Andre Cornelis

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I

I was nine years old. It was in 1864, in the month of June at the close of a warm, bright afternoon. I was at my studies in my room as usual, having come in from the Lycee Bonaparte, and the outer shutters were closed. We lived in the Rue Tronchet, near the Madeleine, in the seventh house on the left, coming from the church. Three highly−polished steps (how often have I slipped on them!) led to the little room, so prettily furnished, all in blue, within whose walls I passed the last completely happy days of my life. Everything comes back to me. I was seated at my table, dressed in a large black overall, and engaged in writing out the tenses of a Latin verb on a ruled sheet divided into several compartments. All of a sudden I heard a loud cry, followed by a clamor of voices; then rapid steps trod the corridor outside my room. Instinctively I rushed to the door and came up against a man−servant, who was deadly pale, and had a roll of linen in his hand. I understood the use of this afterwards. I had not to question this man, for at sight of me he exclaimed, as though involuntarily:

"Ah! M. Andre, what an awful misfortune!"

Then, regaining his presence of mind, he said:

"Go back into your room—go back at once!"

Before I could answer, he caught me up in his arms, rather threw than placed me on the upper step of my staircase, locked the door of the corridor, and walked rapidly away.

"No, no," I cried, flinging myself against the door, "tell me all; I will, I must know." No answer. I shook the lock, I struck the panel with my clenched fists, I dashed my shoulder against the door. Vain was my frenzy! Then, sitting upon the lowest step, I listened, in an agony of fear, to the coming and going of people outside, who knew

of "the awful misfortune," but what was it they knew? Child as I was, I understood the terrible signification which the servant's exclamation bore under the actual circumstances. Two days previously, my father had gone out after breakfast, according to custom, to the place of business which he had occupied for over four years, in the Rue de la Victoire. He had been thoughtful during breakfast, indeed for some months past he had lost his accustomed cheerfulness. When he rose to go out, my mother, myself, and one of the habitual frequenters of our house, M. Jacques Termonde, a fellow student of my father's at the Ecole de Droit, were at table. My father left his seat before breakfast was over, having looked at the clock, and inquired whether it was quite right.

"Are you in such a hurry, Cornelis?" asked Termonde.

"Yes," answered my father, "I have an appointment with a client who is ill—a foreigner—I have to call on him at his hotel to procure some important papers. He is an odd sort of man, and I shall not be sorry to see something of him at closer quarters. I have taken certain steps on his behalf, and I am almost tempted to regret them."

And since then, no news! In the evening of that day, when dinner, which had been put off for one quarter of an hour after another, was over, and my father, who was always so methodical, so punctual, had not come in, my mother began to betray increasing uneasiness, and could not conceal from me that his last words dwelt upon her mind. It was a rare occurrence for him to speak with misgiving of his undertakings!

The night passed, then the next morning and afternoon, and once more it was evening. My mother and I were once more seated at the square table, where the cover laid for my father in front of his empty chair gave, as it were, a form to our nameless dread.

My mother had written to M. Jacques Termonde, and he came after dinner. I was sent away immediately, but not without my having had time to remark the extraordinary brightness of M. Termonde's eyes, which were blue, and usually shone coldly in his thin, sharp face. He had fair hair and a beard best described as pale. Thus do children take note of small details, which are speedily effaced from their minds, but afterwards reappear, at the contact of life, just as certain invisible marks come out upon paper when it is held to the fire.

While begging to be allowed to remain, I was mechanically observing the hurried and agitated turning and returning of a light cane—I had long coveted it—held behind his back in his remarkably beautiful hands. If I had not admired the cane so much, and the fighting centaurs on its handle—a fine piece of Renaissance work— this symptom of extreme disturbance might have escaped me. But, how could M. Termonde fail to be disturbed by the disappearance of his best friend? Nevertheless, his voice, a soft voice which made all his phrases melodious, was quite calm.

"To−morrow," he said, "I will have every inquiry made, if Cornelis has not returned; but he will come back, and all will be explained. Depend on it, he went away somewhere on the business he told you of, and left a letter for you to be sent by a commissionaire who has not delivered it."

"Ah!" said my mother, "you think that is possible?"

How often, in my dark hours, have I recalled this dialogue, and the room in which it took place—a little salon, much liked by my mother, with hangings and furniture of some foreign stuff all striped in red and white, black and yellow, that my father had brought from Morocco; and how plainly have I seen my mother in my mind's eye, with her black hair, her brown eyes, her quivering lips. She was as white as the summer gown she wore that evening. M. Termonde was dressed with his usual correctness, and I remember well his slender and elegant figure.

I attended the two classes at the Lycee, if not with a light, at least with a relieved heart. But, while I was sitting upon the lower step of my little staircase, all my uneasiness revived. I hammered at the door again, I called as

loudly as I could; but no one answered me, until the good woman who had been my nurse came into my room.

"My father!" I cried, "where is my father?"

"Poor child, poor child," said nurse, and took me in her arms.

She had been sent to tell me the awful truth, but her strength failed her. I escaped from her, ran out into the corridor, and reached my father's bedroom before anyone could stop me. Ah! upon the bed lay a rigid form covered by a white sheet, upon the pillow a bloodless, motionless face, with fixed, wide−open eyes, for the lids had not been closed; the chin was supported by a bandage, a napkin was bound around the forehead; at the bed's foot knelt a woman, still dressed in her white summer gown, crushed and helpless with grief. These were my father and my mother.

I flung myself madly upon her, and she clasped me passionately, with the piercing cry, "My Andre, my Andre!" In that cry there was such intense grief, in that embrace there was such frenzied tenderness, her heart was then so big with tears, that it warms my own even now to think of it. The next moment she rose and carried me out of the room, that I might see the dreadful sight no more. She did this easily, her terrible excitement had doubled her strength. "God punishes me! God punishes me!" she said over and over again taking no heed of her words. She had always been given, by fits and starts, to mystical piety. Then she covered my face, my neck, and my hair with kisses and tears. May all that we suffered, the dead and I, be forgiven you, poor mother, for the sincerity of those tears at that moment!

II

When I asked my mother, on the instant, to tell me all about the awful event, she said that my father had been seized with a fit in a hackney carriage, and that as no papers were found upon him, he had not been recognized for two days.

Grown−up people are much too ready to think it is equally easy to tell lies to all children.

Now, I was a child who pondered long in my thoughts over things that were said to me, and by dint of putting a number of small facts together, I came to the conviction that I did not know the whole truth. If my father's death had occurred in the manner stated to me, why should the man−servant have asked me, one day when he took me out to walk, what had been said to me about it? And when I answered him, why did he say no more, and, being a very talkative person, why had he kept silence ever since? Why, too, did I feel the same silence all around me, in the air, sitting on every lip, hidden in every look? Why was the subject of conversation constantly changed whenever I drew near? I guessed this by many trifling signs. Why was not a single newspaper left lying about, whereas, during my father's lifetime, the three journals to which we subscribed were always to be found on a table in the salon? Above all, why did both the masters and my schoolfellows look at me so curiously, when I went back to school early in October, four months after our great misfortune? Alas! it was their curiosity which revealed the full extent of the catastrophe to me.

It was only a fortnight after the reopening of the school, when I happened to be playing one morning with two new boys; I remember their names, Rastonaix and Servoin, now, and I can see the big fat cheeks of Rastonaix and the ferret−like face of Servoin. Although we were day pupils, we were allowed a quarter of an hour's recreation at school, between the Latin and English lessons. The two boys had engaged me on the previous day for a game of ninepins, and when it was over, they came close to me, and looking at each other to keep up their courage, they put to me the following questions, point−blank:

"Is it true that the murderer of your father has been arrested?"

"And that he is to be guillotined?"

This occurred sixteen years ago, but I cannot now recall the beating of my heart at those words without horror. I must have turned frightfully pale, for the two boys, who had struck me this blow with the carelessness of their age—of our age—stood there disconcerted. A blind fury seized upon me, urging me to command them to be silent, and to hit them with my fists if they spoke again; but at the same time I felt a wild impulse of curiosity—what if this were the explanation of the silence by which I felt myself surrounded?—and also a pang of fear, the fear of the unknown. The blood rushed into my face, and I stammered out:

"I do not know."

The drum−tap, summoning us back to the schoolroom, separated us. What a day I passed, bewildered by my trouble, turning the two terrible sentences over and over again.

It would have been natural for me to question my mother; but the truth is, I felt quite unable to repeat to her what my unconscious tormentors had said. It was strange but true, that thenceforth my mother, whom nevertheless I loved with all my heart, exercised a paralyzing influence over me. She was so beautiful in her pallor, so royally beautiful and proud.

No, I should never have ventured to reveal to her that an irresistible doubt of the story she had told me was implanted in my mind merely by the two questions of my schoolfellows; but, as I could not keep silence entirely and live, I resolved to have recourse to Julie, my former nurse. She was a little woman, fifty years of age, an old maid too, with a flat, wrinkled face, like an over−ripe apple; but her eyes were full of kindness, and indeed so was her whole face, although her lips were drawn in by the loss of her front teeth, and this gave her a witch−like mouth. She had deeply mourned my father in my company, for she had been in his service before his marriage. Julie was retained specially on my account, and in addition to her the household consisted of the cook, the man−servant, and the femme de chambre. Julie put me to bed and tucked me in, heard me say my prayers, and listened to my little troubles.

"Oh! the wretches!" she exclaimed, when I opened my heart to her and repeated the words that had agitated me so terribly. "And yet it could not have been hidden from you forever." Then it was that she told me all the truth, there in my little room, speaking very low and bending over me, while I lay sobbing in my narrow bed. She suffered in the telling of that truth as much as I in the hearing of it, and the touch of her dry old hand, with fingers scarred by the needle, fell softly on my curly head as she stroked it.

That ghastly story, which bore down my youth with the weight of an impenetrable mystery, I have found written in the newspapers of the day, but not more clearly than it was narrated by my dear old Julie. Here it is, plainly set forth, as I have turned and re− turned it over and over again in my thoughts, day after day, with the vain hope of penetrating it.

My father, who was a distinguished advocate, had resigned his practice in court some years previously, and set up as a financial agent, hoping by that means to make a fortune more rapidly than by the law. His good official connection, his scrupulous probity, his extensive knowledge of the most important questions, and his great capacity for work, had speedily secured him an exceptional position. He employed ten secretaries, and the million and a half francs which my mother and I inherited formed only the beginnings of the wealth to which he aspired, partly for his own sake, much more for his son's but, above all, for his wife's—he was passionately attached to her. Notes and letters found among his papers proved that at the time of his death, he had been for a month previously in correspondence with a certain person named, or calling himself, William Henry Rochdale, who was commissioned by the firm of Crawford, in San Francisco, to obtain a railway concession in Cochin China, then recently conquered, from the French Government. It was with Rochdale that my father had the appointment of which he spoke before he left my mother, M. Termonde, and myself, after breakfast, on the last fatal morning.

The Instruction had no difficulty in establishing this fact. The appointed place of meeting was the Imperial Hotel, a large building, with a long facade, in the Rue de Rivoli, not far from the Ministere de la Marine. The entire block of houses was destroyed by fire in the Commune; but during my childhood I frequently begged Julie to take me to the spot, that I might gaze, with an aching heart, upon the handsome courtyard adorned with green shrubs, the wide, carpeted staircase, and the slab of black marble, encrusted with gold, that marked the entrance to the place whither my father wended his way, while my mother was talking with M. Termonde, and I was playing in the room with them. My father had left us at a quarter−past twelve, and he must have taken a quarter of an hour to walk to the Imperial Hotel, for the concierge, having seen the corpse, recognized it, and remembered that it was just about half−past twelve when my father inquired of him what was the number of Mr. Rochdale's rooms. This gentleman, a foreigner, had arrived on the previous day, and had fixed, after some hesitation, upon an apartment situated on the second floor, and composed of a salon and a bedroom, with a small ante−room, which separated the apartment from the landing outside. From that moment he had not gone out and he dined the same evening and breakfasted the next morning in his salon. The concierge also remembered that Rochdale came down alone, at about two o'clock on the second day; but he was too much accustomed to the continual coming and going to notice whether the visitor who arrived at half− past twelve had or had not gone away again. Rochdale handed the key of his apartment to the concierge, with directions that anybody who came, wanting to see him, should be asked to wait in his salon. After this he walked away in a leisurely manner, with a business− like portfolio under his arm, smoking a cigar, and he did not reappear.

The day passed on, and towards night two housemaids entered the apartment of the foreign gentlemen to prepare his bed. They passed through the salon without observing anything unusual. The traveler's luggage, composed of a large and much−used trunk and a quite new dressing−bag, were there. His dressing−things were arranged on the top of a cabinet. The next day, towards noon, the same housemaids entered the apartment, and finding that the traveler had slept out, they merely replaced the day−covering upon the bed, and paid no attention to the salon. Precisely the same thing occurred in the evening; but on the following day, one of the women having come into the apartment early, and again finding everything intact, began to wonder what this meant. She searched about, and speedily discovered a body, lying at full length underneath the sofa, with the head wrapped in towels. She uttered a scream which brought other servants to the spot, and the corpse of my father—alas! it was he—was removed from the hiding−place in which the assassin had cunningly concealed it. It was not difficult to reconstruct the scene of the murder. A wound in the back of the neck indicated that the unfortunate man had been shot from behind, while seated at the table examining papers, by a person standing close beside him. The report had not been heard, on account of the proximity of the weapon, and also because of the constant noise in the street, and the position of the salon at the back of the ante−room. Besides, the precautions taken by the murderer rendered it reasonable to believe that he had carefully chosen a weapon which would produce but little sound. The ball had penetrated the spinal marrow and death had been instantaneous. The assassin had placed new unmarked towels in readiness, and in these he wrapped up the head and neck of his victim, so that there were no traces of blood. He had dried his hands on a similar towel, after rinsing them with water taken from the carafe; this water he had poured back into the same bottle, which was found concealed behind the drapery of the mantel−piece. Was the robbery real or pretended? My father's watch was gone, and neither his letter−case nor any paper by which his identity could be proved was found upon his body. An accidental indication led, however, to his immediate recognition. Inside the pocket of his waistcoat was a little band of tape, bearing the address of the tailor's establishment. Inquiry was made there, in the afternoon the sad discovery ensued, and after the necessary legal formalities, the body was brought home.

And the murderer? The only data on which the police could proceed were soon exhausted. The trunk left by the mysterious stranger, whose name was certainly not Rochdale, was opened. It was full of things bought haphazard, like the trunk itself, from a bric−a−brac seller who was found, but who gave a totally different description of the purchaser from that which had been obtained from the concierge of the Imperial Hotel. The latter declared that Rochdale was a dark, sunburnt man with a long thick beard; the former described him as of fair complexion and beardless. The cab on which the trunk had been placed immediately after the purchase, was traced, and the deposition of the driver coincided exactly with that of the bric−a−brac seller. The assassin had been taken in the

cab, first to a shop, where he bought a dressing−bag, next to a linen−draper's where he bought the towels, thence to the Lyons railway station, and there he had deposited the trunk and the dressing−bag at the parcels office. Then the other cab which had taken him, three weeks afterwards, to the Imperial Hotel, was traced, and the description given by the second driver agreed with the deposition of the concierge. From this it was concluded that in the interval formed by these three weeks, the assassin had dyed his skin and his hair, for all the depositions were in agreement with respect to the stature, figure, bearing, and tone of voice of the individual. This hypothesis was confirmed by one Jullien, a hairdresser, who came forward of his own accord to make the following statement:

On the day in the preceding month, a man who answered to the description of Rochdale given by the first driver and the bric−a− brac seller, being fair−haired, pale, tall, and broad−shouldered, came to his shop to order a wig and a beard; these were to be so well constructed that no one could recognize him, and were intended, he said, to be worn at a fancy ball. The unknown person was accordingly furnished with a black wig and a black beard, and he provided himself with all the necessary ingredients for disguising himself as a native of South America, purchasing kohl for blackening his eyebrows, and a composition of Sienna earth and amber for coloring his complexion. He applied these so skilfully, that when he returned to the hairdresser's shop, Jullien did not recognize him. The unusualness of a fancy ball given in the middle of summer, and the perfection to which his customer carried the art of disguise, astonished the hairdresser so much that his attention was immediately attracted by the newspaper articles upon "The Mystery of the Imperial Hotel," as the affair was called. At my father's house two letters were found; both bore the signature of Rochdale, and were dated from London, but without envelopes, and were written in a reversed hand, pronounced by experts to be disguised. He would have had to forward a certain document on receipt of these letters; probably that document was in the letter− case which the assassin carried off after the crime. The firm of Crawford had a real existence at San Francisco, but had never formed the project of making a railroad in Cochin China. The authorities were confronted by one of those criminal problems which set imagination at defiance. It was probably not for the purpose of theft that the assassin had resorted to such numerous and clever devices; he would hardly have led a man of business into so skilfully laid a trap merely to rob him of a few thousand francs and a watch.

Was the murder committed for revenge?

A search into the life of my father revealed nothing whatever that could render such a theory tenable. Every suspicion, every supposition, was routed by the indisputable and inexplicable fact that Rochdale was a reality whose existence could not be contested, that he had been at the Imperial Hotel from seven o'clock in the evening of one day until two o'clock in the afternoon of the next, and that he had then vanished, like a phantom, leaving one only trace behind—ONE ONLY. This man had come there, other men had spoken to him; the manner in which he had passed the night and the morning before the crime was known. He had done his deed of murder, and then—nothing. "All Paris" was full of this affair, and when I made a collection, long afterwards, of newspapers which referred to it, I found that for six whole weeks it occupied a place in the chronicle of every day.

At length the fatal heading, "The Mystery of the Imperial Hotel," disappeared from the columns of the newspapers, as the remembrance of that ghastly enigma faded from the minds of their readers, and solicitude about it ceased to occupy the police. The tide of life, rolling that poor waif amid its waters, had swept on. Yes; but I, the son? How should I ever forget the old woman's story that had filled my childhood with tragic horror? How should I ever cease to see the pale face of the murdered man, with its fixed, open eyes? How should I not say: "I will avenge thee, thou poor ghost?" Poor ghost! When I read Hamlet for the first time, with that passionate avidity which comes from an analogy between the moral situation depicted in a work of art and some crisis of our own life, I remember that I regarded the Prince of Denmark with horror. Ah! if the ghost of my father had come to relate the drama of his death to me, with his unbreathing lips, would I have hesitated one instant? No! I protested to myself; and then? I learned all, and yet I hesitated, like him, though less than he, to dare the terrible deed. Silence! silence! Let me go back to the facts.

III

I remember little of the succeeding events. All was so trivial, so insignificant, between that first vision of horror and the vision of woe which came to me two years later, that, with one exception, I hardly recall the intervening time.

In 1864, my father died; in 1866, my mother married M. Jacques Termonde. The exceptional period of the interval was the only one during which my mother bestowed constant attention upon me. Before the fatal date my father was the only person who had cared for me; at a later period there was no one at all to do so. Our apartment in the Rue Tronchet became unbearable to us; there we could not escape from the remembrance of the terrible event, and we removed to a small hotel in the Boulevard de Latour−Maubourg. The house had belonged to a painter, and stood in a small garden which seemed larger than it was because other gardens adjoined it, and over−shadowed its boundary wall and greenery. The center of the house was a kind of hall, in the English style, which the former occupant had used as a studio; my mother made this her ordinary sitting− room.

Now, at this distance of time, I can understand my mother's character, and recognize that there was something about her, which, although it was very harmless, led her to exaggerate the outward expression of all her feelings. While she occupied herself in studying the attitudes by which her emotions were to be fittingly expressed, the sentiments themselves were fading away. For instance, she chose to condemn herself to voluntary exile and seclusion after her bereavement, receiving only a very few friends, of whom M. Jacques Termonde was one; but she very soon began to adorn herself and everything around her, with the fine and subtle tastefulness that was innate in her.

My mother was a very lovely woman; her beauty was of a refined and pensive order, her figure was tall and slender, her dark hair was very luxuriant and of remarkable length. No doubt it was to the Greek blood in her veins that she owed the classical lines of her profile, her full−lidded soft eyes, and the willowy grace of her form. Her maternal grandfather was a Greek merchant, of the name of Votronto, who had come from the Levant to Marcielles when the Ionian Islands were annexed to France.

Many times in after years I have recalled the strange contrast between her rare and refined beauty and my father's stolid sturdy form, and my own, and wondered whether the origin of many irreparable mistakes might not be traced to that contrast. But I did not reason in those days; I was under the spell of the fair being who called me, "My son." I used to look at her with a kind of idolatry when she was seated at her piano in that elegant sanctum of hers, which she had hung with draped foreign stuffs, and decorated with tall green plants and various curious things, after a fashion entirely her own. For her sake, and in spite of my natural awkwardness and untidiness, I strove to keep myself very clean and neat in the more and more elaborate costumes which she made me wear, and also more and more did the terrible image of the murdered man fade away from that home, which, nevertheless, was provided and adorned by the fortune which he had earned for us and bequeathed to us. All the ways of modern life are so opposed to the tragic in events, so far removed from the savage realities of passion and bloodshed, that when such things intrude upon the decorous life of a family, they are put out of sight with all speed, and soon come to be looked upon as a bad dream, impossible to doubt, but difficult to realize.

Yes, our life had almost resumed its normal course when my mother's second marriage was announced to me. This time I accurately remember not only the period, but also the day and hour.

I was spending my holidays with my spinster aunt, my father's sister, who lived at Compiegne, in a house situated at the far end of the town. She had three servants, one of whom was my dear old Julie, who had left us because my mother could not get on with her. My aunt Louise was a little woman of fifty, with countrified looks and manners; she had hardly ever consented to stay two whole days in Paris during my father's lifetime. Her almost invariable attire was a black silk gown made at home, with just a line of white at the neck and wrists, and she

always wore a very long gold chain of ancient date, which was passed under the bodice of her gown and came out at the belt. To this chain her watch and a bunch of seals and charms were attached. Her cap, plainly trimmed with ribbon, was black like her dress, and the smooth bands of her hair, which was turning gray, framed a thoughtful brow and eyes so kind that she was pleasant to behold, although her nose was large and her mouth and chin were heavy. She had brought up my father in this same little town of Compiegne, and had given him, out of her fortune, all that she could spare from the simple needs of her frugal life, when he wished to marry Mdlle. de Slane, in order to induce my mother's family to listen to his suit.

The contrast between the portrait in my little album of my aunt and her face as I saw it now, told plainly enough how much she had suffered during the past two years. Her hair had become more white, the lines which run from the nostrils to the corners of the mouth were deepened, her eyelids had a withered look. And yet she had never been demonstrative in her grief. I was an observant little boy, and the difference between my mother's character and that of my aunt was precisely indicated to my mind by the difference in their respective sorrow. At that time it was hard for me to understand my aunt's reserve, while I could not suspect her of want of feeling. Now it is to the other sort of nature that I am unjust. My mother also had a tender heart, so tender that she did not feel able to reveal her purpose to me, and it was my Aunt Louise who undertook to do so. She had not consented to be present at the marriage, and M. Termonde, as I afterwards learned, preferred that I should not attend on the occasion, in order, no doubt, to spare the feelings of her who was to become his wife.

In spite of all her self−control, Aunt Louise had tears in her brown eyes when she led me to the far end of the garden, where my father had played when he was a child like myself. The golden tints of September had begun to touch the foliage of the trees. A vine spread its tendrils over the arbor in which we seated ourselves, and wasps were busy among the ripening grapes. My aunt took both my hands in hers, and began:

"Andre, I have to tell you a great piece of news."

I looked at her apprehensively. The shock of the dreadful event in our lives had left its mark upon my nervous system, and at the slightest surprise my heart would beat until I nearly fainted. She saw my agitation and said simply:

"Your mother is about to marry."

It was strange this sentence did not immediately produce the impression which my look at her had led my aunt to expect. I had thought from the tone of her voice, that she was going to tell me of my mother's illness or death. My sensitive imagination readily conjured up such fears. I asked calmly:

"Whom?"

"You do not guess?"

"M. Termonde?" I cried.

Even now I cannot define the reasons which sent this name to my lips so suddenly, without a moment's thought. No doubt M. Termonde had been a good deal at our house since my father's death; but had he not visited us as often, if not more frequently, before my mother's widowhood? Had he not managed every detail of our affairs for us with care and fidelity, which even then I could recognize as very rare? Why should the news of his marriage with my mother seem to me on the instant to be much worse news than if she had married no matter whom? Exactly the opposite effect ought to have been produced, surely? I had known this man for a long time; he had been very kind to me formerly—they said he spoiled me—and he was very kind to me still. My best toys were presents from him, and my prettiest books; a wonderful wooden horse which moved by clockwork, given to me when I was seven—how much my poor father was amused when I told him this horse was "a double

thoroughbred"—"Don Quixote," with Dore's illustrations, this very year; in fact some new gift constantly, and yet I was never easy and light−hearted in his presence as I had formerly been. When had this restraint begun? I could not have told that, but I thought he came too often between my mother and me. I was jealous of him, I may as well confess it, with that unconscious jealousy which children feel, and which made me lavish kisses on my mother when he was by, in order to show him that she was my mother, and nothing at all to him. Had he discovered my feelings? Had they been his own also? However that might be, I now never failed to discern antipathy similar to my own in his looks, notwithstanding his flattering voice and his over−polite ways. At my then age, instinct is never deceived about such impressions.

Without any other cause than the weakness of nerves to which I had been subject ever since my father's death, I burst into tears. The same thing happened to me sometimes when I was shut up in my room alone, with the door bolted, suffering from a dread which I could not conquer, like that of a coming danger. I would forecast the worst accidents that could happen; for example, that my mother would be murdered, like my father, and then myself, and I peered under all the articles of furniture in the room. It had occurred to me, when out walking with a servant, to imagine that the harmless man might be an accomplice of the mysterious criminal, and have it in charge to take me to him, or at all events to have it in charge to take place. My too highly−wrought imagination overmastered me. I fancied myself, however, escaping from the deadly device, and in order to hide myself more effectually, making for Compiegne. Should I have enough money? Then I reflected that it might be possible to sell my watch to an old watchmaker whom I used to see, when on my way to the Lycee, at work behind the window of his little shop, with a glass fixed in his right eye. That was a sad faculty of foresight which poisoned so many of the harmless hours of my childhood! It was the same faculty that now made me break out into choking sobs when my aunt asked me what I had in my mind against M. Termonde. I related the worst of my grievances to her then, leaning my head on her shoulder, and in this one all the others were summed up. It dated from two months before. I had come back from school in a merry mood, contrary to my habit. My teacher had dismissed me with praise of my compositions and congratulations on my prizes. What good news this was to take home and how tenderly my mother would kiss me when she heard it! I put away my books, washed my hands carefully, and flew to the salon where my mother was. I entered the room without knocking at the door, and in such haste that as I sprang towards her to throw myself into her arms, she gave a little cry. She was standing beside the mantlepiece, her face was very pale, and near her stood M. Termonde. He seized me by the arm and held me back from her.

"Oh, how you frightened me!" said my mother.

"Is that the way to come into a salon?" said M. Termonde.

His voice had turned rough like his gesture. He had grasped my arm so tightly that where his fingers had fastened on it I found black marks that night when I undressed myself. But it was neither his insolent words nor the pain of his grasp which made me stand there stupidly, with a swelling heart. No, it was hearing my mother say to him:

"Don't scold Andre too much; he is so young. He will improve."

Then she drew me towards her, and rolled my curls round her fingers; but in her words, in their tone, in her glance, in her faint smile, I detected a singular timidity, almost a supplication, directed to the man before her, who frowned as he pulled his moustache with his restless fingers, as if in impatience of my presence. By what right did he, stranger, speak in the tone of a master in our house? Why had he laid his hand on me ever so lightly? Yes, by what right? Was I his son or his ward? Why did not my mother defend me against him? Even if I were in fault it was towards her only. A fit of rage seized upon me; I burned with longing to spring upon M. Termonde like a beast, to tear his face and bite him. I darted a look of fury at him and at my mother, and left the room without speaking. I was of a sullen temper, and I think this defect was due to my excessive and almost morbid sensitiveness. All my feelings were exaggerated, so that the least thing angered me, and it was misery to me to recover myself. Even my father had found it very difficult to get the better of those fits of wounded feeling, during which I strove against my own relentings with a cold and concentrated anger which both relieved and

tortured me. I was well aware of this moral infirmity, and as I was not a bad child in reality, I was ashamed of it. Therefore, my humiliation was complete when, as I went out of the room, M. Termonde said:

"Now for a week's sulk! His temper is really insufferable."

His remark had one advantage, for I made it a point of honor to give the lie to it, and did not sulk; but the scene had hurt me too deeply for me to forget it, and now my resentment was fully revived, and grew stronger and stronger while I was telling the story to my aunt. Alas! my almost unconscious second−sight, that of a too sensitive child, was not in error. That puerile but painful scene symbolized the whole history of my youth, my invincible antipathy to the man who was about to take my father's place, and the blind partiality in his favor of her who ought to have defended me from the first and always.

"He detests me!" I said through my tears; "what have I done to him?"

"Calm yourself," said the kind woman. "You are just like your poor father, making the worst of all your little troubles. And now you must try to be nice to him on account of your mother, and not to give way to this violent feeling, which frightens me. Do not make an enemy of him," she added.

It was quite natural that she should speak to me in this way, and yet her earnestness appeared strange to me from that moment out. I do not know why she also seemed surprised at my answer to her question, "What do you know?" She wanted to quiet me, and she increased the apprehension with which I regarded the usurper—so I called him ever afterwards—by the slight faltering of her voice when she spoke to him.

"You will have to write to them this evening," said she at length.

Write to them! The words sickened me. They were united; never, nevermore should I be able to think of the one without thinking of the other.

"And you?"

"I have already written."

"When are they to be married?"

"They were married yesterday," she answered, in so low a tone that I hardly heard the words.

"And where?" I asked, after a pause.

"In the country, at the house of some friends." Then she added quickly: "They preferred that you should not be there on account of the interruption of your holidays. They have gone away for three weeks; then they will go to see you in Paris before they start for Italy. You know I am not well enough to travel. I will keep you here until then. Be a good boy, and go now and write."

I had many other questions to put to her, and many more tears to weep, but I restrained myself, and a quarter of an hour later, I was seated at my dear good aunt's writing−table in her salon.

How I loved that room on the ground floor, with its glass door opening on the garden. It was filled with remembrance for me. On the wall at the side of the old−fashioned "secretary" hung the portraits, in frames of all shapes and sizes, of those whom the good and pious soul had loved and lost. This funereal little corner spoke strongly to my fancy. One of the portraits was a colored miniature, representing my great−grandmother in the costume of the Directory, with a short waist, and her hair dressed a la Proudhon. There was also a miniature of my

great−uncle, her son. What an amiable, self−important visage was that of the staunch admirer of Louis Philippe and M. Thiers! Then came my paternal grandfather, with his strong parvenu physiognomy, and my father at all ages. Underneath these works of art was a bookcase, in which I found all my father's school prizes, piously preserved. What a feeling of protection I derived from the portieres in green velvet, with long bands of needlework, my aunt's masterpieces, which hung in wide folds over the doors! With what admiration I regarded the faded carpet, with its impossible flowers, which I had so often tried to gather in my babyhood! This was one of the legends of my earliest years, one of those anecdotes which are told of a beloved son, and which make him feel that the smallest details of his existence have been observed, understood, and loved. In later days I have been frozen by the ice of indifference. And my aunt, she whose life had been lived among these old−fashioned things, how I loved her, with that face in which I read nothing but supreme tenderness for me, those eyes whose gaze did me good in some mysterious part of my soul! I felt her so near to me, only through her likeness to my father, that I rose from my task four or five times to kiss her, during the time it took me to write my letter of congratulation to the worst enemy I had, to my knowledge, in the world.

And this was the second indelible date in my life.

IV

I once spoke to my aunt of the vow I had taken, the solemn promise I had made to myself that I would discover the murderer of my father, and take vengeance upon him, and she laid her hand upon my mouth. She was a pious woman, and she repeated the words of the gospel: "Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord." Then she added: "We must leave the punishment of the crime to Him; His will is hidden from us. Remember the divine precept and promise, 'Forgive and you shall be forgiven.' Never say: 'An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.' Ah, no; drive this enmity out of your heart, Cornelis; yes, even this." And there were tears in her eyes.

My poor aunt! She thought me made of sterner stuff than I really was. There was no need of her advice to prevent my being consumed by the desire for vengeance which had been the fixed star of my early youth, the blood−colored beacon aflame in my night. Ah! the resolutions of boyhood, the "oaths of Hannibal" taken to ourselves, the dream of devoting all our strength to one single and unchanging aim—life sweeps all that away, together with our generous illusions, ardent enthusiasm, and noble hopes. What a difference there is—what a falling off—between the boy of fifteen, unhappy indeed, but so bold and proud in 1870, and the young man of eight years later, in 1878! And to think, only to think, that but for chance occurrences, impossible to foresee, I should still be, at this hour, the young man whose portrait hangs upon the wall above the table at which I am writing. Of a surety, the visitors to the Salon of that year (1878) who looked at this portrait among so many others, had no suspicion that it represented the son of a father who had come to so tragic an end. And I, when I look at that commonplace image of an ordinary Parisian, with eyes unlit by any fire or force of will, complexion paled by the fatigues of fashion, hair cut in the mode of the day, strictly correct dress and attitude, I am astonished to think that I could have lived as I actually did live at that period. Between the misfortunes that saddened my childhood, and those of quite recent date which have finally laid waste my life, the course of my existence was colorless, monotonous, vulgar, just like that of anybody else. I shall merely note the stages of it.

In the second half of 1870, the Franco−Prussian war takes place. The invasion finds me at Compiegne, where I am passing my holidays with my aunt. My stepfather and my mother remain in Paris during the siege. I go on with my studies under the tuition of an old priest belonging to the little town, who prepared my father for his first communion. In the autumn of 1871 I return to Versailles; in August, 1873, I take my bachelor's degree, and then I do my one year's voluntary service in the army at Angers under the easiest possible conditions. My colonel was the father of my old schoolfellow, Rocquin. In 1874 I am set free from tutelage by my stepfather's advice. This was the moment at which my task was to have been begun, the time appointed with my own soul; yet, four years afterwards, in 1878, not only was the vengeance that had been the tragic romance, and, so to speak, the religion of my childhood, unfulfilled, but I did not trouble myself about it.

I was cruelly ashamed of my indifference when I thought about it; but I am now satisfied that it was not so much the result of weakness of character as of causes apart from myself which would have acted in the same way upon any young man placed in my situation. From the first, and when I faced my task of vengeance, an insurmountable obstacle arose before me. It is equally easy and sublime to strike an attitude and exclaim: "I swear that I will never rest until I have punished the guilty one." In reality, one never acts except in detail, and what could I do? I had to proceed in the same way as justice had proceeded, to reopen the inquiry which had been pushed to its extremity without any result.

I began with the Judge of Instruction,* who had had the carriage of the matter, and who was now a Counsellor of the Court. He was a man of fifty, very quiet and plain in his way, and he lived in the Ile de Paris, on the first floor of an ancient house, from whose windows he could see Notre Dame, primitive Paris, and the Seine, which is as narrow as a canal at that place.

* The translator renders literally those terms and phrases relating to the French criminal law and procedure which have no analogous expression in English.

M. Massol, so he was named, was quite willing to resume with me the analysis of the data which had been furnished by the Instruction. No doubt existed either as to the personality of the assassin, or the hour at which the crime was committed. My father had been killed between two and three o'clock in the day, without a struggle, by that tall, broad−shouldered personage whose extraordinary disguise indicated, according to the magistrate, "an amateur." Excess of complication is always an imprudence, for it multiplies the chances of failure. Had the assassin dyed his skin and worn a wig because my father knew him by sight?

To this M. Massol said "No; for M. Cornelis, who was very observant, and who, besides, was on his guard—this is evident from his last words when he left you—would have recognized him by his voice, his glance, and his attitude. A man cannot change his height and his figure, although he may change his face."

M. Massol's theory of this disguise was that the wearer had adopted it in order to gain time to get out of France, should the corpse be discovered on the day of the murder. Supposing that a description of a man with a very brown complexion and a black beard had been telegraphed in every direction, the assassin, having washed off his paint, laid aside his wig and beard, and put on other clothes, might have crossed the frontier without arousing the slightest suspicion. There was reason to believe that the pretended Rochdale lived abroad. He had spoke in English at the hotel, and the people there had taken him for an American; it was therefore presumable either that he was a native of the United States, or that he habitually resided there. The criminal was, then, a foreigner, American or English, or perhaps a Frenchman settled in America. As for the motive of so complicated a crime, it was difficult to admit that it could be robbery alone. "And yet," observed the Judge of Instruction, "we do not know what the note−case carried off by the assassin contained. But," he added, "the hypothesis of robbery seems to me to be utterly routed by the fact that, while Rochdale stripped the dead man of his watch, he left a ring, which was much more valuable, on his finger. From this I conclude that he took the watch merely as a precaution to throw the police off the scent. My supposition is that the man killed M. Cornelis for revenge.

Then the former Judge of Instruction gave me some singular examples of the resentment cherished against medical experts employed in legal cases, Procureurs of the Republic, and Presidents of Assize. His theory was, that in the course of his practice at the bar my father might have excited resentment of a fierce and implacable kind; for he had won many suits of importance, and no doubt had made enemies of those against whom he employed his great powers. Supposing one of those persons, being ruined by the result, had attributed that ruin to my father, there would be an explanation of all the apparatus of this deadly vengeance.

M. Massol begged me to observe that the assassin, whether he were a foreigner or not, was known in Paris. Why, if this were not so, should the man have so carefully avoided being seen in the street? He had been traced out during his first stay in Paris, when he bought the wig and the beard, and that time he put up at a small hotel in the

Rue d'Aboukir under the name of Rochdale, and invariably went out in a cab. "Observe also," said the Judge, "that he kept his room on the day before the murder, and on the morning of the actual day. He breakfasted in his apartment, having breakfasted and dined there the day before. But, when he was in London, and when he lived at the hotel to which your father addressed his first letters, he came and went without any precautions."

And this was all. The addresses of three hotels—such were the meagre particulars that formed the whole of the information to which I listened with passionate eagerness; the magistrate had no more to tell me. He had small, twinkling, very light eyes, and his smooth face wore an expression of extreme keenness. His language was measured, his general demeanor was cold, obliging, and mild, he was always closely shaven, and in him one recognized at once the well−balanced and methodical mind which had given him great professional weight. He acknowledged that he had been unable to discover anything, even after a close analysis of the whole existing situation of my father, as well as his past.

"Ah, I have thought a great deal about this said he, adding that before he resigned his post as Judge of Instruction he had carefully reperused the notes of the case. He had again questioned the concierge of the Imperial Hotel and other persons. Since he had become Counsellor to the Court, he had indicated to his successor what he believed to be a clue; a robbery committed by a carefully made−up Englishman had led him to believe the thief to be identical with the pretended Rochdale. Then there was nothing more.

These steps had, however, been of use inasmuch as they barred the rule of limitation, and he laid stress on that fact. I consulted him then as to how much time still remained for me to seek out the truth on my own account. The last Act of Instruction dated from 1873, so that I had until 1883 to discover the criminal and deliver him up to public justice. What madness! Ten years had already elapsed since the crime, and I, all alone, insignificant, not possessed of the vast resources at the disposal of the police, I presumed to imagine that I should triumph, where so skillful a ferret as he had failed! Folly! Yes; it was so.

And still there was nothing, no indication whatever. Nevertheless, I tried.

I began a thorough and searching investigation of all the dead man's papers. With that unbounded tenderness of hers for my stepfather, which made me so miserable, my mother had placed all these papers in M. Termonde's keeping. Alas! Why should she have understood those niceties of feeling on my part, which rendered the fusion of her present with her past so repugnant to me, any more clearly on this point than on any other? M. Termonde had at least scrupulously respected the whole of those papers, from plans of association and prospectuses to private letters. Among the latter were several from M. Termonde himself, which bore testimony to the friendship that had formerly subsisted between my mother's first husband and her second. Had I not known this always? Why should I suffer from the knowledge?

And still there was nothing, no indication whatever to put me on the track of a suspicion.

I evoked the image of my father as he lived, just as I had seen him for the last time; I heard him replying to M. Termonde's question in the dining−room of the Rue Tronchet, and speaking of the man who awaited him to kill him: "A singular man whom I shall not be sorry to observe more closely." And then he had gone out and was walking towards his death while I was playing in the little salon, and my mother was talking to the friend who was one day to be her master and mine. What a happy home−picture, while in that hotel room— Ah! was I never to find the key of the terrible enigma? Where was I to go? What was I to do? At what door was I to knock?

At the same time that a sense of the responsibility of my task disheartened me, the novel facilities of my new way of life contributed to relax the tension of my will. During my school days, the sufferings I underwent from jealousy of my stepfather, the disappointment of my repressed affections, the meanness and penury of my surroundings, many grievous influences, had maintained the restless ardor of my feelings; but this also had undergone a change. No doubt I still continued to love my mother deeply and painfully, but I now no longer asked

her for what I knew she would not give me, my unshared place, a separate shrine in her heart. I accepted her nature instead of rebelling against it.

Neither had I ceased to regard my stepfather with morose antipathy; but I no longer hated him with the old vehemence. His conduct to me after I had left school was irreproachable. Just as in my childhood, he had made it a point of honor never to raise his voice in speaking to me, so he now seemed to pique himself upon an entire absence of interference in my life as a young man. When, having passed my baccalaureate, I announced that I did not wish to adopt any profession, but without a reason—the true one was my resolution to devote myself entirely to the fulfillment of my task of justice—he had not a word to say against that strange decision; nay, more, he brought my mother to consent to it.

When my fortune was handed over to me, I found that my mother, who had acted as my guardian, and my stepfather, her co−trustee, had agreed not to touch my funds during the whole period of my education; the interest had been re−invested, and I came into possession, not of 750,000 francs, but of more than a million. Painful as I felt the obligation of gratitude towards the man whom I had for years regarded as my enemy, I was bound to acknowledge that he had acted an honorable part towards me. I was well aware that no real contradiction existed between these high−minded actions and the harshness with which he had imprisoned me at school, and, so to speak, relegated me to exile. Provided that I renounced all attempts to form a third between him and his wife, he would have no relations with me but those of perfect courtesy; but I must not be in my mother's house. His will was to reign entirely alone over the heart and life of the woman who bore his name.

How could I have contended with him? Why, too, should I have blamed him, since I knew so well that in his place, jealous as I was, my own conduct would have been exactly similar?

I yielded, therefore, because I was powerless to contend with a love which made my mother happy; because I was weary of keeping up the daily constraint of my relations with her and him, and also because I hoped that when once I was free I should be better fitted for my task as a doer of justice. I myself asked to be permitted to leave the house, so that at nineteen I possessed absolute independence, an apartment of my own in the Avenue Montaigne, close to the round−point in the Champs Elysees, a yearly income of 50,000 francs, the entree to all the salons frequented by my mother, and the entree, too, to all the places at which one may amuse one's self. How could I have resisted the influences of such a position?

Yes, I had dreamed of being an avenger, a justiciary, and I allowed myself to be caught up almost instantly into the whirlwind of that life of pleasure whose destructive power those who see it only from the outside cannot measure. It is a futile and exacting existence which fritters away your hours as it fritters away your mind, raveling out the stuff of time thread by thread with irreparable loss, and also the more precious stuff of mental and moral strength.

With respect to that task of mine, my task as an avenger, I was incapable of immediate action—what and whom was I to attack?

And so I availed myself of all the opportunities that presented themselves of disguising my inaction by movement, and soon the days began to hurry on, and press one upon the other, amid those innumerable amusements of which the idle rich make a code of duties to be performed. What with the morning ride in the Bois, afternoon calls, dinner parties, parties to the theater and after midnight, play at the club, or the pursuit of pleasure elsewhere—how was I to find leisure for the carrying out of a project? I had horses, intrigues, an absurd duel in which I acquitted myself well, because, as I believe, the tragic ideas that were always at the bottom of my life favored me.

A woman of forty persuaded me that I was her first love; then I persuaded myself that I was in love with a Russian great lady, who was living in Paris. The latter was—indeed she still is—one of those incomparable

actresses in society, who, in order to surround themselves with a sort of court, composed of admirers who are more or less rewarded, employ all the allurements of luxury, wit, and beauty, but who have not a particle of either imagination or heart, although they fascinate by a display of the most refined fancies and the most vivid emotions. I led the life of a slave to the caprices of this soulless coquette for nearly six months, and learned that women of the fashionable world and women of "the half− world" are very much alike in point of worth. The former are intolerable on account of their lies, their assumption, and their vanity; the others are equally odious by reason of their vulgarity, their stupidity, and their sordid love of lucre.

I forgot all my absurd relations with women of both orders in the excitement of play, and yet I was well aware of the meanness of that diversion, which only ceases to be insipid when it becomes odious, because it is a clever calculation upon money to be gained without working for it. There was in me something at once wildly dissipated and yet disgusted, which drove me to excess, and at the same time inspired me with bitter self−contempt. In the innermost recesses of my being the memory of my father dwelt, and poisoned my thoughts at their source. An impression of dark fatalism invaded my sick mind; it was so strange that I should live as I was living, nevertheless, I did live thus, and the visible "I" had but little likeness to the real.

Upon me, then, poor creature that I was, as upon the whole universe, a fate rested. "Let it drive me," I said, and yielded myself up to it. I went to sleep, pondering upon ideas of the most somber philosophy, and I awoke to resume an existence without worth or dignity, in which I was losing not only my power of carrying out my design of reparation towards the phantom which haunted my dreams but all self−esteem, and all conscience.

Who could have helped me reascend this fatal stream? My mother? She saw nothing but the fashionable exterior of my life, and she congratulated herself that I had "ceased to be a savage." My stepfather? But he had been, voluntarily or not, favorable to my disorderly life. Had he not made me master of my fortune at the most dangerous age? Had he not procured me admission, at the earliest moment, to the clubs to which he belonged, and in every way facilitated my entrance into society? My aunt? Ah, yes, my aunt was grieved by my mode of life; and yet, was she not glad that at any rate I had forgotten the dark resolution of hate that had always frightened her? And, besides, I hardly ever saw her now. My visits to Compiegne were few, for I was at the age when one always finds time for one's pleasures, but never has any for one's nearest duties. If, indeed, there was a voice that was constantly lifted up against the waste of my life in vulgar pleasures, it was that of the dead, who slept in the day, unavenged; that voice rose, rose, rose unceasingly, from the depths of all my musings, but I had accustomed myself to pay it no heed, to make it no answer. Was it my fault that everything, from the most important to the smallest circumstance, conspired to paralyze my will? And so I existed, in a sort of torpor which was not dispelled even by the hurly−burly of my mock passions and my mock pleasures.

The falling of a thunderbolt awoke me from this craven slumber of the will. My Aunt Louise was seized with paralysis, towards the end of the sad year 1878, in the month of December. I had come in at night, or rather in the morning, having won a large sum at play. Several letters and also a telegram awaited me. I tore open the blue envelope, while I hummed the air of a fashionable song, with a cigarette between my lips, untroubled by an idea that I was about to be apprised of an event which would become, after my father's death and my mother's second marriage, the third great date in my life. The telegram was signed by Julie, my former nurse, and it told me that my aunt had been taken ill quite suddenly, also that I must come at once, although there was a hope of her recovery.

This bad news was the more terrible to me because I had received a letter from my aunt just a week previously, and in it the dear old lady complained, as usual, that I did not come to see her. My answer to her letter was lying half−written upon my writing−table. I had not finished it; God knows for what futile reason. It needs the advent of that dread visitant, Death, to make us understand that we ought to make good haste and love WELL those whom we do love, if we would not have them pass away from us forever, before we have loved them enough.

Bitter remorse, in that I had not proved to her sufficiently how dear she was to me, increased my anxiety about my aunt's state. It was two o'clock a. m., the first train for Compiegne did not start until six; in the interval she might die. Those were very long hours of waiting, which I killed by turning over in my mind all my shortcomings towards my father's only sister, my sole kinswoman. The possibility of an irrevocable parting made me regard myself as utterly ungrateful! My mental pain grew keener when I was in the train speeding through the cold dawn of a winter's day, along the road I knew so well.

As I recognized each familiar feature of the way, I became once more the schoolboy whose heart was full of unuttered tenderness, and whose brain was laden with the weight of a terrible mission. My thoughts outstripped the engine, moving too slowly, to my impatient fancy, which summoned up that beloved face, so frank and so simple, the mouth with its thickish lips and its perfect kindliness, the eyes out of which goodness looked, with their wrinkled, tear−worn lids, the flat bands of grizzled hair. In what state should I find her? Perhaps, if on that night of repentance, wretchedness, and mental disturbance, my nerves had not been strained to the utmost—yes, perhaps I should not have experienced those wild impulses when by the side of my aunt's deathbed, which rendered me capable of disobeying the dying woman. But how can I regret my disobedience, since it was the one thing that set me on the track of the truth? No, I do not regret anything, I am better pleased to have done what I have done.

V

My good old Julie was waiting for me at the station. Her eyes had failed her of late, for she was seventy years old, nevertheless she recognized me as I stepped out of the train, and began to talk to me in her usual interminable fashion so soon as we were seated in the hired coupe, which my aunt had sent to meet me whenever I came to Compiegne, from the days of my earliest childhood. How well I knew the heavy old vehicle, with its worn cushions of yellow leather, and the driver, who had been in the service of the livery stable keeper as long as I could remember. He was a little man with a merry, roguish face, and eyes twinkling with fun; but he tried to give a melancholy tone to his salutation that morning.

"It took her yesterday," said Julie, while the vehicle rumbled heavily through the streets, "but you see it had to happen. Our poor demoiselle had been changing for weeks past. She was so trustful, so gentle, so just; she scolded, she ferreted about, she suspected—there, then, her head was all astray. She talked of nothing but thieves and assassins; she thought everybody wanted to do her some harm, the tradespeople, Jean Mariette, myself—yes, I too. She went into the cellar every day to count the bottles of wine, and wrote the number down on a paper. The next day she found the same number, and she would maintain the paper was not the same, she disowned her own handwriting. I wanted to tell you this the last time you came here, but I did not venture to say anything; I was afraid it would worry you, and then I thought these were only freaks, that she was a little crazy, and it would pass off. Well, then, I came down yesterday to keep her company at her dinner, as she always liked me to do, because, you know, she was fond of me in reality, whether she was ill or well. I could not find her. Mariette, Jean, and I searched everywhere, and at last Jean bethought him of letting the dog loose; the animal brought us straight to the wood−stock, and there we found her lying at full length upon the ground. No doubt she had gone to the stack to count the logs. We lifted her up, our poor dear demoiselle! Her mouth was crooked, and one side of her could not move. She began to talk. Then we thought she was mad, for she said senseless words which we could not understand; but the doctor assures us that she is perfectly clear in her head, only that she utters one word when she means another. She gets angry if we do not obey her on the instant. Last night when I was sitting up with her she asked for some pins. I brought them and she was angry. Would you believe that it was the time of night she wanted to know? At length, by dint of questioning her, and by her yesses and noes, which she expresses with her sound hand, I have come to make out her meaning. If you only knew how troubled she was all night about you; I saw it, and when I uttered your name her eyes brightened. She repeats words, you would think she raves: she calls for you. Now look here, M. Andre, it was the ideas she had about your poor father that brought on her illness. All these last weeks she talked of nothing else. She would say: 'If only they do not kill Andre also. As for me, I am

old, but he so young, so good, so gentle.' And she cried—yes, she cried incessantly. 'Who is it that you think wants to harm M. Andre?' I asked her. Then she turned away from me with a look of distrust that cut me to the heart, although I knew that her head was astray. The doctor says that she believes herself persecuted, and that it is a mania; he also says that she may recover, but will never have her speech again."

I listened to Julie's talk in silence; I made no answer. I was not surprised that my Aunt Louise had begun to be attacked by a mental malady; the trials of her life sufficiently explained this, and I could also account for several singularities that I had observed in her attitude towards me of late. She had surprised me much by asking me to bring back a book of my father's which I had never thought of taking away. "Return it to me," she said, insisting upon it so strongly, that I instituted a search for the book, and at last unearthed it from the bottom of a cupboard where it had been placed, as if on purpose, under a heap of other books. Julie's prolix narrative only enlightened me as to the sad cause of what I had taken for the oddity of a fidgety and lonely old maid.

On the other hand, I could not take the ideas of my father's death so philosophically as Julie accepted them. What were those ideas? Many a time, in the course of conversation with her, I had vaguely felt that she was not opening her heart quite freely to me. Her determined opposition to my plans of a personal inquiry might proceed from her piety, which would naturally cause her to disapprove of any thought or project of vengeance, but was there nothing else, nothing besides that piety in question? Her strange solicitude for my personal safety, which even led her to entreat me not to go out unarmed in the evening, or get into an empty compartment in a train, with other counsels of the same kind, was no doubt caused by morbid excitement; still her constant and distressing dread might possibly rest upon a less vague foundation than I imagined.

I also recalled, with a certain apprehension, that so soon as she ceased to be able completely to control her mind these strange fears took stronger possession of her than before. "What!" said I to myself, "am I becoming like her, that I let such things occur to me? Are not these fixed ideas quite natural in a person whose brain is racked by the mania of persecution, and who has lost a beloved brother under circumstances equally mysterious and tragical?"

"She is awake," said Julie, who had taken the maid's place at the foot of the bed. I approached my aunt and called her by her name. I then clearly saw her poor face distorted by paralysis.

She recognized me, and as I bent down to kiss her, she stroked my cheek with her sound hand. This caress, which was habitual with her, she repeated slowly several times. I placed her, with Julie's assistance, on her back, so that she could see me distinctly; she looked at me for a long time, and two heavy tears fell from the eyes in which I read boundless tenderness, supreme anguish, and inexpressible pity. I answered them by my own tears, which she dried with the back of her hand; then she strove to speak to me, but could only pronounce an incoherent sentence that struck me to the heart. She saw, by the expression of my face, that I had not understood her, and she made a desperate effort to find words in which to render the thought evidently precise and lucid in her mind. Once more she uttered an unintelligible phrase, and began again to make the feeble gesture of despairing helplessness which had so shocked me at her waking. She appeared, however, to take courage when I put the question to her: "What do you want of me, dear aunt?" She made a sign that Julie was to leave the room, and no sooner were we alone than her face changed. With my help she was able to slip her hand under her pillow, and withdraw her bunch of keys; then separating one key from the others she imitated the opening of a lock. I immediately remembered her groundless fears of being robbed and I asked her whether she wanted the box to which that key belonged. It was a small key of a kind that is specially made for safety locks. I saw that I had guessed aright; she was able to get out the word "yes," and her eyes brightened.

"But where is this box?" I asked. Once more she replied by a sentence of which I could make nothing; and, seeing that she was relapsing into a state of agitation, with the former heart−rending movement, I begged her to allow me to question her and to answer by gestures only. After some minutes, I succeeded in discovering that the box in question was locked up in one of the two large cupboards below stairs, and that the key of the cupboard was on the ring with the others. I went downstairs, leaving her alone, as she had desired me by signs to do. I had no

difficulty in finding the casket to which the little key adapted itself; although it was carefully placed behind a bonnet−box and a case of silver forks. The casket was of sweet−scented wood, and the initials J. C. were inlaid upon the lid in gold and platinum. J. C., Justin Cornelies— so, it had belonged to my father. I tried the key in the lock, to make quite sure that I was not mistaken.

I then raised the lid, and glanced at the contents almost mechanically, supposing that I was about to find a roll of business papers, probably shares, a few trinket−cases, and rouleaux of napoleons, a small treasure in fact, hidden away from motives of fear. Instead of this, I beheld several small packets carefully wrapped in paper, each being endorsed with the words, "Justin's Letters," and the year in which they were written. My aunt had preserved these letters with the same pious care that had kept her from allowing anything whatever belonging to him in whom the deepest affection of her life had centered, to be lost, parted with, or injured.

But why had she never spoken to me of this treasure, which was more precious to me than to anyone else in the world? I asked myself that question as I closed the box; then I reflected that no doubt she desired to retain the letters to the last hour of her life; and, satisfied with this explanation, I went upstairs again.

From the doorway my eyes met hers, and I could not mistake their look of impatience and intense anxiety. I placed the little coffer on her bed and she instantly opened it, took out a packet of letters, then another, finally kept only one out, replaced those she had removed at first, locked the box, and signed to me to place it on the chest of drawers. While I was clearing away the things on the top of the drawers, to make a clear space for the box, I caught sight, in the glass opposite to me, of the sick woman. By a great effort she had turned herself partly on her side, and she was trying to throw the packet of letters which she had retained into the fireplace; it was on the right of her bed, and only about a yard away from the foot. But she could hardly raise herself at all, the movement of her hand was too weak, and the little parcel fell on the floor. I hastened to her, to replace her head on the pillows and her body in the middle of the bed, and then, with her powerless arm she again began to make that terrible gesture of despair, clutching the sheet with her thin fingers, while tears streamed from her poor eyes.

Ah! how bitterly ashamed I am of what I am going to write in this place! I will write it, however, for I have sworn to myself that I will be true, even to the avowal of that fault, even to the avowal of a worse still. I had no difficulty in understanding what was passing in my aunt's mind; the little packet—it had fallen on the carpet close to the fender—evidently contained letters which she wished to destroy, so that I should not read them. She might have burned them, dreading as she did their fatal influence upon me, long since; yet I understood why she had shrunk from doing this, year after year, I, who knew with what idolatry she worshipped the smallest objects that had belonged to my father. Had I not seen her put away the blotting−book which he used when he came to Compiegne, with the paper and envelopes that were in it at his last visit?

Yes, she had gone on waiting, still waiting, before she could bring herself to part forever with those dear and dangerous letters, and then her sudden illness came, and with it the terrible thought that these papers would come into my possession. I could also take into account that the unreasonable distrust which she had yielded to of late had prevented her from asking Jean or Julie for the little coffer. This was the secret—I understood it on the instant—of the poor thing's impatience for my arrival, the secret also of the trouble I had witnessed. And now her strength had betrayed her. She had vainly endeavored to throw the letters into the fire, that fire which she could hear crackling, without being able to raise her head so as to see the flame. All these notions which presented themselves suddenly to my thoughts took form afterwards; at the moment they melted into pity for the suffering of the helpless creature before me.

"Do not disturb yourself, dear aunt," said I, as I drew the coverlet up to her shoulders, "I am going to burn those letters."

She raised her eyes, full of eager supplication. I closed the lids with my lips and stooped to pick up the little packet. On the paper in which it was folded, I distinctly read this date: "1864— Justin's letters." 1864! that was

the last year of my father's life. I know it, I feel it, that which I did was infamous; the last wishes of the dying are sacred. I ought not, no, I ought not to have deceived her who was on the point of leaving me forever. I heard her breathing quicken at that very moment. Then came a whirlwind of thought too strong for me. If my Aunt Louise was so wildly, passionately eager that those letters should be burned, it was because they could put me on the right track of vengeance. Letters written in the last year of my father's life, and she had never spoken of them to me! I did not reason, I did not hesitate, in a lightning−flash I perceived the possibility of learning—what? I know not; but—of learning. Instead of throwing the packet of letters into the fire, I flung it to one side, under a chair, returned to the bedside and told her in a voice which I endeavored to keep steady and calm, that her directions had been obeyed, that the letters were burning. She took my hand and kissed it. Oh, what a stab that gentle caress inflicted upon me! I knelt down by her bedside, and hid my head in the sheets, so that her eyes should not meet mine. Alas! it was not for long that I had to dread her glance. At ten she fell asleep, but at noon her restlessness recurred. At two the priest came, and administered the last sacraments to her. She had a second stroke towards evening, never recovered consciousness, and died in the night.

VI

At three o'clock in the morning Julie came in to take my place, and I retired to my room, which was on the same floor as my aunt's. A boxroom divided the two. I threw myself on my bed, worn out with fatigue, and nature triumphed over my grief. I fell into that heavy sleep which follows the expenditure of nerve power, and from which one awakes able to bear life again and to carry the load that seemed unendurable. When I awoke it was day, and the wintry sky was dull and dark like that of yesterday, but it also wore a threatening aspect, from the great masses of black cloud that covered it. I went to the window and looked out for a long time at the gloomy landscape closed in by the edge of the forest. I note these small details in order that I may more faithfully recall my exact impression at the time. In turning away from the window and going towards the fire which the maid had just lighted, my eye fell upon the packet of letters stolen from my aunt. Yes, stolen—'tis the word. It was in the place where I had put it last night, on the mantel−shelf, with my purse, rings, and cigar−case. I took up the little parcel with a beating heart. I had only to stretch out my hand and those papers would fall into the flames and my aunt's dying wish be accomplished. I sank into an easy−chair and watched the yellow flame gaining on the logs, while I weighed the packet in my hand. I thought there must be a good many letters in it. I suffered from the physical uneasiness of indecision. I am not trying to justify this second failure of my loyalty to my dear aunt, I am trying to understand it.

Those letters were not mine, I never ought to have appropriated them. I ought now to destroy them unopened; all the more that the excitement of the first moment, the sudden rush of ideas which had prevented me from obeying the agonized supplication of my poor aunt, had subsided. I asked myself once more what was the cause of her misery, while I gazed at the inscription upon the cover, in my aunt's hand: "Justin's Letters, 1864." The very room which I occupied was an evil counsellor to me in this strife between an indisputable duty and my ardent desire to know; for it had formerly been my father's room, and the furniture had not been changed since his time. The color of the hangings was faded, that was all. He had warmed himself by a fire which burned upon that self−same hearth, and he had used the same low, wide chair in which I now sat, thinking many somber thoughts. He had slept in the bed from which I had just risen, he had written at the table on which I rested my arms. No, that room deprived me of free will to act, it made my father too living. It was as though the phantom of the murdered man had come out of his grave to entreat me to keep the oft−sworn vow of vengeance. Had these letters offered me no more than one single chance, one against a thousand, of obtaining one single indication of the secrets of my father's private life, I could not have hesitated. With such sacrilegious reasoning as this did I dispel the last scruples of pious respect; but I had no need of arguments for yielding to the desire which increased with every moment.

I had there before me those letters, the last his hand had traced; those letters which would lay bare to me the recesses of his life, and I was not to read them! What an absurdity! Enough of such childish hesitation. I tore off

the cover which hid the papers; the yellow sheets with their faded characters shook in my hands. I recognized the compact, square, clear writing, with spaces between the words. The dates had been omitted by my father in several instances, and then my aunt had repaired the omission by writing in the day of the month herself. My poor aunt! this pious carefulness was a fresh testimony to her constant tenderness; and yet, in my wild excitement I no longer thought of her who lay dead within a few yards of me.

Presently Julie came to consult me upon all the material details which accompany death; but I told her I was too much overwhelmed, that she must do as she thought fit, and leave me quite alone for the whole of the morning. Then I plunged so deeply into the reading of the letters, that I forgot the hour, the events taking place around me, forgot to dress myself, to eat, even to go and look upon her whom I had lost while yet I could behold her face. Traitor and ingrate that I was! I had devoured only a few lines before I understood only too well why she had been desirous to prevent me from drinking the poison which entered with each sentence into my heart, as it had entered into hers. Terrible, terrible letters! Now it was as though the phantom had spoken, and a hidden drama of which I had never dreamed unfolded itself before me.

I was quite a child when the thousand little scenes which this correspondence recorded in detail took place. I was too young then to solve the enigma of the situation; and, since, the only person who could have initiated me into that dark history was she who had concealed the existence of the too−eloquent papers from me all her life long, and on her deathbed had been more anxious for their destruction than for her eternal salvation—she, who had no doubt accused herself of having deferred the burning of them from day to day as of a crime. When at last she had brought herself to do this, it was too late.

The first letter, written in January, 1864, began with thanks to my aunt for her New Year's gift to me—a fortress with tin soldiers— with which I was delighted, said the letter, because the cavalry were in two pieces, the man detaching himself from his horse. Then, suddenly, the commonplace sentences changed into utterances of mournful tenderness. An anxious mind, a heart longing for affection, and discontent with the existing state of things, might be discerned in the tone of regret with which the brother dwelt upon his childhood, and the days when his own and his sister's life were passed together. There was a repressed repining in that first letter that immediately astonished and impressed me, for I had always believed my father and mother to have been perfectly happy with each other. Alas! that repining did but grow and also take definite form as I read on. My father wrote to his sister every Sunday, even when he had seen her in the course of the week. As it frequently happens in cases of regular and constant correspondence, the smallest events were recorded in minute detail, so that all our former daily life was resuscitated in my thoughts as I perused the lines, but accompanied by a commentary of melancholy which revealed irreparable division between those whom I had believed to be so closely united. Again I saw my father in his dressing−gown, as he greeted me in the morning at seven o'clock, on coming out of his room to breakfast with me before I started for school at eight. He would go over my lessons with me briefly, and then we would seat ourselves at the table (without a tablecloth) in the dining−room, and Julie would bring us two cups of chocolate, deliciously sweetened to my childish taste. My mother rose much later, and, after my school days, my father occupied a separate room in order to avoid waking her so early. How I enjoyed that morning meal, during which I prattled at my ease, talking of my lessons, my exercises, and my schoolmates! What a delightful recollection I retained of those happy, careless, cordial hours! In his letters my father also spoke of our early breakfasts, but in a way that showed how often he was wounded by finding out from my talk that my mother took too little care of me, according to his notions—that I filled too small a place in her dreamy, wilfully frivolous life. There were passages which the then future had since turned into prophecies. "Were I to be taken from him, what would become of him?" was one of these. At ten I came back from school; by that time my father would be occupied with his business. I had lessons to prepare, and I did not see him again until half−past eleven, at the second breakfast. Then mamma would appear in one of those tasteful morning costumes which suited her slender and supple figure so well. From afar, and beyond the cold years of my boyhood, that family table came before me like a mirage of warm homelife; how often had it become a sort of nostalgia to me when I sat between my mother and M. Termonde on my horrid half−holidays.

And now I found proof in my father's letters that a divorce of the heart already existed between the two persons who, to my filial tenderness, were but one. My father loved his wife passionately, and he felt that his wife did not love him. This was the feeling continually expressed in his letters—not in words so plain and positive, indeed; but how should I, whose boyhood had been strangely analogous with this drama of a man's life, have failed to perceive the secret signification of all he wrote? My father was taciturn, like me—even more so than I—and he allowed irreparable misunderstandings to grow up between my mother and himself. Like me afterwards, he was passionate, awkward, hopelessly timid in the presence of that proud, aristocratic woman, so different from him, the self−made man of almost peasant origin, who had risen to professional prosperity by the force of his genius. Like me—ah! not more than I—he had known the torture of false positions, which cannot be explained except by words that one will never have courage to utter. And, oh, the pity of it, that destiny should thus repeat itself; the same tendencies of the mind developing themselves in the son after they had developed themselves in the father, so that the misery of both should be identical!

My father's letters breathed sighs that my mother had never suspected—vain sighs for a complete blending of their two hearts; tender sighs for the fond dream of fully−shared happiness; despairing sighs for the ending of a moral separation, all the more complete because its origin was not to be sought in their respective faults (mutual love pardons everything), but in a complete, almost animal, contrast between the two natures. Not one of his qualities was pleasing to her; all his defects were displeasing to her. And he adored her. I had seen enough of many kinds of ill−assorted unions since I had been going about in society, to understand in full what a silent hell that one must have been, and the two figures rose up before me in perfect distinctness. I saw my mother with her gestures—a little affectation was, so to speak, natural to her—the delicacy of her hands, her fair, pale complexion, the graceful turn of her head, her studiously low−pitched voice, the something un−material that pervaded her whole person, her eyes, whose glance could be so cold, so disdainful; and, on the other hand, I saw my father with his robust, workingman's frame, his hearty laugh when he allowed himself to be merry, the professional, utilitarian, in fact, plebeian, aspect of him, in his ideas and ways, his gestures and his discourse. But the plebeian was so noble, so lofty in his generosity, in his deep feeling. He did not know how to show that feeling; therein lay his crime. On what wretched trifles, when we think of it, does absolute felicity or irremediable misfortune depend!

The name of M. Termonde occurred several times in the earlier letters, and, when I came to the eleventh, I found it mentioned in a way which brought tears to my eyes, set my hands shaking, and made my heart leap as at the sound of a cry of sharp agony. In the pages which he had written during the night—the writing showed how deeply he was moved—the husband, hitherto so self−restrained, acknowledged to his sister, his kind and faithful confidante, that he was jealous. He was jealous, and of whom? Of that very man who was destined to fill his place at our fireside, to give a new name to her who had been Madame Cornelis; of the man with cat−like ways, with pale eyes, whom my childish instinct had taught me to regard with so precocious and so fixed a hate. He was jealous of Jacques Termonde. In his sudden confession he related the growth of this jealousy, with the bitterness of tone that relieves the heart of misery too long suppressed. In that letter, the first of a series which death only was destined to interrupt, he told how far back was the date of his jealousy, and how it awoke to life with his detection of one look cast at my mother by Termonde. He told how he had at once suspected a dawning passion on the part of this man, then that Termonde had gone away on a long journey, and that he, my father, had attributed his absence to the loyalty of a sincere friend, to a noble effort to fight from the first against a criminal feeling. Termonde came back; his visits to us were soon resumed, and they became more frequent than before. There was every reason for this; my father had been his chum at the Ecole de Droit, and would have chosen him to be his best man at his marriage had not Termonde's diplomatic functions kept him out of France at the time. In this letter and the following ones my father acknowledged that he had been strongly attached to Termonde, so much so, indeed, that he had considered his own jealousy as an unworthy feeling and a sort of treachery. But it is all very well to reproach one's self for a passion; it is there in our hearts all the same, tearing and devouring them. After Termonde's return, my father's jealousy increased, with the certainty that the man's love for the wife of his friend was also growing; and yet, the unhappy husband did not think himself entitled to forbid him the house. Was not his wife the most pure and upright of women? Her very inclination to mysticism and exaggerated devotion,

although he sometimes found fault with her for it, was a pledge that she would never yield to anything by which her conscience could be stained. Besides, Termonde's assiduity was accompanied by such evident, such absolute respect, that it afforded no ground for reproach. What was he to do? Have an explanation with his wife—he who could not bring himself to enter upon the slightest discussion with her? Require her to decline to receive his own friend? But, if she yielded, he would have deprived her of a real pleasure, and for that he should be unable to forgive himself. If she did not yield? So, my poor father had preferred to toss about in that Gehenna of weakness and indecision wherein dwell timid and taciturn souls. All this misery he revealed to my aunt, dwelling upon the morbid nature of his feelings, imploring advice and pity, deciding and blaming the puerility of his jealousy, but jealous all the same, unable to refrain from recurring again and again to the open wound in his heart, and incapable of the energy and decision that would have cured it.

The letters became more and more gloomy, as it always happens when one has not at once put an end to a false position; my father suffered from the consequences of his weakness, and allowed them to develop without taking action, because he could not now have checked them without painful scenes. After having tolerated the increased frequency of his friend's visits, it was torture to him to observe that his wife was sensibly influenced by this encroaching intimacy. He perceived that she took Termonde's advice on all little matters of daily life—upon a question of dress, the purchase of a present, the choice of a book. He came upon the traces of the man in the change of my mother's tastes, in music for instance. When we were alone in the evenings, he liked her to go to the piano and play to him, for hours together, at haphazard; now she would play nothing but pieces selected by Termonde, who had acquired an extensive knowledge of the German masters during his residence abroad. My father, on the contrary, having been brought up in the country with his sister, who was herself taught by a provincial music−master, retained his old−fashioned taste for Italian music.

My mother belonged, by her own family, to a totally different sphere of society from that into which her marriage with my father had introduced her. At first she did not feel any regret for her former circle, because her extreme beauty secured her a triumphant success in the new one; but it was another thing when her intimacy with Termonde, who moved in the most worldly and elegant of the Parisian "world," was perpetually reminding her of all its pleasures and habits. My father saw that she was bored and weary while doing the honors of her own salon with an absent mind. He even found the political opinions of his friend echoed by his wife, who laughed at him for what she called his Utopian liberalism. Her mockery had no malice in it; but still it was mockery, and behind it was Termonde, always Termonde. Nevertheless, he said nothing, and the shyness, which he had always felt in my mother's presence increased with his jealousy. The more unhappy he was, the more incapable of expressing his pain he became. There are minds so constituted that suffering paralzes them into inaction. And then there was the ever−present question, what was he to do? How was he to approach an explanation, when he had no positive accusation to bring? He remained perfectly convinced of the fidelity of his wife, and he again and again affirmed this, entreating my aunt not to withdraw a particle of her esteem from his dear Marie, and imploring her never to make an allusion to the sufferings of which he was ashamed, before their innocent cause. And then he dwelt upon his own faults; he accused himself of lack of tenderness, of failing to win love, and would draw pictures of his sorrowful home, in a few words, with heart−rending humility.

Rough, commonplace minds know nothing of the scruples that rent and tortured my father's soul. They say, "I am jealous," without troubling themselves as to whether the words convey an insult or not. They forbid the house to the person to whom they object, and shut their wives mouths with, "Am I master here?" taking heed of their own feelings merely. Are they in the right? I know not; I only know that such rough methods were impossible to my poor father. He had sufficient strength to assume an icy mien towards Termonde, to address him as seldom as possible, to give him his hand with the insulting politeness that makes a gulf between two sincere friends; but Termonde affected unconsciousness of all this. My father, who did not want to have a scene with him, because the immediate consequence would have been another scene with my mother, multiplied these small affronts, and then Termonde simply changed the time of his visits, and came during my father's business hours. How vividly my father depicted his stormy rage at the idea that his wife and the man of whom he was jealous were talking together, undisturbed, in the flower−decked salon, while he was toiling to procure all the luxury that money could

purchase for that wife who could never, never love him, although he believed her faithful. But, oh, that cold fidelity was not what he longed for—he who ended his letter by these words—how often have I repeated them to myself:

"It is so sad to feel that one is in the way in one's own house, that one possesses a woman by every right, that she gives one all that her duty obliges her to give, all, except her heart, which is another's unknown to herself, perhaps, unless, indeed, that— My sister, there are terrible hours in which I say to myself that I am a fool, a coward, that they laugh together at me, at my blindness, my stupid trust. Do not scold me, dear Louise. This idea is infamous, and I drive it away by taking refuge with you, to whom, at least, I am all the world."

"Unless, indeed, that—" This letter was written on the first Sunday in June, 1864; and on the following Thursday, four days later, he who had written it, and had suffered all it revealed, went out to the appointment at which he met with his mysterious death, that death by which his wife was set free to marry his felon friend. What was the idea, as dreadful, as infamous as the idea of which my father accused himself in his terrible last letter, that flashed across me now? I placed the packet of papers upon the mantelpiece, and pressed my two hands to my head, as though to still the tempest of cruel fancies which made it throb with fever.

Ah, the hideous, nameless thing! My mind got a glimpse of it only to reject it.

But, had not my aunt also been assailed by the same monstrous suspicion? A number of small facts rose up in my memory, and convinced me that my father's faithful sister had been a prey to the same idea which had just laid hold of me so strongly. How many strange things I now understood, all in a moment! On that day when she told me of my mother's second marriage, and I spontaneously uttered the accursed name of Termonde, why had she asked me, in a trembling voice: "What do you know?"

What was it she feared that I had guessed? What dreaded information did she expect to receive from my childish observation of things?

Afterwards, and when she implored me to abandon the task of avenging our beloved dead, when she quoted to me the sacred words, "Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord," who were the guilty ones whom she foresaw I must meet on my path? When she entreated me to bear with my stepfather, even to conciliate him, not to make an enemy of him, had her advice any object except the greater ease of my daily life, or did she think danger might come to me from that quarter? When she became more afraid for me, owing to the weakening of her brain by illness, and again and again enjoined upon me to beware of going out alone in the evening, was the vision of terror that came to her that of a hand which would fain strike me in the dark—the same hand that had struck my father? When she summoned up all her strength in her last moments, that she might destroy this correspondence, what was the clue which she supposed the letters would furnish? A terrific light shone upon me; what my aunt had perceived beyond the plain purport of the letters, I too perceived. Ah! I dared to entertain this idea, yet now I am ashamed to write it down. But could I have escaped from the hard logic of the situation? If my aunt had handed over those letters to the Judge of Instruction in the matter, would he not have arrived at the same conclusion that I drew from them? No, I could not. A man who has no known enemies is assassinated; it is alleged that robbery is not the motive of the murder; his wife has a lover, and shortly after the death of her husband she marries that lover. "But it is they—it is they who are guilty, they have killed the husband," the judge would say, and so would the first−comer. Why did not my aunt place those letters of my father's in the hands of justice? I understood the reason too well; she would not have me think of my mother what I was now in a fit of distraction thinking.

To conceive of this as merely possible was to be guilty of moral parricide, to commit the inexpiable sin against her who had borne me. I had always loved my mother so tenderly, so mournfully; never, never had I judged her. How many times—happening to be alone with her, and not knowing how to tell her what was weighing on my heart—how many times I had dreamed that the barrier between us would not for ever divide us. Some day I might, perhaps, become her only support, then she should see how precious she still was to me. My sufferings had

not lessened my love for her; wretched as I was because she refused me a certain sort of affection, I did not condemn her for lavishing that affection upon another. As a matter of fact, until those fatal letters had done their work of disenchantment, of what was she guilty in my eyes? Of having married again? Of having chosen, being left a widow at thirty, to construct a new life for herself? What could be more legitimate? Of having failed to understand the relations of the child who remained to her with the man whom she had chosen? What was more natural? She was more wife than mother, and besides, fanciful and fragile beings such as she was recoil from daily contests; they shrink from facing realities which would demand sustained courage and energy on their part. I had admitted all these explanations of my mother's attitude towards me, at first from instinct and afterwards on reflection. But now, the inexhaustible spring of indulgence for those who really hold our heart−strings was dried up in a moment, and a flood of odious, abominable suspicion overwhelmed me instead.

This sudden invasion of a horrible, torturing idea was not lasting. I could not have borne it. Had it implanted itself in me then and there, definite, overwhelming in evidence, impossible of rejection, I must have taken a pistol and shot myself, to escape from agony such as I endured in the few minutes which followed my reading of the letters. But the tension was relaxed, I reflected, and my love for my mother began to strive against the horrible suggestion. To the onslaught of these execrable fancies I opposed the facts, in their certainty and completeness. I recalled the smallest particulars of that last occasion on which I saw my father and mother in each other's presence. It was at the table from which he rose to go forth and meet his murderer. But was not my mother cheerful and smiling that morning, as usual? Was not Jacques Termonde with us at breakfast, and did he not stay on, after my father had gone out, talking with my mother while I played with my toys in the room? It was at that very time, between one and two o'clock, that the mysterious Rochdale committed the crime.

Termonde could not be, at one and the same moment, in our salon and at the Imperial Hotel, any more than my mother, impressionable and emotional as I knew her to be, could have gone on talking quietly and happily, if she had known that her husband was being murdered at that very hour. Why, I must have been mad to allow such a notion to present its monstrous image before my eyes for a single moment, and it was infamous of me to have gone so far beyond the most insulting of my father's suspicions.

Already, and without any proof except the expression of jealousy acknowledged by himself to be unreasonable, I had reached a point to which the unhappy but still loving man had not dared to go, even to the extreme outrage against my mother. What if, during the lifetime of her first husband, she had inspired him whom she was one day to marry with too strong a sentiment, did this prove that she had shared it? If she had shared it, would that have proved her to be a fallen woman? Why should she not have entertained an affection for Termonde, which, while it in no wise interfered with her fidelity to her wifely duties, made my father not unnaturally jealous?

Thus did I justify her, not only from any participation in the crime, but from any failure in her duty. And then again my ideas changed; I remembered the cry that she had uttered in presence of my father's dead body: "I am punished by God!" I was not sufficiently charitable to her to admit that those words might be merely the utterance of a refined and scrupulous mind which reproached itself even with its thoughts. I also recalled the gleaming eyes and shaking hands of Termonde, when he was talking with my mother about my father's mysterious disappearance. If they were accomplices, this was a piece of acting performed before me, an innocent witness, so that they might invoke my childish testimony on occasion. These recollections once more drove me upon my fated way. The idea of a guilty tie between her and him now took possession of me, and then came swiftly the thought that they had profited by the murder, that they alone had an engrossing interest in it. So violent was the assault of suspicion that it overthrew all the barriers I had raised against it. I accumulated all the objections founded upon a physical alibi and a moral improbability, and thence I forced myself to say it was, strictly speaking, impossible they could have anything to do with the murder; impossible, impossible! I repeated this frantically; but even as it passed my lips, the hallucination returned, and struck me down. There are moments when the disordered mind is unable to quell visions which it knows to be false, when the imaginary and the real mingle in a nightmare−panic, and the judgment is powerless to distinguish between them. Who is there that, having been jealous, does not know this condition of mind? What did I not suffer from it during the day after I

had read those letters! I wandered about the house, incapable of attending to any duty, struck stupid by emotions which all around me attributed to grief for my aunt's death. Several times I tried to sit for a while beside her bed; but the sight of her pale face, with its pinched nostrils, and its deepening expression of sadness, was unbearable to me. It renewed my miserable doubts.

At four o'clock I received a telegram. It was from my mother, and announced her arrival by evening train. When the slip of blue paper was in my hand my wretchedness was for a moment relieved. She was coming. She had thought of my trouble; she was coming. That assurance [error in text—line missing] criminal thoughts in my face?

But those absurd and infamous notions took possession of me once more. Perhaps she thinks, so ran my thoughts, that the correspondence between my father and my aunt had not been destroyed, and she is coming in order to get hold of those letters before I see them, and to find out what my aunt said to me when she was dying. If she and Termonde are guilty, they must have lived in constant dread of the old maid's penetration. Ah! I had been very unhappy in my childhood, but how gladly would I have gone back to be the school−boy, meditating during the dull and interminable evening hours of study, and not the young man who walked to and fro that night in the station at Compiegne, awaiting the arrival of a mother, suspected as mine was. Just God! Did not I expiate everything in anticipation by that one hour?

VII

The train from Paris approached, and stopped. The railway officials called out the name of the station, as they opened the doors of the carriages one after another, very slowly as it seemed to me. I went from carriage to carriage seeking my mother. Had she at the last moment decided not to come! What a trial to me if it were so! What a night I should have to pass in all the torment of suspicions which, I knew too well, her mere presence would dispel.

A voice called me. It was hers. Then I saw her, dressed in black, and never in my life did I clasp her in my arms as I did then, utterly forgetting that we were in a public place, and why she had come, in the joy of feeling my horrible imaginations vanish, melt away at the mere touch of the being whom I loved so profoundly, the only one who was dear to me, notwithstanding our differences, in the very depths of my heart, now that I had lost my Aunt Louise.

After that first movement, which resembled the grasp in which a drowning man seizes the swimmer who dives for him, I looked at my mother without speaking, holding both her hands. She had thrown back her veil, and in the flickering light of the station I saw that she was very pale and had been weeping. I had only to meet her eyes, which were still wet with tears, to know that I had been mad. I felt this, with the first words she uttered, telling me so tenderly of her grief, and that she had resolved to come at once, although my stepfather was ill. M. Termonde had suffered of late from frequent attacks of liver−complaint.

But neither her grief nor her anxiety about her husband had prevented my poor mother from providing herself, for this little excursion of a few hours, with all her customary appliances of comfort and elegance. Her maid stood behind her, accompanied by a porter, and both were laden with three or four bags of different sizes, of the best English make, carefully buttoned up in their waterproof covers; a dressing−case, a writing−case, an elegant wallet to hold the traveler's purse, handkerchief, book, and second veil; a hot−water bottle for her feet, two cushions for her head, and a little clock suspended from a swinging disc.

"You see," said she, while I was pointing out the carriage to the maid, so that she might get rid of her impedimenta, "I shall not have my right mourning until to−morrow"—and now I perceived that her gown was dark brown and only braided with black—"they could not have the things ready in time, but will send them as

early as possible." Then, as I placed her in the carriage, she added: "There is still a trunk and a bonnet−box." She half smiled in saying this, to make me smile too, for the mass of luggage and the number of small parcels with which she encumbered herself had been of old a subject of mild quarrel between us.

In any other state of mind I should have been pained to find the unfailing evidence of her frivolity side by side with the mark of affection she had given me by coming. Was not this one of the small causes of my great misery? True, but her frivolity was delightful to me at that moment. This then was the woman whom I had been picturing to myself as coming to the house of death, with the sinister purpose of searching my dead aunt's papers and stealing or destroying any accusing pages which she might find among them! This was the woman whom I had represented to myself, that morning, as a criminal steeped in the guilt of a cowardly murder! Yes! I had been mad! had been like a runaway horse galloping after its own shadow. But what a relief to make sure that it was madness, what a blessed relief! It almost made me forget the dear dead woman.

I was very sad at heart in reality, and yet I was happy, while we were rattling through the town in the old coupe, past the long lines of lighted windows. I held my mother's hand; I longed to beg her pardon, to kiss the hem of her dress, to tell her again and again that I loved and revered her. She perceived my emotion very plainly; but she attributed it to the affliction that had just befallen me, and she condoled with me. She said, "My Andre," several times. How rare it was for me to have her thus, all my own, and just in that mood of feeling for which my sick heart pined!

I had had the room on the ground floor, next to the salon, prepared for my mother. I remembered that she had occupied it, when she came to Compiegne with my father, a few days after her marriage, and I felt sure that the impression which would be produced upon her by the sight of the house in the first instance, and then by the sight of the room, would help me to get rid of my dreadful suspicions. I was determined to note minutely the slightest signs of agitation which she might betray at the contact of a resuscitated past, rendered more striking by the aspect of things that do not change so quickly as the heart of a woman. And now, I blushed for that idea, worthy of a detective; for I felt it a shameful thing to judge one's mother: one ought to make an Act of Faith in her which would resist any evidence. I felt this, alas! all the more, because the innocent woman was quite off her guard, as was perfectly natural.

She entered the room with a thoughtful look, seated herself before the fire, and held her slender feet towards the flames, which touched her pale cheeks with red; and, with her jet black hair, her elegant figure, which still retained its youthful grace, she shed upon the dim twilight of the old−fashioned room that refined and aristocratic charm of which my father spoke in his letters. She looked slowly all around her, recognizing most of the things which my aunt's pious care had preserved in their former place, and said, sorrowfully: "What recollections!" But there was no bitterness in the emotion depicted on her face. Ah! no; a woman who is brought, after twenty years, into the room which she had occupied, as a bride, with the husband whose murder she had contrived after having betrayed him, has not such eyes, such a brow, such a mouth as hers.

VIII

There was but one remedy to be applied to my unbearable malady— that remedy which had already been successful in the case of my suspicions of my mother. I must at once proceed to place the real in opposition to the suggestions of imagination. I must seek the presence of the man whom I suspected, look him straight in the face, and see him as he was, not as my fancy, growing more feverish day by day, represented him. Then I should discern whether I had or had not been the sport of a delusion; and the sooner I resorted to this test the better, for my sufferings were terribly increased by solitude.

My head became confused; at last I ceased even to doubt. That which ought to have been only a faint indication, assumed to my mind the importance of an overwhelming proof. In the interest of my inquiry itself it was full time

to resist this, if I were ever to pursue my inquiry farther, or else I should fall into the nervous state which I knew so well, and which rendered any kind of action in cold blood impossible to me.

I made up my mind to leave Compiegne, see my stepfather, and form my judgment of whether there was or was not anything in my suspicions upon the first effect produced on him by my sudden and unexpected appearance before him. I founded this hope on an argument which I had already used in the case of my mother, namely, that if M. Termonde had really been concerned in the assassination of my father, he had dreaded my aunt's penetration beyond all things. Their relations had been formal, with an undercurrent of enmity on her part which had assuredly not escaped a man so astute as he. If he were guilty, would he not have feared that my aunt would have confided her thoughts to me on her death−bed? The attitude that he should assume towards me, at and after our first interview, would be a proof, complete in proportion to its suddenness, and he must have no time for preparation.

I returned to Paris, therefore, without having informed even my valet of my intention, and proceeded almost immediately to my mother's hotel.

I rang the bell.

The door was opened, and the narrow court, the glass porch, the red carpet of the staircase, were before me. The concierge, who saluted me, was not he by whom I had fancied myself slighted in my childhood; but the old valet de chambre who opened the door to me was the same. His close−shaven face wore its former impassive expression, the look that used to convey to me such an impression of insult and insolence when I came home from school. What childish absurdity!

To my question the man replied that my mother was in, also H. Termonde, and Madame Bernard, a friend of theirs. The latter name brought me back at once to the reality of the situation. Madame Bernard was a prettyish woman, very slight and very dark, with a "tip−tilted" nose, frizzy hair worn low upon her forehead, very white teeth which were continually shown by a constant smile, a short upper lip, and all the manners and ways of a woman of society well up to its latest gossip. I fell at once from my fancied height as an imaginary Grand Judiciary into the shallows of Parisian frivolity. I felt about to hear chatter upon the last new play, the latest suit for separation, the latest love affairs, and the newest bonnet. It was for this that I had eaten my heart out all these days!

The servant preceded me to the hall I knew so well, with its Oriental divan, its green plants, its strange furniture, its slightly faded carpet, its Meissonier on a draped easel, in the place formerly occupied by my father's portrait, its crowd of ornamental trifles, and the wide−spreading Japanese parasol open in the middle of the ceiling. The walls were hung with large pieces of Chinese stuff embroidered in black and white silk. My mother was half−reclining in an American rocking−chair, and shading her face from the fire with a hand−screen; Madame Bernard, who sat opposite to her, was holding her muff with one hand and gesticulating with the other; M. Termonde, in walking−dress, was standing with his back to the chimney, smoking a cigar, and warming the sole of one of his boots.

On my appearance, my mother uttered a little cry of glad surprise, and rose to welcome me. Madame Bernard instantly assumed the air with which a well−bred woman prepares to condole with a person of her acquaintance upon a bereavement. All these little details I perceived in a moment, and also the shrug of M. Termonde's shoulders, the quick flutter of his eyelids, the rapidly−dismissed expression of disagreeable surprise which my sudden appearance called forth. But what then? Was it not the same with myself? I could have sworn that at the same moment he experienced sensations exactly similar to those which were catching me at the chest and by the throat. What did this prove but that a current of antipathy existed between him and me? Was it a reason for the man's being a murderer? He was simply my stepfather, and a stepfather who did not like his stepson.

Matters had stood thus for years, and yet, after the week of miserable suspicion I had lived through, the quick look and shrug struck me strangely, even while I took his hand after I had kissed my mother and saluted Madame Bernard. His hand? No, only his finger tips as usual, and they trembled a little as I touched them. How often had my own hand shrunk with unconquerable repugnance from that contact! I listened while he repeated the same phrases of sympathy with my sorrow which he had already written to me while I was at Compiegne. I listened while Madame Bernard uttered other phrases to the same effect; and then the conversation resumed its course, and, during the half−hour that ensued, I looked on, speaking hardly at all, but mentally comparing the physiognomy of my stepfather with that of the visitor, and that of my mother. The contemplation of those three faces produced a curious impression upon me; it was that of their difference, not only of age, but of intensity, of depth. There was no mystery in my mother's face, it was as easy to read as a page in dear handwriting! The mind of Madame Bernard, a worldly, trumpery, poor mind, but harmless enough, was readily to be discerned in her features which were at once refined and commonplace. How little there was of reflection, of decision, of exercise of will, in short of individuality, behind the poetic grace of the one and the pretty affectations of the other! What a face, on the contrary, was that of my stepfather, with its strong individuality, and its vivid expression! In this man of the world, as he stood there talking with two women of the world, in his blue, furtive eyes, too wide apart, and always seeming to shun observation, in his prematurely gray hair, his mouth set round with deep wrinkles, in his dark, blotched, bilious complexion, there seemed to be a creature of another race. What passions had worn those furrows? what vigils had hollowed those eyeballs? Was this the face of a happy man, with whom everything had succeeded, who, having been born to wealth and of an excellent family, had married the woman he loved; who had known neither the wearing cares of ambition, the toil of money−getting, nor the stings of wounded self−love? It is true, he suffered from liver complaint; but why was it that, although I had hitherto been satisfied with this answer, it now appeared to me childish and even foolish? Why did all these marks of trouble and exhaustion suddenly strike me as effects of a secret cause, and why was I astonished that I had not sooner sought for it? Why was it that in his presence, contrary to my expectations, contrary to what had happened about my mother, I was plunged more deeply into the gulf of suspicion from which I had hoped to emerge with a free mind? Why, when our eyes met for just one second, was I afraid that he might read my thoughts in my glance, and why did I shift them with a pang of shame and terror? Ah! coward that I was, triple coward! Either I was wrong to think thus, and at any price I must know that I was wrong; or, I was right and I must know that too. The sole resource henceforth remaining to me for the preservation of my self−respect was ardent and ceaseless search after certainty.

That such a search was beset with difficulty I was well aware. How was I to get at facts? The very position of the problem which I had before me forbade all hope of discovering anything whatsoever by a formal inquiry. What, in fact, was the matter in question? It was to make myself certain whether M. Termonde was or was not the accomplice of the man who had led my father into the trap in which he had lost his life. But I did not know that man himself; I had no data to go upon except the particulars of his disguise and the vague speculations of a Judge of Instruction. If I could only have consulted that Judge, and availed myself of his experience? How often since have I taken out the packet containing the denunciatory letters, with the intention of showing them to him and imploring advice, support, suggestions, from him. But I have always stopped short before the door of his house; the thought of my mother barred its entrance against me. What if he, the Judge of Instruction in the case, were to suspect her as my aunt had done? Then I would go back to my own abode, and shut myself up for hours, lying on the divan in my smoking−room and drugging my senses with tobacco. During that time I read and re−read the fatal letters, although I knew them by heart, in order to verify my first impression with the hope of dispelling it. It was, on the contrary, deepened. The only gain I obtained from my repeated perusals was the knowledge that this certainty, of which I had made a point of honor to myself, could only be psychological. In short, all my fancies started from the moral data of the crime, apart from physical data which I could not obtain. I was therefore obliged to rely entirely, absolutely, upon those moral data, and I began again to reason as I had done at Compiegne. "Supposing," said I to myself, "that M. Termonde is guilty, what state of mind must he be in? This state of mind being once ascertained, how can I act so as to wrest some sign of his guilt from him?" As to his state of mind I had no doubt. Ill and depressed as I knew him to be, his mind troubled to the point of torment, if that suffering, that gloom, that misery were accompanied by the recollection of a murder committed in the past, the man was the victim of secret remorse. The point was then to invent a plan which should give, as it were, a form to

his remorse, to raise the specter of the deed he had done roughly and suddenly before him. If guilty, it was impossible but that he would tremble; if innocent, he would not even be aware of the experiment. But how was this sudden summoning−up of his crime before the man whom I suspected to be accomplished? On the stage and in novels one confronts an assassin with the spectacle of his crime, and keeps watch upon his face for the one second during which he loses his self−possession; but in reality there is no instrument except unwieldy, unmanageable speech wherewith to probe a human conscience. I could not, however, go straight to M. Termonde and say to his face: "You had my father killed!" Innocent or guilty, he would have had me turned from the door as a madman!

After several hours of reflection, I came to the conclusion that only one plan was reasonable, and available: this was to have a private talk with my stepfather at a moment when he would least expect it, an interview in which all should be hints, shades, double meanings, in which each word should be like the laying of a finger upon the sorest spots in his breast, if indeed his reflections were those of a murderer.

Every sentence of mine must be so contrived as to force him to ask himself: "Why does he say this to me if he knows nothing? He does know something. How much does he know?"

So well acquainted was I with every physical trait of his, the slightest variations of his countenance, his simplest gestures, that no sign of disturbance on his part, however slight, could escape me. If I did not succeed in discovering the seat of the malady by this process, I should be convinced of the baselessness of those suspicions which were constantly springing up afresh in my mind since the death of my aunt. I would then admit the simple and probable explanation—nothing in my father's letters discredited it—that M. Termonde had loved my mother without hope in the lifetime of her first husband, and had then profited by her widowhood, of which he had not even ventured to think.

If, on the contrary, I observed during our interview that he was alive to my suspicions, that he divined them, and anxiously followed my words; if I surprised that swift gleam in his eye which reveals the instinctive terror of an animal, attacked at the moment of its fancied security, if the experiment succeeded, then—then—I dared not think of what then?

The mere possibility was too overwhelming.

But should I have the strength to carry on such a conversation? At the mere thought of it my heart−beats were quickened, and my nerves thrilled. What! this was the first opportunity that had been offered to me of action, of devoting myself to the task of vengeance, so coveted, so fully accepted during all my early years, and I could hesitate?

Happily, or unhappily, I had near me a counsellor stronger than my doubts, my father's portrait, which was hung in my smoking−room. When I awoke in the night and plunged into those thoughts, I would light my candle and go to look at the picture. How like we were to each other, my father and I, although I was more slightly built! How exactly the same we were! How near to me I felt him, and how dearly I loved him! With what emotion I studied those features, the lofty forehead, the brown eyes, the rather large mouth, the rather long chin, the mouth especially half−hidden by a black moustache cut like my own; it had no need to open, and cry out: "Andre, Andre, remember me!" Ah, no, my dear dead father, I could not leave you thus, without having done my utmost to avenge you, and it was only an interview to be faced, only an interview!

My nervousness gave way to determination at once feverish and fixed—yes, it was both—and it was in a mood of perfect self− mastery, that, after a long period of mental conflict, I repaired to the hotel on the boulevard, with the plan of my discourse clearly laid out. I felt almost sure of finding my stepfather alone; for my mother was to breakfast on that day with Madame Bernard. M. Termonde was at home, and, as I expected, alone in his study.

When I entered the room, he was sitting in a low chair, close to the fire, looking chilly, and smoking. Like myself in my dark hours, he drugged himself with tobacco. The room was a large one, and both luxurious and ordinary. A handsome bookcase lined one of the walls. Its contents were various, ranging from grave works on history and political economy, to the lightest novels of the day. A large, flat writing−table, on which every kind of writing−material was carefully arranged, occupied the middle of the room, and was adorned with photographs in plain leather cases. These were portraits of my mother and M. Termonde's father and mother. At least one prominent trait of its owner's character, his scrupulous attention to order and correctness of detail, was revealed by the aspect of my stepfather's study; but this quality, which is common to so many persons of his position in the world, may belong to the most commonplace character as well as to the most refined hypocrite. It was not only in the external order and bearing of his life that my stepfather was impenetrable, none could tell whether profound thoughts were or were not hidden behind his politeness and elegance of manner. I had often reflected on this, at a period when as yet I had no stronger motive for examining into the recesses of the man's character than curiosity, and the impression came to me with extreme intensity at the moment when I entered his presence with a firm resolve to read in the book of his past life.

We shook hands, I took a seat opposite to his on the other side of the hearth, lighted a cigar, and said, as if to explain my unaccustomed presence:

"Mamma is not here?"

"Did she not tell you, the other day, that she was to breakfast with Madame Bernard? There's an expedition to Lozano's studio" (Lozano was a Spanish painter much in vogue just then), "to see a portrait he is painting of Madame Bernard. Is there anything you want to have told to your mother?" he added, simply.

These few words were sufficient to show me that he had remarked the singularity of my visit. Ought I to regret or to rejoice at this? He was, then, already aware that I had some particular motive for coming; but this very fact would give all their intended weight to my words. I began by turning the conversation on an indifferent matter, talking of the painter Lozano and a good picture of his which I knew, "A Gipsy−dance in a Tavern−yard at Grenada." I described the bold attitudes, the pale complexions, the Moorish faces of the "gitanas," and the red carnations stuck into the heavy braids of their black hair, and I questioned him about Spain.

He answered me, but evidently out of mere politeness.

While continuing to smoke his cigar, he raked the fire with the tongs, taking up one small piece of charred wood after another between their points. By the quivering of his fingers, the only sign of his nervous sensitiveness which he was unable entirely to keep down, I could observe that my presence was then, as it always was, disagreeable to him. Nevertheless he talked on with his habitual courtesy, in his low voice, almost without tone or accent, as though he had trained himself to talk thus. His eyes were fixed on the flame, and his face, which I saw in profile, wore the expression of infinite weariness that I knew well, in indescribable stillness and sadness, with long deep lines, and the mouth was contracted as though by some bitter thought ever present. Suddenly, I looked straight at that detested profile, concentrating all the attention I had in me upon it, and, passing from one subject to another without transition, I said:

"I paid a very interesting visit this morning."

"In that you are agreeably distinguished from me," was his reply, made in a tone of utter indifference, "for I wasted my morning in putting my correspondence in order."

"Yes," I continued, "very interesting. I passed two hours with M. Massol."

I had reckoned a good deal on the effect of this name, which must have instantly recalled the inquiry into the mystery of the Imperial Hotel to his memory. The muscles of his face did not move. He laid down the tongs, leaned back in his chair, and said in an absent manner:

"The former Judge of Instruction? What is he doing now?"

Was it possible that he really did not know where the man, whom, if he were guilty, he ought to have dreaded most of all men, was then living? How was I to know whether this indifference was feigned? The trap I had set appeared to me all at once a childish notion. Admitting that my stepfather's pulses were even now throbbing with fever, and that he was saying to himself with dread: "What is he coming to? What does he mean?" why, this was a reason why he should conceal his emotion all the more carefully. No matter. I had begun; I was bound to go on, and to hit hard.

"M. Massol is Counsellor to the Court," I replied, and I added— although this was not true—"I see him often. We were talking this morning of criminals who have escaped punishment. Only fancy his being convinced that Troppman had an accomplice. He founds his belief on the details of the crime, which presuppose two men, he says. If this be true it must be admitted that 'Messieurs les assassins' have a kind of honor of their own, however odd that may appear, since the child−killing monster let his own head be cut off without denouncing the other. Nevertheless, the accomplice must have put some bad time over him, after the discovery of the bodies and the arrest of his comrade. I, for my part, would not trust to that honor, and if the humor took me to commit a crime, I should do it by myself. Would you?" I asked jestingly.

These two little words meant nothing, were merely an insignificant jest, if the man to whom I put my odd question was innocent. But, if he were guilty, those two little words were enough to freeze the marrow in his bones. He surrounded himself with smoke while listening to me, his eye−lids half veiled his eyes; I could no longer see his left hand, which hung over the far side of his chair, and he had put the right into the pocket of his morning− coat. There was a short pause before he answered me—very short— but the interval, perhaps a minute, that divided his reply from my question, was a burning one for me. But what of this? It was not his way to speak in a hurry; and besides, my question had nothing interesting in it if he were not guilty, and if he were, would he not have to calculate the bearing of the phrase which he was about to utter with the quickness of thought? He closed his eyes completely—his constant habit—and said, in the unconcerned tone of a man who is talking generalities:

"It is a fact that scraps of conscience do remain intact in very depraved individuals. One sees instances of this especially in countries where habits and morals are more genuine and true to nature than ours. There's Spain, for instance, the country that interests you so much; when I lived in Spain, it was still infested by brigands. One had to make treaties with them in order to cross the Sierras in safety; there was no case known in which they broke the contract. The history of celebrated criminal cases swarms with scoundrels who have been excellent friends, devoted sons, and constant lovers. But I am of your opinion, and I think it is best not to count too much upon them."

He smiled as he uttered the last words, and now he looked full at me with those light blue eyes which were so mysterious and impassible. No, I was not of stature to cope with him, to read his heart by force. It needed capacity of another kind than mine to play in the case of this personage the part of the magnate of police who magnetizes a criminal. And yet, why did my suspicions gather force as I felt the masked, dissimulating, guarded nature of the man in all its strength? Are there not natures so constituted that they shut themselves up without cause, just as others reveal themselves; are there not souls that love darkness as others love daylight? Courage, then, let me strike again.

"M. Massol and I," I resumed, "have been talking about what kind of life Troppmann's accomplice must be leading; and also Rochdale's; for neither of us has relinquished the intention of finding him. Before M. Massol's

retirement he took the precaution to bar the limitation by a formal notice, and we have several years before us in which to search for the man. Do these criminals sleep in peace? Are they punished by remorse, or by the apprehension of danger, even in their momentary security? It would be strange if they were both at this moment good, quiet citizens, smoking their cigars like you and me, loved and loving. Do you believe in remorse?"

"Yes, I do believe in remorse," he answered.

Was it the contrast between the affected levity of my speech, and the seriousness with which he had spoken, that caused his voice to sound grave and deep to my ears? No, no; I was deceiving myself, for without a thrill he had heard the news that the limitation had been barred, that the case might be reopened any day—terrible news for him if he were mixed up with the murder—and he added, calmly, referring to the philosophic side of my question only:

"And does M. Massol believe in remorse?"

"M. Massol," said I, "is a cynic. He has seen too much wickedness, known too many terrible stories. He says that remorse is a question of stomach and religious education, and that a man with a sound digestion, who had never heard anything about hell in his childhood, might rob and kill from morning to night without feeling any other remorse than fear of the police. He also maintains, being a sceptic, that we do not know what part that question of the other life plays in solitude; and I think he is right, for I often begin to think of death, at night, and I am afraid;— yes, I, who don't believe in anything very much, am afraid. And you," I continued, "do you believe in another world?"

"Yes." This time I was sure that there was an alteration in his voice.

"And in the justice of God?"

"In His justice and His mercy," he answered, in a strange tone.

"Singular justice," I said vehemently, "which is able to do everything, and yet delays to punish! My poor aunt used always to say to me when I talked to her about avenging my father: 'I leave it to God to punish,' but, for my part, if I had got hold of the murderer, and he was there before me—if I were sure—no, I would not wait for the hour of that tardy justice of God."

I had risen while uttering these words, carried away by involuntary excitement which I knew to be unwise. M. Termonde had bent over the fire again, and once more taken up the tongs. He made no answer to my outburst. Had he really felt some slight disturbance, as I believed for an instant, at hearing me speak of that inevitable and dreadful morrow of the grave which fills myself with such fear now that there is blood upon my hands?

I could not tell. His profile was, as usual, calm and sad.

The restlessness of his hands—recalling to my mind the gesture with which he turned and returned his cane while my mother was telling him of the disappearance of my father—yes, the restlessness of his hands was extreme; but he had been working at the fire with the same feverish eagerness just before. Silence had fallen between us suddenly; but how often had the same thing happened? Did it ever fail to happen when he and I were in each other's company? And then, what could he have to say against the outburst of my grief and wrath, orphan that I was? Guilty or innocent, it was for him to be silent, and he held his peace. My heart sank; but, at the same time, a senseless rage seized upon me. At that moment I would have given my remaining life for the power of forcing their secret from those shut lips, by any mode of torture.

My stepfather looked at the clock—he, too, had risen now—and said: "Shall I put you down anywhere? I have ordered the carriage for three o'clock, as I have to be at the club at half−past. There's a ballot coming off tomorrow." Instead of the down− stricken criminal I had dreamed of, there stood before me a man of society thinking about the affairs of his club. He came with me so far as the hall, and took leave of me with a smile.

Why, then, a quarter of an hour afterwards, when we passed each other on the quay, I going homeward on foot, he in his coupe—yes— why was his face so transformed, so dark and tragic? He did not see me. He was sitting back in the corner, and his clay−colored face was thrown out by the green leather behind his head. His eyes were looking—where, and at what? The vision of distress that passed before me was so different from the smiling countenance of a while ago that it shook me from head to foot with an extraordinary emotion, and forced me to exclaim, as though frightened at my own success:

"Have I struck home?"

IX

This impression of dread kept hold of me during the whole of that evening, and for several days afterwards. There is an infinite distance between our fancies, however precise they may be, and the least bit of reality.

My father's letters had stirred my being to its utmost depths, had summoned up tragic pictures before my eyes; but the simple fact of my having seen the agonized look in my stepfather's face, after my interview with him, gave me a shock of an entirely different kind.

Even after I had read the letters repeatedly, I had cherished a secret hope that I was mistaken, that some slight proof would arise and dispel suspicions which I denounced as senseless, perhaps because I had a foreknowledge of the dreadful duty that would devolve upon me when the hour of certainty had come. Then I should be obliged to act on a resolution, and I dared not look the necessity in the face. No, I had not so regarded it, previous to my meeting with my enemy, when I saw him cowering in anguish upon the cushions of his carriage. Now I would force myself to contemplate it. What should my course be, if he were guilty? I put this question to myself plainly, and I perceived all the horror of the situation. On whatever side I turned I was confronted with intolerable misery.

That things should remain as they were I could not endure. I saw my mother approach M. Termonde, as she often did, and touch his forehead caressingly with her hand or her lips. That she should do this to the murderer of my father! My very bones burned at the mere thought of it, and I felt as though an arrow pierced my breast. So be it! I would act; I would find strength to go to my mother and say: "This man is an assassin," and prove it to her—and lo! I was already shrinking from the pain that my words must inflict on her. It seemed to me that while I was speaking I should see her eyes open wide, and, through the distended pupils, discern the rending asunder of her being, even to her heart, and that she would go mad or fall down dead on the spot, before my eyes. No, I would speak to her myself. If I held the convincing proof in my hands I would appeal to justice.

But then a new scene arose before me. I pictured my mother at the moment of her husband's arrest. She would be there, in the room, close to him. "Of what crime is he accused?" she would ask, and she would have to hear the inevitable answer. And I should be the voluntary cause of this, I, who, since my childhood, and to spare her a pang, had stifled all my complaints at the time when my heart was laden with so many sighs, so many tears, so much sorrow, that it would have been a supreme relief to have poured them out to her. I had not done so then, because I knew that she was happy in her life, and that it was her happiness only that blinded her to my pain. I preferred that she should be blind and happy. And now? Ah! how could I strike her such a cruel blow, dear and fragile being that she was?

The first glimpse of the double prospect of misery which my future offered if my suspicions proved just was too

terrible for endurance, and I summoned all my strength of will to shut out a vision which must bring about such consequences. Contrary to my habit, I persuaded myself into a happy solution. My stepfather looked sad when he passed me in his coupe; true, but what did this prove? Had he not many causes of care and trouble, beginning with his health, which was failing from day to day?

One fact only would have furnished me with absolute, indisputable proof; if he had been shaken by a nervous convulsion while we were talking, if I had seen him (as Hamlet, my brother in anguish, saw his uncle) start up with distorted face, before the suddenly−evoked specter of his crime. Not a muscle of his face had moved, not an eyelash had quivered;—why, then, should I set down this untroubled calm to amazing hypocrisy, and take the discomposure of his countenance half an hour later for a revelation of the truth? This was just reasoning, or at least it appears so to me, now that I am writing down my recollections in cold blood. They did not prevail against the sort of fatal instinct which forced me to follow this trail. Yes, it was absurd, it was mad, gratuitously to imagine that M. Termonde had employed another person to murder my father; yet I could not prevent myself constantly admitting that this most unlikely suggestion of my fancy was possible, and sometimes that it was certain.

When a man has given place in his mind to ideas of this kind he is no longer his own master; either he is a coward, or the thing must be fought out. It was due to my father, my mother, and myself that I should KNOW.

I walked about my rooms for hours, revolving these thoughts, and more than once I took up a pistol, saying to myself: "Just a touch, a slight movement like this"—I made the gesture—"and I am cured forever of my mortal pain." But the very handling of the weapon, the touch of the smooth barrel, reminded me of the mysterious scene of my father's death. It called up before me the sitting−room in the Imperial Hotel, the disguised man waiting, my father coming in, taking a seat at the table, turning over the papers laid before him, while a pistol, like this one in my hand, was levelled at him, close to the back of his neck; and then the fatal crack of the weapon, the head dropping down upon the table, the murderer wrapping the bleeding neck in towels and washing his hands, coolly, leisurely, as though he had just completed some ordinary task. The picture roused in me a raging thirst for vengeance. I approached the portrait of the dead man, which looked at me with its motionless eyes. What! I had my suspicions of the instigator of this murder, and I would leave them unverified because I was afraid of what I should have to do afterwards! No, no; at any price, I must in the first place know!

Three days elapsed. I was suffering tortures of irresolution, mingled with incoherent projects no sooner formed than they were rejected as impracticable. To know?—this was easily said, but I, who was so eager, nervous, and excitable, so little able to restrain my quickly−varying emotions, would never be able to extort his secret from so resolute a man, one so completely master of himself as my stepfather. My consciousness of his strength and my weakness made me dread his presence as much as I desired it. I was like a novice in arms who was about to fight a duel with a very skillful adversary; he desires to defend himself and to be victorious, but he is doubtful of his own coolness. What was I to do now, when I had struck a first blow and it had not been decisive? If our interview had really told upon his conscience, how was I to proceed to the redoubling of the first effect, to the final reduction of that proud spirit?

My reflections had arrived and stopped at this point, I was forming and re−forming plans only to abandon them, when a note reached me from my mother, complaining that I had not gone to her house since the day on which I had missed seeing her, and telling me that my stepfather had been very ill indeed two days previously with his customary liver complaint.

Two days previously, that was on the day after my conversation with him.

Here again it might be said that fate was making sport of me, redoubling the ambiguity of the signs, the chief cause of my despair. Was the imminence of this attack explanatory of the agonized expression on my stepfather's face when he passed me in his carriage? Was it a cause, or merely the effect of the terror by which he had been

assailed, if he was guilty, under his mask of indifference, while I flung my menacing words in his face? Oh, how intolerable was this uncertainty, and my mother increased it, when I went to her, by her first words.

"This," she said, "is the second attack he has had in two months; they have never come so near together until now. What alarms me most is the strength of the doses of morphine he takes to lull the pain. He has never been a sound sleeper, and for some years he has not slept one single night without having recourse to narcotics; but he used to be moderate—whereas, now—"

She shook her head dejectedly, poor woman, and I, instead of compassionating her sorrow, was conjecturing whether this, too, was not a sign, whether the man's sleeplessness did not arise from terrible, invincible remorse, or whether it also could be merely the result of illness.

"Would you like to see him?" asked my mother, almost timidly, and as I hesitated she added, under the impression that I was afraid of fatiguing him, whereas I was much surprised by the proposal, "he asked to see you himself; he wants to hear the news from you about yesterday's ballot at the club." Was this the real motive of a desire to see me, which I could not but regard as singular, or did he want to prove that our interview had left him wholly unmoved? Was I to interpret the message which he had sent me by my mother as an additional sign of the extreme importance that he attached to the details of "society" life, or was he, apprehending my suspicions, forestalling them? Or, yet again, was he, too, tortured by the desire TO KNOW, by the urgent need of satisfying his curiosity by the sight of my face, whereon he might decipher my thoughts?

I entered the room—it was the same that had been mine when I was a child, but I had not been inside its door for years—in a state of mind similar to that in which I had gone to my former interview with him. I had, however, no hope now that M. Termonde would be brought to his knees by my direct allusion to the hideous crime of which I imagined him to be guilty. My stepfather occupied the room as a sleeping−apartment when he was ill, ordinarily he only dressed there. The walls, hung with dark green damask, ill−lighted by one lamp, with a pink shade, placed upon a pedestal at some distance from the bed, to avoid fatigue to the sick man's eyes, had for their only ornament a likeness of my mother by Bonnat, one of his first female portraits. The picture was hung between the two windows, facing the bed, so that M. Termonde, when he slept in that room, might turn his last look at night and his first look in the morning upon the face whose long−descended beauty the painter had very finely rendered. No less finely had he conveyed the something half−theatrical which characterized that face, the slightly affected set of the mouth, the far−off look in the eyes, the elaborate arrangement of the hair.

First, I looked at this portrait; it confronted me on entering the room; then my glance fell on my stepfather in the bed. His head, with its white hair, and his thin yellow face were supported by the large pillows, round his neck was tied a handkerchief of pale blue silk which I recognized, for I had seen it on my mother's neck, and I also recognized the red woollen coverlet that she had knitted for him; it was exactly the same as one she had made for me; a pretty bit of woman's work on which I had seen her occupied for hours, ornamented with ribbons and lined with silk. Ever and always the smallest details were destined to renew that impression of a shared interest in my mother's life from which I suffered so much, and more cruelly than ever now, by reason of my suspicion.

I felt that my looks must needs betray the tumult of such feelings, and, while I seated myself by the side of the bed, and asked my stepfather how he was, in a voice that sounded to me like that of another person, I avoided meeting his eyes.

My mother had gone out immediately after announcing me, to attend to some small matters relative to the well−being of her dear invalid. My stepfather questioned me upon the ballot at the club which he had assigned as a pretext for his wish to see me. I sat with my elbow on the marble top of the table and my forehead resting in my hand; although I did not catch his eye I felt that he was studying my face, and I persisted in looking fixedly into the half−open drawer where a small pocket−pistol, of English make, lay side by side with his watch, and a brown silk purse, also made for him by my mother. What were the dark misgivings revealed by the presence of this

weapon placed within reach of his hand and probably habitually placed there? Did he interpret my thoughts from my steady observation? Or had he, too, let his glance fall by chance upon the pistol, and was he pursuing the ideas that it suggested in order to keep up the talk it was always so difficult to maintain between us? The fact is that he said, as though replying to the question in my mind: "You are looking at that pistol, it is a pretty thing, is it not?" He took it up, turned in about in his hand, and then replaced it in the drawer, which he closed. "I have a strange fancy, quite a mania; I could not sleep unless I had a loaded pistol there, quite close to me. After all, it is a habit which does no harm to anyone, and might have its advantages. If your poor father had carried a weapon like that upon him when he went to the Imperial Hotel, things would not have gone so easily with the assassin."

This time I could not refrain from raising my eyes and seeking his. How, if he were guilty, did he dare to recall this remembrance? Why, if he were not, did his glance sink before mine? Was it merely in following out an association of ideas that he referred thus to the death of my father; was it for the purpose of displaying his entire unconcern respecting the subject−matter of our last interview; or was he using a probe to discover the depth of my suspicion? After this allusion to the mysterious murder which had made me fatherless, he went on to say:

"And, by−the−bye, have you seen M. Massol again?"

"No," said I, "not since the other day."

"He is a very intelligent man. At the time of that terrible affair, I had a great deal of talk with him, in my capacity as the intimate friend of both your father and mother. If I had known that you were in the habit of seeing him latterly, I should have asked you to convey my kind regards."

"He has not forgotten you," I answered. In this I lied; for M. Massol had never spoken of my stepfather to me; but that frenzy which had made me attack him almost madly in the conversation of the other evening had seized upon me again. Should I never find the vulnerable spot in that dark soul for which I was always looking? This time his eyes did not falter, and whatever there was of the enigmatical in what I had said, did not lead him to question me farther. On the contrary, he put his finger on his lips. Used as he was to all the sounds of the house, he had heard a step approaching, and knew it was my mother's.

Did I deceive myself, or was there an entreaty that I would respect the unsuspecting security of an innocent woman in the gesture by which he enjoined silence?

Was I to translate the look that accompanied the sign into: "Do not awaken suspicion in your mother's mind, she would suffer too much;" and was his motive merely the solicitude of a man who desires to save his wife from the revival of a sad remembrance.

She came in; with the same glance she saw us both, lighted by the same ray from the lamp, and she gave us a smile, meant for both of us in common, and fraught with the same tenderness for each. It had been the dream of her life that we should be together thus, and both of us with her, and, as she had told me at Compiegne, she imputed the obstacles which had hindered the realization of her dream to my moody disposition. She came towards us, smiling, and carrying a silver tray with a glass of Vichy water upon it; this she held out to my stepfather, who drank the water eagerly, and, returning the glass to her, kissed her hand.

"Let us leave him to rest," she said, "his head is burning." Indeed, in merely touching the tips of his fingers, which he placed in mine, I could feel that he was highly feverish; but how was I to interpret this symptom, which was ambiguous like all the others, and might, like them, signify either moral or physical distress? I had sworn to myself that I would KNOW; but how? how?

I had been surprised by my stepfather's having expressed a wish to see me during his illness; but I was far more surprised when, a fortnight later, my servant announced M. Termonde in person, at my abode. I was in my study,

and occupied in arranging some papers of my father's which I had brought up from Compiegne. I had passed these two weeks at my poor aunt's house, making a pretext of a final settlement of affairs, but in reality because I needed to reflect at leisure upon the course to be taken with respect to M. Termonde, and my reflections had increased my doubts. At my request, my mother had written to me three times, giving me news of the patient, so that I was aware he was now better and able to go out. On my return, the day before, I had selected a time at which I was almost sure not to see anyone for my visit to my mother's home. And now, here was my stepfather, who had not been inside my door ten times since I had been installed in an apartment of my own, paying me a visit without the loss of an hour. My mother, he said, had sent him with a message to me. She had lent me two numbers of a review, and she now wanted them back as she was sending the yearly volume to be bound; so, as he was passing the door, he had stepped in to ask me for them. I examined him closely while he was giving this simple explanation of his visit, without being able to decide whether the pretext did or did not conceal his real motive. His complexion was more sallow than usual, the look in his eyes was more glittering, he handled his hat nervously.

"The reviews are not here," I answered; "we shall probably find them in the smoking−room."

It was not true that the two numbers were not there; I knew their exact place on the table in my study; but my father's portrait hung in the smoking−room, and the notion of bringing M. Termonde face to face with the picture, to see how he would bear the confrontation, had occurred to me. At first he did not observe the portrait at all; but I went to the side of the room on which the easel supporting it stood, and his eyes, following all my movements, encountered it. His eyelids opened and closed rapidly, and a sort of dark thrill passed over his face; then he turned his eyes carelessly upon another little picture hanging upon the wall. I did not give him time to recover from the shock; but, in pursuance of the almost brutal method from which I had hitherto gained so little, I persisted:

"Do you not think," said I, "that my father's portrait is strikingly like me? A friend of mine was saying the other day that, if I had my hair cut in the same way, my head would be exactly like—"

He looked first at me, and then at the picture, in the most leisurely way, like an expert in painting examining a work of art, without any other motive than that of establishing its authenticity. If this man had procured the death of him whose portrait he studied thus, his power over himself was indeed wonderful. But—was not the experiment a crucial one for him? To betray his trouble would be to avow all? How ardently I longed to place my hand upon his heart at that moment and to count its beats.

"You do resemble him," he said at length, "but not to that degree. The lower part of the chin especially, the nose and the mouth, are alike, but you have not the same look in the eyes, and the brows, forehead, and cheeks are not the same shape."

"Do you think," said I, "that the resemblance is strong enough for me to startle the murderer if he were to meet me suddenly here, and thus?"—I advanced upon him, looking into the depths of his eyes as though I were imitating a dramatic scene. "Yes," I continued, "would the likeness of feature enable me to produce the effect of a specter, on saying to the man, 'Do you recognize the son of him whom you killed?'"

"Now we are returning to our former discussion," he replied, without any farther alteration of his countenance; "that would depend upon the man's remorse, if he had any, and on his nervous system."

Again we were silent. His pale and sickly but motionless face exasperated me by its complete absence of expression. In those minutes—and how many such scenes have we not acted together since my suspicion was first conceived—I felt myself as bold and resolute as I was the reverse when alone with my own thoughts. His impassive manner drove me wild again; I did not limit myself to this second experiment, but immediately devised a third, which ought to make him suffer as much as the two others, if he were guilty. I was like a man who strikes his enemy with a broken− handled knife, holding it by the blade in his shut hand; the blow draws his own blood

also. But no, no; I was not exactly that man; I could not doubt or deny the harm that I was doing to myself by these cruel experiments, while he, my adversary, hid his wound so well that I saw it not. No matter, the mad desire TO KNOW overcame my pain.

"How strange those resemblances are," I said. "My father's handwriting and mine are exactly the same. Look here."

I opened an iron safe built into the wall, in which I kept papers which I especially valued, and took out first the letters from my father to my aunt which I had selected and placed on top of the packet. These were the latest in date, and I held them out to him, just as I had arranged them in their envelopes. The letters were addressed to "Mademoiselle Louise Cornelis, Compiegne;" they bore the postmark and the quite legible stamp of the days on which they were posted in the April and May of 1864. It was the former process over again. If M. Termonde were guilty, he would be conscious that the sudden change of my attitude towards himself, the boldness of my allusions, the vigor of my attacks were all explained by these letters, and also that I had found the documents among my dead aunt's papers. It was impossible that he should not seek with intense anxiety to ascertain what was contained in those letters that had aroused such suspicions in me. When he had the envelopes in his hands I saw him bend his brows, and I had a momentary hope that I had shattered the mask that hid his true face, that face in which the inner workings of the soul are reflected. The bent brow was, however, merely a contraction of the muscles of the eye, caused by regarding an object closely, and it cleared immediately. He handed me back the letters without any question as to their contents.

"This time," said he simply, "there really is an astonishing resemblance." Then, returning to the ostensible object of his visit—"And the reviews?" he asked.

I could have shed tears of rage. Once more I was conscious that I was a nervous youth engaged in a struggle with a resolutely self− possessed man. I locked up the letters in the safe, and I now rummaged the small bookcase in the smoking−room, then the large one in my study, and finally pretended to be greatly astonished at finding the two reviews under a heap of newspapers on my table. What a silly farce! Was my stepfather taken in by it? When I had handed him the two numbers, he rose from the chair that he had sat in during my pretended search in the chimney−corner of the smoking− room, with his back to my father's portrait. But, again, what did this attitude prove? Why should he care to contemplate an image which could not be anything but painful to him, even if he were innocent?

"I am going to take advantage of the sunshine to have a turn in the Bois," said he. "I have my coupe; will you come with me?"

Was he sincere in proposing this tete−a−tete drive which was so contrary to our habits? What was his motive: the wish to show me that he had not even understood my attack, or the yearning of the sick man who dreads to be alone?

I accepted the offer at all hazards, in order to continue my observation of him, and a quarter of an hour afterwards we were speeding towards the Arc de Triomphe in that same carriage in which I had seen him pass by me, beaten, broken, almost killed, after our first interview.

This time, he looked like another man. Warmly wrapped in an overcoat lined with seal fur, smoking a cigar, waving his hand to this person or that through the open window, he talked on and on, telling me anecdotes of all sorts, which I had either heard or not heard previously, about people whose carriages crossed ours. He seemed to be talking before me and not with me, so little heed did he take of whether he was telling what I might know, or apprising me of what I did not know. I concluded from this—for, in certain states of mind, every mood is significant—that he was talking thus in order to ward off some fresh attempt on my part. But I had not the courage to recommence my efforts to open the wound in his heart and set it bleeding afresh so soon. I merely

listened to him, and once again I remarked the strange contrast between his private thoughts and the rigid doctrines which he generally professed. One would have said that in his eyes the high society, whose principles he habitually defended, was a brigand's cave. It was the hour at which women of fashion go out for their shopping and their calls, and he related all the scandals of their conduct, false or true. He dwelt on all these stories and calumnies with a horrid pleasure, as though he rejoiced in the vileness of humanity. Did this mean the facile misanthropy of a profligate, accustomed to such conversations at the club, or in sporting circles, during which each man lays bare his brutal egotism, and voluntarily exaggerates the depth of his own disenchantment that he may boast more largely of his experience? Was this the cynicism of a villain, guilty of the most hideous of crimes, and glad to demonstrate that others were less worthy than he? To hear him laugh and talk thus threw me into a singular state of dejection.

We had passed the last houses in the Avenue de Bois, and were driving along an alley on the right in which there were but few carriages. On the bare hedgerows a beautiful light shone, coming from that lofty, pale blue sky which is seen only over Paris.

He continued to sneer and chuckle, and I reflected that perhaps he was right, that the seamy side of the world was what he depicted it. Why not? Was not I there, in the same carriage with this man, and I suspected him of having had my father murdered! All the bitterness of life filled my heart with a rush. Did my stepfather perceive, by my silence and my face, that his gay talk was torturing me? Was he weary of his own effort?

He suddenly left off talking, and as we had reached a forsaken corner of the Bois, we got out of the carriage to walk a little. How strongly present to my mind is that by−path, a gray line between the poor spare grass and the bare trees, the cold winter sky, the wide road at a little distance with the carriage advancing slowly, drawn by the bay horse, shaking its head and its bit, and driven by a wooden−faced coachman—then, the man. He walked by my side, a tall figure in a long overcoat. The collar of dark brown fur brought out the premature whiteness of his hair. He held a cane in his gloved hand, and struck away the pebbles with it impatiently. Why does his image return to me at this hour with an unendurable exactness? It is because, as I observed him walking along the wintry road, with his head bent forward, I was struck as I had never been before with the sense of his absolute unremitting wretchedness. Was this due to the influence of our conversation of that afternoon, to the dejection which his sneering, sniggering talk had produced in me, or to the death of nature all around us? For the first time since I knew him, a pang of pity mingled with my hatred of him, while he walked by my side, trying to warm himself in the pale sunshine, a shrunken, weary, lamentable creature. Suddenly he turned his face, which was contracted with pain, to me, and said:

"I do not feel well. Let us go home." When we were in the carriage, he said, putting his sudden seizure upon the pretext of his health:

"I have not long to live, and I suffer so much that I should have made an end of it all years ago, had it not been for your mother." Then he went on talking of her with the blindness that I had already remarked in him. Never, in my most hostile hours, had I doubted that his worship of his wife was perfectly sincere, and once again I listened to him, as we drove rapidly into Paris in the gathering twilight, and all that he said proved how much he loved her. Alas! his passion rated her more highly than my tenderness. He praised the exquisite tact with which my mother discerned the things of the heart, to me, who knew so well her want of feeling! He lauded the keenness of her intelligence to me, whom she had so little understood! And he added, he who had so largely contributed to our separation:

"Love her dearly; you will soon be the only one to love her."

If he were the criminal I believed him to be, he was certainly aware that in thus placing my mother between himself and me he was putting in my way the only barrier which I could never, never break down, and I on my side understood clearly, and with bitterness of soul, that the obstacles so placed would be stronger than even the

most fatal certainty. What, then, was the good of seeking any further? Why not renounce my useless quest at once? But it was already too late.

X

At the beginning of the summer, six months after my aunt's death, I was in exactly the same position with respect to my stepfather as on that already distant day when, maddened with suspicion by my father's letters, I entered his study, to play the part of the physician who examines a man's body, searching with his finger for the tender spot that is probably a symptom of a hidden abscess.

I was full of intuitions now, just as I was at the moment when he passed me in his carriage with his terrible face, but I did not grasp a single certainty. Would I have persisted in a struggle in which I felt beforehand that I must be beaten?

I cannot tell; for, when I no longer expected any solution to the problem set before me for my grief, a grief, too, that was both sterile and mortal, a day came on which I had a conversation with my mother so startling and appalling that to this hour my heart stands still when I think of it. I have spoken of dates; among them is the 25th of May, 1879.

My stepfather, who was on the eve of his departure for Vichy, had just had a severe attack of liver−complaint, the first since his illness after our terrible conversation in the month of January. I know that I counted for nothing—at least in any direct or positive way—in this acute revival of his malady. The fight between us, which went on without the utterance of a word on either side, and with no witnesses except ourselves, had not been marked by any fresh episode; I therefore attributed this complication to the natural development of the disease under which he labored.

I can exactly recall what I was thinking of on the 25th of May, at five o'clock in the evening, as I walked up the stairs in the hotel on the Boulevard de Latour−Marbourg. I hoped to learn that my stepfather was better, because I had been witnessing my mother's distress for a whole week, and also—I must tell all—because to know he was going to the watering−place was a great relief to me, on account of the separation it would bring about. I was so tired of my unprofitable pain! My wretched nerves were in such a state of tension that the slightest disagreeable impression became a torment. I could not sleep without the aid of narcotics, and such sleep as these procured was full of cruel dreams in which I walked by my father's side, while knowing and feeling that he was dead.

One particular nightmare used to recur so regularly that it rendered my dread of the night almost unbearable. I stood in a street crowded with people and was looking into a shop window; on a sudden I heard a man's step approaching, that of M. Termonde. I did not see him, and yet I was certain it was he. I tried to move on, but my feet were leaden; to turn my head, but my neck was immovable. The step drew nearer, my enemy was behind me, I heard his breathing, and knew that he was about to strike me. He passed his arm over my shoulder. I saw his hand, it grasped a knife, and sought for the spot where my heart lay; then it drove the blade in, slowly, slowly, and I awoke in unspeakable agony.

So often had this nightmare recurred within a few weeks, that I had taken to counting the days until my stepfather's departure, which had been at first fixed for the 21st, and then put off until he should be stronger. I hoped that when he was absent I should be at rest at least for a time. I had not the courage to go away myself, attracted as I was every day by that presence which I hated, and yet sought with feverish eagerness; but I secretly rejoiced that the obstacle was of his raising, that his absence gave me breathing−time, without my being obliged to reproach myself with weakness.

Such were my reflections as I mounted the wooden staircase, covered with a red carpet, and lighted by

stained−glass windows, that led to my mother's favorite hall. The servant who opened the door informed me in answer to my question that my stepfather was better, and I entered the room with which my saddest recollections were connected, more cheerfully than usual. Little did I think that the dial hung upon one of the walls was ticking off in minutes one of the most solemn hours of my life!

My mother was seated before a small writing−table, placed in a corner of the deep glazed projection which formed the garden−end of the hall. Her left hand supported her head, and in the right, instead of going on with the letter she had begun to write, she held her idle pen, in a golden holder with a fine pearl set in the top of it (the latter small detail was itself a revelation of her luxurious habits). She was so lost in reverie that she did not hear me enter the room, and I looked at her for some time without moving, startled by the expression of misery in her refined and lovely face. What dark thought was it that closed her mouth, furrowed her brow, and transformed her features? The alteration in her looks and the evident absorption of her mind contrasted so strongly with the habitual serenity of her countenance that it at once alarmed me. But, what was the matter? Her husband was better; why, then, should the anxiety of the last few days have developed into this acute trouble? Did she suspect what had been going on close to her, in her own house, for months past? Had M. Termonde made up his mind to complain to her, in order to procure the cessation of the torture inflicted upon him by my assiduity? No. If he had divined my meaning from the very first day, as I thought he had, unless he were sure he could not have said to her: "Andre suspects me of having had his father killed." Or had the doctor discerned dangerous symptoms behind this seeming improvement in the invalid?

Was my stepfather in danger of death?

At the idea, my first feeling was joy, my second was rage—joy that he should disappear from my life, and for ever; rage that, being guilty, he should die without having felt my full vengeance. Beneath all my hesitation, my scruples, my doubts, there lurked that savage appetite for revenge which I had allowed to grow up in me, revenge that is not satisfied with the death of the hated object unless it be caused by one's self. I thirsted for revenge as a dog thirsts for water after running in the sun on a summer day. I wanted to roll myself in it, as the dog in question rolls himself in the water when he comes to it, were it the sludge of a swamp. I continued to gaze at my mother without moving. Presently she heaved a deep sigh and said aloud: "Oh, me, oh, me! what misery it is!" Then lifting up her tear−stained face, she saw me, and uttered a cry of surprise. I hastened towards her.

"You are in trouble, mother," I said. "What ails you?"

Dread of her answer made my voice falter; I knelt down before her as I used to do when a child, and, taking both her hands, I covered them with kisses. Again, at this solemn hour, my lips were met by that golden wedding−ring which I hated like a living person; yet the feeling did not hinder me from speaking to her almost childishly. "Ah," I said, "you have troubles, and to whom should you tell them if not to me? Where will you find anyone to love you more? Be good to me," I went on; "do you not feel how dear you are to me?"

She bent her head twice, made a sign that she could not speak, and burst into painful sobs.

"Has your trouble anything to do with me?" I asked.

She shook her head as an emphatic negative, and then said in a half−stifled voice, while she smoothed my hair with her hands, as she used to do in the old times:

"You are very nice to me, my Andre."

How simple those few words were, and yet they caught my heart and gripped it as a hand might do. How had I longed for some of those little words which she had never uttered, some of those gracious phrases which are like the gestures of the mind, some of her involuntary tender caresses. Now I had what I had so earnestly desired, but

at what a moment and by what means! It was, nevertheless, very sweet to feel that she loved me. I told her so, employing words which scorched my lips, so that I might be kind to her.

"Is our dear invalid worse?"

"No, he is better. He is resting now," she answered, pointing in the direction of my stepfather's room.

"Mother, speak to me," I urged, "trust yourself to me; let me grieve with you, perhaps I may help you. It is so cruel for me that I must take you by surprise in order to see your tears."

I went on, pressing her by my questions and my complaining. What, then, did I hope to tear from those lips which quivered but yet kept silence? At any price I WOULD know; I was in no state to endure fresh mysteries, and I was certain that my stepfather was somehow concerned in this inexplicable trouble, for it was only he and I who so deeply moved that woman's heart of hers. She was not thus troubled on account of me, she had just told me so; the cause of her grief must have reference to him, and it was not his health. Had she, too, made any discovery? Had the terrible suspicion crossed her mind also? At the mere idea a burning fever seized upon me; I insisted and insisted again. I felt that she was yielding, if it were only by the leaning of her head towards me, the passing of her trembling hand over my hair, and the quickening of her breath.

"If I were sure," said she at length, "that this secret would die with you and me."

"Oh, mother!" I exclaimed, in so reproachful a tone that the blood flew to her cheeks. Perhaps this little betrayal of shame decided her; she pressed a lingering kiss on my forehead, as though she would have effaced the frown which her unjust distrust had set there.

"Forgive me, my Andre," she said, "I was wrong. In whom should I trust, to whom confide this thing, except to you? From whom ask counsel?" And then she went on as though she were speaking to herself, "If he were ever to apply to him?"

"He! Whom?"

"Andre, will you swear to me by your love for me, that you will never, you understand me, never, make the least illusion to what I am going to tell you?"

"Mother!" I replied, in the same tone of reproach, and then added at once, to draw her on, "I give you my word of honor!"

"Nor—" she did not pronounce a name, but she pointed anew to the door of the sick man's room.

"Never."

"You have heard of Edmond Termonde, his brother?" Her voice was lowered, as though she were afraid of the words she uttered, and now her eyes only were turned towards the closed door, indicating that she meant the brother of her husband. I had a vague knowledge of the story; it was of this brother I had thought when I was reviewing the mental history of my stepfather's family. I knew that Edmond Termonde had dissipated his share of the family fortune, no less than 1,200,000 francs, in a few years; that he had been enlisted, that he had gone on leading a debauched life in his regiment; that, having no money to come into from any quarter, and after a heavy loss at cards, he had been tempted into committing both theft and forgery. Then, finding himself on the brink of being detected, he had deserted. The end was that he did justice on himself by drowning himself in the Seine, after he had implored his brother's forgiveness in terms which proved that some sense of moral decency still lingered in him. The stolen money was made good by my stepfather; the scandal was hushed up, thanks to the scoundrel's

disappearance. I had reconstructed the whole story in my mind from the gossip of my good old nurse, and also from certain traces of it which I had found in some passages of my father's correspondence. Thus, when my mother put her question to me in so agitated a way, I supposed she was about to tell me of family grievances on the part of her husband which were totally indifferent to me, and it was with a feeling of disappointment that I asked her:

"Edmond Termonde? The man who killed himself?"

She bent her head to answer, yes, to the first part of my question; then, in a still lower voice, she said:

"He did not kill himself, he is still alive."

"He is still alive," I repeated mechanically, and without a notion of what could be the relation between the existence of this brother and the tears which I had seen her shed.

"Now you know the secret of my sorrow," she resumed, in a firmer, almost a relieved tone. "This infamous brother is a tormentor of my Jacques; he puts him to death daily by the agonies which he inflicts upon him. No; the suicide never took place. Such men as he have not the courage to kill themselves. Jacques dictated that letter to save him from penal servitude after he had arranged everything for his flight, and given him the wherewithal to lead a new life, if he would have done so. My poor love, he hoped at least to save the integrity of his name out of all the terrible wreck. Edmond had, of course, to renounce the name of Termonde, to escape pursuit, and he went to America. There he lived—as he had lived here. The money he took with him was soon exhausted, and again he had recourse to his brother. Ah! the wretch knew well that Jacques had made all these sacrifices to the honor of his name, and when my husband refused him the money he demanded, he made use of the weapon which he knew would avail.

"Then began the vilest persecution, the most atrocious levying of black−mail. Edmond threatened to return to France; between going to the galleys here or starving in America, he said, he preferred the galleys here and Jacques yielded the first time—he loved him; after all, he was his only brother. You know when you have once shown weakness in dealing with people of this sort you are lost. The threat to return had succeeded, and the other has since used it to extort sums of which you have no idea.

"This abominable persecution has been going on for years, but I have only been aware of it since the war. I saw that my husband was utterly miserable about something; I knew that a hidden trouble was preying on him, and then, one day, he told me all. Would you believe it? It was for me that he was afraid. 'What can he possibly do to me?' I asked my Jacques. 'Ah,' he said, 'he is capable of anything for the sake of revenge. And then he saw me so overwhelmed by distress at his fits of melancholy, and I so earnestly entreated him, that at length he made a stand. He positively refused to give any more money. We have not heard of the wretch for some time—he has kept his word—Andre he is in Paris!"

I had listened to my mother with growing attention. At any period of my life, I, who had not the same notions of my stepfather's sensitiveness of feeling which my dear mother entertained, would have been astonished at the influence exercised by this disgraced brother. There are similar pests in so many families, that it is plainly to the interest of society to separate the various representatives of the same name from each other. At any time I should have doubted whether M. Termonde, a bold and violent man as I knew him to be, had yielded under the menace of a scandal whose real importance he would have estimated quite correctly. Then I would have explained this weakness by the recollections of his childhood, by a promise made to his dying parents; but now, in the actual state of my mind, full as I was of the suspicions which had been occupying my thoughts for weeks, it was inevitable that another idea should occur to me. And that idea grew, and grew, taking form as my mother went on speaking. No doubt my face betrayed the dread with which the notion inspired me, for she interrupted her narrative to ask me:

"Are you feeling ill, Andre?"

I found strength to answer, "No; I am upset by having found you in tears. It is nothing."

She believed me; she had just seen me overcome by her emotion; she kissed me tenderly, and I begged her to continue. She then told me that one day in the previous week a stranger, coming ostensibly from one of their friends in London, had asked to see my stepfather. He was ushered into the hall, and into her presence, and she guessed at once by the extraordinary agitation which M. Termonde displayed that the man was Edmond. The two brothers went into my stepfather's private room, while my mother remained in the hall, half dead with anxiety and suspense, every now and then hearing the angry tones of their voices, but unable to distinguish any words. At length the brother came out, through the hall, and looked at her as he passed by with eyes that transfixed her with fear.

"And the same evening," she went on, "Jacques took to his bed. Now, do you understand my despair? Ah, it is not our name that I care for. I wear myself out with repeating, 'What has this to do with us? How can we be spattered by this mud?' It is his health, his precious health! The doctor says that every violent emotion is a dose of poison to him. Ah!" she cried, with a gesture of despair, "this man will kill him."

To hear that cry, which once again revealed to me the depth of her passion for my stepfather, to hear it at this moment, and to think what I was thinking!

"You saw him?" I asked, hardly knowing what I said. "Have I not told you that he passed by me, there?" and with terror depicted in her face, she showed me the place on the carpet.

"And you are sure that the man was his brother?"

"Jacques told me so in the evening; but I did not require that; I should have recognized him by the eyes. How strange it is! Those two brothers, so different; Jacques so refined, so distinguished, so noble−minded, and the other, a big, heavy, vulgar lout, common− looking, and a rascal—well, they have the same look in their eyes."

"And under what name is he in Paris?"

"I do not know. I dare not speak of him any more. If he knew that I have told you this, with his ideas! But then, dear, you would have heard it at some time or other; and besides," she added with firmness, "I would have told you long ago about this wretched secret if I had dared! You are a man now, and you are not bound by this excessively scrupulous fraternal affection. Advise me, Andre; what is to be done?"

"I do not understand you."

"Yes, yes. There must be some means of informing the police and having this man arrested without its being talked of in the newspapers or elsewhere. Jacques would not do this, because the man is his brother; but if we were to act, you and I, on our own side? I have heard you say that you visit M. Massol, whom we knew at the time of our great misfortune; suppose I were to go to him and ask his advice? Ah! I must keep my husband alive—he must be saved! I love him too much!"

Why was I seized with a panic at the idea that she might carry out this project, and apply to the former Judge of Instruction—I, who had not ventured to go to his house since my aunt's death for fear he should divine my suspicions merely by looking at me? What was it that I saw so clearly, that made me implore her to abandon her idea in the very name of the love she bore her husband?

"You will not do this," I said; "you have no right to do it. He would never forgive you, and he would have just cause; it would be betraying him."

"Betraying him! It would be saving him!"

"And if his brother's arrest were to strike him a fresh blow? If you were to see him ill, more ill than ever, on account of what you had done?"

I had used the only argument that could have convinced her. Strange irony of fate! I calmed her, I persuaded her not to act— I, who had suddenly conceived the monstrous notion that the doer of the murderous deed, the docile instrument in my stepfather's hands, was this infamous brother—that Edmond Termonde and Rochdale were one and the same man!

XI

The night which followed that conversation with my mother remains in my memory as the most wretched I had hitherto endured; and yet how many sleepless nights had I passed, while all the world around me slept, in bitter conflict with a thought which held mine eyes waking and devoured my heart! I was like a prisoner who has sounded every inch of his dungeon—the walls, the floor, the ceiling—and who, on shaking the bars of his window for the hundredth time, feels one of the iron rods loosen under the pressure. He hardly dares to believe in his good fortune, and he sits down upon the ground almost dazed by the vision of deliverance that has dawned upon him. "I must be cool−headed now," said I to myself, as I walked to and fro in the smoking−room, whither I had retired without tasting the meal that was served on my return. Evening came, then the black night; the dawn followed, and once more the full day. Still I was there, striving to see clearly amid the cloud of suppositions in which an event, simple in itself (only that in my state of mind no event would have seemed simple), had wrapped me.

I was too well used to these mental tempests not to know that the only safety consisted in clinging to the positive facts, as though to immovable rocks.

In the present instance, the positive facts reduced themselves to two: first, I had just learned that a brother of M. Termonde, who passed for dead, and of whom my stepfather never spoke, existed; secondly, that this man, disgraced, proscribed, ruined, an outlaw in fact, exercised a dictatorship of terror over his rich, honored, and irreproachable brother. The first of these two facts explained itself. It was quite natural that Jacques Termonde should not dispel the legend of the suicide, which was of his own invention, and had saved the other from the galleys. It is never pleasant to have to own a thief, a forger, or a deserter, for one's nearest relation; but this, after all, is only an excessively disagreeable matter.

The second fact was of a different kind. The disproportion between the cause assigned by my stepfather and its result in the terror from which he was suffering was too great. The dominion which Edmond Termonde exercised over his brother was not to be justified by the threat of his return, if that return were not to have any other consequence than a transient scandal. My mother, who regarded her husband as a noble−minded, high−souled, great−hearted man, might be satisfied with the alleged reason; but not I. It occurred to me to consult the Code of Military Justice, and I ascertained, by the 184th clause, that a deserter cannot claim immunity from punishment until after he has attained his forty− seventh year, so that it was most likely Edmond Termonde was still within the reach of the law.

Was it possible that his desire to shield his brother from the punishment of the offense of desertion should throw my stepfather into such a state of illness and agitation? I discerned another reason for this dominion—some dark and terrible bond of complicity between the two men. What if Jacques Termonde had employed his brother to kill my father, and proof of the transaction was still in the murderer's possession? No doubt his hands would be tied so

far as the magistrates were concerned; he had it in his power to enlighten my mother, and the mere threat of doing this would suffice to make a loving husband tremble, and tame his fierce pride.

"I must be cool," I repeated, "I must be cool;" and I put all my strength to recalling the physical and moral particulars respecting the crime which were in my possession. It was my business now to try whether one single point remained obscure when tested by the theory of the identity of Rochdale with Edmond Termonde. The witnesses were agreed in representing Rochdale as tall and stout, my mother had described Edmond Termonde as a big, heavy man. Fifteen years lay between the assassin of 1864, and the elderly rake of 1879; but nothing prevented the two from being identical. My mother had dwelt upon the color of Edmond Termonde's eyes, pale blue like those of his brother; the concierge of the Imperial Hotel had mentioned the pale blue color and the brightness of Rochdale's eyes in his deposition, which I knew by heart. He had noticed this peculiarity on account of the contrast of the eyes with the man's bronzed complexion. Edmond Termonde had taken refuge in America after his alleged suicide, and what had M. Massol said? I could hear him repeat, with his well−modulated voice, and methodical movement of the hand: "A foreigner, American or English, or, perhaps, a Frenchman settled in America." Physical impossibility there existed none.

And moral impossibility? That was equally absent. In order to convince myself more fully of this, I took up the history of the crime from the moment at which my father's correspondence concerning Jacques Termonde became explicit, that is to say, in January, 1864.

So as to rid my judgment of every trace of personal enmity, I suppressed the names in my thoughts, reducing the dreadful occurrence by which I had suffered to the bareness of an abstract narrative. A man is desperately in love with the wife of one of his intimate friends, a woman whom he knows to be absolutely, spotlessly virtuous; he knows, he feels, that if she were free she would love him; but that, not being free, she will never, never be his. This man is of the temperament which makes criminals, his passions are violent in the extreme, he has no scruples and a despotic will; he is accustomed to see everything give way to his desires. He perceives that his friend is growing jealous; a little later and the house will no longer be open to him.

Would not the thought come to him—if the husband could be got rid of? And yet—?

This dream of the death of him, who forms the sole obstacle to his happiness, troubles the man's head, it recurs once, twice, many times, and he turns the fatal idea over and over again in his brain until he becomes used to it. He arrives at the "If I dared," which is the starting point of the blackest villainies. The idea takes a precise form; he conceives that he might have the man whom he now hates, and by whom he feels that he is hated, killed. Has he not, far away, a wretch of a brother, whose actual existence, to say nothing of his present abode, is absolutely unknown? What an admirable instrument of murder he should find in this infamous, depraved, and needy brother, whom he holds at his beck and call by the aid in money that he sends him! And the temptation grows and grows. An hour comes when it is stronger than all besides, and the man, resolved to play this desperate game, summons his brother to Paris. How? By one or two letters in which he excites the rascal's hopes of a large sum of money to be gained, at the same time that he imposes the condition of absolute secrecy as to his voyage. The other accepts; he is a social failure, a bankrupt in life, he has neither relations nor ties, he has been leading an anonymous and haphazard existence for years. The two brothers are face to face. Up to that point all is logical, all is in conformity with the possible stages of a project of this order.

I arrived at the execution of it; and I continued to reason in the same way, impersonally. The rich brother proposes the blood− bargain to the poor brother. He offers him money; a hundred thousand francs, two hundred thousand, three hundred thousand.

From what motive should the scoundrel hesitate to accept the offer?

Moral ideas? What is the morality of a rake who has gone from libertinism to theft? Under the influence of my vengeful thoughts I had read the criminal news of the day in the journals, and the reports of criminal trials, too assiduously for years past, not to know how a man becomes a murderer. How many cases of stabbing, shooting, and poisoning have there not been, in which the gain was entirely uncertain, and the conditions of danger extreme, merely to enable the perpetrators to go, presently, and expend the murder− money in some low haunt of depravity?

Fear of the scaffold? Then nobody would kill. Besides, debauchees, whether they stop short at vice or roll down the descent into crime, have no foresight of the future. Present sensation is too strong for them; its image abolishes all other images, and absorbs all the vital forces of the temperament and the soul. An old dying mother, children perishing of hunger, a despairing wife; have these pictures of their deeds ever arrested drunkards, gamblers, or profligates? No more have the tragic phantoms of the tribunal, the prison, and the guillotine, when, thirsting for gold, they kill to procure it. The scaffold is far off, the brothel is at the street corner, and the being sunk in vice kills a man, just as a butcher would kill a beast, that he may go thither, or to the tavern, or to the low gaming−house, with a pocket full of money. This is the daily mode of procedure in crime.

Why should not the desire of a more elevated kind of debauch possess the same wicked attraction for men who are indeed more refined, but are quite as incapable of moral goodness as the rascally frequenters of the lowest dens of iniquity?

Ah! the thought that my father's blood might have paid for suppers in a New York night−house was too cruel and unendurable. I lost courage to pursue my cold, calm, reasonable deductions, a kind of hallucination came upon me—a mental picture of the hideous scene— and I felt my reason reel. With a great effort I turned to the portrait of my father, gazed at it long, and spoke to him as if he could have heard me, aloud, in abject entreaty. "Help me, help me!"

And then, I once more became strong enough to resume the dreadful hypothesis, and to criticise it point by point. Against it was its utter unlikelihood; it resembled nothing but the nightmare of a diseased imagination. A brother who employs his brother as the assassin of a man whose wife he wants to marry! Still, although the conception of such a devilish plot belonged to the domain of the wildest fantasies, I said to myself: "This may be so, but in the way of crime, there is no such thing as unlikelihood. The assassin ceases to move in the habitual grooves of social life by the mere fact that he makes up his mind to murder." And then a score of examples of crimes committed under circumstances as strange and exceptional as those whose greater or less probability I was then discussing with myself recurred to my memory.

One objection arose at once. Admitting this complicated crime to be possible only, how came I to be the first to form a suspicion of it? Why had not the keen, subtle, experienced old magistrate, M. Massol, looked in that direction for an explanation of the mystery in whose presence he confessed himself powerless? The answer came ready. M. Massol did not think of it, that was all. The important thing is to know, not whether the Judge of Instruction suspected the fact, or did not suspect it; but whether the fact itself is, or is not, real.

Again, what indications had reached M. Massol to put him on this scent? If he had thoroughly studied my father's home and his domestic life, he had acquired the certainty that my mother was a faithful wife and a good woman. He had witnessed her sincere grief, and he had not seen, as I had, letters written by my father in which he acknowledged his jealousy, and revealed the passion of his false friend.

But, even supposing the judge had from the first suspected the villainy of my future stepfather, the discovery of his accomplices would have been the first thing to be done, since, in any case, the presence of M. Termonde in our house at the time of the murder was an ascertained fact.

Supposing M. Massol had been led to think of the brother who had disappeared, what then? Where were the traces of that brother to be found? Where and how? If Edmond and Jacques had been accomplices in the crime, would not their chief care be to contrive a means of correspondence which should defy the vigilance of the police? Did they not cease for a time to communicate with each other by letters? What had they to communicate, indeed? Edmond was in possession of the price of the murder, and Jacques was occupied in completing his conquest of my mother's heart.

I resumed my argument; all this granted again, but, although M. Massol was ignorant of the essential factor in the case, although he was unaware of Jacques Termonde's passion for the wife of the murdered man, my aunt knew it well, she had in her hands indisputable proofs of my father's suspicions; how came she not to have thought as I was now thinking. And how did I know that she had NOT thought just as I was thinking? She had been tormented by suspicions, even she, too; she had lived and died haunted by them. The only difference was that she had included my mother in them, being incapable of forgiving her the sufferings of the brother whom she loved so deeply. To act against my mother was to act against me, so she had forsworn that idea forever. But if she would have acted against my mother, how could she have gone beyond the domain of vague inductions, since she, no more than I, could have divined my stepfather's alibi, or known of the actual existence of Edmond Termonde? No; that I should be the first to explain the murder of my father as I did, proved only that I had come into possession of additional information respecting the surroundings of the crime, and not that the conjectures drawn from it were baseless.

Other objections presented themselves. If my stepfather had employed his brother to commit the murder, how came he to reveal the existence of that brother to his wife? An answer to this question was not far to seek. If the crime had been committed under conditions of complicity, only one proof of the fact could remain, namely, the letters written by Jacques Termonde to Edmond, in which the former recalled the latter to Europe and gave him instructions for his journey; these letters Edmond had of course preserved, and it was through them, and by the threat of showing them to my mother, that he kept a hold over his brother. To tell his wife so much as he had told her was to forestall and neutralize this threat, at least to a certain extent; for, if the doer of the deed should ever resolve on revealing the common secret to the victim's widow, now the wife of him who had inspired it, the latter would be able to deny the authenticity of the letters, to plead the former confidence reposed in her respecting his brother, and to point out that the denunciation was an atrocious act of revenge achieved by a forgery. And, besides, if indeed the crime had been committed in the manner that I imagined, was not that revelation to my mother justified by another reason?

The remorseful moods by which I believed my stepfather to be tortured were not likely to escape the observant affection of his wife; she could not fail to know that there was a dark shadow on his life which even her love could not dispel. Who knows but she had suffered from the worst of all jealousy, that which is inspired by a constant thought not imparted, a strange emotion hidden from one? And he had revealed a portion of the truth to her so as to spare her uneasiness of that kind, and to protect himself from questions which his conscience rendered intolerable to him. There was then no contradiction between this half−revelation made to my mother, and my own theory of the complicity of the two brothers. It was also clear to me that in making that revelation he had been unable to go beyond a certain point in urging upon her the necessity of silence towards me—silence which would never have been broken but for her unforeseen emotion, but for my affectionate entreaties, but for the sudden arrival of Edmond Termonde, which had literally bewildered the poor woman. But how was my stepfather's imprudence in refusing money to this brother, who was at bay and ready to dare any and every thing, to be explained? This, too, I succeeded in explaining to myself. It had happened before my aunt's death, at a period when my stepfather believed himself to be guaranteed from all risk on my side. He believed himself to be sheltered from justice by the statute of limitations. He was ill. What, then, was more natural than that he should wish to recover those papers which might become a means of levying blackmail upon his widow after his death, and dishonoring his memory in the heart of that woman whom he had loved—even to crime— at any price? Such a negotiation could only be conducted in person. My stepfather would have reflected that his brother would not fulfil his threat without making a last attempt; he would come to Paris, and the accomplices would again be face

to face after all these years. A fresh but final offer of money would have to be made to Edmond, the price of the relinquishment of the sole proof whereby the mystery of the Imperial Hotel could be cleared up. In this calculation my stepfather had omitted to forecast the chance that his brother might come to the hotel on the Boulevard de Latour−Maubourg, that he would be ushered into my mother's presence, and that the result of the shock to himself—his health being already undermined by his prolonged mental anguish—would be a fresh attack of his malady. In events, there is always the unexpected to put to rout the skillful calculations of the most astute and the most prudent, and when I reflected that so much cunning, such continual watchfulness over himself and others had all come to this—unless indeed these surmises of mine were but fallacies of a brain disturbed by fever and the consuming desire for vengeance—I once more felt the passage of the wind of destiny over us all.

However, whether reality or fancy, there they were, and I could not remain in ignorance or in doubt. At the end of all my various arguments for and against the probability of my new explanation of the mystery, I arrived at a positive fact: rightly or wrongly I had conceived the possibility of a plot in which Edmond Termonde had served as the instrument of murder in his brother's hand. Were there only one single chance, one against a thousand, that my father had been killed in this way, I was bound to follow up the clew to the end, on pain of having to despise myself as the veriest coward that lived. The time of sorrowful dreaming was over; it was now necessary to act, and to act was to know.

Morning dawned upon these thoughts of mine. I opened my window, I saw the faces of the lofty houses livid in the first light of day, and I swore solemnly to myself, in the presence of re−awakening life, that this day should see me begin to do what I ought, and the morrow should see me continue, and the following days should see the same, until I could say to myself: "I am certain."

I resolutely repressed the wild feelings which had taken hold of me during the night, and I fixed my mind upon the problem: "Does there exist any means of making sure whether Edmond Termonde is, or is not, identical with the man who in 1864 called himself Rochdale?"

For the answer to this question I had only myself, the resources of my own intelligence, and my personal will to rely upon. I must do myself the justice to state that not for one minute, during all those cruel hours, was I tempted to rid myself once for all of the difficulties of my tragic task by appealing to justice, as I should have done had I not taken my mother's sufferings into account. I had resolved that the terrible blow of learning that for fifteen years she had been the wife of an assassin should never be dealt to her by me. In order that she might always remain in ignorance of this story of crime, it was necessary for the struggle to be strictly confined to my stepfather and myself.

And yet, I thought, what if I find that he is guilty?

At this idea, no longer vague and distant, but liable today, to− morrow, at any time, to become an indisputable truth, a terrible project presented itself to my mind. But I would not look in that direction, I made answer to myself: "I will think of this later on," and I forced myself to concentrate all my reflections upon the actual day and its problem: How to verify the identity of Edmond Termonde with the false Rochdale?

To tear the secret from my stepfather was impossible. I had vainly endeavored for months to find the flaw in his armor of dissimulation; I had but broken not one dagger, but twenty against the plates of that cuirass. If I had had all the tormentors of the Middle Ages at my service, I could not have forced his fast−shut lips to open, or extorted an admission from his woebegone and yet impenetrable face.

There remained the other; but in order to attack him, I must first discover under what name he was hiding in Paris, and where. No great effort of imagination was required to hit upon a certain means of discovering these particulars. I had only to recall the circumstances under which I had learned the fact of Edmond Termonde's arrival in Paris. For some reason or other—remembrance of a guilty complicity or fear of a scandal—my

stepfather trembled with fear at the mere idea of his brother's return. His brother had returned, and my stepfather would undoubtedly make every effort to induce him to go away again. He would see him, but not at the house on the Boulevard de Latour−Maubourg, on account of my mother and the servants. I had, therefore, a sure means of finding out where Edmond Termonde was living; I would have his brother followed.

There were two alternatives: either he would arrange a meeting in some lonely place, or he would go himself to Edmond Termonde's abode. In the latter case, I should have the information I wanted at once; in the former, it would be sufficient to give the description of Edmond Termonde just as I had received it from my mother, and to have him also followed on his return from the place of meeting. The spy−system has always seemed to me to be infamous, and even at that moment I felt all the ignominy of setting this trap for my stepfather; but when one is fighting, one must use the weapons that will avail. To attain my end, I would have trodden everything under foot except my mother's grief.

And then? Supposing myself in possession of the false name of Edmond Termonde and his address, WHAT WAS I TO DO? I could not, in imitation of the police, lay my hand upon him and his papers, and get off with profuse excuses for the action when the search was finished. I remember to have turned over twenty plans in my mind, all more or less ingenious, and rejected them all in succession, concluding by again fixing my mind on the bare facts.

Supposing the man really had killed my father, it was impossible that the scene of the murder should not be indelibly impressed upon his memory. In his dark hours the face of the dead man, whom I resembled so closely, must have been visible to his mind's eye.

Once more I studied the portrait at which my stepfather had hardly dared to glance, and recalled my own words: "Do you think the likeness is sufficiently strong for me to have the effect of a specter upon the criminal?"

Why not utilize this resemblance? I had only to present myself suddenly before Edmond Termonde, and call him by the name— Rochdale—to his ears its syllables would have the sound of a funeral bell. Yes! that was the way to do it; to go into the room he now occupied, just as my father had gone into the room at the Imperial Hotel, and to ask for him by the name under which my father had asked for him, showing him the very face of his victim. If he was not guilty, I should merely have to apologize for having knocked at his door by mistake; if he was guilty, he would be so terrified for some minutes that his fear would amount to an avowal. It would then be for me to avail myself of that terror to wring the whole of his secret from him.

What motives would inspire him? Two, manifestly—the fear of punishment, and the love of money. It would then be necessary for me to be provided with a large sum when taking him unawares, and to let him choose between two alternatives, either that he should sell me the letters which had enabled him to blackmail his brother for years past, or that I should shoot him on the spot.

And what if he refused to give up the letters to me? Is it likely that a ruffian of his kind would hesitate?

Well, then, he would accept the bargain, hand me over the papers by which my stepfather is convicted of murder, and take himself off; and I must let him go away just as he had gone away from the Imperial Hotel, smoking a cigar, and paid for his treachery to his brother, even as he had been paid for his treachery to my father! Yes, I must let him go away thus, because to kill him with my own hand would be to place myself under the necessity of revealing the whole of the crime, which I am bound to conceal at all hazards.

"Ah, mother! what will you not cost me!" I murmured with tears.

Fixing my eyes again upon the portrait of the dead man, it seemed to me that I read in its eyes and mouth an injunction never to wound the heart of the woman he had so dearly loved—even for the sake of avenging him. "I will obey you," I made answer to my father, and bade adieu to that part of my vengeance.

It was very hard, very cruel to myself; nevertheless, it was possible; for, after all, did I hate the wretch himself? He had struck the blow, it is true, but only as a servile tool in the hand of another.

Ah! that other, I would not let HIM escape, when he should be in my grip; he who had conceived, meditated, arranged, and paid for the deed; he who had stolen all from me, all, all, from my father's life even to my mother's love; he, the real, the only culprit. Yes, I would lay hold of him, and contrive and execute my vengeance, while my mother should never suspect the existence of that duel out of which I should come triumphant. I was intoxicated beforehand with the idea of the punishment which I would find means to inflict upon the man whom I execrated. It warmed my heart only to think of how this would repay my long, cruel martyrdom.

"To work! to work!" I cried aloud.

I trembled lest this should be nothing but a delusion, lest Edmond Termonde should have already left the country, my stepfather having previously purchased his silence.

At nine o'clock I was in an abominable Private Inquiry Office— merely to have passed its threshold would have seemed to me a shameful action, only a few hours before. At ten I was with my broker, giving him instructions to sell out 100,000 francs' worth of shares for me. That day passed, and then a second. How I bore the succession of the hours, I know not. I do know that I had not courage to go to my mother's house, or to see her again. I feared she might detect my wild hope in my eyes, and unconsciously forewarn my stepfather by a sentence or a word, as she had unconsciously informed me.

Towards noon, on the third day, I learned that my stepfather had gone out that morning. It was a Wednesday, and on that day my mother always attended a meeting for some charitable purpose in the Grenelle quarter. M. Termonde had changed his cab twice, and had alighted from the second vehicle at the Grand Hotel. There he had paid a visit to a traveler who occupied a room on the second floor (No. 353); this person's name was entered in the list of arrivals as Stanbury. At noon I was in possession of these particulars, and at two o'clock I ascended the staircase of the Grand Hotel, with a loaded revolver and a note−case containing one hundred banknotes, wherewith to purchase the letters, in my pocket.

Was I about to enter on a formidable scene in the drama of my life, or was I about to be convinced that I had been once more made the dupe of my own imagination?

At all events, I should have done my duty.

XII

I had reached the second floor. At one corner of the long corridor there was a notification that the numbers ran from 300 to 360. A waiter passed me, whistling; two girls were chattering and laughing in a kind of office at the stair−head; the various noises of the courtyard came up through the open windows.

The moment was opportune for the execution of my project. With these people about the man could not hope to escape from the house. 345, 350, 351, 353—I stood before the door of Edmond Termonde's room; the key was in the lock; chance had served my purpose better than I had ventured to hope. This trifling particular bore witness to the security in which the man whom I was about to surprise was living. Was he even aware that I existed?

I paused a moment before the closed door. I wore a short coat, so as to have my revolver within easy reach in the pocket, and I put my right hand upon it, opened the door with my left, and entered without knocking.

"Who is there?" said a man who was lying rather than sitting in an arm−chair, with his feet on a table; he was

reading a newspaper and smoking, and his back was turned to the door. He did not trouble himself to rise and see whose hand had opened the door, thinking, no doubt, that a servant had come in; he merely turned his head slightly, and I did not give him time to look completely round.

"M. Rochdale?" I asked.

He started to his feet, pushed away the chair, and rushed to the other side of the table, staring at me with a terrified countenance; his light blue eyes were unnaturally distended, his face was livid, his mouth was half open, his legs bent under him. His tall, robust frame had sustained one of those shocks of excessive terror which almost paralyze the forces of life. He uttered but one word—"Cornelis!"

At last I held in my victorious hand the proof that I had been seeking for months, and in that moment I was master of all the resources of my being. Yes, I was as calm, as clear of purpose, as my adversary was the reverse. He was not accustomed to live, like his accomplice, in the daily habits of studied dissimulation. The name, "Rochdale," the terrifying likeness, the unlooked−for arrival! I had not been mistaken in my calculation. With the amazing rapidity of thought that accompanies action I perceived the necessity of following up this first shock of moral terror by a shock of physical terror. Otherwise, the man would hurl himself upon me, in the moment of reaction, thrust me aside and rush away like a madman, at the risk of being stopped on the stairs by the servants, and then? But I had already taken out my revolver, and I now covered the wretch with it, calling him by his real name, to prove that I knew all about him.

"M. Edmond Termonde," I said, "if you make one step towards me, I will kill you, like the assassin that you are, as you killed my father."

Pointing to a chair at the corner of the half−open window, I added:

"Sit down!"

He obeyed mechanically. At that instant I exercised absolute control over him; but I felt sure this would cease so soon as he recovered his presence of mind. But even though the rest of the interview were now to go against me, that could not alter the certainty which I had acquired. I had wanted to know whether Edmond Termonde was the man who had called himself Rochdale, and I had secured undeniable proof of the fact. Nevertheless, it was due to myself that I should extract from my enemy the proof of the truth of all my conjectures, that proof which would place my stepfather at my mercy. This was a fresh phase of the struggle.

I glanced round the room in which I was shut up with the assassin. On the bed, placed on my left, lay a loaded cane, a hat and an overcoat; on a small table were a steel "knuckle−duster" and a revolver. Among the articles laid out on a chest of drawers on my right a bowie−knife was conspicuous, a valise was placed against an unused door, a wardrobe with a looking−glass stood before another unused door, then came the toilet−stand, and the man, crouching under the aim of my revolver, between the table and the window. He could neither escape, nor reach to any means of defense without a personal struggle with me; but he would have to stand my fire first, and besides, if he was tall and robust, I was neither short or feeble. I was twenty−five, he was fifty. All the moral forces were for me, I must win.

"Now," said I, as I took a seat, but without releasing him from the covering barrel of my pistol, "let us talk."

"What do you want of me?" he asked roughly. His voice was both hoarse and muffled; the blood had gone back into his cheeks, his eyes, those eyes so exactly like his brother's, sparkled. The brute−nature was reviving in him after having sustained a fearful shock, as though astonished that it still lived.

"Come, then," he added, clenching his fists, "I am caught. Fire on me, and let this end."

Then, as I made him no answer, but continued to threaten him with my pistol, he exclaimed:

"Ah! I understand; it is that blackguard Jacques who has sold me to you in order to get rid of me himself. There's the statute of limitations—he thinks he is safe! But has he told you that he was in it himself, good, honest man, and that I have the proof of this? Ah! he thinks I am going to let you kill me, like that, without speaking? No, I shall call out, we shall be arrested, and all will be known."

Fury had seized upon him; he was about to shout "Help!" and the worst of it was that rage was rising in me also. It was he, with that same hand which I saw creeping along the table, strong, hairy, seeking something to throw at me—yes—it was he who had killed my father.

One impulse more of anger and I was lost; a bullet was lodged in his body, and I saw his blood flow. Oh, what good it would have done me to see that sight!

But no, I soon made the sacrifice of this particular vengeance. In a second, I beheld myself arrested, obliged to explain everything, and my mother exposed to all the misery of it.

Happily for me, he also had an interval of reflection. The first idea that must have occurred to him was that his brother had betrayed him, by telling me one−half of the truth, so as to deliver him up to my vengeance. The second, no doubt, was that, for a son who came to avenge his dead father, I was making a good deal of delay about it. There was a momentary silence between us. This allowed me to regain my coolness, and to say: "You are mistaken," so quietly that his amazement was visible in his face. He looked at me, then closed his eyes, and knitted his brow. I felt that he could not endure my resemblance to my father.

"Yes, you are mistaken," I continued deliberately, giving the tone of a business conversation to this terrible interview. "I have not come here either to have you arrested or to kill you. Unless," I added, "you oblige me to do so yourself, as I feared just now you would oblige me. I have come to propose a bargain to you, but it is on the condition that you listen, as I shall speak, with coolness."

Once more we were both silent. In the corridor, almost at the door of the room, there were sounds of feet, voices, and peals of laughter. This was enough to recall me to the necessity of controlling myself, and him to the consciousness that he was playing a dangerous game. A shot, a cry, and someone would enter the room, for it opened upon the corridor. Edmond Termonde had heard me with extreme attention; a gleam of hope, succeeded by a singular look of suspicion, had passed over his face.

"Make your conditions," said he.

"If I had intended to kill you," I resumed, so as to convince him of my sincerity by the evidence of his senses, "you would be dead already." I raised the revolver. "If I had intended to have you arrested, I would not have taken the trouble to come here myself; two policemen would have been sufficient, for you don't forget that you are a deserter, and still amenable to the law."

"True," he replied simply, and then added, following out a mental argument which was of vital importance to the issue of our interview:

"If it is not Jacques, then who is it that has sold me?"

"I held you at my disposal," I continued, without noticing what he had said, "and I have not availed myself of that. Therefore I had a strong reason for sparing you yesterday, ere yesterday, this morning, a little while ago, at the present moment; and it depends upon yourself whether I spare you altogether."

"And you want me to believe you," he answered, pointing to my revolver which I still continued to hold in my hand, but no longer covering him with it. "No, no," and he added, with an expression which smacked of the barrack−room, "I don't tumble to that sort of thing."

"Listen to me," said I, now assuming a tone of extreme contempt. "The powerful motive which I have for not shooting you like a mad dog, you shall learn. I do not choose that my mother should ever know what a man she married in your brother. Do you now understand why I resolved to let you go? Provided you are of the same mind, however; for even the idea of my mother would not stop me, if you pushed me too far. I will add, for your guidance, that the limitation by which you supposed yourself to be safe from pursuit for the murder in 1864 has been traversed; you are therefore staking your head at this moment. For ten years past you have been successfully levying blackmail on your brother. I do not suppose you have merely played upon the chord of fraternal love. When you came from America to assume the personality of Rochdale, it was clearly necessary that he should send you some instructions. You have kept those letters. I offer you one hundred thousand francs for them."

"Sir," he replied slowly, and his tone showed me that for the moment he had recovered his self−control, "how can you imagine that I should take such a proposal seriously? Admitting that any such letters were ever written, and that I had kept them, why should I give up a document of this kind to you? What security should I have that you would not have me laid by the heels the moment after! Ah!" he cried, looking me straight in the face, "you know nothing! That name! That likeness! Idiot that I am, you have tricked me."

His face turned crimson with rage, and he uttered an oath.

"You shall pay for this!" he cried; and at the same instant, when he was no longer covered by my pistol, he pushed the table upon me so violently, that if I had not sprung backwards I must have been thrown down; but he already had time to fling himself upon me and seize me round the body. Happily for me the violence of the attack had knocked the pistol out of my hands, so that I could not be tempted to use it, and a struggle began between us in which not one word was spoken by either.

With his first rush he had flung me to the ground; but I was strong, and the strange premonitions of danger, from which I suffered in my youth, had led me to develop all my physical energy and adroitness.

I felt his breath on my face, his skin upon my skin, his muscles striving against mine, and at the same time the dread that our conflict might be overheard gave me the coolness which he had lost. After a few minutes of this tussle, and just as his strength was failing, he fastened his teeth in my shoulder so savagely that the pain of the bite maddened me. I wrenched one of my arms from his grasp and seized him by the throat at the risk of choking him. I held him under me now, and I struck his bead against the floor as though I meant to smash it. He remained motionless for a minute, and I thought I had killed him. I first picked up my pistol, which had rolled away to the door, and then bathed his forehead with water in order to revive him.

When I caught sight of myself in the glass, with my coat−collar torn, my face bruised, my cravat in rags, I shuddered as if I had seen the specter of another Andre Cornelis. The ignoble nature of this adventure filled me with disgust; but it was not a question of fine−gentleman fastidiousness. My enemy was coming to himself, I must end this. I knew in my conscience I had done all that was possible to fulfill my vow in regard to my mother. The blame must fall upon destiny. the wretch had half−raised himself, and was looking at me; I bent over him, and put the barrel of my revolver within a hair's breadth of his temple.

"There is still time," I said. "I give you five minutes to decide upon the bargain which I proposed to you just now; the letters, and one hundred thousand francs, with your liberty; if not, a bullet in your head. Choose. I wished to spare you on account of my mother; but I will not lose my vengeance both ways. I shall be arrested, your papers will be searched, the letters will be found, it will be known that I had a right to shoot you. My mother will go mad with grief; but I shall be avenged. I have spoken. You have five minutes, not one more."

No doubt my face expressed invincible resolution. The assassin looked at that face, then at the clock. He tried to make a movement, but saw that my finger was about to press the trigger.

"I yield," he said.

I ordered him to rise, and he obeyed me.

"Where are the letters?"

"When you have them," he implored, with the terror of a trapped beast in his abject face, "you will let me go away?"

"I swear it," I answered; and, as I saw doubt and dread in his quailing eyes, I added, "by the memory of my father. Where are the letters?"

"There."

He pointed to a valise in a corner of the room.

"Here is the money."

I flung him the note−case which contained it. Is there a sort of moral magnetism in the tone of certain words and in certain expressions of countenance? Was it the nature of the oath which I had just taken, so deeply impressive at that moment, or had this man sufficient strength of mind to say to himself that his single chance of safety resided in belief in my good faith? However that may be, he did not hesitate for a moment; he opened the iron−bound valise, took out a yellow−leather box with a patent lock, and, having opened it, flung its contents—a large sealed envelope−to me, exactly as I had flung the banknotes to him. I, too, for my part, had not a moment's fear that he would produce a weapon from the valise and attack me while I was verifying the contents of the envelope. These consisted of three letters only; the two first bore the double stamp of Paris and New York, the third those of New York and Liverpool, and all three bore the January or February post−marks of the year 1864.

"Is that all?" he asked.

"Not yet," I answered; "you must undertake to leave Paris this evening by the first train, without having seen your brother or written to him."

"I promise; and then?"

"When was he to come back here to see you?"

"On Saturday," he answered, with a shrug of his shoulders. "The bargain was concluded. He was determined to wait until the day came for me to set out for Havre before paying me the money, so that he might make quite sure I should not stay on in Paris.—The game is up," he added, "and now I wash my hands of it."

"Edmond Termonde," said I, rising, but not loosing him from the hold of my eye, "remember that I have spared you; but you must not tempt me a second time by putting yourself in my way, or crossing the path of any whom I love."

Then, with a threatening gesture, I quitted the room, leaving him seated at the table near the window. I had hardly reached the corridor when my nerves, which had been so strangely under my control during the struggle, failed me. My legs bent under me, and I feared I was about to fall. How was I to account for the disorder of my clothes?

I made a great effort, concealed the torn ends of my cravat, turned up the collar of my coat to hide the condition of my shirt, and did my best to repair the damage that had been done to my hat. I then wiped my face with my handkerchief, and went downstairs with a slow and careless step. The inspector of the first floor was, doubtless, occupied at the other end of the corridor; but two of the waiters saw me and were evidently surprised at my aspect. They were, however, too busy, luckily for me, to stop me and inquire into the cause of my discomposure. At last I reached the courtyard. If anybody who knew me had been there? I got into the first cab and gave my address. I had kept my word. I had conquered.

I am afraid to kill; but had I been born in Italy, in the fifteenth century, would I have hesitated to poison my father's murderer? Would I have hesitated to shoot him, had I been born in Corsica fifty years ago? Am I then nothing but a civilized person, a wretched and impotent dreamer, who would fain act, but shrinks from soiling his hands in the action? I forced myself to contemplate the dilemma in which I stood, in its absolute, imperative, inevitable distinctness. I must either avenge my father by handing over his murderer to be dealt with by the law, since M. Massol had prudently fulfilled all the formalities necessary to bar the limitation, or I must be my own minister of justice. There was a third alternative; that I should spare the murderous wretch, allow him to live on in occupation of his victim's place in my mother's home, from which he had driven me; but at the thought of this my rage revived. The scruples of the civilized man did indeed give him pause; but that hesitation did not hinder the savage, who slumbers in us all, from feeling the appetite for retaliation which stirs the animal nature of man—all his flesh, and all his blood— as hunger and thirst stir it. "Well, then," said I to myself, "I will assassinate my stepfather, since that is the right word. Was he afraid to assassinate my father? He killed; he shall be killed. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth; that is the primitive law, and all the rest is a lie."

Evening had come while this strife was raging in my soul. I was laboring under excitement which contrasted strangely with the calmness I had felt a few hours previously, when ascending the stairs in the Grand Hotel. The situation also had undergone a change; then I was preparing for a struggle, a kind of duel; I was about to confront a man whom I had to conquer, to attack him face to face without any treachery, and I had not flinched. It was the mean hypocrisy of clandestine murder that had made me shrink from the idea of killing my stepfather, by luring him into a snare. I had controlled this trembling the first time; but I was afraid of its coming again, and that I should have a sleepless night, and be unfit to act next day with the cool calmness I desired.

I felt that I could not bear suspense; on the morrow I must act. The plan on which I should decide, be it what it might, must be executed within the twenty−four hours.

The best means of calming my nerves was by making a beginning now, at once; by doing something beforehand to guard against suspicion. I determined upon letting myself be seen by persons who could bear witness, if necessary, that they had seen me, careless, easy, almost gay. I dressed and went out, intending to dine at a place where I was known, and to pass the most of the night at the club.

When I was in the Avenue des Champs−Elysees, crowded with carriages and people on foot—the May evening was delicious—I shared the physical sensation of the joy of living, which was abroad in the air. The sky quivered with the innumerable throbs of the stars, and the young leaves shook at the touch of a slow and gentle breeze. Garlands of light illumined the various pleasure−gardens. I passed in front of a restaurant where the tables extended to the edge of the footpath, and young men and women were finishing their dinner gaily.

The contrast between the spring−festival aspect of Paris and the tragedy of my own destiny came home to me too strongly. What had I done to Fate to deserve that I should be the one only person, amid all this crowd, condemned to such an experience? Why had my path been crossed by a man capable of pushing passion to the point of crime, in a society in which passion is ordinarily so mild, so harmless, and so lukewarm? Probably there did not exist in all the "good" society of Paris four persons with daring enough to conceive such a plan as that which Jacques Termonde had executed with such cool deliberation under the influence of his passion. And this villain, who could love so intensely, was my stepfather!

Once more the breath of fatality, which had already thrilled me with a kind of mysterious horror, passed over me, and I felt that I could no longer bear the sight of the human face. Turning my back upon the lit−up, noisy quarter of the Champs Elysees, I walked on towards the Arc de Triomphe. Without thinking about it I took the road to the Bois, bore to the right to avoid the vehicles, and turned into one of the loneliest paths. Had I unconsciously obeyed one of those almost animal impulses of memory, which bring us back to ways that we have already trodden? By the soft, bluish light of the spring moon I recognized the place where I had walked with my stepfather in the winter, on the occasion of our first drive to the Bois. It was on that day I obliged him to look the portrait of his victim in the face, on that day he came to me on the pretext of asking for the Review which my mother had lent me. In my thoughts I beheld him, as he then was, and recalled the strange pity which had stirred my heart at the sight of him, so sad, broken−down, and, so to speak, conquered. He stood before me, in the light of that remembrance, as living and real as if he had been there, close beside me, and the acute sensation of his existence made me feel at the same time all the signification of those fearful and mysterious words: to kill. To kill? I was going to kill him, in a few hours it might be, at the latest in a few days.

I heard voices, and I withdrew into the shade. Two forms passed me, a young man and a girl, lovers, who did not see me. The moonlight fell upon them, as they went on their way, hand in hand. I burst into tears, and wept long, unrestrainedly; for I too was young; in my heart there was a flood of pent−up tenderness, and here I was, on this perfumed, moonlit, starlit night, crouching in a dark corner, meditating murder!

No, not murder, an execution. Has my stepfather deserved death? Yes. Is the executioner who lets down the knife on the neck of the condemned criminal to be called an assassin? No! Well, then I shall be the executioner and nothing else. I rose from the bench where I had shed my last tears of resolution and cowardice—for thus I regarded those hot tears to which I now appeal, as a last proof that I was not born for what I have done.

While walking back to Paris, I multiplied and reiterated my arguments. Sometimes I succeeded in silencing a voice within me, stronger than my reasoning and my longing for vengeance, a voice which pronounced the words formerly uttered by my aunt: "Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord God." And if there be no God? And if there be, is not the fault His, for He has let this thing be? Yes, such were my wild words and thoughts; and then all these scruples of my conscience appeared to me mere vain, futile quibbles, fitting for philosophers and confessors.

There remained one indisputable, absolute fact; I could not endure that the murderer of my father should continue to be the husband of my mother.

There was a second no less evident fact; I could not place this man in the hands of justice without, probably, killing my mother on the spot, or, quite certainly, laying her whole life waste. Therefore I would have to be my own tribunal, judge, and executioner in my own cause. What mattered to me the arguments for or against? I was bound to give heed first to my final instinct, and it cried out to me "Kill!"

I walked fast, keeping my mind fixed on this idea with a kind of tragic pleasure, for I felt that my irresolution was gone, and that I should act. All of a sudden, as I came close to the Arc de Triomphe, I remembered how, on that very spot, I had met one of my club companions for the last time. He shot himself the next day. Why did this remembrance suddenly suggest to me a series of new thoughts?

I stopped short with a beating heart. I had caught a glimpse of the way of safety. Fool that I had been, led away as usual by an undisciplined imagination! My stepfather should die. I had sentenced him in the name of my inalienable right as an avenging son; but could I not condemn him to die by his own hand? Had I not that in my possession which would drive him to suicide? If I went to him without any more reserves or circumlocution, and if I said to him, "I hold the proof that you are the murderer of my father. I give you the choice—either you will kill yourself, or I denounce you to my mother," what would his answer be? He, who loved his wife with that reciprocated devotion by which I had suffered so much, would he consent that she should know the truth, that she should regard him as a base, cowardly assassin? No, never; he would rather die.

My heart, weary and worn with pain, rushed towards this door of hope, so suddenly opened. "I shall have done my duty," I thought, "and I shall have no blood on my hands. My conscience will not be stained." I experienced an immense relief from the weight of foreseen remorse that had caused me such agony, and I went on drawing a picture of the future, freed at last from one dark image which had veiled the sunshine of my youth. "He will kill himself; my mother will weep for him; but I shall be able to dry her tears. Her heart will bleed, but I will heal the wound with the balm of my tenderness. When the assassin is no longer there, she and I will live over again all the dear time that he stole from us, and then I shall be able to show her how I love her. The caresses which I did not give her when I was a child, because the other froze me by his mere presence, I will give her then; the words which I did not speak, the tender words that were stopped upon my lips, she shall hear then. We will leave Paris, and get rid of these sad remembrances. We will retire to some quiet spot, far, far away, where she will have none but me, I none but her, and I will devote myself to her old age. What do I want with any other love, with any other tie? Suffering softens the heart; her grief will make her love me more. Ah! how happy we shall be." But once more the voice within resumed: "What if the wretch refuse to kill himself? What if he were not to believe me when I threaten to denounce him?" Had I not been acting for months as his accomplice in maintaining the deceit practiced upon my mother? Did he not know how much I loved her, he who had been jealous of me as her son, as I had been jealous of him as her husband? Would he not answer: "Denounce me!" being well assured that I would not deal such a blow at the poor woman? To these objections I replied, that, whereas I had suspected previously, now I knew. No, he will not be entirely convinced that the evidence I hold will make me dare everything. Well then, if he refuse, I shall have attempted the impossible to avoid murder—let destiny be accomplished!

XIII

It was four o'clock in the afternoon on the following day, when I presented myself at the hotel on the Boulevard de Latour−Maubourg. I knew that my mother would most probably be out. I also thought it likely my stepfather would he feeling none the better of his early excursion to the Grand Hotel on the previous day, and I therefore hoped to find him at home, perhaps in his bed. I was right; my mother was out, and he had remained at home. He was in his study, the room in which our first explanation had taken place. That upon which I was now bent was of far greater importance, and yet I was less agitated than on the former occasion. At last I was completely certain of the facts, and with that certainty a strange calmness had come to me. I can recall my having talked for a few moments with the servant who announced me, about a child of his who was ill. I also remember to have observed for the first time that the smoky chimney of some manufacturing works at the back of the garden, built, no doubt, during the last winter, was visible through the window of the staircase.

I record these things because I am bound to recognize that my mind was quite clear and free—for I will be sincere to the end—when I entered the spacious room.

My stepfather was reclining in a deep armchair at the far side of the fireplace, and occupied in cutting the pages of a new book with a dagger. The blade of this weapon was broad, short, and strong. He had brought the knife back from Spain, with several other kinds of arms, which lay about in the rooms he habitually occupied. I now understood the order of ideas which this singular taste indicated. He was dressed for walking; but his altered looks bore witness to the intensity of the crisis through which he had passed. It had affected his whole being.

Very likely my face was expressive of an extraordinary resolution, for I saw by his eyes, as our looks met, that he had read the depths of my thoughts at a glance. Nevertheless, he said: "Ah, is it you, Andre? It is very kind of you to come," thus exhibiting once more the power of his self−control, and he put out his hand. I did not take it, and my refusal, contrasting with his gesture of welcome, the silence which I kept for some minutes, the contraction of my features, and, no doubt, the menace in my eyes, entirely enlightened him as to the mood in which I came to him. Very quietly, he laid down his book and the Spanish knife he had been using, on a large table within his reach, and then he rose from his chair, leaned his back against the mantelpiece, and crossing his arms, looked at me with the haughty stare I knew so well, and which had so often humiliated me in my boyhood. I was the first to

break the silence; replying to his polite greeting in a harsh tone, and looking him straight in the face, I said:

"The time of lies is past. You have guessed that I know all?"

He bent his brows into the stern frown he always assumed when he felt anger he was bound to suppress, his eyes met mine with indomitable pride, and he merely replied:

"I do not understand you."

"You do not understand me? Very well, I am about to enlighten you." My voice shook in uttering these words; my coolness was forsaking me. The day before, and in my conversation with the brother, I had come in contact with the vile infamy of a knave and a coward; but the enemy whom I was now facing, although a greater scoundrel than the other, found means to preserve a sort of moral superiority, even in that terrible hour when he knew well he was face to face with his crime.

Yes, this man was a criminal, but of a grand kind, and there was no cowardice in him. Pride sat upon that brow so laden with dark thoughts, but fear set no mark upon it, any more than did repentance. In his eyes—exactly like those of his brother—a fierce resolution shone; I felt that he would defend himself to the end. He would yield to evidence only, and such strength of mind displayed at such a moment had the effect of exasperating me. The blood flew to my head, and my heart beat rapidly, as I went on:

"Allow me to take up the matter a little farther back. In 1864, there was in Paris a man who loved the wife of his most intimate friend. Although that friend was very trusting, very noble, very easily duped, he became aware of this love, and he began to suffer from it. He grew jealous—although he never doubted his wife's purity of heart—jealous as everyone is who loves too well.

"The man who was the object of his jealousy perceived it, understood that he was about to be forbidden the house, knew that the woman whom he loved would never degrade herself by listening to a lover, and this is the plan which be conceived:

"He had a brother somewhere in a distant land, an infamous scoundrel who was supposed to be dead, a creature sunk in shame, a thief, a forger, a deserter, and he bethought him of this brother as an instrument ready to his hand wherewith to rid himself of the friend who stood in the way of his passion. He sent for the fellow secretly, he appointed to meet him in one of the loneliest corners of Paris—in a street adjoining the Jardin des Plantes, and at night—you see I am well informed. It is easy to imagine how he persuaded the former thief to play the part of bravo. A few months after, the husband was assassinated by this brother, who eluded justice. The felon−friend married almost immediately the woman whom he loved; he is now a man in society, wealthy and respected, and his pure and pious wife loves, admires, nay, worships him. Do you now begin to understand?"

"No more than before," he answered, with the same impassive face. He did well not to flinch. What I had said might be only an attempt to wrest his secret from him by feigning to know all. Nevertheless, the detail concerning the place where he had appointed to meet his brother had made him start. That was the spot to hit, and quickly.

"The cowardly assassin," I continued, "yes, the coward, because he dared not commit the crime himself, had carefully calculated all the circumstances of the murder; but he had reckoned without certain little accidents, for instance, that his brother would keep the three letters he had received, the first two at New York, the last at Liverpool, and which contained instructions relating to the stages of this clandestine journey. Neither had he taken into account that the son of his victim would grow up, would become a man, would conceive certain suspicions of the true cause of his father's death, and would succeed in procuring overwhelming proof of the dark conspiracy. Come, then," I added fiercely, "off with the mask! M. Jacques Termonde, it is you who had my unhappy father killed by your brother Edmond. I have in my possession the letters you wrote him in January, 1864, to induce him

to come to Europe, first under the false name of Rochester and afterwards under that of Rochdale. It is not worth your while to play the indignant or the astonished with me—the game is up."

He had turned frightfully pale; but his arms still remained crossed, and his bold eyes did not droop. He made one last attempt to parry the straight blow I had aimed at him, and he had the hardihood to say:

"How much did that wretch Edmond ask as the price of the forgery which he fabricated in revenge for my refusal to give him money?"

"Be silent, you—" said I still more fiercely. "Is it to me that you dare to speak thus—to me? Did I need those letters in order to learn all? Have we not known for weeks past, I, that you had committed the crime, and you, that I had divined your guilt? What I still needed was the written, indisputable, undeniable proof, that which can be laid before a magistrate. You refused him money? You were about to give him money, only that you mistrusted him, and chose to wait until the day of his departure. You did not suspect that I was upon your track. Shall I tell you when it was you saw him for the last time? Yesterday, at ten o'clock in the morning, you went out, you changed your cab first at the Place de la Concorde, and a second time at the Palais Royal. You went to the Grand Hotel, and you asked whether Mr. Stanbury was in his room. A few hours later I, myself, was in that same room. Ah! how much did Edmond Termonde ask from me for the letters? Why, I tore them from him, pistol in hand, after a struggle in which I was nearly killed. You see now that you can deceive me no more, and that it is no longer worth your while to deny."

I thought he was about to drop dead before me. His face changed, until it was hardly human, as I went on, on, on, piling up the exact facts, tracking his falsehood, as one tracks a wild beast, and proving to him that his brother had defended himself after his fashion, even as he had done. He clasped his hands about his head, when I ceased to speak, as though to compress the maddening thoughts which rushed upon him; then, once more looking me in the face, but this time with infinite despair in his eyes, he uttered exactly the same sentence as his brother had spoken, but with quite another expression and tone:

"This hour too was bound to come. What do you want from me now?"

"That you should do justice on yourself," I answered. "You have twenty−four hours before you. If, to−morrow at this hour, you are still living, I place the letters in my mother's hands."

Every sort of feeling was depicted upon his livid face while I placed this ultimatum before him, in a firm voice which admitted of no farther discussion. I was standing up, and I leaned against the large table; he came towards me, with a sort of delirium in his eyes as they strove to meet mine.

"No," he cried, "no, Andre, not yet! Pity me, Andre, pity me! See now, I am a condemned man, I have not six months to live. Your revenge! Ah! you had no need to undertake it. What! If I have done a terrible deed, do you think I have not been punished for it? Look at me, only look at me; I am dying of this frightful secret. It is all over; my days are numbered. The few that remain, leave, oh, leave them to me! Understand this, I am not afraid to die; but to kill myself, to go away, leaving this grief to her whom you love as I do! It is true that, to win her, I have done an atrocious deed; but say, answer, has there ever been an hour, a minute since, in which her happiness was not my only aim? And you would have me leave her thus, inflict upon her the torment of thinking that while I might have grown old by her side, I preferred to go away, to forsake her before the time? No, Andre—this last year, leave it to me! Ah, leave it to me, leave it to us, for I assure you that I am hopelessly ill, that I know it, that the doctors have not hidden it from me. In a few months—fix a date—if the disease has not carried me off, you can come back. But I shall be dead. She will weep for me, without the horror of that idea that I have forestalled my hour, she who is so pious! You only will be there to console her, to love her. Have pity upon her, if not upon me. See, I have no more pride towards you, I entreat you in her name, in the name of her dear heart, for well you know its tenderness. You love her, I know that; I have guessed truly that you hid your suspicions to spare her

pain. I tell you once again, my life is a hell, and I would joyfully give it to you in expiation of what I have done; but she, Andre, she, your mother, who has never, never cherished a thought that was not pure and noble, no, do not inflict this torture upon her."

"Words, words!" I answered, moved to the bottom of my soul in spite of myself, by the outburst of an anguish in which I was forced to recognize sincerity. "It is because my mother is noble and pure that I will not have her remain the wife of a vile murderer for a day longer. You shall kill yourself, or she shall know all."

"Do it then if you dare," he replied, with a return to the natural pride of his character, at the ferocity of my answer. "Do it if you dare! Yes, she is my wife, yes, she loves me; go and tell her, and kill her yourself with the words. Ha, you see! You turn pale at the mere thought. I have allowed you to live, yes, I, on account of her, and do you suppose I do not hate you as much as you hate me? Nevertheless, I have respected you because you were dear to her, and you will have to do the same with me. Yes, do you hear, it must be so—"

It was he who was giving orders now, he who was threatening. How plainly had he read my mind, to stand up before me in such an attitude! Furious passion broke loose in me; I took in the facts of the situation. This man had loved my mother madly enough to purchase her at the cost of the murder of his most intimate friend, and he loved her after all those years passionately enough to desire that not one of the days he had still to pass with her might be lost to him. And it was also true that never, never should I have the courage to reveal the terrific truth to the poor woman.

I was suddenly carried away by rage to the point of losing all control over my frenzy. "Ah!" I cried, "since you will not do justice on yourself, die then, at once!" I stretched out my hand and seized the dagger which he had recently placed upon the table. He looked at me without flinching, or recoiling; indeed presenting his breast to me, as though to brave my childish rage. I was on his left bending down, and ready to spring. I saw his smile of contempt, and then with all my strength I struck him with the knife in the direction of the heart.

The blade entered his body to the hilt.

No sooner had I done this thing than I recoiled, wild with terror at the deed. He uttered a cry. His face was distorted with terrible agony, and he moved his right hand towards the wound, as though he would draw out the dagger. He looked at me, convulsed; I saw that he wanted to speak; his lips moved, but no sound issued from his mouth. The expression of a supreme effort passed into his eyes, he turned to the table, took a pen, dipped it into the inkstand, and traced two lines on a sheet of paper within his reach. He looked at me again, his lips moved once more, then he fell down like a log.

I remember—I saw the body stretched upon the carpet, between the table and the tall mantelpiece, within two feet of me. I approached him, I bent over his face. His eyes seemed to follow me even after death.

Yes, he was dead.

The doctor who certified the death explained afterwards that the knife had passed through the cardiac muscle without completely penetrating the left cavity of the heart, and that, the blood not being shed all at once, death had not been instantaneous.

I cannot tell how long he lived after I struck him, nor do I know how long I remained in the same place, overwhelmed by the thought: "Someone will come, and I am lost." It was not for myself that I trembled. What could be done to a son who had but avenged his murdered father? But, my mother? This was what all my resolutions to spare her at any cost, my daily solicitude for her welfare, my unseen tears, my tender silence, had come to in the end! I must now, inevitably, either explain myself, or leave her to think I was a mere murderer. I was lost. But if I called, if I cried out suddenly that my stepfather had just killed himself in my presence, should I

be believed? And, besides, had he not written what would convict me of murder, on that sheet of paper lying on the table? Was I going to destroy it, as a practiced criminal destroys every vestige of his presence before he leaves the scene of his crime?

I seized the sheet of paper; the lines were written upon it in characters rather larger than usual. How it shook in my hand while I read these words: "Forgive me, Marie. I was suffering too much. I wanted to be done with it." And he had had the strength to affix his signature!

So then, his last thought had been for her. In the brief moments that had elapsed between my blow with the knife, and his death, he had perceived the dreadful truth, that I should be arrested, that I would speak to explain my deed, that my mother would then learn his crime—and he had saved me by compelling me to silence.

But was I going to profit by this means of safety? Was I going to accept the terrible generosity by which the man, whom I had so profoundly detested, would stand acquitted towards me for evermore? I must render so much justice to my honor; my first impulse was to destroy that paper, to annihilate with it even the memory of the debt imposed upon my hatred by the atrocious but sublime action of the murderer of my father.

At that moment I caught sight of a portrait of my mother, on the table, close to where he had been sitting. It was a photograph, taken in her youth; she was represented in brilliant evening attire, her bare arms shaded with lace, pearls in her hair, gay, ay, better than gay, happy, with an ineffably pure expression overspreading her face. My stepfather had sacrificed all to save her from despair on learning the truth, and was she to receive the fatal blow from me, to learn at the same moment that the man she loved had killed her first husband, and that he had been killed by her son?

I desire to believe, so that I may continue to hold myself in some esteem, that only the vision of her grief led me to my decision. I replaced the sheet of paper on the table, and turned away from the corpse lying on the carpet, without casting a glance at it. The remembrance of my flight from the Grand Hotel, on the previous day, gave me courage; I must try a second time to get away without betraying discomposure.

I found my hat, left the room, and closed the door carelessly. I crossed the hall and went down the staircase, passing by the footman who stood up mechanically, and then the concierge who saluted me. The two servants had not even put me out of countenance.

I returned to my room as I had done the day before, but in a far more tragic state of suspense. Was I saved? Was I lost? All depended on the moment at which somebody might go into my stepfather's room. If my mother were to return within a few minutes of my departure; if the footman were to go upstairs with some letter, I should instantly be suspected, in spite of the declaration written by M. Termonde. I felt that my courage was exhausted. I knew that, if accused, I should not have moral strength to defend myself, for my weariness was so overwhelming that I did not suffer any longer. The only thing I had strength to do was to watch the swing of the pendulum of the timepiece on the mantelshelf, and to mark the movement of the hands. A quarter of an hour elapsed, half an hour, a whole hour.

It was an hour and a half after I had left the fatal room, when the bell at the door was rung. I heard it through the walls. A servant brought me a laconic note from my mother scribbled in pencil and hardly legible. It informed me that my stepfather had destroyed himself in an attack of severe pain. The poor woman implored me to go to her immediately. Ah, she would now never know the truth!

XIV

The confession that I wished to write is written. To what end could I add fresh facts to it now? I hoped to ease my

heart by passing in review all the details of this dark story, but I have only revived the dread memory of the scenes in which I have been an actor; from the first—when I saw my father stretched dead upon his bed, and my mother weeping by his side, to the last—when I noiselessly entered a room in which the unhappy woman was again kneeling and weeping. Again upon the bed there lay a corpse, and she rose as she had done before, and uttered the same despairing cry: "My Andre—my son." And I had to answer her questions; I had to invent for her a false conversation with my stepfather, to tell her that I left him rather depressed, but with nothing in his appearance or manner to indicate a fatal resolution. I had to take the necessary steps to prevent this alleged suicide from getting known, to see the commissary of police and the "doctor of the dead." I had to preside at the funeral ceremonies, to receive the guests and act as chief mourner. And always, always, he was present to me, with the dagger in his breast, writing the lines that had saved me, and looking at me, while his lips moved.

Ah, begone, begone, abhorred phantom! Yes! I have done it; yes! I have killed you; yes! it was just. You know well that it was just. Why are you still here now? Ah! I WILL live; I WILL forget. If I could only cease to think of you for one day, only one day, just to breathe, and walk, and see the sky, without your image returning to haunt my poor head which is racked by this hallucination, and troubled? My God! have pity on me. I did not ask for this dreadful fate; it is Thou that hast sent it to me. Why dost Thou punish me? Oh, my God, have pity on me! Miserere mei, Domine.

Vain prayers! Is there any God, any justice, is there either good or evil? None, none, none, none! There is nothing but a pitiless destiny which broods over the human race, iniquitous and blind, distributing joy and grief at haphazard. A God who says, "Thou shalt not kill," to him whose father has been killed? No, I don't believe it. No, if hell were there before me, gaping open, I would make answer: "I have done well," and I would not repent. I do not repent. My remorse is not for having seized the weapon and struck the blow, it is that I owe to him—to him—that infamous good service which he did me—that I cannot to the present hour shake from me the horrible gift I have received from that man. If I had destroyed the paper, if I had gone and given myself up, if I had appeared before a jury, revealing, proclaiming my deed, I should not be ashamed; I could still hold up my head. What relief, what joy it would be if I might cry aloud to all men that I killed him, that he lied, and I lied, that it was I, I, who took the weapon and plunged it into him! And yet, I ought not to suffer from having accepted—no—endured the odious immunity. Was it from any motive of cowardice that I acted thus? What was I afraid of? Of torturing my mother, nothing more. Why, then, do I suffer this unendurable anguish? Ah, it is she, it is my mother who, without intending it, makes the dead so living to me, by her own despair. She lives, shut up in the rooms where they lived together for sixteen years; she has not allowed a single article of furniture to be touched; she surrounds the man's accursed memory with the same pious reverence that my aunt formerly lavished on my unhappy father. I recognize the invincible influence of the dead in the pallor of her cheeks, the wrinkles in her eyelids, the white streaks in her hair. He disputes her with me from the darkness of his coffin; he takes her from me, hour by hour, and I am powerless against that love. If I were to tell her, as I would like to tell her, all the truth, from the hideous crime which he committed, down to the execution carried out by me, it is I whom she would hate, for having killed him. She will grow old thus and I shall see her weep, always, always— What good is it to have done what I did, since I have not killed him in her heart?