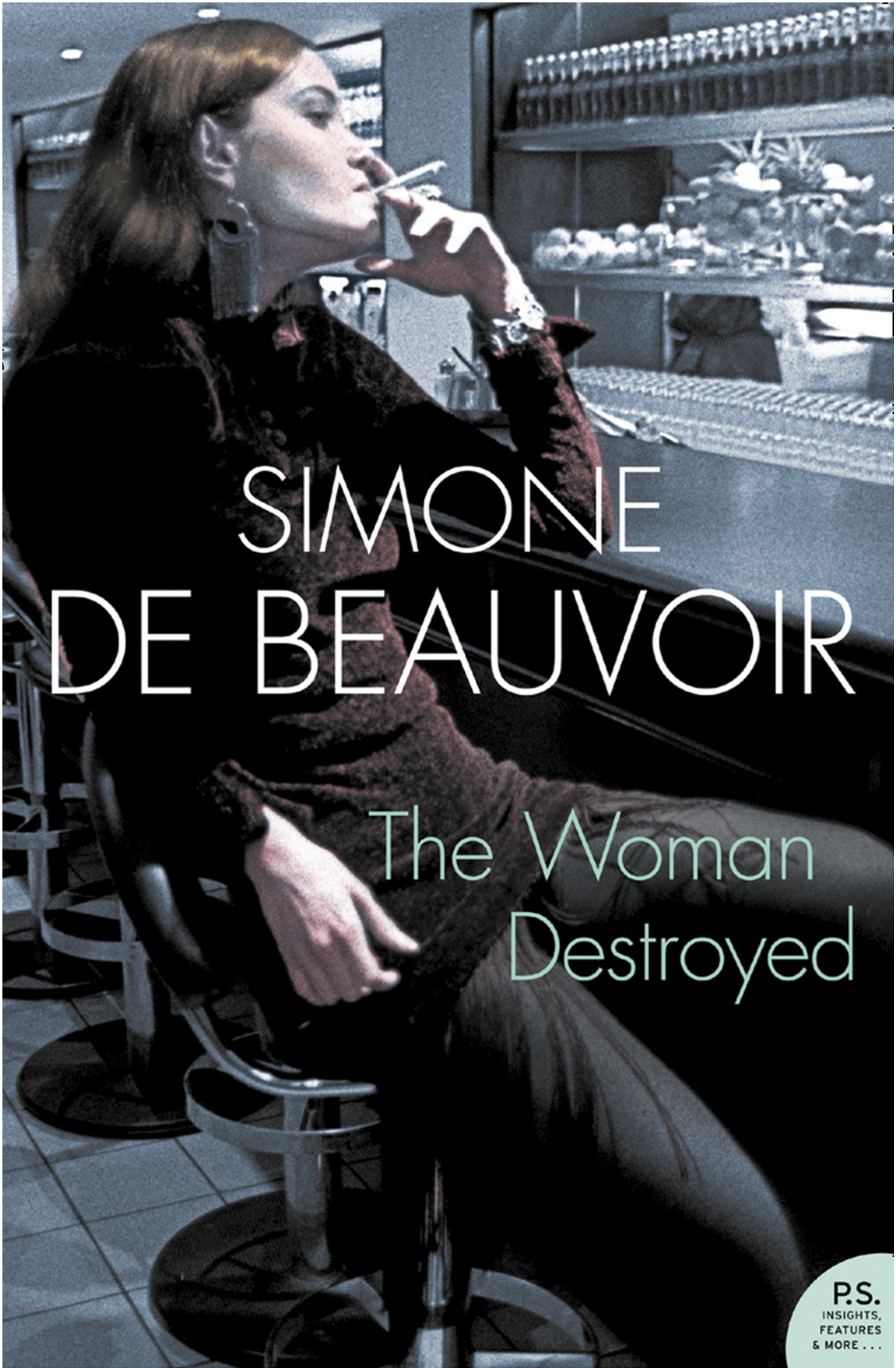

SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR

The Woman Destroyed

P.S.
INSIGHTS, FEATURES & MORE . . .

Simone Beauvoir

The Woman Destroyed

«HarperCollins»

Beauvoir S. d.

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First published in 1967, this book consists of three short novellas on the theme of women's vulnerability – in the first, to the process of ageing, in the second to loneliness, and, in the third, to the growing indifference of a loved one.THE WOMAN DESTROYED is a collection of three stories, each an exquisite and passionate study of a woman trapped by circumstances, trying to rebuild her life.In the first story, ‘The Age of Discretion’, a successful scholar fast approaching middle age faces a double shock – her son’s abandonment of the career she has chosen for him and the harsh critical rejection of her latest academic work. ‘The Monologue’ is an extraordinary New Year’s Eve outpouring of invective from a woman consumed with bitterness and loneliness after her son and her husband have left home. Finally, in ‘The Woman Destroyed’, Simone de Beauvoir tells the story of Monique, trying desperately to resurrect her life after her husband confesses to an affair with a younger woman.Compassionate, lucid, full of wit and knowing, Simone de Beauvoir’s rare insight into the inequalities and complexities of women’s lives is unsurpassable.

Содержание

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The Woman Destroyed

Simone de Beauvoir

SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR
The Woman Destroyed

Translated by Patrick O'Brian

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Contents

THE AGE OF DISCRETION

Has my watch stopped? No. But its hands do not seem to be going round. Don't look at them. Think of something else—anything else: think of yesterday, a calm, ordinary, easy-flowing day, in spite of the nervous tension of waiting.

Tender awakening. André was in an odd, curled-up position in bed, with the bandage over his eyes and one hand pressed against the wall like a child's, as though in the confusion and distress of sleep he had needed to reach out to test the firmness of the world. I sat on the edge of his bed; I put my hand on his shoulder.

'Eight o'clock.'

I carried the breakfast-tray into the library: I took up a book that had arrived the day before—I had already half leafed through it. What a bore, all this going on about non-communication. If you really want to communicate you manage, somehow or other. Not with everybody, of course, but with two or three people. Sometimes I don't tell André about my moods, sorrows, unimportant anxieties; and no doubt he has his little secrets too; but on the whole there is nothing we do not know about one another. I poured out the China tea, piping hot and very strong. We drank it as we looked through our post: the July sun came flooding into the room. How many times had we sat there opposite one another at that little table with piping hot, very strong cups of tea in front of us? And we should do so again tomorrow, and in a year's time, and in ten years' time … That moment possessed the sweet gentleness of a memory and the gaiety of a promise. Were we thirty, or were we sixty?

André's hair had gone white when he was young: in earlier days that snowy hair, emphasizing the clear freshness of his complexion, looked particularly dashing. It looks dashing still. His skin has hardened and wrinkled—old leather—but the smile on his mouth and in his eyes has kept its brilliance. Whatever the photograph-album may say to the contrary, the pictures of the young André conform to his present-day face: my eyes attribute no age to him. A long life filled with laughter, tears, quarrels, embraces, confessions, silences, and sudden impulses of the heart: and yet sometimes it seems that time has not moved by at all. The future still stretches out to infinity.

He stood up. 'I hope your work goes well,' he said.

'Yours too,' I replied.

He made no answer. In this kind of research there are necessarily times when one makes no progress: he cannot accept that as readily as he used to do.

I opened the window. Paris, sweltering beneath the crushing summer heat, smelt of asphalt and impending storms. My eyes followed André. Maybe it is during those moments, as I watch him disappear, that he exists for me with the most overwhelming clarity: his tall shape grows smaller, each pace marking out the path of his return; it vanishes and the street seems to be empty; but in fact it is a field of energy that will lead him back to me as to his natural habitat: I find this certainty even more moving than his presence.

I paused on the balcony for a long while. From my sixth floor I see a great stretch of Paris, with pigeons flying over the slate-covered roofs, and those seeming flowerpots that are really chimneys. Red or yellow, the cranes—five, nine, ten: I can count ten of them—hold their iron arms against the sky: away to the right my gaze bumps against a great soaring wall with little holes in it—a new block: I can also see prism-like towers—recently-built tall buildings. Since when have cars been parked in the tree-lined part of the boulevard Edgar-Quinet? I find the newness of the landscape staringly obvious; yet I cannot remember having seen it look otherwise. I should like two photographs to set side by side, Before and After, so that I could be amazed by the differences. No: not really. The world brings itself into being before my eyes in an everlasting present: I grow used to its different aspects so quickly that it does not seem to me to change.

The card-indexes and blank paper on my desk urged me to work; but there were words dancing in my head that prevented me from concentrating. 'Philippe will be here this evening.' He had been away almost a month. I went into his room. Books and papers were still lying about—an old grey pull-over, a pair of violet pyjamas—in this room that I cannot make up my mind to change because I have not the time to spare, nor the money; and because I do not want to believe that Philippe has stopped belonging to me. I went back into the library, which was filled with the scent of a bunch of roses, as fresh and simple-minded as so many lettuces. I was astonished that I could ever have thought the flat forlorn and empty. There was nothing lacking. My eyes wandered with pleasure over the cushions scattered on the divans, some softly coloured, some vivid: the Polish dolls, the Slovak bandits and the Portuguese cocks were all in their places, as good as gold. 'Philippe will be here …' I was still at a loss for anything to do. Sadness can be wept away. But the impatience of delight—it is not so easy to get rid of that.

I made up my mind to go out and get a breath of the summer heat. A tall negro in an electric blue raincoat and a grey felt hat was listlessly sweeping the pavement: before, it used to be an earth-coloured Algerian. In the boulevard Edgar-Quinet I mingled with the crowd of women. As I almost never go out in the morning any more, the market had an exotic air for me (so many morning markets, beneath so many skies). The little old lady hobbled from one stall to another, her sparse hair carefully combed back, her hand grasping the handle of her empty basket. In earlier days I never used to worry about old people; I looked upon them as the dead whose legs still kept moving. Now I see them—men and women: only a little older than myself. I had noticed this old lady at the butcher's one day when she asked for scraps for her cats. 'For her cats!' he said when she had gone. 'She hasn't got a cat. Such a stew she's going to make for herself!' The butcher found that amusing. Presently she will be picking up the leavings under the stalls before the tall negro sweeps everything into the gutter. Making ends meet on a hundred and eighty francs a month: there are more than a million in the same plight: three million more scarcely less wretched.

I bought some fruit, some flowers, and sauntered along. Retired: it sounds rather like rejected, tossed on to the scrap-heap. The word used to chill my heart. The great stretch of free time frightened me. I was mistaken. I do find the time a little too broad over the shoulders; but I manage. And how delightful to live with no imperatives, no kind of restraint! Yet still from time to time a bewilderment comes over me. I remember my first appointment, my first class, and the dead leaves that rustled under my feet that autumn in the country. In those days retirement seemed to me as unreal as death itself, for between me and that day there lay a stretch of time almost twice as long as that which I had so far lived. And now it is a year since it came. I have crossed other frontiers, but all of them less distinct. This one was as rigid as an iron curtain.

I came home; I sat at my desk. Without some work I should have found even that delightful morning insipid. When it was getting on for one o'clock I stopped so as to lay the table in the kitchen—just like my grandmother's kitchen at Milly (I should like to see Milly again)—with its farmhouse table, its benches, its copper pots, the exposed beams: only there is a gas-stove instead of a range, and a refrigerator. (What year was it that refrigerators first came to France? I bought mine ten years ago, but they were already quite usual by then. When did they begin? Before the war? Just after? There's another of those things I don't remember any more.)

André came in late; he had told me he would. On leaving the laboratory he had attended a meeting on French nuclear weapons.

'Did it go well?' I asked.

'We settled the wording of a new manifesto. But I have no illusions about it. It will have no more effect than the rest of them. The French don't give a damn. About the deterrent, the atomic bomb in general—about anything. Sometimes I feel like getting the hell out of here—going to Cuba, to Mali. No, seriously, I do think about it. Out there it might be possible to make oneself useful.'

'You couldn't work any more.'

'That would be no very great disaster.'

I put salad, ham, cheese and fruit on the table. 'Are you as disheartened as all that? This is not the first time you people have been unable to make headway.'

'No.'

'Well, then?'

'You don't choose to understand.'

He often tells me that nowadays all the fresh ideas come from his colleagues and that he is too old to make new discoveries: I don't believe him. 'Oh, I can see what you are thinking,' I said. 'I don't believe it.'

'You're mistaken. It is fifteen years since I had my last idea.'

Fifteen years. None of the sterile periods he has been through before have lasted that long. But having reached the point he has reached, no doubt he needs a break of this kind to come by fresh inspiration. I thought of Valéry's lines

Chaque atome de silence Est la chance d'un fruit mûr.

Unlooked-for fruit will come from this slow gestation. The adventure in which I have shared so passionately is not over—this adventure with its doubt, failure, the dreariness of no progress, then a glimpse of light, a hope, a hypothesis confirmed; and then after weeks and months of anxious perseverance, the intoxication of success. I do not understand much about André's work, but my obstinate confidence used to reinforce his. My confidence is still unshaken. Why can I no longer convey it to him? I will *not* believe that I am never again to see the feverish joy of discovery blazing in his eyes. I said, 'There is nothing to prove that you will not get your second wind.'

'No. At my age one has habits of mind that hamper inventiveness. And I grow more ignorant year by year.'

'I will remind you of that ten years from now. Maybe you will make your greatest discovery at seventy.'

'You and your optimism; I promise you I shan't.'

'You and your pessimism!'

We laughed. Yet there was nothing to laugh about. André's defeatism has no valid basis: for once he is lacking in logical severity. To be sure, in his letters Freud did say that at a given age one no longer discovers anything new, and that it is terribly sad. But at that time he was much older than André. Nevertheless this extreme gloominess still saddens me just as much, although it is unjustified. And the reason why André gives way to it is that he is in a state of general crisis. It surprises me, but the truth of the matter is that he cannot bring himself to accept the fact that he is over sixty. For my own part I still find countless things amusing: he does not. Formerly he was interested in everything: now it is a tremendous business to drag him as far as a cinema or an exhibition, or to see friends.

'What a pity it is that you no longer like walking,' I said. 'These days are so lovely! I was thinking just now how I should have liked to go back to Milly, and into the forest at Fontainebleau.'

'You are an amazing woman,' he said with a smile. 'You know the whole of Europe, and yet what you want to see again is the outskirts of Paris!'

'Why not? The church at Champeaux is no less beautiful because I have climbed the Acropolis.'

'All right. As soon as the laboratory closes in four or five days' time, I promise you a long run in the car.'

We should have time to go for more than one, since we are staying in Paris until the beginning of August. But would he want to? I said, 'Tomorrow is Sunday. You're not free?'

'No, alas. As you know there's this press-conference on apartheid in the evening. They've brought me a whole pile of papers I have not looked at yet.'

Spanish political prisoners; Portuguese detainees; persecuted Persians; Congolese, Angolan, Cameroonian rebels; Venezuelan, Peruvian and Colombian resistance fighters; he is always ready to

help them as much as ever he can. Meetings, manifestoes, public gatherings, tracts, delegations—he jibs at nothing.

'You do too much.'

What is there to do when the world has lost its savour? All that is left is the killing of time. I went through a wretched period myself, ten years ago. I was disgusted with my body; Philippe had grown up; and after the success of my book on Rousseau I felt completely hollow inside. Growing old filled me with distress. But then I began to work on Montesquieu, I got Phillipe through his *agrégation* [*] and managed to make him start on a thesis. I was given a lectureship at the Sorbonne and I found my teaching there even more interesting than my university-scholarship classes. I became resigned to my body. It seemed to me that I came to life again. And now, if André were not so very sharply aware of his age, I should easily forget my own altogether.

He went out again, and again I stayed a long while on the balcony. I watched an orange-red crane turning against the blue background of the sky. I watched a black insect that drew a broad, foaming, icy furrow across the heavens. The eternal youth of the world makes me feel breathless. Some things I loved have vanished. A great many others have been given to me. Yesterday evening I was going up the boulevard Raspail and the sky was crimson; it seemed to me that I was walking upon an unknown planet where the grass might be violet, the earth blue. It was trees hiding the red glare of a neon-light advertisement. When he was sixty André was astonished at being able to cross. Sweden in less than twenty-four hours, whereas in his youth the journey had taken a week. I have experienced wonders like that. Moscow in three and a half hours from Paris!

A cab took me to the Parc Montsouris, where I had an appointment with Martine. As I came into the gardens the smell of cut grass wrung my heart—the smell of the high Alpine pastures where I used to walk with André with a sack on my shoulders, a smell so moving because it was that of the meadows of childhood. Reflexions, echoes, reverberating back and back to infinity: I have discovered the pleasure of having a long past behind me. I have not the leisure to tell it over to myself, but often, quite unexpectedly, I catch sight of it, a background to the diaphanous present; a background that gives its colour and its light, just as rocks or sand show through the shifting brilliance of the sea. Once I used to cherish schemes and promises for the future; now my feelings and my joys are smoothed and softened with the shadowy velvet of time past.

'Hallo!'

Martine was drinking lemon juice on the café terrace. Thick blade hair, blue eyes, a short dress with orange and yellow stripes and a hint of violet: a lovely young woman. Forty. When I was thirty I smiled to hear André's father describe a forty-year-old as a 'lovely young woman'; and here were the same words on my own lips, as I thought of Martine. Almost everybody seems to me to be young, now. She smiled at me. 'You have brought me your book?'

'Of course.'

She looked at what I had written in it. 'Thank you,' she said, with some emotion. She added, 'I so long to read it. But one is so busy at the end of the school year. I shall have to wait for July 14.'

'I should very much like to know what you think.'

I have great trust in her judgment: that is to say we are almost always in agreement. I should feel on a completely equal footing with her if she had not retained a little of that old pupil-teacher deference towards me, although she is a teacher herself, married and the mother of a family.

'It is hard to teach literature nowadays. Without your books I really should not know how to set about it.' Shyly she asked, 'Are you pleased with this one?'

I smiled at her. 'Frankly, yes.'

There was still a question in her eyes—one that she did not like to put into words. I made the first move. 'You know what I wanted to do—to start off with a consideration of the critical works published since the war and then to go on to suggest a new method by which it is possible to make

one's way into a writer's work, to see it in depth, more accurately than has ever been done before. I hope I have succeeded.'

It was more than a hope: it was a conviction. It filled my heart with sunlight. A lovely day: and I was enchanted with these trees, lawns, walks where I had so often wandered with friends and fellow-students. Some are dead, or life has separated us. Happily—unlike André, who no longer sees anyone—I have made friends with some of my pupils and younger colleagues: I like them better than women of my own age. Their curiosity spurs mine into life: they draw me into their future, on the far side of my own grave.

Martine stroked the book with her open hand. 'Still, I shall dip into it this very evening. Has anyone read it?'

'Only André. But literature does not mean a very great deal to him.'

Nothing means a very great deal to him any more. And he is as much of a defeatist for me as he is for himself. He does not tell me so, but deep down he is quite sure that from now on I shall do nothing that will add to my reputation. This does not worry me, because I know he is wrong. I have just written my best book and the second volume will go even farther.

'Your son?'

'I sent him proofs. He will be telling me about it—he comes back this evening.'

We talked about Philippe, about his thesis, about writing. Just as I do she loves words end people who know how to use them. Only she is allowing herself to be eaten alive by her profession and her home. She drove me back in her little Austin.

'Will you come back to Paris soon?'

'I don't think so. I am going straight on from Nancy into the Yonne, to rest.'

'Will you do a little work during the holidays?'

'I should like to. But I'm always short of time. I don't possess your energy.'

It is not a matter of energy, I said to myself as I left her: I just could not live without writing. Why? And why was I so desperately eager to make an intellectual out of Philippe when André would have let him follow other paths? When I was a child, when I was an adolescent, books saved me from despair: that convinced me that culture was the highest of values, and it is impossible for me to examine this conviction with an objective eye.

In the kitchen Marie-Jeanne was busy getting the dinner ready: we were to have Philippe's favourite dishes. I saw that everything was going well. I read the papers and I did a difficult crossword-puzzle that took me three quarters of an hour: from time to time it is fun to concentrate for a long while upon a set of squares where the words are potentially there although they cannot be seen: I use ray brain as a photographic developer to make them appear—I have the impression of drawing them up from their hiding-places in the depth of the paper.

When the last square was filled I chose the prettiest dress in my wardrobe—pink and grey foulard. When I was fifty my clothes always seemed to me either too cheerful or too dreary: now I know what I am allowed and what I am not, and I dress without worrying. Without pleasure either. That very close, almost affectionate relationship I once had with my clothes has vanished. Nevertheless, I did look at my figure with some gratification. It was Philippe who said to me one day, 'Why, look, you're getting plump.' (He scarcely seems to have noticed that I have grown slim again.) I went on a diet. I bought scales. Earlier on it never occurred to me that I should ever worry about my weight. Yet here I am! The less I identify myself with my body the more I feel myself required to take care of it. It relies on me, and I looked after it with bored conscientiousness, as I might look after a somewhat reduced, somewhat wanting old friend who needed my help.

André brought a bottle of Mumm and I put it to cool; we talked for a while and then he telephoned his mother. He often telephones her. She is sound in wind and limb and she is still a furious militant in the ranks of the Communist Party; but she *is* eighty-four and she lives alone in her house at

Villeneuve-lès-Avignon. He is rather anxious about her. He laughed on the telephone; I heard him cry out and protest; but he was soon cut short—Manette is very talkative whenever she has the chance.

'What did she say?'

'she is more and more certain that one day or another fifty million Chinese will cross the Russian frontier. Or else that they will drop a bomb anywhere, just anywhere, for the pleasure of setting off a world war. She accuses me of taking their side: there's no persuading her I don't.'

'Is she well? She's not bored?'

'she will be delighted to see us; but as for bring bored, she doesn't know the meaning of the word.'

She had been a school-teacher with three children, and, for her, retirement is a delight that she has not yet come to the end of. We talked about her and about the Chinese, of whom we, like everybody else, know so very little. André opened a magazine. And there I was, looking at my watch, whose hands did not seem to be going round.

All at once he was there: every time it surprises me to see his face, with the dissimilar features of my mother and André blending smoothly in it. He hugged me very tight, saying cheerful things, and I leant there with the softness of his flannel jacket against my cheek. I released myself so as to kiss Irène: she smiled at me with so frosty a smile that I was astonished to feel a soft, warm cheek beneath my lips. Irène. I always forget her; and she is always there. Blonde; grey-blue eyes; weak mouth; sharp chin; and something both vague and obstinate about her too-wide forehead. Quickly I wiped her out. I was alone with Philippe as I used to be in the days when I woke him up every morning with a touch on his forehead.

'Not even a drop of whisky?' asked André.

'No, thanks. I'll have some fruit-juice.'

How sensible she is! She dresses with a sensible stylishness; sensibly stylish hair-do—smooth, with a fringe hiding her big forehead. Artless make-up: severe little suit. When I happen to run through a woman's magazine I often say to myself, 'Why, here's Irène!' It often happens too that when I see her I scarcely recognize her. 'She's pretty,' asserts André. There are days when I agree—a delicacy of ear and nostril: a pearly softness of skin emphasized by the dark blue of her lashes. But if she moves her head a little her face slips, and all you see is that mouth, that chin. Iréne. Why? Why has Philippe always gone for women of that kind—smooth, stand-offish, pretentious? To prove to himself that he could attract them, no doubt. He was not fond of them. I used to think that if he fell in love … I used to think he would not fall in love; and one evening he said to me, 'I have great news for you,' with the somewhat over-excited air of a birthday-child who has been playing too much, laughing too much, shouting too much. There was that crash like a gong in my bosom, the blood mounting to my cheeks, all my strength concentrated on stopping the trembling of my lips. A winter evening, with the curtains drawn and the lamplight on the rainbow of cushions, and this suddenly-opened gulf, this chasm of absence. 'You will like her: she is a woman who has a job.' At long intervals she works as a script-girl. I know these with-it young married women. They have some vague kind of a job, they claim to use their minds, to go in for sport, dress well, run their houses faultlessly, bring up their children perfectly, carry on a social life—in short, succeed on every level. And they don't really care deeply about anything at all. They make my blood run cold.

Philippe and Irène had left for Sardinia the day the university closed, at the beginning of June. While we were having dinner at that table where I had so often obliged Philippe to eat (come, finish up your soup: take a little more beef: get something down before going off for your lecture), we talked about their journey—a handsome wedding-present from Irène's parents, who can afford that sort of thing. She was silent most of the time, like an intelligent woman who knows how to wait for the right moment to produce an acute and rather surprising remark: from time to time she did drop a little observation, surprising—or at least surprising to me—by its stupidity or its utter ordinariness.

We went back to the library. Philippe glanced at my desk. 'Did the work go well?'

'Pretty well. You didn't have time to read my proofs?'

'No; can you imagine it? I'm very sorry.'

'You'll read the book. I have a copy for you.' His carelessness saddened me a little, but I showed nothing. I said, 'And what about you? Are you going to get back to serious work on your thesis again now?' He did not answer. He exchanged an odd kind of look with Irène. 'What's the matter? Are you going to set off on your travels again?'

'No.' Silence again and then he said rather crossly, 'Oh, you'll be vexed; you'll blame me; but during this month I have come to a decision. It is altogether too much, teaching and working on a thesis at the same time. But unless I do a thesis there is no worthwhile future for me in the university. I am going to leave.'

'What on earth are you talking about?'

'I'm going to leave the university. I'm still young enough to take up something else.'

'But it's just not possible. Now that you have got this far you cannot drop it all,' I said indignantly.

'Listen. Once upon a time being a don was a splendid career. These days I am not the only one who finds it impossible to look after my students and do any work of my own: there are too many of them.'

That's quite true,' said Andrè. 'Thirty students is one student multiplied by thirty. Fifty is a mob. But surely we can find some way that will give you more time to yourself and let you finish your thesis.'

'No,' said Irène, decisively. 'Teaching and research—they really are too badly paid. I have a cousin who is a chemist. At the National Research Centre he was earning eight hundred francs a month. He has gone into a dye factory—he's pulling down three thousand.'

'It's not only a question of money,' said Philippe.

'Of course not. Being in the swim counts too.'

In little guarded, restrained phrases she let us see what she thought of us. Oh, she did it tactfully—with the tact you can hear rumbling half a mile away. 'Above all I don't want to hurt you—don't hold it against me, for that would be unfair—but still there are some things I have to say to you and if I were not holding myself in I'd say a great deal more.' Andrè is a great scientist of course and for a woman I haven't done badly at all. But we live cut off from the world, in laboratories and libraries. The new generation of intellectuals wants to be in immediate contact with society. With his vitality and drive, Philippe is not made for our kind of life; there are other careers in which he would show his abilities far better. 'And then of course a thesis is totally old hat,' she ended.

Why does she sometimes utter grotesque monstrosities? Irène is not really as stupid as all that. She does exist, she does amount to something: she has wiped out the victory I won with Philippe—a victory over him and for him. A long battle and sometimes so hard for me. 'I can't manage this essay; I have a head-ache. Give me a note saying I'm ill.' 'No.' The soft adolescent face grows tense and old; the green eyes stab me. 'How unkind you are.' Andrè stepping in—'Just this once…' 'No.' My misery in Holland during those Easter holidays when we left Philippe in Paris. 'I don't want your degree to be botched.' And with his voice full of hatred he shouted, 'Don't take me, then; I don't care. And I shan't write a single line.' And then his successes and our understanding, our alliance. The understanding that Iréne is now destroying. I did not want to break out in front of her: I took hold of myself. 'What do you mean to do, then?'

Irène was about to answer. Philippe interrupted her. 'Irène's father has various things in mind.'

'What kind of things? In business?'

'It's still uncertain.'

'You talked it over with him before your journey. Why did you say nothing to us?'

'I wanted to turn it over in my mind.'

A sudden jet of anger filled me: it was unbelievable that he should not have spoken to me the moment the idea of leaving the university stirred in his mind.

'Of course you two blame me,' said Philippe angrily. The green of his eyes took on that stormy colour I knew so well.

'No,' said Andrè. 'One must follow one's own line.'

'And you, do you blame me?'

'Making money does not seem to me a very elevating ambition,' I said. 'I am surprised.'

'I told you it is not a question of money.'

'What is it a question of, then? Be specific.'

'I can't. I have to see my father-in-law again. But I shan't accept his offer unless I think it worth while.'

I argued a little longer, as mildly as possible, trying to persuade him of the value of his thesis and reminding him of earlier plans for papers and research. He answered politely, but my words had no hold on him. No, he did not belong to me any more; not any more at all. Even his physical appearance had changed: another kind of haircut; more up-to-date clothes—the clothes of the fashionable sixteenth arrondissement. It was I who moulded his life. Now I am watching it from outside, a remote spectator. It is the fate common to all mothers; but who has ever found comfort in saying that hers is the common fate?

André saw them to the lift and I collapsed on to the divan. That void again … The happy day, the true presence underlying absence—it had merely been the certainty of having Philippe here, for a few hours. I had waited for him as though he were coming back never to go away again: he will always go away again. And the break between us is far more final than I had imagined. I shall no longer share in his work; we shall no longer have the same interests. Does money really mean all that to him? Or is he only giving way to Irène? Does he love her as much as that? One would have to know about their nights together. No doubt she can satisfy his body to the full, as well as his pride: beneath her fashionable exterior I can see that she might be capable of remarkable outbursts. The: bond that physical happiness brings into being between a man and woman is something whose importance I tend to underestimate. As far as I am concerned sexuality no longer exists. I used to call this indifference serenity: all at once I have come to see it in another light—it is a mutilation; it is the loss of the sense. The lack of it makes me blind to the needs, the pains and the joys of those who do possess it. It seems to me that I no longer know anything at all about Philippe. Only one thing is certain—the degree to which I am going to miss him. It was perhaps thanks to him that I adapted myself to my age, more or less. He carried me along with his youth. He used to take me to the twenty-four hour race at Le Mans, to op-art shows and even, once, to a happening. His mercurial, inventive presence filled the house. Shall I grow used to this silence, this prudent, well-behaved flow of days that is never again to be broken by anything unforeseen?

I said to André, 'Why didn't you help me try to bring Philippe to his senses? You gave way at once. Between us we might perhaps have persuaded him.'

'People have to be left free. He never terribly wanted to teach.'

'But he was interested in his thesis.'

'Up to a point, a very vaguely defined point. I understand him.'

'You understand everybody.'

Once André was as uncompromising for others as he was for himself. Nowadays his political attitudes have not weakened but in private life he keeps his rigour for himself alone: he excuses people, he explains them, he accepts them. To such a pitch that sometimes it maddens me. I went on, 'Do you think that making money is an adequate goal in life?'

'I really scarcely know what our goals were, nor whether they were adequate.'

Did he really believe what he was saying, or was he amusing himself by teasing me? He does that sometimes, when he thinks me too set in my convictions and my principles. Usually I put up with it very well—I join in the game. But this time I was in no mood for trifling. My voice rose. 'Why have we led the kind of life we have led if you think other ways of life just as good?'

'Because *we* could not have done otherwise.'

'We could not have done otherwise because it was our way of life that seemed to us valid.'

'No. As far as I was concerned knowing, discovering, was a mania, a passion, even a kind of neurosis, without the slightest moral justification. I never thought everybody else should do the same.'

Deep down I *do* think that everybody else should do the same, but I did not choose to argue the point. I said, 'It is not a question of everybody, but of Philippe. He is going to turn into a fellow concerned with dubious money-making deals. That was not what I brought him up for.'

André reflected. 'It is difficult for a young man to have over-successful parents. He would think it presumptuous to suppose that he could follow in their steps and rival them. He prefers to put his money on another horse.'

'Philippe was making a very good start.'

'You helped him: he was working under your shadow. Frankly, without you he would not have got vary far and he is clear-sighted enough to realize it.'

There had always been this underlying disagreement between us about Philippe. Maybe André was chagrined because he chose letters and not science: or maybe it was the classic father-son rivalry at work. He always looked upon Philippe as a mediocre being, and that was one way of guiding him towards mediocrity.

'I know,' I said. 'You have never had any confidence in him. And if he has no confidence in himself it is because he sees himself through your eyes.'

'Maybe,' said André, in a conciliatory tone.

'In any case, the person who is really responsible is Irène. It is she who is pushing him on. She wants her husband to earn a lot of money. And she's only too happy to draw him away from me.'

'Oh, don't play the mother-in-law! She's quite as good as the next girl.'

'What next girl? She said monstrous things.'

'She does that sometimes. But sometimes she is quite sharp. The monstrosities are a mark of emotional unbalance rather than a lack of intelligence. And then again, if she had wanted money more than anything else she would never have married Philippe, who is not rich.'

'She saw that he could become rich.'

'At all events she picked him rather than just any pretentious little nobody.'

'If you like her, so much the better for you.'

'When you love someone, you must give the people he loves credit for being of some value.'

'That's true,' I said. 'But I do find Irène disheartening.'

'You have to consider the background she comes from.'

'She scarcely comes from it at all, unfortunately. She is still there.'

Those fat, influential, important bourgeois, stinking with money, seem to me even more loathsome than the fashionable, shallow world I revolted against as a girl.

We remained silent for a while. Outside the window the neon advertisement flicked from red to green: the great wall's eyes blazed. A lovely night. I would have gone out with Philippe for a last drink on the terrace of a café … No point in asking André whether he would like to come for a stroll; he was obviously half asleep already. I said, 'I wonder why Philippe married her.'

'Oh, from outside, you know, there is never any understanding these things.' He answered in an offhand tone. His face had collapsed: he was pressing a finger into his cheek at the level of his gum—a nervous habit he caught some time ago.

'Have you got tooth-ache?'

'No.'

'Then why are you messing about with your gum?'

'I'm making sure it doesn't hurt.'

Last year he used to take his pulse every ten minutes. It is true his blood-pressure was a little high, but treatment steadied it at a hundred and seventy, which is perfect for our age. He kept his

fingers pressed against his cheek; his eyes were vacant; he was playing at being an old man and he would end by persuading me that he was one. For a horrified moment I thought, 'Philippe has gone and I am to spend the rest of my life with an old man!' I felt like shouting, 'Stop, I can't bear it.' As though he had heard me, he smiled, became himself again, and we went to bed.

He is still asleep. I shall go and wake him up: we will drink piping hot, very strong China tea. But this morning is not like yesterday. I must learn that I have lost Philippe—learn it all over again. I ought to have known it. He left me the moment he told me about his marriage: he left me at the moment of his birth—a nurse could have taken my place. What had I imagined? Because he was very demanding I believed I was indispensable. Because he is easily influenced I imagined I had created him in my own image. This year, when I saw him with Irène or his in-laws, so unlike the person he is with me, I thought he was falling in with a game: I was the one who knew the real Philippe. And he has preferred to go away from me, to break our secret alliance, to throw away the life I had built for him with such pains. He will turn into a stranger. Come! André often accuses me of blind optimism: maybe this time I am harrowing myself over nothing. After all, I do not really think that there is no salvation outside the world of the university, nor that writing a thesis is a categorical imperative. Philippe said he would only take a worthwhile job … But I have no confidence in the jobs Irène's father can offer him. I have no confidence in Philippe. He has often hidden things from me, or lied: I know his faults and I am resigned to them—and indeed they move me as a physical ugliness might do. But this time I am indignant because he did not tell me about his plans as they were forming. Indignant and worried. Up until now, whenever he hurt me he always knew how to make it up to me afterwards: I am not so sure that this time he can manage it.

Why was André late? I had worked for four hours without a pause; my head was heavy and I lay down on the divan. Three days, and Philippe had not given any signs of life: that was not his way, and I was all the more surprised by his silence since whenever he is afraid he has hurt me he keeps ringing up and sending little notes. I could not understand; my heart was heavy and my sadness spread and spread, darkening the world; and the world gave it back food to feed upon. André. He was growing more and more morose. Vatrin was the only friend he would still see and yet he was cross when I asked him to lunch. 'He bores me.' Everyone bores him. And what about me? A great while ago now he said to me, 'So long as I have you I can never be unhappy.' And he does not look happy. He no longer loves me as he did. What does love mean to him, these days? He clings to me as he might cling to anything he had been used to for a long while but I no longer bring him any kind of happiness. Perhaps it is unfair, but I resent it: he accepts this indifference—he has settled down into it.

The key turned in the lock; he kissed me; he looked preoccupied. 'I'm late.'

'Yes, rather.'

'Philippe came to fetch me at the Ecole Normale. We had a drink together.'

'Why didn't you bring him here?'

'He wanted to speak to me alone. So that I should be the one to tell you what he has to say.' (Was he leaving for abroad, a great way off, for years and years?) 'You won't like it. He could not bring himself to tell us the other evening but it is all settled. His father-in-law has found him a job. He is getting him into the Ministry of Culture. He tells me that for anyone of his age it is a splendid post. But you see what it implies.'

'It's impossible! Philippe?'

It was impossible. He shared our ideas. He had taken great risks during the Algerian war—that war which had torn our hearts and which now seems never to have taken place at all—he had got himself beaten up in anti-Gaullist demonstrations; he had voted as we did during the last elections …

'He says he has developed. He has come to understand that the French left wing's negativism has led it nowhere, that it is done for, finished, and he wants to be in the swim, to have a grip on the world, accomplish something, construct, build.'

'Anyone would think it was Irène speaking.'

'Yet it was Philippe,' said André in a hard voice.

Suddenly everything fell into place. Anger took hold of me. 'So that's it? He's an arriviste—a creature that's going to succeed whatever it costs? He's turning his coat out of vulgar ambition. I hope you told him what you thought of him.'

'I told him I was against it.'

'You didn't try to make him change his mind?'

'Of course I did. I argued.'

'Argued! You ought to have frightened him—told him that we should never see him again. You were too soft: I know you.' All at once it crashed over me, an avalanche of suspicions and uneasy feelings that I had thrust back. Why had he never had anything but pretentious, fashionable, too-well-dressed young women? Why Irène and that great frothy marriage in church? Why did he display such an eager desire to please his in-laws—why so winning? He was at home in those surroundings, like a fish in its native water. I had not wanted to ask myself any questions, and if ever André ventured a criticism I stood up for Philippe. All my obstinate trust turned into bitterness of heart. In an instant Philippe showed another face. Unscrupulous ambition: plotting. 'I'm going to have a word with him.'

I went angrily towards the telephone. André stopped me. 'Calm down first. A scene will do nobody any good.'

'It will relieve my mind.'

'Please.'

'Leave me alone.'

I dialled Philippe's number. 'Your father has just told me you're joining the Ministry of Culture right up at the top. Congratulations!'

'Oh, please don't take it like that,' he said to me.

'How am I to take it, then? I ought to be glad you're so ashamed of yourself that you didn't dare tell me to my face.'

'I'm not ashamed at all. One has the right to reconsider one's opinions.'

'Reconsider? Only six months ago and you were utterly condemning the régime's entire cultural policy.'

'There you are, then! I'm going to try and change it.'

'Come, come, you aren't of that calibre and you know it. You'll play their little game as good as gold and you'll carve yourself out a charming little career. Your motive is mere ambition, nothing more …' I don't know what else I said to him. He shouted, 'Shut up, shut up.' I went on: he interrupted, his voice filled with hatred, and in the end he shouted furiously, 'I'm not a swine just because I won't share in your senile obstinacy.'

'That's enough. I shall never see you again as long as I live.'

I hung up: I sat down, sweating, trembling, my legs too weak to hold me. We had broken off for ever more than once; but this clash was really serious. I should never see him again. His turning his coat sickened me, and his words had hurt me deeply because he had meant than to hurt deeply.

'He insulted us. He spoke of our senile obstinacy. I shall never see him again and I don't want you to sec him again either.'

'You were pretty hard, too. You should never have treated it on an emotional basis.'

'And just why not? He has not taken our feelings into account at all. He has put his career first, before: us, and he is willing to pay the price of a break …'

'He had not expected any break. Besides, there won't be one: I won't have it.'

'As far as I'm concerned it's there already: everything's over between Philippe and me.' I closed my mouth: I was still quivering with anger.

'For some time now Philippe has been very odd and shifty,' said André. 'You would not admit it, but I saw clearly enough. Still, I should never have believed he could have reached that point.'

'He's just an ambitious little rat.'

'Yes,' said André in a puzzled voice. 'But why?'

'What do you mean, why?'

'As we were saying the other evening, we certainly have our share of responsibility.' He hesitated. 'It was you who put ambition into his mind; left to himself he was comparatively apathetic. And no doubt I built up an antagonism in him.'

'It's all Irène's fault,' I burst out. 'If he had not married her, if he had not got into that environment he would never have ratted.'

'But he did marry her, and he married her partly because he found people of that environment impressive. For a long time now his values have no longer been ours. I can see a great many reasons …'

'You're not going to stand up for him.'

'I'm trying to find an explanation.'

'No explanation will ever convince me. I shall never see him again. And I don't want you to see him, either.'

'Make no mistake about this. I disapprove of him. I disapprove very strongly. But I shall see him again. So will you.'

'No I shan't. And if you let me down, after what he said to me on the telephone, I'll take it more unkindly—I'll resent it more than I have ever resented anything you've done all my life. Don't talk to me about him any more.'

But we could not talk of anything else, either. We had dinner almost in silence, very quickly, and then each of us took up a book. I felt bitter ill-will against Irene, against André, against the world in general. 'We certainly have our share of responsibility.' How trifling it was to look for reasons and excuses. 'Your senile obstinacy': he had shouted those words at me. I had been so certain of his love for us, for me: in actual fact I did not amount to anything much—I was nothing to him; just some old object to be filed away among the minor details. All I had to do was to file him away in the same fashion. The whole night through I choked with resentment. The next morning, as soon as André was gone, I went into Philippe's room, tore up the old letters, flung out the old papers, filled one suitcase with his books, piled his pull-over, pyjamas and everything that was left in the cupboards into another. Looking at the bare shelves I felt my eyes fill with tears. So many moving, overwhelming memories rose up within me. I wrung their necks for them. He had left me, betrayed me, jeered at me, insulted me. I should never forgive him.

Two days went by without our mentioning Philippe. The third morning, as we were looking at our post, I said to André, 'A letter from Philippe.'

'I imagine he is saying he's sorry.'

'He's wasting his time. I shan't read it.'

'Oh, but have a look at it, though. You know how hard he finds it to make the first step. Give him a chance.'

'Certainly not.' I folded the letter, put it into an envelope and wrote Philippe's address. 'Please post that for me.'

I had always given in too easily to his charming smiles and his pretty ways. I should not give in this time.

Two days later, early in the afternoon, Irène rang the bell. 'I'd like to talk to you for five minutes.'

A very simple little dress, bare arms, hair down her back: she looked like a girl, very young, dewy and shy. I had never yet seen her in that particular role. I let her in. She had come to plead for Philippe, of course. The sending back of his letter had grieved him dreadfully. He was sorry for what he had said to me on the telephone; but he did not mean a word of it; but I knew his nature—he lost his temper very quickly and then he would say anything at all, but it was really only so much hot air. He absolutely had to have it out with me.

'Why didn't he come himself?'

'He was afraid you would slam the door on him.'

'And that's just what I should have done. I don't want to see him again. Full stop. The end.'

She persisted. He could not bear my bong cross with him: he had never imagined I should take things so much to heart.

'In that case he must have turned into a half-wit: he can go to hell.'

'But you don't realize. Papa has worked a miracle for him: a post like this, at his age, is something absolutely extraordinary. You can't ask him to sacrifice his future for you.'

'He had a future, a dean one, true to his own ideas.'

'I beg your pardon—true to your ideas. He has developed.'

'He will go on developing: it's a tune we all know. He will make his opinions chime with his interests. For the moment he is up to his middle in bad faith—his only idea is to succeed. He is betraying himself and he knows it; that is what is so tenth-rate,' I said passionately.

Irène gave me a dirty look. 'I imagine your own life has always been perfect, and so that allows you to judge everybody else from a great height.'

I stiffened. 'I have always tried to be honest. I wanted Philippe to be the same. I am sorry that you should have turned him from that course.'

She burst out laughing. 'Anyone would think he had become a burglar, or a coiner.'

'For a man of his convictions, I do not consider his an honourable choice.'

Irène stood up. 'But after all it is strange, this high moral stand of yours,' she said slowly. 'His father is more committed, politically, than you; and he has not broken with Philippe. Whereas you …'

I interrupted her. 'He has not broken … You mean they've seen one another?'

'I don't know,' she replied quickly. 'I know he never spoke of breaking when Philippe told him about his decision.'

'That was before the phone call. What about since?'

'I don't know.'

'You don't know who Philippe sees and who he doesn't?'

Looking stubborn she said, 'No.'

'All right. It doesn't matter,' I said.

I saw her as far as the door. I turned our last exchanges over in my mind. Had she cut herself short on purpose—a cunning stroke—or was it a blunder? At all events my mind was made up. Almost made up. Not quite enough for it to find an outlet in rage. Just enough for me to be choked with distress and anxiety.

As soon as André came in I went for him. 'Why didn't you tell me you had seen Philippe again?'

'Who told you that?'

'Irène. She came to ask me why I didn't see him, since you did.'

'I warned you I should see him again.'

'I warned you that I should resent it most bitterly. It was you who persuaded him to write to me.'

'No: not really.'

'It certainly was. Oh, you had fun with me, all right: "You know how hard it is for him to make the first step." And it was you who had made it! Secretly.'

'With regard to you, he did make the first step.'

'Urged on by you. You plotted together behind my back. You treated me like a child—an invalid. You had no right to do so.'

Suddenly there was red smoke in my brain, a red mist in front of my eyes, something red shouting out in my throat. I am used to my rages against Philippe; I know myself when I am in one of them. But when it happens (and it is rare, very rare) that I grow furious with André, it is a hurricane that carries me away thousands of miles from him and from myself, into a desert that is both scorching and freezing cold.

'You have never lied to me before! This is the first time.'

'Let us agree that I was in the wrong.'

'Wrong to see Philippe again, wrong to plot against me with him and Irène, wrong to make a fool of me, to lie to me. That's very far in the wrong.'

'Listen … will you listen to me quietly?'

'No. I don't want to talk to you any more; I don't want to see you any more. I must be by myself: I am going out for a walk.'

'Go for a walk then, and try to calm yourself down,' he said curtly.

I set off through the streets and I walked as I often used to do when I wanted to calm my fears or rages or to get rid of mental images. Only I am not twenty any more, nor even fifty, and weariness came over me very soon. I went into a café and drank a glass of wine, my eyes hinting in the cruel glare of the neon. Philippe: it was all over. Married, a deserter to the other side. André was all I had left and there it was—I did not have him either. I had supposed that each of us could see right into the other, that we were united, linked to one another like Siamese twins. He had cast himself off from me, lied to me; and here I was on this café bench, alone. I continually called his face, his voice to mind, and I blew on the fire of the furious resentment that was burning me up. It was like one of those illnesses in which you manufacture your own suffering—every breath tears your lungs to pieces, and yet you are forced to breathe.

I left, and I set off again, walking. So what now? I asked myself in a daze. We were not going to part. Each of us alone, we should go on living side by side. I should bury my grievances, then, these grievances that I did not want to forget. The notion that one day my anger would have left me made it far worse.

When I got home I found a note on the table: 'I have gone to the cinema.' I opened our bedroom door. There were André's pyjamas on the bed, a packet of tobacco and his blood-pressure medicines on the bedside table. For a moment he existed—a heart-piercing existence—as though he had been taken far from me by illness or exile and I were seeing him again in these forgotten, scattered objects. Tears came into my eyes. I took a sleeping-pill; I went to bed.

When I woke up in the morning he was asleep, curled in that odd position with one hand against the wall. I looked away. No impulse towards him at all. My heart was as dreary and frigid as a deconsecrated church in which there is no longer the least warm flicker of a lamp. The slippers and the pipe no longer moved me; they no longer called to mind a beloved person far away; they were merely an extension of that stranger who lived under the same roof as myself. Dreadful anomaly of the anger that is born of love and that murders love.

I did not speak to him. While he was drinking his tea in the library I stayed in my room. Before leaving he called, 'You don't want to have it out?'

'No.'

There was nothing to 'have out'. Words would shatter against this anger and pain, this hardness in my heart.

All day long I thought of André, and from time to time there was something that flickered in my brain. Like having been hit on the head, when one's sight is disordered and one sees two different images of the world at different weights, without being able to make out which is above and which below. The two pictures I had, of the past André and the present André, did not coincide. There was an error somewhere. This present moment was a lie: it was not we who were concerned—not André, nor I: the whole thing was happening in another place. Or else the past was an illusion, and I had been completely wrong about André. Neither the one nor the other, I said to myself when I could see clearly again. The truth was that he had changed. Aged. He no longer attributed the same importance to things. Formerly he would have found Philippe's behaviour utterly revolting: now he did no more than disapprove. He would not have plotted behind my back; he would not have lied to me. His sensitivity and his moral values had lost their fine edge. Will he follow this tendency? More and more indifferent … I can't bear it. This sluggishness of the heart is called indulgence and wisdom: in fact it is death settling down within you. Not yet: not now.

That day the first criticism of my book appealed. Lantier accused me of going over the same ground again and again. He's an old fool and he loathes me; I ought never to have let myself feel it But in my exacerbated mood I did grow vexed. I should have liked to talk to André about it, but that would have meant making peace with him: I did not want to.

'I've shut up the laboratory,' he said that evening, with a pleasant smile. 'We can leave for Villeneuve and Italy whatever day you like.'

'We had decided to spend this month in Paris,' I answered shortly.

'You might have changed your mind.'

'I have not done so.'

André's face darkened. 'Are you going to go on sulking for long?'

'I'm afraid I am.'

'Well, you're in the wrong. It is out of proportion to what has happened.'

'Everyone has his own standards.'

'Yours are astray. It's always the same with you. Out of optimism or systematic obstinacy you hide the truth from yourself and when it is forced upon you you either collapse or else you explode. What you can't bear—and of coarse I bear the brunt of it—is that you had too high an opinion of Philippe.'

'You always had too low a one.'

'No. It was merely that I never had much in the way of illusions about his abilities or his character. Yet even so I thought too highly of him.'

'A child is not something you can evaluate like an experiment in the laboratory. He turns into what his parents make him. You backed him to lose, and that was no help to him at all.'

'And you always back to win. You're free to do so. But only if you can take it when you lose. And you can't take it. You always try to get out of paying; you fly into a rage, you accuse other people right and left—anything at all not to own yourself in the wrong.'

'Believing in someone is not being in the wrong.'

'Pigs will fly the day you admit you were mistaken.'

I know. When I was young I was perpetually in the wrong and it was so difficult for me ever to be in the right that now I am very reluctant ever to blame myself. But I was in no mood to acknowledge it. I grasped the whisky bottle. 'Unbelievable! *You* as prosecuting counsel against me!'

I filled a glass and emptied it in one gulp. André's face, André's voice: the same man, another; beloved, hated; this anomaly went down inside my body. My sinews, my muscles contracted in a tetanic convulsion.

'From the very beginning you refused to discuss it calmly. Instead of that you have been swooning about all over the place … And now you're going to get drunk? It's grotesque,' he said, as I began my second glass.

'I shall get drunk if I want. It's nothing to do with you: leave me alone.'

I carried the bottle into my room. I settled in bed with a spy-story but I could not read. Philippe. I had been so wholly taken up with my fury against André that his image had faded a little. Suddenly he was there smiling at me with unbearable sweetnesss through the swimming of the whisky. Too high an opinion of him: no. I had loved him for his weaknesses: if he had been less temperamental and less casual he would have needed me less. He would never have been so adorably tender if he had nothing to beg forgiveness for. Our reconciliations, tears, kisses. But in those days it was only a question of peccadilloes. Now it was something quite different. I swallowed a brimming glass of whisky, the walls began to turn, and I sank right down.

The light made its way through my eyelids. I kept them closed. My head was heavy: I was deathly sad. I could not remember my dreams. I had sunk down into black depths—liquid and stifling, like diesel-oil—and now, this morning, I was only just coming to the surface. I opened my eyes.

André was sitting in an armchair at the foot of the bed, watching me with a smile. 'My dear, we can't go on like this.'

It was he, the past, the present André, the same man; I acknowledged it. But there was still that iron bar in my chest. My lips trembled. Stiffen even more, sink to the bottom, drown myself in the depths of loneliness and the night. Or try to catch this outstretched hand. He was talking in that even, calming voice I love. He admitted that he had been wrong. But it was for my sake that he had spoken to Philippe. He knew we were both so miserable that he had determined to step in right away, before our break could become definitive.

'You are always so gay and alive, and you have no idea how wretched it made me to see you eating your heart out! I quite understand that at the time you were furious with me. But don't forget what we are for one another: you mustn't hold it against me for ever.'

I gave a weak smile; he came close and put an arm round my shoulders. I clung to him and wept quietly. The warm physical pleasure of tears running down my cheek. What a relief! It is so tiring to hate someone you love.

'I know why I lied to you,' he said to me a little later. 'Because I'm growing old. I knew that telling you the truth would mean a scene: that would never have held me back once, but now the idea of a quarrel makes me feel weary. I took a short cut.'

'Does that mean you are going to lie to me more and more?'

'No, I promise you. And in any case I shan't see Philippe often: we haven't much to say to one another.'

'Quarrels make you feel tired: but you bawled me out very thoroughly yesterday evening, for all that.'

'I can't bear it when you sulk. It's much better to shout and scream.'

I smiled at him. 'Maybe you're right. We had to get out of it.'

He took me by the shoulders. 'We are out of it, really out of it? You aren't cross with me any more?'

'Not any more at all. It's over and done with.'

It was over: we were friends again. But had we said everything we had to say to one another? I had not, at all events. There was still something that rankled—the way André just gave in to old age. I did not want to talk about it to him now: the sky had to be quite clear again first. And what about him? Had he any mental reservations? Was he serious in blaming me for what he called my systematically stubborn optimism? The storm had been too short to change anything between us: but Was it not a sign that for some time past—since when?—something had in fact been imperceptibly changing?

Something has changed, I said to myself as we drove down the motorway at ninety miles an hour. I was sitting next to André; our eyes saw the same road and the same sky; but between us, invisible and intangible, there was an insulating layer. Was he aware of it? Yes, certainly he was. The reason why he had suggested this drive was that he hoped it might bring to life the memory of other drives in the past and so bring us wholly together again: it was not like them at all, however, because he did not look forward to deriving the least pleasure from it. I ought to have been grateful for his kindness: but I was not. I was hurt by his indifference. I had felt it so distinctly that I had almost refused, but he would have taken the refusal as a mark of ill-will. What was happening to us? There had been quarrels in our life, but always over serious matters—over the bringing up of Philippe, for example. They were genuine conflicts that we resolved violently, but quickly and for good. This time it had been a great whirling of fog, or smoke without fire; and because of its very vagueness two days had not quite cleared it away. And then again, in former times bed was the place for our stormy reconciliations. Trifling grievances were utterly burnt away in amorous delight, and we found ourselves together again, happy and renewed. Now we were deprived of that resource.

I saw the signpost; I stared and stared again. 'What? Already? We only set off twenty minutes ago.'

'I drove fast,' said André.

Milly. When Mama used to take us to see Grandmama, what an expedition it was! It was the country, vast golden wheat-fields, and we picked poppies at their edges. That remote village was now nearer to Paris than Neuilly or Auteuil had been in Balzac's day.

André found it hard to park the car, for it was market-day—swarms of cars and pedestrians. I recognized the old covered market, the Lion d'Or, the houses and their faded tiles. But the square was completely changed by the stalls that were set up in it. The plastic pots and toys, the millinery, tinned food, scent and the jewellery were in no way reminiscent of the old village fairs. It was Monoprix or Inno shops spread out in the open air. Glass. doors and walls: a big glittering stationery shop, filled with books and magazines with shiny covers. Grandmama's house, once a little outside the village, had been replaced by a five-storey building, and it was now right inside the town.

'Would you like a drink?'

'Oh, no!' I said. 'It's not my Milly any more.' Nothing is the same any more, and that's certain: neither Milly, nor Philippe, nor André. Am I?

'Twenty minutes to reach Milly is miraculous,' I said as we got back into the car. 'Only it's not Milly any longer.'

'There you are. The sight of the changing world is miraculous and heart-breaking, both at the same time.'

I reflected. 'You'll laugh at my optimism again, but for me it's above all miraculous.'

'But so it is for me too. The heart-breaking side of growing old is not in the things around one but in oneself.'

'I don't think so. You do lose in yourself as well, but you also gain.'

'You lose much more than you gain. To tell you the truth, I don't see what gain there is, anyhow. Can you tell me?'

'It's pleasant to have a long past behind one.'

'You think you *have* it? I don't, as far as mine is concerned. Just you try telling it over to yourself.'

'I know it's there. It gives depth to the present.'

'All right. What else?'

'You have a much greater intellectual command of things. You forget a great deal, certainly; but in a way even the things one has forgotten are available to one.'

'In your line, maybe. For my part, I am more and more ignorant of everything that is not my own special subject. I should have to go back to the university like an ordinary undergraduate to be up to date with quantum physics.'

'There's nothing to stop you.'

'Perhaps I will.'

'It's strange,' I said. 'We agree about everything; yet not in this. I can't see what you lose in growing old.'

He smiled. 'Youth.'

'It's not in itself a valuable thing.'

'Youth and what the Italians so prettily call *stamina.* The vigour, the fire, that enables you to love and create. When you've lost that, you've lost everything.'

He had spoken in such a tone that I dared not accuse him of self-indulgence. There was something gnawing at him, something I knew nothing about—that I did not want to know about—that frightened me. It was perhaps that which was keeping us apart.

'I shall never believe that you can no longer create,' I said.

'Bachelard says, "Great scientists are valuable to science in the first half of their lives and harmful in the second." They consider me a scientist. All I can do now is try not to be too harmful.'

I made no reply. True or false, he believed what he was saying: it would have been useless to protest. It was understandable that my optimism should often irritate him: in a way it was an evasion of his problem. But what could I do? I could not tackle it for him. The best thing was to be quiet. We drove in silence as far as Champeaux.

'This nave is really beautiful,' said André as we went into the church. 'It reminds me very much of the one at Sens, only its proportions are even finer.'

'Yes, it is lovely. I have forgotten Sens.'

It's the same thick single pillars alternating with slender twinned columns.'

'What a memory you have!'

Conscientiously we looked at the nave, the: choir, the transept. The church was no less beautiful because I had climbed the Acropolis, but my state of mind was no longer the same as it had been in the days when we systematically combed the Ile de France in an aged second-hand car. Neither of us was really taking it in. I was not really interested in the carved capitals, nor in the misericords that had once amused us so.

As we left the church, André said to me, 'Do you think the Truite d'Or is still there?'

'Let's go and see.'

The little inn at the water's edge, with its simple, delightful food, had once been one of our favourite places. We celebrated our silver wedding there, but we had not been back since. This village, with its silence and its little cobbles, had not changed. We went right along the high street in both directions: the Truite d'Or had vanished. We did not like the restaurant in the forest where we stopped: perhaps because we compared it with our memories.

'And what shall we do now?' I asked.

'We had thought of the Château de Vaux and the towers at Blandy.'

'But do you want to go?'

'Why not?'

He did not give a damn about them, and nor indeed did I; but neither of us liked to say so. What exactly was he thinking of, as we drove along the little leaf-scented country roads? About the desert of his future? I could not follow him on to that ground. I felt that there beside me he was alone. I was, too. Philippe had tried to telephone me several times. I had hung up as soon as I recognized his voice. I questioned myself. Had I been too demanding with regard to him? Had André been too scornfully indulgent? Was it this lack of harmony that had damaged him? I should have liked to talk about it with André, but I was afraid of starting a quarrel again.

The Château de Vaux, the towers at Blandy: we carried out our programme. We said, 'I remember it perfectly, I did not remember it at all, these towers are quite splendid …' But in one way the mere sight of things is neither here nor there. You have to be linked to them by some plan or some question. All I saw was stones piled one on top of the other.

The day did not bring us any closer together; I felt that we were both disappointed and very remote from one another as we drove back to Paris. It seemed to me that we were no longer capable of talking to one another. Might all one heard about non-communication perhaps be true, then? Were we, as I had glimpsed in my anger, condemned to silence and loneliness? Had this always been the case with me, and had it only been that stubborn optimism that had made me say it was not? 'I must make an effort,' I said to myself as I went to bed. 'Tomorrow morning we will discuss it. We will try to get to the bottom of it.' The fact that our quarrel had not been dissipated was because it was merely a symptom. Everything would have to be gone into again, radically. Above all not to be afraid of talking about Philippe. A single forbidden subject and our dialogue would be wholly frustrated.

I poured out the tea and I was trying to find the words to begin this discussion when André said, 'Do you know what I should like? To go to Villeneuve straight away. I should rest there better than in Paris.'

So that was the conclusion he had drawn from the failure of yesterday: instead of trying to come closer he was escaping! It sometimes happens that he spends a few days at his mother's house without me, out of affection for her. But this was a way of escaping from our tête-à-tête. I was cut to the quick.

'A splendid idea,' I said curtly, 'Your mother will be delighted. Do go.'

'Wouldn't you like to come?' he asked, in an unnatural tone.

'You know very well that I haven't the least wish to leave Paris so early. I shall come at the date we fixed.'

'As you like.'

I should have stayed in any case: I wanted to work and also to see how my book would be received—to talk to my friends about it. But I was much taken aback at the way he did not press me. Coldly I asked, 'When do you think of going?'

'I don't know: soon. I have absolutely nothing to do here.'

'What does soon mean? Tomorrow? The day after?.'

'Why not tomorrow morning?'

So we should be away from one another for a fortnight: he never used to leave me for more than three or four days, except for congresses. Had I been so very unpleasant? He ought to have talked things over with me instead of running away. And yet it was not like him, avoiding an issue. I could only see one explanation for it—always the same explanation—he was getting old. I thought crossly, 'Let him go and get over his ageing somewhere else.' I was certainly not going to raise a finger to keep him here.

We agreed that he should take the car. He spent the day at the garage, shopping, telephoning: he said good-bye to his colleagues. I scarcely saw him. When he got into the car the next day we exchanged kisses and smiles. Then I was back in the library, quite at a loss. I had the feeling that André, ditching me in this way, was punishing me. No: it was merely that he wanted to get rid of me.

Once my first amazement was over I felt lightened. Life as a couple implies decisions. 'When shall we eat? What would you like to have?' Plans come into being. When one is alone things happen without premeditation: it is restful. I got up late; I stayed there lapped in the gentle warmth of the sheets, trying to catch the fleeting shreds of my dreams. I read my letters as I drank my tea, and I hummed 'I get along without you very well … of course I do.' Between working hours I strolled about the streets.

This state of grace lasted for three days. On the afternoon of the fourth someone rang with little quick touches on the bell. Only one person rings like that. My heart began to thump furiously. Through the door I said, 'Who is that?'

'Open the door,' cried Philippe. 'I shall keep my finger on the bell until you do.'

I opened, and immediately there were his arms around me and his head leaning on my shoulder. 'Darling, sweet- heart, please, please don't hate me. I can't bear life if we are cross with one another. Please. I do so love you!'

How often this imploring voice had melted away my resentment! I let him come into the library. He loved me; I could have no doubt of that. Did anything else matter? The familiar words 'My little boy' were just coming to my lips, but I thrust them back. He was not a little boy.

'Don't try to soften my heart: it's too late. You've spoilt everything.'

'Listen. Perhaps I was wrong, perhaps I have behaved badly—I don't know. It keeps me awake all night. But I don't want to lose you. Have pity on me. You're making me so unhappy!' Childish tears shone in his eyes. But this was not a child any more. A man, Irène's husband, an entirely adult person.

'That's too easy altogether,' I said. 'You quietly go about your business, knowing perfectly well that you are setting us poles apart. And you want me to take it all with a smile—you want everything to be just the same as it was before! No, no, no.'

'Really, you are too hard—you have too much Party spirit altogether. There are parents and children who love one another without having the same political opinions.'

'It is not a question of differing political opinions. You are changing sides out of mere ambition and a desire to succeed at any price. That is what is so tenth-irate.'

'No, no, not at all. My views *have* changed! Maybe I'm easily influenced but truly I have come to see things in another light. I promise you I have!'

'Then you should have told me about it earlier. Not have carried out your wire-pulling behind my back and then face me with a fait accompli. I shall never forgive you that.'

'I didn't dare. You have a way of looking at me that frightens me.'

'You always used to say that: it has never been a valid excuse.'

'Yet you used to forgive me. Forgive me again this time. Please, please do. I can't bear it when we are against one another, you and I.'

'There's nothing I can do about it. You have acted in such a way that I cannot respect you any more.'

His eyes began to grow stormy: I preferred that. His anger would keep mine up.

'Sometimes you say the cruellest things. For my part I have never wondered whether I respected you or not. You could do bloody-fool things as much as ever you liked and I shouldn't love you any the less. You think love has to be deserved. Oh yes you do: and I've tried hard enough not to be undeserving. Everything I ever wanted to be—a pilot, a racing driver, a reporter: action, adventure—they were all mere whims according to you: I sacrificed them all to please you. The first time I don't give way, you break with me.'

I cut in. 'You're trying to wear me down. Your behaviour disgusts me: that is why I don't want to see you any more.'

'It disgusts you because it goes against your plans. But after all I'm not going to obey you all my life long. You're too tyrannical. Fundamentally you have no heart, only a love of power.' His voice was full of rage and tears. 'All right! Good-bye. Despise me as much as you bloody well like—I shall get along without you very well.'

He stalked towards the door: slammed it behind him. I stood there in the hall, thinking, 'He will come back.' He always came back. I should no longer have had the strength to stand out against him; I should have burst into tears with him. After five minutes I went back to the library; I sat down, and I wept, alone. 'My little boy …' What is an adult? A child puffed with age. I plucked the years away from him and saw him at twelve again: impossible to hold anything against him. Yet now he was a man. There was not the slightest reason to judge him less severely than anyone else. Had I a hard heart? Are there people who can love without respect? Where does respect begin and end? And love? If he had failed in his university career, if he had led a common-place, unsuccessful life, my affection would never have failed him: because he would have needed it. If I had come to be of no use to him any longer, but had remained proud of him, I would cheerfully have gone on loving him. But now he escapes me, and at the same time I condemn him. What have I to do with him?

Sadness came down on me again, and it never left me. From that time on when I stayed late in bed it was because, unsupported, I was reluctant to come to a waling knowledge of thee world and of my life. Once I was up I was sometimes tempted to go back to bed again until the evening. I flung myself into my work. I stayed at my desk for hours and hours on end, keeping myself going with fruit-juice. When I stopped at the end of the afternoon my head was on fire and my bones hurt. Sometimes I would go so deeply to sleep on my divan that on waking I felt dazed and intensely distressed—it was as though my consciousness, rising up secretly from the darkness, was hesitating before taking flesh again. Or else I stared round at these familiar surroundings with unbelieving eyes—they were the illusory, shimmering other side of the void into which I had sunk. My gaze lingered with astonishment upon the things I had brought back from every part of Europe. Space had retained no mark of my journeys and my recollection would not trouble to call them to mind; and yet there they were, the dolls, the pots, the little ornaments. The merest trifles fascinated me and preoccupied my mind. The juxtaposition of a red scarf and a violet cushion: when did I last see fuchsias, with their

bishop's and their cardinal's robes and their long frail penises? When the light-filled convolvulus, the simple dog-rose, the dishevelled honeysuckle, the narcissus with astonished, wide-open eyes in the midst of its whiteness—when? There might be none left on earth, and I should know nothing about it. Nor water-lilies on the lakes nor buckwheat in the fields. All around me the world lay like an immense hypothesis that I no longer verified.

I wrenched myself out of these dark clouds: J went down into the streets. I looked at the sky, the shabby houses. Nothing moved me at all. The moonlight and the sunset, the smell of showery spring and hot tar, the brilliance and the changing of the year: I have known moments that had the pure blaze of a diamond. But they have always come without being called for. They used to spring up unexpectedly, an unlooked-for truce, an unhoped-for promise, cutting across the activities that insisted upon my presence; I would enjoy them almost illicitly, coming out of the lycée, or the exit of a métro, or on my balcony between two sessions of work, or hurrying along the boulevard to meet André. Now I walked about Paris, free, receptive, and frigidly indifferent. My overflowing leisure handed me the world and at the same time prevented me from seeing it. Just as the sun, filtering through the closed Venetian blinds on a hot afternoon, makes the whole magnificence of summer blaze in my mind; whereas if I face its direct harsh glare it blinds me.

I went home: I telephoned André, or he would telephone me. His mother was more pugnacious than ever; he was seeing old school-fellows, walking, gardening. His cheerful friendliness depressed me. I told myself that we should meet again exactly where we had been before, with this wall of silence between us. The telephone—it is not a thing that brings people nearer: it underlines their remoteness. You are not together as you are in a conversation, for you do not see one another. You are not alone as you are in front of a piece of paper that allows you to talk inwardly while you are addressing the other—to seek out and find the truth. I felt like writing to him: but what? Anxiety began to mingle with my distress. The friends to whom I had sent my book ought to have written to tell me about it: not one had done so, not even Martine. The week after André left there were suddenly a great many articles dealing with it. I was disappointed by Monday's, vexed by Wednesday's, quite crushed by Thursday's. The harshest spoke of wearisome repetition, the kindest of 'an interesting restatement'. Not one had grasped the originality of my work. Had I not managed to make it clear? I telephoned Martine. The reviews were stupid, she said; I should take no notice of them. As for her own opinion, she wanted to wait until she had finished the book before letting me know it: she was going to finish it and think it over that very evening, and the next day she would be coming to Paris. I hung up with a bitter taste in my mouth. Martine had not wanted to talk to me over the telephone: so her opinion was unfavourable. I could not understand. I do not usually delude myself about my own work.

Three weeks had passed since our meeting in the Parc Montsouris—three weeks that counted among the most unpleasant I had ever known. Ordinarily I should have been delighted at the idea of seeing Martine again. But I felt more anxious than I had when I was waiting for the results of the *agrégation.* After the first quick civilities I plunged straight in. 'Well? What do you think of it?'

She answered me in well-balanced phrases—I could sense that they had been carefully prepared. The book was an excellent synthesis, it clarified various obscurities; it was valuable in emphasizing what was new in my work.

'But in itself, does it say anything new?'

'That was not its intention.'

'It was mine.'

She grew confused: I went on and on, I badgered her. As she saw it I had already, in my earlier books, applied the methods I was now putting forward; indeed, in many places I had spoken of them quite explicitly. No, I was producing nothing new. As Pélissier had said, the book was rather a well-based restatement and summing up.

'I had meant to do something quite different.'

I was both stunned and unbelieving, as it often happens when a piece of bad news hits one. The unanimity of the verdict was overwhelming. And yet still I said to myself, 'I cannot have been so wholly wrong as all that.'

We were having dinner in a garden just outside Paris, and I made a great effort to hide my mortification. In the end I said, 'I wonder whether one's not condemned to repetition once one has passed sixty.'

'What a notion!'

'There are plenty of painters, composers, and even philosophers who have done their very best work in their old age; but can you tell me of a single writer?'

'Victor Hugo.'

'All right. But who else? Montesquieu virtually came to an end at fifty-nine with *L'Esprit des Lois*, which he had had in his mind for years and years.'

'There must be others.'

'But not one of them springs to mind.'

'Come! You mustn't lose heart,' said Martine reproachfully. 'Any body of work has its ups and its downs. This time you have not fully succeeded in what you set out to do: you will have another go.'

'Usually my failures spur me on. This time it's different.'

'I don't see how.'

'Because of my age. André says that scientists are finished well before they are fifty. In writing too no doubt there comes a stage at which one only marks time.'

'In writing I'm sure that's not so,' said Martine.

'And in science?'

'There I'm not qualified to form an opinion.'

I could see André's face again. Had he felt the same kind of disappointment that I was feeling? Once and for all? Or time after time? 'You have scientists among your friends. What do they think of André?'

'That he's a great scientist.'

'But what is their opinion of what he's doing at present?'

'That he has a fine team and that their work is very important.'

'He says all the fresh ideas come from the men who work with him.'

'That may well be. It seems that scientists only make discoveries in the prime of life. Nearly all the Nobel prizes for science go to young men.'

I sighed. 'So André was right, then. He'll not discover anything any more.'

'One has no right to make up one's mind about the future in advance,' said Martine, with an abrupt change of tone. 'After all, nothing exists except for particular instances. Generalities do not prove anything.'

'I should like to believe it,' I said, and began to talk of other things.

As she left me, Martine said hesitantly, 'I'm going back to your book. I read it too quickly.'

'You read it, all right, and it doesn't come off. But as you say, it's not very important.'

'Not at all important. I'm quite certain you will still write a great many very good books.' I was almost certain that this was not the case, but I did not contradict her. 'You are so young!' she added.

People often tell me that and I feel flattered. All at once the remark irritated me. It is an equivocal compliment and one that foretells a disagreeable future. Remaining young means retaining lively energy, cheerfulness and vitality of mind. So the fate of old age is the dull daily round, gloom and dotage. I am not young: I am well preserved, which is quite different. Well preserved; and maybe finished and done with. I took some sleeping-pills and went to bed.

When I woke up I was in a very curious state—more feverish than anxious. I stopped telephone calls coming through and set about re-reading my *Rousseau* and *Montesquieu.* I read for ten hours on end, scarcely breaking off to eat a couple of hard-boiled eggs and a slice of ham. It was an odd

experience, this bringing to life of pages born of my pen and forgotten. From time to time they interested me—they surprised me as much as if someone else had written them; yet I recognized the vocabulary, the shape of the sentences, the drive, the elliptical forms, the manner- isms. These pages were soaked through and through with myself—there was a sickening intimacy about it, like the smell of a bedroom in which one has been shut up too long. I forced myself to go for a stroll and to dine at the little restaurant nearby: home again I gulped down very strong coffee and I opened this present book. It was all there in my mind, and I knew beforehand what the result of the comparison would be. Everything I had to say had been said in my two monographs. I was doing no more than repeating, in another form, those ideas that had given the monographs their interest. I had deceived myself when I thought I was going on to something new. And what was worse, when my methods were separated from the particular contexts to which I had applied them, they lost their acuity and suppleness. I had produced nothing new: absolutely nothing. And I knew that the second volume would only prolong this stagnation. There it was, then: I had spent three years writing a useless book. Not just a failure, like some others, in which in spite of awkwardness and blunders I did open up certain fresh views. Useless. Only fit for burning.

Do not make up your mind about the future in advance. Easy enough to say. I could see the future. It stretched away in front of me, flat, bare, running on out of sight. Never a plan, never a wish. I should write no more. Then what should I do? What an emptiness within me—all around me. Useless. The Greeks called their old people hornets. 'Useless hornet,' Hecuba called herself in *The Trojan Women.* That was my case. I was shattered. I wondered how people managed to go on living when there was nothing to be hoped for from within.

Out of pride I did not choose to leave any earlier than the fixed date and I did not say anything to André on the telephone. But how long those three days that followed seemed to me! Discs enclosed in their bright-coloured sleeves, books right-packed on their shelves: neither music nor words could do anything for me. Formerly I had looked to them for stimulus or relaxation. Now they were no more than a diversion whose irrelevance sickened me. See an exhibition, go back to the Louvre? I had so longed to have the leisure to do so in the days when I did not: possess it. But if ten days ago all I could see in the churches and chateaux was heaped-up stones, it would be even worse now. Nothing would come over from the canvas to me. For me the pictures would merely be cloth with colours squeezed on from a tube and spread with a brush. Walking bored me: I had already discovered that. My friends were away on holiday and in any case I wanted neither their sincerity nor their falsehoods. Philippe—how I regretted him, and how painfully! I thrust his image aside: it made my eyes fill with tears.

So I stayed at home, brooding. It was very hot, and even if I lowered the sun-blinds I stifled. Time stopped flowing. It is dreadful—I feel like saying it is unfair—that it should be able to go by both so quickly and so slow. I was walking through the gates of the lycée at Bourg, almost as young as my own pupils, gazing with pity at the old grey-haired teachers. Flash, and I was an old teacher myself; and then the lycée gates closed behind me. For years and years my pupils gave me the illusion that my age did not alter: at the beginning of each school year I found them there again, as young as ever; and I adapted myself to this unchanging state. In the great sea of time I was a rock beaten by waves that were continually renewed—a rock that neither moved nor crumbled. And all at once the tide was carrying me away, and would go on carrying me until I ran aground in death. My life was hurrying, racing tragically towards its end. And yet at the same time it was dripping so slowly, so very slowly now, hour by hour, minute by minute. One always has to wait until the sugar melts, the memory dies, the wound scars over, the sun sets, the unhappiness lifts and fades away. Strange anomaly of these two rhythms. My days fly galloping from me; yet the long dragging out of each one makes me weary, weary.

There was only one hope left to me—André. But could he fill this emptiness within me? Where did our relationship stand? And in the first place what had we been for one another, all through this life that is called life together? I wanted to make up my mind about that without cheating. In order to

do so, I should have to recapitulate the story of our life. I had always promised myself that I should do so. I tried. Deep in an armchair, staring at the ceiling, I told over our first meetings, our marriage, the birth of Philippe. I learnt nothing that I had not known already. What poverty! 'The desert of time past,' said Chateaubriand. He was right, alas! I had had a general sort of idea that the life I had behind me was a landscape in which I could wander as I pleased, gradually exploring its windings and its hidden valleys. No. I could repeat names and dates, just as a schoolboy can bring out a carefully-learnt lesson on a subject he knows nothing about. And at long intervals there arose worn, faded images, as abstract as those in my old French History: they stood out arbitrarily, against a white background. Throughout all this calling up of the past André's face never changed. I stopped. What I had to do was to reflect. Had he loved me as I loved him? At the beginning I think he did; or rather the question never arose for either of us, for we were so happy together. But when his work no longer satisfied him, did he come to the conclusion that our love was not enough for him? Did it disappoint him? I think he looks upon me as a mathematical constant whose disappearance would take him very much aback without any way altering his destiny, since the heart of the matter lies elsewhere. In that case even my understanding is not much help to him. Would another woman have succeeded in giving him more? Who had set up the barrier between us? Had he? Had I? Both of us? Was there any possibility of doing away with it? I was tired of asking myself questions. The words came to pieces in my mind: love, understanding, disagreement—they were noises, devoid of meaning. Had they ever had any? When I stepped into the express, the Mistral, early in the afternoon, I had absolutely no idea of what I should find.

He was waiting for me on the platform. After all those mental images and words and that disincarnate voice, the sudden manifestation of a physical presence! Sunburnt, thinner, his hair cut, wearing cotton trousers and a short-sleeved shirt, he was rather unlike the André I had said good-bye to, but it was he. My delight could not be false: it could not dwindle to nothing in a few moments. Or could it? He settled me into the car in the kindest way, and as we drove towards Villeneuve his smiles were full of affection. But we were so much in the habit of talking pleasantly to one another that neither the actions nor the smiles meant much. Was he really pleased to see me again?

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.