

MONSIEUR PARENT

I

LITTLE George on all fours was making castles in the sand on the path. He picked up handfuls of it, built a pyramid and then stuck a chestnut leaf on the top.

His father, sitting on an iron seat, kept a fond gaze fixed on the child, with eyes for no one else in the crowded public garden.

All along the circular path running round the grass plots in front of the fountain and Trinity Church other children were similarly busy at their games like little puppies, while their bored nurse-maids stared blankly into space or their mothers gossiped together, keeping a watchful eye on their young.

Wet-nurses walked about solemnly in pairs, with the long brightly coloured ribbons of their bonnets streaming out behind them, carrying shapeless white masses wrapped up in lace, while little girls in short skirts with bare legs held serious confabulations in the intervals of running races with their hoops; and the garden attendant in his green uniform strolled about through the masses of children, threading his way carefully so as not to destroy the sand castles or tread on little hands and interfere with these fascinating human insects, all working as busily as ants.

The sun was nearly setting behind the roofs of the Rue Saint Lazare and cast its long slanting rays over the animated throng of youngsters and well-dressed grown-ups. A golden light shone upon the chestnuts and the three fountains in front of the great west door of the church were streams of liquid silver.

Monsieur Parent watched his son sprawling in the dust, following his every movement with loving gaze, as though he wanted to kiss the child across the intervening space as he played.

Suddenly looking up at the church clock, he discovered that he was five minutes late. He got up, took the child by the arm, shook the dust out of his clothes, cleaned his hands and hustled him off towards the Rue Blanche. He was in a hurry to get home before his

wife returned; and the little fellow, unable to keep up, trotted along by his father's side. Presently he picked the child up and, increasing his pace, breasted the slope in spite of shortness of breath. He was a man of forty, already grey and somewhat portly, with a nervously apologetic air as if ashamed of the comfortable paunch he had developed.

A few years before he had married a young wife whom he adored and who had him completely under her thumb and bullied him incessantly. She was continually nagging at him alike for sins of omission and commission, with venomous comments on everything he did, his habits, his simple pleasures, his tastes, the way he walked, his gestures, his increasing girth and his good-tempered unruffled way of talking.

But he was still fond of her and he adored George, the child she had given him, who was now three years old and had become his father's greatest joy and interest. He had a little money of his own and he lived without working on his income of 20,000 francs a year; his wife, whom he had married without a dowry, was always furious with him for having no occupation.

At last he reached home, put the child down on the bottom step of the staircase, mopped his brow and started to go up.

On the second floor he rang the bell.

An elderly woman, who had been his nurse, one of those masterful servants who rule the family with a rod of iron, came to the door; he enquired anxiously:

'Is the mistress home?'

The servant shrugged her shoulders:

'Have you ever known the mistress in by half-past six?'

He replied awkwardly:

'All right, so much the better; I shall have time to change, I'm very hot.'

The woman gave him a look of mingled pity, annoyance and contempt. She growled:

'Oh! I'm not blind; you're in a muck sweat, Sir, you've been running and I expect you've been carrying the child, all for the pleasure of waiting for the mistress till half-past seven. You

wouldn't catch me being so punctual. I'm getting dinner ready for eight o'clock, and if I'm kept waiting, so much the worse; a joint spoils if it's over-cooked.'

Monsieur Parent pretended not to hear; he murmured:

'All right, all right! George's hands want washing, he's been making mud pies. I'm going to change; tell the housemaid to see that the child is clean.'

And he went to his room. As soon as he got there he bolted the door; he wanted to be alone, quite alone, absolutely alone. By now he was so used to being slanged and abused that he was never happy unless the door was locked; he dare not even sit down to think quietly by himself, unless he felt safe under lock and key. Throwing himself into a chair, to rest a bit before changing, he realized that Julie was developing into a new danger in the house. She hated his wife, that was obvious; and her feelings were especially bitter against Paul Limousin, who had been the closest friend of his bachelor days and had remained on terms of intimate friendship in the house after his marriage, a thing which does not often happen. It was Limousin who oiled the wheels and acted as a buffer between Henriette and himself, and who defended him, sometimes with spirit, sometimes even roughly, against undeserved reproaches, painful scenes and all the daily worries of his life.

But during the last six months Julie had always been going out of her way to make cutting remarks and ill-natured criticisms of her mistress. She was always down on her and would say twenty times a day: 'If I was you, Sir, I wouldn't let myself be bullied like this. But it's none of my business; that's all there is to it, everybody must go their own way.'

One day she had actually been rude to Henriette, who had said nothing at the time, but in the evening she had remarked to her husband:

'Look here, next time that woman gives me a bit of her lip, I'm going to chuck her out.' But, though she was otherwise entirely fearless, she seemed nevertheless afraid of the old servant; and Parent attributed this mildness to consideration for the woman who had been his nurse and had closed his mother's eyes.

Now the crisis had come; things could not go on as they were any longer; and he was terrified when he thought of what was going to happen. What could he do? The idea of giving Julie notice appeared such an appalling decision that he dared not dwell on it. It was equally impossible to side with her against his wife; and before a month was out the situation between the two women would become intolerable.

He remained sitting in the chair, his arms hanging down limply, vaguely trying to find some solution to the problem but without success. Then he murmured to himself: 'Luckily I've got George: without him I should be utterly miserable.'

Presently it occurred to him that he might consult Limousin and he made up his mind to do so; but immediately he remembered the animosity between the servant and his friend and was afraid that the latter would advise him to give her notice; and again he was lost in an agony of doubt and indecision.

The clock struck seven. He started. Seven o'clock and he had not changed! Terrified and breathing hard, he undressed, washed, put on a clean shirt and dressed again hurriedly, as if someone was waiting for him in the next room for a very important appointment.

This done, he went into the drawing-room with a feeling of relief. He glanced at the paper, went and looked out of the window, and came back and sat down on the sofa, as the door opened and his son came in smiling, clean and tidy. Parent took him up in his arms and kissed him passionately. First he kissed his hair, then his eyes, his cheeks, his mouth, his hands. Then he lifted him in the air right up to the ceiling as high as he could reach. After that he sat down exhausted by the exertion and putting George on his knee made him 'ride a cock-horse'.

The child was delighted and laughed and waved his arms, crowing with joy, while his father roared with laughter, too, completely happy, his fat stomach quivering, enjoying it all even more than the child.

This weak, resigned, bullied husband loved his son with all his honest heart. He loved him with all the uncontrolled passion, with the wildly extravagant caresses and all the shamefaced tenderness,

which had always been repressed and had not been able to come out and expand even in the early days of his married life, for his wife had been unemotional and discouraging from the first.

Julie appeared at the door, her face pale and her eyes flashing, and announced in a voice quivering with rage:

‘It’s half-past seven, Sir.’

Parent glanced at the clock with anxious resignation and murmured:

‘Yes, it is half-past seven.’

‘Well, my dinner is ready.’

Foreseeing the approaching storm, he did his best to stave it off:

‘But didn’t you tell me, when I came in, that you wouldn’t have it ready till eight?’

‘Eight! Well I never! You wouldn’t give the child his dinner at eight, would you? I said ‘eight’, I know, but of course I didn’t mean it. It would ruin the child’s digestion to feed him at eight. I wouldn’t mind, if there were only his mother to consider. A fat lot she cares about the child. What sort of a mother is she, anyhow? A mother like her’s a disgrace.’

Parent, trembling with anxiety, realized that he must cut short this threatening scene somehow.

‘Julie,’ he said, ‘I won’t have you talk about your mistress in this way. You understand and don’t you forget it in the future.’

The old servant, dumbfounded, turned on her heel and left the room, banging the door so violently that all the glass of the chandelier tinkled.

For several seconds there was a faint undefined carillon of little invisible bells, echoing in the still air of the drawing-room.

George, first of all surprised, began to clap his hands with joy and puffing out his cheeks made a loud plop with all the force of his lungs to imitate the bang of the door.

Then his father told him stories, but he was so preoccupied that he was continually losing the thread, and the child, unable to follow, opened his eyes wide in astonishment.

Parent kept his eyes on the clock; he seemed to see the hands moving. He wished he could stop the clock and make time stand

still, till his wife came in. It was not that he was annoyed with Henriette for being late, but he was frightened of her, frightened of Julie, frightened of everything that might happen. Ten minutes more would be enough to cause an irreparable catastrophe, recriminations, a violent scene which he dared not even imagine. At the mere thought of the quarrel, the raised voices, the reproaches hurtling through the air like bullets, the two women glaring at one another face to face, flinging abuse, his heart beat faster and his mouth went dry, as if he had been walking in the sun; he became limp as a rag, so weak that he could not even pick up his son and jog him up and down on his knee.

Eight o'clock struck; the door opened and Julie appeared again. Her fit of temper had passed but she wore an air of bitter, cold resolution that was even more terrifying.

'I served your mother, Sir,' she said, 'to her dying day and I have looked after you from your birth till to-day. I think I can say I have been a faithful servant of the family . . .'

She waited for an answer.

Parent stammered:

'But of course, my dear Julie.'

She went on:

'You know I have never considered the question of money but only your interests; I have never deceived you or lied to you; you've never had cause to find fault with me . . .'

'But of course, my dear Julie.'

'Well, Sir, this can't go on any longer. It's out of consideration for you that I've said nothing; but things have gone too far, you are the laughing-stock of the neighbourhood. You can do what you like, but it's common knowledge; I must tell you at long last, though I hate telling tales. If Mistress comes in like this at any old hour, it's because she's doing unmentionable things.'

He stood there dazed; he could only stammer:

'Not another word . . . you know I forbade you . . .'

She interrupted him, determined not to be cut short:

'No, Sir; now I must tell you everything. Monsieur Limousin has been her lover for a long time. I've seen them myself dozens of

times kissing behind doors. Why, Mistress would never have married you if Monsieur Limousin had had any money. If you remembered, Sir, how the marriage was arranged, you'd understand the whole thing . . .'

Parent got up, livid with rage, stammering:

'Stop, not another word . . . or . . .'

She went on:

'No, I'm going to tell you the whole truth; mistress married you for your money and she was unfaithful from the very start. Of course, it was an understood thing between them; you've only got to think for a minute to see it all. Then, because she didn't love you, she made life hell for you; it made my heart bleed for you, as I watched it all . . .'

He took two steps forward with clenched fists, repeating: 'Be quiet . . . stop . . .'; there was nothing else he could say.

The old servant stood her ground; she was obviously determined to go through with it.

At this moment George, who had been scared at first, now terrified by the angry voices, began to scream. He was standing behind his father, howling, his face contorted and his mouth open.

His son's cries exasperated Parent, overcoming his timidity and making him see red. He rushed at Julie with both hands raised ready to strike her and shouting:

'You wretch, you'll drive the child out of his mind.'

He was already close to her when she flung in his face:

'Hit me, if you like, me that brought you up, but that won't alter the fact that your wife is unfaithful and the child isn't yours!'

He stopped short, his hands dropped to his side and he stood in front of her so dazed that he didn't know where he was. She added:

'You've only got to look at him to see who the child's father is. He's the spit and image of Monsieur Limousin, God knows! You've only got to look at his eyes and his forehead. A blind man could see it . . .'

But he had seized her by the shoulders and was shaking her with all his might, stammering:

'You snake . . . you snake . . . get out of the house, you viper; get out or I'll kill you; out with you, get out . . .'

And exerting all his strength he hurled her into the next room. She fell on the table which was already laid, upsetting and breaking the glasses; quickly picking herself up, she put the table between herself and her master, and while he was chasing her to get hold of her again, she spat in his face the terrible words:

'You've only got to go out . . . to-night . . . after dinner and come back again at once . . . and you'll see if I've told a lie. Just try . . . and you'll see.'

She had got to the kitchen door and escaped. He ran after her, but she ran up the back stairs to her servants' bedroom, where she shut herself in and slammed the door:

'You'll leave the house this minute!'

She answered through the door:

'Don't worry, Sir; I shall be gone in an hour.'

He went slowly down the stairs, clutching the banisters to avoid falling, and returned to the drawing-room, where George was sitting on the floor in tears.

Parent collapsed on to a chair and looked dully at the child. He did not understand, his brain refused to work; he felt stupid, dazed, semi-conscious, as if he had just fallen on his head; he hardly remembered the horrible things the servant had told him. But gradually, like ruffled water, his brain grew calm again and cleared and the awful truth began to come home to him.

Julie had spoken so definitely, so emphatically, with such conviction and certainty that he did not doubt her sincerity, but he clung to the hope that she might be mistaken. She might be wrong, blinded by her devotion to him and deluded by her instinctive hatred of Henriette. But, as he tried to reassure and convince himself, a thousand little things came back to him, words his wife had used, the way Limousin had looked, a mass of trifles unnoticed at the time, how they had gone out late and been away at the same time; even gestures, insignificant in themselves but hard to explain, which he had not observed or understood at the time but were now full of meaning, made it clear that there was an understanding

between them. Everything that had happened since his engagement suddenly came back to him in his present overwrought state of mind. He went over everything, an intonation that was hard to explain, a suspicious attitude; and to the mind of the poor man, so placid and kindly by nature, now in an agony of uncertainty, what might still have been only suspicions appeared as proven truth.

In obstinate desperation he went back over the five years since his marriage, trying to recall everything month by month, day by day; and every disquieting occurrence which he discovered was like a wasp's sting in his heart.

He forgot George, who had stopped crying and was squatting on the carpet. But seeing that no one was taking any notice of him the child began to cry again.

His father ran to him, picked him up and rained kisses on his head. At any rate he still had his son! Nothing else mattered. He held him tightly in his arms, burying his face in his fair hair, comforted and relieved, stammering: 'George . . . George darling, my own little George . . .' But he suddenly remembered what Julie had said . . . Yes, she had said that he was Limousin's child. That was unthinkable, of course it wasn't true, he could never be in doubt for a minute. It was one of those vile lies which originate in a servant's obscene imagination! He repeated: 'George, darling George!' The child had stopped crying under his caresses.

Parent felt the warmth of the little body through the clothes. It revived his love, his courage, his happiness. The warmth of the child's body was like a kiss, giving him strength and something to live for.

Then he held the lovely curly head a little away from him to be able the better to fix his passionate gaze upon it. His eyes devoured it with desperate intensity, as if the sight intoxicated him, and he could only repeat over and over again: 'Oh! my darling . . . my darling little George!'

Suddenly the thought flashed across his mind: 'But supposing he is really like Limousin after all!'

He felt a strange sharp pain, a stabbing, paralysing sensation of cold all over his body, as if every bone in his body had suddenly

turned to ice. Suppose he really was like Limousin! . . . and he kept his eyes fixed on the child, who was now laughing. He looked at him with a dazed blank stare of bewilderment, scanning his forehead, nose, mouth, cheeks, searching in every feature for some likeness to Limousin.

His mind began to wander as in the early stages of insanity; and the child's face seemed to change as he looked, assuming strange forms and fantastic likenesses.

Julie had said: 'A blind man could see it.' So there must be something striking, something about which there could be no doubt. Was it perhaps the forehead? Perhaps that was it. But Limousin had a rather narrow forehead. What about the mouth? Limousin wore a full beard; how could one compare the child's podgy chin with this man's bearded one?

Parent thought: 'I can't see anything there, anyway not now, I'm too upset to recognize any likeness . . . I must wait; I must have a good look at him to-morrow, when I'm getting up.'

He thought: 'If he was like me, I should be saved, everything would be all right.'

And he took two strides across the room in order to examine the child's face by the side of his own in the glass.

He perched George on his arm, so that their faces were quite close, and he was in such a state of excitement that he said out loud: 'Yes, we've got the same nose . . . the same nose . . . but have we? I'm not sure . . . and the same expression . . . no, we haven't, he's got blue eyes . . . So . . . oh! my God! my God! . . . I'm going mad . . . I won't look any more . . . I'm going mad! . . .'

He rushed away from the glass to the other end of the drawing-room, threw himself into an arm-chair, put the child on another and broke down. His tears came in great convulsive sobs. George, frightened by his father's tears, immediately started to scream.

The door-bell rang. Parent jumped as if he had been shot. He said:

'There she is . . . what am I going to do?' And he ran and shut himself in his bedroom, in order to have time at least to dry his eyes. But a few seconds later another peal at the bell made him jump

again; at once it occurred to him that Julie had gone without telling the housemaid. So no one would go to open the door. What was to be done? He went to the door himself.

Suddenly his mind was made up; he felt brave, ready to act a part and full of fight. The frightful shock had matured him in a flash. And besides he wanted to know the truth, he wanted it with the desperation of timidity, the determination of a good-natured man goaded beyond endurance.

But he found himself shaking all over. Was he afraid? Was he still frightened of her? He wondered. No one knows what a coward will not dare when driven to desperation.

He crept to the door and stopped behind it to listen. His heart was beating so violently that he could hear nothing else, only the pounding of his blood and George's continued screaming in the drawing-room. Suddenly the pealing of the bell above his head startled him like an explosion; he seized the knob and, breathing hard, almost fainting, he turned it and opened the door.

His wife and Limousin were facing him on the staircase.

She remarked, annoyance mingled with surprise:

'Have you taken to answering the door? Where on earth is Julie?'

His throat was dry and he was panting; he tried to answer, but he couldn't utter a word.

She went on:

'Have you lost your tongue? I asked you where Julie was.'

At last he managed to stammer:

'She's . . . she's . . . gone . . .'

His wife was beginning to lose her temper:

'What do you mean "gone"? Where's she gone? Why has she gone?'

He was gradually recovering himself and was conscious of a surge of hatred against the shameless woman in front of him:

'Yes, gone for good . . . I've sacked her . . .'

'You've sacked her . . . Julie? You must be mad.'

'Yes, I've sacked her for impertinence and for . . . for ill-treating the child.'

'Julie?'

'Yes, Julie.'

'What was she impertinent about?'

'About you.'

'About me?'

'Yes, because her dinner was burnt, and you weren't in.'

'What did she say?'

'She made . . . well, rude remarks about you, things I couldn't and wouldn't listen to . . .'

'What sort of things?'

'There's no good repeating them.'

'But I insist on knowing.'

'Well, she said it was hard lines for a man like me to be married to a woman like you, unpunctual and untidy, careless and a bad housekeeper, a bad mother and a bad wife.'

The young woman had come into the hall, followed by Limousin who took no part in this unexpected scene. She slammed the door, threw her cloak on a chair and advanced on her husband, stuttering with rage:

'You say . . . you say . . . that I'm . . .'

Very pale but quite calm, he replied:

'I say nothing, my dear; I'm only telling you at your own request what Julie said. May I remind you that it was because of what she said that I turned her out of the house?'

She felt such a violent desire to tear out his beard and scratch his face that she was trembling all over. She sensed his revolt in the tone of his voice and his whole attitude. But there was nothing she could say; she tried to regain the offensive by a frontal attack that would hurt him.

'You've had dinner?' she said.

'No, I waited.'

She shrugged impatiently:

'It's silly to wait after half-past seven. You might have guessed that I had been kept and that I was busy shopping.'

Then suddenly she was conscious of a desire to explain how she had spent the time and she told him in curt supercilious sentences

that she had been looking for some things she needed for the house a long way away, right on the other side of the town in the Rue de Rennes; she had run into Limousin after seven in the Boulevard Saint-Germain on her way home and had asked him to take her to a restaurant to get a snack, not liking to go by herself, though she was almost fainting with hunger. That was how she had dined with him, if you could call it dinner; they had only had some soup and a bit of chicken, in their hurry to get home.

Parent answered simply:

'A very sensible thing to do; I'm not making any complaints.'

At this point Limousin, who had so far said nothing, came forward and, holding out his hand, murmured:

'Are you all right?'

Parent took the proffered hand and shook it perfunctorily:

'Yes, I'm all right.'

But the young woman seized on a word in her husband's last sentence:

'Complaints . . . why do you talk of complaints? It sounds as if you meant something.'

He defended himself:

'No, not at all; I was only trying to tell you that I hadn't worried over your being late and wasn't blaming you.'

She took him up sharply, determined to pick a quarrel:

'My being late? One would think it was one o'clock in the morning and I had been out all night.'

'Not at all, my dear. I said "late", because there's no other word I could use. You were to be in by half-past six and you come back at half-past eight. That's being late! I quite understand; I'm not . . . I'm not even surprised. But . . . well, I don't see what else I could have said.'

'You talk as though I had been out all night . . .'

'Not at all . . . not at all . . .'

She saw that he did not mean to stand up to her and she was just going to her room when she noticed at last that George was screaming and asked, suddenly anxious:

'What's the matter with the child?'

'I told you Julie had been a bit rough with him.'

'What did the horrible woman do to him?'

'Oh! nothing much, she gave him a push and he fell down.'

She wanted to see the child and rushed into the dining-room, but stopped short in front of the table, which was covered with spilt wine, broken decanters and glasses and salt-cellars upset.

'What's the meaning of this wreck?'

'It's Julie who . . .'

But she interrupted him furiously:

'This is a bit too much! Julie calls me a shameless hussy, knocks my child about, breaks my glass, turns the house upside down, and you seem to regard it all as perfectly natural.'

'But I don't . . . after all I did turn her out.'

'Yes, you turned her out . . . you ought to have had her arrested; the police ought to be called to deal with this sort of thing.'

'But . . . my dear . . . I really couldn't do that . . . there was no ground . . . I assure you it was all very difficult . . .'

She shrugged her shoulders with infinite contempt:

'Of course, you'll never be anything but a spineless rotter, a poor white, a creature with no will, no decision, no guts. Your precious Julie must have laid it on pretty thick to make you turn her out. I wish I'd been here to listen even to a minute of it.'

Opening the drawing-room door, she ran to George, picked him up and hugged him, kissing him all the time: 'Georgie, dear, what's the matter, Mummy's own precious darling?'

He stopped crying under his mother's caresses. She repeated:

'What's the matter?'

He replied, his eyes filling with tears as he remembered his fright: 'Zulie hit Daddy.'

Henriette turned to her husband, first of all in amazement. After a moment the glint of laughter showed in her eye, her soft cheeks quivered, her lip curled, her nostrils dilated, and finally a loud explosion of mirth burst from her mouth, a cascade of laughter echoing merrily like the trill of a bird's song. She kept repeating, showing her white teeth as she laughed, every word barbed with a sting to wound Parent:

'Ha ha! Ha ha! so she hit you, did she? My God! that's pricelessly funny. Do you hear, Limousin? Julie hit him, she hit my husband. What a joke!'

Parent stammered:

'No, it's not true, it's a lie; on the contrary, it was I who threw her into the dining-room with such force that she upset the table. The child didn't see what happened; it was I hit Julie.'

Henriette repeated her question to the child:

'Say it again, darling. Did Julie hit Daddy?'

'Es, Zulie hit him.'

Then, suddenly changing the subject, she went on:

'But the child hasn't had his dinner, has he? You've had nothing to eat, my sweetie?'

'No, Mummy.'

She rounded angrily on her husband:

'You're mad, mad as a hatter. It's half-past eight and George hasn't had his dinner.'

He was feeling quite dazed as a result of the scene and all these explanations, but he tried to excuse himself:

'My dear, we were waiting for you; I didn't want to dine without you. You're always late getting in and I thought you'd be back any minute.'

She threw the hat she had kept on till this moment into an arm-chair and said with exasperation in her voice:

'It really is intolerable to have to deal with nitwits who can't guess a thing and can't do anything for themselves. So, if I hadn't come in till midnight, the child wouldn't have had any food at all. Mightn't you have realized, when I wasn't back by half-past seven, that something had kept me and delayed me unexpectedly?'

Parent was trembling, feeling that he was losing control of his temper; but Limousin interposed and said, turning to the young woman:

'You're being very unfair, my dear. Parent couldn't guess you'd be so late - you hardly ever are; besides, how could he have managed by himself, when he had turned Julie out?'

But Henriette, now in a violent temper, replied:

'Anyhow he'll have to do for himself now, I'm not going to help. He'd better get a move on.'

And she went straight to her room, having already forgotten that her son hadn't had his dinner.

Limousin immediately set to work like ten men helping his friend. He swept up and cleared away the broken glass all over the table, laid it again and put the child into his highchair, while Parent went to look for the housemaid and get her to serve the meal.

When she came, she was amazed, for she had been working in George's room and had heard nothing.

She brought in the soup, followed by the burnt leg of mutton and mashed potatoes.

Parent had sat down by his son, distraught, unable to grasp what had happened. He fed the child and tried to eat himself; he cut up his meat and chewed it but he had difficulty in swallowing, as if his throat was paralysed.

Suddenly he became conscious of an overpowering desire to look at Limousin, who was sitting opposite him, rolling bread pellets. He wanted to see if he was like George but he dared not raise his eyes. However, at last he plucked up courage and cast a fleeting glance at the face he knew so well, though he felt as if he had never seen it before, it looked so different from what he had expected. Every few minutes he glanced furtively at this face, trying to fix in his mind its most insignificant lines, features and expression; then he quickly looked back at his son, pretending to be feeding him.

Two words kept echoing in his ear: 'His father, his father, his father!' They reverberated in his brain with every heart-beat. Yes, perhaps this man, sitting quietly opposite him at table, was his son's father, his darling George's father. Parent stopped eating, he couldn't swallow another mouthful. A stabbing pain, which made him want to scream, grovel on the ground and tear at the furniture with his teeth, was gnawing at his vitals. He wanted to seize his knife and plunge it into his stomach; that would give him relief and put him out of his agony; it would be the end of everything.

Could he go on living now? How was he to carry on, get up in

the morning, eat his dinner, go out into the street, go to bed at night and sleep, always with the thought piercing like a dentist's drill, 'Limousin George's father'. No, he would never have the strength to go for a walk, get dressed, think or talk to anyone. Every day, every hour, every minute he would be trying to find out, to guess, to solve this ghastly problem. And every time he saw his beloved child, there would be this agony of uncertainty tearing at his heart, torturing every fibre in his body. He would have to go on living in the same house with the child he loved and hated at the same time; for he knew that he would come to hate him in the end. It was agony. If he knew that Limousin was the father, perhaps he would manage to keep sane and sleep in spite of his misery and his pain. It was not knowing that was unbearable. Not knowing he would be always on the watch, always in torment, every time he kissed the child who perhaps was another's. When he took him out for a walk, when he had him in his arms, when he felt the caress on his lips of the silky hair, he would adore him but at the back of his mind there would always be the thought 'Perhaps he's not mine.' Wouldn't it be better never to see him again, to give him up, to lose him in the streets, or to run away himself, so far away that he would never hear the child mentioned at all?

He started as he heard the door open. His wife came in.

'I'm quite hungry,' she said, 'aren't you, Limousin?'

Limousin replied with some hesitation:

'Yes, I am too.'

And she had the mutton brought back.

Parent wondered: 'Did they really have dinner? Or did they get late because they had been making love?'

Anyhow they both made a good meal. Henriette, now quite calm, laughed and joked. Her husband watched, glancing at her and quickly turning his eyes away.

She was wearing a pink dressing-gown trimmed with lace; and this attractive scented garment showed off her fair hair, her white neck and her plump hands, like a shell with a fringe of foam. What had she been doing all day with this man? Parent saw them in each other's arms, whispering words of love. Why couldn't he know,

why couldn't he guess the truth, when he had them sitting side by side opposite him?

How they must be laughing at him, if they had really been deceiving him ever since his marriage! Was it possible that anyone could make such a fool of a man, an honest man, just because his father had left him a little money? Why can't one look into people's hearts and see the truth? How was it that the scoundrel's trickery could be hidden from the honest man, why was the voice the same to tell lies or to make love, why was the treacherous glance intended to deceive the same as the look of sincerity?

He watched them closely, waiting for a gesture, a word, an intonation.

Suddenly a thought struck him: 'I'll catch them out to-night.' And he said:

'My dear, as I've got rid of Julie, I must do something to-day about finding another servant. I'm going out now to get hold of someone for to-morrow. I may be a little late home.'

She replied:

'All right; I'm staying where I am. Limousin will keep me company. We'll wait for you.'

And, turning to the maid, she said:

'Put George to bed; after that you can clear away and go up to your room.'

Parent had got up; he felt dizzy and his knees were knocking together so that he could hardly stand. He murmured: 'So long!' and he got to the door, supporting himself against the wall, for the floor seemed to be heaving like the deck of a ship.

The maid had taken George out of the room in her arms. Henriette and Limousin went into the drawing-room. As soon as the door was shut the latter exclaimed:

'You know, you're mad to bully your husband like this.'

She retorted:

'Look here, I'm beginning to find this recent habit of yours of holding up Parent as a martyr a bit tiresome.'

Limousin threw himself into an arm-chair and, crossing his legs, said:

'That's the last thing in the world I want to do, to hold him up as a martyr, but in our position it's absurd to nag at him from morning to night.'

She took a cigarette from the mantelpiece, lit it and answered:

'But I don't nag at him; on the contrary it's his stupidity that annoys me; I only treat him as he deserves.'

Limousin retorted impatiently:

'I think you're behaving like a fool. But all women are the same. The position is this; here is an honest man, too honest; he's so confiding and good-natured that he's a fool; he doesn't bother us, he never suspects anything, we are completely free to do as we like in peace; and you do everything you can to irritate him and spoil our life.'

She turned to him:

'You make me tired. You're a coward like all men; you're afraid of this idiot.'

He jumped up angrily:

'I like that! I should like to know what he has done to you and why you've got your knife into him. Does he make you unhappy? Does he knock you about? Is he unfaithful? No! It's a bit thick to make his life a hell just because he's too good-hearted, and get your knife into him just because you're deceiving him.'

She went up to Limousin and looking him straight in the eye she hissed:

'And who are you to reproach me with deceiving him, I should like to know? You must be a pretty dirty dog.'

He defended himself rather shamefacedly:

'But I'm not reproaching you, my dear girl, I'm only asking you to use a little tact with your husband, because we can't either of us afford to rouse his suspicions; you must see that.'

They were standing quite close to one another; he was tall and dark, with Dundreary whiskers, in a slightly common way quite a good-looking young man and very conscious of the fact; she was small and fair, with a pink and white skin, a typical Paris girl, a mixture of prostitute and middle-class respectability. She had been

born in the room behind a shop, had grown up on the door-step learning to give the glad eye to passers-by, and she had been married to a good-hearted man, whom she had chanced to pick up in this way and who had fallen in love with her after seeing her every day at her door, as he went out in the morning and came home at night.

She was saying:

'You don't understand, you big fool, that I hate him just because he married me or rather bought me, and because every word, every act, every thought of his gets on my nerves. He exasperates me every minute of the day by his stupidity – what you call his good-nature – and by the slowness of his mind – what you call his confiding disposition; above all I hate him because he is my husband instead of you. I am always conscious of him between us, though that doesn't cramp our style much. And there's one other thing; he's too much of a fool to suspect anything; I should like him to be just a bit jealous. There are moments when I could scream: "Can't you understand anything, you great booby? Don't you see Paul is my lover?"'

Limousin began to laugh:

'Meanwhile you'd better keep quiet or you'll upset the apple-cart.'

'Oh! don't worry about that! There's nothing to be afraid of with that imbecile. No, but it's incredible that you don't understand how I hate him and how he gets on my nerves. You always seem so friendly and shake hands with him with such an innocent air. Sometimes men surprise me.'

'There are times when deception is unavoidable, my dear.'

'It's not a question of deception, my dear man, but of decent feeling. When one man deceives another, he seems to feel more friendly towards him; but as soon as a woman deceives a man, she immediately hates him.'

'I can't see why one should hate a good fellow just because one is his wife's lover.'

'You don't see . . . you don't see . . . You men have none of you a spark of decency in you. How shall I put it? There are some

things one feels and can't or rather mustn't say. But it's no good, you wouldn't understand. Men have no nice feeling.'

And smiling with the good-humoured contempt of a woman of the world, she put both hands on his shoulders and held out her mouth to be kissed; he bent down towards her putting his arms round her and their lips met. As they were standing in front of the mirror behind the mantelpiece, there was an exact reflection of their embrace in the glass behind the clock.

They had heard nothing, neither the sound of the key turning in the lock nor the creak of the door; but Henriette suddenly pushed Limousin away with both hands, uttering a shrill cry, and they saw Parent watching them, livid with rage, with fists clenched, without his shoes and his hat slipping forward over his eyes.

He was standing stock still watching them, only his eyes darting from one to the other. He seemed to have gone mad; then suddenly without a word he threw himself upon Limousin, seized him in an iron grip as if to throttle him and pushed him towards the corner of the room with such force that Limousin, losing his balance and sawing the air wildly with his arms, crashed the back of his head against the wall.

But when Henriette realized that her husband was going to murder her lover, she fell upon Parent, seized him by the throat and, digging her slender delicate fingers into his flesh, gripped him so fiercely with all the nervous strength of a desperate woman that blood spurted under the pressure of her nails. And she fixed her teeth in his shoulder as if she wanted to tear him in pieces. Parent, half strangled and suffocating, let go of Limousin in order to shake off his wife, who was clinging to his neck; and seizing her round the waist he hurled her with one push right across the room.

Then his anger began to cool, for the violence of a weak, good-natured character is always short-lived, and he stood there between the two, panting, exhausted, not knowing what to do. His blind rage had spilled over in this effort like the froth when a bottle of wine is uncorked; and this unaccustomed burst of energy left him breathless.

As soon as he could speak, he stammered:

'Leave the house . . . both of you . . . at once . . . get out!'

Limousin was standing motionless in the corner of the room, leaning against the wall, still too frightened to understand anything or move a finger. Henriette, leaning on a small round table, her fists clenched and her head thrust forward, her hair dishevelled and her torn bodice showing her naked breast, was waiting like a wild beast about to spring.

Parent went on in a more determined tone:

'Leave the house at once, both of you; get out!'

Seeing that his first fit of anger was passing, his wife recovered herself, stood up straight, took two steps towards him and said in almost her usual insolent tone:

'Are you out of your mind? What's come over you? What's the meaning of this monstrous assault?'

He turned on her and, threatening her with upraised fist, he stammered:

'This is the last straw . . . it's too much . . . I've heard everything . . . everything, you understand . . . you wretch . . . you're both of you blackguards . . . Leave the house . . . both of you . . . this minute or I'll kill you . . . get out!'

She realized that there was nothing to be done, that he knew the truth, that she could not pretend innocence and had got to give in. But she had recovered all her self-assurance, and her hatred of this man, now coming to a head, gave her courage to defy him out of pure bravado.

She said in level tones:

'Come along, Limousin; as I'm being put into the street, I'm coming to you.'

But Limousin made no move. Parent, his anger boiling up again, shouted:

'Go away, leave this house . . . you wretches . . . or else . . . or else . . .' and he seized a chair and swung it round his head.

At this Henriette walked rapidly across the room, took her lover by the arm, pulled him away from the wall to which he seemed to be glued and dragged him towards the door, exclaiming:

'Do come, my dear, come along . . . you can see the man is insane . . . come along.'

As she went out she turned to her husband, wondering what she could do, what she could find that would really hurt him, before she left the house. Suddenly an idea occurred to her, one of those ideas full of deadly poison distilled from a woman's treachery.

She said in a determined tone of voice:

'I want to take my child with me.'

Parent, aghast, stammered:

'Your . . . your child . . . you dare ask for your child . . . after . . . after . . . Oh! this is too much. How have you the face? Get out of this house, you bitch! Get out!'

She came back a few steps towards him, the ghost of a smile on her lips at the thought that now she had got her revenge, and she faced him, standing quite close to him:

'I want my child . . . and you have no right to keep him, because he isn't yours . . . you understand what I'm saying . . . he's not yours, he's Limousin's.'

Dumbfounded, Parent shouted:

'That's a lie . . . that's a lie . . . you wretch!'

But she went on:

'You fool! Everybody knows it except you. I tell you, there's his father. You've only got to use your eyes to see it.'

Parent staggered back. Suddenly he turned, seized a candle and rushed into the next room.

He came back almost at once with little George in his arms, wrapped up in his cot blankets. The child, woken up with a start, was crying with fright. Parent thrust him into his wife's arms and without a word pushed her roughly out of the door towards the staircase, where Limousin was prudently waiting.

He shut the door again at once, double locked and bolted it. He had hardly got back into the drawing-room when he crashed full length on the floor unconscious.

Parent now lived alone, entirely alone. For the first few weeks after the separation the novelty of his changed life prevented him from thinking. He resumed his bachelor habits, lounging about the streets and taking his meals in a restaurant as he used to do. Wishing to avoid any scandal, he paid his wife an allowance through his solicitor and hers. But gradually memories of the child began to haunt his imagination. Often when he was alone at home in the evening he suddenly thought he heard George calling 'Daddy'. His heart immediately started to beat faster, and he got up quickly and opened the door on to the staircase to look, in case the child had come back. Yes, he might have come home as dogs and pigeons do. Why should a child have less homing instinct than an animal?

Finding he was mistaken, he went back to his arm-chair and began to think about the child. He thought about him for hours and days at a time. It was not only a mental obsession, but also, and even more, a physical obsession, a longing of his senses and his nerves to hold him tight and hug him, to fondle him, to take him on his knee and jog him up and down and turn him head over heels. The memory of past caresses put him in a fever and drove him mad. He felt the little arms round his neck, the little mouth pressing a big kiss on his beard, the silky hair tickling his cheek. The longing for the love play that was no more, for the soft skin, warm and delicate, offered to his kiss, made him mad like desire for a woman loved and lost.

Suddenly in the street tears would come into his eyes as he thought that he might have had his tubby little George trotting at his side and be taking him for his walk as he used to do. And he would go home and sob till it got dark, with his head in his hands.

Twenty, a hundred times a day he asked himself the question: 'Was he or wasn't he George's father?' But it was chiefly at night that he went over and over again the arguments for and against either solution of the problem. Hardly had he gone to bed when the interminable consideration of the pros and cons drove him to desperation.

Immediately after his wife's departure he had had no doubts; of course the child was Limousin's! But gradually uncertainty began to creep in. Clearly Henriette's assertion carried no weight; she had defied him merely in order to exasperate him. If one considered the probabilities dispassionately, it was quite likely that she had lied.

Limousin was the only one who might have told the truth. But how could he find out for certain, how could he cross-examine his former friend and force him to confess?

Sometimes he got up in the middle of the night, determined to go and find Limousin and throw himself on his mercy, offering him anything he liked, in order to put an end to this ghastly uncertainty. Then he went to bed again in despair – of course his wife's lover would lie too! In fact, he would be sure to lie, to prevent the child's real father getting his son back.

There was absolutely nothing he could do.

He bitterly regretted his hasty action, due to thoughtless impatience; he ought to have had the sense to bide his time and lie low for a month or two in order to get ocular proof. He should have concealed his suspicions and let them betray themselves naturally. By watching the other man as he kissed the child he could have drawn his inferences and discovered the truth. A friend's kiss is quite different from a father's. He could have spied on them from behind doors. Why hadn't he thought of that? If Limousin, left alone with the child, had not immediately picked him up and hugged and kissed him passionately, if he had let him go on playing, indifferent, without taking any interest, all doubt would have been cleared up. It would have been obvious that he was not his father and knew it and had none of a father's feelings.

In that case he, Parent, having got rid of the mother, would have kept his son and been happy, completely happy.

He tossed about in bed, bathed in perspiration and miserable, trying to recall Limousin's manner with the child. But he could remember nothing, not a gesture, not a glance, not a word, not a caress that had been suspicious. Moreover the child's mother had never shown any interest in him. If her lover had been the father, she would surely have been fonder of him.

So they must have taken away his son out of motives of revenge and cruelty, in order to punish him for having found them out.

And he made up his mind to go to the magistrates the first thing in the morning and make application for the return of his son.

But he had hardly taken this decision when the opposite conviction swept over him. As Limousin had been Henriette's lover from the beginning, she must have given herself to his embraces with the passionate ardour of self-surrender that enables a woman to become a mother, while her coldness in all her intimate relations with himself must surely have prevented her conceiving a child in his arms.

So, if he claimed the child and obtained custody of him, he would always be bringing up and looking after another man's son. He wouldn't be able to look at him, kiss him, or hear him say 'Daddy' without the thought striking him and poisoning his joy: 'He's not my child.' He would condemn himself to a life of utter misery and never-ending torture. No, it was better to remain alone, to live, grow old and die alone.

Every day, every night the ceaseless agony of these torturing doubts began again; nothing could allay them or give him peace of mind.

His worst time was when it started to get dark in the evening; the twilight brought on fits of depression. Misery descended on him like rain and a wave of despair, surging up with the darkness, swept over him and drove him mad. He was afraid of his own thoughts, as one is afraid of a criminal, and they pursued him like a hunted animal. He was afraid above all of the terrible darkness of his empty house and even of the deserted streets, only lit here and there by the gas-lamps, where one imagines a pickpocket in every solitary passer-by, as one hears his step in the distance and slows or hurries on according to whether he is coming towards one or approaching from behind.

Instinctively, in spite of himself, Parent would make his way towards the brightly lit crowded streets. The lights and the people drew him, distracted his thoughts and dulled the ache in his heart. Presently, when tired of wandering aimlessly through the back streets, as the crowds thinned and the pavements began to empty,

fear of being alone in the silent streets drove him to some big café, full of people drinking and brilliantly lit. He made his way there, as a moth is drawn to a candle, sitting down at a small round table and calling for a beer. He sipped it slowly, starting every time a customer rose to leave. He would have liked to seize his arm and stop him and ask him to stay a little longer, so much did he dread the moment when the waiter would stand in front of him and say angrily: 'Time, Sir, closing time!'

Every night he was the last to leave. He saw the tables cleared away and the lights put out one by one, till only two, his own and the one over the bar, remained. He watched in despair the girl-cashier counting her cash and locking it up in a drawer; and he was finally hustled out into the street by the waiters, who mumbled under their breath: 'He's not all there; one would think he had nowhere to sleep.'

And as soon as he found himself in the dark street alone, he began to think of little George and rack his brains and worry himself silly, trying to decide whether he was or was not the boy's father.

In this way he got into the habit of spending his day in the café, where the jostling throng of drinkers surrounds you with a crowd you know by sight but never speak to, and where the heavy pipe smoke lulls your worries to sleep and the heavy beer dulls the brain and drugs the sensibility.

He lived in the café. The first thing in the morning he went there so as not to be alone, to have someone to look at and distract his mind. Soon, too indolent to move, he took his meals there. About twelve o'clock he banged with his saucer on the marble-topped table and the waiter bustled up with a plate, a glass, a napkin and the day's bill-of-fare. When he had finished his meal he sipped his coffee with his eye on the little decanter of brandy, which would give him an hour of blissful forgetfulness. First he moistened his lips with the alcohol, just to get the taste of it, savouring the flavour of the spirit with the tip of his tongue; then he poured it slowly into his mouth drop by drop, throwing his head back, and rolled the fiery liquor round his palate and his gums and the mucus in

his mouth, mixing it with the fresh saliva which was stimulated by the contact of the alcohol. Finally, when it had lost some of its rawness in this way, he swallowed it meditatively, feeling it run right down his throat into his stomach.

After every meal for more than an hour he sipped three or four glasses, which gradually induced a state of torpor. Soon his head would fall forward on his chest, his eyes would close and he slept. About the middle of the afternoon he woke up and immediately stretched out his hand for the glass of beer which the waiter had put before him, while he was asleep; and after drinking it he got up from the red velvet seat, hitched up his trousers, pulled down his waistcoat to cover the white line of his shirt visible between the two, shook his coat-collar and drew down his cuffs; after that he returned to the papers, which he had already read in the morning.

He read them over again from the first line to the last, including the advertisements, situations wanted, announcements, Stock Exchange news and theatre programmes.

From four to six he strolled about the boulevards, taking the air, as he called it, and after that he came back to the place reserved for him at the café and called for his absinthe.

Later on he talked to the regular customers he had got to know. They discussed the events of the day, the items of news and the political happenings; that took him up to dinner-time. The evening was a repetition of the afternoon till closing time. That was the moment he dreaded most, when he had to go back to the darkness of his empty house, so full of painful memories, bitter thoughts and anguished torment. He had given up all his old friends and he never saw his relations or anyone who might remind him of the past.

But as his own house became a hell for him, he took a room in a large hotel on the mezzanine floor, so that he could watch the passers-by. In this vast hostelry he was no longer alone; he was conscious of swarming life all round him. He heard the sound of voices in the rooms; and, when the memories of his past misery became too cruelly acute, as he stood before his turned-down bed and by his lonely fireside, he went out into the broad passages and

walked up and down like a sentry, looking sadly at the two pairs of shoes in front of each door, the woman's little shoes snuggling up against the man's heavier boots; and he thought how happy all these people were, sleeping blissfully side by side or in each other's arms in their cosy bed.

Five years passed in this way, five depressing years, in which nothing happened except an hour or two of love at fifty francs a time now and then.

One day in the course of his usual walk from the Madeleine to the Rue Drouot he saw a woman whose figure seemed familiar. A tall man and a boy were with her. The three of them were walking in front of him. He said to himself: 'Where have I seen those people before?' And suddenly he recognized a gesture; it was his wife with Limousin and his son, his beloved little George.

The beating of his heart nearly suffocated him, but he did not stop; he wanted to see them and he followed them. They looked like a family party, a respectable middle-class family party. Henriette had taken Paul's arm and was talking to him in a low voice with a sidelong glance at him from time to time. Parent then had a sight of her profile and recognized the charming line of her cheek, the movement of her lips, her smile and the caress of her glance. But he was most interested in the child. How tall and strong he had grown! Parent could not see his face, only the long fair hair falling over his coat-collar in wavy curls. It was George, this tall bare-legged boy, walking by his mother's side like a little man.

When they stopped to look in at a shop-window, he got a view of all three. Limousin was now grey; he had aged and shrunk. His wife, on the contrary, had put on weight, though she was as attractive as ever. George was unrecognizable, he had grown so much.

They continued their walk and Parent followed them again; then, quickening his pace, he passed them and presently turned round so as to meet them face to face quite close. As he passed the boy he felt a desire, a passionate desire, to throw his arms round him and carry him off. He brushed against him as if accidentally. The boy turned his head and looked crossly at this clumsy man. And

Parent fled, driven away by the glance which hurt him like a blow. He fled like a thief, haunted by the fear that his wife and her lover had recognized him. He ran all the way to his café and flung himself panting on to a chair.

That evening he had three absinthes.

For four months the pain of this meeting rankled in his heart. Every night he saw in imagination the three of them again walking happy and untroubled along the boulevard, father, mother and child, before going home to dinner.

This new picture obliterated the old one. It was something fresh, a different hallucination, a new agony. Little George, the child he had loved and kissed so often in the old days, was disappearing into a dim past that would never return, and he now saw a different boy, as it were the brother of the first, a little boy with bare legs, and this one did not know him. This thought caused him exquisite pain. The child's affection for him was dead; there was no longer any bond between them; this boy would not have stretched out his arms to him when he saw him. He had even given him an ugly look.

Gradually he recovered his peace of mind; his mental agony was dulled; the picture before his eyes, which had made his nights hideous, lost its sharpness of outline and haunted him less often. He began to live again like other people, like all those who have no occupation and drink their beer at marble-topped tables, wearing the seat of their trousers shiny on the shabby velvet of café benches.

He became an old man in the pipe smoke and the gas fumes made him lose his hair; his weekly bath, his fortnightly hair-cut, the purchase of a new suit or hat were the events of his life. When he entered the café in a new hat, he took a long look at himself in the glass before sitting down, put it on and took it off several times, adjusted it at different angles and finally asked his friend, the barmaid, who was an interested spectator, if she thought it suited him.

Two or three times a year he used to go to the theatre and in the summer he sometimes spent an evening at an open-air concert in the Champs-Élysées. The tunes stayed in his head and he remembered the songs for several weeks; sometimes he even hummed

them over, beating time with his foot, as he sat in front of his glass of beer.

Year followed year in unbroken monotony; but the time did not seem long, because nothing ever happened.

He did not notice the passing of time. He was getting nearer to the grave sitting at a café table, doing nothing, making no effort; and only the big mirror behind his head, which was getting balder every day, reflected the ravages of time, which sweeps away frail humanity in its inexorable march.

Now he hardly ever remembered the tragedy which had made shipwreck of his life on that ghastly evening twenty years before; and the proprietor of his café, the sixth owner since he had first come to it, often said to him: 'You ought to pull yourself together, Monsieur Parent; you ought to get out into the country and have a holiday; I've noticed a great change in you in the last few months.'

And when his customer had gone the proprietor would say to his girl-cashier:

'Poor old Parent's going downhill fast; it's no good always sticking in Paris. Do try and get him to go out into the country sometimes and have fried fish for lunch; he listens to what you say. The nice weather will soon be here and it will do him good.'

And the cashier, out of kindness and pity for her most constant customer, kept saying to Parent: 'Look here, Sir, you must make up your mind to get out of town; the country is divine in good weather. If I could, I'd live in the country always.'

She confided her dreams to him, the simple romantic dreams of every girl cooped up from year's end to year's end behind a shop-window, watching the noisy artificial life of the streets flow past, while she dreams of the peaceful pleasant life of the country; she dreams of life under the trees in the clear bright sunshine which pours down on fields, thick woods, clear streams, cows dozing in the meadows and all the myriad kinds of flowers, blue, red, yellow, violet, purple, pink and white, so lovely, so fresh and sweet-smelling, all the wild flowers which nature has provided for us to make into great bunches.

She loved to talk to him of her unrealized desire, that would

never be realized but which never died; and the poor hopeless old man loved to listen. He soon got into the habit of coming to sit close to the bar so as to talk to Mlle Zoé and discuss the country with her. Later on he gradually began to want to go and see just for once, if it was really as delightful as she said outside the walls of the great city.

One morning he asked:

'Do you know a place where one can get a good lunch not too far from Paris?'

She replied:

'Oh! you ought to go to the Terrace at Saint-Germain. It's so nice!'

He had gone there once for an outing during his engagement. He made up his mind to go there again.

He chose a Sunday, for no special reason, just because it was the conventional thing to go out on Sundays, even if one had nothing to do all the week.

So one Sunday morning he set out.

It was the beginning of July, a hot sunny day. Sitting next the door of his compartment, he watched the trees and the quaint little houses in the outskirts of Paris. He felt depressed, annoyed with himself for giving way to this strange whim and breaking his routine. He was getting tired of the scenery, which was constantly changing but always remained the same. He was thirsty and at every station he would have liked to get out and sit down at the café he could see outside the station, drink a beer or two and take the first train back to Paris; moreover the journey seemed interminable. He didn't mind sitting for days on end, provided the same things, never changing, met his eye, but he found it nerve-racking and tiring to be travelling, while he remained in his seat, and watching the whole country passing by, while he never moved.

The Seine, however, interested him every time he crossed it. Under the Chatou bridge he saw the skiffs speeding past under the powerful strokes of the bare-armed rowers; he thought to himself: 'Those fine fellows must be having a great time!'

The long ribbon of the river, stretching away on both sides of

the bridge at Pecq, aroused deep within him a vague longing to be walking along its banks. But the train plunged into the tunnel just before the Saint-Germain station and soon pulled up at the arrival platform.

Parent got out and, walking slowly like a tired man, made his way with his hands behind his back towards the Terrace. When he came to the iron railing he stopped to look at the extensive view. In front of him stretched the immense plain, limitless as the sea, very green and dotted with large villages as big as towns. White roads crossed this expanse of countryside, with copses here and there; the Vésinet lakes shone like silver plates, and the distant hills of Sannois and Argenteuil were faintly outlined through a shimmering, bluish haze which hid all detail. The pitiless glare of a blazing sun was pouring down on this stretch of country, which was still veiled in the morning fog; the moisture was rising from the hot earth in a thin vapour and there was a damp mist above the Seine, which curled like a snake endlessly across the plain, winding round the villages and following the line of the hills.

A gentle breeze, laden with the scent of grass and growing things, caressed the face, penetrated into the lungs and seemed to make the heart young again and stir the blood.

Surprised at a new sensation, Parent inhaled deep breaths of the fresh air, his eyes dazzled by the extent of the view; and he murmured: 'My word! It's good to be here!'

Then he walked on a few steps and stopped to look at the view again. He seemed to be aware of strange new sensations, not the landscape before his eyes, but something within him, experiences he had never had, happiness of which he had only dreamed, joys he had never tasted; a whole horizon of life, which he had never suspected, opened before him, as he gazed at this limitless expanse of country.

He realized all the ghastly drabness of his life in the brilliant light of the blazing sun. He saw the twenty years of his existence in the café, joyless, monotonous, depressing. He might have travelled like other people, gone far, far away among foreigners to unexplored lands beyond the seas; he might have taken an interest in other

people's enthusiasms, in the arts and sciences; he might have tasted life in its myriad forms, life at once mysterious, delightful or painful, ever changing, ever inexplicable and exciting.

Now it was too late. He would go from glass to glass of beer till he died, without family, without friends, without hope, without interests. And a wave of utter misery swept over him, an overpowering inclination to run away and hide, to return to Paris, his café and his torpor. All the thoughts, all the dreams, all the desires, buried in the subconscious mind of those who never think, had been awakened, stirred by the sunlight on the plain before him.

He felt he would go mad if he stayed any longer where he was by himself, and he hastened to the Henri IV restaurant for his lunch; he meant to drug himself with wine and spirits and he would at least have someone to talk to.

He took a small table under the trees, commanding a view of the whole countryside, ordered his meal and asked for it to be served at once.

Other excursionists arrived and sat down at tables near him; he felt better now that he was no longer alone.

In an arbour three people were lunching. He had glanced at them several times casually, as one glances at strangers, without taking them in.

Suddenly a woman's voice sent a shiver down his spine:

The voice had said: 'George, you shall carve the chicken.'

And another voice answered: 'Right you are, Mother!'

Parent looked up; he realized, he knew by instinct at once who they were.

He certainly would not have recognized them. His wife had gone quite white and had lost her figure; she was now an old woman, dignified and respectable; she was eating with her head well forward to avoid spilling her food on her dress, though she had covered her front with a napkin.

George was grown up. He had got a beard, the uneven, almost colourless beard which curls round the chin of the very young. He was wearing a top-hat, a white duck waistcoat and a monocle, no doubt because it was the smart thing. Parent gazed at them dumb-

founded. Was this really his son George? No! He did not recognize this young man. There was no longer any bond between them.

Limousin had his back to Parent and was eating, with his shoulders a little bent.

So the three of them looked happy and contented; they came out into the country to lunch at well-known restaurants. They had enjoyed a quiet peaceful life, a family life in a nice, cosy, well-appointed house, full of all the little things which make life pleasant; they knew the joys of family affection and were continually hearing the tender words so natural to those who love each other. And this life they owed to the money which he, Parent, had given them, after they had deceived and wronged him and wrecked his life. They had condemned him, the innocent, trusting, good-natured man, to all the bitterness of living alone, to his hateful existence between the streets and the café, to every kind of mental torture and physical discomfort. They had turned him into a miserable useless creature, lost in the crowd, a poor, joyless, hopeless old man with no one to lean on. For him life was an aching void, because he had nothing to love in the world. He might travel abroad or tramp the streets, he might go into every house in Paris, open the door of any room, but he would never find inside the well-loved face he was looking for, the face of wife or child with a smile of welcome. It was this thought that was so bitter, the thought that there was no door he could open and find behind it someone awaiting his embrace.

It was all the fault of these three wretches, his unfaithful wife, the friend who had betrayed him and this tall fair boy with the arrogant air.

His feelings were now as bitter against the boy as against the other two. He must be Limousin's son; otherwise Limousin would never have brought him up and loved him like this. Of course, Limousin would quickly have got rid of both mother and son if he had not been sure that the child was really his own. One does not bring up other people's children!

So there they were, quite close to him, the three guilty ones who were responsible for all his suffering.

Parent watched them with mounting anger, his temper rising, as he remembered all his pain, his agony, his despair. What infuriated him most was their air of placid self-satisfaction. He wanted to kill them, throw his soda-water siphon at them, and crush Limousin's skull, as he watched him bending his head down to his plate and raising it again, as he ate.

And they would go on living like this, without worries or anxieties of any kind. No! That was really too much! He would have his revenge, he would have his revenge here and now, when he had them in his power. But what was he to do? He pondered over the problem, recalling the deeds of violence perpetrated in gangster novels, but nothing practical suggested itself. And he went on drinking glass after glass to keep his anger at white heat and give himself courage, so as not to miss an opportunity that would never recur.

Suddenly an idea, a wicked idea, occurred to him. He stopped drinking to work out the details. A smile played round his lips and he murmured: 'Now I've got them. We shall see what we shall see!'

A waiter asked him:

'What would you like next, Sir?'

'Nothing but coffee and some of your best brandy.'

He kept his eyes on them, as he sipped glass after glass. There were too many people in the restaurant for what he meant to do; so he would wait for them to finish and follow them; they were sure to go for a stroll on the Terrace or in the forest. When they had gone a little way he would catch them up and have his revenge. Yes! Revenge would be sweet; and it was high time, too, after twenty-three years of suffering. They had no idea what was in store for them!

They were taking their time over their lunch, chatting unconcernedly. Parent could not hear what they were saying but their gestures revealed no anxiety. His wife's face in particular infuriated him. She had adopted the patronizing air of a portly lady devoted to good works, impervious to criticism, protected by the armour-plate of virtuous principles.

At last they paid their bill and got up. Then he saw Limousin for

the first time. He looked like a retired diplomat; so impressive were his magnificent silky whiskers, now quite white, which flowed over the lapels of his frock coat.

They went out. George was smoking a cigar, his top-hat tilted over one ear. Parent immediately followed them.

First they strolled along the Terrace, admiring the view with the tranquil contentment of those who have lunched well. Presently they went into the forest.

Parent rubbed his hands and continued to follow them at a distance, keeping out of sight, so as not to attract attention too soon.

They went on slowly, enjoying the beauty of the forest and the warmth of the air. Henriette had taken Limousin's arm and was walking by his side, holding her head high like a wife proud of the dignity of her position. George was slashing the leaves with his cane, now and then leaping the ditches across the path like a spirited young stallion eager to gallop off through the trees.

Parent gradually came nearer and nearer to them, panting with excitement and fatigue, for he had lost the habit of walking. Soon he caught them up, but he was seized by a sudden fear of something he could not define or explain, and he passed them, meaning to turn and face them later.

He walked on with beating heart, conscious of them all the time behind him, and he kept saying to himself: 'Now's the moment; pull yourself together, don't be a coward; now's the time!'

He turned round. They had sat down, all three of them, at the foot of a big tree and they were still talking.

In a flash he made up his mind and walked rapidly back. He stopped in front of them, standing in the middle of the path, and without preamble he stammered in a voice quivering with emotion:

'It's me, here I am! You didn't expect me, did you?'

The three of them gazed in surprise at this seeming madman.

He went on:

'One would think you didn't recognize me. Look again! I'm Parent, Henri Parent. Ah! you didn't expect to see me. You thought it was all over and done with, that you would never see me

again; but I've come back, and we are going to have a little explanation.'

Henriette, terrified, hid her face in her hands, murmuring: 'Oh! my God!'

Seeing this unknown man apparently threatening his mother, George had got up, ready to seize him by the coat-collar.

Limousin, struck dumb, was gazing with terror in his eyes at this ghost, who after breathing hard for a minute, went on:

'Now we're going to have a little explanation. The time has come. You deceived me, you condemned me to a convict's life and you thought I should never find you again.'

But the young man seized him by the shoulders and cried, as he pushed him away: 'What do you want? Are you mad? Clear out and be quick about it or I'll horsewhip you!'

Parent answered:

'What do I want? I want to tell you the truth about these two people.'

But George, losing his temper, was shaking him and was on the point of striking him. Parent went on:

'Hands off, young man! I'm your father . . . Look, these two wretched creatures know well enough now who I am.'

Frightened, the boy let go and turned to his mother.

Parent, released from his grip, advanced towards her:

'Well! You tell him who I am; tell him my name is Henri Parent and that I'm his father, because his name is George Parent and you are my wife and all three of you are living on my money, on the allowance of ten thousand francs that I've been making you since I drove you out of my house. Tell him, too, why I drove you out of the house. Because I found you with this scoundrel, your lover. Tell him how you married me, an honest man, for my money and how you were unfaithful from the beginning. Tell him who you are and who I am . . .'

He stammered and panted with the violence of his rage.

The woman cried out piteously:

'Paul, Paul, stop him, make him be quiet and say no more! Don't let him say these things before my son!'

Limousin at last got up and murmured in a very low voice:

'Shut up! Don't say any more! Don't you realize what you are doing?'

Parent went on in a furious temper:

'Yes, I know perfectly well what I'm doing. But this is not all. There's one thing I want to know, something that has been torturing me for twenty years.'

And turning to George, who was leaning against a tree in bewilderment, he went on:

'I want you to listen to this: when she left my house she wasn't satisfied with having deceived me; she wanted to drive me mad. You were my one comfort. Well, she took you away, swearing that he was your father, not I. Was that a lie? I don't know. For twenty years I've been trying to find out.'

He went close up to her, a tragic, terrible figure, and, tearing away the hands that covered her face, he went on:

'I insist on your telling me to-day which of us is the boy's father, he or I, your husband or your lover. Come on, out with it!'

Limousin threw himself upon him but Parent pushed him back and, snarling with rage, cried:

'Oh! you're brave enough to-day, a good deal braver than the day you hid on the stairs, because I was going to kill you. Well, if she won't answer, you answer. I suppose you know as well as she does. Tell me, are you this boy's father? Come along, out with it!'

He went back to his wife:

'If you won't tell me, at least tell your son. He's a man now. He has a right to know who is his father. I've never known, never; so I can't tell you, my boy.'

He was losing all control and his voice rose to a shriek; he was waving his arms like a man in an epileptic fit:

'Now then . . . answer . . . she doesn't know . . . I bet she doesn't know . . . of course she doesn't . . . she went to bed with both of us . . . what a joke! . . . nobody knows, nobody at all . . . how can anyone know such a thing? . . . you'll never know either, my boy, you'll never know any more than I do, never . . . Well . . . ask her . . . ask her . . . you'll find she doesn't know . . . and I don't know