

CHAPTER I

The slope of the hill, although still not steep, was beginning to take its toll. Viewed from down below, at the mediocre elevation of the cottage, the climb to the ruins did not seem very intimidating, but it was longer and harder than it seemed. Paul had been living on the mountain for eight years now, and he was an assiduous daily walker, but he rarely went all the way to the top. He was usually content to walk down to the village, or in the woods at much the same altitude, usually to the east of the cottage, because the ancient convent and its extensive grounds, now an eccentric phalanstery, was located to the west, further up the slope. The thought that its inhabitants might be observing him made him strangely uneasy, in spite of the fact that he was on satisfactory, if distant, terms with them. In consequence of his lack of practice, he was now beginning to feel the strain in his legs—but he felt strong, and was determined not to flag.

Although they were both city-dwellers, and hence, in theory, should have been less well-equipped for hill-climbing than Paul was, Victor Marvaud and Gaston Lambrunet both seemed sprightly and vigorous, not at all embarrassed by the slope, and they had drawn a dozen paces ahead, chatting animatedly. Paul remembered that they had done exactly the same thing once before, more than half a lifetime ago for the three of them, who were now comfortably past the age of thirty.

Paul could not help thinking, as he remembered the day they had climbed all the way to the ruins when they were fifteen years old, that the sight of their broad backs moving ahead of him, propelled by energetic legs, had been symbolic and prophetic of their path in life, in which they had seemed always to be ahead of him, forever leaving him behind...except that on that day...

He shivered, suddenly, as if under the shock of a supernatural coincidence, as an arm slid beneath his own.

“I’m being indiscreet, I know, Monsieur Furneret—may I call you Paul?—but my short legs are beginning to protest, and I need a little support. Gaston seems to be engrossed in joyful reminiscences with his friend, and I’m reluctant to tear him away. May I borrow your arm?”

Paul turned to look at Armande Lambrunet, Gaston’s new wife, conscious that he must be blushing deeply. Had he blushed as deeply half a lifetime ago when Martine took his arm? Probably, he thought.

“Of course,” he said, hesitantly. “But...”

“Oh, Gaston won’t mind,” she said. “I know that you and he have been friends, almost brothers, forever, so we’re practically family...and I ought to make an effort to get to know you. We hardly saw you at the wedding...an introduction and a leave-taking, with barely a few words exchanged in between...and yet I was so curious about you. The famous painter of the dead! The mysterious genius! Gaston just talks about you familiarly, as a childhood friend, as if you were an ordinary person, and Victor never departs from his customary flippancy, but in society...”

“Surely people in Parisian society don’t talk about me?” Paul protested.

“Certainly they do. Absentees usually get short shrift there; living in Provence is the next best thing to non-existence, even for painters whose works appear in the Salon every year, but your name keeps coming up, albeit in whispers. Did you really paint your famous portrait of Yvaine de Rochemure after seeing her in a vision induced by animal magnetism?”

“I didn’t actually *see* her,” Paul murmured, stammering slightly with an embarrassment sharper than any he had felt for at least a dozen years, “but yes, I based the painting on a drawing I had made unconsciously, under a kind of induced hypnosis.”

The young woman’s gaze was deeply disturbing, although he was not sure why. She was beautiful, of course, with silky dark hair and unusually bright brown eyes flecked with gold, but it was not her beauty that was making his heart pound, nor the fact that she was Gaston’s wife, because he knew that if Gaston turned round to see them arm in arm he really would not mind; it was something deeper, which he

could not quite fathom...although it obviously had something to do with the echo the situation contained of the day when he had linked arms with Martine, Gaston's sister, in similar circumstances.

"And Baron de Rochemure really begged you to paint it as he lay dying?" Armande added, continuing her interrogation.

"It wasn't as melodramatic as you're making it sound," Paul assured her. "He lived for three months after I completed the painting—long enough, I hope, to derive some...well, I don't know whether consolation is the right word, but..."

"But there was a lot of publicity, wasn't there, when his heirs put it up for sale, along with your other portrait, of a dead medium, and a set of sketches? There was something of a frenzy of interest, more excitement than was generated the Delvilles and the other surrealist paintings, which were more valuable in purely monetary terms?"

"Yes, there was a lot of publicity," Paul admitted. "That was largely Victor's doing, I think. He's always blown my trumpet in Paris as loudly as he could. He's been...a very good friend."

Apprehensive about where the conversation might be heading, Paul was almost relieved when the young woman's next observation was: "But you do portraits of the living too, in Toulouse? Gaston says that you're always in demand there."

"I've been fortunate enough to receive a steady stream of commissions," Paul said, a trifle warily.

"I've suggested to Gaston that he commission you to paint me, while I'm still in the full flower of youth. I thought he'd be delighted, with your being such old friends...practically brothers...but he seemed strangely hesitant. I don't know why."

Armande paused, a trifle provocatively, obviously inviting a speculative explanation.

Paul endeavored to oblige, albeit deceptively. "You're only going to be in Toulouse for a few more days," he pointed out. "Then you'll be settling into your new house in Paris. Gaston knows that I rarely come to Paris, and never do any painting while I'm there, so he probably thinks that there isn't time."

"You did the painting of Rochemure's daughter in Paris, though?"

"Yes, I did, at the baron's request, but that was a rare exception."

"Not the painting of the little medium, then? Or the one hanging in your dining room?"

"No, I did those here, in the cottage," Paul confirmed, again somewhat uneasy about the direction of the conversation—with justification, as it rapidly turned out.

"And the one on your easel at the moment," Gaston's bride queried, "is the woman who died recently? The famous author?" Her tone was level and polite, but Paul knew that she was probing. He had no idea what Gaston and Victor might have told her about his relationship with Jane de La Vaudère, but it was not a subject that he wanted to discuss with a young woman barely into her twenties, who was still at the tail end of her honeymoon voyage, on her way back to Paris to take up her new life.

He looked at Gaston and Victor but they had drawn even further ahead since he had had to match strides with Armande, and they were still deep in excited conversation. Having met up that morning for the first time since the wedding, they had probably moved on from Gaston's impressions of the places that he and his new bride had visited recently to talking about Victor's exploits, especially his recent engagement and his embryonic wedding plans.

Deliberately winding the conversation back to an earlier point, Paul said: "Perhaps Gaston's also a trifle reluctant to have his beautiful young bride painted by a man whose primary reputation in Paris, as you just pointed out, is that of a painter of the spirits of the dead. It might seem..." He paused, not quite sure how to continue

"A little like tempting fate? Armande suggested. "But none of the messieurs and mesdames of Toulouse that you've painted in recent years have died in consequence, have they? And as you say, you have a steady trickle of commissions, so no one here is intimidated. And you've been perfectly willing to accept the commissions, and also to paint your friend Clémence from life, which you surely wouldn't have done if you thought it might imperil her in some way?"

Paul knew that she was still probing, but he supposed that it was understandable. When he had visited Paris to serve as a witness at Gaston's wedding he had barely stayed for a few hours, only long enough to attend the ceremony and pay an obligatory call on Auguste Chazelle, his agent. He simply had

not wanted to face the possibility of being asked embarrassing questions—or, even worse, being offered hypocritical condolences—but he could understand that his conduct must have seemed odd to the young bride, making him seem far more a man of mystery than he was...except, he supposed, that he was now making himself even more a man of mystery by being so evasive.

He decided that he had to make an effort. Armande was right; having married Gaston, who was the nearest thing to a brother he had, even closer than Victor, because of...

He cut that thought short, and went on by reminding himself that she really was practically family now, and he ought not to treat her as a stranger. After all, it was not as if he had any secrets...

He almost laughed derisively at that hypocritical thought, and all he eventually said in reply to the young woman's last provocation was: "No, I suppose not."

"Now that Victor's following Gaston's example," Armande said, seemingly feeling that a little more indiscretion was called for, since Paul was being so stubbornly uninformative, "they'll probably be expecting you to follow suit. Gaston's always telling me that the three of you used to do everything together."

"Not everything," Paul objected. "And since we were adolescents we've taken very different paths in life. Victor's a banker, Gaston's a businessman, and I'm a painter. They're both at a point in life when men in their careers typically think of marrying, but painters are notorious Bohemians, who revel in being atypical."

"Are you suggesting that Gaston has only married me because he's at the point in his career when he needs a wife?" she said, teasing him maliciously.

Paul knew that his blush must have turned crimson again. "Of course not," he said. "Gaston has been waiting for years to find the right woman to marry. He's always been the most romantic of the three of us. He would never marry for any reason but a deep and abiding love."

Pompous idiot! he said to himself, secretly.

"Unlike Victor, then?" she said, immediately springing the trap he had accidentally set for himself. "Poor Clorinde!"

Clorinde was Victor's recently acquired fiancée—exactly the kind of fiancée that a socially ambitious young man who was making progress in the profession of playing with other people's money required, in order to create an impression of social stability and respectability.

"Victor loves Clorinde dearly and sincerely," Paul said, hoping that it was true. "His libertine image has always been more show than reality, and if he's engaged in serial flirtations since the days we were at school together, it has mainly been in a spirit of experimentation. Like Gaston, he's been always been looking for the right woman to marry...he's just employed a more active method of enquiry."

"Very delicately put," said Armande, laughing. "So, when Gaston says that Victor would always chase anything in a skirt with predatory fervor, even at the age of fifteen, he's just being malicious, or envious...or both?"

"Victor is a good man," Paul said. "If he's something of a Don Juan, it's not because he's predatory. He doesn't set out to hurt anyone, let alone ruin anyone. He's a handsome man, and he was a handsome boy; girls used to chase him as much as he chased them, and I'll wager that it's still the same in Paris—but once he settles down, he'll be settled. He's doubtless fortunate that Clorinde said yes to him, but she's fortunate too, in my opinion."

"Like me?"

"Of course. There's no better husband on the world than Gaston."

"Absolutely—so you don't agree, then, with the people who tell us that we've got it the wrong way round?"

Paul was startled by that. "I don't know what you mean," he said, honestly.

"I mean that ever since Victor's engagement was announced, people who know us in Paris have apparently been heard to suggest that Clorinde, being so sober and earnest, might have been a better match for the sober and earnest Gaston, whereas I, being so flighty and indiscreet, might have been better suited to a social butterfly and connoisseur of gossip like Victor."

“Even if those descriptions were true,” Paul said, “which I don’t believe, the judgment would be nonsensical. I’ve only met Clorinde once, and I don’t know you very well either, but in my opinion, the two of you have got it exactly the right way round. A little difference and contrast in a relationship is a good thing. People always used to say of Victor and Gaston that they were chalk and cheese, and that I was neither, but that didn’t prevent us being faster friends than anyone else we knew. Quite the opposite.”

Armande looked up at Gaston and Victor, who had almost reached the plateau of the ruins, and were evidently making a final surge in order to reach it, perhaps even racing, although Paul was sure that both would deny it if the suggestion were made to them.

“You do seem to be a rather odd trio,” the young woman observed. “I can’t quite imagine the three of you as friends even at university, let alone school—although I suppose you all passed for intellectuals then, in a company that would hardly have matched the standard of Louis-le-Grand.”

Paul, who thought that he, Gaston and Victor could all have held their own very comfortably at the Lycée Louis-le-Grand, refrained carefully from taking offense at that remark.

“We did have plenty of interests in common—literary, artistic, political and scientific,” he said, “although you might not think so look at us now, but I think our temperamental differences were as important as any similarities in holding us together. We all had different ambitions and objectives, you see; we were never rivals. Any competition between us was...well, as trivial as the competition that Gaston and Victor are now having to get to the top first. Whichever of them wins, the other won’t mind, because it’s a matter of no consequence. With regard to serious objectives, we’ve always been able to support one another wholeheartedly, without any envy, the way that Victor advertises my painting in Paris. It’s because we’re dissimilar that there’s never been any occasion for a serious dispute between us.”

“Not even over women?” she asked, malicious again.

“Especially not over women,” Paul said.

The young woman seemed to be on the point of following up that issue, but Victor and Gaston had now reached the top of the slope, simultaneously, and were looking down at the laggards.

“Just like last time!” shouted Victor, laughing delightedly. “Paul needed to be helped up then, too!”

Although they were still some distance away, Paul had no difficulty seeing Gaston looking daggers at his friend, casting a slight shadow over his claims regarding their unwavering solidarity.

“What does he mean?” asked Armande, looking at Paul curiously.

“When we climbed the mountain at fifteen,” Paul said, “we weren’t alone. Gaston’s sister Martine was with us. She was only thirteen. Gaston and Victor pressed on ahead, as they did today, and I stayed back in order to help her.”

“Ah!” said Armande, as if that answered a question she had wondered about but had not found an opportunity to ask, and said: “Is what when you fell in love with her?”

There was not the slightest reason for Paul to be surprised that Gaston had told her about him and Martine, but even so, he winced. His voice was perfectly level, though, as he replied. “I already loved her—but that was the last time that I was almost alone with her, and it did feel...different. Things between us were never quite the same again.

“But nothing came of it? Gaston says that, so far as he knows, you never even kissed?”

“No,” he admitted, “nothing came of it. I never knew whether my feelings were reciprocated, and I was too timid to ask. There always seemed to be plenty of time...but there wasn’t.”

“Ah!” she said, again—but by then they had caught up with Victor and Gaston.

“Don’t look at me like that,” Armande said to Gaston, apparently having mistaken the direction of his scowl—or pretending that she had. “I’m just a frail girl, and Paul is a perfect gentleman. You’d have done the same for him, I’m sure, except that he would never have neglected his poor newlywed wife like that.” Her tone was deliberately flippant, emphatically unserious.

Victor laughed again. “It was me he was frowning at,” he said. “I shouldn’t have made a reference to Martine. I was entirely at fault—it’s still a touchy subject, even after eight years. None of us has entirely stopped grieving.”

“One of us evidently has,” Gaston muttered, darting an apologetic glance at Paul that was apparently intended to convey to the artist that it was not on his own behalf that Gaston had resented Victor’s slight gaffe.

“You’ve painted her portrait too,” Armande remembered, addressing Paul again. “I’ve seen it, in Gaston’s house in Toulouse, next to the portrait of their mother...” She stopped. “Now it *is* me you’re frowning at,” she said to her husband. “Have I said something I shouldn’t?”

Gaston opened his mouth, but Paul was quick to interrupt “No, Madame Lambrunet,” he said, “you haven’t. As you said, I was very fond of Martine, and I was very fond of Amélie too, who was very kind to me after my own mother died. Gaston was generous enough to urge his mother and sister to treat me almost as if I were his brother—which demonstrates what I was saying just now about our being the best of friends. We were both afflicted when they died—but there’s absolutely no reason why you should refrain from mentioning them to me.”

“Well, then,” she said, “if I’m going to be almost a sister to you, I forbid you to refer to me ever again as Madame Lambrunet. I’m Armande—and I won’t call you Monsieur Furneret again, or anything but Paul. We can treat one another as family, is that agreed? And do stop frowning, Gaston—the wind might change.”

“Actually it hardly ever does up here,” Victor put in, trying to lighten the tone. “Always the same updraft. It’s a quirk of the local geography—Gaston can tell you all about it, at great length, if he hasn’t already.”

Gaston raised his eyes to the heavens, which at least wiped the vestiges of the frown from his face.

Armand was already looking around. She scanned the scattered stones that were all that remained of the crude ramparts of the meager fortress that had once occupied the hilltop, but she seemed to decide immediately that they were of little or no interest except as a symbolic marker of the summit—a judgment that Paul had always shared wholeheartedly. The young woman looked westwards then, in the direction of Toulouse, but the city was invisible. Although there were no very high hills in the way, the ground was sufficiently uneven to hide the valley of the Garonne in that direction. She turned to look instead at the slope they had climbed, her gaze inevitably picking out the only substantial building for miles around, which had not been visible from the cottage, or from the road the automobile had followed in bring her up from the village, because it was hidden by trees.

“What’s that?” she asked.

“It used to be a Cistercian convent,” Victor told her. “Fifteenth century or thereabouts, but built on the site of an older convent destroyed during the so-called Albigensian crusade, which was probably built on the ruins of an early Christian shrine, on what was perhaps a pagan sacred site before that. Nowadays it’s leased by a Parisian sect of sapphists run by an old friend of Paul’s, although he and she haven’t been on speaking terms for four years and she still lives in her Parisian headquarters.”

“Is a sapphist something like a Trappist?” Armande asked, apparently in all innocence, even though she was a Parisian.

Victor laughed again. “Gaston can explain that to you too,” he sniggered.

“I’m not the only one who can explain things at tedious length,” Gaston said. “Victor has only given you the short version of the convent’s story. Do tell Armande the rest, Victor.”

Victor shrugged. “The Cistercian nuns were only there until the Revolution,” he said, “when they were turfed out. The land then associated with the convent was then proclaimed to be national property and broken into lots for sale, but when the Restoration rolled around and committees were set up to enable the return of confiscated estates to their aristocratic owners, mostly émigrés, a Toulousan antiquarian—one of Gaston’s many relatives—produced parchments to prove that the sector of the mountain we’re looking down on still belonged, rightfully, to the descendants of one of Simon de Montfort’s English cronies, who had been gifted it by the King of France after the Albigensian crusade.

“The descendants in question, the Megister family, had no idea that they owned it, but when they consulted their old family documents, they found the necessary supporting evidence. They started collecting a few meager rents, but didn’t really pay any attention to the domain until now, when the most recent heirs have decided to check out their lost estate in the south of France, perhaps because so-called

development is all the rage now that the twentieth century is in full swing. They're staying in Toulouse at present, hobnobbing with one of Gaston's many uncles, while investigating their property before going on to tour the Riviera. If it hadn't been for them, my automobile would have been the first ever to set wheels on the mountain, this morning, but their Sunbeam beat my Panhard to it by one day. They're going to drop in again on Thursday, I believe, after consulting the members of the legal fraternity in the city."

"That's right," said Paul, "but I don't anticipate any bad news. I'm a tenant in good standing, and they seemed to be quite pleased during their flying visit yesterday to have a painter of modest reputation living on their mountain. They didn't say what they thought of the convent, but they really ought to be very pleased with the Sisters, who have worked miracles in a mere eight years with the fields, the orchards and the vineyard, without a single male laborer ever setting foot on the terrain."

"You've still left out all the interesting stuff, Victor," said Gaston, maintaining a hint of malice in his tone. "Why don't you explain what those Alpinists are doing in the forest on the far side of Paul's cottage?"

"Alpinists?" said Armande, puzzled, squinting as her gaze followed the direction of her husband's pointing finger to consider a substantial crew of workmen busy in a long but narrow gap in the forest canopy. "You mean mountain-climbers? But we've just walked up the steeper slope of the mountain, haven't we? What on earth do they need those ropes, grapnels and crampons for?"

"You have very good eyes, my dear," Victor complimented her, "but Gaston is being far too modest. All I can tell you is that they're probably looking either for old bones or the Holy Grail, but either way, they're wasting their time. The Great Cleft is said to be bottomless, and even if that's not true, nobody has ever reached the bottom and come up again to tell the tale. Gaston's the one who can explain why there's a fissure there, which requires sophisticated climbing equipment in order to descend into it. Apparently, it dates all the way back to the glory days of the volcanoes of the Auvergne, but Gaston has his own tedious theory about its precise nature. I'm surprised he hasn't told you all about it, but you've only been married for two months and he's probably still afraid of boring you to death if he displays the true colors of his pedantry."

"Oh, you're impossible, both of you," said Armande, laughing. "Do you know what they're talking about, Paul?"

"Oh yes," said Paul, feigning world-weariness. "I've heard it all before, many a time."

"The thing is....," Gaston began, but she silenced him with a gesture.

"I want Paul to tell me," she said. "After all, it's his mountain."

Paul laughed. "If only," he said. "I'm a tenant in good standing, but only of a small cottage, a stable, a well and a vegetable patch. Zosima's acolytes have custody of a hundred times as much land, including an entire farm, fields, pastureland and orchards as well as the vineyard of which they seem to have high hopes. But the short version of the story Victor wanted Gaston to tell is that, however they were caused, there are three deep cracks, or clefts, in the rock of the mountain. People sometimes go down into the shallower ones: paleontologists or archeologists looking for old bones and ancient cultural artifacts, or treasure-hunters, but as Victor says, their chances of finding anything even in the lesser clefts are very slim.

"So far as I know, all the lateral caves are just bare holes, without a trace of paintings or flints reminiscent of the Age of Chipped Stone, and there are several meters of sticky silt at the bottom of the lesser clefts, in which it's impossible to dig without the holes collapsing. The local people sometimes throw shards of pottery and old tin cups down, in order to have a laugh at the expense of the optimistic scholars or grail-hunters, but the joke really isn't very funny, because if it rains—the climate here is very benign, but the weather can be extremely uneven, and when it does rain, it often comes down in torrents—the lesser clefts flood very rapidly, and anyone caught down the hole is in dire danger. Any recoverable bones are likely to be recent, those of treasure-hunters who didn't heed the warning that going down into them in bright sunshine is easy enough, but coming up during or after a rainstorm is well-nigh impossible."

"But why would anyone think that the Holy Grail might be down there?" the young woman asked, mystified.

“Blame a local historian—or a fantasist—called Napoleon Peyrat,” Gaston put in, finally grasping the opportunity to display the expertise in matters of local history and legend for which his family was justly renowned. “He published a history of the Albigensians some thirty years ago, which claims that the last whimper of the genocide, when the remaining Cathar refugees were besieged in Montségur, they had custody of an inestimable treasure—probably the Holy Grail—which they smuggled out of the citadel before it fell, hid somewhere within a few days’ ride, and which was then lost, because the men who had hidden it were killed. But his whole so-called history is a work of fiction, based on a handful of legends of no great antiquity.”

“That’s not strictly true,” said Victor, competitively. “Obviously, the present population of Toulouse mostly consists of descendants of incomers—by which I mean people who arrived after the twelfth century—and even before the massacre of the Albigensians, the region had had a very troubled history, going beyond Roman times to the fringe of Massalia, the Phocean colony based in what is now Marseille, but there must be at least a few Occitan families whose ancestry really does go back to the first century A.D. The documentary details of the legend of the three Maries are Medieval, but the evidence of place-names and shrines suggest that the oral tradition must be much older. On the other hand, Gaston is absolutely right that anyone who thinks that the convent down there is built on the site of a shrine raised to one of the three Maries, in the ruins of a temple of Artemis, itself built on the ruins of a temple to a goddess whose name hasn’t survived, hasn’t a shred of real evidence, and anyone who thinks that the Holy Grail was an actual cup rather than a symbol, which might once have been hidden in or near the absurd fortress in whose ruins we’re standing, is woefully mistaken.”

Armande frowned, as if wondering whether to follow up one or more of the issues raised by that speech, but she was shivering slightly in the updraft that Victor had mentioned earlier, and seemed to make the decision to postpone further discussion of the myth of the Holy Grail until a more relaxed occasion. She could not, however, resist the temptation to take up one issue. She looked around at the scattered stones of the ancient rampart. “Why do you call the fortress absurd?” she asked. “Surely the Midi is full of ruined castles of this sort, built on the top of hills much like this one, as necessary defenses to protect feudal aristocrats from rebellions and invaders?”

“Yes it is,” said Gaston, “and most of them are absurd—baronic follies not fit for their imagined purpose. That’s why they’re almost all in ruins. They were certainly defensible positions, difficult to take by storm, but they’re not edifices in which any substantial number of people could actually live, or which could withstand a siege for very long. They were expressions of vanity rather than utility.”

“Why couldn’t people live in them?” the young woman wanted to know.

“In a word,” said her husband, “water. As Paul says, when it rains here, it often rains torrentially, but not for long. This is a very petty mountain by comparison with those of the Central Massif, whose peaks you can see on the horizon, but it’s high enough to accumulate cloud and to become the focal point of sudden violent storms. For long periods in summer, though, it’s dry. Doubtless the builders of the fort had cisterns to collect and store water when they could, but not enough to supply a resident population for very long, and if the fort filled up with refugees from an invading force, they would have run out of water in a matter of days.”

“There are three springs that open on this face of the mountain,” Paul added, “but the only one that hasn’t run dry at present is the one that opens in the grounds of the convent. My well has accessible water, but it’s a long way down at the moment. Even at the end of winter, though, in the season of the thaw, when all the springs are gushing and the lesser clefts fill up, it wouldn’t be possible to supply the fort at the summit if it were under siege.”

“And even though we’re in the Midi,” Gaston resumed, “it sometimes gets very cold in the depths of winter, especially at altitude. The water in the cracks in the rock sometimes freezes—not often, but often enough. And when water freezes in cracks in rock, its expansion sometimes exerts enough pressure to widen the cracks, or split the rock. Over tens of thousands of years, or hundreds of thousands, small cracks can gradually become great or lesser clefts...”

“Theoretically,” Victor put in.

“Theoretically,” Gaston admitted.

Armande looked at Paul. "Did they argue like this last time they were here?" she asked.

"I can't remember," Paul said.

"I can," said Victor. "No, we didn't—but we were ignorant children then, with no academic expertise to display, and the predominant impression was that of wild nature, inexplicable and in no need of explanation. The convent was just a ruin then, and there weren't any gangs of potholers in sight. The cottage hardly existed. Gaston and his uncle arranged for it to be rebuilt for Paul eight years ago, and even had the road mended, after a fashion—good enough for Paul's horse and a trap. It was improved again, all the way to the convent, when the lesbian nuns moved in, but it's still pretty rough. Are you going to mention that to your landlords on Thursday, Paul?"

"I don't think I'll have to," Paul said. "They brought their automobile up, remember; if their mechanic consents to try it again, he won't leave them in any doubt that it won't be adequate for future purposes. Whether they'll care or not is a different matter. How the sisters get their rickety donkey-carts back and forth from the village half a dozen times a week—more when they go to the big market in Toulouse—I really don't know."

"What you need to do," said Victor, "is to persuade the new owners to have their portraits painted while they're staying in the vicinity, so that you can work your charm on them. They're young, I believe, and the sister's quite pretty?"

"I expect they have plenty of portrait painters in England," Paul observed.

"It's not the same," said Victor. "You're French—and you're the famous painter of spirits, the living proof of the immortality of the human soul. It's a unique opportunity. Have they visited your studio?"

"Yes, very briefly, but they can take a longer look at the paintings on Thursday if they want."

"Not including the one in your bedroom, I hope?"

"No," Paul admitted. "Not including the one my bedroom."

"Why not the one in the bedroom?" Armande wanted to know. She too had seen the studio and the dining room—and for that matter, the kitchen—but not either of the bedrooms in the cottage."

"The best advertisement by far for Paul's work is in the studio," Gaston said, evading the question while pretending to answer it. "The work in progress shows what he's capable of doing for anyone else—although it might be as well not to mention to the pretty landowner that the lady on the easel is dead...oh, damn. Now I'm doing it. Sorry."

"It's all right," said Paul. "Given my reputation, it's a matter that's bound to come up with any and all visitors. If I were sensitive about it, I wouldn't have hung the portrait of Juliette in the dining room, would I?" He knew, though, that the cases were not comparable. Juliette had been dead for nearly six years, Jane only for a matter of months.

Gaston, having spoken thoughtlessly once and repented of it, kept silent, but Victor said: "You really ought to send the picture of Scarab to Chazelle, along with the horror. Let him sell them. It isn't healthy, keeping them at home like that. You are going to send him the La Vaudère picture to him, I hope? That one he can definitely sell, for big money. Méricant still has unpublished books of hers on hand, and the last one she published while she was alive is said to have sold thirty thousand copies, albeit with the aid of the nude photographs. She has a big following. What?" He was looking at Gaston, whose frown was now almost thunderous. "He *said* he doesn't mind." Defensively, Victor added: "I'm only trying to help."

Armande, apparently having given up asking for clarifications that no one provided, looked at each of them in turn. "I can see why you call yourselves the very best of friends," she murmured, sarcastically.

"We are," Paul assured her. "That's why Gaston is being a trifle oversensitive about the possibility that I might be upset by a careless remark, and why Victor really is only trying to help. They care, and I'm grateful to them, but I don't want our conversation to keep stumbling over needless anxieties." He looked at Gaston. "Armande is one of us now, and she needs to be able to ask us anything she wants, just as you and Victor need to be able to say anything you want. Yes, I was deeply distressed by Jane's sudden and unexpected death, as I was eight years ago by Martine's, but I don't need such matters to be surrounded by a *cordon sanitaire*. And yes, I still miss Juliette, even after all these years, and I have absolutely no intention of sending her portrait to Paris to be put up for auction."

Victor raised his hands defensively. "All right," he said. "If that's the way you feel, but in my defense, you have been telling me for years that you and she didn't love one another."

"So I have," Paul agreed. "Perhaps I was wrong, and am only just beginning to understand that. Sometimes, you have to be haunted for a long time before you figure out what the dead actually mean to you. And now, having conquered the mountain, thus proving—or not—that we're still as sprightly as we were at fifteen, and having reminded ourselves that the old stones really are rather uninteresting, whether the fort was a baronial folly or not, perhaps we ought to start back down again. Madame Louvot will be making a special effort for dinner, and I don't want to worry her with the possibility that we might be late."

"We have plenty of time," Gaston assured him. "It's quicker going down than coming up, as long as no one falls and twists an ankle." As if to emphasize the point, or perhaps to redeem himself for his earlier neglect, he offered his arm to his wife. She seemed to be on the point of making a sarcastic remark, but she stopped herself and nodded her head gracefully. She and Gaston took the lead as they all began to make their way back down the mountain.