

## THE MUTILATED BACCHUS

### PART ONE

#### 1

The Joke had begun in the middle of June the previous year. Sénece is supplied with drinking water by a spring in Telluire wood, three kilometers away. The pipes of that supply pass through a meadow on the Aury estate. One morning, a housewife went, as usual, to fill her bucket at the fountain in the Place Jacques. She turned the tap and looked up at the sky while the water flowed, to see whether the weather was fine and that the weathercock on the steeple had not been stolen during the night. The noise of the liquid flowing brought her attention back to the bucket.

Hello! What's that stream? She leans over, sniffs, becomes alarmed. There's no doubt about it...

It's wine!

At the other fountains, at the same time, other housewives are amazed by the same miracle. In the streets of Sénece, people talk, shrug their shoulders... these women!... let's go see...

They see. Everyone runs to fetch bottles, pitchers, tubs. And Sénece, all morning, is refreshed by long draughts, and celebrates at the marvelous fountains the extravagant Messiah who had, for a few hours, deflected the Telluire spring and replaced the water with wine.

Damn! How many hectoliters is that?

And the cinema in color...on the wall of the church!

The wall had just been freshly roughcast. One evening, young Leluc, going to the Café Gillon for a bottle of rum for his father, was going past the church. Suddenly, there is a flash, and there, on the wall, is a marvelous landscape, which begins to dance! Violet mountains, palm trees replete with golden clusters of dates, camels like those the child has seen in the pictures on the wall at school—but as large and majestic as they must be in reality...

Is that the Magi one can see? Good...it's changing!

A new landscape appears, slightly bumpy because of the swellings of the old wall: a pink and vermilion city beside a sea bluer than the stained-glass windows in the church in sunlight...

The child runs, he shouts, a crowd gathers...

The light is coming from a window at the top of the Aury house: a long and magnificent triangular beam, in which multicolored vaporous spirals flow; the beam of a magic lantern aimed from that high window. But with what magnifying glass, and what projector?

Italian lakes surrounded by mountains; forests in the heart of Africa; landscapes of India and China; extraordinary machines plowing, harvesting, the hundred-limbed bodies of which obey the finger of a child sitting on the seat in front of a control-panel; submarines seen in the ocean; helicopter aircraft; enormous telescopes brandished toward the sky like arms reaching out for the stars—and, indeed, catching them, since one then sees the landscapes of the moon, Mars and Jupiter...

When the beam went out, there was desolation. They could have stayed there all night! The curé made quite a fuss the next day.

Then there were the new bicycles and the American plows left at night—by whom?—at thresholds; the sheets, the garments, the schoolbooks, the tobacco, placed by night on window-sills. The cows led—by whom?—to the stables of poor farmers, always at night, and found at the stake in the morning, with a little note hanging from the horns: *On behalf of Denis Aury.*

Why the jokes? And why the benefits? Political ambition, proposed Ferroux, the schoolteacher. "It's to redeem the father's avarice a little," suggested virtuous folk. The curé insinuated that that Denis wanted to be pardoned for having let his father die without closing his eyes. All sorts of hypotheses, but nothing precise or solid at which to direct the incessantly reignited curiosity.

And above all, why did the Aury son remain invisible?

Frignot, the steward of the Maison Aury, harassed by questions, only succeeded in thickening the enigma, affirming that he had never seen Denis either—or, more precisely, had not seen him since the day when the young man had run away from his father's house—the house of the bitter, taciturn notary Jean-Nicolas Aury. Denis had been seventeen when he disappeared. He had not given any sign of life for years, or almost none.

The only person who had pampered him when he was small, the Aurys' old cook Julia, had received the occasional postcard from her darling, coming from all the corners of France, and then abroad. On one of them, Denis had written that if his presence became absolutely necessary, they were to notify a certain Leviel, a painter, whose address in Paris he gave: a little street in Montparnasse.

Now, Jean-Nicolas died and, although Leviel had been notified, Denis did not appear. Sénece had judged the bad son severely. To be sure, such a father, a funereal miser...but a father is a father, after all, and death is death, and Denis ought to have been there. Denis was informed via the intermediary of Leviel of Montparnasse that he had inherited the château, known as the Maison Aury, the estate and the miser's considerable savings, comprising a handsome capital.

After three months of silence and disordered conjectures, a letter from Denis had reached Frignot, the anxious guardian of the house and the lands. Traveling for an indefinite time, Denis would take personal possession of his wealth when he chose to do so. In the meantime, Frignot would receive orders in writing.

Shortly after that first manifestation, construction of a factory had begun at Courtoisans, which is the next village to Sénece. In the following week, the refurbishment of the Maison Aury commenced. It appeared, straight away, that the new owner wanted to modernize the building entirely; it was very old, and the notary, widowed early, had effectively let it rot. New widows were pierced in the soot-colored façade; the stone, scoured, offered a cheerful white flesh to the daylight; partition walls were demolished. The father's studio, always gray, crammed with filing-cabinets, a drawing room that no one ever entered and guest-rooms unused while Jean-Nicolas was alive were expanded into a vast hall with luminous galleries. From the cellars to a flowery terrace fitted under the roof, an entire electrical network was aggregated, destined to reduce the heavy burdens of service and reduce the work of heating and lighting to the flicking of switches.

When the work was in full swing the famous Leviel appeared, introduced to Fringot by a letter from Denis. The artist slept at an inn while waiting for the château to become habitable, and spent all day at the Maison Aury. He painted frescoes in the hall, the galleries and the antechambers. A small building with walls that were all panes of glass was erected in the park some distance from the house. Was it a greenhouse? There was already one of those. A further letter instructed the steward to consider Monsieur Draguin, soon to arrive, as the master of that building, which would be a laboratory.

When Draguin arrived at Sénece, Frignot discovered that the new guest and Leviel were old friends and great friends of his master. He attempted, feebly, at every opportunity, to obtain some information. By turns mocking, evasive and, it sometimes seemed, embarrassed, the scientist and the painter avoided precise responses.

Denis' personality remained, for Frignot, nebulous. And it became even worse at the beginning of the year in which the prodigies and the tricks began in Sénece. The best joke, the miracle was the most irritating for Frignot; Denis' letters, deposited without stamps in the box at the gate, multiplied until they were daily. They showed that the proprietor was up to date with the smallest details, exactly as if he were present, and the presence was very vigilant and clear-sighted. The steward lay in wait, spied on the domestics and the workmen, but could not discover anything, and was unable to explain how his master

was so well-informed. Resolutely, he once mounted guard on the letter-box all night; the result of his vigil was simply that there were no letters the following morning.

What, in such circumstances, were the people of Sénécé to think?

Now, the mystery was to be concluded that morning in July, in two hours...an hour and a half...an hour. Only one hour to wait. Still an hour to wait! Frignot communicated the great news to Sénécé yesterday. It is at noon that Denis Aury will arrive and take effective possession of his domain, and will become for the Sénéçois a visible man...finally!

The church clock chimes quarter past eleven. Work has been stopped for a long time. All of Sénécé is loitering in the vicinity of the Mason Aury.

At half past, the nearby blare of a klaxon freezes the crowd. Is it him? They recognize the car of the director of the Courtoisans factory. Monsieur Géard gets out of the auto in front of the gate, replies to greetings, and goes into the park; he is seen going into the laboratory, and coming out again a few moments later with Monsieur Draguin. Both of them go into the château, arm in arm.

At eleven thirty-five, Monsieur Leviel is seen arriving from Telluire wood. He has been working in the open air, as he has done since finishing the frescoes at the château. He walks at his tranquil pace, carrying his easel and paint-box, as usual. As he comes through the crowd he jokes, pretending to be astonished: "What's all this? Are we expecting the President of the Republic?"

"Is he definitely going to come?" asks Jeanselme, the farrier.

"The President?"

"We wouldn't go so far out of our way for the President. M'sieu Denis, of course!"

"I'm expecting him, as you are," says Leviel. When he reaches the gate he says, in his solid and joyful voice: "You're very intrigued, eh? I'll tell you something. What you've seen so far is nothing compared with what you'll see when Denis Aury gets here."

He opens the gate and goes toward the house at the same placid pace. Those who have heard him watch him, shaking their heads with a vague joy contained by the bewilderment into which overly complicated perspectives have cast them. His words are repeated, with immediate commentary, colored with extravagant suppositions.

Finally, the fever of the crowd explodes in a: "Good God, will midday never come!" cried by the shop-assistant at the Bailhard grocery.

The waiting weighs upon the Sénéçois like a stormy sky, tightening stomachs and making legs itch. The blast of a horn relieves the enormous irritation.

"Here comes the Maire!"

It's Monsieur Cahoche's auto.

"The bigwigs have all the luck!" comments a young cyclist from the factory, who has found a pretext to come and dawdle at Sénécé. "That one will see him, this Denis, don't worry," he grumbles. "Perhaps he'll even get invited to lunch."

The Maire's car advances with difficulty. The chauffeur sounds his horn repeatedly. Monsieur Cahoche, behind the glass, responds to the salutations. He is trying to be amiable, but his attitude suggests anxiety.

Ordinarily, Monsieur Cahoche is always laughing; he listens to you with little wrinkles of god humor under his eyes and a sugary "Yes, of course, we'll see to that, you'll see that we can reach an understanding" on his lips, with his head slightly tilted, his neat salt-and-pepper beard extended toward his interlocutor like a little pouffe offered in a drawing room. One always has a vague impression, when he speaks, of being in his drawing room. Monsieur Cahoche, a former solicitor in Paris, had bought the Château d'Harcors, a fine Renaissance edifice, Sénécé's other château, built on a hill facing the Maison Aury, and separated from it by Telluire wood and several hectares of fields. They live lavishly at Harcors; Monsieur Cahoche gives frequent receptions, maintaining relations with political man and important people in the magistracy and business.

The auto is obliged to slow down even more. Monsieur Cahoche becomes impatient. It is quite understandable that he too should be nervous, and more than the others, having borne responsibility for

administration and order in the hallucinated village for a year. Monsieur Cahoché lowers a glass and shouts to the chauffeur: "That's all right—I'll get out here." And to the Sénéçois: "It's not worth risking an accident. What a crowd!"

He gets out, paternally moves aside a brat planted in front of him, reaches the gate, goes into the château, and goes up toward the hall.

Anyone going into the new Maison Aury is accompanied, from the ground floor to the hall on the first floor, by an uninterrupted fresco spiraling upwards with the white stone staircase. It is a singular work. "It develops the theme of the Joy of Welcome," Leviel said one day to Frignot, who was contemplating the painter at work with a kind of desolate bewilderment. A very legitimate bewilderment!

At first the gaze only seizes a multicolored tangle of rhombi, cubes, rectangles, spheres, spindles and cylinders enveloped, contorted and tormented by currents, flakes, eddies and spirals...and yet, as the eye adapts, beyond the frightful initial commotion, a veritable prodigy emerges. From that chaos, that crowd of lines and masses, forms and images are detached, seemingly born, stretching, quivering, condensing and expanding... As soon as it is discerned, each image, each form, immediately enriched by a host of possible evocations, is not only itself but a hundred others.

Such a painting, if it demands on the part of the artist a profound science of color, an infallible administration of volumes and their relationship, also demands a luxuriant inspiration. The rigorous mathematical laws that are the foundation of such an art, paralyze mediocre painters. They garrote them, confining them to dry and baroque representations, inaccessible to the majority of spectators, incapable of grasping it via the only interpreter that is offered when habit is shocked and intelligence nonplussed: enchantment.

Leviel's fresco can obtain that truly magical victory. It opens with the image of a man who is advancing through a décor equivalent to that of the château's own entrance, the trees of the park neatest to the façade, the three steps of the perron, the large glazed door, solely ornamented by eight bronze strips framing its two battens, the threshold of the vestibule and the first steps of the staircase. Around the man presses, densely, a sabbat of phantasmal forms, confused, as if incorporated into one another. The painter attempts to materialize therein the nebular escort that everyone trails perpetually behind him: the fatigues, the troubled thoughts, the bitterness, the hauntings. Here, dark patches, streaks of color, sometimes violent, sometimes sordid, muddy or glaucous puddles are permitted to indicate faces that are sniggering, moaning or biting; there, bold, bright, bright lines launch forth, ending in flattered, flaccid, disgusting masses of shadow, seeming figurations of aborted dreams. Beyond the man and his larval conglomerate, the gaze is immediately appeased. The funereal faces flow away, fading and diluted, into an expanse of soft colors and limpid lines; spirals, tufts and effluvia become gradually more precise, as fruits and flowers, in sparkling waves and undulations, some evoking arborescent fluids, some capering of sylphs. Here and there, the painter's thought is inscribed in a more objective design: a laughing juvenile face, a child dancing in the sunlight.

"The Joy of Welcome," Leviel has said...whoever follows that fresco, as he goes upwards, gradually feels the lustral certainty of that theme.

At present, Monsieur Cahoché is scarcely paying any attention to the fresco. He climbs the stairway, the sentiment of his dignity putting a brake on the impatience of his legs. He reaches the landing, breathes, mechanically passes his hand under his beard, tugs his gloves over his wrists, reaches the hall and goes in.

He pays no more heed to the splendid strangeness of the décor that surrounds him. He is not dazzled by the light, which is the sovereign magnificence of that décor—a July light, entering in a river through the bay overlooking the park, a light pouring torrentially from the glazed cupola that covers the hall, a light as heavy as all of space. He will admire some other time the gleaming friezes running between the divans and the shelves laden with books, and Leviel's vast frescos illustrating the room's four panels.

He does not spare a glance for the dazzling statue standing at the entrance to the gallery that opens facing the entrance to the hall. It is a perfect replica of the Bacchus of the Uffizi, in which it seems that

Michelangelo has expanded the corporeal Joy of being. Monsieur Cahoché perceives Fringot, salutes Géard, Leviel and Draguin, who seem surprised to see him come in, goes toward the steward—but does not have far to go, because Fringot comes to meet him, embarrassed, scarcely leaving him time to say: “Bonjour, Fringot, bonjour, my friend...,” before immediately demanding: “Has Monsieur le Maire received a personal letter from Monsieur Denis?”

“No,” says Cahoché, “why? In truth, I came of my own accord. I thought...” He goes *grrhum!* as if something were stuck in his throat, passes his hat from hand to hand, opens his frock-coat with a gesture he tries to make casual and takes out his watch. “Twenty-five minutes, eh!”

“Monsieur le Maire,” says Fringot, “this is very embarrassing to say...especially when it’s someone like you...Monsieur Denis specified to me in his last letter...”

Fringot twists his moustache, biting the hairs that descend from his upper lip. “In brief, that he wanted to be alone with his friends and his lady.”

“He has a lady?”

“Apparently, Monsieur le Maire. We’re expecting her at any moment.”

“Good, good...my word, that’s true...why not? But my presence is perfectly explicable. Denis Aury is coming to take possession of his estate. It’s perfectly logical that, as the primary magistrate of Sénécé, I should come to greet him...”

“Undoubtedly, Monsieur le Maire.”

“With the result that if one weighs the pros and cons, Denis Aury will not find my presence more inopportune than he would think my absence impolite.”

“There are pros and cons, as you say, Monsieur le Maire. It’s very embarrassing...”

“Not for a man of the world, my friend.”

Cahoché takes off his lorgnon, wipes it, replaces on his nose, scans the hall with a serene and cordial gaze. “What I mean,” Fringot continues, “is that, given the authoritarian temperament that one might suppose Monsieur Denis to have, it might perhaps be better to do as he has taken care to specify. And then...given that a person like Monsieur le Maire, as clear-sighted and considerable in all respects...”

The Maire’s gaze, blinking as it scans the frescoes, returns to the steward and stares at him with haughty astonishment.

“Monsieur le Maire,” continues Fringot, softly, “would only have to set aside the curiosity that grips him, like everyone else here, and come back tomorrow or the day after, if Monsieur Denis does not visit him in the meantime...”

“Well...,” says Cahoché. “But my friend, where did you get the idea that I was curious? Is it not my role as an administrator...and...But, in fact, why the devil didn’t I think that it was to me that the visit was due?”

“There, Monsieur le Maire, that would be the curiosity. It’s enough to turn the strongest heads upside down.”

“Indeed, my friend, and it’s high time that this bizarre adventure came to an end. For a year, my word...”

At that moment, emerging from the gallery, three young women appear, their arms laden with flowers that they have obviously just picked in the park. Their hair is ruffled by the branches, droplets of dew are glistening on their half-bare arms. They go to a large table, cover it with the sheaves, which they scatter with fresh litter, and then simply drop the rest on to the carpet, at the foot of an armchair. All three are dressed in white cotton smocks, indented over the breast and lightly tightened at the waist by a slender belt embroidered with brightly colored arabesques. The same embroidery runs along the edges of the short sleeves. Each of them is wearing a necklace that dances over the throat. One is jade, another amber, the third coral. The three women are beautiful; the color of their flesh and their gestures have the soft plenitude that is a kind of concrete sign of easy and spacious wellbeing.

“Are they...?” queries Cahoché, looking at Fringot in surprise.

“Domestics, Monsieur le Maire, nothing more. The lady’s chambermaids. I understand Monsieur le Maire’s thought. They’re not the usual sort. Monsieur le Maire will be astonished if I tell you their names.

They're named after their necklaces: Jade, Ambre and Corail. So it appears! Monsieur Denis' letter said so, and they told me the same thing. Oh, to be sure, it's necessary to prepare to see things!

Having disposed the flowers, Jade, Ambre and Corail have left. Cahoche taps his foot, strokes his beard, and murmurs, with a slight laugh: "I presume that it won't be boring here..." He takes out his watch again. "Oye! Quarter to... I'll go..."

He puts on his hat, sketches a step toward the door and remains in place, immobilized by the deafening blast of an auto horn, an unusual song cutting through the air, in which a musician would have recognized the inaugural notes of the choral sequence of the ninth symphony.

"It's Lène!" cries Leviel to Fringot. "The gate, old chap, quickly!"

Fringot runs off. Leviel, Draguin and Gérard follow him. Cahoche is left alone, somewhat disconcerted. The three strange maidservants reappear, traverse the hall, and head for the staircase in their turn. Cahoche follows them, overtakes them, says: "Pardon..." and rejoins Leviel, Draguin and Gérard in the vestibule. "Excuse me Messieurs, I wouldn't like to disturb..."

They move aside to let him through. Now he is on the perron. He is half way along the drive when the gate opens wide, pulled by Fringot.

In front of the gate there is a tidal wave of curiosity-seekers, jostling one another in their unbridled desire to see. There are people in the trees and children perched on the crest of the wall. Cahoche is annoyed. Caught between the auto that is about to come in and the crowd that will see him leave, he does not really know what he is doing there. He ought to be on the perron with the guests of the Maison Aury, or in his own château, waiting in a dignified fashion for Denis' visit. At any rate he has to adopt an attitude, at least strike a pose.

Oh well...he has come to fulfill his administrative role, to make sure that everything is in order... His mission complete, he goes serenely back toward his auto...

For the moment, Monsieur le Maire is wasting his effort, because no one is paying any heed to him. The ocular attention of the crowd is caught, like iron filings by a magnet, drawn to the monumental auto that is there, and by the woman sitting in that auto: a young blonde woman in a green dress, her upper body outside a large mantle of brown wool that has fallen in heavy folds behind her waist.

The car has turned, passed the threshold, rolls majestically into the drive. Cahoche steps back and, gravely, with a gesture magnified by pompous elegance, bows to the lady, whom he can see through the large windows, and who smiles politely at his salutation.

Now that he can take advantage of the frantic attention of the crowd he leaves, simultaneously prompt and solemn, and goes back to his auto. But there is still a matter of saving appearances! He stands there, hat in hand, his gaze dilated behind the lorgnon, while the car reaches the foot of the perron, and the door opens, liberating the great green flame that has just dazzled his eyes and electrified the fibers of his being...

No, impossible! His mayoral consciousness grips him again. Sapristi! It's isn't over! It has hardly begun. There is time to revise...

Let's go... His temples are throbbing rudely. The gate. Ten paces. The car.

Gaspard has not budged from his seat. He is there, tranquil and cool. He isn't a Sénéçois, a peasant—he's seen many others! Although the auto that just went past... That auto must be at least a hundred horse-power...

"To the château, Gaspard."

Drawing away. The silent, smooth departure of Cahoche's forty horse-power, until that moment the finest car in the region. The road. The banks, the boundary-markers, the trees the only spectators. Monsieur le Maire can let himself go. Well! No, it certainly won't be boring at Denis Aury's. Ambre, Jade, Corail...and that one... There's a man to whom that green flame belongs, a man who can hold her in his arms, place his lips on that bare shoulder that was visible...on that neck...on that hair...that hair...Oh Lord!

“I beg your pardon. Your beauty startled us to the point that we haven’t thought of introducing ourselves. This is Louis Géard, and Pierre Draguin. I’m Bernard Leviel.”

“I know,” Lène replies. “Denis has told me who the three of you are.”

“And this is Fringot,” Leviel adds.

Fringot has unconsciously struck a military pose. He has been a sergeant. He senses the same prickling in his limbs, and the same mist over his eyes that overtook him the first time he had to return a general’s salute.

Lène sees the three pale young women on the first step of the perron. “Bonjour, Ambre, bonjour Jade, bonjour Corail.”

The three men line up. Lène advances and climbs, escorted by the women. And now they are all in the hall.

“What light!” says Lène.

Her nostrils tremble. She parades her gaze over everything in the room. Her visage is tinted pink by a pleasure both delicious and solemn. She goes straight to the flowery armchair. She sits down and says: “Denis will be here in a few minutes.”

They have forgotten the time.

Lène is dressed in a green sheath of jersey and silk, pleated at the waist by a trip of fawn leather. Two slender ribbons of the same fawn color attach the dress to the bare shoulders. Only an artist could have composed the color of that dress. The bright and fluid green is the very flame of copper in fusion. The russet silk stockings have an ardent and heavy sheen like the wing-cases of scarabs. The shoes, fawn mules, secured at the ankles by across-piece, only enclose the end of the foot and the heel, leaving the arch, gilded by the stocking, exposed.

Lène is not merely beautiful. Something utterly unusual animates and exalts that beauty, circulating in the weft of her flesh. A kind of immaterial sap, a presence of wellbeing, which one senses in the young women who serve her, is revealed in Lène, much more richly, and more assured. She has drunk from the very spring of wellbeing.

Leviel is involuntarily put in mind of an expertly trained and well-nourished horse, whose coat is shining...

Lène is shining with Joy. The veins of that young body are carrying, mingled with the blood, the effluvia of that state of Joy. A strange, suave emotion takes hold of Leviel. Of the order of a fervor. Joy! Yes, that is really what it is! And besides which, what else could have recreated that hair, rendering it sublime? Neither nature nor the light, alone, could have achieved the golden vapor that seems to be incessantly renewed, to be the visible breath of the radiant presence that is palpitating and respiring in the limbs and the fibers... Crowning the graces of the body, the hair is also its fluid hymn. It accompanies and concludes every movement with silvery waves. A curl that snakes over the ear prolongs the nacreous freshness of a laugh; a lock that shines on the forehead completes the rosy gleam that springs from the nail of a lifted finger.

A rumor in the park draws Fringot toward the bay. There are still masons at the Mason Aury finishing the garage, and electricians putting the finishing touches to the innumerable circuits that run through the château and the laboratory. Footsteps are heard running through the edifice, in the upstairs rooms, in the antechambers.

Suddenly, the large gallery that opens behind the Bacchus lights up with a blaze. Draguin, Géard and Leviel start. The wait that they have had for their mysterious friend, and the atmosphere, seemingly saturated with nervous energy, of the entire village, the electricity of which has become more intense as the moment approaches, have combined to render noises, silence and things troublesome and irritating...

But suddenly, as soon as they are illuminated, the lights in gallery are extinguished. Three men appear behind the Bacchus, entering the hall. They are wearing blue overalls, two of them carrying bags of tools. All three are robust fellows, young and bearded, with eyes that have a slightly mocking gleam. A fourth workman follows them, this one older, who says: “Excuse me, Messieurs, Ladies,” and heads for a commutator in the antechamber.

Frignot goes toward them, upset.

“What you doing here?”

“A last adjustment to the lights, M’sieu Frignot,” says one of the three workmen, with a vague hint of irony in his voice. He goes to the table, not far from Lène, and checks a contact-point. Lamps light up, and then go out.

Furious, the steward marches up to the older man, who is in the antechamber. “Are you mad, Goivin? You’ve left it until the last minute? It would be a fine thing if Monsieur Denis were to find you here when he arrives. Take your men away, quickly!” He takes out his watch. “Two minutes to noon! Great gods, get out of here!” Then he returns to the hall. “I beg your pardon, Madame,” he says to Lène. “I don’t understand at all. Goivin’s an old supplier of the château, established in the village for years. Everyone’s lost their common sense today...”

Draguin has gone to the bay, and leans out, as if listening. “We ought to be able to hear something,” he says. “Noon is about to chime. Is he arriving by auto...or by airplane...?”

Lène smiles.

“How do you expect him to arrive, Madame?” Draguin asks her.

“He’ll certainly be here at noon,” Lène replies, simply.

Meanwhile, the workmen move slowly toward the hall. One of them, adjusting the strap of his bag, murmurs: “Perhaps he’s already in the château, Monsieur Denis...”

“What is he saying, that man?” grumbles Frignot, following the excessively slow movements of the men with a visible exasperation.

“...And perhaps he’s waiting for noon to make himself visible,” concluded the workman.

“That’s stupid!” Frignot explodes, his fury muffled by anguish. “How would I not have discovered him? He’s not going! Monsieur Géard, you command them better than I do...”

“Sending us away, Monsieur Géard,” says the workman nearest to the engineer, politely, “might perhaps prevent Monsieur Denis from being here at noon...”

“How’s that?” said Géard.

“What if Denis Aury were one of us?”

“Oh, that’s a good one!” Frignot guffaws. “Monsieur Denis a workman! He’s not you, Julien Nouant! I’ve known you since the days when you played truant instead of going to school.”

The first stroke of midday chimes on the church of Sénécé. A confused tumult rises up on the road. Géard, Draguin and Leviel look at one another apprehensively. Ambre, Jade and Corail have their eyes fixed on Lène. She is leaning back in her armchair looking at the workmen with an impatience full of amusement.

One of the three men calmly takes off the false beard that made him resemble his two companions. A frank pleasure dilates their faces; they tug their beards to demonstrate that they are real.

“Of course!” says Leviel. He burst out laughing, and Draguin and Géard join in, all three laughing broadly, with a glad timbre.

It is Denis Aury. Above his blue overall, his face is clear and youthful, gilded by joyful humor. But that clarity, that youth, that delight, is more of the fresh gleam of certain colored granites than the luxuriant sheen of a beautiful plant or that of a healthy and vigorous animal. The glittering glaze of stone is allied to an impression of extreme mineral hardness. In that living substance, hardness become firmness. The clear, youthful bedrock of that face is intelligence and will. A flutter of the eyelids, a crease in the lips, a suddenly serious attention, are sufficient to bring the sculptor of the rude substrate: the habit of thought. A rare spectacle, a face testifying to meditation, not hollowed out or rendered severe, but entirely radiant with it!

Géard, Draguin and Levil have seized Denis’ hand

“Monsieur...,” says Frignol. He is crimson. He does not know whether he ought to laugh too, or yield to a muffled anger that is rising to his throat, at having been fooled for such a long time. Well! For a year you’ve been rubbing shoulders...

The contentment of seeing Denis come into his inheritance ends up overwhelming the anger, which turns to: “But that damned Goivin was in on it! And them!”



He points at the two workmen.

“These two know,” said Denis. “Because of our build and our beards, all three of us were often mistaken for one another, which dispersed suspicions. That helps me a great deal to come and go. And now, Frignot, you can let Sénécé know that I’ve arrived.”

It was easily conceivable that like Frignot, the people of Sénécé who had known Denis as an adolescent, had not rediscovered him in Père Goivin’s sturdy workman. The young man who had run away from the Maison Aury at seventeen was of medium height, timid and shy. The image that people had been able to retain of him was ill-adapted to that of the tall fellow who had called himself Amédée, who was seen working at the château and, on Sundays, idling in the cafés or along the roads, not sensibly different in his behavior from his companions of a similar age doing similar work.

On first reflection, the disproportion of stature exhibited by the two Denis—the one who was remembered and the one who reappeared—might have suggested to romantic minds the idea of a substitution and the usurpation of an inheritance. There was room for many adventures in such a long disappearance...almost twenty years! But it really was the same Denis. A hundred small evocations of childhood would have convinced Frignot promptly and calmed excited imaginations. In any case, it had been a long time since old Julia, in spite of her octogenarian eyesight, and in spite of the false beard and the name of Amédée, had penetrated the identity of her little Denis, and Goivin’s strange workmen had confessed to her. Only the tender old rogue had kept her discovery precious to herself.

It was the same Denis. And yet, there really had been a substitution; expressly, a reaction. The imprecise, hesitant, frail child had transformed himself into that strong and radiant man.