

yet, it was outside her, on the stage, that they materialized. It was agonizing. She would feel herself responsible for the slightest failure and she couldn't raise a finger to prevent it.

...ight with a burst  
...s raised, but his  
...Françoise's life as  
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...audience, and yet  
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...e been the worst,

'Tomorrow afternoon at two o'clock, we'll rehearse the third act without costumes,' said Pierre. 'And tomorrow morning we'll go through the whole thing, in sequence and in costume.'

'I'm going to beat it,' said Gerbert. 'Will you need me tomorrow morning?'

Françoise hesitated. With Gerbert the worst drudgery became almost fun; the morning without him would be arid, but his pathetic tired face was heart-breaking to behold.

'No, there isn't much left to do,' she said.

'Is that really true?' said Gerbert.

'Absolutely true. You can go and sleep like a log.'

Elisabeth walked up to Pierre.

'You know, this Julius Caesar of yours is really extraordinary,' she said. Her face had an intent expression. 'It's so different and at the same time so realistic. The silence at that moment when you raise your hand – the quality of that silence – it's magnificent.'

'That's sweet of you,' said Pierre.

'I assure you it will be a success,' she said emphatically. She looked Xavière up and down with amusement.

'This young lady doesn't seem to care very much for the theatre. So blasée already?'

'I had no idea the theatre was like this,' said Xavière in a disdainful tone.

'What did you think it was like?' said Pierre.

'They all look like shop assistants. They look so intent.'

'It's thrilling,' said Elisabeth. 'All this groping, all this seemingly confused effort which finally bursts forth as a thing of beauty.'

'Personally, I find it disgusting,' said Xavière. Anger had swept away her timidity. She threw a black look at Elisabeth. 'An effort is not a pretty thing to see. And when the effort miscarries, well then,' she sneered, 'it's ludicrous.'

'It's the same in every art,' said Elisabeth curtly. 'Beautiful things are not easily created. The more precious they are, the more work they require. You'll see.'

'The things I call precious,' said Xavière, 'are those that fall like manna from heaven.' She pouted. 'If they have to be bought, they're merchandise just like anything else. That doesn't interest me.'

'What a little romantic!' said Elisabeth with a cold laugh.

'I know what she means,' said Pierre. 'All our seethings and bubblings can scarcely appear very appetizing.'

Elisabeth turned an almost belligerent face towards him.

'Well! That's news! Do you now believe in inspiration?'

'No, but it's true that our work isn't beautiful. On the whole, it's a disgusting mess.'

'I didn't say this work was beautiful,' said Elisabeth abruptly. 'I know that beauty lies only in the completed work, but I find it thrilling to watch the transition from the formless to the pure and completed state.'

Françoise looked at Pierre imploringly. It was painful to argue with Elisabeth. If she couldn't have the last word, she felt she had lost prestige in the sight of the onlookers. To compel their esteem, their love, she fought them with vicious dishonesty. This might go on for hours.

'Yes,' said Pierre looking vague, 'but only a specialist can appreciate that.'

There was a silence.

'I think it would be wise to go,' said Françoise.

Elisabeth looked at her watch.

'Heavens! I'll miss the last métro,' she said with dismay.



'I'm going to dash away. I'll see you tomorrow.'

'We'll take you home,' said Françoise feebly.

'No, no, you'll only delay me,' said Elisabeth. She seized her gloves and bag, cast a wavering smile into space and disappeared.

'We could go somewhere and have a drink,' said Françoise.

'If you two aren't too tired,' said Pierre.

'I don't feel the least bit sleepy,' said Xavière.

Françoise locked the door and they left the theatre. Pierre hailed a taxi.

'Where shall we go?' he said.

'To the Pôle Nord. It's quiet there,' said Françoise.

Pierre told the driver the address. Françoise turned on the light and powdered her nose. She wondered if she had been well advised in suggesting that they go out together. Xavière was sullen and the silence was already becoming awkward.

'Go in. Don't wait for me,' said Pierre, looking for change to pay the taxi.

Françoise pushed open the leather door.

'Is that table in the corner all right?' she said.

'Yes. This place looks very nice,' said Xavière. She took off her coat.

'Excuse me for one moment. I feel a little untidy and I don't like making up my face in public.'

'What shall I order for you?' said Françoise.

'Something strong,' said Xavière.

Françoise's eyes followed her.

'She said that deliberately because I powdered my face in the taxi,' she thought. When Xavière adopted this attitude of discreet superiority, it was because she was frothing with rage.

'Where has your little friend gone?' said Pierre.

'She's titivating. She's in a queer mood tonight.'

'She really is rather charming,' said Pierre. 'What are you having?'

'An aquavit,' said Françoise. 'Order two.'

'Two aquavits,' said Pierre. 'But give us the real aquavit. And one whisky.'

'You're so thoughtful,' said Françoise. The last time she had been brought some cheap brandy. That had been two months ago but Pierre had not forgotten. He never forgot anything connected with her.

'Why is she in a bad mood?' said Pierre.

'She thinks I didn't see enough of her. It's annoying, all the time I waste with her and still she isn't satisfied.'

'You've got to be fair,' said Pierre. 'You don't see much of her.'

'If I were to give her any more time, I wouldn't have a minute to myself,' said Françoise vehemently.

'I understand,' said Pierre. 'But you can't expect her to be so particularly satisfied with you. She has only you and she's very fond of you. That can't be much fun.'

'I don't say it is,' said Françoise. Perhaps she was a little off-hand with Xavière. She found the idea unpleasant. She didn't want to have the slightest reason for blaming herself. 'Here she is,' she said.

She looked at her with surprise. The blue dress fitted revealingly over a slender, rounded body, and the delicate youthful face was framed by sleek hair. The supple, feminine Xavière was something Françoise had not seen since their first meeting.

'I ordered an aquavit for you,' said Françoise.

'What is it?' said Xavière.

'Taste it,' said Pierre, pushing a glass toward her.

Xavière cautiously put her lips to the transparent spirit.

'It's terrible,' she said smiling.

'Would you like something else?'

'No, brandy is always terrible,' she said soberly, 'but one has to drink it.' She leaned her head back, half-closed her eyes and lifted the glass to her mouth.

'It burns all the way down my throat,' she said. She ran her fingers along her slender neck. Her hand slipped slowly along her body. 'And it burns here. And here. It is odd. I feel as if I were being lighted up from inside.'

'Is this the first time you've been to a rehearsal?' said Pierre.

'Yes,' said Xavière.

'And you were disappointed?'

'A little.'

'Do you really believe what you said to Elisabeth?' asked Françoise, 'or did you say it because she annoyed you?'

'She did annoy me,' said Pierre. He pulled a tobacco-pouch out of his pocket and began to fill his pipe. 'In point of fact, to a pure and uninitiated soul, the solemn way in which we seek to create the exact reproduction of something that doesn't exist must seem positively obscene.'



'There's no choice, since we really do want to make it exist,' said Françoise.

'If at least we succeeded the first time, and enjoyed it! But no, we have to grumble and sweat. All that drudgery to produce a ghost . . .' He smiled at Xavière. 'You think it's ridiculous obstinacy?'

'I never like to take trouble over anything,' said Xavière demurely.

Françoise was a little surprised that Pierre took these childish whims so seriously.

'You are questioning the validity of art as a whole, if you take that line,' she said.

'Yes, why not?' said Pierre. 'Don't you see that at this moment the world is in turmoil? We may have war within the next six months.' He caught his left hand between his teeth. 'And here I am trying to reproduce the colour of dawn.'

'What do you want to do?' said Françoise. She felt very upset. Pierre it was who had convinced her that the greatest thing in the world was to create beauty. Their whole life together had been built on this belief. He had no right to change his opinion without warning her.

'Why, I want *Julius Caesar* to be a success,' said Pierre. 'But I feel the size of a bee's knee.'

When had he begun to think that? Did it really worry him or was it one of those brief flashes of illumination which gave him a moment's pleasure and then disappeared without leaving a trace? Françoise dared not continue the conversation. Xavière did not seem bored, but she was looking down.

'Suppose Elisabeth were to hear you,' said Françoise.

'Yes, art is like Claude. It mustn't be touched, otherwise . . .'

'It will collapse immediately,' said Françoise. 'She seems almost to have a premonition.' She turned to Xavière. 'Claude, you know, is the chap who was with her at the Flore the other evening.'

'That horrible dark fellow!' said Xavière.

'He's not so ugly,' said Françoise.

'He's pseudo-handsome,' said Pierre.

'And a pseudo-genius,' said Françoise.

Xavière's look brightened.

'What would she do if you were to tell her that he is stupid and ugly,' she said winningly.

'She wouldn't believe it,' said Françoise. She thought a

moment. 'I think she would break with us and she would hate Battier.'

'You haven't a very high opinion of Elisabeth,' said Pierre cheerfully.

'Not very high,' said Xavière a little embarrassed. She seemed determined to be pleasant to Pierre. Perhaps in order to show Françoise that her ill humour was directed at her alone. Perhaps, too, she was flattered that he took her side.

'What exactly do you dislike about her?' asked Pierre.

Xavière hesitated.

'She's so artificial. Her scarf, her voice, the way she taps her cigarette on the table, it's all done deliberately.' She shrugged her shoulders. 'And it's done badly. I'm sure she doesn't like tobacco. She doesn't even know how to smoke.'

'She's been practising since the age of eighteen,' said Pierre.

Xavière smiled furtively. Her smile indicated a secret understanding with herself.

'I don't dislike people who act a part in front of other people,' she said. 'The ridiculous thing about that woman is that, even when she's alone, she has to walk with a firm step and make deliberate movements with her mouth.'

Her voice was so hard that Françoise felt hurt.

'I think you like to dress up yourself,' said Pierre. 'I wonder what your face is like without the fringe and those rolls that hide half of it. And your handwriting is disguised, isn't it?'

'I've always disguised my handwriting,' said Xavière proudly. 'For a long time I wrote in a round hand, like this.' She traced letters in the air with the point of her finger. 'Now I use a pointed hand. It's more refined.'

'The worst thing about Elisabeth,' said Pierre, 'is that even her feelings are false. Fundamentally, she doesn't give a damn about painting. She's a communist and she admits she doesn't give a damn about the proletariat!'

'Lying doesn't bother me,' said Xavière. 'What I think is monstrous is making up one's mind in that way, as if to order. To think that every day at a set hour she begins to paint without having any desire to paint. She goes to meet her man whether she has any desire to see him or not . . .' Her upper lip curled in a contemptuous sneer. 'How can anyone submit to living according to plan, with time-tables and homework, as if they were still at a boarding school? I'd rather be a failure!'

She had achieved her aim: Françoise had been struck by



the indictment. Usually, Xavière's insinuations left her cold; but tonight, it was a different matter. The attention Pierre was paying to Xavière's opinions lent them weight.

'You make appointments and then don't keep them,' said Françoise. 'It's all very well when you do that to Inès, but you might also ruin some real friendships by going through life like that.'

'If I like people, I'll always want to keep appointments,' said Xavière.

'That's not bound to happen every time,' said Françoise.

'Well, that's just too bad,' said Xavière. She pouted disdainfully. 'I've always ended up by quarrelling with everyone.'

'How could anyone quarrel with Inès?' said Pierre. 'She's like a sheep.'

'Oh, don't be too sure of that,' said Xavière.

'Really?' said Pierre. His eyes wrinkled gaily. He was curiosity itself. 'With that big, innocent face do you mean to tell me she's liable to bite you? What has she done to you?'

'She hasn't done anything,' said Xavière reticently.

'Oh, please tell me,' said Pierre in his most coaxing voice. 'I'd be delighted to know what's hidden in the depths of those still waters.'

'Oh nothing. Inès is a dunce,' said Xavière. 'The point is, I don't like anyone to feel they hold any proprietary rights over me.' She smiled and Françoise's uneasiness crystallized. When alone with Françoise, Xavière, despite herself, permitted loathing, pleasure, affection, to be visible on a defenceless face, a child's face. Now she felt herself a woman in front of a man and her features displayed precisely the shade of confidence or reserve she wanted to express.

'Her affection must be an encumbrance,' said Pierre with a look of concurrence and innocence which trapped Xavière.

'That's right,' said Xavière brightening. 'Once I put off an appointment at the last minute - the evening we went to the Prairie. She pulled a face a yard long . . .'

Françoise laughed.

'Yes,' said Xavière excitedly. 'I was rude, but she dared to make some uncalled-for remarks,' she blushed and added, 'about something that was none of her concern.'

So that was it. Inès must have questioned Xavière about her relations with Françoise, and perhaps, with her calm Norman heavy-handedness, had joked about it. Beneath all Xavière's

vagaries there was without question a whole world of obstinate and secret thoughts. It was a somewhat disquieting idea.

Pierre laughed.

'I know someone, that young Eloy girl, who always answers when a friend breaks a date: "It so happens that I'm no longer free!" But not everyone has that amount of tact.'

Xavière frowned.

'In any case, not Inès,' she said. She must have been vaguely aware of the sarcasm, because her face had frozen.

'It's very complicated, you know,' said Pierre seriously. 'I can readily understand that you find it distasteful to follow the rules, but it's also impossible to live only for the moment.'

'Why?' said Xavière. 'Why do people always have to drag so much dead weight about with them?'

'Look,' said Pierre, 'time isn't made up of a heap of little separate bits into which you can shut yourself up in turn. When you think you're living purely in the present, you're involving your future whether you like it or not.' B&T

'I don't understand,' said Xavière. Her tone was not friendly.

'I'll try to explain,' said Pierre. When he became interested in a person, he was capable of carrying on a discussion for hours with angelic sincerity and patience. It was one form of his generosity. Françoise rarely took the trouble to explain what she thought.

'Let's assume you've decided to go to a concert,' said Pierre. 'Just as you're about to set out, the idea of walking or taking the métro there strikes you as unbearable. So you convince yourself that you are free as regards your previous decision, and you stay at home. That's all very well, but when ten minutes later you find yourself sitting in an arm-chair, bored stiff, you are no longer in the least free. You're simply suffering the consequences of your own act.'

Xavière laughed dryly.

'Concerts! That's another of your beautiful inventions. As if anyone could want to hear music at fixed hours! - It's utterly ridiculous.' She added in a tone of almost bitter hatred: 'Has Françoise told you that I was supposed to go to a concert this afternoon?'

'No, but I do know that as a rule you can never bring yourself to leave your room. It's a shame to live like a hermit in Paris.'

'Well, this evening isn't going to make me want to change



my mind,' she said scornfully.

Pierre's face darkened.

'You'll miss scores of precious opportunities if you carry on like that,' he said.

'Always being afraid of losing something! To me there's nothing more sordid. If it's lost, it's lost, that's all there is to it!'

'Is your life really a series of heroic renunciations?' said Pierre with a sarcastic smile.

'Do you mean I'm a coward? If you knew how little I care!' said Xavière smugly, with a slight curl of her upper lip.

There was a silence. Pierre and Xavière both assumed poker-faces.

'I think we'd better go home to bed,' said Françoise.

What was most aggravating was that she herself could not overlook Xavière's ill humour as easily as during the rehearsal. Xavière had suddenly begun to count, though no one understood exactly why.

'Do you see that woman facing us?' said Françoise. 'Listen to her a moment. She's been telling her boy-friend all the particular secrets of her soul for quite a long time.'

She was a young woman with heavy eyelids. She was staring, as if hypnotized, at her companion. 'I've never been able to follow the rules of flirting,' she was saying. 'I can't bear being touched; it's morbid.'

In another corner, a young woman with green and blue feathers in her hair was looking uncertainly at a man's huge hand that had just pounced on hers.

'This is a great meeting-place for young couples,' said Pierre.

Once more a long silence ensued. Xavière had raised her arm to her lips and was gently blowing the fine down on her skin. Françoise felt she ought to think of something to say, but everything sounded false even as she was putting it into words.

'Have I ever told you anything about Gerbert?' said Françoise to Xavière.

'A little,' said Xavière. 'You've told me he's very nice.'

'He had a queer childhood,' said Françoise. 'He comes from a completely poverty-stricken working-class family. His mother went mad when he was a baby, his father was out of work, and the boy earned a few sous a day selling newspapers. One fine day a pal of his took him along to a film-studio to look for a job as an extra, and it happened that both were taken on.'

He couldn't have been more than ten years old at the time. He was very likeable and he attracted attention. He was given minor parts and, later on, more important ones. He began to make good money, which his father squandered royally.' Françoise gazed apathetically at a tremendous white cake, decorated with fruit and arabesques of icing, which reposed upon a nearby tray; just looking at it was enough to make anyone feel sick. No one was listening to her story.

'People began to take an interest in him. Péclard more or less adopted him; he's still living with him. He's had as many as six adoptive fathers at one time. They dragged him out to cafés and night clubs; the women used to stroke his head. Pierre was one of these fathers; he helped him with his work and his reading.' She smiled and her smile was lost in space. Pierre, huddled into himself, was smoking his pipe. Xavière looked barely polite. Françoise felt ridiculous, but she kept talking with stubborn animation.

'That boy had a very funny education. He was an expert on surrealism without ever having read a line of Racine. It was touching, because to fill in the gaps he used to go to the public libraries to pore over atlases and books on mathematics like a real little self-educator, but he kept it all a secret. And then he had a very hard time of it. He was growing up; people could no longer find amusement in him as if he were a little performing monkey. About the same time as he lost his job in the movies, his adoptive fathers dropped him, one after the other. Péclard dressed and fed him when he thought of it, but that was all. It was then that Pierre took him in hand and persuaded him to take up the theatre. Now he's made a good start. He still lacks experience, but he's talented and has a great stage-sense. He'll get somewhere.'

'How old is he?' asked Xavière.

'He looks sixteen, but he's twenty.'

Pierre smiled faintly.

'I must say, you do know how to spin out a conversation,' he said.

'I'm very glad you've told me his story,' said Xavière eagerly. 'It's extremely amusing to picture that little boy and all those self-important men who condescendingly kicked him around, and so felt strong and generous, and patronizing.'

'You can easily see me doing that, can't you?' said Pierre, pulling a wry face.



'You? Why? No more than the others,' said Xavière, in all innocence. She looked at Françoise with marked affection. 'I always thoroughly enjoy your way of telling stories.'

She was offering Françoise a transference of her allegiance. The woman with the green and blue feathers was saying in a flat voice: '... I only rushed through it, but for a small town it's very picturesque.' She had decided to leave her bare arm on the table and as it lay there, forgotten, ignored, the man's hand was stroking a piece of flesh that no longer belonged to anyone.

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She spoke to herself and no one answered her.

'Have you noticed how pretty those green and gilt latticed windows are?' said Françoise.

'In the dining-room at Lubersac,' said Xavière, 'there were leaded windows, too. But they weren't as wishy-washy as these, they had beautiful rich colours. When I looked out at the park through the yellow panes, there might have been a thunderstorm over the landscape; through the green and blue it appeared like paradise, with trees of precious stones and lawns of brocade; and when through the red, I thought I was in the bowels of the earth.'

Pierre made a perceptible effort to be amiable. 'Which did you prefer?' he asked.

'The yellow, of course,' said Xavière. She stared into space, as if in suspense. 'It's terrible the way one loses things as one grows older.'

'But you can't remember everything?' he said.

'Why not? I never forget anything,' said Xavière scornfully. 'For instance, I remember very clearly how beautiful colours used to transport me in the past; now ...' she said with a disillusioned smile, 'I only find them pleasing.'

'Yes, of course! That always happens when you grow older,' said Pierre in a kind voice. 'But there are other things to be gained. Now you understand books and pictures and plays which would have been meaningless to you in your childhood.'

'But I don't give a damn about understanding just with my mind,' said Xavière with unexpected violence and with a kind of sneer. 'I'm not an intellectual.'

'Why do you have to be so disagreeable?' said Pierre abruptly.

Xavière stared, wide-eyed.

'I'm not being disagreeable.'

'You know very well that you are. You hate me on the slightest pretext. Though I think I can guess why.'

'What do you think?' asked Xavière.

Her cheeks were flushed with anger. Her face was extremely attractive, with such subtly variable shadings that it seemed not to be composed of flesh, but rather of ecstasy, of bitterness, of sorrow, to which the eye became magically sensitive. Yet, despite this ethereal transparency, the outlines of her nose and mouth were extremely sensual.

'You thought I wanted to criticize your way of life,' said Pierre, 'that's not so. I was arguing with you as I would argue with Françoise, or with myself. And for the simple reason that your point of view interested me.'

'Of course you chose the most malicious interpretation at once,' said Xavière. 'I'm not a sensitive child. If you think I'm weak and capricious and I don't know what else, you can surely tell me.'

'Not at all, I'm very envious of your capacity to feel things so strongly,' said Pierre. 'I understand your putting a higher value on that than on anything else.'

If he had taken it into his head to win his way back into Xavière's good graces, this was only the beginning.

'Yes,' said Xavière with a certain gloom; her eyes flashed. 'I'm horrified that you should think that of me. It's not true. I don't get annoyed like a child.'

'Still, don't you see,' said Pierre in a conciliatory tone, 'you put an end to the conversation, and from that moment on you were no longer in the least friendly.'

'I wasn't aware of it,' said Xavière.

'Try to remember; you're sure to become aware of it,' Xavière hesitated.

'It wasn't for the reason you thought.'

'What was the reason?'

Xavière made a brusque gesture.

'No, it's stupid, it's of no importance. What good does it do always to hark back to the past? It's over and done with now.'

Pierre sat up and faced Xavière squarely, he would spend the whole night here rather than give in. To Françoise, such



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'But you can't remember everything?' he said.

'Why not? I never forget anything,' said Xavière scornfully. 'For instance, I remember very clearly how beautiful colours used to transport me in the past; now ...' she said with a disillusioned smile, 'I only find them pleasing.'

'Yes, of course! That always happens when you grow older,' said Pierre in a kind voice. 'But there are other things to be gained. Now you understand books and pictures and plays which would have been meaningless to you in your childhood.'

'But I don't give a damn about understanding just with my mind,' said Xavière with unexpected violence and with a kind of sneer. 'I'm not an intellectual.'

'Why do you have to be so disagreeable?' said Pierre abruptly.

Xavière stared, wide-eyed.

'I'm not being disagreeable.'

'You know very well that you are. You hate me on the slightest pretext. Though I think I can guess why.'

'What do you think?' asked Xavière.

Her cheeks were flushed with anger. Her face was extremely attractive, with such subtly variable shadings that it seemed not to be composed of flesh, but rather of ecstasy, of bitterness, of sorrow, to which the eye became magically sensitive. Yet, despite this ethereal transparency, the outlines of her nose and mouth were extremely sensual.

'You thought I wanted to criticize your way of life,' said Pierre, 'that's not so. I was arguing with you as I would argue with Françoise, or with myself. And for the simple reason that your point of view interested me.'

'Of course you chose the most malicious interpretation at once,' said Xavière. 'I'm not a sensitive child. If you think I'm weak and capricious and I don't know what else, you can surely tell me.'

'Not at all, I'm very envious of your capacity to feel things so strongly,' said Pierre. 'I understand your putting a higher value on that than on anything else.'

If he had taken it into his head to win his way back into Xavière's good graces, this was only the beginning.

'Yes,' said Xavière with a certain gloom; her eyes flashed. 'I'm horrified that you should think that of me. It's not true. I don't get annoyed like a child.'

'Still, don't you see,' said Pierre in a conciliatory tone, 'you put an end to the conversation, and from that moment on you were no longer in the least friendly.'

'I wasn't aware of it,' said Xavière.

'Try to remember; you're sure to become aware of it,' Xavière hesitated.

'It wasn't for the reason you thought.'

'What was the reason?'

Xavière made a brusque gesture.

'No, it's stupid, it's of no importance. What good does it do always to hark back to the past? It's over and done with now.'

Pierre sat up and faced Xavière squarely, he would spend the whole night here rather than give in. To Françoise, such



persistence sometimes seemed tactless, but Pierre was not afraid of being tactless. He had consideration for other people's feelings only in small things. What exactly did he want of Xavière? polite rencontres on the hotel staircase? an affaire? love? friendship?

'It's of no importance if we expect never to see each other again,' said Pierre. 'But that would be a pity: don't you think we could establish pleasant relations?' He had infused a kind of wheedling timidity into his voice. He had such absolute control over his face and his slightest inflections, that it was a little disconcerting.

Xavière gave him a wary and yet almost affectionate look. 'Yes, I think so,' she said.

'Then let's get this straight,' said Pierre. 'What did you hold against me?' His smile already held an implication of secret understanding.

Xavière was playing with a strand of hair. Watching the slow and steady movement of her fingers, she said:

'It suddenly occurred to me that you were trying to be nice to me because of Françoise, and I disliked that.' She flung back the golden strand. 'I have never asked anyone to be nice to me.'

'Why did you think that?' said Pierre. He was chewing the stem of his pipe.

'I don't know,' said Xavière.

'You thought that I'd been too hasty in putting myself on terms of intimacy with you? And that made you angry with me and with yourself? Isn't that so? Therefore, out of some sort of surliness, you decided that my cordiality was only a pretence.'

Xavière said nothing.

'Was that it?' asked Pierre with a twinkle.

'Yes, in a way,' said Xavière with a flattered and embarrassed smile. Again she took hold of a few hairs and began to run her fingers up and down them, squinting at them with a stupid expression. Had she given it so much thought? Certainly Françoise, out of laziness, had over-simplified Xavière; she even wondered, a little uneasily, how she could possibly have treated Xavière like an insignificant little girl for the last few weeks; but wasn't Pierre deriving some pleasure out of making her complicated? In any case, they did not both view her in the same light. Slight as it was, this variance was apparent to Françoise.

'If I hadn't wanted to see you, it would have been very simple to go straight back to the hotel,' said Pierre.

'You might have wanted to see me out of curiosity,' said Xavière. 'That would be natural; you and Françoise have a way of pooling everything.'

A whole world of secret resentment was discernible in this short off-hand sentence.

'You thought we had mutually agreed to lecture you?' said Pierre. 'But that had nothing to do with the case.'

'You were like two grown-ups giving a child a good talking-to,' said Xavière, who seemed now to be sulking only on principle.

'But I didn't say anything,' said Françoise.

Xavière assumed a knowing look. Pierre stared at her, smiling earnestly.

'You'll understand, after you've seen us together enough times, that you need have no fear of considering us as two distinct individuals. I could no more prevent Françoise from being friendly towards you, than she could force me to be friendly towards you if I didn't feel so inclined.' He turned to Françoise. 'Isn't that so?'

'Certainly,' said Françoise with a warmth that apparently did not ring false. She felt a little sick at heart; 'we are but one': that's all very nice, but Pierre was demanding his independence. Of course, in a sense they were two, that she knew very well.

'You both have so many ideas in common,' said Xavière. 'I'm never sure which of you is speaking or to whom to reply.'

'Does it seem preposterous that I, personally, should have a feeling of affection for you?' said Pierre.

Xavière looked at him in some hesitation.

'There's no reason why you should; I've nothing interesting to say, and you . . . you have so many ideas about everything.'

'You mean that I'm so old,' said Pierre. 'You're the one who drew the malicious conclusions. You think I fancy myself.'

'How could you think that!' said Xavière.

Pierre's voice became grave, faintly betraying the professional actor.

'Had I taken you for a charming inconsequential little person, I would have been more polite to you; I would wish for something other than mere politeness between us, because it so happens that I think very highly of you.'



*maintaining power*

'You are wrong,' said Xavière without conviction.

'And it's on purely personal grounds that I hope to win your friendship. Would you like to make a pact of personal friendship with me?'

'Gladly,' said Xavière. She opened wide her innocent eyes. She smiled a charming smile of assent, an almost amorous smile. Françoise looked at this unknown face, filled with reticence and promise, and she saw again that other face, innocent and childish, leaning on her shoulder one grey dawn. She had been unable to retain it; it had become obliterated; it was lost, perhaps, for ever. And suddenly, with regret, with resentment, she felt how much she might have loved her.

'Shake hands on it,' said Pierre. He put his open hand on the table. He had pleasing hands, dry and delicate. Xavière did not hold out her hand.

'I don't like that gesture,' she said coldly. 'It seems adolescent to me.'

Pierre withdrew his hand. When he was thwarted, his upper lip jutted forward, making him look unnatural and a little ill-bred. Silence ensued.

'Are you coming to the dress rehearsal?' asked Pierre.

'Of course, I'm looking forward to seeing you as a ghost,' said Xavière eagerly.

The room was almost empty. Only a few half-drunken Scandinavians were left at the bar. The men were flushed, the women bedraggled, and everyone was kissing everyone else roundly.

'I think we ought to go,' said Françoise.

Pierre turned to her anxiously.

'That's true, you've got to get up early tomorrow. Aren't you tired?'

'No more than I should be.'

'We'll take a taxi.'

'Another taxi?' said Françoise.

'Well, that can't be helped. You must get some sleep.'

They went out and Pierre stopped a taxi. He sat on the tip-up seat opposite Françoise and Xavière.

'You look sleepy, too,' he said amiably.

'Yes, I am sleepy,' said Xavière. 'I'm going to make myself some tea.'

'Tea!' said Françoise. 'You would do better if you went to

bed. It's three o'clock.'

'I detest going to bed when I'm dead tired,' said Xavière, with an apologetic look.

'You prefer to wait until you're wide awake?' said Pierre in an amused tone.

'The very thought of being subject to natural needs disgusts me,' said Xavière haughtily.

They got out of the taxi and went upstairs.

'Good night,' said Xavière. She opened her door without holding out her hand.

Pierre and Françoise went on up another flight. Pierre's dressing-room at the theatre was topsy-turvy these days and he had been sleeping in Françoise's room every night.

'I thought you were going to get angry again when she refused to put her hand in yours,' said Françoise.

Pierre sat down on the edge of the bed.

'I thought she was going to put on her shy act again and it irritated me,' he said. 'But on second thoughts, it sprang from a good motive. She didn't want an agreement, which she took dead seriously, to be treated like a game.'

'That would be just like her, certainly,' said Françoise. She had a curiously murky taste in her mouth that she could not get rid of.

'What a proud little devil she is!' said Pierre. 'She was well disposed towards me at first, but as soon as I dared to express a shadow of criticism, she hated me.'

'You explained things beautifully to her,' said Françoise. 'Was that out of politeness?'

'Oh, there was a lot on her mind tonight,' said Pierre. He did not go on, he appeared absorbed. What exactly was going on in his mind? She looked at his face questioningly. It was a face that had become too familiar and no longer told her anything. She had only to reach out her hand to touch him, but this very proximity made him invisible; it was impossible to think about him. There was not even any name with which to describe him. Françoise called him Pierre or Labrousse only when she was speaking about him to others; when she was with him, or even when she was alone, she never used his name. He was as intimate and as unknowable to her as she was to herself: had he been a stranger, she would at least have been able to form some opinion of him.



'What do you want of her, when all's said and done?' she asked.

'To tell the truth, I'm beginning to wonder,' said Pierre. 'She's no Canzetti, I can't expect just to have an affaire with her. To have a serious liaison with her, I would have to commit myself up to the hilt. And I've neither the time nor the inclination for that.'

'Why not the inclination?' asked Françoise. This fleeting uneasiness that had just come over her was absurd; they told one another everything, they kept nothing hidden from each other.

'It's complicated,' said Pierre, 'the very thought of it tires me. Besides, there's something childish about her that I find a little nauseating. She still smells of mother's milk. All I want is for her not to hate me, but to be able to talk to her once in a while.'

'I think you can count on that,' said Françoise.

Pierre looked at her hesitatingly.

'You weren't offended when I suggested to her that she and I should have a personal relationship?'

'Of course not,' said Françoise. 'Why should I be?'

'I don't know, you seemed to be a little put out. You're fond of her, you might want to be the only one in her life.'

'You know perfectly well that she's rather an encumbrance,' said Françoise.

'I know that you're never jealous of me,' said Pierre, smiling. 'All the same, if you ever do feel like that, you must tell me. This confounded mania of mine for making a conquest . . . there's another case of making myself feel as small as an insect; and it means so little to me.'

'Of course I would tell you,' said Françoise. She hesitated, perhaps she ought to attribute her uneasiness of this evening to jealousy; she had not liked Pierre taking Xavière seriously; she had been worried by the smiles Xavière gave Pierre. It was a passing depression, caused largely by fatigue. If she spoke of it to Pierre, it would become a disquieting and gripping reality instead of a fleeting mood. Thenceforth, he would have to bear it in mind even when she herself attached no importance to it. No, there was nothing to it, she was not jealous.

'You may even fall in love with her, if you wish,' she said.

'There's no question of that,' said Pierre. He shrugged his shoulders. 'I'm not even sure that she doesn't hate me now

even more than before.'

He slipped into bed. Françoise lay down beside him and kissed him.

'Sleep tight,' she said fondly.

'Sleep tight,' said Pierre, kissing her.

Françoise turned over towards the wall. In the room below theirs, Xavière would be drinking tea; she had probably lit a cigarette; she was free to choose the hour when she would get into bed, all alone in her bed, far removed from any alien presence; she was mentally and emotionally free. And without doubt, at this moment, she was revelling in this freedom, was using it to blame Françoise. She would be imagining Françoise, dead-tired, lying beside Pierre, and she would be delighting in her proud contempt.

Françoise stiffened, but she could no longer simply close her eyes and blot out Xavière. Xavière had been growing steadily all through the evening, she had been weighing on her mind as heavily as the huge cake at the Pôle Nord. Her demands, her jealousies, her scorn, these could no longer be ignored, for Pierre had entered into them to give them value. Françoise tried with all her strength to thrust into the background this precious and encumbering Xavière who was gradually beginning to take shape, and it was almost hostility that she felt within her. But there was nothing to be done, no way of going back. Xavière did exist.

*- its FIS choice in the  
first place*