



For reasons easily understood, I have to disguise all the proper names that will appear in this story, and the reader will be kind enough not to require of me any geographical details. There are several ways to tell a story: the one which consists in making you travel through a country carefully explored and faithfully described is, in one respect, the best one; it is one of the aspects through which the novel, this thing long reputed to be frivolous, can become useful reading, and, in my opinion, when one names a place that really exists, it cannot be described faithfully enough. But the other way which, without being purely fanciful, refrains from giving a specific itinerary and from naming the real location of the main scenes, is sometimes preferable in order to communicate some received impressions. The first approach is useful enough for the gradual development of feelings that can be analyzed; the second one leaves to the impetuosity and disorder of strong passions a broader path.

In any case, I would not be free to choose between these two methods because I propose to recount here the story of a passion that was experienced more than explained. This passion created in me so much tumult that I can still only perceive it through some sort of veil. It was twenty years ago. I took it to several places which seemed splendid or miserable according to the state of my soul. There were even days, weeks perhaps, when I lived without really knowing where I was. I shall thus refrain from reconstructing, by means of cold research or laborious attempts to remember, the details of a past where everything is inner confusion and frenzy in and around me; and it might not be a bad thing to leave in my story some of the disorder and incomplete notions that were my life during these terrible days.

I was twenty-three years old when my father, a professor of literature and philosophy in Brussels, gave me permission to spend a year traveling; in doing so, he yielded to my desire as well as to a serious consideration. I was planning to have a career in literature, and I had the rare happiness of having a family who believed in my vocation. I felt the need to see and to understand life in general. My father recognized that our peaceful and patriarchal life offered a rather narrow horizon. He had faith in me. He put the bridle on the neck of the impatient horse. My mother cried, but she hid her tears, and I left: alas! To meet such perils to moral life!

I had been brought up partly in Brussels, partly in Paris, under the care of one of my father's brothers, Antonin Valigny, a distinguished chemist who had died prematurely as I was finishing my studies at the Saint-Louis school. I felt no curiosity for the modern centers of civilization. I yearned for the poetic and the picturesque. I wanted to see, in Switzerland first, the great monuments of nature, and then in Italy, the great monuments of art.

The first and almost the only time I had gone to Geneva was to visit a friend of my father whose son had been in Paris, my classmate and my closest friend; but adolescents don't write much. Henri Obernay was the first one to neglect our correspondence. I followed his bad example. When I looked for him in his fatherland, it had been years since we had last written each other. It is thus likely that I would not have looked for him with much determination, had my father not insisted very strongly, when saying good-bye, that I renew my acquaintance with him. Monsieur Obernay senior, a professor of science in Geneva, was a man of true merit. His son had given indications that he took after him. His family was dear to mine. Finally my mother wanted to know if little Adélaïde was still charming and pretty. I guessed some plan or at least some hope for a match, and, although I was not in the least ready to begin the novel of my youth with its end, curiosity somewhat reinforcing duty, I visited the professor of science.

I did not find Henri there, but his parents welcomed me almost as if I had been his brother. They kept me for dinner and insisted that I stay with them. It was in the part of Geneva called the old town, which, at that time, still had so much character. Separated by the Rhone river from the Catholic part of town, from the new world, and from the palaces of the tourists, the town of Calvin lined the hillsides with terraces of austere houses and narrow gardens, shaded by high walls and trimmed hedges.

There, no noise, no sightseers, no idlers, and thus none of the commotion that characterizes modern industrial life. A studious silence, quiet piety or activities requiring patience and precision, a hospitable *home* but which did not seem to suffer any overindulgence, a meditative and proud sense of well-being, such were generally the characteristics of these prosperous houses.

The Obernay's house was a gentler and somewhat modernized version of this respectable and serious life. The heads of the household, as well as their children and their close friends, protested against the excess of exterior rigidities. Too much of a scholar to be a fanatic, the professor followed the cult and the customs of his forebears; but his intelligence and his culture had made a large breach into the world of taste and progress. His wife, more housewife than scholar, had nonetheless the same respect for science as for religion. It was enough for M. Obernay to engage in some studies for her to consider this activity as the most important and the most useful one that could fill the life of a gentleman; and when this revered husband asked for some relaxation and diversion around him to rest from his research, she naïvely strained her ingenuity in order to please him, convinced that she was working for the greater glory of God when she was working for him.

In spite of the momentary absence of their children, this old couple seemed to me to be extremely likable. They had none of the narrow-mindedness that is often found in the provinces. They were interested in everything, and nothing was foreign to them. They even took a kind of pride in this, and you could have compared their frame of mind to their house, spacious, clean, austere, but brightened up by the most beautiful flowers, and opening unto the majestic vista of the lake and the mountains.

The two daughters, Adélaïde and Rosa, had gone visiting their aunt in Morges. I was shown the portrait of little Rosa, sketched by her sister. The drawing was charming, the young face lovely; but there was no portrait of Adélaïde.

They asked me if I remembered her. I boldly answered that I did even though this memory was very vague. "She was five at the time," Madame Obernay told me, "you can imagine that she is quite changed! Still she is considered a beautiful girl. She looks like her father, who is not bad for a fifty-five-year-old man. Rosa is not as attractive; she looks like me," the excellent woman added with a laugh, "still youthful and beautiful, but she is at an age when you can change!"

Henri Obernay had left on a naturalist expedition with a friend of the family. At that moment he was exploring the Mont-Rose region. They showed me one of his letters, a very recent one, in which he described with such enthusiasm the places where he was staying that I decided to join him. Already familiar with the mountains and speaking all the dialects of the border, he would make an excellent guide, and his mother assured me that he would be happy to have to direct my first excursions. He had not forgotten me; he had always spoken about me with the greatest affection. Madame Obernay knew me as if she had never lost touch with me. She knew my inclinations, my character, and remembered my childhood whims, which she would recount to me, with a charming good-heartedness. Seeing that Henri had made them like me, I thought with good reason that he really cared for me, and my former affection for him was reawakened. After a twenty-four hour stay in Geneva, I found out where I had a good chance of finding him, and I left for Mont-Rose.

Here, reader, you cannot follow me with a guidebook in hand. I shall give the places that I remember the first names that come to mind. I did not promise a travel narrative but a love story.

The base of the mountains, on the Swiss side, gives shelter to a little village, les Chalets-de-Saint-Pierre, which I shall call for short "Saint Pierre." That is where I found Henri Obernay. He had settled there for a week, as his travel companion wanted to explore the glaciers. The wooden house that they had taken over was large, picturesque, and cheerfully clean. They found room for me, for it was a sort of inn for tourists. I can still see the majestic vistas unfolding from every side of the exterior gallery placed on the coping of this beautiful chalet. An imposing ridge of rocks protected the hamlet from the Eastern wind and from avalanches. This natural rampart made a sort of pedestal to the denuded mountain, but green like an emerald and covered with herds. From the bottom of the house, started a meadow in bloom which quickly sloped down toward the bed of a stream full of noise and anger, and in which rushed swift and swirling cascades falling from the rocks facing us. These rocks, just below the glaciers, first confined in narrow grooves and gradually arranged in vast, dazzling arenas, were the first tiers of the frightening mass of the Mont-Rose. Its perpetual snows were still visible in shades of orange-tinted carmine in the sky when the valley was bathed in the blue of the evening.

It was a sublime sight that I was able to enjoy during a free and quiet day, before entering the storm that almost took my reason and my life away.

The first hours, Obernay and I devoted, and so to speak, laboriously employed, to getting reacquainted. You know how quick the development that comes after adolescence is, and we had really changed. However, I had remained rather short compared to Henri, who had grown like a young oak; but, half-Spanish through my mother, I had acquired a fresh beard which was a deep black and which, according to my friend, made me look like a knight-errant. As for him, though at twenty-five years of age his chin was still smooth, the development of his whole body, of his hair, previously pale blond, now golden with glints of red, his speech, formerly hesitant and timid, now concise and confident, his frank and open manners, his imposing presence, finally his herculean strength acquired through exercise rather than from a strong constitution, all this made of him a being who was quite new to me, but equally attractive as my former classmate, and visibly looking like my senior physically and morally. In sum, he was a rather handsome man, a real Swiss mountain boy, sweet and strong, full of a quiet and constant energy. The only thing that had not changed and that was quite distinctive was his skin white as snow and a glowing complexion that women could have envied.

Henri Obernay had become quite a scholar in several respects but botany was his dominant passion of the moment. His travel companion, a chemist, physicist, geologist, astronomer, and I don't know what else, was on a climb when I arrived and was not supposed to come back before evening. The name of this eminent person was not unknown to me; I had often heard it spoken by my parents: his name was M. de Valvèdre.

The first thing one asks after a long separation is whether the person is happy with his life. Obernay seemed delighted with his. He was devoted to the pursuit of science, and with this passion, when it is sincere and disinterested, there are few disappointments. The ideal, always beautiful, has the advantage of always being mysterious, and of never satisfying the saintly desires that it fosters.

I was less calm. The study of literature, which is nothing but the study of man, is painful when it is not terrifying. I had already read a great deal, and, although I had no experience of life, I was somewhat stricken with what has been called the "*mal du siècle*," the malady of the century, boredom, doubt, and arrogance. It is already quite far behind us, this illness of Romanticism. It has been mocked; fathers at that time complained about it a great deal, but the fathers of today should perhaps regret its passing. Perhaps it was preferable to the reaction that followed, the yearning for money, for pleasures without ideals, for boundless ambition,

things that do not seem to me to be such fine characteristics of the *health of the century*.

However, I did not share with Obernay my secret suffering. I only intimated that I was somewhat hurt to be living at a time when there was nothing great to do. We were then during the first years of the reign of Louis-Philippe. We still had vivid memories of the epic adventure of the empire; we had been brought up in generous indignation, in the hatred of the retrograde ideas of the last Bourbon; we had dreamed of a sweeping advance in 1830, and we did not feel the realization of this progress under the triumphant influence of the bourgeoisie. We were mistaken surely: progress occurs anyway during almost every period of history and you can only call retrograde those that close more doors to progress than they open; but there are times when a certain balance is established between advances and obstacles. These are phases in suspension during which youth suffers and yet does not wither since it can express the suffering that it feels.

Obernay did not understand much of my criticism of the century (we always call "century" the time during which we happen to live). As for him, he lived in eternity, since he was at grips with natural laws. He was surprised at my complaints and asked me whether the true goal of man was not to learn and to love what is always great, what no social position can diminish, nor make inaccessible; that is the study of the laws of the universe. We argued a little about this point. I wanted to prove that indeed there are social situations in which science itself is bound by superstition, hypocrisy, or, worse, by the indifference of those who govern and those who are governed. He answered with a slight shrug.

"These obstacles," he said, "are temporary accidents in the life of humanity. Eternity does not care, and consequently neither does the science of eternal things."

"But what about us? We who only have one day to live, can we be that resigned? If you had now, in front of your very eyes, proof that your work will be buried or suppressed, or at the very least without any effect on your contemporaries, would you still carry on with such eagerness?"

"Of course, I would!" he cried out. "Science is a mistress beautiful enough to be loved with no other reward than the honor and exhilaration of mastering her."

My pride was somewhat hurt by my friend's enthusiastic fervor. I was tempted, not so much to doubt his sincerity as to believe in some illusion, in some beginner's enthusiasm. I did not want to tell him and

start our renewed friendship with an argument. Besides I was quite tired. I did not wait for his companion the scientist to return from his walk, and I put back to the next day the honor of being introduced to him.

But the next day, I learned that M. de Valvèdre, who had been preparing for several days a major exploration of the glaciers and the moraine of Mont-Rose, which had been set the day before for two days later, as he saw everything ready and very favorable weather, had decided to take advantage of one of the rare periods of the year when the peaks are clear and calm. Thus he had left at midnight and Obernay had escorted him up to his first base. My friend was supposed to be back around noon, and, on his behalf, I was told to wait for him and not to venture in the precipices alone, as all the local guides had been taken by M. de Valvèdre. Knowing that I was tired, they had not wanted to wake me up to tell me what was happening and I had slept so soundly that the bustle of the expedition leaving, a veritable caravan with mules and luggage, had failed to rouse me from my sleep.

I bowed to the wishes of Obernay and resolved to wait for him at the chalet, or, to be more precise, at the hotel d'Ambroise; such was the name of our host, an excellent man, quite intelligent and majestically corpulent. When chatting with him, I learned that his house had been embellished through the generosity and the care of M. de Valvèdre who had fallen in love with the region. He came here often enough, as his own house was not very far away, and he had arranged to have at his disposal a comfortable pied-à-terre. He had done things so handsomely that Ambroise considered himself his servant as much as the recipient of his favors; but the scientist, who, it seemed to me, was a rather pleasant eccentric, had demanded that the highlander turn his house into a summer inn for the lovers of nature who would find their way into this little known region; Valvèdre had even asked Ambroise to serve with devotion all those who would attempt to explore the mountain, the only condition being that they had to write down their observations on a register now showed to me, and to which I admitted that I had nothing to add. Ambroise was no less eager to accommodate me. I was Obernay's friend, I could not be but somewhat of a scientist, and Ambroise was convinced that he would become one himself, if he wasn't already one, because he had often given shelter to people of merit.

After spending the first hours of the day writing to my parents, I went down to the dining hall for lunch and I found myself alone with a stranger, a man in his mid-thirties, rather handsome, and whom, at first

sight, I identified as an Israelite. This man seemed to me to be halfway between the extreme distinction and the loathsome vulgarity that characterize among Jews two markedly distinct races or types. He belonged to an intermediary or mixed type. He spoke French rather purely, with an unpleasant German accent, and was by turns slow- and quick-witted. At first, I did not like him. Little by little I found him rather amusing. His originality consisted in physical indolence and an extraordinarily active mind. Soft and fat, he had people wait on him as if he were a prince; curious and gossipy, he asked about everything and did not allow a moment of silence in the conversation.

As he showed me, from the very beginning, the honor of being quite sociable, I quickly learned that his name was Moserwald, that he was wealthy enough to take a rest from his business, and that, at the moment, he was traveling for pleasure. He was coming from Venice where he had busied himself with pretty women and fine arts rather than attending to his fortune; he was going to Chamonix. He wanted to see the Mont Blanc, and he was coming through the Mont-Rose, which he had wanted to *get an idea about*. I asked him if he was tempted to do the climb.

“Not at all,” he answered. “It is too dangerous, and to see what, I am asking you! Ice blocks piled on top of each other! No one has yet climbed up to the top of this mountain, and it is not certain at all that the caravan that left last night will come back intact. Besides, I don’t wish much for its success. I arrived at ten last night and I was barely asleep when I was awakened by all the local hobnailed boots which, for two hours, kept going up and down the wooden stairs of this house, which is full of openings. All the animals of the creation lowed, pattered, neighed, cursed, or clamored under the window, and when I thought it was over, they came back to fetch some instrument they had forgotten, a barometer or a telegraph! If I had a scaffold at my disposal I would have sent it to that M. de Valvèdre, God bless! Do you know him?”

“Not yet, and you?”

“I only know him by reputation; people in Geneva where I live talk quite a bit about him, and they talk even more about his wife. And her, do you know her? You don’t? Ah, my dear, what a pretty woman! Eyes as long as this (he was showing me the blade of his knife) and shinier than that!” he added, showing a superb sapphire surrounded by diamonds that he wore on his little finger.

“So her eyes must be sparkling because you have here a beautiful ring.”

“Do you want it? I’ll give it to you at cost.”

“No, thank you. I wouldn’t know what to do with it.”

“That would make a nice gift for your mistress, though, wouldn’t it?”

“My mistress? I don’t have one.”

“Ah, really? It’s a mistake.”

“I’ll mend my ways.”

“I don’t doubt it; but this ring can bring closer the happy moment. Let’s see, do you want it? It is a 12,000-franc trifle.”

“But, once again, I have no fortune.”

“Ah! It’s a greater mistake still; but this can be corrected too. Do you want to go into business? I can set you up.”

“Are you a jeweler?”

“No, I am rich.”

“It is a nice situation, but I have another one.”

“There is no good situation if you are poor.”

“Excuse me, but I am free!”

“So you must be comfortable because with real poverty there is only slavery. I have been there, as I speak to you, and I lacked education; but I remade myself some as I was overcoming bad luck. So you don’t know the Valvèdres? They are a strange couple, from what I hear. A gorgeous woman, a real society lady, sacrificed to an eccentric who lives in the glaciers! You think . . .”

Here the Jew made a few jokes in rather bad taste, but which did not offend me, as the persons about whom he was speaking were no direct acquaintances of mine. He added that in any case, with a husband like hers, Madame de Valvèdre was in her right, if she had had the affairs that Geneva gossip attributed to her. I learned from him that this lady appeared from time to time in Geneva, but less and less often, because her husband had bought for her a villa, near Lake Major, which he demanded that she not leave without his permission. “You must understand,” he added, “that she manages a few escapades when he is not there . . . and he is never there; but he has given her a warden, an old sister of his who, under the pretext of taking care of the children, there are four or five of them, conscientiously plays her role of jailer.”

“I can see that you feel very sorry for this interesting prisoner. Perhaps you know her better than you were willing to admit at lunch?”

“I don’t, my word of honor! I only know her by sight; I have never spoken to her, though I can’t pretend I haven’t felt like it. But patience!

The opportunity will arise one time or another, unless the young man who is traveling with the husband—I saw him from afar last night—M. Obernay, I think, the son of a professor . . .”

“He is my friend.”

“Maybe, but I say that he is handsome and it is only those who are close to us who betray us. An apprentice, he can always bring solace to the boss’s wife; it’s normal.”

“You are a free spirit, quite the skeptic.”

“Not free at all, but damn suspicious; otherwise life would be unbearable. People would take virtue seriously, and it would be sad, when one is not virtuous one self. Do you have the pretension to . . . ?”

“I have none.”

“Well, keep it that way, trust me. Go at it openly, satisfy your passions and don’t do it in excess. You see, I am giving you sound advice.”

“You are too kind.”

“Oh, yes, you are making fun of me, but I don’t mind. Your smiles won’t remove a cent from my pocket nor a hair from my scalp whereas your deference could not bring back in my life a single of the hours that I have lost or wasted.”

“You are quite the philosopher!”

“Excessively so, but a little late. I have lived a great deal since I have been able to indulge my fancy for things, and I am punished through a lesser desire for things. Yes, true, I have already become blasé. There are days when I don’t know what to do to amuse myself. Do you want to go outside and smoke a cigar? We shall look at this famous Mont-Rose; people say it is so pretty! I looked at it yesterday throughout the trip; I found it to be like all the fairly high mountains of the Alps; but maybe you will make me find it different. Let’s see, what has it got that is different and that is beautiful in your opinion? I am all too eager to admire. I haven’t been brought up as a poet or as an artist, but I like beauty and I have eyes like everybody else.”

There was so much naïveté in the chattering of Moserwald that, when smoking outdoors with him, I gave way to the silly conceit of explaining to him the beauty of the Mont-Rose. He listened to me with his handsome Jewish eyes, clear and eager, riveted on me. He looked like he understood and appreciated my enthusiasm, after which he suddenly resumed his air of mocking good-nature and said to me, “My dear Fellow, you may do all you can, you will not succeed in proving to me that there is the least pleasure in looking at this white mass. There is nothing as

stupid as the color white, and it's almost as dull as black. People say that the sun sows diamonds on this ice; as for me, I admit that I can't see a single one, and I am sure that I have more on my little finger than this huge block of sixty or seventy square miles shows on its whole surface. But I am glad I made sure of it: you have proven to me one more time that the imagination of well-educated people can work miracles because you said the prettiest things about a thing that is not pretty at all. I wish I could remember parts of it so that I could recite it on occasion; but I am too stupid, too slow, too practical, and I could never find a word that would not make people laugh at me. Here is why I refrain from being enthusiastic; it is a jewel that you must know how to wear and which doesn't fit well people of my kin. I like what is real; that is my job. I like fine diamonds and can't stand imitations, metaphors included."

"Which means that I only seek fake adornments and that you are a jeweler, don't deny it. Every word you said implies it."

"I am not a jeweler: I don't have the dexterity, nor the patience and the poverty necessary for it."

"But before, before wealth?"

"Before, I never did any manual labor. No, it's quite simple; my only survival tool was my reasoning. Wealth is not in the hands of those who pass their time producing, making, or creating but in the hands of those who don't touch a thing. There are three races of men, my dear: those who sell, those who buy, and those who act as intermediaries between these two. Trust me, sellers and buyers are the lowest on the human scale."

"Which is to say that the one who gouges them is the king of his century."

"By golly, yes! He must be smarter alone than the two together! So you are determined to be witty and to sell words? Well, you will always be wretchedly poor. Buy in order to sell or sell to buy back, that's the only thing that counts; but you don't understand me and you despise me. You say: here is a secondhand goods dealer, a money lender, a shark! Not at all, my dear, I am an excellent fellow, known for my honesty. I have the trust of many people of great distinction; people of talent, philanthropists, even scientists consult me and receive my services. I have a heart, I do more good in one day than you'll ever be able to do in twenty years. My hand is big, flabby, and soft. Well, open your hand if you need a friend, and you'll see what a good Jew, who may be dense, but not foolish, is like."

It did not occur to me to get angry at this strangely patronizing tone which was both insolent and friendly. The man was really everything

he said he was, dense to the point of being offensive without realizing it, kind enough to make sacrifices with pleasure, subtle enough to be generous in order to be forgiven his conceit. I resolved to take his strangeness lightly and, as he saw that I had no need of him but that I thanked him without disdain nor pride, he gave me a little more regard and respect than he had at first. We parted on excellent terms. He wished he could have had me as a companion for his walks; he feared being bored on his own. But it was close to the time Obernay had promised to return, and I doubted that he would like this new face. After taking leave of the Jew and finding out which path Obernay was supposed to take on his way back, I left to go meet him.

We met at the foot of the glacier, in a most picturesque pine grove. Obernay was coming back with several guides and mules that had carried part of his friend's luggage. This group continued on its way toward the valley and Obernay collapsed on the grass next to me. He was extremely tired; he had walked ten hours out of twelve on a path that wasn't cleared, and he had done so out of friendship for me. Split between two affections, he had wanted to gage the difficulties and dangers of M. de Valvèdre's venture and to come back on time to avoid leaving me alone an entire day.

He pulled some food and wine out of his bag, and gradually regaining his strength, he explained to me the exploration techniques of his friend. Contrary to what M. Moserwald had told me, it was not a question of reaching the highest peak of Mont-Rose, which might not have been possible, but, through a detailed analysis, to do a geological survey of the massif. The importance of this research was linked to a series of other explorations, past and future, of the Pennine Alps range, and was supposed to prove or disprove a specific scientific system that today I would be quite incapable of explaining to the reader; in any case, this excursion in the glaciers could last several days. M. de Valvèdre was quite cautious because of his guides and servants, whom he treated quite humanely. He was equipped with several lightweight and ingeniously designed tents, which could hold his instruments and accommodate all of his people. With a boiling water machine of extremely small dimensions, a marvel of portable industry which he had invented, he could generate heat almost instantly anywhere he was and combat all the accidents resulting from the cold. Last, he had all kinds of supplies for a given time: a small pharmacy, a change of clothes for everyone, and so on. He had just established a veritable colony of fifteen people above the glaciers, on a vast ice field, beyond the reach of avalanches. He was supposed to spend

two days there, then look for a passage to move his camp farther up with part of his material and of his people; the rest would join him in two or three trips, while he attempted to go farther still. Condemned perhaps to make only two or three leagues of daily discoveries because of the difficulty of transportation, he had kept a few mules, sacrificed in advance to the dangers and sufferings of the venture. M. de Valvèdre was very wealthy, and could do more than so many other scientists, who are always held back because of their honorable poverty and the parsimony of governments; he felt it was a duty to spare no expense for the sake of the advancement of science. I told Henri that I was sorry that I hadn't been informed of their departure during the night. I would have asked M. de Valvèdre permission to go with him.

"He would have refused," he answered, "as he refused when I asked for myself. He would have told you, as he told me, that you are your parents' son and that he did not have the right to put your life in danger. Besides, you would have understood, as I did, that when one is not truly necessary in these sorts of expeditions, one is quite a burden: one more mouth to feed, shelter, protect, take care of, especially under such conditions."

"Of course, of course, I understand it in my case, but how is it that you are not extremely valuable, you, a scientist, to your scientist friend?"

"I am more valuable to him by staying in Saint Pierre, from where I can follow almost all of his movements on the mountain, and from where, at a given signal, I can send supplies, if he is running short, or come to his rescue, if need be. Besides, I must do a series of comparative analyses simultaneously to his own, and I gave him my word of honor that I would not fail to do so."

"I can see," I said to Obernay, "that you are extremely devoted to this Valvèdre, and that you consider him a man of the greatest merit. It is my father's opinion as well; he sometimes spoke about meeting him at your father's in Paris, and I know that his name carries some weight in scientific circles."

"What I can tell you about him," Obernay answered, "is that, second to my father, he is the man I respect the most, and that, after my father and you, he is the man I like the best."

"After me, thanks Henri! Here is an excellent statement that I was afraid I no longer deserved."

"And for what reason? I haven't forgotten that of the two of us, I am the one who was the laziest in regards to writing; but, as you understood

this weakness of mine, I trusted that you forgave me. You knew me well enough to figure out that I may not be demonstrative but at least I am as faithful a friend as you can ever find.”

I was quite moved and felt that I loved this young man with all my soul. I forgave him the kind of superiority of views and personality that he seemed to assume over me and I began fearing that he really had the right to do so. He rested for a few moments and, while he was sleeping, head in the shade and legs in the sun, I studied him again with interest, as you would someone you feel will influence your life. I don't know why, but I put him alongside in my literary and descriptive thoughts of the Israelite Moserwald. It came to me as a natural antithesis: one fat and indolent like a well-fed gourmand, the other active and lean like an insatiable researcher; the first one, yellow and shiny like the gold which had been the goal of his life; the other, fresh and full of color like the flowers on the mountain in which he delighted and which, like him, owed to the sun's harsh caresses the richness of their hue and the purity of their fine tissue.

This was for my imagination, young and cheerful at that time, the sign that my friend had a strong vocation. I have always noticed that the strong urges of the mind have exterior manifestations in some physical characteristic of the individual. Some ornithologists have birds' eyes; some hunters have the appearance of the game they are pursuing. Musicians who are simply virtuosi have an ear shaped a certain way, whereas composers have in the shape of their forehead the sign of their summarizing ability and seem to hear through the brain. Farmers who raise cattle are slower and heavier than those who raise horses, and they are born thus from generation to generation. Last, without getting lost in many examples, I can say that Obernay was living proof of my system's validity. I fully recognized later that his face, without real beauty, but eminently pleasant, had the bloom of a rose; his soul—without creative genius, had the deep charm of harmony, and, one could say, a subtle and splendid scent of honesty.

After sleeping one hour with the placidity of a soldier on active service who is used to making good use of his time, he felt quite refreshed and we resumed our conversation. I told him about Moserwald, my new acquaintance, and I repeated the jokes this great skeptic had made about his position as necessary bearer of solace to Madame de Valvèdre. He almost jumped with indignation, but I held him back. “After what you told me about your affection and your respect for the character of the husband, it is quite unnecessary to defend yourself against a shameful betrayal that would even be insulting to me.”

“Yes, yes,” he answered sharply, “I don’t doubt you; but if this Jew comes my way, he’d better not joke about this subject!”

“I don’t think he would push his overflowing wit that far, although, after all, I don’t know of what he may be capable with his insolent candor. Do you know him, this Moserwald? Isn’t he from Geneva?”

“No, he is German; but he often comes to our place, I mean in our town, and, without ever speaking to him, I know quite well that he is a conceited wretch!”

“So he is, but with such naïveté!”

“This cynical naïveté may be a trick. What does one ever know about a Jew?”

“What? You have racial prejudices, you, the man of science?”

“Not the least prejudice nor the least hostile opinion. I am only stating a fact: that is, the most insignificant Israelite always has in him something deeply mysterious. Summit or abyss, the representative of ancient times obeys a logic that is not like ours. He has kept something of the esoteric doctrine of the hypogaea, into which Moses was initiated. Moreover, persecution has given him the science of practical life and a very strong feeling for reality. He is thus such a powerful being that I fear for the future of society, as I fear for this forest in which we are the fall of granite blocks that the ice above holds back. I don’t hate the rock; it has its *raison d’être*; it is part of the structure of the earth. I respect its origin, and I even study it with a certain religious anxiety, but I can see the law which drives its course and which, while disintegrating it, brings together in a common fate its ruin and that of more modern creatures that have grown on its sides.”

“Here is, my friend, a metaphor that is overly scientific.”

“No, no, it is accurate. Our wisdom, our religious and social sciences have taken root on the ashes of the Hebraic world and, ungrateful disciples, we have attempted to destroy this world instead of coaxing it into following us. It is taking its revenge. It is exactly like those trees with wild, grasping roots that lift rocks and dig their way to the avalanches that will engulf them.”

“So, in your opinion, Jews will be the future masters of the world?”

“For a while they will, I have no doubt; afterward other cataclysms will quickly sweep them away, if they remain Jewish. Everything must be renewed or else it dies; it is the law of the universe. But, to get back to Moserwald, whoever he may be, beware of striking up a friendship with him before getting to know him well.”

“I don’t intend ever to become his friend, although I think better of him than you do.”

“I am not judging him; I know nothing about him that allows me to suspect him as an individual. On the contrary, I know that he has the reputation for keeping his word and for being more generous in business than any member of his race; but you are telling me that he speaks lightly of M. de Valvèdre, and I don’t like it. And then he offers you his services, and it worries me. One can always need money, and Shylock’s fable is an eternally true symbol. The Jew instinctively needs to eat a piece of our heart; he has so many reasons to hate us and hasn’t acquired with baptism the sublime notion of forgiveness. I beg you, if you were led to have an unforeseen expense, well beyond your means, ask me for the money and never ask this Moserwald. Promise me, I urge you to.”

I was surprised by the intensity of Obernay and I hastened to reassure him by telling him about the respectably comfortable circumstances of my family and the simplicity of my tastes.

“No matter,” he continued, “promise me to consider me your best friend. I don’t know what your life will be like . . . From what you let me guess yesterday of your angst toward the future and of your discontent with the present, I am afraid that passions will play too great a part in your destiny. It doesn’t seem to me that you have made efforts to create for yourself the necessary restraint.”

“What restraint? Botany or geology?”

“Oh, if you are going to laugh at me, let’s speak about something else.”

“I am not laughing when it is a question of loving you and of being moved by your generous affection; but you must admit that you think too much like a scientist and that you would readily say ‘there is no salvation outside science.’”

“Well, yes, I would say it readily. I have the honesty and the courage to admit it. I have seen a number of examples of these false theories that have troubled your soul.”

“What theories do you reproach me with? Do explain.”

“First, the personality theory, the pretension that you can forge a life with personal glory and resolve to be angry or full of despair if you fail.”

“Well, you are mistaken; I have two strings to my ambition. I accept glory without happiness and happiness without glory.”

In turn, Obernay laughed at my so-called modesty, and, while talking thus, I can’t remember how we came to speak about M. de Valvèdre and his wife. I was rather curious to know if there was any truth in

Moserwald's gossip and it so happened that Obernay was inclined to observe the utmost discretion. He gave the highest praise to his friend, and he avoided having an opinion about Madame de Valvèdre; but in spite of himself he became upset and almost irritable when saying her name. He showed a nervous reticence; he would blush when I asked him why. I misunderstood. I imagined that in spite of his virtue, his reason, and his will, he was in love with this woman, and, in a moment when he denied it the most, I let slip out quite ingenuously, "She must be very attractive!"

"Ah," he exclaimed, hitting with his fist on the metal box which held his plants and which he had used as a pillow. "I can see that the Jew's bad thoughts have had an influence on you. Well, since you are pushing me, I will tell you the truth. I don't respect the woman about whom you are speaking. Now, do you still think that I can love her?"

"Huh, sometimes it is one more reason to do so; love is so unpredictable."

"The wrong kind of love, the love found in novels and modern melodrama; but unhealthy love only arises in unhealthy souls, and, thank God, mine is pure. Is yours already corrupted that you admit this shameful fatality?"

"I don't know if my soul is as pure as yours is, my dear Henri, but it is a virgin one; that's all I can tell you."

"Well, don't let it be tainted in advance by these wrong-headed ideas. Don't allow yourself to be convinced that artists and poets are meant to become prey to passions and that they are allowed, more than other men, to live a so-called grand life without moral fetters; don't ever admit to yourself, even if it is the case, that you can fall under the spell of a feeling that is beneath you!"

"But, really, you are going to make me afraid of myself if you go on like this! You put before me dangers that I was not thinking about, and, for all that, you'd think that I was the one in love, without knowing her, with the famous Madame de Valvèdre!"

"Famous! Did I say she was famous?" continued Obernay with a slightly disdainful laugh. "No; fame has nothing to do with her in either a good or bad sense. Know that the affairs attributed to her in Geneva, according to M. Moserwald (and I think she is not attributed any) only exist in the imagination of this triumphant Israelite. Madame de Valvèdre lives in isolation in the countryside with her two sisters-in-law and her two children."

"I can see, indeed, that Moserwald is misinformed; he had mentioned four children and one sister-in-law. But do you realize that you are

contradicting yourself a great deal when speaking about this woman? She is beyond reproach but you don't respect her!"

"I don't know that there is anything to blame about her behavior; it is her personality, her intellect, if you will, that I don't respect."

"Does she have intellectual qualities?"

"No, I don't think so, but others do."

"Is she very young?"

"No, she married when she was twenty, let's see, already some ten years ago. She must be around thirty."

"Well, you are right; it's not so young. And her husband?"

"He is forty years old but he is younger than she is: he is active and strong like a primitive man whereas she is indolent and tired like a Creole."

"Is she?"

"No, her mother was Spanish and her father a Swede; he was consul in Alicante where he got married."

"Some peculiar racial mix! It must have produced a strange type!"

"Quite successful in terms of physical beauty."

"And morally?"

"Morally? Less, I think . . . a soul without energy, a brain without breadth, an uneven temper, irritable and indolent; no serious capacity for anything, a silly scorn for the things that she doesn't understand."

"Even for botany?"

"Oh, for botany more than for anything else."

"In this case, I am quite reassured about you. You do not love and you will never love this woman."

"I can guarantee it," my friend said happily as he was clasping his bag and putting over his shoulder the vasculum,* which he then crossed over his chest. "Flowers are allowed not to like women, but women who don't like flowers are monsters."

It would be impossible for me to say why and how this conversation, interrupted and resumed several times during the course of the day, and always without planning on our part, fostered in me a kind of agitation and something like a predisposition to experience the unhappiness from which Obernay wanted to protect me. It was as if, endowed with a sudden foresight, he could read in the book of my destiny. And yet, I was

*The wrought iron box in which botanists collect their plant specimen to keep them fresh.

neither passive by nature nor incapable of reacting; but I believed strongly in fate. It was fashionable in those times, and to believe in fate is to create it within ourselves.

So, who will take possession of me? I thought as I was struggling to find sleep around midnight, while Obernay, in bed at six o'clock, was getting up again to make the scientific observations, the program of which his friend had put him in charge. Why did Henri seem so concerned about me. Has his eye, trained to read the clouds, seen beyond the horizon the storms that are gathering over my head? Whom shall I love? I don't know any woman who has struck my imagination, apart from two or three great opera singers and theater actresses to whom I have never spoken and to whom I shall probably never speak. I have led a life that has been, if not the quietest one, at least the one of the purest. I have felt in myself the forces of love, and I have been able to keep them intact for an ideal object whom I haven't met yet.

In my sleep, I dreamed of a woman whom I had never seen, whom, apparently, I was never destined to see, that is, Madame de Valvèdre. I loved her passionately during I don't know how many years, the vision of which lasted perhaps less than an hour, but I woke up surprised and exhausted by this long drama, of which I could not remember any details. I chased away this ghost and went back to sleep on my left side. I was unnerved, upset. Moserwald the Jew appeared and offended me so cruelly that I boxed his ear. Awakened again, I found myself mumbling words which made no sense. In my third sleep, I saw again the same character, friendly and mocking, in the shape of a fantastic bird that was quite fat, that heavily rose off the ground, and that I still pursued without being able to catch him. He would land on the highest rocks, crushing them under his weight, and laughing, he would surround me with an avalanche of stones and ice. All the metaphors with which Obernay had entertained me were taking on a tangible appearance, and I could not rest until I had exhausted these strange phantoms.

When I got up, Obernay, who had stayed up until dawn, had gone back to bed for an hour or two. He had the wonderful quality of being able to interrupt and then resume sleep as with any other occupation subjected to his will. I inquired about Moserwald; he had left early in the morning.

I waited for Henri to wake up, and after a frugal breakfast, we left together on a beautiful walk which lasted the greater part of the day, and during which we made no more mention of the Valvèdres, the Jew, or myself. We were totally absorbed by the splendid nature which surrounded

us. I was enjoying it as a dazzled artist who is not yet attempting to understand the effect produced on his soul by the novelty of great sights and who, overcome by sensation, does not have the leisure to appreciate and to summarize. Familiar with the sublime mountains and engaged in detecting the mysteries of living plants, Obernay seemed less excited and happier than I was. He was without fever and without cries, whereas I was all dizziness and rapture.

Around three o'clock in the afternoon, as he was speaking of climbing one more bank of awesome rocks to gather a small rarissimas saxifrage specimen that was supposed to be found over there, I admitted that I felt very tired, that I was starving and dying of thirst and heat.

"Right. This is not surprising," he answered. "I am selfish; I am not thinking that everything requires training, and that you won't be a good hiker before eight to ten days of increasing difficulty. Allow me first to get my saxifrage; it is a little late in the season and I am quite afraid of finding it completely gone to seed if I wait until tomorrow. This afternoon I might still find some opened corollas. I'll join you in Saint Pierre at dinnertime. You are going to take the path where we are now; it will take you without danger or fatigue, in ten minutes at most, to a chalet hidden behind the large rock facing us. There you will find as much milk as you please. You will then go down toward the valley, always turning left, and you'll find our shelter by walking along the stream. The path is safe and shady."

We parted company and, after drinking and resting fifteen minutes at the chalet he had mentioned, I went down toward the valley. The path was quite good, in comparison to those Obernay had led me through, but it was so narrow that, when I met with flocks marching one after another, I was forced to step aside and to climb on slopes of varying accessibility in order to avoid being thrown into a deep precipitous ledge that ran along the opposite side of the path. I had managed to protect myself, when, as I was in one of the narrowest passages, I heard behind me the sound of bells ringing in cadence. It was a herd of loaded mules to which I immediately prepared to give way. To this end, I caught sight of a rock which put me on a level with the heads of these unflappable animals, and I sat there while waiting. The view was splendid, but the small approaching caravan soon drew all my attention.

At the head, a mule rather picturesquely harnessed Italian style, led by a guide on foot, carried a woman draped in a thin white Arab cloak. Behind that group, another group, almost the same—a guide, a mule, and on this mule another woman taller and thinner than the first one, wearing