

# *The Glory of the Pythres*

A NOVEL



RICHARD MILLET

*Translated from the French  
by John Cumming*

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THE MARLBORO PRESS / NORTHWESTERN  
NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY PRESS  
EVANSTON, ILLINOIS

The Marlboro Press/Northwestern  
Northwestern University Press  
Evanston, Illinois 60208-4210

English translation copyright © 2005 by Northwestern  
University Press. Published 2005 by the Marlboro Press/  
Northwestern. Originally published in French in 1995  
under the title *La Gloire des Pythre*. Copyright 1995  
by P.O.L Editeur, Paris. Revised edition copyright  
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ISBN 0-8101-6089-7 (cloth)  
ISBN 0-8101-6049-8 (paper)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication data are available  
from the Library of Congress.

The paper used in this publication meets the minimum  
requirements of the American National Standard for  
Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed  
Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1992.

The moral right of the translator has been asserted.  
*Publication aidé par le ministère français chargé de la culture.*

Do the souls of the innocent  
also suffer the tears and anguish  
of penitence?

B O S S U E T



# *Contents*

ONE	<i>Prunde</i> / 1
TWO	<i>Veix</i> / 79
THREE	<i>Siom</i> / 155
FOUR	<i>Jean</i> / 243



## *The Glory of the Pythres*



PART ONE *Prunde*



# *1*

In March they began to give off quite a stink. Some trace of the smell was always there, of course, depending on the day, and when winter seemed to be yielding at last, it would reawaken and remind us, of itself, at first without our actually believing it, of a real, old and insidious anguish we had thought had gone away for good, had pretended to forget, but now found returning in little gusts as detestable as those let loose by a woman you love; then pursuing anyone who had got a whiff of it—especially White Cat, who would smell the sweetish, first slightly sugary and then sour, malignant, triumphant, and revolting odor long after he had left the valley where he was born, at Prunde, on the eastern edge of the high plateau, when the century was drawing to a close, when they were entering a new era out there and we were forgotten on our granite slab, poverty and cold hammering us, flattened there on our stone shelf, outside time, almost eternal, not as individuals but from father to son, frozen in the sonorous perpetuity of surnames and Christian names passed down, and as strong in grain and fiber as beech wood, stone, winter, or the north wind on the barren heath.

Until his dying day he would recall the odor of the bodies they kept through the winter months, if there was too much snow, first in the Gorges' old corn loft, then in that hut that stood on stilts, looking like a big rabbit hutch drawn on the sky, and that they had finally put up behind Niarfeix's place, at the entrance to a large, gently sloping meadow that reared up sharply at the end, twisting this way and that as if to catch the last scrap of light, that fine cold northeastern light from which the roughest among us could draw their certainties.

The odor, when roused by winds other than those blowing down from Gentioux or Franc-Alleud, would fetch up against Niarfeix's barn first, then, immediately clearing that low gray stone wall, would climb straight up above the roofs and the slopes of Prunde, then level out and hover above our heads before coming back down into the heart of the hamlet, where the animals would scent it first. They would begin to low, to bellow, to tug on their chains, and to hit out with horns or hoofs, while the dogs stopped barking, flattened themselves on the stone thresholds and stared at us defiantly, their lips strangely curled, their eyes gleaming. Only the poultry seemed to ignore it, and the birds that crisscrossed the yard, emitting their piercing, almost joyful, and impudent cries, as we pretended that we were used to it, even though, for hours on end, day after day, and at night, especially as the weather warmed, it put us more and more off our food, taking our appetite away, inclining us to drink and talk too much, or to keep unreasonably silent. But, there, reasonableness wasn't really part of the picture anymore: we could forget neither the smell nor, along with it, the people we had just lost nor the others who had been dead so long that only this anonymous stench survived to remind the living that they had existed. Yet the torment was there all right, the affliction of those who at winter's onset found themselves suddenly orphaned, or widowed, or left to fend for themselves; the anguish also of those who did not know how to offer comfort and were afraid of finding themselves, in their turn, exposed earlier than they'd thought to death's all-seeing eye (as old Rebelier used to say, but he never spoke like other folks), and they'd be sniffing their by-

now half-paralyzed selves to see whether they'd not begun to stink already.

So it was the snow that stopped us, then anyway, from leaving our slot cut into the side of the plateau: so deep, so dark beneath its big trees that we had ended up believing what the priest from Saint-Sulpice said about us: that we were secretive and suspicious, stubborn and opinionated (morons, he used to add, who had forgotten that there existed pink and white towns, slow-moving rivers, endless shores, people who didn't speak our patois); and that to us, when we had climbed the two miles of zigzagging pathway, and reached the highway that came out on the plateau, the mountains of the Auvergne on the horizon, with their snow-clad heights against the blue sky, seemed as far away and fabulous as the ranges of Tibet.

We didn't have the right to bury our dead at Prunde. There was no church, no town hall, no school: just a few, fairly recent households, clumped together there because the winds are slightly less strong than they are higher up, on the great stone shelf; and because the plain on the other side, down below, out there and reaching far beyond the woods and hills, looked, in its dark blue distances, as uninhabitable as any ocean. And then, when the black wind slackened and it blew instead from over in the Creuse and the Haute-Vienne, when the rain made doors and lonely old folks' fingers swell, then (as we put it) the dead would start to talk; and we knew it was about time to get the carts ready. One of us would leave at night and go all the way up to Saint-Sulpice, Millevaches, or Chavanac to tell them we'd be coming. At dawn the whole of Prunde was up and about, round several fires at the entrance to the big meadow and in the Gorges' courtyard. Some old women too feeble to follow the carts had been awake all night, sitting up in the house of the dead, gossiping or praying or keeping still—which amounted to the same thing, the same dialogue with the dead; recalling their story, tirelessly, because that was the only way to fight against the smell and to retain a bit of dignity; and with their threadbare voices rehearsing what distinguished them from the carrion you turned into out there up in the

hut on the stilts that the wind made thrum during the night, narrating the lives of the departed or of their relatives, or their own, or else others'—they were often the same, more or less—and people came to listen to them for the last time: women especially, who were sick or had recently given birth, who wouldn't be able to walk along with the carts and who later, some other winter, would tell the same tales when the very crones who related them now were reeking in the hut perched on its stilts.

How could we help but think of what we would become in our cheap coffins: wretched corpses more pitiful than our own animals? How could we not seek in ourselves the degree of goodness that would prevent this insidious, gross, and even insolent smell from setting us against our dead people, or against each other, and instead would soften us a little, make us feel pity for them and for ourselves due one day to be like them, just as we ended up no longer hating the monsters we had managed to engender but (when we did not kill them with our own hands as Chaudagne the farmer had done, near Gioux) allowed to live in peace somewhere inside our homes? And we did feel pity, for we were afraid to look truth in the face; that task we considered beyond our means. And they would stay there, the old people, enfeebled women and the innocent, rosaries or branches of box between their fingers, sitting on benches or milking stools, round a candle, a mean little kerosene lamp, or just a little oil burning in a hollow scooped in a large potato, around dawn, after standing at the entrance to the big meadow, along with the others but a little to the rear, as if they did not entirely belong to the light of day, at least to that particular daylight, and were about to be sent back to the half-darkness of cold bedrooms and sitting rooms in whose depths their faces would eventually clear, open up, and come alive as the smell and its followers gradually drew away from Prunde.

Besides, we would never have taken it upon ourselves, even if we had had the right, simply to surrender them to the ground right here, without benefit of clergy or of health authorities (and we neither cleaned them out nor salted them, as was the rumor at Meymac ever since they

had seen old Rebelier there leafing through a taxidermist's brochure). We were Christians, you understand, not saintly to be sure but no worse than anywhere else, and if our dead had been buried like that, in unconsecrated ground, we would have been too scared that their souls might be damned and return howling along with winter winds to come, in our woods and our fields and our very chimneys. We preferred to make do with the odor. At least that was what we would maintain in the autumn, bragging a little and grinning when we began to fear that some of us wouldn't last the winter and covertly scrutinized the chances of the aged and the sick.

It was big Niarfeix, along with the eldest Gorce, who would open the door of the hut and pull out the coffins, shivering slightly on the ladder, a scarf round his face, a big black felt hat on his head. We listened to the scraping of the wood in the early morning quiet, the wind in the branches of the tall poplars by the spring, the women's subdued voices, the distant cries of crows and jackdaws, and the hiss of thawing streams. All of Prunde kept behind the cart drawn by red cows that balked at the stilts of the hut if they came too close to them; there had to be a constant waving of handfuls of hay held enticingly below their muzzles. White Cat had often done this, just as, seated on the edge of the field, he had prevented the crows from assembling in unduly large numbers on the roof of the corpse hut, and had tended the fires of leaves and damp wood they sometimes lit in the Gorges' courtyard, near the spring and in front of Niarfeix's place, when, the wind having turned, the smell had to be dealt with. Like the others, he had squatted in front of the house of the dead and very early on had come to know that silent tête-à-tête with the clouds, the too-blue sky, the cold, the departed—above all with the stench, about which there was nothing much we could do. It generated itself, did so constantly, pretending to fade, to disappear; it dissembled, went almost to the point of smelling good, only to reassert itself with a new vigor and permeate everything, without our ever getting used to it or really resigning ourselves to it either. It made us focus on ourselves, forced us to look into ourselves, yet, strange to say, we did not hate it, for

(in early winter at least) it made us appreciate what we were, even if that wasn't much; then, in spite of the cold, we would remember that we were alive, that winter was no more eternal than we were, and that we had been capable of laughter.

We couldn't smell it during the periods of really bitter cold, thank God; so that we ended up—we who had no priest, mayor, or schoolmaster, and who thought that big Niarfeix, because he owned three cows and two acres more than anyone else, was someone important—we ended up liking the frost, indeed loving it, for it silenced the dead, the poor dead at last strangled (we thought, without compunction) between warped planks. Then we laughed, could eat again, and smile; we listened to the youngest Gorce saying that we were very wrong to complain, that this smell of ours was nothing compared with what he had breathed in the streets of Bort, near the tanneries; nothing either, added little Vedrenne, compared to the rear end of a really unwashed woman, and he boasted about smelling one once in a whorehouse at Périgueux during his military service, then muttered that it smelled a lot worse under Granny Moreau's skirts, nodding in the direction of a little old biddy sitting in the chimney corner, whose features had vanished in wrinkles and who couldn't hear anyway.

So we didn't get used to it. It was all pretense. We wanted to preserve some kind of dignity, and so we lived in a constant chatter, trying to distract ourselves. Many found things to do outside, in the woods, on the slopes of the valley, in the gullies down below, ignoring the winds that whipped their faces. No one there had ever been so busy, or more grimly determined: never had our woods been so well thinned; never had foxes been tracked to such distances from our homes; and never did our lives so resemble those of frightened children. We even began to smell it during the winters when no one died. Many years later, White Cat would remember how he had hated that stench from the moment he first breathed it in, bringing up the lentils he had just eaten as soon as he realized that it was old Granny Coupat who stank like that; hating it even before he knew what death was—which he learned the winter when

Firmin Rebelier died, the same one who used to say that the dead talked and who now, no doubt, was talking among them. After that they called him poor Firmin, because they became poor as soon as they died, even poorer than they had been throughout their lives; for they were now in a state pitiable beyond pity, lost in it as within the winter winds and more noisome than the carcass of any animal, bringing with them the memory of other winters; reduced to the same hopeless, anonymous stench, in which they went on with their dying and which seemed eventually to proceed from no particular where, so much so that—for us from Prunde especially—the valley had become an almost accursed spot whose stench mounted, so they said, up to the plateau before reaching the sky.

In the end we were sorry for those poor dead creatures; yes, we ended up agreeing to feel sorry for them instead of missing them, just as, after all, up there in Saint-Sulpice, Chavanac, or Millevaches, they must certainly have felt sorry for us who had become, if not damned souls as yet, at least mute intermediaries between the living and the dead. Yes, we were sorry that they stank so vilely and that they didn't make up their minds to fade away, yet we had all the more cause to be enraged, to keep hold of ourselves and reserve our sorrow for the true days of wrath, even though, as it turned out in the end (if only we had realized this), the smell protected us from a fury more furious even than the fleeting thought, from time to time, of what, day after day, was happening to those bodies up there on stilts. About this, however, we neither spoke nor wished to experience anything beyond what amounted to a shudder or a vague memory of the corpses forgotten in the gullies; for, as the priest from Saint-Sulpice pointed out, what happened there was no longer the concern of people or of God, but an activity between earth and humankind, a simple if mysterious restitution: the condition of forgiveness.

## 2

Perhaps he remembered it the day when his mother died—when he found her dead in her bed, at the end of the room where they had eaten, slept, dreamed, and said nothing since his father had died, or since his own birth: he who had no idea what role had been played in the world by this man of whom almost all that remained was a name crudely cut on a wooden cross, in the graveyard of Saint-Sulpice up there behind the hills, and the unlikely features his mother recalled and offered instead of words in the evening sometimes, when the fire was beginning to die down in the narrow, low-built house beset by the winds and by the cries you heard at night, and your thoughts were drawn yet again toward those who waited with such forbearing behind Niarfeix's place, as if they were sorry for the living, were urging them to love one another, to live better lives than they themselves, in spite of the wretchedness, abandoned, as good as forgotten in this valley where even the greenness of nature is darker than anywhere else, and where they still knew nothing of the new age and mocked the few pilgrims who, having pushed as far as Tulle, Brive, or Guéret, were soon reporting automobiles, aircraft,

electricity, and things still more unheard of—and in any case—just as difficult for White Cat to imagine as the face of his father, who had been carried off by a chest infection and hardship, like so many of us; quietly, even, so his mother said, as discreetly as a dying animal; so that in his eyes (“See him with the eyes of your heart,” his mother would murmur, closing hers and smiling then) this man had a face that was both shadow and fire dying out: a winter face, with carbuncles, wind worn and quite like his mother’s, in spite of the neat mustache that, as she said, was “your poor dad’s” sole pride. And he would never think of this man whom they hadn’t persuaded to face the bellows camera of the photographer at Meymac Fair, could never visualize him, without reminding himself that he, White Cat, was the son of his mother and of the night, of the deep winter night when the dead waiting on the stilts stirred along with the winds. All that, and everything else, this life, this legend, we had had our eyes to see it and our ears to hear it, or had imagined it—which comes to the same thing. We knew, for instance, that he was about thirteen and did not understand, did not want to understand, into what kind of sleep she had entered and had slept for two days and two nights, this everlastingly beautiful woman who had brought him into the world, there at the other end of the room, in the big dark wooden bed she had brought with her as part of her dowry, with the pair of sheets and the blood-red eiderdown under which she was now lying, with her head turned slightly toward him, and her mouth and eyes half-open. She had not complained, had not pointed at stomach or eyelids, but fulfilled her poverty-stricken destiny with dignity, and as in the past had spent Christmas with him at old Rebelier’s place: the man who had wanted to marry her, no denying that, but who was too old to be a real husband to her. Could he, White Cat, ever have supposed that this clean, frail body under the widow’s smock would set itself to stinking in their own house, like those old folk up on the stilts, that lovely January dawn when he finally dared to get out of bed (something he had never done before hearing his mother feel around for her sabots on the granite flags), managing to piss in his chamber pot without setting foot on the ground,

crouched on the mattress edge with one hand hanging onto the bedpost?

The day before it had snowed all day long and throughout the night. He realized she was sick. He woke up from a dreamless sleep, probably roused by the smell—though he still did not really believe in it—and thought it was the two others rotting that winter on the stilts; and he had gone to help Niarfeix and the Gorces collect wood on the southern slope, in spite of the snow. When he came back toward three that afternoon, it became plain to him. He understood that he had to surrender his mother to us, that she would soon stink so badly in that low-roofed house that it would be as if she hated him and was demanding her due place in the earth but, before that, her place on the stilts, near old Julie and the younger of the Vedrenne sisters.

He had to sit up with her. He knew that this was what you did. He dozed off on his own bed, woke up in the middle of the night, dared not look toward his mother's bed because (so he said) of her eyes and teeth gleaming in the half-darkness. He got down under the eiderdown, waited for the cock to crow, then went out into the pale light. He watched the chimney smoke rising straight up from the valley, then started toward Niarfeix's house. Those passing him thought the tears in his eyes were because of the cold. He found old Niarfeix sitting at the table in the middle of his family, in front of the soup that never left the fire and was swallowed three times a day, a good thick liquid mixed with wine and placed there, where the body craved it, before we re-entered the realm of the winds, in the afternoon's swift-moving hours, on the southern slope, without obscuring the memory of what tormented us so and rose up in us like a flight of dark, dismal birds.

He had opened the door without knocking and stayed on the threshold, blinking in the warm half-light, gradually making out the people there around the table. They were still, except for the movement of jaws and the occasional sigh, with the two women—his mother and his wife—standing behind old Niarfeix. They were all looking at White Cat, not in kindly welcome, but without hostility for all that, waiting for him

to speak, to stop standing like that on the threshold, with his mouth halfway open and his arms dangling and the tears drying on his cheeks—and with that fixed orphaned look that we already found irritating. He was letting the cold in, but no one thought of telling him to come the rest of the way in, to shut the door, and to sit down, as if they already knew why he was there, bringing with him the new smell that had driven him from his own place—where his mother’s suffering had doubtless come to an end, as Madame Niarfeix muttered, crossing herself not because White Cat told them that his mother was dead (he didn’t know how to say it or still hoped that it hadn’t happened), but because it was starting to smell in this house the way it did around the stilts. She had been set free at last, Madame Niarfeix observed, from herself and from the memory of that bleak man, from wretchedness, from sleepless nights and nightless days, from the silent cries that she uttered or from those she used to let out at the bottom of ravines where her voice sounded almost as bleached as the sky.

With that she was silent. They had placed White Cat at the far end of the table, near the elder daughter, the one who had lost an eye running through the pine woods when she thought a man was after her, though none of those with mustaches and breeches would have wanted her; but now she had found something that allowed her to howl unashamedly, to let her pain and everything within her sound out; something to add to the basic calamity of having been born at Prunde, born a woman, and born ugly. White Cat found himself at her blind side. They shoved in front of him a full plate of soup and a bit of bread, neither of which he touched, then they went on eating without a word, without taking their eyes from the crockery circles that they canted slowly toward themselves but surely did not see, for they were looking into their very selves, losing themselves there in that kind of waking sleep and half-light that is the country of dreams and self-reproach, and in which, with time, we had finally discovered a more certain sustenance than our soups and wine.

They got up from the table. Niarfeix had folded his jackknife and replaced on his head the big black felt hat that he had kept on his knee.

He beckoned White Cat. Madame Niarfeix left long before them. In front of the Vedrennes' a child was laughing as it peed into the snow. When they were on the threshold of the low house, it was Madame Niarfeix who opened the door, her face as solemn as if she had been there a long time and was surprised to see them arrive so late, while other women busy washing the corpse shouted that they shouldn't come in.

For the rest of his life (so they say) he would wonder why they took such care to wash what would soon stink, turn green, blacken, teem with maggots, swell, and burst like the water bubbling on the surface of the marshes; why he must hate that body, that whiteness glimpsed between the hands of the women washing it as Niarfeix put his big calloused hand on White Cat's neck and made him turn round into the short-lived afternoon light, murmuring as if he had read White Cat's thoughts: "Poor us, poor pitiful us!"—for we were the ones still most in need of pity, having to put up with that, and knowing we too would be like that, blacker and more foul smelling than a hearthstone upon which foxes shat.

"You'll see," said Niarfeix. "There's nothing you can do against that. Nothing works, no perfume or soap; neither prayer, water, nor wind, even when they're fifteen feet under."

We had watched mothers in the autumn laying in a stock of eau de cologne and that incense paper you burnt to give a sweet smell, asking their daughters not to leave them to do their stinking before they were in the cemetery and, even then, to plant something that smelled nice on the grave: a rose bush, a citron tree, or (as their fancy strayed) wistaria, as in books. This fastidiousness born of fear evoked its due response in the anger that White Cat felt for his mother now and that, in fact, everyone in Prunde experienced when someone in the family died and you had to breathe that stench in for weeks on end, forgetting that you were still of this world, even though you weren't worth much, before reality got hold of you again, and you remembered that springtime would return one day to find us neither weeping nor penitent, but haggard, dry eyed, teeth on

edge and fists clenched, exhausted, and consumed by the knowledge that all was vanity.

Some people ordered their coffins at the first hint of spring. Others went to get them almost clandestinely, at the end of summer, at Meymac or at Ussel, and bore their burden back, hidden under straw or pine branches, when the fireflies were dancing in the golden twilight. We pretended to see nothing, just as they acted as if they did not know they were following, though in the opposite direction, what would be their final route; for they preferred to tempt fate rather than find themselves waiting in the depths of winter while Gorce's son Peter, so slow and mulish, but the only one who knew how, planed the oak or pine planks, put them together after a fashion, and screwed a few miserable scraps of tinplate to the sides. But that day young Gorce worked fast, probably because he was very fond of Marthe, the dead woman, whom so many of them had dreamed of, even the very young ones, at Prunde and elsewhere, that Marthe who from that evening onward would lie between oak boards.

White Cat stood on her right. He watched the people from the valley file past, one after the other: the two Gorce boys and their father, the three Niarfeixes, old Vedrenne crying like a baby, and all the male inhabitants of Prunde, twenty in all, while the women stayed in a group on the other side of the coffin. No one said a word as the quivering candlelight disclosed the face of Marthe, of whom all they remembered was that her life had been no different from their own—apart from her loyalty to her dead husband, for she refused all offers of marriage and more discreet proposals, and withdrew behind those smiling and ageless features that could still be seen there, behind that severe and dignified beauty, as if all her efforts had been aimed at achieving only one objective: appearing like that, on this day alone, and ensuring that they would approve of her as she was now, clad entirely in black, her hands finally liberated from all labor, her fingers interlaced with the plain rosary beads bought without really believing him from a hawker who said they came from Jerusalem, and her forehead and lips moistened with a little eau de cologne that old

Madame Grandchamp refreshed now and then as if anointing her with holy oils.

Someone muttered that she had her eyes shut at last; and perhaps it came to White Cat that he had never before watched her sleeping, that possibly she had never slept, and that her life had been only a series of long vigils, each night slower than the day and possibly more luminous, he may have supposed, for her having had to peer into the darkness so intently, in search of now distant or sleeping faces. But now she too was asleep, her countenance relaxed, with a smile that he did not recognize and had never seen on any mouth, and that seemed to rise from this face along with the insipid odor that they all tried to breathe as if it were odorless, in spite of the eau de cologne, the wood in the fireplace, and the candles, and that made them snort in fits and starts, as rapidly as possible, probing the recesses and draughts for some other scent and trying to think of something other than what was happening within this body that seemed to shrink before their very eyes. The odor was the real shroud of this woman who had remained so poor that even the dress she was married in was no longer there to wrap her in. It was an odor, too, that White Cat might not have been far from loving (though “loving” was not exactly the word), as though it was in fact the distillation of her inmost beauty: through whose ministry we would be made, day after day, and even in the secret watches of the night, to think of her as of a woman who always tended to overdo it, but whose last and only coquetry would compel our respect. Then, yes, we would think of Marthe: reserved, upright, daughter of a sharecropper at Celle, near Barsanges, a longtime widower and such a spiteful fellow that she had been glad to forget him, just as he had forgotten his daughter, only too pleased to surrender her to that consumptive, Pythre was his name, who had such nice eyes and three acres over there, he couldn’t say exactly where, in some valley beyond Millevaches, in the direction of the Auvergne or the Creuse. A good-looking girl, anyway, who with that coif of hers got to look rather like a nun as the years passed and whom few of us were content to see lying between oak planks in her least-worn dress,

the black one she got into on Sundays, even when she couldn't go to Mass at Saint-Sulpice, and that smelled clean, with no odor (no smoke, sweat, animals, cabbage, or milk) other than the soap they said came from Marseilles and that in the spring left big bluish trails in the stream. They resembled the Milky Way, which she had shown her son in the summer sky when he was very small.

### 3

He was alone that night with old Elise Grandchamp, silent in the chimney corner, on the other side of the coffin set on two chairs from the Gorges' house. Her eyes were closed too, and she was so very still and her skin so yellow that he wondered if she wasn't as dead as his mother; and perhaps he thought that in the morning, when they came to fetch his mother, he would have to kiss the too-smooth skin of the old Grandchamp woman's forehead and that it would be too much for him. He dozed off, slumped on the table. The cold woke him well before dawn. The old woman was watching him without batting an eyelid. He heard footsteps on the threshold, and the cold entered together with the scents of snow, soil, sawdust, cow dung and eau de cologne that all gave way before the odor emanating from Marthe—*from over there*, as we said in the end, so as not to have to say it directly, as if not calling it by name would prevent the smell from tormenting us anymore or at least reduce its power over all of us who had to live with it, to swallow it with water, wine, and bread, and even allow it to penetrate to the innermost recesses of our dreams.

We complained about it sometimes to the priest at Saint-Sulpice, or to the authorities. Both Church and State treated us like morons, layabouts, embarrassing yokels unable to convey our coffins as far as Christian soil, upon our shoulders, like honorable folk, whether by the route across the plateau, among the broom that grew there, between the snow and the sky, or by way of the valley, behind Rebelier's place, through wooded country. But they knew very well, those with power over us, that we found it impossible—especially ever since big Niarfeix and the Gorce boys had carried Ma Coupat up that abruptly rising path, on a day when it turned mild and the stink was so overwhelming that they had decided that morning, angry and in a hurry, that it had to be done. They wound their mufflers so thoroughly about their faces that only their eyes, stars of fury, could be glimpsed below their hat brims; and all four had climbed that steep rise after Rebelier's, between the stands of ash, with the coffin on their shoulders, moving slowly up the track where otherwise, even on fine days, no one ventured but the shepherdesses on their way up to the moor. After an hour they had reached the furze-clad shelf and began their descent into the little ravine where, at the bottom, they would come to the woodland path. The eldest Gorce slipped and went down the slope on his back. The coffin hit the ground and slid to the bottom of the gorge, where it struck the rocks and broke open. Thereupon all four of them—and we too, hearing their shouts (well, it was as if we were there with them)—and the eldest Gorce especially, more vividly than anyone else, for he was eye to eye with it—they all four saw what no one should have seen: something that for several days so sickened them that they refused to swallow anything but wine, drinking excessively and out of anger at themselves, their wives, their children, and their animals: out of anger indeed at what had slipped from their grasp there at the bottom of the ravine; at what in the end they managed to cover with sprays of furze and butcher's broom, and they would gladly have buried on the spot with their bare hands, swearing that it was shameful to realize that this was what they would come to, that it was utterly loathsome, that God could never want this, that it was

too much to ask of this sad world, that if this was their fate no part of the struggle to stay alive (as the eldest Gorce cried out) was worth becoming so black and unrecognizable, like an old mushroom putrefying on its stalk, worm rotten within, and that eyeless demon's head emerging from the torn shroud, worse than the carcass of an animal, which at least had something pitiful and dignified about it still as it turned slowly to dust and stank much less than Ma Coupat and the others (he could swear to that, he said), and certainly less than that thing up there that all four of them had seen screaming with laughter, its mouth gaping, with no trace of humanity left but that everlasting white howling laugh, which big Niarfeix, usually so unruffled, had come close to whacking with the stick he used to get down into the ravine, putting an end (as he thought) to what they should never have been forced to see but could now not escape seeing again the next day, even with eyes half-closed, when they returned to free it from the branches and stick it in another coffin that they would carry back to the stilts on their drunken shoulders.

White Cat knew all this. He contemplated his mother, possibly wondering how this face was changing, surprised to see that already it was no longer the same as the day before, and how much it could resemble those animals abandoned in the ditches that, once the stench had vanished, went on grinning as if the sun had burst out between their jaws and as if they were laughing at themselves because they had known the moment of truth, gradual decomposition, a triumphant malodorousness, then the slow exfoliation of flesh, the last end, joyous expiation, and a return to the grass upon the mountains, to roots and to the ultimate wrinkles of the earth's rough rind, while their teeth went on smiling among the stones on the pathways, and their vertebrae leapt between children's hands in the evening light.

And then, at the end of that night, alone with the two women—the one recumbent in the burgeoning odor and the other who now and then seemed more dead than the first because her smile was almost the same as the dead woman's—he wept silently, not for the woman lying in front of him, still less for himself (she had taught him to contain himself, had

shown him how pointless it was to complain, to bewail his lot), but for their common misfortune; though that was not how he expressed it, for he had no idea that God had deserted us and that we died earlier and more miserably than anywhere else; and since he didn't know the words, especially those French words that in good weather the schoolmaster tried to ram into their heads and hearts over there in Saint-Sulpice, promising them that if they knew this good French they could travel throughout the world and be afraid of nothing, because fear ceased once you could give things a name, and these words could be understood from one end of the French empire to the other, even though they seemed stilted in this valley, which, the priest at Chavagnac said, had something in common with the valley of Jehoshaphat. The old woman sitting or, rather, huddled up in the chimney corner where the fire had gone out, was sleeping or praying, or doing both at the same time—unless she too had passed from life to death, was making her way alongside Marthe, and continuing to mutter from the other side. She was smiling; he leaned back into the darkness; he did not like this old, old woman's smile, with that half-vacant look of hers, and her moist, transparent eyes. Perhaps he told himself that she too had been young once, like his mother; that she too had lifted up her eyes and looked at the blue sky, had looked elsewhere than at the darkness and, oh! once at least, had been taken by a man—otherwise what was the point of being alive, the Gorces' second daughter-in-law had said in front of him, that time he had caught her unawares behind the bakehouse with her father-in-law, groaning, grunting under him, gripping him as if their eternal salvation depended on accomplishing the union of heaven and earth now, that very moment, out of mind and out of breath, their voices dwindling into cries that weren't of pain or pleasure, or of death approaching, but all that, altogether, and then becoming something no more definable yet something that seemed worth dying for, so the daughter-in-law appeared to say, while her father-in-law staggered off, taking deep breaths of air, bewilderment in his look; and anyway you could die unless you gave in to it, since it was everyone's fate; no one could escape

it. He would learn gradually (he could already sense it as he watched the two women sleeping in the faint dawn light) that life demands enterprise as well as resignation; that we are on earth only to devise tactics for dealing with that, to summon up the willpower needed to consent and to abandon all vain obstinacy, for we know that we cannot dig our heels in against death for long; that only our suffering is infinite, nothing can comfort us, and perpetuating ourselves in our descendants is only one way of agreeing to die.

The old woman had begun to speak. As she mumbled a rivulet of saliva meandered down her chin, and her fingers stirred. Though her eyes were open and she was gazing in his direction, she probably saw nothing, lingering between dream and wakefulness (or, rather, between life and death) to find out on which bank she would come to. A kind of quiver stole through her quince-yellow skin as she let herself drift into morning, probably weary from contending with what was already stinking within, which was no longer the smell of old people nor that of Marthe nor that of the two others over there, upon the stilts.

They stood round him, murmuring, serious, those men and women of Prunde who would have liked to see him cry, he thought, or at the very least to bend over his mother's forehead before they closed the coffin in the room into which light was now filtering, and where the chickens came in that no one thought of chasing away. But he could not weep; a smile hovering about his lips seemed to tell the others that he was still more innocent than they imagined; and he stayed there, standing by the coffin, his arms hanging down, his mouth slightly open, looking at his mother whose face had hardened and seemed to have been drawn taut, as though snatched back from behind by the hair on the nape of her neck, and which in the dawn light had now veered toward gray, toward dullness—toward, rather, the color worn granite takes on, and by and by, he thought, to the black color that he could conceive of only as something like the color of the black Virgin his mother had shown him one day in the church at Meymac, who smiled from the depths of ages past,

exactly as his mother did this morning, her odor having changed yet again, being sweeter now, yes, almost tolerable, almost captivating.

The room quivered in the daylight. They had just taken Marthe away. Perhaps he told himself that this was what being an orphan meant: suddenly no longer knowing what to do with oneself, especially when all you could do was look for mushrooms, help with the harvest, collect wood, look after cows and corpses. Then he could hardly decipher letters or count, was scarcely aware that the world continued beyond Meymac or Gentioux and that the alien fog of names and far-distant people meant something very different from these mountains of the Auvergne, the contemplation of which became for him, in the evening, the picture book he would never own, more beautiful than those the schoolmaster let him see in the Saint-Sulpice school (where he went, when the weather was good, with other boys from the valley, as long as there was not too much to do at Prunde, rising before dawn and walking for more than an hour to reach the big building supported by thick buttresses halfway up the hill), even more beautiful than the sight he had seen on the way into Saint-Sulpice, in front of the Marandes' house, between the bars of the iron gate and the box tree: a young woman on a reclining chair, blond, dressed entirely in white, her shoulders draped in a cream-colored shawl, reading aloud from a heavy book resting on her knees to a child sad faced or bored under the fringe that curved across his forehead, stretched out on another of those chairs and seemingly only half-listening, who, smiling slightly, looked at White Cat as if he were one of the pictures reflecting the afternoon sun from the book his mother held. And, understandably, it was not so much the book and the stories it contained that had surprised him, as that clear, steady, so melodious voice, not in the least heavy and bowed to the ground like ours; and, enunciated as he had never heard it before, not even from the schoolmaster's or the priest's lips, the French language that usually caused him so much pain in that vast hulk moored on the hillside.

The young woman had not raised her eyes, even when the boys from

Prunde had joined him and solemnly inspected the child dressed like a girl and with a girl's hair, reclining in the strange chair. Perhaps White Cat thought then that he was no more real for those people than any character in a fairy tale: the foundling, for instance, described in the dictation the schoolmaster had given to the bigger children, which he had heard after his mother's death, imagining that it was about him; at least that was what he told the master, who was surprised to see him inactive, his arms crossed as if he had been punished. He was pleased, to be sure, to find that the master's language succeeded in naming him, even if he appeared as a somewhat romantic orphan, pleased that finally things were given their due, even though he accepted that there were masters and then the others, the people in the valley and in Saint-Sulpice, Chavanac, Cisterne, Freyte, Millevaches, Rochefort, and elsewhere: those connected with the land and those in a tranquil garden watching the others pass by. And did it matter so much, he would say later, if the watchers despised you, since there were honorable words in French to describe him and everyone else from the valley, words other than those mere given names, actual or acquired, and that patois that earned us so many blows across the knuckles and sounded too close to animal noises, the chattering of aged magpies, or the wind in the trees.

## 4

He was on his own, almost illiterate and ready for anything, already strong and hard on himself, walled up in a silence from which we would scarcely ever see him emerge. He stood in the middle of the now-empty room, gazing through the still-open door at the entire able-bodied population of Prunde as they left, with the narrow plain wooden coffin borne ahead on men's shoulders toward the stilts, in that icy morning air in which Marthe's smell would mingle with that of the two others, to the displeasure of many and to the distress of some that Marthe was gone, still beautiful, and already stinking like the two old dogs over there, the young one and the old one, but both ancient because they had reeked since time immemorial.

He could not make up his mind. He had seen them file past his mother, dragging their feet, their breath as white in the air as their faces, before Madame Niarfeix took him by the hand to lead him up to the coffin, and told him to kiss his mother for the last time. He had known for a long time that he would stay where he was and pull his hand back sharply from the woman's and tell them all, straightforwardly, in that

tone that he had already adopted and that made us all shudder and look upon him, though only thirteen, as a man and a man not like others:

“She doesn’t need that anymore.”

It spared us, admittedly, for it dispensed us from any obligation to show him a sympathy we wouldn’t really have known how to express; and the Gorce boy nailed down the lid that he held up straight in front of him like a great shield and on which an unknown hand had crudely inscribed, perhaps with a carpenter’s pencil: MARTHE PYTHRE, BORN JAVAUD, with a little cross and the date of death—no one knowing the other, the one when she was born.

In the end he followed them and took his place with the men, between the Gorges and the Niarfeixes, whose son-in-law, a Vedrenne boy, fetched the ladder and climbed it to remove the stick that secured the little door, the “scuttle” we would have called it usually, but that was too homely and innocuous a word for the hell gate through which they rapidly slid the coffin of poor Marthe, whose life would now be reconstructed, commented on, idealized, and mourned by autumn and winter firesides. They remembered the day when she arrived on the arm of poor André, whom they already called by his family name alone, “Pythre,” at the entry to Prunde, where the path, after so many twists and turns among the tall beeches, widened just past the little bridge, crossed our hamlet and, after Rebelier’s, disappeared among furze and broom. They recalled her almost-foolish smile, the happy young wife whom Pythre brought from Saint-Sulpice after going up there to fetch her, on the other side of the plateau, near Barsanges; he in a suit already too big for him that seemed to weigh on his shoulders, and she very straight in a plain white dress with a gathered skirt, wrapped in a sky-blue shawl (because it was cold in that early September) that hid from us a bosom that evoked our envy and our pity when we would say to ourselves that poor Pythre was not to enjoy those breasts any more than his father had enjoyed his mother’s, who was twenty-eight when she died in childbirth, at Rochefort Castle nearby where she worked as a servant—

yes, when we would say he wasn't robust enough to be a real husband for this woman who probably already knew what it was all about; which would not prevent him from carrying on as if he was inexhaustible, with the ridiculous conceit of a young man who is determined to tempt fate, and tempts it for the space of an entire day in order to retire more justifiably thereafter; just like his young wife, who was almost a foreigner to us, for we did not understand her patois very well, and who used French like Pythre's mother over there, with the fine folk at Rochefort; holding her head higher each day before what she already sensed the grim future would be, yet trying to believe with her man that they could be happy, that at any rate there was no reason why they should be unluckier than the others, in the valley or elsewhere, and that the gathered dress, the sky blue shawl, the bouquet of wild pinks, the too-big suit, the big black felt hat, the watch chain and the detachable collar were toreros' costumes fit for the ring they were now entering.

Therefore they were justifiably proud of marrying, of arriving in Prunde at the end of a cool September morning, of clearing a few rods of furze and whins, of owning a bed, a table, a bench, and their Sunday best, of finding shelter under a roof rented to them, with a little good land, by the fine folk at Rochefort; proud of their power to procreate, which was another way of defying the Minotaur that he, André Pythre, harbored; and proud, too, of fulfilling that purpose for which he, like the others, thought we were here on earth. Indeed, he needed to be a champion bull to contend with that other increasingly less reticent beast within that went under the odd name of tuberculosis. He was courageous but with no more energy than this son whom he scarcely had time to hug to himself before he realized that there was nothing whatsoever he could do, and yielded to the darkness that yawned before him. Thank God, it happened on a spring day when he was wearing the suit in which he had made his entrance to Prunde the year before, but without the fine display he had put on then, for his face was lined now, almost bare of flesh, more than pale, childlike in this last sleepiness, and happy too that

he had been granted time enough to enter a woman's belly without his mean seed ending up, as with the two or three women he had paid at Ussel or Egletons, in the soapy water of a washbasin.

And now it was Marthe who was leaving us, Marthe who was waiting in the winter wind to rejoin the earth of Barsanges, where, no one knew why, she had wanted to lie beside her father and mother—who, after all, had hardly lifted a finger for her—and not next to her husband, in the graveyard at Saint-Sulpice, right in the woodland, on the hill overlooking the village. She too had believed; a man had taken her from Celle, near Barsanges, had led her to Prunde—as good as Celle any day—and drunk from her breasts almost as her child would soon do, the child whom she would then hold tight to her on the doorstep that spring (in front of the low house that the masters at Rochefort allowed her to live in from the time she was widowed, which made some folk whisper that it certainly wasn't the consumptive who had given her this little creature), in the assurance of her big chestnut eyes, her curly hair, her regular white teeth, which, when she smiled, made us forget that we must die one day, yet she had to suffer more than anyone else, more than the men anyway, and more than the one she had watched declining day by day, without understanding what was happening but thanking heaven that she did not have to suffer more, just as she would give thanks when she felt her guts stirred by something other than colic.

## 5

White Cat stood in front of the stilts, surrounded by the women of Prunde, while they tolled the passing bell on the structure erected the summer before at the behest of the priest who had come in the autumn to bless the installation in the middle of the hamlet: two tall oak uprights supporting a framework covered by a large slate roof below which hung a bell that they had gone to Felletin to buy and that gave us the illusion of becoming full-fledged Christians again.

He listened to this feeble knell, which children's hands would sound until midday, then until the sun disappeared behind the crest of Chavanac, and which would go on resounding in him, as in each of us, long after the child's hand had reattached the rope to the post. A light wind had appeared and reduced the smell a little by sending it out to revolve above the valley. White Cat gazed into the distance, toward the end of the field, where in fine weather the low branches formed a deep vault under which he enjoyed spending time with the cows that came there to escape the flies and gadflies. The tolling of the bell brought him back from his musings and he turned round. The women were waiting.

He opened his mouth; his voice grew faint. That was enough for Ma Vedrenne to declare that poor Marthe had not led a very joyful life. Some maintain that he was then heard to mutter—and he was only thirteen—that she had been lucky to die so young. But the women were already walking toward the low house where Elise Grandchamp was serving wine. The men arrived. They drank, smoked a few cigarettes, even laughed. Then hunger called us back to our homes, and in the noon light the valley recovered its world's-end silence, despite the wind in the bare branches of the birches on the other side of the stream, the regular swaying of the bell whose sound, muffled now, had something of the somber croaking of a toad, and the drawn-out hissing that the wine and cold produced in our ears. We were all but drunk, as was White Cat, who went to sleep at the table and came to only when night had fallen to find himself alone in the dark room, listening out for his mother lamenting in the shifts and surges of the wind; but there was only the smell, in short gusts and, far off, Niarfeix's dog barking at the entrance to the woods. At dawn he realized he had not been alone as he slept, for the fire had been lit, and someone had placed a dish of soup and some bread and cheese on the table. He ate the cold soup standing up; then he held the bread in his half-shut palm, and between fingers of the same hand a piece of cheese from which with his knife he cut tiny cubes and stuck these one by one on scarcely larger bits of bread. And he shivered. Perhaps he was thinking of her who was so cold out there, much colder than he, and who was lying now inside that shameful, evil-smelling embrace.

He had learned from us how to remain quiet, to stay there at the entrance to the field when the weather was milder, holding his slingshot and watching the crows swoop down in the snow not so far away and then draw nearer with assumed innocence and human guile, as if engaged in a polite preamble before reminding us they could not do otherwise than go where they were drawn: to the dead, defeated, humiliated flesh that was theirs by right; to the task assigned them of completing the work of disease and the labor of time, with carrion-guzzling

stomachs as effective as human memory, in which the dead find fit repose, their souls no longer troubled there, their reprobate flesh returning to another flesh, in some way transmuted into another blood and thus purified; theirs the mortal body now consigned to them, and ours the memory of lives that we would merge more or less with our own, so that we had a joint, legendary, and infinite life before we knew a personal existence, each of us living for others and with others before inquiring, when we came to think this way, why and how we were in this world: some keeping vigil over others—in hatred or in love—the living watching over the dead, and the dead over the living, so effectively that we wept for the dead no more than we wept for ourselves, no more than White Cat that January morning, crouching at the quiet meadow's edge.

“D’you hear? They’re squeaking . . .”

White Cat did not turn round. He knew that it was the older kid from the Vedrennes’ place, a farmhand not much older than himself but already as strong as a Turk, born in Saint-Setiers where they had a big procession carrying the saint’s statue once a year on the feast of St. Sagittarius, who believed all sorts of things. The boy was crouching near him and scratched at the snow with a stick, gently laughing and repeating: “They’re squeaking. D’you hear? It won’t stink much tonight, at least!”

Then neither of them said anything more. By midday they hadn’t moved or exchanged a single word. Old Madame Grandchamp called to White Cat from the corner of Niarfeix’s. He got up and followed her to her house, toward the end of the valley, where there was soup and warmth, though even when they got there they said nothing, didn’t even look at one another—nor at the big dark-haired girl who was a kind of servant for Granny Grandchamp and was said to be half daft, so thick that you wondered whether it wasn’t the old woman who looked after her, just as she had seen to White Cat since Marthe’s death.

She would send the girl to fetch him morning, noon, and evening, wherever he was—and she knew where to find him, in the low house, at the entrance to the big meadow, down among the bare trees where he

gave the Gorces a hand, or on the slopes between heaven and earth, where she sometimes found him on his knees in order, such were his strange words, to help his mother to stand the cold—an odd thing to say, we thought. So it was her, this Aimée whose surname no one knew, nor her age, the simpleton in the brown felt hat, with red cheeks and hands, and big pale blue eyes like sheep's, with a poor soul's everlasting smile of shyness and ignorance on her lips, who bobbed up beside him before he knew she was there; who lit the fire, reheated the soup, sometimes brought a bowl of coffee and, at noon and in the evening, a little of the meal that the old woman (or she herself) had to prepare over there at the end of the valley, in another low-built house; though he had never asked for anything, never thanked anyone, never worried if it would continue like that, showing not the least surprise at what happened, not even when one evening the old woman herself brought him something to eat and told him that she was very old now, that it wouldn't be long before she rejoined the others on the stilts, but that Aimée would always look after him because it wasn't right for home fires not to be tended by women's hands; Aimée who was almost innocent, that had to be acknowledged, and who was over twenty, but who was smart enough to keep quiet and to keep herself clean, to do what she was told and to look after him until he in his turn was able to serve her; Aimée, she added, who wasn't at all bad to look at, even if she didn't try to make herself look attractive, not even knowing what it meant to attract nor that anyone could please her otherwise than by not beating her.

He let her take her place, from the very next day, in his mother's bed—he had burnt her straw mattress—under the sheets and the eider-down where his mother had sweated out her last hours and where Aimée went straight to sleep. She had undressed with her back to him and had squatted over the chamber pot, probably not knowing, though she was past her twentieth birthday, what it meant to have a man looking at you, even if he was only thirteen; and she lingered a while on the pot, her flanks bare down there, her cheeks resting upon her fists, gazing into the shadows, humming and moving her rump gently like a heifer in a shed.

All she had known was the old woman and the silences of Prunde. Elise Grandchamp had taken her from the Ussel orphanage when she was a child; that was what the old woman said, but many were convinced it was her daughter, and that it was to give birth that Elise Grandchamp, from a family of tradespeople at Peyrelevade, having (so they said) lost her reputation or having been turned out by her father, had come to live humbly in this valley house that actually belonged to her; or, better, that she had come to shut herself up with the memory of her sin, growing ugly, behaving as if she were older than her age, hating the passage of time and the ways of the times, and men, as tyrannical with herself as she was with Aimée, whom, they said, she had refused to send to school, leaving her to lie fallow and eventually making a simpleton of her, so as not to be alone in her expiation. They said too that in handing Aimée over to White Cat she wasn't doing the girl any harm; that she could believe she had secured her daughter's future, not by marriage, that was certain (even the blockheads who came down from the mountains of Auvergne when the fair was on at Ussel or Bort, and had seen nothing female all winter but their cows' hindquarters or their bitch's ass, wouldn't have wanted her), but by placing her in the condition of a servant like this, of an unlikely big sister refusing nothing, silent and clean, who, once she had entered a man's house, knew how to keep in the background.

Did White Cat notice those plump white shoulders that night? Did he see, when she got up from the chamber pot, before she had let her shift fall down over her thick thighs, what no girl in the village had been able to show him: that dark bird's nest she had between her legs, which gleamed in the firelight? Or did he not notice anything and tumble into his own bed, still thinking of his mother lying in a very different berth, supported by planks and winter, between earth and clouds, reckoning that they would soon be able to take the body to Barsanges and praying it would be so.

## 6

He was to wait another month, during which he would go off every day to crouch at the meadow's edge, wearing the dark cape in which his father had shivered—his hands in the straw inside his sabots and gripping the soles of his feet, like a great bird poised on the ground and gazing ahead no more oddly than the crows, those dawn prowlers that watched him from the nearest trees or wheeled above him before alighting a little further off, in the meadow, then making their way closer to the stilts, little by little, until the boy's body would unfold and, with shouts suddenly coming from his red face, would chuck a rock into the indignant flock.

There was not much to do now. We were living in a kind of stupor, as if, with the end of winter, the smell was growing heavier, more pregnant, and we were becoming ever slower, sly but not very knowing, continuing to sink further into age, to perpetuate a millenarian disgrace, even though up there on the plain, we believed, the strong winds had already driven black bile away and stuffed the stench back in the devil's mouth. We were certainly miserable creatures, living far away from everything—

and perhaps from ourselves—who no longer had any idea what might be done to try to destroy this time against which we could do nothing and which was consuming our very hearts: an old story we no longer wished even to think about in our hovels, where we would gather to keep still, since after all, you speak, don't you, only to fall silent, to fit the modicum of meaning you find in words to the vast rumbling of the earth, to the dinning of a world in which we were scarcely sure we were really included, and meanwhile the new century had already begun, had already got going out there beyond the high snowcaps; and the other language, French—the real language, as big Niarfeix used to say, though he spoke it pretty badly—took no account of us, even when we crossed the threshold of school, church, or town hall. These places were the same as the graveyard: we crossed the threshold when we were able to, when the snow was not up to our knees, or when we were not overwhelmed by the act: passing through the gate we abdicated our language, that patois which, on even the most innocent lips, enraged the masters—especially the teacher—and made the pupils blush, thinking they must have filthy, unhealthy mouths as soiled as the seats of their pants, and which rendered us, the schoolmaster regretted, unworthy of the land where we were born and of the Republic that raised us up out of valleys, farms, and all those centuries of obscurity.

So, even at Prunde, we spoke as little as possible, turning over in our head in patois what we would then produce in an awkward French that the master forced us to correct, urging us to put behind us a language that soon only our animals would understand and to show that we were worthy of our fatherland—causing us gradually to think and speak in both languages, or rather in a mixture of the two in which only the brightest of us were able to get along, whereas the others cut themselves with it as if with a two-edged sword, and the stupidest of all, those who never even heard their own surname so used were they to hearing their Christian names alone, stammered, blushed, and cursed their blessed fatherland and this language said to be their mother tongue, dreaming only of escaping from the long, overheated room that stank of unwashed

children, cows, soil, and a mixture of chalk, violet ink and damp paper: a smell as unique as the master's way of handling the words of the other language (like the priest's of handling the altar cloths and the women's the shrouds of the dead) and of erecting verbal structures as solid as the old Roman bridge at Variéras, near Buiges, though they could scarcely believe that any work of language could last longer than a haystack or a cloud, and they (the stupidest ones and, possibly, those most suffused with the vanity of speech) continued throughout the term granted them upon this earth to jeer at the expressions a few of them assumed (some of the girls and White Cat too, who in their eyes was not a boy like the others: not really one of them, anyway) while reciting or reading poetry, the pronouncements from Napoleon's victorious army in Italy, the life of Du Guesclin or Bayard or Pasteur, or the biography of that fellow Treich-Laplène, born at Ussel around the same time as their parents, and whom their parents might actually have brushed against without knowing it in the streets of the county seat before he went off to explore the Indénie, the Abron, and the Bondoukou; found the colony of the Ivory Coast; and die at Grand-Bassam in the same year White Cat was born.

Some of them, of course, would come to realize that it was just as beautiful as a haystack when a summer's night was falling, surrounded by gold and by humming insects; would understand, too, that words are the sole glory of the dead—and that French is the glorious language of the dead: just as Latin is God's own language, and patois the tongue of beasts and blockheads. They would probably realize that before most of them sank again into the green night of Prunde, as the schoolmaster muttered, just to say something when silence fell in the classroom which the pupils, clever and dull alike, were about to desert in order to help with the harvest or because the Republic could do no more for them now.

White Cat had learned to love this language that came, so they said, from God's own tongue. And for a whole month, squatting at the side of the great white meadow, observed by the birds, he spoke to his mother in French, not quite understanding what he was saying, perhaps: scraps of verse and French history lessons, sentences he invented, proverbs,

and fragments of fairy tales—all served him, as the hours went by, to accompany the transformation of his mother's body into the triumph of the smell which he thought about ceaselessly and in which he fancied he could distinguish her particular odor as surely as if he heard the familiar rhythms of her voice. But the verses and shreds of sentences were not really the truth—the truth the priest talked of—and his poems were not substantial enough to contend with the worms as they ate through the earth and even now (his mind could not bear the thought) through Marthe's body too. At times the sound of his own voice drew tears from him, and he continued to pray in his own way, his eyelashes sometimes stuck together by the icy wind, his hands in his sabots; though nothing could stop the murmur that, whatever he did, fell into the monotonous undulations of the alexandrine meter, little by little inventing his mother's life story of which he knew practically nothing, but happy, in a sense, at the thought that somehow this brought her to life: raised her as a child in the vales of Celle, at the edge of the barrens and peat bogs; then as a young girl in the bright light of July; having her walk along the paths bordered by hazel bushes or in Meymac beside the high moor, that day when the fair was on and she met André Pythre, his father, faceless and wearing the cape in which his son now shivered; the girl pleased to have the name Marthe, which set her apart from all the Jeannes, Léonies and Maries; picking buttercups and laughing softly when a cool breeze passed under her armpits or a boy looked at her, supposing that joy was within her reach, in spite of her uncaring father and poverty, and not knowing that she would derive—all too briefly—the small amount of happiness to come from what she had between her thighs, but still dreaming, because you had to believe it was possible—if not for her at least for him, for White Cat—and that the warm spring air brought back each year, ineluctably, the age-old ritual: celebrations of hunger and thirst before you stretch out to be impregnated, give birth, lie down, die, then rest until, yet again, you were one with this earth on which the Eternal had breathed.

He pictured her much as she had appeared to us the day she arrived

in Prunde on the arm of poor Pythre, who trembled with pride as much as from his illness; they were both smiling, their cheeks bright red, the rest of their faces quite wan; they carried a bundle or a basket in each hand, and there was Marthe's father behind them (because the consumptive's mother was dead and his father had gone to look for work a long way off in the Auvergne, so they said, from where he had never come back), pulling a handcart that held the wooden head- and foot-board and side-pieces and a blood-red eiderdown, all the possessions of Marthe, who had become a Pythre a few hours before at the town hall in Saint-Sulpice. It had probably been like that, why not? And as soon as the sun disappeared behind the pines on the crest, big Aimeé came up silently and tapped him on the shoulder. He rose and she followed him, holding her head high for the first time in her life, smiling too like a young newlywed, toward the low house where they shut the door for the night, ate, and went to bed without saying a word nor even really looking at each other—both lost in the musings of taciturn souls, the girl dreaming perhaps of the glances that men sometimes cast at her now that she was caring for a boy, especially when she stooped to gather sticks for firewood or ears of grain in the stubble, or squatted to piss behind a hedge; but now no one dared to get too close to her or make fun of her either: they knew that Ma Grandchamp was not far away, and that she would loom up right there in front of you, ready, so they said, to take a swipe at you with her bush hook, with the glitter in her eyes of women who have sinned. The result was that this big girl at twenty-five was still living in the almost happy ignorance of a child, devoted to the boy she served as she had served Elise Grandchamp, still washing in front of him even when the blood was running down between her legs and with a little smile she would watch this trickle wind its way along her thighs, whether kneeling out there in the open over a furrow or in the room's half-darkness over the basin in which she would wash tomorrow's vegetables.

## 7

At day's end all of Prunde would peer at the sky, watching for clouds arriving from the west, over toward Limoges; we would be waiting for the Limoges girl's ass to go black, as we put it, to be certain that it would rain the next day and that the weather would be milder, with the rain getting rid of the snow and keeping the smell close to the ground, where it would take on the sweetish taste of old fungus.

It began to rain in the night of March 27. We waited two more days for the water to clear the paths before we opened the door to the hut in front of all the people from the hamlet, assembled under a glowering sky, and put the dead in Niarfeix's cart drawn by two big red bullocks ahead of which Niarfeix himself would walk, the goad on his shoulder, dressed in his best clothes like the others. The dead (old Julia, the younger of the Vedrenne women, and Marthe Pythre) were not satisfied with stinking: now and then you heard them move in their boxes, loaded side by side and covered over with holly; for we tried to affirm, the smell notwithstanding, that there was nothing in any way shameful about the cart, especially up there on the plateau, once we had climbed all those miles of

zigzagging pathway and turned toward Chavanac, where we would leave Julia and the Vedrenne girl before continuing toward Barsanges with fewer people in the cortege. After all, Marthe was an outsider; we hadn't really come to know her and, we thought, this son of hers even less, who was walking now behind the cart which, when we met anyone or went through any bunch of houses, still made us feel ashamed, say what you will. It didn't matter that they knew who we were—the Vedrennes' farm-hand having set out the day before to forewarn people—they turned their backs anyway, doors were hastily shut, faces scowled, eyes looked elsewhere. But we would lift our chins and go by gazing straight ahead, swallowing our rage, consoling ourselves with the thought that their corpses doubtless stank just as much as ours, rotted in the same way, and wound up in the same darkness.

We had never gone so far. We were as much alone on the way we were taking now as in the valley, and that was a relief. As if time were now on our side, we advanced unhurriedly—only a few of us until we were joined by the people from the hamlet of La Celle, they too in their best things, in spite of the mud and the threat of rain, and soon as infuriated as we were with this woman who had been beautiful and incapable, certainly, of stinking to this degree and who seemed to be complaining about not yet being six feet under and about having to abandon this son following the cart, walking by himself ahead of us: this taciturn boy, this son of hers who was not easy to handle in spite of his quiet appearance and that very pale complexion on account of which we had nicknamed him White Cat, but also in remembrance of his father, whom we never saw drink a drop of anything other than milk, and because, well, we couldn't go along with the idea of his having the same Christian name, André, as his father, as if the father, sensing he would not live much longer, had tried to outlive himself in this namesake, without truly succeeding, since for us the boy was only the cuckold's son—after all, that was really being two-timed, wasn't it, to die like that, the very year he was married, and to abandon in a miserable hole like Prunde, at the height of her youth, a still ripe and lovely young woman, the one we were now tak-

ing back to where she was born, who had run her course without having lived her life out, yes, whom we were taking back to Barsanges; and there were the bells in the distance ringing in the real end of winter for us, and we were beginning once again to feel we were Christians like all the others.

Pitiful and slow, we were moving toward the other side of the plateau, feeling a kind of dumb joy deep down inside us, even though we knew that it was a losing game for most of us, since we lived further from the sky than the people up there on the plateau. We had reached Barsanges toward midday without the sun having come through—which made some of us mutter that our troubles weren't over yet. We waited, standing under the big beeches at the entrance to the graveyard above the village. We said not a word. We turned over our own thoughts, like the Barsanges people who had watched us go by from behind their windows, inquisitive at first, then reproving as soon as they got their first whiff of the smell, and finally full of pity for this poor woman whom they remembered (thinking especially of her mother who had grown up among them before she married that Javaud from Celle who hadn't been worth much) and who was going to find rest at last. For truly, that was no life, being exposed day in and day out to winds from every quarter and, since dawn and indeed a lot earlier, being jolted into and out of those muddy ruts, the whole stinking to high heaven. And it reached the point where they felt sorry too for those small, unmoving silhouettes at the entrance to the graveyard and, in particular, for this boy among them who looked so stubborn and stood there so stiffly, somewhat apart from the others, not far from the cart. He was Marthe's child, the eternal orphan, little Pythre still gripped by shame that his mother should give off such a fearsome stink, from which the priest was soon going to free him together with the others who were watching the big white surplice surrounded by smaller surplices hastening up the path to the cemetery, preceded by the mayor's red face.

Even after they had put her in the ground, alongside her father and mother, under a wooden cross from which hung a Christ-figure that a

skimpy tin canopy hadn't kept from rusting, they still scented Martha's odor in the declining afternoon; but now it had become a smell that evoked their pity, for it was somehow filtered by the earth to which it was returning; restored to its natural, tranquillizing element, to that powerful appeasement that made them all want to weep and to sit down among the graves; for suddenly they could stand it no longer, wondered how they had been able to put up with it for so long, having never imagined (and every time they experienced the same amazement, the same sense of outrage) that it could be so difficult to live and to die, and, both for the dead and for those who remained behind, more difficult still to bear what happened afterward.

But they had done what they had to do, and, in the bar where they gathered afterward, they tried to stop thinking about it, to think of nothing at all, these men and women together for once, mingling with the people from Barsanges and from Celle, though exchanging scarcely a word but raising their elbows in the same way, with an almost devout obstinacy, staring open eyed over the glasses, not a drop of whose contents would be wasted. Then, abruptly, they began to stir, sniffle, glance about the already-dark room where the barkeeper had not yet decided to light a lamp and to venture a few too-loud laughs: they were not used to gatherings of any size and still less to expressing themselves in French with people who did not differ from themselves; and, in wine and in words of no importance but uttered very loudly—too loudly, as if they hadn't opened their mouths for months—they sought the means to feel not too alien to this earth and also to summon up the courage needed for the walk back that would take them to Prunde many hours later, toward midnight, exhausted, chilled, asleep on their feet, in their bellies still some small amount of the wrath that had driven them forward and would enable them to undress before sinking upon their pallets, their expressions now contained, neither liberated nor happy—that would have been overdoing it—but resigned to the whole thing repeating itself next winter and to their returning to the valley once again on a night like this, without any moon but not entirely dark, lit by the tenacious little

fire within them, which you had to protect from fierce winds that ground the plateau ever flatter and blew, as the old folk said, from the devil's own gut.

This time White Cat walked at the head of the column, alongside Niarfeix, who held the lantern, and led the oxen and their load of women lying side by side on a bed of straw, exactly where they had ranged the coffins, though these bodies were of course alive, even if by now, in the middle of the night, they may not have been entirely sure of it, what with this weariness. And it was likely that night that, to some extent at least, we grasped who he was: alone in the world, for sure, and as pleased as we were to be done with all that; as worn and weary as the others, yes, but, unlike them, desirous to live at any price, holding up his chin high in spite of the rain coming down in gusts ever since we had passed Lissac. We set our pace by his, without noticing how odd it was that we, so long resigned to the worst, should let ourselves be led (big Niarfeix too, who had begun asking more from his oxen than they could manage) by this young man—far too young, indeed—by this youngster who appeared to think it was possible not to die, that you aren't condemned to adjust to that from the word go. Not that he liked life any more than we did, but, like us, he was free from the stench. With lasting joy he slowly drank in the night air, and his heart must have leapt when, at the farther end of darkness, he scented the first signs of spring. And he forced us too to hope for that spring, to thrust our snouts into the windy night as doggedly as between our wives' thighs, and yet again to pull the wool over our own eyes.

The women in the cart were slowly reciting prayers in French, and we listened to them as once we had listened to the schoolmaster, for we found French reassuring. Between the night and ourselves, between primal disorder and resignation, it interposed the solidity of strong, clear syllables, the only ones able to contend with the elements on an equal footing—so we thought in the midst of those adverse winds and rain sweeping across the barren upland, and through which we pressed forward, all heads bowed save for the boy's, for he hung right on to his

belief that we were not entirely doomed, we small human beings making our way through the night in that high world, at the end of a winter that would still be lying in wait for us on the moor, in the woods, in the freshets, and in the granite's heart—for us, scarcely more solid than hazel saplings and less cunning than the creatures of the night, yet believing in something that still set us apart from beasts and trees: this language in which we had not been born, to be sure, but which extended above us, both obscure and clear, like the sky that night, a language in whose lines so many were convinced their future could be read and whose terms, when interpreted (if they had the skill), might pronounce them masters of their fates. That night, however, while the winds wrung the phrases from the women's mouths, the men quietly summoned all the French words they could recall and mixed them with the women's prayers as if making a fire with any wood to hand, waiting for the earth to give way under them at any moment, splitting and casting them into a very different valley, bottomless, colder, more damp than the graves where the three women were now at rest. Some even wondered, when we passed nearby, up there, whether they would see with their own eyes the vast granite trough carved centuries ago, which in the last century some drunken fellows had tried to drag over the moor with their oxen and had then abandoned in a hollow: that immense vat in which ten people could have stood upright and which, they said, served as a goblet for the devil. There were ten of us that night, on the moor—eleven, if we counted White Cat, who was still walking without looking back, still leading us, who never thought of resisting this boy who, in a few months, even in a few hours, had turned into a little man and who seemed able to stand up to the winds that blew about his face, wringing from them a kind of power or joyous yet grave assurance that gainsaid our sluggish dullness, gainsaid the inexorable working of the soil to which all must return, they of the plateau like those of the valley, they who already stood lower than the earth like those who, in the cities, as we were told, forgot that for them too the earth would open one day more surely than any woman's legs; unless both apertures were one and

the same, and that lukewarm space where they forgot what they were was their destined place where they must submit, lie without entirely deceiving their own selves, attune their outcry to that of those who toiled otherwise, and, finally, endure everything that issued from human mouths: calls, cries, whispers, murmurs, singing, and even laughter, in summer's blaze as in winter's silence; supposing all that was not one and the same thing, the song of the same horror and the same misery.

## 8

The earth performed its ministry. It fastened upon the dead, drained them, ate them gradually. A felicitous breakdown. He would later think about it with a kind of happiness and tell himself that his mother's body had finally found its right weight in earth, its true night. Marthe could set herself to living within him, smiling, thoughtful, with the smell of soap, grass, and milk and with a loving kindness deep within her eyes when she turned to look at him, that goodness he would surely never find to love in any other woman. He would grow used to other smiles, to that of the big dark-haired girl in the misshapen hat, the girl who lived with him, who warmed up not only the food and his hands, which she held between hers when he came back from the woods and fields, but also, night after night, the place where Marthe had sweated her blood and where he never dared to lay himself down. He went on sleeping on his narrow child's bed. The big girl smiled at him. She knew he would not strike her, that he would not try to grab her breasts; she seemed more concerned about them than the goldfinch's nest that she washed while they laughed at her in the fields, and where the youngest Gorce had

once stuck his hand, causing her such a sensation that she had begun to gasp, then moan, moaning so that she had wanted to laugh and cry at one and the same time. She had laughed and cried again when Ma Grandchamp, who had heard Gorce boast about it, beat her black and blue; but then she had forgotten all about it, had sunk back into herself.

From his bed White Cat would contemplate this ruddy face with the high cheekbones and almost slit eyes that you find sometimes on the plateau and in the surrounding valleys. She was the daughter of those girls who long ago had detained the Huns and Moors, men drawn, exhausted, and terrified perhaps by a progress that neither wounds nor death could interrupt, who had yielded there, on those heights that probably reminded them of other highlands, where they loosed their seed in the bellies of women, all wetness, sweetness, whiteness being there for the taking after the Catalaunian Fields; so much so that some among them never remounted their horses but, like holly to the oak, clove to the women they had ravished, planting their swords upon the graves of their comrades-in-arms, suddenly more than fatigued, unable to go on, and essentially no worse than others—than the dour, rightful husbands, the barren cold land, and the poky, smoke-filled houses at the edge of the peat bogs, stinking of goats, hatred and fear as against those smelling of sweat, fire, blood and the vastness of the grasslands, the rivers they had crossed, and the deserts whence they came and that echoed in their speech long afterward, those which they had created by fire and sword, and those that had been there before them, and where they had eventually renounced their origins; unless it was a culmination, a reversion, an allegiance to the general law of the species. So much so that in Aimée's eyes you might see, as if the centuries passed in review before you, the dull echo of armed encounters and laughter, dreams after battle, and fierce winds; and, just as once her ancestress had given way before the little warrior with almond eyes and glossy hair, so this big dark-haired girl submitted to this boy who had been chosen for her, without ever wondering why he was there or why he looked at her only on the sly when, for instance, she dropped her skirts to go to bed or, of

course, now and then at the table in the evening as they ate, in the hearth's faltering light. It never occurred to her to lower her eyes or to bow her head. She looked straight ahead, possibly wondering where the blows would come from and surprised that none came; and she would stay like that, in front of him, as she had remained in front of Madame Grandchamp, her mouth slightly open in an indefinable smile, her hands flat on her heavy thighs, waiting for him to speak. But he said not a word, simply consenting to the old woman's having brought her there and to her not coming back to fetch her and to her uniting these two solitaires—in short, to her settling her daughter before going to spend her last days with her other girl—the older, legitimate one—at Peyrelevede, on the plateau a little way off. We did not discover all this until a good many weeks later when she was already buried and we were there in the valley in winter with another corpse—one of the Gorce daughters-in-law—stinking to highest heaven up on the stilts.

She knew she would be with him. Some time having passed, he would aim a few words at her, much as he would spit in the fire. She did not weep in the spring when he left with the schoolteacher who had come to fetch him and was absent for a whole day and part of the night. She waited for him (just as she had that night when we returned from Barsanges, worn out and soaked to the bone, liberated, yes, but hating even the names of those who had poisoned our lives) by the half-open door, with the fire stoked, her eyes calm. She'd not have cared a fig had she been told that this time he had been at Meymac, at the lawyer's, in the cool room with the dark furniture and the glinting gold of its reflections, where they had got him to sign papers that gave him a life interest not in the house where he lived but in the one where Madame Grandchamp had come among us to hide her shame, as if that was all we were good at: getting the world outside to forget about us and keeping our dead all through those too-long winters. She also gave him (and this was indeed the most unusual part, that from one day to the next a fourteen-year-old boy whose parents had died in near destitution should become overnight a man of independent yet modest means) enough to

keep himself going until he was of age, with the proviso that he should support the big dark-haired girl too.

She would have gone on waiting for him every evening until the end of time, the soup steaming, then cooling on the table where the lamp burned, quite unable to conceive, whatever someone might have told her or that she might have heard in Prunde, that a day could pass without his coming back to sit at the dark wooden table before a glass always filled with a too-young wine, following the precedent established by Elise Grandchamp, who found this (we supposed) a way to damp down the flames of her private hell, but which White Cat never touched, not even to add to his soup, for his part obeying his mother's injunction that derived from her views about drunkards and loafers and never raising his head to look at Aimée until he had emptied his bowl like a man, closed his pocketknife, rolled a cigarette from coarse shag and slipped it between his lips, looking steadily into the corner at the end of the dark room, usually on the side where since sundown the shutters had been closed over the window through which he went on gazing, so it seemed.

There she was: Aimée with her almond eyes and high, red cheekbones, mild and unconcerned. She was as little worry to him as the passing of the seasons: she was, after all, clean about her person, distant, silent by instinct as much as from her inability to put sentences together, probably sensing that her fortune lay in this silence and distance, just as her fate lay in the hands of this now fifteen-year-old boy who spent his days as others did—looking after a few animals, clearing a little woodland, working the land that belonged to others—and his nights sleeping. That summer, perhaps, she had already forgotten the face and name of the woman who had been her mother and had dropped out of sight and out of mind along with everything else: years, seasons, animals, trees cut down and cut up, other people's children; along, too, with those fears that compel other women to take a pitchfork to their menfolk and yet others to wade into ponds at dead of night or to throw themselves down wells. Only barely was she aware of the blood that flowed between her thighs each month, as little concerned about that as about what she let

drop from her bowels into the chamber pot every night before she climbed into bed or the farts she let loose with a quiet little laugh.

Yet she wasn't at all bad looking now that the Grandchamp woman wasn't there to beat her and that she no longer wore the look of a quarried animal, in spite of her short, always disheveled hair, her rather too-thick wet underlip, her big, red hands, and the fact that she was so little given to talking that you were not only taken aback to hear something from her but would not grasp at once exactly what she had muttered and could not be prevailed upon to repeat; with the result that you were annoyed that she could have spoken, annoyed that she too could have had that desire when she didn't need to talk to move about within the low house's four walls and between Prunde's few dwellings. What did she utter when she spoke? Brief expressions of pain or pleasure, those of hunger or thirst, words proper to the girl-child she would remain all her life, with dreams that would not seem different from her waking thoughts, no doubt happy to be there and not somewhere else, except when that stuff started running between her legs and she had a pain there in her belly, when the night-time cold forced her to crouch over the pot and an unpleasant odor formed a cloud about her face, or again when the other one—the boy with hard, quiet eyes—had gone away for the day, or even the night, as he had done when the schoolteacher had come looking for him, and as he would do again three years later when he was eighteen (three years during which no one had died at Prunde in the winter, which we began to take as a sign that fate might be starting to smile on us). He had to go back, alone this time, to Meymac, to the tall house on the sloping square, with the Virginia creeper blotting out the windows, in that dark office with furniture as heavy and shiny as the face of the notary, Léonce Laperge, whom he too had to call “Sir.” Afterward White Cat would tell himself that he'd found it, the secret of these men with power: not one of knowing where, when, and how you would die, but realizing that the world was divided between the masters and the rest, between the poor chumps and those who knew how, could talk, and were able with a snap of their fingers to make you as powerful as they were; yes, men like

this Monsieur Laperge the notary, who indicated to him in a half-murmur that henceforth he, André Pythre (and on hearing these syllables the boy blushed as if the name didn't belong to him at all, as if he had been found out in the awful imposture of owning something on this earth, even a name of his own, and that it had been uncovered by the same man who was making him powerful), would be proprietor not of the little house where he lived in the hamlet of Prunde (which reverted, by this same deed of bequest, to Octavie Bogros, born Grandchamp, legitimate daughter of Elise Massoutre and of Jules Grandchamp, born and resident at Peyrelevade until he was killed by a Prussian near Rouen in 1870) nor of the several acres of woods and meadows that he worked in the said valley, but of a real farm, on the other side of the plateau, to the southwest, near the village of Siom.

White Cat looked at him without blinking that day, as if the boy did not understand or was pretending not to understand in order to give himself time to think and also to regain his self-assurance, sensing that his life was swinging the other way; realizing that you may not be forever the axe but might have a turn at being the hand that controls it, and even, possibly, one day, the voice that tells the hand what to do; his life was swinging, therefore, to the good side, where he might be called by his real name at last, his father's name, the surname and Christian name that were his true inheritance, and that henceforth it would be his responsibility to use to good effect—just as money and land ought to yield benefits, he thought—as the notary gazed at the boy with an air of weariness, almost of indignation that anyone could leave so much property to this blockhead with an obstinate, cold, not entirely unpleasing yet hopelessly uncouth face, wherein so many centuries of privation and determination to survive seemed to culminate and collect, together with a fierce will to escape that condition, with a mental keenness that drew almost entirely upon hatred (upon the boy's own hatred of himself as much of other people and of the cold, ungrateful earth) and upon the longing to have done with these years that passed too slowly, years of being so very young and therefore nothing and no one yet; and in spite

of the earth that he would always have beneath his fingernails, along with the patois in his speech, which did not prevent him from understanding the explanations of Laperge the notary (whose nostrils quivered as they scented the odor of roast lamb drifting toward them from behind the wall of books with faded gold-blocked spines, from the end of a never-ending corridor, this boy may have been thinking, this boy who must also have realized that this too was what power meant: an odor of roast lamb or of what, never having tasted any such thing, what he supposed the smell to be, wafting toward them between volumes with gilded spines), instructing him that Madame Grandchamp, born Massoutre, widow of Jules Grandchamp, had made certain provisions in settlement of part of her property: comprised of a farm with a main building constituting a dwelling-house, another large building, and a bakehouse, and thirty acres of arable land and woods overhanging the Vézère, at Veix, opposite the village of Siom; and that she had left the same to André Pythre, on condition that three years after the death of the testatrix, and at the point when the legatee reached his eighteenth year, he would offer proof positive that he had been duly caring for her adoptive daughter, Aimée Grandchamp, and had been treating her with equanimity, with the decency befitting a proprietor; and on condition, too, that he had completed his military service in full, that he undertook never to break up the property or to separate from Aimée, whom nevertheless he was not compelled to marry, contrary to a previous stipulation of the will, altered by a codicil entered therein shortly before the death of the said Elise Grandchamp.

“All very odd, in my opinion,” muttered the notary, who thought it best to repeat that these provisions applied only until the girl’s death and that Pythre could not have the use of the land and the house unless she lived under the same roof, irrespective of what she did there, whether she was a maid of all work or a mistress-cum-servant or the family idiot, that was of no account, as long as she remained there, warm and undisturbed, for the rest of her days, never crying out in pain or fear and never groaning at night like the Vedrenne girl, who hadn’t been long in this

world anyway, was even more of a simpleton than Aimée, spending more than ten years out by the pigsty because there was no getting her to keep quiet in the house and because she had become pretty much like the swine, at least in the way she whined for food or showed fright, and by the time they let her out had grown as wily and suspicious as any piglet, with the same round, cunning, intent little eyes—for in fact, they said, being so close to the sty had sharpened her up quite remarkably, though of course she wasn't really human anyway—and she died when she was seventeen because, well, she was incapable of living either with people or without them.

The boy heard the notary out, contemplating the man in much the same way as the latter had observed him: almost absentmindedly, with something you could have taken for disdain but was merely embarrassed awkwardness; for though they were both anxious to get this ceremony over with, nonetheless, they did take their time spelling things out, perhaps because it was their duty and because these things were scarcely of an everyday sort. He listened to this man whose gray cheeks were giving off glints of deep waters in the half light and who was saying in conclusion that he, André Pythre, was now in charge of a farm and a woman, and that the one could not be had without the other, which, in spite of the strangeness of the stipulations, was how things were. Pythre was aware of this, had probably known it since that first night, when Aimée did not return to the Grandchamp woman's house—he may then have divined that much, possibly everything, was owing to women—and especially that day when he went to live in Madame Grandchamp's little house after she had gone off to her other daughter (the older, legitimate one, who had unsuccessfully contested the will, there was no getting around that, but this did not seem to affect the boy, used as he was to hatred and envy, unless it was that he saw this hostility as somehow legitimizing the inheritance) in Peyrelevade, on the hillside exposed to every wind, where the soil was darker and colder than in any other corner of the plateau, as Madame Grandchamp was in the habit of saying, and sadder too, a kind of freezing, rain-drenched retreat, where all you had to

do was stretch out on your bed at night to feel death coming on in that tall gray-stone gabled house looking over the valley; when the winds scoured the hillside and whistled under the doors, between the shutters, down the chimneys, lifting the slates with a sharp, crazy, little pattering very like a gust of hail that could not have dropped from the sky and must have come from no possible where: oh, from farther away than the night itself and the very jaws of the wind; yes, from that other bottomless night into which the old woman was beginning her journey, unafraid, with a kind of lassitude, with gratefulness too, thinking about what her life had been, as if it had already ceased to be hers, as if thinking about an object for which you have no more use and which you have abandoned, perhaps recalling almost with amusement the times when she used to run about this very hillside, in the spring, among the flowering broom, gentians, and snapdragons—in her blue skirt, short-sleeved cotton blouse, and lace-up collar, her flat hood tied under the chin and over it a big straw hat—now thinking of that and nothing else and, in these last moments, incapable of grasping that she was dying, yes, and that so inconceivable a horror could befall her, yet prepared for extinction, for she was tranquil and joyous, full of the joy that is surely the true name of the peace we know only when it is too late, not having had, she no more than the others, power over this life; everything having gone by so swiftly since she had skipped about in the heather and known the man who had left her a war widow at twenty-four, widowed by a faraway war whose only terrors for her had been the icy-cold winter, the notice of her husband's death, and the capture and exile of the Emperor. Yes, like the rest, all that had passed too quickly for her to understand any of it. And perhaps, finally, the thought came to her of the will that she had made some months before, when she had sensed she was not much longer for this world, and of the provision she had made for her two daughters: the legitimate one in whose house she was fading away amid the uproar of the fierce winds that now she could scarcely hear, who would inherit almost all her wealth and already knew this and wept for her mother all

the more fiercely, having suffered her own share of shame and having patiently awaited what might pass for reparation or retribution; and the other, the simple one, the occasion of scandal and shame, on account of whom, starting with the orphanage, she had had to pay, lie for, suffer, put up with sarcasm, get used to others' suspicions, and who was now fixed up with a makeshift husband who did not touch her or talk to her and for whom until the end she would be servant, impossible mother and sister, no, even child, and who would need him as he would need her, their destinies linked irrespective of their wishes in the secrecy of a notary's office in Meymac one June afternoon while the air buzzed with lazy insects and Elise Grandchamp was saying, with obvious satisfaction:

"There, Maître Laperge, you see I am not entirely bad, not like the ones who bury their babies alive or leave them to raise themselves along with the cob rollers . . ."

She had said "cob rollers" instead of "pigs" or "swine," because the term probably seemed less harsh than the ordinary French words, but then she corrected herself and said "pigs" after all, though in an undertone, blushing as if she had used profanity in front of this man who, she well knew, judged her even more severely than the priest at Peyrelevede to whom she had confessed everything about her momentary weakness, when she had been widowed for three years and had gone back to her parents and Octavie was four years old: she had surrendered one April evening to that traveler whom no one had seen and of whom she herself may have perceived nothing beyond the golden glint trembling in his eyes; he hadn't needed to say much to get her to meet him that same evening, under the lindens, at the bottom of the hillside, near the stream where that afternoon she had done some washing, which now swung gently in the night air, mingling its scent with the linden-blossoms' fragrance. She knew what she was doing (even if she had told her father, her mother, her sisters, and the others that the lindens, the strange, sweet softness of the night, and life, which for a fleeting moment had seemed so light and easy, had turned her head), from the corner of her eye keep-

ing watch on her father's house—which didn't then have the high gable that caused the people in Peyrelevade to say that despite their shame the Massoutres didn't mind showing off—but inwardly observing, one can be pretty sure, that this was the best thing that could happen to her, yes, to find herself pregnant, having acted without thinking and accepting whatever might follow, on that wonderfully clear night, and surely feeling the earth move under her as if, her eyes now closed and with no fear of a light in her father's window, she had begun to sink into the very depths of heaven, her heart close to bursting, with tears like none she had ever wept and a smile like none she had ever smiled, and sighing as she had never sighed until then: not even when the husband—the one whom an uhlan's lance had pinned to a barn door like a screech owl or a boar's hoof over somewhere near Rouen, from where he had a letter written to tell her how fine was the sight of the gulls as they flew up the Seine with the big ships—no, not even when her husband had planted himself in her with his little cock as thin and stiff as a barrel tap and had worked away without looking at her, his shirt still on, so that all she really knew of him was his hands, his red face, and that panting squealing noise of a young steer headed for the butcher's stall: oh, he was altogether different from the other one, the stranger who had her shoulders wedged between his forearms and her face between his hands that smelled of heather and who moved in her and made her move like the earth beneath the plowshare before falling asleep pressed against her—not like Jules Grandchamp turning onto his side when he had had his, no, but like a child giving way to sleep, smiling, and indistinctly murmuring some girl's name.

She would die thinking of all that: in dying becoming that dream, then becoming the dreamer absorbed by her dream, not clearly aware of what was befalling her, as though caught unprepared by nightfall, a little surprised as well, who knows, that it would amount only to this, vaguely satisfied that everything was in order, in spite of the wildness of the night, Octavie's sobbing, and the dry note of the hail on the slates; entered already into others' memory and into their forgetting; into those

of her daughters, her son-in-law, and the other one, that son-in-law of sorts on whom she had bet her final stakes. She was dying in peace: her money would achieve its work as surely as the earth or the centuries that had made her what she was. She was smiling, they said, when a blast of wind stronger than the others carried her off.

## 9

Young Pythre (as we must call him from now on, not that we had suddenly been filled with respect for him—for us he would still be the cuckold's son, that pigheaded orphan—but out of consideration for that peculiar inheritance that none of us would ever have imagined possible) probably understood that you are always at the mercy of women, that they win in the end, and that in their weakness and their additional misery lies their guarantee of victory.

There he was, not a hair stirring in that room filled with shadows where the clock was about to sound noon and where he could feel that at last time was about to begin for him, no longer time as in Prunde, where there was nothing that could strike the universal coin of hours, but a time in which people opened books and clocks announced roast lamb on the table. There he was, motionless before this notary public, who stared at the country boy, this innocent with now filled pockets who probably did not grasp the full import of the strange contract he had just entered into with death. He seemed to be hesitating between resignation and great expectations. He had been helpless against that

Elise Grandchamp, who over a long period, perhaps even since he was born and she had seen that the consumptive wouldn't last long and that Marthe would lapse into ineffectual widowhood, had marked him as a companion for Aimée, if not a son-in-law; for real compassion was no more present among us than among other folk, and you had to buy, you had to exchange, not just cattle and property, but women and males, and you had to use money to ease the pain of those wounds that go on bleeding inside us.

Essentially, he was just like us; for him stubbornness did the work of pride, but he had something more than we had: he did have pride, and he believed obstinacy would have its rewards. He had signed a paper that made him something tantamount to a lawful impostor, he knew that, but there was nothing else he could do, except remain stuck in the valley and eventually become, in his turn, a kind of dumb and dismal cuckold who until the end of his days would dream of houses covered in sweet young vines, ladies in white at their ease on reclining chairs, of books in gilded bindings, and clocks that struck the hour at the behest of exotic odors.

Was he dreaming of this as he returned that evening along the road descending to Prunde, looking at but not actually seeing the few houses among the beeches and chestnut trees where for our part we pretended not to take any notice of him—he would have said nothing to us if we had, anyway—leaving again at dawn, perhaps after asking Aimée to wait for him, off to exactly where we never discovered, to enlist before the actual call-up—probably to Limoges, said Niarfeix, who claimed that young Pythre had shown him a postcard of soldiers in kepis and dark uniforms standing guard nonchalantly and rolling cigarettes in the courtyard of the Army Service Corps barracks, overshadowed by tall ash trees, from which he would return more than a year later, having fulfilled one of the stipulations of the contract, without the Grandchamp girl finding anything amiss or ceasing to prepare supper for two all that time? When he came back to the valley that autumn (the same but somehow changed: he was arrogant yet amenable, worried yet resolute; at

any rate he was bigger, had put on weight, was shrewder), he knew that he was spending his last days with us, that he would have to leave Prunde without delay (it was in the agreement), the little house and the land reverting now to the elder daughter, and depart with the other daughter, the simple one, to make a name for himself on the holding at Siom, on the other side of the plateau.

We got nothing out of him or out of Aimée Grandchamp either. We scarcely existed any longer for them, for, as the priest repeated often, we were no more able to see what lay around us than were our cows, that we had come there enfolded in our benightedness, that we had tried to break free of our obscurity, tried to give ourselves a more human form in the light of day. We thought of ourselves as eternal: we were resigned to everything. And so we resigned ourselves to the silence of that young fellow and the big girl. We watched them leave very early one morning as September was drawing to a close. It was cold. There was a mist. You could tell, raising your nose to the sky, that it would be a fine day. There was a commotion heard in the valley but not human voices: we were all in our homes, looking out through the dark windows or from our doorways or from further off behind the trees, watching young Pythre and the big girl—we had not been able to bring ourselves to call her by any other name—the funny one, we would also call her that, for want of anything better and so as not to say anything worse. We watched them take the yoke to two cows and tie the halters after young Pythre had protected the lower part of the horns with two little collars a bit like the bands the wrestlers have on at fairs. Niarfeix had once seen them tying bands round their wrists at the Egletons fair. We watched Pythre and the big girl (without it occurring to us to lend a hand, since they weren't our folk any longer, never really had been anyway) lifting the shaft together and carrying it to the yoke between those sluggish heads with their streaming nostrils. We saw them load the wooden side-pieces and head- and footboards into the cart, along with the mattresses, eiderdowns, some household things, and the few dishes that Marthe and the big girl had made last, tucked tightly into deep wicker baskets, big bulging contain-

ers like sheep's bellies, and some tools. But the thing that really annoyed us and kept us from deciding to help them was the cradle they carried out, André Pythre's, the one both father and son had used, with the chain you could use to hang it from the ceiling to keep rats from reaching it, which made us think that these two—the orphan and the moron, the sort-of son-in-law and that creature who was so stupid you assumed she was sterile—might produce a third André, who would howl away in this same cradle where he would swing between heaven and earth.

Only big Niarfeix knew where they were going, because he had bought from the heiress—the legitimate one, the one at Peyreleavede, and without anyone knowing where he got the cash—the little house and the land, along with some cattle he had mixed in with his own, except for the two yoked cows that young Pythre was now leading away, his eyes riveted on the still-invisible ridge. Fixed on the devil, some people said later, recalling that unheard-of thing: a boy from Prunde leaving the valley not to drop even lower, into the everlasting pit; but rather, indeed, to judge from the look about the two of them that autumn morning, for better days beyond Millevaches, even though it was only at the other end of the plateau, another groove in the vast stone tableland where the rivers rise and where the winds shape people's features as surely as work and longing.

We would long remember the expression on his face when the two of them tackled the hill, especially his eyes, which seemed to see ahead through the mist, while the big girl with that peaceful heifer's look, silent and placid, came behind the cart, matching her pace and the sway of her head to those of the red cows, both her hands on her stomach, as if she were carrying something under her tan skirts or was about to squat in a ditch, already heavy, as certain ones among us had guessed, with a burden that was getting the edge on her, making her hang on to the cart from time to time, and that put an odd smile on her face.

They never looked back as they went up. We had come out onto our doorsteps to watch the two move away: the little silhouette in its dark drugget clothes walking ahead of the cows and the other figure in a loose

red jacket and black shawl hanging on to the faded blue cart. We kept them in sight until the first turn, waited for them to reappear after the Gorges' pitch pines; up there, in the mists that were starting to dissolve; we saw them reach the birches on the ridge, and for a long time we watched them in our minds, imagining them making their way along the road that crosses the plateau from Felletin to Meymac, beside which beeches had just been planted.

They reached Chavanac in mid-morning, stopped near the church, and drank some water from the wooden bottle sticking out of one of the big baskets. Perhaps he heard the presbytery clock strike ten. He murmured, in French:

"It's ten o'clock."

He seemed surprised to be able to say what time it was and to have to reckon with time, as if on these expanses he was now discovering—green, pink, yellow, with patches of flaming red—that the hours must necessarily pass otherwise than at Prunde or that now he was in control, if not of time itself, at least of his own time, and of this he would very likely know how to make something.

The girl was making a face but he did not look at her. He shouldered the goad and started off again, turning to the left onto the road that went down toward Saint-Merd, toward the sea of heather, woods, furze, and turf moors that would become visible on the horizon. He walked along, bareheaded as he would be all his life, out of bravado as much as humility, his left forearm loosely over the goad as, while he had done his military service, it had lain over the rifle that we would never see him with, his right hand stuck in his waistband, his eyes as though fixed upon some quarry staring down the road where the dust as it dried grew lighter under sabots and wheels; while the other, following along behind, kept her eyes trained on that neck and on that head with its close-cropped hair that never once turned to look at her but which she followed blindly, without the least shadow of a qualm, even, you might say, with a kind of underlying joy that prevented her from looking about

her and risking getting lost, as if beyond Millevaches they had entered a realm where witches held sway.

Folk, as they watched them pass, were not hostile; neither were they welcoming; at best they were intrigued by the sight of this unusual pair, especially by the big girl with the slant eyes who seemed too old to be anything other than the servant of this young bareheaded fellow with the fierce, determined look. That was how the people of Le Magimel saw them as they went by, then, shortly after midday, those in Saint-Merd, who also saw the two halt after the last houses, under the oaks at the turn, where they ate a little bread and some cold potatoes, cooked the night before in the last hot ashes. That was how the shepherdess outside Les Fargettes, leaning on her staff, saw them when, the Vézère on their right, they were on the moor. She called to them in her old goat's voice, which in bygone days had made wolves break into a run, telling the boy and the girl something that they did not understand, which made them quicken their pace too, for that old owl was certainly a bird of ill omen and it was a good idea to get themselves away from these violet spaces where the winds were now asserting their rule, to reach the ascent toward Fournol, stop after the two turns, once through the hamlet and before the descent, in order to give the cows a breather, young Pythre not having as much as glanced at the houses stuck on the granite spur or at the girl, who had walked along grimacing all the while and since Saint-Merd had not let go of the cart gate. The Fournol dogs had quieted down now, and the travelers heard only the wind among the whins and russet leaves. He nodded, spat, turned toward the cows, shouted in patois to get them started again—the order probably meant for the girl too, who in any case stood up at once, without a word, holding her belly.

Once again the road ran along the river, wider here, flowing between great tufts of yellowed grass and clumps of juniper trees; the most transparent waters—with steely glints, white pebbles, gray lichens, grains of mica—almost as gentle as a woman's eyes, as the young man might have remarked had he been able to pay attention to such things, unless he

happened to remember the eyes of the lady in white that time at the Marandes', long ago, at Saint-Sulpice-les-Bois, who was, he might have gone on to say to himself, the one who could not be bought, or at least who would never be owned by him, for she belonged to the realm of real power, the power that falls to you through blood and not by conquest, yes, true beauty, the incontrovertible sort, which is priceless and for most poor devils remains forever a living thorn, a memory that stings, that smarts, a sadness more difficult to assuage than all the other hungers that rack them.

By and by there was the smell of resin. They watered the cows in a clump of pines to escape the four o'clock sun. A buzzard was circling very high above them and directly above the wood. Young Pythre continued to gaze at the horizon and said he was glad (these were the first words he actually directed to her since leaving Prunde—and he could have been saying them to himself, for he was not looking at her now and hadn't noticed that she had been dragging herself along the whole way) that the Limousin girl had had a tidy ass. As tidy as Aimeé's, he may have thought upon seeing her crouch, dip her hands in the water, run them over her face several times. She had not complained. Did she really think, if that word could be applied to her, that he had just been talking about her? Was it to bear him out that she stepped forward onto two stones that emerged a little above the flowing water, found a secure place to sit, and, after seizing between her teeth the underclothes she had first pulled up over her thick, white thighs, set to washing her crotch, with that little smile she had when she knew she was giving him pleasure?

He lifted his shoulders, then—without looking at anything but the veins throbbing on those thighs and, beyond that thick bush that grew so very high upon her belly like a blacksmith's apron, the streak she was leaving in the water, which resembled a trailing weed—shouted that it was still a long way to Buiges. She straightened up at once, her face frightened, as if darkness were falling upon her shoulders. She slipped on the stones, slid into the river, her belly and legs immersed and the rest of her body hugging the turf of the bank. She was groaning. He, already

half-turned away, the goad upon his shoulder, looked at her without stirring, probably thinking that she was far too clumsy, too stupid to register real pain and that she was more afraid than hurt, he was sure of it—and he was very irritated by the racket she was making as she lay there in the water like an idiot. He restrained himself from going over and hitting her. Perhaps she understood; she pulled herself up with great difficulty, still holding her stomach, and followed the cart, though hindered by her soaked skirts from falling into step.

She had ceased her whimpering despite the continuing pain; she bit her lip and wrinkled her nose under her big, misshapen felt hat, probably dazzled by the light of the setting sun now shining between the branches ahead of them, unless as before she kept her eyes fixed on the deep red nape of young Pythre's neck, those somewhat prominent ears, the heavy brow she glimpsed from time to time, and the blue drugged jacket a size too big for him, which also constituted part of the bargain struck a few years before at Meymac between a dead woman and an orphan. The buzzard kept circling overhead. In it he probably saw nothing significant—no sign that concerned him, anyway, for signs are like words: they do not mean the same thing to all people or in all places, and the signs he may have been looking out for were of another stamp, of an altogether different quality; besides, he had not once looked up from the road now leading between stands of young firs, birches, and beech-trees, above which rose the cold, heavy, forceful drafts that followed the dry yet heady scent of furze and broom. Night was falling, or, rather, had they looked back, they would have seen it creeping stealthily—wolf-like, as we sometimes say—toward the deepening red, down there beyond the hills below them, and toward what bled within them, one would like to say: a secret and furious joy in his case; in hers, the timeless affliction of women.

The long Buiges gradient was ahead of them. He turned. The girl was reeling, the cart was all but dragging her along. Pain made her features seem intelligent now but almost obscene too, with her gaping mouth, her vacant eyes lost in night, and her hoarse gasping, so that it was the

appearance of intelligence and not her idiocy that was intolerable. He stopped the cows, propped the goad against the yoke, and went back to where she now sat on the slope, her hands on either side of her belly, her legs extended and slightly apart: a trickle of water, of blood maybe, showed in the dust behind the cart and was still coming, it seemed, from beneath her skirts (but, as far as he could tell in the half-dark, she might equally well have been pissing out what she had long held back). He tried to grasp what was the matter. He drew back a little before asking her, in a voice so lingering and so flat that he was very near to injecting anger into it:

“You’re not expecting, are you?”

She looked at him and made no reply, not understanding but merely guessing that something important, even extraordinary, was happening to her or that she had done something wrong, supposing that she knew what wrongdoing was, apart from those very rare occasions when she had broken some crockery, let the fire die out, or farted in front of everyone. She had no need to reply: her bewilderment said as much as the rotundity of her belly, until this point well hidden beneath the skirts that on at least one occasion she had allowed someone to lift, without really knowing what was wanted from her, still less what she was doing behind the hedge, at the end of the wood, or against the barn, in the spring, obeying, as old Madame Grandchamp had once done, that gold that at least once in her life every woman feels melt within herself and turning around that hard thing probing her, pinning her to the ground, and seeking that deepest spot where, the Prunde girls would say, no finger can reach but only this thing that lifted her and made her utter little cries and then strange, almost desperate squeals—pretty much like those of a young rabbit cornered by a wood owl—and that had left her sprawled, you can imagine, her head in the wet grass, seeing nothing further—neither the inordinately blue sky nor the delicate greenness of the leaves nor the face of the man who fled through the woods after roaring inside her more fiercely than a man in anger—possibly seeking another glimpse, beyond the day and the night and the vast silence spreading within her, of that great white

bird she had seen as a child on the way from Ussel, when she came through the Bellechassagne forest with Elise Grandchamp, that day when she had taken her from the orphanage, the bird that for her, the old woman said, was her great undying lover; and perhaps he too had come down from heaven, the joker who had laid her that spring day; or perhaps he was snow white and tender-hearted, or celestial, pure and kind all in one—a funny sort of bird anyway, to rape a girl as simple as she and show her heaven and hell, waking something in her that didn't quite belong to the order of intelligence but to the simple sensation of time, a time with a before and an after, childhood and its opposite, eternity and nostalgia, hopes and disappointments. Perhaps she was still thinking about it, about that bird—the one at Bellechassagne or the one at Prunde, either would do, they were probably one and the same—when she looked up at the buzzard that seemed to be following them, high up there in the sky, as they crossed the plateau, from Saint-Merd to the outskirts of Buiges, until she couldn't endure it any longer; until she loosed her pain the way she was losing blood and that blood perhaps reminded her of what the old woman had taught her: that everything has its price; that for women the price is a lot higher than for anyone else; and that the blood that flows from them each month is in a way the tears of Our Lord—you had to see it like that; you couldn't avoid it; it was their disgrace and their crowning glory.

He lifted her skirt (it wasn't the first time, we might have murmured), saying he wasn't going to hurt her, that there was nothing to be afraid of, that besides what was done was done, that he had told her to be careful, hadn't he, and that she was no smarter than a heifer let loose in the meadows, but now they were at Buiges where there was sure to be a doctor. She stood there, empty-handed; tears were running down her cheeks; she looked in dismay at this belly that had reached such a size and at the blood she was losing. Night had now fallen indeed, but there was some moonlight, and he remained there, unmoving, gazing at that quivering white flesh wholly, intimately exposing itself to him for the first time, without there being the least immodesty about the girl, still

innocent at nearly thirty—like a child caught doing something naughty who knows it is forgiven—in front of this lad not yet twenty, who was looking at her with concern and annoyance, while softly asking what the devil was he going to do with her, leave her there at the edge of the ditch as she deserved or send her back to the valley she ought never to have come out of—yet helping her climb onto the shaft of the cart so that they could make Buiges at last, he too possibly bewildered that this should have befallen her and wondering just who it could have been: the buzzard that had accompanied them and that he had finally looked at when with a beat of its wings it had veered and sunk into the darkness; or else the winter wind, or the Holy Spirit, or again he himself, because there was no getting around it: now that she was carrying in her flesh another flesh that might be bleeding along with her and that her fall on the stones in the river, as well as the long walk here, might have killed; yes, whatever it was, this other flesh must have a father, and that father could be him; for wasn't he the master, as the lawyer had explained to him, the one who was allowed to do anything provided he acknowledge his acts and take responsibility for the mistakes of those in his charge, the one finally whose power was measured not only by the quantity of livestock and wooded land he owned, but also, and especially, by the number of times he would make women's bellies grow round?

The girl was quiet now. Perhaps she was all right there on the shaft: her head propped against the edge of a rolled-up mattress, her legs stretched out before her, her eyes full of tears and smiling like a little girl—the very thing she had never truly been or entirely stopped being—now being looked after at last, the passing years having left their mark only upon the big gawk's body, down there in the valley where she had had to be hidden, including from herself, the old woman having given out that she was an orphan, glad that she spoke practically not at all, even thanking her lucky stars that she was a near-simpleton; so that what could be taken for a mark of divine wrath in fact freed both mother and daughter from the burdens of bastardy and shame, the mother in the long run resigning herself, burying her anger inside, together with the

bad memories, and finding in herself the severe indulgence proper to women who have sinned, knowing all too well that between her legs every woman bears that strange wound, that opening owing to which she will never cease to know suffering and (who is to say?) to have the urge to suffer.

## 10

They entered Buiges by the highway that coming from Meymac descends through the town to the Vézère, from which there was now rising a heavy mist hiding the other side of the valley, the last houses, the tracts of pine, the granite quarries, the plains of Plazaneix. They had reached the other side of the plateau. Further on, he probably told himself, it was nothing but darkest night, where the world stopped just like that, for everything had an end. He parked the cart in the square, in front of a big oak. The girl seemed asleep. He shook her, had her climb down, and led her by the arm to the Café de Paris, where he asked for a little something to eat. The drinkers had turned round and were silently examining this young fellow with the stubborn face and, behind him, this big girl with unfocused eyes and a half-tipsy look, holding her belly, nodding wearily. They heard the boy loudly ask—in that tone tinged with arrogance and a certain shrillness they would never become accustomed to—where the midwife lived, embarrassed, it seemed to them, to feel himself forced to ask that on behalf of this lump of a woman who obviously couldn't be his wife and who had such trouble standing that

the proprietress had to help her to a seat near the stove, since the young fellow seemed determined not to do anything more, having already done enough by taking responsibility for the burden the girl bore, in accordance with an impossible truth that would compel him to say not that he was the father but that the girl was pregnant, that this was how it was, they didn't need to know by whom, even if it was his work.

And he chewed the walls of his cheeks, producing a pout that we from Siom would become familiar with. His gaze would darken, his eyes would seem to see beyond all this; and even then, some people would say, he made you afraid or at least inspired mistrust, indeed, a faint revulsion. But he was the master, we would know that before too long, as soon, that is, as the midwife took the girl into the back room on the other side of the corridor, and he asked the owner the way to Siom. He pronounced it "Siom," and not, as we did, "Sion." But we were not in the mood to tease him: we were waiting, we were wondering what such a fellow could be thinking of doing in Siom; and while awful sounds were coming from the little room, as if the woman making them was furious at having to suffer this way, he for his part seemed lost in thought or as if he was hunting for words: and eventually he said in his rather solemn French:

"I am on my way to Veix for the farm."

He was, we saw, possessed by a steely rage, by a kind of determination that strained his features and gave him a look almost of hatred, seeming to narrow that face in which shone two unnaturally small eyes: a city man, you might have said, except for his hands, big, heavily callused, too thick for his body of middling size and frail appearance. We didn't study him that long; he was the new master of Veix, and it wasn't for us to meddle in his affairs, even though we would soon have something to say about a lad so young, who didn't altogether have the look of a peasant, taking over a piece of land in our district, although the property had been abandoned for some time (so long that some of us were inclined to see a curse as the reason), and doing so in the company of a feeble-minded girl older than himself whom he (it had to be allowed, there being no better explanation) he had got in a family way.

He must have felt he shouldn't say anything more, that he oughtn't to have stopped in Buiges, although the stop hadn't been quite pointless: they'd know who he was around here, and then, as stipulated in the will, which we didn't know about at the time, he couldn't let the girl just die like that, particularly when he was so near his goal: he had to cross the threshold of the Veix property with her, even if she was breathing her last—or had breathed it, as some of us would say later who had heard the midwife tell him that things did not look promising and that he should have the doctor fetched. He agreed. They sent the little maid to call the medical man away from the meal he was taking alone, as he did every night, not far away, at the Hôtel des Voyageurs a little down the road. The young fellow arrived at a price with the owner and the midwife, thought it best to pay right away, then went outside to wait under the lowered shaft from which he had detached the two cows, after he had removed their yoke and fed them hay from the cart, as if he was already showing us that he didn't want to owe us anything.

He waited until halfway through the night for the girl to give birth, refusing to eat or drink anything beyond what he had swallowed on arriving, a plate of soup into which he had emptied a glass of wine, probably because that was what he thought a man of substance, someone with power—and, of course, a father—would do; refusing as well the room the owner offered him, very close to where the girl was resting; refusing, finally, even to glance at the lump of dead flesh that lay on a night table by the bed and, after all, was certainly to be considered his flesh and blood, his own because, well, it couldn't be the whole wide world's.

Until dawn, wrapped in what had been his father's cape, he kept underneath his cart, near his cows, watching the long white traces of their breath ascend into the night. He waited for the sun to appear above the slate roofs before he stood up with his cows, gave them hay, and went to piss behind the oak. He did not go into the café, which the servant girl was sweeping out, did not ask how his companion was, but set off to do what he had been told to do by the doctor (a young one, from

Brive, with those very small, steel-rimmed spectacles, almost bald already, and no doubt aghast that anyone could be so ignorant): go up to the town hall and register the infant's death. But he stopped halfway, came down again, passed the Café de Paris, and entered the baker's shop, where he bought three loaves of bread, flour, and yeast, then returned to wait near the cart until the big, dark-haired girl, neither disturbed nor frightened, but pale, dazzled by the full daylight, appeared on the doorstep, walking with the help of the woman who owned the café and holding the little white heap in her arms, a faint smile on her lips.

They said not a word. The lad hitched the animals up again, and to the yoke he attached the shaft upon which the young mother settled herself—the young mother, as we called her for a certain time, though in connection with big Aimée that epithet struck us as somehow obscene, which is why, unlike the folk in Prunde, we got to calling her by the only thing she really owned: her first name, which was all the easier to do because there wasn't a single Aimée among us in the whole Buiges district and especially easy at Siom, where we certainly wouldn't have stood for an idiot and a fallen woman like that having the same name as a real mother, a wife or someone's daughter or granddaughter.

We saw them set off again, slowly. To reach Veix he would not need to go a great distance, walking ahead of his cows, from the corner of his eye apparently watching his short shadow spread out on the road to his left, and she leaning back against the mattress as on the day before, looking anywhere or nowhere, still smiling as she clasped that white parcel to her belly—knowing probably that it meant nothing, that it hadn't been alive, that she would have to dispose of it as soon as possible. We watched them disappear into the mist rising about the bridge over the Vézère down below. We had pointed out the way and had no trouble imagining them three miles further on, where the flat open country ended, coming to the Veix fork on their left and descending beneath the beeches as if they were walking down the aisle of a church: silent, dismal, thinking (he, anyway) of what they had suffered and what they still had to endure, and shivering now and then, for those were parts where the

sun never reached. Then they would rejoin the Vézère again, which they would cross at the bottom of the narrow valley, passing over the frail plank bridge in the mist that never left those hollows before midday.

We were saying to one another that they should have reached Veix by now and would be among the pines; that they couldn't have missed the road that curved up toward the long structure solidly seated on a shelf covered with grass, nettles, and brambles, which brought together dwelling, stables, and, above these, the barn you reached by an earthen ramp at the back; while on the other side of a courtyard full of big ferns there was a partly fallen-down bakehouse, set at right angles to the main building and slate roofed in the same way, for Madame Grandchamp (as we had always called her around here) had done things properly.

Yes, we had no trouble visualizing them approaching the main building, pulling up short, the young fellow grabbing a scythe from the cart and opening up a path to the door through the ferns, brambles, and hazel shoots grown as high as a man. He shot a glance at Aimée (who was looking at him without seeing him), then inserted in the lock the big key that the notary had given him before the boy went off to do his military service and that since then he had not ceased to finger inside the pocket of his pants where it was sewn in place with stout thread, as if it were even more valuable than the papers on which he had put a clumsy signature, even more, too, than the presence at his side of the big girl with a hurt belly whom, for his part, he would never manage to call Aimée (whom he wouldn't address anyway, so that, in order not to incur his anger, she had long ago learned to spy out his least mood or gesture), as if, in sum, it were from this long piece of warm polished iron that he derived the assurance that things had changed, though no one could say as yet they had improved. And while big Aimée entered the kitchen, her parcel under one arm, and opened wide shutters, windows, and doors, he headed toward the light-filled opening a little higher up, toward the northwest, between very tall pines, where, so he guessed, the boundary lay to his land. He turned round, took in the knoll with the buildings from one of whose chimneys smoke was now rising, the pines round-

about, and, farther off, lower down, and barely visible between the trees and under their lower branches, the cultivable pieces of land. At that instant you would have seen his eyes grow moist, and heard him mutter between his teeth that it wasn't much of a choice, this bit of hillside overgrown with pines, brambles, and ferns, and back there the Prunde valley; that here too they would be back in some other century, and that having property is no more than a dubious way of being in the world when you have no one to talk to but an uncommunicative idiot and the sighing forest.

The branches were gently astir, shifting those fleeting patches of brightness on the ground, over which he set off again. He got beyond the highest pines at the top of the hill and saw below, bathed in a very yellow, powdery, gilded light, the two sides of a rather wide and deep valley, on the right cut off by higher slopes and on the left open, without his being able, from the level at which he stood, to see where it ended. The river that ran through the middle, at the bottom, made another bend, foaming between narrow banks until, after passing through the rocks of Veix, slowing conspicuously near the bridge, it practically made a loop around the hill. He squatted down, in a way that he was used to and that revealed an astonishing, irrefutable and immediate familiarity with the place he happened to be in (and where, with time, he had been), the gesture of a proprietor as much as of a *nouveau riche*, we would say, by which he took possession of his land that day and discovered the bounds of his territory: the bank of the Vézère, down below, at his feet; right up to the Jouclas mill, on the left; and opposite him, Siom, perched a little lower on another hill—or, rather, an abrupt spur—built around three roads, the longest descending gently to a terrace constructed like a redoubt, supported by high, dark stone walls and planted with three young acacias; the other two roads, actually narrow streets, one running straight into the upper side of, and the second coming up at right angles to join, the sloping square that had at its highest point a huge oak standing in front of the church. A few low-built houses, mostly with thatched roofs, seemed dug into their tiny kitchen gardens and planted terraces,

which, modest though they were, we Siom folk were rather proud of, with, of course, the presbytery behind the church, the Berthe-Dieu café-restaurant on the square, Monsieur Queyroix's house below, on your way down toward the graveyard and the mill, and, as you went up, a little below Chadiéras' farm, but on the other side of the road, far too imposing for our little village, the great Republican hulk that accommodated the town-hall offices and the schools within its high rough-cast walls and that was moored to the side of another hill, higher than the one on whose crest young Pythre was crouching (but not so high as the plateau upon which ran the highway to Limoges and which, to the right, closed the valley) and whose summit was marked by a gray-granite calvary that we called the Palm Sunday cross.

He heard a bell, more shrill and persistent than the church bell that had been rung a few moments before and filled the whole valley as if it was measuring the valley's exact volume; something that this one did not attempt, contenting itself with releasing from the big yellow hulk about twenty children of all ages in their navy blue capes, who went shouting down the main street to the doorsteps of the houses where they were awaited by the same women whom, at noon, the Angelus bell had told to drop their hoes in those hanging gardens where they seemed to scrap with the garish blue sky over turnips, carrots, and potatoes. All of a sudden they had come to a stop, as had the women at the washhouse or on their way back from the fields. He, too, had made the sign of the cross, possibly reverting to a childhood practice that provided its own kind of peace, unless he had been struck—and why not—by the clarity of the bells and their deep resonance in the valley; whereas at Prunde you had to strain your ears, and only when the wind was from the east, to hear anything at all of the bells of Saint-Sulpice; and even then you would imagine you were hearing them much better than you really were; so that some people, women especially, had got in the habit, in order not to feel wholly abandoned by God, of climbing at vespers right up to the knoll overhanging the valley on the northeast, toward the Auvergne, where

they could hear the distant peal a little more clearly and where they could kneel down to pray together.

Young Pythre, or just Pythre, as we would soon be calling him, did not move. The high plateau came to an end there, at the edge of this valley that you knew had to continue beyond the bend in the river, which, after so many other bends, must broaden out and vanish into the greens, then blues and golds of the faraway distances, and into the mildness, too, that would give voices and faces, according to what he had heard, an unimagined gentleness, out of which came words having the rectitude of poplars lining deep pathways, the long, drawn-out tremor of aspens, and the lovely lucidity of vines; over there—the schoolmaster had said on one of those occasions when he despaired of his lunkheads—they suffered less, or differently; they lived better, loved better, died better. For to be born up on the plateau, in the dimness within the woods, or in the hollows of the narrow valleys there, at the heart of the great winds or down close to the peat, in the scrub, was a disgrace, which some sought to escape by descending toward the vine country or toward the pines, far off, and on toward the shores of the ocean and even beyond the Pyrenees, while others went to shape and assemble stones in the big towns to the north or else to sell wine, even farther north in the cities of Flanders or Wallonia; whereas yet others went off to work for the Republic on the railways, in the postal service, or the schools, before, in most cases, as if they could not really elude their bitter feeling of doom and condemnation, coming back to die where they had first opened their eyes; for wherever you were, you could not elude that feeling; and no words—neither those of the Republic, nor those of the priest, nor even those of women, nor even those of our mothers—could have rescued us or could begin to soothe us when the terror would grip us along with pain, so that, piteous thieves of language, we would hope then for some respite or—and why not?—some small piece of eternity.



PART TWO

*Veix*



## 11

Big Aimée sat on the doorstep, holding the mass of dead flesh in her arms. As she looked at young Pythre, he found her more idiotic and dismal than ever before, waiting for him to take from her hands the lump from which the doctor and midwife had liberated her stomach. She didn't know what to do with it now and had probably forgotten what it was and even that she might have carried it. Perhaps she was rather worried by the smell that it was beginning to give off and, all the more, even though it was long past the twelve o'clock bell, at not having satisfied this hunger that made her feel giddy and brought saliva to her slightly agape mouth as she whimpered softly. He understood and told her to wait, that they had plenty of time, that they were in their own place now, and that she had things to do and should do them nicely. She dropped her head and began to rock the thing she held to her, smiling unbearably, and perhaps remembering how she had seen the little girls of Ussel cradle their straw dolls as she watched them from the orphanage windows.

He had unyoked the cows and taken them into a nearby paddock that seemed secure. He came back, went up to Aimée, and muttered that the

thing would soon be stinking as they did down there but still smiled as he did so, as if he could see nothing wrong with that. Nothing at all, indeed, for he was merely doing what had to be done. He took a trowel from the cart and went back up to the crest, slowly, for he was in his own place, and nothing else mattered, that was clear; or at least there was something he was sure of: for once in his life at least he had some chance of happiness, even though he had never used the word and had never known what it meant. Aimée followed him, panting and snuffling, until they reached the shelf between the high pines where he had crouched to survey Siom and the valley. On the left, above a group of rocks, there was a little hillock overhanging the field and screened by the low pine branches. He removed the pine needles, lifted the carpet of moss, and started to break up the ground, spending some time digging a narrow yet deep trench. Aimée stood on the other side. She recoiled when he came over to collect the packet of flesh. He stared at her, was about to laugh, and then to burst out angrily: it was the first time that she had given any sign of having any will of her own or that he had associated any of her movements with any meaning greater or deeper than the accomplishment of some minor domestic ritual or the fulfillment of some desire or need. She stayed like that, on the edge of the hole, with the dead baby in her arms, her eyes open, her head quite unbowed; she also began to talk, or rather to hum or do he couldn't really tell what, for he had hardly ever known her even to open her mouth. She uttered something between speech and song as she stood there, her eyes shut now and her face paler than ever in spite of the red cheeks. Then she sank to her knees in the wet grass and soil, and he listened, scowling, furious but as astonished as he would have been if his cows had started to talk, almost shocked that this could happen and upset the order of things, could disturb the way in which, for so many years, even hour after hour, surely, he had thought of taking possession of Veix. He heard out what could have been an unending threnody or the babbling of an idiot, listening to her without daring to interrupt this expression of the great lamentation of mothers and daughters, and also perhaps what he

had been unable to say when his mother died: for what Aimée now conveyed was the anthem of all those women who have passed into their darkness, women both guilty and innocent, sunk lower even than the pits they would eventually lie in, yet everlastingly virgin and pure in heart, even though their thighs have been parted as often as their men wished. He listened and watched her finally open her mouth—for the first and last time, he probably thought—just as she had been forced to open her legs and just as her belly had been torn one day in spring, before it had been ripped even wider that cold autumn night at Buiges. She claimed nothing, neither cried nor shouted, named nothing, yet did not remain silent, for she was searching for something that she would never be able to utter: something that would always elude her or that she would find without recognizing or recalling it, no more used to complaining in front of him than she was to being called Aimée, and humming therefore as she swayed from right to left, encircling with this brief movement the white lump on which her gaze was now fixed. This was no gesture of submission to the man who stood before her and for the first time waited for her, assuming the patience proper toward women, or to what she held in her arms, which had never reached the point of being her child, or to all those who might have been its father: to, that is, the wind, running water, and the blueness of the sky, but certainly to that blood that had flowed from one woman to another since the dawn of time, when life came up and was cut down, from the first woman to the last, for each was both first and last, both guilt and its expiation; as if for her, Aimée, as for all her fellow creatures, transgression had become the sole hope of innocence or the ardor with which it was committed a means of grace; for she was born in the valley, a woman and a near idiot, and to be alive, whether consciously or not, meant wearing sin like a set smile, seeking to justify it by other sins, even invoking them since they could not be discarded, and exalting and expiating them at one and the same time; although Aimée herself, the outcome of a sin and its expiation, was not in the least aware of any of this.

She was about to bury the issue of her own wrongdoing, which she

had not even seen and which therefore had no face or name, but which she could not bear to abandon like that in this dirty wrapping, in alien ground. Eventually he understood. He went to the cart to look for one of those oblong, double-lidded baskets used to collect potatoes. He put it down in front of Aimée, took the dead child from her arms, and carefully fitted it into the basket. He waited for a few minutes, motionless, his head bowed; you might have thought that he was praying and that Aimée too was praying—with her hands or fists tight against her chest, upon which she bowed her head—as if both had heard the bells ringing in the valley where the light was failing. Then he kneeled, nailed down the two lids, put the basket into the hole, crossed himself, mumbled something, and possibly even shrugged his shoulders.

He filled in the hole, stuck a fencing stake at the very edge, and tied a not too scabby piece of wood to it in some semblance of a cross. He thought that the big pines would be some kind of memorial anyway, for they were far enough apart at this point to let a little light through and could be seen from the kitchen window as well as from Siom, so that every morning when he went out to piss and turned his back to the rising sun (following a habit that he never thought about and perhaps wasn't truly conscious of, yet never gave up, not even once), he, and she when she revived the fire after opening the single gray wooden shutter, could glance in the direction of the hillock.

“After all, it wasn't a Christian . . .”

He said this in French, not in patois. And after that he spoke French, not only because they didn't really understand his patois at Siom, but because he realized that French would protect him, would help him (or so we thought) to win perhaps some kind of respect, or at least cold if still-suspicious tolerance, for was there anyone at Siom, at Buiges, and throughout the area who didn't distrust this far-too-young man who had come to take over Veix, together with a woman older than he and half-crazed to boot; carrying, what is more, a dead child in her belly that they had to deliver in the middle of the night in a backroom of the café, and not even on a servant's mattress but on a table over which they'd

thrown an old stable blanket, while he, young Pythre, proud and dour, spent the night under his cart, beside his cows?

He spoke an abrupt, rough French, in the course of which we sometimes caught some clever word that he must have heard in Limoges during his military service, a French that wasn't quite the same as ours and made us lower our voices, just as we lowered our eyes in front of him—furious with ourselves for already giving way before this fellow who wasn't even twenty but whom no one would any longer think of deriding, for he was a proprietor, the heir of Madame Grandchamp—whom we in the area had scarcely known, but who we, exaggerating as usual, imagined must have put a tidy bit aside—whose son, we eventually decided (for any other conclusion, if expressed publicly, at any rate, would seem scandalous) he must be, though we still knew nothing about him, except that he wasn't called Grandchamp at all and had a really odd family name: Pythre.

Certainly the first people among us who had anything to do with him took care not to bluster in front of him. Instead we got used to keeping quiet and saying as little as possible when he was around. The silence we kept was a mixture of apprehension and respect, touched with the dislike inevitably aroused by anything outside the slow, everyday course of events. Of course we had never been very congenial characters anyway, but how could we really trust a man who let his fires be laid by a poor simple girl older than himself, his sister too, as some gossips went so far as to say, and spoiled goods at that? And how could we drink with a man who only ordered a gentian aperitif, the sort of thing women drank, and who made it last, someone whose name couldn't be taken seriously anyway?

We laughed, though halfheartedly. But he persisted and for some time would appear at Berthe-Dieu's around six o'clock in the evening to empty his glass of gentian and to have a jug filled with milk, which they went to get up there, on the other side of the square, in the café stables near the church, and which, after just squeezing it from the worst cows, was brought back by a whey-faced girl stumbling back down between

the roots of the big oak and in the cow dung, keeping her eyes on the rich, warmly savorous foam that Berthe then handed to our odd drinker. He thanked her with a mere “Very kind, Madame,” not daring to add “Berthe” or to smile as was usual, so that his words rang rather hollow and, given André Pythre’s serious, cold, unbending manner, we came to the conclusion that he thought a lot of himself, was defying us in some way, and just couldn’t smile; that he had no teeth, as the children said; and must have suffered a lot, muttered some women who probably weren’t at all averse to his way of suddenly staring up at them when they passed him on the roadway or at Berthe-Dieu’s, where he drank his glass, not sitting at the long table with the people from Siom but at the other one, the little one near the kitchen, alone with Berthe as she prepared her vegetables or got on with her knitting.

By the second evening he had begun to talk; he was so loud, in fact, that eventually we began to listen to him. Instinctively, he placed himself under the protection of Berthe, who wasn’t exactly an easy woman to get along with, and her pale-cheeked daughter, who stared intently at him, for he had been convinced for a long time that you couldn’t get anywhere without women, whether all the men were with you or against you. He wanted to know where to find seeds, animals, fodder, and needed the information now, all at once, apparently not realizing that he could have found all those things at the markets at Buiges, La Celle or Treignac; but he asked so gently, with such good will, that even the most distrustful of us—Jean Berthe-Dieu and his wife who was christened Eugénie but whom nonetheless we called Berthe, Jouclas the miller, Heurtebise the smith, old Madame Nuzejoux and her two daughters-in-law, Pintoux, Poirier, Chabrat, Anglars, Roche, Besse, and Orluc, farmers and sharecroppers alike—listened more readily, not being there for any other reason, after all, deciding he meant no harm, especially when old Chadiéras, who had the biggest farm, on the way into Siom and a little higher up than the town hall, decided to answer him the next day, after Berthe had said (to Pythre, apparently, but it was us she was addressing, assuming an importance that annoyed us):

“Well, we’ll have to see.”

It was a Saturday. It had rained a good part of the day, and from five o’clock on we were all in the café to see first Pythre arrive and, a few minutes later, Chadiéras, who sat down opposite him. We went on drinking, not saying a word. We would have dearly liked to listen in, though we pretended to start chatting again and not to take any notice of them, but we couldn’t hear a word that they said, if they were really saying anything at all. And then, that same evening, we saw the newcomer make his way to old Chadiéras, to the farm up there, keeping close to the wall that supported Madame Besse’s garden, then passing the schoolyard and, on the other side of the street, the little wall that protected the vegetable gardens, between the café and the washhouse where the women in black went at all times of day to mingle their chatter with the water they discolored as they scrubbed.

After an hour, we saw them come out again, old Chadiéras accompanying young Pythre all the way to the dung heap at the entrance to his farm—something he’d never done for any of us. Night had almost fallen, and the women who had stayed at the washhouse to see him go by said that he looked more assured than ever, almost happy and even had a slight sparkle in his eyes, which we would rarely see there again. Some of us went down to the terrace below the acacias, from which he had surveyed the whole valley. We were able to keep him in sight as he made his way slowly down to the mill. When he reappeared, after Monsieur Queyroix’s house, we saw him slacken his pace for a moment at the turn for the graveyard, clear the stone bridge, nod cursorily to the miller’s men, then ascend again toward his pines by a path that he would never completely clear of its brambles and gorse—a way of keeping his distance or of putting on airs, although there wasn’t really anything to be proud of in having started off among us like that, with that crude cart and the weird creature who had dropped that parcel of dead flesh and buried it up there on the crest (we could see the hillock and the cross from where we were), without benefit of clergy, or any permission, like savages indeed, although no one dared go and tell them to stop doing

anything so obscene—not even Father Trouche, our priest, who at least said every day that he ought to go and bless the grave, although all he muttered in the end was:

“Let the dead bury their dead.”

But he didn’t explain what he meant by this, so that several people (the poorest folk, children, and idiots) believed for a long time that André Pythre and Aimée were not entirely human, and the others among us held that they would never belong here.

We saw him in the morning when he went to fetch four heifers from Chadiéras, then let them into his big, sloping meadow near Jouclas’s mill along the Vézère, which he started to make secure before beginning to repair a drinking trough.

“He certainly feels at home,” one of us remarked, as we stood under the acacias on the terrace, as though this certainty had suddenly occurred to him and its novelty had to be duly digested.

It was obvious to us all, anyway, since a considerable part of his land and woods extended there, under our very noses, on the other flank of the valley, which was so difficult to work because it was sloping and inaccessible to carts. And by now Chadiéras had put him wise about almost everything.

“Yes, he’s at home there, all right, but he isn’t one of us—he’s not even a Christian!”

The women weren’t displeased to see the smoke rising from a new household up there where it was supposed to be so dead. They knew very well what he should have done really to be one of us, and where he should have sown his flesh and blood. But how could he do that, with this big girl at his side growing more blank and dismal every day, whom he seemed to look out for with the kind of care you surely don’t devote to a housemaid or even to your big sister? Was it to discuss cows and seeds that he went back to Chadiéras, one late autumn evening when it was so foggy that we completely missed seeing him make his way through our village? We had no way of knowing what went on between them up there. They say that he came out with his head held high, the

look in his eyes harder than ever, his face giving nothing away, and his hands in his pockets. But the fog was so thick you couldn't see anything, even six feet away. Some folk swore that they had heard him shout out and that his voice was as sharp as frost, but no one understood exactly what he shouted—was it anger, resentment, victory?—no one could tell; but it was certainly the cry of someone asserting and expressing himself defiantly: the urgent thrust of a dry yet fertile seed that women covertly sought, not only virgins and those who could still give birth, but those past childbearing who knew the meaning of a howl like that, having heard or dreamed it at least once in the very bowels of their innermost selves, and knowing the solitude, hunger, and determination any such cry denoted, and what despair, and what misery too . . .

We guessed what was wrong: Chadiéras had probably given him no ground for hope, telling him that you couldn't assign women to people as if they were cows, especially one of our girls (as it happened, the old farmer's second daughter, whom Pythre must have seen near the house when he first went there to chat about animals and seeds, wasn't too handsome, not very young either, and certainly not all that lively, but she was fresh and untouched, neat and robust; he noticed her again near the café, and she probably hadn't seemed at all averse to him); he couldn't make her live with the other one to whom he was joined by bonds as strong as those of marriage, who would never be seen in the village, who would never be a girl of Siom (Siom, which, and this is important, we pronounced "Sion," which has something sacred about it that the priest tried to explain to us, but we didn't really get the hang of, other than that, damned, poor, and not so poor, despite all that—he said—we somehow lived in a heavenly land). If the weather was good, we could see her at the end of the day, when she came outside to sit on the little bench he had put up there on the crest, not far from the grave where, we would learn, a wild rose had sprouted. From there she surveyed the valley, our houses, our hanging gardens, and the terrace, but she probably didn't see us, did not understand who we were, as if the river to whose bank she descended once a week to wash clothes, and beyond which she did

not venture, was the limit of the habitable world as far as she was concerned; as if we—tiny gray silhouettes—were no more substantial than the shapes and figures in the immense dream in which she dwelled; and as if nothing existed beside the miracle of the rose tree that had sprung from her dead flesh.

We would pick them out occasionally on the other side of the valley, side-by-side on that little bench. There they sat, the young proprietor and his idiot, she smiling as always—perhaps thinking it was her mother next to her. She had one hand on her own shoulder and the other on that of the young man who had acquired her land but not her name, Aimée Grandchamp. It sounded just like a real lady's name, whereas he had to put up with André Pythre. Yes, that was his name, and a real crown of thorns too, no doubt about that: a name to discourage more than one of us from allowing his daughter to caper about under a sign like that. After all, we Siom folk were proud of our names and, quite apart from the fact that “Pythre” meant “clown,” anyone who saw it written would realize it was altogether too weird to be a good, honest Christian name.

But no one, not even old Chadiéras, had thought of telling him that. From his bench Pythre surveyed Siom with the obstinate resentment of one resolved, in spite of ridicule and shame, to understand what was happening and not settle for what fate seemed to have decided. Presumably he thought that the time just wasn't ripe and that in the end he

would find another wife on the other side of the valley, not this great heavy ignorant lump who cared for his hearth and home as she had done in that other, narrow valley and whom he would not give up; and sometimes he surrendered to her (that's how it was, no doubt about that, possessed as she was by something like a fever that made her both hoot like a screech owl and whine) the organ that she would take and, with cries and whimpers, knead until she drew from him a whitish jet, at the sight of which, animal-like, she would laugh and snort, her wide-open mouth exposing the rotten teeth between her wet lips, and her eyes would fill with tears. He let her do as she wished because it had to come out anyway, and dreams were no better for that purpose than work and humiliation, and the brothels in the big towns were too far away. Then he possibly recalled what big Niarfeix had maintained: that this thing men had between their legs could poison them if they didn't use it, because it could make them crazy—in fact it could make them more wretched than a beggar or an epileptic.

She kneaded him as he stood by the hearth ready for bed after dropping the pants he had worn for work, when she had discarded everything but her nightdress. He must have watched her hand move and grip him oh so softly, a light sweat on her fingers as she held him there, unless he was thinking intently of Chadiéras's second daughter whom he would never have because he was André Pythre and realized that what Aimée was doing now was of no use to him except to escape being driven insane; or unless his thoughts were already pressing on Queyroix's daughter who, with eyes replete with more pride and arrogance than he had ever seen in a woman, even in the eyes of the most beautiful whores of Limoges, or at the Marandes' in Saint-Sulpice-les-Bois when he delayed too long in order to glimpse the lady in white smiling, would peep at him from behind her tree-of-life hedge as he went up to Siom or down to Jouclas's mill. Queyroix's daughter, to be sure, was not the most beautiful of creatures. She was all but thirty, tall, quite lanky even, snub-nosed, with rather thick lips; she coughed, too, and her voice was dry. But her eyes were big and gray, and the wind ruffled the

blond down on her neck. She laughed as a child would, and as (he supposed) girls ought not to laugh, and it was then (you can be sure) that he liked to feel big Aimée knead him more powerfully, oh yes, then, until he let go completely and began to groan, his eyes half-shut, his heart pounding fiercely, his breath so rapid while she clapped her hands and her face flushed with joy before she wiped it off with the corner of her nightdress. But then you weren't thinking about that any longer but now only of the earth, because, as he would say later, it brought you down to earth again, and conjured up images of heavy soil, freshly turned and steaming on an autumn evening; the earth that never left anyone in peace; the earth to which he felt women were much closer than men, because like the earth women had their seasons, carried their burden, were in travail, and gave birth, and four years later were the only ones still there to work the land in midsummer, along with the children and old men, after all those big posters had appeared on the town-hall wall and all the church bells had rung out in strangely joyous unison: the bells of Siom and also, in that air that smelled of dry grass and hot stones, those of Buiges, Saint-Priest, Saint-Hilaire, Le Toy, and everywhere else, leading us to imagine that the sky that day was more blue and more far-reaching than usual. The men bustled about the squares, before their houses, and around the railroad stations. They were joyful and festive yet also solemn; their faces showed that they were already elsewhere—distracted, lost, distant—at any rate indifferent to all the care now evident in the furrowed brows of those left behind, showing perhaps that they already guessed a general mobilization would be ordered only if there was no going back and that, war or no war, we would never be more than children crouching, groaning, looking up at the sky and scrutinizing it finally for smiles and dawns before bending down to rest for the last time in the selfsame soil.

But region, fatherland, glory, and that cross on which we would soon learn to bleed were no trifles; all were well worth sacrifices. The men all bore that in mind that day when Léon Poirier, the mayor, who had fought the Prussians in their funny spiked helmets in an earlier war,

assembled them in front of the town hall to explain with the aid of quotations from Gambetta and Victor Hugo what they already knew—André Pythre along with all the others. Antoine Duclos, who protected the crops from thieves and birds, had gone to fetch him, taking not the Buiges road but the one by the mill-bridge. When he saw this, the man at Veix (who by then descended to Siom only on market-days) cried out that they should leave him be, he'd done nothing wrong, and anyway the bells weren't tolling for him, were they!

But there was no escape: he had to turn up there with the others from Siom, Couignoux, Senut, Lestang, Les Places, L'Oussine, Monceaux, La Gane, La Moratille, Condeau, La Croix, La Buffatière, Les Freux, and all the other hamlets and farms of the district, in front of the train station that they had built a mile or so from Siom, where the gorse and heather leveled out over a small area. There they gathered at the behest of a sergeant with waxed, curving mustache ends, just as they had assembled for a class photograph a few years before on the road between the school and the washhouse. There they stood: the youngest in front, the big ones with their arms crossed, joking a little, shod in sabots or pattens, caps all jaunty to impress the girls in the middle there, many of whom were destined to become their wives but who were standing today at the entrance to the pathway, under the pines. This morning, as for the school photograph, they stayed there gaping or kept their eyes screwed up because of the sun, just as they had before, perhaps trying to figure out how this tiny round aperture opposite them, scarcely bigger than a calf's eye, could engender a kind of immortality, yet basically not too concerned about it, for they were already overcome by the torpor of being in the world without really knowing why, by life's ineluctable idiocy, which would surely be the destiny of almost every one of them, if not their true joy, in spite of their harsh labor, their sorrows, their setbacks, and the unfruitful earth. But some in that fall of 1914 had scarcely any time left for any such regrets; whereas there were others (some of whom still stood there among the women under the pines, full of shame that they were not leaving with the rest) who, if they were not mowed

down on the field of battle, would have four years to think things over, astonished to find themselves still alive, in spite of mud, crab lice, trench mortars, gas attacks, frost, machine-gun fire, bombshells and whizbangs, fear and oaths; even though they just wanted to take to their heels; even in spite of their hatred, the hatred that kept them alive as much as their thinking of the earth, there at the edge of the high plateau, and, beyond hatred, the stubborn hope of a dawn that would bring not even more gunfire but real birds of the air and authentic breezes. Perhaps they recalled that day when the class photograph was taken, when they were all there together and the young teacher was leaning almost nonchalantly against the low wall near the washhouse, handsome, smiling, in black coat and pants, his chin almost propped on a celluloid collar that made him look like a cleric of sorts watching over his flock in their sabots, caps, and short trousers, aprons and smocks: surveying those who would die and those who would mourn the dead; those who would never marry and those, so few, who, like him, the young schoolmaster, would return without part of their former bodies to be sure but with a new will to survive, which would always sound somehow false, just as the words of the mayor, the priest, and the sergeant that evening on the little station platform already sounded phony; and probably, once he had returned from “down there” (for soon they would no longer have a specific term for that particular topography), he would persuade himself that the grim reaper had actually looked them over the day the photograph was taken, yes, had viewed them all and made his choice.

Pythre was not smiling along with the others on the day when they left, yet for the first time he had become just one of the bunch. No one tried to challenge his inclusion, in front of the station, between Chabrat’s son and the two Orlucs, or in the wagon that trundled toward Limoges that evening, through the fog that they might have seen rising from the ponds and pools if they had stopped joking or, even then, roused themselves from introspection, until very soon their smiles and defiant martial poses were engulfed in darkness. They were not used to contemplating the earth with arms folded, were not very inquisitive by nature,

and grew increasingly uneasy, since they could see little more inside than outside themselves, in spite of all the time they spent in self-scrutiny. But that was not strange, for the only horizon we really know well is the one in which childhood, hunger, and fear have enclosed us.

The wagons rocked as they continued their descent toward the loamy earth of the Haute-Vienne, soil they never saw, since night fell not long after Eymoutiers; and, without woman, wife, mother, sister, or fiancée to grip, all they could embrace in the semidarkness of the wagons was a haversack containing a pint of red wine, a thick chunk of bread, some cottage cheese, and a few packets of shag tobacco. And perhaps Pythre missed big Aimée, whom he had been forced to leave behind in Veix, and a black dog that the butcher at Buiges had given him. Luckily the harvest was almost completely in, and old Chadiéras had promised to keep an eye on Aimée. She had neither wept nor groaned, nor twisted her hands helplessly in her smock. The young man had said:

“I have to be off now with the others. I don’t think it will last very long.”

He was still not quite out of sight when she was already waiting for him, probably imagining that he would be absent no longer than on one of those rare excursions to Ussel or Tulle, from which he would always return the same evening, promptly, in order to see to the animals, by the last train or on foot, looking rather brighter than usual and with a whiff of whore’s taint on his clothing, which would have made her very jealous if she had realized what it implied: the world, other women, abandonment, ownership, and time—especially time, which—as far as she was concerned, as measured by that year and another winter during which she waited for him—was scarcely more than a long day, as when he had gone to do his military service; and perhaps she thought of time as space—the space of house, forest, meadows, part of the valley from which Pythre was now absent—and, hey, presto! with the first breath of spring, now he would be there again, with lined face, a heavier mustache, eyes harder and darker than before, a brow so furrowed that she did not recognize it as his and anyway one you wouldn’t expect to see on

a twenty-six-year-old, and therefore, though the same, he was a different Pythre, for down there he had found the assurance that humankind is evil and that he too had become evil there, or so he had written to tell her (the only time he sent her any sign of life, no one knows why) on a postcard that Chadiéras had read aloud to her and that she carried with her everywhere afterward, night and day; as he would repeat so often once he was back, though otherwise he never said a word about what he had seen down there, returning otherwise with only an unmistakable dry cough, and a wounded right knee that saved him from being sent into the trenches again and changed his gait forever, so that he swung his hips forward to touch ground quickly with his toes in a quaint and rapid dance step, making a wry face as he did so. And one thing we murmured then was that he was certainly living up to his clownish family name, and another was that he'd managed to make sure he was back on dry land, as it were, whereas two more years would pass before it was over down there, and many of the men who had left for the front that August evening would never return or would do so in a condition much more shattered than his, seared both within and without and just as grave and reticent, but not so fortunate, we murmured, to have been wounded so early on; it was always the weeds that prospered, yes, rotten types like Pythre who was blessed by luck at the end of the day and who was the only one whose name wouldn't be found cut into the granite memorial they soon erected in the middle of the square; and so we said of him that fortune smiles on cuckolds—but you can't really talk of an idiot girl cuckolding anyone, so it wasn't fortune that saved him but fate, and fate only favors unbelievers, foreigners, criminals, and fools.

## 13

Even though it wasn't time yet and he wasn't hungry, that evening he allowed her to serve him the same soup she had made for him, day after day, for almost two years, as though at any minute he might come through the door and sit down at one end of the long table. He allowed her to knead his face and his member too, although he no longer found that pleasurable, for down there he had come across girls whose insides he really enjoyed probing in order to escape the gunfire: the Huns' shell bursts and those that roared within us continually, sent us hurtling back into our innermost depths, and forced us to empty ourselves between women's thighs slowly, to the point of exhaustion.

He was forced to start living again, behave as if nothing had happened, pretend to forget, hear nothing, thank Chadiéras, and cross the Siom road under the increasingly hostile gaze of those who had been left behind: women, children, old folk, widows, and orphans—all of whom condemned him unjustly, though he found compensation for that in a few sparkling looks some women gave him, for, however lame and unpleasant he might be, he was still a young male and not too bad look-

ing in spite of his obstinate expression and his rather weak shoulders. And then he walked in such a strange way and had that gimpy leg so that his pubic bone tended to jut out like that—look!—though of course he didn't do it on purpose, did he? But yes, now they were beginning really to feel a man's absence from their beds, and that was a torment over and above the pain they suffered as mothers or wives or women whom no one suddenly looked at any longer, an additional anguish nothing could still, neither the priest's words of comfort nor the assurance of shame; and this made their gaze, however peremptory, imperious, and distracted, all the more intense.

They had to endure his looking as if he wouldn't hurt a fly, his silence, his proud humility, and his renewed insistence on going every evening toward six o'clock—whatever the weather might be like, no matter what tasks he had—to Berthe-Dieu's to drink the gentian spirit that he now doused in blackcurrant cordial, in order to obtain (so it seemed anyway as he stared at the bronzed gold before him) an aperitif fit for a lord and master, though he did so less for the pleasure of drinking than to be there among those who had stayed behind and, as time went by, among the dead whom we recalled in muted tones, and for the sake of being there because—but then no one was quite sure why—he was superstitious perhaps or because he was less truly present as a person than anyone else, had always been a nobody in fact; unless there was some other reason for his behavior as he took little sips and listened to Berthe muttering obscurely out of complaisance or fatigue, while she peeled vegetables with a tiny knife that, when she removed the eyes from potatoes, made a very slight sound yet one so excruciatingly abhorrent you would have thought she had cut through to the very core of silence.

We would have to learn to put up with that every day, and, in spring 1917, long before the whole horror was over and when so many of us had lost their rightful berths there and probably had nowhere to rest at all, we were forced to endure the burial in our graveyard of the mortal remains of that woman whom we had never known, so to speak: Aimée Grandchamp, who while alive had always observed us without really

seeing us. We were no longer proud or, to repeat another saying of Father Trouche's, pride was no longer acceptable. We prayed that Aimée Grandchamp might rest in peace, even though we murmured that it wasn't right and asked whether a blockhead's soul could find more peace in the hereafter than she had enjoyed in the here and now; since she was scarcely to be pitied, having lived in ignorance of her birth and her role in this world, and they said she had died in her sleep, of what no one knew, but, as the priest insisted, had died happy because she was innocent, and it was only right that someone should be happy, given that men were no longer capable of happiness after expending themselves in a frenzy that had lasted three years already. And in spite of the mischief makers quick to suggest that perhaps André Pythre had some part in her death, we—or those among us, at least, who climbed up to Veix to see the corpse—had to admit that on her deathbed Aimée Grandchamp's face was peaceful and she was smiling gently under the chestnut hair that she had allowed to grow since her arrival in Siom; that she was, indeed, well looked after, and was wearing a pretty garnet red dress we had never seen her in before, which Pythre must have brought her from down there (from Paris, the women swore; from a middle-class house up there in the Belgian hop fields, Orluc's son would tell us later, the one who came back and had served in the same company as Pythre; yes, from a fine big house—would you believe it?—they broke into one evening in search of shelter from the rain that had been falling continuously for more than a week and in order to sleep, despite the Krauts' high-explosive shells and our own artillery fire, in real beds, drink good wine, and make believe for a while that you could take a break from war): her face now was so clear of idiocy that it seemed almost beautiful, and that was enough for us, who never trusted doctors and certainly not that young one from Buiges (the same one who had delivered her burden that time)—enough for us to pronounce André Pythre free of all guilt.

So we followed him into the church, behind the oak coffin that Magnac's son had worked on for a whole day and night before he quit

the scene a few days later during the terrible slaughter of the French offensive on the Chemin des Dames (and that's why some people said the Pythres hadn't brought him good luck, and that possibly explains why on the very same day the big black dog disappeared that had watched over Aimée and waited at the church door during the service). We watched the obstinate cripple sniffing under that low vault on which, through the mold, you could still detect traces of a painting from the time when pilgrims paused here on their way to the shrine at Compostella. Perhaps he remembered the splendid breast he had been compelled to suck once to stop the young woman's blood from being poisoned in childbed; and how of course he had enjoyed not the bitter liquid that oozed from her nut-hard, nut-sized teat, which he could scarcely call milk, but the sweet softness of those heavy, swollen, violet-veined globes, on which drops of sweat so often formed and between which he buried his face, while she, with a tenderness he would never have dreamed she could muster, hummed and stroked his short hair or caressed his neck, rocking herself gently and him at the same time, moving like the great pines on the ridge at the end of summer when the morning wind blew through the valley and dispersed the mist. He sucked her just as she kneaded him between his legs, each of them (so it might seem) liberating the other from his or her particular threat, blood or spirit, mood or seed, for both were sentenced (by God, nature, Madame Grandchamp, and, indirectly, us) to be to one another no more than that and no less.

Even when the milk had dried up, he continued to unwrap and disclose the beautiful whiteness of these breasts without which he would possibly have ended up biting the darkness instead of her nipples, or burying his cries in the earth while she plunged her hand between his legs until, without looking at each other, they groaned in unison, surely forgetting who they were—or at least that was true of Pythre, who seemed to bear the whole world's weight on his shoulders at any other time, especially after coming back from the front.

That, anyway, was what they said in Siom; and some people were

quick to add that after the first interment other parcels of dead flesh had entered the world at Veix only to be turned rapidly into angels and set in the earth along with their predecessor. But gossiping tongues were struck silent by the sight of Aimée's face, before the beauty of this face smiling in the process of extinction. She must have been unaware of the painless, inescapable malady overtaking her, realizing possibly that something extraordinary would happen to her, that she would depart in her turn or, more probably, that she would fall asleep when it was not bedtime, and that in the wretched cot where she had entered the world, she would succumb to the overwhelming sensation of her own weight, probably astonished to feel so heavy and that such heaviness could be so pleasing, seem so beneficial, as if she was surrendering to herself for the first time, giving way to her very nature, which she had never recognized as such, to the idleness and ignorance that no longer had anything in common with the pathetic dream her life must surely have been but were already her means of entry to that long sleep and, yes, to the dreams of others, of Pythre, of us, possibly of the people of Prunde, and of all those who from now on, for a long time and even against their own will, would dream of her and in whose thoughts she would gently disintegrate. She died smiling, on a clear yet quite sharp April afternoon, without knowing why he looked at her so intently or why his eyes, which had seen so many others die down there, were moist; and finally she could not understand how the sickness had been at work in her without her knowing, even though she had guessed that it was something other than colic or her menstrual flow. She probably did not know that we had to die, and before that she must take to and keep to her bed and let him feed and wash her and brush her hair; and she, who had never risen later than Pythre or gone to bed before him, would murmur that she was so very tired, weeping and smiling as she did in front of the doctor from Buiges whom Pythre had decided to fetch and she possibly recognized and who, after examining her, declared:

"You should have shown her to me earlier on!"

Pythre did not listen to him. He was smiling too and had probably

decided that this smile would be his way of stating that he could do no more and that he would join her in resigning himself to bad blood as the cause of her sickness, to what was rumbling away in her bowels, to the fact that she was hot and cold at one and the same time, and did not know how to say so, that she enjoyed her feverishness because it brought her closer to herself at the very time when she was moving out of reach of that very same self without understanding what life actually was, the sudden fleeting pleasure of those last moments that one would rather not have known when it was too late to change things; that liveliness, that incomparable rapture—the end of uncertainty. Now she must fall asleep like the others, like her mother, like Marthe, and like that little creature that had passed from her belly to the soil and had done nothing but go to sleep.

Day would soon break; you could tell that from the wind's more vigorous rustling in the fir branches and the first pitter-patter of birds' feet on the tiles. The doctor had gone, cursing these miserable wretches who did not know how to live, who possibly did not want to live but continued to survive between winter and the heavens as they had done for centuries. You may suppose that she noticed the grimy towel draped over a chair back near her ever-whiter face, which grew even more pale when he opened the window and everything in the room began to shiver, including Aimée, who smiled gently and buried herself in her night and in the cold, and sweated, wept, pissed, no longer holding anything back, because that too was part of her exaltation. The only way she could depart was in this total exudation of self, in this shivering that became a noticeable and regular trembling, of the kind brought on by icy cold and by this deepest night that she had now entered, possibly still inquiring why he wasted his time staying there and sitting on the little chair by her head, touching her face with eau de cologne when he ought to have seen to the animals; but it was pleasant, the eau de cologne, and she had been so very fond of him, was so very comforted by his caring for her like that; he could continue doing just that; it felt good, yes, like that, even though it might not seem so very good in others' eyes; and

now he would take her with him into his own dream, lull her to sleep, and draw her oh so gently into dying—he thought he heard her murmur that between those white lips, but how could she have expressed herself other than by expelling such a little puff of air, she who did not know how tender language could be, and nevertheless through those wan lips murmured that he would surely sleep her, die her, dream her, oh so well—or something of that kind—but, we must suppose, understood no better than he exactly what she mumbled? This was the ultimate defeat of breath, a triumphant and pointless accompaniment, like that of her hands wrestling, first tight, then loose, on her stomach; it was her breath most pitiaibly intoning, already halting, soon rattling, as if night itself had emerged from her mouth, and for a moment her face was engulfed in darkness: now, as if sucked from within, her features would suddenly fall in on her, and Aimée would be effaced, her mouth gaping, eyes staring, words arrested (although you could not speak of silence), and she seemingly struck dumb, as if she might well have uttered words that nevertheless failed her as she slipped away and that escaped her before she could name, perhaps, what had brought her joy in this world and what she was possibly thinking of: the wild rose that had appeared on the grave, which she now relinquished to the dream of this man who sat there quietly, lips tightly drawn, brow furrowed, looking darker than ever before, still by the side of Aimée—as he now called her, who was lying there, her face so blue yet not blank, not stupid; her head inclined a little to the right—by Aimée smiling peacefully.

He had not moved. He contemplated these hands, still red and fleshy, with short, astonishingly white nails. He shuddered, shook himself, probably remembering that they had to deal with it quickly, that the odor wouldn't wait. He opened the main door wide to the dawn. You couldn't be like an animal; you had to go back to the bed, for instance, and completely undress the dead girl—that was women's work, to be sure, but he was the only one who could do it in these circumstances. He studied Aimée's big body with its lovely full shapes, which had never been revealed to any man and which she herself had never been able to see, for she had had no mirror, liquid surface, or gaze generous enough to return her image to her, even if she had been sufficiently curious to inspect it. He cleaned the most secret recesses of this flesh with the towel soaked in eau de cologne until he detected nothing more than the familiar scent of the room or, rather, of the big kitchen in which they lived, lit the fire, cooked, kept watch, and slept, she not far from the hearth and he in the opposite corner, since neither of them had been able finally to decide on occupying one of the two bedrooms extending to the rear and used for storage.

They say that he remained for a long time contemplating this bare white flesh, that he sat down to see it better, that he smoked a cigarette, that this was the first woman whom he had seen entirely naked, that he dressed her reluctantly, and that in any case he found it difficult to lift Aimée's limbs in order to pull onto her body the garnet red dress in which we had never seen her, not even on Sundays, when she sat up there on the little bench, sheltering under a big man's umbrella when the weather was bad, which caused some people to mutter, look, there's proof if you ever wanted it that times had changed—now you could see complete idiots dressed in the latest fashion—and that the century had forgotten us yet again.

He joined her hands as they had done her mother's, and her hands were bare, for Aimée owned neither rosary beads nor jewelry, lacking all those things that usually draw attention to a woman. He looked at her. Her face had changed already; there was no trace there of rigidity, resignation, fear, or desperate intoxication, but complete openness, features wholly restored around her smile, a trace of what she had never experienced: surrender to change and to that night that was no longer ours, in which she continued her descent, ever deeper downward, as if death had not finished with her. There was nothing exemplary or terrifying about her, but already something incredibly old, heavy with the weight of abandonment and yet as light as innocence, and that eau de cologne under which the freshness of the morning was pierced even now by what he did not want to smell, something quite exceptional, between an odor and derisive laughter, accompanying the ascent of this face, not toward daylight but toward that crowning access of innocence that was her true and unique beauty—a beauty some of us discovered that day and by which we knew she was forgiven.

He drew the heavy, dark lids over her too-pale eyes; then he tried to close her mouth but could not, and wrapped round her head and lips a piece of cambric she had inherited from her mother and kept in a chest with old toys, pieces of wood, white pebbles, and other useless objects. At last she looked like a corpse.

What he did next we saw with our own eyes. First he prepared a big fire on the crest of the hill and kept it going all day, and nearby he slowly dug, you might even have said carefully, into the soil between the tall pines. He went on digging until noon and then disappeared for more than two hours, which made us think that he had gone to take his lunch: but who could seriously imagine that he could have spent two hours eating and drinking by a dead body that was beginning to stink? He reappeared well into the afternoon; he led his mule from the light cart he had been forced to buy because of his gimpy leg, stopped at the fire, plied it with wood, and unloaded sacks of cement, planks, posts, and tools, which he placed under the low branches. We watched him disappear into the square emplacement he had carved out and listened to the hammer and pickax blows that could be heard until evening. The fire went on burning for a long time, perhaps throughout the night, if we were to believe what we were told the next morning by old Amélie Besse, who rose from her bed several times between sundown and sunup to piss in her orchard above the square and dream beneath the stars. At dawn, at any rate, it was burning more fiercely than before, for the flames reached straight up into the cold air, while Pythre was at work on the upper edge of a kind of square construction, half buried in the earth, with its most easily visible part (it must have been the back) facing Siom. It looked like the water tower that was built years later above the Palm Sunday cross on the road to La Celle, on Nuzejoux's field.

"He's stopped going berserk!" chortled the youngest of the Pintoux, the one with the loudest voice since the men had gone to the trenches and only old guys, urchins, and invalids were left in Siom. We were scarcely in a mood for laughter; we could easily guess what he was making there, since he had hadn't been down to register the death the day before and was neglecting his animals. Anyway, we weren't kept guessing for long, for we saw him at the end of the very same day, when his fire wasn't even out—as if he couldn't care less that the pines could have been set alight (and couldn't care a damn about us, we thought)—descend to the bridge, then ascend the steep path to the graveyard, where he did not delay, but

made his way down again, until he finally reached us, his head slightly bowed. You might have thought he had drunk a drop too much. But (as Father Trouche told us later) his eyes were darker than ever. He entered the presbytery, soon emerged, and went down to Berthe-Dieu's, where he stood and gulped his glass of gentian spirits straight down; then he turned toward the people in the bar—toward us, who had had just enough time to come down from the acacia terrace. He inspected us as if seeing us for the first time, one by one, and as if he had forgotten that he was the only real man among us (apart from Toinou Perreau, whom the army had rejected because he was too soft in the head), and that our fathers, our brothers, our sons, and our husbands were exposed to the hellfire fury over there, that their blood and entrails were spurting from them, that they were nailed by lightning flashes, and swallowed up by a darkness compared with which our blackest nights were fountains of light, that there they labored upon an earth for which they provided the dung in the form of their very own bodies, while he stood there, yes, with his liquor in his hand, his neat mustache full of cement dust, repeating:

“She’s dead . . .” And he repeated it again and again—to us who had as good as never known her and who thought it indecent of him to come and complain in front of us about the peaceful death of a young simpleton at a time when (you can see how unjust we were, for we forgot his wounded knee and the heroic acts that had earned him a cross of valor he refused to wear) the son of Poirier, the mayor, had just bled to death as he hung like a stuck pig from the Krauts’ barbed wire and was so terribly ripped and torn, as we heard from the youngest Roche, who had been in the same company, that his own mother wouldn’t have recognized him, so that to calm people down a little, Father Trouche had proclaimed from the pulpit that her son Sylvain was now a drop of blood on Jesus’ thorn-pierced brow.

We turned our backs on him. Anyway, he no longer saw us, had never really seen us, for after all we did not like anyone to see us unless it was in the evening, from some way off, as when he was sitting on the little bench side by side with the dead girl. Only Berthe was moved enough to mutter:

“Oh, yes, that poor devil . . .”

He smiled a little, then went out, swinging like some dandy the excuse for a cane he had taken to carrying, a thick stick of box, to one end of which he had attached a sharp point, while the other was a small natural knot, which made us think that we wouldn't have liked to meet this fellow at some bend in a path, especially on the Veix crest we knew so well and where we had watched him, right up to the evening of the day before, laboring so intently on his earthworks and masonry. The fire had continued to burn throughout the day. Clouds had passed over without the least drop falling; the weather was on the side of this Pythre whom we saw that very same evening (while we were getting ready for the Mass to which those harsh times had forced us to return, because we could no longer pray alone) descend to the mill, dressed in his Sunday best and standing upright in his cart with the fine oak coffin behind him. We watched him jolting down to the bridge, almost tipping over several times because of the uneven ground and the roots and the black dog that scampered along the wheels, and looking back over his shoulder to make sure the coffin was still there, just as he would do again when he got to Queyroix's slope, with an obviously hangdog yet determined expression, awkward in his dark, badly cut, brand-new suit—anyway no one had seen him in it before—his chin constrained by a too-white collar, above which he wore a tiny bow tie that looked like a may bug.

Father Trouche was standing by the church, close to the little door. Pythre said nothing. He was probably waiting for the passing bell to ring and the big entrance doors to open, through which the old women of Siom had passed sometime before. Chadiéras was there too. That was our signal, as it were. When the priest decided to open the two doors in the porch entrance, we accompanied the coffin into the church; after all, a woman was being borne before us in this chest of oak that smelled too heavily of eau de cologne, which was more nauseating than if it had reeked of something else. We owed her respect and remembrance, Father Trouche thundered, for she had been a Christian even if she was unaware of it, walking through our vale of tears as if in a dream;

she had not been a bad person, but in the humility of the innocent she had neither known herself nor been known by others, for she had sinned without understanding, indeed against her own will, and therefore was redeemed in spite of the burden that—it is important to remember this—it had been for her, this body, or tomb—as we might put it—in which she had lived in a condition that meant no man could marry her, and nevertheless she had died in the happiness of the innocent for whom the twilight of the mind is the key to the Kingdom of Heaven.

When we saw Pythre later putting the coffin on the hearse and securing it firmly with the help of Chadiéras and Magnac's son, we began to understand exactly what the priest had meant. Little Roche rang the passing bell. The women, enveloped in their shawls, had assembled in silence beneath the oak. The men went to Berthe-Dieu's. But all of us had watched him drive down to the turn at Queyroix's, disappear behind the trees of life, and, when he should have taken the abruptly rising route on the right if he wanted to make for the cemetery, reappear at the fork before the mill, stop for a moment (making us think he was about to ascend to Couignoux), and then pass Jouclas's place. He ascended slowly to his house, walking now in front of his mule and leading it by the bridle. He came to a halt under the pines. We could hardly see him. Night began to fall. He relit the fire. Then we saw him undo the coffin, allow it to slip down the planks until it reached that odd construction, which he got into himself and into which he hauled the coffin. We were at the point of believing that he would never emerge. We were standing beneath the acacias, which were just in bud, waiting to see him come out again from the vault, hoping perhaps (because at that time we were, so to speak, alienated from our very selves and incapable of compassion either for others or for ourselves) that he would never be seen again. But we had to resign ourselves to the sight of him standing once again before that quaint sepulchre, unmoving, in an attitude of prayer, with that great fire behind him threatening the pines and making him seem taller than he was and harder, more disturbing; his face gaunt, red and black, and immobile yet trembling and restless.

He was not yet thirty and there he was on his own with his gimpy leg and his departed souls, on the hill—or on the mountain, as we used to say—surrounded by his land and in a house in the middle of high woods entirely encircled by the loop of the Vézère cutting deep into the valley and hemmed in by winds and still fogs, and there, at the highest point, was the grave for which he had ordered a granite cross from Poulignac, the Buiges stonemason.

We wanted to forget him, to act as if he did not exist; but, undeniably, he was alive and in the evening would rest for a time on the little bench while so many other men were still sweating blood in the storms of war over there, and the graves of those who were dead were no more definitive than Aimée Grandchamp's. We found that unjust and scandalous. But that doesn't explain why, on the next day or the one after that, we saw the policemen from Buiges riding down our street, driving four prisoners in gray-green and gray uniforms before them, then taking the mill path and going up to Veix, accompanied by our mayor, who was on foot. They parleyed in front of the grave for quite a time, having got

down from their mounts to do so. Pythre listened to them without blinking, even with a touch of defiance, his chin raised to compensate for the injury that made him limp so, pretending that he did not understand that the dead, here as in Prunde and throughout the territory of the French Republic, must remain obedient to century-old rules and could not take their repose wherever they wished, in spite of what he had seen over there—in Argonne, at Kemmel, or near Charleroi—in spite of that priest who had had his own grave and memorial erected at La Regaudie, on the road to La Celle, at the top of a hill, and now rested there under a little slate roof, the southernmost wall protected by a big cross, between tall trees of life. But, as you must admit, you have to obey the law, and the policemen, and even the mayor, were unbending, although they did take the veteran's feelings into account:

“If that wasn't the case, we wouldn't really be civilized any longer, would we?”

Pythre said nothing.

“We'd be like them,” said the sergeant, nodding at the four Germans: prisoners whose aid Pythre like many others among us had requested as harvest time drew near.

He studied the four pathetic captives in their grubby field-gray uniforms, worn-out boots, and flat, round caps; uncertain where to put their arms, and with resigned expressions: three mature men and a young one, screwing up their eyes as they waited in the midday sun.

“Real Fritzes,” said the other policeman, “more stupid than evil actually.”

Pythre seemed not to hear their remarks, but there was nothing to be said. He had to watch the prisoners open the grille protecting the entrance to the grave, loosen the slab under the soil, and tip it to one side, enter the vault, pull out the coffin, and place it in front of the policemen and the mayor, while Pythre stared away, toward the valley. The sergeant said:

“Come along now, don't be so childish!”

And he held out his hand in the direction of something that Pythre

had kept in his jacket pocket since the group had arrived at Veix, which his hand had not left for an instant: a service revolver obtained from who knows where, which the former soldier suddenly took out—so solemnly that he alarmed the policemen, the mayor, and the Germans—and persuaded them to freeze on the spot. Then he fired with his arm outstretched well above his head and threw the weapon at the sergeant's feet. After that we watched the no less extraordinary sight of the innocent Aimée exhumed and carried down across the fields in the middle of the day on the shoulders of four Bavarians and taken to the Siom cemetery, where Chave the road mender, who also acted as gravedigger, was waiting for her by a grave dug in the north corner, under Chadiéras's oaks, in front of which before long Father Trouche and the old women of the village were standing together with the members of the burial party. The odor was strong, loathsome, and unyielding. They hastened to cover the coffin with earth and to erect at the end of the grave a wooden cross on which a few days later André Pythre would fix an enamel plate bearing the name AIMÉE GRANDCHAMP, without any date, either because he did not know her birth date or because he wanted to show us (but was he interested in us any longer?) that for him time did not pass in the same way as for us.

None of us would have thought of telling the police about the other body, that of the child, which must be up there in the vault he'd constructed and which the Bavarians had surely seen. But we'd had enough: we had smelled what we should never have scented—that pestilence, that shameful emanation that had suddenly filled the valley and made the dogs howl. At least things were now in order. For a long time certain voices would be heard maintaining that Aimée Grandchamp did not rest in Christian ground, that Pythre and his Bavarians (the two they had allocated to him and the other two who had slept at Veix and who were brought every morning to the road to La Becette, behind Bonneau's cross, where they met up with the other prisoners working on the road being opened into the valley in the direction of Tarnac, between Tempetier Forest and the Bec de Joug), yes, Pythre and his cabbage-

heads who, everyone knew, were his sworn companions from the first—from the moment when he had fired his revolver in front of the policemen and in defiance of us all—because, yes, Pythre and his Krauts had gone in the dead of night to disinter the poor girl they had taken to Veix; and Amélie Besse, that old piss-cow, swore that she had actually seen a light in the cemetery that night, as did Jouclas, who also claimed that he had heard and smelled the satanic cortege passing below his windows.

We did not try to look into the matter more closely. We had our own worries, our own tears, our own fevers, and our own scraps of joy. We realized that Siom was losing its life blood. We no longer busied ourselves with anything amiss like that. We were already living more for our dead than for the living. The returnees were not in much better condition than Pythre. They all had something in common: nightmares, wounded bodies, and the sure knowledge that the game wasn't worth the candle. But appearances were necessary: he still emerged in the evening on the crest or among us to drink his glass of gentian or buy groceries at one of the two stores on opposite sides of the square opened by Chabrat and Berthe-Dieu, who represented quite different viewpoints on the unimpeded progress of the Republic; and he was always accompanied by one of his field-gray Krauts, freshly washed and shaved, with a sleek mustache and, so they whispered, wearing perfume too, and the two of them walked along with such self-assurance, even arrogance, that it infuriated the mothers and the other women, those who had never had a man or were not yet engulfed by widowhood, while fathers and brothers already fancied themselves cocking their guns. The Bavarians soon cottoned on to this and joked about it with Pythre, whom they trusted blindly, for, in spite of the uniform, hatred, differences of language, and countless insults, they had reverted to their roles in their distant homeland: agricultural laborers, regular guys for sure whom war had rendered vicious, as it had us, but who now once again became obedient and industrious. They no longer left their master (how else should we call him?) but walked everywhere with him, keeping just a little behind

him, carrying a spade, ax, or sickle on their shoulders and, like their master, seemingly indifferent to everything around them.

People grumbled. We had no idea how long the war would last, what was happening at the front, and how long they would stay with us, these big fellows with bright eyes, whom people talked about as if they were actually wild beasts, very different in any case from old Hans whom Ma Nuzejoux had been given to dig her garden and chop her firewood. Of course we were afraid, even if we were most frightened of André Pythre, and we said that those five men alone could have set Siom alight and started a bloodbath; and old Magnac remembered and narrated what he had seen in Normandy during the winter of 1870, during the Franco-Prussian War: fifteen-year-old girls raped on farm tables in front of their mothers by German cavalrymen and then handed over to the infantry so that they could take their pleasure too. We trembled but believed neither what Magnac said nor our own fears. Some people began to see the master of Veix in another light—as their daughters had done for a very long time, especially since Aimée Grandchamp's death—since we thought that the Veix estates really belonged to him and that he was entitled to stride over his ground with a landowner's justifiable pride.

We would have to compromise: we knew that he had a solid, well-established basis among us, quite apart from female indulgence, and that all he now needed was a wife. Some people muttered in the reddish glow from their hearths, under the acacias, and in their beds that it wasn't necessary to rush things; the war would not last a hundred years; that some battalions, so they heard, had already refused to fight; that we had been forced to shoot our own soldiers; and that anyway if that one (as we called him sometimes) wanted to take a wife from among us, it would have to be the daughter of Queyroix, his land separated from Pythre's only by the Vézère, who watched him from behind her window, behind her trees of life, or even—they said—from the road that turns off from the one to Buiges and runs to Coignoux by way of Veix, the one she would sometimes scorch along in her automobile at top speed, laughing

no one knew at what, as if it were seemly for a woman to laugh out loud like that, hair and scarves blowing in the wind, as if she were proclaiming from up there in the cockpit of her deadly machine that she was not the kind of girl to have a man she hadn't chosen forced on her.

The idea was soon universally adopted, and everyone was convinced of its truth, including her father, old Queyroix, who had actually hoped for someone more impressive for her than this exile to a place far too near at hand, on the hill opposite, and that she would pair off with a better man than a cripple without name or reputation. But the old man was worn down by the passing years, harsh winters, and money troubles, and anyway he was unable to resist the secret desires of this daughter who had so often turned her nose up at suitors and now, being over thirty, feared that she would never find a husband, so he gave in, having no choice anyway, for he heard her mother's furious blood beating in his daughter and, prizing his peace above all else, was more afraid of that than of this limping Minotaur to whom his near-gentleman's status forced him to surrender his daughter, even though Pythre had never made any request and gave no indication of expecting such a sacrifice.

In any case, he did not take his revenge in this way (even supposing that he really planned to pay us back for all the years during which we had treated him with such disdain) and never unleashed his Fritzes on our daughters, neither in the woods where they went to gather mushrooms and kindling, nor in the stubble fields where we sent them gleaning, nor in the meadows where they looked after the sheep; on the contrary, he would gladly have made the Bavarians available to us, and he made such an offer to the Orlucs when the father died at Verdun, but Yvonne Orluc refused it, did not understand what was intended, and we others acted as if we did not understand either and were furious with him. Nor did he display any arrogance when Monsieur Queyroix—who a few weeks before would not have deigned even to raise his eyes to this limping, waddling Pythre, to this crippled satanic dervish—ascended to Veix one morning driving his cabriolet and clad in his Sunday best, not crossing by the mill bridge but taking the long way round by the road to

Buiges, to stand before Pythre who, possibly ill at ease, astonished, or gratified, but certainly unaware that he ought to have been standing too, remained seated at his table, his Bavarians also sitting in the fading light near the hearth. The old man took this for contempt; he stayed close to the half-open door and, in the cold air, without beating about the bush, began to talk about his daughter, of her feelings for him, André Pythre, and though Queyroix pronounced this name reluctantly, he smiled, which could pass for deference and which made Pythre smile too, as if he were hearing it for the first time in his life. Otherwise, Pythre scarcely listened to Queyroix and probably did not know that the old man, shivering near the door in the cold January light and saying such odd things to him, was descended from the Queyroixes of Montheix, whose manor house was still standing over there at the other end of the valley, facing Couignoux, behind gigantic oaks, and long ago sold to the Barbattes, who had lived since then on that property, over there among their peasants and their animals, the wood owls and foxes, and the sounds of the forest; and therefore Pythre was unaware that these Queyroixes had gone down to Bordeaux halfway through the last century to enter the wine trade and that it was he, Jacques Queyroix—the last and youngest son, the one who wouldn't inherit, Queyroix-come-lately, the good-for-nothing—who had dreamed of something other than Paris, Flanders, or Wallonia, and had allowed a swindler he had met on the Quai des Chartrons to unload on him a tiny island in the Archipelago des Glorieuses in the Indian Ocean, an islet he had seen as paradise itself and from which the colonial administration dislodged him, the improbable princeling, the Queyroix of the Glorieuses, ruining and humiliating him, although essentially he was gratified to have been king for a whole year among the palm trees and languid women, this mediocre painter who burned all his canvases on the beach before returning to Bordeaux but was not at all deceived or disappointed, since at least once he had put on some kind of a show in a world where otherwise he was a nobody or at any rate not one of those Queyroixes waiting for him: his mother and his three brothers, who, to bring matters to a close, offered him an

appropriate allowance on condition that he go spend it in Siom, where they kept some land, a family seat, and a pew in the church, and where we saw him arrive along with the new century, together with his daughter born no one knew where or of whom and a café-au-lait-colored maid who was probably more than a maid, and whom everyone here called Glorieuse because of her royal airs and the way in which she looked so distantly at our little world, saying hardly a word, wearing fine shawls, scarves, and rings. The climate killed her or homesickness or the indifference of the master and of Blanche, the daughter, of whom some people said she wasn't as white as her name suggested and that she was very like this negress, whereas others claimed that she was Queyroix's child by the daughter of an official stationed on Madagascar.

Chadiéras must have told him all that, must even have shown him the grave in which the servant was buried, near the family vault and below a stone without name or date on which a childish hand had crudely inscribed IN GLORY NOW. Pythre took no notice. He remained sitting at his table opposite the old man, who went on talking, his hat in his hands, as Pythre sat silhouetted against the light, which made him seem even thinner, on the threshold of what was no longer exactly a kitchen but almost a guardroom, where, anyway, Queyroix would have refused to sit exposed to the gaze of the four Bavarians, who understood not a word of what was said and contemplated the two men, their master with the face of an elderly child and this very distinguished old man, who was now listening to what the young man, with an abstracted air, was telling him—in a confused and muffled voice they did not recognize—that it was impossible, it wasn't honorable, the harm was done; and then, his eyes suddenly misting over, he spoke of another time, a walled garden, and a lady in white; but the old man understood not a word of what he said and felt somehow checkmated and stood there for a moment, defenseless, before leaving by the door without the other trying to detain him.

That is how we learned that André Pythre would not marry Blanche Queyroix, however much she liked him. We listened to the old father telling us that Monsieur Pythre had other projects, he did not know

exactly what they were, but if Pythre refused Blanche's hand in marriage, then they must extend beyond the bounds of Siom. He added that he had come across a very solitary man up there, the victim of a depressive state from which it was probable only a woman could release him, unless God had deserted him altogether. That did not further endear any of them to us, neither the humiliated father nor his daughter, who was already beginning to shrivel while still alive, and certainly not the other one with his Krauts, when we still did not know what he expected of us—or if indeed he did want anything from us, which we strongly doubted in the end, although the most cautious among us said repeatedly that a guy like that would never give up.

## 16

He waited for the war to end. We had our dead, only a few male descendants, and daughters who had to be set up right. He still had his Fritzes, who had refurbished his house and his land and who would soon be sent back to Germany. Apparently the prisoners wanted to stay, and they were certainly more docile and wiry than the big reddish brown oxen that you could see them leading onto the valley slope below Couignoux, where the Vézère turned for the last time before flowing steeply down to Treignac through thick forests and narrow gorges, exposing the ancient tuff stone to an already softer light in which you might think you felt the fruitful heat of the plains, an unwonted mildness, a kind of latitude that has always attracted both the boldest and the most desperate—or those too who are returning home, like the four Bavarians and the other prisoners of war who had built the road to Tarnac and whom they assembled in the schoolyard one December morning. Everyone was there, our prisoners and, behind the fence, the children whom they had watched grow, and farther off some women and girls who would miss the Germans—who were all there except for one of Pythre's Bavarians,

whose disappearance the master of Veix had reported three days before. They did not find him; he was never seen again, neither in our area nor anywhere else, not even in his hometown in Bavaria, which led us to think that he had died and was buried in Pythre's vault, between the loony and the child. They said many other things about him: for instance, that he was alive, hidden away at Veix, and that he slept in the barn above the cows; some people said that they had seen his shiny bald pate gleaming in the moonlight one night when they were poaching in the cove at Veix; others claimed that they had heard him several times swearing in his own lingo behind the hazel trees that formed the boundary with the estates of Couignoux and that, in any case, Pythre could never have done so much work on his own; yet others arranged a nocturnal roundup in the course of which, apart from their own fear, they came across nothing other than, at the end of the Veix path, the barrel of André Pythre's gun, its steel glinting in the moonlight. Rumors were rife. The police returned, but the Krauts' devotion to André Pythre was well known, and all the law dared ask was for him to reopen the vault: that, we thought, would be the end of something for us and for the authorities—"The end for all of us!" squealed Ma Nuzejoux, and it was indeed the end for all of us, for although we knew what Pythre was not capable of (and until then he had behaved toward us with a respectful indifference that was the next best thing to peace), we were nevertheless convinced that, when it came right down to it, he would do anything. We were neither less rational nor crazier than the people of Buiges, Saint-Priest, or Tarnac, for we too were entitled to peace. Dead or alive, the Bavarian continued to haunt us with a vengeance (and his story, constantly reinvented or distorted, obsessed the youngest and the most fearful among us too), scaring children, turning the milk of women and cows sour, bringing storms and hail upon us, and sleeping in the grave whence he issued forth at dawn to work with Pythre.

The prisoners marched together in two columns to the train station to embark in wagons at the very same spot where, four years earlier, our men had departed in pursuit of an improbable glory and for the most

part now would enjoy only that of a list beneath the inscription: ERECTED BY THE PARISH OF SIOM IN MEMORY OF ITS SONS FALLEN IN THE GREAT WAR, 1914–1918, with surnames and Christian names engraved in the marble tablets soon to be screwed to three sides of the tall granite column set up in the square, halfway between the presbytery garden and the big wooden crucifix standing in Besse's field: those dead men assembled in the meager glory of alphabetical order, not as they had been mown down there, in days of anger and nights of steel, but as they were called each morning at school and as they had been summoned on the station platform before climbing in the wagons. It was a glory of no less value, however, than any other and better, for example, than that of having survived and recalling, day after day until the end, those nights when each mother's son was rent by the question of why she had bothered to bear him and then abandon him, until he ended up puzzling thus in mud, in cold, and in the midst of what by then (so alienated from his own body had he become) was no more than an incompetent fireworks display. And these survivors assembled yet again, footsore, gaunt, speechless, debilitated after gas attacks or Silesian prison camps, with ulcerated stomachs and souls, well aware that they had not been repatriated whole and complete and even that they would never truly return. Those who did come back were all there on that April morning in 1919, standing in their silent ranks at the entry to the new road, a few yards from Bonneau's cross, the flags they had carried to the spot and held before them now lowered and fluttering and their medals and tears sparkling in the bitterly cold breeze. They turned their expressionless faces toward the subprefect who had just uttered a few sentences, as had the mayor, about sacrifice, the fatherland, the future, symbolized (they said) by this road dug jointly by former enemies and Frenchmen. Father Trouche stood next to them, and behind him pressed the women of Siom, the children, and the old men who had managed to retain their authority through all these vicissitudes. The subprefect of the district kissed two little girls—from the Anglars and Sivadiaux families, no man of which had survived—both of them carrying bouquets of field flowers,

before, with scissors that Blanche Queyroix presented to him on a sky blue satin cushion she had embroidered, he cut the thin tricolor ribbon stretched between two beeches.

André Pythre was there among the survivors, upright like the others and just as admired, in spite of his gimpy leg that forced him, even standing still, to hold himself rather oddly, somewhat constricted in the uniform in which the others seemed to swim and tremble; but no one thought of smiling; it was still the period when the survivors of that war moved in an eternal summer light and when the others, the people at the rear, as those from the nonoperational zones would be known for some time, did not see them as they actually were but extolled them to the skies before children and widows. There they were—the Pintoux, Heurtebise, Arbiouloux, Peyrat, Jouclas, Duclos, Roche, the Besse boys, and Célestin from La Voûte in his wheelchair, and André Pythre, of course—shivering under the beeches and the azure sky, exposed to the general gaze and especially to that of the women and girls, whose eyes were as moist and calm as those of cattle in the marketplace, but in whose depths there glimmered from time to time a hint of fury or wonder.

The subprefect was shaking hands. The priest had sprinkled holy water over the road that stretched out into whiteness until it disappeared between the Lornon hills. No one dared venture onto it until the official automobile had gone, followed by the mounted police. No one had spared a word or, to be sure, a thought for Eugen, the big bearded Württemberger who before he was taken prisoner had evaded death several times but was crushed by the great beech, which they had cut down at the edge of the road near La Becette one evening in July. Pythre paid attention neither to the speakers nor to the road, but, on the other side, near the slope, among the hats and headdresses, to two almost jet black eyes that had not left him and seemed not so much to be merely looking at him as, modestly yet just as firmly, to be examining and even boring into him; not into his heart (for no one, not even a mother, can really know what lies in a man's heart—a truth as undeniable as that one

always dies alone), but into his very depths, where only a woman can reach, even if only, like this one, a teenager. He lowered his eyes, yet very soon, aroused or irritated, gazed once again at these other eyes, which, below the little hat with a bunch of cherries trembling on its brim, already forced him to submit to a natural order he knew nothing of, in spite of Aimée Grandchamp, in spite of Blanche Queyroix and in spite of the lady in white. The rest of her face was obscured for the most part by the shoulders of her father, a stocky man with a red yet calm face and enormous hands that seemed to embarrass him, for he kept clasping and unclasping them on his dark suit before him: he was, as we would soon discover, a stonemason from Féniers, on the other side of the plateau, not very far from Prunde, in the Creuse, who had been hired to shape stones for the bridges and road embankments here in the valley, and whom they were thanking on this occasion together with the others. He had brought his daughter with him: Pauline, with coal black eyes like his in a lively, narrow, quivering face that was more regular than beautiful, with a very slender, you might even say slight body, in spite of a high, rounded bust that revealed her pride.

Pythre looked at her, and they looked at one another as if they already knew what would follow and last almost two years, although he had no idea what loving meant, as little a notion of it as this seventeen-year-old girl who was still a girl in spite of her beauty and did not want to get married, as she said, perhaps because she was waiting for someone, a prisoner of war or soldier missing at the front, though she too could not adequately express all she felt, but finally made a decision and bowed to convention: meeting him again on market days, at festivals, at dances, at Peyrelevade, Tarnac, La Celle, Pérols, Saint-Setiers, or Faux-la-Montagne, with a few words exchanged beneath fireworks, in the fresh greenery of arbors, at a refreshment stand, under an oak or in a doorway, while the father, always close by, turned away lest he obstruct matters and in order to permit the operation of that law to which he himself had submitted twenty years before with the woman he had married who knows where; a chance acquaintance in some village in the

Auvergne where he had been working, who before long had succumbed to the blandishments of a traveling salesman (or, they said, of a mere tinker): then she had abandoned the two of them up there on the hill at Féniers, the man stinking of sweat and stone—whom she rarely saw because, she said, he was always “out in the open”—and the girl who had given her so much pain coming into the world and whom he, Odilon Bordes, found a burden seventeen years later because she had become a woman and fallen in love, so that he could no longer leave her on her own when he went out to cut granite in the villages and on the roads, and so he tried to avoid accepting any more commissions that prevented him from returning home at night, for he had no one apart from himself to keep an eye on her and no longer entirely trusted women, even though he knew that he could rely on his daughter. What is more, one October evening at Pérols, after work, when he had just washed his hands in the basin at the end of the corridor and was sitting at his table in the little Hôtel des Touristes at Pérols, where the only tourists they had seen were the few salesmen from Eymoutiers or Ussel who came for the fishing every October and where he had stayed once to fish too while the stones were being shaped and assembled for the war memorial, he listened to this guy from Siom, whom he had got to know by sight in the meantime, even though Pauline and he had never spoken to each other, this fellow with the limp and the unyielding, decisive expression who had just bobbed up before him and was not impolite either, and who, while talking to him about Pauline, clasped his black hat under his elbow—which no man had ever done in front of him before—and then laid it, together with a thin, silver-handled walking stick of the kind you see carried by middle-class folk and dandies, on the oilcloth with the little blue and white squares as soon as Bordes invited him to sit down, not so much because he wanted a dining companion as to get rid of this embarrassment: this fellow standing in front of him with his walking stick and game leg, his grim look, his feelings toward Pauline that he had to talk about to Bordes, who was as ill at ease listening as the young man was talking but who nevertheless heard the suitor out when, after

what he had to say about the stonemason's daughter, he went on about his land, his cattle, the woods, and a whole lot of other things that Odilon Bordes scarcely understood, until finally he heard him pronounce this word, perhaps a name:

"Pythre."

To this utterance Bordes finally replied:

"What?"

"Pythre, it's my name."

"Not a bad one," said Bordes after a short silence. "After all, I suppose there aren't any bad names."

And they looked at each other without smiling, both annoyed but at least they had given it their best shot, as we would say—or were relieved, if you like—the first because he was finally parting with this daughter no one up there, around Féniers, had wanted, wishing to avoid becoming the son-in-law of the cuckold, as they called him, although he claimed to be a widower, and the other, who on this occasion was drinking something other than his usual gentian, because he had spoken without blushing in front of this stonemason who probably knew nothing of his reputation or if he had heard anything of his story treated it with the quiet self-possession of men who cut and shape stone and not with the superstition of those concerned with the soil who, ultimately, are far too close to women and the cycles of blood to judge dispassionately and accept into their circle an André Pythre, a Blanche Queyroix, or even a Glorieuse—all people who one day had submitted to the law that the man from Veix had never dared to call love, not believing that this word applied to him in any way or that he was worthy of it, still less that it described anything from which he might expect salvation of any kind.

For, since Aimée's death, he knew that you needed a woman, unless you were to go crazy like the Couignoux servant who had hanged himself from a beam, that only a woman could lay her hand on the fiery brand that set his belly and loins alight; and he still had to learn what sweet softness lies between their thighs, the silk that would be rent during a spring night of 1922 and move him to tears—tears that the soldiers'

whores had probably jeered at and that he had been unable to shed when his mother died and before Aimée's body; whereas Pauline was amazed that anyone could stir her living body like that on her wedding night in a creaking bed with an iron bedstead, when she was opened up by a single-wheeled plow whose shape was still almost a mystery and made her moan and shout with fear, pain, and, to be sure, something else that stirred her heart and roused her entire body, so that she quivered and sweated, and was incredulous and more yielding than uninhibited, listening to him breathing so heavily on her shoulder and her neck and on her breasts, which she found much more difficult to surrender to him than her thighs, still wearing in spite of his requests the nightdress now soaked with her blood and water, which he tried to tear from her with his teeth, gasping more and more energetically until suddenly without crying out he stopped as though struck on the neck and withdrew from her, and now she heard only the beating of her own heart; and she was neither deceived nor exhausted, but astonished and very slightly repelled, yet accepting that it amounted to this, no more; and thus initiated into the great secret of women, yet determined to be happy, for that alone counted and everything else was the work of darkness, no more than that.

She was certainly not thinking now about her wedding feast in Buiges, in a small, unheated reception room at the Hôtel des Voyageurs; it was in spring, but then it was such a pathetic wedding: the room smelled of cold wax and ripe apples, which must have been stored there until that morning; the windows were filthy; flower-patterned wallpaper was coming away from the walls here and there; and the curtains were scarcely as clean as the cloth on the table, at which a few men and women were seated who really did not know and presumably would never see each other again; they were shy, said hardly anything, did not speak the same patois, and were awkward French speakers; and this, in spite of the wines and liqueurs, prevented people from talking about themselves or trying to discover more about the others: on one side there were André Pythre and Pauline, who had been married that very

morning at the town hall, then in the church at Féniers (almost at dawn, people said, and by a substitute priest who was furious to be there, as annoyed as the mayor, who looked embarrassed and indecisive, as if he had no idea what he was supposed to do); and on the other side Odilon Bordes, his brother and his sister-in-law, who owned a farm in a place called Louzelergue, and a great-aunt whom they had forced to travel all the way from Felletin and who was deaf as a post. Chadiéras had come with his wife. In the end they had even invited in the old servant who had driven them to Buiges. So, in order to avoid talking about anything else, they talked yet again and continually about the war, each content to use this means of communicating, however genuine or false it might be; and anyway they had eaten and drunk, the meal was good, the staff there had done them proud, but the servant drank too much and slumped down asleep on a corner of the tablecloth, while Odilon Bordes's brother, no less drunk, rose in the now unflattering light to sing falsetto a number that made the women blush, the men laugh noisily, and the nephew, the brother's son and the only child at the table, open wide his sticking-out ears, his unresisting mouth, and infinitely sad eyes. Someone had left the window half-open; a dog was barking in the vegetable garden from which they were separated by no more than a decaying wooden fence; the maid stood yawning by the sideboard; they had finished the coffee and liqueurs. Everything that needed to be said had been said. The child had grown even paler. The newlyweds were smiling at each other. Old Bordes was exchanging a few words with his brother apart from the others. Madame Chadiéras was studying the theme of the painting hung between the two windows: a pastoral scene in which a young girl with bare legs was preparing to bathe in a limpid stream dammed by a mill in the background, while three earnest old men hidden in the bushes close by watched her most intently. But perhaps this was not all that Madame Chadiéras, half-asleep, was contemplating, and now and then the same was true of the maid, the great-aunt, the uncle's wife, and even Pauline: you might think that they were

reviewing their lives, their trampled innocence, their despised dreams, the sacrifice of their flesh, their groans, their submission to the law—the inevitable wedding feasts beneath the trees of a little country inn, in a farmyard, or a modest family house in Féniers, Tarnac, or Bonnefond, on just such a spring day—with the same mixture of happiness and apprehension that made their stomachs ache and compelled them, as Pauline was doing now, to rise from the table and crouch behind the dung heap, in a clump of hazel trees, or in the latrine at the end of a vegetable garden, under the mocking gaze of the drivers and peasants attracted by the wedding, anxious not to soil any more the white dresses bearing wine stains, which they interpreted as a bad omen, yet one which they had been granted, so they thought, only so that they might not be shocked by worse sights later when the sweating bodies of their men glistened above them, before they were covered and made to bear a burden heavier than the shadows of the tall beeches.

They reached Veix toward the end of the afternoon; there had been no dancing, which made people say that it had been an old-fashioned wedding, as it were, a forced engagement, a marriage of poverty-stricken partners. Nevertheless (as we had to admit), they both looked very proud up there on their cart: Pauline slightly tipsy and dozing off on the seat in constant danger of tumbling down whenever she smiled and suddenly looked up at the sky, and Pythre driving in silence, with an undeniable trace of satisfaction on his face, which was all the more credible in that his eyes too were like wild honey, but otherwise gleaming and as hard as ever. Once they had crossed the plank bridge over the Vézère, he descended to lead the reluctant mule up the incline under the pines, just as a few years before (in fact not so much time had passed, though it seemed almost a century in view of what life had burdened him with) he had made his exodus, walking before the heavily laden cart, with the other woman, the one who had prevented him from becoming one of us, though now we could not really think of him as a true stranger, and who now rested no one knew where, on the crest, near that son who had

never existed, or under the wooden cross in a corner of the cemetery, or in the devil's hands, we didn't care, it was no longer our concern. And in his own way, silent and cheerless, he had triumphed, going home as if he were returning from market together with—in spite of his gimp leg and bleak reputation—a girl both healthy and pretty who, people agreed, was sensitive, had a school certificate, and very soon gave him a son.

This son arrived neither in the swaddling clothes that became his shroud nor on a cold October night, as the other one had. But then you had to admit that it was only September and the child was perfectly healthy. To help Pauline with the birth, Pythre had summoned three women from among us, one of them a very young girl, scarcely fifteen, Roche's sixth daughter—uglier than an asshole, as we muttered—who did not leave afterwards but stayed on as a servant. The others reported that Pauline Pythre had brought a fine little fellow into the world, almost without pain, and that he bawled stoutly while his father did not stir from the fireside in which he had started a fire in spite of a hot end to the summer season, seemingly not in the least interested in what was happening in the big bed at the end of the room and not even smiling when Ma Nuzejoux held out his son for him to see. He stood up, examined the face of his wife who looked up at him with concern, and said to her, without any gesture or even the least smile, in that voice that had turned quite raucous in the trenches:

“I'll finish seeing to the sheep.”

Next year, when they were sent a daughter, he behaved in exactly the same way. It was November this time, and, as he had done for the first child, he waited until the birth was over, then left, but this time without saying anything to Pauline. He went up to the grave (so Madame Chabrat said, for she was helping Madame Nuzejoux as she had done the year before) to collect his thoughts—unless he was already beginning to defy us from up there as he would certainly do openly in the end, we said (even though today we might regret our readiness then to suppose we were his victims), with that Amédée and this Suzanne whom he carried in each arm with obvious delight and whom Father Trouche baptized in the church with, each time, Pythre at the entrance throwing out fistfuls of small coins and candies that our urchins hunted for between the roots of the great oak and even in the cow pats of Berthe-Dieu's cattle. After the birth of the second daughter, we started addressing and talking of them together as Médée and Suzon, as if they had been born on the same day and were twins. And when, a few years later, the one who stayed with them, Roche's daughter Jeanne—the little brunette whom everyone had all but forgotten, starting with her father who nevertheless recalled her existence when the day for her to bring him her wages came round—also carried with her a taut belly that she could not hide and that made her no longer just ugly but grotesque, we knew that a third child would be sent to the Pythres, little matter which woman was delivered of it, since Pauline became barren as soon as Pythre, as we called him from then on (when we did not call him something else, in more muffled tones, between men: something more appropriate to this guy who impregnated women and land alike with such furious zeal), from the point at which he, so to speak, became established, counted for something, and could do openly what brought such shame on us, while still coming over to us in the evening in all weathers to swallow his glass, always announcing his arrival with that dry cough we never got used to, with this proud, slightly shy, and obstinate expression that prevented us from liking or respecting though not from fearing him, not because he had made Jeanne pregnant or slept with a simpleton before that or saved

his own skin during the war, but because he was a creature of unknown origin, and no one dared to ask him where he was from, even though people thought they knew—going by what Jouclas said, who learned about it from a guy from Cisterne or Freyte—that he was born in some one-horse place on the other side of the plateau with a name as quaint as his own, or even that he came from farther away—or from nowhere at all—at any rate from somewhere without land or women as far as he was concerned, which might explain, we thought (without excusing him because of that), why he lived like that, why he cultivated his soil in that way, and produced his children as he did: with the obstinacy of those who have never believed in anything but do everything they can to induce belief and in order not to perish before their moment has come; and also because from time to time you have to surrender to the surge of the sap within and the song of women without.

We welcomed Jean, this son of little Jeanne and whomever it was (preferring an apparent uncertainty to the shameful truth, even though we had known for a long time, since the war in fact, that something of the kind would happen to us and we were prepared for Pythre's unrestrained appetite); yes, we welcomed the boy whom his mother left with the people in Veix, not because she did not love the child or because it was unacceptable for a man to live with two women and impregnate them both, but because Jeanne (in spite of the daily thrashing old Roche gave her, although like us he must have known that it was inevitable, that she had been somehow marked, and that this shame was necessary and a lesser evil) would not go back to Veix for anything in the world, having fled the place with the child one night and knocked at her father's door, though he would not let her sleep there unless she told him who the father was. But she refused to give his name, even when Pythre was seen at dawn, before cockcrow and before the fog had begun to turn white, hammering at Roche's door and demanding to see the girl. Roche reappeared at the first-floor window, wearing his cap and carrying his gun; he spat, and Pythre understood, turned on his heels and finally discovered little Jeanne (actually not so little or so young or so ill favored as

before) crouching on the threshold of a shed, giving her breast to the child, and trembling when she saw the man from Veix, or rather the shadow he cast on her feet as dawn came up. He held out his hand and smiled, but the people who were watching him at that moment could not say whether it was at Jeanne or the baby or something else—possibly nothing, since he was the kind of man who smiles for no reason and, in any case, not when you ought to smile. He took the child without a word, and Jeanne hadn't said anything either when old Roche shouted:

“Take them away, that whore and her brat! Get them out of here!”

Pythre did not even hear what he said. Proudly and desperately, he swung the child in the first rays of the sun, in the middle of the road, in front of everyone, as if he were forcing us to look at this love child, this child of gold and the night that was bawling with all its might, summoning us to our windows, vigorously claiming what its father believed what his due: to be accepted among us, even though no one could deny that it was too late, that it was surely up to him to welcome us to his place; but no one thought that was possible, so that's how it was: we shared a collective guilt, the origin of which was already contained in our deceitful memories and in women's mouths.

We watched him take the path back up to Veix without Jeanne, holding the child against his thigh, with a peaceful expression again. Everyone knows that he, not demonstrably the father, called the priest to baptize Jean up there and that he raised the three children strictly. In fact we took them to our hearts, these three urchins whom we watched every morning descending the slope of the valley on their way to school—silently, slowly, eyes lowered, smiling weakly, usually holding one another's hands—the girl between her brothers. After all, we would tell each other beneath the acacias, suffering and injustice must relent a little, so that Jean's childhood at least could be spared.

And it was spared: that, at least, is what we believed for ten years or so until the start of their adolescence—until the next war, when only a few guys from the area went to fight and in which only three men from Siom were killed: one from Peyre Nude and two from La Vergne. Not

that we were spared: we had already paid our tribute twenty years before, and we felt that all that was no longer our concern, that we were fading away, and that we were almost the last survivors of a certain way of living on this earth; and we were anxious that these three children would bear witness for us one day: age makes you forgetful or guilty, and some of us that summer were sitting in the trees' blue shade on our chairs, on a bench, or on the wall flecked with gray lichen, looking back into the past as fixedly as day after day we observed the smoke stubbornly rising from the Pythres' hearth, and we hoped that we would have intercessors like these children—presumably because we were not yet below ground and we had not yet committed all the evil acts of which we were capable. We enjoyed life and hadn't grown tired of it yet or of talking about everything and nothing but mainly about those folk from Veix, about whom however we had scarcely anything to say for so many years. And so we complained about ourselves, other people, the whole world; and since that wasn't enough, we also set to whining about the fate of the three children as if they had no mother, even though in the end we had come to admire Pauline who came down once a week, smiling and unpretentious, to buy this or that and whom we still could not bring ourselves to treat as Pythre's wife. Some people would object occasionally, and with good reason, since as they said the three kids were no more to be singled out for commiseration than our own, and we would remark that our pity must be kept in store for harsh times ahead. And so we talked as if they were some kind of birds of ill omen, as though our own time was up or had almost run out, as if we were no longer good for anything and could now muster more dead than living in answer to any roll call.

We imagined them in the big house up there, under the thick branches of the pines, which Pythre could not bring himself to cut down, in spite of the winds and storms that pressed the trees down against the rooftops until their branches began to dislodge the slates and darken everything, rooms and spirits alike, inducing silence. It was easy to pity the children, sitting at the long table, under the blackened beams

of that house besieged by the noise and vigor of the wind, which eventually entered by the chimney, under the door or even through the well in the other room, not to speak of the most disturbing of all: at one end of the table, opposite the window, Pythre the silent watching the three little ones eating in a row with their backs to the fire and Pauline standing behind them between the hearth and the wood stove, ready to serve them before sitting down to eat—not at the table but standing as if she wished to keep between herself and the man the same distance that it is wise to observe between yourself and any animal, and like the children she was more taken up with remaining silent than with what was on her plate, which allowed the children to hear the infinitely various sounds of the night spread about them (for it was always night in this room and in the bedrooms), sometimes glancing at the father whom all these noises seemed to obey as he allocated to each—in the order in which he looked at Médée, Suzon, Jean, and even Pauline—his or her share of harmonies, signs, and mystery.

We pitied the children but did nothing for them; they would not have tolerated it anyway and would never have accepted a single apple, candy, or piece of bread. They observed the world calmly. Their savagery was gentle not malign, but they were already proud of being Pythres, especially the youngest, who was a little like us and the one we found more handsome than his brother or sister and more like Pythre (if you could call him handsome, though you had to admit that he wasn't at all bad-looking) than his mother, apart from that high forehead and those far too thin lips that had come down to him from God knows whom. Moreover, all three children had a glint in their eyes that didn't come from these parts and that seemed to reflect something disturbing, painful, and bitterly harsh that you often detect in self-sufficient people of that sort.

They learned to smile, to listen, to look directly at the person addressing them, to appear guileless, although we sensed that they were as incapable of forgetting that they were Pythres as others are incapable of indifference to their hump, squint-eye, or shock of bright red hair; only the girl began to display more pride and quiet arrogance as the

years went by, knowing that one day she would be able to dump her family name and aware of a beauty she owed almost wholly to her mother, though it was transfigured and refined to such an extent that even then you could look at her only at the risk of an irregular pulse.

We watched them growing up: the little girl putting up her brown plaits and, like our own daughters, curling her fringe with sugared water; the boys wearing navy blue berets, then flat caps with peaks, and smiling conceitedly with cheap cigarettes stuck between their lips. They hardly ever left the company of Suzon, who was able to calm them with gestures some of us found very odd indeed: she kissed them at the corners of the lips, imprisoned their hands between already ample breasts, hummed all but indiscernibly songs that they listened to with eyes closed wherever they might be. All three possessed a complete repertory of finger and hand signs that in school or at Veix made them look like disdainful deaf-mutes. Otherwise, they were no different from our children, and we tried to make sure that their lives, so to speak, flowed among us as naturally as the Vézère down in the valley. We found this comparison very apt, for if you are born on the bank of a river it must have some effect on your life, and, as we were well aware, this was no ordinary stream: little by little we adapted ourselves to its slow-moving, meandering, and fast-flowing stretches and to its clarity; and it was always peaceful, except in the spring when its waters rose to the parapet of the bridge, licked the cemetery walls, and flooded the lower sections of Pythre's, Queyroix's, and other people's meadows.

Then they had to cross by the Veix bridge, at the foot of Puy Lagâche, and reach Siom via La Chapelle on the road to Eymoutiers. But we often saw how, especially on Sundays, on the left side, between the Veix hill and the Puy Gaillau, they would appear on the Vézère in the boat that Pythre must have built himself and painted bright red. They probably launched it behind the hill, very close to the big rockfall, in a kind of small bay where we used to go fishing. Big Pythre crouched at the back, the two boys rowed, and the mother and daughter sat up front looking toward Siom where they would land, yet sometimes the master did not

stop there but, if he felt like it, continued in the direction of Monceaux, while the women went on smiling, looking so beautiful in their Sunday frocks and under their straw hats with wide brims and pink ribbons, for all the world as if André Pythre were about to guide them to the end of the world—far, far away from Veix and Siom, the cold hills and the black earth for the sake of which we must struggle unendingly against gorse, bracken, furze, heather, and stone; far away, too, they probably thought, from the narrow defiles where, as if in gigantic pots, the water bubbled from one waterfall to another, before broadening over there, beyond Treignac and Uzerche, and assuming the pale green hue of real rivers, reflecting the banks sown with aspens and willows, which it passed so slowly, and moving toward a destination where people were no longer on this earth in order to imitate lichen on granite but had decided to free the stone from these flecks and stains, and to turn it into something other than supports for crosses, low or massive buildings, and graves that could be changed less easily than proper names.

Yes, when Pauline and Suzon went out like that on that broad stretch of water (which made us whisper yet again that the Pythres could never behave like other people and were becoming really conceited into the bargain), they must have thought that there were more moderate climates where oranges and lemons grew, where the light was no longer the same as that on the broad heath and in the great forests, different too from the far too blue light of self-knowledge that you discover between rocks and sky, and instead a light that ultimately detaches you from self and restores the innocence of gestures and words. They probably rehearsed what they thought they had seen, eyes half-closed, in the front of the boat while the April breeze played on their faces like the patterned tulle they had envied on Mademoiselle Queyroix when they met her in her automobile on the road to Buiges: they told each other about the blossom in the orchards, the pink or white towns, the scents and voices lighter than laughter, and finally the sea, which the Nuzejoux boy had come close to when he went down there in the spring every year to work in the pine plantations of the Landes; and they wept with joy. And the

two boys also thought that perhaps there was another life here on earth—that neither the teacher nor the poets were complete liars—that it was possible to go somewhere else, to the areas colored violet on maps in the atlas where (Orluc's oldest son had brought back photographs from his years of service with the colonial troops, which his youngest brother showed around to people who paid to see them; but to everyone's great astonishment, for they had not suspected that he was in love with Suzon, he had shown them in the covered part of the school playground, behind the teacher's woodpile, to the two brothers, who had merely glanced at them indifferently and had insisted that they would not call their sister) you could pick fruit to your heart's content that was as beautiful and ripe as the fruits you saw in spring on the river bank, below the mill, under the shirts of the washerwomen doing their spring laundry. Yes, the boys must also have said that they were not totally unvisited by grace between the impossible name and the granite, the slate and the heather, the water and the too blue sky.

But most of the time the three children were alone with us, or stayed with their mother below the acacia terrace and attended Mass, by which Pauline set such store and to which she took the children, while the father crossed back over the river and kept to the other side near the boat, which he had drawn up on the grass and on whose edge he sat to roll a cigarette from cheap black tobacco, turning his back on us as he gazed downstream, also thinking perhaps of the gardens of the great plains, of the ocean, of countries where you can acquire women, far away from the men of Siom, who, while the women were in church, stood making interminable speeches and drinking, yet dressed as if they had gone there with the women, taking part in their own way in this tedious rite in which they no longer needed to believe because of the resumption of peace and which, however, they did not entirely desert, since they were like everyone else and could not forget that they had to die.

And so we had nothing to dream of but harsh spirits, what lay between our women's haunches, our pathetic memories, or the wide heath on the high plateau where they had begun to plant those Douglas

firs that plunged everything into darkness, not only the undergrowth within the forest but what we had been for so many centuries; and we told each other that this was no worse than before, that we couldn't stand it any longer, there must be an end to it, which did not prevent us from repeating that our greatest glory was still to show our backbone: how resilient we were, crouched here against this cold granite slab where winter prevailed longer than anywhere else, forgotten by God, no matter what Father Trouche might say in that respect, allowed a stay of judgment in the gorges and valleys, and on the heath; and, yes, in the glory pure and simple of our names, which those who came before us had transformed into land, trees, rocks, trades, and even villages, for we wanted to remain worthy of what they still signified: Heurtebise, Orluc, Magnac, Chabrat, Besse, Anglars, Roche; and even if we no longer understood them, and even if when we asked the priest and the teacher, they shrugged as if to say that they no longer meant anything—Jouclas, Queyroix, Sivadiaux, Pintoux, Chadiéras, and so many others—we were no less proud of their hidden meaning, which was older than that of other names and, we were sure, reached back to those nights when the women had seen gleaming weapons, teeth and fingernails, and also those glistening spears of flesh that had pierced their bellies so that a little grass from the steppes of Asia could grow on this granite slab. And suddenly we were filled with compassion for the Pythres.

Our conversations soon took a different turn, becoming more disturbed, furious, and uncertain. In spring 1938 three men dispatched from the subprefecture were seen spending several days surveying the valley, taking measurements with weird telescopes and graduated stakes like gigantic thermometers, which they carried on their shoulders. We showed hardly any interest in anyone but ourselves—we didn't care about others' misfortunes—and nothing could detach us from our sloping valley. So, at first, we paid scarcely any attention to the three madmen from the government land registry who were measuring God knows what and were possibly seeing how best to build a new bridge. Farges should know, we said; he was our new mayor and no more worried about his neighbor than we were, but we had elected him so that we did not have to put on anything like a show of social concern ourselves.

The three surveyors stayed at Berthe-Dieu's, in the rooms used by travelers in days gone by and opened up only in the fall for renting out to anglers from Limoges. They hadn't much to say for themselves, were secretive in fact. We stopped smiling when we saw them take Farges with

them to show him the short, red-and-white rods they had stuck in the ground all over the valley. Now we were waiting for something. Some people talked about land reallocation; others of a highway that would pass through Siom and connect us to the modern world. The mayor couldn't be drawn out on the subject. His sick weasel's expression told us that it was serious. But, in the end, it was from one surveyor's mouth that we learned that our valley was to be flooded.

We had gone down to stand with him under the acacias. He spoke well, in short, precise sentences. He showed us the red-and-white stakes, the line that, by moving from one of them to the next, you could make out on each of the valley's slopes, marking the limit to which the water would rise. The dam would be built farther away, toward Montheix, at the entrance to the gorges. The Siom and Montheix mills and Theillard's and Lavaud's houses would be under water and so would part of the land of Cougnoux, Queyroix, Pythre, Sivadiaux, and Roche.

"You'll be up to your feet in water, but at least you'll have electric lights overhead to tell you how deep it is," said the surveyor.

We were not amused. We neither needed these measuring instruments and landing stages nor wanted Siom to look like some fortified naval base; we wanted darkness, poverty, the end of things, and all that our innocence would have signified for the entire course of our lives: this misery that we endured uncomprehendingly.

The land surveyor's eyes were fixed on space.

One of us had to ask:

"What about the dead?"

The women, who had been silent till then, began to weep.

"They'll have to be moved."

It was Farges who spoke. He had caught up with us so quietly that no one had noticed him standing at the edge in the shadows. He added that he had thought of a new place for them, on communal land, up there beyond the hill at the exit to the road to Eymoutiers: a fine, gently sloping meadow surrounded by tall beeches, from which you could see Siom and the whole valley. A fat lot of good that would do us! We might

just as well rest below the water line and be finished once and for all with the land and the living and with human law. We realized that the land itself no longer counted, that ownership was no more enduring than a body or a name, and that we were truly the last. We said no more, clapped Jouclas (who would lose everything) on the shoulder, and would soon clap so many others on the shoulder, who looked at us in bewilderment, tears in their eyes, uncomprehending. We were all thinking the same thing: they would tear up the ground, open the graves, and thrust our dead ones, divested of their natural dignity, into the light of day, as if at the Last Judgment, but we, not they, would have to stand before the judgment seat and justify this assault upon their repose. Eternal rest is a privilege of the plains. Did we, at that point, remember Pythre and poor Aimée whose rest we had already disturbed? Perhaps we were rather intrigued by the prospect of discovering at last if the grave was actually occupied? In fact, that was no longer a matter of any concern to us. It seemed that it was Siom we would have to bury up there and that it was all happening far too quickly; the three Rivière brothers were already building a cemetery wall, while road diggers from Buiges—Spaniards with fixed expressions and eyes as hard as Pythre's—were digging the graves and tombs.

It had to happen sooner or later. The big move (as we called it and as our few descendants would refer to it as long as they remembered) took place two months later, before the October rains. It was a clear day and still warm. We decided that there could not have been a better day for these rediscoveries of old acquaintances. We told the women and children to keep their distance. We all turned up the soil in one movement, as if at a given signal and with the same frenzy and desire to get it done as fast as possible. Vertical and horizontal tombstones and crosses were displaced and borne on our backs to be loaded onto vehicles and trailers—we would never have allowed anyone else to do this work, certainly not any foreigner. We unearthed smells that some of us recognized only too well, having breathed them in the trenches and ossuaries of the war zone: they were excessive, scabrous, shameful odors that we really

did not know how to describe; we were disgusted that there were no special words for them, so our fury and pity grew all the more intense, and now we toiled like slaves on behalf of these poor dead creatures, sometimes even howling like dogs on their account. The most sorely affected were those with recently dead relatives to mourn: they wrapped their faces in scented cloths and made great fires of dry grass and herbs into which they would gladly have thrown their own bodies. But there was no remedy; together with them we inhaled the sweet stench that rose in the valley and that persuaded us that we were damned, in spite of Father Trouche standing at the highest point in the cemetery, beneath Chadiéras's oaks, leaning on the crucifix.

But we could never have imagined—neither those who had breathed (and they certainly remembered) the odor of the exhumed body of Aimée Grandchamp nor even those who were well aware how you stink when you shit yourself, like Augustin Nouaille, the Condeau servant whose left hand was caught in a fox trap and who watched it turn black all over and stink, although he kept pissing on it and dipped it in bleach, until it had to be amputated—we could never have dreamed that this stench was to be the fate of all of us who were already so insignificant, nothing but unimportant little people carrying out our trifling business on a clear September morning on the slope of a doomed valley, bending over the remains of our fathers, mothers, and sometimes even our children in rotten, bursting coffins that revealed bones still clad in fragments of pulp and cloth, bits of reddish, green, or black slime so indefinite that we could not say exactly what they were—whether soil, flesh, or an inseparable mixture of both, the nameless fate of pride and misery, or the body's last attempted coyness in refusing to give itself up to the earth's transforming power, and also perhaps evidence of the human form's sheer self-amazement, at its odor, its ignominy, its terrible metamorphosis—and all this had to be taken up with a shovel and placed in new coffins or, in the case of the most ancient bones, in boxes that we carried under our arms. Some of us found nothing, since the soil had digested everything by now except for coffin handles or a jawbone, but carried

just those fragments or sometimes only a shovelful of earth that the priest blessed just as he blessed the dead whom no one remembered now and the others, those who stank so piteously.

This lasted the whole day. Behind us we left a disemboweled landscape, obscene and wretched as the sex of a violated woman. We could not look back on that scene, and, at the end of that day, each of us peered only into the depths of his or her own self, as did Pythre too, who had joined us when everything was almost completed, in order to open up his plot of ground, from which he certainly seemed—and some people confirmed this—to have removed something or other: an admixture of bones and bits of plank, which he immediately placed in a box—and not one of those supplied free of charge by the municipality for those who required less commodious accommodation for their corpses, but a long and narrow wooden chest, a kind of violin case in what looked like mahogany, which he must have made himself. He returned to Veix with it under his arm, not hurrying yet without looking at anyone, and had scarcely watched Father Trouche bless the chest when he was on his way home to place it in his makeshift crypt, or over his fireplace, or who knows where, but not with us, who after twenty years could not prevent him from taking back his own property (how else should we put it?) and doing it under our noses, so to speak. He had waited, and twenty years—well, yes, he was right, it was a long time, it was even a disturbingly long time; and, since we had forgotten all that, there was every reason for our hearts to flutter with fear. That evening we were despondent in mind and spirit as our odd procession continued, though elated when for a moment exhaust gases or a gust of wind cancelled the stench of our corpses—our own stench, we might even have said, for although we were not yet corpses, deep down inside ourselves we felt as if we were, which was something we did not wish to be reminded of that day. On we went, not taking our eyes from the tall, polished silver cross that the priest bore in front of the cortege and that shone in the evening darkness not like a banner of justice or pride but like the standard that at one time defeated forces hastened to throw at the victors' feet.

When we got to the square, the women were standing there, dressed in black, even though we had forbidden it. We said nothing and even allowed them to line the way, then to join the procession in a group of their own, but at a few yards' distance from us, while the children watched from windows and behind trees, scared and overcome by the odor and by what they could hear shifting in the backs of the four trucks advancing so slowly: they watched them passing, these corpses that the living were going to bury for the second time, and very quickly, in spite of the solemn occasion, for as night came closer we were not quite certain that we were creatures of this world and that the figures our children had seen passing were not those of the dead on their way to bury the dead.

Neither an archbishop nor the subprefect awaited us at the new cemetery, although Farges had led us to believe they would be there (but who cared, since we knew that there was no glory left for these wolves to devour?), but only our priest and the one from Buiges, accompanied by some members of the parish to whom we were variously related and the band of women in black who had emerged from an unknown place and were weeping in front of the graves. The odor stopped at nightfall, but we continued to smell it all around us and even within us, just as you worry a decaying tooth. The beech leaves rustled gently. We began to break ranks, to talk, to laugh. Once again we believed we were immortal. But it went on stinking inside us and would continue to stink for a long time afterward. However much eau de cologne the women sprayed on themselves, however much snuff they took, however much mint or sage they chewed, and however successfully the fumes of our pipes and cigarettes seemed to engulf our heads, the stench was there, in us, insidious and repulsive, making us first shy away from, then greatly pity, not only those whom we had buried up there where fox and hare are equals, under the beeches, but those we had caused to be born and of whom we could say that, however young and innocent they were, they were still the same as we: poor peasant fools granted a stay of execution, dead people without graves, as our old priest reminded us, to whom we pre-

ferred to turn a deaf ear, for he was no better than we, and we did not need him to teach us that being alive is no more than searching for a form of dignity to replace love and innocence. Our bluntness was our only heroism, and the memory of our forefathers a very meager substitute for piety. That day, on the slope of the new cemetery, we listened to Father Trouche without understanding what he said; anyway, we did not want to have to think about anything and especially not about that; we did not need to hear him in order to realize what we would become under the gravestones. We probably thought of him, of the one who was not there, who had not accompanied us and had not shown his nose since the surveyors had started work, although he, together with Jouclas and the people from Couignoux, would suffer most from the construction of the dam. But everything was in order now, even though we now found it difficult to distinguish the living from the dead and to decide whether he, André Pythre, was no more alive than we had ever been.

“Let the dead bury their dead!” the priest said once again; and he, too, probably believed that we were taking ourselves to our own graves that day. But we knew more about it now than he did, more in any case than we wanted to know—we poor, bad people; just as there are bad, rich people elsewhere—having rejected true mysteries in order to busy ourselves, once again and always from then on, with the mystery of André Pythre, and possibly we imagined the very same day that he too was some kind of dead man, a suffering soul trying to inhabit this body called Pythre just as pointlessly as he had lived among us, on his land that would soon be flooded and bearing that impossible name.

Nor did he appear when we had to hurry to the town hall for compensation nor when the building site opened up at Montheix, at the end of the valley, where the gorges began. You would have thought that none of it had anything to do with him—not even the war or the German occupation of France. Jean continued to attend the school; the two others helped on the farm, and they were to be seen together taking the cattle to pasture on the shadowy hillside. There was no reason to think that any part of all this would change had it not been for the muffled rumor

that the wind carried up from the gorges and the workers from the dam who came to Berthe-Dieu's in the evening, for he had expanded his business and thought it was a good idea to paint LAKE HÔTEL & RESTAURANT in big brown letters on the white background of his new façade, above the vegetable garden. "Well, someone's gotten something out of it," we said, whereas several of us were forced to work for the dam builders, and no smoke was to be seen rising from Jouclas's mill or from the other condemned houses, whose doors and windows had been nailed shut and whose interiors had been swept, for no one would leave them in any but a clean state, like the dead.

## 19

It happened in February 1944. It rose slowly, very early one morning, and went on rising day after day. At first you would have said it was just high water, though higher than you would usually expect; then the inexorable swelling of the flood began to seem not merely excessive but obscene, especially when the bridge was submerged and we could see only the gables and chimneys of the mill and the other houses. The graveyard disappeared on the fifteenth day; on the sixteenth the water reached the middle of the slope; and not until a month and a half had passed could we see what our landscape would look like once the water was freed from all its flotsam and jetsam: bits of wood, grassy sods, bodies of little animals, and even a dead cow—probably an escapee from the past that had lost its way in the Couignoux forest; when it was free, therefore, of everything rejected by this deluge—or, rather, by this darkness—that came upon us with its little sucking noises, growls, and exhausted animal sighs.

Those who had wept on the terrace and hidden their faces opened their eyes and searched the unsavory stretch of water that had become the

deep, black, and silent lake we now had to accept. To some extent the terrace now seemed like a well-chosen vantage point above some tourist sight, as did Nuzejoux's and Queyroix's fields, where the water had splashed against the fences just as it lapped against the feet of the tall Veix pines where Aimée Grandchamp's grave was now perched on its hillock as on a miniature peninsula. All things considered, we were not unhappy, in spite of the distant war and the lamps of our lives burning ever lower within us: indeed, we were pleased that time had given us this water to separate us definitively from Pythre, whose little Jean was no longer seen at school once the lake had reached the feet of their pines, so much so that if we had not seen the smoke from their hearth among the trees down there, we would have supposed that they had left or were living another kind of life there, possibly beyond the grave, beyond the lake at any rate (which for us and with regard to Pythre was almost one and the same thing). The people from Buiges told us that as usual big Pythre (as we began to call him) had not calmed down but kept his features resolutely tight, his eyes dark and unyielding, an odd smile on his lips, and was forever gnawing the insides of his cheeks. They said that he would drink the water or die of rage. He could find no land to buy nearby, and some people were very glad about that, for they already anticipated his packing his bags and even their acquisition of what remained of his woods and gorse on the hillside, and so they were very happy to say he could go to the devil; others thought he might buy land farther away, beyond the plains of Plazaneix, beyond the train station, in La Moratille, La Voûte, Condeau, or La Geneytouse; but we were not yet aware that since Aimée Grandchamp's death he no longer owned anything, that he had reverted to being a farmer like the others, and that he was accountable to Octavie Bogros, the other Grandchamp daughter who had succeeded in having Elise Grandchamp's will annulled, so that a few government bonds and his disability pension were all that Pythre had to live on. And so the compulsory purchase money went to Octavie Bogros, together with what was left of the land and house, which could be used now only as a place to stay in the countryside or for hunting. She was the legitimate daughter, and it

was only right that things should return to a steady course in these times of unrest, difficult and uncertain as they were, and that a Pythre should be put in his place by women, land, and time.

But who could have known that after the end of the war (we should have suspected something and remembered the last one) he would live among us right in the middle of Siom, on the edge of the square, opposite the church, in the little house with no second floor or cellar, where old Ma Besse had just died, together with a barn, a vegetable garden, and a meadow higher up, which was bordered in the front by the main road opposite Berthe-Dieu's land, on the other side by the square, and on the two remaining sides by the school and the upper road, where—behind Rivière's place—Pythre also owned a low cottage, which threatened to collapse into the sloping meadow? It had all happened so quickly, after the district council had taken a vote and rejected Besse's son, who lived at Treignac, as prospective owner of the presbytery that had been empty since the death of Father Trouche, the priest, two years earlier. Later on we learned that Besse had made an agreement with Pythre even before his mother was in the ground and found him entirely deserving of respect and a man who shared his own opinion: that land (like the whole kit and caboodle, anyway) was completely bunk, as it surely was, because time was on the side of business, electricity, speed—which, all right, were bullshit too, but something you could make a killing from, just as (so they said) Besse's son had been able to line his nest very nicely by selling cement that he had stolen from the construction site for the dam.

We also learned that they had signed the conveyance at Treignac, at notary Boissie's office, and that, for more than a year—from 1943, that is—André Pythre had owned a house in our neck of the woods, with shutters that were always closed and a garden as uncared for as the meadow at whose edge the big wooden crucifix was almost keeling over, so that we were used to talking of the house as “Besse's old place,” since we didn't know what else to call it, and we went on hoping that it would never be opened again—not by Pythre or his relatives, in any case.

Time seemed to cooperate with us in this respect, as did the bram-

bles and couch grass that grew under the windows, invading the garden paths and the narrow, semicircular plot separating the threshold from the gravel of the square. Anyway we knew that he had sold his last cow, his tools, and even that incredible four-wheel-drive Renault truck-tractor with solid rubber tires used for towing pieces of heavy artillery during the Great War; he had bought it from some guy from Ussel and kept it serviced for two decades; you could hear it screeching in the Veix woods in the evening, so that mothers who wanted to be tough on their kids said they would set the man from Veix on them—yes, that Pythre who went crazy at night and carried children off to the other side. And we wondered what the hell they were doing over there on their land, now almost an island, which could be left only by boat when the Veix bridge was flooded or by the difficult route through Couignoux that met up with the road from Gourdon to Buiges; we couldn't think what they were doing, all five of them, under the pines that made the lake look so dark, through a whole winter and spring, kept there between heaven and earth, as we believed, by the pointless pride of one man, by his hatred, by the vengeance he wished to enjoy but probably by now no longer interested him, as if he guessed that now that he was without the land that he had never truly owned, we were increasingly indifferent as to whether he went on living on his hill, in Siom, or anywhere else, because we could neither forgive each other nor really make him welcome among us.

But no one could have imagined how he would actually arrive among us one summer night, or, more precisely, on St. John's Eve, as if the Pythres too had decided to join in the festival, to bring the dark years to an end, and to put away their weapons. We have never forgotten that clear and sultry night around ten o'clock when everyone in Siom had descended to the terrace to see the bonfire that we had decided to light once again that year, in spite of the war and to locate, no longer in Berthe-Dieu's meadow at the end of the little valley, but where the field extended from the church to the road to Eymoutiers, up near St. Martin's Fountain, where a lot of people still went with their buckets even though

a running-water pipe had been laid for them. This time the bonfire was set up on what remained of a sloping communal field to the left of the terrace. We talked about everything: about people who were no longer there, newcomers, the dam, water, electricity, the war, and a defeat that had almost nothing to do with us, although some of our sons had joined the Maquis—the local Resistance. Nuzejoux's youngest daughter had gone down to the edge of the lake with a flaming torch in her hand; she was dressed in white and wore a holly wreath in her thick black hair; she was just about to lay the torch at the base of the bonfire when (yes, at that very moment, as if they had been watching us, or as if a more powerful hand had suddenly intervened in these events), a great red flame rose among Pythre's pines on the other side of the lake; we might have thought that the Pythres were having their own St. John's Eve bonfire in their courtyard over there, if we had not seen, very soon and as clearly as in the twilight sometimes or when the sun rises in the southeast, that the pines were catching fire one after the other around a homestead in flames that must be the Pythres' house, and that the roof was plainly about to collapse before the onslaught of the column of sparks and scarlet smoke that rose well above the flames, and we heard whistling, shouting, and whining noises that seemed to issue from below, indeed to emerge from the earth itself. The tocsin was sounded. The women had fallen to their knees, and Solange Nuzejoux had thrown her torch in the water: she was immobile, watching the flames rise, her arms dangling at her sides, like ours when we drew back little by little, as if afraid that the fire would scorch our faces—which were red anyway, but more from fear and shame than from the blaze, as people said later who realized what had happened as soon as they caught sight of him there in the middle of the stretch of water, standing upright at the rear of his boat, while his two sons rowed and the women sitting forward had crouched down toward the water, which looked as if it too were on fire; so there he was, André Pythre, his teeth clenched tight, eyes dark and unmoving, yet smiling at us so gently that everyone imagined he had begun to laugh and sing on the water, and against that we were defenseless.



PART THREE

*Siom*



“Those Siom people—the women kneeling under the trees, the children perched on the low walls, and the men descending toward the bank in the light cast by the fire—they must have seen us! And how they looked at me, the little one, the youngest, crouching in the boat, which had just touched land, in Pa’s shadow, which they watched rising on the water, not like a human shadow but like a black flame, so much longer and straighter than the other flames coloring the water fiery red that they said Pa had set fire to the lake!”

He was fifteen and knew as surely as his name was Jean that he who deals in dirt has foul fingers and that they, the Pythres, had done something wrong, committed some kind of crime. “They,” of course, meant his father, whom Médée had seen lighting the fire under the pines and in the building, and who would soon say that the barn had caught fire because the hay there wasn’t quite dry, even though we knew that there wasn’t a single stalk of hay or straw left to bring in. And the others knew that we knew, for we were the Pythres who had emerged from the night and from the flames, from the night that became flames: flames that

purified nothing but rather had something hellish about them, a touch of wild joy and untrammelled laughter in the darkness. There was no doubt that all these Pythres—father, mother and children—were aspects of human darkness disclosed by the light of the Veix fire, which burned throughout the night and the day after and yet was nothing compared with the conflagration that must be burning within them.

This time the Pythres passed between two lines of silent men and women—whose eyes gleamed in the fire red night—as if between two rows of knives (and people said later that the three Rivière boys had actually taken out their knives and had gotten very close to the Pythres), ascending as far as the old Besse house, whose door big Pythre opened with a huge key, which he examined, just as he had done twenty-four years earlier in front of the Veix house, before inserting it in the lock under the eyes of his family and the women of Siom who had accompanied them as far as the semicircle of lawn marking the entrance to their new domain. The mother leaned on Suzon's arm; the two boys kept in the background; they also observed the key glittering in their father's hand, and, once the door was open, they felt on their faces some kind of cold and rancid emanation blowing from the house, with a vague hint of what had once been an old woman, as if Ma Besse, though long dead, was still keeping watch alone in the little kitchen where she had ended her days, under the naked lightbulb covered with specks of fly shit but whose light had made her happier than any sun toward which she extended her face and would ensure that she did not die in the dark.

Four rooms and a big empty loft under a slate roof with the corners cut off, pink granite walls, "and no cellar," muttered Jean, "and especially no storeroom, as in the other house, with that wooden trapdoor in the floor over the well without a lip, into which he had threatened to throw Médée and me and Suzon too, gripping the trapdoor with one hand and pressing his enormous fingers on my neck with the other in order to force my head toward the hole into which he shouted like the devil; but I could not understand him, for it was neither our patois nor French: you would have thought his voice was issuing from the well, cold, deep,

and entirely black, and I also shouted into the well shaft but did not recognize my voice, while Médée and Suzon were standing at the store-room door holding hands, with tears in their eyes, and behind them I saw Ma in the kitchen, sitting at a long table, her hands entwined on the tablecloth in front of a heap of lentils . . .”

And Jean made to rush to her, and as on the other occasions she rose before he had time to reach her and took him by the arm and led him to the bed he shared with Médée in a bedroom at the back, where he dropped off to sleep listening to Suzon singing softly on the other side of the partition. Pine branches brushed against walls, shutters, and slates. Pauline had not glanced at him; she said a word to him, then let go of his arm until the moment when she sensed him falling on the bed, in the dark. Then she went out and closed the door firmly behind her.

“Because, Ma,” he murmured, “pretended not to love me and to be unfriendly to me, Médée said it was not to annoy Father, so that he wouldn’t be angry with us, and I believed him and wasn’t surprised when I saw how she embraced him or spent a long time stroking Suzon’s hair, which shimmered like holly. When she looked at me, she was sad or unpleasant and I would weep silently. I wanted to please her, to stop crying, to bring her roast chestnuts in my hands or mushrooms and not to shout into the well any more. Then Médée took my hand, pressed it, and said:

‘Stop, or else she will start weeping too, and he’ll stick her head in the well . . .’”

And Jean bowed his head in front of Médée, who was almost a man already and knew everything. He admired him in school, looked only at him, listened to no one but him, especially on the other side of the aisle, where the big boys sat. Médée never turned around, and Jean studied this thin and shaven neck over which his father’s hair clippers often traveled, those red, sticking-out ears so different from his own small, well-shaped ears, that nose slightly bent like his father’s, those big hands, red too, and the arms he longed to huddle in: “because I was alone, had always been alone, and I realized that we weren’t alike, the two of us, that

he was handsome and intelligent, and I suddenly felt very sorry for myself and at the same time wanted to laugh, and because he was the only one to maintain his pride, particularly when Pa hit him with the harness strap that he hung by the hearth, when Médée, his pants down and clinging to the table edge, received the blows without a word, keeping his face toward us, Ma holding Suzon tight and me at the entrance to the corridor, with him smiling at me, who was so sorry for him that I smiled in the midst of my tears and was also very proud of him, just as I was at school when he rose to answer the schoolmaster in a very calm, very soft voice, just as he was when he got up as soon as Pa had finished, and then the schoolmaster asked me whether I'd understood at last and I rose stammering that he would have to ask Médée because he knew everything . . .”

And he stood there beside his bench—near big Lontrade—arms hanging down, smiling in the middle of all the roars of laughter, yes, smiling with his half-open moist mouth, turned toward his brother on the left, in the background, who pretended not to see or hear him, his back bent over his monthly exercise book, while the master, red with rage, rapped his desk with his ruler and asked Jean what kind of hick he was to smile and dribble like that and not to have enough brains in his head to answer such simple questions; but then it was Médée the teacher was looking at now, for the boy had raised his quiet eyes to him and that forehead with the tiny horizontal crease that made Jean want to weep. And he started to cry silently, without noticing his brother rise, come over to him, take him not by the arm as Pauline did but by the hand so that he wouldn't cry, and make him put on those noisy sabots with the wooden soles that Jean, like all the other pupils, had slipped off below the bench in case they made a noise and he was punished for it. Médée wiped his brother's lips and eyes with the handkerchief that he always carried, which we believed was used for that purpose alone; then he motioned him into the central aisle, toward the door, and the astonished master stopped trying to keep down the laughter, just repeating:

“Pythres, Pythres, those Pythres!”

“And then he would join in the laughter. My eyes were almost dry and I could see better. Now we were under the playground porch, near the log pile. The girls’ classroom windows were open and I would have liked Suzon to come too. Médée said that wasn’t possible, that I’d caused enough trouble as it was, and he pressed my head to his shoulder until I’d really stopped crying and my mouth was dry: he smelled a little of sweat and of tree of life. He had always smelled like that, at home too, up there on the hill, before the scent there became just cold smoke. Yes, that’s how he always smelled when he took off his shirt to cut pines in the wood . . .”

If they had descended a few yards and climbed onto the low wall protecting the henhouse and yard belonging to Liselotte Vialle, the town-hall secretary, then they could have seen from the schoolyard all that remained of the wood on the Veix hillside: dark stumps and black earth, over which brambles, gorse, bracken, and holly were once again growing exuberantly between the remains of walls and fallen rocks.

But they did not look in that direction. In fact they saw nothing and no one, and when they were at school certainly did not look back over the low wall separating the playground from their land overgrown with nettles, wild carrots, and blackberries. The master sent big Roche to ring the bell near the slate-covered porch at the entrance to the school. Suzon rejoined them and they stayed there, in good or bad weather, quite apart in a corner of the covered playground: Suzon sitting on the chopping block, Médée standing behind her his arms folded, and Jean tapping the outer support of the porch with a chunk of wood. You would have thought that, more than the master or the taunts of the other pupils, they feared the appearance of the father, who was sometimes spied making for the toilet, which he had constructed behind one side of the covered playground, the roof of which, once he was squatting in there, urchins bombarded with pebbles in the hope, as they said, of making him shit himself. They did not laugh long, and it was forced laughter anyway, since they were scared of this man whom their parents and grandparents seemed to fear and whom they rated no higher than the

gypsies who sometimes halted their caravans in front of the church. Perhaps they were also afraid of the three Pythres with their pale poker faces as they stood under the playground roof—not afraid of each of them individually but of the extraordinary trio they formed, because no one knew whether the three of them might not fall on you all of a sudden and tear out your throat with their teeth.

So they were “Pythre’s children” and were known as such—insultingly—throughout the area, hadn’t a single friend, did not venture onto the streets, were resigned to being no more than the children of big Pythre, the man we became used to seeing living among us, day by day, in his Sunday best, descending to draw water from the pump that had been installed in front of Chabrat’s house and the rest of the time doing nothing, apparently waiting for something unknown, sitting in his kitchen from dawn to dusk, while his wife sweated away the livelong day like our wives and as women had done for centuries, and now so many men were in the fields, or in the Resistance, or prisoners of war in Germany; he would sit under the window with his back to it, staring straight ahead, indifferently, since this war concerned him no more than the last one, alone with himself, shrugging when anyone spoke to him of the past, the present, or the future, not resentful in any way but aware that he was not and would never be one of us and that he could expect no more from us than we from him; shrugging like that the day the Germans led away the teacher and two guys from Les Egliseaux, on the other side of the mountain, to be shot on the way into Siom, behind the bar belonging to Heurtebise, the blacksmith, in the little quarry where the Rivière brothers used to hustle sand. “When the Krauts came to carry off the schoolmaster,” murmured Jean, “Médée told me to follow him. I did so. We hid in the wet bracken. Night fell very soon and Médée held my hand tighter and tighter. We could see all three of them standing up very straight, their hands tied behind their backs, and the Krauts in front of them with their rifles at the ready, their caps and helmets gleaming in the drizzle that had begun to fall, and the mayor and the deputies whom the Germans had also brought there to scare them, and

farther off, on the bridle path as it entered the little wood, the women who could be heard praying in muted tones that sounded like the wind in the branches. I looked into the eyes of the teacher; not knowing the two others, I didn't really care about them; I'm sure he could see me, it was as if he wanted to tell me something, his lips were quivering, I couldn't understand what he was saying, his jacket was ripped and his shirt, also torn, showed through it; his eyes were wide open and opened even wider when the shots rang out and he, like the other two guys, began to totter, trying to grip something with his mouth, then fell on his side, his shirt steeped in red now, his great eyes staring at me in astonishment, as if the master was amazed when he finally realized that I had come along with Médée and he was about to go into yet another rage, since we shouldn't have been there or seen all that. Then Médée pressed my face into the moss, and I started to eat it, that damp moss, and the soil too, to stop myself from crying out while the officer—who looked so vile, even worse than the teacher—fired three pistol shots into the three heads, to stop myself letting out the cry that the teacher and the three others had repressed and that I allowed to escape once the Krauts had left the wood, when I shouted into the earth, bawling at its innermost depths . . .”

Then he raised his eyes to the sky, with a soiled mouth—on his lips the same submissive, fearful expression of dogs if you watch them crapping, because he had shat himself—and with the same sad, terrified look of one who has surrendered to remorseless fate. The fusillade had driven away all the evening birds in a vast concatenation of cries, squawks, and scattered globules of rain, which made him laugh, not as the soldiers had done a few minutes before, very loudly as they lit their cigarettes, but much more strongly yet without any sound leaving his lips. He looked at Médée who was stroking his neck and asking him (his face just then expressing neither sadness nor joy but straightforward concern for his brother, who carried on):

“Are you satisfied now? Now he can't make fun of our name any longer, and call us clowns and buffoons.”

And Jean smiled as he licked the moss and earth from his lips and sniffed his own stink.

Soon the Siom women would come to fetch the three bodies and watch over them all night in Berthe-Dieu's barn, next to the church beside the cows, which you could hear snorting and rattling their chains and which reminded us that Jesus was born in a stable. The women were not afraid, for they had seen many others die and had long grown used to wearing mourning, having lost father, husband, or son in the other war, the Great War, the real one, not this one in which soldiers shot civilians and civilians hid in the woods to attack their enemies like wild animals. These daughters or wives or mothers of anonymous heroes had worn black almost all their lives, apart from the years when they still clung to illusions or on their wedding day. They were well acquainted with the need to remain motionless, and knew how to weep silently, utter prayers to suit the occasion, and stare straight ahead in the rain as it fell on the graveyard crosses at dawn on the following day.

Big Pythre stayed at home now, apart from his morning visits to his little wooden toilet at the bottom of his meadow, where he shut himself in, and his descents at the end of the afternoon to Berthe-Dieu's, as in the past, to drink his glass of gentian mixed with blackcurrant cordial. He murmured—at least this is what people thought he said—that he was waiting for the end of the war, none of that was of concern to him, he had made his sacrifice, and he had certain plans. We weren't worried by this; in Siom we were in a world out of time: now part of our land was flooded; where the Vézère had flowed in the past, there was now this spread of water that was more dead than barren land and reflected our sky and, on the other side, the burned earth of Veix. The road to Limoges passed above the meadows of Saint-Martin, beyond the beeches and gorse, and the highway to Tulle stretched out even further away, beyond the hills of L'Eburderie and Les Freux, and the Germans would never have paid us any attention if they had not been attracted by a handful of partisans in retreat, which prompted them to blast this bunch of poor uncomprehending guys to smithereens in the evening air.

All the same, we didn't feel that we had kept up with the times: only a few names had been added to the most recent plate attached to the memorial to the glorious dead, and hatred did not cease. All that made us sleepy: the long years, countless memories, water stretching to our feet; and then many of us, like Pythre, unemployed and embittered, just went on sitting there on the benches by our firesides, under the acacias, or in the bar, with the hollow satisfaction of having received not only the compensation payments for the land appropriation but the electricity that brought light into our tedious lives, under the eagle eyes of patient or incredulous daughters-in-law and sons-in-law on the lookout for something or other: waiting either for the cash to melt in our hands or for it to increase spontaneously—or for us to die, which came to much the same thing: acting as if all that was too good to be true—as if you could actually get handed a gift like that by heaven or the government and then lie back and enjoy it without having to suffer in some way.

We knew that was how it was, even if some of us, like André Pythre, had been swindled and did not turn the other cheek, when they should have agreed that any human life was no more than an extended process of surrender to the decrees of fate, that at the end of the day we should have done more evil than good on earth, and that even the innocent could not count on redemption. Yes, of course, we had been aware of our wickedness since time immemorial and thought that perhaps we were born guilty, condemned from the start in a world that would end with us, incapable of finding out what sin we were supposed to have committed, even though we were beginning to brood on the nature of things—and as a result stayed where we were most of the time, like André Pythre in his kitchen without even a fireplace, with his back to the little wood stove, and his elbows on the table, while Pauline went about her work not far away, noiselessly, without glancing at this husband in front of whom she would not have opened her mouth for anything in the world; but there was probably nothing more for her to say or hear, and no one (an old mother, say, or a sister or a female cousin) to comfort her in the twilight of her secluded room with windows framed in half-open

shutters opening onto hills that no longer reminded her of the still water, blackened trees, and unrelenting sky, and of those women who would stop talking as soon as Pauline emerged onto the fragment of lawn up there, on the square in front of the former Besse house.

No, there was no one to console her: not even the children, Médée and Suzon, and this Jean whom she just couldn't get to like, that was clear, although he was the most gentle and sensitive of them, and the one most in need of love. She found him no more amenable than the other boy, Michel, whom big Pythre brought from the Public Assistance office to be his second in command (though no one could play that part once the Bavarian had departed), yet Médée was almost fourteen and the orphan almost twelve. She had accepted Michel without love or pity, and he was so discreet while at Veix that it was only after five years had passed, when he was hunted, that we were concerned not about who he was (we never knew his surname, so that for us he was just another Pythre) but about what would become of him, this big quiet boy with the narrow face, dark eyes, and disheveled hair, whom Pythre certainly gave a hell of a thrashing when he found out that he had taken to hugging Pauline too closely. The orphan was on the ground, his lip bleeding. He reached out to his right, to grasp a stone that Pythre immediately kicked away, promising him that he would sever his head from his body in the same way if he didn't calm down and ordering him to listen up for once; but Michel hissed his reply: he knew the truth, he would tell everything one day; very soon, his hour would come, he wasn't alone; and he stammered on like this, his nose bleeding, his eyes more distant than ever, making big clumsy gestures as he stood up and looked first at the father, then at Jean, to whom he finally said:

"You, Jean, you'll understand too, one day . . ."

These words earned him a renewed buffeting, more vigorous than the first, which left him staggering but did not prevent him from emitting a kind of wail heard all the way to Siom and from shaking his fist at big Pythre as he left, while Pauline grasped Suzon and Médée, and Jean stood at the entrance to the bakehouse, silently sobbing and watching

him go, this Michel who was almost as fond of him as Médée and showed him how to catch hold of nettles without being stung, cook potatoes in the ashes, make a catapult from the fork of a hazel branch, tie up cows so that they couldn't take your eye out, set snares for small creatures, piss further than other people—and who was now departing forever, with a bloody mouth and looking like a blind man, slightly ridiculous, even pitiful, flailing the air like that with his long arms.

“What did he mean by that?”

Médée said he didn't know, that it wasn't important, that Michel had behaved as if he was drunk, and was pretty far gone at that, and it would be much better for him where he was now.

“And where is he exactly?”

Then Suzon sighed, and no one could get any sleep: not content with belching and farting and stinking like hogs, they had to go on talking until the middle of the night, risking waking Pa and having to shout down the well. But there wasn't a well any longer. Now all three of them had to sleep in the same room, well, not quite a room: it was where the lumber had been stored and where their father had stuck them since deciding to take for himself what had been Ma Besse's living room and which he nevertheless left empty for no apparent reason, not allowing anyone to put the wood or buckets of water there, so that they had to fetch wood from outside, in the barn behind the house, and wash in the kitchen, with everyone watching, especially their father, who observed their ablutions as if they were his own, this same Pythre who never left off his Sunday suit on weekdays, even wore perfume, dressed with particular care, and would not allow even one word of patois to be spoken under his roof.

And so he had a plan, which we would know only later, in fact when the war was over and he had been sitting, waiting in his kitchen as a pensioner, for more than a year. Then he would disappear from one day to the next, without saying a word, without his family seemingly finding anything remarkable in that, even after a month. “He would say that he was old,” murmured Jean, “he wasn't even sixty, but he behaved as if he

was old: he had always been like that. Ma didn't cry; she behaved as if he had gone to Buiges or Treignac for the market, while she must have thought that he had gone to the whorehouse in Limoges or Clermont, and that he could stay there, at least she could get a good night's sleep. And we, it was Médée who said so, like the children of dead people, people who'd died in the Great War, went on as if he were still there, like that morning after the fire on the hill, when he made us all go into the meadow, behind the barn, beside the school. He showed us a wooden hut or shed, a kind of sentry box, with a sloping roof and standing on a brick base. There was a heap of very fine sand near the door. He took a handful of this and then entered the shed; we heard belly noises and something dropping into the hollow beneath the hut. He had not shut the door, and we could see him crouching there with a very red face, his work pants down over his ankles, letting the sand slowly trickle from his hand and between his thighs. Then he came out, looking behind us, even though where he was positioned he could only see the sky, and it was the sky he looked at that day, the empty blue sky; it was autumn and it was weird, you couldn't hear a single bird and not a sound in Siom, for a few minutes anyway, until he spoke, when he told us that he didn't want to see his children shitting just anywhere, only in this hut and regularly—the morning was the best time in fact.

“That's another thing that sets us apart from the animals,” he added.

The three children went there every morning, whether they needed to or not, as if he might suddenly appear in front of the hut and let sand run down onto their heads. They followed each other silently, which made us laugh at first, but then somehow we felt sorry for them. They no longer attended the school and were useless, so people said; and therefore they must have felt as if they were back on the hill at Veix, when their father was in the fields with the guys from Buiges whom he hired for the harvest after getting rid of Michel, and the house was no longer embraced by the shadow of the pines but emerged into daylight with wide-open windows and doors. Then they would go out and walk toward the sun, not to the grave on the crest, but to the little cove on the

other side, a few yards from the bridge, where they were protected from the general gaze; and when the cove was flooded, they would go a little further, to a tiny field surrounded by hedges, and smile, dare to make gestures their father would have frowned on, touching each other lightly, clasping hands, giving kisses, singing, humming tunes as loud as anything, laughing. "Then Ma suddenly seemed to remember me. She no longer moved away but let me stay very close to her still not allowing me to kiss her on the cheek or take her hand. I was a big boy, she said, whereas Pa treated me like a little idiot. She smelled of soap, and the whole room, the cove, and the meadow smelled of sun and soap and no longer stank of cows, earth, and damp ashes—the smell that Pa brought with him . . ." He would never lose that odor of silence and night, in spite of the expensive perfumes that he used to anoint his body and that gave all three of them the distinct impression, as soon as he was there, that they were cooped up even though out of doors.

We did not ask ourselves where he had been. Perhaps we did not want to know and turned this voluntary ignorance into a kind of resolution or spell, almost assured that if we never mentioned him again, never thought about him, he would not return. Our children shared our superstition; they stopped asking the three young Pythres where their father was; a question anyway that the poor devils could never answer: Médée showed his fists, Suzon seemed not to hear and raised her chin, whereas Jean smiled like a simpleton. But surely it had occurred to us that they might have taken the same oath as we? So we stopped being so sorry for them when we saw them walking along the road to Treignac or on our streets, the two boys a little behind Suzon, who about then was beginning to think a lot of herself and show herself off, and taken all together they did not look unattractive and not at all hostile, but distant, very far removed from us. And so we began to sympathize with the mother: we needed sustenance for our hatred, and among us this hatred was only too liable to be transformed into sympathy, or at least into what we took for that, and what was probably only a form of curiosity disguised as fellow feeling; for, yes, this silent Pauline whom we had never tried to get

to know now seemed to us just as sweet and beautiful, with Pythre no longer there, as she had been under her cherry-laden hat the day when they inaugurated the highway. Moreover, we were sorry for her and admired her with a kind of dread because she had given herself body and soul to that dour, hopping Pythre. We often imagined how she must have had to withstand the onslaughts of the absentee, as we had called him for some time, with that smile he had of a girl who is good, self-sacrificing and dutiful, yet injured, “whereas we had hardly turned our backs when he, the father, would lift her dress or shirt in the kitchen, not being able to contain himself until he was in the bedroom; he said he was too hungry, his loins were throbbing with hunger, and he thrust her into the bedroom without closing the door—there wasn’t time—he didn’t listen to her saying she didn’t want to, begging him to wait, she had a headache, but no, there were no buts or ifs; it was just as if he were beating her, as fiercely as he beat us or thrashed Michel, and we heard Ma groan as Suzon did when she had a stomachache, and he was panting like a calf, accompanied by the sound of branches scraping the walls and roof and the wind howling in the fireplace as if his groaning had awakened all the others, especially the noise of the well, where I feared he would take Ma if she went on complaining, but she stopped then, and he made no more noise either; there was a moment like that when you would have said that everything had come to a halt, and then it all started up again at one and the same time: he and she called out together for a long time, and the trees, the fireplace, the well, Ma and us, and the live-long night, the long night of the accursed, renewed its protest. Then I got up and joined Médée and Suzon, and we cried together in Médée’s bed until it was all at an end and we heard Ma running barefoot on the stone flags of the kitchen where she washed herself with as much water as possible, gasping as if she were in pain and had been beaten with every branch in the forest . . .”

But at Siom, in the new house, there was no longer any forest, and he, André Pythre, no longer had power over trees and the sounds of the night; instead there was Médée, now more than twenty, and there was

Pauline, who no longer cried out like a little girl, for it was more violent, with harder breathing, more savage and harsh, like an animal being forced or someone drowning. Then came that night when Médée got up and went out into the freezing corridor, opened the kitchen door, and went as far as the door of the bedroom, which had been left open to let the heat of the oven out, and he stayed on the threshold, his big eyes wide open and mouth tight shut, as he would remain later, incapable of speaking, of saying what he had seen that night in the bedroom from which he returned shivering, propelled by his half-dressed father who tore off his nightshirt in the middle of the empty room below the naked bulb and beat him for a long time “with the piece of harness he had not forgotten to bring with him, and he dribbled as I had done at school, and he did not see us, Suzon and me, as we watched from the half-open door of our redoubt, with Ma whom we had not heard coming and was suddenly just there, pressing against us and clasping us tightly: it was the first time she had hugged me, so that I was almost pleased that he had struck Médée and I smiled even though I wept, and the more I wept the more I wanted to smile . . .”

Médée stayed in the empty room all night. On leaving, his father had unscrewed the lightbulb, gripped it in his bare hand, apparently without getting burned, and put it in his pocket. It was cold. Médée was sniffing.

“Are you crying, Médée?” Suzon asked through the door, which big Pythre had locked as well as the corridor door.

He did not reply. He was not crying. He would not cry again. Suzon slipped her sheet under the door. He wrapped himself in it and remained sitting there all night, huddled against the door on the other side of which Jean was curled up too, and perhaps they shared each other’s body heat through the wood, which was quite possible, for there was something special between the two of them, something that even their sister could not understand, even if at that time she was still interested in anything apart from herself. They discovered how to suppress their tears and their protests, to observe their father with dry eyes, to withstand his gaze without seeming insolent, to dive into this dark, moist

fire that suddenly sent them scrambling into themselves as if kicked back there, and when their father stopped beating them, they feared his look more than his actual blows. But they were no more than a threat now, they had realized that; and Médée taught them how to lie, by omission at least, and that many things are possible when you are not loved.

“Ma had the same look as the schoolmaster when he fell into the quarry,” Médée would say many years later, almost nonchalantly, because he had to say something to them and that wasn’t a secret he could keep to himself; on the contrary, they had to share it with each other, broadcast it, and let it shine in the sun like a bull’s horn in first light.

## 22

But they were to learn nothing, for you could know nothing of such things, of what brings a man and a woman together and persuades them to annihilate themselves in concert, each intent on destroying the other or each seeking to do so after the other. It was a kind of law you had to come to terms with, one that required men never to cease burrowing between women's haunches and women never to stop wishing to receive all the seed that men could deliver, both crying out, moaning, and gasping in unison, and looking as if they enjoyed it and wished to be engulfed in each other, whereas their only sane course was to escape once the thing was over and the ordinance had been obeyed. And Médée sensed the truth of all this, even if he could not express it, for he was one of those people who opens doors gently and then perceives, to whom a glimpse has been given, and who knows that what he sees is something both intimate and banal, the old litany, the ancient request, the eternal supplication of one sex to the other and the hatred between the two; and finally he was aware that you can live without knowing anything whatsoever about all that. But they were aware that he did know, and in his

father's absence he became the reticent one in his stead. Now he was the one who used his knife point to scratch the sign of the cross into the round loaf of bread, pressed it against his chest, and cut amazingly thin slices from it. He rose at dawn, removed the bar to open the corridor door, laid and lit the fire, was the first to go to the toilet, and, once a week, shortly before nightfall, took his shovel and wheelbarrow to deal with the pyramid of turds and sand, which was like some monstrous wedding cake and which they transported to a fallow corner of the vegetable garden and buried there, after laying it carefully on its side like some dead animal. Suzon and Jean observed this procedure from afar, silently, gravely, and solicitously—especially Jean, for whom the series of morning defecations had become the major event of the day, deprived of which he became somber and sad, almost despairing, and would remain so long in the toilet that Médée had to coax him out, the only one who could do so, by slipping a tiny almond-shaped fragment of soap under the door; this Jean moistened with saliva before introducing it into his entrails, swallowing his tears, and awaiting the moment of deliverance, while his big brother held on patiently outside, as did his sister a little further away and Pauline at the corner of the house.

Pauline thought that this order of things was really no worse than the previous one, and then, after all, you do need a system. Perhaps she also believed that he would not return or that he was not close to any such event, judging by the rumors she heard at the grocer's, the washhouse, and the La Celle market where Médée took her once a month, traveling by the railcar they boarded at the train station and took for about five miles: he was in jail for arson, denouncing partisans, abusing his wife and children, seduction of a female minor, or whatever; but that did not prevent us talking and passing judgment, even though we ourselves hated being judged and gradually withdrew from the light of justice; or it was also said (and this rumor grew more insistent when he had been absent for two months) that he had been imprisoned for murdering that Michel whom he had persecuted so cruelly and who was found drowned in the La Voûte pool quite a while later. Then we remembered who that

boy might have been, or rather who he must surely have been, this supposed orphan: one of Pythre's children too, like the other three and, who knows, still others. Because even if he had a gimp leg, the other one, his third leg (and we thought it was very clever to laugh at this point) certainly wasn't out of action and was very effective, you could be sure.

Pythre, some people claimed emphatically, had told the Buiges police what he always maintained: that Michel Mazaud came from a Guéret orphanage, that he gave him a roof, then had to get rid of him because he was coming on to his daughter. But there was no trace of this orphan, at Guéret or anywhere else; and then there was the fact that Michel had talked in bars and in the kitchens of farmhouses where he worked; wine made him evil mouthed, and he said repeatedly that he knew more about the Pythres than we would ever discover; but he seemed afraid of saying any more than that; wine glued his tongue to his palate, for he was scared of André Pythre. But what more could he have known than what had been bandied around among us for years: that he was the son of big Pythre and Blanche Queyroix, from the time when she still went out, her scarf blowing in the wind, her natty little hat on her head, her back bare, seated behind the wheel of her automobile, which we had so often spied parked on the road to Veix? We said that the mother, not having found it possible to transform her son into an angel, had sent him to be raised on a farm not far from Guéret, from which he was expelled at the tender age of ten, because he was too violent and good for nothing, in spite of the increasingly large sums she offered to farmers, and since then there was no place he had been that did not throw him out, until his father took him into his own house, admittedly, and tried to tame this big lad with a wild mop of hair and unyielding eyes, who stammered when you spoke to him and was only too ready to strike out when drunk. He wandered around the district for a few weeks longer, without going too far from Siom and from the woman he thought was his mother but to whom he had never addressed a word and whom he had probably never looked in the face. He drank at Berthe-Dieu's until Blanche Queyroix,

who never behaved like other people, sold her house and her land and withdrew to the city, to Bordeaux, because at her age—although this was hard to believe—she had managed to find a husband there. Then we said that Michel had gone with her (others, the worst scandalmongers, those who in the past would have given anything to get into Mademoiselle Queyroix's pants, muttered that he was the groom in fact, and that when in need the devil must eat flies), and both of them had thought it best to take things only that far, she because she had made the orphan pay sorely enough for her pleasure and he because his right to a little love had prevailed.

We did not miss her; like her father she was just too crazy for words, drove like a man, wore short skirts, danced alone to negro music on the lawn at home as if she was a real epileptic, and was depressed the remainder of the time. As for Michel, we had never imagined that he would be discovered drowned in the pool at La Voûte at about this time, horribly swollen, almost unrecognizable, and stinking to high heaven; no one had any pity to spare for him. But then he was another one who had scared too many people; we understood why André Pythre had first punished him, then thrown him out; and you couldn't help wondering what revenge the orphan would have taken if it had come to an actual fight a few years later, especially when no one ever found out why they had faced up to one another down there at the La Voûte pool one autumn evening, although there was no harm in speculating how they might have come to blows: Michel and André Pythre, the father and the boy who must have been his son (for would there have been any contest otherwise?), even if he had no real surname, neither Pythre nor Queyroix nor, as he pretended, Terrade, but possibly, in a pinch, Mazaud, the name of the farm not far from Guéret, where his mother, so they say, was delivered; it must have been a case of the blind fighting the blind and each blow hurting the assailant more than the victim, each becoming a stab to the heart, and each taking him, panting or groaning, to the very edge of consciousness as if to the brink of a yawning precipice, where he would want to lose himself in order to be done with

it all; and, as night fell, both probably wished for a final blow to be struck, but without any notion of victory, for was not this an inglorious struggle at the edge of a marshy pool, in gorse and mist, with both combatants aware that that one or other must give in, give way, and pretend to lose, for, after all, they were men weren't they? And it couldn't be the father, of course; the way things happen and the weight of years—and also women, race, blood, and memory—required that Michel die for the sake of all that, just as in former times the Mongolian horsemen on the heath first rode the women and then—how else can we put it?—agreed to die under an onslaught of pitchforks and stakes, heads turned toward the sky or searching for the light of the evening star in the night that was now falling, smiling as they laid themselves down in the gorse, while the mists grew thicker and the frogs began to croak, rejoicing as they shed their blood, for they were tired, they had wanted to sleep for so long and as they lost their blood were also liberated from something that boiled within them and prompted them to kill, pillage and burn, rape women, and ride without respite. All they had to do was let go, for honor had been satisfied and race too had been saved, even if mixed for necessity's sake with other blood; all they need do now was think of the sweet softness of the last crack they'd filled and let their heads drop, and as they died look up at the evening star; and we said that Michel must have done just that, since he had surrendered the advantage to his opponent as if he longed for punishment and thus paid his reckoning, made his obeisance to the obscurity of the facts, and submitted to the only father he could find—and this one was surely as good as any other, better than any other, after all, since he resembled him slightly and he, Michel, only respected force, having known nothing else.

You might think that they said nothing to each other, not even a last word; that Michel staggered on the moss, fell, and hit his head on the trunk of a beech, on an especially prominent knotty branch where the police would detect blood and hair later. Then the other could only take him in his arms and as he fell hold this boy who, we were sure, was in fact his son, this big lad with the bloody cheek, who had indeed been his

enfant terrible on this earth and for so short a time and now, with André Pythre's help, had succeeded in closing the circle, which, we muttered, not everyone managed quite like that. He had probably died before reaching the ground, astonished yet peaceful, so we wanted to believe, and Pythre must surely have seen how at the moment when those eyes were fading they sought his own, and then were finally extinguished like the evening star; perhaps he had opened his mouth without uttering a word and watched those dark eyes growing even darker, drowning in his own, becoming fixed and vacant until nothing gleamed within them. Then he went to the edge, slowly entered the pool, and slid the body along until it reached the middle of the water.

That is what they said about big Pythre. They also said that with him everything was possible and that he could even be dead. But we were no longer satisfied with vague conjecture; we wanted the incontrovertible truth. Of course some people claimed that they had spotted André Pythre around Faux-la-Montagne, whereas others had seen him near Chamberet or Egletons. No one really believed them. He must just be dead, not in jail or on the run, but dead and buried; and people started talking about him again as if he was the devil incarnate, and they put the fear in children with stories of this black man who, it was said, strode along the streets of Siom at night with his company of savage Bavarians, who bore a big coffin on their shoulders with a stinking witch inside. And when he did return to Siom about a year after his departure, many people thought they saw a ghost smiling in the dusty light of July, near Chadiéras's house, when we had finished supper or had gone outside for a breath of fresh air. He was smiling to himself, as he had always done, did not look at us, possibly did not see us, and held—this man whom we had heard swear after the fire that he would never touch another animal in his life, not even a cat—the reins of two piebald horses harnessed to a light cart we did not recognize, which was loaded with long chests we could easily imagine stowed carefully beneath an American army tarpaulin. It had been a very hot day; up there, between the beeches and pines, at the bend in the road and behind the Palm Sunday

cross; the sun was already going down in a shower of golden dust, which dropped slowly to the ground around André Pythre. Berthe-Dieu's man bringing his cows back from the meadow along the road to Lestang was the first to see him, addressed him against his own inclination, and asked, quaking inside:

“Hey, Pythre, is that really you?”

And he even forgot about his cows, some of which took themselves off to the schoolyard, whereas others continued on their way to the summit of the hill, and he kept his distance from big Pythre, who did not answer and possibly did not hear him, in any case did not stop but went on slowly descending the main street until he reached the square, making his way round the war memorial, ascending again, and bringing his cart to a halt before the barn, where he immediately unharnessed the horses and started unloading without looking at his family, who had come out onto the semicircular lawn, as if he had not been away for longer than a day.

Pauline and Suzon were trembling. He scolded Médée and Jean, who did not budge when he muttered that, yes, it had really paid off, hadn't it, bringing up two blockheads who couldn't be bothered to lift even their little fingers, yet he pushed them away as soon as they made as if to help him and he shouted that he had done it all, he didn't need anyone now. Then he came back, sat down where no one else had dared to sit, and where they had laid his place at the table morning, noon, and night, fearing that he would suddenly return as he did that evening, even after a year's absence and when Pauline had been able to confirm his desertion of the marital home or could have said, like us, that he was dead. But even if she thought it, that is, hoped for it, she never showed this, being convinced, unlike us, that a man like that could never die—at least not like that, in secret, and far, far away—no, not before she was old; she had lost the best years of her life and even the years after when a woman might still set a spark alight in a man's wintry gaze.

She served him soup and wine. They, the others, had already eaten their supper, but they sat down again at the table, even though they had

scarcely anything on their plates and chewed for the sake of appearances. Médée reached out for the round loaf that Pauline had set on the table, after the first sitting, for the next day's meal; and before he could even touch the bread, the skin on his hand, between his thumb and index finger, was pinned to the table by his father's knife. Médée went terribly pale; he looked dazed, but at the same time his eyes showed something very like satisfaction, something that made you think that he had always expected what had happened, both fearing and hoping for it. He studied his hand, nailed like that to the board, and some drops of blood emerging around the blade, while Suzon got up and hugged her mother, and Jean, standing in the half-open doorway, cried out as he had done before at school when the teacher was so caustic to him; and he made such a noise that Médée pulled out the knife and threw it on the table in front of his father, went over to Jean, pushed him gently into the corridor and into the square where it was dark now and he could cry on Médée's shoulder, and the older boy stroked his head with his wounded hand without noticing the blood pouring down Jean's face, and Jean quivered with joy, "because," he said, "just as I did before, I could smell the mixed scent of the trees of life and sweat, and the odor was like the times when Suzon was bleeding each month, and she let me smell it the first time it happened and I thought she must be dying . . ."

Médée took him to the other end of the square, in front of the small pump on the top of which you turned a horizontal wheel to make the water spurt out; he cleaned the blood from his brother's face, then the wound, which he smiled at, surely guessing what would and indeed did happen the next day, before we had time to grasp what was up. We saw Médée leave his father's house in the early hours of the morning, with a bundle on his shoulder, a cigarette in his mouth, his eyes shining, and a calm expression; without a glance in our direction, he descended to the acacia terrace, crossed the straight bridge separating the lake from Berthe-Dieu's pond, and took the road to the train station, much like, so we thought, the father with whom he could no longer live and whom he, and he alone, wished dead and whom he resembled, which he hated so

much. Now he had to come to terms with it, although he must do that somewhere else, under skies where he could efface that likeness by letting the blood of others, without risking any comparison, and become something other than big Pythre's successor, probably thinking, once he was on the platform, that in this way he would escape poor Michel's fate—although, like all of us, in the meantime he knew that his father had nothing to do with Michel's death or at least that there was no proof that he had, less in any case than against that half-deaf tramp they had arrested three days later, near Bonnefond, a terrified man whose skin was a mass of scabs and bruises; but that did not prevent us from continuing to view Pythre as his son's murderer, since he might well be that one day or another, and what he had done to Médée was sufficient proof of that.

Médée knew this. He distanced himself from this man whom he, like the others, had been quite unable to address as "Father," whom in fact he had never called by any name, for he had always waited for Pythre to call him and had finally grown used to guessing when he was about to call him and had instructed his brother and sister in the same art, ultimately losing all fear of this man who, for this reason alone, we may be sure, had nailed him to the table and even more ineradicably to himself—and Médée was also, perhaps even more, distressed at having to abandon the others up there to this bleak and somber man, especially his young brother, who did not understand anything about life and did not know that the spirit of evil walks about as a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour, and that the man who had just resumed his place at the table and in their mother's bed was the very breath of evil—a terrible, wretched man, he might have said, compared with whom the worst boors of the Siom area were angels of virtue.

The desperation now of the youngest child has to be realized: of Jean, this slim, quite tall boy with slate-gray eyes, red cheeks, thin lips that often opened to reveal small yet regular teeth, and a high-pitched voice, who, though he was now eighteen, did not know where to put his hands. He was to be seen crying in the empty square in the early morning hours when the mists and the sounds of roosters were rising to the

sky, dogs on distant farms answered one another's barking, the sun bathed the hill at Philippeaux on the other side of the lake, opposite Veix in a pale light, and Jean seemed to be looking in the cold air for something that would help him to understand what he repeated in a loud voice: what Suzon at their brother's behest had just told him in her dark room; so that he stammered aloud into the air what she had said in a low voice, between her tears: that Médée had gone, for he couldn't live there any longer, and Pythre would eventually nail his two palms and feet, and even his flank, to the table—and Jean would repeat this in front of his father later, not only when Pythre asked him that morning where Médée had crawled to, but also years later, at a time when all that was no longer really so important:

“Médée's gone. Médée's left . . .”

And Pythre began to shout:

“And where has he gone, you idiot?”

Jean's only answer to this was to recoil, fearing the weak smile of the man advancing toward him in the rising sun more than his father's hand armed with a knife, which Pythre wiped on his thigh, folded, and placed in his pocket, muttering: “He can go to the devil!”

At this Jean seemed to become quite breathless: his voice no longer passed between his lips; he opened his mouth to utter words that he no longer knew how to pronounce, that eluded him all the more as he imagined Médée gradually distancing himself from them in the night, indeed as he went with the night, far away, toward those countries whose violet coloring or gray crosshatching had been pointed out for him by the teacher's ruler or that he had seen in geography books, and whose names he had never been able to remember, and then he repeated the name that encompassed the whole universe for him: Médée's name, yet nothing emerged from his mouth, although his father understood exactly what he intended and shouted:

“You poor fool!”

And from now on he would forbid the name to be uttered in front of him, even when he wasn't there, since he could scent Médée's ill nature

and reek in the air, he said—he couldn't be fooled—and he disowned him, he was no longer his son.

“That swine isn't even worth getting worked up about . . . Nor is this one,” he added, lowering his voice, pointing out his youngest child standing in the square between Berthe-Dieu's stable and the oak, from which he stepped back as soon as he sensed his father was watching him, as if he feared that, as on that morning in the past, he would nail him to the tree too, standing in the square from dawn every morning, facing in the direction from which you could hear, if a north wind was blowing, the railcar to Limoges, which crossed at Buiges, with the other one ascending to Ussel, with a wail that had always made him want to cry since he recalled Médée telling him once as a child that it was on this railcar that the two of them would escape one day and that he certainly would never let him down and that the train's siren was a special signal for them, for the Pythre children, indeed it was a sign “. . . that seemed to say the train was suffering,” he would murmur, “as when Ma was being hurt at night, in the bedroom, and much worse, as when I was crying and he came over and threatened me, telling me he would do to me what he did to Ma at night, before we heard her run across the flagstones to wash in the basin, her face quite red, her hair undone, her eyes gleaming wickedly—yes, her eyes looked wicked—and her shirt open at the front with her tits heaving and that laugh that she always emitted when she caught sight of me . . .”

There was something more important than pain and fear to consider now: the flight the next morning of their brother with the pierced hand, the son who had seen something, the nameless traitor whom no one, not even we, would mention again, although every morning and for the space of almost a year we could see that poor sap waiting for him up there by the oak tree. But the one most deserving of sympathy was certainly Suzon, if you could feel sympathy for a Pythre and if Suzon could have accepted our pity. She was twenty when Médée left and she was undoubtedly the most beautiful girl in the district, although she had known that was no advantage since the Lontrade brothers from Les Places grabbed her not long after the war, when she was walking along the road to Les Freux (when we thought Pythre had been rendered ineffectual and the three lads, the eldest of whom wasn't even eighteen, boasted far and wide that they weren't afraid of anything, not even of big Pythre, who was no longer there to slice off their balls, or of the two brothers, and even less of the mother, whose misfortune had the same effect on her as an unheated house on those forced to live in one). They

dragged Suzon into a little beech wood on the edge of the heath that extended over to Lestang and showed her what it means to be beautiful, proud, and silent, undressing her after sticking her wrists in leather bracelets used to protect the horns of yoked cows, the ends of which they attached to a high branch. Then they watched her spinning round in the pale light below the beeches, her face enveloped in her long brown hair, which they had untied to remove the last trace of propriety, for she was completely naked; it tumbled over her breasts, quivering buttocks, and thighs tightly squeezing the bird's nest below her belly. That made them roar with laughter, the three Lontrade brothers and Philippeau's son, who had joined the others later and laughed even louder than they did. They cackled like the blockheads they most certainly were at having a girl at their mercy at last and not just any one, but the most beautiful and now most naked of them all, Suzanne Pythre, who had never honored them with a single glance, even when they spoke to her at school, yet now they could gaze at her displayed before them, so very beautiful and yet already lost, more obviously exposed to fate than a heifer awaiting the butcher's knife: soft, trembling, and white, and so beautiful with that pout that might even be a lingering touch of her former arrogant pride, which made them reluctant actually to touch her. Anyway, this was the first woman's body they had seen, with its delicate folds, its curves, its shimmering mother-of-pearl surfaces, its breasts that slowly rose and fell, as did their protuberances that were so delicate, yes, but also as sharply pointed as carpet nails, and especially what she carried between her thighs, under that fleece that gleamed in the sunlight, that nest that became the silken focus of their dreams, of the longings of these wretched little men who were scarcely established on this earth and yet were already making their oblique obeisances to her, searching in the instruments now stiffening between their legs for something that would help them to forget what they were and where they would end up, obeying this law as their fathers and grandfathers had done before them and therefore prepared to do anything that April afternoon in the beech forest, these four heroes whose blood had been aroused long ago by the

girl they had heard singing in her garden or at the washhouse, and who stood round her, swallowing their laughter, motionless now except for the second Lontrade brother, who had inserted his hand in his pocket and had begun to tremble and gasp, until his forehead was so covered in sweat that he might have been running a fever—but each of them was alone there with his own particular wound, with the pain that burned inside him: the fire of his loins and the smart in his soul and, possibly, the fear of dying without having enjoyed at the extreme point of his being this entirely white, smooth, firm, and tender flesh, which was, we believed, something in the same order of existence as white bread, electricity, and running water: a gift from heaven; for a divine intervention was surely necessary to turn a child of Pythre's into the most beautiful woman in the district and probably in the entire *département*. The others trembled as well, probably thinking that too, and said that they had seen enough and that she wouldn't tell anyone; it was something between her and them; and they didn't have to threaten her when they untied her, or rather when the eldest Lontrade brother cut the leather thongs and she fell into the grass.

But what could we others do about this girl who walked by without noticing us and this big, dull-witted guy who would have stayed all day long in the square, facing the train station, just waiting? To be sure, most of us were no longer so concerned; we had seen more than enough, and we were no longer the same as before. Father Trouche was dead, and the mayor, a true Red, had assigned the presbytery to Heurtebise, who installed his forge in the former bakehouse. Philippeau couldn't work now and rented his farm to some Normans, crazies who had turned up among us one day with their blond manes, washed-out eyes, and piebald cattle. We were dying one after the other, almost resigned to our fate, with the slight satisfaction (some said the illusion) that we were not the very last to do so. We had abandoned the acacia terrace for Léa Rivière's terrace, which was higher up, behind the Pythres' house. From there you could look out over the other valley, all of which now belonged to Berthe-Dieu, who was said to be rich as Croesus. From this terrace,

between the church and the neighboring house, you could see Chabrat's and Queyroix's roofs, Heurtebise's vegetable garden, the black hill of Veix, and up there to our left the beeches on the highway, Nuzejoux's wood, the graveyard, and Roche's pines. We spoke softly and in patois, since we were afraid we might be heard by the Pythres, whose house had its back to us, showing only a single narrow window that we studied from the corner vantage point. Other people, women mainly, would sit a little farther off, on the low wall in front of the school, while the leading gossipmongers, lacking any conception of how to do nothing at all, descended to chatter in the washhouse where, they said, they could give everything a good rinse, including souls and sins.

But we were a long way from a state of peace and harmony. We realized that the morning Pythre took down the shutters of the empty room that we had always imagined was a living room and revealed its true function as the display window of a shop, behind which we soon made out a broad counter whose shiny wood gleamed in the half-darkness, and shelves packed with rolls of material and various boxes. Big Pythre had become a cloth merchant. Nevertheless, he never put up a shop sign (another way of spitting in our faces) but merely displayed a few fabric samples in the window, behind tulle curtains that he hardly ever drew back, even when there was no risk of the sun fading the materials. He had mounted this minimal display for appearance's sake or, as some people put it, to please our womenfolk, although no one had visited his shop as yet, apart from a few traveling salesmen who parked their automobiles in front of the tiny lawn. These were as efficient as Pythre's vehicle, which he had bought a short while before from the Treignac auto dealer, a black Hotchkiss that impressed people on farms and in the hamlets and villages of the area and beyond, where they knew him only as a cloth merchant, on the same basis as those grocers, bakers, and butchers who were beginning to forage all over the plateau, and all had shops at La Celle, Meymac, or Buiges, where they left their wives in charge—like Pythre, who had installed Pauline as guardian of his temple, Pauline so tight-lipped, unbending, and distant, her eyes often

moist, as we were assured by Léa Rivière, who eventually, along with some others, had indeed ventured into the shop, not so much to buy a couple of yards of cloth or a few inches of ribbon, as, at long last, to inspect her more closely, this Pauline who, they said, was afraid of big Pythre: of his silence, of his decisions, but, even more, of the joy that might suddenly spread across his face, almost persuading her that he had gone stark, staring mad.

But in the end we were to see something even more extraordinary: Pauline and her daughter (both beautiful and weary, and even more beautiful, weary, and proud since Médée had left and Pythre had been upsetting everyone roundabout) leaving the house together one evening in October of the following year, carrying suitcases and bundles of clothes. Big Pythre had left at dawn. Resigned and apprehensive, they waited there on the edge of the nail-paring of lawn as if they were standing on the dark red sand at the train station. But no train stopped to collect them, only the Meymac pork butcher on his Thursday round (for in Siom there were two bars, two shops, a hotel, a postal window, a school, and a smithy, but neither baker nor butcher; and so some people said that this meant that it was the beginning of the end for us, and we had actually been cursed, especially since Father Trouche had died and we had resigned ourselves to the silence of God). The pork butcher put them down at the fork in the road to Féniers, beyond Peyrelevade. He too had noticed the luggage and agitation of the two women. He was also afraid of big Pythre because as a child he had had a run-in with him, when he was collecting mushrooms in the wood at Veix and Pythre had chased him away like a gypsy; perhaps, like us, he pictured the cloth merchant returning at night to his rooms where the fire had gone out, just as distressed, lonely, and soon drunk with rage as the two women were determined as they hastened along the road to Féniers, looking slightly ridiculous, as very beautiful women occasionally do when they cannot run and, embarrassed and breathless, risk twisting their ankles. We watched them hurrying along and kept our eyes on them for some time, these two refugees who progressed along the deserted road, with clouds of insects buzzing

overhead, without really taking in anything they saw, perhaps because they had always been preoccupied with peering into themselves—no man having been able to deflect their gaze to anything else or at least to persuade them to swerve sharply away from this bottomless pit of melancholy that gaped within them and over the rim of which they bent far too often, without realizing that if you jettison your dreams, that very action is a form of dreaming, indeed the worst and most terrifying kind there is.

They hurried toward old Bordes's house, on the way into the little town, and Bordes welcomed them silently, without even showing surprise or raising his eyebrows, unless he possibly wondered why they had not come earlier, for he had been waiting a long time (since, we must suppose, that wedding party in the cold reception room of the Hôtel des Voyageurs, twenty years before) for his daughter to come home and was secretly very pleased to see her, since as a cuckold and now a pensioner, which he had become in the meantime, he really didn't know what to do with himself—he was not one of those stonemasons who, as soon as they grow old, are driven by boredom to produce sculptures for themselves, ludicrous palaces or little figures to put in their own garden and in the gardens of others; no, he was a straightforward worker with enormous paws that he had devoted so exclusively to his tools and to granite that they no longer looked like hands, and now he was "Pa Bordes" and could no longer bear the fact that his fingers and eyes worked only empty space, especially since he now trembled a little, and no one would trust him even to engrave family names and funereal clichés on grave-stones; consequently, he sculpted only wind and the pathetic contents of his memory (not to mention those of his dreams), concealing the embittered lines of his mouth beneath curved white mustaches that were yellowing only a little now below his nostrils because of the tobacco that had become his sole luxury; yet his whole body still resounded with the memory of the countless blows he had struck at stone, a memory that was the irregular, muffled, and yet irrepressible echo of sixty years of labor: a second breathing system, another heart beating, his real heart indeed, the one he had not deceived, the one that had always given him

what he expected from it; especially when he realized that you are always deserted by women, wives and daughters, and mothers too—his own mother, widowed when still very young, had placed him with a stonemason at Gentioux so that she could get married again to some guy from Felletin; he was only twelve at the time (and his brother eleven, which earned him a place on a farm near Villemonteix), so that he, Odilon, had to learn to shape stone and his own heart simultaneously. And, now, his face as gray and rough as granite, he sat the livelong day on his chair with a woven-straw seat, on the threshold of the little house he had built by himself in his free time some years before, and neither saw nor talked to anyone.

He asked them no questions and gave each of them a room, for at one time he had wanted a house with four rooms, out of pride and out of joy at good work well done—or just to tempt fate. He grew used to these two women whom he scarcely knew and whose tongues loosened as time passed. They filled the house with scents, murmurs, whispers, and gentle laughter, and this made him so happy that he wept to think of it; and in tones she tried to make soft but betrayed a hint of annoyance, Pauline said:

“Well, now, Pa, how very odd to find you crying!”

He did not answer her, dried his tears, and began to smile, and, as his cigarette had gone out, he rolled another one, surely pleased to think that he would not have to die alone, a subject that obsessed him at night-time especially, when he couldn't sleep and he listened to their breathing on the other side of the wall, which he had not constructed strongly enough, as he possibly thought when he heard one of them snoring, Pauline probably, for she had always been a little short of breath and caught cold easily. And he would have given up then, would have stopped resisting that other sleep, which he sometimes sensed coming over him, but he did not want to go just now; he was not afraid, for he knew that life was nothing more than the glimmer of a rock shining in the evening air, and then he thought of sand, imagined himself becoming sand, running first slowly, then faster, and then done with, as if from

the hand of a little girl, and then it would be over. But he had to persist a while, to protect the two women, rather proud of having two of them (and what women they were!), especially when he remembered how he had worn such unusually large cuckold's horns all his life. He knew that Pythre would not come to Féniers as long as he was there, the old man with fingers thicker than black sausage, who imagined that winter, sad at heart to think of it, he could hear the husband's cries over there in his cold house on the other side of the high plateau: and they were the cries of a wounded animal, like those that he, Odilon Bordes, had uttered one April evening at the beginning of the century when his wife ran away with the tinsmith.

## 24

We too heard his cries, as soon as he returned. We would not have missed that for anything in the world. It seemed that we had our revenge at last, even though we were not sure what exactly prompted us to seek it. We had forgotten Jean. Since Médée's departure, when he could not find his brother in the square, he would spend the rest of the day striding through meadows and woods, or sleeping in the tree-of-life thicket, behind the washhouse. This evening he came back after his father; he found him sitting in the kitchen, under the naked bulb, in front of the piece of paper that Pauline had left folded for him on his plate and that he had scarcely read, as if he knew, as if he had always known, that this would happen one day and that he was even astonished that it hadn't happened earlier. "And then he got up," muttered Jean, "I could see clearly that he was going to hit me. He had to do something but not thrash me like that, shouting and crying, and very slowly; you would have thought that he couldn't see what he was doing; it was very painful. My hands smelled of tree of life, they smelled like Médée, and I cried; then he hit me even harder and I cried all the more; he was as red as a

lobster and shouted that they were all whores, yes, whores, and that I was a whore too, and when my nose began to bleed and my head began to spin, he opened the corridor door and threw me out, and my forehead struck the clothes stand at the entrance door; it bled all the more, and I cried out. Then he opened the front door and chucked me out. The others were all there . . .”

Yes, we were there, as night was falling, near the oak, at the lower end of the square, in front of Berthe-Dieu’s or at our windows. We saw him there, Jean, gangling and haggard, rushing out to the fringe of lawn, with a lost expression and a bloody face—yes, bloody tears—then collapsing between the roots of the oak, cowering there with his hands above his head, motionless, while the father remained standing on the threshold, shaking with anger and resentment, his hands in his pockets, breathing deeply to calm himself down but continuing to defy us as he had always done, turning toward us that face that had been smooth since he had shaved off his mustache to play at being a tradesman—thus adding a false note to his appearance (or an even more false note, more disturbing than usual), especially with his still thick and oddly brown hair.

He stayed there looking at us for a long time. We knew that he would say nothing to us, would make no gesture, and we would not raise a finger over this; it was too late for that kind of thing, and it had all happened already, it seemed. He went over to Jean, bent down, tapped him on the shoulder, and murmured:

“Get up, I’m ashamed of you . . .”

Since Jean did not move, he kicked him in the side so that he got up by himself and walked to the house. We had not moved.

We often heard him that autumn, and during the winter too, shouting about who knew what and whom: fate, life, Siom, women, us, and this son who was the only one left to him, nineteen years of age, taller than he was and as near as might be to weak-mindedness and whom he didn’t know what to with—who couldn’t do anything and whom he therefore trusted to look after the shop, not so much to see to the goods or to serve customers (since the two women had left, no customers came there now)

as to keep the great booby in the house, to protect him from himself and from others, from the urchins who had taken to parading behind him in the three streets of Siom and on the outskirts, not out of wickedness but because they knew that he was a good Pythre, yes, that this was possible, and that anyway he half-belonged to us, although he was not aware of this and to tell him that would have been the worst possible thing at that particular moment. Yes, it would certainly have alerted him to the defeat of the blood, to the bad luck of a man with no mother, to time that had not passed, and to meaningless similarities. And, of course, as we said, he was frail and alone, something like those isolated beeches that grew at the edge of the heath, were too sensitive, grew tall too rapidly, and were bent by the wind; yes, he possessed some of the characteristics of a beech tree, with his small, light gray eyes, his quivering lips (not like his mother, little Jeanne, whom we had never seen again since Jean's birth, but, like Aimée Grandchamp, those of us who remembered her muttered and added, even though frankly it was quite impossible, that he was the simpleton's son), and his smooth hair, which he combed back and which nevertheless kept falling over his face because it was so long, made him look like an artist, or at least what we took to be an artist or poet, that is, a dreamer or melancholic, one of those guys who cut a pale and miserable figure in the world, an innocent or simpleton if you wish, in any case someone useless, who, a few years later, when wrinkles and a somewhat more bitter smile would crease his face and he would spend most of his time stretched out in the heather or at the waterside—where he would dream more than busy himself fishing—he would look like a writer, more precisely like Jean-Jacques Rousseau on a botanizing excursion, as in the picture of the sage hanging in the schoolmaster's corridor, above the classrooms, a big glazed portrait. But most of the time we saw him only as big Pythre's son, and that was a straightforward matter, father and son, beginning and end, the devil and the innocent, one who no longer expected anything and the other who did not know that he could expect nothing more, spent his days, until his father came home in the shop, sitting behind the counter, in the shade that grew bigger and

bigger as the sun moved westward, until finally it went down there, behind the Palm Sunday cross. And the village boys almost always watched Jean fixedly, complaining that they could no longer spend time with him, and they did not understand what he was doing there, how he could stay there doing nothing in that cold twilight, not moving, with eyes open like a dead person, so they thought. Finally, the most courageous of them opened the door and entered to play at buying and was politely served by a young Pythre who was much more adroit than people had expected, deftly casting the roll of cloth onto the counter with a rule cut into it at the end, and pretending to cut it with an exactitude that led them to admire his hands that were as fine and long as his mother's, and then we recalled her with her heavy breasts and slim waist, her most attractive features.

The rest of the time he just waited or dreamed, which amounted to much the same thing, until the kitchen clock that had arrived as part of Pauline's dowry struck seven, for she had abandoned it there as if henceforth—for her and Suzon—time would no longer pass in the same way; and now it was time for Jean to reheat the constantly renewed soup on the little wood stove. He sat there on his chair near the sideboard, waiting for this man who never spoke, who would never again threaten him with the well or the harness or anything else, and with whom he would soon be eating, although they would not look at each other, in the heart of this narrow kitchen with its dirty cream-colored walls, under the unshaded lightbulb, the father sitting opposite the clock, which he probably noticed no more than the wall to which he had fixed an advertisement for Singer sewing machines that showed a woman dressed in white, in the style worn as the nineteenth century turned into the twentieth, in a high lace collar and her hair piled high, sitting at her machine, “and smiling,” murmured Jean, “as Ma never did, even when she watched Médée and Suzon embracing after they had earned good marks in school. But I never looked at the picture at the same time as he did, it belonged to him, although the same one, but bigger and in tinplate, was attached to the outside of Chadiéras's house on the way into Siom; no, I

never looked at it—it made me want to cry, she was too beautiful—and Pa also looked as if he were about to weep, but he never did so; no, he had no right to cry, and he closed his knife when he saw me looking at him and looked right back at me, then got up, switched the light off, and went to bed, leaving the door of his bedroom ajar in order to benefit from the heat from the stove, while I had to put the bowls in the sink, stow the butter, bread, and sardines in the sideboard, clean the cloth, and wash everything with cold water in the dark without making any noise, particularly when I could not hear him snoring any longer and there was a full moon . . .”

But on some evenings they stayed sitting there for hours, in the odd peace that follows wars and disasters, in a kind of wholly indescribable stupor or lethargy. Big Pythre was no longer shouting like a dog baying the moon, and the son had stopped crying; both of them were resigned to the fact that the others would not be coming back, that people were not exactly like seasons or harvests, and that you had to wait for time to pass, for it to run down and run out, without the least hope that time, something they really didn't know how to cope with, would liberate them from themselves, at the end of the day, between the ocher-colored walls under the naked lightbulb, which enhanced the triumph of night more effectively than it suppressed it and plunged both men with their closed, resigned faces into a shadowland that arose as much from themselves as from external darkness, because things could not have developed any differently and it was pointless to consider them further, to suffer from them, to despair of them, since it was possible that life was no more than that, that it would persist and perpetuate itself in this big, awkward son, in this deaf and complaisant body, sitting motionless on his father's left, opposite Médée's empty chair, his gaze lost in the reflections of the lightbulb on the windowpanes—which is as much as to say, in the night, since there were no shutters and they had not bothered to replace the curtains that Pythre had torn down one evening when he thought that the house looked like a pigsty: “Not even,” he muttered, “a real household,” and this was when they had still been

united round the table, and it had smelled of cabbage, radish, carrots, leeks, potatoes, and everything that André Pythre still obtained from his vegetable garden, where the scent was very different from that of sardines in olive oil and sweat; no, not a real household, he had added, because that old villain Besse, the former owner, had not had a fireplace and chimney or running water, or a cellar, or a toilet installed, and two days a week they had to go down to fetch water from the pump like the lowest of the low, before the whole world, and as often to the barn to chop wood into logs to feed this damned oven that provided too much heat or not enough, and even now in the morning, before anything else, they had to shut themselves in the gray hut at the rear of the meadow, over the pit that was continually filled and emptied by constructing and burying pyramids consisting of heaps of turds, paper, and sand, monuments hardly more worthy of derision than the other memorial in the middle of the square, on which soon there would be no more names to inscribe, not even after the Indochinese and North African wars, because it would be Siom's turn to die, to see the entirely unresisting termination of its centuries, a long way from what was known elsewhere as history, and among us, as everywhere on the high plateau and also in more distant areas, was no more than the completion of the work of day and night. And we were not dupes, for we had realized very quickly that yesterday's victories, World War I and that other unspeakable conflict, were no more than defeats in disguise, and that there would not be a new Zion (as Father Trouche had foretold), in spite of the dam, the lake, and the few successors engendered by the war-wounded of 1914–18 in an attempt to forget the men they had seen smiling in darkness. The only ones remaining were Jean, the Roche sons, Chabrat's boy, Chave's, Nuzejoux's, and a few others in hamlets and on farms, and there weren't enough girls to repopulate everywhere, even if they wanted to, unless they turned their backs on Zion, like Rivière's children, Berthe-Dieu's niece, Chadiéras's grandsons, and came back only on All Souls' Day or during the vacation, in order to be closer not to us but to the dead, the graves, the war memorial, or the little cross of Lorraine, the sign of non-

collaborationist France, that they eventually erected in the Rivière brothers' quarry at the spot where the schoolmaster and his two companions had been shot.

Perhaps that was what André Pythre said to himself when he crouched over the hole, but something that Jean, who was next after his father, did not consider while he spent a good half-hour in the hut, summer or winter, his pants over his ankles, his chin on his knees, his eyes raised to the gap between the little roof and the serrated upper edge of the door, through which he could see the ridges of Berthe-Dieu's and Chabrat's roofs and, somewhat further off, the weathercock on Queyroix's house, as well as the pines that Blanche Queyroix had planted twenty years before; although his gaze might also have alighted on the tall crucifix still standing at the other end of the meadow, projecting over the square, of which Jean could make out only the wood of the cross and just a tiny piece of Jesus' rusted body, "which," he murmured, "seemed to be breathing in the rising sun."

He saw stars when he stood up, and he returned to the kitchen with hands full of logs, made up the fire, and, with half-open mouth and hanging arms, waited for the coffee for his father to trickle through the filter in the tall, earth-colored coffee jug steaming at the center of the table, so that he would be able to offer André Pythre the coffee as soon as he appeared farting and belching in the doorway and looking suspiciously about him, especially at the window, which was beginning to mist up. Then Jean poured the coffee into the big bowls with the red and gold decorated rims, into which each of them would break his dry bread in small pieces, right into the too lightly colored brew to which excessively sweetened canned milk had been added, even though it must have been almost stale, yet neither of them had thought of discarding it, since they had been taught not to waste things, to finish everything, in the same way that you must know how to finish your life and wait patiently for that completion: that is, you must pretend and believe that only when you have lived beyond your time will you finally be vouchsafed an opportunity to rejoice at death.

We were also the boys who watched Jean Pythre while he was alive. We had watched him from the oak: this tall young man who was so embarrassed, already withdrawn into himself, who would go to stand right by the shop window, at the front where two or three rolls of faded cloth were lying. (They had been left there for appearance's sake: "since otherwise," his father had said, "no one would believe, no one would believe anything." Jean said that they smelled like Sunday, and like the loft too.) He opened the door and went out, blinking, sniffing the air like a cat, then emitted that long or short "Oh!" with which he now began or replaced all his sentences. He smiled at us, let us come over, and, if the weather was bad, enter his shop; or we sat on the lawn around the little stump that did service as a bench, between the doorstep and the kitchen window. We listened to him talking, at length and in so confused a way that no one could understand him. But that didn't matter at all. This tall young man's voice was very soft, a little too high pitched and too nasal at times, but with something compelling and irresistible about it, even if what he said (his head bent downward, elbows on his knees, forehead

creased, eyes staring, hair falling over his cheeks) we already knew and had heard a thousand times over from much older lips, but not from those of a Pythre; and we wondered at this, however banal it actually was: Veix, the well, the pines, the innocents' grave, the fire, the execution of the schoolmaster, Michel, Mademoiselle Queyroix, and the others—each time hoping to learn more, but receiving nothing or next to nothing precise in return for our expectations, for he never answered our questions, possibly did not hear them, and we never dared (after all, he was a Pythre) to pose one question that hung tantalizingly on the tips of our tongues: “And what about Jeanne?” it might have been, for instance, which would probably have silenced him totally, and he would have looked up at the presbytery garden with his innocent eyes, or higher still at the clouds coursing over the sky, and would have offered us that “Oh!” and then have sunk into himself again, sending us back among the oak-tree roots, from where we would have seen him starting to tremble. But he would soon shake his head, as if his neck were being tickled, and we would go over to him again. It was Françoise Chadiéras, the granddaughter of the man who had welcomed big Pythre among us, who actually asked him, in a somewhat louder voice:

“And what about Médée?”

He raised his head, smiled, mused a little, then spoke about his brother, assured us that he would be back soon, that he wasn't far away, that he knew very well where Médée was but didn't want to tell us.

“And what do you do all the time there, among the trees of life?”

He did not hear this. He went on muttering that Médée would be coming back, that he wasn't dead, they hadn't seen how he had been consigned to the earth up there, quite a way up there, behind the hill: Médée who smelled of trees of life and talked to him among them when there was a strong wind—all you had to do was lie down, shut your eyes, and smile to hear him—Médée who was tall and supple and strong like the trees of life, and for whom he was waiting in the shop; he had to look after the shop properly, and at nighttime he also had to wait for his father, his poor father, who was always so tired now that he couldn't

beat him or stick his head in the well; anyway there wasn't a well any longer, it had been burned with the trees on the hill, and now his father was pleased with him, with his son Jean, and anyway he wasn't his father; he was shade and light, fury and peace, the soft-footed night; his father was Médée—yes, Médée—because he knew everything, had never hit him, loved him, as neither Pauline nor Suzon had loved him, not even big Pythre, whom people thought they could hear snorting in the evening air like the bull in Berthe-Dieu's stable; whom, yes, he, Jean, loved—Jean, not wee Jean, little Jean, or Jean-Jean, because he had never been small but had always been a Pythre, Jean Pythre like Poot, Jean the stupid Pisser, the Puttyhead, the Piker, the pie-faced Pootbutt and pixilated Pissant, the pythic Potatohead putrified on his Pithfoot, pickled and thoroughly pythrified, pyth-putzing around, the perfect Putz, as we had chanted at one time in the schoolyard in our choir silenced by a single look from Médée—the truly Pythiable for us, who scarcely spared any pity for anyone or anything, starting with our very selves; but in the end we relaxed the rules a little for him, because you can't be bad forever, or certain intervals have to be observed even in the process of wickedness, and we needed a breather; we were young then, weren't afraid, still refused to accept that we would have to die one day, although we no longer believed in love, if we had ever believed in it or thought of it as anything more than a great fit of throaty rattles expelled by men and women as they returned to their essential loneliness.

We were alone as well, you see. Chadiéras died, then Urbain Heurtebise, Amélie Nuzejoux, and Pierre Philippeau. The tall crucifix had fallen over in front of the Pythres' house, and no one now cared about the honor and glory of the Man who was now lying face to ground, in the nettles: the Savior, the Son of God who had walked upon the waves, multiplied the loaves, raised Lazarus from the dead, and who could really rise up by his own power even now—that was the answer proposed to those who said with a smile they would like to “help God up,” but none of them was actually thinking of God but of big Pythre, since what they had just heard could apply both to the Son of God and

to the cloth merchant, who was also the owner of the meadow where the figure of the crucified Lord stuck there in the past by that old bigot Amélie Besse was lying.

God had abandoned us. It hadn't done Heurtebise any good to move into the presbytery and set up his forge there, to transform the priest's house into a fire chamber lying on the same axis as the Pythres' house, because the presbytery and the shop faced each other, behind the church and the square; no, that had not helped any of us to find an eternity that really suited us here on earth. We were the last survivors, and we could not bear the thought that it might not be the same for Pythre, although we hoped that his flesh would be extinguished in his children, at least in the son remaining to us, although most of us wished him no evil and even loved him so to speak and almost pitied him because the blood of the Pythres in him represented a danger to our own blood. But no one now said they would make sure that the Pythres left Siom in the hearse, the last to travel in it having been Father Trouche ten years before, since there were no more horses in Siom to draw the conveyance. Horses would die out at the same time as we would, just as the cross had tumbled over and the bellows in the smithy had ceased to function. Soon no one would know what had happened, who they had been, what they had hoped for, and what they had suppressed; and those who listened to Jean Pythre would only half-believe his tales and later believe them not at all and then would think that in the end he had gone quite crazy, so that in the evenings, in the quivering air, only a few near-deaf or purblind old women would be left who could still read in the lines of their memories what they knew of the Pythre family, on the terrace of Léa Rivière, on the edge of the void and of darkness and of that true nighttime that is the night of the blood silently running out from one century to the other and ending in ancient mouths, scarcely thicker than saliva and the vibration of words.

## 26

He was twenty years of age. His father drove him to the prefecture and left him there in front of a gigantic entrance in the dark, early hours with his call-up papers in his hand and, at his side, a haversack containing a pint of wine and water and a chicken, which his father had cooked and wrapped in a kitchen cloth. It was raining. Perhaps he listened to the engine of the Hotchkiss starting up and then dying away and soon mingling with other sounds, duller and more distant, in the depths of the valley. Other guys emerged from the rain, as young as he and alone, or who, if they recognized one another, formed little groups with the same swaggering or irritated expressions, and waited for the great gray portal to open; and, toward eight o'clock, a narrow door opened on the left-hand side and remained ajar; through it there issued a man in an olive green uniform, with tiny horn-rimmed spectacles and a forage cap perched at an unusual angle on his head; he started bawling that they could come in now, they'd been hanging around long enough, now they had to realize that they weren't civilians any longer or proper soldiers yet, but nothing at all, poor devils, a whole bunch of thick peasants, and

they would soon find out exactly how sound their carcasses were, looking like terrified cattle in a marketplace as they did.

Jean followed the others, smiled along with them, lowered his head like them, and, a few paces from him, recognized the Farges son who had already teamed up with two guys from Sainte-Marie-Lapanouze and was pretending not to recognize him. “Yes,” he would say later, “they pretended not even to know who this poor idiot was, this stupid ass, this simple Simon, this good-for-nothing who would just make them feel ashamed and wasn’t anyone or anything here, neither Pythre nor Jean, but just a number, nothing—in fact the sergeant had hit it on the nail—and who looked as if he didn’t understand a word when he had to strip quite naked in the big building stinking of things in pharmacies and dirty feet; yes, it’s true, he kept asking why they had to take every last piece of clothing off, and the others roared with laughter, their teeth chattering, and they did not even bother to use their hands to hide what was hanging between their legs, the thing that Jean had seen only on his own body.” Some of them actually took pride in displaying themselves and began to rub these fleshy roots till they were stiff but were called to order by a noncommissioned officer who sent them to the shower, “under the rain,” Jean would say, before he allowed himself to be weighed, measured, interrogated, and manipulated by the hands of men in white smocks who were scarcely more amiable than the schoolmaster in a black smock had been formerly, or Pauline, or his father with rough, dry hands, when he had stayed gaping at the letters in the schoolbook, as he had that day, just as today he gasped for air at the sight of the black letters on a white ground and accordingly was sent to join a group of guys from the high plateau whom they’d assembled in another room, all white skinned and thin, too short or very tall, and with the same crazy, idiotic, frightened, apprehensive, and cowed expressions, after they had admitted that they were almost unable to read and could scarcely speak correct French, indeed that they were even worse at writing and counting, and most of them hardly understood the questions being fired at them—Jean behaved like the others, feeling that although he knew how

to read and write, he should do what the others did and must take care not to act the artful dodger, so that when he came before the man who was sitting behind a desk and questioned him, he repeated “can’t read, can’t write,” in a subdued voice and with eyes lowered, but smiling, so that the man thought he was poking fun at him and called out: “Name, Christian names, date and place of birth”; to which Jean replied in a weaker voice, between his teeth: “Jean Pythre,” which was interpreted as a threatening and very unpleasant “You Poot,” which amidst general noisy singing and jeering got him sent to prison immediately, dressed in spite of the cold only in his flannel shirt and pants and, most serious of all, divested of his haversack after trying to keep it and crying for it for two days and two nights, only to have it returned to him in the morning of the third day, together with the chicken, which was beginning to stink, and his exemption certificate pressed into his hand, accompanied by the insults of the others, corporals and conscripts, who proclaimed in excessively loud tones their satisfaction at being free from the presence of this peasant fool, this cretinous hillbilly who was stupider than rocks and stank like the devil and with such a strong odor that he must be carrying his father’s balls around in that haversack.

But he did not listen, heard nothing, wept and smiled, made his way through the great door, passed the sentry box and turned right because for a joke the orderly had whispered “Turn right!” to him. He walked through the deserted Sunday-morning streets, badly dressed, and with his father’s big cape over his shoulders; it was much too big for him and made him look like a tramp; he was wearing shoes, which he wasn’t used to and which hurt his feet, and pants, but without a belt, for they hadn’t returned it to him, and he replaced it almost immediately with one of the pieces of string he always carried in his pockets. A fine October rain was falling and continued throughout the day. He hastened ahead, then began to run along the brown stone quays, probably thinking that he had to go upstream to return to the high plateau, the source of all rivers. He must have looked like a beggar, or like a hunted gypsy; and there were certainly some citizens on the streets that morning who

were scared when they saw him galloping through their town, this pale, unkempt lout of a fellow with three days' growth of beard and his dark cape, stinking like nothing on earth. He kept on running till halfway up the valley he found a signpost directing him to Egletons. He could have taken a shorter route, but he did not consider the possibility, for at that moment, as he would tell us, his only thought was to get home as quickly as possible, since he was upset at stinking so horribly and at the mass congealed in his stomach since leaving Siom.

And we were to see him a couple of mornings later, after he had spent two nights God knows where, probably in the woods, where he had not dared close his eyes because of shaking branches, drops of water, birds of the night, furtive animals, heavy whispers in the shadows, and the wind; instead he had fallen into a torpor from which he emerged by fits and starts, having drunk at fountains because he had not dared to open a café door (never having set foot in one anyway, not even Berthe-Dieu's or Chabrat's) and without even a cent on him, which had made him afraid of meeting the police again who, on the way into Egletons, had looked askance at him, and after finally trying the chicken, which was now maggot ridden but not caring about that since it was his father who had cooked it and he had never eaten any food other than his father's; he probably vomited straightaway into the grass on the verge between Saint-Yrieix and Pradines, and we may suppose that he buried what he had brought up together with the rest of the chicken. He walked on, his teeth chattering, looking feverish; he asked the way sometimes but mainly trusted to the road continuing uphill; when the forest noises became louder, he saw slate and granite once again, and even searched the air for the odor of Siom (which he would think he smelled his whole life long: the burned woods of Veix, the tables, the smithy, Suzon's perfume, the trees of life, Médée's sweat), losing his way in the direction of Gourdon, rejoining the road to Buiges, then that to Siom, and appearing eventually among us on the acacia terrace: worn out, bearded, with wet hair, stinking at fifteen yards, even though the rain had stopped, and unrecognizable in the pale sunlight that penetrated the clouds and

allowed the glinting mica on the street and roofs to gleam among the long, misty exhalation rising from fields, fountains, and lake. We saw this tall lad ascending toward the square, one hand on the shoulder strap of his empty haversack and the other on a heavy walking stick, dressed in that torn, filthy cape open to wind and rain, and in worn shoes, smiling at the children who, looking out from the schoolyard, had seen him coming a long way off; they had climbed on to the low wall and shouted so loudly that they did not calm down until Jean Pythre had got to his father's house. All the doors were shut, the Hotchkiss was not at the side of the house or in the barn; the most courageous urchins jumped over the wall and accompanied him to the toilet, squealing, shouting, laughing and singing, not in mockery this time, but for him, for his glory alone. What he had done down there and why they had not kept him were of little account; he was a man now, they said, and that was enough for them, and for us too, who were growing quite lenient. He was their big brother; they surrounded him, congratulated him, haughtily ignoring the schoolmaster's threats and inevitable punishments; they watched Jean take up a fistful of sand from the ground to the left of the toilet, mount the three brick steps, raise the catch, place the sand on the floor near the hole, undo the string that served him as a belt, and let his pants fall to his feet. They said not a word. Jean hadn't closed the door and he was shitting in front of them, for them, his feet wedged securely on either side of the hole, smiling at them, moaning gently, his eyes raised to the sky and perhaps toward his Father in heaven who had descended into the meadow, and smiling gradually as he appreciated the odor and quality of the matter slowly emerging from his belly, which fell and coiled up on the pyramid below with so great a precision that big Vialle begged him not to cover it up directly; they queued behind the hut to admire this product of Jean's labor, and he finally rose, uttering the words that everyone still remembers: "I brought my dung back to Siom . . ."

During the night, his father found him sleeping in the corner of the doorway. He shrugged, said out loud how amazed he was that anyone could sleep like that on stone and in such cold, and added that you had to be really harebrained to do that, and it was no wonder that they hadn't kept him in the army. He did not wake him. Some people in Buiges, Treignac or La Celle heard him mutter that it was better like that, that Jean would never be a man; he had been lucky, he said too, as he folded his lengths of cloth on the kitchen tables of farms and raised a glass of wine or spirits to his mouth, because life isn't worth much, is it?

"What does it amount to? Not much more than a scrap of moist flesh that can stand up in daylight, but you have to come to terms with it and put up with seeing it suffer all the time. Well, in the end it just isn't worth it . . ."

He did not explain exactly what he meant by that and carried on with his patter because he had to, for it was as much part of his job as drinking whatever he was offered, which was never a gentian aperitif, so that they trusted him, listened to him, and did not stop at that, so it was said,

but allowed themselves to be laid at the rear of living rooms and barns, these farmers' wives just about to pass their prime, widows, young shepherdesses, and even old women—anything, in fact, with a skirt and long hair; and so, the gossipmongers said, he didn't sell his material by the sweat of his brow but with the aid of a very different secretion. This was certainly all pure invention or exaggeration, since very soon they could see his son with him on his rounds. Pythre was introducing him to his trade: showing him how to drive the Hotchkiss; to say very little and then only in a voice to which he tried to give a soft timbre, because it was better to let the fabrics and the women speak first, until the moment when he went on the offensive, changed his tone, began to dominate the proceedings, snatched up the cloth, unrolled more of it, and suddenly wrapped it round the female form in front of him, simultaneously exclaiming:

“It wouldn't look better on the Queen of the Belgians!”

He always said the same thing and omitted any attempt at an explanation, just as he never thought of introducing Jean, whom everyone thought was a pretty thick assistant, an orphan whom it was very decent of André Pythre to take on like that. Moreover, they looked less alike than ever before: the father was beardless, fleshy, with thick curly hair that hadn't gone white yet and still very dark, hard, disturbing eyes; whereas the son was thin, gentle, dreamy, and slow, with an everlasting smile about his lips that made you pity him but also inspired confidence. It looked more professional if you were the first to enter, took off your hat and leather gloves, and introduced yourself before snapping your fingers for Jean to appear with the bits of cloth, then unroll them on the oilcloth on the table, which the assistant with a broad, precise movement had just cleansed of bread crumbs, fruit peels, drops of water and wine, and all the remains of a meal, when the husbands had returned to the fields or, in winter, when the inactivity and heat of the hearthside called for coffee, a good tipple, talk, and curiosity. They gave big Pythre a seat but not the other one, the assistant with the quiet look who remained standing not far from the table, in the shadows, always closer to the door than the fire,

or the oven, or the old chair where a grandmother, or an old dog—often both together—were snoozing and observing him benevolently, for dog and grandmother understood that this guy was not bad, he was of the same race, not a trapper or someone who ran with the pack, but a person of like mind who knew how to relax comfortably on a chair in the kitchen and to wait for something or other to happen, like the dog or the old woman but not like that other, well-dressed man, who had a lame leg but scarcely a slow tongue and was very active in the light from the window or on the threshold, where he motioned the women to go with his long silvery tailor's shears, his yard rule with gold-plated ends, his materials smelling so nice and new, his receipt book, and his way of cutting the cloth with a deft and lively movement, and his half-closed eyes focused not on the fabric but on the woman who had said yes.

But even then these women did not feel that they had been duped in the least, because this cripple with the serious face and the nice way with words looked at all of them as a man ought to, or as they had always wished one would: with a cool enterprise that enabled him to size them up at the first glance, undressing them, scrutinizing each of them for what was desirable beneath the smocks, aprons, ill-fitting dresses, and shrunken, wasted flesh, and then homing in on it; but very few men were capable of this particular way of looking; and women knew that, expecting it yet never offering anything more than a hint of their awareness, some not admitting it even to themselves, but all innately ready to respect it, and to pay for it by buying cloth or, people would mutter, by some other means, because of this decisive yet desperate look in the depths of which there gleamed a desire which, for that kind of man, was a bed of red-hot glowing coals. They sensed that he was one of those men who were always passing through, to whom you surrendered unthinkingly; not a real lover but a passionate guy, someone who would always be solitary in the end, cut off from what was most dear to him, especially from love and from himself, but one whom you could welcome gratefully if you were a woman in whom a fire no husband could damp down was burning. And they showed how they were studying

him, from the first moment of their encounter, in the way in which they felt the fabrics, and sometimes they would also gaze at the tall thin young man behind Pythre, who did not resemble him sufficiently to be anything more than an assistant—because no one would think that a man like that could live by illusions, particularly those of marriage, procreation, and self-perpetuation—even though that had been his lifelong quest: his sole, true, most desperate and most beautiful quest.

Very soon there was a return to silence, to impassive expressions on faces in the half-light of the big farmhouse kitchens that smelled so sour and in the beds where they dreamed, forgot and died, while father and son drove back to Siom. Jean took the wheel, hooting frequently at bends and crossroads, managing the short evening drive most adroitly, brushing against outgrowing gorse, ferns, and holly on the narrow roads, and exhibiting an unequalled ability to avoid potholes, ruts, and leaping animals, as he drove in silence to the house where the little oven had long since gone out and only started to give out heat again when they had gone to bed, a boon from which the father alone benefited by way of his door opening into the kitchen, whereas his son, removing hardly any clothes, slipped between icy, unclean sheets, after swallowing his soup mixed with wine and stale bread and a few of those canned sardines of which his father became so very fond as he grew older that they soon became a staple component of their diet, together with boiled potatoes or potatoes fried in lard; for sardine cans of all brands and sizes were piled between the sideboard and the wall, opposite the window, and we knew that on Sundays Jean liked to examine them individually and handle them for the pleasure of rebuilding the piles and hearing the slight dull thud and click they made as they sought to engage with each other when replaced.

But most of the time the light in their kitchen stayed on until late into the night, and much longer than in Ma Besse's time, for in the darkness of Siom we trusted in this light that, before we went to bed, assured us that everything was in order. It was not that some extraordinary reversal of circumstances had transformed the Pythres into our tutelary deities;

the fact that we lived so peacefully was just fate happening to look favorably upon us, and that particular state of things, to be sure, could not last; then the oldest among us remarked that you must always expect or fear something from the Pythres, and these mute excursions by father and son over all the roads of the plateau were certainly out of the ordinary; and the phenomenon of the son driving the weary father was certainly deceptive and an illusion; it represented not the possibility of being something other than the keeper of an empty house (Jean had never believed in that, having realized from his earliest years that innocence would be his winding sheet), but the explicit hope that the world (that is, everything other than Siom) would open up this simple soul just a little and make him something apart from a son, the father murmured, yes, that something or other would finally divert his gaze from the darkness as it began to fall.

It was a face, certainly the first he ever saw, or the first that studied him, Jean Pythre, carefully without his casting a sidelong glance at his father or lowering his eyes before her, for she was a woman and one skilled in attracting the gaze of others and disconcerting them, in the manner of a good teacher who wouldn't stand any nonsense, although she was still very young and had been appointed only a short while before to the little village of La Nocaudie, between Buiges and Bonnefond; to its isolated school at the summit of a high hill covered in heather and bracken, among the winds that rose from the valleys and those that crossed the plateau, relentlessly bending the tall pines surrounding the school, and making more noise than the nine pupils, boys and girls of all ages, who had to be instructed in a language distinct from the sounds of animals, of wind in the branches of beeches and the leaves of broom, of the cries of birds over the heath, and of the gasps of lovers and the dying.

She arrived there at the start of winter, replacing the schoolmaster who had left for a spell in a sanatorium. She was a tall girl with curly chestnut brown hair, bright eyes, and a laughing, often somewhat appre-

hensive expression yet the look of someone who would not be dictated to. When she talked, big Pythre let her carry on, either intentionally or because he too was tired of bullshit and a time always came, as he said, when you had to stop and hear a woman out. She mentioned a fiancé who had been called up for military service and was serving overseas—no, not in Indochina, as big Pythre thought, but, yes, in Algeria—and who was fighting over there in the same way as she taught school: as well as he could, being anxious to serve the French Republic as effectively and faithfully as possible. The Pythres listened, standing side by side in the schoolroom, otherwise empty after the pupils had gone home, where she remained seated behind her desk on the dais, and the room reeked of ink, chalk, sweat, a wood fire, half-washed children, and a woman who had lived in town. The two Pythres were not in an advantageous position: the first of them was possibly thinking of the school at Saint-Sulpice-les-Bois, the old schoolmaster, the lady in white, the narrow valley, his mother, what he had hoped for at one time, and what was still in store for him; and the other probably had his mind on nothing and no one, for today the voice, the teacher's voice, had acquired a face, and beautiful faces prevent you from living, send you back into your own obscurity, and it was as if he, Jean, had become invisible; he believed, said, and related such things willingly and was fond of repeating that the Krauts hadn't seen him when they shot the schoolmaster, that he had made his way to Ussel under their very eyes to buy twine and nails, and that in addition, when he was in the army, he had watched the captain's daughter taking a shower in front of him, that in the end she had smiled, wanting to marry him, as the captain wished her to do as well, even being ready to promote him, but Jean had no desire for promotion.

"Why was that?"

"I just didn't want it."

You couldn't get any more out of him. His face seemed to close up with a thin smile, and he looked at us as if he was not really there or we did not exist, and he was wholly taken up by what he had just said, smiling all the more as he became all the more captivated by the meaning of

his words. And so he raised his eyes to the schoolmistress that day with a clear expression and closed lips, while his father scowled, probably thinking about the best way to raise the topic of fabric with the teacher, and his leg was so very painful that he staggered a little and asked if he could sit down. He stretched his bad leg out in the aisle like a naughty schoolboy, suddenly not caring whether the young woman saw that he was a cripple, since—how unusual—an abrupt change from the norm had occurred, and she had eyes only for the other Pythre, the idiot, the good-for-nothing, whom he would gladly have sent back to the automobile if he had not been afraid of making a bad impression, though for some minutes now he had realized that potential business from this woman was already compromised; on the other hand, he still hoped to raise the subject on some other occasion, suspecting that he might be able to make use of Jean in this regard; then finally he started talking, saying in a tired, deadpan voice that he knew what that meant, he had been in the forces himself in World War I and, in spite of his sixty-four years, could have shown them something once again if it weren't for his gimpy leg; that his elder son, Amédée, was a soldier too and had joined up just like that, on a sudden whim—you could never tell what young people were going to do—and had served the colors in the colonial theater of war, first in French Equatorial Africa, then in Indochina, where he would certainly have met his death, if he hadn't been taken prisoner by the Vietminh, the Communists, and shoved in one of their filthy re-education camps, you know . . . And he lowered his voice, possibly regretted having spoken, or was amazed that he had, because his son, in front of him, had started to shake and then moan, standing there with his arms hanging down, his mouth wide open, as at school in the past and in the months following Médée's departure, when you would hear nothing from his lips but Médée's name and everyone had looked at him with disapproval: the schoolmaster, his father, Pauline, and the others. But the woman teacher looked at him differently, almost kindly, not like the butcher's wife in Buiges and all those women with a moist, hard glitter

in their eyes; no, on the contrary, she had a bright, fresh expression and smiling eyes, which she wrinkled up a little when she turned to his father, who raised his collar to avoid the noon sun:

“So that’s your son?”

He did not answer her, seeming not to have heard what she said; nor did the son, who had calmed down again, was watching the teacher, and possibly thought that other people scarcely differed from clouds, for example: they were there, he could see them out of the corner of his eye or face-to-face, then, hey presto! they had disappeared, and then they returned, and none of that was important any longer because Médée was no longer there; and Jean himself was not important, as his father was now saying:

“Yes, he’s an idiot; he’s here because you can’t kill him, but it would have been better for him and for us if he wasn’t . . .”

“How can you possibly . . .”

“Just look at him! He doesn’t even know that he’s alive!”

And big Pythre laughed. But you felt that he might just as easily have started crying. Jean did not hear what was said. He was watching the young woman, who blushed and must have wondered if the father was right or whether she was like the clouds or like the snow that had fallen that night and that now reflected the sun’s pale glow. It lent the room a very clear light, which bathed their three faces and gave the young woman’s countenance that smooth, mother-of-pearl, pinkish, almost transparent look that Suzon’s face assumed when in the evening, after school, they walked along the road with Médée to Les Freux to watch the water pouring down from the lock gates of the dam with a roar that could sometimes be heard as far as Siom; there was a bend in the path through the dense pine forest after which he always began to shiver and moan; that was when Médée and Suzon had to take him by the hands; then the two boys approached the immense curved yet vertical construction rising to the sky, removed their capes, berets, pants, and sabots, made their way down a footpath of compressed earth and pebbles into

the narrow ravine and, holding each other by the hand, advanced to the falls, which prompted so many transient rainbows to rise into the warm air; then they descended into the water, not deep in this spot yet boiling, foaming lavishly, and drew as close as they dared to the uproar, then recoiled, laughing exuberantly, their heads raised to the blue sky until they lost their balance and fell into the water.

“But he isn’t wicked,” said his father, laughing gently; “Still, he’s no fighter,” he added, though it wasn’t clear at first whom he meant, Jean or Médée, about whom he might have read in the newspaper (if someone had told him or for once he had agreed not to throw into the fire without reading them those postcards from Fort-Archambault, Tananarive, or Saigon, bearing only the address, the name Pythre, and a picture of a native woman with bare breasts or a typical scene: a village marketplace, buffalo, a sacred dance, a train steaming through the brush, female water carriers, or a transatlantic liner at anchor) that he had been awarded a medal before being listed missing at the battle of Dien Bien Phu; about which his father said he didn’t give a damn, although he was pleased to know that his older son was so far away, since he had enough to deal with in the shape of the other one, the youngest child, who had required rigorous discipline to set him straight; and you could tell then what an effort it required for Pythre to express himself and to conceal how weary he was of all that, and that he merely pretended to believe in it, unless he sensed a woman gazing at him and it took hold of him again and he felt the old glow within for a few minutes; or he talked too much, as he did that day as if he were there only to talk in front of this fresh young woman with curly hair, who listened to him politely and smiled at the simpleton, possibly wondering which of the two was the more ingenuous, the father or the son who was studying her as if he had never seen a woman before, until his father finally rose, thanked the teacher, said good-bye, and, without even showing her his wares or he or she finding this visit and what had been said incongruous, left the schoolroom, into which cooking smells were now wafting, the father probably thinking that he could not hope to sell her anything either today or on any other

occasion, but that his son, considering the way she had looked at him, might manage something in that line; and he did not wait for the vehicle door to close before saying:

“You must go and sell something to this girl yourself. I’m getting too old for this.”

And once a week, on Saturdays, although Jean still had no driver's license, his father sent him out on his rounds, not in the Hotchkiss anymore, because it had finally given up the ghost, but in a used vehicle, a gray Peugeot 203, bought, so people said, from a townie from Uzerche. But Jean was a good driver; at these times nothing and no one could have distracted his attention from what he was doing. He screwed up his eyes slightly, gazed intently at the highway, kept his mouth shut, and assumed a haughty air: he had passed through the last circle of hell in the same way.

He easily rediscovered the road to La Nocaudie, where he did not dare to stop; he turned behind the little stone cross and later had to tell his father that the girl hadn't been there or there had been too much snow to let him get up the mountain. The second time he drove as far as the row of spruce marking the boundary of the school grounds and parked in front of the closed gate. He stayed in the automobile. The hills around him were white; the kids' footsteps made hardly any impression on the covering of snow in the yard and on the pathways; magpies

were marking time near the entrance; smoke of a blue more pure than the sky was rising from the chimney. Perhaps he noticed all this; more probably, he did not think about it, for he stayed in the vehicle without moving, now unaware why he had come there, to this woman with the fresh, smiling face whom he watched drawing the curtain aside on the first floor and keeping it open for some time before closing it and then reappearing at the front door, standing there shivering and looking at the sky, which was beginning to go pale on the horizon, on the side of the Monédières. She readjusted the shawl on her shoulders and slipped into her sabots, which were standing by the door, then went out into the alley. He did not turn his head when she tapped on the window. She gave the impression of being about to go, changed her mind, and opened the automobile door; then he looked at her, smiled, but did not move; perhaps he was trying to recognize in this face, too close to him now, a very different countenance: one harder, less transparent, less feminine. She bent down to see him better as the door had closed again and the window had misted up. He had had time to smell her odor: a mixture of burned wood and gardenia. He blushed and murmured:

“That smells almost like Médée.”

He looked directly in front of him. She nodded and asked whether he intended to stay there and let her freeze to death, or he would rather come in and drink a little coffee, which she was keeping hot.

“And bring your cloth with you, since that’s why you’re here,” she added with a smile.

He looked up at her, his forehead suddenly creased, his mouth half-open. She was about to ask him whether anything was the matter but thought better of it, took a few steps away, and, when she reached the middle of the alley, called to him, half turning, as if he were one of her pupils:

“Come on, don’t dilly-dally!”

Perhaps she heard him say “Oh,” saw him smile a little, descend from the vehicle, open the back door, and take out three rolls of cloth. The topmost bale slipped from his grip and dropped on the snow. He stood

there, clutching the other two rolls, breathing through his mouth with such a throaty noise that she was convinced he was going to break into tears. She retraced her steps, bent down, and picked up the roll that had already started to come undone and made a large bright yellow patch with red and black highlights on the snow. She brushed off the material, remarking in an unusually soft voice that it was beautiful—yes, very beautiful—yes, it was really just what she wanted for a spring dress.

He had not moved, so she tucked the roll under her arm and walked to the house, where he decided to join her and would not sit down but waited until he had drunk the coffee that she had pressed on him, threatening not to hear him out otherwise. This coffee had nothing in common with the weak, lukewarm brew that he generally swallowed with his father in the very early hours and that had a bitter taste of nighttime, dirty water, and restless sleep; this coffee, in this bright, clean kitchen smelling of stewed apples, toast, milk, and gardenias, made him want to weep and laugh at one and the same time, as when Médée and he had rolled on the ground together in Berthe-Dieu's big sloping meadow below the road to Eymoutiers, taking with them an odor compounded of clover, wild carrot, and their breath, and, while his head was still reeling, Médée had given him water from Saint-Martin's fountain to drink, held out in his hands joined like a shell, and because Médée offered it to him, he swallowed it, together with the tiny insects and stalks floating on it.

"It's like Médée," he murmured, balancing on one leg then on the other, his hands in his pockets, an absolutely idiotic smile on his lips.

"What's like Médée?" she asked as gently as she could, and sat for a while on a corner of the table.

He looked at her as if he did not understand what she had said, imagining perhaps that he had never seen a woman dressed like that—in her toreador pants, a big brightly colored pullover, a black shawl thrown over her shoulders, and bare feet in white sandals—and that he had never met a woman who held herself like that, still less one who spoke so softly.

"Tell me who Médée is."

She had spoken even more gently. He began to laugh; at least she might have thought it was laughter; you might also have taken it for the sobbing of a very small, exhausted, or lost boy. The spoon trembled in the bowl. He muttered that it wasn't good to laugh, it wasn't right, you always look naughty if you laugh, and Médée wasn't there any longer. He had begun to shiver. She took the bowl from his hands and led him to the bench near the table and made him sit down, bending down to wipe his tears and the sweat pouring down his forehead, cheeks, and temples, and, though unaware of this, allowing him a sight through the V-neck of her pullover of a whiter skin than the fabrics his father treated more carefully than any others and that for a long time he had been forbidden to touch. She noticed where his gaze was directed, and straightened up, pulled the slipping shawl together over her breasts; then, blushing, because talk was called for and he had begun to cry, she said:

“I cry too, sometimes.”

Did he hear this? Was he looking at her? Did she at this moment mean anything more to him than a voice, the too-soft skin of an almost-white voice that smelled of gardenia and reminded him of Médée and, yes, smelled like him?

And (he would say quietly later, and we would hear this confidence, this tale to lull an infant to sleep) it gave him a tickling feeling between his legs, just like the day when he had heard noise in the stable at Veix when everyone was in the fields and he was watching over the house on a stifling August afternoon: unusual funny noises, little cries, like someone trying to stop laughing or weeping, or both at the same time, so quick and light that it was a pleasure to listen to it: “And I left the shade of the pines in order to enter the strong August light, then the shadow of the stable, noiselessly, and adapted quickly to the half-darkness again, taking care that the chickens did not make a noise while I was approaching the source of the noises and the place where a little calf was tied up, one they took to its mother three times a day. But it didn't suck its mother: in fact it sucked Médée—but no, it couldn't have been Médée, because you couldn't smell him there, and you couldn't see anything

because of all the insects and hay dancing in the rapier thrusts of light that looked as if they had resolved to fight one another—yes, of course, it was Michel, as you know, the guy who didn't want to be called Mazaud and who was drowned in the La Voûte pond, yes, Michel very close to the calf, which was sucking the thing Michel carried between his legs and he had often shown me in the gorse; yes, and it stuck up and out; it was as red as anything and seemed to be hurting him, because he stroked it now and again, and just think how good it was when something like pus came out, and you would have thought he was going to die . . .”

And he had stared at Michel, who probably looked back without recognizing him, with a burning face and sweat pouring over his naked torso and in the midst of a whirl of glittering hay dust caught in the column of light in which he twisted, reared up, and struggled against the force of the calf, which, as it buffeted him with its head, drew from him groans and cries as strong as his breathing and the clinking of the chain by which the animal was tethered, while Jean also began to snort and moan, his arms hanging, hands outspread, and mouth twitching in the warm shade, and his eyes fixed on the beast's muzzle, its round, crazed eyes, the blows it administered to Michel's belly, and the heavy thrusts of his thighs with which he, kneeling in the dung, met this onslaught, all the time keeping his hands over the calf's ears as he twisted the creature's neck slightly in an attempt to ward off its pendulous chops, from which hung strings of saliva mixed with, Jean said, something that came pouring out of Michel like blood and made them both sob: the two bastards, the outcasts, the violent one and the simpleton, one who bled white blood and one who didn't know anything; and both lowered their heads within a fringe of light in which the dust began to fall again, and Michel turned toward his half-brother a face now bearing a very soft, peaceful, and relaxed expression, like Jean's own later when he cacked in the outside toilet and, as slowly as an egg timer, let a handful of time (as Médée called it) trickle over the stuff.

Michel had risen from the ground, wiped his knees and thighs with hay, and rebuckled his belt. He muttered:

“We are Pythres . . .”

And the other replied, lowering his head:

“Yes, Michel.”

“What woman would want us?” Michel murmured and went to the door to light a cigarette and blow its smoke into the beams of light, where the threads of smoke straggled like milk in water.

“Yes, Michel.”

“But we’re no worse than the others.”

“That’s right, Michel, that’s right.”

And he laughed, not at what his brother had said, but because he realized that the pains between Michel’s legs had gone now, that the wound had closed up again, and at last he could put down the pitchfork that he had held ready to stick the calf with.

“Médée,” he told the young woman, “isn’t like Michel.”

She waited, pretending to understand, and now anxious to get rid of this young man, who added:

“You smell like trees too.”

He looked at her with a triumphant smile, then, keeping his hand on the yellow material, called out in an astonishingly clear, almost insolent voice:

“This will really go with your coloring.”

He must have heard this remark from his father’s lips a hundred times, and saying it suddenly made him appear unpleasant, so that the schoolteacher said:

“Well, then, let me have a couple of yards . . .”

Without waiting, she cleared the table of her bowls, pots of jam, dishes, and table napkins, wiped off the oilcloth with a broad, impatient gesture, then, by herself, placed the still damp roll on the table. She watched him cutting the cloth about which she probably felt only fifty-fifty, for and against, or perhaps didn’t like at all, but paid for, feeling that

he really didn't know the price, gave him what she thought she owed, very quickly, before he could think of letting her have it for nothing, and said she was tired, that the kids wore you out, and she just had to rest. But he did not leave. On the other hand, he didn't seem like a freeloader nor like one of those peasants who never leave before knocking back two or three glasses of wine and bestowing a ridiculously inept compliment on you. She was just about to ask him emphatically to go, to adopt the strict tone she used to keep her class under control, and after all she was known as the governess, Ma'am, the schoolmistress, but deciding to give in somewhat, sat down and behaved as if he weren't there. But as soon as she had put out two soup plates, one on either side of the table, and was preparing to pour the soup that she had reheated on the wood stove, he rose, stammered that he didn't want to cause her any trouble, and went out without managing to close the door, while she stood on the threshold slightly numb from the cold yet screwing up her eyes a little in the morning sun. The magpies were chattering in the spruce trees where they had perched. A dog barked at the bottom of the valley. In Siom he put the money on the table and his father pushed over a plate of steaming, overcooked potatoes. They ate without speaking in the pale light, looking directly ahead, their faces enveloped in steam, backs bent, elbows on the oilcloth. Finally his father said:

"You'll have to go back there next Saturday, after the Buiges market. She hasn't paid enough . . ."

He took the La Nocaudie road once again. The snow was beginning to melt. He explained what his father wanted, in a dry, menacing tone, as if it was a personal matter. His lips were quivering, his eyes were wide open, and he looked at the young woman with almost wild joy. Then he was silent, and she, on the doorstep, smiled as she listened to him, rather incredulously, but made no fuss about handing over the few francs asked for, shrugged, and went in leaving him on the step, by the door, which he did not think of shutting again, watching her going to and fro as she prepared her meal, listening to her hum, and even sniffing so that he could catch her perfume now mixed with the odor of the soup she poured into

a soup plate, watching her eat, and leaving when she turned her head to look at him.

He returned the week after, and every week from then on, leaving before the father got up, probably impatient, anxious not to have the car break down or to get there before the young woman's mealtime. But it was only fifteen miles or so from Siom to La Nocaudie, and we realized later that Jean spent his mornings not selling fabrics but sleeping in the automobile, which he parked in a narrow hollow where you turned off to the school, until noon; then he drove very slowly up the incline, stopped in front of the gate, combed his hair, and checked his appearance in the rearview mirror, got out, looking in every direction except that of the door, which he nevertheless approached and knocked on, entered, sat down opposite her, and drank, taking care not to do so more quickly than she, the glass of wine she poured for him, then left without either of them having uttered a single word.

She did not detain him. He never thanked her, brought her anything, or offered to help her. When he was about to open his mouth or stared at her so intensely that he forgot to breathe, she put a finger to her lips and contrived to look incensed, as she did when teaching. That was all.

People were mistaken if they did not believe Jean when he said there was nothing else and that it all came to an end anyway when, at the end of the spring or at the beginning of the summer, he was greeted not by the young woman but by a thin, pale man of about thirty, whose jaw fell in amazement as he watched Jean enter the place as if he were at home, until the man eventually understood what was afoot and told Jean that he was the permanent schoolmaster and was resuming work there and that the substitute had returned to her own area, up there—Saint-Angel or Saint-Pardoux, he didn't really know. And he studied with amusement this big guy as thin as himself, who said nothing, seemed scarcely to understand, moved from one foot to the other like a bear, with a tight then quivering expression, who started to moan, to stammer a name that, the teacher would say, might have been Médée, whom the fellow was clearly begging to help him. He tried to get him to sit down. Since

Jean then began to shout ever more loudly, the teacher ran to the nearest farmer and brought him back to the house. They made the big fellow leave, and right up to midafternoon he remained in the courtyard among the buzzing insects, watched by a few kids quietly waiting in the spruce trees until (as they explained to the schoolmaster) the close friend of Mademoiselle Bonneville, the schoolmistress, decided to leave—if he did leave and did not instead take root there—in the unshaded sunlight, his eyes red, since he had no tears left to weep with; he kept stammering out the same syllables, which the kids eventually chanted along with him, in low tones at first, then more loudly, more loudly than he indeed, until he turned round, saw them, smiled, shrugged, shook himself, emitted an “Oh!” as if his own behavior amazed him, and climbed back into his automobile.

Big Pythre was declining. His leg hurt him. He said, with a little smile, that he already had one foot in the grave. We did not find this amusing and had no desire to hear any more about it, either because we did not believe him, or because we feared it might be some new ploy, or even because he was telling the truth and we were afraid that we would be the next in line. We had become superstitious, almost despairing; we felt that life and what came after it were only flames, but we did not know how to dance in those flames and let them swallow us up, burn our eyes and hearts, and reduce our tongues to ashes. We gossiped, had always gossiped a little, and we still talked about André Pythre. We knew no more about him than when he had arrived, had not accepted him among us, had not forgiven him his sinner's garb, and had no mercy on him. We did not put away our weapons, that was part of our nature, even though we realized that his powers were failing him, that he was ready to bring it to an end and had certainly expiated his wrongdoing. We now knew that he certainly wasn't devilish, yet we found it necessary to meet the devil at least once in human form, for we too had experienced our share

of dread, disgust, and suffering, and needed someone we could hold responsible for it, apart from fate, an unlucky star, the unfruitful earth, and politics; and so some people said we would always still hanker after the proofs of the existence of God, no matter that we were a bunch of Reds; but we did not reply, had no more to say. He was our dark mirror, and like us he had almost no gift for happiness, and in addition he seemed to work hard to deserve his misfortune. And we spoke about him as if he were no longer there, thinking of him as already dead, at the very least as someone who had always been one too many, who had never really left his narrow little valley, who had been neither peasant nor middle-class townsman, a cloth salesman by deception or reason, who spent his days among us in a little house with neither hearth nor wife, having lost everything or chosen to lose everything: land, dwelling, wife, children, except for the youngest whom he initiated into selling if not into life, even then putting on a show, as he had always seemed to do, playing at being a landowner, husband of that woman and father of that girl, neither of whom he had tried to see again (being incapable of forgiveness, even of himself), and whom he no longer considered wholly of this world, since they had been banished at the very least into the darkness of a night where their faces were forever contorted and their lips were forever silent: all of them, the folk from Prunde, Aimée Grandchamp, little Jeanne, Blanche Queyroix, and his other two sons, the one who had been murdered and the one who had fled or, as we said, bolted, having ceased to send news of himself from abroad or possibly from the next world.

He had learned how to pass through the same dark night very early on: it was the night of Prunde, the night of the plateau, and the night of Veix that he had tried to illumine by setting the hillside on fire; our night too, the night of those who in the end scarcely differed from him. Some folk said that here on the plateau we lived closer to the sky, but we paid for that closeness with a harsh, monotonous, joyless existence, while the flames of the avaricious, of egotists, and of the impenitent burned in our hearts and eyes, and nothing dissuaded us from thinking of death,

nothing persuaded us to feel more compassion for our fathers, sons, companions, and all those unknown people whom we refused to recognize as our fellow humans. We suddenly grew weary of our burdens and of ourselves, for we had done enough and far more than we were really capable of doing. André Pythre was like us in this respect, in this pride mixed with humility and resignation before the stench to come—and he had never ceased to stink because he had never succeeded in freeing himself from what he had breathed long ago, in that hamlet where they lived the most wretched of lives as folk did in the time of the Mongols or Huns, whereas we were just as poor but had our church, priest, and cemetery; and our hatred of all that allowed us at least to fluff up our feathers (even if it did not raise our minds and spirits), taking the trouble to look our best on Sundays, since that was the only thing that separated us from our animals. This, however, did not prevent André Pythre from leaving the foul-smelling kitchen where he spent his Sundays in order to emerge one morning (no one knew why and whether it just was a whim of the ageing Pythre or a form of provocation or fear), clad like a gypsy, under the dark vaulted roof of the church where the priest from Buiges (a young worker-priest in glasses and blue jeans who earned his living in Leclerc's sawmill on the road to Tarnac) came to say Mass; and Pythre arrived thus as the last, unexpected member of the congregation, then stood at the back, resting on a stick near the stone holy-water stoup, as if he should not be there among us, as the only man in a gathering in which no man had otherwise taken part other than old Monsieur Queyroix and Eugénie Chaype's husband, who was so jealous that he would not allow his wife to stir an inch from his side, even during Mass. Pythre was looking at something or other: perhaps the stained-glass window in the background (Saint Martin dividing his cloak with a swipe of his sword in front of a poor wretch struck with wonder), from which our roughnecks had ripped all but a few pieces; possibly the women muttering, or even the young priest who also looked like a ordinary poor guy or a Red, at any rate more like an agitator than an apostle or servant of the Church. No one knew why Pythre was there, what far-fetched idea

had drawn him to the event, and the women said: “. . . he stood there behind us until the end, and we could feel his breath on the backs of our necks the whole time—it could have come from the mouth of darkness itself.”

He carried on with his rounds, either alone or together with his son. Perhaps he thought that this was no way to end up—in his kitchen that smelled of reheated fat—and that you ought to keep up appearances till the very end, be on the move, face up to whatever came your way. Perhaps he also thought of his mother, who had died in silence, alone, one winter night, a night longer than all the nights in the world. Since then he had dressed carefully every day of the week and seemed intent on shutting his eyes to things, on abstraction and forgetting, or on cultivating a state of perpetual readiness for the worst to happen and on escaping from his own social milieu—as if that were ever possible. Even Emile Dieu who, not so long before him, when the twentieth century had just begun, had arrived among us from a place unknown with a pigskin case as his only luggage and carrying a license to run a bar, and who with time and his marriage to Berthe had become big Berthe-Dieu, as we named him eventually—even he did not impress us as much as André Pythre in decline, who dragged his black soul and his gimpy stump along bad roads to markets and farms where he unloaded his calico for a pittance. We saw the pointlessness of all that and remembered the thundering barrage of Verdun, the stench of human mud, the faces that had seen what no creature should behold, the women enclosed in their grief, which was the only eternity in which they would believe after that, because you have to believe in something, as we did, and Pythre too. He wanted to live, even though now it was all over. We saw how he left his business to his son on weekdays. And we saw him on Saturdays, when he took the Peugeot 203 and later, when it broke down, the spit-new white 403, which was too good for what they used it for, at least for what he, André Pythre, did: going to drink at certain farms in the area and most willingly to the one belonging to the Raulxes at Sireygeol, to the south of Siom; they were all unmarried, wild, wily, and sharp, and they—

especially the eldest boy and the sister—had not forgotten the names of Voltaire, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Victor Hugo, which they had heard at school and since then pronounced at every opportunity like invocations, opposing this trinity to the better-known one and seeking in wine a way to union with the mysteries of Christ, the sister as devotedly as the brothers, to the point where each became totally convulsed and then rolled under the table or, as people said, onto the sister, quite shamelessly, one after the other. In the long run, however, they weren't such bad guys, these Raulxes, as long as the hard liquor in them hadn't kindled the fires that plunged them all into darkness, making them talk louder than any thunderclap, calling down the seven plagues of Egypt on the whole world, and on Siom in particular. They excluded André Pythre from their curses because he was struck from the same metal as these little farmers, these cheated yet magnificent boors who would spend their entire lives contemplating their own deaths in solitude and shame.

Very early on an October morning we saw three of the Raulxes driving down the slope by the Palm Sunday cross: Albert was behind the wheel, his beret jammed on his too long hair; and Etienne was perched on the side, leaning against the mudguard; and there in the trailer was Marcelle, their sister, whose rubber boots you could see hanging over the side, on the left. They stopped in front of the public washhouse; Albert went up to the town hall to awaken Liselotte Vialle, who opened her shop-window shutters a little, told them to go to the devil, and would say later she had not seen what was lying in the trailer, and they had all seemed stewed to the gills. But they weren't—or weren't any longer. Etienne shrugged, swore, and started up the tractor again, taking it to Berthe-Dieu, who was up already, led them into the kitchen, and served them drinks. All three spoke at once, very loudly, like all those who have spent more time with animals than with humans. Finally, they understood that big Pythre was lying in the trailer, between its railed walls, together with lumps of moss and bits of bark and wood that they had collected the day before. The people descending to Berthe-Dieu's did

not stop by the tractor. They thought of it in connection with Pythre only when an hour had passed by and they learned what had happened, whereupon someone (it must have been Eugénie Chaype's husband, that jealous misery and blowhard, making us regret straightaway that Pythre hadn't cuckolded him ten times over) immediately cried out that it was good riddance to bad rubbish.

"He deserved it!" shouted the eldest Raulx, who didn't understand or was seizing the chance to air his own fixed idea. "It must have been that kick he got taking a piss in the stable, when he was too stewed to realize what was going on—it must have driven his balls right up to his throat!"

The blow had indeed bruised him badly, so badly that he had to be laid in the kitchen, by the fire, in Albert's and Etienne's bed, and they had even been smart enough to think of fetching the doctor from Buiges. But it was pouring down in buckets, it was night already, not one of the Raulxes knew how to drive the 403, and they couldn't find the key anyway. They decided to wait until the next morning and for the postman (although there was no assurance that he would arrive and that it wouldn't be necessary to go to Siom), so that he could tell the doctor at the end of the morning, as soon as he had completed his rounds—which meant around noon, by which time two members of the Raulx family were asleep in Pythre's automobile, Albert and Louis were spread over the kitchen table, and the sister was stretched out on the bed alongside the injured man whose eyes were closed and who was already unconscious, though he was feebly moaning and a slight rattle was coming from his throat, and there at the foot of the bed was the wheelbarrow they had used to bring him from the stable and from which they had scarcely been able to haul him. The doctor (not the same one who had been present when Aimée Grandchamp gave birth, but another one who had long since discarded his illusions and scruples) examined him, muttered that he could hardly believe they had waited so long to fetch him, that they wouldn't have done that to a dumb animal. But he cursed himself too, for on several occasions he had drunk the rum that Albert Raulx

offered him; so then he decided to sit down with them, and he went on drinking until he remembered the injured man and, without lowering his voice, said they could do no more for Pythre and followed up on his opinion by duly signing a death certificate on the spot.

“But he isn’t dead yet!” the sister muttered.

“He’s finished. Whether now or later . . . it doesn’t make any difference . . .”

And he left staggering, assuring the sister that Pythre no longer felt anything, that he would at least be lucky enough not to watch himself die, God couldn’t make everyone equally happy. The sister shrugged. She held out a banknote to the doctor, but he refused it and hurried off to his vehicle. She returned to the big kitchen, saying that there were still decent people around. Then she started drinking with the others, close to the man near death, whose breathing was scarcely audible and who surely could not hear them and, if he could, probably no longer gave a damn, for he was already communing with the angels, we must suppose, since there was already playing about his mouth that unbelievably gentle smile that we would all see the next morning when the Raulxes had sobered up, come to, got to their feet, and confirmed that he was already cold.

And so the Raulxes had watched André Pythre dying. Once seated at Berthe-Dieu's, they drank as never before in their lives, realizing that they could not leave without telling the floor several times, with that dark arrogance you find in heavy toppers, who are the guardians of truth. And we listened to them, breathing that heady scent of wine, tobacco, cows, damp ashes, undergrowth, and soiled linen, and we too started drinking, if not to celebrate the event, then at least to soak it all up, to bring the legend to its resolution in an appropriately raucous way, narrated as it was by the mingled voices of Albert and Etienne Raulx, while Marcelle, the sister, supplied the echoing chorus, and her saturnine, triumphant expression as she did so made us say that the devil was astride her shoulder and had her ear, that was certain. We listened to all that until noon, and the clamor at Berthe-Dieu's continued as if it was market day (but there were no longer any markets in our neck of the woods—just an apology for a village fête on July 2, when we celebrated the eternal darkness that was approaching ever more rapidly); and the men kept going out to piss behind the wooden shed or the garden wall,

near the tractor, without even glancing at the dead man (apart from Philippeau's already bombed-out son, who let fly against the trailer wheel and then, laughing and tottering, caught sight of big Pythre, who was smiling and, as the boy said when he reentered the bar, finally looked at peace) and without thinking, either, of going up there to fetch the son, who had spent the night in the kitchen beneath the naked light-bulb, eating his cold soup and, in the early hours, his father's even colder portion, since he possibly thought his father was off seeing some floozie, tart, or dumb teenaged broad—unless he imagined that his father had probably done the same as Médée, Pauline, and Suzon, and had simply left—and then he didn't worry about it any more but shut himself in the gray shed at the end of the field, not inquiring what all the noise at Berthe-Dieu's could be, for the incline of the field and the little wall prevented him from seeing the tractor or trailer from where he was, so that he must have thought we had all gone mad. Then he opened the big wooden shop shutters, sat down behind the counter in a ray of sunlight, and waited.

Before long we were all there: the folk from Siom, of course; then those from the hamlets and farms where the news of his death had penetrated somehow, like the legend over which we labored first in Berthe's kitchen; then later, even though it wasn't Sunday, in the restaurant; then on the little terrace and in the square, where we could see those people arriving who usually never stirred from their holes, these men who had lost their original names, exchanging them for others that were more beautiful, resonant, and dignified, and who had also become part of the slowly building saga of Siom and of the end of time—Célestin de la Vôte, Guy de la Chapelle, little Roger, Antoine de la Regaudie, Jean de l'Eburderie, Rigadin de la Croix, Léon de la Buffatière, Isidore des Egliseaux, Désiré the bachelor—they all arrived one after the other, without knowing exactly why they had done so, and without anyone saying anything to them. They had followed no star other than a dark longing to go to Siom, as if to celebrate a victory or festival, to hear some fortunate truth announced to the sound of the bells, which the urchins,

without waiting for any order, let ring out, their eyes gleaming and their lips turned upward by the furious joy of the great day, roused too by this news that had originated at Berthe-Dieu's and was spread by countless mouths in patois or in French, and generally in both languages together, and mainly in that rumor residing at the heart of languages, which, beyond words and what they denote, is the true sound and utterance of glory—the glory of André Pythre and his kind, even though this glory shone only through his darkness and our joy. The fact that their blood was cursed did not contribute to our triumph and in any case did not set us, like them, above human law—that is what we said to the police, whom we finally telephoned. The sergeant heard us out with a somewhat irritated expression, the second policeman stood by the trailer, and the third went up to fetch the son.

We watched him, that Pythre—the last one, the simpleton, the one in whom blood had produced an unhappy mixture—come down to the square at the side of the policeman, who held onto his elbow as if he were guilty or did not understand what they had explained to him; and, yes, we saw him pass through the crowd that slowly parted to allow him entry, letting them rub against him, sniff him, smile at him, and not knowing that from now on he would have to speak for the Pythres and in particular about the man to whom the policeman led him, before the trailer where the women of Siom were telling their beads. We expected to see him groan, cry out, weep, stand on one foot, then on the other, and to hear him call out for Médée to come and recite his name in a singsong voice; but he did none of those things: instead, he stood there, dry-eyed, looking at his father, with a calm expression and a smile on his lips, which we could not rightly decipher and therefore interpreted as redemption and the recovery and victory of our blood in him and of true innocence. Now we could rejoice silently before these mortal remains, which none of us obviously knew what to do with (not even when Mayor Farges's representative disclosed the fact that many years before, when the valley was flooded, the deceased had bought a perpetual concession to a burial plot in the new cemetery). The police sergeant wanted to

question Etienne Raulx for having illegally transported a cadaver and having exposed it to public derision; big Etienne did not understand this in the least and threw an angry fit trying to demonstrate that it wasn't a corpse but André Pythre and that André Pythre couldn't be dead, even if he was no longer alive; and they would certainly have come to blows if the old women of Siom forming a black circle round the trailer (those women who had most virulently attacked the dead man were praying too) had not started chanting the prayer for the faithful departed they had learned as children, surely all that remained to them of those years—apart from a few young men's smiles and the light of too-fleeting summers. Silence ensued. They were allowed to have their way. Then the mayor climbed onto the tractor footboard, held on to the steering wheel with one hand, and gesticulated with the other in front of him; his face was red, his eyes wide open and staring, and his mouth had an unpleasant twist to it; in fact he looked just as drunk as the Raulxes. He asked us to go home. We did not move; we had waited so many years for this moment: it was the only one that we had waited for, even though many of us were still too young to have participated in this waiting and to have shared the patience of our forebears and our dead.

We drew back a little to allow the tractor (Farges, made sober by the conviction of his own importance, had taken the wheel) to describe a splendid curve around the memorial to the dead before stopping in front of the semicircle of lawn where the women were waiting in a black line. We stayed in a group at the lower end of the square and on both its sides, on Berthe-Dieu's and Chabrat's pavements, by the great oak, on Heurtebise's wall, and even on Pythre's. The policemen carried the body inside, put it on a bed with dirty sheets and left it there, in the half-light, as if they were in a hurry to be rid of it and to get out of this room with the same stink as the kitchen, as if the house had begun to stink even more, not since André Pythre had been brought inside but (and no one could explain this) since the moment of his death and perhaps since he had come to live there and had realized that he would not leave, that there would be no escape, that he would always sweat with the same fear

that had gripped him by the throat there in Prunde and, when he was a child, made him ask why you had to die and why they did not bury the dead up there in the sky, in the clouds.

Then we lost interest in him and let the son see to his father's body by himself. We possessed the legend; everything else was left to the women, who told us later how Pythre was watched over that night by the oldest among them, who kept vigil not only over the dead man but over the simpleton too, under the bare lightbulb, while Chabrat in his workshop could be heard laboring on the coffin throughout the night. But something strange happened in the morning: without a word, the women returned to their houses, and Chabrat did not finish the coffin but disappeared to repair the Miquelons' roof at Les Places, and straightaway we stopped embellishing the legend, which from that point stayed buried deep within us; we went back to our autumn labors, to our dreams, to our lovemaking, to tedium, to trembling, and to sleep, from which we were roused on the third day by who knows what: the howling of a dog, time laughing within us, or nothing at all. We looked up toward the Pythres' house. We made our way there, knocked at the door, then on the shutters, entered the shop, opened the door to the corridor, were met directly with air colder than a freezing night, and, in the room behind the kitchen, saw big Pythre on his bed, clad in his Sunday best, and the loon taking a nap on a chair by the headboard; when we touched him on the shoulder, he looked at us as if not actually seeing us, so that we wondered if he were not the one who was dead; moreover—and this was even more extraordinary (so much so that we almost took it as a sign from heaven)—big Pythre did not stink but just smelled slightly rancid, and tolerably so, for there was little difference between his odor and that of a poorly ventilated room. It was his face that we found hard to contemplate: it had gone black and looked quite creased, entirely dried up like the whole surface of his body, whereas we could see that what lay beneath was turning liquid—all without losing his beautiful smile.

We no longer knew what to think. Chabrat went to the window, opened it, and said something to Jean, who gazed at him uncompre-

hendingly but allowed himself to be taken by the arm and led into the kitchen, where he was told that this just had to stop, it was over, now it was time for the earth to do its work, and we would have to shift the corpse from the house because, although it did not stink, it was blacker than the fiend himself; and we were still so frightened of it that we wrapped it in Pythre's sheets and bedcover in order to slip it into the coffin that Chabrat's apprentice had finally delivered, the lid of which we immediately secured without worrying about that innocent creature, who was still standing in the kitchen, smiling in the morning light, with a peaceful expression and screwed-up eyes, as he would stand up there later below the cemetery beeches and in front of the grave that Chabrat had dug, deeper than any other, and around which we took our places without waiting for the priest to arrive from Buiges; we were shivering, and we listened with ears closed to Farges's banal remarks, which were the same ones we would hear pronounced about ourselves once we were where big Pythre now lay, when we would be told—Father Guerle added, after having finally arrived, wearing his army-surplus jacket, a stole draped round his neck, and clasping his missal in one hand—that we had amounted to nothing, certainly not a legend, possibly just a few syllables stammered by some ignorant child, less even than the sound of the wind in the nettles—yes, that is all we would signify—we who were his counterparts and fellow creatures, brothers to this tall idiot at the grave's edge, who seemed at last to understand what was afoot, crossed himself ineptly, and looked up at the sky, that bluest of skies across which not a single cloud passed that day.



PART FOUR

*Jean*



We went back with him. We helped the women burn the straw mattress and the dead man's clothes in the backyard, while the son buried their last mixed turds in a corner of the garden, and we others, scarcely fearing unbelievers, finally interred deep within ourselves the vestiges of hope ignited so many years before by the fires of the Soviet motherland, which had convinced us that an earthly paradise was possible, although since then we had resigned ourselves to the worst: our misery, our cold earth, the gall and bitterness of our lives; so we were incapable of feeling pity for the dead man (indeed, we were pleased that we had seen Pythre carried off not by gunshot or stabbing, even less by sickness, but by a kick from a cow, like any drunken farmhand) and had just as little for the one left behind, who went on living as if the father was still there, apart from closing off the dead man's room and lowering his voice more than usual when in the kitchen, in order not to make any noise "because of poor Pa," as he said; he was the only human on this earth to mourn big Pythre, with a quiet, almost detached constancy, as if mourning someone who was neither dead nor living, but lingered in the intermediate realm

of dreams and, from the completion of his morning shit to the middle of the night, kept watch over this vaulted twilight beneath the naked light-bulb, with long hours in between spent at the back of the shop and on Saturdays round trips by automobile to Buiges, La Celle, and Treignac—a triangle within which Siom was not even the center but a mere point of disappearance, oblivion, and resignation.

When, as in the past, he appeared toward the end of the noon meal or during the lingering afternoon hours that smelled of burned fat, fire, milk, cow stalls, and tired women, he would not try to persuade anyone, hardly said a word, yet eventually remembered that he was there to sell. They waited for him to get used to the semidarkness, to the looks he received from gleaming eyes, which were patient, inquisitive, amused, not hostile at any rate, but responsive for the most part to this long-legged guy whom they recognized because he was so very thin and had that too-long hair hanging down behind his ears—like a poet, as the women said—on either side of a narrow, pale face and a forehead creased even at his age, and who smiled rather nervously, waiting with his rolls of material under his arm for someone to tell him to unpack them—which just made women laugh because they knew that they weren't going to buy anything from him, although they probably sympathized with this innocent almost wading in his oversize city suits, his useless wristwatch showing a time as eccentric as himself and as worthless as this fabric that they had been offered for more than four years and that they all knew only too well; they were a mite annoyed that he never bothered to show them anything different, but in the end they let him snip off a yard on credit or in exchange for a glass of coffee or liquor, or perhaps no more than a smile.

He seemed to pop up everywhere—in kitchens, farmyards, markets—with his outmoded, tired-looking fabrics, smiling like some poor airhead, and he was just as much of a pain for the suppliers as for the customers later, who came over, then saw that he had nothing to sell, nothing that you could make even a smock, duster, or shroud of—he couldn't sell himself even, the women muttered; no, that he couldn't, as the Meymac

notary probably thought, the one whose letter Jean kept in his pocket for more than a week. He was the son of Laperge the lawyer, whom André Pythre had dealt with at one time, or rather, as possibly occurred to his successor, the one who had outlined for old man Pythre the conditions for changing his life, at a time when he still entertained illusions of that kind.

Jean drove up to Meymac on a Friday, parked the 403 in a tiny sloping square, in front of a circular fountain where the water had been turned off, and rang the garden-door bell of an old house with a pointed roof and walls completely covered in young vines. They led him into the deep room with gleaming furniture, where you smelled the odors of roast meat intermingled with heavier scents and the bookshelves seemed to support the ceiling. The November rain was beating against the panes of the two windows, so fiercely that for the moment it overpowered the droning of the stove and that of the notary as he outlined for Jean the Pythre family's financial situation as it had developed from that narrow little valley at Prunde to his father's death in Siom. It was the reverse of the legend, a long-winded narrative of the law, the ultimate judgment you can't cover up or cheat, which he received without turning a hair and, it is fair to assume, without understanding a word, if he really listened to it at all, since he spent the whole time staring at the three women whom he found in the study. They were sitting on the right in a semicircle, didn't bother to look up when he entered smelling of rain, cheap brilliantine, and bachelordom, and were all dressed in black and had hard, proud faces, though their pride did not hide their nervousness nor was it unflattering, so it seemed, to the youngest of them, who was very beautiful yet did not appear to be all there and had something strangely submissive, resigned, or even hopeless about her. Perhaps he recognized her as Suzanne Pythre, which was how the notary referred to her after pronouncing the other names: Pauline Pythre, née Bordes; Amédée Pythre; and Aline Broussas, née Bogros, daughter of Octavie Bogros, herself née Grandchamp and daughter of Elise and Jules Grandchamp. But Jean probably did not realize that

these familiar names corresponded to the unfriendly profiles before him, the features of these three women so intent on the lips of the notary, who was now informing them that two of them would lose everything: the hill at Veix ruined at one time in a fire and since then abandoned, which had become the property of the Grandchamp heiress; and the house located in Siom, which they had left voluntarily ten years before when one of them was married and the others were minors, and which the will of the deceased left to the youngest son only, since the elder son had also voluntarily departed from that place and anyway could be presumed dead, or at least missing.

That was all. They rose, contemplated one another for a few seconds, nodded peremptorily, suppressed a few sighs, and went into the corridor into which Jean had preceded them yet had drawn back from to let the Grandchamp heiress pass, but where he was now about to kiss Pauline on the cheek when she boxed his ear and said: "Go to hell!"—which probably took him all the way back to the time when he wished he hadn't seen his mother laughing at the edge of the well. Suzon took her mother by the elbow, looked at Jean, and murmured, though it was not clear whether she was addressing her brother or her mother:

"Well, it's time to go now."

And she pushed her mother into the passageway outside, toward the garden door, already half-opened by the other, the oldest woman, the one not so easy to recall and with the bony features. But Jean was smiling at Suzon; he could not take his eyes off this narrow, pure, extraordinarily white face, her mourning clothes only enhancing its radiance under her heavy brown hair gathered into a high chignon and surmounted by a toque at a slight forward angle from which hung a tiny veil obscuring her already deep dark eyes, which she was possibly anxious to hide beneath the umbrella under which she sheltered, while her brother, exposed to the rain, probably wondered like so many others how anyone could be so incomparably beautiful yet belong to no one; for he had heard that from so many lips, without knowing all the rest: the glory of his sister and her dark legend, which said that the air of Féniers

did not suit her, that she hid herself away, spent her days studying the effects of time on her features, and examined her mirror as meticulously as others their consciences, yet treated the looks men gave her as so much mist upon its surface.

At that time she was the most beautiful woman on the plateau and, as they said with a kind of awe, not merely a good-looking woman or a lovely girl—that is, rosy, round, and robust—but beautiful as the night is beautiful or as your death might be beautiful, or even, as we put it when we remembered whose daughter she was, as beautiful as her father’s soul had been black. All the same, some of them—from Buiges, Tarnac, Siom, or more distant places—would go up to Féniers. They parked their vehicles near the church, then went and sat on the terrace of Thézillat’s café or, if the weather was bad, at its window. They all had the same weary, rather embarrassed, almost sad look, knowing that they were backing the wrong horse, that they didn’t look at all like ordinary drinkers, that Féniers wasn’t one of those places where you stop to drink but a place to die in, even though they too were obviously there to inhale something deathlike, dressed as they were in their Sunday best, with collars that they dared not loosen and that looked as incongruous on a weekday as the moon in the midday sun. They were too-young guys or aging men, dressed for a wedding that they knew would never take place, almost all of them tipsy from the drinks that changed color in the tall bell-mouthed glasses before they had to leave without having seen the beauty who saddened them so and whom Thézillat the innkeeper had described in muted tones as they, pathetic, red with shame, hung on his every word; he always waited to do this until the suitor had reached his third Pernod, had finally undone his tie, and placed his elbows on the table; then Thézillat would come over, look up at the sky, and say:

“It’s my round.”

He would wipe a few drops of water from the table with deft movements of his cloth and sit down next to the suitor, very close to the entrance, where a row of multicolored plastic strips pinned to the top served as a kind of curtain. To be sure, he must have experienced the

same frustration himself, so that the two men were suddenly very like a pair of disappointed and unhappy children, even though intent upon a shared task, which (although they were quite unaware of this) had to do with glory, perpetuation of the species, and the solitude into which women's beauty plunges us. Eventually, Thézillat realized why they were so sad at heart and said, well, you couldn't really object to the way of things, could you: a woman of nearly forty still on her own, beautiful as the day and the night, so beautiful you could weep, and there was absolutely nothing you could do about it. "It's quite true," he continued, lowering his voice, "she's never done a day's work, except for that year when she was town-hall secretary . . .," a job she had soon given up, no one knew why (old Bordes when he died having left her and her mother no more than the little house), probably, so people said, because of the second deputy trying to make up to her, as much as on account of her spelling mistakes and her complete indifference to anything to do with Féniers, the Republic, and its citizens. She lived entrenched behind that beauty, which you might well believe now was her grave, her joy and her torment, her reason for living and her death's knell, which is our common lot, to be sure, yet she was more cursed than any of us, because she had that to bear on top of all the rest—no small burden, even if you had to ask why, and some of us thought they knew, because there was the time when that guy arrived from there, from Siom where she used to live and was even born, came like the others and told how they had caught her once when she was still very young and tied her to the branches of a birch tree in the depths of the forest; they knew, the Siom guy remembered exactly, even though he was quite drunk, how soft her skin was, and it was enough to have seen that just once on a spring day in the soft light falling between the birch branches to brand them forever with the certainty that they would never see the like again in their lives, not even in the brothels of Limoges or Clermont, and from that day forward would hate the woman who had opened this wound in them, and all women through her, including those they would marry later and even their own mothers—yes, their mothers too—for having made it possible

in the first place for them to be permanently seared so horribly that the flames of hell were a dew bath in comparison; for the guys from Siom who had done that to her had known for a long time now that there is no lasting union, that you draw close to women only to be torn in the encounter and to suppurate alongside them; that what they call love is nothing but coming a cropper, alienation, a mad fit: neither song, nor transfiguration, nor redemption, but fear, resignation, and the illusion of living for something worth the trouble.

They, at least, the guys from Siom, would receive their punishment in this life. Never again, even if they fixed other bodies to the same branches and undressed, sniffed, felt, and opened them in the same light, would they encounter this shimmering mother-of-pearl temple of flesh swinging in the spring air and investing their loins with a hunger that their fathers had never shown them how to satisfy and in which they might have heard not only the clamor of the great hungers of long ago from mouths reduced to munching horse chestnuts, grass or wind, or even memories, but the din of an even earlier age when almond-eyed warriors smelling of rancid butter, horse sweat, and desert dust grew tired of running and losing their way in forests, shouting, and flames, and opened in women's bellies wounds that allowed them to believe that they had reached the end of their long meander across rivers and plains, through towns and forests, which would no longer seem like traveling through time. They also knew, the men who had tied Suzon to the birch branches and those who had just come to Féniers to engender male heirs, that they would have to be content to groan as they moved between their wives' haunches, where they would revert to being the boys they remained, even though they had produced children of their own and were now on their way to the gates of darkness. There were tears in their eyes as they looked at Thézillat, whose sole purpose seemed to be to keep silence, to deceive, and to renew the rite of this woman's mystery—to be the innocent and cunning guardian of a very austere temple, a duty for which he received no recompense—not a single hope, look, or smile—for Suzon was probably never aware of his

existence, just as she was oblivious to her own myth and, as we may suppose, crossed the road without noticing the countless looks she received from the men sitting at Thézillat's tables, who did not immediately understand that this aloof and elegant woman who dared to wear a veil and high heels, this black flame seemingly dancing in drizzle or sunlight, hands gloved and face concealed beneath sunshade or umbrella, was actually Suzon. And it was only when they crossed to the other edge of the high plateau and began their descent into the valleys that they considered who she might have been. Then they felt both comforted and cheated, happy anyway to be returning home, to be able to escape from their suits and remove all their clothes, assured not only that this woman and all that—the great love affair, beauty, the glory of such a conquest—had never been theirs, but that they had belonged to no one. Then they turned in their beds and began to plow their wives, sheets, and memories until their invariably pitiful male anger dissolved in tears.

## 33

Of course, they did not know that Suzon had spent her near-forty years living with her mother, who had never been able to let go of her daughter, and that—scarcely credible as it was—no suitor had ever come forward to release even Suzon from their way of life, given that the two women made ends meet only by reselling mushrooms that they had bought from peasants and mushroom gatherers, which mother and daughter cleaned and weighed, sorted by size, and arranged in crates to be sold through a wholesaler from Peyrat-le-Château. Of course, they were also unaware of something that the people of Féniers themselves did not know, and we had heard of from our road mender who, as we quipped, was better acquainted with his colleagues on the plateau than his own children, chewing the fat with them at the borders of their territories like landowners with all the time in the world to waste, leaning nonchalantly on their scythes, with pipes or cigarette butts stuck in their kissers, and working this old story just as they plied their scythes. So it was through Chave that we got to know how Pauline kept anyone with a whiff of the prospective lover-boy, beau, or ladies' man about him well

away from Suzon, apart from a wholesaler known as the Spaniard because he was the son of an exiled Galician who had also been a stone-mason and who had settled in Peyrat-le-Château, then had changed his trade from stonecutting to grocery, which meant that he had come down in the world, although the son was able to adapt to the change all the better when, married and the father of two little girls, his only concern, said Chave, was the homage he paid Suzon during his weekly visit (more often during the mushroom season), after satisfying the mother's desires. He even served the pair of them, so the road mender told us, for he grew accustomed, so it was said, to staying overnight in the autumn when the fog came down unexpectedly in the evening and they had not finished grading and weighing their cèpes and chanterelles.

To be sure, the Spaniard had talked of divorce and remarriage, but no one seemed really interested in the possibility, least of all Suzon; she was content with this stud with such delicate, pleasant features, who knew how to enter her and bring her to the point where she bent over his hard shoulder, drove her teeth into his flesh, opened her big eyes as wide as possible, and waited for her blood to stop pounding. A good guy, yes, but he never found the way to her heart and was probably scared by the way the two women looked at him sometimes in the evening, after a meal, when they had left the kitchen table where they had shared a very frugal supper and he was drinking silently with the mother and also raised his glass to Suzon, who drank nothing, not even a thimbleful of blackcurrant liqueur or port to keep them company. All three of them sat in what was called the drawing room (in reality a back bedroom where the partition wall of a little lumber room that old man Bordes used as a washroom had been taken down), which was poorly illuminated by three pretentious yet miserably ineffectual bracket lamps shaped like sconces, their light was dimmed by parchment lampshades. We may suppose that the Spaniard went on drinking in this semi-obscurity so redolent of women without men, listening to the mother's complaints about peasants who wanted to lay her and against the people of Féniers, against men in general, and against a life that nothing could sweeten, that

was sure—neither patience, nor love, nor resignation. And she would start to sigh, nod, laugh sadly, and lean her head listlessly on the Spaniard's shoulder while Suzon was busy with her needlework—probably with that stag hunt deep within a very dark forest from which elegant figures emerged, though it was impossible to tell whether they were running toward the stag by still waters or toward the distant light of the sun going down reflected in the water and endowing it with something of the same nature as the fire that burned within Suzon: a fiery gold whose combustion never left her in peace and made her look forward, her heart throbbing, to the moment when the Spaniard would place her sleeping mother on the sofa, cover her with her shawl, replace a log on the fire (unless it was all pretense, and her mother and he had agreed on the ruse and did everything for form's sake). Then Suzon would lay the fine horsemen, the hounds, and the stag at bay on the sofa table, fold the golden sunset in obedience to the urgent beating in her temples of that other gold melting within her, turn her head to the Spaniard watching her and smiling not only rather idiotically as men do when they're certain they are going to get theirs, but resignedly, as if he had realized how little he counted for in this transaction and that women are the true victors in this business, as he must have thought, since you never know if they really like it or if they are putting on a show—because it's enough, isn't it, to spread your legs and whimper a bit—and besides what did it matter if it was all the same to him anyway, as long as he could burrow deep into that rare flesh that he was the only one to have enjoyed—after all, he had his pride, didn't he?—he probably thought these things as he followed her up the stairs to the attic bedroom, as they called it, though it was actually a loft improved for Pauline's father to store the tools there when he no longer used or needed them, together with some that had belonged to a colleague killed at Douaumont, in 1917, during the terrible slaughter of the defense of Verdun, and that had been received as a gift from the man's wife, who had remarried very quickly.

The Spaniard never entered this room at the same time as Suzon; you could stand upright only at the center, below the ridge of the roof, and

the only light was shed through a narrow scuttle in front of which they had fixed a brown velvet curtain. He was rather tipsy when he sat on the edge of the bed in the semidarkness and studied the walls with their shining hammers, chisels, angle irons, plummets, and rulers, which Suzon (fulfilling a promise made to the old man as he lay dying) religiously polished once a month and which he now examined in the light of the lamp that shone until midnight from the other side of the street, possibly thinking that he had seen the same tools at his father's and had never taken to them; that he, the wholesaler with the natty mustache, as he was known in the Féniers area, had never got to the point where his hands looked like his father's or those of the Pérols quarrymen: pudgy, huge, shapeless, rough, and useless for anything other than manipulating tools like these, and certainly unsuitable for fondling the kind of bodies that he, the son, was so very fond of: his wife's in Peyrat-le-Château and so many other women's wherever he went between Gentioux and Meymac, and Suzon's, of course. She went to the door once the street lamp had been extinguished, scratched the wood, entered, and stood between door and bed to get used to the darkness—not the darkness of the room (for more than an hour she had been dreaming downstairs in her little bedroom, quite alone and waiting for her mother to fall asleep at last) but that of the night in which she had always lived, more beautiful than intelligent, lacking in intelligence what she possessed of beauty, which made her (so they said) an entirely suitable follower of her mother as the Spaniard's mistress, and no problem anyway—at least since they had tied her completely naked to the birch tree in Siom, poked her with their sticks, and made her swing round and round, her hair hanging heavy all about her, and the almost pleasurable sensation of a cool little breeze caressing her skin, yes, it was so delightful to let herself go like that with her eyes shut and forget for a moment that men had never given her a truly friendly look but had gazed at her as they did at her father, with a kind of anger in their eyes, yes, as when they stuck a stick between her thighs from behind and rummaged about in there until they elicited groans and that rattling sound she was more

ashamed of than anything else, while the blood ran down the insides of her thighs, and they savored that blood, that whiteness, that face with wide-open eyes that could no longer see them, for she had experienced her glory to the full in her abjectness and purity—just as now she bore inverse witness to her glory by the rattling in her throat, which the Spaniard would soon draw from her after she had murmured, “Are you there?” and he had answered “Yes, I’m here,” and was waiting for her, wanting her with a desire that set his very gut on fire. He came close to her and watched her turn her back to him to undress, then drape her clothes carefully over the back of the chair in front of the bedside table with a marble top that shone as brightly as the tools on the walls and as Suzon’s naked body bent over the washbasin into which she would pour water from a earthenware jug for no reason he could think of, since she never used it; and she never came near him and never let him near her until this water had been poured, and she had made sure that the towel was hanging neat, clean, and scented on one of the side pieces of the table. Then she turned toward him, one hand before her breasts and the other covering her crack, and calmly watched him undress, then pull back the sheets while she finally let down her hair, which he thought he could hear falling as it came down over her shoulders like a nightdress, scarcely leaving him enough time to part her hair and relish the beguiling curve of her shoulder. She slipped between the sheets and stretched out beneath him without a word, neither looking nor smiling at him, turning her head toward the now almost dark window as if she seemed obstinately to expect it still to yield a light that only she herself could shed, allowing him to thrust into her for so long, so long, and nuzzle her nipples, neck, and hair, never offering him her lips, fixed to the man by that spear of flesh on which she would never have dared let her eyes rest in full daylight, until she felt a dark light blazing within her and accompanied it with groans and little cries, soon abandoning all restraint and imploring him, even shouting that this couldn’t, shouldn’t, be so, that, dear God almighty, no, it wasn’t possible, until once again she was struck dumb as she had been that time under the birches, yet soon began to

wail vigorously when the man had stopped moving in her and she embraced man and words together only to reject them immediately and sweat with them, entirely subject to the ordeal of bearing their burden and of enduring their near-ineffectiveness, and subject to the minor mystery of their vanity and of their impoverishment slowly dropping back into the silence of the night in which she could hear her heartbeats slow down, the singing of her blood die away in her ears, and the man turned on his left side snoring beside her; indeed he snored as loudly as he had groaned, having paid women that mystifying tribute before he found himself alone in the bed at dawn, probably imagining that it had been a dream and that dreams were all we needed for redemption. Then he had to descend to the still cold kitchen, sit down silently at the table opposite the mother and daughter, drink a little coffee from a big bowl, feeling (as he would say later) that there wasn't enough time even to cut a few pieces of stale bread and dunk them in the coffee before he had to leave in his yellow delivery van loaded with fruit crates, driving off in an atmosphere compounded of the scents of undergrowth, sweet moisture, and fresh earth, which separated him from a woman's powerful odor that he could truly escape only in another woman's arms, whether she was his own or the first to happen along, it scarcely mattered, for he craved more vital, warmer, less profound waters in which he no longer felt he would surely drown.

Yet he returned, even out of season. They say he wasn't the only one; there was also that young Parisian, her mother's second cousin, who in the summer or autumn vacation came back to Féniers, his birthplace, where he had not set foot for ages. He recognized no one. One evening at a festival, Pauline made up to him underneath the fairy lights of a merry-go-round, amidst the laughter of girls having fun. She asked him back to her place, offered him something to drink in the little living room as if she were a middle-class woman, talked with intermittent grammatical errors of the good points of Suzon, who she said was asleep on the first floor, for she had sensed that this young man, this eternal student, this blindly enthusiastic heart, was like all other men and just as tor-

mented by what he bore between his legs. Nor did he put up any resistance, so they say, but left the house some hours later, in the middle of the night, drunk on old white brandy and even more inebriated by the sight of Suzon, whom her mother had eventually shown him, asleep (or feigning sleep) in her girl's bed, for the mother had decided immediately (so some people said) that the cousin would be right for Suzon and not for her, and had whispered in his ear:

“I'm sure you've never seen a woman smile like that . . .”

She showed him Suzon's smile, which he was surely the only man to have seen, would gladly have seen again, and did all he could to see again, even going so far as to stand every night by the street lamp to catch a sight of her in the last reaches of its beam, then returned to Paris more solitary, more dazed, and weary than Antoine, Orluc's dumb son, who if you gave him a glass of red wine would dance in the square, stepping double, forward, behind, and before, laughing, drooling, and singing as many false notes as a whole flock of tipsy birds.

## 34

We at Siom knew all that, or thought we did, and shrugged; and the Lontrade brothers—and all those who had become respectable fathers of families in the meantime and had been initiated into the secret of the birch wood—were among the first to cast a stone at her. But we scarcely mentioned the matter again. We were less interested in the Pythres now. We would probably have forgotten them altogether if Jean hadn't still been with us. He changed. His father had left him enough to survive on between the walls of his mean little house. He abandoned the drapery trade. He used the shop only to garage his automobile, a gray 4 CV, which he bought one day from an auto dealer in Buiges; he got himself up like a prince and walked up the main street neither hearing nor seeing anyone until he reached the Renault garage and paid for the vehicle in cash without going for a trial run or trying to bargain the price down, got behind the wheel, drove around the square in front of the Café de Paris four or five times before returning to Siom more inflexible and formal than ever before, with three ballpoint pens sticking out of his breast pocket that were as useless as the watch in his waistcoat pocket.

No one could say why he had bought this new automobile when his father's 403 was still perfectly all right and he had usually traveled by bicycle for some time: a real racing bike that he had acquired God knows where (and no doubt at the same time as a hunter's rifle that he used only once, to kill two snakes: the first in front of his gray hut at the back of the garden, and the other above Chadiéras's drinking trough, on the way down to the lake), which he mounted every day, even when it was raining, his thighs tightly encased in narrow racing cyclist's shorts, his thin wiry legs shaved and oiled, wearing a kind of brightly colored jockey's jersey and his cap backward, in order to train around Siom before entering every kind of competition at local festivals and at regional elimination events, where he invariably came in last of all if not several laps behind the next-to-last competitor—and then claimed at Berthe-Dieu's or at Ma Chabrat's (for she too had opened a bar) that he had won the race, but they had refused to recognize it, that they had counted the laps incorrectly because he went so fast, or that Poulidor—not the champion but his brother, the one with metal-rimmed spectacles who raced wearing a leather helmet—had overtaken him only at the post and they were infatuated with the brute. He said all this smiling, his hands in his pockets, as indifferent to the two tails of his jacket sticking out behind him as he was to his past, so to speak, stomach drawn in and shoulders hunched as if he were still on his bike, not caring if anyone was listening to him. Then he would leave, having swallowed his beer, which he insisted must be Ancre brand or, if not, then Le Pêcheur, refusing to drink anything else, and leaving as he had arrived: without anyone noticing him enter, which made Berthe-Dieu say that this particular Pythre was like a muffled fart—you didn't hear him yet suddenly he was there, horribly present, and then he vanished, you couldn't say how. And we would watch him go back up the square, by now leveled and asphalted, very sunny since they had cut down the big oak, whose timber several people had profited from, Chabrat getting a front door out of it, Sivadiaux a ladder, and Ma Heurtebise her coffin, so they said, which she kept in her barn covered in an old sheet, perhaps even in the old pall

that until then had grown mildewed in the shed where the hearse that no horse would draw again was waiting.

This Pythre was truly one of us; we no longer found anything to say against him, as the women had long been aware, muttering that this was all we could decently do for the Pythres. And, apart from the races at which he went all out so stubbornly that he had become famous all over the high plateau and beyond, he lived as none of us would ever have lived, even if he had had the opportunity: doing nothing, sitting on a chair among the kitchen's musty smells and shadows as he had when they were all there together, or stretched out on his bed or outside on the little bench, always daydreaming. Perhaps he was assessing his performances at the races, which he constantly reinvented and to which he allocated different casts, not only the unknowns and local stars he raced with, but the real ones, Bobet, Anquetil, Geminiani, Koblet, Coppi, Darrigade and so many others whom he had possibly encountered during heats, men who were so exceptional, radiant, and celebrated, yet quite like him in possessing the exhausted, grimacing, suffering, exaggerated faces of dancing contemplatives, so that he might easily imagine that he shared their glory and that his name, Jean Pythre, was also on everyone's lips and especially emerging from the shadowy mouth of the radio sold to him by the Eymoutiers electrician and thanks to which, he said, he could speak to those who were not there—dead or living, living or dead, it was all the same as far as he was concerned—yes, to Médée for instance, whom he started talking about though it was not clear to anyone if, for Jean, he was living or dead, and if he had existed at all other than in the heavy scent of the trees of life that he still inhaled, no longer behind the washhouse or Berthe-Dieu's garage, but during his morning crap, among the trees planted along the school wall by big Pythre before he died.

Yes, an odor, Médée, trees of life, and sweat, also perhaps a forgotten voice and remains of voices that had been silenced: a smile, the extraordinary tenderness of a smile, indeed, but not of this kind, not the smile of this thin, quite small guy with the almost etched and burned features,

shaved neck, and sad, hard expression that did not suit his too-weak smile, quivering lips, and bitter mouth. One morning the fellow stood there in front of him against the light, in the sun-drenched corridor that Jean had just entered and where he had opened the door, not because he had heard the knocking (you could have hit it with a battering ram and he would never have moved, because that did not count; to be allowed in you had to make your way through the garage, the door to which was never closed, and tap lightly on the kitchen door), but because a boy had just opened the kitchen door:

“Pythre, Pythre, there’s someone here to see you!”

As he shouted the name, he mispronounced it, sounding like some crone calling “Pretty! Pretty!” as people do in our locality when they summon the chickens to be fed.

Did he understand what the man with a drawl was saying to him in the bright May sunlight: that he was Médée, his brother, and that he was coming home at last, because the war was over across the Med, and he was sick of it, his guts were aching, and his whole body was weary, and he wanted something more than a tent or a warrant officer’s room, because he might be a second lieutenant, but he didn’t think there would be another war, he didn’t believe in that any longer, in fact he didn’t believe in anything very much now, for they had been cheated, sold down the river, humiliated, so he deserved something of a breathing-space?

His younger brother looked at him obliquely, with open mouth and wrinkled forehead, certainly not recognizing his brother in this man with a copper-colored face apparently wilting in the sun, who propelled him gently back toward the kitchen door, while Jean did not defend himself and did not even try to stop Médée from entering with him and sitting down at the table, at the very place where, so many years before, their father had nailed his hand. Médée lifted the oilcloth and confirmed that the hole was still there in the old wood, shook his head, and murmured, half-turning to his brother:

“I know what happened to Father.”

Jean was not listening to what he said, but as the circumstances

forced themselves on him he began to stammer in a tired, almost inaudible voice with childish inflections:

“Oh, Médée, you’re not dead . . .?”

Médée smiled at him then (as the little boy said who had acted as a messenger and whom neither of the brothers thought of dislodging from the dark doorway); and, so it seemed, neither one nor the other really cared what he was saying.

“You’re not dead?” Jean repeated.

“No!” said Médée, who might just as well have said nothing.

The younger brother hardly looked up at Médée, at the man who surely was Médée but smelled neither of tree of life nor of sweat and whose eyes and face, way of raising his head, very stiff neck, and direct gaze were reminiscent of the young father. Jean scarcely noticed how he stood up again, opened the cupboard door, took out two glasses, and a half-full liter bottle of cheap red wine, which he opened by springing the metal cap with a deft movement of his nail before pouring the wine and raising his glass very high, into the sunlight above their heads. Jean was still smiling with a gentle yet still mistrustful expression as he listened to the soldier tell him of green mists, rope dancers, dumb girls with very smooth bodies, a hellish dungeon, traitors, men with lead balls for eyes, cockroaches, bamboo cages, and warm rains; of another, less glorious war; of a victory no one had wanted; of dishonorable enemies; of naked, lost, forgotten soldiers; of unburied corpses; of flags trodden into the dust of the jebels . . .

“Of what?” Jean asked, raising his head.

“The jebels, the mountains . . .”

Jean did not understand. Médée emptied his glass and went over to him, took his hand, shook it, went into the corridor, then left without shutting the door, and made his way down to the automobile that he had parked in front of Berthe-Dieu’s and in which a very young woman, a blond with a patient expression, was waiting for him, looking straight ahead, her eyes protected by sunglasses, at the deserted street where the morning mist was dancing and possibly, a little further on, down behind

the acacia terrace, where no one went any longer, at the gray lakeside, and above that at Arbiouloux's and Philippeau's sloping fields overrun by gorse, bracken, and little oak trees.

They returned the next day. The three Rivière brothers were with them. They climbed up to the meadow above the square, opposite the terraced garden of the former presbytery, which big Pythre had allowed to grow wild. In the high grass Médée discovered the crucifix whose wood was so decayed that he easily removed the rusty Christ figure; we watched him lift it up in the full sunlight, holding it under the armpits, with its quivering halo of brambles and nettles, then let it go, allowing it to fall a long way off, and perhaps he even threw it into the grass with a kind of stifled laugh that made us say he was a real Pythre—this forgotten man whom we had thought was dead—and just as crazy as his brother. Then we saw him talking to the three Rivières, who were measuring, hammering stakes into the ground, writing things in a black notebook, while the young woman sat on an old tree stump at the edge of the field, daydreaming, chain-smoking, shivering slightly in her bright raincoat, and, as if casting dice, threw her cigarette butts at the very spot where a graceless yet solid house was erected a few months later, the highest in Siom, where none had been built for more than twenty years. Of course, this outcome would have delighted us if we had not suspected that this Pythre—with his residence and its central gable, gray rough-cast walls, and green shutters; his meadow on which he had sown a lawn, his pines, and his box hedges—wanted to give an impression rather like the effect aimed at by his father on the other side of the lake: he wished to appear successful, not played out, whereas we now knew that he was no more than a lost soldier, a half-pay officer, another poor sap who wanted to look ever so much bigger than his boots, when all we wanted was to be left in peace for the rest of our lives while time forgot us as we even forgot ourselves, after imbuing our descendants with the ability to forget, which had allowed us to get through this century by behaving as if we were alive—in itself a way of believing in life, of being upright and industrious—and by gradually renouncing everything, until

we heard dying within us the high-pitched voice of the almond-eyed warriors with flat, beardless faces that looked like tight-shut, dirty fists, in their colored muskrat or goatskin tunics, until that voice ceased to shout in our blood, together with the voices of Saracens and Englishmen, among the winds sweeping over the high plateau and dispersing the voices of all our dead, bearing with them at last, that same winter, the voice of Pauline Bordes, who had been big Pythre's wife and not one of us.

That did not prevent a few of us from going up to Féniers one Thursday in February to accompany her to the cemetery, where she lies near her father in a narrow grave for which he had cut the stone and cross himself. We were more numerous than the people from Féniers but fewer than those lonely men who, so it was said, followed the cortege only in order to see Suzon in her somber glory, her face open to general view for once, almost smiling beneath the flimsy veil that sometimes stuck to her lips in the cold air, yet more distant than ever with her dark blue gaze, which she would direct at someone—or rather at someone's shoulder, to be precise—only to transfer it immediately to some mysterious horizon, perhaps nowhere, or wherever the bright winter sun no longer shone. There she advanced, surrounded by her two brothers, the elder who had been counted as dead and took her arm and the younger one, pale and gawky, engulfed in his too-large suit, a little behind the others, Jean Pythre whom we remembered later having seen before at Féniers, wearing a racing cyclist's cap, thighs enclosed in tight black cycling shorts, and sporting a number on chest and back that never brought him any luck, a poor sap, the eternal loser pedaling as if to dreamland, the only one that day with tears in his eyes because he did not understand why, once again, in that little house, they had kept him from kissing his Ma.

Médée had arrived in the morning to wake him up before he could shut himself in the gray hut at the bottom of the meadow and, in total silence, drove him to Féniers, where they stopped in front of the little house with a lintel in which stonemasons had chiseled their signs. The

downstairs rooms were deserted; there were only two old women muttering at the back of what had been the mother's room and watching over Pauline lying on the bed and still smiling feebly, now surrounded by the three children, who looked at each other on the sly and stood there self-consciously, unable to say anything, thinking perhaps that, at the end of the day, they really did not know one another in spite of their blood relationship or because of it, not knowing themselves properly and incapable of happiness, each having long since discarded whatever innocence he or she possessed or not having known what to do with it; and, if that were not enough, they also had to bear the everlasting misfortune of being Pythres and yet behave as if nothing had happened before they went forth to discover the world in the clash of arms and the silence of languages, to bury themselves in a useless beauty, or to scorch away for bets on a rickety bike only to lose, only to find themselves lonelier than ever, so solitary indeed that they hardly recognized themselves and probably, as they followed the light delivery van carrying Pauline's body along the icy road, thought it scarcely mattered—that all this, as far as Jean was concerned, was entirely without significance now because names could evoke nothing now—certainly Médée's no longer recalled the fragrance of a tree of life, nor Suzon's the scents of the Veix bedroom—and because Mother was in heaven.

They were Pythres; they had that in common and knew it, especially Suzon who could have exchanged her family name for another mundane or pompous one, and who had finally resigned herself to her fate, just as Médée accepted that with time he would become the spitting image of big Pythre, and Jean, who understood none of that, would also give in and, after the burial, returned with his brother and sister to the deceased's kitchen, where Suzon served them salami and wine and the boiled beef and vegetables whose smell had mingled since mid-morning with the odor of the fumigation paper they had burned in Pauline's room and that of the cheese and cake that she had ordered from the confectioner at Peyrelevade. They ate and drank copiously, said nothing, looked at each other as one listens to rain falling or logs collapsing in the

fire, Suzon engrossed in the silence of her beauty, Médée in the echoes of wars not wholly extinguished within him, whereas Jean, concerned only with his bowels, fidgeted on his chair and watched his brother like a thrashed dog until at last Médée said the toilet was at the end of the corridor.

Jean went to a door with frosted-glass panes, shut himself under the stairs, and switched on the light to reveal an exceptionally white throne; it was so clean and cold that he hesitated for a time before sitting down and daring to produce an offering thin and hard from over-long retention. They said that was the first time he had shat in any but his own place and that even then he cacked in his hand, examined the turd for some time, could not bear to cast it into the lavatory bowl and pull the chain, but wrapped it in pink toilet paper, then in his handkerchief, and slipped the package into his jacket pocket. When he returned to the table, it was some time since the coffee and brandy had been drunk. Médée got up, kissed Suzon on both cheeks, took his brother's arm, pushed him into the corridor before he could utter more than a muffled groan, propelling him to the threshold, which they crossed without turning round, and to the automobile, which they finally climbed into without once looking at the window from which their sister watched them drive off in the direction of Meymac.

At Millevaches they turned right, toward Saint-Merd, passed through it at about two o'clock, then stopped shortly after Fournol heath, at the spot where they met the Vézère again, running beneath the ice, among tall pines. Médée had driven slowly, teeth clenched and eyes screwed up behind the sunglasses he put on as soon as they were facing the sun, as unaware as Jean that big Pythre had covered the same route sixty years before them, walking before a cart with two red brown cows yoked to it and the big brunette dragging along behind, her waters breaking.

"Is it you giving off that stink?"

Médée's voice was so low as scarcely to be heard. Jean did not answer him; he hadn't taken in what his brother said but was certainly very concerned with the source of the smell, which he had tried to confine to his

pocket yet which the vehicle's heat urged upward as an odor first delicate, then insidious, and soon so vile that Médée had to stop, park the Dauphine on the verge, climb out, go to the other side of the automobile, open the door, and haul his brother out, continually warning him that he just couldn't go on stinking like that—like some Vietnamese or Arab, he hissed—and, if he had known everything about the Pythres, might well have added that they, the sons, were certainly less entitled than the others to give off such a stench and should keep as far as possible from everything that might be reminiscent of dung, the cradle, and the grave. Jean did not understand. He stood there in the strong icy wind that swept across the heath until it was captured by the declivity through which the river ran. Night would soon fall. They could hear crows bickering behind a clump of birches and a few gun shots reverberating much further away, behind the hills in the east. Médée surveyed his brother, who was not looking at him yet smiled timidly; his clothes inflated his body so much that you would have thought him twice his real size, and his jacket was weighed down on the right by something quite out of place, something Médée was waiting for his brother to discard, though he knew that Jean would do nothing about it even if he hit him and that he would have to put up with it until they got to Siom, saying nothing that would make Jean weep. He had to get back into the vehicle and speed off to Buiges and Siom, where he would watch Jean make his way slowly toward the rear end of the meadow, gather a handful of sand before entering the gray hut, express the turd, inspect it for the last time before depositing it on the pyramid in the hole, and allow the golden dust to trickle through his fingers, then over it.

## 35

When spring came Médée, or Médée's wife, or rather Médée commissioned by his wife, told Jean to demolish his convenience; as the heat increased, the odor became intolerable and the very sight of the edifice offensive. A set of public toilets had just been built against the wash-house opposite the town hall, and the water there came burbling down every seven minutes as loud as you please. Nevertheless, though we no longer wanted to see it on our streets in the future, we had to put up with something like Jean's nuisance from Berthe-Dieu's animals, the Chadiéras heirs, and Billy, the Norman with sandy-red hair who had arrived a few years before to rent Philippeau's farm—together with his big herd of black-and-white cattle, his wife, sons, and daughters—who were as sandy-red as he but never said much to anyone and whom no one dared to look straight in the eye, especially when the two Billy juniors—sons as hotheaded as the others were fiery haired—were squiring the daughters and in an arrogant and aggressive mood, but anyway you had to be madmen to come and set yourself up among us, on that black soil, and behave as if you wanted to start a tribe with those two idiots,

who were always canned from God knows what, rage or hard liquor, and those girls who were too big for us and would have frightened even the horniest men and walked along so disdainful and silent behind the thirty cows they fetched from the meadow every morning and evening for milking, which, to our eternal shame, deposited their muck on the road-way, on the steep route down to the lake, and in front of the acacias.

Médée's wife, at any rate, found it shameful—that was young Denise: small, house-proud, almost ash-blond with black eyes, lean bodied, daughter of a notary's clerk from Bourganeuf in the Creuse, where Médée had gone after demobilization. Feverish, stupefied, empty-handed, he had been wandering for two days and two nights in Limoges, with a lump in his throat that made him want to cry and came from his belief that he had lost out, been double-crossed. He didn't agree that the war had been both won and lost on the other side of the ocean, as they said, and, refusing to accept that it was pointless to hope in anything at all, dreamed of no longer being alone and so, halfway through a filthy night, remembered that young girl he had come across a few months before in the very same place after getting back from Indochina. He had just left a cinema showing a very old movie about fighting the Japanese in World War II called *Objective Burma!* He had gone to see it because he felt lost in this vast rainy town and because he still needed to believe in fighting for the French empire and the glory of France. She kept laughing and had linked arms with a red-haired girl just as jolly as she was in the pale neon lamplight; her laughter was too loud, to be sure, though not unpleasant. But he was angry and on the verge of telling them to shut up because there wasn't anything amusing about all that: the Japs and the Vietminh were just the same—yellow bastards whom he had gotten away from by the skin of his teeth. But he watched them laughing and persuaded himself that they were making friendly fun of him because he was thin as a rake and stiff necked even then, even though he could rely on his deep, soulful eyes that had already turned the head of more than one woman (a point he stressed); and so he laughed too, because he wasn't Errol Flynn but merely a poor soldier

who had just been liberated from the bamboo cages of Vietnam only to be dispatched to the jebels of North Africa, and guessed that the little blond found him quite attractive but wasn't that sure of himself yet or probably recalled just then what the Foreign Legion chaplain had said: that words are like God or women; they disappear as soon as you go looking for them and emerge shining in all their glory the moment you renounce them.

The girls accepted a lemonade at the station buffet before taking the train back to Bourgneuf. He saw the blond there again several times, always in the company of her friend the laughing redhead; but Denise was more serious than her companion: she looked at him already as if she had set her heart on him definitively and could tell that he would be her man once the other war was over. She said, yes, he could write to her, and received letters from him as poor and inept as the words he used to describe himself at the station buffet when she had been shopping in Limoges and they were both waiting for the 5:11 afternoon train. He tried to tell her what he expected of a woman, but she was quite aware of all that, yes, knew a lot more than that, for she was twenty, wasn't she, and had observed her mother and her father through all those years, in their little house on the way out of Bourgneuf, and was probably only too pleased that he narrated his heroic feats of battle while she pretended to find war ghastly yet deep down in her eyes anticipated with relish the shouting, blood and sand, and the sun going down in the desert; for that was how she pictured war, in spite of the newsreels: soldiers in brightly colored képis and white squadrons or patrols unleashed against natives as cruel as they were deceitful, heathen in fact, until both bands of men died in anonymous twilight glory under the resolute gaze of a chaplain with a beard like that of Charles de Foucauld, the hermit priest among the Touareg of North Africa, whose life she had probably read about in the cheap history magazines her mother subscribed to; her head was so full of these images that she was rather vague about who really sent her the many short, rather awkwardly phrased letters she waited for, or who exactly it was who returned to Limoges from time to

time for a few hours, always putting up at the same shabby hotel not far from the station, where he could not doze off because he had already slept enough during the crossing and the interminable hours of rail travel after Marseilles, and was accustomed to talking only to men now—and then as a matter of urgency or when drunk—and said nothing when he was with Denise, for she was fifteen years younger and he was quite unwilling to deceive her with somber tales of manhunts, skirmishes, and interrogations in Algiers.

He had been heroic but not in the way she imagined; his was a mundane valor, an inexorable submission to rules and regulations, and to perseverance itself, with intermittent fits of hatred and disgust and flashes of renunciation—and a final capitulation to silence and goodwill; and behind all that you could sense the unique fear that he was born with and had always had to conceal, from his father as from the Vietnamese and the fellahin, and that led him to bear arms with a strange fierce intensity. But he knew that there were other rules, higher laws, necessary distortions of truth. And so he spoke of deserts, palm trees and camels, men in blue veils worn in the presence of women and strangers, girls with glowing eyes, the reveille sounding in the whiter dawn of a minor fortress; and when he saw she was dreaming, he asked her why she found all of it so captivating; and then she smiled, raised her dark eyes to him, and replied with a tremor in her voice and feigned naïveté:

“There are no palm trees at Bourganeuf.”

It was to Bourganeuf he went when demobilized a few months later, when it was all done over there, with no winners or losers admittedly, but in an atmosphere of shame and without forgiveness. He stopped at the best hotel and spoke on the phone without lowering his voice in front of the owner, as if he wanted to publicize something that amounted to less even than an affair or a secret engagement to be married, determined now to raise it to a level other than that of dreams and submission to fate. He saw her again; her mother was with her this time. She had changed: her hair was shorter, cut square with two curls ending in points on her

cheeks, and she was wearing black-striped trousers that were very tight around her calves and a canary yellow blouse. She was bigger. She listened to what he said with the patience of women who know that they are more bracing than pretty or not pretty enough to fall in love any more intensely than might be reasonable. He talked of order, shared duties, deserved rest, realizable hopes. We may suppose that Denise listened to him with eyes lowered, or raised to the lime trees on the road-way or the pines further up, on the road to Guéret, smoking a cigarette that she must have regretted lighting because she put it out at once and, her heart beating, although she also knew that she was already deceiving him, waited for the words she had been hoping to hear for so long, but from more glorious lips, although she did hear him out gratefully, and, after a brief silence and glancing at her mother who was smiling too, replied that he was invited to dine the next day at the Blanzats'; and when he was there, the father, who was not much older than Médée, took the soldier to one side to ask what his intentions were, and Médée told him that they had waited long enough—it would soon be a year—that they had a right now not to be alone any longer, for he was almost forty and she twenty-four (although he heard the clerk mutter, without malice, that one was always alone), and that he should marry Denise Blanzat in Tarnac, where Madame Blanzat's family came from.

No one among us had known anything about it, though perhaps we just didn't want to know. Tarnac isn't so far from Siom for news of this marriage not to wash up on our banks; unless it was to be considered almost secret, this wedding that was certainly discreet, with Denise's mother and father, a cousin of the mother's, an old girlfriend of the bride's, two dreary little girls, and Médée, who had preferred to say he was alone in the world rather than to go looking for the brother and sister about whom he no longer knew anything and wanted to know nothing. They believed him, and if Monsieur Blanzat (who was acquainted with the Meymac notary's head clerk) was aware of the truth, he found it no worse than any other. You have to imagine them leaving the church—an unpretentious gray granite church like the one at Siom, with

a porch opening to the north in the same way; a few people had assembled in the square but were not very curious about this bride without a train and a groom who looked old, yet the rain that had fallen since dawn stopped at that very moment, and a spring sun caught the short procession that made its way over the gleaming asphalt and through deserted streets to the family house, which they had opened up the day before and on whose steps there was time for an almost happy photograph in order to fix those expressions of trust in the future and propitious signs, not the least of which was the sun that had shone so favorably on the procession; and everyone said that neither Denise nor Médée could have dreamed of a better match—even though its only glories were the supposed feats of arms of Second Lieutenant Pythre, who claimed just one that day, during the meal, when he told them how he had snatched the bayonet of a Vietminh who had nailed his hand to a tree and would certainly have done the same to the other one if . . . But they were no longer listening to him; they looked at the fine scar shaped like an eye almost completely shut, and they shivered, called out that he had to get back to things that weren't so grim, that the outlook was good and time was on their side, though it was not clear if they were talking of the weather or the time that consumes human hearts, yet by common agreement they were striving to put a happy face on things in that overheated little room of the Hôtel des Voyageurs: Denise and Médée, smiling at each other tenderly, as was appropriate, hands together on the tablecloth or knees touching beneath the table, dutifully happy because they could not behave otherwise, to be sure, and putting into it all their hidden energy, which was almost the courage born of despair and made them seem so very touching: the second lieutenant and the clerk's daughter, he reserved and shy, stiff-necked, reticent, and with those appealing, dark, and shadowy eyes; and she modest yet mettlesome, as you would expect of a young woman from the Limousin, and with that smooth complexion and the little laugh that made her seem almost pretty this day, because the will to happiness lends a transient assurance, a royal if fragile look, to even the most nondescript faces; and she

ate and drank as if she had never done either before—which surprised her, made her heart pump faster, made her soft and tender, and certainly curious about this other flesh that before long she would sample in the silence of the family house, where they were soon left alone, somewhat early in the evening, rather self-conscious, still smiling and touching hands, Médée not daring to unbutton her little gray costume, having to deal for the first time with a woman who was neither an easy lay nor for hire, his heart beating (you may be sure) as if he were still young and behaving as if he were an innocent; so that Denise had to show him how cold she was and—her eyes shut, her head bent back slightly—had to guide his fingers toward the jacket buttons and help him (we must suppose that at that moment, even if trembling, she was confirmed in her will to be a woman at last) to remove her dress, blouse, and underclothes before she took off his clothes and drew him to the bed where, with all the lights out and the blinds drawn, she came to know that thin, burning, scar-sewn male body that threw her on her back, possessed her, and made her bleed, then moan, before she could grasp what was happening, probably guessing that any such comprehension was unnecessary or (as her laughing friend who had married the year before had whispered to her) that a quite different kind of grasping was in question, or another kind of breathing, or, rather, urgently hunting for your own breath and not finding it and thinking you would die as a result, while he was probably laboring too rapidly in this new flesh that smelled so clean and exuded a sweat whose odor was somewhat insipid compared with the reek of the Vietnamese, African, and Arab women and the foreign widows in whose arms he had found a few moments of oblivion in the face of death, which he imagined would take him in a similar way, with dizzying flashes in belly and head that would rob him of selfhood and leave him facedown on the earth, his eyes open and his breathing throttled.

And he was lying like that now, against Denise, who was asleep or pretending to be asleep; he found he was still able to weep quietly, he didn't know why, and was probably thinking about the man who lived

alone not far from there, so he had been told, since his father had died and he decided not to visit again; for perhaps he was afraid to reverse the good luck of the omens that the soldier in him interpreted all too readily (more readily than the Pythre in him), the last of them being the young wife's breasts, very beautiful and quite heavy breasts for a woman as thin as that; and, next morning, when the sun shone through the open slats of the shutters and flooded this childhood bedroom where Denise was softly singing, he then felt that he really deserved her, this woman whom he could watch living her life, washing her face, armpits, and crotch, using creams, scented soaps, makeup, and toilet water, so that she looked not tarty but austere, as if she had guessed that austerity (and not sadness or suffering) was the lifestyle of the Pythres—and hers too, this little blond with the slender body and always wearing those severe outfits that she soon had to relinquish for looser clothes, for she was very hopeful, as Médée always said, at Bourganeuf, at Tarnac, where his parents-in-law had let her use the house, and at Siom, where he had one built that swallowed up all his savings and where he looked so ingenuous when he talked about Denise and the child she was expecting, that we were inclined to doubt that this man's misfortune was already at an end.

He knew, and probably always had known, that his father had all but disinherited him, and, being a stone-broke homeowner and father of a little girl born on Palm Sunday and christened Pascale, he would have to join up with the insurers that Monsieur Blanzat had mentioned; and so (as we whispered) he would find it more than difficult to elude his fate as a Pythre, though no one could say precisely what that might entail, and especially how his destiny might differ from our own. In fact we wished him no harm, for he was the most polite, intelligent, and reasonable of all the Pythres and the one with the best chance of escaping that wretched curse. But we could not imagine that happiness would shelter these three creatures under its wings for long; the best they could hope for in that line, we said, would be that the feathers of some bird of ill fortune would merely brush against them, for it was almost obscene to think of them as happy, to admit the possibility that Médée, who had withstood without flinching the sight of his hand nailed to his father's table and who had been courageous enough to abandon everything to become a resolute warrior, had been transformed into this insignificant salesman

driving every morning to the insurance agency at Chamberet, then setting out across the plateau, valleys, and remote plains, soon becoming as well known as at one time the father he was so very like and necessarily accepting that as big Pythre's son he had to chat about his father and brother before raising the question of insurance, for he realized very soon that insurance is a matter of family history, and he was destined to be André Pythre's son, and ultimately no more than that, in spite of the nailing down of his hand, so many conflicts and wounds, his wife and child, his peaceful eyes, and the appearance of a much older man that had always been his.

Instead of having stayed in Bourgneuf to become an atypical small-town man there, he had ended up building a house in our neck of the woods. Young or old, men or women, our time had passed: this sure knowledge persuaded us that Amédée Pythre was indeed fulfilling his destiny; and all those who had seen an insult to the people of Siom in his desire to build a house and to procreate were wrong. He wasn't like Mademoiselle Lauradour, who, when she reached sixty and put her old mother in the geriatric home at Buiges, had a little house built, gave it a tiled roof and central heating—very rare features among us—and lasted hardly three years between her own walls, languishing from boredom and well being before returning to Buiges, where she soon died. It took Médée longer to understand how things were. He believed, oh, yes, in happiness, like all of us when we are twenty, and imagined he deserved it more than other people. But he was over forty (to be sure, had never been twenty—had any Pythre?) and saw the world through his wife's eyes as something to be dressed to a dexterous order; was totally, unshakably convinced that order is the manifestation of truth in all its glory, and, indeed (if they had believed in him), of God himself, or of beauty at the very least; that order is the authentic expression of something from which we are eternally severed yet which persists beyond bodies and landscapes, music and works of art, laughter and languages. Obviously, he had resigned himself to his fate, renounced this and that, repressed self, and could not conceive of glory and pleasures, of singing in spite of

suffering, of awaiting true redemption. He wanted to be like us: sly, garrulous, and frivolous as we were, who had always been there in the notches etched in this stone slab by winds, rivers, and winters; who accepted that soon we would be there no longer, having been shunted to the end of time, of a world, and of eternity in a certain sense, with daughters and sons who had left for the towns, taken office jobs, and married people from elsewhere, exchanging our patois and the ways and language of our region for those of a civilization that found us superfluous.

We were the last, and Médée too, but he did not wish to acknowledge this but hoped to be saved because he had seen death and was in love with a little blond whom he was happy to obey, for even in married love he sought submission, self-denial, and duty. Denise knew how to deal with him and controlled his behavior without abusing her privilege—though not with regard to the brother who lived nearby and whom she did not like. So it was she who made sure that Jean removed from the meadow below her windows the hut with weather-beaten walls and finally filled in the hole, which did not stop him from returning there every morning until Médée made him see that he had to find somewhere else to shit. He refused to go to the municipal toilets by the washhouse; he went for a whole week without emptying his bowels, thinking only of what might be the best place to drop his load, as he put it, and eventually chose a patch below the northern face of the church, always deserted and not far from Berthe-Dieu's dung pit, between two buttresses and near a rotting night-soil cart, so that from this vantage point he could survey the valley, Saint-Martin's fountain and the graveyard up there, the end of the lake, and the road to Limoges.

He had taken his scythe, cut the nettles and the young hazels, and carved out a perfect square within which every morning, in all weathers, he let down his pants, as he put it, for Jean had discovered a certain advantage in his change of resort: here he could monitor the descent of each turd more proficiently and check its consistency before letting the sand fall slowly upon it, his heart beating all the faster when the product was firm, well-shaped, and multicolored, enabling him to recognize,

even if transformed, what he had consumed, though he was always somewhat saddened should he squeeze out nothing more impressive than the likeness of dog's excrement, or too soft and yielding a deposit. The heaps of excreta accumulated in neat rows within the square, resembling the modest order of paupers' graves; he inspected them several times a day. Though we were scarcely churchgoers, we were not slow to show our disapproval, as if it was not sufficiently indecent that, in the past, Berthe-Dieu had erected his stable at the very corner of the church porch. We went to see not Jean, who, like all of us, was a stubborn asshole, but his brother Médée to explain that these daily excretions were not without their dangers, since the northern wall of the church was bulging outward to such a degree that sometimes stones dropped from it and rolled as far as the valley floor; that it would be really idiotic to die like that, with your pants down and shit on your ass; in fact, it was a sure way to hell. Médée looked at us, listened, said he would talk to Jean, then raised his glass. That was the only time that we drank at a Pythre's table. We drank in silence, amazed to see that the eldest of the Pythre children believed so firmly, so simply, in happiness. His wife stood next to him, smiling and radiant, with little Pascale pressed to her breast, in the half-light of the living room. In the evening on that October day we found this rather unusual, for we went straight from our kitchens to our bedrooms, those among us who did not—like Orluc, Sivadiaux, or Nuzejoux—sleep in the kitchen, near the fireplace, in alcoves deeper than graves. The room was redolent of order and peace, warm beeswax, light-colored wood, milk, cooked pears, and that golden yellow tobacco Médée had gotten used to overseas. Denise, too, believed in her happiness and it was to that we drank.

Médée was in need of such strong faith in happiness, which did not shine on him any more than on the others. He spoke to his brother, who did not listen to him at first but then, contrary to all expectations (and when we were almost resigned to seeing the church surrounded by dung heaps) stopped depositing his ordure in the open air in favor of the municipal toilets, which, apart from Liselotte Vialle, the secretary, he

was the only person to use, forsaking the method of burial in sand for the subterranean roar of water, and the torn-up newspapers with chopped and incomplete articles that had given him so much to dream of, for the ultra-thin sheets of beige paper which an unknown hand constantly replaced in the steel container fixed to the wall. He went there every morning to squat behind the frosted-glass pane, above a white surface regularly inundated by water that always frightened him slightly, for, as he murmured, it reminded him of the well at Veix and too swiftly deprived him of the product of his gut.

He was there, we must admit, when the town crier announced below the town-hall windows that Médée had had an accident, for he had fallen on the road to Les Places, at the Vialloche bend, where he had stopped God knows why, perhaps to piss on an embankment with a supporting wall, which collapsed under him. They brought him back in his own automobile, his head split open, eyes half-shut, smiling weakly. They say that Jean stayed squatting in the toilet all morning and that they had to tap on the frosted glass several times, then threaten to break it, before they could extract an assurance that he had not drowned in the toilet bowl, and then all they could drag out of him was that long, round-mouthed, very soft-voiced “Oh!” in which he wrapped everything that he heard. We watched a silhouette rise slowly behind the glass, bend forward a little, then press a deformed and seemingly defiant face against the pane; yet when the door opened, there was nothing to be seen but the face of the child we had always known, with its trembling lips, mouth opening and shutting with no sound emerging, screwed-up eyes, and stooped shoulders. He stumbled. We supported him. He pulled away as if he understood at last that it was actually his brother who had fallen on his head and on whose behalf he now wept against the deafening rumble of the water behind him and to whom we led him, to that room that none of us (Jean no more than we) had ever penetrated, where it smelled as good as the living room the time when we were there and where everything was certainly too fine for lumps like us, but also for Médée; too fine at any rate to have done him any good, we would say, when

Médée eventually expired after fifteen long days of agony—but painless agony, the doctor assured us, the same one who had signed the father's death certificate while he was still alive and who, this time, not wishing to sign the son's, called in a colleague from Treignac so that they could confirm jointly that he had really passed from life to death, this man who was lying ensconced in the far-too-broad bed, his head wrapped turbanlike with strips of white cloth as if he had finally reentered the company of the princes whose palaces he had seen in the depths of jungles and deserts, becoming one of them not so much by feats of arms as by dint of that mundane heroism known as self-denial—but also by renunciation, since Siom certainly did not wish to claim him, with that slight smile on his lips, watched over by Denise and Pascale, the former with the closed, hard, noble expression of a woman fundamentally unshaken by all that, for she knew that no kingdom, even the least of all realms, is of this world; and the latter, the quiet little girl with that somber face like her mother's, solemnly watching all the men and women approach the bedside of the father of whom later she would remember nothing.

When he looked into his daughter's eyes Médée must have known that he could not decipher her expression as he did the sky, which he spent some time contemplating every evening before he closed the shutters to see what color—pink, light or dark—the Limoges girl's ass had taken on and thus predict the next day's weather. When he saw his wife and child sitting in the room's warm half-darkness, he probably imagined that he could find happiness (if not eternity) here on earth below. And we supposed that he was probably happy now, wherever he might be; that at last he had found the peace that he had tasted during five years among us, which had ended with the collapse of a wall at a field's edge, where he, Médée, who had tramped through rice fields, the bush, and up-country in North Africa, and who had experienced much more devastating defeats—the capture of Dien Bien Phu, the loss of Algeria, and the downfall of the Pythres—had gone to take a piss.

Denise was not anxious to lose everything—which she would have, in her view, should he be buried near his father at Siom or with his mother

at Féniers—and insisted on interment in her family crypt at Tarnac. All Siom was there, or all that remained of Siom (for we had taken to counting our numbers on such occasions). Suzon did not appear. Jean stood between Farges and Orluc, smiling as he did whenever he emerged from the toilets. It was as if it had nothing to do with him and he had not seen, there on the pillow, his elder brother's turbaned head and had never believed that Médée had come back, which made us remark yet again that the Pythres did not behave like other folk and did not know what mourning meant; at least that was what we thought until we realized that Jean had gone into mourning in his own style, for he had stowed his bicycle in the old shop where it rusted away afterward, hanging on the wall between rabbit skins, old jackets, and scythes; below the punctured tires, cap, numbered placards for competitors' backs, and all the rags and shreds of his former glory.

## 37

So the time had come when Jean was the only male to bear the name Pythre. Like an outcast Denise had left Siom one Sunday evening in June. She entrusted the key to Madame Heurtebise, the blacksmith's widow, former postmistress, and hired mourner, who on one Sunday a month opened the house to air it, as she said, but instead strutted about there, mumbling as if she in her wounded crow's voice were communing with the dead. Farmer Billy had gone too: a vast cattle transporter had arrived one morning to take away his cows, which he had followed in his automobile, accompanied by his sons and the daughters no one had wanted to take on. The Nuzejoux brothers had died, one of tuberculosis, the other of syphilis; others had frozen to death, broken their necks while trying out a moped, or imagined they were experiencing a second spring with some slut who had only made them age all the faster. The result was that only some thirty souls remained in Siom, all preferring their fragment of glory, and Berthe-Dieu's four cows, which, four times a day, climbed up and down the main street to the cries of a little herds-

man with a pale, heavily freckled face, who looked about as if he were afraid of his own shadow.

So Jean Pythre was alone, always had been alone, and anyone could see why who saw him spend his days sitting on his little bench enjoying the air he breathed just as if he had drunk the three liqueurs from God's own hand, although he was not yet forty at the time and brooded over his life, just as he worried the bone of the chop that had become the mainstay of his meals and was surrendered to the dogs only when as dry and polished as the shaft of a hickory walking stick; as he himself was, people also said, in women's hands and hearts, for since then he had won an entry to that world of women, the first and only Pythre whom women cared for in that way and pitied, even though they could not really bring themselves to like him, for, as they muttered, he was not at all made for love, at least not for the kind of love that exhausts men and humiliates women.

In fact, since birth he had enjoyed a place in the lives of our women, and also in our words and in our dreams, for he was a love child and you could truthfully say that he was handsome. If he had been ugly, we would not have liked him any less, that is, we would still have gently pitied him, for remember at that time we no longer had anything to pity, not even ourselves, who would soon be lying down there in the earth and who no longer understood why people took so much trouble not only to live (as we women had lived) but to give life and also to go into raptures over it, if it was only to end up like that—in tears, blood, sweat, and twisted faces—on the night when the best among us, but also the worst, had already preceded us, some certainly far too young and others only after living out their time, and we who remained—those other women behind us hard on our heels—keeping our faces in obscurity, ancient fires about to go out and resigned to that, having always been more or less resigned, without having cut too bad a figure in the everlasting struggle to maintain the species, at any rate never having resorted to make-believe or treating it as a duty; and we held out to the very end, until our blood dried up, unlike some who gave in before it was time,

such as Aurélia de Monteil, who had chosen to sink to the bottom of a well, or that farmer's wife from Condeau who like a man had killed her family with so many gunshots before bursting her own head like a melon. No, we tried to be good, to find love within ourselves, or something akin to love, or to improve ourselves and to do what most resembled what was good, like Rosalie Roche, one of the vilest bitches in Siom, with the most feared tongue, who one October morning, when no one thought she had been able to move from her house for a long time (which had made her relations care for her and hate her with that extreme bitterness that we so often showed to useless mouths), rose from her bed by herself, dressed, tied under her chin a small, black varnished straw hat from which the ribbon was missing, and climbed up to the last of the Pythres almost nimbly. She did not knock at the door but went through the old shop as if she were at home, and appeared in the kitchen to the left of Jean, who was engaged in cutting minute, virtually equal cubes of bread over a bowl of coffee, not permitting a single crumb to fall. There she emerged and told him her name, or rather shouted it since she knew no other way to speak, yet he neither answered nor even turned around but merely made gestures as if to chase away this grimacing, toothless Rosalie Roche with a head as dry as an old chestnut, and who, as he certainly did not know, was the incredibly ancient mother of that Jeanne Roche who had brought him into the world almost forty years before, the old woman who had frightened him at one time when she threatened to attack his bottom and legs with nettles, emerging he knew not why where he least expected her, and when he was alone—on the path leading to the presbytery, behind Chabrat's, between the sandarac trees at the washhouse, in Berthe-Dieu's loft, Liselotte Vialle's henhouse, while Heurtebise was alive at the entrance to the smithy or at Saint-Martin's fountain—wherever he sought refuge, where he daydreamed of the future and breathed in the odors of people who were no longer alive. And now she stood there—bending over him, taking short, rancid breaths, her eyelids unusually red as if she had been weeping continuously, though her whole life long, so they said, she had never

been able to shed a tear—and she looked at him in an almost beneficent, at least not hostile, way, urging him in her old magpie’s voice to get up, wash, and dress. She went straight to the gas oven, put some water on to heat, sat on his father’s former chair (she did not know that, but if she had known she would have done the same thing), after Jean had gone to his room to dress, furious that his morning ritual had been disturbed but still afraid of the old woman, having realized that this morning he would not be going to the municipal toilets to drop his pants and obeying this old woman to whom he had never said three words, then accompanying her on foot to Buiges while she walked a little ahead of him as she had done all his life, ignoring the automobiles, at least for the short space of three miles, and progressing more rapidly in spite of her age than this big simpleton in his light gray oversize clothes, who seemed somehow to be limping behind her. She made this clear to everyone, and did so to Madegal who ran the cab and with whom she arranged for them to be driven to Eymoutiers, where he waited for them for an hour or so, in a sloping street on the road to Bourganeuf.

Old Rosalie and Jean Pythre spent that hour in an almost deserted little bar, so Madegal said, watching everything from his cab parked on the other side of the street: the taproom with its light yellow walls, and standing at the counter two or three guys who had come down from Neuville, Plainartige, or Nedde and held forth about the unrest that had affected the Republic for two months. One of them (Madegal could hear him through the half-open door of the bar), a thin fellow with deep blue eyes and a big beret fixed on his head, maintained in a monotonous voice that the Reds, or so they were saying up there around Tarnac or Siom, had drawn up a list of everyone they intended to wipe out (“Shoot, yes, shoot or deport, like the Krauts!”) as soon as they seized power. The other men said nothing. Old Rosalie and Jean were sitting side-by-side at a table at the back of the bar and were silent too. The old woman was watching the owner—a short woman of sixty with curly dyed hair, who was dressed not in a dark smock with a pattern of tiny flowers but, like some middle-class city dweller, in an emerald green

dress and a white shawl, and who smiled as she listened to the big-mouth, glancing occasionally at the man and woman to whom she had just taken a round tray with their aperitifs in tall, wide-mouthed glasses, their stems adorned with a tiny gilded ball that made them easier to grip, and the old woman held hers with an inappropriately elegant gesture that allowed her to admire the amber tint of her Byrrh or Dubonnet, as Madegal remarked, whereas Jean, for his part, appreciated the basic alchemy by which a few drops of cold water transformed the brown gold of his pastis into a kind of first yellow, then white milk and after the second glass made him want to talk and weep. He received a third glass and was soon drunk, did not see the two women staring hard at each other, the younger suddenly blushing under the fixed gaze of the older one, then approaching them again on the crests of blue waves of cigarette smoke, only to stop once more at the rear table, not to ask the old woman for their next order, but to stand there without a word, staring, acknowledging that they had nothing to say to each other, that they had never been able to talk to each other, apart perhaps from that day long ago when (this version was as valid as any other) the mother had disowned the daughter as a pregnant teenager, who had just fled from her master at Veix and whom her father, Roche, had wanted to force directly into the dark night, without even letting her return to the house, but whom Rosalie nevertheless went to (and possibly beat, swore at, cursed) in the bakehouse where she had taken refuge, leaning against the oven still warm from its last charge of bread, before despatching her at dawn, not of course to Veix, but to be housed at Pérols with a cousin who could hold her tongue just as we could, at least until little Jeanne recovered or, according to the other version, had given birth: for she went into labor not at Veix or in some gutter, but near Pérols, then took the bastard on a stormy day to Siom. We saw her around noon coming down the high road accompanied by her father and holding the bastard tightly. They went up to Veix by the Jouclas bridge. They say that the door was opened by Pauline, who said not a word, did not blink an eyelid, did not invite her in. Then they heard big Pythre's voice emerging from the

shadows behind her, threatening to shut Pauline out if she let that wind in, and, since Pauline made no such move, he got up, went to the door, and pushed her to the threshold, where she stumbled and revealed Roche and little Jeanne standing there. Roche stared at him gravely, his eyes shaded by his broad black felt hat, his lips quivering under his white mustache stained tobacco yellow below his nostrils. Jeanne looked down. She was very pale and seemed rather dazed. Perhaps she had been weeping because her father would not hold her by the arm. She grasped the swaddled baby tightly, then held it out to big Pythre when Roche murmured:

“Let’s put it behind us.”

She watched the big hands of the man from Veix enclose her child, quite close to her chest. Then he turned his back on them. Perhaps, through the tears she could not repress, she also saw him offer the bundle to his wife, sit down by the fire again, and watch them, until Pauline closed the door. On their return to Siom, the weeping girl was jostled by her rough, humiliated father, who like her stumbled on the uneven roadway.

She returned to Pérols, then found a place not far away in Ars, with a farmer, whose assaults, they say, she had to endure and who got her with a child whom she disposed of. She looked fresh and natural, though no beauty, but because of that, as she was told, placed under the special protection of an angel; thinking that she was secure, she could not understand why the angel neglected his duty and men desired her body—especially her firm and reasonably big breasts, her thighs, and what nestled between them, particularly when she bled; and the farmer from Ars, knowing she was bleeding, pushed her into the barn or the bakehouse, forcing her to suffer a much more intense pain that drew from her tears and cries that grew ever hoarser and prompted her desperately to search with eyes and hands for something to hang on to, though all she found were the man’s shoulders and beyond them some chains and ropes hanging from the roof, which she thought she might grab and hold on to and that might help her to stifle her cries.

They say that she left Ars one summer evening like a gypsy, that she slept in ditches before reaching Ussel the next day by the road from Alleyrat. It was market day. She wandered about there for a long time, trying to look inconspicuous but almost constantly failing, until she allowed a smiling lad to speak to her, who said that he could tell she really needed a little cash. She blushed, tightened the shawl too hot for the season on her shoulders, intending to run off, but changed her mind, as if she already knew what would happen (she had already been told, and in Pérols she had already seen the Masmonteil girl come back afterward, holding her head high, but pale, tears in her eyes and muttering that it wasn't all that bad). She lowered her head and let the fellow lead her to a group of jeering louts, at the center of which another young man seemed to be waiting for her and straightaway undid her coif and loosened her hair, feeling its thickness, assessing its length, and allowing the noon sun to bring out its color. The other man, his accomplice, must have whispered a few words in the wig-maker's ear, probably that they should pay this girl not like the others—in kind, that is, in fabrics—but in real money. She sat on the folding stool, couldn't think how to hold herself, first crossed her arms, then placed her hands on her knees, and finally plaited her fingers on her stomach, trying to smile but feeling stupid and weary. She closed her eyes. Perhaps she no longer heard whatever the idlers were muttering but was listening to the heifers lowing not far away and, even farther off, the train on its way over the Sarsonne bridge. The wig-maker went ahead hastily, fearing that she might change her mind and that the other people concerned would lose heart. She scarcely had time to grasp the little brown lock on her forehead, which she wanted to keep and which she wanted to be seen emerging from her coif later, as soon as all this was over, when she found herself retying under her chin the ribbon of her perfectly round white piqué bonnet.

By then this shorn woman had discovered that beauty cannot be eaten but can be sold. She was aware of many other things and felt naked as she made her way through the crowd, with the young man at her side, neither looking at nor listening to him, and he had to hold her by the

waist when she began to falter. He sat her first under a fountain in the Place d'Armes; then, when she had recovered, he took her to a café, where she drank some chocolate and ate some bread and butter, which she consumed enthusiastically only after inspecting it suspiciously, while he drank a glass of red wine and smoked, stroking his mustache and half-closing his eyes. After trying his luck with her, without success, he left Jeanne alone in the café to settle the bill with the money that she had grasped in her right hand for two hours and had to spend over the next few days, unable to make up her mind about leaving this town. Of course, she knew danger lurked there but, after all, it was a place where you could learn how to cope with it, cash in on it, and elude it, which was impossible in Veix, Siom, or Ars.

That was what they said in Siom, but at that time, in 1928, wig-makers no longer worked like that, so we must believe that she cut her hair off herself, defiantly, and that she survived by some other means and found a job, perhaps at Lombarteix and Balmisse, the printers, though it is more likely that she was offered work at the Hôtel de la Gare or the Hôtel Agneau, where they were looking for a maid. She was, so they say, nothing to write home about. You just wouldn't notice her, even if she had actually been shorn under her white piqué bonnet. Many years later, she would say that she would have given herself to the first man to offer her two lousy sous' worth of sympathy, treat her as a young woman ought to be treated, look at her differently from those whose gaze she learned to avoid: clerks and shop assistants, waiters and salesmen, who wouldn't have paid a centime for the thighs of this slut with cropped hair, a hard expression and an embittered mouth, and, yes, far too skinny in spite of those heavy breasts. All the same, she gave in to one of them, having carried a jug of hot water to his room and finding him in a generous mood because his business had gone well that day. He was a horse dealer stinking of wine and garlic and straight out of the novels of François Mauriac, thickset, with a fierce red bullneck; there he sat, on the edge of the bed, snorting heavily and laughing softly, for no reason or possibly because he couldn't bend down to undo his shoelaces. She

knelt down and loosened the knots for him. He had asked her politely to do so. They say that at that point her bonnet slipped down on to her shoulder and she pretended not to notice. He looked at her still short hair and she waited for him to laugh or to tell her that she looked like an old shepherdess. But he said something quite different, in a voice so gentle that she wanted to cry:

“I would have given you a hundred francs not to cut it off.”

She did cry. He went on smiling; then, since she did not stop, he took her hands, squeezed them, drew her close to him, and put her on his knee.

“You don’t weigh very much.”

And he laughed. She allowed him to undress her, kiss her neck, lie on and in her, causing her no pain, the first not to do so, so that, yes, she denied him her mouth but not her depths, where he moved slowly, lingeringly, so that she suddenly trusted this weight she felt on her and in her, and was about to groan but dared not, for she had always suppressed her cries, tears, and laughter. Later she tried to hand back the hundred francs that he held out, but accepted them in the end because he looked at her so kindly. That was what they said had happened, but perhaps it had all been less romantic, a more rapid incident, a little shabbier than that.

We do know that she saw him again; that he embraced her for a hundred francs whenever he wished, without rushing her and as a man who knows what he wants and what he is entitled to. Afterward he talked about himself, his wife—unfruitful and cold as an iron church chandelier—the children he never had, and his friendship for her, little Jeanne. He was sly, sentimental, disillusioned, but not sufficiently to prevent him from falling in love with her or at least from suggesting to her that he should give her a child and that he would help to support it and set her up in Ussel, perhaps, or somewhere else. She would probably have accepted this offer if she hadn’t ruined her insides aborting the Ars farmer’s child; she told him this with her head beneath the sheet, not out of shame but to avoid seeing tears in the eyes of the horse dealer, who

breathed very heavily, stroked her injured belly, and murmured that some people had no luck, that birth and rank did not count, and that we had to drink to the lees whatever fate dished out for us. He liked to say such high-sounding things, and he grasped Jeanne closely, blew noisily through his mustache, and dropped off to sleep, only to wake up alone in the dawn that, we may be sure, he watched breaking with a lump in his throat.

This lasted for three years. And for three years he returned to Ussel when a fair was held and at other times too; he surely hoped that she had not told the truth about her insides or would not admit that another woman's womb could resist the seed of this powerful and successful businessman—especially since he had managed to make Jeanne groan, twist beneath him, on him, and on her knees before him, and had seen her roll her eyes as if she had suddenly caught sight of daylight in the depths of the rainy night in Ussel. Then his visits ceased altogether. She waited for him, surprised that it hadn't happened sooner, supposing that the horse dealer from the pages of Mauriac—that Léonce Echameil, whose tears she had watched trembling on his eyelids one night—must at last have found a more fruitful helper and arranged somewhere for her to live; unless, like Jeanne herself, he had simply renounced happiness.

She had money. She had followed the horse dealer's advice and invested it judiciously. She heard that a café was for sale at Eymoutiers. She took the train there, one Sunday afternoon, accompanied by one of the waiters whose ticket she had paid for just to make sure that he would be there with her, looking distinguished and quite serious in his dark suit, so that they wouldn't be suspicious of a woman on her own. And as she descended toward the Haute-Vienne (as she would when she returned, leaving Ussel forever), she did not peer outside even once but kept gazing straight ahead at no one knows what, certainly not the waiter at any rate, although he might have thought that he had been looked at from time to time and had attracted her silent smile; no, she never looked out of the window once—neither at Pérols, nor Buiges, when the train passed it; nor Siom, as if all that no longer existed or had never existed.

She completed the deal, bought the café, the little house, and a piece of garden. You might say that she bought the waiter too; he was fifteen years older than she, rather ugly, but honest and upright. She married him. It was the best thing for both of them, anyway: for him because he had been keen on her for a long time without saying a word about it and had almost given up hope of finding a bride; for her because she needed a man and to show that a country girl—worse still a peasant bumpkin from the high plateau to which the little town of Eymoutiers, tucked into a deeply notched valley, is one of the dismal gates of entry—though young and scarcely beautiful, could have bought a bar, a house, and a husband.

He helped her to survive the war years, sad that she did not present him with an heir, resigned himself to it, said too that you couldn't have everything, and died quite peacefully, shortly after the Liberation, from a chest disease, as Jeanne said. She was quite proud to be a widow—for widowhood was a respectable state among us—and proud too that her spouse had been carried off by tuberculosis, because she had read in a newspaper that it was a distinguished way to go. She went into mourning as others take up a profession and did not cease to wear widow's weeds, even when she allowed a retired policeman to visit her regularly. She was thirty-eight, but preferred, so they said, the honor of dressing in black to a man's white body. From dawn onward she dreamed of the moment when she could escape from the guests in the evening, close the shop, and retire to her room on the upper floor, which she overheated in summer and winter (since she had always felt the cold) and made over completely, furnishing it in the taste that she attributed to the respectable ladies of Eymoutiers, whose big windows she saw reflecting the evening sun, up there on the other side of the river, behind their pines, their lime trees and birch hedges, and she liked to watch vehicles slowly ascending toward them on the way to Bourganeuf and Guéret, dreaming, even though she had never covered any distance longer than the fifty miles between Ussel and Eymoutiers, and seduced by license plates whose significance she knew by heart, of those regions of France news of which

reached her through the radio continually booming away in a corner of her bedroom, as some years later the television set would do, although she never felt that all that was real—the high plateau, the regions, the world, and she herself gently falling asleep in this bedroom, where she was never cold now and from which nothing, she probably told herself, could dislodge her.

But now her mother had arrived and was sitting there in front of her, although she had imagined her to have been dead for years (and indeed she ought not have been among the living), whom she had forgiven nothing (not having forgiven anyone anything, starting with herself), together with that fellow of about forty who looked so imbecilic, vacuous, crazy; who drank slowly, and saw and heard nothing, while the two women looked at each other without smiling or speaking or showing that they recognized each other. Her heart beating fiercely, Jeanne returned to her counter on the other side of the cigarette smoke, close by the half-open window, wondering what the old woman was doing there, who—as she said—by rights should have been six feet under and ought never to have been born, at least never to have brought any children into this world, especially not her, Jeanne, little Jeanne, whom Madegal from his cab on the other side of the road saw looking at the sky, or possibly nothing, through the window's narrow opening.

The old woman signaled again. Jeanne had to go over there, give her the change from the hundred-franc bill, which shortly before she had unfolded on the table and ironed flat like a handkerchief whose wrinkles she had to eliminate. The three drinkers had been joined by other guys from La Celle and L'Église-aux-Bois arguing about the elections and apparently despairing of the whole human race. They could agree on nothing. She did not see them leave or did not want to watch them get up and make for the door. She turned her head only when she heard the doorbell. Perhaps she understood, but that changed nothing. And when a man from Nedde asked her who or what she was thinking of now, she said:

“There'll never be an end to it . . .”

Did he remember the rough, red face of the woman with curly hair who had emerged several times that day from the cigarette smoke on account of a drinking bout that forced him to take to his bed as soon as he was back in Siom, under the gaze of the old woman, who asked, mumbling, how the devil anyone could stay alive when it was so cold, and looked around her not for a stone hot-water bottle or a varnished brick that she could heat on the stove before putting it, wrapped in a few sheets of newspaper, at the bottom of Jean's bed, but that old engine-oil can which, she knew, he filled with hot water to use on his sheets like a warming pan and which, when it was freezing outside and even in the bedroom where the windowpanes were covered in frost on the inside, contracted so noisily that it roused him into a state so terrified that, we said, big Pythre might have returned to fart in his ear? It took him a long time to get to sleep again, yet it never occurred to him to put the can anywhere but, as usual, at the foot of his bed. Accordingly, the old woman said:

“Poor Jean, what you need is a woman in your bed.”

Whereupon he replied that a woman would only fart and shit in his bed, make just as much noise as the can, and eat like a horse into the bargain.

We watched him leave very early the next morning, his shoes polished and a haversack over his shoulder—possibly the same one that he had used once to carry his father’s chicken, for he discarded nothing, neither old suits, nor the newspapers that piled up on the kitchen table in front of him along with insurance policies and envelopes, nor broken-down automobiles that had never worked very well, except the 403, which he abandoned on the lower part of his meadow, behind the Rivières’ house, shutting himself in it occasionally in the summer for long siestas, together with the hens and rabbits that he pretended to raise but that would have died of hunger if Marthe Rivière or Clémence Chave hadn’t fed them.

No one had any idea where he was off to that morning. One thing was certain: he had put on the suit (the good one, the gray one, which could have accommodated three men his size and which the wind filled like a sail), which he formerly wore every Sunday instead of staying in his blue work clothes at the kitchen table under the clock that his father had bought once from old man Bracols, who had been our clockmaker, and that big Pythre had put in his bedroom and that stayed there until Jean (possibly on the evening of the day when the old woman took him to Eymoutiers) placed it not in his own bedroom but on the kitchen wall, above the piles of insurance documents and old newspapers; that’s what he did, this idiot who had no fireside nor wife nor child, because he was on the side of law, money, and order, just like the postman, the teacher, or the mayor’s secretary. So that on Sundays we commissioned him to drive to Treignac with our betting slips for the horse races (and nothing made us suspect that he wore his suit for any other reason), though we were a little worried that he might not get there in time and might waste his time daydreaming or sleeping in some narrow pass, or that the Citroën DS he had just acquired with money from who knows where, which consumed as much oil as gas, might break down; but he never

played us any such trick, always arriving on time or otherwise starting a long conversation and arguing so firmly and convincingly that if they were about to close shop, he would bend time to his own will and not only the time but also those who decided how it was apportioned—café proprietors, betting-office clerks, and any other people in charge of anything who, when they caught sight of him arriving with his archangel's smile and rotten teeth, preferred to hang on for a few more minutes and bend the rules a little, rather than see him standing in front of the closed door or hatch, disappointed, pale, bad tempered, and mouth open as if he were about to howl.

And he was still seen with women, even though they were not exactly his women. Not that they rejected him, but people said all he could do was talk and look. They even said that one Sunday, on the way back from Treignac, he went by way of Les Freux to sign some insurance proposals for old Faurie, whom he didn't find at home although it was almost nighttime. Instead, at the door of the neighboring house, he found the Verviale girl, known thus even though she was over fifty, who was still a hot cookie and on the lookout for men not only with eyes and ears but, so they said, with every hole in her body. Jean approached her. The sun went down behind the pines that bordered the pool and the valley in the west. It was a warm night. All he saw of the Verviale girl was a very white face below tousled hair. She probably told him to come on in and, when he hesitated, seized his hand to lead him not into the house but alongside it, into a barn, where, so she said, there was a wasps' nest she would like to show him, and, though night had already fallen, he followed her, climbing the ladder behind her, his head enveloped in a strong odor that he was sure, as he said later, was essentially fart yet offered a hint of something more subtle, something halfway between sweat and perfume that could turn everyone's, men's and women's, heads, but, so he maintained, especially women's, for they could not hold out long when they scented it, succumbing to such a degree that a doctor had to be called to revive them, or men had to act like a doctor, or a veterinary surgeon who pulls a long transparent glove onto his naked arm right up to the shoul-

der and inserts the whole lot into the cow, which then throws its head back, opens its eyes wide, convulses its whole body, and starts to moan—just like the Verviale girl on the hay, where he could still picture her, tits sticking out and up, head on one elbow, her hand held toward him while he stood there in front of her, his arms at his sides and his mouth open, so that she had to draw him down to kneel there with her and, when he was on his knees, murmured in his ear that she would treat him right—yes, she knew he needed it, and she would give him what he really wanted, how could anyone ignore his obvious unhappiness, and she had fancied him for, oh, so long, since she had seen him cycling past one afternoon, during the Siom races, his thighs and face running with sweat and gleaming in the sunlight, with that suffering expression of his—and with her other hand she removed her panties and used them to wipe Jean's face, which she had already gripped between her thighs, and went on groaning, yet before long grew furious when he did not move, so that she had to kiss his thin, tightly closed lips again, breathing heavily and toiling away, but without any result until she decided to put her hand to Jean's crotch and found the whole area soft and sticky with so copious an exudation that, far from flying into a rage, she was most considerate and offered supper and a bed for the night to this male who spent so generously, though she never realized (and she would be the only one not to know) that what she had felt on her fingers was only the pound of butter he had bought in Treignac and, like all his purchases, stuck in the pocket of his pants, where it melted against his thigh.

The Siom women did not laugh; they wanted to keep him for themselves, but free of all fleshly taint, even of their own, these old, middle-aged, and young women who all believed that copulation wasn't worth the trouble it caused. But they thought this half-Pythre was so upright, soft, and shining that they allowed him to visit them to carry out tasks that, of course, they could have done themselves but that they liked to see performed by this man who wasn't exactly a man—this love child, this son of a faun and a graceless nymph, this old adolescent, this innocent with the surprised expression, whom they got (so it was said) to

suck at their breasts when they had an abscess on a nipple or had decided not to nurse a child, aware that he did that willingly and very proficiently, for he would approach their white globes and take them between his lips, feel with eyes shut for the breast's swollen tip, then swallow without wavering the milk he had never tasted as an infant, while they watched him drink, bringing tears to their eyes as no other man had done.

They related other things: what they knew or thought they knew, and even what they certainly did not know but we pictured without too great an effort before we learned the real truth, for instance, about what he did now at Eymoutiers every Sunday since the old Roche woman, who had finally decided to die, had summoned him to her deathbed and murmured in his ear what we had all known for a long time but he heard whispered in a language no longer truly that of the living but reminiscent of the wind rustling in the graveyard beeches. For we knew that he checked the racing news in a café near the market hall, then went to another bar on the road to Bourganeuf, where Rosalie Roche had taken him a few months before and which he entered very hesitantly, reluctantly it seemed, as if he really had no idea what he was doing, looking to either side, sometimes behind him, then proceeding with hands in pockets to the table at the back, where he sat down and ordered a pastis from that woman when she came over, which she did slowly too, not studying the man, who shut his eyes now and then until she left the table, any more closely than he was observing her; and he continued drinking for exactly half an hour, gazing then not at the counter but straight ahead of him, at a point between the window and the door where an advertisement on the wall showed a very blond child in sea blue clothes and cap, sitting on a barrel, drinking from a tankard. Then, when he heard the clock above the counter strike noon, he stood up at the third stroke precisely, left the exact sum owed in a neatly managed little pile on the table, next to the glass, and left as slowly as he had entered, head lowered and eyes intent on somewhere else. Smiling as if he had passed through the gates of paradise, he climbed back into the black

Citroën and stopped half an hour later at La Celle, at the Hôtel Moderne, where he lunched in a corner, at the very rear of the room, near a narrow window through which he might have seen a little valley overloaded with ugly houses, with a gypsy encampment on one hill and a cemetery on the other side, protected to the north by a fringe of tall pines; but he kept his head down, for he was entirely engrossed in the task of cutting into tiny morsels his bread, his tomatoes vinaigrette, his meat, his potatoes, his fragment of hard cheese, and his flan, under the bored gaze of the waitress, whom he would have found attractive at other times, although she had nothing to speak of in the way of tits or hips or and, surely, could not guess what he certainly did not know himself: that he was trying to chop up something very different; something that could not be seen; something down there within him where there was no more light than at the bottom of the well at Veix.

He seemed more careworn now, more serious, less inclined to do what women asked of him: to cut the grass in their gardens, ridge potatoes, repair a fence, help mow the hay, or even do what the road mender from Buiges was no longer willing to attempt: empty the toilets—Ma Heurtebise's, for instance—the stone ones built against the wall of the former presbytery. For that you had to wear fisherman's waders, raise the heavy slab with the bar in the lifting recess, then swing yourself down ever so adroitly into the cesspool, only to sink into the slime and be engulfed more relentlessly than by a swamp, with the same sucking noise but also a vile stench you found incredible at first and could never get used to but must endure, an old shawl protecting your face while you busied yourself at the bottom of the narrow pit as deep as a grave, scraping up the decomposing matter, and raising it until you had filled the bucket poised on the edge—all before the round, gnarled features of Ma Heurtebise who occasionally appeared, almost obscuring a rectangle of blue sky that soon seemed as unreal as the sheer fact that you were still alive; yet there you were, listening to her express her astonishment that she could have created such a reek: "Good grief! The human race is certainly wretched if even in our lifetimes we creatures produce stuff stink-

ing to high heaven like that! Why, it's worse than going down into the grave," she exclaimed. Jean did not listen to her but, once he was down in the dung, like everyone who had been there did all he could to get out as soon as possible, as malodorous as Lazarus, in pathetic imitation of Orpheus, with only himself to resort to in this tight little underworld, this pit now scavenged yet scarcely clean, even though you could see gleaming, yes, there at the bottom, the newly wiped plate on which next morning, with infinite relief and a dull thud, Ma Heurtebise would deposit her choice tribute. But he had not finished: he still had to place the bucket in a barrow, wheel it to the vegetable garden, dig a deep hole in the earth, and bury what had been scooped from the depths elsewhere, so that when the soil had been replaced, seeds could be sown and yield the finest beans, radishes, lettuces, and cabbages that any of us had ever seen.

But on Sundays he was a different man, it seemed. And we had to place our bets much earlier, for he would leave without delay, his eyes brighter than his brilliantined hair, his head raised high, almost proudly, very sure of himself in his black DS beneath which he spent more time than behind the wheel, while he searched for the source of the noises that he detected while driving and that he alone could hear, to such an extent that he forgot to eat and worked late into the night and even until daybreak, while the automobile's snout projected into the garage, and there was Jean: below the engine, scraping and dismantling and reassembling it with a writer's patience, sometimes forgetting that he was under there and dropping off to sleep, so you might say that, in spite of cold, rain, or snow, he was as snug there as in his bed.

## 39

They say that the owner was the first to speak and made him look up at her. Did he see something other than an ageing woman's face at first? There she was, very close to him, frightening him a little with her creams and powder and lipstick, dyed hair and perfume. He did not look at her for very long but stammered a few words, which made her laugh gently. She did not stay long but was quickly summoned back behind her counter by the tipplers. But as soon as she saw him rise at the third stroke of noon, she stopped, cut short in mid-sentence, one hand in the air, lips trembling, and eyes troubled. The retired cop was not happy with this, since he did not believe the story she served up to him in the end and which this old fox from the Berry region who had seen and heard a lot in his time found rather far-fetched and outrageous, like some incident from an earlier century, out of respect to the woman whom he had courted for so many years (for he too had realized that appearances are worth more than deceptive certainties). But she took no notice and waited for Sundays like a woman who is sure of her future happiness, not on account of the ex-policeman, who had the good taste to withdraw

and offer his services elsewhere, but because of the passing moment when she sat at the table at the back of the café, opposite Jean, after bringing him a *pastis* he had not ordered.

He learned to stare into her eyes—too fixedly at first, then not so intently—making his eyes smaller, as if he were trying not to fathom who this woman was but to decide how he could reconcile what he saw when he looked at her with what he knew or thought he knew. She was usually the one who spoke, in a low voice, of everything and nothing, only so that she could watch him without too much effort and possibly without thinking that this was her son, not that he might be the son of that Pythre who had taken her several nights in a row at Veix, in the wretched scullery and storage room where she slept, without her resisting or thinking of complaining, since she had foreseen her shame and her misfortune from the moment when he had raised the curtain under the staircase and approached her, his face unbending, eyes gleaming, almost sad, and half-naked, guessing that she was prepared to let him have everything except her mouth, which she would never have allowed to be pressed to his and therefore hid in the old folded petticoat that she used as a pillow and that she bit into while the master of Veix served her; and there he was, snorting like a boar, before, finally, the coarse noise became a muffled weeping, not like a child but a man at the end of his tether, even though that scarcely seemed appropriate to what was known of big Pythre, and of her too, little Jeanne, who was only sixteen and who had known what would happen, not when he raised the scullery curtain but when she came to Veix one April morning in beautiful sunshine that somehow made the sky seem to glare, her heart beating and resigned already, and neither that night nor on those that followed could she believe her ears, no more than, as she was to say forty years later, she could admit that this was the son she had brought into the world with the help of her cousin from Pérols and then too without crying out or complaining, realizing that this was how it was and that she was one of those who would have danced with Pythre on his bed of misery, just as in childbed, in the sunlight thick with dust, she had let him dance, the

boy whom she was to call Jean, and who was now with her in her own house, and who, she might have said, ought not to have been there, not just in this bar but in the world at all, unless his presence served to remind her of the curse upon her, her and everyone who knew of it; but she might quite justifiably maintain the contrary, declaring that it was ancient history—no one was interested in that any longer—and she wasn't responsible for bringing him into the world, that you had to put up with being who you were, not a thicket of misfortune and dreams, but a group of those little people who would have managed to live through their allotted time in spite of everything, in spite of any curse and in spite of what ultimately made her look on this fellow as her son, since he had her nose, her mouth, and her ears, but also the Pythres' stubborn forehead and their eyes: a mixture of refinement and brutality characteristic of all those who wanted to evade the black earth without being able to emerge from themselves, from that terrible inner drive and passion, which is sometimes called destiny and is no more than the blood of one individual poured into another, a slow and vain attempt to purify and improve it, and take it toward the light. In this respect, they differed from us since for the most part we had married among ourselves, convinced that this was better, that our blood was thick and heavy enough to enable us to endure for all eternity in our notch at the edge of the high plateau, unlike these thick peasants, the Pythres and all the others who had hoped to save themselves and start again where we stopped; and if the Pythres had paid for us, then from now on we would pay for them, unlike these bad-blood idiots; and if that were not the case, along with them we would pay for all those who had gone before us: the horsemen with billhook eyes and the Saracens, Angles, and all the others who had crucified women with their swords of flesh, their laughter, and their fine words, before deserting them, like little Jeanne in front of the boy who had emerged from her, and to whom, having nothing else, she gave her Christian name, and who was drinking before her so uneasily and with the embarrassment to be expected from a stranger, and who, when he decided to open his mouth, told her things that sounded quite loony

yet that she listened to with the long-suffering indulgence of a bar-owner or mother, not knowing quite what to say; they were too pitiful these tales of women who made up to Jean, a captain's daughter or a schoolmistress, peasant women past their prime, or musicians' daughters, middle-class women who had come into money or just poor shepherdesses—all of whom wanted to get off with him and whom he had rebuffed, he added, suddenly laughing, his eyes half-shut yet meeting those of the proprietress, who inquired:

“Why didn't you want them?”

He went on smiling, stupider than ever, and replied more softly:

“I didn't want to . . .”

Since she still looked amazed, or acted as if she did not understand, and emitted, like Jean himself, a quiet doubting “Oh,” he added, somewhat more loudly, so that she was uncertain whether he was joking or was about to weep—before falling silent again:

“There's no ‘Oh’ about it, and no ‘Ah’ either . . .”

She returned to her counter. His glass was empty and the coins were already piled up near the ashtray. He looked straight ahead, his head slightly inclined to the left to avoid the smoke of the cigarette that he gripped between his lips on his way out; this gave him a dim-witted look so that the regulars said that Widow Lepage seemed to have found a fine toy boy there, a real good-for-nothing, an impossible guy. They choked back their laughter, realizing that she was not the sort of woman who would be sitting for no reason at all with a nitwit twenty years younger, who, they murmured, was oddly like her, though no one said that he resembled her exactly or that he looked like her as a son would. She was still the only person to know that, for he probably didn't quite believe it, or he could not forget the face of the other woman, the one who used to look at him so coldly, so sadly, through the half-open door of the store-room in Veix when the father held his head over the well and he yelled into it: the one whose fingers had felt drier on his skin than the branches of a dead larch and whom he had been compelled to love in spite of everything because that gruff woman was all he had to love; yes, that

mouth was more distant than the mouth of Médée in flight, of Suzon sunk in silence, of his dead father, which, we may suppose, must have left him speechless until he found his own formulas, his own manner of speech, the devices that in any language liberate us from fears and spells, if you cannot change your fate, and that, in his case, were: "I didn't want to," introduced by an "Oh," ensuring that, until now, no one said anything about him or even mentioned his name without imitating his incredulous remark.

They were silent at one and the same time, and had nothing to say to each other or to anyone else. If he missed a Sunday, she spared him any questions the next time, and he obeyed her as on that April day when he found the door closed; she looked out for him, opened the door to him, and let him into the cool, silent hall that smelled of stewed beef and carrots. The table at the back was covered with a white paper tablecloth; sea-blue checkered table napkins were standing folded in stemmed wineglasses, and in the middle, next to a bouquet of flowering broom, between the fruit bowl and the dish stand, was a bottle of good wine, which she pointed out when she asked him to be seated. He did not stir. She took his hand and took a few steps toward the table until she realized that he was still standing there, his expression more mistrustful than unyielding, a wrinkled forehead and quivering lips. She was afraid that he was about to cry; she knew that, even at forty, he was capable of weeping and whimpering like an infant: she had learned this from a truck-driver from Bernis in Limoges who had seen him do just that in a café in Buiges. She left him standing there and, still smiling, went to the kitchen where she shrugged and probably said that he was a real numbskull, that you just had to put up with it . . . Yes, she might well have said that to herself as she went back to the big fellow trembling there in the middle of the room as he did when he had been drinking, before this woman with curly hair, who smelled so pleasantly of beef and vegetables and springtime and, as he would say later, as women smell when their faces suddenly come close to you, like the face of the Verviale girl from Les Freux and all the others who would have liked it when he didn't, and

finally he had also begun to knead the breasts of that curly-headed woman as he had the others', his eyes almost shut, smiling like a child playing blindman's buff, and muttering that she would like that, yes, they all liked that, he had heard big Lontrade say so and a lot of other men too; and when he had taken flight, if that is the right way to describe his slow retreat to the entrance, with eyes hardly open, almost groping his way out, under the tear-filled eyes of the woman who had turned aside to lean on the counter, he went on murmuring and repeating for some time that he hadn't wanted that, no, that wasn't what he'd wanted, that she'd wanted it, that they were all the same, they thought nothing of coming to you and farting and shitting in your bed and passing a kid off on you, and that this one wanted it too, she had been angry, and so she had shouted in a harsh, tired voice like the noise a sack of wheat makes when you drag it along the floor:

"Get out!"

She had shouted that several times as he made his unsteady way to the door, stooping, and with a more idiotic expression than ever before, his mouth open and showing his gray teeth, his hair disheveled in spite of the brilliantine, stumbling from one foot to the other, neither looking at her nor able to utter anything but that "Oh," which could sound like an owl hooting or sobbing, and which made her cry:

"Get out of here!"—and she used patois for the first time since she had left Siom and had wanted to abandon this minor language at the same time as the child, submerging them both to a certain extent in obscurity, as if nothing had happened, surrendering them to the depths of her memory and resorting after that to standard French, to this language that she had scarcely had time to learn at school, for they told her repeatedly that she was just a numbskull and eventually she had come to believe it, just as she had believed them when they said she was not beautiful and would never grow, therefore conceding that she would be no more than a servant, a maid of all work, a woman whose thighs were there to be forced apart, resigned to seeming more simple than she was, and submissive, and dumb, probably experiencing this resignation as a

defensive measure, or fate, of sorts, something that might help her to fend off a destiny that could not be worse.

This fate had the heavy, fleshy features of the horse dealer from the Auvergne, that sentimental and crafty businessman who had taught her to speak French better and convinced her that patois was fit only for peasant blockheads and idiots, indeed that she had to speak French well since they had lost the innocence of those who live off the land—and she was not so stupid as not to acknowledge that—and that you could easily lose your innocence without being thoroughly evil or resigned to being walled in alive in a patois as effectively as in a tomb; whereas French, he added—raising his finger, his lips and eyes moist, his expression lively, and smiling gently (as he surely looked when, as a child in a school from the pages of Mauriac, he recited the poetry of Victor Hugo or Sully Prudhomme before the whole class, his face turned to the window, through which he could see the distant snow-covered summits of the Puy)—was a true sun, which, like the other one, would never set upon the empire; and he uttered all this with a solemn, exaggerated intonation that made her laugh.

But at least he left her with the notion that a language spoken well can save you, can protect you from total impoverishment. She trusted more in this language, the language of the Republic and of the French empire, than in men, having gradually developed a facility for it and had become almost clever, certainly adroit, with a trace of pride and sufficient assurance to decide what to do with her life, while realizing that a woman was never truly free, that she must always suffer a man's shadow over her: old man Roche, big Pythre, the peasant from Ars, the horse dealer, the waiter, the retired policeman, and finally this man who had been given her as a son, this bird of passage, this tall innocent with the wounded expression, to whom she was joined by blood, though he did not really resemble her; yes, joined by blood, that is everything and nothing, visible and invisible, a hope and a curse—above all, a curse, for she told him to be off, this poor fool who had never murmured anything to her but idiocies and nonsense and to whom she could not talk, could not say,

“Jean dear,” or even address by his surname or anything else, which meant that he had no name as he had no mother, and was not the son of little Jeanne and André Pythre but the son of a black earth and the too blue sky, although she, Jeanne, in spite of everything had been ready that Sunday to try to believe that she was really the mother of this apostle, having closed the business for the occasion and prepared a lunch worth having and dressed like a lady, because she thought that some things could not be uttered in everyday clothing or received by dirty hands: forgiveness, for instance—not the kind that she would offer to Jean but the forgiveness she would receive from him, reuniting the thread of her time with his, a time that was finally theirs together, even though she knew that you cannot share time, that you can share nothing, that you live and die alone, just as she was alone before this son whom she would have to drive away yet again, who had closed the door behind him to the shrill tinkle of the doorbell and abandoned her to the scent of beef and carrots wafting about her and the clear light of a Sunday in April.

He went back to Treignac to place our bets on rank outsiders, so that we told ourselves that we were the slow ones, and that justice of a sort, or an irony of fate, allowed our money to melt away in the hands of the last of the Pythres. He lunched at the Hôtel de France, where the waitress talked to him in a friendly way, not only while serving him but after the meal, when the dining room was empty and he planted his plump, acrid Celtique (his favorite brand) between his lips. She did not sit down but listened to him without looking at him (at least without looking him in the face, since he never raised his eyes higher than her thigh). She was a big girl, a blond with too red cheeks and strong hands, not beautiful with her over-crinkly hair and pale eyes behind horn-rimmed glasses; he listened to her after his fashion, lost in dreams or memories, not understanding what she was after with her mysterious gestures—which betrayed not an easy lay but a girl prepared to yield to this particular man, who just couldn't see this and who was reading aloud the text of a label on the bottle before him:

“Vittel, to be sure! The new water that tones up your cells!”

"You're not listening to a word I say," she complained with a shy smile.

Apart from that, he did very little. He no longer went fishing or mushroom gathering, no longer swung himself down into the reeking depths but hardly left his chair, kitchen, and bed. He no longer sought the company of women. He grew thin, became an old youth of fifty, then an old man with a child's face. He no longer stood there to be observed—by those among us who would have been not his friends (for he never had any, apart from, for a few months, that good-looking young fellow in a Glengarry bonnet—whom he met we couldn't say where—who was probably just as crazy as he was and who came to drink with him once a week in the dark kitchen), but we were the only ones who had liked him, we were boys then, who grew up to be neither more nor less evil than our fathers and our fathers' fathers—he was no longer anything other than an almost ordinary man, solitary, abandoned, who no longer resembled the late Jean-Jacques Rousseau, philosopher of nature, and certainly not Kit Carson, the American frontiersman whose adventures we had read in the illustrated magazines scrounged from Berthe-Dieu's grocery shop; no, according to Françoise Chadiéras, who was educated, he was like Emile Littré, the lexicographer and language scholar, with those impossible spectacles (small, narrow, and metal framed) that he wore to see insurance documents, betting slips, and even to listen to the radio in the dark; yes, she said, he resembled Littré, one of those famous men who were interested in words, meanings, origins, silence, a little like Jean, who considered only bygone faces, the vanity of everything, the transparency of air, nothing . . .

That did not prevent him from having his weak points, affectations, even plans, such as reassembling the stones of an old boundary wall that had collapsed in the field where he kept his broken-down automobiles and rabbits; a house whose roof you could see he would never repair since it was not for living in but for breathing the fresh air, there between Chave's henhouse and Rivière's toilet, and for dreaming, as he sat on a fragment of wall, feet dangling in space, staring at the valley before he

returned to the kitchen in the evening, where you could see a light burning late into the night—one of the four lights of Siom, together with the street lamps set up not long before in front of the school, on the square, and in a corner of the acacia terrace, though they did not disperse our darkness; he dreamed there too, but no one knew what, perhaps of far-distant places whose names he had caught through the crackle of the little radio on the table in front of him and which, for him, no longer belonged to geography or to history but, so to speak, to improbability, to what would never be possible to prove—not even this black man, for example, the first he had ever seen, a black giant who played the saxophone at a dance hall in Egletons and around whom he circled, staring rudely and touching his skin to make sure he was not merely made up like that for Mardi Gras, then clinking glasses with him, with this man of the night—as he called him, since the world out there, beyond the Rhine and the Alps, beyond Flanders and the Ardennes, was populated by Krauts, Viets, and blacks, and also by ghosts like Médée when he reemerged from the night after so many years, so different, so somber, so distant, and something very like a Médée who wasn't Médée any longer yet wasn't really dead; because no one died: instead, he said softly, they made their way down the steps from the high plateau, descending slowly into the darkness, following the slope to the farthest reaches of the world, and traveling to the end of night, where all those who had been, yet were no longer, awaited them.

“And then . . . ?” we asked.

He did not reply, for he probably did not know the answer and preferred to say nothing at all. But his face lit up, his wrinkles disappeared, his lips opened over his decayed teeth, and his eyes filled with tears. So we lowered our heads and tiptoed out of the kitchen, which he planned to repaint at the end of the autumn in brown, cream, and blood red, butcher's-shop colors, after re-covering the floor in a new brick-patterned linoleum, and outside, on the fingernail paring of lawn, he had planted a rose tree, on which he urinated morning and evening, and a tree of life through which, before entering, we liked to run our hands

and arms as if through a woman's luxuriant tresses. We would find him sitting at the table, usually resting his head on a closed fist. He did not raise his eyes but went on dreaming, yet eventually broke into speech and made us descend into his dreams, whither we were also led by the smoke of thick caporal cigarettes and coaxed by glasses of red wine, so that we left dreams and kitchen in a rather tipsy state, stinking of burned fat and tobacco, eyes dazzled, hearts dazed, and faces tautened by the cold brought up from the lake by the evening wind.

Winter was dark and never ending. Berthe-Dieu had sold his cows. We no longer had any animals, apart from a few chickens and rabbits, but no dogs, because they had gone before us into the night and we did not want to see younger ones that would survive us—unless we ourselves were animals, though admittedly we had lived better than our fathers and great-grandfathers yet were as stupid as animals all the same, especially since the school had closed; we were abandoned by the Republic after having been deserted by God, and not really suffering because of that; in fact we were rather surprised that we did not feel it more, we poor blind and deaf folk whose heads were filled with heather or stagnant water, and hearts with granite, and who felt that we no longer had anything to expiate: certainly the sign that the end was approaching. We would be the last—the first without descendants and the last to die where we were born, under these tiled roofs whose sole use would soon be to shelter foreigners on vacation. But some of us also departed to die elsewhere, at Ussel or Egletons, in the white silence of a hospital. This did not prevent us (this was all that remained of the pride of people from Siom, this blindness and presumption) from believing that we were immortal and to watch the life of the last of the Pythres ebbing away as if we would escape the general fate; we watched him without being able to do anything about it, or without wanting to, perhaps to avoid anything like introspection; and we closed our ears to the strokes of time, just as we had given up going four or six times a day to watch the train that no longer stopped at Siom pass by.

This was the very same time when Jean started to hear within himself,

accompanied by the sound of water gurgling away, a deep, intolerable rumbling that always surprised him and forced him to hurry to the toilet or behind the church or somewhere closer at hand, or even just to stay at home, for he had bought a very high, night blue enamel bucket on which he squatted in the corridor, from which we saw through the half-open door only his head protrude and continue to grimace and talk, assuring us that he was not sick, although he was shaking with the cold coming not only from the corridor but from his father's bedroom, the door of which had been shut for ages, though it was neither boarded up nor locked, and whose threshold no one—not even Jean—had dared to cross; it was a cold more universally penetrative than winter, a cold that emerged from the depths of aeons; eternal cold, we thought, listening to Jean dump noisily in his bucket. We drew on our cigarettes, but they suddenly tasted unpleasant and the words with which we begged him to consult a doctor sounded false since we could already see how thin he was becoming although he had not changed his diet for forty years: Titus brand sardines, a mutton chop with potatoes fried in lard, and a pippin from Médée's orchard. But he refused to see a doctor, never having consulted one in his life and as suspicious of them as he was of women, muttering that they would expect him to strip like a farm animal. We shrugged, were colder than was reasonable, were on the verge of fear. And we heard Jean come back to us, in that almost completely dark kitchen, telling us again that he would recover, it was nothing, and surely due to that ice he had eaten at the Saint-Hilaire festival, and he was treating himself with an infusion of white stinging nettles. And when he smiled, we smiled back.

He emptied his bowels like that several times a day, during the night too, never ceasing to smile as if he already knew much more about himself and us; it was a smile that we thought we had always known as his, yet it was quite new or had achieved perfection or reached its moment of truth, a real smile, his own true smile, and no longer that rather forced one that he had resorted to since his schooldays to make sure he didn't cut too bad a figure. And there he was smiling now, this fellow whom no

one had ever heard laugh: his eyes open, his arms on the table or held at either side, his cheeks drawn in, lost in his clothes. He smiled to himself, too, since for a long time there had been no one at whom he could truly smile, and his smile was unusually gentle but also with a touch of irony, as if he did not entirely believe in it; and with his drawn cheeks, half-shut eyes, the expression of someone not really there, who did not care what anyone thought, he looked like a toothless old Chinaman and he murmured that in life you had to pay for everything, just like Klaus Barbie, who had sent so many to their deaths during the German occupation, and who had been extradited shortly before that and whom he had seen, he maintained, in the Bourg-Lastic area in the Auvergne and had chased in vain along the station platforms, although it was certain that neither he nor Barbie had set foot in Bourg-Lastic and these two condemned men, the torturer and the innocent, could never have met, not even during the war. He related this in the slow precise manner of an old woman mulling over her past, inventing things as he went along and stopping only to begin all over again. But we no longer listened to what was clearly tearing him apart, though he did not really suffer or express his surprise at growing so weak, continuing to blame that ice he had eaten last summer, at Saint-Angel this time. We thought that he was smiling at that. We had promised to summon the new doctor from Buiges, who refused to come at first, then was persuaded and knocked at Jean's door, which he did not open. He was a stubborn mule, the doctor explained and added that you couldn't force anyone to consult a doctor and that this guy in there was either a saint or an idiot, at any rate a member of a species that he had imagined had died out long ago.

By the spring he was beyond idiocy and sanctity. It was raining. The sky seemed to press down lower than a stable roof. Françoise Chadiéras, who was working off her debt to the Republic in a grammar school in Limoges, returned to Siom for Easter and mentioned the last of the Pythres. They did not reply at first, as if he were no longer among us and now he had no right to our words. She did not relent.

"Don't go up there—you won't be able to take it."

But she climbed up to the deserted shop and called out Jean's name, then listened, and heard nothing. She saw light under the kitchen door, pressed her ear to the wood and eventually detected a very faint voice telling her to come in. Jean—or at least what had become of him, something like a very old woman, as stunted as an ancient gorse bush—was sitting in front of the stove; lost in his wide corduroy jacket, he now had neither cheeks nor flesh nor face, and looked up at her as if he no longer had enough strength to raise his head, just as he could no longer emit more than that childish singsong, soft, fluting, almost inaudible. In the corner, near a gas oven, stood a television set whose sound he had turned off completely, leaving the picture on; he had his back to it. The screen afforded the only light in the room: very pale, bluish, lunar. He did not rise to shake Françoise's hand, and she said: "I see you have television now."

He shook his head and explained that his niece had brought the set, but he didn't watch it. He massaged his calves; his feet were bare, as they had been all his life, but were shod now in dark brown moccasins he had found at the Treignac fair at the same time as a pair of American jeans, which he had bought, he muttered, because they had his name, but he hadn't tried them on because the stall owner was staring at him so oddly.

"She wanted to come along with me," he murmured, "but I didn't want to."

Slowly, almost contentedly, he felt the blisters on his calves, with the stove before him at which he warmed his hands, its crackling stronger than the world murmuring behind him on the television screen and the mumble of the Siom night above his head. It was, as Françoise Chadiéras would say later, as if all of a sudden they were not in the same room or in the same dimension of time; or, rather, as if he were no longer in time at all, if he had ever been in it, and accordingly, the young woman added, was happier than most of us; after more than ten minutes, during which he smiled as if he were the only human being in the world, a happy solitary, like a blind child opening a dark door, he said he had fallen asleep leaning against the electric heater that stood between his

legs, had burnt his ankles, woken up, and regained consciousness, summoned to remain a while longer among us, although he was still in a thousand different places.

He went on pretending. He was trembling as he got up, leaned on the table, and crouched by a small chest from which he took a fresh bottle of port but could not draw its cork. He insisted on clinking glasses and drinking with Françoise Chadiéras, who also heard the wine gurgling through Jean's guts with the noise of water pouring out and falling. She could stand it no longer and called out angrily that he couldn't go on like that, he would die, was probably dying already; but he smiled at her—in the bluish light that was no longer an earthly light, not as mild as his own night—and no longer heard her, probably no longer saw her, not even when she stood up and murmured: "My poor Jean . . ."

She was already at the end of the corridor when she heard something move behind her and turned round. He was standing upright, if you could go as far as to say that, for he was more crooked than the nut trees of the old presbytery, the outline of which could just be discerned out there in front, in the overgrown garden; his head was raised on whatever he still retained of a neck, and now he made a real effort to smile, grimacing and muttering something in that almost nonexistent voice before Françoise turned the door handle and left as though she had decided to flee, or as if she couldn't put up with it a moment longer, leaving him as he murmured that it was true, he wasn't well, it was the ice he had eaten at the Tarnac fête last summer.

It was raining. Everyone was hunched up at home or had withdrawn into themselves, which was much the same thing. If anyone thought for a moment of anything other than himself or herself, or nothing at all, it would be of Jean, with mixed anger and sadness, wishing that it would be over as quickly as possible and that they could be rid of him at last, too, of the last of the Pythres, as old Madame Lontrade muttered, she who already had her ninety-third birthday behind her and kept repeating that she didn't want to die before him, that she wanted to see that at any rate, for she was the only one now who had known both the first of the Pythres and the last, the one who had sown his seed here, there, and everywhere, and the other one who had never voided anything but tears and turds and had scarcely known the sweet softness of a woman's thighs.

The rain stopped toward the end of April. The square began to glisten. The mist that came up from the lake lingered for two days longer in the branches, then rose above the water. We almost took that as something approaching an omen. As soon as we ventured out of our houses,

our first task was to walk up to the Pythre house. The doors were shut. Orluc rapped at the panes; he might as well have knocked on a grave-stone or the night itself. Chabrat and his assistant, Henrion, broke a window and forced their way into the kitchen, where there was neither light nor fire. They stopped before the door of the father's room. Chabrat touched the porcelain handle. Henrion cried out that he must be quite insane, but Chabrat shrugged off the protest and opened wide the door of the dark room. It was full of dust and stank like an ancient cellar, yes, like an old cellar and like something else, said Henrion later, something old and cold and black, that nevertheless had nothing inimical about it; and this prompted Chabrat to say that now it was all really over, at least as far as the father was concerned, since the son was in his own room, on his own bed, stinking like a sewer, lying there in the foul mess he himself had voided. He was breathing and seemed to be sleeping so peacefully that you were reluctant to disturb him. He did not open his eyes. They called the doctor from Buiges with the ambulance—Madegal, that was—the same one who ran the cab service and had taken him to Eymoutiers with Rosalie Roche to see the woman who, at the end of the day, was no more likely to have been his mother than he her son. This time they took him further than Eymoutiers, on the Limoges highway, at his side the doctor who felt his pulse all the time and kept his eyes on this face where all that remained was a child's smile and almond-colored eyes, amazingly small and distant, which had opened and observed him as if deriding him and everything else too, but seemed to murmur (yes, as the doctor would say, at times like that your eyes can utter something softly) that he, Jean, was pleased that at last they were concerned with him, that for the first time, at over fifty years of age, he could sleep peacefully while watched over by someone who didn't care about the Pythres or the stench—the corpse-meat odor that had pursued the father throughout his life, which the last son could not evade. He still had sufficient strength to smile as he pulled out the needle of the drip hanging over his head like a malevolent moon. Then, shortly after Eymoutiers, his gaze froze. He probably had no idea where he was being taken, for he had

been lost to us for some time, but, we may suppose, in the twilight of the ambulance moving between huge beeches, he did perceive something emerge from he knew not where, from the night of ages or from that blue of the heavens that he could no longer see below the heavy foliage, from that terrifyingly distant closeness where, already, he no longer persisted, where no voice now penetrated, and where he was no more than a smile: yes, he glimpsed the face of a very young woman with chestnut curls whose name he seemed to be searching for.

The doctor knocked on the partition. Madegal stopped, opened the little window in the screen, listened to the physician telling him that there was no point in going any further—they had done all they could—adding, when the driver shrugged and lit a cigarette:

“Do you believe in the curse too?”

“You have to believe in something.”

In any event, once the death certificate had been made out and the doctor was in Jean’s room and realized that no one would be coming to watch over the body, it was clear that something had come to an end, a real end. He went down to Berthe-Dieu’s café and started to complain. We kept our peace. Only Orluc had the nerve to remark that he would be quite all right watching over himself, he had been dead much longer than anyone thought, and the distance between us and him was much greater than that between death and us. The doctor shrugged. We did not keep watch over the last of the Pythres; we thought we could hardly do otherwise and found that sufficient reason. But someone could not abide the thought of the body lying there alone, unwashed, unprepared, in that dark night, and went to set a light in the little bedroom. We had no idea who did this or if the light had appeared of its own accord.

No one knew where he should be buried, and no one had seen fit (if it had occurred to anyone) to tell little Jeanne about Jean’s death, and it was two days before the niece and her mother were able to get there; she remembered (or feigned to remember, it hardly matters which) having heard Jean say that he did not wish to be buried with his father (since there had never been any room to spare to the right of a man like that) or

in the Roches' crypt or in that of the Bordes family at Féniers, but alongside the man who had been the first to make anything of the name Pythre, his grandfather, the consumptive cuckold who was buried on his own up there at Saint-Sulpice, among winds, springs, and woods. Jean remained alone for another day and night in the ice-cold alcove that had served him as a bedroom since the Veix fire and that had to be entered the next day, once the light (positioned by the same nocturnal hand, or by no one) had been extinguished, in order to bring in the coffin that Chabrat's son had been working on since the day before, where a smell was already evident even though he was no more than skin and bones, yet a smell no more or less noticeable than any other or than the odor so familiar to our fathers' and mothers' nostrils. It did not prevent us from filing past this body that weighed no more than a twelve-year-old boy and smiled at us from his filthy sheets, or rather seemed to laugh very gently as if he just could not restrain himself, but the laughter was actually resounding a very long way off, in that silence into which he had gone before us.

They deposited him in the coffin, dressed in his wide, beige corduroy jacket and soiled pants. The priest from Buiges was late; he had to compose his thoughts behind Chabrat's delivery truck, where they had stowed the box. It was two o'clock on a spring afternoon with a rather strong, acrid, sickly sweet note to it. Henrion was driving, with two of our fellows alongside him. He was followed by the niece's automobile, and the vehicles of Berthe-Dieu, Orluc, and Lontrade, who had decided to attend after all and give a lift to the serious drinkers from Siom and Buiges. Jean's sister-in-law wanted the coffin to be draped in a pall. They went to look for it in back of the old hearse in Heurtebise's shed, where they found it in shreds; the niece replaced it with her shawl.

On the way out of Buiges, they saw beeches being cut on the Millevaches road. They had to veer to the right, toward Meymac. Beyond Pérols, the women stopped to change a wheel. The others used this as an opportunity to relieve themselves, but not those in the lead vehicle, the 404 carrying the coffin. Henrion hadn't noticed anything; he

stopped at Barsanges, parked in the square, near the inn, and went off to the bar with the two others, remarking that the rest of them wouldn't be long and settled down to wait, convinced that the remainder of the convoy would try to get there more rapidly by turning off before Barsanges, taking the Lissac highway and driving through Millevaches, then Saint-Sulpice, where the mayor and the gravediggers were also in the bar, waiting for them and cursing this stiff who still wasn't there, angrily declaring before long that everyone had arrived except for this cadaver whom no one there knew, the son of some guy whom they could scarcely recall and the grandson of peasants from La Celle or Barsanges, no one could remember exactly where. Tiny yellow butterflies fluttered around the vehicles; someone murmured that they were the souls of the dead lightly touching our faces. The women remained seated in the automobiles. The men looked around them, at the graveyard, church, tall pines, shadows of trees and crosses, and jays scratching at the ground. A voice said again that some people certainly didn't want to go there.

"Where?" asked the mayor.

"Where we'll all end up . . ."

They were silent then for almost an hour, until they saw the gray 404 arrive very slowly with a great clanking noise. Henrion and the two men seemed rather ruffled, as was Berthe-Dieu's young assistant; he stood on the loading platform and used a rope and his feet to secure the coffin which, having shattered in several places, exuded the wretched, shabby, common stench of the dead, thus renewing the mayor's wrath, making the women weep, and sending Jean's niece speechless to the head of the procession. The scene was so overwhelming that everyone was seized by one idea: not really just to get rid of the last of the Pythres, but to make sure that this particular Pythre did not stink to high heaven and, indeed, would be spared that fate at least, so that this man who had never known a woman's bed in his life and who died a virgin and martyr—as the priest all but confirmed—could rest in peace at last as he had wished.

The gravediggers (one was a quite young fellow, with blond hair, little horn-rimmed glasses, and a mauve pullover; and the other a thickset,

very red-faced forty-year-old) had only just dropped the coffin into the trench when the mayor, who had retired behind the wall for a nap and whom no one had bothered to awaken, reappeared and in too loud a voice, clearly still angry, asked the niece who he actually was—this guy they were burying and who stank so vilely. He began to stammer and the niece became quite confused too, mumbling something about at least respecting the memory of the Pythres.

“You’re a fine one to talk . . . !”

And he started laughing in little bursts, as if he were actually weeping, while the gravediggers cast the soil on a grave identified by no more than an unmarked wooden cross beside a crudely arranged cairn of rocks. The niece shrugged and handed the mayor just enough cash to pay the burial charges.

“Once you’re down there, you know . . .” he said, then stopped short, looked up, and left the scene, his face very red, his mouth quivering a little, his beret rather askew. Before long we followed him, leaving Jean’s niece alone at the graveside, where she had laid a wreath of artificial flowers bound with a ribbon inscribed TO MY UNCLE. She was probably weeping for this man whom she had scarcely known and whom she would be the only one to mourn, thinking of him not as a Pythre (presumably she knew nothing of their history and reputation) but as someone who had existed, a human being like other humans, why not, but one with whom she shared a few drops of blood, even though, having married quite recently, she no longer bore the same name; and she was beautiful as neither Pythre, nor Bordes, nor Blanzat, nor Roche had ever been—not even Suzon, who hadn’t known how to make anything of her beauty and had not condescended to attend the burial of her brother lying there, under a few feet of soil, in a box more botched than patched, and slung into the earth rather than interred, after having been thrown to the ground already at a bend beyond Saint-Merd, when the 404 had hit a milestone, and the coffin, breaking its restraining ropes, had gone sliding down a mossy slope through dark and narrow pine rows, ending up hard against rocks beside a stream. They had to

climb down with ropes and shovels to raise this thing; it seemed to grin at them from the grass, even laugh mockingly from behind closed eyes, and went on stinking like nothing on earth while they carried the whole caboodle to the top, that thing still laughing while its eyes stayed shut under the sun, and the broken coffin too, and had to return through those grim cohorts of trees, muttering that it was darker and colder there than in the grave itself and that they should have left the whole lot down there instead of giving this Pythre another chance to make fun of us, foil the gravediggers, and try every trick in the book to avoid ending up in the burial ground.

Sooner or later, after trying to resist the final descent, we would all finish there under the slab, grimacing or with our mouths stuffed full of soil; yes, it would be the same for us too, while the others would still be here, imagining they would live for ever, just like that day in the little cemetery on the slope when they took the central path to return to the gate and the vehicles, leaving the niece to mourn the last of the Pythres, though she should never have been there or should never have been there alone. For we weren't thinking of her on that peaceful, sunny afternoon, but of Suzon who must be old now and, we must declare, in spite of her beauty hadn't differed so very much from our own wives, Suzon who had had her own man go missing, her own lost one, even though that was no more than the memory of a day forty years before when she was cycling back from Treignac, her long brown hair with the dark red sheen blowing free in the hot wind, toiling up the never-ending incline and negotiating the bends that forced her to get down and push the heavy bicycle with its solid rubber tires. She must have been twenty-two or twenty-three and behaved as if she thought of the war no more often than of those Siom boys who had tied her to the birch tree and watched her nakedness as she turned in the light falling through the branches. She was in awe of no one and afraid of everyone, did not speak, never complained. When she reached La Butte, near Saint-Hilaire, she saw the trucks and armored half-tracks drawn up in a straight line, at the turn in the Siom road. It meant nothing in particular to her, we may be sure of

that, and she did not know that at Tulle they had just hanged a hundred men from lampposts and balconies. She did not want to know anything more and did not think that these men busying themselves about the vehicles or resting near them could be any worse than those from Siom or her own father. She knew she was beautiful and was fully aware, we may be sure, of the regularity of her extraordinarily fine features, her dark hair, her wonderfully pert lower lip, and her dark eyes that soon took in these exhausted men, some in black and the others in gray green uniforms, who were astonished, angry, or pleased to see so fetching a girl pass the length of the column, and one of them, a very young officer, as she would say years later when she was no longer beautiful and no longer answered to any name other than that of her mother's family (but did she really say that, or did we dream it, for surely that seemed probable only because we wished to humiliate her all the more, and ourselves at the same time?), standing on the loading platform of a half-track, naked to the waist, very tall, and thin and looking all the taller because she saw him from below and almost against the light, his sunburned face momentarily reddened by the water from the fountain, which he had just been sprinkling on himself, and smiling—she knew not at whom or why—and why not at this girl in a light blue dress, pedaling slowly toward the Siom road, seeming to proffer her heavy breasts as she slowly urged herself forward, and watching him from the corner of her eye, then, as soon as she had turned to the right, looking back, she knew not why. And that would be the love story of her entire life: the sight of that half-naked officer among those tired men, the man to whom she had raised her eyes and who, as they gazed at each other, sprinkled cold water on her and smiled as no one had ever done before; and both of them knew or guessed that they could expect nothing more of life, since each was damned in his or her own way. For the officer this meant that he had already taken the path of denial and defeat; for her that she had entered her long silence about her beauty and had moved into another dimension of feeling that no one would ever assuage; and it was not the fire in her gut but the passing of time that no one would quell, neither

the Spaniard nor the few others allowed her, for none of them was that tall sunburned god with a boy's face, who was about to sing among hellish torments and had smiled at her that evening when the water he threw fanned out, so it seemed, in dewdrops about her head.

That, at least, was what she told the woman—small, too much makeup, middle-class clothes, possibly sixty—who knocked at her door on a hot May evening a year after Jean's death. Suzon soon grasped why she was there, gave her a chair in the cool living room, lit one of the those American cigarettes that had become her only pleasure, and waited, saying nothing even when it was her turn to speak and turn toward this little woman with a shy smile.

"He's dead, isn't he?"

"They're all dead," murmured Suzon, adding: "I might as well be, too . . ."

"Don't say that: you're still beautiful."

Suzon smiled, or rather pursed her lips so that when she released the smoke the visitor might have thought she was smiling; but she was only sighing. She repeated that she had been dead for some time and that the Pythres had always been closer to the dead than to the living, as her father said once; in fact they had scarcely existed, were almost forgotten now, but should have come to more than that. They couldn't have lived in Siom or Féniers or anywhere else, the others would have prevented them—other people or fate, it came to the same thing in the end, she murmured. They had seen her smile at the German officer and would willingly have shaved her head on account of that; but the visitor must know very well that you can't resist the bare torso of a man with cold water running down him in the afternoon sun, who spares you even though he could pass you to the rough soldiery. Yes, surely that's understandable: something that happens suddenly and concerns only one man and one woman, precisely when time is abolished, the sky is all too blue, and nothing else matters. But it was just as impossible to live by a memory as to put up with marrying a town-hall clerk or a mushroom

salesman; you had to come to terms with that and try your best not to spend all your days and nights eating your heart out.

“And what about Jean?” the woman asked finally.

She waited for Suzon to catch her drift and possibly remember who this Jean was whose name the visitor uttered as if she had no right to do so. But Suzon did not remember, did not know that Jean was dead and lying in the graveyard at Saint-Sulpice. The woman rose, was on the verge of telling her that she did not believe her, walked to the door and opened it, then turned back and said:

“You’re probably right. What’s the point of stirring up so much of the past like this?”

Then she added, so quietly that Suzon found it difficult to decide whether she referred to her or to the Pythres:

“You weren’t like the others.”

Suzon did not reply. Perhaps she was smiling because the other woman had declared in her favor and was sending her back to her solitary life, to that wretched state in which she was forced to continue spinning round the center of her own self, as once in the birch wood. Perhaps she said something in return—the visitor could not be sure—possibly it was only a sound from outside, the wind or the lowing of a heifer some way off in the hills where you might think you could hear the brooks murmur.

She got back into the automobile where a man with a thin mustache was waiting for her behind the wheel. They drove to Saint-Sulpice, wandered among the graves, and looked at the other hills, the unmoving leaves, and the shadowy church. Then the woman approached a blond gravedigger brushing the stone covering of a vault where Jean Pythre was buried. The man knew nothing about it and told her to ask one of his colleagues who was burning grass, paper, and dry flowers in a corner of the cemetery. He removed his beret.

“A lad from Siom,” said the woman. “They buried him here last year.”

The man raised his hands and spread them.

“Ask the mayor,” he said at last. “He has nothing to do. He’ll see you all right.”

She shrugged, muttered that she didn’t want to give anyone any trouble; she would find out herself. The blond gravedigger went with her, showed her several unnamed graves, and finally stopped before a plot of gray soil with an old cross leaning over it.

“It might be that one. I think I remember now. The coffin was shattered and he gave off a devil of a stink.”

She pretended that it was the grave she was looking for, stood there for a while, shivering and biting her lips, then crossed herself and, with tears in her eyes, walked back slowly to the mustachioed man waiting for her at the gate and smoking with the gravediggers. She did not turn round but got into the vehicle, closed her eyes, said nothing until she heard the gate close, then remarked, very quietly, that that was how it had to be; but perhaps she didn’t say this or even think of it any longer, for that was the only way to proceed, indeed to persist; because of a smiling man’s torso with something running down it, a trickle of cold water, of sweat or even, she might think, of blood: yes, the blood of the soldiers who had vanished and of the Pythres, the blood of all those who for centuries on this high dark earth had followed the script of immortality, enacting its gestures to the very last.





## *About the Author*

RICHARD MILLET was born in 1953. He is the author of nearly twenty other works in his native France, including *L'innocence*, *L'amour des trois soeurs Piale*, and *L'invention du corps de Saint Marc*. He lives in Paris.

Set in the villages and valleys of France's mountainous provinces, *The Glory of the Pythres* follows the fortunes—or rather the colossal misfortunes—of the Pythres (pronounced the same as *pîtres*, the French word meaning “clowns” or “buffoons”). Of peasant stock, the Pythres live a grim existence, locked up with their dead through long winters and passing on their problems to their children like heirlooms. Their culture is in decline; the way they speak is barely comprehensible; their lives are defined by tribal hatreds with motives that have long since vanished into history.

In this translation from the French, Richard Millet's ambitious and grandiose novel is introduced to an English-speaking audience. Translator John Cumming captures the essence of Millet's musical prose, contrasting the strange patois of the villagers with “proper” French. With its finely observed characters and breathtaking descriptions, *The Glory of the Pythres* is a unique, powerful work of art.

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**JOHN CUMMING** is the translator of Jean Giono's *An Italian Journey*, published in 2001 by Northwestern University Press.



Cover image: Jean-François Millet, *The Sower*, 1850  
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston  
Gift of Quincy Adams Shaw through Quincy Adams Shaw, Jr.,  
and Mrs. Marian Shaw Haughton  
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ISBN 0-8101-6049-8



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