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THE FIG TREE

by

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INTRODUCTION

The Fig Tree was originally conceived and written as a long short story. After May of 1954, both theme and characterization were gradually expanded until the short story had become a novelette.

The action of the novelette takes place in the south of France, in a small village just north of Nice. The place is called La Colle sur Loup, but it is always referred to as La Colle by all the inhabitants. My own familiarity with the place is based on the experiences of a single summer in 1949. I have been back only briefly since then, in 1953. In 1952 I wrote a very short story which had as its main theme the rivalry of two families living in that village; it was a completely unsuccessful story, but it was obvious to me that the place had captured my imagination. In the early months of 1954 I wrote the story which was to provide me with the basic framework for the novelette. The idea for the story was reborn after my second visit to the village, and I thought about it all through the fall but was afraid to tackle it, since I had a feeling that it would grow into a "big" thing. My knowledge of La Colle would probably be purely fragmentary were it not for the fact that I have two aunts and their husbands, a grandmother, and now my mother, all living in the village. My aunts' husbands are both fruit farmers, and for some years they would not even speak to each other. I never knew the reason why. Obviously, though, this feud gave me the original idea for the two rival families.

The person who really inspired the story and its central character is Pierre Morre, one of my uncles. He is a person whom nobody quite understands. He is a very attractive man who does not make a good impression on people, mainly because he seems quite full of himself and impudent to the point of rudeness. I feel, however, that he is not as he appears to be, since I came to know him quite well during that first summer. He is very clever, perhaps brilliant, I am not sure. But he is certainly not just an average farmer, and I doubt that his work really satisfies him. He is very bitter about life in general, I do not know why; probably the bitterness is a result of his frustration and disappointment in his work and in his marriage. He told me, in the summer of 1953, that someone must have had something against him, because this was the third time he had found the tires on his truck all slashed. He had no idea who could have done this; at least he would not say. But it was the mention of this particular incident that incited me to write the story. In it Monique's brother was the man who cut the tires. He was, in a sense, the villain of the story, and Jean was completely justified in his actions. Later I eliminated the tire-cutting episode and turned Marcel into a rather weak, innocuous character; although I continued to justify Jean's actions, I gave him what was, for me, sufficient motivation for his behavior.

Jean was originally conceived as a homeless foundling, but in the short story I did not develop this idea. The superficial reason that Jean gives for competing with Marcel was in the first story the real reason.

After the tires were cut, Jean realized that "the game was up", and he and Monique left for Paris. Thus the themes of the first story were Jean's rejection by his in-laws because of his birth, and Monique's problem--should she stay with her husband or go back to her family? It was really much more Monique's story than Jean's, and nothing was ever resolved.

As I worked with the story more and more, the theme which was to become the dominant one grew into or out of it. And this is, of course, Jean's dual nature. It is not a question of which is the real Jean--both Jeans are real. There is a primitive, irrational, mystical, nature-loving Jean who has "a way with growing things." This Jean is expressed primarily through the fig tree and through Monique, who is in a sense Nature. Thus her pregnancy becomes symbolic. Monique and the tree are one, and Jean is one with them. But, of course, not completely. There can not be, nor should there be, a denial of his intellectual, rational self. It is as much a part of him as the other, and does and will find a way to express itself, even though this may mean leaving the village at some later time. The important thing is that Jean recognize and accept his other self, and that he recognize the validity of kindness unadorned by intellectual pretensions--this is what the mayor stands for, and presumably there are others in the village who share this quality of plain ordinary goodness.

Monique and Ninette are both important. Monique is the instrument of Jean's salvation. She is a Parsifal, Billy Budd-like creature, simple,

innocent, childlike, often comical; she is Love (I could almost quote St. Paul here), undemanding, unselfish--the necessary complement to her unhappy, insecure, brooding, dissatisfied husband. Ninette is, as Jean thinks in the story, the other side of himself carried to its logical extreme. I believe we cannot help liking her--there is no one in this story for whom we should not have some sympathy--but at the same time we should feel that, somehow, she is missing the boat.

Since the plot fell quite naturally into three stages -- prologue, separation, reconciliation -- I have divided it structurally into three parts. The first part is Monique's story, the second both Jean's and Monique's, the third Jean's. The novelette is written very much like a play, in other words, objectively; we see the characters talking to each other and doing things; I have avoided going into their minds at much length. I have called my divisions "chapters", following traditional usage, but perhaps they might more appropriately have been called "scenes". I have tried to give a feeling of the place itself, but I have kept descriptions of nature and of place to a bare minimum. I believe there is hardly anything in the story which is not intended to be there -- which is not there for some specific reason.

Finally, the story is really about Jean and Monique, about how they seem and are to each other and for each other; it is their relationship which is more important than anything else, and it cannot really grow until Jean accepts himself and thus accepts Monique and what she stands for. If the reader in turn can accept Jean and Monique, and grow to like them, and feel that they are real people, then, in Monique's own words, "That's all I ask for".

PART I

CHAPTER 1

Summer had come early to La Colle. It was only the second week in June, and the big fruit season had already begun. Monique Andre's husband was in Nice selling fruit; she had stayed home to bake a cake for their first wedding anniversary.

The house she and her husband lived in looked just like all the other shabby old gray houses on the main street of La Colle. It overlooked the square and the tall plane tree which grew in the middle of it. Monique liked that tree. It gave them lots of shade in the summer time. Over the top of it, she could see from her kitchen window the high stone walls which surrounded the town of St. Paul. She and Jean had been married in the church there.

Monique turned away from the window and, taking out a big mixing bowl from the cupboard, she began to sift some coarse gray flour into it. She looked at the small amount of sugar which she had managed to save in the past few weeks and wondered whether she would have enough for the icing. M. Poussin had not had any sugar today at all, and the fresh butter had cost 500 francs for a pound. But she had bought it anyway, because her mother had always told her that one should never use anything but the best butter in a cake.

She sighed and wiped the sweat off her forehead with the back of her hand. Here it was, only 9 o'clock in the morning, and it was already hot in the kitchen. While she was rolling up the sleeves of

her faded blue dress, she watched a fly climb the other side of the window-pane. She thought for a moment whether she should open the window and let the fly in, or leave the window tight shut and be uncomfortable all morning. She decided to let the fly in. She opened the window wide and the fly flew in and settled on the back of an old cook book. It waved its front legs in front of its face. Monique looked at it disinterestedly. "Don't worry, little friend," she said, "you'll soon have a companion." Then she turned her attention to the batter in the bowl and began to mix it quickly with her wooden spoon, counting the strokes. She got up to one hundred and ninety-nine, and with one final twist of the arm that was it. Two hundred strokes in two minutes. Pretty good, she thought, panting a little and waving the fly away from the bowl with the batter-filled spoon. She pursed her lips and blew at a skimpy lock of light brown hair that hung limply on her forehead. It moved slightly. She blew at it again, then, angrily, she pushed it back with her left hand. I must let that piece grow out, she thought, gazing out of her window at the walls of St. Paul.

This morning, there was a light haze on the horizon which blurred the tall tower of the church and made it waver in the sunshine. Monique remembered how it had looked a year ago. There had been no haze that morning. The tower had risen straight and tall into the sky; people had crowded the aisles and rushed out of the church to throw confetti and rice. But that was before they had known what Jean was going to do.

Monique put the cake in the oven, took off her apron, and folded it

over a hard-backed chair. Jean would be home from the market soon, she thought. She knew he would be pleased with the cake. It had been some time since they had had one. But of course she would have to ask him for more money, and he would say: "More? but I just gave you some three days ago."

She went into the living-room and straightened the pillows on the worn red sofa. Then she picked up a book from the floor beside it and looked at the title. It was called The Trial and it was written by someone with a foreign name. She took it into the bedroom and put it on Jean's desk. Then she smoothed the sheets over the bed, and tucked the bedspread under the bolster. Her mother had made the spread, and had chosen the material herself. It was yellow. Climbing all over it were large red roses and gigantic green leaves. Monique had not been able to decide whether she liked it at first, but her mother had been wild about it. How strange! Monique had thought; her mother was quite an austere person and always dressed severely in muted tones of brown or gray. There had been some material left over and her mother had made a pair of matching curtains; they were tied back from the window with big scarlet bows. When they were first married, Jean had objected to the bows, and had insisted that the curtains hang straight, but Monique had gradually persuaded him that they really looked better with the bows. She had done this primarily to please her mother.

Yet she was really quite proud of this room. It was the only one they had bothered to fix up, as Jean refused to spend any more money on

furniture and redecorating. "We won't be here long," he always said. She remembered the day she and her mother had chosen the wallpaper. She had loved it the minute she saw it. "And this is called - Scenes Champêtres," M. Durand had said. It had a yellow background, champagne yellow, and on it were many scenes of country life: girls milking cows, families out on picnics, hens laying eggs, ducks swimming on a pond, and so on. All the scenes were done in red and green and matched the bedspread and curtains beautifully. The only thing that Monique was really dissatisfied with was the carpet. They had not been able to afford a new one, so her mother had given them an old one of hers that used to be in her living-room. She assured them that it had once had a very pretty red and green floral motif woven into it. Now, however, it was rather faded and worn; the red was almost pink, and the green was almost gray.

Then Monique heard the sound of a truck stopping in front of the house. That must certainly be Jean, she thought. She ran down to meet him, calling his name.

"Just a minute," he answered from the far side of the truck. "I'm checking on this tire."

When he came around, she saw that he was carrying a small white package. "This is for you," he said. "Happy anniversary!"

"Oh Jean, what is it?" Monique began to open up the package quickly, pulling at the string. Then she gave a little gasp: "How wonderful Jean! Where did you get it?"

"I went to Poularde," he said. "It's the real thing. I remember

your once telling me that Gruyère was your favorite kind of cheese."

"Oh yes. And I haven't had any since before the war. Not the good kind anyway." She kissed him on the cheek. It was rough. "You didn't shave last night," she said reproachfully, as they went up the stairs.

"No, I was too tired to bother, and this morning I just didn't have time."

"I didn't even hear you come to bed," she said. "What were you doing, reading that silly book?"

"It's not silly," Jean retorted angrily. "You'd do well to spend some of your time reading too."

"But Jean, I didn't even hear you come to bed, and this is the third time this"

Jean silenced her by pressing a finger on her lips.

She kissed it and took his hand in hers.

"The truck looked quite empty," she said.

"Yes, I sold every last kilo of fruit. That's why I felt rich enough to get the cheese." He smiled and, slipping his arm around her waist, pulled her towards him.

"Let go, Jean, it's too hot," she said laughing, as she opened the door into the living-room.

"It's not that hot," Jean said, pulling her towards him again.

"No Jean, really," Monique pushed him away with both hands. "Listen, I have a surprise for you."

"What is it?" he asked, letting her go.

"I won't tell you until supper time," she said, tucking a loose strand of hair behind one ear.

"That isn't fair."

"Well, all right then. If you promise not to touch it before supper."

"I promise," Jean said.

They went into the kitchen. There on the table was a large plump chocolate cake. Jean leaned over and sniffed it.

"Divine," he said. "How did you get the stuff to make it with?"

"Oh, there are ways...." She smiled. "But, of course, I did use all the money you gave me the other day."

"All of it?"

"All of it."

"Well, then," Jean said, "that only makes me more decided about tomorrow."

"What about tomorrow?" Monique asked, bracing herself for what he would say.

He looked at her pointedly. "I suppose I might as well tell you now," he said, "although I warn you, you won't like it."

"Go on," Monique said.

"I'm going to the market again tomorrow," he announced.

"But it isn't your day!" Monique exclaimed.

"No, it isn't. But I'm going every day from now on, and I'm going to Marcel's customers too, and I won't stop until we have enough money to leave this place and go to Paris."

Monique was amazed. "But what about Marcel?" she cried.

Jean shrugged his shoulders and lit a Gauloise. "There's no other way," he said.

"No other way!" Monique shouted at him. "Don't make me laugh! No other way except to deprive my brother of his work and starve my family?" She felt the tears come into her eyes.

"Oh, must we start this all over again!" Jean strode out of the kitchen.

Monique went after him. "Jean...."

He interrupted her: "Where's the book I was reading?"

"It's in the bedroom. Jean...." She followed him into their room. "Can't we do this slowly, gradually? In another year surely we'll have enough to...."

He interrupted her again. "And at the end of that year we still won't have enough, because you'll have spent it all on cheap little curtains like this," he said, pulling at the red bows, "and cheap little earrings like this," he said, picking up from the dresser two blue shiny birds with little red eyes, "and those slippers you didn't really need, and gloves for your mother that she didn't need, and God knows what else.... and then you'll say: 'please, Jean, just one more year, slowly, Jean, carefully, Jean, you're starving my family, Jean....' and the next thing you know I'll be fifty years old and my whole life will have been wasted!"

He threw the earrings back on the dresser and flopped down onto the bed.

"I didn't think we'd spend our anniversary quarreling," Monique said and sat down on the bed beside him. A little shyly, she stretched out her hand and passed it lightly over his chest. "I'm sorry," she said, giving in again. How many times!

"I'm hungry," he said. "Let's have lunch."

"Shall we have the cheese?"

"If you like," he said.

She went into the kitchen and laid out the bread, the cheese and the wine.

"I think I'll go and work on the mayor's land this afternoon," Jean said, between mouthfuls of bread.

She made no response to his statement.

"I wish that land were mine," he said. "Here I do all the work, and I only get a commission for it. That land should be mine." He dipped a piece of bread into his wine and munched it.

"It's not right for you to say that after all M. Bertholdi has done for you."

Jean shrugged his shoulders. "He's better than most," he said.

"Of course, if it were yours," Monique said, as though the idea had suddenly occurred to her, "perhaps you wouldn't be in such a hurry to leave La Colle."

Jean stopped chewing his bread and cut a large slab of cheese with the bread knife. "Damn it, Monique," he said impatiently, "you don't want to understand, do you?"

"Jean, it's not that I don't want to. It's that you won't explain."

"Listen, Monique, if you don't see why I want to leave this place, then I can't tell you."

Monique tried to hold back her tears, knowing that Jean hated to see her cry. "Just like a snivelling child," he always said.

"You're always saying that to me, Jean. You're making me out to be an idiot, a fool, a stupid self-satisfied fool, and I'm not that way, really I'm not." Two tears finally slipped out of her eyes and slithered down her face.

Suddenly his whole manner changed. "I'm sorry, darling," he said, reaching for her hand across the table. "I didn't mean to upset you. Of course, this is the only life you know."

"And it's the only life you know," Monique said sharply.

"Oh no it isn't," he said. "I've been to Paris, I know ..."

She interrupted him quickly. "But, Jean, that was different. You were in the underground, you weren't living a normal life..." And then she caught herself. Why did I have to mention the underground, she thought. I know he doesn't like me to. I know he doesn't even want to think about it. Did I do it on purpose; did I want to hurt him...

"Monique, I told you not to say that word..." His voice was almost threatening.

"I'm sorry," she said, and then in defense, "but you brought it up, and anyway, why do you feel this way about it, why...?"

He had risen from his seat and was leaning across the table bending

over her. "Just shut up, Monique," he almost shouted, "shut up!" He seemed to be struggling to control himself.

She sat very still, not daring to move, her eyes fastened on his face.

He slumped back into his chair, and poured himself another glass of wine. Then he sipped it slowly for a few minutes, twirling the glass by the stem, and staring into the depths of it with considerable intensity, as though he expected to find the answer to a riddle there.

Then he said, "You know it isn't just Paris. It's what Paris represents. It's having a chance to learn, being able to grow, to develop one's talents..."

"And just what talents do you think you have, M. Jean?" she asked bitinglly.

Jean got up from the table. "It's no use my trying to talk to you, if you're going to be like that," he said.

Monique reached out to him, sorry now for what she had said. "Jean, it's just that I..."

He turned on her viciously. "It's just that you don't understand, that's all. It's quite simply that, and I'm sick of trying to explain to you how I feel." He walked out of the kitchen.

"Are you going now?" Monique asked nervously, getting up from the table.

"Yes."

"What time will you be back?" She hovered around him, wanting to

show her concern, her solicitude, her tenderness.

"About six," he said. "I'm going to start the rounds earlier this afternoon so I'll be through before Marcel begins."

"All right, Jean," Monique said, resignedly. "It's very hot today, be careful."

He shrugged his shoulders and went off without saying goodbye.

When Monique heard the door slam downstairs, she walked to the window and looked out. Jean was getting into the truck. She watched him slowly lighting a cigarette as though he were preoccupied with something; then he started up the engine and drove off fast; but, instead of turning to the right as he should have done, he continued to follow the main road; finally, he went round a curve, and Monique could see him no longer.

That's funny, she said to herself. He wouldn't be going to his customers now.

She walked into the bedroom and, taking off her espadrilles, lay down on the bed. I wonder where he's going, she thought. She tried to stay awake for a few minutes because she wanted to think about Jean and Marcel and the whole horrible mess -- that was her phrase for it -- but her eyes kept closing in spite of herself and in a few moments she fell asleep.

CHAPTER 2

Monique woke up about an hour afterwards. She felt wonderfully rested and decided to spend the rest of the afternoon cleaning up the house.

She took her time about it, singing a slow melancholy tune and pausing every now and then to look out of the window when a bus stopped in the square. A couple of times she called to some people she knew who were getting off the bus, but they didn't respond. Perhaps they hadn't heard her, or then again, perhaps they hadn't wanted to hear her. She stopped sweeping and, resting her hands on the broom handle, she gazed at the small pile of dirt that was accumulating near the door. There was a hairpin, and some used matches, and two cigarette butts, slightly squashed and black and ugly-looking. Jean had a habit of putting out his cigarette by grinding it against his heel and then dropping it on the floor -- that is, if she had forgotten to put an ash-tray at his elbow.

She gazed around her at the room, feeling a little listless and tired, a little faint. It's probably just the heat, she thought, sitting down on the arm of the sofa. Then she remembered that it had been some time since she had swept behind it, and she got up and pushed the heavy piece of furniture away from the wall. Almost exhausted by the effort, she leaned on the back of the sofa, and saw, propped up against the wall, a painting. She stared at it for a moment, not understanding how it had gotten there, and then she lifted it from its place and took it to the

window. It seemed to her that it was a painting of a tree, but the colors merged into each other without any definite demarcations; there was a sort of white, and a pale blue, and a greenish shade, and a blue-gray in the background, and the whole picture was so vague that she couldn't say for sure what kind of a tree it was meant to be, or whether it was a tree at all. Nor could she tell whether there was anything else in the picture besides the tree. She took it into the bedroom and put it on Jean's desk. Had Jean bought it from one of those artists who lived at St. Paul, or had he painted it himself? "I must ask him about it when he gets home," she said, and went back to her sweeping.

She was too worried just now to think about the painting any more. It seemed to her that quite often in the past few months people hadn't heard her when she spoke to them, others hadn't seen her on the street. Why, only last week Mme. Berthelot had said to her, "I hope you don't mind my telling you this, my dear, but your husband is behaving very badly. Surely you can dissuade him from this awful thing he is doing."

"And what is that?" Monique had asked innocently, knowing too well what the answer would be.

"My dear child," Mme. Berthelot had looked shocked. "He is taking the bread out of your mother's mouth, doesn't that mean anything to you?"

Monique had felt herself blushing. "He's just doing his work," she had said defensively.

"Ah, come, come..." Mme. Berthelot had shaken a long bony finger at her, "if that were the whole truth, he could have shared the work with

Marcel and helped him with the farm. No, no, he is purposely trying to run your brother out."

"It isn't so! it isn't so!" Monique had blurted almost hysterically, hating to hear her suspicions voiced by a stranger, "and besides, my family isn't starving; Marcel has his own land and makes much more from it than Jean ever could from M. Bertholdi's."

"But what is the good of having the land if one can't sell the produce?" Mme. Berthelot had cackled nastily.

"Of course he can sell the produce. Jean isn't interfering with that."

Mme. Berthelot had walked away, shaking her gray head disapprovingly.

All the old hag needed was a broom-stick, Monique thought, as she began to sweep the cigarette butts into the dust-pan. But Mme. Berthelot had been right. Marcel would have a hard time selling his fruit now. It was awful. And of course she would have to tell her mother about this new development. She looked at the small clock on the table, it was ten minutes to five -- almost time for her mother's visit -- and she was very punctual. Monique hurriedly dusted the top of the table and the backs and arms of the chairs, and then decided she had better change into something fresh. Her mother was always telling her that she looked untidy and sloppy.

Just as she had put on a clean blouse and skirt, the door banged below, and the old wooden stairs began to creak under the weight of a slow and measured step. Monique drew a brush through her long straight brown hair and pinned it behind her ears with two tortoise-shell combs.

"Can I come in?" It was her mother's voice.

"Yes, mother. Please do."

The door opened and her mother walked in. She was dressed soberly as always in a high-collared dress that had just been pressed; her gray hair had been brushed severely away from her face and fastened at the nape of her neck in a big round bun.

"I brought these for your anniversary dinner," she said, holding out two long thin ivory candles. "They are of the best quality. I bought them in Nice this morning."

"Oh thank you mother, they are lovely!" Monique held them gently in her hands, pressing the cool smooth wax against her damp fingers.

"The house is full of flies," her mother said, shooing one off a table as she walked towards the sofa.

"Yes mother, I know. It was hot this morning, and so I opened the window in the kitchen, but... there weren't many before.... I don't know why they've come all at once, just now," she said, waving her hand in the air.

Her mother looked at her disbelievingly. "And where is Jean on this special day?" she asked.

"He went to work on the land this afternoon..." Monique stopped.

"Well, surely he should be back by now!"

Monique fiddled with the long blue fringes of the table runner. "No, you see," she stopped. How could she possibly say it?

"Well, what is it?" her mother peered at her from under her heavy

black eyebrows. Monique looked at those brows and remembered how, when she was a little girl, she had been afraid that she would grow up to have eyebrows like that. She sat down on a small hard-wood chair beside the table.

"It's hard for me to tell you this," she began, still playing with the long blue fringe.

"Come on, child, and let's have done with it," her mother said, tapping a tightly closed fan on her knee. Her mother always carried a fan in the summer-time, though she seldom used it.

Monique waved a fly away, and took the plunge. "It's like this, mother." She paused, then hurried on: "We don't have much money saved, and Jean's in a hurry to leave, and so..." she almost whispered the last words, "he's gone to collect fruit again today." She glanced at her mother furtively.

"But this is Marcel's day!" her mother gasped.

"Yes, I know," Monique said timidly.

"Ah, but this is too much!" her mother said, standing up and throwing her fan open at the same time. "Far too much," she said, fanning herself rapidly and walking backwards and forwards between Monique and the red sofa.

Monique began to twist the thick gold wedding ring around her finger. "Well, mother, really you know, it isn't too bad." She felt compelled to say something, to atone for Jean's actions in some way, even though she knew she was only making matters worse. "There's so much fruit now,

there'll surely be enough for them both, and, Jean will only go to his regular customers," you're lying now, she said to herself, and so she added, "and even if he went to Marcel's... they wouldn't give him anything."

"Wouldn't they? That's what you think, my girl." Her mother stopped pacing and stared at her, pointing with the fan she had just closed. "Do you suppose they care, those wealthy gentlemen farmers with their beautiful big houses and all the best land? What do they care as long as they get a good price? And let me tell you, my sweet, that husband of yours who doesn't have one true friend in the whole village, that husband of yours knows just which way to rub the skins of those rich folk. Yes, he humbles himself, he makes them purr with contentment; but not Marcel. Marcel has too much pride. Marcel doesn't pander to the rich, he doesn't know how to, but he has more friends than he can count on both hands!" Her mother wound up triumphantly.

Monique bowed her head before her mother's penetrating stare. "I know you're right, mother," she said. "You always are. But after all, Jean's my husband, I must defend him. I must feel that what he's doing is right."

"And do you?"

"I don't know." Monique put her elbow on the table and rested her head on her hand. "I don't know," she said again.

Her mother sat down on the sofa. "We all told you that he was no good, but you wouldn't believe us. A boy who was brought up in charity

by the good sisters of the convent, an 'enfant trouvé', a foundling. Nobody knew who his parents were -- probably very disreputable people. And here you were, Monique La Fargue, descended from one of the most respectable and respected families in the village, and what did you do? You fell in love with this boy. And why? Heaven only knows!" Her mother shook her head and sighed. "How I begged and pleaded with you not to marry this wild young man -- for he was wild; none of the sisters liked him. But no, you're stubborn, mulishly stubborn, like your father, bless his soul, thank God he didn't live to see the day of your wedding!"

"Oh, mother, please!" Monique began to snifle, and wiped her eyes with the fringes of the table-runner.

"We tried to be reconciled to it, your brother and I..." her mother went on, paying no attention to Monique's tears, "especially when the mayor said that the boy had given him no trouble since he had come to work for him. It was the mayor who made us hope that perhaps Jean might, in spite of his birth, bring honor to the family. We gave you a good wedding at the church in St. Paul, the loveliest and oldest of the churches here, and I gave you my mother's lovely old carpet, and I made those curtains for you and the bedspread too." She stopped as if remembering something. "And what kind of thanks did I get?"

"I thanked you, mother," Monique said quietly.

"Yes, but do you know what that husband of yours did?"

"What?" Monique asked, trembling a little.

"He looked at them and he laughed! Yes, he laughed right in my face!"

"Oh no mother, he didn't, did he?"

"He laughed. and I said: 'Will you be so kind as to tell me why you are laughing, M. André?'"

"And what did he say?" Monique asked anxiously.

"Nothing. He had no answer to give me. He looked at me, and then he said: 'If you don't know why I'm laughing, then I can't tell you!'"

"Oh mother," Monique moaned. "He never does want to explain, he won't tell me what he thinks, or why he does things either..."

"You see, it's because he thinks he's above us!" Mme. La Fargue exclaimed. Look at the way he's behaved, the worthless scoundrel..."

"Mother, don't," Monique implored hopelessly, knowing that there was more to come, that nothing could stop her mother now.

"We were good enough to offer him -- that nobody -- a share of our land," her mother continued relentlessly. "We were willing to accept him as one of the family; because of you, you understand, because of you, and because the mayor had given us some hope. And then, not only does he reject the offer, but he begins to collect and sell the fruit of the rich farmers. And because he is wily and treacherous, he gets better prices than my poor Marcel, and slowly, slowly, like a serpent in the grass, he takes almost all of the clients away from your brother. And you, what do you do?" Her mother turned to her scornfully. "You say-- why only last week Mme. Berthelot told me--you say, 'he is doing his work.' Hah! What a joke!"

Monique watched her mother's head bob up and down. It bobbed up

and down whenever she felt that she had stated an eternal truth, scored a brilliant victory, or pointed out an impressive moral.

"And now this," she said, tapping her fan on her knee. "I can see it now," she said. "He will go to the market tomorrow morning, stand next to Marcel, and outsell him every time. Horrible and disgraceful! And for how long is this little plan of his going to go on, may I ask?"

"Oh, not for long," Monique hastened to assure her. "We're leaving for Paris soon."

"When?"

"I don't know. Soon."

"And why do you need all this money to go to Paris? What do you think you're going to do there?"

"Jean is going to study," Monique said timidly.

"Study? Study what?"

Monique searched her mind for an answer. She did not really have one, but she couldn't bring herself to admit this to her mother. "I think he's interested in painting," she said.

"Painting? And what does he plan to do with this painting, supposing he should ever manage to learn it?"

"I don't know, mother," Monique said, wondering what one did with painting anyway.

"Does he know?" her mother inquired, an ominous note in her voice.

"I... I don't think so. At least...." she stopped, seeing the expressing of disapproval and disdain on her mother's face. What shall

I say now? she asked herself. "I'm sure he knows, it's just that he hasn't told me, or maybe he told me and I forgot. You know how absent-minded I am," she said.

Mme. La Fargue squared her shoulders, and Monique felt like a hunchback as she tried to sit up straight too. Nobody could sit or stand as straight as her mother. She had decided that a long time ago and had given up trying to compete. So her shoulders had grown round and sloping, in spite of all Mme. La Fargue's efforts to impart to her daughter a martial bearing worthy of the family name.

"He doesn't tell you much, does he?" her mother retorted.

Monique did not feel like telling another lie. So she said nothing.

"And what about you, my poor child?" her mother asked. "Do you want to go to Paris?"

Monique shrugged her shoulders. "I don't know. I've never been there, how can I tell whether I would like it or not?"

"You will be like a flower transplanted into foreign soil," her mother said, nodding her head, "and you will long to breathe the pure air of Provence once more."

"Oh mother, really!" Monique felt embarrassed by this kind of talk.

"And I suppose you'll have to work while your husband is studying..." Her mother broke off, as though to let that thought sink in, but Monique had already thought about it. "Of course, you've never done anything like that before. It will be hard, but... if you love him... in spite of everything," her mother sighed.

"I do love him, mother," Monique said flatly.

"Ah yes. Those green devil's eyes--yes, you always were attracted by them, and those devil's eyebrows!"

"Devil's eyebrows!" Monique exclaimed. This was something new.

"Yes, haven't you ever seen pictures of the devil? His eyebrows start at the corners of the eyes nearest the nose and then they shoot up and disappear into his forehead." Her mother laughed at her own description. "Yes, that is just how Jean's eyebrows are, instead of being straight or rounded like other people's. And, of course, the devil has a mustache too...."

"But he has one of those long twirly ones... not like Jean's. His is small and..." Monique broke off, disgusted with herself for having deigned to speak.

"Discreet," her mother added. "If only Jean were as discreet as his mustache..."

Monique picked up the candles which she had laid on the table.

"Mother, why did you bother to get us these candles?"

"What do you mean, why did I bother? I just thought that they would add a festive touch to your usual tête-à-tête meal. After all, this is a special day."

"Yes, mother. This is a special day." Monique got up and stared pointedly at her.

"I'm sorry, my dear. I'm afraid I have offended you," her mother said, coming towards her. "Of course, you know I wouldn't hurt you for

anything in the world, but I'm afraid you did make a mistake." She nodded and smoothed out the wrinkles across her flat stomach. "Incidentally, my dear," she said, "you are getting a little fat you know. Not really fat, just plump, on the heavy side. But I suppose Jean likes you that way."

"He hasn't made any objection," Monique stood stiffly against the wall.

They stared at each other for a moment. Then Mme. La Fargue sighed deeply and said: "Goodbye, my child. When will I see you again?"

"I don't know," Monique said. "Any time, you are always welcome here."

Mme. La Fargue patted her on the cheek, then kissed her on the forehead.

"Bye, mother," Monique said. Then she heard the door bang down below, and light steps came running up the squeaky stairs. The living-room door swung open.

Jean looked from one woman to the other. "You've made her cry," he said.

Mme. La Fargue gave him a long, scalding stare. "No, M. André, not I. You are the one who is responsible for her tears."

With those final words, she swept past her son-in-law and out of the room.

Jean looked at her. "Tell me all," he said, reaching for a Gauloise in the pocket of his shirt.

CHAPTER 3

Monique told him while she was fixing supper.

"You know," Jean said slowly, "there's only one thing that worries me in all this."

"What's that?" she asked, as though she had no idea what he was about to say.

"I don't really know where you stand."

"What do you mean?" Monique pulled the cloves of garlic out of the veal roast. Then she put it back into the oven.

"Well, I don't mean that you don't defend me in these attacks... but, even as you're defending me, you're doubting me, isn't that true?"

Monique sat down, making up her mind to be quite frank. "Yes, that's true, Jean," she said. "I can't keep it from you. Everybody thinks you're wrong except you. How can I just take your word against everybody else's?"

"But you wouldn't even have to take my word, if you could only feel it. If you could only feel that what I'm doing is right." Jean stared at her intently across the table.

"But I can't feel it," Monique said, staring back. "I can't see that what you're trying to do is so wonderful. Why is Paris so much better than La Colle?"

Jean put up his hands with an exasperated "Oh!".

"And besides," Monique went on, "what are you really planning to do there? You won't ever tell me and today mother asked me, and I said you

were going to study painting.

"Painting?" Jean smiled. "Where d'you get that idea?"

Monique went to the bedroom, picked up the painting from the desk, and brought it to him.

"This," she said, placing it before him on the kitchen table. "Or didn't you do it?"

"Oh," he said, "I'd forgotten all about that."

But she could tell he was lying. "Did you do it?" she asked him.

"Yes," he said. "Do you like it?"

"I don't know," she said truthfully. "What is it?"

"A fig tree," he said.

"A fig tree?" She held it up from the table and stared at it. "It doesn't look like a fig tree."

"Well, that's what it is," Jean said.

"Why a fig tree?" she asked.

"Why not?" Jean said, and took the painting from her. "I didn't really want you to see this, it isn't very good."

She followed him into the bedroom and watched him place it face down at the bottom of the clothes cupboard.

"Why did you use those colors?" she asked.

"Why not?" he said. "Listen, Monique, it isn't worth discussing."

"But is it what you're planning to do?"

"I do not know," he said. "Please stop asking me all these questions, Monique."

"But how can you go to Paris and not know...."

"Oh, shut up, Monique, for God's sake!"

They went back into the kitchen and sat down at the table again.

Monique sighed. Then suddenly remembering, she said: "Where did you go this afternoon after you left me?"

Jean gazed at her imperturbably. "Where do you think I went?"

Monique said, "I was watching you. You didn't turn off at the right place to go to M. Bertholdi's land."

"Why were you spying on me?"

"Spying on you!" Monique retorted. "Listen, don't try to change the subject. I want to know where you went this afternoon when you were supposed to be working on the land."

"I was working on the land," Jean said, jerking the cigarette out of his mouth.

"Why don't you tell me where you went? Are you keeping something from me?"

"Maybe," Jean said. "It's my privilege as a civilized human being to have some privacy. What makes you think you're entitled to know everything about me?"

"The fact that I'm your wife."

"That doesn't make any difference," Jean said.

Monique realized now that she would get nothing out of him. She got up and, turning her back on him, began to shred some lettuce into the salad bowl.

"Did you get much fruit today?" she asked.

"Yes. Several people said I could come every day for the next month."

"What about Marcel's customers?"

"Only one gave me anything--M. Canelli-- he had a big basket of plums. Here." He handed her a piece of paper with some names on it, and the baskets of fruit listed beside them. "M. Canelli said he'd have some tomatoes for me next week."

"So he's going to be a regular customer of yours?" Monique asked. She started to lay the table in the living-room.

"Yes," said Jean, bringing in the knives and forks. "That is, of course, if I get a better price for his fruit than Marcel does. If I do, there's a good chance that some of the others will follow M. Canelli's good example."

Monique lit the candles. Her hands were shaking a little. "It's when you talk like that that I am doubtful," she said in a low voice, looking into her husband's green eyes. "Devil's eyes," her mother had said; "devil's eyebrows."

They ate in silence, except for an occasional word of praise from Jean about the roast, the potatoes, the salad. Then came the cake. "Delicious," said Jean, devouring large slabs of it. "Especially the chocolate icing. I don't want to know how you did it, because I know it was a miracle..." Monique blushed with pride. "Let nobody say that my wife isn't a good cook, anyway," Jean said.

"What do you mean by 'anyway'?" Monique asked, disturbed by the word.

It seemed to negate the compliment.

"Anyway?" Jean repeated, absent-mindedly. "I can't imagine what I meant by 'anyway'. I don't think I meant anything in particular; anyway, is it against the rules to say 'anyway'?"

"Oh, Jean, stop trying to be funny!" Monique said, and began carrying out the plates to the kitchen.

Jean gave an exaggerated sigh. "You're always so touchy now," he said, lighting a Gauloise and dropping the match on the floor. Then he picked up the Nice-Matin, and, twisting it into a tight wad, he brought it down with a bang on the table. "Missed him," he said.

"Jean, what are you doing?" Monique called from the kitchen.

"Unsuccessfully trying to kill flies," he said, walking up to the sink. Monique was washing the dishes.

"Why do you want to kill them, they're not hurting you," she said.

Jean looked at her meditatively. "Really, Monique, I don't understand your sudden attachment to the house fly."

"It's not a sudden attachment," Monique retorted. "And besides," she added, "you sound just like my mother. That was practically the first thing she said when she came in this afternoon. 'Oh, Monique, your house is full of flies!'"

Jean laughed. "In that case," he said, "I shall cherish these beloved flies, and I'll even make a careful search for all the other flies that are outside the house and bring them in."

He put down the newspaper, and lifted Monique up in his arms.

Then he put her down quickly. "You're heavier than you used to be," he said.

Monique was annoyed. "And that's another comment my mother made this afternoon."

"Oh no," Jean said, "surely not the very same words!"

"No. She said I was getting fat."

"Ah well, that's different. I didn't say you were getting fat."

He kissed her on the cheek. "I like you just the way you are."

"Deo gratias," Monique said.

Jean smiled. "Monique?" he said, lighting a cigarette, "how would you like to have a nice juicy red plum?"

"My mouth's watering," she said.

"I have a basket from M. Bertholdi's land that ought to fetch a pretty price. Let's go down and get some."

Monique finished drying the dishes and wiped her hands on the towel. "Let's go," she said.

The truck stood in its usual place, just a little to the right of the entrance to the house. A street lamp shed a dim yellow glow on the boards; they had been freshly painted a rather bright shade of green. Jean helped Monique to climb up the back.

"Oh, aren't they lovely!" At the sight of the baskets filled with round red plums, she clapped her hands like a little girl. "The plums are the prettiest," she said, "though the peaches are nice too." She leaned over and picked up a large round yellow peach and rubbed her

fingers over its furry skin.

"You can't have any from these baskets," Jean said. "They belong to my customers."

"Oh, I was just feeling it," Monique laughed. She put it back gently into the basket.

"Here are ours," he said, giving her one.

"Oh Jean, they are the most beautiful of all!" She pressed the ruby-colored plum against her cheek. "It feels so firm and cool," she said.

Jean moved her hand with the plum in it over to her mouth. "Open wide," he said.

Monique opened her lips and dug her teeth deep into the soft yielding flesh; then she felt some of the juice trickle slowly down her chin. "Oh, oh," she said, with her mouth full.

Jean laughed and wiped the dribble off with his thumb, then he licked it. "Good?" he asked.

Monique nodded. Stooping over the basket, she carefully chose four more plums, and stuffed them into her skirt pockets.

"Now I know why you sew such big pockets into your clothes," Jean said laughing. He helped her off the truck, then he picked her up in his arms and carried her over the doorstep, wavering a little under her weight. He put her down. "I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't think I could make the stairs."

She smiled at him. "Of course not, that isn't expected of you."

"Yes," he said. But I did it this time last year."

"Jean, am I really that fat?" she asked anxiously.

"No....." he said uncertainly, "but you were never very thin, so a few kilos more make quite a difference."

She pretended to look angry for a minute, then she laughed and ran up the stairs.

They sat in the living-room and sucked at their plums. After a while she said, as though she had suddenly thought of it: "Jean, can I come with you to the market tomorrow?"

He seemed surprised. "Come with me? Why?"

Monique shrugged her shoulders. "I would just like to."

"But why tomorrow," Jean asked suspiciously, "why should you want to come tomorrow?"

"Because I want to see it for myself."

"What?" he asked.

"You and Marcel."

Jean, taking careful aim, threw his peach stone at the wastebasket, and missed.

"Pick that up," Monique said.

He sighed, and walked over to the table where the stone had fallen. "What are you going to do, choose sides?" he asked her. He bent over to look for it.

"Perhaps," Monique said, on her way to the bedroom.

"But why do you want to do a thing like that?" Jean asked, following her.

She turned on him. "Did you pick it up?" she asked.

"I couldn't find it," he said. "Listen, I can tell you right now that Marcel won't do as well as I; and I can also tell you that you'll be sorry for him, and that you'll forget everything except the expression on his face....."

"Heavens, you're sure of yourself!" Monique interrupted, irritated by his manner. "I suppose I'll have to look for it," she said, going into the living-room. "I can see it from here, you liar. Are you going to make me bend down and pick it up?"

"Ordinarily I would," Jean said laughing, "but today...." He picked up the stone.

"Put it in, please; don't throw it," Monique said.

"All right, all right," he said, and dropped it carefully into the wastebasket.

"Perhaps I won't feel that way at all," she said, going back into the bedroom. "But still I want to see what's going to happen."

"Nothing is going to happen, Monique," Jean said. He walked up to her and ran his hands through her hair. "I'm going to sell my fruit, and he's going to sell his. What could be simpler? After all, you've been to the market before, you know exactly what it's like...."

"But Jean," she said. "Don't you see? I have to do something. I can't keep on defending you when I don't know what I'm defending. I've got to see with my own eyes if what you're doing is so awful. Because then, if I don't think it's awful, I can defend you honestly..."

"And if you do?"

"Then I can't defend you any more." Monique slowly unbuttoned her blouse.

"I won't let you come," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"I won't let you get on the truck with me."

"Then I'll come by bus. The earliest one leaves at six o'clock. I won't have missed much by the time I get there."

"But, Monique, you're mad, quite mad! What's the point?"

"I've already explained, Jean." Monique slipped her skirt down over her hips, and stepped out of it carefully.

Jean sat on the bed and frowned at her, while he rubbed his mustache with the thumb and forefinger of his right hand.

"I suppose I could lock you in," he said meditatively.

"You wouldn't dare!"

"Oh, I'd dare all right," he said. "But that wouldn't be fair, would it?"

Monique looked at him questioningly as she laid out his pajamas.

He smiled up at her. "We don't live in the middle ages any more," he said. "Wives don't get beaten, and they don't get locked up in their rooms for being naughty."

"M. Grandet beats his wife regularly every Saturday night. The neighbors hear her screaming," Monique said in a matter-of-fact tone, and closed the bathroom door behind her.

"That good old M. Grandet," Jean sighed. "There aren't many others like him these days. Say, Monique," he called. "Would you love me more than you do now if I beat you every Saturday night?"

Monique opened the door a crack and eyed him seriously. "You know," she said, "that sounds like a good idea."

They looked at each other for a second, and then they both laughed. "I'll be through in a minute," Monique said, and closed the door again.

When she came back into the room, Jean was already in bed and the light was out. She slid in between the heavy coarse sheets.

"Monique?" Jean said, as she snuggled up to him.

"Yes?"

"Do you still insist on going tomorrow morning?"

"Yes, and I'll take the six o'clock bus. You can beat me afterwards if you want to."

"I wish you wouldn't do it," he said. "I just wish you wouldn't do it."

"I've already told you that I must. Don't let's talk about it any more Jean," she said, covering his mouth with her hand. He bit it. "Ow!" she squealed. "I knew you were going to do that!"

He laughed at her and kissed the hand he had just bitten.

For a minute, Monique almost wanted to cry. Why can't we always be like this, she thought. Why should other things bother us and come between us, things that really have nothing to do with Jean and me? And yet, she thought, how Jean treats my brother and my mother and the other people in

the village--that's a part of him too. And if I don't like that part of him...?

"What's the matter, Monique?" Jean asked tenderly.

"Nothing," she said. "I was just thinking."

"Well, don't think then," he said, stroking her forehead with his hand as though he hoped by this gesture to erase her thoughts.

"I won't, she whispered, "I won't," and giving herself up to her love, she took his hand in hers to guide it, and pressed her body tightly against his.

CHAPTER 4

When Monique got out of bed the next morning, Jean had already left the house. The sun was rising over St. Paul, tinging the sky around it with a soft pinkness that overflowed onto the towers and the walls of the old town.

She was waiting in the square when the bus turned the corner.

"How's everything?" the conductor asked, as he came up to collect the fare.

"Oh, pretty good," she said smiling. He handed her the ticket. There were only a handful of people on the bus; nobody she knew. She looked out of the window. About one kilometer over towards St. Paul was the quarter of St. Etienne where Marcel and her mother lived. She could see the pink house from here. It looked slightly more prosperous than the other houses--they stood abjectedly huddled together in a jumble of tans and grays. She noticed, at the same time, that the house was the same shade of pink as the glow which had now receded from St. Paul and was quietly withdrawing into the sky.

The bus bumped along the road in a cheerful, carefree way. It didn't have to make too many stops at this hour of the morning, and the road to Nice was a gradually descending one. It crossed the plain of the Var and rumbled over the bridge that spanned the broad slow-moving river. Monique liked that river. It was still and peaceful. Usually little humps of land raised themselves above the water as though wishing

in full swing. Every other time she had either gone with her father or her brother, and had never been particularly conscious of the market as a spectacle, as a scene. Now, she burst in on it, almost as though she were a total stranger.

The two things she was simultaneously aware of, before she could distinguish separate objects and individual persons, were movement and color. The movement was unceasing. It seemed to be both fast and slow. Shapes and forms ran into each other, then retreated, then moved slowly on; colors clashed, matched, and melted into each other. There was red and blue, and there was orange and yellow and white, gray and black and tan, and the silver color of the tin roofing that gleamed and sparkled in the sunshine, and the rusty color of the steel girders underneath. And then there were people, and baskets, and fruit. People who waved their arms and shouted and talked and moved about; fruit that was passed from hand to hand, touched and smelled, and carefully examined; empty baskets that stood piled on top of one another, and full baskets that were tenderly placed on the dirt floor or on large wooden stands.

She stood there for a moment, bewildered by the movement, almost blinded by the sunlight that bounced off the tin roof and hit her in the eyes; and then she came a little closer. Under the roof, it was darker; and she became aware of something else. Something as powerful as the noise, the movement and the color. It was the smell. It was the smell of people, the smell of bodies that were not too well washed; it was the rancid smell of body sweat. But that smell was not an isolated smell.

For with it was strangely mixed the sweet fresh clean smell of newly picked fruit.

She kept to the outer fringes of the large area, walking hurriedly along. The fruit venders were grouped together according to the villages and towns from which they came, but she couldn't remember where La Colle was. She asked one of the men; "Over there, over there," he said, pointing vaguely across his shoulder. She walked in the direction where the finger had pointed, and then, she stopped. Jean was standing about twenty paces away talking earnestly to a fat little man who was fingering a plum in one hand and a peach in the other. Just beyond, and fairly near him, she could distinguish Marcel's head as it rose over Jean's and, indeed, above most people's. She crossed the street at the risk of being seen by the men in order to get a better view. She was sure she would not be noticed--they were too absorbed in their business. At least, Jean was. Marcel stood watching him with arms folded across his chest. Half his baskets were still full. Two-thirds of Jean's were empty.

Monique stared at her brother intently. Again she had the strange feeling that she was an outsider objectively viewing a scene that was foreign to her and perhaps a little incomprehensible. And yet, who could be more intimately involved in what was going on between these two men? But the feeling remained. She saw her brother as if for the first time. Tall, handsome in a gaunt almost emaciated way; his long legs encased in a pair of faded blue pants neatly patched and very clean;

blue shirt with sleeves rolled up the elbow and collar open at the neck, and a small face with a very high forehead and high prominent cheekbones, a long thin pointed nose, a very thin almost lipless mouth, and black eyes that were set deep in his head with heavy bushy eyebrows.

In the meantime, Jean had sold another basket of fruit. He had only four left. Marcel had eight. She watched her husband pull a handkerchief out of his pocket and wipe his arms, his forehead, and his neck with short rapid movements. His pants were not especially clean and they were rolled up above the ankles. His shirt was open halfway down his chest, revealing a growth of thick black hair. He did not once look at his brother-in-law.

Then a prospective customer walked slowly towards them. A woman this time. Big-hipped, not too young, but young enough. Monique saw Jean lean forward and smile. No, it was more than a smile. It was a grin. On the other hand, it wasn't as open as a grin, it was more like a sneer. No, it wasn't a sneer at all, it was a leer, a lecherous leer, that's what it was. Monique hated him for that. The woman sidled up to him. She didn't have to stand that close, Monique thought. Jean held up a peach in his hand and began to talk very quickly, caressing the fruit all the while with his other hand. The woman smiled. Then she glanced over at Marcel. He bent down and took out a peach from one of his baskets and held it up for her to see. The woman turned away from Marcel's outstretched arm and began bargaining with Jean.

Monique began to feel sorry for Marcel. His peach was obviously just as good as Jean's. It was just that he hadn't looked at the woman

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Monique began to feel sorry for Marcel. His peach was obviously just as good as Jean's. It was just that he hadn't looked at the woman

the way Jean had. Jean seemed very satisfied now. He had sold another basket. Three more to go. He made a notation on a small pad of paper which he carried in his shirt pocket. Marcel still had eight baskets.

Then another woman approached the two men from the other direction, from the side nearest Marcel. She was older; maybe in her fifties. She began to examine Marcel's fruit, while he looked at her eagerly. Jean was not interfering. Suddenly, Marcel and the woman began to talk quite heatedly, and the woman gesticulated quickly with her hands and shook her head several times in rapid succession. They must be arguing about the price, Monique thought. The woman seemed ready to walk away, when Jean lifted one of his baskets, and, stepping in front of Marcel, he thrust it at the woman saying something very fast. She heard Marcel shout in protest. The woman payed no attention to him. She sniffed at the fruit, picked up a plum, bit into it, sucked it slowly with a thoughtful expression on her face, then opened her purse and took out some money. Jean put the plums into two large straw shopping bags which the woman gave him. She watched him intently as he set them on the scales. Then she peered over his shoulder. They had a brief argument, and, finally, Jean shrugged his shoulders and handed the bags to her in exchange for the money. She walked away quickly, holding the bags by the handles.

The two men looked at each other for a minute. Monique watched, horrified. She was sure they were going to fight. But Marcel turned away with his fists clenched in front of him.

Monique wanted to cry. She wanted to run to Marcel and comfort him,

to tell him that everything would be all right in the end. And she wanted to slap the grin off of Jean's face. The intensity of her emotion almost frightened her; knowing that she could not bear to see any more, she slipped away.

CHAPTER 5

Monique ran all the way back to the station, and then had to wait for the bus. She sat on one of the green benches in the shade of the building. The man who always fed the pigeons had assumed his usual position in the middle of the street. The pigeons had begun to flock around him and one of the birds fluttered up and perched on his shoulder. The man smiled ecstatically and held up his hand so that the bird could eat from it. Two young girls were standing by the door giggling and whispering behind their hands to each other. Silly little babies, Monique thought crossly and looked away. An old woman carrying a shopping basket and moving very slowly approached the far end of the bench. She sat down, placed the basket beside her, and, folding her hands on her lap very carefully and precisely, she waited, gazing silently into space.

Monique was out of breath and she knew it was not just from running. She had a pain in her side, and she could feel the sweat seeping out of her scalp into her hair and down onto her forehead. It trickled from the skin on the back of her neck all the way to her waist where it was rapidly being absorbed by the elastic in her panties. This, Monique knew from experience, meant the end of the elastic. Her skin felt very wet under her arms and behind her knees. Her thick hair--pinned away from her face--had come loose, and now fell in heavy waves over her forehead and over her ears. She reached behind her with both hands and pushed the hair away from her neck, holding it out from the damp skin. Then she

stretched her head back until she felt the skin on the front of her neck tighten and become smooth. She kept that position for a minute, her back straight against the hard back of the bench, her legs extended in front of her, loosely, a little apart. Then someone called her name. The voice was familiar.

Monique turned her head, without moving her body, and saw Ninette Bertholdi. She felt slightly embarrassed, although she knew she had no reason to be. Everyone said that Ninette had been in love with Jean when they were growing up together, and that he had returned the sentiment by taking advantage of her and then leaving her for Monique. But that was just talk.

"Thinking great thoughts?" Ninette asked as she sat down beside her. She had a casual friendly manner which Monique had always liked, and she could not understand why the village people said Ninette had become a snob since her father had been elected mayor, and why they resented the fact that she had gone to Nice to finish her studies in the lyc^ée.

She forced a smile. "I was so busy trying to make myself comfortable that I just didn't think about anything," she said.

Ninette laughed. "But it's true," Monique protested, half-seriously. Then she looked at Ninette and thought: She's really quite attractive. And then she remembered all the rumors and how people had criticized M. Bertholdi for giving Jean board and lodging in exchange for work, especially since he had an only daughter and no wife to "keep an eye on the children". They were both thirteen at the time and Jean lived with the Bertholdis until he was eighteen.

Aloud, she said, "I don't want to think, and I don't want to feel either... except physical things like the heat, things like that."

Ninette looked a little puzzled but was silent. The bus had just arrived, and they stood up waiting for the people to get off.

Monique remembered how jealous she had been when she was first married. She had nagged him and nagged him and he had denied everything, and now she thought that she didn't feel jealous in the same way any more. After all, most men did... and if there was only Ninette... but then, of course, there had been Paris in between. Anyway, she knew for a fact that men didn't respect that kind of girl, and so surely he had stopped loving her afterwards, if he ever had before. He couldn't possibly love her now, unless perhaps they hadn't been lovers. But they had been seen in the fields.... at least, Micheline Canotte said she had seen them, and so surely now everything was past and dead and buried, and so what if they had once been lovers. No. Monique told herself that she was jealous of Ninette because she had shared with Jean "the universal experience of growing up"--Monique had liked the sound of that phrase when she had read it in a novel a few months ago--. Ninette had lived with him from day to day, she had watched him grow, and Monique couldn't help feeling that if she had been there then, she would understand him better now. She had never agreed with those who believed in the "what you don't know won't hurt you" idea, and she was oh so sure that if she had really known Jean, been a part of him as it were, when he was growing up, there would not have been all this unpleasantness, these futile

rationalizations, this terrible disillusionment.

She jumped onto the first of the three steep steps, with Ninette close behind her. "You know," she said, her gaze wandering over the bus, "if you were always busy thinking about your body," she moved towards the rear. "This is all right," she said, choosing a seat by an open window. She smoothed her skirt under her thighs and sat down.

"Go on," Ninette said, sitting down beside her, and crossing one leg over the other.

How can she stand to sit with her legs crossed in this heat, Monique thought, shaking out her skirt where it had folded over her knees. "Well," she said, "if you spent all your time thinking about how to make yourself comfortable; you know, if you concentrated very hard on every little movement of your body, almost on every muscle," she smiled at the absurdity of what she was saying, and at the same time wondered why she was saying it, "then you wouldn't have much time to think about other things, would you?"

"No, you certainly wouldn't," Ninette said laughing, "since there are hundreds of muscles involved in each step you take. But who would want to be deprived of the pleasure of anticipation, or of the remembrances of past happiness?"

"No one, I suppose," Monique said, "but thinking can help to make you unhappy sometimes too." She felt Ninette's eyes on her and raised hers to meet them.

Ninette had grayish-blue eyes -- "speaking eyes", the people in the village called them. M. Bertholdi said that since Ninette had been slower

to talk than most children, she had given this extra duty to her eyes; and they had learned to do their job so well that when the words finally came, they seemed unnecessary.

"No, I certainly can't deny it," she said. "Am I supposed to assume from all this that you're so unhappy you can't bear to think about anything except the most elemental physical sensations?"

Monique resented the tone of that question. She had a right to be as unhappy as she pleased and, what's more, she had good reason to be. Why was it that everyone treated her like a child? First her mother, then Jean, and now Ninette, who was only two years her senior.

Then Ninette said quite suddenly: "I think you're very fortunate to be married to someone like Jean."

It seemed to Monique that Ninette had just made a full confession of love. Who in the whole world, at least who in all of La Colle would have said that to her except someone who really loved Jean? She felt humiliated and ashamed. Here was this girl flaunting their love in her face and expecting her to smile sweetly and say: yes, of course, I'm deliriously happy to be married to someone like Jean; he's the most unselfish and considerate of men, and I have every reason to believe that you were responsible for his initiation into the mysteries of love, for which I thank you most humbly and deeply; there is nothing that would have displeased me more than to have a muddling virginal creature breathing all over me, so, really, I owe you an unlimited debt for bequeathing to me a full-grown, full-blown, full-knowing and full-loving MAN.

"I hate him," she said.

"Oh, Monique, you know you don't!"

If there was anything that Monique disliked, it was to be told what she did or didn't know, especially since, in this case, Ninette was right. "But I do," she said; "don't you know what he's been doing since we've been married?"

Ninette sat silently for a while, and then she said, "Yes".

Just like that, Monique thought. I suppose she wouldn't care if Jean killed her father; and then she thought, that's mean of me to think that.

"We're almost there," Ninette said. "Let's talk about this a little, shall we? Would you like to?"

Well, why not, Monique thought, what have I got to lose? Besides, the idea of talking to Jean's former mistress held a morbid fascination for her. She said yes, she'd love to, and why didn't Ninette come home with her for a cup of coffee.

They got off at the square and walked across the street to her house. She had forgotten to open the shutters before she left, and they seemed now to be shutting her out.

Monique opened her pocketbook and groped around in it for her key, then she peered into its depths. She could neither see it nor feel it. She stamped her foot in exasperation. "It's got to be here somewhere," she said. Ninette looked sympathetic and suggested that it might be in the pocket of her skirt. But it was not. So Monique emptied her bag

onto the sidewalk.

They both got down on their knees. Monique was the sort of person who carries a great many things in her bag. She had been told that if you stuffed a leather pocketbook (and this was a leather pocketbook) it would keep its shape better. That is, if you didn't over-stuff it.

Monique picked up five pencils--so that's where they were, she said to herself--, two erasers, a lipstick case without any top to it, a gold compact that had grown green with the years, some wrinkled scraps of paper, two sticky pieces of hard candy which they divided between them, a sheet of newspaper that had been used to wrap a sandwich in about five days ago, an open pack of cigarettes, and some bread crumbs.

"Cigarettes?" Ninette questioned.

"Oh," Monique reached for them hastily, "they're some of Jean's he gave me to keep." She stuffed the pack into the bottom of her bag hurriedly, almost furtively, as though it were a very personal thing that no one else should see.

"Well, I'm sorry," she said. "I guess I'll have to sit on the doorstep until Jean gets back."

"Oh, don't do that," Ninette said. "The café's just across the street." She held her hand out to Monique as though not to touch her but to say "Come with me", and she smiled just a little.

Monique needed no further encouragement. She had thoroughly convinced herself now that Ninette and Jean had been lovers; it seemed ridiculous to think differently. And of course the only reason why

Ninette wasn't yet married was that no self-respecting man would have her, knowing what her past had been like. Monique was feeling happily self-righteous, so much so that she almost forgot about the heat. She smiled sweetly at Ninette and followed her to the café.

The waiter took their order almost immediately. At this hour of the morning there were only three other customers. Monique looked around her very carefully to gain time, then she opened her mouth to speak. At the same moment, Ninette started to say something. Monique laughed self-consciously.

"Go on," she said.

"Oh no, you go on," Ninette said politely.

Monique had been about to ask Ninette whether she often came to the café, but after the embarrassing simultaneous attempt to talk, it seemed to her too trite a remark to make. When Ninette said "Go on" like that, it suggested that she was prepared to hear an important statement or a really interesting question.

So she said: "Of course, I don't really hate my husband. But just the same, I don't think I can pat him on the back for what he's doing to my brother, don't you agree?"

Ninette said, "I understand that you're in a difficult situation. Have you been able to find out why he's trying so hard to compete with Marcel?"

"Some silly thing about making more money so we can go to Paris," Monique said, shrugging her shoulders.

The waiter brought their coffee and set it down carefully on the table.

When he had gone, Ninette said: "Doesn't that strike you as a rather poor reason?"

"Well, what other reason could there be?" Monique asked, not wanting to admit that she had lain awake nights wondering whether Jean was telling her the truth.

"There are many ways he could have earned some extra money, Monique, and you know it."

For Monique, these words were the voiced expression of all the half-felt doubts that she had been suppressing since her marriage. But these too she could not confess.

"I don't think that jobs are so easy to find in Nice or even in Marseille," she said. "And besides, this is the only kind of work he really knows, and he would never have been able to do the same thing in another village. People don't trust strangers."

"All right," Ninette said firmly. "For the sake of the argument, I'll concede that point. But, and this is the crux of the matter, should reasons of expediency be considered above moral values? Answer that one for me."

Monique looked at her aghast. Expediency and moral values.... What could she say now?

"Well, that's precisely what's troubling me, of course," she replied calmly. "But you were the one who seemed surprised when I said I hated

Jean." Now I've got her, she thought.

Ninette shook her head. "You mistake me, Monique. I am not making a judgment. In fact, I'm doing just the opposite. I'm saying that Jean is basically too fine a person to allow his own self-interest to become the most important thing in life. So there must be another reason."

"What is it?" Monique felt like a rubber band that was about to break.

"I don't know," Ninette said.

Thank God, Monique thought, relaxing. At least she doesn't know any more than I do.

Ninette poured some hot milk into her coffee. "I do know," she said slowly, "that he disliked almost everybody he ever met at first sight. Then, maybe later, he would change his mind about one or two people. I think he changed his mind about my father and, eventually," Ninette smiled, "about me."

Monique thought, you cat, and then remembered that Jean would not tell her where he had been yesterday. She felt her face grow hot.

Ninette, however, seemed not to notice the effect of her remark. "I guess he's just suspicious by nature," she said. "He always used to think that people were being nice to him because they felt sorry for him. Those were the ones he really hated. But I don't see how your brother would fit into that category, so it must be something else. Whatever the reason, whether real or imaginary, I'm sure it's based on some deep resentment."

"That's silly," Monique frowned. "Marcel has never done anything to provoke Jean."

Ninette smiled. "How do we know?" She drained her cup and put it back in the saucer. "It's probably something too simple for us to see because we're always trying to complicate matters. The truth is almost always absurdly simple, don't you think?"

Monique wanted to say that it definitely was not; and she also wanted to say how much she hated people who threw their scraps of wisdom at you and expected you to scramble for them as though they were solid gold nuggets.

But she said: "I really don't know," thinking how superior Ninette must be feeling. And then she called the waiter and insisted on paying for the coffee. She'd be damned if she was going to let Ninette get away with that too. After she had laid the tip very carefully under the saucer, she pushed her chair away from the table and stood up.

"I'm sure Jean will be back in a minute," she said.

Ninette got up very slowly and reached for her pocketbook on the other chair.

"Oh, there he is now!" Monique exclaimed as she saw the truck turning into the square. They started to walk towards it.

"You know something," Ninette said, "people have always told me I had 'speaking eyes' as though I were unique, but you do too. Have I said anything to make you angry?"

"No, of course not. I'm just in a bad mood today." Monique forced

a smile.

"Well, don't do anything rash because of it," Ninette said. "Everything will straighten out in the end, you'll see."

Oh, I'll see, will I, Monique said to herself.

"And remember," Ninette went on, "whatever he may do, he's really quite a wonderful person."

Oh, he is, is he, Monique thought. Of course you think so, wouldn't you? And why did Jean have to see us together!

Jean parked the truck and jumped out. He stared at Monique and Ninette for a long long moment in complete silent astonishment.

That does it, Monique thought, He'd never look at us like that if Ninette were just another girl.

Then he recovered and said hello in his normal voice.

Ninette said hello very softly, in just the way Monique imagined a woman would speak to her lover, present or past. Then, thanking her for the coffee and the enjoyable conversation, she said, "Remember, Monique, what I told you," and, smiling mysteriously, she walked off.

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CHAPTER 6

Jean stared after her until she disappeared around the corner, then he turned expectantly to Monique. But she wasn't giving anything away.

"I left my key in the house," she said.

He opened the door and motioned for her to go in. They went up the stairs and entered the living-room in silence. Then they stood in the middle of the floor, about five paces apart, and stared silently at each other.

I will not be the first to speak, Monique thought. She would wait for him to make a rash statement which she would pounce on and tear into shreds.

He said: "Where are those cigarettes I gave you the other day?"

Disappointed, she gave him her purse.

He opened it and pulled out the half-opened pack. As he tilted it towards him to feed a Gauloise to his lips, she saw him close one eye and look into it.

"Your key," he said, holding the package upside down in his hand.

"Well!" Monique said slowly.

"Well what?" Jean asked, tossing the key to her.

"I emptied everything in my purse onto the sidewalk and I couldn't find it," she said, catching it and holding it in her hands.

Jean puffed impatiently on his cigarette. "Obviously you couldn't find it if it was hidden in the pack of Gauloises. I don't see what you're

ooing and aahing about."

"You wouldn't!" Monique said, looking down at the key.

Jean shrugged his shoulders and, bringing out the Nice-Matin from his coat pocket, he sat down on the sofa and began to read.

"You don't care about what happened this morning, do you?" Monique said, irritated beyond measure. "You don't even know whether I went to the market."

Jean looked at her. "You said you were going, so I suppose you did. What do you want me to do, go down on my knees and beg your forgiveness?"

Monique tore the paper out of his hands.

"What's come over you?" Jean asked, getting up and trying to get back the paper.

She moved away. At this moment, she could not understand why she had ever loved him. "Don't touch me," she said. "Don't you dare come near me."

"Oh, Monique, for heaven's sake!"

"Don't!" she said, running into the bedroom and locking the door.

She pulled her suitcase out from under the bed and opened a dresser drawer.

"Monique!" The doorknob turned uselessly.

"Monique! What are you doing in there?"

Monique did not bother to answer. She emptied the drawers on the floor and gathered brassieres, blouses, slips and panties in her arms.

"Let me in, Monique, don't be silly!" Jean said firmly. The knob turned again.

"I won't, I won't," Monique shouted back. "I despise you, don't you understand? I can't stand the sight of you. Go away!"

She stumbled over the drawers on the floor and groped in the clothes cupboard for her skirts and dresses. She piled them into the suitcase and closed the lid over them, her trembling hands fumbling with the brass catches. Then she sat down on the bed. She had never felt so miserable in her whole life. At the moment, she knew only one thing, and that was that she must leave Jean. She got up and straightened her clothes, then she opened the door.

Jean was standing just on the other side.

"I'm going," she announced, and turned back to fetch her suitcase.

"Going?" he echoed unbelievably. Then he saw the empty drawers and the bag. "Oh no," he said, "this is the last straw."

He walked over just as she was picking up the suitcase and sat down on it.

"Get off!" Monique shouted, tugging at the handle which stuck out between his legs.

"I will not get off until you tell me where you're going," Jean said. "I've the right to know that much at least."

Monique said nothing and continued to tug hopelessly at the handle.

"You're wasting your energy, dear," he said, closing his legs around her arms.

Monique could feel herself growing angry again. "Let me go," she gasped.

"Not until I get an answer to my question. Are you going to your mother's?"

Monique hadn't actually thought about where she was going. She didn't really want to go to her mother's. She just wanted to get away from both of them. "Yes," she said. "Now will you let me go?"

"Does your leaving me have anything to do with Ninette? Does it?" Jean reached down and shook her by the shoulders.

"Stop it!" she shouted. "Take your hands off me!"

"Answer my question!"

"Why should it have anything to do with Ninette?" Monique blurted furiously.

Jean relaxed his grip on her shoulders. "What were you doing talking to her?"

Monique was almost in tears. "I met her waiting for the bus in Nice, now are you satisfied?"

"Did you talk about me?"

"That would have been a waste of time!" She threw the words full in his face.

He said: "Then what did she mean when she told you to remember what she'd said?"

"I don't know, I don't remember; it was quite insignificant."

Jean raised his eyebrow. "Was it really?"

Monique could feel herself blush. "Yes," she said.

Jean opened his legs; she got up quickly. Then he picked up the suitcase and carried it to the door. "Can I drive you?" he asked.

"No," Monique said hurriedly.

"It's quite a long way carrying this heavy suitcase," he said.

"I can manage. Please give it to me," she said, reaching for it.

"Your mother, of course, will be delighted to see you," he said bitterly, as she took the bag. "I hope your return to the fold will be celebrated with a bottle of Noilly Prat. I seem to remember that you have a particular weakness for it."

Monique wanted to slap him, but she didn't. She walked to the top of the stairs and turned to face him.

"I'm glad I had a chance to talk to Ninette this morning," she said. "Now I know where you went yesterday afternoon. You went to meet her. That's why you wouldn't tell me...." her voice trembled, "and on our anniversary too."

She had turned her head away so that she was looking a little to the right of him, but she could still see the incredulous expression on his face. For a moment, she wanted so much to believe in it, to believe that what she had just said was completely untrue, but she wouldn't let herself.

Jean tried to say something. Perhaps he'd explain now, maybe she should... but no, it was too late, he'd had his chance.

She interrupted him. "Please," she said. "It's no use. And there was the key in my bag the whole time. Why didn't it fall out of the pack of cigarettes, why didn't I see it in there when Ninette handed the pack to me? My not finding it was a sign," she said.

Jean exclaimed: "Oh, Monique, how could you!" and shook his head.

"Well, it was," she said. "I'm sure it meant that I wasn't supposed to enter this house of my own free will, now, or perhaps ever again. You think that's being superstitious and primitive I know, but I believe in signs.

She reached into the pocket of her skirt and brought out the key.

"Here it is," she said. "It's yours now, and you can do what you will with it.

She threw it at him and it hit the floor with a sharp click.

Then she said, feeling very wicked, and glorying in her wickedness: "You can give it to Ninette, if you like."

"I don't want it," he said firmly.

"Neither do I," she said.

There was a moment of embarrassed silence, then she picked up her suitcase and went downstairs as fast as she could. When she got to the bottom, she stopped and listened. She did not hear the door shut. Either he was still standing on the landing, or he had gone inside and left the door open. Her feet moved to the front door. Her right hand twisted the knob. The door opened. She turned once and looked at the staircase, then she went out into the street.

PART II

CHAPTER 7

Jean's first feeling was one of anger; sharp, bitter, unreasonable anger. It was all he could do to stop himself from running out into the street and bringing Monique back struggling in his arms. He would have liked to have laid her across his knees and spanked her, as one does a small child. He flung open the living-room door, then kicked it shut behind him. He would get back at her for leaving him like this--going to her mother's! He could just see the smug expression on Marcel's face when he went to market tomorrow morning. He would show them!

He sat down by the dinner table and stared helplessly at the walls. The damned room was littered with bric-a-brac. Plates, supposed to have been handmade in China but really machine-made in France, hung forlornly on the walls; on the tables, monstrous semi-nude figures bearing light bulbs in their hands, sat or stood beside massive glass vases decorated with swirls and curlicues; and, in the corner near the window, a whatnot, laden with ornamental porcelain figurines, balanced itself precariously on its slender legs.

"Not another day," Jean said very loudly, "not another day will I put up with this atrocious junk." He had glared at the stuff for a year. Now that Monique had gone, it was going too.

There were six shelves on the whatnot. He started with the top one. He picked up two shepherds and a shepherdess dressed, according to their custom, in blue, pink and gold, and carried them carefully to the window,

where he laid them gently on the sill. He pushed out the shutters as far as they would go, and opened the panes a little wider. Then, holding each figurine between the thumb and forefinger of his right hand, he carefully dropped them, one by one, onto the sidewalk below. He repeated this procedure with the five remaining shelves.

Then he turned his attention to the tables. The bulky lamps and vases could not be handled so delicately. He carried each one in both hands across the room to the window and, lifting it high above his head, threw it down with all his force. As each object landed with a crash on the pavement, his satisfaction increased; by the time he got to the "Chinese" plates, he was feeling almost joyful. He made a little pile of them in each hand and, balancing them like a waiter, shuffled to the window where he stood poised for a moment, as though he were about to do a magician's act. Then he tipped his wrists a little, so that the plates could tumble easily out of his hands. They made the biggest noise.

He leaned halfway out of the window to take a good look at the things, and was surprised to see, standing at a respectful distance, a small group of men and women. The sight of these patiently waiting and obviously interested people delighted him beyond all measure and, as he gazed at the shattered china in the street, he was filled with a magnificent sense of power.

He had just gone into the kitchen to get their best china when he heard, from around the bend, the persistent toot of a horn. He looked out of the window. The people were making way for a truck as it came

cautiously down the street. It stopped just under the bedroom window. Jean peered down at it and recognized Marcel's face behind the windshield.

He stared at it for a moment. Then he had a brilliant idea. In fact, it was so brilliant that it almost overwhelmed him. He strode into the bedroom, pulled the bedspread off the bed and threw it over his shoulder; then he marched to the window, got up on a chair, unscrewed the curtain rod, slipped the curtains off it, got down from the chair, jerked the red bows from the nail onto which they were hooked, and took up his position by the open window. He had timed it perfectly, for at this moment Marcel emerged from the truck. He had a puzzled frown on his face. It was all that Jean could do to keep himself from laughing out loud. Then Marcel bent down to examine some pieces of china at his feet.

"Now!" Jean said and, taking careful aim, he dropped both curtains, then the bedspread and the bows on top of the unsuspecting figure. Shouts and cries of protest came from the crowd as Marcel, unbalanced by the heavy weight of the material, toppled to the sidewalk, struggling to free himself from the long yards of bright yellow cotton.

Jean grinned happily and closed the shutters in both rooms. Then he ran downstairs and bolted the front door. He was too tired to fight. And, besides, a fight would disrupt his present wonderfully gay mood. He had been in such a mood on just one previous occasion in his life, when he had been dead drunk. Still grinning slyly to himself, he tottered up the stairs and into the bedroom, laid down on the bed, and fell sound asleep.

CHAPTER 8

It seemed to Monique, as she thought about it afterwards, that she had not at any moment actually decided to go to the convent. It had been, rather, a feeling which had grown in her until she was quite certain that there in the convent, so far removed from ordinary life, she would find an answer to her problems. She had been walking to her mother's, and she had seen it in the distance--the low gray building on top of the hill near St. Paul--and she had immediately thought of Mother Alicia.

Mother Alicia had been her idol at school. She was a tiny woman. Everything about her was small: her nose, her mouth, her hands; she even had a rather thin high-pitched voice; only her almond-shaped eyes were large, and seemed all the more impressive in contrast with her other features. It was this smallness which had first attracted Monique to her; she herself was such an elephant, and she would have liked so much to be delicate and fragile like Mother Alicia. But Mother Alicia had also been kinder and more gentle than her other teachers. She always tried to understand why you had cheated in an examination before she punished you for doing it; then she talked you out of doing it again. It had seemed to Monique that this was the kind of approach she needed now, gentle but firm and persuasive.

Monique told her story to Mother Alicia, bit by bit, hour by hour, until there was nothing more she could say.

They were walking in one of the cloistered gardens early the next afternoon. The laurel flowers were blossoming in mauves and pinks and the air was heavy with the cloying odor of jasmine. There was no human sounds. In the stillness, Monique could hear the steady drone of the honey bees.

She reached out and plucked off some of the jasmine that climbed the wall. "I'd like to make myself a jasmine necklace," she said, half to herself. Then she turned to the nun: "Could I borrow some thread from you?" she asked.

"To make a necklace of those flowers?"

Monique nodded, holding the jasmine up to her face.

Mother Alicia smiled at her. "My dear, you know such things aren't encouraged here. But come," she added, "Let me put this flower in your hair; you can wear it outdoors."

Monique bent her head. Mother Alicia had to stand on tiptoe to arrange the flower. "Perhaps you'd better do it," she said, laughing apologetically.

Monique fastened the stem between the teeth of her tortoise-shell comb. Then she said: "I would just love to take off my shoes and lie on the grass on my stomach."

Mother Alicia smiled again. "Not just here," she said, and led her to a corner of the garden sheltered from the rest by two beds of tall rosebushes. "All right," she said, and sat down on the hard-wood bench. "If I had my scissors with me, I would cut a rose for you."

Monique sat down on the grass and gazed at the roses. They were all a soft pinkish-red color. She could smell them from here. She lay down on her stomach then and pulled a blade of grass from the earth; she put half of it in her mouth and chewed on it. A bee buzzed noisily about her head. She folded her arms in front of her and hid her face in the crook of her elbow.

Then Mother Alicia said: "Monique, there's something that's been on my mind all day, and I must ask you about it even though it may embarrass you."

Monique raised her head and looked at her inquiringly. What could it be?

"Monique, I'm wondering why you haven't yet had a baby."

She felt her face grow red.

"Most girls who've been married a year either have had a child, or at least are expecting one."

"I know," Monique said quietly, and then decided that she had better tell the truth. "Jean didn't want me to have one," she said.

"Why not?" Mother Alicia asked.

"Because he didn't want to have to worry about a baby when we were in Paris. And if I had to work, who would take care of the child?"

"Do you want one?"

"Yes," Monique admitted.

"Doesn't he care about your feelings at all? Is everything all right just as long as it suits him?"

Monique did not know what to say.

Mother Alicia sighed. "This is all very troubling." She clasped her white blue-veined hands over the folds of her black gown. Then she said a little stiffly: "Have you broken the laws of the Church concerning such matters?"

Monique guessed that she was embarrassed at having to ask such a question.

"Yes," she said.

There was a long silence.

Monique looked away from Mother Alicia and kept her eyes fixed on the roses.

"Hasn't this disturbed you at all?" There was a note of disappointment in Mother Alicia's voice.

"At the beginning it did," Monique said. "Then I got used to it."

"I suppose one can get used to anything after a while," the nun said.

"But what could I have done?" Monique raised herself onto her elbows.

Mother Alicia shook her head. "You've had your problems, haven't you, Monique..."

"I knew you'd understand," Monique said.

She smiled. "I wish I knew what to say, or how to help you. Theoretically, of course, you have sinned, but..." She paused, then frowning: "I wish I had known Jean better when he was here. He was quite docile as a baby, I remember that. And then he changed.... When he had passed his twelfth birthday, we decided we couldn't handle him any longer.

And, besides, we knew he needed to get away from all these women." She smiled. Then she said: "I wish he hadn't turned against the Church."

"Yes, that worries me too," Monique agreed.

"Poor child--is there anything that doesn't?"

Monique rolled over onto her back, and shielded her eyes from the sun. "No," she said. "Everything seems to lately. But," she added, "how do you suppose I could still love him after all that?"

"And you do, don't you?"

"I didn't think so yesterday."

"But today is different?"

"Infinitely...."

They both laughed a little.

"You know, I believe he really needs you but doesn't know it," Mother Alicia said thoughtfully. "Why don't you try blackmailing him?"

"What do you mean?"

"Hide yourself away from him for a few days... Make him come out and get you, then you'll probably be able to impose on him any condition you please."

Monique looked at her uncertainly. Surely this was not the way to behave.

Mother Alicia seemed immediately to understand her. "I know it sounds like an awful thing to do but, actually, wouldn't you do it anyway simply out of pique? Would you run right back to him tomorrow?"

"No... I suppose not," Monique said.

"So--" Mother Alicia smiled. "You're actually doing him a good turn by helping him to realize how much his marriage really does mean to him."

Monique interrupted her. "And if he doesn't realize it?"

"Well, you'll have done your best, won't you?"

Monique sat up and crossed her legs turkish style under her full skirt. "I suppose I will have to go to my mother's then."

"Oh, of course. This is neutral ground, but once you go there your people will have won the battle--or so it will seem to him."

"Can I think this over for a while?" Monique asked, still uncertain.

"My dear, this is just a suggestion. You don't have to follow it!"

Mother Alicia got up from her seat.

"I mean," Monique tried to say it more clearly. "Can I stay here for a day or two?"

"Do you want to?" She seemed surprised.

"Yes," Monique said.

"Don't you mind being closed in behind these walls, sleeping on a hard cot in a narrow cell, getting up so early every morning, eating in silence.... You don't mind any of these things?"

"Not for a little while," Monique said. "But you don't mind," and you're so young and pretty, Monique thought, "so why should you feel that it must be so hard for me?"

"Well...." Mother Alicia hesitated. "It's my life, you see. I've chosen to live it this way."

"And I'm choosing it for a few days," Monique said, getting up from the grass.

They laughed and walked back together to the gray building.

Monique's last night in the convent was a disturbing one for her. It was filled with strange unremembered dreams, and once she woke up feeling painfully hot and uncomfortable. This place really is getting on my nerves, she thought.

She got up, put on her dressing gown and went to the bathroom. She turned on the cold water faucet and, bending her face up underneath it, she let the stream of water dribble into her mouth. She then filled the washbasin and dunked her face into the water and splashed some of it onto her neck and onto her breasts. She did not bother to dry herself. When she went back to her room, she took off the clammy nightgown and lay down on the bed. She felt better now. I must go to mother's tomorrow, she thought, before she fell asleep.

She was in a small shop in Nice buying a cardigan which she did not need. She was the only customer in the shop but the salesgirl refused to pay any attention to her at all, even though she had already picked out the cardigan which she wanted to take. She shouted at the girl and then shook her by the arm, but the girl would not look at her. Then suddenly a group of women swarmed into the shop, all talking excitedly, and one of them took the sweater right out of her hands and shouted at the

salesgirl that this was the one she wanted. The salesgirl took it and began to wrap it up. "But I had it first!" Monique cried. Nobody looked at her. It was as though she were not there. Then all the women left the shop, having taken all the prettiest sweaters. Now the salesgirl saw Monique, but there was nothing left that Monique wanted. She tried to leave the shop, but the salesgirl wouldn't let her. She kept pulling out horrible old cardigans with patches at the elbows; holding them up to Monique, she would say: "They're so beautiful, they would suit you so well." And all the time Monique knew that she must leave the shop because Jean was waiting for her at the corner and she was already late, but the salesgirl kept pulling her away from the door, and something inside her kept telling her that since she had come to buy a cardigan, she must not leave the shop without it. And so, at the bottom of an enormous disordered pile, she found an old green thing with bluish stains all over it, and she tried to put it on. But the sleeves were too tight and she couldn't get her arms through them. She began to get panicky now, because she knew Jean was waiting and she must go. But the salesgirl said: "I'll see if I have a smaller size." "Yes," Monique said, "at least two sizes smaller, but hurry please." And she waited and she waited and she waited. And after what seemed like hours the salesgirl came back. "What you see here is all we have in the shop," she said. Monique ran out into the street. There at the corner was the green truck surrounded by people. The door was open and Jean was talking to them, but the minute he saw Monique he closed the door and drove off.

She called him frantically, and then she saw Marcel standing in the middle of the street where the truck had been. He was selling lottery tickets and shouting to everyone to buy a chance, but the people walked by without noticing him. And as she came nearer she saw that he was crying, and suddenly he threw all the white tickets up in the air and they began to fall very slowly and silently, making a white carpet on the road. "I'm sorry I'm late," she said, and she felt the lottery tickets falling on her hair and on her face like snow.

CHAPTER 9

Jean woke late on Friday, feeling quite hungry. He had not planned to go to the market that morning, since he had been too tired and upset to collect any fruit the day before. He went into the kitchen to get some bread and cheese, and ate it standing in his pajamas, wishing that he had some good hot coffee to drink with it. He took down the green paper bag from the shelf and stared at the black powdery stuff inside. He had no idea what to do with it. I guess I'll just have to go to the café, he thought, knowing that the whole village would be talking about Monique and him; by now everyone probably knew he hadn't been to the market this morning. But there was nothing he could do. Lord knows he would have to face them sometime. He dressed hurriedly and went out.

He had not taken three steps away from his house before he became aware of a bustling activity. It was just the ordinary activity of everyday life, but, in a mere twenty-four hours, Jean had managed to cut himself off from it, to shut himself into his own uncertain world. It was almost with a sense of surprise that he noticed people waiting for the bus, crossing the square, entering the tobacco shop, the bakery, the small shoe store. What are they doing there, he asked himself. Today is no ordinary day, today is different. And here they are, the usual people doing the usual things. Why?

He crossed the street to the café. He could distinguish the vague shapes of people sitting in the coolest, shadiest part, back under the

awning, away from the glare of the sun. He sat down at a table on the edge of the sidewalk, immediately conscious of whispered and low-voiced exchanges in the background.

Mustn't look at them, he thought. Must pretend I don't know they exist. He reached down for the paper-back book which protruded a little from the left pocket of his trousers. He propped it up against a siphon bottle on the table, and began to read.

"Kafka, eh?" a girl's voice said.

He looked up to see Ninette standing beside him. "I was thinking about coming over to see you today," he said, pulling out a chair for her.

She sat down. "For heaven's sake!" she said. "This is something new! Father will be delighted. He's been asking about you for many months. You know you're just like a son to him."

"Oh, pooh," Jean said.

"You are, so help me!"

"Listen, I said I was coming to see you, not your father, and I'm not doing it for fun. I have a reason," Jean said, bothered by her affected way of speaking.

"Don't look so stern and pompous, Jean," she said. "It doesn't suit you."

The waiter came for their order.

"What do you want?" Jean asked her.

Ninette hesitated, then she said: "Nothing for the moment," and dismissed the waiter.

"Well, of all the" Jean tried to call him back.

Ninette laid her hand on his arm. "Jean, don't you feel a hundred eyes are upon us?" she asked in a confidential tone.

"Yes," he said dubiously.

"Well then, why don't you come home with me and I'll fix you some coffee. And then you can stay for lunch. I'm serious, and Father would really love to see you." She said all this anxiously, still holding his arm. "Please do," she added.

"What do you suppose people will say when we walk off together?" he asked.

"Who cares?" Ninette said. "I just can't stand to have them staring at us while we're trying to talk. And I gather you have something important to say to me?"

Jean felt a little pacified. Perhaps it was the prospect of a good lunch--the Bertholdis ate well. "Oh, it isn't that important," he said. "But I'll come with you."

The mayor's house was halfway between La Colle and St. Paul, and Jean suggested that they drive in his truck.

"I hear you didn't go to the market today," Ninette said, as he started the engine.

"No, I didn't," he answered abruptly. He refused to say anything more about it, and kept his eyes fixed on the climbing road.

"You can see the convent awfully well from here," she said rather pointedly.

"Oh," he said politely, not bothering to look.

Then still more pointedly, she said: "You don't seem to be very concerned about where Monique is."

Jean looked at her to see if she was serious. She was. Then he looked at the gray square building on the hill. "You mean...?" he asked.

"Apparently everyone knows but you," she said, half-smiling at his consternation.

Jean swerved off the road into the dirt driveway and tooted his horn at the chickens. Ninette made noises at them out of the window.

"It's safe," she said finally.

He drove up to the back of the house and stopped.

"Are you sure about Monique?" he asked, still unbelieving.

Ninette nodded.

"What a crazy thing to do," he said half to himself, "and yet it's just like her."

The mayor's house was a low, box-like structure. Like most of the other fairly prosperous homes in the village, it was made of stucco, and painted a yellowish beige; unlike most of them, it had both a front and a back door. Jean stared up at the green shuttered windows.

"Come on," Ninette said impatiently.

He followed her inside.

Mme. Gr^âce, the cook and housekeeper, was in the kitchen when they came in. She greeted him with little cries of pleasure. He felt embarrassed, but tried to be nice. I must remember that she still thinks of me as a

very young boy, he thought.

Ninette told her he would be staying for lunch and asked her to fix some coffee. Then she led him into the parlor.

"It hasn't changed much," Jean said, looking around him.

"Not in three generations," Ninette laughed.

He was about to sit down on the horsehair sofa, the place he used to favor when he was a boy, but she beckoned him over to one of the chintz-covered easy chairs. "Here," she said, "you've got a nice big ashtray on this table; it's the only one in the house."

"I knew M. Bertholdi didn't smoke, but I felt sure you would have picked up the habit by now," Jean said.

Ninette shrugged her shoulders. "I tried it but it didn't appeal to me."

She sat on the sofa, took off her shoes, and curled her legs up under her.

Jean smiled, remembering how many times she had been scolded for putting her feet on the chairs.

She said, a little embarrassed: "What amuses you?"

He pointed to her feet. "You're more careful now," he said, still laughing.

"Oh," She drew her skirt more tightly around them. "One learns," she said. "Or rather, one is made to learn."

Jean nodded absent-mindedly. He was thinking of the many times in the past year, especially when he and Monique had quarreled, when

he had asked himself why he had never fallen in love with Ninette. Now he wondered about it again as he watched her sitting there, looking as slender and unformed as a child, with an expression of serious thoughtfulness on her face.

"What's troubling you?" she asked, breaking the silence with her low-pitched voice. It was a voice that suggested good breeding and an absolute sense of propriety.

"A great many things." He paused, thinking about Monique alone in the convent. It was such a senseless thing to do. What did she expect to find there? He suddenly realized that he was more worried about her than he cared to admit, even to himself.

As if in answer to his thoughts, Ninette said: "What'll you do if she finally decides to run home to her mother?"

Jean was quite surprised by her perceptiveness. "You mean indefinitely?" he asked, lighting a cigarette.

"It's in the cards, don't you think?" she said, very sure of herself.

Mme. Gr[^]ace lumbered heavily into the room holding a silver tray at arm's length from her capacious bosom. She smiled happily at Jean. "Where shall I put it?" she asked.

How strange that she should seem so fond of me, Jean thought.

"Oh, anywhere," Ninette said vaguely.

The old woman walked slowly over to Jean's chair, moved the big glass ashtray, and put the tray on the table beside him. She placed the cups neatly on their saucers.

"I'll pour," Ninette said quickly and motioned for her to go.

When Mme. Grace had left the room, Ninette got up without putting on her shoes, and walked to the window.

"It's dark in here, don't you think?" she asked, flinging the shutters wide.

"That's no way to keep the house cool," Jean said half-smiling.

"I don't care about the heat," Ninette said, walking towards him.

"I like the sunshine, it makes me feel good." She poured the coffee and milk slowly, filling each cup to the brim.

"How do you expect me to pick it up without spilling it all over me?" Jean inquired in a playful way.

"Do like this," Ninette said. Getting down on her knees, she brought her lips to the cup.

Jean laughed and slowly lowered his face to the table, conscious that her eyes were on him.

"Don't get your mustache wet," she said, teasing.

"Listen," Jean stopped, his mouth not far from the cup. "I can't do it when you're watching me like that."

"Oh, you don't have to be self-conscious with me!" She gave a laugh that was almost a giggle.

Jean took a big noisy sip. Some of the coffee spilled over onto the saucer.

"Clumsy," she said, shaking a finger at him.

Jean grinned at her and, at the same moment, realized that he had

been smiling steadily for the past ten minutes. Damn it, he thought, I'm supposed to be angry with her. He pulled his lips together and frowned.

"Back to the serious business?" Ninette inquired, getting up from her knees and returning to the sofa, cup in hand.

"Yes," he said. "As you know...."

"Jean, I have a marvellous idea!" Ninette broke in excitedly. "Why don't we go swimming this afternoon?"

"Swimming?" Jean exclaimed, staring at her.

"Yes, just you and I.... We can drive over to La Garoupe." She jumped up from the sofa and clasped her hands together. "There never are many people there, and it will be such fun. Please Jean.... Please?" A slight pinkness had slowly suffused the pale skin on her face.

She looks good enough to eat, Jean thought.

"Please," Ninette said again.

"You're crazy," Jean said, "we can't go swimming alone together!"

"Why not? It's a perfectly innocent way to spend the time."

Ninette pouted like a small child.

She has a cute little mouth, Jean thought, then quickly: "Is it perfectly innocent to go swimming with a married man in a place that's practically always deserted?"

"Oh, don't be silly!" Ninette said. "There's bound to be a few people there."

"There's not bound to be anything of the sort and you know it,"

Jean retorted, angry with her for suggesting an idea which appealed to him, and angry with himself for being attracted by it.

Ninette sat down quietly on the sofa, put on her shoes, crossed her legs slowly and deliberately, then bent down and picked up the cup which she had placed on the floor. She held it at the level of her mouth and began to drink from it very daintily, with her fingers curved gracefully over the handle.

Jean was aware that she had managed to communicate her excitement to him all too successfully, and not so much by her words as by her expression, her gestures, and the movements of her body.

He took the ashtray from the table and stared at it with concentration. There were some words written around the rim of it in big capital letters. Jean read them very carefully, turning the ashtray around slowly in his hand. They said: ALWAYS DRINK CINZANO ALWAYS DRINK CINZANO. He laid the ashtray very carefully between his knees. Then he reached into his shirt pocket for his cigarettes. He took one out of the pack and lit it. Then he drained his cup of coffee, got up from his chair and, carrying the ashtray, walked to the sofa. He sat down beside Ninette.

"Let's do go swimming," he said.

She raised an eyebrow. "I didn't think you'd change your mind." There seemed to be a coyness in her smile which automatically belied the words she had spoken.

That coyness, whether real or imagined, put him on his guard. "But not at La Garoupe," he added.

She shrugged her shoulders. "Just as you say," she agreed calmly.

"We could go to Juan les Pins or Antibes, either one," Jean said in a propitiatory tone.

"Where there's sure to be a safe number of people?" she queried sarcastically.

"Yes," he said.

Ninette took her coffee cup over to the tray, put Jean's on it, and carried it out to the kitchen. At that moment, the mayor came in the front door.

He stared at Jean uncomprehendingly for a moment, then he smiled warmly and gave him his hand. Jean took it.

"I'm pleased to see you here," M. Bertholdi said. "Thought you'd forgotten all about us." He released Jean's hand and took off his straw hat. "Are you just being sociable or did you have something special you wanted to see me about?" he asked in a gruff kindly voice, carefully hanging his hat on the old-fashioned coat rack.

"He came to see me," Ninette said, emerging from the kitchen.

The mayor looked at Jean very closely, and stroked his drooping mustaches. "I see," he said. "I see."

Jean glared at Ninette. She had her nerve, he thought, and then remembered that technically, of course, she was right.

"I asked him to stay for lunch," Ninette added without further explanation.

"Good, good," her father said, still stroking his mustaches.

They sat down to lunch almost immediately.

"How have you been coming along?" the mayor asked, sniffing the fumes from the pot-au-feu which Mme. Gr[^]ace had just placed before him.

As if you don't know, Jean thought, and said: "I've been doing very well, thank you." He watched the mayor open a bottle of red wine.

"Will you work on the land this afternoon?" the mayor asked, evidently at a loss for something to say.

"No, I'm going swimming with Ninette," Jean said, knowing what effect the statement would have on her father. He could almost have predicted his reply.

"Swimming?" M. Bertholdi shook his head at Jean, then reached up to pluck nervously at one eyebrow. "What will people say?" His normally pinkish complexion had grown a little darker.

"No one need know," Jean replied. "And besides, I don't care what people say about me."

"You don't think you do." The mayor dished out some of the steaming meat and vegetables onto Jean's plate.

"There are parts of the world where it wouldn't be so shocking," Jean said.

Ninette sipped her wine thoughtfully and kept her eyes on the table.

M. Bertholdi lifted his arms in a gesture of impatience. "But you are living here, not in...." and then he stopped. "But where would this be acceptable?"

"Paris," Jean said promptly, and then immediately felt very foolish.

"Paris?" The mayor stroked his mustaches again. "Well, I don't know," he said in a tone of finality, and picked up his knife and fork. "What I do know is this." He paused while he chewed on a mouthful of meat. "If you live in a particular place, you have to behave the way people expect you to."

"Why?" Jean asked, dimly aware that he was purposely trying to antagonize him.

"Why?" M. Bertholdi looked at Jean as though he must be an imbecile to ask such a question. "Because you live there, that's why. You must show respect for an established way of life, even though you may not fit into it by natural inclination. And one doesn't show respect for it if one deliberately violates accepted customs."

There was a long pause during which Jean tried to control his emotion.

Then M. Bertholdi said apologetically: "I didn't mean to lecture you, Jean, but I do think it is unwise, on top of everything else."

Jean said nothing.

Mme. Gr[^]ace removed the pot-au-feu and brought in some fresh fruit and bread and cheese.

M. Bertholdi broke the silence again. "I've been meaning to tell you I think our plums are very good this year... thanks to your efforts."

Jean said: "Thank you," very politely.

"Do you think that frost we had has ruined the peaches?" the mayor ventured again.

"I hope not," Jean said. "I did all I could."

"I know, I know...." the mayor smiled as if to say, I didn't mean to reproach you, it wasn't your fault. "You have a way with growing things..."

"No more than anybody else," Jean said brusquely, slapping a piece of cheese onto a slice of bread.

M. Bertholdi wiped his mustaches slowly with his napkin, then pushed his chair back from the table. "Please don't hurry," he said. "But I must get back to work."

Jean stood up.

"If you'd like to stay with us, while Monique is away..." the mayor spoke with some difficulty. "I'm sure it won't be long before things are settled again. We would love to have you here...." He seemed unable to say any more.

"That's very kind of you," Jean replied hastily, not much caring for the idea.

"Well, you can think about it," the mayor said quietly. He took his time about leaving the room, as though he expected Jean to say something else. Then Ninette kissed him playfully and they went together to the front door.

Jean sat down again at the table and poured himself another glass of wine.

The water was very warm. Jean heaved himself onto the raft and sat

on the edge of it while he shook the water out of his ears and pushed his hair back from his face. The sun was deliciously hot on his back. He scanned the surface of the blue-green sea, dotted with the head of bathers. A yellow-capped girl raised her arms and shoulders above the water and waved. He waved back. She began to swim towards him with a rather untidy butterfly stroke. By the time she reached the raft, she was spewing water from her mouth and breathing hard. She tried to pull herself up onto the raft but didn't quite make it, and fell back into the water with a splash.

"Here," Jean said. Opening his legs and propping his feet up on the raft, he seized her under the armpits and dragged her out of the water. Then he moved back from the edge.

She was wearing a thin black wool bathing suit which, in its wetness, clung tightly to her body. Jean looked at her for a minute then turned away and, lying down, rolled over to the far side of the raft. He lay there on his stomach, his head averted from her.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"Nothing." He turned on his back and stared up at the sky. Then suddenly: "Monique thinks we're lovers," he said.

"Oh? I wonder where she got that idea?" Ninette's tone was very calm.

"From you," Jean said slowly.

"From me?" Ninette's voice demanded attention.

He turned to look at her. "You never implied such a thing?"

"Of course not," she said, sitting down beside him and pulling the yellow cap off her head. The sun on her hair gave it an unexpected amber sheen.

"It's so pretty," Jean said, reaching up to touch it. Then he pulled his hand away and folded both arms tightly across his chest.

Ninette smiled. She was sitting at right angles from him, her feet almost touching his thighs.

Jean said very quickly and all in one breath: "She thought I was holding a secret tryst with you on Wednesday afternoon because I didn't turn off to go to your father's land when she was expecting me to."

"Where did you go?" Ninette asked curiously.

He answered very abruptly, "That's none of your business."

She smiled again. "So this is what's been on your mind all this time... just burning to ask me if I had led your wife to believe that we were lovers."

Jean tried to seem nonchalant. "I wouldn't put it that way," he said.

"Wouldn't you?" she asked, her eyes on his face. "Don't tell me you weren't dying to believe that I was responsible... that I was the cause, the reason for her leaving you... instead of you yourself."

He glared at her. "Of course not. I just didn't like the idea that you had told her such a damaging untruth."

"And did you think I would really be capable of doing such a thing? Don't you credit me with a little more finesse?" She was half smiling and half serious.

"I don't know you very well," he said, turning his head away from her.

"But... we grew up together!" There was a note of surprise in her voice.

He turned on her in sudden annoyance. "You know very well that doesn't mean anything. And besides, I haven't really been alone with you since I went to Paris." He paused. "An awful lot has happened since then." He sat up, still hugging his chest, and stared at the white pedalos in the distance.

Ninette followed his gaze. "Shall we take one?" she asked.

He didn't answer immediately. He was watching three young boys who were splashing up to their side of the raft. They sprayed water all over him, giggling and shouting at each other. Then they began to clamber onto the far end of the raft, purposely tilting it at a precarious sloping angle.

"Let's do take a pedalo," he said.

They swam back to the beach quite slowly, keeping together and floating on their backs part of the way. As they approached the shallow area, they found themselves surrounded by noisy splashing people who seemed unable to get out of the way. Jean ignored them, continuing to float on his back with his eyes closed.

He bumped into something soft. "Excuse me," he said, and turned to see a small girl enclosed in an inflated rubber tube. She immediately began to cry. He lowered his feet and touched the sandy bottom. "I'm

sorry," he said. The little girl gave an anguished scream which brought a tall skinny man splashing up to her. "I'm sorry," Jean said again to the man. "I didn't hurt her." The child clung to the man's shoulders. "I know," he said, holding her, "she's nervous.... afraid of the water." Jean nodded and, smiling, turned to look for Ninette. She was right by his side, laughing uncontrollably.

"What's so funny?" Jean asked her, on the verge of being angry again.

"You should have seen the expression on your face!" Ninette continued to laugh, "and the little girl..... ha ha ha ha probably thought you were a monster of the deep." Ninette looked at him as he pushed his wet hair back from his face, and went into another fit of giggles.

"I'll show you something funny," he said, and, springing on top of her, he forced her down under the water. When he released her a moment later, she came up still laughing.

He gave up and started to walk towards the shore.

"Oh, wait, wait," she called. "Let me be your guide!" She came running up to him and, holding him by the neck, whispered in his ear: "You don't want people to accuse you of molesting little girls, do you?" she giggled.

"Stop it, Ninette. It isn't funny any more!" he said angrily, unclasping her hands from his neck. Some women have the queerest sense of humor, he thought.

She went on ahead of him, still smiling to herself, walking steadily through the water and rippling it with her long fingers. When the water had gradually diminished to the level of her hips, she began pulling her bathing suit down her thighs, stretching it in front and in back as far as it would go.

Jean grinned. It always amused him, the way women did that. So automatically, yet so urgently, as though it were a matter of life and death.

They trudged along the sand, side by side, following the water line to where the pedalos lay in a neat row on the beach.

"There's one just coming in," Ninette said. A lifeguard was pulling it up the sand as the two people in it got out. "Don't bother," Ninette shouted, "we'll take it."

The lifeguard let it slip back into the water. Jean paid him for the hour and went to pick up their towels, Ninette's sun lotion and his cigarettes, then he sloshed back through the water with them. She was already working her pedals when he jumped in. He handed her the things and grabbed the tiller.

"Let's go very far," Ninette said. "I don't even want to see the beach."

"Adventurous, eh?" He turned his head to make sure that their path was clear before they began to back away from the shore.

When they were about as far out as they dared to go, they stopped pedalling.

Ninette dragged one hand through the water. With the other, she loosely held the bottle of lotion.

"You'd better put some of that stuff on you," Jean said. "You're still quite pale." Or is it the black bathing suit that makes her skin look so white, he thought.

"The sun isn't that hot any more," Ninette said. "Not enough to burn anyway." She leaned back in the canvas deck-chair type seat. "But you should probably put some on your thighs," she added, looking down at them under partially closed eyelids.

Jean said: "If you can stand it so can I. Besides, all this hair makes a protective cover." Now what did I have to say that for, he thought.

"Not up here," she said, moving her arm over and letting it rest on his chest. "Look at the difference."

Jean gripped the edges of his chair with both hands. "The hair is sparser up there," he said, surprised to hear a slight tremor in his voice.

She smiled sleepily, her left hand still half in the water, her right still lazily holding the bottle. Her whole body seemed to give off a faintly dreamy languorous aura, an undefinable quality which suggested complete abandonment.

Jean felt his mouth go dry. He tried to look away from her but he could not bring himself to do so. It was as though she were drawing him to her with an invincible power. He tried to reason with himself, but he could not. Reason had left him; only pure will remained, and now it

was centered on her. With one quick gesture, he drew her towards him and pressed his mouth hard against hers.

For a brief moment, she did not resist him. Then she jerked her face away from his, and pushed at his chest with her hands. God, what am I doing, he thought, relaxing his hold on her. With an abrupt twist of her body, she freed herself from him, and threw herself into the sea.

The salt water spray blew into Jean's face and stung his eyes. Still breathing hard, he stood up in the *pedalo* holding onto the back of his chair. He felt faint, almost as though he were about to be sick.

Ninette was not more than three feet away. Her wet hair had fallen into her eyes and she was brushing it back with one hand. He had expected her to be terribly angry but, to his surprise, she was smiling. She swam towards him.

"Give me a hand!" she said.

He leaned over the side and pulled her up.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"That's all right," she replied. "Now let go of me please."

He moved back to his seat. "I'm terribly sorry," he said again.

"For heaven's sake, you don't have to be that apologetic!" Then she added, after a moment's hesitation, "For such a little thing."

He stared at her in amazement. "Do you think it would have been a little thing if you hadn't put up such a good fight?"

She shrugged her shoulders and smiled at him. "Let's go back," she said. She started her pedals, but he was so stunned that he made no

effort to help her.

She turned to him, obviously irritated. "Come on, Jean. Steer us toward the shore, will you?"

"Supposing I won't," he said. "I'm stronger than you are. Supposing I go ahead and make love to you now."

"You wouldn't dare!" She flung the words at him. "You're just as bourgeois as everybody else!"

"What do you mean? If you hadn't stopped me, I...."

She looked at him scornfully. "Listen, you loosened your grip before I actually pulled away from you, I wouldn't have been able to manage it otherwise."

"Did I really?" he asked, remembering now that he had.

"You wouldn't have gone through with it," she said. "And you pretend to be so different!"

Jean was completely taken aback. "You mean you purposely led me on?..."

She did not answer his question. "Please, let's do go home," she said.

Jean put his feet on the pedals and his hand on the tiller and turned the pedalo towards the shore.

"You'd have gone moaning around for days, wouldn't you, if you'd actually made love to me?" she asked tauntingly.

"I wouldn't have been very cheerful about it," Jean admitted.

"Why?" She continued in the same tone. "Because you'd have deprived

me of my virginity and been unfaithful to your wife, is that right?"

"I suppose so," Jean said. "One doesn't think these things out very clearly."

"In which case you'd be behaving just like any other proper young husband in La Colle. You realize that, don't you?"

What's got into her, Jean thought, staring at her angrily.

"You don't see the contradiction, do you?" she asked, almost laughing at him.

"What contradiction?"

She smiled. "I'm referring, of course, to your treatment of Monique's family, which is, if I may take the liberty to say so, far from usual."

"I don't see what one thing has to do with the other," Jean retorted.

"Oh come, come," Ninette said impatiently. "You haven't been fooling me. This whole development of hostilities between you and the La Fargues has been planned by you from beginning to end..."

Jean started to interrupt.

"All right," she went on. "So maybe you didn't plan on Monique's action. You didn't think she had the courage to leave you. But don't tell me you haven't been purposely trying to break all the rules--I could have said this to Monique the other day but I didn't because I knew she wouldn't understand. So why don't you break this rule? Because you can't, that's why. It's against your nature. You've forced yourself into a mould which you don't really fit."

Jean lit a cigarette very carefully. "All this because I didn't quite give way to my impulse out there, or rather because I let you stop me from carrying it out," he said. "That's the strangest bit of reasoning I've ever heard."

"I think it makes sense," she said.

They were nearing the beach now, and they began to pedal more slowly--they felt the same unspoken desire to keep themselves for a little longer away from the crowd. Jean smiled inwardly. The girl was amazingly intelligent, he thought. How had she come to understand him so well?

"Tell me why you think I was trying to break the rules, as you put it," he suggested.

"You decided to be a nihilist," she replied without hesitation. Then she stopped. "Perhaps that's the wrong word." She seemed to be thinking quite hard. "I don't know whether you wanted to destroy the traditions of the village eventually, because you didn't believe in them, or whether you just wanted to prove yourself superior to them."

They were drifting in toward the shore now with the slight rippling waves. They had both stopped pedalling.

"Why did I want to do this?" he asked her, hating to admit that anyone could have read his thoughts so clearly.

"Because you felt--and quite naturally, it seems to me--that you were not wholly accepted by the people in the village, and that you never would be, since nobody knew who your parents were."

"Since I was a bastard. Go on, why don't you say it...." Jean flipped his cigarette into the water.

"Well, nobody knows that for sure," Ninette said comfortingly.

"Oh no, of course not. It's quite likely that the fairies left me there," Jean said, striking a match furiously.

"You're just as sensitive about it as you used to be," Ninette remarked.

"You would be too if it were thrown up at you all the time."

"People are too polite to do that," she said disbelievingly.

"Oh, are they? Well, Monique's mother isn't. Too polite, huh," Jean said.

"But you see," Ninette said firmly, "you haven't been too polite to her."

Jean gave a bitter laugh. Of course, she didn't really understand. How could she? "And all this ruthless competition for Marcel's market. How does that fit in?" he queried. The experience of being told what was going on in his mind was so novel to him that he wanted her to spell it out.

"That's quite simple," she said, picking up her towel and her bottle of lotion. "It was and is, I suppose, the particular way in which you tried to prove yourself and, at the same time, destroy or lessen the prestige of one of the oldest and most respected families in the village."

"So this is my diabolic plan, eh?" Jean wanted to laugh, it was so funny.

"If you want to call it that," she said, evidently surprised at his tone.

They both jumped out of the *pédalo* and began to push it onto the sand.

"But you made one mistake," she said, as they picked their way through tight rows of enormous red and white umbrellas.

"What was that?" he asked calmly, knowing what her answer would be.

She seemed to be debating with herself on how to give it, or whether to give it at all. They were passing the snack-stand on the way to the dressing-room area.

"Want something to drink?" he asked her. She shook her head.

"The salt water makes me thirsty," he said. He pulled a hundred franc note out of the pack of cigarettes and bought a bottle of fizz orangeade. He drank it avidly. "Horrible stuff," he said when he had finished it. He put the bottle back on the counter.

"What's the mistake?" he asked again. He couldn't help smiling at her, she was so obviously delighted with herself.

"Marrying Monique, of course," she said finally.

"Instead of you," he laughed, paying no attention to the nasty look she gave him. "That, *Mademoiselle Ninette*, is where you are quite wrong, I'm sorry to say. My mistake was not in marrying her but in falling in love with her."

They had reached their cabins in the enclosed quadrangle. He grinned at *Ninette*, who seemed completely mystified.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"Your turn to question now, and mine to answer," Jean said gleefully. "Don't you see, my marrying her was part of the plan...."

Ninette stared at him with something which was almost a look of horror.

"Yes," he said. "I was ready to go to such lengths to accomplish my purpose. After all, what better way was there than to marry the La Fargues' only daughter?" He paused. "But I defeated myself by falling in love with her. Fate or Cupid, call it what you will, played a trick on me. When you think about it, it's really quite ridiculous." He laughed with unexpected freedom, suddenly seeing himself as a pathetic clown, a miserable Pagliacci full of self-delusions and frustrated hopes.

"And in spite of that, you tried to go on with your plan."

He nodded. "Yes," he repeated, "yes. I tried to go on, somehow..."

She smiled. "A nihilist can't allow himself to be ruled by his emotions just like other people. It's too dangerous."

"I suppose so," he said, unlocking the door to his cabin.

"That's why I'm going to Paris and you're not," she said.

He stopped, his hand on the knob. "When are you going?" he asked.

"The end of the month," she said. "I don't let emotions get in my way."

"But you know why I'm not going just yet," he said incredulously.

"Do I? It isn't lack of money, is it?" She didn't wait for him to answer. "And it isn't because you're waiting to clean out Marcel. You'll

never do that now."

"Why is it, then?" Whatever she said now would be a surprise to him.

"I don't know," she said. "Some other reason. Perhaps you're not even aware of what it is, but I think it must have something to do with that whole side of yourself that wouldn't let you seduce me." She laughed gaily.

"What a strange girl you are," he said, quite serious. "Have you told your father you're going?"

She shook her head.

"He'll be terribly upset," Jean went on, remembering how M. Bertholdi had always thought that nothing was too good for his daughter.

"Of course," she said calmly. "But there's no use worrying him about it ahead of time." Then quickly she added: "You won't tell him, will you?"

"No," Jean said. "It's not my affair." Then he asked: "Are you going to Paris alone?"

She answered immediately: "I'm meeting a friend who has a flat I can share."

"Male or female?" he said, half-teasing.

She smiled. "I'll answer you with your own words. It's none of your business."

"Oh? Did I say that?" he feigned surprise.

"Yes, on the raft. Remember?"

"Oh yes," he said. Then, as she was about to enter her cabin, he

turned to her.

"You wanted to ask me.....?" she said.

He grinned. "Yes, something you said has been puzzling me. Are you really a virgin?"

She smiled mysteriously. "Maybe I am," she said. "And then again, maybe I'm not."

Those were the last words of any consequence that Jean was able to get out of Ninette Bertholdi.

CHAPTER 10

After Mass on Sunday morning, Monique left the convent quietly and unobserved. She wandered slowly down the hill, kicking pebbles as she went, and swinging her straw hat in her left hand. They had said that Marcel could come to pick up her suitcase later so that she would not have to carry it. She was thankful for this.

A strong sea breeze made the leaves rustle around her and bent the boughs of the taller slender trees. She could feel the loose hair on top of her head being lifted and blown this way and that. She took out the combs which fastened her hair back behind her ears and shook the heavy waves loose. How wonderful it was to do as she pleased, to unbutton the top of her blouse if she wanted to, (she unbuttoned it), to feel the openness around her, the sense of being able to run in any direction for as many kilometres as she could, to the left to the right, there was nothing to stop her, there were no walls. There was no gate which someone must open for her. She could open her own, she could fling it wide on the world.

She had reached the bottom of the hill now, and as she stood there, searching for her mother's house in the valley beneath her, she felt a sudden compulsion to look back at the convent, to take a final leave of it with her eyes. And at the same moment, she knew that if she did, she might, like Lot's wife, be transformed into a pillar of salt. She smiled at this strange conviction, but she did not turn her head.

It's just around this bend, she thought. Ten more steps and I will see it.... and there it was. It was pink and pudgy-looking like a newborn baby, and it sat quite low on the ground.

The land was there stretching beyond it. Acres of green things growing, fruit trees, tomato patches, and the vines. It was full, overflowing, prosperous. It wasn't sparse, it wasn't barren. It made her want to cry. And she did a little, thinking it would be nice to have this land, to have their land, she and Jean.

She walked slowly to the door of the pink house. Inside, she could hear water running. She stopped and looked around her once more. Then she went in.

It was the water from the faucet in the kitchen that was running. And there was a smell of onions in the hall. She took her hat slowly from her head and hung it on the rack. I must go in now and speak to her. I must tell her that I've come home. She crossed the stone floor of the living-room and pushed open the kitchen door.

Her mother was standing at the sink washing a heavy iron skillet. She did not see Monique. Her back was to the door. That's my mother, Monique said inside herself. That's my mother, that woman in the gray dress with the white collar, stooping a little over the sink. She doesn't have to hold herself straight now. There's nobody watching her.

The woman at the sink turned one side of her body and reached for a towel. Then with the towel in her hand, she turned all the way around. A smile sprang to her face. It was on her lips and in her eyes too.

Her mother would be so glad to see her. She would think that she had won her victory. Finally, at last, the prodigal daughter home! And Marcel when he went for the suitcase would thank Mother Alicia for what she had done.

Monique stumbled over a large stone by the side of the road and bent down to rub her toes, covered only by the thin material of the espadrille. It would be quite easy for her simply to go on walking until she arrived at the square, at the door of her house. She would go up the stairs..... But no, she must turn off onto the dirt road down there. She did not want to, but she must.

The sun was warmer now. It was close to noon. She felt a little faint and sat down on the low stone wall which bordered the length of the road. Strange to feel faint like this. She put her hat on and tied the ribbons under her chin. Then she stood up and started to walk again.

This was a risk which she must take. And if he did not love her enough, if he refused to stop competing with Marcel, if he was too proud to say: "Monique, come back to me. I'll do anything you want me to," then.... but she would not think about that. Was it really Ninette whom he had gone to see on the afternoon of their anniversary? He had been so loving that day, and that night. On Thursday, after her talk with Ninette, she had been convinced of it. But now she remembered the uncomprehending look on his face when she had made her accusation. He had wanted to say something then, but she hadn't let him.

She had come to the narrow path and, without hesitating, she left the main road. The breeze was not so strong down here. The sun was hotter. She passed the quiet houses on either side of the lane. It was Sunday after Mass, and the men were sitting quietly in the parlors and the women were fixing lunch in the kitchens.

It's just around this bend, she thought. Ten more steps and I will see it.... and there it was. It was pink and pudgy-looking like a newborn baby, and it sat quite low on the ground.

The land was there stretching beyond it. Acres of green things growing, fruit trees, tomato patches, and the vines. It was full, overflowing, prosperous. It wasn't sparse, it wasn't barren. It made her want to cry. And she did a little, thinking it would be nice to have this land, to have their land, she and Jean.

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Her mother was standing at the sink washing a heavy iron skillet. She did not see Monique. Her back was to the door. That's my mother, Monique said inside herself. That's my mother, that woman in the gray dress with the white collar, stooping a little over the sink. She doesn't have to hold herself straight now. There's nobody watching her.

The woman at the sink turned one side of her body and reached for a towel. Then with the towel in her hand, she turned all the way around. A smile sprang to her face. It was on her lips and in her eyes too.

"Monique," she said, "I knew you would come home to me." She put down the skillet and the towel and stepped forward to embrace her.

Monique received a kiss on her cheek, but gave none in return.

"You look tired, my poor dear. You shall have a long rest," her mother said, taking her hand and leading her into the living-room. "I was coming to see you today," she said. "I'm so glad I didn't have to. You should have come here right away. Where are your things?" She looked around the room.

"I left my suitcase for Marcel to pick up later," Monique said.

"Very good." Her mother nodded quickly. "We shall be having lunch in a little while. You must be hungry. What did they give you to eat?"

Monique smiled. "It would be dull to tell you," she said.

"We have some chicken in the oven--roast, the way you like it. Marcel will put some white wine in the well to cool before lunch. He'll be here in a minute." She looked at her daughter closely, holding herself very straight. "My poor dear, you do look tired. Lie down here for a few minutes. It will do you good."

Monique lay down on the sofa under the window. The shutters were closed and it was very dark in the room. There was no furniture anywhere in the four corners of it. Here the sofa, there her mother's chair beside the radio, there Marcel's chair (it had been her father's), and in the corner, beside the chair, a desk. It was there that her mother had always sat late into the night, busy with pencil and paper, figuring, keeping the accounts.

The door opened and the sunshine came into the hall. Marcel stepped into the patch of light. Then he closed the door and it was dark again.

Her mother said in a loud voice: "Monique is here!"

He said: "I see," and came immediately to the sofa.

She propped herself up on her left elbow and extended her right hand.

He took her hand and held it for a moment in both of his. "I'm glad you're back," he said. "I shall put some wine in the well to cool before lunch."

He disappeared into the dining room for a moment, then came back carrying a bottle.

"This is some of our best," he said.

He crossed the room, smiling, and opened the front door. It closed behind him. He is so proud of what is his, she thought. They are both proud. I am the only one who has no pride; I have none of it in me.

Her mother said: "I want you to see your room. Nothing has been changed. I have touched nothing which you left that belonged to you. Nothing."

She has been preserving my room for this very day, Monique thought as she mounted the stairs, a little behind her mother. She has known it all along.

They walked to the end of the hall. Marcel's room and her mother's room opened off it. Hers was at the end. She followed her mother into it.

There were the same blue walls. And the frilly white curtains tied

back with big bows. And her dresser covered with a lace runner, and the table with the cross-stitch mat which she had worked on at school. The cupboard was there, and the rocking chair with the blue silk cushion on it. And her bed in the corner, protected by a blue and white ruffled organdy spread.

"I'll make it up for you after lunch," her mother said. "You even have a nightgown to wear tonight, if Marcel doesn't feel like going for your things." She pulled open one of the drawers and brought out a white cotton gown with short sleeves--Monique had worn it when she was a very young girl.

"I probably can't get into it now," Monique said, holding it up in front of her.

"Oh yes, I'm sure you can," her mother said, draping it over her body. "It used to be quite big."

Monique laid it across the narrow bed. "I'll be down in a minute," she said.

"All right, dear." Her mother patted her on the shoulder. "There's no hurry." She paused at the door. "I'll be in the kitchen if you want me."

Monique sat down on the edge of the bed. It was very hard. "How strange," she said, "to come back here again." She shook her head as though to wake herself. "But"...she couldn't help asking the question, "has it only been a year?" She picked up the nightgown and, cradling it in her arms, she stared down at it until her mother's voice called her

from her dreams.

She woke late the next morning with a sense of being in a strange place, a sense of not belonging. This was where she had grown up. This room, this bed were familiar, but she did not know them. She had taken off her nightgown during the night--it had been too small for her--and the top sheet lay heavily on her naked body. It was a new awareness. An awareness of things pressing on her skin. She had had it before, but never like this. She dressed slowly, carefully, not wanting to leave her room. It would not be so bad, she thought, if her mother would just let her do something. But no, Monique, you must rest, she would say, you look tired. It was perhaps because she had been told this so many times since she had come home yesterday that she was actually beginning to feel tired, or so it seemed to her.

A knock on her door startled her into action. She almost ran to turn the knob. It was Marcel with his arms full of flowers--roses, red and pink.

"For me!" she cried.

"Yes, I bought them in Nice," he said.

"But they're beautiful!" she could only exclaim as she stared at them. "But they're beautiful!" She took them from him, holding them close to her breast, and lifted them to her face.

"I got them in Nice," he said.

"In Nice?" Of course, where else would he get such roses.

"Yes, I went to sell my fruit."

"But today isn't your day," she said. Then she felt a blush spread over her face. If Jean had done it to Marcel, why shouldn't Marcel do the same to Jean?

"Jean wasn't there," he said.

"No?" she was surprised. Perhaps..... what could be the matter?

"Not there?" she said, and sat down on the bed with the flowers still in her arms.

"You're worried, aren't you?"

"Oh no," Monique tried to speak calmly. "Why should I be? It just seems a little....." She did not go on because she saw that she was not deceiving Marcel. His face, which had worn a gentle expression ever since her arrival the day before, took on a sudden stiffness.

"You'd better put those in water," he said sharply, and left the room.

She followed him down the stairs, bringing her feet together on each step, as a child might do. And there at the bottom, looking up at her inquiringly, was, "Tico!" she cried, "Tico!" and, laying the flowers on the step beside her, she sat down and extended a finger to the cat's twitching nose. "Come and see me, Tico, say hello to me...." The cat rubbed its head against her hand. "Come and say hello, Tico," she said, "come and sit on my lap. I won't hurt you, Tico." She picked up the cat

and held it in her arms. "Aren't you going to purr for me, Tico, please purr for me or I shall be angry." The cat purred. "That's my Tico," she said, smoothing down the striped fur on the cat's back. "How soft you are," she said, pressing her bare arms against the furry warmth. "How soft....."

Her mother walked in from the kitchen. "She's going to have kittens," she said.

"Tico! Are you going to have kittens?" Monique felt the cat's sides. "Oh you are, aren't you," Monique said. "I thought she was awfully heavy."

"It's only noticeable from the rear," her mother said. "This will be her second litter since your marriage. We got rid of the others all right, but as for these....."

"I'll take one," Monique said. "Now Tico, don't run away." The cat was wriggling in her grasp. "Oh look, you have a yellowish spot on your nose. I never noticed it before." She touched it with her finger.

"What do you mean?" her mother asked. She was bringing in coffee and a loaf of bread.

Marcel, who had been sitting at the dining-room table with his back to them, turned a little, and looked at Monique.

"She does have a yellowish spot." Monique stood up with the cat still in her arms, and came to the table. "See," she pointed to it.

Marcel looked up at her with a steady gaze. "You said you'd take one of the kittens."

Monique let the cat jump down from her arms and watched her as she

stretched out on the rug and began cleaning her claws.

A profound silence set in. They were sitting in mute judgment on her. I have hurt them, she thought, and felt the sting of tears, and brushed them from her eyes, quickly, they mustn't see I am crying. How could they be so hard, how could they expect her...."Oh, give me time!" she cried, stretching out her arms towards them. "Oh, give me time!"

Marcel kissed the hand which was nearest to him, and poured her a cup of coffee. Her mother pushed her gently down into the chair. The cat padded up to her and rubbed herself against her legs.

"I sold four baskets today," Marcel said.

And their life resumed its normal speed.

CHAPTER 11

It was not until late Monday afternoon that Jean heard about Monique. When he got back from his work on M. Bertholdi's land, he found a note just inside the door. It was folded in two and his name was written on the top fold in big capital letters, JEAN ANDRE. He flipped it open and in it he read: "'Who laughs last laughs longest'. Monique is with us." It was signed, "Marcel La Fargue". Jean thought that it was a typical thing for Marcel to have done. There was a childishness about him which would take pleasure in something like this. He thought of Marcel gloating as he wrote the words. Of course, she might not really be there. Marcel might have written this to provoke him. But no, he didn't credit his brother-in-law with that much imagination. Monique was there all right. He considered asking someone about it. Ninette perhaps, or the mayor, but he was too proud to do it. And besides, he was sure Monique was there.

He had his usual evening meal of boiled ham and mortadelle, and with it he drank a bottle of coarse red wine. Then he read another chapter in The Trial, and drank another bottle of the same wine. He wished that he had something more cheerful to read, although he knew he couldn't read anything really funny.

He laid the book aside, put a fresh pack of cigarettes in his shirt pocket, and left the house. The sun had set an hour ago, but there was still light enough to see by. He got into the truck and drove out of

the village towards St. Paul. He passed the dirt road that led to the La Fargues' house, then the mayor's house on his left, and stopped where the slope of a rather rocky hill jutted out into the road. He took a flashlight that he kept in the truck and put it in his pocket. Then he began to climb the slope.

The path was not an easy one. The ground was dry and hard, and covered with loose stones. Farther up, on the side of the hill, umbrella shaped pines grew in profusion. But here there was nothing. Jean eased himself around a large boulder standing directly in his path, and came upon a wide clearing--it formed a kind of plateau on the side of the hill. There, looking rather lonely and misplaced on the barren ground, stood a fig tree. It had reached its full growth, and was ready to bring forth its fruit.

Jean searched the thin twisted branches for the faintest sign, the smallest green swelling which would tell him that the fruit had come. To be absolutely sure, he held up the flashlight, and guided the narrow beam in among the dense growth of leaves. He could find nothing.

He put the flashlight back in his pocket and, bending down, collected enough twigs to make himself a fire. Not that it was cold, but he liked to watch a fire; he liked to sit within a comfortable distance of it and, gazing into the shooting flames, let himself slip into a vague dream-like state.

As it often did when he came here, the image of Alphonse Béri began to take shape in his mind, and to assume such vividness and such reality

that he was compelled to meditate on it. Pointless, vain, stupid as he knew the process to be, he must think the thing through for God knows how many, perhaps the hundredth time, certain that there was no help in it, that at the end of it he would find no relief.

Alphonse Béri had been Jean's immediate superior in the underground organization. He was an elderly scholar and an important member of the Resistance. That was all Jean had known about him. It was when Jean was holding his third job, as a waiter in a left-bank café--he had received word one afternoon that Béri had been betrayed to the Nazis, and would be arrested that night. The people at headquarters were absolutely sure of it. They had a reliable agent working with the Gestapo. Jean was to go to Béri's place off the Boulevard St. Germain and tell Beri to leave as soon as he possibly could. Then he was to wait for Marchand, his closest contact, at No. 42 Rue Jacob.

It seemed to Jean that before he had been sent on this mission he had had a feeling that something dreadful was going to happen. Earlier that afternoon he had wandered around his room, picking up one magazine after another, unable to concentrate on a single line. The message had transformed a vague feeling of anxiety into a sharp, particular, and immediate sense of danger.

Before he left his room, he made a bundle of his things: "War and Peace", a collection of de Maupassant's short stories, "The Red and the Black", "Madame Bovary", "The Brothers Karamazov", "Candide". There

There was a Bible and a leather-bound Racine which had been presented to him before he left the convent. He tied them together with a piece of string and put them in his sheet. Then came an extra sweater, a couple of shirts, a pair of pants; finally, a loaf of bread. It was the third time he had had to clear out in a hurry, and this time he wasn't leaving anything behind. He tied his wool scarf around his neck and put on his overcoat. He had no gloves; his old ones had worn out the winter before and he had been unable to replace them. He put his rent money in an envelope (he had carefully taken it out of his monthly pay check some days ago) and sealed it. Then he knotted the sheet and slung it over his back. Hope I've got everything, he thought; anyway, there's nothing here that can give me away. He shut the door behind him, walked quickly down the stairs, slipped the envelope under the landlady's door, and left the house. He deposited the bundle seven blocks away, behind the bar at the "Deux Escargots". The proprietor was a friend of his, a quiet man who never asked any questions.

He got off the train at the Place St. Germain and walked up the stairs with the crowd. It was a clear cold January day. He turned up the collar of his overcoat and stuck his hands in his pockets, watching his breath form small puffs of smoke in the air. He wished that they were real. It had been some time since he had held a cigarette between his lips.

Then he saw Marie Dérain. She was sitting at a table by a window in a corner bistro, just across the street from the Métro station

He could have spotted her short curly red hair a mile away. To his surprise, she signaled to him openly, and, leaving the table, came running out to meet him. Silly idiot, Jean thought, doesn't she know we're not supposed to be seen together in public! He tried to swerve to avoid her but she purposely ran right into him. Throwing her arms around him and, pressing her cheek close to his, she whispered in his ear: "You don't have to go. He's already been warned." Then she dragged him to her table.

He looked at her unbelievably. "Are you sure?" she asked.

She nodded and, calling the waiter, ordered two vermouth cassis.

"Sit closer to me, Jean," she said, moving her chair towards his so that the seats touched each other. "Are you afraid people will guess we're lovers?"

He let her snuggle up to him and take his hand while he tried feverishly to make sense out of the situation. Why had they sent someone else, and how did Marie know about it?

"Marie...." he began, uncertain how to phrase the question.

She kissed him on the lips, then moved her mouth across his cheek to his ear. "Don't be silly," she whispered. "Would I be careless about something as important as this?"

The waiter, twisting through the narrow spaces between tables, arrived with their drinks. Marie bit the top of Jean's ear. The people behind them sniggered, and the waiter gave them an approving look.

Jean reached into his pocket. "I'd better pay you now," he said,

handing him the correct change.

The waiter grinned. "Monsieur has forgotten the ten percent...."

Jean felt terribly embarrassed and gave him some more change. The man hurried off, still smiling at the absent-minded lover.

Idiot, Jean said to himself, and sipped slowly on his vermouth. He was still vaguely uneasy about the change in plans, but he had become so used to doing things without asking questions and without having any idea why he was doing them that he thought it was ridiculous for him to be worried, just because he didn't understand what had happened.

"When will I see you again?" he asked her. "Alone, I mean."

"In two or three days perhaps, I'll let you know."

"I still don't think it's very wise for us to be sitting here like this," Jean mumbled into his glass. "By the way, do you have any cigarettes for me?"

Marie nodded and reached into her purse. "I'm glad you reminded me," she said. "I've been saving these for you."

"Two packs at one time." Jean was surprised. "It's not my birthday, you know!" Then he looked at his watch. It was ten minutes after five. "We've been heretwenty minutes," he said.

"Have we? Then I suppose we'd better be going." Her voice was a little strained.

"Aren't you feeling well?" he asked quickly, taking her hand.

"Oh...." she seemed taken aback by his question. "There's nothing wrong. Are you ready to go?"

She stood up and buttoned her coat, then she led the way out. On the sidewalk she gave him a long passionate kiss. He held her tightly for a minute, then she pushed him away.

"Goodbye," Jean said.

"Bye, take care of yourself," she whispered. Then as she turned to go, she said hurriedly: "It's been lots of fun."

Jean stood there for a moment, watching her cross the street. Why had she said that?.... almost as though she did not expect to see him again. He shook his head and lit a cigarette while he debated his next move. He was still curious about Béri. He wanted to know who had been sent to tip him off. Then he remembered that he was supposed to meet Alain on the Rue Jacob. Had that been changed too? He decided he had better go to Béri's place anyway, just in case there was something he could do for the man before he left. He walked on quickly.

Béri lived in the third house from the corner. Jean stopped at the entrance and listened for a moment. There was no sound inside the house. He went in.

The apartment was on the second floor--the door was partially open. Jean looked at it for a moment. He was certain that if Béri was still there it would be closed. He kicked it all the way back and walked in. There was no one there. He looked inside the alcove which took the place of a bedroom. The bed was unmade and there was a dark grease stain on the pillowcase. He looked under the bed. The dust on the floor had thickened into gray balls of fluff which moved a little as he breathed.

He stood up, sniffing distastefully at the close stale air, and saw, on the far side of the room, a typewriter on a small table with a sheet of paper in it. Beside it was a chair with an undershirt and a tie draped over it. Strange, thought Jean, why leave all this stuff behind? Especially the typewriter. He looked at the sheet of paper in it. It was the beginning of a letter.

"My dear Suzanne....." he read. "I'm so glad you're enjoying your new life in the country. I'll try to get out next week if I can, but I'm not sure that I'll" --The letter stopped there.

Jean pulled back the curtain which cut off the kitchen from the living-room. There was a sink with some plates in it, and a single gas burner on a table. Near it was a cup containing some used coffee grounds, a turkish coffee pot half full of black coffee. There was some cheese wrapped in newspaper, and a small pitcher of milk on the window sill. A pan of water had fallen on the floor, making a puddle underneath the table. He picked up the pan and put it in the sink. Then he walked back into the living-room.

Opposite the bed-alcove was a false fireplace. There were some books lying on the mantel. He went over to it and reached up for one, then he heard heavy footsteps on the stairs. Oh God, he thought. He had nothing to defend himself with. There was a single brass candlestick on the mantel. It was quite large and heavy. He took it and hid behind the door. The steps reached the landing. He peered through the crack, holding his breath, and tightened his grasp on the brass stick.

It was a fat elderly woman. He emerged from his hiding-place and put the candlestick back on the mantel.

"Who are you?" she asked, standing as though petrified by the door.

"A friend of Béri's," he said. "Did you know him?"

She looked at him in silence. Then she said three words: "They took him."

Jean's mouth suddenly felt very dry. His lips shaped the word "Who?"

"The Boches," she said.

"Sure?"

"I saw them."

Jean's legs carried him down the stairs and out of the house. He ran as fast as he could towards the Rue Jacob. The only sound he could hear was the noise his shoes made on the sidewalk. He turned the corner and almost collided with Alain Marchand.

"Easy does it," Alain said, laying a hand on his shoulder, "but let's keep walking fast. The sooner we get away from this neighborhood the better. They just might come back."

They turned left at the end of the Rue Jacob and headed for the river.

"Where are we going?" Jean asked.

"We're going to get lost somewhere on the Right Bank. Those are our orders."

Jean stumbled along beside Alain. There was so much he wanted to find out, he didn't know where to begin.

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"You know what happened?" he asked, hoping that the woman had lied to him, that Alain would say: "Sure, he got away all right. I was the one who tipped him off." But at the same moment he remembered what Alain had said: "They might come back."

Alain turned his head slightly towards him. "I got there just as they were pushing him into the car. I managed to hide in a doorway before they saw me. I don't know what went wrong. We were told specifically that the arrest had been planned for a much later hour. Did you leave the minute you got the message?"

Jean heard his voice come very faintly. "I packed my things first."

"You shouldn't have," Alain said severely. "How long did that take you?"

"About fifteen minutes."

"Let me see," Alain began calculating. "You heard from headquarters about 4:30. I got there at 5:10, supposedly in plenty of time to talk things over with you and Béri. Instead, the Germans were carting him off, and you were nowhere to be seen. If you were through at 4:45, it couldn't have taken you more than five or six minutes in the Métro and then three or four minutes walking, which would have given Béri fifteen minutes to get away....."

"Oh God, oh God," Jean said. "Oh God, oh Jesus Christ!" Then he sat down on the sidewalk and wept with his face between his knees.

"For the love of heaven! What's got into you?" He heard Alain's voice whispering in his ear. "I beg of you, I implore you to get up and

start walking before someone notices us. We can't afford to attract attention now."

Jean raised his head. "It's too dark for anyone to see us," he said.

"It's not that dark yet, and it just isn't customary for people to sit on sidewalks, come on!"

Jean stood up. Alain pulled his arm through his and started walking. Jean let himself be dragged along.

They crossed the Pont des Arts. Jean looked down at the Seine. It was very, very black. Across the street and a little to the left were the massive square buildings of the Louvre.

"I want to go there," Jean said, pointing in their general direction.

"Where?" Alain asked.

"The Louvre," Jean said.

"Don't be silly," Alain said sharply, "it's closed now."

"I want to go there anyway. I want to sit and look at paintings," Jean said stubbornly.

"Listen, stop talking nonsense and tell me what happened," Alain said.

"Any paintings, all paintings, a whole world of paintings," Jean said. He felt Alain's arm tighten over his.

"Jean, for the love of heaven, this is no time to be making jokes."

"Painting is no joke," Jean said. "Art is no joke.... but life is no joke either. No, it's no joke at all. Let's go there. I'm sure

there's a way we can get in."

"My God! The man's lost his mind!"

"How lovely to sit and to look.... just to look and to look, hour after hour. There'll be nobody there but ourselves now. No horrible tourists with their evil-looking guides. Tell me, Alain, have you ever noticed," Jean shook his arm, "have you ever noticed how evil those guides look? Not just seedy, not just callous, not just hard-hearted, but evil, really evil. You know what I mean?"

"I don't know what you mean and I think you're insane. I'd better get you off the streets."

"Nobody understands," Jean said. "Nobody understands anything at all. Where are you taking me? I want to get lost in a place where there is music and painting, that's all. Nothing else. Just music and painting."

"Well, I expect you'll get music in here, all right, and you might even see some painting too, although it probably won't be very good," Alain said, dragging him across the street.

Jean saw the building with the tall spire. "Church!" he said. "I don't want to go to church!"

"Come on," Alain said. "It looks like there's going to be a Mass. We won't be too conspicuous among the worshippers."

"Why are they having a Mass now?" Jean asked as they climbed the steps.

"I don't know. Special saint's day, I suppose."

The big doors were open wide. Jean and Alain stopped just inside and

stared at the people walking up the center aisle; Jean started to follow them.

"Pssst!"

He turned. Alain was beckoning furiously. "Stop behaving like a damned Protestant and take some holy water for God's sake!"

Jean dipped his fingers in the bowl and crossed himself, then followed Alain up the aisle toward the apse. Alain paused two rows from the pulpit and genuflected. Jean did the same. Alain chose a seat about half way down the row and Jean took the one beside it. He sat down. Alain got down on his knees and gave Jean a dirty look.

"Kneel!"

Jean knelt.

After a few moments, Alain got up from his knees and sat down. Jean did the same.

"No paintings," he said, glaring at the hideous rococo sculpture over the altar, "and no music." The sharp click of women's heels echoed on the stone floor behind them.

"Jean, snap out of it and tell me what happened."

Jean stared at him. "What happened...." he said slowly. "Yes."

"Well?" Alain said. "I haven't got all night."

"She did it," Jean said.

Alain swore under his breath and shook Jean a little. "Who?" he asked.

"The girl," Jean said. He could not say her name. "The girl with the red hair."

"The girl with...." Alain almost jumped in his seat. "Marie?" he whispered.

Jean nodded.

"You mean she was the one who told the Germans about Béri?"

Jean nodded.

Alain's right eye was twitching. "How do you know?" he asked.

"She was the one who detained me," Jean said. "She told me Béri had already been warned, and that it was useless for me to go there."

Alain rested his head on the chair in front of him.

"Something wrong?" Jean asked.

Alain raised his head and looked at Jean. His eye was twitching noticeably.

"I told her," he said.

"What?"

"I talked to her. It must have been just before you got the message, or just after. I told her that we knew the Germans had caught on to Béri and that we were sending you to him with the news, because you were nearest and because he knew you. I remember now, she gave me a funny look, then she excused herself almost immediately. Said she had an appointment at the hairdresser's."

Jean said very slowly, "If I hadn't wasted all that time packing, I would have reached the Place St. Germain before she did."

"I guess we're both to blame." Alain said. "But who would have thought it! Little Marie with her curly red hair. How long did she keep you?"

"Twenty minutes."

"She must have had a soft spot in her heart for you, didn't want the Germans to get you. And here we were working with her hand in glove." Alain took a handkerchief from his coat pocket and wiped his forehead with it. His eye had stopped twitching. "Beats me how a woman like that could have any feeling for anyone..." Alain mused. Then suddenly he asked: "Was she your mistress?"

Jean nodded.

"Well," Alain said. "That explains it. Women are strange that way, even the worst kind--they always get sentimental about sex. Then he added after a moment's thought, "But not prostitutes I guess." He looked at Jean expectantly. Jean said nothing.

Alain seemed to be thinking some more. "Listen," he said suddenly. "None of us knew where he lived. She couldn't have known."

"There are ways of finding out," Jean said. "That needn't have been very hard. She could easily have followed him." His mind was beginning to work again. "She was after the big game. She wouldn't have bothered with either of us. What help could we really be to the Germans? We don't know enough."

He looked about him. The church was filling up slowly. Two young acolytes were lighting the candles on the altar. It must be almost time for the Mass, he thought.

"It's lucky she didn't know anyone else," Alain went on.

For the first time, Jean suddenly realized all the possible consequences of Beri's capture.

"Supposing he...." Jean did not dare to finish the question.

"He won't. Anyway everyone's dispersed by now."

"I know--but just the same, he doesn't have to tell them about the people, they're interested in what's going on too, not just in who's doing the planning."

"Listen, he won't talk," Alain said firmly. "He's not the type."

"But think of the torture!" Jean winced.

"I know. But I'm sure he won't talk," Alain sighed. "And they'll make it worse for him, just because he's a Jew."

Jean turned abruptly in his seat and stared at him.

"What's the matter?" Alain said. "Didn't you know?"

"How could I know," he said, his voice hoarse, "how could I know..."

Some people sat down in front of them.

Alain said quickly, "Look, Jean. I think I'd better be going. We're to meet tomorrow at eight o'clock in the Bois--the usual place."

Jean nodded.

"Don't take any chances now, will you?" Alain said.

Jean nodded. "You be careful too."

The Mass began a few minutes after Alain had gone. People were sitting on either side of Jean now. He found it very easy to follow their movements, to kneel, to cross himself, to mumble something into his sweaty palms. And then, so much of the required actions and prayers came to him automatically. He kept thinking that he ought to be praying

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very hard now. But he couldn't. He had lost the habit. His mind refused to do anything but repeat and repeat and repeat the events of the past afternoon. As if that's going to do any good, he told himself. But his thought was like a cracked record, resisting the pressure on it, refusing to let the needle move beyond that certain point.

In the middle of the Gloria he said: "I wonder who Suzanne is." The people immediately in front of him turned around.

It occurred to him, a few moments later, that he must have spoken quite loudly. Béri would never make it to the country now. Oh Jesus! Must you think about that, he told himself sharply. How could you have possibly known.... And then he thought of all the nights he had lain in Marie's arms, lain there and enjoyed her--her! Oh, if I could only get my hands on her now! he thought. If I could only get her alone in a room, I'd squeeze the breath right out of that pretty neck, the bitch, the whore, the cheap, rotten.... Why couldn't I have suspected her, why?

It was at that point that the priest had preached his sermon on the fig tree. "Don't be like the fig tree, but be ready when God calls on you," he had said, and he had read the passage from the Bible, a passage with which Jean was not familiar, a strange passage which he had half-listened to, half-heard, and then suddenly he had felt himself being roughly wakened, shaken out of his semi-dazed condition by the priest's voice, which had become loud and commanding. As he looked at the blurred figure, so high above him yet so near, as his eyes began to focus, he saw the priest's face. The misty outlines became unmistakably clear--

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"Béri!" the name exploded from his lips. "Béri!" Jean said again, as the cold blue eyes stared at him, and the pointing finger rose: "Cursed be the fig tree that would not give me fruit, it shall wither and die, and no man shall ever again eat from it."

Jean had stared in horror, stared, sitting erect in the hard-backed chair, and the woman beside him had said: "Is something the matter?" And he had looked at her, and then he had looked back at the priest who had just finished his sermon. He had a round, placid chinless face with an upturned nose and soft brown eyes. It was not Alphonse Béri.

Jean got up, stamped out the dying fire, and went back to his place. He continued to sit there in the darkness, smoking quietly through the pack of cigarettes. When he had reached the last one, he crumpled the pack and threw it away. He smoked the cigarette fast, watching the glowing end as it came closer to his fingers. Then, when there was hardly any cigarette left to hold, he pressed the red burning tip between the thumb and forefinger of his right hand. He held it there a long moment. Then he opened his fingers and let the ash fall on the hard stony earth.

"I shall go and get Monique tomorrow," he said in a loud voice. "I shall go and get her." He stood up, turned on the flashlight, and started to walk slowly down the hill.

PART III

CHAPTER 12

Jean timed his arrival for the safe hour when Marcel would still be at the market. He could not decide at first whether to leave the truck some distance away, and thus surprise them with a silent and therefore sudden appearance, or whether to drive up noisily to the front door. He decided on this last approach.

He had not been over the narrow road for a year and had forgotten how bumpy it was. As the truck lurched along, he realized that he had not prepared an appropriate speech. Or better still, he had not prepared a choice of speeches. How and where would he begin? Supposing Mme. La Fargue saw him before he came into the house, and locked Monique in her room? Supposing he had to have an argument with the mother or listen to her insult him? But perhaps Monique would have guessed that he was coming, and perhaps he would find her waiting for him just outside the door. But supposing Monique really did not want to come back to him? Could it be that he had presumed too much? What would he say, how would he act if any of these things happened?

He roared up to the front door, stepped on the brake, and switched off the ignition. In the sudden silence, he could hear a door slam inside the house. He got out of the truck and walked slowly towards the front door, pausing a moment when he reached it. He knocked twice and went in.

There was no one in the living-room. He sat down on the edge of the

sofa and waited. They must both be upstairs, probably cleaning or something, he thought. He looked at the bareness of the room. The old lady had really emptied the place to furnish their apartment. He couldn't help feeling a little badly now about having thrown all that stuff into the street.

"Who's that?" A voice called down.

He did not answer. Let her come and see for herself.

Two black-stockinged legs appeared on the stairs, topped by a black skirt. Then a long-sleeved gray blouse, and, emerging from the high collar, Mme. La Fargue's head. She stopped, one foot suspended in its fall. She stared at him incredulously.

"You!" she said, her voice full of contempt. "You! What are you doing here?"

"I've come to fetch Monique," he said, standing up and facing her.

Mme. La Fargue descended the remaining stairs and stopped on the last step, holding onto the bannisters with one hand. In this position, it was easy for her to look down on him.

"Is that so?" she asked coolly. "Well, she isn't here just now."

This came as a surprise to Jean. "Where is she?" he inquired.

"Marcel took her to the doctor."

"The doctor? Why?"

"She hasn't been feeling well," Mme. La Fargue said, shifting her gaze from his face to the floor.

"You're lying to me," Jean said, thinking of the locked room upstairs.

Mme. La Fargue held her head high, and folded her hands over his stomach. "How dare you insult me in my own house!" she said.

Jean shrugged his shoulders. "I'll wait," he said, and lit a cigarette.

"And if she prefers to stay?"

"I'll take her," he said.

"By force?"

"If necessary."

She left the staircase and sat down in the chair by the radio.

"Marcel won't let you," she said.

"He can't stop me," he said.

They sat in silence for a few minutes.

"Marcel says you weren't at the market yesterday," she remarked.

He made no comment.

"You haven't been since Monique left you," she went on, staring at him.

He said nothing.

She reached under the table that the radio was on, and pulled out a basket of darning. She laid it in her lap and took out a black sock, and carefully drew it over a wooden darning-egg.

"What's the matter with Monique?" Jean asked, lighting a cigarette.

"It's probably all in her mind," Mme. La Fargue said. "Sunday, she came home looking a little tired, and last night she asked Marcel to take her to the doctor.

"I can't believe she'd ask to see a doctor just because she felt a little tired."

"No, there's more to it than that."

"Well, what?" Jean asked.

"I don't know."

"You do," he insisted.

But she would not say anything more. She perched stiffly on the chair, and sewed on the black sock.

Jean let the ashes of his cigarette fall on the floor. He could hear a truck coming down the road.

"There they are," she said.

Jean got up from the sofa and walked to the door; then he peered through the window. Marcel's truck had stopped just behind his. Damn, why hadn't he thought of that. There was no way out except back down that road, and now it was blocked. He sat down again on the sofa.

Mme. La Fargue continued to sew on her sock.

Why are they talking so long? Jean thought. Staring at my truck, I suppose. Will Marcel decide not to come in, to take her away till I've gone?

But there were footsteps on the stone walk outside the door.

He got up again and thrust his hands into his pockets.

The door opened and Marcel walked in. Monique followed a few steps behind and stopped just inside the door. Jean went towards her.

Marcel blocked his path.

"Get out of my way," Jean said.

"I won't," Marcel said.

Mme. La Fargue put her darning on top of the radio, stood up and said: "Please stop behaving like children!"

Marcel, his face red, stepped inside. Jean took Monique in his arms. She freed herself gently from his embrace.

"Will you come with me?" he said, still holding her arms.

She looked from him to Marcel, to her mother, then back to him.

"Have you lost your tongue, child?" her mother asked.

Monique said nothing.

Jean squeezed her arms. "You know you want to come with me."

"Let go, you're hurting her," Marcel said.

"She can speak for herself," Jean said.

Mme. La Fargue said: "Let's sit down and talk this thing over like grown-up people...."

"Mother, you can't mean it!" Marcel exclaimed.

"It seems to me that it is up to Monique to decide whether to go or to stay," she said. "Calm yourself, Marcel, the end of the world has not yet come."

Jean looked at Monique. It was impossible to tell from the expression on her face what she was thinking.

"I believe," she said, still standing uncertainly by the door, "that I shall stay."

"Ah!" Marcel gave a triumphant cry.

Her mother smiled. "Now," she said, "perhaps you would like to tell us what the doctor said was the matter with you."

"Nothing," Monique said.

"Is that why you're staying...." her mother said cryptically.

Jean saw Monique give her mother a quick look.

"Well, I'd better be going then," he said, and walked towards the door. Monique was still standing quite near it; Marcel had crossed the room to his mother's side. Jean opened the door wide, then, with a quick movement, he seized Monique around the waist, and pulled her out with him.

"Marcel's truck," he whispered in her ear. She ran along with him. They scrambled into it, just as Marcel came leaping towards them. "Lock your door," Jean said, "and raise your window."

She obeyed him immediately, but Marcel jumped onto the running board before she had finished putting up the window.

Jean started the motor and backed out of the driveway. "Get off, Marcel!" he shouted.

But Marcel was still on the running board, clinging to the half-opened window with both hands.

Jean turned the truck around and headed for the main road. "Get off, Marcel!" he shouted again.

But Marcel hung on.

"Oh, Jean, please be careful," Monique said. "Go slowly please!"

"Tell the fool to get off before he falls off," Jean said.

Monique shouted: "Marcel, get off!" and waved her hands at him.

But Marcel hung on.

Jean swore at him under his breath, and drove as carefully as he could over the bumpy road.

"Perhaps you had better stop," Monique suggested.

Jean thought about it and decided there was no harm in trying. "All right, I'll stop to let him off, but no getting out, understand?"

Monique nodded, and Jean stopped the truck.

Marcel stayed exactly where he was.

Jean shouted: "What's the point of clinging on like that? What good will it do you?"

Marcel stared at Jean but made no answer.

"He's had his chance," Jean muttered.

"Let me get out, Jean. I'll come later, I promise you."

"You're too scared. 'Fraid your mother will eat you," Jean said disgustedly.

He shifted the gear into first and turned left on the main road.

"Jean, I promise I'll come back to you...."

"Then why did you say what you did, back there?" he asked. "You don't even have to answer that. It's just that you didn't have the courage to tell them frankly that you were rejecting them for me. Or perhaps this is a real abduction?"

"How do you mean?" she asked.

"Did you really want to stay with Marcel and your mother?"

Monique smiled. "I wanted you to come for me," she said.

Her left hand was lying loosely in her lap; he took it and squeezed

it. He would almost be happy now, if it weren't for Marcel.

He drove slowly into the square and parked the truck in front of the house.

"What do we do?" Monique whispered.

"I'll get out first," he said.

He got out. At the same moment, Marcel jumped down from the other side. Jean came around the front of the truck as Monique opened her door. Marcel went around the back.

"Monique, get out quickly!" Jean said.

"No, no, Monique, stay where you are!" Marcel shouted.

Jean went back to his side of the truck and almost collided with Marcel, who was heading for the driver's seat.

"Monique, get out!" Jean shouted, while he struggled with Marcel.

"Here I am," she said, coming around to their side.

Jean let go of Marcel. "It's all yours now," he said, putting his arm around Monique, and leading her away.

A hand gripped his arm and pulled it away from Monique.

He turned, furious. "Leave me alone, Marcel, I've had enough!"

"I want my sister!" Marcel said.

"And I want my wife!" Jean said.

"You turn your back on me, and you'll be sorry!" Marcel almost shrieked.

Jean began to lead Monique away again. This time he was gripped by the shoulder and twisted a round.

"All right, Marcel, if that's the way you want it!" Jean said, and struck out blindly. He felt the impact of his hand on Marcel's face.

"No, please Jean, please!" Monique was crying beside him.

"Keep out of our way," Jean said, while Marcel staggered backwards.

"I don't want you to get hurt."

Marcel lunged towards him, and Jean hit him again. Marcel fell back against the side of the truck, but straightened himself immediately, and just as Jean was coming close enough to take a good swing, he stuck his leg out.

Jean tripped over it and fell flat on his stomach. The right side of his face hit the earth.

Before he had time to pick himself up, a tremendous weight landed on his back. He bent his arms, hoping that he could act quicker than Marcel, and, pressing against the earth with his hands, and straining every muscle in his body, he jerked himself upward and over onto his side. Marcel fell away from him onto his back.

In a second, Jean was sitting on his chest, battering his face with his fists.

Marcel's arms flailed the air helplessly, in a vain attempt to return the blows. Then he tried to raise himself up onto his elbows.

Jean moved his legs forward, and planted his feet on Marcel's arms.

He could feel Marcel wriggling beneath him, moving his hips and his legs in an effort to throw him off balance and raise himself from the ground.

He could hear Monique's cries from somewhere behind him, and others too. Of course, by this time, the whole village was here.

"Stop, Jean! Stop!" Monique cried.

He felt Marcel's body growing limp beneath him, and, suddenly aware of the blood on his face, he stopped hitting him and stood up.

Marcel lay there, groaning a little.

Three men came up to examine him. "He looks worse than he is," one of them said.

Jean could feel the people closing in behind him. He looked up and saw a crowd, mostly women; he couldn't say how many. It was strange how they were always the first to appear at a fight.

For a moment he was afraid, for he could not judge their mood. Then he saw Monique standing a little apart from the rest. She ran over to him and then to Marcel.

"He's all right, Monique," one of the men said. "We'll take him home."

"This is his truck," she said.

Jean helped to put him inside.

He heard one of the women say: "Marcel didn't put up a very good fight."

"No," another woman answered. "He's not the man his father was."

A man said: "Poor Marcel..... the apple of his mother's eye..."

Jean was amazed at their remarks. He could not understand why they weren't angry with him. Here I've humiliated the man in public, he

thought. Isn't anyone going to do anything about it?

But nobody moved.

"Come on, Monique," he said. He was feeling very tired.

She followed him into the house.

CHAPTER 13

"You have a bruise on your cheek," Monique said.

"Is that all?" he asked mearily, flopping onto the red sofa.

"This place is filthy," she said.

"Monique, why did you let me do it?"

"Take me away?" she asked surprised.

"No, I had to do that."

"What, then? You mean this fight?"

"Aren't you upset about it?" he asked.

She sat down beside him. "Yes. But I suppose it had to happen.

And now that it has happened, in a way, I'm glad it did."

"You're glad! Is that what you said?"

"I don't know how to explain it," she went on. "In a way... it sort of brought things out into the open. Even though it was horrible, and I was so afraid you would really hurt him..... still, it was there, it was real. Everybody recognized it for what it was, a fight over me. There isn't anything wrong really when two men fight over a woman, even when one of them is the husband and the other the brother."

"You mean, if every day Marcel tried to take you away from me, and every day I beat him up, and even hurt him, you would still prefer that to what I've been doing this past year?"

"Oh, infinitely," she said.

He stared at her. "How strange!"

"Why is it so strange?" She seemed surprised at the remark. "This I can understand. The other, nobody can understand." She paused. "I shouldn't have let you take me away, though."

"Why not?" he asked, taking her hand.

"But things happened so quickly, and your visit was so unexpected. I just didn't have time to think straight."

He asked stiffly. "Were you going to issue an ultimatum?"

She frowned, as though thinking over his question. "I was going to make you promise that you wouldn't...."

"Yes," he interrupted. "I thought so." Then he let go of her hand.

"I've made you angry," she said.

"It's just that you're so naive," he exclaimed impatiently. "When will you ever learn?"

"But...what?"

"You thought that you could extract a promise from me, and immediately my whole attitude to Marcel would be changed, is that right?" he asked, marvelling at her innocence.

"I don't know about your attitude," she said. "I wanted you to stop doing what you've been doing."

"Just to please you," he said. "As though it had been a little game."

"Well, couldn't you stop it just to please me, for my sake, couldn't you?" she asked tearfully.

"Monique," he drew her close to him. "Don't you see that I've got to make this decision myself. That it can't be imposed on me by anyone

else? Not even by you?" He kissed her gently on the forehead.

She did not return the gesture.

"You don't understand, do you?" he said.

"You're the one who doesn't understand."

She got up and went into the kitchen. He stretched out on the sofa and lit a cigarette.

Monique came back. "I'm going to get some food, there isn't a thing to eat."

"Want some money?" he asked her.

She nodded.

"There's two thousand francs in the top drawer of our dresser," he said. "Take it all."

It was not until after she had left that he realized he had forgotten to ask her about her visit to the doctor. True, she had told her mother that there was nothing wrong with her, but then her mother had said something queer... what was it now?... At the time he had been wondering how he would get Monique away. She had said, "Is that why you're staying?" Was that it? What did the state of her health have to do with her staying there or coming home with him? And in all the excitement over Marcel, he had forgotten to ask her about it. What was she thinking now? That he didn't care enough to ask her why she had found it necessary to go to the doctor? Supposing she thought that? Supposing she had used the shopping trip as an excuse to leave the house and was now on the way back to her mother's?

Jean got up from the sofa, and paced up and down the room. It had all seemed so clear to him the night before. He had planned to go there, to talk things over with her and her mother, to persuade her firmly but gently. He had not meant to be rude, he had not meant to take her by force, he had not meant to get into a fight with Marcel, and he had not meant to start an argument with Monique... But what was the use? Why not just go? Why not give up? Why not leave her now, before she got back, (if she was coming back), he could pack a bag and be off before... And then spend the rest of his life knowing that he had failed her..... as he had failed Béri? No, he couldn't do it. But Monique would just go home and live with her mother and Marcel. No more fights, no more misunderstandings. Everyone would be much happier. Would she really be happier though? Hadn't she said: "I was waiting for you to come for me..." Could he run now? Wouldn't he be failing himself?

He got down on his knees and groped around on the floor under the sofa. He knew he had put the book down there earlier this morning--if only Monique would move a table over here--he must have kicked it under by mistake... Here it was, finally. He pulled it out and dusted it off against his pants. Then he sat down on the sofa and began to read from where he had left off; Chapter 9, "In the Cathedral".

When Monique came back he had finished the chapter, and was reading it a second time. He laid the book down immediately.

"I almost thought you'd run out on me," he said.

She stood in the middle of the room, holding the heavy shopping bag,

looking very surprised. Then she gave a little laugh, put the bag down on the floor, and ran towards him.

He stood up to meet her and took her in his arms. "Still angry with me?" he asked.

She shook her head. "Did you really think I'd do a thing like that?"

"Not really," he said. "But..."

"What?" She looked up at him smiling.

He shook his head and, bending down, caressed her cheek with his mouth.

She pushed away from him, laughing. Then she picked up the bag of groceries and went into the kitchen.

He followed her. "Monique," he said, "did I start that fight?" He had told himself a number of times that it had been Marcel's fault, that he had been to blame.

"You struck the first blow," she said.

"But you think I was justified in doing it?"

"Well....." she said doubtfully. "I suppose so.... But why are you so worried about it?"

"It bothers me," he said. "I didn't know I could be that brutal."

Monique said: "But he's all right. M. Poussin told me he just had a black eye and a small cut across his lips, and a nose-bleed. That was where all the blood you saw was coming from. Are you hungry?" she asked him.

"Yes," he said.

"It's a bit early for lunch, but perhaps we can have a sandwich."

He sat down at the kitchen table. Then he finally asked her the question which had been on his mind.... "Why did you go to the doctor this morning?"

She blushed. "I hadn't been feeling very well."

"How do you mean?" he asked.

"Well...." She seemed uncertain as to how to proceed. "I'd been feeling a little faint and tired..."

"And that's why you went?" Jean asked disbelievingly.

Monique sat down opposite him.

"I lied to mother," she said.

"When?"

"When I said there was nothing wrong."

"Monique darling, what's the matter?" Jean asked, reaching for her hands.

"Nothing," she said. "At least, it's nothing bad. Not really, that is."

"For heaven's sake!" Jean said impatiently. "There's something wrong with you, but it's not serious, at least not really--Monique, please explain!"

"You're going to be very angry..."

"But why?" Jean could not understand her.

"Promise me you won't be angry."

"But why should I be?"

"Well... something you didn't want to happen has happened."

Suddenly, he realized what she meant. "Not...." he said, and stopped.

"I'm going to have a baby," she said.

He looked at her for a moment, taking her words in, silently, noticing her pink cheeks and the soft lines of her face.

She hid her face in her hands.

The gesture moved him. "O my darling," he said, and came over to her, and knelt beside her, and put his arms around her waist. "O my darling...."

She uncovered her face and took his head in her hands. "You're not angry then," she said.

"How could I be?" he asked, kissing her arms. "It's hardly your fault."

"Oh, I'm so happy," she said. "I thought you'd be awfully upset."

"About going to Paris?"

"Yes...."

"We can go later," he said quietly.

"Jean... you've changed!" She looked into his eyes.

"Have I?" he said, standing up. "Well, perhaps I have, a little."

"But what about all your plans?"

"They're still there, silly," he pulled her hair playfully. "I don't have to scrap them completely, do I?"

She took his hand from her hair and kissed it.

"There'll just be a small delay of nine months," he said. "No, I

suppose it would have to be at least a year."

"Oh yes," Monique laughed.

He smiled at her. "How strange," he said.

"Why?"

"That I should feel so contented. As though I'd really accomplished something."

"But you have," she said, laughing and blushing.

He shook his head. "Why aren't I upset as you expected me to be? All of a sudden it doesn't matter any more. I almost feel free again.... the way I felt when I first went to Paris. But maybe I'm just tired of trying to force things into a particular shape, of trying to force myself how marvellous," he mused, "to live naturally, easily...." He paused. "I've been holding the reins too tightly. I should have let my horse find his own way home."

"What do you mean?"

He realized that he had been speaking to himself rather than to her.

"It isn't important," he said. "Where's that sandwich you promised me?"

She fixed it for him and poured him a glass of wine.

"And you?" he asked.

"I hate to say this, but I'm supposed to be drinking milk."

"Milk?! Oh no!" Jean laughed.

"I am!" she said, and pulled a bottle of milk out of the small ice-box. "A big glass," he said.

Jean laughed so hard at this that he swallowed a piece of bread the wrong way. He choked and coughed for a few seconds while Monique slapped him on the back.

"And the funny thing is," she said, munching on a slice of ham, "that Mother Alicia asked me why I hadn't had a child yet, and finally I told her."

"You're not serious!" Jean said.

"Yes, it was just awful... But anyway, I think it's funny because here I was, pregnant all the time."

Jean laughed. "I think you ought to write her a note and tell her you'll name the child after her, if it's a girl."

"Don't be bad," Monique said, shaking her fork in his face. "What shall we do this afternoon?"

"Well, I expect we both have some work to do," Jean said. "You can spend your time emptying the ashtrays," she smiled, "while I... What day is it?"

"Tuesday," she said.

"Tuesday," he repeated. "I must collect fruit then.... If I still have some customers."

"You haven't been going at all, have you?"

"No," he said.

"Why not?"

"I didn't feel like it," he said. "There'll probably be the devil to pay at first, but I imagine most of the people will calm down after a while."

"Marcel went yesterday, but I don't know whether he got any fruit from your usual customers."

"He probably did, but he certainly can't handle all of his and all of mine, at least not very well, and they know that as well as I do."

"Will you go on Thursday too?" she asked anxiously.

He smiled. "No, I won't go on Thursday," he said.

"Jean, I'm so happy I could cry."

He came over to her and kissed her on the lips. "Don't do that," he said.

She clung to him, pressing his body against hers. "You won't be late this afternoon, will you?"

"No dear," he said, and kissed her again. "But I must go now."

She followed him to the door. "Must you?" she pleaded.

He almost gave in to her then, but the desire to work was stronger in him. "It's just for a few hours, Monique. I'll be back as early as I can. Be good and," he added, "be careful."

She smiled and let him go.

CHAPTER 14

Jean thought, on the way back from work, that he would stop by to see Marcel. That would be the proper thing to do. But somehow he couldn't bring himself to do it. And besides, they had said he was all right. It occurred to him, then, that he was asking too much of himself. Even if he conceded that he had forced himself to play a role for which, by nature, he was not suited, still he had played it convincingly for a year and, like a barnacle, it had stuck to him. He had realized the immensity of his problem, only that morning, when instead of behaving calmly, rationally, tactfully, and even graciously, he had immediately antagonized Mme. La Fargue. And then there was the fight. The fight was the worst thing of all. It seemed to him now that he had been living in an unconscious daze since the beginning of his marriage, and it was only when Monique finally left him that he had gradually come to feel a moral revulsion for his plan. It was almost as though he had lied to Monique so many times that the lie had become, for him, the reality. And then she had suddenly removed herself and there had been a nothing in her place.

But it was not until that day with Ninette, when the girl had, as it were, thrown himself up to himself, that he had been forced to see the truth. She had made him feel like a crushed ant hill. It was not her scornfulness of him that had done it, but her calm and accurate revelation of that secret which he had been guarding from everyone in the

village and, ultimately, from himself. She had said that his idea was natural, ordinary, and perfectly easy to understand.... and she had made it all seem so childish. Ninette was, in a sense, the person he would have liked to have been. She, in spite of her conventional home, in spite of her well-established place in the village, was the born rebel, and he was not, and he might as well admit it, even though it pained him to do so. When Monique had told him about the baby, he had felt different. He had felt glad to be a part of the normal ordinary process of living. But now he doubted his happiness, he doubted his decision not to go to Paris, he doubted everything.

Monique seemed immediately to sense that his mood had changed. He tried to be as he had been that morning, but he couldn't. Something had gone out of him.

"What has happened?" Monique asked him... "Were the people angry with you?"

"No," he said. But their evening was spoiled.

He knew what she must be imagining--that he had changed his mind about the baby, that he resented it now; and since, in a sense, that was true, he could find nothing reassuring to say to her.

They ate their meal in silence. Afterwards, she cried. Clumsily, he took her in his arms, and tried, without speech, to comfort her. But she drew away, and began to complain about the china that was gone, and the plates on the walls, and the curtains, and the knickknacks. "Marcel

village and, ultimately, from himself. She had said that his idea was natural, ordinary, and perfectly easy to understand.... and she had made it all seem so childish. Ninette was, in a sense, the person he would have liked to have been. She, in spite of her conventional home, in spite of her well-established place in the village, was the born rebel, and he was not, and he might as well admit it, even though it pained him to do so. When Monique had told him about the baby, he had felt different. He had felt glad to be a part of the normal ordinary process of living. But now he doubted his happiness, he doubted his decision not to go to Paris, he doubted everything.

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told me," she said. Jean tried to explain about how he had felt that day when she had left him. He said he was sorry. And then she said that she had gone to get some more milk that afternoon, and Mme. Canotte had said she had seen Jean and Ninette together last Friday, and wasn't it a shame. "Is it true?" Monique asked him, "is it true?"

"Yes," he said, and Monique began to cry again.

"But only that we were together," he said, "nothing more, I swear it.... there is nothing between us."

But she did not believe him, and she would not let him make love to her that night.

So he lay on his side of the bed and thought about the fight. He could not put it out of his mind. For Monique, it had been something quite simple and natural. It had been a fight over her. For the people watching, it had been the same kind of thing, a test of physical strength, and their sympathies were automatically for the victor no matter who he was. This was what Jean could not understand. Shouldn't they, quite logically, have hated him for beating up Marcel? Why did they feel so differently about a physical battle?

For him, the fight had been the final jolt. He had known then, as he had never known before, the horror of having an enemy. The fight had embodied with startling clarity the rather abstract and intangible feud that had been going on between him and Marcel for a year. And he knew now that this was why he had been so glad about the baby. It had suddenly seemed to him that this was the only real thing he had ever made.

In his whole adult life, he had done nothing but destroy. First, unwittingly, it had been Béri, now it was Marcel, and it had almost been Monique too; it could still be Monique.

He turned to her and shook her. "Monique, can you forgive me? Have you forgiven me, Monique?"

She did not answer. He felt that, by her silence, he was condemned, and he fell asleep full of troubled thoughts.

A hand tapped him on the shoulder and a voice said, "Come". He turned in the bed and saw the figure of a man standing there, but he could not see the man's face.

"Where do you want me to go?" he asked.

"Don't ask, just come with me," the man said in a commanding voice.

He rose from the bed and followed the man out of the house. Outside, he stopped.

"I must go back for Monique," he said.

"No, this does not concern her," the man replied, and walked on.

Jean followed him. He could move his feet only with the greatest difficulty. The man walked on ahead. He wore black and his form was very indistinct. If only I could see his face, Jean thought. But he could not catch up with him.

"Who are you?" he asked the man. But the man would not answer.

"Where are you taking me?" Still the man would not answer.

They were on the main road, walking towards St. Paul. Jean was afraid. He felt that if he called for help, no one would come to him.

It was very dark and very still. They walked on.

Jean tried to turn around and go back, but he could not make his body face the other way.

The man called, without looking behind him: "It's too late to go back now."

Jean's fear increased with every step he took, and it became harder and harder for him to move his feet. "Please help me," he said to the figure in front.

Again there was no answer.

Jean could go no further. "I must stop here then," he said.

The man turned slightly, but still Jean could not see his face.

"Very well," he said. "Open your eyes."

"But they are...." Jean started to say, and then felt them opening.

Before him, he saw the fig tree. It was black and its branches had shrivelled. The leaves fallen on the ground were dry and brittle. When he picked one of them up, it broke in his hand.

"I know who you are," he said to the man. "You're Alphonse Béri!"

The man came very close to him, and Jean looked into his face.

That's silly, he thought, it isn't Béri at all. The features were quite familiar and the man had a small dark mustache. Jean felt immensely reassured. But who was it? He had to know. Who was it?

"Jean, wake up Jean!" Monique's voice was loud and urgent. "Wake up!"

He turned over in the bed, and opened his eyes. Monique was shaking

him. "You must have had a bad dream," she said. "Are you all right?"

"Yes," he said. "Go back to sleep. I'm sorry I woke you up."

Monique lay down on her stomach with her head away from him.

He looked at the luminous face of his watch. It was ten minutes past two. He pushed the top sheet away from his body and took off his pajama top. He was sweating profusely. He lay back and closed his eyes. It was only a dream he said to himself. It was only a dream. But just supposing.... he banished the thought and tried to relax his body. He could feel the knots of muscles in his arms and in his legs and in his stomach. He tried to let his breath out easily. The whole thing was so absurd. But still.... No, Jean, don't be a fool. He tried once more to go back to sleep. He dozed off for a few minutes, then woke up with a start. "I just can't, I just can't," he said, half-aloud, and threw his legs out of the bed.

Monique switched on the light beside her. "What's the matter, Jean?" she asked.

He stared at her blankly. "Nothing," he said.

"But why are you getting dressed now? You don't have to go to the market yet. It's not four-thirty, is it?"

He said: "It's twenty minutes past two." He had pulled his shirt on over his bare chest and was tucking it into his pants. "I won't be long," he said.

"But Jean," Monique swung her legs out of bed. "Jean... are you angry with me? What is it? Where are you going?"

"Never mind," Jean said. "Go back to sleep."

He walked out of the room. Monique trailed after him in her long nightgown.

"Please, Jean, tell me where you're going." She followed him to the door.

He pushed her back into the room, and closed the door behind him. Then he ran down the stairs and into the truck.

He heard Monique's voice calling him from somewhere over his head. He did not answer. There was nothing he could have said.

He pushed his foot down hard on the gas. He had a feeling that he had been waiting to have this dream for many months. He tried to ask himself what it was that he expected to see. Did he really expect a black and withered tree to be standing there as it had in his dream? Of course not. But what then? What was he afraid of?

He parked the truck by the side of the hill, being careful to leave his rear lights on, though it seemed highly improbable that anyone would be on the road at this hour of the morning.

He took his flashlight and turned it on, then he stumbled up the hill, almost on hands and knees, in his hurry. He swung around the tall boulder as though it were not there, and then he stopped, leaning against it, and focused his flashlight on the tree. It was as green as ever. He walked slowly towards it.

The straggly branches were covered with thick, healthy-looking leaves. He began to circle the tree quite slowly, flashing the beam of

light in among the leaves and into the joints of the branches. He felt tired and upset and angry with himself for having given in to this impulse, and he had described an almost complete circle, having found absolutely nothing. In anger and desperation, he shook one of the branches, separating it from a rather thick branch which grew quite close to it.

"I do believe," he whispered, "I do believe...." and still holding the branch out and away from the other, he stepped in between them, guiding the light towards the place where he thought he had seen something.

At first he could not find it, then, close in, towards the trunk of the tree, the beam of light picked out a tiny green bulb-shaped thing. It was a fig. And there to the left of it, almost indiscernible among the leaves, was another.

He stared at the two figs for a moment. Then he did a silly thing, entirely in keeping with the whole ridiculous outing; he knelt down on the earth and kissed it. Afterwards, he stretched himself out on it, lying on his stomach with his head towards the tree, and laughed.

He did not know how long he had stayed like that, just a few minutes at the most, it seemed, before he sat up and reached in his pocket for a cigarette.

Oh, what a relief! he thought, and realized immediately that he had expected that tree never to bear fruit. When he had had that horrible experience in the church in Paris, when for a moment he had seen the priest as Alphonse Beri, when the man had pointed his finger at him and said, "Cursed be the tree, it shall wither and die"; when this had

happened, the intensity of his emotion at the time, the almost unbearable feeling of guilt, had somehow caused him to see himself as the fig tree, and more particularly since he had planted this fig tree here with love and care before he had left the village. The text had seemed quite obviously to be made for him, to have been chosen, to have been delivered that evening especially for him, and, somehow, in that deep irrational part of himself which he had always suppressed and tried to reason away, somewhere there, it had planted its roots, it had grown to have a greater and greater significance until he was unable to find a moment's peace until he knew with an ever-increasing terrifying certainty that the pointing finger had condemned him, as the fig tree had been condemned. But now.... he saw that there was life in Monique and in the tree.

He stood up and stretched himself, then he listened quietly for a moment. He thought he had heard voices at the bottom of the hill.

"Jean, Jean!" a voice called. It was Monique.

How silly... Why hadn't he thought that she would come after him?

"I'm up here," he called back. He could tell there was somebody with her. It couldn't be Marcel, and it wasn't her mother. The steps were heavy like a man's.

He walked to the boulder and flashed the light down the path. Monique was struggling up it, followed by the mayor.

"Be careful!" he shouted. "Listen, there's no need for you to come up."

But she paid no heed to him. She doesn't trust me to tell her why

I am here, he thought, so she's coming to see for herself. Well, let her, and the mayor too.

He reached down to help her up. The mayor was visibly tired.

"Heavens, boy... what are you doing up here?" he asked between breaths.

"Come and see," Jean said, enjoying in advance the startled expression he knew he would see on the mayor's face.

They pushed past the boulder, and Jean said: "That's all it is."

Monique and M. Bertholdi stared at the tree. Then they stared at Jean.

He laughed. "You really are surprised, aren't you?" he said, and put his arm around Monique's shoulder. "Come, I want to show you something." He drew her towards the branch where the figs were growing.

M. Bertholdi said: "That tree looks like you planted it just before you went to Paris. Am I right?"

Jean nodded. "Now you know why I made you promise me not to cut down your wild fig tree...."

"You wanted to use that fruit to fertilize yours," M. Bertholdi smiled.

"Well, it was your tree that gave me the idea of planting this one," Jean said. "You see, I wanted something of my own that nobody else knew about. And then, when I came back from Paris, I thought that Monique would laugh at me if I told her about it.... and besides, it just didn't seem like me." He paused, then he said: "I had been expecting it to

bear fruit about two weeks ago, but you see the figs have only just come. He looked at Monique. "Now you know where I went last Wednesday afternoon."

"But why didn't you tell me?" she cried. "I think it's a lovely idea!"

"I think it's slightly peculiar myself," Jean said.

M. Bertholdi laughed. Then he said quite seriously: "Jean, if I give you a part of my land, the part with the caprifig tree, would you consider staying here rather than going to Paris?"

"Do you mean it?" Jean asked, overwhelmed by the man's kindness.

"Of course. I always thought you loved the land, you know, though you'd never admit it. Why shouldn't you have some land of your own? It certainly wouldn't be any great loss to me. However, I would impose one condition on you."

And here's the snag, Jean thought. I knew it was too good to be true.

The mayor went on. "I would insist that you stay here for five years before you become the unqualified owner of that portion of land. At the end of each year I would give you two acres. If, however, you should decide to go to Paris before the end of the five-year term, I would have the right to take back from you all the land which you would have received. Does that seem unreasonable to you?"

"No--" Jean said. "But...."

"You're not sure you would want to stick to the agreement?"

"Five years...." Jean said, thoughtfully.

"If, of course, at the end of that time, you should still want to go to Paris, the land would still be yours."

"But why do you want so much to have me stay?" Jean asked.

"Because I had always hoped..." the mayor seemed to be groping for words, "I had hoped that you would eventually become one of us, even though you seemed purposely to set yourself apart. I thought that this was the only way you could ever find real happiness, real satisfaction. So, when Mme. La Fargue told me that you and Monique wanted to get married, I was very pleased. I tried to convince her that the marriage would be a happy one. And then," he said, stroking his long mustache, "all the trouble began and I didn't know what to do. I had given her to think that you would cooperate with her--I had no reason to feel differently. She hasn't spoken to me in six months now." He put both hands on Jean's shoulders. "I want to show her that you can still make good on your own without getting in Marcel's way. If you don't go to Paris, you won't need such a big trade. The commission which you will continue to get from me, and the profits you make from selling fruit will surely be enough to keep you. And just think," M. Bertholdi added, "you'll be able to look forward to the day when you'll have your own land."

"I've decided to stop warring with Marcel anyway," Jean said. "And Monique is pregnant, so we'll have to stay another year..."

M. Bertholdi kissed her on both cheeks. "I'm so glad," he said.

"What will Ninette think of this?" Jean asked.

"My giving you the land?"

Jean nodded.

"She has nothing to say about it," The mayor looked down at the ground. "I told her that if she insisted on going to Paris to live, she had no right to any of my land, either now or later. She doesn't give two centimes for it anyway."

So she told him, Jean thought. "When is she leaving?"

M. Bertholdi looked at him. "She's already gone. She took the night train."

"But she's not going to stay there forever, is she?" Monique asked.

M. Bertholdi smiled. "Forever? No. God will see to that. But she won't come back here to live." He sighed deeply. "So you see, Jean, you're the only child I have left."

Jean was embarrassed by that remark. Even when he was a young boy, he had never thought of M. Bertholdi as his adopted father, although the mayor himself had suggested that he should.

"But I'm not..." he began.

M. Bertholdi smiled again. "No," he said, hesitating a little, "no".

The hesitancy in his voice surprised Jean; and then, he suddenly thought, but supposing.... Oh no. He quickly dismissed the idea--that's perfectly ridiculous--he's just a lonely old man who always wanted a son. And now, of course, that Ninette has walked out on him....

"May I think it over?" he asked.

"Oh, Jean," Monique said, obviously disappointed.

"Of course you may. And if you decide to accept the offer, I'll go to the lawyer tomorrow and draw up a contract. And remember this, Jean. I'm used to you, and I trust you. It means a lot to me to have you working on my land."

M. Bertholdi smiled and patted him on the arm. He seemed to be moved by his own generous gesture. Drawing a handkerchief from his pocket, he blew his nose loudly. "I hope you'll decide to go through with it, Jean," he said. Then he left them, still holding his handkerchief to his face. They could hear his heavy shoes going slowly down the hill.

"Jean, you will, won't you?" Monique turned to him.

"Well, I suppose so," Jean said. "What would I really have to lose if I changed my mind except a few acres of land?" He went on: "I have a lot of explaining to do to you, Monique, and you won't like what I have to say, but perhaps you'll understand. And if you don't...."

She wouldn't let him finish. "But I will, I will!" she cried. "I promise I will!"

Jean laughed and held her tightly. "And another thing.... I don't expect things will ever be right between your mother and me, and certainly not between Marcel and me, but I believe I owe them both an apology, and I intend to make it," he said.

"Oh Jean, I'm so glad," Monique whispered, as they started down the hill.