

The Boys

Also by HENRY DE MONTHERLANT
and translated by TERENCE KILMARTIN

The Dream

The Bachelors

Chaos and Night

The Girls

THE BOYS

a novel by

Henry de Montherlant

translated by

Terence Kilmartin

First published in France in 1969 under the title
Les Garçons

English translation published in 1974

“If I hadn’t loved you so much, everything would have been easier.”

The Boys, Part Two

The Ekaterinburg Regiment occupied the trenches in front of No. 4 Bastion by surprise, chased away or killed the enemy forces and then withdrew with three wounded. The officer commanding the sortie was presented to the Grand-Duke Nikolai Nikolayevich.

“So you were the hero of this affair?” the Grand-Duke said. “Tell me what happened.”

“When I left the Bastion and started towards the trenches the soldiers stopped and did not want to advance further . . .”

“How dare you, Sir!” the Grand-Duke exclaimed, moving away.

“Have you no shame?” Filosopov interjected.

“Away with you!” finished Menshikov.

Tolstoy, *Journal*, 27th November 1854

“Any view of things that fails to recognise their oddity is false.”

Paul Valéry

Two Notes

1

In January 1969, as I was about to send this book to press (having completed it two years earlier), I realized that I had yielded to an unfortunate tendency of mine, which is to take too long over setting the scene. In *Port-Royal* and in *Le Chaos et la nuit*, the action begins half-way through the work. It was the same with *Les Garçons*.

Les Garçons was many years in gestation; and I have learnt from experience that there is a serious disadvantage in leaving a work in one's desk for too long: it turns sour on one. I did not want to delay the publication of *Les Garçons* by recasting the over-lengthy first part; I therefore decided simply to cut certain passages so that the book could be published on the scheduled date in April 1969.

Les Garçons, as it appears here, is complete in itself. There are connoisseurs of antiques who break off the arm or the hand of a statue they have acquired intact. And the horsemen of the Parthenon are obliterated here and there by damage to the marble; they disappear, only to reappear further on. No one laments these missing sections. It is felt that they leave room for the imagination.

2

The chronology of the three novels which are known by the overall title *La jeunesse d'Alban de Bricoule* is as follows: *Les Bestiaires* (bull-fighting), *Les Garçons* (school), *Le Songe* (war). The author apologizes if, as a result of the long gap between the writing of certain of these novels—forty-seven years between *Le Songe* and *Les Garçons*!—the dates mentioned in the course of the narrative do not always correspond from book to book, and if there are even a few enormities (for instance, Mme. de Bricoule,

who dies in 1913 in *Les Garçons*, reappears alive for a few lines in 1918 in *Le Songe*). An error on the author's part, of course, but not a very important one since each of the novels was designed to be read independently and since, moreover, the work is in no sense an autobiography but is very slightly autobiographical in its background, which has been considerably re-arranged.

Similar discrepancies in dates are to be found in Tolstoy, Zola and Proust.

Preface

Forty years ago I spent a few days in a famous abbey. The friend who accompanied me had warned me that the abbot was known to be an “out-and-out” unbeliever. I watched him officiate, a handsome, imposing man of some sixty years, whose whole bearing inspired respect for the religion he represented in that eminent position. I was very impressed by him. Subsequently, three or four other people confirmed to me that the abbot was indeed an atheist, having hinted as much to some one who had been unable to resist the sordid pleasure of divulging such a rare secret.

An atheist priest seemed to me to be a remarkable phenomenon. I planned to write a novel about such a priest—I will not go so far as to say an excellent priest, but a priest who carried out the duties of his ministry to the end, for the greater good of his flock and for their constant edification. As one who has a feeling for Christianity without being a believer, I felt it was a subject made for me. The Christian death of an unbelieving priest had been a central idea of mine since before my thirtieth year; the subject was to haunt me all my life.

In that same year of 1929, no doubt because I had just re-read my play *l'Exil* with a view to its first publication, and this had revived my interest in dramatic writing which I had neglected since 1914, I embarked on two plays, *Les Crétois* and *Don Fadrique*. And I had in my bottom drawer the youthful version of *La Ville dont le prince est un enfant* which I had written at seventeen.

It was then that I began to be haunted by the desire, or rather the hunger, to deal with the same theme both in the form of a novel and of a play. Such an exercise is fascinating for a literary technician. And then, the novel can and should go deeper than the play, since it is not subject to the constraints of stage performance or the necessity to please an audience (of course, even in a novel one can tell only half-truths, but half-truths are enough, as I have

often said). Which of the plays I had already sketched out should I also treat as a novel? *La Ville* seemed to lend itself best. And my atheist priest could be Father de Pradts.

Les Crétois and *Don Fadrique* were soon abandoned.

At about this time I was reading Sainte-Beuve's *Port-Royal*, which I found extremely moving. It appealed to the austere side of my nature, not only through the spirit of Jansenism but because it began with a moral "reformation"—and as an adolescent I had attempted such a reformation at my school. And I was impressed by the fact that this work, which of all those I had read that were calculated to reconcile me with Christianity was the only one to achieve this end, had been written by an unbeliever. Thus in writing a novel of which the kernel would be the subject of *La Ville*, I would satisfy my three desires: to treat the same subject both as a novel and as a play, to develop the character of an atheist priest, and to deal with a movement of reform.

I began *Les Garçons* in 1929 and wrote fifty pages of it;^{*} then I stopped, postponing this task, as I also postponed the completion of *La Ville*, until a time when my mind and my experience were more mature, especially for the purpose of depicting the priests. This day came in 1951 for *La Ville*, and in 1965 for the novel. It was thus that *Les Garçons* was born, the offspring of *La Ville*.

Meanwhile, in 1932, a man of great intellectual distinction, much older than I, whom I had recently met, gave me a detailed account of the customs of a college in the French provinces where he had been brought up in the early 1880s—customs so extraordinary, and confirming so strikingly what I have always thought about reality being more improbable than fiction, that I made up my mind to draw on them for my novel when the time came. As a result, it would lose much of the autobiographical character of *La Ville*, without however becoming a work of pure invention since in one way and another its ingredients would be largely grounded in reality. I made notes of what my informant

^{*} Which appeared in 1948 in a limited edition of 262 copies under the title *Serge Sandrier*, illustrated with lithographs by Mariette Lydis.

told me. Thus the present novel took shape, the product of memory, information, and imagination.

Apart from the afore-mentioned fifty pages, *Les Garçons* was written between July 1965 and March 1967. I may say of the novel what I have always thought of *La Ville*, that it is a book from which the reader should emerge more Christian if he is a Christian, and more sympathetic towards Christianity if he is not, as I emerged from reading Sainte-Beuve's *Port-Royal*. The book was not, of course, written with this intention.

Paris, 1969

Part One

A Children's Paradise

*New school year, 1912,
at the College of Notre-Dame
du Parc: a college Academy*

For the school year 1912–13, the Father Superior of the College of Notre-Dame de —— (commonly known as Notre-Dame du Parc, because of its fine gardens), in the Boulevard de Montmorency at Auteuil, had instituted a new governmental device: an Academy. It was to be made up of ten pupils from the upper and lower sixth, who would reconstitute it annually by their own votes—ratified, not to say inspired, by the authorities—and who were supposed to represent the flower of the college as regards literary talent, intellectual distinction, and “general conduct”, which was naturally taken for granted. A category of “candidate academicians” was also created, for third-, fourth- and fifth-form pupils (ages twelve to fourteen). Since the Frenchman’s sole aim is to become a person of importance, the authorities were confident that from the age of twelve upwards the children, either of their own accord, or, if by some mischance they were so stupid as to despise worldly vanities, at the instigation of their families, would develop the habit of doing what was necessary with a view to entering the Academy in the fullness of time—to wit, suppressing everything individual or forceful in themselves, striving to please, and above all never telling the truth when it might be detrimental to established ideas. For this college Academy was not at all on the lines of similar institutions which are to be encountered in adult society, and to which only a man’s talents and virtues enable him to gain access. In short, the breaking of character and the creation of tools, docile from ambition when they wanted to get in; and from conformity when they were in: such was the aim of this police operation which the foundation of the Academy amounted to. The parents were delighted. At last it had occurred to some one to educate their beloved offspring in the ways of the world as well!

Let us be fair, however: this police operation was a mild one, for the Park’s principles did not countenance severity.

M. Alban de Bricoule, aged sixteen and a half, a notable of the college, who had just joined the sixth form, was among the first six

academicians nominated by the authorities and commissioned to elect their four colleagues.

The announcement of the creation of the Academy, or rather its recruitment by cabal, had been followed by an immediate decline in the moral standards of the entire sixth form, in the same way as the most noble, the most dignified wild animals, once domesticated, sit up and beg at meal-times. On the way out of school one day, Alban saw Maquet, of the lower sixth, walking towards him with drawn features, his whole face strained to breaking-point. He came straight to the point:

“I’m supposed to be a model pupil. Well, I’m not at all. Tell me what you want me to do for you and I’ll do it—no matter what. But I must get in.”

Alban looked at him with a kind of terror, as if he had seen a Great Anteater bearing down on him with a determined air. Since he said nothing, the other broke into a nervous laugh, and when Alban went on staring at him speechlessly, he laughed once more, then turned and went. A moment longer, and Alban would have crossed himself, as if upon the apparition of a spirit. And it was indeed just that, the *spirit of the age*, which was appearing to these children for the first time.

Father Prévôtel, who was in charge of Alban’s year, casually dropped him the names of the boys who seemed to him to be eligible to be their new colleagues.

Alban was well aware of those who by their merits were indeed qualified to be academicians. But he acted in this situation in a manner well beyond his years, which would have won him the esteem of the adult world. He wanted to get Giboy in, simply because Giboy was his friend and he would thus have somebody to talk to during the sessions of the Academy, being somewhat bored in the company of the others, in spite of their merits.

So he sacrificed one of the meritorious ones, and campaigned on behalf of Giboy, who was duly elected.

The ten academicians now had to elect their president. This troubled them a great deal. Alban was the obvious choice, but the thought that it would give him pleasure stuck in their throats and gave them pause. So they gaped towards authority, hoping that it

might dispense them from voting according to their consciences. Authority spoke a name, and it was Alban's. There had been misgivings. Father Prévôtel and Father de Pradts (who was in charge of the middle school), the latter in particular, emphasized the danger of giving too much status to some one who was not entirely reliable: to be president of the Academy really meant being the head boy of the college. But the Superior, Father Pradeau de la Halle, argued that Alban would feel bound by his responsibility; they were giving the opposition a seat in the cabinet. The Superior saw still further. He claimed to discern in Alban an unpredictable ardour which might be drawn impartially either towards good or evil, and which it would take only a slight nudge to direct towards the good, always provided that they kept the young man on this course by gratifying his natural frankness with trust, his sense of honour with responsibility, and his vanity with a little glamour—failing which essential buttressing his tendency to go to opposite extremes would lead him to stray from the path of righteousness, if only for the sake of a change. Father de la Halle was by nature drawn to the tight-rope, upon which he performed with the intrepidity of a child.

The vote took place the following evening. Alban was elected unanimously, apart from his own vote which went to his friend Paul de Linsbourg.

As an academician, he had been issued with a large red and yellow ribbon with a white enamel cross. As president, his cross was changed for a larger and grander one which had some green in it as well. Clearly all this is a far cry from the Catacombs.

Mme. de Bricoule, his mother, was beside herself with joy: she wanted, no less, to put his cross on display in a glass case in the drawing-room, along with the family's crosses of St. Louis and Legions of Honour. "Alas!" thought Alban, "how I shall have to intrigue later on to keep her happy!" Already he was well aware that it is parents, wives, children, mistresses who drag you down into a quagmire of petty honours. And solitude is the wing that lifts you out of it.

On 4 November 1912, the four o'clock break, which began at dusk, witnessed a larger forgathering than usual of two groups, one of boys of the upper school (upper and lower sixth form: fifteen to seventeen years), the other of boys of the middle school (third, fourth and fifth forms: twelve to fourteen years), on either side of the fence which separated their respective playgrounds. It was an ordinary wooden fence which came up to elbow height, as though it had been put there deliberately for people to come and lean on. And a few big and middle boys, always the same ones, never failed to do so. They were in the habit of meeting there instead of playing games, in confabulations which took up the entire half-hour of recreation. It was a scene reminiscent of those coloured prints in which eighteenth-century cavaliers are to be seen in amorous converse with village beauties, on either side of similar fences. The election of the president of the Academy had taken place the previous day, and the academicians, some of whom possessed the added distinction of having passed their *baccalauréat* four months previously, were being goggled at like strange beasts by their juniors.

"We ought to charge them tuppence a look," said Paul de Linsbourg. "It even beats the Schola*."

"Talking about the Schola," Alban said, "couldn't you get the Little General in? I'd do as much for you."

*Aymery de la
Maisonfort*

Alban called the young Aymery de La Maisonfort the Little General because his father was a general. Linsbourg and Giboy belonged to the Schola, while Alban did not. And junior boys stood little chance of getting into the Schola without the patronage of the seniors.

"Are you interested in La Maisonfort?"

"Ye-e-e-s . . . perhaps . . ."

"Doesn't look like a singer to me, that kid."

* *Schola cantorum*: a choir.

“What does that matter? You know quite well that it’s your face that gets you into the Schola, not your voice. And La Maisonfort is charming. He isn’t called Trémignon,* like Lamennais’ chateau, but he deserves to be.”

“His legs are too fat.”

“What do you know about it? His legs are sublime. And besides, he once said to me: ‘I love the wars of the Romans. They’re *delicious!*’”

“A love for the Romans and a felicitous choice of epithets should make him more suitable for the Academy.”

Rightly or wrongly, La Maisonfort was famous for his stupidity, but he was a lively child and that was enough to make him worthy of consideration. Giboy shouted across the fence:

“Go and find that little twit, and we’ll see from his calves whether he can sing in tune.”

A moment later, four boys came up at a run, holding the arms of a tiny urchin whom they brought to a halt at the fence, where he looked inquiringly at the seniors. With his fair hair, peaches and cream complexion and delicate features contrasting with his powerful bare legs, well-rounded, a little clumsy, he was reminiscent of a gosling, but a pretty gosling—so pure, and bathed in a fresh bloom as of violets: purity itself. He was just twelve years old.

Salins pointed at one of La Maisonfort’s knees, which was liberally painted with iodine.

“Is that genuine, or is it to make you interesting?”

An attractive little smile gave the show away.

“Would you be interested in joining the Schola?”

“Me? Oh yes! But my pater doesn’t want me to. He thinks it would take too much of my time.” (He turned towards Linsbourg.) “You knew I’d already asked him.”

“What? Has somebody mentioned it already?”

“Yes . . . de Linsbourg . . .”

“So! Linsbourg tries to talk us out of putting the Little General into the Schola and he’s been scheming to get him in himself?”

* A pun here: Trémignon = *très mignon*, meaning ‘very sweet’.

Linsbourg was chuckling to himself, with an air of spurious embarrassment.

"There's something slightly lop-sided about him that I like," he said at last. "Those big primary-school clogs on a general's son who drives up to the place in an eight-cylinder De Dion-Bouton. . . And besides, I must admit I have a weakness for big feet."

"What about Souplier?" asked Salins, with a malicious glance at Alban.

"Souplier is no good for either the Academy or the Schola."

"Go and tell Souplier that the academicians want to talk to him," Linsbourg told the middle boys.

Alban took a note-book from his pocket and said:

"Here is the composition of the Group, as of 4 November 1912. Six seniors, six juniors. Of the six seniors, three academicians . . ."

He started to read out the names:

". . . *De Linsbourg, Denie.*"

Salins interrupted him.

"We know the list. In fact the whole school knows it. Binet [the history master] asked me yesterday in class, from his rostrum: 'And what about you, Salins, who is your protégé?' I said to him: 'Sir, I can't tell you. Professional secret.' Then Binet told us all the names in the Group, arranged in couples, without a single mistake."

"Good! At least no one will say we're conspirators, and I can't bear being hole-and-corner. There aren't any secrets in this establishment. And did Binet have any observations to make?"

A boy who was listening to them spoke up:

"Binet said to Salins: 'Fancy having Brulat for a protégé! I wonder why you went and picked him, with his big ears. When you take on a protégé, you should choose one with a pretty face.' I asked him: 'What about you, sir? Did you have a little protégé when you were our age?' He answered: 'Oh, I had heaps of them!' "

At this point some middle schoolboys came back to the fence and announced:

"Souplier says he won't come."

"So typical of his sweet nature," said Alban.

The playground, now almost completely dark, resounded with the shrill voices of the juniors, the mannish voices of a few premature adolescents (there was something monstrous about these men's voices emerging from such puny bodies), and, by way of contrast, the childish voices of various bigger boys, a femininity of voice which is encountered only in young Parisians. In the distance Alban caught a glimpse of Souplier, busier than ever, running from one boy to the next: he seemed to be everywhere at once. Also running was Father Prévôtel, prefect* of the upper school, who would take three steps among the football players, then stop short because he was out of breath, shouting "Well played!" at random, naïvely displaying his enjoyment in cavorting about, with the two tails of his sash flapping about the small of his back. Some of the boys, generally an older and a younger one, were playing "tortures". Binaud, known as la Fauvette, a twelve-year-old, had been thrown to the ground and was having his hair pulled and then being dragged through the dust by his feet: he was in the seventh heaven. A big boy interminably twisted the arms of one of his juniors. These "tortures" were often an excuse for cuddling—if they were not, on the other hand, in themselves a sign of the love that dare not speak its name. Maquet's love for Denie, for example, manifested itself by his holding his arms throughout the entire recreation, in order to stop him playing. In this way he both enjoyed him by pawing his arms, and took it out on him for his own shyness by preventing him from playing: the very pinnacle of love.

Between the outer wall and the end of the fence there was a small empty space. La Maisonfort had crept into this hole, and this position seemed to denote a subtle desire to be close to the seniors. Of course big, little and middling boys found themselves in direct contact many times a day, but the proximity of the fence gave that contact an air of greater intimacy here, for a fence implies a prohibition.

* Disciplinary head (Tr.).

Alban thinks about Serge Souplier (aged fourteen and a half), whom he knew a year ago at Maucornet's School, and who is now a fourth-former at Notre-Dame du Parc

*Conversation between the
Superior and Father de Pradts*

Father Pradeau de la Halle, the Father Superior of the college, was rearranging the papers that were scattered over his desk.

"Reopening is synonymous with worrying. How changed will we find our children? They come back bigger, healthier, better-looking, full of the new environment in which they have lived for nearly three months, and sometimes in a disturbing frame of mind. The state of moral neglect they live in during the summer holidays. . . . In such a vacuum it's rare for something not to go amiss. Once they are back, we take them in hand again. This October has been a very good month; God is blessing our work. Not to mention the increase in the number of pupils. . . . Have you the figures in your head? I have them in my heart: fifty-four pupils in the sixth form, sixty-eight in your division, eighty-seven in the third, a hundred and thirty-one juniors, ninety boarders. The overall standard of studies is excellent. Conduct is good. Nevertheless, the consolations this college gives me ought not to make us forget that if the number of communions is up by seventeen over October of last year, and attendance at chapel has improved, piety remains our weak point."

"Alas, it is the weak point in all our colleges."

"When some of the seniors or old boys talk to us frankly, and admit that their religious fervour has fallen off, they are, as you know, unanimous in putting it down to the number and length of the services: that is what the college represents for them more than anything else. It's stupid and sordid, but it is a fact, and one which we do not bear sufficiently in mind. I have given permission for non-attendance at certain services, but only as an experiment."

"At any rate, the experiment with the children from the Brothers has certainly been conclusive."

"That is not an experiment," the Superior said with a touch of asperity. "That is a rule of conduct from which I shall never

swerve. I would not have accepted this post if I had not been allowed to apply it here.”

Father Pradeau de la Halle had a fair complexion, light-blue eyes, light-brown hair which he tonsured himself—on his knees to humiliate the flesh—and a dimpled chin. Father de Pradts, prefect of the middle school, who was sitting opposite him, had the fine-drawn face of a southerner, greyish in complexion and covered with an intricate network of very thin lines, a fairly high forehead, and odd little grey-green piercing eyes, rather close-set, like a monkey’s. The lower half of his face tapered sharply, as though when he came into the world some doctor’s hand had pinched it between his fingers. One might say of these two faces, oversimplifying, that one was the face of idealism and the other of intellect, instinct with the sacred knowledge of lived experience, and that both had the beauty of seriousness. In his early days at the Park, Father de Pradts had worn a small silver cross in a button-hole in his soutane, and then a silver watch-chain, and even a little black ribbon round his neck, but all these had vanished piece by piece when the virtues of self-effacement had been brought home to him. It should be remarked in passing that the Superior liked whatever distinguishes, marks a man out: the cassock, garb of penitence, the tonsure. Father de Pradts was not over-fond of the cassock, which got in his way when he was playing football with his pupils: he had wanted to brighten it up. And yet to wear lay clothes, even for a few hours, would have been distasteful to him.

Nevertheless, similar as these two men were in their leanness, in the sobriety of their dress, in their distinction, their extreme dignity, any one who had taken it into his head to look at their shoes—the shoe reveals the man—would have found one difference between them: the Superior’s high-topped shoes tended towards the hobnailed boot of the soldier (of course, there was not the slightest affectation in this; no sense of the contriving of a personality that priests go in for when they want to appear proletarian); while the prefect’s low shoes tended rather towards the dancing-pump. Similarly, the Superior’s sash was woollen, and unfringed; the prefect’s was fringed. Similarly, the Superior’s

hands were somewhat coarse and thick, and the prefect's delicate and long, the sort of hands one might associate either with a madonna or a monkey, according to taste. The Superior was thirty-six years old; Father de Pradts was thirty-three but looked a good deal older.

The Superior's study was bare in the extreme. No arm-chair. Not a single object on the desk, apart from an ink-well and a paper-weight; nothing but exercise books, note-books, sheets of paper and three books (missals). Nothing on the walls, literally nothing, except a crucifix and some sheets of paper stuck on with drawing-pins—the school curriculum and various time-tables in the bursar's handwriting. No bookcase, but wooden shelves holding mainly paper-bound volumes in poor condition: Blondel, Goyau, Laberthonnière, Sangnier; only a dozen bound volumes: Lacordaire, Montalembert, Ozanam, Gratry; a few devotional books, but on the whole nothing of a date prior to the Restoration. A threadbare Second Empire prie-dieu. On the upper part of the walls, and around the two doors, traces of mouldings, of a whole decorative scheme which had been torn out and the vestiges crudely painted over. One of these doors opened on to one of the corridors of the college, the other on to a small waiting-room into which visiting parents were allowed only when accompanied by the janitor, in the manner of prisoners kept under strict surveillance.

The Superior went on:

“When the Park was entrusted to me by Providence, it was a rather snobbish establishment. With the introduction of the children from the Brothers, and the terms we allow to families which are less well-off than others, I have brought in an infusion of new blood. The merger has passed off with no difficulty at all—you are a witness to that as far as your own division is concerned.”

“No difficulty except perhaps at the beginning, but mere trifles. . . . The same thing this year. I noticed two or three boys raising their caps at the college gate to one of their schoolfellows from a different social class, or visibly hesitating to shake hands with him, or, if they did offer their hands, lowering their eyes as they did so, and I heard—during the first few days—a few *vous* which ought to

have been *tus*. I sent for those boys and had a few words with them. Everything was soon back in order.”*

*The little brothers,
ex-cuculs*

“I know of one ‘little brother’—since that is the accepted term—Miral, who when Salins ran into him early one Sunday afternoon and invited him to the cinema, declined on the grounds that he would have had to go home to put on his Sunday suit—he was wearing his weekday clothes. That is the sort of reflex they must shake off.”

“Perhaps Miral didn’t want to go to the cinema with a senior who was not from his own division and whom he did not know very well.”

“Do you think so?” asked the Superior. “Personally, I believe that story about the clothes. It’s so much more likely.”

“A small investigation would enable us . . .”

“Investigation! What would you expect to find? Simply a touch of shyness, which will soon pass. What’s needed is for our little brothers to loosen up. The realities of life and of history urgently demand it. We haven’t sought to mix Auteuil with Aubervilliers.† That is a task for others. We have mixed Auteuil with Auteuil, which is at once easier and more difficult. The working-class children we have here come from a somewhat special background. Some of their parents, as you know, work for the parents of their schoolfellows; Renouard’s parents are concierges in a block where Vautheret lives on the main floor. We should know the backgrounds of all our boys: it’s a prospecting job that should be carried out systematically.”

“It has been, Father, it has been. I have files which would stand comparison with those of the General Staff. But it’s a slow process.”

“Yes. To think that it took me nearly a whole school year to discover—thanks to Father Prévôtel—that the inadmissible

* This entire conversation should of course be read from the social viewpoint of 1912. (H.M.)

† As it were, Kensington and Bermondsey. (Tr.)

nickname they gave to the boys from the Brothers was not at all unkind, but was simply the result of their being too good at Latin!”

A faint smile wrinkled the prefect’s sensitive foxy face.

The children from the Brothers, who had turned up in a body with the arrival of the Superior, had promptly been christened the *cuculs** by their middle-class schoolfellows. The Superior had banned this nickname, and the *cuculs* had become the *frérots*†. Father de Pradts was smiling because he had his doubts about Father Prévôtel’s interpretation. Certainly the *cucullus* was the hood of a Roman cape, similar to that of the capes worn by less well-off French schoolboys at that time. But Father de Pradts felt that Father Prévôtel was being too erudite, and that *cuculs* had a much more trivial meaning in the minds of the boys.

It was the Superior’s turn to smile, but it was a smile of delight.

“And we only had to ask in order for that first nickname to disappear at once! You see how nice they are! I rather like ‘little brothers’. It reminds me of how the early Christians in Rome used to call each other ‘brother’.” (Father de Pradts smiled again, but only with his eyes. He had a habit of smiling with his eyes without moving a muscle, like every man of wit.) “Yes, our boys found just the right word: that’s exactly what it is, the Park: a brotherhood.

*Liberty, Equality,
Fraternity*

Why do right-wing people shudder when they see ‘Liberty, Equality, Fraternity’ inscribed on our churches? It might be the motto of the Park, and should the occasion arise I would have no hesitation in having it inscribed over the college entrance.”

A very slight frown appeared on Father de Pradts’ brow. Did the Superior notice it? He said forcefully:

“I know that there were those who regretted at least one of the two expulsions that I had to announce last term. Expelling Roguet for bringing in a copy of *Madame Bovary* and passing it round was perfectly understood: books of that sort are not for the eyes of

* Nincompoops

† Little brothers

Christian children; they will come to know them soon enough when they are tossed into the realities of life. But there were a few misgivings about de Margency. Believe me, I know what I'm doing. Whether our boys have titles and are very rich, like Linsbourg, or have names with particles, like some others, or are plutocrats like Bauer or Binaud, none of them betray the least sign of arrogance towards their schoolfellows: it never crosses their minds; I might say that it never crosses their hearts. All their lives they will keep that egalitarian attitude towards other social classes which they learned in college. And perhaps something more than egalitarianism. All the friendships which history has preserved were born at school or on the battle-field. De Margency was odiously snobbish: it could not be tolerated. Good at his books, to be sure. But hearts matter more to me than brains."

*Love much, tolerate
much, pray much*

"The rule which you have given to our system of education is: 'Love much. Tolerate much. Pray much.'* I agree with it utterly . . ."

"Any one who understands the meaning of Christ knows that the whole of Christianity is contained in three words: believe, love, pray."

* Jansenism may seem far removed from a Christian Democratic school. Yet it is from Saint-Cyran that we drew our inspiration for a motto which is very appropriate to the spirit of Notre-Dame du Parc. For junior schools, "he generally reduced what must be done with children to three things: talk little, tolerate much, and pray still more." Quoted, probably from Fontaine, in Sainte-Beuve, Vol. III p. 498, Hachette.

Curiously enough, Sainte-Beuve also draws a parallel between Saint-Cyran's educational formulas and those put into practice by Lamennais and the abbé Gerbet. I say "curiously" because we have encountered the Lamennais group on the book-shelves of M. Pradeau de la Halle.

And the indifference to "*décor*" that we have seen and shall see throughout this book both in the Superior and in Father de Pradts might surely be compared with the same indifference at Port-Royal.

It seems a far cry from Port-Royal to the *Avenir* movement and the Park, which favours that movement. And yet, on occasion, they come close to one another. (H.M.)

“St. Paul wrote: ‘Charity endureth all things.’ But you did not endure de Margency.”

“If we had been the only free educational establishment in Paris I would have endured him, with all the annoyance it would have caused me. But there are other Christian establishments in Paris which are not afraid of people with pretensions” (this shaft was directed against the Jesuits, who at that time were right-wing; the Jesuits were Father de la Halle’s *bête noire*, and he was theirs); “I shunted him in their direction. I want, and have had up to now, a *healthy* school, healthy not only in morals but in spirit, and for a Christian there can be no possible compromise with the spirit of arrogance. It may shock you, but I will even go so far as to say this: a pupil who cribs his composition once may at a pinch remain one of us, after a good shaking; a pupil who looks down on his schoolfellows is not and never can be one of us. We are a family, we should feel at home with each other. And ‘dead flies—just one dead fly—can cause the ointment of the apothecary to send forth a stinking savour.’ ”

All this was in the spirit of the encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, with which the Superior was imbued. Encyclicals succeed one another like popular songs; from time to time one of them makes a hit. But any one who was well acquainted with the college known as “the Park”, as we are not as yet, would have raised a serious objection here. The spirit of arrogance, for which they had “parted company” with the young Margency, to the apparent regret of Father de Pradts, was not supposed to exist among the pupils. But it existed well and truly on the part of what we may refer to as the government—which is to say the Superior and the four divisional prefects; there was no post of Prefect of Discipline—as against all those who were not pupils: parents, teachers, ushers, minor employees, and especially the bursar, marked out for contumely because of his unique attachment to the temporal. Whereas private talks were encouraged between prefects and pupils (usually during preparation), they were firmly discouraged between teachers and pupils; corrected exercises were sometimes subjected to irritating re-corrections on the part of the prefects, intended to show that the pupil was right and that the teacher was

an ass; dissertations by academicians were read first by the prefects, not by the teachers, who were regarded as unworthy of the least contact with the Academy; two priests who taught Latin and history were treated on the same footing as the lay masters. The slightest sign of an usher gaining an influence over a pupil, or of an intimacy developing between them which, however innocent, seemed indiscreet, was anathematized. The usher had literally no existence. Everything that can and should make one take an interest in a person (his family situation, his hopes of a career . . .) was systematically ignored when it came to the usher. As a pupil of the college three or four years earlier, he would have been a “little brother” beloved and honoured by all; as a *pion*,* he was despised by all; he was no longer a “soul”, but a pariah. As for the parents, we shall have more than one occasion to mention them: you will lose nothing by waiting.

Thus, in this college founded on democracy and liberalism, a new caste-consciousness had sprung up which might have been that of an order of mediæval warrior-priests—the caste comprising the five priests who constituted the government, and then all the boys, including the son of the concierge. As for the rest, a single rule applied: to disregard and belittle them. The government and the boys were bound by the steadfast unspoken awareness of their own superiority with which the priests were imbued: “We know how to handle them . . .” To these alone was reserved, one might almost say by divine right, the sacred and subtle art of managing the young.

At this point, there was a faint knock on the door, and without waiting for the Superior’s reply a boy of about fourteen came into the room. His hair, tumbling over his eyes, seemed never to have encountered a comb in its life. Tears were rolling down his cheeks and falling on to his sweater like large raindrops. He would not have wept more copiously if he had lost his mother.

“Father Superior, I’ve come to ask your permission to fight Simonnot after school. He called me an *apache* during break. We

* Slang term for usher or junior master. (Tr.)

wouldn't fight in the street, that would be bad form, but in the yard. The boys would be on the way out, so they wouldn't see us."

"Are you out of your mind? And in any case, who gave you permission to come to see me without an *admittatur*?"

"You had Trévier in yesterday without an *admittatur*. You told him that in very urgent cases . . ."

"That's enough. Father de Pradts will keep a special eye on your behaviour after school this evening. And for the next few days as well." Souplier snuffled, and from time to time his chest rose in a sob. "And why did you not ask Father de Pradts for this absurd permission, instead of bothering me?"

No answer. The child kept pulling at his sweater, as if he had a nervous tic.

An amused expression spread over the Superior's face.

"And what a lot of fuss over nothing! The Apaches are men whose territory was invaded, who were dispossessed of all their belongings and exterminated wholesale when they had done no harm to anybody. 'Apache' is not an insult at all; it's a term of friendship."

There was a further snuffle.

"Yes, but they scalped people."

"It would have been a good thing if they'd scalped your mane. Run along, and don't forget to comb your hair. When you have a proper parting you won't want Simonnot to ruffle it."

The snuffling, which had stopped, resumed more violently than ever.

"I haven't got a mane."

"And why shouldn't you? Lions are splendid creatures! Now, that's enough. Go back to your studies."

Souplier left. Father de Pradts had remained impassive throughout this little scene. Now he shook his head.

"Those baby's tears, for something so trifling!"

"No tears are laughable," said the Superior. "But you see what they're like! That's the second boy who has turned up here without an *admittatur*, because I was rash enough to let Trévier in on the spur of the moment. They scratch at the door and come straight in like puppies when they see a door ajar. Leaving prep

without permission! Turning up here like that! Still, I'd rather a touch of wilfulness than regimented children. Here now, listen to this: 'Rather disorder with love than order without love.' ”*

“Hmm!”

“Yes, hmm! It's from a Father Chevrier, whose name was unfamiliar to me, I confess. I'm not offering you that sentence as a rule of conduct. I find it exaggerated, and am obliged to find it so particularly in my capacity as head of a community. But . . . order . . . order” (he almost grimaced). “For example, when I'm in Paris” (the Park was a secluded place, a reserve) “and I see an Underground exit in the rush hour, all those men and women and youngsters, I say to myself that there always comes a moment when life bursts its bounds and upsets that precious 'order'. . . . We should be careful not to be too much at odds with life. I respect human freedom in the smallest child, even more religiously than in a mature man, because the child is defenceless. And it's better to shut our eyes to one fault; we shall be all the harder on the rest. Punishing all the time! Prohibiting all the time! Have you ever seen those mothers in the Bois, with their poor little brats? I see them sometimes when I go and take a look at your football games from a distance. 'Don't run! Don't go in the sand! There, you've made your hands dirty again! Haven't I told you not to wipe your hands on your trousers? That's it, now on your hair! Go on, kick those stones around! Spoil your shoes! I told you not to run. If I see you running once more, I'll give you a good spanking.' None of these prohibitions makes the slightest sense: it's simply a question of giving orders, and for people with small minds giving orders means forbidding. We ought to be the opposite of those mothers. Not be at them all the time. Trust them, respect them—I'll even go so far as to say trust them because we truly respect them. Keeping on a loose rein presupposes that one is holding the reins. With children it's very often—I don't say always—better to play fair and square. It may not work, but when it does, what an extraordinary thing! To be

* The Venerable P. Chevrier, *Le Vritable Disciple de N.-S. J.-C.*, with an approving prefatory letter from His Eminence Cardinal Maurin, Archbishop of Lyons. Paris-Lyons, 1925. (H.M.)

able to say: 'I aimed high, and it's because of that that I hit the mark!' Truth is more easily attained through life and in life than through reason and logic."

Beside the warmth of the Superior, Father de Pradts, with his stiff half-smile, seemed frozen. But he was not frozen, he was burning: beneath the ashes of his face, fires smouldered. He listened to the Superior with passionate attention. It was as though he were registering every word. And the brown eyes never left the blue eyes, following them in every movement of the head, just as tigers, sitting placidly on their stools, follow the trainer's movements unblinkingly.

They heard the voices of boys passing in the corridor, probably on the way to choir practice. One of them said (but the first word he spoke was barely audible):

"My father [?] is a swine . . ."

"That's Roguet's voice," the Superior said. "A vulgar word, of course: one of our well-to-do pupils. Have you ever heard a vulgar word from one of the little brothers?"

"If they watch their language out of regard for their upper-class schoolfellows, perhaps we ought to loosen them up in that direction too."

The Superior went on as if he had not heard:

"One must be stern because one loves: that is accepted as the word of the Gospel. But is it not also because one loves that one tolerates? I want our children to be happy with us. I believe that we are the only school in France where you could find written on the blackboard in a classroom one morning: 'The Park for ever!' "

"Ah! M. Cordère told you . . ."

"Yes. And one of the rare schools in France where there are day-boys who would like to be boarders. Sometimes one of the masters says to me: 'They're absolutely insufferable. How can one love them?' I answer: 'It's not hard for us to love them, whatever they may be: we simply have to believe in their souls.' I believe, I believe absolutely in the power of true affection. Any one who is loved has a tendency to love in return, if only a little. Isn't that a natural human impulse?"

"I'm not sure. In any case, not always."

“Nothing is ‘always’ with souls, except in eternity. But nothing is ‘always’ anywhere, I think. Do you know why the little brothers are such a good element here? Because when they came they were loved in advance.”

“Instead of that word ‘love’, which is bandied about too freely, especially in our circles, why not ‘affection’? Why not just ‘liking’? Liking is tremendous, provided it’s genuine and proves itself in deed as well as word.”

“St. John didn’t mean ‘liking’ when he said: ‘He that loveth not his brother abideth in death.’ I’m not afraid of words. When I was a young priest working with the St. Joseph group at Grenelle, whenever I struck up an acquaintance with a boy in the street, to try and bring him round to us, I used to ask: ‘Are you a Catholic?’ and I would explain to him that ‘Are you a Catholic?’ means: ‘Do you believe in love?’ And I would smile at him. Later on, if he joined us, and if I had occasion to reprimand him for something or other, I never did so without smiling at the end of my harangue. You can do more with a smile than with bushels of morality. We judge our boys by the sound of their laughter—not by their smiles; adolescents sometimes smile, children don’t—and this criterion of laughter hardly ever lets you down. It is for them to judge us by our smiles. But the smile must be spontaneous, it must rise to the lips as circles rise and spread on the water when a stone is thrown into it. A forced smile would be horrible. And finally, beyond the smile, even beyond affection or liking, there is prayer. Does prayer take the place of everything? In the realm of the concrete, no. But without prayer everything is nothing. . . . Come, my dear friend, I must let you return to your study. I don’t say ‘to your studies’—our children study, but do not give us time to study.”

“And to think that there are those among our parish colleagues who envy us our lives, which they imagine to be full of leisure! Our spare time constantly interrupted; having to be everywhere at once; and that almost continual tension of the spirit . . .”

“‘Watch and pray.’ Our tension of the spirit lies in that one redoubtable little word: watch.”

The Superior rose to show his colleague out: an extreme courtesy governed the relations between the priests of the Park.

The Superior as straight as a ramrod, his face aglow, Father de Pradts slightly bowed, his face curiously grey, the two men passed through a tiny waiting-room in which there were imitation silver cups and an imitation bronze athlete (prizes won by the school in sporting competitions), a battered arm-chair like something out of a solicitor's office, and a portrait of the previous Father Superior, put there as a penance for feudalism. The Superior's study was commonplace, nothing more; in the waiting-room one sensed, both from its exiguity and from the little artistic obscenities which had been relegated there, a desire to make it clear that this was a cast-off room, good enough for visitors, especially parents. The Superior thought that a man who "believes" can only be a priest or a religious: the laity were second-class Christians. He did not think this precisely, of course; he thought it vaguely. However, the waiting-room did have its agreeable detail. High up on one of the walls were two little carved angels, which as angels surprised no one, but were in fact cupids: the house was an eighteenth-century manor, a sort of folly, done up haphazardly at the end of the last century: we shall be speaking of it later on. If the floor of the Superior's study had once upon a time been waxed, it was probably years since this had ceased. Whereas the floor of the waiting-room, of which some of the boards were loose, had never been waxed at all, except perhaps a hundred and fifty Years before: it was scrubbed with soap and water. And the room was so small that when there were a lot of visitors, late arrivals had to stand in the corridor. As he passed the window of this room, whose shutters were open, the Superior nodded towards the gilded statue of the Virgin and Child which stood on the pediment of the college and gleamed through the darkness in the light from other windows. The pallid smile reappeared.

*Our Lady of
the Kids*

"Apparently they call her 'Our Lady of the Kids'. Isn't that charming? Only they could have thought that up . . ."

Flashback: Serge Souplier arrives at Maucornet's (October 1911)

At the beginning of the autumn term of 1911, that is, exactly a year before the scenes we have just described, a new boy had at once attracted attention at M. Maucornet's school in the rue de la Source at Auteuil, because of his quick tongue, his tendency to talk very loud—to bawl—his coarse language, his scruffy yet not vulgar appearance, his brown face, lively little brown eyes, and flattened dark brown locks, which were always dangling across his forehead and which tossed lightly over his eyebrows with every step he took. Maucornet's was a small crammer of some sixty pupils, where all the boys, aged ten to fifteen, knew each other, since they were together for prep, for recreation, and even for some lessons—drawing, for instance. The new boy had arrived at eight o'clock. At half-past eleven, when they came out, the entire school was talking about "Serge". At first, they did not know his name; he was Serge; this Christian name was intriguing, and every one kept repeating it, for pure pleasure; it introduced an exotic, romantic element into this very middle-class environment. "Are you Russian?" "No, Rumanian." "You're Rumanian and your name's Souplier?" "Idiot! Who told you I was Rumanian? But I lived in Bucharest for ten years." "What does your father do?" "He's a director of an insurance company." He said he was fourteen years and three months old. "You, fourteen! You're still wet behind the ears. And anyway, if you're fourteen and in the third form, you must be pretty backward." He admitted that he had added a year. (He might also have admitted that he had lived in Bucharest for only five years, and that his father was only a sub-manager in a second-rate insurance company.)

Souplier was the sort of boy whose name is accompanied with the exclamation: "What a terror!" A strange little creature. The scapegrace of the school. He was continually looking for a chance to play the fool. He cheated so openly at marbles that everybody was flabbergasted. He put water in the inkwells. And his vocabulary! It contained every conceivable swear-word. In the very first week, as he read out the marks in front of the whole school, M. Maucornet thundered: "Some parents have already

complained about you. People have come and asked me: ‘Where did he come from?’ ”

Serge listened fairly impassively, with even a rather defiant air. It was a good two minutes after M. Maucornet had finished with him that he suddenly burst into tears; and for a long while, though he seemed to have calmed down, a sob would escape him from time to time. Once more M. Maucornet thundered: “Don’t think you’ll get round me with your grizzling!” But the solitary sobs still burst forth, uncontrollably. A few boys surreptitiously laughed and mimicked them. Some one blurted: “He’s pretending! He’s in a rage!” Already he was disliked.

For two days he turned up in his patent-leather First Communion shoes (“We’re not just going to throw them out.”). Then they vanished. There had been teasing at school, and a despairing scene at home. Souplier was rarely to be seen except in one of two states, both extreme. Storming, boasting, putting his hand up in class even when he didn’t “know”, taking charge of games he knew nothing about (“I don’t mind having you in my team, but remember, I’m the captain!”), cursing everybody (“Idiot! Cretin!”), so worked up that he foamed at the mouth, and fighting with a brutality that shocked this collection of little weaklings. Or else crying. He would cry for nothing at all: for instance, if he mislaid his beret, or if his bottle of red ink was confiscated. It was rare for two or three days to go by without his being seen in tears. (Nevertheless one had to be careful. He would fall down and start crying. “Did you hurt yourself?” “No, but if I hadn’t made out that I’d hurt myself the beak would have told me off.”) He had become the *bête noire* of the whole teaching staff. He was showered with detentions and got five out of twenty for conduct, an unprecedented mark at the school. Impossible though he was, he was often unfairly accused. If a pen-holder disappeared, or a window was found broken, some nice little classmate had only to pipe up: “It was Souplier!” for him to be punished on the spot, without investigation. One day, after one of these undeserved punishments, Alban de Bricoule spoke up in front of the teachers, saying that “Souplier is the whipping-boy, and he always pays for the others.”

This young man had a very keen sense of justice. But on this occasion there was something more personal involved. For, from the very first day, Bricoule had felt attracted towards Serge Souplier.

*Amorous past of Alban
de Bricoule at the age
of fifteen and a half*

Truth to tell, this feeling was only one in an already respectable series of feelings of a similar nature: one is a seasoned lover at fifteen and a half. The first person through whom Alban de Bricoule had known love was his guardian angel. He could not look at his picture in his prayer-book without feeling a slight stir in his heart: it is true that this angel was extremely handsome.

At the age of nine, he was stirred by a little female cousin. After a children's tea-party, there was a family vote to elect 'the prettiest little girl' in the gathering. Alban rigged the ballots so that his cousin should be elected. At ten, catechism class proved fatal. There was "the girl". He knew her name, but she remained "the girl". He jotted down in a note-book the days when she did not come to catechism, described in detail her hats, dresses and shoes, and made little sketches of them, coloured in crayon; and ditto for her mother's clothes, only without colouring. After class, with a praiseworthy strategic sense, he dragged his governess along on the heels of "the girl" and her mother, to find out their address, which, however, he was never able to discover. Mme. de Bricoule knew all about "the girl", and was very amused. It was regrettable that "the girl" was not titled, but at least she had two surnames joined by a hyphen, which was the next best thing.

Mme. de Bricoule was less amused by the episode which followed. Alban's new flame (he was now eleven) was Hagar's son, pictured lying naked on his belly in the sands of the desert, in an illustrated Bible. Often, at eventide, Alban would leaf through the Bible, sitting by his mother's bed. His agitation became so great as he approached the picture in question that his mother noticed it; indeed, there was one occasion when, for fear of blushing, he turned over two pages together, including the dreaded one. Three weeks later, when Alban opened the Bible again, he saw that

somebody had drawn a little pair of underpants on Hagar's son with a pencil.

Up to the age of twelve—yes, twelve years!—he used to get into his mother's bed for half an hour before going to sleep. She would clasp him to her, in his nightshirt, warm as a kitten; they chatted, and sometimes they read the same book together; it was thus that they read the beginning of *Quo Vadis*: the love of the Romans came to birth under the sheets, which was extremely appropriate. While the English governess was still with them, she used to knock at exactly nine o'clock: "Alby, it's time." Mme. de Bricoule would curse the governess in her somewhat unpolished language, as soon as her back was turned. One day, in his thirteenth year, without even knowing what he was doing, he touched his mother in the wrong place. The next day she said to him: "From now on you won't be coming into my bed. You're too big." He accepted this unthinkingly, just as he had touched her unthinkingly. But she missed her warm little man badly.

During the summer holidays of 1910 (fourteen years and three months) came a sudden maturation of mind and body. Hitherto, when he had noted down his feelings on sheets of paper or in note-books, they had taken on a false and flowery expression under his pen; platitude reigned supreme, with capital letters everywhere, and exclamation marks. And this kind of self-deceptive falseness reached such a point that he interlarded his writing, without inverted commas, with many a love-phrase lifted from novels, from *Werther* to René Maizeroy; he was writing only for himself, and yet he tried to deceive himself! This habit now disappears; henceforth he is lucid, sincere, disencumbered of his execrable reading. A similar maturation in his body: he realizes that he has grown suddenly when he has to raise the seat of his bicycle; his voice breaks; he needs to speak louder in order to reassure himself that this organ really is part of his personality, as a man walking on slippery ground treads firmly in order to keep his footing. He wonders a little anxiously whether this condition will go on for ever. While the school year is propitious to romantic impulses, the only possible kind since one is still shy, the summer holidays are especially conducive to obscene thoughts, because of

those long leisure hours (those obscene thoughts which only a short time ago were called, with childish inappropriateness, “profane” thoughts, or “hirsute”(?) thoughts, or “adulterous” thoughts). Sensuality, even though unenacted, burns out all that unhealthy dead wood and that undergrowth of puerility and twaddle. And there is something solemn in this transition, so clear-cut, so palpable, so *classical*, from child to adolescent: yes, in these holidays of 1910, the child ceased to exist.

School-year 1910–11. Fifteen years of age. Long trousers, high collars, permission to smoke. The little girl cousin with whom he took the collection at a wedding. During the collection, and during the long still minute of the Elevation, that little hand in his, which squeezed it imperceptibly. Another young lady, aged twenty-two. Semi-audacities: putting an arm round her waist; but (being used to smaller models), she seemed so *big!* She frightened him a little. Even though, since the previous year, his motto, surrounded by pretentiously esoteric signs, had been: *Know—want—dare—be silent*, the third of these verbs had seldom been put into practice. September: death of M. de Bricoule. October term (1911): Serge.

But what did Mme. de Bricoule know about all this? And how did she adapt herself to it?

Mme. de Bricoule

Mme. de Bricoule, whose only child Alban was, and who looked thirty-five or thirty-six in 1911 although she was thirty-eight, had contracted an ailment at the birth of her son from which she had never recovered. Forbidden to tire herself in any way, she was almost continually recumbent, either in bed or on a couch; she took an occasional brief walk round the garden, but never went out. At one time there had been a great tribe of males in the house—Alban’s father, his grandfather and various uncles—then there were only his mother and father, and his grandmother, who soon died in her turn. In effect, only his mother, his grandmother and his governesses had looked after him. It is often said that children brought up by women alone are badly brought up. It would seem that our friend was no exception to the rule. Let us remember in this connection that Coriolanus was brought

up by women, for it is essential always to keep in touch with sacred history, by which we mean Roman history.

Mme. de Bricoule was an exceptionally broadminded person considering the education she had received, the background which had produced her and the age which we are recalling here. She had been a very dashing young girl, passionately fond of dancing, flirtation, jewellery, skating, riding in the Bois, and opera-going—all this without overstepping the mark, though she would cheerfully have jumped it had she not been what she was. Pretty in a delicate way, infatuated with the slimness of her waist and the really remarkable smallness of her feet, a good Christian by the standards of upper-class society, proud as a peacock, and snobbish to a degree which would be unbelievable today and which was perhaps the most striking thing about her, together with her sentimentality.

The countess (we give her this title out of politeness, for she would have found it difficult to justify it), driven by Alban out of the limelight into reclusion and shadow, had retained from her young days an ardent taste for adventures of the heart. There was a continual succession of persons in whom she took an interest: her doctor; a vague club-man who was a friend of her husband's; an Italian guitarist, something of a tramp, who used to come and play beneath her window (he was called Angelo, which was irresistible). Her ageing mother and the infant Alban assisted at the various stages of her adventures, which never strayed from the heart; they assisted her in them also when she poured her heart out to them, more or less: the whole household was involved in her ups and downs.

Mme. de Bricoule adored her son. He was fond of her. Their relationship was, however, and above all was to become, that of a horseman with a skittish mare. He had only to mention some name or other three or four times, and she “knew”. And he could not help mentioning them. There had been “the girls”, followed by Robert M—— and Roger D——. Fortunately, there ensued a whole series of actresses, for every time the young man went to the theatre he would come back in love, like those cats that fall in love each time you let them out of the house; he would cut their

pictures out of magazines and stick them in an album, and his mother then had no difficulty in tackling him about Mlle. Greuze, Mlle. Nory, Mlle. Ventura, Mlle. Dieterle and Mlle. de Bray. Up to the age of fourteen, Alban merely dissembled, lied and stuck it out: a dismal attitude, but the only one available to unfortunate children. At fourteen he grew claws, and it was he who, on occasion, took to outwitting his mother. This is how it started.

For one of those mysterious reasons peculiar to the parental mind, Alban had a bike but not the permission to use it. One day he bestraddled it and rode it to school. He was sitting in class when he looked out of the window and saw Emile (the servant), who had come to collect the bike. On his return home, his mother first of all rearranged her hair (she always rearranged her hair when her son went into her room); then there was a scene. "Besides, I know everything, and in particular I know all about that business in the spring. There weren't three of you. You were alone with D——. You were seen."

*Mme. de Bricoule's
first mistake*

A noteworthy episode. For the first time in his life, Alban had caught his mother out in a lie. For there was not, and never had been, any "business in the spring". What had happened was that in April Alban had hinted to his mother that he had spent an afternoon at Luna-Park with Roger D——, and that perhaps there, on the scenic railway. . . . He had not denied it when his mother had said to him: "Did you kiss him?", but had claimed that they were not alone, that another friend had been with them, that famous third party who makes everything all right. In fact there had not been the slightest truth in any of this. No Luna-Park, nor, alas, kisses. Nothing but showing off, a taste for lying, and amusement at sending his mother off on the wrong track. The most astonishing thing about it all was that when he had talked about this myth he had blushed.

This clash with his mother triggered off two reactions in Alban. The first was a feeling of aggressive excitement, so intense that he dashed it down in his diary, which he kept in a very succinct manner, as follows: "How happy I am! The one thing I lacked,

mama's opposition, I now have. Ah! so you want open war? I accept. You want to thwart me, to stand in my way. There's nothing for it but to break down your resistance, since you presume to join issue with me. Had you left me in peace, I would have done the same to you. But since you attack me, I riposte. It will be a splendid fight if you are up to the mark."

The next and final line, in brackets, was: "(Could one possibly be more of a fourteen-year-old than that?)".

His second reaction was to appreciate at its full worth the fact of having seen his mother in a shabby posture. She told lies. She said "I know all about it" when there was nothing to know. There was at the time a much-read magazine called *Je sais tout*. Alban nicknamed his mother *Maman-je-sais-tout*: "Mummy-know-all".

All this led to three resolutions: (1) to be more on his guard against his mother; (2) to strive, by good behaviour, to allay her suspicions until such time as he could regain a free hand; (3) to love Roger D—— even more than before, since she seemed to want to forbid it.

Alban's love for Souplier

In October Serve Souplier arrived, and Roger D—— did not return to school.

Serge. Hieratic and delinquent. Charming, violent and persecuted. Dishevelled as only little boys can be, dishevelled well below his years: his hair all over his forehead. Claiming to have seen a bull-fight in the Midi, and to have enjoyed it: besides, Rumanian and Spanish are the same thing (the dark complexion). In a word, *different*, as Alban was different. Indeed, a little more would have been too much: for instance, if he had really been Rumanian. Alban was head over heels in love. He kissed the pencil which Serge lent him, unstuck the label that Serge had glued over his coat-hook in the cloakroom—a label that Serge had licked with his tongue!—pinched one of his old exercise-books from his desk, took it home, and pressed his forehead against it, concocted a pen-holder identical with his and changed them round so as to have the pen-holder which Serge had held between his fingers, put in his mouth, nibbled. He could not bear to have him on the opposite side in a game in the yard. Once, at a time when Serge

was working a bit harder, Alban, at the risk of expulsion if he was seen, crept into the principal's study to copy out his notes and teach them to Serge. By a ruse—a pretended bet—he had procured a lock of his hair and wore it on his person in a locket, passing it off to everybody, Serge included, as the hair of a kitten of his which had died (it is true that the other side of the locket contained some hair of a favourite fox-terrier, also deceased). Serge had an extraordinary smell, an aroma such that afterwards, for the rest of his life, Alban wondered where it could have come from: from his body? or perhaps from the starched collar of his sailor-suit?—an aroma which was slightly reminiscent of Russian leather; one smelt it as one went past him, as one smells a flower. If, during some lesson given in the study hall, Fortune willed that he should sit in Serge's place, he would bury his face from time to time in his desk, in his smell, and the rest of the time he would keep his hand surreptitiously inside the desk, buried in Serge's beret, where his hair had been, and take it out perfumed. "*Vivien sent bon, plus que baume et encens*" (*Covenans Vivien*, a chanson de geste).

At first, Alban showed him his love by throwing stones at him during break; later, by pulling his hair when he ran into him, or undoing his tie, or murmuring "Idiot!" to him, or making him drop his satchel. The day when the boy pulled a face at him, he realized that he was no longer for Serge an object of total indifference. And then came a succession of huge thrills. Serge and Alban were playing marbles, and when Thierry wanted to come and play with them, Serge said to him: "Leave us alone!" (that *us!*). Serge having dropped all his drawing things, it was towards Alban that he turned at once; he laughed, and they both laughed together. Once, when a boy was chasing him, Serge hid behind Alban and said: "Bricoule, help me!" Another time, he gave him a little dig in the back as he went by! Throwing in at football, it was to Alban that he threw the ball. (It was the same with all these little touches as it is with dreams: you thought it was something tremendous; when you wake up, it's nothing.)

Alban's hopes were of the same meagre order. To see him, talk to him, be noticed by him. To seize any opportunity of defending

and protecting him. It was the result of deep stratagems, constantly revised, and, each week, the goal of a week's expectation, when Serge sat next to him during the Saturday art lesson, in which several classes were mixed and the pupils sat where they pleased. They shared the same drawing to copy from, and borrowed each other's paint-boxes or Indian ink. There was a lot of talk, and a certain amount of innocent horseplay. When the teacher was busy elsewhere, they read the same book together on the sly, and Serge would put his hand on his shoulder, or else their heads would touch, like those of the two boys in Xenophon's *Banquet* (a rather frightening reminder for Alban), and Serge would amuse himself by butting him gently; or perhaps their legs would touch, and remain momentarily pressed against one another. And how Serge would giggle when he was three centimetres out in a drawing which measured perhaps fifteen centimetres wide! After the lesson, as the ultimate proof of affection, Alban would go and wash his paint-box for him in the washroom.

For all that, in some respects Serge was almost "*comme il faut*": he had made his First Communion in an Eton suit, and his beret bore the name of an English dreadnought in gold letters. . . . Personally, Alban cared not a rap, but all that was excellent in case his mother poked her nose in where she shouldn't.

When Serge sent him kisses, accompanied by a "Bricoule, I love you! I love you!" Alban was not surprised to see him showing exceptional indifference during the days that followed. These whims meant literally nothing. The same indeed applied to the whole of Serge's behaviour. Somebody might attack him verbally and call him every sort of name: Serge did not hold it against him in the least. He would have a fight with Mangain, nearly tear him to pieces, and wait for him at the street-corner to start it up again; and ten minutes later they were more chummy than ever. He would stick close to Berget for an entire recreation, take his arm and suck up to him; then in the evening, coming out of school, he would start running to shake him off. Alban could not get used to this childish inconsistency, which bowled him over every time.

There was a great deal of disinterestedness in M. de Bricoule's feeling for his junior. For, after all, he wanted only to give to Souplier—to whisper advice to him; to help him with his homework; to give him tips for the end-of-term exams (but not in composition; Serge, the "bad hat", said that he would never copy in a composition exam, because that would harm his friends; M. de Bricoule, for his part, was not so scrupulous: he had cribbed more than once). There had been a whole apprenticeship in trust. Playing tag in the yard, he would say to him: "Go on, I won't catch you." The boy had taken some time to believe in his sincerity and ventured cautiously; but later, what bliss when Alban saw that he trusted his word! He would have liked to defend and protect him for ever. One day, when Serge was playing the fool during prep, Alban spotted the master's eyes trained on him, while Serge went blithely on without noticing. The elder boy dropped his pile of dictionaries, and let out a resounding "Damn!" Laughter, uproar, "Bricoule! Two hours' detention", and Serge was forgotten. Alban explained this to Serge, with a wealth of bull-fighting analogies: a torero diverts the bull's attention on to himself to save his colleague from danger. Serge replied with a few absent-minded words. In his imagination, Alban was good at consoling his friend if he got into trouble, but when, after a long silence, Serge burst into tears, Alban never knew what to say, and did nothing. Which shows that he loved him.

Serge was clearly aware that Alban had a predilection for him. In return, Alban was among the three or four "seniors" he liked best. Nevertheless, when somebody remarked: "Look, there's Bricoule—with Souplier, of course", there were no smiles, or if there were, they were not knowing smiles. And Serge's liking for Alban remained a thing of small moment. Coming out of school, he would link arms with Alban and say: "Walk home with me, do!"—but after five minutes' walking, he would leave him in the lurch. If Alban gave him some knick-knack (an artistically carved pen-holder, for example), Serge drew everybody's attention to it in prep: "Look what Bricoule has given me! And he wouldn't have given it to anybody else!"—but an hour later Alban would see the pen-holder in the hands of that ass Clouzet, to whom Serge had

made a present of it. If, one week, he got better marks, when they were announced in public it was to Alban that he immediately turned with a radiant look as if to offer them to him—but five minutes later, during break, when Alban was playing tug-of-war, Serge would push gravel under his opponent's foot to help him. Another time, at the Saturday drawing lesson, he even went so far as to find some pretext for leaving that famous place next to Alban which was the object of so much effort. Alban forgave him everything with the words: "He's only a kid!" and added, with the utmost sincerity: "As long as he's happy, that's all that matters." In his heart he told him: "Even when you ignore me, I still love you as much as ever."

*Further jousting
between mother and son*

Shortly after the beginning of term, Mummy-know-all had started teasing him again.

"How's the cherub?"

"The cherub?"

"All right then, the one and only, the wonder of wonders. That beastly little Roger."

"He hasn't come back to school."

"What? And you tell me that so calmly? Then you must be lying; yes, you're lying. You think you can get out of it like that. It wouldn't be hard for me to find out if I wanted to."

Mme. de Bricoule "knew everything" about an affair which had never existed. And she firmly believed in the continued presence at the school of a boy who was no longer there. There was a well-known novel at the time called *Maman Petitdoigt*. To her son, Mme. de Bricoule stopped being *Maman-je-sais-tout*, and became *Maman-doigt-dans-l'œil*:* "Mummy-Get-it-wrong".

Nevertheless, he kept a close watch on himself as regards Serge. The others had been passing fancies. With Serge it was something wild and solemn and a little painful, which, if not love, was at least a presentiment of it. "I must somehow manage to avoid that first mention of him. Because once will be enough for her to twig." He

* *Se mettre le doigt dans l'œil*: to be entirely mistaken. (Tr.)

held out for three weeks, but could keep it up no longer; he made up a story about one of the new boys who “ran beautifully”. Serge, in fact, ran very badly: from behind, his legs were to be seen whizzing off in all directions. But this was a touch of *Quovadism*: the æsthetes Nero, Petronius . . .

A week went by, and then Mme. de Bricoule asked:

“How’s the little runner?”

“What little runner?”

“Come on, now, the one who runs so well. I suppose he’s left the school too.”

That was all, but it was enough. Alban went crimson and buried his nose in his plate. Mme. de Bricoule had discovered the new little patch of raw flesh where she could prod him whenever she felt so inclined. She was everlastingly coming back to “these things”, beating against them in order to find out what they consisted of, as an imprisoned fly beats against a window-pane. Alban found this curiosity unhealthy.

Some days later:

“So, now that Roger has left . . .”

“Ah! So you checked up.”

“No, but I believe you.”

“You can’t resist coming back to the subject.”

“It livens things up. So, now that he’s gone, it’s going to start up again with somebody else. Let’s see, who? The runner?”

“I don’t care a hoot about the runner.”

“I *said* the runner, but it might have been anybody. It’s a pity they don’t take group photos at this time of year. If I’d seen one with a nice face, I would have played you the same trick about him. It’s the third form that’s the popular one, isn’t it? When I was at boarding-school, I also had a pash on one of the girls in my class.”

This was untrue. She had had no such thing. She said this in order to get herself admitted into her son’s world.

Of course, talking to him about the “runner” was a way of holding him, and of getting inside him. But also, secretly, stealthily, that irresistible attraction towards panderism which women have—especially lonely women, and above all lonely

women who are getting on in years—was beginning to burgeon in her. (Moreover, she had not been happy, or, to be precise, she had been happy only for three years: from her nineteenth year until the birth of her son.) And if she was not a procuress, she was at least an accomplice.

She could not take her eyes off him; and all the time there was that irresistible longing of hers to kiss him. . . . As for him, he would glance at her out of the corner of his eye and say to himself foolishly: “What is there about me that deserves to be looked at?”

It was about this time that the Italian guitarist went back to his country. He might have done so much sooner if Mme. de Bricoule had helped him with her purse. She had not done so, certainly not out of stinginess, but because she wanted to keep him.

There were tears. Whenever Alban saw tears in his mother’s eyes, he wondered whether it was because of the love-object of the moment, or because of himself. This time, there could be no mistake. There were tears, and then there was M. Christian de Chantocé, a cousin and a captain in the —th Hussars, seconded from his frontier garrison to a desk in the Invalides.

Chanto

In the course of our story, we shall catch occasional glimpses of Mme. de Bricoule and Captain de Chantocé, a Breton with a fair complexion, a fair, silky moustache, and fair, blue-green eyes—“the colour of the Breton sea”, Mme. de Bricoule, who had never seen Brittany, or even the sea, used to say—the very embodiment of charm and distinction. A “love affair”, but what sort of love affair? “Honourable”, no doubt, both because of the lady’s very fragile health and because of what she was and what she believed herself to be; not to mention a dash of religion. There were lovers’ kisses, one supposes. Were there familiarities? It is not necessary to our purpose either to know or to care. All that will matter are the shadows cast by this love on another love which is the subject of this tale.

It was as often as not at dusk, before the lamps were lit, in the hospitable half-light, when the raucous voice of the gramophone was no longer grating out some tune by Delmet or *Le Carnaval de Buenos Aires*, that Mme. de Bricoule was emboldened to speak of

“Chanto” (she had the schoolboy habit of abbreviating). Sometimes she would begin by apologizing—“I’ll only talk about him for a little while”—or else she would stop in mid-flow, with a flutter of embarrassment—“I’m boring you with my little stories . . .”—and Alban was touched at these moments by a suggestion of humility in her voice. Another day she would say to him sourly: “You didn’t ask me how he was yesterday evening, so I didn’t talk about him. I assumed you weren’t interested.” And it sometimes happened that, while talking about Chanto, she saw that Alban’s eyes were elsewhere, that he wasn’t listening, and yet she continued, such was her need to unburden herself. He was the only person to whom she could: she lived as a recluse.

Thus there was a whole initial period of her love when she opened her heart to her son, going so far as to ask his advice, and being so full of her little anecdotes that she no longer thought about the “runner”. As for Alban, he remained constantly on his guard. Then there came a day when, the first flush of enthusiasm having died down, and M. de Chantocé no longer providing much new material, she pulled herself together and realized the extent to which she had given herself away.

“What’s become of the runner? You never talk to me about him now. Ah! You’re afraid of blushing. You’re hiding behind Bluey . . .”

To conceal his discomfiture, Alban had buried his face in the fur of their blue Persian cat. In the past, he used to prepare himself for the twilight skirmishing as a man prepares himself before appearing in front of a judge: prevarications, alibis, an air of supreme astonishment, an expression of supreme nonchalance—the whole familiar bag of tricks. But now, lulled by his mother’s monologues about herself and Chanto, he was a little rusty.

“Yes, you must be blushing! Is he still nice to you? Do you do his homework for him?”

He had made up a story a few days before about Serge helping him with his exam: the object being to make Serge appear lovable and to show that he himself was loved. But today the wind had changed.

“I see very little of him. I assure you, there’s no comparison between him and D——”

“I talk to you about Chanto. Why won’t you talk to me about this idol of yours? It’s no use denying it. I see a lot of things that I don’t mention. I found a compromising note on the floor in your room. I’m a bit of a detective, you know.”

Vexed, she set about trying to catch him unawares. Having announced that she was going to stay in bed all day, she would appear unexpectedly; having said that she wouldn’t be coming up (from her room to the floor above, where Alban’s room was), she would suddenly throw open his door without knocking. One evening she burst in like this while he was writing some notes about Serge. With studied calm he rolled the sheet of paper into a ball, slipped it under the table, and tucked it into his shoe. But it was obvious that his mother had seen his gesture.

His cupboard was open. On the upper shelf were piled exercise books, files, and papers of all kinds, quite harmless; it was his filing-case, which was locked, that held what he called “the garden of secrets”.

“What’s in there? No need to ask. We’ll have to tidy all that up a bit one of these days.”

“It wouldn’t do any harm.”

“And to think that I never search in there!”

“Who’s stopping you?”

“I imagine that if you show me the cupboard there can’t be anything there.”

“Where, then?”

She gave a knowing smile.

“In the filing-case.”

He got up and went briskly towards the filing-case.

“Do you want to have a look? Here, it’s all yours. The key’s in the lock; all you have to do is to turn it. Why don’t you? Go on, then!”

As he was standing next to her while she sat in the arm-chair, she seized him by the arm, sat him on the arm of the chair and pulled him down towards her, one hand on his forehead.

“And what’s underneath this forehead? The same as in the cupboard, the filing-case, everywhere: bad thoughts. Horrid little beast! I just wanted to give you a fright.”

It would have been elementary wisdom on Alban’s part to let himself be fondled. But his deepest quirk—do to others, but let no one do anything to you—was too strong for him, and he disengaged himself and stood up again so quickly that the kiss she wanted to deposit on his brow alighted on his hair instead. She had felt his muscles contracting in his effort to escape from her. When he had freed himself he heaved a small sigh, of relief. She heard it quite clearly, but kissed him again, forcibly.

“You’re playing a hidden game—don’t think I can’t see through it. And besides, you make me spew with all your blustering. You’ll see one of these days! I’ll bring you to heel. You’re only nice when you’re ill. Oh, no, you don’t play the bully then. As soon as you start to get better, you become unbearable again.”

“You should give me a thrashing. I’d be in a state of collapse and then I’d be nice.”

“You know very well that I’m not strong enough to give you a thrashing.”

With this despairing admission, she went downstairs again.

Alban was always astounded by these gusts of violent vulgarity which were liable to overcome his mother when she lost her temper. Such a delicate lady, the personification of all that is represented by the word “well-bred”, full of her vapours and her languors, with a genealogy that went back at least to the stone age. . . . And indeed, from one point of view, “You make me spew” was perhaps typically the language of duchesses, in the sixteenth or seventeenth century. But from another point of view, it was the language of the fish-market.

Alban was by now accustomed to this blowing hot and cold: words of endearment one day scarcely veiled malevolence the next. One day her face would be full of menace, seemingly capable of anything. The next she was cooing: “You know I only want what you want”, when in fact she spent her time forbidding him this or that. Alban began to realize that the tone was set by the state of his mother’s relations with M. de Chantocé at any given moment.

Such was the atmosphere when, in March (1912), Alban suddenly had a breakdown: the recent death of his father had keenly affected him, and the quality of the teaching staff at Maucornet's, which was adequate for intermediate classes but not for preparing pupils for the *baccalauréat*, had forced the future candidate into excessive personal effort. . . . The doctor ordered immediate rest and distraction, and Mme. de Bricoule agreed to let her son spend a month in Andalusia—a certain cure, since he was wild with joy when he heard of it. We shall see, or we already know, why.

For some years, as a result of having attended various corridas, Alban had been possessed by a violent passion for bull-fighting. This passion had been rendered almost frantic by frustration; for years he had been dreaming of being initiated into the art with young bull-calves of an age suitable to his—say of about a year and a half. At the time this would have appeared very surprising to Frenchmen, apart from southerners, and they would have assumed that it required considerable courage. In fact, this practice was as common among Spanish adolescents of all social classes as football among ours; and as for courage, it required less than it does to hurtle along the highway as all the young of today do almost as soon as they reach the age of sixteen. What was more unusual was that Alban's *sangre torera* ("torero blood") was not confined to one particular pastime but spread over his entire life. It was not so much a matter of seeing bull-fights, or even taking part in them, as of a certain attitude to life, compounded at once of a taste for challenge and risk (which, together with technique, are the basis of bull-fighting), a taste for domination, a taste for flouting popular opinion, and something which can only be called a taste for fear; and he ended up by having the same avid need to satisfy all these tastes as people have to satisfy themselves with food or drugs. It was this that was the basis of Alban's bull-fighting fever; the picturesqueness, the setting, the trimmings, were merely ancillary.

His happiness resounded like clashing cymbals. Let us admit it quite bluntly: Serge was swept away like a leaf in the torrent of taurine felicity. But even before his departure, Alban had looked

to the future. For he had heard from Serge that in the Easter holidays the latter would probably be taken away from Maucornet's and sent to the college of Notre-Dame de —, a well-known religious establishment in the same district. And he prepared the ground with his mother in order to follow Serge. This was not difficult. With a view to the final spurt before the *baccalauréat*, a move to a big college which was obviously superior on the academic level to the Maucornet place was advisable.

Alban in Spain
(March–April 1912)

Alban went to Andalusia (March–April 1912), fought bulls there, had a romance with the daughter of a bull-breeder, Soledad de La Cuesta, and refused the promised “gift of her lips” because the price she demanded was monstrously excessive: that he should fight and kill a young bull whose viciousness was out of all proportion to the age and bull-fighting skill of a French schoolboy. We have seen all this in *Les Bestiaires*.

We saw too that it was during her son's absence that Mme. de Bricoule broke into his filing-case. On leaving, he had offered her the key, which she had refused. But she had blurted out: “If you're prepared to give me the key it must mean that you've removed everything you've been hiding from me.” To which he replied: “open it and see.”

It was a repetition of the first scene, but this time it was the last straw. Once again he was amusing himself by playing with fire, “citing” her as a torero “cites” a bull. “Ah! so you think you can fool me, my boy! You're challenging me! Well, we'll see about that.”

There was a small linen bag in the bathroom which contained all the keys—long separated from their various locks—collected from the lumber-rooms of the huge house. She did not find just one, but two keys in it that opened Alban's filing-case.

But when she discovered, in one of its pockets, a little bunch of grapes, stripped and shrivelled, which she had given him some years before—without thinking, or simply for fun—and which he could only have kept out of sentimental feeling towards her, she

had given up the idea not only of pursuing her search but of ever opening the filing-case again.

*Serge and Alban to move
to the Park (April 1912)*

When Alban returned to Paris on 22 April, the Easter holidays had begun. His first step was to wait in the vicinity of Serge's house for the whole of one Sunday morning, certain that the boy would eventually emerge to go to Mass, and he would then be able to accost him and talk to him. Serge did come out, with his sister. Alban learned that he would be "starting" at the Park, and in the ensuing four days he extorted from his mother the decision that he too would move there. He did not tell Souplier the real reason for this transmutation, judging it rash and humiliating to show him the extent of his attachment. He did not yet love him enough not to mind showing him the extent of his attachment.

Now we leave the temperate regions, the foothills of special friendship. We come now to the peaks and chasms, and the surging, raging clouds. The shadows deepen, the atmosphere grows leaden: arise, ye longed-for storms!

*Flashback
(continued)*

M. de Bricoule junior, having been purged on 26 April (1912) and having communicated on the 27th—a double rite on two levels, analogous to that of the young noblemen of old who, the day before receiving their knighthoods, had a bath and received communion—M. de Bricoule junior "started" at Notre-Dame du Parc on the 28th. In the morning, dressed to the nines with a view to making a dazzling impression, although still in black, like an *infante*, in mourning for his father, he waited for Serge outside his house. He wanted to make the first journey to the Park with him, to cross that threshold of the unknown for the first time with him, to present himself to this new society for the first time in his company: symbolic gestures, all of them, which, he thought, might have some influence on the future. But he waited in vain, and made the journey sick at heart with a terrible foreboding: Serge's parents had changed their minds during the past few days and left him at Maucornet's.

He was looking for him distractedly during break when Father Prévôtel called him over to have a talk with him in the entrance hall. He was a youngish man, weasel-like in appearance, insipid in speech, anxious to be friendly, but excessively shy; shyness trickled down his forehead in drops of sweat. While they were chatting Serge—O joy divine!—appeared, came up to Alban and shook hands with him.

“Ah, you know each other!” the priest said.

“Oh yes, for a long time, too,” Serge blurted out.

“I waited for you this morning,” said Alban.

“The thing is, I’m a boarder . . .”

Consternation. How little they would see of each other! Just how little, he was soon to discover: only on Sunday, at ten o’clock, during the general *exeat*. But he retained a comforting memory of the warm tone of Serge’s “Oh yes, for a long time, too.” And he was pleased that his relations with Souplier had been brought into the open in this way during his first hour at the college.

As for Father Prévôtel, on coming away from their interview Alban had muttered aloud: “*Otro toro!*”—the phrase with which *aficionados* demand another bull, to replace one that has shown itself too much of a duffer.

And he soon saw Serge again, during recreation, now dashing around the yard like a rutting camel careering through the herd, now up on his high horse, bossing the boys about in his rather thick, strangled voice, utterly at ease, as if he had been at the college for six months—slightly disappointing in his ease and self-assurance.

There were ten boys in the upper sixth form. Alban at once singled out four: Fernand Le Bey, pleasant-looking, with beautiful teeth, very likeable; Jean Harlé, handsome, smart, intelligent-looking, likeable; Philippe Lestonnat, the star pupil, prepossessing and friendly; Paul de Linsbourg, no beauty, but intelligent-looking. The others looked like nobodies.

He felt that he would make friends with these four. The presentiment was only semi-accurate. He was to make friends with a boy called Salins and with Linsbourg, but also with a certain Giboy, whom he had at first taken for a nobody. And not

with the bright one. As for Jean Harlé, he disappeared after three days. It was rumoured that having been punished for a bad performance in the *Alcestis* of Euripides, he had climbed over the wall (he was a boarder) and gone home; hence expulsion. The idea of a pupil being punished for lack of theatrical talent, and then skedaddling, had a certain immediate glamour that was a very far cry from Maucornet's.

Alban's new schoolfellows greeted him with some reserve, which hurt him a little, infatuated as he was by the life of the college. The nobodies were friendly, but those he had singled out for preference kept their distance. He noticed that when he arrived in the morning none of them volunteered a handshake. As for Linsbourg, Alban and he had scarcely laid eyes on each other for the first time, during the first lesson which Alban attended, than they were sizing each other up: in more hot-blooded times, at this one look they would simultaneously have drawn swords. It was the apotheosis of absurdity: two angry cocks, angry for no reason, or rather for no reasonable reason, but solely because they were equals. They had never said a word to each other, but they knew each other's names, and that was enough: "*A moi, Comte, deux mots*".* Who would not have thought that these two boys, from the same environment, isolated in a different environment, would take to each other at once? But it was this that made them bristle at one another.

Unlike Maucornet's, where, just as one stirs substances to prevent them from setting, an usher would keep stirring up the boys during recreation to make them go on playing, there seemed to be no objection at the Park when boys stood about talking—even in pairs, which at Maucornet's would have caused immediate ructions.

*André Lapailly,
alias Bonbon*

On his fifth day at the Park, Alban happened to be standing in a group by the fence which separated the playgrounds of the upper and middle schools when he saw a young boy of barely fourteen

* Don Rodrigue to Don Gomes in Corneille's *Le Cid* (Tr.)

with a very pretty face and bare legs approaching from the other side escorted by friends. With his black wavy hair, which stopped short naturally at the nape of the neck, where it grew in that little triangular peak which is said in southern France to be a promise of bliss, and curled round very finely chiselled, slightly pointed ears, and with his laughing eyes, his complexion pink as a budding rose, his delicate dimpled chin and slim-waisted figure, he called to mind a little faun. He came and shook hands of his own accord with all the seniors across the fence, and said "Hallo, Bricoule" to Alban, shaking hands with him as well. Alban was a little surprised that a boy from another division should know his name and greet him so cordially. The "faun" took a tin of caramels out of his pocket and proceeded to offer them around among the seniors, Alban included. If he laughed, however slightly, the blood rose to his cheeks. Other middle-schoolboys soon clustered round him. They looked at him with obvious admiration and excitement: it was at once apparent that he was king among them. One of them leaned an elbow on his shoulder. Another buttoned his jacket. Another pulled his pocket-handkerchief out of his pocket. Another lifted him up by the wrists, and he came back for more. Alban heard him being called Bonbon, and remembered having already overheard this nickname several times on the lips of Giboy and Linsbourg (Bonbon had no fewer than four nicknames, which shows how popular he was: Bonbon, Pussy-cat, Pink Chicken—because he was said to be as cold as marble, and marble called to mind the pink palace of Boni de Castellane in the avenue du Bois—and Phizog). The boys referred to him indiscriminately by one or other of these four nicknames, from which it may be gathered that it was essential to be an initiate in order to understand conversations at the Park, but we shall stick to Bonbon here so as not to confuse you.

The following morning, for the first time, Linsbourg and Giboy came and shook hands with Alban, Linsbourg asininely lifting his elbow after the fashion of the time—the Queen of England had raised her elbow while shaking hands because she had a boil under her arm, and all the snobs in the world had been following suit ever since. And the day after, Giboy, having dragged him off

during a recreation period into the beautiful gardens adjoining the playgrounds—which had always been known by the mysterious name of “la petite Espérance”—had an important conversation with him, in which he lifted a corner of the veil which concealed the arcana of the college. The handshake and the caramel from Bonbon—that kid!—had won him “acceptance” among the seniors of his own form. A strange initiation, but one full of meaning, as we shall see later on.

Traditions and customs of Notre-Dame du Parc. There is a system known as “the Protectorate”, whereby an older boy takes one of his juniors under his wing; at least, a certain number of older boys, who call themselves “the Group”. It is, if you like, somewhat analogous to what are, or used to be, the traditional rites in our “grandes écoles”. Paul de Linsbourg is Grand Master of the Protectorate.

Portraits of various pupils in the first and second division. Here is the portrait of Guy Denie (fourteen and a half), the friend of Paul de Linsbourg (sixteen and a half).

Denie

Guy Denie, the son of a storekeeper in a big textile house, was delinquency personified. All the instincts of delinquency were gathered together on his over-lively little mug, on his too mobile mouth, in his pupils gleaming with insect-like abjection—that face of his, so unprepossessing yet irradiated by the spirit of corruption. A sordid, venomous delinquency, not to be compared with Serge’s good-natured misdemeanours. Putting the clock forward; dirtying the plate which the kitchen-boy had just cleaned; lifting the lever of the electricity meter so that when you wanted to put the light on you thought that the fuses had blown; stealing his sister’s books and selling them; tearing his short trousers to make his parents buy him long ones; when he was taking the collection in chapel, on parents’ days, passing the plate so quickly that some people had no time to give anything, and the receipts fell; writing obscene inscriptions on the lavatory walls in the unmistakable handwriting of one of his innocent classmates; unable to pick up an object without breaking it, or to close a door without slamming

it, losing everything and stealing things from others, even down to their tooth-brushes. None of this was noticed by the authorities, or else they did not want to notice it, whereas with Serge they noticed more than there was. Denie was protected by Linsbourg, who in his turn was protected by his father. It must also be said that he was a hypocrite, though not lacking in style, in the sense in which Sainte-Beuve writes of Chateaubriand that he dropped his mask from time to time on purpose, out of impudence and sporting spirit.

When Alban arrived at the college, Mme. de Bricoule had discovered after a few days that the son of the saddler in the rue Michel-Ange went there too. A saddler, well and good; the equestrian aristocracy extends as far as saddlers, even as far as grooms. But when it came to a storekeeper's son, it was too much, and she took up her pen to write a vehement letter to the Superior. Alban had to plead with her, and there was a fine row. She swallowed her indignation, but it remained with her to the end. Alban liked the common people; he found them more genuine; he had to keep a tight hold on himself during games or on other occasions in order not to take the side of the most lowly born with an instinctive favouritism. And nothing could be funnier than his strategy for concealing from his mother the demophilism of the Park: sometimes lying outrageously in response to the eternal question: "Do you know what his father does?", sometimes brazenly adding a handle to the name of the petty officer's son, sometimes cutting in two names whose first syllables were De or Du, a stratagem which was calculated to cause some perturbation at the end of the school year, since the prize list that gave the game away had at all costs to be hidden from Mme. de Bricoule.

The Protectorate. The Iliad of the Protectorate. Its exploits and its heroes.

*Slippery young
snakes*

When you are eleven years old and you want to live your own life—which is perfectly natural: there's no time to lose—you lie

continually and to every one; it is the only defence, or almost. Those who go into raptures over the perfidy of women are of the breed which attributes to them all kinds of prodigies, both for good and evil, to justify the prostration before them which its desire for them engenders. The perfidy of children is no less great, but it is less notorious, because it has less effect.

It was the little brothers in particular who were masters of the lie, for they added to the lying of the child defending itself against adults a long inheritance of social lying, of the small defending themselves against the great. The means of escape adopted by these slippery young snakes were the delaying tactic, the art of tangling things up to the point of inextricability, deliberately meaningless remarks, a genius for going back on their word, straight physical flight (all this, to Alban's mind, suggesting not so much snakes as muddle-headed bulls, dangerous by reason of their very witlessness, disconcerting for the matador), but above and beyond everything else, the lie: each of these children lived inside a cathedral of lies, and the speed with which they made up these lies, in spite of being so dense when it came to answering the teachers' questions, had, like cathedrals, a touch of the divine. When Lefort was joined by Salins after school and greeted him with a beaming smile, but was already astride his bike—"You're not going?" "Oh no, I just want to test the free-wheel"—there was a fair chance that he would ride off for good, leaving the other stranded. When somebody put his hand on a bare thigh—"You're making me cold!" "Cold?"—he would feel his hand, and it would be boiling. When Bernel said, in a tone of quiet resolution: "It's absolutely dead certain", what was dead certain was that he would not do what he had promised. Perhaps he might have done it if he had not added "It's absolutely dead certain", for whenever any one was definite and circumstantial he was lying: "My mother wants me to stay at home on Sunday, because that's the day we have some cousins arriving from Chateauroux." Or else: "I'll come at a quarter past eleven, or rather twenty past. Yes, that's it, twenty past; try and be on time", which indicated a firm decision not to turn up. When some one said: "You can count on me", you shuddered. With the slippery young snakes, precision of statement

was a sure sign of lying. The happy and hapless Protectorate floundered in a sea of whoppers.

The obfuscation of the slippery young snakes ought not to be confused with that of another type of obfuscator: the *bona fide* obfuscators. "How many are there in your dormitory?" "Forty." There were twenty. "How long have you been at the Park?" "Four years." It was two years. "Where are you going for your holiday?" "I'm staying in Paris." A week later you ask again: "I'm staying with my grandparents in the Lozère." "You told me you were staying in Paris." "I never said that." All this with the utmost sincerity. Sometimes this went hand in hand with a talent peculiar to boys of ten or eleven and to nymphets, that of being at the same time innocent and knowing: exquisite secrets, conspiracies, lies, chummery larded with mysteries of every kind, and then, *nothing*: all the apparatus of "evil" without the "evil"; smoke without fire. "They know neither what they think, nor what they say, nor what they do": this was how Father de Pradts was later to sum them up, as we shall see. But they knew what they wanted, which was to lead their elders up the garden path: "Why don't you want to?" "Because." "Where are you off to like that?" "Nowhere." "Come to the Molitor to-morrow. There's a topping film, *The Revolt of the Elephants*." "I don't like elephants." But enough.

At all events, the obfuscation, the tall stories, the perjury, the prevarication, all the childish and adolescent fantasy created by the slippery or innocent young snakes contributed a great deal, needless to say, towards maintaining at the Park that incessant ferment which we have mentioned.

Heavy-heartedness followed by exhilaration, or vice versa, for the technique of blowing hot and cold was what you generally had to put up with from these little ones, hope and its high moments, assignations to which the other failed to come, the constant waiting for the loved one, but also, with equal avidity, for the confidant to whom it would all be poured out, the froth of misunderstandings that mushroomed endemically, the tricks and turns to evade the vigilance of the authorities, the hazards of every sort, always attributed to Providence, the restless shiftings of situations and feelings—all this meant that there was always news

to be imparted, notes to be passed, in code or not as the case might be, urgent advice to be sought, in short, it kept the clan in a state of constant over-excitement, comparable to the perpetual bubbling of water at the mouth of a spring.

The main thing that held these boys together was telling each other “the latest” of their adventures, and there were excellent comedy scenes—dialogues of the deaf—when Linsbourg and Giboy got together, the one barely listening to what the other was saying, drumming impatiently with his fingers, and interested in one thing alone: getting his own story in. From time to time you would hear one of them say: “Look, for God’s sake, let me speak!” The speaker would get a portion of his story in, then let the other resume his. And they each took their time, since, unable to speak of their affairs except among the initiated, the boys had to hold themselves back a great deal, and once they let themselves go were inexhaustible. An adventure lived once then told thrice was lived four times—a considerable margin of profit. It was not unusual for some of them, having separated at seven in the evening, and due to meet again at eight the next morning, to have covert telephone conversations during the course of the evening, because they had a fund of stories as yet undisgorged and which could not wait: they even confessed themselves to (and asked for advice from) their enemies. Not to mention the night, when, in their sleep, they still dreamed about one another. Alban, a compulsive writer as we know, made lists of the stories he would have to tell the following day.

And amid all this chatter, how much whispering and laughter there was! One of the clichés of our day is that people are bored in the modern world. In the Protectorate no one was ever bored. True, the protégés were said to hate one another, but the fact remains that gaiety was one of the hallmarks of the protectors. In the refectory, at study, in class or in the yard, it was always among this group that the most dazzling amusement reigned. This attracted future protégés: laughter is especially contagious among children; when the seniors and the middle or junior boys had laughed together, the latter were conquered. This method of seduction was not deliberate on the part of the seniors; one might

call it one of nature's wiles. On the other hand, such visible enjoyment of what they were and what they did was regarded with amazement by the nobodies. Amazement is an understatement. If gaiety fails to seduce, it shocks: when they laughed too much, the nobodies could be seen putting on prissy airs. If one of the nobodies came up and listened, the heroes would stop talking, or change the subject, or even disperse, and the laughter subsided. Such laughter, however, was not, as one might have thought, because they were saying dreadful things. There was never anything specific in their remarks, so much so that one might have eavesdropped for years on the conversations of the Protection without knowing precisely what they were about. A triumph of blessed litotes.

At that time, in the rue de Rivoli (or the rue Saint-Honoré), at the corner of the rue Cambon, there was a well-known toy-shop called *The Children's Paradise*. Alban could no longer look at the college porch without imagining it surmounted by the inscription over the shop-front: *The Children's Paradise*.

*The setting for these
marvels*

There is something we have forgotten, and that is to describe the appearance of this college full of fanciful confessions and sacrilegious communions—an excellent college nonetheless, as will be seen in due course. Everything we have just said about this most liberal establishment went on in dilapidated buildings with little spiral staircases which smacked of the castle, little secret or condemned doors which smacked of the *toril*, and thick iron bars on the ground-floor windows, which smacked of the prison. The rain, trickling from these black bars, had left liquid trails of the same colour all the way down the wall to the pavement. Yet this somewhat gloomy building, an eighteenth-century manor-house, had once been a folly, built at the time when Auteuil was in the country, but enlarged and tastelessly restored at the end of the nineteenth century: the chapel, in particular, dated from 1893. There were classes in drawing-rooms and classes in bedrooms (the upper sixth form numbered no more than seven pupils). The

vagaries of the pupils may have been influenced by the vagaries of the place. Seen from the street, the college had two obvious characteristics. The first was that, with its fairly long and imposing façade, it was situated in a very narrow street, so that there was no vantage point to set it off (as with certain churches in Paris, for instance Notre-Dame de Bonne-Nouvelle); the second, that it had only two stories above the ground floor, that is, that it was low; and furthermore the outside walls, of a greyish-yellow hue, had subsided in some places, and bulged out like paunches.

If Notre-Dame du Parc seemed to partake of castle, prison and *toril*, this was a great deception, belied by the original purpose of the place and the afore-mentioned sign: *The Children's Paradise*. But if it also partook of the conventicle, this was true enough, because it was full of cliques and secret hierarchies, and of an entire clandestine liturgy parallel to the overt one.

The decrepitude of Notre-Dame du Parc was not without honourable causes: it was partly through cutting down on outward show that the school had been able to take in poor children. And besides, the Superior liked this shabbiness, which was a constant reminder that the spiritual alone mattered; thus, once again, this almost "modernist" house revealed a note of unconscious Jansenism. The blessed palm-leaves hung on the walls were dusty out of choice, but if the names written on the labels on the prefects' doors looked as if they had been written by an eight-year-old child, this was not deliberate: childhood, it would appear, had left its mark on everything. And Father de Pradts, morally the second in command of the college, also liked this decrepitude, although in his case it was out of culpable reactionary deviation: anything which evoked the past was close to his heart, and a touch of dirt, whether or not a product of the centuries, was for him one of the essential, or if not essential then at least very welcome, ingredients of the "spirit of Christianity". Finally, the pupils in their turn felt more at ease in an unmitigatedly crummy joint than in brand-new buildings. The shadows of this crumminess shrouded and obliterated everything that was shadowy in themselves. The state of neglect which characterized their surroundings enabled them to neglect themselves, both their

clothes and their bodies (some would add “souls”, but that is a moot point), and God knows they took advantage of it. M. de Linsbourg senior, who was always very up to the minute and was at that time a fresh-air fiend, had offered to contribute out of his coffers towards the Construction of a swimming-pool. Father de la Halle had turned it down in horror. Conversely, on another occasion, at a time when the pupils used to have to wash their hands before meals, some parents had protested that this gave them chilblains, and the practice had been discontinued without much ado.

During the last German occupation, a lady who ran a children’s charity thought of renting on their behalf a certain country mansion which had once belonged to the Marquis de Sade. She confided her intentions to a gentleman of her acquaintance, a sophisticated man, who advised her strongly against it, because of Sade. “Surely you can’t be as superstitious as that?” “No, of course I don’t seriously believe that any emanations survive in that house capable of contaminating your children. But I find it distressing, almost unendurable, to think of children and adolescents living in rooms in which the Marquis de Sade once lived.” The lady did not rent the chateau, and she did right.

Flashback: May 1912. Giboy in love

La Fauvette

The 15th of June (1912) was the feast of Corpus Christi, of which it was said in the good books that it was “the feast of Love”. In the procession which wound through the gardens of *la Petite Espérance*, Alban and Linsbourg carried the canopy. Bonbon was among the boys who scattered flower-petals in front of the Blessed Sacrament from tiny baskets hung round their necks. The juniors sang, celestial moppets. After the service, Linsbourg, Alban and Salins went, as agreed, to wait for him in the house of M. Perritet, the choir-master. And there, since Bonbon was late, Linsbourg took the opportunity to raise a kind of canticle in honour of his honorary protégé, *la Fauvette*, or plain Fauvette,* twelve years and

* *Fauvette* = warbler. (Tr.)

seven months old, who had just been nominated a knight of the Golden Button, the highest grade he could aspire to under the honorary status to which he clung with the bovine obstinacy of children. The Iliad of the Protectorate was fertile in touching scenes. As a once for all example, we shall give a glimpse of this one, in which Linsbourg played the Bard and Alban and Salins were content to express those simple and poignant sentiments which are proper to the Chorus when it speaks of heroes.

THE CHORUS

Our beloved Littré, companion of our vigils, says that a *dénicheur de fauvettes* is “a shrewd, scheming man, especially in dealings with women”. He also says that the masculine *fauvet* can be used, and is to be found in such and such a collection of amatory tales: perhaps they were amatory tales about the affairs of the Protection. Tell us then, O warbler-hunter, where you discovered your *fauvette* or your *fauvet*.

THE BARD

The first day I saw him, at the beginning of the spring term, in the hall, he was emerging from a thicket of bicycles, a thicket of steel in which azure and emerald bicycles called to mind Japanese shrubs. He walked, then hopped a few steps as if on the point of taking wing, or else he whistled a few notes, then stopped, then whistled a few more notes. And those little hops and little whistles, and his little brow with its large dark eyes, suggested a bird, and at once I called him “*la Fauvette*” in my heart. I forgot to say that “scholastic deformity” [the right shoulder slightly higher than the left] gave him an added charm. I asked him various traditional questions:

“What’s your father?”

“He’s a director.”

“Obviously. But a director of what?”

“I don’t know.”

“A director of conscience, perhaps?”

A vague gesture here.

“Are you good at French or maths?”

“What’s maths?”

“Arithmetic.”

“I’m very *very* good at maths, except that I can’t do long division.”

“I wonder how you manage to get the hang of maths.”

“I understand very quickly, as long as it’s explained to me for a long time.”

[A wave of jubilation rippled over the faces of the Chorus. They had all realized that an exquisite new flower had just blossomed on the terraces of *la Petite Espérance*.]

THE BARD

There is a sort of bubbling-over quality about him that is to be found in all children, but to an exceptional degree. In the Underground, standing facing me, he slips his hand under the lapel of my overcoat, leans his head on my chest and remains like that for a long time: so I kiss him on the top of his head—on a little bare triangle, the trace of an old fall. What else can I do? What would it look like if I did nothing? I say to him:

“Have you been kissed like that before?”

“Yes.” (*I wince.*)

“By whom?”

“By my mummy.”

People look at us fondly: how sweet, two brothers loving each other so much! And the little butts he gives me in the ribs: the equivalent of the digs others give you with their elbows. Whenever he possibly can, he puts his hands in mine. He holds my hand when we walk along the street, or slips his hand under my arm. The day will come when he stops holding my hand in the street (first stage). And then the day (second stage) when he stops taking my arm . . .

THE CHORUS

May *la Fauvette* never take wing for good. For children are continually taking wing, as we all know.

THE BARD

We meet here sometimes, when Perritet has decamped. I'm sitting down, and she arrives, with her handkerchief sticking out of her pocket. From a distance she stretches out her neck and her face and gives me kisses in the air like a cat waving its paws at you from a distance to attract your attention. She arranges my legs tidily, and I wonder why, and it's so that she can sit on my lap, with her arms around my neck. Her sweater is out at the elbows.

"Always full of holes!"

"Holes, me?"

"What's this then?"

"That's not a hole, it's a gap."

And do you know that this child of rich parents smells of the day-nursery: he smells of milk. I can't say it's a smell I like. But I like it on him. I say to him:

"You've got a lot of hairs on your legs for a kid of twelve."

"It's swimming."

"Does swimming make hair grow? Who told you that?"

"Everybody."

He says to me:

"Hug me. You know I'm very cuddly."

"But doesn't your father cuddle you a bit?"

"No, he does it with Mummy. Oh, once a week he picks me up and bounces me on his knees . . ."

I kiss both his eyelids. He exclaims: "Is that all!"

THE CHORUS

If he wasn't already la Fauvette, he ought to be called Is-that-all—or perhaps Autumn Leaf, because of his freckles.

[The Bard pointed out parenthetically that he had told la Fauvette never to say "Daddy" or "Mummy", which was goofy, but "My father" and "My mother"—always keep one's distance with parents. No one at the Park, as we know, believed in the innocence of parents, the administration least of all, and the Protection, as it happened, was furthering the ends of the administration: principles above all.]

He went on:

THE BARD

Her dark-brown, almost black hair, and her freckled face beneath it. The strangeness of that dark hair combined with freckles. Hair like a cornfield, sticking out this way and that like ears of corn blown this way and that by the wind. No parting, and one would swear that she had never used a comb in her life if one hadn't noticed a pale line underneath, no doubt the remains of a very old parting which will never completely disappear. . . . "Pig! Rotter!" [he had begun to think about Pearl, one of the middle-schoolboys].

THE CHORUS

I notice that there has never been any agreement as to the sex which should be ascribed to the nickname Fauvette, or la Fauvette. You yourself say *he* or *she* when you talk about him or her, only a few seconds apart. It is true that there are many other things at the Park which are "indeterminate".

THE BARD (*strophe*)*

He says to me: "On Sunday I was supposed to go to *Œdipus Rex* at the Trocadero with Mademoiselle. At the last minute, my parents wouldn't let me. Mademoiselle told me it was because of an insect."† [The others chortled with delight.] He gives me a photo of himself, in which he is standing on tiptoe so as to look taller. He says to me: "Last night I had a dream about you. Oh, how I loved you in that dream! I was doing something for you, only I don't remember what." He says to me:

"Scratch my roof."

"Roof?"

* The author is not unaware that in Greek tragedy *strophe* and *antistrophe* are given to the Chorus. But he felt that there was no harm in giving them to the Bard, since nobody cares about such things in France nowadays. (H.M.)

† *Insect* is said here instead of *incest*. We feel we ought to point this out, since nobody in France nowadays knows that incest occurs in *Œdipus Rex*. (H.M.)

“My hair. There are some days when it feels nice, and some days not. There. Farther to the right. Farther to the left. No, you haven’t got it. Oh yes, there! Again! Harder!”

“Don’t you wash your hair, then?”

“Yes, every Sunday.”

“Then why do you want me to scratch your head?”

“Because it makes me purr.”

“I can’t hear you purring.”

“I’m purring inside.”

(Antistrophe)

He says to me:

“After my parents, you’re the one I love best. I love you more than my uncle. The way I love you perpetuates the species.”

“What do you mean?”

“The teacher said that love enabled you to perpetuate the species. Do you know when I first felt that I was really your friend? That it was really firm? It was when you gave me a bag of lozenges. I emptied the whole bag in two mouthfuls.”

“But you’re rich. What do you care about a bag of lozenges?”

“I have money, but I can’t hold on to it. At [the boarding-school he had come from] when I had no money left, Giraud used to give me some.”

“Who was Giraud?”

“A pal in my form.”

Naturally I glower.

“Why did Giraud give you money?”

“To make me happy.”

THE CHORUS

That is quite simply sublime. “Why did he give you money?” “To make me happy.” What could one say to that? It has the sublime simplicity of certain sentences of Homer and certain lines of Racine.

THE BARD

I say to him: “If you would like us to meet again on Tuesday like today, come to Perritet’s at the same time. Have you got a watch?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I’d break it.”

“How do you get to school on time, then?”

“I look at the sun.”

Sublime child!

[*Chortles from the Chorus*]

Still sitting on my lap, she says to me: “Did you know that people with big Adam’s apples have lots of guilty thoughts? And people with bumps at the back of their heads. Feel, I haven’t got an Adam’s apple or a bump. I don’t know why children can only talk smut. All that sex stuff is ridiculous! Grotesque! Do you know why I love you? Because you’re decent.” I thought at first that he was pulling my leg. But he wasn’t. He is diabolically pure. Everything about him is utterly uncorrupt. “Trash! Filth!” (he had remembered Pearl again).

THE CHORUS

He was already called *la Fauvette* and *Angelus castitatis*. From now on he will also be called *The Angel of the school*.[★]

THE BARD

And to be at once so aware and so affectionate—that incoherent jumble of knowledge and ignorance. It’s thanks to him that I discovered that there is smoke without fire. Because the whole school believes that. . . . She knows this, and she says to me: “Fancy believing that, when I am what I am! But I couldn’t care less what they say about me.”

[“What I am!” At twelve years seven months! Corneille after Racine. Accustomed though they were to the splendours of the Protection, Alban and Salins were truly dumbfounded by what they were hearing.]

THE CHORUS

It is all the more remarkable when one thinks that your warbler is a crested warbler, that’s to say that she belongs to one of the

[★] *The Angel of the school*. Nickname of St. Thomas. (H.M.)

grandest families in the school: town house, convertible limousine, governess, villa at Cabourg. . . . It's in those circles that people are the least natural. Yet *he* is sublimely natural.

THE BARD

I'll tell you something: Fauvette is sublimely natural because he's a little backward for his age—in fact, distinctly backward for his age. Have you noticed how his jacket is always stained, his shoelaces are always trailing along the ground, and above all, which is extraordinary in an *Angelus castitatis*, in this most chaste little angel, his flies are always undone? Always the same button missing. . . . And in the opening, his blue shirt between the two edges of his pants, like a patch of blue sky between two clouds. Neither Daddy, nor Mummy, nor Granny, nor Sissie, nor the governess, nor the maids, nor the chauffeur, nor the cook, nobody at all has thought of having that button sewn on again, or sewing it on themselves. That's what grand families are like. I'm sure they must be a bit ashamed of him at home; I'm sure they say: "Poor Philippe" . . . Not that he's a neglected child. Simpletons are either badly treated at home or, on the contrary, if the parents are at all kind-hearted, are more loved than the rest, out of pity. Fauvette is very fond of his parents, and from the way he talks about them it's obvious that they're fond of him. If his manner of dress is impossible, it's probably because there's nothing to be done about it. So, Fauvette is not only sublimely natural because he's a little backward for his age; it's also because he's a little backward for his age that he's as affectionate as he is. In a word, it's because he's backward that he is sublime. As for me, I've always had the same weakness both for the backward and the precocious.

Flashback: June 1912. Exciting visit by Alban and Souplier to a travelling fair. Alban ready to declare his love. But no.

Alban takes his bachot

Then came the *bachot*.^{*} Linsbourg had been to Communion the day before. Moreover, the head of the Orphan-apprentices' Institution of Auteuil had announced that all the boys in the orphanage would be encouraged to pray for him. Alban had no religion, apart from occasional little flashes of sordid superstition, asking for something to happen or not to happen that he wanted or did not want; always with promises of candles, of virtue, of alms, if his prayers were granted, promises which he *never* kept.

Alban and Linsbourg passed with distinction; Giboy with credit. Salins passed. It was a success.

In the days following the exam, Alban came back three times to swagger about the college. Once, as he was taking a big pile of books away under his arm (they were all emptying their desks), he dropped them, and caught a glimpse of Serge in a group of boys, making fun of him. Such was the final image he carried away of his child-friend.

The pupils were dispersing. Fauvette, the backward genius, was going on a yachting cruise, no less. Bonbon had been one of the first to leave. Such was his "presence" that his whole division was at a loss: boys wandered about like lost souls, contemplating the aching void. And Giboy had resumed the traditional lover's expression, a bovine, watery eye. Denie and Linsbourg had bade each other a touching farewell and promised to write, and Salins had given each of them an envelope written in his own handwriting, so that their parents would think the letters came from him, who was deemed to be quite safe. Bonbon himself, cruel Bonbon, had left Giboy his paint-box, his drawing-pen and his bag of marbles as souvenirs. But Alban departed to the mocking laughter of the child-friend.

His diary for the school year finished on this note: "I love him in what he does badly, and I would love him in the bad things he

^{*} *Baccalauréat.*

might do. I love him in what he does not do for me, and I would love him in what he might do against me.”

The summer holidays, with their monstrous length, were held in abhorrence by all concerned: by the parents, who realized that they were going to be saddled with their little darlings, and who, if the devil had appeared to them and asked them to entrust them to him, would have said to him ecstatically: “Oh, thank you, Mister Devil, thank you for taking an interest in our dear little boys”; by the priests, who regarded the holidays as a time when the moral benefits of the college were undermined; by some of the teachers, who with the end of the school year would be losing their pets for good, when they moved up to a higher class; and by the boys, as one might guess—at least the members of the Protectorate. The holidays separated you from the loved one, gave him new friends at the seaside or in the country; he enjoyed himself without you, blossomed out far away from you; his bloom was lost, and sometimes he even returned irreparably disfigured by age. In other words absence, as always happens, threatened to upset things that were “going well”. September heralded the return of happy days. Just as it was popularly believed in Roman times that great events were foreshadowed by heavy rains, the equinoctial rains reminded the boys that in a week’s time *real life* would begin again.

Holidays in Auteuil

Alban did not leave his Auteuil garden all summer. He had just spent three weeks in Spain: that was enough, as far as Mme. de Bricoule was concerned. It cannot be said that he was bored during these holidays, for he was never bored.* He was indifferent to everything, apart from his passions, but his passions—the college, Serge, the bulls—absorbed him to such an extent that he was perpetually full to the brim with them. Photos, bicycle-rides, reading and annotating Marcus Aurelius and Pascal, reading and annotating bull-fighting manuals. Serge remained present in his imagination, perhaps even more than in his heart—above all that

* All the same, there were some bad moments. Visits with Uncle Edward to the Sainte-Chapelle and to the treasury of Notre-Dame. . . . (H.M.)

pathetic, off-colour Serge of June–July. He took photographs of his house. He bought postcards depicting the streets through which he was wont to escort him home. In the Bois, he searched out the places where they had been together the previous winter, during their “walks” and games at Maucornet’s. He revived these memories of six months ago in the spirit in which one revives memories of forty years past; he would find in some bushes a piece of orange-peel that had been there in February, and that he had noticed because it was shaped like an S. . . . Serge! Serge! Serge! Serge! From the beginning of August onward, with the perceptible drawing-in of the days, he sniffed the approach of the new school year.

He received, trembling lest his mother open them, three banal letters from Giboy and an even more banal postcard from Linsbourg: it was as if, when they were not talking about the Protectorate, these boys had nothing to say to each other. In his signature, Giboy worked in Lapailly’s initials with his own. One of his envelopes carried the endorsement: “Please forward, should the necessity arise.” Mme. de Bricoule found it an elegant and distinguished form of words: the Park’s stock rose.

“Get-together” (Park-style) between Alban and Serge.—One Thursday they go to the Pathephone together, on the boulevards, to listen to Spanish music.—They come back by cab.—Their grave tenderness.

They stopped the cab some way from Serge’s house, as a precaution. He was about to put his cap on when Alban said:

“Have you a pocket-comb?”

“No.”

“Here, take mine. Comb your hair.”

“All right, but not *too* much, because if they see my hair combed at home they’ll think it odd.”

Serge re-arranged his parting by the light of a street-lamp. Very carefully, as children do, and at the same time so clumsily that Alban had to take a hand. Soon after the parting began, near the forehead, there were some very short little hairs, less than an inch long, which stuck out in all directions: only the beginning of a

parting, like a path that soon peters out. A little girl of about twelve slowed down, stared at them with astonishment, stopped dead when they kissed each other once more, and moved off only when they had disentangled themselves. The dead November leaves dropped from the trees in the lamplight like wounded birds falling from branches. The shops were lit up, like honeycombs.

“Don’t go home straight away,” said Alban. “You still look very red to me.”

“Red?”

“Yes, from all the kissing.”

They shook hands. In the process, Serge stuck the chewing-gum he had taken from his mouth into Alban’s palm. A joke.

It was ten to five. Alban marvelled at the number of forbidden things that could be done in less than two hours. That evening, in his mother’s room, he was filled with solemn happiness; unable to speak, and rooted to his chair like a suspect in a police station. His mother asked him:

“Is there something on your mind? You look so gloomy . . .”

“Of course not.”

“Yes there is. Won’t you tell me what it is?”

“But there’s nothing on my mind.”

Do you think it doesn’t show?”

He had told her that he had spent the afternoon at the Saint-Didier skating-rink. At precisely the same moment, Serge was telling his mother about the film he had seen that afternoon, on a school “outing” in the educational cinema at the Sorbonne. And Alban mused about all the mothers lied to by their sons; mused about it without making any definite moral judgement. And what judgement could he have made? It was already a great deal for him to be musing about it. But yes, he might have said to himself: after all, why are they mothers if they don’t like being lied to?

At table, his happiness stood before him like a motionless being. Doubtless it was thus with more than one of the heroes of the Protectorate: their happiness beside them like a guardian angel. He had laughed to hear Linsbourg, in telling him about the Protectorate, end up by saying that the protégés were their guardian angels. Now he no longer laughed.

Up in his bedroom he went and looked at himself in the mirror: he wanted to see what his face looked like when he was as happy as this. But his face was the same as usual. Soon after leaving Serge, Alban had thought: "Now he's busy lying." At dinner: "Now he's worried and isn't hungry." In bed, after turning off the light, he cradled his happiness. Then he put the light on again. With a piece of sandpaper, he rubbed out the picture of the Sacred Heart on one side of his scapular and in its place traced out in ink two intertwined S's. He thought: "Terrifyingly happy. I love him too much; I'll go mad if it continues, and I passionately want it to." He also thought: "From now on, how shall I be able to bear moments which lack the intensity of those?" It was the same reaction, perhaps, that Tolstoy recorded in his Journal on the evening of the day when he became engaged to Sophie Behrs: "Incredible happiness. It is impossible that all this should end except with life itself."

Alban and Serge go to the cinema—Outburst from Mme. de Bricoule, who has learned "from a tradesman, who passed it on to Marie" (the maid), that he took a cab "with a small boy". Provoked by his mother's false and insulting accusations, Alban decides to go to the pelota court with Serge. They go. Here is the end of the chapter.*

Coming back from the pelota court at seven o'clock on Thursday evening, Alban wandered through the avenues like a ghost, thinking that, whatever might befall him later, he had experienced something extraordinary, and in this direction would never go further. Alban had said: "For me it's like a dream." Serge had replied: "It's more than a dream." Later, Serge had said: "It's the only thing that exists." Outside, on the court, boys were playing pelota, which was very strange after nightfall. A dog was barking. There were no lights in the cabins, another strange thing; nothing but the little beam from Alban's torch hanging on a nail.

* In the college grounds there was a Basque pelota court (*fronton*) with a number of individual changing-rooms, to which the leading members of the Group had keys. (H.M.)

Groping, and at the highest pitch of excitement, he had grazed the knuckle of his forefinger, and had had to wrap his handkerchief round it to stop the blood. A dead black snake lay twisted on the ground: Serge's belt. Now the night was as if drunk with its own darkness. The street-lamps were drunk with their incandescence. The benches were drunk with their desertedness. No remorse, no anxiety about the future. A sensation of plenitude, after four years of idealism. He was still stunned by it, literally overwhelmed with happiness, incapable of quieting it, unable to focus on anything else. It was as if his life had received an injection which had completely anæsthetized it except at this one point.

Taking off his overcoat on arriving home, he found a huge tear in the lining, which had certainly not been there in the morning. It must have been when he had lost his head in the darkness of the cabin that this accident had occurred, before or after the one with his finger. No tear in his moral sense, but a tear on his forefinger and a tear in his coat.

Mme. de Bricoule had red-rimmed eyes and a flushed face. He was not displeased by this: all the time at the pelota court he had been thinking that he was revenging himself on her by doing what he was doing. Nevertheless, on the way back, as he passed by some houses under construction in the avenue de Versailles, he had felt a gush of love for her, because he had just deceived her so greatly.

The cause of Mme. de Bricoule's red-rimmed eyes was that, for the second time running, Chanto had not come after having promised.

"He's throwing me over," said the countess. "I'm sure of it now. The bottle of Fidelis he gave me [a scent of that name] was to make fun of me. Fidelis! How foul men can be."

She went on in this vein. There was no longer any question of Alban being a bad lot; he was a confidant. Finally she said:

"I've already sent him one express letter a week ago, through Marie. I can't send another through her or through Emile. It would look suspicious. Could you take one to the post for me?"

"Of course. I'll post it to-morrow on the way to school."

They exchanged a few further words on some subject or other from which Mme. de Bricoule's thoughts were absent. Then she said, with some embarrassment: "It would be awfully nice of you if you would go and post the letter at once. Then it would leave at seven o'clock to-morrow."

Seven o'clock instead of a quarter to eight, the time when Alban would have posted it if he had posted it on his way to school! He went out and posted the express letter.

*O haine de Vénus! O fatale colère!
Dans quels égarements l'amour jeta ma mère!*

*Father de Pradts learns of Alban's relationship with Serge
from an usher. Durus amor.*

Philippic from Father de Pradts

Two days later, as soon as Serge came up to Alban, who was waiting for him in the street at their morning rendezvous, he said to him:

"Something sensational happened last night. De Pradts got up on the rostrum during prep and started off: 'Do you know how our philosopher gentlemen spend their time instead of thinking about their future?' And out came the whole history of the Group: 'Idiots, fools . . .' And then, in a thunderous voice: 'I will have no more of these Giboy-Lapailly, Linsbourg-Denie, Bricoule-Souplier associations', and all the names. When we came out Denie had a very sickly smile on his face, and some of the chaps said to me: 'Aren't you ashamed of yourself?' It bothered me at the time, but I've got over it since."

"Well," said Alban sombrely, "what are you going to do about it?"

"I'm going to carry on."

"I love you all the more because they seem to want to forbid us. I'm going on with it too."

Giboy came up to them. He was very worked up.

“We’re academicians, and that’s how they treat us in public, in front of kids who’ll go and tell their parents, and discredit us everywhere!”

“To hell with the Academy. The Academy is cats’ piss. It’s the Protec that matters.”

“Anyway,” Giboy went on, perhaps a little nettled, “why has de Pradts got it in for you and Souplier in particular?”

“For me . . . ?”

“Didn’t Souplier tell you about de Pradts’ remark: ‘The Bricoule–Souplier get-together is the most objectionable of all’?”

“Did he say that?” (to Serge) “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I thought it would upset you. But now you know, I may as well add that he also said: ‘Bricoule is completely mad. Giboy is half-mad. And Linsbourg is seriously affected.’ ”

They were approaching the school. Some boys on the way in looked at them and sniggered.

As they went into class, Alban said to Giboy:

“I’m going to see Pradeau de la Halle at ten o’clock.”

“Quite right. But whatever you feel about it, don’t forget to tell him that de Pradts is doing a lot of harm to the Academy.”

*Alban goes to see the
Superior, who
directs him towards
chaste affection*

At ten o’clock, Alban emphasized to Father de la Halle the ineptitude of referring to the Protectorate in public. The school would suffer from it. Father de la Halle was now sitting beside a meagre stove, his legs under his table wrapped in a grey blanket. Everything he said came from a man stiff with cold, but was none the worse for that.

“I rather agree with you on that point: personally I would have talked to each of you individually. But who started publicizing your affairs? You yourselves, turning the whole thing into a craze, and flaunting it. Why the exhibitionism? Already last year, there were those ridiculous engagement rings . . .”

“Engagement rings?”

“Yes, I know what goes on.”

“But we’ve never exchanged any rings! Never!”

“That’s not what I have been told.”

“We did have badges for a few days, sort of decorations. . . . Perhaps that’s what you heard about.”

“Ah yes, perhaps,” the Superior said, as if his mistake was a trivial detail.

Alban was staggered. The Superior’s “I know what goes on” seemed to him as comic as his mother’s “I know all about it.” What was not comic, but sinister rather, was the ease with which everything was distorted, and the casualness with which this distortion was taken. The badges of the Golden Button transformed into engagement rings!

“Anyway, Father de Pradts was annoyed because a youngster in whom he takes a special interest was being taken away from him. . . . I don’t know whether you quite realize that Father de Pradts is a distinguished man. But he is also a passionate man. You must not take him literally when he says ‘I will have no more of these associations’. Don’t let’s make a mountain out of a molehill. Nobody has dreamt of asking you to break off” (this was a bit steep) “and it would be despicable of you to continue on the sly. There are people who. . . . Here,” he said abruptly, as if he had come to a decision, “here is a book” (he turned it over to conceal the title) “written by a teacher-priest, on the religious education of adolescents. It’s almost four hundred pages long, and of large format. Well, reading it you would think that the whole of Jesus Christ, the whole of the Church, the whole of religion—that all that, which is immense, which is as vast as the universe, that all that boils down simply and solely to preventing a wretched child from doing what some people do when they’re in bed. It’s grotesque, and, I don’t mind saying, odious. Religion is something other than that. Religion is first of all charity, as I’ve told you a hundred times. Some of you have formed attachments with younger boys. I should like you to make your influence, which is real, a good influence and not a bad or dubious one. It is by God’s grace that you have been enabled to love some one. I believe that affection is the most powerful force that exists on earth. And why not between earth and heaven? Why do we not speak of the

affection which it would be so natural and so right for us to feel for God? ‘Grace’, I said it was, in respect to these youngsters. Now I should like to quote to you a saying of Lacordaire: ‘The great secret is to love God while also loving something other than Him.’ The ‘great secret’ is this grace. Love these little ones by all means, but only on condition that your affection is real, that is to say that you have their well-being at heart. Above all, don’t treat it as a game. *Flirting!* It’s an ugly enough word when applied to girls. But flirting with boys! With children of God! You see, I believe that you are good-hearted and decent: that is what I am banking on: let’s call it a bet. You know what Fénelon writes about the value of awakening the sensibility of children at an early age. Awaken theirs by using yours, but not in such a way as to soften the poor kids up even more when they are already deep in the confusions of puberty. It’s too easy! Yes, it really is too easy! Whereas it’s not easy to fortify them and make them better. You can influence them in a way that neither their parents nor their teachers can, since these are people whom they invariably distrust when they are not downright hostile to them. And then, because of your age, and because of your more frequent and more intimate contact with them, you know them better than we do through the confessional . . .”

Alban made no attempt to analyse what the Superior was saying to him: that would come later. He was under a spell, as on the day when a certain priest had preached a sermon about Joan of Arc, and, with sex lending a hand, he had been so moved that he had put ten sous in the plate. No one had ever spoken to him like this. Everything strictly religious was, as it were, sieved out; but all the rest was taken in with eager respect. The Superior had flattered his better mortal self, flattered his liaison, flattered his vanity: this triple play, which was to turn out so badly, presented itself as a masterpiece of ingenuity.

With that tendency of his to think that no harm will come of saying certain things straight out, whereas the rest of the world believes that they ought either to be suppressed or circumvented, Alban said:

“No one has ever spoken to me as you have. When I first came to the Park—it sounds a bit babyish to admit it—and saw that teachers called us ‘Monsieur, Messieurs’ I was touched by it . . .”

“Bossuet speaks of ‘the eminent dignity of the poor in the church’. We believe in the dignity of sixteen-year-old boys like you because you are poor in knowledge, poor in experience and poor in discernment, and because that is not your fault.”

This was unexpected. How strange this priest was!

“That young Souplier . . .” the Superior mused.

He paused. And Alban’s heart had begun to beat furiously, as Souplier’s had in the cabin at the pelota court.

“That young Souplier—ah! what a lot needs to be done with him! Who can say what he will be like in two years’ time? He led us an intolerable dance last year, both from the point of view of work—nil—and from the point of view of conduct—worse than nil. There were some regrettable incidents. But I’ve kept him on, because he interests me. In the first place, he is intelligent. He has a sort of intelligent charm about him. I said to him one day: ‘You’re a precocious child.’ He replied: ‘What I should like to know is whether I shall be precocious at seventeen.’ A youngster who can answer like that is intelligent. And then, in spite of everything, he has made some effort in fits and starts . . .”

But the bell was ringing. Alban got up. The Superior held his hand for a moment, in the manner of Father Prévôtel, and said to him:

“Do you know the Gospels well? No, of course not. Read or reread the four evangelists once a year. Everything is there. You don’t need anything else.”

On the staircase leading to the classrooms, Alban and Giboy only had time to exchange a few words.

“Was he okay?”

“Ripping. He doesn’t want us to split up.”

“The Superior was sent here to shake everything up, but he seems to have picked up the spirit of the place pretty quickly.”

Alban was annoyed by this sarcasm. Father de la Halle’s reception had stirred him to the depths of his being. However, he had taken good care not to tell Giboy that the Superior had called

a book grotesque and odious for making too much of certain “carnal acts” (in fact very insignificant ones). More cautious than the Superior, he felt that it was inadvisable to give encouragement without direction.

After lunch, he came back to school early, sought out Serge in the yard, and brought him into the hall: he felt he could do as he liked. He described his interview with the Superior as precisely and fully as he could. When he got to: “He said you weren’t to be upset during the crisis of puberty”, Serge broke in, laughing: “Oh, that old thing!”

“I was so carried away that for a moment I almost thought we should change our friendship into something purer . . .”

It was not a thought that had occurred to him simply as a result of being “carried away”: it was a thought that had persisted, and that preoccupied him at that very instant—while, feeling a little ill at ease, he rested the ferrule of his umbrella on the rim of Serge’s shoe.

“I can see that all this has made you cool off,” said Serge.

This remark cut Alban to the quick. Could one never get away from misunderstandings! Here he was, prepared to give Serge this heroic proof of his affection, when the wound on his finger, evidence of something beyond words, was still incarnadine, and Serge saw it not as a proof of affection but as a cooling-off! The ringing of the bell cut explanations short.

*Alban learns that
Serge is Father de
Pradts’ pet, and is
delighted*

During the four o’clock break, Giboy said to him:

“Everything’s now clear. Do you know why de Pradts was especially severe about your liaison with Souplier? Because Souplier is his pet. Apparently it’s common knowledge: you and I were the only ones who didn’t know. Now we’re going to have to keep an eye on the Protec among the priests as well! Naturally Souplier didn’t tell you.”

“Souplier has always told me de Pradts took an interest in him.”

“A very close interest! . . . Muller was on his way to Prévôtél for confession when he heard Souplier’s voice in de Pradts’ study and as he knew Souplier was his pet, he looked through the keyhole. De Pradts was holding Souplier’s face between his hands, gazing into his eyes and speaking to him in a low voice. Muller looked away for a second, and when he put his eye back to the keyhole de Pradts still had Souplier’s head between his hands, only he’d brought it closer to his, and their foreheads were touching. Souplier came out soon afterwards, and it was obvious that he’d been crying. Muller told Salins all about it, and I got it from him. Souplier told Denie: ‘De Pradts really knows how to work on you. He made me blub.’ Anyway, he’s the pet. Incidentally, do you know what they call him? The other day he arrived with outsize snow-boots, probably his father’s. So they call him ‘pet-in-boots’.”

Alban thought: “I believed he was forsaken, detested by every one. And yet Pradeau de la Halle spoke so well of him. And de Pradts loves him. They want him to be better, and I . . . I took him to the pelota court. . . . He’s going to the bad, and it’s all my fault.” His thoughts weighed so heavily on him that he could not bear to wait until the following day before talking to Serge. He made some excuse to Father Prévôtél in order to stay in the study hall. He would see Serge after school.

All through prep he could think of nothing else.

While he was waiting for Serge at the college gate, a junior on his way out remarked winningly: “Look, there’s Bricoule waiting for Souplier!”

They went off together.

“Why didn’t you tell me about your conversation with de Pradts the day before yesterday. You see, you don’t trust me.”

Serge looked embarrassed.

“What conversation? I went to confession so as to have a little outing during prep. It had nothing to do with us two.” Suddenly he burst out: “I can’t drop de Pradts! I owe him a debt.”

“Who’s talking to you about dropping him? Am I reproaching you about him? On the contrary, I think it’s absolutely splendid that you trust him and that he cares about you. And even though I’m sorry that you kept it from me, I’m not blaming you.”

"Kept what from you? You've always known that de Pradts was nice to me."

"Well, anyway, keep on good terms with him, and try to please him. It would distress me a great deal if he had more cause to complain about you since we've been together."

They walked along in silence for a while. Finally Serge said:

"De Pradts is a brick. But so are you. So, if you insist, I'll tell you what he said to me . . ."

"Don't tell me if you don't feel like it."

"It's all right. This is what he said: 'Things are not going well any more. You've lost the ground you had gained. You're tiring me out. From now on I shall treat you as I treat the others. I have a great deal of affection for you. I shall now transfer it to one of your friends who will be more grateful for the trouble I take for him'."

"My dear chap, that's just talk. You can't just take your affection and shift it to order from Peter to Paul, like a parcel."

"Do you think so?" asked Serge, in a tone which suggested that he set some store by the priest's affection.

"And he never spoke to you about me?"

"No," Serge said, but Alban sensed that he was not telling the truth: the priest had spoken about him to Serge, and he had not spoken well of him. "You've lost the ground you had gained." Wasn't that enough in itself? Wasn't it obvious? "I'm his stumbling-block. De Pradts knows that, and although he may not have told him so straight out, he made him feel it." He said sadly:

"I'm sure de Pradts thinks I'm a bad influence on you."

"Your influence is the same as his."

"After the pelota court! Listen, Serge, I can't bear de Pradts believing that my influence runs counter to his. What would you say if I went to see him and said 'You think my influence on him is interfering with yours. Even if this influence is not a bad one, it makes too many influences. Each of us tugging at him from the opposite direction. I'm afraid that without meaning to we may all be doing him harm. I offer to withdraw.' "

"And what if he took you at your word? If he told you not to have anything more to do with me, what would that involve?"

Crossing to the other side of the street when you see me? No, I don't want that!"

"Would it upset you?"

"Oh, yes! Wouldn't it you?"

("He loves me!" the young man thought to himself. "I wasn't yet sure. He loves me! And perhaps I'm not worthy of him.")

"There's no question of my leaving you in the lurch. And anyway you know that the Superior was quite categorical: 'No one has dreamt of asking you to part.' When I spoke of withdrawing, I was obsessed with this idea that I'm bad for you. But it isn't entirely that: I'm only bad for you in so far as. . . . That's what we must give up . . ."

"No more kissing, even?"

"Oh, kissing, yes."

There was a silence. As on the previous day, Alban noticed that this prospect was not to Serge's liking, either because he saw it as a "cooling-off" on his friend's part, or because he would be losing what he valued most in their friendship, or for both reasons at once.

An idea struck him.

"Didn't de Pradts kiss you the other day?"

"Yes."

"Ah! Where?"

"In his study."

"No, I mean what part of your face?"

Serge put his finger on the corner of an eyebrow.

"There."

A pause. Then Alban said:

"So, about us, do we decide anything?"

"We'll talk about it again to-morrow. I'll think it over tonight in bed."

They were nearing the Soupliers' house. Alban shook hands and was walking off, deep in thought, when he heard Serge behind him calling him back. He stopped, and in the light of a street-lamp, saw his dejected face.

"You're angry with me," said Serge.

"What! After all I've said to you!"

“Yes, you’re angry with me because I’m de Pradts’ pet, because I didn’t tell you about my conversation with him . . .”

“Really, that’s too much! If I seem to be doing anything against you I’m only doing it because I’m fond of you.”

“Then why didn’t you kiss me?”

A cry from the heart! He pulled him into a doorway. They stood there mouth to mouth for a long, long time: a long embrace that created a void around itself, stock-still at the very summit of oblivion.

“They can’t take that from us,” the elder boy panted as he broke away. “But what about the rest? Serge, Serge, there’s no need for you to think it over in bed tonight: we must give up certain things. Do you agree that I should tell de Pradts tomorrow?”

The reply came tonelessly, as though from ground level: “Yes, if you think it’s best, tell him.”

As they shook hands again, Serge twisted his wrist a little. A joke.

*The Paradise of
Father de Pradts*

Except during the first sixteen years of his life, when religiosity was inevitable in a Catholic environment, Father de Pradts had never believed in God. His mind had no need of a God; nor had his heart. The supernatural was a world as closed to him as the world of science, for example, or of political economy: the natural amply sufficed him. According to him, men had invented God because the great majority needed him, in mind or heart; this need, in his view, was one of the commonest signs of human weakness. Thereafter they had worked unwearyingly, not only to give meaning to this invention but also to give it some prestige, in order not to be ashamed of something that testified so cruelly to their debility. Since they were always capable of both the best and the worst, upon this idea of God they had constructed—each in his own country and his own age—a system full of beauties and absurdities, partly admirable, partly risible, partly repellent, from which they evolved all kinds of actions which also ranged from the

admirable to the repellent by way of the risible. Of these edifices built upon clouds, Catholicism was doubtless the most imposing. Such were the views of Father de Pradts, which made no claim either to originality or to profundity.

Most priests who have good reason to exclude themselves or be excluded outright from the Church over questions of faith or orthodoxy try not to break completely, either in mind or, sometimes, in body: stray, but stay. Such a powerful attraction provides food for thought. This was not, however, the case with Father de Pradts, who was of the Church out of principle, and took care not to deviate in any way except within himself. His ministry caused him no uneasiness. He did not feel sacrilegious, since in his opinion God did not exist. He did not feel guilty of a breach of trust, for he had never (or rather only once, and four years later he still regretted it) allowed any one—least of all a pupil—to suspect that he was a nonbeliever. He talked about God as little as possible. When, with an inner smile, he caught himself speaking of him, he did it well, exactly as he had been taught to—it came to him naturally. He did not say “This is so . . .” but “The Church teaches us that . . .” His words were always rigidly inspired by the ambiguities of the Gospel, of which it has been said that the parables were contrived “so that seeing one might not see, and hearing one might not understand”. In its forest of double meanings, mental reservations, compromises, deceptions, euphemisms, subterfuges of every kind, secret and half-secret and often puerile, he felt so at home that when he happened to say something frank and true, he still twisted it. Such mental gymnastics may seem deplorable, but it was thanks to them that he safeguarded his integrity. If his pupils asked him questions, he referred them to some sacred text, or else he simply told them that to ask such a question was “a mark of pride”. If he saw one of them inflicting some privation on himself as a penance, or coming away from the communion rails in tears, he went out of his way to tone down the boy’s emotion and tried to redirect it in such a way that it might remain in him when he no longer had the prop of religion: he was preparing him for the lay world. (In fact such pious pupils were very rare in his division; they became more

numerous among their elders.) The rites of the Church were to him what the rites of worldly society had been in his youth. He went up to the altar conscientiously, and with a desire to make the best of it, just as he might have stood up on a platform as a layman to preside over a ceremony; he delivered the sacramental words as he might have delivered a speech written by his secretary. To be a priest, and, for twelve years, to elude God in word if not in action was indeed an acrobatic feat. The astonishing thing is that no one noticed. No one at the Park questioned Father de Pradts about his faith, just as no one questioned the boys about their private lives, other than in the sham confessions which we shall speak of later. These children who said nothing about their conduct, and this priest who said nothing about his faith, made up an assembly of veiled figures interweaving, a kind of masked ball of black robes and bare legs.

His clerical culture was that of the seminary, but it was irrigated by a good memory: the less he believed, the more he needed quotations. His lay culture was selective rather than extensive: he had read only the books that suited his temperament. And his political opinions were far less vehement than those of the Superior; the boys sufficed him, leaving him little time for anything else, just as they sufficed the boys themselves, for the most part absorbed by their friendships and nothing else.

A priest is morally obliged to have a director of conscience. Father de Pradts had none: he acted in accordance with his own precepts. On the other hand, he liked hearing the confessions of others, to which he was drawn by his genuine shrewdness, his curiosity, and his belief that he was a great psychologist; the very fact of having to pick and choose stirred his imagination; he prided himself on not questioning the boys on certain points which he could discern for himself: he did not need either their admissions or their lies. He liked the Scriptures, in which he found inexhaustible riches, but not the small change of Catholic literature: thus he read his breviary, whenever he did read it, with a strip of cardboard covering the column in which the prayers were in French and therefore, in his view, so stupid and absurd as to make him lose his temper; he read only the Latin text in the

opposite column: Latin made it all right. Of the sacraments he administered he thought: "There are doctors who go on prescribing radiotherapy treatment all their lives without believing in it." What he often found wearisome was the company of men who invariably seemed to him—at the point where their faith came into play—cankered in their intelligence. There were times when he felt overwhelmed by what he regarded as the coarseness, the mediocrity and the inanity of many of his fellow-priests. Wearisome, too, he found the length of the offices and the time they wasted. But what career does not involve some drawbacks, and some unavoidable boredom? Actions and words which intelligent people deem meaningless were the common coinage of a great many other careers: politics, diplomacy, the Bar, the Bench perhaps. . . . And the pretence required of him was no more arduous than that to which any man of position has been accustomed since youth. The more so since he was not unsympathetic towards Catholicism and had been born and brought up in it. He readily admitted to himself that he was a surface Christian, which was certainly a little odd for a priest. But he felt that it was better than nothing.

Although he was an unbeliever, and regarded all believers as simpletons, Father de Pradts had such a lofty idea of the ecclesiastical state that he was shocked by a priest who seemed to him to be wanting in religious fervour.

He knew the passage in Barrès about a curate who gives up the cloth because he has lost his faith, and considered him superficial to the point of frivolity, "undergraduate" in the worst sense of the word. "What a callow intellect! Why should the loss of his faith make him decide to abandon the priesthood? On the contrary, it makes it much better. He will have a sort of perpetual musical accompaniment. Every word he exchanges with the common herd will be interpreted in a metaphysical sense. There is something vulgar and earthbound in giving words their everyday meaning." As if that was what it was all about!

Why had he chosen this life—which he lived exactly as he had envisioned it? Because he had wanted a life in which he could devote himself exclusively to boys, and live amongst them, and it

was the cassock which best guaranteed that life. He had a vocation to be a teacher-priest, but he did not have a religious vocation.

Around 1896, when he took his bearings, it was far less easy, socially, than it is today to dedicate oneself exclusively to the “young”. There were two powers to which it was necessary to cling always and at all costs, so as to be able to fall back on them in any eventuality: the Church and the government. With no security on the Church side, he sought security elsewhere. There was no longer any question of the separation of Church and State; the two were united for the good of all. He had held to this iron rule during the convulsions that shook the French Church at the beginning of the century—modernism, disestablishment, “black terror”, etc.—which remained as profoundly alien to him as the Russo-Japanese war or the Universal Exhibition. It was in the same spirit that, when the time came, he had dug himself in at the Park, a college stemming from left-wing Catholicism, with the object of enabling the Archbishopric to disencumber itself of the Jesuits, at that time reputedly of the right. The Superior was a man of the left by conviction, Father de Pradts by necessity, and also by fits and starts, for in this direction he did no more than he deemed strictly necessary, being by nature something of a squire. Thus, below, there was the internal pact of the Protection, to which everybody adhered. And above, the pact between this priest and two systems to which he adhered only whimsically if at all.

Father de Pradts was anxious to be on good terms with the Freemasons. He had come across their theories in a book, and found them as complicated and meaningless as theology. But that was not the point. Of course he had no wish to be a mason; he wanted to flirt with Freemasonry, to be considered by the brotherhood, if not a sort of honorary mason, at least a sympathizer, even a possible initiate; to be of it and yet not, just as he was a Catholic and yet not. To this purpose he had been corresponding for three years with a worshipful master, pretending to be extremely interested in the doctrine, and shuffling and prevaricating as was his wont. All this was part of that element of naïvety which exists in every man, and to which we shall also be returning later on.

When a priest lacks ambition, it is either from spiritual detachment, as with Father de la Halle, or because his passion lies elsewhere, as with Father de Pradts. A man of intrigue, cut out for difficult and subtle assignments, as his very looks seemed to suggest—though perhaps this was a snare and delusion: perhaps it was from the “young” alone that Father de Pradts drew his strength and inspiration—he had never for a moment weighed his career against his taste for the educational life, which condemned him to obscurity. Nevertheless, the occasional stirrings of ill-humour that assailed him when some contemporary of his was promoted were enough to show that if he had not had this taste he would have enjoyed making a career for himself as much as any one else. But his passion was there, and everything was ordered around it and subordinated to it. Indeed, Father de Pradts had decided that between forty and forty-five he would plunge into a life of even greater obscurity which (with his ample private means) would enable him to be his own master. We shall see all this in due time.

Money, independence, a life of obscurity; a man of the Church and as good a man of the Church as possible, always on good terms with the powers that be: such, then, was the armature. Single-mindedness simplifies everything. At the time of life when a good many young people grope around, make mistakes about themselves and their future, and waste time, this one had made no mistake either about himself or the path he must choose in order to be himself, or about the precise details of what he must retain and what he must sacrifice in order to be himself. And he had carried out this plan with never a moment's hesitation, never a backward look, without ever allowing himself to be deflected, with never a slip, with a method and determination which demanded no effort from him, because they were at the service of his passion, but which he would have wielded as effortlessly if they had so demanded, for the same reason.

For four years, then, Father de Pradts had been immersed in the world of boys, including one year at the Park, which he had joined with the Superior and the other priests who were there now in the great reform imposed by the Archdiocese on a college as

notorious for its disorderliness as the first Port-Royal of Mme. d'Estrées. For it was indeed to bring about a reformation that these priests had entered this college in which each one of them was making reform impossible: Father de Pradts by closing his eyes out of indulgence; Father Prévôtel by lowering them out of timidity; and the Superior, who kept his open, by not seeing, out of blindness. *Oculos habent et non videbunt*. Ah, it was indeed a Children's Paradise!

The presence at the Park of Father de Pradts had been on the whole beneficial. Beneficial because of his constant efforts to lift the boys, not towards a Christian life, but towards a life of independence and integrity: others here spoke to them of God; he spoke to them with his own voice. Beneficial because of the genuine affection he felt even for those who did not have attractive faces. His was a rare gift: instinctively, that is to say with instantaneous acumen, whatever the circumstances, he *put himself in their place*. This being so, almost anything they did seemed to him natural and normal considering their age. The main thing was that in their manifestations they should not unduly inconvenience others. Even those boys who irritated him by reason of their ugliness, their affectation, their stupidity, their spectacles or their piety (this covered nearly all those whom the Protection called "nobodies"), even to them he showed a friendly bias, an active desire to ensure that they suffered no wrong, and an open mind. And over and above all this, he had the keenest sense of equity, so dear to children. With this understanding, this friendliness, and this sense of justice, it can be said without hesitation that Father de Pradts was beneficent. Sometimes consciously, sometimes unwittingly, he atoned, in loyalty and service, for his abounding intellectual treason.

What Father de Pradts was and what he stood for at Notre-Dame du Parc may be judged by a single fact. In this school where priests, teachers and ushers alike had nicknames given to them by the pupils, he and the Superior were the only two who had none.

Thus did this apparently monotonous existence continue: and monotonous in a sense it was, though in another sense it was

extremely animated, sustained as it ceaselessly was by the effervescence of human beings; hidden from the world, yet intensely exposed to the searching scrutiny of fifty urchins. Father de Pradts lived on the one hand gorged with small boys, on the other hand much respected. In addition he had youth, health, money, and a resourceful mind. With all this he was extremely happy, and this happiness was indeed at the root of his good conduct. No, he would never do anything that might harm the Church, when it was the Church that made it possible for him to lead a life so suited to his tastes.

It was into this happiness that there had entered, the previous April, an element of unhappiness: Serge Souplier had arrived at the Park.

*A contributor to
The Living God*

The editorial board of *The Living God*, “a review of advanced Catholic studies”, had asked Father de Pradts for an article “of about ten single-spaced pages” on the theme “The empirical conditions and infrastructure of contemplation”. Notwithstanding his alacrity of mind, he had cried off. The editors had then suggested the subject: “Who is God?”, and he had accepted.

So, entrenched as he was in an atheism as untroubled as faith is in others—“simple” atheism—Father de Pradts had just devoted nine pages to describing God in every detail. The technique came easily and agreeably to him. Agreeably, because it appealed to this man of wit to write flowery nonsense: he knew the real world too well (at least the real world in relation to boys) not to laugh his head off at metaphysics; he sometimes secretly congratulated himself on “having become an atheist without theology”. Easily, because this metaphysical world never raised any objections and one could therefore assert anything one liked about it, provided one did so with proper circumspection; and circumspection was his forte. Since God did not exist, nothing was easier than to say what he was. One had only to put down whatever came into one’s head, borrowing widely from approved authors, and combining the art of being precise, that is of playing on words, with the art of

being vague where necessary. And agreeably, too, because these articles consolidated his position in the ecclesiastical world—something that was not unimportant to him—and did so without damage to the only people he cared about. For he wrote them because he knew that they would only be read by adult believers, which is to say by men who in his view were mental defectives. Added to which, he hoped by these articles to make up in some measure, in the eyes of his fellow churchmen, for the immense deception by which he lived peaceably in their midst. He wrote them as a matter of policy, but also, to some extent, as a matter of decency. For form's sake, before submitting them he showed them to the Superior, who thought them admirable.

Father de Pradts felt that it was something to be held against Catholicism that an unbeliever required only a little cunning for every door to be opened to him. Speaking the language of the devout, he can hear confessions, write edifying books, preach, discuss theology: all he needs is a grain of cunning. Hence the number of ecclesiastics whom he presumed to be non-believers. Presumed, since it is no more possible to tell from the outside what a person's religious faith amounts to than to tell from the outside what he does in the marriage-bed. No doubt they had a kind of faith, which they systematized in such a way as to be at peace with themselves.

In his estimation, a third of all priests were in this situation. Incapable of quitting, defenceless against the world, fair game for business swindlers, and in any case enmeshed by the Church in secure and inglorious toils, they browsed torpidly at the end of their chains. Even so, many of them, he was sure, must have gone through absurd and horrible crises. The only healthy ones were those who, like himself, had never believed, but they were very rare. Some years later, after the war, the following story used to be told. There was a certain nobleman of slender means who had been discharged from the army with a wound that affected his cerebral hemispheres, and who had been informed too late that his pension would have been considerably augmented had he been listed as insane. He decided to sham madness, and did it so convincingly that he spent a year in a lunatic asylum, from which

he emerged with the higher pension which had been his aim. But it had been, he said, an appalling experience, and those who knew took their hats off to him. Father de Pradts, in order to achieve his ends, had the impression that he had spent twelve years—his twelve years in the priesthood—in a lunatic asylum, or at least an asylum partly for lunatics, who “believed”, and partly for semi-lunatics, who adapted themselves. Catholicism was a ridiculous religion which did not bear a quarter of an hour’s scrutiny. The day Cuicui had said to him: “I like Napoleon better than God, because I don’t understand God”, he had felt like replying: “But there’s nothing to understand, poor pet.” This dark world would have been a nightmare world for any one who was not a man of wit, or who did not have a strong intellectual and physical constitution, but, like the aforementioned nobleman, Father de Pradts was and had all this; and was moreover sustained by what we have described, which was as solid as a rock. But what about Pradeau, so fervent, and the “brain” of the college? And what about X, and Y, and Z, his colleagues, not in the least stupid? Well, they were “unintelligent intellects”—a phrase which Hugo applied to the most distinguished of the clergy, and which could be applied to so many lay intellects. As for his conscience, it was perfectly clear. He was not sincere. But why should it be necessary to be sincere? Catholicism was a lie. The boys were living in a lie. From what he knew of it, social morality was a lie. Who did not wear a mask, apart from the simple-minded? He was like other men. And without doing harm to any one.

*Alban goes to see
Father de Pradts*

Having broken off in the middle of concluding “Who is God?”, Father de Pradts was about to take up his pen again when there was a knock at the door.

“Come in.”

Alban entered. The priest, who had never seen him in his room before, was taken aback.

“Bricoule! I can guess what brings you . . .”

“Monsieur l’Abbé, my relations with Souplier have not always been what they should have been. I want to tell you that from

today onward they will be irreproachable. Of course I shall continue to kiss him" (the priest gave a start) "but that's all. However, if you think that even so my influence over him runs counter to yours, say so, and I shall stop seeing him. Whatever your answer is, I have also come to ask you to be my confessor in future."

Was Alban entirely sincere in his offer to stay away from Serge? There were the Superior's words: "No one has ever dreamt of asking you to part." And, the day before, he had said to Serge: "There's no question of my leaving you." But he was utterly sincere in his promise to purify his friendship.

Some readers may think that the scenario of our story, since Father de Pradts's outburst, must have been deliberately contrived. Father de Pradts explodes: he terrifies and antagonizes the pupils. The Superior comforts them, wins them over and, by sympathy and trust, obtains an improvement in their conduct. Each has brought out the severity or the gentleness of the other, in accordance with the prescribed formula. Such a policy was conceivable, but it was not so. It was indeed under the impact of anger and spleen that Father de Pradts had exploded, though not without calculating his outburst. But there was no calculation in Father Pradeau de la Halle's invitation to Alban to follow the dictates of his heart, though with due circumspection.

As he listened to the young man, Father de Pradts was unaware of his interview with the Superior. The latter had lunched in town, and in the meantime had been preoccupied with more urgent matters. As for Alban, he had not mentioned this interview at the outset because he was above all curious as to the priest's reaction on the subject of confession. Father de Pradts was consequently so taken aback that his first reflex was that of a boxer covering up against an opponent full of indefinable menace. He needed above all to play for time, and after telling Alban to sit down he asked him whether he had a confessor at the college—"No, I go to one of the priests of the parish"—then how he had got to know Souplier. In the first shock of surprise Father de Pradts had mumbled: "I'm concerned about Souplier because he is in my charge, and that's all." Meanwhile Alban had noticed that the

priest had slim ankles. "It's going to be all right," he said to himself.

Involuntarily Father de Pradts screwed up his eyes in order to penetrate to what lay behind this mobile face. A shrewd operator who had thought up a remarkable charade? An innocent who was putting himself in his clutches? A mixture of the two? At all events, some one who was capable of outwitting him, and who must be outwitted. An unprecedented situation, which he would be mad not to turn to account. He became aware that he was screwing up his eyes, and pulled himself together. "Ah, my little bird!" he thought, "now is the time for you to watch out."

He knew Alban only by repute and was ever so slightly irritated by what he heard: "He is good-natured, but dangerous-minded." For the first time he was seeing him at close range, and found him different from the idea he had of him. Fairly untidy: hair over his forehead, waistcoat half unbuttoned, rumpled clothes. "It must be an affectation." It was literally impossible for him to believe for a single moment that Alban was not posing. And again: "One has only to look at him to guess that he's an only child." That blessed race of only children, the only ones with whom it is possible to hit it off completely, because of their intelligence and their extravagance—in a word, their "personality".

Since the first step in his strategy was to give himself some elbow-room in order to be able to act coolly, he merely complimented the boy on "an initiative that testified to his good intentions" (better be cautious). As regards his wish for him, Father de Pradts, to be his confessor, and his relations with Serge, the priest must confer with the Father Superior. Alban did not even have a chance to mention his visit to the Superior.

*Mysterious
operations*

The priest was so agitated that he felt he must go out and walk in the yard. He picked up his breviary. He would pretend to be reading it in order to keep himself in countenance. He went out and walked, holding his breviary upside-down so as not to be distracted by the words. "He thinks he has gained the whip-hand over me with his lofty sentiments. You'll see, my lad! First of all, I

refuse to be his confessor: that would complicate everything. Either he's being honest, and forces me into behaving generously, which doesn't suit my purpose but is interesting. Or he's lying, and I am his dupe. He has offered not to see Serge again. Should I take him at his word? He'll see him again, and I shall have him thrown out. Should I give him his head, encourage his confidences, lead him on without seeming to, and let him cut his own throat?" Father de Pradts occasionally browsed in the Superior's library. In Lacordaire's correspondence he had come across this remark: "I love mysterious operations." He too loved mysterious operations.

His thought about confession—"that would complicate everything"—needs a word of explanation. Father de Pradts knew that from the more turbulent pupils in his division—those at least who were not boarders—he received only second-degree confessions: in other words these pupils, jibbing at a sacrilegious communion, but also at giving themselves away to their priests, went and tipped their full-scale sins into the darkness of any parish confessional, then confessed only their venial sins to one of the priests of the college, and went to communion thereafter with the clearest of consciences. Nothing could be done about this practice, other than to require that before the pupil confessed his sins to you he should own up to having already been to confession elsewhere, which would prompt some of them to cap their confessions with a lie: the cure would be worse than the disease. And Alban, already confessing to a priest (or priests?) of the parish, as he had unashamedly admitted, would be only too inclined, under a pretence of moral rectitude, to reduce Father de Pradts to the job of second-degree confessor. The priests at the Park were aware of this procedure, and put up with it, just as the Latin teacher was aware that translations were copied from the cheap cribs on sale at every bookshop, and as everybody knew that the Academy elections were rigged and that the lectures at the Aeronautical Club were not written by the pupil who delivered them as his own work. Second-degree confession was part of the conventions of the college. But Father de Pradts, who put up with

it from X and Y, was not prepared to put up with it from M. de Bricoule.

*Father de Pradts
learns from the
Superior that he
must adapt himself
to the "new life"*

He had reached this point when the Superior put in an appearance, coming from his room. He informed Father de Pradts of his conversation with Alban, and of the licence he had given him to continue with Serge "without acts".

"I would not have acted as you did. I would not have made a public commotion of this business. You could have spoken to me. Now Bricoule promises to be good. I have complete confidence in him. I know that he needs true grace in order for his influence to be beneficial. But his is the sort of nature that is not impervious to grace. It may come to him all the more easily for his being deprived of acts, and deprived of them of his own volition. Privation is the soil of the supernatural."

The Superior's mind being made up, Father de Pradts had no alternative but to comply. But he broke a few lances.

"I have scarcely ever come across any but bad influences between pupils," he said. The Superior might have retorted: "That is not correct", which would have been an intelligent remark. He said: "That comment is not in the spirit of our house", which was not an intelligent remark.

"What influence can Bricoule have on Souplier? A boy of his age is unformed, and you would have him form others? *Nox nocti indicat scientiam*. 'Night teaches night.' "

"I come back to what I have always told you, and did not hesitate to tell Bricoule himself: unformed though they are, boys can have far more influence on one another than we can. What is an education? An education is a friendship. What Bricoule is suggesting to you is a risk, agreed. It has a chance of success because Bricoule is not immune to nobility of feeling, and solely for that reason: there is a kernel there. It is up to you to find ways of bringing out this nobility, and then using it. Call Bricoule what

you will, but he is honest. If he succumbs, he will tell you, and you'll simply have to go into reverse."

Father de Pradts and the Superior had many traits in common, but above all a passionate affection for their boys: the one loved them for himself and for themselves, the other loved them in the sight of God. Father de Pradts had an affectionate respect for the Superior, the only priest in the college whom he did respect. What he loved in him was his love for the boys. What he respected in him was an unknown world, and he had often sought to absorb from him everything which was not grounded in the divine. But at that moment he respected him less, seeing how easy it was to deceive him.

Father de Pradts was now utterly committed. He who was the specialist in the spiritual dramas of the community, not only in curing them but also in instigating them with a view to curing them, like the famous fireman who started fires for the glory of putting them out, had this time been taken by surprise. Upset at first, on reflection he was pleased. There was going to be some fine sport. These three individuals, three balls on a billiard-table: an infinite prospect of combinations and cannons. Intrigue, tinkering and tampering with souls, agonizing qualms of conscience, high debates, delicate tears, soulfulness galore against a background of human, all too human, frailty. Subtlety, high-mindedness, pathos, against a background of duplicity. Father de Pradts was profoundly steeped in a rarefied culture which, in spite of the "little brothers" and the veneer of democracy, still permeated the Park: not only in two thousand years of unbridled theological brawling and casuistry, but also in Ovid, Gracian, Racine and the *Histoire amoureuse des Gaules*. This was the stuff he was made of; it only awaited an opportunity to express itself. The opportunity was now imminent. They would see what they would see. And all this with the minimum of risk. The outcome was inevitable: Alban would give himself away and be expelled. Two days before, Father de Pradts had felt defenceless in front of the boys. This evening, he saw them at his mercy. The outlook had changed as suddenly as the weather changes.

The thought of causing the expulsion of a boy who was one of the two paragons of the college, who was not in his division, and to whom he had never even spoken before this affair, solely because the boy in question was interfering with his own love-life, gratified his vanity, by making him feel his own power, and the darker side of his nature, because he would be committing an evil action. But it somewhat troubled his nobler side. In order to ease his mind, he decided to reduce or revoke the punishments of several of his pupils. It is one of the laws of society: crime creates amnesty.

*Second interview
between Alban and
Father de Pradts*

Some hours later, closeted with the man who, more than any one else in the college, was likely to do him harm, who wished him harm, who had already done him harm and who he knew had done him harm, Alban savoured the potent and equivocal pleasure—potent because equivocal—of all those who, whether through impulse or calculation, or both at once, have delivered themselves into their enemy's hands. He too was buoyed up by two or three thousand years of humanism. Priam at the feet of Achilles, Coriolanus in the Volscian leader's tent, Themistocles taking refuge with Artaxerxes, Jugurtha in the court of Bocchus, Sulla in the house of Marius—all these were in him and sustained him. If he had suffered by sacrificing his pleasure with Serge, the fever of the present moment consumed that suffering, just as his present pleasure consumed that other pleasure, of which a beloved voice had said: "Nothing else exists after that."

Father de Pradts likewise perceived the rare quality of that moment. He became more and more resolved to play fair for the time being: he would cheat only if he saw himself losing. He felt a granule of sympathy for the young man.

It was thus without mental reservations that he fell to talking about him who was close to his heart. It was a far cry from "Souplier? I'm concerned about him because he's in my charge, and that's all." Nowadays Father de Pradts spoke as little as possible about Serge to anybody: in the days of Serge's

“misdemeanours” he had spoken about him all too often. The priest was accustomed to keeping his own counsel about everything that mattered to him: his atheism, his experience of the young, his extreme right-wing political opinions. Dissimulation had become second nature with him to such an extent that he even concealed what was good in him. In this encounter he saw his adversary, Alban, as a kind of accomplice, and unburdened himself to him in a somewhat strange manner. A similar process made the members of the Protectorate pour out their hearts to one another, and Mme. de Bricoule pour out her feelings about Chanto to her son: in short, a society of sumps. At this moment, three-quarters of Father de Pradts consisted of the need to talk about Serge, while the remaining quarter was part sympathy and part deceit. He quickly lost any notion of what could be said and what would have been better left unsaid.

“I’m worried to death about that boy. He keeps me awake at night. He needs somebody intimately involved with his life. Crouched over him like Elisha over the dead child, to resuscitate him. . . . Plenty of intelligence, a fair amount of heart. . . . But worrying, a sickly soul, that it would be dangerous to meddle with, because while there’s good in it, there’s also bad, and, let’s face it, more bad than good. Inside a year, if he doesn’t pull himself together, a shipwrecked soul. And without wanting to discourage you, it’s ten to one the game will be lost. He is greatly to be pitied.”

“In other words, he’s like the bull in the ring: whatever he does he is bound to perish. Well, I don’t agree, he isn’t as bad as that,” said Alban heatedly. “I’ve never seen him do anything really bad. He never makes fun of religious things. He told me he had made a very good first communion; they thought it would be a bad one, but it was very good . . .”

All this was true. Father de Pradts smiled. He was touched. He was touched even more when Alban added:

“He has no principles, but his niceness makes up for his lack of principle. Because even when he’s doing all he can to be disagreeable, he can’t help being nice.”

“He also reveals unexpected moral scruples, in fits and starts. He isn’t a cheat or a toady, as kids often are, and he doesn’t lie more than he has to . . .”

“He isn’t a pilferer . . .”

(Here we must put in a word about pilfering or purloining at the Park. At the Park, among the twelve- to thirteen-year-olds at least, and especially the upper-class ones, everybody pilfered: baubles from stalls; objects of some value from the counters at charity bazaars, particularly at the Auteuil Orphans’ sale, a pilferers’ playground; vast plunderings of the collection-plates; and lastly, theft through the Aero Club’s raffle-tickets: you marked the donor’s real contribution in pencil while he watched, then rubbed it out and replaced it with a lower figure in ink, and pocketed the difference. It sometimes happened that part of the stolen money was given to the St. Vincent de Paul Society. These children generally stole only for six months, and then became very honest again. But let us continue.)

“If you wish to take on the task of doing him some good we welcome your co-operation. I won’t say wholeheartedly. But here you are, you’re attached to him, he probably feels a certain friendship for you” (Alban quivered slightly), “anyway, things being what they are, and since you’re here, we welcome you; it’s a chance worth taking.

“However, you must bear in mind that you will need true grace,” the priest went on. He had adopted the fine word “grace” from the Superior, and placed it on occasion with great discrimination. “If your influence is not plainly and wholly good, I believe that the mere fact of being involved with a senior is bad for him. Although there are boys who were stupid and have become intelligent and sensitive after striking up a friendship: I’ve seen that. More than anything, he is weak. He needs a great deal of affection, and especially the unshakeable firmness of some one who is sure of himself and will not weaken! We cannot have the surgeon fainting during the operation. If you feel that you have that sort of strength, go ahead. Act rather by example than by moralizing. And do not scrape the rust away too vigorously: the vase might come to pieces in your hands.

“When I say ‘no moralizing’, that doesn’t mean you must not speak to him seriously. It is impossible not to speak seriously to somebody one loves. What objection can there be to speaking to children in a language beyond their years? There’s always a chance that some of it will stick. It’s better than talking nonsense to them.

“But take care! Contrary to what sentimental morality tells us, affection and love do not necessarily have the power to convince: far from it, they can sometimes antagonize. I want to prepare you against disappointment.

“And there’s something else you ought to know: one should not set too much store by children’s demonstrations of affection. They have—especially at thirteen, as a matter of fact—a youthful good-naturedness which makes them mimic an affection they do not feel: holding your hand in the street, taking it back if you let it go, keeping it in theirs for a long time, and so on. . . . I would have you know that there is not so very much difference between the youngster who gives you a vigorous friend-for-life handshake, the one who holds out two fingers, and the one who doesn’t shake your hand at all. And it may be that the one who doesn’t shake your hand is the most loyal.”

“I see that you want to put me on my guard against Souplier’s niceness. Please don’t worry on that score.”

The priest smiled:

“Really? I needn’t worry?”

“No, of course not.”

“Well, I’ll tell you something else (I’m sure you’ll dislike me for it): up to the age of fourteen, everything children say is almost always meaningless. Whether they say appalling things or things that stagger you with their apparent profundity, it’s of no consequence. ‘Forgive them, for they know not what they do.’ Nor what they say, nor what they are. They are odious and they have no idea that they are. They make a promise, and don’t keep it, but do not even know that they’ve made it. In fact they don’t know themselves until after about fourteen, after a certain transformation in their physiology—the turning-point. Why is that? Because at fourteen a boy starts being his own creation, instead of being ours. Up to fourteen, he says: ‘I’m mischievous,

I'm over-sensitive', and so on. But he's only repeating what his parents have told him: 'You're mischievous. You're over-sensitive.' After fourteen, he has some personal awareness of what he is. And almost overnight, from being intelligent he becomes stupid, or vice versa . . .

"Anyway, I took advantage of his attachment to me to visit his home. I found a goose of a mother, which is tiresome for an intelligent son, and a squawking sister. I also suspected that papa must be a bit of a chump. He can expect no help from his background. Christ said: 'I am come to set son against father and daughter against mother.' Of course, we haven't got to that stage. It's more a question of protecting him against the family atmosphere." (He put it more forcefully to himself: parents spoil everything.)

Unsubtle people will say that this Spriest with the nobiliary particle had a most vulgar way of speaking. But his speech was not vulgar: it was occasionally *coarse*, which is something quite different. Coarse perhaps by way of relaxation from the macaronics of Church Latin or the logomachy of Church French. One might also Compare this intermittent coarseness with that of Mme. de Bricoule, and wonder whether it was not a mark of rank.

Father de Pradts was a person of the same calibre as Alban. As he drew to a close, he felt the need to respond to one act of magnanimity with another. It may be noted, parenthetically, that the longer one lives the more one tends to divide the world into two classes of people: those who are capable of magnanimity, and those who are not. All the characters in this story were capable, on occasion, of magnanimity. Thus Father de Pradts, too, wanted to bring his better nature to the fore. At the same time he saw that the more Alban trusted him the easier it would be to destroy him. Magnanimity and malevolence were mingled in him, indistinguishably, like two metals in an alloy. Magnanimity alone would have been preferable, but, such as it was, it was better than nothing.

"You will be able to tell him here and now about the new direction you are giving to your relationship. I am going to send for him, and I shall leave you alone. It will give your resolution a

note of solemnity which will strike home to him. When you leave, lock the door and take the key to the usher of my division in the study hall.” He held out his hand: “If you have any impressions about him which you wish to communicate to me, come back and see me.” He left, thinking, “I trust my enemy, but I do not trust the one I love.”

*In the prefect's study
Alban tells Serge
about the “new life”*

Alban remained in the little room, wonder-struck. At last he had found among these priests men who lived or behaved on the same plane as himself. What style! A moment later, Serge opened the door and stopped on the threshold, flabbergasted. He was wearing his brown sweater, and it was one of his attractive days. Alban had stood up, as if prompted by respect; they remained standing, smiling at first at the strange situation in which they found themselves. Serge's shoes were dusty, but with a spattering of something darker, where they had been splashed in the urinal. His tie stuck out from under his sweater like a kind of miniature loin-cloth. Alban told him that he had informed the prefect of his decision to start a new life. He emphasized everything he would be losing thereby, and that he knew what it would cost him. Then he spoke with somewhat surprising vehemence of the “harm” that “those things” could do to Serge. Serge listened in silence, as he had done the night before in the dark avenue: it cannot be said that he looked very convinced. Finally he gave a submissive nod. Alban was grateful to him for loving him enough to agree to a less agreeable relationship. and also for showing by his whole attitude that what he was being asked to give up had been dear to him too.

“Yes, it would be better,” Serge concluded. “Especially if it makes you happy. If only the whole Group could do the same!”

From their whole exchange, in which Serge had taken something of a back seat, nothing that was said touched Alban more.

“Perhaps the Group will. If only it was up to me . . .”

“All the same, what de Pradts is doing is ripping!”

(“Will he ever think that what I’ve done is ripping?” the older boy wondered.)

All this lasted barely ten minutes. On leaving, Alban kissed Serge, and so that such a solemn talk should finish with a smile, after kissing him on the corner of the left eyebrow, he explained: “In the same place as de Pradts. *Sacratissimus locus*.”

“Idiot,” said Serge, pummelling him.

Had Father de Pradts done it on purpose? One can imagine the “sensation” which Alban and Serge caused when they entered the study hall together, and Alban said to the usher on duty: “Sir, I am returning the key to M. le Préfet’s study, which he entrusted to Souplier and myself.” A triumphant *pas de deux*. Hurrah for high-mindedness!

*Alban tells his
mother everything
(but not the details)*

Alban came home in high spirits. He was pleased with himself; pleased with the Superior, with Father de Pradts, and with Serge, who had behaved well; pleased to be at peace with them all; pleased with the confidence which had been placed in him, the confidence he had placed in others, and the duty and responsibility with which he had been entrusted; buoyed up by the thought of undertaking a reformation of the Group; infinitely grateful to Serge—that notorious scamp!—for having thought of extending their personal reformation to the Group, when it had not occurred to him. Only one person was missing from this high fellowship: his mother. He made up his mind to tell her everything that very evening (but not the details). And besides, Serge had been somewhat lack-lustre; a resurgence of the sublime would not be out of order; the day would end on a brilliant note.

He did not want to mix such matters with grub, and throughout dinner (which they ate, as usual, in Mme. de Bricoule’s bedroom, she dining in bed, Alban at a small table beside the bed) they talked about this and that. “In two years’ time you’ll be going to live in England. Mr. Sinclair will introduce you to the town aristocracy and Aunt Aliette will introduce you to the country aristocracy. English life is the only life that’s livable

nowadays. You won't meet any second-rate people . . ." This last remark cut Alban to the quick. What were the Soupliers, what were most of his schoolfellows' families, but what his mother called "second-rate people"? Once again, it wounded him that his mother did not *approve* of his school life, which contained everything he loved in the world. (In the same way, he had wanted the priests to *approve* of his liaison. Did not this need for approbation conceal a weakness?) It was a somewhat pea-soup atmosphere. Well, he must cut through it.

"I have some serious matters to discuss with you. First of all, it was Souplier I was with in the cab the other day."

He went on to tell her everything; but not the details, in particular the episode in the pelota court and Father de Pradts kissing Serge: covering up for an enemy. Mme. de Bricoule listened without a word. When he seemed to have reached the end, she said:

"Have you finished?"

"Yes."

"Then kiss me."

He kissed her. She said:

"What hurts me most in all this is that you didn't trust me, although I did everything I could to win your trust." ("Trusting" crops up again and again in this story, like an obsession.) "Now that you've decided among yourselves about your relations with Souplier, there's nothing for it but to go ahead on those lines. If you could rescue the boy, so much the better. Although 'true grace', hmm. . . . And besides, I wonder whether after a fortnight, finding it's no fun with you any more, he won't drop you. He mustn't be allowed to go around with everybody . . ."

"What do you mean, go around with everybody?" Alban exclaimed, flabbergasted. "Souplier is the opposite of a seniors' pet; he's never been one. And anyway the seniors don't like him. Especially Linsbourg. In fact Linsbourg was saying only yesterday: 'I noticed that he didn't make the sign of the cross on his way out of chapel.' "

"All the same, it's a bit odd for the Park to regulate your friendships all by itself. I'm just supposed to follow. What if I

forbade you to meet Souplier? Nobody thought of that. It's always the same: everything's always decided without reference to me. I won't forbid you to go out with him, but please do it as little as possible. At any rate, not on Sunday afternoons: Thursdays if you must. It wastes too much of your time and money. And you never know what those walks may lead to. Besides, he has probably lied in order to be able to go out with you. His family must forbid him to go out with a big boy, if he's properly brought up. But he must tell a lot of lies, like you."

These questions of "proper upbringing" were always coming up with Mme. de Bricoule. Alban felt like shouting at her: "No! Once and for all, he's not well brought up!" And the "time" and the "money" that he wasted going out with Serge! As if time could be more usefully spent than in making him better and being happy! And as if money could be better spent than with him!

Mme. de Bricoule's quirk about "proper upbringing" made itself felt again when she said: "Linsbourg comes from a good family. He may pitch and roll a bit, but he will always regain his balance. With the others, who lack any solid social background, it's more doubtful." But her tendency towards coarseness had also appeared with a flourish: "You never know what those walks may lead to." Mme. de Bricoule's thoughts turned infallibly to things that could not have been farther from her son's mind.

She also kept coming back to herself, and to her relations with Alban: "From now on, I shall believe blindly everything you tell me. The moment I find out that you're deceiving me, I shall take you away from the college." ("She'll do nothing of the kind," thought the dutiful son.) "He can write to you over the Easter holidays: I shan't open his letters. I wonder whether I should have had as much confidence in de Pradts if I had been you. Souplier is his pet. One day de Pradts will be jealous of you, if he isn't already. And what about you? Why aren't you jealous of him?"

"If some vulgar, stupid character took an interest in Souplier, I should probably be jealous. But not some one like de Pradts."

"All the same, it isn't normal for you not to be jealous of him. You're always abnormal in everything."

"Anybody who wishes Souplier well is my friend: that's logical."

“Would you have argued the same way about the La Cuesta girl?”

“The La Cuesta girl was a woman.”

“Believe me, it’s better to be jealous—and to love women.”

“I’ll get down to women when I’ve finished my *bachot*.”

“Always remember what your poor father used to say: ‘I don’t want my son to be an eccentric.’ ”

Mme. de Bricoule was not aware that she herself was eccentric, that the two priests who were intimately concerned with her son were both eccentric, and that the college she had chosen for him was eccentric, and how! One might say that when it came to betraying the count’s wishes, she had really hit the bull’s-eye.

Alban concluded:

“Plutarch writes: ‘It is said that the love of women and the love of boys are really one and the same love.’ To listen to you, one would think the opposite.”

“You’ll be jealous of de Pradts one day, you’ll see.”

Alban shrugged his shoulders. There was nothing to be done about it: when she talked about the college, Mme. de Bricoule was always a little to one side of and a little below the correct tone. And how thankful Alban was, among other things, that he had not mentioned that the priest had kissed Serge! Nevertheless, all things considered, he was glad to have spoken to his mother. Now he had everybody’s agreement. Now they were all agreed on saving Serge!

On that day’s page in her diary, in which usually she jotted down only the most factual observations, Mme. de Bricoule wrote these three words: “My darling child!”

*Hostility of the
Protectorate to the
“ideal couple”*

Contrary to Alban’s expectations and perhaps his secret hopes, for he was still a novice in the workings of the human heart, their “new life” aroused no enthusiasm at the college. The idea of Alban enthroned on the lofty heights of pure friendship, with Serge Souplier sitting at his right hand, irritated a great many people. “The ideal couple!” The boys, and with them the masters and the

ushers, considered it objectionable that one couple alone should be given a sort of official stamp of approval. "Why them rather than others? And especially Souplier. A chap who would have been expelled several times over if it hadn't been for favouritism. But that's all it is!" Alban venturing into the sacred grotto of the middle school with Souplier to take back the key to Father de Pradts's study seemed like a challenge. "All you have to do is to get on the right side of de Pradts. It's cheaper than the pelota court."

The Group barely concealed its sarcasm in Alban's presence. But nothing wounded him more than Giboy's perfectly sincere remark: "So you really do love that kid?" As if Serge didn't deserve to be loved! "But . . . how do you love him?" Giboy had insisted oafishly. "I love him as he should be loved." And then there had been Linsbourg's sneer when Alban told him that the original idea of the reformation had been Souplier's.

The ill will boiled down to three sentiments. First and foremost jealousy: "It's all right for them . . ." Then: "He's a traitor." Then: "Who does he think he is, giving us lessons!" Linsbourg: "I'll hit him where it hurts—his reputation. He'll never get over it." More profoundly, the blend of coolness and cynicism that was the characteristic of the Park was not easily reconcilable with a rather high-flown morality.

It was as though there was only one possible subject of conversation in the Group: Alban having "gone over to the other side", the others scarcely exchanged a word with him. And the nobodies followed suit, without knowing why, out of herd instinct.

Alban knew that Linsbourg was too superior to be pestered on the subject of reform. The more so since the Protector had openly taken up a position against him. Not without reason. There had been a time when Linsbourg had often thought of asking the Superior to cast the demons out of Denie's body, but he had eventually given up the idea, preferring to take on the task himself. He had cast out nothing at all. Denie's baseness, as we have said, attracted Linsbourg, and held him in a fatal grip—through the attraction of opposites (which also applied to Alban and Father de Pradts in relation to Souplier, and in general

between the upper-class boys and the “little brothers”); and because he was touched by the fact that this baseness was never exercised against him: “Whatever happens I shall never forget that, considering how wicked he is, and the power he has over me, he has never abused that power. He tells me all kinds of tall stories, which I pretend to believe, because I love him. He must think I’m pretty gullible, but I don’t care.” Denie was the record-holder of the Group with his “four years”, but it was also four years of being on the edge of the precipice without ever falling over; and Denie was the prodigal son, the labourer hired at the eleventh hour: an old Christian weakness. In short, Linsbourg hated the reformation for these two reasons: (1) all his true self was dedicated to a counter-reformation; (2) he had wished to reform Denie, but had sacrificed his reforming zeal to his passion.

So Alban would not talk to Linsbourg. (“He is good-hearted, he’ll come round to it of his own accord.”) He would talk to Salins first; it was he who Alban could most easily envisage being won over. But when he thought about what he would say to him he was embarrassed. He had “spoken well” to Serge about the necessity of reform in Father de Pradts’s study: the novelty and especially the strangeness of the occasion must have served to inspire him. In cold blood, things were not so easy.

In a word, from the outset the reformation needed watering, in the sense in which a lawn needs watering. Having as little religious culture as religious feeling, it never entered his head for a moment that the history of the Church was filled with reformations made or attempted by men and women obsessed by what, rightly or wrongly, they considered its disorders, and that he had only to draw on them. He took out his History of Rome and read pages 111–12 which dealt with the reform of morals under Augustus. But he derived no benefit from it.

At last it seemed to him that he had discovered the argument which could provide the most solid basis for the reformation: the customs of the Park were an abuse of parental trust. This was an unexpected notion, coming from some one who had always played the game, which consisted in taking the side of the school against

parents in whatever circumstances. O youth! changeable as the sea . . .

He hit upon a further argument. The Protectorate was a state within a state, and this was objectionable. A timely recollection of the Templars. With his first argument he had gone serenely over to the side of the hereditary enemy: the parent. With his second argument he was going over to the side of the college authorities, which was equally unexpected. But a chord of austerity had been struck within him, one which was never struck in vain, and which would not stop vibrating all that quickly: "The Incorruptible . . ."

Other arguments presented themselves. First of all there was the continual buzz of the Protectorate, which he was sick of. Suddenly—too suddenly perhaps—the Protectorate, which he now saw through the eyes of a spectator, appeared in a grotesque light, with its frantic chatter, its aggressive gaiety or tearful faces, its intrigues, its whisperings, its furtive glances and its giggles (its girls' school side), its over-intensity and its air of monomania (its padded-cell side), and the froth of lovers' quarrels that ceaselessly mushroomed around it. However, since it is very difficult to persuade people that they are fools . . .

Last argument, and by no means the least: snobbery. There was no need for Alban to have read de Retz, Saint-Simon, Rousseau, Napoleon, Byron, Chateaubriand and Nietzsche, all of whom reiterate in almost identical terms that the French have no opinions, only infatuations, that they are never concerned with anything except "the done thing": he had seen enough of it at the college. How many of the chaps had joined the Protectorate only to follow the fashion! So there was no point in moralizing to them, it was simply a matter of convincing them that they were no longer in the swim. Linsbourg had provided him with an example in this respect, and like a good Frenchman Alban was pleased because he had only to copy him. The St. Vincent de Paul Society at the college was on its last legs. At the beginning of term Linsbourg, consumed with zeal and fine feelings, had decided on the spur of the moment that it was smart to belong to it, and bad form to ignore it. And people had rushed to join. Alban had only to decide on the spur of the moment that dabbling in

Protectorship was absurd. After all, hadn't he become involved out of affectation (except from the moment when Serge had come into it)? Among the various weaknesses of his age, Alban had a terror of appearing different. In that respect the bulls were enough, and in view of the rather hostile reception they encountered from the chaps, he had even ceased to talk about them. If the snob thing had been to chase girls, he would have chased girls (as he would amply prove two years later).

Finally, another powerful tendency of Alban's played its part: a horror of the student rebel mode, which he found facile, vulgar and stupid. If the authorities wanted to subdue the Protectorate, on no account would he raise the standard of revolt. His preference was rather for disorder in the heart of order.

So, agreed, the Protectorate was a vulgar absurdity.

At the end of all this, Alban was not displeased to be able to show every one, himself included, just how objective he was, and hence how flexible, setting the Protectorate successively in two opposing lights, and acting accordingly.

Alban attempts to convert Salins to the reformation, but without success.

Before leaving Alban, Salins could not forbear to tell him that, out of pure friendship, he had rubbed off the blackboard that very morning an inscription chalked on it by an unknown hand: "Down with Tartufes."

At first Alban did not understand. Then it dawned on him. "But the Cæsars hardly ever punished, even when they were caught, the authors of offensive inscriptions about them scrawled on the walls of Rome," he told himself placidly. Salins' remark had misfired.

His "Romanness" was responsive to Salins' argument to the effect that Protectorship represented the *mos maiorum*, the custom of the ancients (of the college), continuity. Excellent. But his Romanness was also a preference for moderation, revulsion and apprehension in face of the inordinate, the excessive. One must master oneself just as one mastered the young bulls: the

Protectorate was no longer master of itself, thus violating the ancient wisdom of Latium, its reserve, its *dignitas*.

Alban foresaw that it would be difficult to bring about a reformation in a society in which nobody felt guilty. He decided to give notice to all concerned, particularly aspiring academicians, that he would never vote for a boy who was guilty of “bad conduct”. A decision which at first sight will be held to be childish, and then grave in its implications—since (1) On what was he to base his belief that such and such a boy was guilty of “bad conduct”? On appearance? It is deceptive. On public opinion? It misrepresents. On the admission of the person concerned? There were some who boasted. On what then? On what inquisitorial system? On what inside knowledge of this subject, acquired how? (2) The creation of the Academy, which had been a police operation at staff level, would now become, through the agency of Alban, a police operation at pupil level. From being the hunted, he was now the hunter. It is the law.

On 9 December there was a rift in the cloud overhanging the Group: they all met to celebrate Cuicui’s twelfth birthday. Ten, twelve and fourteen are key dates. At ten you are in love. At twelve you are a little man. At fourteen you are a sort of man. The intermediate dates are less important. Since Cuicui had been well in with the Protectorate for fifteen months, it wanted to give him a present: a present of that nature did not come into the category of “little presents” forbidden by the rules of the clan. Six seniors, well-intentioned but unimaginative, gave Cuicui a handsome fountain pen, with the injunction to tell his parents that it was a present from his friends, without specifying their ages. This half-truth had the delicate odour of the half-confessions of the Park.

*Serge falls
somewhat short of
the sublime*

On the morning of the following Sunday, after Mass, Serge and Alban walked aimlessly, with some painful silences, through the avenues of Auteuil, and the elder boy was aware that the younger would have enjoyed himself more with one of his classmates. As with one of those galloping bulls whose attention it is impossible

to hold and which make toreros sweat like pigs, he could not hold him down for an instant on the subject of the new life: Serge was continually escaping into childish pranks and tomfooleries. People hold forth endlessly about “instability of character”, but every boy of fourteen, without exception, is unstable. “Was my mother right when she told me that once having entered upon the new life he would be bored with me in a fortnight? Did it only need five days?”

Yet it had begun in a touching manner. Serge:

“I hadn’t intended to go to communion today. I did it because you told me to.”

“Thank you. I say, you went to the barber yesterday. . . . You look much tidier: it’s a symbol of the new life. As a matter of fact, I wanted to talk to you about that. . . . I’d like you to become a really fine person.” (It was a remark his mother had made to him, and which he had adopted.)

“Well, hang on, I’m going to buy a lollipop first, and then I’ll be able to listen to you better.”

He vanished into a sweet shop. When he came back:

“You were talking about something or other, the barber, I’ve forgotten . . .”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Are you annoyed?”

“No. But what I say doesn’t interest you.”

“Yes it does, it interests me a lot. You were telling me about the new line, as your friend Giboy calls it.”

“Don’t talk to me about my friends. Linsbourg and his hysterical craze for kids. . . . Bonbon, that little pest who looks like a music-hall tart . . .”

“Yes. And Corlet and Lapradine holding hands—what idiots!”

“He’s saying what he thinks he ought to say,” thought Alban, who felt that Serge was going a little too fast. After all, they too had been holding hands a few days earlier.

Unconsciously, sensing that he was a bit listless, he sought to appeal to his vanity.

“The atmosphere of the Protec was becoming unbreathable. They’re obsessive.” (He had only recently learnt this word, and

kept trotting it out.) “All that gossiping and giggling! A bunch of sissies, that’s what the Protectorate is. Do you realize how superior we are to the others? And how genuinely praiseworthy it is of you to stay with me, in these new circumstances?”

“Denie thinks we won’t hold out. Wait till they see! As for the others . . .” It was an unspoken wish that the others should fall by the wayside. Then Alban in his turn made a remark which was also a little self-interested.

“If you make an effort, de Pradts will believe that it’s because of my influence.”

“Perhaps he’ll be believing the truth.” Serge began to laugh: “Do you know what? I bought a cigarette-holder, and the first time I tried to smoke with it, I found it was a cigar-holder. I bought some stink-bombs too, to hand round to the chaps.”

“You make me sick.”

“I bought them, but I shan’t use them.”

Alban was left feeling dissatisfied. Serge had been somewhat lacking in sublimity. What Alban did not know was the reason why Serge was a little morose: not at all because Alban’s remarks bored him, but because of the taunts which the new life had earned him, and the false position in which it put him among his friends. Boys of sixteen are to some extent civilized; boys of fourteen are not. Only Serge’s toughness had saved him from some really offensive observations: he was feared. When Rousselet called him and Bricoule “plain hypocrites”, they had to be separated. He had refrained from telling Alban about this, in order not to hurt him. Serge might not be “sublime”, but he was capable of some delicacy of feeling, which Alban did not always see. In the man-woman relationship, the woman is considered, rightly or wrongly, to be more sensitive than the man. In the Protectorate, the younger boy was often more sensitive than the elder.

*Letter from Alban to
the Superior*

On the Tuesday, the seventh day after the “great day”, the attitude of the upper school towards Alban underwent a slight change. Word began to circulate that Alban was a “tough nut”. He had

“pulled off a confidence trick”. Some of them began to look at him with the same admiration which they had shown him when he had been elected president of the Academy.

At first he did not notice. And it was on that same day that he sent the following note to the Superior:

Dear Father Superior,

Forgive me for seeming to give you advice. But since recent events, I have met with some hostility among my classmates, and I despair of being able to influence them in the direction which I had envisaged. I believe that everything would change if you were to send for Giboy, and talk to him about Lapailly in the same way as you talked to me about Souplier.

Once again, I feel somewhat abashed by the liberty I am taking. But did you not point out to me that the pupils know one another better than you know them through the confessional? It is that remark which emboldens me to write to you.

I remain yours respectfully,

Bricoule

If you send for Giboy, please do not tell him that I wrote to you.

Two days later, he received the following letter from the Superior:

*The Superior
summons Giboy*

My dear friend,

We all of us benefit from advice, myself as much as any one else. Far from “forgiving” you for your suggestion, I thank you for it.

I have seen your friend. He will tell you what he wishes to tell you about our interview. I was very pleased with him. Of course, your name was not mentioned.

I remain

Yours affectionately in Our Lord Jesus Christ,

M. Pradeau de la Halle

Alban thought to himself: “How different from holes like Maucornet’s! Black plays and wins.”

Giboy came up to him during break.

“Pradeau de la Halle sent for me and spoke to me about the Protec: ‘You must now consider yourself as having the cure of souls. The juniors look up to you. We can do nothing without you.’

He told me I should use my influence over them to (etc. . . .) ‘Children will do anything if you ask them nicely. Take Young Binaud [this was Fauvette]. He used to talk out loud while he was doing his prep, commenting on everything he wrote. . . . He was told that he was preventing his friends from working. He immediately gave up this habit which doctors (you know he’s a bit odd) had never managed to cure him of.’ ”

“Did Pradeau talk about me?” asked Alban, who did not readily relinquish the limelight.

Giboy said no. He took good care not to tell him what he had said to the Superior about Alban: “Ever since the day I met him, my life has been transfigured.”

“He was a brick about Bonbon: ‘We are not opposed here to—how shall I put it?—a certain ardour, a certain warmth of feeling. . . . We prefer that to the stony heart. What is important is not to regard these youngsters as dolls. Don’t just play at loving them: if you love them, let it be real. God is sometimes close to us in his creatures. The Gospel tells us that the two great commandments, *love God* and *love thy neighbour*, are one and the same. And St. Thomas says, following Tradition, that charity is a friendship between man and God. Bear those words in mind: they are the basis of spirituality. Every time one says to some one: “I love you”, one is saying it partly to God.’ He doesn’t disapprove of our liaison at all. In fact he made some astonishing remarks: ‘I can understand. . . . He has rather pretty curls, hasn’t he? And that air that he has of perpetually offering himself. . . . I don’t forbid you to kiss him, I don’t even advise you not to. But I think it will do him harm.’ He quoted to me an expression of Lacordaire’s: ‘a friendly love’. A ‘friendly love’—that’s exactly it. What a fantastic character, old Lacordaire! So I too have decided to take a new tack with Bonbon. I won’t kiss him any more. Are you still kissing Souplier?’ ”

“I haven’t started again since . . . the fuss. But I intend . . . ”

Giboy was indignant and peremptory.

“You intend! Ah, no, if we go on kissing them, it isn’t serious.”

Alban was nettled. Outbid so quickly!

“I told the Superior that there were a lot of people who cared about nothing else, who were obsessive. He answered: ‘People who think only of their purity are just as obsessive.’ ”

After a moment, Alban wondered whether the Superior’s remark was not aimed at him: that really would be a bit much! A slight, very slight thread of bitterness also took root in him, with the premonition that the future would be a future of progressive sacrifices, and that henceforth each liaison in turn would receive the official stamp, with the label: “sacrifice”. But this feeling was overshadowed by his delight in seeing how Giboy’s jeering, hostile face of the past few days had changed—so much so that at one point emotion had moistened Giboy’s eyes as he spoke. . . . And Alban guessed that one day it would be the same with Linsbourg. For he knew that both of them were “sensitive souls”, and how much they could be worked on for that reason. Soon, indeed, it became common knowledge that Linsbourg, to whom prayer came easily, was praying for Denie.

A wave of virtue

From then on virtuousness became the keynote. “Cure of souls” had been an inspired phrase. It was obvious that Linsbourg too was longing to be summoned by the Superior. He did not like Souplier at all, and yet he said something for which Alban was extremely grateful: “Souplier is the one who has understood best.” The new pattern of behaviour was laid down, and, like good little Frenchmen, they quickly took their cue. Moral chic and snobbery were inextricably mingled.

Now, like mothers in a square boasting about their children and comparing them, the Group took to prattling, with a great deal of boastful exaggeration, about the virtuous words and actions of their protégés, and there was a certain amount of annoyance at being forced to listen to an account of some unbelievably pious deed of a junior who was not one’s own. The “little brothers” had been especially quick to turn over a new leaf: Alban learned that when they put their minds to it the “people” can be bigger snobs than the bourgeois. Gripped by a naïve rivalry, they all watched each other out of the corner of their eyes, like racing cyclists, to see that none of them broke away and stole a sudden surprise lead

over the rest in the exercise of fine sentiments; each one feared lest he and his partner should be held in contempt. And at the same time, since the spirit of the Group could not die altogether, there was a hangover of complicated intrigue, of delicious hugger-muggery in which the seniors vied with one another in prestige and virtue, and took every opportunity of running one another down.

At Sunday mass, having followed his usual habit of bringing a volume of his pocket Plutarch with its old-fashioned binding to read instead of his missal, Alban came across this, in the Life of Lycurgus, on the subject of the children of Sparta: "Rivalry in love was unknown there: those who were in love with the same children were thereby more disposed to love each other, and they jointly conspired to render the object of their affection as good as possible." Alban thrilled with pleasure. He had found the children of Sparta just when he needed them. God is great!

Even Bonbon wanted to join in the reformation. His hair was dark, and Mme. Lapailly insisted on peroxiding one of the beautiful curly locks that hung over his forehead: "It suits you so well." Bonbon would have been delighted with this blond streak, in spite of its unfortunate (maternal) origin, but being such a poppet in any case, he was teased by his reformist friends. He fought and grumbled, and dipped the blond lock in black ink. "All right. I shall peroxide your hair while you're asleep." He could not sleep. His mother gave in. Such was Bonbon's principal contribution to the new order.

The only one who showed some reluctance to join in the reformation was the Archpet (ten years old, the one who intended to become a missionary). "I wonder what God would do in my place," he said. Nevertheless, he too soon fell into line, even to the point of zealotry: using a gargle that disgusted him, so that four black babies should be baptized. Sacrifice reigned supreme.

*Father de Pradts
talks to Alban about
Serge for an hour
and ten minutes*

Alban went to see Father de Pradts, who kept him from two o'clock until ten past three, doing all the talking, and talking solely about Serge, though with a nonchalant little preamble, intended to demonstrate his broadmindedness. He never spoke of him to the Superior, to Alban or to any one else without first throwing off this little flourish of nonchalance. Whenever Alban had a talk with Father Prévôtel, there were interminable silences during which the priest—a good theologian, but unsuited to dealing with boys and inhibited in their company—held Alban's hand, his forehead glistening with sweat in his embarrassment. There was nothing like this with Father de Pradts, who was a sham theologian but a past-master at handling boys. He said:

“I could name you one of the pupils in my charge who is unintelligent, dim, even a little retarded, who has no heart—or has a heart no bigger and no softer than a thimble—and who is nevertheless original and rare on two counts, and two only: sensual immorality and cowardice. A boy who through two of his defects embodies a paradox which might have seemed unimaginable: singularity in insignificance.”

“He really knows his stuff where kids are concerned,” thought Alban, dazzled. Thereupon, having sufficiently demonstrated his broadmindedness, the priest launched into the subject of Serge, and did not leave it again.

“He has an eye that misses nothing, like most children, and a fiendish memory, again like most children, except, of course, when it comes to learning his lessons. He also has a pride which prevents him from looking deep down inside himself for fear of what he'll find there, which makes him believe that he can do everything on his own, and which makes him reject all discipline. When I speak to him, he hangs his head and puts one foot on top of the other.” (Alban laughed.) “You know that habit of his of putting one foot on top of the other?”

“Do I not! I once told him: ‘Don't stand like a butcher-boy.’ ” (The priest laughed.)

“Or else he stares blankly into space, and remains like that without uttering a word. I look steadily at him and I drive every word into him like so many nails into a piece of woodwork, and

then half the nails jump out, because half the places where I planted them were rotten. Yet he's capable of being moved, as I saw the other day. I had reprimanded him for deliberately organizing a giggling session in the refectory—the refectory is where all the trouble starts—and then I was called out of my study and left him there alone. He thought I didn't want to see him again; when I came back I found him crying, and he just said: 'Don't leave me.' Then I asked him to find one point, just one—behaviour during prep, or in the refectory—on which he was prepared to turn over a new leaf. He came back to see me the following morning and said: 'I can't find any.' Children are not at all as malleable as people believe. They have their fortified lines, behind which they put up a stout resistance. His line is inertia. It isn't a question of strengthening his will, but of creating one for him. In the last resort, one has to adapt oneself to them, you'll see. . . . I don't know why I call him a child: he's at the same time babyish and older than his age. In any case he's alive, and that is a great deal." (Alban thought of his mother's words: "Let's talk about *that subject*. It livens things up.") "He's a fertilizer. He fertilizes me. Also he's . . . I'll tell you something. There are two kinds of people: those to whom one can talk in human terms, and those to whom one cannot" ("the little snakes", thought Alban). "Souplier one can talk to in human terms, and it's rarer than you think, both among children and among men."

"I know," said Alban.

He saw all the priest's love for Serge, and he loved this love.

"I'll tell you something else, which may perhaps surprise you, in view of his reputation: he is *trustworthy*."

There was a silence, as if each of them was weighing up this fine, weighty word. But the priest wrecked it all:

"Trustworthy for a short while at any rate. It doesn't last long with youngsters, you know."

Alban was startled and alarmed by these words. Had Father de Pradts already foreseen the "end" of Souplier, and resigned himself to it? And yet, had not he himself replied to the friend who said to him "For ever": "For as long as possible"?

That evening, as every evening after dinner, Alban was writing a few brief notes in his diary—which was more like a note-book—when his eye fell on the entry he had made two days before: “The fashion is going over to virtue. The outbidding has begun”, and reading this word “outbidding” he raised his head and began to ponder.

The day before, his mother had asked him for news of the Park. “I imagine they’ll all be trying to imitate you and overtake you. There’ll be a lot of outbidding.” He had admired her perspicacity.

At the time she said this, he was perfectly aware that he too had been thinking of this word for several days. But he had not remembered putting it in his diary.

Now he saw it, and it seemed to him a little strange that his mother should have used the same word that he had written—not a very common word.

And he remembered how odd he had thought her story ten days before about the “tradesman” who was supposed to have seen him “kissing a boy” on the street, and how quickly his mother had found out about the cab he had taken “with a boy”.

The day he had taken a cab with Serge, he had written in his diary: “Pathephone. Came back with him in a cab.”

Suddenly he began to wonder whether his mother had not been forcing open his filing-case and reading his diary for months, perhaps years. “I’ve got my own police. I know all about it.” Her police and her perspicacity, her mother’s instinct and her woman’s instinct, might simply be that and nothing else.

So, day after day, his mother might have been following his secret life, which she pretended not to know about and asked him questions about: she accused him of lying, and she herself lied all the time. There were the falsehoods of the young snakes, and there were the falsehoods of mothers. At the very moment when he had made the great decision to take her into his confidence and tell her frankly about his relations with Serge, she was reading his diary on the sly while he was at school!

It seemed to him monstrous—but, like many adolescents, he was on a familiar footing with the monstrous. Indeed, this particular piece of monstrosity seemed natural to him.

After all, that was what grown-ups were like.

Nevertheless, it was important to know. You can put up with having, for example, a son in the house who breaks open your desk and steals from you, provided that you know. You can put up with your mother breaking open your filing-case to read your private papers, provided that you know. When all was said and done, what he wanted was no different from what his mother had wanted. She too had wanted, at all costs, to know.

No sooner had the suspicion been raised in Alban's mind than he carefully covered the binding of his diary with dust—a good coating of dust.

He went on keeping the diary, but now he slid the pages into an envelope of P.O.P. paper which bore the printed instruction: "Do not expose to the light", and which he closed and stuck up again each time. There was little danger that Mme. de Bricoule would go so far as to open this envelope.

*The ideal couple go
for a walk in the
Bois*

On the following Sunday morning, which was Christmas Eve, instead of trailing round the avenues as usual, Alban and Serge went to the Bois de Boulogne. As soon as they entered it they were immersed in the sweetish smell of dead leaves, a peaceful, muffled atmosphere, a great harmony of grey and grey-green, punctuated here and there by the sharper green—parrot green—of moss on the trees; and there were certain trees that were so pale it was as though they were aghast at their own pallor. The route taken by the Park boarders (on the way to their football field) could be followed from the trail of apple cores, orange peel and banana skins they had thrown away after lunch. Serge kept tucking tangerines under his sweater to make breasts. Finally he said:

"De Pradts said that our liaison was 'the utmost moral wretchedness'."

“Really! If he said that, it’s bad!”

“Well, I’m not sure whether that was what he actually said, or whether it was: ‘Souplier is in the utmost moral wretchedness.’ ”

“It must have been that,” said Alban, somewhat reassured.

“Yes, that’s more like it, much more. . . . De Pradts told me that things weren’t going well. He wants to take me away to the country for a week during the New Year holidays, to isolate me.”

“Isolate you from whom?”

“I don’t know. From the chaps, I suppose.”

“More likely from your family, since it would be during the holidays. He didn’t tell me about this.”

“It would do me good, I know. But twelve hours moralizing a day. . . . I’m going to get my mother to tell him that I have to stay at home because she’s ill—if I can persuade her, because she’s bound to grumble.”

“Why grumble?”

“She’ll rather I went to de Pradts’. ‘You won’t use up my electricity while you’re there. And besides, you only get up to mischief at home.’ All the same, de Pradts is a brick. I was wrong to think he didn’t like me any more.”

“You ought to go to his country place. Honestly, you really ought to make an effort to cheer him up; he needs it so badly. That man loves you with all his heart, and if you knew how much it hurts him when you relapse, I’m sure you wouldn’t do it.”

“It was in May that I noticed that de Pradts had his eye on me. I was furious at first, and I said to myself: ‘That chap gets on my nerves; he’s after me the whole time. He needn’t think he’s a friend of mine—he’s just a beak and a priest; one of these days I’m going to put him in his place.’ And then I gradually started wondering why I was so furious with him, when he was only doing it for my own good, and wasn’t asking for anything in return, except that I should behave.”

A dead leaf, blown along by the wind, followed them like a dog. Another had settled on Serge’s head. The proximity of the Zoo could be recognized by the barking from its kennels and the trumpeting of its seals. They went in. It was deserted on this wintry morning. Serge got up to all kinds of childish tricks with

the animals. He pointed at them with his arm outstretched, like a baby. He blew cigarette smoke in the parrots' faces. He kept on banging the gate of a paddock. In the aviary he wanted to climb on to a barrier to get a better look. Alban gave him his hand to steady him, and he held the beloved little hand for a long time. The fluttering poultry scattered the dead leaves. The rabbits were the occasion for some ribald jokes* that reminded them of the unregenerate days. There had been a gag that consisted in taking a new boy by the chin and saying to him with a knowing air: "I know you, bunny"; Serge must have repeated this phrase over a dozen times in ten minutes. Then they thought of taxi-cabs and opined that a giraffe "could only get into a cab if it was chopped up into little pieces".

The poultry houses provoked an exclamation from Serge: "I say, we're going to have chicken for lunch to-day", and Alban gave a start, as he had in the cabin at the pelota court when he had seen that Serge's shirt was patched. He felt a glow of tenderness each time he was reminded that the Soupliers were hard up. "Hercules loves captive maids" (Seneca).

As if by some secret association of ideas, Serge said: "When you're old, perhaps you'll be poor, and I'll be rich. Then, whenever you call me, I'll come."

They went into the Palmarium, a vast greenhouse with tropical flora and a tropical temperature. Alone, completely alone in this vastness, a half-caste gentleman with a swarthy complexion and white hair was sitting on an iron chair, with an imposing cigar in his mouth: a touching picture of exile and homesickness. Serge spotted a hidden grotto: "We can kiss in there." Inside the grotto Alban said, "Take off your overcoat, so I can smell your body a bit more when I kiss you." Serge hung the coat on an outcrop of the rockery. Then as they steadied their feet on stones encircled by a little stream, amidst the murmur of flowing or trickling water, their mouths met in a deep kiss—and Serge's mouth was deep and moist and multiform, like the grotto. Then Alban made him take

* The word "rabbit" has a sexual connotation in French, e.g. *un chaud lapin* = a great fornicator. (Tr.)

off his beret, in order to inhale the odour of his hair. Slowly he breathed it in with a lingering intensity, as one fills one's nostrils with the smell of meadows at dawn.

A prying mother

Every day until that Sunday, Alban had carefully taken out his diary and confirmed that the dust was still there, intact.

It was on his return from the Zoo that he noticed that the dust had disappeared from the greater part of the binding.

They used to arrive at school very early in the morning, put their satchels in their classrooms, and go out for a short walk. In the course of one of these excursions, a few mornings later, Serge told Alban that, the plan to go to the country having fallen through, Father de Pradts now wanted Serge to become a boarder again after the New Year holidays. A boarder, then a day-boarder, then a day-boy, then a boarder again, like a sick man receiving every conceivable treatment, on the off-chance.

"But the boarders are said to be even worse than the rest. Do you think they are too?"

"Oh yes!"

"Then I wonder why the priests are always pushing people into becoming boarders. And you in particular."

"De Pradts says it's to save me the journeys to and fro."

"Which you do with me in half the time. It's obvious: de Pradts wants to shield you from my influence."

Alban did not think that Father de Pradts wanted to deprive him of Serge because he was in love with him or because of any jealous fear of his influence, but rather because he considered that influence a bad one. And he was bitter at heart.

On Friday, after Mass, the pupils were to leave the college for a week (the New Year holidays). Serge and Alban went back to the zoo.

"We had a competition to see who could swallow the most pieces of chalk; I won."

A glimmer of sunshine pierced the clouds. Serge:

“I didn’t dare tell you, but now that the sun has come out. . . . Well, de Pradts has put me down for the Schola. He said it would be my Christmas-box.”

“The Schola is no place for you. It’s crazy! They’re the worst of the lot!”

“Remember they’re the same chaps I spend my time with in my form. So . . .”

“Do you know about music? Quavers, flats, all that?”

“No.”

“But you can tell one note from another . . .”

“No.”

“Have you told him?”

“Yes, but he said that it wasn’t necessary to read music to sing.”

“You should have refused.”

“I can’t refuse everything.”

Blissful walks through the Bois, in the paths of the “new life”! (Serge’s “They’re the same chaps I see in my form” had calmed Alban a little.) Serge walked with eyes lowered on to the snow-sprinkled carpet of dead leaves, which he scuffed and kicked at from time to time, pushing the dead leaves in front of him from one foot to the other, like a football. The place was even more deserted than on Sunday. The only signs of life were the steam of their breath, the trickle of a half-frozen stream, the cawing of crows, the murmur of an invisible waterfall, and a black and white bird flitting from tree to tree.

Serge suggested that they should return to the grotto. The old South American gentleman was still there on his chair, still a living statue of exile and melancholy. They found the grotto again and feasted on each other once more in this sanctuary of nature.

Serge gave Alban a picture of his First Communion, which he had refused to give him at the time when their friendship was too intimate because, he had said, “it would have been too much of a contrast.” Alban marvelled at the restrained dedication: “To my dear friend whom I like very much.” Another would have put: “To my adored one”, or something grotesque of that kind.

Serge said that he would be paying a New Year visit to Father de Pradts during the holidays. Alban:

“That will be a good opportunity to talk to him about us. You ought to drop him a hint that I’ve behaved well with you.”

“That’s pride, that is.”

“You realize that it’s very unfair on me to have to behave myself with you and him to know nothing about it.”

“I know. Especially when he doesn’t seem very warm towards you. He told me that you didn’t have a very good opinion of me.”

“He told you that!”

“He didn’t say it in so many words, but I guessed it from what you said to him, which he repeated to me: that you thought I’d have had enough of the new line within a week.”

“My God, yes, I did say something like that to him. He might at least have kept it to himself.”

“Write me a letter during the holidays, and give it to me at the beginning of term. A long letter, ten pages, in which you’ll tell me: firstly, what you’re going to do, secondly, what I ought to do, thirdly . . . thirdly? . . .”

“Thirdly, what I think of the others, fourthly, what I think of you. And what if your parents find my letter?”

“Your letter will be all right.”

“Yes, but even if it is all right, parents don’t understand.”

“I’ll hide it inside my statue of the Blessed Virgin.”

“No, not the Blessed Virgin—that wouldn’t be proper.”

“In my pocket, then, under my handkerchief.”

“Doesn’t your mother go through your pockets?”

“Yes, when she brushes my trousers while I’m washing. But she doesn’t brush them often.”

“You write to me as well, but through the post. Anything you like, half a dozen lines, just so that I have some news of you during this wretched week. My mother told me she wouldn’t open your letters. Only, use a special handwriting on the envelope, so that she’ll say: ‘Oh, what intelligent handwriting he has!’ By the way, I’d like to give you something for New Year too.”

“No, that would be rabbity. I don’t want you to.”

Alban accompanied him to his door. As they were kissing each other good-bye, “Two more kisses,” said Serge, “for the week when we shan’t be seeing each other.” Alban gave him the two

kisses one after the other, on the same spot, in the Spanish fashion. Then, filled with happiness, he held his hand for a long time—for a whole minute, perhaps, while the world went on going round. Such was their leave-taking, full of promises.

*Christmas 1912:
letter from Alban to
Serge & programme
for the future*

For all the members of the Protectorate, Protectorship was their sole interest in life (apart from their studies). Thus home did not exist for Alban; home was merely an extension of school, because when he was at home he thought about nothing but school. How he loved Serge, around five o'clock in the evening, when he would put off lighting the lamp for a while the better to think about him in the gathering dusk. It was after coming up from one of these immersions, in the fumes of the smoking oil-lamp, that he wrote the following letter, constructed somewhat after the manner of his philosophy essays.

31 December 1912

Dear Serge,

You asked me to write you a long letter telling you what I intend to do, and what you ought to do, with de Pradts, with me and with the chaps. Here goes:

A. *What I intend to do.* I had hoped to get to know your ideas better and to familiarize you with mine, by speaking to you often on all kinds of subjects; I had hoped to understand you better, to have some influence over you. But you are probably going to become a boarder and I shall see you only once a week: so there's no point in thinking about that. I am not complaining about the possibility of your becoming a boarder, since you believe that it would be good for you: everything that is good for you is good in itself. I shall nevertheless remain your friend, if you wish, and in that case truly, staunchly, firmly, with no misgivings, with none of those crises and convulsions which are the inevitable concomitant of the egoism inherent in "affair"—type relationships, even the best of them, having laid it down as a principle once and for all that your friendship will always remain steadfast and unchanged whether you show it to me or not, whether we see each other or not.

B. *What you must do.*

I. *With de Pradts.* No need to ask you once again always to behave nicely to him, and go on talking to him about all this as you have begun. There is no reason why you should not trust both him and me at the same time.

II. *With me.* It would please me enormously if I could feel that you were a little more trusting, a little more secure with me. But if you really appreciate how much I love you, that will come of its own accord: so do not force yourself, just stay as you have been since our change. For, whether you realize it or not, you have been marvellous. If we have adopted the new line without too much trouble, you have helped me a great deal by not cooling off, in spite of the fact that we are certainly in a far less enjoyable situation than before, that I hardly ever see you, that I may sometimes talk to you a bit too solemnly, and that I do my utmost to avoid leading you into the slightest temptation, although it is not for lack of inclination.

III. *With the chaps.* I have too much regard for you not to be hurt at seeing you so much at ease with them. It is as though you found it perfectly natural for them to be despicable. I have made a list (which I shall give you) of all those whom I would rather you did not speak to. I beg you not to let yourself be taken in by boys who are none of them as good as you, but against whom you seem not to have any great resistance. They want to drag you into something which is neither love nor friendship, but the counterfeit of both. As regards the Group, you know of its complete change of direction. The movement initiated by me has been followed by Giboy, Linsbourg and Salins, to name only three. The ideas of us four are now precisely the same, and they are also those of the Superior and the prefects. Here is an extract from a letter from Giboy, in reply to one in which I outlined in the clearest possible way my thinking and my programme for the new term: "I want you to know how I feel about everything that has happened and everything that may happen, so that there should be no awkwardness between us on this subject and that we should be able to remain friends as before. I *entirely disapprove* of what you find objectionable. The last two months were an aberration on the part of us all. I now see that the Group as conceived at the beginning of the school year was a mistake, and I condemn those who carry on in that spirit. I repudiate organized pairing-off, flirting, decorations, etc. . . ."

You see that he could not be more in agreement with me. Every one who matters is also on the right side. Let the rest get on with their intrigues—now it's their own look-out. Those who persist must be made to realize that no one is following them any more, and no one is interested in their goings-on. All that sordid nonsense is their own affair, and nothing to do with us.

It only remains for me, dear Serge, to send you my fondest love and to assure you that—although I have never had much of a chance to prove it—I

have a really firm affection for you, on which you can rely, not to mention the aforesaid regard.

Your friend

A.

*New Year
resolution*

Trust demanded of the boys by the Superior; trust demanded of Alban by his mother; Alban's trust in de Pradts; trust required of Serge in Alban and de Pradts. What a lot of trust! What a lot of trust!

On this last day of the year, he always drew up a sort of balance-sheet in his mind. But this time, contrary to his usual habit, he wanted to keep a record of it in order to give it greater solemnity (and also with another end in view) and here is what he wrote in his diary:

By accomplishing what I had so long and so passionately desired and accomplishing it to the utmost possible limit (exceeding my wildest dreams) with the one I have always loved, I have given proof of my will-power. I have given even greater proof of it by abjuring it. Here are my wishes for 1913: that S. continues on the same footing with me as at present; that I become more and more disinterested towards him, and keep him on the right track; that the "craze" at the school stops and that Giboy and Linsbourg honour their intentions; that I work well and pass my second *bachot*; that I go back to Spain during the holidays and kill more bulls there.

He stopped. On the floor below, his mother walked across the landing humming. Mme. de Bricoule hummed all day: waltzes, *Amoureuse*, *Réponse à Amoureuse*, *Je t'aime et j'en meurs*, and then the whole of Manon and the whole of Werther (of which her husband had said to her: "It must be a pose. You can't be sincere when you claim to like that highbrow music"). A door closed. The humming stopped. Alban, who had been holding his pen poised, started a new paragraph and wrote:

Dear mama, when you come and break open my filing-case again and read this, you will be able to ascertain that I was not deceiving you when I spoke of the new line. However, since the day on which I am writing it is usually

marked by resolutions for the future, I advise you this time to take to heart our old proverb: "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth".

That same evening, kneeling at his mother's bedside as was his wont, he asked God to help him to avoid making any false move which would cause him to lose Serge. He reminded God of the Latin adage: "Jupiter blinds those whom he wishes to destroy." "My God, do not let me suffer those few seconds of blindness which cause one to be gored in the ring." God, Jupiter, Serge, the bulls: upon this note the year came to an end.

"To make them happy"

The following morning, which was a Sunday, the college being closed, Alban went to eleven o'clock Mass in Auteuil. An altar-boy took a collection "for the altar-boys' Christmas-box". At the time, he did not think of contributing. But late in the afternoon he wrapped a one-franc piece in a sheet of paper on which he wrote (disguising his handwriting): "For the altar-boys' Christmas-box", then went back to the church and dropped the coin into one of the collecting boxes, somewhat shamefacedly. If some one had said: "Ridiculous sentimentality. Why are you doing that?" he would have answered: "To make them happy". It was Fauvette's answer to Linsbourg when he was asked why, at the school he had attended before coming to the Park, his friend Giraud had sometimes given him money: "To make me happy." He adopted it unreservedly, plagiarized it without the slightest compunction, because he had found it so grandiose in its simplicity and naturalness. There is a kind of beauty which, once offered, belongs to all.

Outside the church, he said to himself: "I must do something for mama as well." What? Light a candle for her health. He counted his money: he was twenty-five centimes short. He went back into the church and said to the attendant:

"I want to light a candle for my mother, who's sick. But I'm twenty-five centimes short."

"Come back to-morrow with the money."

"But I want it for the 1st of January."

“All right. I trust you. Bring the twenty-five centimes tomorrow.”

“Of course.”

That was how the new year began.

Part Two

Mysterious Operations

*Mme. de Bricoule
summons the
Superior and tweaks
his ears, which are
big*

When one is ill, one might as well make the most of it, don't you think? Mme. de Bricoule, who was genuinely unwell, took advantage of it to summon headmasters, teachers, lawyers and others of every description, naming the day and the hour regardless of whether they suited the summoned. And these people invariably complied. If any one had told her that she was high-handed she would have been amazed, appalled, indignant, when in fact she was imperiousness personified. A schoolmaster was irremediably condemned when he arrived in wine-coloured kid gloves, buttoned at the wrist to boot (wine-coloured! and buttoned at the wrist! Hee! hee! hee!).

It was part of the year's ritual for Mme. de Bricoule to summon during the winter holidays the headmaster of the school which her son was attending at the moment, to talk things over with him. On this occasion she wore all her best rings, her pearls and her diamonds. Her room had been lavishly scented with *papier d'Arménie*. The Superior had to be rebuked and captivated at the same time. When he rang, she bit her lips hard, to make them crimson and hence desirable.

Mme. de Bricoule lived with a perfectly clear conscience amidst imitation Louis XIV and even Louis XIII, imitation eighteenth-century, real Louis-Philippe, real Second Empire, one (chipped) piece of real Sèvres, and real Belle Epoque. In other words, she surrounded herself, from lack of taste, with the same horrors, religion apart, with which Fathers de Pradts and Pradeau surrounded themselves from loftier motives. Apart also from the fact that on all, or nearly all these horrors there sprouted as if by virtue of some mysterious disease, bits of lace and bunches of ribbon, often somewhat soiled. Father Pradeau de la Halle was therefore not in the least taken aback by this *décor*, which accorded with his disdain for external appearances.

He launched at once into a eulogy of Alban.

“He has enormous influence, even in the smallest things: they imitate the way he wears his tie . . . the way he laughs. . . . He has put his mark on the college by his intelligence, his style, his reputation, the personality that he impresses on everything he does. He is truly the head of the college.” (Mme. de Bricoule swelled with pride.) “His marks are good, though not exceptional. (Mme. de Bricoule received this with indifference: as far as she was concerned, good marks were nothing, and served no purpose; only the middle classes were obsessed with good marks.) “He made the mistake of getting mixed up in a rather unfortunate movement at the beginning of term . . .”

“I know. He told me.”

“Ah!” said the Superior with a hint of displeasure.

“Yes,” said Mme. de Bricoule, swelling still further with pride, “my son tells me everything.”

The Superior smiled to himself. He had heard the phrase so often on the lips of mothers, and it sounded comic to him, knowing as he did how little their children confided in them, even those who appear most open. But even if she had sensed that she was mistaken, Mme. de Bricoule would have been unable to repress that “He tells me everything”, any more than she had been able to repress the “I know everything” which she had said to her son so often.

Father de la Halle went on to praise Alban for trying to “stem the tide”:

“His complete change over the past few weeks has been most noticeable. Even his face has changed.”

“And what about this young Souplier?” asked Mme. de Bricoule, bringing the name up for the first time.

“How shall I put it? He is engaging. He is dreadful, he does no work at all, but he is engaging. He has been on my list of pupils to be expelled since last spring. And yet I have never managed to bring myself to write the letter.”

“He was in some trouble last spring, wasn’t he?”

“Madame, he is always and everywhere in trouble. He really is the kind of boy who can only be called a trouble-maker. Yet at the

same time he is intelligent, and he has a kind of fitful moral delicacy. . . . More sensibility than heart.”

“In the atmosphere of the Park, there cannot fail to be trouble. This movement they call the Protectorate” (the Superior frowned) “can have developed only because the climate was propitious, almost inviting. Now a few pupils want to break with it. But I believe that something may need changing in the college as a whole. You did well to abandon the idea of putting on *Andromaque* last year. The preparations for these theatrical performances are simply an occasion for laxity.”

Little though he liked parents, the Superior accepted and even prompted their criticisms of the college: on occasion they could be helpful to him. But this time he was surprised to the point of agitation that Mme. de Bricoule should speak to him with such lack of tact. “Gentle and humble of heart” he might be, but people ought not to tread on his toes. This young woman, so graceful, so blonde, so frail. . . . She noticed his agitation, and congratulated herself on her power over men. For, becassocked though he was, to her he was a man, and a man about whom she was now saying to herself: “It’s a pity his ears are so big.” She was not unkind, but playful and teasing, and she rarely missed the mark with people. What rather attracted her about the Superior was the “little boy” quality she saw in him, as if something of all those little boys among whom he lived had rubbed off on him. And that youthful voice of his. . . . And the way he wanted to sneeze without managing to . . . atch . . . atch . . . atch. On the other hand, the Pradeau de la Halles were nonentities—that is to say solid professional middle-class, with a laughable *de*. Not for a moment did she lose sight of this, since it gave her a sense of superiority over him.

Meanwhile the Superior was defending his college, with a gentle and charming smile. For the moment, there was no question of mentioning the word “love”. What did these special friendships consist of, all said and done? “Walking home together after school”. It had all been greatly exaggerated. Those who did have these tendencies had been neutralized. There was a touch of romanticism in it all. This “romanticism” chimed with the

Catholic romanticism of his beloved Lacordaire, but the Superior did not say so, thinking that Mme. de Bricoule would not know who Lacordaire was.

The word romanticism was often used by the authorities at the Park to excuse the Park's delinquencies. It could not have been less appropriate, for the boys' friendships were anything but romantic. Whenever one of them was, everybody was horrified. Father de Pradts's love was romantic, but in a low key. Alban's feeling for Serge was rational, or so he flattered himself.

"What you need, Monsieur l'Abbé" (not once, needless to say, had she addressed him as "Father Superior"; she took great care not to let this title pass her lips), "is a little more authority. Alban is always complaining about the lack of discipline. The very first day he arrived at the Park, he was shocked by a certain free-and-easiness."

"Frankly, Madame, that is a bit much! Your son is one of the disturbing elements in the college, and it is he who . . . !"

The Superior rose. But he instantly corrected the impatience of this movement with a bright smile. He even thanked the young woman for the frankness with which she had spoken to him. This was very urbane for some one of the professional middle class. Truth to tell, he was not unsusceptible to this outspokenness. He could not help feeling slightly drawn to her—just as she felt drawn to him.

*A prying son and a
poet mother*

Mme. de Bricoule gave a detailed account of this interview to her son, who was quietly amused by it.

However, more serious matters impended. The first was to break open Mme. de Bricoule's writing-desk and to read her secrets. There was no ill will involved, still less curiosity. It was simply a settling of accounts: an eye for an eye; if he did not carry out his threat he was not a man. Besides, Mme. de Bricoule forced open his filing-case, and the priests inspected the desks, the trunks, and the clothes of their sleeping boarders. Snooping was as habitual as poison once used to be in Venice.

Genuinely ill though she was, and house-bound, Mme. de Bricoule was at that time obliged to go to the dentist twice a week. Alban procured a duplicate key to her desk by the same absurdly simple means by which she had procured a duplicate key to his filing-case, and settled down in her room as soon as she had left for the dentist's. The only risk was that a servant might come into the room. So he sat down boldly beside the writing-desk, pretending to read *The Lady Who Lost her Painter*—a novel by Paul Bourget left there by Mme. de Bricoule—the very picture of insolent ease.

As soon as he opened the desk there rose from it a smell—or should one say a perfume?—at once stale and pungent, like the smell of those essences with which Bedouin, both men and women, drench themselves: a heady odour of femininity and the past. Mme. de Bricoule had given up *Frileuse* (as the scent was called) a year before. She had used it for only a fortnight before finding it vulgar, but it had gone on reeking there ever since. The desk contained a variety of things tied up with ribbon, folders containing advertising cards which once had been scented too but whose scent had been more or less wiped out by the shock assault of *Frileuse*, cheap jewellery, celluloid flowers—all of which were in fact scarcely noticeable because only a single object sprang to view at first: a piece of candle with five needles stuck in it. Now a few days earlier Mme. de Bricoule, who spent her days buried in magazines—*Femina*, *La Vie heureuse*, *Je sais tout*, *Le Soleil du dimanche*—had mentioned to her son an article she had just read in one of them concerning sympathetic magic practices intended to punish the loved one for not loving you or for loving you no longer, and doubtless to encourage him to come back to you. And she had talked about dolls and candles which were supposed to represent the loved one, and which you pierced with needles, saying this was just what that dreadful Chanto deserved. The desk also contained a prayer-book, from which fluttered the confession certificates of Mme. de Bricoule and her husband when they were engaged, and several stiff-backed note-books. Alban opened one of these at random, and came across a list of masculine names each more “noble” than the one before, followed by either an *l*

(meaning *I like him* in English), or an *h* (meaning *I hate him*), and strongly reminiscent of the lists of protégés with their respective grades in the Order of the Golden Button; lists of collectors for charities; the names of the people who had come to her mother's "Tuesdays"; photographs of singers at the Opéra-Comique; and lists of utterly mysterious objects ("button-holes, bows, monkeys, Chinese lanterns, skittles, whisks") which were for giving away at dances. He opened another more recent note-book. The first page was inscribed:

Yseult de Termor
SOUL FEVER
Poems

He read a few lines:

*Mon Ame, tu le sais, qui sur ton Cœur repose,
Est bercée à jamais par ce Cœur de métal,
Ainsi qu'un Enfant dans son berceau très rose,
Qui jette sur sa Mère un sourire auroral.*

*Mon Ame est un glaïeul.**

The poem stopped there, and was followed by this note: "Interruption by reason of a different passion". Each of the poems was signed Yseult de Termor, which was odd since the fly-leaf already bore this name: it was as if Mme. de Bricoule had been so infatuated with her pseudonym that she had wanted to repeat it indefinitely. But Alban's eyes, already wide open, widened beyond measure when he read:

Voici des fruits, des fleurs, des feuilles et des branches, etc. etc. . .
Verlaine's famous sonnet, *followed by the signature Yseult de Termor!*
Must one infer from this that Mme. de Bricoule indulged in the infantile self-deception, once practised by her son, of copying another's words into a private note-book and signing it with her

* My soul, as you well know, rests in your heart, your stony heart by which it is forever lulled, like an infant rocked in its rosy cradle, bestowing an auroral smile on its mother. My soul is a gladiolus . . . (Tr.)

own name? Indeed, Mme. de Bricoule's handwriting revealed even more. That of her seventeenth year was quite different from her present hand, and the transcript in question was obviously recent. Mme. de Bricoule was doing at thirty-eight what Alban had done at twelve.

He leafed through the note-book and came upon this: "Dear face, wicked face, sweet face, that one could gaze at for a whole lifetime without ever doing anything else." When did that date from? About a year ago, apparently. And written with whom in mind? Chanto, no doubt. Then he remembered that his mother was always telling him that he was "wicked", and he wondered . . . He felt embarrassed, and closed the note-book.

How absurdly inadequate, he thought in amazement, was the course in "experimental" psychology which was part of his philosophy curriculum. Real "experimental" psychology consisted in breaking open a desk (or a filing-case). One learnt more from that in ten minutes than from six months of cramming. But it was a matter of urgency to bring his practical work in "experimental" psychology to a halt at this point. Not for fear of a servant coming in, or of a taxi arriving with Mme. de Bricoule. The unforeseeable fact was that all the danger arose from the exhalations emerging from the desk. If the dutiful son went on with his search, Mme. de Bricoule was bound to realize when she came back to her room that her desk had been opened. So he shut it, and even opened the window for a moment to drive out the smell. Back in his room, with the whiff of the perfume lingering on his fingers like the sickly smell one sniffs on them in a certain circumstance, he washed his hands vigorously, well pleased with himself.

Neither towards de Pradts, nor the Superior, nor perhaps any of the adults he knew, would Alban ever have behaved as he had just behaved towards his mother. It was the family spirit.

These encroachments on privacy, maternal and filial, help to give our story its somewhat special character. Chance, or, if there is a God, a benign Providence, had surrounded the adolescent Alban with people of his own stamp. For he and Linsbourg and Denie were unusual people; Father de Pradts and Mme. de Bricoule were unusual people; and many of the protégés were

unusual people, at any rate monsters of thoughtless frivolity, or to put it at its lowest, enigmas. So the young man did not suffer from loneliness, as often happens at his age. He was in the perfect setting.

*Mme. de Bricoule
receives a counterblow,
takes fright, and
in her turn adopts
the policy of trust.*

Mme. de Bricoule's "I have my police" had consisted of picking the lock of her son's case. The first time, it will be recalled, was in March, while he was in Spain. But on that occasion she had stopped short, touched by the little bunch of grapes. Nevertheless, in November she had gone back to it. Like all blind people, she had flashes of insight, and she had guessed that during the month of November, when Alban was making it up with Serge, something dubious was afoot.

Strictly speaking, Alban did not keep a diary. He scribbled down the barest facts about his personal life together with a few comments in such a deliberately indecipherable handwriting, with so many abbreviations and cryptographic symbols, that it merely set the countess's imagination revolving even more feverishly in the dark. Nevertheless, when she had read "Cab with him", she had made up the story of the "tradesman". It was a different matter when, six weeks later, she came across the *note to the reader* which rounded off the year 1912: "Dear mama, when you come and break open my case again . . ."

"An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth." She took fright. She was frightened of him as in other encounters he had been frightened of her. Chanto? Her previous romances? Even Yseult de Termor, and the malefic candle? Yet it never entered her head that he might answer one forced entry with another. She was never to know how the academician had discovered that he had a poet for a mother. Nor was she ever to disclose to him—which would have been tantamount to confessing—that she had read his threatening message. Both sides kept silent, he with his weapon, she with her fear.

She made up her mind to get on better terms with him and, at the very time when he had just broken into her desk, to take him more into her confidence—in order to deprive him of reasons for animosity against her; to disarm him. Confidence and trust would be just as profitable as police raids. And the Superior's visit, coming at the same moment, contributed towards this *détente*. For the first time, Mme. de Bricoule had heard her son's little friend being praised, and by a man whom she respected in spite of everything. This man had also played down the importance of those notorious, those terrible friendships: although she did not altogether believe him, his words had made some impression. Besides this, the atmosphere of Christmas and New Year was scarcely behind them, festivals which it was the fashion in this household to celebrate in the English style, that is to say, with good humour and sensibility. Encouraged by all this, Mme. de Bricoule inaugurated her own "new line". She adopted the policy that had succeeded so well for the priests of Notre-Dame du Parc: the policy of trust. One evening she said point-blank:

"I'd so like to have another look at those group-photos of the school. Would you show them to me?"

Alban buckled his breast-plate.

She looked at them. "There's that beastly little Bonbon! He's a good-looker, no doubt about it" (she used the same words she had used about her dancing-partners twenty years before). "And our famous Serge. . . . How well-behaved he looks! And what about you? Are you still behaving yourself with him? And with the others? You're not still encouraging them to smoke on the sly?"

Alban clenched his teeth. He did not recognize his mother's right to call Souplier by his Christian name. And as if it had only been a matter of "encouraging them to smoke on the sly"! Still that same view of the college through parental distorting glasses!

Mme. de Bricoule must have sensed his reaction, for she corrected her aim.

"Yes, he has a serious look. Fourteen years old. . . . He could have been my other little boy."

The shot went home, but Alban did not dare to say: "I too have often thought that he could have been my brother!"

Several times that week Mme. de Bricoule brought up Serge's name. Alban no longer panicked when she began, no longer buried his face in the Persian cat's fur to hide his blushes. One evening she said "Why doesn't he come to tea? I ought to get to know him." It was as though she were speaking of her son's prospective fiancée. She had come a long way since the not so distant day when she had suggested that he ought not to waste time meeting Serge because of the forthcoming exams, and in particular that they ought not to go out together in the afternoon.

Serge for tea: Alban was deeply stirred by this idea. Yet it left him tongue-tied. "Never mix parents with boys." This rule of the Superior's, of Father de Pradts', of the whole school's, was and always had been instinctively his own. Besides, what a lot of weighty problems! What if Serge failed to kiss his mother's hand? What if he held out his own, and, horror of horrors, without removing his glove? perhaps he wouldn't even have gloves—another disaster. What if he addressed her first? (Mme. de Bricoule followed court etiquette, whereby a newcomer is never the first to address the Queen.) And in any case, it was out of the question to introduce Serge to the "rites". Already Serge had fired several shafts against the aristocracy.

So he let the matter drop, and his mother did not mention it again.

All the same, he was pleased to see his mother compromise herself. "Will she ever dare to forbid me anything after talking to me as she did?" Incorruptible though he was, he did not lack caution, and kept the future in mind.

For her part, Mme. de Bricoule was delighted with herself for speaking to him so openly about Souplier. How she loved this new atmosphere! Like a girl trying to catch a husband, she had mugged up on Roman history and bull-fighting manuals in order to keep contact with him, and had replaced the usual *vin ordinaire* with Beaujolais. More than ever, through Serge, she was remaining in his life. Through Serge, she was keeping him hers.

Alban never received the promised letter from Serge. He thought that only some serious occurrence could have prevented him from

writing, and was worried. On the first morning of term he waited in vain outside Serge's house. The concierges were airing their lodges, shopkeepers were washing down the pavement in front of their shops, the day was beginning for every one, but for him it was over. He knew now that Serge was a boarder, and was certain that Father de Pradts had only wanted this in order to remove Serge from his bad influence. We know why Father de Pradts wanted it, and wanted it so urgently that when the Soupliers had hesitated, on the grounds of expense, he had obtained for them from the Superior a reduction in the boarding fees.

During that week, Alban could not even see Serge at the barrier, because the new convention forbade meetings there, and the wildest spirits of yesterday, the Giboys and the Bonbons, raised howls of indignation when they saw a senior and a junior together there, however briefly.

On the first Sunday, Serge made a sign to Alban on the way out, under the covered way.

"I can't go out with you. I'm being kept in."

"What time will you get out?"

Serge showed ten fingers, then one finger, then half a finger: half past eleven.

"Well, I'll wait for you."

When Serge came out at half past eleven and spotted him, he did not smile as he usually did, so that Alban immediately froze.

"You've been up to mischief?"

"I've been a fool, a real fool. I carved the bench with my penknife."

"Just as I told you when you showed it to me: 'You'll carve the benches with it.' "

"No, you said 'desks'."

"Do you remember every word I say to you just like that?"

"Not all of them, just some."

"How am I expected to have any influence on you if I see you for half an hour every week? In any case, it's obvious that they don't want me to have any influence on you."

"Wait, I'm going to buy some chestnuts."

In the course of buying the chestnuts, Serge lifted the pan cover three times to waft smoke into people's nostrils. "Rude little boy!" said a lady.

"What about that letter?" asked Alban.

"What letter?"

"The letter you were supposed to write to me."

"I couldn't: I had a cold. Please forgive me."

(It was true. He had been given a new suit for Christmas, and had gone out without an overcoat to dazzle every one with it. Hence the cold. In any case, there was a kind of unwritten rule among the boys, whereby in a mild winter you went out in overcoat and muffler, and only in a jacket when it was freezing solid.)

"You're entirely forgiven—entirely!"

"How nasty you are this morning! And I wanted to give you something."

He took a photograph of himself that Alban had asked for out of his wallet. Alban read the dedication on the back: "To my dear friend Alban." But subsequently—it was obvious from the different coloured ink—the writer had added: "de Bricoule".

"You just put 'Alban' at first. Then you felt it was too intimate, too untruthful, and you added my surname . . ."

Serge blushed at first and denied it. Then:

"Well, yes, I did feel it was too intimate for our present situation."

The excuse was a subtle one, if excuse it was.

"Yes, you may well talk about our present situation! I hardly ever see you. I don't mind sacrificing pleasure, if I must. But to have to sacrifice your presence, O God! The fact that you're so near and yet so far. . . . Mind you, I love you whether you're there or not. It doesn't really matter that you belong to me so little."

"I can't belong to you any more than I have already."

An astonishing, an unbelievable remark, a woman's remark on the lips of a fourteen-year-old boy, and one who was anything but feminine. And that remark he had made the other day: "If you had declared yourself at that moment, you could have done what you liked with me." Where did he get these words? Had he read them

somewhere, and remembered them? No, no, for after all he was only saying what was really true.

“Did you go to see de Pradts during the holidays?”

“Yes.”

“What did he say to you?”

“How do you expect me to remember? It was ten days ago! He said to me: ‘Be very discreet at home. The affairs of the college are your family secrets.’ ”

“And did he talk about me?”

“He asked me if I liked you.”

“What did you tell him?”

“Yes.”

“That’s funny.”

“Why is it funny?”

Alban felt like answering: “It’s odd to say that you like me, because you don’t.” He said:

“You’ve altered in the past fortnight; you’re no longer the same. You probably don’t even remember that you asked me to write you a serious letter saying what I intended to do, what I should like you to do, and so on. . . . I have it here, but I don’t think I’ll give it to you.”

“Yes, do give it to me.”

“No. I wrote it under the influence of our last meeting before the holidays, when you were rather nice to me. But it would be out of place today. It would strike you as being somewhat . . . somewhat . . . too affectionate.” (Serge looked very taken aback.)

“However, I might as well give it to you. You won’t read it. It’s very long. Six pages.”

“Well, that isn’t much.”

They were outside Serge’s house. Serge said good-bye with his hand in his pocket, and turned away. Alban roughly pulled his hand out of his pocket, spinning him round slightly. Serge shook hands vaguely, without a word, while his body was already facing the other way ready for departure.

And a week passed without Alban seeing him again. He said to himself: “It’s obvious that it’s coming to an end. My absence over the holidays has cooled him off even more. He goes on pretending

out of pride, as one might expect. Why is it that trying to do good is always sad?"

Giboy informed him that Salins had said of them: "They're happy, those two. They love each other."

The following Sunday morning Alban kept out of sight while waiting for Serge, to see what he would do. Serge came out, looked round several times to see if the other was there, then set off without waiting for him. Alban followed him, almost on the point of not catching up with him, out of despair, as the year before he had not dared to, out of shyness. Finally he went up to him.

"Thanks for waiting so long!"

"I thought you weren't coming, that you were ill. You didn't come yesterday."

"Fancy, you noticed after all!"

*Unhappy walks in
the Bois: a
friendship corroded
by virtue*

They went to the Zoo. Alban:

"Aren't your hands cold without gloves?"

"I've got gloves," said Serge, pulling a pair out of his pocket and stuffing them back again at once. But Alban had had time to see that they were women's gloves, no doubt his mother's. And he felt saddened, as he did every time he realized that Serge's family was not very well off.

The sky was grey. The earth of the paths, the dead leaves and the bottle-green of a trickling stream made a wan harmony, in which the leaves traced their golden filigree, but the only touch of brightness was the red beak of a black swan.

"I saw you under the covered way with Denie and Perreau. You seem pretty thick with them. And when Salins arrived, you said hello to him. Why?"

"I say hello to anybody who shakes hands with me."

"I saw you chatting with Brulard, too."

“From time to time somebody taps me on the shoulder and says: ‘So and so wants you.’ I’m bound to go.”

“Not at all. You can refuse. But you haven’t any will-power.”

“I won’t do it any more if you don’t want me to.”

“The age of sacrifice begins!”

“Oh hell! You lecture me like de Pradts.”

“And you took Rémond by the arm. Oh, I don’t think it means much. I merely think that it doesn’t mean nothing.”

“I like Rémond very much. . . . Well, I quite like him. Is it forbidden to like people, too?”

“All those chaps are second-raters who want to get their hooks into you and lead you astray. You need to watch out.”

Serge, impatiently: “All right! All right!”

“And that Park vocabulary! Chucking, hitching up with, walking out with, bagging some one, et cætera. . . . It might be the lounge at the Moulin-Rouge. Couldn’t you talk a bit differently?”

“Everybody talks like that here, the priests and beaks as much as the chaps, you know that.”

“But it’s ridiculous, when you think about it. You might at least resist it a bit.”

“You’re repeating what you said to me in your letter, but it was much better in the letter because I could read it again. And besides, it was legibly written. I didn’t read it in bits and pieces, in the evening and then in the morning. I read it all at once, at least the first time, because the second time (I read it twice), one of the beaks went by. I just had time to slip it into my stocking.”

Alban was pleased that Serge had found his letter legible. Legibility played a big part in the letters that passed between the members of the Protectorate. They were always supposed to be illegible, and the recipient complained that the other had written it “as fast as possible, so as to get it over with”, whereas it was often he who did not want to take the trouble of deciphering it, in order to get it over with.

“Pradeau de la Halle told Henriette that since the new line Denie’s conduct has improved. I should be very annoyed if it turned out that Linsbourg has changed Denie more than I’ve changed you.”

“Don’t worry. Denie is far too arrogant and selfish. He hasn’t any heart.”

(Denie would make no progress. What a relief!)

After a while:

“Did de Pradts forbid you to . . . ? No, it can’t be that. If you were interested you would have told me already.”

Alban guessed that it was to do with the grotto, but he was sulking. Rather forgo his pleasure than stop sulking. Eventually Serge:

“Couldn’t we go to the grotto, by any chance? Or has de Pradts forbidden it?”

Inside the grotto, they kissed. Serge: “You have an angry mouth.”

Alban: “I’ve been stupid, I doubted you. But I apologize for it.”

“I like it when you apologize to me.” Holding out his lips, he added: “Once more before we leave.”

The following Saturday, Serge sent Alban a note. He was to be kept in again the next day!

At a quarter past eleven, Alban saw him come out. Serge said to him: “Did you come back specially for me?” He seemed very touched. “No,” said Alban pleasantly, “I had some shopping to do. I was coming back this way.” (He had been waiting for an hour and a half, roaming about the streets.) “So, you get yourself kept in on purpose so that we can’t go to the Zoo any more!”

“Yes, of course!”

“Listen, I can’t stand this life any longer. If you really wanted us to see a bit of each other, you’d see that you weren’t kept in on Sunday morning, since that’s the only time we can meet. At least we could see each other, even if I can’t help you to improve—since it’s obvious now that you’re not making any improvement at all.”

“You’ve just had a 13 for general conduct, and yet you have the . . .”

Serge stopped short, sensing that he had gone too far.

“If you don’t want us to see each other at all any more, then say so openly.”

Serge pummelled him. “Ah! there are times when I could kill you.”

Only a little while before, Alban would have answered with absolute sincerity: "I wouldn't mind being killed if it was you who killed me." This time: "Well, answer! Answer whatever you like, but answer something."

"The sky is grey. . . . What do you expect me to answer to remarks like that?"

"At any rate, our experiment has turned out to be a failure."

"Is it my fault if I'm kept in?"

"Maybe it's mine. Yes, of course, it must be mine. Our relationship takes your mind off your work, in the same way as I think about you while I'm working ever since we've been together, and it makes my work more difficult. Instead of getting up a quarter of an hour earlier on Thursday to go over my maths homework, I stayed in bed to think about you."

"So I'm preventing you from working?"

"Oh, its not a reproach."

"Reproaches are all I get from you."

"Because you deserve them."

Serge muttered between his teeth:

"God, how boring he is!"

"Who's boring?"

"You."

Alban crushed his cigarette-holder between his teeth, spat out the pieces, turned on his heel and went off without another word. This was intended to demonstrate that he could be as violent as any Spaniard. *Caramba!*

He felt sure that they would make it up, but he also felt: "What is beyond question is that, whatever happens from now on, I shall never be able to trust him in the same way as I did before. We wanted to do something decent, and this is the result." With comical vanity, finding Serge less affectionate towards himself, he regarded him as a lost soul. "Poor child, how weak he is! What a hopeless case he'll soon be! I don't hold it against him. I pity him."

That evening his mother said:

"I dreamt about Serge last night. He came down from your room and called in on me to say good-bye. He was standing at the

foot of my bed, with the same expression and the same sailor suit he is wearing in the photo. Unfortunately I was in curlers and felt embarrassed. I wanted to tell him to stay, but I wasn't looking my best, so I let him go. . . . Are things still going well with him?"

Alban cited some examples of virtuous behaviour on the part of the Group: in this case with absolute conviction, for they were real. As regards Serge, he instanced "ripping" remarks and "decent" actions—all imaginary. (In the same way as, in Maucornet days, he had given his mother to understand that when they were in the same class Serge had put the book between them while he was reciting, to help him.) Confess the failure of the new line? Never.

"I don't want to give you swelled heads, but not many could have reformed themselves as you have."

Finding himself on such a good tack, Alban could not help pursuing it. He made up a story about Serge being a royalist and sticking *Action Française* posters on walls. Mme. de Bricoule said: "They're middle-class, but they want to better themselves. That's very good."

She began to muse again:

"There he was with his pretty little bare legs. . . . Actually, I believe that the only true friendships are those that are nourished by the senses." She corrected herself: ". . . or have been. What do you think?"

Alban felt like telling his mother that it was none of her business.

He simply said:

"I think that there are firm friendships based on the senses, and others not."

"And what about Bonbon? Still as captivating as ever? Naturally, with a perfumer for a father! . . . You ought to say to him: 'Model yourself on Souplier, old chap.' "

In the austere context of his relations with Serge, this sort of talk shocked the young man. But he had to resign himself to the fact that on this subject his mother never maintained the right tone for long. So much so that even if she did use the right word it somehow sounded wrong: Alban did call Bonbon "old chap", but

hearing the expression on his mother's lips, he suddenly felt that he never used it.

M. de Chantocé had come back the day before, and been very nice. At that moment, Mme. de Bricoule no longer saw her son's liaison in a gloomy light; rather, her unspoken feeling was: "Let them be happy together!"

"Chanto called me 'dear little creature'. . . . You ought to call Serge that."

"I always call him 'Souplier'," said Alban drily.

(Remembering this exchange when he saw his friend again, he instinctively called him "Souplier". "Why 'Souplier'?" asked the other. "Haven't I got a Christian name?")

As if Mme. de Bricoule's false note had broken the harmony, Alban made the mistake of looking at his watch. Whereupon his mother's raw susceptibilities were aroused:

"You're always going off: it's all you think about! I know what's in your mind. You're like Chanto when he tells me as soon as he arrives: 'I must leave early. I'm expecting a phone call at four o'clock.' As if I didn't know! Sons are so nasty!"

On Wednesday, Denie passed on a note from Serge:

My dear Alban,

I'm sorry I annoyed you. I don't know what was the matter with me, I think it was the cold. Anyway, I'm being good this week and will keep on being till the end, I promise. We'll be able to go and see the grotto and the rabbits (not the droppings of the rabbits).

With all my love.

Your affectionate friend,
Serge.

You thought you would make a big impression on me by spitting out your cigarette-holder, but you didn't. I didn't like you at that moment.

O letter, letter! Alban pressed it against his forehead with a gesture of infinite love. All pain evaporated. And in that gesture he had caught a whiff, on the writing-paper, of the extraordinary odour of Serge Souplier.

But that Sunday was not what it should have been either. First of all, of course, they had to chew over the past.

“If I had said to you: ‘It’s all over, I’m leaving you’, would you have cried?”

“I don’t think so. Or rather, yes, but not for long. Then I would have said: ‘What a swine! What a fat-head! Anyway I’d been sick of him for a long time. I’m jolly glad . . .’ People always say that, don’t you think?”

All this was fine, but still, ever since the new line Alban had not been more but less happy. Now he had become a niggling, jealous bore: recriminations about the past, anxiety about the future. For an hour and a half, he kept harping obsessively on the same themes:

Theme I: “It’s not working. We’re getting nowhere.”

(Reply: “Where do you expect us to get to?”)

Theme II: “When you chuck me . . .”

(Reply: “You’ll end up by making me want to if you go on about it.”)

Theme III: “Do you feel I’m behaving to you the way I should?”

(Reply: “Of course I do. How do you think you ought to behave?”)

And so they went on, through the wintry Bois, each of them wearisome and unsatisfying to the other. If Alban said: “Don’t trail behind me like that”, Serge broke into a run. If Alban said: “Don’t go on the ice” (of the lake), Serge did so.

And he kept crossing the road, checking up on the make of every parked car, jumping over the wire protecting the lawns: it was as if he were trying to counter Alban’s boring-sentimental act with a boring *enfant terrible* act. And he was not very prepossessing, this winter Serge, with his perpetual cold, his red nose and chapped lips, his cap askew, a shabby scarf round his neck worn down to the width of a ribbon, and walking hunched up against the cold. (For his part, Alban told himself that between Madrid and Algeciras the train was often held up by snow. The fact that it was cold in Spain was enough to prevent him suffering from the cold in Auteuil.) Although Serge made an occasional nice remark, more often he was silent. Once he even yawned (as Bonbon prided himself on doing while a senior was kissing him),

and Alban, who had something “important” to say to him on the tip of his tongue at that very moment, did not say it—all enthusiasm drained. Then Serge said with an air of profundity: “That’s life!”

“Why do you say: ‘That’s life?’” asked Alban, who thought it a rather daft thing to say.

“My mother told me that when there’s a silence and you don’t know what to say, you should say: ‘That’s life!’ ”

The younger boy’s silences made the elder realize that he was boring him, and moreover that it was quite natural that his behaviour towards him should bore him. But he was powerless to change it, and went on endlessly rehashing and chewing over themes I, II and III. Before, they had had tangible proofs. Now, in the absence of such realities, Alban no longer had any proofs, or at least was incapable of seeing them. He could not see that Serge was giving him a true proof of friendship by putting up with him, by amiably putting up with this soulful-moral mishmash which meant practically nothing to him. And one might say that their relationship bespoke a contrast between childish wisdom and adolescent emotionalism—Serge perceiving better than Alban what was false and a trifle ridiculous in their situation—if not a contrast between one who is master of himself and one who is not; in other words between the one who loves and the one who loves a little less.

During this same period, Mme. de Bricoule realized that she had less to say to her son than in the days before the reformation. Her joking and teasing no longer had a purpose. Indeed, little though she let herself go with M. de Chantocé, she even felt that she should pretend to restrain the captain’s ardours, remind him of the proprieties, put on her own Incorruptible act, in order to keep in tune with Alban (that is, to retain a subject of conversation with him).

There were silences between mother and son.

“Say something!”

“What do you want me to say?”

“Anything. Lie! But of course, now you no longer have any occasion to lie.” (meaning: “The good times are over.”)

Thus the reformation, which cramped Serge's style and irritated his friends, threatened to envenom even the Bricoule household.

The following Sunday, 12 February (1913), Serge was kept in.

"I made a racket in the gym. I *like* making a racket in the gym."

"What about the afternoon?"

"I'm going to the Louvre in the afternoon."

"What the hell are you going to do in the Louvre?" said the president of the Academy crossly. "Listen, I'm going to see de Pradts to ask him to cancel your detention. Since he approves of our liaison . . ."

"Approves'? Accepts . . ."

"You think only 'accepts'? Anyway, since he knows that I only see you on Sunday mornings, if he refuses it means that he's against me. At least we'll know, and the situation will be clear."

Alban went to see Father de Pradts, who, being in a mood to assert his authority over the master who had imposed the detention, gave his assent, subject to Father Pradeau de la Halle's approval. Alban went immediately to see the Superior. The latter, for once, seemed a little taken aback.

"Are you aware of the unusual nature of your request? If I complied with it, what would the master who gave Souplier a detention think? Why do you want him to be let off?"

"So that I can see a little of him. I never see him."

He might equally well have answered: "Because I love him."

As was to be expected, the Superior could not resist such candour, which was worthy of Fauvette himself: the Park was always extraordinary, both for good and ill. A few moments later, Alban was waiting for Serge at the exit. Serge came up, his face glowing.

"I was in detention, and I'd already written my name on the paper, when a chap brought de Pradts's note. You must admit de Pradts is a brick. Thank you, too. But you did it partly for yourself."

"I was waiting for a reservation of that sort: you always make them in my case. Still, you've thanked me, and since that doesn't happen often . . ."

“Have I made you angry?” asked Serge, gazing up at him and linking arms with him. “Seriously, do you feel that I don’t thank you enough? It’s true, you do a lot for me!”

It was clear that he was touched by the “de-detention”—more so, perhaps, than by any of his friend’s great sacrifices. Now he had taken hold of Alban’s little finger and was playfully squeezing it until it hurt. But from time to time he would forget this game and just hold the finger between his own, and they walked on like that: alternating feigned viciousness with feigned sweetness, like a cat that alternately bites you and licks you. But this illusion of sweetness filled the older boy’s heart with wonder. The game finally stopped. Alban:

“Are you still hiding my letters in a good place?”

“Yes, in my desk, under the books.”

“And what if de Pradts searches it?”

“Do you think he’d do that! But anyway, I think it would be splendid if he found them. The chaps, no, but him. . . . I wouldn’t ever show them to him, of course, but if he happened to find them . . .”

Suddenly their faces stiffened. A cab was heading for the Bois, and in it they had spotted Linsbourg and Denie looking at them and laughing. Alban felt that there was something wounding in this laughter.

Alban and Serge take a cab, in which their behaviour is exemplary, and drive to the Bois

*The Protectorate
reverts to the old
ways*

Meanwhile, like a thawing pond in which little cracking noises can be heard, the moral enthusiasm of the Group was gradually waning. In the first place Alban had noticed that there was no longer as much talk about the “progress” so-and-so had made; then he noticed that people sometimes stopped talking when he approached, and he guessed that “unhealthy” conversations had started again; finally he overheard a few remarks and was struck

by their crudity: it was as though Nature, having been excessively thwarted, was bursting out excessively the moment it ceased to be held in check.

Alban and Serge's cab-ride was common knowledge. Nobody doubted that the ideal couple too had descended from the empyrean, but instead of being commended for becoming like every one else, they were sneered at. There was a pretty scurrilous comment from Giboy, to which Alban indignantly retorted:

"So you think we've started again too?"

"Me? I don't think anything. But after all, in view of what Souplier's like . . ."

"Souplier is better than any of you!"

At the beginning, he had liked them for themselves. Then he had liked them only because he could talk to them about Serge. Now they exasperated him, for they had become even worse than before, restless and virulent like bacilli in sputum. Rightly or wrongly, what struck him most forcibly about them was their absurdity. These boys leaning towards one another, gossiping interminably, glancing round furtively, sometimes covering their mouths with their hands so as not to be overheard, under the rapturous stares of the nobodies. . . . He felt like shouting to the nobodies: "Why should you admire them so much, you poor fools? What have they got that you haven't? I tell you it's the other way round—they're cretinous." There was indeed a sort of cretinism peculiar to Protectorship, or at least to the Group, with every one telling the same story (about protection) twenty times over in the same words while the rest listened without ever tiring of it—which brings us back once more to the rhapsodies and to the Iliad, for the Iliad also has its cretinous side. And now Alban cold-shouldered them, avoided them, shook hands without stopping and without saying a word, or even went by without shaking hands at all. He did not suffer from their hostility; Serge was enough for him. But what poisoned their relations even more than this exasperation was the knowledge of the others' suspicion. To be suspected of what one has not done, to have one's word disbelieved, corrodes everything.

Thus, gradually, a dramatization of the Protectorate had been enacted. It had begun with Giboy's spectacular passion for Lapailly, and continued with the Alban-Serge scandal; its last episode was the reformation, which forbade clowning and created true Incorruptibles, or one at least.

However, at the same time as the Group was going back to its old ways, the St. Vincent de Paul Society of the college was celebrating its fifty-fourth member—out of the fifty-four pupils of the upper school (which alone was eligible for this society)! Unlike the Academy and the Aeronautical Club, which were trivial and pointless, the St. Vincent de Paul Society was an institution entirely worthy of respect. The Superior had imbued it with his spirit, Linsbourg with his energy, and his spirit too. It was by far the most Christian nucleus in the college. Strangely enough, the “little brothers” took as keen an interest as the others in homes that were of the same social class as theirs. Linsbourg was the heart and soul of it all. Linsbourg was the sort of person who at football would pass the ball to a chap nobody else passed it to, because he wasn't a good player . . .

*Promotion of the
Little General*

At about this time, the Little General* was elected a junior academician. Alban still felt some compunction about having disappointed him. As he was rather wheedling to Alban, the latter asked him: “Is it because of the Academy that you suck up to me?” He answered “Yes” with a little smile. But at other times he was not thinking about the Academy at all, and was astonished when it was mentioned: he was both interested and disinterested at the same time, yes and no at the same time, as kids are—with that engaging manner of his age which does not correspond to affection but apes it: holding your hand in the playground or the street, taking it back again if you disengage it, holding it for a long time in his on taking leave of you, and so on.

* Nickname of Aymery de La Maisonfort, the general's son whom we met earlier. (H.M.)

An outstanding composition opened the doors of the Academy to prospective junior members. Alban undertook the task: deliberate grammatical errors, deliberate mistakes in punctuation, deliberate wrong dates, and all kinds of howlers calculated to prove that it was really by the Little General, and at the same time “valid” enough to justify his election. Alban’s fellow-members laughed up their sleeves and played ball: it was taken for granted that the candidates’ papers were composed by their protectors, just as the lectures given by the brilliant speakers of the Aeronautical Club arrived ready-made from the Club’s headquarters. (By way of contrast, the lectures of the academicians were their own work. Alban had spoken on “Athenian Society in the time of Herodotus”. Linsbourg had wavered between two themes: “A Forgotten Author and a Forgotten Book: Berquin and *The Children’s Friend*”, and “Moral Awareness in Boys of Thirteen to Fifteen”. He had picked the latter subject; his talk had made a great impression. Talks on history or applied ethics suited the academicians better than literary dissertations, for their literary tastes amounted to admiring everything bad and disparaging everything beautiful.)

*Dubious expedient
on the part of Mme.
de Bricoule*

In anticipation of her next visit to the dentist Mme. de Bricoule, who had been on the point of fainting during the previous session, had ordered champagne, which was not usual in this household. Dining in his mother’s bedroom, Alban found the champagne on the table and his mother already a little over-excited.

“You know, I think I saw Bonbon. I was on my way back from the dentist’s by cab; it was half past four and he must have been coming home from school; I’m sure it was him. No overcoat, as if it was summer-time. Bare legs, turned-down collar, a blue jacket with white stripes. Oh, he has all the vices written on his face, and he was gazing at himself in every window. I must say he’s wonderfully beautiful; he was like a star that had fallen on the pavement and started walking.” (Alban felt very proud for the sake

of the Park, and inwardly thanked his mother.) “He’s just the right age now to be pursued.” (Bonbon was fourteen and a half) “He was very smart; his family must be well off . . .”

“Oh yes, he’s a golden pheasant [*faisan doré*].”

She laughed.

“Why are you laughing? Did you understand what I meant?”

“Of course I did. Do you take me for a fool?”

Alban was almost certain that his mother did not know the slang meaning of the word *faisan*,^{*} but wanted to seem in the know, as women do when they are trying to make men take them seriously.

“Well then, what did I mean?”

“It’s insulting to be asked for explanations.”

“Tell me what I meant, or I won’t dine in your room any more.”

Mme. de Bricoule gave him a tap on the arm, a familiar gesture among schoolgirls, shop-girls, and occasionally countesses or their equivalents.

“How nasty you are!”

“What did I mean? Explain.”

His poor mother did not know how to get out of it. She stammered:

“Well, the golden pheasant is a species of pheasant . . .”

“But what has it got to do with Lapailly?”

“How should I know?” she burst out.

Once more, Mummy-know-all knew nothing. Alban explained the word *faisan* to her. Whereupon Blue (the cat) jumped on to his lap. He stroked it. Mme. de Bricoule turned sour:

“When you stroke that cat you put on expressions I’ve never seen before. You give yourself away.”

^{*} A shady, disreputable character. Thus *faisan doré*, as well as meaning “golden pheasant”, means “moneyed reprobate”. (Tr.)

Mme. de Bricoule gets her son “pickled” on champagne. Once again, he says how fed-up he is with the Protectorate, and wildly exaggerates its misbehaviour.

A triumph for Mme. de Bricoule. What did it matter his being aloof, stubborn, unaffectionate, very much the “young male”, when a few drops of liquor were enough to alter it all? Alban had thought: “After all, breaking into her desk is all that’s needed.” His dear mother now thought: “After all, champagne is all that’s needed.” Liber* not only liberated you from your cares; he liberated you from your secrets. What she did not perceive was that although Alban was tipsy enough to say more than he would have wished, he was not tipsy enough to have lost the use of his wits. He had guessed that his mother was fuddling him with the champagne and believed everything he was saying at that moment, and to get his own back and make fun of her at the same time, he sent her off on a false scent. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.

Mme. de Bricoule blessed the champagne and was already looking forward to her next session at the dentist’s, followed by another session of disclosures.

*A super session of
the Aeronautical
Club*

Serge had advised Alban to join the Aeronautical Club. This institution made overtures to all secondary schools and invited their pupils to rally together under the up-and-coming banner of aviation, with a view to enabling its president to obtain the Legion of Honour. Another of the aims of the Club was—as we have seen—to enable the boys to fiddle with the raffle tickets. Once a fortnight the head office sent every establishment a talk about aeroplanes which was read out to the members of the Club by a pupil who was supposed to have written it himself. This astonishing fiction—for the speaker was applauded and congratulated, although not a single pupil, even in the lowest forms, was unaware that the talk did not contain a word of his—

* Another Latin name for Bacchus. (H.M.)

was well calculated to habituate young boys to social life as it is understood by grown-ups: like the college Academy, the Aeronautical Club had its underlying reasons for existing. It might have been thought too that it had another reason for existence, a charitable reason in this house where charity was so highly esteemed: that of bringing together what should at all costs have been kept apart. For these talks, which involved lantern slides, were given in the school hall in the dark, and the boys of the senior and middle schools mingled there, each pupil sitting where he chose. Serge had therefore drawn Alban's attention to these meetings which would bring them together twice a month.

"I'll probably be forced to give one of the talks," said Alban.

"Oh no, you mustn't. We wouldn't be able to be next to each other."

The school hall was a terrible place on the days when the boarders met their parents there, during recreation. It was dreadful to see these sometimes exquisite children face to face with the ridiculous caricatures of what they would be in twenty years' time. The spectacle was quite different when Alban entered the room for his first Club meeting.

During the meeting of the Aeronautical Club, a large number of pupils behave extremely badly. This is not the case with Alban and Serge. Alban expresses his indignation to his friend.

That same evening, Alban dined with his mother, and the champagne sparkled beneath the maternal hand. Alban, who had begun to drink like a fish as soon as he sat down, inflamed as he was by the visions of the Aeronautical Club, gave an account of the entire meeting, embellishing it, of course. He was outraged, but he was nevertheless rather proud of belonging to a college which, in the middle of peaceful Auteuil and under the benevolent eye of distinguished clergymen, could re-enact the orgy from *Quo Vadis*. Mme. de Bricoule for her part was reminded not of *Quo Vadis* but of the closing stages of balls twenty years before, when hands pressed hands, or crept round waists . . . something so

similar, yes, no doubt about it, so monstrously similar to what these young devils thought up just like that. . . . She muddled everything up, appalled and delighted.

“There’s no getting away from it,” said Alban. “No reform is possible at the Park in the present circumstances. It needs an iron hand.”

“What about you and Serge? Did *you* behave properly at least?” She poured him another glass.

“Admirably properly,” mumbled her son, who had already, even more than the previous time, lost control of what he was saying. “I just put a hand on his thigh because my hands were cold; the room wasn’t heated.” (He emptied another glass.) “And I felt his heart beating in his thigh. When you put your hand on your heart—that’s it, I had my hand on his heart. There are rapping spirits, but did you know that there are rapping bones?”

He put his hand on his thigh, and in the tone of Vatinius in the orgy scene in *Quo Vadis*, when he says: “Thirty legions? Upon my word I swear there are thirty-two . . .” then collapses under the table, he said:

“But then—a knotty point—perhaps it wasn’t Souplier’s bone! Perhaps it was the blood pulsing in my hand . . .”

He patted her on the hand in a fatherly way, and murmured in a voice so low that, thank God, she did not hear him:

“With this confounded champagne, I think I’m going to finish up by loving you.”

He was only half-conscious. What his tipsiness told him was that it did not really matter what he said or did.

*Mme. de Bricoule
regrets her expedient*

He emptied another glass, and the champagne trickled down his chin and on to his shirt collar. What went through Mme. de Bricoule’s mind at that moment? Whatever it was, she reached out from her bed and seized the bottle firmly. Had she seen through her son at last, seen her son at her mercy, so sadly at her mercy, open before her as his filing-case had been? She had had no scruples about breaking open the filing-case: it was her duty. But

to use the bottle as a means of eliciting secrets. . . . “Go to bed,” she told him; “you need it.”

Nevertheless, when he rose from the table and stooped to pick something up from her bedside table, she took his head and kissed his hair. She was taking advantage of his being drunk to fondle him, just as she had sometimes gone and kissed him in his sleep (which was at least better than peroxidizing his hair).

That was the end of the champagne.

Next day, she said to him at dinner:

“You were a bit squiffy last night. It’s my fault. We won’t do it again. So I don’t know whether everything you told me about the Aeronautical Club was true.” (He swore to her that it was all true.) “Any other mother would write to Prévôtel, since he was present, and ask him to come and explain himself in front of her and her son over this intolerable laxness. I shan’t do it because I know you don’t like me to meddle in school matters. But I do advise you, since you’re in with Pradeau de la Halle, to ask to see him and to tell him what you saw, without naming names. He wasn’t at the meeting. You’ll be doing him a favour by informing him, provided he feels you’re really telling him the honest truth.”

This severity was quite inconsistent with her complaisance at the first “disclosure session” and at the start of the second. But that is how she was, and how we all are.

The Incorruptible acquiesced: he had retained a somewhat alarming impression of the evening. He bore no grudge against his mother for her almost unforgivable trick with the champagne. It was part of the atmosphere of good-natured ferocity in which they had grown accustomed to living.

*Fateful letter from
Alban to the
Superior*

Mme. de Bricoule fussed about how he should write the letter: “Be long-winded and vague; that’s how you go about it in society.” But it was no use; he had Tacitus in his blood. He was short and precise. This is what he wrote:

Dear Father Superior,

I went to the meeting of the Aeronautical Club the day before yesterday. I saw such strange things there that I am venturing to ask you for a short interview. I hope that you will not take this request amiss.

I remain

Yours etc . . .

Strange things? But who is not strange in this story? One person alone, perhaps, and this was the whipping-boy of the establishment: Serge Souplier alone, perhaps, was not strange.

Alban expected a reply the following morning, as with his first letter. But the day passed, and the day after, then three days, then four. And there never was a reply to this letter written with such good intentions, and destined to prove so fateful.

Second impeccable cab-ride

“What do I feel towards you?” Alban mused. “Let’s get things straight. It’s nothing to do with that disgusting thing called love. I am fond of you, but I’m not in love with you. That much you know.”

“Yes, yes, I know,” said Serge gently, as one answers somebody who has a bee in his bonnet.

“I’m fed up with this atmosphere in which nobody talks about anything else except ‘it’; in which the school and the world in general are looked at exclusively in terms of ‘it’; in which the only chaps whose names are mentioned, who count, who have any existence at all, are the ones who are ‘like that’; in which they all cling together. I find myself stifling in the Protec like Vinicius in Nero’s Rome. I’m hungry for something else, like Vinicius.”

“I know what you mean,” said Serge. “They get on my nerves too with their goings-on.” (However, it must be admitted that he did not speak with any great heat.)

“I’ve made out the list of all those I don’t want you to talk to.” He handed over the names. Serge gave a start:

“What, all these? . . . By the way, you’re tuck-store keeper. Why don’t you go to the store-room one evening after dark, and make an excuse about having to go to the lavatory. I’ll join you there.

We'll see each other for a moment and we'll be able to kiss. I'll tell you how the new life's going in the middle school. We won't be able to rely on cabs much longer: they open the roofs in the spring."

They settled on Wednesday at half past six. If it was still "on", Serge was to chalk a cross on the door of the third lavatory in the yard during the four o'clock break that afternoon.

*Tender feelings
resulting from the
cab rides*

Serge had asked Alban for a photograph of himself. When he gave it to him, Serge—wonder of wonders!—put it to his lips! "He kissed my picture, and I did not go down on my knees before him in the cab!" How affectionate he had become again now that they were once more taking cabs! How different it all was! Why had they not thought of it before? This plenitude of utterly chaste tenderness soothed them, mitigated the harshness of absolute coldness (the quick embraces in the grotto hardly counted), recreated a breathable atmosphere. After the seething waters of the bar, they were gliding through the harbour as on the calm of a lake.

As Wednesday morning wore on, Alban grew more and more apprehensive at the thought of being caught in the store-room. Were five minutes of furtive bliss worth such a risk? There had never been any trouble involving the store-room under the present Superior, but before his day two couples were said to have been nabbed there; it was a *sacratissimus locus*, that is to say a place at once sacred and sinister, like certain places in ancient Rome, for instance sites where lightning had struck. At eleven o'clock, he was tempted to send Serge a note telling him that he was backing out, but shame at his pusillanimity prevented him. But he told himself that if a bad omen appeared before six o'clock he would give up. Bull-fighting had inculcated a real superstition in him, which he combined with a little fake superstition, torero-style—the whole thing adding up to a great deal of real superstition at times when he was afraid.

As soon as he went into class at two o'clock, he realized that he had left an exercise book at home containing all the notes he had made on a passage he had to construe: he would have to do it from memory. A sinister portent. An instant later he felt for his handkerchief—he had forgotten it! These omens should have stopped him, but he ignored them: superstition is like that—as inconsistent as everything else. Still, how he longed not to see the chalked cross on the lavatory door during break! But it was there. (So innocent at present, this place where hearts would be beating wildly by the evening.)

During prep, he could neither work nor even read: he fidgeted nervously, kneading a little ball of bread from the roll he had had during break, and fingering the store-room key in his pocket; he was still hoping that something would stop Serge at the last minute. The ideal thing would be (1) for him to have the nerve and (2) for Serge not to come: that way he would have the best of both worlds. He sent up a parody of a prayer to ask for some hitch to arise. He could find only two sources of comfort. The first was a principle professed by Linsbourg, and therefore taken as gospel: that whenever you got into trouble it was always with a chap who meant nothing to you, whom you'd taken on the spur of the moment for no good reason, and never with one you loved. The second was Serge's remark: "I'll tell you how the new life's going in the middle school", which meant that they were going to the store-room to talk about the moral reform of the college; such good intentions could not recoil against them. (What mumbo-jumbo! and what ingenuousness!) At sixteen and a half, Alban had an experience of danger (bulls), and hence an experience of fear, of which none of his schoolfellows had the slightest notion; in particular he had an awareness of danger which is rare in most boys of his age. At the same time he enjoyed all this: quivering with excitement at this danger and this fear. . . . This last reaction was more childish than adolescent, it seems to us.

The prefects of Notre-Dame du Parc had scratched a little clear patch in one of the frosted-glass panels of their study hall, and peeping through it from the corridor, which was very dimly lit in

the evening, they could keep an eye on the pupils and the supervisor. At about a quarter to six that Wednesday, Father de Pradts surveyed the scene through this little spy-hole. Everybody there was forever occupied with his hair. Heads were propped on hands, fingers moved through hair, and hair moved under fingers. Soft, white, smooth, flabby hands of the children of Paris, with slightly dirty fingernails, little bits of skin sticking out near the nails, and an occasional small stain of Turkish tobacco on the inside of the middle finger: he knew them well. If one of the pupils was playing with his pencil and dropped it, his forelocks hung down when he stooped to pick it up. As he sat up again he would toss them back into place, and with some of them this gesture had become such a habit that they tossed their heads back even when their forelocks were not drooping. Another had wet one of his recalcitrant locks to keep it in place, and it showed up darker against the rest of his hair, like that little place where a gazelle licks itself, always the same, always the same, on the axis of its twisting neck, and when it has licked that little place it thinks it has washed itself all over, and goes contentedly to sleep. Others darted surreptitious glances to left and right before whispering some triviality into a neighbour's ear, sometimes cupping their hands to do so (a gesture particularly popular among the "little brothers"), in fact going out of their way, it seemed, to demonstrate to all and sundry that their conversations were highly reprehensible. With three fingers thrust into his mouth, Denie, like the good little Pan that he was, looked as if he was playing the syrinx.

Usually, when he was doing his homework, or trying to, Serge could be seen raising his head with knitted brow and his eyebrows forming circumflex accents: he was racking his brain over the meaning of some sentence or problem; then suddenly his frown would disappear and he would bend over his exercise-book: he had got it. Today his expression was the one he wore on days when he was about to commit some misdemeanour. His pen was suspended over a page on which he had written nothing and he nibbled the end of his ruler. Then he slumped unashamedly over the desk, his fingers also buried in his dishevelled hair; then

propped his chin on a backward-folded hand, which twisted his lips out of shape, and stared into space. Father de Pradts summed him up in a sentence which he murmured to himself: "Exuding from every pore his inner lawlessness and his eagerness to resist us at all costs." But footsteps were approaching: danger! This aberrant spirit fled down the corridor in the semi-darkness.

*A vice punished:
courage*

At a quarter past six, Alban was still hesitating. He had a vague feeling as of fate coiling towards him in the dark and flicking out its venomous tongue. Prévôtel's suspicions were aroused, he would discover them in the store-room and haul them off, petrified. . . . Why not stay at his desk and confess to Serge tomorrow that he had funked? Suddenly he remembered one of his bull-fighting maxims: "When you begin to feel afraid, there is one cure only: be bolder." He had no vices, or rather he had only one: the vice of courage, which drives you irresistibly to do the most courageous thing, even, and especially, when you are afraid, though it does not prevent you from shamelessly giving way to fear on other occasions, with total indifference to what people may say. He repeated this maxim to himself, and immediately stood up and went to ask Father Prévôtel for permission to leave the room. He no longer had any desire to kiss Souplier. Souplier had vanished into thin air. It was that sentence that had brought him to his feet. He had caught a whiff of the bull-ring, and it gave him a sort of inner thrill. On his way to the shed, he took a swig at the drinking-fountain to wet his lips, which were dry with apprehension. Inside the shed, he blocked the lower half of the windows by leaning some play-shields* against them. Night was barely falling (it was 26 March). The clock struck the half hour, more silver-toned in the darkness, which had come at last. "If he isn't here at twenty-five to, I'll leave, and point out to him to-

* *Boucliers des jeux*. There was a school yard game at the time called "Romans v. Carthaginians". Each side bombarded the other with balls against which they protected themselves with shields. (Tr.)

morrow that he wasn't on time. In any case, whether he comes or not, by seven o'clock it will all be over." And he breathed again in anticipation.

He munched two pieces of chocolate, as he was advised to do at football during half-time to pep himself up.

At twenty-seven minutes to, he heard some one outside softly whistling the toreador's song from Carmen. A quick glance revealed Serge coming towards the store-room. Alban took his belt in one notch, as though before advancing on the bull. In the yard, a few boys were mysteriously playing on stilts (at this hour, which was the height of prep, and when darkness had now fallen: so much for Park discipline!), but they were some way off; and Alban thought of the boys who had been playing pelota in the dark while they. . . . Suddenly Serge darted into the shed. Alban's first reflex was to say: "No, don't come in!" But it struck him that it would be as horrible as if a torero who had taken refuge behind a *burladero** were to prevent a threatened colleague from slipping in beside him. Once again, alas! he chose the path of bravery. He closed the door. In God we trust!

"Did you think I wasn't coming?"

Alban clasped him in his arms, his heart in his mouth. Serge, his legs giving way beneath him, sank into the friendly arms, then let himself go, seemed to collapse like a lifeless bundle deprived of balance and support, and slid limply down the other's body until he reached the ground in a kind of swoon with Alban kneeling over him. This was their wildest embrace since the pelota court, and moreover Serge was not wearing his overcoat for once: Alban was enclosed in his odour as in a cradle of fire. At that instant, footsteps halted outside the shed and a voice asked: "Who's there?" Recognizing the voice of the presumed friendly school carpenter, Alban gave Serge a reassuring look, and shouted: "Alban de Bricoule. I'm taking stock of the chocolate. I'm the store-keeper." They had crouched side by side against the wall in the darkness—on the watch, as Father de Pradts had been on the

* A kind of wooden shield behind which toreros pursued by the bull can take refuge. (H.M.)

watch an hour earlier in the corridor outside the study-hall. The darkness heightened their fear. They remained there motionless for a while, until the footsteps had receded.

“I think I’d better clear out,” said Serge. “I’m frightened . . .”

“If you’re frightened, you’d better go.”

They kissed distractedly: both of them were panic-stricken. Serge went out, but reappeared at once, whispering frantically: “De Pradts! I’m sure he’s coming here. The carpenter must have alerted him,” and locked the door. “Why are you locking it? It’s stupid! It will look as if we’re doing something wrong,” said Alban, but he too had lost his head and did not think of unlocking the door again. Serge came back, muttering “What a life!”, but without acrimony.

They squatted down again, then raised their heads cautiously, then crouched once more. Alban could see the boy’s tense face and terrified eyes close by, and this fear was infectious. They were holding their breath. A moment later, footsteps came down the steps and there was a knock at the door.

“Open up!”

“Who is it?”

“Father de Pradts.”

Serge had crept to the furthest corner of the shed on his haunches. It was dark there. Alban put two or three shields over him to hide him, then opened the door. The boy was invisible to anybody who did not cross the threshold.

“What are you doing there?”

“I’m taking stock of the chocolate. I’m store-keeper.”

“That’s odd: why did you lock yourself in?”

“I noticed that the takings were three francs short at four o’clock, and I came back to tot up again to see whether I should have to ask my mother for the three francs tonight. I locked the door because I didn’t want to be disturbed while I was counting up—it puts me in a muddle.”

The priest hesitated for an instant, then withdrew.

Alban shut the door, and motioned to Serge to stay still. He said: “Do you know what I’m going to do? Go to his office and tell him everything.”

“No, no . . .”

Peeping through the window, he saw that the priest had stopped at the latrines. And in this instant of extreme danger, he was overcome by a mysterious impulse. As though he had a presentiment that this was the last time in his life that he would touch the face of this child, as though he was forewarned that the game was up and that there was nothing more to be done than to inject a touch of unforgettable sweetness into what was about to be no more for the rest of time, he knelt down beside Serge. Gravely he undid his muffler and buried his face in the warm neck; cradling his head in the crook of his arm, he kissed his eyelids. All this with slow deliberation and total resignation to his fate.

There was a knock at the door.

He stood up and opened it.

“Really, this cannot be allowed. What are you up to in here at this hour of the night?”

The priest pushed past Alban, who was barring his way, and walked straight in. “Ah, so that’s it!” He took Serge by the arm and pulled him behind him.

“So, while you were being encouraged to act as a kind of guide to this boy, this is what you were doing! You young guttersnipe! And you claimed to be his friend!”

“What was I doing? I haven’t done anything that contradicted what I promised.”

“Oh no, you locked yourself in here with him to catch flies!”

“Monsieur l’Abbé, I give you my word of honour, I’ve done nothing more than kiss him.”

“And you think it was good for a little scamp like that to kiss him?”

“The Superior gave me permission. And anyway, you knew very well that I kissed him. You were his confessor: you must have asked him about it. You read my letters too, and I sent him kisses in every one of them.”

“I read your letters because Souplier showed them to me,” said father de Pradts, telling a half-lie (having discovered them, he had asked Serge if he could read them). “Besides, Souplier is a

boarder. I stand *in loco parentis*. Those were not the sort of letters that a young man should write to a child.”

(“Ah!” thought Alban, “and there he was thinking it would be a good thing for de Pradts to read them!”)

“Anyway you knew I was kissing him, and if you didn’t like it why didn’t you forbid it? It was last Sunday that I arranged to meet him here tonight. He wanted to tell me how our new life was getting on in his division. You want me to have some influence over him. How, where, when, since he’s a boarder, and I’m a day-boy? We can only meet on Sunday mornings, and every other Sunday he’s kept in. I’m told to go ahead, and then I’m foiled; so I can’t do a thing. I’ve said nothing but good things to him. Just before you came back I was on the point of going to you to own up that he was in here with me.”

“Come, come, stop trying to make excuses. You’re supposed to be intelligent and yet your defence is idiotic. And all that nonsense about ‘good things’! . . . If you weren’t attracted to him would this friendship even be conceivable? You want to see him? But you have nothing to say to each other. Do you think I was taken in by all that? Go back to your prep. You haven’t heard the last of this.”

“Whatever happens, I take full responsibility.”

“I should hope so! And by the way, not a word to your mother, if you please, before we have decided on the official version of all this.”

As Alban went past him on the way out, Souplier held out his hand to him. They shook hands. Alban made for the door again.

Souplier took a step towards him and holding out his hand again, said:

“Give me your hand once more.”

Sacratissimus locus.

★

“What I am blamed for is having been too sensitive.”

François de Montherlant before the Revolutionary Tribunal, 1794.

*Alban proud and
elated at first*

Alban went home through the dark avenues. He felt neither anger nor distress, simply an enormous elation. "I'm alive! I'm alive!" He felt perfectly calm, and infinitely resourceful.

As we know, he enjoyed giving himself tests (of will-power, chastity, courage, self-control, etc. . . .). It was purely as a self-imposed test, and not out of obedience to Father de Pradts, that he said nothing to his mother. Throughout the evening he behaved as though there was nothing whatsoever on his mind. He was exhilarated by his success.

He was delighted with himself, too, for having a "worry" and not being worried by it. In less than no time, his state of mind had altered. He had received a superficial goring, and this, for a bull-fighter *de sangre torera*, is more stimulating than depressing. After all, what was there to fear? He was at the stage in life when one believes that innocence will save one. The worst that could happen to him, perhaps, was to be kept in for a whole afternoon; and to be finally prohibited from continuing his friendship with Serge. But he would continue it all the same, outside the college. What he had promised was to give up certain "acts" with him. He would hold to this. Otherwise he was not committed.

Very fleetingly, the idea that he might be expelled crossed his mind—for as long as it took him to dismiss it with an aristocratic "They wouldn't dare."

He had been whipped up by the day's excitements, and the sensation was undoubtedly pleasurable. There had been something rather soporific about the mild euphoria induced by the affectionate Serge of the recent cab-rides.

He told himself that it was the apprehension he had felt that afternoon which had earned him his *cornada*. He also felt that the crisis would never have come to a head had he not twice committed the sin of bravery: first by overcoming his apprehension; secondly, by not sending Serge packing as he had felt prompted to do when the boy had rushed into the shed. It was his bravery that had caused him to make the wrong move which he had prayed God not to let him make. He should have known it

already from his bull-fighting experience: sometimes you must be brave, and sometimes not; there is no rule. His conclusion was: "In spite of what's happened, I'm glad I was brave."

The following morning, when he arrived at school in a rather less uplifted frame of mind, a few crude questions were asked. "Did you get a roasting?" "Is that where they copped you?" Giboy simply said: "Was there hell to pay last night?" and they went in to class. He was expecting Giboy to scribble him some questions in the margin of a book in the usual way. But no. Linsbourg, who was sitting in front him, did not turn to him once throughout the lesson. He was a little disappointed. True, he had cut them dead these last few weeks, but so much taciturnity—with his schoolfellows, with his mother—was beginning to get him down. Every one in our story was always itching to talk.

When they came out of class, they continued to ignore him. His dominant feeling was one of surprise. "Not a single one of them?" It seemed to him almost unbelievable that the creators of the Protectorate should ostracize him for a normal Protectorate occurrence, simply because the authorities had shown their teeth a little. Could they be so contemptible? He had not thought them contemptible. As for their opinion of him, seeing that it caused him no pain, he realized that he had never really cared for them, and was on the whole gratified; only Souplier counted. He wondered now whether they had sought out his company only in order to unburden themselves to him, prompted by the aforesaid itch. And he had not even noticed that he had enemies.

But when they came out of prep at four o'clock there was a curious scene. They were lined up in twos, waiting to move off into the yard. Ten or fifteen feet away, the middle school was also waiting, parallel to the seniors. A few of the boys from the middle school, quickly followed by several others, advanced towards Alban—so that their whole line bulged out in a semi-circle—and stared at him, chatting among themselves with much derisive laughter and mimicry. (Fortunately, Serge was not there.) The master in charge straightened up the line, but his grim smile told the offenders that he was on their side at heart. At the same time, the members of the upper school who were closest to Alban edged

away from him as if fearing contagion—in their case without speaking, but with expressions of reprobation, almost horror. And their entire line bent backwards away from the other. It was extraordinary to see these young Frenchmen, with unerring instinct and assurance, taking their first steps in treachery at sixteen, even fourteen. Thus there was a moment when Alban found himself alone between the two groups, like the bull when he swivels round and confronts the horde of his adversaries. Then, for the first time since the recent occurrences, faced with this shattering revelation of his disgrace, he felt a surge of arrogance, and reminded himself that he was better than they.

*Sejanus statim
solus . . .*

Later he remembered Petronius in *Quo Vadis*, when the throng of courtiers draw away from him, because he has incurred Nero's displeasure. And the disgrace of Sejanus, in Tacitus: *Sejanus statim solus et in subita vastitate trepidus*: "All at once Sejanus found himself alone and trembling in the emptiness that had suddenly opened around him . . ." Had he needed it, these two reminders alone would have been enough to give him strength: how could he suffer from what had been suffered by Sejanus and Petronius? A feeling of intense pride swelled in him like a majestic wave. Twice in the bull-ring he had discovered that cheers and boos were all one to him: it was congenital.

*Alban realizes he
has been expelled,
and rushes to Father
de Pradts*

The next day, Saturday, at five o'clock, the Superior came as usual to hear the weekly marks and the composition gradings read out by the prefect. Alban was somewhat surprised when all the pupils' marks were announced except his. There was some pricking up of ears at this disappearing trick. Giboy, sitting in front, turned and looked at him. Then Linsbourg did the same. Alban answered with an evasive gesture. He assumed it was an oversight—unless the authorities, unable to give him more than a

very ignominious “conduct” mark, had preferred out of delicacy to avoid giving him any at all.

But now Father Prévôtél was reading out: “Upper sixth form. Philosophy composition. First, Giboy, 14. Second, de Linsbourg, 13 . . .”

(Hello, this was odd: he thought he was sure to be first in philosophy . . .)

“ . . . Third, Verniquet, 10. Fourth, Salins, 9. Fifth, Catulle, 8. Sixth, Frecourt, 5. Sixth form, geography composition . . .”

Alban blinked, as his mother did when she received a shock. He had suddenly realized that he was no longer a member of the college. “The two Blaesi had been promised priesthoods, which were withheld from them after their disasters, and subsequently treated as vacant and assigned to others. It was a death sentence, which they understood and acted upon.” (Tacitus.)

Everybody had been playing with fire: Mme. de Bricoule, Father de Pradts, the Superior. Now the fire was ablaze.

A few moments later he went into Father de Pradts’s study without having himself announced, and here is the scene that ensued:*

ALBAN: So I’m being sacked! Sacked like a servant who has stolen a watch. I’m not even given a week’s notice—my presence can’t be put up with an hour longer, it defiles the college. And you haven’t even the courage to tell me to my face, you let me know by that business of the marks. You’re a bunch of cowards. And sacked for what? What have I done? Time and again I’ve been in trouble for this or that, but I’ve always been let off, I’ve never been punished. One hour’s detention in a year, and that was withdrawn! Why this time? And you’re expelling me just before Easter. I won’t be with my friends and with the school for the greatest feast of the year. The school will go on living without me! And what about the exams, which I’ve taken so much trouble about?

[He brushes the tears from his eyes.]

* The two dialogues which follow are scenes III and VII of Act III of *La ville dont le prince est un enfant*, with a few modifications. (H.M.)

FATHER DE PRADTS: Compose yourself. Don't take it so tragically.

ALBAN: And my finals. You're expelling me three months before my finals. A new place, new teachers, new books, at the last minute! You're making me fail my finals.

FATHER DE PRADTS: You're a brilliant pupil. You won't fail.

ALBAN: Heaps of boys have been seen in the store-room: nobody said anything to them. Why should I have to pay for the others? If I had the running of this college, I swear there would be no special friendships. But *you* close your eyes, and then, when it suits you, you open them again.

FATHER DE PRADTS: Although you have caused us as much concern as any one, we know that you love virtue; and I'm convinced that you're quite sincere when you despise the lack of discipline that exists in this college—in spite of the fact that you were one of the principal causes of it, and have taken endless advantage of it.

ALBAN: I was on one side of the barricade, you on the other. Each for himself.

FATHER DE PRADTS: True enough.

ALBAN: Abandoned! Rejected!

FATHER DE PRADTS: Don't take this little escapade so tragically—after all, it's only a trivial school affair. You'll laugh about all this when you're twenty.

ALBAN: No, I shall never laugh about it.

FATHER DE PRADTS: As for your insults, I propose to ignore them. Now, let us get to the point. First of all, there's something you should know which may surprise you a little, after what I've just said: you leave here with the esteem of all.

ALBAN: In that case, why am I being expelled?

FATHER DE PRADTS: Because of one thing: we needn't go back over what was said in the store-room. That esteem will be all the greater if you leave without bitterness or recrimination.

ALBAN: What about Souplier? Surely he's not being expelled?

FATHER DE PRADTS: What grounds have we for expelling him? I had a long talk about your case with the Father Superior last night. Souplier hardly came into it. You were the ringleader, and,

as you rightly saw, the one responsible. You have been guilty of a breach of trust—all along the line, I may say, in view of the use you made of the key which was entrusted to your keeping. For him, it's only one more misdemeanour in the endless string of his misdemeanours. And—I'm going to be frank with you—now that you will no longer be here we may perhaps be able to do something with him. For it has now been proved, and all too quickly proved, my young friend, that in spite of your good will you do not have what is needed to help this child. You entertained the idea of exercising a sort of intellectual and moral guidance over him. But he is too young, too weak, and too shallow, and you too opinionated and dogmatic and self-centred—and weak as well, it must be said, and not as reliable as all that, because after all . . . —for any good to come of it. The fault does not lie in you; it lies in your ages, your temperaments, your qualities and defects. I feel much the same about that other inspiration of yours: that of taking the lead in a kind of moral reformation among the most brilliant but also the most unruly elements in the upper school. You went at it too fast, and without belittling your zeal, I'm afraid—or rather we are afraid, since the Superior agrees with me on this point—that to some extent you were influenced by pride. After all, we're the ones who are supposed to steer the ship: every one should stick to his own job. To revert to your friend, I believed for a short time that your friendship might do him good, and I wanted to see it last longer than you yourself seemed to expect. That is why I agreed to tolerate—yes, only to tolerate—its manifestations in this college. Did I really believe in it? To tell you the truth, I haven't the least idea. . . . There are many things here that I have to pretend to believe in: theatrical performances, football, the Academy, the honesty of my youngsters. . . . But even if I did believe in it, events have proved me wrong. And, in view of the sorry consequences of my efforts as well as yours, can I myself claim to have what's needed? Except that I have to try again. That's my function.

ALBAN: Are you going to take him to your country place during the Easter holidays?

FATHER DE PRADTS: Ah, so he mentioned that to you! Yes, there was a plan. . . . What he needs is a real cure, like a neurasthenic or a drug addict. An influence that can be brought to bear alone, whatever its weaknesses, will always be better than an influence duplicated by another, even if they are both pulling in the same direction. That is why, as I've said, it's a good thing that you're disappearing. Only . . . you must disappear completely.

ALBAN: What do you mean?

FATHER DE PRADTS: You must never see Souplier again.

ALBAN: What! When even now, if I don't see him for two days. . . . No, you can't mean that.

FATHER DE PRADTS: I do.

ALBAN: Never see him again. . . . Not even outside the college?

FATHER DE PRADTS: No.

ALBAN: Oh no, that's too unjust! I have the right to do as I like outside the college.

FATHER DE PRADTS: One word from us to his parents and to your mother would soon take care of that right.

ALBAN: You got me into the situation I'm in, and still you go on threatening me.

FATHER DE PRADTS: If you remain worthy of each other, don't write off the future. A new life will open for the two of you.

ALBAN: We know all about "new lives"!

FATHER DE PRADTS: But the future I am thinking of should not be an immediate future. You must not see Souplier again until he is a man, something self-contained, not that vague, soft little object that resists without resisting.

ALBAN: It's so heartbreaking . . .

FATHER DE PRADTS: Be a good loser.

ALBAN: A good loser! Are we talking about a game?

FATHER DE PRADTS: No, but that word "heartbreaking" cries out to be deflated. Remember what Talleyrand said: "Anything exaggerated is worthless".

ALBAN: Yes, I'd forgotten, litotes . . .

FATHER DE PRADTS: You have a generous nature. In our day, that is the rarest virtue in this country. . . . So, do you promise? Go on, admit it: generosity attracts you.

ALBAN: Yes, I'm afraid it does.

FATHER DE PRADTS: I am speaking to you a language which no one ever speaks to you in vain.

ALBAN: I see that you're beginning to know me.

FATHER DE PRADTS: Your family of souls is well known to us.

ALBAN [*very faintly*]: I promise.

FATHER DE PRADTS: That's courageous of you. . . . I don't think he'll try to bring about a meeting. But if he tried it on, out of bravado, would you avoid such a meeting?

ALBAN: Rebuff him? Oh God, no, I couldn't.

FATHER DE PRADTS: And yet you must.

ALBAN: Well then . . . yes.

FATHER DE PRADTS: Give me your hand. [*Alban lets him take his hand.*] Don't turn your head away as you give me your hand. And don't lower your eyes. The young have a faculty of renunciation which is very moving.

ALBAN: You feel that I've given up too readily, don't you? And it lowers me in your eyes. But it's just the opposite: I love him enough to give him up.

FATHER DE PRADTS: You're not the first person to whom I've caused suffering. In that very chair you're sitting in, I have seen many pupils, and mothers, and even fathers, with the same tears and the same lump in the throat. Believe me, in treating you like this I am not giving way to anything that smacks of jealousy or rancour. The memory of that affection is not in the least painful to me. I've never held it against you, and if I had, I would have ceased to do so now. Now I am only aware of that rich, sad region where we understand each other's unspoken thoughts. And although it's true that the present may force us to see the unfortunate side of this affair, the future will glorify the spirit that animated it. I ask you to believe that in all this I sought nothing but the good of that boy. Your sacrifice may well be the greatest service you have done him. I am sure that he will be grateful to you for it. . . . I have one last thing to say to you. In the store-room yesterday you offered a defence which I didn't believe at the time. Forgive me, I'm a priest, which means that, like doctors and

lawyers, I never believe that I'm being told the whole truth. I now believe your defence, and would like to tell you so.

ALBAN: The other day, when you left us alone in this room, and I talked to him about our new line of conduct, he said to me: "Since you think that's best . . ."! Now it's all I can say to you too: if you think this is what's best . . .

FATHER DE PRADTS: It's what is least bad.

ALBAN: I hope it may be said that he has become better since I left him. . . . Did you tell him that you were asking us to make a complete break?

FATHER DE PRADTS: Yes. He agreed with the minimum of opposition. He hasn't your fervour. But he realized the pain it would cause you. I explained it to him.

ALBAN: Really? Did he need to have it explained to him? Yet when I left the store-room yesterday, how sadly he shook hands with me! How dejected his little face looked in the darkness! Couldn't I see him one last time, to say good-bye? Here, for instance.

FATHER DE PRADTS: I'm afraid that's a little melodramatic for something . . .

ALBAN: . . . so simple, you mean?

FATHER DE PRADTS: Yes, so simple.

ALBAN [*suddenly very brusque*]: There's no point in my answering. I'd say something I shouldn't. But to leave here so utterly crushed!

FATHER DE PRADTS: You will have other defeats in your life.

ALBAN: Ah, you can see that!

FATHER DE PRADTS: Yes.

[Alban gets up and leaves the room without another word. On the way out he passes the Superior coming in. They avoid each other's eyes.]

THE SUPERIOR: Well, this is a most painful business. Poor children, we too toss them about, pull them this way and that. We too agitate and perplex them, poor children, when they are really so defenceless against us.

FATHER DE PRADTS: So defenceless!

THE SUPERIOR: Yes, I repeat: so defenceless. You often say that they take advantage of us. But don't we continually take advantage of our power over them?

FATHER DE PRADTS: Not at all. . . . And as for the agitation we're supposed to cause them, well, they give as good as they get. It was the abbé de Saint-Cyran who said that managing adolescents is "a tempest of the spirit".

THE SUPERIOR: Adolescents sometimes have a capacity for contempt that is quite frightening in its simplicity and justice.

FATHER DE PRADTS: I don't see what contempt . . .

[The Superior makes as if to sit in the chair in front of Father de Pradts's desk. The latter waves him towards his arm-chair behind the desk. The Superior sits there, and Father de Pradts sits in the chair that Alban has vacated.]

THE SUPERIOR: Bricoule had just been seeing you, I suppose? How did he take it?

FATHER DE PRADTS: With a cold distress that was not unpleasing. He seemed to be drawn towards high-mindedness as though towards the edge of an abyss—by that passion that so often takes hold of us to act against our own interests.

THE SUPERIOR: Tears?

FATHER DE PRADTS: Quickly mastered.

THE SUPERIOR: Too quickly! We all know that you like children's tears. And that you also like the tears of mothers, as there are those who like their mistresses' tears. We know that you're a past master in the art of twisting the knife.

FATHER DE PRADTS: Our aim is to inculcate fine feelings in young people undergoing secondary education. This inevitably involves conflicts which are not without nobility, which are indeed the most important thing in this establishment. The soil has been shaken and upturned; it will be all the more fertile for it. That Bricoule should have loved Souplier, that he should have been taken away from him, that he should have had this encounter with me, that he should have been thrown out—all this is excellent for his character. It's by suffering at our hands, and by making us suffer, that he has realized who we are. And that's the important thing this college will have given him, not the few useless notions his teachers may have crammed into his head, three-quarters of which will anyway be forgotten a fortnight after his final exams.

THE SUPERIOR: It would also have counted for something if we had made a Christian of him.

FATHER DE PRADTS: Even what may seem to be on a fairly low level here is still a thousand times superior to what happens outside. What happens here will soon exist nowhere—even now it exists only in a few privileged places. It's we, surely, who have the key of the kingdom into which the rest will never enter.

THE SUPERIOR: Now that Bricoule has ceased to be a threat to you, you no longer deny his merits. I saw Souplier last night. He told me that it was he and not Bricoule who locked the door of the storeroom, and that Bricoule tried to dissuade him and called him a fool because they weren't doing anything wrong. Yet when you accused Bricoule of locking himself in he didn't deny it, did he?

FATHER DE PRADTS: No.

THE SUPERIOR: You see, he wanted to protect the child. . . . deplorable that I should have had to sacrifice this boy because of Your doubly indiscreet behaviour. You gave the whole thing a dramatic complexion which should have been avoided.

FATHER DE PRADTS: I created circumstances. Isn't that our rule?

THE SUPERIOR: You let your feelings get the better of you. At the start, you could have spoken to each of them in private; you could have spoken to me. But you gave way to anger, and you made a public commotion, because Souplier was being taken away from you. "Woe to that man by whom the offence cometh!" The man by whom the offence came was yourself. You forgot that our pupils have a right to their good name. You made a second commotion over the store-room business, which could have been hushed up, and after that it was impossible for me to avoid expelling Bricoule. I should at least have preferred it to be put about that his mother was taking him away from the college at Easter. And again it was you who insisted that the expulsion be made public.

FATHER DE PRADTS: His expulsion would have been meaningless unless it was public, and even somewhat spectacular. An example was needed.

THE SUPERIOR: What you mean is that harshness can be salutary, don't you?

FATHER DE PRADTS: For the young tree to grow tall, not only the rotten wood but also the foliage and the living wood must be pruned. You yourself, in deciding on Bricoule's immediate departure, acted with a severity I had not anticipated.

THE SUPERIOR: I did so in order to cut short Bricoule's complaints and comments to his friends.

FATHER DE PRADTS: You have my full support, Father, believe me.

[From this moment until the end of the scene, the choir is heard in the next room rehearsing, now in faux-bourdon, now in a child's solo (soprano) voice, the Qui Lazarum resuscitasti. There are pauses, of course. In particular, the following leitmotiv keeps coming back, repeated again and again, obsessively, by the soloist:]



As soon as the singing begins, Father de Pradts sits up, listens for a moment, then says:]

*Father de Pradts
learns from the
Superior that Serge
has been expelled*

FATHER DE PRADTS: Souplier isn't at choir-practice.

THE SUPERIOR: How do you know?

FATHER DE PRADTS: I can't make out his voice in the chorus. . . . What's happened? Is he ill? Has he been punished? I hope you haven't removed him from the Schola because of yesterday's episode. *[With a look of shock, and in a different tone]* Oh, no, it can't be true . . .

THE SUPERIOR: Yes.

FATHER DE PRADTS: What?

THE SUPERIOR: Souplier is no longer with us.

FATHER DE PRADTS: What? But when we talked last night . . .

THE SUPERIOR: I took the decision this morning.

FATHER DE PRADTS: You can't do this, Father!

THE SUPERIOR: The letter to his parents went off at two o'clock.

The Souplier experiment has gone on long enough.

FATHER DE PRADTS: But it hasn't even begun! Listen to me. I thought it would be sensible for us to use Bricoule, who had some influence over him. It was also tempting to give the most delicate task to the very boy who gave us most cause for concern. I hoped that in having Souplier entrusted to his care he would feel tied, just as you no doubt thought that we might curb him by getting him elected to the Academy.

THE SUPERIOR: You were also glad to have somebody with whom you could talk about Souplier to your heart's content. Even with me, his name was continually on your lips, with or without an excuse.

FATHER DE PRADTS: Should I have gone on lying, gone on pretending? All right, yes, his name leapt from my heart to my lips. My whole soul . . . [*He stops.*]

THE SUPERIOR: Your "whole soul . . ."?

FATHER DE PRADTS: I've forgotten what I was going to say.

THE SUPERIOR: You know perfectly well.

FATHER DE PRADTS: At any rate I should like to point out that I was never the first to mention his name.

THE SUPERIOR: So you went out of your way to avoid being the first to mention it! Need I say more? A few days ago I saw you from my window playing ball with him all through break independently of the other boys. Is that usual?

FATHER DE PRADTS: I had just given him a very severe scolding. That's why I was playing with him.

THE SUPERIOR: His friends weren't to know that. On Saturday, on your way into the Schola with him, you stood aside to let him pass. That caused some raised eyebrows.

FATHER DE PRADTS: Children have a right to special consideration.

THE SUPERIOR: That's true. But you did not have much consideration for Bricoule.

FATHER DE PRADTS: Bricoule is not a child.

THE SUPERIOR: The distinction is a fine one.

FATHER DE PRADTS: Bricoule! Bricoule! We've seen what came of Bricoule's co-operation. Contrary to what I momentarily believed, not only could Bricoule do nothing, but we could do nothing as long as Bricoule was there. Unwittingly he was undoing at his end the little that I was doing at mine. Are we to abandon that youngster at the very moment when, for the first time, conditions are becoming such that we have some chance of saving him?

THE SUPERIOR: Don't go on, my friend. You've already given me your reasons. On the two occasions when I was on the point of expelling Souplier. And also when, in order to persuade his parents to make him a boarder, you persuaded me to reduce his fees because you were so anxious to have him under your wing.

FATHER DE PRADTS: Under my wing? Under the school's wing, surely. But it doesn't much matter. Anyhow, conditions have totally changed. My reasons are new because the situation is new.

THE SUPERIOR: I ask you once more not to go on.

FATHER DE PRADTS: But you must let me go on! All I ask is a month's postponement of his expulsion. A month of Souplier without Bricoule, and you'll see! If you refuse me that, it will be an act of hostility against me. All I ask is to be given a fair chance. "Knock, and it shall be opened unto you." I am knocking, knocking, and you will open unto me. Yes, I have dragged this youngster back to the surface a dozen times when he was about to drown, and now that the shore is near, am I to let go of him? Am I to let go of him now, when everything is still possible? "The Souplier experiment has gone on long enough." But what do you know of him? How much time have you devoted to him? Have you given him half an hour of your time in the year he has been with us?

THE SUPERIOR: Oh, come! We have five hundred boys here.

FATHER DE PRADTS: As for me, even if he were in hell, there would be something inside me that would still despairingly believe in him. I believe in human beings, you see. I believe in human beings! And the saying in the Gospel about the flame which is almost dead and which nevertheless it is forbidden to put out, who does that apply to if not to him? And who said: "The Son of Man has come to seek and save what is lost"? To save a child, all that is needed sometimes is for there to be an intelligent man at his side. It's a condition that rarely obtains, and when it does, one should not let it slip. The sin of forsaking souls. . . . I have sinned against every one many times in my life, but I shall not sin against him. Why should I hide it, Father? I acknowledge simply, and if I must, humbly, that the expulsion of this child would be the greatest sorrow of my life as a priest.

THE SUPERIOR: Father de Pradts, I wish you other sorrows than that in your life as a priest. Believe me, you protest too much. Your ardour is too intense: it cannot be good. This devouring solicitude. . . . The more I see you cling on to him the more I see how necessary it is for me to ask another sacrifice of you. On the eve of Holy Week, need I remind you of the fecundity of a love that immolates itself? I must ask you to renounce completely your apostolate with this boy, lest you should consider pursuing it after his departure from the college.

FATHER DE PRADTS: What have I done wrong? Is this a punishment?

THE SUPERIOR: It is a precaution.

FATHER DE PRADTS: A precaution! When I've kept such a strict and continuous watch on myself. . . . When I've never given him the slightest encouragement to get out of hand; never allowed myself an over-affectionate word or gesture; never once called him Serge, even at the height of his tears and misery. . . . Or rather, only once.

THE SUPERIOR: You once called him Serge?

FATHER DE PRADTS: I was asleep. I called him Serge in a dream . . .

THE SUPERIOR: There is a fire within you, but it is not the fire of which St. Bernard speaks. It is a fire that burns but gives no light.

FATHER DE PRADTS: Oh my God! have I never given him light?

THE SUPERIOR: At last! At last the name of God, which never used to cross your lips.

FATHER DE PRADTS: No, no, you cannot take him from me when he is still alive. Only death has the right to take away from us what we love to that degree.

THE SUPERIOR: You think I'm harsh and inhuman, as Bricoule no doubt did. That is of no importance. What matters is that every one here should do his duty. And that you too should do yours, as you shall.

FATHER DE PRADTS: My duty stops at the gates of this establishment. By what right am I forbidden to do what good I can outside it? What is this evil in me against which he must be protected so fiercely?

THE SUPERIOR: You only began to take notice of him last June, when he got into his first scrape. You began to love him when he began to sin.

FATHER DE PRADTS: I began to love him when I saw him in danger. What else are you suggesting?

THE SUPERIOR: If I do not receive from your lips an assurance that you will not see him again, I shall advise his parents when they come to-morrow that on leaving the college he must break not only with his friends but with his masters, and I shall mention your name. If necessary, I shall have him sent to a boarding-school in the country. I shall be inflexible on this point. Please spare me that. But at the same time believe me, my dear friend, when I say that I am painfully aware of the distress I am causing you, and that I ask God's blessing on it.

FATHER DE PRADTS: Because of a misapprehension, you have shattered what was best in me: how could I help but be distressed? What do I care now about what remains to me; pedagogy, the daily grind, whatever zeal I've managed to bring to my chosen calling? Only one thing matters in this world: affection for another human being; not the affection one receives; the affection one gives. To feel that affection is to be given some idea of what heaven

must be. I felt it for that child. You have ruined and somehow tarnished it, when it was so pure. I ought to be able to forgive you for it, because I know that you believed you were acting for the best. . . . But I cannot.

THE SUPERIOR: You will forgive me one day, just as I forgive you what you have just said against me.

FATHER DE PRADTS [*with a quick glance at his cassock*]: And who else should I love? Who else can I love? And who will love him? What will become of him now? You knew very well, didn't you, that he was a poor kid, that his parents are nothing, or worse than nothing. He is lost, and I am losing him.

THE SUPERIOR: You didn't tell *him* your opinion of his parents, I trust.

FATHER DE PRADTS: N . . . no.

THE SUPERIOR: A child should never be set against its parents. It's too easy a game for us.

FATHER DE PRADTS: Yes, but his! . . . Morally, the less said the better. Materially. . . . I've been both father and mother to him for the past year. When he arrived here with his socks full of holes and his shirts all torn, who saw that they were mended? Who used to give him a few *sous* to buy himself some soap or a comb, when his parents hadn't thought of it? When he lost weight, or put it on again, who noticed it except me? He had only me to look after him—and Bricoule. Both of us are being taken away from him. Bricoule is the only one who understood him in this establishment, where I have heard nothing but ill spoken of him for a year. One should never give a child the impression that he has been pigeon-holed once and for all as a failure, a pariah. . . . Overwhelmed with punishments from all his teachers, driven to despair by them—and I too sometimes had to punish him excessively, to show them all that I wasn't favouring him—I considered that it was not only Christian but politic, too, from the point of view of the college, to offer him refuge. It was because he was the most put-upon of our children that I held out a hand to him—yes, I'm not ashamed to say it—as I did to no one else. I have the Gospel on my side, surely.

THE SUPERIOR: Let us leave the Gospel and charity out of this, since they have very little to do with it, and merely note that on his downward path he has succeeded in diverting your attention from other boys, perhaps better ones.

FATHER DE PRADTS: Diverting my attention from them? It was he who enabled me to put up with them. Those I had charge of here, and those I shall have charge of in the future, all of them sustained by him.

THE SUPERIOR: Those are not the words of an educator, or even of a priest. I don't know whether it's possible, apart from exceptional cases, to bring up a child successfully, when families generally put such obstacles in the way of even the most well-disposed child. But what Souplier needs is a touch of the true supernatural. You must surely recognize that you were not in a position to bring it to him.

FATHER DE PRADTS: If my religion gives cause for concern—and this is the second time you have pointed it out to me—how is it that I'm a prefect here? Why have I not been warned before?

THE SUPERIOR: A time will come when I shall no longer conceal from you the anxiety that you cause me. . . . But did you at least talk to him about God occasionally? I wonder.

FATHER DE PRADTS: Let's say that I might have talked to him about God more often. If I did not do so, it's because he is not destined to keep his faith.

THE SUPERIOR: You've taken care of that! And Bricoule?

FATHER DE PRADTS: No, nor Bricoule either. But we have infused their passions with religion. They will always remember their passions, and religion along with them; a certain fragrance of religion, at least.

THE SUPERIOR: A fragrance! You make your position very clear. Good heavens, is it possible that I am running a religious house in which faith is a mere fragrance, and not the foundation of all that is done here?

FATHER DE PRADTS: The place is riddled with unbelief. You're taken in by the façade. Services that pave the way for to-morrow's apathy. Classes in religious instruction from which only the objections are remembered . . .

THE SUPERIOR: Stop it! That would be. . . . [*The soloist's voice rises.*] No, no. Can one sing like that if one doesn't believe? Their voices reveal them.

FATHER DE PRADTS: That's Delsau singing. He's a case in point. Do you want me to tell you everything I know about him? Ah! ah! those innocent charms, those seraphic voices! The more heartrendingly they sing, the more corrupt their minds are and the more unspeakable their private lives.

THE SUPERIOR: That's not true! You're making it up, you're saying the first thing that comes into your head; you don't know what you're saying.

FATHER DE PRADTS: Unbelief not only among the pupils but also among the teachers. Or a pretence of belief.

THE SUPERIOR: Among the teachers! I don't know what has got into you. . . . Or rather I do know: it's my turn to suffer, that's it, isn't it? So I've deceived myself, and been deceived. And the irony now is that I must undertake the reform which Bricoule dreamed of, which we begrudged him, and which was the real cause of his dismissal, since he was in the store-room only to lecture the boy, if I am to believe his own account, which I do. Let us have done with it, Father de Pradts—you have had too great a share in all that. For the last time, do you accept the sacrifice which I consider necessary for you?

FATHER DE PRADTS: Nothing but sacrifice! That perennial belief that there can be no virtue except in sacrifice! We were brought up in it, and we bring others up in it. It reminds me of a comical remark of young Peyssonnel's: "I've beaten St. Aloysius Gonzaga."—"Beaten him?"—"I've made more sacrifices than he did!" The sacrifice record! But Christ said on two occasions: "I want mercy, not sacrifice."

THE SUPERIOR: This time I forbid you to go on. When the most important possession we have in the world, our Mass, is a sacrifice! Our ministry obliges us to exact many a sacrifice. You ought to regard it as God's grace for you to be forced to make one. And in any case, if you do not conceive of the priesthood as a perpetual sacrifice, and our religion as a daily act of heroism, you

were mistaken in coming amongst us. Come now, I have asked you a question: answer it.

FATHER DE PRADTS: I accept this sacrifice. But what does accepting it prove?

THE SUPERIOR: Little enough, indeed, if it isn't accepted wholeheartedly.

FATHER DE PRADTS: I accept—what more do you want? I shall never see Serge Souplier again—what more do you want? What more are you asking of me? Yes, I can guess, you're going to ask me not to see him again, not even for one last time. It would be "too melodramatic", wouldn't it?

THE SUPERIOR [*consulting his watch*]: Like Bricoule, and for the same reasons, Souplier has just left the college.

FATHER DE PRADTS: While you kept me here! How did he take it? What did he say to you? Did he cry?

THE SUPERIOR: He said to me: "I don't think I'll be missed here either. I've left a very bad memory wherever I've been." To which I answered: "You leave behind you a troubling memory. A bad memory and a troubling memory are not the same thing." As for you, the memory that will remain is of an episode in your life that you can look back on without discomfiture. By immolating him, you have completely purified him.

FATHER DE PRADTS: He had no need of purifying. And as for memory, no, no, no! Those photographs of him. . . . [*He takes some photographs from a drawer, tears them up, and throws them into the waste-paper basket.*] The less I have to remember, the less I shall suffer. I want that boy to cease to exist for me. Yes, I beg of you, I beseech you, have him sent away to a school in the country so that I shall never risk running into him in the street.

THE SUPERIOR: I understand now what it means to have an attachment in which God has no place. It's horrifying.

FATHER DE PRADTS: No, what's horrifying, according to you, is refusing to suffer.

THE SUPERIOR: My role is neither to inflict upon you nor to spare you suffering, but to force you to bear it in a Christian manner.

FATHER DE PRADTS: Ah, I know what you lack. You have respect for humility, for naïvety, for idiosyncrasy, and I don't know what else. But you have no respect for human frailty.

THE SUPERIOR: To-morrow morning, in the solitude of the altar, I shall celebrate the first Mass for the benefit of your particular frailty. . . . You wince? What makes you wince?

FATHER DE PRADTS: There is no solitude at the altar. There is always a child with us at the altar. And, when he censes us, we even bow before him. And when we say the Gospel for the day, the book of the Gospel, the book of Wisdom, rests against his forehead.

THE SUPERIOR: Where there's a child, there's solitude too, as you well know. In my sermon on Sunday I shall ask our children to pray for their schoolfellows from whom we have had to part. If I could, I would also ask them to pray for you. Above all I would ask Bricoule [*Father de Pradts makes a gesture of distaste*]. Oh, don't worry, I won't. Nobody here, neither pupils nor teachers, must suspect that there has been any difference of opinion between us over this affair. And I ought to ask our children to pray for me too: am I not blameworthy for never having put you on your guard against that generosity in your nature which led you to so intense an attachment? Should I not have drawn your attention to that verse of Ecclesiastes: "Woe to thee, O land, when thy king is a child"? I think a retreat would be good for you during the summer holidays: we'll talk about it. . . . Often, during the past few weeks, as I sat up late in the great silence of Lent, I saw your window lit up too: yours and mine were the last to remain lit up above the sleeping college. What, or who, were you thinking of then? I think I know now. As for me, it was of you that I was thinking at that hour: each of us was thinking of the person who seemed to be most in danger. Except that I was praying for you—prayers of a kind I doubt you ever offered up for that child.

FATHER DE PRADTS: I was praying in my fashion: tenderness, too, is a prayer. But have *you* ever prayed for him, even once?

THE SUPERIOR: I do not have to give an account of my prayers, Father de Pradts. And yet . . . now that you are at peace with God,

with yourself, and with us all, perhaps the time has come for me to tell you something about myself. At the beginning of my priesthood, I too had an overzealous attachment for too frail a soul, on whom I put too great a strain. I was ordered to entrust the care of this soul to others; it seemed to me very harsh, but I obeyed. Seven years later, after the death of the old confessor who had taken over from me, that soul quite naturally turned to me for guidance. Times had changed, and I accepted the change. . . . One day you will find Serge Souplier again.

FATHER DE PRADTS: It will be too late.

THE SUPERIOR: "Too late": what do you mean? Shall I never come across any but unchristian impulses in you? "Too late"! Souls are such great and precious things, and yet you could only love one because of its fleshly exterior, which had a certain charm and grace. You did not love a person, you loved a face. And you admit it! But our love is not the love of faces, as well you know. Ours is another love, Father de Pradts, even for our fellow creatures. When it attains a certain level in the absolute, through its intensity, its constancy, its self-forgetfulness, it is so close to the love of God that one might almost think the human creature was conceived solely in order to show us the way into the arms of the Creator. I know why I can say this. Such a love may be given to you to experience. And may it lead you, as it flowers within you, to that last, stupendous love beside which all the rest is nothing.

[The Superior withdraws slowly towards the door. Father de Pradts comes back towards the desk, thrusting aside the prie-dieu which stands in his way, and sinks into his chair, with his head resting on his arms on the desk, while the voice of the child singing the leitmotiv of the Qui Lazarum resuscitasti rises, hovers and subsides again for the last time. The Superior stands motionless at the door, watching him.]

*Alban faces his
mother*

Alban went home in a sort of trance: literally devoid of feelings. As soon as he looked at his mother, he realized that she had been told. She handed him a letter. In it, the Superior announced that

he would be visiting Mme. de Bricoule at five o'clock next day (this time it was he who dictated the time!) on a "serious and painful" matter. He remained her "melancholy but devoted servant".

"Have you been expelled?"

"Yes."

He told her everything. Everything except the details. Or rather three details. He did not mention a twice-repeated remark of Father de Pradts, which might have been turned against its author: "Don't think there is any jealousy in this." Nor did he tell her that the priest, forgetting the saying he liked to quote: "Anything exaggerated is worthless", had called him a guttersnipe and a fool. Nor did he mention the priest's injunction: "Not a word to your mother before we have decided on the official version"—that is to say, a deception and a lie. He could not prevent himself from feeling a certain pleasure in the midst of his pain, for he was aware that what was happening was really interesting. He watched the spectacle of his own downfall with a keen curiosity.

"You never understood a thing about it all," said Mme. de Bricoule. "De Pradts was jealous of you and led you on so as to have an excuse to expel you. He might at least have used fairer weapons."

"All's fair in love and war, you know."

"Take care! You're giving in to vanity by pretending not to bear him any grudge."

Alban shrugged his shoulders.

Mme. de Bricoule sounds off against the Park priests in her coarse language

Alban listened scandalized. Such language had been habitual between Mme. de Bricoule and her mother when they spoke about their lawyers, their doctors, their tradesmen, even their friends, and, in the case of Mme. de Bricoule, particularly when she spoke about the men she loved. Mme. de Bricoule's mother, the venerable dowager, when her daughter pointed out to her on the morning of one of her "at homes" that the curtains were not

very clean, and that some one ought to go at once and buy new ones, simply replied: "They're quite good enough for those pigs." But priests! Even now, when the priests had so clearly taken up position as enemies, and his mother as an ally, he remained steadfastly on the side of the college, faithful to the unwritten pact of the Protectorate, which demanded that the college—priests, pupils and teachers—must in all circumstances close ranks against the family; unlike those child martyrs who bitterly defend their parents before the court.

"He wanted to make you believe that Souplier didn't care, so as to hurt you and turn you against him. It was very silly of you to promise never to see the boy again. Being no longer a member of the college, your relations with him would be subject to my permission alone, and I would have given it. And if they had forbidden *him* to see you any more, I would have sent for his mother and enlightened her about the whole business."

She was twisting the knife in the wound; she was pushing him towards Serge just as, at one stage, de Pradts and the Superior had pushed him. Her fury was such that she preferred to see her son attached to Souplier than to see him break it off in order to keep a promise made to one of the Park priests. Besides, Souplier had become the almost indispensable bond between Alban and herself. But Alban stood very firm on the position that whether he was a subversive or a would-be reformer, he had always been a disturbing influence in the college, and the Superior had acted within his rights in expelling him. He could not be budged from this position, and all Mme. de Bricoule's efforts to make him hate the priests were in vain.

Suddenly she burst out:

The Park threatened

"Anyway, if there's one of them who deserves what for, it's de Pradts. Ah, if only I were a man! If only I wasn't ill! Because I'd have some questions to ask. That school ought to be investigated by the powers that be."

Alban trembled. His anxiety was so intense that he had to moisten his lips with his tongue, and afterwards his mouth remained agape. What he saw before him was not the frail

aristocrat but a woman transfigured by the desire to do harm, a *tricoteuse* determined to get her teeth in and not let go, frenziedly sniffing drama as an animal sniffs blood. With the torero's instinctive gesture, he interposed his cape between the bull and his endangered master.

"Don't believe everything I've told you about the Park. I was exaggerating, romanticizing, to make us sound interesting. . . . I wanted to make the college into Nero's Rome; a lot of it was fantasy . . ."

He developed this thesis. He would have said anything that came into his head. He wanted one thing only: to protect Father de Pradts, the Superior, the priests, the whole college. Protect them at any price. He was attached to them by a network made up of a thousand interweaving threads. Once again, the bond of "collegiality"—like the bond of vassalhood in the Middle Ages—was stronger than the bond of family.

He went to his room. No tears. Souplier was finished. The college was finished. The *bachot* was probably finished (all this was happening only three months before the exam). Everything was shattered. And why, why? What had he done?

Always in a hurry in the morning, he did his chest-expansion exercises in the afternoon, on his return from school. He tried to do them now but he did not have the strength, and had to give up.

Before dinner, he went to take his "vouchers", and say his farewells, to the widow Chappelle, a bedridden and poverty-stricken old lady who had been allotted to him by the St. Vincent de Paul Society of the college. Misery consoled misery, or tried to.

At dinner, Mme. de Bricoule said that Alban was to take private lessons until his finals. She had a charitable idea: "Immediately after your *bachot*, I shall let you go back to Spain." She expressed the opinion that since it had been made clear, by the reading out of the marks even more than by the letter from the Superior, that he was expelled, there was no need for him to go to school next day. But Alban thought otherwise. No official notification of his dismissal had been given him: so he would go to the Park tomorrow morning as if nothing had happened. He chose this course for no other reason than that it was the brave course (once

again!). It was precisely the reaction of the matador who has just been tossed, trampled and gored, and who gets up and runs towards the bull, without even knowing what he is going to do with it.

Alban quietly liquidated

The next day, he timed his arrival to the second so as to avoid conversations, collected his books from the study hall, then mingled with his classmates on their way to class: all this with the precipitancy of some one who is almost late. But still, he was there, and yet not a single glance was thrown in his direction—not one single glance. He had become invisible, or rather *he did not exist*. The day before, as a result of his name not being mentioned during the reading out of marks, he had ceased to exist, like men whose names are struck off monuments by their victorious enemies. Today it was through not being looked at that he had ceased to exist. Yet he was glad: a fierce and very childish “Alone against them all!” swelled inside him. At that moment the sixth-form usher, M. Habert, beckoned him out of the ranks. While the others went on up the stairs, he went up to M. Habert, a scrawny, bespectacled young man with a shifty look, who said to him in an unctuous, embarrassed voice:

“De Bricoule, I think it would be better if you didn’t go into class.”

“Why not?”

“Don’t you understand? Surely you know the position you’re in.”

“No.”

“You know perfectly well that you’re no longer a member of this college. I have been instructed to help you to collect your belongings, which are in your desk. After that you may go home. I have brought some string, and we will tie up your books. I think you’ll be able to take all of them at once. It would be better if you didn’t come back.”

Alban saw that M. Habert had some string in his hands—like a noose or bowstring dangling from the hands of an executioner of old.

“Are you acting on the orders of the Superior?”

“Of course.”

A few minutes later, with his arms loaded with books—there was one ridiculous moment when he kept dropping them—he crossed the threshold of Notre-Dame du Parc for the last time. And the waters that had swallowed him up quietly closed over him.

But there had been another little incident. He had been so encumbered by his books that he had put them down on one of the benches in the entrance hall in order to re-arrange them. And at that moment a boy called Thévenot, a twelve-year-old junior, had passed by, and as he did so had shaken Alban by the hand and said “Hello, Bricoule”, without stopping, and disappeared. Bricoule did not know this Thévenot, and he was surprised. He had left this beloved place for ever, without a farewell either to Souplier, or to his friends, or to his teachers or the priests. But here was this little unknown furtively shaking his hand for no apparent reason, save perhaps to ensure that this gloomy departure might after all be illuminated by a ray of human kindness.

What was that “rich, sad region where we understand each other’s unspoken thoughts” which Father de Pradts had mentioned to Alban? Was it no more than the realm of special friendships? Or perhaps that extremely rarefied realm in which the four principal characters in our story move (yes, Souplier included!): the kingdom whose key they possessed, and where none could enter after them?

Yes, they did indeed “understand each other’s unspoken thoughts”: Alban asking a priest who had dragged his name through the mud to be his confessor, then standing up for this priest after having been badly misused by him; the priest helping his beaten young adversary to his feet; the Superior retaining Father de Pradts in his position of trust at the college, and expelling Souplier only after bestowing a very flattering compliment on him: “You are not leaving a bad memory behind you; you are leaving a troubling memory” (always the subtle distinction). The four protagonists were people of good breeding:

intelligence and the virtues of the heart—each had proved that he possessed these, and displayed them towards the other three (which in no way precluded veiled atrocities, at least on the part of the adults). Good breeding? Surely it was something else, or the *ne plus ultra* of good breeding? There was a climate of extravagance at the Park that recalled the heroic extravagance of the knighthoods of Persia, Japan and Christendom.

But now the priests are at Mme. de Bricoule's house. The climate is about to change.

*Conversation
between Mme. de
Bricoule and the
Superior*

For reasons that may easily be guessed, the Superior did not have the same penetrating knowledge of boys—particularly of certain boys—as Father de Pradts. His knowledge of them was a little vague and sketchy. Of Alban he might have said to himself: “A boy who is capable of this gesture of abnegation at sixteen has the makings of a man.” But no: Alban aroused in the Superior a host of painful memories: (1) He had always been too independent and too influential in the college. (2) He had been the grey eminence of moral turpitude. (3) He had been the cause of the quarrel with Father de Pradts. (4) He had set himself up as the censor of the college when he had been the trouble-maker. (5) Above all, there had been the letter about the “odd occurrences” at the meeting of the Aeronautical Club, a low informer's letter, an unforgivable letter (making mischief and putting on airs at the same time: no, that was too much!). For the act of telling the truth to their parents or their masters, schoolboys have invented the derogatory term “sneaking”: their masters, on occasion, take up this word themselves, and consequently, it would seem, the sentiments that inspired it. That letter of Alban's, written with such good intentions, and on his mother's advice, had now been turned against him; incredible though it may seem, Pradeau reproached him for the very same thing which the boys held against him—having sought to make others, and himself, better. (6) Lastly, he had committed a clear-cut offence, indictable on

numerous counts, in the store-room escapade. Add to all this a vague feeling of not having behaved very well towards him, and slightly resenting the guilt this aroused. Thus the Superior had come to see Mme. de Bricoule with the resolute intention of being charitable, of being firm, and of being brief: *Sermo cum mulieribus rarus, brevis et austerus* (Council of Trent). The talk-with-the-parents-of-an-expelled-child was a ritual ceremony. What must be particularly avoided in this one were the only too familiar attacks on the college and, once more, melodramatics.

The semi-affection and the pity he felt for Alban were real; they had shown through in his conversation with Father de Pradts. But his attitude stiffened with Mme. de Bricoule's first sentence, and this is why. Mme. de Bricoule had sworn to herself that she would not go too far and would not make any irreparable remark. For instance, she would not say: "Well, you've got what you wanted!" It was too grave an accusation. But no sooner had the Superior entered the room than she was drawn as if by a magnet towards the very words she had resolved not to utter, and this is what she blurted out after they had exchanged compliments:

"Well, Monsieur l'Abbé, you've got what you wanted!"

"What did I want, Madame? To make a Christian of Alban. I must confess that I did not find the ground very well prepared."

"Why does he go on calling him Alban?" thought Mme. de Bricoule, who hated familiarity. "When he belonged to the school, perhaps. . . . But after throwing him out!"

"I don't think that the example he was given at the Park was calculated to prepare that ground."

"I know that you have always thought very ill of Notre-Dame de. . . . In that case, why did you leave him there?"

"I hoped that the spirit of the college would change."

"Thanks to your son! That was to ask of him what he's incapable of giving."

That was what had really stuck in his throat: this stripling presuming to tell them what they ought to do, and his mother doing the same during the Christmas holidays. These few exchanges were enough to make the Superior determined to find an excuse for withdrawing as rapidly as possible.

For Mme. de Bricoule, Alban was unique: her love and her vanity conspired to make him so. And the more he was spoken ill of, the more she loved him. For the Superior, he was after all only one among others, with certain merits, but ultimately a nuisance. And this woman was only one mother among others: a *parent*, that is to say something of *no great importance*. Father de Pradts hated the race of parents, with a jealous animosity that came from the depths of his being: families, I loathe you! Father de la Halle despised them almost unconsciously, without even having to remember that Jesus had spoken of his mother in a horrible manner. "Souls" meant boys—*da mihi animas*—priests, and a few, very rare, men; the female species remained in a secondary, inferior zone, a sort of limbo: it was the same attitude of mind which, in Auteuil parish church, allowed a man or a young whippersnapper to take precedence over a queue of five or six women waiting for confession. But then, should one say "women"? This limbo was the world itself. The worldly would like to forget it, but Jesus never ceased to condemn the world; his maledictions would fill page after page. For the Superior, there were simply boys, who concerned him between the ages of ten and twenty; after this they were soldiers (he detested the army), womanizers, fiancés, husbands, pillars of society. They were the world: that is to say, what Jesus condemned. The Superior could not help dividing society into two groups: boys from ten to twenty, and clergy; and then the rest. "Between the priest and the average decent man there should be as much difference as between heaven and earth."* Punctilious though he was in fulfilling the duties of his ministry towards all without distinction, it was only for these groups that he had any real affection or esteem. As for Father de Pradts, he was interested only in boys of twelve to fifteen. This meant that the interests of the two men partly coincided, although a deeper level they differed totally on essentials.

The conversation switched momentarily to Serge. The Superior informed Mme. de Bricoule that he had been expelled and that his family were going to send him to a lay school.

* Pius X. Exhort. *Hoerent animo*, para. 14. (H.M.)

“No doubt you have your reasons for getting rid of that boy. But you’re throwing my son out for conduct that you knew and approved of for months!”

“We have never approved of a person making dubious assignations in premises the key of which has been entrusted to him for reasons of duty. We call that a breach of trust. And when the person says that he went to the store-room to take stock of the chocolate, when in fact he went there to meet a junior, we call that a lie.”

“My son has never committed a breach of trust, and he’s not a liar!”

This feeble rejoinder irritated the Superior, who detected behind it a whole literature of rodomontade: “A Bricoule is no criminal!” etc. . . . The Superior was a man who loved God, and for him, as we know, the love of God was not a right-wing love. While Father de Pradts masqueraded as a man of the left out of policy, Father de la Halle, in spite of his high-sounding name, was a true man of the left, with an instinctive antipathy for anything that smacked of rank (he was always telling people: “In spite of the *de*, I’m no aristocrat, you know!”). From this point onward, the whole thing boiled down for him to a page that had to be turned as quickly as possible; a drowning man from whom the only thing to be feared was that he might drift back to the surface again.

Her face puffed and her eyes narrowed with vexation, Mme. de Bricoule reached for the bell-push and said:

“I’m going to send for my son, and you can tell him that he has committed a breach of trust.”

Only too delighted with this gesture, the Superior stood up. In any case, he abhorred the habit parents had of remaining present when he was talking to their sons. What is this phenomenon that dulls what a child says to an outsider when he says it in front of one of his parents? They are the same words that would seem to you striking if he said them to you alone, and here they are, somehow deadened, because. . . . And there is also the son who looks at his mother to find out what he is supposed to say to a third party. . . . Yes, children were diminished by their parents

exactly as men were diminished by their wives.* In addition to this, there was the fact that, like Father de Pradts, the Superior felt out of place among adults, and especially among women.

“No, Madame, do not send for him. He is not always in control of what he says. Encouraged by you, he would be even less so. I don’t think you would want an unseemly incident. I have no need to see your son. Father de Pradts has told him what we had to say to him. You will tell him what I have said to you.”

“So you refuse to see him! Not even his divisional prefect has spoken to him since the incident: it’s a bit much! You passed him on your way in to see Father de Pradts and you didn’t say a word to him. You got an usher to show him the door—‘Quick, out you go! You’re not to see any one.’ You haven’t even the courage to look him in the face. You’re afraid of him.” She was flushed, and her eyes brimmed with tears. “He had a right to explain himself to some qualified person, you or his prefect; he has spoken only to Father de Pradts, who is not his prefect and has nothing whatsoever to do with this business.”

“Madame, I will not allow . . .”

“And his marks! Passing them over in silence in front of the whole school so that his humiliation should be as resounding as possible—what a refined piece of unpleasantness that was! And expelling him three months before his final exams, at the risk of his failing. And expelling him a week before the Easter holidays, when it would have been so simple for him not to go back next term; the whole thing would have been over quietly and decently. But Father de Pradts wanted a scandal, and you wanted a public branding. How could you inflict a shock like that on a young boy of his age, especially when you yourself told me in this very room that he was ‘the head of the college’? The way you have behaved is beyond words.”

* “A man abdicates much of his dignity when he binds himself to a woman.” Ozanam, *Lettres* vol. 1, p. 292. The works of Ozanam, founder of the St. Vincent de Paul societies, were, as we have seen, one of the Superior’s bedside books. (H.M.)

“Madame, the remarks of expelled pupils and of the parents of expelled pupils are of no importance whatsoever. They affect no one. Good day.”

When Father Pradeau de la Halle took leave of the parents of an expelled pupil, he usually ended with the traditional “I shall pray for him.” He actually had prayed for Alban, on the night when his expulsion had been decided. But in the face of his mother’s attitude, the polite phrase withered away.

He made for the door. Mme. de Bricoule rang for him to be shown out.

The Superior would have behaved quite differently, of course, if Mme. de Bricoule had been an influential person. But he had no difficulty in detecting that she was alone and harmless. Alban, at the moment of his expulsion, had had his first experience of life in society: either you count, or you don’t; he did not count. And Mme. de Bricoule had forgotten what one must never forget: that it is necessary to be powerful, and to remain so to the end of one’s days—and far beyond.

*Mme. de Bricoule
frees some new
ghosts*

It was on Tuesday that Mme. de Bricoule had told her son that she was going to summon Father de Pradts, on Tuesday that she had uttered the phrase “higher authority” and had written to the priest asking him to call on Thursday. From Tuesday to Thursday, Alban was paralysed with grief and fear: the grief induced by his masters, and the fear induced by his mother. Never before had he experienced a grief comparable to that which the break with Serge caused him. As for fear, no doubt he had felt panic in the hours preceding his entry into the bull-ring, but that was different, that was what one might call a healthy fear, a “good fear”. What he was now discovering was social fear, the fear that a man has of his fellow-man, and it was his mother who had revealed it to him. His mother was releasing and setting on him, a child, the ghosts, the larvæ and lemures that chill the lives of adults.

His agitation was such that he could not walk straight, and bumped into furniture or door-posts like a drunk man. So he lay on his bed with a clammy mouth, a white tongue, burning cheeks and cold fingers, getting up from time to time to drink from the water-jug or to pass urine as colourless as the water he drank. He was incapable of eating, incapable of thinking about anything at all except what was worrying him. He had tried to do some work: his writing was shaky. His anxiety eventually consumed even his grief. He found himself joining his hands together, in one of those flashes of dubious piety that sometimes came over him. Talking to his mother, he found himself stumbling over words, and articulating so faintly in his anguish that she asked him: "Have you lost your voice?" She could scarcely hear what he said. No question of smoking: he had tried a cigarette, a Virginian; it had gone out three times; he was incapable of "drawing".

The college was what it was, but it had its standards. With a single word, Mme. de Bricoule had brought it down to a sordid and dreadful plane. The terrible thing was that no matter how great her efforts to adapt herself to the "tone" of the place, she could not help but move on a different plane, a coarser and baser one. It was she whose insinuations had given Alban the idea of an "act" with Serge—that of the pelota court—an act that had not occurred to him and for which he therefore had had no desire. It was she who had started the lock-forcing competition. It was she who had shown her son, for the first time in his life, the hideous, the unthinkable face of a "love" that wishes harm to the "loved" one. It was she who gratuitously, and in defiance of common sense, had thrown the imagination of this stripling into a turmoil by injecting it with all kinds of medical or medico-legal poppycock culled from her medical dictionary the day before. It was she who had uttered the disquieting phrase "higher authority". What was this higher authority? Ecclesiastical? Civil? There are all sorts of higher authorities. It was she who voiced those insulting suspicions. It was she who preached hatred of the priests. The terrible thing was that with all her maternal love, all her respectability, all her liveliness of mind, all her "breeding", this mother hardly ever entered her son's life except to distort it, to

demean it, or to throw it into confusion. But was it, after all, her fault, or was it simply that, whatever they do, adults cannot help but ruin adolescence and childhood?

On Tuesday and Wednesday, Alban was running a temperature about which he said nothing (the thermometer under his armpit, out of modesty, as was current in “the best families” in those days). On Thursday he received through the post his history and French homework, which they had not had time to return to him corrected—seven out of twenty and nine out of twenty! Marks lower than he had ever had throughout his entire school life. And the comments on his French composition! “A bad piece of work. Your florid style is out of place in this subject, and your affectations, on which you appear to pride yourself, only reveal your lack of taste.” This too was a tone which had never been used towards him during his entire school life. What a flood of pent-up rancour gushed forth the moment they no longer had to indulge him! And for the first time too, Alban discovered that his feeling in the face of baseness was one of amazement.

On Thursday morning, he telephoned Father de Pradts from a post office (the Bricoules had no telephone, far too republican an invention):

“Monsieur l’Abbé, my mother is very worked up about you. May I remind you of your rule never to mix school and family.”

There was a silence, but it seemed to him that at the other end of the line there was heavy breathing against the mouthpiece, intensified by emotion. He said hello again, and the priest’s voice, very calm and composed, said to him:

“That is a general principle of education. Long experience has taught us its value. We follow it in all cases without distinction. I should add that it is in no way intended to reflect against families. And we ask nothing better than for it to be applied to us in return.”

After these carefully chosen words, there were a few commonplaces about how Alban was to pursue his studies, then a polite exchange of compliments, and the priest quickly rang off. Alban had become a real door-mat.

Never mind about that! He got out his History of Rome, his Suetonius and his Sallust, and looked up the Romans who had been slung out of somewhere or other. There is no shortage of them, God knows, but naturally he could not find them. It is always like that when you look something up.

The Superior had advised Father de Pradts to give up the idea of calling on Mme. de Bricoule, one or two of whose remarks he retailed to him. But Father de Pradts, being a thoroughbred, had courage in his blood, and enjoyed frank confrontations. He refused to be put off.

*Mme. de Bricoule
and Father de Pradts*

Lying on her chaise-longue, Mme. de Bricoule at first spoke to Father de Pradts with some unease: blinking eyes, twitching nose. She went over the familiar ground: such a brilliant pupil, a friendship approved of by the authorities, etc. . . . He kept silent and let her talk herself out. He looked her in the eyes without difficulty, whereas she did not look at him, out of a mixture of disapproval and embarrassment. From this detail alone the outcome of the struggle could have been predicted. Perhaps also from the fact that he was sitting bolt upright while she was stretched out, already on her back like an animal laid low and beginning to expire. She, sparkling with rings and all kinds of baubles pinned to her dressing-gown, like a lobster on a slab, half-dead and still moving. He, buttoned up and gloved in black, utterly plain, and all the more formidable.

She fell silent. He then proceeded to reduce the affair to one concrete question: "There were acts. There was a series of occurrences accompanied by scandal." He also observed by way of parenthesis that "Alban's ignorance of things religious was, it must be said, exceptional in a college such as ours", which was pretty cool from an atheist.

"But after all, Monsieur l'Abbé, is there anything very serious in what happened?"

“Usually, Madame, when a pupil’s mother hears a story of this kind about her son, she is somewhat taken aback.”

“I’m not taken aback because I know my son. He is incapable of doing anything bad of that sort.”

“And yet, Madame, a few months ago. . . . He himself admits it.”

“Yes, Monsieur l’Abbé, I know all about it. But even if there were ‘occurrences’ in December, as you say, they had stopped. And I must add that these occurrences would never have happened if Alban had not been at the Park. At M. Maucornet’s, special friendships were strictly forbidden, and there were none. At the Park . . .”

The Superior had cut his interview with her so short the other day that when he was gone Mme. de Bricoule had realized that she had not said any of the things she wanted to say. This time she drained herself. Now she looked her man straight in the eyes, concentrating all her energy to prevent hers from wandering. How often had Father de Pradts nearly lost his temper with pupils’ mothers simply because of their naïvety! In this case he was irritated by the lack of it.

When Mme. de Bricoule, perhaps for the third time, remarked that she was “completely in the know”, the priest seized the opportunity to interrupt her. He echoed the Superior. In this story, everybody kept going over the same ground, but it was inevitable.

“Madame, if you were so much in the know, why did you not withdraw your son from such an evil establishment? Why wait to accuse us until *we* have expelled him, and expelled him precisely because of the sort of behaviour you condemn?”

Mme. de Bricoule did not answer at first. And indeed, what was there to say? She stood accused of the very thing of which she had accused the priest, and she had been as much at fault as he: both had compromised, both had given Alban free rein. She extricated herself by lying.

“It was only a few days ago that I heard the whole truth from Alban. However, I have always known all about that young Souplier, and your interest in him.”

The priest did not blench. Dissimulation had become second nature to him, as with children. It was with the most nonchalant air in the world—and in the same tone in which he had said to Alban, three months before: “Souplier? I’m concerned with him because he is in my charge, and that’s all”—that he answered:

“Our apostolic duty requires us to pay special attention to hopeless cases. This was such a case. But still, there are other pebbles on the beach.”

Having thus verbally dispatched the object of so many alarms and excursions, Father de Pradts, like the Superior the day before, began to defend the college, and Mme. de Bricoule did not have the courage to pursue the matter. She could well imagine everything that she might have said, but could no longer imagine herself saying it.

Defence of the college by Father de Pradts

As he was expatiating on all this, Mme. de Bricoule suddenly became aware that her nose was shiny. This glow which came all too readily to her nose was one of the countess’s worries. She would extinguish it first of all by wiping it with a piece of cigarette-paper, and then she would powder it. In front of the priest she did not dare use cigarette-paper, but she powdered her nose shamelessly, with her *Rêve de Mignon* powder. As she did so, she noticed in the mirror of her compact the two lines descending from her nose, and could not resist pulling at them with her thumb and middle finger. Then she testily dusted off the powder which had, as usual, fallen on to her jabot. Father de Pradts saw these three movements, and was filled with contempt. However much Mme. de Bricoule might despise priests, her contempt was not the sort of feeling that one species arouses in another. But his hatred for her was not (or was only slightly) a hatred arising out of a specific situation; nor was it the hatred of a priest for a woman; no, it was the hatred of the man he was for womanhood and motherhood. It was a real hatred of one species for another, a jungle hatred. Father de Pradts, drawing himself up in front of Mme. de Bricoule as she had drawn herself up in front of him, defended his world, defended it in its entirety, or rather defended

his two worlds. He was conscious of the superiority of his own person over hers, of the superiority of his condition over hers, of the superiority of his life, even in the very falsity he brought to it. He had a double superiority over them all: that of being a priest, and that of not believing and never having believed. Yet it was to him and his like that Christ, through the apostles, had addressed those tremendous words: "I have chosen you and set you apart from the world. You are the salt of the earth." True, he was an odd sort of priest, but he was a priest all the same, he had the honour of being a priest, and *in æternum*. He was a priest, he was *set apart from the world*, which is to say that he lived in a lofty world, the world of the spiritual, of the problems of souls, of moral difficulties, of liturgy and religious art. And he was completely exempt from all sordid cares. Doubtless the deity did not exist, but if by any chance it did, he was in direct communication with its most grandiose, rarest, subtlest and most extravagant manifestations, of which people like these Bricoules had not even the slightest notion. And as for knowing about boys. . . . Mothers were more puerile than the children they reared. Fathers devoted a quarter of an hour a day to their sons. Doctors understood nothing about psychology: take away their therapeutics, and the best of them were asses. Whereas the priest. . . . No, there was simply nothing in common between himself and a worldly widow, clinking and coruscating, corseted in her caste. It was only too true that he had the keys of a kingdom into which this woman would never set foot. Finally he could contain himself no longer, and cut matters short:

"Madame, it's pointless for me to go on, since we are on a plane where you are incapable of following me."

He would have liked to add: "What is hidden from you is immense", which he thought in a theological sense, although he did not believe in theology, but which he would have said in a human sense. He refrained from doing so.

"But I'm perfectly capable of following you . . ." she stammered feebly.

Mme. de Bricoule was aware of his contempt, and was shattered by it: bristling with frustrated dignity and disdain. There

was nothing she could do about it, this man had the upper hand: slim, erect, sharp, severe, the very image of ecclesiastical dignity and certitude, ultimately Father de Pradts seemed to her to be everything he believed himself to be: a person of a superior species. (How different might it not have been if she had been confronted with the theatrical garb of some religious orders!) For nineteen centuries it had been like this: a moment came when the man triumphed, because he was dressed in this distinctive manner; if we may be permitted an absurd comparison, his cassock or his robe was like an ice-breaker that enabled him to go where he chose. In the *Iliad* (Homer's), the gods protect certain combatants: vanquished, a god intervenes and makes them the victors. In the *Iliad* of the Protectorate, the mere reference to a god prevented you from being vanquished: the cassock was the magic armour that rendered its wearer invulnerable. They could say: "We have a solid fact." For her part, she had none; bits of gossip, vague notions, artificial avowals, explications which were incomprehensible to her—everything trickled through her fingers. But if she had had a solid fact, she would not have used it now. She had said too much, she had spoken with a frankness which she could not sustain. She had been mastered, and knew it, and submitted with a sigh. Mme. de Bricoule no longer even pulled her bracelet up and down her arm, as she had at the outset, like an angry lioness beating its tail against the ground. Her strength had dropped from her, as the wind drops.

The Superior did not concern himself with the world because the world did not interest him, having been spewed out by the Gospel; Father de Pradts because the world did not interest him, his boys being outside it; he entered it only when he had to, on boy business. This particular piece of business was over and done with, and he was eager to get back to his beloved den. Presently he rose and, after a few brief civilities and the appropriate grimaces, he went away. Mme. de Bricoule forthwith took to her bed with a raging migraine. Curtains drawn, eyes closed behind immense black rings. Her son found her thus. In the half-light of her bedroom, she said to him simply:

“You told me he was handsome. He is, but not *very*. He looks like a sea-horse.”

This was all that Alban discovered, that day, about the interview between his mother and Father de Pradts.

Exactly five minutes later, the saliva returned to his mouth, replacing the sour yellow scum that had dried it up for two days: the asphyxiated patient was restored to life. Five minutes more, and, aroused by this transformation, he took his temperature out of curiosity: the fever had vanished. He stretched himself out on his bed, where he now dozed off for a while, physically and morally exhausted.

But in the evening, after dinner (which he had eaten alone in the dining-room, because his mother did not want to see anybody), he was in his room writing his farewell letter to Serge, when the door opened. It was Mme. de Bricoule, her features drawn, in her night-dress.

*Resurrection of
Mummy-Get-it-
wrong*

“There’s something that’s preying on my mind. I want to know. You must be honest with me. Has de Pradts always behaved properly towards you?”

“How do you mean, ‘properly’?”

“Has he . . . well . . . has he ever made any improper advances to you?”

“You must be mad!”

“Don’t be so rude. It’s just that, I was wondering . . . after Souplier . . .”

“Father de Pradts never wanted to do Souplier anything but good! Souplier told me so himself often enough. You’re mad!”

He had flared up with indignation at once, as a bowl of paraffin flares up at once at the touch of a match.

“Well, if you say so, I believe you.”

She vanished, a Shakespearian apparition of intellectual confusion and mental derangement, leaving Alban as startled as if he had seen a ghost, or as if he really had been confronted with a mad mother. What had actually happened? Mme. de Bricoule had

momentarily become Mummy-Get-it-wrong again. But was she the only one? Didn't the boys believe that Alban's new life had been a sham? Didn't they believe that the innocent Fauvette . . .? Hadn't La Maisonfort believed that Alban and Giboy . . .? We go calmly through life, confident of the self-evidence of what we are and what is so. But there is nothing so absurd that it cannot be supposed and believed about us. Self-evidence? Never heard of it.

Letter from Alban to Serge

30 March 1913

My darling child,

(I use this style of address, which I have never used with you before, because that is how my mother addresses me in her letters.)

I wanted to see you one last time and say good-bye, but Father de Pradts forbade it, saying that it would be "too melodramatic for something so simple". So simple!

For I must leave you, presumably for ever: Father de Pradts made me promise. He told me that he had *tolerated*—only tolerated—our friendship, that I had "pretended" to be your friend, and that I was preventing him from doing you some good. I have behaved badly towards you, it seems. If I have, it hurts me more than it has ever hurt you. And if I have done you harm, others would have done worse.

But I am supposed to have behaved badly towards everybody! My friends considered that I was "betraying" them at the time of the reform, Father de Pradts tells me that I was "pretending" to be your friend, and the Superior has accused me of a "breach of trust", in front of my mother, too! That is how, with all my good intentions and everything I have sacrificed, I have forfeited the respect of everybody who had any for me, or pretended to. Fortune has been against me, I feel.

In my sadness,* I have two consolations. One is that my conscience is quite clear; the other is my certainty that you loved me. Father de Pradts told me that I would laugh about all this when I am twenty. All I can say is that on my death-bed I shall remember your last gesture, when he was taking you away, and you came back to shake my hand.

Dear Serge, I cannot go on, as I would say things I shouldn't say, and there are such things. I beg and pray you to take good care of yourself, and

* Alban had originally written "my terrible sadness", but remembering de Pradts's recent advice, he crossed out "terrible". Father de Pradts even took care of prose style in the catastrophes he engineered. (H.M.)

not to let yourself be influenced by dubious characters in the place where you are going. And once more I ask you what I have always asked you—as *you* well know—from the bottom of my heart: to behave better and to become what you ought to be, even if it comes to be said that you became better from the day I left you.

Good-bye, dear Serge, my darling child. Let me kiss you for the last time, and hold you in my arms, with a tenderness and sadness which you cannot understand, and which I do not understand very well myself. At the beginning of our friendship, remember, you said to me: “For ever”, and I corrected you: “For as long as possible”. Today, when I am leaving you, I know at last that I too can say: for ever. No, I don’t believe that I shall ever in my life deny what you have been and what you are to me. If I hadn’t loved you so much, everything would have been easier. How much you meant to me! How right I was to love you!

Do not answer this. It would only stir it all up again, and I have had enough of the hurt it causes me.

Your friend,
ALBAN.

Alban slipped this letter (sealed) into another envelope addressed to Lapradine, a junior who was the usual messenger between himself and Serge. Then he went round after school and asked one of the day-boys to pass the letter on to Lapradine.

Lapradine knew that Serge had been expelled and was not coming back. But whether out of thoughtlessness, or to curry favour, or because he had succumbed to the general revulsion against expellees, he gave it to Father de Pradts.

The priest read it, and thought well of it: fine sentiments always appealed to him. Then he put it in the waste-paper basket. What else could he do with it?

★

“Trust, that divine possibility in man . . .”

H.M. Preface to *Service inutile*, 1934.

“There is a demon whose name is Trust.”

H.M. *Don Juan*, Act III, scene I, 1958.

Father de Pradts had been informed by the Superior that now that the Souplier affair was closed, a further interview between them was necessary, “solely concerned with spiritual matters”. This interview had been arranged for the following Thursday, which was Maundy Thursday. A remark that had been let fall during their debate about Souplier had given Father de Pradts to understand that it was to do with the firmness of his faith. In ecclesiastical circles, questions are never asked about faith; it needed the immense candour of Father de la Halle to venture on to this forbidden ground. Father de Pradts was quite unworried; knowing how it would turn out, he did not even think about it beforehand, and was thus free to think only of Souplier.

There is a study to be made of naïvety, which seems never to have been undertaken. It is one of the main cogs in the machinery of the world; in fact it is what makes everything run smoothly. What would the world be without dupes? But there, lots of men who have climbed to their little pinnacles by their cleverness and guile also have their moments of naïvety, outside their own line of business or even inside it: it is a striking thing. Very rare are the men who *never* have a momentary lapse: Father de Pradts was one such (if we except his flirtation with Freemasonry). As for the Superior, he wallowed in naïvety like a fish in water, or rather, to be more elevated, like a bird in air. It had already played him some nasty tricks, but they had not cured him. For it is easier to drain a man of the contents of his brain, or to give him an artificial heart, than to cure him of his naïvety.

*The dove and the
serpent*

Since our story is called *The Boys*, we have no call to expatiate at length on the content of this interview, in which boys were not involved. It was an interview between an intelligent man and a not so intelligent man. Father de Pradts played with the Superior like a cat with a mouse, or rather, if the Church, as Jesus had it, should be “simple as the dove, and wise as the serpent”, it would be apter to say that in this encounter the Superior was the dove and the other the serpent (meaning by “serpent” not that he was a bad man, but that he was sinuous). The Superior had his small boy

side, which Mme. de Bricoule had noticed; Father de Pradts had too. He slithered like a young snake, half acknowledging that he did not believe, then five minutes later giving an admirable analysis of what the ideal priest should be, declaring that a third of the clergy were atheists, then that the Catholic Church was such a great institution that it would “never perish”, and castigating those who fling abuse at it; saying a thing and then five minutes later protesting that he hadn’t said it—quite the young snake, in fact: he might have been grappling with a senior.

The Superior had not broached the subject of their debate directly. Alban would inevitably have said that he had tried to approach it as a *banderillero* approaches the bull to place the *banderillas*, describing a wide semi-circle, supposedly æsthetic, in reality prudent.

“You told me that some of the masters had lost their faith. What proof have you?”

“I cannot see into their consciences. It’s more an intuition.”

The Superior’s cape, which on entering the room he had put down on a chair with a slightly convex leather seat, slid off of its own accord and fell, as a petal falls. The effect was strange.

“You spoke to me of ‘unbelief not only among the pupils but among the teachers. Or a semblance of belief’. Was that just an intuition?”

“Did I say that?”

“You said it word for word. One does not forget remarks of that sort.”

“Perhaps I exaggerated under the impact of the blow I had just received from you.”

“If there are teachers here who express anti-religious views, it is my right and my duty to know who they are. The two mainstays of our religion are faith and charity: the Gospel says it often enough. . . . As for hope, it’s rather similar to faith,” he added modestly, laying his bait.

“Our lay masters are men of talent and ability, absurdly ill paid, often with large families, who come here more or less out of dedication. Even if I had the names, would charity allow me to give them to you so that you could throw these poor devils out?”

“Faith comes even before charity. And before conduct. Better a great sinner who believes in God and who loves him, than a nice chap who believes ‘so-so’ and doesn’t love him. Anyway, you speak of dedication. If our teachers come here out of dedication, it’s because they believe in what they dedicate themselves to.”

De Pradts did not reply, but smiled to himself. There were men who loved this college, and dedicated themselves to it, and who did not believe in what it was founded on.

The Superior saw that he was dealing with some one who was well armoured. If de Pradts would not talk about other people’s faith, how would he ever talk about his own. Nevertheless the Superior strove to gain ground.

“When you speak from the rostrum, whenever I’ve come to listen to your talks,* I’ve been struck by the fact that the morality you prescribe might equally well be a lay morality. That is not wrong in itself, but it’s wrong in a house of Christian education. ‘Go ye therefore and teach all nations.’ We must teach the truth, which is Christian. Have you paid sufficient attention to that?”

“Religion is not an obsession with me,” said Father de Pradts, who had a touch of natural impudence.

“If religion is not an obsession, it is nothing at all,” retorted the Superior, who could also be sharp when he wanted to be.

“I always show you the articles I send to *The Living God*. What are they if not educational?”

“I am talking about the concrete, practical, daily teaching that you should be giving to our pupils.”

“They will become half-believers in any case. Haven’t we expressed *ad nauseam* our community of views on the value of parents from the religious point of view? They will be parents one day, and they’ll become what their own parents are. I have felt that it was more efficacious to put the accent less on faith than on what I may call everyday morality. What has been grafted on to morality is more likely to remain with them than what has been

* Daily talks given by the divisional prefects between half past four and a quarter to five, before prep. (H.M.)

grafted on to religion, because morality will remain with them longer than religion—as I said to you only the other day.”

This was not at all what he had said. He had said: “We have mingled religion with their passions. They will always remember their passions, and religion along with them.” But it was pointless and inopportune to hark back to the subject of passions today; they had exhausted that subject the other day. This was no doubt the Superior’s opinion too, since he did not point out the inaccuracy, although he had noticed it.

A remark was buzzing in his head like an angry bee, a remark he had heard made by a certain bishop: “The greatest service we can render to dogma is to talk about it as little as possible.” Wasn’t this what Father de Pradts thought?

The latter took a black note-book from his pocket and read out: “An English pedagogue once wrote: ‘I can mould Christian men, but not Christian adolescents.’ ”

The Superior bridled.

“Everything I know, and everything I’ve seen, cries out against that statement. I’ve seen fifteen-year-old boys develop vocations that were subsequently confirmed.”

Father de Pradts turned over a few pages of his note-book.

“Fénelon, to a mother complaining that her son didn’t listen to her when she talked to him about God: ‘Madame, I advise you to talk to God about your son, rather than about God to your son.’ ”

“The one does not exclude the other! You keep a note-book to write down all the objections to a Christian education. It’s quite incredible!”

“People raise objections. One part of the note-book contains the answers to be made to the objections.”

He turned some more pages, and read, with great seriousness:

“ ‘. . . That this clock should exist and have no clock-maker.’ ”

The Superior was still inwardly quivering. He was silent for a moment, then said, in a faltering voice:

*When the Son of
man cometh . . .*

“ ‘When the Son of Man cometh, shall he still find faith on earth?’ It was Christ who spoke those poignant words—perhaps

the most poignant that have come out of the bosom of Christianity. Have you ever meditated on them?"

"There will always be faith on earth," said Father de Pradts with conviction, and with emotion too: the Superior's emotion had moved him. "Christianity will always be there for those who are worthy of it."

And so it went on. It had been easy to tell Father de Pradts when he was prostrate over the Souplier affair that the trial would be salutary; it was not easy to tell him so as regards his dubious faith, since he did not seem to see it as a trial. The striking thing was that at no point did the Superior bring himself to look the other in the eye and say to him: "Well then, yes or no, do you believe in God, and if so, do you believe that this God is Jesus of Nazareth?" The Superior did not have the right to order de Pradts to confess to him, but did he not have the right to know to what extent the priest who exercised authority under him believed in what he was doing? However that may be, the question was several times on the tip of his tongue, but never got any further: it was too shocking. He sensed, too, that even in confession de Pradts would have continued to prevaricate (yes, like the pupils in theirs, but the Superior did not know about the practice of half-confessions). So he remained in the vague penumbra prescribed for "awkward questions". He had never been face to face with a non-believer, endeavouring to inculcate the faith, and finding himself in that position—with a priest, of all people!—he could not find the right words, felt unequal to his task, and was even more so in consequence. It was above all the other man's style—his ease of manner—even more than his answers, that unnerved him.

Father de Pradts had anticipated this saving vagueness. And in any case he had no qualms: if he was asked whether he had lost his faith, he would begin by blurring the issue, which is not a difficult thing to do: "What exactly is faith?" or "To believe that I could fully account for my religious position by reason alone—that would show that I had lost my faith." If he was cornered, he would answer that he "believed" wholeheartedly. As Linsbourg instructed the boys: "Everything except the truth." He would not say what was always hovering on the tip of his tongue—the

insolent, jesting admission: "I am a Christian without faith—isn't that better than nothing?" Or rather, only this time more seriously: "I have taught a lay morality but a good one. Why should I have to believe? What difference would it make? I have conscientiously fulfilled the duties of my ministry, and I have taught the good wholeheartedly: that is no more and no less than what was expected of me. As for the relations between me and a putative God, that is my concern and nobody else's." No, he would not say that, he would simply say that he believed. Everything he had built up over twelve years depended on that "yes". And a Superior who lacked the subtlety to realize that this was the question not to ask deserved to be lied to. Moreover, a "no" to the Superior would be a blow which Father de Pradts was loath to inflict on him. He belonged to that admirable breed for whom respect soon dissipates aversion. He felt no more aversion for the man who had wrenched him away from Souplier than he had felt for Alban at the end of their final interview.

The Superior had been victorious a week earlier. Today he was tied up in knots. The torments of the past week had brought out an ugly little sore on his lip which reappeared whenever he was faced with an annoyance of any kind, and this little sore (which de Pradts did not even notice) diminished him in his own eyes in a confrontation that he was anxious to make a solemn one. He had arranged to devote an hour and a half to this confrontation. Man of prayer that he was, before receiving Father de Pradts he had said a prayer to the Holy Ghost. After thirty-five minutes he felt played out. He said:

"Pray, my friend" (once more his voice faltered). "Trust blindly in God's grace. Put yourself humbly in his hands. He is more patient than we are, and he loves you. Jesus said to Peter: 'I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not.' I shall say that prayer for you. If you too are capable of saying it, say it for those of our children who have the misfortune to be weak in faith."

"I am capable of saying it, and I will," Father de Pradts said firmly. He was absolutely sincere. Sincerity and insincerity had succeeded each other in him as the light and shade of the

nocturnal avenue had succeeded each other in Alban and Serge's cab.

Skating on thin ice

Thus, ostensibly, the Superior had seemed only faintly to suspect that Father de Pradts did not believe in God. He had thought that he might be tempted, but had not pursued the matter any further: "Always make allowances." The tone of the Souplier affair had reappeared: "Your integrity is not in question, only your firmness of purpose." The Park loved to skate on thin ice. The Superior had always been blind, but on this occasion, having caught a glimmer of light, he shut his eyes tight to make himself even blinder. Father de Pradts remained a man of faith: there was no other choice. To-morrow, or the day after, the Superior's anathema would fall upon some of the pupils, perhaps on masters or ushers too. But it would fall upon them over questions of conduct, not over questions of faith. which for him were infinitely more serious and of a kind that must be kept dark (but in that case, why had he raised them?). In any event, it would not fall upon this priest who was esteemed by all, both in the college and outside it, when exceptional men were so rare in the Church of today. Even if his religion was a façade, if that façade inspired respect the Church must not be deprived of it. And in any case he knew how much good this priest had done: he knew that there was more to it than a façade. Another thing: if he were to disappear, even at the beginning of next term, nobody would have any doubt, after the Souplier affair, that he was disappearing because of an "indiscretion"; and since this was not so, it would be shameful if it were generally believed that it was. And what would the Jesuits think of the Park? They would be exultant. Finally, if the Superior did not hush things up, somebody would do it for him: silence would be out-silenced; silence above, silence below, silence all around. The expression "the Church of silence" has entered today's parlance with a specific political meaning; but all churches are churches of silence. And doesn't the same hold true in the world? On the one side calculated blah, on the other calculated silence; between the two, nothing.

So there was neither confession nor the automatic absolution that terminated the boys' semi-confessions. Hear his confession? Not on any account! There were simply pious formulas—"Visit the Blessed Sacrament often", etc. . . . —and an injunction to go into retreat during the summer holidays, at Solesmes, a prospect not at all to Father de Pradts' liking, since he would much rather have taken a bit of a rest from religion and cured himself of Souplier at a holiday camp. It was his one annoyance during this restrained confrontation, for he had always been sure that whatever the outcome he would remain unscathed.

"Believe me," the Superior said at last, making as if to rise, "people think they can be great souls outside Christianity, but in so far as they fall short of Christianity they will fall short of this aim. More than everything else, it is Christianity that puts things into perspective."

"I know. I told you so the other day."

Father de Pradts had said nothing remotely resembling these astonishing words, but he had set out to cloud the issue wittingly or unwittingly, and was continuing to do so.

"The Superior took out his watch and stirred in his chair. He was not short of time; he simply wanted to have done with it all. When Father de Pradts stood up, Father de la Halle seized him by the biceps, looked him in the eyes, and embraced him, with an ecclesiastical but nonetheless robust embrace which the other returned warmly. It was by this embrace that Father de Pradts realized that the Superior had seen through him and knew that he did not believe in God.

Father de Pradts bowed and withdrew. Father de la Halle's flannel vest was drenched with sweat. He drew a sizable crucifix from inside his cassock, next to his heart, where he permanently wore it, murmured his favourite invocation: "My God, living and true!", and then kissed it. On this eve of Good Friday, he too was on the Cross.

"The disciple whom Jesus loved": five times John described himself thus (which was a little unflattering to the other disciples). And he alone had lain on Jesus's breast. And, as it happened, he

was *the youngest* of the Twelve: a real girl if the painters are to be believed. And the mysterious thrill of his Gospel. . . . In the painful life of Jesus, it was this alone that moved Father de Pradts: St. John's Gospel was to him a fascinating fable, like the *Theogony*, the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, the *Arabian Nights*. As for Alban, the character in the Passion for whom he had a weakness was Pontius Pilate, the Roman fallen among Orientals whom he did not understand in the least, and yet who tried obstinately to save one of them whom he felt to be a man of honour. There had come a moment when he had lost his nerve, partly on the advice of his wife (a spicy detail), partly because "I'm fed up with all this fuss about whether or not he's king of the Jews. How should I know who's the king of the Jews? I've done all I can; they can sort it out among themselves. What was I being punished for (but I think I can guess: I didn't crawl enough in the Servilius affair) by being sent to this hole?" Pontius Pilate was no hero, but he was one of those whom the angels had called "men of good will". For Alban, this just and disdainful Roman was a real friend.

The Superior's feelings about the Passion were very different. Ever since childhood, it had never failed to overwhelm him. As man and priest, he did not linger over it more than he had to during the rest of the year, in order to come to it afresh at the end of each Lent, and each time, on coming to it, he felt a lump in his throat. Today, kneeling at his prie-dieu after Father de Pradts had gone. . . . But we must go back a few days in order to understand what was happening inside him.

The insects emerge

Alban had been admired and moderately liked in the college, without there being any hostility towards him. Linsbourg was liked, and much admired, both for his academic and his protectionist successes. Masters and pupils alike turned a blind eye to his eccentricities. But from the day of Alban's expulsion, injustice, to which, as we are often told, boys are very sensitive, had set tongues wagging, and there had also been a sudden awakening of our old national passion, envy, which has made us do so many great things. Up till then, Linsbourg was said to have been protected by his cheek; now he was said to be protected by

his papa. Untouchable because his father was on the governing board of the Park, and an influential shareholder and benefactor of the house—this had been accepted for a long time; all of a sudden it no longer was. All of a sudden, it was felt that Linsbourg had been admired and liked for too long (eight years, as against Alban's thirteen months); so much so that the word "Prussian" had crept out like some unspeakable insect from underneath a stone. People stopped covering up for Linsbourg, and hence for Denie, who had been covered up for only because of Linsbourg. The Park was by no means a hotbed of delation. But it is fatal to open the floodgates. The Protectorate ceased to be protected. Names began to circulate: pupils, two masters, concierges, *sacratissima loca*. A sixth-form master, M. Bidel, an excellent man, had disclosed some intolerable facts to the Superior (but why had he waited for the wolves to howl before howling with them?). It was not simply unbelief that was rife, it was immorality. The Superior emerged from his waking dream. Around the pure and upright knight, twisted goblins with gleaming eyes swarmed from all over the forest. The vague feeling at the Park was that between boys it was not really very serious, but with women it was abominable. Everything had suddenly changed. Father de la Halle had a little of the instability peculiar to the children around him (O children, changeable as the sea . . .).

When M. Bidel had spoken to him, the Superior's first feeling had been one of humiliation and shame. To have deceived himself so! To have been so deceived! "You have ears to hear and hear not. You have eyes to see and see not." Only two days before he had said of M. Cordère, one of the accused masters: "He's so nice. He's a really excellent man . . ." Yes, two days before. Ridiculous. Farcical. He, a Priest, that is to say "another Christ", *alter Christus*, he, the Superior of the college of Notre-Dame de ———: a farcical character. Superior! Superior in what? "Oh my God, I am nothing. But I offer you this nothing." And these pupils! If he was so mistaken on one point, on how many others might he not be mistaken? Was there a single son of peace in this house, on whom

he could rely? No, not one. And on what adult? All of a sudden he distrusted everybody, including himself; humanity, which ordinarily inspired him with benevolence, seemed hideous to him; the whole face of the world had changed. It was no longer possible to speak well of any one after what he had said about M. Cordère, no longer possible simply to say of some one: "He's so nice . . ." Who had been true? Who had been false? He had no idea. He was like a man whose house has been robbed and who vaguely suspects every single person among his acquaintanceship, even the most reliable, so that his life is poisoned by it. He had loved his college and loved his boys, and he had wanted to be able to go on loving them; therefore it *went without saying* that they did nothing wrong (all this was unconscious, of course). He had been too much in love with the trust he had in his children and in their masters; too much in love with trust for its own sake; alas, the very principle on which he had established the college had now been challenged and shaken. Three years before, a man whom he liked without actually belonging to his group had been condemned by Rome. At the time he himself had felt convicted in his inclinations, which were the same as this man's. Today, he was convicted in his actions too. Everything that was most characteristically and profoundly Christian in what he had done—acts of whose Christian validity he had been convinced at the time—now seemed to him nothing but laughable absurdity.

Since then, he had been trying to pull himself together: "They gave me their trust; they confided to me their little troubles, sometimes those of their homes, sometimes even their little physical troubles; they told me things they don't even tell their parents. They gave me their trust, and I gave them mine; I cannot possibly have been wrong. Isn't the Church making an immense act of trust when it asks for faith?" But presently: "I deceived myself, and one is always wrong to deceive oneself. Am I not too young to have accepted this task? Weren't the Jesuits right? But in that case, O my God, why did you not warn me? It was so simple.

* "And into whatsoever house ye enter, first say, Peace be to this house. And if the son of peace be there, your peace shall rest upon it." Luke, x, 5–6. (H.M.)

. . . And you too, if I may think this without impropriety, you too, at about my age, deceived yourself, and deceived yourself out of too much trust. You too, Lord, you too, Lord . . . out of too much trust. . . . ‘Watch and pray’: first they fell asleep—twice—and then they fled; and they were the chosen. And it was the one to whom you had entrusted the common purse who handed you over. My people did not watch because they were negligent, and they did not pray because their faith was only a half-faith.”

Thus, between the college and the Bricoule household there was a disturbing parallel: the Superior had desperately wanted to trust his pupils; Mme. de Bricoule had desperately wanted Alban to trust in her. And in both cases this touching need for trust had led to disaster. Wanting her son’s trust had driven Mme. de Bricoule into her adventurist policy concerning Souplier; trusting his pupils at all costs had driven the Superior into his adventurist policy towards them as regards their friendships. Trust, “that divine possibility in man”, an author has written. . . . Divine? What god had it served in this conjuncture? Different gods, at the very least:

Des dieux que nous servons connais la différence.

This half-faith, or rather this absence of faith, that Father de Pradts had just admitted to him through his evasions, added still further to the Superior’s distress. To think that he was going to have to live side by side with. . . . Everything seemed to be continuing as if nothing had happened. But something *had* “happened”—something terrible. True, Christ had not rejected Thomas, who had not believed at first. And it was to Peter that he had entrusted his Church, to Peter who had denied him thrice. And if de Pradts had more or less admitted his betrayal, Judas had implicitly admitted his too, and Jesus had continued to eat with him. True, true. . . . But Christ had a human side—given free rein in his Passion, when he had truly been “the Son of Man”—and it was that side which now struggled in the breast of the *alter Christus* meditating at his dilapidated prie-dieu. He wanted to regenerate the college, and his “right hand” was a man who needed to be totally regenerated. He wanted to lop off the rotten branches, and he had failed to lop off that one, was even thinking

of relying on it still. Relying? On whom could he rely, between Father Prévôtél who did not see, and Father de Pradts who would not see, and sometimes would not talk? On M. Bidel, the worthy informer? But Father de la Halle was incapable, constitutionally incapable, of allowing a layman to meddle with the running of the college. And then, he distrusted M. Bidel too.

No one to dip a finger in the water and moisten his tongue with it. Literally riddled with humiliations as with dagger-thrusts. Humiliated by having allowed himself to be taken in by both the great and the small, humiliated by having behaved unfairly towards Bricoule, humiliated by having put up with Linsbourg for so long for shameful reasons, humiliated by having seen through Father de Pradts and gone on putting up with him too, humiliated by having been unable to find help and being so alone in such a crisis, humiliated by having chosen and sought to take into his confidence Father Prévôtél, from whom, in spite of his merits, he would have to part company next term. To be humble of heart and to be humiliated are not quite the same thing, and a man who is humble of heart, wholeheartedly so, may not be able to stand humiliation.

The Superior detested ostentation, and indeed anything that might seem a little excessive: he cloaked his love of God as Father de Pradts cloaked his love of boys. As a seminarist, during his military service he did not say his prayers kneeling beside his bed, not out of cowardice, to be sure, but out of reluctance to make what might be taken as a spectacular gesture of defiance in a barrack-room which in those days would have been very anti-clerical; he said them in bed. Tonight, exhausted in body and soul by the torments of the day, it occurred to him quite naturally to leave his prie-dieu and continue his meditation in bed, with his hands joined—that half-hour's meditation that he gave himself daily, whatever the circumstances. It was also the cold that had driven him from his prie-dieu. Because of his indifference about such things and the negligence of the servant boys, the little stove in his bedroom worked even less well than the one in his study (for one or other of the same reasons, the electric light bulbs there were too dim).

*The night Jesus felt
cold*

He slid from the wearisomeness of people into his inner colloquy, where all was ease and simplicity. Everything to do with the supernatural came naturally to him, and “went without saying”; Jesus Christ was like the air he breathed. It was decidedly a far cry from the combative methods attributed to Ignatian prayer: there could be no “method” in praying because there was no method in loving (this love and this prayer were equally incommunicable to his pupils, but was he sufficiently aware of that?). On the night commemorated by this night, at the hour when darkness reigned, the Apostles, returning from the Mount of Olives, had warmed themselves around the fire in Caiaphas’s courtyard. And the next day, naked on the Cross, in addition to his other sufferings Jesus must have felt cold. It was not such a tremendous thing that his side should have been pierced by a spear, but it was appalling that he should have been cold—something that nobody mentioned. The Superior, although he dismissed as improper any notion of an analogy between his ordeal and Christ’s (betrayal by his own people, his sweat . . .), could not help acknowledging certain similarities which comforted him a little, just as—with all due respect and making all due allowance—Giboy took courage when he identified himself with Werther, and Cuicui with Napoleon. The problems of the college deprived him of his peace of mind when he ought to have had it totally available for thinking about God; he rediscovered God by identifying himself with him: “My God, why hast thou forsaken me?” Anguish lay on his face like the mud-packs which certain pretty women put on at night to beautify themselves. There was the solitude of this great house, empty on Maundy Thursday, abandoned by the children, and there was the solitude of this great house when it was full, and when it was he himself who was abandoned; and the sadness of having believed himself to be loved, and of perceiving that he was not loved.

The endless desert of nocturnal Auteuil was disturbed, very intermittently, only by the distant clatter of a cab-horse’s hoofs or by a slow-moving motor-car. Who were these men and women

passing in the night? People for whom the next day—Good Friday—was like any other day, people who did not even know that to-morrow was Good Friday, people who did not know what Good Friday was. Among them, perhaps, were parents of Park pupils, or old boys of the Park, laughing and indifferent, in the night in which Jesus had felt cold. “When the Son of Man cometh, shall he still find faith on earth?”

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“Justice will reign only after love.” Paul Renaudin (co-founder, with Marc Sangnier, of *Le Sillon*).

Le Sillon, no. 5, 1895.

*The Mass of the
Resurrection*

It was the second year that the Superior had been running the college, and the Easter Mass was celebrated as it had been celebrated the previous year, with a simplicity that was characteristic of the house, in a chapel that was neither beautiful nor ugly, but middling: no more than Father de Pradts did the Superior feel that the idea of beauty was bound up with the idea of religion. The Superior said Mass alone, assisted by four schoolboy servers. There were no stalls in the choir. The altar was adorned with four vases of big white carnations—a concession to the temporal which showed that the Superior did not make an affectation of his austerity—and bordered by thick clusters of foliage from the “park”, which is to say the gardens, planted in pots on the floor concealed by a strip of green velvet. Behind the leaves of this shrubbery—for it was almost a shrubbery—could be glimpsed, a few moments before the Mass began, the red cassocks of the altar-boys, who seemed to be moving inside a sacred wood.

On the Gospel side stood the paschal candle. The day before, the Superior had blessed the new fire “kindled from flint” and had sprinkled it with holy water three times. An acolyte, Mulard, a fifth-former, had filled the thurible with charcoal; the priest had added incense and censured the fire three times; then he had lit the

candle with the new flame. And below the choir, the candle now stood erect, with the masculine flame at its summit, the flame that in early times had signified the Bull and the fertilizing principle, and which today signified Jesus, triumphant rival of the Bull, who had become the light-giver and fertilizer of the world in its stead.* Alban had never taken part in the Easter vigil. In the liturgy of the Christianized flame, God knows what he would have seen that he was not required to see, he who in his happier moments already identified the Sun with Jesus as did a great many people in the Hellenic world at the beginning of the Christian era; he who, at the age of seven or eight, kneeling beside his mother's bed to say his evening prayer, insisted on saying: "Hail Mary, full of grace, the Sun is with thee" (his mother would chide him, but to no avail). But this syncretism was far less serious than that which prevailed at the college of Notre-Dame du Parc, whose genius was for reconciling the irreconcilable on a more down-to-earth plane; and the candle at the foot of which the disparate meanderings of one and all were about to interweave evoked not so much the syncretism of the first centuries as a remark that Alban had once made to Giboy: "It isn't the one true God, but the Goddess of the Double Life whose mysteries are celebrated here."

The parents came in first; the most stupid Right in the world sat down in the back rows of the chapel. The most stupid Right in the world had sent their sons to a left-wing college; two years had already gone by, but they still had not realized that it was a left-wing college. Then the pupils, with the usual interweavings and jostlings with a view to slipping in not far from, if not next to, a loved one, or simply because such and such a seat on a certain bench meant such and such a reply to a question secretly posed. Notes were passed from hand to hand, and read under cover of prayer-books. There were ways of turning and smiling that soothed aching hearts; ways of standing with hands behind one's back while a senior knelt behind with his face in his hands, so that the senior's hands touched the junior's, this having been

* Carved in the stone of the cloister at Vaison is a head of Christ with two huge bull's horns. (H.M.)

prearranged between them. Each divisional prefect remained standing at the side of his charges, keeping an eye on their supposed good conduct. Father de Pradts, alongside his, regulated with his clapper the “stand”, “sit” and “kneel” of the whole school, movements by which, as we have seen, the ex-president of the Academy claimed to have been physically exhausted. The priest used his clapper in a caressing manner—so gentle, that is, that it was scarcely audible except to childish ears attuned to the subtleties of the Park. It was high art.

On this Easter Sunday there were middle-schoolboys who, though accustomed to trousers and especially to stockings, had arrived with their legs bare almost to the navel (in a manner of speaking), because Easter meant spring, and in theory the warm season, but at the same time with thickly-lined kid gloves (turned back at the wrist). These midsummer legs accompanying these midwinter gloves surprised nobody: it was, in each case, the “done” thing.

Usually the choristers, in everyday clothes, sang in the gallery perched above the entrance. On feast-days they put on albs in the gallery, and it was thus garbed that they filed down the centre aisle to the first three rows in the nave, which were reserved for them, the smallest boys in front. They walked two by two, and in the eyes of their schoolfellows as they passed, conscious though these were of all their excesses (the Schola was particularly excessive), they had already taken on an aura of mystery with those albs and that processional gait. However much they brushed against their friends as they went by, this almost feminine garb gave them a remote and enigmatic air, and the boys looked at these faces, the faces of their daily companions, with a curiosity tinged with respect. The height at which the cord encircled them—the cord which symbolized the subservience of the flesh—indicated the height of their legs. Those sitting next to the centre aisle bathed for a few moments in the odour of the albs, which the more refined members of the Protectorate loved: it was a faint smell of not very clean underwear, at once holy and a little dubious, and in this it was the authentic odour of the college. When, in summer, boys wearing albs were to be seen rubbing their sweaty hands on

their thighs, or better still, wiping their sweaty faces on the sleeves of their albs, one realized why the smell of the albs was a little dubious. These albs, in fact, were used for a variety of purposes, like the Arab *chech*: boys polished their shoes with the inside flaps of their skirts, slipped clandestine notes into their amices, and all but blew their noses in them: it would be difficult to imagine a more comprehensive garment.

On that Easter Sunday of 1913, the congregation was less numerous than on normal Sundays because of the holidays, which had absented some families, though not many, the habit of going away for the holidays being far less widespread then than now.

No sooner had they come in than a number of mischief-makers coughed loudly. True, the chapel was fairly cold, but these coughs were concerted, as when, at a dress-rehearsal, the author's friends cough as soon as the curtain goes up in order to sabotage the play. There was also an ostentatious rubbing of hands together; then it all died down.

At ten o'clock precisely ("as punctual as a bull-fight", Alban always used to think; but we swear that from now on we shall spare the reader the obsessional analogies this young man was wont to draw between the Mass and the *corrida*), the Superior, clad in cloth-of-gold vestments, emerged from the verdant grove, or rather the sacristy which it camouflaged, skirted the chancel to the left, along the altar-rails, and went up to the altar, preceded by *la Fauvette*,* *la Maisonfort*, *Denie* and *Mulard*, the latter acting as master of ceremonies. They brought with them an odour of incense and of sanctity, and the congregation rose ("as it should rise when the *cuadrilla* marches past in the ring", Alban used to

* As they grew older, the protégés often changed nicknames, or else their nicknames simply became corrupted. Thus Binaud, indiscriminately masculine or feminine both as *la Fauvette* or as plain *Fauvette*, had finally found his sex with *le Fauvetton*, not to mention the sex of the angels which he already had with the nickname *Angelus castitatis*. We have stuck to *la Fauvette* in this chapter so as not to confuse things, but alternating *he* and *she* as they did at the Park when talking of Binaud (before settling on *he* with his final nickname). The foregoing remarks being extremely important, in case you might have doubted it. (H.M.)

say to himself—but once and for all, to hell with bull-fighting). The chandeliers were lit—outside, it was dull and overcast—and the Superior glowed with all his gold.

The priest kissed the altar. He put incense in the thurible, and censured the altar. The servers, kneeling before the altar, carefully adjusted their cassocks over the soles of their red slippers, in the regulation manner, as if these soles were an improper place. And perhaps they were, by reason of the assignations to which they were in the habit of running.

The gestures of the Superior, now blessing the congregation, now opening and closing his arms in a fatherly embrace, now spreading them in prayer, with the gesture which before being that of Christ on the Cross had been the most ancient and venerable gesture of adoration, and which he performed with a natural tendency to throw his head back and lower his eyelids, betokened such evident faith and fervour that even the boys were overcome with respect. And the recitatives, the chanted prayers, recalled the sentence that Alban had written in one of his essays: “When I hear Latin spoken, it always sounds to me like words of love”, a remark which had been very well received in high places. But when the Superior intoned the Gloria, while the school bell pealed triumphantly to announce that Christ was risen, the meaning he gave to this Mass also burst out, a meaning that he would elucidate a few minutes later.

Linsbourg had a very precise opinion of his schoolfellows “of the right age”: either they were charming, or else they were oafish. The servers on view today confirmed this verdict: la Fauvette and La Maisonfort were charming, Denie was striking, and Mulard was oafish. Nevertheless, this oaf, whose father ran a small window-cleaning business, had those long, delicate, “aristocratic” hands (now joined in prayer) that are so often to be found among boys of the Parisian proletariat. It should also be mentioned that, of these four servers, two were pure and would subsequently keep their faith—Mulard and la Fauvette—and two were impure and would not keep it—La Maisonfort and Denie.

Mulard, short-sighted and bespectacled, was destined for the priesthood. La Maisonfort had schemed to be an acolyte, for

effect, and joked about being one, also for effect. Our backward darling, Fauvette, was an acolyte because it was his parents' wish. He regarded it as fun, and did it as he did everything, with his habitual charm. A duffer at his studies, he held his own in divine service, for God loved him.

In the eyes of any one who was informed of the inner life of the college, no matter how determined he might be not to take what went on there too tragically, it was madness for Denie to have been chosen to officiate in a ceremony of this kind. Linsbourg, in the third row of the choir, trembled at the thought of it. As some one says in *Michel Strogoff*: "Look with all your eyes! Just look!" Linsbourg had first-hand knowledge of the thurifer's tricks: Denie sewing up the celebrant's chasuble so that at the last minute he was unable to put it on; Denie urinating a few drops into the altar wine; Denie, when standing side by side with a fellow-server very close to the celebrant to offer him the altar-cruets, farting so that the priest, who could not budge, was at once asphyxiated and helpless, unable to decide which of the two was the guilty party; Denie climbing up to the top of the bell-rope and trying to cut it; Denie throwing the little crucifix his mother had put round his neck down the bog and replacing it with the key to his locker at the pelota court: a double sacrilege, throwing the crucifix away and wearing the emblem of impurity round his neck, religiously. And Linsbourg remembered the mediæval legend about an unknown boy serving Mass who had astonished the whole congregation by the oddity of his behaviour—ringing the bell at the wrong time, offering the altar-cruets empty—until finally, as the priest was elevating the host, the server had sprung at him and strangled him: the server was the devil. Outwardly, it was true, Denie served in exemplary fashion, but for this very reason, when one knew him, one might regard him as diabolical.

Once again, for the seniors at least, who knew the Plutarch title, here were two "parallel lives", the life of appearances and the real life, superimposed one on the other, and from the friction of these two lives there arose a warmth and a sort of aroma, infinitely precious and pernicious, provided, of course, that one had a sensitive nose.

Outside, the sky had brightened. Inside the chapel for a while, the sun had competed with the electric light from the chandeliers. Then the chandeliers had been switched off.

During the Gradual and the Alleluia, candles and a thurible were brought; the Superior sprinkled incense on the glowing embers and blessed them in these words, full of varied and profound meanings: "Be blessed by Him in whose honour you are about to burn." La Maisonfort blew on the flame of his candle, for fun, so that it only held on by a thread. Around the tabernacle, the flowers held out their young faces. Then came the spectacle recently evoked by Father de Pradts, who with good reason (and for his own good reasons) found it awe-inspiring, but which was even more peculiar in the present conjuncture: the Superior bowed before the little demon Denie.

Now the preacher—a stranger to the college—rose up, and forthwith took flight, borne on the two vast wings of sonorous vacuity and fatuity. There was not a single person in the congregation, from the Superior to the youngest tot and including all the priests and teachers, who did not instantly register his consummate mediocrity, some with consternation, others with silent laughter. Everybody, both in the sanctuary and in the nave, was now seated. The Superior buried his head in his hands. The servers, sitting in a row on either side of him on stools (a series of enfiling profiles), had at first put their hands on their knees, but soon those hands were impatiently tapping those knees, and the two younger boys waved their white socks and red slippers in the air, like a row of tied-up donkeys waving their tails, and from the front row their toes could be seen wriggling in their slippers. Finally, as the sermon dragged interminably on, the more sedate of them scratched their elbows with their hands in their sleeves, La Fauvette stuck his little finger in his ear, and La Maisonfort crossed his red-cassocked legs, and even swung a leg nonchalantly up and down, and even blew his nose, which, in this sanctuary and in the presence of God, was as startling as an actor blowing his nose on stage. Denie nibbled his fingers right across, then stuck them deep into his mouth, took them out again, looked at them greedily for a moment, and literally flung himself upon them

to get them into his mouth again. La Maisonfort yawned, and his yawns set off la Fauvette's. Among the choristers, heads nodded with fatigue, hands fidgeted with the famous girdles of chastity, whose tassels twitched like tiny snakes, and Rigal kept tucking up the sleeves of his alb as if they were too long, then pulling them down again. Eyes were frequently raised, as if in search of support or inspiration, towards a statue of nobody knew what saint, whose lowered eyes, modest demeanour and nicely bulging belly had earned her the nickname of *sainte nitouche*:* in the hierarchy of guardian powers of the college, she ranked immediately after Our Lady of the Kids.

The Superior was brooding, with his head in his cold hands. The crisis precipitated by the Bricoule–Souplier scandal was finding vent in this Mass which was in a sense providential since it enabled the Superior to add a new tier of symbols to the cathedral of symbols that the Mass in itself already is: there is no end to it—on condition, that is, that there is some attempt to understand, which there seldom is, even among those who say it. This Easter Mass was the Mass of the resurrection of Christ, but this year it would also be that of the resurrection of the college. The college had been overwhelmed by that same “outer darkness” which had surrounded Christ's agony; it had experienced the corruption of the tomb. *Quis revolvat lapidem?* “Who will roll back the stone from the tomb?” It was he, the Superior, who would roll back the stone from the tomb. Whatever else he might be, this man who found himself melting with emotion when he recited Jesus's words to himself: “Learn of me, for I am meek and humble of heart”, was a man of character, and of passion too, like Father de Pradts, though in a different sense. Like so many men for whom the word “love” comes readily to the tongue, the Superior had no difficulty in being ruthless if he felt he had to be; there was the “meek and humble-hearted” Christ, and there was the Christ who drove away his fellow-men with a whip, who hurled his familiar anathema at the Pharisees: “Race of vipers”, who spoke those strange words: “I

* The expression *sainte nitouche* is used of some one who looks as if butter wouldn't melt in his (or her) mouth. (Tr.)

pray not for the world.” Moreover, he was if anything rather mild, with the fearlessness that mild men show once they have taken the bit between their teeth. To purify is to destroy. To-morrow would begin, led mercilessly by him, a week of denunciations, accusations, delations perhaps, and condemnations. “I came not to judge the world, but to save it.” He must judge the college, in order to save it, and because he loved it. When the bishop’s representative had handed him his wand of office years ago, he had said to him: “In the correction of vice, you will be inflexible, because you will love.” So much for his having almost called Alban a sneak after his letter about the Aeronautical Club. That letter had been inexcusable, but it nonetheless told, and the pupil who had been so noisily expelled had initiated at the highest level the reformation he had failed to bring off at the base.

Prefects, masters and ushers had been told to hold themselves at the Superior’s disposal for forty-eight hours on the Tuesday and Wednesday after Easter—even if they had arranged to be away from Paris; he had not thought about the janitors, the serving boys and the caretaker at the pelota court, but the others would do. A searching inquiry would be held, and at the end of it the Superior had no doubt that there would be a purge among the pupils and perhaps also among the teaching staff. By a remarkable coincidence, the word *missa*, Mass, also meant dismissal. And *pascha*, Easter, meant exodus. He would cut out the rotten element as one cuts a rotten piece out of a healthy fruit. Through the purge of the college he would moreover be punishing himself, an old Christian impulse which for that reason elated him: yet another mysterious operation. And then he would be able to speak the words of the Epistle for that day with all his heart: “Therefore let us feast, not with the old leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. Alleluia! Alleluia!” For upon this feast-day he was beginning to trust once more in his trust. Can a man be other than he is?

He lifted his head from his hands. On one of the side walls of the chapel there was a dilapidated, though modern, fresco, which had faded almost to the point of extinction either from humidity or some other cause. The sun now caught it, and brought out the

figures of veiled women and bearded men—a scene from the Old Testament. Thus, even this ruined fresco received its share of light! So anything was still possible! Death became life again: the death of Christ, the death of the college. The intellectual and moral environment in which the Superior had been brought up (he had been twenty-three in 1900) was founded on hope. Seated in fact, but prostrate in spirit as upon a prayer-rug, prostrate as on a flying carpet, which was hope, the Superior flew through the future. Alleluia! Alleluia! Hosanna in the highest! And yet from what an abyss of despair and folly was his hope swelling at this hour!

He cast his eyes over the congregation. The interminable blah from the pulpit, incomprehensible to children and adolescents, but equally incomprehensible to any adult in his right mind, left his mind free to reflect or observe. His eyes wandered contemptuously over the back of the chapel, where a frieze of tarnished faces dimly stirred: the boys' parents—parents who in faith, religious knowledge and piety were far beneath even their twelve-year-old sons, and whose sole preoccupation was with criticizing the boarders' food or asking for exemption from gymnastics or religious instruction—parents who in every respect were so unworthy of their children—parents who believed that they believed. The little brothers' parents had mostly stayed away (Denie's were an exception): their sons were at the Park, *mirabile dictu*, but they "felt ashamed". On the other hand there were a good half-dozen of the mighty of this world, each more piggish than the last. The mothers, magnificent feminine freaks in full 1913 fig, gallinaceans only recently turned human, retaining the crest, the plumage, the stupid, cruel eye, and, instead of a mouth, the gallinacean pope's-nose, towering over their husbands, queenly, superb, flashed from time to time the gilt edges of their missals, symbol of Catholic money-bags. The wind-bags (the men), with their stupid grins and degenerate expressions, were exclusively preoccupied with their neighbours, anxious to see if they had the Legion of Honour, and, if so, what grade, and whether they were standing, kneeling, or remaining seated, so as to do likewise; they were relieved when they found one of their

number who did not sing. Zealous though he was, in the course of his ministry the Superior had always refused to get involved in parental gatherings. He would certainly never have uttered the admonition then in vogue in ecclesiastical circles: "My child, see Jesus Christ in your father, and the Blessed Virgin in your mother." Rather would he have said, with Father de Pradts: "Parents, those evil geniuses hovering over their children's cradles."

The Superior saw his charges, spread out between the parents and the choir, with new eyes, eyes that Father de Pradts had opened for him, having closed them so many times. He looked for those who would "believe" in later years, and for those who would not, for "the sons of the resurrection" and the others. They had been symbolized for him a few moments before by the candles which La Maisonfort and la Fauvette had been carrying, one alight, the other accidentally extinguished: in his present emotional state, this little incident had made an impression on him (la Fauvette's had remained lit, La Maisonfort's had gone out—another symbol). And the Superior had an impulse that almost made him cry out, paraphrasing a famous line of verse: "Could I but give my faith for yours!" And he looked for those who would be expelled to-morrow, and those who would not. And this search was so painful to him that he blurted out the words that were his habitual ejaculatory prayer: "My God living and true!"

The three rows of the choir, close by him, were like white spume on a shore that extended through the rows of pupils to finish in the distant open sea of the parents. Among the choristers, the Superior noticed the empty place of Souplier, more present than those present. To those present he said, as Christ said to the apostles: "One of you is a devil." And he looked at Linsbourg with an unforgiving eye. "Those whom thou gavest me I have kept, and none of them is lost." Not one! The Superior was on the point of making the sign of the cross; he would have been wrong, for, apart from sinning, Linsbourg was an excellent Christian. Just now the Superior believed that he was a monster of hypocrisy, whereas Linsbourg was not in the least hypocritical: he was shamelessness

personified. His two resounding escapades would in any case have made it impossible for him to act the hypocrite, and it was the Superior, rather, who was guilty of a little unconscious hypocrisy in pretending to have just learned what those escapades should have made it impossible for him not to know. The piercing intensity of his gaze, coming from a face as motionless as a waxwork, transfixed Linsbourg in his white robe; he sensed that he was done for, but his reaction differed from Alban's: he did not care. His eyes, accustomed to the glory of wrong-doing, easily withstood that almost unbearable gaze, with the gallantry of the Saint-Cyrien he was destined to become. He had been a boarder at the Park for eight years; he had plenty to say for himself, and had no hesitation in saying it, and the same applied to his father. Like Father de Pradts, he felt invulnerable.

The Superior then turned his gaze to Father de Pradts. Staring impassively at the preacher, the priest seemed to be listening to him with keen interest. And the Superior said to himself: "If he is to that degree capable of concealing what he thinks of the horror of Catholicism served with cretin sauce [the sermon], he can hide anything." Was it the contrast between the preacher and de Pradts? Was it a slight fit of over-excitement engendered in a man who was susceptible in the extreme by the modest pageantry of this Easter Mass? Whatever it was, the Superior plunged like a dive-bomber into the depths of Christianity. There he found forgiveness for Father de Pradts, his friendship for him. The good thief had been saved because he had believed for one single instant. The Superior said to Father de Pradts: "Believe for one single instant, and you will be saved." And in any case, had he not in himself enough faith and fervour to redeem him?

The two junior servers interrupted these wild musings. La Maisonfort and Fauvette calmly began to chatter to each other almost out loud. The Superior was brought down to earth and Linsbourg, alerted by the furious look he gave them, wondered: "Are they talking about me?" While Fauvette looked at the congregation simply out of mischief, with an occasional incomprehensible smile (those in the first few rows could even see that he smiled *with his eyes*—for as we know he was not lacking in

wit, although backward, or because backward), La Maisonfort, who was also improperly looking at the congregation, did so out of vainglory: he was as self-important as the child whom the conjuror picks out from the circle of onlookers and invites on to the stage to hold the magical top-hat. The Little General was wearing a gold ring—he had shown the hallmark to his chums—a rare thing among children at that time, and particularly out of place in the holy function which he occupied at that moment. When the sermon was over, “the little twit”, in order to call attention to himself, pulled la Fauvette by the sleeve of his surplice with a view to making him turn the right way; but he was wrong, and received a furious glare from Denie, and even from the Superior. The whole thing was typical of the mild chaos which was the glory of the Park. *Little children play behind the altar*, the Spanish saying has it. Here, they played in front of it. It was a ballet, but a disorganized one, under the shadow of the clean sweep* that awaited these young gentlemen. The Protectorate, in the nave, followed the ballet all agog, being in complicity with most of its executants: *office* rhymes with *accomplice*. Their eyes kept returning to the “Epistle side”, which was sometimes known as “the kitchen”, because there, laid out on a table, were the altar-cruets, the hand-bells, the candles, the hand-towels, and the thuribles hanging from the wall, and because the acolytes were busiest of all in this corner, and sometimes “the clown side”,† because of the clowning that the little red cassocks indulged in there: in this privileged spot, as in the refectory, they were particularly bent on misbehaving. For the Protectorate, this famous “side” was the true sanctuary.

The prayers of the Offertory reiterated the sacrifices of Father de Pradts, Alban, Souplier, and all those who would be sacrificed to-morrow: our principal offering is ourselves. La Fauvette and the Little General presented the altar-cruets. The Superior uncovered the chalice and presented the host on the paten. La Fauvette smoothed back a lock of hair. The Superior poured the

* An untranslatable pun: *coup de balai*. (Tr.)

† *Le côté des pitres* for *le côté de l'Épître*. (Tr.)

wine into the chalice together with a few drops of water that he had blessed. There was none of the milk and honey that used to be included in the Offertory in the Easter masses of the early centuries; perhaps Fauvette, by his guilelessness, personified the milk, and La Maisonfort the honey, because he overdid it a little, like honey. The Superior raised his hands to heaven to call down the Holy Ghost, then washed them in water and bowed deeply in the centre of the altar. On the Epistle side he was censed three times again by Denie, and bowed to him. Whereupon Denie went up to the altar-rails and censed the assembled pupils three times; they too bowed to him. And the powerful swing he imparted to the thurible with his nail-bitten hands, curiously large and curiously pure, was as beautiful as his hieratic bearing. Denie was not beautiful, but at that instant he was nobility itself. And it was beautiful, it was admirable, although it was strange or because it was strange (but is not all religion steeped in strangeness?) that the one most in need of being purified himself should perform the act of purification on his schoolfellows and their parents, including his own. The second time he censed, he looked at Linsbourg, and Linsbourg reacted so violently that if he had had a prie-dieu he would have pushed it over as if to fling himself upon him.

The servers went to fetch candles from the sacristy, and brought them back lighted.

The signal for the Sanctus was given with the handbell. The Sanctus, which is an angels' chorus, was sung by the angels of the Schola.

Standing on the bottom step of the chancel, M. Perritet conducted the singers with a harmonious arm terminating in a feminine little hand and swinging like the tail of an impatient cat. His powerful voice, although he toned it down, filled the chapel almost to excess. Now and then it would soar alone, in *recto tono*, a timeless, time-destroying voice. From the third row Linsbourg, the awful boy, never ceased to follow the Mass with genuine piety and a liturgical competence very rare among his schoolfellows, while at the same time observing the gyrations of three of the four servers in the sanctuary, we know which three (and for him all their

gestures were full of reminders of other gestures, reminders which occasionally made him lower his eyelids), and covering and licking like a flame his fellow-choristers, magnificently insulated from sordid reality by their garb which was the garb of the elect and of the angels, the colour of the redeemed in the Apocalypse, the colour of the robes of the transfigured Christ, when he knew as no one else knew—better than any of their confessors—their hearts and their loins.

In front of him was a sort of orchard of necks, laid out in rows: thick necks, swollen with evil or violent instincts; necks rising towards close-cropped heads ripe for the tonsure; necks supporting ears that shone like ivy leaves and were sometimes encircled by the metal wire of glasses (and he remembered having heard that short-sighted people of either sex are especially drawn to pleasure); graceful necks on which the hair grew down to a neat triangular point which also, in southern France, is supposed to indicate that the “wearer” is made for love; necks on which the (slightly wavy) hair terminated in a precise, natural line, as in the profiles on Greek medallions. The amices hid the chains of the medals which nearly all of them wore, and nearly all of which Linsbourg knew: medals he had kissed many times; medals he had kissed only once and whose owners had then stopped wearing them out of scruple, so that he should not kiss them again (“I’ve broken the chain”), or else turned round as he was about to kiss them; medals that had been worn for ten years without the wearer ever having had the curiosity to see what was on them: Sacred Heart? Blessed Virgin? And there were certain necks whose curve his fingers remembered as a connoisseur remembers the contours of a sculpture he has lovingly handled, and certain skulls whose configurations it was hard for the fingers to feel when the unwashed hair was thick, and easy when the freshly washed hair was no more than a light crop through which the fingers could glide effortlessly (he guessed that there were many washed heads today in honour of the feast; he guessed it from certain familiar fair heads which had suddenly taken on a lighter hue very different from their usual dingy blond . . .).

From his third row Linsbourg could almost have told, by these necks and these heads seen from behind, those whose eyes would never again be pure. If the Superior had his gauge—those who would stick to their faith and those who would not—Linsbourg had his. Sincere believer that he was, his gauge indeed often overlapped with the Superior's. It was not difficult for him, in this extraordinary choir to which most of them belonged for reasons other than the quality of their voices, to distinguish to-morrow's zealots by their present zeal in singing and by the decorousness of their behaviour. There were those who sang with all their hearts (the juniors), those who opened their mouths without emitting a sound (some of the middle-school ones) and those who, qualified choristers though they were supposed to be—and this was really the limit—did not open their mouths at all (mostly seniors). And when, instead of gaping at the altar, a kneeling boy kept his face buried in his hands for a long time, what was he so engrossed in? Devotion, Protection, or affectation? Linsbourg, a stickler for principle, gave the boy in front of him a thump in the back because he kept shifting the bench under his feet out of boredom; and he was furious with another who was sitting with his legs sprawled apart under his alb like a boxer between rounds.

All this, however, he felt was no doubt doomed. But Denie he would keep, wherever he went, and through Denie he would meet again outside the college all those whom he cared about; he would reconstitute his "little family", for he too used, though only for few, that cosy word "family" by which the Superior designated the college as a whole. In any case he would have to put in a big effort in his last term to get through his finals. Then it would be holiday time when, beside himself with euphoria, he would sin right and left, as is natural at the seaside. Onward! Onward!

From time to time, the changing sky had cast glints of sunlight across the chapel that came and went in a flash. Now a violet patch, a reflection from a stained-glass window, had just appeared in the sanctuary, alongside the altar-rails, and it remained there. And the acolytes took care not to tread on it as they went past.

Then something singular occurred. La Fauvette left her station and went and whispered something to Mulard. There was so

much whispering and nodding and winking in the sanctuary during services at the Park that so far it was nothing out of the ordinary. Then La Fauvette left the altar and went into the sacristy. He returned ten minutes later. Mulard could then be seen “tidying” him like a mother tidying up her child and scolding him the while when he has got himself in a mess while playing. He patted down the collar of his surplice, and, putting his hands underneath it, openly checked his waistband and cassock. La Fauvette submitted with an air of delight. Nobody in the congregation had taken it all in except Linsbourg, who missed nothing, and who followed the juvenile ballet with a keen eye, like a producer at a rehearsal. And he was shaken by a gentle inner mirth. How like Fauvette! Fauvette who used to arrive with a shoe-lace missing! Fauvette with the fly-buttons always undone! And now Fauvette who wanted to go to the lav. while she was serving Mass! Yes, it really was Fauvette all over!

The Superior re-enacted the ritual performed by Jesus at the Last Supper, blessed the bread, bowed in thanksgiving, and stood up again to exhibit the Host to the congregation. Mulard and La Maisonfort lifted the edge of his chasuble. La Fauvette rang the bell three times. Its delicate silvery tinkle was one of the rare æsthetic refinements of the college (accidental no doubt). La Fauvette managed to laugh in the very act of ringing it. Then La Maisonfort rang three times, yawning once without putting his beringed hand over his mouth. Denie disappeared behind the thick cloud of incense he was disseminating, which drifted, almost opaque, through a shaft of sunlight, and the young demon emerged from the clouds of smoke like the Lord in the Old Testament. At that time, the pupils did not know that one is supposed to look at the Host during the Elevation. Had they done so, they would have believed themselves to be in a state of mortal sin. Nevertheless they did look at it surreptitiously, out of curiosity and a taste for courting danger: what if a trap-door were to open and tip them into hell?

The servers took back to the sacristy the candles they had fetched from it before the Sanctus, and returned empty-handed.

The Superior took Communion himself, then gave Communion to the four servers, who then came down from the altar. La Fauvette, masticating the host like a piece of chewing-gum, was still laughing with his eyes. The pious Mulard, with the host in his mouth, threw an anxious glance at the clock at the back of the chapel; no doubt he had a basket-ball match at two o'clock. A gleam from a stained-glass window had alighted on *sainte Nitouche*; it was green, the colour of hopes great and small.

The servers draped the Communion cloth over the altar-rails. The Superior repeated three times: *Domine non sum dignus*. In the whole of the Mass, this was the sentence which moved Alban most, because it had been spoken by a centurion: in the whole of the liturgy he was moved only by what was not Christian. In the same way, nothing in the chapel touched him except the legionaries in the Stations of the Cross: only with them did he feel at home.

Meanwhile, all the members of the choir went up to receive Communion, their faces stamped with a real or sham gravity on the way back. One of the juniors—a twelve-year-old—did not go to the altar-rails. The boy next to him, on rising, nudged him with his elbow as if to wake him up, but he shook his head vigorously. Linsbourg was impressed and moved by the strength of character it took for this junior (who was not one of “his”) to become the cynosure of all his companions, who must be wondering: “What has he done to be the only one not to communicate? to be the *excommunicate*?” The shadow of a bird flitted back and forth behind a stained-glass window: was it always the same one? Just inside the sanctuary, beside the altar-rails, his incomprehensible face raised towards the congregation, Denie stood holding in his left hand a tall candle resting on the floor, with his right hand—his limpid, chewed hand, as ambiguous as his face—laid on his heart in a gesture of infinite grace and nobility. The purple stain from the window at his feet had shifted and turned red, like blood flowing from him—from what invisible wound? Does the devil bleed?

Linsbourg, from his third row, took in a forest of necks. The Superior was conscious of another forest, the row of faces raised

towards him above the Communion-rails, eyelids lowered, mouths open, tongues sticking out a little, oblivious of the strange impression such an attitude might make on a hostile observer, or simply a non-believer. He knew them nearly all, the faces of his college, in this attitude, and it was thus that they lay side by side in his heart, the faces of the most humble being closest to his heart. Among them he saw Serge and Alban, as he had been wont to see them until only a few days before, kneeling, waiting, and trustingly offering themselves. From now on, how often would they receive Communion? Who would look after them? Who would watch over them? They had been expelled and yet they were there, just as a thing is itself and at the same time something else in dreams. And he gave them the body of Christ with a special love.

For most of the pupils, the moment when the altar-boys had spread the Communion-cloth had been a happy one, for they knew that, to all intents and purposes, once Communion was over so was the Mass. At the parish church, a minority of the faithful would leave after the Communion; at the college one had to stay, but things went at a good lick from then on. The Superior went briskly back up the altar steps; a little water was poured over his fingers into the chalice, and he drank this water. La Fauvette, who was changing the missal from one side to the other, did not even genuflect as she passed in front of the altar: she made a vague bob that resembled a little *entrechat*. An almost bouncy tune, gay as a *sevillana*, rose from the harmonium, *O filii et filiae*, which seemed to mean: "Right, you can run along now!" Alban used to compare these last moments of the Mass to the end of the *corrida* (all right, here we are again, but it's the last time, and for a very good reason) which usually finishes in a somewhat undignified stampede, quite out of keeping with the solemnity of its opening.

The Superior vanished into the sacristy, behind the altar. The altar-boys vanished after him, two to the right, two to the left, as Spanish ballerinas disappear to the right and left of the stage at the end of a ballet. Each one disappeared with his own secret, for Mulard too had his secret, which was that he wished to be a priest. La Fauvette, the last to leave, turned to smile at Linsbourg.

The purest pupil in the college—*angelus castitatis*—turned to smile at the most impure. This smile was all innocence. It meant: “Ouf!” So ended the Mass of the Resurrection.

Frileuse again

Opening the door of his mother’s bedroom, Alban was assailed even before he saw her by the heady, choking, asphyxiating smell of Frileuse—the scent in the writing-desk. Mme. de Bricoule was in bed, holding in her hands a bunch of letters from a large yellow envelope which Alban remembered having seen in the desk, and which he had not in fact opened. He feared the worst: by one of those devious paths of which she had the secret, she was going to let him know that she had noticed that he had broken into the desk. It was all such ancient history! Three months. . . . But when she spoke it was with no apparent equivocation.

“I was re-reading some of the letters Chanto wrote to me last year. How affectionate he was in those days! I’ve never shown them to you—it would have been indelicate. But there are some you could read.” Alban quaked. “This one, for instance.” She handed him a letter.

It began: “Dearest and most beautiful friend, enchanting one . . .” It was such painful reading that he skipped to the end: “My feelings crystallize around all the beauty that lies hidden in your heart.” “Well, I’ll be damned,” he thought.

“He’s got a pretty bit of quill on his riding crop”, was the remark that sprang to his lips, but he did not want to wound her.

“He writes well,” he said.

“He’s very cultured for a cavalry officer,” she said, ruder than he, even about the man she loved. “Here, this one isn’t bad either.”

She handed him another letter, and Alban stuck to his formula: the first and the last sentence: they set the tone. The first was: “Dear shade, dearest shade, my possible and impossible sin . . .” The last: “A rapturous kiss on your pale hand . . .” “Well, I’ll be damned,” he said to himself again.

“I don’t think he’d be pleased with your showing me his letters. I don’t think we should go on.”

“You’re right. I only wanted to show you that he’s not without class.”

She put the letter back in the envelope, which she kept beside her on the bed. They talked about other things.

Alban gave a slight involuntary cough: it was that scent. . . . The Superior needed to be loved by his schoolboy community; Father de Pradts needed to be loved by Serge; Mme. de Bricoule needed to be loved by her son. But he, like most boys, had no need to be loved, and even preferred not to be. She had shown him these letters so that he should know that, although she was at death’s door, she had been loved. He merely saw that she had loved an idiot, and was appalled. But was he himself in a position to talk? One is always somebody’s fool.

Purge at the Park

Three weeks after Easter, Alban caught sight of Mulard in the neighbourhood of the Park. Mulard crossed over quickly, to avoid catching the plague, but Alban crossed over too and accosted him. In no time he had learned the names of the principal expellees. Seventy-four in all, according to Mulard, a figure which he considered exaggerated. “What do they say about our affair? What do they say about me?” he asked. “We avoid mentioning you,” said Mulard frostily. Clearly he was an embarrassment to all. Since, as the days had gone by, his expulsion from the college had come to be one of the high points of his life (together with “his first bull”), he was somewhat deflated by this reception.

This is what had happened at the Park.

The Superior had set up a kind of tribunal, assisted by Father Prévôtel and Father de Pradts, and had heard evidence from the whole of the teaching staff—separately interrogated, in the proper manner. It was a carnival of baseness. Everybody informed on everybody else. Alban had sensed right: “You’re a bunch of cowards.” The Superior was well aware that Father de Pradts would not talk, and Father de Pradts did not talk. Asked for his opinion, he would answer: “I didn’t notice anything in particular about such and such a pupil” or “A few trifling misdemeanours”. He had been treated with indulgence; he would be indulgent to

others. He was questioned no further. None of the accused, whether boy or adult, was given a hearing, either because that was the Superior's method or because he wished to demonstrate that he had not invented a special style for Alban's expulsion. The boarders, arriving back at the college with all the others, were just given time to collect their belongings under the eyes of an usher before being returned to their families in Paris or the country, preceded by an express letter or a telegram. The day-boys were stopped by an usher on the threshold. He showed them the contents of their desks, stacked in the caretaker's lodge; they picked them up and departed for ever.

Mussolini said of the French that they were enraged sheep. For forty-eight hours, Father Pradeau de la Halle was an enraged sheep (or an enraged dove). Perhaps he had taken his cue from St. Jerome's remark to Heliodorus, that in certain circumstances "the only piety is to be cruel." M. Cordère had pleaded with him, with clasped and trembling hands, urging his position as husband and father (what else?). These entreaties had hardened the Superior's heart to such an extent that even if Cordère's innocence had been proved, he might still have expelled him for having seen him plead. Yet this same man, on the night of his Gethsemane, had said to his God: "I am nothing." It was his weakness more than anything else that made him so implacable. But those who knew the vehemence of his political aversions were not surprised to see this ruthlessness.

All this lasted for more than forty-eight hours, for there were some who were allowed to come back and peacefully resume their studies, and who were then sacked after three days. Alban would have been delighted had he been there; it was exactly like "Nero's Rome"—every one living on tenterhooks, in expectation of the fateful summons, and feigning nonchalance; each one assuming that his fate was known to all except himself.

Of those who have appeared in our story, Linsbourg, Salins, Giboy, Denie, Lapailly (Bonbon), La Maisonfort and Cuicui were all expelled. The Archpet remained because his future as a missionary must not be jeopardized. In all, seventeen, including

Alban. One master: M. Cordère. The caretaker and his wife. The keeper of the pelota court was ordered to clear out within a week.

In the three months following his expulsion, Alban was exclusively preoccupied with his finals.

He had no friends, and felt none the worse for it: at ease in a community, he was equally at ease in solitude. Of course he missed one friend. Often it occurred to him to wait for Serge outside his home one morning on his way to the *lycée*. He would not approach him, of course; he would follow him at a distance for a while and see his silhouette. . . . The fear of suffering discouraged him and held him back. Indeed, at the beginning that same fear had caused him to go out of his way to avoid passing Serge's house. He thought about him a good deal, while at the same time exerting his will-power (another of his self-imposed tests) to put off thinking about him more fully and, so to speak, systematically until "after the exams".

As the exam approached Mme. de Bricoule decided to set the prayer-wheels in motion with a view to ensuring his success. He fell in with this idea unaffectedly, not to say gladly. Duly purged, he nevertheless failed his oral: he had sparkled only in the *fertilization of the flower*—which was to anticipate. Since his expulsion, time had been lost looking for teachers; there had been changes of books and methods, only three months before the examination. It was obvious that all this had distorted the results of his entire tuition.

Mme. de Bricoule was growing weaker, with the illness from which she was to die. M. de Chantocé had discontinued his visits, from which he used to emerge more upset than heart-smitten. The captain, who was to die a hero's death in the war fifteen months later, had no use for civilian emotions.

With Serge, the main interest in common between Alban and his mother had disappeared. No longer could she hope to worm her way into the little gang of accomplices; never again would there be any confidences from him, never an unguarded moment, never, ever, a spontaneous gesture of affection.

"It was very silly of you to promise not to see that child again. Why did you do it?"

“Out of elegance.”

“Elegance is sometimes a vice.”

“Another one!”

“Don’t you ever try to meet him?”

“He would despise me, after what I promised.”

“No, he’d be very pleased.”

“Perhaps, but he’d despise me.”

After that she slightly changed tack. She knew him to be both fiery and self-possessed, steadfast in and out of season, fiendishly headstrong, but she had no inkling of what he might be like when he was wounded in what he loved: she saw how staunch his feelings were, was proud of him, and did not want to risk blunting them by talking to him about Serge. Once or twice, however, she was unable to contain herself: the Monster rubbed up against her once more, and she fondled it ever so slightly. Once she said: “Poor kid, I wonder what’s happened to him.” Another time: “Haven’t you kept up at all with the Park boys? Haven’t you tried to find a new boy friend?” But for Alban there was Serge and no one else; he was shocked, if only by the expression “boy friend”. No, there was nothing to be done: his mother would remain Mummy-Get-it-wrong until the end.

An engaging interlude must be inserted here—a curio of the age. At the start of the holidays a summer ritual reappeared: Mme. de Bricoule reminded her son that he must put his hands in his pocket once a year. Why? To avoid having to shake hands with the servants when they left for their holidays. Yet the (deceased) brother of the countess used to bandage the injured foot of one of the menservants, kneeling in front of him like the priest in front of the poor on Maundy Thursday; the same brother, when the plumber came, would sit down with him at the kitchen table and “have a chat” over a bottle of wine; and Mme. de Bricoule was the godmother of one of her cook’s daughters, who addressed her as *tu* whereas her son addressed her as *vous*. Thus the inconsistency and mumbo-jumbo of the Bricoule household matched the inconsistency and mumbo-jumbo of the Park. But, we may ask ourselves, would the Superior have admitted the son of a housemaid—however gifted—among the sacrosanct “little

brothers"? Propertied people (Linsbourg) and small householders rubbing shoulders? Perhaps. A caretaker's son, yes. But a housemaid's son? Democratic though it was, the Park, we may be sure, had its intricacies of etiquette which were worthy of the court of the Sun King.

Home bull-fighting, which made his head reel throughout the summer, was also quite incapable of bringing him closer to his mother, although the poor woman swotted hard over bull-fighting manuals in order to have a subject of conversation with him. However, when the holidays were over, nature allowed her to blossom out once more for the last time before dying. It was the glory of the setting sun.

*Second purge at the
Park*

Meanwhile, soon after the beginning of the school year, Alban had met another Park pupil, and learned that the entire management had been changed, and half the teachers replaced. The Superior was now canon in the cathedral of a provincial town: "Apparently he's left teaching for good," said the pupil, who knew no more than that. Father de Pradts was parish priest in a Breton village. Father Prévôtel had been liquidated too, inactive though he had been in the college's final upheavals, consulted about nothing, aware of nothing, incapable of doing anything but sweat. Thus the Superior had been overthrown after putting through the reformation, just as Alban had been brought down after attempting to do so. Did the Monster want its revenge? This was food for thought, and thinking there was.

*Alban makes his
entry into society,
and enjoys it
(October 1913)*

For years Mme. de Bricoule had been waiting for the day when her son would make his "entry into society". It was as though she herself, past forty and with not long to live, were re-entering it too, projecting herself back into her twentieth year. "Let me live until then!" she prayed. She could describe in detail the lay-out of some of the houses to which he would be invited; he would take his

partner aside into the same nook where she had been taken—when? yesterday. Moreover, she would regain the whip hand over him, more so than ever, by means of the “marriage question”. From now on, there would be social contacts to be made, an engagement, perhaps, to be negotiated, a future to plan: he would marry as soon as he was back from military service. It was in this spirit, and in a veritable resurgence of her entire being, that Mme. de Bricoule approached with Alban the autumn season of 1913.

He had passed his finals, and was nonchalantly embarking on an arts degree at the Sorbonne. The first dancing lessons, and the first invitations to afternoon dances in the most formal houses in Paris, excited him. According to everything we know about him, he ought to have said no, a thousand times no. But he said yes, as he had said yes to the prayers for passing his exams, and as he would have lent himself without too much repugnance to his mother’s “spells” against M. de Chantocé. He still had that easygoingness of adolescence, its freedom from disgust or contempt, in spite of his hectoring airs.

He found that he had his mother’s taste for dancing, flirtation and worldly glitter. He wanted to please, did please, and was pleased. She was beside herself with joy. At last her son was becoming what he ought to be—frivolous! She was winning him back. With the little puppet who invariably went out at four o’clock in the afternoon dressed in top-hat and morning coat, patent-leather shoes, white spats, buttercup-yellow gloves (carefully turned back at the wrists), gold-knobbed cane (yes, really!), and a spray of cornflowers in his button-hole (moreover surprising nobody, for such were the times), and returned at eight to disguise himself in dinner jacket or tails and set out again at eleven—with this pathetic dummy she was far more at ease than with the untidy schoolboy, his well-worn satchel under his arm, who used to leave home a quarter of an hour early in the morning to wait for Serge outside his house. In a world whose obsessions were social climbing and money, she felt at home. Finished, exorcized, was the world of little males. At least so she thought, but we shall rediscover a little male later on.

*A time for fawns, a
time for fillies*

For it was not only a matter of “cutting a dash” (a stock term). There was, as we have said, the future marriage. In aristocratic parlance, this was called “marrying a bag”. A bag of gold. The origin of the gold was immaterial. Provided the girl was neither Protestant nor Jewish, it mattered little how the gold had been acquired, or what her social origins were; it mattered little that the family might be tainted, a fact which was readily revealed to you by the priest who had discovered it under the seal of the confessional. “It would be hard to find a single historic name in France that would not consent to lose its honour rather than a forest” (Chateaubriand). Mme. de Bricoule threw herself upon all her acquaintances or ex-acquaintances to get her son included in lists of dancing-partners; she taught her son how to get himself invited to the So-and-So’s by inventing a non-existent kinship; how to arrange things in order to dance the cotillion with an heiress; how to make himself out to be a count without being one, in accordance with family tradition; how to keep counterfeit coins in a box and unload them during the collections at grand weddings, or simply how to dip his fingers into the collection bag without putting anything in at all; how to gate-crash a ball to which he was not invited; or how to talk about it, ostensibly at first hand, without having been there. All the rules of social behaviour, everything there was to know, she taught him in a voice that already betrayed the imminence of death.

The role played by money in the circles he was frequenting was very new to Alban. Outside “society”, all women, without exception—the young, the mature, the old, the dying—were kept. Whether or not it was overt, the result was always the same: woman lived off man’s work, and did not spend a sou on him, even when she was in his company: this was one of the characteristics of western civilization. But in “society” it was the young men who expected money from women, since they were all trying to make a money-marriage.

Alban, as we have said, took pleasure in all this. He entered into the snobbery of the social world, before spewing it out (with the

coming of the war), as he had entered momentarily into the snobbery of the Protectorate before spewing it out. He plunged delightedly into the swagger, the gossip, the intrigues, the tiffs, the showing-off, the effrontery, the jealousies and the skulduggeries—a mixture of finesse and caddishness in which indeed he excelled. The lists of protégés had given way to other lists: those of the girls with whom one had danced, or with whom it was necessary (for social reasons) to dance; those of the mothers to whom one had to make oneself particularly agreeable; those of the people who might be useful to you (since everybody was trying to get something out of everybody else). The invitation cards stuck into the frame of the mirror over your mantelpiece in the accepted fashion already constituted a triumphal arch there, celebrating the glory of being so *répandu**—like urine when the chamberpot is overturned.

It was no fun going to three balls a week. What was fun was going to three balls in the same evening. What was fun was the flirtations without love; febrile, fatuous flirtations which managed to dampen your eyes, without love (one came across even more insolent people than oneself, and there were also sordid little scenes: for instance, over dances to which one had not been invited). It was the *allumeuses* whose tricks were indistinguishable from those of an André Lapailly who had found his true sex at last. It was the *Carte du Tendre*† without tenderness, pored over with a mother still young, dying and aquiver. It was the tango and the Boston two-step, in the aura of a sweet-smelling girl—smelling of face powder and armpits, that is—and the sap sometimes rising in you when you were glued too hard to her firm thigh; and the girls you snatched from another man's arms as they danced. You could tell them from afar by the smell of their sweat; virginal exudations crossed and recrossed in the ballroom like meteor trails in the sky. When he danced in a slightly obscene way, he

* Widely known in social circles. Also “spilled” or “upset”. (Tr.)

† The map of the *pays du Tendre*, the realm of the tender emotions, conceived by Mlle. de Scudéry in her novel *Clélie*. (Tr.)

imagined how proud his mother would have been had she seen him.

After Alban's name had twice appeared at the bottom of the list of dancers at a ball in the society column of the *Figaro*, Mme. de Bricoule noisily cancelled her subscription to this newspaper. But she still had it bought for her day by day, because of the society news.

This was the glitter. The substance was elsewhere. Whether because he did not know how to go about it, or because it really was impossible, he neither expected nor obtained concrete satisfaction from the young ladies of "society". The street provided it. He had the good fortune not to be squeamish, at least when it was essential not to be. He did not breathe a word to his mother about this. The fawns of the Park and the fillies of high society, perhaps. But not the chicklets of the boulevard Magenta and the rue Laferrière. Goodness, what would mama have said!

The daughters of the night, those vernal flowers, were the stuff of dreams (he called them the daughters of the night because he encountered them only at dances, after eleven o'clock at night). The street paid on the nail. Neither of these societies was without a certain poetry. There were the dying moments of balls, at the approach of dawn, with some exquisite filly, and the best names in Paris: that was not nothing. And the girls you slept with, female "little brothers", as polite as the "little brothers": that was not nothing. But on neither side was there anything that remotely suggested love, affection, tenderness or simply friendship. Here there was enjoyment, there, pleasant hygiene. Certain daughters of the night set your imagination bubbling; but the effervescence subsided after a few weeks, and another girl's replaced it. Nevertheless he would have been prepared to marry there and then the two or three for whom he felt that sparkle, if they had been pushed into his arms and if he had been the right age. That is how pliable eighteen-year-olds are. As for the hotel bedrooms, he went to them calmly, as he went to the Bibliothèque Nationale (where he went with a false card, his father's, not being old enough for that either, and because youth would not be youth without a little cheating).

On the fringe of this vaporous but well-fleshed universe, the boys he passed in the street seemed to him on the whole rather puny. He had no feeling or desire for them, but he looked on them with affection, especially the ones with Catholic faces: he recognized these at once, and felt a family feeling for them. Like a precise connoisseur, he now assigned an age to each of them who passed: eleven years three months, fourteen years seven months, eleven years eleven months, etc. . . . As for the fact that a man might desire a man, he found it crazy, disgusting and grotesque. The metamorphosis of a man into a werewolf under his very eyes would not have seemed to him more terrifying than that of a father of five being transformed at nightfall into a man who goes out to pick up guardsmen.

On one occasion, which was to be the last, Mme. de Bricoule, leaning on his arm and on her memories, went out again into those avenues that for him were forever filled, forever filled, with a presence that he never mentioned. It happened that they met a priest, who was walking by the side of a young boy. He turned his face towards him and smiled. Had he been a layman, she would have realized at once that a man who turned and smiled like that was not his father. And she said: "Poor parents!" This was the last, or penultimate, allusion she made in her life to that strange and beautiful world in which her son's adolescence had been immersed.

*Tender feeling for
Mlle. de Guerchange*

Then came Mlle. de Guerchange (March 1914). The evening was a *soirée intime*. They danced; she did not know the one-step (very unusual). She was an only child (hurrah). She did not like moustaches (hurrah, very unusual). She had been seventeen in January; he would be eighteen in April. He saw at once that she was *different*, and was smitten by it. So reserved, so natural, without a hint of arrogance, and so superlatively well-bred, with that supreme and unobtrusive distinction. Enchanting eyes; a single ring with three tiny pearls like cat's incisors; almost modestly dressed: bodice of misty chiffon, pointed yoke, small lace Medici collar opening to reveal a tasteful choker, pale grey velvet

bow. Alban was struck by the notion that this get-up had been, if not more or less made, then at least refurbished by her; or else she went to little dressmakers who copied: three dresses per season. Voluptuously he imagined and savoured her poverty, which inflamed his heart and his senses.

He saw her twice more at smart balls (one waiter per yard of buffet). Wherever he met her, she seemed little known and little sought after. French society, high or low, is always vulgar: what is one to say of the custom whereby girls whom no one has asked to dance must stay in their chairs, as blatantly humiliated as if they were displayed in the pillory? Mlle. de Guerchange did not get to that stage, but once she seemed on the verge of it: it was her simplicity that undid her. Alban saw her at two other balls, and danced with her six times. She did not look at him while she danced, as others did with a hint of boldness, but darting her eyes—eyes made for tears and happiness—from left to right of his face, without bringing them to rest, she danced as in a dream, wide-awake but evanescent. She was a filly among fillies. She was the filly of fillies. Of course he was ready to marry her.

In the background, under the palms that tickled their skulls, sat the mothers. If the fathers of the loved ones in the parlour at the Park presented a melancholy image of what the loved one would later become, this did not much matter, it being the nature of such loved ones to have no existence except in the bloom of youth. With girls you married, it was for life, and with sublime unawareness you were shown what they would be in twenty-five years: paradise lost is not only our own youth, it is also that of others. This unawareness was safe enough: not one of the prospective husbands recoiled in fright. You haven't that much imagination at twenty.

On the very first evening, Mlle. de Guerchange had introduced Alban to her mother, who was dressed up to the nines for this informal evening, thus betraying her provincial background: a pink watered-silk dress with bow and flounces of dark blue tulle, and embroidered in gold thread with cabochon amethyst beads on the shoulders. No great beauty, fair where her daughter was dark, with small eyes where her daughter had the eyes of a gazelle.

Thereafter, Alban would go and talk to her for a while at every dance. Mme. de Guerchange, emerging from the forests of Lorraine, where they had lived hitherto, had “caught up” by forced marches: she talked each time about Isadora Duncan, eurhythmics, the already famous Society balls known as the Bal des Crinolines and Bal des Pierreries, about the Egyptian Ballet which was to wind up the season in June, and about the recent entry into society of coloured wigs, at the fête of the duchesse d’Uzès. These subjects never changed. She called girls “Françoises” because of the *Lettres à Françoise jeune fille* by Maître Marcel Prévost, apparently her breviary, as the *Lettres à Françoise mariée* had been Mme. de Bricoule’s. But she was a year behind, because of Lorraine: no one in Paris called girls Françoises any more.

Between dances, Mlle. de Guerchange would sit on Alban’s right, her long thighs stretched out beside his. When she sat down beside him, he was immediately overwhelmed by the odour of her hair. Her conversation was like what a cat’s might have been, but a pretty intelligent cat. She was certainly not without intelligence when she said: “I have only negative qualities.” After the death of her father, a great sportsman, her mother had sold their property in Lorraine and they had moved to Paris, rue de Babylone. “They tell me I’m proud. But humble people and old ladies like me.” She liked dancing for dancing’s sake, and was indifferent to “society”. Unlike the first evening, each time she felt his face turn towards her she now turned her face towards him, in a very girlish way, with her clear gaze. She had the slender hands of Mme. de Bricoule. Which hand would he kiss first, Sabine’s, or the hand of his dead mother?

He came home full of her. A feather from her fan joined Mme. de Bricoule’s little desiccated bunch of grapes, Serge’s letters, essays and pen-holders, and the hairs of the defunct fox-terrier bitch, in the famous filing-case. All these lived amicably together, as the most disparate deities rubbed shoulders in the Roman pantheon. He went to look at her house, a classic sign of love. It was a mansion block, 1885 style: a house for an ophthalmologist rather than an angel.

To pass from boys to women, a transition which so many adolescents go through, is an opening out; it is like music starting up. One thinks also of a half-open fan, which is then opened completely, or of that sudden majestic extension of the screen at the cinema when the big film is due. "Man, when he is moved, feels immensity deeply," Goethe wrote. Man encountering Woman for the first time "feels immensity deeply". A life can be complete without the love of boys; it cannot be complete without the love of women.

This blossoming out had taken place in Alban not with the daughters of the night, nor with the street girls, nor even with Sabine de Guerchange, but with Soledad de La Cuesta two years earlier. All the same, the "immense" is not the profound, and the profound and serious side of Alban had been moved hitherto only by Serge. With Sabine it was happening again, or seemed to be. Holding her in his arms like a great warm bird, while they whirled and glided, he respected her not as a mysterious object, for he imagined no mystery in her, but as a person who deserved to share the best of himself, some one with whom he felt a passionate need for truth. And it was thus that he had loved Serge, in every instant of his affection for him. But it was above all her rare distinction that made him want to violate her.

Alban spoke to his mother about her. "Guerchange? The name means nothing to me," the countess said with a certain distaste, like Louis XIV saying: "He is a man I have never seen." When he had spoken about her four or five times, she wrote to Aunt Aliette, mentioning the names of a few other girls so as to blur the issue. Aunt Aliette's answer was as follows: "They are very respectable people, but more or less on the rocks. The father never did anything but shoot in Lorraine, on his estates, or rather other people's. When he died the mother sold up and brought her daughter to Paris to place her." To place her as what? As a maid? But what else was Mme. de Bricoule doing by sending him, Alban, into "society" except trying to place him? Nevertheless, the letter did unveil *in fine* a small patch of blue sky. "There are hopes on the side of the uncle de Beauraing. But he's not very old. I think he's scarcely more than fifty." The odiousness and vulgarity

of the sentiment and its expression go to show that we are still in very high society. Mme. de Bricoule concluded: "Don't see too much of her: you would only compromise her. Don't fall in love with her, because it would lead nowhere. If I could have gone out, I would have found you hundreds of better girls." (Alban thought to himself: "Yes, but they would have been 'found' for me by you. I 'found' this one myself. And then again, was it a question of 'finding'?"")

"Lead nowhere." Because she wasn't rich. Mme. de Bricoule had invited Alban to resume his relationship with Serge, in spite of the promise he had made to Father de Pradts; she had inquired with benevolent interest whether he had "looked for a new boy friend" after Serge. But she was advising him to fight shy of this girl of exceptional distinction who personified all the nobility that has ever been associated with virginity, because she wasn't rich. And the firm voice that decreed this law of the jungle was a voice that brooked no disobedience. It came from the grave.

This obsession with "the heiress" exasperated Alban, who had decided that he would have enough money for two, and had never felt any affection or desire or attraction except for impecunious people: Serge, the street girls, Sabine (Soledad was the exception). Money burned holes in his pockets when it came to loving: it had taken the draconian principles of the Park for him not to pamper Serge as extravagantly as a schoolboy can pamper. After his mother's warning, he cried off various dances at which he was to see Sabine. And then he accepted a few, without telling the dying woman, and without her asking questions: both of them dissembling to the end. He had no precise intention of becoming engaged to the girl, and indeed the idea of doing so seemed to him foolish in the extreme; his sole precise wish was that she should not become engaged to anybody else. He loved Sabine, and every day there was some one else who attracted him so much that he would have liked to marry her too; in short, he would have liked to marry them all; or rather, he would have liked to marry Sabine and have a number of others as mistresses at the same time: a harem with her as favourite.

People are sometimes monstrous because of a basic flaw in their temperament; in other cases, life puts them in a monstrous situation; they are not monstrous, but they become so. Alban spaced out his meetings with Sabine because one does not disobey a dying mother. At the same time, he “kept in touch” because if his mother died, or rather (let us come out into the open), when she was dead: . . . A tutelary decree can prevent you from marrying, but not from becoming engaged. His mother had allowed him Souplier, and was forbidding him Sabine. *He* remained faithful to the promise given to Father de Pradts—his enemy—and he was ready to be unfaithful, *post mortem*, to the warning, or should one say the command, given by his mother. With Serge and Father de Pradts, the male order triumphed on both sides. The fact remained that Alban’s attitude was monstrous. It was ordained that there would always be something monstrous between him and his mother, sometimes on her part, sometimes on his. There had also been something monstrous on the part of Father de Pradts vis-à-vis Alban. But there had never been anything monstrous between Serge and Alban, from either side.

During this period there were two memorable moments with Sabine. She was always in the front row of seated dancers, on the edge of the floor, exposed to every one’s gaze, with him at her side. Once, she slipped off one of her white dancing shoes with the other and remained for a few moments with her foot, clad in white silk, half out of her shoe. Nobody would even notice such a thing today, but in 1914, and at the edge of the dance floor, and at a very up-stage ball, it was a bit fast. Alban was very surprised by this gesture which was so unlike her and yet unquestionably *was* her, as Mme. de Bricoule’s outbursts of vulgarity were her: it revealed something that had not appeared before. And it reminded him, too, of the story that is told of the *ci-devant* citizenesses about to be guillotined under the Terror: they were seated on a kind of platform near the scaffold, awaiting their turn, and the women of the people raucously demanded the pretty shoes of those in the front row; whereupon the *ci-devants*, whose hands were tied behind their backs, worked their shoes off with the other foot, and the women of the people grabbed them. This

memory came to him on the instant. It was only after a few days that Sabine's white stockings reminded him of the white socks of the altar-boys at the Park.

The other stirring moment occurred one evening when her thin dress let a very pale pink sheath show through, pink as the open mouth of a dog under its saliva. The sleeves of her evening bodice stopped a little below the crook of the arm. While they were seated on the edge of the dance floor, with a surreptitious movement of his elbow he pushed her sleeve upward until the hollow of her arm was revealed. She saw the manoeuvre and let him proceed, and they looked at her arm together: the vein appeared at the wrist, disappeared along the forearm, and reappeared in the hollow of the elbow, like a wadi that disappears beneath the sand and emerges again further on. And the two silent looks converging on a piece of flesh that was presumably forbidden, since the proprieties required it to be hidden, sealed a slightly conspiratorial alliance between them.

That half-uncovered foot and that half-knowing look of hers were reinforced by a certain wildness about the nape of her neck, a thick tangle of hair that dare not speak its name, and by the fact that she spent days on horseback in Lorraine; there was both sylph and animal in her: so at least the young wooer mused. On the second of these evenings, he spoke to her about Mme. de Bricoule, as if he hoped to make his mother live again by speaking affectionately about her.

And indeed Mme. de Bricoule did seem to blossom a little under the dew, however distant, of these few affectionate words, to the point of wishing to take part in the grand *Femina* competition, with a prize of fifteen thousand francs: "Where should the beauty-spot be placed?" She opted for the base of the neck, under the chin. Alban preferred the left cheek, near the corner of the mouth. A memory.

*Last rays of Mme. de
Bricoule. Last rays
of the Belle Epoque
(Spring 1914)*

Mme. de Bricoule was descending to the grave to the strains of the same slow waltzes that had given colour to her youth and that she now rediscovered on the lips of her son. What was she dying of? Pulmonary tuberculosis. Since they could not bear to say so, the family put it about that there was nothing wrong with her: for respectable people, tuberculosis was in those days as shameful as syphilis. They told Alban: "Your mother mustn't think of herself as an invalid." If she had set about it in time, she might have gone to the mountains, or rather to the Côte d'Azur, which was recommended at the time for that kind of illness, for which it is particularly contra-indicated. But she refused. It would have meant parting from Alban and M. de Chantocé: her loves took precedence over her life. After dining at her bedside, Alban often used to wind up a Second Empire musical box that she had. The fragile tones slowed down gradually, interminably, and finally ground to a stop. One evening she said to him: "We won't start the musical box again. It's too sad." He understood. They did not play it again.

Mme. de Bricoule slept much more than in the past, as if nature was taking pity on her; for all her conscious hours were nothing but pain: each minute contained a century of pain. She who had always had breakfast brought up to her at eight now took another sleeping pill at eight, in order to sleep longer; at a quarter to ten she was still sleeping, or dozing: a few more hours snatched from pain. Yet it was this life, in which there was nothing but anguish, physical and mental, that it was so horrible to leave.

She slept on her back so that the pillow would not remove the beauty creams she smeared over her cheeks before switching off the light. Waking up, she was attracted and repelled by the mirror in which, more attracted still than repelled, she would examine her waking-up face, the worst of all her faces, and worse every day (she also looked at it when she woke up during the night). Every day, yes, every day dug a new wrinkle there, accentuated a crow's foot, swelled even more the bags under her eyes—eyes that no longer shone, that were forever staring inwardly at shadowy things—heightened even further, sinisterly, the flush of pink on cheek-bones plastered every day with a thicker coating of face

powder. But a new beauty, a beauty of distress and anguish, was taking possession of these ravages: she had not seen it at first, then, having seen it, kept the mirror within reach, looking at herself in it every ten minutes to confirm the reasons for her despair; her hands now nothing but veins, bracelet and rings long since discarded because they had become too large; her body reduced to the dimensions of a fourteen-year-old boy, and a puny one at that; fiddling with the lamp so as to be in the shadow when Alban was there, and admitting it to him: "I'm putting myself in the dark, then you won't see me"; motionless on her bed, bathed in her own perspiration, covered by a tide of gloom on the edge of which stood ghosts of the dead and dying—her mother, her brother, her husband, herself—but also ghosts of the living: Chantocé and her son.

M. de Chantocé had spontaneously stopped coming; he had bowed out with a bunch of roses: pity for men. She too had no desire to see him again, to show him her ruin. The break had happened without causing her suffering, or almost none: it was submerged in a graver and incomparably more meaningful suffering. Against the fact of ceasing to exist, the idyll with M. de Chantocé seemed to her derisory. All things were falling into place at last. Their place in relation to death, maybe. But their place in relation to life? For good or ill (mostly ill) M. de Chantocé had represented life.

Yet behind this greater suffering there still flickered the suffering her son caused her: and this was not derisory. Mme. de Bricoule felt sure that Alban too would have stopped coming to see her if he could, or would have come only with great reluctance, for the sake of propriety. Eighteen years of immense love had come to this. The battle was lost, and this time irretrievably: lost as it had been lost when she had been reduced to plastering her face with beauty creams. He was her deepest failure: thanks to him, even her death was wasted. Between Chantocé and him, she found, with some bewilderment, that her final disappearance would affect no one, just as Alban had found that his disappearance from the college would affect no one—with the hypothetical exception of Serge.

She tried to console herself: “He’s heartless. He’s like that. He only likes cats.” Although she could not be fully aware how much he loved Serge (he had never told her, out of reticence and out of charity), she had had some grounds for suspecting; but no, all that had become non-existent, or had never existed. He did not love her: therefore, he was heartless. *Oculos habent et non videbunt*—she too, like the Superior. In the face of her present plight we no longer dare speak again of Mummy-Get-it-wrong.

As for Alban’s penchant for Mlle. de Guerchange, she took it only just seriously enough to be slightly irritated by it. She teased him about it as she had in the early days with Serge, but without the good humour of those days. Sour, rather, and sharp. One day the dying woman sneered point-blank: “You’d better not call Mlle. de Guerchange by the diminutive of her first name.”

“Why not?”

“*Sa binette** . . . heh! heh! heh!” She also told him that with her big eyes and her mother’s small ones, and moreover big eyes not being a characteristic of Lorrainers, she must be an illegitimate child. But a half-Lorrainer was enough; he could be reminded of that old mediæval saying: *Lorrain, vilain, Traître à Dieu et à son prochain*. Alban found it all incomprehensible. She had flung him into “society”. And she grumbled when he enjoyed himself in it. He had no inkling of this rule: that many mothers push their sons towards women, then when they see them with women try to divert them from them, because they are jealous, and let them take up with boys, of whom they are not jealous.

Did Alban love her, and, if so, how did he love her? He loved her badly, as he loved people whom he did not desire with a sensual desire. There were plenty of girls whom he scarcely knew and yet for whom, if they were ill, he would have performed and repeated acts of devotion. And similarly with any of the kids at the Park. But, poor boy, he did not desire his mother: all the trouble stemmed from this. He stiffened when she tried to kiss him, or shook his head like a cat whose cranium you have scratched without consulting it; at first he used to offer his neck instead of

* Slang for face: phiz, mug. (Tr.)

his cheek, but later even his neck would more or less shy away. Kissing her was equally distasteful to him. Ah, if he had been twenty when she was eighteen! For he was dazzled by the photographs of her at that age. If he had known her then, he would have married her. But since he did not dare to say to her: "I'm not more affectionate to you because I don't desire you", or: "Twenty years ago, I would have married you" (a remark which would in fact have made her wild with delight), it all finished up with "He's heartless." And yet, in one of her rare flashes of insight, had not Mme. de Bricoule said to him: "Don't you think that there is no true friendship except when the senses are involved?" But these words, having shone for a while, had gone back into the shadows, like the phosphorescent gleams that kindle and die on the crest of the waves in the tropical night.

Those words had been spoken by Mme. de Bricoule on the subject of Souplier. Sitting beside his dying mother, Alhan often thought of another remark, an unbelievable remark made to him by de Pradts, to the effect that when his own father was on his death-bed, he had thought mainly about Serge, even at that moment. Ah, if Serge had been in hospital! His tenderness soared like a firework rocket, burst out into a corona, and filled his inner sky. Serge ill! What would he not have done for him? He would have given his life.

We have heard a young man of twenty-five say to his mother, with whom he was more affectionate and more considerate than sons usually are: "I hate you when you're ill!" This cry could have been uttered by most men, and especially most young men. Alban had the greatest difficulty in remaining polite to his declining mother. On one occasion when he said to her: "You're weakening," and she replied: "I am indeed, since I'm dying", after which the tears came to her eyes, he had to make an effort not to be more hateful still. It is easier to exercise charity in the St. Vincent de Paul Society than with one's mother. Formerly, when his mother wept because of Chanto, it did not irritate him; but when she wept because of him, it did. At such times he would have been capable of anything. The odd thing was that it arose from a humble impulse: "It's grotesque for some one to cry

because of me; I don't deserve so much." And again, when she said to him one day: "You don't know how much I love you!" he could only say, embarrassed and almost shamefaced: "Why do you love me so?"

There was no vindictiveness in all this: he scarcely realized the harm she had done him. But he was conscious of what he was, took a look at himself for one horrified moment, and carried on. At other times, however, he was ashamed of his harshness, and tried to blunt it with idiotic boyish kindnesses: cakes the very sight of which made her feel sick; gramophone records that were precisely the ones she did not like; in a word, the same hapless genius that guided her own "attentions" towards him to the point of absurdity. She gave him chocolates and he disliked chocolates. She gave him scarves when he would have preferred money—not that he was greedy, but she did not give him what he considered a reasonable allowance. And so on. She was well aware that her son hated receiving presents—he had been telling her as much several times a year since he was five—but, like the Superior becoming set in his trusting ways, after having been duped by his excess of trust, she was helpless against her own nature, and went on giving him presents. And then there came a moment when he grew anxious about his own attentions. Wouldn't they make her realize that she had been given up as lost? Relations with people who are about to die are always very difficult, and are more than can be asked of an adolescent. He brought her *Femina*. She flung the magazine aside in horror. There were some smart ladies on the cover, going to the polo in the Bagatelle Gardens, and they filled her with horror. What did she care about the doings of a world that she would be leaving to-morrow? She also had a horror of fine weather.

One day the doctor took Alban aside after a visit to Mme. de Bricoule. He told him that his mother had mentioned Lourdes, and he sneered: "Nobody seriously believes in the miracles of Lourdes."

"I do!" Alban snapped, with a pretty toss of the chin. He did not believe in them at all. But it was the brave thing, or supposedly the brave thing, to say in the circumstances. That was all that mattered.

A digression on doctors. Mme. de Bricoule felt—and with reason—that hers looked after her very badly, and she hated them. The consolation of the dying is to think of the death of their doctors.

Now that there was no longer a man in her life, men sometimes came to her in her dreams. There was a tzigane who poured such a caressing melody into her ear in a restaurant. . . . A young man with rings on his fingers who took her boating on the Marne. . . . A more mature gentleman, an officer in the Legion of Honour, who had accosted her in an avenue in Auteuil and said: “I give you my word that I shall leave you when you ask me. You must not think that I want to know where you live . . .” These gentlemen—whom we might call, after Alban’s “daughters of the night”, her “gentlemen of the night”—replaced the vanished Chanto. Nature was sending her a few dreams of sweetness, to console her for death and for life.

Serge, who appeared in the dreams of Father de Pradts (those dreams in which he called him by his Christian name) and in Alban’s, also visited the nights of Mme. de Bricoule, as the ghost of her little dead boy appears to the mother in the Nô play, *The Sumida River*. One morning when she was in the depths of depression she told her son: “I dreamt that I had you on my lap, when you were twelve, in short trousers. You lowered your head so that I could only kiss your hair. Then you raised it nicely and I kissed you on the eyelids, as I often used to do when you were asleep.” (“We know all about that,” thought Alban.) “But then I saw that it wasn’t you any longer; it was Souplier. You had turned into Souplier . . . In her last throes, suspended over a terrible infinity, she merged these two guilty or guiltless children into a single, precious possession. And Alban thought: “If my mother has seen him so often in her dreams, I must have the right to love him.”

*Meeting between
Alban and
Linsbourg (27th
May 1914)*

There was something intoxicating in those final balls of the 1914 season, which glittered like mountain peaks already almost entirely submerged in the evening shadow. Hugo, in *La Fête chez Thérèse*, and Rostand in a poem in the *Nouvelles musardises*, in fact inspired by *La Fête*, have evoked a similar climate of unique elegance so well that one does not dare try to emulate them. Rostand, writing in 1887, speaks in his last line “of all of which soon nothing will remain”, as if he had been writing in June 1914. This elegance was mingled with the crapulous, as we have seen so often here, and the one could not be isolated from the other.

That night, in the Salle Hoche,* Alban was waiting for the Guerchanges, his eyes glued to the entrance. Some way off, amid the swarm of dancers, he recognized Linsbourg. He looked at him for a moment, violently stirred. Not once had he run into Linsbourg at a society gathering. As a matter of fact, Linsbourg appeared lost. He was not talking to any one, and (apart from his age) recalled one of those police inspectors disguised as guests who used to keep an eye on the display of presents at grand weddings, lest the duchess should swipe the silver ash-tray.

Their eyes met. Each had a moment's hesitation: both of them smiled, a half-embarrassed, half-cordial smile that meant: “Shall we?” Then Alban went towards him, his face radiant, and they shook hands effusively. Quarrels—which were frequent—had never lasted long at the Park. A common passion unravelled them, and relations were resumed with a laugh.

Alban: “You were pretty foul to me, all the same.”

“Me, foul?” (a lack of frankness straight away, as in the past).
“But if I was, please forgive me.”

“I forgave you a long time ago.”

“I must forgive others, if I wish to be forgiven On High.”

* Fashionable public ball-room in the Avenue Hoche.

Alban, somewhat taken aback by such language in a ballroom, said to himself: "I don't make conditions for forgiveness. I forgive because I don't give a damn." He had never borne him a grudge, and if his expulsion had made him weep with injustice at first, if he had suffered and still suffered from his break with Serge, the treachery of his "friends" had never affected him: indeed, if anything it had seemed to him amusing—and hallowed besides, because there are so many precedents in Roman history. . . . The perfidy of de Pradts, the unfairness of the Superior, the lock-picking exploits of Mme. de Bricoule and the shabbiness of the chaps—all this was swept away with a "That's how people are!" which excused everything. As for Linsbourg, he had experienced one of the greatest pleasures of his young life at seeing the liquidation of Alban, whom he nonetheless liked. But now Alban was coming to his rescue. We shall see how.

"Have you kept in touch with any of the chaps at the Park?"

"No, none."

"Denie?"

"He's at an Arts and Crafts school in Besançon. And anyway, he's past the age." He mused for an instant: "I don't know why, but at the end his palms had gone dry. It must have been a question of age . . ."

Gone were the days when everything was explained, everything excused, everything glorified with a sweeping "Denie, he's just Denie!" Past the age! Father de Pradts had told the Superior when he spoke about finding Souplier again some day: "It will be too late", and Alban: "With kids it doesn't last long." So everything was a matter of age. The prohibited had its prohibitions. And that business about the palms!

"What about Rabaud, and the Pearl?"

Linsbourg gave a scornful grimace. Rabaud and the Pearl were "little brothers", and the "little brothers" were all right as long as you were at college. But once outside they went back to the ranks. Here too, the Superior had been Father-get-it-wrong.

"Why was the management changed?"

"I don't know. De Pradts wasn't cut out for the cloth. Pradeau de la Halle was an Utopian. I suppose they weren't successful.

That must have been enough. Serve Pradeau right. I can't stand blindness."

In one sentence and in two words, the two priests were judged, and with what acumen! Alban was impressed. "He certainly isn't blind. But he knows how to profit from other people's blindness, even if he can't stand it."

For the first time, it crossed his mind that de Pradts might well have been something of a sceptic. But after all, Cicero, Marcus Aurelius and Titus, excellent men, were all pontiffs and did not believe in the religion in which they officiated.

When all was said and done, de Pradts and Linsbourg were the only people in this story who had really understood boys. Pradeau and Mme. de Bricoule had unfailingly got hold of the wrong end of the stick.

"They destroyed themselves by expelling us. It attracted attention. Without that outcry, everything would have gone on, and for some time, perhaps." It was true, but even more so than he thought. For what Linsbourg did not say was that it was his father who had been the principal destroyer of Father Pradeau de la Halle and his régime. His father and himself, with Mme. de Linsbourg playing the most self-effacing part, because it was she who had brought the least money into the marriage. M. de Linsbourg was an influential gentleman, connected with high finance, high politics, and high society, in addition to being a member of the board of governors of the Park. He had done what Mme. de Bricoule had momentarily considered doing, but she had been paralysed by illness and Alban's tearful opposition: he had gone to the archbishopric, accompanied by his son. The latter, although like everybody at the Park he on the whole respected the Superior, despised him a little for letting himself be subjugated by anything so crude as fear of his father. He was not in the least grateful to the Superior for having handled him gently for such a reason, and in fact had nothing to be grateful to him for. On top of this, as was to be expected, he did not admire him for having surmounted that fear.

He did not slander anybody, or name any of his schoolfellows; he talked more freely about the staff. Of the Superior he said only

that under him everything was anarchy, and it was not hard for him to prove it with irrefutable facts. "I'll hit him where it hurts—his reputation. He'll never get over it," he had once said of Alban. It was the Superior whose reputation he had destroyed—the Superior, the most innocent of men, whose one fault was that he was only too innocent. He did not volunteer the fact that he had been in one or two "scrapes" (but the Superior, summoned a few days later, did not volunteer the fact that he had known about them, which would have shown his weakness). Finally, M. de Linsbourg had agreed to remain on the board of governors, on condition that certain changes of personnel were made at the college, changes on which the Superior had already decided. Thus it was the boy whom we are about to see so helpless and crushed who had destroyed the old Park which Alban had tried desperately to preserve when his mother had attacked it. He had destroyed it in leaving it, as a regiment wrecks its positions when it is driven out of them by the enemy. The Superior had perished because of his courage in expelling Linsbourg, just as Alban had perished because of his courage in ignoring his panicky impulse not to go to the store-room.

From another point of view, Alban had been expelled because of de Pradts's intriguing, Linsbourg had been expelled by the Superior, and the Superior had been expelled by Linsbourg. It was fair play, but hard play.

"And how's the joint now—the discipline, and the academic standard?"

"All my cousins are there. Perfect discipline. Academically even more brilliant than in our day. The unanimous view is that the college has become terrific."

"Morals?"

"Exemplary. Father Lignier (the new head) is supposed to have announced at the Old Boys' dinner: 'Now, thanks be to God, I may say that we have a chaste college.' "

"It was high time," said Alban.

"Thanks be to God," he was thinking. "But also thanks to me." It was his "scrape", more precisely it was his sacrifice of Souplier, and his expulsion, that had led Father de la Halle to initiate his

great purge. Then Father Lignier had undoubtedly been directed towards strictness *de moribus* by the archbishopric. He himself had botched the reform the first time round. But the second time he had brought it off. And paid for it, as was proper. All in all, in so far as it was a service to reform the college on that score, his service had not been useless.

“The real Park is dead,” said Linsbourg gloomily.

“The real Park is dead.” It had the same grandiloquent ring as “Great Pan is dead”, and meant roughly the same thing. He added:

“I think we’re hated there. I wrote asking to consult the Golden Book of the Academy, because I wanted to copy out my lecture on *Duty*. They didn’t reply. They were foul. It seems there wasn’t one voice raised on my behalf, nor on yours if it comes to that, not only from indifference but from cowardice: they would have antagonized the authorities by coming to our defence. ‘It would have meant exposing ourselves to pointless reprisals,’ as Mulard apparently said. The Park used to be the seraglio in *Bajazet*, but they stabbed you with rubber daggers. And after being a boarder there for eight and a half years, and after everything my father’s done for the place!”

But eight years of organized bacchanalia too, and a bacchanalia known to have been protected by his father’s cash; was that so glorious? However, Linsbourg wound up in a way that touched Alban.

“Pradeau could have sent for me, if only to tweak my ears. One little word is enough sometimes . . . the ‘word that should have been said’. . . . A lot of things might have been different if he had said that little word to me, although I don’t know what word. Perhaps I would have dissuaded my father from going to the archbishopric . . .”

So Linsbourg was ready to save the Superior from his father, as Alban had passionately wanted to save Father de Pradts from his mother! But the little word had not been spoken. They seemed to be realizing at last that there is no charity to be expected, from anybody.

Alban put the same question he had put to Mulard, in which a touch of vanity was to be detected:

“What do they say about us at college?”

And the reply was the same:

“They never talk about us.”

By common consent, the torture of death in life. Just as, to start with, they had skipped Alban’s name in the reading out of marks.

Alban’s eyes lit up. Mlle. de Guerchange and her mother had just come in.

“I see some of my partners arriving. We can’t stay talking by ourselves without asking the ladies to dance.”

“Me too, there are some girls who. . . . Actually I don’t know a soul. I’m locked up at the Postes,* and on Sundays I go out with my grandmother, who likes going to theatre matinees, and can’t go by herself, because her sight is bad.”

“We can meet again in an hour and go somewhere, although . . . I wonder where. We could take a walk in the avenue, the weather’s so fine . . .”

Linsbourg looked so disappointed and crestfallen, he seemed to be setting such store by an immediate talk, that Alban said:

“Actually, we could go for a stroll right away. Then I could come back here and go on to the des Adrets about one o’clock. I’ve got another dance there.”

“Fine.”

“But I must just make my apologies to one of my dancing-partners. She’ll understand. In any case we’re due to see each other again in two days’ time.”

He went to speak to the Guerchanges. An old school-friend, whom he might never meet again; at worst, if he didn’t come back, they would meet again in two days’ time at the Pré Catelan ball. It was Sabine’s turn to look crestfallen.

In the cloakroom he made sure that the tiny vase in which another carnation for his button-hole was being kept fresh for the

* College run by the Jesuits, where people prepared for the *grandes écoles*. Patronized by all the aristocracy. (H.M.)

second dance had not leaked into his cloak. When they were in the street, he said:

“First of all, what are all these rumours about war? In your circles” (Linsbourg was preparing for Saint-Cyr), “you should be well-informed . . .”

“War is inevitable, but not in the immediate future. But anyhow, if the Germans want to try it on, let them come, they’ll get a hot reception.”

“Jupiter’s mind easily passes from one thought to another,” an Ancient wrote. Likewise the mind of M. de Bricoule, and of all those of his age. The war, dare one say it, did not last long. An idea came to him:

“How about driving out to the Park?”

“The Park?”

“Instead of chatting here on the pavement, we could talk on the pavement of the Park, while we walked around it. We’d see how it looked at midnight.”

Linsbourg seemed flabbergasted. His mouth fell open, as if he had been hit in the face.

“You like powerful emotions.”

“That’s because I’m used to them.”

“I’m afraid of getting sentimental.”

“Well, you’ll get sentimental.”

They quickly found a taxi. Linsbourg did not say a word, as if struck dumb by what they were doing. For a while Alban respected his silence. Then, slightly embarrassed, he broke it clumsily:

“That’s a handsome waistcoat.”

“What good does it do me to have a handsome waistcoat if I’m not happy? Are you happy?”

“More or less,” said Alban, implying: “As happy as I can be without Souplier.” But he did not want to talk about Souplier.

“I thought I’d find you unhappy,” said Linsbourg, his disappointment written all over his face.

Now the floodgates were open, he let it all come pouring out.

“I lost everything when I lost the Park. I could tell you that I’m going through a momentary depression; actually I’ve been in a

state of depression for fourteen months. At the Postes there are nothing but chaps of eighteen to twenty. I only go out on Sundays, and you know under what conditions, and Saturday evening. Besides. I've no desire to go out with chaps of my own age."

The ex-pasha of the Park did seem rather subdued. Where was that lively face on which the fire of effrontery had once glowed? Alban remembered a remark that M. de Bricoule had made about his son, and that his mother had repeated to him: "I'll send him to Pipo.* That'll stop him thinking."

"What about 'society'?"

"Terrible clots."

"Yes, but the girls . . ."

"Girls—they're too complicated."

"They wouldn't seem too complicated if you really wanted them."

"Maybe."

("Aha!")

"Those twinkling feet, don't you like them? And the chignon you can hold in the palm of your hand like a big tropical fruit? And the girl pressing herself against you ever so lightly when you're dancing, then the contact stops, then starts again, don't you like that?"

"Yes, I do—or rather I would like it, but it's complicated. And then, with girls, you get bored. They're so stupid."

"The Park was complicated too. But all the same, there you were this evening, in 'society'."

"This evening I had to be. To meet the rich heiress." (Alban's heart missed a beat. But no, Sabine wasn't rich.) "Two, in fact, there are two sisters."

Alban breathed again, and smiled. Linsbourg had dropped the two rich heiresses, and Alban the impecunious one, to go on a joy-ride to Notre-Dame des Gosses. . . . Really, it was too comic! The extremely well-to-do Linsbourg, scion of the international aristocracy—he too had been catapulted by the maternal hand in the direction of the rich heiress!

* The Ecole Polytechnique, in the smart slang of the time. (H.M.)

Did “rich” remind him of “poor”?—“Is there a St. Vincent de Paul Society at the Postes?” he asked.

“Yes, there is, but I don’t bother with it.”

He could be charitable when he was happy, not when he wasn’t. They were not far from the Park now. Alban stopped the taxi. They must not miss “the approaches”.

They remained silent during these approaches, as if they were advancing towards a holy place.

The college appeared, and simultaneously they were enveloped by the fragrance of its gardens, intensified by the night; to judge by these exhalations alone, great Pan was not dead. It was not, however, that indefinable atmosphere of a conventicle, a deer park and a nursery, the special atmosphere of the inside of the college, of which they could have only the memory. The building at once seemed smaller to Alban than he had remembered it. Now it looked as though it had sunk, subsided into the ground, reminiscent of the superstructure of some half-submerged vessel. It was completely dark, as decrepit and dilapidated as ever, without even the light at the Superior’s window that used to shine so late into the night to brighten it. Yet what intense emotion had vibrated behind these rough walls, almost offensive in their grime! The Superior’s view had been the right one: the more ramshackle the college was, the more it set off to advantage the inner life it had contained. Alban said:

“As schools go, well, it really was quite a school! A school of happiness and experience of the passions. That was the most astonishing thing about the Park, that double register: we enjoyed ourselves there like mad . . .”

“How could we not be happy when we got up to so much mischief?”

“. . . and at the same time we went through an apprenticeship in seriousness, which is so cruelly lacking elsewhere. They say I’ve been badly brought up, or that I haven’t been brought up at all. In fact I consider that between my mother and the Park I was brought up marvellously. My mother and the Park, who couldn’t stand each other, collaborated to a degree that no one could imagine.”

It was a girl who had told him that he was badly brought up, and it was good uncle Edward who had told him that he had not been brought up at all.

As for enjoyment. . . . The Park had been immense fun. The exchanges with his mother had been fun. The daughters of the night were fun. The street girls were fun. If he had to go to war, it would be fun. The only serious thing had been Serge. And serious mainly thanks to the Park. If his liaison with Serge had happened at Maucornet's, how different a complexion it would have had!

Linsbourg: "You remember Cuicui's remark about 'the good life'? Well, that's what it was. No one who didn't live at the Park between 1905 and 1913 can have known the joys of life. One came across children at the Park that one didn't meet anywhere else. The God 'who rejoices our youth' For you find it remarkable that the Park should have given us at one and the same time a happy adolescence and experience of the passions. What I find remarkable is that it should have given us at the same time 'the good life' and religion."

"That proves that the ways of God are inscrutable."

"What do you mean? St. Paul says in the Epistle to the Romans: 'There is now no condemnation to them who are in Him.' And St. John: 'There is no sin in Him. Whosoever abideth in Him does not sin.' "

"Yes, but when St. Paul and St. John said 'Him', they weren't thinking of the Park! . . ."

"They were thinking of God. At the Park, we were immersed in God like fish in the sea. That's what you meant even without knowing it, when you said that the Park had taught us seriousness."

Alban reflected that, as fish go, the little fish at the Park. . . . Be that as it might, he took the carnation out of the mini-vase concealed behind his lapel, emptied the vase, put it in his pocket, and threw away the flower. Perhaps this meant that the conversation was becoming interesting enough for him to give up the des Adrets ball.

It may be noted that they had praised the college for having given them happiness, passion and religion. But Alban had

forgotten the remark Salins had made to him: “We have made it a house of wisdom.” And neither of them had pointed out the extraordinary and improbable character of what they had lived through and seen there, especially Linsbourg, who had been eight years a boarder, when it had been merely an introduction to life, in which everything, always, is extraordinary and improbable.

“When I think of that phrase of Zola’s that I read the other day: ‘A lair of young bandits, like most provincial colleges’.”

“You read Zola!” exclaimed the Incorruptible, scandalized.

They turned into the endless, empty side street along which Alban and Serge had gone to the travelling fair in June 1912. The very long façade of the college on that side bore an enormous inscription: ONM WILL WIN. Another slogan displayed there read: UP WITH LE SILLON.* On the numerous CAMELOTS DU ROI† inscriptions, the I had been obliterated and replaced by a Y, which had been furiously scrubbed out in its turn and replaced by the original I; the S on one of them had been rubbed out and replaced by a vengeful E.‡ Wherever there was the smallest empty space it had been filled in with a daubed 445. All this had, as it were, splashed across to the other side of the street, where the bright new apartment houses were blackened on their outer ground-floor walls with 445, VIVE LE ROI, and the enigmatic capitals P.R. This flora was obviously the work of the Park pupils, for as soon as one looked further along the street the walls became white and clean again.

“You can see at once that the college is a serious place today,” said Alban. “In our time, we were too taken up with Protectorship to have political opinions. We were evidently missing a great deal.”

Since these inscriptions were incomprehensible, Alban added: “Perhaps they’re formulas for exorcism. I suppose Father Lignier must have exorcized the college.”

But Linsbourg, without being “bitten”, knew a little about politics. He explained. The Y on ROI was insulting; 445 was a

* Left-wing Catholic review founded by Marc Sagnier.

† Literally “the king’s newsvendors”: young royalists grouped round the royalist paper *L’Action française*. (Tr.)

‡ Camelote = trash. (Tr.)

magical number in the arcana of the *Action française*; the P.R. was “proportional representation”, a method of electing deputies (?) which oddly aroused people’s passions. For Alban, the people who were inflamed by these things belonged to a very strange and very alien world. But these people would have found the world of the Protection very strange had they known of it.

The windows of the visiting-room on the ground floor were open behind their bars: in the shadows, they could dimly make out the chairs, the religious painting, the “honours board”, on which their names—Linsbourg’s in particular—had been inscribed so often, and all the paraphernalia of the famous *mahomeries** of the Aeronautical Club. Some classroom windows were open on the first floor. Fresh air! Fresh air! The new headmaster must have thought that this college stood much in need of it. But on the second floor, the dormitory windows were closed. At this hour the boys were sleeping soundly, marinating in themselves, many of them curled up as in their mothers’ wombs, from time to time giving a little sigh, or even a little moan as of a woman in pleasure, or a leopard’s growl which came from having something up the nose, or a rumbling of the stomach; or now and then scratching their noses in their sleep, or twitching a muscle like a horse, or giving a start of fright, or knitting their brows a little, their faces clothed in a slumbering beauty that transfigured even the most ill-favoured in the shadows. Then the Park premises came to an end; on the other side of the wall there was now only the Petite Espérance, from which there wafted a strong sweet smell of greenery. And it was still “the other side of the wall”, it was paradise lost, the garden forever closed. The night was warm but airy; the sky unobtrusive. No assertive moon, no sleepless stars, not a hint of poetry, nothing.

Linsbourg: “To think we lived amid that smell! How did we manage not to get completely intoxicated by it!”

* Few people are probably aware of the origin of the word *môme* (kid, brat). Mediæval French called a boy a *mahom*, meaning a follower of Mahomet, alluding to all the faults and vices Mahometans were supposed to have, and which boys have. (H.M.)—Note that no such derivation appears in *Le Grand Robert* of today. (E.)

Growing from inside the college, but spreading outside, long untended creepers hung down the wall, like the arms of the sleeping children hanging out of their beds, and these creepers also smelt good, like the arms. Above, high branches swayed like insects' antennæ. Linsbourg detached the end of one of these creepers and held it in his hand respectfully, like one of the *tollentes ramos* of the Gospel. Alban thought he was going to offer him another. He would have refused; his friend's exaltation was getting on his nerves a bit. And yet, holding in his right hand a blessed collegial palm, and in his left his white kid gloves, like a Roman emperor with his insignia of command, he would have presented a good symbol of himself: college and "society", each in one pan of the scales, and balancing each other.

On the pavement, they were treading underfoot the shadows of the college trees. The trees belonged to the college and their shadows did not. The two young men no more belonged to the college than the shadows they were walking on. And yet, like the shadows, they did belong to it a little. Tirelessly the chestnut blossom stirred in the night air. The buzz of a tiny winged creature brushed past their faces.

"When I was a child," said Linsbourg, "I wasn't devout; I was converted not long after coming to the Park. Well, I may tell you that I regret not having become a non-believer since, so as to be converted a second time."

Alban said nothing. No question, he was not on the same level. Linsbourg went on:

"It's deadly at the Postes. I'm dying of loneliness. What it is to have a past! I could work all right if I had a normal private life." (Normal private life meant Protectorship.) "Otherwise, no. I just can't go on not being happy, I just can't. I'm sinking like a stone. I've got to touch the bottom, or else I'll drown. And I've got to do it at once. I must live, live! Some people say you can die of love. I'm dying of not loving. If only this spring that's already coming to an end weren't entirely wasted. It's that idea of spring that gets me all het up. The children of Rhodes used to go along singing and holding hands at the return of spring. I need to raise my voice in chorus too; I need to put my hand in another hand. Fortunately,

there's Father Peignot. He's my supervisor. A terrific chap. I told you, when I first went to the Park I wasn't at all devout. Then I met Denie, and I became devout so as to be able to beseech God every day, on my knees, not to take him away from me for a long time. I was devout all right. But I was unformed. Father Peignot has provided me with a framework."

"A framework?"

"A spiritual framework. I said to him: 'I've got to live, haven't I? I'm too lonely, and I'm a person who needs to be two.' If I'd had the nerve, I would have cried out to him like Rachel in the desert: 'Give me children or else I die!' "

"And what was his answer?"

"He said: 'Why don't you become a scoutmaster?' I asked him to introduce me. He said: 'Surely you can do it without me.' "

"It sounds to me as though he rather let you down . . ."

"Yes, I suppose he did," said Linsbourg, with a slightly crestfallen air, as if it had only just struck him. "God! the people who stuck me in that place don't know what they're responsible for. And it needs so little! 'Say but the word, and my soul shall be saved'. . . . No, I'd rather not see kids at all than see one and not become his friend."

De Pradts had torn up the photos of Serge. Alban had gone out of his way not to pass by his house. Linsbourg would rather not. . . . Each of them fleeing before suffering like a little sailing-boat before a storm.

Once more Alban was silent. He was not too sure whether he should laugh, or he touched, or be dismayed. It was mostly with dismay that he contemplated this life eaten up by an obsession that left room for nothing else. And how it had developed in Linsbourg in the past year! The famous disquiet beloved of young French literary men in 1920 (*Unquiet Adolescence . . . The Unquiet Life of Jean Hermelin . . .*) did not exist at the Park, save among the nobodies, when they were not totally inert: the members of the Protectorate lived a life without problems, other than those created by their own actions. But here was Linsbourg, cut off from the social environment that enabled him to be healthy and swaggering, collapsing into the horrors of frustration. The desert

drives men mad, as everybody knows. The desert was driving him mad. "Give me children or else I die!"

Still staring into space, with that desperate unappeased look, he went on: "Not a soul whom I can call 'my little one' or 'my poppet' . . ." Last Saturday, in the rush hour on the underground, with everybody wedged against everybody else, there was a kid of ten or eleven who held my hand for a long time, mistaking it for his father's. A weird sensation. When he realized his mistake, he pulled his hand away hurriedly, with a kind of disgust, and said: 'You might have told me!' Sometimes, when I'm thinking about the future, I say to myself: 'When children call me *vous* . . . ' "

"That's a name for a slow waltz. But waltzes are not Protectorate affairs, even if they did lead us a dance because of those affairs. One day you'll have your own children, and you'll be pacified."

"I envisage my mission as a father as sacred," said Linsbourg majestically. What followed was equally rich: "Besides, I have some idea of what it's like: I've seen so many growing up around me. But first of all I must get my career well established. I'll start as a second-lieutenant in the army of Africa. In Morocco, with Lyautey. As far as the resources I acquire through my ability and guts enable me to, I want to contribute to the reconstruction of the country, which has fallen pretty low as you know. I must also be a first-rate officer, and if possible indispensable."

The only ambitions of the Alban of May 1914 were knowledge and carnal pleasure. Other ambitions were to come to him only with the war: the ambition for adventure, the ambition for citations for war exploits, the ambition for a fraternity in which he would rediscover that of the college, which he too secretly missed. The ambition to serve evinced by Linsbourg, and to make one's mark through that service, was alien to him, and made his friend alien to him. He asked:

"And will you send your sons to the Park later on?"

"Of course. Alas, there won't be a Pradeau de la Halle there."

(This was a bit much, after what he had done to him.)

"The Pradeau de la Halles are immortal. And the de Pradts."

"And will you send your sons to the Park as well?"

“Naturally!”

Linsbourg laughed. What the two boys did not know was that at the same time Souplier, Salins, even Bonbon, when they thought of their future, told themselves that they would send their children to the Park. All the expellees wanted more of the same for their brats!

Alban thought that he would call his son, or the first-born of his sons, Serge.

From a pocket in his cape, he pulled out the second button-hole, prepared for the second ball, and threw it away.

“I’m not going to the des Adrets dance. One dance more or less! We can talk a bit more, if you like.”

“You’ve done your G.D.,”* said Linsbourg, grasping him by the hand. “You came to my rescue just when I needed it. Just think, I haven’t been able to talk to anybody like this in fourteen months . . .”

Linsbourg begins to churn out old stories about the Park, which Alban has heard a hundred times, in other words, six or seven times, which is quite often enough.

How he churned them out! As at the Park, that vast little world of confidants and accomplices, like a woman’s world, Alban was no longer a friend, he had become once more the time-honoured rubbish-tip.

And at intervals of a few minutes, the same story would come round again, told in the self-same words. And Linsbourg stopped every ten yards, like Jews when they talk to you as they walk along the street with you, so gripped are they by what they are saying; in the same way, in the refectory at the Park, the members of the Protectorate did not eat because they were gossiping so much. For the second time he relit his cigar, which kept going out, because he was gossiping so much. For he was smoking a cigar at one o’clock at night out of the stupidity of his age; but Alban also saw this cigar that he could not do without as a prescription against misery and despair: it proclaimed him a pathetic creature. And a

* Good deed, in scout language.

word came back to him, the word “cretinism”, which he had used to describe the most hysterical boys in the college one day when he was talking about the reformation to Serge: the cretinism of the Protectorate was rearing its head again, together with the inexhaustible tittle-tattle of the cretinous. Twice, Alban attempted to switch the subject to something other than “it”. Linsbourg’s face fell instantaneously: suddenly silent and abstracted, if he said a few words on this tedious new subject they were awkward and floundering; and then he would return post-haste to “it”, and at once his face would light up, he would become voluble again, come back to life. Alban also noticed the incoherence of his thinking. He would say: “All I have is work. Work is my opium”, and then, only a little later, “I’m incapable of working.” Then back to the endless anecdotes. So much so that gradually a river began to form and widen between the two young men, with Linsbourg on the opposite bank, with or without Lyautey.

Linsbourg becomes more and more impassioned. “For me, the Park is like a dream. I can’t believe it existed.”

Life begins to-morrow: that is the preconceived idea of the majority of adolescents, who put off taking the plunge out of timidity, awkwardness, or incompetence—all of which are perfectly natural—and because they have been taught the secrets of the stratosphere and the moon, but not the key words that unlock the things of this earth. “When I start wearing long trousers . . .”—“When I’ve finished my exams . . .”—“After the holidays . . .”—“When I come back from military service . . .” Confined in the austere and prosaic atmosphere of the Postes, and of Sunday with his family, Linsbourg the pasha had become gormless, whereas Alban, sharpened up by “society” and skirt-chasing, had lost the pusillanimity that had made him keep Souplier at arm’s length for eighteen months, in spite of his performances with Soledad, in which he had been boosted by his bull-fighting prowess. The Protector no longer protected any one; it was he who had need of succour. Cast up high and dry, he lay panting and dying for lack of sustenance from the Fountain of Youth. The future leader of men, the future warrior, had been

reduced to clutching at some one he had neither seen nor tried to see for fourteen months, whom moreover, at the Park, he had tended to cold-shoulder and disparage, and from whom he had parted on bad terms; reduced too, like the rest, to “everything begins to-morrow.” But whereas those who have not lived vigorously at school have unbridled expectations of the life they will live once out of it, and whereas Alban had lived vigorously enough at school to have only a dispassionate and even relatively incurious expectation of his new life, Linsbourg seemed to expect nothing of his life as a man—even his life as a father—except a kind of repetition of school. His face had become more virile in fourteen months, and his cheeks had hollowed, as happens with girls when they become young women, but his soul had not followed suit. “Ah, what it is to have a past!” he had sighed. And also: “I’m nineteen: I’m getting old.” His head turned back, like the damned in Dante’s *Inferno*.

“Don’t you think that school is after all a page that has to be turned? It’s true, isn’t it, that you’re still to some extent at school? As for me, I’m well out of it. Admit it, you’d like to revive the Order of the Golden Button, with decorations. You’d better be careful, old boy. That’s the way to the waxworks. And it even smells a tiny bit rancid to me.”

“And you’re the one who used to accuse me of being a deserter! But it was obvious at the Park, when you turned against the Protec. ‘Turned’? In fact you could never really stand it. You’ve organized your life after a certain fashion and you’re happy with it. You couldn’t care less about other people. A deserter, an egotist and a prig. You wanted to reform the college. Now it’s me you want to reform! But I don’t want to be reformed.”

To the jealousy he had always felt towards Alban there was added the well-known bitchiness of homosexuals (already pointed out by an Ancient: Juvenal, we believe), a bitchiness born of their disrepute.

Since there was a silence, into that silence Alban let fall:

“Ah, is this your son, Madame? What an egg!”*

* *Un œuf* is an outdated slang term for “an idiot”. (Tr.)

The old joke had barely passed his lips than he realized that he had blundered. He had only wanted to “stir up the past” with this joke, to shake Linsbourg up a little more. And he realized that it must have sounded like a gratuitous insult. But Linsbourg’s eyes filled with tears: no, he did not feel insulted. Simply upset.

These tears exasperated Alban. He did not like his mother’s tears: he did not like Linsbourg’s; he had only liked Serge’s tears, and his own. Linsbourg was gnawing at the end of his cigar with the almost savage frenzy and irritation of the dissatisfied. He bit it off, and spat it on to the pavement, as Alban had done with the end of his cigarette-holder to impress Serge. But Linsbourg really was frantic, whereas Alban had only been shamming. When Linsbourg spat out the cigar, he laughed.

The two boys were talking neither about intellectual life, nor social life, nor political life, which is to say about things they did not understand and were incapable of understanding, but about their private lives, with which they were very familiar. What they said was therefore not stupid, and one of them was painfully sincere in what he was saying. But his inflated tone, and the peremptory tone of the other, and the high notes and trills they gave out from time to time as they whinnied or choked with laughter for no apparent reason, meant that any one who passed them on the pavement at that hour (especially a little girl), would have thought: “How stupid they are!”

Alban was not pleased. So he was an egoist because he didn’t dream about becoming a scoutmaster! He had dropped Sabine, and dropped the des Adrets ball, only in order to be upbraided. That was the consequence of his G.D.: he might have expected it. Now he wanted one thing only: this time to drop Linsbourg, and go back to the avenue Hoche, where the dance might not yet be over, and where he might be able to have a waltz with Sabine at that first peep of dawn when indefatigable girls still want to whirl, while the young men are practically on their knees. He walked faster, dragging his friend along towards the Porte d’Auteuil, where he hoped to find a taxi.

Linsbourg had begun reminiscing again, though less feverishly, doubtless as much because of Alban’s chilliness as because of their

rapid pace: a hectic gallopade, crossing the empty avenues without a qualm, as a good steeplechaser makes nothing of a fence. . . . Nevertheless, he went on unburdening himself, and it was somehow strange that he should do so with some one for whom he had just shown his dislike. But it was in the blood: his kind had such a need to spill the beans that they did so to an enemy as if to a soul-mate; this trust without trust was one of the specialities of the Park.

Linsbourg displays his bent more and more. "The itch to proselytize and the itch to involve others combined to produce a dreadful rash which made people scratch themselves to death."

But Alban was obdurate. Was it all a question of age, then, since he had accepted from the seventeen-year-old Linsbourg what he now refused him at nineteen? There was something terrible in Linsbourg's obsession, bewailing what he did not have. There was also something terrible in Alban's refusal to pay him the slightest heed, in his refusal to feel the pathos of that "Give me children or else I die!" "Piffle. Drivel. Nonsense." Not that he was passing any moral judgement on Linsbourg. The reason why he almost loathed him was that he saw in him an exclusive homosexual, which for him meant some one abnormal ("I hate you when you're sick", as the saying went), and he had such a physical repulsion for anything that was or seemed to him abnormal that he shuddered at the sight of Denie chewing his fingers and had frequently accused Linsbourg of being abnormal for liking or even tolerating Denie. But was not he himself being a little inconsistent here, since if he had only really been an honorary member of the Protectorate, it was from a kind of exclusivism: he had been interested in Souplier alone. Aloof, impenetrable, implacable, as he sometimes was with his mother, as later he would sometimes be with a girl who loved him and with a comrade-in-arms: the Incorruptible. Linsbourg's world was not his: Linsbourg's problem was not his problem (as a matter of fact Alban had no problems, and suspected, rightly or wrongly, that people who have problems are nearly always idiots); he did not enter into Linsbourg's

anguish, did not like it, did not want to enter into it, least of all to pity him for it. "Piffle. Drivel. Nonsense." Aloof, impenetrable, implacable, incorruptible, with that special ferocity one reserves for one's friends when one has quarrelled with them, and more especially that urge which drove him to turn violently and cruelly against what he liked or gave the impression of liking—going so far as to hate and despise him for being so pathetic, like those parents who despise their twenty-year-old sons for being unable to pick up a woman—totally immersed in himself, but a self much more supple and wide-ranging than Linsbourg's, and determined to wallow in it in a relaxed and uncomplicated way. Life was opening out before him in every direction—as Serge's hair opened out in every direction when he ran his hand through it. And he heard Linsbourg talk without listening to him, as the judge at a special tribunal hears the accused pleading for his life but does not listen to him, because the sentence has been decided in advance.

Linsbourg was not altogether mistaken when he called him bourgeois: there was something of the bourgeois mentality in his condemnations. And he was not altogether in error when he called him a deserter. It was Alban who had suggested the romantic pilgrimage to the nocturnal Park, and long before the pilgrimage was at an end he had "turned traitor", yes, just as he had turned traitor at the time of the reformation: it brought him the subtle pleasure one gets from knowing oneself to be free. Everything being more or less the same to him, in a world where most differences were artificial, he switched without warning from his own to the opposite camp. as a field-mouse will innocently cross over from one trench to the enemy trench in the thick of a battle. It is clear that the unfortunate boy was already suffering from a superiority complex that he was later to have a great deal of trouble getting rid of.

Linsbourg had had enough of this false friend. He was entitled, after their school life, to see him as one of "them", for Alban had kept quiet about his heterosexual fancies as well as his escapade with Soledad, as much out of modesty as out of some slight shame at showing, in that environment, that he was interested in women

too. Linsbourg was mistaken about Alban's physiological constitution, just as Alban had been mistaken about Linsbourg's. They had believed that they were members of the same family, and they were not. In the end, Alban was heartily sick of this intolerant and intolerable individual, against whom he must remain on his guard, and who hissed now and for ever with that rancorous note of self-justification, provocation and recrimination: the rancour of intelligent and persecuted minorities. He knew that he would never see him again in his life (when his poor mother had been so anxious for him to keep in touch with Linsbourg!). Both of them were terrified that there might be no taxis at the Porte d'Auteuil, or that there might be only one, which would compel them to stay together a little longer. But there were two!

"Good-bye, Monsieur de Bricoule. And thanks all the same for the G.D."

Under the street-lamp, Alban saw his schoolfriend's eyes sparkling with that quick malevolent gleam that he had seen in them so often. And that "Monsieur de Bricoule" was another very old acquaintance. Then Linsbourg held out his left hand, the final insult. "He's getting his own back for being unhappy when I'm not." During the three hours they had spent together, Linsbourg had not once mentioned Souplier's name, whether out of tact, forgetfulness or rudeness. True, in the old days Alban had talked about Serge to his mother and the two priests; he had very seldom spoken about him to Linsbourg, Giboy and Salins, who didn't much like him; and Serge had been part of the "garden of secrets". But in that silence he had seen an obstinate contempt, and this had played its part in his turning against Linsbourg.

Each of them got into his taxi. Their May night was at an end. Each of them disliked the other. The dislike was of long standing, but they had just confirmed it to themselves. Now it was a real feud, of the kind that Alban was just beginning to indulge in, very different from the inconsequential tiffs at the Park: solid, massive and opaque; a feud of basalt and of iron.

So ended this friendship (?) with the boy to whom he had been closest at college, though it had been a *liaison dangereuse* from the first, because of Linsbourg's jealousy. In a number of respects

Alban and Linsbourg were made to hit it off together, and their liaison was breaking up cruelly. Whereas Linsbourg and de Pradts, for far more profound reasons, were made to hit it off together, and yet had always remained strangers to each other.

Alban would never know that the following Sunday a resentful Linsbourg had telephoned Giboy and turned the whole story upside down. He attributed his own situation to Alban, lost and helpless, prowling about the Park, and finally calling Linsbourg to the rescue. "I sent him packing. I don't like monomaniacs." Thus, after fourteen months, he resumed the vengeance he had vowed on the occasion of the reform: "I'll hit him where it hurts—his reputation! He'll never get over it." But it was not only a question of revenge, it was a question of compromising him in order to annex him, and annexing him in order to feel less alone—as he sought, habitually, to annex the entire universe. His delight in fantasizing did the rest. Linsbourg did not fantasize at the Park, because at the Park everybody acted out "these things" with complete openness and even with pride. Once out of the Park, he had seen that pretence was necessary, and from pretence to invention is only a short step.

For his part, what would Linsbourg have said if he had known that Alban, when asked about him by some one who knew that they had met, had answered: "He's gaga. He's psychotic"? Gaga because one does not have what one desires with a deep, visceral need! Gratify his desire, and Linsbourg would once again become that gifted, balanced, radiant, charitable—in a word, superior—boy that he had been at the Park. But the clan had the characteristics of every clan—among others the settlement of old scores. Those who had left it must clobber one another.

But now to more serious matters. It was the day after that May night that the doctor, called in urgently to see Mme. de Bricoule, took Alban into the drawing-room and told him that his mother would not live through the week. Alban rushed out, panic-stricken, to telephone uncle Edward from a nearby café. "I'm on my way," said the good uncle. "But you know what your mother's like. She gets worked up so easily."

From a certain day onward, each time Mme. de Bricoule performed an action—got up for ten minutes, for example, while her bed was being made—she asked herself: “How many more times will I do this? Is this the last?” And there came indeed a time that was the last time she got up, and, as it happened, she had a presentiment of it.

Mme. de Bricoule believed that people who are dying have a right to some special consideration; she was greatly mistaken. She wrote letters that went unanswered; the post contained only printed matter (usually begging letters). Every one contrived to show her, after their own fashion, that they were indifferent to her death, that she could and should disappear, and that it was useless for her to hang on, as well as tactless. A friendly word, no matter from whom, would have warmed her heart momentarily, but people held out against speaking that word: there was no one, no one, no one. She was dying of her illness, and she was dying of her sadness at dying, and of the way she was dying. She was dying of not being loved. “To be loved! To be loved!” But her mother was the only person who would have loved her.

It was at this time, which was May 1914, while Alban was skipping from ball to ball, that she began to develop that disposition towards her son in which she was to die, a disposition whose dramatic character was accentuated by its mean-mindedness. Surrounded by her son, a nurse and two servants, Mme. de Bricoule felt abandoned, and she had good reason to feel so; furthermore, she was haunted by the thought that when she was in direst need, one of the servants, if not both, would leave. In a sordid recess of his being, Alban held it against his mother that she was ill, in other words gloomy and utterly self-absorbed. In a similar sordid recess, Mme. de Bricoule held it against her son that he was not there *all the time*. Not in her room, but in the house. What would have appeased her would have been for him to be “on call”. For him to come at the precise moment when she wanted him and sit silently by her bed listening to her indulge herself for one last time in her memories or perhaps her

complaints. For it to be he who did certain errands, rather than employees, who did them badly. For him to be helpful and convenient to her. The adored son was no longer thought of except in the role of flunkey: that is what death does. For his part, unable to make her adopt the role of rubbish-tip (into which he would dump stories about Sabine and other fillies), he simply wanted to escape. Against all this gloom his sole refuge was coition: therein he felt safe. Mme. de Bricoule had her suspicions. Nevertheless she did not go so far as to imagine that her son burst into song as soon as he was out of the house in which his mother was dying: which is what he did. For nature is like that, when given its head.

Alban thought at the time that it was a terrible thing to make love while his mother. . . . Later he saw that love and death dance together without animosity. Indeed, distressed though he was to see her die, he had never made love so well.

Once, as he was going out, his mother wanted to cry out to him with the cry of the dying: "Don't leave me!" and again: "You don't know what it's like to die: it's horrible", and even: "Have pity on me!" But pride restrained her, and that time, too, nothing was said. Each of them sank deeper into silence: she because she did not want to say anything, he because he did not know what to say.

Once his mother asked him to go to the nurses' home to find a replacement: it was urgent. It was urgent, but first he had to call round at the hotel where he had a rendezvous with one of his girlfriends, in order to make another rendezvous. He could not leave a note there, because between the stupidity of the hotelier and the stupidity of the girl-friend, there was every chance of the rendezvous being missed, and the whole liaison perishing, since he did not know the girl-friend's present address. She was late, and he had to wait. The message about the nurse was urgent, but he had wasted fifty minutes over the girl-friend. Such are sons, such is pleasure, and such is life—and such too is death. Alban's son, if he had one, would do the same thing to him when the old man was on the way out. It is the torch-race, assuming there to be a torch, which is a generous assumption.

If he told her: "I'm going out to-morrow evening", she did not even inquire where he had been invited. Nor, two days later, did she ask him for news about the previous night: she had forgotten. Always an authoritarian, the weakness of impending death was making her irascible before it finally overwhelmed her: those last outbursts of anger before the grave, impotent and harmless, but none the less sinister for that. In the ten minutes Alban spent with her, she would talk of her illness, then her doctors, then her medicines, then the nurse, and then begin all over again, in a different order. Alban was too young to be aware how normal this attitude was. Seeing his mother becoming entrenched in the egoism of the dying, he entrenched himself in his, without too much compunction—full of nothing but his dances, while she was full of nothing but her death.

All this was too much for Mme. de Bricoule, and she finally stopped loving her son: a love that is a passion, and such had been hers, can suddenly abate as passion abates. There was a slow waltz, beloved of Mme. de Bricoule, entitled *When love dies*. Well, that was it. It is not uncommon for people to undergo a crucial change at the approach of death. Don Quixote discovers his own madness only a few days before the end. Something had now changed in Mme. de Bricoule. There had been countless tiny drops that had not made the vase overflow; the present ones were doing so. All her love for her son was ebbing away at the same time as the warmth ebbed from her body at the approach of the end. When he was out and overdue, she awaited his return with impatience, but it was not at all, as would have been the case only a short time before, in a state of inordinate anxiety lest "something might have happened" to him; it was because she wanted him "at hand"; and she was aware of the difference in kind between these two states of mind without being affected by it. She had never known him to be anything other than detached from domestic matters, interested only in his school work and the sentimental adventures of the college. She had put up with this indifference and selfishness even after he had reached the age of reason; now she put up with them no longer. She flung them in his face. "I told you three days ago. Naturally you don't

remember, because you don't care." Or, "You didn't ask me how I was. No, don't bother. . . . Since you don't care." He would answer feebly: "But I do care", as feebly as when she used to ask: "Do you love me a little?" and he would answer: "Of course I do." She kept harping on her imminent death: "I'll be dead soon, and . . ." She vaguely hoped that he would answer: "Die? You know very well that your last analysis was better" or, "The doctor told me he was still optimistic." But no, he said nothing, and after a while he changed the subject. She would wind up with her *leitmotiv*, that he didn't care a fig.

After these domestic scenes, the iron curtain had descended, so to speak. We die when there is no longer any one for whom we want to live. Mme. de Bricoules no longer wanted to live for Alban, and still less for M. de Chantocé; and she was dying, or letting herself die. It was as it should be: she was dying without having anything to regret. He did not kiss her, and she no longer kissed him. She had gone into the desert, a harsher desert than Linsbourg's, gone into the desert of deserts, where there is no longer even thirst: Linsbourg retained his thirst. She had failed to complete the course; she was collapsing a few yards before the finishing line. She had said to him: "I don't want you to miss a single ball because of me. You're going to be in mourning, and you won't be able to go out. And then, there may be a war. This is your last season for a long time. Make the most of it." But when she saw him, scarcely inside the door of his doomed mother's bedroom, opening the society "Who's Who" to look up the address of one of his dancing-partners, or for a map of Paris to look for the street she lived in, or else casually remarking that he wanted to learn the furlana, the tango having become "impossible", she froze into stubborn silence, did not say another word, possessed solely by a feeling of aridity and disgust with him, in which there was no longer room even for reproach. She was about to be destroyed, but she did not want to be destroyed as a bleating victim, at least she no longer wanted to be, for she had not been so rigid in the past. She had gone too long without receiving the equivalent of what she gave; she could no longer give in a vacuum. She had read in a magazine that certain savage tribes

worshipped stones, and kissed them devoutly: "I'm fed up with giving kisses to a stone." If she had been more subtle—but subtlety is not women's strong point—she would have told herself: "He isn't demonstrative. He's like that. One must take him as he is." But it is hard not to feel that there is something appalling about giving a kiss that is not returned. What was she to say to him? Say to him: "Don't you see I'm dying? Can't you give me a month of your time, when in a month you'll be rid of me for ever?" Say that to him, no. No false devotion. Or even true. Whereas Alban himself was thinking: "If I say something nice to her, she'll know that she's doomed." Thus, once again, everything resolved into silence; they had talked enough, talked too much. Give him some final moral exhortations, go into the financial situation she was leaving behind, instruct him in the steps that would have to be taken immediately after her death? No, not even that. He had life: let him sort things out for himself! He could do as he wished. He could go on living his life; she herself had to live her death. No words of a "practical" kind; no "solemn" words: nothing. But after all, was this such an exceptional case? Of all those who stand by the bedside of a dying man, on how many could he deliver a verdict other than silence?

Formerly, until recently indeed, when he was there it was like a glimpse of sunlight between two clouds. Now, these brief moments of his presence that in spirit she had passionately desired, now that they were there it was she who cut them short. She all but showed him the door. She avoided letting her eyes come to rest on him, avoided looking at what she had cherished more than anything else on earth, on the brink of not seeing him again for ever. So she advanced, fettered and tottering, to the brink of the terrible adventure of dying.

She had decided that she would not send for him when she was about to breathe her last. She decided, too, that he was no longer to dine in her room, at her bedside, as he was in the habit of doing, but in the dining-room, by himself, as he did at lunch. Meagre as this dinner-time conversation had become, it exhausted her, she said, sincerely, but only half-sincerely. From that day onward, their relations were reduced to almost nothing: it was

what she wanted. Besides, what would her son have said to her? Doubtless there is an art of talking to the dying, but that art is not in the repertoire of boys of eighteen. And whose repertoire is it in? There is no common language between a person who is going to live and a person who is going to die.

Alban had a painful memory in this connection. Every evening after dinner, his father used to come and sit at his wife's bedside with the little fox-terrier bitch on his knee, and would stay there for a quarter of an hour, stroking the dog affectionately, without a word being spoken by either himself or his wife. It was not exactly out of mutual hostility; it was because they had nothing to say to each other, literally nothing; perhaps also because he preferred his dog to his wife. When the quarter of an hour was over, he would go to his room and annotate books about horses.

After the dog, the cat. Mme. de Bricoule did not want to see Bluey in her room any more: he tired her. The moment she told him, Alban thought: "She's jealous of the cat, because I kiss him." She had not been jealous of her husband's fox-terrier bitch.

Mme. de Bricoule went further still. They had another immemorial custom, which was that after having dined and chatted with her for a while, Alban should kneel by her bedside and recite with her an *Our Father*, a *Hail Mary*, and a *Memorare* before going up to his room. She said to him:

"You've play-acted enough one way and another. It's pointless to go on play-acting with religion. From now on you can say your prayers in your own room, or not, as you wish."

Yet he did pray! Sometimes he might walk into Mme. de Bricoule's room with a swaggering gait—his famous conquistador's gait, renowned at the college—as if to call the dying woman's attention to his rude health and vigour. A little later, he would be telling his beads for her recovery. At that hour—the hour when evening falls—she herself was watching, through the trees, the gradual decomposition of those vast skies that were about to cease to be.

So now in the morning it was simply: "Morning, mama", and in the evening: "Evening, mama." The day opened and closed on this loveless voice.

“I have a son who does not love me and whom I do not love,” she thought. “In these circumstances, quite apart from the horrors of a lingering death, the best thing is for it to be over as soon as possible.”

Nevertheless, one evening as he came to kiss her hand—for the vesperal ritual was now reduced to that—she asked an unexpected question:

“Do you ever hear anything of Serge?”

“What do you mean, Serge?”

A slight quiver ran through her.

“Do you ever hear anything of Souplier?”

“No.” (It was true.)

“There’s something I wanted to say to you once more . . .”

She began to cough, and her face went crimson. The nurse’s room was next door. He went in, but it was empty. He rang for the servants. The cook came upstairs and went into Mme. de Bricoule’s bedroom. . . .

The cook came out of the room. “Madame is resting. Madame said you should go to bed.”

“There’s something I wanted to say to you once more.” What? He already knew. “If you still love Souplier, see him again. It’s the only thing that’s real. Your obstinacy is stupid.”

She was dying estranged (estranged!) from the son she adored, and yet she had wanted her final message to be this message of love: “Above all, let them be happy.” But she herself, who loved only to be loved, she had no further need of love.

She never mentioned Serge again, and Alban did not mention him either: what would have been the use? Shortly before that time, a translation of an Italian novel had appeared under the title *More Than Love*. What is it that is more than love? Superfluous acts of heroism.

Mme. de Bricoule’s family was made up exclusively of imbeciles, and she had always treated them as such, in the same off-hand way as she treated Alban’s teachers and priests. It was the obnoxious custom of those days to call on people without warning. Mme. de Bricoule told the servants to say that she was too ill to receive visitors; one can imagine the cousins’ faces, the

more so since Auteuil is a long way out. The cousins consequently put it about more than ever that they were dealing with a sham invalid, a woman afflicted with languors, vapours and humours; even when she was spitting blood they still said it was “purely neurotic”. Two or three times, however, she did receive some cousins, who did not even take the trouble to compose their cheerful faces. Since she could think of nothing but her illness, and talked of nothing else, she bored them stiff, and they made tracks as soon as possible, not without complimenting her on how well she looked (the flush on the cheeks of the consumptive) and saying as they left: “I’m glad to have found you so well.” She was glad of their hasty departure, but at the same time mortified by it. She had, of course, a few women friends, but she was too intelligent to like her women friends, and too snooty not to think that it was *infra dig* to have such things, and she created petty opportunities for showing them that they meant nothing to her. They revenged themselves by ceasing to come to see her, “in order not to tire her”. As for Uncle Edward, who was a man of breeding, he did not want to defect without “a gesture”: he sent some champagne. The dying woman winced, and gave the champagne to the servants: it brought back inglorious memories.

Mme. de Bricoule was abandoned, as the Superior had believed himself to be on the night of Maundy Thursday. Yet this solitude in death was not painful to her now; on the contrary, it seemed fitting. If her life gave pleasure to no one, why should it matter to her either? Gone were the days when she would cry out: “No, no, I can’t die! I’ve been unhappy for too long.” For twenty years she had been losing the game all round; now she was entering a state in which she would stop losing. Mme. de Bricoule, alone in a ten-roomed house, with a son confined to the floor she did not live on. was a prey to four frenetic winged creatures: a nurse with the immense eyes of a night-bird, and a mouth drawn tight with ill-nature; a nun, a dried-up peasant woman with the beady eye and beak of a vulture, long acquainted with the family dead and dying, and as such very high and mighty; and the cook and the housemaid, who were faithful enough, and utterly reliable, and defended the countess as best they could, accusing the nurse and

the nun of stealing, and even (the nun) of carrying things off beneath her skirts, in a little bag dangling you know where. Mme. de Bricoule was dying amid a farmyard hullabaloo. But she did not care. Her sole thought was her prayer: "My God, let it be over as soon as possible!"

Yet until her last day she saw to her face, for the sake of servants for whom she cared less than she did about the cat, and for the son she had ceased to love. Her heart was no longer in it, and her mind was more or less elsewhere, so that she who normally took such pains over this operation now did it any old how, with a feeble hand which she could not control properly, having further conceived the idea, which had never occurred to her before in her life, of improving her eyebrows with a burnt matchstick, haphazardly applied. Crowning her delicate features, two exaggerated curves now appeared above her eyes, like archers' bows. The effect was catastrophic.

One day she said to her son on the spur of the moment:

"I'm ashamed."

"Ashamed of what?"

"I'm ashamed of dying."

First of all he answered what anybody would have answered: "It's by no means certain that you're going to die, etc. . . ." Then, rational but ruthless, ruthless because he was eighteen years old:

"And besides, every one has to die . . ."

The doctors no longer did anything except try and "buck her up". One of them recommended champagne. This champagne business was becoming a menace. There was a parish curate who came and gave her Communion once a month and on feast-days. She received the last sacraments, as her son had taken his First Communion, almost without knowing what it was all about, but with good grace, and even satisfaction. It had always been the case that the less she respected a priest, the more uplifted she felt when confessing to him: God showed his divinity through the mediocrity of his instruments. Everything that she had merely skimmed over throughout her life came flooding back: the hope of paradise, where she would meet her mother again, the certainty that God forgives, that everything works out, et cætera—all this

made up the familiar balm which now and again assuaged her. In this mood of self-surrender she even reached the point of thinking without hatred about the Superior and Father de Pradts, and asking, imploring the curate to “keep an eye on” Alban, who was “so alone”. “Do you promise?” She was returning to the fold at nightfall.

One day, she had asked him to come at a particular time. He arrived five minutes late. She hissed:

“I can see that it’s really quite an effort for you to come and see me.”

She felt under the pillow for the key to her desk, and asked him to take out her private diaries and some bundles of letters.

“I could ask you to do it after my death. But it might just as well be done straight away. Wrap them up in a parcel and go and throw them in the Seine this afternoon. I don’t need to tell you not even to glance at them: what is in them doesn’t concern you. I trust you absolutely.”

Alban opened in trust what he had violated in breach of it, tied up the parcel, took a taxi and threw the parcel into the Seine, his eyes burning with tears that would not come at first, but then gushed out and disfigured his face. Perhaps everything would have been redeemed *in extremis* if he had wept in front of her; but he had done so only outside. Within a week of her death, he was finally waking up: he was beginning to love her when she no longer loved him.

A short time before she had made an odd remark to him: “You’ve been a great disappointment to me in the course of our friendship. *I’ve* done what I could.” Their “friendship”! Yes, between the sublime educators, the learned teachers and the beloved pals, only she had loved him. She had been his best friend, his only friend (he had never worried much about whether Serge loved him: loving Serge sufficed; though there had at least been that moment in the cab when, to his amazement, Serge had kissed his photograph: that was something other than just-good-friendship). What other mother would have had her open-mindedness, her extravagance and her gifts (her gift for music, her gift for drawing), her profound originality juxtaposed with her

more ordinary side? Who else could have created as she had done that atmosphere of good-natured skulduggery in which they had both delighted? Could he possibly have had a more improbable mother than she? She had marked him for life, just as the Park had marked him for life. They had sunk their teeth into each other until they drew blood, they had bamboozled each other, then rashly confided in each other, then been afraid of each other; but they had never been bored with each other—as he had never been bored at the Park. No longer, now, did he have the least desire to add his voice to the horrible refrain (especially horrible when it is not the dying person who recites it): “Let it be over as soon as possible!” He wanted to cry: “Anything, as long as she doesn’t die!” Crying and praying; but we are familiar with the prayers of M. de Bricoule: infantile, paltry, and with not the slightest spiritual value. In the last resort all this was done as men, and men’s children, do things: when it was too late.

On the first floor lies the body of Yseult de Termor, watched over by the nun who never stops asking for a glass of wine, which the cook jibs at sending up to her because she does not take orders from a stranger and a thief. On the second there is a shattered boy who is weeping, head in hands, tears trickling through his fingers, a bar of fire across his throat, shaking with sobs. “You’ve been a great disappointment to me in the course of our friendship. *I’ve* done what I could.” He had not wept over the parting from Serge, partly because he was keyed up by the excitement of his expulsion, partly because the break with Serge was beyond tears. There are footsteps on the landing. He is afraid some one may come in. He hurries over to his dressing-table and moistens his face with water, to hide his tears.

In the midst of his despair, he recalls a little fact that he can keep at bay no longer. Two days ago, his mother told him: “At half past five it was still 39°” (her temperature). Shortly afterwards, quite by chance, his eye alighted on the note-book in which she kept a record of her temperatures, and he read: “5.30—38.7°”. Thus, two days before her death, Mme. de Bricoule was rounding out the figures, for greater effect.

A time comes when he stops crying. The sordid has driven out the sublime; there is no more room for suffering. Formalities, obsequies, the estate, the board of guardians, this big house with two servants to control, the prospect of having to move. . . . Already the servants are coming to him for orders, and he is consulted about everything, as if he knew about anything at all except school and the Romans. He has lived, his grasp on life has been short but intense—two years of adolescence are richer than twenty of adult life—and he realizes that while he may know the deeper realities, he is dazed and helpless in face of the trivial realities. . . . Thank God! Uncle Edward knocks at the door. Uncle Edward informs this young man whom he dislikes because he is “young”, and because he is “impractical”, that he will take care of everything. He also knows the words that console: “Let us be thankful that your poor mother has been mercifully released.” For every one had become heartily sick of Mme. de Bricoule’s dying: she overdid it. Even while she was still alive they talked about her in the past tense, and in front of her. The sparrows settled on her window-sill and went in and out of her room as if already she *no longer existed*. Uncle Edward leaves. Alban can return to the sublime. He starts to cry again.

He has the strangest feeling that in this surfeit of tears there are also the tears he failed to shed when he was parted from Serge. Once again his mother and Serge are mingled. Once again, a mysterious operation.

The relations and friends arrive; they have not come for the sake of the dead woman or for Alban: they have come because of Uncle Edward, who has a certain social standing. Cart-loads of reproaches are tipped over Mme. de Bricoule: “She should have gone to Switzerland. If only she’d listened to me.” “She wouldn’t see a soul!” “And that craze for changing her doctor all the time!” Mme. de Bricoule is not a fresh corpse, she is a woman in the dock. Indeed she has always been in the dock as far as the family is concerned. And then, putting some one in the dock enables you not to give a damn, and to make no secret of the fact.

Among Mme. de Bricoule’s papers the following posthumous request was found: “That my son should not be allowed into my

room while I look ridiculous with the chin-bandage, and that my hair be left as it is." Thus did Euripides' Polyxena arrange her dress before dropping dead. But actually the chin-bandage was of little moment. Ridicule, like love, was a stage long past. In any case they had let Alban in before the chin-bandage was in place.

In the same document she asked for her age not to be mentioned in the notification, doubtless in order that no one should know that she had always taken two years off. She had decided, as far as her son was concerned, that nothing was important any longer. At the same time she regarded this question of age as important. Her first perception was the right one: none of all this had the slightest importance.

Serge was sent to the Lycée Janson de Sailly as a weekly boarder. There was nothing there that remotely resembled the Protectorate. In October 1914 Father de Pradts, who had been called up and was working in a staff headquarters, received a few painstaking and commonplace letters from him (Serge had never been able to do himself justice in writing). It seemed to the priest that he had lost his sparkle: it was inevitable, he thought, once he had left the Park. Gradually these letters became less and less frequent, then stopped, without causing the priest any pain: there are always other people in this world. He had once thought: "I shall get over it some day, of course, but there is a part of me that will never get over it." Not so: he had completely got over it. It is difficult to go on remembering. Oblivion is a state that defies the novelist's analysis.

After the "affair", Serge had not tried to see Alban again. The double prohibition imposed—by his parents and by Father de Pradts—weighed upon him. He had not known about Alban's final letter, thrown away by the man of God, who had also thrown away all the previous letters, which Serge had not dared to reclaim when he left the school. He was "a little bird". He flew from branch to branch.

The parish curate, whom Mme. de Bricoule had entreated to "keep an eye on" Alban, wrote to him. Alban went to see him, and deemed it pointless to go back again. The priest, for his part

(although he had not been called up) did not write to him again. That is what happens to the “entreaties” of the dying.

Alban had greeted the declaration of war with near-indifference. He was too concerned with his own life to concern himself with the war. Moreover, he did not keep in touch with politics. The time had not yet come when, by mixing the war and his life together, he would be able to take an interest in it.

The fillies vanish

No sooner was his mother dead than the echoes of the last dances of the season reached his ears: the daughters of the night danced away into the distance, vanished dancing into the night. And Mlle. de Guerchange? He had met her only at dances, and there were no more dances. Their only mutual acquaintances were hostesses who gave dances and who were doubtless now in the ambulance service, as she herself doubtless was too. How was he to find her there? How was he to insinuate himself into her new life? What pretext could he give to their meetings outside the easy framework of the ballroom, that would not be either too forward, or nothing at all? For a moment he had believed that he could link his life to hers, and a project on the face of it so solemn had evaporated for want of propitious circumstances, just as absence had dissolved the *durus amor* of Father de Pradts for Serge. Mlle. de Guerchange had become one of those plumes of cigarette smoke that took the form of a sylph in the posters of the period, smoke and sylph fading away together. Alban said to her philosophically: “Good-bye, good-bye!” What would a plume of smoke be if you did not bid it good-bye.

*The Park comes
back to Alban*

Month after month went by. Time, faithful and unfaithful, went by. “Society” had foundered; the Park rose again. Now an odd whim took hold of him: that it was October, and not traditional spring, October with the first mists, the first cool spells, the first rains, that was the stirring time of the year for him. And why? Because the autumn reminded him of the prelude to the “Souplier affair”; once again, in the gathering dusk, the empty cabs waited

at the dark verge of the Bois, full of the ghosts of vanished caresses (so much so that one August day, during the battle of Charleroi, he went to visit a girl-friend with more emotion than usual because the weather, which was unseasonally grey and overcast, reminded him of November 1912). Linsbourg was partly right: the Park, with its coarse, cowardly, thieving, snobbish, sacrilegious, debauched and hypocritical boys, had nevertheless been the *santa casa* of Loreto, a house transported by the angels. Nowhere, since, had he found the same quality, intensity and generosity that he had experienced at the Park; not once had he found again, either in himself or around him, that desire to make another person “better” to which some one was capable of sacrificing the dearest treasures of his life; it was that so utterly improper place that had honed the most adamant part of himself.

Mme. de Bricoule had never had occasion to write to her son except when he was in Spain. One day he came across some of her letters. They warned him against Spanish women, whereas he ought to have been warned against the bulls; but he had concealed the bulls, and in these pathetic letters it was still Mummy-Get-it-wrong rising from the depths of the grave, Mummy deceived and self-deceiving: it wrung his heart. It was worse still when he read:

“How I love you! It is truly terrible, for it goes on growing from day to day.”

In another letter:

“I should like to live a thousand years so as to be able to love you for a thousand years.”

In yet another:

“My life is wrapped up in yours in an unbelievable way, and I would not wish it on my worst enemy to love as I love you.”

What expressive power! What extraordinary cries! (which he had read, on first receiving them, with a cursory eye, with less attention than Serge used to pay to what Father de Pradts said to him). How had he ever deserved to be loved like that? How inadequately he had returned that love! She had said to him: “Taking all the time, and never giving anything in return: that’s

what boys are like.” Was that really what boys were like? But that was what it had been like, alas, between his mother and himself. And why was it that what she wrote with M. de Chantocé in mind was so asinine? Were there two sorts of love here too?

It was interesting to see, too, that she had asked him to write her a letter or a card from Spain every day, without fail, so that she wouldn’t worry. He had done so scrupulously. But without ever mentioning that he was learning to fight bulls. Niceness and lack of candour hand in hand; that too was what boys were like.

With extreme emotion, Alban received a letter headed “N.D. du Parc” early in 1915: the president of the Old Boys’ Association was asking him to join. So he was being restored (he did not know why) to the bosom of that beloved house! The new Father Superior had inspired the invitation. The time-honoured French technique had been brought into play: black list, conviction, amnesty.

A copy of the school magazine accompanied the letter. The obituaries on the young war dead were equally painful in their mediocrity whether written by their masters or their schoolfellows—the same conformist, optimistic blah, the sort of thing people say when they don’t know what to say, or when they are unwilling to say what should be said. And the dead youths, if it was they who had survived and had written about their dead friends, would have intoned the same flapdoodle of lies that was intoned about them. Nonentities were transformed into eagles, delinquents into paragons of virtue. Of one of them it was said: “Death frightened him less than the temptations of life.” So you had to die at nineteen because life involves “temptations” (of the flesh, needless to say): ugh! One had only to read those notices to realize how little known and little loved these boys were—and doubtless every boy and every man along with them—since they were “tidied up” in this manner.

Ambition, in which he had been so lacking in Park days, when he was kept fully occupied by his work and by Serge, was beginning to burgeon in Alban. The first and modest shoot of ambition was to become president of the Old Boys’ Association of the college that had chucked him out! He sent his subscription,

and a few weeks later received a circular bidding him to a Mass for the war dead of the college; the Mass was to be followed by “a friendly reunion, in anticipation of the end of the war when we shall be able to resume our traditional monthly dances”. Licking their chops over the freshly dug graves in anticipation of a bit of skirt! He answered the invitation with the incomparable pleasure that every educated eighteen-year-old feels when he writes an insulting letter:

Dear Sir,

I am surprised that you should not be aware of the impropriety of associating the dead of N.D. du Parc with frivolities such as you are already contemplating. The order of feelings in which I lived at the Park, and the feelings I experience when I think about the war, are incompatible with an attitude of mind that is even now looking forward to “social” celebrations (and I know what is meant by “social”).

I am keeping your letter as a sad foretaste of what the post-war period will bring. I shall not go to your reunion. In honouring the Park, and my dead comrades, it would be not a help but a hindrance.

The president showed the letter to the Superior. He did not understand it at all, did not even understand what it was about. The Superior understood; he too had been slightly shocked by the juxtaposition of the dead with dances. But when he saw it censured in the terms in which Alban censured it, it was no longer that which shocked him, but Alban’s censure. He realized that Alban was utterly “impossible”. And the second Father Superior rejected him, as the first had done.

In April 1915, Alban had a curious dream. He saw Linsbourg, in the débâcle at Charleroi, with Father Prévôtel, and all three of them were soldiers. And in this dream he was glad to be fighting alongside Linsbourg, and he realized that he was fond of him.

*His dream of 11
May 1915*

In May, on the night of the 11th, he had another dream, which affected him deeply. In this dream he was his present age, just over nineteen, and yet he was still at the college, where Souplier was still fourteen. Alban went through the hall and up the stairs. Serge

passed him in a group of boys. Did he see him? He gave no sign of recognition: that blind face, voiceless and expressionless. . . . Oh, it was a dream very much like life: quite simple, not very happy.

Suddenly there stood Mme. de Bricoule, in a pale grey costume, with her monumental old-fashioned hat surmounted by a gull transfixing by a long, murderous pin; she was at the gate of the college, as the boys were coming out and night was falling. Serge was walking towards her. He had that poignant look on his face that he had sometimes worn in the summer of 1912, when he chanced to turn towards Alban in chapel with an expression as though of astonishment and shame at the follies of his body. He put his arm through Mme. de Bricoule's, and they went off arm in arm into the night. And Mme. de Bricoule was saying to Souplier, without turning towards him but looking straight ahead: "Luckily it's dark. You can't see my wrinkles." Alban, behind them, tried to catch up, but the weight of his haversack (ah, so he was a soldier this time too!) slowed him down; they were moving further and further away, they were leaving him behind, they were about to vanish. . . . Alban was weeping in his dream, and he awoke weeping: tears were running down his cheeks, into his ears, and landing on the pillow.

What would Father de Pradts and the Superior have said of this dream and these tears, after two years? of this still open, bleeding wound? and what would Souplier have said?

At eleven in the morning Alban was still under the impact of this dream, like a man in a daze. How terrifying, how pointless was everyday life, when one had such things in one's heart! Having to shave, having to go to the tailor's to try on a suit . . .

So, time and again in the dreams of our characters this sad child returned, as the guardian spirit of the Empire in Rome's times of trouble used to appear to the sleeping Cæsars, sometimes in the guise of an adolescent with a pensive brow. Shortly before the death of Mme. de Bricoule, Serge had appeared to her in one of her dreams, in which he had turned into Alban. This time it was in one of Alban's dreams that he had returned, and once again he *was* Alban, since Mme. de Bricoule called him *tu* and said to him the same thing she had said to her son so often. Irresistibly,

something kept coming from another world to make these two people one, and thereby show that they were vindicated.

Alban thought to himself that society could be divided into two sorts of people: those who had once wept as he had just wept, and those who have no inkling of such things. This distinction was quite as meaningful as that between the intelligent and the stupid, the virtuous and the sinful, the beautiful and the ugly, the rich and the poor. People who have shed the same tears ought always to be attuned to one another. But no doubt that too was a dream.

In the afternoon, another thought occurred to him. It was that from a certain moment onwards his mother had *loved* Serge. He had been “the male”, that she had failed to find in her husband, her admirers and her son. He had not failed her, because he was the male in hope, in potential, in dream. Above everything else she had loved him, mixing him up with her son, imagining that she was rediscovering in him the little boy her son had been and had not remained; she had loved him, the urchin with the chubby knees and the eyes that were out of this world, the little beast of pleasure and, in flashes, of tenderness; loved him as mistress and as mother. Now, all at once, Alban had finally understood. That carnal turn of phrase she adopted when talking about him, those dreams in which he appeared to her, her wish to have him round to the house, and lastly, after the final incident, the surprising way in which she had tried to push Alban into his arms. . . . How obvious it all seemed to him now! First through his distaste for mixing school and family, then through his honourable and absurd “promise”, he had missed all that! With Serge she would have cured that disease of coldness that existed between Alban and herself, and that Serge and he had cured simply by virtue of the chaste cab-rides. How he would have loved his mother to do good to Serge, the good that he himself had been incapable of doing! And how much more he would have loved his mother for loving the one he loved!

So his mother had loved him, had loved Chanto, had loved Serge. De Pradts and he had loved Serge, Linsbourg had loved Denie, Giboy had loved Bonbon. . . . All of them, young or old, had been to an unbelievable degree immersed in love. Their loves

shot up and reached out above their heads like branches. They had been brought up in a grove of love.

He remembered the marvellous remark: "Why did Giraud give you money?" "To make me happy." As for him, since little presents were forbidden at the Park, what had he done to make Serge happy? Nothing? And he was saddened by the thought.

The following day he wrote to Father de Pradts, who by now had been posted to a different headquarters, to ask for news of Serge—a respectful letter with a hint of sincere affection. But he received no answer. We may believe, if we feel so inclined, that the letter was lost in the post.

In the summer of 1915, seeing the closed shutters of the Souplier flat, he remembered those evenings when, after he had escorted Serge home, they had so often walked up and down outside the front door, because they could not make up their minds to separate, and then, as they gave each other a farewell handshake, continued to clasp each other's hands, because they still could not make up their minds to separate. He remembered his hands, always ink-stained, the fingers that smelled of ink and the palms that tasted of salt, and at the memory of those hands his heart swelled up like a sponge in water: "Serge, my little Serge with those beloved hands . . ." And he saw his face again, round as a fruit, a slightly rotten fruit on certain days, gleaming against the dark background of the nocturnal avenue: "I have drunk of a face that has quenched my thirst for eternity." He did not know that thirst is immortal, thank God, for whoever dares to slake it.

Then, making up his mind on the spur of the moment, he slipped stealthily into the porte-cochère and went up the stairs with a feeling of overpowering emotion. The stairs that Serge climbed every day and that for four years he himself had dreamily tried to visualize! Having reached the fifth floor, he stood trembling on the landing for an instant. The door, the mat. . . . His heart was beating like a novice burglar's. Finally he bent down and placed his lips on the bell-push that Serge used to press with his finger. A time for fillies, a time for fawns.

In the autumn of 1915, God knows why, Alban had a diabolical inspiration. One morning, on his way back from riding in the Bois,

booted, spurred, with a stag's tooth pin in his hunting stock, slapping his boots with his riding-crop and exuding from every pore the noble sweat and powerful effluvium proper to proud chargers, he presented himself at the caretaker's lodge at the Park and asked to see the Superior. On the façade of the college he had seen a brand-new inscription: DAUDET THE TRAITOR. The Protectorate had disappeared, but the political idiots went imperturbably on.

What did he want with the Superior? Perhaps to describe in his own way the circumstances of his expulsion. Perhaps simply to tell him again, with the forcefulness of the spoken word, that the president of the old boys' association was a lamentable fellow. After a moment the caretaker, having telephoned, told him that the Superior was not there. He was scribbling a few words on a visiting-card engraved by Stern—nothing but the best—when a priest opened the door leading from the hall to the waiting-room, and stopped dead. To his embarrassment, Alban guessed that it was the new Superior?

“Father Superior?”

The priest, caught unawares, gave a vague nod of assent.

“Ah! I thought you weren't in,” the boy said in a not very agreeable tone.

“I am not in to you,” said the Superior in a similar tone.

Thus the attempt at reconciliation initiated by the new Superior ended in insults, as the fine reciprocal enthusiasm of Pradeau and Alban had ended in expulsion. Nevertheless Alban was delighted by this incident, which was lent additional spice by the equestrian accoutrements. How his mother would have laughed if he had told her about it! He delighted in snubs, setbacks, quarrels, etc. . . . for the very simple reason that he did not feel in the least hurt by them, as any one else would have been; he had read Epictetus and Seneca with close attention, and they had simply reinforced him in what he was. Whence a pleasant awareness of his strength. He was beginning to show signs of muscularity.

In the spring of 1916, Alban ran into an old school acquaintance and heard that Serge, who had enlisted in the Chasseurs Alpains at the age of eighteen, had been decorated with

the military medal for conspicuous gallantry a few weeks after his arrival at the front. This was his final appearance on the luminous surface of the water. Thereafter, the boy who had “left a burning memory” sank down again and came to rest in the great cool deeps that the winds have never touched.

One can do nothing without an obsession. Priests who lack one are crushed by routine. What, then, had Father de Pradts done with his obsession? The answer is that he had put into practice what his obsession demanded. There is only one sensible way of life, and that is to bury oneself in what one loves and never to leave it—or at most to put one’s nose outside briefly, the better to appreciate its worth. Father de Pradts had been shattered by the sanction inflicted on Father de la Halle (whose heart was broken by this diktat, quite apart from the profound humiliation). Something deep inside him thought: him! and not me! But he was a man of resource, who always saw a long way ahead and laid meticulous plans, and through the intervention of a freemason bishop, whose acquaintance he had assiduously cultivated, he had himself appointed parish priest of a village in the Morbihan, a place that he had long ago chosen as his bolt-hole if a storm were ever to break over him at the Park. It was Chouan^{*} country, and chosen as such by our Chouan from the Roussillon, relieved to be breathing at last the climate of his political predilections, but careful not to compromise himself, in accordance with his golden rule.

For nine years in all—interrupted by a painful penance in various rear headquarters of the army, from which he was invalided out after ten months—he buried himself in this antiquated, sleepy, happy little nook; nine years which, for any one else with the wit, culture and worldly gifts of Father de Pradts, would have led to the verge of a nervous breakdown, but which for him went by like a dream in which he was never for a moment bored. His passion for hiding his light under a bushel—which he had in common with the Superior—found itself sated. In an area

^{*} Breton royalist rebels during the Revolution. (Tr.)

where families of twelve to fourteen children are not unusual, it can be imagined that he was in his element. He had a motor-cycle on which he rode into the departmental capital to look after the local youth, organizing games, theatrical performances, and “family matinées”. In this part of the world—for the children especially—the cassock was sacred. It was a bizarre sight, the priest with the Roman collar—all elegance long since abandoned—spending whole afternoons playing billiards with the sons of agricultural workers in their Sunday best: the educative value of billiards was instantaneously confirmed. It was a far cry from the day when, speaking of the “little brothers”, he had said to the Superior with a brief flash of disdain: “It’s a good thing we keep Latin for those who are worthy of it.” The life he had led at the Park had been the life of a prince of the church compared to this lay brother’s life, which was a life, nevertheless, in which his inclinations, among them that of humility, were gratified to the full. For the man had every sort of pride—pride of birth, pride of intellect, pride in unbelief, pride in the sacerdotal cloth he was usurping, and if not pride of money, at least the happy awareness of the advantages it procures. This quadruple pride soared arrogantly into the air, and fell back again in a dust of self-effacement and modesty. But not of self-forgetfulness.

However, the Morbihan was not quite the world of “precious lads”; precious lads meant Paris. Not the Paris of complicated boys of the Linsbourg type, or elevated ones like Bricoule, or bespectacled intellectual ones like such and such another, but the Paris of the sly and artful “little brothers”. One does not remain unaffected by a long period spent exclusively with people very different from oneself in age or social background: the influence of the less developed rubs off on the more developed. During his nine years of provincial, not to say a trifle rustic, dealings with boys, Father de Pradts’s mind had contracted somewhat, and in many respects grown dimmer. It was a cultivated mind, but it was totally lacking in curiosity, and lived on its cultural capital. He directed it solely towards his “youngsters”, entertaining them, being loved by them, and being useful to them. This solitary interest was certainly not transcended by a Christian apostolate,

since he was not a Christian; it was, if not transcended, at least uplifted by a certain moralism, of which we shall have something to say later on; in fact, it had meaning only by virtue of the muted ardour which the priest brought to hear on it, but the source of this ardour was neither spiritual nor mental. Hence, when he wanted to go back to Paris, it was only for the sake of the “little brothers”. One “old Adam”—at least one—was dead, and better so: the man of the Park, “specialist in the dramas of the soul, not only in healing them, but provoking them”, the dilettante of emotional storms and rivalries, the man of the Bricoule–Souplier affair. In heading for the Morbihan and then the western suburbs of Paris, Father de Pradts was not in search of life (“the people are life,” the Superior used to say): rather was he in search of serenity.

According to police investigations, the Seine-et-Oise is the champion department in France for incest. Of course, Father de Pradts was not concerned with incest, but this is simply to point out that the department he chose was not an uninteresting one. In 1923, at the age of forty-five, Father de Pradts got himself attached, without the mediation of freemasonry, as a “free priest” (liberal catholicism, free education, free day-boys, free priest: what a lot of freedoms we have encountered in the course of this story!) to a parish in this pilot department. Champion and pilot in its speciality, the said department is nevertheless *bien-pensant*, like the Morbihan: for his postings, Father de Pradts always chose places that ministered to his peace of mind. And then, the Seine-et-Oise, like the Morbihan, represented (what with the Sun King and so on) the sweet smell of the past, which soothed our atheist “ultra”. He bought a lodge, which he made both his own residence and the new premises of the parish youth club, and took over this youth club which had been declining and which he rekindled with his ardour and his brass. Add to this that the parish priest, Father Froget, who had also been picked out from afar by Father de Pradts, was just the man who was needed: understanding, ideally reactionary, and never in his life having given a moment’s reflection to anything whatsoever.

Father de Pradts spent seventeen years in this blessed retreat, unreservedly devoted—*devotus*, consecrated—to the new precious

lads. Here, as in Brittany, this man's whole ambition—yes, all the ambition he had in the world—was that the children of the people, having become adults, should say of him: "Oh, the abbé, he was a good bloke!" or better still, as had happened to him more than once: "I wish I'd had a father like you." An ambition that seems unbelievable in its mediocrity, almost laughable, but which was not, because it was the fruit of a genuine passion. From time to time an André or a Roger, aged twenty-five or thirty, would ring the door-bell, a big wedding-ring on his somewhat horny paw: it was one of the ex-cherubs from the Morbihan. And next day at Erdeven or Larmor a young woman would improve her layette with the generous gift from Father de Pradts—"Babies cost money"—and write a pretty letter to "M. l'Abbé", although she was a bit of a red. As for Roger, he would be accompanied by a boy of ten, his son, whom he wanted to put in the priest's care during the holidays. Although the unshakable law of human societies is that you are offered what you do not want, and savagely refused what you long for, people led by the hand to Father de Pradts a little of what he needed to accomplish his destiny on earth.

Year after year he gathered obscurity about himself, having broken with every one, apart from the precious lads, except two politically well-placed personages, and his beloved Father Froget. They often dined at one or other's house, and only then did Father de Pradts allow himself to smoke a cigarette and open a bottle of Beaujolais, for never in his life as a priest had he smoked in public, or drunk any but the most ordinary wine in a restaurant, so exacting was his conception of the ecclesiastical state. Father Froget would invariably bring up his favourite theme: the decline in vocations for the priesthood, the decreasing number of men attending Mass, etc. . . . Father de Pradts used to emerge from these sessions almost shattered. He did not have the faith, but he suffered when he was told that faith was disappearing among other people, just as it was almost unbearable for him to hear any one speak ill of religion.

His reclusion, for which he would have been despised if he had been a layman, made him revered in the neighbourhood because

he was a priest. How right he had been, from every viewpoint, to choose the cassock! Having reached the end of a voyage that had demanded careful navigation, “What a success I’ve made of my life”, he told himself in a highly profane style—that was but a very distant echo of the remark Father Pradeau de la Halle had once made to him: “We mustn’t put ourselves too much at odds with life.” He was far more in the house style—the Park style—when he repeated to himself with satisfaction the words of St. John of the Cross: “In the evening of your life, you will be judged by your love.” But in the end it was always this that he kept coming back to, at that age when men search for an idea to soften the pain of extinction: “What a success I’ve made of my life!” One may have one’s reservations about Father de Pradts, but one must certainly take off one’s hat to him for the impressive unity his temperament had given him. “He who lives with a woman is divided,” a Christian author has written. Father de Pradts was dual and yet not divided. He was monolithic.

Do precocious children make precocious old men? Having started earlier than the rest, perhaps it is natural that they should stop earlier. Father de Pradts had been a very precocious child. Perhaps it was for this reason that what we call “senile decay” set in fairly early. At sixty-three, he felt an immense fatigue, lost his memory, mislaid things, wore a beret, nodded off, and his heart sometimes missed a beat; he apologized at the slightest provocation; he sought the company of his card-playing colleagues, whom he had avoided in the past; he called people “My dear friend” whom formerly he had called “dear Monsieur”; he kept making telephone calls when he had nothing to say, because he needed human contact. When he was with the boys, he would pull himself together and stop dragging his feet. Nevertheless, he had already realized some years before that a man over fifty-five ought to stop being concerned with precious lads: one way and another they live in worlds that are too far apart. It had been brought home to him one day when, practising football with one of the lads, the latter had gradually stopped sending him the ball, which the priest had missed several times, and passed it to another lad who was watching them; the three of

them had played together for a while, and then by imperceptible degrees the two boys had ended up playing on their own, ignoring the priest; the latter took the hint, and no longer joined in any games.

*Enigmatic
conversion and
tender death of
Father de Pradts*

And yet, feeling himself nearing the end, he loved his lads more affectionately than he had loved their fellows in the past; he took more pleasure in making them happy, and he even remembered with surprise how much less nice he had been twenty or thirty years ago to “those ones” (apart from the *durus amor* for Souplier, and another similar case). As happens with many people—though there are some, it is true, who harden—he was becoming softer in old age. They had never done anything against him, never been rude, never jealous, always easy to deal with, not particularly nice to him either, but always decent. He regretted not having done more for them, and not having guided them more attentively: “Soon I shall be gone; they’ll go on living, and what will I have done for them?” He was grateful to them for still putting up with him, and for not hating him because of his cassock, his age, his money or his *de*; in a word, for never making him feel the immense gap that separated him from them. . . . Yet sometimes he thought to himself: “They are at the age when everything makes a strong impression. What image of me will be imprinted on their minds and remain when they are men?”

It was at this point that there befell him what befalls war-wounded men who have been exaggerating the consequences of their wounds for years: in the end they develop genuine lumbago instead of the imaginary pains they have spun yarns about so often. Three things in particular, it seems, induced Father de Pradts to come to terms (at the end of 1937) with the Power he had treated so singularly for over forty years.

This is how the “surface Christian” began to be reconciled. One of the lads had spent five months in gaol for burglary, and had then been released on parole. The day before his trial, he came to

see Father de Pradts, and when he was on the point of leaving the latter embraced him and said: "God bless you!" True, this was a familiar priestly phrase, but Father de Pradts had not said it as he said the "I shall pray for you"s which on his lips were little more than meaningless politeness: he had said it with sincerity; more, with emotion. It was literally the first time that he had spoken a phrase of that kind with emotion, and he had been all the more struck by the fact because the lad in question had repudiated all religion on reaching his majority, and made no secret of the fact. This phrase came as a *warning* to Father de Pradts.

What are the "three things" that induced Father de Pradts to come to terms . . .? (see above).

One of them was gratitude—yes, as with the precious lads. This man of sixty-three realized that from beginning to end the life he had lived had been identical with what he had dreamed of as a young man, as a tracing is identical with its model, with not a single moral ordeal to be able to "offer up" (for in spite of everything he was not without Christian reflexes; but still, it is interesting to note that he did not count the Souplier affair as an ordeal . . .). Base natures think of Providence when it comes to asking; better natures think of it when it comes to thanking. Father de Pradts felt an irresistible need to give thanks, and he had no one to give thanks to. Doubtless he could and should give thanks to the precious lads, and he did not fail to do so: all his life had been a hymn of thanksgiving from him to them, and there were some indeed of whom he felt in all seriousness that their photographs on the wall of his room ought by rights to have been honoured by a votive candle kept burning day and night. "I have had the keys of the Kingdom in my hands, and it was they who gave them to me—they, and this religion in which I do not believe." He often told himself this, until finally he reached the point of feeling the need to give thanks to something other than them.

Deus nobis haec otia fecit: was it not a god who had permitted him this lasting happiness? And then, his immense, life-long submersion in boys had an aura of asceticism, without in the least pertaining thereto, which conduced towards confusion and did

not count for nothing in the peace of his soul. He had never had any desire to believe, and indeed if faith had descended on him like a thunderbolt he would have been humiliated: however much of a believer he imagined himself to be, he could not imagine himself as a believer without a remnant of reason furiously protesting. But Hafiz's cat put rosary beads round its neck to lull the partridges and snap them up more easily; similarly the rosary beads he had worn all his life had ended up by leaving their mark willy-nilly on Father de Pradts, as the Persian story-teller's cat had its neck rubbed bare by the collar it had worn for too long. And this mark had become the mark of the collar of slavery.

It was thus that he strove to give a meaning—their Christian meaning—to the sacred words that he had been repeating for forty years without finding any meaning in them. He threw out the issues of *The Living God* in which his articles reminded him of a charade he preferred to forget—although at bottom he retained the unshakably clear conscience which had been characteristic of everybody at the Park, great and small. Soon it would all be over. If there was a God, and if he was the God of the Christians, an act of faith would no doubt save him. And if there was nothing, why should that act of faith embarrass him? To whom did it matter that one should be consistent with oneself? A plague on the vanity of the death-bed! Truly it seemed that the famous saying might have been written especially for him: “Lord, I believe. Help thou mine unbelief.” Having spent his life in acrobatics (if not intellectual, then at least verbal), he was well prepared for facing the final ordeal acrobatically. Furthermore, it was too late to give much consideration to all that, which he had always thought unworthy of much consideration; and perhaps in any case his mind was no longer sharp enough to consider it with intelligence. He had to want to believe. He did want to. Was it belief, or half-belief? But we know that he was a connoisseur of people who half-believe. We know that he also loved mysterious operations. But the God of the Christians, if he exists, loves mysterious operations.

Gratitude was not the only feeling that inclined him to “believe”. He was also inclined towards it by the natural defencelessness of every human being who is approaching his end.

For some time now he had taken to finishing his letters, or saying good-bye to visitors, with a "Pray for me". It was an expression he had never used in his life before. It had been an expression of weakness before being one of faith. Some twenty-five years earlier, at the time of the Park, he had sent *The Living God* an article on damned priests inspired by what St. Thomas Aquinas says on the subject, which is to the effect that the damned priest will still emit a sacerdotal aura that will bring the devils thronging round him, and they will vent on him all the hatred they feel for Christ whom they cannot reach (it really isn't worth being damned for the sake of being received in hell in such a manner). This passage, very exciting to the mind, was all the more exciting to the mind of Father de Pradts in that he did not believe a word of it, and moreover, supposing that there were such things as damned priests, felt nothing in common with them. "Me, damned? I'd like to see that!" It would have been a waste of time to have preached so often on the theme that the sin of Judas was not to have believed that Christ would forgive him. The Superior, and afterwards Father Froget, had told him often enough: "God loves you." He had ended up by taking them at their word. And besides, hadn't the editor of *The Living God*, in rejecting his article as "too painful", told him that no priest was damned nowadays? To hell with St. Thomas and his devils! And did not the Church bury the excommunicated? Thus his weakness was not that of a man who is afraid of the after-life, but of a man who still has a certain fear of life.

He had felt on many an occasion the almost jubilant satisfaction that a man of wit feels at hoodwinking society. And in what circumstances he had hoodwinked it! The most subtly refined: making the hoodwinked power serve his own ends. But it was too extreme not to cause him a little apprehension. He had lived by veiled effrontery, which was easy for a man in the prime of life, but which neither his mind nor his character nor his body were any longer capable of sustaining. In the state of slight defencelessness that had overtaken him, he was almost afraid, and did not mind giving a few hostages to the adversary, who really had been the adversary in the case of society, but in the case of the

Church was an adversary-friend. Linsbourg had sought the community of Catholicism out of a need for human warmth, or rather boyish warmth; Father de Pradts was seeking it out of a need to die more serenely (a moment of serenity before dying is not to be despised) and to enter that community he was prepared to make a few concessions, such, for instance, as believing in God. And then, everything within him was beginning to fade into a kind of mist, or shall we say dream; his conversion was part of this dream. He had read the words of the curé d'Ars: "The priest will only really understand himself in Heaven." He was waiting for Heaven to sort himself out.

There are some who will say of this premature softening that it was hastened by the double and triple duplicity of Father de Pradts, who pretended to be republican and was conservative, who pretended to be straight with the young and was slightly crooked with them, and who was a minister of God and did not believe in God. But does duplicity wear people out, as it is said to do? or does it not rather invigorate them, because of the mental stimulus, intelligence, vigilance and amusement that it engenders, so that in the final analysis duplicity might be more or less a guarantee of prolonged youth? We suspect that it depends on the person, and that in the case of Father de Pradts it was not this that had aged him. But (we think) that he was not averse to liquidating one at least of his duplicities, by becoming in good earnest the man of faith he had always been assumed to be.

The third fact that impelled him towards "conversion" cannot fail to seem somewhat surprising. In 1936, he had replaced the various men and women who had succeeded each other as his housekeepers by a Polish lady of seventy, Mlle. Sniejkowska, who had left her country in 1932 for political reasons and had lived in Paris since then doing translations from Polish, Russian and German. She was devoted to him after a week to a degree that it would have taken any one else three years, or thirty, to become—besides which she was so naturally religious as to make irreligion unimaginable, going to Communion every morning, unbeatable on the liturgy, devout without being bigoted. Father de Pradts had lived in the company of an outstanding priest, the Superior, had

sought out his particularly zealous colleagues in the parish since his “conversion”, and was on intimate terms with a very good priest, Father Froget. But Mlle. Sniejkowska was different. As the threats of the Nazis intensified more and more, Mlle. Sniejkowska steeled herself more and more in the expectation, the hope, of a persecution of the Christians being launched not only in Poland but, if events took a certain turn, in France. And in the somewhat vulnerable state in which he now found himself, Father de Pradts was as it were overpowered by this Christianity of another world and another age. He did not understand Mlle. Sniejkowska, but she overpowered and overwhelmed him, all the more so because, never for a moment doubting the sincerity of her priest, she was content to be quite simply what she was, without any thought of reform or example. The Moroccans believe that an old man who habitually sleeps naked with a very young boy or a very young girl becomes impregnated with the energies of this new body, which are so abundant that this body itself is not diminished in the process. In his cohabitation with Mlle. Sniejkowska, Father de Pradts was impregnated with an abounding Christianity, such as he had never experienced in his life. She kept house for him; she soon kept his soul for him. The man who loved young boys was ending up in the hands of an old maid. She also looked after the parish, which was a great relief for Father de Pradts, who was exhausted by everything except his boys.

And so he tried to drag himself out of his area of darkness and to reach up towards the light, if hope means light, and if one can speak of light and darkness in all this.

Eighteen months after this tentative conversion, which calls for not a few reservations but which did at least (with good reason) have the merit of coming about without fanfares, on 6 May 1940, which was a Friday, Father de Pradts did not feel like going down after dinner to the “study group” in which the older boys conducted a kind of evening class for the younger ones. It was the first time he had not wanted to see the boys, and he said to himself that if he did not want to see the boys, it was because his existence was finished. He did not feel anything in particular, except this non-desire. He looked at a little magazine called *Les*

Aventures des Pieds nickelés that was lying on a chest of drawers—a magazine apparently aimed at youngsters (yet which he had once seen in the hands of a young man of twenty-three!) which a ten-year-old had handed him a little while ago, saying: “Here, if you want to read it . . .” When Mlle. Sniejkowska had made as if to throw it out, he had stopped her: “No, we must keep that. It was too funny.” Too funny? That too had touched him. But now he looked at the little comic, and if he had seen the woman throwing it out, he would have let her do so. It was in the midst of these feelings, or rather this absence of feeling, that he decided to receive extreme unction. Was it the fact of detaching himself from the boys that *warned* him of his imminent death, or was it this fact that *determined* it? It is a matter of opinion.

Father Froget gave him extreme unction. This priest was such a good man that as he administered the sacrament there was the hint of a smile on his lips from time to time. Let no one be astonished: he did not have the slightest doubt as to the salvation of Father de Pradts, any more than did Father de Pradts himself, who now, paraphrasing the words of Jesus in Pascal, imagined that Jesus was saying to him: “You would not find me if I were not in you” (those whom young people call their “masters” ought to say these words to their charges). Both priests were in agreement with the Superior: when all was said and done, Father de Pradts had served the Church well. Father Froget had guessed at a lot of things; he attributed no importance to them. As the dying man murmured *Et clamor meus ad te veniat*, a sentence took shape at the back of his mind: “I do not believe”; but he did not say it; he said the sentence of faith. And similarly, when Father Froget was intoning *Respice quaesumus Domine*, he thought: “If I said out loud: ‘I do not believe’, what would Froget do? Nothing. He would smile, openly this time. He would think: ‘Poor fellow, his mind has gone already.’ He’d say: ‘But of course you believe in God, you know perfectly well you do. Come, recite with me: *Credo in unum Deum . . .*’” And Father de Pradts would recite the Creed docilely, and indeed wholeheartedly, since it was taken for granted that he believed, and because it was pleasant to speak words in unison with a friend. “Religion was not made to help people to live, but

to help them die,” the Superior used to say. And after all, perhaps he had the faith in his blood—how are we to know?

It was at the end of the interview when for the first and only time the Superior had embraced him that he had become a Christian, he thought. That embrace had made him a Christian, as dubbing made you a knight. There had been a first mysterious operation—embracing him because he did not believe in God. Then a second—having made him a Christian by that embrace. So he saw it today, at any rate. Father de Pradts, atheist though he was, had always been very much at home on the wilder shores of Christianity.

He had made his will long since. A substantial sum to Mlle. Sniejkowska, and the rest to Father Froget for the youth club and the parish, with a few small individual bequests. His family could look after themselves.

The following day he was even weaker, and still in the same state of apathy. What a strange and mysterious conjunction if he were to die with a closed heart, like Mme. de Bricoule. Mlle. Sniejkowska asked him if he wanted her to send up one of the bigger boys; he declined, on the pretext that young people ought not to have to see the dying. Sitting in his arm-chair, his eyes remained glued to the walls of his room, which were covered with a strange tribe, strange at any rate in its profusion: boys in First Communion clothes, in scout uniform, in football jerseys, in camping gear, in running shorts, with arms round each other's shoulders, or else in groups taken by the official school photographer—perhaps four hundred boys (with only three snaps of Souplier), a tribe on which the cassock conferred a meaning that it would have been hard to give it otherwise—the cassock, two cassocks, for these photographs were grouped round a photograph of the Superior, for whom Father de Pradts had never lost his affectionate respect (above all he loved his starry-eyed innocence) although it was now seven years since they had stopped corresponding, even desultorily, and a blown-up photograph of Jesus the Good Shepherd from the Lateran, aged fourteen, in football stockings and with bare thighs. Looking at these pictures he felt nothing, except the knowledge that all this had once been.

These pictures were like the little paper-weight shell on the table, of which he had said to himself that it would remind him for the rest of his life of something unforgettable, but he had long ago ceased to recall that unforgettable thing. And he said to himself: "I should have died forty-eight hours ago, when I still loved. But to die in this kind of negation!" And the thought that came to his mind was the same as the remark that Alban had blurted out to him on the day of his expulsion: "No, it's too unjust!" This was the opposite way of thinking from that of Mme. de Bricoules, who had been glad to die having ceased to love.

"While the light of dawn shone into the gloomy chamber where the king had laboured so hard, and in the church to his left the choirboys chanted a morning Mass, he [Philip II] died." There was no Mass and no singing the following day, Sunday, at three o'clock, to uplift Father de Pradts as he sat in his arm-chair as on the previous day. But from the youth-club yard, through the half-open window, he heard the boys squawking, that is to say protesting, because a football game, or any sort of game in France, among boys, does not consist of playing, it consists of squawking. The only identifiable phrase to be heard was: "shut your trap!" The rest was raucous eructations. Then the spring reopened, with the release that tears bring when they gush out after being dammed up for a long time; there was no more drought, he loved once more. He said: "Thank you, God! But I must die now. It might come back again . . ." Then he said: "How right I was to give them pleasure when the time was ripe! Now it would be too late."

He called Mlle. Sniejkowska, and she helped him to lie down on his bed. She said to him: "M. le Curé is at vespers. But Father Thouvenin could come." He said: "There's no need. God knows me." Like the Superior, he too was making an act of trust—and what an act!

Mlle. Sniejkowska was not unduly surprised by the fact that Father de Pradts was not especially anxious to see one of his colleagues. That God knew him, and knew him as an excellent priest, there could not be the slightest doubt in her mind. And besides, she was glad to have him to herself while he was dying.

The boys' ball struck the house not very far from the priest's window. Mlle. Sniejowska started up angrily to open the window and tell them to mind what they were doing. He pacified her with: "They can't always shoot straight." In the square of colourless sky framed by the window, four grey birds flapped slowly by, passing as things pass which are passing for the last time.

He was holding the hand of the unexpected, loyal woman, the woman who had been loyal from the start—a tiny hand as white as face-powder and blue with old veins like a cheese, with a slender ring like a little girl's. Which of the two hands was holding the other? Impossible to say: they were holding hands together. On his left were the boys, who had been the key of the Kingdom; on his right was this embodiment of Christianity holding his hand to guide him where he had to go; and all this was good, if one can speak of good. The kind of dream in which he had lived, which usually ends in ugliness, was ending for him in tranquillity: there too, a god had given him this good fortune. His hand in the woman's hand, but his eyes gazing at the boys on the walls, still with that overflowing unceasing effusion (ah, if it were to stop!). The unity of his life had come from them: from them and from his affection for them. True, what was drawing to its close had been a highly profane existence; he had been guilty of everything the Superior had accused him of during that famous month of March in 1913. And yet, among the children who had succeeded one another from one end of this existence to the other—it was they who had upheld him on the surface of life as corks hold a net on the surface of the sea—there were some whom no one had loved better or as well as he had loved them: he had helped them, materially and morally, guided them, given them self-confidence, sustained them by his will, when they were so inclined to be lacking in will, he had given them a happier childhood; in the course of their lives, no one had ever spoken to them or would speak to them at the level on which he had spoken to them: with the same respect. And he himself had never been betrayed by any of them, or seriously cheated by any of them. He in his turn had been on the whole respected by them—respected even by little rogues, whom he respected knowing them for what they were—

and sometimes loved a little, in so far as boys can love. And the niceness he had found in them (“They aren’t so bad, these children”: the Superior’s remark kept coming back to him) when they could have done him so much harm, was surely enough to vindicate the human race? “My natural bent did not encourage me to love the human race. But I managed to love it, thanks to them.”

The ball thudded against the wall again, almost against the window-pane. The priest squeezed the woman’s hand as if to restrain her, as if to say to her: “Let the boys play.” He raised himself up, and his eyes came to rest on the wall, perhaps beyond the wall. He said: “How beautiful it is! How beautiful!” Then he fell back on to the pillow, and ceased to be. It was 7 May 1940. God was calling Father de Pradts back to him just in time to prevent him from being a collaborator.

All this had happened painlessly, both for Father de Pradts and for Mlle. Sniejkowska, for whom the death of a saintly priest was if anything a consoling event. Besides, death interested her less than did suffering.

God knew Father de Pradts, according to his own account. Mlle. Sniejkowska knew nothing, nothing whatsoever, about Father de Pradts. She had loved, served and sustained, at the hour when his destiny was perhaps being settled for eternity, a man who was not the man she believed him to be, a man as unknown to her as if she had found him at his last gasp on the pavement. What would she have done had she known the real Father de Pradts? What would she have been? Human, and withdrawn in horror, or Christian, and remained without any effort, as Father Froget had remained? Father de Pradts had his unfathomable side. Mlle. Sniejkowska doubtless had hers, like you and me.

Ubi Troja fuit

In 1961, the Ecole Notre-Dame du Parc was razed to the ground, together with the pelota court, to make room for a monster garage and monster buildings intended not so much to house their occupants as to ensure them a status not to be sneered at. The Iliad of the Protection had ended like the other Iliad: *Ubi Troja fuit*. The priests’ studies were razed; the dormitories were razed; the

store-room was razed; the Petite Espérance was razed; the chapel was razed, and in the chapel, destroyed with the rest, a marble plaque bearing a long, a very long list of names, among them the following:

Paul de LINSBOURG, second-lieutenant, 23rd R.A.L., Verdun, 1916.

Raymond GIBOY, sergeant, 132nd R.I., Verdun, 1916.

Hubert SALINS, officer cadet, 26th B.C.A., Mont Kemmel, 1917.

André LAPAILLY, private, 29th Engineers, Saint-Mihiel, 1918.

DIED ON THE FIELD OF HONOUR