

She looked at the bar. 'I was afraid it might be empty, but the Spaniards aren't so affected by events.'

'These women are amazing,' said Françoise. 'They are covered with layers of make-up and yet it doesn't make them look artificial; their faces are still completely alive and sensual.'

One by one she was studying the short, fat, Spanish women, their heavily painted faces crowned with thick black hair. They were all like the women of Seville who, on summer evenings, wore clusters of richly scented spikenard flowers behind their ears.

'And how they dance!' said Paule. 'I often come here to admire them. When they're standing still, they look rather dumpy and short-legged. They appear clumsy, but as soon as they begin to move, their bodies become so light and so full of grace.'

Françoise took a sip from her glass. The flavour of dried nuts brought back at once the merciful shade of the Seville bars where she and Pierre had stuffed themselves with olives and anchovies, while the sun beat down pitilessly on the streets. She turned to look at him, she wanted him to join her in recalling that wonderful holiday. But Pierre kept a malevolent eye fixed on Xavière.

'Well, it didn't take long,' he said.

The rose was drooping sadly on its stem, as if it had been poisoned; it had turned yellow and its petals were tinged with brown. Xavière picked it up gently.

'Yes, I think it's quite dead,' she said.

She threw it on the table and then looked at Pierre defiantly. She seized her glass and drained it at one draught. Paule gaped in astonishment.

'Does the soul of a rose have a pleasant taste?' said Pierre.

Xavière leaned back and lighted a cigarette without answering. There was an awkward silence. Paule smiled at Françoise.

'Would you like to try this paso doble?' she said, obviously trying to change the subject.

'When I dance with you, I almost have the illusion of knowing how,' said Françoise, rising.

Pierre and Xavière sat side by side without exchanging a word. Xavière was gazing at the smoke of her cigarette with an entranced look.

'How far advanced are the plans for your recital?' asked Françoise, after a short space of time.

'If the situation clears up I'll try something in May,' said Paule.

'It will certainly be a success,' said Françoise.

'Perhaps.' A shadow passed over Paule's face. 'But that does not particularly interest me. I would so like to find a way of introducing my dance technique to the stage.'

'But you're doing that to a certain extent,' said Françoise. 'Your plasticity is so perfect.'

'That's not enough,' said Paule. 'I'm sure there must be something else to discover, something really new.' Again her face clouded over. 'Only I would have to feel my way, take risks . . .'

Françoise looked at her with warm appreciation. When Paule had renounced her past to throw herself into Berger's

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A plump, mature woman, in Spanish costume, was moving towards the middle of the dance floor. Her features were suddenly animated and assumed the fullness of youth beneath her black hair parted in the middle and crowned by a comb as red as her shawl. She smiled to everyone around her while the guitarist plucked out a few staccato notes on his instrument. He began to play. Slowly the woman straightened her torso. Slowly she raised her two beautiful arms; her fingers clicked the castanets, and her body began to spring with child-



like lightness. The wide flowered skirt whirled about her muscular legs.

'How beautiful she became all of a sudden,' said Françoise turning to Xavière.

Xavière did not reply. Deep in her enraptured contemplation, she was oblivious to everyone near her. Her cheeks were flushed, her features were no longer under control and her eyes followed the movements of the dancer in dazed ecstasy. Françoise emptied her glass. Although she knew well that no one could ever be at one with Xavière in any single thought or action, it was hard, after the earlier joy she had felt at regaining her affection, not to exist for her any longer. She again turned her attention to the dancer. She was now smiling at an imaginary gallant. She enticed him; she spurned him; finally, she fell into his arms; then she became a sorceress, every movement suggesting dangerous mystery. Following that dance, she mimed a joyful peasant woman at some village festivity, whirling dizzily, her eyes starting out of her head. All the youth and reckless gaiety evoked by her dancing acquired a moving purity as they sprang, transmuted, from her no longer youthful body. Françoise could not help taking a surreptitious glance at Xavière: she gave a gasp of amazement. Xavière was no longer watching, her head was lowered. In her right hand she held a half-smoked cigarette which she was slowly moving towards her left hand. Françoise barely repressed a scream. Xavière was pressing the glowing brand against her skin with a bitter smile curling her lips. It was an intimate, solitary smile, like the smile of a half-wit; the voluptuous, tortured smile of a woman possessed by secret pleasure. The sight of it was almost unbearable, it concealed something horrible.

The dancer had finished her repertoire, and she was bowing amid applause. Paule had turned towards the table, and now gaped speechlessly with questioning eyes. Pierre had noticed Xavière's performance some time before. Since no one thought fit to speak, Françoise held her tongue, and yet what was going on was intolerable. With her lips rounded coquettishly and affectedly Xavière was gently blowing on the burnt skin which covered her burn. When she had blown away this little protective layer, she once more pressed the glowing end of her cigarette against the open wound. Françoise flinched. Not only did her flesh rise up in revolt, but the wound had injured

her more deeply and irrevocably to the very depths of her being. Behind that maniacal grin, was the threat of a danger more positive than any she had ever imagined. Something was there that hungrily hugged itself, that unquestionably existed on its own account. Approach to it was impossible even in thought. Just as she seemed to be getting near it the thought dissolved. This was no tangible object, but an incessant flux, a never-ending escape, only comprehensible to itself, and for ever occult. Eternally shut out she could only continue to circle round it.

'That's idiotic,' she said. 'You will burn yourself to the bone.'

Xavière raised her head and gazed about her with a slightly wild look.

'It doesn't hurt,' she said.

Paule took her wrist.

'In a few moments it's going to hurt terribly,' she said to her. 'How childish!'

The burn was as large as a sixpenny-piece and seemed to be very deep.

'I assure you I don't feel it at all,' said Xavière, pulling her hand away and looking at Paule in a self-satisfied and mysterious way. 'A burn is voluptuous.'

The dancer came to the table. In one hand she was holding a plate, and in the other one of those double necked *porrons* from which the Spaniards drink on festive occasions.

'Who wants to drink my health?' she asked.

Pierre put a note on the plate and Paule took the *porron* between her hands. She said a few words to the woman in Spanish. She threw back her head and skilfully directed a jet of red wine into her mouth, and then cut off the flow with a quick jerk.

'Your turn,' she said to Pierre.

Pierre took the contraption and examined it warily. Then he tilted his head back, bringing the nozzle to the very edge of his lips.

'No, not like that,' said the woman.

With a steady hand, she drew the *porron* away. For a short moment Pierre let the wine run into his mouth, and then in an effort to catch his breath he moved and the liquid drenched his tie.

'Hell!' he said furiously.



The dancer laughed and began to rail at him in Spanish. He looked so upset that a great burst of laughter softened Paule's grave features.

Françoise barely achieved a feeble grin. Fear had penetrated into her, and nothing could take her mind off it. This time she felt imperilled above and beyond her own happiness.

'We're staying on for a while, aren't we?' said Pierre.

'If it doesn't bore you,' said Xavière timidly.

Paule had just left. It was to her calm gaiety that this evening had owed all its charm. She had initiated them, one by one, in the more unusual steps of the *paso doble* and the tango. She had invited the dancer to their table and had induced her to sing for them some beautiful folk songs, which the whole audience had taken up in chorus. They had drunk a considerable amount of Manzanilla. Pierre had finally brightened up and had fully regained his good humour. Xavière did not seem to be suffering from her burn; innumerable violent and contradictory feelings had been successively reflected in her face. Only for Françoise had the time passed slowly. Music, songs, dancing, nothing had succeeded in allaying the anguish that paralysed her. From the moment Xavière had burnt her hand she had been unable to detach her thoughts from that tortured, ecstatic face, the memory of which made her shudder. She turned to Pierre; she needed to regain a contact with him, but she had separated herself too decisively from him. She could not succeed in attuning herself to him. She was alone. Pierre and Xavière were talking and their voices seemed to be coming from a very great distance.

'Why did you do that?' Pierre was saying as he touched Xavière's hand.

Xavière looked at him in supplication; her whole expression was one of tender pleading. It was because of her that Françoise had stood up to Pierre to the extent of being unable now to smile at him; and yet Xavière had already silently made it up with him, and seemed prepared to fall into his arms.

'Why?' said Pierre. He stared for a moment at the injured hand. 'I'd swear that it's a holy burn.'

Xavière was smiling, as she turned a guileless face towards him.

'A penitential burn,' he continued.

'Yes,' said Xavière. 'I was so disgustingly sentimental about

that rose. I was ashamed of it.'

'You wanted to bury deep within you the memory of last night, didn't you?' Pierre's tone was friendly, but he was tense.

Xavière stared with admiring eyes.

'How do you know?' she said. She seemed spellbound by this sorcery.

'That wilted rose. It was easy to guess,' said Pierre.

'That was a ridiculous, a theatrical gesture,' said Xavière.

'But it was you who provoked me,' she added archly.

Her smile was as warm as a kiss, and Françoise wondered uncomfortably what she was doing there, witnessing this amorous tête-à-tête. She did not belong here; but where did she belong? Surely nowhere else. At this moment she felt expunged from the face of the world.

'I!' said Pierre.

'You were looking sarcastic, and you were staring at me threateningly,' said Xavière tenderly.

'Yes, I was unpleasant,' said Pierre. 'I apologize. But it was because I felt that you were interested in anything rather than in us.'

'You must have antennae,' said Xavière. 'You were bristling before I even opened my mouth,' she shook her head, 'only they're not very good ones.'

'I at once suspected that you'd become infatuated with Gerbert,' said Pierre bluntly.

'Infatuated?' said Xavière. She frowned. 'But what on earth did that young man tell you?'

Pierre had not done it intentionally. He was incapable of anything so contemptible, but his words contained an unpleasant insinuation against Gerbert.

'He didn't tell me anything,' said Pierre, 'but he enjoyed his evening, and it's unusual for you to make the effort to charm anyone.'

'I might have guessed as much,' said Xavière with rage. 'No sooner is one a little civil to a fellow than he gets ideas! God knows what he's gone and concocted in that empty little brain of his!'

'And besides, if you stayed shut up all day,' said Pierre, 'it was surely to ruminate over last evening's romance.'

Xavière shrugged her shoulders.

'It was inflated romance,' she said testily.

'That's how it seems to you now,' said Pierre.



'Not at all. I knew it all the time,' said Xavière impatiently. She looked straight at Pierre. 'I wanted yesterday evening to seem wonderful to me,' she said. 'Do you understand?'

There was a silence. One would never know precisely what Gerbert had been to her during those twenty-four hours, and she herself had already forgotten it. What was certain was that now she was openly denying him.

'It was to revenge yourself on us,' said Pierre.

'Yes,' said Xavière, in a low voice.

'But we hadn't had dinner with Gerbert for ages. We have to see him occasionally,' said Pierre, in an apologetic tone.

'I know,' said Xavière, 'but it always aggravates me when you allow yourselves to be preyed upon by all these people.'

'You're a possessive little person,' said Pierre.

'I can't help it,' said Xavière dejectedly.

'Don't try,' said Pierre tenderly. 'Your possessiveness is not petty jealousy. It goes with your inflexibility, with the violence of your feelings. You'd no longer be the same person if it were taken away from you.'

'Ah! It would be so nice if we three were alone in the world!' said Xavière. Her eyes had a passionate gleam. 'Only the three of us!'

Françoise's smile was forced. She had often been hurt by Pierre's and Xavière's collusion, but tonight she detected her own condemnation in it. Jealousy and resentment were feelings she had always spurned; yet this pair were now discussing them as if they were beautiful, cumbersome, precious objects to be handled with respectful care. She, too, might have enshrined these disturbing riches within herself. Why had she preferred to them the old, empty precepts which Xavière brazenly kicked aside? On many occasions she had been transfixed with jealousy. She had been tempted to hate Pierre, to wish Xavière ill; but, under the futile pretext of keeping herself pure, she had created a void within herself. With calm audacity Xavière chose to assert herself. Her reward was that she had a definite place in the world, and Pierre turned to her with passionate interest. Françoise had not dared to be herself, and she understood, in a passion of suffering, that this hypocritical cowardice had resulted in her being nothing at all.

She looked up. Xavière was speaking.

'I like you when you look tired,' she was saying; 'you become very ethereal.' She gave Pierre a quick smile. 'You

look like your ghost. You were beautiful as a ghost.'

Françoise studied Pierre. It was true that he was pale. That nervous fragility, reflected at this moment in his drawn features, had often moved her to tears, but she was too detached from him to be touched by his appearance. It was only through Xavière's smile that she could sense its romantic charm.

'But you know I don't want to be a ghost any more,' said Pierre.

'Ah! But a ghost isn't a corpse,' said Xavière. 'It's a living thing, only it gets its body from its soul. It hasn't any unnecessary flesh; it doesn't get hungry, thirsty, or sleepy.' Her eyes rested on Pierre's forehead, then on his hands, long, firm, slender hands Françoise had often lovingly touched, but that she never thought to look at. 'And besides, what I find poetic is that it's not earthbound. Wherever it may be, it is also elsewhere at the same time.'

'I'm nowhere else but here,' said Pierre.

He smiled fondly at Xavière. Françoise called to mind with what joy she had so often been the recipient of such smiles, yet she was now incapable of coveting them.

'Yes,' said Xavière, 'but I don't know how to put it exactly; you are here because you want to be. You don't look confined.'

'Do I often look confined?'

Xavière hesitated.

'Sometimes,' she smiled conquettishly. 'When you talk with dull old fogies you almost seem to be one of them yourself.'

'I remember when you met me, you were inclined to take me for a tiresome pompous ass!'

'You've changed,' said Xavière.

She ran her eyes over him with a proud and happy possessive look. She thought she had changed him. Could it be true? It was no longer for Françoise to judge. Tonight her troubled heart allowed the greatest riches to sink into indifference: she felt obliged to trust this intense fervour that shone with new brilliance in Xavière's eyes.

'You look completely worn out,' said Pierre.

Françoise shuddered. It was to her that he was speaking, and he seemed worried. She tried to control her voice.

'I think I've drunk too much,' she said. The words stuck in her throat.

Pierre looked at her with distress. 'You've thought me



completely hateful this evening, haven't you?' he said remorsefully.

Spontaneously he laid his hand on hers. She managed to smile at him. She was touched by his solicitude, but even this tenderness that he was reawakening in her could not tear her out of her solitary anguish.

'You were a little hateful,' she said, taking his hand.

'I'm sorry,' said Pierre, 'for losing control.' He was so upset at having hurt her, that if their love alone had been at stake Françoise would have been at peace again. 'Now I've spoiled your evening for you,' he said, 'and you were so looking forward to it.'

'Nothing's been spoiled,' said Françoise, and with an effort she added more cheerfully, 'we still have some time ahead of us. It's delightful to be here.' She turned to Xavière. 'Isn't it? Paule was not fibbing. It is a nice place.'

Xavière wore a peculiar smile. 'Don't you think we look a little like American tourists seeing the night-life of Paris? We're sitting by ourselves so that we won't be contaminated, and we're sight-seeing without coming into contact with anything . . .'

Pierre's face clouded over. 'What! Do you expect us to snap our fingers and shout "Olle!" What do you expect?'

'I don't expect anything,' said Xavière coldly, 'I'm stating a fact.'

It was beginning all over again. Dense vapours of hatred, as corrosive as an acid, were once more emanating from Xavière, and there was no defence against its excruciating bite. There was nothing to do but to endure it and wait. But Françoise felt completely exhausted. Pierre was not so resigned: Xavière did not frighten him.

'Why do you suddenly hate us?' he said harshly.

Xavière burst into a strident laugh.

'No, no! You're not going to begin all over again,' she said. Her cheeks were aflame and her mouth was set. She seemed on the point of exasperation. 'I don't spend my time hating you. I'm listening to the music.'

'You do hate us,' Pierre insisted.

'Definitely not,' said Xavière. She caught her breath. 'It's not the first time that I've been astonished at the pleasure you take in looking at things from the outside as if they were stage sets.' She touched her breast. 'I,' she continued with an

eloquent smile, 'I'm made of flesh and blood. Do you understand?'

Pierre threw a despairing glance at Françoise. He hesitated, then seemed to be trying to get control of himself.

'What happened?' he said, in a conciliatory tone.

'Nothing happened,' said Xavière.

'You thought we were behaving like lovers?'

Xavière looked him in the eye.

'Precisely,' she said arrogantly.

Françoise clenched her teeth. She was struck with a wild desire to thrash Xavière, to trample upon her. She spent hours listening patiently to her duets with Pierre, and Xavière was refusing her the right to exchange the slightest token of friendship with him! That was too much. It could not go on in this way. She would stand it no longer.

'You're utterly unfair,' said Pierre angrily. 'If Françoise was depressed it was because of my behaviour with you. I don't think that can be called behaving like lovers.'

Without answering Xavière leaned forward. At a neighbouring table, a young woman had just sprung to her feet and in a raucous voice was beginning to recite a Spanish poem. A great silence fell, and every eye was turned towards her. Even without full knowledge of the meaning of the words, her impassioned accent, and her face illuminated by emotional fervour were deeply moving. The poem was about hatred and death, about hope too perhaps, and by virtue of the rhythmic ebb and flow the fate of ravaged Spain was vividly evoked to every mind. Fire and sword had driven the guitars from the streets, gone were the songs, the dazzling shawls, and the spikenard blossoms. The cabarets were flat, and the bombs had ripped open the goatskin bottles swelled with wine; in the warm evening sweetness, fear and hunger stalked. The flamenco songs and the taste of intoxicating wines were now no more than funeral trappings veiling a dead past. For a little while, her eyes fixed on the red and tragic mouth, Françoise yielded to the power of the desolate pictures evoked by this rasping incantation: she longed to lose herself, body and soul, in these lamentations; in the nostalgia throbbing beneath these mysterious resonances. She turned her head. She was able to stop thinking about herself, but she could not forget that Xavière was beside her.

Xavière was no longer watching the woman: she was staring



into space. A cigarette was alight between her fingers and the glowing end was beginning to touch her flesh without her seeming to be aware of it, she seemed to be in the grip of hysterical ecstasy. Françoise passed her hand across her forehead, she was dripping with perspiration. The atmosphere was stifling, and deep down her thoughts were burning like a torch. This hostile presence, which earlier had betrayed itself in a lunatic's smile, was approaching closer and closer: there was now no way of avoiding its terrifying disclosure. Day after day, minute after minute, Françoise had fled the danger; but the worst had happened, and she had at last come face to face with this insurmountable obstacle which she had sensed, behind a shadowy outline, since her earliest childhood. At the back of Xavière's maniacal pleasure, at the back of her hatred and jealousy, the abomination loomed, as monstrous and definite as death. Before Françoise's very eyes, and yet apart from her, something existed like a sentence without an appeal: detached, absolute, unalterable, an alien conscience was taking up its position. It was like death, a total negation, an eternal absence, and yet, by a staggering contradiction, this abyss of nothingness could make itself present to itself and make itself fully exist for itself. The entire universe was engulfed in it, and Françoise, for ever excluded from the world, was herself dissolved in this void, of which the infinite contour no word, no image could encompass.

'Beautiful!' said Pierre.

He bent over Xavière and lifted the red-hot stub from her fingers. She stared at him as if waking from a nightmare, then looked at Françoise. Abruptly she took them each by the hand. The palms of her hands were burning. Françoise shuddered when she came in contact with these feverish fingers which tightened on hers; she wanted to withdraw her hand, but she was now unable to move. Riveted to Xavière she contemplated in amazement this body which allowed itself to be touched, and this beautiful face behind which the abomination was concealed. For a long time Xavière had been only a fragment of Françoise's life, and suddenly she had become the only sovereign reality, and Françoise now possessed no more than the colourless contours of a reflection.

'Why should it be she rather than I?' thought Françoise, with anger. She need only say one word, she need only say, 'It is I.' But she would have to believe in that word; she would

have to know how to choose herself. For many weeks Françoise had no longer been able to dissolve Xavière's hatred, her affection, her thoughts, to harmless vapours. She had let them bite into her; she had turned herself into a prey. Freely, through her moments of resistance and revolt, she had made use of herself to destroy herself. She was witnessing the course of her own life like an indifferent spectator, without ever daring to assert herself, whereas Xavière, from head to foot, was nothing but a living assertion of herself. She made herself exist with so sure a power, that Françoise, spellbound, had allowed herself to be carried away so far as to prefer Xavière to herself, and thus to obliterate herself. She had gone so far as to be seeing places, people, and Pierre's smiles, through Xavière's eyes. She had reached the point of no longer knowing herself, except through Xavière's feelings for her, and now she was trying to merge into Xavière. But in this hopeless effort she was only succeeding in destroying herself.

The guitars kept up their monotonous thrumming and the air was throbbing like a sirocco. Xavière's hands had not let go their prey: her set face bore no expression. Pierre had not moved either. It was as if the same spell had transmogrified all three of them into marble. Visions were flitting through Françoise's mind: an old jacket, a deserted glade, a corner of the Pôle Nord where Pierre and Xavière were carrying on a mysterious tête-à-tête far apart from her. It had happened to her before, as now it was happening tonight, that she had felt her being dissolve to the advantage of inaccessible other beings; but never had she been aware of her own annihilation with such perfect lucidity. Had she perchance become a complete void! Yet there remained a faint phosphorescence hovering over the surface of things, attended by an infinity of deceptive will-o'-the-wisps. The tension which had been reducing her to rigidity snapped suddenly, and she burst into silent sobs.

The spell was broken. Xavière withdrew her hands. Pierre spoke.

'Suppose we leave,' he said.

Françoise rose. In a flash she was drained of all thought, and her body submissively set itself in motion. She put her cape over her arm and crossed the room. The cold outdoor air dried her tears, but her inner trembling never ceased. Pierre touched her shoulder,



'You aren't well,' he said anxiously.

Françoise gave a ghost of an apologetic smile.

'I've definitely drunk too much,' she said.

Xavière was walking a few paces ahead of them, as stiff as an automaton.

'She's also had all she can hold,' said Pierre. 'We'll take her home, and then we can talk undisturbed.'

'Yes,' said Françoise.

The cool of the night and Pierre's tenderness helped to restore her calm. They caught up with Xavière and each took her by an arm.

'I think it would do us good to walk a short way,' said Pierre.

Xavière said nothing. Against a livid face, her lips were set in a stony grin. They walked down the street in silence; day was dawning. Xavière stopped suddenly.

'Where are we?' she said.

'At la Trinité,' said Pierre.

'Ah!' said Xavière. 'I think I was a little tipsy.'

'I think so too,' said Pierre cheerfully. 'How do you feel?'

'I don't know,' said Xavière. 'I don't know what's happened.' She frowned as if in pain. 'I remember a very beautiful woman who was talking in Spanish; after that there's a blank.'

'You watched her for a while,' said Pierre. 'You were smoking cigarette after cigarette, and you had to have the stubs taken from between your fingers. You were letting them burn you without feeling anything. And then you seemed to wake up a little. You took our hands.'

'Ah! Yes,' said Xavière. She shuddered. 'We were in the depths of hell. I began to think we'd never get out again.'

'You sat there for some time, as if you'd been turned into a statue,' said Pierre. 'And then Françoise began to cry.'

'I remember,' said Xavière, with a vague smile. She lowered her eyelids and said, in a faraway voice, 'I was so glad when she cried, for that's just what I wanted to do.'

For a second Françoise looked with horror at this delicate but implacable face in which she had not once seen reflected any of her own joys and sorrows. Not for one minute during the whole evening had Xavière given a thought to her distress. She had seen her tears only to rejoice at them. Françoise snatched her arm from Xavière's and began to run on ahead

as if carried away by a tornado. Sobs of revulsion shook her: her anguish, her tears, this night of torture, belonged to her and she would not allow Xavière to rob her of them. She would flee to the end of the world to escape the avid tentacles with which she wanted to drain her of her lifeblood. She heard hurrying steps behind her and a firm hand stopped her.

'What is it?' said Pierre. 'I beg of you, calm yourself.'

'I don't want to,' said Françoise. 'I don't want to.' Weeping, she fell against his shoulder. When she looked up she saw Xavière, who had caught up with them and was now looking at her with dismayed curiosity. But she had lost all sense of shame; nothing could affect her now. Pierre pushed them both into a taxi and she continued to weep without restraint.

'We're home,' said Pierre.

She rushed upstairs without looking back, and collapsed on to the couch. Her head was hurting her. There was a sound of voices on the floor below, and almost immediately the door opened.

'What's happening?' said Pierre. Quickly he came to her and took her in his arms. She pressed tightly to him, and for a long while there was nothing but emptiness and night, and a caress that lightly touched her hair.

'My dear love, what's happening to you? Speak to me,' said Pierre's voice.

She opened her eyes. In the light of dawn the room had an unusual freshness; she felt that it had not come under the influence of the night. With surprise Françoise found herself once again in the presence of familiar shapes which her eyes could take in with composure. This idea of rejected reality was no more indefinitely tenable than the idea of death. She must return to the full consciousness of material objects and of herself. But she remained as overwhelmed as if she had just come out of a death agony. Never more would she forget.

'I do not know,' she said. She smiled at him feebly. 'Everything was so unbearable.'

'Did I hurt you?'

She seized his hands. 'No,' she said.

'Is it because of Xavière?'

Françoise shrugged her shoulders helplessly. It was too difficult to explain, and her head was aching too much.

'It was hateful for you to witness her jealousy of you,' said



Pierre. There was a touch of remorse in his voice. 'I myself found her insufferable. This cannot go on; I shall speak to her tomorrow.'

Françoise started. 'You can't do that,' she said. 'She'll hate you.'

'I don't care.' He got up, took a few steps round the room, then came back to her.

'I feel guilty,' he said. 'I stupidly relied on the good feelings that girl has for me, but there was no question of a stupid little attempt at seduction. We wanted to build a real trio, a well-balanced life for three in which no one would be sacrificed. Perhaps it was taking a risk, but at least it was worth trying! But if Xavière behaves like a jealous little bitch, and you are an unfortunate victim while I play the gallant lover, it becomes a dirty business.' His face was stern and his voice harsh. 'I shall speak to her.'

Françoise looked at him tenderly. He judged any weakness he may have shown as severely as she had done. Once more he was himself again, in his strength, in his clarity of thought, and in his proud rejection of everything base. But even the return to this perfect agreement between them did not give her back happiness. She felt exhausted and cowardly at the thought of new complications.

'You don't expect to get her to admit that she's jealous of me out of love for you?' she said warily.

'I shall no doubt look like a conceited ass and she will be insanely angry,' said Pierre, 'but I'll take my chance.'

'No,' said Françoise. If Pierre were to lose Xavière, she in her turn would feel unbearably guilty. 'No, please. Besides, that wasn't why I cried.'

'Why did you, then?'

'You'll laugh at me,' she said, with a weak smile. There was a glimmer of hope: perhaps if she managed to encompass her anguish in words she might be rid of it. 'It's because I discovered that she has a conscience like mine. Have you ever felt, in your inmost being, the conscience of others?' Again she was trembling, the words were not releasing her. 'It's intolerable, you know.'

Pierre was looking at her a little incredulously.

'You think I'm drunk,' said Françoise. 'In one way, I am. It's true, but it makes no difference. Why are you so astounded?' She rose suddenly. 'If I were to tell you that I'm

afraid of death, you would understand. Well, this thing is just as real and just as terrifying. Of course, we all know that we're not alone in the world. We say these things, just as we say that we'll die some day. But when we begin to believe in it . . .'

She leaned against the wall, the room was swirling round her. Pierre took her by the arm.

'Listen, don't you think you ought to rest? I am not making light of what you're telling me, but it would be better to talk about it calmly after you've slept a little.'

'There's nothing to say about it,' said Françoise. Again the tears began to flow. She was dead tired.

He laid her on the bed, took off her shoes and threw a blanket over her.

'I'd rather like to get a breath of air,' he said, 'but I'll stay until you've fallen asleep.'

He sat down beside her, and she pressed his hand against her cheek. Tonight Pierre's love no longer sufficed to bring her peace, he could not defend her against this thing that had revealed itself during the day and evening. It was beyond reach. Françoise no longer even felt its mysterious emanation and yet it continued inexorably to exist. The weariness, the worries, even the disasters, brought by Xavière when she came to Paris, all these Françoise had accepted wholeheartedly because they were moments of her own life. But what had happened during the course of this night was something utterly different. She could not sublimate it. The world now stood before her like a gigantic interdict. The failure of her very existence was now brought to completion.