Early Stories of Marcel Proust

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Early Stories

Norman Things

Trouville, the capital of the canton, with a population of 6,808, can lodge 15,000 guests in the summer.
—GUIDE JOANNE

For Paul Grünebaum

For several days now we have been able to contemplate the calm of the sea in the sky, which has become pure again—contemplate it as one contemplates a soul in a gaze. No one, however, is left to enjoy the follies and serenities of the September sea, for it is fashionable to desert the beaches at the end of August and head for the country. But I envy and, if acquainted with them, I often visit people whose countryside lies by the sea, is located, for example, above Trouville. I envy the person who can spend the autumn in Normandy, however little he knows how to think and feel.

The terrain, never very cold even in winter, is the greenest there is, grassy by nature, without the slightest gap, and even on the other sides of the hillocks, in the amiable arrangements called “woodlands.” Often, when on a terrace, where the blond tea is steaming on the set table, you can, as Baudelaire puts it, watch “the sunshine radiating on the

sea” and sails that come, “all those movements of people departing, people who still have the strength to desire and to wish.”

In the so sweet and peaceful midst of all that greenery, you can look at the peace of the seas, or the tempestuous sea, and the waves crowned with foam and gulls, charging like lions, their white manes rippling in the wind.

However, the moon, invisible to all the waves by day, though still troubling them with its magnetic gaze, tames them, suddenly crushes their assault, and excites them again before repelling them, no doubt to charm the melancholy leisures of the gathering of stars, the mysterious princes of the maritime skies.

A person who lives in Normandy sees all that; and if he goes down to the shore in the daytime, he can hear the sea sobbing to the beat of the surges of the human soul, the sea, which corresponds to music in the created world, because, showing us no material thing and not being descriptive in its way, the sea sounds like the monotonous chant of an ambitious and faltering will. In the evening, the Normandy dweller goes back to the countryside, and in his gardens he cannot distinguish between sky and sea, which blend together. Yet they appear to be separated by that brilliant line; above it that must be the sky.

That must be the sky, that airy sash of pale azure, and the sea drenches only the golden fringes. But now a vessel puts a graft upon it while seeming to navigate in the midst of the sky. In the evening, the moon, if shining, whitens the very dense vapors rising from the grasslands, and, gracefully bewitched, the field looks like a lake or a snow-covered meadow.

Thus, this rustic area, which is the richest in France, which, with its inexhaustible abundance of farms, cows, cream, apple trees for cider, thick grass, invites you solely to eat and sleep—at night this countryside decks itself out with mystery, and its melancholy rivals that of the vast plain of the sea.

Finally, there are several utterly desirable abodes, a few assailed by the sea and protected against it, others perched on the cliff, in the middle of the woods, or amply stretched out on grassy plateaus.

I am not talking about the “Oriental” or “Persian” houses, which would be more agreeable in Teheran; I mean, above all, the Norman homes—in reality half-Norman, half-English—in which the profusion of the finials of roof timbers multiplies the points of view and complicates a silhouette, in which the windows, though broad, are so tender and intimate, in which, from the flower boxes in the wall under each window, the flowers cascade inexhaustibly upon the outside stairs and the glassed-in entrance halls. It is to one of those houses that I go home, for night is falling, and I will reread, for the hundredth time, Confiteor by the poet Gabriel Trarieux. . . .

Memory

A servant in brown livery and gold buttons opened the door quite promptly and showed me to a small drawing room that had pine paneling, walls hung with cretonne, and a view of the sea. When I entered, a young man, rather handsome indeed, stood up, greeted me coldly, then sat back down in his easy chair and continued reading his newspaper while smoking his pipe. I remained standing, a bit embarrassed, I might say even preoccupied with the reception I would be given here. Was I doing the right thing after so many years, coming to this house, where they might have forgotten me long ago?—this once hospitable house, where I had spent profoundly tender hours, the happiest of my life?

The garden surrounding the house and forming a terrace at one end, the house itself with its two red-brick turrets encrusted with diversely colored faiences, the long, rectangular vestibule, where we had spent our rainy days, and even the furnishings of the small drawing room to which I had just been led—nothing had changed.

Several moments later an old man with a white beard shuffled in; he was short and very bent. His indecisive gaze lent him a highly indifferent expression. I instantly recognized Monsieur de N. But he could not place me. I repeated my name several times: it evoked no memory in him. I felt more and more embarrassed. Our eyes locked without our really knowing what to say.

I vainly struggled to give him clues: he had totally forgotten me. I was a stranger to him. Just as I was about to leave, the door flew open: “My sister Odette,” said a pretty girl of ten or twelve in a soft, melodious voice, “my sister has just found out that you’re here. Would you like to come and see her? It would make her so happy!” I followed the little girl, and we went down into the garden. And there, indeed, I found Odette reclining on a chaise longue and wrapped in a large plaid blanket.

She had changed so greatly that I would not, as it were, have recognized her. Her features had lengthened, and her dark-ringed eyes seemed to perforate her wan face. She had once been so pretty, but this was no longer the case at all. In a somewhat constrained manner she asked me to sit at her side.

We were alone. “You must be quite surprised to find me in this state,” she said after several moments. “Well, since my terrible illness I’ve been condemned, as you can see, to remain lying without budging. I live on feelings and sufferings. I stare deep into that blue sea, whose apparently infinite grandeur is so enchanting for me. The waves, breaking on the beach, are so many sad thoughts that cross my mind, so many hopes that I have to abandon. I read, I even read a lot.

The music of poetry evokes my sweetest memories and makes my entire being vibrate. How nice of you not to have forgotten me after so many years and to come and see me! It does me good! I already feel much better. I can say so—can’t I?—since we were such good friends.

Do you remember the tennis games we used to play here, on this very spot? I was agile back then; I was merry. Today I can no longer be agile;

I can no longer be merry. When I watch the sea ebbing far out, very far, I often think of our solitary strolls at low tide. My enchanting memory of them could suffice to keep me happy, if I were not so selfish, so wicked.

But, you know, I can hardly resign myself, and, from time to time, in spite of myself, I rebel against my fate. I'm bored all alone, for I've been alone since Mama died.

As for Papa, he's too sick and too old to concern himself with me. My brother suffered a terrible blow from a woman who deceived him horrendously. Since then, he's been living alone; nothing can console him or even distract him. My little sister is so young, and besides, we have to let her live happily, to the extent that she can."

As she spoke to me, her eyes livened up; her cadaverous pallor disappeared. She resumed her sweet expression of long ago. She was pretty again. My goodness, how beautiful she was! I would have liked to clasp her in my arms: I would have liked to tell her that I loved her. . . . We remained together for a long time. Then she was moved indoors, since the evening was growing cool. I now had to say goodbye to her.

My tears choked me. I walked through that long vestibule, that delightful garden, where the graveled paths would never, alas, grind under my feet again. I went down to the beach; it was deserted.

Thinking about Odette, I strolled, pensive, along the water, which was ebbing, tranquil and indifferent. The sun had disappeared behind the horizon; but its purple rays still splattered the sky.

Pierre de Touche

Portrait of Madame X.

Nicole combines Italian grace with the mystery of northern women. She has their blond hair, their eyes as clear as the transparency of the sky in

a lake, their lofty bearing. However, she breathes a knowing softness that has virtually ripened in that Tuscan sun, which inundates the eyes of women, lengthens their arms, raises the corners of their mouths, and rhythmically scans their gait, ultimately making all their beauty divinely languorous.

And not for nothing have the charms of both climates and both races fused together to make up Nicole's charm, for she is the perfect courtesan, if this simply means that in her the art of pleasing has reached a truly unique degree, that it is composed of both talents and efforts, that it is both natural and refined.

Thus, the tiniest flower between her breasts or in her hand, the most ordinary compliment on her lips, the most banal act, like offering her arm to whoever escorts her to the table—all these things, when she does them, are imbued with a grace as poignant as an artistic emotion. Everything softens around her in a delightful harmony that is summed up in the folds of her gown.

But Nicole is unconcerned about the artistic pleasure that she provides, and as for her eyes, which seem to promise so much bliss, she barely knows for certain on whom her gaze has fallen—barely knows for no other reason most likely than that its fall was lovely. She is concerned only about good, loves it enough to do it, loves it too much to be content with just doing it, without trying to grasp what—in doing it—she does. One cannot say that she is pedantic in her magnanimity, for it appeals to her too sincerely.

Let us say rather that she is erudite about it, an enchanting erudition that places only the agreeable names of the Virtues in her mind and on her lips. This makes her charm all the sweeter, as if it were perfumed with a saintly fragrance. One can seldom admire what one loves. Hence, it is all the more exquisite to understand the seductions, the fecundity of a great heart in Nicole's soft and rich beauty, in her lactea ubertas [her milky abundance], in her whole alluring person.

Before the Night

“Even though I’m still quite strong, you know” (she spoke with a more intimate sweetness, the way accentuation can mellow the overly harsh things that one must say to the people one loves), “you know I could die any day now—even though I may just as easily live another few months. So I can no longer wait to reveal to you something that has been weighing on my conscience; afterwards you will understand how painful it was to tell you.”

Her pupils, symbolic blue flowers, discolored as if they were fading. I thought she was about to cry, but she did nothing of the kind. “I’m quite sad about intentionally destroying my hope of still being esteemed by my best friend after my death, about tarnishing and shattering his memory of me, in terms of which I often imagine my own life in order to see it as more beautiful and more harmonious.

But my concern about an aesthetic arrangement” (she smiled while pronouncing that epithet with the slightly ironic exaggeration accompanying her extremely rare use of such words in conversation) “cannot repress the imperious need for truth that forces me to speak. Listen, Leslie, I have to tell you this. But first, hand me my coat. This terrace is a bit chilly, and the doctor forbade me to get up if it’s not necessary.” I handed her the coat. The sun was already gone, and the sea, which could be spotted through the apple trees, was mauve.

As airy as pale, withered wreaths and as persistent as regrets, blue and pink cloudlets floated on the horizon. A melancholy row of poplars sank into the darkness, leaving their submissive crowns in churchlike rosiness; the final rays, without grazing their trunks, stained their branches, hanging festoons of light on these balustrades of darkness.

The breeze blended the three smells of sea, wet leaves, and milk. Never had the Norman countryside more voluptuously softened the melancholy of evening, but I barely savored it—deeply agitated as I was by my friend’s mysterious words.

“I loved you very much, but I’ve given you little, my poor friend.” Forgive me for defying the rules of this literary genre by interrupting a confession to which I should listen in silence,” I cried out, trying to use humor to calm her down, but in reality mortally sad.

“What do you mean you’ve given me little? And the less I’ve asked for, the more you’ve given me, indeed far more than if our senses had played any part in our affection. You were as supernatural as a Madonna and as tender as a wet nurse; I worshiped you, and you nurtured me. I loved you with an affection whose tangible prudence was not disturbed by any hope for carnal pleasure.

Did you not requite my feelings with incomparable friendship, exquisite tea, naturally embellished conversation, and how many bunches of fresh roses? You alone, with your maternal and expressive hands, could cool my feverish brow, drip honey between my withered lips, put noble images into my life. Dear friend, I do not want to hear that absurd confession. Give me your hands so I may kiss them: it’s cold, why don’t we go inside and talk about something else.”

“Leslie, you must listen to me all the same, my poor dear. It’s crucial. Have you never wondered whether I, after becoming a widow at twenty, have remained one . . . ?”

“I’m certain of it, but it’s none of my business. You are a creature so superior to anyone else that any weakness of yours would have a nobility and beauty that are not to be found in other people’s good deeds. You’ve acted as you’ve seen fit, and I’m certain that you’ve never done anything that wasn’t pure and delicate.”

“Pure! Leslie, your trust grieves me like an anticipated reproach. Listen . . . I don’t know how to tell you this. It’s far worse than if I had loved you, say, or someone else, yes, truly, anyone else.”

I turned as white as a sheet, as white as she, alas, and, terrified that she might notice it, I tried to laugh and I repeated without really knowing what I was saying: “Ah! Ah! Anyone else—how strange you are.”

“I said far worse, Leslie, I can’t decide at this moment, however luminous it may be. In the evening one sees things more calmly, but I don’t see this clearly, and there are enormous shadows on my life. Still, if, in the depths of my conscience, I believe that it was not worse, why be ashamed to tell you?”

“Was it worse?” I did not understand; but, prey to a horrible agitation that was impossible to disguise, I started trembling in terror as in a nightmare. I did not dare look at the garden path, which, now filled with night and dread, opened before us, nor did I dare to close my eyes.

Her voice, which, broken by deeper and deeper sadness, had faded, suddenly grew louder, and, in a clear and natural tone, she said to me: “Do you remember when my poor friend Dorothy was caught with a soprano, whose name I’ve forgotten?” (I was delighted with this diversion, which, I hoped, would definitively lead us away from the tale of her sufferings.) “Do you recall explaining to me that we could not despise her?

I remember your exact words: ‘How can we wax indignant about habits that Socrates (it involved men, but isn’t that the same thing?), who drank the hemlock rather than commit an injustice, cheerfully approved of among his closest friends? If fruitful love, meant to perpetuate the race, noble as a familial, social, human duty, is superior to purely sensual love, then there is no hierarchy of sterile loves, and such a love is no less moral—or, rather, it is no more immoral for a woman to find pleasure with another woman than with a person of the opposite sex.

The cause of such love is a nervous impairment which is too exclusively nervous to have any moral content. One cannot say that, because most people see as red the objects qualified as red, those people who see

them as violet are mistaken. Furthermore,' you added, 'if we refine sensuality to the point of making it aesthetic, then, just as male and female bodies can be equally beautiful, there is no reason why a truly artistic woman might not fall in love with another woman.

In a truly artistic nature, physical attraction and repulsion are modified by the contemplation of beauty. Most people are repelled by a jellyfish. Michelet, who appreciated the delicacy of their hues, gathered them with delight.

I was revolted by oysters, but after musing' (you went on) 'about their voyages through the sea, which their taste would now evoke for me, they have become a suggestive treat, especially when I am far from the sea. Thus, physical aptitudes, the pleasure of contact, the enjoyment of food, the pleasures of the senses are all grafted to where our taste for beauty has taken root.'

"Don't you think that these arguments could help a woman physically predisposed to this kind of love to come to terms with her vague curiosity, particularly if, for example, certain statuettes of Rodin's have triumphed—artistically—over her repugnance; don't you think that these arguments would excuse her in her own eyes, appease her conscience—and that this might be a great misfortune?"

I don't know how I managed to stifle my cry: a sudden flash of lightning illuminated the drift of her confession, and I simultaneously felt the brunt of my dreadful responsibility. But, letting myself be blindly led by one of those loftier inspirations that tear off our masks and recite our roles extempore when we fail to do justice to ourselves, when we are too inadequate to play our roles in life, I calmly said: "I can assure you that I would have no remorse whatsoever, for I truly feel no scorn, not even pity, for those women."

She said mysteriously, with an infinite sweetness of gratitude: "You are generous." She then quickly murmured with an air of boredom, the way one disdains commonplace details even while expressing them: "You know, despite everyone's secrecy, it dawned on me that you've all been

anxiously trying to determine who fired the bullet, which couldn't be extracted and which brought on my illness.

I've always hoped that this bullet wouldn't be discovered. Fine, now that the doctor appears certain, and you might suspect innocent people, I'll make a clean breast of it. Indeed, I prefer to tell you the truth." With the tenderness she had shown when starting to speak about her imminent death, so that her tone of voice might ease the pain that her words would cause, she added: "In one of those moments of despair that are quite natural in any truly living person, it was I who . . . wounded myself."

I wanted to go over and embrace her, but much as I tried to control myself, when I reached her, my throat felt strangled by an irresistible force, my eyes filled with tears, and I began sobbing.

She, at first, dried my tears, laughed a bit, consoled me gently as in the past with a thousand lovely words and gestures. But from deep inside her an immense pity for herself and for me came welling up, spurting toward her eyes—and flowed down in burning tears. We wept together. The accord of a sad and vast harmony.

Her pity and mine, blending into one, now had a larger object than ourselves, and we wept about it, voluntarily, unrestrainedly. I tried to drink her poor tears from her hands. But more tears kept streaming, and she let them benumb her. Her hand froze through like the pale leaves that have fallen into the basins of fountains. And never had we known so much grief and so much joy.

Another Memory

To M. Winter
Last year I spent some time in T., at the Grand Hôtel, which, standing at the far end of the beach, faces the sea. Because of the rancid fumes coming from the kitchens and from the waste water, the luxurious

banality of the tapestries, which offered the sole variation on the grayish nudity of the walls and complemented this exile decoration, I was almost morbidly depressed; then one day, with a gust that threatened to become a tempest, I was walking along a corridor to my room, when I was stopped short by a rare and delectable scent.

I found it impossible to analyze, but it was so richly and so complexly floral that someone must have denuded whole fields, Florentine fields, I assumed, merely to produce a few drops of that fragrance.

The sensual bliss was so powerful that I lingered there for a very long time without moving on; beyond the crack of a barely open door, which was the only one through which the perfume could have wafted, I discovered a room that, despite my limited glimpse, hinted at the presence of the most exquisite personality.

How could a guest, at the very heart of this nauseating hotel, have managed to sanctify such a pure chapel, perfect such a refined boudoir, erect an isolated tower of ivory and fragrance? The sound of footsteps, invisible from the hallway, and, moreover, an almost religious reverence prevented me from nudging the door any further.

All at once, the furious wind tore open a poorly attached corridor window, and a salty blast swept through in broad and rapid waves, diluting, without drowning, the concentrated floral perfume.

Never will I forget the fine persistence of the original scent adding its tonality to the aroma of that vast wind. The draft had closed the door, and so I went downstairs. But as my utterly annoying luck would have it: when I inquired about the inhabitants of room 47 (for those chosen beings had a number just like anyone else), all that the hotel director could provide were obvious pseudonyms.

Only once did I hear a grave and trembling, solemn and gentle male voice calling “Violet,” and a supernaturally enchanting female voice answering “Clarence.” Despite those two British names, they normally

seemed, according to the hotel domestics, to speak French—and without a foreign accent.

Since they took their meals in a private room, I was unable to see them. One single time, in vanishing lines so spiritually expressive, so uniquely distinct that they remain for me one of the loftiest revelations of beauty, I saw a tall woman disappearing, her face averted, her shape elusive in a long brown and pink woolen coat.

Several days later, while ascending a staircase that was quite remote from the mysterious corridor, I smelled a faint, delicious fragrance, definitely the same as the first time. I headed toward that hallway and, upon reaching that door, I was numbed by the violence of fragrances, which boomed like organs, growing measurably more intense by the minute.

Through the wide-open door the unfurnished room looked virtually disemboweled. Some twenty small, broken phials lay on the parquet floor, which was soiled by wet stains. “They left this morning,” said the domestic, who was wiping the floor, “and they smashed the flagons so that nobody could use their perfumes, since they couldn’t fit them in their trunks, which were crammed with all the stuff they bought here. What a mess!” I pounced on a flagon that had a few final drops. Unbeknown to the mysterious travelers, those drops still perfume my room.

In my humdrum life I was exalted one day by perfumes exhaled by a world that had been so bland. They were the troubling heralds of love. Suddenly love itself had come, with its roses and its flutes, sculpting, papering, closing, perfuming everything around it. Love had blended with the most immense breath of the thoughts themselves, the respiration that, without weakening love, had made it infinite.

But what did I know about love itself? Did I, in any way, clarify its mystery, and did I know anything about it other than the fragrance of its sadness and the smell of its fragrances? Then, love went away, and

the perfumes, from shattered flagons, were exhaled with a purer intensity. The scent of a weakened drop still impregnates my life.

The Indifferent Man

We heal as we console ourselves; the heart cannot always weep or always love.
—LA BRUYÈRE: CHARACTERS, CHAPTER IV, THE HEART

Madeleine de Gouvres had just arrived in Madame Lawrence's box. General de Buivres asked:
"Who are your escorts tonight? Avranches, Lepré? . . ."

"Avranches, yes," replied Madame Lawrence. "As for Lepré, I didn't dare."

Nodding toward Madeleine, she added:
"She's very hard to please, and since it would have practically meant a new acquaintanceship for her . . ."

Madeleine protested. She had met Monsieur Lepré several times and found him charming; once she had even had him over for lunch.

"In any case," Madame Lawrence concluded, "you have nothing to regret, he is very nice, but there is nothing remarkable about him, and certainly not for the most spoiled woman in Paris. I can quite understand that the close friendships you have make you hard to please."

Lepré was very nice but very insignificant: that was the general view. Madeleine, feeling that this was not entirely her opinion, was amazed; but then, since Lepré's absence did not cause her any keen disappointment, she did not like him enough to be perturbed.

In the auditorium, heads had turned in her direction; friends were already coming to greet her and compliment her. This was nothing new, and yet, with the obscure clear-sightedness of a jockey during a race or of an actor during a performance, she felt that tonight she was triumphing more fully and more easily than usual. Wearing no jewels, her yellow tulle bodice strewn with cattleyas, she had also pinned a few cattleyas to her black hair, and these blossoms suspended garlands of pale light from that dark turret.

As fresh as her flowers and equally pensive, she evoked, with the Polynesian charm of her coiffure, Mahenu in Pierre Loti's play The Island of Dreams, for which Reynaldo Hahn had composed the music. Soon her regret that Lepré had not seen her like this blended with the happy indifference with which she mirrored her charms of this evening in the dazzled eyes that reflected them reliably and faithfully.

"How she loves flowers," cried Madame Lawrence, gazing at her friend's bodice.

She did love them, in the ordinary sense that she knew how beautiful they were and how beautiful they made a woman. She loved their beauty, their gaiety, and their sadness, too, but externally, as one of their ways of expressing their beauty. When they were no longer fresh, she would discard them like a faded gown.

All at once, during the first intermission, several moments after General de Buivres and the Duke and Duchess d'Alériouvres had said good night, leaving her alone with Madame Lawrence, Madeleine spotted Lepré in the orchestra. She saw that he was having the attendant open the box.

"Madame Lawrence," said Madeleine, "would you permit me to invite Monsieur Lepré to stay here since he is alone in the orchestra?"

"All the more gladly since I'm going to be obliged to leave in an instant, my dear; you know you gave me permission. Robert is a bit under the weather. Would you like me to ask Monsieur Lepré?"

“No, I’d rather do it myself.”
Throughout intermission, Madeleine let Lepré chat with Madame Lawrence. Leaning on the balustrade and gazing into the auditorium, she pretended to ignore them, certain that she would soon enjoy his presence all the more when she was alone with him.

Madame Lawrence went off to put on her coat.
“I would like to invite you to stay with me during the next act,” said Madeleine with an indifferent amiability.
“That’s very kind of you, Madame, but I can’t; I am obliged to leave.”

“Why, I’ll be all alone,” said Madeleine in an urgent tone; then suddenly, wanting almost unconsciously to apply the maxims of coquetry in the famous line from Carmen, “If I don’t love you, you’ll love me,” she went on:
“Oh, you’re quite right, and if you have an appointment, don’t keep them waiting. Good night, Monsieur.”

With a friendly smile she tried to compensate for what struck her as the implicit harshness of her permission. However, that harshness was impelled by her violent desire to keep him here, by the bitterness of her disappointment. Aimed at anyone else, her advice to leave would have been pleasant.

Madame Lawrence came back.
“Well, he’s leaving; I’ll stay with you so you won’t be alone. Did you have a tender farewell?”
“Farewell?”

“I believe that at the end of this week he’s starting his long tour of Italy, Greece, and Asia Minor.”

A child who has been breathing since birth without ever noticing it does not know how essential the unheeded air that gently swells his chest is to his life. Does he happen to be suffocating in a convulsion, a bout of fever? Desperately straining his entire being, he struggles almost for his

life, for his lost tranquillity, which he will regain only with the air from which he did not realize his tranquillity was inseparable.

Similarly, the instant Madeleine learned of Lepré's departure, of which she had been unaware, she understood only what had entered into his leaving as she felt everything that was being torn away from her.

And with a painful and gentle despondency, she gazed at Madame Lawrence without resenting her any more than a poor, suffocating patient resents his asthma while, through eyes filled with tears, he smiles at the people who pity him but cannot help him. All at once Madeleine rose:
"Come, my dear, I don't want you to get home late on my account."

While slipping into her coat, she spotted Lepré, and in the anguish of letting him leave without her seeing him again, she hurried down the stairs.

"I'm devastated—especially since Monsieur Lepré is going abroad—to think he could assume he might offend me."
"Why, he's never said that," replied Madame Lawrence.

"He must have: since you assume it, he must assume it as well."
"Quite the contrary."
"I tell you it's true," Madeleine rejoined harshly. And as they caught up with Lepré, she said:
"Monsieur Lepré, I expect you for dinner on Thursday, at eight P.M."
"I'm not free on Thursday, Madame."

"Then how about Friday?"
"I'm not free on Friday either."
"Saturday?"
"Saturday would be fine."
"But darling, you're forgetting that you're to dine with Princess d'Avranches on Saturday."

"Too bad, I'll cancel."

“Oh! Madame, I wouldn’t want that,” said Lepré.
“I want it,” cried Madeleine, beside herself. “I’m not going to Fanny’s no matter what, I never had any intention of going.”

Once home again, Madeleine, slowly undressing, reviewed the events of the evening. Upon reaching the moment when Lepré had refused to stay with her for the last act, she turned crimson with humiliation. The most elementary coquetry as well as the most stringent dignity commanded her to show him an extreme coldness after that.

Instead, that threefold invitation on the stairway! Indignant, she raised her head proudly and appeared so beautiful to herself in the depth of the mirror that she no longer doubted that he would love her.

Unsettled and disconsolate only because of his imminent departure, she pictured his affection, which he—she did not know why—wanted to conceal from her. He was going to confess it to her, perhaps in a letter, quite soon, and he would probably put off his departure, he would sail with her. . . . What? . . . She must not think about that. But she could see his handsome, loving face approaching her face, asking her to forgive him. “You naughty boy!” she said.

But then, perhaps he did not love her as yet; he would leave without having time to fall in love with her. . . . Disconsolate, she lowered her head, and her eyes fell upon her bodice, upon the even more languishing eyes of the wilted blossoms, which seemed ready to weep under their withered eyelids.

The thought of the brevity of her unconscious dream about him, of the brevity of their happiness if ever it materialized, was associated for her with the sadness of those flowers, which, before dying, languished on the heart that they had felt beating with her first love, her first humiliation, and her first sorrow.

The next day she wanted no other flowers in her bedroom, which was normally filled and radiant with the glory of fresh roses.

When Madame Lawrence came by, she halted before the vases where the cattleyas were finally dying and, for eyes without love, were stripped of beauty.

“What, darling, you who love flowers so much?”

Madeleine was going to say, “It seems to me that I have only begun loving them today”; she stopped, annoyed at having to explain herself and sensing that there are realities that people cannot be made to grasp if they do not already have them inside themselves.

She contented herself with smiling amiably at the reproach. The feeling that no one, perhaps not even Lepré himself, was aware of her new life gave her a rare and disconsolate pleasure of pride.

The servant brought the mail; finding no letter from Lepré, she was overwhelmed with disappointment. Upon measuring the gap between the absurdity of her disappointment, when there had not been the slightest chance of hope, and the very real and very cruel intensity of that disappointment, she understood that she had stopped living solely a life of events and facts. The veil of lies had started unrolling before her eyes for a duration that was impossible to predict.

She would now see things only through that veil, and, more than all other things, those she would have wanted to know and experience the most concretely and in the most similar way as Lepré, those that had to do with him.

Still, she had one remaining hope—that he had lied to her, that his indifference was feigned: she knew by unanimous consensus that she was one of the most beautiful women in Paris, that her reputation for wit, intelligence, elegance, her high social standing added prestige to her beauty. Lepré, on the other hand, was considered intelligent, artistic, very gentle, a very good son, but he was barely sought after and had never been successful with women; the attention she gave him was bound to strike him as something improbable and unhoped for. She was astonished and hopeful. . . .

Although Madeline would, in an instant, have subordinated all the interests and affections of her life to Lepré, she nevertheless still believed—and her judgment was fortified by the universal judgment—that, without being disagreeable, he was inferior to the remarkable men who, in the four years since the death of the Marquis de Gouvres, had been dropping by several times a day to console the widow and were thus the most precious ornament of her life.

She very keenly sensed that her inexplicable inclination, which made him a unique person for her, did not make him the equal of those other men. The reasons for her love were inside her, and if they were a bit inside him too, they were not in his intellectual superiority or even in his physical superiority. It was precisely because she loved him that no face, no smile, no conduct was as agreeable to her as his, and it was not because his face, his smile, his conduct were more agreeable that she loved him. She was acquainted with more handsome, more charming men, and she knew it.

Thus, when Lepré entered Madeleine's drawing room on Saturday at a quarter past eight, he faced, without suspecting anything, his most passionate friend, his most clear-sighted adversary. While her beauty was armed to vanquish him, her mind was no less armed to judge him; she was ready to pick, like a bitter flower, the pleasure of finding him mediocre and ridiculously disproportionate to her love for him. She was not acting out of prudence! She quite keenly sensed that she would continually be caught again in the magic net, and that once Lepré left, her prolific imagination would repair the meshes that her too incisive mind would have torn in his presence.

And in fact, when he walked in, she was suddenly calmed; by shaking his hand, she appeared to drain him of all power. He was no longer the sole and absolute despot of her dreams; he was just a pleasant visitor.

They chatted; now all her assumptions vanished. In his fine goodness, in the bold precision of his mind, she found reasons that, while not absolutely justifying her love, explained it, at least slightly, and, by

showing her that something corresponded to it in reality, made its roots plunge deeper in that reality, draw more life from it. She also noticed that he was more attractive than she had thought, with a noble and delicate Louis XIII face.

All her artistic memories of the portraits of that period were henceforth tied to the thought of her love, gave it a new existence by letting it enter the system of her artistic sensibilities. She ordered a photograph from Amsterdam, the picture of a young man who resembled Lepré.

She ran into him a few days later. His mother was seriously ill; his trip was put off. She told him that she now had a picture on her table, a portrait that reminded her of him. He appeared moved but cold. She was deeply pained, but consoled herself with the thought that he at least understood her attention though he did not enjoy it.

Loving a boor who did not realize it would have been even crueler. So, mentally reproaching him for his indifference, she wanted to see the men who were enamored of her, with whom she had been indifferent and coquettish; she wanted to see them again in order to show them the ingenious and tender compassion that she would have at least wanted to obtain from him. But when she encountered them, they all had the horrible defect of not being Lepré, and the sight of them merely irritated her.

She wrote to him; four days wore by without a response; then she received a letter that any other woman would have found friendly but that drove Madeleine to despair. He wrote:
“My mother has improved; I am leaving in three weeks; until then, my life is quite full, but I will try to call on you once to pay my respects.”

Was it jealousy of everything that “filled his life,” preventing her from penetrating it, was it sorrow that he was going abroad and that he would come by only once, or even the greater sorrow that he did not feel the need to come and visit her ten times a day before his departure: she could no longer stay at home; she hastily donned a hat, went out, and, hurrying, on foot, along the streets that led to him, she

nurtured the absurd hope that, by some miracle she was counting on, he would appear to her at the corner of a square, radiant with tenderness, and that a single glance of his would explain everything to her.

All at once she spotted him walking, chatting gaily with friends. But now she was embarrassed; she believed he would guess that she was looking for him, and so she brusquely stepped into a shop. During the next few days she no longer looked for him; she avoided places where she might run into him—she maintained this final coquetry toward him, this final dignity for herself.

One morning, she was sitting alone in the Tuileries, on the waterside terrace. She let her sorrow float, spread out, relax more freely on the broader horizon, she let it pick flowers, spring forth with the hollyhocks, the fountains, and the columns, gallop behind the dragoons leaving the Quartier d'Orsay, she let her sorrow drift on the Seine and soar with the swallows across the pale sky.

It was the fifth day since the friendly letter that had devastated her.

All at once she saw Lepré's fat, white poodle, which he allowed to go out alone every morning. She had joked about it, had said to him that one day somebody would kidnap it. The animal recognized her and came over. After five days of repressing her emotions, she was utterly overwhelmed with a wild need to see Lepré. Seizing the animal in her arms and shaking with sobs, she hugged it for a long time, with all her strength; then, unpinning the nosegay of violets from her bodice and attaching it to the dog's collar, she let the animal go.

But, calmed by that crisis, also mollified, and feeling better, she noticed her resentment vanishing bit by bit, a little cheer and hope coming back to her with her physical well-being, and she perceived that she valued life and happiness again. Lepré would be leaving in seventeen days; she wrote him, inviting him to dinner the next day, apologizing for not responding earlier, and she spent a rather pleasant afternoon.

That evening, she would be attending a dinner; the guests probably included many artists and athletes who knew Lepré. She wanted to know if he had a mistress, any kind of attachment that prevented him from getting close to Madeleine, that explained his extraordinary behavior. She would suffer greatly upon finding out, but at least she would know, and perhaps she might hope that in time her beauty would carry the day. She went out, determined to inquire immediately, but then, stricken with fear, she lost her nerve.

In the last moment, upon arriving, she was impelled less by the desire to know the truth than by the need to speak to others about him, that sad charm of vainly conjuring him up wherever she was without him. After dinner she said to two men who were near her, and whose conversation was quite free:
“Tell me, do you know Lepré well?”

“We’ve been running into him every day forever, but we’re not very close.”
“Is he a charming man?”
“He’s a charming man.”
“Well, perhaps you can tell me. . . . Don’t feel obligated to be too benevolent—you see, I have a very important reason for asking. A girl I love with all my heart likes him a bit. Is he a man whom a woman could marry with an easy mind?”
Her two interlocutors paused for a moment, embarrassed:
“No, that’s out of the question.”

Madeleine, very courageously, went on, all the more quickly to get it over with:
“Does he have any long-term attachment?”
“No, but still, it’s impossible.”
“Tell me why, seriously, I beg you.”
“No.”
“But still, it would be better to tell her after all. Otherwise she might imagine worse things or silly things.”

“Very well! This is it, and I don’t think we’re hurting Lepré in any way by revealing it. First of all, you are not to repeat it; besides, the whole of Paris knows about it anyway; and as for marrying, he’s far too honest and sensitive to even consider it. Lepré is a charming fellow, but he has one vice. He loves the vile women that are found in the gutter, he’s crazy about them; he occasionally spends whole nights in the industrial suburbs or on the outer boulevards, running the risk of getting killed eventually; and not only is he crazy about them, but he loves only them.

The most ravishing socialite, the most ideal girl leave him absolutely indifferent. He can’t even pay them any attention. His pleasures, his preoccupations, his life are somewhere else. People who didn’t know him well used to say that with his exquisite nature a great love would rescue him. But for that he would have to be capable of experiencing it, and he’s incapable of doing so. His father was already like that, and if it doesn’t happen to Lepré’s sons, then only because he won’t have any.”

At eight the next evening, Madeline was informed that Monsieur Lepré was in the drawing room. She went in; the windows were open, the lamps were not yet lit, and he was waiting on the balcony. Not far from there, several houses surrounded by gardens rested in the gentle evening light, distant, Oriental, and pious, as if this had been Jerusalem. The rare, caressing light gave each object a brand-new and almost poignant value.

A luminous wheelbarrow in the middle of the dark street was as touching as, there, a bit further, the somber and already nocturnal trunk of a chestnut tree under its foliage, which was still basking in the final rays. At the end of the avenue the sunset was gloriously bowing like an arch of triumph decked out with celestial flags of gold and green. In the neighboring window, heads were absorbed in reading with familiar solemnity. Walking over to Lepré, Madeleine felt the appeased sweetness of all these things mellow her heart, half open it, make it languish, and she held back her tears.

He, however, more handsome tonight and more charming, displayed sensitive kindness such as he had never exhibited to her before. Then they had an earnest conversation, and now she first discovered how sublime his intelligence was. If he was not popular socially, it was precisely because the truths he was seeking lay beyond the visual horizon of intelligent people and because the truths of high minds are ridiculous errors down here.

His goodness, incidentally, sometimes lent them an enchanting poetry the way the sun gracefully colors the high summits. And he was so genial with her, he acted so grateful for her goodness that, feeling she had never loved him this much and abandoning all hope of his requiting her love, she suddenly and joyously envisaged the prospect of a purely friendly intimacy that would enable her to see him every day; she inventively and joyfully revealed the plan to him.

He, however, said that he was very busy and could hardly spare more than one day every two weeks. She had told him enough to make him understand she loved him—had he wanted to understand. And had he, timid as he was, felt a particle of love for her, he would have come up with even negligible words of friendship. Her sickly gaze was focused so intently on him that she would have promptly made out those words and greedily feasted on them.

She wanted to stop Lepré, who kept talking about his demanding agenda, his crowded life, but suddenly her gaze plunged so deep into her adversary's heart that it could have plunged into the infinite horizon of the sky that stretched out before her, and she felt the futility of words. She held her tongue, then she said:
"Yes, I understand, you're very busy."

And at the end of the evening, when they were parting, he said:
"May I call on you to say goodbye?"
And she gently replied: "No, my friend, I'm somewhat busy; I think we should leave things as they are."

She waited for a word; he did not utter it, and she said:

“Goodbye.”
Then she waited for a letter, in vain. So she wrote him that it was preferable for her to be frank, that she may have led him to believe she liked him, that this was not the case, that she would rather not see him as often as she had requested with imprudent friendliness.

He replied that he had never really believed in anything more than her friendship, for which she was famous, and which he had never meant to abuse to the point of coming so often and bothering her.

Then she wrote him that she loved him, that she would never love anyone but him. He replied that she must be joking.

She stopped writing to him, but not, at first, thinking about him. Then that also stopped. Two years later, weighed down by her widowhood, she married the Duke de Mortagne, who was handsome and witty and who, until Madeleine’s death—for over forty years, that is—filled her life with a glory and affection that she never failed to appreciate.

The end