

THE CALL OF THE BEAST

Chapter I

How did it come about within me? I seem to remember. It was not by virtue of a slow sequence of desires, an evolution of my soul. It appeared to me abruptly, one evening in my life, like a new road that one discovers at a crossroads, where there are more trees and where it is more agreeable to walk.

When I stopped in front of the kiosk of the Toulousan florist and I look a large bouquet of carnations in my hand, I was still similar to myself and I did not know what magic there was in those flowers.

I smiled at the toothless merchant because I recognized her, she had no more changed, in fifteen years, than the low, bright houses of my native city, its avenue, its side-streets and its canal. I remembered that she had previously been a procuress as well as a florist, but in the manner in which one is in the Midi, more to render a service to good girls than out of personal cupidity. Doubtless she still was, and at the same time as the dusty flowers of her display she had a desire to offer me a young friend—but she did not. She wrapped the stems of the carnations in paper and held them out to me.

Dusk was about to fall. It was summer, and the atmosphere was very heavy. A thousand impressions of my youth came back to me, emerging from familiar doors and stones once trodden.

I walked joyfully, bouquet in hand, toward the cemetery, for in truth I was enjoying my pious action, the victory that I had won over my egotism by devoting two hours to carrying those flowers to my mother's grave—two precious hours, since I had arrived that morning and was departing again the following day.

A tram stopped beside me. I thought about boarding it. Perhaps my destiny would have been different if I had done so. But the weather was warm and I knew that men of my race, gathered together in a vehicle, emit a disagreeable odor of garlic and sweat. I hesitated. The tram set off again. In any case, the distance was not long—at least, I thought so. It was, in reality, infinite, since I was never able to reach the cemetery that evening.

Memories are linked to sounds and odors. When I heard the saws of marble-cutters and an odor of stone mingled with the perfume of my carnations, I immediately relived a melancholy All Souls' Eve, an excessively heavy shirt the knot of a blue cravat with white spots displayed on my breast, and an infantile conversation with a child named Robert. And I walked with all the more contentment for having honored the past.

The monumental mason's shop overflowed on to the avenue with all kinds of model tombstones. And as I bumped into the corner of I know not what eternal regrets, laughter rang out, and I saw a woman at a ground-floor window,

She was a joyful she-wolf with gilded ears of May corn in her brown hair. She was leaning idly on her elbows and I could see her breasts jutting over the window-sill.

My hesitation lasted a second, during which I wondered to what social category the woman might belong. As soon as the next second, however, after her laughter had resounded in my ears, I was fixed on that point and I could, without fear of being mistaken, estimate the woman's value in monetary terms.

She was a twenty-year-old she wolf who was offering her warm form to a passing bearer of flowers, extending her teeth to bite and laughing by virtue of natural gaiety. Her corsage was unfastened, there was a laziness in the movement of her shoulders, and one sensed in the inclination of her body a natural desire to undress.

I was like someone sitting on a seesaw who falls abruptly to the other side of life. The attraction of a vulgar room that I glimpsed, of an unfamiliar bed on to which I might push a cheerful and venal young

woman, mingled within me with lust and the heat, the dust and the heavy blue air. I leapt over a cross and I offered my flowers to the woman, thus introducing a slight sentimental character into an affair that was not.

She continued to laugh, while staring at me. I saw a veritable sensuality in the green reflection of her dark eyes, which filled me with desire. My heart beat a little more forcefully, I sensed my blood circulating harmoniously and, like a wave coming from the end of the avenue, I received an impression of the beauty of things. The canal that I had followed, a barge towed by a horse, the white stones of the monumental masons, the wreaths of artificial flowers, a line of cypresses in the distance that dominate a white wall, and even the bottles of a small pharmacy, all seemed to me to be the chosen frame of a unique evening that my destiny had arranged for me.

I threw an invitation to dinner into the balance of an a ready-certain success, She responded with an acceptance—and I perceived, in observing that she had almost no southern accent, that all the coincidences were favorable to me and that I was fully gratified by fate.

I opened the door of the room with delight. I had no regret for my interrupted pilgrimage. Was it not, in sum, a vain manifestation good for simple folk? Was it not sufficient to honor the dead mentally?

In reality, that shaky ground-floor door did not only open to the room of a one-louis little woman; it enabled me to enter a new region of life that I cannot say was either less beautiful or less dolorous; it enabled me to connect with a long corridor of which I could not see the end, with an infinity of other rooms where there were low lamps, turned-back beds and naked forms, where I was to pursue for such a long time the youth of pleasure that does not want to die.

Chapter II

When I plunged my key into the lock of my apartment it seemed to me that the key turned with difficulty, as if, during my absence, it had been damaged by rust I dropped my valise, but not with the satisfaction of a man who finds himself at home after twelve hours in the railway and half an hour in a taxi. On the sofa there was a handkerchief, an open book and a paper-knife, and a small slipper on the carpet, all of which gave me the image of a disorder that seemed annoying. By contrast, an unaccustomed order on my work-table appeared to me to be an assault on the materials of my thought. The light was less rosy through the lampshades. It was too warm.

Immediately, I heard Rose-Thé's voice calling to me.

"It's you, finally!"

In those syllables there was all the pleasure she felt in seeing me again, but I was not touched by it. Finally! She had, then, been waiting excessively, I was too late, my voyage had been too long. She was already reproaching me.

I opened the door and I saw Rose-Thé, stark naked on the bed, supporting herself on her left elbow. Her skin made a long blonde patch against the violet wall-paper. There was a natural abandonment in her pose, mingled with a slight effort to make the line harmonious. I savored that unexpected beauty keenly, for Rose-Thé was beautiful and that had been the original reason for my amour. I also savored the surge of affection that pushed her toward me and the quiver of her being as she kissed me.

But I savored it in a new fashion and I was internally astonished to receive familiar impressions so differently. It seemed to me that I was a stranger who was watching a play, who was seeing a traveler return home after a few days' absence and find his mistress naked on his bed. I heard the banal words they exchanged.

"How long you've been away. What have you done? Have you had a good time? Have you cheated on me?"

"It was horribly hot. I haven't done anything interesting. I've been in the train since seven o'clock this morning."

I looked around at the furniture and the walls of my narrow room. There was not a corner of the carpet, a pleat of the curtain or a design on a cushion that was unknown to me, that was not like the testimony of my existence, my desires and my thoughts. And I perceived that all those things surrounding me were bizarrely detached from the past, existed in themselves, with a life of their own to which no memory was linked. The cushions no longer attested that Rose-Thé's slender body had sunk among them; there was no memory of a delicate hand over the ash-trays. The mirror was mute, as if no image were reflected in its cold glass.

I was penetrated by a disagreeable impression, and I wanted to efface it as quickly as possible.

It was as if the wellbeing that I did not utilize because of its continual presence and its certainty, while continuing to be present and certain, had evaporated round me, by virtue of a subtle mystery that is not appropriate to wellbeing. I wanted to grasp it, to assure myself of its indisputable possession.

I took Rose-Thé in my arms and I kissed her lips. They were warm and tasted simultaneously of milk and fruit. I touched her breasts, which were perfect in form and firmness.

But then I thought of other, less perfect breasts that I had seen crushed on the sill of a ground-floor window, in a white avenue rising toward a cemetery. I thought about a heavier human contour, a mouth from which an animal merriment burst forth. I saw again an entire banal evening in which I had intoxicated myself with vulgarity.

We had dined in a restaurant that she had chosen because she was known there, where the waiter gave her a familiar wink. Then she had a desire to go to the cinema, because of a film of which she had seen the first part the previous week. There she had met a man who had a black moustache and wore a bowler hat and trousers without a crease, and who had come up to her, addressing her as *tu*. Then he had perceived me and had moved aside.

"Pardon me—I didn't see that you were with company."

“He’s a pharmacist, you see,” said my new friend, laughing, “and it’s very useful to know a pharmacist, because he sells you all the drugs you want.”

Then we had been in a bar, where she drank several cocktails, as much by taste as to conciliate the proprietress, a fat Jewess obsequious with men and severe with women.

Then, excited by the drink, the music of a tango, the cries and the laughter, my friend had become truthful and realistic.

“You see that fellow,” she said, showing me a young man dressed like an illustration in a fashion magazine. “I was with him for six months, and I’ve also slept with the fat man who’s with him, but only once.”

And I thought that she had also slept with another, powerfully built, who had just sat down on a stool and had said *bonsoir* to her without looking at her, with a little twitch of his jaw.

And I relived the impression of unhealthy disturbance that had gripped me, in that atmosphere of provincial partying, next to that woman that I had desired, and whom all those men had had before me and would have in future.

Roe-Thé smiled at me with her beloved mouth and I had before my eyes the teeth of the she-wolf. I perceived an alcoholic breath.

I wanted to rediscover the richness of every evening, the possibility of pleasure that seemed to flee from me. I folded the offered body of Rose-Thé against the bed. Her perfume rose from warm sheets, and it seemed to me that I was breathing an odor of rain and dust, out there, in a room where the clock was covered by a globe of glass and where, from the sky of a wooden bed, floral curtains fell.

The life of a man, his wellbeing and the march of his destiny, depend on the riches he possesses and those of which he disposes.

In that epoch, I was rich. By that I mean that I had no money, or very little, but that all the other goods for which a man searches had devolved upon me in abundance. My friends were numerous, they pressed me incessantly to go and see them and they were visibly glad when I went to surprise them in order to spend the evening with them. My apartment, without being vast and luxurious, possessed the atmosphere that comes neither from furniture, nor fabrics, nor the disposition of the rooms, nor the light, but from a special life proper to apartments, which ensures that one is at ease there and one has no desire to go away rapidly when one has gone in. I say that I had no money, but I had enough for a moderate existence with modest pleasures, which was sufficient for me. A few people said that I must have talent. I enjoyed a certain consideration. I had the reasonable and clear-sighted appearance, the facility of entering into an understanding with people, that immediately attracts the sympathy of concierges, taxi-drivers, post office clerks, and which enables one to move in the streets as in a familiar element.

I was only familiar with the ennui that one can measure and limit—which is to say, the ennui that one experiences in an antechamber when evil destiny obliges you to go and solicit an official personage, or the ennui of waiting, when one has a rendezvous, for someone who is late. But I was unfamiliar with the profound ennui, inherent to your nature, which grips a man by the temples when he wakes up and makes him see the emptiness of his existence.

I had not read all the books. I even discovered, perpetually, a great number of them to which I had never even given a thought, but which were very interesting. I even obtained a new pleasure from them, that of having them rebound and collecting them.

I loved traveling and railways. The frame of a railway carriage pleased me because of the moving solitude one finds here. I did not know many countries, and the ever unrealized desire to see them gave me a kind of reserve of fortunate possibilities that I might draw upon when the moment came.

The theater cost me nothing. I didn’t go there, because it sent me to sleep, but I knew that I could go there easily, because I knew artistes everywhere with whom it was permissible to chat for an hour.

I had no taste for nature, and I found it redoubtable because of its powerful sadness, but I knew that, strictly speaking, by confronting it and struggling with it in the confines of some beautiful property where I was invited to spend the summer. I would succeed in mastering it and extracting joys from it.

I could wander for a long time in unknown quarters, enjoying the variety of shops that were always similar, finding picturesque details of life in side-streets where there was nothing in particular. Sometimes, the mere appearance of a café encountered on my route and where I sat down was sufficient to give me pleasure. And on those days, everyone appeared to me to be interesting and worthy of being studied, simply because they were clad in human form.

A long way away, in the charming town of Saint-Gaudens, I had a happy family who were alive, and I knew that they would be even happier if I went to live nearby. I didn't go, but I knew that I could. And my family was, for me, like nature, a possible resource for bad days, a grave, respectable wellbeing to which one could have recourse any time, with a little effort.

I worked regularly, and I liked to work. I was content with small successes that enabled me to hope for great ones. I said that the most absolute liberty is indispensable to life and, as I thought that I was free, I was. I had no stomach aches and I slept well. No religious thought tormented me. I was not followed by the specter of any evil deed.

And there was also the morning air when I went for a walk in the Bois, the pleasure of the port drunk at six o'clock in a bar in the center, where the number of comrades and women whose hands I shook gave me the sensation of being a very popular man. There was the warmth of the little restaurant into which one goes when one is hungry, the silence of midnight when one returns home and the impassioned book over which one goes to sleep.

Finally, there was Rose-Thé, whom I loved.

I was not entirely sure of loving Rose-Thé. Sometimes, I said to myself: "Do I love her?"

And at other times I said to myself: "I've loved her a lot. How long will I love her?"

But those were questions to which I did not reply, because I knew full well that I only asked them in order to deceive myself.

When one meets a woman and one begins to walk with her, one can take several roads. Some of them are short, some of them long. Some are sunlit, some are rainy. There are some where there are trees and others where one continually stumbles over stones. Some are bordered with charming little houses and others in which all the doors open to shady furnished hotels. There are some that only go to Asnières and others that take you to China, and even further.

The one that I had followed with Rose-Thé began in the Bois de Boulogne, beside a table where here were two cocktails, before which we were sitting. It plunged under the acacias, amid the heavy summer heat; one saw couples enlaced on benches there, and one was sometimes blinded by the headlight of an automobile traveling at top speed. In truth, we had no idea where that road led, but we found it full of an immense charm, because we had not yet reached the period where one holds hands. That period arrived very rapidly, however and was surpassed as soon as the road turned and brought us back toward the Porte Dauphine.

The road led to places where one takes tea at five o'clock; it made zigzags in the environs of Paris, traversed the fair at Neuilly, stopped at shooting-ranges and menageries and plunged into a dazzling fourteenth of July to vanish into the Gare de Lyon.

The road went along the quays of Marseille; it turned through the old quarter of that astonishing city's port, paused for the time to have lunch on a terrace of the Réserve and continued along the sea shore. Then it was shaded by parasol pines, buried beneath enormous mimosas that overflowed from florid properties, crushed beneath the leaves and petals that rained down from rose-bushes. It traversed towns, rolled through Nice, returned to Grasse, a lands of perfumes, reached the high rocks of Estérel, in order to bring back those who were following it to their exact point of departure, at a table in the Bois de Boulogne where there were two cocktails.

But the road didn't stop there. Then it took a rather uniform trajectory. It made little curves in Paris, to end every evening at the same place, at the door of the house in which I lived. And in spite of that uniformity—or perhaps because of it, who knows?—the road continued to have its charm and poetry.

I sometimes walked along it with delight, when I had the luck to perceive that I was happy, at other times with ennui, for one always thinks, foolishly, that present happiness is depriving you of a greater happiness that one imagines, and which could be realized in other circumstances.

I was not entirely sure of loving Rose-Thé, but in reality, I loved her. I loved her, first of all, for the habitual reasons that enable one to love someone. Because of the efforts I had initially made to conquer her, which are like a capital that one has invested, which one does not want to lose, and which one wants to see fructify into durable happiness. Because of her face and her body, which corresponded well enough to the ideal that I had of beauty. Because of her appetite for sensuality and a physical harmony that existed between us for pleasure. Because of her mental facility in conforming to my tastes, my ideas and my reading, a facility that is often what we call intelligence in others. Because of a spontaneity and an exaggeration of her instinct, which made her laugh for little things and weep for even less, which made her participate with an extreme ardor in the smallest events of life in which she was involved.

But in addition to those reasons, I loved Rose-Thé for a host of petty actions, tastes and spoken words, which formed a kind of chain composed of rings of different form and color, a chain of memories by which I had held her.

Long ago, at the beginning of everything, there was an attitude of simultaneous timidity and curiosity.

Then there was a comical dance to mark her satisfaction one day when I had announced that I would spend three entire days with her.

Then there was an evening at the home of friends when she had really drunk too much champagne and on the way back, on foot, in the street, when she wept softly against my shoulder, manifesting an infantile remorse and promising me not to do it again.

Another time, I saw her at the window, one day when I was late; the wind was scattering her hair and there was an anxiety so full of tenderness in her features.

She had broken a little vase of no value. I opened the door and before I had had time to express my indifference to that minimal event, she fell to her knees, begging my pardon.

One day when she was laughing in loud bursts, she stopped abruptly in order to say to me passionately: "You are my life!" And afterwards, she had resumed laughing, without my being able to grasp the transition between hilarity and amour.

But I loved her above all...and in truth, I was never able to explain the profound reason for it...because she had known difficult days in her childhood and the quotidian drama of momentary need. Perhaps it was because of my habit of weighing in a mental balance the supposed merit of every person and honoring each according to the sum of effort. Perhaps it was because of the contrast that I established between such a delicate and beautiful creature and evocation of the poor lodgings, the miserable meal and the absent fire. Perhaps it was simply because of the magnificent charm of poverty.

But something else entirely had gripped my heart. It was the relationship between Rose-Thé and her parents. Every time I had had a mistress I had tried hard never to see her parents. The mothers resembled their daughters too much; the aged image of the person one loves is suggestive, to the point that one no longer finds in her anything but a youth permanently deteriorated. One is embarrassed before the fathers, who, in any case, rarely exist.

Rose-Thé had almost never spoken to me about her parents, except to mention that they lived nearby; but one day when, exceptionally, I went to find her at home, I saw them.

Two timid old people were sitting in a modest dining room. They were framed by the shadow of a walnut dresser; and it seemed to me that they must always have lived there, that they were immobile and immutable, in the radius of that item of furniture, which only contained a few plates, no silverware and where the provisions were lacking in abundance that the lowest shelf was garnished with books.

One sensed that the genius of financial affairs had been far away from them, that they had shown little initiative in their lives, and a great deal of resignation to an ordinary fate; that they had not attempted great enterprises, he remaining in his role as an employee, she not seeking to develop a very petty commerce in lingerie. But qualities radiated from them of the tranquil depth of race, disinterest and

probity, and a certain moral purity, which cannot be expressed in words, enabled by their confidence in life and good will.

It also seemed to me that they marveled with a constant wonder, that they could not get used to the idea that they had put into the world a being so blonde, so luminous and so created for elevation as the smiling Rose-Thé.

And when I quit them, after banal remarks, as I went downstairs with my mistress, I had the sentiment that I had made a discovery, that I had just heard, for the first time, a harmony that I had never perceived before.

And I also loved her more for not acting like a thousand other women, for not making any excuses for the poverty of the house, for not talking to me about a great fortune and great situation lost, for being, with an easy loyalty, devoid of reticence or regret, comfortable with her family and her past.

We had turned on all the electric light-switches in order to make the apartment more cheerful. Something was separating us, a shadow that I wanted to dissipate; and for that I enlisted the aid of light, thinking that all the illuminated lamps might perhaps induce a little clarity in us.

There was a power cut at that moment. After having waited for a few moments in darkness, we decided to remedy the cut, but our lack of foresight meant that we only possessed one single candle.

We placed the unique candle in an ugly medieval candlestick that had been relegated to a cupboard, and a wave of ill humor emerged from the fabrics and the walls and passed through us, because of our lack of foresight. A short argument followed, to determine which of us had been at fault in not thinking about buying candles.

Then we each took a book and sat down to read, our two heads close enough to touch, beside the little flickering flame.

But I wasn't reading. In my mind there was the obsessive memory of the prostitute with the teeth of a she-wolf and the breasts squashed on the sill; I respired the perfume of tobacco in her hair; I heard her obscene laughter on the bed; I perceived in the most minute detail the slightest gestures she had then made with me, the fall of her ankle-boots, the dress that she had taken off, the hairpins that she had removed.

I wanted to chase that vision away and find affectionate words within me in order to reestablish a current of warm sympathy with Rose-Thé.

I found exactly what it was necessary to say. I nudged her with my elbow. But she was reading a novel and had reached the most dramatic passage.

"You're annoying me," she said. "Let me read."

I waited a little. I saw that she had finished a chapter. I took her hand. I was about to speak. Then the candle threw out a large flame and went out.

Rose-Thé uttered a cry of anger. She had not been able to read the last few lines, which were of capital importance.

We got undressed in the darkness, which is an infinitely melancholy thing. In order for Rose-Thé to let her hair down, I lit a match, and then another. As she did not consent to hurry, I was obliged to confess to her, at the sixth match, that by an inconceivable stroke of bad luck, I had just burned the last one in the only box.

That was not calculated to modify her humor. I postponed my impulse of tenderness until the following day, not knowing that in that order of ideas, words that are not spoken are never rediscovered.