature," outlined the group's goals and aspirations in a long poem entitled *Edel*, which remains the group's most significant poetic contribution. Huysmans' own efforts resulted in *Le Drageoir aux épices*, a mediocre collection of prose poems, which appeared in October 1874.

The failure of *Le Drageoir aux épices* to attract significant critical acclaim doubtless contributed to Huysmans' move from poetry to the novel. He was particularly struck by the novels of Flaubert and the Goncourt brothers. However, in 1875, with the controversy over Zola's novels beginning to intensify, it is not surprising to find Huysmans' attention turning to the *Rougon-Macquart* and Naturalism.¹ Although Huysmans did not meet Zola until the spring of 1876,² by the time of the publication of *L'Assommoir* a year later, he was one of Zola's most ardent and vociferous supporters.³

For Huysmans, the linking of his earlier goals and aspirations to those of Zola's new school was a simple and straightforward matter.⁴ In

1877, in his remarks on Zola and *L'Assommoir*, Huysmans noted that "the supreme goal of any artist," be he painter, writer, or whatever, should be simply "truth" and "life" (*O.c.* 2:191), precisely the focus his work had taken under the flag of "modernité" as evidenced by various pieces in *Le Drageoir aux épices*, such as "La Rive gauche" and the like. On another occasion he was to refer to Naturalism's greatest single contribution to literature as being "to situate living persons in real milieus" (*O.c.* 7:vii). As early as 1879, the year in which *The Vatarad Sisters* (*Les Soeurs Vatarad*) was published, Huysmans defined his own art in terms that give evidence of his own acceptance of such goals: "I portray what I see, what I feel, what I have experienced, writing the best I can, and that's all" (*O.c.* 2:9).

So it is that, after the failure of *Le Drageoir aux épices*, Huysmans turned to the novel and Naturalism, and the world around him—in particular the physical reality of contemporary Paris—became the focus of his literary efforts.

His first novel, *Marthe, histoire d'une fille* (1876), depicts the dismal fate of a Parisian prostitute. Huysmans himself later criticized *Marthe* as being "a first work, curious and stirring, but somehow lacking, insufficiently personal."⁵ What is lacking in *Marthe* is this emphasis on descriptions of the physical world, which are limited to several minor efforts depicting the brothel, the Théâtre Bobino, and the Rue de Lourcine.

It was not until *The Vatarad Sisters* (1879), his second novel, that Huysmans gave full vent to his artistic impulses. In his opinion, this "lewd but exact slice-of-life portrait of the life of women bookbinders" represented his first typical work, the novel in which his personality was felt for the first time (*En Marge.* 56).

The principal importance of *The Vatarad Sisters* lies in the revelation of this precisely observed series of sketches, which bring to life the world of Céline and Désirée Vatarad. These sketches point out something about the early stages of Huysmans' development as a writer and show the essential character of Naturalism as first accepted by Huysmans, a "fervent admirer and devoted friend" of Zola.

It is evident in *The Vatarad Sisters* that Huysmans' Naturalism has none of the emphasis of Zola's scientific experiment. Heredity, genetics, emphasis on a deterministic view of life, these elements of Zola's Naturalism play no role in *The Vatarad Sisters*.

Two years earlier, in his defense of Zola and *L'Assommoir*,

Huysmans had neatly sidestepped the question of Zola's scientific pretensions, revealing even then his lack of interest in this aspect of Naturalism. "In truth, all that matters very little to me," was his terse comment (*O.c.* 2:168).

What he had found interesting in *L'Assommoir* were Zola's descriptions of Paris, which were, he felt, "the first [in a French novel] in which life swarms and teems with like intensity" (*O.c.* 2:189). Huysmans himself already viewed the esthetic goals of the Naturalists as centering primarily on such descriptions:

We [Naturalists] are men who believe that a writer . . . must be a man of his time. We are artists constantly seeking out "modernité." . . . We go to the street, to the living, teeming street. . . . We want to try to erect flesh and blood characters, characters speaking the language they were taught, that is to say, living, breathing characters. . . . Being given a man and a woman as subjects of study, we want to make them act in a milieu which we have observed and carefully rendered in minute detail. (*O.c.* 2:162-63)

Interestingly enough, Huysmans inserted into *The Vatarad Sisters* itself statements that, even though they are made in reference to another medium, clearly support the obvious emphasis he now placed on such descriptions. One of the characters in the novel is an artist-painter named Cyprien Tibaille, Céline Vatarad's lover. Cyprien's views on art differ radically from the accepted norm, and this causes his paintings of Paris and its denizens to be turned down by reputable Parisian art shows. Cyprien, it is explained, "understood only the modern. Caring little about the cast-off clothing of old periods, he asserted that a painter ought to render only that which he was able to visit and see" (*O.c.* 3:159). "His sole ideal was to create a living and true work" (*O.c.* 3:162). These remarks parallel very closely Huysmans' own statement of goals quoted above.

The goals and efforts of Cyprien, as described in *The Vatarad Sisters*, are remarkably similar to those of the painter Jean-François Raffaëli (1850-1924), whose works Huysmans came to admire immensely about this time. In *Certains* (1889) Huysmans praised Raffaëli as the "painter of suburban landscapes whose plaintive barrenness and doleful joys he alone has captured" (*O.c.* 10:3). In his article on the "Exposition des Indépendants en 1880" Huysmans referred to Raffaëli as "the artist . . . who will have rendered the melancholy grandeur of anemic sites lying beneath the infinity of the heavens; here then finally is expressed

that poignant note of the emptiness and of the plaintive delights of our suburban landscapes (*O.c.* 6:117). Here we see clearly expressed, Huysmans' sensitivity and real preference for this type of subject matter. Later in the same article, his attempts to justify Raffaëlli's choice of such subject material for his paintings become, in fact, an assertion of the validity of his own preoccupation, and that of the other Naturalists, with similar subject material in the novel. Huysmans noted:

There is no "grand" Nature any more than there is an "average" or "lesser" Nature. Nature is as interesting to describe when it is withering and losing its leaves as when it is bursting with blossoms and flourishing in full sunlight. No site is more noble than another. No countryside is to be neglected, no flower remain unpicked, whether it blossoms in the artificial heat of a greenhouse and is as enticing as reddened lips or whether it has sprung forth with great difficulty through the crust of a rubbish pile and blooms, sickly and pale, in an airless garden of the capital. . . . The two contrary poles of the Parisian landscape, the manicured square of Monceau Park and the empty lots of Montmartre and the Gobelins are delightful, each in its own manner. (*O.c.* 6:118-19)

In *The Vatarad Sisters* Cyprien's efforts as a landscape painter are described in very similar terms:

For a brief time he [Cyprien] had . . . been associated with some prominent landscape artists. However, his theories had soon brought cries of distress from them. His paintings of railroad crossings, gardens along the Rue de la Chine, all the sickly, shabby locales which appealed to him, had disgraced him in their eyes. The day he declared that the pitiful spectacle of gillyflowers drying in a pot seemed more interesting to him than the sun-drenched laughter of roses blossoming in an open field, he caused reputable studios to close their doors to his works. (*O.c.* 3:160)

Something of this predilection for the melancholy and plaintive delights of contemporary life, this turning toward a "lesser Nature," is likewise evident in Cyprien's approach to painting women. Once again his views resemble those of another contemporary painter, Forain, whose efforts are discussed in a number of articles written by Huysmans about this time.

Instead of "the faultless forms of so-called nude paintings, with the model lying snake-like on a sofa or standing with one leg slightly bent, her complexion creamy and smooth, her chest bulging with the round

mounds of her pink-tipped breasts" (*O.c.* 3:162), Cyprien preferred to depict real women with all their defects, in unaffected poses, in the light of a natural setting.

He did not really care for nudes, preferring instead the innocently salacious postures of Parisian girls. He especially liked rendering prostitutes in the places where they abound: yawning in the evening in front of a glass of beer at a concert-hall; on the prowl at a café table; out hunting in the streets, laughing full-tilt over little nothings, making themselves idle in order not to scare away the timid, uninterested and caressing in order to better swallow them up, swearing and yelling in jealousy or drunkenness, their bloated faces raised in the air. (*O.c.* 3:162)

In his article on the "Exposition des Indépendants en 1880," Huysmans remarked:

[The prostitute] has found in [Forain] her true master because no painter has studied her more closely or more ably captured her impudent laughter, her provocative eyes, her shrewish air; no painter has better understood the pleasant caprices of her dress, with her enormous, jutting breasts, match stick arms, slender waist, her bust bulging against the constraint of the armor compressing and compacting the flesh in one area in order to distend and increase it in another.

Whether rich and successful or poor and needy, a tart with a long trailing dress or a bareheaded gadabout, he has depicted them all with the same dexterity, the same boldness. (*O.c.* 6:125)

Similarly, in *Certains* (1889) Huysmans noted:

Mr. Forain has wished to do what le Guys, who was made famous by Baudelaire, had done for his era, namely to paint womankind wherever she asserts herself, in the places where she works. . . . Certainly, no one has captured the prostitute better than he in unforgettable water-colors; no painter has better rendered the tepid allure of her empty eyes, the polished ambush of her smile, the perfumed excitement of her breasts, the glorious rocking of her chignon, which has been peroxidized and soaked in potash. To sum up, no painter has more precisely expressed the delicious horror of her shrewish mask, her elegant ways of avenging the times she has done without, her poverty veiled beneath the gaiety of flounces and the glitter of her makeup. (*O.c.* 10:42-3)

In general, efforts to depict the contemporary era in Huysmans' fiction fall into four categories: descriptions of the physical world, specific references to the period, comments on society and its mores,

and finally, general observations on problems confronting man in the modern world. However, in his earliest novels these efforts center almost exclusively on descriptions of the physical world. These descriptions constitute the most direct and most objective of his efforts to portray the era since they render the physical reality of the period most palpably visible and are the least affected by any personal bias (which is not to say they do not reflect something of Huysmans' character and temperament).

In this respect, *The Vatarad Sisters* is the best of Huysmans' early novels because in it he has been most successful in translating into print the goals expressed above. Here we enter into the very real world of Céline and her sister Désirée, the bindery, the little shops and streets of the Montparnasse quarter, the street fair, the Folies-Bobino, the Belle Polonaise restaurant, the Café d'Apollon, the railyards: "landscapes à la Raffaëlli," which Lucien Descaves remarked are "as memorable at present as the models of this sort in *L'Assommoir*" (*O.c.* 3:339).

NOTES

1. R. Baldick, *The Life of J.-K. Huysmans* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955), p. 35.

2. P. Cogy, "Introduction" in J.-K. Huysmans, *Lettres inédites à Emile Zola* (Geneva: Droz, 1953), p. xiii.

3. In 1877 Huysmans defended Zola and *L'Assommoir* in a series of four articles which appeared in the March 11, 18, and 25, and April 1 issues of *L'Actualité* (Brussels).

4. This linking of "modernité" and Naturalism is reflected in a passage of Huysmans' third novel, *En Ménage*, published in 1881. (J.-K. Huysmans, *Œuvres complètes*, 18 vols. [Paris: Crés, 1928-34], 4:130. The Crés edition of Huysmans' *Œuvres complètes* will hereafter be listed simply as *O.c.*)

5. J.-K. Huysmans, *En Marge*, ed. L. Descaves (Paris: M. Lesage, 1927), p. 57.

THE
VATARD SISTERS

J.-K. Huysmans

TO EMILE ZOLA

His fervent admirer and devoted friend

J.-K. Huysmans

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Chapter One

A bell tolled. It was 2:00 A.M.

Deciding to play a silly little joke on her sleeping sister, Céline placed her index finger next to Désirée's nose and suddenly woke her. "How stupid!" Désirée cried out angrily, tenderly rubbing her injured nose, which smarted in pain from striking against the finger.

The women split their sides laughing.

"All right, ladies! Quiet, please!" prompted the woman supervisor.

A sort of continuous humming sound could be heard, pierced suddenly by a flute-like laugh. Then, backed by the rhythmic clamor of the presses, two voices burst out in a patriotic song. The men's voices thundered equally loudly, the raucous cough from their drink-ravaged throats cutting through the shrill cries of the girls:

He's dead, the soldier most stoic,
He has died for the Republic!

"All right, ladies! Quiet, please!" prompted the supervisor once more.

The roaring and gasping of the press grew louder. The soft whistling of the wooden knives skimming over the paper was countered by the grating noises of the trimmers. The racket of falling benches and of bundles being tossed onto tables echoed throughout the shop, intermingled with the vibrating noises of the gas jets and the murmur of the stove. Laughter burst out from one end of the workshop to the other, stopped briefly, then started up once more in a long rumble.

"Ladies, ladies! Quiet, please!" repeated the supervisor for the third time.

Scattered fits of loud coughing broke out around the room, accompanied by noisy outbursts of half-stifled laughter. Here and there,

hawking, the sound of throats being cleared, broke through the mounting storm.

In one corner, a lone, shrill peal of laughter skittered about, dancing above the tumult. There was a moment of silence. A cat in heat meowed loudly. Then a quavering voice arose, "Ladies, I have been patient with you all night."

This last remark touched off a chorus of boos, abruptly cut short by an explosive thunderclap created by the collapse of an enormous stamping machine. When it was ascertained that no one had been struck in the head by the stamping machine, the singing began once again.

"Come now, ladies! Ladies, quiet, please!" begged the supervisor.

In an immense crescendo the voices of forty women erupted, "We want our money! We want our money!" Their shouts drowned out the falsetto of one of the group whose shrill voice rose to the ceiling:

On my suff'rings pity cast,
Soldiers, keep on moving past!
Wine is served here in this inn (twice)
Only to our true Frenchmen!

Paper knives struck against table tops. Wine bottles dripping saliva and wine were passed around from mouth to mouth. The friends of a worker trying to get back to her seat crushed her stomach with the backs of their chairs. Another girl blew her nose with a trumpet blare. The neck of a wine bottle broke off on the edge of a table, spilling cheap wine on the dresses of two women who began to shout obscene insults at one another. Grabbing them by their hair coils and their tattered dresses, their companions held them apart, but they twisted and shouted, chins stuck out, teeth bared, slavering, hurling themselves at one another, arms in the air, the hollows of their armpits visible beneath their torn blouses.

Once more there was a moment of respite and nothing could be heard except the muffled tapping of the binding machines in the other room.

The voices of the bindery women sounded like broken toy flutes giving their last gasps.

Then one of them brought up that stupid question that was forever repeated whenever the conversation lagged: "Mlle Elisabeth, what do you want more than anything else?"

Getting up very stiffly, another woman went over and poked around

in the stove. Basking in the heat, she remained bent over in front of the flaming hole, eyelids fluttering, mouth gaping.

Meanwhile a raspy voice croaked:

But whether the branches
Are all white
Or the grass is growing green in the spring,
Rose, I love you
Always the same,
Because in love there is no season!

“Ladies, quiet. . .”

Seven o’clock sounded, interrupting the supervisor’s plea.

“Seven o’clock,” said a voice. “My man has hit the hay!”

Then the workshop took on new life, echoing a single cry: “We want our money! Our money!”

A man came out of a small office next to the main room and called out, “Mme Eugénie Voblat!” Cheers rang out.

“Say now! And not a moment too soon! We’re finally going to get our little handful!” Their chairs shrieked beneath the weight of their rumps as they applauded, eyes aglow.

The Voblat woman, a hideously fat mass of rolling, flabby flesh, crossed through the maze of tables, pushed and shoved at by a horde of trumpy females clinging to her blouse. Scratching haphazardly at their noses, she broke free and entered the office with her skirts coming loose. When she came out, she shouted, “Your turn, Angèle!”

The night came to an end. The women were worn out with fatigue, exhausted from naps taken with head on arms. Those who had received their money left. The distribution of pay continued at a slow pace. The owner called out a name, but another woman came up to him instead.

“Mme Teston.”

“She isn’t here.”

“Who’s going to take her money?”

A friend of the absent woman ran up, requesting she be given her own money at the same time. Then there were frantic complaints, stubborn arguments over a single *sou*. Certain of the women, exhibiting the tenacious stubbornness of savages, obstinately refused to understand. The sewing was far too poorly paid! The poor were not happy! The eternal request was, “Oh, sir! Couldn’t you give me some small change, some *sous*?” Sometimes a woman’s numbed fingers let fall what they held and then she would flatten herself on the floor, and with her

backside protruding, would sift through the dust with her hands in search of the fallen money.

The bindery women gathered together opposite the tank near the water machine. Some leaned against the stamping machines, their bobbing faces as white as sheets; others hung onto the press pillars, throwing themselves back, pinching themselves to wake up, their hiked-up skirts revealing dirty, badly worn-out stockings and hobnail boots. Off all alone in a corner where she was muttering to herself as she calculated her figures, making totals with a pencil wettened with saliva, the supervisor watched astounded as the girls collapsed onto the floor.

The workshop now resembled a morgue. A scattering of arms and legs was visible beneath the cart-full of petticoats, which seemed to have been dumped there in a pile. The distribution of pay continued at a slow pace. The remaining workers began undoing their shirt sleeves and smoothing their hair with spit. They laughed at the sight of a drowsy little girl who had strayed from her mother and was lying on her stomach in a pile of scraps, dabbling her little finger in the sticky mess of a bucket of glue.

Daylight broke. The supervisor put out the gaslights. Through windowpanes barred and spotted by streaming rains, a pale winter sun brought on a dawn of a sinister whiteness, which spread over the staggered clusters of women, lighting up their pallid cheeks and from time to time catching the flicker of a tongue tip brushing across the dirty corner of a mouth. Gradually the bindery women disappeared. Soon only two remained, a small girl suffering from an incurable toothache and a large hip-swaying type who was checking herself for bugs while sucking at a drop of blood seeping from her chapped lips.

Someone opened the transoms to let in some fresh air.

In the heavy mist hanging over the room an unbearable odor of oil and gas and the sweat from unwashed female privates, a strong smell not unlike that of goats kicking about in the sun, was mixed with the putrid smells of cooked pork and wine, the bitter stench of cat urine, the nauseous stink of toilets, the dull odor of wet paper and buckets of glue.

The supervisor went around straightening up the chairs thrown haphazardly on their sides and on their backs, with their legs in the air and intestines of blond straw rising up in corkscrew twirls or fleeing in strands through holes in their bellies. The jumble of tall stools she piled on stands.

Nine o'clock sounded.

The sun decided to come out, its red sphere darkening as it rose. The rays of sunshine became filled with dancing dust motes spiraling upward from the floor to the windowpanes. The sunlight jumped, started, splashing the floor and tables with broader flecks, lighting up the neck of a carafe and the belly of a bucket with a trembling sparkle, its red coal burning into the heart of a peony struggling to blossom in its pot of turbid water, before finally ending in a large golden wave on the piles of paper whose raw whiteness clashed with the soot on the walls.

Chapter Two

1

At the bindery works of Débonnaire & Co., a firm the supervisor liked to refer to as a sieve because of the constant turnover among its employees, four women were employed full-time. Apart from occasional escapades, these four worked quite regularly. Three of them were celibate, the first because she was too old, the second because she was too ugly, the third because she was young and not stupid. The fourth was not really promiscuous: she did change lovers every month, but never had more than one or two at a time. Mme Teston, an ugly old goat of fifty, was a tall, gaunt, whining woman with skinny legs, a large face, and ears like pot handles; Mme Voblat was a basket of tallow, a feast of flesh barely contained by her girdle staves, a stupid, gaping girl who laughed and clutched at her waist over everything—the meowing of a cat, the buzzing of a fly; and lastly, there were the Vatar sisters: Désirée, an urchin of fifteen, a brunette with large, pale eyes that were somewhat crossed, plump without being fat, attractive and clean; and Céline, the carouser, a big girl with clear eyes and hair the color of straw, a solid, vigorous girl whose blood raced and danced in her veins, a great minx who had run after men ever since the first onset of puberty.

Old lady Teston had worked for the Débonnaire firm for more than thirty years. The other three had cried and sucked there as babies while their mothers folded reams of paper with one hand and tended to them with the other. In addition to these four, about twenty others, young girls, some of them not yet in their teens, gathered together mornings at seven o'clock alongside the tables and departed, according to the season or the greater or lesser demand of the work, at six, seven, or even eight o'clock in the evening.

These twenty girls, changing every ten days, formed part of that

nomadic population, that group of women who work as bookbinders, a strange lot who yell out the most horrible swear-words at the top of their voices and treat each other in the crudest possible fashion, a very bizarre race of young women who scarcely ever seek ties outside their own world, who most commonly find sexual stimulation only in the breath of a drunk, a collection of female scoundrels blossoming, for the most part, in hovels, women who extinguished the first flames of their flesh at the age of fourteen behind the wall of a slaughterhouse or at the back of some alley.

They all detested one another and they all, men and women alike, understood one another like thieves at a fair when it came to deceiving the supervisors, but outside the shop, they scarcely ever got together except to exchange blows and scratches. Once the morning work began the sight of a late arrival barely able to drag herself to her place or still wearing heavy, black eyeshadow was cause for great hilarity, with everyone leaping about in rowdy abandon. If the owner, exasperated at seeing some great devil of a guy drunk as a Polack, bouncing from one pile to another, paid him off and fired him, that did not prevent the woman this drunk honored with his caresses and blows from getting up and leaving, dragging with her the whole group that took her side. This always provoked some booing from the other workers, punctuated by a scattering of doleful remarks from the older, more worldly-wise women who complained "Isn't she stupid to follow a man who beats her! I would get rid of him!" Ironically, the same older women would arrive the next day with a black eye or with marks on their faces and then energetically defend their own man when the others called him a thief and coward! Gossip was a way of life in the workshop. So and so was running around like a bitch in heat after a man who did not care at all about her. She whined all day long at her work and ended up tearing out the hair of the other woman who was dishonest enough to have stolen away her lover and tease enough to have put it up to her face. With all these little disputes embittered by stupidity, with all this hatred enflamed by contact with the male population, it was a miracle that ten or twelve of the same women remained at the end of several days. The Débonnaire sieve was not stoppered, like a stream of dirty water all its personnel of men and women rolled in waves to gush out through the hole of its doors into the street.

"What a bad lot!" said the foreman sententiously. He was an extremely ugly man of poor build, with a livid face pitted by smallpox

and eyebrows sprouting in bushy tufts around an empty eyesocket rolling milkily beneath a red eyelid.

"Scamps!" sighed the supervisor, a large angular female with small brown eyes like apple seeds and a mouth barred with formidable fangs. But the whole miserable lot, men and women alike, paid no attention to them! Monday the workshop was empty. Tuesday likewise, Wednesday beginning to fill, and Saturday beginning to empty once again. Apart from the supervisors, who were penny pinchers, and a poor old man who had drunk too much in his youth, ruining his stomach so that he was no longer able to drink, all the rest worked simply in order to have a few coins to spend. The women worked just enough to allow them to stuff themselves with fried potatoes and buy cheap jewelry. The men worked simply because it allowed them to put away great quantities of white wine in the morning and spend their afternoons lapping up liters of cheap red wine.

Such was the personnel at the firm of Débonnaire & Co. For the night shift another pile of women was recruited from those gathered at the exits of the workshops of other bookbinding firms. Ah! the supervisor had a lot to do on those long nights. The work had to be distributed. "Thanks a lot!" the girls would exclaim. "That kind is no good! That's not paid in advance! That's really hard work! That kind of paper breaks your fingernails!" And it was necessary to be continually pouring out coffee and brandy to satisfy their thirst. She had to keep watch to prevent them from jumping at each other's eyes and exchanging slaps. Completed work had to be marked down piece by piece. The full-time workers always wanted to be checked out before the rubbish hired for the night shift; then these others would become annoyed and complain that they should not be taken for worthless, worn-out bunglers!

When this swill had also been swept out, the supervisor sighed as she adjusted the straps of her large bonnet. Removing the speck encrusting her eye, she pushed her little bench under the table with her foot, and then gaily directed herself toward the office of the owner.

She stopped, surprised. Céline and Désirée were involved in a deep discussion. Désirée was asking to be paid by the hour instead of by the piece.

"Ha! You see," said the supervisor, "like me then!"

But Céline, who knew how to hold her own, began again, "Well, why not? My sister isn't a porter, only good for folding pages. She does the delicate jobs too, the sewing, and the rest. Since Monsieur put me on

hourly wages last week, why won't he give my sister the same salary he's giving me?" After long discussion, it was settled that Désirée would begin to receive twenty-five and a half centimes per hour. Pleased at the outcome of these negotiations, the two sisters bade farewell, giving a bump of their rears as a parting gesture. In the courtyard they went over to the water fountain to freshen up. Then, pushing and shoving and jumping up and down in order to warm themselves, they went off up the Rue du Dragon to Vaugirard.

Feeling very sluggish, Désirée dragged her feet, stopping in front of all the street stalls. Céline, whose nights of vagabondage had accustomed her to hunger pangs in the morning along with the chill in the back which makes a person shrug his shoulders and move more quickly, yelled at her, calling her lazy and soft.

The Rue de Sèvres extended unendingly with its religious orders, its abbeys, its homes for the sick and aged, its boarding houses for single girls. But what slowed Désirée's pace was not the cluster of cripples and bums crying pitifully with their hats held out while the church filled up, nor was it that starving mob who, with arms in slings and legs in bandages, piled up drunk and freezing in front of the Dames of Saint-Thomas of Villeneuve; it was those numerous shops, those countless devotional objects that filled the street.

Near the Jesuits, where teachers' horse teams pranced and snorted next to the rabble of dismounted drivers, who were idly lounging in pious poses in their uniform braid, there were colored statues of the Blessed Virgin, grave Madonnas suitable for mounting in niches, life-sized Christs with lilac stomachs and carmine fingertips, statues of Jesus in a blessing pose, with curly blond hair, arms in front, gracious and well dressed; on the lower counter monstrances, patens, and ciboriums lay in dazzling display with their gilt and mosaics; bizarre vigil lights, hearts in red glass mounted on bronze, lilies with pistils and stems made of copper, vases with JMs interlaced, and bouquets of roses made of white paper lay in piles on a shelf surrounding a small pink wax Redeemer frolicking in straw, squeezed like an old woman's plaything beneath a glass globe.

And all these shops spread out, diminishing in splendor as the street drew near the boulevard.

Here and there, alternating with these shops of religious articles, wine shops gaped open on the sidewalk, displaying varnished barrels along their walls and crimson grillwork in their windows. At that hour

they were crowded with tired-eyed drunks resting their elbows on the zinc counters, their wine-stained teeth flashing as they laughed at the young girls. Céline puffed out her skirt, smoothed her eyebrows, and turning, called to her sister who was daydreaming out loud in front of the display window of an herbalist, admiring amber necklaces, red-necked douches, rubber nipples, leather combs, powder puffs, tiny fine sponges shaped like almonds. Désirée pointed out some shaving brushes and elastic supporters to her sister, who was compressing her lips.

"Those are for men," said Céline, who began walking once again. But her sister, slowing down more and more, strolled along in front of the stuffed cat on display in the window of a shoe store. She left off her musings in front of the door of a laundry decked out with a tri-colored zinc flag to gape at the clothing racks displaying trousers edged in velvet, priced eight francs, complete outfits for small children in boxes labelled: "The Flashy One," "Jean-Bart," and "Lolo," scarlet carpenters' belts, stiped percales, soft twilled silks woven in the Batignolles, starched short-sleeved shirts, and ties decorated with thin stripes and polkadots.

"Oh! What beautiful shirts!" sighed Désirée. "These flutes are really stylish!"

"Oh, yes! Go on and look. But that's not for us, my girl. And yet to think that there are women who are not my equal who wear those things not only on Sundays but every blasted day of the week! If it isn't enough to drive you out of your mind when you think that while you're slaving away, prostitutes like Gamel's girl stuff themselves with oysters and wear lace underwear! She's ugly, that bird, and yet she does nothing but sleep and drink and eat like a hog and have a good time! It's enough to make you sick! Are you coming? What's that you're muttering? That I may act like her? Certainly, if I wanted, I could be like her."

"I know, I know," repeated Désirée. "Come on now, let me alone. You're hurting me with your fingernails and any way I don't know why you're angry with Virginia. She bought you some drinks last summer."

"So, I don't give a damn about her drinks!" exclaimed Céline, exasperated. But her anger suddenly shifted direction, focusing on a blockhead who had accidentally knocked his basket into her hair. She yelled harshly at the boy, who, after having retreated a reasonable distance, taunted her, slapping his thigh with an open hand, then with a fist, his thumb in the air.

She decided to ignore this obscenity and continued on her way. Désirée dragged her feet along the sidewalk, stopping in spite of her sister's prodding in front of some shops selling blessed candles. Her podgy finger left spots of condensation on the windowpanes as she pointed out the different items: fluted candles, round ones, plain ones, some skirted with fleur-de-lys-print paper, tapers of pale corkscrews of wax, refined sanctuary incense with directions written on the box. She remained there, half asleep or turning around, gazing without knowing why at the file of coaches, the pruned trees in the square, the ten-cent stores being swallowed up in a soft blue haze in the distance. Céline stamped her feet in rage. "Anatole is going to be mad," she said. "Please get yourself together and come on!"

As they proceeded up the sidewalk, exhausted, the religious prints along their route ran the gamut from the sublime to the ridiculous, gilded, fading, melting, renderings in the worst possible taste: engravings full of little boys on their knees, prostrate women, fluffy angels pointing to the heavens; *Mater Dolorosas* made according to the formula of Delaroche, eyes in tears and hands full of rays; children with lambs around their necks; crucifixes with a shell at the base to hold Holy Water; hearts of platinum, nickel-silver, silver-gilt; hearts pierced by swords, tops in flames and bottoms bleeding; hollow Mary Immaculates made of tallow wax and unglazed porcelain; St. Josephs badly molded and poorly glazed; lighted cribs; shaggy asses; a whole Judea of cardboard, a whole Nazareth of painted wood, a whole religion in imitation jewelry, lay spread out between wide-mouthed jars of powdery chocolates and old gumballs!

Désirée did not really wake up until they were in front of the former Home for the Incurable, where she pushed the knob of a water fountain, causing a gush of water to spit out into the pitcher held by a stone Egyptian, and splash a woman standing nearby from head to toe. The accident delighted Désirée and her eyes were alight with gaiety as she ran off to catch up with her sister at the Boulevard des Invalides.

The Rue de Sèvres continued, widening a little, opening onto the square like a funnel spout. Then, becoming the Rue Lecourbe, it flowed on, flanked at each turn by a huge low-class dive in a wide expanse of black ramshackle houses. The closer it approached the ramparts the more desolate the quarter became. This teeming street, the deserted boulevards running obliquely into it and then fleeing out of sight, the populace seething in the road, the women going out to wipe off the

sweating plaster in the corridors, the men taking it easy with their hands in their pockets, smoking Sultanas, the children rubbing their backsides in streams of water, all gave evidence of the deplorable wretchedness of the ancient suburbs, the endless desolation of pay-checks eroded by drinking and finished off by illnesses.

Not far from Ragache's the two sisters stopped in front of a small restaurant whose specials, plates of cauliflower and bowls of murky bouillon, sat on display between greenish windowpanes and white curtains. Céline opened the door with her shoulder and went straight up to a tall youth seated inside. This young man, wearing his hat flattened on the back of his head, was stirring up a potful of greasy dominos with a friend.

2

"Hey, now! And not any too soon," said Anatole. "The young lady has finally decided to show up. Let's hear your excuse. You know I don't like to be kept waiting by a woman."

"Please! Don't say another word! You've said enough. What are you drinking?"

Céline tried a gesture of indifference, which ended rather lamely in a look of submission and fear beneath Anatole's stare. Disconcerted, she stuttered, "I would like something hot. Is there any white wine on the stove, Mme Antoine?"

"Of course! I'll heat some for you. Should I prepare a glass for you too, Mlle Désirée?"

The younger girl nodded affirmatively. She was standing in front of the cast iron stove in the middle of the room. Not appearing to realize what she was doing, she scratched at the sheet metal of the stove lid with her fingernails as, somewhat unsteady on her feet, she looked with an indolent air at the copper knob of the stove pipe. The small restaurant was bare, some old smocks and a couple of hooded cloaks hanging on one wall, a double-stemmed salt shaker and a mustard jar with the point broken off its lid on a table at the back. At that hour old lady Antoine was bustling around busily in her kitchen in the rear, wiping up with her greasy rag the spluttering, nasty-smelling little bubbles of milk, swelling and popping atop the cast iron stove. Every ten minutes she returned to the dining area, wiping her constantly dripping nose, refilling the two men's glasses, furtively picking at the

sticky beads coating the bottle necks with a nailless finger. Anatole and his friend Colombel had been drinking like fish while waiting for the girls. When their game of dominos ended, Colombel arose, stretched, adjusted his pant legs, and began scraping his shoes on the floor tile in order to get rid of some of the crust of cigarettes and mud fouling them. Prancing around on one foot, he snapped, "Mlle Désirée, when are you going to let me court you?"

But Désirée scarcely heard him. Yawning so hard that tears flowed, she stretched her fingers and bent her knees. It was Céline, shamelessly kissing Anatole, who answered, "That's insulting! What do you have to offer? Your heart? Only people who have nothing else make offers like that! That's not good enough! You can go fly a kite!"

Colombel laughed through his unruly, thick beard. Anatole, much amused also, fondled Céline's breasts, exclaiming, "The whole works belong to papa!" Colombel came back, sat down, and once more mixed up the dominos. The door opened and two men, sporting their Sunday best, outfits suitable to escort middle-class girls for a glass of Campeche wine in a bar, entered. They were wearing flashy new clothes, striped pants with pieces sewn in the crotch, frock coats abandoned and repaired at the Temple, and string ties. They shook hands with everyone and made fun of Céline who, with her nose in her glass of hot wine, was nibbling on the lemon peel every time the slice came within reach of her lips. Sitting down facing one another across the table with a bottle and two glasses between them, they chatted with their heads together, speaking loud and clear, tapping one another on the arms as if to make themselves better understood.

"Well, now!" said Colombel. "Where are you two going today? You must be rich!"

"Well, friend, first we're going to pick up his blonde, and then we're going down to Pinel square to drink up a storm. And then, after that, we'll see."

"Hey, that's an idea!" exclaimed Anatole. "Let's go get a fried dish and some snails. How about it, Céline? Colombel and your sister can come with us." But the girls said no. They had to return home to prepare their father's meal. Anyway, they were too tired. Maybe some other time.

"Yes, there's no way," murmured Céline. "Nevertheless, it might have been nice." Leaning on her elbows, she was pensively contemplating a pinwheel attached to the wall. This pinwheel, featuring a wall-

paper couple embracing beneath a leafy bower, brought to mind the pleasures of nice parties, the slowly eaten fish stews, the morsels from which lovers take bites in the same place, the coffee and liquor they share from the same cup. Then one of the workers gave the mechanism a spin and the countryside became a blur, which cleared once again when it stopped spinning. Céline remained there daydreaming of walks lovers take together, strolls along the Seine, the flirting, the languid stares, the kisses shared from time to time in the thickets, all that happiness that finally ends up in arguments once they have crossed the fence.

"Well, then. Come on," said Anatole. "Standing there looking bored won't help anything. Are you coming or not?"

"I can't," repeated Céline.

"Too bad!" And while the young girls rubbed their eyes and got ready to return home, Columbel, who was very annoyed at seeing them leave, ordered several brandies. Tilting his head back he poured them down his swollen throat while the two sisters, limping along, returned home where they slept like logs, too tired even to undress.

Then old man Vatarad returned home, very exhilarated by the thought that the table would be set with a rare leg of lamb. The old man had spent the day at the house of his friend Tabuche, a carpenter whose first concern when he had become prosperous had been to get mad at his wife and build a wine cellar. Vatarad, playing the gallant, kissed his daughters and danced around his wife, whose belly resembled a large keg. Emptying his pipe on his thumbnail, he shot a long spurt of saliva into the ashes. Moistening his finger, he rubbed it on his pant leg to remove the pipe juice spotting it. Then he collapsed into an armchair, where he sat, blissfully content, legs spread wide, arms dangling.

Pierre-Séraphin Vatarad had married at a very early age. His wife was spirited in her good moments, lifeless at other times. All in all, he had been lucky. Eulalie was quite cantankerous and crotchety, but she was basically a hardy, simple soul. She had produced only two offspring, Céline and Désirée. Content to father girls, Vatarad had slackened his sexual demands to lessen the risk of having a boy. Basically, he had always been a quiet, careful man and might have been a perfect husband except for his complete indifference toward the thousand trivial tasks of daily life and his unyielding laziness about them. What he wanted was a peaceful, idle existence. He had been happy in the household, giving in to his wife's demands, answering, "Yes, mother" to

everything she said. As a consequence, she pampered him, letting him live from the few pennies she had inherited from her brother, a tanner who made sheepskin saddle blankets in the Saint-Marceau suburb. The few arguments that sometimes arose occurred only at night when they could not sleep. As they lay in bed in the dark with their eyes open they grew bitter. He suffered from rheumatism and she was already feeling the first attacks of a serious case of dropsy.

But two serious problems threatened this nice comfortable existence he was promising himself: his wife's illness and Céline's astonishing zest for chasing after men. For a moment he felt depressed, but quickly grew brighter. Désirée was old enough now to care for him and to replace her mother, and as for the other daughter, the best thing to do was to ignore her escapades. In any case, he had acted as a responsible father. He had reproached her, mentioning the courts and the dissoluteness of her way of life. But she had become angry and had upset the whole household, threatening to cause a real commotion if anyone bothered her again. Subsequently Vatarad had become very indulgent. In any event, his daughter's constant gabbing kept him amused in the evening after supper. He thought her very bright and playful. The vulgar expressions she brought in from the street, her dance-hall gestures, her laughter of a girl who knows life, reminded him of his youth and of a certain mistress he could have loved. At the time when he counted on marrying her off, Céline would have scared away any respectable suitor. If she wanted to live like a slut, he would rather have her cheerful and not nasty and mean like all those girls embittered by celibacy. As for Désirée, Vatarad would let her do as she wanted, provided she took care of his meals and did not desert the house once night fell. His wife, who sat glued in her easy chair, dull-witted and ill, offered him little in the way of companionship. The unfortunate woman lived in a constant daze without saying a word. What's more, she ruined his appetite with her air of perpetual distress and her manner of letting her stew grow cold in her dish.

That evening poor Eulalie sat like a lump, her stare annoying her husband. Désirée was asleep in a chair. Céline moved languidly from the stove to the window. The leg of lamb was overcooked. His daughters had never been in such a state. The elder, exhausted from her revels and a sleepless night of work in the bindery, had spilled the sauce and splattered herself with grease from head to toe while basting the roast with a trembling hand. The younger, who had gotten up only to

collapse once more on a chair, was snoring slowly, restless and shuddering, her nose nestled on her shoulder, her eyes closed. Vatarad smoked his pipe disconsolately. A burning odor was coming from the kitchen. Finally Désirée woke with a start. Rubbing her eyes briskly, she got up and began to set the table. The meal was strained. Very disgruntled, the father kept silent while his daughters ate distractedly, drumming their fingertips on their plates. When the dessert had been swallowed, it was the father's turn to drop off to sleep while the daughters came back to life.

Céline heated some water for coffee. At that moment the darkened sky rumbled and gusts of wind shook the house from top to bottom. Whirlwinds swept down the chimney, forcing smoke from the fire into the room. Suddenly all were on their feet, scurrying to open the windows.

"Damnation!" said Vatarad. "If this weather continues, the Testons won't come." He leaned his elbows on the window rail, enjoying the feeling of being inside, dry and protected, and not at all upset at the prospect of seeing others get wet. "The main thing is that they have left their house," he mused. "In any case, they ought to make an amusing spectacle in the street in weather like this!"

The rain grew in intensity, cutting the length of the street with its gray diagonals. Whirlwinds sailed across the slate roofs, shaking pieces of slate loose and causing them to fly into the air to break on the sidewalks below with a flat crack. From time to time, rain squalls sweeping across a cornice broke up, flying into a fine spray. They could hear the snapping of water on the windowpanes, the hiccup of streams, the mute complaints of blocked gutters, the roulade of overflowing drainpipes. Streaming down on the pavement, the shower persisted in its attack on the tiles, brightening up the faded ochre of the walls and staining them with darker blotches, sometimes pouring with the din of an avalanche, at other times crackling like food frying in a hot pan.

Vatarad was really beginning to be amused. He watched some passers-by scurrying along as fast as their legs could take them: women splashing about with their hair glued to their foreheads, their hats wilting; men running so fast their heels were hitting their backsides, their pants as stiff as boards, their coats glued to their hips, trying to cover their hats from which the gum was leaking. Then later, when all those unfortunates had disappeared and when the street was deserted, Vatarad took

delight in listening to the plaintive song of a drainspout, the retch of a badly soldered drainpipe.

At that moment, the Testons appeared in the distance, the wife with her dress raised to her knees, floundering through puddles, the husband bent over, shrunken beneath the rain, pulling his better half behind him. About this time Vatarad noticed a cast iron pipe that had developed several splits. Water escaping in white foam through these holes was making choppy waves, boiling out in soapy bubbles that spread like white roses. When all these bubbly flowers broke and flattened into a sheet of wretchedly filthy water, new ones blossomed only to shed their petals once more in an opaque spittle.

"If they come by on this sidewalk, that's going to be nice," Vatarad said to himself.

Failing to look ahead, the unfortunate couple walked straight into the cascade. With their eyes closed, they staggered along, blinded by the rain and deafened by the wind shaking the umbrella to which they were clinging. Grabbing one another by the arm, they hung on for dear life at each new gust, lowering their heads, splashing their socks, wiping their necks. As they sank into a lake of mud, they arrived at the curb and passed close by the pipe. Their umbrella bent and reverberated like a drum. The husband and wife both swore. Losing her shawl, the wife tucked her clothes up to her waist and wrestled with the flapping umbrella. A gust of wind cutting across the street at an angle shook the woman's curls and engulfed the umbrella. No longer sheltered by the umbrella, the husband received the whole deluge from the overflowing gutters right on top of his skull. Teston danced like an idiot beneath the shower, and his wife, exasperated, the strings of her bonnet whipping her cheeks, swore and cursed, chewing out the wind and the rain, calling her husband a good-for-nothing imbecile. Vatarad was splitting his sides with laughter when the couple knocked at the door.

"Ah! what horrible weather! What horrible weather!" exclaimed Teston's wife. Teston himself did not say a word. Standing there completely soaked, with water even up his nose, he was a lamentable and grotesque figure, his hair streaming water, his hat in rags, little puddles of dirty water squishing from his shoes with every step he took.

"Wait, Mme Teston," said Céline. "I'll go find you a housecoat and some slippers."

"And you, old man," offered Vatarad, "do you want an overcoat?"

But Teston declared that he did not need anything except something hot to drink. Huddled by one of the corners of the fireplace, he pulled out a checkered handkerchief and mopped his head. Angrily tearing off her hat, which had formerly been white and now resembled a grayish-brown rag that needed to be wrung out, his wife began to undress. Turning her back to the fireplace she looked in the mirror at her slender figure wrapped in a pile of underclothes. Thin as a rail, she was elongated like those endless barley-sugar candies that street urchins wearing fezzes fabricate by drawing them out on a rod equipped with small bells at suburban carnivals. The arch of her shoulders descended in a rapid slope down to her hips, which split apart her chemise and came back together in a small indistinct rear end held in by two long stays. Completely soaked from head to toe, she dried herself as best she could, revealing her rib cage in the process. Bundled up in one of Désirée's old nightgowns, she squatted on her haunches in front of the fire and unlaced the cords of her boots. The shoe polish was running and the shriveled leather stuck to her feet. She needed Vatar'd's help, so between two draws on his pipe, he pulled them off for her. She gave a cry of dismay when she saw the sorry state of her stockings. The whole end of her foot seemed to have been soaked in an ink bath, and the stain grew lighter or changed color the higher up her leg it went. Black became blackish-brown, blackish-brown turned to yellow. Near her instep the stain had enlarged but was only pale gray in color. The Teston woman slipped on some old mismatched shoes and, with her nose in her handkerchief and her body broken with weariness, sat watching the brightly burning fire which was spitting small broadsides of sparks amidst the tall flames.

A gentle warmth filled the room. The curtains had been drawn and Désirée had placed an old towel under the door to stop drafts. They were all overcome by a great sense of well-being, of lazy drowsiness. Désirée was preparing some hot wine in a pot and Vatar'd, very happy to think he would not be forced, like the Testons, to get up and run through the streets to return home, looked with visible satisfaction at his friend whose clothes and boots were emitting a smelly steam.

No one spoke. Vatar'd beamed his happiness. Old lady Teston was thinking about her ruined bonnet, her husband was thinking about his wife's murderous humor, Céline about her lover, her mother about nothing, and Désirée about the wine, which she had made too sweet.

Then their tongues loosened up. The men chatted together while the

women exchanged the latest gossip about their friends in the workshop.

Teston's wife pretended to be very pleased by the news that Désirée would be paid by the hour instead of by the piece now. Only she insinuated that if Désirée had been more persistent, she would have been able to work out an agreement for thirty centimes instead of twenty-five and a half. She was so insistent that Désirée, who was enchanted by her success that morning, became convinced that perhaps she had been stupid. In the end, her increased earnings no longer seemed quite so great after all and she lost some of her elation.

And while they chatted, Vatarid cried out, brandishing his pipe with each word, "A wife is a working man's happiness! That's my opinion." Then he spoke sadly of his friend Tabuche, who was separated from his wife. Now that he was sick, he sat all alone in his house like a poor dog. He had a whitlow on his finger. That is, as you are aware, a pretty bad infection, and he was going to be forced to have himself cared for by the nuns of Saint-Thomas on the Rue de Sèvres. They cured such afflictions without operating.

Old lady Teston had once known a man with a bad thumb infection. He had stuck his thumb into the rear of a frog. The further he stuck his thumb into the frog, the less his pain had become. He was cured now, but the frog was dead.

Vatarid did not think too much of this particular remedy. He considered it a joke, but the old lady swore on the head of her mother that she had this story first hand from the man involved.

The moral of this story was that it is always better not to call a doctor when one is sick. Tabuche was right to go to the Sisters. It's only for the poor that doctors lance infections of this sort. If they did not cure the rich without resorting to cutting them up, they would no longer have them as patients and would lose their practices.

Then Céline came up with the novel suggestion that families who are financially well off are happier than those with nothing.

Everyone agreed with her. After a short lull in the conversation, as if it could have some relationship to the infection of his friend Tabuche, Vatarid continued, "Today I ran into the Thomassins' former maid on the Rue de Rennes. She has a new job now in the house of an engineer and she said she pays six francs a bottle for his brandy."

"Six francs a bottle! That's not possible!" exclaimed Teston's wife.

"That's the way it is!" continued Vatarid, and he shook his head, not listening to Céline who was running down one of her companions whom

she had met having a wild time, legs flailing and arms waving, in one of the cheap Montparnasse dance halls. "A girl who respects her parents can go dance at Anacreon's Banquet or at the Thousand Columns, but she doesn't go to the Grados Dance Hall. That dive is a disgrace."

But old man Teston was telling of the discovery of the body of a nine-year-old girl who had been found raped and murdered at the bottom of a well. All conversation turned to that single subject, with everyone contributing a couple of emotional remarks deploring the poor child's misfortune.

Vatard doubted very much that the story was true. "It's the police," he said gravely. "They want to divert public opinion."

"Or it's the Jesuits," said Mme Teston in a low voice. She was a real wit. The girls believed the crime had actually taken place.

But what moved Mme Teston the most and made the story more horrible and more interesting was not really the child's slashed throat or the outrage she had suffered; it was the fact that her panties had been torn away by a brute's hand, revealing her poor little naked belly for all the world to see. She went into ecstasy over these panties, saying she was certainly the daughter of someone rich, a prince or a duke. Men like that are so corrupt. You only have to read novels to know that.

Désirée put a spoon in each glass and poured the wine, which became fringed in pink foam around the edge. Everyone drank together and between two swallows Mama Teston added, "To think that we were exposed to that kind of thing when we were children!"

At that moment the rain began to fall again; the windows creaked beneath the pressure of the wind. "It's eleven o'clock," said Teston. "We're going to have to leave." His wife once again put on her damp clothes and her stiff laced boots. Cursing the sky, she kissed the girls and told them she would see them the next day at the workshop. When they left, making waves and grumbling in the pitch black rain squalls, Céline asked her sister, "Colombel isn't bad, is he?"

"Oh!" replied the other, laughing, "His face turns me off!"

"You wretch! You're just being difficult. I'm not saying he's good-looking, but he isn't ugly either." and when her sister did not respond, she added, "Then he's not the one to make you happy?"

"That's for certain!" said Désirée. "You hit it right on the button. One, two, three. I'm blowing out the lamp." And darkness settled over the room.

Chapter Three

Céline's first lover was a tall, dark, handsome young fellow named Eugène Tourte. He had a mocking air, commanding eyes, and his wandering hands and suggestive jokes turned her on. One hot evening the inevitable happened. She flopped down on the edge of a remote road. Nearby, some clumps of trees facing one another swayed in the passing breeze like clowning couples from the dregs of society at the quadrille dances in cheap dance halls. She did not cover her face with her hands as was customary, but simply closing her eyes, fell without flinching and got up without feeling any shame. She was very surprised. Now that her curiosity was satisfied, she no longer understood why women became so rabidly attached to men. "So that was what it was all about! Some groping, a bit of pain, a momentary tremor, a cry unleashed with a jerk. That was why they wept and let their backs be caressed by the stockiest, most muscle-bound bookbinders! Ah! How stupid!" Then, little by little, she listened to the revelations of her own flesh, and her desire became an overwhelming obsession. Only then did she come to understand the weaknesses and frailties, the enraged despair of these girls! She became unbearable. This explosion of affection, which made her coo and faint like an animal, exasperated her lover. He finally left her and went away to work in a bindery on the right bank of the Seine, after first administering her a sound thrashing with his cane.

For her next lord and master Céline chose Gabriel Michon, a bald shrimp of a man with a cherub's chubbiness and the drowned countenance of a drunk. From the very first evening this new lover bruised her buttocks with sharp kicks. Two others soon replaced him, sharing the enjoyment of her favors with one another at the same time. They left her by common accord after a quarrel that ended with them beating her. Afterward they offered one another a series of toasts in the bar

while she wept noisily, tears streaming down her cheeks. There was a moment of respite. Then Anatole took a job as a press setter at the workshop. After they had fooled around in a few dark corners, they became lovers one rainy day when he offered to go get her some head cheese for her lunch.

Basically, all these couplings, all this jumping in and out of beds at every free moment, were ruining her looks and did not really satisfy her. All these comings and goings, all these pirouettes with one, all these tumbles with another, resulted in an alternating from bad to worse and from worse to bad. One took her money and drank it up with another girl, the other beat her to a pulp, making fun of her, mimicking the shrill cries of fright she let out when she saw him roll up his sleeves. In the end, cuffs on the nose, kicks in the rear, such was her lot in life. The man was more or less strong, the dance more or less lively, that was all. It was fairly natural, in any case. Céline did not possess that lush sensuality that attracts men. She was pretty, pleasing, nicely groomed, a quite attractive young woman, with that delicate, almost excessive thinness of girls who have been corrupted before maturity. But the louts in the bindery preferred those enormous sows whose clothes split on the mounds of their flesh, and who bantered, snouts in the air, with laughs that shook their double chins and made their bellies dance.

As a crowning bit of bad luck, she was still very naïve in spite of everything. She was as astonished as a child sometimes when the men, speaking among themselves, opened new vistas of filth she had never suspected. According to an expression of Eugène Tourte, she was a bit "cracked," daydreaming next to her good friend of caressing loves, imagining a perfect lover who would embrace her with the gentleness of a little girl and offer her a tart or a flower on her name day. One thing was sure: Eugène, that disgusting man, as the other women referred to him, would never have given her a ribbon or offered her a drink! His face to kiss every other day, his fists to submit to every other hour, and that was all: Wanting her when she did not feel like sex, not wanting her when she did feel like sex, he had made her life very miserable. Moreover, Eugène was a rotten character of the worst sort. Completely corrupt, a real cad, as cantankerous as a coachman, he had no regard for women, and spent his evenings pursuing every skirt that came down the street, only to abandon them as soon as he had stopped them long enough to spend a few minutes with them in bed at the Bourbe. All the

women working in the book binderies knew him and despised him, and all of them managed to have themselves coaxed into bed by him. But smart women and girls with any spirit only let themselves be seduced once, certain of being abandoned at the end of a week if they were pretty, in half that time if they were ugly. Céline lacked experience when she knew him. Besides, she could not believe a man would so easily leave a girl who had given herself to him. The sad truth of the matter, however, became fully apparent to her the day Eugène moved out of the district, going off with a bottle of cognac to celebrate the charms of a coal seller.

Céline became sad and morose. She thought about throwing herself into the Seine, but figured it was really useless to suffer the agony of drowning for such a terrible man. With swollen heart and teary eyes, she whimpered for a long while. Then one night she ate supper at her girl friend's and got such a bad case of indigestion on some fritters that she was unable to stop her stomach from dancing around and accompanied it with the music of hiccups and gassy organ blasts. The fact that she had not eaten properly for the past week, nor had much at all to drink, had left her in such a weakened physical state that this meal made her become desperately ill, with acute chest pains and her stomach unable to hold down what she had eaten. When her heart had finished leaping about and her digestive system was functioning properly once more, the happiness of being able to begin eating again the foods she really enjoyed, made life seem more pleasant. A certain drooping of her spirits, the last reminder of her first unhappy affair, disappeared in the breath of the first kiss on her mouth.

She had promised herself to change her ways. Her split with Eugène had occurred following a beating, and for five days her shoulders had been marked black and blue like the bluish mottling on the skin of a goose. But in the condition she was in, with her sensuality aroused to such a fever pitch by her first lover, she was completely defenseless. Michon took her and left her. His successors made her swing to any tune they called, sometimes with the one, sometimes with the other. Once the habit had taken hold of her, she would have danced all alone in front of a broom.

What else could she have done, after all? She was like the majority of women. When she had a lover, what a bore! what a pain! When she did not have one, what a calamity! what a disaster! It was not any kind of existence to be young and attractive and to have no one interested in

the superiority of your looks, in the feast of your eyes! She struggled between the wish not to serve as a sex object to the first comer and the joy of being expected by someone when night fell.

Formerly, when she returned to her room with her feet throbbing and her groin pulsing beneath her skin, she undressed quickly and buried herself under the covers. Then, with her back aching, a burning sensation in her stomach, sweating, she thought about her lover and the next night's meeting. These days she came home early and loafed about, going from one chair to another, looking forlorn during supper. She chewed on bits of thread, spit them out or twisted them between her fingers, then glued her nose to the windowpane, yawned expansively, returned to her place, went downstairs to the news stand to buy a cheap rag exploiting romance and murders. She dozed with cramps in her calves, before finally deciding to go to bed. In her room she slowly undid her hair, scratching her head thoughtfully, then collapsed, listless and depressed, on her unmade bed. During this period she became less careful about her appearance. Like most girls of the lower classes, she took little interest in personal hygiene except when she had a man. In the grip of a great lassitude, her nerves utterly exhausted, she ruminated at great length, remembering her former pleasures, listening beneath the stir of the covers to the sounding of the slowly passing hours. Ah! It was far, far too stupid to live like this! And the persecution of her flesh left her without strength. She had sudden hot flashes in her hands and in her temples. At times in the workshop her eyes grew blurred when she overheard certain evocative remarks exchanged by the other women. As a result of this period of sexual abstinence, she began to suffer from migraine headaches. She sought relief from these by placing patches of opium on her forehead and by taking quinine drops, but nothing helped.

It was about this time that she met Gabriel Michon who, roguish debauched tramp that he was, succeeded in getting her to kiss him without repugnance when he offered her his toothless little face. Now that she had a man once more, she recovered her former gay spirits, returning home at midnight, sometimes not coming home at all, getting dressed immediately upon jumping out of bed in the morning, placing a violet or rose in her hairnet and covering her shoulders with a small red-checked shawl. Désirée laughed to see the great care Céline took to pomade her hair and scrub her ears with soap. One day she was actually startled. Taking a small flask with a flower painted on the lip which she

had bought at a bazaar on the Rue Bonaparte, Céline had liberally applied its contents of sour mignonette perfume to her chignon and cheeks. This luxury of using perfume had really started a revolution in the workshop. All the women wanted to have some, and one of the binders, whose brother was a door-to-door salesman in that line of merchandise, had come to work the next day with a stack of little flasks which he sold for five, ten, and fifteen sous apiece. Little work was accomplished that day. The women were astonished at smelling so good and swooned with pleasure, holding their handkerchiefs under their noses. Believing themselves irresistible, they took on airs, calling one another "Mademoiselle" and "Madame," as if a drop of musk and amber could have modified their sluttish looks!

Actually, in the workshop, there was little need of this shoddy bilge water, since the men were anything but delicate. Whatever they generally ate was usually liberally spiced with chives and garlic, and was accompanied by several glasses of wine and cognac along with a pipe, so that the air around them was rank with the odor of alcohol and the kitchen sink.

None of this attracted Désirée. Not that she wanted a gentleman with a black hat, a fancy beard, and spittle on his lips when he spoke. That would have bothered her. She liked to laugh with workmen like her father, men who were clean, not covered with greasy sweat and reeking of rank ointments. She wanted a husband who did not have spots on his shirt, who washed his feet at least once a week, a man who did not drink and would permit her at last to realize her dream: to have a bedroom with flowered wallpaper, a walnut bed and table, white curtains on the windows, a pincushion made of shells, a cup with her initials in gold on the dresser, and a nice picture hanging on the wall, perhaps a print of a little cupid knocking on a door. Often she even daydreamed about an engraving of this sort which she had seen in a bric-à-brac shop, and she imagined how comfortable and gay the room would be with this picture leaning on the mantelpiece, reflecting in its glass the back of an alarm clock and two zinc candles that she would encircle with sconces of pink paper.

She had never desired more than that. To live in peace, to be able to put aside ten francs per year to raise a dog, and to possess, in addition to her bedroom, a small pantry in which she could store her water and coke, behind a green woolen curtain. All the desires of her soul were limited to this!

If Vatard had ever been afraid, he could sleep peacefully now! His daughter would not lose her head and get drunk in a moment of weakness. Moreover, her sister had done her a real favor by not preventing her from turning bad. Free to carouse as much as she wanted, she had no desire to do so. She was guarding the "flower" of her maidenhood, very determined not to lose it except for good cause. And, then, the example of Céline was there, and the cutting words of the girl who has thought about drowning herself still echoed in her ears. Also, she had been around during her sister's numerous and facile infatuations and had seen how at times Eugène coddled her and at other times abused her. Once she herself had received such a hard slap for daring to call him wicked that her cheek had carried the mark for a whole day. This fashion of terminating discussions had not been to her taste, and if the example of her sister was not tempting, that of the other women working at the bindery was scarcely any more so. There is really a lot to detest about men when one has labored in a workshop! And it was not just one or two of them; they were all like that, all of them, even old man Chaudrut, an old workman, a real dotard, freshly shaven, with a hypocrite's eye and an overworked approach. With his stern countenance, distressing deafness, and simple air, Chaudrut was neither more nor less than a damn animal! As affectionate as a sparrow and as drunk as a thrush, he was a companion whose instincts for the seamy side of life had grown with age. He was a crock full of vices that spilled out from time to time on the dresses of the young women, muddying them from top to bottom. Riddled with debts, hounded by his creditors, this deaf old man, the terror of the cheap little bars that abhor giving credit, fluttered about with his wire-rimmed glasses, cooing, strutting, flirting, acting the real fool. And in spite of his thinning hair he still found girls willing to try to rekindle in the pink fire of their lips the burned-out embers of his own.

His mistress was a friend of Céline and Désirée, a woman separated from her husband, a nice girl who was honest in her fashion, but such a glutton that it was unbelievable! Chaudrut adored rabbit cooked in wine, and he had seduced her with feasts of that tasteless meat. Now that she was in his control, the little strength he still possessed he reserved to deal her careful thrashings. This manner of picturing love had made Désirée think more and more. Would she ever be happy with lovers like that? Admittedly you could make a bad mistake in marrying, but, even so, her father and mother had lived happily enough. In other

households that she was acquainted with the husband did not beat the wife or did so only rarely and then because they had been together for twenty years and it is easy to grow impatient after living together so long! Her decision was made: she would wait until she had discovered a lover to her liking, a handsome young man who would love her, a tall blond, if possible, with long eyelashes and a fine, silky mustache. Gazing off into the distance as she worked, she sometimes dreamed about her future lover. She imagined seeing him and having been married to him for a month. Mornings she would gently kiss his eyes before getting up. She would tie his tie for him and pull his shirt down in the back to prevent it from covering his neck. After straightening up her little household and placing some left-over stew in a cup in her basket to heat up again in the workshop over her little alcohol burner, she too would leave, departing a bit early in order to be able to loaf along in front of the shops selling housewares and to give herself the pleasure of admiring a beautiful little necklace for fifteen sous that she would buy the following Saturday when she was paid.

After all, she was a real lady and the only acceptable marriage was one that would allow her to spend at least ten francs per month for her personal needs! While sewing book pages she added sums, computing her husband's salary and her own, smiling at the idea of the other women in the Débonnaire shop exclaiming, "My, but you're chic today!" when they saw her enter with a new hairnet and wearing rouge.

The whole point was to find a man who could fulfill these conditions. Not that she had lacked offers since she had reached the age of puberty. She had a roguishly attractive face, with that wicked allure which is so appealing in young women. But none of her suitors had pleased her. They were a fine lot, these guys on-the-make who made a habit of coming around to see her after a few drinks, their moustaches still dripping wine as they strutted about, smiling!

"You're too ambitious. You'll end up badly," her sister warned, and Désirée, glancing at herself in a mirror, surveyed her luscious pinkness with some pleasure, rolling her hips a bit, rearranging her hair with little touches to puff it out.

"Well, why not?" she responded. "I'm probably not any worse than anyone else. I have the right to be ambitious."

Her father, not wishing to see her get married, supported Désirée's remarks. She was the one who generally took care of the house, so he watched her, murmuring with a tender air, "My little baby is as good as

gold. I'll never be the one to force her to marry a man she doesn't want. I'm not an insensitive father." And, as if he believed or wanted to make one believe that parents had the power to make their children marry against their will, he took advantage of his pretense of being a good father to obtain everything he wanted from Désirée.

After all, wasn't she his favorite? Of course, he loved the other daughter very much, but it was not the same thing. Without a doubt, Céline was a good girl, more affectionate sometimes than her younger sister, but so unstable that she was often really intolerable. The whole household submitted to the fluctuations of her passions, the anger of her breakups. Whenever she was jilted by a current lover, there was all hell to pay. She poked the fire in the furnace with such vigor that the whole house shook. These rapid changes from good humor to fury made her father unhappy. As for her mother, she was indifferent. She sat in a stupor, staring at her growling stomach, incapable of stirring up two thoughts or of moving two fingers.

Chapter Four

The round wall clock struck six o'clock, seemed to cough, then slowly the gong rang six times.

Désirée had just swallowed the last turnip of an Irish stew. The shops were nearly deserted; the shop workers, men and women alike, had gone out to find a bit of something to drink in the neighborhood bars. All alone, the women of better character ate their meager meal in the workshop. The supervisor ground some prune pits between her teeth. Céline warmed up some day-old coffee over a small lamp. Old lady Teston sucked the back of a rabbit cooked with potatoes.

A young man entered.

Addressing himself to Désirée, who had looked up when he entered, he asked rather timidly, "Do you have any jobs open here?"

"Don't ask us," answered the supervisor. "Talk to the owner. He's the one who does all the hiring."

The worker whirled his cap between his fingers.

"He's not here," added the supervisor. "Come back in half an hour. He'll surely be back by then."

"I don't know that guy," growled Chaudrut, who, finding himself broke, was eating a crust of bread and a piece of cheese in the workshop. That very morning the owner had refused to lend him the ten sous that he asked for with fake tears in his voice. The old scoundrel wept, casting an envious eye on his granddaughter who was filling a large glass with wine from a small wicker-covered bottle. "Be careful, little darling!" he said. "You're going to choke. Wait until your mouth is empty before drinking." He had become very paternal and was trying to make the child feel sorry for him and offer him half of her cheap wine.

When the little girl did not answer, he got up, and all stooped over, pulling on his rope-soled sandals, went out bottle in hand to get some

water at the fountain, whimpering about the evils of his stomach and grumbling about the rotten bad luck he was having.

“You know,” said old lady Teston to the little girl, “if you give any wine to your grandfather, I’ll tell your mother and you’ll see.”

Chaudrut returned, more unhappy and disgruntled than ever. He placed the bottle in front of him, looked at it shaking his head, and appearing to overcome an invincible disgust, swallowed a mouthful. The little girl drank some of her wine. He was afraid she had emptied the bottle, and no longer able to restrain himself, he murmured, “Say there, honey. You see your grandfather. He’s not happy. Wouldn’t you like to leave him a little drop for his dessert?”

“If that isn’t shameful,” cried out the supervisor. “A man that age trying to trick a child out of something. It’s disgusting.”

“Is it my fault I don’t have a cent?” wept the old man.

“Yes, it’s your fault!” exclaimed old lady Teston with vigor. “If you hadn’t gotten drunk all week long, you would have some money to buy something to drink today.”

“Oh, yeah! Keep it up!” said Chaudrut, who became insolent now he was certain that nothing was going to be given to him. “You don’t complain about the others because you have just washed down that tuba you call a throat! Thanks! That’s really a nice way to run everyone down! You stuff yourself with the best rabbit and expensive wine. Where do you put all that, lady, if I may be so bold? To put away all you gobble down, you must have a stomach like an elephant!”

They had to step in between them. Old lady Teston had lost control of herself and was ready to tear him apart. Fortunately, the foreman made a diversion by leading in the new worker. He installed his recruit near the water press and, joking, said to him, “Go on, Auguste, and pump firmly!”

The workshop filled up gradually. Those who worked on book-covers had taken their places near their scissors and were trimming pages; others were gluing covers and end papers; the newcomer fidgeted between the arms of the machine, glancing indirectly at Désirée who, while collating engravings, was secretly stealing a look at him also.

She found him nice, with his somewhat sly, crafty look, his blond curly locks. And, then, he seemed so sweet and sad. Also, he had a pretty little blond mustache. His teeth, however, were not in very good shape. One of them protruded and another on the left side was bluish and looked bad. In summary, he was somewhat pale and sickly.

Nevertheless, even so, he was still able to do honor to the woman he courted.

He did not find her very pretty. She was rather short and her eyes were slightly crossed, but she was attractive anyhow with her pink mouth and flashing eyes, her haughty air, and blushing, prudish charm. With all that, she was as shiny as a new penny, with her hair neatly combed, her skirt in good repair, her waistcoat showing no traces of glue or grease, and even her laced boots, of which he caught a brief glimpse, in good condition though well worn, with fasteners mended and buttons in place. Even her underskirt, peeking out from beneath her dress when she crossed her legs, was white and clean.

Also, there were several factors indicating to him that she was of good moral character; in the first place, she did not eat lunch in the little restaurants nearby; secondly, she was not indebted to Crespin's for frivolous purchases of underwear and the like, since Crespin's collector never sought her out when he made his weekly rounds. In the Débonnaire workshop there were scarcely two or three who were not in debt to Crespin's. Every week the collector arrived with his yellow-edged black notebook beneath his arm, a silvery cap on his head, dressed in a tunic with a blue collar and white buttons ornamented with a greyhound, the symbol of faithfulness. Joking with most of them as if he were an intimate acquaintance, he wrote down the sums they paid him in his account book and in each customer's little red passbook. On that particular day, the receipts were meager; no one had any money. So why didn't he come Saturday? Did he think they were rolling in money? So much the worse for him! And the collector, who had a personal interest in the amount he gathered, grumbled, even though he was accustomed to these rebuffs.

When he had left, all the women were in an uproar, and as usual, they stopped complaining only after blaming their misery on the dump where they worked. How could anyone earn a decent living when the maximum they received was twelve to fifteen francs per week?

"Well! Why don't you come to work in the morning, and why do you leave ahead of time in the evening?" asked the supervisor.

The small girl whose teeth were bothering her exclaimed angrily, "Hey, tell me! Do you think you're dealing with animals?"

Auguste noticed that Désirée kept silent and continued to work.

She felt his glances fall on her and no longer dared to raise her eyes. Nothing could be said against him; he was nice, but perhaps he had his

bad side; perhaps he was a drunkard, quick to argue. In any case, he was poorly paid, a common laborer receiving only forty centimes an hour since they used him only for uncomplicated manual labor. And nevertheless he did not appear to be a carouser or an imbecile. As for looks, he fit her image of a lover very nicely. Besides, he did not look at her with indecent glances like so many others whom she had had to put in their place. It was just too bad he did not have a hardier and gayer demeanor.

Auguste was, in effect, neither hardy nor gay. If he were to be classed, he would have fit in the category of those listed as lacking drive. After five years of military service he had returned to live with his mother. He had shown up at the bindery after hearing that a serious young man could rapidly learn the assembly work and easily earn a living there.

The Débonnaire House was known on the streets of the capital for hiring odd-job men and being able to furnish work even to persons with little knowledge of the bookbinding profession. Upon arriving, Auguste had addressed himself to Désirée rather than to any other woman. He could not explain why. Probably because she had seemed pleasant and not at all haughty. He thought the others seemed fiendishly ill-natured and was afraid of being told a lot of silly nonsense. He would have socked one of the men had it been necessary, but with a woman, he felt himself stammering and indecisive, awkward in forming a retort, blushing to his ears at a joking remark.

When he was a soldier, he had scarcely ever run after the women who do the cooking or those who follow the camps. On his way back to his mother's house he never had the luck to stay in a house crammed with prostitutes or filled with whores just waiting to brighten him up. He certainly was not ignorant of how that agreeable thing which the young women workers call "banging" is practiced, but out of stupidity, out of shame, or simply because he was unlucky, he had never had what his buddies called a "little honey." Once he had been in love for a week, but the woman had been so dishonest, so steeped in slime, that her filthy habits had disgusted him and made him ashamed. The rest of the time he had gone to drink glasses of mazagran coffee on the Boulevard de Montrouge in those little bars with golden ceilings where women wearing baby clothes dance polkas while shouting out songs or doze half-asleep, tits in the air, chins between their fists. Ah, my God,

he had not disdained those women. There were some with attractive faces whose peals of laughter had charmed him. But all that was not the kind of satisfaction of which he had dreamed. This grown boy, whose sensual appetites were lively enough, ardently desired a mistress with whom he could spend his evenings and his Sundays. He never drank more than three glasses of wine after his dinner, played billiards only rarely, never wasted his money on bets at the counter, and consequently had little to occupy his free time. He needed a woman at any price. He hoped for a nice girl who would be modest in front of his friends and not make extravagant demands on his limited financial resources.

As for niceness, Désirée pleased him greatly. Unfortunately, he did not know who she was. However naïve he might be, it was quite clear that she must be well-behaved. That is immediately evident in a workshop from the way people speak to you, in the girl's silence to ribald proposals, in her ease at listening to them. Those women who grow indignant surely have had a lover or two; they are always more prudish than virgins. Anyhow, it is always the same story: fallen women have no more pitiless judges than those who have only fallen occasionally.

Did he please her? That was the question. He had a spruce, full face, but he did not have the poise, the sharp, knowing look that girls admire. She did not doubt he was enchanted by her, and naturally she was flattered.

One time, she had to get up to go get some work on a stand located near the press. She blushed faintly when she brushed past him. Auguste froze. He had been trying to get a look at her when she was far away: from close up he no longer dared. When she returned to her place, her body leaning slightly backwards to accommodate the weight of the pages she was carrying in her arms, he thought she was really quite attractive.

He was angry with himself for being so timid. Why didn't he say something to her when she was near him? But, in fact, what could he have said? In a workshop, everyone is watching and listening. He could not even whisper a word without it being heard, and then surely she would get angry. That did not matter. He should have taken the chance anyway. He thought about how he might make up for his cowardice when he followed her home that evening. He asked himself what he would say when he approached her. If she did not tell him to go away,

he would offer to buy her a drink at the wineshop, where he would feel more at ease. The main thing was not have her turn him away at the first word.

Then it crossed his mind that it would most likely be all for nothing. She probably already had a boyfriend or lover and would not accept his offer. He bet that someone was waiting for her when she left work.

Meanwhile, he made the acquaintance of old man Chaudrut, who was lugging around some piles of unbound pages and piling them behind the water machine. He seemed like such a dignified old man! The fact is that this old dotard was obliging and gracious to all newcomers. The young man seemed inexperienced and ought to be an easy prey. Auguste turned the conversation to the subject of the women in the bindery and tried to make it stop on the young girl.

The crafty old man let him flounder as he tried to conceal the true objective of his questions. Peering from beneath his glasses, this rogue had guessed the reason for Auguste's questions. He said what he knew Auguste wanted to hear; he praised Désirée and told the young man that she had a sister, whom he pointed out for him; he pretended to have a high regard for the little girl, who was chaste and came from a very honorable family. Finally he extorted ten sous from the young man and was immediately in a hurry to get away from him so he could go spend them on something to drink.

During this exchange, without hearing anything of what was being said, Désirée knew that she was the subject of their conversation. She ran her hand through her curls and adjusted the pink ribbon that moved whenever she raised or lowered her head. In the event Auguste should follow her into the street, she decided to receive him as coolly as possible, so he would understand she was an honest girl, accessible only through marriage.

He was a little disconcerted. When the younger sister buried her nose in her work in order to annoy him, he watched the other sister and found her to be terribly vulgar. Her blouse was open and in disarray at the neck, her hairnet in rags, and she had the habit of yelling to the men at the paper-trimming machines, "All right now, you tobacco-chewing Jesuses, who's going to buy a round of drinks?"

Either that was not her sister, or else Désirée was a goody-goody who, in other circumstances, was as worthless as her sister. It pleased him that this might excuse any awkwardness on his part in case he did

not succeed in making a date with her. And yet it was impossible! The supervisor, a woman whose soured virginity had left her unforgiving toward all the sins she had not had occasion to commit herself, called Désirée "my child," chatting with her about her sick mother, and treating her with a regard which she showed for neither Céline nor any of the others.

And then, after all, there was nothing to stop him from taking the same way home as she. But if he did so and did not speak to her, he would be an idiot. One way or the other, it was time he made up his mind. The quitting hour was fast approaching.

Most of the men had already slipped off. The women hurried to finish their tasks. The din in the workshop died down to a distant clamor. The women took off their aprons and began to tease Moumout, the cat, who was prowling around, defiant, ready to scratch. He ran across the tables, pendulous lips shaking and tail swaying, making his rounds, letting himself be touched by some and giving others a bad eye. Then, having eaten all the scraps from the emptied baskets, he jumped up on a chair, plunged his head beneath his raised leg, and began attacking his fleas.

The women left in a group. Désirée petted Moumout while she waited for her sister to get ready. She was really very cute with her blue wool hood and her spiraling curls. In order to keep her poise, she scratched the chin of the cat, which purred even more contentedly, making its topaz eyes, faintly barred with a black line, glimmer as it opened them.

"Let's go. Are you coming?" asked Céline.

Désirée kept a watch behind her on their way home, and she saw the young man pretending to look at the roofs when she glanced back at him. He followed behind them as far as the Montparnasse train station, but did not seem to want to draw any closer. The girl was annoyed. She would have liked to be accosted so she could turn him down. She even stopped for a second on the pretext of pulling up her stocking, which was making a fold in her boot. Auguste either did not know how to or did not dare take advantage of the moment. Désirée began walking once more.

And nevertheless, when the bedroom lamp was extinguished that night, she could not help thinking of the stranger with the blond mustache and nearly forgave him for his timidity. He was not hand-

some, it was true, but at least he did not look like one of those crumbs who march their women along with kicks and slaps.

“And that’s a good start!” she sighed. Burying her pale face in the pillow, she began to snore prettily, her lips slightly parted beneath her sputtering nose.

Chapter Five

“Come on now! Swallow your spit! Stick your fingers in your nose, if you want, but shut up!”

“All right! No more fooling around! The match is about to begin. I am Marseille, the one and only Marseille. It is I who fought against the most famous wrestlers of all Europe at the World’s Fair of 1867 in the Le Peletier street arena, and none of those I held in my hands can boast of having remained standing.”

And some shills, scattered throughout the crowd, shouted, “A glove, give me a glove!”

“To whom? To you, squirt?”

“Yes! Yes!”

And the crowd began to applaud. After some milling about, they all began to pile into the tent.

“Come on in! Come on in!” cried out the athlete through a megaphone. Trombones blasted, bells pealed wildly, cymbals clanged furiously, strident fifes peeped sharply. In the midst of all this hellish tumult, herculean giants, calmly chewing gum, stood erect on the stage, puffing out their hairy torsos, making their biceps bounce. People came from every direction, pushing, shoving, hollering, whistling.

“Hey, children!”

“Come on, Paul!”

“Here, Louis!”

“Here, old man!”

And like a wave of dirty water, the crowd beat against the shanty where, breathless, red, sweating, wild, Marseille kept yelling without a pause, “Come on in! Come on in!”

Céline held onto Désirée’s arm, very amused by the spectacle. Anatole and Colombel were smoking cigarette butts with their fists stuffed into their mouths. Both men wanted to go see the wrestling

match, but the two girls did not, especially Désirée, who was listening to the line of patter a clown was reciting with exaggerated gestures in order to keep the crowd holding its breath.

From inside the already full tent came sounds of boots pounding the floorboards, the clamor of laughter; from time to time the canvas was dented by the rears of the tightly packed audience inside. A pitchman wearing yellow pants and a yellow vest adorned with red braid, a Robespierre vest with a broad collar floating over a bottle-green suit, wagged the tail of his wig, shouting, "Ladies and gentlemen, we are going to have the honor of offering you a second performance! For this one performance and this one time only, ticket prices will be reduced, fifty centimes for front row seats, twenty-five centimes for rear seats, and fifteen centimes for men in military uniform! And stirred up by its own racket, the music burst out more loudly than before. The clown sucked on the mouth of his flute; its bitter cry hovered over the explosion of brass instruments and the thundering of the bass drum. Then the clown did tricks with his instrument, sticking it in his eyes, his nose, his mouth, holding out three fingers in front of his smooth head, repeating at each tone, "Fifteen centimes, three sous, for military men."

All the tumult excited Colombel, who began to fidget. "Come on!" he yelled to the others. "Let's go in! I'll pay for the girls!" But the girls fled into the crowd, not wishing to have to sit through a long, drawn-out performance. The young men were forced to follow them.

A dense crowd was moving between the buildings. Groups of boisterous children with runny noses and faces plastered with gingerbread ran about blowing horns and having a very gay time. Babies being carried in the arms of their parents danced up and down in their diapers, waving sticky little hands covered with candy. People walked on one another's toes, pushing and shoving each other. Young loafers played toy flutes and leapt about, halting in front of the shooting galleries where they tried to break an egg perched on a fountain of water. Scattered here and there throughout the fairgrounds, the stands serving as shooting galleries were filled with people standing on tiptoe, leaning on each other's shoulders, trying to see through the rows of heads. The object of all this attention was the massacre taking place in which dolls dressed like farmers, newlyweds, and princes, served as targets.

The best shot was to upend the bride. The most ridiculous remarks,

the grossest allusions were to be heard from the crowd when the virgin fell head over heels. Anatole wanted to really clobber her. Colombel said he was thirsty and Céline chimed in that she was hungry. Anatole scored a hit on a well-dressed gentleman, but missed the other targets. Then he left, angry at having been called a bad shot by his girl.

Colombel once more declared that he needed something to drink before going any further. The girls demanded that they stop in a tent where a man was making waffles. They could eat and drink there. Their seats were bad; dust swirled about them, covering the tables and glasses with gritty particles. But at least it was better than the back room of a wine shop. The little establishment was not elegant, ten tables, thirty stools, the waffle iron, and a bowl of white batter. At the back there were some barrels on stands and a French flag hung out front. That was it. But it offered the advantage that the patrons were able to see the crowds passing by and win red or black macaroons.

The wine the men ordered turned out to be so bitter it would curl hair. They decided it was a bit immature but good. The girls bit into their waffles, coating their mouths with the white powdered frosting. Then, while drinking cassis and water, the two girls declared they wanted to go see some fat ladies.

Their wish was easily satisfied. Included among the exhibits at the fair were numerous booths displaying gross piles of fat molded into the shape of women. There were all kinds for all tastes: the Venus of Luchon, the beautiful Brabançon woman, the giantess of Auvergne. Scruffy men armed with pointers stressed their sales pitches with drum rolls, pointing to signs all of which looked alike. In effect, all these signs consisted of two-tone red fields on which were depicted gigantic bellies with breasts like barbell balls and enormous tower-like legs. With the immense ham of their thighs resting on gilt pillows, they sat surrounded by drum-majors, doctors wearing medals, and officers in full uniform, all of whom appeared amazed by the sight before them.

Anatole maintained that it would be better to go see a foreigner rather than a French woman; it would be more strange. His opinion prevailed and all four went into the palace of the beautiful Brabançon woman.

Colombel and Anatole were excited by the prospect of touching the leg of such a huge woman. Céline knew Anatole was fickle and decided to keep an eye on him. Désirée simply wanted to satisfy her curiosity.

A woman wearing a green dress with a very daring décolletage that

revealed the globes of her breasts like pink balloons sat resting on a raised platform. There were three fake freckles near her temples. She arose, said she was from Brussels and was twenty-two years old. She extended her arm above the shako of a soldier who was watching her armpit in ecstasy and finished her little spiel with the following sentence: "Thank you very much. I hope you will return and that you will tell your friends and acquaintances."

Anatole said he wanted to feel her calf. The huge woman allowed him to do so, but did not seem pleased. She lifted her skirt a little and when the young man had buried his hand in the fat of her leg, she grumbled, "That's enough, little one! That's enough!"

Red with anger, Céline pinched Anatole until he bled. This put him in an ill humor and he smacked her right back with an elbow to her kidneys. They swore at one another, and Désirée and Colombel had to intervene. It delighted Anatole to see his mistress infuriated, and he repeated that if he ever fell in love it would certainly be with a good-looking woman like that. Désirée said that so much flesh was disgusting, but Colombel, who was having little success with Désirée, supported his friend just to make her mad. The two of them ended up sulking. When the men went on ahead, Céline suggested to her sister that they lose them and go around the fair alone. Désirée agreed with her sister's proposal. As the four of them were threading their way behind a stand, however, the two men stopped abruptly. Anatole shook hands with Auguste, who was strolling between the stands with his nose in the air.

"Hey, now, that's nice!" Anatole exclaimed. "It's been three years since I left the army and now I find you again, but this time without your infantry uniform. Have you given up the profession? Hey! What a rotten life, old pal! Do you remember? But hey, pardon me! I haven't introduced you to my gal," he continued, pulling Céline close to himself. This last remark made her even more furious. Auguste stood dumbfounded in front of Désirée. They all went into a wineshop where they chatted over a drink. The newcomer offered to buy a round of drinks. He exchanged some pleasantries with Désirée who was polite, but just barely. The young man was embarrassed. He thought that Colombel was her date, but she appeared to be paying little attention to him and even asked Colombel to pull back his chair, declaring that she did not like anyone breathing in her face. They talked about the Débonnaire firm. Anatole and Colombel, who had been fired for being drunk, were completely critical of the bosses. Céline's wrath was

limited to the supervisor, a nasty bitch who would go searching when she noticed a girl missing from her work station and who would call the delinquent a little pig when she found her chatting with men out in the courtyard. In a chorus they all informed Auguste, "You'll be doing pretty good if you stay in that joint very long!" But he responded that he did not have any choice. Before leaving to do his military service, he had been learning to make meerschaum pipes. Now he was too old to take up his apprenticeship once more. In the end, one way or another, he had to earn a living.

Désirée agreed with his logic, but unfortunately could not help feeling some disdain for the man who fit her needs so badly. Then they began to talk about their fellow workers. Chaudrut was an old rascal! When his wife had died, the ugly old crone had left him some material in which to bury her, but he had sold it and spent the money getting drunk! They all agreed, however, that his wife had been neither better nor worse than he.

The two sisters found that disgusting, but what they really held against him was his continual begging for money. Anatole laughed and reminded them of the day the old rogue had brought his mistress to the workshop. She was a disgusting dwarf, pockmarked like the woman from Holland, and a little daft. Chaudrut's daughter and his girl friend had gotten into a fight, and the men had had to step in and separate them. The owner had fired Chaudrut and his mistress, but two days later Chaudrut had come back, crying that he could not get another job because of his age and the owner had taken pity on him and rehired him.

When Auguste admitted to the group that Chaudrut had borrowed ten sous from him everyone laughed at him and called him a fool. Even Désirée asked him why he had been so quick to become friendly with a con man like that, much to Auguste's embarrassment.

"Oh, well, of course!" Colombel said. "It's all right to hang around him. I don't say he's not a real rascal, but he always has something funny to say. And anyhow, he's basically a good man."

The girls stood up. They had come to see some shows, not to be shut up in a wineshop.

"Are you coming with us, old horse?" Anatole asked Auguste. He nodded, but said he would be able to accompany them only until dinner time. He had to return home because his mother had been sick for several days. When he had added that he lived with his mother on

the Rue du Champs-d'asile, Céline said, "Oh, well! Since Désirée has to return to the house to fix supper for mom and dad, you two can go together on the streetcar." The young couple blushed. While waiting, since they all wished to make good use of the time they had left, they plunged once more into the throng.

Stuck between displays of willow products and bowling games were a host of shops selling gingerbread. Anatole, who had become very gallant, had the group stop at the most luxurious of these, and invited the girls to choose something.

There were so many good things that they could not decide. "It's as beautiful as an opera!" murmured Désirée, enraptured. In truth, in the midst of that shabby collection of canvas tents and tarpaulins, this particular hut stood out from the rest with its pretty tinsel, red pom-poms, and gold spangles.

Great copper lamps swung above the shopwindows, which rose up to the roof. Standing in a recess formed by a notch in the middle of these windows, an impudent and solemn matron beamed at the crowd.

This woman was flanked on her right by a pile of slabs of honey-coated gingerbread, little rolled cakes of iced gingerbread, Arras hearts, Dijon Crowns, wrapped in glazed paper, streaked with gold letters, decorated with blue silk ribbons, the whole display furrowed by gigantic creamhorns covered with yellow, lilac, green, wavy spirals of silver, and covered with tender sayings. To her left lay an army of little gingerbread men, soft and blond. Some were plain, others skillfully festooned with pastry, speckled with aniseed, sprinkled with bits of sugar. Innkeepers, bourgeois, riflemen, generals, a person could find them all there, even a lion with the legs of a basset hound and the snout of a pig.

The two girls chose hearts speckled soft red, then the troupe went to see the snake charmer. This spectacle impressed them more than all the rest. The snake charmer, a big woman from the South, was made up like a Jezebel, dressed in a pink silk blouse, reddish-brown tights, and gold-tasseled boots. From a chest she pulled innumerable reptiles, which darted out black forked tongues and undulated around her body, caressing her rouged cheeks with their flat heads, tickling the underside of her arms with their rolling coils. Little cries of admiration and fright came from the huge crowd filling the tent. "This one is Baptiste, a young crocodile twenty-one years old!" shouted the snake charmer, as she pulled a saurian from a covering. Placing it against her chest, she rapped its teeth, opening them by force to show the audience a wide

throat bristling with fangs. Then she threw it on the ground and while the monster crawled and moved about, finally retreating into its box, she bowed to the group and sat down once more. Looking up in the air, she leaned on one elbow, nonchalant, as if disgusted by the praise everyone was giving her.

"It's really amazing," said Céline. "Did you see how the boa constrictor caresses her cheeks? My God! I couldn't stand having an animal like that touch me." But Colombel laughed, claiming that on the contrary it ought to produce a strange effect. Cold chills ran up and down Désirée's back. Brrr! It must be freezing. Auguste agreed with her. They followed the crowd, which grew more and more dense. There were artillerymen everywhere in the crowd, dominating the scene with the red brush of their shakos. They all looked alike, with badly shaven cheeks and thin drops of blood on their necks, wearing oversized white gloves, their faces revealing looks of bewilderment and joy. Street urchins swarmed around their legs. Children whose impetigo was flaking off were sent marching down the avenue by their mothers. They squatted to eat their dry little cakes and red nougats in the middle of the street. There was no longer any room to go forward or backward. Everything was in a diabolical uproar. Whistle blasts from a miniature train that wound through the fair pierced the din.

Anatole went ahead of the group, and taking advantage of an opening in the crowd and by dint of using his elbows, made a path for the girls up to the merry-go-round. All the carts and animals were taken. The machine turned to the music of an organ, gratingly accompanied by a thundering of cymbals and drums. Nannies straddled painted hobby horses, little girls, buckled on their stallions with leather belts, tried to grab rings as they passed by. Désirée's and Céline's stomachs turned queasy as they watched this wheel spin around.

They wanted to leave. Walking single file, holding on to each other by the skirt in order not to get lost, they darted into the crowd with lowered heads. The sky darkened. A bolt of lightning cracked the wall of the clouds, and some drops of rain fell. They had to take shelter as quickly as possible in a tent where a model of a prison camp was on exhibit. At the door a steam engine was blowing through some pistons, punctuating the deafening discordant music of an organ with shrill whistles. It was a nice display, showing the daily routine of the red and orange garbed prisoners: at work, sleeping, eating, receiving beatings on the buttocks from the guards, being marched off to the guillotine. The

mahout explained the different scenes, noting that the dolls wearing green caps were those serving life terms, those with orange sleeves matching their pants were rebellious prisoners who had been punished. He added, finally, that the men wearing red caps would be able to return to their families after they had served their time. Then he asked for donations and when this brought in no money, he invited everyone who wished to learn more to go into a separate room for a charge of only ten centimes.

"While we are here," said Céline, "we might as well see everything." They went in very eagerly and came out furious. It was highway robbery. There was only a diving suit and a model boat made of wood with a plaque reading: "Model of the *Avenger* made in the prison ship at Brest by a convict named Pouillac, who labored ten years to complete it." They were really taking advantage of the public! And all the visitors were just as angry as they at having paid two sous to see such dumb things. Désirée asked what time it was, but Anatole assured her that she had plenty of time. If she left in twenty minutes at the earliest, she would get home to her father at five-thirty. Since their mouths were full of dust and their teeth coated with powdery grit, they thought about getting something to drink. Céline tried a Calabran drink and made the others try some at a sou per glass. The men made a face, saying they preferred wine, and they went away once more to find a seat in a cheap wineshop. The girls asked for curaçao, a drink as thick as hair grease, which they thinned in a glass of water. Anatole, who was paying for this bit of refreshment, felt they could have drunk wine like the men and not been gulping down something so expensive.

By now they all felt exhausted. They collapsed in a motionless heap on their benches, dozing. Céline yawned. Désirée was worried. She was afraid of not finding a seat on the streetcar. Auguste tried to reassure her. Colombel suggested that after dinner they might go to the theater to see the Legois or Delille family, or the Corvi circus. For a whole quarter of an hour they remained quiet, watching the ebb and flow of the noisy crowd in the distance.

Finally, Désirée declared that she was going to leave and Auguste offered to accompany her. All the others said they would go along with them as far as the Bastille. They stood up with renewed vigor and went down the Cours de Vincennes. The hubbub of the voices, the crack of the rifles, the racket of the bells, gradually subsided. There remained only a few miserable stands stationed here and there along the way.

Scattered on the sidewalks, some overage infantas sold Tunisian lozenges and nougats. Women selling oranges pushed their carts, shouting as loud as they could, "Beautiful Valencians! Beautiful Valencians!" Some hawkers offered toothpicks and earpicks, and a frightful gutter-snipe whose eyes were covered with styes shouted, "Key rings, safety for your keys, ten centimes, two sous!"

Désirée ignored all the commotion around her. What interested her at that moment were the streetcars passing by filled with hordes of passengers. At the end of half an hour Auguste finally succeeded in hoisting her up on the platform of a passing streetcar. And Anatole, who was spouting some silly nonsense to make the crowd laugh, cried out, "Hey, now, kids, don't do anything stupid, o.k.?"

They stood, squeezed against one another. Auguste asked Désirée why her sister was not going back home with her. "Oh! She wants to have some fun," she replied very simply.

"Oh, well! And don't you want to have some fun too?" She gave a little, meaningless pout. Auguste continued, "Colombel is nice, isn't he?" This time her pout was more eloquent. It seemed to say, "I don't care anything at all about Colombel!"

Auguste changed the subject of conversation once again. "I've heard," he began, "that you are one of the best workers in the shop." This time he had touched a sensitive chord. Désirée proudly admitted that she and her sister were, in effect, very good binders and, since he seemed attentive and charmed, she smiled, very pleased by his interest. He returned to the theme of his first questions and asked her if it did not annoy her to have to go home. Wouldn't it be nice to have a lover to take her around like Céline?

She responded very casually that, of course, she would be happy to have a *good friend*, but she added in a very firm tone, "For the right reason."

Auguste was not very satisfied and it bothered him when, looking directly at him, she added, "But don't you have a girl some place? Is that why you came to the fair all alone?"

He wanted to show himself in a good light and was about to reply that he could never fall for one of those slatterns that working-class men so often favor, that his girl would have to be nice and of good moral fiber, when, unfortunately, their conversation was interrupted. A seat was free inside the streetcar. Désirée went and sat down. He remained alone.

He said to himself that she was very frank and did not seem to be a girl to let herself be coaxed into anything by the first comer. Then a man made him lose his train of thought by asking him for a light. As the streetcar slowly made its way down the Boulevard de l'Hôpital, he contemplated the various tableaux it offered. A woman seated on the steps of the streetcar stairway was frightened by each blast of the horn. Inside, everyone was moving rolls and packages of gingerbread, and the children visited one another, showing off their little toys. A little girl had won a quart-size glass; another girl had won some blue egg cups; a third had won a porcelain chicken laying an egg. One man claimed that all that was thievery, that no one ever won anything worthwhile for his money. Others were more just, claiming that it was necessary for all the hawkers to be able to earn a living. When the streetcar arrived at the Boulevard de Port-Royal near the Capucins, there were some problems. The children, stuffed with candy, were crying and retching. The women got their dresses out of the way. A girl suggested that they should put a key down their backs like for a nose bleed. The mothers said, "Don't cry, honey. It's nothing." All the children had imploring or heart-broken looks. Some half-drunk idlers joked, crying out, "Give them a cup!" An abominable shrimp of a man wearing a velvet cap, his hands in his pockets and a pipe in his mouth, hummed:

Returning from Montparnasse
With his cousin the fireman.

The crowd on the streetcar was very amused. The ticket collector held his sides as he took up the tickets, and his purse, jolted by his shaking belly, danced with a clinking of coins. One man tapped his knee, then wiped his eyes. A woman twisted about, stamping her boots on the floor. All this gaiety created a din filled with the sounds of sighs, hiccups, crying, to which the rolling of the streetcar added a deep bass cut by honks, bell rings, the cries of mothers, the strangled tears of children. One well-dressed woman grew disgusted and got off. Others followed her. Auguste came to occupy a seat left empty near Désirée. They had become very good friends. He said that he had had a very nice day and when he told her how he normally scarcely ever enjoyed himself on Sundays, since he did not like to play cards and drink for hours at a time, she looked at him pleasantly and said that she too did not understand how men could drink wine and play piquet all day long. She still found it hard to believe that he did not have a girl friend. For

his part, he maintained that he too was surprised that a pretty young girl like herself was not being courted by some young man. But she replied once more very positively, "Oh! But that is not at all the same thing! It does not matter if a man wants to amuse himself, but such behavior would prevent a girl from making a good marriage. I am not like Céline in that respect. I don't like the idea of constantly changing partners, and it would really bother me to have a man beat me because he was jealous or drunk."

Auguste cried out impetuously that any man who beats a woman is a coward.

"That's quite true. But," she added, shaking out her dress, "it's late and I have to run." And when the streetcar made its next stop, she leapt off and ran down the street.

Chapter Six

The supervisor repeated for the hundredth time in two weeks that she would rather not eat than be deprived of coffee after her meals. A woman close to her nodded her head, and they began a long discussion on how to make coffee water drip through the coffee filter.

Désirée's teeth were bothering her and she held her head in a suffering manner against her shoulder while folding pages. She was thinking about the last visit she had made to the dentist on the Avenue du Maine. All her stumps were full of cavities. The dentist had told her she would have to have them all pulled or else have them all filled with lead. She had chosen a middle course and had had eight teeth pulled and the others filled. For more than a month her jaw had smelled of creosote. Sometimes one of her upper molars caused her a stab of pain that she was barely able to contain by squeezing her cheek between her fingers. She was thinking about the fact that the next day she had to return to that puller-of-baby-teeth. She was going to have to open her mouth and let him probe all her teeth with the instrument handle, then let him dig its point into the holes. Once again he would cram soaked cotton into the roots. She felt like crying already. To make matters worse, her mother upset her every evening by declaring that she would not pay for this dental work, so the poor girl was working herself to death just to be able to have her rotten gums treated.

Moumout, the tomcat, was not bothered by his teeth. Perched atop a package, he lay rolled up into a ball with his ears flattened, half asleep, from time to time half-opening an eye in order to keep watch on the supervisor, who that very morning had roughed up his fur and had called him a no-good because of a stolen pork chop.

Fat Eugénie, that bastion of over-ripe flesh, was absorbed in trimming some end papers. She was trying to think of a way to prepare a veal roast without spending more than fifteen sous. The two women

next to her, Sidonie and Blanche, were lamenting the fact that book-binding caused them to break their fingernails and forced them to wear only gray or black dresses because of the dirt in the bindery.

As for Chaudrut, he was gluing covers and hatching a new scheme. A wineshop owner whom he owed eighteen francs had threatened him, "If you don't pay me, I'll clobber you good and make sure everyone in the district knows about you." All his creditors, it seemed, had decided to deal with him in an equally undignified fashion. Fortunately, his furniture could not be seized since it consisted exclusively of an iron bedstead and a mattress. But since all the wineshops and hangouts were closed to him, he was going to be forced to take refuge in a new quarter of the city. Where? That was something to think about. Montrouge, Notre-Dame-des-Champs, Grenelle were all closed to him. He was thinking about an attack on the Gros-Caillou district.

All that kept Chaudrut worried. And the worst was that his mistress was becoming increasingly demanding. She had invented an abominable system of sponging from him. She was always wanting lavish meals, asking for dresses, disheveling his hair, taunting him about his growing baldness with mocking laughter, "Hey, look. Four more deserters!" And as she dropped the four offending hairs to the floor, she added that a girl really needed to be attached to a man to stay with him when he is getting bald. The slaps he used to give her were no longer having the desired result. His fists had softened. Now during their quarrels he was receiving as much as he gave.

Old lady Teston worked without thinking of anything. She was like a machine, a mechanical folder at so much per day. She was happy, however, and did not have any problems to worry her. Her husband was a simple-minded, childish man, who obeyed her least orders without balking. From dawn to dusk she drew a wooden knife across sheets of paper; at seven in the evening she returned home, cooked supper, reeled off to her husband Alexandre the story of all the intrigues at the workshop, had him read aloud to her all the accidents and crimes noted in the *Petit Journal*, washed the dishes, scoured the cat's bowl, mended a wool sock on a wooden egg, and without a single prayer went to bed at ten o'clock, splitting the sheets with her bony limbs.

Her husband, passing gas, would putter around the house, noisily crashing into the chimney and against the chest of drawers. But after twenty years of marriage old lady Teston did not pay the least bit of attention to this racket. The old man enjoyed making a lot of noise and

scaring the cat beneath the furniture. Finally, having had a few laughs, he too would go to bed, covering his head with a madras nightcap with a turned-up brim.

In short, this woman led a nice easy life, and from time to time, when she was not swearing at Chaudrut, her *bête noire*, or when she was not deploring with the supervisor the rise in the price of her beloved beans, she petted Céline, her favorite, whose mop of chrome yellow hair interested her.

Céline was quite hesitant for the moment. Anatole was such a nasty individual! She remembered the way he had looked at the fat woman at the fair and she was beginning not to be amused by it. And to top it off he had spent all her savings and she no longer had a dress to wear or a scarf to wind in her frizzy hair. She thought about the miseries love caused, repeating to herself, "It would be nicer not to be in love. At least it wouldn't cost me anything!"

Moreover, at that particular moment she was being tortured by a bad case of envy. She had just met one of her former co-workers at the bindery, a girl named Rosine, whom everyone called "the Cow," a big gawk of a woman with grooves in her shoulders and very few teeth. Humpbacked, with a complexion as red as a tomato, she had nonetheless managed to catch a well-to-do gentleman who had given her a watch and several gold watch charms! They had chatted together on a doorstep and the affluence of this tramp had cut Céline to the heart. "Yes, my dear," the other woman had said, "I take up with men of substance; no more bruises and some money. You see, all you have to do is wish and you find lots of dopes loaded with money when you know how to go about it!"

Was it true then? In fact, hadn't she been followed by a prosperous gentleman wearing a black hat, and hadn't Gamel's wife taken as her lover a man who wore fancy leather boots? And in spite of the fact that she was nothing special, this woman had a second lover as well, a cad of the worst sort named Alfred, and she had her gentleman lover pay for nice dinners for this Alfred, whom she pretended was her brother. Everything considered, perhaps it was not very nice to take on a lover simply because of his money, but it seemed the right thing to do, especially since she needed to be outfitted with new clothes from head to toe. She even needed handkerchiefs and stockings.

She had suddenly felt an urgent need for the ideal situation, which

would allow her to order a drink anytime she was thirsty or buy herself knit mittens if she wanted.

She did not deceive herself, knowing full well that such an affair would be tedious at first. Respectable men would most certainly bore her. There would be times when she would have to hold her tongue, and the good times that she counted on having would probably be less amusing than those casual evenings when she and Anatole got drunk together. But, in the end, all that could not last. She was the one who was paying for those revelries, and it was only right that someone else pay for them now.

Désirée was less agitated. She was remembering the previous evening, and she felt quite drawn to Auguste. He had acted very courteously and had not even asked her to let him kiss her. That was even a little naïve on his part. Oh! she would have refused at first! But, in the end, this reserve on his part showed that he realized that he was dealing with a proper young woman and that he respected her. In any case, what was she risking? When she left work with her sister, Anatole always had Colombel join them, and that was a bore. They would remain standing there, one in front of the other, like two china dogs. Certainly, she asked for no more than to have a young man who would not go too far, who would submit to her caprices, and who would accede to her wishes.

Basically, however, all the reasons that she thought up served no purpose. Auguste pleased her and that was that. He was friendly, really a quite agreeable young man. When he came close to you, his breath did not knock you over with alcoholic fumes the way some others did; he was always carefully shaved, his clothes neat and clean. All in all, he was a charming young man.

Auguste too was recalling the least details of the previous evening as he gave pages a satin finish with the press. He remembered the times when her skirt brushed him, the jiggle of her earrings when she began to laugh, the pretty movement of her neck, which he followed with his eyes all the way down to her breast. He would never find a better girl than Désirée, only he understood that he could not try anything improper with her. He was in love, but trapped, without any chance of success unless he could earn enough for food, clothing, and babies! But for him, too, all this reasoning was a pure waste. Désirée seemed ravishing to him and struck his fancy more than any other girl he knew. It

was no use saying, "I don't want this. It's necessary to have a reason, my good man. It's stupid." He was attached to this female's petticoats. Whether he wanted her or not, he was bound to follow her wherever she went.

Like all men who cannot make up their minds, he ended up crying out, "Ah, so be it! Too bad! Let come what may!" Putting on his coat, he followed the crowd of workers who were leaving together in a group. Catching up with Désirée at the doorway, he suggested that they walk on together.

She accepted his offer. It pleased her all the more because her sister was going to meet Anatole at the dairy shop on the Rue Lecourbe, and for this reason she and her sister were going to have to part company once they reached the Boulevard des Invalides.

Auguste had prepared for the struggle. He was very nicely dressed, wearing his Sunday hat, a little punk-colored bowler, and a tie with pink stripes and yellow patches which he had just bought. He had decided to take her to a café for a glass of something special. Certainly, she would appreciate these efforts, and he would seem a well-mannered young man for not taking her to a wineshop.

Although the young girl was a little intimidated, she did appreciate this attention. At first she did not want to order anything they did not usually drink, fearing this might be too expensive, but he made her ask for a glass of Malaga wine, which to him seemed the ultimate luxury.

It was the absinthe hour. In the crowded café the waiters were beginning to light the chandeliers. Désirée's eyelids smarted. The leather bench on which she was sitting, reclining slightly, was so high that her short legs barely touched the floor. Auguste asked for a small stool. She blushed and said to him, "No! No! I don't need one." Nevertheless, when she had placed her feet on the stool, she thought to herself that Céline, drinking cheap vermouth with Anatole, was certainly not as comfortably seated as she, and she savoured the comfort of her gently settled body, the languor of an atmosphere warmed by pipe smoke.

Blinking her eyes against a sudden spell of dizziness, she watched a woman who had her head glued against a man's shoulder. Somewhat on the fat side, that particular girl had a habit of sticking out her tongue, and liked to scratch with her nails. From time to time she would gulp down a slug of absinthe and roll cigarettes with a nicotine-stained thumb. Soon Désirée could see her only through a haze. She was getting drunk, but not from drinking. It was so hot and there was such a strong

odor of alcohol that her brain was floating. The café was raucous and noisy, as is usual when men gather away from their wives in order to have some fun. The waiter, his hair streaming, trampling worn-out socks in shoes that were too wide, balanced trays and glasses on his palms. To the left of Auguste a man lit his pipe and, raising his eyes to the ceiling, blew smoke rings while brushing bits of tobacco from his breeches. Card players cried out, "Ten in clubs! Twenty in diamonds!" From another table came the annoying clicking noise of dominos being shaken. A man seated on a chair leaned forward, spread his legs, and spit. A soldier with a silver chain attached to the first buttonhole of his overcoat cried out as loud as he could, "Alphonse, a beer!" Then there was a clatter of saucers, the bark of a dog, the greeting of a drinker who, having turned on his stool, waved to a new arrival and then immediately turned back to his card game. Auguste had taken Désirée's hand and was squeezing it gently. She let him, dazed by the clamor of the voices. He was afraid of pinching her cornelian and silver rings. She awakened. "Oh! My hands are filthy!" she said, attempting to withdraw her little hand from his grasp. But Auguste refused to let go, declaring that she was wrong; it was his hands that were dirty. "Oh, man!" he added, "Anyone who works cannot expect to have fingers of glossy paper." And he told her a very curious story. Just recently he had gone down the Rue Neuve-des-Petits-Champs where he had seen some oil-skin gloves in a perfume shop window. The label next to the gloves read: "Venetian evening gloves." The thought of women wearing gloves to bed made them both laugh very heartily. He added that these gloves appeared to be as stiff as boards, which prompted her blithe remark that that might prove awkward when a person wanted to scratch an itch.

Burnt matchsticks and old score sheets made of playing cards lay scattered about on the floor. A dripping umbrella was creating a small mud puddle in the yellow sand. Désirée was wearing new boots with rather high heels and she wanted the umbrella folded so that the young man might see her pretty shoes. He really did admire them and even became a bit daring, saying he would like to have those boots between his knees, a remark which got him two smacks on the head. He invited her to have another glass of the Malaga wine, but she refused, saying it went straight to her head, and she had to be careful. Auguste pretended that it was as inoffensive as whey, but she was firm and drank no more. Since he did not have much money anyway, he did not insist.

About this time some guitar players entered, pinching ham knuckles with their fingers or rasping red boxes along their thighs. Playing that unbearable music invented by the Italians, they stopped after each piece to pass around a hat. Feeling generous, Auguste gave them three sous. Désirée began to fear her lover was something of a spendthrift. He reassured her, saying that it was simply the joy of being close to her that was making him do such foolish things. But he told himself it would have been better to tell her that he did not have the heart to refuse to give these musicians something because they seemed so poor. Women, when they themselves are not the subject of the moment, are always sensitive to kind and generous acts. Then they chatted about music. Désirée admitted to him that she adored sentimental songs, the kind that touch a person's soul, with little birds taking wing, growing trees, and weeping lovers. He said he preferred patriotic songs, those that stir the blood and where it is a question of the tricolored flag and Alsace. He knew one called "The Child's Letter," a song so sad it would make a person weep. At any rate, neither of the two young people detested such silly songs as "I Don't Dare," and "I'm from Châlons," which were amusing but admittedly not very poetic.

Désirée was very well acquainted with the songs at the café-dance halls and revealed she often frequented the Gaîté dance hall on Sunday evenings. Ah! They could really go on a spree at that place! Alphonse was really funny when he sang "The Butcher Boys," and there was a young man with a waxed mustache who swooned with his eyes closed as he sang:

Let your dear memory charm me to death,
Alas! My faded heart would not
 be able to chase it away;
Ah! Let me shed
A last tear, darling!

Auguste spoke to her of the Bobino, which he claimed had a better show. She said she had never gone there, mainly because its seats were too expensive. This prompted him to offer to take her there whenever she liked. After at first refusing, she eventually accepted his invitation. Suddenly he had permission to really court her. Ecstatic with joy, he leaped and hopped about gaily as they proceeded down the road. Realizing that Désirée did not want him to accompany her all the way to the door, he took a bold step and stopped her in a corner where the

street sweepers stored their brooms. For several moments he eyed her voraciously, then suddenly squeezed her tightly against himself and gave her a dry kiss on the cheek. She ran off, threatening him with her finger, while he stood there licking his lips like a cat that has just swallowed a canary.

Chapter Seven

After Désirée spread a towel over the folded shirts, her father abruptly sat down on the recalcitrant suitcase, an old chest covered in shedding wild boarskin and outfitted with copper latches that needed oiling. Jumping and falling back together, Désirée and Céline threw themselves on top the suitcase with their father. Vatarde held the lock spring. The key turned gratingly. As he strapped down the belts, he cautioned his two daughters, “You understand now, don’t you, girls? You take good care of your mother. Mme Teston will come by to keep her company evenings. I’ll write to you as soon as I find a place to stay.”

Overcome by emotion, he suddenly kissed the two girls. His sister, Mme Cabouat, lay dying at Amiens, and he was leaving in order to be present when she gave up the ghost and her money. He had not left his district of Paris in fifteen years and was getting ready for this trip as if it were a crossing fraught with danger and peril. He kissed his daughters’ foreheads once more, embraced the greasy braids of his fat Eulalie, and wishing to be done with all the sentimentality of departing, he picked up his suitcase, hoisted it onto his shoulder, and left for the Gare du Nord.

When he had disappeared around the bend in the road, Désirée left the window and gave a sweep of the broom to the floor. Leaning against the wall, Céline lost her anxious look and suddenly all her pent-up feelings came spilling out like a spring freshet. Oh, yes! she was going to get rid of Anatole! She had found a replacement for him: a tall, slender, distinguished looking gentleman with an average face and sporting a goatee. His clothes were new and carefully brushed, and he wore a shiny black stovepipe hat, a ring set with a turquoise, and a hasp watch. His button boots were of kid leather and he smoked cigars which probably cost at least two sous apiece.

She had to set her mind to getting rid of Anatole one way or

another. Once she had danced with her new lover, he would get the hint to clear out. He already seemed to suspect something because he was constantly prowling around the neighborhood. A smack or two and that would probably finish the matter. A little soreness and she would be rid of him. The sole difficulty to resolve was to make sure she covered up her face well enough to keep from getting it marked black and blue.

Désirée was speechless. For her sister to dump a drunk like Anatole was not unusual, but for her to take a rich man for her lover was almost unbelievable. "What kind of job did this man have then?" Céline answered that he must work in an office because his fingernails were trimmed and his hands white. However, he might also be a painter because his thumb was sometimes stained pink and green. "Perhaps he paints pictures," suggested Désirée. But Céline did not think this could be, since he did not have long hair and did not wear a velvet jacket.

In any case, Désirée thought all these changes scarcely proper. She did not see anything wrong in living with a working class man without first getting married; that was simply a bit casual. But for Céline to let herself be used by the scummy likes of the upper class was practically tantamount to becoming a whore. Certainly, it was a taint on the family honor. Céline was making a mistake, but her sister told her she was still too young to understand anything about men, and she resolved not to tell her anything else, saving the news about her new outfit and new hat to surprise her.

However, another problem arose. Désirée was not capable of putting their mother to bed by herself. Her arms were not very strong and the poor old woman weighed a ton. Céline was going to be forced to stay home nights until her father's return or at least not leave until their mother had been properly put to bed. All that was a little inconvenient because, in short, when a girl wants to feed a man a line, she must have an opportunity to fill his eyes with the swing of her hips, the languor of her smile, the suggestiveness of a look, all the cliché-ridden tricks of the trade. So she thought of Mme Teston as a Saviour, a female Messiah announcing every evening the coming of the long-hoped-for moment when she would be able to crack bawdy jokes at her leisure in some of the local dives.

The wait was made more difficult by the fact that the house had been cheerless since Vatarde's departure. They all missed the gurgling of the fat man's smouldering pipe and the splash of his saliva in the

spittoon. They all lacked a sense of direction, especially Céline who really did not like doing the mending. Twiddling her fingers, she would go from the table to the window and lean over the railing to glance down the Rue Vandamme.

Their house was located near the intersection of the Rue Vandamme and the Rue du Château, a corner decorated with red railings and blue sheet-metal grapes. Their own room was situated at the back of the house overlooking the tracks of the West rail line. A suspension bridge with a six-foot grillwork cut across the tracks at this particular spot. Beneath the bridge there was a passageway for vehicles, topped with a wooden tower ornamented with clocks.

At first, the two girls had found the commotion, the constant shriek of metal and moving machines, all very amusing. Now that they had grown accustomed to the noise, they found the principal inconvenience in being so close to the railroad came from having to cope with the steady infiltration of coal dust and black smoke into their room.

As happens to persons who lean out of train coach doorways when a train is departing from the station, their hair was often filled with cinders that would make the comb teeth shriek whenever they ran a comb through it. They had to rake their hair with a fine-tooth comb every day of the week. But Vatarde remained deaf to their tales of woe. Because of these very inconveniences the rent for this lodging was very cheap. He had become perfectly accustomed to the whistles and horn blasts. And, in any case, his window opened onto the Rue Vandamme. "A little dust in your ears won't kill you," he would answer. "All you have to do is scrub a little harder with the soap!"

"How about playing some cards?" suggested Céline, spreading on the table a pack of cards greasy enough to season noodles. But she did not even have time to separate the red from the black. There was a sudden pounding on the door. The door flew open and there stood Anatole. They were speechless.

"What's the matter?" he growled. "Why are you looking at me like someone who sees a roof tile clattering down? What good will that do you? Yes, of course, it's me, Anatole, better known as that Handsome Brute. I learned from the wine seller downstairs that your father was gone. You don't like for me to come when he is here, so now that he is gone, here I am."

When she had recovered from her surprise, Désirée led them into her room so that they would not awaken her mother who was dozing in

her chair with her head resting on her shoulder. Anatole had been drinking and was in a very gay mood. As soon as the door was closed he kissed his sweetheart on the temple. He said hello to Désirée and, leaning on his elbows on the crossbar of the window frame, exclaimed, "Very nice!"

Céline, who had been expecting a volley of slaps, glanced at him in dazed thankfulness.

"Very nice!" he repeated. "It's really quite cheery here. Hey! The train for Versailles is about to depart! My God, but it's hot in here!" And overcome by an unusual feeling of tenderness, he pulled Céline toward him by the waist and had her lean over next to him on the window railing.

Low-hanging, black clouds parted with loud booming cracks. The sky spread out above like an immense surplice of a very sickly color, with lightning bolts seeming to nail its hiked-up skirts in place. The atmosphere was permeated with an odor of burned coal, heated cast iron, steam, soot, and oily smoke. In the distance, starry pinpoints of orange and white light, reflections from gaslights and signal lanterns marking open rail lines, swam in a yellow fog enveloping the train station.

Behind the station platform the sky seemed full of darker and more threatening clouds. A round clock dial above two lighted windows glowed like a moon with two black bars across it.

Almost directly across from the window a mass of buildings, the bottoms of which disappeared into the shadows, stood with the outline of their roofs silhouetted against the darkness which grew less intense the higher one looked. Then, squeezed between fences and shanties, cabbage patches, and clusters of trees, the rail line spread on into infinity, its path marked by rails glistening beneath lantern rays like thin streams of water.

Howling and whistling piercingly, two locomotives maneuvered on the tracks, searching their way. One of them proceeded slowly, belching showers of sparks from its smokestack, pissing dribbles of steam, letting burning cinders fall chunk by chunk from its open gut. Then a cloud of red steam enveloped it from top to bottom; its gaping mouth flamed. A black shadow, alternately bending down and rising up, passed in front of the furnace glare, stuffing shovelful of coke down the beast's maw.

It roared and grumbled, blowing stronger, its belly round and sweating, and in the growling of its sides, the clanking noises of the

shovel striking its iron mouth sounded more clearly. The other engine ran along in a whirlwind of smoke and flames, calling to the switchman to shift it over to a track going to the storage area in order to comply with the orange disk signaling in the distance. It slowed down, shooting jets of steam, causing the skirt of its tender, marked with a ruby red light, to sway on the zigzag joining the two tracks.

A small green light indicating a fork in the track glimmered at the side of the railbed; whistle blasts, sometimes impatiently strident, sometimes very imploringly bass, crossed through the night air.

From time to time, a trumpet-like blast sounded, echoed, grew weak, and then once again blared. The gateman closed the barriers. An express train was approaching in the distance. A fierce snorting, a shrill cry repeated three times, cut through the night. Then two signal torches came down the track like two enormous eyes, making the rails in front glisten as the train rumbled along toward the station. The earth shook and in a white haze sprinkled with flashes of flame, a shower of dust and ashes, a gush of sparks, the long train shot into the railyard with a frightful din of clanking metal, shrieking boilers, and moving pistons. It filed past the window, its thundering gradually diminishing until only the three red lights of the caboose could be seen and only the jerky noise of freight cars jumping over rail switches could be heard.

Some men moved about in confusion along the route over which the train had just passed. The signal lines grated. A splotch of blood made a hole in the darkness of the sky, sheltering the forbidden track. The barriers were opened once again, allowing carts to pass.

Anatole reflected. He was just at the point of meeting success in his attempt to seduce a young girl in a neighboring workshop. This poor being limped and possessed a pale and sickly face lit up by large sad eyes. She had probably remained a virgin simply because no one had wanted her. In any case, she was a very able worker who earned good wages and supported her widowed mother, who was often sick. Anatole was correct in thinking that she ought to be affectionate and would not refuse him the money necessary to drink his fill of beer. For this reason it had not upset him to see Céline cavort with someone else. Now that he had run through her savings she could go do whatever she pleased!

For that reason, he was in the best of moods that evening. He was as wet as a cork, just drunk enough to be friendly and pleasant. Very content with himself, he felt irresistible and stood like a drooping lily,

ready to reel off a whole spool of romantic nonsense to the first woman who came along.

Standing by the window, he bobbed and twisted, beginning to like to sprinkle his long tirades with a deluge of observations touching upon and completely covering all subjects, from the copper-bossed engines of the Gare du Nord, which he claimed were nicer looking than those across the way, to the wine sold in wineshops and love, whose virtues he extolled. When the only response his remarks drew from the two girls consisted of monosyllables and short exclamations, he shut up for several minutes. Then, abruptly addressing himself to Céline, he asked, "What is it that makes you feel like you have to run around after upper-class men?"

She blushed. He cut short all her replies, continuing, "It's really sad! You love a woman, sacrifice for her, then comes the day when she tells you, 'Oh, shut up! Go sit on it! You bore me. Do you want to or not? Is that it? I'm in love with a man who wears gloves and whose pants are not worn out. I want to ride in cabriolets. I've eaten enough hard-boiled eggs. I want oysters from Ostende, and maybe the little forks to get them out of the shell!' Well, too bad! But if I wanted to take the trouble, I could put an end to your new man. But no, I don't want to hurt the bourgeoisie. So then, it's all settled. We're going to part company? Well, good! And politely, without any kicks in the butt. I don't start knocking a woman around unless she tries to leave me. I know it's stupid, because no matter who starts, it is always the same thing. But the reason I do things like that is for the sake of appearances. Hell, yes! Don't you understand? Just suppose I meet Colombel and Michon, and they say to me, 'Hey Now! What are you doing about your little gal?' I tell them 'Someone else is taking care of her now!' And I seem like an idiot, while tomorrow I can tell them, 'Rumors! I've decided to get rid of her!' You see, the difference is very plain. And then, I've noticed women don't have any respect for a man until he has sent a herd of women packing. And, above all, a person must preserve his prestige! First of all, I'm a pretty decent fellow, the result of a good education! You know, there are some who say to the pissy women they want to send to the devil, 'I'm leaving for Algeria. Goodbye, my pretty Andalousian. Don't weep. I'll send you some dates.' And all the while they are thinking, 'Count on it, it's going to rain!' Now, is that nice? No, isn't that so? I'm not like that. I always give my girl a week's notice

that I'm leaving. That's being frank and chic, the way I see it! Now give me a little kiss, darling."

Céline was completely flabbergasted. So, Anatole did not care for her at all and was leaving her without any regrets. She knew he was a dirty cad, a no-good, but she would never have believed he could be so horrible. When a woman lets a man know it is all over between them, the man should at least get a little upset and angry! If not, what pleasure is there left for the woman? When she had begun to break away from her previous lovers, they all became jealous, followed her, and slapped her around. In letting herself be seduced by a proper gentleman she had been made happy by the thought that Anatole would carry on like the devil. Oh, yes! He would be a lot of trouble. He would follow her and knock her around along the Avenue du Maine, but in the end, after enduring his beating, she would be able to say to him, "All your blows are in vain, buddy. I'm walking out on you all the same." But if he laughs and answers "I don't give a damn!" what was the use of playing this sort of dirty trick on him? Anatole was nasty, but only when she refused to lend him money. No heart and no money! A guy like that was enough to make a person disgusted with all men!

Anatole twisted around graciously and repeated in a very innocent voice, "Kiss me, darling." Turning purple with rage, her blood boiling, Céline challenged him, "You've finished talking haven't you? Well, then. All right, it's true. I've found a rich man who's a whole lot better than you!"

Anatole broke into a wide grin. "Now don't get angry," he said. "That doesn't help anything. Let's be reasonable about this matter. I love you and you love me. I tell you I love you and you try to blush and lower your eyes. But all women do that to coax their men to their side. You're saying to yourself, 'I'm going to get him where I want him.' But I tell myself the same thing. And in the end, by God, whoever is the cleverest tricks the other! And then, after all, nothing was broken! I've respected your bod and it's none the worse for wear. You're still beautiful in the moonlight because that sickly guy who wears two overcoats, one on top of the other, is wearing out the pavement to catch you when you come down the Boulevard de Montrouge. When something ceases to give pleasure, it's time to give it up, so why shouldn't I let you go now? There's no reason to be afraid that you will wither away on the counter, since there's already a buyer! No, now hold on! Do you want me to say it? You were wrong, not really suit-

able. You turned your nose up at everything. You wanted this, you wanted that. You were hungry, you weren't hungry, damn! Since we ate off the same plate, it was necessary to hurry you up to pitch into the stew. I would bolt down my food while you picked away at yours. I would finish first and no longer feel like eating. I'm thirsty, for example, and do you offer me anything? No? Are you mad? Well, then, goodbye. My greetings to everyone!"

Anatole quickly disappeared down the street while Céline stared stupidly at the floor in front of her. After a while she cried a bit, tears trickling down her cheeks like silvery pills. Désirée had to put their mother to bed by herself because her sister, choking back her sobs, had collapsed by the window where she sat peering vacantly out at what was happening in the street below.

Night had fallen and it was pitch black. There were no more trains plowing through the darkness. Not a sound was to be heard except the distant hooting, like a sob in the darkness, of an engine near the outer-circle train station. From time to time gusts of wind rushed across the telegraph wires, making them vibrate with a shrill clicking sound which faded away like a doleful moan. Then, rolling deep and full through the night air, came the blasts from departing locomotives. A switchman in his shack under the bridge cracked open a window and a ray of escaping light flitted across the jumble of ivy covering the walls of the shack. The window closed once more; a thin thread of pink and gold light broke on the cluster of foliage, zigzagged rapidly, and then all became black once more. To the left two men seated on a bench were chatting together. From time to time the light of their glowing pipes revealed glimpses of faces, noses, and fingertips. Farther away, lost in the night, seven or eight engines belching smoke had their backs turned so that their gaping furnace mouths seemed like so many red moons lined up in a row beside each other. Elsewhere the yellow moons of the signal lights attached to the train platform and the bridge rose higher, still dominated by the shining disk of the real moon, which, emerging from the clouds as if from the shadowy waters of a dark lake, powdered the whole railroad yard with silvery iron filings.

Chapter Eight

Désirée was not happy with the breakup of her sister and Anatole. Céline had become bad-tempered and sullen, as prickly as a holly leaf. Until now she had considered it quite natural that Désirée stay at home while she ran off to join her man in the night spots of the Montrouge quarter. But now the younger girl also wanted to leave the house to have some fun in the evening. Much wrangling resulted. One evening at supper Céline abruptly declared she would not be able to clear the table or wash the dishes; she had a date at eight o'clock. Désirée, a little upset and exasperated by her sister's bad humor, declared that she too had a date and would not have time to dry the plates and glasses. Chewing a last mouthful, Céline had already disappeared out the open door onto the landing, so the younger girl, consenting to stay in her place by their mother, was forced to remain home and wait until old lady Teston came to free her.

As a result of all the wrangling caused by Céline's stubbornness, Mama Vatarad went to bed sooner than usual. They had to hoist her into bed at eight o'clock now. At least she did not complain, since, like all those who are suffering, she was happy just to change places from time to time, lifting her nose like a worried animal, wondering why the days seemed so much shorter now.

During this period Auguste began to hate Céline. He had to wait long hours to see Désirée and felt she was very stupid to let Céline push her around like that. Selfish like all lovers, he cared little about Mme Vatarad's health, even though it was not good. He saw and understood only one thing: Désirée was scarcely ever free and then only for a few minutes in the evening. And he was right when he told her that their opportunities to meet would be even fewer than at present once her father returned. It was now or never for them to get together while her

father was still away. If they did not take advantage of this opportunity, how would they ever get to know one another?

Céline guessed what Auguste was telling her sister and it made her angry. At that moment, moreover, she was irritable and bad-tempered. She was beginning to think that her gentleman lover was far too well behaved. Sitting down beside her, he would chat about nothing and look around at the sky with a sorrowful air; in short, his behavior exasperated her. Inwardly, she thought he was silly, but she returned home every evening, humiliated by his lack of sexual aggressiveness.

Old lady Teston was really very helpful in this situation. Moved by the unhappiness of Céline, her favorite, she would come at dusk and settle herself beside the bed of the patient with dropsy. Sitting there mending her Alexandre's socks, she would talk to herself, solemnly relating the latest scandals, and from time to time dozing fitfully.

At ten o'clock she would get up, put her needles, thread, and thimble back into her sewing basket, cover the half-extinguished embers of the fire with ashes, tuck in her friend, put out the coal-oil lamp, and go out to look for her husband, who was invariably smoking his pipe, his rear end resting on a corner post, his back leaning against one of the double doors at the main entrance.

And then, one after the other, the two girls would return home, taking the key from under the doormat, replacing it afterwards if one of them had not yet returned. One day old lady Teston, who closed her eyes to these escapades, told them they were being stupid because, in their haste to decamp, they were no longer eating properly; instead of thick, hearty soup they were dipping old crusts into bouillon from a small corner restaurant and eating odds and ends from the delicatessen.

"You're going to ruin your health!" she warned. But the two girls, driven by their passions, replied that they would be all right. Their system was, to say the least, simple. They would leave the ham hock or hog jowl on its paper, making one less dish to wash. A quick swipe of a towel across the table and they were through. And then, since Céline insisted on it with diabolical tenacity, they ate not only larded veal and Italian cheese, but also pan-fried fish and mussels swimming in a white sauce, which they obtained very cheaply from the fry shop at old man Auvergne's place located two paces from the apartment. In disagreement about everything else, the two sisters were in perfect accord about how to avoid the problems of preparing meals and cleaning up afterwards.

Céline continued to be the first to leave. She was always supposed to be coming back in a few minutes, but instead would always return very late, which annoyed the concierge and caused her to lose all respect for the girl. Désirée would remain at the house until eight o'clock; then she too would hurry down the stairs, leaving old lady Teston to drink her cassis as she ran off to join Auguste, who was walking up and down the Rue du Cotentin.

Then they would start off on long excursions across the quarter, nearly always ending up on the Avenue du Maine, which they would follow to the Rue de la Gaité. If this street merits its name, the Avenue du Maine is quite the opposite, giving off an aura of mournful sadness. It is as dark as the inside of an oven along this street, and the shops close up at eight o'clock. Here and there a public urinal, the mouth of which bubbles with chlorine, softly gurgles, lighted by a gaslight; then the street lights, located between slender, disheveled trees, become spaced further apart. Ten paces from the street strains of vaudeville music are borne on a breath of wind, and the clamor of a whole district carousing comes up this street with its softly glowing lights, joining two black avenues.

There, once dusk falls, lamps are lit and spread out on the second floors of buildings; four red lanterns, one in a police station and three in tobacco shops, add a bright purple glow to the roughened plaster surface of the walls of the buildings. Sometimes another red light flames brightly outside a cheap bar marked by a street sign depicting an enormous mug held by a hand fastened to the plaster wall, a mug filled with blood once it is lit.

The street was full that evening. Cries of delight came from the open windows of the dance halls and from the half-opened doors of the wine-shops. Groups were clustered in the road, bands of children swarmed about playing hide-and-seek, threatened with a couple of slaps when they grabbed onto the clothing of the adults. The crowd grew more dense near the Jamin concert hall, and especially near the former Grados dance hall. At the door of this particular dancing saloon a member of the Parisian military police bristled threateningly while young fellows with tall, puffed-out hats, ruffled shirts, wing collars and no ties, took long drags on their cigarettes and called names at the girls wrapped from head to foot in long raincoats. Out on the sidewalk couples walked along, momentarily caught in the yellow and green light coming from wide-mouthed jars in a pharmacist's shop. Then the

Plaisance bus came, its headlights splashing cherry-red light across the white croups of the horses pulling it. The milling groups reformed, with breaks appearing here and there caused by a line of people coming out of the Montparnasse Theater, spreading out into a broad fan, which wrapped itself around a cart driven by a shouting and cursing orange vendor.

The cheap dives gave off odors of alcohol and wine. Through an open window came the click of billiard balls. People ran after one another and pummeled each other with their fists in gestures of friendship. Drooling thirteen-year-old urchins stood around smoking cigarette butts. The stomach of a grossly fat woman bobbed up and down beneath her greasy apron. Families stood gaping in ecstasy in front of a pastry shop display window.

Fingers ravaged broken eclairs that were pouring out their cream fillings. Other fingers tried the weight of soft almond puddings barely held together by a fragile, limp crust. Mouths drank in foamy St.-Honoré mousses. Molars closed on morsels of baked custard spread out on a platter.

The turnovers and tarts were replaced as quickly as they were bought. The cross-hatched crusts of steaming-hot pies bent beneath the weight of waves of thick juices welling up to the surface. The tops of the brioches were spotted with wart-like bumps. Pastry horns filled with white cream burst their seams. Rum babas fell apart, rum leaking down their sides. All the preserves and jams ran, overtaking each other, stopping once they had met, hesitating, then running more quickly once they had collided and mixed.

Cheap wine, black-currant liqueur, and brandy were splashed on the zinc counter-top by gay patrons. The street was filled with men wiping their mouths and spitting purple phlegm on the pavement.

Auguste suggested to Désirée that they go to the Folies-Bobino. The theater was barely surviving and was open now only every second or third evening. Désirée, who feared that it might close for good, wanted to enjoy its show at least once in her life, so she accepted Auguste's invitation.

She admired the theater entrance very much. Its architecture was quite complex, a mixture of Siamese, Japanese, and other styles, cross-bred with the imbecilic fantasy of the architect. The whole structure was chocolate-brown and slate-gray in color and was adorned with bas-reliefs of cupids, with buttocks three times too large, scraping cello

strings. A yellow woman dancing on the pagoda-like roof, holding a gas jet the shape of a lyre in her hand, amazed Désirée.

Then she entered a garden planted with broomsticks, vases, and statues of women crowned with leaves, holding cornucopias in their arms. All these statues were dislocated, one-armed, mangled, or one-eyed. All had ugly ulcers on their noses, white plasters on their throats, green leprous sores on their foreheads, and all of them leaned more one way than the other. Through the grime and disrepair they smiled invitingly, extending a sad welcome with lips soiled by unthinking brats. The door opened and she saw a spacious hall in front of her. A woman flinging her arms about and bellowing in a roaring din stood on a wide stage decorated with an eternal forest.

It was an expensive show, fifteen sous to enter, with drinks extra. Auguste decided almost immediately that they would not be doing this kind of thing often, especially since they did not even have good seats. The help piled everyone up like onions and placed the glasses of black coffee and beer on a board that formed part of the back of the seat in front. Désirée almost put her heck out of joint trying to look up in the air. Unfortunately, the balcony was right over her head, and the trampling of boots and other sounds overhead rolled right down on her. People cried out, "Encore! Do the jig again!" And an actor dressed as an Englishman, with green polka-dot pants, red sideburns, and a gray hat, made his legs fly, jumping straight up and kicking his heels together. Then, bringing his knees together like a knock-kneed person, he jumped out unexpectedly and fell back, his thighs spread apart like an upside-down V. He did all sorts of contortions, sweating, crying out pathetic hurrahs, cutting capers, waltzing on tiptoe, rocking back on his feet, cavalcading and prancing about, his arms twirling, his head thrown about like a bell-clapper. Following a short intermission, a placard appeared on which the name "Regina" was written. The orchestra leader lifted his baton, the musicians blew, and a woman made her entrance on the stage. Standing in front of the prompter's pit, she bowed like a marionette and began singing, from time to time kicking aside the bothersome train of her gown. She was wearing a pink dress with a very low neckline, and her bare, red arms were whitened with powder. Her chin cast a shadow over the lower portion of her neck. She accompanied the hoarse sounds of her throat with four gestures: one hand on her heart and the other glued alongside her leg; her right arm out in front of her body and her left behind her; the same stance in

reverse; and lastly, both hands stretched out toward the public. She spouted one verse to the audience on the left, another to the right. Her eyes opened and closed according to whether the music she was pouring out was supposed to touch people's souls or make them gay. From where Désirée and Auguste were seated, a considerable distance from the stage, her wide-open mouth gaped like a black hole when she howled out the last verses of the refrain.

For a moment, while the orchestra played the ritournelle, she coughed slightly, showing an unsuspected profile, ogled the chief violinist, looked down at her eight-button gloves, the ends of which were stiffened by the starch of her sweat. Then, leaning over the orchestra, she bawled out as loud as she could, her swinging arms revealing a sort of black plume of smoke floating in the half-seen hollows of her armpits.

The whole theater went wild, breaking into frenzied cheering. Bowing, smiling, throwing kisses to the crowd, her dress rippled as she twisted her hips. The silk of the lower half glistened as if it were newer than the material at her bust which was less directly in line with the ramp lights.

She poured out her last note. The wooden benches resounded with the noise of beer mugs keeping time with the charge blasted by a trombone. The woman took a second bow, and as she bent low, her nipples came into full view from behind the dike of her bust, the cleavage of her full breasts glistening with perspiration. Gathering up her skirt, she glanced about haughtily and took a few turns across the stage, before finally fleeing, deafened by a rapidfire scatter of bravos and encores.

Désirée went pale with admiration. First of all, the couplets of some of the songs had expressed such poignant emotions: a woman weeping for her dead child and cursing war. A person cannot help shedding a few tears upon hearing such moving things; then too, the singer, with her bracelets, pendants, and long, trailing skirt, seemed as beautiful as a queen to her. She realized that her cheeks were heavily covered with pancake makeup and her eyes outlined with pencil-liner, but in the stage lights, in that dazzling setting, she was nonetheless enchanting with her luxuriously pampered skin and painted silks. Auguste too was an enthusiastic admirer of this woman. This impossible dream, the vision of a poor, honest man possessing for himself for a quarter of an hour a girl so much in the public view, so bursting with affected youth and grace, troubled his brain, and he contemplated the empty stage,

eyes wide-open, mouth gaping. Désirée found his openmouthed admiration a little annoying and pinched him. He gave a jump as if he had been sleeping; then, confronted by Désirée's smile of amusement at seeing him so easily startled, he too began to laugh and squeezed her hand.

The brass section of the orchestra began blaring again, and a young man, dressed in a magpie-tail suit, with a lowcut vest, a shirt adorned with little pipes, and badly tailored black pants, came forward, and after a bow gently bellowed this mournful song:

When we sing of cherry blossom time,
The gay nightingales and mocking blackbirds
Will all be celebrating!
Beautiful women will be thinking foolish things,
And lovers will have the sun in their hearts!
When we sing of cherry blossom time, etc.

This bad-tempered individual was the darling of the working-class girls of Montrouge. Small, pale, thin, of poor build, he seemed much younger than his thirty years. He stressed to the utmost the distastefulness of his tenor voice, rising at the end of each couplet to string out very long notes that the women in the audience found appealing.

Now it was Auguste who was upset. He thought Désirée was ogling the singer too much, and not daring to risk pinching her in return, he pushed her with his elbow as if by accident. She looked at him out of the corner of her eye, and thinking him a little demanding, deliberately made a point of crying out for an encore when this Céladon of the low-class concert hall left the stage.

Auguste was preparing to swallow a sip from his glass of black coffee, a brew so watery it no longer had the look or taste of coffee, when a woman on his left, trying to wipe a brat's nose, knocked into his elbow and caused him to dump half his glass on his pants. Désirée burst out laughing. The woman maintained that coffee was good for getting rid of spots. Furious, Auguste chewed on his beard as he sponged up the mess with his handkerchief. His face flushed with embarrassment and anger while Désirée split her sides with laughter. It was silly, but she was one of those who break into laughter in the street when a passer-by stumbles and falls. Eventually, however, she assisted him by taking a jug and cleaning his trousers herself. Then she leaned

her shoulder against Auguste and he forgot his mishap. His knee was drying now, and the disagreeable feeling that he had at first experienced when the cold water filtered through the cloth had disappeared.

The show was supposed to close with a little sketch, the usual sort with three characters: a young woman of the world disguises herself as a servant in order to test her suitor, then plays fickle with another man in order to stimulate her lover's jealousy, and ends up by marrying him in a finale dance boisterously sung in chorus by the actors and the audience.

The action always unfolded in the same manner, enlivened by the gibes of the servant girl, her use of the familiar "tu," the flat, cracking sounds of her slaps, the senseless bell-ringing, the impatient bewilderment of the master, the drinking song bellowed out in front of a liter of reddened water and a bird of golden cardboard. Everyone got up and began heading toward the exits, paying little attention to whomever they might bump in the process. It was eleven o'clock. All the public places were emptying at the same time and the road was crowded with people. Some, in an uproar, headed into a tobacco shop in order to light their cigarettes and pipes. Near the stuffed white rabbit seated in the sordid store window of a pastry shop, the shop "of the little pot" filled up with drunks downing glasses of tart verjuice liqueur; the Hôtel-de-Ville bus rolled slowly by, its greenish-brown carriage topped by a coachman cracking his whip and crying out every few seconds, "Eh, giddy up!" Auguste took Désirée to the Waffle House where they collapsed on the broad benches and had two glasses of beer with two waffles for ten sous. But she wanted to return home; the odor of the fried golden-brown dough mixed with the smoky smell of the small restaurant was suffocating her. They left and he took her home, listening to her hum the refrains of the popular songs she had picked up in passing.

One of the songs kept coming back to her and she very softly sang some of its lines as they walked along:

Did you see her under the elms
Or admiring herself in the stream
With the girls of the hamlet?
Did you see her some evening?
My little Rosine. Alas! I have lost her!
I have lost her! Lost her!

Auguste was pleased that Désirée had a good voice, but he might have preferred that she pay attention to all the little things he was trying to tell her. Finally she grew impatient at trying to figure out the tune without any help from Auguste and exclaimed, "That's enough for tonight! I will think of the tune tomorrow morning when I wake up." And she began to jump about on her lover's arm as they proceeded down a dark, narrow little street filled with shadowy couples. Suddenly Auguste remembered a little gambit he had heard used by an officer when he was in the army; he stopped Désirée and asked her, "Do you know the Maltese Cross?"

She did not know what that meant.

Then he told her to close her eyes and, with zigzags representing the points of the cross, kissed her, first on the forehead, then on her eyelids, then on the tip of her nose, on her cheeks, on her lips, and finally on the chin.

She protested, shuddering when his lips touched hers. But in reality she enjoyed it very much.

Nevertheless, she finally made him stop when she felt herself growing weak. "No! Stop!" she said to him. "If you wish to kiss me, give me a friendly peck, here, like this." And she kissed him quickly and briskly on the cheek.

He would have preferred a more exquisite, slower kiss, but some sneering laughter disturbed them. Some women on the prowl, hunting from behind the walls and gates, were taking aim on the men strolling by, attracting them to their sides with crude allusions. Désirée became embarrassed. As drunk as skunks, the effects of their drinking made these girls clown about; one of them, leaning against a window, made an inviting gesture to a carpenter in distress by a signpost at the corner. Désirée ran off, dragging Auguste with her. This sordid sort of behavior was spoiling her happy mood. They walked without speaking to the Rue Vandamme. When they arrived at the apartment, Auguste waited for the door to be opened. Just before it closed once more, Désirée sent him a parting smile through the bars of the grating. Then she disappeared into the darkness, and he turned around slowly to begin the trek back to his humble lodging.

Along the way he began thinking of the money he owed his friends. All this extravagance was ruining his budget, and he felt Désirée, like other girls, could have at least offered to pay her half of the expenses.

Chapter Nine

With her hands behind her head, Désirée delicately fished with her fingers for the hairpins hidden in the billowing mass of her hair. As she placed them one beside the other on the simulated marble of the mantelpiece, she kept remembering the Folies-Bobino and the darkened street where Auguste had kissed her. Her eyes grew moist and a shudder ran up her back at the memory of the wet heat of his lips pressed against hers. Whether it had been right or wrong to allow him to hug and kiss her like that, it was none the less true that, in the darkness, those foolish actions produced strange longings in her. But the pleasure of moments such as those was not going to last. That very morning they had received a letter from her father. Since his sister seemed unlikely to die anytime soon, he was going to return home by train. The situation was becoming trying. News of their father's return did not trouble Céline, since he let her do as she wished anyway. When she slipped out of the house, still chewing a mouthful of food, their father let her go. But he would never ever consent to let Désirée go off on her own when supper was finished. Of course, she could fall back on that ruse used by working-class girls when they find themselves hampered by their parents who, not because of any particular rigid moral considerations but rather for practical reasons, come to look for their daughters at quitting time in order to take them in hand and lead them home without trouble. Girls in this situation leave during the day with their lovers and do not return to the shop until a few minutes before quitting time. But if the supervisor closed her eyes to this sort of daily cheating on working hours because the girls who did so were runabouts and good-for-nothings anyway, she would certainly not allow one of her best workers to go off to spend the whole day carousing with her lover in some cabaret or furnished room. She would undoubtedly tell Vatarad. In truth, evenings would be better. She would leave the Débonnaire works

at seven in the evening, but instead of returning home she would eat with Auguste. Later, at eleven, she would return home to settle down to the household chores. This trick had a chance of success as long as her father believed she was eating at the workshop and the supervisor believed she was eating at home. But for some time now business at the bindery had been growing slack and overtime work was becoming rare.

However one looked at it, her meetings with Auguste would necessarily become less and less frequent, unless the young man asked for her hand in marriage and unless her father, keeping his promise not to interfere, left her free to marry the first comer who proposed. But this was unlikely. Désirée would have many arguments to support her side: no other young man would please her more than Auguste; he was the only man who attracted her; his eyes got to her; when his hands squeezed hers, it made the blood rush to her head. Her father would answer that the gift of attracting women with a wink did not constitute sufficient qualities in a man to make a good husband. Between puffs on his pipe, he would say bluntly, "Your lover is a lowly laborer, a handyman, a nothing." Auguste was not a drunk it is true. When a new wine-shop opened in the quarter and when the owner, seeking patrons, announced that he would give free drinks during certain hours on opening day, all the workers, always on the lookout for windfalls like this, would go there. Auguste would go too, but he would come back before the others, after only a drink or two. He might be a lowly worker, but drink was not a vice with him.

It was evident, however, that this last circumstance would not seem to strengthen her case in her father's eyes. And then there was still another problem: there was nothing to prove that Auguste had any intention of asking her hand in marriage. The more Désirée thought about the whole situation, the more she could not make up her mind what to do. Suppose that she speak quite frankly to Auguste and ask him, "Auguste, do you want to marry me?" If he did not answer, then all would be finished between them. Unless she consented to carry on foolishly, all that remained for her to do was to tell him to beat it. Her eyelids grew wet with tears as she thought of being alone nights in her room. Before she had known this young man, she only thought about having fun. Now she needed a man's caresses, walks together, laughter lighting up their eyes when they glanced at each other. For the first time she realized that her father's house was as bleak as a warehouse.

The only thing left for her to do while waiting was to go to bed, put

herself under the cart cover, as her sister phrased it so elegantly when she was in a gay mood. But no matter what she did, turn her nose to the wall, reverse and face the other way, stretch out full length, curl up, sigh or yawn, the same ideas kept passing through her head and she could not sleep.

About this time the key turned in the lock and Céline entered.

For two weeks the two sisters had spoken little to each other, a few words in the evening when they went to bed, a few in the morning while pulling on their stockings, that was all. But that night, in their eagerness to chat with one another, neither girl wished to sleep. They started up once again on the subjects they used to talk about, as if all the bitterness and quarrels dividing them had come to an end.

It was obvious that Céline was in an emotional state. She paced back and forth across the room, nervous and excited. Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes filled with a moist light. Désirée asked her if she had a fever, and she laughed in silence.

"Well, it has happened," she said finally.

"What?" asked the other

"What else? I'm his mistress!"

"Weren't you already?" exclaimed Désirée, amazed.

"No! Fancy that. Cyprien didn't dare ask. I would have gotten angry, if it had looked like it was never going to get that far. I would have immediately gotten on my high horse and said to him, 'What do you take me for?' Ah! my dear, it's all the same. There's no need to get angry with men who make the mistake of being nice! There are so many who aren't! But it's all the same. Nevertheless, it was becoming a bore! I couldn't make advances or cry out to him, 'Well, stupid. Get going. That's what I'm here for!' How would that have appeared, I ask you? I did my part and then waited for him to begin to boil. I'll tell you, he didn't budge. Once I told him, 'I've got a stay in my girdle that's killing me.' Guess what he said? 'Well, take it out, silly.' I had gone into his bedroom, figuring he would follow to help me. Pooh! He continued painting. I was furious, you understand. I had unlaced my girdle, so in order not to seem like an idiot, I was obliged to wrap it up in a newspaper and carry it back under my arm.

"So I had decided to go full out tonight. For a week now, when I've gone to his place in the evening, I've been wearing my Sunday shoes. They look nice but kill my feet. It was no kind of life, everything considered.

“Listen for a moment and I’ll tell you how I went about it. When I entered the apartment Cyprien was in front of his painting. Over the painting there was a lamp with a device to make the room dark and focus the light on the canvas. He was painting a woman taking an evening stroll. He kissed me, but didn’t stop working and continued to put red on the lips of his woman. I could have killed him! I said to myself, ‘This has got to stop! This is the end! I’ve had enough.’ But then I figured it was probably better not to be too abrupt with a person as timid as Cyprien. Since I did not know what to do with my hands and couldn’t think of anything to say, I began messing around with his tubes of paint and had fun opening them and making them ooze out onto his palette. My hands got all covered with paint, so he took me into his bathroom, a little space about as big as a handkerchief, where he poured some water into a basin for me. Since there wasn’t any room, we were forced to squeeze together. Just for fun I threw some water on him with my fingertips. He yelled, ‘Stop it or I’ll kiss you.’ I kept it up, so he grabbed hold of me and showered me with kisses while I struggled in his arms.

“He was holding me by the waist when we returned to the studio, and when he sat down on his stool, I sat down on his knees and put my arms around his neck. Since my mouth was near his ear, I breathed hotly into it. I slipped about on his trembling knees, and we quit talking. Somewhere in the room some damn old piece of furniture kept making noises. You have no idea how bothersome that can be! I was heavy, in any case, and his knees were worn out. I was about to fall, but he kept me up with his hands. His eyes were smouldering, his forehead covered with perspiration, only the tips of his teeth visible between his lips. I said to myself, ‘You’re done for!’ Growling as he nibbled on my curls, he ended up by quickly kissing me here on the neck. I turned my head slightly. Our noses and mouths touched. He kept opening and closing his eyes with a sort of wild look. In short, still clinging to him, I fell off his lap. What’s so stupid about all this is that I broke one of the hoops of my crinoline. But pooh! That’s nothing. What’s funny, though, is that this fine gentleman, who up until then had been as cold as ice, was like a dog who has found his master from then on. I didn’t have another moment’s rest with him. He came and went. He kissed me on the nose, on the eyes, right flush on the lips! Ah! You’d better believe it. All his timidity was gone and at that moment he even made fun of his painting.

"In the end, he had become as passionate as Anatole. He no longer put on airs. He called me his 'little chickee' with the same tone Anatole used when he called me his 'little kiddo.' It's astonishing how alike men are! I'm sure the Emperor was no different in similar circumstances. They all like to take your head in their hands and kiss it slowly.

"Ah! And then, you know, he appeared to notice that my dress was worn out. He'll probably buy me a new one. I'm counting on a hat too, because I've noticed it always annoys him when I come bare-headed. And right now there is some really nice blue and black-striped material at the ten-cent store. A person could make a tight-fitting dress, one like Rosine has, the kind that swishes like the sound of falling leaves when you walk. Only they cost a lot! Well, too bad! I want one anyway. Will Rosine ever be upset when she sees me as well dressed as she!"

"But," suggested her sister, "your lover cannot be very rich, if he is a painter. Perhaps he won't be able to buy you one quite as nice."

"Be quiet now," responded Céline. "Cyprien must have money, because his place is loaded with antiques! I wouldn't give two cents for the whole lot, but I know things like that cost money. He'll make do without something else, that's all! In any case, it doesn't matter. At the very least, he'll get me the cloth, and I'll make it myself. And how are things going with you and your guy?"

Désirée told her how the evening had gone. "Well, that's very nice and everything," said Céline, "but it's not serious! Don't play that game, silly. You'll just get in a mess! Come on, now. Sincerely, what do you want this thing with Auguste to come to?"

Désirée made no reply. "You don't wish to be his mistress, do you? Well, then, you've got to take a stand. You cannot remain like this, because in the end, can one foresee what is going to happen? It doesn't take much. You walk. You're calm. Then a sudden little ripple runs through your breast and down your belly. What the hell! You're done for! If men knew, we would all be lost before they believe it possible. But they are so stupid! Most of the time they don't suspect anything. It's not when they attack that it's necessary to mistrust them; it's when they seem tender and squeeze your elbow and hurt your hands without meaning to. I know you're not like me, but be careful anyway. They say to watch out for stormy evenings, but that's a joke! What does it depend on? On what one has eaten or drunk, on a lack of sleep from staying up all night, on the way one walks, on the words they whisper, on everything and on nothing in the end! Marry him or throw him out!

There's no half way. Let's see! Think a little. Papa will be back tomorrow. Auguste will become very dangerous because you will no longer be able to see him except at long intervals. Now, do you want me to talk to him, if you're afraid? It will be clean and neat. Do you wish to marry my sister? Yes? Then go to it, sonny. You don't wish to marry her? Out then. You're dirtying up the room. I'm going to dust you out of here. Does that suit you? Well, answer me now. You sit there like a dummy who can't hear!"

Désirée was uneasy. She sputtered, "I know. I've been repeating what you've been telling me over and over to myself for the past hour. You're right, but first I need to know if papa will accept Auguste."

"Ah ha! That's something else again!" exclaimed Céline, a little disconcerted by this unforeseen complication. "But the important thing is to know, first of all, if your lover has honest intentions. I'll take charge of that." And Céline sketched her plan of attack, hesitating between an immediate confrontation with the young man and another idea that had come to her as she put out the lamp: to wait, instead, until Auguste was upset at no longer seeing Désirée except at rare intervals. Then he would be anxious enough to submit to all her desires and caprices. She concluded, "I'll put Auguste in line just like I've done with my painter friend." And she went to sleep without even suspecting how great an error she had made.

First of all, she had not put Cyprien Tibaille in line. She was wrong to think him timid. The fact of the matter was simply that he had been sick when he had first met her, and in both their interests, he had waited until he was completely recovered to begin his attack on her virtue.

In actual fact, he was really quite debauched. His taste ran the gamut of all the nuances of vice, provided they were subtle and complex. He had been fortunate enough to have made love to third-rate actresses as well as to the dregs. Frail and excessively nervous, haunted by those unheard ardors that rise from exhausted organs, he had reached the point of no longer dreaming of anything other than sexual fantasies spiced with perverse faces and baroque trappings. Where art was concerned, he understood only the modern. Caring little about the cast-off clothing of old periods, he asserted that a painter ought to render only that which he was able to visit and see. Now since prostitutes made up the bulk of his acquaintances, they were the sole subjects of his paint-

ings. Basically, only the aristocratic and plebeian vices appealed to him. The bourgeois attitude toward prostitution repelled him. He was infatuated by the figures of common prostitutes, by their bitchy, provocative airs, by their gestures, which revealed quantities of bare skin beneath their loose-fitting blouses when they guzzled their wine or caressed with kisses the orgy-ravaged faces of their men. He was also exceedingly fond of the depravity of high-fashion whores. Their energetic smells, their tormented dress, their wild eyes, ravished him. His ideal even went to extravagance. He wished to make heartbreak a foil to joy. He would have liked to make love to a woman dressed like a rich clown beneath a gray and yellow winter sky about to let fall its snow, in a bedroom hung with Japanese fabrics, to the music of sad waltzes being churned out from a music-box by some half-starved organ grinder. His art showed these tendencies very markedly. He sketched with an astoundingly seductive air the suggestive poses, the worn-out sleepiness of prostitutes on the prowl, and in his work, brushed with broad strokes, spattered with oil, cut by pastel streaks, often first stripped like an etching, then taken from the proof, he arrived, with some odds and ends of water colors, slashed with wild hammerings of color, inviting, giving way or melting, at an intensity of wild life, at an unheard-of rendering of the impression. He was for a time a student of Cabanel and Gérôme, but these two rheumatic persons had tried in vain to inculcate in him their shoddy formulas. He had rejected their patchwork efforts almost immediately. For a brief time he had also been associated with some prominent landscape artists. However, his theories had soon brought cries of distress from them. His paintings of railroad crossings, gardens along the Rue de la Chine, the Gobelins plains, vice-haunted beer gardens, all the sickly, shabby locales that appealed to him, had disgraced him in their eyes. The day he declared that the pitiful spectacle of gillyflowers drying in a pot seemed more interesting to him than the sun-drenched laughter of roses blossoming in an open field, he caused reputable studios to close their doors to his works.

It goes without saying that Céline had never understood anything of the character of a man so completely disorganized. He, in turn, took her for what she was worth. She pleased him, although she was without excess or mysterious spice. But he needed a girl from the masses for a painting, a strong-backed, solid girl, an erotic good lay with a body fit to stir a man's blood with each step she took. He scorned, with reason,

those models who sprawl their unwashed nudity across the studio of every painter. The Medici Venus, to use his expression, seemed stupid to him. He did not admit that one might pose a woman constructed of the bits and pieces of five or six others in a conventional attitude. In his opinion, it was necessary to paint her when she was not expecting it, to capture her, without affected emphasis of gestures, in the moments when she dragged about sad and depressed or skipped joyfully like a free animal with no one watching. Basically, the type of woman that appealed to him was young and worn out, with her color already wasted by long orgies, with breasts that were still pliant but softening and beginning to sag, with an attractively wicked face, depraved and rouged. Céline, it was true, lacked the savor of those vices he so ardently pursued, but she possessed a certain mobility of features, a certain pliancy of the upper part of her body, which amused him. She was not very well built, being short and stocky like her sister. But that mattered little to Cyprien whose sole ideal was to create a living and true work.

The faultless forms of so-called nude paintings, with the model lying snake-like on a sofa or standing with one leg slightly bent, her complexion creamy and smooth, her chest bulging with the round mounds of her pink-tipped breasts, disgusted him. The Ancients had succeeded in that type of work better than anyone could hope to do today! It was a style of work that was passé now. It was necessary to go in new directions! As the subject of his painting, he might have taken a fleshy woman, faded like the majority of those women who have borne children or have been promiscuous or too often drunk. He might have depicted her with drooping breasts, an impassioned eye, her mouth slightly parted! But he did not really care for nudes, preferring instead the innocently salacious postures of Parisian girls. He especially liked rendering prostitutes in the places where they abound: yawning in the evening in front of a glass of beer at a concert-hall; on the prowl at a café table; out hunting in the streets, laughing full-tilt over little nothings, making themselves idle in order not scare away the timid, uninterested and caressing the better to swallow them up, swearing and yelling in jealousy or drunkenness, their bloated faces raised in the air. The art committee made a point of refusing to accept his canvases for the yearly exhibit, and the public ratified this judgement by not buying them. This scarcely discouraged him, living off the three hundred francs income he received each month, running through the bizarre sections of

the city in pursuit of flirting women whose swaying hips bulged against the tight fabric of their dresses.

But, as he was accustomed to say with bitter regret, it would take more wealth than he possessed to enable him to frequent the high-fashion whores and paint them as they are, in their silken-ceilinged boudoirs, with their working clothes and their vulgarity covered over with elegant manners. He had never been able to accomplish this particular dream. For lack of money, he had been forced to paint only the side dishes, cheap vice.

Even so, the field was broad, and he was cultivating it bit by bit. Then, the day after his success with Céline, he made a happy discovery. He noticed that when she had grown exhausted and was dozing on the divan, she took on the alluring air of a swooning prostitute. She became extraordinarily seductive, with the cascade of her straw hair across a cushion, her rump twisted, one leg thrown up in the air and the other hanging over the bottom of the divan. He immediately put one of his plans into execution. He walked through the Temple and the used-clothing shops and bought a quantity of silk stockings. Very excited with his purchases, he returned to his apartment and examined them in the light. They were of all colors and all shades, some plain and some embroidered, stockings that, new, had had to be worth twenty to thirty francs, and some even thirty-five to sixty francs. Fifty centimes to have them cleaned at the laundry and they would be as good as new. About this time Céline arrived, and at the sight of this display of hose she began to screech like a hawk. Cyprien held them out, turned them over, and made them flutter in front of the candlelight so that flashes of brightness slashed through dark indigo embroidered with blood-red, turquoise striped with gray, crimson and yellow checks, wheat color, mauve, black bordered with white. But two pairs in particular caught his eye: one, a superb lemon-yellow, the other, a smoked-orange with lacy perforations on the instep to let the whiteness of the wearer's flesh show through in a suggestive manner.

Céline wanted to put them on immediately, and Cyprien had a lot of trouble making her understand that they were dirty and that it was necessary to at least wait until they had been washed. Then he himself could not resist the pleasure of seeing their effect on her skin, and he helped her pull on the orange pair, which went up to the middle of her thighs. Céline was ecstatic. "Give me a pair," she begged in a wheedling

tone. Then, with the quickness of a magician who forces someone from the audience to choose a particular card from a deck, he made her choose the pale blue pair, striped pearl gray, of which he had two pairs.

Two days later, Céline began to fall for Cyprien. He himself, however, had not yet gotten to the point of having his stomach flip-flop whenever she did not arrive at the expected hour.

Chapter Ten

“Oh, wow! Boy, oh, boy! Am I ever glad to be back, my little gals! To have my feet in my slippers, to once again find the little pipes I haven’t used for such a long time, that’s happiness! Phooey on their vinegary beer and praised be good old wine! Hey, I think I’ll have another glass of wine.”

And, while gulping this nectar that cost all of thirteen sous a liter, Vatarad answered his daughters’ questions. “Is Amiens fun? About as much fun as a prison cell! A few streets, a citadel, a huge church with silly statues, a dirty little stream, trees like everywhere, some new pipes made of black earth and copper pots to light them, gin that had the look and taste of white brandy in which matches had been left to soak, a bitter beer that was very hard to stomach. A hole in the wall, girls, a real hole in the wall! And with all that, your aunt not as sick as she claimed. An old grumbler, a genuine soak who wouldn’t get off my back, repeating to me over and over again, ‘Oh, hey now, Vatarad! You aren’t going to leave yet?’ Ah! I can really say I did my purgatory in that stupid city. I’m not any more patriotic than anyone else, and it isn’t because I was born at Montrouge, but, you see, it will take some place better than Amiens to surpass all that.” And through the open window he pointed out a horizon of chimneys, roofs, and telegraph poles.

“Why are you putting on your hat? Ah, yes! It’s time. I’m no longer with it. It’s true; I’m completely done in. I had bought a second-class ticket to go there, and counted on bringing back some money. Ha! money my eye! Not a penny! I had to come back third-class at night! Saints alive! There wasn’t any padding and my back is really aching! Oh, well! Since you’re leaving for the workshop, I’m going to go visit Tabuche for a while to see if his sore is better and perhaps drink a glass to his health. I’ll see you this evening. Try not to get home too late, so

we can cook some brains in wine sauce. That will make up for the frilled chops that I was forced to eat at your aunt's. Are you ready? You aren't forgetting anything? No? I'm closing the door." And he left his daughters at the bottom of the bottom of the staircase, puffing his pipe, twirling his cane, stopping to chat with the shopkeepers, who enjoyed listening to his account of his trip.

When the two sisters arrived at the workshop, all the women were gathered around a little girl about four or five years old, a skinny little blonde thing who was very pale. That morning a woman had come and asked the supervisor if she couldn't take the child as an apprentice. The astonished supervisor had replied that a little girl that young was incapable of doing any kind of work. Then the woman had begun to weep, saying she was in dire straits. Her husband was dead, and she was forced to sell medlar fruit and apples in the street in order to make a living. The child was too young to leave alone in the house, but she would never consent to send her to a day-nursery or entrust her to babysitters. She wiped her eyes and cheeks with trembling hands, and sobbing, begged them to keep her little girl.

Seeing so many people around her, the child turned away, pouting, huge tears in her eyes. Taking pity on the child, the supervisor lifted her up and placed her on her knees, and rocking her legs back and forth, sang, "Ride a hobby-horse, on my pony, giddap, giddap, giddap, little one!" The little girl clapped her hands and shouted, "More!" And when the breathless supervisor put her back on the ground, she tugged at her cloak, begging her to do it some more. The mother suddenly got a wild look on her face, and gathering her daughter up, hugged her and kissed her with abandon. The little girl began to cry once again. Then fat Eugénie danced around with her, and kissing her little hands, said, "With poor little hands like that, she'll never be able to work! Even to think so would be a crime!"

All nodded their heads in agreement. Finally, the supervisor, after having consulted with the owner, who was not opposed, told the mother it was all right; they would take care of the child. She could bring her every morning and come after her in the evening. The poor woman murmured, "Pauline, say 'Thank you!' to the ladies." But Pauline had become frightened and hid her head in her mother's skirts. Then, while one of the women fed her a piece of sugar, the mother quietly left, with her head bowed, swallowing her tears, thanking every-one.

At the end of ten minutes, the little girl, who had begun to weep once more, crying tearfully, "I wanna see my mama!," was wriggling and laughing merrily. They had set her on a table. Each one gave her some leftovers from lunch and she eagerly stretched out her hands, jabbering, "Nana, that for Pauline?" Her joy was at its height when Désirée made her a doll from scraps of yellow paper, and Moumout made her almost equally happy, letting himself be petted by the child, when ordinarily he scratched anyone else.

The folding machines once more began their back and forth cycle over the reams of paper. "Hey! Céline!" yelled the young woman with rotten teeth. "That guy you were strolling with last night was really sharp!"

Céline played dumb and pretended not to understand the significance of this remark. But the other woman, driven by a sort of envy, continued her teasing. "It's true what I say. And the proof is that old man Chaudrut saw you too." And Chaudrut, who was using some scissors, nodded in agreement. "A respectable gentleman, a man from a decent family, what the hell, that wasn't chicken feed! But it wasn't any reason to turn into a snob and pass people in the street without seeming to recognize them."

Old lady Teston yawned in bewilderment at all this. "Well, if you ask me," she said, "Céline's got the right idea. Why should she be like the others and give up her youth to a bunch of factory tramps who would eat up everything she earns?"

"Hey, now!" cried out Chaudrut. "Don't knock the working class man."

"All tramps like you!" snorted old lady Teston.

"All right, now, mama! Let Chaudrut alone," groaned the supervisor.

"What surprises me," simpered the young woman, who was busily picking the stumps of her teeth with the tip of a pin, "is that when a person gets money from a man as well-heeled as that, they don't also get some new dresses."

This remark angered Céline.

"Well, of course I'm going to get some dresses, dresses like you'll never have! What are you bragging about anyway? Your guy is anyone who'll have you. And besides, you know, instead of bothering other people, you'd do better to stick your head in the press. Perhaps that would flatten the balloons someone has stuck in your gums!"

Old lady Teston laughed so hard her cheeks hurt. Her eyes rolled back up into her head.

“Serves you right,” she said.

But the supervisor threatened to toss the other one out if she replied.

“That’s enough!” she shouted. “My word, this place is getting worse than the market!”

All these disputes held little interest for Désirée, who sat scratching a louse crawling up her leg. Suddenly she stopped and straightened up. Auguste had just arrived in the back room, and he seemed to have something black over his eye. It frightened her, and she leaned forward a little to get a better view. However, he seemed to wish to remain in the shadow and persisted in turning his back to the light. A press hid him from her view, so she got up and then saw very plainly that he had a black eye.

She went over to him and said in a low voice, “Hey, what have you done to yourself? Come out into the courtyard. I have to speak to you right away. Papa has returned and I will not be able to meet with you this evening.”

“Oh!” he said, and lowered the hand covering his face.

“Did you get into a fight?” she asked. “Your eye looks like a rotten apple.”

He claimed he had fallen and excused himself from going with her, saying he had a whole pile of work that had to be completed before quitting time.

“That’s nice!” she remarked drily, pursing her lips. As Chaudrut passed, tying the strings of his apron, she asked him what had happened to Auguste’s eye. He swore on the ashes of his late wife that he knew nothing about the matter. It was not until she was out in the courtyard that she learned what had happened.

When the scrap collector had come, the supervisor had called all the men together, and the whole group, Auguste included, had gone down to the storeroom where the waste paper was kept. When they were down in the basement and had opened the door to the storeroom, the gigantic pile of scrap cuttings and shavings resembled a mountain of golden sauerkraut in the single shaft of sunlight piercing through a small, dirty window set high in the wall. Old man Potier complained that one lantern was not enough; he insisted on seeing the quality of the merchandise he was buying, so Auguste had gone back up with

Alfred to look for some candles. This Alfred happened to be the person Auguste owed a sum of money. Earlier that morning, while guzzling some white wine, Alfred had pulled eight or nine corks from his pocket, muttering to himself, "God damn! I haven't filled up since yesterday evening." The corks represented the bottles he had put away, and served as a sort of gauge of his condition. In the meanwhile, he was broke and his drunkenness was making him nasty. He asked Auguste, who had only thirty-five centimes to his name, for the two francs he had loaned him to take Désirée to the Folies-Bobino. The discussion had lasted all the while they were looking for the candles. Once they had gone back down to the storeroom and begun to load up the pile of scraps and trash and put it into sacks and weigh it, the quarrel had begun once more and had ended with Auguste receiving a thorough licking.

After learning the details of this little disaster from the supervisor, Désirée returned to her seat, trembling.

Her first thought was, "He's a rowdy. Oh, damn it all!" And then, even admitting that Auguste might not like to pick quarrels with his companions, anyone who takes a beating like that is either a coward or a weakling. And she felt humiliated at having a boy friend who could not win a fight. On the other hand, however, his swollen eyelid made her feel sorry for him, and she wanted to cry. Auguste said nothing, but it must have hurt him a great deal. At the very least, it must have been embarrassing. She could imagine how vexing it must be for a man to have to be seen in such a condition. She remembered now the foreman's sly smile when he had mentioned that Auguste had borrowed the money to take her out. In fact, maybe she was to blame. She should have known that he earned very little and that the pleasant times they had had going out together had cost him a great deal. However, her pocketbook was never very full, since her father demanded she pay ten francs per week for her food, laundry, and lodging. If she had helped to pay for these dates, she would have never been able to do honor to her boy friend by buying a new hood and veil.

At first she thought of going to find Alfred and paying him the two francs, but then she decided that that would be too compromising and would make Auguste appear in a bad light, and any way, two francs was a considerable sum of money. In any case, the poor boy was penniless! Perhaps he did not even have enough to smoke. She would have been pleased, with that silly sort of contentment which wishes misfortunes

on others in order to place oneself in a position to be able to help them, to learn that he did not have enough to buy the makings to roll his own cigarettes, so she could go out and buy them for him.

Whatever the case, she was filled with tender feelings toward him, and she was angry with herself for the dry tone with which she had spoken to him earlier. She could not stay seated. Auguste was alone in his corner. She got up and, not knowing how to show him she was not angry with him, she went up to him and without raising her eyes presented her cheek to him.

Auguste, too, was very moved. He kissed her gently, and when the kiss became more drawn out than she had intended, Désirée ran back to her seat, her cheeks on fire. When the supervisor asked her what she had done to cause her face to be so flushed, she replied her ears were burning up.

Céline had followed the whole scene with her eyes. She was still asking herself if she should stop things or let them continue. She wondered if it might not be better to consult her father before speaking of marriage to Auguste. Ever since she had succeeded in conquering her painter by force, all her moods, all her whims, had disappeared and she was very indulgent toward her sister's affair. Just as before, happy couples had caused her to jump in rage, now these same couples seemed to her to merit that she take an interest in them. Auguste did not always please her very much; there was something timid and cold about him that bothered her. He lacked humor and spirit, but, all in all, she had no special complaint about him. He had always behaved very properly toward her, paying for her drinks as well as those of her sister when they were all together. He had defended Désirée when they bickered, but that was natural: each defending his own property. And then, she was like all women who, no longer having anything to envy for themselves, take an interest in the affairs of others, and love to get involved in matters that do not concern themselves; they splash about in the messed-up skeins of yarn of other people's lives, mess them up more, and try all the harder to unravel them the more they do not have any serious interest in them.

Everything considered, it might have been wiser to let Auguste stand waiting without a meeting for several months. But on the other hand, her sister could become half crazy and decide to join him anyhow, and end up falling flat on her face. The kiss she had just offered him worried Céline. She decided it was best to conclude the matter, to meet

Auguste and ask him the question straight out. She could worry later about persuading her father.

Céline looked so strange when she came up to him that Auguste feared something was wrong. He went out immediately to join her in the street. They did not say a word on the sidewalk. Céline led him to a bar and there, shouldered against some pots of laurel, they looked at one another with a rather embarrassed air, all while idly stirring the frothy mixture of their absinthe with steel spoons.

In spite of her self-assurance, Céline did not really know how to begin. She started on a related subject, speaking of the little girl who was in the workshop. She remarked that children were nice, and that if she were married, she would like to have some.

Auguste remained silent, first of all, because Céline's sudden enthusiasm for the joys of maternity mattered little to him, secondly, because his eye was bothering him.

"Is it true," she continued, "that you got socked in the eye because of my sister?"

He replied that it was not precisely because of her. It concerned a matter between Alfred and himself. Moreover, he had been struck when he was not looking. He would have given a good account of himself, if his friends had not held him back. In any case, he would catch Alfred alone some day and then they would see!

Céline listened patiently, while he outlined his plans for revenge.

"This whole matter is stupid!" she said. "Everyone in the workshop is convinced that Désirée is the cause of this battle. It's bad for her reputation. They all stare at her and make remarks. Oh, well! Damn it! I might as well just ask you straight out. Let's not mess around any more. Do you want to marry her or not?"

Auguste blushed, and his black eye grew darker. He sputtered, "But yes, of course. I love her very much. But I need a little time alone to think it over."

"To think about what?" exclaimed Céline. "Come on now. No more useless words. Let's talk a little. Here's the situation. Désirée is not bad looking. She has one eye which is not perhaps exactly straight, but that's not important. First of all, as my painter friend said after meeting her, an eye which is a little out of line is like a well-placed beauty mark on a girl's face; it attracts your attention!" Auguste looked confused, as if he did not understand what she was saying. Céline hurried up her argument, afraid that he was going to ask her to explain her last state-

ment, when she knew she could not. The remark had so astonished her the day Cyprien had made it that she had kept it and rolled it around in her head, without the least comprehension of what a beauty mark on a person's face could possibly have in common with her sister's eye. She continued, "I don't need to brag about my family, but Désirée is an extraordinary worker who sometimes earns twenty francs per week. Under these circumstances, she certainly doesn't lack suitors, believe me! So it isn't a lack of a good match which makes me speak to you now. What do you have to offer, anyway! Respectability and your two arms, all of which adds up to nothing more than forty centimes an hour. That's not much inducement! But it doesn't matter, if you love one another. Listen to me closely. As Désirée must have already told you, papa has returned, so your rendezvous can no longer take place. My sister's not going to hop into bed with you; I'll be there to see to that. You needn't look at me like that. I'm different than she. If I've done some things, it's because I liked it. I'm not any less an honest person for all that. What's that you're saying? That you know it. Holy cow! It's a known fact that you don't deserve to know it. Anyhow, wouldn't it be nice: a little family with children, a nice bedroom with a walnut bed set, white curtains, plenty of loving, wine in the cupboard, and a roast every Sunday if you are thrifty. Hey! That's worth thinking about. Our father's a good man; our mother's no trouble; you already know the sister, lazy but not nasty. It remains to be seen if papa will approve. Now that's another question! But I'll see to that. First, however, I will have to know what your feelings are. Only let's hurry up. I'll need an answer before I leave and that will be in three minutes."

Auguste was perspiring profusely. He finally said yes, but his response lacked enthusiasm.

"Then everything is all right," Céline remarked. "I'll get things moving." She asked the barman, "How much for the absinthes?" Auguste did not stop her. The four sous he had paid for a packet of tobacco left him with only three sous to his name. And then, as Céline said while paying the check, "There's no longer any reason for any fuss among us, since we're all family now."

He remained very much in a daze. He would have certainly preferred to remain single, with Désirée as his mistress rather than as his wife, but he knew perfectly well that that was impossible now. She had expressed herself very clearly on that subject. It did not matter; he might have wished to be able to prolong the situation thus, counting on luck or

something like that. On the other hand, always being broke was not much of a life. Certainly Désirée was a good match, and it would please his mother who, like most helpless old women, wanted to see her son get married. He went back over all these considerations and concluded, "I've said yes. I'm going to take the big leap. But how?" And in spite of everything, the idea that he was going to lose his freedom bothered him. He began hoping Vatarad would say no to the marriage, but a moment later, when he remembered the portrait of married life Céline had painted for him—a bright, cheerful bedroom with Désirée dressed in a pretty white skirt, dusting the furniture of which she was so proud—he was afraid of being turned down.

Caught between conflicting desires of freedom and marital bliss, he ended up being very confused about the whole matter. He had had only one absinthe, and it had not been very strong, but he felt quite drunk. Through the drunken stupor he had fallen into, one thought penetrated his consciousness, and it succeeded in convincing him that saying yes had not been a mistake. Rumors were circulating in the Débonnaire shop that the owner had had an argument with the foreman and that the foreman was probably going to be fired. If the story were true, who would take his place? No one in the shop was capable of replacing him. The new foreman would be chosen from another establishment and of course he would bring his friends with him. The less able workers would be fired and replaced by newcomers who would not be any better, but at least they would be friends of the foreman. Auguste did not hide the fact that should the occasion arise he ran a very strong risk of being among those fired. The prospect of finding himself on the street without a job made chills run up his spine. If he married Désirée, he was by that fact safe since the supervisor liked her and old lady Teston was pretty close to the owners.

Chapter Eleven

“Well, that’s one down!” murmured Céline, very satisfied with the results of her talk with Auguste. “Now for the other.” Success with her father was less certain, so Céline made up her mind to ask old lady Teston for help. Because of her age, her domestic virtues, and her special knack at cooking beans, this woman exerted a very special influence over Vatard. Together, the two of them had a chance of demolishing his objections to Auguste’s proposal for Désirée’s hand in marriage.

When Céline had told her good friend of the service for which she needed her help, old lady Teston was jubilant. Laughing in stunned amazement, she clasped her hands together and marveled, “How nice!” She was one of those women who weep when they see a little girl making her First Communion or a bride all dressed in white. The color white suggested all sorts of touching ideas to her, brought back chaste memories of her childhood, her virginal desires. Auguste or someone else, it did not really matter to her. But the thought that her little Désirée would soon march down a church aisle with a branch of orange blossom in her hair and her train sweeping across the floor, made such an impression on her that she wept, pouring out huge tears that slipped across her fat cheeks. Her face wore a wide grin as she swore she would help Céline work on her father.

A meeting time was set. On the agreed-upon morning, Céline said to her sister, “You can go eat supper with Auguste this evening. I will arrange it for you. You can even stay out with him until ten o’clock. Don’t come back before then.”

Without asking explanations, Désirée jumped up and went off to find her young man to tell him the good news. Chances for them to meet in the mists had been few and far between, and she was constantly being forced to cope with his ill-humor and pleas. When he heard her

good news, he began shouting for joy across from a stamping-trough and invited her to come eat supper with him at the "Belle Polonaise" restaurant.

In the workshop Céline and old lady Teston were raising their big guns. It had been agreed that the old woman would open fire first and Céline would limit herself to backing her up.

Vatard was surprised not to see Désirée at supper, but Céline implied that she would explain her absence when old lady Teston arrived.

Vatard insisted she explain immediately. When she refused, he became angry. She did not change her mind, but thought the matter was starting off badly. They did not exchange another word during the meal. Old lady Teston entered just as they were starting to eat a cheese tart.

Throwing her a distressed glance, Céline drew next to her and whispered, "Start talking, mama Teston, and be firm!"

The old lady solemnly drew out an undershirt with a hole in it, a remnant of material which she wished to use to repair the hole, some needles, and a thimble. With a very weak voice, she began, "Vatard, when you asked old man Briquet for Eulalie's hand in marriage, what did he say?"

"He probably said to me, 'Take her, my boy!' But I don't see what . . ."

"It doesn't matter if you see or not. Then what did you do?"

"What do you mean, what did I do? How do I know? That all happened many years ago."

"You must have jumped in the air, Vatard, and cried out, 'What luck!'"

"Perhaps! But I still don't see . . ."

"Well," she said quietly, "now it's your turn to cry out, 'Take her, my boy!'"

"Eh! What? What's that you're saying?"

"Papa!" interjected Céline, "it's Désirée and Auguste."

"Désirée! You want Désirée to marry Auguste! Who is Auguste?"

Then the charge went ahead full speed. Old lady Teston and Céline spoke at the same time. "Auguste is a nice boy, a bindery worker who loves Désirée and whom Désirée loves. He's a quiet, peaceful, decent sort."

Vatard repelled their assault with the simple broadside, "How much does he earn?"

The two women retreated for a moment. In a very low voice they finally replied, "Eight sous per hour!"

"An old crock, eh?"

Old lady Teston was at a loss at what to say. Céline came to the rescue, replying, "Eight sous is all he is earning right now, but ten sous, twelve sous in a couple of months. He's a very steady worker, quiet. . . ."

"I know! You've already said that. Don't chatter on! I've always been a good father, if I do say so myself, and I'm not about to consent just now to something that will make my daughter unhappy. Eight sous! That's nothing! That's poverty! That's stony broke! Eight sous, that's beans all week long and me giving a franc sixty centimes every Sunday for some veal. That's not being able to pay the rent and tears every three months in order to squeeze it out of me. It's my plates, my casseroles, my dishes, being borrowed for two days and never being returned. Eight sous, that's my furniture being pillaged, my wallet being emptied. Oh, yes, I know full well what you are going to tell me, that they will make out on their own. That's not possible! I just don't believe it for a minute!"

"But they're in love, papa!" exclaimed Céline.

"Is that my fault? No, it's not, isn't that right? And anyway, if you had an ounce of sense, you'd have understood that Désirée couldn't get married yet! Here's her mother, ill, incapable of moving. What if Désirée goes off and gets married! Céline's gone every evening. She takes the house for an inn. She doesn't help around the house, doesn't clean anything, goes I don't know where! Don't answer. I prefer not to know where you go. Oh, yeah! That would be real nice! The house in utter confusion just like Tabuche's, where you have to rinse a glass if you want something to drink and then, when you put sugar in your toddy, you can't ever find a little spoon and have to take a key out of your pocket and use it! If you call that an agreeable prospect for a father, well, then, you're not very demanding."

Old lady Teston replied with a sort of bitter gentleness, "Then, because your wife is ill, it follows that your daughter must not marry?"

"I didn't say that," cried out Vatar. "I didn't say that. I say that if, instead of suggesting to me a penniless boy without a profession, you had presented to me a worker capable of bringing in a good dozen francs a day, I would have thought about it; I would have seen. I say

that for me to accept the stupid life you're offering me, I want my daughter to have something so she won't have to live in poverty. I want some sort of compensation in other words!"

"But they're in love!" shrieked Céline.

"First of all, you shut your mouth! Your screams are driving me crazy! 'They're in love! They're in love!' How original! Jesus Christ! If every man married all the women he loved, well, that would really be nice! They'll get over it! Everyone loves one woman and then marries another. Isn't that true? Yes or no? Take you for example, old lady. Before marrying Alexandre, you certainly must have carried on with someone else?"

Old lady Teston, shocked at this thoughtless remark, replied with dignity, one hand resting on the left side of her stomach, "You're wrong, Vatar! Alexandre was the only man I ever loved."

"Well, then," the father continued, "that's enough arguing. No more! Let's talk about whatever you want except that. We're not here to quarrel, and besides, since the wedding won't be taking place tomorrow, do me a favor and leave me in peace for right now."

The evening turned gloomy. Old lady Teston sewed without saying a word. Céline sighed from time to time as she sewed some buttons back on her petticoats.

Vatar relit his pipe, and as he sat there smoking it, he felt very threatened by the numerous quarrels and no end of trouble he foresaw.

And while they all grew bored, Auguste and Désirée were laughing like idiots. Céline had not informed her sister of the effort she was going to undertake on her behalf. Auguste had told Désirée that he had decided to ask for her hand in marriage, and she, who had always feared her father's refusal, had taken heart that evening. Convinced that her lover was very pleasing, she no longer doubted that her father would accept him for a son-in-law, albeit after a bit of grumbling. She was very far from imagining the pitiful results of that evening's events.

While waiting, the couple amused themselves like playful lovebirds. Auguste had taken his fiancée to a famous restaurant on the Rue de la Gaité, a restaurant where wedding dinners were served, and they had dined in the garden beneath a gable.

It was a charming spot with starry clusters of leaves, dusty little trees, wooden tables, and a swing among the chestnut trees. At the back there was a curtain of cypress and pines, the cypress and pines of the

Montparnasse cemetery, which stretched out behind the little establishment. The restaurant was not crowded that particular evening. In one corner a man and a woman sat at a table eating mackerel and peas. A dog, running around in circles trying to catch his tail, stopped, yawned, and lifting a haunch, pissed a few drops against the foot of a table. Another couple had seated themselves on the swing. After tying down her skirts with a handkerchief, the woman assisted her partner in giving some good solid pushes, and they went flying into the branches. Auguste and Désirée dined well without spending too much. Their repast consisted of a bottle of wine, soup, roast veal, and some cheese, all of which cost three francs seventy centimes. Their happiness might have been complete, if three young fellows had not sat down near their table. These young men had become unbearable, making statements to the effect that they smelled rotting corpses and roast rabbit. The waiter serving them was positively scandalized, and with good reason too. When someone does not want something, he should at least have the courtesy not to disturb those around him. The fact is that Désirée came to believe that from time to time she could smell some sort of odor coming from the cemetery. Auguste denied it, but in the end, as the young men continued their poor joke, while smoking cigarettes between dishes, he admitted that perhaps they were right; there did seem to be some sort of brackish smell in the garden from the tombs heated by the blazing summer sun.

Désirée was annoyed. The three young men stared at her too much. One of them, with brown hair, the eyes of an Arab, and a forked black beard, kept glancing at her with lecherous intent. Another, thin and blond, with a fan-shaped beard and a hooked nose, looked her over with a mocking air. The third, wearing pince-nez glasses, with his hair curled and combed back, and a brush mustache, seemed to pity Auguste. She hurried through the meal and wanted to go somewhere else for coffee.

Auguste had taken things better. He was proud of his girl and thought it nice to be envied by well-dressed men. They left, and since it was already late and Désirée wanted to be home by ten o'clock, they decided to go no farther than the "Café d'Apollo," which was located next door to the restaurant. Instead of taking a table outside and being bothered by the steady stream of people passing along the street, they chose to go down to the basement room where it was quieter and where

one could sit on wide divans and talk at ease. On the floor above, which one reached by way of a spiral staircase decorated in old Algerian style to hide women's legs from indiscreet glances, someone pounding on a piano was accompanying a squalling singer. A faint odor of carousing hung over the rooms of this little bar. The owner offered some little surprises too: when mazagran was served, a small cannon shell made of sugar was included on the tray along with the glasses of black coffee, and if you placed a match near the tip of the cannon shell, a small sparkler began spitting fire, scattering a shower of sparks on the table, mixing the sharp smell of gunpowder with the aroma of burning tobacco and hot coffee.

They shared the cost together in spite of Auguste's attempt to protest. He did not insist because he noticed her involuntarily glancing at his black eye. After several minutes of silence he simply said that when they were living together, if some Sunday they did not wish to cook, they could do as today and enjoy dinner at the "Belle Polonaise" or across the street at "Gagny's." Désirée gave her approval to this idea and observed that they could spend even less by ordering a single portion instead of two and a liter of wine instead of a corked bottle. Then they continued to speak of the future. "Céline must speak to your father about me," sighed Auguste. "I have already said something to my mother. She is thrilled to have a daughter-in-law like you because you are going to make a rich little woman."

"You don't really believe that, you devil," interrupted Désirée, who thought it her duty to simmer.

"I do too think so, I've told you that. I think you are nice and pretty." She tapped him on the fingers to make him shut up.

"And you," he began again. "What are you going to say to your father when Céline talks to him about us getting married?"

"Well, I probably won't say anything to him. Maybe he won't accept the idea when he first hears of it, but after a day or two he will. Let's not worry. Everything will be all right without me saying anything."

It was at that very precise moment that Vatarad was exclaiming, "An old crock, eh?"

When she returned home, Désirée found Céline waiting for her. Reading the truth in her sister's eyes, Désirée guessed everything. She threw herself toward her. "Have you spoken to him? Tell me quickly!"

Céline lowered her head and her sister lowered hers, a large tear trickling down her eyelashes. Céline did not say a word, not daring to hope to console her. Nevertheless, she started to speak, but could not finish. Placing an arm around her sister's neck, she kissed her eyelids and made her go to bed.

Chapter Twelve

Vatard was not mistaken. His rejection of Auguste was going to be the cause of countless quarrels and result in seemingly endless harassment for himself. One of the first results was that Désirée became absolutely possessed by her passion for Auguste. She never loved him so much. They used the familiar "tu" exclusively in addressing each other now, not as before, sometimes "tu" and sometimes "vous." They experienced a sort of consolation in their unhappiness and found themselves closer and even more sure of one another ever since they had spoken to each other in this manner. In isolated corners, in the courtyard near the fountain, they took delight in looking at one another, stammering half-uttered words, laughing without motive, exchanging flowers and bits of ribbon. Auguste got up earlier in the morning now. Running ahead of his girl, he would station himself in the street, reading the ads plastered on the walls, examining the muddy fruit carts being pushed down the sidewalks by women clomping along in heavy boots. When he saw her in the distance, trotting along with her leather purse under her arm, he would run toward her. When they met, he would take her into one of the little half-deserted side streets, where they would lock together in a passionate embrace, their arms entwined around each other's shoulders. They had only one idea in mind, to escape the surveillance of Vatard who, having become suspicious, came to look for his daughter at the exit of the workshop and no longer left evenings for fear that she would leave also.

Life had become unbearable for all parties concerned. At table Désirée would eat very little. Refusing to speak, she would pick at each little morsel, so caught up in her daydreams that she would not even touch her wine. Her woeful sighs "God! God!," "Alas!," and the like, were enough to ruin anyone's appetite. Céline would grumble, and spitting out a plum pit, she would throw it angrily into the fireplace.

With a defiant look on her face, she would get up and leave, slamming the door behind her. Afraid to start a quarrel, Vatarad would lower his eyes. Then Désirée would also get up, and folding her napkin, would go straight to her room, locking the door behind her.

Raising his head, Vatarad would clench his fists and curse, but he did not budge, contemplating his wife Eulalie, whose stomach threw a large bottle-shaped shadow on the wall. He always believed Désirée's show of locking herself in her room was a protest against his refusal. He was mistaken. That was partly the reason, but there was another more compelling motive. She would go over to the window to keep watch on the suspension bridge. Eventually Auguste would arrive and take up a position on the bridge. Because they were too far apart to carry on a conversation, they would use sign language, throwing kisses, winking, and laughing. That would last until dark and sometimes their signals were interrupted by passing trains. Auguste would suddenly disappear, swallowed up in a cloud of smoke and steam, and when the air cleared, the young man would continue to send her little kisses with his fingers through the cottonball wisps of parting smoke. As careful as he was, Vatarad had not yet discovered this ruse. However, he did know what Auguste looked like. Always seeing the same individual prowling around his home, it had been easy for him to guess his name.

Meanwhile, Désirée's obstinate silence, her nonchalant seductiveness, her steadily growing indifference to preparing meals, threw Vatarad into silent rages that were ruining his digestion. Seated in front of his soup, surrounded by hostile or tearful faces, he would withdraw into his shell, furious and at the same time afraid, letting his spoon get bogged down in the quickly congealing soup.

The sight of a poorly cooked veal roast, bleeding on a bed of carrots, filled him with a tremendous anger, but Céline's peevish face made him hold back any comment. In the evening, he would sit alone. Even old lady Teston no longer visited him. After smoking two pipes in silence, he would go to bed with Eulalie, where he would yawn crossly until ten before going to sleep.

Then, one fine evening, the situation suddenly grew worse. Céline came back from an unusually boisterous evening making wild gestures, bumping into everything, slamming doors, lowering windows with pounding fists, completely uncontrollable. Vatarad thought that his answer to the proposals she had made to him concerning Désirée's marriage to Auguste was the cause of her storming. Once more he was

mistaken. Céline was quite well enough annoyed on her own account without persisting in taking the defense of her sister as she had done until then.

She had run into Anatole again. He had not succeeded in seducing the poor girl he counted on making his new mistress. This failure had caused him to regret not having slapped Céline the evening he had jokingly offered his theories and made his goodbyes. Moreover, he had been informed by some good friends at the workshop that his former mistress was going to be getting a new silk wardrobe. From this he had concluded that she had a rich lover. In his mind it seemed only just that he share in such a rich windfall. So for this reason he had kept an eye out for Céline, and one evening he had hailed her, "Hey, fish face!" She had increased her stride, but he had caught up with her. Taking her by the arm, he had continued with broad gestures, "I'll bet you were just saying to yourself, 'Anatole's completely happy now! He's forgotten me, my one dream come true! Someone else is sharing his charms now. Men! They're all rotten!' But you're mistaken, my love! Anatole was always thinking of his little Céline. You wouldn't believe how many glasses of wine it has cost me trying to forget her. At least forty sous credit a day! You'll be the ruin of a lot of little cafés! See what you've done! Isn't it a pity too! I still adore you. And now that I've found you once more, I'm never going to leave you again."

Céline was in anguish. "Come on now, let me be," she said. "You know full well that everything is over between us. I have a lover; you have a mistress. I'm not angry at you for that."

"I've let her go," Anatole cried out triumphantly. "She was as stupid as an empty wine bottle, and ugly! Boobs? Oh, yeah. Two little beans on a saucer! Eyes? Prunes in egg whites! And with all that, every time she opened her mouth to say anything, she smelled like a brewery! Thank you, anyway! If she was a jewel, she didn't have the hallmark of the Treasury. I don't like anything fake. I want the real thing. She wasn't like you. You're so sexy you make a man eat his heart out! God, I get aroused just looking at you! Your eyes glitter with bursting fireworks. A person would have to be really dumb not to recognize that. Yes, I know! You have a lover who spouts gold-colored coins all over you whenever you call him your prince. How much does he give you, by the way? Nothing? You mean you're that stupid! Oh! It's not possible. I think too much of you to believe that you would bring happiness to a gentleman without it costing him anything! If that's the

way it was, I would oppose it. I want you to be happy, that's all! But that's stupid. Let's pass over that. I'm big-hearted enough not to want you to degrade yourself for that bird. I authorize you not to let him go. That would be lacking in *savoir-vivre*. No, no! Treat him like a pet, my angel! Coddle him, pick his lice, tell him he's as handsome as a sheik, tell him you love him when he gets up and adore him when he lies down! Flatter him with how attractive he is when he moves, and what a noble bearing he has when he's still. Whisper in his ear, 'You, you're the first, the only one, the sole man who has ever pleased me. However you want your pleasure, I'll deliver, provided I get a tip.' Tell me, how does that sound?"

"I don't want any part of it!" exclaimed Céline.

"Ha! You don't want any part of it! You've gone crazy! You've really thought it out! You don't want to put anything there on the counter in front of you to tide me over. Would you like me to smack you in the eye? No, that would really cause me pain! Come on now, decide. If you're still unhappy, I'll clobber you."

Céline glanced around helplessly, afraid of Anatole when he was in this mood. Taking his hand, she tried to soothe him.

"Ah, come now! Be reasonable! You know I can't help you. I haven't a cent. His paintings don't sell. He scarcely gives me anything. Really, I can't!"

"All that's just words that don't mean a thing." Anatole continued. "Hey, now, I do things right." Out of the corner of his eye he spied two police officers coming into view in the distance. "I'll give you three days to think about it. Between now and then I'm going to have the glue warmed up to repair this break between us. It's good stuff and I'll guarantee you, you won't be able to loosen the bond once it sets; it will tear off your skin if you try to get rid of it!" And he smacked the back of his knees, stood at attention, bowed as if he were opening a coach door, and whistling, departed with the air of debauched sensuality which made him irresistible to women.

So Céline had Cyprien accompany her on her evening strolls in the streets. Anatole followed them at a distance, but the painter's lead-filled cane evidently scared him because he never attempted to approach them. Nevertheless, Céline was unable to get back her courage. Cyprien limited himself to making her observe that it was impossible to go out in all sorts of weather in the evening and that the prospect of getting into a bout of fisticuffs with some street lout held

little appeal for him. Céline thought his attitude showed a lack of feeling. As he stood there, unconcernedly humming to himself, crushing his pastes in a saucer, she became furious with him, but every time she got ready to yell at him, she kept her anger in check and did not let it escape until she returned to her father's house. Impatient with this bickering and these mindless disputes, Vatarad gradually came to realize that the house was no longer tenable and he should not feel obliged to stay cooped up like a dumb animal. Little by little, he relaxed the watch he was keeping over Désirée. Sometimes, however, he was overcome by a sudden sense of mistrust and then, in a fit of zeal which exhausted him and made him lament upon getting into bed, "If she turns out bad, it won't be my fault! No father has ever been so careful about his daughter's virtue," he would follow her and spy on her, forgetting Tabuche's philosophical admonition that "if you bother your child, if you are always on her back, you can be sure that she will fall. It would be a lot simpler to push her straight into her boy friend's arms. At least it would save you a lot of time and trouble." Whether or not he had at first recognized the truth of this axiom, it was nonetheless true that Vatarad ceased to chase after his daughter. So she was once more able to see Auguste, but their meetings were necessarily of shorter duration. Désirée waited until a half-hour had passed after her father's departure, fearing that he might have forgotten his handkerchief or pipe, and she came back very early, before his return.

Fortunately, the street where they met was not far away, a street made expressly for lovers, the Rue Cotentin. This poorly lighted broad expanse was bordered on the left by the railroad embankment and various freight depots for merchandise, coal, and parcel post. On the right it was lined by old buildings, paving stone depots, and palisades. They strolled up and down, meeting hardly anyone, occasionally passing a running child or a dog on the prowl. Arriving at the middle of the block at the place where the dock entrance opens across from the Rue de l'Armorique, they quickly passed in front of the three lanterns which lit up the customs building and plunged back into the shadows. They nearly always stopped halfway up the street to gaze curiously through the pickets of a gate across the entrance way. A black row of houses bordering the far edge of a large field was made barely discernible by the scattering of windows lit by red dots. As far as one could see, piles of paving stones rose up, grayish pyramids that turned blue when the moon, breaking across their summits, spread the cold water of its

light over the diminishing shadows of the streets. In a vague dusk down at the end of the street a cluster of trees swelled up between two gigantic mounds of larger paving stones, their branches sometimes suddenly twisted upward by a gust of wind or obscured by the swirling flakes from a nearby factory. Behind the hedge of wooden pickets, close to where Désirée stood, lay an overturned cart; the copper handles on the arms of a dump truck glistened; flashes reflected from a metal shovel and a pick handle. Dead silence hung over the street, broken abruptly by the strident noise of a machine whistle, the sound of laughter from the customs office.

These piles of rocks rising up into the night gave Désirée goose bumps. She squeezed herself more tightly against Auguste. With her head leaning against his shoulder, she strolled quietly down the deserted street, and like all girls in love on a moonlit night, without knowing why, she looked up at the sky, admiring the scattered twinkling of the stars. Hunched over, she gave her lover's arm little squeezes, finally pinching him with the tips of her fingernails to get him to look at her and see her smile. But the hour when they had to leave one another was approaching, and they stood there silently side by side, not wishing to leave yet. In the end, tying the cords of her cape, she murmured, "I'm going now." Their parting kiss was long and deep. Finally, with a sigh, they set up a meeting for the next day at the workshop. Then she set off like an alley rat, scurrying along the shadowy walls. When she reached the corner, she turned back one last time to look at Auguste. Several minutes later he arrived at his lodging on the Rue du Champ-d'Asile, mouthing an unlit cigarette.

Their meetings started up once more, but these few minutes, which took great efforts to arrange, no longer satisfied them. They had become as hungry for one another as before when they only saw each other during the day near the water-press or behind the walls of paper and books. Only now they wanted to spend a whole evening together, eat at the same table, laugh together at the silly couplets of a song at a dance-hall, and return home together by a very circuitous route. This dream became an obsession with them and when, after having used up the language of embraces and caresses, they complained in monotones of the unquenched ardor of their passion, they could not stop. The Gaité quarter seemed different to them. Filtered through their desire, it became a promised land, a paradise of joy and enchantment. "This

cannot go on! This cannot go on!" complained Auguste. "You must find a way to be free one day." While waiting, they gadded about, arm in arm, whispering sweet nothings to one another in the shadows of the wall-lined streets. One evening the street was no longer exclusively theirs; another couple was strolling slowly along. This new couple began to come regularly as soon as night fell. Without a word being spoken, it was arranged that each pair of lovers would stay on the opposite sidewalk, and in order to keep even more isolated, they walked in opposite directions, Auguste and Désirée heading towards the Rue des Fourneaux while the other two went down towards the Rue Vandamme.

They proceeded back and forth in this manner. Whenever they arrived back at their point of departure, they stopped, turned around, and once more took up the reverse direction. The twittering sighs of one couple had scarcely begun to fade away before they started up once more from the other couple, as if, rebounding from a tennis racquet, they had flown across the street to the opposite sidewalk.

When, as it happened from time to time, the two couples ran out of things to say after kissing and repeating a thousand times how much they loved each other, the two girls would begin to examine each other out of the corners of their eyes.

One evening the two young men met one another. Both were impatiently awaiting the arrival of their girls, who were late. Auguste did not have any matches and the other was smoking. They began to talk to one another to kill time. Auguste got the idea that his new acquaintance was a gentle sort. He was quite young, thin and puny, with a sad, sickly air. He told Auguste he was in love with his cousin. He was going to have to return to his regiment soon, and they were seeing each other for the last time. He revealed he worked as a porcelain painter. Doing piecework he earned eight francs per week, but, he added sadly, after five years military service he would no doubt be unable to go back to his former profession. Auguste understood. Their conversation was interrupted by the arrival of the girls, both of whom came out of the Rue du Château at the same time. At the sight of the two men chatting together, the girls were speechless and stared at one another. But their lovers came up and the couples parted to begin their long back-and-forth treks.

Désirée immediately asked Auguste for information about the other

couple, and the other girl must have asked her lover a similar question, because she was surreptitiously glancing curiously at Auguste and Désirée.

One day when the other girl was later than usual, Auguste and Désirée stayed with the young man to keep him company. When his beloved finally arrived, they all stood around and chatted for a while. Finally, tiring of their little meeting, the couples began following each other on the same walk, kissing and repeating little nothings as they proceeded down the street.

The day was approaching when the young man had to return to his army post. The night before his departure he invited Auguste and Désirée to have a drink, and all four found a table not far away in the backroom of a wineshop.

The young man was very depressed by the thought that he was going to have to leave Paris the next morning, part from the woman he loved, abandon his work and his friends. In a few hours he would no longer belong, he would be a thing, a nothing, placed and moved about at the whim of an order. Seated in front of his glass with his eyes downcast, he remained silent. Auguste gave him some precise details of a soldier's life that were of little comfort. Each of his sentences ended with the words "jail," "police station," and "thugs," like some sort of refrain. To hear him, the soldier's life was a terrible torture for the weak, but for well-built guys like himself, and here he gave his chest several solid thumps, it was a joke and nothing more. He added, however, "There were days when I was done in, and I am not saying this to discourage you, but because it's the pure and simple truth." And, as if, in spite of all their intentions of lessening his fears, they had sworn to take all hope away from him, his girl started up under her breath with some very disheartening remarks. Showing his frail wrists to the others, she protested, "His arms are so thin and weak he has never been able to handle heavy work of any kind. He'll never be able to carry a ten-pound rifle!"

He said nothing. He was no longer even listening. A single *idée fixe* haunted him: he had to leave. He could already picture himself with the regiment—his shirt replaced by a tunic with copper buttons, a rifle in his hand, straining in sun, wind, and rain to perform complicated maneuvers. Then he thought of the leave periods, of evening walks in the streets limited by the hour, without a penny to pay for a glass of wine or a bite to eat. He thought of the ugly barracks, of going to sleep

without a good-night kiss from his girl, of waking mornings without hope. But even garrison life had its advantages. Right now he faced endless marches. He saw himself worn out by fatigue on a highway, exhausted, broken, sweating beneath his equipment, dragging at the tail end of the line of troops around which watch dogs were running. He heard himself called good-for-nothing, lazy. He saw himself fallen in a ditch, picked up, and thrown into the trunk of a van and with the exaggeration that comes from trances, he imagined himself lying in a hospital, dying there, while his comrades grumbled, annoyed by the death-rattle of his agony.

Désirée was very moved. She offered Auguste her glass to drink, but their hands trembled and the splashing wine scattered in large drops on the table. They put their glasses down without having the courage to wet their lips. Abashed, they were at a loss for words. Auguste stared at the tips of his fingernails; Désirée contemplated the young man's frail hands. She was revolted by the thought that these dainty hands were going to have to bear the same heavy loads as the fists of stronger men.

The other girl kissed her beloved, attempting to console him. With her handkerchief she wiped his nose, swearing eternal love for him, and at that moment at least she was being truthful.

They did not have the courage to drink a second liter to the health of the patient, and Désirée, who was already late, left very depressed, full of pity for her new friends.

When she returned home, her father was unfastening his suspenders with a very melancholy air. Any other day she might have trembled in front of him. On this particular evening, however, she walked right past his thundering glare without a second glance. Once she had closed herself up in her room, with that unconscious joy which results from the unhappiness of others, she told herself that it was really wrong to complain of her lot, since, in spite of everything, she was happy and since, however little she could see him, Auguste nevertheless was staying in Paris near her and was not going away to the far reaches of the Landes area like the other young man.

Chapter Thirteen

The evening that Désirée spent on the Rue du Cotentin gave her father three days respite. Although she still did not go about the house singing, at least Vatarde no longer had to submit to stifled sobs, silent, angry gestures. His daughter had become calmer. She was eating and drinking almost like normal. She no longer stared out from beneath dark, angry eyes. After the excitement of the previous evening had worn off, she had expected an avalanche of reproaches from her father the next morning, but he had not made any allusions at all to her late-night return. She was thankful to him for this and her tears ceased.

But this resigned peacefulness did not last long. Quickly forgetting the sadness of the draftee on orders, she quit comparing her lot to that of others and once again began to bemoan the fact that she was not free to do as she wished in the evening.

As for Céline, she persisted in being unbearable, even though Anatole had disappeared. Rumors circulating at the workshop gave the impression that he was living with some young corset-maker. So, in a sense, she had reason to be less worried and, in effect, she was less afraid, but her mood continued to be ugly. Now it was her painter who was upsetting her.

First of all, he scarcely ever took her out, made no attempt to do anything to entertain her, let her sit bored to death in a corner, like an animal a person knows is there and has been fed. She had nothing to do but twiddle her fingers, get up, sit down, dust a piece of furniture, mend an article of clothing, heat water. These distractions were not enough. She began to wish her lover would need something so she could go down to the street and wake up her eyes in the open air. Maybe she would chat with the concierge as she returned up the staircase.

To make matters worse, he was stingy. And yet he had to be less

broke than he pretended, because he was always buying old bits of rug, remnants of stoles, broken porcelain pitchers, whole piles of odds and ends and rags fit for the trash bin. He was really a miser! He liked his comfort and did not refuse himself anything, but he did not care if she liked a jewel or wanted a dress. Sometimes he took her out for dinner, accompanied her to a theater, but he never gave her any money of her own! In truth, it appeared he was willing to spend money on her only when it was for something they could both share.

Then one fine day he quit taking her out to eat. Her table manners annoyed him to no end. The way she liked to order rabbit and sink her teeth into its carcass, the way she always filled a glass to the top, the way she laughed and bounced about in her chair, the way she splashed around in the plate with her fork, looking for little onions, all grew to be too much for him.

Not long afterward he stopped taking her to the theater too. Her childish laughter, the way she clapped her hands and was always fiddling with the lorgnette until it would not focus, her habit of carelessly kicking surrounding seats and jumping up on hers to lean over the balustrade, her inevitable insistence on buying apple and orange sugar candysticks, made him cringe with embarrassment.

It was even worse the next day. She always felt compelled to relate the whole play from beginning to end, going into paroxysms of ecstasy over the principal male lead's acting, the heroine and her white dress, the stage set château and forest, the persons seated around them, the boxes, the usherette, everything. The ridiculous remarks with which she livened her narrative annoyed him and he hurled himself at his paint-box, trying to absorb himself in his work in order to escape her drivel.

When they walked together she was perhaps even more tiresome. She stopped at every little field, at the haberdasher's, ate turnovers and hard biscuits covered with almonds, borrowed his handkerchief to wipe her fingers, forced him to halt to watch those endless games of badminton that shopkeepers with their shirt-sleeves rolled up play on summer evenings in poor districts. Sometimes she made him follow her to the elegant sections of the city where she fancied strolling like a fashionable lady down arcades lined with shops and along the new avenues. He detested the Palais-Royal and the huge boulevards, especially because of her. She lolled in front of the jewelry displays, got excited at the things with a Paris label, made ugly remarks about the taste of a flask placed

in a small cart made of gilded bronze, a pendulum clock topped by a hunting scene, a miniature of the Vendôme pillar or the Obelisk priced at eighteen francs each. She clucked in front of framed color lithographs and said she wanted to see her man wear a tie-stick like those she was admiring, a dog's head or an enameled postage stamp mounted on a gold pin.

All in all, she behaved in a less silly fashion on the outer boulevards. Since there was nothing of interest to see, she had no reason to make remarks. But although she often kept silent, everything about her irritated him, from the cassis and water she drank, licking her lips with her tongue, to the puffs from a cigarette she begged for so she could blow smoke from a red sugar pipe. Everything, even the way she pommaded her hair, the way she shook her pendant earrings of fake coral, the way she deliberately placed her hand to show off a silver ring she was wearing, annoyed him.

To excuse himself from going out he would use the pretext that he had work to do. This, of course, would make Céline furious. What bothered her most about the way Cyprien was acting was the benevolent disdain he displayed toward her. He treated her like a child one gives a toy or rattle or picture to keep it pacified. When she had finished looking through one box, he would replace it with another. Crushed, she would spend hours paging through his collections of stamps and engravings. These drab assortments made her depressed; she regretted that these black and white scribbles had not been livened up with warm apple-green or pink colors.

But all that was bearable when she was alone with her lover. When he had his friends over, however, it became humiliating.

The room would fill with a stack of people who cackled like geese whenever she ventured to throw in a word. Especially painful for her was the time she related seeing a very charming painting in a shop along the Rue du Cherche-Midi. It showed a little boy in his nightshirt kneeling on a prie-dieu. They asked how much the frame cost, spoke of cold-cream, cucumbers, rose-petal pommade, and made as much fun of the little man at prayer as they could. When they had had their fun, her lover had kissed her hand with feigned respect, remarking, "Céline, you're priceless. You are really something else, my girl!"

They had no cause to laugh like that, suggesting that this poor little child in his nightshirt was not as good as their own canvases, which

were nothing more than unfinished constructions lacking a real subject. Wasn't a very neat, glossy painting what they should have been producing? One evening, pushed to the limit by all their teasing, she very bluntly told them her ideas on literature and painting. Her thoughts could be summed up thus: in a novel she liked crimes and in a painting she looked for something sentimental. These remarks drew whoops of laughter from her audience.

On one occasion, however, when she had begun to tell about a dispute that had arisen between the owner of the bindery and the shop foreman, they had listened to her attentively.

The owner, it seemed, was competent when it came to external matters, but knew nothing at all about the work involved in book-binding. The foreman, a cad of the worst sort, had made himself indispensable by firing all the good workers and making a mess of the stacks, hiding pages, burying covers in corners. When he was absent or sick, everything was complete confusion. No one could find anything. He took advantage of this situation by asking for successive raises and hiring his son, who, as it happened, was an atrocious crumb who had been run out of all the other workshops in the district because of his improper conduct. The owner gave in after these quarrels, preferring to submit to all these affronts rather than see the bindery collapse. The foreman's demands grew accordingly when the work became more pressing and voluminous. The other employees were well aware of all these unfortunate events. The women usually found the foreman at fault; the men, who despised the foreman, all agreed that he behaved like an animal, but basically it pleased them to see the humiliations he inflicted on the owner.

Sometime later, after having searched the whole city for a worker who had had ten years prior experience in bindery work, the owner had found such a man and had taken his revenge by firing both the foreman and his son in one fell swoop.

Once she had started her little tale, Céline had become animated and eloquent, her eyes sparkling. As she piled detail on detail, the throng of bindery workers moving about the workshop took on life and substance. With the stroke of an adjective she sketched the silhouette of the foreman, the owner's face. She brought to life their quarrels, their anger, showed the whole workshop, their ears tuned in, joking and laughing at these outbursts. "That's how it is!" exclaimed the audience

gathered around her. "That's true to life!" Obviously charmed by her success, the painter had taken her out for a stroll the next day. For once she found herself treated decently, like a real person.

Céline told herself that she had probably been very funny without knowing it, and she wanted to do it again.

She began to repeat all the gossip, all the rumors she picked up at the bindery. But, either the stories lacked appeal the second time around or Céline no longer had the same accent and allure as before. They listened to her with a bored air, and once they thought she had finished, they changed subject without paying any more attention to her.

After that the evenings grew long, and dull, and dreary.

The moments when they were alone together became as pitiful as when the group met. They would scarcely exchange a single word. Certain evenings they would stare at one another for hours at a time. To break the silence Céline would ask questions which needed no answer.

He would casually answer yes or no.

She would begin again, choosing her words carefully, trying to speak correctly. It was wasted effort. For a quarter of an hour she would make countless blunders, saying things like "jollyhocks" for "hollyhocks," "eye of the larynx" for "eye of the Sphinx," and "the zebras of Lebanon" for "the cedars of Lebanon." She would quote proverbs backwards and brag about earthenware monkeys disguised as lawyers that were on display at the Palais-Royal. Revealing that she was related to a talented young man who was an artist who sketched charcoal portraits from photographs, she asked her painter if he could do that. Then, abruptly changing the conversation around, she asked him, "Tell me, did you know that Gamel's daughter is getting married? You know, the one I told you about!"

He simply shrugged his shoulders.

"You're not very friendly this evening."

"Well! You unload a whole raft of things on me that don't make heads or tails. What the devil do you want me to say?"

"That's nice! You don't want me to talk. I won't say another thing!"

And very much annoyed, she sat tapping her fingers on her knees, staring idly about her. Grumbling beneath her breath, she began chewing on her fingernails.

Similar scenes occurred almost every evening. The painter's anger would begin as soon as Céline had entered the room. For the twentieth time he would beg her not to hang her bonnet on the corner of a picture frame, and she would stubbornly refuse to hang it on a coat-stand or on the back of a chair. The picture would lean, of course, hanging askew on the wall. She would insist that it was not important, her cap was not ruining the gilding, and it really did not matter that the picture was not straight.

With that, she was good for nothing. Sometimes, when her movements were those of a graceful woman nonchalantly getting up out of a chair, he would yell at her to stop. She would halt, bewildered, standing there awkwardly. Then he would replace his notebook, saying dejectedly, "O.K. You can move now. I've disturbed you for nothing."

Their quarrels often grew more bitter. Céline would become obstreperous, throwing all her boredom, all her anger in his face. She would accuse him of changing, of no longer being the same as during the first days of their liaison, and he had the temerity to agree with her. Her emotions would gradually get the better of her and she would begin to yell at him. Whenever this happened, he would glance at her out of the corner of his eye, wishing that there were really some way he could get rid of her. But he would say nothing, hiding his anger out of a sense of weakness, afraid of being forced to go out to look for a sexual partner when Céline was already so handy. Besides, he was used to having company, someone moving about, making little noises. Having Cyprien for a lover was often exasperating, but Céline valued him in spite of everything. He was an imposing person, and she had a sort of respect for his city bearing, his soft, white hands, the fine linen sheets on his bed. She felt his apartment gave off a certain aura of elegance and it made her proud to be part of it. In all sincerity she considered herself very superior to all her friends, and she felt only pity for the banal love life of Auguste and her sister.

One day at the workshop she had carelessly hiked up her dress in order to show off the silk stockings Cyprien had given her. The silent envy of the other women had pleased her, but they had gotten their revenge by making nasty cracks about her dresses and scarves, pointing out how dirty they were. "It's all or nothing," said one of them. "Whatever that means," cried out another. "Silk stockings with old boots!" These remarks stung, and Céline swore to herself, "Cyprien's got to buy me a dress." Oh! How exasperating! It was humiliating to have to ask,

but he did not even seem to notice the wretched state of her clothing.

One fine evening, she drew up all her courage and, sputtering, finally remarked, "I've been waiting. I didn't want to. It really bothers me, you know! But please, take a look. The bottom of this dress is falling apart. It's tearing apart at the elbows and under the arm, I've been wearing it so long! But I don't have any money. It's the off-season and sometimes we don't make anything for weeks at a time."

He took her over to the bureau. Opening a drawer, he divided the thirty francs he had left with her. She hugged him and went into long explanations about her dress. All things considered, she could not afford one like those she had seen at the Bon Marché; they were too expensive. She would simply buy some vicuna for forty-nine sous per meter. She would need a piece eight meters long by one meter wide. To avoid the expense of braid and trimmings, she would make do with fashioning pleats with the same material. Happy now, she stared at the ceiling with an idiotic, meditative look on her face as she counted on her fingers.

She could not stop talking. Her street chatter and the profusion of details she drived in connection with the bodice made Cyprien dizzy. He almost regretted the charitable moment that had led him to open his drawer. One evening, no longer able to restrain himself, he told her to go to the devil.

These scenes happened again and again. After numerous trips to various shops and endless haggling, Céline discovered that her dress would come to a much higher price than she had thought. It was then, in particular, that she poured out all her fury on the whole household. Her mother did not even notice. Désirée, whose thoughts were elsewhere, was scarcely bothered. Only her father took the full brunt of these stormings. He analysed the situation to himself thus, "I have two daughters. One doesn't wish to bother marrying anyone, and she is more unbearable than the other, who would like to get married but cannot. It's really discouraging, and I don't know what to do about it."

Chapter Fourteen

In effect, what could he have done? Everything was against him. Summer was ending and that ugly time of year was at hand. Autumn brought to the smoking city its faded skies, hazy afternoons, and long rainy evenings. At six o'clock it was dark and lamps had to be lit. Désirée and Céline would come back from the workshop as filthy as pigs and immediately begin to shake off the mud and scrape their clothing so they could leave more quickly after supper.

It rained constantly. Vatarad, with no wish to leave, would sit at the table forever, and Désirée would be forced to wait, chin in hand, until he finally felt like going out for a walk. Whenever he eventually decided to remove his slippers and go out, she would take off behind him, running breathlessly to meet Auguste, who had been walking along the walls for more than twenty minutes, shivering in the cold.

He would take her to the closest wineshop and they agreed to meet there in the back room now that evenings were becoming so nasty.

But this wretched little place, which had been almost empty the evening the draftee paid for a round of drinks, was crowded with idlers and prostitutes now. It became impossible to talk or kiss. They went to another spot, but the bar counters were full everywhere. They decided to look some more and visit less frequented places when they met. Sometimes they unearthed disreputable cabarets almost completely empty of customers, but even these filled up little by little. Although they sought to hide in shadowy corners, they could not escape the vulgar display surrounding them: coarse laughter, noisy disturbances created by drunks getting into fights, crude boasts by slattern street-walkers joking about their charms. Disgusted, they ended up leaving sooner than they had planned.

On these evenings, Désirée would return home nervous and annoyed, and Auguste, aroused in spite of everything by the lascivious remarks he

had heard, was animal-like. Mistrusting himself, he would masturbate before going to meet her. Even so, he considered himself almost a saint, since he was certain that, all things considered, he was being more patient than most men. Nevertheless, he kept trying to convince himself that, loving Désirée as he did, it would no longer have been the same thing if she had yielded to him. He liked to think that her kisses would have less appeal if he possessed her more.

Despite all his precautions and rationalization, he desired her physically and was irritated by the impossibility of ever seeing her alone to chat with her in private.

Désirée suffered as much as he, and one evening, at the end of her strength, she would have given herself to him, if he had not been afraid and hesitated at the last moment.

He had finally persuaded her, after long discussion, to go to a hotel room he had rented for two hours. She was still hesitant about going there, fearing some disaster. Since it was drizzling and the wineshops were overflowing, she let him drag her there, but as they went up the stairs she felt like crying. When they entered the room, Auguste placed some wine and crackers on a round, marble-veneered table. The clerk brought them two glasses. Taking a seat near the hearth, Désirée sat huddled with her feet hiked up on the chair rung, withdrawn, her head bowed.

A violent shudder ran down both their backs at the sight of those four miserable walls which had seen unfold so many midnight revels, so many bestial couplings, so many pitifully unhappy nights. In the fireplace several carelessly stacked logs crackled and smoldered in the absence of a draft, a few flames licking the ashless fire-back.

The tomblike horror of furnished hotel rooms rose from this sordid pigsty like a psalm of lamentation, completely obliterating all Auguste and Désirée's thoughts of passion and seclusion. He poured her some wine, but she said she was not thirsty. Quickly downing several glasses himself, he went over to where she was seated and, blushing, his hands trembling with nervousness, abruptly pulled up her dress. She gave a sudden start and struggled against him, crying out, "Leave me alone! I don't want to!"

Ashamed of his violence, he released her and begged her to pardon him, never suspecting that at that moment her own passion had been so aroused that she would have given herself to him if only he had continued to press her.

That evening made Désirée think. In spite of all her earlier good resolutions, she might have been lost if Auguste had been bolder. She realized that she had lost control of herself for a moment, and now she suddenly remembered a remark Céline had made one evening: "Men are so stupid! If they knew, we would be lost before they believed it possible." In any case, now that her reason had returned, she vowed never again to allow herself to be placed in a similar position and never again to agree to meet except in the street or in a wineshop drinking room.

After this fiasco their relations became strained. Auguste no longer dared squeeze her close and she kept somewhat aloof. One night, however, they were able to spend a whole evening together. Vatar had obtained a theater ticket for the Château-d'Eau and would certainly not be back before midnight. They wandered toward the Gaîté quarter, but the joy they had been awaiting for such a long time seemed dead to them. Not knowing what to do, they went to the Mille-Colonnes dance-hall at Gagny's where the crowd circulating about in the narrow strip reserved for dancing seemed glum.

The musicians began playing a quadrille of Hervé, a fast dance livened by a very fiery tempo, something to make a man's blood flow, the sort of peppy music to inspire lurching, swaying movements, dances with skirts flying and feet zooming skyward.

The couples on the dance floor moved and turned with a bored air. When the flute trills pirouetted over the noise of the brass section, with the cash register adding its racket to the increasing din of the orchestra, Auguste expected a whirlwind flash of arms to cut through the air and make corkscrewing motions alongside the dancers' thighs, past proud, jutting breasts, over churning feet skating across the floor, stretching and shortening the noses of the dancing women. There was none of this. The dancers barely moved, turning about in an idolent and gawky manner, trying not to work up a sweat.

The assembly seated at tables alongside the dance floor and overhead in the gallery seemed equally woebegone. Entire families sat and stared at one another with gloomy detachment, drinking without enthusiasm, coming to life only to cuff some youngsters dancing around and falling, feet in the air, in the middle of the dancing couples.

Everyone seemed lethargic; they all looked maudlin drunk. A helmeted member of the Parisian military police dozed in one corner while the man in charge of collecting money called the dances in an

extremely bored voice. Auguste and Désirée took a table and ordered a salad bowl. The water the waiter poured on the sugar was cloudy and the wine bitter. They did not feel like shaking off their unease by dancing a polka together. Upset, they finally got up and left and began walking aimlessly down the Boulevard de Montrouge to the Avenue du Maine.

Four days later, Désirée became ill and had to remain in her room. The evenings she had spent splashing through the rain and mud with Auguste had left her with a bad cold. She tried various cures: jujube gum, medicinal pastes, herbal teas, *quatre-fleurs*, sedative syrups, and soothing emulsions, but the cough persisted. She made use of this forced rest to mend her clothes and help her sister sew her new dress.

She was completely bored, especially on Sunday. However, Céline stayed with her. Her lover had been gone to the country for a week, seeking remote, shabby locales, and she decided to profit from this spare time to work on her outfit too. Seated next to the window, they cut and slashed and sewed. From time to time they looked up and gazed through the windowpanes. Here and there a shaft of sunlight touched the road, its pale rays glinting from the center of puddles. Parisians were making use of this period of fair weather to go to the country one more time. Trains left every ten minutes for Versailles. Double-decked coaches, bursting with passengers, whistled in the wind that lashed the faces of the women and shook their skirts. Hunched over their bench seats, their eyes tired, hats in hand, umbrellas between their legs, the crowd of travelers rolled along through a cloud of coal smoke and dust. The ripples of laughter upset the two sisters. They envied the contentment of these throngs. After suffering for a whole week behind their counters, shopkeepers closed their shutters on Sunday and forsook the sidewalks where Monday through Saturday, on warm evenings, they set up their chairs to watch their children. The two girls begrudged them their mania for wanting to frolic in the open air in some Clamart; the imbecilic satisfaction they all seemed to take in carrying a picnic basket mounted on a pole; the picnics on the grass with waxed paper; the return trips homeward with bundles of flowers; the cavorting, the cries, the silly shouts along the way; the disheveled casual attire, with shirt tails hanging out, corsets unfastened, belts loosened several notches; the games of hide-and-seek and *visa* in bushes stinking with all the vomit and garbage from just-eaten meals.

They envied the happiness of these people, never suspecting that

they might not be any more happy than themselves. They were so depressed they no longer responded to the greetings and shouts of the travelers perched on the train coaches. When pairs of lovers smiled, filled with delight at the idea of going out to fritter away a whole week's pay, the two sisters looked the other way.

For want of something better to do, they took note of the least details of the railroad, the glistening of the copper handles on the coaches, the air-bubbles in the window panes. They listened to the telegraph tick-tack, the muffled noise that train cars being pushed by hand make as they glide along. They watched the smoke emitted by the locomotives, fumes varying in color from white to black, from blue to gray, sometimes tinted yellow, a dirty, heavy yellow of the Barèges baths. They recognized each locomotive, knew its name, read on its side the name of the factory where it had been constructed: the yards and shops of Océan, Cail and Company, the Graffenstaden factory, Koechlin at Mulhouse, Schneider at Creusot, Gouin at Batignolles, Claparède at Saint-Denis, the Cail, Parent, Schalken and Company group at Fives-Lille. And they pointed out the differences of these creatures, frail and strong, small ones without tenders for the suburban lines, huge brutes for long freight hauls.

Then their attention became fixed on an engine that had broken down. They watched the monstrous gears of its wheels, the strokes of its pistons in and out of the cylinders, silent and gentle at first, then suddenly rapid and fierce, with a frightful racket of rods and valves. The firebox could be seen emitting flashes of flame, while the blow-valves and popcocks let off steam. With a hiccuping sound the locomotive started up, and their ears were filled with the engine's strident cries and raucous panting, the jerky whistling of its jets.

They were as happy as children when they saw one very small locomotive reserved for moving merchandise within the station yard and for roadbed work, miniature and cute, elegant and sharp, with its iron roof to shelter the engineers and its large cab-windows at the rear.

This particular engine was their favorite. Often seeing it describe its zigzags and curves and hearing it gaily whistle at the tongue-rails, they had become very fond of it. In the morning, when they got up and cracked their curtains, the little locomotive was there, alert and spruce, smoking noiselessly, and they laughingly cried hello to it.

But on that particular Sunday, the "kid" as they called it, had remained in its shed. Near the engine sheds there were only some enor-

mous brutes, whose innards, grilled with square moldings, were being cleaned out. Céline and Désirée were bored to tears. And to make matters worse, Désirée was angry. She had looked to see if Auguste was on the bridge across the way and he was not there. She was mad at him for not taking the trouble to be there, and, as she began coughing once more, she decided that it was he who was to blame for her illness; she told herself he had not really shown good sense in making her go out like that to wander the streets in any kind of weather.

Chapter Fifteen

Auguste was miserable. First, his meetings with Désirée had been interrupted; then, other difficulties had developed. His mother's illness was becoming worse. She could not breathe properly and going downstairs to the street to shop was impossible. She could not cook or tolerate the fumes from smoking embers. Going to do laundry at the wash house was out of the question. In addition, she needed company. She had suddenly come to hate the Rue du Champ-d'Asile. From their apartment window the view of the Montparnasse cemetery, with its lush greenery and the stark whiteness of its tombs, the nests of warbling birds and dense tangles of plants, all of which she had at first found so pleasing during the summer, soon cast a pall over her humor. This put Auguste in a very difficult position. As is always the case with the doting mother of an only child, the good woman adored him. In return, he loved her with the devotion and affection of an individual who realizes something of the tremendous struggle for survival faced by a woman who has been widowed at a very early age and left with a child to raise by herself. He had to make up his mind what to do in a hurry. After listening to the doctor's advice, he finally decided to place her with one of his aunts who owned a cottage with a little garden along the Rue Picpus. It was a desolate district, but the little house itself was sunny and filled with flowers. Since she would never be alone there, he would not have to worry about her lacking care if she suddenly took a turn for the worse while he was gone.

Life was going to be difficult for him, however, since Picpus was a long way from the Saint-Sulpice district. But the increased exhaustion involved mattered little to him. The biggest problem to be resolved was that of his meetings with Désirée. These encounters had been quite short even when they both lived in the same quarter! Now they would only last a couple of minutes, since going and coming would take up

such a large part of their time. To have to miss eating with his mother and sit waiting in some dive until Désirée was free was an unpleasant prospect. Then, too, his mother was so unhappy when she did not see him seated beside her at suppertime that, suffering as she was, he could not really think of depriving her of this little pleasure. Moreover, his mother was like most old women who have lost their appetite: she could not stand the sight of food and began retching when supper was placed before her. In spite of the doctor's advice, she would not have touched any meat if Auguste had not gently forced her to suck the blood from a chop, even if it entailed spitting out the piece she had in her mouth if she could not swallow it.

Auguste was like all those people who remain indecisive for a long while and then suddenly take a firm stand. He decided to make the move without delay. Placing a notice on their door that the apartment was available to be sublet for six months, he borrowed a small cart, loaded their furniture into it with the help of some of his friends, and harnessing himself to the straps, with the others pushing and making frequent stops along the way to fortify themselves with something to drink, transported his furniture and goods, little by little, to the new location that very same morning.

He had easily obtained permission to be two hours late coming to work. The foreman thought highly of him. In compensation for his lack of knowledge of the bookbinding profession, he at least possessed one important quality—he only very rarely failed to show up for work on Mondays and he was neither insubordinate nor rude. Then, too, his affair with Désirée had made him interesting. Everyone knew of Vatar'd's refusal to let him marry his daughter and everyone, not only the less scrupulous but also very upright individuals such as old lady Teston and the woman supervisor, thought Vatar'd in the wrong. If they had had a daughter to marry off, they probably would not have given her to Auguste. But since they were not directly concerned, it amazed them that a father could be hardhearted enough to let two lovers languish like that. Without realizing it, they were drawing from an ancient fount of folklore in novels and songs lamenting the misfortunes of couples in love. Once the whining sentimentality of the common folk made its appearance, Vatar'd became a monster in the eyes of everyone. If need be, they all would have helped Auguste deceive him.

No one was surprised, then, that Auguste spent a great part of every morning chattering with Céline, who served as an intermediary and gave

him news of Désirée, explaining that they had placed a mustard plaster on her chest, she was doing fine, and would be able to leave the house very soon. In the evening Céline told her sister that she had talked with Auguste and related that he was unhappy not to be able to see her and was more in love with her than ever.

Céline also informed her sister that Auguste had moved. This upset Désirée somewhat since he had done so without telling her. Because she did not understand anything at all of the old lady's aversion for their apartment, she was unjust in her thoughts toward Auguste, becoming alarmed and afraid he was only seeking a way to avoid seeing her so often. She had the terrible thought that since he had failed in his attempt to seduce her, he wanted to gradually draw away from her. But all her suspicions vanished when she saw him again. He seemed so happy and kissed her with such fervor that she blamed herself for having suspected him and made herself more charming and more sweet for him. The intimacy that had existed between them and which, in spite of all their efforts, had not been the same since the unfortunate episode at the hotel, began again as if nothing had ever come between them.

After this reestablishment of their relationship, they began hatching complicated schemes, clever plans for going quickly from one end of Paris to the other at no cost. Auguste investigated the tram routes. He bought a timetable at the bus office, but this scrawl, with its brackets of bold print and rows of periods, told them nothing. They put out their eyes over it, but were unable to unravel the complicated pattern of junctions and connections. Exhausted from repeatedly blinking her eyelids and following her finger as she ran it beneath the lines, Désirée finally suggested to Auguste that he could let her know which bus to take once he was installed in his new quarter and had seen which buses ran there. Auguste furnished her with all the necessary information. In the end, however, they decided not to use the trams and buses since they were always full on rainy days and, with all their detours and stops, would scarcely leave them time to kiss before they would have to part once more. It remained understood they would each go halfway on foot. She would try, for her part, to go as far as the Quai de la Halle aux Vins, where he would be waiting for her along the parapet or against the iron railing.

If now they had less time together weekdays, on the other hand they had an additional day to meet—Sunday. For a long time the workers

had only been working a half-day Sunday mornings. But the owner had decided to close his shops on Sundays since he had come to realize that their ardor to come to work was simply the result of having exhausted all their credit in the quarters where they lived and having always been able to keep some credit in the area around the workshop; the workers came in order to drink without having to pay out of their own pockets. No useful work was accomplished, since they spent their time drinking and yakking out in the courtyard or snoozing behind the paper bales. Since he no longer had to set up a press on Sunday mornings, Auguste was now able to join Désirée about nine o'clock in the morning.

Their meetings followed one after another in monotonous succession. The weather remained cold, but it stopped raining. At first Désirée was not sorry about crossing the bounds of the Montrouge district. It was a change for her, especially since the Rue du Cotentin, with its perpetually sad air of a forgotten street, was beginning to get on her nerves. In any case, for the first few days she had the pleasure of crossing boulevards and streets she normally saw but once or twice a year.

If she was not late when she arrived at the Boulevard Saint-Michel, she would slowly stroll along, window-shopping in front of shoe stores where she would become entranced by puce-colored laced boots, little low-cut shoes with high heels and rosettes, boots of rough fabric dyed bright green, blue, and red, trimmed and laced with fake gold chenille. She would look around to see what sort of women could really bring themselves to buy shoes of that sort, convinced no one in her right mind would want to be seen wearing them. Then she would study the sparkling interiors of the cafés, the painted women fidgeting at the tables, the shrimp merchants and flower vendors, the huge woman reeking dissipation, the stupid bands of braying students, the beggars carting orphans about, gazing in wonderment at the gilded mirrors.

All this activity and noise caught her attention, and she would dawdle, entranced, not really beginning to walk again until she had arrived in front of the iron railings of the Cluny Gardens. There the guard on sentry duty beneath the dark vault of the Thermes usually attracted her pity.

One evening some young men began following her. These loafers, probably because they lacked money to buy something to drink and with nothing better to occupy their time, fell in step behind her and began making lewd suggestions to her. She quickened her pace, not

allowing herself to reply to them. Once they caught sight of Auguste standing forlornly at the bend of the pier, they went away. Like all girls her age, Désirée was not really angry at being followed, especially since it permitted Auguste to see that other young men thought she was attractive enough to want to seduce her. But it upset Auguste, who grumbled to himself, thinking she should have put them in their place, feeling she was not bothered enough by their invitations.

She laughed. Tapping him on the fingers, she murmured, "How silly you are! It's obvious I don't give a hoot about them since I'm here!" Pleased to see that he was jealous, she scolded him, then hung more caressingly onto his arm, bending forward to tilt her face up toward his, smiling sweetly into his eyes.

But time was passing by quickly. They walked back up toward the Boulevard du Montparnasse. One day they came across a nice tavern standing fairly isolated from the rest of the quarter. As they sat drinking cider, it suddenly seemed to them the tavern of their dreams. There was a small room garlanded with roses, wooden tables, a nice, fat mama snoring at her counter with her arms crossed, a waiter yawning in the doorway, a customer spitting and smoking behind a newspaper. "Hey! This is a good place to know," remarked Auguste. "Instead of going all the way down to the quai, you can stop here when it rains. I'm not afraid of getting wet. Since you won't be with me, I'll lose the time it takes to walk here, but that will certainly be better than letting you get soaked to the skin and have you fall sick again."

It was a good thing they had discovered this quiet spot, because the weather continued to be contrary, with streets and skies draped in the same mud-colored pall, windowpanes coated with condensation, shoes forever sinking into greasy mire. When it came time to go and meet Auguste, Désirée would grow sluggish, sitting with her legs curled up in front of the coal stove. Her eyelids would feel heavy as she repeated to herself, "It's time to go." She would give herself five minutes respite, then remain seated. Realizing she was weak and feeling sorry for Auguste who did not hesitate to muck around in the rain for her, she would berate herself for being lazy. Finally, she would jump to her feet, shake herself, put on her hood, and march rapidly to the tavern.

Then, on the days when she was feeling out of sorts, those days when women become irritable and get upset at the natural rhythms of their sex, she was left completely without strength. On those days she would debate whether to go or not, lamenting, "I'm not feeling well.

I'm tired. If I don't go, tomorrow I'll tell him I was sick." Glancing at herself in the mirror, she would note the circles beneath her eyes and think how pale her skin looked. She wanted to go to bed. She would try to cough, and failing, felt she was lost. She would say to herself, "Come on now! Chin up!" She was really hoping the doorbell would ring, announcing some visit that would justify her inactivity and allow her to believe she had no choice but to remain at the house. No one would come, so she would decide to open the door. Going down to the street, she would look up and down the sidewalk. When it was evident no one she knew was in sight, she would finally decide to depart.

On those evenings, of course, she would be in a nasty humor and scarcely let herself be kissed. Auguste, upon seeing her so overwrought and pale, would ask, "What's the matter? Are you sick?" She would reply with a peevish "No!" If he continued to question her, she would get angry and insist, "I've already told you, there's nothing the matter with me!" Ten minutes later, shivering, she would complain of being cold. Although he would order a hot drink to cheer her up, she would sit silent, absorbed in her own thoughts. Worried at seeing her like this, Auguste would suggest he take her home. When she did not insist on staying, they would leave together.

After saying goodbye, he would return home beset by a great feeling of emptiness. He would have liked to be able to return home to a warm bedroom and a wife who would rouse from her sleep with a gentle and affectionate query. Upon lighting the candle, it would have been nice to see his wife, who had fallen asleep waiting for him, smile when he entered the bedroom. He recalled, word for word, that picture of well-being and happiness which Céline had evoked the day she invited him to marry her sister. When he passed several men who were late and walking at a brisk pace along the Boulevard de Mazas, he envied them, thinking, "These men are going home to a comfortable house where they are going to be able to recount to their awaiting wives all the things they have seen and done." He wished for the quiet of a household, the restful union of two beings whose interests and thoughts are sometimes the same.

At night, especially, when he had gone to bed and the bedroom was pitch black, he became obsessed with sad thoughts, and although he obstinately closed his eyes, he was unable to sleep. Sometimes he tried to cast off all his depression, remarking to himself, "But after all, I have no occasion to complain. I am content with my good mother." He

admitted, nevertheless, that the tranquil affection and caresses of this old woman left him angry or cold. At times he was frightened, fearing this meant his love for his mother was growing weaker.

Then the image of Désirée would haunt him again and he would grow bored with useless regrets, repeating to himself, "Oh! If only I had not joined the army, today I would be earning eight francs per day carving meerschaum pipes, enough to get married." And he would seek to console himself, remembering that if he had practiced a different profession, he would never have met Désirée at the Débonnaire House. He thought about changing his profession and adopting one that would pay better, but realized he was not trained for anything else. The money he earned at the bindery furnished him a modest living, which it would be foolish to jeopardize by suddenly taking up a different sort of job.

As for Désirée, her thoughts were less tormented and less bitter. She slipped bit by bit into a sort of apathy and calm. The Boulevard Saint-Michel, which had at first interested her with its expensive shop-windows and the buzzing of its crowds, bored her now. The impetus given to their meetings by Vatarde's ill will no longer drove her. Since he had begun to let her go out, she was becoming excessively sensitive to the wind and cold, showing up for their meetings sometimes early, sometimes late. Suddenly becoming impatient and feeling a need to walk she sometimes went there very early, at other times very late, nearly always as if she were accomplishing an onerous duty.

On hazy, rain-drenched days, as they had agreed, she went no further than the wineshop. But even on days when the pavement was dry and a brisk wind invited long walks, she no longer went all the way to the quai to meet Auguste.

Two weeks passed, two weeks when hour by hour the stages of the weakening of her resolve were clearly evident. One day she went half-way down the Boulevard Saint-Germain, the next she did not cross the corner of the Boulevard Saint-Michel. Each evening she ventured successively less and less far. It finally got to the point that no matter what the weather she would go no farther than the wineshop.

Chapter Sixteen

When Céline had finished her dress and tried it on, she celebrated like a crazy person, jumping up and down in her bedroom, putting her neck out of joint attempting to look at her back. She thought she looked ravishing, somewhat chic even. When she dashed into Cyprien's studio and sat down in front of him seeking compliments, he was less enthusiastic and limited himself to remarking that the dress did nothing for her figure, and furthermore, as threadbare as it was, the other dress fit her better and made her look more pliant and willowy.

These remarks, spoken in a very positive tone, hit Céline like a pair of slaps. After a moment's stunned silence, she offered a bitter retort. As he was not feeling up to an argument, Cyprien replied that he was merely joking. Her good humour returned and she began strutting about once more in front of a mirror, very satisfied with herself.

This dress became a constant source of argument and discussion.

Céline arrived Sunday morning and declared, "I'm all set for a stroll." Cyprien made excuses, saying he had too much pressing work to do, and in this manner, as he had promised himself, he attempted to avoid going out with her. She stretched out on the divan, grumbling and fidgeting. Finally he lost patience with her, as she knew he would, and consented to take her out.

She wanted to stroll through some nice districts, across the Tuileries, down the Champs-Élysées, along streets where she would be able to show off her new dress. He refused to go along with these plans and proposed instead that they go to the Moulin de la Galette, Montmartre, along the Boulevard d'Italie, near the Gobelins, to a nice little quarter where he would be able to smoke his pipe.

"You don't need a new dress to visit places like that," complained Céline.

"Why didn't you wear your everyday dress?" he suggested.

"Well, thank you! And when do you suppose I should show off my good dress, if not on Sunday?"

He tried to make her understand that there was no reason to dress better on Sundays than on any other day of the week. However, she was as stubborn as a mule concerning this matter.

Finally, one afternoon he decided to take her to the Champs-Élysées. He made her sit on a dusty bench with her back to the road, and they watched that whole raft of fools who sport about in their new outfits from the Place de la Concorde to the Cirque d'Été. That whole surging pack of humanity disgusted him, but she gazed wide-eyed, imagining that they were admiring her outfit, her bearing, her charm.

He swore never again to take her to that "dress fair," as he called it. Instead, he towed her to Bercy on a sightseeing boat, took her to a spot behind a slaughter house near the Place Pinel where he praised the funereal ugliness of those boulevards, the dilapidated debauchery of those streets. She did not know whether he was making fun of her or not.

All that did little to brighten her spirits. Really, she did not need a lover to go see those sordid areas! It was decidedly quite difficult for them to see eye to eye. She became very critical of his artistic whims, and he wanted to get away from her vulgarity. Some of her little mannerisms grated on his nerves, such as the fact that she could not stand people wearing pince-nez glasses, and she would spy on couples to see if the woman was wearing a ring, whispering to him, "She's not married, you know!"

And yet there were days when he was tormented by a kind of remorse. He would resolve to treat Céline better and when she arrived he would take her in his arms and play with her like a puppy. They would share a cigarette, each taking several drags as they sat next to the stove, and she would tell him stories of her family life and the disputes she had had with her friends.

Sometimes she would unleash sad torrents, weeping uncontrollably, and Cyprien, in spite of his intention to remain calm, would end up berating her with sharp remarks. Once, when he begged her to save her tears for the day when she would not be coming to his place, she replied, "To whom do you want me to relate my problems, if not to you?"

But the times when their love faced the greatest stress were those stormy evenings when the painter dressed to go out to some social

gathering or dance. For her, a salon was a sort of expensive dive where women could be picked up. He was wasting his breath when he denied this, snorting, "That's not true!" She would nod her head with an air of defiance, and the hatred of the working class woman for her bourgeois counterpart would burst forth in raw language. Very depressed, she would help her lover get ready, prowl around him admiring his white tie and tails, staring respectfully at his opera-hat, making it expand and flatten, going into ecstasy over its black-silk lining on which gold letters were sewn.

On those evenings she planned to sleep at his place in order to make sure of his return. She did not understand anything at all of the anger he felt at being forced to go to the houses of people who might buy some of his paintings. He would swear like a cart driver as he struggled to button his gloves and rebelled against the starch in his shirt. She would say to him, "Don't go! You'll see, we'll have fun!" And Cyprien, exasperated, would cry out, "What the devil! Do you think it's for my pleasure that I'm going to spend two francs for a cab and be bored to death in some middle-class household?" But she would reply, "Quit it! I really think you're going there to find a woman." The painter would end up responding, "Oh, yes! I would prefer that!" Then, furious, she would smack him. He would end up getting mad because she was rumpling his shirt. Overwhelmed by the prospect of standing next to a door for two or three hours without smoking, he would leave.

Since he neither danced nor played cards, he would stand apart, idle, looking somewhat foolish, part of that sad band who contemplate the ceiling, checking to see if their ties are straight every ten minutes in order to look occupied. Generally, he took refuge in the cardroom where other men, ignorant like him of the delight of cards and dancing, sighed with regret at having to be away from their slippers and their fireside corners. They knew it was getting too late to hire a carriage, so they would be forced to drag irritated, tired women on their arms to distant quarters.

He would slip away as soon as possible and return to his room. No matter how careful he was, Céline would awaken, challenging him angrily, "I smell powder on you! You've decided to get rid of me, I'm just sure of it!" And she would shriek, "All right then! Go on and find your highfaluting girls! Oh, yes! They're nice! All you have to do is say it. Pretty bodies with simple-minded airs! And what tubs they have for breasts! But you should see them in the morning when they awaken!

Now there's a pretty sight! They cough and whine, and swallow cod-liver oil and other ridiculously expensive medicaments, hoping somehow to purchase their health!"

When he would try to interrupt this deluge of gross remarks, she would cut loose, more angrily, "I know what I'm talking about, you damn brute! Look at me! It's not the clothing or jewels that make a woman! If they were there like me in a nightgown, well then, that would be fun! You would see! They're not worth what we are! No, they're not worth what we are! Without their finery, they fade away, do you hear me?" Patting her firm, full breasts, she would exclaim, "Hey! Here's what beats them!" And she would point to the bed, her eyes glowing, her hair tumbling about her bare shoulders like a sheaf of straw.

Buried in an armchair, Cyprien would smoke several cigarettes without responding. In order to have peace he would finally be forced to threaten her with not coming back at all. This shut her up, but she would become very jumpy and fidgety. Eventually she would develop an attack of nerves and it would end with her becoming more of a bother than when she was standing there howling her anguish at him.

So he tried another tactic. Letting her throw herself about, twist around, tear her handkerchief with her teeth, he sat there reading, completely ignoring her.

His apparent indifference brought her display to a halt. Suddenly whining but meek, Céline attempted to please her lover in every possible way to make him love her.

As she was always seeing him paint women wearing makeup, one evening while he was gone she shook a powder-puff over her face, put flour on her nose, and rouged her cheeks with a pastel pencil she found. Applied without practice or taste, this paint job made her look like an Indian. When Cyprien returned and saw her all bedaubed, he began to laugh. This made her angry and brought tears to her eyes. She swiped at her face with her fingers, smudging the colors on her cheeks until she stood smeared and grotesque, her hands stained, her lips wet, her face a mess of pink mud.

After this she lost hope of ever conquering his affection. Meanwhile, he had become more benevolent and patient with her. As long as she did not groan or complain, he felt content. He had begun to feel a sincere compassion for her, but at the end of some time he perceived that it was a mistake not to continue to be on guard. Céline had a heart

of gold, but she needed to be dominated, and whenever he gave her too much freedom she would revert to her earlier, more tempestuous, vitriolic self.

In the meanwhile, the sort of timid affection that she felt for the painter began to change. The pride she had once taken in possessing a gentleman for her lover had now vanished; the attraction of having a new lover was long lost. Now she thought constantly of the pleasures of her former liaisons. On days when they got into arguments she would become upset by the silence and disdain with which Cyprien greeted her complaints and she would once more begin to think about Anatole.

This man, who had wounded her so deeply when he broke off their relationship without giving her the satisfaction of being the one to call it quits, she now recalled as being a strapping, handsome young man, a boon companion. She had fond memories of the simple, carefree times they had enjoyed together. The brutality he sometimes exhibited on these occasions no longer repelled her. She excused it as the inevitable conclusion of an honest passion. His violence and depredations had worn her out, but, in spite of everything, he pleased her more than Cyprien. At least with Anatole she could laugh and say "Damn!" when she wanted. They would jump about in the streets, sing like birds, dance the cancan, drink, do whatever they well pleased. In any case, she had scarcely gained in the exchange. Cyprien did not give her enough money to support herself. While it was true that Anatole stole from her, it seemed true also that some compensations were necessary in order to make this disappointing life acceptable. Money? No! Caresses, affection, attention even? Not any more! Oh! If Anatole pursued her one evening now, she would certainly not ask Cyprien for protection any more!

Little by little, she got to the point where a woman wants to betray the man with whom she lives in order to get even with him for his disdain or his goodness, but she did not yet possess the material means to get this revenge. One certain Sunday these desires became more fixed, more vivid. After a struggle of more than an hour, she had broken Cyprien and gotten him to take her out. They went down the street tugging each other by the arm. He made nasty remarks to her all along the way or else answered haphazardly, making it plain he was not listening to her. She quit speaking and, with a pained air, was examining the shops in front of which she no longer even had his permission to stop, when a couple came toward them on the sidewalk across the

street. She nearly fainted. It was Anatole. With a masterful air he was leaning lovingly across a seductively attractive young woman all dressed out in a new outfit. They appeared to be very happy. From the tone of his half-heard voice and that of her muffled laughter, he was obviously playing the gallant, making coarse pleasantries of the sort that amuse young women. It was obvious that they were spending a day of happy-go-lucky celebrating in the local cabarets, drinking and having a very simple happy time in some dives. Anatole saw Céline. He gave her a sidelong glance that suggested interest and an invitation. He walked with a rolling gait, curly locks of hair at his temple, his hat cocked to the right, very pleased that his former mistress could see him enjoying the company of a mature, well-dressed woman.

Céline was completely devastated by the sight of this girl. If she had been some poor tramp dressed in castoff clothing picked up from some crook, with her cheeks hollowed from excessive sexual indulgence and plastered with makeup, Céline would certainly not have been tortured by the jealousy that had seized her. But since her rival was seductive and well-dressed, she would have liked to be the one in Anatole's arms.

The change in Céline did not go unnoticed by Cyprien. The first signs hinting that his mistress might betray him were an absorbed silence, a desire to disobey him, the fact that her visits to his apartment were no longer as regular as before.

But he really became apprehensive the day Céline made a comment that opened new horizons for him. Hoping to arouse his jealousy, she had spoken to him of her former love affairs. She especially relished giving details on her relations with Anatole, noting, "Now Anatole was common, just like me. We understood one another. He took everything I had, stole from me, but it doesn't matter, he was loving. He was not like so many others who are frigid and consider you to be poor, silly little dimwits, good-for-nothings not worth beating."

Chapter Seventeen

Sometimes Céline was astonished by her sister's apathy. One day she remarked to her, "You're going to be late. Hurry up!" Very unconcerned, Désirée replied, "No, I'm not! I didn't tell Auguste any certain hour. I simply promised to join him sometime between eight and nine o'clock. It's only half past. I've got lots of time." Céline left. Désirée waited until the water was hot to wash her hands. That made her lose at least ten minutes, five more to dress and go down the stairs. By the time she crossed the hall and went out the doorway, Auguste had been waiting more than three-quarters of an hour.

One evening she did not come. It was the first time she had completely failed to show up for a meeting.

Auguste strolled down the boulevard, going as far as Observatory Square. In a cheap dive where they had often met, he asked if anyone had seen her. He wandered about like a lost soul, keeping an eye on the sidewalks, watching the road, not daring to go inside a tobacco shop out of fear that she might pass by while his back was turned. He did not dare go any further than the Rue du Montparnasse, since she could get to the boulevard by that street or by the Rue du Départ. And so he remained standing there by a bench alongside the road, eyed with suspicion by a pair of police sergeants who were slowly passing by on this poorly lighted street.

It was evident Désirée had not yet arrived. He went slowly back down the boulevard, turning every three minutes to scan the narrow horizon, waiting until the black specks moving in the distance had grown larger and changed into women he did not know.

The hour had long since passed when he still believed she might show up. Sometimes he perceived a figure resembling Désirée coming in the opposite direction, and he would run up, thinking that she had perhaps taken a different route and, angered at not finding him when

she arrived at the quai, was now returning home. When he drew closer, he would find a woman who did not look at all like Désirée. The woman would stare at him, alarmed or pleased by his sudden approach; she would smile or make an abrupt circle to avoid him. Disconsolate and panting, he arrived at the Saint-Germain bridge. Then, slowly, he once again wandered past the iron grillwork of the Entrepôt where, by the bleary light of lanterns placed at the four corners of a gaping hole, he examined the state of the repairwork being done on the gas mains and water lines. Crossing the street, he leaned his elbows on the parapet. Black and silent, the Seine flowed below, its surface striped here and there by wriggly reflections from the street lamps. Eleven o'clock sounded. No Désirée. Ah! she wasn't very nice! She had lazed in a warm corner by the fireside and gone to bed, nice and comfortable, without thinking of him. Then he would try to persuade himself that she was ill; but that day she had chattered and laughed as usual at work. She had been happy and well when she left the workshop at six o'clock. It would have surprised him very much to learn she had fallen ill upon arriving home. Perhaps her father had made her stay home. That, too, was unlikely. Vatarad scarcely ever left the house except on fixed days. Désirée knew the evenings when he was going to Tabuche's to play cards. Consequently, she knew exactly when she was going to be free. In any case, her father no longer bothered her; he let her go out pretty much at will. Even admitting that, like before, he might have wanted to spy on her and keep her under his finger, she could have pretended she needed to buy a spool of thread or a packet of needles and gone to the wineshop. Once there, she could have asked the proprietor to tell Auguste, when he arrived, that she could not make it and then, if she was really in too big a hurry to wait for him, she could have quickly returned to the house.

He tried to recall her remarks over the last few days. Hadn't she said that her temples were throbbing, that she felt uneasy? After all, perhaps she had simply suddenly been struck by a migraine headache, just when she was going to leave, and had gone to bed instead. With the egotism of a person in love, he would have preferred her to be sick rather than indifferent. For the twentieth time, he could take it or leave it. He took it.

Life became very difficult. From then on, whenever Désirée failed to meet Auguste as promised, she would be cross and quick to anger as she prepared to meet him the next day, knowing she was going to have

to put up with his whining and repeat to him twenty times, "I couldn't come!" She had to be careful not to contradict herself. She knew that to shut him up she was going to have to turn sulky, mutter a few threats. Then she would be forced to listen to heavy sighs, submit to fits of suppressed anger, endure the mistrust feeding his sense of injury.

It would not have taken much to make her stay home.

Their meetings, which in the beginning had been so happy, became gloomy now. Making matters worse was the tone of sarcasm and criticism that now increasingly colored Désirée's remarks, perhaps without her realizing it. Formerly, if it suddenly began raining as they walked along together, she would accept it gaily, like a sort of adventure; now she grumbled, "That's nice! There it is raining again! I'm going to get soaked. That's all I needed!"

Their love seemed to waver at times beneath the pressure of a thousand stupid little nothings which, like termites, made their holes, gnawing silently at the last bonds holding them together. The feeling that he was losing Désirée drove Auguste to despair. Seeing him determined to fight her made Désirée rear back. However, Auguste would end up giving way, admitting faults that later, when he was away from her, he would not acknowledge. When, with irony and cruelty, she let him understand that she could have once again gone back on her word and remained at home, he would lower his head, almost thanking her for having come.

How many resolutions he had made before going to meet her! How many times he had promised himself not to give in to her! Then, at the first look she gave him, all his firmness would melt away in uncertainty and fear. He was like a person who has been thrown to the ground and mangled, and then calls his enemy merciful, if he consents not to finish him off.

Certain evenings, as he slowly walked down the middle of the Boulevard Saint-Germain keeping an eye out for Désirée, he would meet a sad-faced, blonde street-walker, wandering bare-headed, her hands in a muff. She would always say to him, "Hello there, good-looking!" But he would ignore her and continue on his way. When he did not see Désirée and returned back down the sidewalk, they would pass once more, and she would look at him and ask, curious, "Well then, hasn't she shown up yet?" In the course of passing one another several times like this, they would exchange a few words. It so happened she was very easy to talk to when business was slow. Auguste was so unhappy,

so feverish from all the deceptions his love had suffered, that he let escape several complaints, but this girl always sided with Désirée. If only men could know! Women weren't free to do what they want! Oh, yeah! Men! What egotists! They always suspect the worst! That had happened to her. Her first lover had beaten her up because she was late, and at the time she was not even being unfaithful! And what's more, he beat her for vices she did not yet have. Oh, yes! You really had to feel sorry for women! And she would stubbornly defend Désirée, a total stranger.

On those evenings, Auguste would return home a little more comforted. On the days when he saw Désirée coming, he would abruptly leave the street-walker, who immediately headed in the other direction, beginning her slow patrol once more, twenty paces farther up the street, crooning the low notes of a soldier's marching tune in her deep voice.

The two lovers once more sought to find the fervor and rapture that had formerly joined them. They tried to rekindle the joy of those past meetings, the painful delights of separations necessitated by the lateness of the hour. However, it was not the same the second time around and their attempts failed miserably. They found themselves ill at ease and morose in each other's company.

They ended up not saying a word, listening to the refrain that sometimes came to their ears from the street-walker as she paused for a moment. They would go back up toward the Boulevard Saint-Michel, feeling their passion untracked, like a toy manhandled by a curious child. When they were alone, each remained buried in his own private thoughts. Auguste would repeat to himself, "Oh! If only I had gotten her to go to bed with me, things would certainly not be like this!" All the while, she would be thinking quite the contrary, "If I had gone to bed with him, nothing would be different. I was lucky to have escaped intact!"

The pettiness, the baseness, the bitterness, all the worst aspects of character that had dried up and become silent when the affection they felt for one another suffocated in them any idea of conflict and struggle, now began to show themselves, as a coarse lining shows through the frayed material of an article of clothing. Désirée was no longer paying any attention to Auguste's obedience and devotion.

Deep down, it was she who was perhaps most unhappy. She blamed herself, in spite of everything, but kept herself from admitting this in

front of him. She would get mad at him for being right and was furious when he happened to repeat a word or phrase that made her realize it. When he said nothing, seeming to believe the banal excuses for her absences, she was almost contemptuous.

There were days when she no longer knew herself. She would weep without knowing why and see black butterflies dance before her eyes. She was suffering from kidney troubles, and her legs ached with fatigue, like a woman who had been running a lot of errands. The least bit of noise made her jump in alarm. Everything bothered her. She hardly responded to her father's questions or her sister's wheedling. The doctor came and pronounced the catch-all word—"anemia." For a week she faithfully swallowed the tonics, quinquina, oil, and iron he prescribed. Then, tiring of the effort, she dumped the whole works down the drain.

Céline attempted to cheer her up and shake her out of this torpor, this dreary nonchalance that forced her to collapse in a chair, her eyes blank, her arms and legs numb with heaviness. One day, more disturbed than ever by his daughter's paleness, Vatarad asked Céline to go get the doctor. She refused, replying simply, "It's not worth the trouble. He wouldn't be able to do anything for her. What Désirée needs is a husband. That's something a pharmacist can't cure." Vatarad remained silent, and now he too became thoughtful and morose.

Auguste began to regain some spirit and now believed he should have shown himself more gallant, more forceful, in his relations with Désirée. His friends at the workshop, who were well aware of the situation, urged him to treat her more brusquely. One exclaimed, "You don't have any guts!" Another chimed in, "Oh, boy! She'll make you toe the line when you get married!" Old man Chaudrut cried out, "Rattle her till her bones knock, and, if necessary, mark her face up a little!" They all had examples to cite, mistresses they had roughed up while knocking them around. Slap them like you do screaming children, that's all that was needed! Everything else would take care of itself.

Auguste refused to go along with these suggestions, but after much indecision and debate, decided to speak firmly to Désirée, even give her a chewing out, if need be. However, as so often happens when a timid person wishes to appear brave, he overstepped the limits that evening.

Désirée could not believe her ears; she was so astonished she could not reply. Indignant, she turned her back to him, and without listening to another word, set off to return home.

It was all Auguste could do to keep from calling her back or setting off after her. Finally, forgetting all sense of pride, he started off down the boulevard in pursuit of her quickly disappearing figure. Désirée was walking very swiftly. He stopped and begged her not to go any farther. He started running again, and when he caught up with her, asked her to forgive him. She would not listen, and when he tried to take her arm, she jerked it away. He became insistent, his pleas louder. Several passers-by who had congregated in the street stood there snickering.

She said to him, very drily, "Leave me alone! Don't you see people are looking?" He began walking silently at her side, and when they arrived in front of the house, he murmured in a trembling voice, "Désirée, I beg you. Listen to me! Come tomorrow evening, you'll see!" The door slammed in his face.

A chill ran through him. It seemed that his whole life was crumbling away in front of that door. The flame of his dying love grew stronger. He returned home completely unaware of what he was doing, sputtering, halting drunkenly from time to time, and fell into a deep sleep as soon as he hit the bed. When he awoke he was confused and discouraged.

Next day at the workshop he alternated all day long between fits of shuddering and moments of complete collapse. He wanted to cry out, to call out her name on his knees, to beat her. Désirée seemed the same as ever, moving about, chattering, sewing as usual. He noticed, however, that she was pretending not to see him.

That evening he was very upset as he left to meet Désirée. He kept repeating to himself, "She won't come and it's my fault; I was wrong." He would have liked to corner Chaudrut and the rest of his supposed friends, take them by the scruffs of their necks, and strangle them one after the other to repay them for their stupid advice. He tried to think of an excuse, something tender to say to her. He prepared several funny stories to make her laugh and overcome her hesitation to forgive him. He shook the coins he had in his pocket, thinking it might be good to offer her a beer and some hard biscuits covered with almonds.

His spirits brightened once more, and he thought, "This whole thing is just a stupid mistake! We love each other. We'll begin meeting once again just like before." Suddenly he stopped short, panic-stricken, his heart pounding. He was convinced she would not come.

He had begun walking along once more, head bowed, when he met the big blonde making her rounds. Seeing his chagrined look, she

inquired, "Isn't your love life going very well?" He choked, feeling the need to pour out his anxiety and hopes and fears to someone else in order to reassure himself that Désirée would come. The woman listened to him, but said nothing. He pressed her, "If you were in her place, wouldn't you come?" She murmured, "I don't know." She seemed not to want to tell him what she would have done. He recognized this and begged her to speak. She ended by replying, "If you had not followed her yesterday, she would already be here. Now, Christ! I don't know! She is convinced you really think very highly of her. Everything depends on a person's character, you know. I really can't say."

Suddenly Désirée appeared. She had halted across the street and was watching with astonishment as Auguste talked to this woman. She crossed the road and stood behind them. The prostitute stared at her boldly, then without saying a word, turned abruptly and went off farther down the street to parade her wares beneath her ballooning white petticoat.

Auguste did not have time to open his mouth. Désirée started right in on him, saying she would not continue to see a man who consorted with sluts.

He tried to calm her, telling her she was wrong, the other girl was really a nice sort. He was chatting with her merely to kill time. He did not know her name or address. She was engaged in a detestable profession, that he realized, but unlike others of that ilk, she was neither coarse nor offensive.

"She's treating you nice just to get your money," countered Désirée, drily.

But he denied that she had ever even invited him to go up to her room. Thinking Désirée would be impressed, he added, "She's a good sort, I tell you. And the proof is that when you didn't come, she always stuck up for you!"

This careless remark cut Désirée to the quick. She was horribly hurt to learn that a street-walker knew all about them and was taking her side when she was at fault. This sort of collusion revolted her. Her haughty fury stunned Auguste. This meeting, which was supposed to bring them closer together, only deepened the gulf between them. With her love already wounded by Auguste's doubt and insults, Désirée was completely intractable after this blow to her pride.

Auguste finally realized how stupid he had been, and the next day,

angry with himself, he yelled at Chaudrut, who had been bragging about his own love affairs, "You're to blame for our estrangement, you and your stupid ideas!" During this tirade the old man, preparing an absinthe, shook his head without interrupting Auguste's enumeration of his faults.

"You must really like absorbing punishment to stick your neck out like that!" he said to him, finally. "You should have let her believe you were making time with that other girl, denying it all the while, of course! Désirée would have tried to get you back. That way two days of fighting would have given you a whole week of good times. And damn it all! A week of peace with a woman was worth the trouble! You shouldn't be so stupid, you see! When you have love to spare, you make use of all of it and don't try to save any. Not counting my own dear wife, who is dead, I've known some ill-tempered women who would just as soon hit you as feed you, if you let them have their way. 'Wait a minute, Eugénie! You shouldn't play around with a person. There's my vote!' And I'd bash her in the head. She'd blubber a bit, of course, but she'd go back to the kitchen and never make another peep. For God's sake, do the same thing! Don't let yourself be had. Go give her a quick kick in the rump! Now, you know, I'm saying this to you, but it doesn't matter to me. You can both argue like architects for all I care. The reason I'm making anything about it at all is because it bothers me to see grown men taken advantage of by spoiled gals scarcely old enough to make it! But that's enough preaching. My advice would be that it's time to see about making her dance." And he left, leaving the check for his absinthe to be paid by Auguste in exchange for his good advice.

"Ah, what the hell! Let it end how it may!" Auguste said to himself, very undecided about what he should do or the attitude he should adopt. He felt emotionally drained. All the petty wranglings, all the disappointments, the coldness, the faces, the snubs, had sapped all his energy and zest. He was like a man who really covets an object for a long time, then one fine day finds he no longer wants it, even though he has never yet had it.

He missed the days when he used to go out with his buddies to cruise the linen warehouses in the Montrouge quarter in search of girls. What an easy life then! No cares or worries! Ah! Without a doubt, after having lived that kind of life for some time, after having drunk

from everyone's glass for months on end, he had had enough! He had had a sudden impulse, a sudden need to find a different sort of woman. His hopes and dreams had centered on finding a nice pleasant girl with whom he could share a quiet, intimate bedroom, a wife whose thoughts would all center on himself. Where had all these desires and feverish dreams led? To the extreme boredom of a chaste relationship, insults, the grief of a passion magnified by obstacles, a passion driven back, weakened, practically used up by daily conflicts and the constant friction of personalities. Now he found himself more alone, more beaten, more disoriented than ever. He realized he was drifting now, but he no longer even had the courage to grab on to a branch. A single idea survived this debacle, an *idée fixe* which obsessed him: marriage. He wanted to find a release, a shelter where he would be able to run aground, no matter what the cost. After all these storm squalls he dreamed of a long repose. These thoughts haunted him, especially since the day he had gone to see a friend just recently married. This fellow was really happy! He had no problems with his future! They had married simply because they found each other pleasing. The husband earned no more than five francs per day and the wife brought in only two. For all that, they were neither less comfortable nor less content. Auguste envied them absolutely, and he cursed that sort of aristocracy of laborers, those men like Vatar who, because they have a bit of money and a daughter keen on working, want her to marry only an extraordinary worker. The more he thought about it, the less possibility he saw for his love affair with Désirée.

He perceived now the bottom of the impasse he had entered. He had two choices: to turn back and start over, or to butt his head against the wall. To find a more lucrative job than the one he now possessed? He should not even think of it. He had tried, by all possible means, to fill the office of carter in a book-bindery. It was a good position, thirty francs per week, plus the profits from the manure he sold, tips he did not report, rebates on the fodder, small additional amounts from publishing firms for delivering their prospectuses to the post office on Sundays. He had always failed.

One day or another his salary might increase a little, but that would be all. By breaking his back he received, on an average, 4.8 francs per day. So he was bringing in almost as much as his friend. He spent considerable time comparing his friend's situation to his own. He returned

to visit with this friend on a number of occasions, spending the evening with the young man's in-laws, including his wife's sister, a fair-headed eighteen-year-old with pretty lips and strong white teeth. All bright and sparkling, these teeth would appear every time she burst out laughing after beating the whole table at *rheimps*.

Chapter Eighteen

1

He had all the time in the world now to frequent this home which, with the smug serenity of its happy household, gave peace of mind in place of the anguish and fears that burdened him.

For some days now Désirée had not shown up at the workshop. Her mother was about to undergo a surgical draining procedure, and Vatar and his two daughters, worried by the thought of the drilling that was going to have to be done to pierce her stomach, were very upset and unable to function.

So Auguste's evenings were no longer taken up by meetings with Désirée. The routine of going down to the quai gradually changed to the custom of going every evening to his friend's house where he found a warm fire, a glass of wine, and a bit of laughter. He lazed around at their place now and pestered Irma, his friend's sister-in-law. She was a crazy little thing who always, no matter what the weather, maintained a cheerful disposition. Singing full blast, she would sew and sometimes play pranks. She liked to tease him about his depression.

This feeling of well-being, this reprieve from misery, this allaying of all gloom, strengthened in him the desire to create his own household. Marriage, which he formerly conceived of only with Désirée as his wife, he now desired simply for itself. His beloved no longer naturally sprang to mind when he thought of this long-sought goal. Since little Irma was the only other honorable and attractive girl with whom he had daily contact, he necessarily associated her with his future projects. He told himself that, after all, she fulfilled the required conditions for making his life agreeable and sweet equally as well as Désirée.

Her face was even prettier and younger than Désirée's. But in spite of everything he preferred Vatar's daughter. He acknowledged this, but became very philosophical and consoled himself with the melancholy proverb, "When a person does not have what he wants, he takes

what he can get." And he was certain of having Irma, if he wanted her, because his friend had made it quite clear one day that the young girl liked him and that, consequently, if he presented himself as her suitor, he would most likely be accepted.

However, he hesitated still, held back by lingering memories of Désirée. But the last bonds joining him to her were beginning to fall apart, and he felt, somewhat joyfully, they would soon disappear. Angered by the memory of the posing he had submitted to, he mused, with a certain bitterness, "I don't want any more meetings, any more dawdling like before. Either I marry Irma immediately or not at all." Even though he had a good excuse for breaking up with Désirée, he dreaded facing her. Of course, he could quite simply say to her, "Your sister's the one who suggested the marriage to me. I said yes and your father said no. Has he or has he not changed his mind? As for myself, I cannot wait until he dies or swings around to my side one nice windy day."

One Friday he repeated to himself, "Let's see! Let me reason it all out and try to make up my mind once and for all. Tomorrow's Saturday, pay day. Désirée will surely come by to pick up her pay for the first part of the week. Let's be brave. Let's cross the bridge before seeing her." And that evening he proposed to Irma, pressing her to accept his hand in marriage. After resisting a short while for the sake of principle, she accepted. Then, in a deluge of roasted chestnuts and a bath of white wine, they exchanged a resounding engagement kiss.

When he left, an enormous weight had been lifted from his chest. There was no longer anything to retract this time; it was done. His mother, who had known Irma since her birth, wept for joy when she learned this good news. Auguste was somewhat surprised at himself for not having married this girl sooner. His love for Désirée seemed childish and empty now.

When he entered the workshop the next day there was the usual pay-day commotion. One woman, standing and leaning a little forward with her hands on the table, was suggesting that they put a little wooden bowl next to the owner's office where every working woman could deposit a franc or some sous to help the brother of one of them who had fallen from a scaffolding and broken his arm. All the bindery women agreed. Neither Désirée nor Céline was present. The supervisor was recording each girl's work for the week in a large ledger. The men, lying scattered about on the work tables, were absorbed in their figures. Old

lady Teston, very upset and pale, was telling them, "I have just come from Vatar's place. The poor old woman has come through the operation very well. She said, 'Ouf!' and it was over."

"That's more than she ever said in her life," snickered Chaudrut. But this remark did not go over at all. Old lady Teston angrily lashed out at him, declaring that a person had to be heartless to laugh at another's misfortune like that. All the other women agreed in a chorus, and their indignant grumbling put Chaudrut in his place.

The supervisor's shout rose over the voices, "All right! Quiet! I'm marking down for the ribbons. Let's see. Félicité, how many?"

"Folding, forty. Sewing, fifty."

"That makes that much," said the supervisor.

Félicité found five more centimes. Everyone else settled down to adding, hoping to find the supervisor making a mistake.

Meanwhile, the men lounged around, very glum, no longer going off to drink. Outside in a corner of the courtyard a huge talkative woman who sold wine was lying in ambush. She would wait until they had received their pay and then grab them as they passed by, hoping to squeeze partial payment from them for the money they owed her.

But this was nearly always wasted effort. So then the huge woman would make her way toward the main office. There she was always sent packing by the owner, who responded to all her threats and complaints, "It's too bad for you. You shouldn't have given them credit." Furious, she would leave, and arguments would break out in the courtyard, especially when Chaudrut came out.

Each Saturday the owner threatened to fire Chaudrut if these scenes did not cease. Thanks to this rascal he could no longer enter a tobacco shop without immediately having a storm of abuse thrown at him and the shopkeeper begging him to force Chaudrut to pay his debts for cassis and absinthe.

In order to avoid all these rows the owner was forced to buy his tobacco and cigars in a different quarter.

Chaudrut invariably replied, "It's my mouse that's eating up everything I have. I'm a poor old man. I know I don't have any moral character. But as soon as my affairs are in order, I'll do my best to repay everyone."

Out of the goodness of his soul or out of weakness, the owner pretended to believe him, and, of course, these affairs were never taken care of. Moreover, Chaudrut was free to leave them so, since his pay

could not be docked. He did piece work and did not have a fixed salary.

While waiting, the supervisor lined up her columns of figures. One of the women came running into the shop, shouting excitedly, "There's a nice little marriage at the end of the street! The pastryshop owner's daughter is getting married! Oh, yes! It's true! There's a real crowd there!"

Some of the men who were just standing around unoccupied added that free cake was being given away to anyone who came by. A commotion arose in the workshop. Pretending they had to go the bathroom or go get a drink, the whole troop of girls rushed outside. They arrived panting in front of the shop where the shutters were open. Some very well-dressed ladies were delicately sipping mocha coffee and eating tarts from a saucer, their little fingers poised in the air. The mistress of the establishment stood there surprised by this invasion of stupidly snickering tramps. She asked them what they wanted and when they stated they were there to taste some of the cake, she immediately showed them the door. Then the whole band galloped off, throwing themselves into the street helter-skelter, yelling, socking each other, running in front of carriages, bumping passers-by into pub windows, leaping dishevelled onto the pavement, sliding in the mud right at the feet of horses, being pursued by shouting urchins and yapping dogs. Like a gust of wind they returned to the workshop, shouting that someone had played a trick on them. They unleashed a torrent of insults on the bride, calling her, "Cardboard Sophie, Chance-encounter Virginia, a Rue Moufmouf virgin." The uproar got so bad that the supervisor had to resort to stringent measures; she tallied the amount due the most unruly and fired them on the spot.

The men twisted about during this commotion, finding the joke they had played very amusing. The foreman let them have their fun, hoping in this manner to avoid the incessant quarrels that arose among the men every Saturday.

In effect, a number of the men worked together assembling the same book. Some passed pages while others folded them or placed them in piles. Together they formed a group account. They marked down a general figure for the work produced during the week and then divided among themselves the money paid in a lump sum by the owner. The division of this sum nearly always involved protracted quibbling and endless recriminations.

The uproar caused by the departure of the women who had been

fired had not yet died down when Céline arrived. She came to pick up the pay for her sister and herself. The others gathered round and she confirmed the details given by old lady Teston, announcing that her mother was doing better and that Désirée and she would be returning to work Monday. Since she was in a hurry to get back to her father's house, she went and found the little account books in which she and Désirée kept track of their time, since they were paid by the hour. She handed them to the supervisor, who checked to see that they were correct and then signed them. Crossing the assembly room Céline told Auguste to come to the quai the next morning. She said she would be there with her sister; they had some important matters to discuss with him.

Auguste agreed, but showed so little enthusiasm that Céline felt very satisfied.

During the two or three days they had not budged from the house, the two girls had inevitably chatted about their love life. Céline, disconcerted by Désirée's inexplicable apathy, wanted to find out her real feelings about Auguste. The coldness and constraint she found in her sister amazed her. Désirée did not reply, not really explaining even to herself the indifference she now felt toward Auguste. Vatar, for his part, was upset by the forlorn look of his favorite child. Céline's remark that it was not worth the trouble to send for a doctor, Désirée simply needed a husband, had struck home. Nowadays he no longer hesitated to grant her permission to do whatever she wished. But he wanted to be rid of Auguste and arrange, if possible, for her to marry another young man he had in mind, a certain Amédée Guibout. This young man, Tabuche's nephew, was a foreman earning good wages. Besides, Désirée was well acquainted with this young man; they had known each other for years. But while he liked him and found him nice, it had certainly never occurred to Vatar that they might marry.

Vatar had informed Céline of his idea. Ever since learning that Auguste had dared to call Désirée names one evening, Céline had come to loathe him and now considered him the lowest of the low. And yet Anatole had called her plenty of names in his time. However, she no longer thought about this and reserved her indignation for the man who had dared insult her sister. She volunteered to test the ground. The sort of gloomy unhappiness she saw in Désirée gave her good hope. She resolved to proceed with frankness, and so, one day when they were seated by the fire tending to their mother during her stomach illness,

she remarked very bluntly, "If you are that taken up with Auguste, marry him! Papa will consent to it. But think about it a little while before doing anything so stupid!" A blush washed over her sister's face when she learned she was free to marry Auguste, but she did not jump for joy as Céline had feared. Désirée kissed the tip of her sister's nose, listening to her as she continued, "After all, perhaps you have been the least stupid of the two of us. You have wanted to get married, but not if it meant living in poverty. You've got ambition, and that's good. So what's the rush to leave home now to give yourself to a good-for-nothing worker who will never amount to anything? Why, I ask you? He won't even be able to feed you. What the hell, you deserve at least a foreman. There are plenty of young men who are as good a candidate and as handsome as Auguste, Tabuche's nephew, for example. He's a handsome young man and he would make a far better husband than Auguste. You could be a real lady with him on Sundays. You'd have a bedroom like you've always dreamed having, a dog too, since you like them. You would not have to put up with being poor. If you wanted, you could be the best dressed, the best fixed-up woman in the workshop." Lost in her thoughts, Désirée did not reply. Her sister had just touched on her desires which, after having been suppressed, sprang up more vivid than ever when she saw a means of satisfying them. Her goal, her ideal, the bedroom with a mirror and a colored engraving on the wall, a husband she could control, a happy financial situation, the right to no longer get up so early in the morning, and to toil less late in the evening at the workshop, now rose up clearly before her consciousness. However, she could not think of Auguste without a certain pang of regret. They had been so close for so many months! And then, perhaps it would cause him a lot of pain! It is hard to admit to someone that you no longer love him just at the moment when you could make him happy! But the permission to marry this man, something she had desired so ardently earlier, came too late! The emotional state in which Désirée now found herself was pulling her further away from Auguste. Since the difficulties that had bolstered her waning affection for such a long time had now disappeared, the last traces of her love for him were fast disappearing like water down a drain.

Seeing Désirée so uncertain and sad, Céline decided to strike while the iron was hot and said to her, "Come on now! Am I wrong? What are you going to use to raise the children you and Auguste will have? Tell me now, how will you manage? He not only has himself to

support, but his mother too. Just to have something to eat, you're going to have to work your tail off! And with that, how strong you are! You'll be working there until the day you die! We were just speaking about Amédée, weren't we? Well, papa would be happy, and Amédée too. He likes you, that's obvious. Say, you two would make a nice couple! He's supposed to come this evening. So, go kiss him! If it bothers you about getting Auguste mad, I'll take care of that. In any case, he doesn't need to know that father would accept him if no one else were available. Besides, I think he has several girls he sees on the side, according to Chaudrut, so he'll have to resign himself to breaking up. After all, he won't be the first to whom this has happened!"

But Désirée declared that if she broke with him, she wanted to do it properly. She preferred to tell him straight out. In a hurry to settle the matter, Céline exclaimed, "I'm going to go to the workshop to get our pay. I'll ask Auguste to meet us at the quai tomorrow. We'll go together and everything will be taken care of in a jiffy." She left immediately so her sister would not have time to change her mind.

Then Vatard, who was keeping watch, hugged his daughter and began praising Amédée. He told her she would be as happy as a queen with him and that their marriage would be the consolation of all the pains he had had during his lifetime. They hugged each other with muffled cries of tenderness. Désirée chatted very knowledgeably about her new love. Now that this young man wanted her for a wife she remembered a thousand details she had never caught when he was only a pleasant companion. He was a tall, well-built blond who liked to laugh. She did not love him, but that would surely come. Her infatuation for Auguste was already disappearing. What would it have been like after several months of living together? Then too, it could not be denied, marrying him would have meant being poor. Céline and her father were right. She had told herself this many times, but a moment had come when she had really lost her head, when her dreams of happiness and comfort had abandoned her. Now that she was no longer blinded to the facts, she realized perfectly well that Auguste was not at all, basically, the sort of man she needed.

Vatard's head was in the clouds. He had come to an agreement with Amédée that if the marriage took place, they would rent a room upstairs in the same building. In this manner Désirée would be able to look after her mother just like before, and in order to live more cheaply the two families would eat together.

This relieved him of his fear of being left to care for his sick wife with only Céline to aid him, because she deserted her post every evening. Not being able to prevent his youngest daughter from marrying, for fear of seeing her wilt and languish, he henceforth used all his powers of persuasion to push this union, resolved to press her out of fear that she might change her mind. Rubbing his hands together, he repeated to himself, "What a sharp old man Tabuche is! He was really right when he said, 'If you don't marry the person who has served you by awakening the first stirrings of love, at least that person prepares you to love the one you do marry. The main thing is to give the heart its first start. After that, the heart proceeds along by itself, as if on roller-skates.'"

2

Auguste was late as he made his way to the meeting, very annoyed at the thought of the scene he figured he was going to have with Désirée. He had a date to eat lunch with his fiancée, so he had to get it over with and explain his intentions to Désirée very bluntly. He would have given a hundred sous to have it all over with.

Désirée arrived with her sister a little ahead of time, very moved, likewise determined to get it over with. When the two girls arrived at the quai, the young man was nowhere to be seen.

They retraced their steps a little, and with nothing better to do, they stopped in front of a photographer's show-window. Désirée was suffocating. There was no longer any time to beat around the bush. The die was cast. There was nothing to do now but be firm during this last visit with her young man. She forced back the tears that came to her eyes when she thought of Auguste's sad face. Céline was boiling. She had wanted to get down to brass tacks immediately. She had already made up her mind that she was going to interrupt any weepy conversations, immediately cut short any sad stories.

While they stood immobile in front of the black frames, Désirée felt her heart toll the death knell. She watched the bridge entrance with terror as Céline lost herself in contemplation of the shop-window. She liked the poodle seated on a chair with a curtain as a backdrop, also the woman seated in a languorous and careless attitude at an outdoor table, braiding flower crowns. She made a fuss over the faces of curly-headed men with walrus mustaches, the countenances of ruffians with self-

satisfied airs, posturing gallantly, short-lived distinctions ineffectual in front of a camera lens. She stood with her mouth gaping in front of shaded portraits, the dirty-white surrounding the heads dotted with what looked like flyspecks, portraits of women, big lumps with enormous boobs spilling over low-necked gowns, faces a person looks for in ports, faces a person goes Psst! Psst! at in dark alleys; actresses of the fifteenth rank dressed in cotton bathing suits, their hair adorned with artificial taffeta flowers; servant girls wearing aprons, their fingers covered with chilblains; newlyweds, the woman seated with her hands on her knees, the man leaning over an armchair with a discreetly wicked look on his face; dazed and satiated First Communicants; stupid, gaping infantrymen. But what caught her attention even more was a family consisting of a father, a mother, a child, and a cat, all seated at a window between a pot of dried mignonettes and a geranium losing its leaves; the mother, who appeared to be very ordinary, was heavy-jowled and puffy-faced, and wore a dirty-white dressing gown; the father was heavy-set and debonnaire, and resembled some bloated-faced carpenter who was a good guy and a drunk; the child was skinny and rascally; the cat, in profile, appeared faded, as if shrouded in a mist.

Céline told her sister about the thought that had been passing through her mind, but all those persons, frozen in pretentious or stupid poses, held little interest for Désirée that morning. She felt herself grow more faint as time passed.

“Oh, yes! He’s late!” remarked Céline, who was planted directly opposite the bridge. “It makes you think the prospect of seeing you once again doesn’t please him very much.”

And while they were crossing the road to go to the sidewalk on the other side, having tired of the one on which they were walking, Désirée thought of the times she had made Auguste wait. She accepted all the blame for their breakup, and the courage she had promised herself she would have when she came face to face with him evaporated.

Céline realized vaguely that it would be helpful if her sister were distracted and kept from thinking too much about Auguste’s arrival. She dragged her in front of a bric-a-brac shop where one could buy scraps and bones, where rusty andirons were piled up along with dented lamps, dusty sea shells, enema kits with pipes and spouts missing, Legion of Honor Crosses, rabbit skins, tea boxes, military neckbands indicating an infantry officer’s rank, dripping pans, boots, binoculars

with missing lenses, pairs of snuffers, vases of artificial flowers covered by dirty glass globes with red chenille in the bottom.

Céline was squinting at a folding night table, a piece shining like the sun with its newly-veneered mahogany, when Auguste appeared on the bridge.

"There he is!" sighed Désirée, very nervous. Then, as if they were just on time, they slowly went over to meet him.

Désirée remained several paces behind her sister. When Céline had ended a series of stock greetings, they all stood there at a loss for words. Auguste, who had made up his mind to be forceful, could not even get up his courage to ask for a kiss. Unconsciously, they felt each other's lack of affection. A growing embarrassment held them there with eyes downcast, mouths dry. Céline broke the silence. "Why don't we go get a vermouth, huh? Is that all right with you, Auguste?"

The other two accepted this suggestion as a deliverance. They found seats in the café at the corner of the Boulevard Saint-Germain and the Quai de la Tournelle. Since they had to talk about something, Auguste inquired about Mme Vatar's health. "She's doing well." This conversation lasted approximately five minutes and was followed by a long period of silence.

"Hey!" Auguste exclaimed suddenly. "There's our friend from the Rue du Cotentin!" They called her over and Auguste invited her to have a drink with them. But she was in a hurry. They asked her about her boy friend. She gave a sort of free and easy gesture and shrugged. "I don't know. I think he's still stationed at Dax. He has written me several times, but I've moved and did not give him my new address and I've forgotten to go look for his letters. He's in good health evidently. There isn't any reason he should be ill. But, excuse me now. I've got to be running along. Someone is waiting for me."

"Oh, well! That's always the way it is with love," remarked Céline. Désirée and Auguste did not dare look at one another. Céline continued in a warlike tone, "Listen to me, you two. We've got to straighten this out. Auguste, father is dead set against letting you marry Désirée. My sister cannot hold herself until the end of the world, nor can you remain in the waiting room, since the doors must remain forever closed to you. Well, then, let's see! In my opinion, if you each released the other from any feeling of obligation, the best thing would be for each of you to get married."

Désirée gasped. She looked up at Auguste. He did not appear too shocked by this suggestion.

He said he agreed with Céline. Certainly, it was difficult to have to part company. He himself was completely dismayed at the prospect, but in the end. . . .

“Then, Chaudrut had been telling the truth,” Céline interrupted. “Admit it. If you don’t feel too upset about this situation, is it because you are going to get married?”

He blushed, sputtered a bit, then admitted she was right. Désirée mumbled that she was also on the point of doing the same thing. Then they looked at one another. Each asked about the other’s prospective spouse. Both very tactfully said they would have preferred to remain together, but they had to think of what was for the best. After all, they were no longer children. And quivering, they added, “It doesn’t matter! Do you remember the good times we had together? Do you remember the first time you came to the workshop? How about the day I met you at the gingerbread fair? The walks we took on Sundays when we were off? The great meal we had among the trees at the Belle-Polonoise?” And both recalled the winks they had exchanged in stores, the strolls they had taken arm in arm through the Gaîté quarter, the kisses in the dark. Then they paused and stood there blushing. Simultaneously, they both began to recall the evening when, had he been more forceful, she would have given herself to him. They each shuddered, absorbed in their own reflections, convinced that they would have gotten married had that evening ended differently.

Auguste forced himself to chase away the melancholy regret caused by that memory, and he very gently told Désirée that he would always remember their relationship with pleasure. And then, a little embarrassed, she replied with a damp smile, “I have not always been nice to you. You aren’t angry with me any more, are you?” But he maintained he was to blame; he had been rude; it was she, not he, who had reason to complain.

Céline wanted to stop all these effusions that threatened to rekindle their barely dormant affection.

They stared at one another in silence, their looks filled with tenderness and pity.

“I hope you will be very happy with her,” sputtered Désirée.

He squeezed her hand across the table top, and thanking her, wished her all sorts of happiness also.

Céline sat silent, quite astonished. She had never seen a breakup take place like this, without at least a few blows or curses. "How nice you both are!" she exclaimed, joining her hands. And they both sat there, their hearts filled with sadness, smiling at one another. Auguste was in a hurry to get away. He was beginning to suffocate. For her part, Désirée was trembling and it was taking all her efforts not to cry. The memories they had stirred up were making them both very depressed. "Let's go!" prompted Céline. "Come on now, Désirée. We've got to go home to prepare lunch." They all got up. Once in the street Auguste held out his hand to her without saying a word, but she extended her cheek to him and they embraced very warmly. Then they left, filled with an overwhelming sense of sadness at the thought that their whole former way of life had collapsed and that they were going to try to rebuild anew, each in his own way.

The worry and fear they had held in check up to this point took hold of them now that they each faced the unknown alone, an unknown which they were entering without any hope of retreat.

The two sisters walked down the boulevard, Désirée, tired and shaken, Céline, thoughtful and grumbling. "All that's very nice, but since I'm through worrying about you others, I'm going to begin thinking about myself or rather about my painter. He's going to see, he is, the nice way I'm going to get rid of him!" And she made a threatening gesture suggestive of the store of meanness and rottenness a woman can hold in reserve for a lover she has come to hate.

Chapter Nineteen

As far as Céline was concerned, her decision was made. Her affair with Cyprien was too troubled, too bitter. The last bit of hesitation she might have had had vanished one morning when she spotted Anatole as she was on her way to the workshop. Strutting around showing off his good looks, he greeted her with courteous suspicion when they met.

She poured out her soul to him that day. Calm at times, at other moments she exploded in fury as she related to him her disappointments with her painter, revealing the entire disarray of her love life at that moment.

Anatole twisted his mustache, deliberately affecting a show of surprise and wonder. His girl had practically abandoned him. He was tired of her anyway. As lazy as could be, the less she worked and the less she made, the more demanding she became.

And then, basically, he felt a certain affection for Céline. He thought her a good sort, especially nice, a good worker, fond of fun and easy to get along with. He could think of nothing better than to start up with her again. Only he did not want to be the one to make the first overtures. He wanted to appear hesitant and seem to yield only when moved by her sad tale, overwhelmed by a disarming pity.

"Well, now. And you," Céline asked him, "what's become of you since we parted company?"

"I got myself a girl," Anatole replied, negligently. "She makes corsets, and is as sweet as a liqueur and as warm as toast! Really! She's a tidbit fit for a king! But, anyway, you must have seen her the day we met, a little angel wearing a new hat. Didn't you see her?"

Céline pretended she had not seen her.

"It really doesn't matter," he continued. "Some people are lucky and some aren't! That's life. I was lucky. You got hold of a paint dauber who has repeatedly snubbed you like a reject. What's made you

so squeamish? You should have let him stew in his own juice if he refused to soften up."

But without defending herself, Céline glanced imploringly at him. Then suddenly her eyes sparkled. The memory of the last insult inflicted on her by Cyprien came back to her and made her wince.

One evening when they were in bed the painter had sniffed the air, making a face. He looked at Céline with a peculiar stare but did not say a word. Surprised, she demanded an explanation. Then he inquired, "Have you been eating garlic? The bed reeks of it!" This particular remark, more so than all the bitter retorts, all the cutting words he had flung at her on other occasions, had cruelly wounded her. "I can't help it!" she replied. "At home they cover roast leg of lamb with shallots and garlic. That's the way father likes it. I can't quit eating simply because I'm going to come see you later that evening." Cyprien did not deny she was right to go ahead and eat the roast, but the smell repelled him nonetheless. Heated by her breath and multiplied ten-fold by the heat of the covers, the bitter odor nauseated him. Céline's anger stirred again every time she thought of that night. Without understanding the cause, Anatole observed her cheeks flush with anger. The moment seemed propitious; he decided to play his trump card. "Oh, well, gal," he said, "it's been nice seeing you again. I'll say it one more time: get rid of your color merchant and find me anyone who can match that." And he tapped the left side of his chest. As he started to leave, she grabbed his arm. No longer counting on getting him to make her an offer, she decided now to put aside all pride and ask him straight out to take her back. He seemed undecided, but little by little gave way. "Shall we play a good trick on him together?" she asked him finally. Anatole smiled in agreement. The idea of causing trouble for this man from another social class, coupled with the prospect of getting revenge for the fear caused by the painter's lead-filled cane when he was following Céline, pleased him very much. They agreed to meet Sunday at the music hall on the Rue de la Gaité. Céline would bring Cyprien there and at the intermission she would arrange matters so that he would have to save their seats or else she would lose him in the crowd and join Anatole in the street outside the door.

Their plot made her smile with glee.

From that moment she was on her best behavior for Cyprien. No sooner did he say he wanted something than she did it for him. If he did not wish to go out, she gave in to his wishes without showing the

slightest trace of ill humor. Each time his laundry came back she counted and carefully folded it, making sure all the seams were mended. When friends came, she was gracious and scarcely said a word. She served the tea, smiled, but no longer talked nonsense. This sweetness of character, this gentle submission, this sudden lull of words and gestures puzzled Cyprien. He had a new foreboding, but he searched the depths of his mistress's wide-open eyes in vain in an attempt to catch some inkling of her intentions in the lines of her face, in a careless remark; he was unable to discover anything. Céline, who until then had always been so frank and open, became inscrutable.

Once Friday arrived, she insisted that he take her to the music hall on Sunday. Cyprien did not dare refuse her this pleasure, which she asked for with such imploring grace. He agreed to take her and was so touched by her show of appreciation that he in turn began to shower her with all his attention and affection. They vied with one another in cooing over each other so much that a casual observer might have been convinced they were really in love.

About six o'clock on the appointed day the painter had half a chicken and some vegetables brought up from the meatshop below, and he bought some jam and wine at the grocer's. They set the table, each gaily responding to the antics of the other. He served her with kind attention and afterward she cleaned up in a gracious and hospitable manner, replacing the dried plates in the cabinet. Simpering, she told him, "Pour me something to drink! Let's hurry up so we'll get a good place to sit!" A new interlude of love seemed to be reasserting itself in their relationship. Cyprien did not suspect a thing. The closer the meal came to its end, the sweeter and more expansive Céline became. She hummed softly as she measured the coffee and wiped the filter. Crouching on her heels in front of the crackling stove, she smiled at her lover as she waited for the water to get hot so she could pour it. Cyprien was as happy as could be. With his legs stretched out and his buttocks ensconced on the velvet cushion of an armchair, he had lit his pipe, and through billowing clouds of smoke, he admired Céline's dainty reclining position with her torso emerging from beneath her swelling skirts as if rising from a satiny pool. She got up finally and with pretty little fearful faces wrapped her hand in a handkerchief in order to avoid burning herself on the handle of the coffeepot. Holding the pot high, she poured them each a cup. Then she sat down again so she was facing him and they sipped their coffee slowly, waiting until it was time to

leave. He gave her the small carafe of cognac; she placed the sugar bowl by him. They thanked one another with tender glances, shared cigarettes, fooled around a bit, their spirits at ease, smiling with outbursts of feeling they thought had been lost.

Cyprien would have much preferred to remain there, his feet warm, wearing his loose-fitting jacket, rather than go shut himself up to see some buffoons. The intense heat of the stove cut his arms and legs, but he did not budge from his armchair, feeling perfectly relaxed and content. Céline called him lazy, and taking him by the hands in a very friendly fashion, she pulled him to herself and made him get up. She brought him his boots, his hat, and got dressed herself. Fiddling with some locks of hair with her fingertips, she glanced one last time around the studio. She passed in front of Cyprien and waited for him out on the landing while he closed the door.

She was silent and a little glum as they walked down the street. Her gay mood had left her. This change worried Cyprien and he asked if she were ill. Laughing, she replied no.

When they arrived, all the seats had already been taken. They had to move back beyond the doors, follow a hallway, descend several steps and then take another hallway painted a horrid chocolate brown and apple green. As they made their way behind the theater through this dimly lit bowel impregnated with the saline stench of urinals, they collided with ladders clamped to the walls. Overhead to the right a loud rumble could be heard. They went back up a staircase and made their way alongside a glass partition separating the theater from a café. Handprints scattered across the film of condensation clouding the partition windows, marking attempts by patrons to swipe clean the panes with their fingertips, allowed a glimpse of the interior of the café. Inside, couples could be seen downing tankards of beer as they played cards or shook clicking dice cups. Through this curtain of vapor, as if through oiled paper, the outlines of enormous shadows resembling Chinese specters were discernible. The rapid circular motion of the arms of billiard players chalking their cue sticks evoked an indescribably strange flattening of this play of light, which distorted and exaggerated every movement, every pose: spasmodic gestures, twisting buttocks, leaning bodies, bizarre profiles, huge hats, all blurred together on this transparency in black outlines that muddled the grotesque silhouettes of the scurrying waiters.

Cyprien and Céline bore to their right and again found themselves in

the music hall. This corner was even more crowded than the seats in the center. They went back down the hallway and through an underground passageway that led to the other wing of the theater. There they ended up sitting on a bench right next to the orchestra section, where they had an oblique view of the actors from the feet up. The swinging doors made it a disagreeably cool spot to sit.

Céline was not very pleased. They were too close to the stage for her to preserve her illusions. Furthermore, the location was not very well suited to the escape she intended to make. She rose up a little on her bench and looked around for Anatole. When she saw him, they mouthed a silent hello to one another and indicated the door with a wink. Cyprien had seen nothing of this exchange of looks; he was too busy surveying the theater while some lout on the stage mangled patriotism and love in a trite musical bit. This half-circus with its heavy, golden checked pattern and two-tiered gallery appeared to him to be in the worst possible taste. One gallery, tinted catechu, varnished and scorched by the gas-lights, was supported by cast-iron columns draped to their midpoint with red velvet; the other, higher up, was divided into something like barred cages, as if to pen up wild animals. The bars were daubed that horrible greenish-bronze color ordinarily found on stoves. The ceiling, done in diamond shapes with floral designs and palm-leaf moldings so that it looked like those very cheap cashmeres manufactured in France, nauseated him.

Paying very little attention to Céline, who was continuing to signal Anatole with her eye, Cyprien tried in vain to console himself for the disappointment he felt upon observing the poorly decorated stage. It seemed to him as forlorn and shabby as all the rest of the hall. Although it was sufficiently wide and deep, it was decorated on each side with panels of flowers and symbols cast in relief, roughly fashioned, crushed by wretched masks grimacing above. Suddenly the curtain was lowered and three blows striking the stage floor invited the public not to leave. As a last resource the painter had the sight of this dustcloth with its contraband acropolis, its botched stream, its pitifully blooming bushes, its open eye in the shaft of a column that resembled a radiator. The music hall was filled with the musty smells of damp cardboard, smoky lamps, tobacco pipes, old shoes, and greasy sweat. It swarmed with people in limp hats and caps, who lay sloppily sprawled across their benches, barely visible in the dim light of eight gas lamps hanging from the ceiling like giant spiders, the hanging pipe being the thread,

the small round disc the body, the gas flames the tips of their feet. Some crosseyed young hoodlum whose face was covered with warts made his way through the hall, yelling in a shrill voice, "Ask for the popular songs, the ones sung by M. Auguste: 'The Good-looking Mexican,' 'April,' 'My Titles of Nobility.'"

Céline no longer bothered to look anywhere except at Anatole. For once, she seemed uninterested in the slapstick antics which were taking place on stage. Cyprien, who had at first been amused to see painted mouths open in withered faces, hear false notes sung, listen to the lurching cries, the rasping, divine bugle of jaded women singers, was beginning to be tremendously bored. Céline's distraction caught his eye and made him hope she would shorten his torture.

"That's not very amusing," he murmured. Afraid that he might want to leave, she immediately commented that she was enjoying herself. "That's strange," he noted. "You don't seem happy." Then she leaned over and whispered in his ear, blushing.

He replied, "Oh, I see! Well, it won't be long. You can go during the intermission."

She attempted to show him a satisfied look and from time to time twisted about in her seat like a person having fun but uncomfortable.

Cyprien went back to listening to an amazing song on whose lines a woman was wreaking havoc to the applause of the crowd. For Céline the intermission could not come quickly enough. She was boiling now, in a hurry to break her ties. The moment of hesitation that had taken hold of her upon leaving the painter's studio had passed. Remembering the episode with the garlic, she savored her revenge, impatient for the moment to arrive. Then she added a further refinement to her cruelty. Squeezing Cyprien's hand, she looked at him with limpid eyes, as if she were madly in love and in a hurry to be alone with him. A shiver of excitement ran through Cyprien and he in turn stared at his mistress with moist lips and greedy eyes.

On stage the parade of nonsense continued to unfold. Men followed women and women followed men, the women entering from the left and the men from the right. Placed as they were, Cyprien and Céline could observe all the wretchedness of their costumes, the procession of soiled gloves, worn-out pockets, cheap work shoes worn beneath ball-room gowns. All the imperfections and defects of the faces—the blood-shot eyes, cheeks pocked by smallpox, scars, cold sores on the corners of lips—all the flaccid flesh, coarse arms, ignominious ankle joints, were

displayed in front of them, poorly concealed by layers of cotton stockings and coats of rouge, bodies propped by whalebone stays and encased in cotton wadding.

With the intermission the sounds of the trombones slowly died. Céline glanced to make sure Anatole was no longer in his seat. The canvas curtain fell. "Wait for me. I'll be back," she told the painter. Out of discretion, he did not follow her. Cutting through the crowd streaming through the doors, she made her way to where Anatole was waiting.

"Oh, heavens! A kidnapping!" he yelled out. "That takes care of that fine big-shot!" Céline took his arm and they scurried off down the street.

Cyprien stubbornly kept watch on the music hall. Two, three, five persons entered. Then a whole horde of girls and workers crossed through the doorway. Finally a dense throng began to make its way inside and the hall was filled once more. Céline did not return. The painter turned around in his seat, convinced that she had met some of her friends from the workshop and was chatting with them outside. The show started up again. The pitiful group of musicians took their seats in the orchestra pit, moving about noisily. Cyprien was beginning to get worried. Perhaps Céline had become ill. He remained seated a few minutes more, then, unable to wait any longer, he left, booed by the people he disturbed. Approaching the waiters from the ministry, who stand at the entranceway evenings keeping tabs on the distribution of seats and beer, he asked if they had seen a woman of such and such description dressed thus. They laughed in his face. He admitted to himself that his request was stupid, since, of course, these men would not have taken any more notice of Céline than of any other woman. Then he went out and stood in the street. Wandering along the sidewalk, he went down as far as the Mille-Colonnes dance-hall. A pharmacist's shop he peeked in revealed only a chemist dozing with his bespectacled nose resting on a book. He stopped for a moment in front of the Iles-Marquises, an abominable place that Céline liked, a gloomy shop with chains of shelled snails and oysters on straw pallets. Returning to the music hall, he entered and found their seats already taken by another couple. He left once more, and outside on the sidewalk felt at a complete loss to know what to do.

He felt as if he had been bludgeoned with a club. At first suspecting a sudden illness, he now feared an abrupt change in their arrangement. So his forebodings were justified! Then that explained her renewed

patience and amiability. But, in spite of everything, it seemed unlikely to him. If they were unable to come to an agreement, then nothing was more natural than that she should end up preferring the caresses of some bum to his own! He could not object, but, in that case, it might have been simpler to part friends. She could quite simply have said to him, "Hey, I've had enough! I'm leaving." "Oh, how stupid I am!" he suddenly exclaimed. "I'm unjustly accusing her of a ghastly act." The idea suddenly occurred to him that, having fallen ill, she might simply have gone back to his place.

He returned to his apartment as quickly as possible. His heart skipped a beat when he realized that the door-latch was double-locked. When he opened the door the studio seemed darker and more gloomy than usual and from the first step he took he felt the icy-cold sensation of a shower. He lit a lamp. The dining table was still in the middle of the room near the dying stove. Nothing had been disturbed, neither the napkins scattered about on the furniture nor the saucers in which cigarette ashes melted in the footbath of the cups. A sudden thought made him go into the bedroom. He ran over to the night-table looking for Céline's slippers. They were gone. There was no longer any room for doubt. She had left him. This insulting way of breaking her tether threw him into a fit of rage followed by an immense depression.

As long as Céline had remained close to him he had told himself, "My God, but she's a pain! It would really be nice if she decided to leave me!" Now that she had left, he felt dejected, lost! The prospect of remaining there alone in that room as before frightened him. Rising up before him he saw the unending heartbreak of those doleful evenings when a person evokes the joys of bygone love affairs, the mortal anguish of those hours when, tired by the day's tasks, he no longer has either strength or courage and sleeps enervated in an armchair, ashamed almost to be going to sleep before nightfall. The loneliness he formerly put up with so proudly now made him cry out in fear. He knew in advance that he was beaten. He knew he had been obsessed with regret for months, incapable of producing anything, and he thought of the desolation brought on by failure, of the revolt and defeats that follow those struggles in which a person fights without hope of winning.

Ah! His pride was mortally wounded. And, yet, when he thought of Céline, he no longer envisioned a woman who had so unworthily deceived him, he no longer saw in her anything but the sensual and sweet mistress. He had a sudden realization of the offenses and cruelties

he had committed. He reproached himself for his kidding banter, his haughty caresses. He admitted that he had been at fault, that he should have pardoned the grotesqueness of her language and taste in favor of her great good spirits. He liked her, frankly was just a little short of adoring her. Then, like a flash, the memory of her betrayal struck him. He remembered her outburst that she would prefer being beaten to being treated like a poor, silly dimwit. And for a minute he regretted not having satisfied this masochistic leaning of hers. Then he became calmer and realized he would never have been able to bring himself to slap a woman. Sitting up in his bed, undressed, he recalled the crude treatment accorded him by his other mistresses.

“Oh, yes! Clémence left me without even writing; Suzanne, I never knew why; Héloïse, because I was keeping a watch on her; Eugénie, because I was not keeping a watch on her.” Very despondent, he repeated to himself, “When I think that Héloïse, who was so proud of her upbringing, found a way to swipe my box-wood powder box with never a word from her since, I don’t have the right to get angry with Céline who, in spite of being penniless, did not steal anything.”

Overwhelmed by the memory of all these broken liaisons, stirred by all these faces passing before his eyes with their bedroom smiles and the spit they had thrown in his face upon leaving him, he extinguished his lamp.

“I’m being stupid,” he murmured. “Why should all this surprise me? Since it is understood that all women fail to exhibit good manners when they desert us, it is ridiculous to expect Céline, the grossest of all, to have shown herself more polite at that moment. Let’s be just. That would not have been realistic.” And with a forced smile, he added, “All the same, it’s not funny. I’m going to miss that girl. I feel there are going to be times when I’ll yearn for her silliness. Ah, damn it! I wish it were two months from now!”

Chapter Twenty

“It’s possible,” replied old lady Teston, “but if you continue to bully me like that, I’ll have the owner fire you.”

“You wouldn’t dare,” countered Chaudrut, unafraid, leaning back a little with his hands stuck inside the cord he used for a belt.

Turning her back on him without a moment’s hesitation, old lady Teston headed towards the owner’s office.

The supervisor, who had left two hours earlier, returned with a heavy basket on her arm. All the women ran over to her, crying out, “Let’s see!” The supervisor lifted the towel covering the wicker basket and revealed, for all to see, twelve flat plates, six hollow plates, two hors-d’oeuvres dishes, a round platter, a salt shaker, a mustard pot, and a large soup dish.

“It’s porcelain!” shrieked fat Eugénie.

“Well, what did you expect?” exclaimed the supervisor. “When I want to please someone, don’t you think I’d buy the best?”

The set of dishes was passed from hand to hand. Some of the women bookbinders held the plates up to the light to see through them, others flicked them with their fingernails, carefully listening to see if they sounded cracked. The shining enamel became covered with black fingerprints. The soup dish almost got broken as it was being passed around. The supervisor immediately interrupted the chain going from one end of the workshop to the other and once more very carefully piled these fabulous products of Montereau and Creil in her basket, which she placed beside her chair.

“Désirée is sure going to be pleased!” said Céline. “That’s really a beautiful wedding gift you’re giving her, madame!”

“She’s getting married! Well, so what?” interjected the girl whose teeth were so rotten. “Isn’t that great! My word, you’d think that’s something special. It’s all a lot of trouble for nothing. The firm

wouldn't even give us a radish, if, like Désirée, we decided to offer ourselves the pleasure later of pissing only legitimate babies!"

"Not to you, that's for sure," replied the supervisor. "No one would go out of their way to do something special for the likes of you!"

The girl was going to reply, but just at that moment someone told her that a well-dressed woman wanted to see her.

She returned a few minutes later, triumphantly shaking a robe with lilac polka dots.

"It's the old idiot who came," she said in reply to fat Eugénie's question. "She asked me why I hadn't gone to the church social club meeting Sunday. Hey, my eye! I don't care, I let her chatter. I pretended I had had stomach cramps. She quit buttering me up, but decided to give me a robe nevertheless."

The whole workshop burst out laughing.

Old lady Teston, who was slowly padding her way back into the workshop, became indignant. "When a person is playing the little hypocrite, like you, at least they should not call a person an idiot simply because they've tricked them when they were trying to do something good!"

But except for one or two girls who did not utter a word, everyone else approved the young girl's actions.

"Well, too bad!" exclaimed one. "Why do those prudes come around and bother us anyway?" "It serves her right!" cried out another. "What a disgusting bunch of women! They come sniffing around you to see if they smell men. Every morning they feast on the strapping young guys they secretly observe through their lowered eyes, and in the evening they live a fast life of leisure. Thank you, no! Who needs slugs like that?"

"Hey, mother morality!" said Chaudrut. "Well, then? And your audience with the President? What came of it? Are they going to make me give up my portfolio today?"

"He isn't there," snorted old lady Teston, angrily. "But rest assured, you'll get what's coming to you!"

Then someone in the workshop repeated a joke that had been circulating for a year and a half, to wit that Chaudrut had fallen in love with old lady Teston and was just waiting for her to be widowed to ask her to marry him.

The old woman was furious. "Marry him! a good-for-nothing of his sort! I'd rather become an I don't know what!" And sure she was going

to hit him where it hurt, she glanced scornfully his way and said, "He's old enough to be my father!"

"I would be angry at myself," retorted the old man, who was deeply wounded by this reference to his age.

But, as always, the supervisor intervened. "Back to work now! It's true, no one does anything around here any more. For a whole week now, using the excuse that they are drinking to Auguste's health, the men and women have been on a binge. Well, since he's married, what's the use of that now? Without counting the fact that I'm certain they've fricasseed Moumout. It's been a long time since anyone has seen him and I'm not blind. There are people here with hands covered with scratch marks."

She was interrupted by the racket of the folding machine rollers striking the tables. "There she is!" exclaimed the group as Désirée gaily made her entrance.

The supervisor gathered up her basket and placed it on the table in front of the young girl. Blushing, Désirée stepped back a pace, clasping her hands together. Then she threw herself into the arms of the supervisor, hugging her so tightly she almost suffocated her.

"Oh, how happy I am! Oh, yes!" she repeated, very moved. "Oh, how pretty it is!" And very carefully she groped around in the hamper, gently removing the hors-d'oeuvres dishes. She opened the soup dish and took out the salt shaker, which she swung gaily around through the air holding it by the stem. "Oh, a mustard pot!" And the women passed the mustard pot around. They examined the slot fashioned in the lip of the top to hold the little spoon. They became ecstatic over the elegance of the mustard pot top, with its little knob on top so a person could hold it.

Dusk slowly began to creep into the workshop. Through the cloudy windowpanes a pale, faded day spread out over the tables and broke in the shadowy corners before dying in a last burst on a bed of yellow trimmings.

When the supervisor chided them for wasting time, the women, gathered idly together in a circle, responded that they could no longer see to work.

So then someone hollered for a man who came with his coiled wax taper and soon all the gaslights flamed, throwing their cheery brightness into the penetrating sadness of the approaching night.

They all went back to their seats.

“Well, then! The marriage is set for next Saturday?” asked the supervisor.

“Yes, madame,” replied Désirée.

The supervisor bent over her work and asked herself the question that she had never been able to answer in the thirty years she had worked at the bindery. “The girls who go out and go on binges almost always are the least desirable workers. Those who don’t go out, work regularly, but they get married and become worse than the worst of the others since they quit coming to work altogether. What to do?” Re-threading her needle, she added, “There goes another binder! Once she has her household set up, Désirée will be like all the others. She’ll give up her job and I’ll be forced to go out to find a good young girl to replace her.” And shaking her head, she sighed knowingly, unhappy at the thought of the effort it was going to cost her to come up with a suitable replacement.

The End