

Tides of Mont St.-Michel

Roger Verce1

Translated by
Warre Bradley Wells



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Title: Tides of Mont St.-Michel

Date of first publication: 1938

Author: Roger Verce1 (1894-1957)

Translator: Warre Bradley Wells (1892-1958)

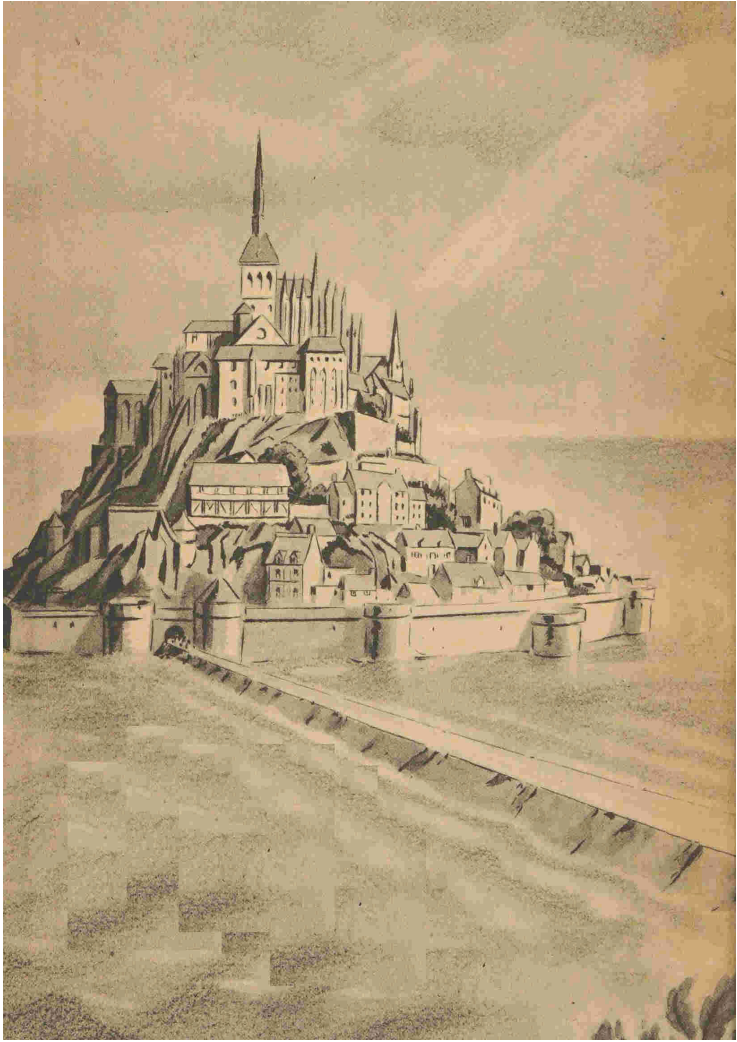
Date first posted: June 3, 2026

Date last updated: June 3, 2026

Faded Page eBook #20260605

This eBook was produced by: Al Haines, John Routh & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <https://www.pgdpCanada.net>

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This is the Abbey of Mont St. Michel—crowning glory of mediaeval architecture. Not only a shrine, it is also a fortress set boldly on a great rock in the Atlantic Ocean. At low tide the causeway to the French mainland is passable; at high tide the water submerges it, and the Abbey becomes an island.

This modern novel tells of a drama enacted within the stone walls of the incredible structure that man and nature have created here—a drama of a man and a woman, of strong opposing forces and of lofty aspiration.



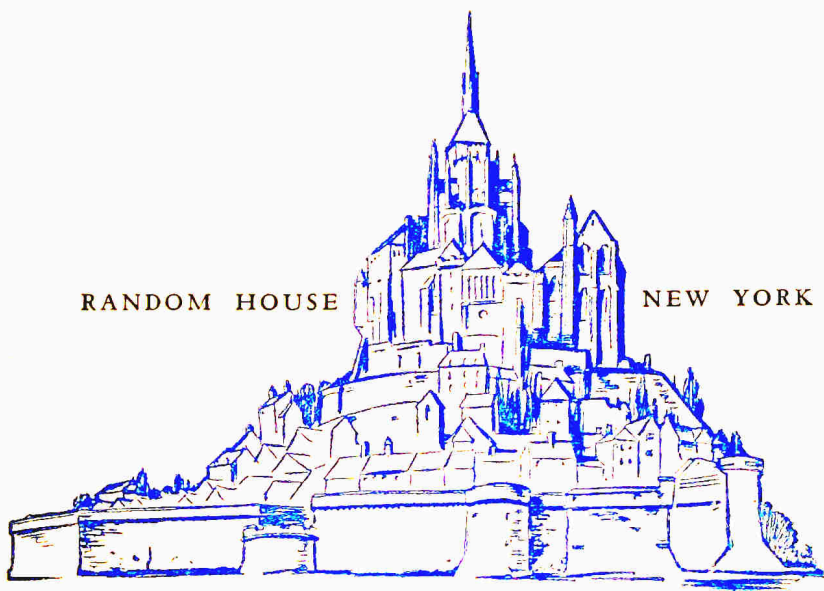
TIDES
of
MONT ST.-MICHEL

BY ROGER VERCEL

Translated from the French by Warre Bradley Wells

RANDOM HOUSE

NEW YORK



FIRST PRINTING

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MANUFACTURED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

TIDES
of
MONT ST.-MICHEL

The motor-coach jerked to a stop in front of a wall. The glare of the headlights cast a blinding light on its wet stones. It looked as though the driver had only just missed running into it.

“Here we are. Out you get!”

The man, who wore a leather coat, had stood up. Then he bent down again to speak to the woman who stayed sitting still on the wide red moleskin seat.

She found it hard to shake off the uneasy torpor induced by the past two hours of rolling along on soft springs. The journey had struck her simply as a sequence of swinging from side to side and bobbing up and down. It conveyed no sense of speed, or even of motion, so dense was the dark outside the windows, with a murky screen of rain steadily streaming down them.

The woman stared at the wall. Suddenly it vanished as the headlights were dimmed. The road had been blocked so abruptly that she thought the driver had lost his way and run into a dead-end. She expected him to back.

“Here we are, my dear,” her companion repeated softly.

There were only the two of them in the coach. He let her get out first and followed her with their heavy expanding suitcase.

She was hardly out on the step when she suddenly turned round, as though she were going to get back into the coach. The wind dashed the rain against her eyes, her cheeks, with all the force of a hard blow. But the bulky suitcase which the man was pushing along with his knee behind her drove her down to the ground.

“What a night!” he growled.

He crammed his felt hat down on his head, turned up the collar of his coat, and buttoned it. Then he took the arm of the woman, who was wearing a light-coloured waterproof. She kept her head well down and took the weight of the wind on her beret. To their right the wall rounded out in the dark. It must be the base of a tower.

“Mind the steps!”

The woman made no attempt to see where she was or find her way. She was indifferent to everything, except the wind which hooked in between her beret and her collar and froze the back of her neck like the flat of a sword-blade. At the foot of the steps, the man had to let go of her.

“Follow the hand-rail—and watch out! It’s slippery.”

She could feel sticky planks underfoot and a smooth bar beneath her glove. In front of her, the two parallel lines of the hand-rails were promptly lost to sight in the dark. Only the feel of a bend in the bar beneath her left hand made her turn and walk to the right.

“Watch out! There are four more steps.”

At the bottom of them, she found pavement underfoot again. Sheltered from the wind by a jut of the wall, she raised her eyes for the first time. In front of her rose a tall trapeze of reddish light, cut off by a cross-bar; a deep embrasure into which the walls of shining sandstone plunged. When they were through this gate, she caught sight of the curve of a sidewalk. She was surprised and secretly relieved to see it.

But they were right back in the wind’s eye. Crouching with her head sunk into her shoulders, the woman let the man drag her along.

The pelting rain cut at them in sidelong squalls. It stung them in savage squirts, amid a jarring din from the sheet-iron signs that swung protesting overhead. So shrewdly did the downpour aim at the exposed parts of their two faces that they might have been the victims of a series of detestable practical jokes. After every assault, they expected to hear the loud laughter of somebody playing the fool with a hose. The reflector of an electric lamp attached to a gable-end projected a conical, shining stream of water, as though it were the rose of a shower-bath.

They skirted dark walls pierced by flights of steps. In this dead street, just one wide window struck them as vaguely luminous, though the rills of rain that blurred the panes left them guessing whence the light came. It might be from a room at the back of the house, still lit up, from which the light filtered through one door ajar after another. To their right, too, they caught a glimpse of the gleaming mass of great cylinders standing on stone sockets, flanked by curious cast-iron cannon-balls glossy with wet.

Then they made their way through a broad, black tunnel, where the whole strength of the storm seemed to be lying in ambush. The wind bent the brim of the man’s hat and banged it against his eyes. It drove the thick collar of his leather coat into his mouth. It caught the woman by the legs,

plastering her waterproof and her heavy skirt against her shins and her thighs and fitting them to her like tight trousers.

Beyond the tunnel, the paving mounted. It looked like deep, still water, with the long reddish rays of the electric lamps reflected upside down in it. In the lulls between the squalls, the travellers could hear the echo of their footsteps.

Then the houses closed in right and left. The paving gave way to flights of steps, broken by short landings. Rounding a turn, all at once they found themselves on the extreme north of the deserted town, with nothing between them and the wind. When their heads rose above the rugged parapet, the blast from seaward was so sudden, so strong that the man let go of his companion and clapped his hand to his hat to stop it blowing off.

Instinctively, they swung left into a narrow street running at right angles. They passed a school playground, with stunted lime-trees writhing in the wind. They skirted a broad moat, with the crosses of a cemetery glimmering white in its depths. Then lanes barely a pace wide opened up, running down on the left and up on the right. But in both directions their steepness and their darkness were discouraging.

The man stopped for a moment to get his bearings. The woman had followed his lead in depressed silence. Sheltered from the wind by a gable-end, she stood up straight and took a deep breath. Then, in exasperation, she looked around her for a light. Raising her eyes in search of one, she stood stock still, with her head cocked uneasily.

As her eyes became more accustomed to the dark, she made out above her an overwhelming staircase of structures, with their tops merging into the streaming night. There was a gleam at the base of their massive walls, and she could catch a glimpse of other shadowy cliffs rising from the edge of a rocky slope and mounting upwards, strongly supported by buttresses.

The sense of solid dark, the sense of height, which they conveyed oppressed her temples. She suffered from that uneasy feeling of tightness round the head, that impression that the air has thickened, which you experience when you are groping in the dark and bump into an obstacle.

The forbidding solitude, the pitch blackness, the icy wind, the spiteful buffets which had welcomed her—all this produced in her a profound impulse of hatred: the kind of hatred you feel for inanimate objects, which lasts as long as they do.

She had not said a word since they got out of the coach. But now she flung a question at her companion, who was squatting down, trying to light a cigarette.

“Well, are we going to stay here all night?”

The man took two or three deep puffs at his cigarette, which lit up only the outline of his face.

“I don’t want to take you up to the top in weather like this,” he said. “We must find somewhere still open where you can wait for me.”

The woman shrugged her shoulders, and they set off again. They came upon a tall fir-tree wrestling with the wind in between two low houses and beating furiously upon their roofs with its topmost branches. Finally, to their right, there was a light behind a glass door. They opened it.

Their entrance obviously surprised the three occupants of the little café: two men, booted to the thighs in rough-grained gum-boots; and the landlady, a woman with a severe face and brushed-back hair, who was standing on duty behind her counter.

The male traveller dropped onto the bench running round the room, with his hands flat on the table in front of him and his suitcase between his knees, and let out a long breath. Then he took off his hat.

A lock of his hair, dank with sweat, fell over his eyes. He brushed it back with both hands, revealing a jutting forehead that bespoke determination. His nose and his chin were equally strong. His delicate mouth was by contrast a surprising feature: a mobile mouth, quick to smile, which already looked like making fun of the adventure.

His grey-green eyes roamed curiously over the people and things around him. They soon took in the narrow room: the landlady’s blue apron, the yellow knitting which she had picked up again, her hard, wrinkled face, the two pictures on the walls, representing four-masters under full sail on a neatly waved sea, such as picture-shops in big ports sell to sailors.

His eyes lingered longer over the baskets which the two fishermen had in front of them; but he could not make out what fish there were in them. Then he looked up at the bullet head of the customer sitting with his back to him, and caught the eyes of the other customer, who was studying him. The customer politely lowered his eyes at once and resumed his conversation.

Finally, the traveller in the leather coat turned to his companion and smiled at her, rather sheepishly.

She looked back at him with a face for the moment incapable of telling him anything, except that it was drowned and frozen: a face white beneath its gloss of water. She dried it. All its features were blurred. The diffused pallor of the lips smudged the shape of the small mouth. Even the eyes were washy and lacklustre; for the rain had ended by clearing them of anger, indignation, disappointment, or any other enlivening emotion.

“What will you have? Better make it something hot. What about a grog?”

Without stirring, as though in a dream, she replied:

“They won’t have any lemons.”

From behind her counter, without any further question, the landlady confirmed:

“No, Madame.”

“Well, will you have some very hot coffee, with rum in it?”

“I’ll have tea.”

“Could you make us some tea?”

The landlady nodded, and betook herself to the kitchen.

The man made no attempt to break the silence in which his companion had shut herself up again. For a moment or two, he stared with renewed interest at the two fishermen. Obviously he wanted to speak to them. Then something else suddenly struck him. Beneath the table, he felt for the woman’s knees, grasped them firmly, and ran his hands down her shins.

“Your stockings are wringing wet!”

“Naturally.”

“There’s a fire in the kitchen. You can go and dry yourself there while I go up.”

She shook her head.

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Doesn’t it?” he retorted. “We’ll soon see about that.”

The landlady came back with some cups.

“My wife is soaked. Couldn’t she dry herself at your fire?”

“She could,” replied the landlady, without looking at them. She reflected for a moment, and added:

“I might serve you in the kitchen.”

“A very good idea,” declared the man. “Come on!”

They climbed up three steps into the narrow room. Copper saucepans shone on top of the enamelled Dutch oven, and in the wide stone fireplace, with its very high hood, piled logs blazed. The landlady laid the teacups at one end of the wooden table. At the other end, a boy about ten years old, who was doing his home-work, stared at the intruders, with his pen poised in the air.

The man put a chair in front of the fire, and ordered:

“Take your shoes off!”

The woman kicked off her little brown shoes.

“Your stockings, too!” the man ordered again.

She had turned suddenly docile. Adroitly and very quickly, she unfastened her garters, slid the long silk sheaths off her legs, and sat with her bare feet on the warm hearthstone. Her toe-nails were polished and painted coral-red.

Her husband wrung her stockings out with his big hands over the hot ashes, in which the drops of water fizzled, spread them out on the back of a chair, and pushed it close to the fire.

The landlady poured out the tea.

“What weather!” he said to her.

Without stopping what she was doing, without taking her eyes off the amber thread flowing from the tea-pot, she replied, deliberately:

“It’s seasonable weather.”

As he stirred the sugar in his tea, the man asked:

“How do I get to the Head Guardian’s house?”

This time the landlady looked at him, suddenly interested.

“You go up the Precipice Steps till you get to the Guard Room. Then you turn up the Grand Staircase. It’s a little round door on your left. You won’t find your way, if you haven’t been here before.”

“I’ve been here in the summer.”

“It’s not summer now.”

The man laughed, a very boyish laugh.

“No, it certainly isn’t!”

Then he suggested, squarely:

“Would that young man there like to show me the way?”

The landlady looked at him again. She nodded.

“All right—if you simply must see Monsieur Plantier tonight.”

She was reverting to her curiosity about him by a roundabout route, hoping he would take her into his confidence in return for services rendered. But he merely replied:

“I simply must.”

“The only thing is that you can’t be sure of finding him at home. He may not be back yet. He comes down every night for a game of cards.”

The traveller waved his hand evasively and stood up. Now that he was on his feet, he revealed himself tall and broad-shouldered. In the light, which struck him full in the face as he stood there, bare-headed, he looked about thirty.

He hesitated for a moment or two, brooding, absentminded. In imagination, he was already standing before the door at which he must knock. Then he crammed his hat on his head.

“Well, let’s go!” he said. “Coming, young man?”

“Put your clogs on,” the landlady told the boy, who was busy drying his page with thumps of his fist on the blotting-paper.

The traveller laid his hand on his wife’s shoulder.

“Just rest yourself and get dry. I won’t be much more than a quarter of an hour. I just want to put in an appearance.”

His wife showed no sign that she had heard what he said. She was twiddling her dainty toes at the fire.

The man went out on the heels of his guide. Once outside, he felt his way, groping for the steps with his feet. A clatter of clogs was already dying away up the street. He had to lengthen his stride to overtake the boy.

“Do you know Monsieur Plantier?”

The boy nodded, sulkily. He was lending himself with a bad grace to this job which was imposed upon him.

“Look, here’s a franc for your trouble. Is Monsieur Plantier a nice man?”

“Yes.”

That was the end of the conversation; for the lane made a turn which brought them into the wind again. They reached the foot of a long, broad staircase. It ascended towards a gateway through which a copper-coloured light showed: an opening as squat and narrow as an oven-door. The boy slipped off his clogs, and, in his sheepskin shoes, sped upwards as fast as his legs would carry him. The man hastened after him, taking the steps two at a time.

Under the archway they came to a broad passage with a vaulted roof. Then the steps started again, getting wider and wider. Beyond an iron gate, out in the rain again, they turned into a spacious street, which went up in tiers between the buttresses of a church on one side and long, blind buildings on the other.

The clatter of clogs—the boy had put them on again—stopped in front of a romanesque doorway.

“Here you are.”

“Thanks. You’re a good little boy. . . . Wouldn’t you like to wait for me? Aren’t you afraid to go down again all by yourself?”

The boy seemed to suspect some sort of trick. He replied:

“You can find your way back all right.”

“Of course I can. But . . .”

The boy had already disappeared. Left alone, the man knocked at the door.

Then he promptly turned round again. A deep hole had just opened in the black sky, letting through a sulphurous light, and now he could make out the strange street. He could not see down to the bottom of its stairs; for a covered bridge crossed it at a height of fifteen to eighteen feet. The long building at whose base the visitor was waiting followed the curve of the street. The windows of the great church glimmered with a cold sheen. Very high up, he fancied he could make out pinnacles.

The opening of the door took him by surprise. It disclosed, at one and the same time, the forbidding face of a woman and the closing strains of a

jazz tune, very close and very jarring.

“What do you want?”

He took off his hat as he replied, “May I see Monsieur Plantier? . . . I’m the new guardian.”

“Oh! Will you come in?”

The room which he entered, a dining-room, seemed to be made out of part of a cathedral. Its walls cut right across the pointed arches of the roof, and a section of diamond-paned window formed its south end. You could tell that the glass extended below the flooring and above the roof. It simply took the room in its stride. The room was stuck up against it, like a box, and, beyond, it went its way, free and untrammelled.

In the rear wall the visitor noticed a hollow in the mossy stone, a sort of butterfly-hatch framed in a ribbed arch. Here those who served Mass once used to place the tray with the vases and the napkin. Now an uncorked bottle stood there ready at hand. . . .

“We must apologise to listeners for a short break in the programme . . .”

A man whom the visitor had not yet noticed, because he was seated behind a sideboard in Henri II style, rose quickly to his feet and switched off the radio.

“Monsieur Plantier?”

“Yes.”

“I’m André Brelet, the new guardian.”

“Glad to see you. I rather expected you this morning. Sit down. . . . You haven’t brought very good weather with you. You needn’t have come up all this way tonight. Still, you’re young; and besides, in a place like this one can’t stop to think about two or three hundred steps.”

While Monsieur Plantier was speaking, André studied him with extreme attention. He gave him about sixty years of age. His dark tunic with its silver stripes sat close to his thick-set body. His face was unlined, but mottled with red. The light gleamed on his prominent cheek-bones. His grey eyes surveyed one shrewdly. Beneath his white moustache, his mouth had a mocking twist about it.

Above all, his voice struck the newcomer. It was a high-pitched, rather nasal voice, used to echoing in great halls. You felt that it had been trained to speak clearly.

The new guardian started apologising for his late arrival; but Monsieur Plantier interrupted him.

“It doesn’t matter in the least. There are eleven other guardians, and you make up the dozen. Well, in the winter nobody’s on duty more than once a week. What’s the good of disturbing two when one’s enough? Today, all in all, there were exactly five visitors. So you needn’t be in any hurry about learning your job.”

“That suits me,” said André.

The Head Guardian hunched a shoulder.

“Oh, you’ll get on all right. It’s very easy—or not so easy as all that. It all depends on how you look at it. It will only take you an hour or so to learn how to show people round. But, if you want to understand the place yourself, and get other people to understand it, why, that’s quite another matter. . . . You’ve been here before, of course?”

“Yes, several times.”

“You belong to the district, don’t you?”

“Yes, I come from Granville.”

“Are you married?”

“Yes.”

“And has Madame Brelet come with you?”

“Yes. She’s waiting for me in a café down below.”

The Head Guardian stood up.

“Then you mustn’t keep her waiting any longer. Ladies are nervous at night after travelling. . . . Well, if you care to look in tomorrow, any time you’re out for a stroll . . . I’m always here.”

He planted himself in front of André, raised his head, and looked him in the eyes. A shrewd smile raised his short upper lip.

“By the way, you must have plenty of pull, haven’t you?”

“I? Why do you say that?”

Plantier’s chaffing voice rang out:

“The Ministry received seven hundred applications for the job—not one less! And here you are. Well, may the best man win!”

He held out his hand, frankly.

Outside it had stopped raining. There was nothing to be heard now but the wind, raving like an imprisoned madman as it rushed about in a frenzy and bumped into everything.

Buffeted though he was by the squalls, André chose to make his way to the North Tower. Thence he tried to probe the heart of the storm.

All he could see, very far below him, was a darkness denser than ever, stretching to infinity. It might be land, or it might be sea. André could not tell.

For some little time, he endeavoured to summon out of the windy north pictures in his mind's eye which he knew to be hidden in the depths of that vast, vociferous void. Then he went back on his tracks, and came again to the level street and the red rectangle which marked the glass door of the little café.

There his wife was waiting for him, all by herself. She had returned from the kitchen to the public room.

As soon as André came in, she stood up and picked up her waterproof from the bench. Then she buttoned her green woollen coat, which sat closely to her slim hips, while its high-waisted belt made her look taller.

Once she was thawed-out and dry, she had made up her face; for she was one of those women to whom an undefined mouth is as unendurable as a badly fitting dress. Her mignonette felt beret was cocked on one side of the damp, flattened waves of her fair hair. She had shadowed the ends of her long eyes, heightened the curve of her lips, and put touches of rouge low down on her pale cheeks.

“And now let's go and have dinner!” said André, with more high spirits than he felt.

His wife shook her head, with her face impenetrable and her eyes on the ground.

“You can have dinner if you like. For my part, I simply couldn't swallow anything.”

She held out her waterproof to him. As he helped her on with it, he informed her, in a coaxing tone:

“It's stopped raining.”

Then, as he paid the bill, he asked the landlady:

“Where can we get dinner? What place is open?”

“The ‘Constance’ is open. You know where it is?”

“Oh, yes,” André hastened to reply.

He knew his way about. He had been here before. But this wasn’t the moment to remember those days. . . .

“They’ve got bedrooms, have they?”

“Oh, yes, certainly.”

The “Constance” was indeed open; for a little door into a dark passage stood ajar, though the front of the hotel was as black as the walls around it.

André manoeuvred his suitcase into the narrow passage, and preceded his wife along it. He was surprised to find it so long. It seemed as deep as a mine-shaft running into the heart of rocks. Then they came to a lobby, which they crossed. A door opened as the sound of their footsteps approached, and they found themselves on the threshold of a big kitchen.

Here, too, the radio was in full blast, piling words on top of one another to which nobody listened. It might have been the family dotard sitting in his corner, an unheeded babbler whom nobody even took the trouble to shut up.

The landlord, a very tall man, with a phlegmatic face and heavy-lidded, slow-moving eyes, wearing a blue jersey and a cap pushed back on his forehead, was seated at the end of a wooden bench, with his arms sprawling on a long table. He raised his head, somewhat surprised to see guests. The landlady, quicker on the uptake, came forward to meet them. The servant, standing at a huge kitchen-range, turned round and stared at them.

“Could we have some dinner?”

The landlady seemed hesitant about it.

“Would you want it in the dining-room? The trouble is that the central heating isn’t on. Scarcely anybody comes in January. You’d be warmer in here.”

André Brelet agreed at once.

“Why, of course! Don’t you think so?”

He glanced at his wife. She simply shrugged her shoulders, by way of registering absolute indifference.

They were given seats at the end of the table, near the fireplace, and the servant, who was pretty and sensible-looking, spread out two napkins, so

new that they were stiff, on the table, whose wood was all cockled with constant washing.

When she brought the soup, André insisted on his wife's taking a few spoonfuls. She swallowed them reluctantly; but she refused prawns.

"They're quite fresh," the landlord assured them. "I caught them myself this morning."

"Do you mean to say you have prawns here in January?" asked André, in astonishment.

"Of course, with a winter like this!" replied the landlord, grumpily. "We haven't had a single cold day. Nothing but wet all the time. In such weather, the prawns don't go back to the sea. You can always find a plateful here and there. Such a thing hasn't happened in these parts for years."

"You'll have a little omelette, won't you, Madame?"

The landlady brought one, sizzling, together with a plate of ham.

"No, thank you."

"Won't you just try it?"

"No."

The landlady beat a retreat. She studied this guest of hers, too fashionable for the time of year.

What was she doing here? Why did she refuse to eat anything? Was she just sulky, or was she in sorrow?

The man's slightly tense attitude; the couple's low voices; above all, the mystery of their presence, for nobody ever came at night—all this was intriguing.

The landlord, raising his head a little, fixed his meditative eyes upon the couple.

"Do you want a room prepared for you?"

"Yes."

"Just for the night?"

"Yes, just for the night."

"Are you a commercial traveller, eh?"

It was André's wife, brought to life, who replied:

“No.”

She said it so scornfully that André, in embarrassment, changed the conversation.

“I suppose you don’t have many people here in the winter?”

The landlady placed in front of them two lamb cutlets swimming in melted butter.

“Next to nobody.”

“The season begins at Easter, doesn’t it?”

“Not on your life!” protested the landlord. “You may say it begins after July 14th, and it ends on September 15th. Just two months—and it’s getting shorter every year.”

“Are there many people left here in the winter?”

“Only those who can’t help it. The guardians. Half a dozen fishermen, if there are that many left. The schoolmistress and the priest. Apart from them . . . Most people have houses at Pontarlier and spend the winter there.”

“But you stay open?”

“Yes, though I don’t know why I do. For all the guests I get! . . . I suppose it’s because I’ve always known the place open.”

“You belong here?”

“Yes. I was born here, in 1880. You won’t find many people of my age who were born in Mont Saint-Michel and who are still here. It’s all strangers nowadays. . . .”

He broke off, morosely. But at this point André’s wife intervened, without raising her voice, in her frigid tone.

“It must be gay here in winter!”

The landlord heaved his shoulders, placidly.

“Oh, when one is at home, you know, one can always find something to do. One gets through it, like the rest of the year.”

“He shoots and he fishes,” the landlady explained.

But this stirred the landlord up again.

“Talk about fishing!” he cried. “There hasn’t been a single salmon caught since the season opened. With all this rain, the rivers run too high.

Nobody's been able to spread a net yet. For the last forty years, I don't remember ever having seen the Couesnon as it is this year. And just try to get to Tombelaine! There's more than a hundred yards of water round it even at low tide. Then again, in this mild weather, where's your chance of getting a shot at wild duck?"

He leant on the table more heavily than ever, and shook his head over his hopes of fishing and shooting, washed out by the endless rain.

Silence reigned again. Then, fearing questions which would make him talk about himself, André asked:

"What's that they're building next door to you?"

"A post-office."

"Is there much building still done here?"

Once more, without knowing it, he had touched a sore spot. The landlord raised his fist in the air, and then let it drop again, dejectedly.

"People might build if they were their own masters. You are not allowed to build anything within six yards of the ramparts, or anything higher than thirty-six feet. That's understood. So far, so good. You proceed to get plans drafted. The architect of the Ministry of Fine Arts reports favourably on them. Then the people in Paris run their pens through the whole thing. After that, you get a letter signed by some underling on behalf of the Minister, which informs you: 'Your house, number so-and-so in the government survey, including walls and roof, is classified as a historical monument.' From that moment, you're not your own master. They are your masters!"

He jerked his head towards his wife, who was sitting beside him, eating her dinner.

"I ask you, is what happened to your sister tolerable? Last year, Monsieur, my wife's sister had an ordinary verandah built. It cost her fifty thousand francs. The Fine Arts people condemned it. A fine of five hundred francs a day if she didn't demolish it. She's the kind of woman who stands up for herself. She protested. She appealed. Still, she had to knock the whole thing down. One way and another, it cost her a hundred and fifty thousand francs. Is that sort of thing reasonable?"

André, who was finishing his last prune, waved his hand vaguely. His wife stood up.

"We've aired your bed," said the landlady, "and we've given you more blankets."

“It’s not cold, though,” added the landlord. “Not so long as we have this beastly rain. . . .”

They went up to the first floor, and made their way through long passages painted green. Their bedroom looked out on the street. It was spotlessly clean, with washable walls, as bare as a hospital ward.

André went over to the window. He could see the staircase which pierced the ramparts, and, to the right, a statue of the Virgin in a niche hollowed out in the pediment of the King’s Gate.

He drew the curtain, left the window, and unfastened his suitcase. When it was open, he turned slowly round.

His wife was standing stock still at the bedside. Her beret, that little circlet of green felt, had twice fallen off the peg on which she had hung it. She had not troubled to pick it up again. She simply stood there, stiff and hostile, as though she could not reconcile herself to putting up, even for one night, with the shelter which was offered her.

In two strides, André went over to her. He took her by the shoulders.

“Come, come, Laura!”

But she was unbending. She turned her head away when he tried to kiss her. He let go of her at once.

“And what about me?” he asked, in a voice that had suddenly turned hard. “Do you think this is all fun for me?”

His wife sat down on a chair, and started taking her shoes off. She dropped them on the floor, one after the other. André was walking up and down between the door and the window. The noise exasperated him.

“Yes,” he went on, “of the two of us, who is the more to be pitied? . . . Had you anything better to suggest? Did you? . . .”

“Ah, no!” she cried. “Don’t start that again tonight!”

She stood up, defiantly, with her eyes blazing.

André turned away. He apologised, somewhat shame-facedly.

“You’re quite right. . . .”

He stopped beside the bed, and pulled the clothes well down.

“The sheets are clean, anyway,” he said, in a low voice.

The night was long and very hard for both of them.

The day had been taken up by their journey. It had not left them really alone together. Besides, during this day they were simply on their way towards their new way of life.

But now, in this bedroom, they were on the verge of it. The night was a burden of hours when expectation was over, but time stood still.

An electric lamp outside shone into the room. It showed up the cluster of Laura's fair hair, buried in the pillow.

The moment he got into bed, André found himself up against the inertia of her slim body, the dead weight of her soft arms, the compactness of her narrow back.

He started talking to her; but he made a poor job of it. Without any conviction, he added one encouragement to another. But he fully realised how false, how futile, how irritating they were; for he had nothing to offer, nothing to promise, to the mute dejection of the woman who lay beside him, but remote from him.

All at once, she burst into tears, desperate weeping that shook the whole bed. Her first sob curled her up, huddled over her grief, with her knees drawn up, her elbows pressing into her bosom, and her open hands hiding her face.

André was instantly aware that her despair was aimed at him; that she hated and despised him for being beaten; that she was crying only over herself.

For a few moments, he gritted his teeth to stop himself giving vent to unworthy reproaches, cruel arguments, reminders which would crush her. Then he relapsed into a silence to match her own. He passed judgment on her, with no mercy. He refused to recognise that only now had it dawned upon her that she was poor, and that this hurt her as much as she was capable of being hurt.

At length, towards dawn, sleep disarmed them.

As soon as he awakened, André looked at the time. Five past eight. Their furniture would arrive during the morning. Before that, they must pay a visit to the rooms assigned to him in the guardians' quarters.

"I'm not going to have breakfast in that kitchen!"

Laura spoke without stirring, without even opening her eyes.

André, on the other hand, had been calmed down by his short sleep. He was merely amused at her childish persistence in making the worst of things. She would get tired of it before he did. . . .

Still, he went downstairs to ask for breakfast to be sent up.

"Did you sleep well?" asked the landlord, who was busy raking out the range.

"Yes."

"Anyhow, there wasn't any noise to disturb you."

"No, there certainly wasn't."

"So you're the new guardian, are you?"

They knew all about him already. They had lost no time in finding out. André was surprised to hear himself reply, with no effort, in quite a natural tone of voice:

"Yes, I am."

"Well, it's not at all a bad job," the landlord allowed. "You make good money at it in the summer. Will you be having lunch here?"

"Yes, certainly."

"Very well. I'll get some fresh ones for you."

He meant the prawns which he caught in bow-nets fixed a couple of hundred yards away from the Mount. André got him to explain how the fishing was done.

You stretched your net between stakes, the landlord told him, flush with the sand, in a "run," or stream on the beach. The net fished all by itself as the tide went down, catching everything small that was carried seaward.

"I've caught mullet, and, two or three times this winter, sole as big as my hand. Do you fish?"

"Yes, when I get the chance."

“Well, you won’t be short of time or chance here. The only thing short is the fish. . . .”

He blamed this shortage on the thirty fisheries in the bay, operating over an area of some ten miles, which destroyed the small fry by the hundred thousand. They used huge triangular bow-nets, two hundred and fifty yards wide by four yards deep, stretched on tree-trunks and wattles, which simply swallowed up the fish. As the tide ebbed, mullet, mackerel, maigre, wrasse, whiting, plaice and sole were carried into the depths of the trap, towards the point of the great “V,” until they came to the terminal net, where there was nothing left to do but empty them into baskets.

“Do you call that fishing, eh? I call it a massacre. It isn’t what they catch that I grudge them, it’s what they waste: all the fry you find dead in the net and stuck to the stays. I’ve seen enough of them to make a fine dunghill rotting at the Mechanical.”

“The Mechanical?”

“That’s what the fishery nearest the Mount is called, because it was exchanged for a threshing-machine. . . .”

“Your breakfast has gone up,” the landlady announced.

“Well, did they get you to grind the coffee?”

Laura was brushing her hair at the mirror. It was through the mirror that she looked at André as she sped this shaft at him.

When they got out into the street, they found workmen clinging to a house-front, which they were scraping. The rasping of the scrapers and the yellow dust which rained down hastened their steps towards the Outer Guard.

Once they were outside the Mount, and she set foot on the wet sand which clung to their soles and slid from under them, Laura stopped short, shrinking from the slime.

“Isn’t there even a path?” she exclaimed.

“Yes, but we should have had to climb up to the top and down the other side. This way, it isn’t more than a hundred yards.”

They skirted the western escarpment of the Mount. Here there were no buildings. The rugged ridge of rock fell sheer to the sand. Then, right in front of them, a wall barred their way: a wall pierced by a high arched

doorway. Above and behind it loomed a broad, massive building three floors high.

Entering a paved courtyard, in which two boats were stored, they found that the building stood on arcades. One could walk underneath it. The wind swept shrieking through this tunnel and eddied round the pillars. On a blue slab inserted into the front of the building Laura read:

“Barracks built in 1828 for the garrison of the central prison.”

“Oh,” she said, “so we’re going to live in barracks! . . .”

On the staircase they met a woman in a check blouse and red list-slippers, carrying a garbage pail. She told them where their rooms were.

“The third floor, fourth door on your right.”

She stood where she was, eyeing them curiously as they climbed.

Their apartment consisted of three fair-sized rooms, kitchen, dining-room, and bedroom, all overlooking the embankment and the sands beyond it.

“It’s bright, anyway,” murmured André.

But Laura had crossed over to the window. She stared at the black embankment; the glassy pallor, the dreary desolation of the sands; the grey, ashen vegetation of the grazing land beyond them.

This desert, these barracks for prison-warders—it was worse than anything she had feared. The present overwhelmed her so much that she could not even contemplate the future which awaited her here. A stupor such as that of somebody sentenced to death glued her to the glass of the window. It dug a void in her like death itself.

In the presence of this cheerless, chilling habitation, André weakened in his turn. They would never be able to stand it. . . .

If Laura had looked at him at that moment, he would have said to her:

“Let’s get out of this!”

Their downfall dated from barely a year back.

Laura was the daughter of a mill-owner in the North of France, who had simply let himself slide down the slope of industrial depression, just as limply as he had let himself be borne to the heights of success by the period of inflation.

If he made little effort to save himself, it was because he knew himself. He knew his intellectual limitations, just as you know if you have one leg shorter than the other. All he exerted himself to do was keep the façade of his fortune intact till the very last moment. He bluffed everybody, he took everybody in, by a blindness so bland that it passed for confidence and impressed people.

Still, a fortnight after being declared bankrupt he managed to make a success of a tactful suicide. He drowned himself while he was fishing, in circumstances which could be glossed over as accident. But he left a letter behind him in which he confessed his terror, his horror, of the prospect of poverty.

At about the same time, André's father, an old shipbuilder, closed his yards at Granville for lack of orders. His business simply died of starvation, like the merchant marine business in general.

Once the business had been wound up, old Brelet said to his son:

"You needn't worry about me. I haven't involved anybody else in loss of money. For my own part, I've got eight hundred francs a month left: the proceeds of an assurance policy which your mother made me take out when I was only an overseer. I joked about paying the premiums when I became a shipbuilder, and now that policy will save me from dying of hunger. With my pipe, an old boat to cruise along the coast, and my old servant, Marie Rose—she says she won't leave, because she brought you up—I shall be better off than I've ever been before.

"The only thing that cuts me to the heart is my old workers. They started shipbuilding at the same time as I did, and now they're out of a job. So are you, for that matter. I suppose you'd be glad now if I had a business left for you to take over. I can only hope that, with your father-in-law's connections, you'll be able to find something. I wonder . . . In any case, my house is always open to you."

It was really open for the first time; for André's father had flatly disapproved of his son's marriage.

It was on the esplanade at Dinard that André met Laura. She was walking along amid a group of girls and young men of the type who disconcert you by their brainless conversation, but attract you by their bursting health.

Laura was the tallest of the girls, the most sunburned, and, in her blue shorts and narrow brassière, the most undressed. Her somewhat jerky stride

in her sandals set her breasts quivering, and her fluffy hair streamed behind her as though in a breeze. Alone among her chattering companions, she was neither laughing nor talking. Despite her fairness, she made up with the vivid carmine lip-stick generally used only by the darkest of brunettes.

When she raised her head and gazed at André with her blue eyes, under their heavy lids, he felt that blow over the heart which means you have met your fate.

But when, a month later, he asked his father to approach Laura's parents for her hand, his father told him:

"Since you first spoke to me about her, I've been making inquiries. . . . She's a good deal better off than you are. You wouldn't like that—at least, I hope you wouldn't. But there's something else as well. I've received this letter. Have a look at it."

André took the typewritten sheet.

It said that everybody knew Laura Songal was the mistress of a young spendthrift, already divorced, who had run through a fortune. It gave his name: Robert Delabre. It added that this information could easily be verified by the chambermaids at the hotel where Delabre had stayed. Mlle. Songal went to meet him there.

The letter was signed: "A well-wisher."

André tore it up and threw the pieces into the fire. Then he looked his father up and down.

"Surely," he said, "you're not going to soil your hands with dirt like that?"

Quite calmly, his father replied:

"My boy, I don't need you to teach me what one does with anonymous letters. But I informed myself before I got this one. It doesn't affect my opinion, one way or the other. I can tell you, for a fact, that Mlle. Songal compromised herself with this fellow. Don't laugh, please. . . . Of course, I know I'm only an old fossil. But I'm quite ready to admit that the girls of today are more free in their behaviour than their grandmothers at their age. At the same time, there are limits. . . . I dare say that, in this case, Mlle. Songal was merely imprudent; but imprudent she certainly was. . . . For that matter, this fellow has a vile reputation. It appears his family has recently had to ship him to Africa. . . . You ought to clear all this up before you commit yourself."

“I’ll do it this minute!” cried André; and he went straight to Laura with the whole story.

After their marriage, André’s father nevertheless offered to retire and turn his yards over to his son. But Laura, still burning with resentment against old Brelet, had opposed this idea tooth and nail. So André became his father-in-law’s partner.

At the factory, he had at once run up against Songal’s smiling evasion, his roguish reticence. Songal treated all his son-in-law’s attempts to assert himself with airy persiflage.

“Go and look after your wife,” he advised him, “and don’t worry about the business. It’s run all by itself for the last hundred years. It’s used to it. . . .”

Often at the cost of complicated ruses, Songal concealed the true situation from André: his steady slide towards the verge of the precipice; his crazy schemes for climbing up the slope again. He seemed to guess that André, with his character, would insist upon cutting their coat according to their cloth at once.

Songal, for his part, was guided only by a childish dread of making any sacrifice, or accepting any straitened circumstances. He was also guided by a tenacious, an irrational hope, as impervious to argument as an instinct, that his millions must return to him, just because he had once had them. He lived in desperate expectation of a miracle. He was incapable even of imagining that wealth, which was his natural atmosphere, could ever fail him.

The monthly sums he paid his “partner,” by way of a share in the profits, reassured André. But, at the same time, they irritated him. He felt he was getting them under false pretences. He complained to Laura that he was not earning a single cent of them.

Laura simply shrugged her shoulders.

She had that contempt for money which derives from a surfeit of it. She had never troubled her head about the source from which it had always been lavished upon her. Her habits of luxury were as much a part of her as her face. They seemed to her as natural as dressing in the morning. She did not pride herself on getting two thousand francs a month as pocket-money, or wearing her silk stockings only one day and then handing them over to her maid. All she bragged about was that her one love was “beauty”—she was severely critical of her friends’ bad taste—and that she knew how to get value for her money.

But André's father judged him more sternly than his wife.

"In short," he said, "you're just letting yourself be kept."

André jibbed at that.

"You can say what you like," his father went on, "but I'd rather have you smelling of tar."

When André had left school, his father had sent him for three years to England, and then to Norway, to work in big building-yards for sailing ships and in dry docks. Old Brelet had made his way as a carpenter, and he insisted that his son should pass, for the normal period of apprenticeship, through all the crafts of the shipbuilding trade, from caulking to rigging.

So André had developed his muscles at the jointing-plane, cured himself of giddiness up aloft, and hardened his palms by hauling on ropes.

It was his horny hands of that time, and the soul which went with them, that his father mourned for now.

Finally, one March evening, Songal had called his son-in-law into his glass-walled office, a kind of bridge from which he could keep an eye on the rows of looms.

The mill-owner was a little man, and should have been a fat one. But his ruin had bowed his back. It left him slumped in his chair, with his chin sunk on his chest. His body had been the last thing to collapse: long after his credit.

He confessed his devastating deficit only under cover of ridiculous explanations of it.

"Who is our best customer, and the very one we never think about? The working-man! When he is employed, he can easily buy two suits a year. When he is unemployed, he wears the shirt he has on his back till it is in rags. . . ."

He waved his short arms about in the gloom. André felt a physical need for light. He pressed the electric switch.

"They've cut off the current," Songal told him.

Then he went on, in his ponderous voice.

"To keep your end up, you would have to rob. But the customer won't let himself be robbed. Every little retailer nowadays has a typewriter. For the

smallest order, he puts five carbons into it, and sends six letters asking for quotations. He accepts the lowest. . . .”

André refused to accept the fact of disaster.

“See for yourself,” said Songal.

Then, during a whole week, André sought desperately for some way out, with Songal at his heels: an almost mocking Songal, satisfied, so it seemed, because there wasn’t any way out, because he had gone conscientiously over the walls of his prison without finding a crack in them, and because his son-in-law had merely broken his nails on them.

The disaster was indeed complete.

Songal seemed to take a kind of pride in the fact. This was the one thing which his indolent mediocrity had managed to make a real success.

When, one morning, standing amid the icy mist of the river in the stern of a flat-bottomed boat, André felt his boat-hook sink into the swollen stomach of Songal’s drowned body, for the first time he felt some respect for him.

Laura and André soon had their minds harshly taken off Songal’s death by the seizure and sale of the factory and the dismissal of the staff.

At the outset, Laura induced her husband to be fool enough to lay claim to important posts, such as director of a firm or manager of a big branch.

The only business he really knew was his outworn one as a builder of luxury ships. But Laura, for her part, with all the strength of her blindness to facts, declared that his lack of qualification merely extended his freedom of choice. According to her, having lost a fortune was in itself a reference. André’s record as a member of the idle rich conferred a prestige upon him which would at least prevent potential employers from offering him “just anything.”

Laura had learned from her father’s guests how to pronounce the words “commerce” and “industry.” She knew how to give them their full weight.

“Write so-and-so to them,” she said to André. “Tell them so-and-so. . . .”

She drafted letters for him, suggested approaches. She framed formulas of application in which she bluffed as though she were playing poker. But André repeated her lessons badly. He soon dropped them altogether, in the presence of the polite or mocking surprise which greeted them.

Without saying anything to Laura, he applied for minor jobs. He queued up in passages and lobbies dignified by the name of “halls,” only to be told: “You’re the thirtieth applicant,” or “We’ll write to you.” He waited for hours to be dismissed inside three minutes.

He never forgot one wholesale house where he was at once ushered into the spacious office of the boss, a thin, bilious-looking person with spectacles and hair falling over his eyes. The boss stood up, all smiles, and invited him to take a seat.

But, at André’s first words, the man rose to his feet again so violently that he nearly knocked over his mahogany armchair. His thumb jabbed at a bell-push, and, with his eyes starting out of his head and red veins standing out on his cheeks, he shouted:

“Who let you in here? Who? . . .”

He had taken André for a customer, thanks to his gloves and his still smart suit.

André looked for a job more desperately than ever, just as a tired swimmer quickens his stroke. He applied to friends of his father-in-law, club friends, yachting friends. They welcomed him with a cordiality which he instantly felt to be so overdone that it froze him up. But, once he mentioned a job, all of them dodged. The cleverest of them laughed his request off.

“I’ve got a vacancy for a clerk. But you’ll hardly expect me to offer you that!”

What was at the back of their minds was quite clear to André.

“I’m not going to have any false position. I’m not going to give a job to a man at whose house I used to dine. He’d only think himself entitled to preferential treatment, and imagine he was doing me a favour by being on my pay-roll.”

All these applications, which simply shook the dust off his shoes on to his heart, dug his depression a little deeper. He got to the point of presenting himself as a matter of form, almost with indifference, in order to hasten the refusal of his services which would set him free to go elsewhere. He ended by getting to look like any professional job-seeker, familiar to every employer, with his glassy, patient draught-horse’s eyes, and his way of sitting only on the edge of a chair and getting up at the first discouraging word.

When he got home, he found that Laura had cut his daily ration of “want ads.” out of the newspapers for him. She indicated his next objectives to him with all the cold-blooded precision of a commander, sheltered in his dugout, sending his beaten, jaded troops back to the attack.

Sometimes, indeed often, André was so overcome with shame that he violently refused to return to it. In a fury, he told the tale of his begging and shouted that he was sick of it.

Laura scarcely listened to him. She stuck to one reply, always the same reply.

“And may I ask what we’re going to do when I’ve sold my last ring?”

One evening André went home resolute, with defiance flaming in his eyes.

“I’ve found something,” he announced.

Laura realised that a fight was before her. She nerved herself for it.

“Where?”

“At a cabinet-maker’s.”

“As what?”

“As a workman!”

André flung the word in her face, bending over close to her.

Laura did not say a word. But her narrow mouth hardened very slowly. Her lips thinned until they were no more than a red, straight slit, turned down at the ends in two tiny folds.

André marched up and down the room.

“After all,” he growled, “it’s my trade, and the only one I know. If I can’t do anything else, I can saw and shape and plane a piece of wood. I needn’t be ashamed of it. We’ve got to eat, haven’t we?”

Laura’s quiet words hit him in the back as he reached the other end of the room.

“If you do a thing like that, I’ll leave you.”

She had gone on fighting till October, hoping that something would turn up when, as she put it, “people returned to town.” Meanwhile she spurred André on with reproaches and sneers, slapping him like somebody in a faint until he nearly cried for mercy. In her desperation, moreover, she learnt the

art of gentler caresses which simulated affection better than her former passionate kisses. So she kept André going round and round, indifferent, almost insensible, like a ball running slower and slower over the numbered slots in a roulette-board.

But one night, all at once, she cracked up in a frightful nervous breakdown.

She stiffened as though she were electrocuted, as rigid as an iron bar. Then she let herself go in a grotesque fit of trembling. She slobbered at the mouth, with her teeth clenched together like a vice. Waves of shudders raced across her face, and it turned blue.

André sent for a young local doctor. He bent over Laura, stammering, taken aback by her convulsions. Then he scribbled a prescription for a bromide, and advised:

“Change of air. Take her to the country.”

That very night, while Laura lay exhausted in bed, disjointed and flabby as a rag-doll, André telegraphed to his father that they were coming to stay with him.

It was the end of the autumn when they reached Berinville.

Laura began by keeping quiet, in a long, luxurious stupor. She was all wrapped up in her convalescence. She surrendered herself to the limpness of her exhausted body, which seemed as relaxed as though it were wasted away to its last fibres. She got old Marie Rose to wait on her in bed and at table.

Marie Rose was a Breton woman from the Arcoat district. It is woodland country, and her own face might have been made out of yellow box-wood, whittled away with his knife by a clumsy shepherd, who had hesitated about cutting lines in it and picked little shavings of flesh out of it instead.

As for André, he got into his sou'-wester and his fishing-boots the moment he arrived.

He lived on the sands, letting the sea-air and the spray cleanse him of all the filth of his cringing and beseeching, all the vileness of his forced, false smiles. He probed hollows with a hook for conger eels all day long. He wore the skin off his hands, digging up acres of sand to find worms for bait.

In his honour, his father recommissioned his old boat, which had been laid up for the winter in a rickety boathouse. The two of them went trolling for the last of the mackerel. In exhausting fatigue André's father found the best treatment for his depression, his disgust, his resentment.

They went out in wild weather. André had to fight to stop the boat heaving-to; and this rammed a taste for struggle into his skin. Sometimes indeed, when a sixty-miles-an-hour squall swept down upon them, an ardent love of life inspired André: love of the life to which he held tight with the helm beneath his hand.

As they fished, he told his father, in bits and scraps, all about his humiliating life as a job-seeker. The old man was so overcome that he let his pipe go out.

“If I’d had any idea you were going through a twentieth part of all that,” he said, shaking his head, “I’d have come and fetched you at once.”

“I don’t know how I stuck it,” André assented. “Sitting up and begging for a bit of bread for months! If I had to start that all over again! . . .”

“Don’t be silly!” returned his father, very gently. “Aren’t you all right here? You can take your time to look round, when you feel you’ve had enough of your old man.”

But then came a December afternoon, when the sky was livid and the sea was colourless and viscous as albumen. Old Brelet moored the boat, with its woodwork all blistered with wet, to the iron ring at the quay.

“Laura and Marie Rose can’t go on like this any longer,” he said. “Stay till over the holidays, anyway. But, after New Year, you’ll have to go.”

André hung his head. There was nothing he could say.

While father and son had been haunting the sea and the sands, fast friends, happy and proud of one another, in the little house the two women, the Parisian and the Breton, had taken to despising each other from the bottom of their hearts.

One evening André came back, shouting for food, and went into the bedroom to take off his sou’-wester and his boots.

“I’m not going to have that woman call me just ‘Laura,’” his wife announced. “I’ve told her so, without mincing my words. Please tell your father the same thing, or I’ll tell him myself.”

Another evening, Laura said to him:

“I’ve had enough of that woman’s bragging to me about her daughter, who has five children and goes out to do housework. I’ve had enough of hearing her say: ‘She, at least, earns the bread she eats.’”

Finally, three days before Christmas, Laura declared:

“No, I’m not going in to dinner. I’d throw the plates at that woman’s head. Do you know what she said to me today? She said that only abandoned women painted their finger-nails, and that it made her sick. She wouldn’t even let me cut the bread. Oh, but I told her where she got off! I made her white in the face, the old fool.”

There was a truce over Christmas Day. In the evening, André’s father took him aside.

“Listen to me,” he said. “You’ve told me that not at any price would you think of going back to Paris and starting to look for a job again. If you could have stayed here a few weeks longer, you would have had time to turn round and think about things. But you can’t help that, and neither can I. . . . Unfortunately, there’s nothing else I can do for you. At the most, a couple of hundred francs at a pinch. . . . Yes, yes, I know—you wouldn’t take them.

“So what’s the next move? You don’t want a job a year hence, or a month hence. You want one right away. . . . Well, I mentioned you to Boutier, the member of Parliament. I did him a service once. But, when you can’t do people either any good or any harm any more, you mustn’t count too much on their gratitude. Still, he’s offered me something. . . .”

Old Brelet paused. He fixed his eyes upon his son: those grey-blue eyes of his, the colour of evening mist, still quite young-looking. Now they were dimmed, either by emotion or by anxiety.

“What’s he offered you?”

“I warn you, you’re going to blow up. . . .”

Old Brelet let a moment or two elapse. Then, with all the decision he used to show as an employer, he went on:

“And you’ll be making a mistake if you do. . . . He’s offered me a job for you as a guide at Mont Saint-Michel.”

André burst out laughing.

“My dear father, with all due respect to you, he’s making fun of you.”

His father laughed in turn, shortly, mockingly, like the hard-boiled Norman he was.

“Nobody’s ever run the risk of doing that yet, my boy, and Boutier is the last man in the world to do it. So don’t do it yourself, please. I’m talking to you quite seriously. . . . Have you anything else in view? You’re down to zero, aren’t you? Aren’t both of us? Since your wife makes my home too hot

to hold her, you've got to get out of it. I'm the first to tell you so. Well, where are you going? That old silly, Marie Rose, will shove something into your suitcase, of course. But, when you've eaten that, what are you going to do? How are you going to live tomorrow and the day after?

"You're not a boy any more. After all, at the age of twenty-nine you ought to be capable of answering a question like that for yourself. . . . At the Mount, you'll be housed. You'll have very little to do till the summer. You'll have time to think and look round for something better. As regular pay, you'll get eighteen hundred francs a year—in other words, next to nothing. But wait a minute. In the summer, more people visit the Mount than the Louvre. You get up to a hundred thousand tourists. Every one of them leaves at least a cent or two behind him. . . ."

"You mean I should live on tips?"

"Well, it's better than living on your wits, or not living at all."

"Just talk to Laura about it. You'll soon see . . ."

André's father stared at him, with his eyes very wide open. When he was in business, nobody who was in the wrong had ever been able to face those clear-sighted, only too shrewd eyes of his.

"You can't expect me to do that, my boy. In the first place, it's your business, not mine. In the next place, I don't fancy looking to your wife as though I were treating you like a little boy. I've submitted an offer to you. You must decide about it for yourself. You and your wife must decide about it for yourselves. Take it or leave it. If you take it, do so with the determination to treat the job seriously. In this case, as in any other, anything worth doing is worth doing well. Take three days to think it over. Then tell me: Yes or No."

But that very evening, at table, Laura had cried out against the proposal. Her indignation set her trembling. She made a shocking scene. She hurled insults and reproaches. André's father did not say a word. Marie Rose, who ate with them, listened to her with her eyes lowered, impassively.

"Be quiet!" André ordered his wife, harshly.

Laura flung her napkin on the table.

"I'm not going to stay here. I'm going back to Paris."

In a fury, she snatched undies and dresses out of wardrobes and stuffed them into a couple of suitcases. Then she reappeared at the door of the dining-room, with her hat on.

André looked her up and down.

“You haven’t got a sou for your fare!”

His brutal words left Laura standing there for a few seconds, weeping with rage. Then his father got up and took one of the suitcases out of his daughter-in-law’s hand. He did not look at André as he spoke.

“Come on, take her back to her room! You’re behaving like a fool. . . . After all, Laura, you know quite well he’ll only do what you want.”

He was wrong; for the next day André said to him:

“Thank Boutier for me, and tell him I accept his offer.”

“Oh . . . !”

Laura stared at André with positive horror as he appeared at the bedroom door.

“Well, I’ve got to try it on, haven’t I?” André replied, sulkily.

“You look like a cemetery-keeper. It’s worse than a servant’s livery. I wonder you don’t die of shame.”

André swung round at her, angry-eyed. He had hated the sight of himself in the mirror badly enough, as he buttoned up his black uniform, stamped with the initials “M. H.” Once more he repeated the retort which had served him so many times since their arrival.

“Die of shame, eh? Would you rather die of starvation? Do you think it’s any fun to me to put the thing on? . . . How does it fit at the shoulders?”

Laura recoiled, as though he had threatened her.

“You dragged me here, didn’t you? . . . But don’t you ask me any questions when you’ve got that rig-out on! Don’t you even speak to me! I can’t stand the sight of you in it, and I won’t. Is that clear?”

André did not reply. He walked over to the passage-door. He had his hand on the knob when Laura asked:

“Are you going out like that?”

André made a point of laughing very loudly.

“Why, of course I am! . . .”

Under the arcades, through which the wind swept, he frowned as he recalled the brief fight he had just broken off.

During the week they had been there, Laura had never disarmed. She had not said one word which was not a reproach, a regret, or a complaint.

André admitted that she had a right to complain about the lack of housekeeping conveniences. There was no gas, there was no running water, coal had to be carried up, and garbage had to be carried away and thrown

into the Couesnon. For that matter, it was André who had to bear the burden of all these jobs.

But Laura went so far as to refuse to take the slightest interest in their apartment. André had made the furniture for yacht cabins with his own hands, and he undertook to transform the whole place with the help of a few planks. He made sketches for a book-rest, a cosy corner, shelves, a couch. Laura opposed all his plans with positive hatred. She refused to “settle down,” as he put it. She declined to tolerate anything which suggested staying there for good.

By leaving their books piled in packing-cases, and their linen at the bottom of trunks, she managed to impose the atmosphere of a casual stop upon this lodging she loathed. This atmosphere comforted her, and secretly thrilled her. Nails knocked in at random, all the disorder of mere camping—this was definite proof that they were not going to stay there.

After losing his temper altogether, André gave way, tired of fighting. He left the bed, the tables and the sideboard which he had bought at an auction in Avranches dumped just anywhere in the three rooms.

And now it was his uniform. After all, he had felt it burning his skin without waiting for Laura to revile it.

This was proved by the fact that he hesitated to leave the shelter of the arcades. He did not venture out into the Fanils road until he made sure that he had it all to himself.

Laura did not stir as she listened to him going downstairs. When his footsteps died away, she shook her head.

“Ah, no!” she exclaimed.

Here in Mont Saint-Michel her rebellion had become active. She showed herself a tactician, alternating sudden attacks with long-prepared ambushes.

Since André had brought her to the Mount by main force, in her own way she had felt the benefit of the fresh air, the peace, the silence. Down in the depths of her, there had been a kind of regrouping of her strength, a fusion of all her feelings, all her thoughts, into a single implacable passion: horror of her new life; a horror—she was sure of it now—strong enough to make an end of it.

In Paris she had remained for months on end prostrate at the bottom of a pit of stupor. All she could do was suffer with every fibre of her being.

Regret held a fresh sense of privation, a fresh source of disgust, in reserve for every second of her poverty.

Oh, that summer on a sixth floor up under the roof! The suffocation of cooking in the sultry weather, the offending of her ears by disgusting sounds, the sight of the squalid bedroom! The furtive spying by the janitress; her frantic sobbing on her creaking bed; her thirst, quenched by lukewarm beer; her doldrums in the dog days; her despair, like that of a free animal newly caged!

Two things had helped her to endure all this. One was an instinctive feeling of hope: such suffering as hers simply could not last.

The other was the fact that her good looks remained unimpaired. She made sure of this ten times a day, just as you make sure that a key is still in your pocket.

In fact, disaster had improved her looks. Experience of it, rebellion against it, had tempered her features and made her eyes more expressive. The ten pounds which, together with her appetite, she had lost in that oven of an attic had made her look taller and, so to speak, kneaded her all over again into muscular slimness.

Above all, she had discovered how potent, how disturbing, is the charm which tears give to a face. She had discovered how much the marks of them help to spur laggard desire. Deep down in herself, Laura had made up her mind never to forget that. . . .

The masterful way in which André whisked her off to the Mount at first left her stunned and stupefied. It imposed upon her something like a furious respect for him. But she pulled herself together as soon as he tried to disarm her resentment and win her over.

She realised that he was hurt by feeling all alone for the first time; for in Paris they had struggled together to save themselves from shipwreck. Well, here he would have to go on being all alone; for she was never going to reconcile herself to this life.

That outfit he had to wear now! . . .

As she had stormed at him, she could not, she would not, stand the sight of him coming back in it in an hour's time. She could not, she would not, have him sitting opposite her at lunch like that.

Hastily she made ready everything that was wanted for the meal: butter, eggs, the rest of the stewed veal. Then she scribbled a pencilled note on the

fly-leaf of the calendar.

“I’m going to Avranches. I’ll be back by the six o’clock coach.”

She placed the bottle of cider on top of the flimsy sheet of paper. After that, she dressed and hurried out to catch the mail-coach.

If André had not stopped on his way, he would have reached the Grand Staircase, and thence seen her when she came out on the embankment. But he was leaning on the granite parapet which bordered the Fanils road.

Thence he could see the Couesnon running into the distance in front of him, the colour of chalk. He followed its wide curve in between the dykes of mossy stone that hemmed it in. Then his eyes glided across the grey sands to the coast of Brittany, with its dark, low lines. It looked like a landscape drawn on blotting-paper.

There was a feel of water everywhere. It steeped the sky and the sands, the sodden flats and the marsh. The spongy strand resembled a rough cast on which a clumsy polisher had left streaks and swellings. Only the stunted poplars along the canal to his left made up a spindly, but still definite line.

André went on climbing up. He passed beside the Gabriel Tower, the lodging of the gardener appointed by the Ministry of Fine Arts: a gardener gaitered but grammared, who could quote Latin and turn a flowery phrase, but was tireless and singularly shrewd in his planting. André walked alongside strands of wire which the gardener had stretched flush with the ground, like those of a field-telephone, to train rose-shoots and cuttings of dark ivy.

The broad path brought André to the foot of the four great buttresses which shore up the slope below the ruins of the women’s prison. Bars still clung to a fragment of romanesque window: a stout checker-work that looked silly in this stretch of wall eaten away.

Then André skirted the deep depression containing the allotments granted to the guardians: a dead garden, divided into twelve sections. He leant over and looked at his own section, in which heads of artichoke were withering away. He had never been fond of gardening. When the time for digging came, he would turn his plot of ground over to one of his colleagues with a taste for it. There must be one among them.

So far he had seen little of his colleagues, and nothing at all of some of them; for some did not live on the Mount, and came there only when it was their turn to act as guardians. Several of them were men wounded or mutilated in the war.

André hoped he could do the same thing here as he had done during his term of military service: keep on good terms with everybody, but make friends with nobody.

This thought brought him back to Laura. She had welcomed the advances of their neighbours, the wives of other guardians, with an insolent frigidity which promptly created a void around them. Yet it would have been so easy for her to discourage their overtures more tactfully, without hurting them.

André reached the foot of the castle, at the bottom of the Precipice Steps. There he stood still for a moment or two, looking up at the tall turrets, the two battlemented “Michelettes,” whose bases all but blocked the gateway leading to the sheer staircase. The two stout cylinders of stone looked as though they were on the point of coming together and wiping out the narrow entrance that opened between their feet. André felt that the barbican still guarded the approach, and he would not have been in the least surprised to see the portcullis drop and bar the grudging gap.

In front of him, narrow steps rose up steeply, leading into darkness. He mounted them, and passed the heavy wooden door, with its iron clamps, which stood ajar at the end of the vast vault.

He entered the Guard Room, a mere landing on the staircase under a moss-grown roof, almost collapsed in places, with its Caen stone arches crumbling away. He went straight to the huge fireplace. To the left of it, a narrow lobby led to the guardians’ room. André went in, found nobody there, came out again, and made his way across the Merveille courtyard to the waiting-room.

“Oho, isn’t he smart?”

The Head Guardian greeted him, standing in the doorway. He waved his rubber-shod walking-stick in the air.

“Advance and give the pass-word, and let me have a look at you!”

Plantier took André by the shoulders and twirled him round.

“That’s the first uniform I’ve ever seen fit,” he declared. “As a rule, they have to be altered by the tailor at Pontorson. That’s the advantage of being a fine figure of a man. You’ll make some conquests next summer. Doesn’t Madame Brelet think you look superb? She doesn’t, eh? A bit hard to please, isn’t she? . . . Well, now that you’re in uniform of the Historical Monuments, I suppose you feel you’ve become quite competent in archaeology, eh? In an Abbey like this, it’s the habit that makes the monk.”

He led André along the great hall with its two aisles. Its pillars, bound with iron-grey cement, looked as though their stones were suspended in isolation. Plantier walked with a limp, leaning on his silent stick at every step.

“Your colleague is going round with two visitors. If you had been here, it would have made two guardians for the two of them. They would have felt very much flattered. . . .”

As André studied Plantier, he was confirmed in the liking for him which he had felt the first night they met. While Plantier bantered, his upper lip drew a very thin, straight line below his small white moustache. Then he preened himself, and his double chin spread out in selfindulgent complacency.

The Head Guardian spent his days hobbling up and down the hall.

“I’m always to be found here,” he told André. It never occurred to him that his steady sentry-go within those chilly walls might have something meritorious, not to say fine, about it.

“You don’t take visitors round yourself now, *Monsieur le gardien chef*?” asked André.

“For Heaven’s sake don’t call me *‘Monsieur le gardien chef*! It’s too tiring to say. When your colleagues talk to me, they say: ‘Monsieur Plantier.’ When they talk about me, they say: ‘Old Plantier.’ Makes things much easier, doesn’t it? . . . No, I don’t take visitors round any more, but I sometimes welcome distinguished visitors, recommended by the Ministry. Last month, for example, we had a visitor no less distinguished than Sir Austen Chamberlain, if you please. After he had been round, I welcomed him in the Chapter House. It’s a room with nothing interesting about it, but he exclaimed: ‘This is the finest room in the Mount.’ ‘Sir,’ I said, ‘allow me to point out that you have seen much finer ones.’ ‘No, no,’ he replied, ‘this is the finest one. It’s the only one with chairs in it.’”

They walked past show-cases in which lay the leaden crosses of old abbots, seals and coins. On a bombard lying on the ground, André read a date: 1300. Monsieur Plantier tapped the bronze cannon with his stick as they passed it.

“The last person it nearly killed,” he remarked, “was Uncle. . . . But, of course, you don’t know Uncle. He’s a fat film-actor who played a monk when they shot *Jeanne d’Arc* here. Everybody called him Uncle. He used to parade about the High Street in his habit, and addressed the parish priest as

‘my dear colleague.’ He fell over that bombard one night, and the roof rang with the way he called upon the name of God. As a matter of fact, he cut a piece out of himself as long as that. Everybody rushed to pick him up, for he was all tied up in his cowl. It was one of the few bright spots of their stay here. Oh, what a curse they made of themselves! Their motors shook the whole place. It will be a long time before anybody else gets permission to do the same thing.”

He glanced at his fat, round watch.

“The visitors will be back soon. It’s just eleven o’clock. Our rush-hour is over. Two people the whole morning! I suppose our colleague will collect ten sous. That’s got to be divided by twelve. There are some days in winter when there’s only six or seven sous to be put on the table. But down below everybody says that our pockets are bursting with tips. The tourists, for their part, are convinced that the State pays us fat salaries. The State, for its part, says to us: ‘What have you got to grouse about? Don’t you get your tips?’ Everybody counts on everybody else, and we have to count on the goodness of God. . . . Hullo, here’s the relief!”

Plantier’s voice rang suddenly cordial as he went to meet the man who had just appeared at the entrance to the hall.

He was wearing a coat flung over his shoulders, a cap pulled down over his eyes, and leggings. He had the face of a *condottiere*, with all its features angular, a mouth like a sabre-cut, and steady grey eyes. André noticed a long scar which seared his right cheek from eyebrow to chin.

The newcomer came to attention and executed a military salute. The joke made his face look harder than ever.

“Stand at ease!” ordered Monsieur Plantier.

Without saying a word, the man handed him a photograph. It appeared that he had been framing it. The Head Guardian took it and admired it at arm’s length.

“Ah, Guardian Hulard,” he exclaimed. “That earns you a mention in dispatches!”

The photograph, yellow with age, represented a group of N.C.O.’s of the Zouaves, sporting stripes in the fashion of the end of last century, nearly as wide as streets.

“Can you recognise me there?” the Head Guardian asked André.

“That’s you, isn’t it?”

“It is. You’re quite a physiognomist.”

“Or rather *Monsieur le gardien chef* hasn’t changed since forty years ago,” suggested the newcomer, without a tremor of his face.

Monsieur Plantier raised his stick.

“Look here, you rude fellow, aren’t you satisfied with framing my face, without insulting me to it?”

“I shall venture to do that only on the eve of my retirement,” retorted the newcomer.

Monsieur Plantier walked towards the door. Then he changed his mind and came back, with all his old sergeant-major’s litheness, not much braked by his lame leg.

“I’m in such a hurry to hang up this souvenir of my youth that I haven’t even introduced you to each other. This is Brelet, your new colleague. This is Monsieur Hulard, guardian in his spare time, but more often archaeologist, numismatist, engineer and pioneer in the tropics, geometrician and portrait-framer—in short, jack of all trades.”

Hulard bowed.

“And fireman,” he added.

“That’s understood. . . . And that reminds me, Brelet. Now you’ve got your uniform, you can take over your helmet, your belt and your leather jacket from me.”

André laughed, thinking this was some joke. But Hulard cut in with an explanation. He spoke in quite a different tone: the tone of a comrade showing a new colleague the ropes.

“We guardians are *ex officio* firemen of the Abbey. It’s been on fire thirteen times: ten times through being struck by lightning, twice through enemy action, and once through arson by the prisoners. We drill twice a year. It’s a fine sight to see Monsieur Plantier taking charge.”

But the Head Guardian was consulting his watch again.

“About closing-time, isn’t it, Hulard?”

“I should say so. They’ll be icing the apéritifs.”

While Hulard was pushing the great leaves of the door together, a gust of wind sent a cone of dust whirling towards them. Monsieur Plantier pursed his lips.

“Oh, this dust of ages!” he said.

He led the way into his office, where he wanted to hang up the photograph. It was a big, vaulted room, as dark as a crypt. Panoplies of rifles and sabres, souvenirs of Morocco and the World War, hung on the walls. The table was strewn with bits of mosaic, arrow-heads, and other little finds during excavations. The office also contained books, arranged on shelves fitted into a wide cavity in the wall.

While Monsieur Plantier hung up his photograph, André read the titles of the books. Looking up, he caught Hulard staring at him extremely hard.

The Head Guardian stopped in the middle of driving in a nail.

“Looking at my library, are you? The Benedictine was doing the same thing the day before yesterday. I said to him: ‘You see, Father, old sinner though I am, I’ve got some good books: the Bible, *Lives of the Saints*. It’s true you’ll find Voltaire and Rabelais side by side with them.’ He passed his finger over the back of a volume, and showed it to me all black. ‘That dust earns you absolution, Monsieur Plantier,’ he said.”

“He’s a great chap,” Hulard bore witness.

He went on to explain to André:

“The Benedictines of Farnborough keep one monk here, in order to assert their rights over the Abbey. I’ll introduce you to him. He’s a wonderful fellow. He’s just arrived from Rome, where he’d been a member of a board of biblical studies for the past eight years.”

Hulard turned to the Head Guardian, and his set face suddenly became animated.

“That reminds me: we wanted to see you the day before yesterday. I took him to see my excavations. We went down through the hole in the Carolingian crypt, farther to the left than the one in the Aquilon. We took a fireman’s ladder with us, and he carried his end of it like a man. We went down, but we couldn’t see anything. There’s a bad land-slip right at the bottom. I’ll go back with a pick some time and clear it away. . . . Well, when Dom Gabriel got out again, his scapular was all whitewash. He looked himself up and down. ‘Hullo,’ he said, ‘I’ve turned into a White Father. This would be a good time to go and evangelise Monsieur Plantier and all the other Moroccans.’ ‘Just the right time,’ I told him. ‘Monsieur Plantier’s just got some Vouvray which is only waiting to hear good tidings.’ We called on you on our way back; but you weren’t at home.”

André felt like thanking them for their conversation.

So there was real life in this icy, empty Abbey. People worked in it, apparently with enthusiasm.

Within a few moments, it had become populated. There was this learned monk. Above all, there was this enigmatic guardian. His true personality intrigued André. Amid all those fanciful professions with which Monsieur Plantier had credited Hulard, which was worth remembering?

At the same time, André could tell that Hulard, as he studied him furtively, was asking himself similar questions about him. Between them had come to birth that mutual curiosity which is the first link between two minds on the point of meeting.

“I didn’t finish introducing your colleague Hulard to you,” Monsieur Plantier remarked. “Among other things, he’s an acrobat, and he tames bats. He’s a fellow who spends his days dangling down all the holes in the Abbey, at the end of a knotted rope, or balancing himself on the rafters in the ruins of the Abbey annexes. . . .”

Hulard laid his hand on his superior’s shoulder, in a way in which friendliness and respect were nicely proportioned.

“I’ve finished taking the measurements,” he announced. “I’ll have all the costing ready within the next three days. If we could get them to restore that hall in the annexes, what a fine setting it would make for exhibitions of Gothic art!”

“It would cost millions of francs. . . . By the way, how much did you make this morning?”

“Twenty sous.”

“Why, that’s fine! Twenty sous for two visitors!”

André laughed.

“Let me tell you,” Monsieur Plantier went on, “that, if everybody gave as much, you’d be able to buy an automobile: a small one, anyway. . . . Shall we go down the Precipice Steps?”

They crossed the Merveille courtyard and returned to the Guard Room. Monsieur Plantier pointed with his stick to a sculptured flower which had just been restored. Its crude white clashed with the other ornamentation.

“I must get you to touch that up with a dab of watercolour,” he said.

Hulard shook his head.

“Don’t you know what gives the best patine? . . . Rust-water. A handful of nails in a cupful of water. I’ve given an air of age like that to an acanthus-flower on one of the capitals in the Hall of the Knights. I’ll stand you a cherry brandy if you can tell me which one it is.”

When they reached the steps, the Head Guardian turned sideways and started going down them that way, putting his stiff leg carefully first.

“Rheumatism?” inquired André.

“Not at all! A fall down the Grand Staircase, from top to bottom, one day when there was a glazed frost. I tore a muscle and fractured my knee-cap. It was he”—Plantier nodded at Hulard—“who picked me up. Then they carried me down to the town on their shoulders.”

“It was a fine sight,” Hulard bore witness. “It looked like the burial of an abbot.”

“All the same,” the Head Guardian proclaimed, proudly, “there are precisely two hundred and eighty-seven steps between my quarters and the town, and I go up and down them twice a day.”

“Two hundred and eighty-seven steps between the cup and the lip,” Hulard explained, keeping a straight face. “Monsieur Plantier goes up and down for a drink.”

They reached the High Street. André had forgotten all about his uniform while they were talking. Now he suddenly remembered it, for the street was full of people.

Women made their appearance in doorways and at windows. Most of them were elderly, but some were young. In the summer they would make themselves attractive with bright blouses, permanent waves and touched-up faces. At the moment they were letting themselves go. Some of them were airing their shops, and brass and porcelain gleamed through half-open doors.

All of them eyed André curiously.

When he first saw them staring at him, his uniform seemed to weigh on him like a leaden cope. But, as he went on, he felt that, on the contrary, here on the Mount his uniform explained him, protected him, gave him the freedom of the town.

Monsieur Plantier spoke to everybody as he passed. He had plenty of time to do it; for, owing to the steepness of the street, he was still walking

carefully.

A little lower down, André was very much surprised to see men forming a chain in the middle of the narrow street and passing from hand to hand buckets full of a brown, bubbly fluid. They looked like firemen; but there was no excitement.

“Is it good?” cried the Head Guardian.

“It will be, Monsieur Plantier.”

It was cider being conveyed to the cellars of the “Golden Sheep.”

“This is the only town in France,” Hulard explained, “where you won’t find a cart, an automobile, or a beggar.”

They went into the “Fancy” inn. It was kept by the son and daughter-in-law of one of the guardians. The daughter-in-law was a very young woman, comely and cheerful; but nobody ever took any liberties with her, thanks to her steadfast eyes and her air of reserve.

“Is Clément here?” the Head Guardian asked her.

“What do you think, Monsieur Plantier? He’s on duty tomorrow. So he’s making the best of today. Naturally, in weather like this, he’s out on the sands.”

“Do you fish, Brelet?”

“Whenever I can.”

“Well, you’ll meet your match here. Clément’s crazy about fishing.”

“He certainly knows the bay as well as anybody else,” Hulard admitted. “What age is Clément? About fifty?”

“He’s fifty-two.”

“Is he? Well, that makes at least forty-five years that he’s been prowling about the sands.”

Hulard lowered his voice, and added to André:

“He’s a wonderful fellow. He was born here. His father was deputy mayor for thirty-five years, and the sands and the Abbey are his whole life. He’s an expert on them.”

“Did he tell you,” asked the Head Guardian, “that he got lost last Monday with the architect in the Abbey annexes? I mean really lost, in the midst of all that rubble and tumbledown walls, so that he couldn’t find his

way out. Of course, Clément never loses his head, so he didn't say so. He just went on showing the architect round, regardless of the fact that all the architect wanted was his lunch, though he didn't like to tell Clément so in so many words. Our friend Clément kept on opening door after door, in the hope of finding the right one. Every time, he saved his face by saying: 'There are traces of an arch here which I'd like you to see,' or something like that. And every time he said to himself: 'Good God, this isn't the way out yet!' Still, they got out in the end, about half past twelve, and the architect is convinced that Clément knows the Abbey annexes inside out. So he does, so far as anybody can know them without being absolutely bent on breaking his neck. That's what you'll do, one of these days. I'm talking to you, you rope-dancer!"

But Hulard was thinking about something else, and he omitted even to shrug his shoulders.

The landlady served them with pernod. Monsieur Plantier was just starting to talk about Algerian absinthe when two women came in. They were cockle-gatherers. One was old, and the other was young. They sat down at a nearby table.

The girl had well-defined features: a short chin, and the hooked, narrow nose common in Cancale. Her bold black eyes drove into things rather than rested on them. Her mouth was heavy, and her jaw-bones stuck out prominently under her tanned skin; but her lips were firmly formed, and they had not yet become shapeless or sunken from fatigue.

She wore a man's beret, with her straight, sleek hair in a rudimentary bob beneath it. A navy blue jersey gave free play to her broad shoulders and her deep bosom. Her faded old woollen skirt revealed bare legs, sparkling with specks of mica from the sand which had stuck to them.

She laid her hands—misshapen, chapped hands, with the nails worn down to the quick by her work—quite flat on the table, and stared at André, as though surprised at the sight of his new uniform. She stared at him without ogling him, but boldly, just because she chose.

The old woman, for her part, was all shrivelled and, so to speak, smoked by the wind. A knotted handkerchief framed her dried-up face, with its hawk-like nose and its receding lips.

In a tone very unlike any the men would have ventured to use, she ordered:

"Two coffees and two brandies."

“Well, Mother Hirson,” asked the Head Guardian, “are the cockles giving themselves away?”

The old woman glanced at him and replied, sulkily:

“No, they’re not. Any more than anything else. If you want a thing, you’ve got to look for it, and then grab it.”

“Just what I was going to say,” replied Monsieur Plantier, coolly. “Still, now that fine girls like that go looking for them, the cockles ought to jump into the baskets all by themselves.”

The old woman shrugged her shoulders. The girl laughed; but she never took her eyes off André.

Hulard spoke quietly, in that detached, serious tone of voice which he employed when he cracked a joke.

“After all, Mother Hirson, your trade is unique. It’s the only one about which it can be said that you have only to bend down and pick up things.”

“I’ve been bending down for fifty years,” retorted the old woman, sourly, as she stirred the sugar in her coffee. “It’s about time I sat down for a change.”

“The sands seem to be bad since the last tide, aren’t they?” asked the young landlady, who had just served the two women.

“So bad you can scarcely put one foot before the other,” the old woman confirmed. “They’re shaking in all directions.”

She glanced out of the window at the steady drizzle.

“That filthy weather! Why can’t it rain buckets and then clear up?”

She threw her head back, tossed the remaining contents of her cup down her throat, and stood up.

“Well, I can’t sit here gossiping. We haven’t done our day’s work yet. Are you ready, Andréa?”

The tall girl stood up too, in no hurry. The old woman had already picked up the brown canvas sacks which she had flung on the floor beside her.

“So,” said Monsieur Plantier, “you’re taking that fine girl out on the sands to find her a husband, are you?”

“I’m taking her to find her living, and that’s much better.”

“But does she think so?” objected the Head Guardian, in his resonant voice. “The day she finds some handsome fellow, she won’t give him up for a sackful of cockles. Isn’t that so, Mademoiselle?”

It was the old woman who answered for her.

“She’s like me. She’d sooner be her own mistress. It’s better to feed on your own sous than have a man drinking on them.”

“So you don’t drink on any of them yourself, eh?”

The old woman turned round. She seemed hurt.

“Well, what if I do? Why shouldn’t what’s good for you be good for me?”

She motioned to the tall girl, who stood waiting, very erect.

“Come on, can’t you? We’re not going to fill our pockets listening to the likes of them.”

“Well, *au revoir!*” said the girl, as she went out.

She had a rather hoarse voice, and stressed her words in such a staccato style that her farewell sounded like a snub.

“She’s a hell of a handful, that old woman,” said the Head Guardian. “She drinks and swears just like a man. She lives at Beauvoir. Every day, let me tell you, Brelet, she trudges at least twenty-five miles; and, on top of that, she makes a round of five leagues with a sack which you couldn’t carry for even a quarter of an hour, strong as you are. Last year, when she’d had one or two glasses too many, she made a bet with a journalist that she’d walk to Paris. And she did it in a week, too. It earned her five hundred francs and her railway ticket back. She had her photo in the *Intransigeant*.”

“Was that her daughter with her?” asked André.

“No, her niece. . . . Well, I’m not exactly bored, but . . .”

“What about another drink?” suggested Hulard.

The Head Guardian stood up.

“I’ve got two hundred and eighty-seven steps as an appetiser before lunch. . . . Well, Brelet, I’ll see you later, as you’re having your baptism of fire this afternoon.”

“Quite so,” Hulard persisted. “His first day on duty ought to be celebrated.”

“No, no! Leave the celebration till it’s over. . . . See you tomorrow, Hulard, and you later, Brelet.”

“Seems a good fellow,” André suggested to Hulard, once the two of them were out in the street, while behind them the Head Guardian, with his slight limp, slowly climbed the slope.

“Plantier?” replied Hulard. “He’s the best of fellows. And no fool either, you know. He had only an elementary education, and boasts about it; but you could get him to pilot a professor of the Collège de France, and the professor would sit up and take notice. He’s as cute as a fox, old Plantier; and he’s got a gift of common sense that borders on genius. . . .”

They passed the Guard Room of the Gentlemen-at-arms. André studied his companion furtively.

He felt sure that, in summing up their chief like this, Hulard was giving him a pass-word. It was as though Hulard had said:

“I know you. We belong to the same sphere of society, the same level of education.”

But such a meeting was so unexpected that André refused to believe in it. He hesitated about questioning Hulard, not so much for fear of hurting him as in order to put off his own disappointment as long as possible.

He merely asked:

“Have you been here long?”

“Two years.”

“And were you guardian at another Historical Monument before that?”

“Oh, no. . . . I was in Africa.”

What was he doing there? André did not dare to ask him.

By now they were making their way to the barracks, over the sand which crumbled beneath their feet like ashes, and past the steep, rugged rocks.

“The winter here must drag, doesn’t it?” André remarked.

Hulard suddenly came to a standstill.

“I’d rather have it than the summer, when we’re worn out with all the visitors. . . . Still, you’ve come a couple of months too early. What’s wonderful here is the seasons of change: the spring and the autumn. In the winter . . . well, in the winter you just creep into your shell and curl up, like a gastropod.”

The last word—he said it in a way which robbed it of any pedantry—was another overture. André felt it.

“If you have time,” he ventured, “I’d be glad if you’d pilot me round a little.”

“As much as you like.”

They reached the Fanils courtyard.

“Here you are back home,” said Hulard. “For my part, I’ve taken up quarters in the Abbey annexes. In a prisoner’s cell, next door to Barbès’s cell. . . . When I’m not there, I’m at the Abbey. If there’s anything I can do for you, just let me know.”

André held out his hand. Hulard retained it for a moment.

“And,” he added, gazing at André with his hard eyes, “I wouldn’t say that to everybody.”

Once Hulard had gone, André looked at his watch. He was aghast to find how late he was. Ten to one!

Feeling rather sheepish, he ran up the stairs four at a time. Then he found Laura’s note under the bottle of cider.

He was relieved, and not much surprised. He preferred Laura’s absence to a scene. Besides, she had long since accustomed him to such sudden whims. She used to telephone to his office:

“I’m going out with the So-and-sos. I won’t be back till late.”

At the outset, André had kicked. But Laura had asserted her right to independence so violently that he had to give way.

Now she was trying to start the same thing over again. The fact amused André; and his amusement had a touch of cruelty about it.

Laura did not know Avranches. Once she had walked ten times up and down the one shopping street in the town—shops were the only thing that interested her—she would be cured of her taste for it.

André decided to go and meet her on the six o’clock coach. Meanwhile he would have plenty of time to think about his discoveries this morning.

Until now, the Abbey and the deserted town had chilled him. They struck him simply as an empty church and a closed bazaar below it.

After a few rounds of the Abbey, he had learned by heart the monotonous recitation of the guides: the recitation which he would repeat in

his turn this afternoon, if anybody was fool enough to venture up to the Abbey in this drizzle. In the unsettlement of his arrival, these 'prentice rounds, in the wake of guardians politely dragging two or three unresponsive visitors through the icy halls, had left him merely with an impression of dreariness and boredom.

The litany seemed done to death. When he had heard the merits of one and the same capital vaunted in one and the same terms twenty times over, he acquired a positive horror of it. Never, he felt, would he find this sheep-herding anything but the dullest of jobs.

But now he had found up there that shrewd, sarcastic old man who spent his days hobbling about a Gothic hall, without his good humour being in the least affected.

Above all, he had found that other guardian, obviously an educated man, who still experienced all the thrills of the enthusiastic explorer.

Then there was that monk Plantier and Hulard had talked about, who did not seem to be by any means bowed down by the weight of his lonely lot. There was Clément, that haunter of the sands, another "expert," as Hulard had called him.

Perhaps here, just the same as anywhere else, things were not nearly so simple as André had at first thought.

Still, the afternoon was a disappointment to him. He spent endless hours sitting beside the stove in the guardians' room, drumming his fingers on the table. It was not until late in the day that a ring at the bell took him to the door.

The visitors were a young man and a young woman, somewhat uneasy about being all by themselves. They inquired whether it was too late to go round the Abbey. André escorted them to the waiting-room, where Monsieur Plantier called them over to him in his thundering voice, his official voice, used to addressing crowds, which echoed from the roof.

"This way for tickets, please!"

When the couple approached his desk, the Head Guardian inquired:

"Do you want to include the Lacework Staircase? It's five francs if you do. Without the Staircase, it's three francs."

The couple glanced at one another. The young woman shook her head.

"No. Without the Staircase. We haven't got time. . . ."

André started showing the couple round. Their reaction to the very first rooms gave him the impression that they were people of the small shopkeeping class, who were fulfilling an irksome duty. Presumably they had said to themselves:

“It’s the thing to do to see the Abbey. . . .”

The young woman shrank into the fur collar of her coat, until André could see nothing of her but her eyes, scared like those of a caged bird. Her husband nodded polite acceptance of André’s explanations. Instinctively André cut them short; for he felt from the outset that the couple were in a hurry to be done with the job. He overheard the young woman murmur:

“It’s awful!”

The Great Wheel did not make the couple unbend, nor did the dungeons. Little by little, their boredom communicated itself to André. He felt almost ashamed to open up more rooms for them, to have nothing to offer them but these icy voids, into which he let drop a catalogue of centuries dead and gone.

Still, he made them take their proper time, thanks to another feeling, which humiliated him: fear lest Monsieur Plantier should accuse him of having hurried the couple round, if he brought them back too soon.

But it was with real relief, after the desolation of those dreary rooms, that he closed the door of the Store Room behind them.

The young man thanked him, and held out his hand to him. André took it, and was astonished to feel a coin thrust between his fingers. He had forgotten all about his tip!

“They’re a honeymoon couple,” Monsieur Plantier declared, when they were gone. “I always feel sorry for honeymooners when they come here in the winter. They don’t get a chance of a kiss behind a pillar. But in the summer! . . . Keep your eyes to yourself in the Aquilon crypt, above all. That’s where they get their big chance. If the poor monks in Heaven can look down and see them! . . . You might close now. . . . No, there’s still three minutes left. . . . By the way, what do you think of your colleague Hulard?”

André seized his opportunity.

After one or two complimentary remarks about Hulard, he went on:

“You said something about his being an engineer in the tropics, didn’t you?”

Monsieur Plantier stopped walking up and down.

“I did,” he agreed. “He’s an ex-civil engineer, if you please. He finished up as manager of some zinc mines, in the Congo, I think.”

“Then why? . . .”

“Why? The slump, of course. Shareholders with cold feet. The mines abandoned to rot and the jungle, and the staff left to shift for themselves. When Hulard came back to France, he didn’t find many jobs going. Besides, he’s not an accommodating gentleman. I don’t suppose he did much grovelling. The fact remains that, six months after his return from Africa—six months during which he didn’t let the grass grow under his feet, it would seem—he turned up here one fine day with his appointment as a guardian in his pocket. That was two years ago.

“After all, he comes from Cherrueix. When he was three months old, he used to stop suckling in order to have a look at the Mount. By the time he was eight, he used to slip out of his parents’ home and make his way here. . . . He says that, after Africa, this is the only place he can stand. . . . And he’s not the only man like that. I know other men, old men, who still have cottages clinging to the rocks here, and who won’t sell them if they’re offered their weight in gold for them. . . . And now we can close. . . . This damned leg of mine is aching like the deuce tonight. The weather’s going to change.”

André had two hours to kill before the arrival of the coach from Avranches. He decided to make a thorough exploration of the little town, to which he had hitherto paid only hasty visits during the summer. But he knew by now how easy it was to mistake one’s level and get lost there.

The town slid down in front of him, with its cramped old houses, its pointed roofs, its mildewed walls, intersected by little gardens and yards. From the top of the steps, he could see the deep cutting of the High Street and, on either side of it, a bristle of gables that stopped dead, closely hemmed in by the girdle of the ramparts.

So striking was the contrast between the empty, misty sands that spread beyond and the sharp, keen contours of the town, with its narrow divisions, the sheer ditches of its lanes, that André suddenly experienced an impression such as he had known before: the sense of the sea, as he looked down upon it from the main-top of a Norwegian steamer, perched high above her superstructure.

He went down a few steps, in between two blind houses. A woman came out of the darker of them, presumably a fisherman's wife, wearing a woollen jacket and clogs down at heel. She emptied a pailful of dirty water down the slope. Then she stood still and watched André pass before shutting the door again.

All at once, André stopped in surprise. To his right rose a tall, thriving fig-tree. Giant wisteria wrapped in supple coils around the iron railings which supported it. Never had André seen trees with such an air of intense vitality, all the more unexpected here, amid these windswept stones.

Then he skirted the tiny school playground, with its sickly, shrivelled lime-trees. The narrow street, with a parapet on one side, led him to the cemetery.

Like the school, it was so small that it seemed to exist only to conform to custom. It bore witness that Mont Saint-Michel was a municipality like any other, with its own mayor, its own town council, its own schoolmistress and its own dead.

André made his way among the graves, where the chrysanthemums laid on them on All-Hallows day were all but withered away. On a tombstone he read:

“Here lie Victor and Annette Poulard, good help-mates and good hotel-keepers. May the Lord welcome them as they welcomed their guests!”

This daring comparison between the traditional omelette and eternal bliss tickled André. He was still chuckling over it when he came to the North Tower. He leant on the parapet.

The tide was rising slowly, soundlessly, all a level grey, like water upset spreading into a pool. Evening was already darkening the horizon. In all that wan waste, all André could still see were a beached boat, a man on his way to the Mount with a basket on his back, and, in the distance shorewards, two black dots moving slowly towards dry land.

André recalled the two cockle-gatherers whom he had seen at the “Fancy.” Those black dots must be they, beating a retreat before the rising tide.

The “plop” of a big fish rising quite close to him, at the base of the tower, made André lean farther over the parapet, with his old fisherman's instinct suddenly on the alert. At this point a smooth stream flowed towards the Couesnon, with its bend licking the foot of the rocks. It was in this bend that something was moving backwards and forwards. André could follow

the eddies it created. It swam heavily, making a great splashing as it whipped the water. Now and again André caught a glimpse of what looked like the long ridge of its back.

André wondered whether it could be a salmon. What could one be doing there? Still, it must be either a salmon or an otter.

André turned round. A man had come up silently behind him: a fisherman wearing gum-boots up to his thighs. He was collecting fishing nets which were drying along the railings.

“What’s that?” André asked him.

The man, a tall fellow, spare and bony, answered without even looking.

“It’s the erosion: sandbanks crumbling away underneath. . . . You’d think it was a fish, wouldn’t you?”

André was caught; but he wouldn’t admit it.

“Oh,” he said, “I don’t suppose fish often come up this high.”

“They do sometimes,” returned the fisherman.

“Any this year?”

“No. There’s too much fresh water.”

The fisherman took himself off, with his nets flung over his shoulder like the folds of a toga.

By this time night was invading the sky, just as the sea invaded the sands. Darkness spread like the tide, by stealth. André could not tell from which quarter of the sky it came.

He made his way along the ramparts. To his right, down below in the High Street, the electric lamps were lit. At the same time, a gust of wind swept up the dust in front of him. The wind had veered to the north. All at once, the sea came to life. It answered the potent breath that blew upon it with an immense murmur. The first stars came out in a sky soon swept clear of clouds.

André went home to stoke up the stove. Household jobs had long since been familiar to him. As a scout, as a camper, in fishing boats and in shipyards, he had made soup, gutted fish, peeled vegetables and attended to fires.

It was getting quite dark when he returned to the embankment to wait for the coach. There was a nip in the air, so he started walking briskly towards

Pontorson. At the end of ten minutes, he looked round. He came to a halt, wonderstruck by what he saw.

Before him, against a background of night studded with stars, the Mount rose up in spectral but vivid relief. Its base was bathed in diffused light; but all the Abbey remained in darkness, a prodigious blackness in which every detail was carved out.

The crenellations of the cypresses merged into those of the Merveille. The pinnacles showed shapes so like those of tall trees that their stillness was astonishing. The spire soared up into the stars.

Thus uplifted into the night, despite its dark mass the Mount suggested an ethereal buoyancy, a dauntless aspiration. It imposed a sense, at once overwhelming and exalting, that it was closely on the watch, like a living presence.

André gazed at it for a long time, stirred to the depths of his soul by the peace, the repose, of this heavenly vision. Never, in the presence of any other spectacle, had he felt this spell of peerless beauty which gripped him like grief. Never had he contemplated anything with such profound contentment.

“Ah,” he exclaimed aloud, “it’s wonderful!”

With an effort, he tore his eyes away from the Mount and looked to right and left of him. Everywhere was the sea, like a calm, star-strewn sky, but a pale, soft blue deeper than that of the sky.

To the east he could see the lights of Avranches twinkling. To the west the thin crescent of the moon hung over Brittany. Out to sea, on the horizon, winked a ship’s navigation-lights.

Then a gleam of light lengthened towards him, throwing sudden splashes on the telegraph-poles. He looked round. The headlights of a car were rushing in his direction. André started running, but the big bulk of the coach outdistanced him. He reached the edge of the sidewalk, breathless. Laura was waiting for him, sulkily.

“I thought you weren’t coming,” she said. “I thought I should have to get across that mire all by myself.”

She took André by the arm, possessively. She expected him to call her to account for her escapade. But he simply said:

“Mind the steps!”

André elbowed out of his way the butt of the gun which was slung across his shoulder, and tapped at the door of the “Fancy.”

The night was already paling in the east, but here in the street the electric lamps still testified to it. One of them shone strongly on the statue of the Virgin, standing in its niche over the gateway, where it was hard to see by daylight.

The dark door in front of André swung inwards, and a man, shod like himself in gum-boots which came up to his thighs, held out his left hand to him; for his right hand was easing out one of the unwieldy drag-nets which the fishermen of the bay call “racquets.” He proceeded to produce out of the darkness a gun and a stout wicker-basket, fitted for carrying on the back. He slipped his arms through its straps, like a soldier donning a knapsack.

He was a tall, burly man, with a placid face. He had a short moustache, jaws deeply lined for his age, and wide-awake eyes. Such was Clément Docheais, formerly landlord of the “Fancy,” guardian at the Abbey, and fisherman expert about the sands.

He set the pace promptly with the quick step which he had acquired on the springy sands during the forty years he had walked on them.

“We’ve no time to lose,” he said. “It’s half past five now. The tide turns at seven, and it comes in fast.”

The Outer Guard gateway, with a powerful lamp shining harshly outside it, had turned into a deep tunnel, as red as the mouth of a stoke-hole. Beyond it André and Docheais were in darkness again. They crossed the embankment and climbed down the other side of it.

“Look out!” warned Docheais. “It’s slippery. . . .”

“You’ll have to flounder for about fifty yards,” he went on, “and it doesn’t smell so good. It’s really a shame that we have to throw our slops over the walls like this. . . . Even so, this is nothing to what it’s like in the summer. That’s when it’s nice to walk round the Mount, what with the oyster-shells, the lobster-leavings, and the mutton-bones!”

The slimy, sticky mud let go of their feet reluctantly, with a sound like a cupping-glass. It came up to the ankles of their boots. André was disgusted by the thought of what was underfoot. He was glad when he felt harder sand beneath his soles.

To his left lay the dark wall of the ramparts. In front of him stretched the sands, an eerie extent of dimness over which will-o'-the-wisps wandered. This pallid darkness struck him as boundless, and he was surprised to see with what sure strides Docheais, who was a pace or two ahead of him, plunged into it.

All at once, his companion's steps left behind them the sound of water, a long lapping. He was crossing a stream. André hesitated almost imperceptibly on the brink of this flow which he could scarcely see. Docheais reassured him, without turning round or slowing down.

"It doesn't come up to your calves."

André was astonished at the strength of the water against his boots. The current flowed so fast that, when he raised his foot, it was almost swept away. Then they were back on firm sand again.

"For the beginning of February," said Docheais, "it's almost warm. I'm very much afraid there won't be any wild duck."

"Have you seen any?"

"The day before yesterday, in the bend of the Couesnon, where I'm taking you. But, of course, I didn't have a gun."

"Were they green-necks?"

"Yes. . . . Ah, but you should have seen them five years ago, when there was a cold winter! They came by the thousand. They landed on top of one another. All January and February the bay was black with them. You could kill ten of them with one shot. Later on, though, they got wise, and you had to approach them flat on your face. But at that time there was ice in the bay, whereas today walking makes you hot."

Docheais went on to talk about other game to be got on the sands. He spoke with all the animation, all the spontaneity of the true sportsman, who, as he tells tales of his stalking or his lying in wait, imagines he is in the act of beating up game or starting it.

Tombelaine, he said, was stuffed with the nests of sheldrake, large-sized ducks with grey plumage speckled with black and spotted with green on their necks and heads. The first couple had arrived twelve years earlier from

Africa, where they hibernated. Docheais himself had seen the two birds hovering over the rocks for three days before making up their minds to land. Now thousands of them nested in March in rabbit-burrows, and flew about the Mount all spring and all summer. They were saved from shooting because they tasted of the fish on which they fed. They flew south again in October.

Barnacle-geese, maritime geese with short beaks, had been hibernating in the bay for the past four years. They arrived from Jan Mayen Land and Spitzbergen in November, and stayed till March. They became uneatable once the sea-weed was gathered, for they were gluttons for it.

There were also swans flying south, and herons, but small-sized ones. Finally, there were hundreds of rabbits on Tombelaine, with nothing to feed on but brushwood, on which they did not get very fat.

Docheais also talked about shooting in the swamps, stretches of grazing land intersected by creeks of brackish water, in which sheep and their shepherds were sometimes swallowed up. Here there were hares. But they were wily. Once they were started, from whatever side you approached them, they set off straight inland, towards the flats—never towards the sea. They made their way across ditches and through hedges by well-defined tracks. Their runs alongside the creeks ended by making regular paths. You mustn't talk when you were after them, because voices carried so far across the sands.

When Docheais stopped talking, André noticed that the darkness was full of an immense murmur like that of fermentation. Millions of bubbles were bursting on the sands.

André felt as though they had been walking for a very long time, with their lengthy, steady strides over the firm footing. He looked round. Nothing was now to be seen of the Mount but a bright fixed light: the powerful electric lamp on the North Tower, set there as a guide for people out on the sands.

Furtively André looked at the time by his wrist-watch. Six o'clock. The tide turned at ten past seven, and it was a flood-tide.

“We've no time to lose,” Docheais had said. First, they had their wait for wild duck in the bend of the Couesnon to which they were on their way. Then they were going netting in a *marou*, a big stretch of low water where one of the streams had cut a fresh bed, in which salmon might be stranded.

Obviously, they had no time to lose. In fact, they would have a bare margin of safety, both in space and in time.

But this was the necessary condition of such shooting or such fishing. It could be successful only during a brief period, and on the very edge of the sea at slack water. They must not miss the five minutes at dawn when the wild duck flew over, as regularly as a street-car making its first trip of the day. They must not miss the five minutes of low water, when a big fish which had ventured too far inshore, just because it knew that the tide would soon refloat it again, was left without enough depth to turn and get away. After that, they would have to beat a rapid retreat before the rising tide.

For that matter, there was no danger so long as the fowler or the fisherman restrained his enthusiasm and never for a moment lost his sense of time.

“We couldn’t have come this way a week ago,” said Docheais. “There were more than three feet of water. The streams have worked overtime this year. They bring sand down, and they shift it about. You never know what you’re going to find.”

By now the darkness was diminishing to their right. There they could make out something like a pale, motionless mist. It marked the approach of dawn. Then a black mass rose up quite close to them, like a whale arching its great back: the island of Tombelaine. To their left, a murmur swelled, and a whole stretch of space fled away into the dark.

“Here’s the Couesnon,” announced Docheais.

Its water showed neither light nor colour. All André and Docheais could see was its black, turbulent movement. At Pontorson the Couesnon was a mere rivulet. Here it had become a great river without banks, prehistoric in scale, with its rapids roaring along in the night.

They followed the sound of it for some little time. Day must be breaking somewhere, for they were soon able to make out the edge of the stream. It had dug a continuous notch in the sand, like the sheer face of a tier of seats, and below this it had flattened out a platform along which a fringe of spray ran rapidly. They got down on to the platform and walked along it.

All at once, Docheais came to a standstill. He trampled the sand with his heavy boots, like a wine-presser doing a ponderous dance in a vat.

“Hullo,” he exclaimed, “it’s going to be bad here in a few days.”

“Why?” asked André.

“It’s a quicksand forming.”

“Is it, really?”

Since his arrival at the Mount, André had always avoided talking about quicksands, for fear of being mistaken for a tourist.

He imagined that quicksands were a local leg-pull. The danger of them, so he had heard, was a thing of the past, now that the embankment had stabilised the sands. There was even a story that, when a film company wanted to “shoot” a quicksand scene, they had to dig a hole in the sands and pour several cart-loads of mud into it.

André reached the spot where Docheais had been trampling. Docheais stepped back to let him take his place. André set foot on the liquid mud. His foot sank into it, as though it were sucked down. It disappeared so easily that he was scarcely conscious of its sinking. He had to make an effort to pull it out again.

“Tugs at your boot already, doesn’t it?” said Docheais. “If you’d gone in up to your knee, you’d never have got out all by yourself. Since the last flood-tide there are quicksands all over the place. As late as yesterday I crossed one which was swaying to such an extent that I walked with my arms outstretched, ready to throw myself into the water if I went through the surface of it.”

“Why, do you mean to say one can cross a quicksand?” exclaimed André.

“You can, on condition that you walk briskly and don’t step too heavily. If you stop, you sink in.”

André made no attempt to conceal his surprise, almost his disappointment. Hitherto he had believed in the quicksand of fiction, with its victim slowly sucked down to his death. Now he learnt that everything about this hoary legend was false.

Once it had formed, Docheais told him, a quicksand was nothing like that soft, sneaking paste in which he had just mired himself. It was a crust of sand, still solid, floating on top of liquid sand. When dry, it was easily recognisable; for it formed a flat, shining surface in the midst of the firm sands, which were always uneven. It could not take you by surprise unless you encountered it when you were crossing a stream. Then you felt as though you were walking on something taut. It was like a raft of sand that swayed under your feet.

Sometimes you might break the solid crust and fall through it, just as you might fall through a rotten floor; and, if you did, your fall was equally sudden. You sank at once up to your waist, up to your neck, or over your head, according to the depth of the liquid sand. If the quicksand came up to your thighs, you could not get out of it without help, whether you were man or beast; and, if the tide was rising, you were drowned.

But, as for being swallowed up alive, you would have to lose your head, like an animal, which sank itself through its struggles. What to do? Throw yourself flat on your face into the water when the crust gave way, swim, and get out by rolling yourself on to firm sand. Above all, do your best to avoid the bend of a stream, where a quicksand was apt to form.

When carts crossed the sands from Genêts to the Mount, drawn by two horses hitched one in front of the other, the horses always trotted in soft sand and walked only on firm sand. The carts were preceded, forty-five minutes ahead, by a scout. He was a very smart fellow: the only man left in the neighbourhood who was capable of plotting the course for the carts. He burdened himself with a route at least three times longer, on account of the zigzags he made to test it. He carried a kind of trident, and every now and then, without stopping, he used it to throw up little heaps of sand, which marked firm going.

Well, it was precisely at a bend in a river that he made these little heaps of sand closest together; for there the carts must not deviate from their course by a yard. The current wore away the banks and dug deep crevasses, which the next flood-tide filled with soft sand.

The immediate neighbourhood of the Mount, for that matter, was not the least dangerous. Between the chapel and Saint Aubert's fountain there was a little stream which was as nasty as anything.

Even on the grazing land, shepherds sometimes got drowned while crossing the muddy lagoons made by the creeks. The carcasses of sheep, too, were sometimes dug out of them.

You could make a quicksand anywhere simply by trampling. Boys amused themselves by making quicksands in this way, and their quicksands were capable of swallowing them up ten times over, if their playmates did not stand by to pull them out.

“Still, there are only two real dangers,” Docheais wound up, “a rising tide, and mist. They're especially dangerous because you can't be sure of the sands between one tide and the next.”

Docheais was insistent upon the sands' perpetual movement, their daily changes. The three rivers which flowed through them were potent in their meanderings. Sometimes they piled up sandbanks; sometimes they gnawed them away. Sometimes they spread out into great sheets of water. Sometimes, on the contrary, they deepened in narrow beds. The clash between their waters, swollen by the winter rains, and the tides piled up by the wind kneaded the sands throughout the dark months. Everything was quiet during the summer. But, from November to May you had to foresee what the currents meant to do, ferret out their feints, and, above all, keep in your mind every detail of that vague landscape.

"Still," remarked André, with a chuckle, "some people seem to find their way about the sands better than they do about the Abbey annexes."

Docheais chuckled in his turn.

"Oh, so you've heard that story, have you?" he said. "The only man who can find his way about there is Hulard. In the Abbey, you know, it's worse in a way than it is here. You think you know your way about, and then you find you've got everything to learn. . . . Ah, now we're getting there."

André turned round to measure the distance they had come. The Mount was now nothing more than a grey, shadowy shape simplified in the extreme: a sharp pyramid, which nevertheless seemed squat. It looked extremely far away, and, as he followed Docheais, who was striding still farther away from it, André recalled, with a trace of apprehension, all the very different areas they had already crossed: sandbanks; regular hump-backed dunes, intersected by deep depressions; motionless "bays" or sheets of water, which lapped against their boots for a long time. He knew that, at a given moment, all this stagnant water would come to life and start racing and rising.

He had his own watch; but, by way of a ruse for putting Docheais on his guard, he asked:

"What's the time?"

"Twenty-five to seven. We mustn't dilly-dally."

They went on walking. Around them was a sound like that of a shell held to one's ear. Nothing was yet plainly visible except the sheer bank of the stream, and the nearest waves, hemmed with yellow foam. Beyond, everything merged into the grey of sky and water.

They reached a bend in the stream. Docheais jumped down below the parapet which the current had cut in the sands.

“Here we are,” he said.

He laid down his basket and his net, to free his hands for his gun.

“We mustn’t let ourselves be seen,” he went on.

He knelt down. André did the same.

There they stayed, like sharpshooters lurking in the depths of a trench. André could see nothing but the cutting of sand in front of him. But he could tell that daylight was dawning all around him.

They waited without saying a word. Both of them were once more possessed by the sportsman’s soul. André was already one with the pictures which would soon succeed one another: the long triangle of birds, with their necks outstretched between their fast-beating wings; the shots; the flying formation broken up amid cries; the straight drop of a killed duck; the slower, sadder fall of a wounded bird, with its convulsive wings no longer braced against the air.

But Docheais stood up.

“They won’t come now,” he said. “I was afraid so. It’s not cold enough.”

By now it was daylight. Tombelaine rose up before them. A wide, shimmering sheet of water isolated it from the mainland from the equinoctial tides onwards. They could make out its grassgrown summit, the sheer surface of the rocks round its sides, the black belt of sterile stone with which the tides girded it.

“Will you wait for me here for five minutes?” said Docheais. “I want to go and try a bit of netting in the *marou*. There may be something there.”

Left alone, André looked towards the east. He swore beneath his breath at the startling spectacle that met his eyes.

Dark red belts of light from the rising sun spread out over Brittany, shading off at the ends into tints of violet ink and light blue ink. Very high above the low-lying land, the Mount rose up against a background of yellow gold. Against that background it stood out like a pale silhouette, which the buttresses of the Merveille barely notched with tawny shadow. The archangel on its summit sparkled like a golden spear-head. To the south, the sky curved down to the horizon, milky white.

Then the sun rose over the woods, a great red ball; and the sands, caught by its rays, turned shining silver, touched with rose.

The spectacle revived André's anxiety about the time. The turn of the tide would follow the sunrise very closely.

He looked round for Docheais, and caught sight of his tall figure moving in water which was still grey, like all the waste of sea that stretched in that direction. Docheais was pushing his net in front of him as though he were driving a plough and leaning on its handles.

All at once, André saw him bend lower and quicken his pace. André could hear the water splashing with the speed of his movements. Docheais was evidently after a fish. He crouched to summon up all his strength, and then suddenly cast his net violently forwards to make his catch.

"I've got him!" he cried.

André hastened towards him, freeing himself as best he could from the grip of the water, which he could feel clinging to his legs. On the way, he saw Docheais strike something he was holding. When André reached him, he found a fish, with two rows of fine sharp teeth, gaping at the bottom of the net. Its skin was steel blue on its back, and silver speckled with mother-o'-pearl on its sides.

"He must be ten or eleven pounds," Docheais reckoned. "I've been after him for the last three days."

The fish was one of the salmon which strayed into wide bends of streams in search of brackish water, by way of a transition between the sea from which they came and the freshwater currents up which they swam to spawn. They found such brackish water in this outflow of the Couesnon where its water mingled with tidal water. They made a practice of staying there to get the salt gradually out of their gills and accustom them to the insipid water of the streams.

But such stays were dangerous on account of the small depth of water over these levels. At slack water big fish had barely four inches of water under their bellies, and it was easy to frighten them and drive them aground.

Often, indeed, they themselves ran aground. Misled by the treacherous sands, they ventured into a lagoon which dried up. Then the sea-gulls fell upon them by the hundred, pecked out their eyes, ate their heads, and within an hour left nothing of them but their bones—unless a fisherman, put on the alert by the number of the gulls and their noisy squabbling, hurried across the sands and robbed them of what was still left of the salmon.

"There must be more in the *marou*," Docheais declared. "But we haven't got time to go and look for them now."

Discipline came into play automatically against passion for pursuit. On the Mount and all round the bay, anybody who did not manage to restrain his enthusiasm and let himself be caught by the tide was despised. He was capable of risking his life for the sake of a few pounds of fish, and the fact was no credit to him.

So André and Docheais made their way back along the Couesnon. In this direction, André found himself face to face with the dawning day. The red sun had risen what looked like a yard above the Avranches hills. By now it was setting the Merveille aflame and turning the Little Wood rosy. The dew sparkled on the slate roofs, and the narrow arches shone like swords beneath the pinnacles, which were the colour of ripe corn.

Once more the marvellous etherealness of the spire, the sublime upthrust of the buttresses, imposed upon André a strong sense of life. It was the same thing as he had felt before: the assertion of a paramount presence. The great Mount watched and waited.

This feeling struck even the most humdrum summer visitors when they first got out of their coaches. They had expected to find something. Instead, they met somebody. But they soon forgot this impression, as they lost sight of the Mount on approaching it and buried themselves in the narrow ditches of its streets.

Those who lived there, however, those who for years had seen it standing up at all times of day from every point on the horizon—they had the Mount within their hearts, without even knowing it, as a living friend.

Some people could not reconcile themselves to doing without their daily ration of wonder. They stayed on the Mount, or kept on coming back to it. André had been told about certain elderly men living in retirement at Pontorson who walked every day along the road to the Mount as far as the turning from which they could see it. Then there was a foreign doctor who had come one morning as a tourist and never gone away again. There was Hulard, who had hastened to the Mount from the depths of the equatorial forest.

The crossing of a stream brought André's eyes and thoughts back to the sands again. But he remarked:

“That was a fine sunrise this morning.”

“Yes,” said Docheais. “It's a sign of rain.”

When they reached the arm of the river which formed a bend below Saint Aubert's chapel, he signed to André to stop.

“Wait a minute! I’ll see if the sand will bear.”

He walked into the water, stopped, tested the sand underfoot by swaying from one foot to the other, and went on again.

“It’s all right,” he said.

André made the crossing in his turn. He was astonished at the sensation. It was like walking on a thick rubber carpet.

“It’s hardened,” Docheais told him. “It was shaking more than this a couple of days ago.”

As they were climbing up the southern escarpment of the Mount, the tide raced in below them. They stopped to look at it.

A great grey wave rushed roaring along, rearing up like a horse and shaking a long mane of spray. It remained hollow and did not break. It kept its growling line, while its ends assailed the undermined banks, from which big blocks of sand slid heavily. Where it had passed, there was a surging swell, all the restless life of the sea. Where it had not yet reached, there was the sleeping calm of the river. Even when it came to the canalised part of the Couesnon, it did not contract, but instead swept far over the embankments.

Birds went with it, as though suddenly seized with madness. Over its crest hovered a strident medley of gulls, petrels and curlews. They raced along with it, dabbled their grey feet in it, and seemed to be pecking at it furiously.

“You see,” said Docheais. “It’s a good thing we didn’t dawdle too long.”

Then he suggested:

“You must come home with me and have something. We must celebrate this salmon. It’s the first of the season. Afterwards, if you’ve got time, we might go and see if old Biard is thinking about netting the river one of these days.”

“Yes, I’ve got time,” André agreed. “I said I wouldn’t be back before lunch.”

After consuming their white wine and coffee, they climbed up to old Biard’s. He was a burly fellow, with a clean-shaven, stern face. His wife and his daughters called him “the boss.” He was the owner of a cramped house clinging to the east side of the Mount. He had refused a fantastic sum offered for it by the museum, which wanted room for extension.

Now that he had put on flesh, he fished only for his own amusement. But there had been a time, before the War, when he got himself talked about.

At that time, the Mont Saint-Michel dynasty of the Etianvres were engaged in disputing their rights over the Sélune with the Jugans of Vains, and in repelling the “yellow bellies” of Cherrueix, who sometimes raided as far as the Couesnon. It was a war of nets torn or slashed loose, of fishing boats stove in with axes or cut adrift.

Old Biard was a partisan of the Etianvres, and many a time this war of reprisals brought him before a court. Twice, indeed, it earned him imprisonment. Since then the younger generation of fishermen, disciplined by their trade-unions, had divided up the rivers between them by friendly arrangement, and old Toto Jugan of Vains, known as “the Pope,” the chief of the Jugan tribe, was spending his old age at peace.

“The boss” was no babbler; but on this subject he was inexhaustible. He offered André and Docheais cider. It was eleven o’clock before they left him, after he had promised to let them know when the river had fallen low enough to try netting.

On their way out they met old Biard’s son. André found that he was the fisherman to whom he had talked on the North Tower, that evening when he mistook the erosion of the sand for a fish in search of prey. Young Biard was a tall, spare man with a long, drooping moustache, slow-moving, methodical, industrious and unconcerned as a clock.

André parted from Docheais outside the “Fancy.”

“We might have another try at the duck, the first cold day, if you like,” Docheais suggested.

“I’d like it very much,” replied André, thanking him warmly.

In the Fanils courtyard, as he was on the point of going up to his quarters, André was stricken with shame over his slimy boots. He scraped them as well as he could on the side of the boat which was hauled up there till the spring. They were still so soiled that he hesitated on the threshold, staring at them. But the door opened.

“Oh, there you are!” said Laura.

She was untidy, almost dirty. Blondes are always exposed to the risk of turning an earthy yellow if they let themselves go in the least. Laura had let herself go.

Her hair lacked lustre. It hung round her neck, with all the wave gone out of it. She had stopped making up her face. It looked unfinished. It was becoming common. The button-holes of her dressing-gown were split, and it was held together with a safety-pin.

But she was wearing gloves: suède gloves all over soot. In her downfall, the only thing she still protected was her hands.

There was nothing in all this that surprised André. He was familiar with her neglected appearance, with the kind of beauty-strike in which she had persisted ever since their arrival, with her contemptuous refusal to adorn herself.

“Who’s to see me?” Laura had asked, when he first commented on her neglect of herself.

“Even if it’s only myself . . .”

Laura shrugged her shoulders.

“What have you got to grouse about? I’m quite in keeping. Am I a guardian’s wife, or am I not? You’ve seen the others, haven’t you? . . . If I dressed myself up, you’d come and preach me a stodgy sermon about its being my duty not to make myself conspicuous. . . . Besides, as I never go out . . .”

André shrugged his shoulders in his turn. But, ever since her trip to Avranches, which must have been a terrible disappointment to her, Laura had kept her word about never going out.

She shut herself up in their quarters with a determination which aroused a similar obstinacy in André. It was he who did the shopping; for Laura told him she had made up her mind not to go even as far as the courtyard.

André made no attempt to get her to give way. When people inquired about her, he said she was laid up with a bad cold. Meanwhile he waited for her to surrender, with a sneaking respect for her tenacity.

He did not dare to let himself think about what her days must be like, about the boredom of isolation that gnawed at her, about the dangers that were piling up in her. He knew very well that she was in course of changing her very soul, that she was poisoning herself with disgust in strong doses.

But adversity had tempered his own determination to stand it. It had strengthened his obtuse man’s logic. So he kept his mouth shut. He had to suffer all alone, since Laura refused to share his suffering. His resentment against her for this was lasting.

André was one of those stubborn men who can be disarmed by a look, but who will not budge any more than a cog-wheel if you try to work it the wrong way. . . .

Thus they had been in opposition for days. They said nothing to each other, or at least exchanged only commonplaces. André never mentioned the Abbey or the sands. The newspapers and the radio filled in the time for them. During the first week they were there André's father had sent them a little portable set. The muted music which it picked up went on sounding tirelessly while they stood to arms, like people besieged.

But today, André realised, the long siege was at an end. He could tell it not so much from Laura's face as from her body.

Everything about her had suddenly come to life again. Her elbows were drawn back and jerked at her breasts. The ripple that ran through her from her shoulders to her hips set André thinking that she was unsheathing herself before his eyes. Her foot pawed the ground in exasperation, just as Docheais had dabbled in the sand.

Without waiting for André to shut the door behind him, Laura declared:

"I'm not going to stay here a day longer!"

André set his lips, stared at the ground, and waited. But Laura had worked herself into such a paroxysm that her antagonist's silence had ceased to matter to her. It did not worry her, or even affect her. She was simply stating a decision. André seemed to be there merely to listen to it.

"I've just slapped one of those women in the face," she announced.

André jumped.

"Which one?"

"I've no idea. I don't know her name."

"But why did you slap her?"

"It was about a garbage pail. . . . You don't expect me to go into details about it, like a washerwoman, do you? . . . She said she wasn't my servant. She said I would have to do without one now, like everybody else. I told her she never would have been a servant of mine. I told her I'd never had sluts in my service. Then she threw some dirty remark in my face. So I shut her up with a couple of cuffs. She got frightened and ran home, calling for her husband. . . . After that, I'm going."

Laura's last remark made no impression on André. So far, he regarded it merely as a threat made in anger. Laura was bound to say that. . . .

All André worried about was the quarrel. He must find out just how much damage had been done. He started walking up and down the room, making no noise in his gum-boots.

"We'll see about that," he parried. "But what I want to know . . ."

Laura had sat down. Her opened dressing-gown exposed her crossed legs. Her head was flung so far back that André could see the bottom of her chin, the converging lines of her jaws.

The thought flashed across his mind:

"She's got thin."

"What do you want to know?" she demanded. "Have you ever worried about what my 'neighbours,' as you call them, may have been saying to me and doing to me for the past three weeks? Do you want to know why the woman upstairs threw dirty water over my window? Do you want to know why they got their kids to knock over my milk-bottles in the passage? Do you want to know what I found scribbled on my door? . . . All this time, you've been going for walks. You've been fishing. And I've been stuck here at the sink."

André shrugged that grievance away.

"Come, come! Haven't you persisted in refusing to go out?"

"Where do you expect me to go? Do you expect me to go for a walk along an alley or two where everybody rushes to the door when one passes? Do you expect me to call on my next-door neighbour for afternoon coffee and sit there sewing socks? Do you expect me to talk about the servant at the café who runs after the men building the post-office, or about your colleague who came back boozed from Pontorson, or about the new priest's visit?"

For the first time since they had started talking, André looked Laura straight in the eyes.

"No, I don't. But do you happen to think that your former friends had a higher standard of conversation?"

Laura picked up his challenge.

"Maybe you've got to the point where you can't tell the difference."

Then, all at once, defiance faded from her eyes. She sprang to her feet, came across to André, breathing hard, and tried to take his hand.

“Listen to me, André. This isn’t just a whim. I’ve been thinking about it for days and nights. I simply must get away. I shall go mad if I stay here. I feel thirty years older. I feel like an old woman, with everything behind me and nothing in front of me—nothing to which to look forward. . . . Can’t you try and understand that? It’s different for you. You can get about. You’ve got something to do. You can talk to people, just as you always did.”

André was scarcely listening to her. He had just remembered something.

“Wasn’t the draw in the national lottery announced in this morning’s papers?”

Laura did not reply. Nor did she lower her eyes.

“I didn’t say anything to you when I found the ticket,” André went on. “But after all, you know, a ticket costing a hundred francs! . . . You must pretty nearly have stolen them. . . . Well, this morning you found you hadn’t won, and you threw the ticket away. So now you say you must get away. That was all that was keeping you: your crazy hope of winning a big prize.”

Laura nodded.

“Why, of course it was! Do you think I could have gone on living like this, do you think I can go on living like this, unless I’ve got some hope that it will stop? You like being here. Everyone to his taste. You were brought up to it. I wasn’t. . . . And I’ll do anything to get out of it—anything, do you hear me?”

In her anger, her lips curled back as she blurted her words. Her face lengthened, and her eyebrows went up into her forehead. The threats she spat at André hit him in the face in short, warm puffs. She was so animated, so animal, that André could no longer doubt her strength of purpose.

“You’d do anything, would you?” he sneered. “I’m beginning to believe it. ‘I’m going, and you can stay if you like.’ All right! That’s clear enough, anyway. . . . And just imagine that I once used to believe in you! Just imagine that I once used to believe in all your wheedling, all your humbug! As though you ever cared a damn about what I might think, what I might want to do, what kind of man I was, even!”

Laura marched upon him, with blazing eyes.

“What kind of man you are? Do you want me to tell you what kind of man you are? You’re just a failure—that’s all you are! A fine job you’ve

found for yourself, with nothing to do but starve quietly to death and wander about the sands, just as you used to do with your father! A fine job, playing bear-leader once a week to a handful of people who come here in the winter instead of the summer to save the price of their lunch! A failure, that's all you are—and a slacker into the bargain, let me tell you, a slacker!"

Laura shouted the taunt at him from the door of the bedroom. Then she went in and slammed the door. André could hear the click of the latch as she locked it.

With clenched teeth, he went on walking up and down the kitchen. The floor rang dully under his rubber heels. It was this unusual sound which finally succeeded in taking his mind off his rage.

Come what might, he had got to get out of these gum-boots which he had been wearing all morning; and nobody could get out of them by himself. He wasn't going to beg at that locked door. . . .

André made a parcel of his walking shoes, went out, and climbed up to the "Fancy." There he got them to help him out of his boots. He made the excuse that his wife had tried to help him out; but she wasn't used to it.

He also asked if he might leave his boots in a corner of the cellar, and pick them up again in the evening.

He had made up his mind not to go home again before dark. He would walk till he tired himself out. It was the sensible thing to do. It was the only way of stilling the raging storm of anger that beat at his temples till he was afraid of it.

He set out on the road to Pontorson, quickening his pace to the point where even his thoughts became breathless and weary. Little by little, the shrieking tumult within him subsided. His indignation was still immense, still profound; but it had sunk to a level surface, like a mass of water dammed by a high dyke.

Automobiles passed him; but all he saw of them was their sides low down near the ground, like an intermittent, moving streak that broke the emptiness on his left. He must have walked very fast; for the first thing in the outside world that caught his notice was a mile-stone, a cube of cement standing on a pedestal, with the inscription: "Beauvoir, 300 metres."

He went through Beauvoir and then through Les Pas, and continued in the direction of Ardevon and the sea, without seeing anything of the road except the ups and downs on it.

By now he was able to recall some of the things Laura had said to him.

“A handful of people who come here in the winter . . . to save the price of their lunch. . . .”

That came back into his mind first, because the most hateful feature of all she had said was her crushing contempt for people and things that did not bear the hallmark of money; her intensely narrow-minded caste-consciousness. It was so grotesque in her present position as to suggest that she was not merely blind, but a perfect fool.

Then André caught the echo of that insult which, of all things, she had selected.

“A slacker . . .”

He reacted against the slur like a working-man, who knows no deadlier insult. She called him that, when she was ashamed of work, when she hated work! . . .

All at once, as he followed up his grievances, something came back into his mind: the anonymous letter sent to his father, which accused Laura of being Delabre’s mistress.

André had always refused to let himself dwell on it. But this afternoon he made up his mind to brood over it, to read it over again in thought, even to challenge the evidence for it, in order to torture himself.

But he was prevented. Somebody said:

“So you’re taking a walk out our way, are you?”

The speaker, behind him, was one of two women whom he had just passed. André turned round. The three of them had the road to themselves. The woman must have been speaking to him.

“I am,” he replied, somewhat suspiciously.

But then he recognised one of the women: a tall girl, who was laughing just as she had laughed at the “Fancy.” The women were the two cockle-gatherers: the old one who had once walked to Paris, and the young one whom she called Andréa.

They caught up with him and walked along beside him.

“Off duty today, are you?” the old woman asked.

“Yes. . . . Where does this road go to?”

“It goes to the shore. Is that where you want to go?”

“Oh,” said André, “I’m not going anywhere in particular.”

“For somebody going nowhere in particular,” remarked Andréa, “you were going there pretty fast.”

She stared at him boldly with her brown eyes: eyes which frankly admitted that she liked looking at him, but at the same time had a glint of mockery in them.

“Don’t you see?” said Mother Hirson. “He’s going to the shore to buy us a drink.”

Her impudence amused André for a moment. The girl, for her part, laughed again, showing her sound teeth. But André noticed that her right eye-tooth was missing. The gap gave her laugh an ambiguous ring, just as a slight squint distorts eyes.

“Aren’t I right?” persisted the old woman.

“If you like.”

“There, I knew I was right!”

The two women, who wore no stockings and shoes badly down at heel, walked on fast, with the long stride of walkers on sand. They said no more. Mother Hirson, thinking about the time their stop at the inn would take, led them at a pace which did not encourage conversation.

She had been gathering cockles ever since she was fourteen, and her walks around the bay and to the neighbouring villages totalled a distance equivalent to ten times round the world. Her dried-up legs, knotted with varicose veins, kept a steady step, as automatic as the spring of a watch. It did not fit in with André’s step, and the speed of it stopped him thinking about anything but saving his breath and not being left behind by its crazy pace.

Even so, he reached the inn a good last. The two women were already seated on the bench around the room.

“Three coffees,” ordered Mother Hirson, “and something to wash it down with.”

Then a thought struck her.

“You’ve got a kettle on the fire, eh? We’ve no time to waste.”

“It’s just coming to the boil,” the landlady reassured her. “So this is on your route today, Mother Hirson?”

“We met this fine gentleman, and he was good enough to offer us a drink,” the old woman explained.

During the summer, she excelled at getting her thirst quenched by tourists with a craze for the picturesque.

André studied her. The lines on her face were as deep as cuts, and it was almost surprising not to see blood coming from them. Her dried-up, deformed hands, as they lay on the table in repose, looked like grey crabs. Then they got restless and started drumming on her saucer.

“Hurry up, hurry up!” she cried. “It’s nearly two o’clock.”

“That clock’s fast,” declared the landlady, as she brought the coffee-pot and the carafe of brandy.

Mother Hirson glanced outside through the blurred window.

“The weather looks bad,” she said. “Shouldn’t be surprised if we have a fog tonight.”

She gulped down a good third of her cupful of burning coffee, and filled the cup up with brandy. Andréa, for her part, drank like a cat, in little sips. She served herself with brandy more politely; but she drank just as much of it.

Mother Hirson stood up.

“And now we must thank you and get to work,” she said.

Andréa stood up almost at the same moment. André realised that she was trained never to question the old woman’s orders or actions. Such obedience was a safeguard, as in all professions connected with the sea.

For his part, André remained seated.

“It’s a fine thing,” remarked Mother Hirson, “to play the gentleman and have nothing to do.”

More warmly than her remark warranted, André retorted:

“Maybe it’s because I began my day before you did, Mother. I was out on the sands at five o’clock this morning.”

He explained that he had gone out with Docheais after duck and salmon.

“That’s just what I was saying,” the old woman declared. “You’ve had nothing to do ever since this morning.”

Andréa laughed her vulgar, provocative laugh. André stood up.

“To listen to you,” he countered, “one would think that picking up a few pounds of cockles was the hardest job in the world. I’ve done it myself, you know.”

“I’m not inquisitive,” said Mother Hirson, “but I’d like to see you do it.”

Mischief glinted in her yellow eyes. She was counting on something that would be fun for her, but not for him.

By now André realised that she could find amusement, as convicts do, only in other people being hurt or frightened. But this afternoon he could not fail to pick up such a challenge. He felt what an absurd, madcap adventure it was. But he made up his mind without hesitation.

“Let’s go!” he said.

The two women hurried down the steps of the inn in front of him. Andréa looked round, and he could see on her face the same expression of sly mockery as the old woman’s.

So he wanted to see what a cockle-gatherer’s life was like, did he?

These women took a pride in the hardships they endured, in their killing profession which no man could stand. A cockle-gatherer risked her life at her job, and sometimes lost it. By the age of fifty, she was incapable of getting any older, so pickled in salt was she, so permanently bent by perpetual stooping.

Mother Hirson led the way across the road and over a ploughed field. They were at the end of the flats. Beyond two gentle slopes, the grazing land began.

André had never walked on it before. Muddy sea-fennel and marsh-samphire hid pools of brackish water. André went into one up to his ankle. He did not draw attention to his mishap, and his companions did not seem to notice it. Then they came to creeks, whose miry edges they skirted. After that, André was glad to find firm sand underfoot and be able to look elsewhere than at his feet.

From where they were, they could see the whole extent of the bay: a pearly, shifting stretch of water swaying with the swell. A light mist hung over it, and through the mist the Mount and Tombelaine looked like a stump-drawing seen through badly focussed binoculars.

Everything was streaming. Grey water escaped everywhere in hurried little trickles. Here and there, the freed sands bulged out like long shining shields flung in disorder, with sharp spears among them. What was left of

the sea shredded away into colourless rags. The sands drank it in tirelessly, with a sound of sucking. A flight of starlings darted in the dead white sky, a disciplined handful of big black dots. They circled for a moment or two over the head of a shepherd standing in the grazing land, very far away. His flock was invisible.

André was surprised to hear water lapping against his shoes. He had not noticed this little stream of water, so transparent was it, so seemingly still.

The two women stopped for a second. In two quick movements they kicked off their shoes. André took longer to remove his. The two women set off again, without waiting for him, as though he had ceased to count, now they had got him.

André rolled his trousers up above his knees and walked into the water. It was so cold that it felt like fire, and he had to stop himself shivering. He was so ashamed of his silliness in taking up Mother Hirson's challenge that he nearly turned back. He realised that the two women were going to make ferocious fun of him. He slowed down. But the old woman seemed to know.

"Well, how do you like it?" she shouted back to him.

"It's fine," replied André.

He quickened his pace to catch up with Andréa, who was following the old woman. But the girl, without turning round, signed to him to stay behind her. They must keep in a row, like roped mountaineers.

By this time, the water was nearly up to their knees. The slight sheen of its ripples ended by dazzling André. He looked up. In this white atmosphere no landmark was left. Even Tombelaine, towards which they were walking, was now nothing more than a grey ghost on the horizon.

The old woman, who was walking ten steps ahead, seemed to sway slightly.

"It's shaking!" she shouted.

She did not slow down. One must walk straight on across a quicksand. But she went on relaxed, so to speak, with her knees bent. Obviously she was concerned not to press on the moving surface, to make herself as light as she could. Her whole gait registered an effort to bring her weight upwards.

André, walking in Andréa's wake, saw the girl's whole body trim itself in front of him like that of an equilibrist. Her hips worked to lessen the

impact of her steps. Her shoulders swayed. Her arms were outstretched to keep her balance.

In his turn, André started across the quicksand. In the morning he had been wearing boots. Now his bare feet gave him a much more definite feeling that they were bearing down upon a taut crust over mud, a gelatinous raft. It wobbled worse at the smallest fault in his footing, and had to be steadied again.

At one moment, André was aghast as he felt the swaying sand on the point of capsizing, like a flat-bottomed boat heeling over when one is not careful to walk in the middle of it.

Over her shoulder, Andréa snapped at him:

“Put one foot in front of the other!”

She was quite right. One had to glide along as though on a tight-rope. Once André did so, the quicksand steadied.

But, the farther he advanced, the more he felt his feet sucked down into the liquid mud; the more conscious he became of the give of water under the soft, sticky crust. He took his last few steps almost at a run, just as you run when you come towards the end of a plank-bridge across a torrent.

Mother Hirson stood waiting stiffly on the firm sand, out of danger. Andréa joined her. Then, as though André were not there, she said:

“I thought he was going to break up the whole thing.”

She rounded on André.

“Don’t you know you ought to walk as though you were walking on eggs?”

She seemed exasperated that he should be so clumsy.

“Well, I got across, anyway,” retorted André, sulkily.

Mother Hirson glanced at him.

“A man will get anywhere after a fine girl. . . . He must be in love with you.”

André shrugged his shoulders, and they set off again across the sands, which at this point were higher. They came to a big dry bank, which felt warm. The old woman jerked her head at the vast stretch of sands.

“If you want to bring your mistress somewhere there’s no fear of your wife’s seeing you,” she counselled, “this is the place to come. Nobody’s

likely to disturb you. . . . Still, if your wife found out you were running after a girl out here, you'd get into trouble."

André laughed. It gave him an unkindly sense of amusement that he should be reminded of Laura here, and by these women. It was as though Mother Hirson were giving him his chance of a cheap revenge on Laura. He took it.

"She wouldn't mind at all," he said, quietly.

"You mean she isn't in love with you?" Mother Hirson supplemented, promptly.

Her question gave André a shock.

"She must be hard to please," the old woman went on. "You're a fine fellow, after all. In my young days, I wouldn't have turned up my nose at you. . . . Well, here we are at the backwater. You ought to take your trousers off, young man."

In a sudden dip, a kind of long fold in the sands, flowed a branch, or backwater, of the Sélune, fast and muddy. The old woman watched the turbid stream running past.

"It's pretty full," she remarked. "I haven't seen it flowing like that for months."

She started quickly bundling up her skirt in front of her, exposing her knobby knees, her skinny thighs. Shamelessly unconcerned, Andréa bared her strong, shapely thighs still higher. The old woman boldly led the way into the stream.

"Some people say cockle-gatherers don't wear any drawers," she said. "Have a good look. You can tell us if it's true when we get to the other side."

Andréa started to ford the stream in her turn. André followed her. He found the water over his knees at once. At the first step he took, it rose to his waist, making his trousers cling to him icily.

The two women had stopped, with the water over their waists. It was so muddy that nothing was to be seen of them but their busts sticking out of it. They were holding their dresses rolled right up, and watching André in amusement; but not the same kind of amusement.

The old woman's was mocking and impassive. Andréa was in a state of unbridled mirth, nearly doubled up in the water with laughter.

"Stand still!" she cried. "I'll take you on my back and carry you across."

She would have done it, too, for she started back towards him. But André set his teeth, plunged forward furiously, and reached the other side ahead of the two women.

“The bitches!” he said to himself. “They meant to do that to me all the time.”

He was soaked right up to his chest.

Without paying any further attention to him, the two women went to work.

As they burrowed into the sandbanks, the cockles left above them tiny holes like the eye of a needle, out of which water bubbled and gave them away. Bending over like gleaners, the two women scooped the sand with their little curved knives. Then, with surprising speed, they tossed the shell-fish into the little string-bags that hung at their waists.

“Do you go gathering every day?”

André asked the question lest he should seem upset by the silly trick they had just played on him. He wanted to show that he made light of it.

“Of course we do,” replied the old woman. “Cockles haven’t yet got the habit of sticking themselves into sacks all by themselves.”

“And in summer too?”

“We get more in summer than in winter.”

André was quite close to Andréa.

“But what about you?” he asked her. “Don’t you go into service during the season? I’m told that it’s well paid.”

It was Mother Hirson who replied, without stopping her digging in the sand.

“You might even say it’s too well paid. When their day’s work is over, the bosses get the girls to do another job. And the girls pay for that themselves, and dearly, too.”

André shrugged his shoulders.

“Come, come,” he protested, “all bosses aren’t like that.”

“What do you know about it?” growled the old woman.

But, with her face close to the sand, Andréa spoke, sneeringly:

“Why, of course he knows! Hasn’t he been a boss himself? . . . Is it true that your wife said she wouldn’t have Roubaud’s wife for a servant? . . .”

So that misadventure was already public property. Laura’s slap must have echoed all round the Mount first thing in the morning. In his exasperation, André rediscovered the insolence he had picked up from his wealthy friends.

“Perhaps,” he retorted, “you’d like the place yourself?”

Andréa stood up, with her eyes blazing, her nostrils pinched with anger. She wiped her sandy hands on her skirt, mechanically.

André realised that his insult had hurt her more than he meant. He was sorry. But, before he could say so, Andréa’s hoarse voice lashed him.

“I don’t imagine there’s any place going now. I fancy Madame has got to do her own washing-up and scrub Monsieur’s socks like anybody else.”

That was probably just what the guardian’s wife had said to Laura in the morning. But Andréa was fair; for she went on:

“There’s nothing to be ashamed of about that, when you’re working for yourself. But, as for being paid to serve as somebody else’s dog! . . . ‘Fetch that here, take this there, eat the leavings, and go to bed.’ As for that, why! . . .”

Andréa swore like a man and spat into the wind which was ruffling her short hair and brushing it back from her face. Then she started digging in the sand again, furiously.

But, as she worked, she went on talking. Her voice was broken by the little needs of her job. Bits of her words were carried away by the bitter wind.

She would wait for the tide on that bank, she muttered, she would be found dead the next day with her mouth full of sand, sooner than go and pick up the coppers that people flung into puddles of cider for the waitresses on the Mount, or polish the shoes outside bedrooms where fat fellows were sleeping off the fatigue of strolling about.

Still, they might as well make the best of their luck. It wouldn’t last for ever. André himself was a gentleman, and still he had to work for his living. The rest of them would come to that, too. Already in Russia there weren’t any more rich people, any more bosses. Here, too, a day would come when everybody would have his turn. When that day came, she’d serve all their whores as lady’s maid all right! She’d tear the fine clothes off their backs!

André listened to Andréa's angry outburst with calm curiosity, as a man standing on a quay might watch a deadly torrent tearing past.

All at once, Mother Hirson muttered:

“Hullo, there's Baucher!”

Andréa half stood up. She stopped talking. Then she joined the old woman, and the two of them, talking in low voices, went on working side by side, moving away from André towards the man who had come in sight.

André realised that they were abandoning him, and that this man was the cause of it. He stood where he was, intrigued.

The man whom the old woman had called Baucher approached with long strides. He was wearing gum-boots and a cap pulled down over his eyes, and had a basket on his back with a net flung over it.

He came to a standstill beside the two women and spoke to them, bending over; for they went on working and he stood over them, with their heads level with his knees.

Obviously he had asked a question. André saw the girl stand up and point a shameless finger at him.

“Who's that gentleman there?” she said. “He's taken a fancy to me. Haven't you, sir?”

André did not move a muscle of his face. Nor did he when, loud enough for André to overhear him, Baucher retorted:

“Well, you can tell him from me that I'm not very fond of men with nothing better to do but run after working women.”

At that, Andréa burst out laughing.

“Oh, my,” she exclaimed, “he's not going to eat your wife. He's got a better one of his own. Haven't you?”

She was setting André at defiance. Looking him straight in the eyes, she put her arm round the fisherman's neck. But Baucher flung it off roughly.

“None of your tricks, see?” he said. “Pick up your sack, and let's go!”

André had not stirred. He watched them filing past him, to his left.

Baucher, leading the way, simply seemed to ignore him. Then came Mother Hirson, bent beneath the weight of her sackful of cockles.

Andréa brought up the rear: Andréa laughing that coarse, crude laugh of hers, a laugh that made fun of everything—of André, of the man she was following, of the sack on her back, of hardship, of life itself.

André was chilled to the bone. Into the bargain, he had been made a mockery. He felt as though his gall-bladder had burst inside him with disgust.

It was with a slut like Andréa that Laura had come to blows this morning. So what? . . .

The storm had lasted five days: one of those great northerly gales of March that herald the equinox.

For five days the Abbey rocked and rang and roared. It might have had a strident whistle stuck to every bevel of its roofs. Getting a door shut was a matter of main force.

Visitors were few. One of them, a young man, was knocked down by the wind and nearly stunned against the parapet of the great western platform, the Prisoners' Plummet, whence you can see Dol, Cancale and the Chausey archipelago. After that, Monsieur Plantier, on his own responsibility, forbade access to the platform.

Never, the Head Guardian declared, had he known a storm of such fury. The slates that rained down set him worrying about the stability of the statue of Saint Michael. He kept an eye on it through his telescope.

"Suppose he comes down," he said. "It would mean sixteen hundredweight multiplied by five hundred feet. . . . I don't know how long they've been promising us a scaffolding to see how he's getting on up there."

You could see tradesmen's vans standing at the foot of the towers rocking on their wheels. Nobody ever ventured out on the embankment except in the attitude of the damned in religious pictures: crouching, with both hands covering his face, to ward off the sharp sting of the sand that swept over it in spouts all day long. The raging yellow sea broke with a crash like the collapse of a house.

Then, one night, everything quieted down. It turned cold again.

One morning, when he went to the window, André cried out at the spectacle of the Mount covered with snow. Even Laura shared his admiration, though with sour scorn. Still, he got her to come out on the embankment with him and go down on to the sands.

The snow had blotted out the lower town and made all its roofs merge. It was now no more than a dazzling dapple from which a milky light rose up towards the Abbey walls. Thus lit up from their base, the long buildings did

not seem to bear down on the rock at all. Their severe squareness was softened. Their triangular roofs capped them with white abbots' mitres.

The church, above all, was a marvel. Its choir had blossomed into an ethereal garden full of dazzling flowers. Everything except what had been carved only for the eyes of God stood out: the exquisite perfection of the pinnacles; the jewelled workmanship of the flying buttresses; the lines of the balusters, with their ups and downs like those of a Gregorian chant; the capitals shaped like shrines. All these were so many fervent, joyous prayers in stone. The snow, with its endless patience, had picked out everything, emphasised everything. On the steep slates of the bell-turret it had left only a few downy flakes. But the Archangel had kept it on his wings, and in the blue air he looked like a great gull soaring.

André gazed at all this wide-eyed like a child, laughing with delight. He detailed what was before her eyes to Laura.

"To the right, that wall which looks almost blue is the wall of Belle-Chaise, the ecclesiastical court building, where the abbot rendered justice. You see that tower which seems suspended, and doesn't come right down to the rock? That's the Perrine Tower. The Procure . . ."

"Where's the Lacework Staircase?" Laura interrupted.

André pointed out its flying buttress to her; but he had to admit that its steps could not be seen from below.

Still, he tried to stir Laura to enthusiasm.

"It's fine, isn't it? . . . That's something you can't see in the summer."

"I don't suppose you can."

Laura laughed at his silliness, as he had not heard her laugh for months. André shrugged his shoulders sadly. All his own enthusiasm was shattered.

"You know quite well what I mean. . . ."

He proposed to take Laura below the North Tower to admire the Little Wood and the Merveille. But she refused to go, on account of the stinking cess-pool which they would have to cross. When they got home, she could talk about nothing except the dirt of the town.

André, for his part, had to go up to the Abbey. But he forbore to tell Laura what he was going to do there. He was going to work at a carpenter's bench.

During the past year, a rule had been brought into force that every guardian should take up a trade and attend to day-to-day repairs and maintenance. For this work he was paid extra. As carpenter, André at the moment was making a show-case for the waiting-room.

In the Merveille courtyard he found Monsieur Plantier and Hulard, who, armed with a shovel, was clearing away the snow. As the three of them went inside together, André sang the praises of the splendid sight which the Abbey presented.

“Yes,” said the Head Guardian, “it was in weather like this that I broke my leg. . . .”

Hulard looked at André and shook his head.

“I’ll bet,” he said, “that you haven’t yet seen the best of it. . . . Any visitors this morning will get value for their money. Has anybody come yet?”

“Two Englishwomen,” replied Monsieur Plantier, “and they don’t speak anything but English. They’re on their way round with Bertrand. They’ll be back soon. Bertrand knows just as much English as I do. He can say: ‘I don’t speak English.’ About all he can do is open the doors for them and show them what century the room is on his fingers. However, they took tickets for photographing, so they can console themselves with that.”

“Are you going to let them out this time?” asked Hulard.

“You don’t know why he’s asking me that, do you, Brelet? . . . Well, last summer, after she had been round, an Englishwoman hung about here a bit, looking at the show-cases and writing postcards. Meanwhile, a fresh party of visitors formed up. She joined them, thinking they were on their way out. When she got to the barrier, of course, I stopped her. ‘Ticket?’ I said. She’d thrown it away. ‘Ticket for visit,’ I explained. The poor woman took another, in the belief that she had to have one to get out. Then she caught up with the party of visitors. She went all the way round a second time. When she came back, she was in a terrible state, crying and complaining. Everybody wondered what was wrong with her. Finally, a gentleman who understood English told me: ‘Why, she wants to get out!’ ‘Nothing easier, Madame,’ I said. ‘This way. . . .’ That’s the sort of thing that happens. . . .”

The great door at the end of the room opened, and the two visitors appeared, followed by Bertrand. He smiled and shook his head, by way of conveying that the tour had been no easy matter. The two Englishwomen went straight to the counter where cards and books were exposed for sale.

Monsieur Plantier, affable and business-like, took up his position behind the counter, and waited quietly, pencil in hand. The visitors pointed to things, and he wrote down the price.

Then the younger of the two women looked up, fingered a pamphlet, and asked a question.

Monsieur Plantier was already starting to make friendly signs that he didn't understand, when André explained:

“She wants to know whether there is an English translation of that guide-book.”

The Head Guardian promptly forgot all about the Englishwoman and the question. He stared at André in astonishment.

“So you speak English, eh?”

“Yes.”

“And you never said so! . . . Why, that's fine! Ever since I wouldn't let that Englishwoman of mine out, I haven't let a month pass without asking the Ministry for a guide-interpreter. And you let me tell that story without saying a word! . . . By the way, what did you say she was asking?”

“She wants to know whether there's a translation . . .”

“Oh, yes, of course. . . . No, there isn't. . . . But really, Brelet, this is splendid, you know. You're just the man I want. Out of sheer cussedness, Hulard speaks German and Italian, which we hardly ever want. But you speak English. Don't you think an occasion like this calls for celebration, Hulard?”

“It can be properly celebrated,” declared Hulard, “only with Monsieur the Head Guardian's Vouvray.”

“I agree, heartily. . . . Have you come to work, Brelet?”

“Yes.”

“There's something better for you to do this morning,” Hulard interposed. “By the afternoon, it will be too late.”

Monsieur Plantier pricked up his ears.

“Too late for what?”

“To show him what I want to show him.”

“Another of your damned holes or your rotten floors,” jeered the Head Guardian. “Don’t you go and break my interpreter’s neck, see? I might still have got over it as late as yesterday. But this morning he’s become indispensable to me—d’you hear me, in-dis-pen-sable?”

André and Hulard reached the end of the room.

“Good-bye!” Monsieur Plantier shouted after them, in English.

Hulard was already sliding the wooden bar which bolted the huge door. He chose a key from his bunch, and opened one of the heavy leaves of the door into the Store Room.

“I’m very glad to hear you know English,” he said.

“Why?”

“Because it will mean a privileged position for you here. You can count on Old Plantier to boost you to the Fine Arts architect. That’s one of the remarkable things about him, among others. Not only is he not jealous of a man who is superior to him in any way, but he actually shoves him on for all he’s worth. That’s not so common, let me tell you, among people down below.”

By that he meant the rest of the world outside the Mount.

They walked on under the roof with its massive arches, in between the square pillars of the lofty Store Room.

“I’m very fond of this Store Room,” said Hulard, abruptly. “Aren’t you? . . . Those are something like walls for you! You’ve only got to look at them, you’ve only got to touch them. And then there’s that sound-supporting roof. There’s something sturdy, something simple about the place, like a lay brother. . . . It’s airy and cool in here, and that’s just what you wanted for the food and for the wine, when you couldn’t spare the time to ice it. . . . And then there’s the magnificent way in which the room opens straight out into the Almonry. Just imagine all the food and drink that went out that way for the poor! At Cluny the Benedictines used to maintain seventeen thousand of them. Looks a bit better than the office of a board of charity, anyway, doesn’t it?”

They went up a short staircase. Then Hulard opened the door into the Hall of the Knights.

“And what about this?” he asked.

André stopped on the threshold, in astonishment, as though the hall had vanished before his eyes. Once again it was one of those unexpected, those straight, those almost brutal blows that beauty dealt you here.

There had been the Mount standing out against the stars. There had been the flaming of the Merveille at dawn, as André had seen it from far out on the sands. This morning, there had been the outside of the Abbey, a garden in full bloom.

Now there was the spreading splendour of the silvery sheen that bathed and bedecked these pillars. For today the hall was lit not by its normal niggardly northern light, but by the trees in the Little Wood. Their tops carried the snow right up to the sills of the Moresque windows. The sheen of the snow overflowed into the four aisles of pillars. It sank into the stone. It left not one angle, not one groove, untouched with its magic.

But, above all, by driving away the shadows, this glorious light stressed the successive sanctuaries of the arches. They merged into the vaulting of the roof more solidly than ever. They supplied salvation. They provided protection. In this even outpouring of pearly light, the pillars, with their outreaching, robust ribbing, looked like the cluster of a sacred grove. They shed security. They bestowed benediction. Once more they had become a shelter for souls.

Hulard stared at the spectacle, with his hands deep down in his pockets. What appealed to him about this illumination, above all, was its pellucid pleasure.

“Seems to be smiling all to itself, doesn’t it?” he said.

Then he glanced at his friend.

“This is nibbling at you, you know.”

“What do you mean— nibbling at me?”

“Well, look out, that’s all. . . . For some people, what they see here makes them disgusted with anything else. I’ve known people who had every reason in the world for going away. But they’re still here. . . .”

Then he laughed, by way of breaking the spell of a secret shared.

“Just like that poor Devil wriggling about up there under the Archangel’s foot.”

They went into the Hall of Guests. Here, too, the sheen of the snow stressed the spring of the slender pillars and emphasised the ogives of the

arches. It made the flowers that bedecked the capitals look lustier, as though they were bursting with sap. This morning the hall had the somewhat immature grace of a nursery-garden in an oasis, with its palm-trees awaiting their growth.

Hulard was once more in the grip of his passion for research.

“I can’t find a trace of justification for calling this room ‘the Hall of Guests,’” he declared. “According to Dom Thomas le Roy, it was the plumbers’ workshop. In fact, you can imagine how much lead was wanted to repair the roofs; and, as the Mount had to be self-supporting . . .”

He was as happy as a bull in a china-shop. He seemed to take a keen pleasure in turning what was commonly regarded as the most beautiful building in the Merveille into a lead-works.

“Just look at those two fireplaces!” he went on. “Obviously they’re factory fireplaces. . . .”

“I think,” remarked André, “I see the engineer cropping up.”

“Oh, so Old Plantier told you about that, did he? He’s more proud of it than I am. . . . Well, where shall we go now?”

“What about the Cloister?” suggested André.

It was above their heads. Its galleries must embrace a dazzling stretch of virgin snow. But Hulard did not like the Cloister.

“Oh, yes, I know. Of course,” he declaimed, “it’s ‘unique in the world.’ It’s ‘the finest monument France can boast.’ It’s all ‘grace’ here, and ‘wealth’ there, and ‘exquisite art’ all over the place. . . . But, to begin with, its builders left their names and their portraits in it; and that in itself doesn’t appeal to me much. Then again, it’s too smart, too knowing for my liking. Of course, I agree that the way in which they juggled away the thrust of the roof with their quincunx columns was masterly. But that led them to cramp their arches and their vaultings and twist them about like marshmallows. And then there’s that rose-coloured granitel, those varnished tiles. . . . Oh, no, it’s all too much made-up!”

As he talked, he led André through the Covered Walk into the Crypt of the Great Pillars. There he paused just inside.

“There’s strength for you, eh?” he said. He chuckled contentedly, and grasped André by the wrist.

“You called me an engineer, just now. . . . Sometimes, in the summer, I meet a fellow-student or a war-comrade in the waiting-room. They stare at me wide-eyed when they recognise me. They can’t get over my being here. It offends their sense of professional dignity, and more than one of them before now has offered to find another job for me. You should just hear them: ‘If this is all the good your degrees have done you . . .’ But, in Heaven’s name, just look at these, Brelet!”

Hulard stroked one of the enormous pillars.

“Just look at them! They’ve got half a cathedral on top of them. The rock on which it was built wasn’t long enough, so d’Estetouteville made it longer with these pillars. They’re as firm as rock, and they don’t feel the weight they carry. Do they give you any impression that they’ve been ‘working’ every second for the past four hundred years? They conceal their strength, they juggle it away with those arches that vanish into the pillars and merge with them. They don’t carry the weight with outstretched arms, as the pillars in the church overhead do. They carry it all on their elbows, with their arms at this angle, see?”

He crooked his arm closely, and tapped it.

“Well, I can follow all that ‘working’ in the stone. The whole effort; the thrust; the direction of its strength; the reply of the arches; the way in which they help one another; their cohesion—I can see all that. I can see the play of the muscles. ‘Eight pillars, arches like this, and chapels like that.’ That’s what you say when you show people round. You’re simply making a statement. But, for my part, I know all that lies behind it. All the ideas, all the nerve of the Fifteenth Century monk who dared to construct this on the ruins of his collapsed crypt—I’ve got all that weighed up to within a pound. I’ve made all his calculations over again for myself. And, when I fully realised just what he’d managed to do, I nearly cried at the thought of it, let me tell you.

“Am I supposed to think that I’ve come down in the world, just because the blue prints I’ve learned to draw, the equations I’ve learned to do, enable me to tumble to a thing like that? I, too, have built against the danger of collapse. For weeks I’ve felt on my own back the pressure of millions of tons of rock or water thrusting against my shores or my embankments, just as the builder here felt the weight of all those tons of stone settling down on his pillars. Now, one hundred thousand people a year are herded through here. Out of the whole lot of them, is there one who can take the whole thing in? Is there one able to estimate what a masterpiece it is? . . . Ah, I tell you,

Brelet, when I think of all the pleasure I have found, all the pleasure I still find, all the pleasure I shall go on finding in discovering, one by one, all the dodges of the hundreds of wonderful fellows who worked here, I didn't pay too dearly for it when I let everything else go hang!"

His harsh voice echoed in the titanic crypt. He proceeded to lead André along the dark, narrow passage which skirts the tip of the plateau. Then, through Saint Martin's crypt, he brought him beneath the vaulting of the catacombs of the Carolingian church.

"These are the parts I like," he confessed, "where you're in the Tenth and Eleventh Centuries. Here everything's virile. You can have your Cloister ten times over for this or the Covered Walk. Here the stones listen. Up there, all the capitals chatter."

"That's quite true," cried André.

In one word, Hulard had defined the impression which André had felt so strongly ever since they had started their tour: the impression that he was being listened to, or, to put it better, summed up. . . .

They made their way to the southern substructures. As they passed the Great Wheel, Hulard looked at it darkly.

"That blasted roulette-board!" he growled. "Why doesn't somebody set the damned thing on fire? . . . You tire yourself out trying to tell the people all about the Underground Church, the Covered Walk, the Aquilon. They're not half-way round before they're bored with the whole business. They start cuddling their girls in corners. Then you bring them here, in front of the Wheel. Ah, that's better! They come to life again, they can understand that, they can get a laugh out of it. Six men on the Wheel, playing squirrel—they can imagine that all right. That's really interesting. You have quite a job dragging them away from it. The Wheel and the dungeons—that's what's going to stick in their minds. If we hadn't got those to show them, tips would drop a hundred per cent, and they're poor enough as it is."

That word "tip" shocked André every time he heard it. He imagined the arrival of the summer tourists in terms of an army of barbarians, already on the march, who would reach the Mount three months hence. Above all, the thought of holding out his hand to them made him shrink.

He stopped, looked at Hulard, and asked, uneasily:

"Talking about tips: when you first got them, didn't it embarrass you?"

Hulard stared at him hard.

“When I was a gentleman,” he replied, “I was often offered a rake-off, sometimes amounting to a small fortune, for some dirty trick with which I could easily get away. Well, let me tell you, that was more humiliating. A fellow would crack a little joke at a street corner, look down at the tips of his shoes, and suggest some underhand dodge. He meant: ‘You’re for sale. What’s your price?’ I say that was more humiliating than accepting a franc from some decent chap whom you don’t know and whom you’ll never see again. Besides, in the first case I had to tell the fellow where he got off. Here all you’ve got to say is ‘Thank you. . . .’ If you like your money clean, at least it’s clean here.”

With a naturalness which shocked André strangely, he proceeded, there in Saint Stephen’s chapel, to give him practical advice.

“What you must avoid above all,” he said, “is letting the first man out pass you without giving you anything. If he does, all the rest will follow him without forking out. So there’s a regular trick. When the first man passes you, whether he gives you anything or not, you say: ‘Thank you, sir.’ If he hasn’t given you anything, serve him right! You’ve paid him back. He’s got what was coming to him. In any case, the rest are put on the alert. You see them stopping in the Store Room and looking for small change. You hear them consulting their wives. ‘Is five sous enough?’ ‘Well, there are two of us, after all, so better make it ten.’”

“You mean to say people give only five sous?” exclaimed André.

He had not forgotten the two-franc piece he had received instead of a handshake.

“They give two sous, they give one sou!” cried Hulard. His voice was swallowed up in the Carolingian church. “And you can tell by touch. If somebody presses a coin into your hand, you’ve no need to look at it. It’s a sou! . . . You’ll soon learn all their tricks. There’s the woman by herself, who turns round as she passes you and pretends to signal to a man behind to tip you for her. There’s the dirty dog who says, loud enough for you to overhear him: ‘They’re paid, aren’t they?’ To him I always reply: ‘Quite so, sir. Eighteen hundred francs a year.’”

“Do you really say that?”

“Why shouldn’t I? It’s true, isn’t it? . . . All of them think we’re laden with cash. They imagine that the money for the admission tickets goes to us. If they knew that we live only on what they give us, they wouldn’t dare to be so mean as they are.”

“And we share out every evening, don’t we?”

“Every evening all tips are pooled on the table in the guardians’ room. . . . And let me give you a friendly piece of advice, Brelet. At first, nobody will be surprised if you contribute less than the others. But, if that goes on, you won’t be accused of being too shy. You’ll be accused of being too smart. . . .”

“In what way?”

“Why, keeping the money in your own pocket, of course! . . . One of Old Plantier’s predecessors had all the guardians’ pockets sewn up.”

“It’s all rather disgusting to me,” André confessed.

“You’ll get used to it,” Hulard assured him. “You’ll learn to look elsewhere. It’s so easy to stare at the ceiling while your hand gets on with the job. You don’t hold it out, for that matter. Just a tiny movement level with your leg. Look, like this! . . . Another thing: always have your right hand empty. Transfer the tip to your left hand at once. Above all, never let one sou ring against another. If you do, they’ll think you’re better off than they are.

“For my part, I’m convinced you’ve got a gift for it. I don’t give you a month before you’ll be finding just the right cutting thing to say to the stingy ones: those customers who pay you compliments by the yard and think that’s enough. That reminds me, there was one no longer ago than last week. I thought he was never going to stop, with his: ‘Thank you. Thank you so much. I’ve never been shown round anywhere in such an interesting way. Thank you again.’ I simply said to him: ‘What a pity I can’t say the same thing to you!’ ‘Say what?’ ‘Why, Thank you. I should have been so glad if I could.’ . . .”

Hulard grinned broadly: that sardonic, stationary grin of his, which went on indefinitely once he had got it fixed at the corners of his mouth. This was one of the times when he stood himself the satisfaction of making fun of his past and revelling out loud in his vow of poverty.

André could not understand him. Once more he despised his friend a little for his readiness in making the most of small change. It never occurred to André that this meant an astonishing piece of self-conquest on Hulard’s part. It was the mark of a lofty disdain, a breadth of mind, which had doubtless cost him dearly.

Hulard glanced at his wrist-watch.

“Well, time’s gone on while we’ve been gossiping. Before you go, come and look for some parsley. There’s always some to be found, even in the winter.”

He led the way to the top of the main buttress. It formed a great, slightly sloping platform, which overlooked the embankment; the Couesnon, yellower than ever between its snowy banks; and the grazing land, which seemed to consist of dazzling fleeces, already gnawed away by the thaw.

It was dominated by the mass of the walls. But, in front of André, limp light quivered as far away as the hilly horizon. On this platform with no parapet which led down gently towards the void, he felt as though he were suspended in that spacious clarity. The sensation intoxicated him and made him slightly giddy.

Fighting against this feeling, he watched Hulard picking short, crisp sprigs of parsley out of the moss. He offered André a handful of it.

“Take this,” he said. “It will make you welcome when you get home. . . . In the summer, when you want the price of a drink, you can always get one by taking a bunch of parsley down to the hotel-keepers. They use a tremendous lot of it with omelettes and lobsters.”

They returned by way of a staircase cut in the buttress itself: a dark staircase where tourists never went and bats hung like dead leaves. When they came to Gautier’s Leap, Hulard drew André’s attention to test blocks of concrete, which would crack if the wall “worked,” and to overseers’ marks: an 8 and a 9 cut in the stone.

Such was his real passion: these traces of all the efforts that had succeeded one another here, from the most modest jobs to the highest flights of builders.

Then he looked to the right, towards the ruins of the hostelry, later used as a women’s prison.

“What a collapse, eh? Just imagine that morning in 1817 when the women saw the whole hillside sliding away in front of them, and they found themselves with no walls, no bars, but still alive, three hundred feet up in the air. The key to freedom; but hung a bit too high. . . .”

He wound up, severely:

“Everything Robert de Torigny built was badly built.”

But André stopped listening to him as he went on to enumerate the abbot-builder’s failures.

Hulard's evocation of those women prisoners shrieking on the verge of the void had directed André's eyes straight to a window in the barracks which he could see very far below: a mere black slit cut in the wall. It was the window of their kitchen. Inside there Laura was waiting for him: invisible, hidden, unknown. . . .

For by now, whenever André started thinking about his wife, it was to ask himself an immediate question. It had become an obsession with him.

What did he know about her?

Little by little, in fact, he had come to realise that plenty of things did not belong to Laura in person. They had merely been deposited upon her, so to speak, by her life of wealth.

During their years of prosperity—he was sure of this now—she had given him nothing of herself but her habits, her prepossessions, her acquired tastes: everything she owed to her environment. Even those cutting sallies which he had once regarded as proofs of her wit—how many other people in her sphere had the recipe for them? . . .

Today it seemed to him as though he had been living for a long time with a show-woman at a fair: one of those women dipped in a bath of gilded bronze, which hardens and shields their real faces. Now that this coating, which had imposed on André himself, was scaling off and falling away, what would he find underneath it?

So long as Laura had stood up to him, André had never been afraid of finding her both commonplace and common. The intensity of her opposition commanded respect. But a truce had come about.

When André had fled from the sandbank where Mother Hirson and Andréa had left him, chilled to the bone, sickened and, so to speak, thrown back upon his own caste by their vulgar hostility and mockery, he could almost excuse Laura's detestation of the life they were leading. Now that they were both in a state of disturbance, they had finally come together.

André, for his part, had conceded:

“This is only a stop-gap. If anything substantial, anything really worth while, presents itself . . .”

Laura, for her part, had promised to do her best to wait till something turned up.

Since then, in order to kill time and help herself to hold out, she had taken to reading. She flung herself upon the books in the packing-cases.

André resigned himself to her doing so, just as you resign yourself to children's depredations when you say to them: "Do what you like, so long as you don't make a noise."

At the same time, he smelt danger. He knew that, when a lonely woman closes a book, she is never the same as she was before she opened it.

Above all, he was alarmed because Laura never got tired of reading the most artificial and the most foolish novels, the most laborious pieces of pornography, over and over again. On the other hand, with unfailing sureness she dismissed at a glance the books which André liked. . . .

Hulard's silence brought him back to the platform. His friend was staring at him.

"Boring you with my old stones, am I, eh? I was forgetting that, like myself, it's your job to sell them. . . ."

They went down the Grand Staircase. Hulard stopped at a little low door in the Abbey annexes.

"I won't ask you in," he said. "I'd make you too late. I know myself only too well. Once I start showing books! . . . And you'd be too polite to say: 'Oh, that will do! I've had enough of this.' So we'd be here all day. . . . Still, come in some morning. I'll throw my housekeeper out of the window, and then we can be quiet. . . ."

As he passed the "Fancy," André heard somebody calling him. It was Clément Docheais's daughter-in-law. She told André that Docheais wanted to see him. He had arranged something with old Biard about salmon-fishing. He had just gone out to the garden, but he would soon be back.

So André sat down in the little café and ordered a glass of port. From his table, without being able to see her, he talked to the young woman, who was frying fish in the kitchen. He was just asking whether Docheais had been out on the sands again and seen any duck, when the entrance-bell rang.

André turned round, expecting to see Docheais. But it was a woman. She missed the step, staggered, and dropped on to a chair.

André at once recognised Andréa.

"She's dead drunk," he said to himself.

For she had the dazed face, the closed eyes, the dropped jaw, the dismal flabbiness of a drunken woman. Besides, she was all over sand from head to foot. It was stuck in her hair and dried on her cheeks.

“She must have fallen down over and over again,” André reflected.

He felt more ashamed than ever of his absurd escapade on the sands, of the ambiguous curiosity which had led him to follow the girl.

But the young landlady, after a glance at Andréa from the top of the kitchen steps, hastened across the café and bent over her.

“What’s the matter?”

“I fell into a quicksand.”

André pricked up his ears.

“What’s that?”

“She fell into a quicksand,” the landlady repeated. “We must get her into the kitchen. She’s frozen.”

Andréa’s teeth suddenly started chattering, so loud and so fast that André was aghast. He knocked over his chair as he sprang up to help her. He took her under the armpits. Andréa, half dead with exhaustion, let him do what he liked with her. Her knees and her bare feet bumped against the legs of the table as he lifted her up.

While he helped her into the kitchen, André imagined her frightful adventure. He had heard other people who had survived such experiences telling what they were like.

Andréa had broken through the swaying crust of a quicksand. She sank up to her bosom at once. Then she started a still struggle with the cold sand. She surrendered herself to it entirely. She gave way to it. She lay down in it. She plunged her face, her shoulders, her arms, every part of her body that was still free, into it, in an effort to wrest herself out of its grip.

She had the nerve to stretch herself out in it in order to get a purchase on its stickiness. Then, at the cost of an appalling series of wriggles, she managed, inch by inch, to free first a bit of her hips, and finally her legs.

She could hear the rushing sound of the sea hastening to drown her. But, despite the bumping of her heart against her ribs, despite the panic that filled her brain till it nearly burst, she persisted in the careful gentleness, the abominable slowness, of all her efforts. She knew very well that one feverish movement, just a single one, would entrap her beyond hope.

It must have been atrocious, that struggle of hers, to have drained this tall, robust girl of all her strength, and turned her into the dirty doll, stuffed

with her own saturation, so to speak, whom André proceeded to prop up on a chair in the kitchen in front of the glowing stove.

“I think I must have passed out. . . .”

Andréa, in fact, had fainted, without André’s noticing it, while he was getting her across the room.

The landlady was already heating coffee. She put sugar into a cup, filled it only half full of coffee, and filled it up with brandy. Then, as Andréa had started shivering again, not so much from cold as from the intoxication of her fatigue, she made her drink out of the spoon, like a child.

“Where did it happen?” the landlady asked.

“The other side of Tombelaine,” Andréa replied.

Her gasps for breath made her whole bosom heave.

When she had finished her cup, she murmured in a broken voice, hurrying to get her words out:

“Give me a little more brandy!”

The landlady poured her out nearly a cupful. She gulped it down, with the edge of the cup knocking against her teeth. Her soaked clothes were steaming, and her skirt dripped on to the red tiles.

“Would you like me to lend you a dress?” asked the landlady.

Andréa shook her head. Then she brooded until she remembered something.

“I lost my bag.”

She meant her cockle-bag. She looked up and caught André half smiling. He was both amused and touched that, at such a time, she could think about her cockle-gathering.

“It’s nothing to laugh about,” she muttered.

“Well,” replied André, in a friendly way, “if you can get annoyed you must be feeling better.”

Then he waited, watching her, just as he used to watch half-dead birds which he picked up when he was fishing in the winter.

Andréa looked almost unconscious. Her eyes were closed. Her lips were white. Every now and then, shivers ran through her which shook even the

chair on which she was sitting. For a moment or two, André studied the throbbing at her temples.

“You’ll never get home all by yourself,” he declared. “Where’s your aunt?”

“She’s ill.”

Doubtless that explained how Andréa had strayed into a quicksand. Mother Hirson could scent out quicksands better than she could.

By now a little blood was coming back to Andréa’s cheeks. With a limp, exhausted hand she started dusting the sand off her knees. Then, as she moved her bare feet, she recalled still another loss.

“I lost my shoes, too,” she said, shaking her head, as though overwhelmed by so complete a disaster.

“I’ll lend you a pair of slippers,” promised the landlady. “But you’re not fit to go yet.”

“Still, I must. . . .”

Andréa made an effort to get up. It was not encouraging.

“I’m not very steady on my pins,” she murmured.

The entrance-bell rang again, and a man’s voice shouted:

“Is Andréa in there?”

Madame Docheais went to the kitchen door to answer him.

“She is,” she said, not very graciously.

Baucher made his appearance behind her. He bestowed a black look on André, standing beside Andréa’s chair, and demanded, roughly:

“Well, what’s all this about? What’s happened to you?”

He kept his cap on. That was the custom. But he also kept a cigarette-stub stuck to his lip. That wasn’t done if you wanted to be polite.

Andréa answered him simply with a shrug of her shoulders.

“Looks as though you’d gone through,” said Baucher. “But you can’t have gone down very deep. You’d never have got out all by yourself. . . . Well, are you ready to come along? No bones broken, eh?”

Andréa managed to stand up. She hung on to Baucher’s arm.

“What the hell!” said he. “Can’t you stand up by yourself yet?”

The landlady answered for Andréa.

“If you’d been two hours in the water, in weather like this, we’d soon see what you’d have to say about it.”

But Baucher was already dragging Andréa towards the kitchen door. She walked like an old woman, dragging her feet flat along the ground.

“She won’t get far, in that state,” Madame Docheais pointed out.

Baucher contented himself with replying:

“What does she owe you for her drink?”

“Oh, that’s all right. . . .”

“I’m not taking any presents,” Baucher persisted, rummaging in his pocket.

“It’s paid for,” said André, smoothly, behind him.

Baucher suddenly let go of Andréa’s arm. He strode over to André.

“I’m not inquisitive,” he said, very softly, “but I’d like to know what business this is of yours.”

André gripped the back of the chair. Anger flamed in his eyes.

“I’ll tell you,” he promised, “any other time you like. But, just now, look after her.”

He pointed to Andréa, who was leaning against the wall. She stared at him with eyes which surprise suddenly brought to life again. Then she murmured:

“Leave him alone, and come on. . . . Come on, I say!”

But Baucher was enraged by André’s defiance and Andréa’s order.

“I know what I’m doing,” he growled. “I also know that this makes twice I’ve found you . . . That makes at least once too often.”

“If you want a third meeting,” replied André, “any time is all right with me.”

Baucher ground his teeth and took a step towards him. But Andréa clung to his coat.

“Oh, that’s enough, isn’t it? Stop it, I tell you! . . .”

The entrance-bell rang again. The broad shoulders of Clément Docheais filled the doorway.

“What’s all this about?” he demanded, in turn, in his quiet voice.

Hastily, his daughter-in-law told him. Docheais turned to Baucher.

“Well, why don’t you take her home?” he asked. “The baker’s van is just starting. . . .”

The idea of the baker’s van, of transport on the spot, made Baucher hurry.

“Coming?” he growled to Andréa.

As she passed André, all she said was:

“This has made you late for lunch.”

Once Baucher and Andréa were outside, Clément Docheais shook his head.

“A hell of a thug!” he said.

“They’re not married, are they?” asked André.

“Not likely!”

“He beats her,” put in Docheais’s daughter-in-law.

“No,” corrected Docheais. “They beat each other.”

Then he changed his tone.

“Well, I’ve seen old Biard. The river has gone down a little. Next Friday, if that suits you . . .”

André was rummaging in a cupboard. He would just have a snack of anything, he said, as he was going fishing for salmon.

“That will be the third time in the last fortnight,” remarked Laura.

“So you count the times, do you?”

Laura looked out of the window at the white sky.

“You get some amusement, anyway,” she said.

André shut the cupboard-door and turned round.

“You’re not going to start that again, are you? . . . When I stay in, you never open your mouth. I’ve asked you a score of times to come out with me; but you never will.”

Laura came over to the middle of the room.

“We might go out this afternoon, if you like,” she replied.

André shrugged his shoulders. Laura’s silly attempt to annoy him was exasperating.

“Just because I’ve told you I’d arranged something else?”

“Yes, precisely. . . .”

Laura challenged him, looking him straight in the eyes.

“I just want to know,” she said, “whether you are capable of giving up one of your amusements for me.”

“Any time you like,” André returned, “if you have a shadow of ground for asking me. You know that very well. But you’ve no ground at the moment except wanting to annoy me.”

“I’ve got another ground,” Laura denied.

“What is it?”

“I want to know how you’re going to answer me.”

André turned on her abruptly.

“Well, my answer is ‘No.’ There you are!”

Laura bowed her head.

“Very well. Now I know where I stand. . . . Were you looking for your gum-boots? They’re under the sideboard. . . .”

As it was daylight, and in daylight the salmon return towards the sea, the rendezvous was at the lower net. The four men got there on the heels of the ebb. They found the meshes of the net full of sea-weed, which they proceeded to shake off by the potful.

For the past three months, the law had allowed the rivers to be netted only over an area of one hundred and sixty yards. The fishermen of the Mount complained about this. They also went on lamenting about the foul winter, with its ceaseless rain.

Nevertheless, they did their best to fish. Anybody looking out from the North Tower could see the sands divided up by long rows of stakes. They were planted a yard apart, and a long strip of snares, consisting of forty to sixty nets, was attached to them along a rope.

These nets formed a barrier which was free at the bottom. The flood lifted them, and they floated on the surface until high water. So there was nothing to stop the salmon ascending the three rivers as they liked.

The big migratory fish swung with the sea for some time. They seemed suspicious of these roving rivers. They hesitated about choosing the polluted waters of the Sélune; the Couesnon, with its canalised banks; or the slime of the Sée, which the ebb left almost dry. Deceived by the deltas of these spreading streams, they entered them, but soon found them barred. So they did not commit themselves definitely to the rivers. They ascended them with the flood at night as far as the factory weirs, which they reconnoitred; but they descended again with the ebb by daylight, as soon as they felt the rivers emptying.

Once the tide turned and the current ran the other way, the nets started fishing all by themselves. The rope flush with the surface sank, and the ebb stuck the mesh to the stakes. Thus the stream was blocked. The big fishes’ snouts came up against the nets. They were still at liberty to return upstream, whence they had come; but they persisted, patient in their anxiety, in trying to force a passage to the sea.

Now and again one could catch a vague glimpse of their dark grey backs, their stout spindle-shaped bodies, in the sandy fringes of eddies. They

reconnoitred the obstacle, darting back and forth amid the swirl of water, and then suddenly leaping, curved like commas.

It was at this moment, when the salmon was seeking for a breach, that the fishermen, up to their waists in the water, tried to frighten it by beating the surface, drive it right up against the fixed net, and then hem it in with their hand-nets.

Such fishing was a matter both of lying in wait and beating-up. It was hard work, since it involved both standing in icy water and constantly cleaning the nets, which picked up all the flotsam of the rivers.

Besides, fish were few and far between. Around the bay people still quoted a clause in oldtime hire contracts, in which servants specified that they should not be asked to eat salmon more than once a week. Nowadays, when they bagged one ten-pounder after waiting three hours, a team of four fishermen did not feel entitled to complain.

André, Docheais, and the two Biards, father and son, had been fishing for the past two hours. They operated at a distance from one another. Every man had to watch his own stretch of net, shake its mesh from time to time, and remove bits of sea-weed, which dripped up his arms and chilled him to the bone. They were fishing between the Mount and Tombelaine, but nearer to Tombelaine, in a broad “backwater” with a swift current which thrust against their legs.

Before coming to the Mount, André had never fished for salmon except on a river in Devon: a form of fishing in which there was no fighting until the fish was hooked. But here fishing meant a hand-to-hand struggle with a free fish, something like fast and furious fencing, with all its attacks, retreats and feints. The net merely bounded the area in which the game was played; and it was played actually in the water, with all the handicaps, in the way of slowness and awkwardness of movement, which water imposes. On his side the fisherman had nothing but the fish's persistency in trying to force the barrier, and its frightened condition.

Despite this advantage, during the first few minutes of his watch, André had missed a big winter salmon. He aimed his hand-net badly, and merely grazed the fish with its frame. The salmon made a splashing turn, and sped upstream like an arrow, high in the water.

Ever since then, André and his companions had been awaiting its return. They felt fairly sure that, once it had recovered from its fright, it would come back, with the patience of its species, and bump up against the barrier once more.

It was a greyish afternoon at the end of February. The weather was mild, almost warm. It was one of those moist, prematurely springlike days which force plants to put forth their first shoots, only to have them nipped by the March frosts, and make people wearing too many clothes gasp for air.

Behind them the Mount stood out simply as a featureless, violet-hued shape, a slim steeple on a humped hill. There was no sheen on anything except the slime; for the muddy water, the flood water which was fleeing furtively in all directions, caught no more light than an earthy track.

André was just shaking the nets, which retorted by giving him an unpleasant shower-bath in his face and down his neck, when he fancied he saw an unusual eddy twenty feet away to his right. It looked like the quivering of water above a diver coming up again. Then a tail slapped the surface loudly. The big fish, stopped again, was registering its disappointment and its impatience.

With his heart beating fast, André made his way towards the spot with cautious haste. He must reach the fish without disturbing the water too much, without being heard, and attack it from behind. Now that he was walking against the current, the flow of the "backwater" dazzled him and made him slightly giddy. Still, he never took his eyes off the spot where the salmon had just leapt.

Advancing gingerly, with his hand-net ready, he was just on the point of summoning reinforcements when he himself heard a long drawn-out hail:

"Hullo-o-o-o-o!"

At the other end of the line of nets, the elder Biard was moving rapidly too, waving his arm vigorously. At first André thought he had sighted another salmon. Then he saw that the old fisherman was hastening away from the line of stakes. The other two had abandoned their fishing with equal speed. Docheais was already out of the stream, on dry sand.

"Hurry up!" he shouted. "There's a mist coming!"

André looked around him. He was surprised to see that everything was the same as before. Behind them the ridge of Tombelaine, like a whale washed up, stood out as clearly as ever. The Mount itself, after an instant of eclipse, reappeared through the reek of trailing clouds. The only difference was that it looked more distant and conveyed a startling sense of movement, as though it were running through the rounded clouds, just as the moon seems to ride in a stormy sky.

Still, despite the reassuring aspect of things, André hastened his steps. The depth of the broad stream diminished, and, since he need not worry any longer about making no noise as he walked, he lifted his feet right out of the water and took longer and faster strides.

“Well, what’s the matter?” he asked, when he caught up with the other three men.

The two Biards made no reply. They started running at top speed westwards, towards the bend of the Couesnon. Old Biard led the way, a few paces in advance.

“But where do you see this mist you’re talking about?” persisted André, as he ran behind them.

Docheais, who had waited for him, replied rapidly:

“The boss scents it, and he’s never wrong. . . .”

They ran for a hundred yards. Then they came to a wide “backwater,” whose water was soon half-way up their legs. Beyond it they had to reach the bank of the Couesnon, which they could see spreading out in a wan fan barely a thousand yards away. Once they got there, they would be out of danger; for they had only to follow the river and it would lead them back to the Mount.

All at once, at a speed astonishing in that still air, André saw advancing from the north-east—the sea side—something like a fleecy wall. It seemed to spring out of the water itself. Wreaths of grey vapour rolled over it, expanded, and curled towards them with supernatural rapidity.

What was rolling across the sands was a great bank of mist come from the sea. The main danger of the sands could assume no more unpredictable or sudden form. For mist is as varied as the sea itself, and the bay of Mont Saint-Michel is a sphere of its spells, a scene of its most menacing metamorphoses.

Sometimes it is the sands and the grazing land which steam like sweating beasts. Then, for some time, the mist hovers very low over the brackish creeks, the “backwaters” and the sandbanks. Its waves proceed to wash the embankments, roll over the flats and soak the level fields. Its pallid flood, at first of no great density, comes half-way up a man’s legs. It blots out the huddled sheep and the black Brie sheep-dogs, whom it drives mad. But it leaves the shepherd, in his shabby old beret and his cloak, still visible, standing as motionless as ever.

Then, little by little, the mist thickens. Lazily it submerges the farms, the church-towers, the tops of the slim poplars, the houses cascading down the Mount, until it reaches the Abbey itself. Its springy waves hoist themselves over the Merveille. Finally it drowns the Archangel Michael, who has long stood out above its clouds.

Sometimes, again, it is the three rivers, the network of their deltas, which exhale mist. Then a stream of vapour rolls in spirals over the real river, overflows it, and spreads fast across the sands like a flood tide. The wind refuses to drop all at once. It keeps the mist stirring and twisting. It tucks up stretches of it, and they suddenly dissolve. But little by little the wind, overcome in its turn, puts up less of a fight. The gaps which it makes in the mist are soon filled, just as water is barely parted by the tiring arms of a drowning man.

In winter, most often, mist takes the shape of a kind of sickness of the atmosphere. All at once the air turns opaque, just as a clear liquid in a test-tube does when you drop something into it that makes it turbid. Instead of a transparent window, suddenly you have ground glass before your eyes.

For the fishermen of the Mount, mist is the great danger which the sea presents. It is almost the only danger; for quicksands can be detected and crossed or avoided, and the tide is subject to the clock and can be foreseen.

This time the mist rose up everywhere at once like a tide-race, so fast that the sands seemed to spring up to meet it. It swallowed up the whole bay.

André glanced over his shoulder to his right. Tombelaine had already vanished.

All at once, he found himself alone in an icy bath, with an acrid smell like soot in his nostrils. He shouted. Docheais's figure showed up like a smudge two steps away from him. His friend's voice reached André muffled and, so to speak, disembodied.

“Not a good time to lose touch with one another. . . .”

All four of them spoke to be sure they were still together. By now they could not make out their own feet. All of them had gone blind at the same moment. They stayed there, stock still in the position in which they had seen for the last time. In their minds, they sited points in relationship to this defined position and to different parts of their bodies.

André knew that Tombelaine was just in line with his right shoulder. The Mount stood on a line extending from his left boot. He moved his foot inside it to feel the direction; for by this time even his knees had disappeared.

The other three similarly clung to their landmarks: a useless treasure from which they must soon part. But they could not make up their minds to do so yet.

André listened to the mist; for it had a sound of its own, a confused murmur which came from its deadness, its damp silence. He could hear the same sound as you hear when you close your ears tight with your fingers.

The mist froze his mouth. He swallowed it deep down into his lungs. The cold with which it filled them seemed to mould them inside his chest. He could feel the volume of them with every breath he drew, thanks to the acrid iciness in which they were soaked. The feeling ended by alarming him.

“It won’t lift till the tide goes down,” Docheais muttered.

For the sea which brought these fogs often took them away again. This one must have come from England. There André had seen a similar fog bring cars to a standstill in the streets, as suddenly as if they had run into a wall all at once. It was black, and felt laden with coal-dust.

Biard, the leader, still could not make up his mind to move. For, with the first step they took, worse trouble awaited them. They would lose the sense of direction which they retained so long as they stood still.

They would set off all right. They would walk in the right direction, in which they were going when the mist fell upon them: towards the Couesnon. It lay five hundred yards ahead of them, and barred their route so completely that it seemed impossible to miss it. Yes, they would set off all right.

But from the second step they would start going astray. They would veer sideways, slackly, as though they were drunk, and with no hope of striking their line again. They knew beforehand that they were bound to blunder. They put off that anxious groping as long as possible.

André heard the remote voice of old Biard.

“What’s the time?” he asked.

André glanced at his wrist-watch, and shouted back:

“A quarter past one.”

“The tide turns at twenty past two,” recalled Docheais, right beside him. “That gives us over an hour.”

As though this respite had suddenly made up his mind for him, old Biard ordered:

“Come on! It’s no good staying here.”

The shadows ahead of André abruptly vanished. He hurried after them until he found Docheais’s dark figure beside him. The lapping of the water against their boots was a comfort to him, since it broke the overwhelming silence. Docheais slowed down long enough to say to him:

“If only we could keep a line! But we can’t see one another two yards away.”

For sometimes, when as many men as themselves were surprised by a mist less dense, they turned themselves into landmarks by stringing out as far as they could see one another, taking off from one of them who stayed facing the right way at the point where the mist had overtaken them. In this way, by walking past one another, they managed to keep more or less the right direction. But, this time, there was no question of doing that.

André walked in this vague shadowland as though he were walking in the dark, afraid of running into a wall or stumbling into a hole. He groped for his footing, ready to be brought up sharp. He felt like putting his hands out in front of him, as though he were playing blind man’s buff. He never took his eyes off the moving blur of Docheais, a little ahead of him to his right.

He must not lose sight of it. He must not be left alone to find his own way. For that a second or two of inattention, a step or two aside, would suffice. . . .

All at once, André caught a glimpse of a shadow fleeting fast on his left. Somebody else was wandering about in the mist, and running hard, too. It struck André as odd that anybody should be running through the “backwater” in silence. Still, he shouted:

“Hullo!”

Then he explained:

“I saw somebody running over there. . . .”

He had caught up with old Biard close enough to touch him. He saw Biard shake his head, without slowing down.

It was mirages that were starting now: those fugitive, fearsome forms which fishermen lost in a mist never failed to see on the sands.

Sometimes a form assumed such a definite shape that a fisherman identified it as a dead man. When he was back in safety, he persisted in

saying so. He had recognised the face and the clothes of the dead man: a dead man always hurrying, always heedless, who did not stop and, for his part, never recognised any of his old friends. Nobody on the Mount ever made fun of such stories, and they ended with Masses for the repose of the dead man's soul.

“Once,” muttered Auguste Biard, “I met Jean de Tombelaine, near the Cross on the sands. . . .”

In these words he evoked two ghosts at once. He evoked a cross which had been buried ever since the Fourteenth Century, but still served to designate a stretch of the sands between Tombelaine and the Grouin southwards.

He also evoked the half-wit whom, as a boy, he had known on the Mount. Jean was a simpleton of stupendous strength. He could swim up the Couesnon against the race of the ebb, and turn the Great Wheel in the Abbey, which six men found it hard to move, all by himself. A novelist made him a character in one of his books.

Fifteen years after Jean's death, Auguste Biard met him on the sands one evening in a mist. He recognised his plaited hair, his grey beard, his huge feet which could cover twenty leagues a day.

For a moment or two, André thought about Jean with a kind of envy. That strong swimmer could jump into the water at Tombelaine and reach the Mount without setting foot aground. Jean never worried about the time of the tide. He let himself be overtaken by it, and swam with it or against it, whichever he liked. But at length, one evening, he got dead drunk and sank like a stone. Since then several men, apart from Auguste, had seen him pass in the mist.

All at once, André bumped into old Biard's back. He had stopped dead, without warning.

“I've been counting my steps,” said Biard. “We should have got there long ago.”

As he had walked in the water towards the river-bed and the rise in the sands which marked its bank, he had counted one thousand paces. That was at least three hundred too many. Clearly they had not been going the right way.

“Now,” he wound up, “we're completely lost.”

He meant exactly what he said. They had gone astray. They were lost. They could not now tell which way the sea lay, or Tombelaine, or the Mount, or Brittany, or Normandy.

Docheais stretched out an arm into the dimness. The mist amputated it almost at the wrist.

“If you ask me,” he said, “the Mount’s that way.”

But Auguste Biard, keeping his hands stuck in his pockets, jerked his head towards another point of the compass.

“I should say it was over there. . . .”

It was so absurd that nobody said anything more. Then André suggested:

“Suppose we shout?”

Nobody took the trouble to answer him. The others left him free to try this childish expedient if he liked. André put his hands to his mouth and shouted:

“Hullo-o-o-o! . . .”

He did not try again. It was as though he were shouting through a gag. The sound seemed to come up at once against soft layers of cottonwool, a kind of quilting which stifled it. André’s voice itself frightened him. It sounded so queer, like a madman’s shriek heard outside an asylum on a stormy night.

André saw old Biard squat down, plunge his hands into the water, and stroke the sand and feel it. He was on the point of asking:

“Have you lost something?”

Then he remembered that fishermen in trouble found their direction like this from the little hillocks made by the ebb which slightly ridged the soft sands of the bay. The less steep side of these rises always faced the sea. Thus their relief indicated the run of the tide and which way the coast lay.

This would have enabled the party to find their way, but for the fact that the meanderings of the rivers and streams had ridged the sands irregularly and confused all the tide-tracks.

Still, the hillocks gave some indication. Old Biard set off again. He had not gone far when he asked:

“What’s the time?”

“Twenty to two.”

There were forty minutes left before the tide turned.

The dimness in which they walked was not even. The mist was a moving one. Sometimes darker patches bellied out against them. Sometimes they could see the mist wreathing. Sometimes, indeed, it looked as though it were on the point of dissolving and clearing away. Though the wind had dropped, it still made slow swirls and eddies in the mist's density. It dug something like holes in it; but they were promptly filled by fresh vapour. All the time, there was that acrid taste of the mist which rasped the party's throats and chilled the inside of their lungs. Their clothes were wringing wet.

Suddenly, as their ghostly march went on, André felt a terror of his childhood spring up in him: a terror absurd, but agonising.

He had always dreaded being buried alive. Many a time he had awakened with a shocking scream, after a dreadful feeling that he was beating against the planks of his coffin. Then he lay for an endless time wild-eyed, breathless, with his temples throbbing, before he realised that he was in his own bedroom, still alive. He had insisted on making his mother swear that, if he died before her, she would have poison injected into his body or have his heart removed.

This obsession was not wholly effaced when he came to manhood. Now here he was feeling the same oppression, the same panic.

To offset this sense of imprisonment by giving his muscles free play, he hastened his steps. His faster walk brought him alongside Docheais. All at once, Docheais stopped dead.

“Halt!” he cried. He listened.

“The bells . . . !”

They felt sure at once that the ringing they could hear was not an illusion. They could identify, to their right, the hasty clang of the bells of the parish church. The people on the Mount knew they were in trouble, and were ringing the bells to guide them.

At Saint-Léonard, one of the younger Jugans, the Biards' sometime enemies, was doubtless calling to them on his bugle. He had now taken the place of old Jugan, who had become too short of breath to use his conch, the famous “cone” through which he had bellowed for thirty years whenever there was a mist.

The sound of the bells came to their ears through a breach in the mist. As he listened to their hurried, worried ringing, with a keen sense of remorse

André suddenly thought about Laura. The bells bore him her anxiety.

By this time, his companions' wives were fretting; but they were fretting in the bosoms of their families. They were further strengthened by the fellowship in anxiety that peril on the sands always aroused in the fishing village to which the Mount reverted during the winter.

But Laura must be nearly out of her mind. She was all alone, without one friend; for, even in her trouble, she would not mix with the others.

With a second sight which now overwhelmed André, she had asked him to give up this fishing expedition, for her sake. He had roughly refused. Ah, if he got back safe . . .!

A sudden cessation of the sound of bells snatched him back from his repentance and the reparation which he resolutely vowed to make.

"They're still ringing," said old Biard, "but the gap in the mist is closed. The sound can't get through any more."

Then he decided:

"It came from that way."

As they set off again, Docheais growled:

"Just imagine that the fog-bell has been rusting on the floor of the sacristy for the last twenty years!"

Long ago, in fact, the helpful monks had hoisted a huge bell up the campanile of the Abbey church. It started ringing as soon as a sign of mist wreathed over the sands. The Revolution requisitioned all the other bronze in the Abbey; but it left the fog-bell. When the campanile was pulled down for reconstruction, however, the bell was lowered, and it had since remained on the ground, forgotten amid dust and debris. Nobody remembered it except at a time of danger. It was like an abandoned old saint who had lost his power.

The bells had made them swerve to the right. The surface rose slightly, and they found themselves on dry sand. The Biards were familiar with all the sandbanks. If this were one, as soon as they had taken its measure they would be able to put a name to it, and then they would at least know whether they were gaining ground or losing it, walking towards the Mount or hastening to meet the tide. . . .

But almost immediately water started lapping against their boots again. They were once more in the "bay," the plain of water. All they had crossed

was an insignificant rise in the sand which could tell them nothing.

“What’s the time?” old Biard asked again.

“Three minutes past two. . . .”

By now it was his watch which hypnotised André. He kept glancing up to keep in touch with the three moving shadows, and glancing down at its hands. . . . Four minutes past two. . . . Five minutes past. In a quarter of an hour, the tide would turn. If they did not find themselves quite close to the Mount then . . . !

The last men who had been caught in a mist, the year before, had happened to bump into Tombelaine, which was not at the time cut off by water. They had climbed on to the island, and spent a bitter January night there. But at dawn the weather had cleared, and at low tide they had made their way back to the Mount, where consternation reigned and their wives were by now mourning them as lost. People had shouted for them from the North Tower for three hours.

André also remembered the cockle-gatherers, who had been caught too. They had clung to one another on a sandbank higher than the surrounding sands. Rather than risk, as André and his companions were now doing, a deadly race against the tide, they chose to chance their luck where they were. They let themselves be cut off by the tide, and then gradually be submerged. By their united efforts, they resisted being swept away. The water did not rise higher than their waists. After endless hours, it had gone down again, leaving them frozen on the sands.

But that day it had been a neap-tide. Today it was a flood-tide. . . .

All at once, old Biard stopped again, as though he had come up against an obstacle. So he had; for in front of him, slim and jet-black, stood a stake. There was a glimpse of another farther away. Biard recognised the stakes; for it was he himself who had cut them, stripped them, sharpened them.

“These are our own stakes,” he said.

It was an admission of final defeat.

They had been walking for an hour and a quarter; and they had come back to their starting-point.

Nevertheless, old Biard set off again; but now he walked more slowly. From stake to stake, they made their way to the end of the row, until they came to the last stake which held their nets: the one planted nearest the

Mount, barely a mile and a half away from the rocks—twenty minutes' fast walking.

Here André was astonished to see Biard throw his basket on the sand, turn it upside down, and sit on it.

The other men made no comment. But André took Biard's action to be a sinister sign of depression, an abandonment of the struggle, a melancholy acceptance of fate.

"Surely we're not going to stay here?" he asked, anxiously.

Old Biard raised his head, stared at him hard, and asked:

"Where do you suggest going?"

Nobody made any reply. Nothing was to be heard but the silence. It damped conversation.

"What's the time?" old Biard asked, once again.

"Twenty-two minutes past two."

The tide had already turned. Exasperated at this surrender, André cried:

"Why, in ten minutes the tide will be upon us!"

"Let it!" growled the old man.

Then, by way of a concession, he added:

"If we make a move, we've just as much chance of going seaward as landward. It's too late now to make any mistake."

"It will take us all our time to beat it," muttered Docheais.

"There's nothing else to do now," said the old man.

André had not yet grasped the desperate expedient they had in view. Their immobility made him feel suffocated. He started prowling round the stake and the seated man like a tethered beast. He bumped into Docheais. Docheais promptly explained:

"We're going to wait for the tide, and then run in front of it. We know it's heading straight for the shore. . . . The whole question is whether it will let us cross the 'backwater.' . . ."

On flat sand, this risky adventure would mean merely a fast walk. But the sands were intersected by deep lagoons. The tide poured into them, quickly cutting off islands which it proceeded to submerge at leisure. Elsewhere it rushed violently up the streams in the sands and the arms of the

rivers, turning them in a few minutes into deep, rapid torrents, whereas at low water they did not come up to one's ankles.

Between André and his companions and the Mount lay one of these "backwaters."

What they proposed to do was let the tide drive them before it. Its crest of foam would show them the way. But it would turn their left flank and cut off their retreat.

Since they were blind, they must wait for it. Meanwhile it would be hastening into the bed of the "backwater."

When they reached the "backwater," would the depth still allow them to cross it? That was the gamble.

The mist had stopped moving. It was no longer, as it had been hitherto, riddled with eddies, visited by fleeting forms. It had become as stable, as solid as putty. It was like the brown canvas round a circus arena.

All at once, the loud noise of the rising tide filled the drowned air. That sound of water, that growl of a distant cataract, was capable, when it made itself heard in summer, of imposing silence upon twenty thousand babblers as they listened to it. Now it hastened from every point of the compass. It surrounded André and his companions.

It was another of the mist's mirages, this ubiquity of the growl of the sea. But for the line of stakes, which they knew was at right angles to the tide, they could have had no idea whence it was coming.

Old Biard stood up and slipped the straps of his basket on again. All four of them stood around the last stake, poised for flight, and watched.

All at once, an edging of foam made its appearance, slid along their boots, and moved on ahead of them. It was the tide. It broke in little bubbles, and nothing could have looked calmer or more peaceful.

But it pushed on steadily, without stopping, without any of those alternations, those flows and ebbs, which enable children to play with an incoming tide on a beach. You could tell that this was merely the outer rim of a force formidable and fast.

With one accord, the four men hurried on the heels of the fleeting water.

"She's travelling, the bitch!" panted old Biard.

Now he was labouring in the rear; for he was too fat and easily winded.

They did their best to get ahead of the tide, to have dry sand underfoot again, to keep the water just behind them instead of floundering in it. But the flood-tide was a strong one, the volume of water had been gathering for six miles or more, and it was now putting on a spurt in its last lap to cover the ground where they had been fishing.

They started running, heavily. By now the tide was beating against their calves. Through the sheathing of rubber, André could feel the cold pressure of the water which was guiding them in a straight line towards the Mount, like the pressure of a boot on a horse's flank.

Behind him he heard old Biard gasping. His son had taken him by the arm and was helping him along. André stopped for a second, just long enough to grasp the old man's other arm, and they set off again.

The water went down. They had not gained on the tide, but the surface underfoot was rising. Soon they were running on dry sand.

"The Aioli sandbank!" panted old Biard. His feet had found their whereabouts again.

They crossed the sandbank at top speed. The steepening of its slope guided them, and their take-off stopped them going astray.

"Steady!" cried Docheais. "Mind the drop!"

He meant the sheer slope of the sandbank down to the bed of the "backwater." They slowed down, and then stopped, leaning over.

Now they could hear, though they could not see, the torrent flowing at their feet. It was boiling. It was racing towards the Sélune, and they knew that, second by second, it was swelling and running more and more rapidly in its rage.

Bending over that unseen flow, they hesitated. Then old Biard stepped back, without saying a word. . . .

André took it that he was giving up. He judged it impossible to get across.

There was nothing more to be done but wait on the summit of the sandbank for slow drowning, death on their feet, the quiet rise of the tide till it reached their mouths.

Horror of such an end flung André forward. He surrendered to a mad desire to go on fighting. Throwing his net away, he jumped into the water.

Before he reached it, he heard Docheais shouting something at him, desperately. Then he found himself gasping for air, in the grip of a cold which got at him everywhere: through his boots, below the belt of his trousers. It struck him in the chest like the blow of a flailing tiller.

He had slid down the bank on his back. He found no bottom. Then he was horrified to feel his heavy boots sinking beneath him. He expected to go under, but he was surprised to find himself floating. His empty, broad wicker-basket was keeping him afloat.

But some smooth strength was carrying him away. He slipped along in the yellow water, running as fast as a torrent.

Then the quick instinct of a swimmer pulled him together. He started battling against the current with a desperate "crawl."

His knee bumped against a jut of sand. It crumpled away under the shock. With his elbows, his nails, his chest, his thighs, he sought to cling to the bank, to dig himself into it. But all he did was break away big blocks of sand. They snapped off and slid and shattered as soon as he got the least hold on them. He could touch the bank which meant his salvation with his whole body; but his salvation kept on collapsing. . . .

A sudden rise in the tide saved him. He felt himself lifted up from behind. He flung out his arms and got a grip on the bank. His fingers bit into it.

Then he heard somebody calling him. But he was not going to waste his breath answering; for the tide had him by the belly. It was tugging at him, sucking him back. For a moment or two, he stayed still, with his fingers dug in right up to the palms.

His grip held firm. He had struck one of those marly veins which intersect the sands and do not give way.

Then, slowly, with an effort which set his whole body quivering, he got a purchase with his elbows. Their leverage brought first his face, and then his chest, out on to the sand.

It was only when he was on his feet that he gave an answering hail.

He found Docheais's face right up against his own, white as a ghost, staring at him.

Docheais exclaimed:

"When I saw you jump in . . .!"

He went on to explain:

“We couldn’t try to get across there. We could hear the ‘burn.’”

Such is the name of one of those dangerous eddies which the tide makes at certain points where it meets a river.

The other three men had crossed the “backwater” higher up, at a spot where the torrent spread out and so lost some of its speed. Even so, the current had come up to their armpits, fighting against them. But, by keeping head-on to it, presenting their chests to it, bending over and breaking the force of it with their hand-nets, they had managed to get across.

For that matter, they seemed already to have forgotten all about this fleeting feat of theirs, so anxious had they been about André.

When the four of them climbed up on the embankment a quarter of an hour later, they found a group of women awaiting them.

At the first sight of them, the women did not make a sound. They were afraid to be too hasty about identifying these forms looming up out of the mist.

It was a boy who was the first to assert:

“Here they are!”

Then there was a rush which separated the four men. Suddenly delivered from their anxiety, the women started talking, asking questions, boasting about the terrible time they had had. Men, too, came up to André and his companions and questioned them about their narrow escape. The whole population of the Mount seemed to have gathered on the embankment. André saw faces unknown to him smiling at him.

He looked round for Laura. He recognised Hulard’s burly form before he caught sight of her, with a white woollen scarf tied round her head.

He went over to her. He stared at her.

All he had brought back with him from the brink of death: his love for her, his contrition, his delight, his eager desire to see her again, to have her always—all this was shattered by his first look at her face.

She had thought him lost. She found him alive. Her trial had merely managed to cast her face in a mask of irritation, of spite.

She dragged him away.

“Well,” she said, “are you satisfied now? . . . You’re never going back there again—never, d’you hear me? . . .”

“You’ll see,” André had told Laura.

On the strength of guide-books and local gossip, he had built up the spring tide as a great attraction. The Mount turned back into an island, with the sea beating against its walls. You had the fun of being hemmed in, and getting in and out by boat. Tourists flocked to see the sight.

Now Laura was looking at it with the cross face of somebody who has been taken in by brazen publicity, and lured into a show shamelessly exaggerated.

Beneath the dismal light of a March day, the tide flowed in stealthily, slowly: an expanse of muddy water like a stretch of sodden clay, which it was difficult to distinguish from the sand that was still dry. In this slimy waste, the big streams were now no more than white strands, marked by trails of filthy foam.

To be sure, the sea was there, touching the walls, already licking the embankment. But, in the course of its overflow, it seemed to have lost all its strength, all its impulse. The low sky gave it no light to reflect; for it was blocked by long swarthy clouds, as flat as slabs of stone. The setting sun barely revealed its presence over Brittany by a belt of faded coral above the dark, broken line of the woods.

There had been only one spectacular moment. It was when the tide flowed up the Couesnon. But, here again, the breadth of the “bore” spoiled the effect. The river and its banks were submerged at one and the same time, and the tide-race was reduced to a mere swirl, a surge that rounded out turbidly, heavily.

André had realised the speed of the tide only by looking at a buoy floating in the middle of the river. It was anchored, it was motionless. Yet it left behind it a wide wake like that of a speed-boat, an immense upside-down “V” of backflung, foaming water. For that matter, the rush of the sea into the river had very soon slackened as it spread out. The buoy looked as though it were slowing down and then stopping.

By now, the sole element of surprise came from the fact that there was water where it was not normally to be seen. The whole grazing land was

covered, and the tide was slowly nibbling at the piles of the foot-bridge and hemming in the Outer Guard Gate. It was at least a quantitative success. . . .

Laura was leaning on the parapet of the King's Tower.

"It's as dirty as a flood," she declared.

André did not contradict her. The tide really resembled a flood. It suggested all the dismal stupidity of water in its wrong place, fouling itself ashore.

Night was falling fast. A sprinkling of winter tourists, wearing drab-coloured overcoats and cloaks, fringed the top of the ramparts. They stared at the spectacle with no less disappointment than Laura, but at the same time with all the earnest attention of people who had come there specially to stare at it. Local people leavened the groups of tourists. For their part, they had plenty to say. They explained how far the sea would reach.

"All that will be covered. . . . It will reach as far as that row of trees over there. . . ."

There was no denying that the extent of the inundation imposed respect.

Laura started studying the row of automobiles on the embankment. They were mostly antiquated family cars, not overburdened by application of the principles of aerodynamics. They came from the immediate neighbourhood: Pontorson, Avranches, Dinan. They had brought shop-keepers whose trade was slack at this time of year; schoolteachers free after school hours; middle-class families who had read about the spectacle.

"Plenty of water, eh? And at that, as somebody said, we can see only the top of it."

The speaker was Hulard, who had come up behind them. He took off his Basque beret and bowed to Laura.

Laura did not seem to see him. Hulard remained unmoved.

He had long since realised how much he annoyed Laura. She cursed him for the example which he set André. That a man of his class should have settled down in a job which she loathed was a precedent to be feared.

From their very first meeting, Laura had made up her mind that Hulard was fighting her. She thought he was doing everything he could to keep André at Mont Saint-Michel.

She was wrong. Hulard was like a novice-master, who knows the price that must be paid for the calm of the cloister, and so exerts himself to test a

postulant's vocation and keeps the door open for years for his free departure.

He had misused women enough to despise them, and at the same time to exaggerate their power. He had made a bad choice of his women friends at the time of his downfall. Ever since then, he looked at all women in the light of his own memory of their hasty betrayal, their precipitate desertion of him. He preserved such an embittered picture of society as a liner captain might retain if he had been several times involved in shipwreck with hundreds of passengers, and had read ferocious cowardice, homicidal selfishness, on only too many faces.

Far from trying to make a proselyte of André, Hulard was convinced that he was not yet ripe for life in the Abbey, and that Laura would have no difficulty in getting him away from it. His friendship for André had no objective beyond making his stay pleasant. He did not imagine that André would outstay the summer.

As for Laura, Hulard had taken her measure. Only his regard for André had stopped him teaching André's wife more than one hard lesson in return for her rudeness. For Hulard had a biting tongue.

This time, as usual, he appeared to take no notice of Laura's ungraciousness. He simply left her alone. He eliminated her, just as he always did, with an ease which exasperated her.

Leaving Laura leaning on the broad parapet, he withdrew a little to the rear, where André joined him. Hulard proceeded to lament the dead calm. It was a pity the wind had dropped. He had often seen it stir up the flood-tide and give the water's embrace of the walls all the tumultuous violence of rape.

In front of them stood a bespectacled gentleman, looking through binoculars. He was flanked by two tall daughters and a short wife. He turned round.

"If they'd only cut the embankment," he declared, pontifically, "the sea would come back."

Then he went on to assert that otherwise, twenty years hence, Mont Saint-Michel would rise up, like Mont-Dol, in the midst of a cultivated plain. They ought to cut the embankment. It hid the substructure of two towers, it bumped up stupidly against the ramparts, and it ended in a squalid dead-end. It was a shame that the only entrance to the Mount should be a wretched foot-bridge, a mere gangway of rotten planks.

André and Hulard listened to him as he proceeded to curse the corporation that was reclaiming the flats. He demanded the demolition of the dyke and the elimination of the tramway-line. The utmost he would concede was a causeway for pedestrians and hand-carts. He got red in the face in his excitement.

“I say it’s a shame,” he growled.

“Don’t you think we’d better go?” his wife interrupted, gently. “Otherwise we may not be able to reach the car.”

Casually, but loud enough to be overheard, Hulard remarked:

“In ten minutes the water will be over the bridge, and there’ll be no getting out except by boat.”

“Did you hear that?” whispered the wife, in alarm.

The family hurried away.

“There you have the whole question of the embankment,” summed up Hulard, jerking his head towards them as they sped down the staircase. “They want the Mount to be an island; but at the same time they want to get in and out of it at any time. They don’t want to plod through a mile of mud to get back to their car. Look how they hurried off to their horrible contraption for fear of having to walk through an inch or so of water!

“Well, since they want insularity, but at the same time demand comfort, there’s no reason why the argument should ever end. In any case, they ought to begin by agreeing among themselves. There are the wholesale slashers. They’d cut away fifteen hundred yards of the embankment—no less! Into the bargain, they’d raze Roche-Torin, and the dykes of the Couesnon as well. Then there are others who compromise on cutting away a couple of hundred yards. And what do they offer us in its place? The purists say: ‘Nothing at all. Just a nice gap; but we might consent to pave it for you.’ Some of them offer us a little transporter-bridge. Can’t you imagine it? Luna Park on the sands! Why not a cable-railway? Why not piles of reinforced concrete? Wouldn’t that look lovely? If they simply want to inflict on us a concrete centipede, carrying a causeway forty-five feet up in the air, why can’t they leave well alone? What we’ve got is less ugly than that, anyway. The people here, of course, claim that a cut two or three hundred yards long wouldn’t make any difference to the sands at all. They cry out as though they were burned if you suggest such a thing.”

“They’re crying over their bread and butter,” remarked André.

“Quite so. Just as the people on the mainland, where the cut would come, are all in favour of cutting. They’ve got land where they could build hotels and cafés. Their idea is that tourists would sit there, eating and drinking, until the passage was free. . . . Well, some days in the summer three thousand cars come here, not to speak of coaches and trams. How many would come if they had to stop a mile away from the Mount, and the twelve thousand people they carry had to trudge that mile on foot twice over? The cutters say: ‘Quite as many people would come, if not more, just to see the fine sight of the Mount surrounded by water.’ I ask them, quite politely, if they’re trying to be funny. . . . Here, just the same as anywhere else, old man, you’ve got to make your choice. You’ve got to choose between beauty and convenience, between catering for connoisseurs and catering for the masses. The real trouble is that nobody will make up his mind one way or the other. That’s why everybody shouts: ‘Let’s get on with it!’ and meanwhile we mark time furiously on that nice asphalted embankment.”

While Hulard had been talking, night had almost fallen. The electric lamps were lit in the street behind them. All colour had faded from the water. But the wind had risen, and with it arose the murmur of the sea. Very far away, a vague light moved about it.

André and Hulard could catch a glimpse of waves swarming in the dark. The slow rise of the tide was coming to an end, and the waves swung heavily from east to west in a sounding swell. As they broke along the ramparts, they left a wavering wake of cold light, like those obscure gleams you can see in the dark flow of a river when you look down on it from a bridge.

The two men stared at the sea. They said nothing for some little time. Then Hulard murmured:

“After all, little by little it comes up to expectations.”

This evening the sea had contented itself with a mass-demonstration. From it emanated the impression of potent, pregnant calm which rises from a silent crowd. By invading the landscape as far as twilight let the eye reach, it had deepened the background.

As he leant over the parapet, above the sea which the tower parted like the prow of a ship, once more, with all the strength of a spell, André felt the impression that the whole Mount was gliding over the waters. It was sailing on a voyage which had no end.

Then he remembered Laura. He looked round the top of the tower for her.

She was not in the same place, and it was some little time before he caught sight of her. She was leaning against the parapet with her back to the sea. The light of a lamp in a sconce shone on her face, and lit up the mink-marmot coat of a fat woman to whom she was talking.

For Laura was actually talking. This was what surprised André, much more than anything else. She was talking gaily. She was even laughing as she faced her companion, of whom André could make out nothing but her broad, motionless back. For the past year he had never seen Laura chatting and laughing like this.

The woman to whom she was talking had arrived towards nightfall. She had a little white Pomeranian on a leash. She came and leant on the parapet close to Laura, breathing heavily after her climb.

Laura placed her at her first glance.

The woman's dried-up hand, lying on the parapet beside her, had too many rings on its fingers. Her face, fallen into dead folds, was too heavily powdered. Her eyes stared at Laura boldly. Obviously they had had plenty of practice in the gymnastics of "gladness." Her wig was as wavy and shiny as a mayonnaise salad. It set off the hard ageing of her features. Her eyebrows were plucked and pencilled-in. Her lips were thin. Everything about her bore definite witness to her readiness to stare harder than ever.

"A retired prostitute," Laura said to herself.

As a rule, she despised such women for their downfall. At the same time, being a middle-class woman still hemmed in by her environment, she did not fail to make fun of them for going astray and then, when they got on in years, thinking about nothing but becoming respectable again and repaying to God all they owed to the Devil.

But something told her, all at once, that this woman, on the contrary, belonged to the shameless race of those who never ask for pardon from public opinion, give back contempt for contempt, and remain strong-minded and formidable.

The woman took the dog up in her arms. Then she threw her head back to avoid the flicking tongue with which it set about licking her face.

"Now then, be good, Neigette, can't you? . . . Look, isn't that nice? . . ."

The dog struggled out of her arms and jumped down to the ground.

“Had enough of it already, have you? You don’t like the dirty water, eh? But you ought to think it fine, or everybody will take you for a fool.”

Laura laughed, approvingly. She was glad to meet an ally who dared to make open fun of conventional admiration. The old woman turned towards her.

“That’s quite true, isn’t it, Madame? But perhaps I ought not to say so. I dare say you’ve taken the trouble to come from a distance to see this. . . . Still, do you really think it’s worth while?”

“I certainly don’t,” replied Laura.

“No, of course it isn’t. . . . But look—do you see that gentleman down there: the one in the grey overcoat? He came all the way from Tours. If I were he, I’d be sorry I’d spent three hundred francs on gasoline. . . . I hope you haven’t come from so far away. . . .”

Laura hesitated for a moment. The woman’s shrewd yellow eyes never left her face. They studied her, they pulled her to pieces, more than was fitting for a chance meeting. Laura felt that her reply might commit her to something. Still, she made up her mind.

“I haven’t come here at all. I live here. . . .”

The woman started, in sincere surprise.

“Do you, really? Why, so do I! . . . How is it we’ve never met before? There aren’t so many people as all that on the Mount in the winter. We bump into one another ten times a day.”

“I’ve only been here for the last two months,” Laura explained, “and I don’t go out very much.”

“I’ve only been here for a week. But I was born here, and I’ve come back every summer for the past fifteen years. This year, I had to arrive earlier than usual to see about some repairs to my bungalow. Besides, it was idiotic of me, but I wanted to see the Mount again with the sea all round it. I’d seen it as a child, but never since. You get an idea into your head when you’re away, you know—and then this is what you find! Still, I shan’t say I was disappointed when I get back to the mainland. . . . Do you keep a shop here?”

Laura hesitated again. But the penetrating way in which the woman kept on staring at her told her that she could not help taking her into her confidence. The woman’s curiosity was aroused, and she would find out for

herself. Would it not be better for Laura to reap the advantage of being frank?

She could feel that the old prostitute had taken a kind of liking to her, guarded but glad if it could declare itself. Besides, it struck Laura vaguely that this woman who could come here when she liked, and go away again when she liked, was the possessor of a source of strength, of independence. She could get the better of the circumstances which kept Laura chained.

Very quickly, with a blush, and inwardly cursing herself furiously for blushing, Laura replied:

“My husband is one of the guardians at the Abbey.”

The tone of her confession; the shame which she failed to keep out of it; the resentment which marked it—all this, she realised at once, had given her away, with all her secrets. The woman was not one to miss a hint.

She started with surprise again. She spoke in quite a different tone of voice. It was no longer the tone of somebody feeling her way. In it rang a cordiality which had suddenly become familiar.

“Why,” she exclaimed, “I know your husband! I’ve heard so much about him from Old Plantier, the Head Guardian. He never gets tired of singing his praises. . . . Well, if the guardians are going to start having such pretty wives, it will be a nice change for us. . . . You can’t have had a very amusing time here, have you? I remember the winters I spent here when I was a child. They still give me shivers down my back. But perhaps things have changed?”

Laura shook her head.

“Not in the least,” she replied.

At this point, the little dog stood up on her back legs and started drumming on Laura’s skirt. Her mistress looked down at her indulgently.

“There’s Neigette wanting to shake hands with you. She’s like me, you know—she has her likes and dislikes. . . . Well, now that you’re a friend of hers, why not come and see us? . . . I’ll bet you’re a Parisienne. You needn’t tell me—it’s obvious. Well, we can talk about Paris. I’ve just come from there. . . . Is that understood, then? My name is Madame Montard, and I live at Claire-Fontaine.”

She shook hands, with a fleeting smile, and was gone.

As she passed the two men, Hulard, who, like André, had seen her in conversation with Laura, swivelled his eyes from André to her.

“You see that woman passing? She’s an old tart. That’s her own business. But, when it comes to tongues, she’s certainly the foulest creature on earth, after the toad. . . .”

Laura came across the tower towards them.

“Let’s go home,” she said, authoritatively.

“Time enough,” replied André, suddenly looking black.

But Laura was already on her way towards the stairs.

“Well, I’m going, anyway. . . .”

As she set foot on the first step, Hulard’s coldly courteous voice caught up with her.

“You won’t get back that way, Madame. The water must be half-way up the street.”

Laura went her way downstairs without answering.

“Madame Brelet will have to go round by way of the patrol-path,” Hulard went on to André. “You’d better go with her. It’s so dark that she might break her neck up there.”

He shook hands with André, and strode off along the ramparts towards the Buckle Tower.

When André got out into the street, he came to a standstill, surprised at the strange sight before him. Laura was standing on the sidewalk staring at it too. André joined her.

The sea had invaded the town and risen almost as high as the Barbican. The sloping street was now quite flat, for a dark strip of water levelled it. Everything in it had shrunk.

The Guard Room of the Gentlemen-at-arms had lost its staircase and fell sheer into the flood. The postern-gate was shortened, and the Outer Guard Gate, usually a long upright rectangle, was crushed into a square. The entrance to the Mount was half full of water, and its opening was now no larger than the air-shaft of a cellar.

The grey-green water swirled under the light of the electric lamps, and a boat bobbed at the very edge of the sidewalk. Boys in rubber-boots played at

walking a few steps down the street, until the water threatened to rise above their knees. Others got into the boat and made it rock.

There was a crowd on the sidewalks. All the venturesome tourists who had stayed behind, bent on being hemmed in, had gathered at the King's Gate. Already hotel-scouts were gliding among them, murmuring:

“Supper for twelve francs, ladies and gentlemen, cider included. . . . Nice warm bedrooms looking out to sea. . . .”

They slipped cards into the tourists' hands.

Monsieur Plantier was there too. He came up and greeted André.

“They can't do better in Venice,” he declared. “You'd better go home by boat. . . . Talking about boats, I can see the end of one now. . . .”

The bow of a row-boat emerged from the Outer Guard Gate. It was amusing to see it floating like this, very high above the ground on which one walked every day. The boat turned slowly, and came up the middle of the street. The man who was rowing it had shipped his oars to get through the gate. He started rowing again. As he lay back at the end of his stroke, the bright light of the lamp outside the Guard Room fell on his face. Not till then did André recognise him. He was Baucher.

As the boat came nearer, the eddy of the bow-wave set the water moving, and its ripples gleamed beneath the light of the electric lamps. A fisherman in thigh-boots took a few steps down the sidewalk. The water was over his knees almost at once; but he managed to get hold of the boat's prow, and drew its nose up high and dry on the paving. Baucher sat where he was, and concentrated on rolling a cigarette while he waited for customers.

But none of the tourists could make up his mind to embark so soon. The local people said that the flood would rise higher, and everybody wanted to see the end of it.

Besides, the strange spectacle held them: this street of water rising between walls by lamplight; this boat, carrying a lantern, which had come in silently through the top of the gate; these men, booted to their thighs in yellow, rough-grained gum-boots, whom three paces turned into mere broad busts moving on the dark surface of the water; the persistent rippling of the flood and its sudden spurts, which wet the tourists' soles and set them exclaiming and recoiling. The dense darkness overhead roofed in the spectacle and kept their eyes fixed on it.

But Laura soon got tired of it.

“Are you coming?” she asked André.

She walked over to the boat, and put her hand on the gunwale. André seized her by the arm and held her back.

“No,” he said. “We’re going back by the patrol-path.”

Laura tried to twist herself free from him.

“Not on your life! I’d never stand that climb. Besides, it will be fun by boat. . . .”

André tightened his grip on her.

“No, I tell you!”

Until now, they had been talking in low voices, with their faces close together. Only Baucher could overhear them. He watched them, mockingly. Then Laura lost patience.

“Well, I’m going, anyway,” she announced, at the top of her voice. “If you’re afraid, you can go round.”

Instantly all eyes were concentrated on them. André let go of Laura. But, as he did so, he gave her an angry shove. He stopped it too late, and Laura’s knee banged against the side of the boat.

Like all men who are not brutes, André had a horror of scenes with a woman. He had a horror of those outbursts in which a woman gives vent to her fundamental lack of any sense of shame. He could imagine no failure in fair play worse than letting spectators into the secret of a family row, allowing them to sneer over it, and so triumphing over the other party to the row by making him ashamed.

Such a thing set him tingling to his finger-tips. Laura knew this. She took advantage of it.

“Well, really!” she wailed in disgust, as she bumped into the boat.

“Get in!” cried Baucher.

André saw the stern of the boat move, diminish, disappear. He swung round, keeping his eyes on the ground, and walked up the street. He exerted all his strength of will to put a brake on his pace and look as though he were simply strolling away. But he did not take in anybody. . . .

The bow of the boat, with its lantern bobbing up and down, made its way under the Outer Guard Gate. Baucher shipped his oars.

“Mind your hands!” he warned his passenger.

Laura had been holding on to the gunwales. She let go of them; for the passage narrowed, and one side of the boat rasped against the wall.

Outside, everything was pitch dark. The sea started rocking the boat gently.

“I don’t want to go to the embankment,” said Laura. “Land me at the Fanils.”

“All right,” replied Baucher. “I know who you are.”

Laura looked at the man in the bow in surprise. He was silhouetted against the lantern, and all she could see of him was his dark figure, with no face. . . .

After a few moments, he stopped rowing. Laura could see the gleam on the shafts of the oars, stuck out straight. Their blades were lost in the dark. For a moment or two, she listened to the water lapping against the boat’s sides.

She was on the point of asking:

“What are you waiting for?”

Then she realised that Baucher was leaning forward, staring at her. He was paying no attention to anything except her.

At length, in a queer tone of voice, he said:

“If I were a bad man, you know, I might take you for a ride . . .”

Laura could not imagine that the man was drunk. He spoke quite clearly, without slurring his words; and they were charged with hidden meaning.

She stared into the darkness around them. Ahead of her shone the windows of the barracks in which she lived; but they were still far away.

Furtively, she looked behind her. The red light that streamed out of the Outer Guard Gate was by now equally far off. Her boatman had stopped half-way.

Still, if he tried to touch her, and she screamed, she might be heard from the embankment, along which the headlights of cars were gliding. . . .

“Your husband would only get what was coming to him. . . .”

Laura was taken aback. The last thing she had imagined was André’s being mixed up in this. . . .

Then it struck her that perhaps the boatman was angry with André because he had objected to her boarding the boat. The boatman might have been done out of his fare and his tip.

“My husband?” she asked.

“Yes, your husband. It would just be paying him back tit for tat. He runs after my girl enough. . . .”

Laura was aghast. Then she heard the oars striking the water. They were on their way again. That gave her the upper hand once more.

“What do you mean?” she demanded, coldly.

“I mean what I say . . . I mean that I’ll leather him, if he has another try at turning up a skirt that doesn’t belong to him. . . .”

The boatman’s threatening words beat against the darkness huskily. Then he lay back on his oars, rowing hard, and the boat went ahead.

Neither of them said another word until its bottom rasped against the paving of the Fanils courtyard. With his back to Laura, the fisherman looked after their landing. The light of the lantern made the main tendon in his neck stand out. He got out into the water and brought the boat alongside the hand-rail of the steps, so that his passenger could disembark easily.

Once she was standing on the stone steps, she asked:

“How much do I owe you?”

Baucher was already pushing his bow out into the flood again. He answered without looking round:

“I don’t charge local people anything.”

That made Laura feel more humiliated than everything he had said to her before.

André got back five minutes after her.

Once he was out of sight of the crowd, he had taken to his heels, raced up the steps two at a time, and rushed along the patrol-path regardless of bumps against the stones.

He found Laura standing at the stove, watching butter sizzling in a dish. He had imagined everything except this; for he had forgotten all about supper.

Laura did not look at him. She tilted the enamelled dish by its handle to mix the melted butter, and remarked, as though she were talking to herself:

“I ought to have been told . . .”

“Told what?”

“That you were sleeping with his girl.”

She was so obviously looking for a scene that André simply shrugged his shoulders and sat down. He even automatically hitched up his trousers at the knee, just as he used to do. He had no creases to keep in them now; but he was controlling his reflexes badly. He was wholly concentrated upon making a clear explanation which would dispose of this silly business on the spot.

“Let me tell you exactly what happened. . . .”

He went on to say that he had met the cockle-gatherers on the sands by chance. He did not mention the enforced bath they had made him take. To pass the time, he had got into conversation with them. Baucher had come along. Baucher was a brute. He had twice been to prison for violence and wounding. Baucher had promptly made some vulgar remark. André, of course, had taken no notice of it.

But, when the girl fell into a quicksand and turned up half dead at the “Fancy,” where André was waiting for a colleague, he could not very well help doing something for her. That had sufficed to drive Baucher into a rage again. This time, André had put him in his place. Such was the whole story.

“You never told me about that girl falling into a quicksand,” said Laura.

André shook his head. There were so many things he never talked about to her. . . .

“So,” Laura went on, “that was why Baucher threatened just now to take me where he liked in his boat and pay you back in your own coin. . . . For that was what I had to listen to—I, your wife! . . .”

“I’ll smash his face in,” André undertook.

“And have people say you were fighting over the girl! . . . I don’t believe a word of that story of yours. A man doesn’t get as mad as Baucher was without good reason. He must have caught the two of you. I was a fool not to ask him for details. But I’ll see him again, you may be sure of that. . . . So you’ve started running after fish-wives now, eh? Well, that finishes it.”

André was on the point of retorting:

“When it was a question of you and Delabre . . .”

He might contrast his fine faith in Laura at that time with her outburst of silly suspicion about him now. But an ambiguous scruple stopped him. He did not want to pride himself on his faith in Laura. He was not sure now that he had kept it intact.

Then a false note in Laura's anger struck him. There was a kind of flaw in the fury with which she piled on the agony.

He studied her with profound attention. Then he said, very gently:

“Drop this play-acting. It isn't very pretty . . .”

Laura jumped as though she were stung.

“Play-acting?”

“Yes, play-acting. . . . I know now that you believe me. I know you realise perfectly well that there's nothing in all this but the grudge of a pig-headed brute. Anywhere else, at any other time, you'd have laughed at it. You'd have made fun of me. But, here and now, you find any stick good enough to beat me. I tell you again: it isn't very pretty.”

Laura came closer to him, up in arms.

“I don't want any cross-word puzzles from you, see? And I don't want any high-and-mightiness, either. It doesn't become you. . . . Just what do you mean?”

André raised his head and looked straight at her.

“I mean simply that, for the last ten minutes, you've been pretending indignation. You've been playing the outraged wife. You're trying to get something off your chest that you can't get off, just because it's too absurd.”

Laura realised that André had caught her out. She had better dodge the issue and break off the fight.

But then she saw André smile. She drove her attack home.

“What am I trying to get off my chest? Do you mean that I give you your choice? . . .”

André never took his eyes off her.

“Here we are!” he sneered. “We're just getting to it now. . . .”

“Well, I'll say it. If you want to stay here for the sake of that girl, you can stay by yourself.”

André stood up. This time, he laughed out loud. But his laugh fell to pieces at once. It simply dragged down one corner of his mouth.

“Yes, there we are. . . . That’s what you’ve been working up to, ever since I came in. The same old threat that you’ll go away. I’ve seen it coming all the time. . . . But are you such a fool that you have to jump at a lousy lie like this? Are you such a fool that you can’t see that, this time, it’s all so silly, so stupid, that you might as well drop it?”

Laura listened to him with livid face and trembling lips.

“I warn you you’ll be sorry for what you’re saying. . . .”

André shrugged his shoulders, wearily.

“Of course! Sooner than be worsted, you’ll go away. That’s quite in order, too. . . . Well, if I could think you were sincere, I’d rather you did—a hundred times rather. But you seize hold of this woman, or any other woman who comes to hand, just to fling her between us. You use her simply as another pretext for slamming the door behind you. I can’t tell you how much you disgust me.”

André’s voice rose as he marched up and down the room. His exasperation rose with it. He planted himself in front of Laura.

“Look here! I’ve only one regret tonight. I’m sorry you’re not right. I’m sorry I didn’t take that girl. I expect that was just what she wanted. I’m sorry I’m not capable of the degradation with which you pretend to reproach me.”

Laura was tense as she retorted. Her voice was strident.

“Not capable of it, eh? Well, that’s good! If you can live on tips, if you can sweep up dung in the Abbey, if you can go about in rags on the sands with a lot of other ragamuffins, then you can run after sluts. Isn’t it all of a piece? If you’re capable of the one thing, you’re quite capable of the other. You’re not going to tell me you’ve become fastidious.”

André fixed his eyes on Laura. He looked at her so shrewdly, so sadly, that she turned her eyes away. He echoed her, softly.

“Become fastidious? . . . Yes, I have . . . unfortunately. . . .”

Mid-April saw the spring established, and the Mount at last lay under a clear sky.

All through the winter, cloud, wind, rain or mist gave it an aspect singularly changeable. The dark months plagued it endlessly. They blotted it out, wholly or in part; they ate away its pilasters and its towers; they flattened it against the horizon, or, on the contrary, breached its ramparts with shadows. Squalls spattered it with spray. The sea and the sands went wan and livid beneath it, chilling it with their sudden pallor, drowning it from below, as though it had become its own reflection. Through soaking in scudding skies, it lost all colour. It seemed to stream away in grey streaks. Sometimes its shape darkened as though it were a storm-cloud, and its overlapping roofs flickered like lightning.

During the winter the Mount, like everything lasting, was the sport of everything fleeting.

But the pale blue sky of spring gave it back fixity and proportion. It restored, too, its patine of ripening wheat, which went on ripening until August, when high summer inflicted upon the Mount the Saharan aspect of a pyramid. Much better than the glare of midsummer, the newborn light of spring brought out the charm of its old age. The yellow ivory of its walls was not yet gilded. Its slates remained rose-coloured. On his turret of pale blue, the silver-gilt Archangel gleamed, but did not dazzle.

Above all, the limpidity of April drew a clear dividing line between God and Mammon.

It was the month of the year, more than any other, when the cathedral threw the shopping street into the shade. You could see at a glance that everything that belonged to the world stayed low down. It cowered between the ramparts and the hill: a huddle of bent backs that looked as though they were ashamed of themselves.

On the other hand, prayer rose from the Mount in a great aspiration upwards. It threw up the thrust of the arches to the point of miracle. It added height to the towers and the Benedictine walls, with their sparing windows, barred against the world.

Then, more than ever, it would have been well to treat the Mount like the Promised Land, which wise men contemplated from afar, leaving the less wise to enter into it.

For, as soon as you were through the King's Gate, the tinsel of the High Street drew your eyes. Since Easter Monday, which had brought the first wave of tourists, the shops had taken down their shutters and brought out their stalls.

A whole tin-smithery of pitchers and pots bulged out all up the slope in burnished bays. Pieces of brassware caught the sun's rays everywhere. Animals in painted wood and celluloid wagged their heads from side to side on the stalls. There were little fishermen in terra cotta. There were chocolate-boxes shaped like shells and wrapped in gilt paper.

But what ended by overwhelming you, through its endless repetition, was the uglification of the supreme spectacle which you had come here to see.

At every step it was presented to you a hundred times over, so disfigured, so cheapened, that you felt like crying. The ingenuity of curio-manufacturers had multiplied Mont Saint-Michels to the point of nausea. It had put the Mount on plates; on chromo-lithographs in shrieking colours; on salad-bowls; on those slabs of wood with bark frames which try to look rustic; in those globes, full of water and shavings, which give an effect of snow when you shake them.

All this very soon created an obsession. The caricature ended by masking the marvellous model. In this ditch devoted to trade, you could no longer see it. You might think yourself a hundred leagues distant. You could find it again only by going away from it.

At the same time, the chain of *gogluage* was working from top to bottom of the street.

This old word designates an old and abominable custom which prides itself on going back to the clamorous commercial methods of the Middle Ages. It means pestering people for their patronage. It means that every visitor has to run the gauntlet of a double row of rowdy solicitation. His passing lets it loose as though he had released a spring.

Hotel-waitresses and shop-assistants, entrusted with this business of fishing for customers, had been chosen from among the sprightliest of girls. They had then been taught the wheedling tone, the knowing nod, of the prostitute.

Their crafty crimping was so sickening that it made you look back with regret on the free fight of the old days, when the *goglus* were men.

They used to contend for suitcases with fisticuffs, snatching them out of tourists' hands and telling them they would find them at the hotel. They used to grab women visitors by the arm and warn them: "Don't go with that man! He's just out of prison." They used to shout: "I pity anybody who goes to So-and-so's for lunch. He'll pay a lot for the privilege of being starved." They used to return a tip of four sous with the comment: "Keep that for yourself. You may want it." Things got to such a point that the police, and finally the Government, had to intervene. Then girls were put on the job instead.

From the beginning of May, the seasonal population was at full complement: chambermaids, kitchen-maids, waitresses, scullery-maids, waiters, cooks, shop-girls and packers. They were engaged for four months, and they were all bent on making money and doing one another in the eye, though without prejudice to having a good time together.

The servant-girls were mostly girls of the type who cannot reconcile themselves to private service because they find their kitchens so lonely that they cry over their washing-up. They wanted the atmosphere of the servants' hall, with all its coarse gaiety, its liveliness, its exhausting activity, its companionship, its smutty talk of cooks and waiters.

On weekdays they still had time to yawn, for they often had nothing to do. But on Sundays all was bustle. The employers preferred to keep them on hand. After all, they paid them next to nothing. The staffs worked for the sake of their tips.

Bosses, or their managers, had come to the Mount after spending the winter in Paris, Pontorson or Avranches. Henceforth the High Street belonged to them. Just as in street-fighting, some of them kept an eye on the houses opposite all day long. For jealousy, spying and squabbling came into play with competition.

Shop-keepers cursed one another from doorway to doorway, standing shoulder to shoulder. The sight of customers going into one shop went to the heart of the owner of a rival shop. Hotel-keepers sent servants to count the number of tables taken at other hotels. You called your tradesman a cheat and changed him if you caught him supplying a competitor.

One morning Laura had an odd visitor: a fat little man. He apologised for troubling her, and said he wanted somebody who lived there to tell him

the best place to lunch. Laura dismissed him ungraciously, saying she neither knew nor cared.

She learnt afterwards that he was a sheriff's officer, entrusted with making sure that the guardians observed strict neutrality where hotel propaganda was concerned. He had a form all ready to fill up, if necessary, laying a complaint to the Ministry for improper behaviour and abuse of office.

It was Madame Montard who told Laura about this. The two of them had become fast friends.

The first afternoon Laura paid a visit to Madame Montard at her house, Claire-Fontaine, the warmth of its central heating, the mosaics in its hall, the drawing-room with its low armchairs where tea awaited her—all this enchanted her. It was as though she had returned from exile.

After one or two more visits, the whole aspect of the Mount seemed changed for her. The fact that it sheltered luxurious rooms, in which she was welcomed as a familiar friend, suddenly brought her to life again.

At Claire-Fontaine she linked on with her lost past. It delighted her, and she welcomed this delight eagerly as a proof that she had not changed. As she verified her refusal to reconcile herself to poverty, her unabated appetite for luxury, sharpened by the lack of it, she rejoiced like a convalescent boxer trying his muscles and finding them still supple.

She took Madame Montard into her confidence at once. She told her all about her former life, as hurriedly as though she were presenting her credentials.

After that, Madame Montard never called her anything but "my dear." Of course, Madame Montard had guessed everything Laura had told her from the moment they met.

"My dear, just imagine you as a guardian's wife! Why, one has only to look at you . . .!"

Naturally, Laura could count upon her to help her all she could. . . .

Laura's plans for escape filled Madame Montard with enthusiasm at once. She, too, loathed this little town, from which she had run away as a girl under age, with the police after her. It was not so long since she had ventured to return to it. It had welcomed her with the outraged scandalisation of the older generation, the jeering curiosity of the younger.

She knew perfectly well, through her servants who had come to her after being dismissed from other places, what people thought and said about her. On the Mount scarcely anything counted but money. Everybody there clung to the Mount simply to make money, as fast as possible and as much as possible. But Madame Montard's money had failed to rehabilitate her.

In the eyes of these suspicious, spiteful Normans, she remained branded with the mark of infamy. In their eyes, she was still "Julie Monta," who had run away from her father's with a tourist—one of the tourists brought by the building of the causeway in 1880—and had come back only because men did not want her any more in Paris.

Despite her generous gifts to charity, public and private, all she had been able to buy was the apparent respect of the parish priest and the mayor, who in any case were bound to show it. As for everybody else, she repaid their lack of esteem for her with fierce disparagement of them.

"If you knew them as I do!" she told Laura.

She was tireless in telling all the tittle-tattle of the Mount: its family feuds, its strife of shop-keepers and hotel-keepers, with all their incidents, funny or ferocious. She mimicked the people of the Mount. When she put words into their mouths, she reverted to the accent, the expressions of her youth. She sketched them in insidious imputations, with all the refund gift of the gab of the slut she used to be.

"But why did you come back here?" asked Laura, in sincere astonishment.

For she was not taken in by Madame Montard. She made a very large allowance for disappointment, for spite, in her stories. She said to herself that anywhere else Julie Montard would have been unknown and in a position to play the part of the respectable old lady.

"Why did I come back here?" replied Madame Montard. "In the first place, to make them burst with envy. I washed dishes for them; and now their daughters would be only too glad to come and wash dishes for me. Besides—you can explain this how you like—when I'm away from here, there's only one thing I want: to come back here. Why? I ask you! . . . I haven't been in those vaults they show tourists up there three times in my life. When I was a kid, I used to run about the sands; but, I needn't tell you, I don't want to do that now. I can't stand the people who live here, and, as for all those tourists who come and swill cider and eat sausage in the summer, they make me sick. When they're here, I never set foot outside till the

evening. . . . And yet I don't feel at home anywhere except here. I spend all my time between these two windows."

One of her windows faced towards the Abbey. If she looked up, she could see the triangular roofs of its annexes, and, above the tracery of the arches, the pinnacles of the choir, the Lacework Staircase, the blue triangle of the turret, and the soaring spire.

The east window looked out across the buff-coloured beach to Tombelaine, with its image dully reflected upside down in the shining mirror of the sands.

The fat old woman kept on the go from one window to the other. But she never understood that the two-fold wonder of the Abbey and its setting, without her even being conscious of the fact, had soaked into her, cast its spell over her, as it did over plenty of other people. The incomparable spectacle before her eyes had become the very bread of life to her. She lamented it.

"What a fool you become when you get old! The air here is bad for my asthma. I know it will bring on attacks. Still, I said to the doctor: 'I may die here ten years earlier than elsewhere; but at least I'll die here. . . .' Well, if anybody had told me, when I was younger, that you could get a place under your skin, just like a man! . . . But I can quite understand how much you want to get away from it."

Sitting at her window looking out on the sands, Madame Montard brooded for a moment or two: one of those minor meditations made up merely of regrets. Then she pulled herself together, and looked at Laura with eyes which had suddenly turned hard and shrewd again.

"Well, what about your husband? Nothing new, eh? Still satisfied with his job? . . ."

Their conversations always returned like this to prowling round the enemy and studying ways of dislodging him from his position.

Madame Montard did not know André beyond seeing him in the street and spying on him. Laura had tried in vain to introduce him to her best friend. André refused, sulkily.

"She makes me sick," he said. "You can sleep with her if you like; but don't talk to me about her."

The old woman had very soon guessed his feelings towards her from the way in which he looked away or down at his feet when they met in the

street. But she cherished no resentment towards him.

As she grew old in her profession, she had trained herself to expect contempt from young men, to make a virtue of resignation, to discipline her desires strictly. This was essential wisdom. She shrugged her shoulders and said it served them right when she heard about old friends of hers being eaten out of house and home by young lovers. Young men had ceased to mean anything to her. At the most, she got some satisfaction out of seeing them make fools of themselves. . . .

Still, André intrigued her. From what Laura told her, she could not make out what was the Mount's attraction for him. When she asked Laura, she simply said:

“He likes it.”

Adroitly, Madame Montard cast about in all directions for an explanation.

Was André a slacker? That would explain much.

“No, he's not,” replied Laura.

“Is he religious?”

“Oh, no, not at all.”

Surely, Madame Montard went on to inquire, André wasn't yet old enough to get wrapped up in old stones and books and architect's plans? He wasn't like one of those old fogies who got themselves shut up in the Abbey, and whom you could dust till you were black in the face without getting rid of the cobwebs in their brain-pans?

“No,” said Laura. “Hulard has lent him books about the Abbey; but he hasn't read them.”

“Hulard, eh? Yes, he would. . . . There's a fellow with a fine bee in his bonnet. . . .”

When Laura told her about Andréa, Madame Montard imagined for a moment that she was on the right track. But her own experience made her abandon it at once.

“That's not worth considering,” she decided. “If a man were going to hang on everywhere he found a girl ready to let herself go . . . !”

She tried in all directions, except one. She did not look into herself. In the enchantment which bound her to the Mount, she might perhaps have

found an explanation.

But she was so convinced that this enchantment was simply an infirmity of age, and it annoyed her so much, that it never occurred to her for a moment that a young man might be feeling the first effects of the Mount's spell.

"There's nothing to do but wait," she wound up. "Meanwhile, you mustn't stand up to him, because that always makes a young man pig-headed. . . . Above all, my dear, he must find you attractive. If you've ceased to attract him, you must do it again. When your chance comes, when you are in a position to give him his choice between you and the fine job he's got here, he mustn't hesitate. . . . To begin with, you'll do me the pleasure of dolling yourself up a bit better than you do. It's spring, let me remind you. . . ."

Laura jumped.

"I needn't tell you," Madame Montard went on, "that, if I take a hand in this business, of course I'll foot the bill. . . . Now, no objections! It will be fun for me to set you up in clothes. . . . Yes, of course, you can pay me back later on. . . . Suppose your husband asks you where you got the money, you say? Look here, my dear, a man never worries about where a woman gets the money for her clothes, so long as she doesn't ask him for it."

Another day, however, Madame Montard suddenly broke off in the middle of giving her *protégée* this kind of advice. She looked Laura straight in the eyes.

"Look here," she said, "I'm saying all this to you; but there's one thing I ought to know first. Are you fond of your husband? . . . If you're not, that alters everything. . . ."

"I'm fond enough of him to want to get away from here with him," replied Laura. "But, if he stays here next winter, he'll stay alone; and he knows it."

She said it with all a woman's cold determination, about which another woman can never be mistaken.

Laura, Madame Montard said to herself, was certainly capable of smashing up everything in order to get away. This was going to be fun. Her husband didn't look the kind of man who shouted his business on the housetops. With a man like that, who kept things to himself, you might look out for surprises.

This adventure made Madame Montard feel younger. It was an unexpected amusement, a fine game which she had once played very well, when she wanted either to bring a girl and a man together or take a man away from a girl. She knew just the tactics to use.

“Above all,” she advised Laura, “don’t be in a hurry. You’ve got time to turn round now. You won’t be so bored in the summer. Imagine this is just a little bathing-place like any other. . . .”

Laura took her advice. After she had been followed and accosted twice, she found it quite pleasant to go for walks along the ramparts and in the gardens around the Little Wood. She sent the men who accosted her about their business; but they gave her back her liking for her looks. . . .

“As for your husband,” Madame Montard also told her, “don’t say anything more to him about going away. I shouldn’t be very much surprised if he’s obstinate about staying just because you persist in wanting to leave. Let him alone! He’ll get sick of it all by himself. He hasn’t seen the half of it yet, you know. In winter it’s a fine life for the guardians. They live just like gentlemen. But in the summer it’s a very different thing. What with those hundred thousand fools who pass through their hands, they earn their money hard enough. . . .”

Madame Montard was quite right.

The Mount’s abrupt metamorphosis promptly repelled André. The shops which he had so long seen closed had fallen into the hands of surly strangers who camped on the Mount with all the arrogance of conquerors. Even those who stayed there during the winter and, when they had nothing better to do, were glad enough to talk to the guardians to pass the time, had now changed their outlook and their demeanour. They had suddenly laid hands again upon all their dignity as comfortably circumstanced shop-keepers. They stressed the distance which divided them from the poor beggars up at the Abbey.

The guardians were no longer at home in the High Street: that street which, during the winter, had rung with the nasal voice of Old Plantier and the shouts of Hulard calling to his friends from the North Tower to the King’s Gate. Now, stared at by brazen waitresses and shop-girls, they passed through it hastily, with all the humility of people who sold nothing, bought nothing, and did not even consume anything.

At the Abbey the invasion of tourists kept on increasing. The guardians, now at full strength, waited their turn in the little room behind the fireplace of the Guard Room. At least, the other guardians sat about there, chatting and smoking. Neither André nor Hulard stayed there.

The other guardians included men mutilated in the war, pensioners who had a right to civil employment. Most of them were good fellows, and they knew their patter.

But two of them were in open enmity with André. One was Roubaud, whose wife's face Laura had slapped. The other was Grénier, who had been gassed in the war, with the result that draughts and dust made him cough. At school he had been a dunce.

He detested André and Hulard as educated men who had come down in the world, and accused them of toadying to the Head Guardian, who for that matter could not stand the sight of him. As Grénier was afraid of Hulard's biting tongue, he did not venture to attack him and André to their faces. But he stirred up prejudice against them behind their backs, and, if either of them happened to go into the guardians' room, everybody stopped talking and answered questions reluctantly.

André had tried to disarm Roubaud and Grénier by making awkward advances to them; but Hulard had chided him harshly.

"Do you think you can make those two fellows intelligent," he asked, "or can you lower yourself to their level? That's the whole question. . . . So long as there's this little difference between you and them, you can't hope to make friends with them. Do the same as I do. Say 'Good morning' and 'Good evening,' do them a service if opportunity offers, give them a light if they ask you for one, and, for the rest, keep to yourself. When they come to see what kind of man you are, they'll let you know. But you must give them time. They're quite good fellows at bottom, but they're bent on being fools."

André and Hulard usually stayed in the Guard Room, at the top of the Precipice Steps, or else in the waiting-room, where they flanked the Head Guardian, which did not improve matters. Docheais sometimes joined them.

A stroke on the bell summoned them. If it was André's turn, he took his place at the head of his party of tourists, shouting:

"Visitors this way!"

Then he set off for the Abbey staircase, with the visitors tramping behind him. They were always impressed by the size of the stairs, and generally kept quiet until they came to Gautier's Leap.

Over the cistern in the Almonry some prisoner had once carved the Latin word: *Spes*. This touching inscription was not one of the official exhibits, and André did not point it out. But he never passed beneath it without thinking about it and feeling a little comforted.

The tourists escaped from his shepherding when they reached the Southern Platform, from which they could see the Couesnon, the embankment, a stretch of grazing land, and Avranches. They amused themselves by picking out their own automobiles, shrunk to specks, and noting the tiny figures of people walking in the High Street and on the sands. They would have liked to linger there.

On the contrary, they were soon tired of the Western Platform, which looked out to sea and across to the lowlands of Brittany, and they needed no pressing to pass into the Cloister. They liked that. André pointed out that no two sculptures of the capitals were alike, and all of them started verifying the fact.

“So they’re not!” they vouched.

They were also tickled by the fact that not a single one of the fifty-seven lancet windows in the Refectory was visible from the entrance, and that visitors had to unmask them one after the other on either side as they walked down the room. This gave them the idea that the monks were facetious builders who amused themselves with architectural tricks.

Even though it came after the Great Wheel, the Crypt of the Great Pillars made some impression on them. They respected it for supporting the choir of the church, where they had just been. But they visited the Reception Room and the Hall of the Knights as though they were in a church, and in a hurry to get out of it.

Those of them who listened to André’s explanations up to the end were dazed with dates and measurements. He had walked them through a labyrinth, and most of them gave up trying to find their bearings. Sometimes, however, more persistent people went on endeavouring to discover just where they were.

“Are we under the church here?” they would ask.

“No,” André would reply. “You’re in the Merveille buildings, level with the Covered Walk.”

“Oh, I see,” they would say, and let it go at that.

Such people made up the unsophisticated, inoffensive herd. But then there were self-important people who assumed that André’s explanations were addressed especially to them. There were people who had been there before, and showed off by announcing the name of the next room, just as people announce what is going to happen next in a film. There were people who could not make head or tail of anything, but could not resign

themselves to the fact and harassed their guide with silly questions. There were people who wondered whether they would miss their train. Above all, there were the wags, who said they wanted Saint Michael's wings and made the whole round a misery, until André had to concentrate public indignation against them by threatening:

“If this goes on, I shall have to stop the visit. . . .”

Besides, now that he had to go round it ten times a day, endlessly repeating the same recitation about it, André found the Abbey a dry-as-dust place, just as it had struck him when he was first learning his job. His mechanical expressions of admiration, cast in formulas which he did not yet venture to vary, got on his nerves, and, like the other guardians, he reached the point of ceasing to look at what he was showing. He was the first to be shocked by this. But he could not rise above his job. It often struck him as being fit only for clowning on the stage. “Follow the guide” was a commonplace cliché in broad farce.

Sometimes he felt jealous of Hulard, who saved himself by overwhelming his public with erudition and talking only for his own benefit, or the benefit of an intelligent connoisseur, whom he excelled at unearthing amid the mass. On such occasions, Hulard used to take so long over his round that Monsieur Plantier looked at his watch and growled in disgust:

“What the dickens is he finding to say to them? The others are going round twice to his once.”

André, for his part, found his recitation such a burden that he could have gone round three times to Hulard's once. He had to slow down and dawdle towards the end of the round, letting his tourists wander about by themselves, while he walked up and down with his hands behind his back, looking like a schoolmaster in a class-room.

His tips burnt his fingers. Never had he managed to make up his mind to let fly that first “Thank you” which, according to Hulard, always started the tips coming. The result was that he sometimes let a whole round pass without getting any at all. In the evening, when all the guardians pooled their tips on the table in their room, his pile was always contemptible.

Accordingly, while André was going through his pockets, as ashamed of himself as though he were disgorging stolen money, Grénier had got into the habit of pushing the earlier contributions aside and leaving a large empty space on the table right in front of André.

“Make room there!” Grénier would say, officiously, as though money were going to rain down out of André’s pockets.

After a few days, nobody laughed at the joke any longer. But Grénier went on with it, with shrewd spite, knowing that it was the surest way of tormenting André. As yet he did not venture to protest openly against André’s small takings; for Hulard had said, with the intention of its being repeated to Grénier:

“If Brelet did the same thing as Grénier, if he asked for alms in the Almonry, he would have more to put on the table.”

For it was whispered that, when he opened the last door, Grénier used to say in an undertone:

“Don’t forget the guide, please!”

Now this was strictly forbidden, and Old Plantier had threatened:

“Let me just catch him at it! I’ll make a report that will mean a kick in the pants for him.”

After defending his friend to the others, one evening Hulard proceeded to admonish André.

“I’ve been watching you,” he declared. “You say ‘Thank you’ as though you were a member of the mourning family at a graveyard gate. Then you go and stand in a corner. People would have to go out of their way to thrust a tip on you.”

“I’ll do anything else, but I won’t stick my hand out,” replied André, obstinately.

Hulard nearly jumped down his throat.

“No high-and-mightiness, if you please!” he retorted. “If you don’t want to ‘stick your hand out,’ as you put it, would you rather have the others reproach you, one of these days, with living on their takings? It won’t be long before they do. For my part, what first got me into training was putting down thirty sous on the table and picking up ten francs after the share-out. Begging for begging, I’d rather beg from my customers than my colleagues.”

Then he went on:

“How much have you got this evening?”

André displayed his meagre harvest in the palm of his hand. Hulard promptly dived into his own pocket, and thrust a handful of money into André's pocket.

"If you don't want to make me go on like this," he said, "see that you manage better."

That evening, at the share-out, Hulard was able to proclaim:

"Brelet's beaten all of us!"

Grénier said nothing. He simply looked hard at Hulard. Hulard did not move a muscle. He merely remarked:

"Brelet's tumbled to the trick now."

"And a good thing, too," growled Roubaud, the husband of the woman whose face Laura had slapped.

Hulard turned round.

"But it's a bad thing that flats can't play dominoes," he retorted. "I shouldn't be long getting the double six. . . ."

Roubaud's slowness of mind was notorious.

These skirmishes exasperated André. One Sunday afternoon, he burst out and, before all the guardians, told Grénier where he got off in such harsh terms that he was left dumb. Then André started on a round.

As ill-luck would have it, his party of visitors included a particularly execrable joker, a fat fellow with his lids drooping over his little eyes, which he screwed up smaller than ever just to be funny. He repeated and distorted everything André said, and mimicked everything he did. André put up with this clownish caricature of him until they reached the Hall of the Knights. There one or two of the other visitors at last got to the point of murmuring:

"Oh, stop it, can't you?"

"Don't mind him," said André. "He's had too much lunch."

The wag got on his high horse. He announced that he would lodge a complaint. The guardians were paid to be polite, and he hadn't paid his three francs just to hear himself called a drunkard.

In fact, when they returned to the waiting-room, he went straight over to Monsieur Plantier and demanded the complaint-book. The Head Guardian advised him not to make such a fuss. Still, he had to take cognisance of the man's complaint.

He proceeded to remind his subordinate sharply that the regulations merely authorised guardians to stop the visit if somebody deliberately made himself a nuisance, and to come back and report. He added, by way of killing two birds with one stone, that one piece of vulgarity did not justify another.

André went home full of bitterness.

Never so much as in connection with this absurd affair had he been conscious of his servile status. Positively he was in the pay of all these sight-seers who hired him for an hour. He had to put up with all their complaints, all their mockeries, all their stupidities. Any of these fellows who came up from the town, full of omelettes and cider, could make game of him with impunity. Like any other servant, he had the right only to close his ears.

At her first glance at him, Laura realised that he was in a state of suppressed rage. But her instinct for biding her time, now developed by Madame Montard, warned her at once not to give anything away.

André had been overtaken by the disgust which Madame Montard had predicted. Laura must leave it to do its own work, break down his resistance, sever his links with the Mount. Her own role was simply to wait, to stick around, to be ready to catch him on the hop when he came back to her. Meanwhile, above all, she must not put him on the alert by awkward advances.

But tonight she felt that he was at a disadvantage. André was still keeping his troubles to himself. She was not going to ask him to share them with her; for that would mean forcing him to admit defeat. On the contrary, he would be grateful to her for keeping her mouth shut. But she must get closer to him. The time had come.

After supper, she suggested:

“Shall we go out on the sands for a bit? It’s such a lovely evening. . . .”

“If you like,” replied André.

The tide was out, and the sands were firm. Laura took André by the arm.

Very soon they might have been alone in the world. There was a mauve mist backing towards the sea to meet the night. It had already swallowed up Tombelaine. Nothing was left distinct before their eyes but the ridges in the sands.

Walking aimlessly like this, on this level surface, with nothing to be seen, in this enormous silence, made each of them all the more conscious of

the other's presence. The very thread of their irritated thoughts broke. André could now hold on only to bits of his. The peace of the sands reigned supreme, and there was nothing here to give food for anger.

They walked on for some time without saying a word. Then, little by little, Laura's grip on André's arm tightened. Her body pressed closer against his. Her hand groped for André's hand, opened it, clasped it.

Then, in a very low voice, as though she were afraid of hearing herself put that dreadful question, she asked:

"Don't you love me any more?"

In the dark, she saw André shrug his shoulders.

Then, without calculation, gulled by herself, by the time, by the place, by André's presence, she found just the right thing to say to soften him, to disarm him.

"I'm doing my best, you know," she pleaded, humbly.

She had forced André to slow down, as though she wanted to listen to her words sinking into him, reaching the depths of him.

She felt André's hand close on her own. Another step, and she was up against him, with his lips on hers.

Night had fallen completely. Abruptly, André suggested:

"Shall we go back?"

Without answering, Laura took his arm again, and they started back towards the embankment. On their right, the Mount was now no more than a few low lights piercing the darkness and a long streak of diffused clarity in the black sky which marked the High Street.

Suddenly from it burst forth the strident strains of brass instruments. The bugles of a social club whose members had dined there were blowing while they waited for their coach.

The sound made André grit his teeth. This noise, coming on top of the herd of visitors, with all their gabble, and the overflowing shops and eating-houses, served to round off the degradation of the Abbey, to rob it of all its charm, all its power of attraction.

"How sick it makes me!" André growled.

Laura realised that he was not thinking only about the buglers who were exercising their lungs. She put her arm round his neck. She was as tall as he

was, and her action made them one. . . .

The next day there was a pilgrimage. Pilgrims to Lisieux often stopped at the Mount, either going or coming. Others came there directly from neighbouring places, and even from Caen, which organised a procession complete with beadle, banners, and incense-bearers.

This time the pilgrims were Bretons from Saint-Pol de Léon, led by their priests. The men were sober and clean-shaven. They wore beribboned beaver hats, and their tall, thin bodies looked longer than ever in their tight grey trousers and their brief jackets stopping short at the waist.

The women, who always walked behind the contingent of men and did not intermingle with them, wore voluminous gathered dresses. The younger ones had lace kerchiefs which left their slim necks bare. The older ones had black silk kerchiefs which hid their necks right up to their hair. The strappings of their coifs stretched severely under their chins, and the coifs themselves were stiff with starch and without any embroidery to be seen.

The faces of men and women alike were impressive in their gravity, their reserve, their dignity.

They spent the morning in the parish church, in front of the silver statue of Saint Michael, whose breast-plate blazed beneath the light of all the candles lit in his honour. They prayed to the Archangel, that weigher of souls, for their own dead and for all the dying. Then all of them took Communion. They proceeded, without haste, to make their way to the hotels and the shops that sold religious mementoes.

In the afternoon, they visited the Abbey. As it was a Monday, they had it almost to themselves.

André took charge of one of the parties. These people were connoisseurs in ancient buildings, familiar with the tall steeples of Saint-Pol de Léon, its calvaries, its triumphal arches, its granite ossuaries. They looked about them and listened to André in such silence and with such attention that at first he was embarrassed. Then he pulled himself together. He talked about the Abbey with a warmth of feeling, a sense of loyalty to it, which surprised himself. The men nodded their heads slowly in approval and exchanged a few words in Breton.

In the Abbey church, one of the priests asked whether Mass was ever said there.

“Yes,” said André, “on Saint Michael’s day and Easter Sunday.”

As it was still a church, the pilgrims said their prayers in it. The women went down on their knees, with their voluminous dresses spread about them. The men remained standing, with folded arms.

Everywhere, with André's help, their priests followed in the footsteps of the monks and recreated the setting of monastic life for them. The priests questioned André so closely that he was sometimes at a loss for an answer and regretted that Hulard was not there to lend him a hand.

Nevertheless, he felt as though he were helping them to perform an exorcism. Their presence, their respect, washed away the stain left upon the Abbey by visitors idly curious, perfunctory or stupid.

At the door of the Almonry, one of the priests slipped a large tip into André's hand on behalf of the whole party. The men thanked him, and the women bowed to him as they passed him.

As a rule, Monsieur Plantier let visitors go without taking any notice of them. But this time he came forward to meet the pilgrims.

"It's fine, isn't it?" he asked.

One of the men, an old man, replied:

"It's very fine."

Then they went out.

"I'll bet they appreciated it, didn't they?" said the Head Guardian.

André nodded.

"There are still people who do," Monsieur Plantier went on, "and more than you might think."

"That may be. But," André objected, "there are also the others."

The Head Guardian's strident voice made the roof ring and one of the departing Breton women turn round.

"The others? But what does it matter about the others?"

Monsieur Plantier was in a good humour. His granddaughter had written to him, that very morning, to say that she had won her school certificate. To show André that he had no ill-feeling over the incident of the day before, he took him to see his garden.

It consisted of three narrow walled-in terraces under the Perrine Tower. The walls were pierced to make room for a few stunted trees. Monsieur Plantier had spent a long time clearing the ground of stones. In the highest

garden he grew magnificent roses: Gloire de Dijon, Tosca, and opulent Madame Alfred Carrière. He had turned the middle terrace into a kitchen-garden. On the lowest terrace he had a model poultry-run, made out of tarred boarding.

Nothing of all this could be even suspected from down below. But, from the postern-gate of the tower, which gave access to the terraces, André could see other strips of garden sited in folds in the rocky hill.

“I’m getting short of water already,” Monsieur Plantier lamented. “It’s a record, you know, Brelet, to get anything to grow as high as this, with the wind we have here. So, when the sub-prefect wanted to award me an academical distinction, I said to him:

“Thank you, but I’m not very strong on spelling. If you must give me something, give me the diploma of agricultural merit, because I’ve made flowers grow where nothing but stones grew before.”

“An order from the architect,” announced Monsieur Plantier. “We are not to go on letting the museum people cut the ground from under our feet without making any retort. Somebody is to stand at the King’s Gate and remind tourists that there is an Abbey to be seen in the place. You’re the junior, Brelet. So *gogluage* duty for you tomorrow morning, from nine o’clock to eleven.”

These instructions brought André to the entrance to the Mount on a Sunday morning. He took up his position beside the bombards captured from the English, known as the “Michelettes.”

As the earliest groups of tourists passed him, he murmured:

“For the Abbey, straight on and up the steps.”

At this hour of the morning, the arrivals were excursionists who had brought lunch-baskets with them. Some of them wanted, in the first place, to find an inn which would admit customers with their own provisions. Others proposed to stroll round the town before going and lunching on the sands.

They were noisy people in their Sunday best. Later on, they would give vent to their feelings by complaining about the absence of an elevator and counting the steps. They would look up at the Abbey and say:

“Plenty of stones up there. Not a bad piece of work, say what you like. . . .”

The bombards attracted their attention for a moment or two. André felt that they thought him a nuisance for standing there advertising the Abbey. He moved a little lower down.

Even there, he could not make up his mind to speak in anything higher than a confidential tone of voice. Yet his formula, drafted by Monsieur Plantier, spared his feelings and might pass merely for an obliging piece of information.

Towards ten o’clock, however, visitors spending their summer holidays on automobile tours started making their appearance: the class of visitors who paid for their lunch. At once the volume of advertising around André swelled.

The museum had a wax-work show to offer, including a prisoner being eaten alive by rats and a man being swallowed up in a quicksand, represented by composition. Its guardians redoubled their appeals for custom. They sang the praises of their periscope. They went at it shamelessly. For that matter, they were showing no spite towards a competitor. They had no intention of annoying André. They were simply speaking with all the glibness of long practice.

As he listened to them, André felt ashamed. It was as though he were begging. He was reminded of the days when his school-fellows turned newsboys and bellowed their salesmanship of political pamphlets outside churches.

Then he cursed himself softly for the rooted respect for human decency which he felt like a barrier in front of him. On his own, he added spell-binding words to his formula.

“For the Abbey, the Merveille, the Lacework Staircase . . .”

Two girls in beach pajamas, with reddened toe-nails and Franciscan sandals, glanced at him in amusement. That made him shout louder than ever, almost like a madman.

“So you’re playing the tout, eh?” somebody said behind him.

André was leaning against one of the empty tables outside a café. At first he did not recognise the waitress who had just spoken to him. She was so different from the muddy girl whom he had helped into the kitchen at the “Fancy.”

Andréa was wearing the regulation black dress and white apron with crossed straps. Her hair was freshly waved, and it seemed to pull her whole face upwards. It was by her sneering expression that André recognised her, by that shameless laugh of hers which had always exasperated him.

“Hullo,” he said, ungraciously, “so you’re here, are you?”

“I’ve been here since the day before yesterday.”

“You have, eh? . . .”

André recalled her savage diatribe against the servile status of domestic servants, her indomitable pride in being Baucher’s squaw. He felt more disappointment than she was worth at having been taken in by her. Of course, these girls were all the same. Like all the rest of them, Andréa had fallen for easy money, dressing up, having a good time. . . .

“Your throat must be dry with all your shouting. Would you like a drink?”

Andréa jerked her head towards the inside of the café. Obviously she was proposing to scrounge a drink for André. He gathered that from her low tone of voice, her conspiratorial wink.

“Thanks,” said André.

“Yes, thanks?”

“No, thanks.”

Andréa pouted with vexation. Her face darkened at André’s curt reply, his deliberate disdain. Her firm mouth expanded, with the lips protruding in a snout, like those of men on the point of fighting. André thought she was going to curse him. But Andréa held herself in. Something better to say had suddenly struck her. She broke into a laugh.

“I hear that Baucher went and told your wife you were making love to me,” she said. “Did she believe it?”

André jeered the question away as though it were an absurd one.

“Why, no! Of course she didn’t.”

He knew that Andréa was sharp enough to catch the wounding implication. But she took no notice of it. She simply retorted:

“I suppose she knows you’re not in the running anyway, eh?”

André studied her. Her café uniform emphasised her air of vulgarity. Sneering challenge was still stamped on her face. It reminded him of her fierce flaunting of him at their second meeting, that day when she had soaked him in the icy water. The reminder didn’t displease him. After all, she wasn’t so domesticated as he had thought.

He reverted to the reproach which, so far, he had scorned to address to her.

“Talking about not being in the running,” he replied, “how about yourself? There was a time when you had plenty to say against being a servant and washing other people’s dishes. But you’ve come to it, like everybody else, haven’t you?”

Quite simply, Andréa replied:

“Oh, it doesn’t matter much what I do now, you know. It won’t be six months before I pass out.”

André stared at her, in astonishment.

Then he realised that, if he had not recognised her at first, it was because she had shrunk. Her face had fallen in, and it had patches of red at the cheek-bones, instead of being sunburned all over.

“That coffee you bought for me came too late,” Andréa went on. “That bath of mine gave me a fine dose of pneumonia, and ever since then I’m quietly rotting away inside my chest. I’ve lost twenty-two pounds in the last three months. I can’t carry my sack any more. Still, I’ve got to eat until I go into hospital. . . . If it comes to that, it can’t be much fun for you, either, playing the showman in the street. When I saw you at it just now, it gave me quite a turn. . . .”

André went on staring at her. He felt dazed by the two-fold blow she had just dealt him.

With unerring insight, Andréa had found him out in his secret shame, though he had not said a word about it; and she had done so just after announcing, quite casually, her own approaching death.

That altered so many values that it could not fail to upset him.

In his mind, he ran over all the sources from which Andréa might expect help.

“What about your aunt?” he asked.

“She died two months ago. Didn’t you know? I was in bed myself at the time. It was something like a race to see which of us would peg out first.”

André hesitated. Then he went on:

“And what about Baucher?”

“He’s gone away. He got a job on board a trawler. He took it into his head when he thought I might try to make him keep me. But he needn’t have been afraid of that. I’ll die without owing anybody anything, or asking anybody for anything.”

A man’s voice shouted:

“Andréa!”

“That’s the boss,” said Andréa, in a whisper. “He wants me to lay the tables. . . .”

She seemed quite concerned that she had been taken at fault.

“Coming!” she cried, and she ran off, with a nod of farewell to André.

He was still thinking about her when a colleague arrived to relieve him at eleven o'clock.

Then he went down to the sands. There he found Hulard, with a badge on his arm, controlling the car traffic. Hulard was raging.

"I told all of them they couldn't park here later than six o'clock, because the tide would be coming in," he said. "So anybody who wouldn't be back by then was to leave his car unlocked, so that we could release the brakes and move it back by hand. Well, I've just discovered a customer who knows better than the annual. He's sure the tide won't rise as high as his bus, and he's locked the whole thing up. Well, this evening, when the water's over his wheels and we have to smash his windows with a hammer to get into it, I'll make it my business to be here. I just want to see his face."

Hulard walked up and down for a moment or two, with his hands behind his back and a sardonic grin on his face. Then he turned to André.

"So you've been playing the beater-up, have you? Just think of it! Just think that we have to remind them there's such a place as the Abbey, and beg them to come and spend an hour there! Just think that what they come here for is omelettes! 'Mont Saint-Michel?' they say. 'Oh yes, of course—Mother Poulard's . . .' May God rest that worthy woman's blessed soul! But may He serve her omelettes to all eternity, in return for all the omelettes they come and gobble here! . . ."

He bent over towards André. He showed his teeth as he went on:

"Good God, when I remember that people used to come here on foot from Germany, from Spain, even from Austria, praying and singing and begging their way along the 'Paths to Paradise'! They used to die on the road, laughing at the sight of the angels. They used to fall on their knees and weep when they caught sight of the Abbey. . . . And now—look at them!"

Hulard shook his fist towards the people getting out of their cars.

"Has it ever struck you, Brelet," he asked, "what it must have been like to come here barefoot, after dreaming about it for a score of years? For my part, I often used to think about it at night, when I was in the depths of Africa. . . ."

"You went in procession with your candle through the Crypt of the Great Pillars and the Aquilon. You intoxicated yourself with psalm-singing and incense. You believed in miracles. You believed in Saint Michael. You believed that he existed, that he trampled ugliness and dirtiness underfoot, that he put everybody in his place with his question: 'Who is like God? . . .'"

You wept down your doublet over your sins. You were still capable of weeping over them. Then you left them all behind you here, in a heap, at the feet of a monk. You went away again, light-hearted, cleansed and burnished. Don't you think that must have been fine? . . . No, no, you can't park here, sir. You must go to the end of the row. . . .”

Hulard bent down to the window of a jade-green cabriolet, and with a jerk of his head and a wave of his hand motioned it to the end of the row of cars.

“All right,” said the driver, obediently.

When the car stopped, André accompanied Hulard to the door. A girl got out and shook the creases out of her clothes with a wriggle of her shoulders and hips. A man in a light-coloured dustcoat followed her: a stout fellow with chubby cheeks, who blinked his eyes in the sunlight.

André recognised him before he could pretend not to know him.

He was Henri Boudard, fat “Boubou,” as he had been called at school. André had remained friends with him after their school days because he was handy and from force of habit, just as one sticks to a tradesman.

Boudard stood stock still in front of André, with his eyes and his mouth wide open.

“It can't be!” he exclaimed.

“It is,” said André.

“Well, just imagine that! . . .”

Boudard's stupefaction nevertheless left his mechanism for making introductions still working.

“This is André Brelet, a friend of mine at school—and ever since. This is my secretary, Mlle. Raymonde Riveul. . . .”

They walked a few steps along the sands.

“Well, who would ever have imagined it?” Boudard repeated. “Have you been here long?”

“Six months.”

“Well, you know, it really bowls me over.”

André was more amused than offended by Boudard's confusion. He broke into a laugh.

“Don’t take it so tragically, my dear fellow!”

But by now Boudard was talking to the girl. She listened to him in silence. Doubtless she was accustomed to the fat fellow’s facility in astonishment.

“He’s never had the same ideas as everybody else; but after all, this beats everything! . . . What about your wife?”

“She’s here too.”

Boudard still persisted in flying in the face of facts. He seemed hypnotised by the buttons on André’s uniform.

“But,” he ventured, “surely you’re not here as . . . to . . .?”

“As a guardian, to show people round? Yes, I am, old chap. At your service. . . .”

Boudard brooded over André’s reply until they came abreast of the “Siren” inn. Then he clutched at the recent past, as you sometimes do in a nightmare, when you want to convince yourself you are dreaming.

“Look here, the last time we met was at Dinard, at your father-in-law’s, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, I think so.”

Boudard stared down at his toes.

“Of course,” he murmured, awkwardly, “I heard about your troubles, just like everybody else. But I imagined that you still had . . . I mean to say . . .”

“Oh,” said André, “I’ve got plenty left. The only difference is that they’re not the same things.”

Fat Henri did not attempt to make head or tail of that. They had just passed the “Golden Head.” He stopped dead.

“Of course,” he said, “we must have lunch together. You must go and tell your wife. Now . . .”

He was on the point of saying:

“You know all the hotels here. . . .”

But a scruple checked him.

“Last year,” he went on, “I lunched here with the Forestiers. You remember Forestier, of the Spidoléine Company? We went to the ‘Golden Sheep.’ We had quite a good meal. Will the ‘Golden Sheep’ suit you?”

“Very well.”

“All right, then. Shall we meet there at half past twelve? You might reserve a table, will you? Meanwhile, I want to show this child the ramparts. See you later, eh?”

Boudard and the girl went on up the narrow street. As you do when you don't want to be suspected of speaking, Boudard talked straight in front of him, holding himself unnaturally stiff and not turning towards his companion. But she turned round furtively to look back at André. That annoyed him much more than his friend's frank amazement.

When André told Laura that they were lunching with Boudard and his secretary, who was obviously something else, Laura did not seem in the least surprised. She had been expecting some such meeting ever since the beginning of the summer. She knew that a trip to the Mount once every season was traditional with holiday-makers.

She had prepared herself in her own mind for such a meeting. She had imagined, in detail, just the right thing to say, just the right attitude to adopt, just when to parry and when to feint.

If she met a friend whom she knew to be a neglected wife, she would say:

“I've never had my husband so much to myself.”

If she met a friend who was dieting, she would say:

“Since I've been here, I eat all before me, and I sleep like a top.”

She would explain that André was employed as an interpreter. Together with a friend of his, who, besides being a guardian, was an archaeologist and an ex-engineer, he was also responsible for carrying out excavations and making a plan of the Abbey annexes. She wasn't going to give anything away. . . .

But really, with that fat fellow Boudard, it would be almost too easy. He was a chatterbox, and he was also an ass. Laura would not have to take much trouble to get him to tell everybody:

“I saw the Brelets at Mont Saint-Michel. Brelet's a guardian there. Just imagine that! But I can assure you I never saw two happier people in my life. . . .”

André took off his uniform tunic.

“Are you going to change?” Laura asked.

“Hadn’t I better?” replied André, somewhat surprised.

“Just as you like. But, if you’ve got to go on duty again at two o’clock, you’ll barely have time to get back into uniform.”

Despite what Laura said, André put on a summer suit. He realised that Laura meant to brazen things out. He had no intention of lending her a hand.

Lunch started in an atmosphere of extremely embarrassed cordiality. The two women, especially, took stock of one another.

Boudard’s companion did not look the kind of girl you pick up in your car just for a trip or a month or so. She seemed already to have entered into his life, and to have made up her mind to stay in it for keeps. She called him “my dear,” though without ostentation. She discussed his lunch with him.

“Lobster always disagrees with you, you know,” she said.

Boudard beamed beneath the influence of her semi-conjugal attentions.

Meanwhile Raymonde was wondering about Laura. In this woman who knew her lover, would she find an ally or an enemy?

Raymonde was aware that a man who has not yet made up his mind about his mistress is sensitive about the attitude of another woman towards her. She knew how dangerous Laura might be if she treated her with polite contempt. She knew how useful Laura’s help might be if she murmured a compliment into Boudard’s ear about his choice.

Raymonde decided that she must be the first to make an advance. So she was all smiles for Laura.

As for fat Henri, after his third glass of wine he was already back to his and André’s school days.

“André used to be first in everything, Madame,” he told Laura. “It didn’t matter whether it was catechism or gymnastics. As for me, I was always the complete, one hundred per cent dunce. . . . So, my dear fellow, if there were any justice in the world, it’s I who ought to be in your place, and you who ought to be in mine.”

Henri’s candour amused André. It gave him a sneaking satisfaction that his past should come back to him in the likeness of this harmless idiot.

Boudard went on talking about their old friends. Through the medium of his anecdotes, they appeared to André in their true light. They were vulgar, bursting with greed, brainless but with plenty of low cunning. They became

really alive only when women, with their instinctive appetites, came along and bumped into their lives.

Fat Henri was a back-biter. He knew all the latest scandals, he was familiar with everybody's failings. He darted from one to another like a crow knocking down nuts, delighting in it and never missing a mouthful.

"But you never heard what happened to young Lambert, did you? Well, just imagine . . ."

So the parade passed by: insipid indiscretions, dismal adulteries, heart-breaking marriages, unamusing adventures in the mire.

To André's way of thinking, what emerged from all this tittle-tattle was a sense of the incurable boredom in which all these idle rich floundered: a boredom which they carried within them like a secretion, and which smirched everything they touched. André himself had once felt the weight of such a sense of satiety. It was only here that he had got rid of the burden of it, after an effort which still left his shoulders sore.

As Boudard called the roll, all these people came to life again for André: their faces, their voices, their idiosyncrasies, the gossip about them. Boudard mentioned people who had sunk in the trough of the depression. All he now knew about them was the contemptible figures to which their incomes had shrunk. He mentioned people who were still struggling, only to dismiss them with a shake of his head, as one talks about the dying.

Two or three times, André tried to get more out of him about them. But fat Henri was interested only in people who had held their ground, people whose wealth was impregnable, people who were rich by nature, just as one is fat by nature. He spun his chronicle about them tirelessly.

The more he talked about them, the more delighted André was to find that he had ceased to envy them. . . .

At the outset, Laura listened to Boudard with her nerves all on edge. She would never have imagined that her year of poverty had left its mark upon her to such an extent. This meeting found her as sensitive as though she were flayed alive.

But, though Boudard had no idea of tact, this was precisely his salvation. He gossiped just as though nothing had happened. He brought André and Laura forcibly back into the circle of their old acquaintances. He did it so naturally, so consistently, that Laura relaxed and let herself go. She demanded details and started fat Henri along fresh tracks.

She started doing so out of curiosity; but it became a matter of calculation. In relation to Raymonde, listening to her, she asserted in this way that she belonged to the same sphere as Raymonde's lover. On this ground, thanks to their common friends, their common memories, she was closer to Boudard than Raymonde herself. Despite the fact that she had come down in the world for the moment, this guaranteed Laura's influence over Boudard.

By the time they were having liqueurs, Boudard was quite worked up. He threw himself back in his chair, and declaimed, very earnestly:

"Look here, old man, let's talk about things seriously. I've found you again, and I'm not going to lose sight of you. It's simply scandalous that you should be here. . . . Oh, yes, I know what you're going to say. You're going to say that you're not asking for anything, and that you're quite well off as you are. If I were in your place, I should say the same thing. But I'm not at all sure that I'm going to leave you in it—not at all sure, let me tell you!"

André smiled. Not for a moment was he tempted to take Henri's after-lunch remarks seriously. But he saw no point whatever in saying so. Laura, for her part, listened to what Henri said rather tensely. Raymonde turned one of her rings round her finger.

"Suppose I found you something," Henri went on, "I mean something serious, of course, something stunning?"

"For example?" asked André.

"Oh," Boudard protested, "I've no idea, just at the moment. All I can say is that tomorrow, as soon as I'm back in Paris, I'll start looking out for something. As soon as I hear of anything, I'll let you know here. How does that suit you?"

"That suits me very well," said André.

Then he stood up.

"You must excuse me, old man. I go on duty again at two o'clock, and I've only just time to get back into uniform."

When André had gone, Boudard shook his head, sorrowfully.

"Really, it makes me want to cry," he confided to Laura.

Then Laura started talking. She told him all about the winter they had spent. She talked about André's stoicism. He refused to complain, even though he had to sweep out the Abbey and lived on tips.

“But it’s crazy, I repeat!” exclaimed Boudard. “Whatever put it into his head to take a job like that?”

“It was his father,” Laura explained.

They did not go down into the town for the afternoon, but went straight from the hotel terrace to the ramparts, which were less crowded. Boudard walked between Laura and Raymonde, in a brown study. Once he stopped dead, as though something had suddenly struck him. Then he set off again, dragging the girls with him and babbling small talk.

About four o’clock, he decided to go up to the Abbey and say good-bye to André.

A thunderstorm of extreme density was piling up in the west, out to sea. The Mount stood out against it as though it were a slab of slate. The squall broke as they reached the Guard Room. A torrent raced in a cascade down Gautier’s Leap, plunged under the arches, and set off again down the Precipice Steps. They could hear the hollow halls of the Abbey echo with every peal of thunder. It had been set on fire by lightning ten times.

They found the Almonry full of people, for everybody who had been strolling in the gardens or along the patrol-path had sought shelter there. Laura pushed her way through the crowd to Monsieur Plantier and asked for her husband.

“He’ll be back in five minutes, Madame,” replied the Head Guardian. “He’s just getting to the end of a round.”

Then he went on to talk about the thunderstorm. He explained to Boudard how the lightning-conductors were arranged. It was the Archangel Michael who had the job of catching the lightning on the platinum tips of his sword and his wings. Every time he did so, he announced the fact by a great rattling of his arms. He must have been struck twice already in the last quarter of an hour. The Head Guardian’s ears never made a mistake about that. Then Monsieur Plantier broke off.

“Here they are coming out. . . .”

The Store Room door opened. Boudard and his companions saw André stand to one side and take his tips. They could hear him repeating “Thank you,” in an easy tone of voice; for this evening he felt comforted by the mere mass of the anonymous crowd.

Boudard stared at him, flabbergasted. As for Laura, she started crying, wiping away her tears with quick dabs of her forefinger.

Fat Henri took her by the hand.

“Come, come,” he said, “don’t take it so hard! I tell you, I swear to you that I’ll get him out of it. . . .”

He said it in a tone of savage certainty. For he had just been seized with terror: the only kind of terror that is any good where somebody else’s misfortune is concerned; the terror which strikes back at yourself and makes you say:

“Suppose such a thing should ever happen to me!”

André caught sight of them when the last of his party had gone and he had shut the door behind them. He could not conceal his vexation. They took it for shame.

So Laura had done a thing like that! She had brought this ass and his tart to see him get his tips. Just the kind of mess she would make!

“We just came to say *au revoir* to you,” stammered Boudard.

“Oh, yes? . . . Well, *au revoir*, old man. You must excuse me for not coming down with you, but we’re pretty busy.”

“Yes, of course,” Boudard floundered. “Well, *au revoir*. . . . I won’t forget you, you know.”

His anxiety to make his escape was so obvious that André relaxed into amusement.

“Very nice of you. . . . I won’t forget you, either. . . . My compliments, Mademoiselle.”

Raymonde looked at André with a kind of respect, with a certain softening which disarmed her hard eyes. But André paid no attention to it.

“I’ll go with them,” said Laura, with her eyes still red.

“All right,” agreed André.

“Are you coming, Raymonde?”

That Laura should now be addressing this girl by her Christian name jarred upon André more than anything else. To be sure, she used to make friends easily in the old days; but after all, there were limits which she did not cross, or, at least, not so quickly.

Setting off with a new party of visitors, André brooded over this fresh grievance against Laura all the way to the Aquilon Crypt. His mind was

elsewhere as he explained the rooms, to the accompaniment of the tourists' murmuring voices and trampling feet. But, in the crypt, somebody asked:

"Why is it called the Aquilon Crypt? Simply because it faces north?"

André took the questioner to be a schoolmaster. He was quite young; but he had all a schoolmaster's deliberate air and slowness of speech, all the methodical curiosity which becomes second nature to him. His young wife, a little blonde with porcelain blue eyes, was also, André felt, trained to be patient and pay protracted attention to things. She waited for André's reply with her head cocked on one side.

André explained that no document had been found which established for certain at what date the name had been given to the crypt. Still, it did not appear to be earlier than the Seventeenth Century. When Robert de Torigny spoke about the "*Cripta Aquilonalis*," or North Crypt, he was referring only to the Chapel of the Thirty Candles, under the northern part of the transept.

André was simply quoting Hulard's erudition. But the two young people stuck to him for the rest of the round, showing him a somewhat surprised deference.

"We come here every year," the young man told him, "and we never get tired of it."

"You ought to come in the winter," André confided to the two of them. "Then you can go round by yourselves, or in a very small party, and one has plenty of time. . . ."

When André got home, Laura was not there. He assumed that she had got to see Madame Montard and tell her all about the great event of the day, the arrival of those people from Paris. But Laura came back a few minutes after him.

"They've only just gone," she explained.

"But fat Henri seemed in such a hurry," said André, in surprise.

"Mlle. Riveul wanted to see the 'bore' ascending the Couesnon. So they had to wait."

André noticed that Laura did not now say "Raymonde."

"I wonder where he picked up that secretary of his," he remarked. "Just imagine fat Henri with a secretary! What does he want one for—to write picture-postcards? He might have found another label for her."

"She's very nice," replied Laura, curtly.

“And she’s got him very nicely, too! She’ll lead him a dance, and serve him right. He’s such an ass!”

At this point, their conversation reminded André of his resentment against Laura for her crass indiscretion. He was sorry he had not snubbed her at the start.

Then it struck him that he was not the only person to whom the incident had been a trial.

In fact, it dawned on him with astonishment in this connection, that he had given up thinking about Laura so spontaneously as he used to do where their joint lives were concerned. She had accustomed him only too much to making two halves of everything that happened and concerning herself only about her own share in it. In the long run, he had come to do the same thing.

Still, he asked:

“What impression did it make on you, meeting that big fat fool again?”

Laura sidetracked the question.

“He seems much the same. . . .”

André noticed that she was dodging the issue. He pressed hard on her sore spot.

“I wish you could have seen his face when he recognised me. His eyes were like saucers. You’d have thought he was going to swallow all the buttons on my uniform. . . .”

“Well, put yourself in his place. . . .”

Laura’s tone of voice was placid and indifferent. André felt at once that she was not going to give away any sincere impression. He knew that voice of hers which brought one up against a blank wall.

He could tell only too well that, at this very moment, Laura was still listening to fat Henri’s sloppy remarks: “I won’t lose sight of you again. . . . I’ll find something for you. . . .”

She was going to be disillusioned. . . .

All at once, André felt sorry for her. But he could not tell her so without hurting her. So his pity turned into anger against that idiot who had come along and plied her, with all his might, with his talk of Paris, his memories and his promises.

André stood up.

“Boudard was always all talk and no action,” he warned Laura.

She contented herself with shrugging her shoulders. That might mean anything.

The following Wednesday, at lunch, André told Laura that one of the guardians was leaving. He had just inherited a little farm, and he was going to work it. So his lodging was at liberty. It was a four-roomed bungalow, entirely detached, facing the Fanils road. Monsieur Plantier had offered it to André.

As he told Laura this, André studied her.

He had not gone out of his way to find this test for her; but it presented itself just at the right time. For weeks past, ever since they had clashed so savagely that evening of the flood-tide, they had continued their truce. Laura had said nothing more about going away. But André realised that he owed this respite only to the summer, and that Laura’s determination to make her escape was simply in a state of suspense.

He wanted to make sure about this. So he asked:

“Well, what do you think?”

“When would we get the house?” Laura countered.

“In September.”

“In that case, we’ve got time to think about it. . . .”

“That’s just what we haven’t got. I must tell Plantier, one way or the other.”

This time, Laura looked up. So far, she had kept her eyes fixed on the table.

“But you haven’t got to tell him right away, I take it. After all, I must have a look at the house. . . .”

“Any time you like.”

“In an hour or so? . . .”

“All right. . . .”

Contrary to André’s anticipations, Laura did not hurry through their inspection of the house. When they had finished it, she summed up:

“It’s better than where we are. I think you’d better take it. You’re entitled to quarters anyway, so that won’t commit you to anything.”

André imagined that at last Laura was becoming resigned to their lot. At least, she had stopped throwing cold water on anything he suggested, without even considering it. In his delight, he started making more plans on the spot.

“We might turn the dining-room into a living-room. . . .”

“Yes, we might. . . .”

But on Friday, when André came home to lunch after his morning’s duty, Laura did not give him time to shut the door before she cried:

“I’ve had a letter from Boudard!”

From her ill-concealed jubilation, André realised at once that she had laid hands on a weapon. Looking him straight in the eyes, Laura went on:

“He’s found something for you. . . .”

André hung up his cap.

“Something?” he growled. “One can always find something. . . .”

“But this is something almost too good to be true. . . . Here, see for yourself!”

As he took the sheet of paper, for the first time André realised how much, already, he clung to the Mount. This letter was going to tear him away from it. He had a presentiment that it would. He could not bring himself to read it.

But Laura’s eyes, levelled at him, made him lower his own eyes to the lines of writing. He skipped the first half-page in which fat Henri professed his friendship and said how sorry he was for them.

“Immediately on my return to Paris,” he wrote, “I went to see Monsieur Marvel, as I promised you, my dear little lady. . . .”

“Oh,” interjected André, “so you had it all arranged between you? . . .”

“I am very glad,” Boudard’s letter went on, “to be able to tell you that I was completely successful. At my request, Monsieur Marvel agreed to offer André a post as commercial correspondent with his British partners. It would be André’s duty to keep the London and Edinburgh firms in touch with headquarters in Paris. His perfect knowledge of English and his taste for travel, which is bad for clothes but helps a young man’s education, would find plenty of scope in this direction. As for terms, Monsieur Marvel himself will tell André about them next Monday; for he is looking forward

to seeing him at his office on Monday afternoon. But I am in a position to assure you that they are better than anything I should ever have dared to hope.”

The letter wound up with fat Henri’s jocular singing of his own praises for his friendly interest. A large part of these praises, he was at the same time careful to specify, belonged to Raymonde. She had advised him, she had goaded him, she had spurred him on. She was in such a hurry to see her new-found friend Laura again.

André could not deceive himself for a moment. This was serious business.

It was well known on the Stock Exchange how much of his strength Marvel owed to his British branches. He supervised them closely, and anybody who helped him to do so, if he was capable of keeping his eyes open, understanding what he saw, reporting upon it and making suggestions, was in line for an enviable position.

There was no refusing this job. André could not get away from that.

He was left with only one thing that dumbfounded him. How quickly it had all happened! He laid the letter on the table. How suddenly it had made an end of so much!

“Just how good is this job he’s offering you?” asked Laura.

André felt annoyed with her. Why should she pretend to take any interest in anything except getting away?

“You needn’t worry,” he replied, sulkily. “You win. We’re going.”

But Laura shook her head.

“You can think what you like; but I’m not going to let you take just anything at all. . . .”

André did not spend much time over his lunch. He made only one remark.

“There’s just one thing that beats me. It was questioned whether that fat fellow Boudard was competent to manage his own money. And now he’s only got to put in an appearance, and he gets this job for me! . . . Certainly, when imbeciles start getting busy . . .!”

“You’ve a queer way of showing your gratitude to him,” Laura reproached him, in her reasonable tone of voice.

André overtook Hulard on the patrol-path, on his way up to the Abbey. He showed him Boudard's letter.

"Well," said Hulard, "I must say it strikes me as well worth while. . . . Oh, it was that little fat man with the pretty lady, was it? . . . So you've still got friends who bestir themselves about you, eh? Lucky, aren't you? Of course, you'll be taking off your uniform cap to us for the last time. You can't refuse a thing like that. In short, it's a pretty good job."

"So is this," retorted André.

"This," replied Hulard, "is a job either for a poor devil who is glad to earn a little money by repeating a recitation and sweeping stairs, or else for a fellow who is smitten with the place like me. You're neither the one nor the other, so obviously it's no job for you. . . . After all, you're not so bitten by the place that you're going to lie down across the Precipice Steps and say: 'Kill me if you like; but I won't budge!'"

There was a short silence. Then André answered:

"I'm not so sure. . . ."

Hulard slapped him on the back.

"You're just down in the dumps because your holiday is coming to an end, old man. Everybody knows that feeling. But you'll soon get over it. You'll be coming back next year and asking all of us to lunch."

"No, I won't," replied André, promptly. "If I go away from here, I'll never come back."

Hulard broke into a laugh.

"Come, come, you're not very complimentary! . . . But, seriously, it's almost too good to be true, this offer you've got."

He was repeating Laura's very words. André was struck by the fact.

That evening, when he got home, he switched on the radio at once. Laura walked up and down the room, talking. She behaved prudently, rather anxiously, like somebody handling an explosive.

At dinner, all at once André remembered something.

"Hadn't Marvel a daughter?" he asked. "A gawk of a girl, with a squint, who couldn't say three words without laughing like a loony?"

Laura smiled. André's overdone prejudice amused her.

“After all,” she remarked, “just because he offers you a job, that’s no reason why you should run down his daughter.”

André was privately aware that he was making himself ridiculous; but he had the bit between his teeth.

“I’d better warn you that nothing’s settled yet,” he went on. “I’m not going to Marvel’s just to say ‘Amen’ to everything beforehand.”

Laura replied as though she were dealing with a sulky child.

“On the other hand, I don’t suppose you’re going to refuse to consider anything he suggests. If so, you might as well not go at all. . . .”

From the very beginning of this business, Laura had been in the right: inexorably in the right. . . .

The next day, Saturday, André was on duty at the Lacework Staircase. It was a job which the guardians dreaded. It involved escorting every party of visitors up the hundred steps situated in one of the buttresses of the chapels, before emerging on to the dizzying flight of stairs, fringed by its bold balustrade, up among the pinnacles and the slanting spring of the flying buttresses.

When André went up there for the first time this morning, the sun was already high and streaming on the roof. The garden of stonework cast light blue shadows below it, which repeated its lines and its arches on the walls and the galleries. The famous staircase might have been the bridge of some ship of dreams. From it, below the bristle of silver-gilt pilasters and the cascading roofs, the eye could take in at a glance the boundless stretch of the sands, with all their display of pale gold.

Space struck everybody who went up there like a blow in the face. Then he was invited to turn round and look upwards. He could see something that could be clearly seen only from there: the Archangel Michael, in all his lofty bearing as a young warrior.

André kept on climbing up and down all day long. Sometimes the guardians cheated. They let the parties of visitors go up by themselves and waited for them down below; for there was no danger in climbing the staircase now that it had been restored, and it was only a matter of getting out of breath.

But André put a kind of puerile persistence into seeing the dazzling spectacle a score of times over: this spectacle that gathered all the Mount’s

beauties into one sheaf and let no detail of its carvings, no winding of its streams, be lost. Every ascent renewed his regrets.

He had found the weak spot in himself. On this Mount he had acquired the habit of beauty. It was like a drug which he could not forgo without torment. When he had been told that a spell fell upon those who stayed here too long, that the Mount would not let them go away or forced them to come back, he had been hard put to it not to smile. But now, under the threat of his approaching departure, he discovered that it was true.

Concordance between a certain type of mind and a certain environment might become so close that it turned everywhere else in the world into exile. There was too much oxygen here, too much light, too much sublimity, too much height. In the long run, they led to an everlasting expansion of the soul. It would stifle anywhere else.

Finding himself so sensitive to the spell of a place struck André as, after all, so strange that survivals of his pious childhood came to life again to explain it.

He wondered whether this miraculous Mount might not remain magnetic. Might it not have lost all the irresistible power of spiritual attraction which had drawn multitudes to it for centuries? Might the Archangel to whom it belonged not have let himself be entirely evicted by the Ministry of Fine Arts? . . .

But at length the fatigue of climbing up and down the staircase brought André a dull sense of appeasement. When he came down again with the last party of visitors, he had accepted the inevitable. Nothing remained to him but a dreary disillusionment. With it, however, was mingled a vague confidence in himself and his future, which he owed to his youth.

This week-end afternoon, the High Street was crowded as he went down it, and he had to worm his way in between groups of people looking at shop-windows.

As he passed the "Fancy," he hesitated for a moment. Then he went in and asked if he might consult the Directory.

In his letter, Boudard had not even mentioned the address of Marvel's office in Paris, at which André was to call on Monday.

Marvel? . . . Yes, here was the name, displayed in big letters, in that heavy type reserved for important firms which could afford this expensive form of advertising.

But, underneath that bombastic “Marvel,” another name, less ostentatious, sprang to André’s eyes. He stared at it intensely for a moment or two without taking in its meaning.

It read: “Robert Delabre and Company. . . .”

“Did you find what you wanted?” asked young Madame Docheais, who was busy serving her clamorous customers.

“I did, thank you. . . .”

André hurried outside. He bumped into people walking in the High Street. Once beyond the Outer Guard, he started running towards the barracks, slipping in the slime.

“Marvel, Robert Delabre and Company. . . .”

His discovery of that second name, tucked away in a corner of the page, shocked him as though he had suddenly unmasked an ambush.

So Laura had dared to do that. Through the medium of that fat fool Boudard, she had dared to beg for a job for him from the very man who was said to have been her lover . . . the man who had been her lover.

For that, at least, was clear now. It was as conclusively proved as though Laura had signed and dated a record of all her meetings with Delabre at Dinard.

It was on her whole shameless past that she was cynically collecting, now that she had an opportunity of getting Delabre to pay his debts to her. . . .

And André, like a dolt, like an idiot, had always shut his eyes tight, for fear lest the obvious should end by smacking him in them! . . .

A pool of rainwater made him go out of his way. During those few seconds, the tide of hatred which was swelling within him spread out just like that pool.

On the other side of it, he found an odious picture which, this time, refused to be dismissed: a picture of Delabre on the Casino promenade; Delabre in bathing-trunks, in all his slim, sunburned nudity, with his tawny hair streaming in the wind like a torch.

It was Laura herself who had brought them face to face, just as Delabre, with a shallow, sheepish little smile, was awkwardly trying to make himself inconspicuous among his friends.

“Let me introduce you to Bob . . . Monsieur André Brelet.”

They had taken a contemptuous dislike to one another at sight.

André had felt Delabre’s eyes running over him and summing him up: his new tie, his last year’s jacket, his stout shoes, his peasant’s build.

For his part, André had been no less quick to discern, in this only too handsome fellow, the very type of lady-killer. He saw that Delabre, for all his fine figure, had nothing inside him. From the sly shiftiness of Delabre’s brown eyes, from the greedy slackness of his shapely mouth, he drew his conclusion:

“He’s worse than a rake—he’s a rotter. . . .”

André had not even done Delabre the honour of being jealous of him—at that time. He disliked Delabre so much that he could not imagine Laura’s being attracted by him. For that matter, she treated him like a lap-dog.

“Come here, Bob the Beau!” she used to say.

Besides, the moment André asked her to do so, she had unceremoniously dismissed her whole gang, beginning with Bob.

“You reproach me for playing about with them,” she said to André, making movie-star eyes at him, “but why didn’t you come along sooner? . . .”

It was with this kind of talk that she had got him, with her docility, with her cleverness in copying; for, at that time, she would serve up to order whatever picture of herself he looked like wanting. . . .

When André went in, Laura was sitting at the window. She jumped as she heard the door slam behind him.

André had his hands crammed into his pockets. He marched across the room until he was up against Laura’s chair, standing knee to knee with her.

Then he said, in a curt tone of voice:

“Look here: you overlooked one interesting detail, didn’t you? Delabre is Marvel’s partner, isn’t he? . . .”

Laura overdid her naturalness as she replied:

“Why, of course! He’s Marvel’s son-in-law. . . .”

André started. This was an unexpected find.

“Oh, is he?” he went on. “Well, that’s very, very nice! . . . I understand the whole thing from start to finish now, and it’s even more perfect than I imagined. So handsome Robert married the idiot daughter for the sake of a share in the profits. . . . Yes, it’s quite a time since we had any news of old Bob—or, at least, since I had any news of him. . . . You can’t reproach me with ever having mentioned his name to you. I may have thought about him. I may have thought about him more than I wanted. But I never said so. Just imagine it—I believed in you. . . .”

He swung round suddenly, as though Laura had raised an objection, and flung at her:

“Yes, I believed in you. . . . When people who knew wrote to my father that you’d been caught lying mouth to mouth with Delabre in the Vicomte woods, that you went so far as to meet him in his hotel bedroom, it was in you that I believed. Ever since then, I’ve always forced myself to go on believing in you. That surprises you, doesn’t it? It surprises you that, out of respect for his wife, a man should keep her safe inside himself, even against his better judgment. It’s bound to surprise you: a woman like you, who picked on a poor girl to trip me up. You needn’t try to work it out, but that’s what I did, anyway. . . . If I found Delabre’s name under Marvel’s just now, it was by chance. I wasn’t expecting to find it.”

Laura did not realise that André was doing himself justice before condemning her, that he was emphasising how wide was the gulf that lay between them.

She grasped only his last words. She thought that he was excusing himself for his discovery, and presenting it to her to dispose of it. André had outstripped her too long. She had ceased to make head or tail of him. Her mind always worked on too low a level.

“And what about it?” she said, picking up the knitting in her lap.

André studied her, cruelly, eager to see to what depths she would descend in her fatuous attempt to go on deceiving him. For his part, he saw everything so clearly that he almost felt a kind of exasperated pity for her.

Laura pulled her needle through her knitting as she outlined her paltry plan of campaign.

“What about it?” she repeated. “You bring Delabre back into the picture just because you’ve found out that he’s Marvel’s partner. But, if you’d asked me, I could have told you so. . . .”

A little diminuendo chuckle, like a horse's whinny, died away in the depths of André's throat.

"So you knew it?"

"Of course I knew it. Boudard told me."

"And then you promptly said to Boudard: 'Well, in that case, ask him for a job for André on my behalf.'"

Laura tried to pull herself together. But André beat her down again.

"'On my behalf,' eh? . . . He's not strong on brains, our friend Bob. Let's be fair to him. He's as empty-headed as he's handsome. But that was so clear that he tumbled to it at once. You don't forget a good time so easily as all that, do you? Particularly when you're offered a chance of taking up the chorus just where some bumpkin turned up and broke it off. After all, it's flattering to you, a thing like that. . . . So he thought up a capital dodge for getting his morsel back, that nice morsel which was all ready to fall into his beautiful mouth again. . . . Hadn't Marvel got just the very job at his disposal, a cosy little job abroad? The boss could send the husband to England, and meanwhile the partner . . . And just imagine that he may have thought that *I* agreed to all this! . . . Well, say something, can't you, damn it? Say something! Say anything you like!"

André seized Laura by her wrists and shook them.

Laura threw back her head and looked him straight in the eyes. She was so pale that he let go of her.

"After that," she stammered, "I've got only one thing to say to you. It's this. If you don't start for Paris tomorrow night and tell Marvel that you accept his offer, I'll go there by myself, and you'll never see me again."

When Laura stammered her ultimatum, André cried:

“All right, go if you like!”

Then he hurried to Hulard’s. Hulard lived in two former prisoners’ cells, chock-full of books, plans and stones dug up in the excavations.

He listened to his friend as a confessor listens, leaning forward, motionless, with his clasped hands resting on his knees.

André’s passionate harangue against Laura went on for hours. It was not merely her betrayal of him that day about which he told Hulard. It was also her other, her greater, betrayal of him. Only on the Mount had Laura revealed her appalling poverty of mind.

“If you’d simply said: ‘She’s got money,’ you’d have told me everything there was to be said about her—every mortal thing. Everything about her came back to that. But, fool that I was, I had to bring her here to find it out. Before that, what with the bits of music and the bits of reading she’d picked up somewhere, and the bits she still had left of what she’d learned at school, I could say to myself: ‘She’s no fool.’ She nearly killed herself having a good time—and I thought she was as gay as a lark by nature! And when I think about what I mistook for love! But when we got here—oh, my dear fellow!

“When we were in Paris, she could still stick it, just as you stick it at a roulette-board, when you hope up to the bitter end that you’re going to win back all you’ve lost. But, when we got here, she sank to zero. There’s nothing in her, I tell you, nothing at all. Not a thing, anywhere in her. Whatever I did, I couldn’t help seeing that for myself.

“At the beginning, I didn’t understand. I said to myself: ‘Is it possible that she can have changed like this?’ But it wasn’t she who had changed. It was I who had changed. Here, inevitably, I’ve got a bit more decent. So I see things more clearly. You may think it silly of me, but nothing will get it out of my head that it’s thanks to the Abbey, to the sands, and perhaps to you too, that I’ve ended by seeing her as she really is. . . .

“When I think of all the times I’ve gone home and found her still sulking, doing nothing but trying to get out, like an animal in a cage, ready

to trample on me a score of times if only she could get out, bent at all costs on recovering what she calls 'her life'!" . . .

"Talking about that," Hulard ventured, "haven't you left her too much by herself?"

André shrugged his shoulders.

"I haven't left her by herself enough. . . . If I'd seen less of her, I might have gone on trying to believe that I was wrong about her. . . . I wanted to get her back, I needn't tell you. But I had nothing to offer her: no dances, no dressmakers, no cocktail-parties, nothing. . . . Then what had I got? Just myself? The mere fact of my presence? . . ."

André laughed, bitterly.

"I'm just a piece of furniture, just an empty cupboard, old man. . . . Of course, she's reproached me a hundred times over with my fishing, and my shooting, and my talks with you. But was it because she wanted to have me more to herself? Not at all! It was simply because she was furious that I should still have some amusements when she had lost all hers."

With savage shrewdness, André dislodged Laura from all her lairs, one after the other. But he kept on coming back to his horror of her cynical stroke of business.

"Look here," he asked, "can she really have thought me capable of standing for a thing like that? After all, she must have known that, from the very first day, I should find out that Delabre was Marvel's partner. . . . So what? So what, I ask you?"

For the first time, Hulard made a move. He sat up straight.

"And when you reproached her with all this," he asked, "what did she say?"

"She said that, after what I'd just said, either I'd accept Marvel's offer, or else she'd leave me. . . ."

André sneered as he reported Laura's ultimatum.

Hulard stood up. He started walking up and down alongside one of the walls, with the piles of books heaped against it. His tall shadow first followed him, and then, all at once, went ahead of him.

"She was quite right," he declared, at length. "You have no right to refuse to put her to the test."

He glanced at André.

André had his mouth wide open, and his fists brought up to his chest, as though he had just bumped into something.

Hulard held up his hand to stop him speaking.

“I know just what you’re going to say,” he went on. “You’re going to tell me that she’s playing a part, that she’s feeling her footing, that she’s bluffing. . . . Well, she may be. But the point is that you can’t be sure; and you’ve no right to make any mistake about it. . . . If you can bring yourself to do it, just suppose for a moment that she’s merely being rash, or even, if you like, reckless. Just suppose, in fact, that she’s a woman so sure of herself that she can ask a favour of an old flame of hers, with no intention of paying him any more than a trifle. Why, that sort of thing is done every day of the week, and nobody calls it anything worse than flirting! . . .”

André shook his head. He went on shaking it, as though he couldn’t stop.

“But damn it,” cried Hulard, “I tell you again that you can’t be sure. On the other hand, you do know that she’ll go away without you if you don’t agree to what she wants. I repeat that you’ve no right to cast her off, unless you’re absolutely certain that she’s made up her mind, at this very moment, to go to the bad. And that’s precisely what you can’t be sure about unless you put her to the test on the spot.”

It was much to Hulard’s credit that he should defend Laura like this. But André gave him no credit for it at all.

He remembered only that Hulard had taught him how to ask for tips without looking like it. This was the same man who was talking to him now, the same trickster.

“So that’s the big idea, is it, eh?” he asked, with his lip curling. “I’m to take her to the other fellow, and let the whole lot of them think it’s all right with me? . . .”

Hulard burst out laughing: that robust, ringing laugh of his that seemed to drive all shadows away.

“Come, come,” he exclaimed, “don’t make me out more of a rotter than I am! . . . I’ve got quite an easy conscience about it—only too easy. Neither Delabre nor anybody else is going to take in a man like you for one moment. I can count on you to see how things stand. After that, if there has to be a smash, well, there’ll be a smash, but . . .”

Hulard clicked his thumb-nail against his teeth.

“But you won’t have anything with which to reproach yourself.”

Then he pointed to the long, livid scar which split his cheek.

“Look here! I got this, one night in the jungle, through making a mistake, and going on making a mistake, about what a woman meant. I’ll tell you the story one day, if you’ll promise me to go to bed now, and start for Paris tomorrow night. . . . Yes, I tell you, you must go. . . .”

When André got home, he found Laura’s big trunk open, with folded clothes already at the bottom of it.

He did not go into the bedroom, but lay down on the little couch in the dining-room. He slept till dawn.

It was Laura who awakened him by poking at him.

“Aren’t you on duty at half past eight?” she said. “It’s time you had breakfast.”

In the momentary bewilderment of awakening, André stared at her for a moment or two without recognising her. It was as though, during the past night, the last links that bound her to him had snapped one by one.

He gulped down his coffee and went up to the Abbey. All morning he showed visitors round. He applied himself to his job with a kind of fury.

It was going to remain his job. He was not going to catch the six o’clock coach. Laura could catch it if she liked. Its departure seemed to him as remote as old age.

At one moment, in the Guard Room, he reassured himself:

“She won’t dare to go. She’ll give way in the end.”

Not for a moment did he dream that, as Hulard had said, he himself might give way and go.

At the end of lunch, once more it was Laura who broke the silence.

“The coach leaves at six o’clock, you know. . . .”

André walked out of the room as though he had not heard what she said.

When he reached the Almonry, he found Monsieur Plantier and Grénier walking up and down side by side. Grénier was talking in a low voice. The Head Guardian listened to him, frowning crossly. As soon as he caught sight of André, he signed to him to join them.

“Look here, Brelet,” he said, “what’s this that’s happened? I’ve just come from the Cloister. A ram’s head on one of the capitals has been broken off. . . . Grénier tells me it wasn’t broken off when he went round at eleven o’clock, because he pointed it out to the visitors. Nobody but you has been round since. Well, was it while you were going round that some swine did it?”

Grénier stood motionless, leaning against a pillar.

“I hadn’t more than twenty people with me,” replied André, “and I never took my eyes off them. After all, you can’t break off a thing like that as though you were snapping a match in two. It would mean . . .”

“It doesn’t take long to swing a walking-stick,” remarked Grénier, without stirring.

“It would mean,” André went on, “that it was done without my either seeing it or hearing it. Besides, wouldn’t some, at least, of the visitors have looked round when the head fell off and rolled on the floor? . . .”

“When one is at one end of the Cloister,” Grénier observed again, “there are often visitors still at the other end. One can’t hold all of them by the hand, and they can do more or less what they like . . .”

“Look here,” André interrupted, “are you so keen as all that on blaming this business on me? . . . You’d better mind what you’re saying. It would lead one to think . . .”

“To think what?” growled Grénier, with his eyes flashing anger.

“To think that somebody went round after me, by himself, damaged the capital, and came back here to report it. . . .”

Grénier took two steps forward. The Head Guardian’s stick fell between him and André.

“Do you think you’re going to fight here? Well, you’re not! . . . I’m going to clear this business up, and I can tell you that, whoever is the guilty party, he’ll pay for that breakage!”

Some visitors had come in. They stopped at the door and listened with interest.

“This way for tickets!” cried the Head Guardian.

André set off with a party of visitors. Grénier’s dirty trick occupied his mind until he got to the Cloister. He reckoned at what time the thing could

have been done, and cast around for a possible witness: somebody who might have seen Grénier entering or leaving.

When he reached the Cloister, he stopped and had a look at the damaged capital. He had to stop himself from shrugging his shoulders. The trap Grénier had tried to lay for him was too clumsy. The head had not been broken off at all: it had been filed off. The rasping trace of the file was still visible where the neck had been cut through two-thirds of the way down. André could make out the streaks. Old Plantier wouldn't take long in dismissing that as a visitor's doing! . . .

With astonishment, it dawned on André that for some little time he had forgotten to think about Laura and the approaching hour of six o'clock.

But now Grénier's accusation against him mingled with that other source of embitterment. For the first time, the injustice with which he was threatened set him doubting whether he was being fair towards Laura.

The fact that he himself had been wrongly suspected embarrassed him in his suspicions of her. In the Cloister, he had just worked out his own defence. That paved the way for a possible defence for Laura. . . .

Ever since the night before, André had been driving away the memory of Hulard and what he had said. He accused Hulard of lack of understanding. He accused him also of showing some lack of a sense of decency.

Only now, in the intervals of his hasty recitation of his guide's patter, did André do Hulard justice. Only now did he listen to the echo of Hulard's words, just as, in these very halls, he had so often listened to him with affectionate deference.

"Just suppose that she's merely being rash. . . . You have no right to make any mistake about it. . . . You have no right to cast her off. . . ."

Words, words, words! Just the kind of thing you always say in such cases. Just the kind of thing that is valid for everybody and does no good to anybody. André himself had said to other people: "It's just a misunderstanding. . . . Think things over. . . . Above all, don't do anything irreparable. . . ." But all he had really meant was: "What the hell do I care about it?"

Yet one thing that Hulard had shouted at him, with an oath, refused to be argued away. Even more clearly than the night before, André could hear his friend saying:

"You can't be sure. . . . You don't know for certain. . . ."

No, he didn't know for certain. But as for being sure . . .?

Yes, he was sure to this extent. He was sure that Laura had said to herself:

"Even if I have to become Delabre's mistress . . ."

What was he talking about: "become his mistress"? Of course, he meant: "become his mistress *again*."

The word hit André so hard that it brought him to himself.

He was in the Hall of the Knights, right at the end of it, up against the west wall. His party of visitors had got bored with their long halt. They had gathered round him. They were staring at him in surprise. Some of them already looked like making fun of him.

André felt ashamed of himself. He clapped his hands.

"This way, ladies and gentlemen!"

He set off on his round again.

After this warning, he paid more attention to his following rounds. The parties of visitors whom he escorted became more and more numerous, more and more noisy. It was difficult to keep them together. André had to have his wits about him to avoid overlooking stragglers all over the place. Bear-leading them occupied all his attention until the bell rang for closing-time.

But he had just had time, in the Aquilon Crypt, to make up his mind.

"I'll go home," he said to himself. "I'll talk to her. I'll find out . . ."

This decision calmed him down, because it postponed the hour of reckoning still further. It never dawned on him that it was in itself a token of surrender. . . .

At half past four, after the share-out on the table, he was on his way out, with his pockets bursting with small change, when Hulard came up to him.

"Well," said Hulard, "I've fixed it up with Old Plantier. It's understood that I'll substitute for you tomorrow and on Tuesday."

André shrugged his shoulders wearily by way of agreement.

He made his way down the Precipice Steps. A splendid summer's evening was drawing to its end beneath him. It was the time when the sun stopped shaking its powder-box. The shimmer of heat faded out of the horizon and left it once more distinct.

All down the steps, a crowd awaited the rise of the tide, watching to see it come in like a horse at a gallop, and the North Tower was topped by a broad parapet of heads. The tide, which was a flood-tide, still hovered at the slack at the edge of the sands, drawing a line like quicksilver in suspense six miles away from the Mount.

André came to a standstill. His mind was as much of a blank as the minds of all these spectators.

He was merely a man exhausted by a ridiculous conflict, an interminable fencing-match of quibbles and conjectures. All he could now rummage up in his head was poverty-stricken commonplaces.

After all, Laura was his wife. He couldn't smash up everything without stopping to think. He must wait and see. . . .

This halt in the midst of his rout was the last stand of his proper pride.

He was going, of course. But, even so, he couldn't be on the spot too long before the coach left. . . .

He leant on the parapet and listened to the distant murmur which announced the turn of the tide. The metallic line along the horizon turned into a race of foam advancing abreast. Its tumultuous tossing could soon be seen.

The Sée was the first of the rivers that seemed to shudder. To the east it spread out in a mere trail of silver across the sands, with short white branchings and bifurcations, simply streaks of still water. The tide brought all this dead water to life all at once. A wave ran through it to the very end of the lagoons. After it had passed, they kept on getting rougher and growing bigger.

The Sélune was deeper and more compact, with its gleaming arms lying alongside its body, so to speak. It swelled suddenly, with a rush of water into it that looked like the bursting of a dam.

Until now, there had been nothing around Tombelaine but sand. The island's rocks, its brushwood and its belt of sea-wrack stood out with startling clarity. All at once, it was surrounded by a moving circle of shining water.

It was at this moment that somebody near André exclaimed, as though reluctantly:

“Why, they're going to get caught! . . .”

Then, for the first time, André caught sight of two tiny figures moving on the sands. They seemed to be trying to make their way to Tombelaine. Then, all at once, they fell back towards the Mount.

Their smallness, in that vast expanse, bore witness to the distance they were away. So did the apparent slowness of their flight, though they must be hurrying.

André stood straight up, in sudden alarm. He wondered what had happened.

Had these people lingered too long on the island, or had they been surprised by the tide before they got there? He could not tell. But one thing he was already sure about. Their way to Tombelaine was barred by the rush of the sea into the river.

“They’re running,” said a man who was looking at the figures through field-glasses.

André himself could now see the two black dots getting bigger. Those who knew nothing about the sands might still think that they could outdistance the tide, for they were moving on a wide stretch of sand which seemed to reach right to the Mount.

To their left, the Sélune was by now entirely swallowed up by the sea. It was merely a broad belt of a calm flood water, slowly spreading.

All at once, the two figures stopped again. They went back on their tracks. They had found their way across the sands barred for the second time. It was barred by a torrent, deep and swift, which could not be seen from the Mount, because it flowed in the depths of a depression.

André lived again through those seconds of panic that afternoon in the mist, when he had bent over the dark flow. . . .

“They’re done for,” said a woman’s voice, beside him.

André turned round and recognised Andréa. She was standing staring at the two figures, with her hands thrust into the pockets of her white apron.

As yet, nobody who did not know would have believed her. The sea seemed to be sparing precisely the broad plateau on which the figures were running. . . .

By now, distraught, they were falling back at top speed on Tombelaine, which they had not ventured to make for a little earlier. As he looked at the loitering progress of the tide around the island, the narrowness of the belt of

water that hemmed it in, André still hoped they might manage to reach the rocks.

But Andréa dashed his hopes.

“There’s more than six feet of water round it already,” she said, unemotionally.

Yet it did not seem possible that two men should die like this, in the presence of twenty thousand impotent spectators, who had come there on a holiday just to amuse themselves.

How could anybody believe that the famous rush of the tide, that attraction which figured in guide-books and had been taken under the wing of tourist agencies, was capable of killing? . . .

That it was going to kill the two men the spectators realised only when they saw them separate and start running about, frantically, aimlessly, from one end to the other of the now shrinking sandbank.

“They’re waving their arms,” announced another tourist with field-glasses.

“But can’t anything be done to save them?” cried a woman. “Isn’t there a lifeboat?”

There was a lifeboat: a rowing boat; three pairs of oars against one of the strongest currents in the world. It had already been manhandled in the Couesnon. But André knew in advance that it could not fight against the current until the tide had practically reached its peak.

“The mayor must be told!” shouted somebody.

In this little town, chock-full of thousands of strangers, it dawned on André suddenly, there were only a handful of men on whom one could count. Behind the inert crowd, the people of the Mount started shouting to one another, getting into touch with one another, like the crew of a ship in difficulties, when they pen up the passengers and merely ask them not to interfere with navigation.

Andréa shrugged her shoulders.

“I don’t see what the mayor can do about it,” she said. “The priest, for his part, might give them his blessing from his window. . . . The same thing happens every year,” she added, still unemotionally.

Obviously she felt no pity for the two men. They had let themselves be caught, and caught stupidly, without the least excuse. There was no reason

why they should have set out for Tombelaine just when everybody else was coming back.

Somebody murmured that in fact a fisherman had met them and urged them to go back, but in vain.

“There you are,” went on Andréa. “They were warned; but of course they knew better than anybody else.”

The mistake they had made was trusting their own eyes, instead of heeding a passing fisherman’s warning.

On this clear day, Tombelaine looked quite close, so definitely distinct that it surely could not be a quarter of an hour’s walk away. All afternoon parties of visitors had linked the island to the Mount, like a procession of black ants.

But it was not till after four o’clock that three young men—it was known now that they came from Ille-et-Vilaine—made up their minds to undertake this more or less obligatory excursion. They set off despite advice to the contrary.

Half-way, however, one of them got frightened and turned back. The other two pursued him with friendly insults and catcalls. Still, after his desertion they themselves quickened their pace; for they were astonished to find how riddled were these sands that looked so smooth when they started. They were cut up by deep lagoons, in which a little water still lay sleeping, and they were humped by banks. Meanwhile Tombelaine, still as plain as ever, did not seem to be getting any nearer.

The two young men had already fallen victims to the most terrible of the Mount’s mirages: that absolute transparency of the atmosphere which eliminates distance. They were also misled by the disappearance of the sea, of which the keenest eyes could not catch a glimpse, so far had it retreated.

They had got within five hundred yards of Tombelaine when they heard the loud rumble of the incoming tide and saw the island surrounded by water. Then, at length, they thought fit to give it up and turn back.

That decision was the death of them. At that moment, they could still have reached Tombelaine, at the same time as the tide which was just pressing in upon it. They would have beaten the flood by a bare margin and been able to climb up the rocks. Then a boat could have gone and fetched them off.

But, in their anxiety, they made a rapid retreat. Then came that ghastly surprise. They found themselves cut off by an unfordable torrent which was not there on their way out. . . .

Now they were reduced to running about a strip of sand which was being whittled away and dissolving in all directions with appalling speed. They rushed about in zigzags, with sudden twists and turns, like hunted animals. One of them even ran into the water. Then he ran back.

Presumably they were shouting. . . . But to the spectators they remained no more than two black dots. Only their frantic rushing to and fro bore witness to their death-agony.

André reflected that they could see the Mount, the people walking about on it, the automobiles driving along the embankment, the tramcar that had brought them, which was just setting off again. They could see all this, quite close to them, dreadfully distinct.

The thought of the despair which was wringing their hearts was unendurable to André. It was rebellion against precisely the same torture as they were suffering that had once made him jump into the raging torrent of the “backwater.”

It caught at his throat again. He turned away, overwhelmed because there was nothing he could do.

Behind him, leaning out of her bow-window which overlooked the sands, Madame Montard was thirstily drinking in the spectacle of the two men’s doom. André could hear her scolding her servant furiously for failing to find her field-glasses. She reminded him of the women who rent windows from which they can catch a glimpse of the guillotine. He felt like shouting something rude at her. . . .

“Brelet!”

Somebody was calling him. His name rang out over the silent crowd, mute with horror. . . .

“Brelet!”

This time, André caught sight of Docheais at the top of the steps, near the gate into the Little Wood. Docheais had recognised him by his uniform cap. He held two pairs of oars aloft.

“Brelet!” he shouted again. “My boat! . . .”

All at once, André remembered that Docheais had anchored his boat below Saint Aubert's chapel, to the north. From that point, now that the Couesnon was swollen by the flood, they might be able to make headway against the tide. . . .

Elbowing his way through the crowd, André dashed after Docheais, who had already disappeared round the turn in the stairs. He was climbing the top steps when Andréa's voice overtook him: her voice that he knew so well, all corroded by cynicism.

"What's your hurry?" she shouted. "It will be an hour before you get there!"

As he plunged into the gardens, André heard a great gasp of horror, a dreadful sigh from the whole crowd of spectators. It meant that those two poor devils had been swept off the sands by the tide.

In front of him, Docheais shouldered the gate into the Little Wood open.

Only for a moment did André remember the six o'clock coach. It would soon be starting.

Its departure did not seem to concern him any more. It was like an event which he had run past, and which already lay behind him.

Ahead of him, through the tree-trunks, he could catch a glimpse of the sea, the sands, and, down below, a black boat, with raised bow and stern, waiting for him. . . .

As he ran through the Little Wood, for a few yards the path kept straight. Here he managed to collect his thoughts.

"Laura will be gone. . . ."

When he came back, after rowing and dragging for hours, she would be gone. . . .

At last it dawned on him that every step he took was tearing him away from Laura. He slowed down, with all his strength.

He was just coming to a standstill when the path steepened stealthily at a turn, took him by surprise, and shot him forward again down the sheer slope.

It was so sudden, so violent, that the thought flashed through his mind that somebody, somebody inflexible, had given him a shove. . . .

So, scratched on his way by briars, lashed by low branches, he slid down the slope towards the boat.

It was as though Saint Michael, in his wisdom, had put his foot down firmly, thrusting André towards the solitude of the sands, the solitude of his days to come.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *Tides of Mont St.-Michel* by Roger Verce]l]