

PART ONE

I do not bend a docile knee before idols.
Lord Byron.

I

“You know, Maman, I’m leaving shortly with Claude.”

“You’re leaving. All right, my daughter.”

Without astonishment, Annik Raimbert enveloped Gine’s blonde body, striking health and decided grace with an affectionate gaze. Standing in front of the helicopter, with one arm raised and the hand on the edge of the wing, the child seemed, with her breasts uplifted, a little Victory ready to take flight.

So modern, in her delicate tremulous features! And yet, in those nineteen years, fashioned and hardened by sports, that nobility of an antique figurine! Beside her leaning over his engine, whose exhaust-pipe he was palpating, Claude, suntanned and muscular, was the very image of robust and smiling simplicity.

Silently, Jean Roussot admired them, too. He still lived on the same hillside, in his old small country house, the red roof of which was perceptible from the Jacquemin-Raimbert farm in a grove of eucalyptus. As he had grown older, the great artist had maintained the enthusiasm of his faith. He replied to Annik’s thought.

“Aren’t they genteel? There they go, my Adam and my Eve.”

“All they lack is the future city,” said Annik, smiling.

Without touching her youth, the years had streaked her short hair with white. She was as alert as ever, but with a greater determination about her, and also a greater softness. Roussot assembled all three of them in the same amicable tenderness.

“The future! I’m quite tranquil—it will be better. Thanks to them—which is to say, to you...not forgetting Jacquemin.”

“Oh, us! Now them, yes...I hope!”

She felt a surge of pride. Her son, her daughter! A true man, and a true woman. The brother and the sister had not belied her hopes. They had launched themselves boldly into life, as they were about to soar into the air.

She scanned the familiar terrace with its large mimosas. The house of happiness! Beyond the sweep of the rocky slopes, the endless sea sparkled in the sunlight, confounded with the azure.

The blaze that had stripped the Maures of their age-old cork oaks and pines in 1923 had only denuded the beauty of the landscape temporarily. 1943! And the mountains of La Gaillarde extended, under the carpet of their new vegetation, the same splendor as before. Twenty years had sufficed for another forest to become verdant.

Every time she came back, Annik admired the untiring force of Nature. Here she retempered, with Amédée, her faith in the life that resuscitates and recreates... Amédée, the dear half of her existence.

Certainly, it had not been without many difficulties and struggles, succeeding where many other, less well-armed, had failed, that they had ended up triumphantly imposing the example of their free union: harmony within independence.

They had also had the sadness of seeing disappear along the way, one by one, the faithful friends of difficult times. Paule had departed first, and then Mérette, bequeathing to Claude and Gine the savings of a life of privations and nobility.

Then, in their turn, the good Zélonoff and Madame Broussat—whose seat on the International Council of Women she now occupied—had been gently extinguished: beloved shades whose memory

would live as long as she did. The spirits of the dead are the counsel of the living, when they are able to hear it.

And there, in front of her, the self-embellished image of those two proud, charming individuals, born of their flesh and petrified by their souls. They had an upright stance like the pines, insensibly grown, beautiful trees of the full earth.

Roussot's right, she thought. *Today they'll catch up with us; tomorrow they'll surpass us.* The law of incessant growth, which, far from saddening her, illuminated her: comforting promises in the fire of the daily battle, the perpetual ravages of the conflagration, ever reignited by human Stupidity and Malevolence.

"Do you want anything from Paris?" Gine offered, generously.

"Yes."

"Hurry up and make a list, while I pack my valise."

"How long are you going to be there?"

"Just long enough to run your errands and visit some friends, since Claude has to come and pick you up at the end of the week. Your famous Conference in Budapest!"

A hint of jealousy showed through beneath the smile. Gine would have liked her mother to associate her more often with her propaganda trips, and to employ her, in preference to her brother, in external secretarial tasks. She was good enough to undertake daily correspondence, to dictate to the automatic recorder, to do filing—it was hardly worth the trouble, for that, of having graduated from the *École Normale Supérieure*! A bureaucrat, when it would have been so amusing, like Annik and Claude, to travel all over Europe, to cast the good grain to the crowds, to go back and forth, intoxicated by space, with the wind whipping her cheeks, breathing in the sky, at top speed, at an aerial gallop!

Annik perceived her regret and, in order to attenuate it, proposed: "If you prefer, you can stay with the Blanchets while we're in Budapest. I'm sure that Monique would be delighted..."

"That's an idea! I love Versailles..."

Claude underlined the remark with hearty laughter. "And you adore Georgi!"

She sketched a dance step, and then said to her brother, who was checking that the wings obeyed the controls properly: "Go on, maniac! For a journey of an hour and a half!"

"I'll be responsible for a donkey," he declared, "since I'm taking you!"

She punched him cheerfully. "Donkey yourself. Given that the apparatus has been tuned up by Georgi!"

The image of Georgi Blanchet, their childhood comrade, was interposed affectionately between them—and at the same time, the silhouette of his sister Sylvestre. The prospect of a pleasant fortnight in the house that she loved suddenly consoled Gine. Let Sylvestre, who would soon be a doctor of medicine, amuse herself playing the conference delegate, at her ease! She no longer envied her.

Claude grumbled, sarcastically: "Obviously, when Sylvestre and you have said Georgi, there's no more to do than take away the ladder. His trickery is good, that's understood—but he's not a sorcerer."

He swung the steering column laterally, in various inclined planes. The pearly wings curved one after another. Then he moved them from down to up, and from up to down, in the vertical plane. When they were raised they gave the apparatus, perched like a great red bird on its metal foot, a vertical oscillation.

"That's splendid!" said Gine. "To have combined the two kinds of flight, sail and motor. No, my lad, you didn't find that. And it isn't with your ground-scraper that you'll advance progress as rapidly as with his cloud-skimmers!"

While inspecting his magneto, Claude said, sardonically: "Daily bread is good, even by comparison with Dr. Lagre's concentrates—a complete meal in a pill!"

"Your turn, Annik!" said Jean Roussot

"Perhaps he'll be content to do as I do one day. Life is short and meals long."

“And then there are people whom the earth still nourishes fortunately. Wait until I’ve brought out my *essorette*¹... Gine will see whether or not it’s as good as a *helic*!”

That was one of that perpetual subjects of teasing between him and his sister. Georgi Blanchet, a graduate of the Polytechnique, was already well-known, at twenty-two, for his discoveries in aerial locomotion. Claude, two years younger, yesterday a simple pupil of the Arts et Métiers—as his parents had wanted, in order that he should remain closer to the artisan and technologist—was today a manufacturer, inglorious but assiduous, of agricultural machinery, and also a passionate writer of poetry. He concluded: “Go get ready instead of talking! I have a meeting at six o’clock at the factory.”

“And one at five in the Tuileries!”

He looked at her with feigned surprise. “What! What?”

“One knows what one knows!”

He could not help smiling. A mute confession. Well, yes, she had guessed. He intended to be there, at the time announced for the landing of Marise Cervier, returning from New York. And afterwards...?

Gine, satisfied with having guessed correctly, did not persist. “Don’t worry—you’ll be there. Give me five minutes.”

Although the ardor of the September sun was radiating over his vacation and the agricultural machinery could do perfectly well without him, Claude, embarrassed to reveal the true motive for his flight, had found the pretext of making a surprise visit to the factory to make sure that everything was going smoothly.

He was the co-director—with an authority and a competence that was surprising in an adolescent, in spite of the precocious maturity of his generation—of the great cooperative industry founded at Mantes in 1937 by Baron Plombino, a philanthropic capitalist. Other offers even more advantageous had been made to him. The foundries of Romicourt and Crozat would have liked to acquire Amédée Jacquemin’s son; via the young man they would have “had” the father: the Statesman whose character added an additional luster to evangelical socialism...

The international plutocracy and its feudal masters of the world hated the great heir of Jaurès,² the savior who, in two terms as President of the Council, had returned the ox-cart of France to the popular path. For a time, the State-Machine had forged straight ahead, modernized in the hands of the meritorious conductor, by virtue of his broad views and generous heart. And then, as soon as the idler kings, the profiteers become Oligarchs, were reinstalled, the grinding vehicle had resumed its zigzags toward the gulf. It was heading there at speed since they had got their hands on power again.

Annik finished giving Claude her instructions in order that he could make the best use of his short stay in Paris...to seek information, cleverly, from Jean Cervier’s entourage about the underside of the oil deposit business and the true motive for his voyage to New York.

“Since you’re infatuated with his daughter, at least try, when you see her, to find out the hidden agenda of the mission.”

Anglo-German finance, it was said, was trying to take possession of the inexhaustible deposits of Provence, recently discovered after those in Forez. In the absence of Amédée, who was away at a pacifist conference in Japan, it was absolutely necessary to obtain information as to which foreign banks were interested, along with Jean Cervier’s, in methodically taking over the French oil wells.

Claude promised.

¹ This improvised term has been re-improvised more than once since 1924, but its modern meanings are derived from the verb *essorer* [to wring out or spin-dry]; it is usually used nowadays with respect to salad spinners, but the comparison with a helicopter here implies that the author is deriving it from *essor* [flight, or soaring], and that it is some kind of flying machine.

² The pioneering “social democrat” Jean Jaurès (1859-1914) became the leader of the French Socialist Party in 1902, which merged three years later with Jules Guesde’s more radical Socialist Party of France to form the Section Française de l’Internationale Ouvrière [French Section of the Workers’ International], more usually abbreviated to SFIO. He was a committed anti-militarist, and tried to organize co-ordinated strikes in France and Germany in order to prevent the Great War; he was assassinated on 31 July 1914, the day before the war began, and is the obvious model for Amédée Jacquemin.

Roussot, whose art was never disinterested in public affairs, added: “If the big eaters have their way, we’ll be swiftly devoured, not *à la sauce Anglaise*³ but in the manner of Anglo-German finance—and without even being aware of it. Fruitful as war might be, from all points of view, for those Messieurs, they’ll obtain even more profit, if they can, from making economies therein.”

“I’m not so sure about that. Embryonic as it still is, the threat posed by popular organization to capitalist supremacy is increasing by the day. War isn’t only an objective for the manufacturers of cannons and gases. For the Finance that leads us, it’s the sole means of realizing Thiers’ dream: bloodying democracy, not just for thirty years but forever.”⁴

Claude shrugged his shoulders. “Right!”

“Oh, I never despair of the future,” said Annik. “It’s the present that worries me. At the end of this looting of oil there’ll be an inevitable revolt of the community, which won’t allow itself to be suppressed so easily this time. Then...”

“That’s a bold move! Will they risk it?”

“With much less scruple, because their very existence is at stake! And as they think they’re the stronger...”

Claude cast a glance toward the house. What was Gine doing? Not seeing her coming, he protested: “War against the Profiteers? Impossible! When Europe’s wounds have only just begun to scar over! When the democratic movement, everywhere...”

“In a fine state here,” jeered the painter, “with the de Laumes and the Solmous in power! It’s worse than before, when Perd-la-Victoire⁵ or Alexandre Vilfaux was in power!”

“Solmou and de Laume are another accident,” said Annik. “Amédée will cure us...but England has fallen under the yoke again! Conservatives and Liberals in coalition against the workers’ movement, after its defeat...”

“It’s still alive,” Claude observed.

“But diminished—and the ultranationalist Prussians and Bavarians are now masters of Germany in spite of our friend Rohn? There, as here, party rivalries have weakened the working class; the bourgeoisie take advantage of that. There’s also the obsession with revenge that troubles so many minds beyond the Rhine!”

“Whose fault is it,” observed Roussot “that we’re taken back the Sarre and that we were only able to free the Rhineland by force? Today we’re expiating our past errors and the Imperialist face that the Bloc National had given France with the juridical chicanery of Cibéron.⁶ We’re expiating—after the narrow spirit of the Treaty of Versailles, so different from Wilson’s great dream, the just peace that people were expecting—our politics of magnificence, all the more stupid because in men and money alike, our meager birth-rate and our shrunken finances don’t give us the means!”

“When one thinks,” said Claude “that so many millions of men had accepted their sacrifice because they thought they were ensuring a new order!”

“Well, my dear Roussot,” said Annik, “have we repeated it enough, that every victory is a catastrophe and that the anthem *War Pays* was the bloodiest of deceptions? Today, as yesterday, war only pays those who count on it, as it will pay tomorrow, if those who prepare it like a coup on the Bourse

³ i.e. with custard.

⁴ Adolphe Thiers (1797-1877) became the president of the Third Republic in 1871, in the wake of the Franco-Prussian War, but acquired the lasting hatred of French socialists by immediately ordering the bloody suppression of the Paris Commune.

⁵ Georges Clemenceau, President of the Council during the Great War, was hailed thereafter as the “père de la Victoire” [father of the victory], which cynics dissatisfied with his post-war politics scathingly amended to “Perd-la-Victoire” [Lose the Victory].

⁶ The Bloc National was a right-wing coalition that took control of the French parliament after the Great War, riding a wave of nationalist sentiment and winning the 1919 election by a landslide; it was still in power while the author was writing the present novel, although it was defeated in the May 1924 election. It plays a significant role in the political background of *Le Compagnon*, in which its actual leaders are replaced by fictitious characters, including Cibéron.

have their way. And now we're arriving at a moment more critical than that of 1914. It's no longer the emperors of Germany, Russia and Austria, nor French chauvinism, that's threatening the precarious peace: it's the emperors of oil, coal and iron, world capitalism working secretly on its supreme war of conquest."

"Fortunately," exclaimed Roussot, "socialism is ever more alert, and in all countries. I hope that in France, and everywhere else, the sheep won't allow themselves to be led to the slaughterhouse this time."

"You won't have sown in vain, Maman! Today we're the majority and tomorrow we'll be the masters. The bourgeoisie will die, the people will be born."

"The former still have the power!"

"It will break against the energy!" The young man's eyebrows had furrowed harshly. "If a revolution is required, there'll be one. Let the blood fall back on those who cause it to be shed. The evil will disappear, along with the evil-doers." His appetite for risk and audacious youth were trenchant.

"Bravo, Saint-Just!" cried Roussot. He had baptized Claude thus, being fondest, among all the heroes of revolutionary history, of the archangel with the steely gaze. Saint-Just doubly incarnated, in the gaze of juvenile worship, the virtues with which his name shone: sanctity and justice. The model and the pupil had the same absolute thirst.

Claude was gentler, however. He looked kindly at his mother, who exclaimed in distress: "Blood, what horror! I'll never convince you, then? You don't understand that it fatally summons blood? That it's the provocation of endless massacre? How many times have I told you that violence is the worst of weaknesses?"

"I expect we'll reckon with the vultures without having to wring their necks," Claude said. "What on earth can Gine be doing?" He was waiting impatiently beside his airplane, no longer listening to Roussot or his mother.

"Your efforts won't have been futile," said the painter. "Thanks to your International Council of Women, a universal conscience is awakening, with a clearer sense of progress, an immense need for peace and work..."

"How I wish!" murmured Annik, ardently.

"Now that women can vote all over the world..."

"Except in the Latin countries! What shame, that they're still quibbling over the legislative mandate, as if we female voters and candidates hadn't given proof enough by now in the municipal arena—in hygiene, in welfare, in the management of budgets!"⁷

"Patience! France will end up listening to her prophets. The syndical organization for which you and Amédée have worked so hard is beginning to bear fruit. If the League of Nations has vegetated impotently, it's because it's only an intergovernmental administrative council, and can no more decide to arm itself alone than to disarm everyone else. A new moral power exists; the League of Peoples. It only has to cry "Peace!" to shut the warmonger up. And tomorrow, instead of the Cerviers having a free hand to fabricate a United States of Europe in their service, with monopolized zones of production, the International Syndical Federation will be able to divide between its participants, like an honest commercial entity, that which is, in the final analysis, the wealth of all. We'll see, Annik, we'll see! Look no further than the imminent elections. If your husband resumes the helm, and instead of the tugboat that she's become, France will reappear as what she was, with a figurehead carrying a beacon at the prow!

"For sure!"

Gine's laughter rang out. "As soon as you're left alone with Saint-Just! Kiss your mother and let's get away. You'll have time to prepare speeches when you're on the way to Budapest."

She bowed: "Madame President, Monsieur Portraitist of the League of Peoples..."

"Little clown!" said the painter, laughing.

⁷ Although women had been able to vote and stand as candidates in French municipal elections since 1872, they were not allowed to vote or stand in legislative elections until 1944, so the author's anticipation that the demand would still not have been met in 1943 was correct.

With an affectionate caress, Annik stroked the covered head of which only the mischievous eyes could be seen within the leather of the fur-lined helmet. Then, tenderly, she kissed Claude's forehead, before he fastened his safety-harness.

Scarcely had the passengers sat down when the helicopter, with a noise like a rocket, rose up vertically, its ascent so abrupt that it cut short the farewell waves. A black dot, diminishing by the second, it veered vertiginously northwards and disappeared.

Annik and Roussot followed it with their gaze for as long as they could.