

## CHAPTER I

When Paul rang the bell of the apartment, the door was answered by an aged maidservant, whom he recognized, but was unable to greet by name. She had no difficulty in addressing him as “Monsieur Furneret,” however, even though she probably did not remember him; his brief return to Paris had been announced in advance by letter, and he was expected.

He was shown into the drawing room, where Jane de La Vaudère was waiting for him, dressed with a casual and simple elegance, carefully posed between two Buddhas, one cast in bronze and the other carved in wood; the space on the wall behind her was occupied by the painting of a siren that she had bought from him four years ago, in 1901; whether that was the location that it occupied permanently or whether it had been hung there especially for the occasion, he had no idea, but he was slightly surprised that she had hung that picture in her drawing-room rather than the portrait of her that he had painted. Where was that, he wondered?

“Paul,” she said, advancing to meet him, immediately establishing a comfortable informality with that single syllable and the attitude of her extended arms, “It’s wonderful to see you again—at last. It’s not good of you to have stayed away for so long, always promising an eventual return in your letters but never keeping the promise.”

“It’s unforgivable, Jane, I know,” he said, taking her hand and kissing it, with only a slight awkwardness. “I’m a wretch—but I’ve suffered from not seeing you for four years more than you can possibly have suffered from not seeing me.” He hesitated as to whether to hand over the parcel he was carrying under his arm immediately, but as his hostess seemed to be deliberately not looking at it, he decided that it would be better to wait until she gave him a signal.

“What a wicked thing to say,” she said, inviting him to sit down next to a small table where tea would doubtless be served in matter of minutes. “You’re making me out to be light-minded and forgetful, at last by comparison with your grave seriousness, but you have no idea how tedious Parisian society is when one is perpetually on probation, perpetually unforgiven for entirely imaginary sins, and starved of understanding of one’s work.”

“I read the newspapers, Jane,” he said. “Toulouse isn’t the edge of the world. They’re full of praise for you every time a new a book comes out.”

“Diplomatic praise,” she said, dismissively, “the professional courtesy of apolitical journalism. Not that I’m ungrateful, mind—I’ll take ever crumb of comfort I can get, and I still have a few good literary friends here, even though some of the old crowd seem to spend more time in the Midi or in Normandy than in the capital—but you know what a tyrant I am, jealous of everything, and I can’t help seeing your absence as a treason of sorts. Green or brown?”

The tea had arrived, in two large urns, on a wheeled trolley.

“Brown, please.”

“Lemon?”

“Yes, please.”

Jane passed the request to the maidservant with a flick of the wrist, and waited for her to withdraw before taking up the conversation again. Now, she did look at the package, as if an exchange had become appropriate now that his tea had been poured into a Sèvres porcelain cup.

“It’s very small,” he said, apologetically, “but I hoped that you might have a corner somewhere that could accommodate it.” He glanced round as he spoke. The decoration of the room although some stern observers might have considered it a trifle cluttered with *objets d’art*, seemed a little less flamboyant than the last time he had seen it. His memory was a trifle vague, but he was certain that two of the more garish Hindu statuettes had been removed.

Jane unwrapped the parcel with delicate precision and held up the small painting for inspection. Paul had been understandably apprehensive about this meeting, after such a long absence, but now that he was

in Jane's presence he could feel himself relaxing; it seemed to him that the unique bond they had formed during the hectic days of their first acquaintance, never entirely severed by distance, was being spontaneously magnified again by proximity.

Did she feel something similar? he wondered. Was that even possible?

She looked up from the painting, to stare at him in a fashion that she had not so far done. She was not a hypnotist, but the attention of the blue eyes nevertheless had an effect on him, as it had the very first time she had looked at him in that way. Then, being unfamiliar, it had been intimidating; now, recalling a fond memory, it seemed welcome and reassuring.

"A sphinx," she said. "Or, I suppose, to put it more pedantically, a sphinge. Lovely breasts, and the eyes, as usual, are positively magnetic. Is this because I told you that I was working on an Egyptian novel?" Her voice was still light and polite, but it seemed to him that he sensed a genuine warmth in it, as if she too were glad, and slightly surprised, to find that a long-dormant intimacy had not deteriorated in the least.

"Partly because of that," he replied. "It's too late, alas, to provide any inspiration, as the book's imminent publication has already been announced, but it seemed not inappropriate as...a gesture."

"Indeed not—I'm delighted. I shall probably hang it in the dining room—or perhaps in my boudoir, where your painting of me has pride of place. Are you returning to mythological themes, then? The paintings you've sent to your dealer during the last two years have been...different."

"I never gave up entirely," Paul told her, "but the material I send to Paris tends to conform to what people in Paris seem to want to buy. My...more obviously fantastic works obtain a better reception in Toulouse. But I knew that you would appreciate the sphinx, for precisely the reasons that the majority of your contemporaries might not."

"Is that a disguised way of suggesting that I'm perverse?—no, don't answer that, of course I am, and I shall refrain from making any remarks about the tide of fashion, in part, because it's a tide from which I've sometimes benefited, and railing against it makes one seem so old. I am old, of course, but I haven't yet consented to admit that I seem it...and please don't bother to tell me that I haven't changed a bit, because I know what I see in the mirror. I might be what you term psychically blind, but with the aid of spectacles, my ordinary sight is quite sharp."

"Everything changes," Paul said, knowing that she was fishing for the compliment, "but beauty isn't a mere quantity that observes a strict negative proportionality with age. You're as beautiful now as when I painted you, and yours is the kind of beauty that improves with age, like good wine for the connoisseur palate."

"I've heard that one before," she said, smiling—presumably because she had, indeed, heard it before, more than once—"from tongues whose hypocrisy have devalued it somewhat...but from you, I'll accept it as sincere, and hope that you haven't spent the last four years cultivating the cunning that you didn't have when you were last in Paris, and were so charming in your innocence."

"Even if I had become a master of calculated insincerity, my dear Jane," Paul assured her, "I wouldn't employ it with you. I owe you too much to be dishonest with you."

She smiled again. "That's a miscalculation of our account, I fear," she said, "but I'm glad of the error. And I can say with all sincerity that you've become significantly more handsome than you were before, time and maturity being on your side, although there is...a certain melancholy about you. I'll admit that I feared that your troubles might have taken a heavy toll, and that the deliberately optimistic tone of your recent letters might be a mask hiding a deeper malaise. Your paintings"—she lifted the sphinx, which she was still holding in both hands—"always tell a slightly different story."

"I could say the same about your books," Paul observed.

"Touché," she conceded, readily, "which is exactly why I have suspicions...excuse me for a moment." She stood up and went to place the painting carefully on an *étagère* whose Japanese vases were sufficiently widely spaced to leave room for its temporary storage, evidently not wanting to ring for the maidservant for the moment. Paul noted that her movements were slightly stiffer than the feline glide of 1901, but still gave evidence of natural stylishness as well as educated deportment.

When she returned to sit down and pick up her teacup, she restarted the conversation, with an accomplished smoothness, at a different point

“Are you looking for premises in Paris,” she asked him, “with a view to moving back here, now that your reputation is established and...there’s nothing keeping you away?”

“No,” Paul told her. “It’s just a brief visit—a matter of a few days. I have other people to see here, to whom I have important questions to pose, but I also have...things to which I need to return.”

“Ah!” she said “By things, I presume you mean a woman? You’ve found a new inamorata?” She seemed to be trying hard to manufacture approval, but it did not quite ring true. In her mind, he suspected, he was still classified as an idolater, not entitled to have any other goddess but her, even though, consciously, at least, she knew that the vanity was inappropriate, and even though she sincerely wished him well and would have liked him to be happy.

“No,” he replied, attempting to affect a wry smile. “I don’t have a new...inamorata.”

“Oh, Paul! It’s terrible, I know, to feel a certain gladness when someone dies, but to be honest, when you wrote to tell me that Père Culose had collected Juliette, I simply wasn’t able to see it as an unalloyed tragedy. I thought that, after a decent interval of mourning, you might take advantage of your freedom to form...well, yes, I’ll say it explicitly, and hope you’ll forgive my bluntness: a healthier relationship. You don’t know how many times I’ve cursed Antoine, God rest his soul, for telling you that you had to be kind to that girl, knowing full well that you would take it so seriously.”

“In all fairness to Antoine,” Paul said, judiciously, “he did warn me, even while advising me to be kind, that relationships between young artists and models always end badly, and he also advised Juliette to be kind to me, in a fashion that she took to imply that the kindest thing she could do was to get out of my life completely.”

Jane was clearly startled by that, and her brow furrowed, pensively. “He never told me that,” she said, “but I suppose he wouldn’t—the old rogue delighted in using patient confidentiality as an excuse for covering up his little games. He told you to be kind to me too, obviously, because he gave everybody the same advice—but when he told me to be kind to you he took great care to observe that relationships between relatively well-off women of my age and young men of your age were an infallible recipe for short-term heartache and long-term disaster. Not that I wasn’t well aware of that, of course...and there was no way, whatever Antoine Cros might have thought about it, that I was going to allow you to leave Paris without painting me first, no matter what we might have been risking. Nothing, as it turned out...but that’s by the by. Juliette didn’t take his advice, then?”

The line of questioning was indiscreet, but Paul was already convinced that it was not mere curiosity, and the license he had given Jane for indiscretion for years ago was still fully valid. In fact, he found that he wanted to talk to her about it—to her, specifically, because she was the only person who knew enough about what had happened in Paris to understand what had happened in Toulouse

“She wanted to take it, at first,” he told her. “I had to work hard to talk her out of it.”

“Is that why you decided to paint that second Jeanne d’Arc and insisted on taking her to Toulouse in order to do it?”

“No, I’d already decided to do that—but I had to press the case hard to stop her refusing. Antoine was a great surgeon, but as a psychologist, I can’t help suspecting that he was less than perfect, and not just because he took such pride before he died in being elected king of an imaginary country. He really didn’t know me at all, on the basis of an acquaintanceship of a few hours...and he certainly didn’t know Juliette.”

Paul lowered his eyes as Jane looked at him with what seemed to him to be a little too much speculative intensity, perhaps wondering exactly how many liberties she could take, given that any objective observer would surely opine that she and he hardly knew one another, in spite of the fact that they had been exchanging regular correspondence ever since he had left Paris, apparently without the slightest inclination on either part to let the communication fall into desuetude.

Finally, she said: “Did you love her very much?”

Paul hesitated for some time, but eventually said: “No. I didn’t love her. That wasn’t part of the arrangement.”

If she had been startled before, his hostess now seemed positively aghast. “You lived together for two years without...sleeping together?” she said, incredulously. She had long grown accustomed to playing fast and loose with the boundaries of the conventionally unmentionable, and while he was painting her portrait they had conversed together often enough and long enough to establish a confidentiality that their letters had preserved, but she was well aware that she was now being indelicate as well as intrusive. He did not mind in the least; it was not a matter that he could have discussed with anyone else, but Jane was different.

“We slept together,” he told her, “for convenience and comfort—but she had warned me before we even left Paris that she was no longer capable of loving anyone, and that she long since abandoned the belief that it was any longer possible that someone might love her. She was probably right on both counts...although, while we were together, I didn’t have any inclination to sleep with anyone else, and to the best of my knowledge neither did she, so if, as is sometimes alleged, fidelity is the sole criterion of true love...” He left it at that.

“It’s not,” was all that his hostess could say to that, for the moment. Her novels, while ambivalent in many other respects in regard to “the mystery of Kama” never doubted that there was far more to authentic love than mere fidelity.

“I agree,” said Paul. “Hence my judgment: no, I didn’t love her. Whether I’m actually capable of loving anyone, I don’t know. Time will tell...or perhaps not. Doctor Cros seemed to think that I was in more danger of falling in love with you than with Juliette, and he was probably right, which might be why he suggested to you that it wouldn’t be a good idea to give me the opportunity, or at least that it would be as well not to encourage me to do so...but that’s all speculation, and the poor fellow’s dead, so he won’t be able to examine us again and offer us an updated diagnosis.”

“Of which we have no need,” said Jane, thoughtfully. After a slight pause, she sighed and said: “Given that discretion seems to have gone out of the window already, in spite of the good resolutions I made this morning, I might as well let curiosity get the better of me. If you didn’t love Juliette, why on earth were you so determined to take her with you to Toulouse?”

“I needed her.”

“For the painting? You can’t possibly have thought that!”

“No—the painting was just an excuse to keep her with me.”

“Then I don’t understand.”

“That’s my fault. I’ve been writing to you for four years, and never explained...it didn’t seem to be a suitable subject for a letter. It’s probably not a suitable topic for afternoon tea, either, and I hadn’t intended to embark upon such a deep matter so early in our reacquaintance...but I had hoped to find or to manufacture an opportunity to discuss it with you in depth before I return to Toulouse, because you’re one of the few people who might be able to understand.”

“Well, now that you’ve whetted my appetite to that extent,” she said, “there’s no possibility that I can let you leave without hearing a full explanation, even if you have to stay for dinner...which I was intending to invite you to do you anyway if...well, if it didn’t seem inappropriate.”

“You were afraid that I might have changed so much that you’d be only too glad to get rid of me as soon as possible?”

“Don’t be ridiculous Paul. But you might have changed sufficiently to want to reestablish our relationship on...less familiar terms that we seem to be about to contrive. To tell you the truth, I was hoping that we might have an opportunity while you were here to discuss...subjects of intense curiosity...and while I can’t honestly say that I’m not one to beat around the bush, I’m versatile enough to crash straight through it when I feel a sense of urgency. So tell me the story—the true story.”

Paul took time out to pour his hostess a second cup of tea, and then filled his own cup.

“I’ll have to start at the beginning,” he said, “or I won’t be able to keep it straight in my head. You remember the four sketches I made at Flammarion’s séance?”

“Vividly.

“And you remember the journey home on the train from Juvisy to Paris, when Antoine played the skeptic to perfection, striving to convince me that I had not, in fact, drawn the spirits of four dead people,

including his brother, but that I had simply drawn material from my unconscious mind, which had been screened there by a process analogous to what Flournoy, in his then-recent book about H  l  ne Smith's supposed visions of Mars, called cryptomnesia?"

"Of course. The occasion is deeply etched in my conscious memory, for reasons you know.

"I do. By the time I got back to the studio that night, I was at least half-convinced that Antoine was right, and I wanted desperately to be convinced, because I wanted fervently to believe that Martine wasn't dead—but the doubts lingered, if only because I was so acutely aware of my own desperation. The whole business had been so strange, so disturbing and so disorientating that I was...well, I think I was still under the influence of Zosima's suggestion, whether or not that suggestion was aided by any kind of psychic magnetism or psychic gravity. I was still disorientated the next morning, and my uncertainties were complicated and compounded by the series of visitations I received, from Antoine, you, Talia and Zosima. By the time I started painting in the afternoon, my head was in a spin. I hoped that painting would calm me down and absorb me thoroughly, to restore a kind of mental stability...and in a way, it worked...perhaps far too well. It absorbed me very thoroughly indeed, and put me back into what I still call, for want of a better term, a trance state."

"I remember," Jane said. "You told us about it when you reached Antoine's house. You were speaking lightly, but I could tell that you were seriously distressed. I was concerned, and I should have tried to intervene to stop Antoine putting you and Zosima on trial again...but curiosity got the better of me, I fear."

"It had the upper hand on all of us that night, even poor Talia. At any rate, for me, at least, things became seriously weird when I lent myself to Zosima's suggestion for a second time. Again, when I woke up in that bedroom, after losing several hours, I was extremely disorientated, and when you took me to see what I'd drawn, I was immediately petrified, once again, by the idea that I had drawn the dead—that I'd drawn Jeanne d'Arc and Juliette, and that Juliette had been murdered, just as Martine had drowned...of which I was ninety per cent convinced by then. It turned out, almost immediately, that Juliette hadn't been murdered, that she had not only seen a murder but had apparently gone into a trance state herself, if not induced by my painting, at least shaped by it...and the hallucination she'd suffered had caused her to jump into the Seine, where she might easily have drowned.

"Again, Antoine wasn't at a loss to provide an immediate explanation of how I'd come to draw what I'd drawn because of what was in my mind at the moment when I lent myself to Zosima's suggestion, and he could undoubtedly have produced a similar account of why Juliette had jumped in the river and why Talia suffered a fit of hysteria that nearly killed her by provoking a pulmonary crisis. But even though each of those explanations might have seemed to hold up if considered individually, it seemed to me that the coincidence of all three of them happening simultaneously added an extra dimension of implausibility. And it wasn't simply a triple coincidence. You told me that Flammarion had also reported that he had had a vision, albeit a familiar one, and you...well, you admitted yourself the next day that you hadn't been quite yourself."

"Yes," said Jane, in a neutral tone, "I did admit that."

"And you also told me, shortly thereafter, that I really had drawn the dead at the Observatory, and gave me what seemed to you to be conclusive proof of the fact."

"Yes," she agreed, "I did that too."

"Which, as you can surely imagine, renewed and amplified my uncertainty and cast me into utter confusion."

"I'm sorry," Jane said. "I should never have told you...what I told you. I have no idea why I did it, given that I maintained the lie so steadfastly with everyone else. Antoine had confused me as well as you, stirring my feelings...and he knew perfectly well that it was a sore point. He had no right to speak to you the way he did in that railway carriage...but he just couldn't resist showing off...and he allowed his own curiosity to run riot."

"He came to see me the next morning to apologize," Paul said, "and to explain why it was more than a mere matter of curiosity for him. Obviously, it was more than a matter of curiosity for you too—and for me, perhaps most of all, it certainly wasn't. I wanted to know what had happened to me, and what might

happen to me in future. I wanted to know exactly what kind of weird phenomenon was contained in the dark recesses of my mind, and I wanted to investigate that as carefully and minutely—and as safely—as possible.

“Zosima, of course, wanted to magnetize me again immediately, in order to feed her own curiosity, but the last thing I wanted was to conduct my own research under the spur of her suggestion, magnetic or otherwise. I wanted to be in control, to the extent that I could be. I wanted, desperately, to know whether the apparent psychic links that had been established between me and other people were real or illusory, and what, if they were real, their implications might be.

“In order to carry out that investigation, I needed the assistance of one of the people with whom I seemed to have been linked. For practical reasons, there was only one available candidate: Juliette. So I knew, before I went to see her in the hospital the last time, that I had to persuade her to come to Toulouse with me. Love had nothing to do with it—on my part, or on hers. I wasn’t entirely straight with her about the precise reasons for my wanting her to come with me, but she was absolutely straight with me—she told me in advance that she didn’t and couldn’t love me, and that it would be purely a matter of practical convenience.”

“And you believed her?”

“Yes, I did. There was no reason for her to lie.”

“You don’t know little girls the way I do,” Jane murmured.

“Probably not, in general terms,” Paul agreed. “But I think I got to know Juliette as well as anyone could. I don’t believe that she was lying, even to herself.”

Jane seemed to think about that for a moment or two, and then asked: “Was she happy? During the two years before Père Culose came to collect her, I mean. Was she happy, living with you?”

In his turn, Paul had to think about that for a moment. It wasn’t an easy question to answer.

“No,” he said, finally. “Not exactly.”

“*Not exactly!* What’s that supposed to mean.”

“In simple terms no, she wasn’t happy. She was always anxious, frequently sad, perhaps perpetually feeling guilty that she hadn’t done what she thought Antoine had advised her to do, worrying that she was holding me back somehow, preventing me from finding a better relationship with someone else, and not liking herself for the jealousy she felt in wanting to have me all to herself. Nothing I said could convince her that she not only wasn’t doing me any harm but was doing me good. But then, when she got seriously sick and was coughing blood almost without remission...her attitude changed, and she gave me a different story.”

“What?”

“She said that she was sorry for having been so ungrateful. She said that now she had had a chance to look back over her entire life—which wasn’t very long—the last two years had been far and away the best. She said that if she hadn’t been able to be happy, that was entirely her fault, because she had had every opportunity not to be unhappy, and every incentive, but simply hadn’t been able to do it. But happy or not, she said, they’d been the only two years of her life that she’s actually lived rather than simply enduring them, and that they’d made up for the rest—that they’d finally given her a reason to think that it had actually been worth living. She said that encountering me was the only good thing that had ever happened to her, and that she was stupid for not having been able to appreciate it more. So, no, she wasn’t happy living with me...not exactly.

“She also said that she was lucky that I hadn’t been able to love her, because, if I had fallen in love with her, I’d have been sure to fall out again, and then I would have left or discarded her; but as I was just being kind, she knew that she could rely on that, because no matter how ungrateful she seemed, no matter how unhappy she seemed, and no matter how unlovable the consumption made her, she knew that I’d keep on being kind. So she thanked me for not loving her. Given that it was impossible that anyone could love her, she said, kindness was the best that she could hope for, and she was extremely lucky to have found some, because, in her opinion, there was far less kindness in the word than love, and it did infinitely less harm.”

Privately he thought that Jane could certainly understand and agree with that, if her books were anything to go by—and he certainly had no intention of asking her questions as indiscreet as the ones that she was asking him; that was not the way their arrangement worked.

“She said all that, and you think she didn’t love you? You really don’t know the first thing about little girls, do you? And you did all that, and you think you didn’t love her? She doesn’t seem to have been able to give you much help in your self-exploration. All that and fidelity too? If you’d lived to be a hundred, you’d have been Baucis and Philemon.”

Paul managed to laugh at that, as if it were a joke, but any frivolity that had been in the conversation at the beginning had vanished completely now. He filled his teacup for the third time and renewed the slice of lemon, although the lemon was drying up in the bowl and the tea was no longer hot. Jane took a sip from her own cup and pulled a face, but she did not ring for the maidservant in order the replacement of the urn. She looked at the window; it faced westwards, but the elevation of the houses opposite was already insufficient for the sun still to be visible over the rooftops, even though the afternoon was not far advanced. Dusk was still some way off, but the shadows were already projecting a certain suggestion of gloom into the room. There was no need as yet to employ artificial lighting, but Paul glanced at the chandelier, which had contained candles last time he had been in the drawing room, rendered virtually redundant by the gaslights accommodated in the walls. It had not yet been adapted to carry electric bulbs.

The twentieth century was already a century of rapid progress in Paris, manifest inside houses as well as in the streets, where the memory of Baron Haussmann’s transfiguration had not had the opportunity to grow old before everything was being ripped up again for the relentless expansion of the Metropolitan, under the Seine and out into what had once been surrounding villages but were now mere outlying districts of the sprawling City of Light.

Antoine Cros had installed electric lighting four years ago, but Jane had not. She was still living in the nineteenth century, in terms of vulgar residential illumination

After a long pause, during which Paul simply waited for the inevitable question—the question that would mark the crucial watershed in the discussion—Jane de La Vaudère eventually said: “And have you seen Juliette since she died?”

“No,” said Paul, and added, pedantically: “I don’t *see* the dead; at least, not consciously—you know that. If I actually saw them, the problem of figuring out exactly what kind of freak I am would be much more straightforward than it has proved to be.”

“A slip of the tongue,” she said, and only hesitated slightly before adding: “I infer, then, that you *have* drawn her—more than once.”

“Yes.”

“And you haven’t sought to avoid the haunting? Quite the reverse, in fact?” She knew him well, and had just proved it.

“I don’t think that there’s anything I could do to avoid it,” Paul admitted. “Or, for that matter, to encourage it. And even if your suspicion that I loved her without being aware of it has no substance to it, I had been living with her for two years and I sat beside her for many long hours while she died, slowly. There’s every reason why she should have been present in my mind for a long time thereafter. If Antoine were still alive, and I consulted him about the drawings, he would undoubtedly say that there’s absolutely no reason to think that there’s anything slightly supernatural about the fact that my peculiar somnambulism has produced numerous sketches of Juliette over the last two years.”

“He said exactly that to me to me when your portrait of Talia went on display, a few weeks before he died,” Jane said. “It was the last time I saw him—the last serious conversation we had, at any rate. I wasn’t with him when he went to see the painting, but once he’d seen it, he was eager to discuss it with me...Camille, I suppose, seemed too far away in Juvisy, and Zosima, although still only a fiacre ride away, was even further away spiritually...and in any case, they hadn’t been in that railway carriage. They hadn’t been...bound together in the way that the three of us were...which raises the question...”

“Yes,” said Paul. “I’ve sketched Antoine too...and you.”

She raised her eyebrows. “I’m not dead,” she said.

“Nor was Juliette, on the night I drew her at Antoine’s house,” Paul reminded her. “Zosima and Camille, you’ll remember, both mentioned the book that members of the British Society for Psychical Research had recently published, called *Phantasms of the Living*...and my correspondence with Camille has kept me up to date with their investigations of what he and they call telepathy. Antoine would dismiss all that as nonsense, of course, and say that it’s absurd to look for a supernatural reason why I might sketch people who aren’t dead...especially people that I think about often and intensely...but there’s still a puzzle.”

“Antoine wouldn’t think so,” Jane opened, thoughtfully. “I don’t have to be hypnotize to imagine him sitting with us in a third armchair, sipping his green tea, and saying, with ruthless common sense, that you’re an artist, so there’s no reason at all to wonder that instead of walking in your sleep, like vulgar somnambulists, you draw. And he’d say that since you feel a compulsion to draw when you’re in that particular state of unconsciousness, you have to find a subject, and that your mind will automatically pluck something out of the various ideas that had recently crossed your mind, or had been stirred up in the cryptomnesic store-room of forgetfulness, in the minutes before you fell out of consciousness. He’d say that there’s no puzzle at all about the fact that you drew Talia after you received news of her death, or him after you received news of his, or that you’ve drawn Juliette repeatedly...and that you’ve also drawn me, on occasion, when you’ve been kind enough to spare me a thought because you’d been reading one of my books, or one of my letters, or planning to write one of your letters to me. He’d say that it was all absolutely natural.”

She was right, Paul knew. But she knew as well as he did that there was a puzzle—more than one, in fact—and that she had an interest in its solution as well, if not as urgently, as he did.

“Well,” he said, aloud, “perhaps I’m simply irrationally obsessed. But I’m seeing Flammarion tomorrow afternoon, and I suspect that he’ll see a puzzle, even if Antoine wouldn’t.”

“I don’t go to Juvisy anymore,” Jane said, quietly, “or even to séances in Paris, although I still get invitations. But Antoine might be right, mightn’t he, about the fact that you’ve sometimes drawn me—that that, at least, might simply be an effect of memory, and not a phantasmal visitation at all. It couldn’t be, could it? If I’m not mistaken, the idea is that it’s only in moments of existential crisis that people like you or I can project phantoms subconsciously in the way that Juliette apparently did on that traumatic night. Fakirs can do it deliberately, but they require years of training and mortification of the flesh before they master the art of astral projection—which is almost lost, in spite of the theosophists’ intense attempts to renew it. I haven’t witnessed any murders, and I’ve never learned astral projection. You didn’t think to bring me a portrait of myself, then, instead of that sphinx?”

She was speaking calmly, if not lightly, but Paul took note of the slight inconsequentiality that had crept into her discourse, and suspected that she was more disturbed than she seemed, not merely by the fact that he had drawing her in the one of his fits of strange somnambulism, but by the other confessions he had made, and by the situation itself. Their communication in writing had always been measured and disciplined, because the medium of handwriting compelled measure and discipline; it had not been without intimacy, but it had been carefully externalized, scrupulously polite intimacy, the intimacy of friends who were inevitably distanced, and not simply by the kilometers that separated them. Doubtless she had assumed, as he had, that when they met in the flesh again, they would continue in the same vein, which was not conspicuously different from the strangely conspiratorial relationship they had established while he was painting her portrait—when, separately forewarned by Antoine Cros, they had both been conscientiously determined not to fall prey to the temptation to transmute a certain flirtatious flippancy into anything more intense and potentially damaging.

It did not seem to be that simple, Paul, adjudged, wryly, for either of them.

“I haven’t tried to turn any of my recent sketches of people I know into portraits,” Paul told her, “but I have brought some of them with me to Paris. I didn’t bring them with me this afternoon because...like you, apparently...I wasn’t sure exactly how this first renewal of our acquaintance was going to work out. If you wish, though, I’ll show all of them to you...but I won’t show any sketch of you to anyone else without your permission.”

Jane hesitated before responding to that, probably because there was more than one issue she wanted to take up. In the end, as the practical and intelligent woman she was, she decided to take them in order.

"I certainly do want to see them," she said. "Not just any you might have made of me, but the others...all of them, at least that you don't need anyone's permission to show me. You didn't say anything when I mentioned the possibility of staying to dinner, but I'm assuming that you will...or, rather, that you'll come back when you've returned to your hotel to collect the sketches. Is that settled?"

"Of course," said Paul. "I'd be..."

"Never mind the formulaic politeness—and don't bother to dress for dinner. We're obviously past that. By 'anyone else' I presume you meant Camille?"

"Yes, I had intended to show him all the sketches I'd made when I see him tomorrow, including those of you, if I could obtain your permission. He and I have been in frequent communication, as you know, and although he's agreed not to publish any account of my 'case' until I give him permission to do so, he's taken an intense interest in it. He's not only familiar with all the published research but can assess it sanely and intelligently. He's already been invaluable, and will doubtless continue to be...but he's not the only person with whom I have an appointment tomorrow."

His interlocutor had no need of the traditional three guesses. "Zosima," she said, without even giving it the inflection of a question.

"Yes; she's agreed to see me tomorrow morning, before I go to Juvisy. I have no intention of showing her all the sketches, but I think that she has a moral entitlement to see some of them...those of Talia, at least."

"At least? Not only those, then?"

"I'll begin with one of those, and decide later what else I might show her. I wasn't sure that she'd agree to see me—I haven't been in regular communication with her, as you can imagine, and all I know about this cult that she's founded is what I've read in the newspapers, but..."

"Oh, don't believe all that rubbish," she said. "Worse than salon gossip, although the professional courtesy of apolitical journalism shouldn't allow me to say so. I don't know much more myself—we don't exactly meet in society, as you can imagine, and I know enough to be suspicious of hearsay, but so far as I can make out, it's not a cult in the same sense as all the quasi-Rosicrucian, neo-Martinist and offshoot theosophical not-so-secret societies that have proliferated over the last twenty years. It's more like a convent with spiritist overtones, which functions primarily as a refuge for women who...need to get away."

"The press and popular gossip represent it as a kind of sapphic sorority in much the same way that they represent Natalie Barney's salon, but there's a word of difference. Natalie's crowd mostly consists of upper-class esthetes devoted to a cult of female beauty and its celebration in flesh-grinding and poetry; Zosima's followers mostly aren't aristocratic, mostly aren't esthetes and aren't poets at all, and I suspect that many of them aren't even ardent lesbians—there are many other good reasons for determined misandry in our world than the mere accident of nature that causes some women to lust after their own sex."

"Antoine would probably judge that what she's actually offering her recruits is a form of psychotherapy, in which her hypnotic revelations of supposed anterior existences merely function as a palliative for present woes, and I'm not unsympathetic to that interpretation, even though I have more open mind than his. I'm astonished, though, that she's agreed to let you into her temple—I thought that rule one of the sorority was that no man would ever set foot there."

"She hasn't. She's given me a rendezvous at a café nearby. She didn't say whether she'd come incognito, but either way, it's not the most convenient location for an exhibition of sketches. In all probability, though, she views it as an exploratory preliminary...much like this meeting."

"As I've already said, you and I are past that. Supernatural or not, the bond we formed four years ago obviously hasn't been broken by a mere four-year interim in physical proximity, so I'll take that as a license to indulge my curiosity to the full. I presume that I'm right in taking it for granted that the portrait of Talia you exhibited more than two years ago, which helped to make your reputation, isn't the only portrait you've painted based on one of your...somnambulistic sketches...is that the right word?"

“Probably not. Some would-be pedants already use somniloquism for what spiritist medium do, who talk instead of walking, but no one, so far as I know, has yet invented a jargon term like somnifabrication or somnartificium. But I’m not sure that you have the question the right way round. Perhaps it’s not a matter of whether I’ve done other paintings based on sketches made wholly or partly in a trance state, but whether I’ve ever done any that weren’t. Even when I’m sketching while fully conscious—as I was, for instance, when I made the sketches for the portrait that’s apparently hanging in your boudoir, I wonder whether I slip automatically into a different state of mind. Don’t you feel the same while you’re writing?”

“Yes, I do,” she agreed, without hesitation, obviously having given the matter some thought, probably long before she had met him, “but there are many degrees. Sometimes, when it seems entirely conscious, it’s a hard grind, like milling corn by hand; sometimes, when I let go and it almost becomes automatic writing, like the phenomenon Camille’s hypnotists used to try to induce in his séances, I seem to have established a direct link between my hand and some kind of well of creativity—the unconscious mind, in Antoine’s jargon, although that’s really only the prelude to an explanation that still remains elusive. I’ve never forgotten, though, an observation that I made of your drawing, that it was so much faster than the laborious physical process of writing. Your connection with the well of creativity, whatever it consists of, seemed much more immediate and fluent than mine can ever be. I envied you that...and still do.”

“It’s not entirely an advantage,” Paul told her. “The rapidity, I think, is either a cause or a consequence of the fact that nothing is engraved in my memory. I don’t even know whether I see what I draw in my imagination, or whether the visual phase of the process is skipped completely. Four years ago, I suggested to Juliette that it wasn’t actually me who had drawn her image as a murder victim—that she had somehow taken possession of my hand, at a distance. She said that it was nonsense, and perhaps it was, but it seemed plausible at the time to me, and it still seems plausible that when I’m deeply entranced, it really isn’t me that is making the sketches, that my hand is obedient to another design than mine. Antoine would doubtless dismiss that as mere illusion, and perhaps he’d be right, but...what do you think?”

“I know the feeling you mean,” she said, “and I’ve heard other writers—poets, especially—say the same. It’s built into the legendry of literary creation, in the language of inspiration and the idea of the Muse. I know writers who are utterly convinced that all of that is just a way of speaking, and that they’re entirely responsible for what they produce...but I also know some who are convinced of the opposite, and not just the mystics and other belated members of the club des hashischins. It’s a mystery. I’ve heard painters talk in exactly the same vein, and not just Symbolists—although I suspect that everyone who used to exhibit in Péladan’s Rosicrucian Salon would sympathize with you entirely, and probably envy you your prolific somnifabrication. If you can make a technique of it, you won’t be short of students.”

“That’s not my objective,” Paul said. “I want to understand it. I still remember the little lecture that Zosima gave us on the fateful night, when she explained briefly why even sincere mediums felt an enormous pressure to fake the phenomena that their audiences expected of them rather than trying to objectively and methodically to investigate and understand what happens to them. That, I think, rather than Talia’s death, might be what made her turn her back on the séance circuit, and whatever good her present organization does in providing a refuge for women in need, I suspect that her own motives are still primarily exploratory, trying to figure out what kinds of phenomena her hypnotic skills can bring out, in a conducive environment.”

“You’re probably right,” Jane agreed, “and I’m certainly in no position to pass judgment on her attempts to use her supposed magnetic powers to help people remember their anterior lives, as I’ve wondered more than once whether I ought to seek that kind of assistance myself. I probably would if I weren’t so scared of finding that I’d been Messalina...or Medusa. Are you going to ask her to magnetize you again...as a means of furthering your research...and hers?”

“Probably,” Paul admitted. “I wasn’t ready for it four years ago, and I think I was right to run at the time. It wasn’t just cowardice...but now, I think I’m ready. I might suggest to Camille that we try again at Juvisy...in private, without an audience.”

“But not without me,” Jane was quick to say.

“Zosima tried to exclude you last time,” he reminded her. “She might not consent...”

“She was just being petty,” Jane said, interrupting him. “And I don’t care if I’m a distracting presence. I want to be a distracting presence—and I want to be there. If you do decide, I want to be there, if only to look after you if things go wrong again. Promise me that you won’t do it without me.”

“If that’s what you want...,” said Paul, but didn’t finish the sentence or make the promise requested, which was not entirely his to make. In order to change the subject, he said: “It’s rather gloomy in here when the sky’s cloudy, isn’t it?” he said. “You haven’t thought of installing electric lighting?”

Jane looked around, as if surprised by the gloom that had colonized the room even in mid-afternoon. “I’m used to it,” she admitted. “In any case, I still inhabit a world, mentally, in which the servants bring in the lamps as the twilight fades, as a kind of vespereal ritual. I never really adapted to the gas jet, let alone the electric bulb. It’s a failure of adaptation, not so much to the changing world as my own advancing antiquity—and don’t bother with the usual flattery; you and I don’t need that. I’ll be fifty years old soon and fifty is old even for a man, let alone a woman...especially a vain woman like me. But you’d better to go back to your hotel to fetch those sketches before it really gets dark. I want to see them, and I want to see them before Flammarion, and before Zosima. I’m entitled to that, aren’t I? I don’t know quite what I am to you—and if you suggest that I’m a second substitute mother, replacing Amélie Lambrunet, I’ll never forgive you—but I’m something, and it’s more than Camille, and far more than Zosima. So, yes, I’m entitled to make demands of you, however whimsical. That’s a kind of vanity to which I can still cling. And thank you, by the way, for coming to see me first, for being willing to show me the products of your...somniafabrication first, for affording me an importance that I might not deserve, but if which I’m certainly prepared to be jealous...but I’m rambling.”

As she finished speaking, she stood up, and Paul automatically stood up too. Again, she offered him her hand, but this time, he did not kiss it, by way of a slightly daring social ritual. He clasped it, sincerely, as an improvised symbol of collaboration, or even conspiracy. She understood, and nodded.

She showed him to the door of the apartment herself, and remained on the threshold as he went downstairs in a gloom that was even worse, without the aid of the unactivated gaslight, than the grayness in the drawing room...with the result that when he glanced back at the threshold in which she was still standing, she was surrounded by a vague nimbus of subtle, quasi-supernatural light, as befitted a true idol.