

# HUMAN SEED

## PART ONE

### I

At the sudden crackling sound that departed from the almost-extinct fire, Antonin Fargeaud, the father and old head of the family, raised his white-haired head momentarily, exhausted by the fatigue and emotion of the night that had almost passed. From the armchair in which he was dozing he tried to distinguish the details of the closed room in the rapidly dissipating fulgurance of the fire, but his eyes, threatened by cataracts, were poor, and his memory awoke with difficulty in a brain debilitated by the years, bitterness and disappointment.

One thing appeared in the gloom, however that prompted remembrance. On the whiteness of the bed where the invalid was sleeping painfully, his respiration punctuated by a few inarticulate groans, there was a bloodstain, a red splash that renewed the constriction of his heart. It evoked one of the most poignant shocks of his long life, already stirred by so much anguish.

The day before, his favorite son, Claude Fargeaud, brought back from Paris suffering, had been seized as soon as he arrived at the château by a hemoptysis so serious that it had required three hours to vanquish it: three hours of alarm, during which the urgency of Doctor Bouret, the physician from Rouen, had struggled in vain against the red flow emerging inexhaustibly from the livid mouth. Then, suddenly, as if the malady were weary of playing with so much resistant life, the red source had dried up and the young man, annihilated, with a feverish illumination in his cheeks had fallen into a heavy sleep, disturbed by a few groans, the unconscious plaints of having suffered so much and having so much still to suffer.

And he, the old father overwhelmed by the years, whose stiffened limbs required a gentler posture than the one he had, and who wished for a seat softer than the old wooden armchair that hurt his back, had remained there all night, in the heavy atmosphere charged with the emanations of ether, keeping watch on his child's curt respiration, trying to interpret the brief words that the latter murmured in his delirium.

At any rate, he was not alone in keeping that vigil. On a nearby sofa, one of Claude's childhood friends, a companion in thought, Raoul Fieux, had also put his affectionate devotion at the service of the invalid; but his courage had ceded to the imperious necessity of sleep, and since the moment when Claude had calmed down, he had been slumbering soundly, with all the lethargy of his thirty years and the need to pay with repose for the intense and powerful vigor that circulated in his veins, of which his blond and handsome Christ-like head, now lying on the back of the seat, revealed the youthfulness and the strength.

And that bloodstain soling the sheets, glimpsed in a flash of firelight, that human redness that no one had had the time to make disappear, dispelled the old man's daze, reanimating yesterday's drama, and the dread of a fatal denouement, now avoided, like a dagger-thrust tearing the veil of his torpor. He reproached himself for having succumbed to fatigue; he recalled the doctor's orders, the care to be taken not to allow the atmosphere to get cold. Although the day before, a beautiful bright June day radiant with precocious summer, had been warm, and although the dawn, still pale, filtering through a gap in the long curtains, promised imminent sunshine, the old Château de la Taquainerie, a vestige of feudal resistance, guarded the cold dampness of frost jealously in its stone carcass under the tall trees that dominated it, under the caress of fresh water that shivered at its flanks and protected it with a kind of natural rampart.

The old man straightened his tall frame, seized the little lamp whose light was almost dying, and raised it to the level of a thermometer hanging near the fireplace. Having observed the lowering of the temperature, he leaned toward a box of wood, took a log therefrom, and deposited it in the hearth, taking infinite care not to make any noise. Slight as his movement was, however, it awoke Raoul. Prompt in alarm, but less rapid in extracting himself from his heavy slumber, the young man had to stretch himself before recovering his senses. Finally, also returning to the reality of things, a little ashamed of having been a less vigilant guardian, he approached Antonin Fargeaud, who was finishing his task.

"Would you like me to help you, Monsieur? Do you need me?"

"No, I've finished."

"You should have alerted me," Raoul added. "I'm confused by the trouble you're taking..."

The old man made a gesture that excused a very legitimate lassitude; then, having consulted the clock, which was preparing to chime three, he said: "Go to bed, my friend...you're tired. At your age, one needs sleep. At mine, on the contrary, one sleeps little, for one knows that one can soon be compensated during the eternal night."

"I'm astonished to hear you talk like that, Monsieur Fargeaud. Have you lost your faith in a long life, in the twenty years of vigor that your strength reserves for you?"

"Yes," said the old man, sadly, "I've lost the faith. Since yesterday, everything is broken. Yesterday, I still had hope, I wanted to live, leaning on my old man's stick, and on my little Claude...alas, the poor fellow...! You see...!"

The desolation of his attitude indicated the bed where Claude was continuing a slumber disturbed by painful respiration. As Raoul was about to protest, he continued: "Yesterday, I was dreaming of grandchildren coming from him. That blossoming of young faces and clear gazes would have been an encouragement to subsist. The new sap departed from the branches would have come to render a little verdure to the exhausted trunk. Now, it's finished, quite finished..."

"You're wrong to be alarmed, Monsieur Fargeaud. Claude isn't so very ill. Numerous people have hemoptyses and subsequently engender fine children. Isn't Claude engaged, moreover, to the most reassuring of young women, to Henriette? Come on...you're being too pessimistic."

Antonin Fargeaud shook his head again, resumed his place in his armchair and drew the young man to a neighboring seat. Then, speaking in a low voice, for his solicitude for his son's repose did not quit him, he became communicative, he whispered his heart, he surrendered his haunting, the unique hope and the unique concern of his declining career; he unveiled his aspirations of old, his present failures, the disappointed illusions of a creator, of the custodian of his family, having maintained in his hands thus far the precious treasure of blood, and now seeing it escape suddenly, and spill into oblivion.

"My friend," he said, in a murmur that could not reach the ear of the invalid, "it's good of you to want to reassure me, but you'd strive to do so in vain. I'm not a physician, it's true; I don't have the science that examines and foresees...but unfortunately, I've been brought up in the school of experience; and I know that this accident that has befallen my son is the beginning of tuberculosis. I know because Emmeline, my second wife, of whom Claude was born, whose features he has preserved so faithfully—the great sea-blue eyes and the rosy complexion, so troubling in its false promise of vigor, and even the voice, through whose harmonies pass the hoarseness of a perpetual cough—commenced her phthisis in an identical fashion, with eruptions of blood, when I believed her valiant, the poor, ever-adored angel!"

Raoul was afflicted by that dejection. However, he protested again. "I tell you that Claude will be cured, Monsieur Fargeaud. Doctor Bouret affirms it, and he has no reason to disguise the truth from me. And then, have you no confidence in your other children? Hector has only to marry, and Madame Duverdon is very well..."

The old man hesitated momentarily before underlining with a negation the words addressed to him. The newly alighted hearth deployed a noisy and rapid effervescence, and by its glow, half-shadow and half-light, the physiognomy of the despairing man contracted. His thick white eyebrows came together, designing a cruel bar, and his eyes sketched briefly, with a flame as ardent and as fugitive as that of the logs, the sinister radiation of his past.

"Hector...! Rolande...! He said, in a voice so low that Raoul had to lean over in order to hear it. "Hector and Rolande...my two older children, continue my family, and prolong my lineage! You want to make me hope in them? You know them, however. And should one even hope? What fine progeniture, I ask you, could they reserve for me? It's said that children support hereditary flaws, and you ought to know, as a naturalist who has studied those particular subjects. It's said that creation is abominable enough to transmit to the descendants the deteriorations that blighted extinct generations, as if life were a ladder of misery going toward a gulf, a ladder that the race descends without being able to climb up again, or to stop. And you talk to me about Hector and Rolande!"

He fell silent again, and a new energy of the hearth, illuminating him from below, showed him to be grim, the crevices of his wrinkles accentuated, the gutters of shadow in his features hollowed out by the sketcher of old age, sinking dolorously into dryness of his mask, covered by the unkempt whiteness of his long beard. Without giving Raoul time to give evidence of his scientific knowledge and experience by certifying that ancestral decadence did not necessarily subsist, that it could be avoided or overcome by education, by the admixture of blood-lines, he continued his confidences precipitately, with bitter phrases, gestures and implications that expressed more than words.

He talked about his first marriage, to which he had been constrained by parents anxious to see him rich, his union with a woman whose hysteria had been carefully hidden from him, a hysteria that confined an epilepsy, attacks in which the unfortunate woman fell, her head striking the parquet, her eyes convulsed, her face atrocious, her lips soiled by red foam, in an improbable torsion of her entire being.

Yes, at twenty-five, that was the gift that had been made to him, and he had accepted it by virtue of ignorance, and also, a little, out of pity, the physician allowing him to hope that the neurosis in question might be tempered by

marriage. The best moments were those in which he had only had to curb his head before his wife's changes of mood, before the whims of her prodigality or her suspicions, or before her amorous rages, her thirst for complicated voluptuousness, so untiring and so excessive that he had to stop, like those birds that are breathless from having loved too much.

And from that coupling, vitiated in its essence, his first two children were born, Hector first, now forty-five year old, whose childhood had been tormented by disquieting threats of meningitis, troubled by secret vices, and whose maturity was darkened by an exaggerated passion of women, a sensual bulimia that would drive him some day to commit some folly, if he were not guided to it by his pride, by ambitious whims that veiled an apparent eccentricity.

Thirteen years later—surprisingly, for his first wife had refused any other procreation—Rolande was born; and of her he scarcely dared speak. At twenty-two, after a youth unhinged by nerves, she had wanted a marriage with Julien Duverdon, a gentle honest and timid gentleman. She had wanted it abruptly, as she had wanted her toys and her clothes, doubtless in order to be more liberated. Later, while traveling with her husband, she had made a friend of Clara Boswett, an American woman older than her, almost aged, in spite of the make-up and the artifice of dyes, and who enjoyed a strange authority over her, dominating her with a troubling suggestion, never calling her anything but “darling.”

“That was my first marriage,” confessed the old man. “it was not happy, as you can imagine, and remarkable fruits could not be expected from it. My wife died not long after Rolande's birth; the devil has her soul!”

Again, the fire was animated redly, as if to support the malediction, and the old man appeared at that moment to become a kind of evil spirit himself, with the hostile flame of his eyes raised toward the ceiling. Already, however, that impression was modified, moderating and dissolving in the sweetness of other memories. And he unfurled the second phase of his life the same veridical impartiality with which the first had been exposed.

“The legal delays had scarcely elapsed,” he said, “when I contracted a second union. This time, it was an idyll. Oh, what a charming, gentle and saintly creature Emmeline was! In any case, you've seen her, haven't you? You've known her, since she illuminated with her beauty and her grace the region that is your homeland. Emmeline! I had loved her for a long time and I believed that it was unnecessary to reflect on the bronchitis that had darkened her childhood, for she was apparently vigorous, she affirmed health. And then, I wanted a son worthy of me, a man to continue my race, to make me proud, in him, of all my past and all my future.

“The period of my engagement, the day of my marriage and the time that followed was a dazzle, something akin to a celestial enthusiasm, a bliss of adoration. I had resumed a new youth on contact with hers. In delivering myself to the ingenuousness of her transports, I ornamented myself with her virginity, her soul; I gave myself truly for the first time. She seemed to me so radiant of complexion that I forgot the coughs of her youth, and the death of her mother, extinguished by a malady of languor, I was told...a vague term about whose meaning I was wrong not to seek precision.

“You can, therefore, judge my joy—no, the word is inappropriate, there are no terms to explain what I felt—when, after the cries and sufferings of a long childbirth, I was presented with Claude, wrapped in lace, fresh, rosy, already intelligent, his eyes already open...her eyes, eyes as blue as waves irradiated by the sun! He laughed on seeing me...! I danced, my friend. I danced like savages around a prey! For that parcel of flesh really was my prey of tenderness, my prey of paternity, for which I had been lying in wait for twenty-five years. And in my delight, I imagined that I had finally perfected my masterpiece, built my true familial edifice on three friendly columns—had, in a word, subscribed to the holy obligations of the persistence of my blood.

“Twelve years later, the edifice collapsed. One of the columns crumbled, oscillated and fell. Emmeline spat blood, as Claude did today, and then died with the falling leaves, in autumn...and I remained alone with the child, alone with him, for you can imagine that his elders no longer counted; they had already manifested too clearly what they obtained from their mother...from the other...”

The old man's voice had taken on a higher pitch. Perhaps, too, the drama that he was evoking so dolorously had troubled the slumber of the invalid by means of a sort of telepathy, for the latter had turned over in his bed and was murmuring a vague appeal. Already, the father had got up, with an adolescent rapidity, and had approached the bed on tiptoe, his heart squeezed by the emotion he had just provoked. For a long moment he leaned over, monitoring his son's breathing.

“No, he's asleep,” he said, resuming his place. “But how poorly he's breathing, poor fellow...”

“It's a matter of a few days. All that will sort itself out,” Raoul affirmed.

Once again, Antonin Fargeaud did not share that confidence, and returned to his subject, as if hypnotized by its suggestion. While he spoke, Raoul was astonished by the wildness of his features, the mystic gleam that gave his eyes a disquieting hallucinatory fixity, directed toward the hearth, now in full activity.

“That child,” he said, “that child! If you knew how I pampered him, once his mother had gone, how I cradled him with my dread, my solicitude! Well, yes, you do know, since you were his friend. You have seen me not quitting him with a single thought; summoning teachers here so that he would not be corrupted in class; you’ve seen me warming him when he was cold, brooding like a hen guarding her egg, a miser his treasure. But what you don’t know is the frightful stirring of my heart when he coughed, my alarm when his temperature rose by a degree, my long waits in the antechambers of physicians, of all the physicians in Paris, and my emotion when I saw them, those impenetrable individuals leaning over his breast and listening to what was happening behind the ribs. But in sum, all went well; he grew up without too many hitches; he reached the age of twenty almost vigorous. It was then that I began to hate you.”

“To hate me?” repeated Raoul, thinking that he had misheard.

“Hate. I could have strangled you on the day when Claude came to tell me that he wanted to follow your example and undertake studies in natural science with you. His tastes bore him toward serious abstractions, in any case, and your faith in the work was such an engaging example. I cursed you for a long time, my friend. But could I hate someone forever who loved my son?”

“In vain I showed him the dangers of that career, unnecessary since he was rich; in vain I talked to him about the miasmas that float in laboratories, and which one respire; in vain I proved that his health required life in the fields, fresh air. He resisted my warnings, for he’s headstrong, the child; he’s stubborn, like his father, like his ancestors, all headstrong...”

“He worked hard, he became a scientist. At twenty-three, like you, he was qualified, and savants noticed him. Last year he published his book on *The Amours of Plants*,<sup>1</sup> which made some noise, and which you are revising with him for a new edition. Well, this is the result! Look at his sheets; there is blood on them, the blood of his bronchi. It’s the malady that corrodes, the bacillus that devours...I know it, I’ve read the books, I’ve understood the images, and the little footnotes...”

The old man gazed more fixedly at the log fire, and in the phantasmagoria of the flames, he sought shapes soon dissipated, the evaporation of lives in gaps in the light, the symbolic destruction of phantoms dissolving into ash, red at first, then gray, and then black.

“Existence is stupid,” he said, bitterly. “Why is that log blazing, why are we living, and why are we creating? The log blazes in giving its heat, we live and create squandering our energy, and afterwards, what remains? Dust and death...nothing!”

He repeated his final phrase in soliloquy; then he fell back into a hallucinated mutism, which floated dolorously in the bedroom while the fire slowly died down, collapsing into its scoria, and on the bed, Claude’s halting respiration continued, oppressed and dying, like the breath of the hearth.

The obscure flight of the minutes was prolonged in the silence, amid the reek of potions charging the air with the sublimations of ether. The father maintained a fixed immobility. The night-light, which was sputtering, and the clock, which chimed, did not make him turn his head. He seemed a shadow among the shadows, pierced toward the ceiling by a golden radiation issuing through the crack in the curtains, bringing into the slumber of the room the suggestion of an exterior awakening.

Respectful of that calm, Raoul reflected. He revived his youth, spent in the verdant country in the environs of Rouen, silently ribboned by the capricious contours of the Seine. The son of a small landowner, now dead, he remembered his robust youth, vivified by running over the plain, by the pure air that followed in great gusts the natural current of populated wooded hills, the plastered walls of which delimited its fragmentation. Near the river, the country collapsed in white cliffs and broad stretches of clay all the way to the blond road that followed the sinuosity of the water. Behind the hills were the woods of Roumare and then fecund plains, dull in winter, damp with rain or snow, retaining in their entrails the promises of seeds. In summer, the plains awoke; life recommenced its cycle; muscular energies, the traction of beasts and plowshares animated the soil. Raoul followed the incessant labor; he saw sweat streaming over suntanned rustic skin, he heard the cries of animals, the oaths of herdsmen. The hunting season provoked the impetuosity of men and dogs and the flight of game through the furrows, throwing up dust. Everywhere, there was effort, productive effort in labor and effort even in destruction, and he admired it with all his atavism of a Norman laborer.

Above all he remembered the Fargeauds, whom he had not known in that epoch. Standing on a hill outside the village of Dieppedalle, the château was imposing, with its old thirteenth-century tower, alongside which, over the

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<sup>1</sup> *Les Amours des plantes* is the title of the French translation of *The Loves of the Plants* (1799) by Erasmus Darwin; I have used a different translation of that title for what is obviously a different book, but the reference is not accidental.

razed ruins, a heavy square building had been built in the last century.<sup>2</sup> That tower had traversed several seigneurial epics, and legends neglected by history persisted with the machicolations, barbicans and crenellations of its enormous carcass. A depth of fresh water made it a natural rampart. Once, a drawbridge thrown over that water had isolated the enclosure, but, felled during the Revolution, that drawbridge had been destroyed and replaced by an embankment, with the consequence that the water now stagnated. Restored several times, pierced with modern windows, the monstrous block gave the impression of a surly giant, still menacing, adapted to the fashion of the day in order to keep decent company with the rest of the habitation.

Raoul had been astonished by that enormity of stones, and from there his respect had reflected on to Antonin Fargeaud, the acquirer of the manor and a little surrounding land. So much mass and so much wealth dazzled him. The children of the first marriage, Hector and Rolande, passed over the sonorous roads on horseback, seemingly disdainful of the little vagabond dressed as a peasant. He feared them. Then came the death of Monsieur Fargeaud's second wife, with the impressive pomp of an unusual funeral, a black ceremonial spangled with silver, the chants of priests, the decoration of the catafalque, the heavy drag of the hearse that took the corpse to Rouen, and, in the first rank, a delicate child almost his own age, who was sobbing, his face in a handkerchief bordered with mourning.

The memory of that heir, consecrated to fortune and dolor, had remained vivid. He was surprised a few years later to see him grown, transformed, deprived of his silky curls, guiding an English carriage harnessed to a pony, with a young brunette by his side, whom he seemed already to be surrounding with a amorous solicitude. He learned that that was Henriette Divoir, the ward and niece of the château-owner.

One day, the carriage overturned in a rut, without any damage to its passengers. Raoul helped them to set the vehicle on its wheels again. The children's amity stemmed from that accident, Raoul was introduced into the château, and the three of them, Claude, Henriette and he, formed an amicable trio that the vacations reunited every year in inseparable games.

Then came the studies of adolescence. Raoul departed for a college in Rouen, while Claude, delivered to the zeal of private tutors, completed his education under his father's aegis. In the meantime, Henriette had been put into a convent; she drew therefrom the first seeds of a religious faith that her destiny did not necessitate, for at sixteen she was engaged to her cousin. She was impregnated with an obscure mysticism, while the two friends entered into brutal contact with life, penetrating into amphitheatres, fathoming the obscure causes of existence and those of death, the complicated mechanisms whose rhythms humankind obey in order to bloom and to disappear.

No study was more fecund in marvels, more disappointing in philosophy or more destined to slice sharply through the ideas transmitted by stupid social constraints, the prejudices of education and the embarrassments of faith. Thus, their conceptions matured and extended; thus they observed, reflected and exchanged the unexpectedness of their astonishments. And gradually, an entire flap of the veil was lifted over the light, a disturbing conviction that the truth had so far been restricted, enclosed in the narrow mesh of a stifling pedagogy.

Raoul, pushed toward Claude by a genuine affection, became anxious for the fate reserved for his friend's profound amour for the young woman who had just completed a pious education under the narrow direction of nuns. Could so much light, on the one hand, and so much darkness on the other, ensure happiness? Would the broad vision of the one and the paltry mirages of the other not lead, from the very beginning of the marriage, to surprises, frictions, and irritations destined to trouble subsequently the accord that two lovers in the flesh and the spirit would desire?

But in truth, that was already to take preoccupation with the future too far. A movement made by the invalid brought the thinker back to the contingency of events, to the dramatic hemoptysis of the day before, a warning so somber that one could wonder whether those moral anxieties would not collapse before the physical episode, and whether, in a few months, matter, resuming its domination over all eventuality, would not suppress the prognostication by annihilating the individual. For the illnesses experienced by Claude for some time—his loss of weight, all the precursory signs of a profound deterioration of his health—if they had not surprised their object, had disquieted Raoul to the point that he had recommended to his friend the therapeutics of repose and fresh air. It had required the appearance of the first drops of that red blood to overcome Claude's indifference and bring him back to the paternal hearth, where he had collapsed as soon as he had entered, like a wounded animal.

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<sup>2</sup> This and another reference in which "le siècle dernier" [the last century] clearly refers to the eighteenth century, suggest that the story is set some years prior to its publication, and might have been written then; it is possible that an early draft was written before *Le Mal nécessaire* but could not be published then because of its highly controversial subject matter; however, datable references in the story establish that the final version begins in the year 1901, the story eventually extending into 1904.

At a movement made by the invalid, his two guardians ran forward. Claude asked for something to drink, and scarcely had the desire been expressed than his father handed him a bowl of milk augmented with a few drops of kirsch.

When his head, wearied by having lost so much fluid, had been delicately reposed on the pillow, the old man's voice, extraordinarily soft and sympathetic, interrogated: "Do you want to go to sleep again, my child?"

"No. Open the curtains."

A flood of gilded daylight penetrated from outside, with all the birdsong. Amid the foliage, almost level with the window, the star surged forth in an azure magnificence. Already, the hopping, joyful fluttering and fleeting intoxication of the birds was abruptly interposed upon the décor of the sky.

More light, more!" stammered Claude. "Oh, the sunlight, it's so good, the sunlight! And those birds, that life, that music!"

"Yes the sunlight, my boy. That's what will restore you. You're going to enjoy it for the full four months that you'll spend here with us, with Raoul—for I'm counting on Raoul staying—and with Henriette. Isn't that, for you, almost all that you need to be happy?" the old man concluded, in a tone that belied his anguish.

At the name of Henriette, Claude's physiognomy, which the abrupt irruption of sunlight had almost reanimated, suddenly darkened again, charged with melancholy. He shook his head slowly.

"Henriette! Your poor child! What will become of her?"

"What? What will become of her?" Antonin Fargeaud protested. "She'll become your wife when you've recovered."

"Do you think so, Father?"

There was such doubt in that question that the old man dared not reply to it. A false protestation would have been more dolorous for his son than silence. He contented himself, therefore, with sitting down next to the bed, keeping in his stiff and wrinkled hands the hand of the invalid, overheated by fever.

Claude closed his eyes again, gripped by a touch of vertigo consequent on so much effort. Rings darkened the contour of his eyelids, above which the forehead, already creased by study and reflection, stood out, remarkably high and intelligent, surmounted by thick brown hair, a section of which fell over the right temple. The nose became thinner at the root, the lips were rather full, covered by a drooping moustache, to which a blood clot still adhered. The thinness of the clean-shaven square chin further emphasized its contour. All of that physiognomy suggested benevolence, moderated by a certain willfulness. If the eyelid had been raised, the blue gaze, too shiny with a gleam of fever, would have revealed the reflective studiousness and slight disillusionment that dominated that laborious brain. At the moment, the complexion, normally colored, especially over the cheekbones, was mat and dull, drained by excessive blood loss.

On considering that mask, so profoundly deteriorated, Antonin Fargeaud could not help encountering there the stigmata of tuberculosis that the malady of Emmeline, his second wife, had engraved so intensely in his memory. All the morbid heredity appeared in that faithful reproduction of a forehead, a nose and a mouth that he had adored. Even the long hand with the tapering fingers, the feverish hand that he was holding devotedly, revealed anguishing analogies in its structure, in the termination of the fingernails, curling at the extremity. Through the gap in the shirt he glimpsed the projection of the clavicles, the rectitude of the muscular fibers of the neck, fleshless, as if stretched, designing hollows behind which the rhythm of the arteries was transparent. The parted lips revealed the gracious sculpture of the perfect white teeth, exactly similar to Emmeline's. Yes, the unfortunate child was truly the son of the deceased. He had too much of her, to the point of having to depart, as she had.

A comparison could not fail to impose itself, between that scion of an exhausted race, the issue of a father already old and a mother touched by consumption, and the frier of iron, the prototype of strength destined to ensure the triumph of life, after having been engendered by the vigor of two healthy parents. With his ardently blond head, rendered astonishing by the contrast of dilated pupils, two centers of brown, living, bright, bold energy, flamboyant with a surprising youth, with the slenderness of his lightly flared nose, with his yellow full beard divided in the middle into two quivering points, that sun of the soil, from which scarcely a generation distanced him, gave the impression of a harmonious Christ, by whom Calvary had not been climbed. And his health also triumphed in the powerful squareness of his shoulders, the elegant litheness of his torso, planted delicately on the solidity of the legs.

Raoul Fieux thus presented, in spite of his serious expression, the attraction of a handsome male, the virile incarnation that accompanies unconsciously the curiosity of women, the secret desire of their amorousness. Passions that he had not had the whim of engendering, and of which he had great trouble disencumbering himself, affirmed his plastic supremacy. His person did not inspire languor, or emotion, or the flourishing of tender sentiment in the heart, but it transported with an esthetic enthusiasm, it emitted the fluid of a beautiful work of art, suggestive of appetite, virility and health.

In truth, the rectitude of the young man, his hostility to any expression of animality, and also his severe education and his precocious maturity in contact with his occupations, greatly attenuated his adolescent character of a young stallion propitious to the remaking of blood. The crease of his eyelids blurred the provocative glare of his eyes, the gracious cordiality of his lips enabled forgetfulness of the sensuality of the two bulbs bursting with health. It was necessary to strip away the covering acquired by calm and study to comprehend and admire the heroic robustness of the muscles and to sense the breath of creative generosity that he emitted, radiating with his gestures, his grave voice, his smile and the undulation of his beard. And although a night of near-insomnia next to the invalid had wearied him, he stood up again without fatigue and prompted once again the slightly jealous admiration of the old man.

But the father had to call a truce to his reflections, for the invalid, hearing a noise, had just opened his eyes again, and smiled at a delightful apparition. Henriette Divoir, his fiancée and cousin, Antonin Fargeaud's ward, was standing hesitantly on the threshold. On seeing the welcome that greeted her, she advanced.

She was exquisite, youthful in the splendor of her twenty years; she brought with her the balm of a bright morning, entering as the sunlight had entered a little while before. She was wearing a blue lawn dress, as light and spring-like as her advent, sufficiently tight-fitting to allow the divination of the eloquence of her torso and the curve of her hips, and short enough to allow the sight of an elegant foot clad in yellow leather. Her mat complexion was helmed by a brown torsade; her eyes had dark velvet reflections; her lips were lightly blurred by a down. The smile that she sketched as she approached the invalid put three good, joyous and piquant dimples in her cheeks and chin, while arching a mouth in which a nacreous row of teeth appeared.

Like Raoul, she could have seemed the expression of good health and exceptional vigor, for she was, for anyone who judged her in accordance with appearances, a beautiful work of carnal art modeled in a crucible of life and strength; but something humble and mystical contradicted the first impression that one might obtain from her. She did not draw from her person the advantages of seduction that she could have obtained therefrom. She walked with her head slightly bowed; her shoulders were a trifle folded, and her hands, cross in front of her waist, seemed disposed to join together for meditation. Her smile was almost confused, and belied the graciousness of her three dimples, the pure gleam of her eyes and the mat warmth of her cheeks. She conserved a kind of outer layer of religious decorum, and close to the earth as she was, in the splendor of her form, she drew away from it and approached the heavens in the attitude that she adopted.

She had taken the hand of the still-wonderstruck Claude, and spoke in a low voice:

"Are you better this morning? Did you have a good night? I wanted to stay with you and keep vigil, you know, but these villains didn't want it and sent me to bed."

With her finger she indicated the villains, the old man and Raoul, but without paying any attention to either of them. And she kept chatting, quietly and serenely, narrating a dream that she had had—for she had slept in spite of everything, vanquished by her great fatigue—but a good dream, entirely reassuring, which had shown her Claude clad in the robe of a saint, his head ringed by a luminous circle, accomplishing miraculous cures. She believed in dreams.

"Don't tire him, my dear Henriette," Raoul interrupted. "The doctor desires a great deal of calm around his patient."

She turned round, looked at the protester, who apologized with a gesture, and then blushed slightly.

"That's true, I forgot," she said. "I forgot that it's still early and that you need rest. I'll quit you; I'm going to mass. But from this morning on I want to stand guard by your side. I hope that won't be refused me, this time..."

She leaned toward her fiancé, as if for a confidence, and squeezed his hand, which she had not abandoned.

"I'll pray for you," she confessed—after which she withdrew.

The rustle of her dress was heard, brushing the door-jamb as she went though, and even after her departure, a perfume of freshness, youth and health persisted in the confined atmosphere, as if spring had come with her. Raoul marveled at that; but having turned to Claude, he saw his head fall back, almost unconscious, on the pillow, with a tear in the corner of his eye, by which Antonin Fargeaud was alarmed.