

Chapter Two

From the back of a Moorish café, seated on rough woollen cushions, Xavière and Françoise were watching the Arab dancing girl.

'I wish I could dance like that,' said Xavière. A light tremor passed over her shoulders and ran through her body. Françoise smiled at her, and was sorry that their day together was coming to an end. Xavière had been delightful.

'In the red-light district of Fez, Labrousse and I saw them dance naked,' said Françoise. 'But that was a little too much like an anatomical exhibition.'

'You've seen so many things,' said Xavière with a touch of bitterness.

'So will you, one day,' said Françoise.

'I doubt it,' said Xavière.

'You won't remain in Rouen all your life,' said Françoise.

'What else can I do?' said Xavière sadly. She looked at her fingers with close attention. They were red, peasant's fingers, in strange contrast to her delicate wrists. 'I could perhaps try to be a prostitute, but I'm not experienced enough yet.'

'That's a hard profession, you know,' said Françoise with a laugh.

'I must learn not to be afraid of people,' said Xavière thoughtfully. She nodded her head. 'But I'm improving. When a man brushes against me in the street, I no longer let out a scream.'

'And you go into cafés by yourself. That's also an improvement,' said Françoise.

Xavière gave her a shamefaced look. 'Yes, but I haven't told you everything. At that little dance-hall where I was last night, a sailor asked me to dance and I refused. I gulped down my calvados and rushed out of the place like a coward.' She made a wry face. 'Calvados is terrible stuff.'

'It must have been fine rot-gut,' said Françoise. 'I do think you could have danced with your sailor. I did all sorts of things like that when I was younger, and no harm ever came out of them.'

'The next time I shall accept,' said Xavière.

'Aren't you afraid that your aunt will wake up some night? I should think that might very well happen.'

'She wouldn't dare to come into my room,' said Xavière, with defiance. She smiled and began to hunt through her bag. 'I've made a little sketch for you.'

It was of a woman, who had a slight resemblance to Françoise, standing at a bar with her elbows resting on the counter. Her cheeks were green and her dress was yellow. Beneath the drawing Xavière had written in large, purple lettering: 'The Road to Ruin.'

'You must sign it for me,' said Françoise.

Xavière looked at Françoise, looked at the sketch, and then pushed it away. 'It's too difficult,' she said.

The dancing girl moved towards the middle of the room; her hips began to undulate, and her stomach to ripple to the rhythm of the tambourine.

'It seems almost as if a demon were trying to tear itself from her body,' said Xavière. She leaned forward, entranced. Françoise had certainly had an inspiration in bringing her here; never before had Xavière spoken at such length about herself, and she had a charming way of telling a story. Françoise sank back against the cushions; she, too, had been affected by the shoddy glamour of the place, but what especially delighted her was to have annexed this insignificant, pathetic little being into her own life: for, like Gerbert, like Inès, like Canzetti, Xavière now belonged to her. Nothing ever gave Françoise such intense joy as this kind of possession.

Xavière was absorbed in the dancing girl. She could not see her own face, its beauty heightened by the state of her excitement. Her fingers stroked the contours of the cup which she was holding lightly in her hand, but Françoise alone was aware of the contours of that hand. Xavière's gestures, her face, her very life depended on Françoise for their existence. Xavière, here and now at this moment, the essence of Xavière, was no more than the flavour of the coffee, than the piercing music or the dance, no more than indeterminate well-being; but to Françoise, her childhood, her days of stagnation, her distastes, were a romantic story as real as the delicate contour of her cheeks. And that story ended here in this café, among the vari-coloured hangings, and at this very instant in Françoise's life, as she sat looking at Xavière and studying her.

'It's seven o'clock already,' said Françoise. It bored her to have to spend the evening with Elisabeth, but it was unavoidable. 'Are you going out with Inès tonight?'

'I suppose so,' said Xavière gloomily.

'How much longer do you think you'll be staying in Paris?'

'I'm leaving tomorrow.' A flash of rage appeared in Xavière's eyes. 'Tomorrow, all this will still be going on here and I shall be in Rouen.'

'Why don't you take a secretarial course as I suggested? I could find you a job.'

Xavière shrugged her shoulders despondently. 'I couldn't do it,' she said.

'Of course you could. It's not difficult,' said Françoise.

'My aunt even tried to teach me how to knit,' said Xavière, 'but my last sock was a disaster.' She turned to Françoise with a discouraged and faintly provocative look. 'She's quite right. No one will ever manage to make anything of me.'

'Definitely not a good housewife,' said Françoise cheerfully. 'But one can live without that.'

'It's not because of the sock,' said Xavière hopelessly. 'Yet that was an indication.'

'You lose heart too easily. But still, you would like to leave Rouen, wouldn't you? You have no attachments there to anyone or anything.'

'I hate the people and the place,' said Xavière. 'I loathe that filthy city and the people in the streets with their leering glances.'

'That can't go on,' said Françoise.

'It will go on,' said Xavière. She jumped up suddenly. 'I'm going now.'

'Wait, I'll go with you,' said Françoise.

'No, don't bother. I've already taken up your entire afternoon.'

'You've taken up nothing,' said Françoise. 'How strange you are!' She looked in slight bewilderment at Xavière's sullen face. What a disconcerting little person she was: with that beret hiding her fair hair, her head looked almost like a small boy's; but the face was a young girl's, the same face that had held an appeal for Françoise six months earlier. The silence was prolonged.

'I'm sorry,' said Xavière. 'I've a terrible headache.' With a pained look, she touched her temples. 'It must be the smoke.

I've a pain here, and here.'

Her face was puffy under her eyes and her skin blotchy. The heavy smell of incense and tobacco made the air almost unbreathable. Françoise motioned to the waiter.

'That's too bad. If you were not so tired, I'd take you dancing tonight,' she said.

'I thought you had to see a friend,' said Xavière.

'She'd come with us. She's Labrousse's sister, the girl with the red hair and a short bob whom you saw at the hundredth performance of *Philoctetes*.'

'I don't remember,' said Xavière. Her face lighted up. 'I only remember you. You were wearing a long tight black skirt, a lamé blouse and a silver net on your hair. You were so beautiful!'

Françoise smiled. She was not beautiful, yet she was quite pleased with her face. Whenever she caught a glimpse of it in a looking-glass, she always felt a pleasant surprise. For most of the time, she was not even aware that she had a face.

'You were wearing a lovely blue dress with a pleated skirt,' she said. 'And you were tipsy.'

'I brought that dress with me. I'll wear it tonight,' said Xavière.

'Do you think it wise if you have a headache?'

'My headache's gone,' said Xavière. 'It was just a dizzy spell.' Her eyes were shining, and her skin had regained its beautiful pearly lustre.

'That's good,' said Françoise. She pushed open the door. 'But won't Inès be angry, if she's counting on you?'

'Well, let her be angry,' said Xavière, pouting disdainfully. Françoise hailed a taxi.

'I'll drop you at her place, and I'll meet you at the Dôme at nine-thirty. Just walk straight up to the boulevard Montparnasse.'

'Yes, I know,' said Xavière.

In the taxi Françoise sat close beside Xavière and slipped an arm through hers.

'I'm glad we still have a few hours ahead of us.'

'I'm glad too,' said Xavière softly.

The taxi stopped at the corner of the rue de Rennes. Xavière got out, and Françoise drove on to the theatre.

Pierre was in his dressing-room, wearing a dressing-gown and munching a ham sandwich.

'Did the rehearsal go off well?'

'We worked very hard,' said Pierre. He pointed to the manuscript lying on the desk. 'That's good,' he said, 'really good.'

'Do you mean it? Oh, I'm so glad! I was a little upset at having to cut out Lucilius, but I think it was necessary.'

'Yes, it was,' said Pierre. 'That changed the whole run of the act.' He bit into a sandwich. 'Haven't you had dinner? Would you like a sandwich?'

'Of course I'd like a sandwich,' said Françoise. She took one and looked at Pierre reproachfully. 'You don't eat enough. You're looking very pale.'

'I don't want to put on weight,' said Pierre.

'Caesar wasn't skinny,' said Françoise. She smiled. 'You might ring through to the concierge and ask her to get us a bottle of Château Margaux.'

'That's not such a bad idea,' said Pierre. He picked up the receiver, and Françoise curled up on the couch. This was where Pierre slept when he did not spend the night with her. She was very fond of this small dressing-room.

'There, you shall have your wine.'

'I'm so happy,' said Françoise. 'I thought I'd never get to the end of that third act.'

'You've done some excellent work,' said Pierre. He leaned over and kissed her. Françoise threw her arms around his neck. 'It's you,' she said. 'Do you remember what you said to me at Delos? That you wanted to introduce something absolutely new to the theatre? Well, this time you've done it.'

'Do you really think so?' said Pierre.

'Don't you?'

'Well, I've just a dawning suspicion.'

Françoise began to laugh. 'You know you have. You look positively smug, Pierre! If only we don't have to worry too much over money, what a wonderful year we'll have!'

'As soon as we're a little better off I shall buy you another coat,' said Pierre.

'Oh, I'm quite accustomed to this one.'

'That's only too obvious,' said Pierre. He sat down in an armchair near Françoise.

'Did you have a good time with your little friend?'

'She's very nice. It's a pity for her to rot away in Rouen.'

'Did she tell you any stories?'

'Endless stories. I'll tell you them some day.'

'Well then, you're happy; you didn't waste your day.'

'I love stories,' said Françoise.

There was a knock and the door opened. With a majestic air the concierge carried in a tray with two glasses and a bottle of wine.

'Thank you very much,' said Françoise. She filled the glasses.

'Please,' said Pierre to the concierge, 'I'm not in to anyone.'

'Very good, Monsieur Labrousse,' said the woman. She went away.

Françoise picked up her glass and started on a second sandwich.

'I'm going to bring Xavière along with us tonight,' she said. 'We'll go dancing. I think that will be fun. I hope she'll neutralize Elisabeth a little.'

'She must be in the seventh heaven,' said Pierre.

'Poor child, it's painful to see her. She's so utterly miserable at having to return to Rouen.'

'Is there no way out of it?' said Pierre.

'Hardly,' said Françoise. 'She's so spineless. She would never have the strength of mind to train for a profession. And the only prospect her uncle can think of for her is a devoted husband and a lot of children.'

'You ought to take her in hand,' said Pierre.

'How can I? I only see her once a month.'

'Why don't you bring her to Paris?' said Pierre. 'You could keep an eye on her and make her work. Let her learn to type and we can easily find a job for her somewhere.'

'Her family would never consent to that,' said Françoise.

'Well, let her do it without their permission. Isn't she of age?'

'No,' said Françoise. 'But that isn't the main point. I don't think that the police would be set on her trail.'

Pierre smiled.

'What is the main point?'

Françoise hesitated; actually she had never suspected that there was a debatable point.

'In other words, your idea would be for her to live in Paris at our expense until she sorts herself out?'

'Why not?' said Pierre. 'Offer it to her as a loan.'

'Oh, of course,' said Françoise. This trick he had of conjuring up a thousand unsuspected possibilities in only a few words always took her by surprise. Where others saw only an

Sweetie ♥

impenetrable jungle, Pierre saw a virgin future which was his to shape as he chose. That was the secret of his strength.

'We've had so much luck in our life,' said Pierre, 'we ought to let others benefit from it whenever we can.'

Françoise, perplexed, stared at the bottom of her glass.

'In a way I feel very tempted,' she said. 'But I would really have to look after her. I hardly have the time.'

'Little busy bee,' said Pierre affectionately.

Françoise coloured. 'You know I haven't much leisure,' she said.

'Yes, I know,' said Pierre. 'But it's odd, the way you draw back as soon as you're confronted by something new.'

'The only something new which interests me is our future together,' said Françoise. 'I can't help it. That's what makes me happy. You've only yourself to blame for it.'

'Oh, I don't blame you,' said Pierre. 'On the contrary, I think you are far more honest than I am. There's nothing in your life that rings false.'

'That's because you attach no importance to your life as such. It's your work that counts,' said Françoise.

'That's true,' said Pierre. He began to gnaw one of his nails, and he looked ill at ease. 'With the exception of my relationship with you, everything about me is frivolous and wasteful.' He kept worrying his finger. He would not be satisfied until he had made it bleed. 'But as soon as I've got rid of Canzetti, all that will be finished.'

'That's what you say,' said Françoise.

'I shall prove it,' said Pierre.

'You are lucky. Your affaires are always easily terminated.'

'It's because, basically, no one of these dear little creatures has ever been really in love with me,' said Pierre.

'I don't think Canzetti is a self-seeking girl,' said Françoise.

'No, it's not so much to get herself parts. Only she thinks I'm a great man and she has a notion that genius will rise from her sex-appeal to her brain.'

'There's something in that,' said Françoise laughing.

'I no longer enjoy these affaires,' said Pierre. 'It's not as if I were a great sensualist, I don't even have that excuse!' He looked at Françoise confusedly. 'The truth is that I enjoy the early stages. You don't understand that?'

'Perhaps,' said Françoise. 'But I would not be interested in an affaire which had no continuity.'

'No?'

'No,' she said. 'It is something stronger than myself. I'm the faithful sort.'

'It's impossible to talk about faithfulness and unfaithfulness where we are concerned,' said Pierre. He drew Françoise to him. 'You and I are simply one. That's the truth, you know. Neither of us can be described without the other.'

'That's thanks to you,' said Françoise. She took Pierre's face between her hands, and began to kiss his cheeks, on which she could smell the fumes of tobacco somehow blended with the childish and unexpected smell of pastry. 'We are simply one,' she murmured.

Nothing that happened was completely real until she had told Pierre about it; it remained poised, motionless and uncertain, in a kind of limbo. When, in the past, she had been shy with Pierre, there were a number of things that she had brushed aside in this way: uncomfortable thoughts and ill-considered gestures. If they were not mentioned, it was almost as if they had not existed at all, and this allowed a shameful subterranean vegetation to grow up under the surface of true existence where she felt utterly alone and in danger of suffocation. Little by little she had resolved everything: she no longer knew aloneness, but she had rid herself of those chaotic subterranean tendrils. Every moment of her life that she entrusted to him, Pierre gave back to her clear, polished, completed, and they became moments of their shared life. She knew that she served the same purpose for him. There was nothing concealed, nothing modest about him: he was crafty only when he needed a shave or when his shirt was dirty; then he would pretend to have a cold and stubbornly keep his muffler wrapped around his neck, which gave him the appearance of a precocious old man.

'I must be leaving you in a moment,' she said regretfully. 'Are you going to sleep here or come to my place?'

'I'll come over to you,' said Pierre. 'I want to be with you again just as soon as I can.'

Elisabeth was already at the Dôme. She was smoking a cigarette, and staring fixedly into space. 'Something's gone wrong,' thought Françoise. She was very carefully made-up, yet her face had a puffy, tired look. She caught sight of Françoise and a fleeting smile seemed to release her from her thoughts.

'Hullo, I'm so glad to see you,' she said enthusiastically.

'So am I,' said Françoise. 'Tell me, I hope it won't annoy you, but I've asked the Pagès girl to come along with us. She's dying to go to a dance-hall. We can talk while she dances. She's no bother.'

'It's ages since I've heard any jazz,' said Elisabeth. 'That would be fun.'

'Isn't she here yet?' said Françoise. 'That's strange.' She turned towards Elisabeth. 'Well, what about your trip?' she said gaily. 'Are you definitely leaving tomorrow?'

'You think it's as simple as that,' said Elisabeth, laughing unpleasantly. 'To do that, apparently, would hurt Suzanne, and Suzanne has already gone through so much because of what happened in September.'

So that was it. Françoise gave Elisabeth a look of indignant pity: Claude's behaviour towards her was really disgusting.

'As if you hadn't suffered too.'

'Yet, but I happen to be a strong, clear-minded individual,' said Elisabeth sarcastically. 'I'm a woman who never makes a scene.'

'Yes, but Claude is no longer in love with Suzanne,' said Françoise. 'She's old and frumpy.'

'He's no longer in love with her,' said Elisabeth. 'But Suzanne is a superstition. He's convinced that, without her behind him, he'll never succeed in anything.'

Silence ensued. Elisabeth was absorbed in watching the smoke from her cigarette. She gave no outward sign of it, but what blackness there must be in her heart! She had been expecting so much from this trip, and perhaps this long period together might finally persuade Claude to break with his wife. Françoise had grown sceptical, for Elisabeth had been waiting two years for the decisive hour. She felt Elisabeth's disappointment with a painful tightening of her heart.

'I must say Suzanne is clever,' said Elisabeth. She looked at Françoise. 'She's now trying to get one of Claude's plays produced with Nanteuil. That's something else that's keeping him in Paris.'

'Nanteuil!' Françoise repeated lazily. 'What a strange idea! She looked toward the door a little uneasily. Why hadn't Xavière come?

'It's idiotic,' Elisabeth steadied her voice. 'Besides, it's obvious; as far as I can see only Pierre could put on *Partage*.

He would be magnificent as Achab.'

'It's a good part,' said Françoise.

'Do you think he might be interested?' said Elisabeth. There was an anxious appeal in her voice.

'*Partage* is a very interesting play,' said Françoise. 'Only it's not at all the sort of thing Pierre is looking for. Listen,' she added hastily, 'why doesn't Claude take his script to Berger? Would you like Pierre to write to Berger?'

Elisabeth gulped painfully. 'You have no notion of how important it would be to Claude if Pierre were to accept his play. He's got so little self-confidence. Only Pierre could get him out of that state of mind.'

Françoise looked away. Battier's play was dreadful, there was no possible question of accepting it; but she knew how much Elisabeth had staked on this last chance, and, confronted with her drawn face, she really felt pained herself. She was fully aware how much her life and her example had influenced Elisabeth's life.

'Frankly, that can't be done,' she said.

'But *Luce et Armanda* was quite a success,' said Elisabeth.

'That's why - after *Julius Caesar* Pierre wants to try to launch an unknown playwright.'

Françoise stopped almost in the middle of a sentence. With relief she saw Xavière coming towards them. Her hair was carefully arranged and a light film of make-up toned down her cheekbones and made her large sensual nose look more refined.

'I think you've met already,' said Françoise. She smiled at Xavière. 'You're terribly late. I feel sure you haven't had dinner. Would you like something to eat?'

'No, thanks, I'm not at all hungry,' said Xavière. She sat down, hanging her head so that she seemed ill at ease. 'I got lost,' she said.

Elisabeth stared at her. She was sizing her up.

'You got lost? Did you have far to come?'

Xavière turned a distressed face to Françoise.

'I don't know what happened to me. I walked straight up the boulevard, but it seemed endless. I came to an avenue that was pitch black. I must have passed the Dôme without seeing it.'

Elisabeth began to laugh. 'That took some doing,' she said. Xavière scowled at her.

'Well, here you are at last, that's the main thing,' said

Françoise. 'What about going to the Prairie? It's no longer what it was when we were younger, but it's not bad.'

'Just as you like,' said Elisabeth.

They left the café. Along the boulevard Montparnasse a strong wind was sweeping up the leaves of the plane-trees. Françoise derived a certain pleasure in crackling them underfoot, it gave her a faint suggestion of dried nuts and warm wine.

'It's at least a year since I've been to the Prairie,' she said. No one answered. Xavière, shivering, clutched her coat collar; Elisabeth was carrying her scarf in her hand; she seemed neither to feel the cold nor to see anything.

'What a crowd there is already,' said Françoise. All the stools at the bar were taken. She chose one of the more secluded tables.

'I'll have a whisky,' said Elisabeth.

'Two whiskies,' said Françoise. 'And you?'

'The same as you,' said Xavière.

'Three whiskies,' said Françoise. This smell of alcohol and smoke took her back to her girlhood. She had always enjoyed the jazz-bands, the yellow lights and the swarming crowds in night clubs. How easy it was to live a full life in a world that held both the ruins at Delphi and the bare Provençal hill-sides, as well as this congeries of humanity! She smiled at Xavière.

'Look at that snub-nosed blonde at the bar. She lives in my hotel. She wanders about the corridors for hours on end in a pale-blue nightgown. I think she's trying to hook the Negro who lives above me.'

'She's not pretty,' said Xavière. Her eyes opened wide. 'There's a dark-haired woman next to her who is very attractive. She's really beautiful!'

'I'd better tell you that her boy-friend is a wrestler; they stroll round our neighbourhood clinging to each other's little fingers.'

'Oh!' said Xavière reproachfully.

'I'm not responsible,' said Françoise.

Xavière rose to her feet: two young men had come up to their table and were smiling engagingly.

'I'm sorry, I don't dance,' said Françoise.

Elisabeth hesitated and she too rose.

'At this moment she hates me,' thought Françoise. At the

next table a rather tired blonde and a very young man were affectionately holding hands: the youth was talking ardently in a low voice, the woman smiling cautiously, without letting a single wrinkle furrow her once pretty face; the little professional from the hotel was dancing with a sailor, clinging tightly against him, her eyes half-closed; the attractive brunette, seated on her bar stool, was munching banana slices, with an expression of boredom. Françoise smiled proudly. **Each one of these men, each one of these women present here tonight was completely absorbed in living a moment of his or her insignificant individual existence.** Xavière was dancing. Elisabeth was shaken by convulsions of anger and despair. 'And I—here I am at the very heart of the dance-hall—impersonal and free. I am watching all these lives and all these faces. If I were to turn away from them, they would disintegrate at once like a deserted landscape.'

Elisabeth returned and sat down.

'You know,' said Françoise, 'I am sorry that it can't be managed.'

'I understand perfectly well . . .' Her face fell. She was incapable of remaining angry for any length of time, especially in the presence of others.

'Aren't things going well with you and Claude at the moment?' asked Françoise.

Elisabeth shook her head. Her face gave an ugly twitch, and Françoise thought she was going to burst into tears. But she controlled herself.

'Claude is working up for a crisis. He says that he can't work as long as his play has not been accepted, that he doesn't feel really free. When he's in one of those states he's terrible.'

'Surely, you can't be held responsible?' said Françoise.

'But the blame always falls on me,' said Elisabeth. Again her lips trembled. 'Because I'm a strong-minded woman. It doesn't occur to him that a strong-minded woman can suffer just as much as any other,' she said in a tone of passionate self-pity.

She burst into sobs.

'My poor Elisabeth!' said Françoise, taking her hand.

Through her tears Elisabeth's face regained a kind of child-like quality.

'It's ridiculous,' she said, dabbing her eyes. 'It can't go on

like this, with Suzanne always between us.'

'What do you want him to do?' said Françoise. 'Divorce her?'

'He'll never divorce her,' Elisabeth began to sob again in a kind of fury. 'Is he in love with me? As far as I'm concerned, I don't even know if I'm in love with him.' She looked at Françoise and her eyes were wild. 'For two years I've been fighting for this love. I've been killing myself in the process. I've sacrificed everything. And now I don't even know if we're in love with each other.'

'Of course you're in love with him,' said Françoise, her courage failing. 'At the moment you're angry with him, so you don't know what you feel, but that doesn't mean anything.' It was absolutely essential for her to reassure Elisabeth. What a terrible discovery she would make if one day she were to decide to be sincere from start to finish! She must have feared this herself, for her flashes of lucidity always stopped in time.

'I don't know any longer,' said Elisabeth.

Françoise pressed her hand tighter. She was really moved.

'Claude is weak, that's all. But he has shown you a thousand times over that he loves you.' She looked up. Xavière was standing beside the table, observing the scene with a curious smile on her face.

'Sit down,' said Françoise, embarrassed.

'No, I'm going to dance again,' said Xavière. Her expression was contemptuous, and almost spiteful. This malicious reaction gave Françoise an unpleasant shock.

Elisabeth had recovered. She was powdering her face.

'I must be patient,' she said. She steadied her voice. 'It's a question of influence. I've always played too fair with Claude, and I don't make demands on him.'

'Have you ever told him plainly that you couldn't stand the situation?'

'No,' said Elisabeth. 'I must wait.' She had resumed her hard, cautious expression. *Barclay*

Was she in love with Claude? She had thrown herself at his head simply because she, too, wanted to have a great love; the admiration she had showered on him was just another way of protecting herself against Pierre. Yet because of him she endured suffering in which both Françoise and Pierre were powerless to help her.

'What a mess,' thought Françoise with a pang.

Elisabeth had left the table. She was dancing, her eyes swollen, her mouth set. Something like envy flashed through Françoise. Elisabeth's feelings might well be false, her objective false, and false her whole life, but her present suffering was violent and real. Françoise looked at Xavière while she was dancing, her head thrown back, her face ecstatic. Her life had not yet begun; for her everything was possible and this enchanted evening held the promise of a thousand unknown enchantments. For this young girl, and for this heavy-hearted woman, the moment had a sharp and unforgettable quality. 'And I,' thought Françoise, 'just a spectator. But this jazz, and the taste of this whisky, and these orange-coloured lights, these are not mere stage effects, there must be some way of finding a proper use for them! But what?'

In Elisabeth's fierce, tense soul, the music was gently transformed into hope; Xavière transmuted it into passionate expectation; and Françoise alone found nothing in herself that harmonized with the plaintive sound of the saxophone. She searched for a desire, a regret; but behind her and before her there stretched a radiant and cloudless happiness. Pierre—that name was incapable of awakening pain. Gerbert—she was no longer concerned about Gerbert. No longer was she conscious of risk, or hope, or fear; only of this happiness over which she did not even have control. Misunderstanding with Pierre was impossible; no act would ever be irreparable. If one day she tried to inflict suffering upon herself, he would understand so well, that happiness would once more close over her. She lit a cigarette. No, she could find nothing beyond this abstract regret of having nothing to regret. Her throat was becoming dry; her heart was beating a little more quickly than usual, but she could not even believe that she was honestly tired of happiness. This uneasiness brought her no pitiful revelation. It was only a ripple on the surface, a short and, in a way, foreseeable modulation that would be resolved in peace. No longer did she get caught up in the forcefulness of a passing moment: she knew that no one of these moments was of intrinsic value. 'Imprisoned in happiness,' she murmured to herself. But she was conscious of a smile somewhere deep down within her.

Françoise cast a discouraged look at the empty glasses and the over-full ashtray: it was four o'clock, Elisabeth had long since

left, but Xavière had never left off dancing. Françoise did not dance, and to pass the time she had drunk and smoked too much. Her head was heavy and she was beginning to feel all over her body the lassitude of sleepiness.

'I think it's time to go,' she said.

'Already!' said Xavière. She looked at Françoise with disappointment. 'Are you tired?'

'A little,' said Françoise. She hesitated. 'You can stay on without me,' she said. 'You've been to a dance-hall alone before.'

'If you leave, I'll go with you,' said Xavière.

'I don't want to oblige you to go home,' said Françoise.

Xavière shrugged her shoulders with an air that accepted the inevitable. 'Oh, I may just as well go home,' she said.

'No, that would be a pity,' said Françoise. She smiled. 'Let's stay a bit longer.' Xavière's face brightened. 'This place is so nice, isn't it?' She smiled at a young man who was bowing to her and then followed him to the middle of the dance floor.

Françoise lit another cigarette. After all, nothing obliged her to resume her work the very next day. It was slightly absurd to spend hour after hour here without dancing, without speaking to a soul, but if one set one's mind to it there was fascination to be found in this kind of self-absorption. It was years since she had sat thus, lost in alcohol fumes and tobacco smoke, pursuing little dreams and thoughts that led nowhere.

Xavière came back and sat down beside Françoise.

'Why don't you dance?'

'I dance very badly,' said Françoise.

'But aren't you bored?' asked Xavière in a plaintive tone.

'Not at all. I love to look on. I'm fascinated just listening to the music and watching the people.'

She smiled. She owed to Xavière both this hour and this evening. Why exclude from her life this offering of refreshing richness, a young, completely fresh companion, with her demands, her reticent smiles and unexpected reactions?

'I can see that it can't be very amusing for you,' said Xavière. Her face looked quite dejected; she, too, now seemed a little tired.

'But I assure you that I am quite happy,' said Françoise. She gently patted Xavière's wrist. 'I enjoy being with you.'

Xavière smiled without conviction. Françoise looked at her affectionately. She no longer understood very clearly the

resistance she had put up against Pierre. It was just this very faint scent of risk and mystery that intrigued her.

'Do you know what I was thinking last night?' she asked abruptly. 'That you will never do anything as long as you stay in Rouen. There's only one way out of it and that's to come and live in Paris.'

'Live in Paris?' said Xavière in astonishment. 'I'd love to, unfortunately!'

'I'm in earnest,' said Françoise. She hesitated; she was afraid Xavière might think her tactless. 'I'll tell you what you could do: you could stay in Paris, at my hotel, if you like. I would lend you what money you need and you would train for a career, a typist perhaps. Or, better still, I have a friend who runs a beauty-parlour and she would employ you as soon as you have your certificate.'

Xavière's face darkened.

'My uncle would never consent to that,' she said.

'You can do without his consent. You aren't afraid of him, are you?'

'No,' said Xavière. She stared at her sharply pointed nails. Her pale complexion, her long fair hair a little in disorder from dancing, gave her the woebegone look of a jellyfish washed up on dry sand.

'Well?' said Françoise.

'Excuse me,' said Xavière. She rose to rejoin one of the young men who was making signs to her and her features were alive again. Françoise's glance followed her in utter amazement. Xavière had strange abrupt changes of mood. It was a little disconcerting that she had not even taken the trouble to think over Françoise's suggestion. And yet, this plan was eminently sensible. With some impatience she waited for Xavière to come back.

'Well,' she said, 'what do you think of my plan?'

'What plan?' said Xavière. She seemed honestly at a loss.

'To come and live in Paris,' said Françoise.

'Oh, to live in Paris,' said Xavière.

'But this is serious,' said Françoise. 'You seem to imagine that I'm romancing.'

Xavière shrugged her shoulders. 'But it can't be done,' she said.

'It can—if you want to do it,' said Françoise. 'What's standing in your way?'

Cynical here
'It's impossible,' said Xavière with annoyance. She looked round about her. 'This place is getting sinister, don't you think? All these people have eyes in the middle of their face. They are taking root here because they haven't even the strength to drag themselves elsewhere.'

'Well, let's go,' said Françoise. She crossed the room and opened the door. A faint grey dawn was visible in the sky. 'We could walk a little,' she said.

'We could,' said Xavière. She pulled her coat tight around her neck and began to walk very quickly. Why had she refused to take Françoise's offer seriously? It was irritating to feel this small, hostile, stubborn mind beside her.

'I must convince her,' thought Françoise. Up to the present, the discussion with Pierre and the vague dreams of the evening, the very opening of this conversation, had been only a game. Suddenly, everything had become real. Xavière's resistance was real and Françoise wanted to break it down. It was outrageous; she had felt so strongly that she was dominating Xavière, possessing her even in her past and in the still unknown meanderings of her future. And yet there was this obstinate will against which her own will was breaking.

Xavière walked faster and faster, scowling as if in pain. It was impossible to talk. Françoise followed her silently for a while, then lost her patience.

'You're sure you don't mind walking?' she said.

'Not at all,' said Xavière. Her face contorted tragically. 'I hate the cold.'

'You should have said so,' said Françoise. 'We'll go into the first bistro we find open.'

'No, let's walk if you'd like to,' said Xavière in gallant self-sacrifice.

'I'm not particularly keen on walking any farther,' said Françoise. 'But I would very much like a cup of hot coffee.'

They slackened their pace a little. Near the Gare Montparnasse, at the corner of the rue d'Odessa, people were grouped at the counter of the Café Biard. Françoise went in and sat down in a corner at the far end of the room.

'Two coffees,' she ordered.

At one of the tables a woman was asleep, with her body slumped forward: there were suitcases and bundles on the floor. At another table three Breton peasants were drinking calvados.

Françoise looked at Xavière. 'I don't understand you,' she said.

Xavière looked at her uneasily. 'Do I aggravate you?'

'I'm disappointed,' said Françoise. 'I thought you would be brave enough to accept my offer.'

Xavière hesitated. She looked around her with an agonized expression. 'I don't want to do facial massage,' she said plaintively.

Françoise laughed.

'There's nothing to force you to do that. I might well be able to find you a job as a mannequin, for instance. Or you could certainly learn to type.'

'I don't want to be a typist or a mannequin,' said Xavière vehemently.

Françoise was taken aback.

'My idea was that it would be only a beginning. Once you are trained and in a job you would have time to look about you. What exactly would interest you? Studying, drawing, acting?'

'I don't know,' said Xavière. 'Nothing in particular. Is it absolutely necessary for me to do something?' she asked a little haughtily.

'A few hours of boring work wouldn't seem to me too much to pay for your independence,' said Françoise.

Xavière wrinkled her face in disgust.

'I hate these compromises. If one can't have the sort of life one wants, one might as well be dead.'

'The fact is that you will never kill yourself,' said Françoise a little sharply. 'So it would be just as well to try to live a suitable life.'

She swallowed a little coffee. This was really early morning coffee, acrid and sweet like the coffee you drink on a station platform after a night of travel, or in country inns while waiting for the first bus. Its dank flavour softened Françoise's heart.

'What do you think life should be like?' she asked amiably.

'Like it was when I was a child,' said Xavière.

'Having things come to you without your having to look for them? As when your father took you for a ride on his big horse?'

'There were a great many other moments,' said Xavière. 'When he took me hunting at six o'clock in the morning and

the grass was covered with fresh cobwebs. **Everything seemed important.**

'But you'll find similar happiness in Paris,' said Françoise. 'Just think, music, plays, dance-halls.'

'And I would have to be like your friend, counting the number of drinks I've had and looking at my watch all the time, so that I can get to work the next morning.'

Françoise felt hurt, for she had been looking at the time.

'She almost seems annoyed with me. But why?' she thought.

This clearly unpredictable Xavière interested her.

'Yet you are prepared to accept a far drearier life than hers,' she said, 'and one which is ten times less free. As a matter of fact, it's obvious: you're afraid. Perhaps not afraid of your family, but afraid of breaking with your own little ways, afraid of freedom.'

Xavière bent her head without replying.

'What's the matter?' said Françoise softly. 'You are so completely obstinate. You don't seem to put any trust in me.'

'But I do,' said Xavière coldly.

'What is the matter?' repeated Françoise.

'It drives me mad to think of my life,' said Xavière.

'But that's not all,' said Françoise. 'You have been queer the whole evening.' She smiled. 'Were you annoyed at having Elisabeth with us? You don't seem to care very much for her.'

'Why?' said Xavière. She added stiffly: 'She must surely be a very interesting person.'

'You were shocked to see her crying in public, weren't you?' said Françoise. 'Admit it. I shock you too. You thought me disgracefully sentimental.'

Xavière stared, wide-eyed. She had the frank blue eyes of a child.

'It seemed odd to me,' she said ingenuously.

She remained on the defensive. It was useless to press the matter. Françoise stifled a little yawn. 'I'm going home,' she said. 'Are you going to Inès's place?'

'Yes, I'm going to try to pick up my things and get out without waking her,' said Xavière. 'Otherwise she'll tell me off.'

'I thought you were fond of Inès?'

'Yes, I am fond of her,' said Xavière. 'But she's the sort of person in front of whom one can't even drink a glass of milk without having a guilty conscience.'

Was the bitterness of her voice aimed at Inès or Françoise?

In any case it was wise not to insist.

'Well, let's go,' said Françoise. She put her hand on Xavière's shoulder. 'I'm sorry you didn't have a pleasant evening.'

Xavière's face suddenly fell and all the hardness disappeared. She looked at Françoise with despair.

'But I've had a lovely time,' she said. She looked down and said quickly: 'But you can't have had a very good time dragging me around like a poodle.'

Françoise smiled. 'So that's it,' she thought. 'She really thought that I was taking her out simply from pity.' She looked affectionately at this touchy little person.

'On the contrary, I was very happy to have you with me, otherwise I wouldn't have asked you,' said Françoise. 'Why did you think that?'

Xavière gave her a look of loving trust.

'You have such a full life,' she said. 'So many friends, so much to do, I felt thoroughly insignificant.'

'That's foolish,' said Françoise. It was astonishing to think that Xavière could have been jealous of Elisabeth. 'Then when I spoke to you about coming to Paris, you thought I wanted to offer you charity?'

'I did - a bit,' said Xavière humbly.

'And you hated me for it,' said Françoise.

'I didn't hate you for it; I hated myself.' - Hegel, *Lung*

'That's the same thing,' said Françoise. Her hand moved from Xavière's shoulder and slipped down her arm. 'But I'm fond of you,' she said. 'I would be extremely happy to have you near me.'

Xavière turned overjoyed and incredulous eyes towards her.

'Didn't we have a good time together this afternoon?' said Françoise.

'Yes,' said Xavière embarrassed.

'We could have lots of times like that! Doesn't that tempt you?'

Xavière squeezed Françoise's hand.

'Oh, how I'd like to,' she said enthusiastically.

'If you agree it's as good as done,' said Françoise. 'I'll get Inès to send you a letter saying that she's found you a job. And the day you make up your mind, all you'll have to do is write to me "I'm coming," and you will come.' She patted the warm hand that lay trustingly in hers. 'You'll see, you'll have a beautiful rich little life.'

'Oh, I do want to come,' said Xavière. She sank with all her weight against Françoise's shoulder; for some time they remained motionless, leaning against each other. Xavière's hair brushed against Françoise's cheek. Their fingers remained intertwined.

'It makes me sad to leave you,' said Françoise.

'So it does me,' said Xavière softly.

'My dear little Xavière,' murmured Françoise. Xavière looked at her, with eyes shining, parted lips; mollified, yielding; she had abandoned herself completely. Henceforth Françoise would lead her through life.

'I shall make her happy,' she decided with conviction.

Chapter Three

A ray of light shone from under Xavière's door. Françoise heard a faint jingling and a rustle of garments, and then she knocked. There was a prolonged silence.

'Who is it?'

'It is I, Françoise. It's almost time to leave.'

Ever since Xavière had arrived at the Hotel Bayard, Françoise had learned never to knock at her door unexpectedly, and never to arrive early for an appointment. All the same, her arrival always created mysterious agitation on the other side of the door.

'Would you mind waiting for me a minute? I'll come up to your room in a moment.'

'All right, I'll wait for you,' said Françoise.

She went upstairs. Xavière liked formality. She never opened her door to Françoise until she had made elaborate preparations to receive her. To be taken by surprise in her everyday privacy would have seemed to her obscene.

'I only hope everything goes well tonight,' thought Françoise. 'We'll never be ready in three days.' She sat down on the sofa and picked up one of the manuscripts which were piled on the night table. Pierre had asked her to read the plays sent in to him and it was work that she usually found entertaining. *Marsyas*, or *The Doubtful Metamorphosis*. Françoise looked despondently at the titles. Things had not gone at all well that afternoon; everyone was worn out. Pierre's nerves had been on edge and he had not slept for a week. With anything less than a hundred performances to a full house, expenses would not be covered.

She threw down the manuscript and rose to her feet. She had plenty of time to make up her face again, but she was too agitated. She lit a cigarette, and a smile came to her lips. Actually she enjoyed nothing better than this last-minute excitement. She knew perfectly well that everything would be ready when the time came. Pierre could do wonders in three days. That question of mercury lights would be settled. And if only Tedesco could make up his mind to fall into line with

confidence in the face of
ambiguity