

MOUCHETTE
GEORGES BERNANOS

INTRODUCTION BY
FANNY HOWE

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MOUCHETTE

GEORGES BERNANOS (1888–1948) was born in Paris and studied for his license in law and literature at the University of Paris. He was the author of many novels, including *The Diary of a Country Priest*, which, like *Mouchette*, was adapted for film by Robert Bresson. His *Dialogues des Carmelites* was used by composer François Poulenc as the libretto for the opera of the same title.

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Translated from the French by

J.C. WHITEHOUSE

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Introduction

Au Hasard Suicide

Years ago I read two books, *Film Form* and *Film Sense*, by the Soviet director Sergei Eisenstein. They helped me legitimize the process I was beginning to use in my own fiction. In his chapter on montage Eisenstein determined that the tonality of a work is established by a rhythmic relationship between its segments.

He noted that in music the distance of separation between intervals may be so great that it leads to a collapse inside the organic body of sound. However, its irregularity usually becomes its dynamism. Like a healthy human heartbeat, which has an intrinsic irregular system, the body of an artwork gets its vitality from a rhythm based in uncertainty. (Sick hearts have a dull regular thump.)

Eisenstein believed that there is a social mission for artists—that is, the purpose of any work is to “make manifest the contradictions of Being,” if only temporarily, in the single mind of the viewer/reader.

His notes on juxtaposition and composition reassured me, because I was working already with frame and

space. I was aware of the galactic loneliness that lay outside all stories and the strange nature of choice in the construction of a narrative. I used to spread the sheets of my final draft on the floors in my apartment and move them around. This way each event became a self-contained section and the links (not gaps) remained mysteries.

I now can see how this process was encouraged by moviegoing, and by an underlying consciousness of editing as a new kind of revision. The leap from scene to scene, from face to face—this action was unlike anything one did with prose narrative. It was closer to poetry.

Some of the first films I saw were made by Bergman, Visconti, Rossellini, Fellini, Bresson, and the directors of the French New Wave. Janus Films was the distributor of these movies, which premiered at the Brattle Theater in Cambridge, where I grew up. They were all foreign and subtitled; they were black and white and speckled with stars and radiant dust.

There was something else about these movies that I found new beyond their pace, imagery, and structure. The ethos that permeated many of them was

European Catholic; this ethos was not Jansenist and stern like the churches of Ireland and America I was used to. It was passionate and earthy; it was both close-up and distant.

In these postwar movies, the country curates were equal to their parishioners and did not hold themselves apart or seek Vatican rewards. They were often fat and kind and even childlike. They were poor. I noticed that they were often friends of the partisans and rebels and did what they could to help them. They bordered on despair and expected little. They had a very basic political position, which manifested itself as a preferential option for the poor.

Movies at that time were like extensions of the news that was broadcast before the main feature. The movies seemed to deepen the real stories, turning them into portraits of individual lives at the heart of world conflicts. People eating or starving, shouting, hanging out of windows, planting seeds, being shot, going to jail. The blurry subtitles, white on white, randomly selected from the conversation taking place on screen, would come to a viewer as a kind of news-poetry, scraps fallen from the divine table of great faces. Crucifixes, prayers, priests, and murdered parishioners were embedded in scene after scene.

My own first interest in Catholicism rose out of the darkness and the bony chairs in the Brattle Theater and made me wonder, even at age fourteen: What is a Catholic?

I find it impossible to write about Georges Bernanos, about *Mouchette* in particular, without thinking about Catholicism and film. Why film? Film is all about light and movement; its subjectivity is drawn from facial expressions and voices, music and natural sounds. Bernanos writes out of the same visual economy. It is no accident that Robert Bresson (also Catholic) made one of his greatest movies out of the story of *Mouchette*; sixteen years before, he had made another great film, *Diary of a Country Priest*, also adapted from a book by Bernanos.

Georges Bernanos was born at the turn of the century. He served in the army during World War I and wrote his major fiction during twelve years (1926–1937) of an intensely thoughtful and politically active life, a life of hardship, disillusionment, and faith. For him writing was a divine calling. The persistence and survival of innocence was his primary subject; Joan of Arc and Thérèse of Lisieux were his heroines. He was a monarchist until his royalist beliefs collapsed in the late 1920s and he

denounced Franco, appeasement in Munich, France's armistice with Germany, and the French middle class. During his lifetime he was at times drawn to—and embraced by—the extreme right and the extreme left, as many Catholics are.

For the filmmaker Robert Bresson (born 1901), it seems that the world is a prison in which actions are dictated by fate and are predetermined according to someone else's agenda. A person moves robotically through the social system without awareness of consequence or cause. The untrained actors Bresson chose to work with are famous for their slow movements, their lack of charm or dramatic gesture. They are anti-actors. How can this be Catholic? Shouldn't they be liberated and loving and radiant if they have faith? Or can they only be accused of blind obedience?

In Bresson's system, as in Bernanos's, obedience can be understood to be a form of innocence. "They know not what they do." Human faith is existential: to put one foot in front of the other requires an act of faith. I believe Bresson was drawn to the two books by Bernanos because he understood what was at stake with rural life disappearing in France. The rural Catholic was born into religion as children of alcoholics are born soaked in gin or as rabbits are born to hop and hide. Bresson, like Bernanos, was

astonished by innocence, and by the faith of feet to keep on moving, given the alienating circumstances of the twentieth century. And like Bernanos, he was obsessed with the last minutes in a life.

Catholics by and large share a feeling that life has a liminal quality, that it slides towards an invisible aura, that the earth is consecrated by a presence that has either fled or still hovers, that prayer to plastic figures is useful, the way the figure focuses the attention on a lost object, and most Catholics feel with Keats that the world is a vale of soul-making and that suffering is part of that ordeal and therefore there is a plot to life, a goal and a chance of transformation. They believe in ritual as contributing to the transformation.

Film, offering a radiant artifice that moves as if on a stream of water and that captivates an audience for a limited time, shares some of the characteristics of religion. It is often designed to show life at its worst in order to prove that life is nonetheless worth living.

In other words, the ethos of Catholicism can be demonstrated on film as film *per se*.

It is not surprising that Bresson would want to work with the two novels by Georges Bernanos—*The Diary of a Country Priest* and *Mouchette*—because

they stir up a vision of a world that the two had in common. Subjective, but rural; objective, but urban. They were caught in a terrible contradiction as they traveled towards the center of the twentieth century.

Before Bresson made *Mouchette*, he made *Au Hasard Balhasar*, a movie whose hero is a donkey. "I have always had a weakness for donkeys," Bresson remarked.

The barn door creaks on its hinges. A prolonged rasping like the one you hear in working machinery. It is as if the use it is being put to is giving it a taste of suffering.

The depressive sound of a buzz-saw or an electric lawn mower.

A refrigerator groaning at night.

Or something like the bare winter trees forming a syntax that looks like new sheet music.

It isn't a barn door creaking after all. It is a donkey's mechanistic bray.

Then the donkey comes out into the light and stands aside while the children play nearby.

And this is the beginning of *Au Hasard Balhasar*.

About this film the director Bresson remarked in an interview: “It is the life of a donkey going through the same steps that you find in a human life—infancy with its caresses, maturity, work, talent, the donkey who is put in a circus and then some time before dying has a dreamy period, and then he does die from the weight of human sins, having transported the gold all the way to the final frontier.”

Au Hasard Balhasar was one of Bresson’s last two black-and-white films. A luminous pallor surges out of the screen, spreads over every face and form in the picture; it is the color of consciousness. The subtitles are ghostly and easily submerged in the background light.

Squalor bleeds into this whiteness. Blends.

The plot follows an erratic lifeline until it is swallowed in bells and pale sheep.

This film and *Mouchette* were made in the days when the poverty of resources in filmmaking were equal to their stories of human poverty and petty crime. There was little separation between equipment and subject. The sudden shifts in scene, the unschooled acting, and the engagement in a religious view that carries obedience to its last point replicate the donkey’s experience.

That is, the whole movie—its message, its method, its tools—function as a whole instrument. The donkey is the hero. He is the film. He seems as blind as chance. Only once is there a scene where the donkey is put in a circus to perform with other long-suffering animals and there is an unblinking exchange of glances among them.

Mouchette was the last of Bresson's movies made in black and white and the first to end in suicide. The tale shimmers and leaps into the wasteland of space. Fourteen-year-old Mouchette ("little fly") is a social reject among beaten-down peasants. Her parents are alcoholics; the whole town drinks gin. She is a sullen schoolgirl who has had little or no love in her life. She wears dirty clothes and has a bad attitude. Her mother dies leaving behind an infant who is screaming with hunger. Mouchette hides in the raining woods and is taken home by an alcoholic, epileptic poacher, Arsène. In the novel she has had her eye on him for some time, aware of his degradation as a revolt against the convention and cruelty of their town. He has an epileptic seizure in the shack, she comforts him, he violates her, she assents, and off he goes, in a state of paranoia, to the next town. When asked by the authorities what her relationship to him was, Mouchette replies, "He is my lover."

Arsène's paranoia about having murdered someone is the symptom of his self-loathing. What Mouchette feels in him is this soft spot, this place of ruin and fear. Her love for him is indistinguishable from God's love for him, if one has a universe structured in divine mystery as Bernanos did. Her unexpected consent and tenderness is a blessing which he then abuses, slashing his way through the rain to escape payment for a crime he in fact did not commit.

The book is 127 pages long. It is a perfect short novel, written with the sense of bitter detail that Balzac is known for, and with full understanding of the despair that grabs Mouchette in the end. The novel gives a deeper sense of Mouchette's emotions, her reasons for calling Arsène her lover, it hovers longer over their time together than *Bresson* does in his film. It is fuller than the film. The film is like a shadow of the book, but a transparent shadow.

Mouchette is like a second image of Balthazar. The beast doesn't know despair but has nobility of spirit. He consents to his mechanism, because he has no choice. However, the child knows her own despair and therefore has a choice to make. Her freedom leads to suicide.

Each of them receives the same battering from people.

Each has had very pale and swift encounters with love—a touch here, a slap there. Grace is what?

An unintended good.

Here is an example of grace, as written by Bernanos in *Mouchette*:

“It had happened one holiday-time at Trémières. She was taking back to Dumont’s café the fish which the old man had caught during the day—a basketful of eels. On the way a big fair-haired girl had bumped into her, and turned round and asked her her name. Mouchette had not answered and the girl had gently and absent-mindedly stroked her cheek. At first Mouchette had thought nothing of it, and indeed the memory had been painful until evening, and she had pushed it out of her mind. It had returned suddenly, changed and almost unrecognizable, just before dawn when she was asleep on the ragged mattress which Madame Dumont, on events when the café was full, put down for her in a narrow corridor littered with empty bottles and cans and smelling sharply of sour wine and heavily and greasily of paraffin. In some strange way, while she was half-asleep, she felt herself cushion her face in the crook of her arm and smell the imperceptible perfume of that warm hand, and indeed she seemed to feel the hand itself, so near and so real and living that without thinking she raised her head and put up her lips to be kissed.”

Later Mouchette looks at her own swarthy, calloused hand and is horrified. It is the sight of this hand that drives her into the blur of suicide. There is nothing in her drowning that is joyful or gives a feeling of spiritual liberation. But there is exhilaration and, once the inevitability has sunk in, a mild consciousness that “grace is everywhere.” Bernanos, like Bresson, exhibits sangfroid to the end.

Suicide, like little else, makes people aware of chance. If only, if only.

The dreadful thought that suicide could have been prevented by a phone call, a plan, a tender word haunts the act forever. One feels that it could have been prevented because it has the force of an accident (but whose?) in the trajectory of the person’s life. The whole plot got derailed. Someone lost the storyline. Who? The others around the suicide or the suicide herself?

Bernanos was attacked by critics and the public for the cruel story of Mouchette. How can a story show a child choosing to die when this act fundamentally interrupts the passage of time and time is the pulse of plot? Suicide is detachment beyond recognition. It is usually a reaction to one’s own idea of an endless future. Rather than running and shedding the present in a state of blind hope, you falter and feel the whole weight coming at you. Suicide is the an-

swer to one question; religion one answer to many questions. In the Fifties existentialism put suicide as the inevitable burden of a life of pure freedom. Suicide for Catholics has always remained an assent to absolute solitude.

Bernanos wrote: "People generally think that suicide is an act like any other, the last link in a chain of reflections, or at least of mental images, the conclusion of a supreme debate between the instinct to live and another, more mysterious instinct of renouncement and refusal. But it is not like that. Apart from certain abnormal exceptions, suicide is an inexplicable and frighteningly sudden event, rather like that kind of rapid chemical decomposition which currently-fashionable science can only explain with absurd or contradictory hypotheses."

One is seized by suicide as one is seized by love. The Prince of the World prepares you for this collapse in small doses. Indifference, bad luck, poverty, illness, verbal cruelty, changes of heart, betrayal, slander: all of these are killers. Suicide is less common during times of revolution because there is a surge of collective hope for a better future. Suicide is a lonely surge of unhope. This is why it is more common to commit suicide when you are abandoned by your lover than when you are widowed.

It is a scandal to simply chart the miseries in a child's life that lead to her suicide. Where is the lesson?

If suicide is seen to be a sin and the suicidal character is the most sympathetic in the story, what is the moral judgment being made? Is it possible that suicide is a movement towards God? It can't be if God is indifferent, or if the character is indifferent to God. For both Bresson and Bernanos the devil is stronger than God. Indeed, God's weakness may be the source of all the trouble.

The moral burden is shoved away from God onto the question of what a person needs to live in the world. (At least one of three criteria has to be met for a person to survive: one needs to be useful, to be loved, to be safe. Old people, like the children of the poor, are often deprived of all three.) This is what the story of Mouchette is out to discover. What do we need in order to live?

The mystery of the story is that Mouchette loved the miserable Arsène (who belongs to the devil) and claimed him as her lover. In the movie, these moments fly by almost too quickly. For Bernanos they are central to his Catholic vision, which includes a large portion of despair. Mouchette is both redeemed and destroyed by the emergence of love into her soul. Her suicide is her way of ending her

own story before it is finished in the long human exhausting way. She ends it where it has found its meaning.

Her love for Arsène has a little history which is essentially not chosen but delivered.

It is automatic. *Au hasard*. She loves and cares for him at his most reduced moment, while he is frothing and twisting in a fit.

Bresson's Arsène is ugly, brutish, middle-aged. He shows no tenderness for the child whose hands wrap around his shoulders during the rape, and there is hesitation and deliberation in the girl's suicide at the end of the story. In other words, unlike Bernanos, Bresson doesn't hover over the issue of love whereas he does over the act of suicide.

Bernanos sees that she has been set up to die by experiencing love and that her consent to suicide is as natural as Arsène's epileptic fit. She just steps into the water. ("Her sins, which are many, are forgiven for she loved much." Luke 7:47)

"If we behold ourselves at a particular instant—the present instant, severed from the past and the future—we are innocent. We cannot be at this instant anything other than what we are; all progress implies a duration. It forms part of the order of the

world, at this instant, that we should be such as we are. All problems come back to the question of time.” (Simone Weil)

At any time a life can seem complete enough.

—FANNY HOWE

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MOUCHETTE

Author's Note

From the very first pages of this story the familiar name of Mouchette impressed itself on my consciousness far too deeply to be altered.

The Mouchette of *Nouvelle Histoire de Mouchette* (Mouchette) resembles the Mouchette of *Sous le Soleil de Satan* (The Star of Satan) in nothing except the tragic solitude in which I watched both of them live and die.

May God have mercy on the one and on the other!

Georges Bernanos, 1937



I

THE DARK west wind, the sea wind, was already scattering the voices in the darkness. It toyed with them a moment and then lifted them all together, dispersing them with an angry roar. The voice which Mouchette had just heard hovered in the air a long time, like a dead leaf floating interminably.

Mouchette had taken off her clogs in order to run better. She put them on again, but on the wrong feet. *Tant pis!* They were Eugène's, and so wide that she could push all five fingers of her little hand under the top while she was wearing them. They had one advantage – if she pushed her toes to the end, treating them like a pair of enormous castanets, as she ran across the asphalted schoolyard, she could make the kind of noise that drove the mistress wild.

Mouchette slid as far as the top of the bank and settled down to watch, her back against the dripping hedge. From her post the school still seemed quite near, but the yard was deserted now. After playtime on Saturdays the children assembled in the main hall, which was decorated with a bust of the Republic, an old portrait of Monsieur Armand Fallières which had never been replaced, and the

flag of the gymnastics society rolled up in its oil-cloth sheath. Madame would read out the week's marks and they would sing – once again – the song which was to be one of the highlights of the still-distant prize-day, an age away in this desolate March. Now she recognized the familiar words, the 'plus d'espoir' which Madame always forced out with a terrible grimace on her face and such a violent jerk of her head that her comb fell out:

'Espérez! . . . Plus d'espoir!'

Trois jours, leur dit Colomb, et je vous do-o-onne un monde.

*Et son doigt le montrait et son œil pour le voir,
Scrutait de l'immense horizon l'immensité pro-o-fonde—'*

From beyond the rain-bleared windows Mouchette could scarcely make out the heads grouped in twos and threes round the music-sheets, but Madame's tall silhouette stood out darkly against the painted walls. Her thin arm, with its measured rise and fall, stopped from time to time, rigid and dominating, and the voices slowly fell silent, seeming to lie down like docile animals at the feet of their tamer.

According to her teacher, Mouchette had no gift for singing. The truth was that she hated it, as she hated all music, with a savage and inexplicable hatred. As soon as Madame's long fingers, deformed

by rheumatism, touched the keys of the moaning harmonium, her breast would contract so painfully that tears came to her eyes, tears of something like shame. Each note seemed like a word which wounded the depths of her soul, one of those cruel words which the boys muttered to her as they passed and which she would pretend not to hear, although they remained with her throughout the day, seeming almost to stick to her skin.

One day, pale with rage, she had tried to communicate to Madame the secret of her insurmountable dislike, but had only managed to stammer out a few ridiculous explanations in which the word 'disgust' had occurred again and again. 'Music disgusts me.'

'You're nothing but a little savage,' Madame had said heavily, 'a proper savage. Even savages have their music – a savage one, of course, but still music. Music comes before knowledge everywhere.' Nevertheless, she had stopped trying to teach her her scales – it was too much of a waste of time and too upsetting. But Mouchette, who for some unknown reason, insisted on speaking in her throat and exaggerating her horrible Picard accent, had, according to Madame, a charming voice, so gentle and fragile that it always seemed to be about to break, but never did. Unfortunately, since reaching her fourteenth year and thus becoming the senior girl in the school, Mouchette had also started to

sing in her throat; whenever she *did* sing, that is, for usually she simply opened her mouth without uttering a sound, hoping to deceive the teacher's infallible ear. Sometimes Madame would lose her temper completely, climb down from the platform, drag the rebel to the harmonium and push her head down to the keyboard.

Sometimes Mouchette resisted. Sometimes she begged forgiveness and shouted that she would try. Then the teacher would sit down, draw out a mournful groan from the instrument, and the clear voice, miraculously rediscovered, would waver dizzily above it like a tiny boat on the crest of a mountain of foam.

At first, Mouchette would not recognize her own voice. She was too immersed in watching her companions, their looks and their pale, envious smiles which she naïvely thought were disdainful. She was lost in a sensation which seemed to come from the depths of some magic, impenetrable darkness. She would try in vain to break the crystal stem and would sullenly assume again her husky voice and her Picard accent. Each time she did this Madame's terrible look and the harsh note of the harmonium would call her to order. For a few seconds she would wear herself out in the unequal struggle, whose cruelty no one would ever know, and then suddenly, without her willing it, the false note, forced out from her sobbing breast, would set her

free. Nothing mattered now. Laughter would break out on all sides and her face would take on that expression of stupidity which she used to hide all her joys.

Madame must have noticed her absence by now, but what did it matter? In a few moments Mouchette would experience her greatest pleasure, her own pleasure, a pleasure as humble and as undisciplined as herself. In a moment the door, still closed and black against the wall, would finally open and spill out the class on to the road. They would rush out with a single piercing yell, deaf to Madame's final calls and her powerless claps. Then, holding her breath and squatting under the hedge, filled with a delectable anguish, she would spy on the noisy troop with its faces now invisible in the darkness and only its voices rising, losing their usual tone, taking on another, and giving themselves away.

Like all Mouchette's pleasures, this one seemed to increase rather than diminish on each occasion. Just as she picked up in the shadows and in the cart-ruts a thousand precious things which had lain unnoticed for years, she discovered this pleasure by chance also.

On some days – her bad days, Madame called them – when the bell rang for afternoon play-time, which was spent in the yard, in the dim light of a single gas-jet, she could not resist the temptation

of clambering over the hedge and running straight off into the darkness. With the sound of her own clogs in her ears, not daring to look round, she used to run as far as the Aubin road not stopping until, out of breath, she reached the place where the Saint-Vaast lane met it. One day, however, on a whim of the teacher's, the music lesson had been put off until the next day and the whole school ran out almost on Mouchette's heels. She had just time to scramble hurriedly up the bank and throw herself flat on her stomach in the grass. It was surprising to learn that the breathless girls stopped and gossiped there for quite a long time, and that quite often two friends would stay to talk for a moment after the others had gone. Sometimes they would come and lean against the grassy bank, and Mouchette could almost reach out and touch their hair twisted into its dirty ribbons.

The last minutes were the best, when the groups of children had gone off across the surrounding countryside with its many paths, its woods, meadows and pools, and a couple stayed behind to whisper. The damp would slowly soak into Mouchette's stockings and she could hardly stop herself sneezing.

On this particular evening, they had all rushed off and disappeared together, and all that remained to be heard was the almost imperceptible pattering of rain on dry leaves. Mouchette was furious and

threw a handful of mud after the last ones. It fell noiselessly on the road, and they did not even turn round. Their harsh voices soon faded away into a soft murmur, answered periodically by the tapping of the blacksmith's hammer on the anvil, a sound as clear and as pure as, in another season, the silver-throated call of the toad.

Once again Madame had forgotten to put out the gas-light in the yard. It was one of the old-fashioned kind with a butterfly-shaped flame with a blue centre. The flame spat and hissed in the wind, but always rose again and cast the shadows of the red posts and the hideous flat roof on to the pale cement. Mouchette could not take her eyes from it. She seemed to have dreamed, many times, that this humble setting was now waiting for someone. Would he come back? Would he come back to-night? . . . But only Madame appeared suddenly at the kitchen door and stepped out. Nothing remained but the tall poplar, scarcely visible in the sky, murmuring like a spring.

Mouchette did not even bother to scramble down the bank. She slipped under the hedge, leaving a thread from her scarf on a strand of barbed wire, and set off across the fields, following the slight slope towards the Manerville woods. They covered only a few acres of poor, sandy soil and were

swarming with starving rabbits scarcely bigger than rats. She lived in the hamlet of Saint-Venant, on the further edge. It consisted of a few cottages, all that remained of an immense estate divided up ten years ago by a Jewish land speculator from the Ardennes. Mouchette's house was to one side, on the edge of a stagnant pool. Its mud walls were cracked by frosts and giving way everywhere, and its frame, made from beams stolen from one place or another, was rotting. When the first cold spell came her father would simply stuff the holes with faggots.

The wind was still rising when she reached the woods and short squalls of rain were rustling the dead branches. It was now too dark to see the ground. The rain seemed almost like hail.

Mouchette pulled her skirt over her head and ran on as quickly as she could, but the soil, undermined by rabbits, gave way beneath her feet at almost every step, and if she kept to the edge of the wood, where the interlaced roots made the ground firmer, she was lashed by sodden branches. Her scarf caught on one. She reached out after it, stumbled against a tree-stump and fell full length. Damn the scarf. It was not new, but it went the rounds of the family as it was needed. Even her father sometimes wore it wound round his head when his face was swollen and disfigured by his terrible toothache. How could they not miss such a precious thing which they were

all used to seeing on the same nail every day? She could already feel the thrashing she would get.

The rustle of the rain increased, and with it mingled the sound of the soaked earth. Beneath an invisible stone the tinkle of clear water could be heard.

Mouchette wandered about in despair in the thickest part of the wood, and in the end had to duck her head and press straight on. Her skirt was soaked and clinging to her knees. Almost at every step her clogs stuck in the mud and she had to pull at them with both hands to free them. As she struggled to jump over a patch of mud – wider than she thought it was – the earth sucked noisily at one of her clogs, pulling it off. She rolled to the bottom of the ditch, walked a few steps at random and stood stunned, unable to find her way. Crying with rage she hopped about holding her foot in one hand.

She dropped down, frozen and exhausted. After so many detours she had no hope of getting her bearings again. She shut her eyes tightly hoping that it would enable her to hear better, but with no result. There was no sound but the lashing of the trees in the violent storm; the noise of the hammer on the anvil had stopped long ago. A dog barked and the wind carried the sound away immediately. The path she had just reached was nothing but one of the many tracks made by old women coming

back with kindling or enormous baskets of dead wood.

It must have been past supper-time. Whatever she did, she would have to go to bed hungry. If only her father was drunk ! But unluckily she could not be sure, because the beetroot had been in over a week (there was no more work, and the café would not give credit, because Madame Isambart, the new owner, was hard on drunkards). 'There was always the bottle of gin kept in reserve behind the pile of logs, but her mother, because of the terrible pain in her chest, kept taking a small glassful and topping up the bottle with water. Normally no one noticed, for the former smuggler only used his own supply when he got home from the café, full of liquor and just ready to finish himself off. But tonight . . .

Of course, thoughts never passed through Mouchette's mind in such a logical way. She was vague and jumped quickly from one thing to another. If the very poor could associate the various images of their poverty they would be overwhelmed by it, but their wretchedness seems to them to consist simply of an endless succession of miseries, a series of unfortunate chances. They are like blind men who with trembling fingers count out the coins whose value they cannot calculate. For the poor, the idea of poverty is enough. Their poverty is faceless.

Now that she had abandoned the struggle Mouchette returned to her instinctive, unconscious animal-like resignation. As she had never been ill, the cold which chilled her was scarcely a suffering, but rather a discomfort like so many others. It was not threatening, and did not suggest death. In any case, Mouchette thought of death as something as strange and unlikely as winning a big prize in the lottery. At her age, dying and becoming a lady were equally fantastic adventures.

She had gradually slipped down between the twin trunks of a fully-grown pine which the woodcutters seemed to have forgotten. The thick carpet of needles made an almost dry bed for her, for the water flowed away beneath them. She took off her other clog and her woollen stockings and wrung them out. The wind seemed to be blowing from everywhere at once, billowing and eddying in the middle of the storm-tossed wood. Amongst the parted branches a thin column of dead leaves rose briefly, only to be beaten down at once by the heavy rain.

Hearing footsteps she looked slowly up and saw him walking softly and carefully towards her, like some wary nocturnal animal. His long dark silhouette stood out against the lighter sky just as Madame's had done a short while ago. The wide overalls

which covered the top of his corduroy trousers looked almost like a skirt. Mouchette immediately recognized him by the scent of his contraband Belgian tobacco, for he sometimes brought some for her father, compressed into a flame-coloured brick so hard that it had to be chopped up.

‘Oh, it’s you, is it,’ he said.

His large boots, smelling strongly of grease and mould, were almost upon her. Suddenly a torch shone full into her face.

‘The weather’s too bad to put my snares out. I’m off back.’

Still holding her stockings and her remaining clog, she got up with difficulty, trembling all over.

‘Damn it, girl, you’ll get your death! What do you think you’re playing at, sheltering here in weather like this? The water’s rising, you can bet on that. And where’s your other clog?’

‘I’ve lost it, M’sieu Arsène.’

‘Idiot! Why couldn’t you come back from school along the road with your pals? You’ve no idea, you fathead!’

He shone the torch again. Mouchette struggled desperately to put on her wet stockings. For what seemed an age she was caught in the centre of a halo of light with one leg stretched out and the other bent, unable to leave her shelter, and finally dropping down paralysed by the light.

‘You go home without your other clog and

you'll catch it where it hurts, girl. Don't you even know where you lost it?

Mouchette looked up and tried to make out the face stretched out towards her in the darkness. She was no more worried by the presence of this man than by that of some familiar animal, but without being really aware of it she had caught something false, something odd in the tone of his voice. It acted like a lash across her back and she jumped up.

'What's biting you now? You look as though you'd walked into a wasps' nest. Well, where's your clog for God's sake?'

His voice was harder now and commanding and Mouchette knew that it was getting late and that she was running the risk of getting her face smacked. But neither threats nor blows would drag a word out of her until she was less tense. She could listen to one of Madame's tirades for a quarter of an hour without flinching or even hearing it, but often a gesture or a single word could upset her terribly. Then Madame would simply say 'Oh dear, perhaps I've upset Mademoiselle Mouchette,' and the other girls would start laughing. Her father described this stubbornness more simply by telling her that she was pulling her pig's face again.

She walked back and stood against the largest of the pines, wiping her cheeks and forehead with the back of her left hand. The ribbon she usually wore

round her short plait had been caught in the brambles too. The rain dripped from her thin hair, on which she put oil every Sunday. Arsène looked at her again. She could not see his eyes, but she could hear his breathing.

‘Come on. We’ve talked enough. The water’s rising.’

He walked in front and she followed. The small amount of light from the torch made the night seem darker and more treacherous. She stumbled against tree-stumps and the pine-needles hurt her feet. She dared not ask Arsène to go more slowly for she had all the docility of the peasant woman, that docility which allows them to scold and insult the drunkard but nevertheless makes them trot at his side, adjusting their step to his. Her dress was like an icy shroud. She paid no attention to it, for the cold no longer affected her. Her legs and body had no sensation, but there was a queasiness, an emptiness, a sickness in her chest. Her eyes saw nothing but the regular movements of her companion’s shoulders.

‘Stop!’

She heard the word too late; she walked on, fell to her knees, got up again. They were in the middle of a clearing which she did not recognize. It had stopped raining, but the wind was much stronger now. Pale clouds sailed past above them and the wind made a noise like rushing water.

‘Come here!’

She had to go on a few steps. She was so tired that her bare feet slipped on the slight slope and unthinkingly she took her companion's hand to help her up.

'Duck down!'

He went into the hut first and threw off his bag. It fell to the floor with a soft thud. It was full of rabbits, not quite stiff yet, sticky and glistening with blood and water.

'I bet you didn't know about Zidas' hut. The stupidest hideouts are always the best. Nobody bothers about a dirty broken-down old shack. Last year, just before the season started, these lads from Boulogne came out with their traps and cleared so many partridges that the van had to make two trips. On the way back, they got let down on the Blangy road. The police got wind of it. I'd got more than five thousand francs' worth of game stored here. The police searched the plain all over – they even found last autumn's hideouts, full of rotten straw, but they never thought of searching the hut. Even if they had done, they'd only have found a pile of firewood and an old jacket, I expect, because . . .'

She had dropped into a corner on the bare earth. The flood of words stopped her thinking, but her senses were awake to a sudden danger. Once alerted, she did not relax easily. Her eyes ached and she lowered her lids. She looked as if she was sleeping, but none of her host's actions escaped her notice.

Arsène, with his long hands, which underneath their grime were whiter than anyone's in the village, was scratching around in the earth like a dog searching for something, scattering dead leaves all over the cabin. Finally he found the trap-door – simply a box-lid with a rope handle – pulled it up, leant down, and got up again.

'Drink that.' No refusal was possible.

The brutality of his voice reassured Mouchette more than any word of friendship would. She could only defend herself by immobility and silence. She was just beginning to realize how long her journey through the woods had taken and how exhausted she was. Her teeth clenched involuntarily round the cloth-covered neck of the Army water bottle which smelt of sour wine.

The alcohol hit her stomach like molten lead. Weariness flowed along her limbs and diffused itself at every bruised joint of her body.

Arsène threw wood on to the crudely-fashioned clay hearth. He had thrown his leather jacket and his woollen shirt off behind him. His naked chest gleamed like copper in the sudden light of the flames.

'Come and get warm. I ought to be pushing off, but it's best to get the worst of the cyclone over first. Yes, it's a cyclone, as they say. It's over twenty years since I saw anything like it – before I was going to school even. It started off over the sea, miles

away, and came along the English coast. In Boulogne the sky was so dark that people came out into the streets to see what was going on. It was really quiet, and then all at once, in the north-west it'd be, I suppose, the sea started boiling – just like water in a saucepan. But it was still quiet. I suppose you didn't hear much the whole time. Then all of a sudden there was steam all round the customs shed – not smoke, steam – it just looked like the air was boiling too. Then a warehouse roof came off slowly. It looked just like an animal yawning – like a dragon – from a long way off. Then there was that roof flapping like a sail again, going up into the air with all its timbers – crash! You can imagine all us kids were watching it. When the cyclone went over the town, the earth trembled. But when it's like that you don't feel how strong the wind is – it's all drawn up and you're left in a sort of empty space. You wouldn't have heard a thing if it wasn't for the slates and ridgetiles falling, just like gunfire it was. There was smoke all over the town and the sea.'

Mouchette's experience told her that Arsène was drunk, even if in a different way from her father. No one had ever seen him tottering along the road or lurching against a wall, like a wounded animal seeking its lair. He despised such people, calling them yokels, clods who couldn't take their drink, boasting because they have had too much. He was

proud of the fact that he was not a local man, and of coming from Boulogne, born of a Breton mother and an unknown father. Usually alcohol made him quiet, but sometimes, like tonight, he would talk in an even, quiet voice with a strange light in his eyes, and when he started off on his sea-stories (he had once been a sailor) it was better not to laugh. Then he would start to strut – an infallible sign of his anger, which everyone feared because of its strangeness and its difference from their own.

‘Listen,’ he said. ‘There it is blowing across the plain. In another five minutes it will be bad on the hill-tops. If you put your ear to the ground you’d hear a galloping noise. Weather like this stirs you up; it’s a man’s weather.’

With one hand he raised the bottle and drank with a greedy pout which made him look like a child.

‘You’ll get drunk, Monsieur Arsène,’ said Mouchette quietly.

‘I’ve got to get drunk tonight. Dead drunk. I’ve got troubles.’

His long hand reached out and clumsily caressed her back and thighs.

‘Good. You’re dry now. With a wind like this the ashes might get blown round the cabin and we’d burn like rats. You didn’t know you’d got your backside on my supply of cartridges, girl, did you! What an explosion that’d be, eh?’

He visibly forced himself to laugh. Mouchette

would have liked to reply, from politeness, but an instinct much stronger than her will made her keep silent. The warmth from the alcohol was vanishing and her eyelids were heavy. She would have liked to sleep.

‘You’ve not got much to say for yourself, but that’s a nice change in a girl.’

From the pocket of his jacket hanging on the wall he took an enormous silver watch.

‘What time did you come out of school?’

‘I don’t know,’ Mouchette answered mistrustfully. ‘About half-past six I suppose. I came out before the others.’

‘On your own?’

‘Yes.’

‘Nobody saw you?’

‘How should I know? What are you asking me for, Monsieur Arsène?’

His nose wrinkled like a cat’s. She shrugged her shoulders, but imperceptibly and to herself. All the beatings she had suffered had not subjugated her, only taught her prudence and a calm and sly scorn for men’s anger.

‘I ran out, Monsieur Arsène.’

‘And you were going to go home through the fields?’

‘Yes.’

‘Right. Remember what I’m going to tell you. You didn’t come through the fields. You came

along the Linières road, like you should, because of the bad weather. Perhaps you even went to Linières to buy marbles.'

'Marbles? What with? I've got no money, Monsieur Arsène.'

'Here's some. Say you found it. Right – you were on your way to the village and you stopped at La Palud corner, because the weather was getting bad.'

'Right, Monsieur Arsène. I understand.'

She pushed the coins into her apron pocket and warmed them with her hands. She had never had so much money. The coins were nice to feel and touch.

Arsène changed his story.

'So you didn't see me at the crossroads. Say you saw me coming out of Duplouy's café – he's a pal – and that I told you I'd been to Bassompierre to pick up some snares.'

'Snares? You want me to mention snares to the police?'

'You're a wideawake girl!'

He finished off the bottle, swirled the last drop around his mouth, and spat it into the red ashes.

'It's better to be caught for a small crime than a big one, isn't it?'

Mouchette watched the flames of the burning alcohol dancing like little blue flies. Her little face expressed resignation and cunning. It was nothing

new for her to have to lie. Her father had once been a smuggler when they lived over Berblooké way on the edge of the marshes. These were so dangerous that after nightfall they could only be crossed with a dog who could sniff out, beneath the hard surface, those sticky mud-holes which could suck down a man, inch by inch, in ten minutes. She had been small then. Nowadays of course she could lie better. Every word she had just heard was stored in her head in its proper place.

Arsène paced up and down the cabin, unhindered by its smallness. He had all the ease of the wild animals in their cages in Belloc's menagerie, which Mouchette had once seen through a gap in the fence.

'You're not an ordinary girl, you're different,' he said suddenly. 'I'm going to find your shoe. We might have quite a walk in front of us.'

He stopped a moment at the door. Rain glistened in the reflexion of the dying firelight on his bare back.

She was alone. Her clothes were dry, the pulse in her temple was no longer beating, and hunger seemed now a prolongation of physical well-being, a delicious drowsiness. All her senses, except her hearing, seemed asleep. Without any effort she could distinguish all the many separate sounds which

came in from outside – the last breath of wind in the tree-tops, the dripping of the rain, and now and again the sound of a dead branch, broken off by the storm, as it slowly crashed through the undergrowth before settling into the muddy earth which would now hold it for ever. Her hand suddenly stopped playing with the cooling ashes and tightened convulsively, and almost at the same time she jerked herself up to her knees. She had heard two shots, quite separate, but deadened by distance.

Her eyes turned automatically to Arsène's gun. It was still hanging on its nail. In any case he could hardly be so far away yet. Perhaps it was some poacher taking refuge in a shelter and letting off his gun before he went in? But the two shots were so spaced that it was not easy to imagine them coming from a double-barrelled shot-gun.

Once again Mouchette's mind turned to the nights of her childhood in the clay house on the edge of the open plain. More than one smuggler, groping for the narrow path in the darkness, had fired a few shots as a last appeal to his comrades, who were themselves scattered in the darkness, and whose whistles sounded like the cry of certain marsh birds. The noise of such spaced shots, undisturbed by echoes, could carry enormous distances, for the viscous, heavy air of the bogs bore it along as deep water would. Mouchette rarely heard shots: it was the rattling of windows which startled

her out of sleep and jerked her bolt upright on her rag mattress.

Arsène was soon back. He had found her soaked clog and threw it down to her.

'I thought the water would have carried it down. All sorts of stuff's been carried along. There was even a rabbit – some stones must have broken its back. And there's eddies strong enough to carry your legs from under you. It's as frothy as beer.'

She could feel his heavy gaze upon her.

'Did you hear it?'

Another single shot. They waited breathlessly, but in vain, for the second.

Arsène cursed softly. 'If I'd another bottle of gin I'd go back, I tell you.'

'You're crafty,' he went on. 'Crafty as a partridge. We'll throw what's left of the fire outside and tidy up a bit. But first . . .

He squatted down before the fireplace, raised his left hand to the height of his face, and examined it with a low whistle.

'Come here. Bring the torch from the pocket of my leather jacket and hold it steady. Come on, like a real smuggler's girl. If you think you're going to be sick, close your eyes.'

The back of his hand had an enormous strangely-shaped wound on it. It was surrounded by a blue bruise and stood out, gleaming wet from the rain. His fingers were swollen.

‘A bite. A blasted bite.’

With his other hand he separated the last embers, picked one out and blew on it.

‘Now let’s have some light.’

He bound a rag as tightly round his wrist as he could. His fingers were purple and the wound was raised and sharply visible. It was blurred, but the teeth marks could be clearly seen. They were certainly not those of a fox or a badger. ‘

He moistened his fingertips with spittle and picked up the glowing ember. It was exactly the same size as the wound. He put it on unhurriedly and blew again. The flesh sizzled horribly. Mouchette did not look at the ember. She kept her eyes on his face, which was shadowy and indistinct in the halo of light reflected from the wall. His vulgarity of expression had gone and he seemed withdrawn and composed. His neck, which was silky and almost as long and supple as a woman’s, swelled and a large, dark vein stood out. His lips trembled but no sound escaped from them. For years Mouchette had felt herself a stranger amongst the villagers, dark and hairy like goats, whom she hated so much. Even while they were still young they ran to unhealthy fat. Their nerves were poisoned by the coffee they drank all day in their stinking cafés, and it finally started to colour their skin.

She was not aware of despising anyone because,

in her innocence, this seemed outside her capabilities and she thought no more of it than she did of the other more material characteristics which the rich and the powerful reserve for themselves. Indeed, she would have been amazed if anyone had told her that she despised Madame. She simply saw herself as a rebel against an order which the schoolmistress typified. When Madame told her from time to time that she was no good, she never contradicted her. She was no more ashamed of that than she was of her rags. For a long time she had delighted in a savage indifference to the disdainful comments of the other girls and the mockery of the boys. Often on a Sunday morning, when her mother sent her to the village for the week's bacon, she deliberately let herself get muddy on the road and reached the square just as people were coming out of Mass. And yet, suddenly, something had happened. . . .

He blew on the coal for a few moments longer and then dropped it at his feet. Their eyes met. She would have liked him to understand her feelings, of which she was at the moment only aware of the shock, like the sting of raw spirits on her palate. She could give no name to that shock. What had it in common with what people called love and the actions she had seen? All she could do was to shine the light steadily on his wounded hand.

'Open the door,' he ordered. 'I'm going out to

scatter the ashes. Whoever asks you, we've not been here today, right? Don't tell anybody, even your father. I'm going out first. Come after me.'

The leather tops of her clogs hurt her feet terribly but she was too busy keeping her eyes on her companion to notice it. It was not too dark outside now. They kept leaving the paths to cut through the undergrowth and Mouchette lost all sense of direction. She soon resigned herself. Suddenly she was astonished to find herself on the road just outside Duploux's café. It was so late that the shutters were closed and there was no light to be seen.

Arsène went into the yard and knocked on a low door. Someone opened it quietly and she heard voices, but could not make out a single word. When he came back to her he was smiling.

'The lad's not what I thought he was. It doesn't matter. We'll manage without him. I know what I'm doing even if I am drunk. We're going a bit further. I'll carry you if you're too tired.'

He spoke to her like an equal. Oh, she wasn't tired or scared, she'd walk all night, he'd no need to worry! These phrases passed through her mind softly and gently, but she only managed to shake her head sullenly.

They stopped at another hut, which Mouchette knew well. It was called the 'Rendez-vous' and in springtime the woodcutters stored their tools there.

It was empty and the door yielded to the first kick.

'Lucky I came here the day before yesterday,' said Arsène.

'There's dry wood and a bit of candle. We're going to have a proper blaze. I want there to be a barrow load of ashes here tomorrow, so I can say I was here all day, in the dry.'

They sat down at either side of the fireplace and Mouchette stared at her clogs. Any sort of reflexion was so unusual for her that she was unaware of the enormous effort she was making to understand. By dreaming she often managed to escape from herself, but it was a long time since she had lost the secret of those mysterious ways by which one entered into oneself. Her whole life seemed concentrated in one painful spot inside her and seemed to burn as hard and bright as a diamond. A diamond – one of those magic stones which Madame said were found in the middle of a chunk of carbon. She did not dare look at Arsène, and she was even more afraid of hearing him. One word from him, in this silence, would break her as if she were glass.

'Listen,' he said suddenly. 'Now I've told you a bit I may as well tell you the lot. In any case you won't get outside your door tomorrow without hearing gossip. I know what people are like. They wouldn't hurt a fly, but as soon as they see a pool of blood they've got to put their tongue in it. So what! You don't usually trust a girl – especially one

like you, just a kid. Come on, try to look at me – like a man.'

She tried, bravely. But every time she met his eyes she had to look away. She could not help herself; involuntarily her gaze slipped away like a drop of oil on a smooth surface. With great difficulty she managed to keep her eyes on the opening of his shirt, at the spot where the brown skin was visible, etched in a darker shadow.

'It's a pity,' he said with a shrug. 'You women. It doesn't matter how young you are, you're always pulling faces. Look at me or don't, suit yourself. But don't think I've not thought about what I'm doing. I might be drunk, but I've still got my wits about me. Do you want to know why I think a bit about you? Since I saw your father beating you on the night of the fair at Saint-Venant – do you remember it? He was smacking your bottom with his gun-rod and he couldn't stop you turning round to face him, so he hit you in the face. And you just went and sat in the window and shook your skirt without a tear in your eye. I had more than one thrashing when I was a kid, but you put me to shame. You looked like . . . like a . . .'

He gave up trying to find the word he wanted and whistled softly. Suddenly his face seemed turned to stone.

'I think I've killed a man,' he said. 'Or as near as makes no difference.'

She sighed deeply, twice, without moving. She almost seemed to have yawned. He thought she had not heard him.

‘It’s Mathieu, isn’t it?’ she said after a silence.

‘Yes. Why do you think it’s him?’

‘I saw him going past our house this morning. Father said he’d got his groundsheet slung over his shoulder. “Mathieu’s going to spend the night outside,” he said. “Young Arsène’d better keep his eyes open.”’

‘Trust him to say that. People’ve been saying things like that for weeks. As soon as Mathieu looks out of the window, people start saying that Arsène had better look out, Mathieu’s going to catch him. Well, it’s me that caught him.’

He spoke almost regretfully. The admission he had just made had softened his harsh face, and his eyes seemed to search empty space for some ancient, half-forgotten memories.

‘I suppose that this blasted cyclone had upset me. The air seemed to have gone all thick, like glue or something, and I felt as if it was sticking to my skin. And it was sultry too. I was just digging up one of my traps, near the Camille paddock, a good spring one I’d paid a good thirty for. With rain as heavy as that you never know – my trap could have been washed away to Saint-Vaast, even if I’d put it in nice and firm. “What’re you doing there then, Arsène, my lad?” he asked me. “You want a trip

to the other side of the herring-pond? You're likely to get one." He said that because I'd put my hand in my trouser pocket while I was turning round. I turned my pocket out. There was only my pipe and pouch in it. "Listen", I said, "I'm not an idiot. What good would it do me to harm you? If I did you in, it wouldn't be Guiana for me, it'd be Deibler. Anyway, if you want this little toy, you can have it" – I could see he'd been keeping his eye on it. "Right," he said, straight out. I turned away, but he called me back. "Don't think you've got off so easily, Arsène my lad. You've kept us up too long at night. You think you're O.K. because you've got the big Arras or Boulogne poaching rings behind you – the tough guys, the real gangsters. But what's a man like you for them – they can get ten more for every one they lose. You'll get it, sooner or later, unless you clear out of here." "Don't count on it, Mathieu," I said.

'He looked a bit odd to me. It dawned on me that he was drunk, as well. You could only tell by his cheeks – they were hollow – and because the pupils of his eyes were flickering when he looked at me. I could tell he wasn't just doing his job – he was out to settle a score. We stared at each other for a minute, without blinking. I wanted to get away, but I seemed rooted there, and my ears were buzzing, and I could feel myself getting angry.

'When I get that itching between my shoulder

blades, I know I've got to fight or my heart might burst. It's happened to me more than once. Educated people call it epilepsy. Anyway, I'd already gone a little way off, but I stopped. He was pulling my leg, and I fell for it. It had started raining again, hard – just like molten lead dropping. We were in the little copse, and there wasn't much more shelter than there would have been out in the fields. We were both frozen, in spite of everything, so we went off together to a clump of old pines, not far from Duponchel's cabin. Perhaps the rain had sobered us up? I don't think so. Men like us – up to a point – we're more careful when we're drunk. But once we get past that point, we don't give a damn.

'But neither of us wanted to look as if we were pulling back. You've seen dogs fighting in the road. If a lorry goes past, they go off to finish it somewhere else – they go off side by side, keeping an eye on each other. It was just like that with us. But once we were under cover, in the dry, I remembered what I'd be letting myself in for if I did anything stupid. The wind was bellowing in from the sea, and the ground seemed to be shaking underneath us. "Listen, Arsène," he said, twisting his mouth, "while we're here, I'm warning you to leave Louisa alone. I don't like anybody playing about when it's a question of women!" "You're a fine copper." I answered. "Why do you have to provoke a man,

when all you've got to do is speak up and get him sent to jail?"

'We rolled on the ground like savages. I couldn't get at his neck because of the heavy cord jacket he was wearing. He bit my hand. Christ! What a bite! I banged his head on the ground, but the earth was too soft and I couldn't make him let go. We slipped down the slope, slowly, still struggling, and suddenly we were in the ditch, with water up to our waists. Christ, we were stupid! We got out as best we could. I felt my flask of spirits – the cork had come out! I was scared of losing it all. Might as well drink it and get rid of it, I thought, it's safer in my belly – but a litre, damn it all, when I'd had a skinful already! I had to stop guzzling it, I was so breathless. My eyes were popping out of my head like marbles.

'He was as white as a sheet, and his teeth were chattering. He was looking at me queerly. He was wetter than I was, because I'd fallen on top of him. I held out the flask to him, and for a time we were pals again. The storm was at its worst and even in the shelter of the pines we had to hold each other's arm to stop the wind blowing us over. Anyway, we finished the litre sitting on a big stump under the groundsheet, with water running off it like a gutter. We didn't even notice. Our throats hurt with shouting, and the wind blew all our words away – thump, like somebody hitting you. And then Mathieu. . . .'

He stopped suddenly, put his hand to his throat for a few minutes with his features fixed in a kind of stupid, hopeless searching look. Then his face brightened a little in spite of the anguish which he had doubtlessly forgotten. Then, after a silence which seemed endless to Mouchette, he took up his story again with the resigned air of a man who has just managed to recall something, but who knows that he will only manage to remember a small part of the forgotten facts.

‘It happens to me sometimes.’ (His hands brushed his face convulsively, as if to rid it of an invisible fly.) ‘The doctor calls it my blank spells.’

For a moment he remained silent, forcing himself to smile, with a strange look on his face. Mouchette noticed that one of his eyes seemed to turn imperceptibly upwards.

‘It seems queer to you, I suppose?’ he said. ‘Well, I can’t help it. It’s probably the blasted gin. Don’t be scared. It’ll come back to me. Anyway, I can remember most of it – it’s just the details that I can’t recall. They’re all there, but I can’t sort them out. It’s all wound up together like a ball of string.’

Squatting on her heels and leaning forward with her arms stretched out and her hands on the floor, Mouchette looked like a young cat lying in wait for something.

‘What do you expect from a man when he’s drunk? There’s nothing left in his mind but one or

two pictures, as clear as photos. Well, what I remember is holding the trap by the spring – a long one, a good six inches long – then thump, twice on his head. He fell forward. His legs worked violently at first, then slowly, then he stopped moving altogether. His face was in a rut in the ground, and it filled with blood. I can't remember anything that happened before that. After that, I think I stood there, scared to turn him over. Even if I'd not split his skull, he would have suffocated in the water. But when a man's finished, I can tell you, it's easy to recognize. His legs were jerking like a hare's when you pull its neck. . . .'

He wiped his forehead again.

'But when I heard the shots just now, I thought he wasn't dead. I thought he was shooting to call his mate. In weather like this, nobody'd go out shooting. The game's hidden in the dry. Anyway, I recognized his gun. It's a big English twelve-bore, and he uses that M powder that always hangs fire a bit when the weather's damp.'

Mouchette was not deceived by his apparent calmness. Looking at his face, which she knew well, she seemed to be seeing it for the first time; or, rather, it seemed to be the first human face she had ever really looked at. Her attention was so absorbed and so tender that it seemed to be an extension of

her own life. It did not occur to her to find Arsène's face handsome. It was simply that it seemed made for her, and seemed as easy and natural in her gaze as the handle of her old knife in her hand, the old knife which she had found on the road one evening, and had shown to no one, and which was the only thing in the world which she possessed. She would have liked to touch his face, but its golden colour, as warm as that of bread, was enough to make her happy.

Indeed, it was not a handsome face. The faces of film-stars, which she had sometimes seen in newspapers, belonged to men who were too different from her, whom she would never know, and only aroused in her a mixture of scorn and envy. This face, however, had something fraternal and friendly about it. Suddenly it had become as familiar as her own. All the pleasure in looking at it came not from him, but from the depths of herself, where it had lain hidden and germinating, like a seed of wheat beneath the snow. Nothing could alter its power and sweetness, and it depended neither on time nor on place. If it were ever pushed aside, it would recur again, following a rhythm as natural and regular as that of sleep or hunger. She had, no doubt, occasionally thought of love, but in order to overcome an uncontrollable physical revulsion she had had to force herself to imagine beings as different as possible from those around her, and her imagination

was soon defeated. But the face before her now, which she was looking at with such a fierce tenderness, left her as untroubled as a glimpse of her own caught in the single looking-glass in her home. And that indeed was what is seemed to be – a mysterious double of her own face, but a thousand times dearer, because she knew, without needing a mirror to tell her that, on certain days (when, for example, Madame's mockery suddenly searched out the painful spot and the terrible flush 'rose to her cheeks and her chin trembled before she started to sob) she hated and despised her face. Arsène's, however, could never be hateful or ridiculous to her.

Even the drunkard's wild grin which she hated so much on her father inspired, when she saw it on Arsène, merely a tender compassion and another previously unknown feeling – she had always hated children – one of humble protection, of inexhaustible patience stronger than any disgust, a maternal instinct newly-awakened in her, as fragile as a rose in May.

'Monsieur Arsène,' she said, 'if Mathieu really isn't dead, what's the good of saying I saw you outside the café? We'll have to think of something else.'

He was standing against the wall, with his hands behind his back, looking at her as if weighing her up. Enormous drops of sweat appeared at the roots of his hair and ran slowly down over his face and bare chest.

‘What’s it matter,’ he said thickly. ‘If he can talk, he will. He’ll say yes, I’ll say no – the papers will like that. There’ll always be somebody ready to settle him, me or somebody else, and if you get a good thump on the head you don’t usually have time to turn round to see who’s done it.’

‘But if you want me to try to help you, you’ll have to try to remember . . .’

‘. . . Remember, remember. You’re too nosy, girl. My head’s buzzing like mad.’

Anger shone for a moment in his grey eyes, and then disappeared at once. For an instant Mouchette seemed to detect a formless plea, a painful appeal.

‘What do you want me to tell you? He was there all right, with his face in the mud, with rain splashing and water gurgling about. And I saw his legs kicking about, I’m sure of that.’

His cheeks were a deathly grey, and his right eyelid had drooped almost over his eye. But his slightly twisted mouth, with a trace of foam at the corners, and his grey lips, frightened Mouchette even more. She staggered up. Arsène seemed not to see her. She had to make a great effort to put her hand on his arm, which he had folded across his chest in an enigmatic gesture of defence. She was trembling, and her tongue was so dry and rough that she could scarcely speak.

‘I’ll say . . . I was hidden . . . in the wood . . . that I saw you both . . . that Mathieu . . . Arsène, listen,

listen! Shall I say he was drunk? You can trust me . . . I'll stick up for you.'

He stumbled a few steps away from the cabin wall, looking like a child who has thrown himself across his bed, still heavy with an unfinished dream.

'Mouchette,' he stuttered, 'I can hardly see. The back of my head hurts. I'm sure I'm going to have an attack. Don't be scared, just watch that I don't knock my head against the wall.'

He crashed down like a falling tree. She heard the thud of his chin on the floor. How could anyone fall like that without killing himself? Then she saw his back arch, and he twisted round, face upwards. His eyes were white and his pinched nose more livid than the rest of his face. Suddenly, with a strange, broken sigh, he stiffened again, until only his heels and the nape of his neck seemed to support him. His broad chest, caught in the spasm, slowly swelled until his ribs almost seemed to burst through his skin. For a moment he remained thus, and then a stream of spirits and foam gushed from his mouth. All at once his features became peaceful again and seemed, once their calm had been regained, so full of suffering and surprise that he looked like a dead child.

Mouchette squatted beside him, level with his shoulders. What should she do? She had never

seen a corpse stretched out like that, on the bare ground, without a bed, without a shroud, without a sprig of box in an earthenware saucer, or without the murmurings of pious old women who watch over the corpse, and who are as busy at a deathbed as they are at the bed of a woman in childbirth. She felt incapable of any action; the apparent inevitability of the strange events she had witnessed had drained all volition from her. She tried in vain to clarify them in her mind, but could make nothing of them. They would have been frightful if she had not been bound to them by a much greater emotion than fear.

She managed to slip her hand between the man's head and the floor of beaten earth. How light the head seemed! The slightest pressure of her fingers was enough to make it tremble and to fall to one side or another. Holding it in her hands as lightly as she could, she lifted it gently. The eyelids were closed, and the lips bore the faint traces of a smile. She wiped the face with a corner of her apron, feeling within herself her whole life smiling with the same smile. She desired nothing. If it had occurred to her then to kiss the forehead that her tumbled hair was gently touching, she would have done so. But the idea did not come to her. Her desire, like the warmth of her living body itself, was spread throughout her veins and not concentrated in any one precise image. She held Arsène's head as she

would have held anything precious, fragile or easily lost, not even daring to cradle it in her lap.

And suddenly she began to sing. It came so naturally that at first she did not even realize that she was singing.

She thought she was humming a tune she had heard many times from the café – a Negro dance-tune, they said – whose incomprehensible words the hideous, scarlet gramophone blared out every Sunday. Until then, she had always disliked it, but had never been able to get it out of her head, unlike Madame's favourite tunes, which she could never keep there. From time to time, when her drunken father came home late at night, slamming the door back against the wall and rousing her from her deep adolescent sleep, she would hum it softly, with her head under the bedclothes, before she went to sleep again.

As long as she merely followed the rhythm and the shape of the strange melody in her mind, she was amazed at her success, and at the same time frightened by it. She seemed to be sliding down a snow-covered slope, but, as she descended, all awareness of the dizzy fall left her. Whenever she became bold enough to hum the tune, she was no longer held by its magic, and, for an instant, she would be inexplicably confused, trembling and stupefied, with her little hands sticky with sweat. The blood would rush to her head and she would

feel as ashamed as if she were suddenly naked before a mocking crowd. In the silent house, unheeding of the drunkard's snoring, she would hear an imaginary song gradually die away, and feel her heart beating in fright against her ribs.

Tonight she was so surprised at her victory over her fear that she could feel nothing else. She heard her own voice, pure, still wavering a little, and extraordinarily fragile. Nothing had taught her that this mysterious voice was in fact the expression of her youth in its sudden blossoming and the compensation for all the humiliations of her life, humiliations so deeply buried that she accepted them for what they were, and even found a secret peace in them.

Her voice was her secret, the only one which she could have shared with her strange companion as he lay, alive or dead – dead in all probability – at her feet. She would have given it to him and she would have given herself if she had not still been more of a child than a woman. Now that her humble treasure had been offered, she no longer recognized it. Her song rose in her ears humbly and fervently, refreshing her body and her soul like some pure liquid in which she would have liked to immerse her hands.

For what seemed to her a long time – for perhaps a minute as long as a whole day – her song went on. Suddenly the magical voice was silent. Mouchette

looked down and saw that her hands were empty.

Arsène had got up and stood facing her. His face was still smeared with mud; one of his lips had been bruised during his fall and was bleeding.

‘What the hell are you singing?’

He tried to laugh, but there was a strange brightness in his eyes. They were as restless as those of a hunted animal. He wiped his forehead with his hand, and drew it away covered with mud and blood.

‘So I’ve had my attack. It’s a bit rough on my nerves, but not serious. My father was an epileptic too. So they say – I never knew him.’

He studied the girl through half-closed eyes. It was clear that he was trying to make some pattern from the tumult of images in his mind. The fear of betraying himself held him back from asking the question which, although carefully phrased, came out despite him.

‘Listen, my girl – hadn’t we better be getting off? It’s late already.’

While he was speaking, he put on his soaked leather jacket, cleared his gun, slung his bag on his back and, still watching the girl slyly, moved towards the door.

‘Come on. I’ll drop you off at home. Your father’ll manage to find us a drop of gin.’

She was not happy to see him standing. Fatigue, cold, and the alcohol burning in her stomach had

reduced her to drowsiness. She took the strange man's hand. For years now she had never offered her hand to anyone, and all the simplicity and fervour of her nature was apparent in her gesture.

'Where are we going now, Arsène?'

'Where the hell do you think? Home!'

'What about you . . . and Mathieu! What about the police, Arsène!'

She had almost shouted the last word, alarmed by the strangeness of his look. Her blood rushed to her chest, almost stifling her.

'The police?'

Arsène hung his head and stepped slowly back into the hut.

'Wait a minute,' he said. 'Take it easy. I can't follow things after these attacks. Stand still. It'll come back in a minute.'

He threw the rest of the wood on to the ashes. It was so dry that it caught when he put his lighter to it. Mouchette knelt beside him.

'Arsène, what about Mathieu . . . you . . .'

'Quiet! Shut up,' he said. 'We had an argument, sure. After that . . . after that we had a drink together.'

She stood up until their faces were almost touching, although she was not aware of it.

'Arsène,' she begged. 'Can't you remember? He fell, with his face in a rut, you said, and it turned red. You killed him!' She sobbed fearfully.

'Maybe. What did I kill him with? With my gun?'

'With the trap, Arsène, you picked the trap up by its spring and . . .'

For what seemed an age he sat with his face in his hands, lost in thought.

'It's true enough that I'd gone to dig the trap up. But Mathieu . . . We had a drink together. Then . . . God knows what happened then. We were drunk.'

Suddenly he stopped, as if struck by a half-formed thought which could not find expression. He leaned against the door, barring the threshold with his outstretched arms – or so it looked to Mouchette. She was already afraid, and his action made her suddenly aware of her exhausted body.

'Let me past, Arsène,' she begged.

'Let you past? Where are you going at this time of night?'

'Straight home, Arsène, I swear it.'

He watched her with a calm and self-possessed scrutiny, as he might have examined tracks which he alone knew in the dead leaves at the edge of the wood. 'I can smell game out' was his usual expression. There was neither anger nor pity in his thoughtful gaze.

'I'll remember everything, Arsène, don't be afraid! And you'll remember everything tomorrow as well, when you've had a sleep and got over the

drink. If they ask me questions before I've seen you again, I'll say . . .'

'Wait!' he shouted. 'What do you think you're saying? If you breathe a word to anybody I'll break your neck!'

His voice, low and hoarse now, seemed terrible to Mouchette, but nothing would have induced her to leave. Flight was no longer possible, and she was less afraid of blows.

'Arsène,' she began, 'I'd sooner kill myself than do anything to harm you.'

There was no need for her to finish. Her thin face showed such a marvellous determination that Arsène could only look at her in amazement. In the silence that followed she seemed to be able to feel her heart jumping in her breast.

'Well,' he said finally with a kind of drunken gravity, his voice even lower, 'and why are you so scared of harming me, my girl?'

She tried to reply, but could only swallow hard.

'For a girl of your age you're pretty clever. You could show older girls a thing or two.'

The fire had sunk lower and the ashes were darkening. Only a strange, soft glow which seemed to come from no particular point was left. Arsène's huge shadow was almost invisible on the wall. He himself was little more than a shadow, but she could see the gleam of his white teeth as he smiled.

'I've always thought a lot of you,' he began, clicking his tongue.

Mouchette was sure now. There was no mistaking the note of that disembodied voice, so terribly near, and yet seeming suspended in the darkness. How strange his voice was! She shivered with a strange, delicate shudder as she heard its falseness and lack of candour. The simplest and most inoffensive words are changed when they are spoken thus, and assume a strange, evil aspect, like cardboard masks glimpsed at a fair.

She had heard youths talk like that on holiday evenings through pipe smoke and the steam from coffee laced with cheap spirits, when Madame Aufray had taken her on to do the washing-up. Many girls, not yet old enough for love, might have paid no attention to it and heard it without fear or disgust – and later, whichever of the two it might inspire would have been smothered by the shrill nasal laughter which brought a flush to their cheeks. Such a voice has something of all the miseries of the life of the poor. Sometimes these miseries hurt and humiliate, but, accepted with resignation, they become part of the familiar tissue of everyday life, inseparable from the warmth and security of the home.

A silence as strange as the glow from the hearth had again fallen between them. Mouchette seemed rooted to the spot. Although she was deeply afraid,

it did not occur to her to try to escape. Her fear was bodily, physical, for at this crucial moment for her, when the funeral veil was already being drawn over her face, she was incapable of any conscious foresight. The man before her, whose breath she could already feel, was the only one she would never flee from, even to save her life.

She started away from him, staggered, and steadied herself clumsily against the wall. At that moment a word would probably have been enough to recall Arsène to his senses, but no sound escaped her tight throat. Her teeth were so tightly clenched that she could hear their grating. He seized her with hands, to which his fit of lust had lent an unnatural strength, but he could not bend her back without breaking it. He hurled her against the wall and the shock made her double and groan for a moment. It was the only sound she made. There was nothing to be heard in the shadows but Arsène's panting breath.

She had hidden herself in a clump of broom, rolled up and occupying hardly more space than a hare. The sandy soil had been undermined by the rain and was crumbling away beneath her, so that she was almost invisible. The coolness of the earth soothed her. She held her breath and searched the surrounding darkness calmly.

The hut was not far away, and she occasionally thought that she could make out its dark bulk amongst the scattered trees at the other side of the waterlogged hollow. She could see no sign of Arsène. He had not pursued her very far, and had probably stumbled against the bevelled edges of a stump, for she had heard his furious swearing. Then she had heard him stealthily looking for her for a long time. Once he had passed very close behind her, but she had neither looked round nor felt afraid.

At last, after a long silence, he had begun calling her, at first humbly and almost with shame in his voice, then suddenly angrily. The worst was that she did not know whether he was still in the same place she had supposed him to be, from which he could see both paths. Luckily, it was dark, and all she had to do was wait. There was no need to hurry.

She seemed to ache in all her bones, throughout her whole body. In the village, she was thought of as 'tough,' but she had never had to bear such a pain before. She had never before had time for introspection, and any subtle distinction between the physical and the spiritual was beyond her grasp. Patiently and uncomprehendingly she suffered in every atom of her being a pain which culminated in a terrible nausea. She raised herself to her knees and stifled a racking dry sob.

She listened again. Still no sound but the eternal dripping of the trees, yet she dared not turn away from the hut. She backed away from it, and stopped for the last time. The path was just below her now. It was not easy to make out, but she could almost follow its curves from the sound of the water gurgling along its ruts. She slid down.

As soon as she felt firmer ground beneath her feet, she could not stop herself running on through the wood. At first she tried to shield her face from the lash of the wet branches, but after a while she lost all awareness of it. She ran, moaning feebly like a hunted animal making a last desperate effort and managing to force out, scarcely beyond reach of the hounds' jaws, a final bound from its tense muscles.

She reached the edge of the wood before she stopped and found herself on the road, its puddles gleaming feebly as far as she could see.



II

FOR ALL HER care in opening the wooden gate with its squeaking single hinge she stumbled over the bucket in which the boiled bran for the hens was kept. Her mother was a light sleeper and as soon as Mouchette opened the door she called out.

‘Is it you? Where’ve you been?’

There was something in the well-known voice which Mouchette did not recognize but which struck her at once.

‘You’re late,’ her mother went on. ‘But I’ve no idea what time it is, I felt tired out straight after supper. Your father and the boys are out. Try to get a bit of fire going and warm the baby’s milk up a bit. I was too tired to give him a drink.’

The ashes had been cold for a long time, and there were no more matches in the house, for her father took the box with him when he went out to the café for the night. Too bad! The baby would have to make do with a cold bottle. As usual, Mouchette slipped it down the front of her dress for a few minutes to take the chill off it.

Although she did this often, tonight the touch of the bottle – a big one with a neck too thick for

the stretched teat – sent an awful shudder through her whole body. She could keep it no longer and bent to find her brother – a pale and flabby baby – on his mattress.

She had never before felt anything but a sly and spiteful dislike for the baby, the last-born of a long line of alcoholics. After yelling all night, he would only fall asleep well after sunrise, overcome by the light, turning his staring eyes, with their heavy lids and sparse reddish lashes, away from it in fear. She had never expressed this dislike, both because she feared a blow in return and because she came from a race of resigned mothers, as subject to babies as they were to men. She had never doubted the right of a howling baby to dominate those around it, simply because it had no other way of making its will felt. But now, with a movement as spontaneous as that of a drowning man, she picked up the bundle of rags stinking of urine and sour milk and, feeling its sobs against her young breasts, ran and sat on the stool at the other end of the room behind the half-open door to the woodshed.

Surprised by the force of the embrace, the child gazed at her with a wretched mixture of fear and apathy, and then pushed his puffy face against her, sucking everywhere with his wet lips, and feeling the rough cloth of her frock with his hands. Mouchette watched him. In the feeble glow from the night-light, placed in a niche in the wall, she

could see her thin bosom which was, nevertheless, already a woman's. Was there a shadow? There, beneath her left breast? The baby's fingers touched it and suddenly she could hold out no longer and burst into a low, breathless weeping. Her tears ran down the bottle and on to the face of the baby, who grimaced as he felt them.

Her mother had heard nothing, for after a short while she said:

'You'll find a nappy I washed last night on the line. Don't let him stay wet all night, or he'll yell, and I just couldn't stand it. Can you hear me, Mouchette?'

She listened again, and tried to understand what she had heard in her mother's voice. There was certainly something different about it. It no longer had that tone of weary resignation which always made her shout, whether she was talking to people or the cows, to a cat that had stolen something, to a broken dish or to rancid bacon. There was now something gentle, almost tender, in it. It didn't seem to fit the words she was saying; it was as if she had in her mind other words which she would only dare say when the time came.

Before changing the baby, Mouchette wiped her face with the rough rag he was to wear, which, despite its recent washing, still stank of alcohol. Then she drew her mattress farther away and stretched out on it fully-clothed, taking off only

her clogs, which were still muddy and smelt of leaf-mould and pine-needles.

Usually she slept curled up 'like a gun-dog,' as Madame would say, censorious in the name of hygiene. (She had a book with a chapter on sleeping, which recommended lying on the back, with the head to the north and the feet to the south, following the direction of magnetic currents.) But as soon as Mouchette had crossed her arms across her chest she threw them apart in a wild irrational gesture. There was the faintest look of repugnance on her sleepy face. Even a little later, after she had fallen deeply asleep and was breathing as heavily and slowly as usual, her hands, with no forgiveness in them, lay clenched on the mattress and refused to touch her hated body.

She woke in tears – or, rather, her tears woke her. They were running down her face and neck and had soaked her blouse. Her first reaction was one of surprise rather than of fright, for she had not cried for a long time, and even then it had been with occasional tears of rage which dried as soon as they were shed. She could not understand what had made her cry while she was asleep, and was disgusted that she had done.

The thin blanket had fallen to the ground and she felt chilled and dead to her bones, forgetting even her unhappiness. She half-raised herself, and the sudden pain made her cry out in anger. The

tears stopped as she finally sat up and crouched with her arms around her knees, as she usually did when she was trying to do her homework. For another moment she struggled against sleep. . . .

Those girls are lucky in whom the first sexual experience arouses remorse or at least some emotion violent enough to overcome the formless anguish and desperate nausea which Mouchette felt. She made a pathetic effort to think about her banal adventure, but managed only to accelerate the procession of wild images that flowed through her brain. It was like one of those endless nightmares of uniform horror which, as a real alcoholic's daughter, she often had to endure throughout a whole night and whose full memory only really came back much later, at supper-time, when she had carried it with her all day like an invisible animal attached to her body.

Running away from school, waiting at the roadside, wandering through the woods lashed by the wind and the rain, meeting Arsène – none of this added up to a real story. It had no beginning and no end, it was more like a confused noise in her head, a kind of funeral hymn. And when the noise disappeared there was a fathomless dark silence, a silence of all her senses, and a certain voice, almost unintelligible, calling her name, so low that she could scarcely hear it, so familiar, so unique that even before she heard it she could almost feel the

two syllables inside her . . . Mouchette . . . Arsène had only said her name once, just as . . .

She did not even know for sure if it was her name. There was something in it of a man's sob, and of fear and anger mixed, and of an animal threatened in his lair. However well Mouchette might stand up to pain, she had had her fill. When her father beat her she bowed beneath the blows without shame and wanted to die, incapable of feeling any rancour towards her torturer, and bound to him by a strange feeling of complicity in his fury and his hatred. Such things she could only think of with bitterness, but at least once the humiliation had passed she began to consider ways of getting her revenge and to regain the pride which, it seemed, nothing could destroy without destroying her too. And now that pride had died, was dead. Why?

Daybreak must still have been far away, but, from the direction of the village, she could hear the cocks calling to each other. Soon she would have to get up and face people. Knowing that she now had a secret other than her own and that she would soon have to face the police with a man's liberty in her hands – and perhaps his life – did nothing to calm her obsession. She had no desire for revenge.

A more lucid mind might have seen in the quick temper – the cause of Madame's scoldings and her

companions' hostility – the bitter awareness, which she had had for so long, of her own wretchedness and the feeling of being imprisoned in it. Only a few days ago she would have acknowledged that a girl like herself would sooner or later have to accept the inevitable and submit to a man.

Her sullen shyness with boys disconcerted her companions, who called her sly and accused her of being much more interested in their intrigues than she showed. Indeed, nothing escaped her and she watched them with a kind of painful curiosity which she sometimes took for pleasure. On these occasions she did not quite know what was really aroused in her: it was always the memory of the same experience that flickered through her mind. Once this naïve and precocious vision of vice had passed she would feel nothing but a vague uneasiness, as if the impression of a dream remained, colouring and affecting her sensibility, long after its memory had faded.

It had happened last autumn. One day Pourjat, the blacksmith, who bought her father's polecats and stone-martens for the pelt business which he also ran, had grabbed at her in the dark, stinking shed where he kept the skins, tearing her skirt badly. Although she had kept quiet about it, Pourjat's assistant had told the tale. Pourjat himself had had to appease her father, who, glowing with alcohol and paternal zeal, had threatened to go to the police.

From that memorable scene she had acquired the knowledge that the law protected girls of her age and that for a short time yet she was even shielded from men like Monsieur Pourjat, once the mayor's assistant and still a drinking companion of the *député*. Perhaps in this way the innate knowledge and pride for which she had doubtlessly been born had awakened. Any talk of virginity would simply have made her smile stupidly. Purity meant scarcely more to her than the physical image of clear water or – even more naïvely – the memory of the pretty girls who visited the big houses of the district each summer, with their fresh, clean clothes, their soft, laughing voices and their long hands lingering on carriage doors. Thus her hungry pride, so long unrewarded and joyless, but secretly nourished in her own innermost being, had at last found in this childish and brutal revelation of her physical integrity what it needed to blossom.

She had no vanity about her body. It bore the marks of blows and the scratches of brambles; it was tanned by winter winds and dressed in ridiculous dresses made from cut-down garments of her mother's. Her fierce modesty had nothing in common with that other sentiment which throughout the centuries has owed more to painters and poets than to the deep instinct of defence from which it is supposed to derive. It was not that false modesty with which the beautiful girl, preoccupied

with the worship of her body since before her senses were awakened, confuses her sense of delicacy, and which she feels to have been offended when, despite the concerted efforts of her perfumer and her dressmaker, she must submit to the humiliating violation of her idol.

Mouchette had never known such feelings. She was amazed that a girl could refuse to yield her virginity and that her virginity could only be yielded once. The value of the surrender seemed unimportant to her. She could easily understand that hers could only be worth what her wretched, squalid life was worth. Even to be begged to yield it would be worth a great deal to her. But, yesterday, a voice deep within her had told her that she would surrender it one day.

She was of course incapable of forming such thoughts clearly. Arsène's face kept drifting into her dream, seeming from time to time to stare at hers, indifferently, proudly and scornfully. Her blood would pound to her head, and just as suddenly seem to drain to her frozen heart. The violence which had been done to her had taken her by surprise at the height of her humble love, and she could not feel any real hatred – a woman's hatred – for the man who had ravished her body. In her child's mind, the memory of that violence was somehow mixed with that of many others, and her reason could scarcely distinguish it from her father's

savage beatings. The shame which she felt now, however, was of a kind which she had never known before, for always previously she had merely feared and despised her persecutors; but Arsène could not lose her admiration, now or ever. The doomed child in her was reluctant to die.

For a long time she fought against her sorrow. She watched the faint light of dawn appear in the dirty windows. Suddenly she wanted to see her face, her eyes. She felt that she would regain her courage if the broken piece of mirror – the only one she had – showed that her face was as secretive and stubborn as usual. She had often seen with astonishment and almost with terror, the lies in other faces, and their insolent gaze, even when they were warm from the last kiss. How often she had seen them, when she was going to draw cider in the café cellar, appear out of the dark and empty rooms which the owner purposely left open on holiday nights!

But it seemed to her that those faces were nothing like hers. They were no longer children's faces. 'She's got such a small face,' Madame used to say, 'that I could hold it in the palm of my hand!' Neither Arsène nor anyone else could take her face seriously. She suddenly saw her hope for what it was. It had been too great for her, too great to bring any joy, and all that remained of it was a feeling of strange, overpowering expectancy. She

knew now that it had simply been a foretaste of a humiliation which was worse than all the others she had known, although similar to them. She had only entered more deeply into it, until her body had responded by a mysterious suffering, spreading throughout her aching limbs. The suffering might fade, but not the mark which it had left. That was Mouchette's secret. She would never be able to tell anyone, because it was beyond her comprehension and her powers of expression. It would be the secret of her body. If only she could be sure that Arsène hated her! But he didn't hate her. She had only to close her eyes to hear his words: 'I've always liked you. . . .'

She seemed literally to hear them and sprang out of bed. She stood, bending over, with one hand against the wall and one on her stomach. Oh, if only she had been two years older – perhaps even one year – Arsène wouldn't have treated her like this, and she would have defended herself. And he'd been drunk – does a man know what he's doing when he's drunk? Last year, some young lads had set upon old Chaudey, a crazy woman who lived in a wooden hut and who had borne six children, by various unknown fathers, and reared them in the drawer of an ancient chest-of-drawers, on bread soaked in sweet cider. The police had never caught them, although their names had been on the lips of everyone in the village.

She could no longer weep. She was too ashamed of her situation and of herself, and hated herself too much. It was not, she knew, her fault that she was so ashamed. She hated herself for having wanted what she could never have, and knew that her youth, which had been about to begin as she left her childhood behind her, was ruined and spoilt for ever.

The floor of the draughty hovel was simply beaten clay, and the cold and damp rose along her legs. The bruises on her breast, which had not hurt for a long time, started to throb painfully again. She knew that she could no longer stand up to Madame's looks – indifferent, disdainful, ignorant of her secret – and that it would be better to defy her, to defy them all. Lying had never seemed wrong to Mouchette, for it was the most precious – probably the only – privilege of the wretched; but any dissimulation would now be too cruel a blow to her pride. She would undergo anything rather than live through the empty days ahead.

Because to her mind, which was still that of a child, the murder of a *garde* and the rape of a girl of fourteen were, for the law, two crimes of equal gravity, she could do nothing for the man she loved. She had in any case never seriously expected him to wait for the police, for a man like him would always escape from them. Even now, she thought, he would be far away. Unless he was hidden away

somewhere safe, planning his movements – it was so easy to escape from the law. With her whole being she hoped that Mathieu was dead.

‘What’re you doing up at this time?’ asked her mother.

At first Mouchette did not answer. She seemed shut in behind the wall of darkness. Her mother could only have heard her, and yet ‘usually her hearing was not so good.

‘I’m really sick,’ the voice went on. ‘Get a candle from the drawer. There might be a box of matches in your father’s old pair of trousers. He’s wearing his new ones.’

In the candlelight the poor woman’s face was scarcely distinguishable; in any case, Mouchette paid no attention to it, because for months now everyone except the mother herself had become accustomed to her illness. Her husband and the boys would get up in the mornings and find her wearing only her blouse and petticoat despite the cold. She would be sitting on her stool wearily rocking herself to and fro nursing her pain. They no longer questioned her (what could her answers tell them?), but simply cursed and untied the firewood and heated the coffee themselves. The wretched woman would be embarrassed by their silence and moan a little through closed lips, as if to apologize. Sometimes,

in a tone which seemed to require an answer, she would say, 'It's my pain. I'll have to get the doctor', but the only reply would be an unintelligible groan.

The poor are not interested in sickness. For them, it is only another burden, as unavoidable as the others they have to bear. In any case, experience tells them that doctors cannot do much for it.

Mouchette's mother had shared these feelings and had fought against her illness, but now, although still as patient, she was afraid. She could probably bear the pain in her chest and her shoulder, but the thought that it would always be there, in spite of brief periods of ease, sometimes brutal and sometimes sly, filled her with a kind of horrible fear which she had not known since childhood. It was not that she expected much from the doctor. They were like vets – they cost a lot but all you got in return was a lot of words. But she felt that it would ease her simply to talk to him, for all her acquaintances had grown tired of hearing her complaints, and simply nodded in an embarrassed way. Only the doctor – young and rather effeminate, with white hands like those of a midwife – would listen to her. She had only seen him once, when he had visited the grocer's wife, but she often consoled herself by thinking of him. She would never take it upon herself to send for him, however, although her husband spent more each week on drink than a visit would cost. And he knew it. He did not keep

silent from ill-will or from avarice, but from a kind of stupid stubbornness which took the place of thought, which he took *for* thought, and because he had always seen women suffer without complaining.

Mouchette was not drawn by her features, although they were distorted, but by an unusual and incomprehensible tenderness in her voice. Her words were very ordinary, and yet they had a quality of humble solicitation, almost of prayer, which left Mouchette stupefied, holding the candle in a trembling hand.

‘Mind the spots!’ her mother said, but with no trace of anger. ‘Stick the candle on the wall. It’s nice to see it when you’re in pain.’

She tried to sit up, and turned deathly pale. For what seemed an age she said nothing, but she seemed to be as afraid of the silence as of the dark.

‘Come here,’ she said, stretching out her bare arm. ‘The pain goes right up here to my chest. It feels like a stone inside. What can I do?’

She said this no doubt without thinking, but Mouchette almost felt that her mother wanted her advice. She could think of nothing to say, and shuffled stupidly. . . .

‘Try to get a bit of a fire going. When your brother had colic, nothing’d stop him yelling but a starch poultice. Get me one. I think I need a bit of

warmth. But don't set Gustave off – if he starts crying, he won't stop.'

Mouchette busied herself at the other end of the room. She came back holding out an empty tin box.

'There's no more starch, Maman.'

They looked at each other for a moment, and then the mother glanced away as she tried to steady her voice.

'Get some flour, then. It's all the same.'

They had bought the week's supply yesterday from the man who came round every Saturday.

'But don't waste it. Just use what you need. A plaster as big as my two hands, no bigger . . . ah, ah, hurry up, Mouchette. . . .'

She sighed once or twice more and then was silent. The saucepan was old, and Mouchette had to watch that the flour did not stick to it. She stirred it carefully. The smell made her realize how terribly hungry she was. As she was spreading the dough on a rag to make the plaster, she could not resist sucking her fingers.

Her mother had already uncovered her breast and stretched out her arm. During the last few minutes her face had changed alarmingly. The skin seemed stretched tight over the bones and at every leap of the dancing candle-light it shone like a waxen mask. Her nose seemed strangely lengthened and the pinched nostrils gave it a pointed look.

When the burning poultice touched her skin she cried a little. Mouchette had already turned away.

‘Stay with me a bit,’ she said humbly. ‘I don’t think the heat will do me any harm. I can breathe better already. Doudou, I won’t be able to blow the candle out without you later on.’

Doudou! As far as Mouchette could remember, her mother had never called her by that name more than a dozen times. It had been her grandfather’s favourite nickname. He had been a miner from Lens, something of a scandal in the district, for everyone had known that he had done five years in Guiana for some crime committed in his youth.

He had told tales of how he had earned his living in fairs as a wrestler. Although the body he had exhibited at the entrance to the booth had been skinny, it had been wonderfully tattooed in three inks of different colours. Then he had gone farther back to the day when his terrified mother had seen him come home one day, the ghost of his former self and scarcely recognizable, dressed in a soldier’s shirt, trousers and shoes, and carrying all his belongings tied up in a serviette bearing in red letters the name of the station buffet in Dijon. He had only stayed six months with his daughter, for he had died of tuberculosis complicated by asthma and inflammation of the lungs. His diseases had made his breathing into little more than a rumbling wheeze, which everyone but Mouchette, five years

old at the time, had found repulsive. He had often encouraged her to listen to it. She had been the only creature in the house whom he had not cursed filthily from morning to night, letting out from between his blackened teeth a stream of insults which even his son-in-law could not understand, for they were a mixture of the slang of prison-settlements and the jargon of fair-people.

One evening he had had a raging fever and neither threats nor entreaties had stopped him trying out a remedy he claimed to have learned from the savages of South America. He had lain stark naked in the straw of a cowshed at a neighbour's farm. The next morning he was dead.

Mouchette did not think that she had loved him, but neither had she feared him. Even when he had been laid out on the single bed of the house – a fabulous heirloom from Flanders – he had seemed grotesque to her. His horrible, cunning old face, scarcely made for the kind of solemn peace into which he had so hurriedly entered, had seemed to be mocking the whole serious business. She had almost been able to see the lines of one of those frightening grimaces which he knew how to make. The day before he had been practising one in secret in the bit of mirror hanging on the wall. His tattoos had been faintly visible through his worn shirt – the face of a woman with long slit eyes with a red, almost round mouth, shaped like a heart.

‘Poor Doudou!’

Her weary body shuddered at the caressing words.

A hard, distrustful look flashed over her face, for she had not heard words of faith or trust for a very long time; but if she had been able to bring herself merely to lean over the mattress, nothing would have stopped her flinging her head on her mother’s shoulder, just as a short while ago she had snatched the baby to herself.

‘I wish I knew what time it was,’ the tired voice went on. ‘When the wind comes over from that way, from the sea, you can’t hear the church clock.’

‘It can’t be far off five,’ answered Mouchette. ‘But the wind must have changed, because of the cyclone.’

‘Cyclone? What d’you mean, cyclone?’

‘Last night there was a cyclone.’

‘Last night? It was just a high wind from the sea. It was the woman next door’s washday, and she didn’t even bring her sheets in from the line.’

Mouchette was so astonished that she almost dropped the candle which she was trying to fit into the neck of a wine bottle. She did not contradict her mother, for it never occurred to her that she was not telling the truth. Every event of the past night seemed treacherous and deceptive to her. All she remembered of the cyclone was what Arsène had said about it. The steam round the customs-house (‘not smoke, steam’), the warehouse roof

coming off – all that was fresh in her memory; such things were difficult to imagine, and yet she saw them, more clearly than she saw the candle flame before her, as Arsène had described them.

Suddenly she had no doubt that Arsène would have forgotten both the cyclone and herself by now. She saw that she had been the victim of a dream, and not of a man. More than anything else she felt that someone must share her secret at all costs.

‘Listen, Maman,’ she began, bending so low over her that she felt her hair on her cheek; but at that very moment Gustave’s piercing, continuous, almost unbearable yelling began. There was neither pleasure nor pain in it; it was simply a reflex, but so powerful that it seemed miraculous that his feeble lungs could sustain the effort. He had been wakened by the light, and had squatted on the mattress, but his blanket had fallen off and exposed him to the cold wind which blew in beneath the door.

‘Keep him quiet.’ The mother’s voice was hoarse, her eyes frightened and wild. ‘I can’t bear it, I can’t!’

Mouchette blindly picked up the slimy bundle of rags. The baby’s howling was unbearable, and she tried to drown it with a lullaby which, however, soon became little more than another tuneless wailing.

The mother groaned in pain again. ‘God, oh

God, I'm dying. I can't breathe. Open the window! Open the window, for God's sake!

Mouchette stumbled towards the bed, clutching the baby. Her mother's face was frightful to see. She was sitting on the bed, bent double, with her blue mouth gasping towards the door.

Without putting Gustave down, Mouchette opened the door and kicked it back against the wall. Because of the north-westerly aspect of the house, the sea-wind blew in at an angle with a strange, shivering noise, like foliage rustling.

'Keep him quiet! Keep him quiet!'

Mouchette wrapped his single woollen blanket – which was of course wet – more tightly round Gustave's convulsed body, but to no avail. His crying was neither quieter nor louder. It seemed piercing, but the sound could not have carried across the tiny yard, for Balaud, the dog, made no sound or movement. Mouchette could scarcely bear it. She tried everything in her efforts to quieten him – stroked him, held him above her head and squeezed him to her breast – but nothing would calm him.

'Give him to me', sighed her mother. But, with a grimace of pain, she gave him straight back to Mouchette. Like the faces of all very poor women, that of Mouchette's mother could express weary resignation rather than pain. To the girl, her mouth seemed swollen, but then she saw that it was her

tongue – also of a bluish colour – which was protruding slightly between her lips.

‘Put him back in the bed,’ she said. ‘Sometimes if you leave him to kick till he’s tired of it, he drops off again. Oh Christ! Fetch the bottle of gin – I put it on the cellar-head, behind the box. If I’ve got to die, I can’t die in this pain!’

Mouchette was so overwrought that she could no longer hold a thought in her head, and obeyed mechanically. Although she was incapable of perceiving it, her mother bore the whole weight of their poverty. Her gossiping, which from time to time irritated them all, her sudden flashes of temper, which frightened even her drunken husband, were somehow their voice and their silence, their tireless watching and taciturnity, the symbol of their shared misery and its occasional humble joy. They were also in a way their revolt. On the galley to which they were all condemned, the mother was the figurehead, buffeted by the wind and lashed by each new storm of spray and foam.

She sighed deeply as she took the bottle. The baby, chilled through now, was crying ceaselessly, and in his kennel the dog howled softly, finishing with a series of ascending, unbearable yelps.

When Mouchette came back, the dying woman was holding the neck of the bottle to her mouth and breathing noisily and clumsily. The liquid ran at first from both sides of her mouth, and then

soaked her neck and her nightgown. It was only then that Mouchette realized that she had lost consciousness. Although her eyes opened again almost at once, they seemed to focus with difficulty and scarcely to recognize the familiar objects around her. She finally forced out a small, embarrassed smile that brought a little colour to her livid cheeks.

She fingered the damp blanket. 'I've made a proper mess of myself. I don't want your father to see his gin spilt on the bed. But I expect he'll be too far gone to notice anything. What's it matter, anyway? I feel a lot better, Doudou.'

For a moment she said nothing. Mouchette felt that she had to close the door, for her legs were numb with cold. She ran to the other mattress and rolled Gustave up tightly, leaving him to yell out his anger into his pillow. The dog had begun howling continuously. Her mother appeared quite patient now. The alcohol had run into one of her eyes, and the reddened lid was twitching furiously.

'Put your head to my chest. Listen. I can't hear my heart beating.' Her voice was no more than a whisper. 'I'm going to die,' she went on. 'My legs have gone all dead. I shouldn't die drinking, I've never been a real drinker, God knows. But it can't be helped.'

The word 'die' seemed to strike Mouchette physically; but she had no time to reflect, for Gustave's crying had become a desperate choking

spluttering. She ran to the mattress again. His mouth was full of straw. She hooked it out as best she could.

'God. What a noise he makes!' The mother's sigh was frightening to hear. She opened one eye and looked at the baby for the last time, and then turned away.

'Give me the bottle again, Doudou! Why shouldn't I? I've gone without all my life, I may as well have a bit of pleasure while I'm dying. It's not dying that upsets me. All my life I've had to do as I was told – "grumble or don't, just as you want, but do as you're told, or you'll catch it" – it's always like that for us, that's our fate. Well, from now on I'm going to do as I like.'

She absently caressed the bottle with her left hand. It was so pale that the furrows and wrinkles looked black, like writing in Indian ink on white paper.

'What if I don't die tonight? Remember what I'm going to tell you, Mouchette. Go and get the doctor. I've been dying to see him for days, to talk to him – I can't explain why. I'm not blaming you, but all of you've brought me nothing but pain. There's something to be said for nice people – they're not like us. You'll go for him Mouchette, won't you? Tell him to come in the evening, because of your father. He wouldn't be very nice to him. You'll tell him, won't you, Mouchette?'

'Yes, Maman, I'll go.'

'And you – don't get taken in by any idlers and drunkards. A girl might fall for them. But, you see . . . there's M. Arsène as well. You're too young, you don't understand, but he's not the sort of man your father should know.'

She stretched out her hand for the bottle like a blind woman.

'Just one swallow, just one, my poor Doudou. I feel hollow inside, as if I didn't weigh any more than a feather cushion.'

Gently, almost shyly, she laid her rough hand on her daughter's head, seeming to apologize for her tenderness, which must have seemed strange to the girl from whom she had been able to draw no word of pity. For an instant, the stubborn little head resisted imperceptibly, and then sank slowly on to the mother's breast, yielding, as if at the end of its strength, with a faint, weary moan.

'Maman,' she began, 'I must tell you something. . . .'

Her mother was dead and heard nothing.

They came back at daybreak, drunk. Zéphyrin, the younger of the brothers, was the first to notice the candle which Mouchette had left burning by the dead woman's bedside, and had pulled off his cap without realizing why. A neighbour, Madame Dumay, was sitting on the stool, grinding the

coffee. The water was already boiling in the kettle. On her mattress Mouchette lay, prostrate with exhaustion, beside the defeated baby.

They drank the coffee without a word. Zéphyrin then went off to the village to inform the authorities. Her father took off his jacket and, in spite of the cold, sat smoking his pipe at the foot of the trough as he did every Sunday morning. His tiny, dirty-grey eyes were blinking unceasingly.

‘Where’re you going, girl?’

‘To get some milk for Gustave.’

He pointed his clay pipe at her; his cheeks reddened. His face was still drunkenly vague and solemn, but his mouth, with its blackened stumps of teeth, grimaced in an embarrassed smile. Mouchette continued to look at him in complete silence, her thin face motionless.

‘She was a brave woman,’ he stammered. The whistling of his alcohol-rotted lungs made his voice almost incomprehensible.

Mouchette stared at him impassively. The experiences of the past night seemed to close about her like a mist, strangely distorting things and people. There was no ill-will in the way she looked so attentively at his ageless face. She seemed no longer to recognize it. For a brief moment, it had lost its usual stubborn look and seemed doubtful and troubled, almost childish. Suddenly faced with this scrutiny from a child he had previously

scorned, the father became more and more embarrassed. The wind ruffled the hair on his ruddy head.

‘How long are you going to stare at me like that? Have you no manners?’

Mouchette stepped back a little, from long habit, but without any fear. She did not attempt to reply. The rebellion beginning within her was a blind, dumb demon. Perhaps it did not deserve to be called a rebellion. It was rather an instantaneous, almost overwhelming feeling of turning her back on the past and risking the first decisive step towards her destiny. She could scarcely force herself to speak, and all that she managed to utter was an insult. She articulated it slowly and sadly, so sadly that at first her father did not understand. Before opening her mouth, she had already pushed back the wooden gate, and her clogs were clattering on the road. The insult was the coarsest she knew, but for her it had no real meaning and simply expressed her deep, unconscious despair:

‘Merde!’

Nevertheless, when she had said it she walked off quickly to the top of the slope, from which the first house of the village could be seen. And yet the idea of fleeing blows, which had always been natural, now seemed intolerable. There was no joy in her new-found sense of freedom. She knew that it had arrived too late and would not save her. But nothing

would snatch it from her, and she would struggle to defend it.

With these thoughts in her mind, she looked at her clothes and shrugged. What sort of clothes were they, anyway? She had forgotten her jacket, and was only wearing her blouse and her horrible skirt with holes in it. The leather tops of her clogs had turned the colour of rust and, as they had dried out, had turned up in a grotesque fashion. She had also scattered ash on her head and could feel it grating between her teeth. But her dirtiness meant nothing to her. If she had not been held back by the fear of not accomplishing her task, she would willingly have rolled in the mud like an animal, flat on her belly in the icy mud. Her stomach was aching so violently that she had to walk bent almost in two.

She had left the house without any precise idea of what she intended to do. The spirits which Arsène had given her still lay inside her, at the spot where the pain was greatest. Arsène . . . how far away he must be by now! She could see him walking, in his supple, sidling way, along some road – singing, perhaps, because he rarely seemed to stop. She was absolutely certain that by the next night he would have crossed the frontier, and for her the frontier was a mysterious line which the police, no more than customs-men, would never dare cross. . . . The Belgian frontier . . . beyond it she saw in her imagination mingled with early childhood

memories, a flat countryside, limited only by the sky, thick with enormous cattle, huge Flemish cows so long in the body that their hindquarters seemed a strange burden which they were doomed to drag behind them, a countryside swept day and night by a wind which set the mill sails whirring round – a free country.

She would never see it. She was too weary. The anger which could not reach Arsène was now turned against the squalid village. Nothing exasperated her more than the memory of Madame. She would have liked to throw the truth in her face, or at least a skilfully prepared truth which would take her aback and stun her into silence. She could imagine herself startling them during the Tuesday *leçon de morale*, while Madame was condemning 'the abominable crime committed against a faithful guardian of the law whilst he was doing his duty'. But they would all simply laugh. Nobody would believe her. Or she could . . . but whatever she said now could only harm the fugitive; she herself was out of the game. Why should she struggle against her fate? All she need do was despise it. For her part was now only that of a child who had blundered into a mortal struggle between grown men. Crime, like love, could not accept such a slight burden. And yet she alone knew the secret that all the forces of the law were perhaps even now hunting down on the roads.

This was the only thought which sustained her in her despair. It was not clearly formulated; the pride which inspired it was intermingled with fear, but for the first time the half-conscious revolt which was the real expression of her nature had an intelligible meaning. She was alone now, completely alone, against everyone.



III

MADAME DERAINE, THE widow who kept the grocer's shop, beckoned to her from the doorway. Usually her attitude to Mouchette was one of scornful hostility tempered by a fear of reprisals, for Mouchette was generally thought quite capable of the unforgivable crime of the locality, and getting her vengeance by harming livestock. The news of her mother's sudden death, however, had spread round the village and aroused interest.

'So your poor mother's passed on. So quick, too. They say you hadn't even time to send for the neighbour, and that she got there too late. Come on in and have a drop of coffee.'

Mouchette stopped at the foot of the tiny flight of steps, unable to raise her eyes. Madame Derain exchanged a look with a customer who was still at the counter.

'Come on in, I said. It's no good letting it get you down. It's something everybody has to go through sooner or later. At least she went easily. A stroke, I suppose. The papers are always full of them.'

It was clear that Mouchette's demeanour inspired surprise and something like respect in Madame

Derain. Who would have thought that little savage capable of real grief? And no one would have called her mother patient.

Mouchette remained indifferent to the curiosity which surrounded her; the smell of the hot coffee stifled all feeling and all thought in her, and brought tears to her eyes.

Madame Derain pushed the *croissant*-basket over to her. They were two days old, for the baker only delivered on Sundays after High Mass, but this was unimportant. Mouchette's hand trembled as she dipped the rare treat into the steaming bowl. It was too much for her. Unable to control herself, hunched over the fragrant coffee like a kitten over a bowl of cream, she ate and sobbed at the same time.

Madame Derain slipped a fourth *croissant* into her shaking hand. Mouchette put it in her pocket mechanically. With her elbows on the table, she seemed lost in thought, but in fact her mind was completely empty. Even the light oak of the counter looked appetizing and edible. The low voices of Madame Derain and her customer seemed like the peaceful murmur of her own sleep. Finally they fell quiet and the ensuing silence banished her formless dreaming. She was suddenly looking at the two women in her old cunning, suspicious way, so that they had to drop their eyes.

The neck of Mouchette's blouse was open and

the bruises on her chest were plainly visible. They had not yet turned purple. On her brown skin their dark red, with the lighter red of the scratches, stood out clearly. It was common knowledge that her father was free with his fists, but these marks had a deeper and more sinister significance. On her young girl's bosom they had written a story which the experienced glance of the two older women immediately apprehended.

Mouchette instantly made to close her collar, but without success. The material had been even more roughly handled than her skin and her hasty fingers only enlarged the tear. Doubtless the women were hesitating. A word or a smile might have been enough to calm them, but the girl was capable of neither. She jumped up like a startled animal, bumping the table with her chair, and the half-full bowl smashed on the stone floor.

'What do you think you're doing, breaking my bowl?' hissed Madame Derain. 'You little savage!'

Shame and anger disfigured Mouchette's face, accusing her more plainly than any confession. She backed awkwardly towards the door.

'Little slut!' said Madame Derain. 'And I was feeling sorry for her. No wonder they say you can't pet a wild cat!'

Mouchette was deaf to this. She was out on the road stumbling towards the village so stiffly that each step hurt her stomach. Nothing Madame

Derain could call after her hurt her. Once again her fear and her anger turned inwards upon herself; it was herself she hated. Why? What had she done? If only she *had* done something! No remorse could have caused her more anguish than the blind, incomprehensible shame she carried in her flesh and blood. As she walked along her fingers clenched on her breast and pulled at it almost murderously.

She reached the church square, not noticing that she was limping. The brewer's two boys who were always playing outside their house and never missed shouting out 'rat face' after her as soon as they saw her, simply watched from a distance, close together, silent. The bell was ringing for the first Mass. Mouchette walked on at the same pace. She was only just beginning to realize where she was going, for she had come this far to the village in a trance. A little beyond the last houses of the village alongside a sunken, hedged lane which wandered off into the fields stood Mathieu's house, a new brick construction flanked by a shed and an outhouse.

It was not curiosity which drove Mouchette on. Despite the turmoil in her mind she realized full well that on such a day she could learn the truth about what had happened the previous night from anyone, without compromising herself in any way.

Until her mother was buried, she belonged to the community assembled around her with respectful

fear and mysterious solicitude. There is only one dead person in a village, as there is only one mayor or one priest. Her daughter would enjoy certain unavowed privileges. The force which drew Mouchette towards Mathieu's house was of the same kind as the force which turned her against herself. She was obedient to a law as fixed and implacable as that which governs the fall of a body in space, for some kinds of despair have their own acceleration. Nothing could stop her now. She would follow her anguish to its end.

One thing surprised her, however. The village was quiet, just as if it were an ordinary Sunday with its imperceptible, happy feeling, suddenly crystallizing in the pealing of bells. She had paid no attention to this so far, for her own inner state could change and alter things. But she was slowly beginning to realize how strangely quiet it was, when everyone must know about the murder. She saw no reason for hope in this; she accepted it rather as an evil omen. It was as if the village, in its secret enmity, was yielding before her and widening the treacherous zone of silence which surrounded her.

She reached the entrance to the lane, vaguely aware of the foolishness of what she was about to do. It was too late to turn back. Her exhausted will could only survive by being defiant, like a hunted beast, at the limit of its endurance, who leaps jerkily towards the dogs and then falls dead. She had not,

however, the courage to open the gate. The gate was made of wide wooden slats which almost overlapped. She stopped, breathless and with a thumping heart. Her sweaty hands spread a widening ring of shadow on the paint.

The first bell for Mass was still ringing . . . and suddenly . . . Mathieu was not dead, not even wounded. He had just appeared at the window in shirt-sleeves, his face lathered with shaving-soap. He had doubtlessly been watching Mouchette through the window for some time, for he called to her at once. His voice, like that of all the lower ranks of those who enforce the law, with something suggestive of Punch in its ferocious bonhomie, had always worried and frightened her.

‘What are you up to out there?’

She could neither answer nor run away.

‘Good job you’ve come. I want a word with you. Come on in, I won’t hurt you.’

He left the window. A few seconds later his broad shoulders were blocking the door. Mouchette slowly climbed the steps. The noise brought Mathieu’s wife from the kitchen, her sparse carrotty hair hanging loose.

‘Leave the girl alone, Camille. Her mother died only today!’

A strange thing happened. Mouchette had walked on unthinkingly. She stopped at the young woman’s side and leant her head against her blue apron. The

action was as spontaneous and unconscious as that of someone awaking from a dream. Madame Mathieu gently stroked the back of her head, then raised it, turning her face towards her own. Mouchette's features were so tense and hard that Madame Mathieu uttered an exclamation of surprise and – almost – disgust. She was the only daughter of an Amiens post office worker and had always lived in a town. The country epithet of 'savage' had never aroused in her the image of anything but a white-toothed negro, like those in jazz-bands, but naked and with a bronze ring through his nose.

'Listen,' Mathieu went on in a dangerously soft voice, 'you know Arsène, right? We had a little argument last night, nothing serious, about a trap, nothing at all. He was a lot drunker than I'd ever seen him. He's a lad who can hold his drink. Anyway, we had a bit of a scuffle – but nothing to do with my job, eh? Nothing to do with anybody else. But the police at Tiffauges arrested him early today. They reckon he'd dynamited more than eleven kilometres of the river, in league with the gents from Boulogne, who took the fish off in a fast van. The police chased them for over twenty minutes, but they got away. Arsène got away of course, but one of the policemen – Chauvet – thought he recognized him. They arrested him inside a couple of hours, but fifteen kilometres away from there. I wonder if Arsène's telling the truth for once. He

told the police he'd met you last night, near the Poullenc place. If that's true . . .'

'It is true, M'sieu,' said Mouchette with unaccustomed politeness.

Mathieu burst out laughing. 'You're no fool,' he said. 'I expect you saw Arsène this morning. He probably came out to your place to give himself an alibi. Otherwise why would you have come here? You don't often come to visit me.'

It was his bantering tone rather than his actual words which really lashed Mouchette. She was so completely unused to irony that any suggestion of it terrified her rather than made her angry.

'Or else your father saw him. Arsène's too cunning to have sent you straight here into the lion's den.'

'Oh for God's sake leave her alone,' came his wife's voice from the kitchen. 'Can't you see she's ready to drop?'

Once more she advanced towards Mouchette, who slowly backed to the wall. The sympathetic voice had disturbed her and made her will powerless.

'You're wasting your time,' shrugged Mathieu. 'I don't wish her any harm, but just look at her eyes. They're just like a wild cat's.'

'I did see Arsène last night,' Mouchette went on. 'As true as I'm standing here, Monsieur Mathieu.'

'Where did you see him, then?'

'In his cabin in the Mourey woods.'

'Well, my shameless girl, and what were you doing in his cabin, eh?'

'I'd gone in to shelter from the cyclo . . . from the rain, I mean.'

'I didn't realize you were so delicate. Scared of a drop of rain now, eh?'

Mouchette was silent for a moment. 'Monsieur Arsène took me,' she said. She immediately stopped, for she had intercepted the look which Mathieu and his wife had exchanged. She flushed violently.

'And where had you been when he took you there? Let's have the truth, now.'

'At school.'

'At school? You go to school at night, do you?'

'It wasn't night then,' Mouchette continued brokenly. 'I'd just sheltered at the edge of the woods and Monsieur Arsène was coming from Surville: I know he was, because he told me that . . .'

'What could he have told you? He was as drunk as a lord then!'

'No, Monsieur, he wasn't. He was walking all right.'

'Don't be stupid! Don't you know he's half-crazy when he's had a drink? When he's got a litre inside him he's as steady on his pins as the curé in the Corpus Christi procession. Anyway, what did he tell you?'

'He said you'd both had a fight about a trap, and

that you . . . you were drunk as well, Monsieur Mathieu.'

'What a girl!' said Mathieu, forcing out a laugh. 'Anyway, go on. Don't be scared. You came out of school, you sheltered in Arsène's cabin, it stopped raining about midnight. After that you went home, I suppose? Even if you're telling the truth, what's to have stopped Arsène going over to Tiffauges to watch the sun come up? That's enough for the police.'

'I didn't go home till it was getting light, Monsieur Mathieu. I stayed nearly all night.'

Her tongue was so painfully dry that the rest of her words were incomprehensible. She had forgotten that the poacher's crime was an imaginary one, no more real than the cyclone, and that it was now only a question of an ordinary poaching offence like the many others for which Arsène had already appeared before every bench in the district.

'All night? You spent all night in Arsène's cabin? Well, my girl, for someone of your age you don't seem to realize what you're saying. All night, eh?'

He had stopped laughing, because his wife had put her fingers to her lips.

'Be quiet, Camille,' she said. 'Don't be hard on her.'

She turned quickly to Mouchette, took her by

the waist, and – as she was much the taller – bent till their faces were level.

‘I’d have sworn it,’ she said. ‘Smell her yourself. The poor kid stinks of spirits. The dirty beast got her drunk first.’

Mouchette had already pulled herself free.

‘Aren’t men stupid,’ the young woman continued softly. ‘Just to look at you when you came in just now, I guessed you hadn’t spent the night at home. Your hair’s still full of pine-needles. And I didn’t need to smell the alcohol; your eyes still look queer. I was sure all along you were telling the truth. But you didn’t tell us all the truth, did you? . . . Go on, Camille, leave us alone now.’

‘Don’t go away, Monsieur Mathieu!’ The cry escaped from Mouchette’s lips without her realizing it. It expressed the terror she felt at the prospect of remaining alone with the woman, whose pity had just awoken in her that secret shame which a woman only really feels in the presence of another woman, and whose violence, however rarely it may be observed, has something sacred about it.

Mathieu, who was already moving towards the door, turned round. In spite of his coarseness, such a cry moved him. Plainly embarrassed, he flushed and looked at Mouchette. She could no longer escape. In starting back from Mathieu’s wife she had put herself farther from the door. She looked at it desperately out of the corner of her eye. Her

head was thrown back, and the artery was clearly visible, beating, like a heart, in her thin neck.

‘Let her go,’ said Mathieu. ‘Don’t drive her mad. Look how her hands are trembling.’

‘You can say what you like, but to think that a brute . . . it makes my blood boil. You wouldn’t even let him off if he took a young hare, not even if his dog was just going to swallow it, and you’re not worried about whether he got the girl drunk or not to . . .’

‘You’re talking rubbish. Do you think dirt like that’s any of my business? But young hares are. The police know their job, I suppose? Her father’s only got to bring in a charge.’

‘Father? You call *him* a father? Don’t be stupid! He’d sell the girl for a drop of rum! Listen to me, Mouchette. I just can’t ask you anything today – you’re too upset. But if you come back to see me tomorrow, I promise you I’ll give you ten francs for your trouble, and you can tell me about it if you want to, just as you like.’

Mouchette’s face was completely impassive for a moment. She was edging imperceptibly towards the door and forced herself not to shudder when Madame Mathieu’s hand almost caressed her cheek. Indeed, all she had remembered of her words was the new threat to Arsène.

The whole weight of the irrational, animal, secret revolt of generations of wretchedly poor ancestors

came, literally, to her mouth, for it seemed that her tongue was bathed in harsh and acid bilious slime instead of saliva. When she reached the doorway and felt the touch of the icy air on her forehead, face and body – almost naked under her light dress – she suddenly regained her voice. Bravado rather than insults sprang to her lips, but bravado or insults, what did it matter? The most insignificant word, in the silence which seemed to envelope her, would create just as great a shock within her. Before she even heard her ridiculously stilted words, she could feel each syllable echoing inside her as if she were a brass bell.

‘Monsieur Arsène is my lover,’ she said. ‘Ask him if you want. He’ll tell you.’

She jumped down the steps, regained her balance at the bottom, and walked off down the sunken lane slowly and calmly, taking care to step in the bottom of the ruts so as not to slip in her clogs. The buzzing in her ears was worse, making her almost giddy, but she heard Mathieu’s voice from behind the closed door:

‘You don’t expect me to chase after her, do you? If you feel you’ve got to, go and see the mayor about her tomorrow.’

The idea came to her while she was going back through the village. She reached the Dardelle house

without anyone noticing her. The hour before High Mass is still, as it always has been, a time of withdrawal and peace. It takes centuries to change the rhythm of life in a French village. The explanation offered for the emptiness and silence of the main street is that people are 'getting ready'. Getting ready for what? No one goes to High Mass any more; but at nine o'clock fathers still put on their stiff-fronted shirts, cursing as they push their heads through the crackling cloth, and mothers, peeling vegetables for the soup, have already carefully laid out the black pleated woollen dresses and stockings on the bed.

The Dardelle house, called thus after its former owner, had been occupied for ten years by an old servant of the Marquis de Champains. Although she was so old and stiff-jointed that she could only walk with two silver-handled ebony sticks, a gift of the late Marquis, she visited the sick and, more especially, acted as *veilleuse* when someone had died.

At the first sound of the passing-bell – which she often rang herself, using the smallest of the three bells, with her sticks lying on the ground and her tiny body, lighter than a baby's, swaying imperceptibly at the end of the rope – the bereaved family would watch from the windows for her arrival. They never had to wait long. Indifferent to their hushed welcomes, she would go at once to the

death-bed. It was noticed that she always dropped her gaze, as if conserving her strength or her pleasure.

After crossing herself, she would carefully put down in a corner the rough bag containing the necessities for her vigil – a bottle of black coffee laced with a drop of rum, a copper foot-warmer with its supply of briquettes, and a slice of bread and butter wrapped in a spotless white handkerchief. Only when she had done this would she consent to sit down at the fireside, and to ask her questions. These were always the same, and she often answered them herself, leaving even those who were most talkative and ready to entrust her with the macabre details to listen with a kind of terror to her strange monologue and wonder at her gentle smile and faded blue eyes. She would continue, gossiping or dozing, finding for the children caramels which were tucked away in odd corners of the wide pockets of her dress and which were often so sticky that she would sometimes lick them clean before distributing them.

Until nightfall she would hardly seem aware of the corpse and the stream of visitors coming to pay their respects. But then when even the women from neighbouring houses had drifted away one by one and the embarrassed family, with short, deep and ingenious sighs, had sat down to a meal ('What can you do? We must keep our strength up, I

suppose') she would get up quietly and go to the corpse. Their gaze would follow her as she crossed the room and disappeared into the shadows with her thin body shaken by the two silent sticks (they were rubber-tipped) like a tiny boat raised by the swell.

For hours on end she would watch by the corpse, gazing intently at it the whole while. No crease in the sheet could escape her vigilance. Her fleshless, long-nailed finger would scratch against the cloth as she straightened it out. No wandering fly was allowed to remain near the face which, as soon as she had taken up her watch, was covered by a white handkerchief – always the same one, and now a little yellowed by frequent washing. Although she liked to be thought pious, and sometimes acted, without any payment, as sacristan, she never seemed to pray. At least, no one had ever seen her move her lips; they always seemed to be fixed in watchful grimace. Nothing, however, could keep her from her mysterious duties or distract her from her enigmatic contemplation.

If the candle had been placed too far away, she would always draw it closer to the bed, until it clearly illuminated the stony features of her companion, himself absorbed in unfathomable reflexion. It was generally thought that she slept, during these vigils, with her eyes open, as is reputed to be the case with so many old women of her kind. Indeed,

in the course of the night she would rarely reply to anyone who questioned her, and yet no one ever dared repeat his request. In the presence of those pale pupils, reflecting the candle-flame, they would perhaps be afraid of waking both the dead man and his guardian.

When the cocks began to crow and the candle-flame grew dimmer, she would seem to shrink with her armchair. She would sometimes even lean her elbows on the bed and lose herself in a final contemplation as if the grey light of dawn were about to reveal to her what she had been seeking in vain for so many years. The house would gradually awake, the cowshed doors be thrown open, the beasts snort and rattle their chains, the occupants of the house begin to talk again in everyday tones, finding difficulty in hiding their peasants' deep joy in another morning. Only then would she pretend to sleep, hiding her hands under her woollen shawl, awaking at full light to the happy rush of breakfast. There would be traces of an incomprehensible fatigue in her ashen face, a fatigue which was not that of tired muscles nor a sleepless night. It was always hard to look her in the eyes; eyes so dull and lifeless that they were like those of a blind woman. She never seemed to notice their embarrassment, and would accept a bowl of coffee, which she always drank standing with her back to the wall. She would then share out what was left of her provisions

amongst the children just setting off for school, and go on her way. As she went out of sight at the corner of the cool road, touched by the morning sunlight, she left a strange impression behind her. Her cat would be waiting for her on the doorstep.

‘Mouchette, I’ll go and watch over your mother tonight,’ she said.

Mouchette had cut off sharply to the right to avoid the café, whose doors were now wide open, and had found herself face to face with the *sacristine*.

‘If you want to. Do as you like,’ she said unsteadily.

The pale blue eyes, irresistibly curious and compassionate, stared at her with a look of strange complicity.

‘Come on in,’ said the old woman softly.

Mouchette did as she was told, simply because she felt she could go on no longer. She dropped into a chair by the empty hearth. The carefully-cleaned tiles smelled of polish and sour apples. In the ebony-coloured oak of the cupboard she could faintly see the reflection of her own face.

The old woman had sat down silently opposite her. The clock with a bronze cock perched on its top, was ticking slowly and dully, each fall of the copper pendulum casting a brief reflection on the wall. For a time Mouchette struggled against the

heavy silence. It was too late. She felt as if an invisible cloth were covering her face and shoulders. The illusion was so strong that she seemed to be making an immense effort to thrust it off, but she was unable to move. Just as she abandoned the effort and yielded herself to the sensation she heard the old woman's voice again. She seemed to be finishing a sentence which she had already started.

'You're a little upset. Take things gently for a time, my dear. Stay here.'

'No,' said Mouchette. 'I've got to get back.'

The strange silence fell again, but this time Mouchette made no effort to break it. She slipped into it with an almost physical delight.

'You were going to do something wrong,' the old woman went on. 'There's something in your eyes. When you went past the house this morning, I thought "that girl's up to no good".'

Silence. Mouchette followed the ticking of the clock with a strange new pleasure, for her dreaming was rarely as disconnected and sleep-like as this. It was so disconnected that she saw nothing clearly and distinctly, but was rather only aware of the extreme slowness of the rhythm of her thoughts. Her state was like that which precedes all deep rest, between wakefulness and sleep, scarcely part of life.

'I've been thinking about you for months,' the old lady continued. 'Isn't it strange? And I know you well. It all started only one day last summer.

Do you remember? I gave you a green apple.'

Mouchette remembered, but did not give any sign of doing so. She had never trusted anyone – in the exact sense of the word – and the urge which had carried her a few hours ago to her mother's bedside was the only one of its kind she had ever felt. She somehow knew that it would be the last, and that some mysterious instinct in her had died at its first expression.

Her secret was not one which could be shared, for it was connected with so many different things. It was like one of those sickly-looking plants which bring up, when one tries to uproot them, the lump of earth which has sustained them. Yet she could make no effort to escape from the strange, delicious languor which filled her and seemed to be weaving around her, diligently and patiently, the threads of some invisible design.

'I didn't say anything earlier, because it was too soon. Everything comes in its own good time. Why try to stop a horse when he's kicking and biting? When he's tired and he's had enough, that's when you speak quietly to him and put the bridle on. There aren't many animals or many people who can resist a gentle word when it's needed. But people talk too much. They talk and talk so much that when the time comes there's nothing left in their words. They're like the dust you raise when you're winnowing grain.'

She went over to the cupboard and opened it. A faint, warm scent of verbená filled the room. From top to bottom the cupboard was full of white linen, imperceptibly golden in the gleam of the centuries-old polished wood. It seemed, in the darkened room with its one window with drawn curtains, another source of incredibly soft light. What woman of Mouchette's class had never dreamed of such a treasure? At any other time her bewildered admiration would soon have changed to anger, but now she was too exhausted. As she caught the delicate perfume, she seemed to feel the caressing coolness of the gleaming sheets on her hands.

'On the day of your mother's death you can't go home like that. Today is a special day and you must honour it. Believe me, my dear, it's an important day. Have you ever thought about death?'

Mouchette did not reply. Her gaze was still drawn towards the cupboard. Suddenly the idea of death was confused with the image of the piles of immaculate sheets.

'I understand death,' the old woman went confidently on. 'I understand the dead too. When I was your age I was afraid of them. Now I talk to them – in a manner of speaking – and they answer me. It's like a murmur, a little whisper, that seems to come from the depths of the earth.

'I told the curé about it one day. He scolded me. He thinks the dead are in heaven. I don't want to

contradict him, you know, but I stick to my own ideas. They say that once people used to adore the dead, that they were gods. I think that must have been the true religion, don't you? You think that the dead don't smell nice. I know. When cider's boiling, it smells like a wet cow-stall. Death's like cider – it's got to throw off its scum.'

She trotted to the far end of the room and put down on the bed a bulky parcel carefully rolled in a cloth.

'If I said what I think' (putting the pins between her teeth as she pulled them out), 'people would laugh at me. You too . . . you know that on any other day you'd be pulling faces already. But today your heart's asleep. Don't try to waken it too quickly, my dear. They're the best moments of life. I can't do anything for people who're too wide awake. There's too much bad in them. You might just as well put your hand in a badger's hole. When you passed by this morning, just remember, you stopped a minute in the middle of the road. Your whole face was asleep, apart from your eyes. When you came back, your eyes were asleep too. What's the good of waking her, I thought. Hasn't she had enough unhappiness already?'

She whispered these last words into Mouchette's ear. Mouchette slowly looked up.

'I know you understand.' Her wrinkled cheeks coloured. 'I suppose you haven't even a sheet at

home to wind her in? It hurts me to see how they look after their dead here. Before Jesus came, they used to embalm them with perfumes – spices, they called them – it cost a fortune. And now they don't even wash them. Even the Marquis had a week's beard and dirty nails. If they dared, my dear, they'd put them in their coffins straightaway, and the curé would back them up. What's he want to walk round the coffin for, with his holy water and incense! He just thinks the body is something to get rid of, like an empty bag. You should treat a dead person better than a sweetheart and be nice to it and spoil it before it goes off to purify itself under the ground.'

Her faded eyes gleamed bright blue. Mouchette gazed at her in amazement. It was clear that the old woman was lost in her own mysterious memories. In her voice, her features and her fixed smile there was a kind of frightful innocence.

'I'll bring one of my sheets, my very best one. We'll wrap her together, my dear. I'll do that for you because you're listening to me without laughing.'

'I come from somewhere you've never heard of, in the mountains. In my village, once autumn was past, you didn't see the sun any more. It came up on one side and set on the other and never got high enough for you to see its silly face. In winter, the ground was frozen so hard you couldn't bury the

dead. They used to hoist the coffins into the roof of an isolated barn, and the cold preserved them till spring. The cemetery was just by our house, and the church, just a tiny one, half stone and half wood. The road was poor, and was always being cut by avalanches, and for six months on end the curé scarcely used to show his face. The sacristan had to read the gospel on Sundays because there was no Mass. There wasn't much room, and they'd made the cemetery on a kind of small piece of flat land – but the sides dropped a hundred metres. It was just a tiny little cemetery, but you can't imagine anything prettier. I used to get up at night to look at it. Even when there wasn't a moon, you could make out the crosses.'

She spoke without raising her voice, but more and more quickly. It reminded Mouchette of the little wooden windmills that the local boys made. There was one behind the house, unnoticed since the summer, and now almost covered by the swollen waters of the stream, whose insect-like sound could still be heard above the gushing of the spring.

'Listen,' said the old woman. 'Because we're friends, I'm going to give you this nice sheet. There are a lot of rich people who don't leave us so nicely-dressed – families are so nasty! And I've a nice surprise for you, too.'

She picked up the half-open parcel from the bed.

'It's a souvenir,' she whispered. 'You'll find something nice to wear inside, if you feel that you should. It must be your size. But I'm afraid the colour isn't very suitable – it's all either blue or white. The poor girl was pledged until she was fifteen, you know.'

'Pledged?' said Mouchette. 'What does that mean?'

'It was a vow her mother had made. Her mother had been old M. Trévène's daughter, the big mill-owner from Roubaix, a very rich man. He'd bought the château at Tremolens, about eighty kilometres from here. I used to be in service there every summer. When I was getting on for thirty I wasn't in too good health – I was very thin and sallow and my breath was bad. No boy looked at me without laughing. Never mind! The little girl would only play with me, and the grandfather had nothing against it. I say play, but she really only liked reading and talking. I was slow and didn't understand much, but I liked to watch her. I know now that you mustn't go by appearances. I've seen so many of those lovely girls die! Anybody seeing the two of us together wouldn't have thought much of my chances. I was as thin as a rake.

'When Mademoiselle came back in the summer, jumping out of the big black carriage full of leather trunks, all white and sweet-smelling and young, she never missed telling me, with her little hands

on my shoulders, how sad I looked. One year she came back from town a lot earlier than usual, in the spring. I'd never seen her looking so beautiful, and for a long time I didn't notice that she'd lost weight. The funny thing is that from that moment I started to get better. I didn't know why. The servants hardly recognized me. They told me I'd got a different face. It wasn't my face; I felt that something wonderful was going to happen to me, that it was my turn now.

'When I was with Mademoiselle I never felt embarrassed any more. In any case, everybody made a fuss of me because Mademoiselle was ill and I was looking after her as well as I possibly could. Nothing was too much for me. I stayed up three nights running with her, even though it wasn't necessary, and watched her sleeping. Perhaps it was by watching her like that that I began to like watching over the dead. Just before dawn, especially, her face lost its bloom and its youth. It was a face that belonged to me. The distance between us seemed suddenly wiped out. You would have thought that all the strength and freshness she lost while she was most deeply asleep were passing into me. It was like another blood flowing under my skin. Sometimes Mademoiselle was resentful. She'd ask me why I was looking at her like that. I'd tell her not to be afraid. When I went near her, she would laugh in a strange, quiet way. And yet she

always gave way in the end. My pity was stronger than her revulsion. Sometimes she even put her head on my shoulder and cried.

‘Her fair hair smelt of heather. It was so nice that it made me think about love – me, who’d never bothered with men. But even at those times I couldn’t forget how ill she was. The sweat on her forehead was cold and thick. She wiped it off all the time with her finger-tips, pulling faces, and I always pretended not to notice anything. But it was still our secret. And it was for a long time, because she made up so carefully every morning that it was a long time before her mother realized how ill she was. But she was getting worse very quickly. I heard the doctors talking to each other, saying she wasn’t putting up a fight. Why should she put up a fight? After a few weeks, as soon as she was alone with me, she gave up. I think she even liked to let me see her at her worst, as pale as death under her make-up, with her eyes lifeless. In the neck of her blouses – I’d always envied them – I could see how hollow her chest was. Perhaps that was how she made up for the show she’d had to put on during the day? Now she insisted that I slept in her room on a camp-bed. The grandfather had booked a room for the autumn in one of those places they call a sanatorium, a hospital for millionaires. “It’s not so urgent,” her mother used to say. “In summer the climate’s as good here as anywhere, and you

can see that she can't do without Philomène." And she did cling to me more and more, and I clung to her. Her mother was a bit mistrustful. The grandfather would say I wasn't looking after myself properly, and she'd answer that I was putting on weight. It was true. The watching at night had no effect on me – I could do without sleep. And Mademoiselle could do without sleep too, or she no longer liked to sleep.

'During the day, she came and went as usual, and sometimes she laughed. I kept myself away from her as much as possible, but if she happened to meet me, she would pretend not to see me, or smile in a funny, embarrassed way. When we were alone together, she always began by pretending to be asleep. About midnight, her cough used to wake her. I had to sit on her bed. Her nightgown was sticking to her skin. Once the crisis was over, she'd no more strength than a child. She would tell me that she was going to die, and that she knew it, and that all the doctors' lies made her ashamed. From then on, it seemed to me that you just had to give in to death. She cried for hours, quietly, with no sobbing, without even blinking, just as if life were passing out of her. In the end I'd cry too. She used to say "How you love me!" They weren't bad tears, because tiredness was never too much for me. To tell the truth, I'd never had such an appetite. I was always first in the kitchen in the morning, before

the milk was in the saucepans. I could have eaten a horse!’

She was clearly speaking to herself now, forgetting Mouchette and the parcel in her lap with her trembling arms around it. She had reached, in her confidences, some deep inner depth – but in vain.

‘What became of Mademoiselle, then?’ Mouchette’s hoarse voice interrupted her. She seized the old woman’s arm nervously, with her ‘bad look’ on her face.

‘You frightened me, my dear. Where was I? I can’t remember. You startled me, my girl.’

The short rest had refreshed Mouchette. She felt a well-known flush on her cheeks and a circle of pain round her head, a sure sign of the stubborn bad temper which exasperated the schoolmistress.

‘You horrible old woman. If I’d been the young lady, I’d have strangled you.’

‘Look at you,’ retorted the old woman, with no trace of fear. ‘A real wild-cat. What have you got to do with the young lady; you’re too swarthy. She was pretty and fresh. You’re like a gipsy.’

With a sudden unexpected movement which took Mouchette unawares, she went up to the girl and put her hand on her breast, over her heart.

‘I only wish you well,’ she said. ‘You’re bad, but it’s only because you don’t understand. I think I

know your story already. You just tell me about it, my dear.'

She had curled up in her chair, and her fingers were moving so restlessly and quickly along her black dress that her hands were like two small grey animals hunting an invisible prey.



IV

THE OLD sand quarry had been abandoned for a long time. It was almost at the foot of the hills and had gradually filled up with water. Each winter the spring rose from under the old shingle thrown up by the work which had been carried out there and began its quiet flow, going down the gentle slope in a dozen tiny channels until just before it reached the flat land and joined the Planquet stream it formed a tiny pool. The bottom was entirely of pink and white gravel, and the water was so clear that no fish would live there.

Mouchette's school mates often met boys there, but on this Sunday morning the solitude was complete. To make completely certain that she was alone, Mouchette climbed an old bank which had crumbled away so much in places that it was almost like a grotto. A notice at the entrance warned off trespassers. The boys had scrawled obscene drawings all over it. If it was seen in the moonlight, it cast a lengthened shadow like a cross on the light-coloured side of the embankment.

From there, Mouchette could see the hollow in which the village lay. A thin stream of smoke rose towards the sky. The smell of wet sand, very

different from the earthy smells she was used to, rose all round her. It smelt of new mortar, a recently built house, and salt, and spray. She had often escaped here, on mornings such as this, from the stale smell of the hovel in which she lived, and to which she returned each evening like an exhausted animal, not without a secret pleasure. The only real rest she had ever found, amongst so many people whom she hated or scorned, was in a feeling of disgust. She was incapable of any rational justification of her revolt and her barely-conscious refusal of the life around her, and took her revenge for her incomprehensible solitude in her own way. If she was tired, she would consciously lie down in the dirtiest place at the roadside.

She was now savouring her disgust more clearly and consciously than ever before, and with a sense of wonder. The old woman had uttered the words which were needed, the words which could make her feel sorry for herself. Mouchette had to struggle to experience the emotions that a town girl, with her mind full of serials and films, feels so easily. She had to make a tremendous effort just to understand that her loss of her lover had to be made into something wonderful, and that all at once she had stepped into the strange world that she had sometimes glimpsed in books, and now belonged amongst those rare people who provide a tender spectacle for sensitive souls.

The old woman had indeed uttered the necessary words. The wonderful thing was that she had somehow torn Mouchette's secret from her. No mere words could have softened Mouchette's stony heart or drawn tears from her.

Indeed, all she remembered of what the old woman had said was one thing – 'death'. She seemed to have heard the word for the first time. It had always been empty and colourless, inspiring in her nothing more than a vague, formless, passive fear. If she ordinarily avoided listening to the word, it was rather from callous indifference towards the dead than from any superstitious fear. In any case old age and death still seemed to her – as they had when she was a tiny girl – almost synonymous, two aspects of the same event.

And now she was thinking of her own death, with her heart gripped not by fear but by the excitement of a great discovery, the feeling that she was about to learn what she had been unable to learn from her brief experience of love. What she thought about death was childish, but what could never have touched her in the past now filled her with poignant tenderness, as sometimes a familiar face we see suddenly with the eyes of love makes us aware that it has been dearer to us than life itself for longer than we have ever realized.

The parcel which the old woman had given her was still on the sand at her feet. While she slowly

pulled out the rusty old pins Mouchette tried in vain to imagine the dead girl's face. The dress lay on her knees, almost as light and ethereal as the ghost it evoked. The muslin slipped through her fingers, making her brown hand look swarthy. For a few moments she stared at them with surprise, then with disgust and finally with a sort of terror.

At that moment and for that trivial reason her budding self-pity vanished at once. People generally think that suicide is an act like any other, the last link in a chain of reflexions, or at least of mental images, the conclusion of a supreme debate between the instinct to live and another, more mysterious instinct of renouncement and refusal. But it is not like that. Apart from certain abnormal exceptions, suicide is an inexplicable and frighteningly sudden event, rather like the kind of rapid chemical decompositions which currently-fashionable science can only explain with absurd or contradictory hypotheses.

Her brown hand with its dirty nails, already wrinkled and withered, and yet still childish and thin-wristed was there before her eyes. With its half-opened palm and bent fingers it seemed dead. Mouchette suddenly saw it buried, just as it was, in the dark earth, and hated it as if it were no longer part of her but a strange and horrible thing.

Her thumb had once been misshapen by an abscess, and the scar it had left stood out pale and

white against her skin. Her father had a thumb like that, broad and almost distorted with its enormous bulging nail. Her hand was of the sort that brought unhappiness; it only reminded her of countless humiliations. How often Madame had shown it to the whole class, holding it out above her desk – a dirty hand, defying the most elementary principles of hygiene and scattering deadly germs! The hands which Mouchette had seen a few hours ago crossed on her mother's hollow breast, were clearly of the same unlucky kind. Even more unlucky, because they had worked in vain for so many years.

Her mother had never been affectionate and Mouchette had never received many caresses from her hands. Had there been caresses, when she was little, perhaps? Her childhood had gone and left hardly any memories, because, like all creatures born to dream, her early years were like a misty scene which would only appear to her years later when she was old or about to die. For most girls like her, life only begins when their senses awake. That time, for Mouchette, had been the one when she had received the worst blows, for her father had had his share of the cruel perspicacity of the peasant.

In such circumstances most girls in Mouchette's position manage to find some tenderness outside their own squalid surroundings, even if it is only

the comradeship of a girl of their own age. But Mouchette had always rejected any overtures instinctively and almost in spite of herself, out of a kind of defensive instinct which seemed absurd to her, because it was so deep-rooted that she could never explain or justify it. In any case, her face with its rather sly, insolent and yet fearful expression, was not one to inspire liking. It certainly seemed to Mouchette that she had never known the sweetness of a real caress. Only once, perhaps. . . .

It had happened one holiday-time at Trémières. She was taking back to Dumont's café the fish which the old man had caught during the day – a basketful of eels. On the way a big fair-haired girl had bumped into her, and turned round and asked her her name. Mouchette had not answered and the girl had gently and absent-mindedly stroked her cheek. At first Mouchette had thought nothing of it, and indeed, the memory had been painful until evening and she had pushed it out of mind. It had returned suddenly, changed and almost unrecognizable, just before dawn when she was asleep on the ragged mattress which Madame Dumont, on evenings when the café was full, put down for her in a narrow corridor littered with empty bottles and cans and smelling sharply of sour wine and heavily and greasily of paraffin. In some strange way, while she was half-asleep, she felt herself cushion her face in the crook of her arm and smell

the imperceptible perfume of that warm hand, and indeed she seemed to feel the hand itself, so near and so real and living that without thinking she raised her head and put up her lips to be kissed.

At the time she had been ten years old, but she was hardened enough to get over the mysterious weakness very quickly. Until her chance meeting with Arsène she had never, despite such fleeting moments, been able to overcome the strange rebellion against tenderness which made her so solitary. But, as a hidden injury to the nervous system may cause pain so far away from the injury as to baffle the surgeon, now that the memory of the unknown girl and her caress had almost disappeared from Mouchette's mind, she began to examine her own hands curiously and with a half-conscious repugnance.

Mouchette hated anyone looking at her (Madame could make her turn scarlet) but she had learned how to understand a person by watching his hands, which show so much more than the eyes and cannot lie, and are easier to watch while they are occupied. Her father's hands, lying lifeless and somehow terrible in his lap in the flickering light of the single lamp, with their wrist bones apparently about to pierce the skin, and the tufts of hair on each finger, and her grandfather's, which she had seen one summer's day folded across his stomach and surrounded by a cloud of tiny flies as he lay sleep-

ing. . . . She had also watched her brothers' hands and seen how quickly they had become workmen's hands, and the hands of the local farm-women, smelling of sour milk and mash for the calves and pigs. Madame's hands were smaller, and her fingertips covered with needle-pricks. They were all hard-working hands and looked ridiculous when they were resting. The poor are somehow conscious of this, and are uneasy when their hands are unoccupied. To say of the workman in his Sunday suit that he 'doesn't know where to put his hands' is a cruel mockery, for he owes his daily bread to them.

The skirt of the dress, which was made of light material and no longer very strong, was caught under one of Mouchette's clogs and in picking it up she tore it along its whole length. The material was as fragile as a spider's web.

At that moment, the deep, secret impulse towards death seized her again. It was so violent that she was almost dancing with anguish, like an animal caught in a trap. The thought of death, however, did not come to her mind clearly, and the involuntary glance which she cast over the pool shining at her feet was vague and unseeing. She did not want to die. All she felt was a strange shame, an inexplicable timidity, like that which suddenly seizes certain highly-strung people, more often than not when they are talking to old friends, with

all the brutality of an epileptic attack, creating around them a region of silence and solitude inside which they seem to revolve madly like a scorpion encircled by flames.

No thought of the man who had seized her and whose crude and childish fears she had shared for a night crossed her mind. In such a crisis, anger or shame, with their consequent desire for revenge, might have taken the place of hope for her, but her imagination was too sensual and violent to pass beyond the present, and now more than ever the future was a meaningless word for her. The terrible, inexorable sense of futility which has tormented so many perceptive and ardent men and has been on rare occasions the instrument of their salvation (rare, because like the serpent of the legend, or perhaps as the serpent of the legend, it is destructive) was still not clear in her mind. It had escaped somewhere inside her like a mine exploding in the depths of the sea, where the sound of the explosion is muffled but the surface of the water is disturbed. The watchful caressing hatred which escapes from hell, and which is the same temptation, spreads its charm insidiously amongst the rich and powerful of this world, but can only take possession of the very poor by surprise, for they carry the sacred sign of their poverty. It spies on them day after day, terrible and watchful and perhaps in secret terror. But once they have been induced to despair,

the defences of the simple are irretrievably breached and their ignorance knows of no escape save suicide – the suicide of the poor, which is so like that of children.

A shred of muslin hung over the edge of the bank, motionless in the still air.

Mouchette's eyes were fixed on the tiny, solitary pool; as the light struck it or a shadow moved over it, its surface brightened or darkened in turn.

A sudden sense of her danger made her begin to climb down the slope and try to arrange her thoughts. She was confused, and her mind was disordered and drowsy, as if her blood were pounding through her head too fast. Indeed, she was aware of it racing through every vein of her body. But today it was the drowsiness which precedes sleep after an attack of fever. She did not know what sleep was to come.

She turned away from the pool and looked towards the familiar countryside as if seeking help and support. She looked towards the lane which went round the edge of the woods and dropped into the hollow, the lane which she had walked along so often on Sundays in autumn, under hedges thick with blackberries. Tears came to her eyes; at least, she felt them burning beneath her lids. Suddenly the noise of hoofs rang out on the Mézargnes road, and almost immediately Ménétrier's heavy mare came into view at the top of the

hill. The man and the beast were so close that she could hear Ménétrier grumbling to himself and cursing his catarrh.

Her first instinct was to run away, but her legs seemed made of lead. As Ménétrier came round the corner and nearer to her, Mouchette's heart beat so fast that she thought it would burst. The old man looked towards her, and for a moment their eyes met, but his were as indifferent as those of the horse. She would have liked to shout, call out, and run out to meet her grotesque saviour; he plodded slowly on his way and suddenly seemed to be disappearing, as if sucked up into nothingness. She watched his mysterious departure for a second; the man of flesh and blood seemed to have no more substance than a ghost.

Suicide only really frightens those who are never tempted by it and never will be, for its darkness only welcomes those who are predestined to it. The man with murder in his heart will only become aware of suicide at the last moment. Unless he is mad, the last feeling of the person who kills himself must be one of amazement and desperate surprise. Apart from madmen, whose law is not our law, no one tries to kill himself twice.

When she came close to it, the water was clear. The silt on the bottom was of a greenish-grey colour, as gentle to the eyes as velvet.

But the voice which Mouchette could hear was

infinitely more gentle. Was it a voice? She listened to it like a dog listening to his master as he encourages and pacifies him. It was like the old woman's voice, but also like Arsène's, and now and again even like Madame's. It spoke no human language; it was nothing more than a dying, whispering murmur. Then it was silent.

Mouchette slid down the bank until she felt the gentle sting of the cold water on her leg and as far as her thigh. The sudden silence inside her seemed infinite, like that of the crowd as it holds its breath when the trapeze-artist reaches the top rung of the ladder. Her will dissolved. She slid out into the water, pushing against the bank with one of her hands. She could hold herself up in the shallow water by the pressure of one hand on the bottom. Then she twisted over and looked up into the sky. She felt the insidious flow of the water along her head and neck, filling her ears with its joyful sound. She knew that life was slipping away from her, and the smell of the grave itself rose to her nostrils.



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