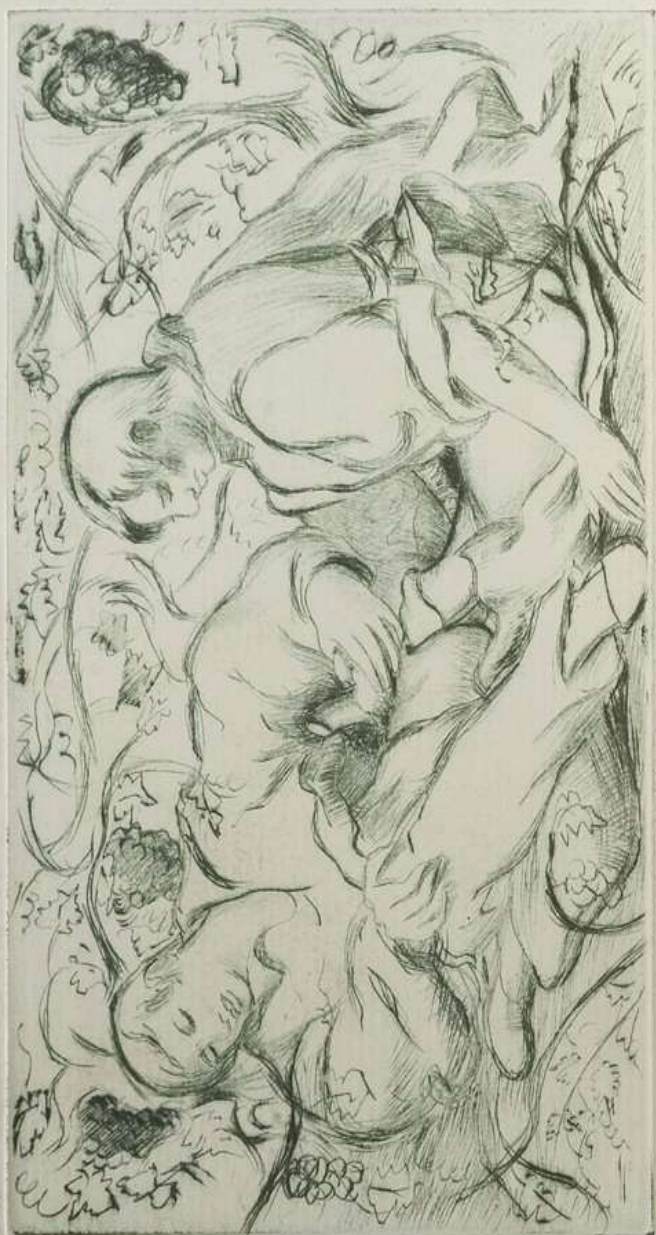


LE SUPPLICE

D'UNE
QUEUE

AVEC UN
FRONTISPICE
GRAVÉ A LA
POINTE-SÈCHE

MCMXXXI



Note

Le Supplice d'une queue was first published, anonymously and *sous le manteau*, in 1931. It is an 8vo of pp. [6], 98, [8], with a fine frontispiece by the Catalan artist Pedro Criexams.

The edition was limited to just 95 copies: 1 copy on *Chine*, with a proof of the frontispiece, 89 copies on *vergé d'Arches*, numbered 2 to 90 and 5 'exemplaires nominatifs' on different papers reserved for the author and publisher, the latter stated to be, fancifully, 'Éditions de l'Ile de la Barthelasse.'

Both the book and its author remained relatively unknown until just after WWII when it was recognized to be the work of François-Paul Alibert (1873-1953), a French poet and journalist who spent most of his life in Carcassonne, in southern France, close to the foothills of the Pyrenees. Alibert had apparently been close friends with André Gide since before WWI, and the latter, having read *Supplice* in MS, was sufficiently impressed to pass it on to Roland Saucier, director of the Gallimard bookshop on boulevard Raspail, who in turn gave to René Bonnel who would become its clandestine publisher.

The book was reprinted in 1991 at Paris as a joint venture by Éditions Ramsay and J.-J. Pauvert, the text preceded by *Le jeu de l'amour et de la nécessité*, an introductory essay par Hugo Marsan. This edition is today quite scarce, Éditions Ramsay having gone out of business. A third reprint was published by la Musardine in 2002 as part of the series *Lectures amoureuses de Jean-Jacques Pauvert*.

Le Supplice d'une queue was the first volume of what might be described loosely as a trilogy, the other two being *La Couronne de Pines*, and *Le Fils de Loth*.

Like *Le Supplice d'une*, the MS of *La Couronne de Pines* was received by Roland Saucier who arranged for its publication in the early 30s in Belgium by an unknown printer. Unfortunately, the project failed when the police seized the issue and the text now seems lost.

Le Fils de Loth remained unpublished until 2002 when it was issued by la Musardine, a 'présentation par Emmanuel Pierrat' with a Preface by Didier Éribon.

Patrick Kearney
Bakersfield, October 2026.

[I]

“There are not many mosquitoes this evening.” How many times had Albert not heard similar remarks! It would be:

“I’m afraid we shall have rain before long.”

Or:

“How fragrant that heap of freshly cut hay is! One would think it were inviting you to rest in it...”

Or again:

“That great ring around the moon is a sign that the weather will change tomorrow.”

It was the indirect approach, the invitation to a journey, an implicit way of suggesting:

“Do you not see that I ask nothing better than to begin, and that it might be possible for us to come to an understanding?”

If Albert had seldom uttered such phrases himself, they always sent a sharp thrill through him. The waiting beneath the trees, the unknown beauty passing by, desire taking hold wherever it could, clandestine beauty—all the dearer for being more forbidden, and more precious for being more despised—all this that voice revived for him in advance, repeating, with a poorly assured boldness, and a timid accent trying its hand at cynicism:

“There are not many mosquitoes this evening.”

Truth be told, the air was thick with them. But the other man could just as well have said he had never seen so many; his need to start a conversation was no less obvious for that—indeed, all the more so, since he had to blurt out something that showed how eager he was to seize the uncertain opportunity, the sudden and unexpected prey that had presented itself, and

to which he was impatient (Albert could tell from the mere tremor in his voice) to sacrifice himself in his turn.

A heavy, warm, almost stifling late-September evening weighed down the sky and thickened the night, while on the far side of the path, hedges of tamarisk descended, darker still, toward the pond rimmed with mildew and debris. Beyond, the sea barely swelled, as though no longer having the strength to sigh. Everything merged before the eye in a darkness burdened with the scent of pines, in which Albert could scarcely make out—even less could he see his face—the slender, fragile shape of the man who had murmured a moment earlier:

“There aren’t many mosquitoes...”

Without a word, Albert accompanied the stranger. He did not care for long speeches, and dreaded banality, especially in such matters; besides, what was the point of talking when they had understood one another so well? Little by little, he slipped his arm around the man’s waist; the other resisted complacently, then yielded, surrendering by turns to that evasive pressure. Albert’s hand passed over a lean, wiry torso, almost straight flanks hardened in the fire of the fiercest passions, and finally thin thighs stiffened with tension, before suddenly encountering an enormous rounded fullness, already swollen and rigid.

“Well, well,” he said aloud, though inwardly he laughed, so as not to offend the stranger. Yet he had always taken even the worst debauchery seriously, and surrendered, as in all things, to the demon of irony only when confronted by disproportions so extreme that they could not help but awaken in him an irresistible comic spirit.

Curiosity, however, always got the better of him; and Nature had also endowed him with a taste for excess, though he succumbed to it only intermittently. So he went through with it, and while the man, pressed more tightly against him, trembled with pleasure and hope, Albert proceeded, with a slowness that only heightened his own anticipation by delaying it, to a partial undressing that placed in his hand, so to speak, and all at

once violently sprung forth, a member whose dimensions, beyond anything he had known until that day, astonished him all the more because hanging beneath it, like two oak galls suspended from the master branch of an oak, were two almost tiny testicles, which seemed to be wondering what useless function they fulfilled there, accompanying this monstrous sex, around which all the glory of earth and heaven seemed to coil.

Even so, Albert, in his instinct for proportion, was a little put off. *It is said*, he reflected, *that a woman's breast is perfect only insofar as it fits exactly into the hollow of the hand. I would say as much of you, double scrotum, twin scrotum, generative scrotum, who are never more charming to me than when you stand in just proportion to the shaft above you, and when the hand that caresses you is filled by you entirely, rather than finding you reduced within it like a little water escaping between the fingers—or else overflowing in the opposite direction like some outrageously swollen wineskin, beneath which, most of the time, when at rest, crawls only a ridiculously meagre appendage, like an earthworm forgotten atop a Jerusalem artichoke. And the same I would say of you, sacred shaft, who attain your total perfection only when my ten fingers may close around you with the most delicate exactitude. Yet if forced to choose, I prefer your enormity, formidable shaft that a Centaur might envy, since if the testicles are among man's noble organs, it is from you at least, holy shaft—from you—that invincible, ineffable voluptuousness comes to us, though you are but an instrument of transmission.*

However, as in the course of these inward wanderings, which threatened to lapse into rather dubious lyricism, Albert lingered over prolonging the preliminaries of a furtive caress, he was glad to be recalled to reality by the dinner bell. In this little resort, where only a few bathers remained, one sat down to table at the very last hour.

“You’ll come back?” the man asked with a trace of anxiety.

“In a little while,” said Albert. “I promise.”

“Hurry, if you can,” said the stranger. “I must be going in soon.”

Albert went off, resolved not to return, judging that he had seen enough. Which is doubtless why, twenty minutes later, he was back there, finding the man in the very place where he had left him, by now scarcely more than his shadow, the almost invisible shape of desire—which in Albert had become all the more imperious because, only moments before, he had sworn not to yield to it.

They moved away until they reached a branching path, where they turned right, toward the pond. Albert had once again slipped his hand around his companion in adventure's waist. Beneath a thin smock of black gauze, made thinner still by wear, one sensed his naked body beneath it, all freshness and heat, taut as a bow of green wood that at times bends almost to breaking. Their footsteps were muffled in the sand. They walked between vineyards from which rose the faint scent of shrivelled grape clusters. The man knew the place well; despite the opaque night, he guided Albert with assurance, and Albert followed close behind. *This can hardly be his first attempt*, Albert thought, *and I am surely not the first he has led this way—but what does it matter?*

The stranger turned again, cutting across another vineyard.

"Let us stop here," he said; and they stretched out on the sand beneath a hedge of still-green reeds, sheltered from the wind. Albert was strangely moved. The stranger's low, almost plaintive voice, his long silences, an air of gentleness that nonetheless stopped short of humility, his wish to please, his fear of seeming importunate through too much compliance or cynicism—all this touched Albert deeply, who suddenly felt himself ready for a secret tenderness toward this chance wanderer, being naturally inclined to invest his whole soul, and always some sort of infinity, in the slightest passing embrace. As soon as they lay down, Albert felt two thick, warm lips seeking his own with abandon. He returned the kiss, and suddenly felt the man's chest swell against his with a deep and painful sigh.

"What is it, my friend?" Albert asked. "What makes you unhappy?"

“Unhappy—I have always been so,” said the other, “and there is not a day that I am not more so. But at this moment I am happy, since I hold a friend in my arms.”

Albert was privately obliged to admit that this man, so poorly dressed and seemingly of the humblest station, nonetheless expressed himself with an ease—and at times even a distinction—that belied his appearance. Accustomed, in any case, to being surprised by nothing, he felt his sympathy redouble, and once more, more sincerely than the first time, kissed those chance-offered lips that yielded themselves to his with such eager fervour.

Now while their kiss deepened, their hands gradually disengaged; and each, on his own side, with that deliberate slowness that hesitates, gropes, lingers, begins again, grows irritated, and ends in voluptuous roughness, each undressed the other in an ever closer embrace, in the course of which Albert felt pressed against him that enormous, splendid, disproportionate member, straight and round as a column, already traversed by imperceptible vibrations like a bell-clapper on the verge of motion, trembling along his belly and almost level with his chest with a dull, broken pulsation.

As he began to feel almost suffocated beneath that weight, he shifted slightly and caught his breath. After all, so formidable a case was not altogether displeasing to him. For a moment he dreamed of monstrous loves, of bestial legends from antiquity. *Come now*, he mocked himself, *I am not here to make literature*; and drew close again.

They were both naked from the waist to the knees. The sand retained a little of the afternoon’s warmth, though an underground coolness seeped through it, born of the season and the night, and of the moisture long insinuated by the nearby sea, against which their burning flanks found delicious relief. Little by little, the stranger, who had seized Albert bodily, turned him over without ceasing to hold him tightly, with an enveloping and persuasive strength. Albert, lying on his folded arm, with the man pressed full length behind him, felt a heated, insistent

weight sliding between his parted thighs—a forceful presence whose warmth and contact he enjoyed, though he was quite certain it could go no further.

At bottom, even had the other succeeded, Albert took little pleasure in that particular game; he preferred less brutal and more refined amusements. If he had sometimes submitted willingly, he had derived only mediocre satisfaction from it. Now, his comic demon once more gaining the upper hand, he laughed inwardly, knowing perfectly well that one’s adversary gets only as far as one permits.

He remembered that little coachman from A★★, for whom he had once felt such a violent whim, who one night, when they lay together on a makeshift bed in a sordid room, had suddenly said in a tone of pathetic entreaty and imperious coaxing—made all the more exquisite by his southern accent: “Turn over, so I can fuck you.” — “Thank you,” Albert had replied, laughing, “I have not the slightest desire.” And the little coachman, a good fellow, had not insisted.

He also thought of that magnificent Russian soldier he had met in Macedonia during the war, one oppressive summer afternoon on the slope of B★★, laden like a mule, broad sweat-stains across chest and thighs, whom he had authoritatively led into the little dilapidated room he occupied there, and whose splendid blond flesh he had quite literally devoured for an entire night. At one point, the Russian too had wanted the same thing. Albert, as a joke, had humoured him; and he never forgot the comic despair with which the other, after several fruitless attempts, had collapsed to one side, all his golden hair exposed, sighing: “*Nié moje*” (‘I can’t’).

But what were those two beside this one? The point of assault was becoming unmistakable; the man multiplied his attacks, alternately furious and slowed. It would have made as much sense, Albert thought, to try demolishing several layers of reinforced concrete with a penknife. He was greatly amused, though he still felt a certain pleasure in this futile rigor bent on possessing him.

Then, as if understanding the vanity of his efforts, the man fell despairingly still; and immediately, drawing Albert back against him, kissed him more furiously than ever, then burst into sobs.

“Take comfort,” Albert said. “You would probably have done no better with anyone else.”

He stroked that naked flesh slowly with a light hand, in an infinite pity mingled with another desire, when the stranger, bending over him, bestowed a long, sinuous caress that wound around his chest, slipped beneath his arms like the head of a loving grass snake, pressed into the hollow of his navel as though seeking to drive it into the depths of his arched belly beneath that seeking mouth, then rose and fell, circled and spiralled, supple and firm at once, wandering around Albert’s thighs and lower still, then climbing again along his aroused flesh, until it fixed at last upon one almost imperceptible point from which Albert felt his whole body radiate to the ends of the world. There it lingered, insisted, penetrated ever deeper, and all at once, in a tightening inward vortex that seemed never to cease winding itself smaller and smaller, entered into the innermost core of Albert, making him groan and plead, drawing forth from him a blazing release that the man received eagerly, and which, once spent, left Albert shattered, annihilated, speechless and motionless, melted through every limb into the softness of the night, the cooing sea in the distance, the stars he could no longer distinguish with his stupefied gaze and which seemed to lower themselves to touch his brow.

All the same, he thought, when he had recovered somewhat, *I must return the courtesy—or at least try.*

So, he did what he could. But how could one encompass, even partially, so formidable a magnitude? He could only proceed piecemeal, moving from place to place, attempting that alternating motion which, while the tongue insists upon a precise point, gradually brings the body to that lightning-like wrenching release that seems to draw the marrow from one’s bones.

The stranger, now on the verge of pleasure, now pulled several fathoms back from it, grew gently frustrated—more with himself than with Albert—passing through abrupt alternations of hope and despair, then falling back again; until Albert, exhausted, resolved to love him with his hands, now roughly, now with infinite delicacy, until he found himself grappling with a kind of *Meta Sudans*, an unceasingly overflowing fountain beneath his hands, which moved ceaselessly over it, pressing downward until at last they drew forth that torrent of force and life, to which Albert, losing his head in an unexpected taste for the monstrous, devoted himself in turn, alternately obstructing and releasing it, while its abundance seemed to rise from the deepest entrails of the prostrate man, who clenched his teeth and uttered only a guttural moan whose meaning Albert could no longer tell—whether pleading for mercy, or begging: ‘More!’

They remained intertwined for a long time, then, dressing themselves as best they could, took the sandy path back through the vineyards to the fork in the road. Before parting, Albert hesitated; the man seemed so poor. But in such circumstances, he always felt awkward.

“Will you allow me?” he said at last.

Even through the darkness, he sensed rather than saw the stranger smile.

“No,” said the man. “I understand your mistake, but I could not. We shall see one another again tomorrow, if you wish, in the same place, at the same hour. It is late now, and I must go rejoin my wife. She is leaving shortly for two or three days; then we may converse at greater length.”

Albert, completely dumbfounded, could do nothing but nod yes; and as he made his way back, kept turning over the thought: *Why the devil does one marry when one has such tastes—and above all, when one is built like that?*

[II]

“My friend,” Albert said, the next day, “believe me, this is no indiscretion on my part. I should certainly prefer, as has so often happened to me, that you remain in my memory no more than a faceless mask. But you are not like the others; some indefinable quality that draws me toward you makes me suspect that, in my life, you will represent nothing indifferent. And so there is nothing in the world I detest so much as being unable to attach some name, any name at all, to the features of those toward whom a nascent inclination carries me.”

“Do not apologize,” said the stranger. “I myself would never have put the same question to you, since it was I who made the customary advances in such circumstances.”

“My name is Albert F***,” Albert said eagerly, forestalling the other.

“If your name,” the stranger resumed, “tells me something, mine will certainly tell you nothing. You may therefore call me, if you please, Armand R***, which, moreover, is my true name. The night is mild; we shall walk a little; then, if it suits you, and if nothing detains you elsewhere, we shall go, since my wife is away, and spend the rest of the night at my house.”

There was such a contrast between the assurance, almost the elegance, of the language in which Armand now expressed himself, and the somewhat humbled gentleness that had marked most of his words the evening before, that Albert could not help feeling a measure of perplexity, if not discomfort. But, once again, curiosity prevailed. He therefore followed Armand.

“I understand,” the latter said, “your astonishment; it is of several kinds. I shall not now recount to you, save perhaps as

conversation may chance to lead us there, the events by which, after squandering a fortune greater than mere affluence, I was obliged, in order to live, to accept a position as a railway porter at the little station of L***, which, as you know, is only a stone's throw from here. What interest could such details hold for you, at least for the present? Yet your greater astonishment lies elsewhere: in wondering how, afflicted by Nature with a monstrosity such as the one you observed yesterday, I could have taken a wife, and what use it is possible for me to make of her."

"Let us go in," he continued, as they arrived before a small low house set back from the road behind a copse of wild almond trees. "Here is my dwelling; I was granted the favour of not having to live in the barracks where the Company lodges its employees behind the station; and besides, I am freer here to receive the occasional passing friend during my wife's frequent absences. She will not return until the day after tomorrow, and tomorrow is my day of rest. We therefore have the whole night before us."

He pushed open the door and led Albert into the kitchen, where, after lighting a small lamp, he kindled a fire of tree stumps.

"The latter part of the night," he said, "grows chilly in September, and I should not wish you to carry away an unpleasant memory of my hospitality. Forgive me, moreover, if I have nothing but humble wine to offer you."

Albert signalled that none of that mattered; at the same time, he looked about him. Everything there spoke of extreme poverty, but without disorder; indeed, this very destitution delighted him. He recalled another kitchen, in a small town where he had once spent several months. There, drinking the same harsh, limpid wine by the uncertain glow of a hearth in its last embers, sometimes on the floor, upon a wretched blanket through which the chill of the reddening tiles made him shiver as much from cold as from voluptuous excitement, a splendid brute had yielded himself to him in every fashion, directly be-

neath the storey above where the sleeping wife and child constrained them both to velvet steps, to the movements of thieves, and then, all at once, to those convulsive silences in which they strove to extinguish the slightest tremor—not so much from fear of danger, always possible though it was, as in order better to weave about themselves a deliberately contrived atmosphere of peril that lent greater savour to their various pleasures.

Once the lamp was lit, Albert was able to examine Armand more at his ease. Though he seemed already to have reached his thirties, he had the body of an adolescent, slender and alive beneath clothes that seemed worn almost by design, so that any hand laid upon them might more quickly seize, through their nearly transparent weave, the lean, muscular nakedness that eluded them beneath—a body made almost immaterial by the sheer tension of its nerves. What struck the eye still more was the ardently flushed face, the high forehead of admirable shape crowned with a mass of red hair, blood-coloured lips, two deep verdigris eyes, and above all an expression at once imploring and strained, like that of certain women whose faces suggest, even in repose, that they harbour between their thighs something that stops them up, fills them, suffocates them, and keeps them perpetually possessed by a pleasure forever imminent, forever sated, forever insatiable. That face bore the mark of a tragic ugliness which, far from repelling Albert, attracted him all the more. He sensed in it the surfacing of a desperate soul which, beneath a smile full of charm, withdrew into an inaccessible solitude, into an immense, infinite void where one could imagine that the sound of no human word would ever awaken the slightest echo.

After filling two glasses, Armand, in a slow, low voice, began to speak.

“No doubt you are astonished that, being married, and sharing the same tastes as yourself, I should moreover be fashioned in such a way as to forbid my finding complete satisfaction, whether with a woman or with a man, save by indirect means; I shall presently tell you the reason. In truth, I have never felt

toward women either taste or distaste; rather indifference. I shall say simply that women have never inspired in me, whether in imagination or by contact, any desire whatsoever; beside them, as from afar, I have always remained as cold as marble.

“My schoolboy loves—what is the use of speaking of them? Which of us has not passed that way? You know as well as I how such things are satisfied. A hurried encounter in the dormitory, when the monitor is asleep; in study hall or in class, beneath one’s smock, during the lesson or in the interval between exercises—and that is all. But even then, I brought to it more sincerity than the others, and a sincerity that has never belied itself.

“I was, I admit, famous among my comrades, from the youngest age, for the enormity of a member that some of them—even among the biggest—could scarcely encompass with one hand. More or less successfully, and with as much effort on their part as on my own, they brought me to my conclusion, and afterwards left me in such a state of gratitude and ecstasy that I felt very well that never, whatever might happen, could I ever experience any other amorous pleasure save through the hand of someone of my own sex, and perhaps through other practices that I scarcely then glimpsed, but which no doubt already pre-existed my desires; for one never discovers oneself, does one, except in what one already carries within oneself—as I shall now give you proof.

“One day, two or three years ago, out in the countryside, when I was just a young lad, I went into the stable whilst I was staying with my grandfather. A man was busy there repairing the horses’ feeding trough. He was a stunted, withered figure, one-eyed or cross-eyed—I can’t quite remember—and about forty years old, which, to my eyes, made him almost as old as an old man. But there is no age limit for anyone, however young, who finds themselves in a state of gratitude and ecstasy where I felt quite clearly that never, whatever might happen, I could experience any other amorous pleasure than through the hand of someone of my own sex, and perhaps through other

practices that I could barely glimpse at the time, but which undoubtedly already existed prior to my desires, for one is never found, is one not, except in what one carries within oneself, as I shall now prove to you. ‘One day, two or three years ago, in the countryside, when I was still a young lad, I went into the stable whilst staying at my grandfather’s house. A man was there, busy repairing the horses’ feeding trough. He was a stunted, withered creature, one-eyed or squinting—I can no longer remember—and about forty years old, which, in my eyes, made him almost the equal of an old man. But there is no age for one who, however young, is the prey of a single dominant demon. Around the same time, on one occasion when my uncle had taken me with him to visit a sick person, and I had stayed to wait for him by the edge of a small pond surrounded by trees, with his coachman—a man of sixty with white hair—had I not found myself mentally, and in the most serious manner imaginable, to God, that the old coachman might put his hand down my fly—something I dared not do myself—and yet, in the end, he did nothing?’”

“I’ve a fair number of similar tales myself,” said Albert, after taking a drink of wine. “Do continue.”

“So,” continued Armand, “I walked into the stable without a thought in my head; straight away, I approached the man and struck up a conversation with him. Despite my young age, how many things I already sensed!’ However, as one might always say of everyone and everything, why him rather than someone else? Even before he had turned his face towards me, even seen from behind, he had, as I told you, a shabby appearance, hunched shoulders, a shabby cap pulled low over his forehead; in short, nothing that did not border on the ordinary and the banal, if not the repulsive. It was far worse when he turned round; but I realise now with hindsight, we recognised each other at a glance. He was talking—I can’t remember about what; I barely replied. He went back to his work; and I, behind him, pressing closer and closer, wrapped my arms round his sides, and little by little, bringing my hands together on his

stomach—all the more thrilled that he let me do it, and yet blindly certain that he couldn't possibly not let me do it—I began slowly, with a confidence that still astounds me, to undo his fly, and took in my childish hands that mysterious mass, that centre of male flesh, no longer quite a novelty to me, yet in which I lost myself entirely, for it was not that of a child, but a man's, which I kneaded, which I massaged, and which, beneath my fingers, rolled, undulated, swelled until I could no longer enclose it in my grasp, and in turn stiffened me in a fierce rapture that redoubled the man's willingness to let himself be caressed.

“Sometimes, turning halfway round, he would ask me questions that I could barely make out. I did not reply, and knew only how to continue this caress, the outcome of which I could not foresee, despite the vague premonition I had of it. Soon, wishing, I imagine, to share with me the pleasure he was beginning to feel, he sought to return the favour. I refused, I know not why, with a savage obstinacy; when, hearing myself called to leave, and yielding to some sudden impulse, I turned him about violently, took his cock in my mouth, and, by way of farewell, bit into it with a frenzy that made him cry out, and then fled, without anyone having the faintest suspicion, when I reappeared before my parents, that the slightest thing had happened, or noticing, from the expression on my face, the discovery I had just made, and the fullness of joy with which it had filled me.

“If I have dwelt at such length upon a subject which, to some, might seem of no importance, or in which others would see nothing more than one of those aberrations common to many children, know that I do so with no complacency; I am certain, however, that, like me, you are persuaded that in such matters nothing is without its importance, just as there are no aberrations, but only individual cases. I have insisted upon it above all in order to make you understand clearly that, despite appearances, it has been solely toward a sex like my own that my amorous desire has always, from childhood until now,

drawn me; that I have never imagined or experienced pleasure except with it; and that if, later, I felt a curiosity about women, that curiosity was of so specious a nature that, in all my account, the explanation I may be able to give you of it will perhaps prove the strangest and most difficult part.”

He fell silent for a moment, as though stirring the embers of old memories, then resumed:

“I was turning seventeen; just as you see me today, or thereabouts, so I was then. A secret organ seemed to absorb all my growth and develop endlessly at the expense of the rest of my body. For a long time, this cock—from which so many others might perhaps have drawn a source of pride, and of which, moreover, I am not entirely sure that at that time I did not flatter myself that it set me apart from others—this cock, I say, had for a long time been, to my young companions, nothing but an object of astonishment, sometimes of ridicule, and, most of the time, of terror. I was already aware of the futility of my efforts as soon as I tried to satisfy myself with those among them who were willing to receive me, and could only achieve pleasure through them by means of detailed and superficial caresses, of which, moreover, I had to take on more than half. I never ceased to strive for deeper penetration which, despite either their compliance or the preparatory measures they took, could never lead to anything. Do not suppose that I ever deluded myself about these kinds of couplings, nor that I sought in them—any less than most of those who indulge in them—the illusion of a female simulacrum. If I persisted in it, it was perhaps because I already knew in advance that I should never be able to carry such acts through to completion, and also because, with my schoolmates, I was attempting some kind of substitute for a spiritual voluptuousness—one which I later sought from the female sex, but to which it is not yet time to come.

“One day, when I was nearing my seventeenth year, I went and knocked at the door of a brothel. It was not, I assure you, out of curiosity, nor from any desire to do as everyone else does—a thing I have always mocked—nor from the awakening

of some new sense. What was I seeking there? Be that as it may, I entered coldly, deliberately, and knowing, despite never having set foot in such a place before, what insurmountable disgust awaited me there. The proprietress called out: 'Marthe.' A tall red-haired woman appeared, painted, already mature if not positively old, bare-armed, dressed in a blue violent enough to make one cry out. I followed her up the stairs to her room. She was soon naked; I have never seen anything so hideous, above all those two withered, wrinkled breasts hanging in corkscrew twists like two pig's bladders from which all fat had been drained. When I in turn undressed, I saw an expression of alarm spread across her face; she had never seen, nor received, anything so large—she whose cunt (forgive me) was nevertheless so wide and so deep, as I discovered by touch, that one might without difficulty have introduced a champagne bottle through the rear passage.

"She nevertheless did everything she could; but the battering ram exceeded by far the dimensions of the breach. Yes, I know very well what you are thinking and about to say. With persistence—and above all brutality—one can always force one's way through anything; but, quite apart from the fact that, in my own case, nothing could be less certain, violence is not in my nature, and I am no sadist. The sight, the smell, the taste, the touch of blood, in love, fill me with horror; I have never been one of those who insist that voluptuous pleasure be obtained through cruelty—save perhaps that wholly cerebral form of it which is, I grant you, one variety of sadism, but which I always end by turning against myself, and which, as you know, goes by another name. You may be further astonished that, feeling toward women nothing but coldness, it should nevertheless have been possible, in contact with this one, hideous though she was, for me to achieve that erection which only the approach of the male ever aroused in me. If I could become aroused before that old Fate, it was doubtless because, in imagination, I was summoning other beauties to my aid, and because there was already taking shape within me that vague presentiment of which I spoke to

you earlier, and which only some years later was to assume definite form before my inward eye."

"At last, I was no longer ignorant of the fact that my monstrosity set me apart from all the rest of humankind, to whatever sex they might belong. I overflowed with a bitter joy; I dragged behind me everywhere some sort of poisoned happiness. For a long time I travelled, in France and abroad, obstinately resisting all evidence, multiplying experiments that all ended in the same disappointment. One day, I met Jacques. He was a magnificent creature, good-natured and stupid, at once sly and gullible, with the neck of a bull and the low profile of a harmless tiger, who by his gaze, his face, his gait, revealed that he lived for nothing but pleasure, and in every least square inch of his skin. When Jacques undressed, he reminded me of the heroic musculature of the young man in the Sistine Chapel who, to the left of the prophet Jeremiah, displays with violent shamelessness his thighs and Titan's torso, as though offering them to an insatiable kiss that could never have its fill. Then, drawing himself upright, arms and legs spread, and, as in every perfect canon of the human body, the four cardinal points converging precisely at the splendid intersection of his sex, he stood before me while I ranged over him avidly with my eyes, my hand, my lips, unable to exhaust that inextinguishable cup of pleasure in which all my senses, one after another and all together, became intoxicated. From arms to flanks, from shoulders to knees, I traced those admirable contours, those slightly prominent breasts that were nothing more than full pectorals of a firmness resistant to any pressure, that down which, from the warm forest of the armpits to the perfect curling, luxuriant triangle running from the navel to the root of his sex and all about the upper thighs, made my mouth tremble against a silky animal pelt, a thickness of sharply scented moss, a warm tawny fleece in which I sank as though into the darkest depths of the primitive jungle.

"How much more so afterwards when he turned around and revealed that superbly hollowed back, broadening and swelling at the hips; and when, bending him over, while he submitted

with a frenzied docility, my tongue invaded him, worked him with savage insistence, became one with him, while my hand moved alternately between his backside, his sex, and his balls, which I would now draw back, now thrust away, according to the degree to which he could endure that burning, almost painful throbbing. Then I would concentrate my tongue upon a single point, while my hands roamed everywhere—over his flanks, over those places where the skin of the belly is so delicate that it recoils from the slightest touch, into the armpits, across the chest where they narrowed about the breasts, and finally to the rigid sex, which they again drew backward together with the opulent testicles that my mouth engulfed indiscriminately—so much so that, I half suffocating and he on the verge of collapse, he in turn would spin me round and hold me crushed within his arms and the whole expanse of his body, to consummate, in a fit of delirium enough to stifle me, the frenzy to which I had gradually brought him.

“I confess that I derived no very keen pleasure from it, except, if I may put it so, by reflection—that is to say, through the pleasure he himself experienced, and which, compared with that which he would have enjoyed had he been in my place, and with anyone but me, amounted, as he admitted, to very little. For however I might have gone about it, how could he possibly have accommodated himself to it? I had not even had the trouble of renouncing the idea; just as he too had always had to renounce, like yourself yesterday, any hope of bringing me to voluptuous completion while, up to the very throat, he shook me with his furious assaults, except by enclosing in his two rough navvy’s hands that member to whose making three mules might seem to have contributed, and which moreover, at the very instant he gave way, drenched him in sympathetic correspondence up to the wrists with a torrent of seed, a geyser of spunk, a surging column that he spread everywhere, from base to summit and back again, with a prolonged vehemence that soon forced me to beg for mercy.

“But almost at once, wrenching myself from his embrace, and while he was still groaning from his scarcely completed pleasure, I in my turn set to work upon that source of overflowing humour which rose from his most secret depths, as though from its very wellspring, in hurried surges; and soon there sprang forth anew from that beautiful body, trembling and resonant with words at once of gratitude and malediction, words which, far more than from the bewildered mouth that uttered them, seemed everywhere at once to overflow from Jacques’s entire being.”

“I have known some,” Albert said in a tone half thoughtful, half mocking, “who at that moment invoked their mother—which is said, apparently, to be common among women—but which, in a man, remains even more touching than ridiculous, because there is always more sincerity in it.”

“Precisely,” Armand replied, with that fleeting smile that lent so much charm to his melancholy face; “it sometimes even happened that he called upon God for help. I see that, as with myself, a certain comedy in debauchery, and even in love, is far from escaping you. Yet would you prefer to postpone the continuation of this account until later? I fear it may prove tedious to you, and besides, may shed light only upon matters already familiar to you.”

“On the contrary,” said Albert, “the interest your story excites in me is immense, and even more by what I expect from it than by what I already know. I have the whole night before me, and it is not yet very far advanced.”

Armand made a gesture of thanks, stirred the fire, and resumed:

[III]

“My affair with Jacques lasted a long time.

“As a rule, I detached myself quickly—more quickly, indeed, than others detached themselves from me. Perhaps I put more pride into it than I ought; but I could not resign myself to being, for most of them, if not all, merely an object of horror, disgust, or simple curiosity. And yet I was all love; there was nothing in me but love. How many charming beings have I not known, who left me, whom I left, and who had nevertheless become attached to me with all their heart and all their body: one is sometimes too severe with oneself—and with others. One attributes to them all manner of reflections and intentions, when in their simplicity they attach no importance whatever to that which constitutes our most dreadful torment. Almost always, rather than surprise in their glance, upon their face, or in the slightest gesture, some shadow of weariness or indifference, it was I who first withdrew—not without first having secured, insofar as I was able, some part of their future livelihood for two or three years to come. This was not in order to oblige them to a gratitude nine times out of ten self-interested, but perhaps to implant myself more deeply in their memory, and thereby persuade myself that, later, one day, in some hour of discouragement or distress, one of them might come running at my call and be, for a few moments, if my spirit were too heavily burdened, a consolation to me.”

“I was already weary of so many birds of passage, of so many strangers encountered by chance in a urinal or on a bench in some deserted square, if not in those nameless places where, on certain nights of obsession, and unable to find anything more

favourable, one goes in to satisfy oneself at any cost. Thus, that sewer vault into which I slipped one night with—I no longer remember whom. One stumbled there among incredible heaps of debris and splashes of nauseating water which, with the help of the echo and so violent was their reverberation, one took for avalanches of rats. Thus, again that mouldering cellar into which I once descended with a being of inexpressible ugliness, whom I happened to come upon sometime later, reduced to the last degree of misery, sitting in a corner of the countryside in the sun, picking lice from himself and nibbling at his vermin. Or others, less aggressively ugly perhaps, but all the more banal, and who inspired in me nothing but disgust. And finally, that one, well past sixty, in rags and smelling of linen unwashed for three months, whom I frenziedly pleased in a sordid alley in Marseille, less from kindness of soul, or because of the grateful eyes he fixed upon me, than in order to find in his ugliness some nameless quality of failure, corruption, and horror that might correspond to my own deformity.

“Yet not all of these almost daily encounters were of so flat and sordid a nature; they only cast me back the further into my misery. One evening, as I recall, toward the end of February, while one of those fine drizzles was falling that soften and at the same time irritate the nerves, because one can feel the swelling imminence of spring, I met in a public garden in the little town of C*** a young man of whom, from the studied idleness that marked his gait alone, I guessed he was looking for an adventure. Passing near me again, he carelessly let fall some casual remark, as I myself did yesterday, by way of opening matters. You know, when one addresses a stranger in that fashion, without necessity requiring it, one has declared oneself. I sat down beside him on a thoroughly damp bench. From beneath his cap escaped heavy masses of chestnut-gold hair, the same tawny shade as the skin of his cheeks. In the half-light dimly pierced by the misty glow of a nearby lamp, I caught sight of a violent, fleshy mouth, surmounted by the silken trace of a moustache, and two admirable eyes of speckled blue, fixed, stubborn, at times wild, and yet looking without seeing. Why should I not

have loved that one too, as I did so many others? I hesitated to begin a conversation, fearing nothing in the world so much—even though one is sometimes obliged to resort to them—as those banalities into which one feels constrained, in such circumstances, to let oneself fall, whereas the sublime bestiality of love, under whatever mask it may wear, ought always to accomplish itself in the most religious silence.

“This one, moreover, though he had made the first advance, did little to encourage conversation. In the end, his unbroken silence, his immobility, his deeply absorbed air, resembling a kind of indignant rumination, could not but unsettle me. All the more because I saw him from time to time fumbling with slow caution beneath his clothes, stopping, then beginning again. *Am I dealing with a maniac, or a madman?* I asked myself. *Is he going, at the moment I least expect it, to produce a revolver, a knife, and do me some injury?* Yet curiosity, as with yourself, proved stronger. I continued to keep silent and did not stir. But I was far from the truth, for all at once I saw him spring to his feet in a single movement and, abruptly pulling down his trousers to mid-thigh and lifting the rest of his clothing to his waist, offer me the most beautiful backside, of the same pale bronze hue as his cheeks and the same smooth, full softness to the touch. So that was what he had been waiting for—and what I, no doubt the first, was unable to give him! I could have laughed from nervous agitation and sobbed from sadness. Nor did he have time to realize anything, for I fled precipitately, leaving him with his lowered trousers, his disappointment, and his useless shame.

“Quite different was the one (reassure yourself, I shall soon be done) whom I met one night in that same year, at much the same place, though in the month when spring was in its full splendour, and whom I led along a little solitary canal that ran not far from there. There, on the slope of a bank carpeted with flowering periwinkles, beneath low plane trees that deepened the darkness of the night, I held at my mercy the most beautiful young body I could least have imagined might one day fall into

my arms. I had privately christened this one the young man with the broken nose. He had indeed had the cartilage broken during some ferocious match of I no longer remember what sport. Despite this slight imperfection, he possessed, beneath a low and almost Neronian brow, the most magnificently cut face of some young Renaissance prince one could imagine, together with that burnt-wheat hair which, as you have doubtless often observed, is the surest indication of the richest temperament. No, I could never have believed that so much youth and virile beauty, so evenly balanced a gait, so supple and resilient a frame, and above all the proud, distant, disdainful reserve of so noble a face—made, I told myself, to inspire every desire in women and to take pleasure only in the desires of women—could melt so utterly at my approach; nor that that mouth, of so pure an arc, should suddenly abandon itself to the most abjectly imploring entreaties. How flattering to the hands and lips was the vibrant firmness of those flanks; and likewise, the harmony of that perfect sex, in such perfect proportion, emerging from a dense growth which I guessed to be of the same opulent tawny hue as the hair! My ardour wearied neither of dividing itself between those fair, rounded testicles, which my mouth swallowed whole, and that sex, at once so gentle and so hard beneath my kiss, which I prolonged, multiplied with an ever more inspired skill, clinging to it as though I wished to drain through a single vein all the blood of that superb victim.

“Yet despite the voluptuous pleasure in which I afterwards left him, all trembling and spent, I sensed perfectly well that it was something else he desired; fortunately, as reserved and modest, despite his abandon, as the previous one had been obscene and unrestrained, I wished to conclude either that I had been mistaken, or that I should have before me a few days’ respite, after which I might see him again—but in what agonies! Two or three weeks later, indeed, we met once more. My caresses were, if possible, still more incisive, and his trembling still more acute. But perhaps, like myself, you know that inner demon which so often, for no reason, for the sheer pleasure of injuring ourselves, when we might long postpone our sentence, drives

us, under the spur of a truly diabolical malice, to provoke our own condemnation. Thus, it was that, suddenly interrupting myself, I could not refrain from asking him in a low voice: 'Is that all you desire?' And he, misunderstanding me (for his hands had remained innocent of any touch), and believing that I was about to fulfil his dearest wish, answered me, his head thrown back as though at last he were about to touch the happiness for which he had so impatiently waited; answered me in a hoarse and supplicating breath: 'Do with me what you will!'

"This reply—I knew what it meant, I expected it, I heard it coming; and for nothing in the world could I have refrained from provoking it. Then I heard once more resounding within myself that bitter laughter, that desperate laughter that rose silently to my throat whenever I measured the extent of my affliction; but I could do no better than resume my relentless attentions, wrench from him once again the very marrow of pleasure, and cast him, despite himself, into an infinite delirium, without his ever losing so entirely the sense of things that there did not reach my ears, several times repeated in a tone of almost heartrending supplication, those words murmured under his breath: 'Deeper, deeper...'

"What could I have given him, I ask you, since what he desired with all his exasperated body was that furtive yielding, that successive penetration which begins with a burning breach and ends in a triumphant dilation; that total invasion which makes one believe oneself transformed into the very column of flesh, stone, and fire that shakes, convulses, and dislocates one to the innermost depths; that mare's whinny beneath the stallion; that pressure—almost that suction—of buttocks compressed against the other's belly while clasping hands, joined like a girdle, knead one's rigid sex; and that final double thunderbolt which makes of two frenzied bodies a single bestial mass.

"What could I possibly have given him, I ask you, since what he desired with his whole exasperated body was that insidious yielding, that progressive penetration which begins with a burning breach and ends in triumphant dilation; that total invasion

which makes one believe oneself transformed into the very column of flesh, stone, and fire that shakes, convulses, and dislocates one to one's most intimate depths; that mare's whinny beneath the stallion; that pressure—almost that suction—of buttocks compressed against the other's belly, while the other's clasped hands, joined like a girdle, knead one's rigid sex; and that final double thunderbolt which makes of two frenzied bodies a single convulsed bestial mass, suddenly collapsing, in which one embraces a faceless voluptuousness, and therefore one without deformity or grimace, while the other, in an ecstasy yet more delirious, adores before him nothing but an immense void in which there floats an imponderable happiness descended from every quarter of the heavens?

“Once again, I fled. More than once afterwards I saw the young man with the broken nose again. Sometimes he looked at me with an air of sadness; most of the time, he turned away and pretended not to recognize me. What, indeed, could we have said to one another? But what was his disappointment, his resentment, perhaps even his hatred, beside my despair?

“If I recount to you with such minuteness impressions or memories so personal, and which after all are not of so uncommon a kind, it is not because I imagine they can reveal to you anything unforeseen; but rather because I should not wish you to perceive the slightest fissure or rupture between adventures that do not exceed the ordinary course of such things and what follows. On the contrary, I wish you to grasp in them a continuous chain, whatever curve or turning it may assume, as you will presently perceive.”

[IV]

“I told you that Jacques had been my longest affair; it would have depended only upon me for it to continue. Indeed, it is enough for me to know, as with certain others, where he may be found, and that at the slightest sign he would not fail to come running. Yet of him I can state quite precisely that I did not love him; I mean that I was never jealous of him, having felt toward him nothing but a tranquil tenderness, a carnal liking, both of which sprang from the simplicity—I might almost say the naïveté—of his soul. Above all, I was grateful to him for never having made me feel, not even at the beginning, one of those humiliations so many others had caused me to endure. Indeed, it was with a certain admiration, if not with hearty good humour, that he regarded that formidable endowment. No doubt that is why I became so complacently attached to him; and perhaps also because, without ever speaking of it, we both perceived a certain harmony between his colossal build and the singular disproportion with which some caprice of fate had seen fit to afflict me.

“The strength and generosity of Jacques’s physical nature were as inexhaustible as his kindness. Consider that he was married; that he had a mistress; that he satisfied them both—which did not prevent him, apart from myself, whom he joined every two or three days, from pursuing every sort of adventure, with men as with women. When I would say to him, ‘Take care, you are overdoing it; you will wear yourself out,’ he would laugh magnificently, and, stripping at once his splendid musculature bare, bring himself to readiness in an instant, only to submit, immediately afterwards, on my part, to the most exhausting voluptuousness, which he would almost at once exchange for

another, whether by taking possession of me forthwith, from which, moreover, he seemed to feel no more burden or fatigue than from the previous exertions.

“One day, I took it into my head to bring Jacques among women; he agreed readily enough, nothing being a matter of surprise to him. To be sure, I had often, with him present, taken part in what are called trios, though my own inclinations were little drawn that way. I remember that once he had brought me one of his comrades, younger than himself (Jacques was nearing thirty), a workman like him, who displayed, poised at the centre of a young David’s nakedness, a magnificent member of which Jacques had spoken to me as one of the finest conquests he had ever made, but which, compared with mine, shrank to modest and almost paltry proportions. The three of us engaged in the *mêlée* you may imagine, repeated in every possible variation, I myself taking my place in this improvised concert as chance encounters directed, yet unable to disentangle what predominated in me—whether the pleasure I took in it, which, save at its conclusion, always remained imperfect, or that which the other two experienced in full, and which, by reflection, always redoubled my own. Which is to say, once again, that this infinity, forever unfinished and so quickly collapsing into nothingness, which voluptuous pleasure scarcely allowed me to embrace, I could situate only in the exclusive use, possession, and spectacle of the male sex. Why then, under the impulse of some sudden whim, did I take Jacques to a brothel? I truly knew nothing of it—or rather perceived why only through an extreme confusion of feelings and thoughts.”

“I was not, as I told you, jealous of Jacques. Had I been, my condition would have obliged me to keep my jealousy locked within myself; for there can be no jealousy, if I may put it so, except between equals. We had just arrived in Marseille, where I had invited Jacques to spend a few days with me. With a child-like delight, he took pleasure in everything; the sight of the sea, our boat excursions, our breakfasts of shellfish, that jostling con-

tact with the people of Marseille, where every species of debauchery springs up and proliferates at random on every side. It was not, moreover, by deliberate design that we entered the quarter of the brothels, but rather as though blindly, and as if merely to add to the litter of capital sins that this city, unique in the world, unrolls beneath one's feet like the magic carpet of the *Arabian Nights*.

"You know as well as I those streets that smell of Naples, the Orient, woman, semen, and the knife-thrust; where every form of prostitution is displayed, spills over, and satisfies itself almost upon the paving stones themselves; where all the scum of all the seas of the Mediterranean converges, accumulates, ferments, and ebbs again; torn by mandolins, barrel-organs, and Negro orchestras; oozing even into the gutter with the refuse of pimps and whores whose rooms stand almost open to the sky; streets that gather and confound in the same shudder all spaces, all epochs, and all races; and where to expire in a single gush of blood from the point of a knife in one's back would seem to you as natural as to feel all your arteries pounding, and to take pleasure through every pore and every mucous membrane.

"Doors stand open just enough to let you glimpse a bed surmounted by a crucifix or an image of the Virgin beneath a little lamp exhausted from smoking, as though from having illuminated too much; and on the threshold women—so to speak, women of joy—coax you, accost you, insult you, offer to service you for a few coppers, or less; seize your hat to compel you to come in and reclaim it; and, once you have entered, shut the door upon you and constrain you, if you allow it, to every form of debauchery, disease included. One of them, however, drew my attention. Not overly tall, dark-haired and olive-skinned, she stood silently on the threshold, a little less undressed than the others, inviting one more by her reserve than by her beauty; for I did not at first notice that she was truly beautiful.

"She made a sign, and we entered after her; she shut the door. The three of us undressed in the blink of an eye. She had the torso of an adolescent, scarcely rounded by small, firm

breasts; broad hips and rounded thighs running straight from the knot of the knee to the ankle; in short, the appearance of a young boy, to which she added the scent of barely ripened fruit. Her skin was of a splendid pallor, which her thick black hair, together with the dense growth at her sex, threw into relief almost to bloodlessness. To Jacques's question she replied that her name was Andrée. What importance, besides, did her name have? At that moment, I would have preferred her to remain anonymous. I had enough difficulty, in any case, recovering my composure after the fact. *What are you doing here?* I asked myself. It was far more in relation to myself than to the other two that I put the question in this way, Jacques being perfectly at ease anywhere, and Andrée accustomed to whims which, in her eyes, possessed no character of novelty.

"Moreover, I am convinced that she had nevertheless understood what sort of bond existed between Jacques and myself. She was grave, almost taciturn, not from affectation, but by nature. With a languor that was nevertheless far from passive, she was the first to stretch herself out upon the bed, and I could not help admiring, however little habit or taste I had for such things, that body at once slender and full; nor admitting to myself, on the other hand, that if I had responded to her summons rather than to that of any of the other prostitutes who make certain streets of Marseille one of the most burning embodiments of sex in the universe, it was because, even clothed, there was in her some delicately virile quality that distinguished her from the rest. Yet what desire could she possibly have inspired in me?

"After stretching myself in turn beside her, I took her half into my arms, but in such a way that she should immediately understand that the one before whom she was to open herself was not I, but my companion, who in any event needed no second invitation. Thus, lying on my back and propped upon the pillow, one thigh half hanging over the side of the bed, I felt resting for the greater part upon me that back, those flanks, those legs of an adolescent Ganymede whose sex I had for the moment forgotten, and whom I recognized as a woman only at

the instant when Jacques, stepping forward and stretching himself out in turn with a blissful extension that expanded the torso of a half-pagan demigod, slowly entered her, while she yielded herself ever wider to admit, to the furthest depths of her body, that imperious virility offered with triumphant indolence.

“Jacques had clasped his arms about the young woman’s waist. He waited a moment, savouring with mute satisfaction his irresistible possession; then he began, with a practised regularity, that rocking movement to which Andrée responded in the same rhythm, no more eager than he to hasten it, as though wishing to preserve as long as possible within herself the magnificent masculine fullness to which she adhered on every side. Thus, their entire combined weight rested upon me, who, despite that crushing burden, was in no way inconvenienced. For my part, I had closed my arms around Jacques’s hips; and, insinuating myself little by little, I had placed myself between them in such a way that at each movement I remained physically implicated in their shared rhythm.

“In this way I completed and sustained their mutual cadence with an undulation for which Jacques cared little insofar as it led toward pleasure; but which, unlike Jacques, and yielding instead to the young woman’s back-and-forth motion, gave me the illusion that it was I who sustained and directed their pleasure at will, and that they could obtain it only from me and through me.

“Of that pleasure, I was certain in advance that Andrée, however hardened she might have been by the labours of love, could not fail to obtain it, so sincerely did I feel her to be engaged in it; in truth, hers mattered less to me than Jacques’s. It was his face that I watched with passionate attention. As he stood a full head taller than his partner, he bent down toward me from time to time; silent and concentrated, despite the barely perceptible shadow of a smile that touched his features, his lips sought mine, and our tongues swiftly met; then, turning away once more, he drew the young woman’s head against his powerful neck and resumed his slow pendulum movement.

“I had almost, so to speak, never seen the expression successive ascent—and still less the final explosion—of pleasure communicated to his face. It was not often that he gratified himself with me by means of what theologians call a forbidden receptacle; he knew I had no very lively taste for it, save when submitting to his whim of the moment. He preferred to have me attend to him in the other fashion, and I confess it was the kind of pleasure I most liked to provide him. Sometimes, halfway through, I would interrupt myself and lift my gaze toward him; I would then see a face languid and remote, eyes closed, as though dissolved into that spiritualization which the imminence of pleasure lends even to the most bestial countenances. Then I would resume, and feel once again that pleasure rising in him only as far as his hands, which tightened ever more violently upon my shoulders, or his thighs, which locked themselves around my flanks until they took my breath away like the coils of Laocoön; but at the instant when, with the panting exertion of a forge-blower bent over the anvil, that great body emptied itself wholly, I was too intent upon drawing forth, absorbing the torrent that poured into me, and draining it to the final drop, to see afterwards in Jacques’s features anything but the loosened calm of his already slumbering pleasure.

“Here, by contrast, and thanks to the clarity of the lamp, I could follow upon his face every oscillation, every curve, every ascending wave, the entire progress of it. I shall never forget that expression—strained, at times ecstatic, always wild-eyed, and from time to time painful and supplicating, yet constantly commanding; and when all three of us sank together into the abyss, I nevertheless retained sufficient presence of mind to admire, in the convulsive relaxation of all Jacques’s features, something beyond the world that seemed to me the most perfect image of what has so aptly been called the little death of pleasure, and which had nothing in common with the languid acquiescence his features would express when, with one hand passed around his sturdy flank and caressing him with the other, I would see pleasure reach and unfold within him after a few light touches, though with more detachment than I should have wished;

whereas, by means of that same caress, I had seen other faces twist and convulse as though struck by some blazing horror. This was now another revelation—but of what nature, I could not yet clearly discern.

Would you have wished to be in Jacques's place? I asked myself, a moment later, when, each apart upon the bed, we lay at rest with only scattered arms and interlaced legs. On reflection, I concluded in the negative. My inclinations could not have changed in so short a time; they still inclined in one direction only. If the sudden idea of that coupling, so to speak, in three, had occurred to me, it was, I repeated to myself, for Jacques, and not for me. I felt no love for him, as I have already told you; otherwise, I should have suffered a thousand deaths to see him take, however closely I might have participated in it, any pleasure whatsoever with someone other than myself. Nor had there been, on my part, any perversity of any kind in this adventure, nor any need to revive, by some novel excitation, senses less jaded than ever; besides, it would never have entered my mind to come there alone, much less with a woman. *Was it, then, to procure Jacques a pleasure of another order?* But that pleasure he enjoyed just as fully, and alone, in the arms of many other women; there was too much simplicity in him for my presence and participation to have added anything to it. Love, modesty, jealousy, still less amorous subtlety, had never had any hold upon his soul; he was a magnificent animal, good-natured and pleasure-loving, nothing more, who, the more he had, the more he took, and who that evening would have been just as happy and fulfilled had I not been there at all.

And yet, while admiring that one could be as skilful as he in playing, with equal virtuosity, upon an alternative string, I was even more astonished to find myself plunged into such disturbance, such a scattering of thought. *Could it be,* I asked myself, *that you are beginning, by chance, to incline toward women?* A single glance cast at our chance companion was enough to inflict the lie upon me. If among all the women in the world there had been one capable of inspiring desire in me, it would nonetheless

have been this one; yet I was certain that, even had my physical conformation permitted it, and allowed me, if only once, to be her lover, not only would I not have been so, I should not even have desired to be. If I had just now gone to the very paroxysm of pleasure, Andrée, charming though she was, had certainly contributed nothing to it, but only Jacques, and the pleasure I had felt in seeing him swell, expand, and overflow with a happiness not indeed greater, but nevertheless different from that which I caused him to experience when we were alone together.

“I could not succeed in bringing order to my thoughts. Was I, then, so soon to contradict myself; and, on the basis of a single experience, yet of so singular a nature, to contradict not only myself, but all those who, like you and me, place above everything—not from principle, but from inclination—the worship and amorous practice of masculine beauty? Was I therefore to admit that Jacques, who had always assured me of his preference for men over women, had nevertheless, before my very eyes, experienced with a woman such a plenitude of pleasure that I was still profoundly shaken by it? I told myself in vain that, unlike myself and many others, woman was for him merely a keyboard from which, at a given moment, he might draw whatever chord pleased him; I nonetheless felt humiliated by it, and even more irritated at being unable to cast any light upon my own feelings. If I was humiliated, believe me, it was not for having been unable to attune myself to their pitch otherwise than by makeshift means. Even had I jarred against it in dissonance, I should have felt no confusion. I have always preferred the pleasure I give to that which I may receive; the latter, after all, I always managed to attain, one way or another. Was not one of the keenest pleasures Jacques could give me precisely when, crossing and tightening his Homeric thighs with the vigour of Hercules around my enormous member, he thus lent me an artificial counterpart in which I found the same satisfaction others attain with a woman? Yes—but it was with Jacques, that is to say, with a man; moreover, even had my physical conformation

allowed me to comport myself like everyone else, I knew perfectly well that I should have remained as cold as ice.

“The next instant, wavering between material explanations and moral ones, I told myself that if Jacques had just now reached the very limit of felicity, it was because, at each forward movement of his pendulum motion, the third limb that my unhappy fate has bestowed upon me struck against him, giving him the illusion of enjoying both sexes at once. Had he not, several times, even while plunging into the narrowest depths of the woman stretched in my arms, turned aside to join his lips to mine with a rough tenderness? Yet that was to attribute to him intentions far too complicated, for which his nature in no way predisposed him, and which he was certainly incapable either of disentangling—or rather of entangling—to the same degree as myself. No doubt there was a little of everything in it, and nothing in it was wholly true, nor wholly false. But neither could anything explain to me—not the pleasure Jacques had taken, since I knew that to be bilateral, but the pleasure I had taken in his, and in which I was obliged to admit that Andrée was not altogether without part.

“I pass over certain unimportant interludes in silence; for example, Andrée lying crosswise upon the bed to the waist, legs apart; Jacques bent over before her; I myself, mostly stretched out upon the carpet, my back to the bed, contributing my part to the improvised concert, while the street of Marseille continued to roll against the door with a marine murmur, now loud, now muffled, rocking us like an amorous swell. Those prolonged murmurs added to our isolation, leaving subsisting in the universe only that warm, enclosed room, where three monsters, touching one another at the almost infinitesimal yet sharpest point of their whole being, pursued a pleasure yet more overwhelming than the first, which burst and flared forth at once, each multiplied by the other two, and left them once again exhausted and trembling, yet ready to begin again the very next instant.

“And indeed we began again, in the time it takes to say so, insatiable and never weary, but this time Andrée and I face to face, with Jacques taking her from behind, so that I could see alternately, and at times together, both their faces. Jacques cared little enough for taking women in that fashion, unless expressly asked. ‘Where there’s only one opening,’ he would say with good humour, ‘fair enough, so long as there’s pleasure; but where there are two, why make life difficult?’ (Naturally, I translate into passable French.) Thus, it was, stretched over Andrée beyond what immediately offered itself to him, that he had arranged himself, despite the apparent awkwardness of their respective positions—which was in fact made easier, the length of my own unhappy endowment helping, by the arc described by Andrée’s body against the main support on which she leaned, and which instead offered her completely to Jacques. Once again I felt that magnificent burden weighing upon me—more, if possible, than the first time, when it had threatened to crush me. I braced myself so as not to give way; and, this time wholly indifferent to whatever pleasure I myself might have taken, of which in any case I had had my fill, I strained with all my strength to remain clear-sighted, to preserve an almost supernatural lucidity throughout my whole being, through which, watching Andrée’s face more attentively than Jacques’s, I began to glimpse what I had unconsciously come there to seek.

“I had already noticed how singular Andrée remained even in the most exasperated heights of pleasure. I mean that she abandoned herself to none of those contortions, uttered none of those cries or complaints which, no doubt because of my estrangement from women, I find particularly repellent, since the base animality of their sex makes itself too plainly felt in them, and which moreover answer to an insincerity, a need for simulation and exaggeration in which their nature reveals itself in its true light. What I say is not from experience; but I have received more than one confidence; nor are you unaware that certain hotel rooms have exceedingly thin partitions, and, what is more, obligingly placed apertures.

“Yet even in those moments when the sincerest woman, the woman most mistress of herself, keeps the least watch over herself, Andrée did not utter so much as a sigh. I had only felt her suddenly grow icy, as though all the blood had withdrawn from her veins, tremble scarcely at all, and, for the span of a lightning-flash, stiffen in an almost tetanic convulsion, intertwining her hands with mine upon Jacques’s hips so tightly as to hurt me, then fall back and stretch herself into the immobility of a corpse. Now I saw her face to face. She wore a strange, distant, almost absent expression; yet her eyes, wide open, her eyes fiercely dilated, fixed themselves upon mine with a steadiness that became more and more disquieting. She had fastened her arms about my waist and clung to me with her whole body, like a drowning creature on the verge of sinking. Less and less did I concern myself with Jacques, who continued upon her his cheerful and triumphant labour; I saw only her—the terrible pallor of her face about which her curls, blacker than ink, fell in disorder; her lips, unrouged by any cosmetic and growing ever paler, which suddenly, timidly at first, then with unrestrained violence, sought mine, yet went no further, as though she had divined that she would be venturing upon an indiscretion by carrying beyond measure a caress to which I was unaccustomed, and which would have been more troubling than pleasing to me.

“What there was at once bold and modest in that kiss profoundly shook me. Understand me clearly. It is claimed that many homosexuals resign themselves to what, in a stupid and shameful phrase, is called their vice only through timidity toward the opposite sex, or else, if put to the test, through fear of being left tongue-tied. In fact, I believe none of it; besides, I was sufficiently certain of my own nature for you in turn to be certain that Andrée’s kiss, no more than her touch, was capable of awakening in me the slightest instinct hitherto buried and dormant at the bottom of myself, waiting only for such an occasion to awaken.

“Nor did I read in Andrée’s eyes any compassion for my monstrous condition, which placed me, as she well knew, in the

impossibility of finding satisfaction with any woman whatsoever; I should at once have repulsed her with horror. No: what I discerned in that gaze, in that almost hallucinatory embrace, was in Andrée a horror of her own nature, and the exasperated desire to belong to another sex than her own. There, indeed, is what admirably explains the fundamental difference between man and woman. I could not doubt that Andrée, like many of her kind, had known and loved other women; everything in her—her face, her almost masculine form—was a sure indication of it. But you know to what poor expedients they are reduced. And I divined that at that moment Andrée would have given some of the finest years of her life to be able, in her turn, by means of another sex, to give the pleasure she was receiving. At what price would she not have purchased the happiness of being a man; and, with one of those innumerable creatures she had held at her mercy, to cut them down, ravage them, transfix them until they cried for mercy, and impose upon them, heedless herself of her own pleasure, her conquering sex!

“How far Jacques now was from my thoughts! It is said that our longest, most complicated dreams last scarcely more than a few seconds. Thus, in far less time than it takes to tell it, an entire world of shifting thoughts passed through and agitated my mind. I forgot everything, and above all my deformity, to think of one thing only: that at that moment I might have been a man like any other, a simple brute, a simple Jacques, but one so constituted as to be able to accommodate himself to any woman. This man I fashioned at will; I endowed him with my own inclinations. Must I not, since that creature of reason into whom I incorporated myself was, after all, only a pure reflection of myself? Yes, he loved men, and loved only men; but no more than any of those others—men and men, men and women, women and women—who love one another and who count, could he ever embrace the absolute toward which he tended, which he sought in vain in all the bodies that sank within his arms and in which he in turn sank? In truth, all those bodies resembled one another at some point, and none of those he had so savagely devoured had failed to disappoint him. That is why,

sometimes, in an insurmountable horror of himself and of the act he was about to force himself to commit, he sought out a woman: and with closed eyes, through sheer tension, imagination, will, and self-forgetfulness, he went so far as to share the pleasure she felt. But how came it that he felt it himself? Ah, because, however far removed he was from it, their two natures, for the span of a flash, for a single moment, had merged. Had they truly mingled so completely? No—I am compelled to admit otherwise. The woman had remained, without complication, far away in all her native animality. Her nature is only to enjoy, and we know well that the woman who enjoys completely, utterly—unlike those who, whatever one may do, will never have felt the divine death of pleasure annihilate them—enjoys ten times more than a man, precisely because she is nothing but an animal and is not encumbered by her brain.

“But he—that man—if he had, even for a few seconds, melted into the burning fire that emanated from that woman’s body; if he had succeeded in mastering his nature, bringing it to the very point from which instinct and taste held him diametrically opposed, it was because in thought, from beginning to end, he had substituted himself for the groaning, sighing brute struggling beneath his weight; because he would have wished to be she herself; because he *was* she herself and, wholly, that displayed, deep, unfathomable abyss; and because he said to himself through clenched teeth, shaken by a criminal fury: since it is said, since it is established that you enjoy ten times, twenty times more than the most pleasure-filled among us, why can I not myself be that abyss without shape, without bottom, without limit? Why can I not, lying thus upon my back, call for, invoke, provoke the male; feel him slide along my thighs; seize him and guide him, helping and easing his entrance into my own gaping opening, ever more widely parted; absorb that rigid mass as it enters slowly, then brutally, as though passing through me from end to end; thrust it back with a sudden movement so that it may descend deeper still; go out to meet that virile weight crushing my frail flesh; and finally receive that flood which fills

me, inundates me, blocks me, obstructs me, and drowns me beneath the outpouring shed by the stupid brute collapsing upon me, imagining there is no pleasure in the world comparable to his, when he has in fact been only the blind instrument of a pleasure surpassing his own by a hundred cubits?"

"You are quite right," Albert said thoughtfully; "we are all failed women, and we never reconcile ourselves to it. I have put that question to myself many times, and I should have been incapable—not indeed of resolving it, but even of stating its terms with so much eloquence."

"Alas," Armand replied, with the same pale smile as before, "there is no use in being eloquent about it; what is terrible is being able to do nothing about it. Yet that, I believe, is the most plausible explanation of our nature—all of us, I mean, who, like you and me, possess the exclusive taste for virile love. I shall not lose myself in digressive considerations upon our nature; it has been quibbled over in a hundred ways, and no one has offered a satisfying interpretation. I nevertheless believe mine holds good. More than once, to indulge some whim of Jacques's by which he wished to return the favour, allowing him in turn to insert himself between my crossed thighs, I restored to him, from time to time, the mode of pleasure I myself demanded of him. How much keener mine then was than when I ministered to him in the same way! Then it was I who received him at the same place as though I had been a woman; and no doubt the happiness with which I was filled at the moment when he thus flooded himself with joy against me inclined me now, in Andrée's arms, to see more clearly into the deep and almost inexpressible reasons for what so many fools—or virtuous men, which comes to the same thing—have called our inversion.

"Observe that, even then, Andrée inspired not the slightest desire in me, just as I was certain that I inspired none in her. I was simply grateful to her, that was all, for having helped me to become more clearly conscious of myself; and above all for that wholly disinterested feeling she had shown, since, certain that

she could in no way count on me for her pleasure, she had revealed to me, by her gaze alone and her silent kiss, that she recognized in me a nature akin to her own, thus giving me the mute proof of a complicit tenderness that could only have come from the deepest part of her soul.

“Jacques and I went back to her several times; over Jacques’s head, an obscure tenderness was forming between her and me. No, I did not love her; I never loved her. What drew us toward one another was simply the desire each of us felt to exchange our sex for that of the other—the dream of an impossible love, made still more impossible by my physical conformation. Had I been made like ordinary mortals, would I ever have thought of joining our two lives? As it happened, sometime later I left Jacques—though I never entirely lost sight of him—and asked Andrée whether she would come and live with me. Silent and grave as always, she accepted, indifferent to everything that was not her chimera. I concealed nothing from her (after all, had she anything to learn?) Nor did I hide from her that I had almost completely lost my fortune, and that I was therefore obliged, in order to provide for her and for myself, to seek employment of the most modest and inconspicuous sort; money mattered even less to her. Thus, after marrying her, we settled in this little forgotten corner, where the little I earn suffices to keep us alive.”

“But does your wife know...?” Albert asked.

“That I sometimes have fancies in which she plays no part? Certainly—and, at the point we have reached, she attaches no importance to them. Never was a woman more accommodating and devoted to a man who is not, and never will be, her husband. For if I myself am grateful to her for having, in a kind of blinding revelation, illuminated the darkest depths of my sexual nature, in return I serve only to cultivate and nourish the insatiable desire by which she is consumed. Every night, habit lending its aid, the same genuine attempt begins again, without ever being able—despite all her efforts and mine—to succeed; because we both know that it cannot succeed. Thus, each seeking in the other a sex we would wish to be our own, we both live

in a state of horrible tenderness and exasperated, almost infernal chastity, in a paroxysm of amorous torment of which nothing could give you any idea. At times, Andrée goes away, as at present, for two or three days. Does she go elsewhere to seek some diversion from our double misery? It is possible. She has never told me; I have never asked her. She returns always the same, taciturn and gentle, as though she had been gone no more than an instant, and resumes her usual attentions. As for me, as happened last night, my old temptations sometimes return. On this little beach, in season, opportunities are frequent enough; they leave me every time just as disillusioned, just as humiliated, and most often more disgusted with myself than the day before.

“I cannot tell you how happy I am, however, to have met you; I bless heaven that it was in the dark, where I could scarcely make you out, and thanks to the dishevelled state of your dress, which led me to take you for someone else. Otherwise, I should never have dared approach you. For in general, as I have told you, I have never had any taste except for brutes, and above all I dread the ironic or affected manner of society people, whether genuine or assumed. Although the ice is now broken between us, neither now nor ever can there be any question of repeating yesterday’s adventure; we are worth better than that. When two souls have touched one another in such a way, and at such painful points, they can no longer descend again to their bodies. There is now nothing between us but friendship—you, for having listened to me with such obliging intelligence; I, for having poured myself out, as I have done, into your heart. For to whom else could I have revealed my misery, and before whom found relief from it? Indeed, I intended nothing more than to confess it aloud to you, so as to deflate memories grown too oppressive; and it is for reasons other than yesterday’s that I now dare to call you my friend.”

The fire was dying in a haze of smoke, the lamp sputtering. Armand half-opened the shutters; a pale glimmer slipped in. The damp wind of dawn stirred the pine branches; the sea, beginning to turn blue, murmured softly.

"It will soon be time," said Armand, "for me to resume my duties; we shall not see one another again before your departure. And yet, let me not say a complete farewell; I shall always remember the night that has just passed, far more than the one before it.

"Here—before we part, will you give me your address? I have always been powerless against the desire, sooner or later, to see again those for whom I feel affection or friendship; if an opportunity to find you again should present itself, I should not wish to let it escape me.

"Go out through the garden; that will be better. In your interest more than mine, it is best that no one should see you leaving. If, by chance, you should meet someone on the path, after all you are merely an early bather, seized by the whim to go and watch the sun rise over the sea. Your hand—and perhaps until soon."

As he made his way back to his hotel, Albert was more moved than he was willing to admit by the story he had just heard. Yes, Armand was right: neither revelation nor surprise. Had he not himself, long ago, undergone similar experiences, and arrived at the same conclusions? What he could not forget was that passionate tone, that poignant sincerity, that mysterious determination to show himself without veils, that cold lucidity, at once lending so much firmness and distinction to Armand's manner of speech. That was what surprised Albert—and unsettled him as well. He was, all the same, a little dazed, and resolved to think of it no more.

It was barely six o'clock when he arrived; it was precisely the right moment when, almost every morning, taking the utmost care not to wake the parents sleeping in the adjoining room, he would go to see the handsome boy Ramire, whom he had already met the previous year, and who, from one year to the next, had grown into the most perfect teenager in the world. Albert was filled with a joy that was ever new, heightened still by the danger, as he pushed open like a thief the door that Ramire had left deliberately ajar the night before, to look

for a moment, in the dim light filtering through the shutters, the sleeping young man, to slip in beside him, to wrap his arms around him, whilst Ramire, languidly opening his beautiful eyes heavy with sleep, recognised his great friend and threw his arms round his neck. It was the same that morning. Albert had a singular need to refresh his soul through this youthful contact; it seemed to him that he had just lived a hundred years. He felt the soft, warm, supple body—soon to stiffen—wrap itself around his own; he caressed, slowly and sensually, the sloping shoulders, the long, hollowed back, the rounded hips, the muscular thighs flecked with dark down, the firm penis which, throbbing in regular beats, demanded, however sleepy the adolescent still was, his daily caress.

Yet Albert's hand did not grow firmer; on the contrary, it grew lighter, almost insubstantial; his only pleasure today lay in this chaste embrace, in the languid weight of that delicate bosom which was already beating less strongly than a moment ago; in that firm, smooth belly which was gradually relaxing; in that member which, though still erect, was nevertheless subsiding. Youth is quick to fall back to sleep; after a moment, Albert noticed that Ramire was letting his head drop and drifting back to sleep. Albert's hand grew even more imperceptible, and soon came to a halt; whilst watching the child sleep, whilst listening to his breathing, he thought ceaselessly of the other, however hard he tried to forget him, and his heart was filled with the tenderest compassion.

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