

DAPHNE  
DU MAURIER



THE  
SCAPEGOAT

A NOVEL OF IMPERSONATION

Du Maurier, Daphne, 1907-1989. Scapegoat

"The Scapegoat," copyright 1956, 1957 by Daphne du Maurier  
Browning, is published at \$3.95 by Doubleday ir Co., Inc., 575  
Madison Ave., New York 22, N. Y.

Have you ever thought of what it would be like to change places with someone -- actually to enter another person's life? This is the situation in which a lonely professor, tricked by a stranger in France who is his identical double, finds himself.

The reader follows him breathlessly as he meets and sorts out his new family, skirts the narrow brink of detection, and effects revolutionary changes in the warped lives around him.

The Scapegoat, by a past master of suspense, is the absorbing story of a masquerade that ended as unpredictably as it began.

## CHAPTER 1

LEFT the car by the side of the cathedral and walked down the steps into the Place des Jacobins. It was still raining hard. It had not once let up since Tours, and all I had seen of the countryside I loved was the gleaming surface of the route nationale, rhythmically cut by the monotonous swing of the windscreen wiper.

Outside Le Mans, the depression that had grown upon me during the past twenty-four hours had intensified. The notes I had written for the lectures I was to give in London during the coming autumn were scholarly, precise, with dates and facts that I should afterwards dress up in language designed to strike a spark in the dull minds of inattentive students. But even if I held their flagging interest, I should know, when I had finished, that nothing I had said to them was of any value. The real meaning of history would have escaped me, because I had never been close enough to people.

My realization that I had achieved nothing in life, that all I had ever done was to watch people, never to partake of their haziness or pain, brought such a sense of overwhelming depression that when I came to Le Mans, although I had not intended to stop there and lunch, I changed my mind, hoping to change my mood.

It must have been one of the big market days, for the Place was full of country people. Two blackshawled women argued beside an open cart, one of them holding a squawking hen, while towards them came a hulking fellow, his face purple with good cheer from a nearby bistro, grumbling as he peered down at the few coins in his hand. Three men prodded a bullock towards a lorry, pricking his flanks with a hayfork. I walked past the lorry and across the Place to the brasserie at the corner, and suddenly the pale sun shone from the fitful sky, and the people thronging the Place, who had seemed black smudges in the rain, became animated blobs of color, smiling, gesticulating, strolling about their business with new leisure as the sky fell apart, turning the dull day to gold.

The brasserie was crowded, the atmosphere

thick with the good smell of food -- of cheese upon sauce-tipped knives, spilt wine and the bitter dregs of coffee -- the whole scene framed in a blue smoke cloud of Gauloise cigarettes. I found a seat in the far corner near the service door, and as I ate an omelette the swing door kept bursting backwards, forwards, pushed impatiently by waiters with trays piled high with food. The woman who ate beside me expostulated to her sister upon the cost of living, ignoring the illid little girl who sat on the husband's knee. As I listened my former depression returned. I was an alien, I was not one of them. Years of study, the fluency with which I spoke their language, taught their history had never brought me closer to the people themselves. The urge to know was with me, and the ache. The smell of the soil, the faded paint of shutters masking windows through which I should never look, the gray faces of houses whose doors I should never enter were an everlasting reproach, a reminder of distance, of nationality. I should never be a Frenchman, never be one of them.

I paid, and went out, and walked aimlessly along the streets, my lack of purpose, my very clothes -- gray flannel bags, well-worn tweed jacket -- betraying me an Englishman in this jostling market-day crowd. The rain came spattering down again, sending the crowd to huddle in the shops; and suddenly, like a gulf of darkness swamping reason, I knew that later on I must get drunk, or die. How much did failure matter? Not, perhaps, to the few friends who thought they knew me well, not to the persons who employed me nor the students to whom I lectured, who knew me as a law-abiding, quiet individual of thirty-eight, with no family, no ties, no entanglements. But to the self who clamored for release, the man within?

Who he was, what urges and what longings he might possess, I could not tell. Perhaps if I had not kept him locked within me, he might have laughed and roistered -- or spent himself on causes and loved humanity. I was so used to denying him expression that his ways were unknown to me. Whatever his nature, he always hovered beneath the insignificant facade of that pale self who now waited for the rain to cease, for the holiday to come to its appointed end, for the routine of his uneventful London life to close upon him again. The (question was, what lever would set that other

self free?

I thought of my map back in the car, and the blue circle with which I had marked the Cistercian monastery called the Abbaye de la Grande-Trappe. What did I expect to gain if I should go there? That the monks might have my answer, and the answer to the man within . . .

I was surprised to see the station ahead of me and, thinking I would have a drink at the buffet and come to some decision about la Grande-Trappe, I crossed the road. A car swerved to avoid me and then stopped. The driver leant out of the window and shouted in French, "Hullo, Jean, when did you return?"

The fact that my own name was John confused me. I thought that he must be someone I had met somewhere, and I called back, also in French, "I'm only passing through -- I go back tonight."

"A wasted visit, I suppose," he said, "but you'll bluff them all at home into thinking it's been a success."

The remark was offensive. How on earth could he know about my deep personal sense of failure? Then I saw he was a stranger. "I beg your pardon," I said, "I'm afraid we have both made a mistake."

To my astonishment he laughed, winked broadly, and said, "All right, pretend I haven't seen you. But why do here in Le Mans what could be better done in Paris? I'll ask you when we meet again next Sunday." Laughing, he drove away.

I watched his car disappear, and turned into the crowded station buffet. Chattering travelers elbowed me from the counter. Whistles blew, dogs on leashes yapped, a child wailed.

Someone jolted my elbow as I drank and said, "Je vous demande pardon," and as I moved to give him space he turned and stared at me and I at him, and I realized, with a strange sense of shock and fear and nausea all combined, that his face and voice were known to me too well.

I was looking at myself. ...

We did not speak: we went on staring at one another. I felt a chill down my spine, a desire to turn and run. Finally he said, "You don't happen to be the devil, by any chance?"

"I might ask you the same question," I replied.

"Here . . ." He took me by the arm and pulled me closer to the counter, and although the mirror behind the bar was steamy, and partly hidden by bottles, it showed us plainly enough to be standing together, searching the mirrored surface as though our lives depended upon what it had to tell. And the answer was no chance resemblance, no superficial likeness: it was as though one man stood there. He said -- and even the intonation sounded like my own -- "I make it a rule never to be surprised by anything in life; there is no reason to make an exception now. What will you drink?"

I was too shaken to care. He asked for two fines, and we moved with one accord to the further end of the counter, where the mirror was less steamy and the pushing crowd less dense.

We might have been two actors studying our make-up as we glanced from the looking glass back to one another. He arranged his tie and I arranged mine; and we both drank our brandy at one gulp to see what we looked like drinking.

"Are you a man of fortune?" he asked.

"No," I said. "Why?"

"We might do an act at a circus, or make a milhon in a cabaret." He ordered two more fines. Nobody seemed surprised at the resemblance. "They think you're my twin brother here at the station to meet me," he said. "Perhaps you are. Where are you from?"

"London," I told him.

"What I mean is, what part of France do you come from?"

"I'm English. I happen to have made a study of your language."

He raised his eyebrows. "My compliments," he said. "I wouldn't have known you for a foreigner. What are you doing in Le Mans?"

I explained that I was in the last few days of holiday, that I gave lectures in England about his country and its past.

He looked amused. "Is that how you earn a living?"

"Yes."

"Are you married?"

"No. I have no family at all. I live alone."

"You're lucky." He spoke with emphasis, and raised his glass. "To your most fortunate freedom," he said. "Long may it last."

"What about you?" I asked.

"Me?" he said. "Oh, I can call myself a family man. Very much so, in fact. I was caught long ago."

"Are you a man of business too?"

"I own some property about thirty kilometers from here." He stared at his glass. "Are you stopping in Le Mans overnight?"

"I don't know. I haven't planned. As a matter of fact ..." I paused. The brandy had given me a comfortable glow inside, and I had the impression that it would not matter what I said to this man; it would be like talking to myself. "As a matter of fact, I was thinking of spending a few days in la Grande-Trappe."

"For the love of God, why do you want to go there?"

His phrase was apt. The reason why men went to la Grande-Trappe was to find the love of God. Or so I supposed.

"I thought if I went," I said, "and stayed there before returning to England, I might find the courage to go on living."

He looked at me thoughtfully as he drank his fine.

"What's the trouble?" he asked. "A woman? Money?"

"No."

"You have cancer?"

"No."

He shrugged his shoulders. "Perhaps you're a drunkard," he said, "or enjoy discomfort for its own sake. There must be something seriously wrong if you want to go to la Grande-Trappe."

I glanced beyond him to the mirror once again. And now, for the first time, I could see the difference between us. It was not the clothes, his dark traveling suit and my tweed jacket, which distinguished us; it was his ease of manner. He looked, and spoke, and smiled as I had never done.

"There's nothing wrong," I said. "It's just that, as an individual, I've failed in life."

"So have we all," he said. "The secret of life is to recognize the fact early on, and become reconciled."

He finished his drink and glanced at the clock on the wall.

"There is no need," he observed, "to go to la Grande-Trappe immediately. The good monks are

waiting upon eternity, they can wait a few more hours for you. Let us go where we can drink in greater comfort, and perhaps dine, because, being a family man, I am in no great hurry to go home."

It was then that I remembered the man in the car who had spoken to me outside. "Are you called Jean?" I asked.

"Yes," he said, "Jean de Gue. Why?"

"Someone mistook me for you. He shouted, 'Hullo, Jean,' and when I told him he was mistaken he seemed amused, and obviously thought I didn't want to be recognized. He drove off laughing, calling out something about seeing me on Sunday."

"Oh yes. La chasse takes place then."

My words must have started a new train of thought, for his expression changed, as if a problem, not easy to solve, had thrust its way to the surface of his mind. He beckoned to a porter who was waiting patiently with a couple of valises outside the swing door of the buffet.

"You have a car?" he asked.

"Yes," I answered. "I left it at the cathedral"

"Then if you don't mind giving room to my valises, we might fetch it and drive somewhere for dinner?"

"Certainly. Anywhere you say."

He tipped the porter, summoned a taxi and we drove away. It was odd, and like a dream. So often, dreaming, I was the shadow, watching myself take part in some action. I had the same lack of substance now, the same lack of will.

After a moment I glanced at him, half furtively, and saw that he was looking as furtively at me. Our eyes met, and instead of smiling instinctively, because of the bond of likeness, the sensation was unpleasant, like contact with danger. I turned away from him to gaze out of the window, and as the taxi swerved and pulled up by the cathedral the deep, solemn bells sounded for the Angelus. It was a summons that never failed to move me. Tonight it rang like a challenge, loud and compelling, as we climbed from the taxi. Two or three people passed through the doors into the cathedral.

I went and unlocked the car, a Ford Consul. My companion looked at it with interest. As I stowed away his valises he asked me all sorts of questions about it, fingered the switches, felt the seats to test the springs, fiddled with the gears and finally asked, with a burst of enthusiasm, whether he might drive it.

"Certainly," I said. "You know this town better than I do."

He settled himself with assurance behind the wheel and I climbed in beside him. It turned out to be, by my rather cautious standard, a hair-raising ride. When he had jumped one set of Lights, and forced a large Buick driven by an infuriated American into the side of the street, he proceeded to circle the town in order, so he explained, to try the car's pace. "You know," he said, "it amuses me enormously to use other people's possessions. It is one of life's greatest pleasures." I closed my eyes as we took a corner like a bobsleigh.

"I was thinking," he went on, "of taking you to the only restaurant where it is possible to eat superbly, but I am known there, and somehow I feel that tonight I want to be without identity."

His words gave me the same sense of discomfort that I had experienced in the taxi. The likeness between us was not something that either of us wanted to show off in public.

He began to slow down as we approached the center of the town. "Possibly," he said, "I will spend tonight at a hotel." He seemed to be thinking aloud. "After all, by the time we have dined, it will be rather late to telephone for Gaston to bring in the car. And anyway, they are not expecting me."

I have made the same sort of excuses myself to put off facing something unpleasant.

"And you," he said, "you may decide you do not want to go to la Grande-Trappe. You, too, could stay in a hotel."

His voice was odd. It was as though he was feeling his way towards some sort of agreement between us.

"Perhaps," I said. "I don't know."

He drove through the center of the town until we came to a quarter where the buildings appeared gray and drab. He stopped the car in front of a shabby house above whose half-open door I saw the word Hotel, in dim blue electric light.

"Sometimes," he said, "these places can be useful. One does not always want to run up against one's friends." He switched off the engine and opened the door. "Are you coming?" he said.

"I don't think so," I said. "You go inside and book your room if you want to. I'd rather dine first and then decide what to do."

"As you like," he said, shrugging, and I lit a cigarette and watched him push through the door into the hotel. The drinks I had had were beginning to take effect. Nothing that was happening had reality, and in a state of blurred confusion I asked myself what I was doing here. I wondered whether I should drive away, and so be quit of the whole encounter, which, fascinating at first, now seemed menacing, even evil. I was reaching for the switch when he returned.

"That's fixed," he said. "Come and eat. No need to take the car. I know of a place just round the corner."

I couldn't summon an excuse to be quit of him, and, despising my own weakness, I followed him along the street like a shadow. He led me to a place half restaurant, half bistro, in the next street. It was crowded with youths in colored jerseys, singing and shouting, while a knot of older men, workmen, played some dice game at a table. He pushed his way with assurance through the turmoil, and we sat down at a table behind a battered screen.

The patron thrust an indecipherable menu into my hands, and a glass of wine was before me and a plate of soup I hadn't ordered; for the ceiling was now merging with the floor and time losing significance, and my companion was leaning across the table, his glass raised, saying, "To your sojourn at la Grande-Trappe." His voice, so like an echo of my own, prodded me into confession: I found myself talking about loneliness, death, the empty shell of my personal world. "Surely at la Grande-Trappe," I heard my voice saying, "where men live by silence, they must have an answer to this, for they have deliberately gone into darkness to find light. Or, if they cannot give the answer, they can tell me where to look for it."

"My friend," he said, "if you knew as much about religion as I do you would run from it like the plague. I have a sister who thinks of nothing else. I have learnt one thing in life: that the only motive force in human nature is greed. The thing to do is to minister to the greed, to give people what they want. The trouble is, they are never satisfied." He poured himself another glass of wine. "You complain that your life is empty," he said, in a new, hard voice. "To me it sounds like paradise. No family ties, no business worries, the whole of London a playground, if you wish."

There was resentment in his eyes, and exasperation -- he too had his personal problem which he did not wish to face.

"It's your turn for the confessional," I said. "What's your trouble?"

I thought for a moment that he might be going to tell me. Something wavered in his eyes, a flicker of uncertainty, then it was gone again and in its stead the tolerant smile, the lazy shrug.

"Oh, me!" he said. "My one trouble is that I have too many possessions. Human ones." And his gesture of dismissal as he lit a cigarette was a warning not to question further.

I fell silent; I was aware of his eyes upon me, bringing a strange discomfort. When he said he must telephone home, and left the table, I was relieved, as if his absence made it easier to breathe. When he returned I said, "Well?" and he answered briefly, "I told them to send the car in to fetch me tomorrow." Calling the patron, he paid the bill, brushing my feeble attempts aside, and then seized my arm and pushed me through the singing youths into the street.

I murmured something about finding the car and going on my way, but he went on holding my arm and said, "I can't let you go like this. Our meeting is too unusual, too bizarre." We came once more to the entrance of his shabby, dim hotel, and I looked through the door and saw there was no one behind the desk. He noticed it too, and said quickly, "Come upstairs. Let's have one more drink before you go." His voice was urgent, insistent, as though we had little time to lose. I protested, but he half led me up the stairs. He took a key out of his pocket, opened a door, and switched on the light of a small drab single room. "Here," he said, "sit down on the bed." He brought out his flask and poured cognac into a tooth glass. Once again the ceiling hit the floor as it had done in the bistro, and it seemed to me that what was happening was fated, inevitable, that I should never be rid of him or he of me.

"What's the matter? Are you ill?" His eyes peered into mine.

I stood up, torn between two desires -- one to get away, the other to stand beside him once again and look into the mirror. I knew that the first was wisdom and the other somehow evil, and yet it had to be done. We turned with one accord and stared, and the likeness seemed even more uncanny and horrible than it had been in the crowded buffet. He thrust the glass of cognac into my trembling hand and himself drank from the flask, and then he said, his voice unsteady as my own, "Shall I put on your clothes and you wear mine?"

I remember that one of us laughed as I hit the floor.

## CHAPTER 2

SOMEONE was knocking on the door. The sound went on and on until finally I roused myself from heaven knows what depths of darkness and shouted "Entrez!" A man came in, wearing a faded, old-fashioned chauffeur's uniform, and holding his cap in his hands. His build was short and square, his eyes deep brown, and he looked at me from the doorway with compassion. "Monsieur le Comte is awake at last?" he said.

I considered him a moment, frowning, and then I glanced about the room and saw one valise open on the chair, another on the floor, and the clothes of my late companion thrown over the end of the bed on which I lay. I was wearing a striped pajama coat I did not recognize, and there was no sign of my own clothes.

"Who are you?" I said to the chauffeur. "What do you want?"

He sighed, flashed a sympathetic eye at the disorder of the room, and said, "Monsieur le Comte would like to sleep a little longer?"

"Monsieur le Comte isn't here," I said. "He must have gone out. What's the time?"

I remembered now that my companion had telephoned for a car to come and fetch him the next day. This must be Gaston, the chauffeur, who was mistaking me for his master.

"It is five o'clock in the evening," he said. "Monsieur le Comte has slept very soundly all the day. I have been waiting here since eleven o'clock this morning."

His words held no reproach: they were merely a statement of fact. I put my hand to my aching head. I thought of the drinks the night before, and that last tooth glass of cognac. "I fell," I told the chauffeur, "and I think I must have been drugged as well."

"Very possibly," he said. "These things will happen."

His voice had the soothing quality of an old nurse speaking to a child. I swang my legs out of bed and gazed down at the unfamiliar pajama trousers. They fitted, yet they were not mine. At the end of the bed, I recognized the dark traveling suit of my companion.

"What happened to my clothes?" I asked.

The chauffeur came forward, and, taking the suit, hung the coat on the back of the chair and smoothed the trousers.

"Monsieur le Comte was no doubt thinking of other things when he undressed," he observed, and he glanced across at me and smiled.

"No," I said, "those things aren't mine. They belong to your master. Mine are probably in the wardrobe there."

He raised his eyebrows and pursed his lips, like someone who humors a child, and, crossing to the wardrobe, flung it open. There was nothing hanging there. I got out of bed and rummaged in the valises. They were filled with the possessions of my late companion: toilet articles, clothes, checkbook, calling cards with "Comte de Gue, St. Gilles, Sarthe" on them. I realized then that we must have exchanged clothes in a fit of drunken folly, and somehow the thought of it was distasteful, beastly.

I went to the window and looked down into the street. There was a Renault drawn up in front of the hotel, and my car had gone.

"Did you see my car when you arrived?" I asked the chauffeur.

The man looked puzzled. "Monsieur le Comte has bought a new car?" he asked. "There was no other car when I came this morning."

His continued self-deception irritated me. "No," I said impatiently, "my car, my Ford. I am not

Monsieiu- le Comte. Monsieur le Comte has gone out wearing my clothes. See if he left a message with anyone below. He must have taken my car too. It's a joke on his part, but I am not particularly amused."

A new expression -- worried, upset -- came into the chauffeur's eyes. "There is no hurry," he said, "if Monsieur le Comte wishes to rest a little longer." Very gently, he put out his hand and felt my head. "Would you like me to fetch something from the pharmacie?" he asked.

I knew I must be patient. "Would you ask whoever is at the reception desk to come upstairs?" I said. He left me and went down the stairs, and when he had gone I sat down again on the bed, my head in my hands. There was nothing I could do but wait. Presently de Cue would come back. He must come back. He had taken my car, my money, my passport, every personal thing I carried. I had only to go to the police; they would find him. Meanwhile . . . meanwhile, what?

The chauffeur came back into the room, and with him a greasy, furtive-looking man whom I took to be the reception clerk.

"Where is the gentleman I was with last night?" I asked. "Did anybody see him go out this morning?"

"You were alone when you took the room yesterday evening, Monsieur," replied the man. "Whether you were alone when you returned later in the evening I couldn't say. We are discreet here."

Beneath the obsequious tone I caught the note of familiarity, of contempt. The chauffeur was staring at the floor. I saw the clerk glance at my tumbled bed, and at the brandy flask on the washstand.

"I must get on to the police," I said.

The man looked startled. "You have been robbed. Monsieur?"

The chauffeur raised his eyes and, still clutching his cap in his hand, came and stood beside me, as though to protect me. "It would be better not to have any trouble in a place like this, Monsieur le Comte," he said in a low voice. "In an hour or two you will be feeling more like yourself. Let me help you to dress, and then we will drive home as quickly as possible."

Suddenly I became angry. All right. If my late companion wished to make an idiot of me, I would do the same to him. I would put on his clothes, and drive his car to hell -- as he was no doubt driving mine -- and have myself arrested, and then wait for him to turn up to explain his senseless action as best he could.

"Very well. Clear out and leave me," I said to the chauffeur. He went, and the hotelkeeper with him, and with a strange distaste and fury mingled I reached for the clothes and began to dress.

When I had finished, my reflection stared back at me from the mirror with a strange indefinable difference. My own self had become submerged. It was the man who called himself Jean de Gue who stood there now. The change of clothes had brought a change of personality: my shoulders looked broader, I seemed to hold my head higher, even the expression in my eyes now resembled his. Slowly I took his wallet and searched it carefully in case he had left an explanation, some scrawl admitting the joke he had played upon me. There was nothing, no word, no clue.

My anger grew. I foresaw the string of explanations that was going to be forced upon me -- the rambling, disjointed story to the police, their bored reluctance to seek confirmation of my story that two of us, identical in appearance, had been together there.

I went downstairs, paid the bill, and had the luggage brought out to the ancient Renault and the waiting chauffeur. I realized that I had taken the first step in duplicity: by not at once demanding the police, by wearing the wrong clothes and passing myself off as Jean de Gue even for half an hour, I had put myself in the wrong. I was now the accomplice of the man who had driven away.

The chauffeur had put the luggage in the car. He held the door open. "Monsieur le Comte is himself

again?" he asked anxiously.

I could have answered, "I am not Monsieur le Comte. Drive me to the police station at once," but I did not. I took my second decisive step, and got into the driving seat of the Renault, the chauffeur getting in beside me. I started the car, filled with an intense desire to get away from that dingy, shabby hotel, and, as my anger rose and self-disgust took possession of me, I followed the first road I saw that led out of Le Mans. I stepped on the accelerator, possessed by a reckless feeling I had never known before. The old car leapt in response. Whatever damage I do to her, I thought, it does not matter: the accident would be Jean de Cue's, not mine.

Suddenly I laughed, and the chauffeur beside me said, "That's better. Before we left Le Mans I was afraid that Monsieur le Comte was going to be ill. It was a good thing Monsieur Paul did not come instead of me, but luckily he had too much to do."

I must have driven about twenty-five kilometers along the route nationale when an approaching village forced me to slow down. We were through and out again the other side before the chauffeur said, "You have missed the turning, Monsieur le Comte."

I knew then that I was committed. Some freak of fortune had brought me to this spot on the map, to the heart of this unknown land to which I did not belong and which I had for years told myself I wanted to understand. For the first time I saw the point of the joke, the irony of the situation as it must have struck Jean de Cue when he left me sleeping in Le Mans.

"The only motive force in human nature is greed," he had said to me. "The thing to do is to minister to the greed, to give people what they want." He had given me what I asked, the chance to be accepted. He had lent me his name, his possessions, his identity. I had told him my own life was empty: he had given me his.

"All right," I said to the chauffeur, stopping the car. "You drive the rest of the way."

He looked at me inquiringly but made no answer, and we exchanged places without a word. He turned the car back to the village and struck left, leaving the route nationale behind us.

The setting sun dipped in our wake, and as we drove east the deep country folded upon us, forested and still. The lonely farmsteads lay oasislike and misty amidst the soft red glow of fields. Everything had the quality of a dream. Long avenues of poplars, with shivering, falling leaves, came out of nowhere and disappeared again. A sudden impulse bade me tell the chauffeur to stop the car, and I stood in the road for a moment, listening to silence, as the sun went down behind us dark and red, and the white mist rose.

Gaston said, "Monsieur le Comte has no great longing to go home?"

I looked down at his kind, honest face, sympathy in the depths of his brown eyes, and irony too, the gentle mockery of one who must surely love his master well, yet would dare to tell him when he strayed. His warmth brought a smile from me in answer, until I remembered that it was not me he loved but Jean de Gue. I climbed back again into the car beside him.

"It isn't always easy," I said, "to be a family man," echoing the words that had been spoken to me the night before.

"Very true," replied the chauffeur with a shrug and a sigh, "There are always so many problems in a household such as yours. Sometimes I wonder how Monsieur le Comte avoids disaster."

A household such as mine . . . The road topped the brow of a hill and I saw a sign: St. Gilles. We passed an ancient church, a little sandy square flanked with a few worn houses and a solitary grocer's shop, and swung left down an avenue of limes and over a narrow bridge. And now the enormity of what I was doing hit me like a blow. I had but one desire -- to run, to hide, not to be carried forward fate-fully and inevitably to the ivy-covered chateau I saw looming ahead of me. The car jolted over a wooden bridgeway spanning a moat that was now gone to grass and nettles, and, passing swiftly through the open gate, came to a standstill beneath the chateau terrace. As I

hesitated in the car, a man came out of the dark door between the windows and stood there on the terrace, waiting.

"There's Monsieur Paul," said Gaston. "If he questions me later I shall say you had business in Le Mans, and that I picked you up from the Hotel de Paris."

He got out of the car and I followed slowly.

The man on the terrace looked down at me. "Well?" he said. "You've taken your time." And he did not smile.

I went up the steps, lifting my eyes to meet the first penetrating gaze, the man's use of the familiar "tu" proving him, surely, a relative. I saw that he was shorter, thinner, probably younger than myself, yet with a haggard appearance as if he were tired or his health bad. The lines around his mouth were pinched and dissatisfied. I stood beside him, waiting for his move.

"You might have telephoned this morning," he said. "They waited lunch. Françoise and Renee declared you had had an accident. I said you were probably spending the day in the bar of the Hotel de Paris. We tried to get you there, but they told us you hadn't been seen. After that, of course, there were the usual lamentations."

Surprise that I had passed his near inspection kept me silent. He looked me up and down, then laughed, the laugh of someone who is irritated, not amused. "I tell you frankly, you look a wreck."

For the first time in my life, I recognized dislike. The effect was strange. I was angry for the sake of Jean de Gue. Whatever he might have done to incur hostility, I was on his side.

"Thank you," I said. "Your opinion doesn't worry me. As a matter of fact, I feel extremely well."

He turned on his heel, walking towards the door, and Gaston caught my eye and smiled. I realized with amazement that I had said what was expected of me, and the answering "titi," which I had never used before, had come naturally, without effort.

I followed the man named Paul into the house. A narrow hall led to another, wider passage whence I could see a twisting stairway going to the floors above. At the far end of the wider passage hall there were two doors, half open. A murmur of voices came from one of them.

Paul crossed the passage and called, "Here is Jean arrived at last," his voice betraying his exasperation. He turned back to me. "I'm off. I have a Rotary Club dinner and I'm late already. I can see you are in no fit state to tell me anything tonight. We can discuss things in the morning." He turned and went out.

Gaston, the two valises in his hand, was mounting the stairs. I wondered if I should follow him, when a woman's voice, high, complaining, called from the room beyond, "Are you there, Jean?" and once again the chauffeur glanced down at me in sympathy. Slowly, with lagging steps, I passed through the open door into the room. I had one swift impression of vastness, heavy curtains, papered walls. Standard lamps, masked by ugly shades with beaded fringes, dimmed the light. An exquisite chandelier, glittering through a veil of dust, swung unlit from the high ceiling.

Three women were sitting in the room. As I entered they looked up, and one of them, tall as myself, with hard, clear-cut features and a narrow mouth, her hair strained back and twisted in a bun, immediately rose and left the room. A second, with dark hair and eyes, handsome, almost beautiful, yet marred by a sallow skin and a sullen mouth, watched me without expression from her chair. She called over her shoulder as the first woman left the room, "If you must go, Blanche, please shut the door. I mind drafts, if nobody else does."

The third woman had faded, rather colorless blond hair. She might have been pretty once, with her small delicate features and blue eyes, but her expression of defeat, of petulance, destroyed the first impression of charm. She gave a little laugh of exasperation, and then, rising, came towards me across the polished floor. "Well," she said, "aren't you going to kiss either of us?"

I bent my head and kissed her on both cheeks, crossed the floor and kissed the other woman in the same fashion. The fair, blue-eyed one took my arm, leading me to the open hearth on which one log smoldered. "You may well look ashamed of yourself. We have been worried sick that you might have had an accident, but as usual you didn't give that a thought. I begin to think you do this sort of thing on purpose, just to frighten us and make us imagine the worst."

"And what would that be, the worst?" I asked her.

My retort, coming so quickly, gave me confidence. I felt that it did not matter what I said or did: however outrageous, these people would have to accept it.

"You know perfectly well we must have been anxious," the woman said, dropping my arm. "When you are away from home you are capable of anything. You talk too much, you drink too much, you drive too fast ..."

"I do everything, in fact, to excess?" I interrupted.

"You do everything you can to make us miserable," she said.

"Oh, leave him alone," called the other woman. "It is obvious he isn't going to tell you anything. You are just wasting your time."

"Thank you," I said.

She flashed me a look of understanding. We were aUies, perhaps? I wondered who she was. The fair woman sat down again and sighed. I reahzed now, from her figure, that she must be expecting a child.

"You could at least tell us what happened in Paris," she said.

"I have no idea what happened in Paris," I said carelessly. "I'm suffering from loss of memory."

"You are suffering from too much drink," she answered. "I can smell it on your breath. It would be a good idea if you went up to bed and slept it off. Don't go near Marie-Noel -- she has some fever, and it might be catching. They have a case of German measles in the village, and ff I were to get that, in my condition -- " She paused significantly.

I wondered how I could escape and find the right room. I should recognize the valises, of course, unless they had been unpacked, and bed was at least a place to think and plan. Or did I no longer want to think or plan? Laughter rose in my throat.

"What is it now?" asked the fair woman, resentfully.

"It's an extraordinary situation," I said. "You neither of you know how extraordinary."

The freedom of saying this acted like a charm on my own lingering consciousness of self. It was like being invisible, or possessing a ventriloquist's voice.

"I see nothing funny in infection," said the fair woman. "Or do you mean the situation in Paris was extraordinary? I hope, for everyone's sake, that you came to some agreement."

I turned from her reproachful eyes to those of the other woman, but her expression had changed. She looked wary, and shook her head, imperceptibly, as ff in warning. She and de Gue were undoubtedly allies, but what relationship were the three of them, one to the other? I decided suddenly to tell the truth.

"Actually," I said, "I am not Jean de Gue at all. I am someone else. We met in Le Mans last night, and changed clothes, and he has disappeared in my car, heaven knows where, and I am here in his place. You must admit it's an extraordinary situation."

I expected an outburst but the fair woman simply yawned, and remarked to the dark one that Paul would probably come home late from his dinner. My remark, which they must have interpreted as some tasteless joke, fell so flat that they did not even answer it. This surely proved that deception

was complete. I could say anything, do anything: they would merely believe me to be drunk or mad. I could, if I chose, do incalculable harm to these people -- injure them, upset their lives, put them at odds with one another. When Jean de Gue left me in Le Mans, did he realize the danger? Was his action not the wild prank it appeared, but a deliberate desire that I might wreck the home which he said possessed him?

The dark woman turned on me, her eyes brooding, suspicious. "Why don't you go upstairs as Françoise suggests?" she said.

"Very well, I will," I said. "You were both right. I drank too much in Le Mans. I spent the day there senseless in a hotel."

The fact that it was true added flavor to deception. Both women stared. Neither said anything. I crossed the floor and went out into the hall beyond. I heard the one called Françoise break into a torrent of words as soon as I left the room.

The hall was empty and I decided to try the stairs. The first flight ended in a long corridor, leading left and right; above me was a further flight to another floor. I hesitated, then turned left along the corridor. I was seized with a furtive excitement as I turned the handle of the door at the far end. The room was dark. I felt for a switch. The light revealed a bleak high room, dark-red curtains drawn across the windows, a high single bed also draped with red, above which hung a large reproduction of Guido Reni's "Ecce Homo." The windows were circular, forming an alcove, and this had been adapted as a place for prayer, with a prie-dieu, a crucifix, even a stoup for holy water.

I switched off the light and went out. As I did so I saw that a woman had come down from the floor above, and now stood watching me. "Bonsoir, Monsieur le Comte," she said. "Are you looking for Mademoiselle Blanche?"

"Yes," I lied quickly, "she's not in her room."

I felt myself obliged to go towards her. She was small, thin and elderly, and I judged her to be a servant.

"Mademoiselle Blanche is with Madame la Comtesse," she said. The expression in her eyes was curious.

"It doesn't matter," I said. "I can see her later."

Her eyes flickered away from me. I sensed no warmth there, yet there was at the same time a suggestion of long familiarity, some understanding between us of an unpleasant kind. I was about to pass her when she said, "Madame la Comtesse knows you are home. It would be best to come up and see her now or I shall have no peace."

Madame la Comtesse . . . The words were ominous. If I were Monsieur le Comte, then who was she?

"Very well," I said. The servant turned towards the stairs and I went after her up the long, twisting flight to another corridor like the one below, and proceeded to a door at the end.

The servant opened it, giving me a little nod, like a signal, and as she went through she said to someone within, "I met Monsieur le Comte coming up the stairs. He was on his way to see you."

There were three persons in the room, which was large but so filled with furniture that there was hardly space to move. Dominating the whole was a great double bed with curtained hangings. A stove, burning brightly with open doors, gave out an intense heat. Two small fox terriers, bows and bells jangling from their collars, ran towards me barking shrilly. I swung my eyes round the room and saw the tall, thin woman who had left the salon when I entered it, and close to her an ancient cure, white-haired, his small black cap on the back of his head. Beyond him, seated in a great armchair, almost on top of the stove, was a massive elderly woman, her flesh sagging in a hundred lines, but her eyes, nose and mouth astonishingly, horribly like my own.

She held out her arms, and, drawn to her like a magnet, I went instinctively to kneel beside her chair, and was at once caught and smothered in a mountain of flesh and woolen wraps, feeling momentarily like a fly trapped in a great spider's web. Her hands clung about me, reluctant to let me go yet pushing me at the same time, murmuring in my ear, "There, there, be off with you, great baby, great brute. You've been amusing yourself, I know. Everyone is upset as usual with your goings on. Francoise in hysterics, Marie-Noel with a fever, Renee sulking, Paul ill-tempered. Ouf! They make me sick, the whole collection. I knew you would turn up when you were ready to come home, and not before." She patted me again on the shoulder and thrust me away.

I glanced at the thin woman, who had not once looked at me since I entered the room, but now closed the book she was holding.

"You don't wish me to go on reading any more, I suppose, Maman," she said, her voice dead, expressionless. I knew that she must be Mademoiselle Blanche in whose bedroom I had just trespassed, and guessed that she must therefore be an elder sister to my masquerading self. The countess turned to the cure.

"Since Jean has come home, Monsieur le Cure," she said in a tone of courtesy and respect, "would you think it very rude of me if I asked to be excused this evening from our usual little session? He will have so much to tell me."

"Naturally, Madame la Comtesse," said the cure, rising to his feet, his pink face wreathed in smiles; and after bows and farewells, he left the room, closely followed by Mademoiselle Blanche, head bent low like an acolyte.

The servant came towards us with a medicine glass and said, "Monsieur le Comte will have a tray up here as well?"

"Naturally, idiot," said the comtesse, "and I'm not going to take any of that stuff, Charlotte. Throw it away. Get out!" Impatiently she gestured to the door. "Come here," she said, beckoning me to sit beside her, while the two fox terriers leapt upon her lap and settled there. "Well now, did you do it, did you settle with Carvalet?"

It was the first direct question put to me since I had come to the chateau which I could not evade with some jest or careless remark. I swallowed. "Did I do what?" I asked.

"Renew the contract," she said.

Jean de Cue had gone to Paris, then, on business. I remembered envelopes and folders in the writing case in the valise. The matter was evidently important, and the expression in her eyes brought back to me once again those words of Jean de Cue about human greed. "Minister to it . . . give people what they want. . . ." This being his creed, doubtless he would satisfy his mother now. "Don't worry," I told her, "everything is arranged."

"Ah!" She gave a little grunt of satisfaction. "You actually came to terms with them after all. And you brought me the little present you promised?" Her eyes went small, her body stiff with expectation. The atmosphere suddenly became taut and strange. I did not know how to answer her.

"Did I promise you a present?" I asked.

Her great mouth sagged. Her eyes pleaded with a tense, frightened look I would not have believed possible a moment ago.

"You didn't forget?" she said.

I was spared a reply by the reappearance of Blanche. A change of expression came like a mask over the mother's face. The daughter proceeded to tidy books and papers about the room, never looking in my direction. I guessed her age to be about forty-two or three, yet she could have been older or younger. The cross and chain which she wore over the dark jumper were her only adornments. She brought a table beside her mother's chair in preparation for dinner. Then she sat down and took up

her knitting.

"Marie-Noel has been seeing visions again," said the mother to me.

Someone below had talked of Marie-Noel having a fever. Was she another religious sister? "It's probably due to her fever," I said.

"She hasn't a fever. She likes everyone to notice her, that's all. What did you say to her before you went to Paris that upset her?"

"I didn't say anything," I answered.

"You must have done. She kept telling Françoise and Renée that you were not coming back. It was not only you who told her, but the Sainte Vierge as well."

I glanced at Blanche. She raised her pale eyes from the clicking needles to her mother. "If Marie-Noel has visions," she said, "and I for one believe her, then it is time that somebody in this house took them seriously. If they continue, I shall write to the bishop. I am very sure what his advice will be: that Marie-Noel should live amongst people where she cannot possibly be corrupted, and where she can offer her gifts to the greater glory of God."

"You are a fool, Blanche," said the comtesse. "If we are to have a saint in the family, let us keep her at home. We might turn St. Gilles into a place of pilgrimage. Money might be found at last to repair the roof of the church."

"Marie-Noel's soul is of greater importance than the roof of the church," said Blanche. "If I had my way she would leave the chateau tomorrow."

"You're jealous," said her mother, "jealous of her pretty face and her big eyes. One of these days Marie-Noel won't bother about visions any more -- she'll want a husband. Isn't that so, Jean?"

"Probably," I said.

"Pray God I live to see the wedding. He'll have to be rich. . . ."

Charlotte came in with a tray, close- followed by a little red-cheeked femme de chambre of about eighteen, who at sight of me blushed and giggled and said, "Bonsoir, Monsieur le Comte," as she arranged a tray for me on another table. Blanche put aside her knitting and kissed her mother good night. Then she left the room followed by the femme de chambre, whom Charlotte addressed as Germaine, without having once looked at me. I wondered what Jean de Gue had done to offend her. I uncovered my bowl of soup; it smelt good and I was hungry.

Curiosity made me venture a question to the mother. "What was the matter with Blanche?" I asked.

"Nothing particular. If anything, she's irritated me less than usual. Charlotte, are you there? Give Monsieur Jean his wine. Why don't you tell me more about Paris? You have told me nothing yet."

I searched my imagination. What I knew and loved of Paris was too full of museums and historical buildings for her ear. I talked of eating, which she understood, and the expense, which pleased her even better, and with sudden inspiration invented visits to the theater, a meeting with wartime friends -- she even supplied their names for me, which helped. By the time the trays were removed, I felt more at ease with her than I had ever done with anyone in my life. The reason was simple: she accepted me, loved me, trusted me; I held a position that had never been mine before. I laughed, I chatted, and the unaccustomed ease was a delight to me -- until suddenly, when Charlotte had left the room, she said to me, "Jean, you didn't really forget my little present, did you? You were joking."

Once again the sagging mouth, the pleading eyes. Gone was the wicked humor, the rollicking impression of warmth and savagery combined. She had changed into a pitiable, trembling creature, hands clawing at mine. I did not know what to do or what to say. I went to the door and called, "Charlotte, are you there?"

Charlotte came quickly from some room nearby, and I said, "Madame la Comtesse is unwell. You had better go to her."

She looked at me and asked. "Haven't you brought it? You know. Monsieur le Comte, what you promised to bring from Paris?"

I tried to think of the contents of the valise, and remembered some packages that looked like presents. What they were I did not know, nor where the things had been unpacked.

Charlotte said to me swiftly, "Go and find it at once. Monsieur le Comte. She will suffer if you don't."

I went down the first flight of stairs, and presently came to a room with the door open. I threw a quick glance round it, and to my relief I had struck lucky. It was a small dressing room, with a single bed in it, and I recognized the brushes on the table. Someone had unpacked for me, and the vases had been removed, but there on the table were the packages. Thank God, here was one addressed to "Maman," wrapped in strong brown paper, sealed. I took it and went up the stairs again.

Charlotte was waiting for me. "Have you got it?" she said.

"Yes," I answered. "Does she want me to give it to her?"

She stared at me and answered "No, no . . ." as though shocked. Taking the package from me, she said, "Good night. Monsieur le Comte." Then she walked quickly away along the corridor.

I went slowly down again and stood in the dressing room, suddenly tired and depressed. I could not forget the change in the mother's face. As I stood there, wondering what to do, I heard a voice calling to me, "Have you said good night to Maman?"

I recognized the voice of Françoise, the fair, faded woman, and for the first time I noticed a door which had been screened by a large wardrobe. She must have heard me come into the dressing room.

I braced myself for the effort and went through the door. I was looking into a large bedroom, with lightly figured wallpaper and an alcove holding a dressing table and a looking glass. A large double bed faced the alcove. Françoise was sitting up in it, her hair pinned in curlers, a fluffy pink bed jacket round her shoulders.

She said to me, still plaintive, still aggrieved, "Of course you had to stay the whole evening upstairs with Maman. Don't you ever for one moment stop to consider me? Even Renee, who is generally on your side, said you are becoming quite impossible."

I glanced away from her weary, complaining face to the empty pillow on the other side. I recognized the striped pajamas that I had worn at the hotel, folded neatly on the turned-down sheet. I had thought, in my stupidity, that Françoise was married to Paul, and was the sister of Jean de Gue. I realized, with a sinking heart, that on the contrary she was his wife.

### CHAPTER 3

A FIRST instinct, absurd and automatic, was to retrieve the pajamas, and I went and fetched them, not glancing at Françoise and turned back again into the dressing room. To my dismay she started to cry, saying something about not caring for her, and being miserable, and how Maman had always come between us. I waited for the sounds to cease. Presently there was a blowing of the nose, and those little sniffs and coughs that accompany the aftermath of crying and the attempt at self-control. I wondered if Jean de Gue had foreseen this moment, or whether he had thought, as I had driving to the chateau, that after an hour or two the game would be played out, the masquerade be over.

If he really intended to slip away and make me his scapegoat, then it clearly proved that he cared for no one at the chateau: I could do with them as I pleased. The elation and ease I had experienced with the mother had changed to depression with her change of mood, and I had wanted to placate

her. Now, with the realization that the complaining Françoise was de Gue's wife, I wanted to placate her too: her tears distressed me.

I went to the table and picked up the package marked F. It had a fancy wrapping and was small and hard. I stood a moment, weighing it in my hand, then once again I opened the bedroom door. The room was in darkness. "Are you awake?" I said.

I heard a movement; then the light was switched on and she sat up, looking at me. Her curlers were now concealed by a net cap, and the fluffy bed jacket had been exchanged for a shawl. The effect was incongruous against the pale tired face. "What is it?" she said.

I went over to her. "Listen," I said, "you must forgive me if I was abrupt just now. Maman seemed suddenly unwell, and I was worried. Look, I bought you this in Paris."

I put the package into her hand, but she let it drop on the coverlet, and sighed. "Sometimes I think Maman hates me, and not only Maman but all of you. Even Marie-Noël has no feeling for me." She did not seem to expect an answer, and I was thankful, for I had no words. "When we were first married, it was different," she went on. "I felt so happy. Then little by little it all seemed to slip away, the happy feeling. I don't know if it's my fault or yours." The wan face under the ugly net cap stared up at me without hope. "I wouldn't care if I had you to myself, but here everyone is on top of us. Everything's closing in on me, the chateau, the family, the whole countryside. It's like being suffocated. The terrible thing is that you don't notice, you don't mind."

She fingered the package, which she had not opened, and I thought that the evening with the mother had been too easy. I did not know what to say to her. Suddenly she said quite simply, without complaint or grievance, "Jean, I'm frightened. You know what Dr. Lebrun said when I lost the last. It isn't easy for me."

I felt inadequate and useless. I took the package from her, undid it, and drew out a small velvet case, which I opened. Inside was a locket, framed in pearls, which, when the release was sprung, revealed a miniature of myself, or rather him. The workmanship was very fine, and it must have cost the purchaser no mean sum of money.

She uttered an exclamation of wonder and delight. "Oh, how beautiful!" she said. "And how dear of you to think of it! I have been grumbling, complaining . . . and you bring me this. Forgive me." She put her hand up to my face. I forced a smile. "You are good to put up with me," she said. "When I talk to you I hear words coming out of my mouth that I don't really mean, and I hate myself for it, but I can't prevent it."

She closed the locket, then opened it again, two or three times, smiling at the trick of it. Then she pinned it on her shawl. "Look," she said, "I wear my husband on my heart. Did you have this specially done for me in Paris?"

"Yes," I said.

"Paul will never get over it when he sees it," she said. "But I suppose it means that the visit was successful after all. How exactly like you to celebrate by doing something extravagant. You know, I feel so helpless when I hear Paul talking about the impossibility of carrying on at the foundry, and I feel he is hinting at my own money all tied up in that ridiculous way. However, if we have a boy . . ." She lay back, still touching the locket pinned on her shawl. "I shall sleep now," she said. "Don't be long. You must be tired."

She switched off her light, and I heard her sigh and settle once more against the pillow.

I went back to the dressing room, threw open the window, and leant out. It was a moonlit night, cold and clear. Beneath me was the tangled grass of the moat, and its rough stone ivy-covered walls, and beyond stretched what might once have been a formal garden but was now given to grass too, where the cattle wandered, this in turn forming rides and avenues that became lost in the dusky trees. The deep silence was broken now and then by a single plopping sound, like the drip of water. I leant out

and craned my head to try and trace it, but could not, for no water came from the grinning gargoyle face that stared down at me from the coping of the tower above.

The church clock in the village struck eleven, and when the last note had died away the feeling of oppression and distress increased within me, and the voice of reason seemed to say, "What are you doing in this place? Get out, before it's too late."

I opened the door to the corridor and listened. Everything was quiet. I went out and down the stairs. I had turned the handle of the door to the terrace when I was aware of a footstep on the stair behind me, and, looking up, I saw the dark woman, Renee, in wrapper and slippers, her hair loose on her shoulders.

"Where are you going?" she whispered.

"Outside, for some air," I lied swiftly. "I couldn't sleep."

"I heard you come down from Maman, and then I waited for you, leaving my door open. Didn't you notice it?"

"No," I said.

She looked incredulous. "You must have realized I urged Paul to go out to the dinner on purpose, as soon as I knew you would be home. Now the evening is wasted. He'll be back any moment."

"I'm sorry," I said. "Maman had a lot to say to me -- it was impossible to get away. Surely we can talk tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow?" she echoed, her manner abrupt and queer. "Tomorrow is soon enough for you, is it, after ten days in Paris? I might have known it. I suppose that's why you didn't bother to answer my letters."

Her anger irritated me. The mother's mood had touched me, and the wife's too; I had no time for this one. "You'll catch cold," I said to her. "Why don't you go to bed?"

She stared at me; then, catching her breath, she said, "Mon Dieu, how I hate you at times!" Turning her back, she went upstairs.

I opened the door and stepped outside. The air felt clean and good. I walked softly down the steps towards the moat. Once again the little plopping thud that had disturbed me in the dressing room sounded, close by, and I saw that it was the chestnuts falling from the trees onto the gravel path beyond the moat.

The church clock struck the half-hour. I had lingered long enough amongst these people who were strangers to me. I decided to cross the bridge, take the road away from the village, and walk through the night to the nearest town.

The chestnuts continued to fall beside the moat, and this time, with no trees near, one hit me on the head and dropped beside me. I looked up, puzzled, and saw that a small window in a turret above the dressing room held a peering figure, kneeling on the sill. Suddenly the figure rose to its feet and stood on the sill by the open slit, and I saw that it was a child, perhaps ten years old, wearing a white nightgown, and that one false move would send it headlong to the depths below. I could not distinguish sex or feature: all I could sense was danger.

"Go back," I called softly. The figure did not move. "Go back," I called again. "Go back, or you will fall."

Then the child spoke, the voice clear and high and quite composed. "I swear to you," it said, "that if you don't come to me by the time I count a hundred, I shall throw myself out of the window."

I did nothing, and the voice called again: "You know I never break my word. I'm beginning to count now. One . . . two . . . three . . ."

The conversation of the evening made sense to me at last. It had never occurred to me that the religious, saintly Marie-Noel might be a child. The voice continued counting, and I turned and went back into the house. I groped my way up the stairs to the first corridor, blindly seeking a stairway that might lead me to the turret room. When I came to a winding stair, lit by a dim blue bulb, I ran up it, two steps at a time. At the top there was a door; from behind it I could hear the voice counting steadily, "Eighty-six, eighty-seven ..." I burst through the door, seized the figure from the window sill, and threw it down on its bed beside the wall. It stared up at me; and as I looked at the enormous eyes and close-cropped hair, I felt sick because here was a replica of Jean de Gue, and therefore in fantastic fashion of a self long buried in the past and so forgotten.

"Why did you not come to say good night, Papa?" she said to me.

She gave me no time to think what I should answer. She jumped up, flinging her arms round my neck, covering me with kisses.

"Well?" she said -- the inevitable "Alors?" that is question and exclamation and retort all in one -- and I repeated it, to gain time, to try and grasp the significance of this new and unexpected complication of a daughter, and then, endeavoring to hold my ground, I said, "I thought you were supposed to have a fever?"

"I did this morning," she said. "Since I stood up by the window it has probably shot up. But sit down." I sat down and glanced around the room -- an odd mixture of nursery and cell. Against one wall was a prie-dieu, made out of a packing case with a piece of old brocade on top. Above this was a crucifix; between two candles on the prie-dieu, a statue of the Madonna. On the wall were pictures of the Holy Family and St. Therese of Lisieux, and incongruously, perched lopsided on a stool, a stuffed doll pierced through the heart with a penholder, and labeled "The Martyrdom of St. Sebastian." Toys more suited to her age lay about the floor; beside her bed was a youthful photograph of Jean de Gue in uniform.

"Why didn't you come to see me the instant you got back?" she said imperiously. I did not answer. "Joker," she said lightly. Then she seized my hand and kissed it. "Have you had your nails manicured?" she asked.

"No."

"They are a different shape, and your hands are cleaner. I suppose that is what Paris does for men. Also you have a different smell, like a doctor, or a priest, or a stranger who comes to tea."

"I'm sorry." I stared at her, nonplused.

"It will pass off. What have you been doing?"

I decided to speak all the truth possible. "I slept in a hotel in Le Mans. I had drunk too much. Also I swallowed a sleeping draft by mistake."

"The Sainte Vierge told me you mightn't ever come back. That's why I got a fever. It is a sign of grace. If you hadn't taken that sleeping draft, would you have gone away?"

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"You told me before you went to Paris that if hfe became too difficult you would just disappear one day and never come home again."

"I'd forgotten I said that."

"I hadn't forgotten. When Uncle Paul began talking about the money troubles, and how you had gone to Paris to try and arrange things, I thought to myself. Now is the moment for him to do this. I woke in the night and was sick, and the Sainte Vierge came and stood at the end of my bed and looked sorrowful."

The direct gaze of the child was hard to meet.

"If I hadn't come back," I asked, "what would you have done?"

"Killed myself," she said.

"Children don't kill themselves," I told her.

"Then why did you run upstairs so fast just now?"

"You might have slipped."

"I couldn't have slipped. I was holding on. But if you hadn't come home I shouldn't have held on. I should have jumped out, and died. And then I should have burnt in hell. But I would rather burn in hell than live in this world without you."

I looked at her again: the small oval face, the close-cropped hair, the burning eyes. The passionate avowal was disturbing, and I thought hard to find the right thing to say. "Marie-Noel," I said, "promise something. Promise you won't climb on the window sill again."

"I will promise, if you will too," she said.

I sensed a trap. This was something for Jean de Gue to handle, not for me. I did not understand children. "What must I promise?" I asked.

"Never to go away. Or, if you must go, to take me with you."

Once again I avoided the direct question in her eyes. The situation was impossible. "Listen," I said, "I promise you that, if I do go away, I'll tell you first. I may tell nobody else, but I will tell you."

"That's fair," she nodded. "Tell me," she went on, "is it true that measles can be bad for unborn babies?"

The switch of mood was beyond me. "I don't know," I said.

"Maman told me that if my fever was measles, and I passed it to her, then the little brother would be born blind. If he was blind, would you like him? Or would he have to be put in an institution?"

"No, he would be taken care of at home. Anyway, it won't happen. Now go to sleep." I tucked her into bed. "Good night," I said, "sleep well." And I kissed her on the cheek.

I went out and down to the dressing room.

I felt suddenly very tired. The house was quite still. I crept into the bedroom, listening, and from the sound of breathing knew Françoise to be asleep. I went back into the dressing room and put on the pajamas I had worn at the hotel. Then I picked up the parcel that bore the initials M-N. Carefully I undid the wrapping. It was a book about St. Therese of Lisieux: *The Little Flower*. On the flyleaf Jean de Gue had written, "To my adorable Marie-Noel, with all my heart, Papa."

I wrapped it up again, and put it back on the table. He must have chosen his presents with great care. Whatever he had brought his mother was something she needed badly. The locket had dried his wife's tears. *The Little Flower* would feed the imagination of his child, so that she might see visions, and dream dreams, and in doing so perhaps nag his conscience less -- that is, if he had a conscience, which I doubted.

Jean de Gue had run away from life, from the emotions that he had himself created. None of these people would be behaving as they had tonight but for something he had done to them. The mother would not have turned to me with frightened eyes, the sister would not have left the room in silence, Paul would not have spoken with hostility, Renee would not have cursed me on the stairs, the wife would not have wept, the child would not have threatened to throw herself out of the window. Jean de Gue had failed. And that was why he had left me sleeping in the hotel in Le Mans and gone away. I knew now that he would not come back. He would not even bother to find out what had happened. I could do as I pleased.

I said aloud, "Oh, God, what am I to do? Ought I to leave this place, or should I stay?"

And there was no answer, only a question mark.

## CHAPTER 4

I AWOKE next morning in a different vein. Last night I had sensed tragedy, and was so filled with compassion that it had seemed to me I was destined to make amends to these people for all that had gone wrong in their lives and my own. The self who wakened this morning suggested that they might be as much to blame as Jean de Gue; that the whole situation was but a prolongation of my holiday, and when it got out of control, as sooner or later it must, I could quit. The one embarrassment -- discovery -- would have happened last night if it was going to happen at all. Whatever blunders I might make in the future would be put down to whim or freak of temper, for the simple reason that I was above suspicion.

Someone knocked. I called out "Entrez!" and the blushing, rosy-cheeked femme de chambre who had served my dinner presented herself at the door. "Monsieur le Comte slept well?" she asked.

I told her very well, and asked for coffee. I inquired after the rest of the family and was informed that Madame la Comtesse was souârante and staying in bed; that Mademoiselle was in church; that Monsieur Paul had gone to the verrerie; that Marie-Noel was getting up; that Madame Jean and Madame Paul were in the salon. I thanked her and she went away. I had learnt three things: my present to the mother had done her no good; Paul's business, the family business, was a glass foundry; and Renee, the dark woman, was his wife.

Gaston, the chauffeur, wearing now the striped coat of a valet de chambre, brought my coffee to the dressing room. I greeted him as a friend.

"Things are better this morning, then?" he said, placing the tray on the table. "It is not so bad to be home again after all." He went to the wardrobe, took out a brown tweed jacket and began to brush it. "Will Monsieur le Comte be going down to the verrerie?"

"Not this morning," I said. "Did Monsieur Paul suggest it?"

"Monsieur Paul will be back for lunch as usual. Possibly he is expecting you to go with him this afternoon."

"What's the time now?"

"Already after haff past ten, Monsieur le Comte."

When I had dressed, I walked downstairs and, hearing the murmur of women's voices from the salon, crept softly to the open door leading to the terrace and so out into the golden autumn day. The chateau, graceful and serene, might have been an island, separated as it was by moat and wall from the village of St. Gilles; an island whose way of life went back to centuries long past, having no concern with the postman I saw wheeling his bicycle past the village church or the van bringing supplies to the epicerie.

I found a door in the wall, and a narrow footbridge leading across the moat; and, turning left, avoiding the garage and stabling, I was at once amongst cow houses and straw and muddy earth, with a vegetable garden beyond, and beyond this fields surrounded by forest. The paths through the forest spread from a single center, like the hours on a sundial; and a dell in the center was dominated by a lichen-covered statue of Artemis, the classic drapery chipped, the right hand of the huntress missing.

I walked up one of the paths and looked at the chateau from the furthest point, seeing it now as a picture within a frame. The blue-black roof, the turrets, the tall chimneys and the sandstone walls had shrunk to fairy-tale proportions: it no longer held living, feeling people, but was a plate turned over in a book of illustrations, noted momentarily for its beauty and then dismissed.

I retraced my steps past the seeking Artemis, and as I neared the chateau the long windows of the salon opened and the child came running out, calling, "Papa . . . Papa . . ." Crossing the footbridge, she sprang over the grass to join me, leaping high when almost on top of me so that I had to catch her in mid-air like a ballet dancer.

I put her down and we walked off aimlessly together, hand in hand, she stooping to pick up chestnuts when we came to the path, filling a pocket in her frock and then throwing the rest away. Presently she ran on ahead, skipping and leaping, and I followed her to the stabling and outbuildings. A dog, which had been sleeping in the sun, stretched himself, wagging his tail, and she opened the gate of his run and let him out. He barked as he saw me approach, and when I called out, "Come here, then, what's the matter, old fellow?" he kept his distance and growled, standing beside Marie-Noel as though to guard her.

"Stop it, Cesar," said the child, jerking at his collar. "Have you gone blind that you don't know your master? Perhaps he isn't feeling well." He wagged his tail again and licked her hand, but he did not come to me, and I stood where I was, with an intuition that my efforts to make friends would only increase his suspicion.

"Leave him alone. Don't excite him," I said, and I began to walk towards the house, while the child patted the dog's great flanks and felt his nose.

As I reached the chateau, I saw Blanche turn down the hill from the church, all in black, with a little old-fashioned toque on her head. Looking neither to right nor to left, she walked stiff and straight up the gravel driveway to the terrace steps. Even when Marie-Noel ran to meet her, her frozen face never relaxed an instant. "As you are now well enough to be out of doors, Marie-Noel," she said as she came up the steps, "you are well enough to come for your lessons with me after lunch."

"I don't have to do them today, do I, Papa?" the child protested.

"I don't see why not," I said, believing I might ingratiate myself with Blanche.

Blanche made no comment. She walked straight past me into the house: I might not have been there. Marie-Noel took my hand and shook it crossly. "Why are you in such a bad humor today?" she said.

"I'm not in a bad humor."

"You are. You don't want to play with me."

"It won't hurt you to have lessons, if your aunt can spare the time," I said. "Now come upstairs -- I have something for you."

It occurred to me suddenly that the giving of Jean's presents would be much simpler if it were done at the table, while we were all assembled there having lunch, than if I gave them to each one individually. But the child might have hers now, as a sop, because I had taken an unpopular attitude over the lessons.

She followed me up to the dressing room, and I went to the table and gave her the book in its wrappings. She tore them off, and when she saw what the book was she exclaimed in delight and hugged it to her. "It is just what I wanted," she said. "Oh, my darling, sweet Papa, why do you always guess the right things?"

In her enthusiasm she Hung herself upon me, and once again I was forced to undergo the arms round the neck, the cheek thrust against mine, the random kisses falling anywhere. This time instead of being awkward with her I found myself responding. I pulled her hair and tickled the back of her neck, both of us laughing, her very naturalness making me unafraid, confident of myself and of her.

"Must I do lessons?" she said, sensing intuitively my sudden response, trying to turn it to advantage.

"I don't know," I said. "We can decide that later." Putting her down, I stood looking at the other packages. "I'll tell you something," I said. "I've brought presents from Paris for everyone. I gave your mother hers last night, and one to your grandmother too. We'll put these in the dining room, and they can open them at lunch."

"Uncle Paul and Aunt Renee? It's not either of their birthdays."

"No, but it's a good thing to give presents. It shows appreciation. I have one for your Aunt Blanche too."

"For my Aunt Blanche?" She stared at me, amazed. "But you never give her anything, even for Christmas or the New Year!"

"Well, I'm giving her something now. It might make her better tempered."

The child went on staring at me, and began biting her fingers. "I don't think it's a good idea, opening the presents at the table, in front of everyone," she said, her voice worried. "What have you brought for the others?"

"We'll see later."

I heard the sound of a car driving up to the chateau, and Marie-Noel ran to the window and craned out. "It's my Uncle Paul," she said. "His present is the smallest of the lot. I shouldn't like to be him. But, being a man, I suppose he can hide his feelings."

We went down like conspirators and into the dining room -- a long, narrow room facing the terrace -- and cunningly I told the child to lay the presents in their proper places, which she did with evident enjoyment. I noticed, to my surprise, that Blanche, the sister, sat at one end of the table, not Françoise, as I should have thought. Gaston came into the room, changed from his valet's rig to a dark coat.

"What do you think, Gaston," said Marie-Noel, "Papa is giving everybody presents, even my Aunt Blanche. It is not in celebration of anything, it is just a sign of appreciation."

I saw Gaston dart me a quick look, and I wondered why it should be so unusual to present gifts on returning home. A moment or two later he flung open double doors at the end of the room, leading to what appeared to be a library, and said, "Madame la Comtesse is served." The rather stiff little group which his action revealed looked up as the child and I advanced into the room.

"Papa has a surprise for you all," Marie-Noel said, "but I am not going to tell you what it is."

I saw apprehension on both Françoise's face and Renee's. "What is it, Jean?" said Françoise, rising to her feet.

"Nothing," I replied. "Marie-Noel likes to be mysterious. It's only that I have brought back a small present for everyone, and we put them on the table in the dining room."

The tension eased. Renee relaxed, Paul shrugged his shoulders, and Françoise smiled, fingering the locket which she wore pinned onto her jumper. Blanche betrayed no interest whatsoever.

"I'm afraid you spent too much money in Paris," said Françoise. "If you continue giving me presents like this one there'll be nothing left at all." She passed by into the dining room and we followed her. I made a pretense of tying my shoe, allowing the others to sit, so as to make sure that I was right in assuming my place to be at the head of the table. This was correct, and I sat down. There was a momentary hush while Blanche said grace and we bowed our heads over our plates. I noticed Marie-Noel watch her aunt in fascination, and, looking to the end of the table, I saw that Blanche's eyes were on the package beside her napkin. Her usual frozen immobility changed to incredulity. Had the package been a live snake she could not have expressed greater horror or disgust. Then she regained composure, and, ignoring the package, she placed the napkin on her lap.

I saw then that the others were all looking at me with curiosity. "Well," I said, "what's wrong? Why are you all staring at me?"

The child, my familiar spirit, gave me the answer. "Everyone is surprised because you have given a present to my Aunt Blanche."

So that was it. I had acted out of character. But I was not yet discovered. "I was in a generous mood," I announced. Then, feeling sure Jean's gifts must have been chosen to suit the recipients, I

added, "I hope I have given everybody what they needed most. It's part of my system."

"There's only one present I want," said Paul, "and that's the renewal of the Car-valet contract, and possibly a check for ten million francs. You haven't been able to oblige, by any chance?"

"I dislike talking business when I am eating," I said. "On the other hand, I am perfectly willing to come with you to the verrerie this afternoon."

My sense of power was unbounded. I knew nothing about the contract or the business, but I felt my bluff to be superb, and it must have worked, for they were all attacking their plates. As the meal went on I learned that during the war Jean de Gue had fought for the Resistance, that he and Françoise had met and married soon after the Liberation, that Paul had been a prisoner of war, and that he was the younger brother. Judging from his manner, he resented his position.

Renee, whom I had expected to dominate the table, was silent, even sullen, and when Blanche inquired after her migraine she replied briefly that it was as bad as ever.

"Perhaps Aunt Renee is getting German measles," said Marie-Noel. "But it wouldn't hurt her if she was, because Aunt Renee isn't going to have a baby."

The remark was unfortunate. Renee flushed and darted a look of venom at her niece, while Françoise, frowning at the child, quickly turned the subject, asking Paul about one of the verrerie workmen who had burnt his arm in a furnace.

"If what we pay out in benefits and sickness could only go into the business, we should be better able to face the future," said Paul. "The men seize any excuse to be idle, knowing they will be kept at our expense. It was very different in my father's day."

"Our father had brains and integrity," said Blanche, surprisingly. "His sons unfortunately have neither."

Good for Blanche, I thought, looking towards her in astonishment. Paul, thrusting out his chin and flushing darkly, said swiftly, "Are you suggesting that / am dishonest?"

"No," said Blanche, "misled."

"Please," said Françoise wearily, "must we have this at the table? I thought for once we were going to keep off family affairs."

Dinner was almost over. I felt it was time to ease the tension.

"How about opening the presents?" I said cheerfully. "Come on, Renee, a gift to chase the migraine."

Marie-Noel ran round the table to stand beside her aunt. Reluctantly, I noticed, Renee opened the package. Inside layers of tissue, I caught a glimpse of lace, and Renee paused and said hurriedly, "I'll open it upstairs. I might spill something on it here."

"But what is it?" said Françoise. "A blouse?"

The child forestalled the covering hand of her aunt, and drew from the folded tissue the flimsiest of nightgowns, gossamer light, a frivolity for brides on midsummer eve.

"How pretty," said Françoise. But her tone lacked warmth.

Renee had taken the piece of nonsense away from Marie-Noel and was folding it back again between the concealing paper. She did not thank me. It was only then that I realized I had made a faux pas. The gift was not intended for public display. Too late to make amends. Paul was staring moodily at his wife, and Françoise wore the false, bright smile of someone who tries to pretend that all is well. Marie-Noel was the only one delighted.

"You will have to keep that for best, Aunt Renee," she said. "A pity that only Uncle Paul will see you wearing it." She darted round to his side of the table. "I wonder what Papa has given you?"

He shrugged his shoulders. His wife's gift had taken the edge off expectation. "I've no idea. You had better open it," he said.

Excitedly she snipped the string with a knife, while I sought to make excuses for Jean de Gue. At least, I decided, he had brought a present for his brother too. But worse was to come. The child, with puzzled face, drew a small bottle from corrugated wrapping. "It's medicine," she said. "It's called Elixir." And looking at the printed folder enclosed with it she read aloud, " 'A hormone preparation to counteract impotence.' . . . What does impotence mean. Papa?"

Paul snatched the bottle from her and turned to me in fury. "If that's your idea of a joke, I don't see it." He got up and went out of the room.

The silence was appalling, and this time I could find no excuses for Jean for such a wanton piece of cruelty. I felt Gaston's gaze on me from the sideboard, and lowered my eyes to my plate. Hostility surrounded me on all sides. Apology was useless. "For what we have received may the Lord make us truly thankful," said Blanche, and rose from her seat. Francoise and Renee followed her, and I was left sitting at the table.

"Aunt Blanche," called the child, "you haven't taken your present." She ran after her, holding the package in her hands.

Gaston came to sweep the crumbs. "If Monsieur le Comte is going to the verrerie the car is outside," he said.

I met his eyes and saw reproach. And this upset me, because his devotion gave me confidence.

"What happened just then," I said, "was not intentional."

"No, Monsieur le Comte."

"I had forgotten the contents of the packages."

"Evidently, Monsieur le Comte."

There was no more to say. I went out to the terrace, and drawn up below the steps was the Renault, and Paul waiting by the door.

## CHAPTER 5

THERE WAS no escaping him. The situation was my responsibility. Whatever Jean de Gue might have intended to do, discreetly and in private, I had now wrecked with brash bonhomie; and in assuming Jean's personality I must make amends for the faults I committed in his name. "You drive," I said to Paul, and climbed in beside him. "I'm sorry for what happened just now," I went on. "The whole thing was a mistake. Everything got mixed up in my valise."

"I don't believe you," he said. "If any gesture was deliberate, yours was, to make me look like a fool in front of everyone."

"I've told you it was a mistake," I said. "Forget it."

He turned out of the village, and took a road into the forest. "I've put up with practical jokes from you all my life," he said, "but there are certain limits. Another thing," he continued, "don't you think it's time you stopped treating Renee as if she were a second Marie-Noel? I object to my wife being turned into a doll merely to gratify your desire for popularity."

The role of apologist was not an easy one. "All women like to be spoiled," I said. "Didn't you see what I gave Françoise? Naturally I brought back something pretty for Renee too."

Paul turned the car to the right, on a sandy byroad. The forest was thinning, and there was a clearing ahead. "Your choice was vulgar and your timing crude," said Paul. "I happened to be watching Françoise as well as Renee. Anyway, next time you decide to give my wife a present, consult me first."

The road narrowed. Before us was a long line of workmen's cottages, and to our right a great shedlike building with a sloping roof and tall stovepipe chimneys, surrounded by other sheds. From the chimneys came a peculiar gasping, choking sound of smoke expelled by a furnace. Paul drove the car through the open gates, stopping by a small lodge. He got out, and without another word walked away towards a building behind the shed with the high chimneys.

I followed him, and as I picked my way between some trolley rails I realized, from the crunching beneath my feet, that the ground was covered with minute particles of glass, blue and green and amber, fine as sand upon a beach. Workmen pushing barrows stopped to let us pass, and I noticed that, although they nodded to him, to me they smiled, with camaraderie and warmth, as if they were genuinely glad to see my face.

Paul made straight for a two-storied eighteenth-century house, with a red-tiled, lichen-covered roof, and, opening the door, led the way into a paneled room with a stone floor. There was a table in the middle covered with books and papers, and a big desk in one corner. A bald-headed man with spectacles and hollow cheeks, wearing a dark suit, rose from the table when he saw us.

"Bonjour, Monsieur le Comte," he said to me. "You are feeling better, then?"

"There was nothing wrong with me," I said. "I was merely idle."

Paul laughed -- the disparaging sound of one who is not amused. "It must be pleasant to lie in bed mornings," he said. "It's something neither Jacques nor I have been able to do for a long time."

The man made a deprecatory gesture, and said quickly, "Is there anything you wish to discuss in private? If so, I can leave you."

"No," said Paul, "the verrerie's future is as much your concern as ours. Like you, I am waiting to hear what was achieved in Paris."

They looked at me. I went over to the chair by the desk and sat down. "What do you want to know exactly?" I asked, bending over to light a cigarette. The action enabled me to hide the uncertainty in my face.

"Oh, mon Dieu . . ." said Paul in exasperation. "There's only one issue, isn't there? Do we, or do we

not, close down?"

Somebody -- was it the mother? -- had said something about a contract. The visit to Paris hinged on a Carvalet contract. Jean de Gue was expected to bring it back with him. Very well, then, they should have it. "If you mean did I succeed in getting Carvalet to renew the contract, the answer is yes," I said.

Both men stared at me, astounded. Jacques burst out with a "Bravo!" but Paul interrupted, "On what terms, what stipulations?"

"Our terms," I said, "and they made no stipulations."

"You don't mean to tell me they will take our stuff for another six months in spite of the lower quotations from other firms?"

"That's about it."

"I can't understand it. You've achieved something I frankly believed to be impossible. My congratulations."

They began discussing the contract, without reference to me, and I swiveled round in my chair and looked out of the window, wondering what I had been talking about. I saw a tangled orchard, golden in the sun, and a woman with a gray shawl round her shoulders and sabots on her feet, hoeing in a vegetable garden, hens pecking in her path. She was large, elderly, broad-hipped, with a lined brown peasant's face, and when she caught sight of me she smiled and, leaving the hoe, plodded across the ground towards the house. Paul, noticing her for the first time, said, "There's Julie, all ears as usual." He leant out of the window. "Monsieur Jean succeeded in Paris. Don't pretend you don't know what I mean."

The half-smile broadened on the woman's face. She plucked a bunch of grapes dangling from the vine on the wall, and offered it to me with the gesture of a queen. "There you are," she said. "Grown especially for you, Monsieur le Comte. Eat them at once before the bloom is off them."

She went off again to her vegetables, and turning my head I saw that Paul was hanging up his coat and putting on overalls. "There's not been much correspondence in since you were away," he said. "It's all on the desk. Jacques will show you."

He went out, and I was left alone with Jacques and a little stack of letters, invoices, inquiries from other firms. As I looked through them I knew that I understood absolutely nothing of what I was supposed to dictate or write. To speak the truth was the only way out. I swept them all aside and said, "What is all this? What do you want me to do about it?" Jacques smiled and replied, "These are only routine matters. Monsieur le Comte. I can deal with them."

I got up, went to the open door and looked out on the line of sheds, the workmen passing to and fro with wheelbarrows, a lorry being driven out of the gates, the pleasing, incongruous proximity of farm buildings some fifty yards from the foundry itself. Geese were strutting in the farmyard, and mingling with the lowing of cattle from beyond the farm gate came the intermittent clanging of metal within the shed. I knew instinctively that all this had been happening for two or three hundred years, that wars and the Revolution had not altered it. It continued because the family and the workmen believed in it, because they wanted it that way, and to destroy it would be like tearing the roots of a live thing from the soil.

I said to Jacques, "How long can a factory like this compete against big firms with modern machinery, paying high wages?"

"That depends on you, Monsieur le Comte. We know it's a rich man's hobby that has become a habit to you. If you don't mind losing money it's your affair. Only . . ."

"Only what?"

"You would not be losing quite so much today if a little more trouble had been taken in the past to

look after what belongs to you. Forgive me, I am being frank. How can I put it to you, Monsieur le Comte? A business is like a home: it must have a head, a center, and depending upon that center it either thrives or falls to pieces. Your father was much respected, and Monsieur Duval was another like him. Had he lived he would have made his home here in the house, and there would have been a sense of continuity. But as things are . . ." He looked at me apologetically, unable to finish his sentence.

"Are you blaming me or my brother?" I asked.

"Neither, Monsieur le Comte. Circumstances have been against us all. Monsieur Paul has a great sense of duty, but he has been fighting a losing battle against costs and wages, and you know he is not at ease with the workmen. Sometimes that makes things difficult."

I thought how unenviable was this man's position, the buffer, the go-between, cursed probably by employer and employed, yet bearing on his shoulders the real sweat and toil of the business -- checking orders, pacifying creditors, working overtime, the last prop and support of a tottering system.

"You are not offended, Monsieur le Comte, at what I said?" Jacques asked with a touching humility.

"No," I answered. "No, I'm grateful."

I went out, crossing to the main foundry shed. Inside, near the furnace, the men were working stripped because of the heat. All round me were vats and tubs, and rods, and connecting pipes, and there was a roar and a clanging and an odd pungent smell which was not unpleasant. Moving on to the other sheds, where men in overalls were working with different tools, I turned in my hands the blues and greens and ambers of rejected glass that seemed to me perfect, little flacons and bottles of every shape and size.

Presently I went out again and got into the Renault and drove back toward St. Gilles. Before the road dipped to the village, I stopped, lit a cigarette, and looked down at the country below.

I wished I could feel detached: could look down on St. Gilles and the chateau with dispassionate eyes. My morning mood had somehow gone awry. The feeling of amusement, of power, had turned to shame. I had exchanged my own negligible self for a worthless personality. He had the supreme advantage over me in that he had not cared. Or had he, after all? Was this why he had disappeared? I drove on to the chateau and asked Gaston to take the car back to the verrerie for Paul. Then I went indoors. Upstairs, in the dressing room, I found the packet of letters that I remembered seeing in the valise. Among them was one with the name and address of the Carvalet people stamped on the back. I read it through, and it was as I feared. They said that they regretted their unfavorable decision, in view of so much business between us in the past; but on further consideration they found themselves unable to renew their contract.

I did not, for the moment, mind about Jacques or the family at the chateau. Presumably they had prepared themselves for the worst, and were merely surprised and relieved that they were able to believe the contrary. I minded, immediately, for the workmen I had seen at the verrerie this afternoon, sweating beside that furnace, or working in the sheds at their separate skilled tasks.

The thing that puzzled me most was why I cared. Their scorn and disenchantment when they learned that I had lied to them could not touch my inviolate self. This person who walked about wearing another's clothes was guiltless, merely a covering, a facade. What was happening, then, was that I wanted to preserve Jean de Gue from degradation. I could not bear to see him shamed. Why? Because he looked like me?

I sat in the dressing room, staring at the letter from Carvalet. I knew I must come to a decision -- either to tell Paul directly that I had lied about the contract, or to allow him to go on believing it had gone through.

I put the letter in my pocket and went downstairs. It was almost four o'clock. There was no one

about, and a feeling of siesta brooded over the place. I found the telephone, jammed between mackintoshes in a dark closet: an old-fashioned instrument, the mouthpiece fastened to the wall and the receiver hanging at one side.

I unhooked the receiver and waited, and after a moment there was a buzz and a nasal voice intoned, "J'ecoute" I asked for the Paris number on Carvalet's letter, and waited for what seemed eternity, crouched in my dark hole, until I reached the Monsieur Mercier who had signed the letter, and identified myself as Jean de Gue.

"Monsieur," I said, "a thousand apologies for disturbing you, also for my discourtesy in not acknowledging your letter. I was obliged to return home very suddenly, owing to illness in my family. I have now seen my brother and gone over the points you and I discussed, and we are prepared to lower our figure and meet your demands."

There was silence, and then a polite but exceedingly surprised voice answered, "But Monsieur le Comte, this is in complete contradiction to what you yourself gave us to understand."

"What you are saying is perfectly correct," I said, "but I have changed my mind. I will agree to any proviso, if we can continue to keep the foundry working. I am asking you to renew your contract on your own terms, whatever they may be."

A more prolonged silence. Then, swiftly, "Monsieur, we have had a long connection with you and your family, and we were upset that it should be severed. If you are now prepared to meet us over figures, I will again consult my fellow directors. I see no reason why the result should not be satisfactory to us both."

We exchanged final compliments, and he hung up. I reached for my handkerchief and wiped the sweat off my forehead. I had committed myself to something without having the slightest idea of how to carry it through. If the price Carvalet paid did not cover costs, then the money would have to come from another source.

It was at this moment that I heard someone breathing down the receiver, which I still held, unthinking, against my ear: the unmistakable sound of a person listening at an extension. Presently the exchange cut in, asking if I had finished with Paris, and when I said yes, and the line went dead, I heard the breathing again, and then a gentle click, proving that whoever listened within the chateau had now hung up.

Discovery of the extension, and of the eavesdropper, were things that must wait. I felt it more immediately important to find out something about Jean de Gue's finances. The half-finished checkbook in the dressing room upstairs, which I went to fetch, bore cryptic figures but no balance, and its only worth-while information was the name and address of the bank in Villars, a neighboring town. There was no desk in the dressing room. Somewhere in the chateau there must be a room where the owner wrote his letters and kept personal possessions. I remembered the library where the family had assembled before lunch. To be sure -- there was a desk in the corner. Inside it there was a muddle and disorder of envelopes spilling their contents, letters, bills, receipts, all thrown in haphazard. I wanted bank statements and I could not find them, only the stubs of checkbooks long since used and put away. Finally, my eye caught by the red leather cover of what might be a ledger, I tugged and squeezed it out of the reluctant drawer and found it to be an album of photographs, most of them faded.

I let the bank statements go. A glimpse at the past was irresistible. The album bore a crest on the first page, and underneath, "Marie de Gue" in a long sloping hand. When I turned the page there was the mother, unmistakably, a young woman in her mid-twenties, the present heavy jowl a rounded and determined chin, the shock of gray hair blond, profuse, a frilly blouse adorning the sloping shoulders that were now hunched and covered with a multitude of wraps. Beside it was the date, 1914. Then followed, one by one, the others: Jean de Gue, the father, suggesting Paul but with a bristling mustache, the eyes alert; mother and father together, gazing with fond pride at a much

beribboned Blanche; then a small Jean and Blanche straddling a pony, and the same pair posed in mufflers, their arms round each other's necks. The couple were seldom apart in the pictures. Wherever Jean stood, holding fishing rod or gun, Blanche would be lurking -- almost a replica of the Marie-Noel of today, with the same long legs, thin body and close-cropped hair. When she must have been about fifteen she began to change, the expression in the eyes becoming more watchful, more solemn; but even so I could not recognize in that grave and surely sympathetic face the tight-lipped spinster of today.

The young Jean was never solemn. Every snapshot showed laughter, or a comic attitude, or some mockery of the camera. Paul did not figure much in the album. He was often out of focus, the dimmest figure in a group, half obscured by Jean's robust shoulder or eclipsed by Jean's devastating smile. A man called Maurice appeared often in the latter pages of the album, amongst groups at the glass foundry or at the chateau; and there was one of him and Jean together, standing by the stone statue in the park. Then, abruptly, the snapshots ended. An era was over, a cycle closed.

I shut the album with a curious feeling of nostalgia. This furtive glance at the family background was oddly moving. I minded not that the handsome countess should grow old, but that she had aged in the way she had, those dominating, confident eyes turned restless, the proud mouth voracious. I minded that Blanche, so winning as a child, so serious and watchful as a growing girl, could become warped out of recognition, crude as a caricature.

These pictures of a past when all seemed well were disturbed by an intrusion from the present. I heard the child's voice calling: "Papa? Where are you?"

"In here. Do you want me?"

She burst into the room. "Gran'mie is awake," she said. "I have been telling her about the presents, and how disappointed Uncle Paul was in his. And do you know. Papa, you made a mistake with the one for my Aunt Blanche? She would not open it, so Maman and I unwrapped it for her, and inside was a note, 'For my beautiful Bela, from Jean,' not Blanche at all, and it was an enormous bottle of scent called 'Femme' in a lovely box wrapped in cellophane, and the price upon it still, ten thousand francs." She paused. "It's a funny thing. Papa, but everybody seems to be in a bad mood about those presents. Maman was so pleased with hers this morning, but now she has taken it off and put it with the rest of the things in her jewel case. She said, 'I'm afraid all this has been a joke after all, and rather a cruel one.'"

## CHAPTER 6

THIS SECOND evening of my masquerade took shape and substance like a second night at school. I was familiar now with my surroundings, and my audacity, an intoxicating drug the night before, seemed natural. When I opened a door or came face to face with one of the family I no longer felt a shock of surj<sup>^</sup>rise.

Dinner that night was a silent affair. We were only four. Marie-Noel, I discovered, had soup and crackers at seven and did not join us, while Blanche, according to Gaston, wished to fast. Francoise, the prop at lunch, looked tired, and with flagging interest touched upon little topics to stir the silence: illness in the village, a letter from a cousin in Orleans. Her voice, when the complaint was out of it, was clear and pleasant. Renee, wearing a high-necked blouse that became her well, with hair brushed up to show her ears, had put a spot of rouge on either cheekbone, perhaps to dazzle me with her charm. I was unmoved, and Paul did not even notice. He concentrated upon his food; and directly dinner was over he moved to a chair under the best light in the salon, and, lighting a cigar, was hidden to view by the wide-open sheets of Figaro and L'Onest-France.

Francoise and I played drafts while Renee toyed with a book until nine o'clock, when we bade each other good night, pairing off like couples at a set of lancers.

I went into the dressing room and opened the window. The chestnut trees were still, and there were no stars. As I lit a cigarette with the thought that twenty-four hours or more had passed since I came to St. Gilles, I knew that the sins of Jean de Gue had been increased tenfold by his scapegoat; that everything I had said or done had implicated me further, driven me deeper, bound me more closely still to that man whose thoughts and actions were a world apart from mine, and yet whose inner substance was part of my nature, part of my secret self.

When I awoke the next morning I knew there was something urgent I had to do. Then I remembered the telephone conversation with Carvalet, and how I had committed the verrerie to continued production on their terms, without the remotest knowledge of the family resources. Somehow I had to get to Jean de Cue's bank in Villars and talk to the manager about the financial situation, inventing some excuse for my ignorance.

I got up, bathed and dressed. I no longer had my maps, but Villars should be easy enough to find. When Gaston came into the dressing room to brush my clothes I told him I was going to the bank, and wanted the Renault around ten.

"Very well/" he said. "Monsieur Paul can take the Citroen to the verrerie."

I had forgotten there was a second car. This would simplify matters. There would be no suggestion of Paul's coming with me to the bank, which I had feared. I was reckoning, though, without the complications of family shopping. Gaston must have mentioned my intention, for I was just about to go downstairs when the little femme de chambre knocked at the door.

"Excuse me, Monsieur le Comte," she said, "but may Madame Paul go with you to Villars? She has an appointment with the coiffeur."

The last tiling I wanted was another tete-<sup>^</sup>tete with Madame Paul, but there seemed no possibility of excuse. I wondered if her appointment was a deliberate scheme for my company. I told Germaine that of course I would take Madame Paul to the coiffeur, and then, with a sudden inspiration, went into the bedroom, where I found Francoise sitting up in bed.

"I'm going into Villars," I said. "Do you want to come?"

Then I remembered that surely every husband kisses his wife good morning, and I kissed her and asked her how she had slept.

"I was restless," she said. "No, I can't come into Villars. I shall stay in bed. I'm expecting Dr. Lebrun sometime this morning. Why must you go? I had hoped you would see him."

"I have to go to the bank," I said. "I've got business to discuss." In an attempt to ease my conscience, I added, "I won't be long. Ill probably be back before he's gone."

She did not answer. Germaine came in to take away the breakfast tray, and behind her Marie-Noel, who, having kissed us in turn, immediately demanded to be taken into Villars too.

Here was the perfect counterplot to Renee: I wondered I had not thought of it myself. When I said that she might come the child watched me with dancing eyes, wriggling impatiently while her mother brushed her hair.

"It's market day," said Francoise. "Jean, don't let her go wandering in the market."

"I'll look after her," I said. "Anyway, Renee is coming too."

"Renee? Whatever for?"

"She has an appointment at the coiffeur," said Marie-Noel, "As soon as she heard Papa was going into Villars, she came to Aunt Blanche's room to telephone."

"But she washed her hair only a few days ago," said Francoise.

I heard the child say something about Aunt Renee wanting to look nice for "la chasse," but I did not listen. I fastened on the information that the telephone extension was in Blanche's room. Blanche, then, had listened when I spoke to Paris. If not Blanche, who else? And how much had been heard?

"I'll try and keep Dr. Lebrun until you come back," Francoise was saying now, "but you know how he is, he never can stay long."

"What's he going to do?" asked Marie-Noel.

"He's going to Hsten to baby brother," said Francoise.

The child looked from one to the other of us, anxious, expectant, and then, for no apparent reason, suddenly turned a cartwheel.

"Look out . . ." warned Francoise, but it was too late. The flying feet overbalanced and crashed upon a little table near the fireplace, smashing a porcelain cat and dog on the hearth. The child picked herself up, scarlet in the face, and looked at her mother, who sat up in bed gazing at the disaster, stunned.

"My cat and dog," she said, "my favorite pieces. The two my mother gave me that I brought from home." A tumult of feeling must have swept over her on that instant, breaking all control, and the bitterness of months, perhaps of years, surged to the surface.

"You little beast," she said to the child, "with your horrible clumsy feet, smashing the only things I possess and value in this house. Why doesn't your father teach you discipline and manners instead of filling your head with all this nonsense about saints and visions? Now leave me, both of you. I don't want either of you. Leave me alone. . . ."

The child, her face drained of color, ran from the room. I went over to the bed. "Francoise ..." I began.

She pushed me away, her eyes tormented. "No," she said. "No . . . no . . . no . . ." She flung herself back on her pillows, burying herself against them, and, in a futile endeavor to be useful, I picked up the porcelain fragments and carried them into the dressing room. Mechanically I wrapped them in the cellophane and paper from the bottle of scent. There was no sign of Marie-Noel, and, remembering the threat of the open window, I ran out of the dressing room and up the back stairs to the turret room. But when I came to the room I saw with relief that the window was closed, and that she was undressing, folding her clothes neatly on a chair.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"I've been naughty," she said. "Don't I have to go to bed?"

"I don't think it would do much good," I said. "And, anyway, you were not naughty. It was bad luck. You didn't intend to break the figures. The thing to do now is to try and have them mended. Put your dress on again, then come downstairs. It's nearly ten o'clock."

I went back and picked up the broken pieces in their wrapping paper. Downstairs, Renee was standing in the hall.

"I hope I haven't kept you waiting," she said.

There was a world of anticipation in her voice, excitement and avidity in her face, as she walked out of the house and down the steps. Then the child came running across the terrace after us.

"I'm coming with you, Aunt Renee," she said, "but it's not a treat. I have some rather serious shopping to do."

I had never seen expression alter so swiftly from assurance to dismay. For a moment I thought Renee was going to return to the chateau, the frustration was so shattering. Then she pulled herself together, and without looking at me got into the back of the car.

I need not have worried about the road to Villars. The truth, as usual, proved an easy way out of difficulty.

"We will pretend," I said to Marie-Noel, "that I'm a stranger and don't know the way, and that you have to direct me."

"Oh yes," she said, "what a good idea."

It was as simple as that. Soon we were out of the magic of farm and forest and back on the hard, straight route nationale and so to Villars, the child announcing each turn in a singsong chant.

"We'll drop Aunt Renee at the coiffeur and put the car in the Place de la Republique afterwards," said Marie-Noel. I stopped in front of the small establishment with the waxen lady's head in the window and opened the door for Renee, who got out without a word.

"What time will you be ready?" I asked, but she did not answer. She went straight into the shop with never a backward glance.

The absence of Renee put an end to restraint, and my mood, like the child's, turned festive. We found parking space, and plunged into the market in the Place beside the church.

Nothing was on a grand scale, as it had been in Le Mans. Only trestle tables crammed together in a small space, spilling over with aprons, jackets, mackintoshes, sabots; and the child and I moved leisurely between them, our eyes caught foolishly by the same objects. We bought some gray-and-white checked slippers for Ger-maine; yellow boot laces, both for ourselves and for Gaston; and two sponges on a string, and finally a great hunk of milk-white soap, a mermaid riding a dolphin embossed upon its surface.

We turned in the crowded alley, laden with our wares, and I saw we were being watched with intense amusement by a blond woman in a bright-blue coat, her arms full of red and gold dahlias. As she brushed past us, going in the opposite direction towards the church, she murmured for my ear alone, "Pere de famille for a change?"

I looked back at the blue coat swinging down the alley, amused, intrigued, and then Marie-Noel, pulling at me, said, "Oh, Papa, there's a little lace cloth -- " and we were involved in purchases once more. I forgot all about my purpose in coming to Villars, until the church bell boomed half past eleven and I thought, aghast, of the bank closing at twelve, and nothing achieved.

"Hurry," I said, and we went and spilt our purchases in the car.

"Papa," said the child, "we've never seen about mending the broken porcelain for Maman," and, looking at her, I saw anxiety in her face, the happiness gone. "Couldn't I go to the shop by the Porte de Ville, you know, where they have candlesticks, and see if they would mend the porcelain, and

then come and meet you at the bank?" She stared up at me expectantly.

"Where is it?" I said. "I've forgotten."

"Just inside the Porte de Ville," she said impatiently. "Next to the umbrella shop. And then I'll come back past the church and straight to the bank. It's barely four minutes."

"All right," I said, "here's the parcel. Be careful, now." I put the broken pieces in their wrappings into her hands.

I watched her across the road and then turned left to the obvious bank building standing at the corner. I pushed through the doors, and was met by a clerk. "Good morning. Monsieur le Comte," he said. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Yes," I answered, "I want to know how my account stands."

"Which one, Monsieur?"

"All of them. I want the full statements."

He disappeared, returning presently with a sheaf of papers. "Perhaps you would like to take a seat in the office, Monsieur le Comte?" he said, and he led the way to a small room with a glass door.

He left me, and as I turned the papers I realized that I was as lost before these columns of figures as I had been before the bills and statements in the verrerie. I looked them over one by one, but could make nothing of them, and then the clerk returned to find out whether I wanted any more information.

"Is this all?" I asked. "You have no other papers of mine?"

He looked at me inquiringly, a little puzzled, and said, "No, Monsieur le Comte, unless, of course, there is anything you wish to look at in your safe in the vault."

"Is there time for me to look in it before you close?" I asked.

"Certainly," he replied, and I followed him down a long flight of stairs to the basement. He unlocked a door, and we were in a vast, low room like a cellar, the walls lined with safes, all numbered. He left me gazing at the contents of number 17, another mass of papers, all of them tied with tape. Oddly disappointed, I took them to the light. The title of a document caught my eye, "Marriage Settlement of Françoise Bruyere," and I was beginning to untie the tape when the clerk returned.

"Your little girl is outside," he said. "She asked me to tell you that everything is arranged about the porcelain, and can she go back in the lorry with Madame Yves?"

I had heard somewhere that Julie, the concierge at the foundry lodge, was Madame Yves. "All right," I said, preoccupied; "tell her I'll be along in a moment." I had the tape undone and had opened the document. I sat down and began to read.

The father of Françoise, a Monsieur Robert Bruyere, had evidently been a rich man with little faith in the stability of Jean de Gue, and no desire to bolster his tottering fortunes. Her dowry, which was considerable, was therefore in trust for a male heir, but the income could be used during the minority of the said heir, husband and wife having joint control over it. In default of a son, when Françoise reached the age of fifty the trust funds were to be divided between her and any surviving daughters of the marriage, or, if she predeceased her husband before she reached the age of fifty, between the husband and any daughters. The point was that the income from this vast trust could only be used by the parents on the birth of a male heir, and if no male child was born no one could touch a sou until Françoise reached the age of fifty -- unless, of course, she were to die before that age.

I read the document over a dozen times, and I understood at last the allusions to the advantage of the next child being a boy. Poor Marie-Noël, no trust money for her if a brother came along. As to

Jean de Gue, he could control half the capital only if there was no heir and Francoise died before the age of fifty.

"Excuse me, Monsieur le Comte, but will you be much longer? We close at twelve, and it is already twenty past."

The clerk stood beside me, wearing an injured expression, and with an effort I brought myself back to reality.

"I'm coming," I said. "I didn't realize it was so late."

As I put the documents back in the safe, a paper fell out which had not been tied up in tape with the others, but seemed to have been thrust in hastily. I glanced at it, and saw that it was a letter from a lawyer called Talbert, written two or three weeks earlier. Odd words caught my eye -- "verrierie," "rentes" "placements" "divi-dendes" -- and, sensing that here might be the clue to the whole financial tangle, I put it in my pocket.

The clerk led me upstairs and let me out, locking the door behind me. I started out in the direction I had seen Marie-Noel take: I must discover what she had done about the broken porcelain. In due course I came to the Porte de Ville, an ancient gateway to the once fortified town, with a stone bridge over the canal where the drawbridge used to be. I passed under the archway to what was evidently the main shopping street of the town, and at once I saw, on the right-hand side, the place that the child must have meant, an antique shop with china and silver in the window. But the door was fast shut, and there was a notice saying they closed from midday until three.

I turned away, then paused, noticing with vague curiosity that the rear of the antique shop itself was in reality a small eighteenth-century house, with a balcony and strip of garden fronting the canal like a miniature palazzo on a Venetian backwater. A narrow plank bridge led from the road to the garden. As I stood there, someone came out on the balcony and I recognized in an instant the blond woman in the bright-blue coat who had laughed at Marie-Noel and myself in the market place. Was she the keeper of the antique shop?

"Excuse me, Madame," I called, "I tried the shop just now, but the door was locked. Did my daughter visit you this morning?"

The woman turned round, surprised, and then to my astonishment burst into laughter. "Idiot," she said. "I thought you'd gone home. What are you doing, hanging about and playing the fool?"

The familiarity, the use of the intimate "tu," shook me off balance. I could only stare. She looked away, past the Porte de Ville to the Place St. Julien. It was the siesta hour: the streets were empty. "There's no one about," she said. "Come on in."

The reputation of Jean de Cue in Villars was evidently a light one. I hesitated, and then, glancing across the square, saw Renee, whom I had forgotten all about, long finished at the coiffeur, tramping the town in search of me. Since Marie-Noel had gone off in a lorry, I should have to drive Renee back to St. Gilles alone. I was trapped. The woman in the blue coat followed my eyes and saw my dilemma. "Quick," she said, "she hasn't seen you yet."

I dashed across the little bridge and onto the balcony, and, laughing still, she pulled me into the room. "There's luck," she said. "A moment later she'd have caught us."

She shut the long window and turned to me, smiling, the same look of amusement on her face that I had noticed and indeed shared in the market place. But now there was nothing guarded about it; her whole expression was open and free.

"That child of yours is adorable," she said, "but it was very naughty of you to send her here. And why for heaven's sake did you wrap up those pieces of broken porcelain with a card addressed to me? One of these days, my angel, your jokes will go too far. I'll see to your broken porcelain, but after this don't use your child or your wife or your sister as your deputy, because it's making fools of them and I have too much respect for your family."

She put her hand in her pocket and produced a crumpled card, on which was written "For my beautiful Bela, from Jean." The dog and cat lay in pieces on a table. The only link that was missing was the outsize bottle of "Femme."

## CHAPTER 7

ALTHOUGH she had closed the long window, the casement curtains masking the view, the room was full of sun. I had an impression of blue-gray walls and cushions, but the effect, instead of being cold, was light as air. The red and gold dahlias that I had seen her carrying from the market place spilt in profusion from a vase in the corner, the sun upon them still. Deep chairs stood about the room, and a Persian cat cleaned its paws in one of them. Close to the window was a low flat table with artist's materials upon it, thin, small brushes and a special sort of paper. There was a smell of apricots.

"Why are you in Villars in the middle of the day?" she asked.

"I went to the bank," I said, "and forgot the time. I was supposed to pick up one of the family from the coiffeur."

"You've left it until rather late," she said. "Does she enjoy walking about the streets?" She went to a corner cupboard and brought out a bottle of Dubonnet and two glasses. "Are you going to have lunch with me? It's all here -- ham, salad, cheese, fruit and coffee." She opened a hatchway between this room and another, and there was a tray laid ready, with food upon it.

"How can I," I asked, "with my sister-in-law waiting for me?"

She went to the window, opened it, and looked out to the Place St. Julien. "She's not there any more. If she has any sense she will go and sit in the car, and then, when she becomes tired of waiting, drive back to St. Gilles."

I wondered if Renee could drive. I did not care. I felt suddenly devoid of responsibility and content to let things take their course.

"You can imagine how I felt," she said, "when Vincent came to me and told me that your small daughter was in the shop asking if we would mend something very precious belonging to her mother. I couldn't imagine what had happened -- for a moment I thought your wife had found out that I had done the miniature. Did you give it to her? Did she like it?"

I paused a moment, considering my words. "Yes," I said, "yes, it was a great success. She was very pleased."

"I'm so glad. It was a marvelous idea of yours, and must have come to you in one of your better moments. The dog and cat won't mend, but I can get duplicates from Paris. They're Copenhagen -- I suppose you realized that? Come on, let's eat. I'm hungry, if you are not."

She laid the table, drawing it up to my chair, and I thought to myself that this was, so far, the most effortless moment of my masquerade. It could be termed a gift, even, on the part of Fate, which had been sparing of indulgence up to date.

Eating the ham and salad, it struck me how much more pleasant was lunch today, with this woman opposite me, than it had been yesterday in the dining room at the chateau. This train of thought led me to the one undelivered present. "There's a bottle of scent for you," I said, "on the chest in the dressing room at St. Gilles."

"Thank you. Am I supposed to go and fetch it?" she asked.

I told her about the mistake in the initial B, and she looked bewildered. "I don't see how it happened," she said, "since you and your sister have not spoken in fifteen years."

Fifteen years . . . Then Blanche's disapproval was so deep-rooted that it must affect the relationship of the entire family. The revelation was disturbing, even sinister, especially when I remembered the snapshots of the two children with their arms about each other.

"My mind wasn't functioning properly," I said lamely at last. "Too much to drink in Le Mans the day before."

She raised her eyebrows. "The Paris visit was unsuccessful?"

"Very unsuccessful." I told her, then, of my telephone commitment to Carvalet. "That's why I went to the bank this morning -- to see if I can stand the loss. I still don't know the answer."

Her wide blue eyes were fixed upon me. "But you told me before you went to Paris that if Carvalet wouldn't agree to your terms you were going to close down."

"That wouldn't be fair to the workers."

"Since when have you bothered about the workers?"

"Since I got drunk in Le Mans."

There was the sound of a door in the distance. She got up and went to the passage. "Is that you, Vincent?" she called.

"Yes, Madame."

"Go and see if the Comte de Cue's car is in the Place de la Republique, and if there is a lady waiting in it."

"Very good, Madame."

She poured me another glass of wine, cut a slice of Gruyere cheese and gave it to me. "You know," she said, "it's a good thing, now and again, to take stock of oneself, to see where one has gone wrong. I sometimes wonder why I go on living here in Villars. I barely make a living out of the shop, and I exist mainly on what Georges left me, which is precious little these days."

Was Georges perhaps a husband? Some kind of comment seemed necessary. "Why do you go on living here?" I asked.

She shrugged her shoulders. "Habit, I suppose. It suits me. I'm fond of this little house. If you think I exist for your occasional visits, you flatter yourself." She began to peel a pear and gave me the quarters from it. "You make a mistake leaving so much of the administrative part of the foundry to your brother. If you weren't so infernally lazy you would do it yourself."

"That had occurred to me, but I don't understand it."

"That's nonsense. You've watched it since you were a child, and you must have picked up a working knowledge. I sometimes wonder if your lack of feeling for the verrerie is because you don't want to think about it too deeply. You don't want to be reminded of what happened to Maurice Duval."

I was silent. This was the fringe of something. Jacques, at the verrerie, had spoken of Monsieur Duval: and Maurice was the man in the photograph album by the side of Jean de Gue.

"It could be," I said slowly, after a moment or two.

"The Occupation was over fifteen years ago," she said, "his part of it. Yet people go on remembering him -- what a fine man he was, and how he died. It can hardly make for peace of mind for those involved."

There was a tap at the door and a small thin man, wearing a beret, looked into the room. He smiled when he saw me.

"Bonjour, Monsieur le Comte," he said. "There was no lady in the car. But there was this note on the seat."

He handed it to me with a bow. It was short and to the point. "I have been looking for you and Marie-Noel for nearly an hour. I have hired a car to take me home. R." I showed it to my hostess.

"Now you can relax," she said.

She had thrown off the bright-blue jacket, revealing a thin wool frock of indeterminate gray. It was restful to look upon her, and to know that in this room nothing was expected of me. I wondered how

often Jean de Gue came here from the chateau and sat with his head against a cushion, as I was doing now. Her casual friendliness held a quality of ease suggesting mutual understanding without emotional demand.

She gazed at me thoughtfully. The candid eyes were disconcerting. "What's the matter?" she said. "It's not just finance, is it? It goes much deeper. What really happened to you in Le Mans?"

I closed my eyes, stroking the cat which had jumped on my knee. Safety lay in evasion, and in the truth as well.

"You said something a little while ago about taking stock of oneself," I said. "Perhaps that's just what I've been doing, over a period of time, and it came to a head that evening in Le Mans. The self I knew had failed. The only way to escape responsibility for failure was to become someone else. Let another personality take charge."

"The other Jean de Gue," she said, "the one who's been hidden for so long beneath the surface gaiety and charm -- I've often wondered if he existed. But no one avoids responsibility by finding another self. The problems remain to be tackled just the same."

"No," I said. "The problems and responsibilities are new, because the man in charge is somebody else."

My eyes still closed, I heard her get up and carry the tray to the hatch. Then she came back and sat on the arm of my chair.

"How does he seem to you, then, the man in charge?" she asked.

"I think he has twisted ideas, but he's come terribly near to the truth. He says he believes that the only motive which moves the human race is greed, and by ministering to this greed he himself survives. The thing is, it isn't greed at all, it's hunger. And if it's hunger, what about the conflicting claims? Mother, wife, child, brother, sister-in-law, even workers -- I can't satisfy them all. Frankly, I don't know where to start or what to do."

She did not answer, but I felt a soothing hand on my head.

I put out my hands and felt her face. "I don't want to have to think," I said.

She laughed, and, hardly brushing them, kissed my closed eyes. "That's why you come here, isn't it?" she said.

As I entered the chateau in the late afternoon Paul came out of the small cloakroom to the right of the stairs.

"Where the devil have you been all day?" he asked. "We've been trying to get you since one o'clock. Lebrun waited until two, and then had to go. He's just been through to me again."

"What's wrong?" I inquired.

"What's wrong?" he repeated. "Only that Françoise isn't at all well, and Lebrun has forbidden her to move from bed. If she isn't careful she'll have a premature baby and lose it, and more than likely be critically ill herself. That's all that's wrong."

The contempt in his voice was something I had to accept. The fault was not Jean de Gue's but mine. I had promised to be back in time to see the doctor. I had not kept the promise.

"What's his number?" I asked. "I'll get on to him at once."

"No use," he said. "He's been called out again. I told him to try you later this evening."

He turned on his heel and disappeared into the library. I went straight upstairs to the bedroom. Françoise was lying against her pillows with closed eyes. She opened them as I came into the room.

"Oh, it's you," she said, "at last. I'd given you up long ago. I told them you'd probably taken the train back to Paris."

The voice was flat, expressionless. I went up to the bed and took her hand. "I should have telephoned," I said. "I was held up in Villars. How are you feeling? Paul tells me Lebrun has ordered you to stay in bed."

The hand in mine felt limp and cold. She did not take it away. "If I don't I shall lose the baby," she said. "I've always known something would go wrong."

"It won't go wrong," I said. "The question is, how good is Lebrun? Wouldn't you like me to call in a specialist?"

"No," she said, "I don't want a stranger interfering at this point, upsetting me, upsetting Lebrun. I shall be all right as long as I stay quiet and nobody worries me." The tired eyes searched my face.

"What with Marie-Noel coming back on the workmen's truck, and you disappearing, I've been almost frantic with anxiety."

"I had a long session at the bank," I said. "I don't mind telling you, but I don't want the others to know. The fact is, I lied about the contract." And I told her the truth about it.

She looked bewildered. "What was the point of lying?" she asked. "I don't understand."

"I suppose it was pride," I said. "I wanted everyone to believe I had succeeded. Well, perhaps I have succeeded, for a time. But I want you to keep this to yourself. I don't intend telling anyone except you unless absolutely necessary."

She smiled for the first time, and, as she half raised herself on her pillow, I saw that she meant me to kiss her. I did so, and let go her hand.

"I won't tell anybody," she said. "I'm only too glad that you've taken me into your confidence for once." She lay back on her pillows. Then she said, "You might get me the locket you brought me from Paris. I think I'll keep it here on the table."

I went to the dressing table in the alcove, took the small jewel case I saw there, and gave it to her. She looked at the locket, snapping the miniature open as she had done before. "You'd better go down and make your peace with Renee," she said. "You know how impossible she can be when she loses her temper."

"She'll get over it."

I closed the shutters, and then I put a log on the fire.

"I suppose the child's with Blanche," she said. "I haven't felt well enough to see her. Tell her I didn't mean what I said this morning, that I was ill and wretched."

"I think she understood that."

"What did you do with the broken pieces?"

"I've seen to them. Is there anything else you want?"

"No. No, I shall just go on lying here quietly."

I went out into the corridor, and came face to face with Charlotte.

"Monsieur le Cure has just gone," she said. "Madame la Comtesse has been asking for you."

"I'll go to her now," I said.

Once again she preceded me up the stairs. The mother was again sitting by the fire, her massive shoulders draped in a purple shawl. I bent and kissed her, relieved to see that she was alone.

"Good morning and good evening," I said. "I'm sorry I never came to see you this morning. I left early. I'm glad to see you up. Have you had a good day?"

The mocking, questing eyes met mine, and she grunted and pointed to a chair. "Sit down," she said,

"there with the light on your face, so that I can see you. Get out, Charlotte. And no listening at the door. Go down to the kitchen and order two trays for dinner. Go on, hurry up." The terriers climbed up and settled themselves on her lap, and she remained silent until the servant went out of the room. I lighted a cigarette, feeling her eyes upon me still. "Well," she said, "where were you?"

"I had business," I said.

"You left the bank before half past twelve," she said, "and it's now half past six."

I smiled. The itching curiosity was blatant, like a child's.

"If you want the truth," I said, "I was trying to avoid Renee. And I succeeded. That's all I'm going to tell you."

She chuckled, and I saw that once again my instinct not to lie had proved my salvation. "I don't blame you," she said. "Don't give in to her, or she'll prove insatiable."

"She hasn't enough to do," I said. "None of you women have enough to do."

"I had plenty to do once," she said, "when your father was alive, in the old days, before the war and before you married. There were no women sitting about idle then. I had something to live for. So had Blanche."

The sudden venom in her voice startled me. I looked up, and the mouth was narrow, hard, like her daughter's, and the eyes that had mocked me a moment ago were veiled under the hooded lids.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"You know very well what I mean." Then her expression changed again, and she shrugged her shoulders. "I'm old and ill, that's my trouble," she said, "and it bores me, as it will bore you when your time comes. We're too much alike. How is Francoise this evening?"

I felt I had been near to some inner core of revelation, but the new question came from another quarter, the quiet, elaborately casual tone was that of someone without heart or feeling.

"As you know, I missed Lebrun," I said. "He's going to telephone me later. She has to stay in bed. She isn't at all well."

"I saw Lebrun myself," she said. "He won't tell you any more than he told me. He's a bungler, and he won't admit it. She's going to have trouble with this baby, just as she did with the last -- I've known it all along."

"She doesn't want a specialist. I suggested it just now."

"You suggested it?" she asked. "Whatever for?"

"Why, surely," I said, "if there's going to be any trouble . . ." Unaccountably, her eyes meeting mine, discomfort seized me. I remembered the terms of the Marriage Settlement, and that if Francoise died without giving birth to a son the whole vast dowry would be divided between Jean de Gue and Marie-Noel.

The room, already stifling, became suddenly unbearable. I got up, loosening my collar. I felt her eyes upon my back as I went over to the window, lifted the sash, and leant out, drawing in a deep breath of air. When I shut the window and looked back into the room, I saw her watching me fixedly. "What's wrong with you?" she said. "You're nervous, aren't you?"

"No," I answered. "I couldn't breathe, that's all. You keep this room too warm."

"If so, it's partly for your sake," she said. "You always say the chateau is too cold. Come over here."

I went towards her slowly, against my will. Those eyes of hers, so like my own, surely had intuition of the masquerade. She reached for my hands.

"Don't let's become sentimental," she said, "and trouble ourselves over what Fate sends us. It's too

late, for you and for me. Life isn't a short affair, as everybody likes to make out; it's long, much too long. We are neither of us going to die for years. Let us both be comfortable, if we can."

A discreet tap at the door revealed Charlotte and Germaine with our trays, and once again there was the ritual of the meal, now familiar to me. The first evening the comtesse had barely tasted food, but tonight she sopped up her soup with soft pieces of bread, her eyes intent, her chin nearly touching the plate.

The meal over, she said, "Better say good night to me now. I shall be tired directly. All Françoise has to do is to keep her feet up, and she may produce a boy. Kiss me, then." The hands gripped me once again, the eyes held mine. "None of this nonsense about specialists. They cost too much," she said.

Downstairs, Marie-Noel followed me into the salon, "Papa," she whispered, "is Maman ill because I made her unhappy?"

"No," I said, "it's got nothing to do with it."

I sat down and pulled her to me. "What's the matter with you?" I asked. "Why are you so nervous?"

Her eyes flickered away from me. "I don't see why you want this baby," she said at last. "Maman told Aunt Renee a long time ago that she wished she didn't have to have it."

It seemed easiest to tell her the truth as I saw it myself. "It's peculiar," I said, "but your grandfather Bruyere tied up his money in such a way that we can't use any of it unless we have a son. So, even though we are perfectly content with our one daughter, it would make things much easier to have a boy."

The instant look of relief upon her face was as though she had been given a blessed antidote to physical pain.

"Oh," she said, "is that all? Just for money?"

In an excess of emotional release she slipped off my knee and turned a somersault from the sofa onto the floor, dressing gown and nightgown flying over her head, revealing her small round behind. Shouting with laughter, her head hidden in the bunch of clothes as she bent from the waist, she walked backwards across the room as Blanche and Renee and Paul came in.

Blanche said swiftly, "Pull down your dressing gown at once."

Marie-Noel stood up and smiled. "It's all right, Aunt Blanche," she said. "Papa and Maman are having the baby just for money, not because they want children." She caught my hand with a happy, proprietary air. "You know, Papa," she said, "Aunt Blanche told me that after you were born everyone stopped loving her, nobody took any notice of her any more, and it was one of the lessons in humility that turned her to God. But when my little brother arrives, you will love me as much as ever, and perhaps the Sainte Vierge will teach me a different lesson in humility, not the one she taught Aunt Blanche."

It must have struck her that the frozen faces of her aunts and uncle did not reflect her own happiness. She glanced at me uncertainly, then back again to the sisters-in-law. Of the two women, Renee, if possible, looked the more outraged. The child smiled at her graciously.

"After all," she said, "there are other virtues besides humblity. I could learn to have patience, like Aunt Renee. It's not everyone who can grow a baby. She has been married for three years to Uncle Paul, and nothing has happened to her yet."

## CHAPTER 8

IT SEEMED to me that I had reason to bless Françoise: her weakness gave me an excuse for absence upstairs. It was far simpler to sit with her in the bedroom than down below in the salon with Paul and Renée. I went upstairs with Marie-Noël and tucked her in for the night, then I returned to Françoise and did the same for her. I fetched hot water from the bathroom, and a sponge and soap and towel; then toothbrush and powder, pins for her hair, a nightcap that tied with ribbon under the chin. I waited on her like an orderly in the hospital, or someone called urgently to minister first aid. Her gratitude was intense. She kept saying, in wonder and surprise, that I was kind.

"It's nothing," I answered. "What else would you expect?"

"I'm not used to it," she said. "You're not thoughtful as a rule. But perhaps you're avoiding Paul and Renée tonight in case they ask you what you were doing in Villars?"

I wondered, as I kissed her and turned out the light, whether she realized instinctively that I had disclosed only part of what had happened during the day.

As I went back to the dressing room, I remembered the letter from the lawyer Talbert, and I took it out of my pocket and read it. The verrerie, he said, was running at a steady loss -- that at least I already knew -- and bankruptcy could only be avoided if it was subsidized from some other source, by the sale of land or securities, for instance. Presumably it was this letter which had made it so vital that Jean should see the Carvalet people and persuade them, if he could, to agree to more favorable terms.

The following day was Saturday, and I decided to go down to the foundry first thing in the morning, before Paul had dressed and had his coffee, to see if there was a letter from Carvalet.

As I crossed the rough ground to the house behind the big foundry shed I met the postman walking away from it, and I knew my instinct to come early had been right. I went swiftly to the office door, and there was Jacques sorting the letters beside the desk. He turned round, looking at me in surprise.

"I thought Carvalet might have written," I said in explanation. "Let's see if there is anything from them."

He looked down at the small pile of letters in his hand, and second from the top was a long envelope with the Carvalet stamped address. I took it from him, and discreetly he moved away while I read the letter. It was all right. It confirmed the telephone conversation and enclosed the contract, extended for a further six months, drawn up on the new terms.

"Jacques," I said, "have you got our old contract there?"

He handed me the contract without a word, and I sat down at the desk and compared the two. Knowing nothing of the business, I could at least seize the salient fact that in the future Carvalet would pay less for the products sent them.

"I want to run through the figures," I said to Jacques. "Wages, production costs, the whole outfit."

He stared. "You saw them recently," he said. "You and Monsieur Paul and I checked everything before you went to Paris."

"I want to do it again," I said.

It took us about an hour and a half. When we had done, and he went through to the kitchen to make some coffee, I was able to compare the final figures he had given me with what they would become under the new contract. The answer was that something in the nature of five million francs would have to be found from the personal account of Jean de Cue to balance costs. My blundering sentiment had cost the owners dear.

I put the new contract in my coat pocket, and went through to the kitchen to find Jacques.

"There, Monsieur le Comte," he said, "a little refreshment after so much work." He handed me a

cup of steaming coffee. "I am still marveling at your success in Paris," he said.

"At least," I said, "no one will be out of work."

He raised his eyebrows. "Were you so concerned about the men?" he asked. "Actually, they would soon have found employment. They've been prepared for a close-down for a long time."

I drank my coffee, disillusioned. Perhaps I had meddled to no purpose after all. Someone knocked on the outer door and, excusing himself, Jacques went back to the office. I looked about me, and saw that I was standing in a fair-sized kitchen that must once have done duty for a family, the door beyond leading through to the rest of the house. Curious, I opened it, and saw a broad stone passage, with other rooms leading off it. I crossed the passage and looked into the rooms. They were empty, unfurnished, paint cracking, dust thick upon the floors. In the furthest one of all, a fine, square room with paneled walls, there were large pieces of furniture stacked against a wall, cases of crockery-, chairs piled high one upon the other, the whole giving an appearance of neglect. An old almanac was pinned to the wall, the date 1941, and beside it was a box of books. I bent down and opened one of the books. Inside was written "Maurice Duval."

I heard footsteps coming through from the direction of the kitchen. Jacques stood in the doorway, watching me. He hesitated, then advanced uncertainly to the middle of the room. "Were you looking for something. Monsieur le Comte?"

His manner was diffident, embarrassed. I wondered if I had broken some sort of family etiquette by exploring the house.

"Do you think we ought to make use of these rooms?" I said. "Get someone to live in the house, instead of letting it stand empty? Why don't you live here yourself?"

His discomfort became even plainer, and I could tell from his expression that he thought I was attacking him in some way.

"My wife and I are very content where we are in Lauray," he said. "Besides which . . ." He broke off, distressed.

"Besides what?" I asked.

"Everybody would think it a little strange," he said. "No one has lived here for so long, and then . . . you must excuse me. Monsieur le Comte, but there are not very happy memories connected with the house. Few people would wish to live here now." Once more he hesitated, and then, seeming to gather courage, went quickly on, his words spilling out as if he were driven by something stronger than respect. "Monsieur le Comte," he said, "had there been fighting in the grounds of the verrerie. a battle between soldiers, that is something one accepts. But when the last man to live here, the master of the verrerie, Monsieur Duval, is woken from his bed in the middle of the night, and taken downstairs and shot by his own countrymen, and his body thrown into the well, cut to pieces with his own glass, even if it happened a long time ago and is something we all prefer to forget, yet it does not make anybody very anxious to come and live here, where it happened, bringing a wife and a family."

"No," I said slowly. "You are right, of course."

As I made my way slowly back to the chateau I pondered over the two things I had learnt from my morning. First, that through my telephone conversation to Carvalet I had committed the glass found to a course which could only bring about its ruin; secondly, that the last, well-loved master of the foundry had been butchered on his own doorstep and his body flung down the well.

Before I reached the village I stopped the car and felt in my pockets for the contract and Jean de Cue's wallet. I took from it his driving license. The signature was a typically flowing French one; a dozen attempts at copying it were enough to give me confidence. When I took up the contract again and wrote his name with a flourish at the bottom of the page, de Cue himself would have hesitated to denounce it as a forgery. Then I drove down the hill to the village and on to the chateau, stopping

only to post the contract.

The front door stood wide open and there was commotion in the hall. Gaston, with sleeves rolled up, was edging a heavy sideboard through to the dining room, assisted by another man. As soon as Gaston saw me, and while I was wondering how, without betraying my ignorance, I could find out what this signified, he gasped at me over his shoulder: "Monsieur Paul has been looking for you all morning, Monsieur le Comte. He says you have given no orders yet."

"Well?" I asked. "What is it he wants to know?"

He looked up at me, puzzled. "It's for tomorrow. Monsieur le Comte," he said. "What we must know is your program for the day."

"You don't think," I began cautiously, "that for once we might leave the arrangements to Monsieur Paul?"

The man stared at me, astounded. "Why, Monsieur le Comte," he exclaimed, "you have never done such a thing in your life. Ever since Monsieur le Comte your father died, it is you who have organized the Sunday of the grande chasse."

The grande chasse . . . Then, tomorrow, Sunday, must be the big annual shoot in the district, centering in the domaine of St. Gilles, planned and wholly organized by the seigneur, Jean de Cue.

"I've had a lot on my mind since I came back from Paris," I said, "and, frankly, I've not yet worked out tomorrow's program. I'll see you later."

He looked baffled, frustrated. "As you say, Monsieur le Comte," he answered, "but time is getting on and there is much to be done. Will you see me at two o'clock?"

"At two o'clock," I said, and to be rid of him I went to the lobby as though to telephone, and waited until I heard him pass through the service door. Then I crossed the hall and went outside. Two o'clock or midnight could make no difference -- I should have no program and no plan. Lecturing on French history had not equipped me for la classe: I did not shoot.

I WALKED swiftly away from the chateau and into the woods. I had to put myself out of the range of call and somehow decide upon a course of action. The most obvious one was to feign illness, but Dr. Lebrun would know at once that there was nothing wrong. I wondered if I could make Francoise the excuse, but it was too much out of character. However sick his wife might be, it would not matter to Jean de Cue. I could see no way out of my dilemma except by admitting defeat.

I walked slowly to the statue and stood beside it, looking towards the chateau. The autumn sky had clouded, and the chateau looked gray and frigid, encircled by its moat. Although the long windows of the salon were thrown open they were not inviting: only darkness came from within. Cattle cropped the grass by the dovecote, and a few yards away a bonfire smoldered, the smell of charred wet wood coming towards me on a wisp of air.

I was filled increasingly with self-disgust. The sense of power and confidence had seeped away, and my likeness to Jean de Gue was nothing but a clown's covering, a ludicrous mask of paint and powder, already falling away in strips. I had been confident this morning, not an hour ago, coming from the foundry with the contract in my pocket. Now I was deflated, the bubble of conceit exploded.

As if it were a symbol mocking me, Jean de Gue's watch, which I wore on my left wrist, suddenly fell to the ground, smashing the glass. I bent and picked it up. The strap had given -- I should have noticed it was worn. Irritated by this new mishap, I walked slowly on until I came to the dovecote. Marie-Noel must have been playing here earlier, for her cardigan lay forgotten on the swing. I stood by the bonfire, the bitter, pungent smoke stinging my eyes, and suddenly I was reminded of the well in front of the master's house at the verrerie. There were nettles here, too, and tangled grass; and as I looked at them I saw in my mind's eye a man's limp body being thrust down the deep black hole of the well.

Another gust of smoke came to me and I suddenly knew what I was going to do. I walked over and tossed the watch I was holding into the fire. I saw it fall against a heap of glowing embers. Then I knelt down and thrust my hand amongst them until I had the watch. I cried out with the searing agony of pain and collapsed sideways onto the grass, clutching my hand, while the broken watch lay forgotten beside me.

I lay a moment, waiting for the faintness to pass, and then, because of the intensity of the pain, I got to my feet and began to run towards the chateau. I remember stumbling across the threshold and falling onto the sofa, and seeing the frightened face of Renee, and hearing her cry out; and then the darkness that I sought was with me and about me, but the pain continued.

Renee ran out of the room screaming for Blanche. I heard Paul say he was telephoning for the doctor, and I thought dimly, through the pain, that if only I could faint the pain would stop. Then Blanche was there, kneeling. She reached for my hand and covered it with something cool and cleansing. Then she put a bandage over it and fastened it loosely, and told the others that in a moment or two the pain would ease.

"Is that better?" asked Paul, and I waited a moment and then said, "Yes, I think so." I saw that Marie-Noel had now joined the circle and was staring down at me, her eyes enormous in her small white face.

"Whatever happened?" asked Renee. Beyond her was Gaston, troubled, unhappy, with a glass of brandy that I did not want.

"My watch fell off my wrist into the bonfire," I said. "I didn't want to lose it, so I bent to pick it up and burnt myself instead. My own fault entirely. An idiotic thing to do."

"One thing's evident," said Paul, "You'll be in no shape to shoot tomorrow."

"That's the first thing I thought of," I said.

They stared at me in sympathy. Gaston made a little clicking sound of vexation. "It's what you most enjoy. Monsieur le Comte."

I shrugged my shoulders. "It can't be helped," I said. "And now let's forget it," I said. "I've caused enough commotion for one morning. Why don't you start lunch? It must be after one."

I closed my eyes again and they all went away. Some time later there was a bell, and in a minute or two the elderly bearded face of Dr. Lebrun was looking at me, pince-nez on the bridge of a large nose, side by side with the impassive Blanche. "They tell me you've been playing the fool with a bonfire," he said. "Well, we all do foolish things now and again. Let's have a look at the damage."

Blanche unwrapped my hand again. Our eyes met, and there was something searching in her expression that made me feel, during one instant of fear, that she knew the truth about this masquerade, and that was why she had relieved me of pain -- because she did it to a stranger. The doctor anointed my hand and did it up again, asking Blanche to renew the dressings night and morning. Their ministrations completed, Blanche invited the doctor into the dining room to have something to eat.

When the family had finished lunch they came flocking back into the room to inquire after me, and I put the second part of my plan into action. "Paul," I said, "you arrange everything for tomorrow. Now I'm out of it I prefer to be quit altogether."

"Oh, nonsense," exclaimed Paul. "You'll feel more like it in an hour or so. If I run it you'll only criticize me and say I've wrecked it."

"I won't," I said, "you go ahead. If I can't shoot I'm not interested." I got up from the sofa, telling them that I wanted to rest alone in the library, and I could tell by their faces that they believed my decision came from bitter disappointment, and also because I was still in pain.

I went into the library and, to make the hours pass, pushed a chair over by the desk and pulled out

the photograph album once again. I could take my time with it now, and I noticed things that had escaped me in my previous hurried glimpse. Maurice Duval, for instance, appeared quite early in the groups at the verrerie. He was standing in a back row, a youngish man, in a group that had the date 1925 beside it; and then, rather like a boy in a school picture, he advanced year by year to a more prominent position, until, towards the end of the album, he was promoted to a chair beside the Comte de Gue himself, looking confident and at ease. I liked his face. It was strong, wise, trustworthy, a face that surely would command affection and respect.

I must have slept in the chair, because suddenly it was six o'clock, and I woke feeling better. At dinner Paul and Renee were both full of the arrangements for the shoot, the time the guests were to arrive, the names of some of them, the plans for lunch at a farmhouse if it was wet. It was as though, in some fortunate way, my ridiculous action had given them purpose and authority. Paul obviously enjoyed his part of organizer, and Renee, with Francoise out of the way, saw herself, through Paul's promotion, suddenly acting hostess; she kept asking Paul if he had remembered this or forgotten that; and there was something touching about their enthusiasm and their keenness, like understudies cast at a moment's notice into leading roles.

The evening wore on, the newspapers our distraction, and now and again Renee glanced at me and smiled, the smile of sympathy, of collusion -- to show me, I suppose, that because of my injury I was now pardoned for my neglect of yesterday. At half past nine I said good night and went upstairs, stopping to see Marie-Noel before retiring. Her room was in darkness, so I fumbled for the switch and turned it on. The child was kneeling at her prie-dieu, clutching a rosary, and I realized I had stumbled upon some meditation.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I'll come back when you've finished."

She turned blank eyes towards me, holding up her hand for silence, and I stood there, uncertain what I was meant to do. But in a moment she crossed herself and laid her rosary at the feet of the Madonna, then stood up and climbed into bed.

"I was doing my Stations of the Cross," she said. "Aunt Blanche always says it helps to do the Stations if one is thinking about something else."

"^What were you thinking about?" I asked.

"This morning I was thinking about the shoot and what fun it would be," she said, "which I'm sure was a sin in itself. The rest of the day I've been thinking about you."

Her eyes were more puzzled than concerned. "You needn't worry about me," I said, tucking her in with one hand. "Dr. Lebrun says my hand will be quite all right in a few days. It was a silly thing to happen, the watch falling off - I ought to have remembered that the strap was loose."

"But it didn't fall off," she said,

"What do you mean?"

She stared up at me, turning red, and began picking at the bedclothes in embarrassment. "I was in the dovecote," she said. "I had climbed up to the top, and was looking through that little gap beside the hole where the pigeons go in and out. I saw you come down the path swinging the watch in your hand. I was going to call out to you, but you looked so serious I didn't like to. You went to the bonfire, and threw the watch right in the middle of it. You did it on purpose. Why?"

I sat down on the chair beside the bed. It was easier than standing up. "The watch was really an excuse," I said. "I didn't want to shoot tomorrow, and I couldn't pretend to be ill. People would have realized nothing was the matter. But I burned my hand more than I meant to. I was a bit muddled in my mind, thinking about someone who had been murdered a long time ago."

She nodded. "You were thinking about Monsieur Duval."

I stared at her, surprised. "As a matter of fact I was."

"Very natural," she said, "since he gave you the watch."

"What do you know about Monsieur Duval?" I asked.

"He was master at the verrerie," she said, "and some say he was a patriot and some say he was a traitor. He had a horrid death and I'm forbidden to talk about it. Especially to you and to Aunt Blanche. But tell me. Papa, why don't you want to shoot tomorrow?"

Here was the question, and I did not know how to answer it. "I just don't," I said. "I don't want to shoot."

She considered me gravely. "Is it because you don't want to kill? Because it is suddenly a sin to you to take any life, even a bird's?"

I should have told her instantly no, but instead I hesitated. I could see that she was weaving some fantasy in her mind about her father being sickened suddenly of all slaughter; that he had burnt his hand so that he should not be tempted to kill again.

"Perhaps," I said.

As soon as I had spoken I realized my mistake. I had not deliberately lied to her before.

She knelt up in bed, and put her arms round my neck. "I think you've shown great courage," she said. "It's just like the verse in St. Matthew: 'Wherefore, if thy hand or thy foot offend thee, cut them off, and cast them from thee. And if thine eye offend thee, pluck it out . . .'"

"Listen," I told her, "there's no great mystery about this. I burnt my hand, and there's an end to it. Now forget it."

She smiled, bent down and kissed my bandaged hand. "I promise I won't mention it," she said, "but you can't prevent me from thinking about it. If you see me looking at you tomorrow in a very particular way, it will mean I am thinking of your great act of humiliation. Good night, Papa,"

## CHAPTER 9

I SLEPT restlessly for a few hours, and was woken by Gaston throwing back the shutters to a gray damp morning with a thin drizzle. Instantly the whole day loomed before me -- the shoot, the guests, the ritual of the hours to come, as foreign to me as a tribal feast -- and it seemed to me desperately important that I should not disgrace the de Gue family or the chateau of St. Gilles, not because I had any respect for the absent seigneur but because something within me acknowledged tradition.

Despite my efforts, however, the day was a complete fiasco. After early Mass, which, to my surprise, the Comtesse herself attended, the rain increased and by ten it was a downpour. We stood on the terrace as the first cars drove through the gateway. Poor Renee, her innocent plan thwarted, was hidden from view by the massive figure of her mother-in-law, who, leaning on a stick, a great shawl over her shoulders, stood in the place of honor at the entrance to the chateau, regally offering a word of welcome to each arrival.

I stood apart and my silence was taken for irritation at my accident. My reiteration of "Don't ask me anything -- ask Paul" was thought to be mockery of his efforts, and I could see the impression spreading that the day would be a hit-and-miss affair, with nobody in charge and the whole thing slightly ridiculous.

Matters went from bad to worse. Cesar, wildly excited because he had been unleashed, got in a fight with a rival, a well-trained retriever. Later, in the field, he resumed the battle, to the rage of the other dog's owner, a visiting marquis, who stalked off, his face purple with fury. And even when, exhausted and humiliated, I decided to return to the chateau alone, I lost my way and inadvertently stumbled on a covey of birds. There was a flurry of wings as one bird after another took flight. I then perceived, not twenty yards away, Paul staring at me, while posted down the ride, like sentinels on guard, the line of chasseurs waited in ignorance for the birds I had prematurely scattered.

At that moment Gaston appeared from nowhere with the car. He also had a flask of cognac, which I swallowed humped on the back seat of the Renault. Through the misty windscreen I watched the disconsolate figures of the sportsmen, balked of their prey, turn and disappear through the belt of trees in the hope of less elusive quarry. Gaston, devoted, anxious, suggested that Dr. Lebrun should be summoned, but he read my symptoms wrongly. My hand was not hurting me: the cognac was the solace I needed.

After a while, the flask emptied, we came to a huge barn, and I barely had time to huddle in the far corner, screened from the open door, before the hvmters entered, thirsty, tired and steamy wet, turning the barn to babel until the rafters rang. Servants from the chateau hastened round with wine.

I was aware of someone touching my elbow. It was Marie-Noel, saying, "Uncle Paul wants to know if you are going to say a few words, or shall he?" Before I could answer, the whole company was banging and stamping, and someone was patting me on the shoulder, saying, "Go on, Jean, make a .speech." The brandy had affected me; in a haze of alcohol, surrounded on all sides by a sea of faces, I thought. This is where I make my mark as seigneur of St. Gilles. I may have ruined the sport this morning, but now I am in form.

"Mesdames et Messieurs" I began, "once again it is my pleasure to welcome you upon this happy occasion, and although, alas, an accident has prevented me from taking an active part in the proceedings, I am consoled by the fact that my brother has deputized so well. It is not an easy thing to do, to take another's place. The truth of this was forced upon me only yesterday morning when I was down at the verrerie looking through the accounts." I pulled myself up. What the devil was I saying? "Be that as it may," I floundered, "I am not here to talk about the verrerie but about shooting. . . ."

In front of me the faces were puzzled, uneasy, and it dawned upon me that it would be best to finish my speech speedily with some jocular remark.

"In conclusion," I said, lifting my glass, "I will only add this -- that my damaged hand today surely prevented disaster. The marquis was wise to go home when he did. If I had carried a gun -- " and here I paused for emphasis " -- some of you present might never have survived." I stopped, oddly relieved to have uttered my own truth, but I could not understand why nobody clapped. However feeble my joke may have seemed to them, surely courtesy demanded at any rate a show of applause? Instead, there was a shuffling of feet, and everybody began to move away and outside as though the bam had suddenly become unbearably warm and they longed for the open air.

Renee was with me again, and Dr. Lebrun. "I think you must have a touch of fever," he said. "It would be wise to get back to the chateau as soon as possible."

"Nonsense," I said, "my hand isn't hurting at all."

"All the same," he said, "you'd be wiser to lie down."

I was in no condition to argue. I allowed myself to be led to the car, and, as we turned out of the farmyard, I could see the straggling line of sportsmen moving off to their afternoon objective. It was still raining, and I did not envy them.

"My speech didn't seem to go down very well," I said to the silent Gaston at my side.

He did not answer for a moment. Then the corner of his mouth twitched. "Listen, Monsieur le Comte," he said, his voice an apology, "you had a little too much to drink, that was all."

"Was it so noticeable?" I said.

I felt rather than saw the shrug. "People are sensitive," he said, "especially about the past. It doesn't do to mix up war and peace and make a joke of it. After all, you were a resistance leader talking to a group of well-known collaborators."

"But I didn't do anything of the sort," I said. "I was speaking of something quite different."

"Excuse me. Monsieur le Comte," he said, "I misunderstood you. So did they."

We drove the few miles back in silence, and in silence I went upstairs and crept softly into the dressing room so as not to disturb Françoise. Throwing myself down on the bed in my clothes, I slept instantly. I was woken by someone whispering in my ear. Opening my eyes I saw that it was Germaine, the little *femme de chambre*.

"Come quickly, Monsieur le Comte," she was saying. "Madame la Comtesse is unwell, she is asking for you."

I got up instantly. "What's the matter with Madame le Comtesse?" I asked, straightening my tie and running a comb through my hair at the mirror.

"I don't know. Monsieur le Comte," she answered, looking frightened. "She started to groan and to ask for Charlotte, but Charlotte had joined some visitors in the kitchen and told me not to go down for her. So I told Madame a lie -- I said I could not find Charlotte. Then she asked for you, and she said to come at once, no matter what you were doing. I was frightened, she looked so ill."

She followed me out of the dressing room and up the stairs. When we came to the bedroom door I asked her to wait outside in the corridor. The room was dark. Only a feeble glow from the stove enabled me to distinguish the shape of the bed, and, because I did not want to disturb the comtesse by turning on the light, I went to the window and eased the shutter so that a streak of pallor might at least make the darkness gray.

Her voice came to me, faint and strangely guttural, from the depths of the Aast bed. "I'm ill. Why didn't you come before?"

Her words, "*Je souffre*," do not lend themselves to another language. The distress is there, physical or mental, embraced in the single phrase.

"What do you want me to do?" I asked. I knelt down beside the bed and took her hand.

"You know perfectly what I want you to do," she said.

There were medicines on the table beside the bed, and I glanced towards them, perplexed, but she shook her head, impatient, exasperated, and moaned, thrashing her head from side to side.

"Charlotte keeps it next door," she said, "in the dressing room, in the drawer of the cupboard there. Surely you remember?"

I got up, went into the dressing room, and switched on the light. There was only one cupboard in the small room, with a single drawer, and this I opened. Inside were two boxes, one of them still half wrapped, the gift which I had given into Charlotte's hands that first evening in the chateau. I took the wrapping off now, and opened the box. It was full of little ampoules packed one upon the other in layers of cotton wool. They contained liquid, and a label upon each, with the single word "moq)hine." I opened the other box. It held a hypodermic syringe. As I stood there, staring, I heard her calling me from the bedroom, "Jean, why don't you come?" Slowly I took the syringe out of its box, and one of the ampoules, and laid them on the table below. There was cotton wool there, and a bottle containing medical alcohol. I understood at last what it was that Jean de Gu( nad brought his mother from Paris. But his mother was not ill or dying, neither was she in pain.

I went back into the bedroom and turned on a light. The woman lying there was not the one who had stood on the terrace that morning, regal and commanding, but another, gray and old and frightened, her hands restless, her eyes staring. She kept turning her head from side to side on the pillow in a movement that was honible, inhuman, like something long imprisoned without food, light or water.

"What are you waiting for?" she said. "Why are you so long?"

I knelt beside her. My bum did not matter any more, and I put both my hands behind her, and turned her head towards me so that she was forced to look at me and be still.

"I don't want to give it to you," I said.

"Why?" She spoke in anguish, and she pulled herself up in bed and held my shoulders. The mask became a face, and the face hers and mine and Marie-Noel's together, looking out at me from her eyes, and the voice was no longer deep and guttural but the voice of the child when she spoke to me the first evening and asked, "Papa, why did you not come and say good night to me?"

I got up and went into the bathroom. Breaking the neck of the ampoule, I filled the syringe, and came back and prepared her arm with the alcohol as I remembered we had done during the war. Then I drove the needle into her arm, pressed the plunger and waited, and she leant back on her pillows and waited too. Her eyelids flickered, and for a moment, before closing them, she looked at me and smiled. I took the syringe back to the dressing room, washed it and replaced it in the box. However much I tried to tell myself that what had happened in this room was compassionate and merciful, it was not true. I knew that I had done what the son and the mother had done before me -- I had taken the easiest way out.

I went into the corridor and found Germaine still standing there, waiting. I said to her, "It's all right now, Madame la Comtesse is sleeping. I've left the light on. She won't notice it. You had better sit by the stove until Charlotte comes up."

It must have been a little before eight the next morning when I first heard the hurrying footsteps along the corridor, the knocking on Francoise's door, and the confused babble of voices, exclamation, cries.

Then came the voice of Francoise herself, urgent, shrill, "Jean, Jean, are you awake?"

I leapt from my bed and opened the door to her room. She was standing there in her nightgown, wan and pale, and behind her Germaine, and beyond, Paul, Renee and the gaunt, accusing figure of Blanche, watching me without a word.

I put out my hand to steady Françoise. "It's Maman, isn't it?"

Her eyes swept me, incredulous. "Maman?" she said. "Of course not. It's the child. She's disappeared. Germaine has just been to call her, and her bed hasn't been slept in."

Their faces were turned to mine; decisions, plans, must come from me. Françoise, shivering without a wrapper, was my first concern. "Get back into bed," I said, "we'll soon find her. You can't do anything about it."

Blanche led her, crying, protesting, back to bed, and the rest of us moved out into the corridor.

"She's probably in the park, or in the woods," I said to the others. "Let's not become hysterical. Germaine, go and tell Gaston to start searching the grounds. Tell him to get hold of anyone else who's about. Monsieur Paul and I will be down directly."

"If you want to know what I think," said Paul, "it's this. The child has run away because Jean made an exhibition of himself in public yesterday. She was ashamed. So were we all."

"Marie-Noël was not ashamed," said Renée. "I heard her telling everyone that Jean was the most courageous man in the world and nobody but herself knew why,"

Paul shuddered. "In any case, we had better get dressed," he said. "Jean and I will search the grounds with Gaston. That is," he added, throwing me a glance, "if you're sufficiently recovered."

They left; and as I turned back into the room, I stepped onto a piece of paper that must have been thrust beneath the door. It was pink, with a sprig of flowers in one corner. It said, in round, unformed letters, "My Papa, the Sainte Vierge tells me you are suffering for the wrong you did in the past, so I am going to pray that all your sins may be visited upon me, who, being young and strong, can bear them better. Sleep well, and have faith in Marie-Noël, who loves you dearly."

I put the paper in my pocket and, crossing quickly to the window, looked down into the moat. There was nothing in it but the tangled grass, the ivy and the weeds. It was only in my tortured imagination that I saw the small body in the blue dress lying in the ditch, broken and useless. It was as I stood there that Gaston came in to tell me that César the dog was also missing. This news brought an odd sense of relief. A child bent on self-destruction would not take a dog with her.

I dressed hurriedly. Once outside the chateau, Paul and the men and I divided between us the ground to be searched, and my territory took me towards the scene of yesterday's shoot. The woods were soggy with the rain, the fallen leaves like paper under my feet, I knew, tramping the long rides, climbing the ditches in the black woods, that she would not be there, in front of me, a small Artemis with her hound at the end of the ride, or a babe in the woods asleep at the foot of a tree. If the child wanted to be found she would be found, waiting, hidden, before her own symbolic shrine.

When I broke finally from the forest and emerged into fields once more, I saw that my walk had brought me in a half circle, and there, a couple of fields away, were the foundry sheds. I climbed under the wire surrounding the wood, crossed the fields, and, opening a small gate, came to the apple orchard and the deserted master's house. There was a half-open window beside the blistered door, a window that on my visit only three days before had been fast shut and crusted with the years.

Someone came to the window and looked out at me, and I walked over. It was Julie, and she had her finger to her lips for silence. "You came quickly," she whispered. "I only sent word to the chateau ten minutes ago. I could get no reply by telephone."

Her words had no meaning for me. Yet I was afraid. The intuition that I had learnt never to mistrust turned to apprehension. "I had no message," I said. "I came by chance."

I climbed through the window into the room. It was the same that I had entered before, the onetime salon of the master's house. A shaft of sunlight fell upon the child, white and still under a heap of blankets, and upon the dog, his muzzle between his paws, stretched at her feet. It was what my

fancy had conjured, yet, strangely, more poignant still.

"One of the workmen, Ernest, found her because of Cesar," said Julie. "He was standing guard beside the old well. She must have climbed down the ladder and lain there, amongst the glass and rubble, all the night. She was asleep when he brought her up."

Asleep. I had thought her dead. The small face against the dark blanket looked like something carved from stone, an angel's head in a cold cloister.

"Poor little one," said Julie, "it is always at this age they take fancies into their heads. For myself, it was a boy in the village. I followed him everywhere. My sister had a passion for her teacher. This one is religious, like Mademoiselle Blanche. It will pass."

She patted the blanket, her hand brown and strong and wrinkled like her face. I wished I possessed her common sense, her tenderness, her perception.

"It's odd," I said to her. "When they told me she had disappeared, my first thought was that she had drowned."

"Drowned?" she said, puzzled. "There is nowhere here to drown. There has been no water in the well for fifteen years."

I said, feeling suddenly that I could keep the truth to myself no longer, "I didn't know. I don't know anything. I'm a stranger here."

Surely she must understand? Her honesty would not be fooled: she must recognize me for what I was, an intruder and a fraud.

"Monsieur le Comte was always a stranger at the verrerie," she said. She patted my shoulder. "That was the trouble, wasn't it? You allowed another man to take your place and bear your responsibilities. And now you're nearly forty, and it's too late to change. You can't bring back your young days any more than you can bring back poor Monsieur Duval, whose only crime was trying to preserve the verrerie while you were absent, for which you and your little group of patriots called him a collaborator, and shot him and let him die there in the well."

She looked at me with pity, and I realized that her words were neither accusation nor condemnation. She knew, the whole countryside knew that Jean de Gue had killed Maurice Duval. Only I had not been sure.

"Julie," I said, "did you like Maurice Duval?"

Her hand was still on my shoulder. "We all liked him," she said. "No one could help it. He had all the qualities you lacked. That was why Monsieur le Comte your father made him master of the verrerie. I'm sorry. Monsieur Jean, but it's true."

I could hear footsteps now. Julie turned her head.

"They got my message," she said. "Someone has come from the chateau. Carry the child to the car and back to her bed, and she may never know that she walked in her sleep."

"She didn't walk in her sleep," I said. "She came deliberately." My lie about my burnt hand, my behavior at the shoot had combined to make her think her father penitent about Duval. She had atoned for his deed in her own way, by acting the part of the victim. Only by doing this could she bring him absolution.

Someone appeared at the door. It was Blanche.

"Mademoiselle?" exclaimed Julie, and the astonishment in her voice, the swift glance back to me and to the furniture stored against the walls betrayed some sudden emotion that she had not shown hitherto.

Blanche said nothing. She went straight to Marie-Noel and knelt beside her.

"Where did you find her?" she asked, her voice so low I could hardly hear the words.

"It was Ernest who discovered her, Mademoiselle," Julie said, "here, inside the house. Didn't he tell you?"

"He told me inside a shed," she answered, "but the sheds are always locked at night. And, from her clothes, she has been lying amongst broken glass and lime."

Inside the house or inside the shed, both were hes. Why did Ernest and Juhe He to Blanche? Juhe had not hed to me.

"Her pockets are full of glass," said Blanche. "Did you know that?" Feeling in the child's coat pocket, she drew out a handful of minuscule objects: a jug no larger than a thumbnail, a vase, a flacon, all miniature yet perfectly formed, and amongst them a diminutive replica of the chateau of St. Gilles. two towers smashed. "These have not been made since before the war," said Blanche. "I ought to know, since I helped design them."

For the first time she looked about the room, at the tables and chairs stored there, untouched and unused. And suddenly, in a flash of comprehension, I realized that what she was looking at had once been part of her life. This dusty salon in the master's house was to have been a place possessed by two people who loved each other well. But something had gone amiss, sorrow had turned inward, creation ceased; the Cross she knelt before in her bedroom was not a Saviour but her own hope crucified.

"The little one has blood on her hands," said Julie suddenly. "I did not notice it when I covered her with the blankets."

Together Blanche and I knelt beside the child. Taking the small clenched fists, Blanche opened one hand and I the other. In the hollow of each palm was the red weal of a recent cut, dry, not bleeding. The hands were clean -- there was no dust, no glass. Slowly, Blanche raised her eyes.

"Julie," she said, "phone Monsieur le Cure and ask him to come here at once. Then get me the Sacre-Coeur convent at Lauray."

"No," I said. "No. Are you mad? Don't you realize she did it on purpose, for me, because I burnt my hand in the fire?"

Julie, distressed, looked from Blanche to me. "There is no need for Monsieur le Cure," she said. "The child has only cut herself with glass. The bottom of the well is full of old glass."

"The well?" said Blanche. "She climbed into the well?"

Julie realized her mistake too late. "Why, yes. Mademoiselle," she said reluctantly. "But what if she did? What if she walked here to the verrerie, asleep or awake, because she has too much imagination? Does it make any difference to what is past and gone? Why doesn't someone in the chateau look after her properly, and love her for herself?"

Blanche turned white. Emotion, long controlled, fought for release.

"How dare you?" she said, her voice outraged. "I've watched over the child since she was bom. I've loved her, trained her as if she were my own, because her mother is a fool and her father a devil. I won't let her suffer in this world as I have suffered. She was made for another world, another hfe."

The Blanche who had come into the master's house so full of memories, looking for the lost child, was now another woman, fanatical, bitter, seeking a victim in the one she wished to save.

"If the Seigneur wants to call the child to Himself, Mademoiselle," said Julie, "He will do so in His own good time, and not because Monsieur le Comte killed the man you loved. The little one will suffer in this world only because of what you do to her; yes, you, and her father, and her grandmother, and everybody up at the chateau. You are used up, spent, good for nothing, the whole lot of you. Now, look . . . you have woken her."

Yet it was Julie herself whose voice, loud and indignant, had caused Cesar to bark and the bark to startle the child. Marie-Noel, her eyes suddenly open and alive with curiosity, sat up, instantly alert, staring at each one of us in turn.

"I've had the most atrocious dream," she said.

Blanche bent over her at once, her arms round her. "It's all right, my cherie," she said. "You're safe. It will never happen again, the horror of the well."

Marie-Noel looked at her calmly. "It was not horrible," she replied. "Germaine said it was haunted, but I never saw a ghost. The verrerie is a happy place. It's the chateau that is full of ghosts." Cesar, reassured by the sound of her voice, settled himself at her feet. Marie-Noel patted his head, "He's hungry, and so am I. Can we go across to the cottage with Julie and get some bread?"

The telephone started ringing from the office, and the child looked troubled.

"I hope that's not the beginning of it," she said,

"The beginning of what?" I asked.

"The beginning of my ferocious dream," she said. She stood up and put her hand in mine. "The Sainte Vierge is anxious about all of us," she said. "She told me Gran'mie wanted Maman to die, and I wanted her to die too. So did you. We were all guilty. It was very wicked. Isn't there something you can do to prevent it coming true?"

Jacques must have arrived at the office, for the ringing ceased, and through the open door I heard his low voice speaking. After a moment he appeared at the kitchen door and beckoned. I went to him. "You had better go back at once to the chateau," he whispered. "There has been an accident. Do not take the child. . . ."

This time intuition had not lied. I looked over my shoulder to the inner room. Marie-Noel was kneeling, taking the small glass fiacons out of her pocket, and arranging them upon the dusty floor, the chateau at the head. She caught sight of her hands, and turning them, palms outward, called to Blanche, "I must have cut myself. I don't remember how. Will the cuts fade and leave no mark, or will you have to bandage me as you did Papa?"

At the chateau we were met by Charlotte, blabbing and hysterical, the woman who milked the cows screaming in my ear, and the cook, whom I had not seen before but whom I knew to be Gaston's wife. She came from the kitchen premises, eyes startled, hair unpinned and loose, and said, "They brought the ambulance from Villars. I did not know where else to telephone."

The crooked finger of the woman who milked the cows stabbed at a patch of trampled grass as she repeated again and again, "I saw her fall ... I saw her fall . . ." The jabbing finger, the eyes upturned to the gaping bedroom window, the sudden sweeping gesture of her hand as she mimed the falling body were terrible and vivid, the drama of a witch, and Charlotte, plucking at Blanche's sleeve and babbling, "She was still breathing. Mademoiselle, I put a mirror to her hps," became her partner in the dreadful play.

A nightmare ride began: out of the drive, up the avenue and onto the road to Villars, in the wake of the ambulance that could only have preceded us by some twenty-five minutes. When we got to the hospital it was Blanche who entered first, Blanche who spoke rapidly to someone white-coated, young, standing in the passage, and Blanche who pushed me into the bare impersonal waiting room while she disappeared after him. The sister who returned with her was calm, impassive, trained like all her colleagues the world over to meet emotion.

"I can't tell you the extent of the injuries. The doctor is examining her now," she said to me as she led us from the waiting room to a smaller private one. I stared at a map of the region framed on the wall, and I saw that Villars was twenty kilometers from Mortagne, and from Mortagne, a byroad led direct to the Abbey of la Grande-Trappe. On the desk was a calendar. A week ago tomorrow I had been driving to Le Mans ... A week ago . . . Everything I had said, everything I had done had

brought this family closer to disaster and to pain. Mine was the responsibility, mine the guilt. Jean de Gue, laughing before the mirror in that hotel bedroom, had left me to solve his problems as I chose. My own folly, ignorance, bluff and blind conceit had brought about the moment that was passing now.

"Monsieur le Comte?" The man who entered, big, burly, would surely have given confidence to a waiting relative, but I had seen too many doctors' expressions in the war not to recognize finality. "I am Dr. Moutier. I want to tell you that everything possible is being done. The injuries are extensive, and it would be wrong of me to express any great hope. The comtesse is, of course, unconscious. I understand neither of you was present when the accident occurred."

Blanche was the spokesman. "The windows are large," she said, "She had been unwell. She must have gone to the window feeling faint and opened it too wide, and leaning out . . ."

"Naturally, naturally," the doctor said mechanically. "Excuse me."

He turned from us to speak to the sister outside the door. The low, rapid conversation was inaudible to us inside the room, but I thought I caught the words "transfusion" and "Le Mans," and I could see from Blanche's face that she had heard them too.

"They are going to give a transfusion," she said. "I heard him say they were sending the blood from Le Mans."

I wondered if she realized that these were the first words she had spoken to her brother for fifteen years. They came too late. He was not there to hear them.

The doctor turned to us again, and Blanche caught at his sleeve. "Forgive me, Doctor. I could not help overhearing something of what you said to the sister. You have sent to Le Mans for blood: wouldn't it save time if my brother gave his blood instead? Both he and my brother Paul belong to blood group O, which I understand can be given to anyone without danger."

For a moment the doctor hesitated, glancing at me. Appalled at what might happen, at the inevitable worsening of disaster, I said swiftly, "I'm not group O. I only wish to God I were."

Blanche looked at me, dumfounded. "That's not true. You are both universal donors, you and Paul. I remember Paul telling me only a few months ago."

I shook my head. "No," I said, "you're mistaken. Paul, perhaps, not me. I belong to group A. It wouldn't be any use."

The doctor gestured. "Please don't distress yourselves. It is preferable to use blood straight from the laboratory. There will be very little delay. Everything is on its way already."

He paused, looking curiously from me to Blanche, and went out of the room.

For a few moments Blanche said nothing. Then oddly, terribly, it seemed to me, her expression of concern and anguish changed. She knows, I thought, she knows at last. I've given myself away. But I was wrong. Slowly, as though she could not believe her own words, she said, "You don't want to save her. You're hoping she will die."

I stared at her, aghast. She turned and went back to the window. There was nothing I could say, nothing I could do.

At one o'clock Paul and Renee arrived. I met them at the hospital entrance and pointed to the room where Blanche was waiting. I did not want to talk to them. Renee went straight in, but Paul, after a second's hesitation, came to me. "How is she?" he asked.

I shook my head, and went out of the hospital into the street. I began walking without thought, without intention; yet half consciously, I suppose, I knew where I must go. I found myself before the closed door of Bela's shop, "L'Antiquaire du Pont." The glass was shattered and there was a notice in the window saying, "Ferme le lundi." I stood looking up at the balcony and the windows

of the house, but they were closed too. I walked slowly back to the hospital. Paul was standing by the entrance. He said, "We've been looking for you."

I knew then it had happened. He took my arm, an odd, half-protective gesture, and we walked along together to the small room. Dr. Moutier was there, with Blanche and Renee and the sister who had received us. He said, "It's all over. I'm so very sorry."

They were all looking at me except Blanche, who turned away, and when I did not answer immediately Dr. Moutier added, "She never recovered consciousness. She was in no pain. I can assure you of that."

The sister said, "You would like to see her," her words a plain statement of fact, not an interrogation, and she led me down the passage and into a small room. We stood together beside the bed, looking down on Franyoise de Gue. There was no sign of injury. She might have been sleeping. She did not look like a person dead.

The sister said, "I always think the real personality appears on the face during the first hour after death. Sometimes it is a consolation to believe this."

I was not sure. The Françoise lying dead looked peaceful, younger, happier, than the Françoise of that morning, who had been haggard, anxious, querulous. If this, the dead one, was true and the other false, then living had accomplished nothing: it had been a waste of time.

Paul said to me, "You had better get home to St. Gilles. I've telephoned to Gaston to bring the Citroen. Blanche and I will stay here to make arrangements, and Gaston can drive you and Renee in the Renault."

Mistakenly, the bereaved are left alone to indulge grief. It would have been better to give me something to do. Instead I watched, silent, ineffectual.

When Gaston came I sensed relief. They wanted me out of the way. Renee silently pushed me into the front seat, herself got into the back, and we drove away.

Gaston's face was shocked and drawn. He had not said anything, but silently, gently, he had put a rug over my knees, a strange, touching gesture of sympathy for sorrow.

The closed shutters of the chateau were the first sign of mourning, and I supposed that Gaston had given orders for this to be done. Gaston had also ordered a meal to be laid in the dining room, for none of us had touched any food. More to satisfy him, I think, than ourselves, we sat down and ate mechanically. It was strange, I thought, how sudden death, like war, brings instant sympathy. The challenging, sensual Renee of the past week was now natural, kindly, anxious about the child -- ready to do anything to make the sudden loss less appalling for Marie-Noel.

"I don't think she will be frightened," I said. "I think -- I can't explain why -- she was prepared."

After a while I called Gaston and asked him to go to the verrerie with a message for JuHe. Would he, I said, tell her that Françoise was dead, and that I wanted Julie to break the news to Marie-Noel?

"Monsieur le Cure is upstairs with Madame la Comtesse," he said to me, after a moment's hesitation. "Does Monsieur le Comte wish to see him now, or presently?"

"I'll see Monsieur le Cure directly," I said.

I went upstairs to Françoise's bedroom. Someone had closed the shutters and window here as elsewhere; I opened them. The base of the window came to my hip. It was possible to sit on the sill, lean out, and lean too far. Possible, but not probable. Yet it had happened ... I closed the window and the shutters once again. I looked around the bedroom that gave no clue to what had passed, no hint of tragedy, and then went out and shut the door behind me. I walked along the corridor, up the stairs, through the door to the other corridor, and so to the room in the tower at the far end.

CHAPTER 10

I DID NOT knock. I opened the door and went straight in. The room was shuttered, the window closed, even the curtains were drawn too. The dogs had been banished elsewhere, and the only sound was the low murmur of the cure, praying, and the echoing response from the opposite chair. Both had their rosaries in their hands; the cure was kneeling, head bowed, the mother sat huddled in her chair, shoulders hunched, chin touching her chest.

When the last Gloria was said, and the last Amen, the gentle old cure with his baby face and his nodding head rose and came to me, taking my hand.

"My son," he said, "we have been praying so hard for you, and we have asked that you may be given courage and support in this terrible moment of affliction."

I thanked him, and he continued standing, holding my hand and patting it, his face troubled for my sake, yet serene. "You know," he said, "that now, tomorrow and always I am at your disposal, ready to do all in my power for you, and Madame la Comtesse, and the child, and everyone at the chateau."

He blessed us both, took his books and left the room. We were alone. I said nothing. Nor did she. I did not look at her. Then suddenly, on impulse, I crossed to the window and pulled back the heavy curtains. I opened the windows wide and the shutters too, and air came into the room, and light.

"What are you doing? Are you trying to blind me?" she said, and she moved forward in her chair, trying to escape the light.

"What happened?" I asked.

"Happened?" She repeated the question after me, raising her head and staring. "How do I know what happened, imprisoned here as I am, useless, nobody even answering a bell? I thought you had come to tell me what happened, not I you."

I knelt on one knee beside her chair, my hand on the arm of it. Her face was a mask. "What did you say to Françoise?" I asked.

Nothing happened, except that she sat more still.

"When?" she asked. "I had not seen her for several days."

"You're lying," I said. "You saw her this morning."

My reply was sudden. She did not expect it. I saw her whole body stiffen in her chair.

"Who says so?" she demanded. "Who's been talking?"

"I say so," I answered, "and nobody's been talking." Purposely I kept my voice low. There was no accusation in it. "I want to know how and why she died," I said.

She gestured. "What's the use? She became giddy and fell. Berthe saw her, didn't she, as she was crossing into the park with the cows? Weren't you told the same story?"

"Yes" I said, "I was told the same story. I don't believe it, that's all."

"What do you believe?"

I stared at the face that told me nothing. "I believe she killed herself," I said, "and so do you."

I expected a denial, or an outburst -- or possibly a crumpling and a plea for sympathy. Instead, unbelievably, she shrugged, and then she smiled and said without emotion, "And if she did . . ."

This answer, cold, inhuman, was a confirmation of all I had most feared. Whatever the reason -- jealousy, possessiveness, malice, greed -- the mother had wanted Françoise out of the way, and had believed that her son had wanted it too. Death, or the birth of an heir -- either meant release from poverty; and Jean's mother felt only relief that matters were now resolved.

She leant forward in her chair and took my face between her hands.

"It's too late to develop a conscience," she said. "If you thought that Francoise would survive the birth of the child, what made you gamble on her death?"

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"The day after you returned from Paris you telephoned Carvalet," she said. "Charlotte told me -- she listened on the extension in Blanche's room -- and when I heard of your nonsensical agreement to their demands, I knew at once that it was a gamble. You were counting on the fortune that might come. Otherwise you'd ruin yourself."

The pattern of events was plain and could not be denied. My motives, misconstrued and twisted, were unimportant now.

"Francoise knew about the contract," I said. "I didn't keep it from her. I told her the truth."

"The truth?" The eyes that looked into mine were cynical and hard. "We all of us tell the truth when it happens to suit us," she said. "Francoise told me the truth this morning, when she came in here. Oh yes, you're right. I did see her. I was probably the last to do so. She came up here dressed, ready to search for the child. 'What upset Marie-Noel?' she asked. 'What upset her?' I answered. 'She's afraid of being supplanted, that's all. She wants you out of the way, and the baby too.' That started it. She told me she'd never been happy here, she'd always been homesick, lonely, lost, and it was my fault, because I'd been against her from the start. 'Jean was never in love with me,' she said. I agreed. 'Even now he only wants the money,' she went on. 'Naturally,' I replied. 'Does he want me to die so that he can marry someone else?' she asked at last. I told her I did not know. 'Jean makes love to everyone,' I said. 'He has made love to Renee, even, here in the chateau, and he has a mistress in Villars.' She told me she had suspected both these things, and that your kindness to her, the last few days, had been a blind, to make her believe otherwise. She said, 'The child, Jean, all of you want me out of the way.' I told her to stop being hysterical, and to take herself downstairs. That was all. Nothing more was said. She asked for the truth and got it. If she was not brave enough to face up to it, that was her affair, not mine. Whether she threw herself out of the window or fell because she was giddy is beside the point, and something we can't ever prove. The result is the same. You've got what you wanted, haven't you?"

"No," I shouted, "no . . ."

I pushed her back in the chair, and her expression changed. She looked bewildered, frightened, and the sudden switch from criticism to apprehension at the sound of my voice, roused in anger, made me realize the hopelessness of trying to make her understand. Whatever she had said to Francoise had been said for her son's sake. I could not accuse her.

I got up and went to the window, and stood there staring out. Dear God, I thought, there must be an answer to this, there must be a way out -- not for me, the impostor, but for the mother, for the child, for Blanche and Paul and Renee. If Jean de Gue had fostered jealousy, dissension, animosity, he had the excuse of the past. I had no such pretext. I turned from the window, and looked back at the woman in the chair. I said, "You've got to help me."

"Help you? How?" she asked. "How can I help you?"

I knelt beside her and took her hand. "You told me just now that I had got what I wanted," I said. "Did you mean the money?"

"What else?" she asked. "You'll be a rich man, and you'll be free. That's all that matters to you, isn't it?"

"No," I said, "you matter to me. I want you to be the head of my house, as you used to be. And you can't as long as you take morphine."

Something fell apart, the layer upon layer of defense protecting every individual from assault crumbled for one brief moment as I spoke, and I felt, in the hand that tightened on mine, the loneliness of years, the numbed senses, the mocking mind, the empty heart. Then she withdrew her

hand from mine, the armor folded about her once again. She became a person who had chosen a way of life because there was no alternative, with only one solace, one method of oblivion.

"I'm tired and old and useless," she said. "Why should you grudge me something that makes me forget?"

"You're not tired or old or useless," I said. "To yourself, perhaps, but not to me. Yesterday you came downstairs and stood on the terrace, receiving the guests, as you stood beside my father long ago. You proved that you were not dependent on the box of ampoules in there, and the syringe, and Charlotte. You could defeat them, and you did. You would have gone on defeating them but for me." She looked up at me, watchful, guarded. "What do you mean?"

"What did you think about," I asked, "yesterday morning, after the guests had gone?"

"I thought about you," she said, "about the past. What does it matter what I thought? I began to suffer, that's all. When I suffer I have to have morphine."

"I made you suffer," I said. "I was the cause."

"What if you were?" she said. "All mothers suffer for their sons. It's part of our life. We don't blame you for it."

"It's not part of a son's life," I said. "They can't stand pain. I'm a coward and always have been. That's why I want your help, now and in the future, much more so than in the past."

I rose from my knees and went into the dressing room next door. The box of ampoules was still in the cupboard, and the syringe, and I brought them into the bedroom and showed them to her.

"I'm going to take them away," I said. "Perhaps it's dangerous to do so -- I don't know. You told me I gambled on winning a fortune when I made that new contract with Carvalet. This is another gamble, a different kind."

I saw her hands tighten on the chair, and for a moment a look of terror, of despair, came into her eyes.

"I can't do it, Jean," she said. "You don't understand. I'm too old, too tired. If you wanted me to stop, why didn't you tell me so before? It's too late."

"It's not too late." I put the box down on the table. "Give me your hands," I said.

She put her hands in mine and I pulled her up from the chair. As she stood beside me she steadied herself, tightly clutching my bandaged hand, and I felt the pain shoot from my fingers to my elbow. She went on holding me, not realizing, and I knew that if I took my hand away something would be lost to her, some confidence, some strength.

"Now come downstairs," I said.

She stood between me and the window, massive, huge, blocking the light, trembling a moment as she gained her balance, her ebony crucifix swinging against her breast like a pendulum.

"Downstairs?" she repeated. "What for?"

"Because I need you," I said, "and in the future you'll come down every day."

For a long time she held onto me, never once relaxing her grip upon my hand. Then she released me and moved slowly to the door, majestic, dignified. She did not take my arm in the corridor but went forward, ahead of me, and opened the door of another room. At once the terriers rushed at her, barking, leaping to lick her hands.

She turned to me, exultant. "Just as I thought," she said. "These dogs are not taken out. Charlotte lies to me. Charlotte is supposed to take them in the park every afternoon. The trouble is there is no supervision in the chateau, no sort of order."

The dogs, released, ran to the stairs, and we followed them. She said, "There hasn't been a funeral in

the chateau since your father died. It must be done properly, for Françoise was a person of importance. After all, she was your wife. She was the Comtesse de Cue."

She waited at the head of the stairs while I put the boxes in the dressing room. As we entered the salon we heard voices. The others had returned. Paul was standing by the fireplace, the cure beside him. Renee was in her usual place on the sofa, Blanche on another chair. They stared at us, disconcerted, and even the cure, startled, took a moment to recover before he came forward, solicitous, anxious to assist. But she waved him aside and went straight to the chair beside the fire, the chair where Françoise always sat. Blanche rose at once and went to her.

"You ought to be in bed," she said. "Charlotte told me you were very shaken, very exhausted."

"Charlotte's a liar," was the answer, "and you can mind your own business." She fumbled on her dress for the pair of spectacles that were hanging from a chain round her neck beside the crucifix, and put them on and looked at each one of us in turn. "This is a house of mourning," she said, "not a nursing home. My daughter-in-law has died. I intend to see that everything is done to honor her that should be done. Paul, get me a pencil and some sheets of paper. Blanche, in the desk in my room, in the top drawer, you will find a dossier containing all the names of the people who came to your father's funeral. Most of them are dead, but they have relatives. Renee, fetch me the telephone directory from the cloakroom. Monsieur le Cure, I should be obliged if you will come and sit beside me; I may have to refer to you for matters concerning the actual burial itself. Jean --" she looked up at me, and paused "-- I don't expect any help from you for the moment. You had better take a walk, the air will do you good. You can exercise the dogs, as Charlotte failed to do so. But before you go," she added, "change into a dark suit. The Comte de Cue does not stroll about in a sports jacket when he has lost his wife."

I LEFT them in the salon, and went upstairs and changed. Then I called for Gaston and asked him to take me to the verrerie to fetch the child.

As we drove out of the village and up the hill towards the forest Gaston said, "My wife and I, Monsieur le Comte, and indeed everyone in the chateau, wish to express our deepest sympathy to you in this moment of stress."

"Thank you, Gaston," I said.

"If there is anything any of us can do, you have only to say so. Monsieur le Comte."

I thanked him again. There was nothing anybody could do to ease things, except myself; and I had started off by depriving an addict of morphine, which might lead to a tragedy worse than the first. I did not know. All I knew was that I had become a gambler, like Jean de Cue.

I got out of the car and went into the deserted grounds. Julie was not in her lodge. I told Gaston to wait, and walked to the master's house, but the door was locked. And then I saw Marie-Noel, coming across the ground towards me.

Suddenly I did not know what to say to her. I stood awkwardly, looking down at her. Surely, I thought, there must be something that a father does or says at a time of tragedy like this?

"I couldn't fetch you before ..." I began, but she did not wait for me to finish. She took my hand and said, "I'm glad you didn't. I have been playing with Madame Yves' son, Pierre. Come and see what we've been making." She led me over to a mound of rubble beside a heap of waste glass. "There is the chateau," she said, pointing to a small glass model, "and these other pieces are the houses in St. Gilles. That big block is the church, and this line of pebbles is the river. We've been playing this all afternoon."

Julie couldn't have told her, then. She didn't know.

"Do you know," she said, and she lowered her voice, "it's very sad, but Pierre's mother doesn't live with them any more. She ran away to Le Mans some weeks ago, and Madame Yves goes in and cooks for Pierre and his father. It's such a shocking thing, for a boy to be without his mother and a

husband without his wife."

I hadn't given Julie enough time. That had been it. Gaston had brought the message less than an hour ago. She had not yet found the right moment to break the news. But I was wrong.

"Our situation is ver}' similar," she said, "except that we shall have the consolation of knowing that Maman is well cared for, in Paradise." She stood up, brushing the sand from her knees. "When I heard that Maman had been taken to the hospital, I knew what would happen," she went on. "My dreams have a habit of coming true. But at least this was an accident. In my dream we were trying to kill her on purpose. How did Maman come to fall from the window?"

"I don't know," I said. "Nobody knows."

"I shall find out," she said. "It will console Maman in Paradise if we know."

Then she picked up the glass chateau and, holding it under her arm, ran off to say good-bye to Pierre. I walked over to the lodge. Julie was waiting for me. "She has been ver>' courageous," she said softly. "You can be proud of her."

"It's happened too suddenly," I said. "She hasn't felt it yet."

Julie looked at me with pity. "Do you know so little about children, Monsieur Jean," she asked, "that you imagine, because they don't cry, therefore they feel nothing? The truth is that the child won all our hearts today. My condolences. Monsieur le Comte, in your great loss."

The proprieties were restored between us. The concierge of the glass foundry was speaking to the seigneur of St. Gilles.

"You have done a lot for us today, Julie," I said. "I believed it better for you to break the news than anyone else. And I was right."

"She needed no telling," Julie answered. "It was she who told us. The dream had warned her, she said. For my part, I have never believed in dreams. Monsieur Jean. Only that children, like animals, are close to God. I suppose," she continued, "there will be a police inquiry?"

"A police inquiry?" I repeated.

"No doubt it is for the doctors to arrange. It is to be hoped it will be quickly over. These things are unpleasant."

I had been too dazed at the hospital, and too distressed, to consider such a thing as an inquiry. But Julie was right, of course. This must have been one of the things discussed by Paul and Blanche at the hospital after I left.

Marie-Noel came back. She kissed Julie and we said good-bye, and Gaston drove us to St. Gilles. As we passed through the gateway I saw there were four other cars in the drive below the terrace.

"There's Dr. Lebrun's car," said Marie-Noel, "and Monsieur Talbert's too. I don't know about the others."

Talbert -- he was the lawyer who had written the letter I had found in the safe. No doubt he looked after the family affairs. Then, as we drew up behind the cars and got out, we saw a man in uniform seated behind the wheel of the front one.

"The car of the commissaire de police," Gaston murmured.

"Why do they all have to come?" asked Marie-Noel. "They aren't going to arrest anyone, surely?"

"They always come," I said, "if there's been an accident. I shall have to see them. Will you go and find Germaine and ask her to read to you?" She went up the terrace and in through the door, and I turned to Gaston.

"The commissaire will probably have to question your wife," I said.

"Yes, Monsieur le Comte."

He looked anxious. I was anxious too. The nightmare of the day was not yet over. I entered the chateau and heard voices coming from the salon. They ceased as I opened the door, and everyone turned and looked at me. I recognized Dr. Lebrun, and Dr. Moutier from the hospital. The third was small, thickset, with graying hair. This was presumably the lawyer, Talbert. The fourth, who had a more official air, must be the commissaire de police.

My first thought was for the comtesse. I looked across the room at her, and saw that she was still sitting in the chair beside the fireplace, commanding, indomitable. She showed no sign of fatigue, and her presence filled the room, dwarfing the others.

"Here is my son. Monsieur," she said to the commissaire. And then turning to me, "Monsieur Lemotte has been so good as to come himself from Villars to ask the necessary questions."

The four men approached me, anxious to show their sympathy; and it was only after many courtesies that the commissaire turned to me.

"Dr. Lebrun and Dr. Moutier have informed me, Monsieur, that your wife was expecting a child within a few weeks, and I understand there was some increase in nervousness lately," he said. "Would you agree?"

"Yes," I replied. "That's quite correct."

"She was, perhaps, unduly apprehensive about the birth?"

"I think she was."

"Excuse me, Monsieur," interrupted Talbert, the lawyer. "Monsieur le Comte will forgive the explanation, but the birth was eagerly awaited both by him and by Madame la Comtesse Jean. They hoped for a son because under the terms of her Marriage Settlement the birth of a son meant an immediate increase of income, above all to Monsieur le Comte. I know, from what she said to me, that Madame la Comtesse Jean dreaded disappointing her husband, and indeed the whole family. This would, I think, account for more nervousness than usual in her case."

The commissaire looked at Dr. Lebrun, who hesitated, glancing at the comtesse and at me. "Madame Jean was certainly anxious for a son," he said. "In fact, she stressed the point when I attended her last. No doubt this anxiety added to her nervous state."

"In short," said the commissaire, "Madame la Comtesse Jean was inclined to hysteria. Forgive me, Monsieur, I only wish to establish that your wife was particularly agitated at the time of the accident, and therefore, in her condition, more liable to attacks of giddiness. I have examined the spot where she fell, and I propose going to the bedroom directly, with your approval."

"Of course," I said.

"I have already questioned Berthe, the woman who tends the cows. She saw your wife leaning from the window, as though reaching out -- so she described it -- and then she grasped at the air, as it seemed, and fell. Berthe screamed for help, and was heard by the cook and Charlotte, who went instantly to the moat. The cook telephoned for the ambulance from Villars. I should like to establish that nobody went to the bedroom after the femme de chambre took up her breakfast."

"Charlotte might have done," said Renee.

"Would you ring for her. Monsieur?" asked the commissaire.

"Charlotte is my personal maid: I will ring for her," said the comtesse. When Gaston answered the bell she told him the commissaire wished to speak to Charlotte.

"I don't quite follow," said Paul, "why it matters what Charlotte or Germaine said to my sister-in-law. It has no bearing on the fact that she became giddy and fell from the window."

"I am sorry. Monsieur," said the commissaire. "I quite understand the distress all this must cause to the family. It is just that, to conform with the requirements of the law, I must establish beyond any shadow of doubt that the cause of the fall was accidental. Unhappily, when someone falls from a height this is not always the case."

Renee turned suddenly white. "What do you mean?" she asked.

"Madame," explained the commissaire gently, "when a person is in a highly nervous condition it leads them, sometimes, to do dangerous things. I am not suggesting that is what happened in this case, but I have to make quite sure."

"Do you mean," asked Blanche, "that my sister-in-law may have fallen from the window purposely?"

"It is possible, Madame. Not probable."

There was a sudden silence in the room, a silence filled, it seemed to me, as I looked from one to another of their troubled faces, with swift, unspoken denial, born of their inner guilt that each one of them might have contributed to Françoise's death.

The tension was broken as Charlotte came in, looking aggrieved and suspicious. "You sent for me, Madame la Comtesse?"

"The commissaire de police has some questions to ask you, Charlotte," replied the comtesse.

"I want to know," said the commissaire, "if you had any conversation with Madame la Comtesse Jean before the accident?"

Charlotte flashed an angry look at me, and I realized that she believed he was asking her this question because of some complaint of mine. "I only saw Madame Jean for a few minutes," she said.

"You found Madame la Comtesse Jean her usual self?" he asked.

Charlotte shrugged her shoulders. "I suppose so," she said sullenly. "I don't know. Madame Jean was easily depressed. She told me this last upset of hers had come about because some favorite pieces of porcelain had been broken. She set great store by her possessions. She even dusted them herself, and would let no one touch them. 'At least they're mine/ she used to say. 'They're not part of St. Gilles.' "

The venomous parting stroke embraced us all. The chateau stood condemned. I wondered if the commissaire saw Françoise as I saw her, an isolated figure clinging to the treasures of the home she had left, lonely, neglected, sought after solely for her fortune.

He asked me whether he might now see the bedroom, and I took him upstairs, the others remaining below.

As we entered the room I saw that the shutters were no longer closed but flung wide, and the windows too thrust back against the wall. The child's body was across the sill, one hand grasping the window frame, the other, with her head and shoulders, out of sight. I heard the commissaire catch his breath. I put my hand on his arm. To dash forward was the impulse of us both, yet to do so might have startled her, causing her to lose the hold she already had. For the eternity of perhaps ten seconds we waited, immobile. Then the child's hand shifted its grip, the body wriggled across the sill, and she slipped back into the room to face us, her eyes shining, her hair disheveled.

"I've got it," she said. "It was caught on the ledge."

The commissaire found his voice before I did: I could only stare at Marie-Noel, safe and unaware of danger, holding what looked like a duster. "What have you got, my child?" he asked gently.

"Maman's locket," she said, "the locket Papa brought her last week from Paris. She must have been shaking her duster out of the window, as she always did, and the locket was caught in it. They were

lying together on the ledge below. I leant out and saw them." She came towards us. "If Maman had only rung her bell, Gaston or someone would have rescued them for her. But she was impatient. She thought she could reach them herself." She looked at the commissaire. "Are you religious?" she asked.

"I hope so. Mademoiselle," he said, taken aback.

"Papa is not. He is a sceptic. But finding the locket was an answer to prayer. I said to the Sainte Vierge, I did little for Maman when she was alive. Let me do something for her now she is dead.' The Sainte Vierge told me to lean out of the window. I did not want to do it. It was unpleasant. But I found the locket. I still don't know why that should help Maman, unless it is that to her, in Paradise, it seems better for her daughter to wear the locket than to let it lie forgotten on a ledge."

## CHAPTER 11

BEFORE the commissaire left he assured me that he was perfectly satisfied my wife had fallen accidentally from the window, but asked me to call on him the next day at eleven o'clock to complete certain formalities. He understood that my brother had arranged for the body to be brought home to the chateau afterwards. He left in his car, closely followed by the two doctors. Only the lawyer now remained with the family, and he had the grace to apologize for his presence.

"I only stayed, Monsieur," he said, "because I understand, from a conversation with your brother, that he knows nothing whatsoever of the terms of the new Carvalet contract, a copy of which they have sent me only this morning. I thought perhaps a few words while I am here might clarify the position."

"Nothing will clarify the position," I said, "except for my brother to read the contract, which he is at liberty to do whenever he pleases. I have it upstairs in my dressing room now."

I threw a bunch of keys on the table. "It's in the valise in the wardrobe," I said. "Go and find it, if you like."

Marie-Noel jumped up. "I'll find it," she said, seizing the keys. She was out of the room before anyone thought of stopping her.

"Really, Paul," said Renee, "I hardly think this is the moment to start talking business."

Maitre Talbert was ill at ease. "I apologize," he said. "I should not have mentioned the matter. Naturally, I am at your disposal for a full discussion on this and other matters at any time convenient to you after the funeral."

"the funeral will be on Friday," said the comtesse. "I have already arranged it with Monsieur le Cure. My daughter-in-law will be brought home the day after tomorrow and will lie here, so that our friends and everyone in the district will have time to pay their respects. I shall of course receive them." The lawyer bowed. "You will have the kindness, Maitre, to see that notification of the death goes to the newspapers this evening, so that it can be read in tomorrow's editions. I have written the notices myself." She took some sheets of paper from her lap, and handed them to him. "Monsieur le Cure is arranging with the Mother Superior of the convent at Lauray to send sisters to the chateau to watch during the nights of Wednesday and Thursday." She paused for reflection, tapping the arm of her chair with her fingers. "The bearers, of course, will be our own people on the estate."

The sound of Marie-Noel running down the stairs and across the hall could be heard through the open door.

"Not so much noise, child," said the comtesse as she burst into the room. "One should tread softly in a house of mourning."

Marie-Noel went straight to Paul and gave him the document. For a while there was no sound except the rustling of paper as Paul turned the pages of the contract. Then he turned to me.

"You realize," he said, his voice expressionless, betraying nothing of what he must have felt, "that this contract goes against all we agreed to before you went to Paris?"

"Yes," I said.

"That means everything you told Jacques and me on your return from Paris was a lie?"

"Yes," I said again.

"But why? What was the point of making fools of us all?"

"I didn't want to make fools of you." I said. "I thought it was the only way to save the verrerie. I changed my mind after I came back from Paris. Don't ask me why. You wouldn't understand."

"You've signed a duplicate and returned it to them?"

"I signed it in the office on Saturday, and posted it."

"Then there's nothing more to be done. You own the business, you can make what terms you please. It just means that, as far as I am concerned, trying to run it for you becomes impossible."

For a moment no one spoke. Then the comtesse reached for the bell beside the fire. "I think," she said, "that we needn't detain Maitre Talbert any longer. A prolonged discussion on the future of the verrerie is quite out of place at the present time."

the lawyer shook hands with all of us and followed Caston from the room. The comtesse turned to me. "You look tired, Jean." she said. "Why not rest? You have just an hour before we go to church for the special service of prayers for the dead for Françoise which Monsieur le Cure has arranged. After that we shall all drive into Villars to the hospital chapel."

She fumbled for her spectacles, and began to scribble names and addresses on sheets of paper.

I went outside and stood in the grounds beyond the moat. The cattle had come to pasture, and the sun had dipped behind the trees. Paul came out and joined me. For a moment or two he smoked a cigarette in silence, then nervously he threw it away, saying abruptly, "I meant what I said just now: it is impossible to run the verrerie for you any more."

"What's your reason?" I asked.

"My reason?" He stared down into the moat. "We've never got on, you know that. You had all the favors and I the kicks. I've been used to that my whole life. You asked me to run the verrerie because nobody else would take it on after Maurice was shot, and you were too idle yourself. I did it for the family, not for you. At least, up to date, I've respected your business judgment, if nothing else. Now I can't even do that." His voice, resentful, bitter, sounded as though he had lost all faith not only in his work but in himself; as if what he had striven to do, through the years, had come to no account, the purpose gone.

"Supposing," I said slowly, "that in the future I rely upon your business judgment, not you on mine?"

"What do you mean?"

"Suppose, in the future, you take on the part of the business that involves travel -- go to Paris, London, anywhere you please, get the orders, make fresh contacts -- while I stay here?"

He straightened himself and looked at me, puzzled, unbelieving.

"Are you serious?" he asked.

"Yes," I answered. Then, because he looked doubtful still, "Don't you want to travel? Don't you want to get away?"

"Get away?" His laugh was short, mirthless. "Naturally I want to get away. I always have. But there was never the money, nor the opportunity. You never made it possible for me."

"I can make it possible for you now," I said.

"You mean," he said, "that you'd give me a free hand to travel in Europe, or even America, visiting other plants like ours, seeing how they keep going by using more up-to-date methods, so that at the end of six months or so, when I got back, we might incorporate them here at St. Gilles?"

The voice, which had been bitter and resentful, was suddenly interested, alert; he was seeing himself transformed into the one who made decisions, bringing fresh blood to what had been decayed and dying, thereby saving both tradition and himself.

"I believe you could do all that and more," I said. "Talk to Renee, see what she says. I don't want to force you to it."

"Renee . . ." For a moment he frowned, thinking hard, then awkwardly, a little diffident, he said, "It

might be the answer for us both. We haven't been very happy -- you've known that. She's felt herself asted at St. Gilles, whereas if we were traveling, meeting people, and she had something to think about, she'd stop being bored and dissatisfied, and I'd be a better companion. I wouldn't seem the country boor that I do to her now."

He stood staring in front of him, the new image of himself taking shape and substance, and oddly, with a sort of poignancy, I saw the image too. Through his eyes I saw Renee smiling upon him, elegant and sleek, the pair of them enveloped in a little cloud of their own success which would make them kinder to one another.

"Can I discuss this with Renee, now, tonight?" he asked abruptly. "Before there's any chance of your changing your mind?"

"I shan't change my mind," I said. "Good luck to you, Paul." And foolishly, like an old-fashioned figure in a drawing-room comedy, I put out my hand to him, and he shook it, stiffly, as though sealing a pact, before he turned and disappeared into the chateau.

When the church bell tolled solemnly, breaking the stillness, I went and joined the others in the hall. Both cars were drawn up below the terrace, with Gaston in uniform at the wheel of the first and Paul at the second, and the three women, already in deep black, followed by Marie-Noel in a dark winter coat, entered the cars in some order of precedence which had already been decided upon -- the comtesse, myself and the child in the Renault, and Paul driving his sister and his wife.

Slowly we proceeded through the gateway and over the bridge, and slowly, at the same sober pace, descended from the cars, entered the church, and took our places at the front. I wondered, kneeling there, listening to the prayers, what petitions went up in fei-vor or humility from those beside me, whether they asked for the repose of the absent Francoise or pardon for themselves.

The service over, we drove to Villars to stand for a few moments in the chapel. Strangely, it was not, as I had expected, distressing and macabre. The now waxen and infinitely remote figure of Francoise was not the person we had all betrayed, but something mummified and distant, discovered after centuries in an Egyptian tomb.

It was nearly half past eight by the time we returned to the chateau for dinner. The comtesse, whom I had never before seen in the dining room, took her place opposite me at the end of the table, and her presence there gave sudden warmth and distinction to the room. Only after the dessert had been served and the tray of coffee cups taken to the salon did she, for the first time, flag; and, glancing at her, I s. v that she had turned suddenly gray. The beads of perspiration stood out on her forehead, and her eyes, flickering restlessly about the room, lost instantly all life and concentration.

Quietly I said, "I'm going to take you upstairs."

She stared at me as if she did not understand, and then, when I put out my arm to her, she leant upon it, trembling. I said, loudly, so that the others heard, "I think it would be much better if we went over the lists together in your room."

She straightened herself, gripping my arm more firmly, and as we moved towards the door she said clearly, without difficulty, "Good night, good night, everybody. Don't disturb yourselves. Jean and I have matters we prefer to discuss upstairs."

They all rose instantly, and Blanche said, "You should never have come down, Maman. It has been too much for you."

Her words had just the necessary sting to waken response, and in a second her mother turned, loosening her hold upon my arm, retorting, "When I want advice from you I'll ask for it. There are four hundred envelopes to address before tomorrow evening. I suggest you make a start tonight, and the child can help."

We went out of the room and climbed the stairs together to the first corridor. As she paused for a

moment to regain breath she said, "Why did I say that? What are the invitations for?"

"The funeral," I said, "the funeral on Friday."

"Whose funeral?"

"Francoise's," I replied. "Francoise died today."

"Of course," she said. "For a moment I forgot. I was thinking of that time we made lists for Blanche's wedding. We had the invitations printed, and then none of them were used."

Charlotte opened the door for us, and I could see at once from her face that she was frightened. She whispered to me, "The boxes have gone from the dressing room."

"I know," I said. "I took them away."

"What for?" she said. "I shall need them tonight."

"No," I said. I pushed by her, following the comtesse, and said, "Undress and get into bed, Maman. You may sleep, you may not; it doesn't matter. I shall stay here with you tonight."

Her shadow, reflected on the ceiling, monstrous and overpowering like a witch, seemed part of the heavy curtains and the hangings to the bed; but when she turned and looked at me the shadow shrank to the ground, and the smile belonged to the woman who had held court downstairs, opposing tragedy with her own pride. "The tables are turned," she said. "You had a high temperature once when you were twelve years old. I sat in your room beside you and bathed your face. Is that what you're prepared to do for me tonight?"

She laughed and waved me from the room, calling to Charlotte. I went down to the salon, and found the others preparing to go to their rooms. Marie-Noel went towards the stairs hand in hand with Blanche, her small face white with fatigue.

"You'll come and say good night, Papa?" she asked.

"Yes," I promised, and went into the dining room for a cigarette. When I returned to the hall I found that Renee had not followed the others, but was waiting for me on the stairs.

"So you want to get rid of us, Paul and me?" she said. "Have you been planning this ever since you returned from Paris?"

I shook my head. "There's no question of its being planned," I told her. "This evening the idea came to me, that's all. If you dislike the thought, put it out of your head."

She did not say anything for a moment. She seemed to be considering something, and then she said slowly, "You've altered, Jean. I don't just mean you've changed towards me. I realize now that you were bored, there was nothing else for you to do, and I happened to be here. You've changed somehow in yourself, become harder, more withdrawn."

"Harder?" I said. "I should have thought the reverse. Softer, weaker in every way."

"Oh no. You're more detached, not only to me. to everyone." She considered me thoughtfully.

"That's why it surprised Paul and me that you suggested that we should travel, and not you. This past week you have given the impression that the one thing in the world you wanted was to get away."

I stared at her, disconcerted. "I gave that impression?"

"Frankly, yes."

"It isn't true," I said. "I've never stopped thinking about all of you, day and night. The last thing I want to do is to go away."

She looked incredulous. "I don't understand you," she said. "I suppose the truth is that I never have. You were never in love with me for one minute, were you?"

"I'm not in love with you now, Renee," I said. "I don't know about the past, but I rather doubt it," She drew in her breath. "A week ago I couldn't have left St. Gilles, but now -- " she turned and began to climb the stairs " -- now I know I can't go on living here."

I watched her disappear along the corridor, and, as I switched off the light and climbed the stairs in darkness, it seemed to me that what I had done to these two, Paul and Renee, was not the action of my own self, nor yet that of Jean de Gue, whose shadow I had become, but the work of a third -- someone who was neither he nor I but a fusion of the two of us, who was born not of thought but of intuition, and brought release to us both.

At the top of Marie-Noel's turret stairs I turned the handle of her door, expecting to find her still dressed, or at her prie-dieu. But the long day had closed upon her at last. She was in bed, asleep. The chapel had not left her untouched, as I had thought. Two lighted candles stood at the foot of the bed, and a toy duck now knelt in prayer between them.

I blew out the candles, and, leaving the window open, closed the shutters. Then I went down the turret stairs and through to the other side of the chateau, to that other room in the tower. Here there were no candles burning, only a light beside the bed, and the woman on the pillows was not asleep like the child, but awake and watchful. Her eyes, sunk in her gray, exhausted face, stared up to mine. "I thought you weren't coming," she said.

I sat down close to the bed and put out my hand to her. She held it fast.

"I sent Charlotte to her room," she said. "I told her, 'Monsieur le Comte is looking after me tonight. I don't need you,' That's what you meant me to say, didn't you?"

"Yes, Maman," I answered.

Her grip tightened, and I knew she would hold it thus, through the night, as her defense against darkness, and I must not move, nor withdraw it, for if I did the bond would be loosened, and the meaning lost.

"I've been thinking," she said. "In a few days' time, when everything's over, I shall leave this room and go downstairs to my old one. It's more practical. I can keep my eye on things."

"Just as you like," I answered.

"Lying here," she said, "I find my memory goes. I don't know if I am in the present or the past. And I have bad dreams."

The gilt clock beside her bed ticked loudly, and the pendulum, showing through a glass case, moved backwards, forwards, the two combining to make the minutes slow.

"If you dream tonight," I said, "I shall be here. It won't matter."

I leant forward and turned out the light with my burnt hand, and at once the darkness seemed to press upon me, enveloping me. The despair that was in the shadows invaded me, and she began to talk and mutter in a half sleep that I could not share but could only listen to, with the ticking clock. Sometimes she called out, cursing, sometimes she fell into a prayer, once she broke into uncontrollable laughter; but never, as the fragmentary thoughts pursued her, did she clamor for relief, nor yet release my hand. When, just after five o'clock, she fell asleep and I leant forward and looked down at her, her face seemed to me no longer a mask, haggard, fearful, hiding the torment of months and years; but peaceful, relaxed and oddly beautiful, not even old.

I rose from the chair and went out of the room, down through the silent house to the salon, and, opening the shutters, let myself out onto the terrace. I crossed the moat and walked up the pathway under the chestnut trees, and so to the woods roads and the stone huntress standing in the midst of them.

I sat by the base of the huntress and waited for the day, and as the sky paled, and the light came,

and the village and the chateau took on shape and substance. I was no longer isolated, watching apart, numb with exhaustion. but one among many, part of St. Gilles. I knew suddenly, with conviction. that it was not a stranger's curiosity that drew me to the people of this Village, a sentimental attraction to the picturesque, but something deeper, more intimate, a desire so intense for their well-being and their future that although akin to love it resembled pain. Finally I got up and walked across the park to the chateau, and when I had crossed the moat and stood beneath her room, I saw Blanche. I saw her reach to the windows to close them but before she could do so I called up to her. "My hand is troubling me. Would you dress it for me?"

She did not answer but withdrew into her room, leaving the windows open, from which I concluded that she did not refuse to help me. Going to her room. I knocked, but. hearing no answer, turned the handle and entered. She was standing by a table unrolling a fresh dressing.

She did not look at me, but took my hand in hers and removed the dressing, her action that of an automaton, silent, unconcerned.

"If you made a vow of silence." I said to her. "You broke it yesterday, in the hospital. It isn't valid any more." She did not answer. "Fifteen years ago." I said, "the death of one person came between us. It took the death of another, yesterday. to loosen your tongue. Wouldn't it be simpler for both of us. and for the family too, if we made an end to silence?"

"It would be simpler for you," she said, without raising her eyes, "just as it was simpler for you to let Françoise die."

"I did not let her die." I said.

"You lied about your blood." she said. "You lied about that contract. You've lied about everything, always, through the years. I don't want to speak to you, now or in the future. We have nothing to say" to one another."

She had finished the dressing. She let go my hand. The gesture was final, a dismissal. I looked about me, at the severity of Françoise's coldness, the tortured pictures of the scourged Christ, the crucified Christ, that must face her upon the blank impersonal walls as she lay there in her high narrow bed, and I said to her, "Is that why you hang those pictures there? To remind yourself that you can't forgive?"

She turned and looked at me, the eyes bitter, the mouth hard.

"Don't mock my God," she said. "You've destroyed everything else in my life. Leave Him to me."

"Would you have hung them in the master's house?" I asked. "Would they have gone as part of your dowry to Maurice Duval?"

Now at last I had broken down reserve. The agony of years came to the surface, showing in her mouth and eyes like a sudden flame. "How dare you speak of him?" she said. "How dare you even utter his name? Do you think I ever forget one moment, day or night, what you did to him?"

"No," I said, "you haven't forgotten. Nor have I. You can't forgive me -- perhaps I can't forgive myself."

What I had hoped for, and what I had also feared, then happened. Tears rose in her eyes, ran down her cheeks: not the grief of sudden loss or pain, but the anguish of years. She went over to the window and stood beside it looking out, her back defenseless, betraying the emotion that I could not see. Presently she turned, dry-eyed now, composed, and yet more vulnerable because of the grief she had shown before me.

"What are you waiting for?" she asked. "Why are you still here?"

I could not ask forgiveness for something I had not done. As scapegoat, I could only bear the fault.

"I was looking in the album last week," I said. "I found the old snapshots of ourselves as children.

And later ones as well. Groups at the verrerie, with Maurice there amongst them."

"Well?" she asked. "What of it?"

"Nothing," I answered. "Only that I wished what came about fifteen years ago had never happened."

Perhaps because what I said was out of character, unexpected, she looked up at me, startled momentarily out of her composure, and then, seeing that I spoke sincerely, without cynicism or any sort of mockery, she said quietly, "Why?"

My own truth was all that I could give her. If she did not believe it there was no more to say. "I liked his face," I said. "I had never looked at those photographs before. I realized, turning the pages, that he was good, and that the workmen must have loved and respected him. It came to me that when he was killed it was through jealousy; the man who shot him, or ordered him to be shot, did it not from mistaken patriotism but because he envied him, because Maurice Duval was finer than he was himself."

She stared at me, incredulous, and I supposed that what I was telling her was so alien to anything her brother might have said that she could not accept it. "If you want to make your confession," she said, "don't make it to me. It's fifteen years too late." She moved about the room, straightening things already orderly, using preoccupation to disguise emotion. "What use is it to either of us now to come here and accuse yourself? You can't restore the past. You can't bring Maurice back. You hadn't even the courage to shoot him yourself, but went that night to the verrerie pretending to be alone, asking him to hide you; and he came down and opened the door to let you in, and there you stood with your little band of murderers. God may forgive you, Jean, I can't."

She went and stood by the window once again, the air coming fresh and cool into the room. But when I followed her she did not move away, which seemed to me forgiveness in itself.

"From the first you were against Maurice, you and Maman," she said. "Even in the early days, when he first came to work at the verrerie, you were envious because Papa thought so much of him, though you took no interest in the verrerie yourself. Then later, when Papa gave him control and made him master, you began to hate him. I can see you now, you and Maman, in the salon, laughing, and Maman saying, 'Can it be that Blanche, the fastidious Mademoiselle de Gue, is amorous at last?'"

She stared out across the park, and her profile now was the profile of the girl in the album, already somber, already reserved, possessor of a secret she did not wish revealed.

"Ridicule was your weapon always, yours and Maman's," she said. "Because Maurice came from the people, you pretended to despise him. Papa was never like that, he understood. He wouldn't have tried to prevent us marrying, as you did. With the Occupation, you had your chance. So easy, wasn't it, to make murder seem heroic? It happened in other families. Ours wasn't the only one."

She gestured with her hands. It was suddenly over. The past was the past. She turned and looked at the alcove, bare and simple like a convent cell, the prie-dieu in the corner, the crucifix above.

"Now I have this," she said, "instead of the master's house."

I think that what endeared her to me most was that she still used "tu," the intimate form of "you." The custom of a lifetime could not be broken by the silence of fifteen years. There was hope for the future in this if nothing else.

"I want you to go to the master's house and make it yours," I said. "I want you to make it come alive again, as it was when Maurice had it, to be the master now in place of him." Dumfounded, she stared at me in disbelief, and swiftly, so that she could not reject me utterly, I went on talking. "I've told Paul he can get away, travel, he and Renee. Paul has never had a chance of showing what he can do in business, in meeting people, outside St. Gilles. It's time he did."

Perhaps it was the note of urgency in my voice that most astounded her. She sat down, not realizing.

I believe, that she did so, and stared at me, clasping the arms of her chair.

"Someone in the family has to take over," I said. "I can't. I've never had the slightest interest in the verrerie. The only person who understands and loves it is yourself. If you had married Maurice you would have made something of it, instead of letting it decay and become out of date, which it is today. When Marie-Noel grows up it will be hers. If she marries it can be her dowry. I want it to be your trust, your responsibility, because of Maurice, because of Marie-Noel."

Still she said nothing. I think if I had struck her across the face she could not have been more stunned. "The house is waiting there for you," I said. "It's been waiting for fifteen years. Pictures, china, tables, chairs, even his books, all the things you would have used together. You could design and engrave again, as you did once. And then, instead of sending scent bottles and medicine phials to a firm like Cai-valet, who would do better to buy them mass-produced, you could choose your own market, the market Paul will find for you, demanding fine workmanship, artistry, skill, which was what St. Gilles gave once, long ago, and can give again."

I paused, exhausted, drained suddenly of energy, of thought. And just as holding the mother's hand through the night had seemed to invest me with her own past phantoms of regret, so the eyes of Blanche, upon me now, lost their bitterness, becoming reflective, considerate, even kind, while the loneliness that had been hers was now my loneliness, my pain, engulfing me in a darkness that must be carried and endured.

I left her sitting there, and went to the dressing room. I flung myself on the bed, closed my eyes and slept dreamlessly until past ten, when I awoke to find Gaston shaking me by the shoulder, telling me that I had to see the commissaire de police at eleven o'clock.

I got up, shaved and bathed and dressed again, and went with him into the town. The formalities were soon over: the commissaire simply wished me to read and verify the notes he had taken the previous day. When I came out Vincent, who helped Bela at "L'Antiquaire du Pont," was waiting to speak to me. He had a small package in his hands.

"Forgive me, Monsieur le Comte," he said. "Madame could not get in touch with you in any other way. This package came from Paris yesterday. She knows now it arrived too late. She is so sorry for this. But she wanted me to give it to you, for the little girl."

I took the package from him. "What is it?" I asked.

"Some porcelain was broken. The little girl asked Madame if it could be mended. Instead, she sent to Paris for duplicates. She asked me to beg you not to tell the little girl they are substitutes. She believes the child would be happier to keep them in memory of her mother if she believes they are the broken ones made whole."

I thanked him, and then, hesitating, asked, "Did Madame send any other message to me?"

"No, Monsieur le Comte. Just that, and her deep sympathy."

## CHAPTER 12

WHEN WE got back to St. Gilles I saw Marie-Noel waiting for me on the terrace. She ran forward and flung herself upon me.

"Gran'mie was down early, before eleven," she said. "She's in the salon, preparing it for Maman, and Madame Yves is helping her. Gran'mie said she was the only person who remembered how things were arranged when my grandfather died. They are arguing now about the position of the table."

She took my hand and led me to the salon, where I could hear the sound of voices raised in dispute. The shutters were still closed, the lights on, and the sofa and chairs had been turned to face the center of the room. A long table, covered with a lace cloth, stood between the windows and the door. The comtesse was sitting on a chair beside the table, and Julie, with another white drapery over her arm, confronted her.

"But I assure you, Madame la Comtesse, the table was more in the center and we did not use the lace cloth but the damask, which I found myself just now at the back of the linen room, pushed in any old way."

"Nonsense," answered the comtesse. "We used the lace. The lace was in my mother's family for a hundred years."

"Very possibly, Madame la Comtesse," said Julie. "I don't dispute it. I remember the lace cloth perfectly; but the white damask is more suitable for mourning, just as it was in 1938 for Monsieur le Comte."

"I don't care," said the comtesse. "I prefer the lace. It may be more ostentatious than the damask, but what of it? I intend my daughter-in-law to have the best."

"In that case," said Julie, "there's no more to be said. The lace it will have to be. And I suppose the damask must go back to the linen room to be forgotten for another twenty years. Who looks after things nowadays at the chateau, I ask myself? It wasn't like this in the old days."

She sighed, folding the damask cloth on the end of the table.

"What else do you expect," said the comtesse, "with servants as they are today, without pride in their work?"

"Then it's the fault of the mistress," said Julie. "A good mistress makes a good servant. I remember when you used to come down into the kitchen we none of us spoke afterwards for half an hour, we were so frightened. That is how it should be. But today --" She shook her head.

"I've been ill," said the comtesse. "Things have got out of hand. It will be different in the future."

"I hope so," said Julie. "It was time."

"You say that because you're jealous," said the comtesse. "You always liked coming up here poking your nose into what didn't concern you."

"It does concern me," said Julie. "Anything that happens here to you, Madame la Comtesse, or to any of the family, concerns me."

"You haven't enough to do," said the comtesse, "that's your trouble. In the future you can come up twice a week and help me set things in order once again. I was right, though, about the lace cloth."

"You are free to form your own opinion, Madame la Comtesse," said Julie. "I won't argue with you. But if it's the last word I ever utter, I shall insist that it was the damask cloth we used at the funeral of Monsieur le Comte."

They stared across the table at one another in perfect understanding. Then the comtesse, aware of my presence for the first time, wished me good day. "Everything went well?" she asked. "The

commissaire had nothing to say?"

"No."

"The authorities were satisfied?"

"Perfectly."

"Then we can proceed with the arrangements. You had better help Renee address the envelopes. Blanche has disappeared. I suppose, as usual, she's in church. Now go along, both of you, Julie and I have work to do."

We met Gaston in the hall, bringing the packet I had left in the car. I took it from him and went upstairs to the bedroom, the child following me.

"What is it?" she said. "Have you bought something?"

I did not answer. I undid the string and opened the paper. The Copenhagen cat and dog, perfect replicas of the ones that had been broken, lay revealed. I put them on the table where they belonged and then glanced at Marie-Noel. She stood with her hands clasped, smiling.

"You would never know," she said. "You could never tell that anything had happened. They are perfect. Just as if they hadn't been broken. Now I feel myself forgiven."

We went down to the library, and the lists were waiting for us on the desk. But nobody was there addressing the envelopes, neither Paul nor Renee nor Blanche.

"Where's everyone gone?" I said to the child.

She had already seized an envelope and was addressing it in a careful sloping hand. "I'm not supposed to say," she said, "because Gran'mie doesn't know. Aunt Renee is in her bedroom, looking through all her winter clothes. She told me, as a great secret, that she and Uncle Paul are going to travel, and later on they might even have an apartment in Paris. She said she would ask me to visit."

"Is Uncle Paul also upstairs looking through his clothes?" I asked.

"Oh no," she answered, "he's gone down to the verrerie. Aunt Blanche went with him, and that's a secret too. Aunt Blanche wants to look through the furniture that's stored at the master's house. She said it was a waste nobody lived there, and it ought to be made habitable once again." For a few moments she addressed the envelopes in silence. Then she raised her head, and biting the end of her pen said, "Rather a dreadful thought came to me just now, I don't know whether to tell it to you or not."

"Go ahead," I said.

"It's just that suddenly," she said, "since Maman died, everyone is getting what they want. Gran'mie, who loves everyone to notice her, has come downstairs. Uncle Paul and Aunt Renee are going to travel, which has made them pleased. Aunt Blanche has gone to look at the master's house, where long ago she meant to live. Even Madame Yves is bustling with the linen, which makes her feel important. You have got the money you wanted, and can go spending now as much as you please. As for me -- " she hesitated, her eyes troubled, a little sad " -- as for me, I have you to myself for the rest of my days."

Through the half-open double doors I heard the sudden ring of the telephone.

"The thing is," she went on, "would any of these things have happened if Maman hadn't died?"

Her question, devastating, terrible, seemed to shake the foundation of all belief. "Yes," I said swiftly, "they had to happen, they were bound to happen. It's nothing to do with Maman dying. If she had lived they would have come about just the same."

Still she looked doubtful, not entirely satisfied. "When the bon Dieu arranges things, everything is for the best," she said, "but sometimes the devil tempts us in disguise."

The ringing of the telephone ceased. Gaston was answering it in the lobby. In a moment or two his footsteps sounded in the dining room, coming towards us.

"The point is to discover which is which," said Marie-Noel, "who gives us the things we want, God or the devil. It must be one or the other, but how do you tell?"

Gaston came to the double doors and said, "Monsieur le Comte is wanted on the telephone."

I got up and went through to the lobby in the hall. I lifted the old-fashioned receiver. "Who's there?" I asked.

Someone said, "Ne quittez pas" the line blurred and inaudible, as though it came from a distance. Then, after a minute, another voice, a man's said, "Am I speaking to the Comte de Gue?"

"Yes," I answered.

There was a pause. The speaker at the other end seemed to be thinking, deciding what to say.

"Who is it?" I said. "What do you want?"

Then softly, almost in a whisper, the voice replied, "It's me. Jean de Gue. I've just seen today's newspaper. I'm coming back."

Instinct denied him. Mind, body, spirit united in revolt against him. He no longer existed. He was not real. The whisper at the other end of the telephone was imaginary, conjured up by fatigue. I waited, not answering. And then in a moment he spoke again.

"You are there?" he said. "The remplaceant?"

I suppose, because I heard a footstep in the hall, caution seized me and the conventional being who gives orders, takes them, makes arrangements and plans spoke into the mouthpiece for me.

"Yes," I said, "I'm here."

"I'm speaking from Deauville," he said. "I have your car. I intend driving to St. Gilles later in the day. It's no use arriving before dusk -- I might be seen. I suggest we meet at seven."

The cool assurance with which he spoke, believing I would fall in with his plans, made me hate him the more. "Where?" I asked.

There was silence for a moment while he thought. Then, softly, he said, "You know the master's house at the verrerie?"

"Yes," I said.

"I'll leave the car on a side track in the woods," he said, "and come across the orchard. Wait for me inside the house and let me in. I'll be with you there as soon after seven as I can."

He did not say good-bye. The telephone clicked as he hung up.

Although the emotion that filled me now was violent, overwhelming, yet at the same time I felt deliberate and calm. I was the possessor now, he the intruder. The chateau was my chateau, the family who in a few minutes would sit with me round the table were my family; they belonged to me and I to them. He could not return and make them his again.

I went into the salon, and the comtesse was sitting there.

"Who was that on the telephone?" she asked.

"No one of any importance," I replied. "Someone who had seen the morning newspaper."

"In the old days, no one would have telephoned at such a time. It shows want of tact. However, good manners are a thing of the past."

I went over to her and took her hand. "I want to know how you feel," I said.

She looked up at me and smiled. "We had a vigil, didn't we? You slept in your chair. As for me, I never closed my eyes. If you think this business is going to be easy, you're mistaken."

"I never said it would be easy," I answered. "It's going to be the hardest thing you've ever done."

"I have to deny myself peace and pleasant dreams for your sake," she said. "That's what it amounts to, doesn't it? Just because you want me about the place. How do I know you won't change your mind again and banish me upstairs?"

"No," I said. "No . . . no . . ."

My sudden violence amused her, and she reached up and patted my cheek. "You're spoiled," she said, "that's your trouble. Julie and I agreed upon it this morning."

Gaston came into the salon and announced lunch, in his new hushed voice suited to mourning. The others were already in the dining room, and as the mother took her seat opposite me I said, "Now you are back again, where you belong, I intend making other changes too. Paul isn't going to direct the verrerie any more. He's going to travel, with Renee."

My statement left her unmoved. Giving a piece of kidney from her plate to the terriers crouched on either side of her, she said, "An excellent idea. They ought to have gone before. But who will take his place? Not Jacques, surely? He hasn't the authority."

"Blanche," I replied. "She knows more about the verrerie than any of us. In the future she will live at the master's house."

Even this failed to excite her. She said almost placidly, "I always said Blanche had a head for business. She'll have the tourists here in no time at all. A shop inside the gates, selling replicas of the chateau and the church, ice creams from Julie at the lodge. It would have happened long ago, only that the war intervened."

She went on eating. Paul, throwing a look at me, said quickly, "You don't disapprove, then? Of either plan?"

"Disapprove?" she echoed. "Why should I disapprove? Both suggestions suit me well."

I was aware of Marie-Noel watching me from across the table. "Well?" I said. "What now?"

"You've made plans for everyone but yourself," she said. "What are you going to do when everybody's gone?"

Her question caught attention from the rest. They all looked at me, curious.

"I shall stay here," I said, "at the chateau, at St. Gilles. I've no intention of going away. I shall stay here always."

My remark sounded perhaps too vehement, too tense. They were looking at me, puzzled, oddly strained. Marie-Noel, the only one without embarrassment, exclaimed, "When there's a sudden silence, and nobody speaks, it means there's an angel in the room, so Ger-maine told me. I'm not altogether sure. It could be a demon."

Then Gaston came with vegetables. The moment passed, and everyone began to talk at once, except myself. I knew now what I was going to do. I had remembered the service revolver in the drawer of the library desk. I should have no remorse and no regret. He would receive the welcome he deserved. Even the rendezvous he had chosen, the master's house, was added justice. The only thing I minded was somehow getting rid of my car, but it belonged to a past I had forgotten anyway. The project, born in an instant, took shape, becoming clear. Like him, I would walk to the master's house through the woods, and, crossing the orchard at the back, climb through the window. There would be no witnesses to this encounter.

After lunch my opportunity came. Blanche and the child went upstairs for lessons. The mother called the others to see the rearrangement of the salon. I went to the library, got the revolver from

the desk and opened it. It was loaded. I slipped it into my coat pocket, went upstairs to the dressing room and put it away in the drawer beside the boxes containing the morphine and the syringe.

When I came downstairs I realized I had been only just in time.

They were moving into the library. Paul sat down at the desk, Renee at the table, and both began addressing envelopes. The mother, settling herself in a chair where she could watch, put out her hand to me. "You're restless," she said. "What's on your mind?"

As I looked at her I reminded myself that it was not her son I was going to kill but someone without emotions, without heart, who had no feeling for her or anyone else. She recognized me as her son. In the future I should do everything for her that he had failed to do. "I want to bury the past," I said. "That's the only thing on my mind."

"Just as you like," she said. "I ask for nothing better, if it works. The whole thing is a conspiracy, of course, to make life more pleasant for yourself. Come and sit down."

She gestured to the chair beside her and I sat down, still holding her hand. Presently, I saw she slept. Paul said quietly, "She's doing much too much. She'll suffer for it later. You ought to stop her."

"No," I said, "it's better this way."

The long afternoon wore on. There was no sound but the scratching of the pens. I looked at the mother's face, asleep, and knew suddenly I must go before she woke, before the child came down. Paul had his back to me, and Renee also. They must none of them know where I was going. Some impulse, like touching wood to ward off danger, made me kiss the mother's hand. Then I rose and went out of the room. No one looked up or called me back.

I fetched the revolver from the dressing room and went out of the front door onto the terrace and round the side of the chateau, through the garden door and into the park. Never had the forest seemed more beautiful or more benign, the hot sun gilding the falling leaves. When I came to the field bordering the foundry grounds I lay down and waited. It was no use entering the master's house until Jacques had gone and the men had stopped work for the day. Lying there in the woods, I could see the wisp of smoke coming from the foundry chimney, and I began to get impatient.

Two hours must have passed. I had no means of telling, without a watch, but of a sudden the air became more chill, the sun had dipped behind the trees, and I was aware of silence. All sounds from the foundry had ceased. I got up, crossed the orchard, keeping close to the hedge, and stood against the wall of the master's house. I waited a moment, then, sheltered by the vine, looked in at the office window. The room was empty, Jacques had gone home, and I had the place to myself. I moved along the house to the further end and climbed through a window. The room was full of traces of Blanche and Paul. Some of the furniture had already been shifted, tables and chairs pulled forward, pictures moved. The room was no longer a shell, housing the past, but waited, expectant, for Blanche to bring life to it once more.

I sat waiting, too, for the man I meant to kill. Sunlight went from the room, and the shadows grew. In half an hour or less it would be dusk, and when he came, knocking on the window or the door, he would find that what happened to him was his own crime in reverse. He, and not I, would go back fifteen years.

I saw the handle of the door turn first, and because of disuse the knob fell to the floor. The door did not open, for I had bolted it. I crossed the room, picked up the knob and fitted it back. Slowly I withdrew the bolt, holding the revolver ready. I opened the door. It was thus, I thought, that Maurice Duval must have opened the door that night, and found him standing there in the darkness. Then I heard an exclamation from without and a voice -- not his -- said, "Hullo, is there somebody in the house?" It was not Jean de Gue, it was the cure. We confronted one another, I shaken and nonplused, he smiling, nodding, until his eye, falling upon the revolver, oddly changed.

"Will you allow me?" he said, and he put out his hand and took the revolver from me before I knew

what he was about. Then he emptied it, putting the cartridges in the pocket beneath his cassock, and the revolver also.

"I don't like those things," he said. "They caused a lot of damage during the war and they could do so again."

He looked up at me, his head nodding agreement, and because I was without words, unable to speak, he patted my arm and said, "Don't be angry. You'll be glad I took it away from you one of these days. You had planned destruction, hadn't you?"

I didn't answer him at once. Then I said, "Yes, Father."

"Very well," he said, "we won't discuss it. It's a matter for your own conscience and for God. It's not my business to ask you what is wrong. But it is my business to save life if I can. Perhaps, if I had not happened to pass by, something would have happened to cause grief to all of us. There has been tragedy enough in your family without your adding to it."

"I wasn't going to add to tragedy, Father," I said. "I hoped to remove the cause."

"By destroying yourself?" he asked. "What good would that do, to you or to them? By living, you can create their world afresh. Already I see signs of it, here in the master's house. That's what's needed: life, not death."

He waited for me to answer. I said nothing. He hesitated, his eyes anxious. "I'm not sure that I'm happy to leave you," he said, "after what I discovered just now. You might still do something rash."

"I can't," I said. "You've made it impossible."

He smiled. "I'm glad," he said. "I shall never regret it. As for your gun -- " he patted his cassock " -- perhaps I'll let you have it back again, one of these days. Bonsoir."

He went out of the doorway into the dusk. I watched him pass the well without a glance, and so across the ground towards the sheds. I closed the door and bolted it again. The room was now filled with shadows, the day was done. As I went to the window facing the orchard a figure rose from beneath it, gun in hand, and, throwing his legs across the sill, climbed in. Laughing softly, pointing the gun at my chest, he said, "That's how I worked it once before, but this was far easier. No sentries, no roadblocks, and instead of a bunch of lads who might give me away under threat, good Monsieur le Cure himself, who happened to pass by. You must admit that luck is always on my side, I was right, wasn't I, to come armed? It was the only thing I didn't leave you in my valise in Le Mans."

He pulled forward two of the chairs that Blanche had moved that morning. "Sit down," he said. "You don't have to keep your hands up. This isn't a threat, merely a precaution. I've always carried a gun since '41." He straddled the other chair, facing me. The back of it made a resting place for the gun. "So you planned to get rid of me, did you, and stay in St. Gilles? The sudden prospect of a fortune was too much for you? I sympathize. I felt that way myself."

## CHAPTER 13

I couldn't see his eyes but only his features, dimly, which were mine. The absence of light made his presence, although more sinister, somehow easier to bear.

"What happened?" he asked. "How did she die? The notice I read this morning said by accident."

"She fell," I answered, "from the window of her bedroom. She had dropped the locket brooch you brought her from Paris, and was reaching for it. Tomorrow they bring her back to St. Gilles, and the funeral is on Friday."

"I read that in the papers," he said. "That's why I returned."

I made no comment. It was not his wife's funeral which had brought him home, but what her death would mean to him hereafter.

"You know," he said, "I never thought you'd face it. When I left you in that hotel bedroom, I imagined you going to the police, and, after many muddled explanations, persuading them to believe your story. Instead -- " he laughed " -- you've succeeded in living a lie for seven whole days. My congratulations. Has no one any suspicion?"

"No one," I said.

"What about my mother, and the child?"

"They least of all."

To say this gave me a strange sort of satisfaction that was almost savage. He had not been missed; no one had regretted him.

"I wonder how much you learnt," he said. "It amuses me to think of how you dealt with Renee, who was becoming a bore. And how you kept Francoise pacified. And whether, with misplaced courtesy, you tried to talk to Blanche. As for my mother, her demands can only be dealt with in the future by a doctor: not our own, but an expert. She'll have to go to a clinic. I'm already in touch with one, in Paris,"

I watched the muzzle of the revolver on the back of his chair. I should never reach it. Expert in trickery as in all things, he would be too quick for me.

"There's no need to send her to Paris," I said. "Though I expect she will need medical care at home. She wants to stop the drug. I was with her all last night. She's made the first attempt."

I could feel his eyes upon me. "What do you mean?" he asked. "You were with her all last night? What did you do?"

I thought back to the chair beside her bed, to the half dreams, to the silence, to the threatening shadows that seemed to dissolve and pass. To tell him about the night now sounded trite, absurd. Nothing had been accomplished, only sleep.

"I sat beside her and she slept," I said. "I held her hand."

His laughter, infectious yet intolerable, rang through the dark room. "My poor friend," he said, "do you imagine that is the way to cure a morphine addict? Tonight she'll be a raving maniac. Charlotte will have to give her a double dose."

"No," I said. "No." But doubt assailed me. Already, when I left her, sleeping in her chair, she had looked ill and exhausted.

"What else?" he said. "Tell me what else you've done."

What else? I searched my mind. "Paul," I said, "Paul and Renee. They're leaving the chateau, leaving St. Gilles. They're going to travel, at any rate for six months or a year."

I saw him nod. "That will break up the marriage even sooner," he said. "Renee will find the lover

she's been searching for, and Paul feel himself more inferior than ever. Put him in the world and he'll look what he knows he is -- a provincial boor. What want of tact, if I may say so, how lacking in finesse. Tell me more."

I remembered, as a boy, playing skittles. One bowled a ball along an alley, and the ninepin at the other end toppled and fell flat. This was what he was doing now to the plans I had conceived through love.

"You turned down the Carvalet contract, didn't you?" I said. "I signed a new one. The verrerie won't close. No one will be out of a job. You'll have to back the loss with capital."

This time he didn't laugh. He whistled. The expression of dismay delighted me. "I suppose I can get out of it," he said. "It may take time. Your other moves were minor blunders, but this is serious. Even with Francoise's money, propping up a dying business is no fun. Whom did you intend to look after things, with Paul away?"

"Blanche," I said.

"You actually spoke to Blanche?" he asked. "And she replied?"

"I did," I said. "She came down here this morning. I told her the verrerie was hers from now on. She can do what she Hkes with it, she can build it up as a dowry for Marie-Noel."

He said nothing for a moment. The upsetting of all his preconceived ideas may have shaken him. I hoped it had. More than anything else, I wanted him to lose assurance. He did not do so.

"Do you know," he said slowly, "it might, in the long run, work. If Blanche took up designing again, and we could turn out cheap gimcrack stuff to attract the tourist, we might develop a market in this part of the country that would undercut everyone else. How clever of you to Hatter her ego, which I suppose you did. You haven't done too badly, on the whole," he said. "What about Marie-Noel? Has she seen any visions this week, or dreamt any dreams?"

I did not answer. To tarnish the child was surely the ultimate evil. He might desecrate the mother, mock the sister and the brother, but to give him Marie-Noel as a butt for humor, that I would not do. "She's all right," I said. "She stood yesterday's tragedy well."

"That doesn't surprise me," he said. "The two of them never got on. Francoise was jealous of the child, and the child knew it. Now, at least, you understand what it means to have a possessive family. And you were prepared to endure it, for the sake of money. You came down here to the master's house determined to kill me, so you could live in comfort for the rest of your days."

He tilted his chair back again, blowing smoke into the air.

"You won't believe me," I said, "but I didn't think about the money. I happen to love your family, that's all."

My statement made him laugh once more. "You have the audacity to tell me," he said, "that you love my mother, who is without exception the most egotistical, the most rapacious woman I have ever known; you love Paul, who is an oaf and a weakling; you love Renee, who has a mind like an empty box; you love Blanche, who is so twisted with frustrated passion that the only stimulation she gets out of life is to kneel before a crucifix. And I suppose you'll tell me that you love my child for her sweetness and innocence, which, let me tell you, can be put on for effect."

I did not argue. What he said was true, according to his light, and perhaps mine too. It did not matter. "I agree with you," I said, "your family are all those things. It doesn't prevent me from loving them, that's all. Do<sup>^</sup>r t.sV: me why. I couldn't answer you."

"I have affection for them," he said, "because they happen to belong to me. But you have no reason. You've only known them a week. You're an incurable sentimentalist, of course. Did you see yourself as a savior?"

"No. As a fool."

"That's honest, anyway. And what do you suppose is going to happen now?"

"I don't know. It's up to you."

He scratched his head with the butt of his revolver. I might have sprung at him then, but it wouldn't have worked.

"Exactly," he said. "I can carry through your program if I choose. Or tear it up, depending on my mood. What about you? Shall we walk into the forest and dig a grave? No one would look for you. You'd simply disappear. It's happened to other people before now."

"If that's what you decide," I said, "then go ahead. I'm in your hands. Unless you prefer to throw me down the well."

I couldn't see him, but I could feel his smile. "Have you raked up that one too?" he said. "What a ferret you are. I thought the mud had settled years ago. Do you also love your image of Maurice Duval?"

"It's not much use," I said, "discussing Duval or your family. I have my own picture of them. Nothing you can say will break it down. If you intend to kill me, as I intended to kill you, let's get it over. I'm ready."

"I'm not sure I want to kill you," he said. "It seems rather a waste. After all, we've deceived them once, we could do so again. I could let you know, we could arrange a rendezvous, I could disappear for a week or a month and you take my place. What do you think? Of course, I might have undone, in the meantime, all that you'd tried to do. But that wouldn't bother you. It might even add zest to your stay."

I hated him so much I could not answer. And, taking my silence for consideration, he went on, "You'd hardly have met my Bela. There wouldn't have been time. She keeps a shop in Villars, cooks like an angel, and that's not her only attraction. I visit her now and again to keep boredom at bay. Naturally, if we come to an agreement, she'll be part of the bargain. It would even add a certain piquancy when I returned, if I thought you'd been deceiving Bela with the rest."

I got up from my chair. Instantly he rose too, covering me with the gun.

"Let's get it over," I said. "I've nothing more to say."

"I have, though," he answered. "Don't you want to know what I've been doing the past week?"

"No," I said. "Frankly, I don't care. It doesn't concern me."

"But it does," he insisted. "It concerns you very much."

"How?"

"Sit down again," he said, "and I'll enlighten you." He snapped on a cigarette lighter, which I realized, in the light of the flame, was mine. And then I saw that his coat was also mine. But not the one I had been wearing in Le Mans.

"You see?" he said. "I played the game fair, just as you did. If you were taking my place, it was only sporting to take yours. I went to London, to your flat. I only flew back today."

I stared at him, or rather at his shadow. When I had thought of him, during the past week, it had been as a shadow, a wraith. And had I given the wraith substance I should have placed him perhaps in Paris, or in Italy, in Spain, anywhere but in my own life, deceiving my own world.

"You went to my flat?" I said. "You used my things?"

"Why not?" he said. "That's what you did at St. Gilles. I left you my family. You used them in the way you've described. You can hardly blame me for playing the game in reverse."

I tried to think. The hall porters would merely nod and say good morning or good night. The woman who cleaned my flat never came until after half past ten, when I had already left. My friends believed me away on holiday. There was no reason for anyone to telephone, to write. Bewildered, I still sought for proof that he was lying. "How did you know where to go?" I said. "How did you manage?"

"My poor idiot," he replied, "your card was in your valise, your notebook, your checks, your keys, your passport-- all the things I was likely to need. To take over your very retiring personality proved the easiest thing in the world. I enjoyed myself: after the turmoil of St. Gilles I felt I was in paradise. I rifled your drawers, read your letters, deciphered your lecture notes, cashed your checks -- fortunately your somewhat cramped signature was easy enough to imitate. I spent five days in complete and utter idleness, which was just what I needed."

The humor, and the justice, struck me at last. I had played about with human life; he had not. I had done my best to change his household; he had merely yawned and taken his ease. Then I remembered that he had, after all, returned to France; for he had read the news of Francoise's death in the papers at Deauville.

"If you enjoyed my London solitude so much," I asked, "what made you come back again to France?"

I felt him watch me in the darkness. He did not answer immediately, and when he did it was almost with embarrassment.

"That's where I have to apologize," he said, "but not more so, I think, than you, who by altering that contract may have let me in for very heavy loss. The fact is -- " he paused, choosing his words " -- the fact is, five days in London were enough. I couldn't have continued your dull, virtuous existence. In time, friends would have written, people at the university got in touch; and though I have never questioned either my ability to take another's part or my command of English -- I had plenty of practice in both during the war -- I appear to have lacked your supreme confidence. The easiest thing to do, as I intended using your name and personality, was to change your mode of living. This was, to tell you the truth, just what I did."

I did not understand what he was trying to tell me. "What do you mean?" I said. "How could you change my life?"

I heard him sigh in the darkness. "It may come as a shock," he said, "just as what you have been doing at St. Gilles has come as a shock to me. First I wrote to the university, resigning your job. Then I told your landlord that I was going abroad immediately and wanted to give up the lease of your flat, and, flats being as few and far between in London as they are in Paris, he was only too glad for me -- or rather you -- to get out at once. I instructed a firm of auctioneers to sell your furniture. And finally, having found out from your bank statement how much money you had in the bank, I cashed a check for just that amount. It was, if you remember, a couple of hundred pounds. Not a fortune, but enough to tide me over comfortably for a month or two, until something else turned up."

I tried to grasp what he was telling me, to make myself realize that he was speaking of something which had actually happened, to think myself back into the person I had been. But all I could see was this shadow, wearing my clothes, who within a number of hours had destroyed that person's life.

"The point is, my friend," he continued smoothly, "that if I don't kill you, and if you won't agree to my little plan of deception that we share each other's lives from time to time, what are you going to do? There is no future for you."

The full meaning of his words was forced upon me. Unless I made a fool of myself by writing to the university and saying it was all a mistake, I had no work. I had no money, save for one or two modest investments. I had no flat, and if I didn't get back to London soon I should have no

furniture. I did not exist.

"Of course," he said, "I didn't intend to come home. I was going to amuse myself spending your money over here. I had in mind, to start off with, some little niche in Sicily or Greece, taking Bela with me as a companion. She might have palled in time, but not at first: Hungarian women have the strangest charm. But now -- " he broke off, and I could dimly see the shrug of the shoulders " -- poor Françoise dying has rather changed my plans. Instead of being an impoverished provincial count I might, with any luck, be a millionaire. Fate, or whoever arranges these things, has done what I wanted."

He stood up, the gun still pointing at me.

"It's a curious thing," he said, "and shows weakness of character. But while I was driving from Deauville this afternoon I felt myself moved. This is, after all, my country, and where I belong. The chateau, heaven knows, is falling to pieces and the grounds are unkempt and ragged, but if you've been born in a place it does something to you. I neglect it, and curse it, and fight against all it does to me, just as I curse my mother, for the selfsame reason. And yet -- " he laughed, and I saw him gesture with his hand " -- and yet, in a strange sort of way I missed her, while I was gone. She's a devil and a brute, but I understand her and she understands me, and that's more than you can say, after your seven days."

Suddenly, with geniality, almost with affection, he shook my shoulder. "Come on," he said, "I don't want to kill you. In many ways I'm grateful for what you've done." He pulled out a wallet -- mine. "This will keep you for some considerable time," he said. "And any time you decide upon deception, for a few days even, I'll be delighted to oblige. What about it? Shall we play charades again now, and start to strip?"

I thought of the cure. He was now back in St. Gilles, putting away his bicycle. At the chateau they were waiting for dinner. They would be wondering where I had gone. Marie-Noel, anxious, perhaps, at my absence, was waiting for me on the terrace. I began to take off my coat.

The exchange in the darkness was macabre, even terrible. It meant, with every garment shed, a loss of the self I had found. When I stood in front of him at last, naked, his revolver pointing at me still, I said, "Finish me off, I don't want to live."

"Nonsense," he answered. "No one refuses life. Besides, I don't want to kill you. The point has gone." He began throwing off his clothes as he spoke, and seeing that I fumbled with them as I put them on, he said, "What have you done to your hand?"

"I burnt it," I said. "I burnt it in a bonfire."

"How careless," he said. "Does it mean you're not able to drive?"

"No," I said. "It's better now."

"You'd better hand over the dressing, I can't appear without it."

The clothes, that had once been mine, seemed shrunken, small. As I stood before him, dressed and ready, it was like wearing some sort of garment long outgrown, almost as if a man struggled once again into his schoolboy clothes.

"That's better," he said. "I feel like myself again." He moved towards the window. "We'd better go out this way," he said. "It's safer. That gossip Julie may be in her lodge. There's another wicked old rascal for you. I suppose you loved her too."

He climbed from the window and I followed him. The scent of the tumbled orchard filled the air.

"I'm sorry," he said, "I shall have to ask you to walk in front of me. I'll direct you to the place where I've left your car."

The dark woods closed upon us, and even now I could not be sure, even now it might suit his plan

to kill me and have done with me forever. I walked on, through darkness, undergrowth and moss, and now the self who stumbled had no heart or mind.

"There's the car," he said suddenly.

The Ford, familiar, spattered with mud, was drawn up beside the forest track. It seemed to me, like my clothes, a phase outgrown. I patted the hood with my hand.

"Get in and back her out into the track," he said.

We got in and drove along the path. We turned into the forest road and followed it to the top of the hill. Below us were the lights of the village, and the clock struck eight.

"It may not be easy," I said slowly, "They have become different. Your mother, I mean, and Blanche, and Paul, and Renee. Only the child is the same. The child hasn't changed."

He laughed. "Even if she had," he said, "she'd soon be mine again. I'm the only one who matters in her world."

We drove down the lime avenue and across the bridge. When I came to the gateway I stopped the car. "I won't go any further," I said. "It wouldn't be safe."

He got out and stood for a moment, an animal, sniffing the air. "It's good," he said. "It's part of the place. It's St. Gilles." Now at last he emptied his gun and put it, with the cartridges, into his pocket.

"Good luck," he said, and then, with a smile, "Listen." He put two fingers in his mouth and whistled. The sound was shrill and long. It was answered almost instantly by Cesar. He began to bark. Not savagely, not as he would to a stranger, but excitedly, the bark changing to a howl, to a whine. The sound went on and on, filling the air. "You didn't learn that trick?" he asked. "Of course not, how could you know?"

He smiled, and waved his hand, and passed through the gateway onto the drive. Looking towards the terrace steps, I saw a figure waiting there, the glow from the fanlight above the door shining upon her. It was Marie-Noel. When she saw the figure striding up the drive she gave a cry and ran down the steps towards him. I saw him swing her up in his arms and climb the steps. They went inside the chateau. The dog was whining still. I got into the car and drove away.

What I did was automatic. I don't remember thinking anything. I turned the car up the lime avenue and then onto the road to Villars. I concentrated on holding the wheel and watching the road, and the effort of doing so shut out thoughts of anything else. I made no image of the life I had left.

Coming into Villars was a strange relief. The country roads held menace: they were nerve cells leading back to St. Gilles. Villars was lighted and had solidity, and people strolling in the streets. I turned down past the market place and stopped the car just short of the Porte de Ville. I looked across the canal and saw that the long window of Bela's room was opened wide, and lighted too. Something stirred within me that had been frozen since Jean de Gue and I had changed clothes in darkness. The light in her window was consoling, kindly. It stood for reality, for things that were true. It was important to know the false from the true, and I could no longer distinguish between them. Bela could tell me, Bela would know.

I left the car, went over the footbridge to her balcony, and walked in through the open window. The room was empty, but I could hear her moving about in the kitchen. I stood there, waiting, and in a moment she was with me. She stood in the doorway, looking at me, and then she shut the door and came towards me.

"I didn't expect you," she said, "but it doesn't matter. If I'd known you were coming I would have waited dinner for you."

"I'm not hungry," I said. "I don't want anything."

"You look ill," she said. "Sit down, I'll get you a drink."

I sat in the deep chair. I did not know what I was going to say to her. She gave me cognac, and watched me while I drank. The cognac brought some sort of warmth to me, but the numbness remained. I felt the solidity of the arm of the chair under my hand, and it was safety.

"Have you been in the hospital chapel?" she said.

I stared at her. It took me a moment to realize what she meant. "No," I said, "no, I was there this morning." I paused. "Thank you for the porcelain. The child was pleased. She believed they were the old ones, mended. It was right of you to suggest that."

"Yes," she said, "I thought it better that way."

She looked at me with compassion. No doubt I seemed to her strained and queer. She must believe I was still shaken by Françoise's death. It might be better to let her think that. Yet I could not be sure. I wanted something for myself alone.

"I came," I said, "because I was not sure when I should see you again."

"I understand," she answered. "Naturally, the next few days, the next weeks, are going to be very hard for you."

The next days . . . the next weeks. They did not exist. It was not easy to tell her that.

She was still watching me. I saw her eye fall on my clothes. She did not recognize the suit. The shirt, the tie, the socks, the shoes -- she had never seen any of them before. An odd silence seemed to come between us. I felt I must justify myself, give her some explanation. "I want to thank you," I said. "You've shown me great understanding all this past week. I'm very grateful to you."

Suddenly I saw comprehension come into her eyes, the flash of intuition that sweeps an adult hearing the confession of a child. In a moment she was kneeling by my side. "He has come back then?" she said. "The other one?" She put her hands on my shoulders. "I might have known it. He saw the notice in the papers. That brought him back."

Her words gave me such a sense of overpowering relief that all feeling of strain and tension went from me. It was like the stanching of a wound, the cessation of pain, the blotting out of fear. I put down the cognac and did something infantile and absurd. I laid my head on her shoulder and closed my eyes.

"Why you?" I asked. "Why you and nobody else? Why not the mother, why not the child?"

I felt her hands on my head, soothing, gentle. It was surrender, it was peace.

"I suppose I was not easy to deceive," she said. "I did not realize at first. It was not till later that I knew."

"What did I do?" I said.

She laughed, and the laugh was not mocking, or easy, or gay, but had a strange quality of warmth, of understanding.

"It was not what you did," she said, "but what you were. You have something that he doesn't possess. That's how I knew."

"What do I have?" I asked.

"You may call it tendresse," she said. "I don't know another word for it." Then abruptly she asked my name.

"John," I said. "We share even that. Shall I tell you what happened?"

"If you want to," she said. "I can guess a great deal. The past is done with, for both of you. The future is what matters."

"Yes," I said, "but not mine, theirs." I knew with urgency, with conviction, that what I was saying

was right and true. The old self of Le Mans was dead. The shadow of Jean de Gue had also vanished. In their place was something else that was born of feeling, that could not die, and it was like a flame, contained in the body's shell.

"I love them," I said, "I'm part of them now, forever. That's what I want you to understand. I shall never see them again, but because of them I live."

"I understand," she said, "and it could be the same for them. Because of you they also live."

"If I could believe that," I said, "then nothing matters. But he's gone back to them. It will start all over again -- the carelessness, the unhappiness, the pain. If that were to happen, I should want to hang myself on the nearest tree. I want them to be happy -- not his sort of happiness, but the kind that is buried inside them, locked up, that I know is there. Bela, it exists, I've seen it, like a light or a hunger, waiting to be released." I stopped. "He's a devil," I said, "and they belong to him again."

"No," she said, "that's where you're wrong. He's not a devil. He's a human, ordinary man, just like yourself."

She rose and drew the curtains, and then came back to me again. "Remember, I know him," she said, "his weakness and his strength, his good points and his bad. If he were a devil I should have left him long ago."

I wanted to believe her, but I could not be sure. Little by little I told her what I knew of the past. Yet as I talked, wishing to condemn him, it was as if it was the shadow I condemned, the man who had moved and spoken and acted in his place, and not Jean de Gue at all. "It's no use," I said at last. "I'm not describing the man you know."

"You are," she answered, "but you're describing yourself as well."

There was the fear. Which one of us was real? It struck me suddenly that if I should now look at myself in a mirror I should see no reflection.

"Bela," I said, "hold me. Tell me my name."

"You are John," she said, "you are John, who changed places with Jean de Gue. You lived his life for a week. You came here to my house and you entered my life as John, not as Jean de Gue. Is that reality for you? Does that help you to become yourself?"

I touched her hair and her face and her hands, and there was no falsity about her, no pretense.

"You've given something to all of us," she said, "to me, to his mother, to his sister, to his child. Just now I called it tendresse. Whatever it is, it can't be destroyed. It's taken root. It will go on growing. In the future we shall look for you in Jean, not for Jean in you." She smiled, and put her hands on my shoulders. "Do you realize I know-nothing about you?" she said. "I don't know where you come from, or where you are going, or anything at all except that your name is John."

"There is no more to know," I said. "Let's leave it at that."

I looked at the window and the curtains she had drawn across it.

"Why did you draw the curtains?" I asked.

"It's a signal," she said. "He doesn't come in when they're drawn. It means I'm not alone."

The same thought, then, had come to both of us. Once he had dined, and said good night to the child, and left his mother in the tower room alone, he might go down to the car once again, and drive from St. Gilles to Villars, as I had done. He belonged here, just as he did there. I got up from the chair.

She said, "What are you going to do?"

"Leave the house," I answered, "before he comes."

She looked at me thoughtfully. "I could leave the curtains drawn," she said.

I glanced at the window. "Pull the curtains back when I've left the house," I said. "I'll go out through the street door."

She followed me out of the room to the passage beyond. "What about your hand? It has no dressing." She went to the bathroom and fetched an oilskin packet. As she held my hand, and dressed it, I thought of Blanche, who had done the same for me in the morning, and I thought of the mother, whose hand had lain in mine throughout the night. I remembered, too, the firm, warm clasp of the child.

"Look after them," I said. "You can do it, but nobody else. Perhaps he'll listen to you. Help him to love them."

"He loves them already," she said. "I want you to believe it. It wasn't just the money that brought him back."

"I wonder," I said. "I wonder . . ."

When she had dressed my hand she came with me down the stairs, and drew back the bolts from the door. "A week ago," I told her, "I was a man named John, who didn't know what to do with failure. I thought of a place I might go to, to find out. Then I met Jean de Gue, and the failure turned into love for St. Gilles. But the problem remains the same. What do I do with love?"

She opened the door. The shops and houses opposite were shuttered and closed. There was nobody in the street.

"You give it away," she said, "but the trouble is, it stays with you just the same. Like water in a well." She put her arms round me and kissed me. "Will you write to me?" she asked.

"I expect so."

"And you know where you're going?"

"I know where I'm going."

"If they could have shown you there what to do with failure, can they also show you what to do with love?"

"I believe so. I believe they'll give me the answer you've given me now."

I kissed her, and then I went out into the street. I heard her shut the door and bolt it behind me. I went under the Porte de Ville, and climbed into the car, and reached for my maps. I found the route I had marked with a blue cross a week ago, the road to the Abbey from Mortagne. I might be able to get there in not much more than an hour.

I put down the map, and glancing up at her window I saw that she had pulled the curtains back once more. The light was shining from the window down to the canal and the footbridge. I backed the car, and turned and went up the avenue, and as I passed the hospital I saw the Renault drawn up there. It was not outside the hospital entrance, but by the smaller gate, leading to the chapel. It was empty, and there was no sign of Gaston. Whoever had come in the car had gone in to pay tribute alone.

I drove to the network of roads at the top of the town, turned left, and took the road to Belleme and Mortagne.

## Daphne du Maurier

Daphne du Maurier leads several lives: as Lady Browning, wife of Lieutenant-General Sir Frederick Arthur Montague Browning, Treasurer to the Duke of Edinburgh, she moves in London's highest social circles; as mother of three children, she has a full and rich domestic life; as a writer, she puts in long, secluded hours in a bare hut on the grounds of her beautiful old house, Menabilly, which has appeared, thinly disguised, in several of her novels. Miss du Maurier, daughter of the former matinee idol Sir Gerald du Maurier, and granddaughter of the author of *Trilby* and *Peter Ibbetson*, is a fantastically successful novelist, she is extraordinarily pretty, and she has a low opinion of herself as an author - in spite of having written a dozen internationally known books, including *Rebecca* and *My Cousin Rachel* (Condensed Books, Summer 1952).