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THE BOULEVARD DU CANGE was a broad, quiet street that marked the eastern flank of the city of Amiens. The wagons that rolled in from Lille and Arras to the north made directly into the tanneries and mills of the Saint-Leu quarter without needing to use this rutted, leafy road. The town side of the boulevard backed on to substantial gardens which were squared off and apportioned with civic precision to the houses they adjoined. On the damp grass were chestnut trees, lilac and willows, cultivated to give shade and quietness to their owners. The gardens had a wild, overgrown look and their deep lawns and bursting hedges could conceal small clearings, quiet pools, and areas unvisited even by the inhabitants, where patches of grass and wild flowers lay beneath the branches of overhanging trees.

Behind the gardens the river Somme broke up into small canals that were the picturesque feature of Saint-Leu; on the other side of the boulevard these had been made into a series of water-gardens, little islands of damp fertility divided by the channels of the split river. Long, flat-bottomed boats propelled by poles took the town-dwellers through the waterways on Sunday afternoons. All along the river and its streams sat fishermen, slumped on their rods; in hats and coats beneath the cathedral and in shirtsleeves by the banks of the water-gardens, they dipped their lines in search of trout or carp.

The Azaires' house showed a strong, formal front towards the road from behind iron railings. The traffic looping down

towards the river would have been in no doubt that this was the property of a substantial man. The slate roof plunged in conflicting angles to cover the irregular shape of the house. Beneath one of them a dormer window looked out on to the boulevard. The first floor was dominated by a stone balcony over whose balustrades the red creeper had made its way up to the roof. There was a formidable front door with iron facings on the timber.

Inside, the house was both smaller and larger than it looked. It had no rooms of intimidating grandeur, no gilt ball-rooms with dripping chandeliers, yet it had unexpected spaces and corridors that disclosed new corners with steps down into the gardens; there were small salons equipped with writing desks and tapestry-covered chairs that opened inwards from unregarded passageways. Even from the end of the lawn it was difficult to see how the rooms and corridors were fitted into the placid rectangles of stone. Throughout the building the floors made distinctive sounds beneath the press of feet, so that with its closed angles and echoing air the house was always a place of unseen footsteps.

Stephen Wraysford's metal trunk had been sent ahead and was waiting at the foot of the bed. He unpacked his clothes and hung his spare suit in the giant carved wardrobe. There was an enamel wash bowl and wooden towel rail beneath the window. He had to stand on tiptoe to look out over the boulevard where a cab was waiting on the other side of the street, the horse shaking its harness and reaching up its neck to nibble at the branches of a lime tree. He tested the resilience of the bed, then lay down on it, resting his head on the concealed bolster. The room was simple but had been decorated with some care. There was a vase of wild flowers on the table and prints of street scenes in Honfleur on either side of the door.

It was a spring evening with a late sun in the sky beyond the cathedral and the sounds of blackbirds from either side of the house. Stephen washed perfunctorily and tried to flatten his black hair in the small looking glass. He placed half a dozen cigarettes in a metal case which he tucked inside his jacket. He emptied his pockets of items he no longer needed: railway

tickets, a blue leather notebook and a knife with a single, scrupulously sharpened, blade.

He went downstairs to dinner, startled by the sound of his steps on the two staircases that took him to the landing of the first floor and the family bedrooms, and thence down to the hall. He felt hot beneath his waistcoat and jacket. He stood for a moment disorientated, unsure which of the four glass-panelled doors that opened off the hall was the one through which he was supposed to go. He half-opened one and found himself looking into a steam-filled kitchen in the middle of which a maid was loading plates on to a tray on a large deal table.

‘This way, Monsieur. Dinner is served,’ said the maid, squeezing past him in the doorway.

In the dining room the family were already seated. Madame Azaire stood up.

‘Ah, Monsieur, your seat is here.’

Azaire muttered an introduction of which Stephen heard only the words ‘my wife’. He took her hand and bowed his head briefly. Two children were staring at him from the other side of the table.

‘Lisette,’ Madame Azaire said, gesturing to a girl of perhaps sixteen with dark hair in a ribbon, who smirked and held out her hand, ‘and Grégoire.’ This was a boy of about ten, whose small head was barely visible above the table, beneath which he was swinging his legs vigorously backwards and forwards.

The maid hovered at Stephen’s shoulder with a tureen of soup. Stephen lowered a ladleful of it into his plate and smelt the scent of some unfamiliar herb. Beneath the concentric rings of swirling green the soup was thickened with potato.

Azaire had already finished his and sat rapping his knife in a persistent rhythm against its silver rest. Stephen lifted searching eyes above the soup spoon as he sucked the liquid over his teeth.

‘How old are you?’ said the boy.

‘Grégoire!’

‘It doesn’t matter,’ said Stephen to Madame Azaire. ‘Twenty.’

‘Do you drink wine?’ said Azaire, holding a bottle over Stephen’s glass. **Copyrighted Material**

‘Thank you.’

Azaire poured out an inch or two for Stephen and for his wife before returning the bottle to its place.

‘So what do you know about textiles?’ said Azaire. He was only forty years old but could have been ten years more. His body was of a kind that would neither harden nor sag with age. His eyes had an alert, humourless glare.

‘A little,’ said Stephen. ‘I have worked in the business for nearly four years, though mostly dealing with financial matters. My employer wanted me to understand more of the manufacturing process.’

The maid took away the soup plates and Azaire began to talk about the local industries and the difficulties he had had with his work force. He owned a factory in town and another a few miles outside.

‘The organization of the men into their syndicates leaves me very little room for manoeuvre. They complain they are losing their jobs because we have introduced machinery, but if we cannot compete with our competitors in Spain and England, then we have no hope.’

The maid brought in a dish of sliced meat in thin gravy which she placed in front of Madame Azaire. Lisette began to tell a story of her day at school. She tossed her head and giggled as she spoke. The story concerned a prank played by one girl on another, but Lisette’s telling of it contained a second level. It was as though she recognized the childish nature of what she said and wanted to intimate to Stephen and her parents that she herself was too grown-up for such things. But where her own interests and tastes now lay she seemed unsure; she stammered a little before tailing off and turning to rebuke her brother for his laughter.

Stephen watched her as she spoke, his dark eyes scrutinizing her face. Azaire ignored his daughter as he helped himself to salad and passed the bowl to his wife. He ran a piece of bread round the rim of the plate where traces of the gravy remained.

Madame Azaire had not fully engaged Stephen’s eye. In return he avoided hers, as though waiting to be addressed, but within his peripheral view fell the sweep of her strawberry-

chestnut hair, caught and held up off her face. She wore a white lace blouse with a dark red stone at the throat.

As they finished dinner there was a ring at the front door and they heard a hearty male voice in the hall.

Azaire smiled for the first time. 'Good old Bérard. On the dot as usual!'

'Monsieur and Madame Bérard,' said the maid as she opened the door.

'Good evening to you, Azaire. Madame, delighted.' Bérard, a heavily set grey-haired man in his fifties, lowered his lips to Madame Azaire's hand. His wife, almost equally well built, though with thick hair wound up on top of her head, shook hands and kissed the children on the cheek.

'I am sorry, I didn't hear your name when René introduced us,' said Bérard to Stephen.

While Stephen repeated it and spelled it out for him, the children were dismissed and the Bérards installed in their place.

Azaire seemed rejuvenated by their arrival. 'Brandy for you, Bérard? And for you, Madame, a little tisane, I think? Isabelle, ring for coffee also, please. Now then -'

'Before you go any further,' said Bérard, holding up his fleshy hand, 'I have some bad news. The dyers have called for a strike to begin tomorrow. The syndicate chiefs met the employers' representatives at five this evening and that is their decision.'

Azaire snorted. 'I thought the meeting was tomorrow.'

'It was brought forward to today. I don't like to bring you bad tidings, my dear René, but you would not have thanked me if you had learned it from your foreman tomorrow. At least I suppose it won't affect your factory immediately.'

Bérard in fact appeared to have enjoyed delivering the news. His face expressed a quiet satisfaction at the importance it had conferred on him. Madame Bérard looked admiringly at her husband.

Azaire continued to curse the work force and to ask how they expected him to keep his factories going. Stephen and the women were reluctant to give an opinion and Bérard, having delivered the news, seemed to have no further contribution to make on the subject.

‘So,’ he said, when Azaire had run on long enough, ‘a strike of dyers. There it is, there it is.’

This conclusion was taken by all, including Azaire, as the termination of the subject.

‘How did you travel?’ said Bérard.

‘By train,’ said Stephen, assuming he was being addressed. ‘It was a long journey.’

‘Ah, the trains,’ said Bérard. ‘What a system! We are a great junction here. Trains to Paris, to Lille, to Boulogne . . . Tell me, do you have trains in England?’

‘Yes.’

‘Since when?’

‘Let me see . . . For about seventy years.’

‘But you have problems in England, I think.’

‘I’m not sure. I wasn’t aware of any.’

Bérard smiled happily as he drank his brandy. ‘So there it is. They have trains now in England.’

The course of the conversation depended on Bérard; he took it as his burden to act as a conductor, to bring in the different voices, and then summarize what they had contributed.

‘And in England you eat meat for breakfast every day,’ he said.

‘I think most people do,’ said Stephen.

‘Imagine, dear Madame Azaire, roast meat for breakfast every day!’ Bérard invited his hostess to speak.

She declined, but murmured something about the need to open a window.

‘Perhaps one day we shall do the same, eh, René?’

‘Oh, I doubt it, I doubt it,’ said Azaire. ‘Unless one day we have the London fog as well.’

‘Oh, and the rain,’ laughed Bérard. ‘It rains five days out of six in London, I believe.’ He looked towards Stephen again.

‘I read in a newspaper that last year it rained a little less in London than in Paris, though –’

‘Five days out of six,’ beamed Bérard. ‘Can you imagine?’

‘Papa can’t stand the rain,’ Madame Bérard told Stephen.

‘And how have you passed this beautiful spring day, dear Madame?’ said Bérard, again inviting a contribution from his hostess. This time he was successful, and Madame Azaire, out

of politeness or enthusiasm, addressed him directly.

‘This morning I was out doing some errands in the town. There was a window open in a house near the cathedral and someone was playing the piano.’ Madame Azaire’s voice was cool and low. She spent some time describing what she had heard. ‘It was a beautiful thing,’ she concluded, ‘though just a few notes. I wanted to stop and knock on the door of the house and ask whoever was playing it what it was called.’

Monsieur and Madame Bérard looked startled. It was evidently not the kind of thing they had expected. Azaire spoke with the soothing voice of one used to such fancies. ‘And what was the tune, my dear?’

‘I don’t know. I had never heard it before. It was just a tune like . . . Beethoven or Chopin.’

‘I doubt it was Beethoven if you failed to recognize it, Madame,’ said Bérard gallantly. ‘It was one of those folk songs, I’ll bet you anything.’

‘It didn’t sound like that,’ said Madame Azaire.

‘I can’t bear these folk tunes you hear so much of these days,’ Bérard continued. ‘When I was a young man it was different. Of course, everything was different then.’ He laughed with wry self-recognition. ‘But give me a proper melody that’s been written by one of our great composers any day. A song by Schubert or a nocturne by Chopin, something that will make the hairs of your head stand on end! The function of music is to liberate in the soul those feelings which normally we keep locked up in the heart. The great composers of the past were able to do this, but the musicians of today are satisfied with four notes in a line you can sell on a song-sheet at the street corner. Genius does not find its recognition quite as easily as that, my dear Madame Azaire!’

Stephen watched as Madame Azaire turned her head slowly so that her eyes met those of Bérard. He saw them open wider as they focused on his smiling face on which small drops of perspiration stood out in the still air of the dining room. How on earth, he wondered, could she be the mother of the girl and boy who had been with them at dinner?

‘I do think I should open that window,’ she said coldly, and stood up with a rustle of silk skirt.

‘And you too are a musical man, Azaire?’ said Bérard. ‘It’s a good thing to have music in a household where there are children. Madame Bérard and I always encouraged our children in their singing.’

Stephen’s mind was racing as Bérard’s voice went on and on. There was something magnificent about the way Madame Azaire turned this absurd man aside. He was only a small-town bully, it was true, but he was clearly used to having his own way.

‘I have enjoyed evenings at the concert hall,’ said Azaire modestly, ‘though I should hesitate to describe myself as a “musical man” on account of that. I merely –’

‘Nonsense. Music is a democratic form of art. You don’t need money to buy it or education to study it. All you need is a pair of these.’ Bérard took hold of his large pink ears and shook them. ‘Ears. The gift of God at birth. You must not be shy about your preference, Azaire. That can only lead to the triumph of inferior taste through the failing of false modesty.’ Bérard sat back in his chair and glanced towards the now open window. The draught seemed to spoil his enjoyment of the epigram he had pretended to invent. ‘But forgive me, René,’ he said. ‘I cut you off.’

Azaire was working at his black briar pipe, tamping down the tobacco with his fingers and testing its draw by sucking noisily on it. When it was done to his satisfaction he struck a match and for a moment a blue spiral of smoke encircled his bald head. In the silence before he could reply to his friend, they heard the birds in the garden outside.

‘Patriotic songs,’ said Azaire. ‘I have a particular fondness for them. The sound of bands playing and a thousand voices lifted together to sing the Marseillaise as the army went off to fight the Prussians. What a day that must have been!’

‘But if you’ll forgive me,’ said Bérard, ‘that is an example of music being used for a purpose – to instil a fighting valour in the hearts of our soldiers. When any art is put to practical ends it loses its essential purity. Am I not right, Madame Azaire?’

‘I daresay you are, Monsieur. What does Monsieur Wrayford think?’

Stephen, momentarily startled, look at Madame Azaire and found her eyes on his for the first time. ‘I have no view on that, Madame,’ he said, recovering his composure. ‘But I think if any song can touch the heart, then one should value it.’

Bérard suddenly held out his hand. ‘A little brandy, if you please, Azaire. Thank you. Now then. I am going to do something in which I risk playing the fool and making you think ill of me.’

Madame Bérard laughed incredulously.

‘I am going to sing. Yes, there’s no point in trying to dissuade me. I am going to sing a little song that was popular when I was a boy, and that, I can assure you, was very many years ago.’

It was the speed with which, having made his declaration, Bérard launched into his song that surprised his listeners. One moment they had been making formal after-dinner conversation, the next they had been turned into a trapped audience as Bérard leant forward in his chair, elbows on the table, and sang in a warbling baritone.

He fixed his eyes on Madame Azaire, who was sitting opposite. She was unable to hold his gaze, but looked down at her plate. Her discomfort did not deflect Bérard. Azaire was fiddling with his pipe and Stephen studied the wall above Bérard’s head. Madame Bérard watched with a proud smile as her husband made the gift of his song to his hostess. Madame Azaire blushed and squirmed in her chair under the unblinking stare of the singer.

The dewlaps on his neck wobbled as he turned his head for emphasis at a touching part of the song. It was a sentimental ballad about the different times of a man’s life. Its chorus ran, ‘But then I was young and the leaves were green/Now the corn is cut and the little boat sailed away.’

At the end of each refrain Bérard would pause dramatically and Stephen would allow his eyes a quick glance to see if he had finished. For a moment there was utter silence in the hot dining room, but then would come another deep inhalation and a further verse.

“One day the young men came back from the war,
The corn was high and our sweethearts were waiting . . .”

Bérard's head revolved a little as he sang, and his voice grew louder as he warmed to the song, but his bloodshot eyes remained fixed on Madame Azaire, as though his head could turn only on the axis of his stare. By an effort of will she appeared to compose herself and stiffen her body against the intimacy of his attention.

“... and the little boat sailed away-y-y.” There,’ said Bérard, coming abruptly to an end, ‘I told you I should make a fool of myself!’

The others all protested that, on the contrary, the song had been magnificent.

‘Papa has a beautiful voice,’ said Madam Bérard, flushed with pride.

Madame Azaire's face was also pink, though not from the same emotion. Azaire became falsely jovial and Stephen felt a drop of sweat run down inside the back of his collar. Only Bérard himself was completely unembarrassed.

‘Now, Azaire, what about a game of cards? What shall it be?’

‘Excuse me, René,’ said Madame Azaire, ‘I have a slight headache. I think I shall go to bed. Perhaps Monsieur Wraysford would like to take my place.’

Stephen stood up as Madame Azaire rose from her chair. There were protests and anxious enquiries from the Bérards which Madame Azaire waved away with a smile, assuring them she was perfectly all right. Bérard lowered his face to her hand and Madame Bérard kissed the still-pink skin of Madame Azaire's cheek. There were a few freckles on her bare forearm, Stephen noticed as she turned to the door, a tall, suddenly commanding figure in a blood-red skirt that swept over the floor of the hall.

‘Let's go into the sitting room,’ said Azaire. ‘Monsieur, I trust you will join us to make up our card game.’

‘Yes, of course,’ said Stephen, forcing a smile of acquiescence.

‘Poor Madame Azaire,’ said Madame Bérard, as they settled at the card table. ‘I hope she hasn't caught a chill.’

Azaire laughed. ‘No, no. It's just her nerves. Think nothing of it.’

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‘Such a delicate creature,’ murmured Bérard. ‘Your deal, I think, Azaire.’

‘Nevertheless, a headache can mean the beginning of a fever,’ said Madame Bérard.

‘Madame,’ said Azaire, ‘I assure you that Isabelle has no fever. She is a woman of nervous temperament. She suffers from headaches and various minor maladies. It signifies nothing. Believe me, I know her very well and I have learned how to live with her little ways.’ He gave a glance of complicity towards Bérard, who chuckled. ‘You yourself are fortunate in having a robust constitution.’

‘Has she always suffered from headaches?’ Madame Bérard was persistent.

Azaire’s lips stretched into a narrow smile. ‘It is a small price one pays. It is you to play, Monsieur.’

‘What?’ Stephen looked down at his cards. ‘I’m sorry. I wasn’t concentrating.’ He had been watching Azaire’s smile and wondering what it meant.

Bérard talked to Azaire about the strike as they laid down their cards on the table with swift assurance.

Stephen tried to concentrate on the game and to engage Madame Bérard in some sort of conversation. She seemed indifferent to his attention, though her face lit up whenever her husband addressed her.

‘What these strikers need,’ said Azaire, ‘is for someone to call their bluff. I’m not prepared to see my business stagnate because of the gross demands of a few idle men. Some owner has to have the strength to stand up to them and sack the whole lot.’

‘I fear there would be violence. The mobs would rampage,’ said Bérard.

‘Not without food in their stomachs.’

‘I’m not sure it would be wise for a town councillor like yourself, René, to be involved in such a dispute.’

Bérard took up the pack to shuffle it; his thick fingers moved dextrously over the rippling cards. When he had dealt, he lit a cigar and sat back in his chair, pulling his waistcoat smartly down over his belly.

The maid came in to ask if there was anything further.

Stephen stifled a yawn. He had been travelling since the previous day and was drawn to the idea of his modest room with the starched sheets and the view across the boulevard.

‘No, thank you,’ said Azaire. ‘Please go to Madame Azaire’s room on your way to bed and tell her I shall look in to see if she’s all right later.’

For a moment Stephen thought he had seen another half-glance of complicity between the two men, but when he looked at Bérard his face was absorbed in the cards that were fanned out in his hand.

Stephen said goodbye to the visitors when they finally got up to leave. He stood at the window of the sitting room, watching them in the light of the porch. Bérard put on a top hat as though he were some baron on his way home from the opera; Madame Bérard, her face glowing, wrapped her cape round her and took his arm. Azaire leaned forward from the waist and talked in what looked like an urgent whisper.

A soft rain had begun to fall outside, loosening the earth at the sides of the rutted tracks on the road and sounding the leaves on the plane trees. It gave a greasy film to the window of the sitting room and then formed larger drops which began to run down the glass. Behind it Stephen’s pale face was visible as he watched the departing guests – a tall figure with hands thrust into his pockets, his eyes patient and intent, the angle of his body that of a youthful indifference cultivated by willpower and necessity. It was a face which in turn most people treated cautiously, unsure whether its ambivalent expressions would resolve themselves into passion or acquiescence.

Up in his room Stephen listened to the noises of the night. A loose shutter turned slowly on its hinges and banged against the wall at the back of the house. There was an owl somewhere deep in the gardens, where the cultivation gave way to wildness. There was also the irregular wheeze and rush of the plumbing in its narrow pipes.

Stephen sat down at the writing table by the window and opened a notebook with pages ruled in thick blue lines. It was half-full with inky writing that spread over the lines in clusters that erupted from the red margin on the left. There were

dates at intervals in the text, though there were gaps of days and sometimes weeks between them.

He had kept a notebook for five years, since a master at the grammar school had suggested it. The hours of Greek and Latin study had given him an unwanted but ingrained knowledge of the languages that he used as the basis of a code. When the subject matter was sensitive, he would change the sex of the characters and note their actions or his responses with phrases that could not mean anything to a chance reader.

He laughed softly to himself as he wrote. This sense of secrecy was something he had had to cultivate in order to overcome a natural openness and a quick temper. At the age of ten or eleven his artless enthusiasm and outraged sense of right and wrong had made him the despair of his teachers, but he had slowly learned to breathe and keep calm, not to trust his responses, but to wait and be watchful.

His cuffs loosened, he held his face in his hands and looked at the blank wall ahead of him. There came a noise that this time was not the shutter or the sound of water but something shriller and more human. It came again, and Stephen crossed the room to listen for it. He opened the door on to the landing and stepped out gently, remembering the sound his feet had made before. The noise was of a woman's voice, he was almost sure, and it was coming from the floor below.

He took off his shoes, slid them quietly over the threshold of his room and began to creep down the stairs. It was completely dark in the house; Azaire must have turned off all the lights on his way to bed. Stephen felt the spring of the wooden treads beneath his socks and the line of the banister under his exploring hand. He had no fear.

On the first-floor landing he hesitated. The size of the house and the number of possible directions from which the noise could have come became dauntingly clear. Three passageways opened from the landing, one of them up a small step leading towards the front of the house and two going sideways along the length of it before breaking up into further corridors. A whole family and its servants, to say nothing of bathrooms, laundries or stores, was on this floor. He could wander by

chance into a cook's bedroom or an upstairs salon with Chinese ornaments and Louis XVI silks.

He listened intently, stifling his own breath for a moment. There was a different sound now, not identifiably a woman's voice, but a lower note, almost like sobbing, interrupted by a more material sound of brief impact. Stephen wondered if he should continue. He had left his room impulsively in the belief that something was wrong; now it seemed to him he might merely be trespassing on the privacy of some member of the household. But he did not falter long because he knew that the noise was not a normal one.

He took a passageway to the right, walking with exaggerated care, one arm in front of him to protect his eyes from harm, and one feeling along the wall. The passageway came to a junction, and looking leftwards Stephen saw a narrow bar of light coming from beneath a closed door. He calculated how close to the door he should go. He wanted to remain sufficiently near to the turn in the corridor that he would have time to double back into it and out of sight of anyone emerging from the room.

He went to within half a dozen paces, which was as close as he dared. He stopped and listened, again quelling his own breathing so he would not miss a sound. He could feel the swell of his heart against his chest and a light pulse in the flesh of his neck.

He heard a woman's voice, cool and low, though made intense by desperation. She was pleading, and the words, though indistinct because of the way she kept her voice down, were made audible in places by the urgency of the feeling behind them. Stephen could distinguish the word 'René', and later 'I implore you', and then 'children'. The voice, which he recognized even on this slight evidence as Madame Azaire's, was cut short by the thudding sound he had heard before. It turned to a gasp which, because of its sudden move into a higher register, was clearly one of pain.

Stephen moved forward along the corridor, his hands no longer raised cautiously in front of him but tensed into fists by his ribs. A step or two short of the door he managed to control his sense of confused anger. For the first time he heard a

man's voice. It was repeating a single word in a broken, unconvinced tone that gave way to a sob. Then there were footsteps.

Stephen turned and ran for the cover of the passageway, knowing he had advanced beyond the limit he had set himself. As he turned the corner he heard Azaire's quizzical voice. 'Is there anyone there?' He tried to remember whether there had been any hazards on his way as he ran back towards the landing without time to check that his path was clear. From the foot of the stairs going up to the second floor he could see that some light was coming from his room. He took the steps two at a time and plunged towards the switch on the table lamp, causing it to rock and bang as he reached it.

He stood still in the middle of the room, listening. He could hear footsteps reach the bottom of the stairs below. If Azaire came up he would wonder why he was standing fully dressed in the middle of a dark room. He moved to the bed and slid under the covers.

After ten minutes he thought it safe to undress for bed. He closed the door and the shutter on the small window and sat down in his nightclothes at the writing table. He read over the entry he had written earlier, which described his journey from London, the train in France and the arrival in the boulevard du Cange. It made brief comments on the character of Bérard and his wife, under heavy disguise, and gave his impressions of Azaire and the two children. He saw, with some surprise, that what had struck him most he had not written about at all.

RISING IN THE morning with a clear head, rested, and full of interest in his new surroundings, Stephen put the happenings of the night from his mind and submitted to a full tour of Azaire's business operations.

They left the prosperity of the boulevard and walked to Saint-Leu quarter, which looked to Stephen like a medieval engraving, with gabled houses leaning over cobbled streets above the canals. There were washing lines attached to crooked walls and drainpipes; small children in ragged clothes played hide-and-seek on the bridges and ran sticks along the iron railings at the water's edge. Women carried buckets of drinking water collected from the fountains in the better areas of town to their numerous offspring, some of whom waited in the family's single room, while others, mostly immigrants from the countryside of Picardy who had come in search of work, lodged in makeshift shelters in the back yards of the bursting houses. There was the noise of poverty that comes from children on the streets and their mothers screaming threats or admonishments or calling out important news to neighbours. There was the racket of cohabitation when no household is closed to another, there were voices from the crowded bakeries and shops, while the men with barrows and horse-drawn carts cried up their goods a dozen times on each street.

Azaire moved nimbly through the crowd, took Stephen's arm as they crossed a wooden bridge, turned from the shouted abuse of a surly adolescent boy, led the way up a

wrought-iron staircase on the side of a building and delivered them both into a first-floor office that looked down on to a factory floor.

‘Sit down. I have a meeting now with Meyraux, who is my senior man and also, as a punishment for whatever sins I have committed, the head of the syndicate.’ Azaire pointed to a leather-covered seat on the far side of a desk piled with papers. He went down the internal steps to the factory floor, leaving Stephen to look out through the glass walls of the office on to the scene below.

The workers were mostly women, sitting at spinning machines at the far end of the room, though there were also men and boys in flat leather caps at work on the machines or transporting yarn or bolts of material on little wooden-wheeled wagons. There was a rhythmical clatter from the antiquated jennys which almost drowned the shouts of the foreman, a red-faced man with a moustache who strode up and down in a coat that came down almost to his ankles. At the near end of the factory were rows of workers at Singer sewing machines, their knees rising and falling as they pumped the mechanism, their hands working in flat opposition to one another, going rapidly this way then that, as though adjusting the pressure on a huge tap. To Stephen, who had spent many hours on such premises in England, the process looked old-fashioned, in the same way that the streets of Saint-Leu seemed to belong to a different century from the terraces of the mill towns of Lancashire.

Azaire returned with Meyraux, a small, fleshy man with thick dark hair swept across his forehead. Meyraux had the look of someone honest who had been driven to suspicion and a profound stubbornness. He shook hands with Stephen, though the reserved look in his eye seemed to indicate that Stephen should read nothing into the formality. When Azaire offered him a seat Meyraux hovered for a moment before apparently deciding that this did not necessarily amount to a capitulation. He sat square and unbudgeable in the chair, though his fingers fluttered in his lap as though weaving invisible strands of cotton.

‘As you know, Meyraux, Monsieur Wrayford has come to

visit us from England. He is a young man and wants to learn a little more about our business.'

Meyraux nodded. Stephen smiled at him. He enjoyed the feeling of being unlicensed, disqualified by his age from responsibility or commitment. He could see the entrenched weariness of the older men.

'However,' Azaire went on, 'as you also know, Monsieur Wraysford's compatriots in Manchester are able to produce the same cloth as we do for two-thirds of the price. Since the company he works for is one of our major customers in England, it is only fair that we should try to impress him. I understand from his employer, who is a most far-sighted man, that he would like to see more cooperation between the two countries. He has talked about taking shares in the company.'

Meyraux's fingers were jabbing faster. 'Another Cosserat,' he said dismissively.

Azaire smiled. 'My dear Meyraux, you mustn't be so suspicious.' He turned to Stephen. 'He is referring to one of the great producers, Eugène Cosserat, who many years ago imported English workers and techniques -'

'At the cost of several jobs among local people.'

Azaire continued to address Stephen. 'The government wants us to rationalize our operations, to try to bring more of them under one roof. This is a perfectly reasonable thing to want to do, but it inevitably means greater use of machinery and a consequent loss of jobs.'

'What the industry needs,' said Meyraux, 'as the government has been saying since my father's day, is more investment and a less mean and timid attitude on the part of the owners.'

Azaire's face became suddenly rigid, whether from anger or simple distaste was impossible to say. He sat down, put on a pair of spectacles and pulled a piece of paper towards him from the pile on the table.

'We are in difficult times. We have no money to invest and we can therefore only retrench. These are my specific proposals. Employees on salaries will take a cut of one per cent. Those on piecework will be paid at the same rate but will have to raise output by an average of five per cent. Their output

will no longer be measured by the metre but by the piece. Those not qualified to use the new machinery, about half the work force, will be reclassified as untrained workers and their rate of pay will be adjusted accordingly.'

He took off his glasses and pushed the piece of paper towards Meyraux. Stephen was surprised by the simplicity of Azaire's assault. He had made no pretence that the work force had anything to gain from the new arrangements or that they would make up in some other way for what they were clearly being asked to forgo. Perhaps it was just a first bargaining position.

Meyraux, confronted with the details, was impressively calm. 'It's about what I expected,' he said. 'You appear to be asking us to settle for even less than the dyers, Monsieur. I need hardly remind you what situation they are in.'

Azaire began to fill his pipe. 'Who is behind that nonsense?' he said.

'What is behind it,' said Meyraux, 'are the attempts of the owners to use slave labour at diminishing levels of pay.'

'You know what I mean,' said Azaire.

'The name of Lucien Lebrun is being mentioned.'

'Little Lucien! I didn't think he had the courage.'

It was bright in the glass office, the sunlight streaming in across the books and papers on the table beneath the window and illuminating the faces of the two antagonists. Stephen watched their hard exchange but felt dissociated from it, as though they only spoke in slogans. From the subject of Azaire's wealth, his mind moved naturally to possessions, to the house on the boulevard, the garden, the plump children, Grégoire with his bored eyes, Lisette with her suggestive smile, and above all to Madame Azaire, a figure he viewed with an incompatible mixture of feelings.

'... the natural consequence of a production with so many separate processes,' said Azaire.

'Well, I too would like to see the dyeing done here,' said Meyraux, 'but as you know . . .'

He could not be sure of her age, and there was something in the vulnerability of her skin where he had seen the goosepimples rise on her arm in a draught from the garden.

There was something above all in the impatience he had seen in the turn of her head that concealed the expression of her eyes.

‘. . . would you not agree, Monsieur Wraysford?’

‘I certainly would.’

‘Not if we were to invest in larger premises,’ said Meyraux.

I am mad, thought Stephen, quelling a desire to laugh; I must be insane to be sitting in this hot glass office watching the face of this man discussing the employment of hundreds and I am thinking things I can’t admit even to myself while smiling my complicity to . . .

‘I will not discuss it further in the presence of this young man,’ said Meyraux. ‘Forgive me, Monsieur.’ He stood up and inclined his head formally towards Stephen. ‘It’s nothing personal.’

‘Of course,’ said Stephen, also standing up. ‘Nothing personal.’

In his notebook the code word Stephen used when describing a certain aspect of Madame Azaire and of his confused feeling towards her was ‘pulse’. It seemed to him to be sufficiently cryptic, yet also to suggest something of his suspicion that she was animated by a different kind of rhythm from that which beat in her husband’s blood. It also referred to an unusual aspect of her physical presence. No one could have been more proper in their dress and toilet than Madame Azaire. She spent long parts of the day bathing or changing her clothes; she carried a light scent of rose soap or perfume when she brushed past him in the passageways. Her clothes were more fashionable than those of other women in the town yet revealed less. She carried herself modestly when she sat or stood; she slid into chairs with her feet close together so that beneath the folds of her skirts her knees too must have been almost touching. When she rose again it was without any leverage from her hands or arms but with a spontaneous upward movement of grace and propriety. Her white hands seemed barely to touch the cutlery when they ate at the family dinner table and her lips left no trace of their presence on the wine glass. On one occasion, Stephen had noticed, some tiny

adhesion caused the membrane of her lower lip to linger for a fraction of a second as she pulled the glass away to return it to its place, but still the surface of it had remained clear and shining. She caught him staring at it.

Yet despite her formality towards him and her punctilious ease of manner, Stephen sensed some other element in what he had termed the pulse of her. It was impossible to say through which sense he had the impression, but somehow, perhaps only in the tiny white hairs on the skin of her bare arm or the blood he had seen rise beneath the light freckles of her cheekbones, he felt certain there was some keener physical life than she was actually living in the calm, restrictive rooms of her husband's house with its oval doorhandles of polished china and its neatly hatched parquet floors.

A WEEK LATER Azaire suggested to Meyraux that he should bring Stephen to eat with the men in a room at the back of the factory where they had lunch. There were two or three long refectory tables at which they could either eat the food they had brought or buy whatever dish had been cooked by a woman with a white headscarf and missing teeth.

On the third day, in the middle of a general conversation, Stephen stood up abruptly, said, 'Excuse me,' and rushed from the room.

An elderly man called Jacques Bonnet followed him outside and found him leaning against the wall of the factory. He put a friendly hand on Stephen's shoulder and asked if he was all right.

Stephen's face was pale and two lines of sweat ran from his forehead. 'Yes, I'm fine,' he said.

'What was the matter? Don't you feel well?'

'It was probably just too hot. I'll be fine.' He took out a handkerchief and wiped his face.

Bonnet said, 'Why don't you come back inside and finish your lunch? It looked a nice bit of rabbit the old woman had cooked up.'

'No!' Stephen was trembling. 'I won't go back. I'm sorry.'

He pulled himself away from Bonnet's paternal hand and moved off briskly into the town. 'Tell Azaire I'll be back later,' he called over his shoulder.

At dinner the following day Azaire asked him if he had recovered.

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‘Yes, thank you,’ said Stephen. ‘There was nothing the matter with me. I just felt a little faint.’

‘Faint? It sounds like a problem of the circulation.’

‘I don’t know. There’s something in the air, it may be one of the chemicals used by the dyers, I’m not sure. It makes it hard for me to breathe.’

‘Perhaps you should see a doctor, then. I can easily arrange an appointment.’

‘No, thank you. It’s nothing.’

Azaire’s gaze had filled with something like amusement. ‘I don’t like to think of you having some kind of fit. I could easily –’

‘For goodness’ sake, René,’ said Madame Azaire. ‘He’s told you that there’s nothing to worry about. Why don’t you leave him alone?’

Azaire’s fork made a loud clatter as he laid it down on his plate. For a moment his face had an expression of panic, like that of the schoolboy who suffers a sudden reverse and can’t understand the rules of behaviour by which his rival has won approval. Then he began to smile sardonically, as though to indicate that really he knew best and that his decision not to argue further was a temporary indulgence he was granting his juniors. He turned to his wife with a teasing lightness of manner.

‘And have you heard your minstrel again in your wanderings in the town, my dear?’

She looked down at her plate. ‘I was not wandering, René. I was doing errands.’

‘Of course, my dear. My wife is a mysterious creature, Monsieur,’ he said to Stephen. ‘No one knows – like the little stream in the song – whither she flows or where her end will be.’

Stephen held his teeth together in order to prevent himself protesting on Madame Azaire’s behalf.

‘I don’t suppose Monsieur Wraysford is familiar with the song,’ said Madame Azaire.

‘Perhaps Monsieur Bérard would sing it to me.’ Stephen found that the words had escaped.

Madame Azaire let out a sudden laugh before she could

catch herself. She coughed and Stephen saw the skin of her cheeks stain lightly as her husband glared at her.

Although he was annoyed with himself for what his host might take as rudeness, Stephen's face remained expressionless. Azaire had no spontaneous reaction, like his wife, nor, like Stephen, a contrived one. Fortunately for him Lisette began to giggle and he was able to rebuke her.

'Is Monsieur Bérard a good singer, then?' asked Grégoire, looking up from his plate, his napkin tucked into his collar.

'A very distinguished one,' said Azaire challengingly.

'Indeed,' said Stephen, meeting his gaze with level eyes. Then he looked directly at Madame Azaire. She had recovered her composure and returned his look, for a moment, a dying light of humour still in her face.

'So you didn't pass the house again?' he said to her.

'I believe I walked past it on my way to the chemist, but the window was shut and I didn't hear any music.'

The Bérards came again after dinner and brought with them Madame Bérard's mother, a woman with a wrinkled face who wore a black lace shawl and was said to have great religious sensitivity. Bérard referred to her, for reasons that were not explained, as Aunt Élise, and she asked the others to do likewise. Stephen wondered whether her married name carried painful reminders of her dead husband or whether it was some social secret of his wife's family that Bérard thought it better to conceal.

On that and later occasions Stephen watched the Bérards and the role they played in the lives of the Azaires. On the terrace, when the evenings grew warm enough, the five of them sat in wickerwork chairs with the scent of honeysuckle and jasmine that lay on the lintels and window frames at the back of the house. Bérard in his stout black boots and formal waistcoat conducted his small orchestra with dogged skill, though he always kept the best parts for himself. He was an authority on the important families of the town and could speak at length on the role played by names such as Sellier, Laurendeau or de Morville in the making of its wealth and social fabric. He hinted in a long and indirect way that his own family had had connections with the de Morvilles which,

through the negligence of some Bonapartist Bérard, they had failed to ratify. His manner of criticizing this errant ancestor was to belittle the ingratiating habits of Paris society, particularly in its hunger for titles, in such a way that the failure of his forebear, who had remained stubbornly provincial, was portrayed as being virtuous in a timeless manner yet possessing in addition a greater finesse than that displayed by the more artful Parisians. This early Bérard therefore seemed both sturdy and refined, while his descendants themselves were consequently presented both as the inheritors of commendable virtues and as the guileless beneficiaries of superior breeding.

It passed the time. It was a way of getting to the end of peaceful evenings, Stephen supposed, but it made him burn with frustration. He could not understand how Madame Azaire could bear it.

She was the only one who did not respond to Bérard's promptings. She barely contributed when he invited her to do so, but would speak, unbidden, on a subject of her own choice. This appeared to leave Bérard no choice but to cut her off. He would apologize with a small bow of his head, though not for some minutes, and not until he had taken the conversation safely down the path he wanted. Madame Azaire would shrug lightly or smile at his belated apology as though to suggest that what she had been about to say was unimportant.

Aunt Élise's presence was a particular benefit to Bérard, since she could be relied on to raise the tone of any conversation with her religious conviction. Her reputation as a person of patience and sanctity was based on her long widowhood and the large collection of missals, crucifixes and mementoes of pilgrimage she had collected in her bedroom at the Bérards' house. With her blackened mouth and harsh voice she seemed to embody a minatory spiritual truth, that real faith is not to be found in the pale face of the anchorite but in the ravaged lives of those who have had to struggle to survive. Sometimes her laugh seemed more ribald or full-blooded than holy, but in her frequent appeals to the saints she was able to dumbfound her listeners by invoking names and martyrdoms of the early church and its formative years in Asia Minor.

'I'm proposing an afternoon in the water-gardens next Sunday,' said Bérard. 'I wonder if I might interest you in joining us?'

Azaire agreed enthusiastically. Aunt Elise said she was too old for boating and managed to imply that such self-indulgence was not appropriate for a Sunday.

'I should think you're pretty handy with a boat, René?' said Bérard.

'I've got a feel for the water, it's true,' said Azaire.

'Listen to him, the modest old devil,' Bérard laughed. 'If it wasn't for all the evidence to contradict him, he wouldn't even admit to being any good at business.'

Azaire enjoyed being cast in the role of self-effacing joker that Bérard had created for him. He had devised a way of inhaling sceptically when some talent of his was mentioned and following the hissing intake of breath with a sip from the glass he was drinking. He said nothing, so his reputation for wit remained intact, though not to Stephen who, each time Azaire modestly rolled his eyes, remembered the sounds of pain he had heard from the bedroom.

Sometimes from the safety of the sitting room he would fix his eyes on the group and on the vital, unspeaking figure of Madame Azaire. He didn't ask himself if she was beautiful, because the physical effect of her presence made the question insignificant. Perhaps in the harshest judgement of the term she was not. While everything was feminine about her face, her nose was slightly larger than fashion prescribed; her hair had more different shades of brown and gold and red than most women would have wanted. For all the lightness of her face, its obvious strength of character overpowered conventional prettiness. But Stephen made no judgements; he was motivated by compulsion.

Returning one afternoon from work, he found her in the garden, pruning an unchecked group of rose bushes, some of which had grown higher than her head.

'Monsieur.' She greeted him with formality, though not coldly.

Stephen, with no plan of action, merely took the little pruning shears from her hand and said, 'Allow me.'

She smiled in a surprised way that forgave his abrupt movement.

He snipped at a few dead flowers before he realized he had no proper sense of what he was trying to do.

‘Let me,’ she said. Her arm brushed across the front of his suit and her hand touched his as she took the little shears from him. ‘You do it like this. Beneath each bloom that’s died you cut at a slight angle to the stem, like this. Look.’

The brown petals of a formerly white rose fell away. Stephen moved a little closer to catch the smell of Madame Azaire’s laundered clothes. Her skirt was the colour of parched earth; there was a dog-toothed edging to her blouse which suggested patterns or frippery of an earlier, more elaborate age of dressing. The little waistcoat she wore above it was open to reveal a rosy flush at the bottom of her throat, brought on by the small exertion of her gardening. Stephen imagined the different eras of fashion and history summoned by her decorative way of dressing: it suggested victory balls from the battles of Wagram and Borodino or nights of the Second Empire. Her still-unlined face seemed to him to hint at intrigue and worldliness beyond her obvious position.

‘I haven’t seen your daughter for a day or two,’ he said, bringing his reverie to a halt. ‘Where is she?’

‘Lisette is with her grandmother near Rouen for a few days.’

‘How old is Lisette?’

‘Sixteen.’

Without meaning to sound ingratiating, Stephen said, ‘How is it possible for you to have a daughter of that age?’

‘She and Grégoire are my step-children,’ said Madame Azaire. ‘My husband’s first wife died eight years ago and we were married two years after that.’

‘I knew it,’ he said. ‘I knew you couldn’t be old enough to have a child that old.’

Madame Azaire smiled again, a little more self-consciously.

He looked at her face, bent over the thorns and dry blooms of the roses, and imagined her flesh beaten by her withered, corrupt husband. Without thinking he reached out and grabbed her hand, holding it in both of his own.

She turned swiftly to him, the blood rushing into her face, her eyes filled with alarm.

Stephen held her hand to the thick serge of his jacket. He said nothing. The satisfaction of acting on impulse had lent him calm. He looked into her eyes as though daring her to respond in a way not dictated by their social positions.

‘Monsieur. Please let go of my hand.’ She tried to laugh it off.

Stephen noticed that there was not much pressure of withdrawal from her hand itself to accompany her words. The fact that her other hand held the pruning shears made it difficult for her to extract herself without pulling in some way that risked making her lose her composure.

Stephen said, ‘The other night I heard sounds from your room. Isabelle –’

‘Monsieur, you –’

‘Stephen.’

‘You must stop this now. You must not humiliate me.’

‘I have no wish to humiliate you. Ever. I merely wanted to reassure you.’

It was a strange choice of words, and Stephen felt its oddness as he spoke, but he let go of her hand.

She looked into his face with more composure than she had managed before. ‘You must respect my position,’ she said.

‘I will,’ said Stephen. It seemed to him there was some ambiguity in what she had said and that he had capitalized on it by using the future tense in his acquiescence.

Seeing he could not improve on this advance, he dragged himself from her presence.

Madame Azaire watched his tall figure retreat across the grass to the house. She turned back to her roses, shaking her head as though in defiance of some unwanted feeling.

SINCE HIS FLIGHT from the room in the factory where the workers took their meals, Stephen had found a café on the other side of the cathedral where he went each day for lunch. It was a place frequented by young men, students or apprentices, many of whom sat at the same tables each day. The food was prepared by a sturdy Parisian exile who had once had a café in the Place de l'Odéon. Knowing student appetites, he served only one dish, but in quantity, with bread and wine included in the price. His commonest dish was beef, with custards or fruit tart to follow it.

Stephen was halfway through lunch at a seat in the window when he saw a familiar figure bustle past, her head lowered, with a basket on her arm. Her face was concealed by a scarf but he recognized her by her walk and the tartan sash at her waist.

He left some coins spinning on the table as he pushed back his chair and went out into the street. He saw her disappear from the corner of the square and go down a narrow side street. He ran to catch her up. He drew level just as she was pulling the bell handle outside a double door with flaking green paint.

Madame Azaire was flustered when he accosted her. 'Monsieur . . . I, I wasn't expecting you. I am delivering something to a friend.'

'I saw you go past the café I was in. I thought I would come and see if I could help carry anything for you.'

She looked doubtfully at her basket. 'No, No, thank you.'

The door was opened by a young man with brown wavy hair and an alert expression. His face showed recognition and urgency.

‘Come in,’ he said and laid his hand on Madame Azaire’s shoulder as he ushered her into a courtyard.

‘This is a friend,’ she said uncertainly, indicating Stephen, who was lingering in the doorway.

‘Come in, come in,’ said the man and closed the door behind them.

He led the way across the courtyard and up some stairs to a small apartment. He told them to wait in a cramped sitting room in which the shutters were closed and piles of papers and leaflets lay on the surface of every table and chair.

He returned and pulled back a curtain which let in some light on the cramped and squalid room.

He waved his hand at it and apologized. ‘There are five of us living in this little place at the moment.’ He held out his hand to Stephen. ‘My name is Lucien Lebrun.’

They shook hands and Lucien turned to Madame Azaire. ‘Have you heard the news? They have agreed to take back the ten men they sacked last week. They won’t back down on the question of pay, but still, it’s a start.’

Feeling Stephen’s quizzical eyes on her, Madame Azaire said, ‘You must wonder what I’m doing here, Monsieur. I bring food to Monsieur Lebrun from time to time and he gives it to one of the dyers’ families. Some of them have five or six children – even more in some cases – and they find it hard to live.’

‘I see. And your husband doesn’t know.’

‘He doesn’t know. I couldn’t involve myself with his workers one way or another but the dyers are a separate group of people, as you know.’

‘Don’t be apologetic!’ said Lucien. ‘A gift of food is just an act of Christian charity. And in any case, the injustice done to my people is outrageous. Last week at the local meeting of the syndicate –’

‘Don’t start on that again.’ Madame Azaire laughed.

Lucien smiled. ‘I despair of you, Madame.’

Stephen felt an acid worry at the familiar way in which

Lucien addressed Madame Azaire. He did not feel particularly concerned with the politics of the strike or the ethical nicety of Madame Azaire's position. He only wanted to know how she had come to be on such easy terms with this forceful young man.

He said, 'I think it's time I went back to the factory. Your husband is going to show me the finishing process.'

'You work with Azaire?' Lucien was dumbfounded.

'I work for an English company who have sent me here for a short time.'

'You speak very good French for an Englishman.'

'I learned it in Paris.'

'And what has he told you about the dyers' strike?'

Stephen remembered Azaire's remark about 'little Lucien'.

'Not very much. I think he will be more worried when it begins to affect his own factory.'

Lucien gave a short, animal laugh. 'That won't be long, I can assure you. Madame, will you have something to drink?'

'That's very kind. Perhaps a glass of water.'

Lucien disappeared and Stephen lingered, unwilling to leave Madame Azaire.

'You mustn't think badly of me, Monsieur,' she said.

'Of course not,' said Stephen, pleased that she should care what he thought of her.

'I am loyal to my husband.'

Stephen said nothing. He heard Lucien's footsteps approaching. He reached forward, laid his hand on Madame Azaire's arm and kissed her cheek. He left at once, before he could see the blood he had raised, calling, 'Goodbye,' as though his kiss might have been merely a polite farewell.

ISABELLE AZAIRE, BORN Fourmentier, came from a family that lived near Rouen. She was the youngest of five sisters and had disappointed her father by not being the son he had wanted.

As the youngest child she lived life unregarded by her parents, who by the time their fifth daughter was born no longer found much to charm them in the noises and changes of childhood. Two of her elder sisters, Béatrice and Delphine, had early in their lives formed an alliance against the remote tyranny of their father and Madame Fourmentier's manipulative indolence. They were both lively, quick-witted girls with various talents that went unnoticed and unencouraged by their parents. They developed a shared selfishness that prevented them from venturing far from their own mutual reassurance.

The eldest sister, Mathilde, was given to outbursts of temper and to sulks that could last for days. She had dark hair and a cold eye that sometimes made even her father think twice before crossing her. When she was eighteen she developed a passion for an architect who worked near the cathedral in Rouen. He was a small, shifty-looking man with a certain weasel quickness in his movements. He had been married for ten years and was himself the father of two girls. Rumours of a growing friendship between them reached the ears of Monsieur Fourmentier, and there was a noisy confrontation. From her attic bedroom the five-year-old Isabelle heard the first sound of adult passion as her father's

pleading turned to anger and her sister's well-known temper became something more wailing and elemental. She felt the house tremble as Mathilde slammed the front door behind her.

Isabelle was a child of exceptionally sweet nature. She did not question her parents' indifference. The closest thing she had to a confidante was her sister Jeanne, who was two years older. Jeanne was the most resourceful of the girls. She had not had to make the first moves into the world, like Mathilde, nor was she included in Béatrice and Delphine's alliance. When blood came one day to Isabelle, unexplained and unpredicted, it was Jeanne who explained what their mother, through idleness or prudishness, had failed to do. This blood, Jeanne said, was supposed to be shameful, but she had never thought of it that way. She valued it because it spoke of some greater rhythm of life that would lead them away from the narrow boredom of childhood. Isabelle, who was still shocked by what had happened, was suggestible enough to share Jeanne's private pleasure, though not without a qualm. She could never quite reconcile herself to the fact that this secret thing that promised new life and liberation should manifest itself in the colour of pain.

Isabelle's father was a lawyer who had political ambitions but lacked the ability to realize them or the charm that might have made connections where talent had failed. He became bored by his houseful of women and spent mealtimes reading Parisian newspapers with their accounts of political intrigue. He was unaware of the complexity or passion of the lives led by his family. He would rebuke the girls for bad behaviour and occasionally punish them severely, but he had no other interest in their development. Madame Fourmentier was driven by his indifference into an excessive concern with fashion and appearance. She assumed her husband had a mistress in Rouen and that this was the reason he no longer showed any interest in her. To compensate for this presumed slight she devoted her time to making herself look attractive to men.

A year after her failed affair with the married architect, Mathilde was married off to a local doctor, to the relief of her parents and the envy of her sisters. It was assumed that when

the other girls had also left home Isabelle would stay and look after her parents.

‘Is that what I’m supposed to do, Jeanne?’ she asked her sister. ‘Stay here for ever while they grow old?’

‘I think they’d like it, but they have no right to expect it. You must find your own life. That’s what I’m going to do. If no one marries me I’m going to live in Paris and open a shop.’

‘I thought you were going to be a missionary in the jungle.’

‘That’s only if the shop fails and my lover rejects me.’

Jeanne had a greater sense of humour and detachment than Isabelle’s other sisters and their conversations together gave Isabelle the feeling that the things she had read about in books and newspapers were not just the ingredients of other people’s lives, as she had once believed, but were open to some extent to her too. She loved Jeanne as she loved no one else.

At the age of eighteen Isabelle was a self-reliant but gentle girl who had no proper outlet either for her natural instincts or for the exuberant energy that was frustrated by the routine and torpor of her parents’ house. At her sister Béatrice’s wedding she met a young infantry officer called Jean Destournel. He spoke to her kindly and seemed to value her for some quality of her own. Isabelle, who had only ever been made to feel a shadowy version of a child who should in any case have been a boy, was confused to find that someone could think she was unique and worth knowing for herself. Jean was not just anyone, either; he was attentive and handsome in a conventional way. He wrote to her and sent small presents.

After a year of courtship, most of it conducted by letter since Jean’s various postings seldom allowed him to be in Rouen, Isabelle’s father made one of his rare interventions into family life. He summoned Jean to see him when he came to visit Isabelle and told him he was too old, too junior in rank, too undistinguished in family and too dilatory in his courtship. Destournel, who was essentially a shy man, was taken aback by the force of Fourmentier’s objection and began to question his own motives. He was entranced by Isabelle’s character and her individual appearance, which was already different from that of most girls of her age. When he had spent an evening in the mess he loved to go to his room

and think of this young, vital woman. He allowed his imagination to dwell on the details of her feminine home life, with the trappings of peace and domesticity and the company of her two remaining unmarried sisters, Delphine and Jeanne. He liked to evaluate their comparative worth in his mind and was pleased with his perverse judgement that the youngest one, pretty well unregarded by the others, was the most beautiful and most interesting. But while Isabelle Fourmentier and her pale skin and her fresh clothes and her laughter undoubtedly gave him a wonderful source of relief from the daily details of army life, he was not certain that in his heart he had any definite intention of marrying her. Perhaps if Fourmentier had not interfered it might have come naturally to that; but the sudden advent of self-consciousness prompted a destructive doubt.

A few months later, on his next visit, he took Isabelle for a walk in the garden and told her that he was being posted abroad and that he was not in a position to continue their friendship. He skated round the question of marriage with pleas of poverty and unworthiness. Isabelle didn't care whether he married her or not, but when he said he would not see her again she felt the simple agony of bereavement, like a child whose only source of love has gone.

For three years her loss coloured every moment of her day. When at last it became bearable it was still like a wound on which the skin would not thicken, so the least thing could reopen it. The reckless innocence of her unguided childhood was finished, but eventually a sweetness and balance in her nature returned. At the age of twenty-three she no longer seemed the baby of the house; she appeared older than her age, and began to cultivate a style and manner of her own that were not those of her parents or her elder sisters. Her mother was a little frightened by the certainty of her tastes and the assurance of her opinions. Isabelle felt herself grow, and she met no resistance.

At a party her father heard of a local family called Azaire who had gone to live in Amiens where the wife had died, leaving two young children. He manoeuvred an introduction and distinctly liked the look of Gene Azaire. Isabelle was not the

comfort he had hoped for at home; she had become far too strong-willed to be a housekeeper, and although she was an accomplished helper to her mother she threatened at times to become an embarrassment to him. In the strict and experienced figure of René Azaire, Isabelle's father saw a solution to a number of difficulties.

The match was adroitly sold to Isabelle by both men. Her father played on her sympathy for Azaire while he in turn introduced his children, both then at captivating stages of their lives. Azaire promised her some independence in their marriage, and Isabelle, who longed to be free of her parents' house, agreed. Her interest in Lisette and Grégoire was the most important thing to her; she wanted to help them and to submerge her own disappointments in their successes. It was also agreed that she and Azaire should have children of their own. So she changed from the little Fourmentier girl into Madame Azaire, a woman of dignity beyond her age, of pronounced taste and opinion but with an accumulation of natural impulse and affection that had not been satisfied by any of the circumstances of her life.

Azaire was at first proud to have married such a young and attractive woman and liked to display her to his friends. He saw his children prosper under her attention. Lisette was taken tactfully through the awkward changes in her body; Grégoire was encouraged in his enthusiasms and forced to improve his manners. Madame Azaire was well regarded in the town. She was an affectionate and dutiful wife to her husband, and he required no more from her; she did not love him, but he would have been frightened to have aroused such an unnecessary emotion.

Madame Azaire grew into her new name. She was content with the role she had accepted and thought that her ambitious desires could be safely and permanently forgotten. It was, by a paradox she did not seem to understand at the time, the cold figure of her husband who kept those desires alive.

He saw the production of further children as an important proof of his standing in society and a confirmation that this was a balanced match in which his age and the difference in tastes were not important. He approached his wife in a

businesslike and predatory manner; she reacted with the submissive indifference which was the only response he left open to her. He made love to her each night, though, once embarked on it, he seemed to want it to be over quickly. Afterwards he never referred to what they had done together. Madame Azaire, who was initially frightened and ashamed, slowly became frustrated by her husband's attitude; she could not understand why this aspect of their lives, which seemed to mean so much to him, was something he would not talk about, nor why the startling intimacy of the act opened no doors in her mind, made no connections with the deeper feelings and aspirations that had grown in her since childhood.

She did not become pregnant, and each month as the blood returned Azaire became a little more desperate. Some reflexive guilt made him blame himself. He began to believe that there might be something wrong with him, even though he had two children to prove that this was unlikely; he even suspected in some quiet moments of the night that he was being punished for marrying Isabelle, though why this should be so or what he had done wrong he couldn't say. Eventually his feelings of frustration affected the frequency with which he was able to perform. He began also to see that there was an absence of feeling in his wife, though the prospect of examining it and finding a remedy was so appalling that he could not bring himself to face it.

Madame Azaire, meanwhile, became less concerned about her husband. She was frightened of Stephen. From the day he arrived in the boulevard du Cange with his dark face and its staring brown eyes, and his swift impetuous movements, she was afraid of him. He was not like the other men she had known, not like her father or her husband, not even like Jean Destournel, who, though young and romantic, had proved in the end to be weak.

Because Stephen was nine years younger than she was, she viewed him with a little condescension; she could see in him the youth, or at least a stage of it, that she had left behind. She tried to think of him as the third child, as Lisette's brother; after all, she thought, he is only four years older. To some extent she was successful in making herself look down on

him, though she noticed that this only seemed to add an element of motherly tenderness to her alarm.

On Sunday morning Stephen rose early and went downstairs to find something to eat in the kitchen. He walked along the passageways of the ground floor, his footsteps alive in the closed air. There were still rooms in the house he had not visited and others which, having once glanced into, he could not re-find. From the doors of a small sitting room he let himself into the cool of the garden and walked down to the end of the lawn. Beneath a chestnut tree there was a bench where he sat chewing on the bread he had taken from the kitchen, looking back at the house.

The night before he had taken his knife and made a small sculpture from a piece of soft wood he had found in the garden. He took it from his jacket pocket and examined it in the fresh, damp air of the morning. It was the figure of a woman in a long skirt and little jacket; close indentations in the wood indicated her hair, though the features could only be represented by marks for the eyes and mouth. He took the knife and trimmed a few shavings from around the feet, to make them look more realistic where they emerged from the skirt. He saw some shutters being opened on a first-floor bedroom. He imagined the sound of voices and running water and door-handles being turned. When he judged that the whole family would be dressed and downstairs, he returned to the house.

The children were not excited by the prospect of the trip round the water-gardens. Madame Azaire leaned across Grégoire to stop him tapping his spoon on the table. She was dressed in cream linen with a blue sash and a panel in the dress with a row of buttons that neither opened nor held anything together.

Lisette eyed Stephen flirtatiously. 'So are you coming to the famous water-gardens?' she said.

'I don't know if I'm invited.'

'Of course you are,' said Madame Azaire.

'In that case I will, with pleasure.'

Lisette said, 'Well, that might make it a bit less boring.'

'It's very kind of Monsieur Berard to invite us,' said

Madame Azaire. ‘You must be very polite to both of them. And I don’t think that dress is quite right, either, for a girl of your age. It’s too small.’

‘But it’s so *hot*,’ said Lisette.

‘I can’t help the weather. Now run and put on something else.’

‘Run, run, run,’ said Lisette sulkily as she pushed back her chair. Her arm brushed Stephen’s shoulder on her way to the door. The dress in question emphasised the plump swell of her breasts, of which she was clearly proud.

The five of them set out towards eleven o’clock with Marguerite, the maid, helping Stephen and Madame Azaire to carry the various baskets of food, parasols, rugs and extra clothes that had been deemed necessary. It was only a short walk to the edge of the water-gardens. They went down a flight of stairs to the landing stage where Bérard was waiting in a straw hat. Madame Bérard was already installed in the stern of a flat-bottomed boat which was shaped, after long local tradition, like a punt with a raised and squared-off end.

‘Madame, good morning! What a lovely day.’ Bérard was at his most expansive. He held out his arm to help Madame Azaire down into the boat. Gripping his proffered arm with one hand, she raised her skirt with the other and stepped lightly into the low craft. Grégoire, no longer bored as he had been, pushed excitedly past the others and jumped in, making the boat rock. Madame Bérard let out a little scream, ‘Oh, Papa!’

Bérard laughed. ‘Women and children first.’

Lisette embarked with his help and sat next to Madame Azaire.

‘I shall be the helmsman in the stern of the craft,’ said Bérard impressively, ‘so you sit facing Lisette and you, Monsieur,’ he said to Stephen, ‘if you sit next to Grégoire, and Madame Bérard would like to go here, opposite you, Azaire – that’s right – then we shall have perfect balance.’

Stephen settled opposite Madame Azaire, as instructed, and found room for his feet on the floor of the boat while trying not to touch hers.

Bérard let out a nautical cry and clambered into the stern

where he pushed the boat off from the bank with a long wooden pole.

The gardens were formed by the backwaters of the Somme, which had been channelled between numerous small islands whose banks were secured with wooden plank revetting. The land was intensely cultivated for vegetables, either in small plots, where the owner lived in a simple house on the site, or in larger areas whose farmer was likely to live in town. The area was regarded by the people who had nothing to do with its work as a site of natural beauty and an object of civic pride.

Bérard worked the boat along with some skill, plunging in the pole with a vigorous thrust and moving it to the left or right to steer as he pulled it out again. They slid along beneath the overhanging trees, occasionally coming close to other Sunday pleasure-seekers who called out greetings and comments on the sunny weather from their own boats. Bérard sweated freely at his work, mopping at his forehead with a handkerchief, but was still able to give an account of the history of the water-gardens as he punted them along.

Stephen sat uncomfortably on his wooden seat with his back to the direction of the boat's movement. The stagnant water, unmoved by any breeze, seemed to emphasize the unnatural heat of the day. His polished leather shoes lay on the slatted wooden floor of the craft at the unnatural angle required by his feet if they were not to touch the white shoes of Madame Azaire, which lay together in the position dictated by the slightly sideways attitude of her closed legs. The extreme lowness of the seats, however, which were only a few inches off the floor of the boat, meant that her knees were a little raised and the pale skirt was drawn up to reveal the taut stretch of the stockings over her instep. They were of a fine, silken material that was not, Stephen thought, the product of either of her husband's factories. He noticed the delicate definition of her ankles and the beginning of her calves and found himself wondering what fastening beneath the folds of her linen skirt achieved the tension that made the stocking's fabric look so light and open on the arch of her foot.

‘... by the Roman soldiers. But the channelling of the water