upside down. The fingers are the paws. I amuse myself by making them move about very quickly, like the claws of a crab which has fallen on its back. The crab is dead: the claws curl up and close over the belly of my hand. I see the nails – the only thing in me which isn't alive. And even that isn't sure. My hand turns over, spreads itself out on its belly, and now it is showing me its back. A silvery, somewhat shiny back – you might think it was a fish, if it weren't for the red hairs near the knuckles. I feel my hand. It is me, those two animals moving about at the end of my arms. My hand scratches one of its paws with the nail of another paw; I can feel its weight on the table which isn't me. It's long, long, this impression of weight, it doesn't go. There's no reason why it should go. In the long run, it's unbearable ... I withdraw my hand, I put it in my pocket. But straight away, through the material, I feel the warmth of my thigh. I promptly make my hand jump out of my pocket; I let it hang against the back of the chair. Now I feel its weight at the end of my arm. It pulls a little, not very much, gently, softly, it exists. I don't press the point: wherever I put it, it will go on existing; I can't suppress it, nor can I suppress the rest of my body, the damp warmth which soils my shirt, nor all this warm fat which turns lazily, as if somebody were stirring it with a spoon, nor all the sensations wandering about inside, coming and going, rising from my side to my armpit or else quietly vegetating, from morning till night, in their usual corner.

I jump to my feet: if only I could stop thinking, that would be something of an improvement. Thoughts are the dullest things on earth. Even duller than flesh. They stretch out endlessly and they leave a funny taste in the mouth. Then there are the words, inside the thoughts, the unfinished words, the sketchy phrases which keep coming back: 'I must fini ... I ex ... Dead ... Monsieur de Roll

is dead ... I am not ... I ex ...' It goes on and on ... and there's no end to it. It's worse than the rest because I feel responsible, I feel that I am to blame. For example, it is I who keep up this sort of painful rumination: *I exist*. It is I. The body lives all by itself, once it has started. But when it comes to thought, it is I who continue it, I who unwind it. I exist. I think I exist. Oh, how long and serpentine this feeling of existing is – and I unwind it, slowly ... If only I could prevent myself from thinking! I try, I succeed: it seems as if my head is filling with smoke ... And now it starts again: 'Smoke.... Mustn't think ... I don't want to think ... I think that I don't want to think. I musn't think that I don't want to think. Because it is still a thought.' Will there never be an end to it?

My thought is *me*: that is why I can't stop. I exist by what I think ... and I can't prevent myself from thinking. At this very moment – this is terrible – if I exist, *it is because* I hate existing. It is I, *it is I* who pull myself from the nothingness to which I aspire: hatred and disgust for existence are just so many ways of *making me* exist, of thrusting me into existence. Thoughts are born behind me like a feeling of giddiness, I can feel them being born behind my head. ... If I give way, they'll come here in front, between my eyes – and I go on giving way, the thought grows and grows and here it is, huge, filling me completely and renewing my existence.

My saliva is sugary, my body is warm; I feel insipid. My penknife is on the table. I open it. Why not? In any case it would be a change. I put my left hand on the pad and I jab the knife into the palm. The movement was too sudden; the blade slipped, the wound is superficial. It is bleeding. And what of it? What has changed? All the same, I look with a feeling of satisfaction at the white paper, where, across the lines I wrote a little while ago, there is this little

pool of blood which has at last stopped being me. Four lines on a white paper, a splash of blood, together that makes a beautiful memory. I must write underneath it: 'That day I gave up writing my book about the Marquis de Rollebon.'

Am I going to see to my hand? I hesitate. I watch the small, monotonous trickle of blood. Now it is coagulating. It's over. My skin looks rusty round the cut. Under the skin, there is nothing left but a small sensation like the rest, perhaps even more insipid.

That is half past five striking. I get up, my cold shirt is sticking to my flesh. I go out. Why? Well, because I have no reason for not going out either. Even if I stay, even if I curl up quietly in a corner, I shan't forget myself. I shall be there, I shall weigh on the floor. I am.

I buy a newspaper on the way. Sensational news. Little Lucienne's body has been found! Smell of ink, the paper crumples up between my fingers. The murderer has fled. The child was raped. They have found her body, the fingers clutching at the mud. I roll the paper into a ball, my fingers clutching at the paper; smell of ink; God, how strongly things exist today. Little Lucienne was raped. Strangled. Her body still exists, her bruised flesh. *She* no longer exists. Her hands. She no longer exists. The houses. I am walking between the houses, I am between the houses, upright on the pavement; the pavement beneath my feet exists, the houses close in on me, as the water closes over me, over the paper in the shape of a swan, I am. I am, I exist, I think therefore I am; I am because I think, why do I think? I don't want to think any more, I am because I think that I don't want to be, I think that I . . . because . . . Ugh! I flee, the criminal has fled, her raped body. She felt that other flesh slipping into hers. I . . . now I . . . raped. A sweet, bloody longing for rape takes hold of me from behind, gently,

behind the ears, the ears race along behind me, the red hair, it is red on my head, wet grass, red grass, is it me too? and is this paper me too? hold the paper existence against existence, things exist against one another, I let go of the paper. The house juts out, it exists; in front of me I walk alongside the wall, alongside the long wall I exist, in front of the wall, a step, the wall exists in front of me, one, two, behind me, a finger which scratches inside my pants, scratches, scratches and pulls the little girl's finger soiled with mud, the mud on my finger which came out of the muddy gutter and falls back gently, gently, relaxing, scratching less hard than the fingers of the little girl who was being strangled, criminal, scratching the mud, the earth less hard, the finger slides gently, falls head first and caresses curled up warm against my thigh; existence is soft and rolls and tosses, I toss between the houses, I am, I exist, I think therefore I toss, I am, existence is a fallen fall, won't fall, will fall, the finger scratches at the window, existence is an imperfection. The gentleman. The fine gentleman exists. The gentleman feels that he exists. No, the fine gentleman passing by, as proud and gentle as a convolvulus, doesn't feel that he exists. To expand; my cut hand hurts, exists, exists, exists. The fine gentleman exists Legion of Honour, exists moustache, that's all; how happy one must be to be nothing more than a Legion of Honour and a moustache and nobody sees the rest, he sees the two pointed ends of moustache on both sides of the nose; I do not think therefore I am a moustache. He sees neither his gaunt body, nor his big feet, if you fumbled about inside his trousers, you would be sure to find a pair of little grey india-rubbers. He has the Legion of Honour, the Bastards have the right to exist: 'I exist because that is my right.' I have the right to exist, therefore I have the right not to think: the finger is raised. Am I going to . . . caress in the splendour of white sheets the splendid white flesh

which falls back gently, touch the blossoming moisture of the armpits, the elixirs and the liqueurs and the florescences of the flesh, enter into the other person's existence, into the red mucous membranes with the heavy, sweet, sweet smell of existence, feel myself existing between the soft wet lips, the lips red with pale blood, the throbbing, yawning lips all wet with existence, all wet with a transparent pus, between the wet sugary lips which cry like eyes? My body of living flesh, the flesh which swarms and turns gently liqueurs, which turns cream, the flesh which turns, turns, turns, the sweet sugary water of my flesh, the blood of my hand, it hurts, gentle to my bruised flesh which turns, walks, I walk, I flee, I am a criminal with bruised flesh, bruised with existence against these walls. I am cold, I take a step, I am cold, a step, I turn left, he turns left, he thinks that he turns left, mad, am I mad? He says that he is afraid of being mad, existence, you see child in existence, he stops, the body stops, he thinks that he stops, where does he come from? What does he do? He sets off again, he is afraid, terribly afraid, criminal, desire like a fog, desire, disgust, he says that he is disgusted with existence, is he disgusted, tired of disgusted with existence? He runs. What does he hope for? Does he run to flee from himself, to throw himself into the lake? He runs, the heart, the heart beating is a holiday. The heart exists, the legs exist, the breath exists, they exist running, breathing, beating softly, gently gets out of breath, gets me out of breath, he says that he is getting out of breath; existence takes my thoughts from behind and gently expands them *from behind*; somebody takes me from behind, they force me from behind to think, therefore to be something, behind me, breathing in light bubbles of existence, he is a bubble of fog of desire, he is pale in the mirror like a dead man, Rollebon is dead, Antoine Roquentin isn't dead, I'm fainting, he says that he would like to faint, he

runs, he runs races (from behind) from behind *from behind*, little Lucienne assaulted from behind, raped by existence from behind, he begs for mercy, he is ashamed of begging for mercy, pity, help, help therefore I exist, he goes into the Bar de la Marine, the little mirrors in the little brothel, he is pale in the little mirrors in the little brothel the big soft red-head who drops on to the bench, the gramophone plays, exists, everything turns, the gramophone exists, the heart beats: turn, turn liqueurs of life, turn jellies, syrups of my flesh, sweetnesses . . . the gramophone.

> When that yellow moon begins to beam
> Every night I dream my little dream.

The voice, deep and husky, suddenly appears and the world vanishes, the world of existences. A woman of flesh had that voice, she sang in front of a record, in her best dress and they recorded her voice. A woman: bah, she existed like me, like Rollebon, I don't want to know her. But there it is. You can't say that that exists. The spinning record exists, the air struck by the vibrating voice exists, the voice which made an impression on the record existed. I who am listening, I exist. Everything is full, existence everywhere, dense and heavy and sweet. But, beyond all this sweetness, inaccessible, quite close, so far away alas, young, merciless, and serene, there is this . . . this rigour.

Tuesday

Nothing. Existed.

Wednesday

There is a patch of sunlight on the paper tablecloth. In the patch of sunlight, a fly is dragging itself along, dazed, warming itself and rubbing its front legs against one

another. I am going to do it the favour of squashing it. It doesn't see this gigantic index-finger looming up with the gold hairs shining in the sun.

'Don't kill it, Monsieur!' cried the Autodidact.

It bursts, its little white guts come out of its belly; I have relieved it of existence. I say dryly to the Autodidact:

'I've done it a favour.'

Why am I here? – And why shouldn't I be here? It is midday, I am waiting for it to be time to sleep. (Fortunately sleep doesn't avoid me.) In four days I shall see Anny again: for the moment, that is my only reason for living. And afterwards? When Anny has left me? I know very well what I am secretly hoping: I am hoping that she will never leave me again. Yet I ought to know that Anny will never agree to grow old in front of me. I am weak and lonely, I need her. I should have liked to see her again while I was strong: Anny has no pity for flotsam.

'Is anything the matter, Monsieur? Do you feel all right?'

The Autodidact looks sideways at me with laughing eyes. He is panting slightly, his mouth open, like a dog out of breath. I have to admit it: this morning I was almost glad to see him again, I needed to talk.

'How glad I am to have you at my table,' he says. 'If you're cold, we could go and sit next to the stove. Those gentlemen are going to go soon, they have asked for their bill.'

Somebody is worrying about me, wondering if I am cold; I am speaking to another man: that hasn't happened to me for years.

'They're leaving, would you like to change places?'

The two gentlemen have lighted cigarettes. They go out, there they are in the pure air, in the sunshine. They walk along past the big windows, holding their hats on with both hands. They laugh; the wind puffs out their overcoats. No,

I don't want to change places. What would be the use? And then, through the windows, between the white roofs of the bathing-huts, I see the sea, green and compact.

The Autodidact has taken two rectangles of purple cardboard from his wallet. He will hand them over at the cash-desk later on. On the back of one I decipher the words:

Maison Bottanet, cuisine bourgeoise.
Le déjeuner à prix fixe: 8 francs
Hors-d'œuvre au choix
Viande garnie
Fromage ou dessert
140 francs les 20 cachets

That fellow eating at the round table, near the door – I recognize him now: he often stays at the Hôtel Printania, he's a commercial traveller. Now and then he turns his attentive and smiling gaze upon me; but he doesn't see me; he is too busy examining what he is eating. On the other side of the cash-desk, two stocky, red-faced men are eating mussels and drinking white wine. The smaller of the two, who has a thin yellow moustache, is telling a story which he himself is finding amusing. He pauses and laughs, revealing dazzling teeth. The other man doesn't laugh; his eyes are hard. But he often nods his head affirmatively. Near the window, a dark, thin man, with distinguished features and fine white hair brushed back from his forehead, is thoughtfully reading his paper. On the bench beside him, he has put a leather brief-case. He is drinking Vichy water. In a moment all these people are going to leave; weighed down by food, caressed by the breeze, their overcoats wide open, their heads a little hot and muzzy, they will walk along by the balustrade, looking at the children on the beach and the boats on the sea; they will go to work. I for my part will go nowhere, I have no work.

The Autodidact laughs innocently and the sunshine plays in his sparse hair:

'Would you like to order?'

He hands me the menu: I am entitled to choose one hors-d'œuvre: either five slices of sausage or radishes or shrimps or a dish of celery in sauce. There is an extra charge for the Burgundy snails.

'I'll have sausage,' I tell the waitress. He snatches the menu out of my hands:

'Isn't there anything better? Look, there are Burgundy snails.'

'The thing is that I'm not very fond of snails.'

'Oh! Then what about oysters?'

'They're four francs extra,' says the waitress.

'All right, oysters, Mademoiselle – and radishes for me.'

Blushing, he explains to me:

'I'm very partial to radishes.'

So am I.

'And afterwards?' he asks.

I look through the list of meat dishes. The braised beef would tempt me. But I know in advance that I shall have chicken, the only meat dish with an extra charge.

'This gentleman,' he says, 'will have chicken. Braised beef for me, Mademoiselle.'

He turns the menu round: the wine list is on the back:

'We shall have some wine,' he says with a somewhat solemn expression.

'Well I never,' says the waitress, 'we *are* letting ourselves go! You've never had any before.'

'But I can easily stand a glass of wine now and then. Mademoiselle, will you bring us a carafe of Anjou rosé.'

The Autodidact puts down the menu, breaks his bread into small pieces and rubs his knife and fork with his napkin.

He glances at the white-haired man reading his paper, then he smiles at me:

'Usually I come here with a book, even though a doctor once advised me not to: you eat too quickly and you don't chew. But I've got a stomach like an ostrich, I can swallow anything. During the winter of 1917, when I was a prisoner of war, the food was so bad that everybody fell ill. Naturally I went sick like everybody else: but there was nothing wrong with me.'

He has been a prisoner of war.... This is the first time he has ever spoken to me about it; I can't get over it: I can't imagine him as anything but an autodidact.

'Where were you a prisoner?'

He doesn't reply. He has put down his fork and is looking at me terribly hard. He is going to tell me his troubles: now I remember that there was something wrong at the library. I am all ears: I ask for nothing better than to sympathize with other people's troubles, that will make a change for me. I haven't any troubles, I have some money like a gentleman of leisure, no boss, no wife, no children; I exist, that's all. And that particular trouble is so vague, so metaphysical, that I am ashamed of it.

The Autodidact doesn't seem to want to talk. What a curious look he is giving me: it isn't a look to see with, but rather one for a communion of souls. The Autodidact's soul has risen to the surface of his magnificent blind man's eyes. If mine does the same, if it comes and presses its nose against the window panes, the two of them can exchange greetings.

I don't want a communion of souls, I haven't fallen so low. I draw back. But the Autodidact leans forward across the table, without taking his eyes off me. Fortunately the waitress brings him his radishes. He slumps back in his chair, his soul disappears from his eyes, he docilely starts eating.

'Have you sorted out your troubles?'

He gives a start:

'What troubles, Monsieur?' he asks with a frightened look.

'You know, the other day you spoke to me about them.'

He blushes scarlet.

'Ha!' he says in a dry voice. 'Ha! Yes, the other day. Well, it's that Corsican, Monsieur, that Corsican in the library.'

He hesitates a second time, with the stubborn look of a sheep.

'They're just trivialities, Monsieur, that I don't want to bother you about.'

I don't pursue the matter. Without seeming to, he eats at an extraordinary speed. He has already finished his radishes by the time the waitress brings me the oysters. Nothing is left on his plate but a heap of green stalks and a little damp salt.

Outside, a young couple has stopped in front of the menu which a cardboard chef is holding out to them in his left hand (in his right he has a frying-pan). They hesitate. The woman is cold, she tucks her chin into her fur collar. The young man makes up his mind first, he opens the door and stands to one side to let his companion pass.

She comes in. She looks around her amiably and gives a little shiver:

'It's hot,' she says in a deep voice.

The young man closes the door.

'Messieurs dames,' he says.

The Autodidact turns round and says pleasantly:

'Messieurs dames.'

The other customers don't answer, but the distinguished-looking gentleman lowers his paper slightly and submits the new arrivals to a searching scrutiny.

'Thank you, don't bother.'

Before the waitress, who had run up to help him, could

make a move, the young man had slipped out of his raincoat. In place of a jacket, he is wearing a leather windcheater with a zip fastener. The waitress, a little disappointed, turns to the young woman. But once again he is ahead of her and helps his companion out of her coat with gentle, precise movements. They sit down near us, side by side. They don't look as if they'd known each other for long. The young woman has a tired pure face, with a somewhat sullen expression. She suddenly takes off her hat, shakes her black hair and smiles.

The Autodidact gazes at them for a long time, with a kindly eye; then he turns to me and gives me a meaning wink as if to say: 'What a good-looking pair they are!'

They are not ugly. They are silent, they are happy to be together, happy to be seen together. Sometimes, when we went into a restaurant in Piccadilly, Anny and I, we felt ourselves the objects of admiring attention. It annoyed Anny, but I must admit that I was rather proud of it. Above all, astonished; I have never had the neat look which becomes that young man so well and nobody could even say that my ugliness was touching. Only we were young: now I am at the age to be touched by the youth of others. I am not touched. The woman has dark, gentle eyes; the young man a rather leathery, orange-tinted skin and a charming, stubborn little chin. Yes, I do find them touching, but they also make me feel a little sick. I feel them so far away from me: the warmth is making them languid, they are pursuing a single dream in their hearts, so sweet, so low. They are at ease, they look confidently at the yellow walls, at the people, they consider that the world is fine as it is, just as it is, and for the moment each of them discovers the significance of his life in the life of the other. Soon the two of them will form just a single life, a slow, tepid life which will have no significance left at all – but they won't notice that.

They look as if they were intimidated by each other. Finally, the young man, in an awkward and determined manner, takes the young woman's hand with the tips of his fingers. She breathes heavily and they bend over the menu together. Yes, they are happy. But what of it?

The Autodidact assumes an amused, somewhat mysterious expression:

'I saw you the day before yesterday.'

'Where?'

'Ha, ha!' he says teasingly but respectfully.

He keeps me waiting for a moment, then:

'You were coming out of the museum.'

'Oh, yes,' I say, 'but not the day before yesterday: Saturday.'

The day before yesterday I was certainly in no mood for traipsing round museums.

'Have you seen that remarkable wood-carving of Orsini's attempted assassination?'

'I don't remember it.'

'Really? It's in a little room, on the right as you go in. It's the work of an insurgent in the Commune who lived at Bouville until the amnesty, hiding in an attic. He had intended to get on a boat for America, but the port here is very well policed. An admirable man. He spent his enforced leisure carving a great oak panel. The only tools he had were his penknife and a nail file. He did the intricate parts with the file: the hands and eyes. The panel is five feet long by three feet wide; the whole work is in one piece; there are seventy figures, each the size of my hand, not counting the two horses pulling the Emperor's carriage. And the faces, Monsieur, those faces carved with a nail file, they all have features, they all look human. Monsieur, if I may venture to say so, it is a work well worth seeing.'

I don't want to commit myself:

'I simply wanted to see Bordurin's pictures again.'

The Autodidact suddenly grows sad:

'Those portraits in the main hall? Monsieur,' he says, with a tremulous smile, 'I don't know anything about painting. Naturally I realize that Bordurin is a great painter, I can see that he knows his stuff, as they say. But pleasure, Monsieur, aesthetic pleasure is something I have never known.'

I tell him sympathetically:

'It's the same for me with sculpture.'

'Ah, Monsieur, for me too, alas. And with music, and with dancing. Yet I do possess a certain amount of knowledge. Well, believe it or not, I have seen some young people who didn't know half as much as I do, and who, standing in front of a painting, seemed to be experiencing pleasure.'

'They must have been pretending,' I say encouragingly.

'Perhaps. . . .'

The Autodidact reflects for a moment:

'What upsets me is not so much being deprived of a certain type of pleasure, it's rather that a whole branch of human activity should be foreign to me . . . yet I am a man and it is *men* that have made those pictures . . .'

Suddenly he goes on in a changed voice:

'Monsieur, at one time I ventured to think that beauty was only a matter of taste. Aren't there different rules for each period? Will you excuse me, Monsieur?'

To my surprise I see him take a black leather notebook out of his pocket. He goes through it for a moment: a lot of blank pages and, now and then, a few lines written in red ink. He has turned quite pale. He has put the notebook flat on the table and he places his great hand on the open page. He coughs with embarrassment.

'Sometimes things occur to me – I daren't call them

thoughts. It's very strange: I am sitting there reading and all of a sudden, I don't know where it comes from, I get a sort of revelation. At first I didn't take any notice of it, but then I made up my mind to buy a notebook.'

He stops and looks at me: he is waiting.

'Ah,' I say.

'Monsieur, these maxims are naturally only provisional: my education isn't complete yet.'

He picks up the notebook in his trembling hands, he is deeply moved:

'As it happens there is something here about painting. I should be happy if you would allow me to read it to you.'

'With pleasure,' I say.

He reads:

'Nobody believes any longer what the eighteenth century considered to be true. Why should we be expected to go on taking pleasure in the works which it considered to be beautiful?'

He looks at me beseechingly.

'What am I to think of that, Monsieur? Perhaps it's rather paradoxical? That's because I thought I could express my ideas in the form of a witty remark.'

'Well, I . . . I think it's very interesting.'

'Have you read it anywhere before?'

'No, certainly not.'

'Really, you really haven't read it anywhere? Then, Monsieur,' he says, his face falling, 'that means it isn't true. If it were true, somebody would have thought of it already.'

'Wait a minute,' I tell him, 'now that I come to think of it, I believe that I have read something like it.'

His eyes light up; he takes out his pencil.

'In a book by which author?' he asks me in a matter-of-fact tone of voice.

'By . . . by Renan.'

He is overjoyed.

'Would you be kind enough to give me the exact passage?' he says, sucking the point of his pencil.

'You know, it's a very long time since I read it.'

'Oh, it doesn't matter, it doesn't matter.'

He writes Renan's name in his notebook, underneath his maxim.

'I have had the same idea as Renan! I've written his name in pencil,' he explains delightedly, 'but this evening I'll go over it in red ink.'

He looks ecstatically at his notebook for a moment, and I wait for him to read me some more maxims. But he closes it carefully and stuffs it into his pocket. He probably considers that this is enough happiness for one time.

'How pleasant it is,' he says with a confidential air, 'to be able to talk freely at times, like this.'

This remark, as might be imagined, kills off our languishing conversation. A long silence follows.

Since the arrival of the young couple, the atmosphere of the restaurant has completely changed. The two red-faced men have fallen silent; they are shamelessly examining the young woman's charms. The distinguished-looking gentleman has put down his paper and is looking at the couple with a kindliness almost bordering on complicity. He is thinking that old age is wise and youth is beautiful, he nods his head with a certain coquetry: he is well aware that he is still handsome and well-preserved, that with his dark complexion and slim figure he is still attractive. He is playing at feeling paternal. The waitress's feelings seem to be simpler: she has planted herself in front of the young people and is staring at them open-mouthed.

They are talking quietly. The waitress has brought them their hors-d'œuvre, but they don't touch them. Straining my ears, I can make out snatches of their conversation. It is

easier for me to distinguish what the woman is saying, in her rich, veiled voice.

'No, Jean, no.'

'Why not?' the young man murmurs with passionate vivacity.

'I've told you why.'

'That isn't a reason.'

There are a few words which escape me, then the young woman makes a charming, weary gesture:

'I've tried too often. I'm past the age when you can start your life again. I'm an old woman, you know.'

The young man laughs sarcastically. She goes on:

'I couldn't stand a . . . disappointment.'

'You must have more confidence,' says the young man; 'the way you are now, you aren't living.'

She sighs.

'I know!'

'Look at Jeannette.'

'Yes,' she says, pulling a face.

'Well, I think it was splendid what she said. She showed courage.'

'You know,' says the young woman, 'the fact is, she really grabbed the chance. I can tell you that if I'd wanted, I could have had hundreds of chances like that. I preferred to wait.'

'You were right,' he says tenderly, 'you were right to wait for me.'

She laughs in her turn.

'What conceit! I didn't say that.'

I stop listening to them: they annoy me. They are going to sleep together. They know it. Each of them knows that the other knows it. But as they are young, chaste, and decent, as each wants to keep his self-respect and that of the other, and as love is a great poetic thing which mustn't be shocked,

they go several times a week to dances and restaurants, to present the spectacle of their ritualistic, mechanical dances. . . .

After all, you have to kill time. They are young and well built, they have another thirty years in front of them. So they don't hurry, they take their time, and they are quite right. Once they have been to bed together, they will have to find something else to conceal the enormous absurdity of their existence. All the same . . . Is it absolutely necessary to lie to each other? I look round the room. What a farce! All these people sitting there looking serious, eating. No, they aren't eating: they are reviving their strength in order to complete their respective tasks. Each of them has his little personal obstinacy which prevents him from noticing that he exists; there isn't one of them who doesn't think he is indispensable to somebody or something. Wasn't it the Autodidact who said to me the other day: 'Nobody was better qualified than Nouçapié to undertake this vast synthesis?' Every one of them does one little thing and nobody is better qualified than he to do it. Nobody is better qualified than the commercial traveller over there to sell Swan toothpaste. Nobody is better qualified than that interesting young man to fumble about under his neighbour's skirts. And I am among them and if they look at me they must think that nobody is better qualified than I to do what I do. But *I know*. I don't look very important but I know that I exist and that they exist. And if I knew the art of convincing people, I should go and sit down next to that handsome white-haired gentleman and I should explain to him what existence is. The thought of the look which would come on to his face if I did makes me burst out laughing. The Autodidact looks at me in surprise. I should like to stop, but I can't: I laugh until I cry.

'You are in a gay mood, Monsieur,' the Autodidact says to me with a guarded air.

'I was just thinking,' I tell him, laughing, 'that here we are, all of us, eating and drinking to preserve our precious existence, and that there's nothing, nothing, absolutely no reason for existing.'

The Autodidact has become serious, he makes an effort to understand me. I laughed too loud: I saw several heads turn towards me. Then I regret having said so much. After all, that's nobody's business.

He repeats slowly:

'No reason for existing . . . I suppose, Monsieur, you mean that life has no object. Isn't that what people call pessimism?'

He goes on thinking for a moment, then he says gently:

'A few years ago I read a book by an American author, called *Is Life Worth Living?* Isn't that the question you are asking yourself?'

No, that obviously isn't the question I'm asking myself. But I don't want to explain anything.

'He concluded,' the Autodidact tells me in a consoling voice, 'in favour of deliberate optimism. Life has a meaning if you choose to give it one. First of all you must act, you must throw yourself into some enterprise. If you think about it later on, the die is already cast, you are already involved. I don't know what you think about that, Monsieur?'

'Nothing,' I say.

Or rather I think that that is precisely the sort of lie that the commercial traveller, the two young people, and the white-haired gentleman keep on telling themselves.

The Autodidact smiles with a certain malice and much solemnity:

'It isn't my opinion either. I don't think we need look so far to find the meaning of our life.'

'Oh?'

'There is a goal, Monsieur, there is a goal . . . there are people.'

That's right: I was forgetting that he was a humanist. He remains silent for a moment, long enough to put away, neatly and inexorably, half his braised beef and a whole slice of bread. 'There are people . . .' He has just painted a complete portrait of himself, this tender-hearted fellow. Yes, but he doesn't know how to say his piece properly. His eyes are as soulful as could be, that can't be denied, but being soulful isn't enough. I knocked around with some Parisian humanists in the old days, and scores of times I've heard them say: 'There are people'. That was quite another matter! Virgan was unbeatable in this respect. He would take off his spectacles, as if to show himself naked, in his human flesh, and stare at me with his eloquent eyes, with a solemn, weary gaze which seemed to undress me in order to seize my human essence, and then he would murmur melodiously: 'There are people, old fellow, there are people,' giving the 'There are' a sort of awkward emphasis, as if his love of people, perpetually new and astonished, were getting caught up in its giant wings.

The Autodidact's mimicry hasn't acquired this smoothness; his love of mankind is naïve and barbaric: he is very much the provincial humanist.

'People,' I say to him, 'people . . . in any case you don't seem to worry about them very much: you are always alone, always with your nose in a book.'

The Autodidact claps his hands, he starts laughing mischievously:

'You're wrong. Ah, Monsieur, allow me to say how very wrong you are!'

He reflects for a moment and discreetly finishes swallowing. His face is as radiant as dawn. Behind him the young woman gives a gay laugh. Her companion is bending over her and whispering in her ear.

'Your mistake is perfectly natural,' says the Autodidact,

'I should have told you long ago . . . but I am so shy, Monsieur: I was looking for an opportunity.'

'Here it is,' I tell him politely.

'I think so too. I think so too! Monsieur, what I am about to tell you . . .' He stops, blushing: 'But perhaps I am imposing on you?'

I reassure him. He heaves a sigh of happiness.

'It isn't every day that one meets a man like you, Monsieur, in whom breadth of vision is linked with clear-sighted intelligence. I have been wanting to talk to you for months, to explain what I have been, what I have become. . . .'

His plate is as empty and clean as if it had just been brought to him. I suddenly discover, next to mine, a little tin dish in which a drum-stick of chicken is swimming in a brown sauce. I have to eat that.

'A little while ago I mentioned my captivity in Germany. It was there that it all began. Before the war I was alone and I didn't realize it; I lived with my parents, who were good people, but I didn't get on with them. When I think of those years . . . but how could I have lived like that? I was dead, Monsieur, and I never realized it; I had a collection of postage stamps.'

He looks at me and breaks off to say:

'Monsieur, you are pale, you look tired, I hope I'm not boring you?'

'You interest me greatly.'

'The war came and I enlisted without knowing why. I spent two years without understanding, because life at the front left little time for thought and besides, the soldiers were too coarse. At the end of 1917 I was taken prisoner. Since then I have been told that a lot of soldiers recovered their childhood faith during their captivity. Monsieur,' the Autodidact says, lowering his eyelids over burning pupils, 'I don't believe in God; his existence is disproved by

Science. But, in the internment camp, I learnt to believe in people.'

'They endured their fate bravely?'

'Yes,' he says vaguely, 'there was that too. Besides, we were treated well. But I wanted to speak of something else; during the last few months of the war, they gave us scarcely any work to do. When it rained, they made us go into a big wooden shed which held about two hundred of us at a pinch. They closed the door and left us there, squeezed up against one another, in almost total darkness.'

He hesitates for a moment.

'I don't know how to explain this to you, Monsieur. All those men were there, you could scarcely see them but you could feel them against you, you could hear the sound of their breathing. . . . One of the first times they locked us in that shed the crush was so great that at first I thought I was going to suffocate, then suddenly a tremendous feeling of joy came over me, and I almost fainted: at that moment I felt I loved those men like brothers, I would have liked to kiss them all. After that, every time I went back there, I felt the same joy.'

I have to eat my chicken, which must be cold by now. The Autodidact has finished a long time ago and the waitress is waiting to change the plates.

'That shed had taken on a sacred character in my eyes. Sometimes I managed to escape the attention of our guards. I slipped into it all alone and there, in the darkness, at the memory of the joys I had known there, I fell into a sort of ecstasy. Hours went by, but I paid no attention. Sometimes I burst out sobbing.'

I must be ill: there is no other way of explaining that terrible rage which has just overwhelmed me. Yes, a sick man's rage: my hands were shaking, the blood rushed to my head, and finally my lips too started trembling. All that

simply because the chicken was cold. I was cold too, for that matter, and that was the worst of it: I mean that the heart of me had remained as it had been for the last thirty-six hours, absolutely cold and icy. Anger went through me like a whirlwind, it was something like a shudder, an effort by my conscience to react, to fight against this lowering of my temperature. It was all in vain: on the slightest pretext I should probably have rained blows and curses on the Autodidact or the waitress. But my heart wouldn't really have been in it. My rage blustered on the surface, and for a moment I had the painful impression of being a block of ice enveloped in fire, an *omelette-surprise*. This superficial agitation disappeared and I heard the Autodidact say:

'Every Sunday I used to go to Mass. Monsieur, I have never been a believer. But couldn't one say that the real mystery of the Mass is the communion of souls? A French chaplain, who had only one arm, used to celebrate the Mass. We had a harmonium. We listened, standing, bare-headed, and as the sounds of the harmonium carried me away, I felt myself at one with all the men surrounding me. Ah, Monsieur, how I loved those Masses! Even now, in memory of them, I sometimes go to church on Sunday morning. We have a remarkable organist at Sainte-Cécile.'

'You must have often missed that life?'

'Yes, Monsieur, in 1919. That was the year I was released. I spent some utterly miserable months. I didn't know what to do, I wasted away. Whenever I saw some men gathered together I would insinuate myself into their group. There were times,' he adds with a smile, 'when I joined the funeral procession of a complete stranger. One day, in despair, I threw my stamp collection into the fire . . . but I found my vocation.'

'Really?'

'Somebody advised me . . . Monsieur, I know that I can

count on your discretion. I am – perhaps these are not your ideas, but you are so broad-minded – I am a Socialist.'

He has lowered his eyes and his long lashes are trembling:

'Since September 1921 I have been a member of the S.F.I.O. Socialist Party. That is what I wanted to tell you.'

He is radiant with pride. He looks at me, his head thrown back, his eyes half-closed, his mouth slightly open, looking like a martyr.

'That's excellent,' I say, 'that's very fine.'

'Monsieur, I knew that you would approve. And how could you disapprove of somebody who comes and tells you: I have arranged my life in such and such a way, and now I am perfectly happy?'

He has spread his arms out with his palms towards me and his fingers pointing to the ground, as if he were about to receive the stigmata. His eyes are glazed, I can see a dark pink mass rolling about in his mouth.

'Ah,' I say, 'as long as you're happy. . . .'

'Happy?' His gaze is disconcerting, he has raised his eyelids and is staring at me. 'You are going to be able to judge, Monsieur. Before taking that decision, I felt such utter loneliness that I thought of committing suicide. What held me back was the idea that nobody, absolutely nobody would be moved by my death, that I would be even more alone in death than in life.'

He straightens up, his cheeks puff out.

'I am no longer alone, Monsieur. And I shall never be alone again.'

'Ah, so you know a lot of people?' I say.

He smiles and I promptly realize my mistake.

'I mean that I no longer *feel* alone. But naturally, Monsieur, I don't have to be with anybody.'

'All the same,' I say, 'at the local branch of the party . . .'

'Ah, I know everybody there. But most of them only by

name. Monsieur,' he says mischievously, 'is one obliged to choose one's companions in such a narrow way? All men are my friends. When I go to the office in the morning, there are other men in front of me, behind me, going to their work. I see them, if I dared I would smile at them, I think that I am a Socialist, that they all form the purpose of my life, the object of my efforts, and that they don't know it yet. That's a positive holiday for me, Monsieur.'

He looks inquiringly at me: I nod my approval, but I can feel that he is a little disappointed, that he would like rather more enthusiasm. What can I do? Is it my fault if, in everything he tells me, I recognize borrowings, quotations? Is it my fault if, while he speaks, I see all the humanists I have known reappear? Alas, I've known so many of them! The radical humanist is a special friend of civil servants. The so-called 'Left wing' humanist's chief concern is to preserve human values; he belongs to no party because he doesn't want to betray humanity as a whole, but his sympathies go towards the humble; it is to the humble that he devotes his fine classical culture. He is generally a widower with beautiful eyes always clouded with tears; he weeps at anniversaries. He also loves cats, dogs, all the higher animals. The Communist writer has been loving men ever since the second Five-Year Plan; he punishes because he loves. Modest as all strong men are, he knows how to hide his feelings, but he also knows how, with a look or an inflection of his voice, to reveal, behind his stern justicial words, a glimpse of his bitter-sweet passion for his brethren. The Catholic humanist, the late-comer, the Benjamin, speaks of men with a wonder-struck air. What a beautiful fairy tale, he says, is the humblest life, that of a London docker, of a girl in a shoe factory! He has chosen the humanism of the angels; he writes, for the edification of the angels, long, sad, beautiful novels, which frequently win the Prix Femina.

Those are the principal types. But there are others, a swarm of others: the humanist philosopher who bends over his brothers like an elder brother who is conscious of his responsibilities; the humanist who loves men as they are, the one who loves them as they ought to be, the one who wants to save them with their consent, and the one who will save them in spite of themselves, the one who wants to create myths, and the one who is satisfied with the old myths, the one who loves man for his death, the one who loves man for his life, the happy humanist who always knows what to say to make people laugh, the gloomy humanist whom you usually meet at wakes. They all hate one another: as individuals, of course, not as men. But the Autodidact doesn't know it: he has locked them up inside him like cats in a leather bag and they are tearing one another to pieces without his noticing it.

He is already looking at me with less confidence.

'Don't you feel as I do, Monsieur?'

'Good heavens . . .'

Faced with his anxious, rather spiteful look, I feel a moment's regret at having disappointed him. But he goes on amiably:

'I know: you have your research, your books, you serve the same cause in your own way.'

My books, *my* research: the idiot. He couldn't have made a worse blunder.

'That isn't why I write.'

The Autodidact's face is immediately transformed: it is as if he had scented the enemy. I had never seen that expression on his face before. Something has died between us.

Feigning surprise, he asks:

'But . . . if I am not being indiscreet, why do you write, then, Monsieur?'

'Well . . . I don't know: just to write.'

He gives a satisfied smile, he thinks that he has caught me out:

'Would you write on a desert island? Doesn't one always write in order to be read?'

It was out of habit that he put that sentence in an interrogative form. In fact, he is making a statement. His veneer of gentleness and shyness has peeled off; I don't recognize him any more. His features reveal a massive obstinacy; he is a wall of complacency. I still haven't got over my astonishment when I hear him say:

'If somebody tells me: I write for a certain social class, for a group of friends, that's all right. Perhaps you write for posterity . . . but, Monsieur, in spite of yourself you write for somebody.'

He waits for an answer. As it doesn't come, he smiles feebly.

'Perhaps you are a misanthrope?'

I know what this fallacious effort at conciliation hides. He is asking very little from me in fact: simply to accept a label. But this is a trap: if I consent, the Autodidact triumphs, I am promptly out-flanked, recaptured, overtaken, for humanism takes all human attitudes and fuses them together. If you stand up to it, you play its game; it lives on its opponents. There is a race of stubborn, stupid villains who lose to it every time: it digests all their violences and worst excesses, it turns them into a white, frothy lymph. It has digested anti-intellectualism, manicheism, mysticism, pessimism, anarchy, and egotism: they are nothing more than stages, incomplete thoughts which find their justification only in humanism. Misanthropy also has its place in this concert: it is simply a discord necessary to the harmony of the whole. The misanthrope is a man: it is therefore inevitable that the humanist should be misanthropic to a certain degree. But he is a scientific misanthrope who has

succeeded in determining the extent of his hatred, who hates men at first only to love them better later.

I don't want to be integrated, I don't want my good red blood to go and fatten that lymphatic animal: I am not going to be fool enough to say that I am an 'anti-humanist'. I *am not* a humanist, that's all.

'I believe,' I say to the Autodidact, 'that one cannot hate men any more than one can love them.'

The Autodidact looks at me with a distant, patronizing air. He murmurs, as if he were paying no particular attention to his words:

'We must love them, we must love them. . . .'

'Whom must we love? The people here?'

'Them too. One and all.'

He turns round to look at the radiant young couple: that's what we must love. For a moment he contemplates the white-haired gentleman. Then his gaze returns to me; on his face I read a mute question. I shake my head. He looks as if he felt sorry for me.

'You don't love them either,' I tell him in irritation.

'Really, Monsieur? Will you allow me to disagree with you?'

He has become respectful again, respectful to his fingertips, but he has the ironic look in his eyes of somebody who is tremendously amused. He hates me. I would have been a fool to worry about this maniac. I question him in my turn:

'So, those two young people behind you – you love them, do you?'

He looks at them again, he ponders:

'You want to make me say,' he says suspiciously, 'that I love them without knowing them. Well, Monsieur, I admit that I don't know them . . . unless, of course, love is true knowledge,' he adds with a silly laugh.

'But what do you love?'

'I see that they are young and it is youth that I love in them. Among other things, Monsieur.'

He breaks off and listens:

'Can you understand what they're saying?'

Can I understand it? The young man, emboldened by the sympathetic atmosphere around him, is describing in a loud voice a football match which his team won last year against a club from Le Havre.

'He's telling her a story,' I say to the Autodidact.

'Ah! I can't hear them properly. But I can hear their voices, a soft voice, a deep voice, they alternate. It's . . . it's so attractive.'

'Only I can also hear what they're saying, unfortunately.'

'Well?'

'Well, they're play-acting.'

'Really? Playing at being young, perhaps?' he asks sarcastically. 'Allow me, Monsieur, to say that I consider that a very profitable exercise. Is it enough to play at being young to return to their age?'

I remain deaf to his sarcasm; I continue:

'You've got your back to them, you can't hear what they're saying. . . . What colour is the young woman's hair?'

He gets flustered:

'Well, I . . .' He shoots a glance at the young couple and recovers his composure. 'Black!'

'You see!'

'See what?'

'You see that you don't love them. You probably wouldn't be able to recognize them in the street. They are only symbols in your eyes. You aren't the least bit touched by them: you're touched by the Youth of Man, by the Love of Man and Woman, by the Human Voice.'

'Well? Doesn't all that exist?'

'Of course it doesn't exist! Neither Youth nor Maturity nor Old Age nor Death. . . .'

The Autodidact's face, as hard and yellow as a quince, has frozen in lockjawed disapproval. Nevertheless I go on:

'It's like that old gentleman drinking Vichy water behind you. It's the Mature Man, I suppose, that you love in him; the Mature Man bravely heading towards his decline, and taking care of his appearance because he doesn't want to let himself go?'

'Exactly,' he says defiantly.

'And you can't see that he's a bastard?'

He laughs, he thinks I'm joking, he darts a quick glance at the handsome face framed in white hair:

'But, Monsieur, even supposing that he looks what you say, how can you judge that man by his face? A face, Monsieur, tells nothing when it is in repose.'

Blind humanists! That face is so eloquent, so clear – but their tender, abstract souls have never allowed themselves to be affected by the meaning of a face.

'How can you,' says the Autodidact, 'limit a man like that, how can you say that he *is* this or that? Who can drain a man dry? Who can know a man's resources?'

Drain a man dry! I salute in passing the Catholic humanism from which the Autodidact has unknowingly borrowed this formula.

'I know,' I tell him, 'I know that all men are admirable. You are admirable. I am admirable. In so far as we are God's creatures of course.'

He looks at me uncomprehendingly, then says with a thin smile:

'I suppose you are joking, Monsieur, but it is true that all men are entitled to our admiration. It is difficult, Monsieur, very difficult to be a man.'

Without noticing, he has abandoned the love of men in

Christ; he nods his head, and by a curious phenomenon of mimicry, he resembles that poor Guéhenno.

'Excuse me,' I say, 'but in that case I'm not quite sure of being a man: I had never found that very difficult. It always seemed to me that you only had to let yourself go.'

The Autodidact laughs openly, but his eyes remain spiteful:

'You are too modest, Monsieur. In order to endure your condition, the human condition, you, like everybody else, need a great deal of courage. Monsieur, the next moment may be the moment of your death, you know it and yet you can smile: come now, isn't that admirable? In the most insignificant of your actions,' he adds sourly, 'there is an immensity of heroism.'

'And what will you gentlemen have for dessert?' asks the waitress.

The Autodidact is quite white, his eyelids are half-lowered over eyes of stone. He makes a feeble gesture with his hand, as if inviting me to choose.

'Cheese,' I say heroically.

'And you, Monsieur?'

He gives a start.

'Eh? Oh, yes: Well, I won't have anything, I've finished.'

'Louise!'

The two fat men pay and go off. One of them limps. The *patron* shows them to the door: they are important customers, they were served with a bottle of wine in an ice-bucket.

I look at the Autodidact with a little remorse: he has been looking forward all week to this luncheon, at which he would be able to tell another man about his love of man. He so rarely has the opportunity of talking. And now I have spoilt his pleasure. In point of fact he is as lonely as I am: nobody cares about him. Only he doesn't realize his solitude.

Well, yes: but it wasn't up to me to open his eyes. I feel very ill at ease: I'm furious, it's true, but not with him, with Virgan and the others, all those who have poisoned that poor brain of his. If I could have them here in front of me, I'd have something to say to them, and no mistake. I shall say nothing to the Autodidact, I have nothing but sympathy for him: he is somebody like Monsieur Achille, somebody of my sort, who has deserted out of ignorance and good-will.

A burst of laughter from the Autodidact rouses me from my morose reflections:

'Forgive me, but when I think of the depth of my love for people, of the strength of the impulses which carry me towards them, and when I see us here, arguing and discussing . . . it makes me want to laugh.'

I say nothing, I give a forced smile. The waitress puts a plate in front of me with a piece of chalky Camembert on it. I glance round the room and a feeling of violent disgust comes over me. What am I doing here? Why did I get mixed up in a discusion about humanism? What are these people here? Why are they eating? It's true that *they* don't know that they exist. I want to leave, to go somewhere where I should be really *in my place*, where I would fit in . . . but my place is nowhere; I am unwanted.

The Autodidact calms down. He had been afraid that I would put up rather more resistance. He is willing to forget about all that I have said. He leans towards me in a confidential manner:

'At heart, you love them, Monsieur, you love them as I do: we are separated by words.'

I can't speak any more, I bow my head. The Autodidact's face is right up against mine. He smiles foolishly, right up against my face, just as people do in nightmares. I laboriously chew a piece of bread which I can't make up my mind to swallow. People. You must love people. People are admir-

able. I feel like vomiting – and all of a sudden, there it is: the Nausea.

A really bad attack: it shakes me from top to bottom. I had seen it coming for the last hour, only I didn't want to admit it. This taste of cheese in my mouth.... The Autodidact babbles on and his voice buzzes gently in my ears. But I don't know what he's talking about any more. I nod my head mechanically. My hand is clutching the handle of the dessert knife. I can feel this black wooden handle. It is my hand which is holding it. My hand. Personally, I would rather leave this knife alone: what is the use of always touching something? Objects are not made to be touched. It is much better to slip between them, avoiding them as much as possible. Sometimes you take one of them in your hand and you are obliged to drop it as quickly as you can. The knife falls on the plate. The white-haired gentleman jumps at the noise and looks at me. I pick up the knife again, I press the blade against the table and I bend it.

So this is the Nausea: this blinding revelation? To think how I have racked my brains over it! To think how much I've written about it! Now I know: I exist – the world exists – and I know that the world exists. That's all. But I don't care. It's strange that I should care so little about everything: it frightens me. It's since that day when I wanted to play ducks and drakes. I was going to throw that pebble, I looked at it and that was when it all began: I felt that it *existed*. And then, after that, there were other Nauseas; every now and then objects start existing in your hand. There was the Nausea of the Rendez-vous des Cheminots and then another one before that, one night when I was looking out of the window; and then another one in the municipal park, one Sunday, and then others. But it had never been as strong as today.

'... of ancient Rome, Monsieur?'

The Autodidact is asking me a question, I think. I turn towards him and smile at him. Well? What's the matter with him? Why is he shrinking back into his chair? Do I frighten people now? It was bound to end up like that. I don't care anyway. They aren't completely wrong to be frightened. I can feel that I could do anything. For example plunge this cheese-knife into the Autodidact's eye. After that, all these people would trample on me and kick my teeth in. But that isn't what stops me: the taste of blood in my mouth instead of the taste of cheese would make no difference. Only it would be necessary to make a gesture, to give birth to a superfluous event: the cry the Autodidact would give would be superfluous – and so would the blood flowing down his cheek and the jumping-up of all these people. There are quite enough things existing already.

Everybody is looking at me; the two representatives of youth have interrupted their sweet conversation. The woman has her mouth open in a pout. Yet they ought to see that I am quite harmless.

I get up, everything spins about me. The Autodidact stares at me with his big eyes which I shan't put out.

'You're leaving already?' he murmurs.

'I'm a little tired. It was very nice of you to invite me. Good-bye.'

As I am leaving, I notice that I have kept the dessert-knife in my left hand. I throw it on my plate which makes a clinking noise. I cross the room in the midst of total silence. They have stopped eating: they are looking at me, they have lost their appetite. If I were to walk towards the young woman and say 'Boo!' she would start screaming, that's certain. It isn't worth it.

All the same, before going out, I turn round and I show them my face, so that they can engrave it in their memory.

'Messieurs dames.'