

THE MAKER OF MEN

I

First, the décor:

The immensity, which is to say, nothing but the sky and the sea, a very blue sea, apparently freed from the primordial physical laws, for, in spite of the universal conflagration, it does not manifest the slightest sign of boiling. And doubtless these things are in that order, in this place—the middle of the Indian Ocean, in the vicinity of Sumatra—for all eternity. That which is not for all eternity, even though participating in the bleak immutability of its frame, and which is merely an entirely transitory accident of the picture, is the frail white boat simulating, at a distance, a smudge on the prestigious canvas, and in which two individuals are sitting face to face, ferociously impassive in appearance: my wife and me.

You know that I am incapable of lying, my dear Jules Hoche; I swear to you that it was at that moment—which is to say, the moment when the mutinous crew of the *Samarang* disembarked us in the middle of the Sunda archipelago—that the very simple plot of our fantastic story had its commencement.¹

Take note also that a tract of sea, in the region of the equator, exactly resembles a tract of sea off Marseille, and that it is necessary, in no matter what latitude, not to expect any new effect from the Ocean unless one has decided firmly, to extract it oneself. For it is only the changing of our environment that magnifies or degrades things, and décor only has the value that we put into it. Personally, I did not put anything into it, deliberately, and my state of mind closely resembled that of an amateur sailor tacking between Nice and Beaulieu.

It was not the same for my wife, whose delightful face, harsh and firm for me alone, had always given me, since our marriage, the sensation of a lovely park with tender pasture, fresh green waves, from which I was separated by a wall bristling with shards of broken bottles—the wall of her almost hateful indifference—but which was allowing, for the moment, an intense curiosity to filter through those shards, as to what I might be thinking about her, and of everything that had happened to us, by her fault.

Because it was her fault, as you can imagine. At forty, a globetrotter like me, who has been around the world three times, no longer dreams of anything but peace and repose in the permanence of a setting that does not vary, and not moving therefrom. And it was certainly with that thought in mind that I had offered myself, in marriage, the delightful jewel that, between the four walls of some small country house, might continue to evoke all the scattered magic in the world.

But think now about all the little girls who, five or six years before the time at which this story begins, were bouncing balls off the walls almost everywhere that there were agglomerations of humanity to contain; imagine that one of those little girls—the prettiest, certainly, and the most mischievous—might perhaps still be playing that insipid game had my afterthought not abruptly could the trajectory of her puerile destiny to make her a wife—my wife—and picture the anger of that little girl, whose ball I confiscated, giving her a million in exchange: a million that I assured her in the form of a dowry, to obtain forgiveness for my age and hers.

¹ Author's note: "In my turn, I feel the need to declare that my stenography reproduces adequately faithfully the story of my friend Maurice d'Autremont; I have even tried hard to conserve the form dear to the narrator, a kind of continuous pedal-note of humor that transforms the words, superbly spanning sentiment and irony, outlining in the same delicate and precise stroke the enormous and the infinitesimally small, the most unusual and the most banal appearances, all the while doing himself the favor of conserving, in the bosom of veritably hallucinatory situations, a relative impassivity."

What do you expect? I had become so used to paying for everything in gold that the idea had come to me quite naturally of buying the person who would embellish my retreat, rather than searching, perhaps for years, for the improbable chance of finding someone capable of loving me for myself. My wife was only eighteen. But it is not with impunity that one is, in the life of a young woman, the man who brings her prematurely, and perhaps a trifle despotically, out of the era of innocent games. She made me understand that on the very night of our wedding by saying to me, in the calmest fashion in the world: "I shall be your wife, since it is my duty to be, and since I've been obliged to consent to the bargain to which you have, in a way, constrained my parents, but on one sole condition, which is that you will always do my bidding, and never ask me to love you."

I acquiesced, letting her suppose that my way of comprehending our reciprocal duties was not too far removed from her ideal of a heartless doll. She was, moreover, able to put me to the proof. As you can imagine, she did not have to be begged. And that is why she imposed upon me, without hesitation or remorse—on me, whom she knew to be obsessed by a dream of definitive repose in carpet slippers—the insipid chore of a nuptial voyage to the Far East.

I admired her then because, things having turned out badly, and our situation having become almost critical, she was able to remain indifferent, stoical, less preoccupied with the fear that she most certainly have been feeling than those she thought she was inflicting on me, without yielding to the desire, natural among women who have someone to tyrannize, to throw back on me the responsibility for her personal faults.

Take note my dear friend, that I share your opinion; I consider that certain women are exquisite creatures, that it is necessary to love them as much as one can, while being careful not to allow them to become excessively aware of it. You will agree, however, that their sex, viewed as a whole, presents the same inequalities as ours. Save for a rare elite who merit our admiration and our most elevated suffrage, the greater number can only legitimately lay claim to a certain number of kicks up the backside, in order to prevent them from becoming intolerable, not to say dangerous.

I don't say that mine merited being classed in the latter category, but it's certain that she had taken charge of me, with the sole entitlement of my prior tenderness—which is to say, the very reason that confirmed her congenital inferiority.

In any case, our nuptial voyage had just entered a phase so alarming that it seemed to me to be logically bound to end in a denouement ignominious for both of us. A mutiny had, in fact, broken out aboard the small Portuguese ship on which we had taken passage in Malacca. I had intervened, taking the side of the captain, on whom the mutineers were inflicting the most odious treatment, and it was then that we had been disembarked, politely enough, in the vicinity, so the ringleaders said, of a certain island X, the steep shores of which could be distinguished four or five miles away, close to the equator at ninety degrees of longitude—which is to say, on the shipping route traveled by the Australian mailboats.

We were left with the alternatives of marking time there, uncomfortably, while awaiting the first passing steamer, or making for little island X, where French colonists had been established for some years, who could not fail to give a good welcome to two of their compatriots...

All that evidently did not represent a desperate situation, but you'll grant me that it was also not one that warranted a vote of thanks to the Demiurge that holds the threads of our destiny. During the hour and more that I plied the oars, we made rapid progress over a flat sea, and island X was no more than the range of a rifle-shot away. The spectacle of its shores, which one might have thought painted by a master landscape artist, even drew a cry of admiration from my wife. It was then that, already habituated to mistrust her enthusiasms, I let go of the oars in order to turn round and contemplate the scene in my turn.

Truly, the view was delightful. One might have thought that a mysterious curtain had just risen over a magical setting; a low strand appeared, rosy and green, making a kind of bright girdle for a delicate screen of little wooded mountains, whose jagged outline seemed more cheerful than severe, and which might have been taken, at a distance, for a fan of green feathers. In brief, that lost island, designated in the special tablets of our mutineers by the most algebraic and enigmatic letter in the alphabet was a pastel, a miniature.

My wife's eyes, very wide and very blue—a violet-tinted blue—have an astonishing faculty of refraction. Some feminine eyes reflect the sky, the sea, and everything they contemplate; hers break up the luminous rays as surely as a prism, only retaining a kind of luminous dust in the utmost depths of the pupils. That, at least, was what I had found every time I had plunged into her gaze, and it is, I believe, that power of refraction in her eyes that ensures that no one ever knows what she is thinking.

On that score you might tell me that the eyes of other women are generally true mirrors, but that one still doesn't know what they're thinking, because mirrors don't think, and again we'd be in agreement.

When I've added that my wife resembles a little girl in terms of her stature, but that the hardness of her eyes, her quivering nostrils, the willful curve of her slightly plump nose and the imperious arc of her pepper-red lips reveal a temperament of fire and iron, in spite of her blonde hair and a skin as delicate as rose petals, I can't see any possibility of painting a more revealing portrait for you. I know that novelists affect to describe the features of their characters scrupulously, but I don't believe any of them has ever given his readers a sensation of the man or woman he is trying to paint, because the physiognomy of anything whatsoever—even a banal hill, let alone a human face—always escapes those who pretend to fix it with the aid of simple words in the guise of a brush or pencil.

"Do you think?" said my wife, suddenly, "that we'll get out of this sorry adventure safe and sound?"

"I don't believe that our chances would weigh very heavy in the estimation of an insurance company, but after all, if this island X really is inhabited, and if it is by Europeans, especially Frenchmen..."

"By whom do you expect it to be inhabited?"

I hesitated momentarily, very tempted to enlighten her as to certain probabilities supported by the most elementary geographical and ethnographical knowledge—to wit, that quite a few of the islands lost in the Sunda Strait still shelter ferocious cannibals. And in truth, if I didn't yield to that malicious impulse, it was purely out of admiration for the composure she had shown thus far.

"By no one," I replied, simply.

"A desert island!" she said, smiling. "Bah! They no longer exist except in adventure stories; rents are too high everywhere for any abandoned island to exist anywhere without becoming the prey of some entrepreneur of colonial settlement. In any case, we have everything we need to subsist by ourselves while we wait for the next steamer to pick us up and repatriate us."

I nodded my head, but without conviction, occupied precisely with taking an inventory of the limited food supplies, weapons and ammunition that we had been able to bring along with our trunks, hammocks and a few rusty tools that I did not know how to use. From a distance, we must have had the appearance of carrying toward the equator the contents of one of those handcarts containing the precarious possessions of the victim of an eviction from his lodgings. And I clenched my fists in rage at the thought of the wretches who had done us that bad turn, and the dirty Portuguese coaster whose sail had now completely disappeared over the horizon.

Oh, the swine! If only there had been gendarmes in that watery desert! Only the proximity of my two revolvers and my six-shot carbine—a superb weapon bought from the best gunsmith in Paris—defended the coquettish silhouette of the island where we were about to land from the invasive flood of excessively desperate suspicions.

My wife, with her eyes glued to the binoculars, was studying the shore that was getting closer and closer: a beach of fine sand, which the surf was fringing with a line of foam.

"It's delightful," she murmured, "but there's no trace of human beings." Suddenly, however, she uttered an exclamation. "There, in that clump of trees that seem to be falling into the water..."

"Mangroves." I specified.

"...I seemed to catch a glimpse of bare skin...of human skin, perhaps..."

I seized the binoculars in my turn, and made out the form of a creature that plunged precipitately into the branches of the mangrove—rapidly enough, at any rate, for it to be impossible for me to make any judgment as to its species. Was it an animal or a human? Its haste to disappear from the field of the binoculars, if it was not fortuitous, surely indicated a human—and, what is more, a civilized human.

"You see," said my wife. "Those scoundrels were telling the truth."

We landed. We were about to find out.

In the meantime, in order to have the upper hand in any kind of confrontation, I seized my carbine and passed my two revolvers through the flannel belt knotted, for the occasion, over my shirt—for I was in my shirt sleeves, in view of the heat, and with the abstraction of my weapons, believe me, I did not have a martial appearance at all. In Paris, on the boulevards, I would have been taken for a madman, and had it not been for the gravity of the moment, my wife would certainly have made fun of me; she had not allowed far less propitious opportunities to escape.

I think, in reality, that she had not taken an exact account of our situation until the moment when we touched that unknown land, where death might perhaps be lying in wait for us, for I saw her suddenly go pale, and she drew closer to me, talking to me with soft inflexions that I could previously have believed to be absent from her vocal register.

“Are you really sure of yourself, Maurice?” It was the first time that she had called me by my forename.

“As sure of myself as of you,” I said, in the same tone, not without smiling internally at the ambiguity of the response.

And we disembarked, our eyes and ears on the alert. It might have been seven o’clock in the evening. It was September, and the sun was declining rapidly over the horizon, ready to plunge between the sky and the sea.

Our first steps on the sand put a group of giant tortoises to flight, and flocks of aquatic birds nesting among the reeds of a marsh that extended into the interior of the island in an inlet. Immediately behind the marsh, whose muddy banks we prudently went around, woody promontories overlooked the strand, overhanging a gorge with gentle slopes carpeted with a dense jungle, in which, it being twice or three times our height, we would have disappeared. There was no trace of a path anywhere, and although I affected the most perfect calm in the laconic responses I opposed to my wife’s optimistic hypotheses, I was much less reassured than her, because it appeared increasingly evident to me that if the island was inhabited, it was not by civilized people.

The worst of it was that those accursed promontories were multiplied all along the strand, veritable cliffs some thirty meters high, cutting off the view and allowing nothing to be divined of what might be behind them. At all costs, it was necessary to scale one.

I confided one of the revolvers to my wife, who waited for me by the boat while I risked the climb.

“Above all, my dear Yvonne, no untimely alarms. A gunshot would cause a mighty echo here, and it’s not a good idea to attract curiosity-seekers before finding out what race they belong to, and what their intentions might be. Furthermore, it’s necessary to be economical with our ammunition.”

“All right, but don’t be long, Maurice.”

Delighted with the new progress implicit in that remark, nuanced by a semblance of tender inflection, I was just setting forth, carrying a kind of boarding ax, which played the role of the machete employed by trappers and pioneers, when a violent sneeze nailed me to the ground, in the pose of comical fury mitigated by distress that I struck every time I was formally menaced by a cold in the head.

“Damn—that’s all I needed!”

And I smiled myself at hearing the traditional phrase falling from my lips, naively astonished that a cold in the head could extract exactly the same stupid expression from me on the equator as in Paris.

“Bless you!” mocked Yvonne—but she was almost immediately punished for her sarcastic intention by a sneeze even more violent than mine. At the same time, an acrid taste grabbed us by the throat, and I suddenly understood. After taking a few strides, I had reached a point on the shore from which I could see the mountains of the interior again. My wife followed me.

“Volcanoes!” I said, smiling and indicating the blue-tinted summits, now plumed with pale gleams, very visible in the crepuscular sky.

My joviality annoyed her. “An aggravation of our situation,” she groaned.

“Pooh! Inactive volcanoes retired from employment...which is to say, somnolent and three-quarters extinct. Besides which, isn’t the worst of possibilities preferable to the certainty of a cold in the head?”

“I don’t know—I’ve never had one.”

I drew away rapidly, disdaining to comment on that mendacious assertion, surely a corollary of inveterate feminine coquetry.

The ascension of the cliff was relatively easy, but I bloodied my hands and face as copiously as possible, avoiding the inoffensive thickets of rhododendron and mint, and throwing myself in preference into the ferns and thorny creepers strewn over the plateau. Was it not necessary to acquire a halo of heroism in Yvonne's eyes, in order to smooth out the path of repentance into which she had entered?

In any case, the result of the little expedition was negative. As always happens when one scales unknown cliffs or plateaus, I did not discover any new horizon, but merely a host of further plateaus and promontories, each more enigmatic than the one before. The part of the island embraced by my gaze seemed to be divided up into a series of thin slices extending more-or-less symmetrically toward the sea. Along their declivities and in their interstices, the virgin forest extended its mystery all the way to the foot of the line of volcanoes—which is to say, over an extent of some fifty or sixty square kilometers, for, although the nearest of those crests was scarcely a league to our left, detaching a buttress that seemed to plunged into the sea, the entire chain curved away, plunging into the interior and only approaching the shore again at the opposite extremity of the island.

Fortunately, my compass enabled me to determine our orientation—or, rather, that of the shore: a splendid beach following the arc of a circle with a southerly exposure, where Frenchmen would certainly have built a casino a long time ago.

“From which you conclude,” said my wife, when I had communicated my impressions to her, “that those wretched sailors were mistaken.”

“Who can tell? It might perfectly well be the case that the colonists, if they exist, having only cleared the north of the island, have founded some important center on the shore opposite to this one, behind the natural screen formed by the mountain chain.”

“The best thing would be to go and see.”

“Tomorrow,” I replied, without flinching—and we looked at each other with the satisfied expression of people who have just decided an excursion to Saint-Germain or Fontainebleau.

My wife added: “What a pity it is that you've got your trousers in that state.”

I made no reply. As soon as I had reappeared, a tender emotion had shone in her eyes, and she had almost taken it upon herself to staunch the blood paling along my scratches, but now she had got a grip on herself again, and doubtless for fear of sliding down the slope of pity, had caught hold of the rips in my trousers. It was, however, her nuptial voyage, and she was my wife! And I was still sufficiently crazy about her to be astonished that our situation, so thorny, and the real perils hanging over us and getting worse—in our conjectures, at least—as night fell, had not yet persuaded her to throw her arms around me and beg my forgiveness.

I don't know whether her imagination was exploring, at the same time, a field adjacent to those reflections; at any rate, she broke our silence to ask me in the most natural tone in the world what arrangements we were going to make to spend the night.

“It's quite simple. I'll disembark our essential luggage and haul the boat up on to the shore as far as that cleft, where we'll have nothing to fear from the tide. We'll install ourselves therein as best we can, and as I'm not sleepy I'll keep watch until dawn while you sleep. Furthermore, there are plenty of dead branches, bamboo and brushwood in the jungle back there. We'll make use of it to light a big fire, which, if it doesn't attract the attention of some steamer or sailing ship, will at least preserve us from indiscreet visits by wild beasts and carnivores, including snakes and mosquitoes.”

“That's true—I've read about that in books of illustrious voyages.”

“Me too—that's one more thing we have in common, isn't it?”

A mocking smile illuminated her lips, proving that she appreciated the quip.

My work of haulage and the preparations for the fire only took me an hour. However, night had fallen abruptly when I was finally able to sit down next to Yvonne, who had taken her place in the dried-out boat.

“To table!” she said to me, in a tone that was almost good-humored.

And I praised her, not only for having conserved her appetite in such circumstance, but also for having extended condescension to the point of preparing personally, and disposing on a white napkin placed on the central bench of the boat, the tinned food making up our menu.

“I’m a wife like any other,” she agreed, a trifle naively.

My God! What was she saying?

Eternal magic of the tropical skies! As the darkness thickened around the ring of flame that protected us, we slid into a torpor, in the profound security poured over us by the tranquil starlight, and the sudden, seemingly religious silence of the nocturnal immensity.

We had abandoned the remains of our dinner to a large red monkey that had been bold enough to approach the line of fires. Its capers amused my wife a great deal; as for me, I appreciated its audacity and its familiarity too, but not without wondering whether they implied the absence of any human beings from the island. I refrained carefully from making my wife party to those reflections. Lying in the bottom of the boat on a bed improvised from clothes and a travel blanket, she was already falling into the semi-consciousness that precedes sleep.

It was only when I was alone with my own thoughts that I finally took account of the fact that there was not, in this accursed adventure, the hundredth part of the gaiety that we had forced ourselves to put into it, and a discouraged, peevish, exasperated lassitude overwhelmed me, to which sleep would have been a hundred times preferable. Why was I not lying down at that moment in the coolness and absolute calm of my little entresol in the Avenue Marceau? When and how would I be able to return to the surroundings that were dear to me, the familiar harness so well-adapted to my quadragenarian eccentricities?

And for the first time, I felt a sentiment of hatred against the woman who was the indirect cause of that odious bifurcation of my destiny.

I had always slept so abominably lightly that in Paris, the squeaking of a mouse reaching me through three floors caused me to sit up in bed. I was, therefore sure of a sleepless night, even though fatigue and ennui were inciting me to drowsiness. Insects—flies and moths—were roasting their wings in the flames and then whirling around us with an enervating sizzle and buzz. On the sand close by, the furtive slithering was audible of more or less heavy and slow-moving beasts, for which I experienced the profoundest disgust. Furthermore, the forest itself was no longer entirely silent, for I had already heard the distant snigger of some wild beast or nocturnal bird on several occasions.

I don’t know whether you’re like me, but my brain is terribly similar to my stomach; neither of them ever takes the slightest rest. Even at night, while I fall unconscious, they continue to function, emptily, crushing ideas and aliments, populating their leisure and my sleep with frightful nightmares. In case of insomnia it’s even worse; indescribable horripilations keep me breathless on the pillow, and I have no other distraction than reading, which I hate.

This time, again—toward midnight, I think—I had recourse to that extreme remedy, hazard having placed it within range of my hand in the form of a copy of *Graziella*, the only volume that my wife had felt obliged to bring on the voyage. Thirty years previously I had read that book without being impressed by the classical beauties that lovers of Lamartine find therein.² This time, I opened it with the firm desire to rectify the doubtless-erroneous judgment of the boy of old, and I smiled in thinking about the singular and complicated combination of circumstances that it had required to impose on the man of today the reading of a work once judged tedious by the child he had been.

I reopened it, as I said, ready to reread it with a fervor and an impartiality for which I was praising myself in advance...and less than five minutes later, I was profoundly asleep.

² Alphonse de Lamartine’s fictionalized memoir of his youth ostensibly tells the story of his first love, for a fisherman’s daughter, during his first visit to Italy.