

She answered with a sleepy smile: 'Don't be silly!' And, shaking off her drowsiness, she added: 'Now tell us something to amuse us. You are always supposed to have more luck than the Duc de Richelieu, Monsieur Chenal; tell us the story of one of your love affairs, anything you like.'

Léon Chenal, an old painter, who had been a very strong, good-looking man, exceedingly proud of his physique and very successful with women, stroked his long white beard and smiled; then, after a moment's thought, he became serious again.

'It won't be an amusing story, ladies; I'll tell you about the most tragic affair in my life. I hope no friend of mine may ever inspire such a passion.'

I was twenty-five at the time and was making a sketching trip along the Normandy coast.

By sketching trip I mean wandering about from inn to inn with one's luggage on one's back, pretending to be doing studies from nature and landscapes. This unplanned vagabond life is the best I know. You are absolutely free of all restraint, with no anxieties, no worries, no need even to take thought for the morrow. You take any road that attracts, following the whim of the moment, in search of nothing but beauty. You stop because a stream appeals to you or because the smell of fried potatoes at the door of some inn is good. Sometimes it was the scent of clematis that decided your choice, sometimes a barmaid's welcoming smile. Don't despise these country affairs. These girls have souls and passions too, firm cheeks and fresh lips; and their rough kisses are intoxicating and sweet as wild fruit. Love is always worth while, wherever it comes from. A heart that beats quicker when you appear, an eye that sheds a tear at your departure are things so rare, so sweet, so precious that they should never be despised.

I have known trysts in ditches covered with primroses, behind the shed where the cows were asleep, on the straw in barns still warm with the sun's heat. I have memories of coarse grey linen on firm strong bodies and a longing for simple natural caresses, more

thrilling in their honest clumsiness than the sophisticated pleasure to be obtained from the charms of society ladies.

But what is most attractive in such random wanderings is the countryside, the woods, the sunrise, the gloaming and the moonlight. They are the painter's honeymoon with the earth. You are alone, very close to her in a long, peaceful lovers' tryst. You lie down in a meadow on a bed of daisies and poppies, and before closing your eyes in the blazing sunshine you look at the little village in the distance with its pointed clock-tower striking twelve.

You sit down beside a spring at the foot of an oak in a tangle of tall feathery grass, gleaming and alive. You kneel and bend down to drink the cool water which wets the moustache and nose, drinking with a sense of physical enjoyment as if kissing the spring, lip to lip. Sometimes you find a pool in one of these tiny streams and you dive in, naked, feeling as it were a deliciously cool caress, as the gentle current strokes the body like a thing alive.

On a hill-top you are cheerful, melancholy beside a pond, thrilled when the sun sets in a sea of blood-red clouds, reflected crimson in the rivers. And in the evening under a moon sailing in the zenith you have a thousand strange dreams which would never enter the mind in the blazing heat of the day.

Well, as I was wandering like this over the very country where we are this year, I came one evening to the tiny village of Bénouville, on the cliff between Yport and Etretat. I was coming from Fécamp along the coast, that high straight coast-wall with its outcrops of chalk, which plunge sheer into the sea. Since morning I had been walking on the short turf, fine and springy as a carpet, which grows up to the cliff edge under the salt sea wind. Singing at the top of my voice as I strode along, watching now the slow sweeping flight of a gull, with the white curve of its wings silhouetted against the sky, now the brown sail of a fishing-boat against the jade-green of the sea, I had spent a day of unalloyed happiness without a care in the world.

I was directed to a small farm-house, where travellers could put up, a sort of inn kept by a peasant-woman; it stood in the

centre of a Normandy courtyard surrounded by a double row of beeches.

So, leaving the cliffs I made my way to the hamlet in the shelter of its tall trees and knocked at Mother Lecacheur's door.

She was an old peasant-woman, wrinkled and unsmiling, who always seemed annoyed and distrustful at the sight of a visitor.

It was May at the time; apple-trees in bloom shaded the courtyard with a roof of scented blossom, raining down on the grass or those who passed beneath them a shower of pink petals.

I asked: 'Well, Madame Lecacheur, have you got a room for me?' Surprised at my knowing her name, she replied: 'That depends; I'm full up. But we might manage something.'

In five minutes everything was fixed up and I put down my rucksack on the earth floor of a primitive room, whose furniture consisted of a bed, two chairs, a basin and a table. It opened off the large smoky kitchen, where the guests had their meals with the farm-hands and their mistress, who was a widow.

I washed my hands and came out again. The old woman was frying a chicken for dinner in the open fire-place, where hung a smoke-blackened pot-hook.

'So you've got other guests,' I said.

'We's got one middle-aged lady from England; she be in t'other bedroom,' she answered crossly.

For an extra sixpence a day I secured the right to have my meals alone in the courtyard when it was fine.

So my place was laid just outside the door and I began to dismember the skinny Normandy chicken with my teeth, washing it down with golden cider and munching the coarse white bread, four days old but still excellent.

Suddenly the wooden garden gate on to the road opened and a strange figure advanced towards the house. She was very thin, very tall and swathed so tightly in a red tartan shawl that one would have thought she had no arms, had not one long hand been visible on the level of her hips, holding the typical tripper's sunshade. Her face resembled a mummy's, framed in grey sausage curls which bobbed up and down as she walked, and for some reason reminded me of a

kipper tied up with curl papers. She walked rapidly past me with lowered eyes and disappeared into the cottage.

This strange apparition amused me; it was obviously the middle-aged Englishwoman of whom my hostess had spoken.

I did not see her again that day. Next morning, when I had settled down to paint at the bottom of the charming valley you all know which runs down to Etretat, I suddenly looked up and saw a strange figure standing on the top of the cliff like a dressed flag-staff. It was she. When she saw me, she disappeared.

I went back at midday for lunch and sat down at the common table in order to make the acquaintance of this old eccentric, but she made no answer to my advances, taking no notice of my attentions. I kept her glass filled with water and passed her the dishes with persistent politeness. A slight, almost imperceptible nod and a word in English, murmured so low that I couldn't catch it, were all the thanks I got.

I gave up the struggle, though she intrigued me.

Three days later I knew as much about her as Madame Lecacheur herself.

Her name was Miss Harriet. Looking for a quiet village in which to spend the summer, she had stopped at Bénouville six weeks before and seemed to have no intention of moving on. She never spoke at meals, eating quickly and reading a little Protestant tract. She made a habit of distributing these pamphlets to all and sundry. The village priest himself had received four delivered by a little boy to whom she had given a penny for his trouble. Sometimes, without any introduction, she would say to our hostess in her bad French: 'I love the Lord above everything; I adore him in all His creation, I worship Him in all nature, I always carry Him in my heart.' And she handed the woman, who didn't know what to say, one of the booklets intended to convert the world.

They didn't like her in the village; the schoolmaster had called her an atheist, so that she was under a cloud of disapproval. Madame Lecacheur consulted the priest, who replied: 'She is a heretic, but God desireth not the death of a sinner and I believe her to be a person of strict morals.'

The words 'atheist' and 'heretic', the precise meaning of which they did not know, made everyone suspicious of her. It was alleged besides that she was rich and had spent her life travelling about the world, because her family had turned her out. Why had they turned her out? Of course, because of her impiety.

In fact she was one of those fanatically obstinate Puritan spinsters, so common in England, who haunt the hotel dining-rooms of Europe, spoil Italy, poison Switzerland and make the charming Mediterranean towns impossible, taking everywhere with them their strange crazes, the morals of a fossilized Vestal Virgin, their indescribable clothes and a kind of smell of india-rubber, as if they were put away at night in an indiarubber bag.

Whenever I caught sight of one, I used to run away like a bird at the sight of a scarecrow.

But this woman seemed such an unusual type that I was actually attracted.

Madame Lecacheur, instinctively disliking everything not of peasant origin, felt a kind of hatred in her prejudiced mind for the old maid's fanatical enthusiasms. She had found a word to describe her, a word obviously meant to express contempt – I don't know how she knew it or what confused mysterious mental process coined it. She used to say: 'She's a demoniac possessed.' This expression applied to this austere sentimental woman struck me as irresistibly comic. I always called her 'the demoniac' and took an unaccountable pleasure in saying the word aloud, whenever I saw her.

I used to ask Mother Lecacheur: 'Well, what's our demoniac been doing to-day?' And the peasant woman answered in a shocked tone of voice: 'Would you believe it, Sir? She's been an' picked up a toad what's 'ad its leg crushed, an' took it to 'er room an' stuck it in 'er basin an' puts bandages on it as if it was a 'uman. It's a real scandal, it is!'

Another day, as she was walking at the foot of the cliff, she had bought a big fish, just caught, simply in order to throw it back into the sea. And the fisherman, though well paid, had sworn violently at her, angrier than if she had stolen money out of his pocket. A

month later he still could not speak of the incident without losing his temper and using bad language. Yes, Miss Harriet was really a demoniac, and it was an inspiration on Madame Lecacheur's part to have given her the name.

The stable-boy, known as Sapper, because he had done his military service in Africa as a youth, had other views about her. He would say with a wink: 'I believe the old thing's got a past!'

If only 'the old thing' had known!

Céleste, the little servant, didn't like doing things for her, I don't quite know why. Perhaps just because she was a foreigner, of another race, another language, another religion. In a word, she was a demoniac!

She spent her time wandering over the countryside, looking for God and worshipping Him in nature. I found her one evening on her knees in a bush. Seeing something red through the leaves, I pushed back the branches and Miss Harriet got up confused at having been seen like this, staring at me with frightened eyes like an owl surprised in the daylight.

Sometimes, when I was working among the rocks, I suddenly caught sight of her on the edge of the cliff like the arm of a semaphore. Her passionate gaze was fixed on the expanse of ocean, shimmering like gold, and the sky crimson in the sunset. Sometimes I saw her at the bottom of a valley, walking fast with an Englishwoman's springy stride, and I went towards her, somehow attracted, just to see the ecstatic look on her face, a hard, nondescript face but tranquil with some deep inward joy.

Often, too, I came upon her at the corner of a farm, sitting on the grass in the shade of an apple-tree, with her little holy book open on her knees, gazing vaguely into the distance.

For I, too, had no thought of going away, drawn to this peaceful country-side by a thousand bonds of love for its wide open spaces. I was happy in this secluded farm, far from everything, near the earth, the good wholesome green, beautiful earth, which we shall ourselves fertilize with our bodies. And perhaps, I must admit, a spark of curiosity kept me at Mother Lecacheur's; I wanted to get to know this enigmatic Miss Harriet a little and find out what

goes on in the lonely souls of those elderly peripatetic English spinsters.

II

We got to know each other in an odd way. I had just finished a study, which I thought audacious – and not without reason; it was sold for 10,000 francs fifteen years later. It was simpler than two and two makes four, and broke all the academic rules. The whole of the right side of my canvas showed a rock, a huge rough rock, covered with seaweed, brown, yellow and red, and the sunlight was pouring over it like oil. The sun was out of the picture, behind me, but its light, falling full on the rock, made it shine like fiery gold. That was all. A foreground of dazzling light, flaming, magnificent.

On the left the sea, not blue or slate grey but the colour of jade, greenish, milky, steely as if under a leaden sky.

I was so pleased with my work that I was walking on air, as I brought it home. I wanted the whole world to see it straightaway. I remember showing it to a cow by the side of the path, shouting: 'Look at this, old lady; you won't often see the like of this!'

When I got to the door, I shouted to Mother Lecacheur at once, at the top of my voice: 'Hullo! Come here, Mother Lecacheur, and have a squint at this.'

The peasant woman came and looked uncomprehendingly at my work, seeing nothing and not knowing whether it represented a bullock or a house.

Miss Harriet was coming in and she passed behind me at the very moment when I was holding out the canvas at arm's length to show to my hostess. The demoniac could not avoid seeing it, for I took care to hold it so that it must catch her eye. She stopped short, dumbfounded, speechless.

It turned out to be her own particular rock, on to which she used to climb in order to dream undisturbed.

She uttered an English 'Oh!' with such flattering emphasis that I turned with a smile, saying: 'This is my latest study, Miss Harriet.'

She murmured ecstatically with a naïveté that was quite moving: 'Oh! Sir, your understanding of nature is quite thrilling!'

Believe it or not, I blushed at the compliment, more moved than if it had been uttered by a queen. I was her slave; she had made a complete conquest. I could have kissed her, I assure you!

I sat next her at dinner as usual. For the first time she talked, following the train of her thought aloud: 'Oh! I do love nature so!'

I plied her with bread, water, wine. To-day she accepted my attentions with a mummy-like smile. And I began to talk landscapes.

After the meal, rising at the same moment, we walked together across the courtyard; then, attracted no doubt by the astonishing blaze of light kindled by the setting sun on the sea, I opened the gate leading out on to the cliff and we walked on side by side like two people understanding one another fully for the first time.

It was a warm, soft evening, one of those evenings when body and spirit both have a sense of well-being. One is completely happy, everything is perfect. The warm-scented air, full of the fragrance of grass and seaweed, rises pleasantly to the nostrils with its wild perfume and the tang of the sea, lapping the spirit with its penetrating sweetness. We were walking now on the edge of the cliff, above the boundless ocean, whose waves looked tiny as they broke three hundred feet below. With mouth open and chest expanded, we breathed the fresh air from the sea, which caressed the skin gently, salty from the long kiss of the waves.

Tightly wrapped in her tartan shawl, her prominent teeth bared to the breeze, the Englishwoman watched the great sun sinking towards the sea, like one in ecstasy. In front of us, far below, near the sky-line a three-masted schooner under full sail was silhouetted against the flaming sky, and, nearer, a steamer was passing, leaving behind an endless trail of smoke across the whole horizon.

The crimson ball was sinking slowly. Soon it touched the sea, just behind the motionless ship, which stood out against its flaming orb, as if framed in fire. It sank slowly into the gulf of the ocean. We watched it touch the water, diminish in size and finally dis-

appear. It was all over. Only the silhouette of the little boat was still visible against the golden background of the sky.

Miss Harriet gazed at the fiery sunset with passionate eyes; she must have felt a wild longing to embrace the sky, the sea, the whole horizon.

She whispered: 'Oh! I love . . . I love . . . I love,' and I saw a tear in her eye. She went on: 'I wish I were a little bird to fly away into the sky.'

And she stood there, as I had often seen her, erect on the cliff, as red as her crimson shawl. I wanted to draw her in my sketch-book; she looked for all the world like a caricature of ecstasy!

I turned away to avoid smiling.

Then I talked painting to her as I would have talked to a fellow-student, using technical terms about tones, values, high lights and so on. She listened attentively, understanding and trying to guess the meaning of the obscure words and follow my train of thought. From time to time she interjected: 'Oh! I see. It's frightfully thrilling!'

We went back.

Next day, when she saw me, she came up quickly and shook hands. We were friends at once.

She was a good honest creature, with a soul as it were on springs, always ready for a burst of enthusiasm. She was unbalanced like all unmarried women of fifty. She seemed inhibited with an innocence that had gone sour but she had kept in her heart something that was very young and easily stirred. She loved nature and animals with a passionate love, which had fermented like wine kept too long, a sensual love which she had never given to a man.

Certain it is that the sight of a bitch suckling her puppies, a mare with foal at foot in a field, a bird's nest full of twittering fledglings, with open beaks, exaggerated heads and unfeathered bodies, made her tremble with unnatural excitement.

You poor lonely souls, straying sadly through hotel dining-rooms, poor, ridiculous, pathetic figures, I love you all, since I have known Miss Harriet!

I soon sensed that she wanted to say something but did not dare,

and her timidity amused me. When I started out every morning with my paint-box on my back, she would come with me as far as the end of the village, silent but obviously worried, searching for words to begin. And suddenly she would leave me and walk away quickly with her jerky gait.

At last one day she plucked up courage: 'I should so like to see you paint. Will you let me? I'm very curious to know.' And she blushed as though she had made a risky suggestion.

I took her to the bottom of the Little Valley, where I was beginning a large-scale study.

She stood behind me following my every movement with concentrated attention. Then suddenly, perhaps because she was afraid of being in the way, she said: 'Thank you,' and was gone.

But it was not long before she became more at ease, and she took to coming with me every day with obvious pleasure. She always brought her own stool under her arm, never letting me carry it, and sat by my side. She stayed there for hours, not moving or speaking, watching every movement of my brush. When I obtained the right effect unexpectedly with a large splash of colour applied quickly with the knife, she uttered involuntarily a little 'Oh!' of excitement, joy and admiration. She had a sentimental respect for my canvases, an almost religious respect for this human copy of a small part of the divine creation. My studies were like sacred pictures in her eyes; and sometimes she spoke to me of God in an attempt to convert me.

Her God was a strange being indeed, a sort of village sage, without great resources or much power, for she always pictured Him as distressed by the acts of injustice perpetrated in His sight – as if He were unable to prevent them.

Moreover she was on intimate terms with Him, with a knowledge apparently of His secrets and worries. She used to say: 'It is God's will' or 'it is not God's will', as a sergeant might say to a private: 'That's C.O.'s orders.'

She was deeply distressed at my ignorance of the divine intentions, which she was eager to reveal to me; and every day in my pockets, in my hat if I left it on the ground, in my paint-box, in the

newly cleaned shoes at my bedroom door in the morning, I used to find those little tracts, which she received no doubt straight from Paradise.

I treated her as an old friend with frank cordiality. But I soon sensed a slight change in her manner. At first I paid no heed.

When I was working either at the bottom of my valley or in some sunken road, I would suddenly see her appear with her fast jerky walk. She sat down, out of breath as if she had been running or was under the influence of violent emotion. She was very red in the face, red as only English women can get; then for no apparent reason she would blanch with an earthy pallor and seemed about to faint. But gradually she recovered her normal appearance and began to talk.

Soon, however, breaking off abruptly in the middle of a sentence, she would get up and go away so quickly and so strangely that I wondered if I had done something to displease or offend her.

Finally I came to the conclusion that this was only her normal behaviour, which she had no doubt somewhat modified in my honour at the beginning of our acquaintance.

When she came back to the farm-house after walking for hours on the wind-swept cliffs, her long side curls had often come down and were hanging as if a spring had given way in them. Before she had not bothered about it and had come in to dinner without any embarrassment, with her hair all out of curl by the action of her sister, the wind.

But now she always went to her room to tidy what I called her 'lamp chimneys', and when I said with a gallant friendliness which always shocked her: 'You are as lovely as a star to-day, Miss Harriet', she used to blush like a girl of fifteen.

Then all of a sudden she became distant and gave up coming to watch me painting. I thought: 'It's only a phase, it will pass'; but it did not pass.

Now, whenever I spoke to her she replied with studied indifference or curt irritability. And she became rude, impatient, nervy. I saw her only at meals and we hardly spoke. I really thought I must have offended her somehow; and one evening I asked her: 'Why

have you changed towards me, Miss Harriet? What have I done to annoy you? You are making me very unhappy.'

She replied in an angry tone that was quite comic: 'I haven't changed; it's a lie, it's not true'; and disappeared into her room.

Sometimes she looked strangely at me. Since then I have often thought that it was the look which men condemned to death give to those who come to tell them that their last hour has come. There was madness in her eye, the madness of the fanatic about to do some act of violence; and there was something else, too, a fever of exasperated frustration, impotently desiring some unrealized and unrealizable dream. She seemed to be struggling against some mysterious power within her, which she was striving to repress, and perhaps there was something else too ... I wonder ... I wonder.

III

The explanation came as a shock.

I had been working from dawn every morning for some time at a picture with the following subject:

A deep valley, shut in and dominated by two banks of reeds and trees, stretched away into the distance, deserted, blanketed by the whitish mist like cotton-wool, which sometimes fills such valleys at daybreak. And behind this curtain of fog, at once thick and transparent, one saw, or rather sensed, the approach of two figures, a girl in a man's close embrace, she with her head back looking up at him and he bending down towards her their lips meeting in a kiss.

The first rays of the sun, shining through the branches, pierced the dawn mist, casting a pink light behind the country lovers and imparting a silvery radiance to their undefined shapes. It was a very successful effect, I assure you.

I was working on the slope going down to the little Etretat valley, and that morning I happened to find just the floating mist I wanted. A ghostly form suddenly rose in front of me; it was Miss Harriet. When she saw me, she made as if to run away; but I

shouted to her: 'Come here, Miss Harriet, I've got a little picture for you.'

She approached as if unwillingly. I handed her my sketch. She made no comment, standing still for a long while gazing at it; and suddenly she burst into tears. Her sobs came in convulsive spasms, as with those who have struggled long against their tears but can restrain them no longer and give way, without however abandoning the effort at control.

I jumped up, moved by the sight of an emotion which I did not understand, and seized her hands with a gesture of instinctive affection, the gesture natural to a Frenchman, who always acts first and thinks afterwards.

She let her hands lie in mine for a few seconds and I felt them quivering as if every nerve were in a state of tension. Then she pulled them away quickly or rather wrenched them free.

I had recognized that quiver, for I had felt it before; there was no mistaking it. The quiver of a woman in love, whether she is fifteen or fifty, a woman of the people or a society lady, goes straight to my heart and I can never mistake it.

Her whole being, poor thing, had quivered and vibrated like a harp string and then snapped. I knew the truth. She was gone before I could say a word, leaving me dazed as if I had witnessed a miracle and remorseful as if I had committed a crime.

I did not go back for lunch. I went for a walk along the cliff, not knowing whether I wanted to laugh or cry; my position was at once comic and distressing. I recognized its ridiculous side but I realized that her unhappiness might drive her mad. I wondered what I ought to do.

I decided that I must go away and made up my mind to do so at once. After wandering about till the evening in a state of sentimental depression, I returned for dinner.

We sat down as usual. Miss Harriet was there. She ate her food solemnly, in silence with lowered eyes. Her expression and manner were normal.

I waited till the end of the meal, then, turning to my hostess, I said:

'Well, Madame Lecacheur, I shall soon be leaving you.'

The good woman, surprised and sorry, exclaimed in her drawling accent:

'What do you mean, Sir? You're leaving us? I was just getting quite used to you!'

I was watching Miss Harriet out of the corner of my eye; her face was inscrutable. But Céleste, the little servant-girl, had looked up at me. She was a plump girl of eighteen, with a fresh ruddy complexion, as strong as a horse and clean, a rare quality in a peasant. I had sometimes given her a kiss in a corner, as one does to any chambermaid, nothing more.

So the meal ended.

I went out to have my pipe under the apple-trees, walking up and down the courtyard. All the thoughts that had passed through my mind during the day, the morning's strange revelation, this ridiculous passion I had inspired, memories awakened by this discovery, sweet exciting memories, perhaps, too, the look the servant-girl had given me, when I announced my departure, the combination of all these things stimulated me physically; I felt the prick of kisses on my lips and the stirring of the blood that drives a man to do silly things.

Night was coming on and it was getting dark under the trees, when I saw Céleste come out to shut up the hen-run on the other side of the yard. I ran after her so lightly that she did not hear me coming and, as she stood up after shutting the little trap-door by which the hens got in and out, I seized her in my arms, covering her broad fat face with a hail of kisses. She struggled, laughing all the time, for this was nothing new to her.

Why did I suddenly let her go? Why did I turn round with a start? How did I sense the presence of someone behind me?

It was Miss Harriet coming in; she had seen us and was standing there stock still as if she had seen a ghost. Then she disappeared into the darkness.

I went in, ashamed and worried, more upset at having been surprised by her like this than if she had caught me committing a crime.

I slept badly, my nerves on edge, haunted by depressing thoughts. I seemed to hear the sound of weeping but I must have imagined it. Several times, too, I thought someone was moving about in the house and opening the front door.

Towards dawn I was so tired that I dropped asleep at last. I did not wake till late and only appeared for lunch, still feeling uncomfortable and not knowing how to face the situation.

Miss Harriet had not been seen. We waited for her but she did not appear. Madame Lecacheur went to her room but she was not there. She must have gone out at dawn, as she often did, to see the sunrise. No one thought anything of it and we began the meal in silence.

It was hot, very hot, one of those heavy stifling days without a leaf stirring. The table had been dragged outside under an apple-tree and from time to time Sapper went to the cellar to refill the cider jug, everyone was so thirsty. Céleste brought the dishes from the kitchen, stewed mutton and potatoes, followed by boiled rabbit and salad. Then she put on the table a plate of cherries, the first of the season.

Wishing to plunge them in water to cool them, I asked the little servant to go and draw me a bucket of very cold water.

She came back five minutes later, saying that the well had dried up. She had let out all the rope, and the bucket had touched bottom and come up empty. Madame Lecacheur wanted to see for herself and went off to look down the shaft. She came back, saying that she could certainly see something in the well, something that ought not to be there. A neighbour with a grudge against her must have thrown in a truss of straw.

I wanted to look, too, hoping to be able to make out more, and I peered down over the well-head. I made out something white, I couldn't see what. Then I had the idea of letting down a lantern on the end of a cord. The yellow light flickered on the stone sides as it descended slowly. All four of us were leaning over the opening, Sapper and Céleste having joined us. The lantern came to a stop above an indistinct black-and-white object, something strange which we could not make out. Sapper cried: 'It's a horse; I can see

its hoof. It must have escaped from the field and fallen in during the night.'

Suddenly I went cold all over. I had just recognized a foot, then a leg sticking up; the body and the other leg were under water.

I stammered in a hushed voice, trembling so violently that the lantern danced madly above the shoe: 'There's a woman down there; it's Miss Harriet.'

Sapper alone showed no signs of emotion; he had often seen corpses in Africa! Madame Lecacheur and Céleste uttered shrill cries and ran away.

We had to recover the body. I tied a rope firmly round the stable-boy's waist and let him down on the pulley very slowly, watching him go down into the darkness. He carried the lantern and another rope. Soon his voice, which seemed to come from the bowels of the earth, shouted: 'Stop!' and I saw him pull something out of the water; it was the other leg; presently, after tying the two feet together, he shouted again: 'Haul away!' I pulled him up, but my arms felt weak and my muscles paralysed, so that I was afraid of allowing the boy to fall back again by letting the rope slip through my hands. When his head appeared at the top, I asked him: 'Well?' as if I expected him to give me news of the woman at the bottom.

We both stood on the stone well-head, facing each other, and leaning over the opening we began to raise the body.

Madame Lecacheur and Céleste watched us from a distance, hiding behind the wall of the house. When they saw the black shoes and white stockings of the drowned woman appear over the edge, they disappeared. Sapper seized hold of the ankles and we pulled out the poor chaste spinster in the most immodest posture. Her head was a dreadful sight, bruised and disfigured, and her long grey hair, all dishevelled, never to be tidied again, hung down, dripping and covered with mud.

Sapper remarked contemptuously: 'My God! she's a skinny one!'

We carried her to her room and, as the two women did not appear, I laid her out with the stable-boy's help.

I washed the poor disfigured face. As I did so, one eye opened a little and she seemed to be looking at me from the other world with the cold, expressionless, terrifying stare of a corpse. I tidied her dishevelled hair as best I could and arranged it clumsily over her forehead in a style it had never known before. Next I took off her soaked garments, uncovering her shoulders and breast and her long arms, as thin as match-sticks, with a feeling of shame, as if I were profaning a holy place. After that I fetched flowers, poppies, corn-flowers, daisies and fresh scented grass, to cover her bier.

I had to carry out the usual formalities, being the only person on the spot. A letter which we found in her pocket, written just before her death, asked that she should be buried in the village where she had spent her last days. It came upon me with an unpleasant shock that it was because of me that she wanted to be laid to rest here.

Towards evening the women from the village came to view the body, but I would not let anyone in; I wanted to be alone and I kept vigil all night.

I watched her by the candle-light, poor unhappy woman, who had died so tragically among strangers far from home. Had she any friends or relations anywhere? What had her childhood and her life been? Where had she come from, to wander about in this way, alone, friendless, like a dog driven from home? What secret suffering, what despair had been shut up in this unattractive body, which she had worn like a badge of shame all her life, a ridiculous uniform which had defrauded her of all affection and love?

Some people have no luck! I realized the eternal injustice of cruel Nature which had crushed that human soul. Now death had come to her and she had never known the only consolation of the dispossessed, the hope of being loved just once. Why else had she hidden herself away, flying from all human contacts? This must have been the reason why she loved all things and all living creatures except men.

I understood her belief in God; she had hoped for compensation in the next world for her unhappiness in this life. Now she would rot, to live again as a plant, which would bloom in the sun; her leaves would be pasture for cattle and her seeds be carried away by

the fowls of the air, and, after being part of their flesh, she would be reabsorbed into other human bodies. But what goes by the name of soul had perished at the bottom of the dark well. Her sufferings were over. She had given her life in exchange for other lives that she would help to bring into being.

The hours of my grim vigil dragged on in silence. A faint brightness heralded the approach of dawn; soon a ray of sunshine crept over the bed and threw a line of rosy light on sheet and hands. It was the hour she had loved. The birds awoke and began to sing in the trees.

I flung the window wide open, drew the curtain, so that the whole eye of heaven should see us, and, leaning over the cold body, I took the disfigured face in my hands and, without fear or repulsion, pressed on those lips a kiss, a long kiss, the first perhaps they had ever received.



Léon Chenal stopped. The women were sobbing. On the box the Comte d'Etraille was blowing his nose violently. The driver alone was dozing and the horses, no longer feeling the whip, had slowed down and were hardly moving. The brake seemed almost to stop, as if suddenly weighed down with a load of sorrow.