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CONFESSION OF A CHILD OF THE CENTURY  
(Confession d'un Enfant du Siecle)

By ALFRED DE MUSSET

With a Preface by HENRI DE BORNIER, of the French Academy

## **ALFRED DE MUSSET**

A poet has no right to play fast and loose with his genius. It does not belong to him, it belongs to the Almighty; it belongs to the world and to a coming generation. At thirty De Musset was already an old man, seeking in artificial stimuli the youth that would not spring again. Coming from a literary family the zeal of his house had eaten him up; his passion had burned itself out and his heart with it. He had done his work; it mattered little to him or to literature whether the curtain fell on his life's drama in 1841 or in 1857.

Alfred de Musset, by virtue of his genial, ironical temperament, eminently clear brain, and undying achievements, belongs to the great poets of the ages. We to-day do not approve the timbre of his epoch: that impertinent, somewhat irritant mask, that redundant rhetoric, that occasional disdain for the metre. Yet he remains the greatest poete de l'amour, the most spontaneous, the most sincere, the most emotional singer of the tender passion that modern times has produced.

Born of noble parentage on December 11, 1810—his full name being Louis Charles Alfred de Musset—the son of De Musset-Pathai, he received his education at the College Henri IV, where, among others, the Duke of Orleans was his schoolmate. When only eighteen he was introduced into the Romantic 'cénacle' at Nodier's. His first work, 'Les Contes d'Espagne et d'Italie' (1829), shows reckless daring in the choice of subjects quite in the spirit of Le Sage, with a dash of the dandified impertinence that mocked the foibles of the old Romanticists. However, he presently abandoned this style for the more subjective strain of 'Les Voeux Steyiles, Octave, Les Secretes Pensees de Rafael, Namouna, and Rolla', the last two being very eloquent at times, though immature. Rolla (1833) is one of the strongest and most depressing of his works; the sceptic regrets the faith he has lost the power to regain, and realizes in lurid flashes the desolate emptiness of his own heart. At this period the crisis of his life was reached. He accompanied George Sand to Italy, a rupture between them occurred, and De Musset returned to Paris alone in 1834.

More subdued sadness is found in 'Les Nuits' (1832-1837), and in 'Espoir en Dieu' (1838), etc., and his 'Lettre a Lamartine' belongs to the most beautiful pages of French literature. But henceforth his production grows more sparing and in form less romantic, although 'Le Rhin Allemand', for example, shows that at times he can still gather up all his powers. The poet becomes lazy and morose, his will is sapped by a wild and reckless life, and one is more than once tempted to wish that his lyre had ceased to sing.

De Musset's prose is more abundant than his lyrics or his dramas. It is of immense value, and owes its chief significance to the clearness with which it exhibits the progress of his ethical disintegration. In 'Emmeline' (1837) we have a rather dangerous juggling with the psychology of love. Then follows a study of simultaneous love, 'Les Deux Mattresses' (1838), quite in the spirit of Jean Paul. He then wrote three sympathetic depictions of Parisian Bohemia: 'Frederic et Bernadette, Mimi Pinson, and Le Secret de Javotte', all in 1838. 'Le Fils de Titien' (1838) and 'Croiselles' (1839) are carefully elaborated historical novelettes; the latter is considered one of his best works, overflowing with romantic spirit, and contrasting in this respect strangely with 'La Mouche' (1853), one of the last flickerings of his imagination. 'Maggot' (1838) bears marks of the influence of George Sand; 'Le Merle Blanc' (1842) is a sort of allegory dealing with their quarrel. 'Pierre et Camille' is a pretty but slight tale of a deaf-mute's love. His greatest work, 'Confession d'un Enfant du Siecle', crowned with acclaim by the French Academy, and classic for all time, was written in 1836, when the poet, somewhat recovered from the shock, relates his unhappy Italian experience. It is an ambitious and deeply interesting work, and shows whither his dread of all moral compulsion and self-control was leading him.

De Musset also wrote some critical essays, witty and satirical in tone, in which his genius appears in another light. It is not generally known that he was the translator into French of De Quincey's 'Confessions of an Opium Eater' (1828). He was also a prominent contributor to the 'Revue des Deux Mondes.' In 1852 he was elected to the French Academy, but hardly ever appeared at the sessions. A confrere once made the remark: "De Musset frequently absents himself," whereupon it is said another Immortal answered, "And frequently absinthe's himself!"

While Brunetiere, Lemaitre, and others consider De Musset a great dramatist, Sainte-Beuve, singularly enough, does not appreciate him as a playwright. Theophile Gautier says about 'Un Caprice' (1847): "Since the days of Marivaux nothing has been produced in 'La Comedie Francaise' so fine, so delicate, so dainty, than this tender piece, this chef-d'oeuvre, long buried within the pages of a review; and we are greatly indebted to the Russians of St. Petersburg, that snow-covered Athens, for having dug up and revived it." Nevertheless, his blquette, 'La Nuit Venetienne', was outrageously treated at the Odeon. The opposition was exasperated by the recent success of Hugo's 'Hernani.' Musset was then in complete accord with the fundamental romantic conception that tragedy must mingle with comedy on the stage as well as in life, but he had too delicate a taste to yield to the extravagance of Dumas and the lesser romanticists. All his plays, by the way, were written for the 'Revue des Deux Mondes' between 1833 and 1850, and they did not win a definite place on the stage till the later years of the Second Empire. In some comedies the dialogue is unequalled by any writer since the days of Beaumarchais. Taine says that De Musset has more real originality in some respects than Hugo, and possesses truer dramatic genius. Two or three of his comedies will probably hold the stage longer than any dramatic work of the romantic school. They contain the quintessence of romantic imaginative art; they show in full flow that unchecked freedom of fancy which, joined to the spirit of realistic comedy, produces the modern French drama. Yet De Musset's prose has in greater measure the qualities that endure.

The Duke of Orleans created De Musset Librarian in the Department of the Interior. It was sometimes stated that there was no library at all. It is certain that it was a sinecure, though the pay, 3,000 francs, was small. In 1848 the Duke had the bad taste to ask for his resignation, but the Empire repaired the injury. Alfred de Musset died in Paris, May 2, 1857. HENRI DE BORNIER de l'Academie Francaise.

# THE CONFESSIONS OF A CHILD OF THE CENTURY

## BOOK 1.

### PART I

#### CHAPTER I

##### TO THE READER

Before the history of any life can be written, that life must be lived; so that it is not my life that I am now writing. Attacked in early youth by an abominable moral malady, I here narrate what happened to me during the space of three years. Were I the only victim of that disease, I would say nothing, but as many others suffer from the same evil, I write for them, although I am not sure that they will give heed to me. Should my warning be unheeded, I shall still have reaped the fruit of my agonizing in having cured myself, and, like the fox caught in a trap, shall have gnawed off my captive foot.

## CHAPTER II

### REFLECTIONS

During the wars of the Empire, while husbands and brothers were in Germany, anxious mothers gave birth to an ardent, pale, and neurotic generation. Conceived between battles, reared amid the noises of war, thousands of children looked about them with dull eyes while testing their limp muscles. From time to time their blood-stained fathers would appear, raise them to their gold-laced bosoms, then place them on the ground and remount their horses.

The life of Europe centred in one man; men tried to fill their lungs with the air which he had breathed. Yearly France presented that man with three hundred thousand of her youth; it was the tax to Caesar; without that troop behind him, he could not follow his fortune. It was the escort he needed that he might scour the world, and then fall in a little valley on a deserted island, under weeping willows.

Never had there been so many sleepless nights as in the time of that man; never had there been seen, hanging over the ramparts of the cities, such a nation of desolate mothers; never was there such a silence about those who spoke of death. And yet there was never such joy, such life, such fanfares of war, in all hearts. Never was there such pure sunlight as that which dried all this blood. God made the sun for this man, men said; and they called it the Sun of Austerlitz. But he made this sunlight himself with his ever-booming guns that left no clouds but those which succeed the day of battle.

It was this air of the spotless sky, where shone so much glory, where glistened so many swords, that the youth of the time breathed. They well knew that they were destined to the slaughter; but they believed that Murat was invulnerable, and the Emperor had been seen to cross a bridge where so many bullets whistled that they wondered if he were mortal. And even if one must die, what did it matter? Death itself was so beautiful, so noble, so illustrious, in its battle-scarred purple! It borrowed the color of hope, it reaped so many immature harvests that it became young, and there was no more old age. All the cradles of France, as indeed all its tombs, were armed with bucklers; there were no more graybeards, there were only corpses or demi-gods.

Nevertheless the immortal Emperor stood one day on a hill watching seven nations engaged in mutual slaughter, not knowing whether he would be master of all the world or only half. Azrael passed, touched the warrior with the tip of his wing, and hurled him into the ocean. At the noise of his fall, the dying Powers sat up in their beds of pain; and stealthily advancing with furtive tread, the royal spiders made partition of Europe, and the purple of Caesar became the motley of Harlequin.

Just as the traveller, certain of his way, hastes night and day through rain and sunlight, careless of vigils or of dangers, but, safe at home and seated before the fire, is seized by extreme lassitude and can hardly drag himself to bed, so France, the widow of Caesar, suddenly felt her wound. She fell through sheer exhaustion, and lapsed into a coma so profound that her old kings, believing her dead, wrapped about her a burial shroud. The veterans, their hair whitened in service, returned exhausted, and the

hearths of deserted castles sadly flickered into life.

Then the men of the Empire, who had been through so much, who had lived in such carnage, kissed their emaciated wives and spoke of their first love. They looked into the fountains of their native fields and found themselves so old, so mutilated, that they bethought themselves of their sons, in order that these might close the paternal eyes in peace. They asked where they were; the children came from the schools, and, seeing neither sabres, nor cuirasses, neither infantry nor cavalry, asked in turn where were their fathers. They were told that the war was ended, that Caesar was dead, and that the portraits of Wellington and of Blucher were suspended in the ante-chambers of the consulates and the embassies, with this legend beneath: 'Salvatoribus mundi'.

Then came upon a world in ruins an anxious youth. The children were drops of burning blood which had inundated the earth; they were born in the bosom of war, for war. For fifteen years they had dreamed of the snows of Moscow and of the sun of the Pyramids.

They had not gone beyond their native towns; but had been told that through each gateway of these towns lay the road to a capital of Europe. They had in their heads a world; they saw the earth, the sky, the streets and the highways; but these were empty, and the bells of parish churches resounded faintly in the distance.

Pale phantoms, shrouded in black robes, slowly traversed the countryside; some knocked at the doors of houses, and, when admitted, drew from their pockets large, well-worn documents with which they evicted the tenants. From every direction came men still trembling with the fear that had seized them when they had fled twenty years before. All began to urge their claims, disputing loudly and crying for help; strange that a single death should attract so many buzzards.

The King of France was on his throne, looking here and there to see if he could perchance find a bee [symbol of Napoleon D.W.] in the royal tapestry. Some men held out their hats, and he gave them money; others extended a crucifix and he kissed it; others contented themselves with pronouncing in his ear great names of powerful families, and he replied to these by inviting them into his grand salle, where the echoes were more sonorous; still others showed him their old cloaks, when they had carefully effaced the bees, and to these he gave new robes.

The children saw all this, thinking that the spirit of Caesar would soon land at Cannes and breathe upon this larva; but the silence was unbroken, and they saw floating in the sky only the paleness of the lily. When these children spoke of glory, they met the answer:

"Become priests;" when they spoke of hope, of love, of power, of life:  
"Become priests."

And yet upon the rostrum came a man who held in his hand a contract between king and people. He began by saying that glory was a beautiful thing, and ambition and war as well; but there was something still more beautiful, and it was called liberty.

The children raised their heads and remembered that thus their grandfathers had spoken. They remembered having seen in certain obscure corners of the paternal home mysterious busts with long marble hair and a Latin inscription; they remembered how their grandsires shook their heads and spoke of streams of blood more terrible than those of the Empire. Something in that word liberty made their hearts beat with the memory of a terrible past and the hope of a glorious future.

They trembled at the word; but returning to their homes they encountered in the street three coffins which were being borne to Clamart; within were three young men who had pronounced that word liberty too distinctly.

A strange smile hovered on their lips at that sad sight; but other speakers, mounted on the rostrum, began publicly to estimate what ambition had cost and how very dear was glory; they pointed out the horror of war and called the battle-losses butcheries. They spoke so often and so long that all human illusions, like the trees in autumn, fell leaf by leaf about them, and those who listened passed their hands over their foreheads as if awakening from a feverish dream.

Some said: "The Emperor has fallen because the people wished no more of him;" others added: "The people wished the king; no, liberty; no, reason; no, religion; no, the English constitution; no, absolutism;" and the last one said: "No, none of these things, but simply peace."

Three elements entered into the life which offered itself to these children: behind them a past forever destroyed, still quivering on its ruins with all the fossils of centuries of absolutism; before them the aurora of an immense horizon, the first gleams of the future; and between these two worlds—like the ocean which separates the Old World from the New—something vague and floating, a troubled sea

filled with wreckage, traversed from time to time by some distant sail or some ship trailing thick clouds of smoke; the present, in a word, which separates the past from the future, which is neither the one nor the other, which resembles both, and where one can not know whether, at each step, one treads on living matter or on dead refuse.

It was in such chaos that choice had to be made; this was the aspect presented to children full of spirit and of audacity, sons of the Empire and grandsons of the Revolution.

As for the past, they would none of it, they had no faith in it; the future, they loved it, but how? As Pygmalion before Galatea, it was for them a lover in marble, and they waited for the breath of life to animate that breast, for blood to color those veins.

There remained then the present, the spirit of the time, angel of the dawn which is neither night nor day; they found him seated on a lime-sack filled with bones, clad in the mantle of egoism, and shivering in terrible cold. The anguish of death entered into the soul at the sight of that spectre, half mummy and half foetus; they approached it as does the traveller who is shown at Strasburg the daughter of an old count of Sarvenden, embalmed in her bride's dress: that childish skeleton makes one shudder, for her slender and livid hand wears the wedding-ring and her head decays enwreathed in orange-blossoms.

As on the approach of a tempest there passes through the forests a terrible gust of wind which makes the trees shudder, to which profound silence succeeds, so had Napoleon, in passing, shaken the world; kings felt their crowns oscillate in the storm, and, raising hands to steady them, found only their hair, bristling with terror. The Pope had travelled three hundred leagues to bless him in the name of God and to crown him with the diadem; but Napoleon had taken it from his hands. Thus everything trembled in that dismal forest of old Europe; then silence succeeded.

It is said that when you meet a mad dog, if you keep quietly on your way without turning, the dog will merely follow you a short distance growling and showing his teeth; but if you allow yourself to be frightened into a movement of terror, if you but make a sudden step, he will leap at your throat and devour you; that when the first bite has been taken there is no escaping him.

In European history it has often happened that a sovereign has made such a movement of terror and his people have devoured him; but if one had done it, all had not done it at the same time—that is to say, one king had disappeared, but not all royal majesty. Before the sword of Napoleon majesty made this movement, this gesture which ruins everything, not only majesty but religion, nobility, all power both human and divine.

Napoleon dead, human and divine power were reestablished, but belief in them no longer existed. A terrible danger lurks in the knowledge of what is possible, for the mind always goes farther. It is one thing to say: "That may be" and another thing to say: "That has been;" it is the first bite of the dog.

The fall of Napoleon was the last flicker of the lamp of despotism; it destroyed and it parodied kings as Voltaire the Holy Scripture. And after him was heard a great noise: it was the stone of St. Helena which had just fallen on the ancient world. Immediately there appeared in the heavens the cold star of reason, and its rays, like those of the goddess of the night, shedding light without heat, enveloped the world in a livid shroud.

There had been those who hated the nobles, who cried out against priests, who conspired against kings; abuses and prejudices had been attacked; but all that was not so great a novelty as to see a smiling people. If a noble or a priest or a sovereign passed, the peasants who had made war possible began to shake their heads and say: "Ah! when we saw this man in such a time and place he wore a different face." And when the throne and altar were mentioned, they replied: "They are made of four planks of wood; we have nailed them together and torn them apart." And when some one said: "People, you have recovered from the errors which led you astray; you have recalled your kings and your priests," they replied: "We have nothing to do with those prattlers." And when some one said "People, forget the past, work and obey," they arose from their seats and a dull jangling could be heard. It was the rusty and notched sabre in the corner of the cottage chimney. Then they hastened to add: "Then keep quiet, at least; if no one harms you, do not seek to harm." Alas! they were content with that.

But youth was not content. It is certain that there are in man two occult powers engaged in a death-struggle: the one, clear-sighted and cold, is concerned with reality, calculation, weight, and judges the past; the other is athirst for the future and eager for the unknown. When passion sways man, reason follows him weeping and warning, him of his danger; but when man listens to the voice of reason, when he stops at her request and says: "What a fool I am; where am I going?" passion calls to him: "Ah, must I die?"

A feeling of extreme uneasiness began to ferment in all young hearts. Condemned to inaction by the

powers which governed the world, delivered to vulgar pedants of every kind, to idleness and to ennui, the youth saw the foaming billows which they had prepared to meet, subside. All these gladiators glistening with oil felt in the bottom of their souls an insupportable wretchedness. The richest became libertines; those of moderate fortune followed some profession and resigned themselves to the sword or to the church. The poorest gave themselves up with cold enthusiasm to great thoughts, plunged into the frightful sea of aimless effort. As human weakness seeks association and as men are gregarious by nature, politics became mingled with it. There were struggles with the 'garde du corps' on the steps of the legislative assembly; at the theatre Talma wore a wig which made him resemble Caesar; every one flocked to the burial of a Liberal deputy.

But of the members of the two parties there was not one who, upon returning home, did not bitterly realize the emptiness of his life and the feebleness of his hands.

While life outside was so colorless and so mean, the inner life of society assumed a sombre aspect of silence; hypocrisy ruled in all departments of conduct; English ideas, combining gayety with devotion, had disappeared. Perhaps Providence was already preparing new ways, perhaps the herald angel of future society was already sowing in the hearts of women the seeds of human independence. But it is certain that a strange thing suddenly happened: in all the salons of Paris the men passed on one side and the women on the other; and thus, the one clad in white like brides, and the other in black like orphans, began to take measure of one another with the eye.

Let us not be deceived: that vestment of black which the men of our time wear is a terrible symbol; before coming to this, the armor must have fallen piece by piece and the embroidery flower by flower. Human reason has overthrown all illusions; but it bears in itself sorrow, in order that it may be consoled.

The customs of students and artists, those customs so free, so beautiful, so full of youth, began to experience the universal change. Men in taking leave of women whispered the word which wounds to the death: contempt. They plunged into the dissipation of wine and courtesans. Students and artists did the same; love was treated as were glory and religion: it was an old illusion. The grisette, that woman so dreamy, so romantic, so tender, and so sweet in love, abandoned herself to the counting-house and to the shop. She was poor and no one loved her; she needed gowns and hats and she sold herself. Oh! misery! the young man who ought to love her, whom she loved, who used to take her to the woods of Verrieres and Romainville, to the dances on the lawn, to the suppers under the trees; he who used to talk with her as she sat near the lamp in the rear of the shop on the long winter evenings; he who shared her crust of bread moistened with the sweat of her brow, and her love at once sublime and poor; he, that same man, after abandoning her, finds her after a night of orgy, pale and leaden, forever lost, with hunger on her lips and prostitution in her heart.

About this time two poets, whose genius was second only to that of Napoleon, consecrated their lives to the work of collecting the elements of anguish and of grief scattered over the universe. Goethe, the patriarch of a new literature, after painting in his *Weyther* the passion which leads to suicide, traced in his *Faust* the most sombre human character which has ever represented evil and unhappiness. His writings began to pass from Germany into France. From his studio, surrounded by pictures and statues, rich, happy, and at ease, he watched with a paternal smile his gloomy creations marching in dismal procession across the frontiers of France. Byron replied to him in a cry of grief which made Greece tremble, and hung *Manfred* over the abyss, as if oblivion were the solution of the hideous enigma with which he enveloped him.

Pardon, great poets! who are now but ashes and who sleep in peace! Pardon, ye demigods, for I am only a child who suffers. But while I write all this I can not but curse you. Why did you not sing of the perfume of flowers, of the voices of nature, of hope and of love, of the vine and the sun, of the azure heavens and of beauty? You must have understood life, you must have suffered; the world was crumbling to pieces about you; you wept on its ruins and you despaired; your mistresses were false; your friends calumniated, your compatriots misunderstood; your heart was empty; death was in your eyes, and you were the Colossi of grief. But tell me, noble Goethe, was there no more consoling voice in the religious murmur of your old German forests? You, for whom beautiful poesy was the sister of science, could not they find in immortal nature a healing plant for the heart of their favorite? You, who were a pantheist, and antique poet of Greece, a lover of sacred forms, could you not put a little honey in the beautiful vases you made; you who had only to smile and allow the bees to come to your lips? And thou, Byron, hadst thou not near Ravenna, under the orange-trees of Italy, under thy beautiful Venetian sky, near thy Adriatic, hadst thou not thy well-beloved? Oh, God! I who speak to you, who am only a feeble child, have perhaps known sorrows that you have never suffered, and yet I believe and hope, and still bless God.

When English and German ideas had passed thus over our heads there ensued disgust and mournful

silence, followed by a terrible convulsion. For to formulate general ideas is to change saltpetre into powder, and the Homeric brain of the great Goethe had sucked up, as an alembic, all the juice of the forbidden fruit. Those who did not read him, did not believe it, knew nothing of it. Poor creatures! The explosion carried them away like grains of dust into the abyss of universal doubt.

It was a denial of all heavenly and earthly facts that might be termed disenchantment, or if you will, despair; as if humanity in lethargy had been pronounced dead by those who felt its pulse. Like a soldier who is asked: "In what do you believe?" and who replies: "In myself," so the youth of France, hearing that question, replied: "In nothing."

Then formed two camps: on one side the exalted spirits, sufferers, all the expansive souls who yearned toward the infinite, bowed their heads and wept; they wrapped themselves in unhealthy dreams and nothing could be seen but broken reeds in an ocean of bitterness. On the other side the materialists remained erect, inflexible, in the midst of positive joys, and cared for nothing except to count the money they had acquired. It was but a sob and a burst of laughter, the one coming from the soul, the other from the body.

This is what the soul said:

"Alas! Alas! religion has departed; the clouds of heaven fall in rain; we have no longer either hope or expectation, not even two little pieces of black wood in the shape of a cross before which to clasp our hands. The star of the future is loath to appear; it can not rise above the horizon; it is enveloped in clouds, and like the sun in winter its disc is the color of blood, as in '93. There is no more love, no more glory. What heavy darkness over all the earth! And death will come ere the day breaks."

This is what the body said:

"Man is here below to satisfy his senses; he has more or less of white or yellow metal, by which he merits more or less esteem. To eat, to drink, and to sleep, that is life. As for the bonds which exist between men, friendship consists in loaning money; but one rarely has a friend whom he loves enough for that. Kinship determines inheritance; love is an exercise of the body; the only intellectual joy is vanity."

Like the Asiatic plague exhaled from the vapors of the Ganges, frightful despair stalked over the earth. Already Chateaubriand, prince of poesy, wrapping the horrible idol in his pilgrim's mantle, had placed it on a marble altar in the midst of perfumes and holy incense. Already the children were clenching idle hands and drinking in a bitter cup the poisoned brewage of doubt. Already things were drifting toward the abyss, when the jackals suddenly emerged from the earth. A deathly and infected literature, which had no form but that of ugliness, began to sprinkle with fetid blood all the monsters of nature.

Who will dare to recount what was passing in the colleges? Men doubted everything: the young men denied everything. The poets sang of despair; the youth came from the schools with serene brow, their faces glowing with health, and blasphemy in their mouths. Moreover, the French character, being by nature gay and open, readily assimilated English and German ideas; but hearts too light to struggle and to suffer withered like crushed flowers. Thus the seed of death descended slowly and without shock from the head to the bowels. Instead of having the enthusiasm of evil we had only the negation of the good; instead of despair, insensibility. Children of fifteen, seated listlessly under flowering shrubs, conversed for pastime on subjects which would have made shudder with terror the still thickets of Versailles. The Communion of Christ, the Host, those wafers that stand as the eternal symbol of divine love, were used to seal letters; the children spit upon the Bread of God.

Happy they who escaped those times! Happy they who passed over the abyss while looking up to Heaven. There are such, doubtless, and they will pity us.

It is unfortunately true that there is in blasphemy a certain outlet which solaces the burdened heart. When an atheist, drawing his watch, gave God a quarter of an hour in which to strike him dead, it is certain that it was a quarter of an hour of wrath and of atrocious joy. It was the paroxysm of despair, a nameless appeal to all celestial powers; it was a poor, wretched creature squirming under the foot that was crushing him; it was a loud cry of pain. Who knows? In the eyes of Him who sees all things, it was perhaps a prayer.

Thus these youth found employment for their idle powers in a fondness for despair. To scoff at glory, at religion, at love, at all the world, is a great consolation for those who do not know what to do; they mock at themselves, and in doing so prove the correctness of their view. And then it is pleasant to believe one's self unhappy when one is only idle and tired. Debauchery, moreover, the first result of the principles of death, is a terrible millstone for grinding the energies.

The rich said: "There is nothing real but riches, all else is a dream; let us enjoy and then let us die." Those of moderate fortune said: "There is nothing real but oblivion, all else is a dream; let us forget and let us die." And the poor said: "There is nothing real but unhappiness, all else is a dream; let us blaspheme and die."

Is this too black? Is it exaggerated? What do you think of it? Am I a misanthrope? Allow me to make a reflection.

In reading the history of the fall of the Roman Empire, it is impossible to overlook the evil that the Christians, so admirable when in the desert, did to the State when they were in power. "When I think," said Montesquieu, "of the profound ignorance into which the Greek clergy plunged the laity, I am obliged to compare them to the Scythians of whom Herodotus speaks, who put out the eyes of their slaves in order that nothing might distract their attention from their work . . . . No affair of State, no peace, no truce, no negotiations, no marriage could be transacted by any one but the clergy. The evils of this system were beyond belief."

Montesquieu might have added: Christianity destroyed the emperors but it saved the people. It opened to the barbarians the palaces of Constantinople, but it opened the doors of cottages to the ministering angels of Christ. It had much to do with the great ones of earth. And what is more interesting than the death-rattle of an empire corrupt to the very marrow of its bones, than the sombre galvanism under the influence of which the skeleton of tyranny danced upon the tombs of Heliogabalus and Caracalla? How beautiful that mummy of Rome, embalmed in the perfumes of Nero and swathed in the shroud of Tiberius! It had to do, my friends the politicians, with finding the poor and giving them life and peace; it had to do with allowing the worms and tumors to destroy the monuments of shame, while drawing from the ribs of this mummy a virgin as beautiful as the mother of the Redeemer, Hope, the friend of the oppressed.

That is what Christianity did; and now, after many years, what have they done who destroyed it? They saw that the poor allowed themselves to be oppressed by the rich, the feeble by the strong, because of that saying: "The rich and the strong will oppress me on earth; but when they wish to enter paradise, I shall be at the door and I will accuse them before the tribunal of God." And so, alas! they were patient.

The antagonists of Christ therefore said to the poor: "You wait patiently for the day of justice: there is no justice; you wait for the life eternal to achieve your vengeance: there is no life eternal; you gather up your tears and those of your family, the cries of children and the sobs of women, to place them at the feet of God at the hour of death: there is no God."

Then it is certain that the poor man dried his tears, that he told his wife to check her sobs, his children to come with him, and that he stood erect upon the soil with the power of a bull. He said to the rich: "Thou who oppressest me, thou art only man," and to the priest: "Thou who hast consoled me, thou hast lied." That was just what the antagonists of Christ desired. Perhaps they thought this was the way to achieve man's happiness, sending him out to the conquest of liberty.

But, if the poor man, once satisfied that the priests deceive him, that the rich rob him, that all men have rights, that all good is of this world, and that misery is impiety; if the poor man, believing in himself and in his two arms, says to himself some fine day: "War on the rich! For me, happiness here in this life, since there is no other! for me, the earth, since heaven is empty! for me and for all, since all are equal." Oh! reasoners sublime, who have led him to this, what will you say to him if he is conquered?

Doubtless you are philanthropists, doubtless you are right about the future, and the day will come when you will be blessed; but thus far, we have not blessed you. When the oppressor said: "This world for me!" the oppressed replied: "Heaven for me!" Now what can he say?

All the evils of the present come from two causes: the people who have passed through 1793 and 1814 nurse wounds in their hearts. That which was is no more; what will be, is not yet. Do not seek elsewhere the cause of our malady.

Here is a man whose house falls in ruins; he has torn it down in order to build another. The rubbish encumbers the spot, and he waits for new materials for his new home. At the moment he has prepared to cut the stone and mix the cement, while standing pick in hand with sleeves rolled up, he is informed that there is no more stone, and is advised to whiten the old material and make the best possible use of that. What can you expect this man to do who is unwilling to build his nest out of ruins? The quarry is deep, the tools too weak to hew out the stones. "Wait!" they say to him, "we will draw out the stones one by one; hope, work, advance, withdraw." What do they not tell him? And in the mean time he has lost his old house, and has not yet built the new; he does not know where to protect himself from the rain, or how to prepare his evening meal, nor where to work, nor where to sleep, nor where to die; and

his children are newly born.

I am much deceived if we do not resemble that man. Oh! people of the future! when on a warm summer day you bend over your plows in the green fields of your native land; when you see in the pure sunlight, under a spotless sky, the earth, your fruitful mother, smiling in her matutinal robe on the workman, her well-beloved child; when drying on your brow the holy baptism of sweat, you cast your eye over the vast horizon, where there will not be one blade higher than another in the human harvest, but only violets and marguerites in the midst of ripening ears; oh! free men! when you thank God that you were born for that harvest, think of those who are no more, tell yourself that we have dearly purchased the repose which you enjoy; pity us more than all your fathers, for we have suffered the evil which entitled them to pity and we have lost that which consoled them.

## CHAPTER III

### THE BEGINNING OF THE CONFESSIONS

I have to explain how I was first taken with the malady of the age.

I was at table, at a great supper, after a masquerade. About me were my friends, richly costumed, on all sides young men and women, all sparkling with beauty and joy; on the right and on the left exquisite dishes, flagons, splendor, flowers; above my head was an obstreperous orchestra, and before me my loved one, whom I idolized.

I was then nineteen; I had passed through no great misfortune, I had suffered from no disease; my character was at once haughty and frank, my heart full of the hopes of youth. The fumes of wine fermented in my head; it was one of those moments of intoxication when all that one sees and hears speaks to one of the well-beloved. All nature appeared a beautiful stone with a thousand facets, on which was engraven the mysterious name. One would willingly embrace all who smile, and feel that he is brother of all who live. My mistress had granted me a rendezvous, and I was gently raising my glass to my lips while my eyes were fixed on her.

As I turned to take a napkin, my fork fell. I stooped to pick it up, and not finding it at first I raised the table cloth to see where it had rolled. I then saw under the table my mistress's foot; it touched that of a young man seated beside her; from time to time they exchanged a gentle pressure.

Perfectly calm, I asked for another fork and continued my supper. My mistress and her neighbor, on their side, were very quiet, talking but little and never looking at each other. The young man had his elbows on the table and was chatting with another woman, who was showing him her necklace and bracelets. My mistress sat motionless, her eyes fixed and swimming with languor. I watched both of them during the entire supper, and I saw nothing either in their gestures or in their faces that could betray them. Finally, at dessert, I dropped my napkin, and stooping down saw that they were still in the same position.

I had promised to escort my mistress to her home that night. She was a widow and therefore free, living alone with an old relative who served as chaperon. As I was crossing the hall she called to me:

"Come, Octave!" she said, "let us go; here I am."

I laughed, and passed out without replying. After walking a short distance I sat down on a stone projecting from a wall. I do not know what my thoughts were; I sat as if stupefied by the unfaithfulness of one of whom I had never been jealous, whom I had never had cause to suspect. What I had seen left no room for doubt; I was felled as if by a stroke from a club. The only thing I remember doing as I sat there, was looking mechanically up at the sky, and, seeing a star shoot across the heavens, I saluted that fugitive gleam, in which poets see a worn-out world, and gravely took off my hat to it.

I returned to my home very quietly, experiencing nothing, as if deprived of all sensation and reflection. I undressed and retired; hardly had my head touched the pillow when the spirit of vengeance seized me with such force that I suddenly sat bolt upright against the wall as if all my muscles were made of wood. I then jumped from my bed with a cry of pain; I could walk only on my heels, the nerves in my toes were so irritated. I passed an hour in this way, completely beside myself, and stiff as a skeleton. It was the first burst of passion I had ever experienced.

The man I had surprised with my mistress was one of my most intimate friends. I went to his house the next day, in company with a young lawyer named Desgenais; we took pistols, another witness, and repaired to the woods of Vincennes. On the way I avoided speaking to my adversary or even approaching him; thus I resisted the temptation to insult or strike him, a useless form of violence at a time when the law recognized the code. But I could not remove my eyes from him. He was the companion of my childhood, and we had lived in the closest intimacy for many years. He understood perfectly my love for my mistress, and had several times intimated that bonds of this kind were sacred to a friend, and that he would be incapable of an attempt to supplant me, even if he loved the same woman. In short, I had perfect confidence in him and I had perhaps never pressed the hand of any human creature more cordially than his.

Eagerly and curiously I scrutinized this man whom I had heard speak of love like an antique hero and whom yet I had caught caressing my mistress. It was the first time in my life I had seen a monster; I measured him with a haggard eye to see what manner of man was this. He whom I had known since he was ten years old, with whom I had lived in the most perfect friendship, it seemed to me I had never seen him. Allow me a comparison.

There is a Spanish play, familiar to all the world, in which a stone statue comes to sup with a profligate, sent thither by divine justice. The profligate puts a good face on the matter and forces himself to affect indifference; but the statue asks for his hand, and when he has extended it he feels himself seized by a mortal chill and falls in convulsions.

Whenever I have loved and confided in any one, either friend or mistress, and suddenly discover that I have been deceived, I can only describe the effect produced on me by comparing it to the clasp of that marble hand. It is the actual impression of marble, it is as if a man of stone had embraced me. Alas! this horrible apparition has knocked more than once at my door; more than once we have supped together.

When the arrangements were all made we placed ourselves in line, facing each other and slowly advancing. My adversary fired the first shot, wounding me in the right arm. I immediately seized my pistol in the other hand; but my strength failed, I could not raise it; I fell on one knee.

Then I saw my enemy running up to me with an expression of great anxiety on his face, and very pale. Seeing that I was wounded, my seconds hastened to my side, but he pushed them aside and seized my wounded arm. His teeth were set, and I could see that he was suffering intense anguish. His agony was as frightful as man can experience.

"Go!" he cried; "go, stanch your wound at the house of ——"

He choked, and so did I.

I was placed in a cab, where I found a physician. My wound was not dangerous, the bone being untouched, but I was in such a state of excitation that it was impossible properly to dress my wound. As they were about to drive from the field I saw a trembling hand at the door of my cab; it was that of my adversary. I shook my head in reply; I was in such a rage that I could not pardon him, although I felt that his repentance was sincere.

By the time I reached home I had lost much blood and felt relieved, for feebleness saved me from the anger which was doing me more harm than my wound. I willingly retired to my bed and called for a glass of water, which I gulped down with relish.

But I was soon attacked by fever. It was then I began to shed tears. I could understand that my mistress had ceased to love me, but not that she could deceive me. I could not comprehend why a woman, who was forced to it by neither duty nor interest, could lie to one man when she loved another. Twenty times a day I asked my friend Desgenais how that could be possible.

"If I were her husband," I said, "or if I supported her, I could easily understand how she might be tempted to deceive me; but if she no longer loves me, why deceive me?"

I did not understand how any one could lie for love; I was but a child, then, but I confess that I do not understand it yet. Every time I have loved a woman I have told her of it, and when I ceased to love her I have confessed it with the same sincerity, having always thought that in matters of this kind the will was not concerned and that there was no crime but falsehood.

To all this Desgenais replied:

"She is unworthy; promise me that you will never see her again."

I solemnly promised. He advised me, moreover, not to write to her, not even to reproach her, and if

she wrote to me not to reply. I promised all, with some surprise that he should consider it necessary to exact such a pledge.

Nevertheless, the first thing I did when I was able to leave my room was to visit my mistress. I found her alone, seated in the corner of her room, with an expression of sorrow on her face and an appearance of general disorder in her surroundings. I overwhelmed her with violent reproaches; I was intoxicated with despair. In a paroxysm of grief I fell on the bed and gave free course to my tears.

"Ah! faithless one! wretch!" I cried between my sobs, "you knew that it would kill me. Did the prospect please you? What have I done to you?"

She threw her arms around my neck, saying that she had been tempted, that my rival had intoxicated her at that fatal supper, but that she had never been his; that she had abandoned herself in a moment of forgetfulness; that she had committed a fault but not a crime; but that if I would not pardon her, she, too, would die. All that sincere repentance has of tears, all that sorrow has of eloquence, she exhausted in order to console me; pale and distraught, her dress deranged, her hair falling over her shoulders, she kneeled in the middle of her chamber; never have I seen anything so beautiful, and I shuddered with horror as my senses revolted at the sight.

I went away crushed, scarcely able to direct my tottering steps. I wished never to see her again; but in a quarter of an hour I returned. I do not know what desperate resolve I had formed; I experienced a full desire to know her mine once more, to drain the cup of tears and bitterness to the dregs, and then to die with her. In short I abhorred her, yet I idolized her; I felt that her love was ruin, but that to live without her was impossible. I mounted the stairs like a flash; I spoke to none of the servants, but, familiar with the house, opened the door of her chamber.

I found her seated calmly before her toilette-table, covered with jewels; she held in her hand a piece of red crepe which she passed gently over her cheeks. I thought I was dreaming; it did not seem possible that this was the woman I had left, just fifteen minutes before, overwhelmed with grief, abased to the floor; I was as motionless as a statue. She, hearing the door open, turned her head and smiled:

"Is it you?" she said.

She was going to a ball and was expecting my rival. As she recognized me, she compressed her lips and frowned.

I started to leave the room. I looked at her bare neck, lithe and perfumed, on which rested her knotted hair confined by a jewelled comb; that neck, the seat of vital force, was blacker than hell; two shining tresses had fallen there and some light silvern hairs balanced above it. Her shoulders and neck, whiter than milk, displayed a heavy growth of down. There was in that knotted mass of hair something maddeningly lovely, which seemed to mock me when I thought of the sorrowful abandon in which I had seen her a moment before. I suddenly stepped up to her and struck that neck with the back of my hand. My mistress gave vent to a cry of terror, and fell on her hands, while I hastened from the room.

When I reached my room I was again attacked by fever and was obliged to take to my bed. My wound had reopened and I suffered great pain. Desgenais came to see me and I told him what had happened. He listened in silence, then paced up and down the room as if undecided as to his next course. Finally he stopped before my bed and burst out laughing.

"Is she your first love?" he asked.

"No!" I replied, "she is my last."

Toward midnight, while sleeping restlessly, I seemed to hear in my dreams a profound sigh. I opened my eyes and saw my mistress standing near my bed with arms crossed, looking like a spectre. I could not restrain a cry of fright, believing it to be an apparition conjured up by my diseased brain. I leaped from my bed and fled to the farther end of the room; but she followed me.

"It is I!" said she; putting her arms around me, she drew me to her.

"What do you want of me?" I cried. "Leave, me! I fear I shall kill you!"

"Very well, kill me!" she said. "I have deceived you, I have lied to you, I am an infamous wretch and I am miserable; but I love you, and I can not live without you."

I looked at her; how beautiful she was! Her body was quivering; her eyes were languid with love and moist with voluptuousness; her bosom was bare, her lips were burning. I raised her in my arms.

"Very well," I said, "but before God who sees us, by the soul of my father, I swear that I will kill you

and that I will die with you."

I took a knife from the table and placed it under the pillow.

"Come, Octave," she said, smiling and kissing me, "do not be foolish. Come, my dear, all these horrors have unsettled your mind; you are feverish. Give me that knife."

I saw that she wished to take it.

"Listen to me," I then said; "I do not know what comedy you are playing, but as for me I am in earnest. I have loved you as only man can love, and to my sorrow I love you still. You have just told me that you love me, and I hope it is true; but, by all that is sacred, if I am your lover to-night, no one shall take my place tomorrow. Before God, before God," I repeated, "I would not take you back as my mistress, for I hate you as much as I love you. Before God, if you wish to stay here to-night I will kill you in the morning."

When I had spoken these words I fell into a delirium. She threw her cloak over her shoulders and fled from the room.

When I told Desgenais about it he said:

"Why did you do that? You must be very much disgusted, for she is a beautiful woman."

"Are you joking?" I asked. "Do you think such a woman could be my mistress? Do you think I would ever consent to share her with another? Do you know that she confesses that another attracts her, and do you expect me, loving her as I do, to share my love? If that is the way you love, I pity you."

Desgenais replied that he was not so particular.

"My dear Octave," he added, "you are very young. You want many things, beautiful things, which do not exist. You believe in a singular sort of love; perhaps you are capable of it; I believe you are, but I do not envy you. You will have other mistresses, my friend, and you will live to regret what happened last night. If that woman came to you it is certain that she loved you; perhaps she does not love you at this moment—indeed, she may be in the arms of another; but she loved you last night in that room; and what should you care for the rest? You will regret it, believe me, for she will not come again. A woman pardons everything except such a slight. Her love for you must have been something terrible when she came to you knowing and confessing herself guilty, risking rebuff and contempt at your hands. Believe me, you will regret it, for I am satisfied that you will soon be cured."

There was such an air of simple conviction about my friend's words, such a despairing certainty based on experience, that I shuddered as I listened. While he was speaking I felt a strong desire to go to my mistress, or to write to her to come to me. I was so weak that I could not leave my bed, and that saved me from the shame of finding her waiting for my rival or perhaps in his company. But I could write to her; in spite of myself I doubted whether she would come if I should write.

When Desgenais left me I became so desperate that I resolved to put an end to my trouble. After a terrible struggle, horror got the better of love. I wrote my mistress that I would never see her again, and begged her not to try to see me unless she wished to be exposed to the shame of being refused admittance. I called a servant and ordered him to deliver the letter at once. He had hardly closed the door when I called him back. He did not hear me; I did not dare call again; covering my face with my hands, I yielded to an overwhelming sense of despair.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE PATH OF DESPAIR

The next morning the first question that occurred to my mind was: "What shall I do?"

I had no occupation. I had studied medicine and law without being able to decide on either of the two careers; I had worked for a banker for six months, and my services were so unsatisfactory that I was obliged to resign to avoid being discharged. My studies had been varied but superficial; my memory was active but not retentive.

My only treasure, after love, was reserve. In my childhood I had devoted myself to a solitary way of life, and had, so to speak, consecrated my heart to it. One day my father, solicitous about my future, spoke to me of several careers among which he allowed me to choose. I was leaning on the window-sill, looking at a solitary poplar-tree that was swaying in the breeze down in the garden. I thought over all the various occupations and wondered which one I should choose. I turned them all over, one after another, in my mind, and then, not feeling inclined to any of them, I allowed my thoughts to wander. Suddenly it seemed to me that I felt the earth move, and that a secret, invisible force was slowly dragging me into space and becoming tangible to my senses. I saw it mount into the sky; I seemed to be on a ship; the poplar near my window resembled a mast; I arose, stretched out my arms, and cried:

"It is little enough to be a passenger for one day on this ship floating through space; it is little enough to be a man, a black point on that ship; I will be a man, but not any particular kind of man."

Such was the first vow that, at the age of fourteen, I pronounced in the face of nature, and since then I have done nothing, except in obedience to my father, never being able to overcome my repugnance.

I was therefore free, not through indolence but by choice; loving, moreover, all that God had made and very little that man had made. Of life I knew nothing but love, of the world only my mistress, and I did not care to know anything more. So, falling in love upon leaving college, I sincerely believed that it was for life, and every other thought disappeared.

My life was indolent. I was accustomed to pass the day with my mistress; my greatest pleasure was to take her through the fields on beautiful summer days, the sight of nature in her splendor having ever been for me the most powerful incentive to love. In winter, as she enjoyed society, we attended numerous balls and masquerades, and because I thought of no one but her I fondly imagined her equally true to me.

To give you an idea of my state of mind I can not do better than compare it to one of those rooms we see nowadays in which are collected and mingled the furniture of all times and countries. Our age has no impress of its own. We have impressed the seal of our time neither on our houses nor our gardens, nor on anything that is ours. On the street may be seen men who have their beards trimmed as in the time of Henry III, others who are clean-shaven, others who have their hair arranged as in the time of Raphael, others as in the time of Christ. So the homes of the rich are cabinets of curiosities: the antique, the gothic, the style of the Renaissance, that of Louis XIII, all pell-mell. In short, we have every century except our own—a thing which has never been seen at any other epoch: eclecticism is our taste; we take everything we find, this for beauty, that for utility, another for antiquity, still another for its ugliness even, so that we live surrounded by debris, as if the end of the world were at hand.

Such was the state of my mind; I had read much; moreover I had learned to paint. I knew by heart a great many things, but nothing in order, so that my head was like a sponge, swollen but empty. I fell in love with all the poets one after another; but being of an impressionable nature the last acquaintance disgusted me with the rest. I had made of myself a great warehouse of odds and ends, so that having no more thirst after drinking of the novel and the unknown, I became an oddity myself.

Nevertheless, about me there was still something of youth: it was the hope of my heart, which was still childlike.

That hope, which nothing had withered or corrupted and which love had exalted to excess, had now received a mortal wound. The perfidy of my mistress had struck deep, and when I thought of it, I felt in my soul a swooning away, the convulsive flutter of a wounded bird in agony.

Society, which works so much evil, is like that serpent of the Indies whose habitat is under a shrub, the leaves of which afford the antidote to its venom; in nearly every case it brings the remedy with the wound it causes. For example, the man whose life is one of routine, who has his business cares to claim his attention upon rising, visits at one hour, loves at another, can lose his mistress and suffer no evil effects. His occupations and his thoughts are like impassive soldiers ranged in line of battle; a single shot strikes one down, his neighbors close the gap and the line is intact.

I had not that resource, since I was alone: nature, the kind mother, seemed, on the contrary, vaster and more empty than before. Had I been able to forget my mistress, I should have been saved. How many there are who can be cured with even less than that. Such men are incapable of loving a faithless woman, and their conduct, under the circumstances, is admirable in its firmness. But is it thus one loves at nineteen when, knowing nothing of the world, desiring everything, one feels, within, the germ of all the passions? Everywhere some voice appeals to him. All is desire, all is revery. There is no reality which holds him when the heart is young; there is no oak so gnarled that it may not give birth to a dryad; and if one had a hundred arms one need not fear to open them; one has but to clasp his mistress and all is well.

As for me, I did not understand what else there was to do but love, and when any one spoke to me of other occupations I did not reply. My passion for my mistress had something fierce about it, for all my life had been severely monachal. Let me cite a single instance. She gave me her miniature in a medallion. I wore it over my heart, a practice much affected by men; but one day, while idly rummaging about a shop filled with curiosities, I found an iron "discipline whip" such as was used by the mediaeval flagellants. At the end of this whip was a metal plate bristling with sharp iron points; I had the medallion riveted to this plate and then returned it to its place over my heart. The sharp points pierced my bosom with every movement and caused such strange, voluptuous anguish that I sometimes pressed it down with my hand in order to intensify the sensation. I knew very well that I was committing a folly; love is responsible for many such idiocies.

But since this woman deceived me I loathed the cruel medallion. I can not tell with what sadness I removed that iron circlet, and what a sigh escaped me when it was gone.

"Ah! poor wounds!" I said, "you will soon heal, but what balm is there for that other deeper wound?"

I had reason to hate this woman; she was, so to speak, mingled with the blood of my veins; I cursed her, but I dreamed of her. What could I do with a dream? By what effort of the will could I drown a memory of flesh and blood? Lady Macbeth, having killed Duncan, saw that the ocean would not wash her hands clean again; it would not have washed away my wounds. I said to Desgenais: "When I sleep, her head is on my pillow."

My life had been wrapped up in this woman; to doubt her was to doubt all; to deny her, to curse all; to lose her, to renounce all. I no longer went out; the world seemed peopled with monsters, with horned deer and crocodiles. To all that was said to distract my mind, I replied:

"Yes, that is all very well, but you may rest assured I shall do nothing of the kind."

I sat in my window and said:

"She will come, I am sure of it; she is coming, she is turning the corner at this moment, I can feel her approach. She can no more live without me than I without her. What shall I say? How shall I receive her?"

Then the thought of her perfidy occurred to me.

"Ah! let her come! I will kill her!"

Since my last letter I had heard nothing of her.

"What is she doing?" I asked myself. "She loves another? Then I will love another also. Whom shall I love?"

While thinking, I heard a far distant voice crying:

"Thou, love another? Two beings who love, who embrace, and who are not thou and I! Is such a thing possible? Are you a fool?"

"Coward!" said Desgenais, "when will you forget that woman? Is she such a great loss? Take the first comer and console yourself."

"No," I replied, "it is not such a great loss. Have I not done what I ought? Have I not driven her away from here? What have you to say to that? The rest concerns me; the bull wounded in the arena can lie down in a corner with the sword of the matador 'twixt his shoulders, and die in peace. What can I do, tell me? What do you mean by first comer? You will show me a cloudless sky, trees and houses, men who talk, drink, sing, women who dance and horses that gallop. All that is not life, it is the noise of life. Go, go, leave me in peace."

## CHAPTER V

### A PHILOSOPHER'S ADVICE

Desgenais saw that my despair was incurable, that I would neither listen to any advice nor leave my room, he took the thing seriously. I saw him enter one evening with an expression of gravity on his

face; he spoke of my mistress and continued in his tone of persiflage, saying all manner of evil of women. While he was speaking I was leaning on my elbow, and, rising in my bed, I listened attentively.

It was one of those sombre evenings when the sighing of the wind recalls the moaning of a dying man. A fitful storm was brewing, and between the plashes of rain on the windows there was the silence of death. All nature suffers in such moments, the trees writhe in pain and hide their heads; the birds of the fields cower under the bushes; the streets of cities are deserted. I was suffering from my wound. But a short time before I had a mistress and a friend. The mistress had deceived me and the friend had stretched me on a bed of pain. I could not clearly distinguish what was passing in my head; it seemed to me that I was under the influence of a horrible dream and that I had but to awake to find myself cured; at times it seemed that my entire life had been a dream, ridiculous and puerile, the falseness of which had just been disclosed. Desgenais was seated near the lamp at my side; he was firm and serious, although a smile hovered about his lips. He was a man of heart, but as dry as a pumice-stone. An early experience had made him bald before his time; he knew life and had suffered; but his grief was a cuirass; he was a materialist and he waited for death.

"Octave," he said, "after what has happened to you, I see that you believe in love such as the poets and romancers have represented; in a word, you believe in what is said here below and not in what is done. That is because you do not reason soundly, and it may lead you into great misfortune.

"Poets represent love as sculptors design beauty, as musicians create melody; that is to say, endowed with an exquisite nervous organization, they gather up with discerning ardor the purest elements of life, the most beautiful lines of matter, and the most harmonious voices of nature. There lived, it is said, at Athens a great number of beautiful girls; Praxiteles drew them all one after another; then from these diverse types of beauty, each one of which had its defects, he formed a single faultless beauty and created Venus. The man who first created a musical instrument, and who gave to harmony its rules and its laws, had for a long time listened to the murmuring of reeds and the singing of birds. Thus the poets, who understand life, after knowing much of love, more or less transitory, after feeling that sublime exaltation which real passion can for the moment inspire, eliminating from human nature all that degrades it, created the mysterious names which through the ages fly from lip to lip: Daphnis and Chloe, Hero and Leander, Pyramus and Thisbe.

"To try to find in real life such love as this, eternal and absolute, is but to seek on public squares a woman such as Venus, or to expect nightingales to sing the symphonies of Beethoven.

"Perfection does not exist; to comprehend it is the triumph of human intelligence; to desire to possess it, the most dangerous of follies. Open your window, Octave; do you not see the infinite? You try to form some idea of a thing that has no limits, you who were born yesterday and who will die to-morrow! This spectacle of immensity in every country in the world produces the wildest illusions. Religions are born of it; it was to possess the infinite that Cato cut his throat, that the Christians delivered themselves to lions, the Huguenots to the Catholics; all the people of the earth have stretched out their hands to that immensity and have longed to plunge into it. The fool wishes to possess heaven; the sage admires it, kneels before it, but does not desire it.

"Perfection, my friend, is no more made for us than immensity. We must seek for nothing in it, demand nothing of it, neither love nor beauty, happiness nor virtue; but we must love it if we would be virtuous, if we would attain the greatest happiness of which man is capable.

"Let us suppose you have in your study a picture by Raphael that you consider perfect. Let us say that upon a close examination you discover in one of the figures a gross defect of design, a limb distorted, or a muscle that belies nature, such as has been discovered, they say, in one of the arms of an antique gladiator. You would experience a feeling of displeasure, but you would not throw that picture in the fire; you would merely say that it is not perfect, but that it has qualities that are worthy of admiration.

"There are women whose natural singleness of heart and sincerity are such that they could not have two lovers at the same time. You believed your mistress such an one; that is best, I admit. You have discovered that she has deceived you; does that oblige you to depose and to abuse her, to believe her deserving of your hatred?

"Even if your mistress had never deceived you, even if at this moment she loved none other than you, think, Octave, how far her love would still be from perfection, how human it would be, how small, how restrained by the hypocrisies and conventions of the world; remember that another man possessed her before you, that many others will possess her after you.

"Reflect: what drives you at this moment to despair is the idea of perfection in your mistress, the idea that has been shattered. But when you understand that the primal idea itself was human, small and restricted, you will see that it is little more than a rung in the rotten ladder of human imperfection.

"I think you will readily admit that your mistress has had other admirers, and that she will have still others in the future; you will doubtless reply that it matters little, so long as she loved you. But I ask you, since she has had others, what difference does it make whether it was yesterday or two years since? Since she loves but one at a time, what does it matter whether it is during an interval of two years or in the course of a single night? Are you a man, Octave? Do you see the leaves falling from the trees, the sun rising and setting? Do you hear the ticking of the horologe of time with each pulsation of your heart? Is there, then, such a difference between the love of a year and the love of an hour? I challenge you to answer that, you fool, as you sit there looking out at the infinite through a window not larger than your hand.

"You consider that woman faithful who loves you two years; you must have an almanac that will indicate just how long it takes for an honest man's kisses to dry on a woman's lips. You make a distinction between the woman who sells herself for money and the one who gives herself for pleasure; between the one who gives herself through pride and the one who gives herself through devotion. Among women who are for sale, some cost more than others; among those who are sought for pleasure some inspire more confidence than others; and among those who are worthy of devotion there are some who receive a third of a man's heart, others a quarter, others a half, depending upon her education, her manner, her name, her birth, her beauty, her temperament, according to the occasion, according to what is said, according to the time, according to what you have drunk at dinner.

"You love women, Octave, because you are young, ardent, because your features are regular, and your hair dark and glossy, but you do not, for all that, understand woman.

"Nature, having all, desires the reproduction of beings; everywhere, from the summit of the mountain to the bottom of the sea, life is opposed to death. God, to conserve the work of His hands, has established this law- that the greatest pleasure of all sentient beings shall be to procreate.

"Oh! my friend, when you feel bursting on your lips the vow of eternal love, do not be afraid to yield, but do not confound wine with intoxication; do not think of the cup divine because the draught is of celestial flavor; do not be astonished to find it broken and empty in the evening. It is but woman, but a fragile vase, made of earth by a potter.

"Thank God for giving you a glimpse of heaven, but do not imagine yourself a bird because you can flap your wings. The birds themselves can not escape the clouds; there is a region where air fails them and the lark, rising with its song into the morning fog, sometimes falls back dead in the field.

"Take love as a sober man takes wine; do not become a drunkard. If your mistress is sincere and faithful, love her for that; but if she is not, if she is merely young and beautiful, love her for that; if she is agreeable and spirituelle, love her for that; if she is none of these things but merely loves you, love her for that. Love does not come to us every day.

"Do not tear your hair and stab yourself because you have a rival. You say that your mistress deceives you for another; it is your pride that suffers; but change the words, say that it is for you that she deceives him, and behold, you are happy!

"Do not make a rule of conduct, and do not say that you wish to be loved exclusively, for in saying that, as you are a man and inconstant yourself, you are forced to add tacitly: 'As far as possible.'

"Take time as it comes, the wind as it blows, woman as she is. The Spaniards, first among women, love faithfully; their hearts are sincere and violent, but they wear a dagger just above them. Italian women are lascivious. The English are exalted and melancholy, cold and unnatural. The German women are tender and sweet, but colorless and monotonous. The French are spirituelle, elegant, and voluptuous, but are false at heart.

"Above all, do not accuse women of being what they are; we have made them thus, undoing the work of nature.

"Nature, who thinks of everything, made the virgin for love; but with the first child her bosom loses form, her beauty its freshness. Woman is made for motherhood. Man would perhaps abandon her, disgusted by the loss of beauty; but his child clings to him and weeps. Behold the family, the human law; everything that departs from this law is monstrous.

"Civilization thwarts the ends of nature. In our cities, according to our customs, the virgin destined by nature for the open air, made to run in the sunlight; to admire the nude wrestlers, as in Lacedaemonia, to choose and to love, is shut up in close confinement and bolted in. Meanwhile she hides romance under her cross; pale and idle, she fades away and loses, in the silence of the nights, that beauty which oppresses her and needs the open air. Then she is suddenly snatched from this solitude, knowing nothing, loving nothing, desiring everything; an old woman instructs her, a mysterious word is

whispered in her ear, and she is thrown into the arms of a stranger. There you have marriage, that is to say, the civilized family.

"A child is born. This poor creature has lost her beauty and she has never loved. The child is brought to her with the words: "You are a mother." She replies: 'I am not a mother; take that child to some woman who can nurse it. I can not.' Her husband tells her that she is right, that her child would be disgusted with her. She receives careful attention and is soon cured of the disease of maternity. A month later she may be seen at the Tuileries, at the ball, at the opera; her child is at Chaillot, at Auxerre; her husband with another woman. Then young men speak to her of love, of devotion, of sympathy, of all that is in the heart. She takes one, draws him to her bosom; he dishonors her and returns to the Bourse. She cries all night, but discovers that tears make her eyes red. She takes a consoler, for the loss of whom another consoles her; thus up to the age of thirty or more. Then, blase and corrupted, with no human sentiment, not even disgust, she meets a fine youth with raven locks, ardent eye and hopeful heart; she recalls her own youth, she remembers what she has suffered, and telling him the story of her life, she teaches him to eschew love.

"That is woman as we have made her; such are your mistresses. But you say they are women and that there is something good in them!

"But if your character is formed, if you are truly a man, sure of yourself and confident of your strength, you may taste of life without fear and without reserve; you may be sad or joyous, deceived or respected; but be sure you are loved, for what matters the rest?

"If you are mediocre and ordinary, I advise you to consider your course very carefully before deciding, but do not expect too much of your mistress.

"If you are weak, dependent upon others, inclined to allow yourself to be dominated by opinion, to take root wherever you see a little soil, make for yourself a shield that will resist everything, for if you yield to your weaker nature you will not grow, you will dry up like a dead plant, and you will bear neither fruit nor flowers. The sap of your life will dissipate into the formation of useless bark; all your actions will be as colorless as the leaves of the willow; you will have no tears to water you, but those from your own eyes; to nourish you, no heart but your own.

"But if you are of an exalted nature, believing in dreams and wishing to realize them, I say to you plainly: Love does not exist.

"For to love is to give body and soul, or better, it is to make a single being of two; it is to walk in the sunlight, in the open air through the boundless prairies with a body having four arms, two heads, and two hearts. Love is faith, it is the religion of terrestrial happiness, it is a luminous triangle suspended in the temple of the world. To love is to walk freely through that temple, at your side a being capable of understanding why a thought, a word, a flower makes you pause and raise your eyes to that celestial triangle. To exercise the noble faculties of man is a great good—that is why genius is glorious; but to double those faculties, to place a heart and an intelligence upon a heart and an intelligence—that is supreme happiness. God has nothing better for man; that is why love is better than genius.

"But tell me, is that the love of our women? No, no, it must be admitted. Love, for them, is another thing; it is to go out veiled, to write in secret, to make trembling advances, to heave chaste sighs under starched and unnatural robes, then to draw bolts and throw them aside, to humiliate a rival, to deceive a husband, to render a lover desolate. To love, for our women, is to play at lying, as children play at hide and seek, a hideous orgy of the heart, worse than the lubricity of the Romans, or the Saturnalia of Priapus; a bastard parody of vice itself, as well as of virtue; a loathsome comedy where all is whispering and sidelong glances, where all is small, elegant, and deformed, like those porcelain monsters brought from China; a lamentable satire on all that is beautiful and ugly, divine and infernal; a shadow without a body, a skeleton of all that God has made."

Thus spoke Desgenais; and the shadows of night began to fall.

## CHAPTER VI

### MADAME LEVASSEUR

The following morning I rode through the Bois de Boulogne; the weather was dark and threatening.

At the Porte Maillot I dropped the reins on my horse's back and abandoned myself to revery, revolving in my mind the words spoken by Desgenais the evening before.

Suddenly I heard my name called. Turning my head I spied one of my inamorata's most intimate friends in an open carriage. She bade me stop, and, holding out her hand with a friendly air, invited me to dine with her if I had no other engagement.

This woman, Madame Levasseur by name, was small, stout, and decidedly blonde; I had never liked her, and my attitude toward her had always been one of studied politeness. But I could not resist a desire to accept her invitation; I pressed her hand and thanked her; I was sure that we should talk of my mistress.

She sent a servant to lead my horse and I entered her carriage; she was alone, and we at once took the road to Paris. Rain began to fall, and the carriage curtains were drawn; thus shut up together we rode on in silence. I looked at her with inexpressible sadness; she was not only the friend of my faithless one but her confidante. She had often formed one of our party when I called on my mistress in the evening. With what impatience had I endured her presence! How often I counted the minutes that must elapse before she would leave! That was probably the cause of my aversion to her. I knew that she approved of our love; she even went so far as to defend me in our quarrels. In spite of the services she had rendered me, I considered her ugly and tiresome. Alas! now I found her beautiful! I looked at her hands, her clothes; every gesture went straight to my heart; all the past was associated with her. She noticed the change in manner and understood that I was oppressed by sad memories of the past. Thus we sped on our way, I looking at her, she smiling at me. When we reached Paris she took my hand:

"Well?" she said.

"Well?" I replied, sobbing, "tell her if you wish." Tears rushed from my eyes.

After dinner we sat before the fire.

"But tell me," she said, "is it irrevocable? Can nothing be done?"

"Alas! Madame," I replied, "there is nothing irrevocable except the grief that is killing me. My condition can be expressed in a few words: I can not love her, I can not love another, and I can not cease loving."

At these words she moved uneasily in her chair, and I could see an expression of compassion on her face.

For some time she appeared to be reflecting, as if pondering over my fate and seeking some remedy for my sorrow. Her eyes were closed and she appeared lost in revery. She extended her hand and I took it in mine.

"And I, too," she murmured, "that is just my experience." She stopped, overcome by emotion.

Of all the sisters of love, the most beautiful is pity. I held Madame Levasseur's hand as she began to speak of my mistress, saying all she could think of in her favor. My sadness increased. What could I reply? Finally she came to speak of herself.

Not long since, she said, a man who loved her abandoned her. She had made great sacrifices for him; her fortune was compromised, as well as her honor and her name. Her husband, whom she knew to be vindictive, had made threats. Her tears flowed as she continued, and I began to forget my own sorrow in my sympathy for her. She had been married against her will; she struggled a long time; but she regretted nothing except that she had not been able to inspire a more sincere affection. I believe she even accused herself because she had not been able to hold her lover's heart, and because she had been guilty of apparent indifference.

When she had unburdened her heart she became silent.

"Madame," I said, "it was not chance that brought about our meeting in the Bois de Boulogne. I believe that human sorrows are but wandering sisters and that some good angel unites the trembling hands that are stretched out for aid. Do not repent having told me your sorrow. The secret you have confided to me is only a tear which has fallen from your eye, but has rested on my heart. Permit me to come again and let us suffer together."

Such lively sympathy took possession of me that without reflection I kissed her; it did not occur to my mind that it could offend her, and she did not appear even to notice it.

Our conversation continued in this tone of expansive friendship. She told me her sorrows, I told her mine, and between these two experiences which touched each other, I felt arise a sweetness, a celestial accord born of two voices in anguish. All this time I had seen nothing but her face. Suddenly I noticed that her dress was in disorder. It appeared singular to me that, seeing my embarrassment, she did not rearrange it, and I turned my head to give her an opportunity. She did nothing. Finally, meeting her eyes and seeing that she was perfectly aware of the state she was in, I felt as if I had been struck by a thunderbolt, for I now clearly understood that I was the plaything of her monstrous effrontery, that grief itself was for her but a means of seducing the senses. I took my hat without a word, bowed profoundly, and left the room.

## CHAPTER VII

### THE WISDOM OF SIRACH

Upon returning to my apartments I found a large box in the centre of the room. One of my aunts had died, and I was one of the heirs to her fortune, which was not large.

The box contained, among other things, a number of musty old books. Not knowing what to do, and being afflicted with ennui, I began to read one of them. They were for the most part romances of the time of Louis XV; my pious aunt had probably inherited them herself and never read them, for they were, so to speak, catechisms of vice.

I was singularly disposed to reflect on everything that came to my notice, to give everything a mental and moral significance; I treated events as pearls in a necklace which I tried to string together.

It struck me that there was something significant about the arrival of these books at this time. I devoured them with a bitterness and a sadness born of despair. "Yes, you are right," I said to myself, "you alone possess the secret of life, you alone dare to say that nothing is true and real but debauchery, hypocrisy, and corruption. Be my friends, throw on the wound in my soul your corrosive poisons, teach me to believe in you."

While buried in these shadows, I allowed my favorite poets and text-books to accumulate dust. I even ground them under my feet in excess of wrath. "You wretched dreamers!" I said to them; "you who teach me only suffering, miserable shufflers of words, charlatans, if you know the truth, fools, if you speak in good faith, liars in either case, who make fairy-tales of the woes of the human heart. I will burn the last one of you!"

Then tears came to my aid and I perceived that there was nothing real but my grief. "Very well," I cried, in my delirium, "tell me, good and bad genii, counselors for good or evil, tell me what to do! Choose an arbiter and let him speak."

I seized an old Bible which lay on my table, and read the first passage that caught my eye.

"Reply to me, thou book of God!" I said, "what word hast thou for me?"  
My eye fell on this passage in Ecclesiastes, Chapter IX:

For all this I considered in my heart even to declare all this, that the righteous and the wise, and their works, are in the hand of God; no man knoweth either love or hatred by all that is before them.

All things come alike to all: there is one event to the righteous, and to the wicked; to the good and to the clean, and to the unclean; to him that sacrificeth, and to him that sacrificeth not: as is the good, so is the sinner; and he that sweareth, as he that feareth an oath.

This is an evil among all things that are done under the sun, that there is one event unto all: yea, also the heart of the sons of men is full of evil, and madness is in their heart while they live, and after that they go to the dead.

When I read these words I was astounded; I did not know that there was such a sentiment in the Bible. "And thou, too, as all others, thou book of hope!"

What do the astronomers think when they predict, at a given hour and place, the passage of a comet,

that most eccentric of celestial travellers? What do the naturalists think when they reveal the myriad forms of life concealed in a drop of water? Do they think they have invented what they see and that their lenses and microscopes make the law of nature? What did the first law-giver think when, seeking for the corner-stone in the social edifice, angered doubtless by some idle importunity, he struck the tables of brass and felt in his bowels the yearning for a law of retaliation? Did he, then, invent justice? And the first who plucked the fruit planted by his neighbor and who fled cowering under his mantle, did he invent shame? And he who, having overtaken that same thief who had robbed him of the product of his toil, forgave him his sin, and, instead of raising his hand to smite him, said, "Sit thou down and eat thy fill;" when, after thus returning good for evil, he raised his eyes toward Heaven and felt his heart quivering, tears welling from his eyes, and his knees bending to the earth, did he invent virtue? Oh, Heaven! here is a woman who speaks of love and who deceives me; here is a man who speaks of friendship and counsels me to seek consolation in debauchery; here is another woman who weeps and would console me with the flesh; here is a Bible that speaks of God and says: "Perhaps; but nothing is of any real importance."

I ran to the open window: "Is it true that you are empty?" I cried, looking up at the pale expanse of sky which spread above me. "Reply, reply! Before I die, grant that I may clasp in these arms of mine something more than a dream!"

Profound silence reigned. As I stood with arms outstretched, eyes lost in space, a swallow uttered a plaintive cry; in spite of myself I followed it with my eyes; while the swallow disappeared from sight like a flash, a little girl passed singing.

## CHAPTER VIII

### THE SEARCH FOR HEALING

Yet I was unwilling to yield.

Before taking life on its pleasant side—a side which to me seemed rather sinister—I resolved to test everything. I remained thus for some time, a prey to countless sorrows, tormented by terrible dreams.

The great obstacle to my cure was my youth. Wherever I happened to be, whatever my occupation, I could think of nothing but women; the sight of a woman made me tremble.

It had been my fate—a fate as rare as happy—to give to love my unsullied youth. But the result of this was that all my senses united in idealizing love; there was the cause of my unhappiness. For not being able to think of anything but women, I could not help turning over in my head, day and night, all the ideas of debauchery, of false love and of feminine treason, with which my mind was filled. For me to possess a woman was to love her; I thought of nothing but women, but I believed no more in the possibility of true love.

All this suffering inspired me with a sort of rage. At times I was tempted to imitate the monks and starve my body in order to conquer my senses; at times I felt like rushing out into the street to throw myself at the feet of the first woman I met and vow to her eternal love.

God is my witness that I did all in my power to cure myself. Preoccupied from the first with the idea that the society of men was the haunt of vice and hypocrisy, where all were like my mistress, I resolved to separate myself from them and live in complete isolation. I resumed my neglected studies, and plunged into history, poetry, and anatomy. There happened to be on the fourth floor of the same house an old and learned German. I determined to learn his language; the German was poor and friendless, and willingly accepted the task of instructing me. My perpetual state of distraction worried him. How many times he waited in patient astonishment while I, seated near him with a smoking lamp between us, sat with my arms crossed on my book, lost in reverie, oblivious of his presence and of his pity.

"My dear sir," said I to him one day, "all this is useless, but you are the best of men. What a task you have undertaken! You must leave me to my fate; we can do nothing, neither you nor I."

I do not know that he understood my meaning, but he grasped my hand and there was no more talk of German.

I soon realized that solitude, instead of curing me, was doing me harm, and so I completely changed

my system. I went into the country, and galloped through the woods with the huntsmen; I would ride until I was out of breath, trying to cure myself with fatigue, and when, after a day of sweat in the fields, I reached my bed in the evening smelling of powder and the stable, I would bury my head in the pillow, roll about under the covers and cry: "Phantom, phantom! are you not satiated? Will you not leave me for one single night?"

But why these vain efforts? Solitude sent me to nature, and nature to love. Standing in the street of Mental Observation, I saw myself pale and wan, surrounded by corpses, and, drying my hands on my bloody apron, stifled by the odor of putrefaction, I turned my head in spite of myself, and saw floating before my eyes green harvests, balmy fields, and the pensive harmony of the evening. "No," said I, "science can not console me; rather will I plunge into this sea of irresponsible nature and die there myself by drowning. I will not war against my youth; I will live where there is life, or at least die in the sunlight." I began to mingle with the throngs at Sevres and Chaville, and stretch myself on flowery swards in secluded groves. Alas! all the forests and fields cried to me:

"What do you seek here? We are young, poor child! We wear the colors of hope."

Then I returned to the city; I lost myself in its obscure streets; I looked up at the lights in its windows, into those mysterious family nests; I watched the passing carriages; I saw man jostling against man. Oh, what solitude! How sad the smoke on those roofs! What sorrow in those tortuous streets where all are hurrying hither and thither, working and sweating, where thousands of strangers rub against your elbows; a sewer where society is of bodies only, while souls are solitary and alone, where all who hold out a hand to you are prostitutes! "Become corrupt, corrupt, and you will cease to suffer!" This has been the cry of all cities unto man; it is written with charcoal on the walls, on the streets with mud, on men's faces with extravasated blood.

At times, when seated in the corner of some salon I watched the women as they danced, some rosy, some blue, and others white, their arms bare and their hair gathered gracefully about their shapely heads, looking like cherubim drunk with light, floating in spheres of harmony and beauty, I would think: "Ah, what a garden, what flowers to gather, to breathe! Ah! Marguerites, Marguerites! What will your last petal say to him who plucks it? A little, a little, but not all. That is the moral of the world, that is the end of your smiles. It is over this terrible abyss that you are walking in your spangled gauze; it is on this hideous reality you run like gazelles on the tips of your little toes!"

"But why take things so seriously?" said Desgenais. "That is something that is never seen. You complain because bottles become empty? There are many casks in the vaults, and many vaults in the hills. Give me a dainty fish-hook gilded with sweet words, a drop of honey for bait, and quick! catch in the stream of oblivion a pretty consoler, as fresh and slippery as an eel; you will still have the hook when the fish shall have glided from your hands. Youth must pass away, and if I were you I would carry off the queen of Portugal rather than study anatomy."

Such was the advice of Desgenais. I made my way home with swollen heart, my face concealed under my cloak. I kneeled at the side of my bed and my poor heart dissolved in tears. What vows! what prayers! Galileo struck the earth, crying: "Nevertheless it moves!" Thus I struck my heart.

## **CHAPTER IX**

### **BACCHUS, THE CONSOLER**

Suddenly, in the midst of black despair, youth and chance led me to commit an act that decided my fate.

I had written my mistress that I wished never to see her again; I kept my word, but I passed the nights under her window, seated on a bench before her door. I could see the lights in her room, I could hear the sound of her piano, at times I saw something that looked like a shadow through the partially drawn curtains.

One night as I was seated on the bench, plunged in frightful melancholy, I saw a belated workman staggering along the street. He muttered a few words in a dazed manner and then began to sing. So much was he under the influence of liquor that he walked at times on one side of the gutter and then on the other. Finally he fell upon a bench facing another house opposite me. There he lay still, supported on his elbows, and slept profoundly.

The street was deserted, a dry wind stirred the dust here and there; the moon shone through a rift in the clouds and lighted the spot where the man slept. So I found myself *tete-a-tete* with this boor, who, not suspecting my presence, was sleeping on that stone bench as peacefully as if in his own bed.

The man served to divert my grief; I arose to leave him in full possession, but returned and resumed my seat. I could not leave that fateful door, at which I would not have knocked for an empire. Finally, after walking up and down a few times, I stopped before the sleeper.

"What sleep!" I said. "Surely this man does not dream. His clothes are in tatters, his cheeks are wrinkled, his hands hardened with toil; he is some unfortunate who does not have a meal every day. A thousand gnawing cares, a thousand mortal sorrows await his return to consciousness; nevertheless, this evening he had money in his pocket, and entered a tavern where he purchased oblivion. He has earned enough in a week to enjoy a night of slumber, and perhaps has purchased it at the expense of his children's supper. Now his mistress can betray him, his friend can glide like a thief into his hut; I could shake him by the shoulder and tell him that he is being murdered, that his house is on fire; he would turn over and continue to sleep."

"And I—I do not sleep," I continued, pacing up and down the street, "I do not sleep, I who have enough in my pocket at this moment to purchase sleep for a year. I am so proud and so foolish that I dare not enter a tavern, and it seems I do not understand that if unfortunates enter there, it is to come out happy. O God! grapes crushed beneath the foot suffice to dissipate the deepest sorrow and to break the invisible threads that the fates weave about our pathway. We weep like women, we suffer like martyrs; in our despair it seems that the world is crumbling under our feet, and we sit down in tears as did Adam at Eden's gate. And to cure our griefs we have but to make a movement of the hand and moisten our throats. How contemptible our sorrow since it can be thus assuaged! We are surprised that Providence does not send angels to grant our prayers; it need not take the trouble, for it has seen our woes, it knows our desires, our pride and bitterness, the ocean of evil that surrounds us, and is content to hang a small black fruit along our paths. Since that man sleeps so soundly on his bench, why do not I sleep on mine? My rival is doubtless passing the night with my mistress; he will leave her at daybreak; she will accompany him to the door and they will see me asleep on my bench. Their kisses will not awaken me, and they will shake me by the shoulder; I will turn over on the other side and sleep on."

Thus, inspired by fierce joy, I set out in quest of a tavern. As it was past midnight some were closed; this put me in a fury. "What!" I cried, "even that consolation is refused me!" I ran hither and thither knocking at the doors of taverns, crying: "Wine! Wine!"

At last I found one open; I called for a bottle, and without caring whether it was good or bad, I gulped it down; a second followed, and then a third. I dosed myself as with medicine, and forced the wine down as if it had been prescribed by some physician to save my life.

The heavy fumes of the liquor, doubtless adulterated, mounted to my head. As I had gulped it down at a breath, drunkenness seized me promptly; I felt that I was becoming muddled, then I experienced a lucid moment, then confusion followed. Then consciousness left me, I leaned my elbows on the table and said adieu to myself.

But I had a confused idea that I was not alone in the tavern. At the other end of the room stood a hideous group with haggard faces and harsh voices. Their dress indicated that they belonged to the poorer class, but were not bourgeois; in short, they belonged to that ambiguous class, the vilest of all, which has neither fortune nor occupation, which never works except at some criminal plot, a class which, neither poor nor rich, combines the vices of one with the misery of the other.

They were quarrelling over a dirty pack of cards. Among them was a girl who appeared to be very young and very pretty, was decently clad, and resembled her companions in no way, except in the harshness of her voice, which was as rough and broken as if it had performed the office of public crier. She looked at me closely, as if astonished to see me in such a bad place, for I was elegantly attired. Little by little she approached my table and seeing that all the bottles were empty, smiled. I saw that she had fine teeth of brilliant whiteness; I took her hand and begged her to be seated; she consented with good grace and asked what we should have for supper.

I looked at her without saying a word, while my eyes began to fill with tears; she observed my emotion and inquired the cause. I could not reply. She understood that I had some secret sorrow and forebore any attempt to learn the cause; with her handkerchief she dried my tears from time to time as we dined.

There was something about this girl at once repulsive and sweet, a singular boldness mingled with pity, that I could not understand. If she had taken my hand in the street she would have inspired a feeling of horror in me; but it seemed so strange that a creature I had never seen should come to me,

and, without a word, proceed to order supper and dry my tears with her handkerchief, that I was rendered speechless; it revolted, yet charmed me. What I had done had been done so quickly that I seemed to have obeyed some impulse of despair. Perhaps I was a fool, or the victim of some supernatural caprice.

"Who are you?" I suddenly cried out; "what do you want of me? How do you know who I am? Who told you to dry my tears? Is this your vocation and do you think I desire you? I would not touch you with the tip of my finger. What are you doing here? Reply at once. Is it money you want? What price do you put on your pity?"

I arose and tried to go out, but my feet refused to support me. At the same time my eyes failed me, a mortal weakness took possession of me and I fell over a stool.

"You are not well," she said, taking me by the arm, "you have drunk, like the child that you are, without knowing what you were doing. Sit down in this chair and wait until a cab passes. You will tell me where you live and I will order the driver to take you home to your mother, since," she added, "you really find me ugly."

As she spoke I raised my eyes. Perhaps my drunkenness deceived me, or perhaps I had not seen her face clearly before, but suddenly I detected in that unfortunate girl a fatal resemblance to my mistress. I shuddered at the sight. There is a certain shudder that affects the hair; some say it is death passing over the head, but it was not death that passed over mine.

It was the malady of the age, or rather was it that girl herself; and it was she who, with her pale, halfmocking features and rasping voice, came and sat with me at the end of the tavern room.

The moment I perceived her resemblance to my mistress a frightful idea occurred to me; it took irresistible possession of my muddled mind, and I put it into execution at once.

I escorted that girl to my home; and I arranged my room just as I had been wont to do when my mistress was with me, for I was dominated by a certain recollection of past joys.

Having arranged my room to my satisfaction, I gave myself up to the intoxication of despair. I probed my heart to the bottom in order to sound its depths. A Tyrolean song that my loved one used to sing began to run through my head:

Altra volta gieri biele,  
Blanch' a rossa com' un flore,  
Ma ora no. Non son piu biele  
Consumatis dal' amore.

[Once I was beautiful, white and rosy as a flower; but now I am not.  
I am no longer beautiful, consumed by the fire of love.]

I listened to the echo of that song as it reverberated through the desert of my heart. I said: "Behold the happiness of man; behold my little Paradise; behold my queen Mab, a girl from the streets. My mistress is no better. Behold what is found at the bottom of the glass when the nectar of the gods has been drained; behold the corpse of love."

The unfortunate creature heard me singing and began to sing herself. I turned pale; for that harsh and rasping voice, coming from the lips of one who resembled my mistress, seemed a symbol of my experience. It sounded like a gurgle in the throat of debauchery. It seemed to me that my mistress, having been unfaithful, must have such a voice. I was reminded of Faust who, dancing at the Brocken with a young sorceress, saw a red mouse emerge from her throat.

"Stop!" I cried. I arose and approached her.

Let me ask you, O men of the time, bent upon pleasure, who attend the balls and the opera and who, upon retiring this night, will seek slumber with the aid of some threadbare blasphemy of old Voltaire, some sensible satire by Paul Louis Courier, or some essay on economics, you who dally with the cold substance of that monstrous water-lily that Reason has planted in the hearts of our cities-let me ask, if by some chance this obscure book falls into your hands, not to smile with noble disdain or shrug your shoulders. Be not too sure that I complain of an imaginary evil; be not too sure that human reason is the most beautiful of faculties, that there is nothing real here below but quotations on the Bourse, gambling in the salon, wine on the table, the glow of health, indifference toward others, and the pleasures of the night.

For some day, across your stagnant life, a gust of wind will blow. Those beautiful trees, that you

water with the stream of oblivion, Providence will destroy; despair will overtake you, heedless ones, and tears will dim your eyes. I will not say that your mistresses will deceive you— that would not grieve you so much as the loss of a horse—but you can lose on the Bourse. For the first plunge is not the last, and even if you do not gamble, bethink you that your moneyed tranquillity, your golden happiness, are in the care of a banker who may fail. In short, I tell you, frozen as you are, you are capable of loving something; some fibre of your being can be torn and you can give vent to cries that will resemble a moan of pain. Some day, wandering about the muddy streets, when daily material joys shall have failed, you will find yourself seated disconsolately on a deserted bench at midnight.

O men of marble! sublime egoists, inimitable reasoners, who have never given way to despair or made a mistake in arithmetic, if this ever happens to you, at the hour of your ruin you will remember Abelard when he lost Heloise. For he loved her more than you love your horses, your money, or your mistresses; and in losing her he lost more than your monarch Satan would lose in falling again from the battlements of Heaven. He loved her with a love of which the gazettes do not speak, the shadow of which your wives and your daughters do not perceive in our theatres and in our books. He passed half of his life kissing her white forehead, teaching her to sing the psalms of David and the canticles of Saul; he had but her on earth alone; and God consoled him.

Believe me, when in your distress you think of Abelard you will not look with the same eye upon the rich blasphemy of Voltaire and the badinage of Courier; you will feel that human reason can cure illusions but can not heal sorrows; that God has use for Reason but that He has not made her a sister of Charity. You will find that when the heart of man said: "I believe in nothing, for I see nothing," it did not speak the last word on the subject. You will look about you for something like hope, you will shake the doors of churches to see if they still swing, but you will find them walled up; you will think of becoming Trappists, and destiny will mock at you, and for reply will give you a bottle of wine and a courtesan.

And if you drink the wine, and take the courtesan, you will learn how such things come to pass.

## **PART II**

### **CHAPTER I**

#### **AT THE CROSSWAYS**

Upon awaking the following morning I experienced a feeling of such deep disgust with myself, and felt so degraded in my own eyes that a horrible temptation assailed me. Then I sat down and looked gloomily about the room, my eyes resting mechanically on a brace of pistols that decorated the walls.

When the suffering mind stretches its hands, so to speak, toward annihilation, when the soul forms some violent resolution, there seems to be an independent physical horror in the act of touching the cold steel of some deadly weapon; the fingers stiffen in anguish, the arm grows cold and hard. Nature recoils as the condemned walks to death. I can not express what I experienced, unless it was as if my pistol had said to me: "Think what you are about to do."

Since then I have often wondered what would have happened to me if the girl had departed immediately. Doubtless the first flush of shame would have subsided; sadness is not despair, and God has joined them in order that the one should not leave us alone with the other. Once relieved of the presence of that woman, my heart would have become calm. There would remain only repentance, for the angel of pardon has forbidden man to kill. But I was doubtless cured for life; debauchery was once for all driven from my door, and I would never again know the feeling of disgust with which its first visit had inspired me.

But it happened otherwise. The struggle which was going on within, the poignant reflections which overwhelmed me, the disgust, the fear, the wrath, even (for I experienced all these emotions at the same time), all these fatal powers nailed me to my chair; and, while I was thus a prey to dangerous delirium, the creature, standing before my mirror, thought of nothing but how best to arrange her dress and fix her hair, smiling the while. This lasted more than a quarter of an hour, during which I had almost forgotten her. Finally some slight noise attracted my attention to her, and turning about with impatience I ordered her to leave the room in such a tone that she at once opened the door and threw me a kiss before going out.

At the same moment some one rang the bell of the outer door. I arose precipitately, and had only time

to open the closet door and motion the creature into it, when Desgenais entered the room with two friends.

The great currents that are found in the middle of the ocean resemble certain events in life. Fatality, Chance, Providence, what matters the name? Those who quarrel over the word admit the fact. Such are not those who, speaking of Napoleon or Caesar, say:

"He was a man of Providence." They apparently believe that heroes merit the attention which Heaven shows them, and that the color of purple attracts gods as well as bulls.

As to what rules the course of these little events, or what objects and circumstances, in appearance the least important, lead to changes in fortune, there is not, to my mind, a deeper cause and opportunity for thought. For something in our ordinary actions resembles the little blunted arrows we shoot at targets; little by little we make of our successive deeds an abstract and regular entity that we call our prudence or our will. Then comes a gust of wind, and lo! the smallest of these arrows, the very lightest and most ineffective, is wafted beyond our vision, beyond the very horizon to the dwelling-place of God himself.

What a strange feeling of unrest seizes us then! What becomes of those phantoms of tranquil pride, the will and prudence? Force itself, that mistress of the world, that sword of man in the combat of life, in vain do we brandish it over our heads in wrath, in vain do we seek to ward off with it a blow which threatens us; an invisible power turns aside the point, and all the impetus of effort, deflected into space, serves only to precipitate our fall.

Thus, at the moment I was hoping to cleanse myself from the sin I had committed, perhaps to inflict the penalty, at the very instant when a great horror had taken possession of me, I learned that I had to sustain a dangerous test.

Desgenais was in good humor; stretching himself out on my sofa he began to chaff me about my appearance, which indicated, he said, that I had not slept well. As I was little disposed to indulge in pleasantries I begged him to spare me.

He appeared to pay no attention to me, but, warned by my tone, soon broached the subject that had brought him to me. He informed me that my mistress had not only two lovers at a time, but three; that is to say, she had treated my rival as badly as she had treated me; the poor boy, having discovered her inconstancy, made a great ado and all Paris knew it. At first I did not catch the meaning of Desgenais's words, as I was not listening attentively; but when he had repeated his story three times in detail I was so stupefied that I could not reply. My first impulse was to laugh, for I saw that I had loved the most unworthy of women; but it was no less true that I loved her still. "Is it possible?" was all I could say.

Desgenais's friends confirmed all he had said. My mistress had been surprised in her own house between two lovers, and a scene ensued that all Paris knew by heart. She was disgraced, obliged to leave Paris or remain exposed to the most bitter taunts.

It was easy for me to see that in all this ridicule a great part was directed at me, not only on account of my duel in connection with this woman, but from my whole conduct in regard to her. To say that she deserved severest censure, that she had perhaps committed far worse sins than those she was charged with, was but to make me feel that I had been one of her dupes.

All this did not please me; but Desgenais had undertaken the task of curing me of my love, and was prepared to treat my disease heroically. A long friendship, founded on mutual services, gave him certain rights, and as his motive appeared praiseworthy I allowed him to have his way.

Not only did he not spare me, but when he saw my trouble and my shame increase, he pressed me the harder. My impatience was so obvious that he could not continue, so he stopped and remained silent—a course that irritated me still more.

In my turn I began to ask questions; I paced to and fro in my room. Although the recital of the story was well-nigh insupportable, I wished to hear it again. I tried to assume a smiling face and tranquil air, but in vain. Desgenais suddenly became silent after having shown himself to be a most virulent gossip. While I was pacing up and down my room he looked at me calmly, as if I were a caged fox.

I can not express my state of mind. That a woman who had so long been the idol of my heart, and who, since I had lost her, had caused me such deep affliction, the only one I had ever loved, for whom indeed I might sorrow till death, should become suddenly a shameless wretch, the subject of coarse jests, of universal censure and scandal! It seemed to me that I felt on my shoulder the brand of a glowing iron and that I was marked with a burning stigma.

The more I reflected, the more the darkness thickened about me. From time to time I turned my head and saw a cold smile or a curious glance. Desgenais did not leave me; he knew very well what he was doing, and saw that I might go to any lengths in my present desperate condition.

When he found that he had brought me to the desired point, he did not hesitate to deal the finishing stroke.

"Does that story displease you?" he asked. "The best is yet to come. My dear Octave, the scene I have described took place on a certain night when the moon was shining brightly. While the two lovers were quarrelling over their fair one, and talking of cutting her throat as she sat before the fire, down in the street a certain shadow was seen to pass up and down before the house, a shadow that resembled you so closely that it was decided it must be you."

"Who says so?" I asked, "who saw me in the street?"

"Your mistress herself; she told it to every one who cared to listen, just as cheerfully as we tell you her story. She claims that you love her still, that you keep guard at her door, in short—everything you can think of; but you ought to know that she talks about you publicly."

I have never been able to lie, for whenever I have tried to disguise the truth my face has betrayed me. 'Amour propre', the shame of confessing my weakness before witnesses induced me, however, to make the effort. "It is very true that I was in the street," I thought, "but had I known that my mistress was as bad as she is, I should not have been there."

Finally I persuaded myself that I had not been seen distinctly; I attempted to deny it. A deep flush suffused my face and I felt the futility of my feint. Desgenais smiled.

"Take care," said he, "take care, do not go too far."

"But," I protested, "how did I know it, how could I know—"

Desgenais compressed his lips as if to say:

"You knew enough."

I stopped short, mumbling the remnant of my sentence. My blood became so hot that I could not continue.

"I in the street bathed in tears, in despair, and during that time that encounter within! What! that very night! Mocked by her! Surely, Desgenais, you are dreaming. Is it true? Can it be possible? What can you know about it?"

Thus talking at haphazard, I lost my head and an irresistible feeling of wrath began to rise within me. Finally I sat down exhausted.

"My friend," said Desgenais, "do not take the thing so seriously. The solitary life you have been leading for the last two months has made you ill; I see you have need of distraction. Come to supper with me this evening, and tomorrow morning we will go to the country."

The tone in which he said this hurt me more than anything else; in vain I tried to control myself. "Yes," I thought, "deceived by that woman, poisoned by horrible suggestions, having no refuge either in work or in fatigue, having for my only safeguard against despair and ruin a sacred but frightful grief. O God! it is that grief, that sacred relic of my sorrow, that has just crumbled in my hands! It is no longer, my love, it is my despair that is insulted. Mockery! She mocks at me as I weep!" That appeared incredible to me. All the memories of the past crowded about my heart when I thought of it. I seemed to see the spectres of our nights of love; they hung over a bottomless, eternal abyss, black as chaos, and from the bottom of that abyss arose a shriek of laughter, sweet but mocking, that said: "Behold your reward!"

Had I been told that the world mocked at me I would have replied: "So much the worse for it," and I should not have been angry; but at the same time I was told that my mistress was a shameless wretch. Thus, on one side, the ridicule was public, vouched for, stated by two witnesses who, before telling what they knew, must have felt that the world was against me; and, on the other hand, what reply could I make? How could I escape? What could I do when the centre of my life, my heart itself, was ruined, killed, annihilated. What could I say when the woman for whom I had braved all, ridicule as well as blame, for whom I had borne a load of misery, whom I loved, and who loved another, of whom I demanded no love, of whom I desired nothing but permission to weep at her door, no favor but that of vowing my youth to her memory and of writing her name, her name alone, on the tomb of my hopes!—Ah! when I thought of it, I felt the hand of death heavy upon me. That woman mocked me, it was she

who first pointed her finger at me, singling me out to the idle crowd which surrounded her; it was she, it was those lips erstwhile so many times pressed to mine, it was that body, that soul of my life, my flesh and my blood, it was from that source the injury came; yea, the last pang of all, the most cowardly and the most bitter, the pitiless laugh that sneers in the face of grief.

The more I thought of it the more enraged I became. Did I say enraged? I do not know what passion possessed me. What I do know is that an inordinate desire for vengeance entered into my soul. How could I revenge myself on a woman? I would have paid any price for a weapon that could be used against her. But I had none, not even the one she had employed; I could not pay her in her own coin.

Suddenly I noticed a shadow moving behind the curtain before the closet. I had forgotten my prisoner.

"Listen to me!" I cried, rising, "I have loved, I have loved like a fool. I deserve all the ridicule you have subjected me to. But, by Heaven! I will show you something that will prove to you that I am not such a fool as you think."

With these words I pulled aside the curtain and exposed the interior of the closet. The girl was trying to conceal herself in a corner.

"Go in, if you choose," I said to Desgenais; "you who call me a fool for loving a woman, see how your teaching has affected me. Do you think I passed last night under the windows of—? But that is not all," I added, "that is not all I have to say. You give a supper to-night and to-morrow go to the country; I am with you, and shall not leave you from now on. We will not separate, but will pass the entire day together. Are you with me? Agreed! I have tried to make of my heart the mausoleum of my love, but I will bury my love in another tomb."

With these words I sat down, marvelling how indignation can solace grief and restore happiness. Whoever is astonished to learn that, from that day, I completely changed my course of life does not know the heart of man, and does not understand that a young man of twenty may hesitate before taking a step, but does not retreat when he has once taken it.

## CHAPTER II

### THE CHOSEN WAY

The first steps in debauchery resemble vertigo, for one feels a sort of terror mingled with sensuous delight, as if peering downward from some giddy—height. While shameful, secret dissipation ruins the noblest of men, in the frank and open defiance of conventionality there is something that compels respect even in the most depraved. He who goes at nightfall, muffled in his cloak, to sully his life in secret, and clandestinely to shake off the hypocrisy of the day, resembles an Italian who strikes his enemy from behind, not daring to provoke him to open quarrel. There are assassinations in the dark corners of the city under shelter of the night. He who goes his way without concealment says: "Every one does it and conceals it; I do it and do not conceal it." Thus speaks pride, and once that cuirass has been buckled on, it glitters with the refulgent light of day.

It is said that Damocles saw a sword suspended over his head. Thus libertines seem to have something over their heads which says: "Go on, but remember, I hang not by a thread." Those masked carriages that are seen during Carnival are the faithful images of their life. A dilapidated open wagon, flaming torches lighting up painted faces; some laugh, some sing. Among them you see what appear to be women; they are in fact what once were women, with human semblance. They are caressed and insulted; no one knows who they are or what their names. They float and stagger under the flaming torches in an intoxication that thinks of nothing, and over which, it is said, a pitying God watches.

But if the first impression be astonishment, the second is horror, and the third pity. There is evident so much force, or rather such an abuse of force, that often the noblest characters and the strongest constitutions are ruined. The life appears hardy and dangerous to these; they would make prodigies of themselves; bound to debauchery as Mazeppa to his horse, they gallop, making Centaurs of themselves and seeing neither the bloody trail that the shreds of their flesh leave, nor the eyes of the wolves that gleam in hungry pursuit, nor the desert, nor the vultures.

Launched into that life by the circumstances that I have recounted, I must now describe what I saw

there.

Before I had a close view of one of those famous gatherings called theatrical masked balls, I had heard the debauchery of the Regency spoken of, and a reference to the time when a queen of France appeared disguised as a violet-seller. I found there flower-merchants disguised as vivandieres. I expected to find libertinism there, but in fact I found none at all. One sees only the scum of libertinism, some blows, and drunken women lying in deathlike stupor on broken bottles.

Ere I saw debauchery at table I had heard of the suppers of Heliogabolus and of the philosophy of Greece, which made the pleasures of the senses a kind of natural religion. I expected to find oblivion or something like joy; I found there the worst thing in the world: ennui trying to live, and some Englishmen who said: "I do this or that, and so I amuse myself. I have spent so many sovereigns, and have procured so much pleasure." And thus they wear out their life on that grindstone.

I had known nothing of courtesans when I heard of Aspasia, who sat on the knees of Alcibiades while discussing philosophy with Socrates. I expected to find something bold and insolent, but gay, free, and vivacious, something with the sparkle of champagne; I found a yawning mouth, a fixed eye, and light fingers.

Before I saw titled courtesans I had read Boccaccio and Bandello; above all, I had read Shakespeare. I had dreamed of those beautiful triflers; of those cherubim of hell. A thousand times I had drawn those heads so poetically foolish, so enterprising in audacity, heads of harebrained mistresses who wreck a romance with a glance, and who pass through life by waves and by pulsations, like the sirens of the tides. I thought of the fairies of the modern tales, who are always drunk with love if not with wine. I found, instead, writers of letters, exact arrangers of assignations, who practised lying as an art and cloaked their baseness under hypocrisy, whose only thought was to give themselves for profit and to forget.

Ere first I looked on the gaming-table I had heard of floods of gold, of fortunes made in a quarter of an hour, and of a lord of the court of Henry IV, who won on one card a hundred thousand louis. I found a narrow room where workmen who had but one shirt rented a suit for the evening for twenty sous, police stationed at the door, and starving wretches staking a crust of bread against a pistol-shot.

Unknown to me were those dance-halls, public or other, open to any of those thirty thousand women who are permitted to sell themselves in Paris; I had heard of the saturnalia of all ages, of every imaginable orgy, from Babylon to Rome, from the temple of Priapus to the Parc-aux-Cerfs, and I have always seen written on the sill of that door the word, "Pleasure." I found nothing suggestive of pleasure, but in its place another word; and it has always seemed ineffaceable, not graven in that glorious metal that takes the sun's light, but in the palest of all, the cold colors of which seem tinted by the moonlight silver.

The first time I saw a mob, it was a depressing morning—Ash Wednesday, near Courtille. A cold, fine rain had been falling since the evening before; the streets were covered with pools of water. Carriages with blinds down were strung out hither and thither, crowding between hedges of hideous men and women standing on the sidewalks. That sinister wall of spectators had tigerish eyes, red with wine, gleaming with hatred. The carriage-wheels splashed mud over them, but they did not move. I was standing on the front seat of an open carriage; from time to time a man in rags would step out from the wall, hurl a torrent of abuse at us, then cover us with a cloud of flour. Mud would soon follow; yet we kept on our way toward the Isle of Love and the pretty wood of Romainville, consecrated by so many sweet kisses. One of my friends fell from his seat into the mud, narrowly escaping death on the paving. The people threw themselves on him to overpower him, and we were obliged to hasten to his assistance. One of the trumpeters who preceded us on horseback was struck on the shoulder by a paving-stone; the flour had given out. I had never heard of anything like that.

I began to understand the time and comprehend the spirit of the age.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **AFRICAN HOSPITALITY**

Desgenais had planned a reunion of young people at his country house. The best wines, a splendid table, gaming, dancing, hunting, nothing was lacking. Desgenais was rich and generous. He combined

an antique hospitality with modern ways. Moreover one could always find in his house the best books; his conversation was that of a man of learning and culture. He was a problem.

I took with me a taciturn humor that nothing could overcome; he respected it scrupulously. I did not reply to his questions and he dropped the subject; he was satisfied that I had forgotten my mistress. I went to the chase and appeared at the table, and was as convivial as the best; he asked no more.

One of the most unfortunate tendencies of inexperienced youth is to judge of the world from first impressions; but it must be confessed that there is a race of men who are also very unhappy; a race which says to youth: "You are right in believing in evil, for we know what it is." I have heard, for example, a curious thing spoken of, a medium between good and evil, a certain arrangement between heartless women and men worthy of them—apparently love, but in reality a passing sentiment. They speak of love as of an engine constructed by a wagon-builder or a building-contractor. They said to me: "This and that are agreed upon, such and such phrases are spoken, and certain others are repeated in reply; letters are written in a prescribed manner, you kneel in a certain attitude." All is regulated as in a parade.

This made me laugh. Unfortunately for me, I can not tell a woman whom I despise that I love her, even when I know that it is only a convention and that she will not be deceived by it. I have never bent my knee to the ground when my heart did not go with it. So that class of women known as *facile* is unknown to me, or if I allow myself to be taken with them, it is without knowing it, and through innate simplicity.

I can understand that one's soul can be put aside, but not that it should be handled. That there is some pride in this, I confess, but I do not intend either to boast or abase myself. Above all things I hate those women who laugh at love, and I permit them to reciprocate the sentiment; there will never be any dispute between us.

Such women are beneath courtesans, for courtesans may lie as well as they; but courtesans are capable of love, and these women are not. I remember a woman who loved me, and who said to a man many times richer than I, with whom she was living: "I am weary of you, I am going to my lover." That woman is worth more than many others who are not despised by society.

I passed the entire season with Desgenais, and learned that my mistress had left France; that news left in my heart a feeling of languor which I could not overcome.

At the sight of that world which surrounded and was so new to me, I experienced at first a kind of bizarre curiosity, at once sad and profound, which made me look timorously at things as does a restless horse. Then an incident occurred which made a deep impression on me.

Desgenais had with him a very beautiful woman who loved him much. One evening as I was walking with him I told him that I considered her admirable, as much on account of her attachment for him as because of her beauty. In short, I praised her highly and with warmth, giving him to understand that he ought to be happy.

He made no reply. It was his manner, for he was the dryest of men. That night when all had retired, and I had been in bed some fifteen minutes I heard a knock at my door. I supposed it was some one of my friends who could not sleep, and invited him to enter.

There appeared before my astonished eyes a woman, very pale, carrying a bouquet in her hands, to which was attached a piece of paper bearing these words "To Octave, from his friend Desgenais."

I had no sooner read these words than a flash of light came to me. I understood the meaning of this action of Desgenais in making me this African gift. It made me think. The poor woman was weeping and did not dare dry her tears for fear I would see them. I said to her: "You may return and fear nothing."

She replied that if she should return Desgenais would send her back to Paris. "Yes," I replied, "you are beautiful and I am susceptible to temptation, but you weep, and your tears not being shed for me, I care nothing for the rest. Go, therefore, and I will see to it that you are not sent back to Paris."

One of my peculiarities is that meditation, which with many is a firm and constant quality of the mind, is in my case an instinct independent of the will, and seizes me like a fit of passion. It comes to me at intervals in its own good time, regardless of my will and in almost any place. But when it comes I can do nothing against it. It takes me whither it pleases by whatever route seems good to it.

When the woman had left, I sat up.

"My friend," I said to myself, "behold what has been sent you. If Desgenais had not seen fit to send

you his mistress he would not have been mistaken, perhaps, in supposing that you might fall in love with her.

"Have you well considered it? A sublime and divine mystery is accomplished. Such a being costs nature the most vigilant maternal care; yet man, who would cure you, can think of nothing better than to offer you lips which belong to him in order to teach you how to cease to love.

"How was it accomplished? Others than you have doubtless admired her, but they ran no risk. She might employ all the seduction she pleased; you alone were in danger.

"It must be that Desgenais has a heart, since he lives. In what respect does he differ from you. He is a man who believes in nothing, fears nothing, who knows no care or ennui, perhaps, and yet it is clear that a scratch on the finger would fill him with terror, for if his body abandons him, what becomes of him? He lives only in the body. What sort of creature is he who treats his soul as the flagellants treat their bodies? Can one live without a head?

"Think of it. Here is a man who possesses one of the most beautiful women in the world; he is young and ardent; he finds her beautiful and tells her so; she replies that she loves him. Some one touches him on the shoulder and says to him: 'She is unfaithful.' Nothing more, he is sure of himself. If some one had said: 'She is a poisoner,' he would, perhaps have continued to love her, he would not have given her a kiss less; but she is unfaithful, and it is no more a question of love with him than of the star of Saturn.

"What is there in that word? A word that is merited, positive, withering, at will. But why? It is still but a word. Can you kill a body with a word?

"And if you love that body? Some one pours a glass of wine and says to you: 'Do not love that, for you can get four for six francs.' And it may intoxicate you!

"But Desgenais loves his mistress, since he keeps her; he must, therefore, have a peculiar fashion of loving? No, he has not; his fashion of loving is not love, and he cares no more for the woman who merits affection than for her who is unworthy. He loves no one, simply and truly.

"What has led him to this? Was he born thus? To love is as natural as to eat and to drink. He is not a man. Is he a dwarf or a giant? Is he always so impassive? Upon what does he feed, what beverage does he drink? Behold him at thirty like old Mithridates; poisons are his familiar friends.

"There is the great secret, my child, the key you must grasp. By whatever process of reasoning debauchery may be defended, it will be proven that it is natural at a given day, hour, or night, but not to-morrow nor every day. There is not a nation on earth which has not considered woman either the companion and consolation of man or the sacred instrument of life, and has not under either of these two forms honored her. And yet here is an armed warrior who leaps into the abyss that God has dug with His own hands between man and brute; as well might he deny that fact. What mute Titan is this who dares repress under the kisses of the body the love of the soul, and place on human lips the stigma of the brute, the seal of eternal silence?

"There is a word that should be studied. In it you hear the faint moan of those dismal labyrinths we know as secret societies, mysteries that the angels of destruction whisper in the ear of night as it descends upon the earth. That man is better or worse than God has made him. He is like a sterile woman, in whom nature has not completed her work, or there is distilled in the shadow of his life some venomous poison.

"Ah! yes, neither occupation nor study has been able to cure you, my friend. To forget and to learn, that is your device. You turn the leaves of dead books; you are too young for antiquities. Look about you, the pale throng of men surrounds you. The eyes of life's sphynx glitter in the midst of divine hieroglyphics; decipher the book of life! Courage, scholar, launch out on the Styx, the deathless flood, and let the waves of sorrow waft you to oblivion or to God."

## CHAPTER IV

MARCO

"All the good there was in it, supposing there was some good in it, was that false pleasures were the

seeds of sorrow and of bitterness which fatigued me to the point of exhaustion." Such are the simple words spoken with reference to his youth by a man who was the most manly of any who have lived—St. Augustine. Of those who have done as I, few would say those words; all have them in their hearts; I have found no others in mine.

Returning to Paris in the month of December, I passed the winter attending pleasure parties, masquerades, suppers, rarely leaving Desgenais, who was delighted with me: not so was I with him. The more I went about, the more unhappy I became. It seemed to me after a short time that the world which had at first appeared so strange would hamper me, so to speak, at every step; yet where I had expected to see a spectre, I discovered, upon closer inspection, a shadow.

Desgenais asked what ailed me.

"And you?" I asked. "What is the matter with you? Have you lost some relative? Or do you suffer from some wound?"

At times he seemed to understand and did not question me. Occasionally we sat down at a cafe table and drank until our heads swam; or in the middle of the night took horses and rode ten or twelve leagues into the country; returning to the bath, then to table, then to gambling, then to bed; and on reaching mine, I fell on my knees and wept. That was my evening prayer.

Strange to say, I took pride in passing for what I was not, I boasted of being worse than I really was, and experienced a sort of melancholy pleasure in doing so. When I had actually done what I claimed, I felt nothing but ennui, but when I invented an account of some folly, some story of debauchery, or a recital of an orgy with which I had nothing to do, it seemed to me that my heart was better satisfied, although I know not why.

Whenever I joined a party of pleasure-seekers and visited some spot made sacred by tender associations I became stupid, went off by myself, looked gloomily at the trees and bushes as if I would like to trample them under my feet. Upon my return I would remain silent for hours.

The baleful idea that truth is nudity beset me on every occasion.

"The world," I said to myself, "is accustomed to call its disguise virtue, its chaplet religion, its flowing mantle convenience. Honor and Morality are man's chambermaids; he drinks in his wine the tears of the poor in spirit who believe in him; while the sun is high in the heavens he walks about with downcast eye; he goes to church, to the ball, to the assembly, and when evening has come he removes his mantle and there appears a naked bacchante with the hoofs of a goat."

But such thoughts aroused a feeling of horror, for I felt that if the body was under the clothing, the skeleton was under the body. "Is it possible that that is all?" I asked in spite of myself. Then I returned to the city, I saw a little girl take her mother's arm, and I became like a child.

Although I had followed my friends into all manner of dissipation, I had no desire to resume my place in the world of society. The sight of women caused me intolerable pain; I could not touch a woman's hand without trembling. I had decided never to love again.

Nevertheless I returned from the ball one evening so sick at heart that I feared that it was love. I happened to have had beside me at supper the most charming and the most distinguished woman whom it had ever been my good fortune to meet. When I closed my eyes to sleep I saw her image before me. I thought I was lost, and I at once resolved that I would avoid meeting her again. A sort of fever seized me, and I lay on my bed for fifteen days, repeating over and over the lightest words I had exchanged with her.

As there is no spot on earth where one can be so well-known by his neighbors as in Paris, it was not long before the people of my acquaintance who had seen me with Desgenais began to accuse me of being a great libertine. In that I admired the discernment of the world: in proportion as I had passed for inexperienced and sensitive at the time of my rupture with my mistress, I was now considered corrupt and hardened. Some one had just told me that it was clear I had never loved that woman, that I had doubtless merely played at love, thereby paying me a compliment which I really did not deserve; but the truth of it was that I was so swollen with vanity I was charmed with it.

My desire was to pass as blase, even while I was filled with desires and my exalted imagination was carrying me beyond all limits. I began to say that I could not make any headway with the women; my head was filled with chimeras which I preferred to realities. In short, my unique pleasure consisted in altering the nature of facts. If a thought were but extraordinary, if it shocked common sense, I became its ardent champion at the risk of advocating the most dangerous sentiments.

My greatest fault was imitation of everything that struck me, not by its beauty but by its strangeness, and not wishing to confess myself an imitator I resorted to exaggeration in order to appear original. According to my idea, nothing was good or even tolerable; nothing was worth the trouble of turning the head, and yet when I had become warmed up in a discussion it seemed as if there was no expression in the French language strong enough to sustain my cause; but my warmth would subside as soon as my opponents ranged themselves on my side.

It was a natural consequence of my conduct. Although disgusted with the life I was leading I was unwilling to change it:

Simigliante a quelli 'nferma  
Che non puo trovar posa in su le piume,  
Ma con dar volta suo dolore scherma.—DANTE.

Thus I tortured my mind to give it change, and I fell into all these vagaries in order to get away from myself.

But while my vanity was thus occupied, my heart was suffering, so that ever within me were a man who laughed and a man who wept. It was a perpetual struggle between my head and my heart. My own mockeries frequently caused me great pain and my deepest sorrows aroused a desire to burst into laughter.

One day a man boasted of being proof against superstitious fears, in fact, fear of every kind. His friends put a human skeleton in his bed and then concealed themselves in an adjoining room to wait for his return. They did not hear any noise, but in the morning they found him dressed and sitting on the bed playing with the bones; he had lost his reason.

I might be that man but for the fact that my favorite bones are those of a well-beloved skeleton; they are the debris of my first love, all that remains of the past.

But it must not be supposed that there were no joyous moments in all this maddened whirl. Among Desgenais's companions were several young men of distinction and a number of artists. We sometimes passed together delightful evenings imagining ourselves libertines. One of them was infatuated with a beautiful singer, who charmed us with her fresh and expressive voice. How many times we sat listening to her while supper was waiting! How many times, when the flagons had been emptied, one of us held a volume of Lamartine and read aloud in a voice choked by emotion! Every other thought disappeared. The hours passed by unheeded. What strange "libertines" we were! We did not speak a word and there were tears in our eyes.

Desgenais especially, habitually the coldest and driest of men, was inexplicable on such occasions; he delivered himself of such extraordinary sentiments that he might have been a poet in delirium. But after these effusions he would be seized with furious joy. When warmed by wine he would break everything within reach; the genius of destruction stalked forth in him armed to the teeth. I have seen him pick up a chair and hurl it through a closed window.

I could not help making a study of this singular man. He appeared to me the exact type of a class which ought to exist somewhere but which was unknown to me. One could never tell whether his outbursts were the despair of a man sick of life, or the whim of a spoiled child.

During the fete, in particular, he was in such a state of nervous excitement that he acted like a schoolboy. Once he persuaded me to go out on foot with him, muffled in grotesque costumes, with masks and instruments of music. We promenaded all night, in the midst of the most frightful din of horrible sounds. We found a driver asleep on his box and unhitched his horses; then, pretending we had just come from the ball, set up a great cry. The coachman started up, cracked his whip, and his horses started off on a trot, leaving him seated on the box. That same evening we had passed through the Champs Elysees; Desgenais, seeing another carriage passing, stopped it after the manner of a highwayman; he intimidated the coachman by threats and forced him to climb down and lie flat on his stomach. He opened the carriage door and found within a young man and a lady motionless with fright. He whispered to me to imitate him, and we began to enter one door and go out by the other, so that in the obscurity the poor young people thought they saw a procession of bandits going through their carriage.

As I understand it, the men who say that the world gives experience ought to be astonished if they are believed. The world is merely a number of whirlpools, each one independent of the others; they circle in groups like flocks of birds. There is no resemblance between the different quarters of the same city, and the denizen of the Chaussee d'Antin has as much to learn at Marais as at Lisbon. It is true that these various whirlpools are traversed, and have been since the beginning of the world, by seven

personages who are always the same: the first is called hope; the second, conscience; the third, opinion; the fourth, desire; the fifth, sorrow; the sixth, pride; and the seventh, man.

"But," the reader objects, "where are the women in all this?"

Oh! creatures who bear the name of women and who have passed like dreams through a life that was itself a dream, what shall I say of you? Where there is no shadow of hope can there be memory? Where shall I seek for it? What is there more dumb in human memory? What is there more completely forgotten than you?

If I must speak of women I will mention two; here is one of them:

I ask what would be expected of a poor sewing-girl, young and pretty, about eighteen, with a romantic affair on her hands that is purely a question of love; with little knowledge of life and no idea of morals; eternally sewing near a window before which processions were not allowed to pass by order of the police, but near which a dozen young women prowled who were licensed and recognized by these same police; what could you expect of her, when after wearying her hands and eyes all day long on a dress or a hat, she leans out of that window as night falls? That dress she has sewed, that hat she has trimmed with her poor and honest hands in order to earn a supper for the household, she sees passing along the street on the head or on the body of a notorious woman. Thirty times a day a hired carriage stops before the door, and there steps out a dissolute character, numbered as is the hack in which she rides, who stands before a glass and primps, taking off and putting on the results of many days' work on the part of the poor girl who watches her. She sees that woman draw from her pocket gold in plenty, she who has but one louis a week; she looks at her feet and her head, she examines her dress and eyes her as she steps into her carriage; and then, what can you expect? When night has fallen, after a day when work has been scarce, when her mother is sick, she opens her door, stretches out her hand and stops a passerby.

Such is the story of a girl I once knew. She could play the piano, knew something of accounts, a little designing, even a little history and grammar, and thus a little of everything. How many times have I regarded with poignant compassion that sad work of nature, mutilated by society! How many times have I followed in the darkness the pale and vacillating gleams of a spark flickering in abortive life! How many times have I tried to revive the fire that smouldered under those ashes! Alas! her long hair was the color of ashes, and we called her Cendrillon.

I was not rich enough to help her; Desgenais, at my request, interested himself in the poor creature; he made her learn over again all of which she had a slight knowledge. But she could make no appreciable progress. When her teacher left her she would fold her arms and for hours look silently across the public square. What days! What misery! One day I threatened that if she did not work she should have no money; she silently resumed her task, and I learned that she stole out of the house a few minutes later. Where did she go? God knows. Before she left I asked her to embroider a purse for me. I still have that sad relic, it hangs in my room, a monument of the ruin that is wrought here below.

But here is another case:

It was about ten in the evening when, after a riotous day, we repaired to Desgenais's, who had left us some hours before to make his preparations. The orchestra was ready and the room filled when we arrived.

Most of the dancers were girls from the theatres.

As soon as we entered I plunged into the giddy whirl of the waltz. That delightful exercise has always been dear to me; I know of nothing more beautiful, more worthy of a beautiful woman and a young man; all dances compared with the waltz are but insipid conventions or pretexts for insignificant converse. It is truly to possess a woman, in a certain sense, to hold her for a half hour in your arms, and to draw her on in the dance, palpitating in spite of herself, in such a way that it can not be positively asserted whether she is being protected or seduced. Some deliver themselves up to the pleasure with such modest voluptuousness, with such sweet and pure abandon, that one does not know whether he experiences desire or fear, and whether, if pressed to the heart, they would faint or break in pieces like the rose. Germany, where that dance was invented, is surely the land of love.

I held in my arms a superb danseuse from an Italian theatre who had come to Paris for the carnival; she wore the costume of a Bacchante with a robe of panther's skin. Never have I seen anything so languishing as that creature. She was tall and slender, and while dancing with extreme rapidity, had the appearance of allowing herself to be led; to see her one would think that she would tire her partner, but such was not the case, for she moved as if by enchantment.

On her bosom rested an enormous bouquet, the perfume of which intoxicated me. She yielded to my

encircling arms as would an Indian vine, with a gentleness so sweet and so sympathetic that I seemed enveloped with a perfumed veil of silk. At each turn there could be heard a light tinkling from her metal girdle; she moved so gracefully that I thought I beheld a beautiful star, and her smile was that of a fairy about to vanish from human sight. The tender and voluptuous music of the dance seemed to come from her lips, while her head, covered with a wilderness of black tresses, bent backward as if her neck was too slender to support its weight.

When the waltz was over I threw myself on a chair; my heart beat wildly: "Oh, heaven!" I murmured, "how can it be possible? Oh, superb monster! Oh! beautiful reptile! How you writhe, how you coil in and out, sweet adder, with supple and spotted skin! Thy cousin the serpent has taught thee to coil about the tree of life holding between thy lips the apple of temptation. Oh! Melusina! Melusina! The hearts of men are thine. You know it well, enchantress, with your soft languor that seems to suspect nothing! You know very well that you ruin, that you destroy; you know that he who touches you will suffer; you know that he dies who basks in your smile, who breathes the perfume of your flowers and comes under the magic influence of your charms; that is why you abandon yourself so freely, that is why your smile is so sweet, your flowers so fresh; that is why you place your arms so gently on our shoulders. Oh, heaven! what is your will with us?"

Professor Halle has said a terrible thing: "Woman is the nervous part of humanity, man the muscular." Humboldt himself, that serious thinker, has said that an invisible atmosphere surrounds the human nerves.

I do not quote the dreamers who watch the wheeling flight of Spallanzani's bat, and who think they have found a sixth sense in nature. Such as nature is, her mysteries are terrible enough, her powers mighty enough—that nature which creates us, mocks at us, and kills us—without our seeking to deepen the shadows that surround us. But where is the man who thinks he has lived that will deny woman's power over us? Has he ever taken leave of a beautiful dancer with trembling hands? Has he ever felt that indefinable enervating magnetism which, in the midst of the dance, under the influence of music, and the warmth, making all else seem cold, that comes from a young woman, electrifying her and leaping from her to him as the perfume of aloes from the swinging censer?

I was struck with stupor. I was familiar with that sensation similar to drunkenness which characterizes love; I knew that it was the aureole which crowned my well-beloved. But that she should excite such heart-throbs, that she should evoke such phantoms with nothing but her beauty, her flowers, her motley costume, and a certain trick of dancing she had learned from some merry-andrew; and that without a word, without a thought, without even appearing to know it! What was chaos, if it required seven days to make such a being?

It was not love, however, that I felt, and I do not know how to describe it unless I call it thirst. For the first time I felt vibrating in my body a cord that was not attuned to my heart. The sight of that beautiful animal had aroused a responsive roar from another animal in my nature. I felt sure I could never tell that woman that I loved her, or that she pleased me, or even that she was beautiful; there was nothing on my lips but a desire to kiss her, and say to her: "Make a girdle of those listless arms and lean that head on my breast; place that sweet smile on my lips." My body loved hers; I was under the influence of beauty as of wine.

Desgenais passed and asked what I was doing there.

"Who is that woman?" I asked.

"What woman? Of whom do you speak?"

I took his arm and led him into the hall. The Italian saw us coming and smiled. I stopped and stepped back.

"Ah!" said Desgenais, "you have danced with Marco?"

"Who is Marco?" I asked.

"Why, that idle creature who is laughing over there. Does she please you?"

"No," I replied, "I have waltzed with her and wanted to know her name; I have no further interest in her."

Shame led me to speak thus, but when Desgenais turned away I followed him.

"You are very prompt," he said, "Marco is no ordinary woman. She was almost the wife of M. de ———, ambassador to Milan. One of his friends brought her here. Yet," he added, "you may rest assured

I shall speak to her. We shall not allow you to die so long as there is any hope for you or any resource left untried. It is possible that she will remain to supper."

He left me, and I was alarmed to see him approach her. But they were soon lost in the crowd.

"Is it possible," I murmured; "have I come to this? Oh! heavens! is this what I am going to love? But after all," I thought, "my senses have spoken, but not my heart."

Thus I tried to calm myself. A few minutes later Desgenais tapped me on the shoulder.

"We shall go to supper at once," said he. "You will give your arm to Marco."

"Listen," I said; "I hardly know what I am experiencing. It seems to me I see limping Vulcan covering Venus with kisses while his beard smokes with the fumes of the forge. He fixes his staring eyes on the dazzling skin of his prey. His happiness in the possession of his prize makes him laugh for joy, and at the same time shudder with happiness, and then he remembers his father, Jupiter, seated on high among the gods."

Desgenais looked at me but made no reply; taking me by the arm he led me away.

"I am tired," he said, "and I am sad; this noise wearies me. Let us go to supper, that will refresh us."

The supper was splendid, but I could not touch it.

"What is the matter with you?" asked Marco.

I sat like a statue, making no reply and looking at her from head to foot with amazement.

She began to laugh, and Desgenais, who could see us from his table, joined her. Before her was a large crystal glass cut in the shape of a chalice, which reflected the glittering lights on its thousand sparkling facets, shining like the prism and revealing the seven colors of the rainbow. She listlessly extended her arm and filled it to the brim with Cyprian and a sweetened Oriental wine which I afterward found so bitter on the deserted Lido.

"Here," she said, presenting it to me, "per voi, bambino mio."

"For you and for me," I said, presenting her my glass in turn.

She moistened her lips while I emptied my glass, unable to conceal the sadness she seemed to read in my eyes.

"Is it not good?" she asked.

"No," I replied.

"Perhaps your head aches?"

"No."

"Or you are tired?"

"No."

"Ah! then it is the ennui of love?"

With these words she became serious, for in spite of herself, in speaking of love, her Italian heart beat the faster.

A scene of folly ensued. Heads were becoming heated, cheeks were assuming that purple hue with which wine suffuses the face as if to prevent shame appearing there. A confused murmur, like to that of a rising sea, could be heard all over the room; here and there eyes would become inflamed, then fixed and empty; I know not what wind stirred above this drunkenness. A woman rises, as in a tranquil sea the first wave that feels the tempest's breath foams up to announce it; she makes a sign with her hand to command silence, empties her glass at a gulp and with the same movement undoes her hair, which falls in shining tresses over her shoulders; she opens her mouth as if to start a drinking-song; her eyes are half closed. She breathes with an effort; twice a harsh sound comes from her throat; a mortal pallor overspreads her features and she drops into her chair.

Then came an uproar which lasted an hour. It was impossible to distinguish anything, either laughter, songs, or cries.

"What do you think of it?" asked Desgenais.

"Nothing," I replied. "I have stopped my ears and am looking at it."

In the midst of this Bacchanalian orgy the beautiful Marco remained mute, drinking nothing and leaning quietly on her bare arm. She seemed neither astonished nor affected by it.

"Do you not wish to do as they?" I asked. "You have just offered me Cyprian wine; why do you not drink some yourself?"

With these words I poured out a large glass full to the brim. She raised it to her lips and then placed it on the table, and resumed her listless attitude.

The more I studied that Marco, the more singular she appeared; she took pleasure in nothing and did not seem to be annoyed by anything. It appeared as difficult to anger her as to please her; she did what was asked of her, but no more. I thought of the genius of eternal repose, and I imagined that if that pale statue should become somnambulant it would resemble Marco.

"Are you good or bad?" I asked. "Are you sad or gay? Are you loved? Do you wish to be beloved? Are you fond of money, of pleasure, of what? Horses, the country, balls? What pleases you? Of what are you dreaming?"

To all these questions the same smile on her part, a smile that expressed neither joy nor sorrow, but which seemed to say, "What does it matter?" and nothing more.

I held my lips to hers; she gave me a listless kiss and then passed her handkerchief over her mouth.

"Marco," I said, "woe to him who loves you."

She turned her dark eyes on me, then turned them upward, and raising her finger with that Italian gesture which can not be imitated, she pronounced that characteristic feminine word of her country:

"Forse!"

And then dessert was served. Some of the party had departed, some were smoking, others gambling, and a few still at table; some of the women danced, others slept. The orchestra returned; the candles paled and others were lighted. I recalled a supper of Petronius, where the lights went out around the drunken masters, and the slaves entered and stole the silver. All the while songs were being sung in various parts of the room, and three Englishmen, three of those gloomy figures for whom the Continent is a hospital, kept up a most sinister ballad that must have been born of the fogs of their marshes.

"Come," said I to Marco, "let us go."

She arose and took my arm.

"To-morrow!" cried Desgenais to me, as we left the hall.

When approaching Marco's house, my heart beat violently and I could not speak. I could not understand such a woman; she seemed to experience neither desire nor disgust, and I could think of nothing but the fact that my hand was trembling and hers motionless.

Her room was, like her, sombre and voluptuous; it was dimly lighted by an alabaster lamp. The chairs and sofa were as soft as beds, and there was everywhere suggestion of down and silk. Upon entering I was struck with the strong odor of Turkish pastilles, not such as are sold here on the streets, but those of Constantinople, which are more powerful and more dangerous. She rang, and a maid appeared. She entered an alcove without a word, and a few minutes later I saw her leaning on her elbow in her habitual attitude of nonchalance.

I stood looking at her. Strange to say, the more I admired her, the more beautiful I found her, the more rapidly I felt my desires subside. I do not know whether it was some magnetic influence or her silence and listlessness. I lay down on a sofa opposite the alcove, and the coldness of death settled on my soul.

The pulsation of the blood in the arteries is a sort of clock, the ticking of which can be heard only at night. Man, free from exterior attractions, falls back upon himself; he hears himself live. In spite of my fatigue I could not close my eyes; those of Marco were fixed on me; we looked at each other in silence, gently, so to speak.

"What are you doing there?" she asked.

She heaved a gentle sigh that was almost a plaint.

I turned my head and saw that the first gleams of morning light were shining through the window.

I arose and opened the window; a bright light penetrated every corner of the room. The sky was clear.

I motioned to her to wait. Considerations of prudence had led her to choose an apartment some distance from the centre of the city; perhaps she had other quarters, for she sometimes received a number of visitors. Her lover's friends sometimes visited her, and this room was doubtless only a *petite maison*; it overlooked the Luxembourg, the gardens of which extended as far as my eye could reach.

As a cork held under water seems restless under the hand which holds it, and slips through the fingers to rise to the surface, thus there stirred in me a sentiment that I could neither overcome nor escape. The gardens of the Luxembourg made my heart leap and banished every other thought. How many times had I stretched myself out on one of those little mounds, a sort of sylvan school, while I read in the cool shade some book filled with foolish poetry! For such, alas, were the extravagances of my childhood. I saw many souvenirs of the past among those leafless trees and faded lawns. There, when ten years of age, I had walked with my brother and my tutor, throwing bits of bread to some of the poor half-starved birds; there, seated under a tree, I had watched a group of little girls as they danced, and felt my heart beat in unison with the refrain of their childish song. There, returning from school, I had followed a thousand times the same path, lost in meditation upon some verse of Virgil and kicking the pebbles at my feet.

"Oh, my childhood! You are there!" I cried. "Oh, heaven! now I am here."

I turned around. Marco was asleep, the lamp had gone out, the light of day had changed the aspect of the room; the hangings which had at first appeared blue were now a faded yellow, and Marco, the beautiful statue, was livid as death.

I shuddered in spite of myself; I looked at the alcove, then at the garden; my head became drowsy and fell on my breast. I sat down before an open secretary near one of the windows. A piece of paper caught my eye; it was an open letter and I looked at it mechanically. I read it several times before I thought what I was doing. Suddenly a gleam of intelligence came to me, although I could not understand everything. I picked up the paper and read what follows, written in an unskilled hand and filled with errors in spelling:

"She died yesterday. She began to fail at twelve the night before. She called me and said: 'Louison, I am going to join my companion; go to the closet and take down the cloth that hangs on a nail; it is the mate of the other.' I fell on my knees and wept, but she took my hand and said: 'Do not weep, do not weep!' And she heaved such a sigh—"

The rest was torn, I can not describe the impression that sad letter made on me; I turned it over and saw on the other side Marco's address and the date that of the evening previous.

"Is she dead? Who is dead?" I cried going to the alcove. "Dead! Who?"

Marco opened her eyes. She saw me with the letter in my hand.

"It is my mother," she said, "who is dead. You are not coming?"

As she spoke she extended her hand.

"Silence!" I said, "sleep, and leave me to myself."

She turned over and went to sleep. I looked at her for some time to assure myself that she would not hear me, and then quietly left the house.

## CHAPTER V

### SATIETY

One evening I was seated before the fire with Desgenais. The window was open; it was one of the early days in March, a harbinger of spring.

It had been raining, and a light odor came from the garden.

"What shall we do this spring?" I asked. "I do not care to travel."

"I shall do what I did last year," replied Desgenais. "I shall go to the country when the time comes."

"What!" I replied. "Do you do the same thing every year? Are you going to begin life over again this year?"

"What would you expect me to do?"

"What would I expect you to do?" I cried, jumping to my feet. "That is just like you. Ah! Desgenais, how all this wearies me! Do you never tire of this sort of life?"

"No," he replied.

I was standing before an engraving of the Magdalen in the desert. Involuntarily I joined my hands.

"What are you doing?" asked Desgenais.

"If I were an artist," I replied, "and wished to represent melancholy, I would not paint a dreamy girl with a book in her hands."

"What is the matter with you this evening?" he asked, smiling.

"No, in truth," I continued, "that Magdalen in tears has a spark of hope in her bosom; that pale and sickly hand on which she supports her head, is still sweet with the perfume with which she anointed the feet of her Lord. You do not understand that in that desert there are thinking people who pray. This is not melancholy."

"It is a woman who reads," he replied dryly.

"And a happy woman," I continued, "with a happy book."

Desgenais understood me; he saw that a profound sadness had taken possession of me. He asked if I had some secret cause of sorrow. I hesitated, but did not reply.

"My dear Octave," he said, "if you have any trouble, do not hesitate to confide in me. Speak freely and you will find that I am your friend!"

"I know it," I replied, "I know I have a friend; that is not my trouble."

He urged me to explain.

"But what will it avail," I asked, "since neither of us can help matters? Do you want the fulness of my heart or merely a word and an excuse?"

"Be frank!" he said.

"Very well," I replied, "you have seen fit to give me advice in the past and now I ask you to listen to me as I have listened to you. You ask what is in my heart, and I am about to tell you.

"Take the first comer and say to him: 'Here are people who pass their lives drinking, riding, laughing, gambling, enjoying all kinds of pleasures; no barrier restrains them, their law is their pleasure, women are their playthings; they are rich. They have no cares, not one. All their days are days of feasting.' What do you think of it? Unless that man happened to be a severe bigot, he would probably reply that it was the greatest happiness that could be imagined.

"Then take that man into the centre of the whirl, place him at a table with a woman on either side, a glass in his hand, a handful of gold every morning and say to him: 'This is your life. While you sleep near your mistress, your horses neigh in the stables; while you drive your horses along the boulevards, your wines are ripening in your vaults; while you pass away the night drinking, the bankers are increasing your wealth. You have but to express a wish and your desires are gratified. You are the happiest of men. But take care lest some night of carousal you drink too much and destroy the capacity of your body for enjoyment. That would be a serious misfortune, for all the ills that afflict human flesh can be cured, except that. You ride some night through the woods with joyous companions; your horse falls and you are thrown into a ditch filled with mud, and it may be that your companions, in the midst of their happy shoutings will not hear your cry of anguish; it may be that the sound of their trumpets will die away in the distance while you drag your broken limbs through the deserted forest.

"Some night you will lose at the gaming-table; fortune has its bad days. When you return home and are seated before the fire, do not strike your forehead with your hands, and allow sorrow to moisten your cheeks with tears; do not anxiously cast your eyes about here and there as if searching for a friend; do not, under any circumstances, think of those who, under some thatched roof, enjoy a tranquil life and who sleep holding each other by the hand; for before you on your luxurious bed reclines a pale creature who loves—your money. From her you will seek consolation for your grief, and she will remark that you are very sad and ask if your loss was considerable; the tears from your eyes will concern her deeply, for they may be the cause of allowing her dress to grow old or the rings to drop from her fingers. Do not name him who won your money that night, for she may meet him on the morrow, and may make sweet eyes at him that would destroy your remaining happiness.

"That is what is to be expected of human frailty; have you the strength to endure it? Are you a man? Beware of disgust, it is an incurable evil; death is more to be desired than a living distaste for life. Have you a heart? Beware of love, for it is worse than disease for a debauchee, and it is ridiculous. Debauchees pay their mistresses, and the woman who sells herself has no right but that of contempt for the purchaser. Are you passionate? Take care of your face. It is shameful for a soldier to throw down his arms and for a debauchee to appear to hold to anything; his glory consists in touching nothing except with hands of marble that have been bathed in oil in order that nothing may stick to them.

"Are you hot-headed? If you desire to live, learn how to kill, for wine is a wrangler. Have you a conscience? Take care of your slumber, for a debauchee who repents too late is like a ship that leaks: it can neither return to land nor continue on its course; the winds can with difficulty move it, the ocean yawns for it, it careens and disappears. If you have a body, look out for suffering; if you have a soul, despair awaits you.

"O unhappy one! beware of men; while they walk along the same path with you, you will see a vast plain strewn with garlands where a happy throng of dancers trip the gladsome farandole standing in a circle, each a link in an endless chain. It is but a mirage; those who look down know that they are dancing on a silken thread stretched over an abyss that swallows up all who fall and shows not even a ripple on its surface. What foot is sure? Nature herself seems to deny you her divine consolation; trees and flowers are yours no more; you have broken your mother's laws, you are no longer one of her foster children; the birds of the field become silent when you appear.

"You are alone! Beware of God! You are face to face with Him, standing like a cold statue upon the pedestal of will. The rain from heaven no longer refreshes you, it undermines and weakens you. The passing wind no longer gives you the kiss of life, its benediction on all that lives and breathes; it buffets you and makes you stagger. Every woman who kisses you takes from you a spark of life and gives you none in return; you exhaust yourself on phantoms; wherever falls a drop of your sweat there springs up one of those sinister weeds that grow in graveyards. Die! You are the enemy of all who love; blot yourself from the face of the earth, do not wait for old age; do not leave a child behind you, do not perpetuate a drop of your corrupted blood; vanish as does the smoke, do not deprive a single blade of living grass of a ray of sunlight."

When I had spoken these words I fell back in my chair, and a flood of tears streamed from my eyes.

"Ah! Desgenais," I cried, sobbing, "this is not what you told me. Did you not know it? And if you did, why did you not tell me of it?"

But Desgenais sat still with folded hands; he was as pale as a shroud, and a tear trickled slowly down his cheek.

A moment of silence ensued. The clock struck; I suddenly remembered that it was on this hour and this day one year ago that my mistress deceived me.

"Do you hear that clock?" I cried, "do you hear it? I do not know what it means at this moment, but it is a terrible hour, and one that will count in my life."

I was beside myself, and scarcely knew what I was saying. But at that instant a servant rushed into the room; he took my hand and led me aside, whispering in my ear:

"Sir, I have come to inform you that your father is dying; he has just been seized with an attack of apoplexy and the physicians despair of his life."

A terrible danger lurks in the knowledge of what is possible  
Accustomed to call its disguise virtue  
All that is not life, it is the noise of life  
Become corrupt, and you will cease to suffer  
Began to forget my own sorrow in my sympathy for her  
Beware of disgust, it is an incurable evil  
Death is more to be desired than a living distaste for life  
Despair of a man sick of life, or the whim of a spoiled child  
Do they think they have invented what they see  
Force itself, that mistress of the world  
Galileo struck the earth, crying: "Nevertheless it moves!"  
Grief itself was for her but a means of seducing  
He lives only in the body  
Human weakness seeks association  
I boasted of being worse than I really was  
I can not love her, I can not love another  
I do not intend either to boast or abase myself  
Ignorance into which the Greek clergy plunged the laity  
In what do you believe?  
Indignation can solace grief and restore happiness  
Is he a dwarf or a giant  
Men doubted everything: the young men denied everything  
Of all the sisters of love, the most beautiful is pity  
Perfection does not exist  
Resorted to exaggeration in order to appear original  
Sceptic regrets the faith he has lost the power to regain  
Seven who are always the same: the first is called hope  
St. Augustine  
Ticking of which (our arteries) can be heard only at night  
When passion sways man, reason follows him weeping and warning  
Wine suffuses the face as if to prevent shame appearing there  
You believe in what is said here below and not in what is done  
You turn the leaves of dead books  
Youth is to judge of the world from first impressions

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— VOLUME 1 \*\*\*

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