

# THE FORTHRIGHT SPIRIT

by

CHRIS MARKER

*Translated from the French by*  
*ROBERT KEE and*  
*TERENCE KILMARTIN*

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## *Part One*

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### I

AN ACCIDENT—it's nothing, it is quite literally nothing. There's the moment just before, when the aircraft leaves the runway, when a certain quality of silence, something static about the light all round it, seems to immobilise it, to make of it a petrifying fountain (so might a hurried angel strip a man of his soul a second before death, so is a bandage put over the eyes of a condemned man)—and the moment afterwards, when the aircraft is no more than a dart stuck in the earth, a burnt-out grasshopper, a crucifix. Between the two moments—nothing.

You're surprised to find that you foresaw it. You know, you'd be ready to swear, that at the moment when the aircraft left the runway you were expecting the accident, and that all the rest was a mere fulfilment of your expectation. And yet you haven't moved, you haven't uttered a sound. An accident is like a hypnotist: it puts you to sleep in order to do its tricks. Sometimes it seems that to prevent it, you have only to say a word, to stretch out a hand. So it takes its precautions. You are present throughout the whole performance, but as soon as you are able to rush on to the stage, open the drawers with false bottoms, pull out from the mass of twisted metal a hand tattooed with blood, a body metamorphosed into a crucified beast, the magician is already far away,

giving other performances, duping other audiences. And make no mistake about it: this feeling of waiting for an accident, you always have it, at every moment of every take-off. It's always the next moment that is the important one. But as soon as the aircraft has taken off, as soon as the moment has passed without anything going wrong, the bandage is untied from your eyes, the chain of enchantment is undone down to its last link. You are awake, you forget your dream. If anyone tells you you were apprehensive, you deny it, quite sincerely.

The moment of the accident is something in the past, something silent, something that has congealed, something that will go on for ever. It is, at that moment, as if the film had gone into slow motion, so that no detail should be left out, so that there might still be a chance of the accident being avoided, a longer time for prayer. The crashed aircraft merges into the boundary of the airfield, shimmering in the sun. Noise and movement spring up together, voices are carried on the wind, the slightly ridiculous chuffing of the airport truck starts up a few yards away from Van Helsen, the director of the mail service. Van Helsen jumps on to the running board and the truck picks its way over the holes, loaded with men like a carnival car. As it gathers speed, a journalist from Saigon, full of curiosity but a little frightened, trots silently along behind it, reminding one with the movement of his arms of the squat little gestures of a penguin.

The moment is still not entirely demagnetised. The wave of the accident has not yet broken. There is still a sort of mist in front of one's eyes. From the top of the truck Van Helsen vaguely sees a crowd of people, a deadened, drugged, unreal world. The truck passes other

figures hurrying along. As it passes them, they turn towards Van Helsen. He has to take in every one of their stares, every one of these European and Annamite faces which revolve round him like planets. There is no sign of reproach in their eyes, but they know that a chain of contact has been established between him and that altar of twisted steel over at the end of the field, and this enables them to pass on the result of the accident from one to the other until he, Van Helsen, is finally left carrying the full weight. Whatever the news may be, life or death, he alone is involved totally. For the others, a short prayer, and it's no more concern of theirs. If the pilot is dead, his debate with death is now over, and no one else will know anything more about it. But Van Helsen's debate with this death is just about to start, adding itself to all the other deaths that he long ago chose to take upon himself. This great sea-swell of death which, all of a sudden, has just lifted every man on the field, will calm down again and return them to life—all except Van Helsen, who has launched himself on it and will only cease to be carried along when he himself becomes engulfed in it.

Only another hundred metres. The 'plane had not caught fire, and wasn't going to. Those on foot had been left far behind, and Van Helsen was at the front of the group on the truck so that he wouldn't have to learn the verdict from anyone else. He must be the first to be brought face to face with this work of his that had been made flesh, flesh that might be dead or suffering. The truck stopped. Van Helsen jumped off and ran. Simultaneously with the stupor brought on by the accident, which deadened the sounds around him, he

felt a mad physical exaltation. The aircraft had spilled itself across the runway, its nose buried, one wing lifted like a wrestler asking for mercy. This wing concealed the sliding turret that Van Helsen would open as if it were a sarcophagus, and at that moment the insane, outlandish joy that filled him at every stride would be destroyed. Another few metres, and the turret appeared, half open, holding between its hoops, like a croquet ball, a little helmeted head, tiny, like a baby's, half hidden by a splash of sunlight on the mica, seeming to move under the light, actually moving as Van Helsen leapt on to the wing, moving and speaking; and the words broke the spell, the mist dissolved, the world came to life again, warm and real, in Van Helsen's ears. Nothing came between him and this aircraft against which he leaned, these men who crowded around it, this field burning in the sun, and this calm individual they carefully helped out of the cockpit, who grimaced and smiled and said: "Leg broken, that's all. . . ."

Once more the chuffing noise of the truck, carrying away the wounded pilot. One of the men asked anxiously: "Sure you're not hurt anywhere else?" The pilot, propped up on cushions, Olympian, did not even turn his head. "I ought to know what's wrong. After all, it's the third time I've broken it. Always in the same place. . . . It's becoming a habit" he added for Van Helsen's benefit. And Van Helsen laughed, partly by way of acknowledgment to the pilot, and partly to show the accident that it hadn't pulled it off.

The shade of the offices. Lowered blinds. The typists bent over their machines, pecking at the bark of the reports like woodpeckers. With one quick gesture, they

dismiss these sheets of paper to another world. Van Helsen passed through the cool rooms, the dusky blue corridors. At a drawing-table near the window in a beam of sunlight, a group of white silhouettes conversed in low voices. The Publicity Organisation. Hélène Marcheva got up and followed Van Helsen. A curious pattern of light and shade checkered her lovely, rather masculine face. "I hear Lagier's crashed." "Yes," Van Helsen said, "nothing broken, except a leg."

Hélène shrugged her shoulders slightly. Van Helsen knew that she was thinking of Kelso, who was bringing the Hanoi mail that evening. A pilot injured—that might mean that Kelso would have to go off again tomorrow. . . . "No decision's been taken about replacing him yet," said Van Helsen, who felt decidedly paternal. "We'll see about it this evening."

"I see," Hélène said. "By the way, we got a message for you. A Mr. Stone telephoned. He wants you to ring him at the Continental."

Stone? Van Helsen tried to remember the name. There was no Stone he could think of, unless. . . .

"Mr. Jerry Stone," said Hélène, more precisely.

Van Helsen walked slowly into his office. Just now, on his way out to the crashed aircraft, feeling as if he were advancing towards the enemy lines, a vague memory had stirred in him, had struggled to reach the surface of his consciousness. His surprise and joy had driven it away. Now with the name of Jerry it was back again with a new and overwhelming force. The image of a crashed aircraft—the struggle with his memory was resolved; and it was his own accident that he saw again, through Jerry's eyes as Jerry had seen it when he had

been the first to arrive beside his plane, the "Lady Sappho" (Van Helsen was not a logical man, but there was a certain order in the sequence of his ideas). And now there was no stopping it. The machinery of memory, difficult to get going but difficult to brake, was under way, moving faster and faster, clean and precise at first and then disordered, gathering, at top speed, people and events of the most preposterous kind, on the strength of a resemblance, an assonance, a stray recollection. . . . Van Helsen, twenty-five year old pilot and war hero, beginning to understand, as the Ecclesiast so rightly says, that there is a time for beating records and a time for letting others beat them, straining his luck, attempting an ill-prepared venture, and landing up on an American beach, fallen from the dazzling sky like Icarus . . . the wound . . . the fever. . . . The nearby house transformed into a hospital. And those three astonishing youngsters, Joel, Daniel and Jerry, gradually wrapping him up in the cloak of their mythology, of their own fantasies, their gremlins and the rest of it. . . . A continuous game which grown-ups play without realising it, missing its essential riches—the right to scratch l'oiseau Pipe on the top of its head, the crown of coral, the passport of the Unholy Three which is the key to the whole thing—without the elementary senses making them aware of it. With the fever to help him, Van Helsen entered into the game, understood it, added to it. Jerry called up the dead with the aid of special gremlins, and of Daniel, who named them without hesitation as they appeared. Pyrogene, Wakee Wakee, Abraham Lincoln. . . . And Dawn, Daniel's sister—(here a short struggle took place in Van Helsen's

memory, for he wanted to remember no more of her than her face, the flame of her beauty). And Joel—the young prodigy as the papers called him—who evoked a different group of dead at the piano: Bach, Couperin, Dittersdorf. . . . "Give me the Continental". . . . After all these years only three things remained in the life of Van Helsen, director of the mail service: the face of Dawn, a concern not to aggravate the Gremlins, and the music that had entered into him through his wounds and never left him.

"Jerry?"

"Happy Christmas."

"You're at Saigon?"

"It's a small world, isn't it?"

"When am I going to see you again, you ass? What are you doing?"

"On an assignment, earning my living describing the mysteries of the east. Keep a few for me."

"Are you free for this evening? Come and dine in the mess."

"What is there for dinner?"

"Don't know. Couldn't care less."

"I could. What is there for dinner?"

"Don't be a fool. I'll introduce you to an extraordinary type."

"But I can't eat him. What's for dinner?"

"Eight o'clock in the Mail Service mess. Don't forget. He's one of my pilots. He's called Kelso."

"I'm not one of your pilots. I'd like birds' nests, do you hear, director, b-i-r-d-s' n-e-s-t-s."

Van Helsen put back the receiver and stood up. Or rather he unwound himself, like a snake. It was Jerry

who had nicknamed him the python-man. Joel called him the Flying Dutchman. . . . Van Helsen was pleased with the idea of introducing Kelso to Jerry. Kelso was worthy to be a member of the Unholy Three, he was of the same race of men. For it is a race of its own, which will go anywhere, is capable of anything, splendid in victory, admirable in defeat, whose secret is to be ignorant of what it is that makes it so fine, a kind of super-innocence. From the literary cafés of Paris to the opium dens of Saigon, Van Helsen had come across a thousand attempts to imitate the attributes of this race of men, its code, its style, its haircut, its general behaviour. In vain; Dawn, Joel and the rest of them remained inimitable, like Kelso. Would he be here by eight? The weather was all right. Van Helsen picked up the met. reports again. Vinh. Fair. Wind—nil. The next 'plane passed at four o'clock.

Tourane . . . nothing for Tourane. . . . "Where's the form for Tourane?"

"One moment, M. le Directeur."

"Right." Van Helsen breathed a sigh. One moment. He looked at the map abstractedly, then out of the window. M. le Directeur looking at the map and through the window. Sultry evening after a fine day; Saigon swollen with heat, fanned only by the movement of the rickshaws with their noise like insects; vague dronings rising through the torpor. M. le Directeur flexes his muscles. In this drowsy atmosphere, it is good to feel strong and responsible—responsible for the mail, for the Service, for that silent, glossy world that is an air-line, a world peopled with leather archangels with broad shoulders and slow, sure gestures, accustomed to facing

squarely the things that men build and only see in profile. Such are the thoughts of M. le Directeur. The sky, no longer broken by a single cloud, hangs heavily over the town. The keeper of a doss-house, leaning against a wall, mops his brow and sees in the distance M. le Directeur's white silhouette in the large bay window. Van Helsen sees in the distance a doss-house keeper silhouetted in black against a white wall. He thinks "Doss-house keeper," does M. le Directeur, and because he thinks in French, he smiles. But the doss-house keeper, who is an uncouth, ignorant fellow, doesn't think "M. le Directeur"; he just remains impassive. In any case, M. le Directeur has disappeared from the bay window. He has had a sudden desire to go and take a bath with the expert little person whose name his Annamite interpreter translates as Light of the Darkness, which strikes him as slightly impertinent. But he pulls himself together. There's a lot of serious work demanding his presence here. In this sacred place there's no room for expert little women, even in his thoughts. And M. le Directeur, back in his Director's chair, begins reading the met. reports again, to set a good example and to appease the gremlins.

Hong 33 was a clearing twelve days' march from the nearest village—the nearest safe village, that is to say, for there were plenty of encampments round about of hunters who were more or less subdued, more or less hunters, but it was safer to keep them at a distance. Van Helsen had built an emergency landing ground there with circuit lighting and a man to guard it. There had been

three of these men in two years. The first had disappeared. It was supposed that he had tried to reach the village through the forest, and had lost his way, or that he had met some charming reptile or a party of "hunters", or else . . . or else . . . there's never any shortage of suppositions in this sort of country. The second had gone up in smoke with his hut in circumstances not clearly defined, the report had said. In any case, there was no one else there to define them. Agyre, the third, had been slumbering for more than a year in the rebuilt hut. The last supply 'plane had passed nearly two months before, and since then the fever had come with its whole box of tricks, too ridiculous for him to dare complain about on the radio to Saigon, which made enquiries from time to time about his health. Agyre ruled over a barren tract of land, a pink rectangle on the maps, a dead kingdom. To be able to survive here at all one had to secrete something that was hostile to life altogether. The red and white boundary lights, sly beasts in the beaten earth, gave him the horrors. But he didn't dare touch them. Somewhere deep down in his mind, he seemed to remember that he was supposed to be looking after them. Words, clear and precise, the actual sense of which had been forgotten, lay jumbled and confused in his memory. For two months he had been repeating to himself the conversation he had had with the last pilot to land there—the last human contact he had known apart from the high-pitched scream of the radio which mimicked his fever. Now he could no longer make sense of the conversation. It had passed him by, left him on one side, was like a mechanism out of control. He had re-created it, reconstructed it, but he just couldn't con-

centrate on it any more. He couldn't follow it. For a year Agyre had lived a prey to schizophrenia. And now in this conversation, he was no longer there. He wasn't in it and he wasn't of it. His replies, his own words, it was no longer he who pronounced them, he no longer connected them with himself. It was another who had stepped out of the shadows of his mind and recited monotonously the words Agyre knew he had spoken, a litany of echoes. Soon he would see this continual and meaningless dialogue that was always with him. He would see the pilot, jovial and sweaty, sitting in front of the stove, merging into the stove, transparent at first like all mirages, then opaque. Then he would see a grey shadow turn his back to him and speak to the pilot, and the pilot taking a cigarette from the shadow, the shadow becoming real, and the red and white boundary lights, on the look-out, motionless, and the hut merging with the forest, only the conversation real, the conversation ceaselessly repeated, less and less coherent, impossible to follow, to get out of, to get hold of, the conversation escaping him like a wet fish, the shadow becoming flesh, the shadow becoming Agyre in bone and flesh, the shadow becoming bone, Agyre turning his back on it, another Agyre chatting and laughing with the pilot, another Agyre talking in front of the Agyre who listened, an Agyre of flesh and blood, with a mind, a memory and a will . . . a *real* Agyre.

Jerry looked round the storm-tossed sea that was his hotel bedroom with an air of satisfaction. Among the ritual objects of his travels—the rather faded erotic

drawing by Nicolas Manuel; the teddy-bear dressed in postage stamps; and the miracle-working machines he had made out of anything at all, of matches and iron shavings—his recent acquisitions in Saigon made a dazzling cavalcade, displaying a frieze of paper masks, cheap chinaware, little jade and ivory figures, multi-coloured newspapers, embroidered inscriptions in which each character looked like the imprint of a seal—the whole thing conforming as closely as possible to the æsthetic standard of the bazaars for Western tourists because they think everything there is “so picturesque”. This scene of booty gave off an aroma somewhere between a boat and a museum, and mingling subtly with it was the perfume of the delicious girl who had left Jerry’s bed in the early hours of the morning. Sitting astride the bedrail, Jerry turned over in his mind the data he had collected for his articles from the daily and nightly discussions he had had since his arrival. Not very encouraging for my readers, he thought, to learn that in a thousand years’ time, if the Americans behave themselves, they may begin to get an inkling of what Annamite civilisation represents. On the other hand, they’ll be pleased to know that in the eyes of the Indo-Chinese the Japs are still complete barbarians. “They’re no better than you are,” had been the comment of the worthy L. . . . A comment that could well be omitted. And that music. . . . After all, I should think Joel has taught me a thing or two about music, difficult music, but I understood nothing, absolutely nothing, of what they played me the other night, except that it was exactly like the improvisations of Mrs. Miley when she’s drunk. And the worthy L. . . , still smiling: “In a

thousand years, Mr. Stone, the Americans will begin to understand.” “And the French?” “A little sooner, *naturally*.” Naturally! The son of a bitch! And the other fellow with his names. “Can you repeat this little word, Mr. Stone: Mâ.” “Right, Mâ.” “No, Mr. Stone, that’s not it. You say Mâ.” “Well, Mâ.” “No, not Mâ, Mâ.” “Mâ!” and the pair of them, crumbling with smiles and compliments: “In a thousand years, Mr. Stone, in a thousand years your ear will begin to get refined.” Mâ. Mâ? No, Mâ. Ah, Mâ. . . . Stories about deaf men can’t have much point in this country. Anyhow, that’s one side of it. What about the rest. . . . The rest is all the shoddy bric-a-brac, the bazaar for Western tourists, the ivory stiletto bought at Cholon with a “Made in Germany” trade mark, and last night’s girl, with her eyes in parentheses and her skin the colour of grape-fruit, who told me the story of her childhood in the Bronx. That’s the Orient. Never mind, we’ll fix all that. Between real power and real threats, between the dizzy height of Annamite civilisation and the power of big business, between the abject poverty of the coolies and the deafness of Americans, there is the Press. And the role of the Press, declares Jerry, flat on his belly on the bedside rug, balancing his sun-helmet on one foot, is to form round each citizen a world of his own that has no connection with the world, like those false stucco towns they build during wars to protect the real ones. That’s how the gremlins want it. And thereupon Jerry somersaults to his feet and stands there, with his sun-helmet on his head, enchanted with everything. Saigon is yielding to the night, without resistance, and Jerry belongs to the army of the night, his kit consisting of a



map of the town, the weight of a trunk-load of memories, the prospect of understanding everything in a thousand years' time, the familiar gremlins, the voice of a friend, the body of a pretty girl, this evening the company of an airline pilot. . . . And besides, Van Helsen hadn't told him what there would be for dinner. Perhaps there really would be birds' nests. . . .

"Well, what about that report?" Van Helsen roared.

The thump of his fist on the table warned him that his nerves were on edge, though he hadn't noticed the change coming. He didn't want to work himself up into a state of anxiety but he knew his own reactions to things. There must be a storm somewhere. He sensed it with every nerve, with every fibre of his being. That report?

The secretary stammered, mopped his forehead, held out a bundle of documents, as if he were selling newspapers. The Tourane report was missing.

"I . . . I imagine it's an oversight on the part of the met. people."

". . . surrounded by incompetents," Van Helsen mumbled. Python-like, his right hand darted out frenziedly.

"Monsieur le D . . . irecteur?"

"Give me the other reports!"

"Here they are, Monsieur le Dir . . ."

Weather fine. Weather fine. Calm. Slight wind. Slight wind. No wind. Still slight wind. Why "still"? Either it is or it isn't. Slight wind. Moderate wind. Look out,

it's coming. . . . The secretary tried to make himself useful.

"Wind nil at Khong, monsieur le Directeur. So that means. . . ."

Right. That's fine. Thank you. Wind nil. Therefore, no danger over Tourane, at any rate, unless. . . . Wind nil. . . . Van Helsen blew up.

"You're the one who's nil! You've given me this morning's report. Didn't you look at the time?"

The secretary prayed with all his heart for some coincidence that might give him the chance that night of saving M. le Directeur's baby from certain death, thus enabling him to regain his esteem. True, he felt hardly capable of saving anyone from certain death, and anyhow, M. le Directeur hadn't a baby. . . . Meanwhile, M. le Directeur was himself surprised at his anger. It worried him. "If there was a storm," Joel used to say, "we'd find sparks under your hair." The telephone. . . .

"A report for Khong, and quick." The secretary tried to save his honour by sliding towards the door.

"You stay here," said Van Helsen very calmly. A blast of cool air swept through the room. At the same moment, just as the secretary was recovering his composure, the director's fist crashed down even more violently on the desk, the python swore by all the local divinities and shook the telephone, calming down at last when he heard the airport.

"Take this down: slight north-east wind. Ceiling still clear" (Van Helsen shrugged his shoulders at the word 'still'). "Threat of storm northwards. That's all, thank you." He hung up. "Is that clear enough?"

"Yes, yes . . ." said the secretary, looking worried.

Van Helsen looked at him with sympathy. He knew that in this country rancour festered like an open wound. What with his blowing up and the intense heat, the secretary was almost passing out in the middle of the room, like a groggy boxer. "There now," Van Helsen said, "when you've understood that storms are controlled by the winds, you'll have made a big step forward in meteorology." The secretary gave a fatuous smile and wiped his forehead again. He gave a side-glance towards the window, sheepishly, again like a boxer, a boxer who sees in the far far distance, four metres away, a place of refuge, where he can escape from the ring. . . . The bell rang. That is, Van Helsen dismissed him, reminding him that he was still waiting for the Tourane report. The secretary left the room and hurried through long, cool corridors. Gradually, as he went, his self-assurance returned to him, his shame vanished with the heat. He's mad, old Van Helsen, to raise his blinds. . . . The secretary went into his office. There was a whirr of ventilators. Mademoiselle Bernard raised her eyes and pursed her lips: "Did he give you hell?" "Yes, he seems to be in a bit of a state. . . ." The secretary was standing underneath the ventilator, and it was cool, and Mademoiselle smiled at him amiably; and he added, "Of course, you know, I just let him shout. . . ."

Van Helsen shook his head slowly like a bear. All these reports which tallied, and just one missing. . . . The coincidences of the Unholy Three seemed to be at work, Jerry's miracle-making machines seemed to be putting in an appearance, since the arrival of one of the initiates. Since midday, no earlier. . . . Still, storms had

blown up more suddenly than that. An oversight on the part of the met. people. Bastards. Cretins.

He turned his back on the map. He knew Kelso's itinerary well enough. If there was anything wrong, he would be right inside the danger area. But he had given no sign of life. Yes, and the radio was out of order, too. Another coincidence? No, he was letting his imagination run away with him. And it was behaving rather despicably. But then, why didn't Kelso call up himself, the ass? An oversight, perhaps. An oversight on the part of the met. An oversight on Kelso's part. An oversight on the part of the secretary. An oversight on God's part, probably, this phantom storm. Am I in charge of an airline or a centre for the rehabilitation of amnesiacs? What if I began to forget things. Imbeciles. Clots.

"Tell them to contact HKI at once."

HKI was Kelso. The telephone was still shaking. Strange object, which is the central figure in the whole Army, which pushes out its curious roots in all directions, its silent tentacles.

"What about Tourane? What the hell are you up to?"

"There's no reply, M. le Directeur. Listen yourself."

Poppings and cracklings. Crumbling and flaky noises in the receiver.

"There's nothing we can do. It's probably the storm."

"What storm?" Van Helsen shouted.

Silence, full of holes like an old bit of cloth. The tearing of sound. At the end of this caricature of a storm, a voice at last.

"Tourane? Well, what's the weather like?" shouted Van Helsen without any preamble.

"Violent storm." The words were guessed at. The voice was uneven, cut in half, crossed with all sorts of fantastic bubblings and cracklings. "Violent storm."

"Unexpected?" asked Van Helsen.

"By the met., at least."

"Bastards. Adolescent idiots. What about the mail plane?"

"Passed here 40 minutes ago. Everything O.K."

Van Helsen breathed a sigh of relief.

But the voice added:

"He should be at Hué by now."

It was true. Entirely taken up with thoughts of Kelso, he had forgotten the Hanoi mail plane. It was too ridiculous.

"No, not Hanoi. Kelso. . . . HKr. . . . Saigon, that is."

"Ah, Saigon. Haven't seen it. No, nor received anything. Although hearing anything in this row, you know. . . ."

For a long time now Kelso had been looking at the sea. Between the purple coast lit by the forge of the setting sun, and the background of grey sky, it lay like a lake of quicksilver shot through with delicate moving lines like tendons. He loved these dusk landings when the aircraft and the sun settled together. A sort of meditative calm waits for you on the ground. All sounds are deadened. The people on the runway leave their work

and stroll away, as if your return released them from some obligation. For one evening, the airline pilot savours a rare pleasure, a wild mixture of the extravagant and the unexpected: he adopts the working timetable of the town clerk, the schoolteacher and the shopkeeper. It's time to knock off, for him no less than for the porter at the museum, or the park attendant. He's back from work: that's all. The dusk marks the end of a stage, an interlude of rest. It's not like those morning arrivals, when night seems to be a stage in itself, a long and impenetrable one; but the end of the road, the goal from which one looks back over the whole journey. It was at such moments, when he found himself most closely linked with the rhythm of other people's work, that Kelso had the feeling of having flown for pleasure.

And his pleasure was immense. He felt within him that profound harmony between the very essence of the luminous evening and his own thoughts which, together with physical well-being, is known as "being in form". In great form, he thought. And he sang softly to himself, with sudden wild outbursts of joy, in the negro manner, the lament of "Jack the Rabbit". There was just one anxiety: that the day might end without anyone being there to take advantage of his mood, to confirm, by their presence, his love of life—an anxiety that this miraculous state of equilibrium would thereby be wasted. All kinds of unlikely thoughts, tender and humorous, came into his mind. "Don't lie, buddy, don't lie. . . ." He imagined himself as he looked in mufti, well washed, wearing a white suit with a flower in his buttonhole, in a bar. . . . In a bar like the one in Athens, where that grey-eyed Turkish girl was waiting for me. . . . I must

polish up my left hook. Whenever a disagreeable memory reared its head, Kelso automatically took refuge in thoughts of violence, just as he had chosen a life of violence to escape the disturbing phantoms of his childhood.

First, a bath. . . . Van Helsen's invited me to dinner—that suits me perfectly. We're good friends, Van Helsen and me. In fact, if we weren't good friends I wouldn't be there still. A bit of luck. A bit of luck for him too. If it was only a question of him being the boss, I think I'd have killed him by now. "*Don't buddy, don't.*" . . . He swipes my cigarettes, but the day I asked the Dutch commercial attaché if he wanted my photograph he might easily have fired me. "*Don't lie!*" The memory of that incident added the final touch to Kelso's happy mood. There are evenings when the only thing that matters is the joy of being clean, well-dressed, and full of absurd notions. One's body, relaxed, seems to expand, to transcend itself, to raise an impassable barrier against all the dross of the imagination and the soul which normally makes one so interesting and which one claims to value above everything else. A happy indifference sustains one. It is the realm of the pagan gods, where the spirit manifests itself only in the body's well-being and, for the rest, remains as inaccessible as supersonic music.

Kelso watched the dusk falling. It was for this that he had joined the air-line. It was for this that he had committed himself totally, that he had blinded himself with the radiance of the propellers in the sun. To obliterate the sordid memory of Soho, the anguish of a hunted child. To gain instead the soft light of dusk, a dusk that

no longer fell like a threat, like the curtain of a shabby theatre, but like peace itself. A twilight that brought rest, and no longer stirred up spectres and low voices. A violent, solitary life. To have nothing more in common with men but risk and friendship. That was what the war must have meant. . . . Through his sensibility, Kelso had long since surmised the real quality of war. Though raised in a world that held it in horror, a stupid, travestied horror created by newspapers, films, Hyde Park orators, back-shop gossips, Kelso had grown up with the myth of a pure and noble kind of war, without squalor. For the child of Soho, whose only experience of his fellow-creatures had been learned in poverty and hatred, the idea of war was not a threat. It was a risk to be run. It was almost a promise of something. To have nothing to risk but one's life. Those around him, in their work and in their pleasure, risked everything, salvation, dignity, and their lives as well. . . . Of course, there was politics. But, without a faith, how could one remain honest, in politics, if one was a poor man? Kelso had had a job for a time beating up the speakers of other parties, but then he had rebelled. He couldn't surrender his self-respect, degrade himself to the role of a mere tool; nor could he identify himself with the cause. In war, it must be easier to make it one's own concern, to bamboozle the people who got you into it by turning it to one's own account, by making it the instrument of one's personal fulfilment. Kelso breathed a deep sigh. He was telling himself about himself, like a story: Then I met Mac. Then we travelled round the world with our aerobatics act. Then I met Van Helsen. Then I discovered the Airline. Then I began to live.

Then the dials began to waver; then the rain began to imitate Hokusai; then the sky above the aircraft became mottled and grey. A storm that had lain hidden somewhere unfolded its wings with a great flourish of funereal drums. Kelso hardly raised an eyebrow; he headed for Tourane where the storm would be less violent.

There was only one thing that had not lost its reality for Agyre—the forest. It was full of strange shadows of imaginary beasts, snake-trees, helmeted warriors, but especially full of elephants. Elephants, that's pretty serious. No forest is without elephants, everyone knows that. They live at ease among the snares that wait there. Agyre had understood that from the first moment he had penetrated the jungle. Hardly was he out of the clear-cut, orderly town than he found himself in the middle of a mass of corridors, like in those little theatres where the various props of forest décor are piled up against the walls of the public square. And all sorts of sinister forces unknown to the town were there, eavesdropping, lying in wait, patient, ready to obliterate your tracks, to lead you on after will-o'-the-wisps, to hide your enemies, and to slip away from under your feet. Not a single slip, not a sound, not a voice to give them away. But their very silence betrayed them, that crushing, improbable silence of the jungle, broken only by the rushing sound of flight or a cry of attack, for the only voice there is the voice of death. Now, cut off from his base, prisoner of the forest which had closed in round him like deep-sea vegetation, Agyre knew that his fate was sealed and that the elephants, dumb spirits of the jungle, would be the

instrument of his destruction. I should have spoken to the pilot about it. Who? *He* should have spoken about it, he, the other one, me, Agyre. He hadn't suspected anything, poor chap. Who said there weren't any elephants? He didn't suspect, poor chap, that a death sentence had been passed on him by the forest, by the elephants that advance, heads lowered into the single massed head of the herd, in their slippers of grass. The forehead of a thousand elephants would press like a battering ram against the hut, and the ground lights would bark with joy. They'd be only too pleased, the bitches. There was the pilot there in the stove, on fire. And the other one was talking. . . . Agyre sensed the forest rather than actually knew it. He could sense, at the bend in the track, half covered already by a mass of growth, the thunderous weight of the elephant-pilots. When they all charged against the hut. . . . The other two, the two who were still talking together, what would they do? They ought to be warned. Agyre went towards them, tried to walk, tried to speak, stammered, fell to his knees, closed his eyes. The fever gripped his temples. Three steps and he would be there. They would hear him. Eyes closed, he rose to his feet and walked, saw himself walking, went on walking. They must have gone out, the other two. Eyes closed, Agyre walked out of the hut, then sighed: there was an aircraft. An aircraft that had landed there without a sound, like an insect. He went towards it. He spoke. He tried to explain the elephants' plot, slobbering, trying to cry. But all he did was to make his eyes smart. Did they understand, the others? All the same, he managed to finish his explanation, stammering for words. He had spoken. The air-

craft was there, the aircraft that was going to take him away. He had walked. He was saved. Then he opened his eyes and found that he was still where he had fallen, in exactly the same spot, inside the hut, with the two others still talking together, the pilot and the shadow. There was no aircraft. He was alone, pinned to the ground, gasping and groaning whenever he opened his mouth, because he could no longer listen, because he could no longer even listen. Elephants in serried ranks, columns of elephants, danced in front of him. He was there, in the same spot, where the elephants would crush him, head to head, strong as a thousand towers, with the thunder of a thousand squadrons of cavalry, with bells, bright trumpets and pilots' goggles, making a noise like aircraft, like a storm. . . . They would think it was a storm. They thought they already heard a storm. But that deceived nobody. It was quite obvious that it was the herd on the move. The earth was shaking with it. The noise was coming nearer, like approaching thunder, only it was the herd that was coming. Elephants slowly advancing. Trees falling beneath their tread. Helmeted pilots driving them, with umbrellas to goad them. They had squares of lace on the tops of their heads, and their ears beat like fins. Their thousands of feet made the earth groan. They advanced through the din. They stamped. And the two fools still stood there talking, thinking it was a storm.

"Hullo!" said Jerry, examining the sky from his balcony, "it's going to rain."

## II

"HKI HAS ANSWERED, M. le Directeur. He's in the storm, but up to now everything's O.K. He's approaching Tourane."

"Keep in touch with him. Signal his position every quarter of an hour."

Van Helsen had just arrived in Indo-China, having been called there by someone he had known in the war. His old project for a trans-Pacific airline, which would unite Australia and North America and serve the whole of the Far East, was going to stake its first claim between Japan and the east coast of Annam. And the mail service grew, in a rather exciting atmosphere of slander and hostility. Everything was against it—tradition, routine, vested interests, superstition. Everything was mobilised against it—diplomacy, competition, the monsoon, the right of self-determination, the safety of the mail, and professional secrecy. The apparent inadequacy of this fragment of a line, whose significance could only properly be judged against the perspective of the whole project about which Van Helsen was purposely secretive, exposed it to criticism. The company's capital was condemned by some as Jewish, by others as clerical, by the Chinese revolutionaries as Anglo-Saxon, and by the French administration as Bolshevik. On this last point, Van Helsen's sympathy with the U.S.S.R., which he did not conceal although he avoided active participation in politics, and also the affair of the Comintern agent who had been carried illegally, did not make things any easier. In spite of all this, Van Helsen went on buying aeroplanes, building airfields, and establishing bases in

the wilds, baptising them with fancy names which were agreeable to the ear but which profoundly irritated the powers-that-be. It was said in Saigon that he had had a field cleared for an emergency landing ground fifty kilometres north of a perfectly safe French base, and the technicians roared with laughter, not knowing that the French field, which was perfect for aircraft of the current type, would be useless for the four-engined machines that Van Helsen intended for the trip from Sydney in ten years' time. And when that moment came, it would be easier for him to enlarge *his* field, and to organise a 'bus service for the passengers. . . . His reputation for madness now well established, he forged ahead, concluding agreements, quelling intrigues, looking for pilots. . . .

Rudy, who was to vanish two years later in northern China, had come to see him with a cutting from a newspaper: "For the first time in Saigon: MacMahon, the death-defying bird-man." And there was an entrancing photograph showing this MacMahon hanging by his feet from a trapeze attached to a highly improbable monoplane. "But what a pilot!" Rudy had said. "We don't want any clowns in our airline," Van Helsen had grumbled in reply. After which he had allowed himself to be dragged to the airfield where the death-defyer offered himself for the admiration of the public. The skill of the pilot had indeed impressed him. "What's the chap's name?" "He's English, name of Kelso. . . ."

Keep in touch with him. Van Helsen, his hand on the telephone, remembered it all. His first sight of Kelso, in the air, had merely affected him professionally. Even his landing, his stride like a Great Dane's, his boyish

face, his dishevelled hair, had not immediately impressed him. He had had an argument with his mechanic, a sly and querulous Irishman who dreamed of taking his place as pilot and reproached him for hedge-hopping too fast. "When Mac breaks his neck we'll be in a fine way. . . ." Kelso defended himself, speaking in the name of his aircraft, identifying himself with it in a curiously impressive way: "He's only got to cling on. If I slow down at that moment, I stall; I know myself. . . ." and all the time he clung on to the aircraft as if he were a sort of centaur. Van Helsen was standing beside the fuselage and had placed his hand on the canvas. It smelt good: the oil, the burnt petrol, the grease. And there was a sort of after-taste of the sea. Then he had looked at Kelso differently. That smell was the smell of the airfields in France when all the aircraft were like this one—the wings veined and, as it were, webbed between the ribs. The heroic days when one spent one's time in warm hangars, testing the radial engines mounted on trestles like Hindu gods, while outside the aircraft throbbed slowly in the heat. The shining, plump, insect-like fuselages, the canvas stretched over the wooden skeletons, seemed unbelievably light, miraculously fragile, like a naked boy, and possessed in the same way of a strength that seemed beyond them. An epic period, ill-reported and misunderstood. A period reflected most faithfully in boys' magazines and popular weeklies, with their pictures of crimson aircraft with flamboyant markings against cobalt skies. And it was a time of great exploits. Every day a new record was set up. Quantities of bad literature were discharged over it all. Man, conqueror of the sky, the dream of

Icarus, infinity at your beck and call. Whereas it was all so simple. It was all contained in that one smell, in that colour, the incense and the lustre of the long struggle between man and his gods in which he is never victorious.

"HKI is over Tourane, M. le Directeur."

"Thank you."

HKI. Van Helsen had looked at the figure of Kelso merging with the glittering, old-fashioned aircraft, and he followed the trail of that forgotten smell, recalling an image from the past, the living image of himself, just before the last sortie, the one that had carried him forward like a wave and had broken on the shore of l'oiseau Pipe. It was his own steps that he retraced, rich with the wisdom of his first defeat; a trick of fate had brought him back to the very spot, as it were, where he had lost something. Now it was the other's turn to do his stuff—this youth standing motionless there, half hidden under the shadow of the wing. Van Helsen knew that he too would fail. He was quite certain, with a certitude beyond all precognition, that Kelso was on the verge of the last adventure, that he, Van Helsen, had come there to save him, that he hadn't the right to let him go. They were side by side now, on the deserted beach, impregnating the dry sand with the ink of their long, slender shadows. Van Helsen and his young brother beside the fragments of the crashed machine, and Van Helsen was saying: "I came down here so that you might be able to go on. . . ." A desperate sympathy possessed him. Already he looked at Kelso as though they had had struggles, achievements, joys in common, as though he knew everything about him. He felt that he could speak

to him as one speaks to those with whom each word touches some common chord, stirs up private allusions, memories that have been shared together. From then on, everything was simple and straightforward, everything was settled and agreed between them. All that remained was a lot of superfluous talk about references and generally putting him in the picture, which they would enter into for the fun of it, without being taken in by it, like friends who play at being strangers, like two spies exchanging their passwords out of mere scruple, having recognised one another a long time before. Rudy had stepped forward: "This is the young pilot who. . ." "This evening, six o'clock, in my office." Van Helsen had said, and, turning towards Kelso, addressed him for the first time: "And if you agree, it's fixed."

At six o'clock, Kelso was there in front of him in a white tunic, his hair dishevelled, apparently nonchalant. Van Helsen had looked at that tense face, those wild, restless eyes. He would never be able to treat that type of youngster as a mere tool, and the risk was great. Van Helsen would never admit that his friendship gave anyone any rights when working with him, but he disliked imposing conditions. "I'll take the risk." Kelso looked at him squarely, his eyes questioning, a little on the defensive. Van Helsen launched out: "You're living a ridiculous life, but you're earning money and you're more or less free. I offer you a job which is monotonous, in which you will always be under orders, and in which I'm the one who gives them. As for the future, it's just a big question-mark. We've got practically everybody against us. To-morrow we may find ourselves penniless.



Our routes aren't fixed yet. Accidents and deaths will entail modifications. . . . What else did I want to say? Ah yes, in the event of a serious mistake, one retaliation and one only: dismissal—which would mean, for you, starting from scratch again. All this may strike you as rather tough. Perhaps you find me rather a brute. But in a job like this we can't worry about what we are. The only thing that matters is what we do."

Van Helsen grew more animated: "What I want is not life in a barracks but a life in the trenches. If you've any idea of what war is like, you'll understand me." Kelso listened, wrinkling his forehead. Van Helsen thought: "If he's not *absolutely* what I imagine him to be he'll turn it down." Kelso had stayed. His only regret had been leaving Mac in the lurch. The latter had encouraged him to make the move. Van Helsen, learning that Mac had been a mechanic during the war, had offered him a job. Mac had declined. "You understand, Mister Van Helsen, at my age. . . . No offence meant, Mister Van Helsen. . . ." Van Helsen understood. What counted for Mac now, was that moment of triumph after each performance, that little taste of divinity provided by the sight of five hundred people craning their necks. Without this, his life would have been emptied, would have disappeared at one gulp. In spite of the fear he felt every time he left the cockpit, it was at those moments that he was really himself again, that life entered into him, like blood flowing back into a cramped limb. As for the Irish mechanic, he had been ecstatic. He sang the praises of the Indo-Chinese climate to Kelso, he went out of his way to find him accommodation, to arrange for the transport of his luggage. . . . Finally, he and Mac

had left for America. Kelso piloted the first mail plane from China. Van Helsen had seen the service taking shape, opposition slackening, victory approaching. "Victory, Rudy!" "Just wait for the bill," Rudy would say. It was about this time that the newspapers announced the death of MacMahon, the aerial acrobat. His aircraft had stalled and spun in.

Van Helsen remembered all this, with his hand on the telephone. At times he had reproached himself for his friendship with Kelso. He knew all about the supremacy of the will in the domain of feeling, and of the way in which the mind adopts and discards ties of affection, from design as often as from chance. So what was the good of taking on new ties, making oneself more vulnerable? Moreover, that was not his role. He was anxious, on the contrary, to maintain a certain distance between his colleagues and himself. Not out of lofty pride, or any feeling of superiority. His remoteness was not that of the business chief whose contempt for his men is combined with superficial familiarity. It arose rather from a desire for reciprocal reserve, a mutual refusal to reveal the inner personality. For Van Helsen knew that on that level everything could be justified and excused. It would fill him with a sort of shame to know that one of his colleagues, having made a mistake, should be able to say "I know Van; it'll be all right. . . ."; it would bring home to him a weakness on *his* part. If one has to pass judgment, one should reveal only that part of oneself that has the right to judge. It would be all too easy to fall into a rather sordid sort of companionship, to wallow together in a communal bath of helplessness, of chaos, to exchange confessions of weakness. However distress-

ing to admit it, if you look down on someone you bind yourself closer to him than if you build him up too much, and the true sources of most of our friendships would make us blush if we ever remembered them. Van Helsen refused to adopt the attitude of the officer who, when off duty, fraternises with the troops, confides in them, and then, back in his official role, distributes punishments without thought of the logical reaction of the men. "What about him?" That would falsify everything, Van Helsen thought. The only justice is that which is automatically accepted. And it's just too bad for kings who complain of having no friends. If they regard friendship as more precious than their crown, they have only to abdicate. As for me, no one forced me to command. . . . And so Van Helsen kept himself to himself. The pilots didn't complain. A man who is constantly asking you to risk your life on the job can well dispense with sentimentality. His war record, his three crashes, his ten thousand flying hours, his wounds, his reputation, made him fit to be obeyed. He did not ask for more.

But suddenly, in this rigorous, exacting, ordered structure, there was a loose stone: Kelso arriving in the service with his anxieties, his insomnia, his feverish eyes, his absurd bravado, his childish cruelty, that inarticulate sort of question he seemed to carry about with him, that desire to work out his own salvation which possessed him and which he didn't know what to do about, which shone out of him and struck all who saw him, like a message that a blind man might hold out to passers-by so that he might know at last what it meant. *He* cared little for reserve; he revealed his weaknesses with the innocence of an animal, and that very inno-

cence preserved him from rebuffs. He piloted the mail planes through all kinds of weather with the same tormented face, the same slightly crazy laugh. The only thing he was afraid of was the darkness, and that fear made him plunge into night-flying, drawn into the shadows as a man with fear of heights is drawn towards the ground. From that struggle a new being had slowly emerged, purified by danger. Under the furrowed mask a new expression and a new smile took shape. Van Helsen had been watching that smile. He read Kelso's face, on his return from a trip, as he might read a met. report. The smile was there, striving always to burst through. "He owes it to me," Van Helsen thought, "and he doesn't realise it. He thinks he's solving his problem himself." And he would speak to him gently, as though to a wounded comrade. In himself, he detected a deep serenity, together with a sort of impatient admiration. He was overwhelmed by this presence which was on the same level as his own, as real as himself, which was not to be consigned to registers and forms. For once, he was aware that one of his pilots existed; that, beyond all the reports and cash bonuses, he was able to fashion him in his being and in his actions. That's what it must be like having a son, he thought without regret. And in the harshness of his acts and decisions Van Helsen always felt one sensitive spot, a burning, living wound. To have a son in one's regiment—it was like the patient who knows in advance the one movement, among the hundreds he performs without any feeling of dread, which will demand all his will-power if he is not to cry out in pain. And this way, experience was doubled, as through a mirror. Through Kelso he detected his own

human weaknesses, the cracks in his own armour, the channels by which life drains away. He reproached himself for this friendship, but without much conviction. At bottom, he was proud of it as of his only weakness. He nursed for it the secret affection that men have for their particular vice, the one which links them to the earth, which saves them from perfection. Through Kelso, Van Helsen was brought down to the world of men, men who meet to sing and drink together, men who philosophise in the avenues of parks, men who fight in deserted streets, men who are taken to visit sideshows and wax-works. Kelso's friendship served him as a sort of proof that he existed. Outside it, there was only the airline. Kelso introduced a third dimension.

And then, there had been the inspection of the Chinese fields. . . .

"Hanoi telephoned, M. le Directeur. The mail plane has just landed."

"Good. Thanks. Is the weather all right up there?"

"Yes, fine, M. le Directeur. It's in the South that it's getting bad."

Van Helsen glanced up at the map. The Chinese fields. The spring of 19. . . , the spring in which the mail service had finally received Simouns. It had been high time. Rudy, who was responsible for the North China circuit, had crashed and killed himself the week before. Van Helsen decided to study the routes himself, with Kelso as pilot. They covered the circuit airfield by airfield, with a Mongol interpreter whom Kelso nicknamed Tarass Boulba. There were long flights over country that was grey and white like saltmarshes. The aircraft flew low in an empty sky, from time to time setting on the move

wandering herds that were like clouds of dust on the motionless disc of the plain. Both had thought of Rudy falling into this desolation and dying like the last of mankind between a heaven and an earth that had lost touch with life.

It was on the way back that the thing had happened. Kelso had flown low over a party of horsemen that he wanted to identify. They could think of no politer way of returning his greeting than by firing a salvo in his direction. It was one of those surprises that China is apt to reserve for the naïve traveller. At first, nothing vital seemed to have been affected, except Kelso's temper: he told Van Helsen to arrange for the next mail plane to be loaded up with bombs. Then he discovered that they were losing height. At first, it was almost imperceptible, but grew suddenly worse. They levelled up again, and then slowly but surely continued to sink. Kelso looked round for somewhere to land. The plain had now given way to a sort of flock of hillocks, which, from three thousand feet, looked like boulders covered with moss. Van Helsen's eyes were glued to the rev. counter. He was conscious of Kelso eyeing him, but did not want to make a move. They remained there, side by side, cool, motionless, rooted to their seats. Kelso tried to regain height, but this time the aircraft no longer obeyed, and the engine began to splutter. Clear-headed, motionless, they looked at the rev. counter. If nothing happened, if the mechanism of disaster continued to unwind, it would mean a crash within a few minutes. Van Helsen did not feel personally implicated. It was as though he was involved in an air crash in a dream, paralysed by his own helplessness, but himself running no risk. Kelso was

straining every nerve, putting his whole body into the effort to get the aircraft flying straight and level again, and the needle on the rev. counter was falling jerkily like a closing trap. Impossible to bale out, they hadn't the height. The ground rushed away under the aircraft, faster and faster, like the desert herds. Motionless, completely absorbed by the tension, clear-headed, they watched the needle on the rev. counter. Beneath them there were great slippery boulders, full of dead plants, with now and again a sharp ridge. . . . "We've had it." It was someone else who breathed the words in his ear. Van Helsen was now past all judgment, past thinking even. He was overcome by a kind of torpor, the anaesthetic of death. There was nothing to be done. His body had understood before him and was preparing for the worst. Kelso said nothing, and pulled with all his might. Van Helsen saw the round backs of the hills under the wheels of the aircraft. His eyelids were heavy. Hills. Hills. And suddenly, stretching across and beyond this lunar landscape, a long white stain revealed itself. . . . The plain. At once, something unlocked itself inside him; he was himself again, on the alert; he turned to Kelso, opened his mouth, and shut it again when Kelso, extraordinarily calm, murmured without looking at him: "I've seen it!"

At the same moment the needle on the rev. counter flickered, and the aircraft began to drop. A last bulge of hills still separated it from the plain. It dived straight towards them, the dials racing madly, the controls dead. Confusedly Van Helsen perceived that Death had reserved for them this last refinement: it was bringing them down at the very boundary of its kingdom. He

thought of the last man to be killed in the war. Now he felt in splendid form; his mind was sharpened: he was furiously determined to live. "If I were piloting, what would I do?" But he was experienced enough to know that to try to influence a pilot, at such a critical moment, would be taking a terrible risk. He simply watched Kelso's manœuvres, with an acute awareness of his muscles, of his breathing. The aircraft was at a height of perhaps three hundred feet when the last barrier of hills reared up in front of them. Kelso, who up to then had been pulling with all his strength, seemed to go crazy, to try to precipitate the accident by flinging the aircraft at full speed towards the ground. Then everything became mixed up: Van Helsen felt the machine rear upwards, tilt back, plunge down again. . . . And this time it was the plain that was under the wheels. Although she was pitching about frightfully, the Simoun came down unscathed, the wheels skidded and she slid sideways, leaving a tremulous wake in the white grass, on to the ploughed land where she was pulled up short. The propellor went on turning for a few seconds, then there was silence.

Van Helsen leaned out: the hills were behind them, smooth and shining like the back of a dog that has been drenched in water. The tracks made by the aircraft were visible between two ditches, keeping between them with miraculous steadiness. The slightest diversion, and the 'plane would have capsized.

"Did you do it on purpose?" he asked.

"Sometimes it's useful to be piloted by a clown," said Kelso, and they both began to laugh. Kelso manipulated

the radio for a moment to indicate their position and said:

"We'll have to alter the route in this spot."

They had spent the night in the aircraft, wrapped up in blankets. Van Helsen had slept little. He was musing on this snow landscape, thinking of the men who have houses, who each night can open their window and rule over a familiar domain. The night was soft and starless. He thought vaguely that Kelso had saved his life, and also that he had never seriously believed that they would die. In the early hours of the morning the stars appeared, like ships returning to port, blinking intermittent call-signs and signals. The rescue plane had landed in the morning.

"How did you manage to land here?" asked the astonished pilot.

"We took the *téléférique*," Kelso said. There was a smile on his face, the smile that Van Helsen had been expecting, but that no one had ever seen on him before.

One hand on the telephone, Van Helsen remembered. "Keep in touch." It was he who needed to keep in touch, in touch with the earth, with his one point of contact with the earth, the very centre of the earth, in fact, that was now escaping him, that was caught in the storm, in the night that was falling, nine thousand feet above Tourane.

The rain was falling steadily on Hong 33, making a noise like the rustling of evening dresses at a ball. Agyre, who hadn't seen a woman for a year, was shaking his head. He had done all he could to create some female

form beside him in the darkness. It seemed to him that, formerly, his sleep had given birth to women whom he had been able somehow to guide, to attract towards him as with a magnet. The nearer they came, the uglier they turned out to be, but he took them none the less, for want of anything better. Those that he had known escaped him; even his memory could not recapture them. They were gone. Not dead: they would have come to visit him. They were gone, they had fled, they had repudiated him, they had left him with these daughters of the night, painted, frigid, and more and more ugly as his dream became clearer and his actions more disciplined. And he took them clumsily, brutally, for fear that with each new caress they might become even uglier. Then he would wake, exhausted. Now his tortured brain refused him even the consolation of dreams. Nothing remained in it, except tension. Yet should he not, at the time of the elephants' attack, have had a body to clasp, a fear to respond to his own, an animal gratification? Agyre lay gasping on his bed, his head throbbing with an immeasurable emptiness. . . . The voice of a woman a long way off rose up somewhere in the world, reverberating through the sonorous caves of thought, calling up an image of flowers, an image of sea-beaches. It lived in him like a wound between the shoulders, that he could neither touch nor forget. The fever enveloped him like a flame that might be the essence of himself, that might carry his senses unbelievable distances, waving its great transparent hands on all sides. A flame that might lick its way as far as the temperate lands beneath the moon, which perhaps was where the woman was singing. And the voice came

and went at the bidding of the fire, matching all the tempestuous fury of his tormented soul as it stormed and writhed, seeking to recapture a creature that had once been his. A scraping noise, as of a burrowing animal, invaded the hut. Shadow-rings on the ceiling grew larger, and from time to time a heavy raindrop made Agyre jump under its icy sting. Successive lightning flashes projected every object and every movement in flickering images with the agitated rhythm of early films. Agyre was aware of his body by fits and starts. Gradually he curled himself up, assuming the age-old posture of the American mummies, the human shell closed in on itself, defying the gods. Agyre curled up in order to enter into nothingness without resistance; he assumed that funereal contortion that makes a man as smooth as a pebble and lets him slide down into the abyss of death. The voice of a woman was calling, a long way off, somewhere out in the world. Agyre, entombed in his fear, was conscious of the sound undermining him. The voice of a woman, a long way off, pervading his whole being, unfolding a curious tale. A tale which he couldn't quite grasp.

The Mail Service Simoun bumped and yawed in the storm. Look out for the sea. That was Kelso's sole pre-occupation. He remembered once finding the ocean beneath his wheels during a night flight, when he thought he was still over the forest. He also remembered Berline of Air France floating all night only to sink in the early morning within sight of his rescuers. Apart from that, the storm rather excited him. A few trips of this sort

had been the price he had had to pay to cure himself of his neurosis. Once long ago, in London, when he had been beaten up at a police station, he had marvelled at the fact that he hadn't felt the blows. Later, he had come to understand that men secrete a strength proportionate to their ordeals, that even fear itself brings a kind of peace, a deadening of all the senses, that springs from them like tears, like shivering, for their protection. Anxiety, that anxiety that emptied his head when Mac was performing his acrobatics under the aircraft, springs only from the unknown, from anticipation of it. The presence of danger fixes its limits, and kills fear. Policemen know it, which is why they base their intimidation on uncertainty. Kelso's life had played the policeman for years. Fear clutched at him with every noise in the street, every glance exchanged with a passer-by, every time he heard a knocking on a wall, and every day at nightfall. Now all that seemed to him as ridiculous as the death's heads perched on the entrances to cemeteries. Destiny had raised its mask for him and Kelso now knew his destiny; he knew it by sight.

I must have passed Tourane. . . . The cloud base was very low, and night was falling, tapering off in lightning flashes beneath the aircraft. Kelso tried to climb to twelve thousand feet, where it would be calm. The Simoun shook, the rain whipped along the fuselage as it battled with the plunging universe. Its exhaust sputtered, attacking the cloud like a soldering iron. Cascades of rumblings rebounded from stair to stair as he climbed; the sentinels of the storm shouted their orders at each floor of the sky. Kelso drove into an aurora borealis. The aircraft raised up shadows, carried away shreds of

night. The weight of a heavy pagan sky hung over it. It bathed in a false light like that of a negative. All at once, the night was complete, caught in the trough of the clouds, starless, stretched out like a fabric, shot through with the jets of flame-throwers. Only the cockpit light still glowed. Ten thousand five hundred feet. The engine seemed to vibrate. Kelso bent over the instrument panel. Somewhere a train became derailed and hit him in the face. The aircraft turned over, and the darkness spun round once completely above it. Kelso calmly straightened her up. Surprised to find that he could no longer see anything, he blinked his eyelids. Only then did he realise that the cockpit lights had fused. The luminous needles shone feebly; he found it difficult to distinguish the dials. The darkness had taken its revenge, had closed over him like an octopus. Below him a million children were screaming with terror.

Leaving the Continental on foot, to get over his fit of nerves. Jerry walked briskly. At the Perroquet bar, where he was being plied with Manhattans by the best barman east of Aden, he had had a telephone call from Van Helsen, asking him to call round after dinner. Jerry had eaten a sandwich, and now he was hurrying to the office of the airmail service. The sky was now empty. All was calm. A new silence had developed, that same silence that precedes the screams when there is an accident. The storm was there, all around, ready to attack. Jerry thought vaguely of the pilot whom Van Helsen seemed so agitated about, though he couldn't define the quality of his emotion very precisely. Alone in the storm. . . .

It was the idea of the responsibility that struck Jerry most. The terrifying freedom to choose one's actions, knowing at the same time that the knots one ties can never be untied, that one's actions pile up like stones blocking all the exits one by one, marking out the sole, inexorable road that leads either to life or death. Jerry, like most young men of his age, had as yet no notion of the irreparable. He belonged automatically to a class in which one always works with a safety net beneath one, a world in which gamblers have bank accounts, prodigal sons have parents or fatted calves awaiting them, travelers have life insurance policies; in which sinners can count on confession, those who make mistakes can count on indulgence, husbands and wives can count on divorce; in which all the companies are limited liability companies. A world in which everything is faked like the Alps of Tartarin, where exits abound, where one can always retrace one's steps. Jerry had heard of those anguished prisoners who a few minutes after their arrest cannot understand why it is no longer possible to go back and start again. And Kelso in the storm seemed to him just as absurd. Irreparable, he thought, and he made a praiseworthy effort to consider the storm as something more than a means of getting wet.

Just as he was entering the big airline building, the heat-laden sky burst open and spilled over the town. In the waiting-room, with its empty benches and its walls covered with maps and screaming posters, men were waiting. Friends of the pilot's, or else just curious. Jerry, on the threshold, guessed that they were waiting for Kelso. Some of them were still in overalls or leather jackets, in spite of the heat. One group was playing

poker in silence. Others, standing at the bay windows that were now dripping with warm rain as if being washed, watched the storm. A secretary hurriedly crossed the room. No-one spoke, but every head followed him, the faces expressionless. Before going out, he made a gesture to show that he knew nothing. The dice rolled. Foreheads bent over the table again. Lighters clicked. Jerry went up to a porter with the initials of the airline embroidered on his linen jacket. I've got an appointment with the Director. Heads turned, but not for long. The dice rolled. One moment, sir. Thank you. The rain slowly stained the windows. Jerry stopped in front of a map of the sky. All the constellations were there, and there was a crimson thread stitching them to the earth, which represented the network of the airlines. Behind him were the sounds of the rain smacking spasmodically at the windows, and of the rolling dice. Jerry thought of Kelso, and again he felt cut off. Kelso couldn't belong to him as much as to them. They could visualise him exactly, foresee his difficulties, his hopes, in the minutest detail. Whereas he, whether he liked it or not, belonged to the other hemisphere, where the only thing one risks is one's luck. He would have liked to speak to them, but he knew that he would be unable to hit the right note, that he would be too distant or too familiar. However deep his sympathy, this was essentially something between themselves. The war must have given the same sort of prerogatives. But the only exploits he was involved in were those of the amateur; his was a film star's heroism. He turned round. He saw the faces, heavy, distracted, curious, mobile, listless. For some, Kelso was already doomed. He had entered that great

cold region where the blood dries up and the image hardens like a statue of ice and becomes memory. They thought of him in the past tense, which was perhaps why they did not talk about him. Others were optimistic. From this latent dispute between life and death, Kelso came out bigger, intensely present, summed up, acknowledged by all these silences more powerfully than if they were all shouting his name. Jerry was struck full in the face by that silent invocation, that prayer compact as a stone. And he began to be conscious of Kelso, to know him by his absence.



### III

AN EAST WIND had got up. From one end of the Line to the other, every station reported an east wind. It drove the storm before it with strokes of the whip. The storm retreated, stamping with rage. The sky over Saigon, having cleared for a moment, became overcast again. The storm surged back over the whole coast. And Kelso, lost in the night, on the point of leaving the danger zone, re-entered the area of the storm. East wind. Hélène went into the concert hall in Saigon. East wind. Jerry went into Van Helsen's office. East wind. Ten thousand kilometres away, Joel went into his box at the festival in Lucerne, where it was daytime and the sun was shining, and there was a slight east wind. Joel was thinking of Jerry, Jerry and Van Helsen were thinking of Kelso, Hélène was thinking of Kelso and Kelso was thinking of his height. No altimeter. No gyro. He existed solely on his navigation lights; they alone preserved him from invisibility. At the moment of the shock he must have lost height. And as for his direction—only his wings were left visible by the storm. He looked around him. Hélène looked around her. Kelso had warned her that he was having a "stag" dinner party that evening, and Van Helsen had advised her to go to this concert. She looked around her and saw a magnificent-looking girl with delicate half-caste features and a transparent skin that looked as if it had been tinted from within, who was sitting some rows behind her. Jerry, who had spent the night with a magnificent-looking girl with delicate half-caste features and a transparent skin that looked as if it had been

tinted from within, saw Van Helsen who looked as though he were cast in bronze at his desk. Hélène acknowledged to herself that the girl's animal beauty would harmonize perfectly with Kelso's slim jaguar-like body, and immediately she began to hate her own white skin, her boyish face. The half-caste was listening to the orchestra tuning up, her eyelids half-closed, displayed in her seat, her body relaxed, naked in her shapeless garment which betrayed her as clearly as the trees betray themselves through the rocks. Joel listened to the orchestra tuning up. Kelso listened to the storm. The thunder-claps had by now blended into one single rumbling, a single roar of rollers, of kegs and chests tumbling down a stairway. Kelso slowly pulled back the stick; gusts of rain beat down on him. He should have been out of the storm by now. All the black men of Soho were there, closing their eyes as grimly as possible, to rob him even of the help of false stars. Shaken, deafened, wounded in the jaw, Kelso closed his eyes. Soho. The yellow-eyed woman who stared continuously. It was I who had to avert my eyes. With all this pulling back on the stick, I ought to be at twelve thousand feet and out of all this filth. She used to look at me and laugh. The roar of charging bulls. Legions grouped and broke up again in the shadows. Choristers of the dark. Monasteries of the night, where the wind comes to ask for shelter, knocking and imploring. Corridors of monasteries, bobbing lanterns of the monks all woven together, gathering in high, vaulted halls to intone the hymn of the wind. Bells of lost shepherds, flying with great wing-beats over the hills to muster their howling herds. Gates are broken down, sheds where the straw was

drying are burst open on all four sides and crumble to dust, the crops become knotted to the hooves of the stampeding beasts, unsuspecting sleepers are trampled upon, clogs of stone and metal crush the bleeding vine. She wore a purple dressing-gown, faded and mended. Soho. Soho. It might have been one of the wind's cries: Soho. Clouds crashed together, burst one another open, swallowed one another up. Uproar. The orchestra tuning up. A procession advances through the clouds: black magi, Christs with outstretched arms, fragile banners bellying in the wind, covered with kingfishers' wings. Whole rows of flat, silhouetted figures, like toy soldiers. Others wrapped up in great white sacks, light as clouds, covered with signs, making horrible faces. Holy Sacrament of fire, of red-hot metal, under a canopy of plumed horses, black, rearing, splendid with the wonderful evocations of the circus and of war. The shrieking of tortured angels. Then the yellow-eyed woman had put out the light, and I felt her slide in beside me. And ever since, I've been afraid of the night. Hélène thought of Kelso lying beside her, one hand laid like a claw between his legs, the other folded over his chest, the fist clenched, always on guard against some shadow. Beside this other girl, the half-caste, would he be able to drop his mask, let his hands fall to his side, give himself up, defenceless? He had spoken of the tragic look on her face when they made love. Perhaps she put too much fury into it, perhaps she responded too much to his own anguish when she clasped him as though it was a victory she had not deserved. The half-caste obviously gave herself easily, happily, without misgiving, sure of her pleasure. Hélène

tried to calm herself, and at the same time something dead lit up inside her, making her shiver and turn away her eyes. How's Joel? Van Helsen asked. Very well, Joel replied to the first violin who was shaking him by the hand, and he looked at himself once more in the large mirror in his dressing room before making his way towards the piano. You know he's playing today at Lucerne, Jerry said. If I had known, said Van Helsen, I wouldn't have invited you to dinner; I'd have listened to the concert over the radio. "We're probably still in time," Jerry said, and he turned on the big Hungarian set, an Orion, capable of trapping everything on all the waves of the earth, from the speeches of statesmen to the signals of fog-bound ships. "If Kelso's delay is a courtesy of Providence to allow me to listen to Joel . . ." Van Helsen said. "What price the miracle-making machine?" said Jerry. "The three of us just had to meet." He turned the knob rapidly, and sounds jostled one another like instruments tuning up. Hélène looked at the programme. Mozart's C minor concerto for piano and orchestra. Jerry found Sottens. A solemn voice announced the programme. Mozart's piano concerto in C minor for piano and orchestra. Soloist, Joel Ferrer. Good omen, said Van Helsen, and he smiled for the first time that evening. If only the other one would give some sign of life. What do you want to do about it? Jerry asked. Nothing, just wait, Van Helsen said. Then let's wait, said Jerry. Kelso was surrounded by a sort of clapping sound. The rain smashed on to his wings. With each flash of lightning the aircraft bristled with a sort of luminous grass. Joel was surrounded by the sound of clapping as he stood in front of the piano and made a

deep bow, murmuring: "What fools, my God, what fools!" Hélène was surrounded by the sound of clapping. She applauded with the rest of them, that is, all of them except the half-caste who crossed her admirable legs and, throwing back her head, waited for the music as if she was waiting for a kiss. Do you get any music here? Jerry asked. Oh, some opera, said Van Helsen. But otherwise. . . . You know French tastes. . . . Well, now and again there's a good concert. The girl I slept with last night told me she was going to a concert this evening, Jerry said. I know, said Van Helsen. I was invited.

They were silent as they listened to the first bars of the concerto. The half-caste closed her eyes. Hélène listened to the music with delight, but part of her attention was abstracted from it, absorbed by her obsession with Kelso. Jerry listened. Van Helsen listened. The half-caste listened. Hélène listened. Seven hundred listeners in Saigon, four thousand at Lucerne, a million throughout the world, listened. Joel listened, his eyes half-closed, his hands poised on the keys, waiting for his cue to enter the lists. Kelso listened, observing with amusement that in the tumult of the storm certain sounds grouped together; it seemed almost to take on a definite shape, one could almost hear violins. But an even stronger gust than before upset the aircraft. He had to lean forward, to strain all his muscles to straighten her up; he no longer thought of listening to the east wind rising. East wind, reported every station along the line. The orchestra was playing alone, stating all the themes, outlining the poignant question that dominates the first movement. A tragic concerto, Jerry said. Since we've

been living together. . . . Hélène was thinking. Is it true that we live together, or isn't it rather just the obverse of life that we have in common? It's true that it's my greatest joy. But how can there be real unity unless it's total, how can one live together if one doesn't possess every moment together? *I'm* there for his return, for his sleep. But where is his life? That face that she only saw closed up, those arms held up in unconscious self-defence, perhaps it was in action that they became relaxed, that they acknowledged their joy of living; and it was for his comrades, for his aircraft, that he became fully alive. Apparently there are women who have been able to follow their lovers into war, into danger. . . . But when Kelso masters his exhaustion, when he has just risked death, it is not *my* face that is the first to welcome him, it's not from *me* that he seeks support. Oh, yes, he'll tell me all about what happened, in a tender, detached way. I'll have his words. But who will give me those moments when he lives himself to the full, when he knows real happiness, those moments which I have no part in? Others will have taken them, perhaps without thinking. I shall have to steal them later on, in the night, as if making a secret of it, to seek them in groping caresses—clumsy because of the effort of watching his face—that ineffable smile that arose perhaps of its own accord in the hour of his victory. If only they would last, those moments in which, amid the lightning and the thunder, our bodies are made one. . . . Then I must wait and watch, happy nonetheless, a sentinel at the gate of that sleep in which he finds the deep joys that I do not know. Who is this sleeper whose head lies between my breasts, who clings to me like a drowning man, whose

secret domain I guard without ever entering its gates? Kelso closed his eyes and screwed up his face, drunk with the fatigue and the noise. East wind over the entire coast, Van Helsen repeated over the telephone, and he replaced the receiver gently, listening to the concerto in which the orchestra had finished posing its question, the most burning question of all. East wind. Jerry thought of Sandburg's poem: "Long ago I learned to listen to the wind. . . ." And he smiled at the refrain, at the cry of the wind insanely asking: Who, who are you? Who are you? asked the wind at Khong, at Haiphong, at Tourane. Who are you? asked Mozart at Saigon, at Lucerne. Who are you? asked H  l  ne. Joel raised his head, placed his right hand on the keyboard, waited for the orchestra which was announcing the last chords of the introduction, and entered on two notes, like a dancer leaping on to the stage.

Behind the mountains, in the hollows of the sea, between the peaks of shadow, in that magic forge, that crucible in which all the tempests of the world are dipped, between the moss-covered walls, over the madly knotted forest. the east wind exercised its power. The east wind, with its yells and buffets, broke ships from their moorings and drove them along the coast like caravels, a fleet of fireships. From the depths of the night it dragged out all its puppets. It drove a wave of clouds towards Tourane, a towering wave which broke some way off, of which only the tepid froth reached Saigon. It slowly pushed a heavy door against Kelso, who turned like a blinded beast. It entered into Agyre's fever, and

with strokes of the whip goaded on the elephant herd of madness that closed in round the hut and trampled the earth rhythmically with hissing, sighing sounds. It drove before it the boats lost among the islands, and it drove before it the storm itself, which retreated, growling. Agyre, clinging to the trembling wall, had groped for his Colt and found it. He clasped it like a friendly hand, his eyes glued to the radio set, that unhappy cage where the beast of silence slept, the hushed voice, the only voice that could intercede for him, the only language left in which he might call for help. Slowly, dragging himself along the ground, paralysed by the fear of experiencing a new hallucination, scarcely believing in this short respite from madness which now showed him a real path towards his fellow-men, Agyre moved towards the radio, suspicious as a savage. Drums beat all round him. He was almost touching the set; his hands hesitated as if over a woman's body. His whole memory, his whole will stampeded round this forgotten instrument. The message prepared dissolved a dozen times, the words broke up, he hadn't the strength to hold them. He was exhausted and his head rested like a battering-ram on the grey metal casing, where the futile sending-key lay gleaming. Thus lay the man who at Saigon had claimed to be called Agyre, who learned Morse by ear, who had been an army radio operator in Switzerland, who lived and thought, who had buried himself in the bush on account of a woman, like everyone else, and who was now feebly wondering if he was yet quite dead. Deafened, he dived under a new wave, and suddenly the miracle happened. Something unlocked in his brain, and memory returned. His call-sign

emerged first of all, then whole sentences, perfectly composed. An imbecile fear prevented his making a movement, fear lest it should all disintegrate again the next second. Something was working away deep down inside him, slowly, painfully, laboriously. He managed to prop himself on his knees, took a deep breath, wanted to laugh, felt himself capable of reciting the whole Bible in morse. At last his body connected with his mind, and he placed his hand on the sending-key. Just at that moment, the hut became transfigured. It was bathed in blue flashes of lightning and gigantic shadows leapt from every object like the souls leaving the dead. Outside, the thunder rumbled among the trees, a ball of flame unwinding itself. Agyre uttered the cry of a stricken beast and flung himself to the ground. The Colt slithered across the floor; the hand that had been on the radio was inert and the other gripped it awkwardly. The storm had overwhelmed everything; the metal knob no longer connected with anything but the storm. Still staggered by the shock, Agyre laboriously collected his revolver. Then he returned to his corner, trembling all over. At that moment he was not mad. The fever left him zones of lucid calm, let him stop at each turn in the path to Calvary to survey the ground already covered. For the moment, exhaustion and disgust possessed him utterly. He was like a drunkard who sees in a lucid moment all the irreparable things that he has done, and to which he is inexorably bound. Me! me to have come to this! he said to himself stupidly, hardly understanding the meaning of his lament. Then he wept and became querulous. Why had he not the right to start again from scratch? Where were they? Where was the man who was

holding him prisoner? Let him show himself? He admitted that he had made a mistake; he cried it out to the night. Yes, he had taken the wrong road; he repented, he would never do it again. Well then, why didn't they hear him? Why didn't they put a stop to the torture, now that he had confessed? He recanted, he surrendered. So it should all come to an end. So the curtain of fear and storm and fever should be torn away, should disappear; this absurd conspiracy should dissolve and he, Agyre, with the name he bore in former days and which was his own, should find himself in Lausanne again as before, with Ganna. And even without Ganna, he thought, on the brink of perjury. With nothing but the cool night all round him, and without death, without madness, without fear. And thinking about his terror, the real fever rose up again inside him, as desire arises from the gestures that mimic it. The heat took possession of him once more; the old images became confused and rearranged themselves as hostile figures. And fury possessed him again, and thirst. And the obsession with the elephants. The metamorphosis operated slowly. All the forces that were returning to him fed the monstrous being that was taking his place. Thus it is that madmen are born. He lowered his head and pressed his two hands together against his face, the gesture of an anguish that was no longer his. When he raised his head, his face was calm. Madness had engulfed him; he struggled no longer. He simply stared intently at the radio. And at the beating drums. Bang bang bang. For the moment the grey square of the radio set embodied all the forces gathered against him. Gently he lifted the Colt. He checked himself. Something un-

expressed, a distant warning told him he hadn't the right to do that; he would be punished. But who would punish him? He was dead. Crushed. An enormous elephant's foot dangled above the hut, a grotesque metronome. A call, a signal, and the hut would close in on itself like an anemone shutting up. Agyre, Agyre would be transformed into a stew of flesh, of crumbled bones, of green and red liquids. Bang bang bang. The herd rushed round the field with a great sound of trumpeting. Jericho. Bang bang bang. The east wind tossed its dismasted fleets about the night. Kelso revolved in a boundless territory; the earth had been removed from him like a carpet rolled back. The east wind swelled its voice; the storm broke up under its onslaught in a froth of fire. The cry of the east wind came from the sea, deafening Kelso, sweeping the coast, as far as Hong 33. Agyre got up, also cried out and fired two bullets into the radio set. He was stunned by the noise of the shots, the smell of the powder. He stood in the darkness, his arms dangling. A noise as of a woman groaning floated round him, like an open wound. The drums beat wildly. Bang bang bang. Agyre collapsed at the foot of the bed, his face contorted. He was caught up in the rhythm of the storm; he breathed to the cadence of the east wind. Smoke floated slowly through the spellbound cabin, probed every few seconds by the red hot iron of the lightning flashes. In the world that he now inhabited, Agyre could no longer recognise the rhythm of the drums that haunted him, the rhythm of death. Bang bang ta-ta-tang. Bang bang ta-ta-tang. Processions without faces, the rite of death. And the east wind leading them, grouping the mourners, sounding its gongs in front of

the unfurled banners. Bang bang. Kelso revolved and Joel played and Hélène listened and Jerry listened and Van Helsen listened. Bang bang ta-ta-tang. Bang bang ta-ta-tang. Now Agyre sang. He sang in a far-away voice like voices heard over the telephone. A vague chant that clung to the rhythm of the storm. It gushed from him effortlessly, almost against his will. It absorbed him, reducing him to nothing but a voice. He was nothing but the sound of his own singing. The rest of his flesh was a collapsed jellyfish, lifted up in waves by the pulsing surge of fear. His melancholy song alone magnetised him. It was that alone which kept his head up, his eyes open. It twisted and turned on itself like an Arabic letter. It unfolded itself, now rising sharply in a cry of desperation, then returning to a low register, curling slowly round a single note like some slow-moving swimmer. Long creeper-like plants twisted round in his memory. He saw lakes of quicksilver, black heavily-scented trees, feathery bracken, spears. Agyre chanted an exorcism of primitive times. His chant broke, scaled off into tears, grew hoarse, like the voice of an old negress nursing a dead child. Step by step, Agyre was drifting away from himself. All memories had gone. He was a melodic line grafted to the figured basses of the storm. Bang bang. An obscure vibration.

Somewhere, a long way off, night moved forward. A purple stain expanding on a blotting pad. Somewhere, a long way off, over the fever lands, over the silent towns, over the river deltas, over the sodden beaches. The stars manoeuvred in the roadstead of the sky. Somewhere, a

long way off, the night was deep and cool like a well, still constellations lit up over the plain, scattering their beams deep into the night where they shone back from a myriad jutting rocks. Somewhere, a long way off, the night was a vast altar laden with lamps, beginning that mysterious work of espionage in which every light is a signal to the gods. Beyond the walls of the besieged city went the call signs, the blinking lights, the clustering lights of houses. Somewhere, a long way off, the night was soft and studded with gold. Under the great canvas, angels swung backwards and forwards in the beams of the arc lights, and to anticipate their fall, radio signals joined to weave an invisible net across the nocturnal circus. Somewhere, a long way off, through the tapping of the morse signals, like stuttering toads, deep voices crossed the stormless night, undisturbed by the east wind. Somewhere, a long way off, in an American town humming with machinery, a woman sang in front of an orchestra, standing in her long blue dress like the column of fire that guides an army. Her voice floated softly through the world, brooding over townships killed by the moon, where the white houses cast on the earth the shadow of their future ruins. And thousands of searching hearts grasped that voice like a halliard, to hoist their secret sails. The voice brought those who were united closer together, parted those who were already divided: to each it brought his own consolatory truth. All night it would float, it would be a vibration prolonging itself in sleep, an intimate murmur, a breeding ground for dreams. Symbol of the music that is in man, the voice would be the guardian angel of those who are incapable of expressing it. It would die at dawn, as spies do. . . .

Somewhere, a long way off, the night carried the singing voices and their meaningless words, the beams of the lighthouses, and the twin jewels of navigation lights. Ships nearing the coast announced their arrival, observers on islands in the cold sea asked for news of the continent, airports talked to the mail planes, promising them good weather, a Japanese station in Manchuria emitted discordant music, the English ladies of Simla, who had taken refuge there from the monsoon, waited for the news from London, Russian pioneers received messages from their families, a radio amateur on the short wave shrieked out his first transmission trembling with pride, the French radio pushed stupidity to still further limits, Andorra ground out waltzes on accordeons, the orchestra played at Lucerne, and Jerry and Van Helsen listened. Somewhere, a long way off, Joel was deciphering a cryptogram; through him Mozart's message was being transmitted in plain language to Saigon. Joel's hands moved along the keyboard, reaching higher and higher; Kelso pulled back the stick and gained height; Jerry in his turn deciphered the signal like a receiving station, letting the precious web of music disentangle itself inside him, each strand pairing off with its counterpart inside him, happiness or disquiet, and his mind soared upwards. He dreamed of the advancing night: somewhere, a long way off. . . . The words filled him with a sort of confused tenderness, like music, as if he sensed in them everything that kept him cut off from peace. And yet, there was a serenity about this nocturnal world. Night must be falling now over Samarkand and the dawn frost advancing on Vancouver. Soon the night would fully cover that half of mankind that seeks to

reconcile itself with the world, leaving the light for those who wish to transform it. All the empires of sleep would shine feebly under the moon, the east wind would blow gently through the ricefields, and the shadow of the sacred bushes would leave a light and regular imprint on the false snow that was the moonlight, like the tracks of a fox. At the same time the night would be biting at the mouths of the Obi and the Yukon rivers, between which sleep the people who move in the stream of the universe, who never resist, who never try to dam the current, the people whose salvation remains inseparable from that of the earth, of the stars, of the rivers, of the night itself. Is that what peace means? Jerry asked himself. Is that where salvation lies, in self absorption in the human dream? Has my life any meaning, seen from this half-submerged Asia, iceberg of nothingness, that looms silently over us? . . . Van Helsen was signing service messages. There could be no question of allowing the whole activity of the station to revolve round Kelso's troubles. They were giving enough thought to him as it was. It was a question of keeping up the rhythm of work, of reducing the case of Kelso to material proportions, the proportions of an unfortunate loss of time, a difficult trip. It was a question of exorcising the human myth, the shroud of glory in which dead pilots become wrapped. If the drama was played out in front of everyone, as a human drama of flesh and blood, who would be able to continue? It is possible to withstand fear, but not the absurd. . . . Van Helsen knew that the mail he was carrying wasn't worth the life of a man, certainly not the life of a man like Kelso. He remembered how infuriated he had been, at the time of the armistice, on

hearing one of his relations saying to the mother of a dead comrade: "Ah well, you see now that your son's sacrifice wasn't in vain." As if there was any common standard by which the two things could be compared. As if anything, at any level, was worth the life of Kelso, or his, Van Helsen's life. As if earthly things could counterbalance the weight of the void that awaited them. As if a few consolations or arguments could restore even partially the loss of one who has lost all. Van Helsen, even before the war, had never acknowledged that one could die otherwise than in vain. And yet he had fought, he had seen death in the raw. With a curious mixture of contempt and exhilaration. . . . "To become an airman, it's just like condemning yourself to death," some fool had told him. As if you weren't all condemned to death. . . . Perhaps at that very moment Kelso was saying to himself: "A little sooner, a little later." But he, Van Helsen, remained on the shore, useless, merely a witness to this death, condemned to waiting. To think that I'm incapable of approaching him, of perceiving him, that he could blow up at this very moment half a mile away without my receiving any warning of it, without anything clicking in my memory, or my getting any picture of it. I claim to understand him, to be close to him, and yet he could be annihilated, return to dust without touching off any hidden spring inside me. How shall I ever recover his friendship if he crashes? How shall I excuse myself for not having been there, for not having watched over him in his last agony, for not having thrown the first handful of earth on his body? And how carry on with an enterprise the price of which is the rarest, the most irreplaceable thing in



the world, in order to realise a dream. . . . Van Helsen knew that he would carry on, that he would not let himself be ensnared by what was absurd and contradictory, he knew that a man's power to endure such a shattering experience, to embrace it in spite of himself, was the measure of his true strength. "Pilots are reminded that disciplinary action will be taken in the event of any change of route not justified by an immediate danger. . . ." Van Helsen signed. He repudiated nothing of his work. If I had had a more . . . agreeable existence, he thought with a smile, perhaps I wouldn't have ended up with thoughts that were any more comforting, but I should probably have lost the right to have them. And he listened intently to Mozart's music, in which the theme had come back into the minor key, as though stripped of all affirmation, of any will to dominate, trusting now exclusively to its strange power to disturb. The moment of the cadenza came, when the whole orchestra is suddenly silent, like a circus audience anxious not to disturb the most dangerous feat of all. Van Helsen looked at Jerry. They knew that Joel had often taken the liberty of improvising his own cadenza in the middle of the concert, meeting up with the orchestra again at the final flourish. But at Lucerne such things were not done, and Jerry was able to follow a very beautiful cadenza that he knew by heart, that had been written in the enchanted house two years before. All alone, Joel played, coming up slowly from the low octaves like a diver laden with mother-of-pearl. Alone, Van Helsen listened. Alone, Jerry listened. Alone, Hélène listened. Alone, Kelso blinked his eyelids. Alone, Agyre barked out his strange song. Somewhere, a long way off,

in the friendly night, men were coming to terms with the world, making excuses for themselves, justifying themselves. Somewhere, a long way off, the radio was weaving a network of men who spoke to one another, who joined up with one another, who, by the magic of their voices, entered into and enriched one another. But around those who had been affected by the profound question, the links of the network were broken, and only the mute spirit of solitude remained. At the concert in Saigon, where the pianist was content to reproduce a cadenza by Fischer, Hélène called to Kelso from the depths of her being and her flesh, and nothing answered, nothing but the void, the void with its swooning effect that resembled desire, that made her catch her breath and slowly swelled her breasts. Kelso struggled against the sleep that had gripped him, and for the first time since he had been caught in the storm he thought of Hélène's breasts, her wide mouth, her handsome face like that of a Nordic Amazon. His wound, numbness and exhaustion were leading him gradually into dreams. As he crossed the frontier it was as though a canvas was being ripped, and the voice of Hélène echoing near him flung him back again. He raised his head, his eyes opened. Sleep did not lose heart, but set its traps once more. After some delicate arabesques Joel came back to the basic theme, unadorned at first then enriched with all the embellishments authorised by Mozart. On the way, he emphasised a certain phrase, at once delicate and firm, that he was particularly fond of and which the score only touched on lightly. He plunged into the theme, using the melody to construct a series of clear and fragile arpeggios like tinkling glass. Out of the theme he drew its

question, its lofty, calm despair. The music rose in volume, the tone swelled. Kelso's head was bowed. Hélène's body braced itself; a force outside her was pressing against the back of her neck. Agyre finished his song with a wolfish howl. Joel rapidly ascended the keyboard and then down again, with a flourish, giving it everything he knew. The orchestra came in again and quelled the flood. A few more arpeggios, changing the colour of the horn's insistent call which gradually faded, and then it was over. Kelso plunged into a hostile sleep. Agyre lay down on the floor, his voice broken; he was mad. Hélène had calmed down; she sat with her legs together, her fingers gripping the arm rests, weary and dissatisfied. Van Helsen was silent. Jerry was still in a dream. The Saigon pianist acknowledged the applause while grumbling to himself about this audience of hungry enthusiasts who didn't know that one never claps at the end of a movement. It was over. Somewhere, a long way off, night was advancing. A purple stain spreading over a blotting pad. Somewhere, a long way off, the night was a promise, the world was at peace. It was over. Kelso slept and Agyre slept and Hélène was at rest. They were alone. Alone. Buried in their solitude, decked out and offered up for death. The telephone rang. Van Helsen turned off the radio. The storm could be heard galloping over the roofs. Somewhere, a long way off, night was clearing, revealing its double towns, black and white, its marble galleries, its flowers. It made the watchers on watch towers sing, to drive away the angel of solitude and to answer Mozart.

## IV

VAN HELSEN put down the receiver. Jerry wondered why he had never noticed his clear blue sailor's eyes before, the gentleness of his expression. Following his glance, Jerry's eyes rested on the map—that part of the map where the curves change, on the peg in the centre of the violet wave that was Indo-China, the point where the deep hollow of Tonking merges with the jagged ridge that comes straight down to Saigon, the hinge of that old port of Hué, defended against the sea by a pair of crab-like pincers. Van Helsen got up and went over to the wall. He grasped the map as though he hoped to see a new continent arise there, emerging to welcome Kelso. He gazed intently at that sleeping land: everything that, for Kelso, might be a cause of death was marked in colour. Nothing was missing. There were the ragged contours of the coast, snatched like shreds of fabric from the hands of the ship-wrecked. There were the mountains with all their ridges, their persistent folds, riddled with traps. There were the swamp lands which suck one under, the false alleyways of rock where one crashes, the peaks pointing straight up into the night marked with their height so that nothing should be left out, and the strange or friendly names under which they shelter so as to inspire confidence: Pou Atouat, the Pass of the Clouds, the Mother and Child. There were the lakes like plains of salt, and the soft unhealthy lands round the rivers, infested with fever and bandits; there was the tangled forest, and there was the sea, the last enemy, divided into tiers of different blues, darker and darker as disaster becomes more certain. Van Helsen saw

Kelso, the tiny silhouette of an aircraft standing out like a fly, approaching that funnel of coloured rings, above the circles already widening away from the exact position of his fall, entering that mouth lit as it were with the diminishing gleam of some spectre. And all the little jagged gods of the coast, Quang-Tri, Quang-Ngai, Qui-Nhon, were watching there like lighthouses in reverse, ready to fling him into the sea. Against this vast enemy host, fighting with visors up, there was but one ally, lost, shaking in the midst of the storm: the radio. And, in the gaps between those short moments when Kelso let himself be heard or seen, there was Van Helsen striking attitudes, shaking his fists against the familiar demons, threatening the invisible with reprisals, lodging complaints against the unknown. . . . He was completely overwrought. He turned and looked at Jerry, who was questioning him with his eyes.

"Huh, there we are . . . Hué has heard an engine approximately south-east. It can't be anyone but him."

"So all's well?"

"No. In the first place he's completely off his course. You can imagine, with his lights fused, in this filth. . . . And then he seems to be heading straight out to sea."

"Perhaps he's turned back."

"No. If he had turned back, it would have been at Tourane or further back. And then we would have heard him. . . . No. At the moment the people at Hué are shouting themselves hoarse trying to get him to signal by stopping his engine. If it's really him, they will try to divert him to one of the landing grounds in the interior. But then, how to get in touch with him. The operators

here are finding it bad enough. So as for him, up there. . . ."

"And if it isn't him?"

"Well, you know, there can't be very many of them left in the air by now. Those who were able to land have landed, and the others. . . ." He sketched a nonchalant gesture, and was annoyed with himself for not being able to complete it.

Outside, the half-hidden storm turned over under its blankets making puffing, crackling noises. Jerry thought of the loneliness of Kelso, alone in the air of all those who had saved themselves and those who had fallen. The hero. The hero, the last to fall. The survivors were all supernumerary. Van Helsen turned back to the map. He could not leave it, his eyes were drawn towards it as if by a magnet. All that deep blue, that violet striped with names, those orange-coloured veins, reflected themselves in his eyes, in which the pupils glinted like little raisins in the lamplight; and Jerry saw, shining above the dark table, two identical planets in which moving peninsulas could be divined like fishes at the bottom of an aquarium. In a region of his mind that he refused to acknowledge, Van Helsen was thinking of what a memorial service for Kelso would be like. The beauty of that service. The solemnity, the simplicity of that service. The chorale "Christ Lay in the Bonds of Death". Van Helsen's words. "The Director of the Line, in a few words that went straight to every heart. . . ." Enough of this sloppiness. . . . What on earth am I admitting to myself with these thoughts? Perhaps it's temptation. . . . Kelso wasn't a cheap hero, one of those that one can describe in a few vivid phrases. No, not that. Kelso was a, was

a. . . . No. No. No. Kelso is still alive. He isn't a cheap hero. He's still alive. If only he'd signal, for God's sake, I'd go straight to the gonio. . . .

"You've got a nasty look about you," Jerry remarked half smiling.

"So much the better," Van Helsen said. "When one's getting old either one looks nasty or one looks stupid."

"Oh yeah. . . . Earlier on, while Joel was playing, you were more like an amiable cowboy, you know the sort of chap who wears his heart on his sleeve. . . . But just now your eyes were turned inwards, your cheeks were hollow. A regular monk."

"Is that what you call nasty? All right. . . . Let's say it's the prayer that makes the monk. I was thinking, er . . . piously, about Kelso."

"Don't tell me you've become religious?"

"You know, we didn't discuss theology much at Sonnowa. Joel has a wonderful technique of being shocked by anything that bores him. And the rest of you, at bottom, just didn't care a damn."

"Me, I'm a Buddhist," Jerry declared facetiously.

"That, my dear old boy, you had better reserve for Brooklyn. Because over here, if you'll excuse my saying so, they know something about Buddhism. . . . No, I don't know if I'm religious. But I believe in God. I get there by a tiny little narrow path, but I do believe."

"What do you mean by a tiny little narrow path? It's the gate that's narrow, or something like that, isn't it? Tell me about it, you fascinate me."

"Jerry, it's obvious that you're still an adolescent. You're incapable of talking seriously."

"Touché," said Jerry sportingly. "Tell me all the same."

"What I mean is that there are, so to speak, guide posts between which I believe. For me to believe in God, He must be a little like me. . . . He must be part of me a little. But if He's too much like me, then there's only me left. So that's what it is, that little narrow ribbon of road, where I can apprehend God. If I leave it, He escapes me, or I become merged with Him."

"Yes. . . . You're going to shoot me down again, but for me God in the shape of Van Helsen isn't very far removed from God with a long white beard."

Van Helsen stretched himself. "You know, *à propos* of that. . . . I'm very fond of the story our theology professor used to tell us. He knew some people, practising Christians, who had decided to bring up their small daughter in an enlightened creed, without any imagery of any sort. Fine. In the language of enlightenment God was not an old gentleman sitting on a cloud, but a substance who—which—anyway a substance. But when the professor asked her questions, to try to find out what image this word 'substance' conjured up for her after all, he found that it was something rather like tapioca. . . . I prefer my own face."

Jerry decided to counter-attack. "I can see what your Christianity consists of. A system of connecting links between God and your actions, at the end of which it's you who make all the decisions. Like the bishops who are God's policemen, or his knights. God's administration, and the fight for God's cause ends by taking the place of God. Don't tell me that you have leanings towards contemplation. . . ."

"I haven't told you anything, Jerry."

"Nor that you go to Mass on Sundays."

"No. . . . That is, sometimes . . . for the music."

"There you are. . . . An edifying spectacle: Van Helsen listening to sacred music while thinking of his aeroplanes, with God in the background waiting for an audience. . . . Whatever you may say, to me it's phoney. It's the cult of beautiful despair. One takes the cream of every system and makes one's own little cocktail from it. It's funny, but between the two of us, it's you who fall into the sin of adolescence."

"Well spoken. . . . But nevertheless it's you who are the adolescent, because you're afraid of religion. . . . The sign of maturity, perhaps, is simply not to be ashamed of one's, how shall I say it, adolescentricities. . . ."

"I say, you're not going to give me that line about age and youth. . . ."

"I am indeed. And the wrong way round, as usual. You know, it's almost impossible to speak of youth, because it's too many things at once, because it's elusive when one's in it, irretrievable when one's out of it. . . . It's, so to speak, the hen with the golden eggs. One must wait for the daily miracle and seek no further. But one of the few certain things is that sort of osmosis through which each generation assumes the perspective of the other. You speak of adolescence in the way in which you think a mature man would speak of it: as a lack of order. And I, the mature man, I don't think it's funny; I tell you that what frightens me in adolescence, on the contrary, is its order, its inhuman order. It's not for nothing that political militants are recruited among

adolescents. You reproach me for gleaning from all the systems, whereas you, you're prepared to choose one, to accept it totally regardless of the direction in which it's going, with all its consequences. Your order is determined by a faith. (Moreover it's a false faith. One should first honestly take into account all the hazards, all the frailties that make you choose.) It's the order of the propagandists, of the posters. The A is faithful to the B, and so on. My lack of order, as you call it, which is in fact a form of order, is determined by things that oppose one another, that fight one another. If yours is the order of a workshop, mine might be that of . . . a planetary system," Van Helsen concluded, laughing. Jerry didn't answer. Van Helsen went on, more seriously: "You can call that my beautiful despair if you like. Actually, I expect nothing from death. I don't even feel the need to establish any connection between it and what I believe of God. The little savings bank of the Church, which gives you eternity at the end of your payments, that doesn't excite me at all. I am not the saving type. What matters is to await death with an imprint of your own, of your actions, to leave around you. You mould the cast around yourself, and when Death comes to drive you out of it, he at least stays trapped there. He becomes your own statue. . . . All that may not be very orthodox, but there it is. . . . And I believe that after all I remain linked to God by a sort of loose wire at the end of which I happen to lose sight of Him. . . ."

The telephone. Van Helsen flung himself at it, with the smile he had meant for Jerry still on his lips.

"Hué has just called us back, M. le Directeur. The aircraft they spotted has answered their signal. They

lost him for a moment, but he's signalling again now."

Van Helsen nodded his head to indicate to Jerry that it was Kelso they were talking about. At the same time he moved over to the map pressing the receiver to his face like the hand of a dying man. With his other hand he made vague signs, pointing his index finger at the compass card in the corner, bright and bristling like an enormous spider. Fragments of his funeral oration for Kelso slid in between the figures again, and he shook his head to try and get rid of them.

"Tell Hué to send a message to Kelso immediately: *Here is your position. Heading out to sea. Alter course three-quarters South.* That's all. Get them to send this message by any means possible. Now give me the R.D.F. . . . Or rather, wait . . . I'll go there myself."

He put down the receiver. In spite of himself his eyes went back to the map. Three-quarters South. Whatever the little devils may do, Kelso will force his way through. "I think he's safe," Van Helsen muttered to himself.

"I'm going to the R.D.F.," he added aloud. "You coming Jerry?"

"Yes." They took a few steps. Van Helsen glanced once more at the map, with a challenging sort of look.

"I wanted to ask you . . ." Jerry hesitated.

"Yes?"

"It's about what you were saying when the telephone rang. At tricky moments, I mean . . . not for you specially . . . for example, now if you like: do you really think a great deal about God, or is it precisely at such moments that you lose sight of Him? . . . I mean, what strikes you most when you think of Kelso, God or . . . your 'beautiful despair'?"

"Let's go to the R.D.F. room," Van Helsen said. They went down through empty ill-lit rooms, banging the doors, awakening echoes, like foreign travellers violating a tomb.

Kelso was in his bed now, in Soho. The street-noises lulled rather than wakened him. He dreamt that he had gone up in an aeroplane, that he had been caught in a storm . . . He knew perfectly well that he was dreaming, that all that wasn't serious, that as soon as the flaming aircraft flung him into space he would find himself in his grey room, with its grey sheets, and the rain outside. How heavy his head was. He might have been much older. He no longer felt that pleasant elasticity in his legs; instead there was a numbness that he had never known. And those noises. When he was older, he would really go up in an aeroplane, in real storms, that would do him no harm. . . . God! as long as I don't wake up. After that, I must spell out Hickory-Dickory-Dock, backwards and forwards, or else recite a prayer, or some limericks, especially those I don't want to remember. . . . God! as long as I don't wake up. He didn't wake from the edge of sleep which merged with the street noises and the smell of the grey room; but his dream shifted, glided rapidly between the two layers of his fatigue, evoking on its way things known but shapeless that were not yet memories. The Dark. She glued herself on to me. The wind blew wildly in the narrow street. Old scrap-iron. Dirty water. What blind beast awoke inside me. The Dark is lying in wait for me. If I close my eyes in my dreams, I am lost. And yet the heaviness of my

head. . . . It was dark; I heard her groan. Sleep. The dream itself is falling asleep. I'm returning to the Dark. I'm returning. Dark. Darkly. Darkling. Darkness. Dark. Dark. . . .

And sleep flung him back on to the beach like a half-drowned man. He was once more aware of the aircraft, of the storm. He was aware of himself once more, so different. The bitter tang of awakening hung on his lips. Utter darkness. A little anxious now, he pulled on the stick. It's extraordinary, he thought, but I've been asleep twice running, not for long, it's true, but I have been asleep. And I might fall asleep again, and it might last . . . last precisely as long as me. By way of reassuring himself, Kelso recalled everything he had heard about those dreams that compress themselves into a fraction of a second, however long they may seem. But he remained a little anxious. He bent forward. He peered into the night. Nothing. Darkness. That at least he hadn't dreamed, that old enemy that descends into both realms. To think that I never once dreamed of Hélène—and hasn't she often enough complained of not being able to enter into my sleep—and that my fear comes in and joins me even there, however deeply I may have buried myself in it. . . . Buried as I am now in this darkness. When he had received the signal from Hué, he had corrected his course, by guesswork. No compass; no rev. counter. A mass of shadow. I must be following the coastline. After the dazzling freshness of the evening. . . . Revolting, this swamp of memories. Either one regrets having lived them, or one regrets losing them. . . . I must be following the coastline. A cold sweat broke out on Kelso's forehead; he felt his mouth tremble

a little. What if I've changed direction while I was asleep? Not much, of course, but. . . . If I've swerved off again, however little, I'm lost again, until some station picks me up. . . .

Impossible to transmit or receive anything by radio. The storm pervaded everything.

A sudden gleam lit up the clouds. Kelso gave a start. Tourane perhaps. . . .

The light dissolved before he had been able to see anything, but he dived down in a wide spiral towards the spot where . . .

Another. Obviously a flare. The Simoun dived towards it. The flare died.

Could I have the luck to be just above an emergency landing ground on the look out for me? Or else a coastal station signalling to ships in the storm?

I can't be flying very high now. I've only to keep going. His mind was now entirely preoccupied with the light he was looking for. Soho and the black men had remained at nine thousand feet.

A third flare. Kelso was dazzled, but managed to distinguish an oblong, flickering shape. . . .

A ship. The sea.

He turned sharply, his temples throbbing. A lost child. Again he saw the woman's grin. Darkness.

Closing the door behind her, Hélène stood still for some time in the darkness of her room. The music still echoed in her memory, merging with the sounds of the receding storm as everywhere it beat a furious retreat. She thought of her South American friend who would

fling herself on her knees at the faintest clap of thunder, rapidly reciting "Santa Barbara donzella . . .", a sovereign adjuration against the elements. With her back against the door, she stood there in the darkness. Her whole will and all her thoughts shaped themselves to her feeling of exhaustion. She groped for a cigarette. A large mirror, standing at an angle in front of the window, framed her reflection faintly illuminated by the frosty light of the night itself. When she lit the cigarette, the face flared up in the mirror, striped with fierce shadows in the places where the lines would form, like the outline of a path along which everything would pass and vanish, life and everything that justifies it. How much longer. . . . She raised her head, and leant it against the door in an agonised way; she was aware of her taut, smooth skin, her slightly swollen lips, and she was happy in the realisation that her face was at its loveliest precisely in the attitude of surrender. Slowly she ran her teeth over the scar where Kelso had bitten her. And suddenly, before she had realised it, she had reopened the scar herself. Realisation followed, combining shame with joy, while her teeth remained in the wound and she felt a drop of blood on her tongue, thick and heavy like warm oil. She tasted it long and deliberately, then forced more blood by pressing her lips together, trying to imagine the savour of her mouth, to steal from Kelso a part of that world into which he shut himself. To be him! To be him! she thought, that was the only way to belong to him. And she ran her teeth gently over the scar. Motionless, her hands clasped in front of her body and holding the cigarette, she stared into the mirror at a large, shadowy figure burning with passion. She opened

her mouth, abandoning her search. I shall never be him. We will desire one another, we will come near enough to bruise and hurt one another, but we will never be one. It is as though we embraced one another through an infinitely fine and transparent tissue, spread between us by chance when we were separated; we can feel all over it from now until the end of time without finding any opening in it. We can strike one another through it, we can leave the imprint of our faces or the marks of our love on it, we can wrap ourselves up in it (it is supple and follows the shape of our bodies like clay)—but we shall never be quite naked one against the other. Never. She quickly switched on the light before the obsession became too strong. The brightness dazzled and calmed her. "As if I were waking from the dead." She went to the mirror and looked at her face for a long time, her superb face like that of a wounded Diana, with its almost miraculous whiteness made all the more transparent by her sunburn, a face like marble, the face of a statue, of an idol, upon which life could be detected only by the pale ring of shadow around the eyes and the trace of blood on the lips.

How much longer. . . . Hélène watched the angel of death that lay hidden inside her, working slowly but surely, tunnelling silently like a miner without a lamp. Slowly it mined away, always creeping forward. Its presence is disclosed in a single day. All that flesh so precisely woven together that a fingernail can tear it, in a single day it flakes off and crinkles under the blind pressure of the other face that will take its place at the end of the struggle. When shall I see death look at me with my own eyes? And when that day comes, will I



have the courage to face up to it? Her lips brushed lightly against the mirror. But the time can't have come yet. . . . They were her own eyes still, none but hers, so near to her that it seemed she almost sank into them. Nothing mocking or defiant troubled them. Two discs of blue metal, like sword hilts, plunging straight ahead, purer than death. The angel's work had not yet gone so very far.

Hélène stretched herself out on the large austere bed, checkered in black and white and raised like an altar against the naked wall. For the first time, she thought of what the future would be, if they were spared an early death: old age with Kelso. The thought frightened her. How many people are there who have sworn not to outlive the first suggestion of decay, and who yet from day to day, with every look in the mirror, with each dab of make-up, have travelled the strange road of tortured beauty, that tunnel of self-deception, of conscious blindness, of slow intoxication, that leads finally, when it is already too late, to an alien face. Long separated from her family, all of whose photographs she had burnt, Hélène at least had no mother beside her to be continually showing her what she would look like, like the death's head on the alchemist's table. But she knew what it meant to grow old: no longer to arouse desire. No longer to feel it either, perhaps, or only a desperate, monstrous desire. And Kelso grown old. . . . Of course, there must be others who see, beyond their love, a job of work to be accomplished, the human testimony, the life to be passed on. For them, the defeat of the body matters little: the children and the task itself can give them all the beauty they need. But for us, our love is

our task. In it we have invested all our energy, all our powers of incarnation. Yet even such a concentration of strength as this cannot defend love against Time. It is as though it were being eaten away by an irresistible sea, to which it will be forced to yield by all that is uncompromising and unjust in itself, by all that makes it ours. If others make it a continuous indulgence, for us it's a continuous demand, a hard and unremitting encounter, a contest of body and soul. I know those devoted old couples who are full of attention for one another and who arouse nothing but smiles and pity. A question of brotherhood, mutual aid between accomplices. Each recognises in the other his own complacency, and that dull, cowardly disgust in which pride still lingers. A living creature is added to the stock of familiar objects, old clothes, old ideas, to become at the same time a point of reference and an excuse. Nothing more to hide, nothing more to uphold; one can at last taste of the opium of abasement, without the need for a shred of human dignity. And then there are the little presents, and the tactful gestures, as if each wanted to buy the silence of the other. United unto death, they say. And I know the source of that union. There's a corpse between them. No, two corpses. Their own.

Opposite the bed, Hélène had hung a fine reproduction of the Garden of Hieronymus Bosch. There time was stopped, the air was stripped of all that goes to make up its living vapour—shade, heat, perspective. All those naked bodies bathed in a void; none breathed, and already the useless breasts, the muscles no longer exercised by any weight, were beginning to wither and grow thin. There was pleasure, limitless, without point and

without fulfilment, under the sun of Joshua. And because it touched the eternal, it no longer had the power to move. Whereas imagination, or music (or, as a moment before, her own image) could find an easy way to the very depths of Héléne's being and strike in her a secret, irresistible chord, she was able to gaze at the creatures of the Garden without emotion. There, hands could be folded over the sexual organs, Sirens could offer their breasts to the sea-horses, lovers screen their embraces in transparent bubbles, but nothing affected the senses. A prodigious intelligence was chasing its own tail, was seeking to express itself in a delirium of invention. It was the image of Hell. The faces were ageless, the caresses without purpose. There was no beginning and no end; desire was dead and with it the satisfaction of desire. Pleasure condemned itself to its own perpetuation without hope, to the contemplation of an eternal and unthinkable present. No joy inhabited those faces, there was no vigour in their sexual organs. It was the world of sterility, the world of continual application, of pure spirit: it was Hell. A few great birds, gorged with life and as big as three men, alone moved about and watched, as if they were the gaolers of God.

Perhaps that's the world I'm destined for, Héléne thought. Whether I arrive there as a result of my obsession with him or by some path that gives easier access to that country—alcohol or opium—makes little difference. . . . To break with Kelso while there's still time, and spend the rest of my life re-creating him, re-creating myself as well, with all the weariness, the twisting of the limbs, the nervous exhaustion, the fever of the solitary

prisoner who caresses herself all through the night thinking of the hand of her lover. . . . Have I any choice, between the lukewarm, cowardly garden of life which is acceptance, and that other ice-cold garden? Either means shame, and between the two there is agony, my own agony. To go on living with that agony, to make it my rule, my balancing pole, like a tightrope walker advancing with a sword piercing his heart, that would be far too Christian for me. . . . She got up painfully, turned down the lights and opened the window on to the warm, damp night where in the distance the storm was flinging its thundering waves on to the shore of the sky. Slowly she took off her clothes. Before lying down, she took another long look at herself in the mirror, without anxiety or complacency, but with the calm anguish of nakedness without desire. Her beauty was forceful, the strength of her hips and shoulders all the more poignant for being belied by the fatal softness of the breasts. Born, so to speak, without either family, homeland or any sort of guide line, the only thing she had was her beauty. The rest she had had to win for herself, and she guessed that the influence of the will was small in essential things: it was with her beauty that she must play life's game, that she must win whatever was to be won. She thought once more of the half-caste she had seen at the concert, but without any feeling of regret. . . . It was too late; the die was cast; only her body belonged to her: it was her body which must prove itself stronger than the enchanted little finches of the Garden, more powerful than the gods that made it. Héléne now lay in the attitude of a swimmer; and, with her left hand buried deep beneath the pillow like one

who, on a beach, seeks the cooler under-sand, she struggled for sleep. Her teeth still rubbed against the scar on her lower lip. She crossed and uncrossed her legs like slow-moving seaweed. Towards dawn, by some mysterious sympathy even in the depths of sleep, Kelso and Héléne used to alter their embrace; their legs, entwined, would bestride one another; Héléne would lay her head on Kelso's chest. "My place," she would sometimes say—and Kelso would smile. Perhaps he was thinking of other women. . . . Héléne relaxed, thrust her arm further under the pillow in search of coolness, and stretched out her legs, spread-eagled like a swimmer, filled with an immense and fruitless tenderness. And even if my anguish, she murmured, on the brink of sleep, and even if my anguish must always be in me, *he'll* always be able to put it to sleep for me. And even if it stays awake. . . . She relaxed her other hand in its turn. Sleep did not come. The sense of oppression remained, like the storm that could still be heard here and there, an enemy column surrounded and trying to escape. By way of distraction, Héléne half sat up in bed and picked up the telephone. She had suddenly had the idea of telephoning the Mail Service, to find out whether Lagier had been replaced and whether Kelso was flying tomorrow. If not, he would be there with her all day, and all night. . . . Héléne was happily impatient as she called the number.

The Mail Service was a long time answering. Not so long as Kelso returning to his "stag party" dinner. Héléne lay down again, the receiver pressed to her ear, her free hand drifting slowly along her burning hip.

There were splutterings and cracklings in the receiver. Then came the voice of the night operator.

"Is that the Mail Service? Marcheva here. Can you give me the pilot's room?"

Silence. Héléne waited, thinking the operator was putting her through without a word. But the voice came back, stammering a little: "Right you are. . . . Just a moment. . . ." What's wrong with him? Is he drunk? Héléne wondered. Through the window she saw the night lit up with sudden flames. Low clouds scudded across the sky like trucks loaded with troops.

The telephone rang and rang. Then a voice. Héléne recognised the voice.

"That you Marsan? Marcheva here. Did I wake you?"

A moment of confusion at the end of the line. I suppose I really did wake him. Héléne smiled. Low white clouds were now speeding over the rooftops.

"Not at all. . . . That's what I'm here for. . . . What can I do for you?"

"How very formal you are at night. I suppose you were sleeping like a little angel. . . . I wanted to know if Kelso was on duty tomorrow. You know, what with Lagier's accident, the service is a bit disorganised. . . ."

"I don't know, I . . . I'll ask M. Van Helsen. Just a minute."

There was the faint noise of the receiver being put down. Héléne thought she heard a step. No, it's not here. She imagined the empty, resounding halls of the Mail Service, and the sleepy Marsan trying the wrong door and locking himself in the lift.

Steps . . . this time at the other end of the wire. More noises, shrill as morse.

"M. Van Helsen says it's unlikely."

The moment Marsan began to speak, Héléne realised that something was wrong. Following him in her mind through the corridors of the Mail Service, she had arrived at Van Helsen's office, and heard Marsan asking him. . . . But Van Helsen *could not* be there, he was spending the evening with Kelso and an American journalist. . . . It was her turn to be silent. Marsan, at the other end, became worried: "Are you there, Héléne? Are you still there?" Héléne quickly pulled herself together.

"Yes, thanks, Marsan. Can you put me back to the switchboard?"

Perhaps they had gone back to the office together. . . . Yes, but what about Van Helsen's "unlikely"? Or had they just left each other. . . .

"Switchboard."

"M. Van Helsen, please."

Without noticing it Héléne had again sat up in bed in the dimly lit room. Her free hand still stroked her hip. With a swift movement she placed one cheek against her smooth, warm shoulder. Slowly she became aware of something stirring inside her. Why had she made this telephone call, knowing that Kelso could not be long coming? It was as though she was acting under some sort of threat.

"M. Van Helsen isn't in his office, Mademoiselle. I'll put you on to the R.D.F."

The R.D.F.—what could he be doing at the R.D.F. at this time of the night? And the threat circled round

and round like a prisoner in his cell. Héléne felt her lips trembling.

"Hallo, yes?"

"Joris? Héléne here. Sorry to disturb you, but . . . I thought you were spending the evening with Kelso?"

". . . and finding me here, you were overcome by the worst possible suspicions." With his customary sang-froid, Van Helsen was able to adopt the right tone at once.

"No, it's not that. . . . I know it's silly, but I was a little worried."

"Well, stop worrying, but don't expect him back. Yes. . . . What with this storm, I was afraid he might be in trouble. So I've ordered him to land on an emergency field. Forgive me for depriving you of him, but it was the wisest thing to do."

Van Helsen was sufficiently used to such stories not to add the "Above all, don't worry" calculated to agitate the calmest spirits. Nonetheless, Héléne remained aware of the threat. And Van Helsen's presence at the R.D.F. worried her. She tried to think up some way of putting the question without seeming pressing or indiscreet. She became flustered, couldn't find the right form of words, was afraid of prolonging the silence. And how could she start Van Helsen off again? "Joris, you're hiding something from me!" How ridiculous. Van Helsen made some reassuring remarks in a seemingly off-hand way. Héléne had a muddled feeling that something was happening at that moment, that she ought to force her way through the silence, intervene somehow. But nothing happened; she was overcome by shyness. Murmuring a confused thank you, she hung

up. The sensation of deafness induced by the telephone persisted for a moment or two. She put out the light. White clouds still hurried across the sky, reinforcements for the storm.

The night was now deserted. The bed grew large, like a vast salt desert. Hélène ran her hand along her hip, until it burned. Clouds raced over the rooftops. Her teeth gently felt the scar. The absence of Kelso was a great rope knotted round her breasts and cutting her, tossing her from one side to the other without any hope of rest. The faces in Bosch's Garden, the white bodies, the stilled embraces revolved slowly, unceasingly round her. Her open hand slid along her hip, once, twice, then stopped. The other hand plunged deep under the pillow, into the cool sands, seeking the wet road between the two gardens, where, as in the dreams of lovers, the full and fragile night is immortalised.

## V

THE R.D.F. room was a large square room with bare walls which, in the pyramid of light thrown by a low-hanging shade, resembled the burial chamber of an Egyptian pharaoh. Under the lamp, the radio-operator was busy giving vague exhibitions of magic. The men were crouched diligently over their work like magicians. Beyond the range of light, the high window shone feebly like a black slab on the threshold of a mausoleum. The rain still flowed down it in an unchanging network of glistening veins. Every now and again, at irregular intervals, a heavier drop would splash on to the sill. There were two other operators there, and a Russian pilot. The big radio-goniometric map displayed its dials like some implacable god. The men's still, silent figures revealed their presence through their moving shadows. Only Van Helsen cast a statuesque shadow on to the white wall.

Kelso was not answering. Indefatigably the radio operator repeated his message: "Saigon calling HKI—Saigon calling HKI." On the table, scribbled in red chalk, lay Kelso's last signal, transmitted via Hué. It was merely an acknowledgment, in the American style: "MNY TKS". Since then, silence. There, where the black threads crossed on the map, around that now deserted point, a great circle was widening from second to second, a great ring of emptiness, the boundary of a lost world. Van Helsen made a calculation: like a grid, the Simoun's radius of action gave him something by which to measure death. Ominous phrases that he angrily sought to obliterate crystallised automatically in

his mind: the radius of death. . . . Van Helsen looked at his watch. About an hour since Kelso had signalled. If he had been able to maintain his cruising speed. . . . The figures took shape: 6.28 . . . 270 . . . . The slot machine did its stuff and produced a nice shining number: 1695. Sixteen hundred and ninety five kilometres, brand new and sewn end to end, would be shown on the map. . . . A great circle nearly 2,000 kilometres in circumference, and Kelso inside it, blind, deaf, free, terribly free in the midst of all these directions, those that would lead him to calm weather, those that would carry him out over the sea, those that would fling him among the mountains, those that would plunge him into the depths of the storm—all equal in his eyes. Jerry watched the transmitting key under the operator's finger. One short, one long—A. Two short—I. He lost the rhythm, then picked it up again. He was as fascinated by the riddle of this as by Kelso's disappearance. The impassive face of the operator between the headphones seemed remote, paralysed. Only his finger moved, pecking insistently at the machine. Jerry remembered an old film he had seen; about a telegraph operator who had had a stroke and could only make himself understood through his finger; and his wife, not knowing morse, watched the signal helplessly and wept. . . . For the thousandth time, Saigon called HK1. Van Helsen looked at the dials, Jerry looked at the operator's finger. Thus they remained, motionless, concentrated round this mysterious clicking, like busy insects, like the fates themselves.

The telephone. One of the operators picked up the receiver.

"The switchboard's asking for M. Van Helsen."

Van Helsen, who was seated on a corner of the table, got up with a sigh. When he put the receiver to his ear, he frowned slightly, and immediately began to speak in a loud, almost jovial voice, that rang out in the room like some sort of desecration.

"Well, stop worrying, but don't expect him back. . . ."

His wife? His mother? Jerry realised that he knew nothing about this man who had occupied his attention continuously for the past few hours.

Van Helsen put down the receiver, but kept his hand flat on top of it; it was his habitual gesture with objects and with animals. His sharp Junker's profile stood out against the wall in a rather inhuman way. Half closing his eyes, Jerry could see a large black silhouette, a greenstone bas relief in a cave. Only the prominent cheekbone gleamed through, and Jerry thought of the crack in the face of the sphinx at Gizeh, where the sun also lit up its false tears.

Since the start of their vigil, Jerry had not once thought of Kelso as belonging to anyone but this group that was searching for him. He himself felt involved in an indirect but genuine comradeship. It had not struck him that there might be another vigil proceeding simultaneously outside, another human bond that could be linked with this one. What a fool, he thought. He can't, after all, have taken a vow of chastity on joining the Mail Service. And Jerry imagined a sort of R.D.F. of the emotions. The idea pleased him. Thus Kelso was at the point of intersection of these two beams that sought him—but was it the same thing? Jerry felt slightly dis-

appointed. It seemed to him, in a vague and irrational way, that the presence of this stranger tarnished the picture of Kelso he had built up for himself and lowered the tone of the drama that was being played out in front of him. He fought against the idea, trying to attribute it to a gratuitous attack of misogyny, but the uneasiness remained. It must be his wife, at this hour of the night. . . . Let's hope at least that she's beautiful. . . . Jerry shuddered at the thought that all the intense seriousness of this night might end up at dawn in the sobbing of a little, vulgar, painted woman—a typical colonial French-woman, Jerry murmured to himself, for he was inclined to generalise.

Van Helsen got up, took Jerry by the shoulder and led him out into the empty, ill-lit corridor that was like the gangway of a ship. For a time they could hear nothing but their echoing steps on the linoleum. Then, before Jerry could say a word, Van Helsen spoke.

"That was his *compagne* . . ." he said in French. "Don't blame me, it's the word they use. As a matter of fact, it's not inaccurate. . . ."

"You know her well?"

"Fairly well. It was here that he met her. She's secretary to the Publicity Department; it's she who really runs the service."

"French?"

"Huh . . . naturalised, more or less. She's Bulgarian by origin, I believe, but completely assimilated. You know the sort of thing; a lovely, brilliant girl, knowing everything, grasping everything, born into a family of carpet-sellers, brutish and illiterate. . . ."

"I know the type. Jewish, I suppose?"

"She denies it. But it's quite possible. It's not so much her intelligence that makes her so outstanding, but a sort of . . . vitality that takes the place of everything else. She arrived here in M's time, and he was fascinated, of course. She's been fairly heavily involved with the extreme left."

"Naturally. . . . It was there, perhaps, that she got her title 'compagne'?"

"Perhaps. . . . I tell you that out here, as soon as you take the trouble to look around you. . . . No, you Americans, you can't possibly have any idea of what it's like. Even the French out here don't realise. I think if I went back to Europe or to your country I wouldn't ever dare to use the word 'poverty' again."

"And in spite of all that, she left?"

"Well, you know, after M left, it wasn't the same. And besides, she's a girl who gives herself, huh . . . completely. I think there's a certain inconclusiveness about politics in these parts. I rescued her in time. And then it was Kelso who was her salvation, or as near as it's possible for anyone to be."

"Hell, she can't have fallen in love with him out of humanitarianism."

"Let's say out of necessity. . . . She had to ask the Party, and offer them, after all, the same thing as she was offering to Kelso."

"I find this rather disturbing."

"No, but it's difficult to explain. You know, there's a need for conquest that can take a good many forms. And when you have a nature rich enough to unite violence with sensual pleasure. . . . Also sex is liable to be taken rather tragically in this part of the world."

People get very worked up in the tropics, you know."

"Yes, all that can't make your friend Kelso's life very easy."

"I don't know. . . . I don't even know if they're happy. But when one sees them together, one comes to wonder if happiness is important: They make no concessions to one another, they fight all the time, but sometimes one feels they have a sort of pride in living. It's absurd, it's exhausting, it's disastrous. . . . And yet I've never come across anything so justifiable in the way of love."

"Don't you justify yourself?"

"It isn't necessary."

"Don't you get worked up in the tropics?"

"Enough to whet my appetite. But Saigon is full of little creatures with their bushes shaved who have had all the training required to cope with the effects of the climate. Apart from that, I live without love. I'm not so stupid as to make it a rule to do so, but I must say one doesn't die for the lack of it, one's soul doesn't die for the lack of it. In the West, emotional virginity is considered almost more impossible to own up to than the other kind; people gloss over it with fine phrases culled from books. It's the body that knows how to love in the way one should love, gravely and in silence. But that kind of love is considered a subject for joking, while sentimental tears are spilled over the other sort. . . . As for me, I can't be bothered with words, I know that one can get through a whole lifetime with no other love but love-making, and one's no more handicapped because of it."

"Rather less. With me, love takes one of two courses:

either I'm too happy to perform at all, or else I'm too unhappy to perform well."

"You've always had a symmetrical mind. Still, you're right. . . . After all, Tristan and Isolde had nothing else to do. I don't think love and work can go on together for long. . . . You see, for me, a great love would be like a great injustice—like taking soldiers out of the ranks to make an example of them. Two individuals picked haphazard, loaded with all the love in the world, in spite of themselves, so to speak. . . . Contrary to their will, contrary to their happiness—it can't be helped: executed by the angels."

"Yet you talk of their pride in living."

"So what? Convicts sing too. I too take a pride in my life, in my actions when I act, and even more when I think of the next stage. . . . And I swear that at the same time I know the precise value of such things in relation to, I don't know, history . . . or my death. . . . You know, there's a certain virile tenderness in the ridiculous. . . . That was the clearest lesson I got from the war. I think that's what saves them, the possibility of a tenderness that is neither sentimentality nor . . . huh . . ."

"A virile tenderness in the ridiculous, I like that. And I, with no war and no love, I'd be condemned to . . . what? A puerile toughness in logic?" Jerry suggested mockingly.

"Don't worry, you'll have your war. Moreover, you can afford to play at being tough, as long as the trap doesn't shut."

"What trap?"

"It's a little notion of mine. . . . You see, you for example, you belong to a world that has no limits, which



is more or less the world of childhood. Your ideas, your actions, everything bubbles out of you and gets lost. You can think of what you like, you can dream of every sort of action, you can imagine yourself in every sort of situation. And if in your dreams you always play the star part, it's much less by way of compensation for a life you don't know than by the logic of your imagination. If everything is open to you, why not take the pleasantest choice. The day your actions bounce back on you as if they'd hit a wall, that's what I call the closing of the trap. Things stay around you. You're a prisoner. Whatever your freedom of mind, there are ideas that you'll never again be able to visualize, hopes that you'll never again be able to envisage except indirectly, almost unconsciously. You'll know exactly what you're capable of, and all that is lost to you, finally and irretrievably. . . . I imagine that one of the aims of a revolution must be to break down those walls. Because, all that we're taught to make us endure and respect ourselves—steadfastness, lucidity, and even that pride in living—it's nothing but acquiescence in the trap. . . ."

Since correcting his course, Kelso had been struggling against sleep with greater success. The certainty that he had now turned his back on the sea had had a calming effect, as the providential sighting of the ship had done. He merely felt very tired, glued to his seat by a heavy weight on his shoulders. His jaw was no longer hurting him, but he was seized by a numbness in his calves and in his wrists, a sort of armour of fatigue, a casing of clay that he could break by moving a leg or by sliding

forward a little in his seat, but which immediately formed round him again. As soon as he stretched himself out more fully, the nose of the aircraft reared up. He needed all his strength to straighten it out. His numbed muscles reacted unwillingly. Preposterous phrases, fragments of words and names, sounded in his ears. He was thirsty. Absurd shadows arose from his exhaustion, floated an instant round his head, suspended in the narrow cell of the cockpit like jelly-fish round a diver, and left him after having pronounced the title of some song: *Rose . . . of . . . Broadway*—the rest was drowned in the noise of the storm. Some also said: *Hélène*—but this was when they were forced to do so by Kelso, and he didn't even manage it every time. Apart from that *Hélène* was absent from him; he had to make an effort to recapture her name, her face, her voice. Without any sort of anxiety, though: he knew that a man who is shot attaches more importance, a second before his death, to the shape of a stone, to the movement of his foot across the ground, to a passing insect, than to everything that has made him live. He stretched out a leg, shook it slowly, and winced with pain, but felt the life returning gradually all the way up to the stiffened knee. . . . If the storm would only abate for a minute, Saigon would signal my position.

To divert his mind from the weather, Kelso tried to improvise a blues. The title was easy: *Lost 'plane blues*. . . . *I've got the blues*, he murmured; but his head was in a whirl, he could no longer control and direct his thoughts. He had given up fighting against his exhaustion. It continued to form round him like plaster of Paris, enveloping him remorselessly. At the slightest

movement he could feel the rigid weight of it. . . . He preferred to select the position that was easiest to bear, and abandon himself to it. *I've got the fly-y-ing blues.* . . . A theatre opened up somewhere at the back of his eyes, with the slanting beams of its lights falling in sheaves, in handfuls of silver coins. I musn't fall asleep. Dresses and uniforms glittered: A conductor with a red stock like a pigeon whose throat has been cut, like an aristocrat at the guillotine, raised his hand and discharged a gushing wave of rain, of wet linen, of soft ice, which burst upon the spectators, took them by the throat, strangled them, flattened and twisted them—a sea of dissolving heads, a shattered daguerrotype, melting gelatine. I-must-not-fall-asleep. Dancers in crocus skirts, their white lace bodices carefully woven and skin-tight round the bust, the breasts piercing through the stuff and ready to burst out into life, scandal, death; each head small and dark, the periscope of the buried plant, cruel, hooded, glossy, the little head of a praying mantis, of an Indian sacrifice. The folds of the curtain falling one by one like enormous petals in the roar of the storm, a frosty shower of broken glass. The tumult among the men, caught at the throat by the wolves of fear. A gap in the glass dome painted with the naked, shaven nudes of the sort seen in every theatre, and a blaze of stars came crashing among the cries of the women who stood there scalded by the rain, lashed by the hailstones, the snow lying between their breasts. The howls of a woman lacerated by the white-hot fire of her dress split open at the side and at the shoulder by the hard, brittle arrows of the rain, a beacon of flesh on the last night of the world, signalling amid the ruins:

“Beware of reefs!” for the benefit of other species, of other planets, for the benefit of the birds, and of the dead. *I must not fall asleep.* The great calm blades of a propeller bored through this magic night, churning through the rain-greased bodies, digging its way through the piles of prostrate women floating in a gurgling torrent of blood-stained rags, like the hand of one who has been crucified, like the heart of a rose. I MUST NOT. *Sure I am in a jam. . . . But I know watta sing . . . the lo-ost . . . 'plane . . . blues!* Swimming over prostrate bodies, which were stuck to the ground, in long dresses pulled back over faces to reveal the legs and cover the hearts like shrouds. They sped away under the aircraft, foam of the earth; in long impeccable ranks, two by two, foot to foot. Here and there an open tomb, a ruined column, an insect-like plant struggling through the yellow earth. And the interminable lines of bodies, like the convoys of some strange army. *And yet I'm not asleep.* Motionless amid the clouds that whistled like jets of steam from the tubes of the storm, his hand frozen on to the stick, he watched the wonders of the night without astonishment, like the Russian farmer awakened by chance who, in a trance half-way between dreaming and madness, looks on calmly, as though from another life, at an assembly of weird birds beneath the moon. *Then every time I'll fly . . . I'll have a single song.* Because now I'm lost, he thought without a trace of fear. *The lo-ost . . . 'pla-ane . . . blues!*

The aircraft emerged suddenly into light. The moon slipped through a gap in the storm. Kelso relaxed at once and looked at his instruments. Height fifteen hundred feet. A nice drop. He swore softly. One o'clock in the

morning, for Christ's sake! Just over an hour's petrol left. The Simoun dipped slowly. Kelso watched for the ground. A milky light stretched beneath the clouds, caressing a black, moving, polar mass, edged with foam. The sea.

This time, Kelso wanted to weep.

Hélène slept. She played no part in the night's struggle. Her turn would come tomorrow. As in a relay race, she rested while another member of the team made his effort, so as to bring him the aid of a body renewed, a spirit refreshed, when the time came. Take your rest, Hélène. The orders have been given; there's nothing to do but watch the great lathes of the sky at work over there, cutting, amid the slow-falling cloud of sawdust, the fiery hole through which the day will come. Let your mind be still empty, happily empty, calmed by the soothing equilibrium of this hour when anything can happen, and take your rest. Noiselessly your bedroom slips from its rails, sheds its moorings, sets out through the night carrying its lamp—your lamp—before it, like a deep-sea fish. The waves of the harvest bear you along. Clandestine traveller in this vessel full of signs on which a thousand lives are embarked, see the two shores of the night, the ashen beach where the glazed bodies of lovers are cast ashore, and the white line of the cliffs where the fleet of the dawn sets sail, ready to burst, with its icy screams, upon the helpless lovers. But nothing yet disturbs the swarming of all these burrowing beasts drawn towards a hidden source of milk and honey, nothing unravels the patiently woven murmurs, save

the sudden sound of a name, a sudden moan that is quickly swallowed, like soft rain, by the porous stone of lovers' bodies. Leave them to their fate. There are fraternities of every kind, of the poor, of criminals, even of the lonely, but there is no fraternity of lovers. Each couple wrapped up in its shell of love, leave it to its fate. And you in your turn, surrender yourself to the miracle of your room. . . . Your room has already reached its highest dimension, the dimension it will preserve after your death, when you come back to relive unceasingly the most dazzling moments of your love. Kelso, borne by the night, now rests beside you. Take up with him again the perpetual psalm of desire, the uninterrupted incantation of death. Just as the spaced holes made by the needle are the only passage for the thread that will gather the stuff together and give it its shape, so these moments of blindness and deafness caused by the pistol-shot of love, these moments of utter darkness, this black, impalpable water into which the gratified bodies plunge, are the rents in the fabric that betray the presence of death and make it possible to trace its course. When death tightens the thread and makes the final loop, it is through these memories that you will gauge your route, that you will measure your gain or your loss. Rescued from time, you will be able to go back over any part of the ladder that you climbed rung by rung without ever stopping or retracing your steps. Every minute of your life will be there, welded together, cast in the same mould, outlining forever, irrevocably, the graph of your life, your eternal body. Imagine that series of embraces, all tangled together as in those films where one movement dissolves into another, all those gestures that belong

to you, not one of which has been lost, which are there for all eternity, which you have left during your lifetime, like tracings, like a wake behind you, and which death restores to you in an instant. There lies your salvation or your ruin. No requital, no repentance; your only riches are those that you yourself have amassed, your actions. Think, Héléne, that every moment of happiness is inexorably set down to your account, that the very haste with which you seek to put this hour behind you is bringing you back to it, this time to gaze upon its face forever. There the traps will open, there the lakes of solitude will unfold, there and nowhere else. There the hidden face of your union will be uncovered, the soil ploughed where your roots will plunge. And if those roots are one, if the welding of your bodies is sufficiently strong and clean, there also your fear will vanish. There, perhaps, you will be permitted to live in him, to be him.

There is no sign of a truce in the nocturnal struggle, no voice raised in favour of peace, no betrayal, no avowal. Neither the slow fall of the leaves in the stone fireplace, nor the plants propped against the close-hewn walls, nor the alphabet of signs traced on the vault of the sky by the brick towers like phallic gods. Neither the broken mirrors that crash in the pitiless silence, nor the high ardour of the slatted blinds, guardians of your tomb that unite you with the cold light of midnight through their great ladders of shade. Nor your sleep itself, crystal sarcophagus with golden eyelids, hailed in the midst of your secret navigation by another human vessel whose spur still bleeds on your lip. Nothing will stop the embarkation of the troops of death, nothing will awaken the land of men from its immense and concrete rêverie.

Leaning over your enamelled breast, Kelso will not have seen the shadow of the swords above your double cross. And you, Héléne, death's ally, will preserve till the end the secret of death's victory and your mute understanding with the knowing, hostile carrion crows who write with great beats of velvet wings, amid the fitful pulsing of the hearts, the horoscope of sleeping hours.

Sleep, Héléne. Death perhaps will be less familiar to your awakened body. If Kelso falls tonight, the explosion of your solitude, the dull explosion of the void in your room will hide, perhaps, time's patient work, the thousand glassy embraces whose vapour might trouble the sight of a stranger here, might govern his dreams. If he does not fall, remember at least this lesson of the night. The resurrection of the body, and in its greatest splendour; that has been shown to you, Héléne, and so clearly. . . . But sleep, at the will of the night tides, on the deep undercurrents that rise from the sleeping earth. In your room that is filled with the breath of midnight, the bed-posts bend and drag the sails down, harassing the barque on which you sleep naked, setting out to meet this old earth on the march, always in motion, rigged with winds, ballasted with metals, and never out of touch with the continuous adventure of desire. Console yourself with the wonders of your room, between whose walls you have locked your salvation so that it cannot escape you; wherein you have left a password, a charm so powerful that you will surely return, from however far away, to taste its precious savour, to crave the same fire; in which you have sunk a well that henceforth will never run dry. To sleep in your room, Héléne, is no longer the nether side of life, if living there still robs sleep

of some of its weapons. Your room, the only name that is touched by grace; room, the only place that is touched by grace—the only place where those two enchanted processes are accomplished: love, and death. . . .

Agyre slowly raised his head. Between two claps of thunder—two elephant-steps—he thought he had heard the purring of an aircraft engine. For there were other noises creeping through the night; the stamping of the herd was no longer the only accompaniment to his waiting. That must mean that the attack was imminent. When, on the eve of a battle, the din of preparation, the clatter of trucks and weapons, the shouting of orders, is succeeded by a rainbow of silence; when after dawn there comes the first cry of a bird, the first distant bark of a watchdog, the first cluster of voices carried by the wind, then the moment when you have your last chance to see that everything's in order, or to say a prayer, has come—the attack is about to start. They were there, in a circle round the hut, their little eyes creased with curiosity and blood-lust. They shuffled round slowly, advancing imperceptibly. Their flabby, formless bodies were welded into a continuous ring of flesh encircling him, one great hard mouth that was about to close on him. And in the silence that widened round the last thunder-clap like the circular wave caused by a stone flung into water, Agyre caught the steady throb, the ebb and flow of an aircraft engine. Drops of sound that sank into one another, an intolerable buzzing and throbbing that revived every time just as it was about to disappear. Absurdly, Agyre raised his eyes, as though

he hoped to see the aircraft through the roof of the hut. *De profundis clamavi*. . . . But this flying presence no longer represented either a hope or a promise. It was a mockery. This 'plane that he had waited for so ardently, that he had dreamed about, that had come to challenge him in his hallucination, to aggravate his feeling of being completely abandoned—there it was, quite real, quite audible, *now*. . . . Now that all was lost, now that it was too late, now that the elephants drawn up in battle formation covered the whole field with their shining backs, great boulders of the storm. (He could hear them all breathing together, a deep heavy breathing reminiscent of tunnels and volcanoes.) A great wave of hatred seized Agyre, heaved him up against the wall, held him upon its crest ready to fall. Beating a rapid tattoo with his stiff arm on the wall behind him to transmit his wish to the forest, he willed with all his strength that the aircraft should crash, that this cruel witness, this Peeping Tom of death, should be crushed. The pledge that others take to die with a friend Agyre took on his own account, for his enemy, with a passion as strong as physical desire. May he fall here, with me! And the Colt at his feet, pointing at the door, seemed also to be waiting for him, like the jaws of a trap, a tiny black asp. Once again the thunder burst over the forest: a great stirring in the elephant ranks. A shutter caved in, and as the lightning flashed Agyre discerned a Japanese warrior on the black frame, a giant crayfish with a metal mask, a death doll wrapped in silken clothes, a precious vampire of lacquer and ribbon. A brief bark of terror, and calm returned, broken by the whisperings of muffled voices telling filthy, lying stories about a man called

Agyre, who had never existed, who anyway had been buried in a royal crypt, who anyway was stillborn, who anyway had received a state funeral, who anyway was asleep in an aeroplane, who anyway had been cremated, who anyway was lying at the bottom of the sea, who anyway no one had ever heard of. . . . They're lying. And in the middle of this sinister muttering, this litany in which every word caused a wound, and a poisoned wound at that, like a bullet rubbed with garlic, in the middle of all this the aircraft returned with the intermittent purring of a cat stroking itself, and, to Agyre, as obsessively insistent, as absurd and as menacing as the dentist's drill. Agyre stooped and picked up the Colt, cautiously and with a sly smile, like one of those big rats that cunningly remove the bait from a trap without releasing the spring and go off to devour it in their holes. The operation succeeded. The revolver was now in Agyre's hands and nothing had moved. He twirled the chamber round, and with his head bent slightly forward and his lips moving, silently chewing the cud of madness, he waited for the aircraft. He forced all his concentration into the tip of his ear; all the diffused power of his senses converged and sharpened there. There was now nothing left of him but this vigilant ear; the cold metal of the Colt had already rotted the hands that clasped it, and the arms at the end of which it swung. It had injected a stream of freezing iron through this abandoned body, making of it an unfeeling piece of armour, a robot of flesh at the service of his fear, braced to its watchfulness and awaiting its orders.

"He's answering," Van Helsen said in a low voice. Jerry had been expecting him to shout.

The storm had subsided a little—enough to enable Kelso to hear in his earphones the steady refrain: "Saigon calling HKI. Saigon calling HKI." He was transmitting now, with little regular taps, and waiting to be given his position, while the beams of Saigon and Tourane closed on him, immobilising him on the map as if he were being put in check. Van Helsen eagerly followed the R.D.F. work.

One point north-west. One point north-west.

The wire wavered, cutting closer and closer to the Saigon axis. Van Helsen's eyes were fixed on the point, continually shifting, where it changed colour as it moved out over the sea. More calculations—a consultation round the electric chair. . . . The intersection shifted, oscillated once more, but this time the sea had been left behind. "Difficult to give the exact position yet." It was one of the operators who spoke, his voice clear, cold, almost medical. "But he's certainly over the forest."

"Tell him that," Van Helsen said to the radio operator. The finger went back to work.

"*You've left sea, now over forest, patience, position follows.*" The operators moved round the instrument, consulting one another. Jerry could not help thinking of his appendicitis, although the atmosphere this evening was more like that of an accouchement, a cæsarian in the night. Van Helsen himself took a hand in the work. He followed the wire with his thumb; the nail was short and the yellowish skin of the European living in the East emphasised the veins. Behind him there came a change in Kelso's call-sign; the rhythm altered; he was speak-

ing. A moment later, the operator handed out a message: "*Can I get back.*" Van Helsen turned the paper over, scribbled a line, and gave it back to the operator. "*Impossible, directing you nearest landing ground.*" The reply in its turn was condensed into drops of sound. Van Helsen, returning to the map, added over his shoulder: "Sign it Van Helsen." Jerry tried to visualise what Kelso's plight must be like—that solitude in the four dimensions, that utter darkness, that blind chase in which a circus horse galloped through the clouds, obedient to the interminable whip of the radio. In vain. He was still too near the age at which storms, accidents, ambushes and threats of death are common currency and end up always for the best possible good of the hero. He hardly thought of exhaustion, numbness, thirst. For him, danger must necessarily exclude minor problems. Think of a pirate suffering from a cold in the head! No, for us the noble misfortunes: imprisonment, phthisis, poisoned arrows, lost aircraft. . . . But his mind was unable to make any real contact with the danger Kelso was facing, his idea of it remained abstract and alien. In the face of this adventure the mass of imaginative equipment that he had accumulated in childhood became cumbersome, useless, without point or consequence, suddenly deprived of everything that, only yesterday, had made it the very framework of life. It was like a currency that had suddenly gone out of circulation. At this moment, perhaps Jerry was living his first night of manhood. He was like the savage who is proud of his arrows until he suddenly discovers fire-arms among his opponent's weapons. He would now patiently have to reconstitute his arsenal, to familiarise himself with

unknown objects. The initiation brought nothing with it: it just made a void. The initiate had to shift for himself, to make his own choice. It was still too early. Jerry was conscious only of his own penury. He was beginning to understand that Kelso's *passion* concerned him, that it renewed, without his knowing it, the mystery of redemption; but though he had a presentiment that faith was involved he did not yet know what it was founded on. The radio operator brought Kelso's reply back to Van Helsen. "*If that's the way it is I'd better dine out.*" Van Helsen gave a short laugh and showed the message to Jerry, with a certain pride.

Tourane on the telephone. . . . The net was closing. A hunt in reverse, in which the order was to preserve the game. Van Helsen rapidly considered the state of the landing grounds. The rain had been coming down continuously for more than five hours.

"Another message: *How much petrol?*"

The Simouns which the Line owned had been fitted out for long distance flying. But Kelso must be nearly running out by now. Van Helsen disliked the idea of landing grounds, they would be a tricky business after such a storm. If only he could reach a safe base. . . . Van Helsen thought of himself as a boxer's manager, eyes glued to the ring, taking each punch with the same grimace as his trainee, exactly the same, following his counter-attack with the same fury, exactly the same. But here, there was no question of advice between the rounds. There was only one round, a round that went on and on. But Van Helsen's thought raced on faster, outstripped his sense of expectation. Kelso had already landed. Kelso was back already. Van Helsen was clasp-

ing his shoulders and laughing. Like the manager again, he was saying: "We've won." And if he didn't come back, if one last danger caught him, what would he say? Hell, what do managers say? "He has lost. . . ." No: "He is dead."

The reply: "*Half an hour at most.*"

Van Helsen thought for a moment. There could no longer be any question of a safe base. The Saigon axis was now fixed; only one final call from Tourane was needed to know Kelso's exact position. Silence fell. The radio operator removed his headphones, rubbed his ears, leant his elbows on the back of his chair. The two R.D.F. operators, leaning against the wall, were careful not to touch the map and found themselves one at either side framing it like attendants in a museum. The Russian pilot looked down his nose, and Jerry eyed Van Helsen, turning away when he met his gaze, afraid that a smile at this moment might be considered an offence. All were seized with the same impatience, a last-minute fear, a sort of rebound of anxiety, that came from excessive confidence. Everything must be all right now, everything is all right: it's the moment when the devil plays his trump cards. "Why don't they get a move on, for God's sake," Van Helsen grumbled. The telephone in the middle of the group, like a suspect who must be made to talk surrounded by cops. . . . It struck Jerry that in order to portray the scene on the stage or in a film there would have to be a clock ticking. But nothing could be done about it: the tall electric clock was silent. No rhythm to take hold of, no intervals by which to measure their waiting. Still no call from Tourane. Time became diluted in that waiting, as in prison. Was it a minute or

an hour that it had lasted? A sort of ankylosis, vast, paralysing, absurd, prevented them from moving or speaking, the impression that it could last indefinitely, that they were now chained to the telephone call from Tourane, that it alone could release them from the spell. Jerry would have liked to break it; a thousand pretexts came into his mind. He said nothing. His body had declutched, and his brain revolved in a vacuum. The white lights accentuated the madness of this tableau, froze it, stripped the men of all normality, gave the scene an unbearable clarity. Outside, the storm had vanished; gusts of wind raced behind the window panes, went from one to the other, crashing against them like insects.

And then it was over: the telephone had rung, the measurements had been transmitted, and the great "X" of the black wires had delivered its judgment. The radio operator tapped away furiously, giving Kelso his position. Jerry, who had found himself standing stripped of his embarrassment by the excitement of the moment, leaned over the map beside Van Helsen, thrilled by this struggle in which men defended themselves from the spirits of the air and the wild freedom of the storm by means of captive waves. The horsemen of the wind galloped madly along the walls; the whole room shook with it, and even the lights began to dance. . . . Van Helsen, with his face close to the map and two fingers raised, hesitated only for an instant. The pink rectangle was there, offering itself up to him. He turned round. There was a throb of victory in his voice.

"Switch him to Hong 33."



## VI

KELSO could now make out the landing ground. For the past ten minutes the radio operators at Saigon and Tourane had been repeating "You're there," and he had continued to turn, finding nothing beneath his wheels but the shadowy fleece, the quivering moss that was the forest. But he was unwilling to sacrifice his only flare except in acknowledgment of a signal to go in and land. He had gone on turning, and suddenly oblivious of all that had preoccupied him for hours—fatigue, thirst—he had taken the measure of his anxiety. The petrol was running out and soon would come the crash among the trees, like the prisoner dragged from his cell, and death or wounds in the depths of the cold and beast-ridden forest. . . . For the first time since the beginning of the struggle he felt inside him, in his chest and in his shoulders, the gnawings of fear. He had been more exasperated than anything else by the storm that had taken him off his course, and by the way in which he had kept on finding himself over the sea. It was like some ridiculous farce that had gone on too long. But he had known that he could still keep in the air, that unless he had the worst of bad luck he would be located and guided to safety. . . . And now all the cards were in his hand; no one else could do anything for him, except the keeper of the landing ground. But evidently he wasn't able to light a fire after such heavy rain. Kelso had imagined him listening intently, following in impotent rage the 'plane's wide circlings, as powerless to reveal his presence as Kelso to guess it. He had tried to call him on the radio, repeating his call-sign; there was no

reply. "The storm must have destroyed the set." And then, high above him, a white flare had blazed out—the moon, forcing its way through the clouds, forcing a passage that was now hardly contested by the storm, and letting fall over the forest a slow cascade of light like floating powder—and Kelso had breathed more calmly. In the light of the moon, the drenched soil of the landing-ground should stand out clearly against the mossy dimness of the trees.

And so it did. As the wind started up again, Kelso caught sight of a number of glistening narrow furrows, curved and regular like a fingerprint. He flew across the landing ground twice into wind, checked his height, and informed Saigon that he was about to land. His fear had left him. Nothing but the will to succeed possessed him now. "Van Helsen must have them all in a state at the moment," he thought with a slightly feverish gaiety. Leaving the boundaries of the landing ground, he began to fly a figure of eight, climbed a little, and released his flare. A glittering chandelier exploded behind him and swung downwards causing the forest to vibrate, creating huge shadows that made the trees bend and quiver and stir like a field of corn. Look out for distortions caused by the light. He completed his figure of eight and found himself opposite the landing ground in the light of the falling flare. Am I low enough? No point in asking: it's now or never. . . . Yes, or never. Switching his eyes from the altimeter to the flattened image of the landing ground on which a ring of light was contracting like the glow of a cigarette burning down, he shut off the engine, put the aircraft's nose down and tried to gain as much distance as possible while he still had the height. As

soon as he had touched the ground, there could be no going back. If he had calculated wrongly, he would go on to crash among the trees at the other end of the landing ground. It remained to be seen what state the ground was in. . . . The flare landed and sputtered out. Its final flash remained imprinted on Kelso's vision, light and dark reversed as on a photographic negative. He had seen the mud a few feet below him. The line of the trees was still some distance away. If I don't break anything on landing, I'm saved. . . . As he had come gliding down among the trees, Kelso had left the night behind him above his head. He was descending into life. The Simoun touched a puddle, bounced three times with an arc of rainwater spinning from its wheels, then stayed on the ground. Kelso put the brakes on carefully, in little bursts. The aircraft splashed on for another fifty yards, slowed down with its wings outstretched in a gesture of surrender, then stopped. Kelso, exhausted by the events of the night, fell back in his seat, his eyes closed. His head went on buzzing with the sound of an aircraft, a little shadowy pinpoint of noise high-sounding in his ears, like an accent on all the other noises.

Agyre suddenly stopped sobbing. He had heard something new. No longer the snorting of the elephants surrounding the tree in which he lay hiding from their lace-covered foreheads and threshing trunks. . . . All that was finished; the noise had vanished, and with it the fantasies it had given rise to. Their place had been taken by the fantasies of silence. Agyre's efforts to wound this silence—his methodically mingled cries and

gesticulations, the whole business of artificial respiration which he had practised in the void to restore life around him and to escape from the wilderness of the night that was even worse than the spectres which haunted him—all had been in vain. After each anguished howl, each crash of falling objects, each smashing of a glass or an inkwell, a slight mist of sound still rose, and silence gently returned, as the sediment falls to the bottom of a test-tube when you stop shaking it. Agyre wandered crazily round the room, taking hold of a chair, or a book, and flinging them around, gravely, without anger, like an effects man. He waited with a vague hope for the waves of sound that would arise from each impact, for them to condense and take on some sort of living shape. Nothing happened. Trembling, obstinately he began again. He stopped to scratch himself between the shoulders, stamped his two feet, jumping right off the ground, muttered inarticulate curses. Then he began to weep, feeling himself abandoned by everyone. No more elephants, no pilot, not even his own shadow, hostile yet somehow fraternal, turning its back on him. . . . No more noise. Noise meant life and warmth. Death, promised for the moment to come, still meant life assured for the moment that was ending, still meant a lungful of air, a mouthful of blood, the ability to shout out loud. Even that aircraft that had come to scoff at him, that he had waited for with so much hate, had at least been a human symbol: he could envisage it, destroy it in his mind, rebuild it so as to torment it all the longer. For a moment he had thought it was coming nearer; the noise of the engine had grown louder, and a wind had arisen above him. And then it had stopped suddenly, shot

down by the gunners of silence. The reign of silence had now begun. Walled up inside a pyramid at the end of the earth, surrounded by guards who had had their tongues cut out, he reigned in splendour. Each night a new favourite would be brought to him, a tall, naked girl with her mouth locked by a silken bit on which she tore her lips in the act of love, staining him with blood. The high officials writhed in the palace rooms, their mouths stuffed with gags. Huge carpets covered with headless images smothered even the noise of the slithering bodies. The doors closed on a cushion of birds' wings, and beautiful dumb children, the boys with their lips sewn up, the girls with their lips closed by great golden hooks, greeted the stranger by placing a velvet-gloved finger on those inviolate mouths. Outside the palace, the trees were petrifying; the royal gardeners sprinkled each plant with water from a chalky spring which covered stems, bulbs and leaves with a kind of snow, creating a rigid vegetation through which the wind no longer moved. Freed from the gross birds, the stiff branches of the forest stood tangled like the arms of polyps. The sky was still, a blue stone. The sea became frozen over, welded its sheet of ice from shore to shore, into a petal that would never fade, under which the fishes slowly died. The cries of beasts impaled on long blades of lava-stiffened grass, the cries of men fainting with hunger before fruits of mother-of-pearl, became lost in the stillness. The sandstone gods smiled at the temple gates. They had created man in their image, and this was the day of judgment. This image of a deserted world assailed Agyre with its rigid waves, as earlier it had crept into Kelso's dreams. How many more would

experience it that night, in various forms, this blinding, obsessional nightmare, from which man shields himself by his every act, from art to war—the nightmare of a world in which he is no longer the master.

“You were talking to me just now about contemplation,” Van Helsen said to Jerry, “as though it were the opposite to action. You should beware of that kind of over-simplification. It's really the ultimate end of action, its consummation. . . . It's the one faculty in us, the one single force which abandons the outer contours of things to plunge into the inner world. When I say it plunges I put it badly—I should say it rises, rather.” He traced his metaphors on the glass table-top faintly with his fingers so that the marks faded instantaneously. “The contours of a deep-sea valley are no different from the mountains surrounding it; it's the same geological fold extended into another element. Just as the tree is the extension of the roots, only . . . only it's the tree that bears the fruit and the flowers. That contemplation which you rather despise, Jerry, it's through that perhaps that in the end your acts will flower.”

“Rather a self-centred view, don't you think?”

“It seems to me rather an economic use of one's personality. I very much admire that freedom they have here in the East to accept withdrawal from action a little before the limits of action are reached, in order to prepare for death. It's recognised that a man who has devoted part of his life to some service or other, civic, scientific, whatever you like . . . has the right to regard himself as having discharged his debt to the world, and

to concentrate on himself, his own self-fulfilment, his own salvation. . . . A sort of retirement, if you like, but imagine what a Westerner understands by the phrase "retirement": the end of everything, isn't it? Here, it's the beginning of everything. And if that contemplation has been earned by a life's work first, surely that's a safeguard against its becoming a refuge for cowardice. . . ." They were standing up now, and they could hear through the doorways the noise the night crews were making, as if the silence of the radio had woken everyone up. Slowly they crossed the room. They were relaxed now and a little intoxicated with confidence. "Of course, if you leave it in its, ugh . . . sociological context, it isn't exactly a revolutionary idea. . . . But go into it deeply. It's rather the same sort of thing as chastity, which is only a virtue when it's caused by redundancy of love rather than restriction. . . . It's a question of going beyond action after having proved oneself capable of action. Proved, not for others, not specially for others, if you know how to judge yourself. . . ." He paused reflectively and looked at a point beyond Jerry's shoulder, smiling out of the corners of his mouth. "There again, you see, one finds God in oneself. In your choice—mixed with your choice—there may be an infinite power of judgment, which is God. Whether you make good use of it or not, whether or not you take it into account, is another story. . . . Just as in the most trivial ill that you want to be rid of, there may be an infinite power of suffering. . . .

"I know," Van Helsen went on as he accompanied Jerry through the long, half-lit corridor, "I know well enough that at your age it's almost impossible to con-

ceive of an adventure that is other than external. The idea that without ever leaving your room you can experience all the emotions of search, of discovery, of pursuit, of lying in wait, that's probably beyond you. . . . It's a funny thing. Adventure for you, I suppose, is Kelso circling around in the storm. And yet, you know, in everything I've told you during the past few hours, there's not a word that didn't come to me direct from him. I've never stopped thinking of him."

"I'm sure of that," Jerry said. "But he, he was risking his life."

Van Helsen made a slight gesture with his arms. "I know only too well how, ugh . . . disarmed one finds oneself when faced with this mystery of physical suffering. All the same, one oughtn't to deify it." They stopped in front of the door. "It's very strange, but . . . this adventure of Kelso's tonight, perhaps its true meaning will come out much later, in some reflection, some revelation I shall have. Perhaps it was for me that he fought tonight."

"Well, you see I'm not so . . . unaware as you imagined. I too had a vague sort of impression that something united him to me. He got through all right, of course; but if the sacrifice had taken place, I would have thought that he had been sacrificed so that I should live."

"Death in battle is always a question of sharing," Van Helsen said. "Part of it is for the ideal one has of oneself, part for the sake of others, even if one doesn't know it, even if one doesn't want it. The official pretext comes a long way behind. . . . Because after all, let's be serious; if we defined our actions in objective terms

we'd soon be in the lunatic asylum: sending men to their death for the sake of the mail! Only there's this to be said: one's actions are always in vain when they take the straightforward path, and when they take other, more secret paths, a kind of invisible network between unknowns, they are never in vain. You've seen tonight that I've repudiated nothing of my deification of action, it's just that I place it further away, I can see its real nature more clearly. I know that what matters is not the act in itself, but what it expresses of us, what it exalts and liberates. So that if somebody came and asked me now what I had created in my life, I would no longer answer 'An airline', but 'Opportunities for courage'. In the same way as, if I had chosen a different life, if I had bothered about women, if I had married, I would answer 'Opportunities for happiness. . . .'

They had passed through the door. The night received them, clear, light, washed clean of all trace of the storm, as irreproachable in its purity as a woman just out of her lover's arms. Jerry smoothed the hair round his temples and breathed deeply.

"I shall remember this night, you know."

"Me too," Van Helsen said. "Shall we meet tomorrow?"

"Certainly, if you have a less . . . occupied day than today. . . . When will your pilot friend be back?"

"They'll go and rescue him in the morning. If all goes well, the three of us will have dinner together. Tonight's dinner, what, with one day's delay, and certain accessory circumstances. . . ."

"Quite accessory," Jerry said. He looked at Van

Helsen and winked. "I'm off to bed. I need to put my ideas in order."

"You just sleep, that's the best thing you can do. And let your ideas put themselves in order. Good-night. . . ." They exchanged a long, firm handshake. As he took his hand away Jerry feigned a kidney punch, which in his alphabet of gestures was the highest sign of friendship. Van Helsen laughed quietly. "Ring me when you wake up."

"I'm going to do a bit of contemplation," said Jerry, already some way off. "I feel I shall be contemplating at full blast for the next twelve hours." The white blur of his linen suit was lost in the night. Van Helsen went back into the tall building with all the stealth, the sense of piety, that one assumes at that hour when every house seems like a temple of the moon. He wanted to send a last message to Kelso.

Going down the long corridor again, he thought of Jerry and of what he had just been saying to him there. "Was I wrong to attack him like that? Isn't there a risk of that rhythm, that delicate tension between action and the stage beyond it being impaired by too precocious an understanding? After all, the ardour of youth is largely the result of ignorance. If reflection comes too early, can one still trust oneself in action? If I had been conscious of the full significance of it all at Jerry's age, would I have persevered? Perhaps, but out of a sense of shame, out of self-respect. Which is to say that something in me would have been killed. . . . It can't be helped. Anyway, he's tough; he's the most balanced of the three; he'll only believe what he's capable of assimilating. His temperament will eliminate the rest."

And Van Helsen's thoughts returned to Kelso. He also was navigating in perilous seas, running the risk of merciless laceration. It was not the danger of death: he had grown used to that. But strength is surrounded by so many snares. . . . Van Helsen remembered the day when, at a dinner party for superior officers, industrialists and politicians, he had glimpsed for the first time the true face of war. He had had the courage to carry on, to reduce the whole business to its most intimate refraction. It had been a test of his strength, but he had never again been able to think of himself in terms of a cause, of a nation. When a woman has lied to you once, even her most innocent remarks always have a veneer of untruth after that. "Kelso and Jerry must be preserved from that laceration. They must be led gently to that inner world, acceleration must be gradual. It's still too early, they've still got to win their way through to it. Even if they proved themselves worthy of it at the first go, even if they found there more than I myself have. . . . For them there's no question of cowardice, of course, but nevertheless it would be a mistake. We're continuously in touch with the highest, most incontestable form of contemplation, if we only took the trouble to notice it. But it would not be right to fall into it. We come from God and we are going towards God like a ship from one country to another. Throughout the voyage, God is near us in depth, like the bottom of the sea. We can get to him by sinking; but that would be to cheat. Our aim is to reach the other shore. . . ."

After reporting his landing to Saigon, after having noted all the necessary details for his report, Kelso found that he was in no hurry to leave the aircraft for the hut, which he could just make out at the other end of the field. He sought to prolong the echo of these recent hours, as one prolongs the pleasure of some play one has enjoyed by going over it again in one's mind. Up to the moment of landing, there had been no definite colour to it all; only a vague shape, a mould. Everything was still possible. Black or white, pain or joy, it was the final second that would decide one way or the other, like a river returning to its source. He had had the absurd feeling that he was reading a book or perhaps a musical score back to front, without knowing whether it was a pæan of triumph or a funeral march. For lack of a title, perhaps. Now that he was safe, the title was there; he could take up his reading where he had left off, the pages fell into place, and passages that would have made the angels weep now only evoked in him intense joy. Victory over time. He laughed to himself as he unfastened his straps, stirring the exhaustion which lay inside him like a deposit of sand in water, without paying any more attention to it than a slight impatience. Only the absence of the guard surprised him. As the aircraft had landed, he might at least have come out, or called, or waved a lamp. Perhaps he was asleep, or drunk, or sick. . . . And Kelso, in spite of his reluctance to cross the airfield, and a certain vague antipathy for that shadowy hut beneath the trees, felt obliged to go and see what was happening. "It would be the last straw to have to play the part of a nurse tonight." But after all, the poor chap might have one of those filthy forest fevers, and as his

radio was no longer functioning. . . . Kelso opened the cockpit door with an effort, and let himself drop, feet together, into the mud that squelched slowly with the noise of a balloon going down. He looked gloomily over towards the hut three hundred yards away, and the distance seemed to him more formidable than the whole distance he had covered up to then. He remembered a story that Rudy used to tell about a Chinaman who was being taken off to be executed and, already half-dead, collapsed on the way and seemed incapable of getting up again. "Kill him here," an officer said. Whereupon the Chinaman began to moan, dragged himself off the ground, and staggered off towards the place of execution. "Let's be Chinese," Kelso said to himself good-humouredly, and he set off through the mud, the soles of his boots growing thicker at every step until finally they were turned into slippery clogs which forced him to balance with his arms like a penguin. "Triumphal march, or the hero's return." He laughed, and repeated to himself "I'm saved," not in order to convince himself of the fact, but to try the effect of the words on his feeling of happiness and relief. Just as, on the night he had first slept with H  l  ne, he had repeated to himself with calm exaltation "I have known H  l  ne's mouth, I have known H  l  ne's body." He had even said "I have slept with H  l  ne" to savour the transfiguration of the words, to lift his emotion out of the trough of memory and the words out of the rut of usage, to snatch a word from the embers in which words lie smouldering and give himself up to the sensation of being burnt, let it soar through the sky of his body like a rocket. He had understood then why sailors tattooed the images and names of

women on their chests. . . . His acknowledgment of his safety now was of the same order, even if he put less fervour into it. His restoration to life meant less to him than his fusion with the life of H  l  ne. Or rather, his life, the secret alchemy of his life, seemed to him to be less involved in that simple chain of hazards and decisions than in the vivid turbulence of their love. And then, he was accustomed to life: danger or sickness were only its shifts of mood, similar to the vagaries of a temperamental but fundamentally faithful wife who one knows will come back in the end. Just when one has lost all hope, a key turns in the lock. "Here she is," one says to oneself. It is Death. One may be mistaken . . . Kelso swore under his breath, infuriated by the mouths of mud that were continually sucking at him. All the more furious now that, stirred by the memories of his discovery of H  l  ne, desire began to spread its net of anxiety over him. "I could at least have sent her a message." He stopped in the middle of the landing ground and took stock of the distance he had already covered. The aircraft still stood out in relief against the forest: its blackness was different from that of the trees. The hut was fifty yards away. The wind flung its darts through the branches, making the leaves fly, wounding the birds. White clouds, very low, formed huge snowy shapes that changed continually. Higher up a bank of cloud parted to reveal the moon like a woman's breast glimpsed through a torn dress. "Your pale breasts like twin moons . . ." that would be a good opening to an oriental poem. Kelso thought of going back to the aircraft to radio a message to H  l  ne in their private code, their Song of Songs in morse. But the aircraft was now

a long way off, and the mud was thick and heavy. He was almost at the hut, and he would find sleep there. Before he could make up his mind, an involuntary step forward carried him on towards the hut. Another step. A third. "Later on, when I've had some sleep. . . ." Another step. "Anyhow, his set can probably be mended; I'll send the message from the hut." He was well on his way again, with a sort of emptiness inside him, and a vague remorse at having failed to think of sending a message earlier. "My nerves are in a state." He walked on, and as he came closer to the hut the ground became firmer, the beaten earth less sticky. He shook his feet, and two black wax impressions dropped off in front of him. He set off again, more easily, walking more steadily, more fit for the wind of desire which filled him like a sail. His message was taking shape inside him, he assembled the figures of the code like a prisoner knocking on the wall and asking his neighbour for a cigarette, a newspaper or a kiss. He was tortured by his impatience. He abandoned himself to the idea of rushing through this night, making a gap in this forest, reaching Saigon in one bound, and swooping upon Hélène in her sleep, stifling the cry with which she woke with her own cry of pleasure. The idea took hold of him, made him almost break into a run. Another two steps, and he was at the door of the hut. It opened at the first push. He could just distinguish a little shadow clinging to the wall and trembling, but his first concern was for the radio set, which seemed to be intact. "A message for Hélène," he thought, and in the darkness of the hut Hélène's body opened up like a sea anemone. Kelso leant against the door, smiling, while the words of his

message sank slowly down inside him like drops of lead. He passionately wanted to fall asleep here, at once, and not to wake up until he was in the aircraft taking him back at full speed to Hélène, into Hélène's presence, into her bed. The message dissolved inside him, and now sleep was his only ally. His eyes were closing on Hélène's face, so near, so incomprehensibly sad, saying something that he didn't understand, that he hadn't yet understood when Agyre rose with the Colt in his hand, the bullets cut through the silence, and another message, fiery red, went out to Hélène through the fading stars.



## Part Two

### I

HELENE gazed at Kelso, at the mummified figure that was Kelso. A skilfully worked model, wrapped in bandages, resting on an absurd iron bier. A replica of Kelso's face, sewn on to the stuffed and shapeless body of a doll. A mask, a paper lantern from which the light was fading, getting nearer every hour to the fixed smile, the insouciance of the dead, so exactly copied that one might almost have been taken in by it, but for the trembling breath round the lips, the quick throb at the temples like a small muscular hand expanding and contracting, the pulsation of the throat as it drank great draughts of the waters of death. None of that was Kelso. Kelso had eyes that were wide open. He breathed slowly, he talked: that thing on the bed was not Kelso. Hélène gazed a little fearfully at the silent monster that crazy doctors had created in the image of her lover. It didn't walk as men do; if one closed one's eyes, one might almost think it was supposed to represent Nature herself: it moaned like the wind, it rumbled like the sea, from time to time it was shaken by a ripple, a surge, a tidal wave of suffering. But all the same it lived. Not for long though: when Hélène arrived, the doctor had taken her by the shoulders and said "Don't cling on to what little life is left to him. There is no hope. There is no need for *your* torture to be prolonged." She had

gone in, and at once realised that it was not Kelso who was there. She would have left, but they had all moved away, to respect what they believed to be their last meeting. Not wanting to surprise or disturb them, she had stayed by the pillow of this thing. She had even kissed its lips, but with the feeling that she was fulfilling a rite—as one kisses the Cross on Good Friday. She shed no tears; she stayed there without any effort of will, without curiosity, filled with an immense fatigue. She wanted it all to be over quickly, to be able to take leave of this thing, to go out in search of Kelso. She knew where to find him—in those streets that they had gone through together, that they had peopled with echoes, with private images and myths (that street where he took my arm for the first time, where at the touch of his hand I first received the lance-thrust of desire, where for the first time I felt something expanding inside me—though I didn't talk to him about it, he would have been too proud. . . . Ought I to have spoken?); in those books that they would lend one another and of which, with a wonderful scorn for the author's intentions, they remembered only what could be related to themselves, exulting in descriptions of love as heroes exult in tales of adventure; in that bed. . . . (Ah yes, let it be over quickly, so that I can go and bury myself in our bed, and sleep there, sleep there until I die). An idea struck her: there would have to be a funeral, hours would be lost in burying this thing, receiving consolation and advice from those who would think she was linked with this thing. She would listen to them, embarrassed like someone being congratulated for something they haven't done. (Not to mention those who will presume to *associate*

*themselves* with my sorrow. My sorrow is my own, I share it with no one—had he a mother?—with no one. That they should pretend to know and understand it, that they should speak to me about it, can only be, for me, the vilest of insults, like a man coming to tell me that he has seen me naked. . . .) So much time wasted! She must watch it carefully now, no longer yield to the temptation to fritter it away. It was good when we had *our* life together! From now on every minute was precious, she would never have enough of them to accomplish her new task, to assemble and preserve those memories that time would try and shake through her fingers like mercury. To recreate those moments, to live on echoes—all the obsessions of the night before returned to her—"To break with Kelso". . . . (Was it I who willed it, that moment? Did I myself give the alarm to the angel of death? The angels are solemn people, stubborn, literal-minded and rather obtuse; they take every thought, every wish at its face value. We let slip some image, and they give it reality. It can be worse for God to grant our prayers than for him to forsake us.) Hélène gazed at Kelso, the mummy of Kelso. The others were coming back now, feeling that the tête-à-tête had gone on long enough. Hélène made as if to rise from her chair; the doctor's hands once more gripped her shoulders: "Don't get up, my dear, stay there, don't say anything. . . ." Who does he expect me to talk to? Hélène wondered. And at the same time she understood why Kelso was no longer Kelso, why this body in its agony no longer aroused any feeling in her. Because he did not *acknowledge* her. Because she no longer aroused any feeling in him. Because he was completely absorbed

with his suffering, saturated by it. Because he didn't see her. Can one really love oneself alone? she asked herself with a kind of calm despair. (Was it because I was the object of it that his passion so overwhelmed me? Was it simply the blazing, agonizing confirmation of my existence? Perhaps the only real sin is to usurp God's place, and God alone has the right to love only his own gifts. . . . But, that gift I made to him, he passes through it now as a bird passes through a shadow, and because I no longer exist for his body, his body no longer exists for me. And as for his soul, will there be any other heaven but my memory?) Perhaps it was through the presence of the others that she experienced the heightening of her own. Like mirrors. . . . But how tarnished they were, these mirrors that now filled the hospital room, bending over Kelso whispering conspiratorially. (Is the presence of these others then the only barrier against extinction? And since they throw back to me an ever fainter echo of myself, since to my eyes they have hardly any consistency left, it must be that I am gradually ceasing to exist. "It's the world that is ceasing to exist not Me"—what nonsense! Me, with a capital M, M for Murder.) "He might last the night," the doctor said. The night. . . . Hélène shivered. To have to go through a whole night, with this dummy. To have to go on with this futile comparison of the two realms, this exhausting conversation with deaf-mutes. (To sleep in our bed, to find all his things as he left them, to move them around as he would have done, to finish off that game of chess for him.) Two nurses stood at the foot of the bed, waiting to be told what to do. One of them was quite pretty. It'll be all right so long as she's the

one who stays on duty, Hélène thought. Kelso had once said that he would be quite willing to join up in the next war if he could be assured of dying in the arms of a beautiful American nurse—but Hélène only remembered that afterwards: this wish of hers had slipped out spontaneously, with a curious familiarity. (Perhaps he's beginning to live in me?) Further off, by the door, Van Helsen was standing, stooping slightly; the lack of expression on his face and the scar on his left cheek gave him the look of a German officer. Near him was a young man with very light eyes and an open collar whom Hélène didn't know. They were talking in low voices. Jerry's voice was hardly even raised when he quoted to Van Helsen the phrase of a French writer: "*Je suis de la race qui meurt à l'Hôpital.*"

"Mere boasting," said Van Helsen harshly. And he looked at Kelso by fits and starts, between prayers, like a monstrence.

"She's very lovely," Jerry said as they left the room.

"Yes," said Van Helsen. "She has class. . . . It's probably the first time a dead pilot's wife hasn't looked at me as though I was a guest who has broken a vase. In fact she hardly looked at me at all. The idea that I'm responsible hadn't even entered her head. Not out of resignation, mind you. Out of pride. She will never admit that another person, even his best friend, could have any power over them. Nobody but she has the right to bear Kelso's death. And thus she'll blame herself for it. . . ."

"Who was he, the chap who shot him?"

Three floors below, in the morgue, they had seen the disfigured corpse of Agyre. He had fired his last bullet

into his mouth, and, in falling, had dragged down wires attached to the accumulators lying above on a shelf, and the radio set itself. The whole thing had crashed down on Agyre's dead body like an elephant's foot, covering him with wounds, crushing his vertebræ.

"I'm going to have a look at his file. There must be someone who should be notified. He was a Swiss. A mere youth. . . . Well, twenty-six or twenty-seven. He came here out of the blue, after some trouble over a woman, as one might go to a monastery. With a certain romantic feeling for action into the bargain. . . . I thought a spell in the bush would calm him down."

"What could have made him shoot Kelso? Fever?"

Van Helsen shrugged his shoulders. "Of course one can say fever, or a touch of madness, or fear, or what have you. . . . One might just as well say: the knife, when one's asked the name of the murderer. . . . No, it all comes from, er . . . further back. . . ." He made a gesture with his arm as though to rub something off a blackboard. A typically Germanic gesture, Jerry thought: blotting out the day, turning to the night. He knew that Van Helsen's mother had been German.

"He came here under a false name. Later the Sûreté told me his real name of course. I hadn't said anything to him. I was sure that after his return from Hong 33 he'd be only too anxious to tell me the story of his life. . . ." Van Helsen flicked through the files. "Perhaps he wouldn't, after all, have told me much more than this." He took out several sheets of paper clipped together, separated them, and read rapidly: "*Bender, William*—they're all called William or John, it's a trick for widening frontiers—*born at Cossonay, Canton de*

*Vaud, on the . . . Yes, you see, twenty-six years old. Parents divorced. Foreign travel. Studied at the University of Lausanne. . . .*

*Mother divorced. Foreign travel. Studied at the University of Lausanne.* A feverish plea arose from Agyre's trampled body, a plea that faded like a faint breeze through the vaulted rooms of the morgue, through the stairways and the thickly-carpeted corridors of the hospital. Van Helsen was right. On his return from Hong 33, he was only too anxious to tell his life story, to justify himself, to plead the cause of the last few years of his life, to tell of the wave that had lifted him up and carried him to Indo-China with his woman trouble and his romantic feeling for action, and had then retreated, leaving this battered wreck behind on the beach. On his way now to the prison of the angels, condemned to solitary confinement till the end of time, he was making a last attempt to explain himself, to rescue his story from contemptuous oblivion, to convince those indifferent jurors, the living, that there had been something more to him than the words on a form, an absurd crime, a mutilated corpse—that he had a right to something more than pity. All that remained of Agyre now centred on those who were talking about him. It beseeched them to listen to him, knocked at the door like an outcast, demanding a last asylum. They did not hear him; they passed through him like smoke. These invisible blows tore open new wounds in him.

"They lasted a long time, his studies," Van Helsen said.

"Of course my studies lasted a long time. My stepfather was rich; I wrote poems for the university

magazines; I grew up with an absolute conviction of my superiority, as pleased with myself as only a Swiss student can be, at ease with the world, protected from suffocation by the Swiss air, from weak health by Swiss chocolate, from loneliness by Swiss relations, from shyness by Swiss girls. I was so healthy and well fed that I could not contemplate anything better than to go out and conquer the world with a Swiss blunderbuss. I went to the University for want of something to do, choosing from preference those courses that didn't require personal study: the history of music, the history of art. For generations, M. Dénézéaz had been explaining Franck and Beethoven by the golden number. There were also lantern lectures to show us photographs of Coptic temples and Roman camps, when it was easy, in the darkness, to make passes at the girls next to one. I went through it all with the aureole of the gifted young man, my pockets full of poems written in the style of my favourite authors, of unfinished manuscripts, of esoteric and in fact indecipherable jottings, of projects and imaginary adventures. I looked down on my fellow-students from the heights of the future that awaited me. . . . Now I recognise the barrenness of all that. But I left it all, and you see what became of me. . . ."

"It was there that it all went wrong, because of that girl," Van Helsen said.

"What was her name?" Jerry asked.

"It's not on the file," Van Helsen said. "I only asked for very general information."

"Ganna. Her name was Ganna. She was Italian. Her father was a well-known anti-fascist, exiled by Mussolini. He had installed Ganna and her mother in Lausanne

and then gone back to Italy to continue the struggle underground. The first time I saw her. . . . Go ahead, do as they do in films, a fade-in to the accompaniment of my words, and you'll see the new University, the Palais de Rumine, looming up like a steamer out of the fog. It was winter; night was falling and it gave a kind of dignity to that ignoble building, which normally looks rather like a bathing establishment. I hadn't returned to Lausanne for the beginning of term: my mother had taken me to France, to the Côte d'Azur—a whirl of big hotels, gaming rooms, midnight bathing, necking parties in the small hours with the daughters of ambassadors or racing motorists. Then I had been to Davos to do some skiing. Back at the University at last, I took up the History of Art course more or less at the point where I found it each year, realising that only the closing of the frontiers would ever enable me to learn what happened before the reign of King Sargon and his winged bulls. I was late that day, of course, and the lecture had already begun. With a little miner's lamp beside him, the professor was reeling off a string of dates in a bored tone of voice. On the screen, there was a sort of seal propping itself up on its fore-paws, pierced with arrows—the wounded lion from the British Museum. The lecture-room as far as I could see in the darkness seemed to be only half full. I took a seat at the end of a row, vaguely noticing a shadowy figure at the other end. The lights came on; I looked at my neighbour, a girl. It was like a punch in the solar plexus; the girl was Ganna."

"What a pity," Jerry said. "There ought at least to be a photograph of her."

"Yes, but in profile. Because you must see her first

in profile, as I did—in the same way as certain mountain passes are best taken obliquely. Her Florentine profile, of an almost agonising purity. I was staggered; I'd never had anything like this feeling before. I didn't understand what had happened to me. She appeared not to have seen me, not to notice my stupefaction. Later, she told me she had missed nothing. My frank stare had aroused a vague tenderness in her. She was grateful to me for putting myself so completely at her mercy; it helped her to feel strong. By a sort of inverted process, she took strength from my weakness. And her feelings finally took shape in a little ruse which coming from anyone else would have made me smile, but which seemed to me afterwards, when I understood it, intensely serious: on the way out of the lecture-room, she dropped her portfolio at my feet. There was no suggestion of affectation on her part, no gesture of surprise. She was there, a few feet away from me, waiting for me to pick the portfolio up, with the first sentence she would speak to me already composed in her mind; the philtre that would link us together. This gesture was for me so unforeseeable, I was so far from suspecting that she would take the initiative in getting to know me, that I passed by without bending down, without looking at her, like a sleep-walker, my heart beating as though I had just crossed a frontier illegally. I went down the steps at a run, I rushed through the most brightly lit streets of Lausanne, I went on the scenic railway, drunk, delirious, realising with a sort of dizzy rage that one could really go off one's head as a result of a single look, and consoling myself with the thought that it wouldn't last. And in fact it didn't last, any more than I did."

"*Having made the acquaintance of a girl at the University . . .*" Van Helsen read.

"Two days later, there was another lecture on the history of art. She was there; I didn't need to look in her direction; I knew that I would find her in the same place; as I went down the steps of the amphitheatre I made a point of looking straight in front of me. A little spot of colour glowed to the right of me, and that was Ganna. I went and sat down two rows below her. I wanted to test her. Since she had been so clumsy as to give me one sign, I would let her commit herself further, sure that in the end, when she offered herself to me, I would be back in my element, freed from my obsession. A girl just like all the others, with an attractive profile. . . . With that phrase I would set the seal on my victory. A minute later, she picked up her books and came to sit in my row. Instead of releasing me, her presence revived my agitation, took my breath away. All the things I usually relied upon in my relations with girls deserted me; I was left without anything, with no feeling of ease, or originality. None of that was worthy of Ganna. She was on a different plane. I was abandoned, at the mercy of the only thing still left in me—let's give it its proper name—my fear of Ganna. It was a girl student who released us from our silence. A big girl, older than the others, who followed the courses in the same way as I did, although her aim was rather different from mine, for she was looking for a husband. At that moment she was flirting outrageously with some young bloods, cooing and wriggling while a gentle twitter ran through the amphitheatre. I looked at Ganna. She smiled at me. I made some remark such as 'It's nice to be young,'

which she affected to find amusing. We were now side by side. I entered the orbit of her scent in the same way as one might enter into the gravitational pull of a planet. It was a scent of fruit and fur. I made a few remarks to her at random, I tried to draw her into my orbit. 'You like music? You ought to come to Dénéreáz's lectures—that would cure you of it.' We exchanged christian names, ages, addresses, as children swap stamps or insects. The turning out of the lights for the lantern lecture took us by surprise. The room was hushed. A muezzin wail rose from the screen: the professor, tortured by time, fatigue, perhaps also by age, hastened to reveal all he knew about Assyrian art, so as to be released as soon as possible and to devote himself to Helvetian art in the cabaret of the Pomme de Pin. I stayed with my face turned towards Ganna. As a lighter picture came on to the screen, her profile appeared, outlined by little wisps of light, like cigarette smoke. I felt I had to press my leg against hers. Convention demanded that I do so, and perhaps she expected it. The decision rose in me like a wave, and fell back again before I had made the move. I struggled with myself, I persevered. I understood these allurements. I gave in to them. It was at one of these moments of submission that my leg, like some remote mechanism obeying an order that had in fact already been countermanded, transmitted through an infinity of wheelworks, moved of its own accord and accosted Ganna's leg, a twin barque. I felt a slight contraction there, but she didn't move, and to her scent was joined her body's warmth, and a burning wax seemed to weld our legs together. Slowly my leg twisted around hers, like a jungle fig-tree round the column of a temple,

gripping it as though to break it. And during this struggle of plants, of octopus tentacles, that was playing out the sequel to our adventure without our knowing it, we avoided each other with our eyes, which remained fixed on the screen, on the reconstitutions of Chaldean temples, on the treasures of Khorsabad. For us the background to the first rendezvous, which old couples recall so tenderly, had been built by the slaves of Sennacherib. What was for others the shore of the Lake, the park of Versailles, the staircase at Ranelagh, would be represented for us by Babylon, Nippur, and Dur-Sharokin. Instead of the first walk together, with hands linked, through the streets of the town, there was this exploration of our motionless bodies, caught in the stones of shattered cities advancing through clouds of red brickdust. Instead of jewellers' showcases we stared at the jewels of the Assyrians, at terracotta tablets instead of bookshop windows. Had we carved our names on the desk, it would have been in cuneiform characters. I surrendered to the magic of these dead empires and pictured in my mind the itinerary of our love through the ages—each stage, each signpost. Before Nineveh I would taste of Ganna's lips, and I would touch her breast beneath the eyes of Assurbanipal. Each name, of city or king or god, would remind me of its secret counterpart on Ganna's body. I even wondered, with a sort of frightened fervour—forgetting the limits that were, after all, set on such an enterprise by the lecture room—what vision of massacred prisoners, of fish-gods, of tortured souls, would remain linked to our final embrace, would consecrate it by mixing with our tumultuous visions the seal of the end of time, the sun-serpent,

the moon-serpent and their bisexual divinity. The lecture ended without our having thought of unwinding our legs, and in the moment that followed I was able at last to look long at Ganna. And my tenderness increased, more unexpectedly and overwhelmingly than before, when I saw that for all the purity of her profile and the slim grace of her figure, she was scarcely even pretty."

"... *he quarrels with his family,*" Van Helsen went on.

"Of course, it was bound to happen. My parents, like all parents, had a genius for misunderstanding. My mother would reproach me from time to time for associating with certain young hooligans whose influence was if anything healthy and bracing, whilst I, on my side, had been obliged to defend myself against the advances of a young intellectual pederast with whom she had become infatuated and whom she wanted me to cultivate. Until I met Ganna, I had never had a relationship that was at once so innocent and so unfrivolous. It was a chance for me to raise my standards a little. That was enough for my mother to take a dislike to her. 'That little tart,' she would say. I could have told her that in fact Ganna wasn't enough of a tart for my liking—for one part of me was impatient, accused me of wasting time, of bungling the job, challenged me to force her or give her up. Her presence reduced that part of me to silence. Each of our meetings, however unsatisfied it left my desire, brought me a kind of exaltation, which turned to disgust when I got home. My stepfather made rather a contemptible scene about it all: 'She's making a fool of you . . . etcetera'. I took no notice. I could have recited the tirade myself, for I knew the kind of thing

that people of that sort liked to say on such a subject. And yet there was still something in me that sympathised with it; that baseness still haunted my thoughts and dreams. I was not equipped for greatness. My chance was fading, beginning to wither away—I could sense it with the impotent lucidity of an invalid. I must do something to prevent myself from sinking. I must act.”

We do not know if the drowned see the whole of their life in a single flash. But those who see them drowning can, if they love them, feel on their lips the taste of what they are losing, and its overtones in time. Seated beside the bed where Kelso was being taken apart stone by stone to be rebuilt in some other country, Héléne submitted to the invisible stocktaking. Accompanied by a silent black-clad angel, and already draped in that lofty indifference which would from now on defend her body against every approach and which would be her only widow's veil, she passed from room to room, from floor to floor, through the palace of her memory, listening to the inventory, the enumeration, soft and spell-like, of what was left to her to live on. Seated on the bank of the river, Héléne watched the reflection of her estate, entered into the mirror of memory where all things are alike and yet different, while the transparent breach closed up behind her without leaving a scar, imprisoning her in a cage of living glass. Seated on the edge of time, Héléne watched her life flow by, began the long dialogue with memory's echo that would be her means of making good her loss, that she would renew incessantly, untiringly and patiently until the day she died.

She said “Kelso”, and echo answered “Kelso”. No one had ever called him anything else—one would think he had no christian name. She took Kelso's face and flung it at the echo; back it came to her like a ball, like a cork in a well. A strange game of patience, this, where one finds only what one knows already—a game without surprises, a prisoner's game. Sometimes a memory remains unformulated; oblivion has passed that way, with its lava and its snows; echo is silent. Sometimes, too, but how rarely, the echo goes off of its own accord, like a clock, and in its turn throws up an image that you had thought completely buried. You take up the ball again, and the game goes on. You play with your shadow, with the wall, you play like those lonely little girls in narrow courtyards, keeping the score by muttering the lost words of the night; fragmentary names, the froth of language that comes before the honey of physical love, all the passwords of desire. Behind you now are the thousand embraces that trouble the sleep of the young; they no longer have the unbreakable hardness of things that are promised one, of that crystal mountain where waiting runs dry. More sure, indisputable, they have less reality: some of them crumble into dust. Pleasure does not outlive itself; its miracle is in its infinite possibility of renewal, its eternal present. He who turns back to it risks being transformed into a pillar of salt. For the impotent, this risk is the curse of pleasure, and they dedicate themselves to the eternal future. Héléne was aware of this trap, and knew how to avoid it—by humble, ardent submission to the present, by continuous response to the continual provocation of the passing moment. Nothing can prevent this hour from having



existed. It matters little that it should rot away in the memory, that the moment you try to perpetuate it, only its absence counts. H el ene was now trying the other road, venturing fearlessly into the furthest depths of the sleeping galleries. And as she explored them the trance-like hours broke away from their sunken anchorages and moved to the surface. Accompanied by a silent black-clad angel, H el ene went down into the pit, began her long dialogue with the abyss, at the end of which she would know her heritage. It was a pilgrimage without anxiety, a sweet enigma, since the key to it was simple—it was now only a question of living, or dying.

“I had a friend,” said the shade of Agyre. “Charlie. He was a bit of a hero to me—a sailor, he had travelled all over the world and back again. . . He had done a good many of the things I dreamed about, and I could guess that he was capable of others. He urged me to break with my family, to go out and find adventure. I pleaded my youth, my inexperience, my lack of preparation for the hard life. ‘Later on, when I’m ready for it.’ I went on reproducing these arguments for some time, and every day that passed made them less and less valid. I told him the story of Ganna, and since she was the measure of my weakness, he again advised me to get away from all that, to come to grips with life, and to return later on in a calmer, more detached frame of mind, capable of assessing things, of orientating myself, of acting like a man. ‘But there’s nothing I know how to do; surely you don’t want me to go out and beg in the streets.’ ‘You’ve been trained as an army radio

operator; you know how to work a field set. . . . Listen, I’ve got a pal who works on a Japanese boat. He’ll be in Marseilles in a fortnight’s time. Those boats generally come back empty, and they’re quite prepared to carry any sort of return freight—emigrants, pilgrims on the way to Mecca, or what have you. . . . In return for some sort of work—dish-washing, scrubbing the deck, whatever you like—it’ll take you all the way to Indo-China. I’ll give you the address in Saigon of another pal of mine who works for an airline they’re building up out there. With your certificate as a radio operator, you’re sure to get a job. You need a change of climate.’ I knew that he was right. I knew also that at the prospect of real action I was taken with a sort of uncertainty that I was afraid to analyse too closely. In following Charlie’s advice, I would quite certainly discover myself, but what exactly would I find? As a finished product I might be worse than the sketchy outline that I was accused of being. And then I was in need of Ganna. We went out together, we went to shows, we went for long walks. She soothed me with her gentle, serious manner, her grave voice, her unbelievable purity. Sometimes I was seized with rage; I tried to shock her, to make her blush. I was always defeated. At the sound of her voice everything became clear and composed. In the end it was I who blushed. She had a sort of indulgence for me, she listened patiently while I sang the praises of Mussolini, like someone letting a small boy have his say. Afterwards, she would try to make me understand what life had taught her. She spoke to me of the Lipari Islands—I retaliated with the draining of the Pontine Marshes. She told me of her father’s ordeals,

how he had been tracked down and his comrades tortured and executed—I replied with the theory of political amorality. She would shrug her shoulders gently. One day, as we were coming out of the Lausanne Stadium after some sporting event, she pointed out to me the Bois-Mermet prison opposite. 'Can you imagine what happens in a prison?' 'Swiss prisons are the best in the world, after Australian ones,' I answered proudly. I had read that somewhere. 'And Italian prisons are the worst, after the Spanish,' she replied. 'And they all have something in common that you have no conception of—separation.' 'You're the only one I'd mind being separated from,' I said. 'That's just what I thought,' Ganna said, and I could elicit nothing more from her on the subject.

"Meanwhile, our relationship ran into further difficulties. After our first few meetings, she had hesitated a little about letting me kiss her, but once she had made the decision she had refused me nothing in that direction and in fact had shown, in default of experience, such keen understanding in her embraces that I was forced to attribute her further resistance to a graver motive than fear or coldness. I had already repeatedly expressed my desire for her, seeking to shock her, to excite her. She did not reply, but merely looked at me calmly. I was the first to lower my eyes. I was so exhausted with this struggle, my behaviour seemed to me so absurd, that I reached the point of asking her, in rage (for it was the first time that I had put this question to her otherwise than jokingly and when I was sure of her reply): 'Do you love me?' 'You're good-looking,' she answered, 'I like good-looking people.' It was as wily

an answer as you could have got from anyone, but at least I wasn't so stupid as to ignore the affinity between supreme innocence and supreme guile. And moreover I knew that the future of our relationship depended on me, on what I would make of myself. True, she loved me for my looks, and also for whatever devotion I showed to her, less from coquetry than from a quiet confidence in being able to raise me to her own level. For the rest, she knew that I was still too weak and sterile a character for her to become really tied to me. I was a little offended by her attitude, but thanked my lucky stars for my good looks which still attracted her and kept her from finding a worthier friend, and I also knew that if I proved myself more worthwhile, she would not refuse me her body. That was Ganna's secret, that was her plan—to make of her body the price of my reformation and redemption. I could see the childish seriousness and the outrageous innocence of it all. She would quote to me St. Exupéry's phrase 'Love is not looking at one another, but looking together in the same direction'. I would applaud this, fuming to myself. I knew only too well that I could indeed be looked at with some pleasure, but that I myself was no good for looking anywhere.

"One day, however, I found her more yielding. I had brought her a copy of a slim volume I had just had published at my own expense by one of the worst rogues in the Swiss publishing world. It was called "Innocent Breasts", a collection of poems in a synthetic surrealist manner, dedicated exclusively but covertly to Ganna, in which my pen, in default of another organ, leapt wildly beyond the bounds of our present relation-

ship. She seemed to me to be distraught, preoccupied, easier to unsettle. Under the pretext of reading, I stretched out beside her on a divan (we were alone: her mother was working; the afternoon sun burned through the half-closed blinds), and pressed myself against her. She listened, her eyes wide open and expressionless. I started to mime some of the more obvious insinuations of the poem (there was a smell of trees through the open windows; the wind from the lake carved great cool gulfs out of the heat) and before I had fully realised that I was passing to a new stage, I had undone her dress and my lips had encountered the living firmness of her breasts. Gently she placed her hand on my face and pressed it against her body. I took this as an encouragement. (Birds pursued one another with their cries, insects buzzed in the sunlight, got themselves caught in the trap made by the shadow of the curtains.) I followed up my advantage, slid on to my knees so as to be nearer to her hips, and started on her skirt. (A boat on the lake greeted the land with a blast on its siren; the big flowers on the divan cover came alive under my eyes, while others in glass tanks swayed gently, drunk with sun.) As I pulled at the flounces of her skirt, the dress flattened itself against her body, revealing at the junction of the legs a darker swelling, an under-sea grotto surrounded by sea-weed. I bent down over it, her whole body began to quiver, and I heard her catch her breath. I paused, certain of my triumph, and let my eyes travel up towards her heaving breast, her shoulders, her face. She was crying. I was dumbfounded, at once furious at the mistake I had made and full of false pity: I knew these tears of little girls who surrender to you with all the signs

of martyrdom, and five minutes later, their eyes quite dry, ask you to start again. So that was what Ganna was, after all. I had been well advised not to change my character. When it came to the point, we found ourselves on the same level. I soothed her with ready-made words of consolation (here I found I was master of myself once more—I knew my role by heart). She wiped her eyes; she shook her head, looked at me, tried to smile. ‘Forgive me,’ she said. And a moment later: ‘My father was arrested yesterday in Italy.’

“I said nothing. There was nothing I could say. Once more with Ganna, I found myself completely in the dark. The world to which she belonged and the things that could touch her were too remote from me. I could find not the faintest echo of them in my own experience. Even the thrilling half-nakedness of this body beside me—she had not thought of covering herself up again—seemed to me to be removed from reality, behind all the barriers of Ganna’s world, which I could scarcely imagine. For a second, however, I had the contemptible impulse to take advantage of her weakness and of the agitation that the news must have caused her. I made no move, my eyelids hardly flickered, but I felt that she had guessed my intention, and the look she gave me pained me. I helped her on with her clothes, I placed my lips on hers with a touch as light as a mayfly’s on the water, I put my arm round her shoulder and comforted her, listening to her grave voice telling me the details of her father’s arrest, weighing up the chances and the dangers with a terrifying assurance. ‘He had a false identity card, of course. If he isn’t recognised, he’ll get away with ten years. If he is recognised, it means death. . . .’

"On leaving her, I remembered what she had said to me outside the Bois-Mermet—separation. . . . There, perhaps, was the key to Ganna's world. In my turn I must experience the world of separation. I was living unjustifiably on boundless capital as if everything belonged to me. I must come down to earth, get to know the world of men, in which one has to work out one's own salvation. A kind of serenity came over me. I was going away, I didn't yet know where. . . . I would return after a time a better and a wiser man. Ganna would wait for me—there was no question about that. I would then be on a footing of equality with her—we could then try to be happy together. . . . I had gone down towards the Grand-Chêne, but I changed my mind. The town was at once bright and sombre, like my hopes. I paused for a moment, then I made my way towards Charlie's house. . . ."

Night was falling over Saigon. Another night, almost identical with the rest, scarcely lighter than that of yesterday which had bought the storm. In the gap between these two nightfalls treasures and lives had accumulated. The ice was holding well, the glacier was forming. Agyre and Kelso had already entered its kingdom, were breathing in its drugs, beginning their slow metamorphosis. Van Helsen and Jerry were standing on the steps of the hospital, silent in the middle of a deserted field, beaten captains on the night of their defeat. The sky was rotting like a fruit; black trails drifted across it like the veins in marble, the closing lid of a false tomb. The heat exhausted itself on clothing,

noises died. The day ebbed away in silence, like a crowd. Van Helsen put the sheaf of reports back into his pocket. "A pretty poor type, you see. Anyhow, I'll write to his stepfather. . . . Funny that he should die under the name he chose to symbolise his hopes—Agyre."

"That's not very fair of you," Jerry said. "After all, he must have had some guts to leave home and go off into the bush. . . . You seem to be reproaching him for the best he had in him. You'd have preferred him to sink lower? After all, if he hadn't had this attack . . ."

"There isn't any 'if', Jerry."

"But you were saying yourself, about me . . ."

"He just wasn't one of us," Van Helsen said. And he went down the steps, with a great weight on his shoulders.

"I'll come back later tonight," he went on, "although . . ." He shrugged his shoulders and turned towards Jerry. "You ought to go and rest, or at least relax a bit. . . ."

"No," said Jerry. "I—I'm going to stay a bit longer." He immediately regretted this admission. Van Helsen knew that the company of a dying man would be more likely to frighten him away. If he was staying, it could only be for Héléne.

Van Helsen looked him in the eyes, and the infinite sadness of his gaze was mixed with a certain admiration. "Already," he said. "A girl you've only seen for a few minutes, and you'd give your life for her."

"Yes," Jerry said, very embarrassed. "I—I . . ."

"Unfortunately, it's not your life that she needs," Van Helsen said, and he moved off, stooping slightly,

one hand in a pocket. His footsteps resounded on the pavement as though it was already night. "How does he know that I would give my life for her," Jerry wondered. He went back into the hospital. White shapes passed backwards and forwards, exchanging orders, pushing silent trolleys. It might have been a landing-stage. Jerry crossed the hall, looking at the white walls, the high-up windows. It might have been a liner. He started up the stairs as though it were a gangway, his foot pausing longer on the first step, his hand hesitating on the bannister—and there was a ringing of bells at every floor. It might have been the signal for sailing. Jerry was going up towards Hélène, he was going to try and discover Hélène, to bridge the gap that separated him from her. And his life seemed to him indeed a very meagre viaticum for so long a journey.

## II

THE VISUAL IMAGE of first meetings remains clear, but the words that are said are only a vague memory. Hélène remembered having astonished Kelso by describing to him with complete accuracy the clothes he had worn on the day of his arrival (whereas he, the cad, hadn't even noticed her). But their words were forgotten. No doubt they had exchanged many an insignificant word before getting to know each other. Even the details of their first outings together had become confused, so unmemorable were they—it was all one friendly haze until the evening Hélène had teased Kelso about his assiduity in pursuing her when he was in Saigon, and had asked him flippantly "Would you by any chance be in love with me?" From then on, memory did not flag. There was no risk of Hélène's forgetting the solemn way Kelso had answered her, with his calm voice and his suddenly rather English manner: "Not in the least. I want you passionately. That's all." It was his first challenge, and it filled Hélène with a sort of warmth, with a feeling akin to the tension of battle. She was glad to feel a bond between them, and at the same time disconcerted. She exchanged a currency that seemed to her familiar—love—for a foreign currency—desire. She tried to judge its weight, to discern its exact blend of alloys. Until then, desire had not played much part in her life. She was even inclined to regard it as just one of the illusions of adolescence, like the delusive impulse that had once guided her into a school-friend's bed only to leave it in the utmost distress. She had a lover, a handsome boy who was a member of her party, and for

them physical intercourse had been undertaken as part of a wider, more purposeful union in the interests of the common task. Pleasant though it was, this intercourse seemed to her to be something trivial, a form of relaxation. She could see nothing in it to justify its being taken seriously, confused with friendship or with God. (In spite of her militant left-wing views, she believed in God. When she was asked why, she would answer "Because it's the only poetry there is," and get herself called an idiot by her comrades.) She guessed that her lover attached greater importance to it than she did, and this difference of attitude astonished her, worried her at times. Her waiting came to be infused with fear when in the waters of night her man came to be ensnared in her, as if in a trap. His violence, his abandon, seemed to her to be disproportionate to the act itself, and shocked her a little. The boy suffered, and although she was amenable enough to his desire, he did not dare go beyond certain limits, or to pronounce certain words that burned his lips and consumed his body. (The same limits that she would go beyond with Kelso, the same words that she would invent for him. . . .) Yet their relationship continued, equivocal and cankered by silence, without her finding a valid reason to break the bond. Their common goal and the respect she had for him cemented it. The two components had crumbled together. As, through that terrifying trick of perspective in reverse that makes people smaller the closer one gets to them, she became more conscious of her companion's weaknesses, she also began to be aware of the wiles and deceptions connected with her cause. Innocent of political education, she had arrived instinctively at what

seemed to her to represent justice. As she grew to distinguish other ends, other means, her reasons for continuing the struggle seemed to lose their force. She was careful not to condemn these stratagems newly revealed to her—she simply realised that it was no longer for her. While conceding, to those who were sustained by a faith that was noble and exacting enough, the right to go beyond justice, to forgo its immediate consummation the more firmly to establish it in the future, she found she hadn't the nerve for this, and refused to lend herself to it. To those who accused her of egoism, she answered that the fault really arose from complaisance, and that those who hadn't yet been struck by the falsity of their position were entitled to go ahead. Even if they were wrong, they would be forgiven. For her, now that she had seen through it all, it would be cowardly to carry on. It was on the day after this double break that she had met Kelso, and had discovered almost imperceptibly that the sharing of happiness with a single human being could be just as important as the sharing of unhappiness with all the rest.

Kelso's childhood experiences had cured him of politics. He would repeat delightedly a phrase of Van Helsen's: "Bothering about others is almost always a sign of glandular trouble." He carried his egoism with superb effrontery, and had nothing but jibes for Hélène's political adventures. "Can you explain to me why politicians are so ugly? One can see right away that they're incapable of anything else. What did you have to get yourself mixed up in all that for? Attractive women should have nothing to do with politics. There'll always be plenty of hysterical battle-axes wanting to

improve the world and pick up the males they so badly need in the process. Attractive women should just be attractive, to enchant the leisure hours of poor proletarians like me. . . ." "Funny sort of proletarian," Hélène would say. "What?" Kelso would howl indignantly, and he would proceed to construct a long and highly embellished saga about his childhood miseries, which disarmed and amused Hélène, and attracted her more than she realised. After his blunt declaration, she had adopted the tone of a big sister, explaining to him that, having just got over an emotional crisis, she was in need of calm and friendship. "Okay," Kelso had coolly replied, "We're friends. For the time being. But I warn you, I'll wear you down eventually." And immediately afterwards, exploiting his advantage like a scientific boxer, "Friends call each other 'tu'. So that's settled, we call each other 'tu'. I'll wear you down eventually." Hélène wondered what it was that prevented her from slapping his face. And at the same time, an involuntary smile formed on her lips. It was of little importance to her whether Kelso was this or that. To see him live was enough to fill her with a sort of confident joy—"what one probably feels when one looks at one's child," she thought. She kept the reflection to herself, knowing how unresponsive Kelso was to maternal sentiments.

These arrangements had fixed a kind of ceremonial between them. When Kelso returned from one of his trips, he would go straight to Hélène's office, would saunter in, his gazelle-hound's gait miraculously regained after the stiffness of the journey, and would take up his stand behind her. "You still don't love me?" "Not

yet." "Okay. Neither do I," he would say. "Fine." And if she was alone, he would take the opportunity to pin her arms to the back of the chair and forcibly kiss her half-a-dozen times, after which he would go off laughing uproariously to make his report to Van Helsen, leaving her furious. As the door closed behind him, he would hear a blotting pad or an india-rubber bounce noisily against it. One day when she reproached him for his behaviour, he replied: "You can't find it as displeasing as all that, because you've only to get up when I come in, and you never think of doing that." It was true. The next time she just looked at him without answering when he asked his question. Kelso complicated things by behaving coquettishly himself. Instead of taking advantage of the situation, he remarked flippantly: "Look out—seven-tenths cloud," which immediately roused Hélène to fury. After these scenes, she hated him for about five minutes, and then realised that she was beginning to listen for his footsteps. She was becoming used to him like a drug. She tried to analyse her feelings, to define the attraction he held for her. He was good-looking, though less so, perhaps, than her first lover. In spite of the hardness of the chin and the cheekbones, there was a certain softness about the mouth that irritated and attracted her at the same time. He had a clear and agile mind, not over-encumbered with knowledge, but astonishingly quick to learn from his reading and conversations. Above all, she was struck by his integrity. He seemed to her incapable of baseness, but effortlessly, by a sort of divine ignorance of evil. The phantoms of his childhood, which she could analyse better than he, worried him very little. He regarded them

as vague importunate dreams and chased them from his mind. All that had been purged away by the fine life of action he now led, and from which he derived his strength. This strength of his intrigued H el ene. She did not confuse it with his muscles, and yet she could not think of him as real without his strong arms and shoulders. For the first time she had the revelation of a domain common to body and soul, of a single source of power feeding both. And as a result of this discovery, all the diffuse and repressed emotion that attracted her towards Kelso, and which so far had had a sort of dream-like quality, assumed greater substance and flowed into her own body, to enlighten it.

It was sometime in the middle of summer, when throats were parched by the burning air, the sky was like plaster, and the ventilators crunched insects like pieces of dry toast. In the evening they had gone to have a drink together at the Perroquet. It was there that Kelso, in the middle of talking, had taken H el ene by the arm in the most natural way possible, and their bodies had touched. And it was there that an icy sword had pierced her, that a slow shiver rose in her, as though a thousand stars had lit beneath her skin and begun to gravitate unceasingly around her sex and the tips of her breasts. It was there that she came to know his power. Up to then, his kisses, against which she defended herself, had touched her no more than blows received in battle and deadened by the tension of the struggle. Now, for the first time, she had yielded defenceless to his touch, and at once the world of desire opened up before her. She watched Kelso from out of the corner of her eye, a little fearfully. She was afraid that he might have noticed her

agitation and would make a joke of it. The notion was unbearable—it would be a kind of blasphemy. Luckily he had noticed nothing, and went on talking, a little excited by the alcohol. He had won his first victory without knowing it.

Before dinner they met again on the edge of the air-field, watching for the lights of the Hanoi mail plane. The suffocating heat was ended; the day cried out for relief; an agonising sweetness arose from the dried-up earth. Above the horizon, the sun set over islands and promontories of cloud. An unbelievably smooth and luminous sea, full of glowing archipelagoes, merged with the sky. Far off, dogs howled for thirst, while an aircraft apparently immobile in the sky hummed, was silent, hummed again. But H el ene knew a different thirst. The shivering had gone, its cool weight had slipped off her like a dress. But now she felt its after-effects—there was an emptiness inside her, waiting to be filled again. Kelso was silent. With a perception that was new to her, that filled her with wonder, she sensed the same sort of feelings in him. That sexual pride that she dreaded in others was now intelligible and sacred to her. What had been darkness and fear became clarity and will. Her resolution to belong to Kelso mounted in her body, bringing with it a dazzling confidence, a wealth of glory. She kept the avowal waiting on her lips, as though she already knew how to delay the arrival of the orgasm. Kelso was the first to speak. She faintly regretted it: she would have liked to surrender of her own accord, to enjoy his surprise, as though she were to appear naked in front of him. But her desire was too strong for another thought to check it. Kelso said: "H el ene."



"Yes?"

"I'll come to your place tonight."

"Yes."

"You'll wait up for me?"

"Yes."

"I can stay?"

"Yes."

All these "yeses" had been very brief and clear cut. "Like those you say in church," she thought with amusement. They walked a few steps together. Their words had released them. Their forces were being re-organised, with a view to another battle, that night. . . . Kelso was once more the young puppy. He twirled round her, laughing. And laughing he took her in his arms and whispered in her ear: "That's a nice way to behave! Letting a young man you're not in love with into your room!" "I love you," she heard herself answering. She said it for him, and also for that force that was growing inside her, that force of which she had just experienced the first blinding realisation. Kelso, in spite of his self-assurance, was staggered. He remained balanced on one leg, his breath coming in short gasps. "What's that?" he said, "I didn't quite catch what you said." "I love you," she repeated in English. "You do. . . ?" He left the two syllables suspended very softly in the air, like one of the names he would murmur to her that night in the long conjuration of the transfigured words—the beauty of her face and each part of her body in turn—whose low sound would stir their barque until they were washed ashore. Héléne hardened again for a moment: "What difference can it make to

you, since you only want me physically?" "Only . . ." he said, laughing silently, "you little idiot. . . ." She no longer resisted now, but clung to him with all her strength, with her hands, her knees, her mouth. A real cinema kiss. More serious than that, all the same, for their bodies were joined, she could feel him against her like some human plant, she anticipated his desire and longed for its accomplishment, and the Hanoi plane landed noiselessly without their having seen its red and green lights, while the same black and gold lights lit up between their faces.

Chance was merciful. It was the pretty nurse who remained on duty. The doctor spoke to her in a low voice; their murmuring mingled with Kelso's restless breathing. As he left her, he added more distinctly: "If he speaks or calls, come and fetch me," and turning towards Héléne: "You should rest now, my dear."

For an hour Héléne had been expecting those words. Now she no longer paid any attention to them: she was overcome by the doctor's first words. So this thing could still speak, could still call out? All the fear and aversion she had felt before now disappeared, and the tortured form became once more Kelso, the body of Kelso. She might still hear his voice again (she knew that his first word would be "Héléne"), a living voice might still deliver the message she was asking memory to give her. . . . There was no longer any question of her leaving.

"I shall stay."

The doctor spread his hands. "As you wish." Sorrow

is a praiseworthy feeling. Fidelity is a splendid thing. The doctor was a cultivated man. All was for the best. Hélène returned to her secret incantation. *And, that night, he came to my room. The mosquito net made the bed seem larger, like a canopy, like an adornment for royal nuptials, like a wedding veil. Night came in through the high open windows, full of small sounds. At the level of the roofs the darkness became more blue, edged with torn clouds, like the fringes of a gas flame. Cats with scrawny limbs ran through the streets. A radio played. From time to time a shutter was opened or the lights went on in another room on the other side of the street and then great patches of light were thrown across the dark bedroom, like ships. Brought up short by the furniture and the upholstery, this light paused, suddenly revived, over the two of us, reclothing our naked bodies for a moment with a new sheen.*

Jerry advanced along the corridor. Each closed door he passed had a great pane of glass in it, through which the sick-rooms appeared one after the other, bathed in a greenish light, like tanks in an aquarium. The slowness, the silence, the cautious movements of the creatures inside them also had an under-water quality about them. "Preserved in light, as though in alcohol," Jerry thought. He passed from one green blur to another; it was as though he were on a station platform, all these windows being the compartments of the great night train, the Death Express. "Pillows! Blankets!" White-uniformed conductresses passed him pushing those same little station trolleys, those buffets for lazy passengers, with bread and fruit on them, the very gifts one places on a grave. There were the same families waiting on the

platform, the same farewells, the same waving of handkerchiefs. But there was neither the throb of machinery nor the smell of coal. Today, the railways of death are electrified, the soul's adventure is illumined by great white sparks. Jerry imagined its ordeals, in the form of vague Customs formalities, police interrogations in which officials with Anubis heads made you sign interminable questionnaires and forms bordered with black like funeral notices. A priest went from compartment to compartment punching tickets, examining the credentials and opinions of the passengers. One must be vigilant: the kingdom of heaven is infested with spies. . . . Jerry strode along the platform, looking for a woman traveller without a ticket. He must drag her from the train, take her out of the station, bring her back to the world of the living, with him. . . .

*Kelso was asleep. What I wanted most was to be that thinking head and that sleeping one at the same time. Still swollen by our caresses, my skin taut and burning, my blood swirling round and responding to the hammering of my body with a tingling coolness, like after being drenched with rain (like after a sea-bathe, with the same trace of foam in the fold of the hip, the same after-taste of salt on the lips), I was kept awake by my ignorance of what he had felt. "And they shall be one flesh"—that phrase haunted me like an only prayer. All that joy, all that beauty, all that play of flame and shadow could have but one end: to annihilate differences, to reconcile alien bodies, to redeem the living from the sin of separation, from the original malediction that forbade them communication, as prisoners are forbidden adjoining cells. And it was myself that I had*

*met with at the climax of it all. I knew only myself: that flame illumined me more powerfully than any other, that water held my reflection more clearly than any other, it was always my image, my reflection. My happiness was greater than ever, and it was always my happiness. Kelso's was merely a reflection of mine. I reconstructed it in me like a foreign language.*

Jerry paused on the threshold of Hélène's compartment. Sitting upright, with her eyes half closed and her lips joined in a seam that was softer than a smile, she watched over Kelso, motionless beside his bed like a genie of death, like a tree beside a tomb. Jerry leant his forehead against the glass, astonished to find her so much as he had expected, unchanged by the light, by fatigue, by the hope with which he had charged her. This sleeping sentinel defended the room better than any guard. Jerry stayed by the door, incapable of going in, spellbound like those exhumers of corpses who find a body intact at the bottom of a grave, and draw back from its snowy stare.

*The mosquito net floated in the night. I lifted my breasts up to the moon, like medals. I learned by heart Kelso's long-limbed body—his smooth torso, stretched taut over the ribs like his aeroplane; his leg stretched out loose and marked with a white scar like an angel's bite; his penis limp like a dead tree trunk lying in the grass. I was light, solemn, serene, happy—and also changed, so changed. . . .*

One by one the lights went out along the corridor. For all the others it was the time for sleep. In Kelso's

room the lighting was changed—the green patch disappeared, but a night-light remained, the privilege of the man about to die. His nearest neighbours pricked up their ears, turned over in their beds, foolishly opened wide their eyes to pierce the darkness and the wall. From room to room there flowed a wordless tide, of fear (When will it be my turn?), of pity (Poor chap, and so young), of rage (Why couldn't he die somewhere else?)—the apprehension of prisoners on the day of an execution. At the end of the row, under a hood of yellow light, the night nurse read a love story to keep herself awake. From time to time she made a quick round—pointlessly, for she meant so little to them compared with dreams and death. She inspected every room without seeing what was going on there, gropingly, a blind shepherdess. She returned to her novel, and her sleep-dimmed eyes brightened up again. There, all the colours were bright and there was no darkness. There death came cleanly, with hand on heart and eyes shining, and very quick. And dead men's wives shed tears that drew tears from you, and uttered fine words that buoyed you up, instead of remaining cold and silent like that poor girl in the room along there. There each one knew his part and how to play it. Here, all was improvisation and disorder. The living knew nothing of death, and the dead didn't know how to die.

Jerry had convinced the pretty nurse without much difficulty that he was a friend of Kelso's. Van Helsen had returned, looking preoccupied, and then left again, asking to be telephoned if anything happened. Jerry had stayed in the room face to face with Hélène. He now felt at ease, having got over his initial embarrassment:

for Hélène, who didn't know him and who knew that Kelso didn't either, his presence in that room at such an hour explained itself. He had reached the heights where all is possible, where one goes out to face the enemy without a qualm, where fear is left behind and there remains only a confused exaltation, a sensation of flaming absurdity. Nothing had happened; Hélène hadn't even appeared to notice him. He was afraid she would interrogate him impatiently, but at the same time he hoped to take advantage of it to say something, to make his presence felt, to savour all the strangeness and impropriety of the situation, push it to the last limit, beyond all reason, until it exploded in a flash—drama, hysteria, or flight together, impelled by a wind of madness. . . . Everything collapsed under Hélène's silence; the words Jerry had dreamed up grew heavy and sank, as though ashamed of themselves; all his hope deserted him. He remained there, face to face with Hélène. In a quarter of an hour he had given her everything, had lost everything, and he felt himself linked to her by these dice-throws. He thought of those gamblers who risk their all on a last throw and who, like him, incapable of quitting the game, sit waiting for the dawn.

Kelso quivered beneath his bandages. An insect with a man's face trying to tear its chrysalis. He was being led away, and he struggled. Patiently his warders showed him their cards: they were in order, they were only obeying instructions. It would all be settled up there. He didn't recognise the signature, he didn't see the words. All that mattered was to get to the other end of the field, to send the message to Hélène. Those who were trying to prevent him were his enemies.

Hélène . . .

Hélène hovered on the borders of sleep. Memory and dream became merged, like the sea and sky in misty weather. She was walking in the street, and her footsteps rang out as though night had already fallen. The street was empty: people were sleeping in broad daylight. There were only the gutter cats, squatting at each corner like boundary posts. She went on beside a bare, interminable wall. Suddenly she was no longer alone. Kelso leaped out from a cul-de-sac, laughing, and took her arm. She scarcely showed any surprise: "Why did you frighten us like that?" "It was arranged beforehand," Kelso said, and he repeated: "Yes, yes, it was arranged beforehand." Their shadows lengthened before them, filled the whole street, closed over them like nets, swallowed them up. In the darkness, shreds of feeble light, like vague clouds, gaps opening into the room where the night-light burned, where Kelso . . . It's true, Kelso is going to die. Unable to shake off her torpor, she felt through the narrow chink in her sleep, which shut down on her again like a slab, those words clutching at her heart: "Kelso is going to die." The room was still in place: nothing changed, except that it was light again. The doctor bent over Kelso and said: "Good, good, that's better." Van Helsen was also there, and the young man with the light eyes whom she didn't know. They were smiling. Kelso was smiling too. The pretty nurse brought him a tray full of fruit—"To make you better." "I thought you were going to die," Hélène said. "Only a moment ago I was saying to myself: Kelso's going to die. . . ." Where was I a moment ago? The scene came apart, unfolded backwards, back to that

precise moment when, as the night-light flickered in the room, a voice had murmured close to her ear: "Kelso's going to die." So it was true. . . . And her dream was off again, released from time, carried in all directions by the winds of the night, spun out at times till morning, when Kelso was no longer more than a marble statue, only to come back and encounter the insuperable minute, compact and light as a pebble, in which a feverish voice incessantly repeated: "Kelso's going to die, Kelso's going to die." She was getting worried at his lateness. Why was Van Helsen in the control room? She must ring him up again. Stretched out on her bed, lit by a night-light, she took up the receiver. At the end of the line there was Van Helsen's voice: "Kelso's going to die." She got up, dressed, found herself dressed and already in the street. . . No, she had no skirt on, the wind blew round her, and with her hands crossed in front of her body, full of confusion and sadness, she hurried towards Kelso, who was going to die. Demented birds, carried on the wind, clawed at her naked hips. It was raining. The rain was heavy and warm (How could that have happened?); sheets of rain, blown by the wind, flowed swiftly between her legs, creating an unbearable sweetness. The rain passed through her without wetting her (How could that have happened), Kelso walked beside her in the murky light. "How did it happen?" "It's nothing. Hurry, hurry." The houses slid past them like blocks of ice. They went into the hospital. Van Helsen was there waiting for them. "It's a mistake. It's not Kelso's who's dead, it's Lagier. You remember he had an accident yesterday morning. . . ." Why didn't I realise it straight away?

Hélène thought. She leaned over Kelso. "I dreamed you were going to die." He was lying naked on the big bed. The mosquito net enveloped them like a cloud of smoke. Outside, patches of light moved about slowly, lingering over their bodies. A radio played. Kelso slept. A crippled angel. The wall of the bedroom became transparent; other forms appeared around a bed in a green room. Shapes preserved like flowers, Hélène watching and Kelso dying. Hélène raised herself up on the bed, and advanced towards the petrified scene, where only a single flame was dancing. The wall was smooth and the ascent was difficult, with the ice flowing between her fingers. Below her there were empty streets, blank walls, crouching cats with their snouts between their paws, softly lamenting. Again interminable wanderings in the darkness, whispered passwords, black curtains parting to reveal other black curtains, and she hoisted herself up into the sick-room, became reincarnated in her own body, next to Kelso who was going to die. This time it was the end. Sleep consumed her, clung to her mouth and eyes. She wiped her face slowly. The night-light burned. The young man with the light-coloured eyes was there, sitting opposite her, throwing her quick glances from time to time. There was a slight hissing sound from Kelso, a suggestion of grinding machinery: the death factory at work. Hélène was awake. This time it was the end.

Later in the night, Jerry went to look for the nurse at the end of the corridor. She questioned him about his friend. He entered fiercely into the game, inventing

details, with desperate irony usurping Kelso's sombre role, as though he were purloining his clothes, as though he were daubing himself with his blood. The nurse was moved, and tried to console him. She found him attractive. Pretending pity, she put her arm around his neck. Jerry shook with rage, savoured perversely this caricature of his desire, wallowed in it. All that he would have liked to give to Héléne he flung at this other girl. Crushing her against the wall which was almost invisible in the darkness, he covered her with furious, clumsy kisses, like someone feverishly burning letters. Each time his mouth met hers, he felt as though he was taking a further step down into a state of dismal abjection where there was neither astonishment nor guilt, to what must be the elysium of the damned. Let their paradise glitter as it may—for us, long live the fires of hell! The nurse parted her lips with docility, finding it all most romantic.

Héléne floated on the surface of sleep. Now and again she sank into it. Amid the green flames and the water bubbles, a single image recurred: Kelso's face upon the bed, coming alive and calling her name. "Héléne." At first she would give a start, the dream would drive her back to the surface, and she would find herself facing the bed, with crazy eyes, waiting for a sequel that never came. Kelso would still be wheezing softly. She would go back to sleep, and take refuge in it, beginning to find there the tenderness that from now on her life would lack. After several leaps, she remained below. "Héléne." "Yes, here I am." In the waters of sleep vague, soothing voices rose, with slow and wayward movements like those of deep-sea divers. Impelled by death, Héléne

began to cherish the night. She was surrendering herself to her worst enemy.

"Héléne." This time the call cut through the layers of sleep, was refracted, reverberated, touched its goal. Héléne leaned over Kelso who stammered out some words, stirred his crippled body, raised fluttering hands. "Mademoiselle." The nurse emerged from the shadow, her face rather pink, all but one of the buttons on her blouse undone. Jerry followed some way behind her. He was sober now and filled with self-disgust. "I'm just a kid, a filthy kid." Seen through the glass partition, the silent scene by the bed was almost comic. "Two girls holding his head while he vomits his life away." Tired and overwrought, Jerry turned his back on the room. And yet, he thought, one word from Héléne would be enough. . . .

Kelso stammered, making an immense effort. "I'm here," Héléne said, "Can you hear me, can you recognise me?" His reply was an inarticulate moan, which she forced herself to take as an assent. "Don't tire yourself. What do you want?" She repeated the question in English—perhaps the world in which he struggled was that of his native country. He seemed to have understood (or did the question anticipate his only wish?), for his lips parted: "Dr . . . drink . . . ." The nurse gazed at him with her eyes wide open. "He's thirsty," Héléne said. "I'm going to telephone the doctor," the nurse said, "I don't know whether he's allowed to drink." Héléne was about to say "What's the use—he's finished?" But she didn't dare pronounce the words: it would be as though she acquiesced in the calamity, as though she accepted death's proposals.

But the doctor must have pronounced them, for the nurse returned with a jug and a glass of water. H  l  ne remembered the stifling nights when she would go to get a drink in the bathroom and come back, with her mouth full of water, to refresh Kelso with a mermaid's kiss. She took the glass herself and lowered it very gently, and longed to melt in him like this water, to let her body stretch out inside his body, like a liquid soul. The water spilled over Kelso's cheeks, but he drank, with trembling lips. When the glass was empty, he calmed down, and murmured a few more words. H  l  ne listened intently for them, inventing for each one a special prayer—like a castaway who sees an aircraft pass above him, exhausts himself with gesturings, and watches out for its return. "You . . . you can't imagi . . ." Silence, the aircraft circles round, the noise of the engine grows louder again, hope rises. "It was . . . it was so . . ." A few moans, and all is quiet. Only the hissing noise maintains the illusion of life. Silence. The aircraft has gone. H  l  ne is left alone on her island.

The nurse returned to her post, rather annoyed by the interruption. A slight embarrassment prevented her from returning immediately to Jerry's arms. She looked at him and tried to smile. He had a nasty, frustrated look in his face. "There's no hope, is there?" "None. . . ." And she brushed his face with quick, charitable kisses which he accepted with indifference. He tried to persuade himself that it would be worth while to be dying in a hospital bed in order to have the right to say "H  l  ne".

## III

"HELENE."

"Yes, I'm here."

"H  l  ne. . . ."

H  l  ne shook off the clinging cobwebs of sleep. From the depths of the heavy seas in which she floundered, something began to move towards the will-o'-the-wisp of the night-light, as though towards some strange Nativity. All the hope of the world was concentrated in that faint crib light which sputtered alone in the night, between the frozen hills, beneath a sky that was ravaged like a battlefield. She paused and listened. Each time before, she had been mistaken, had presented herself at the gate of awakening with a false talisman, a dud cheque signed by her dreams. She had been sent away again; she had no right to a word from Kelso; she had been misinformed, her confidence abused. All he wanted was to drink or to complain. "H  l  ne"—it was she who had said that. She was sending messages to herself, like a lunatic. They couldn't be taken into account. There is no law to prevent you from writing to yourself, but such letters are not accepted as evidence. Any evidence they may provide can only be against you. Far from enhancing you, this false dialogue has a negative effect. You exist only through others. . . . And, she was told as she moved towards the frontier of sleep, you should do it only if you cannot help it, but you must not show it. The law punishes solitary love. H  l  ne sank down again, exhausted. "He's leaving me, and at the same time I'm leaving myself. All that part of me that existed only through him is unable to outlive him. I can no longer

separate his realm from mine, delimit the boundaries between them—much less cling on to him. He is absconding with all that I possess, leaving behind an emptiness. I am losing both his presence and that no-man's-land between us in which our beings merged like two colours mixed together. I am left with my own colour, that thin band of pure colour in which I contain everything, my life, my actions, my memories—so little." Suddenly, she was no longer being driven away. She was even being called. She could now present herself at the counter and receive her due. "Hélène." She checked an involuntary movement to go and fetch the nurse. It was she herself who was being called. It was for her to quench his thirst. She used the same words as she had used earlier, as though at the end of a telephone a long way off and very faint:

"Can you hear me? Do you recognise me?"

"Yes."

One does not die of joy: it's quite the contrary. Hélène became all the more attentive and keyed up. Contact lost—then the first faint taps of the rescue party digging its way through to you. If her name could be engraved on this moment, if she could hold out until the end with this delicate morsel of time, if the message could live in her like a seed. . . . Kelso was speaking, trying to ask a question which he had difficulty in formulating, blurting it out at last in English, which came to him more easily:

" . . . gonna . . . die?"

A curtain of scalding tears closed over Hélène's eyes. She fought hard to break through it, to hide her weakness from Kelso. For him she must be only the face he

knew and loved. . . . At the same time, she would have liked to lie to him, to say to him: "No, you're not going to die" (my words must be words of life—I don't want him to see death through my eyes), and yet the idea flared up in her, filling her with a sort of mad exaltation, that he alone of his kind had a right to the truth. But he hadn't waited for a reply. He repeated her name softly, like a spell to protect him against evil encounters on the paths that awaited him. The words reached Hélène through a vast tiredness and a soft confusion of sounds; it was as though she were listening to herself from the other side of the wall. She was very near to falling asleep again, but with an effort of will she kept herself on the surface. Kelso was still talking. Each of his "Hélènes" seemed a renewal of his loyalty to her; serenely she listened to her name forging the invisible chain that would preserve them from solitude, that would keep them in touch, like a diver's rope. Silently she spoke to him: "I thought you were already dead and that I would never hear your voice again. And I found myself destitute. Our love had gone like a shower of gold coins, that pass through one's hand without one ever bothering to save them. I hadn't even kept the last one, and I was destitute. . . . You see, all our life was inside me, already swallowed up and digested. It was something different, it had been transformed as the water one drinks is transformed and ceases to be water. I should have saved a glass or at least a drop of that water to keep before my eyes so that I could continue to believe in water once I was in the middle of the desert. But there was none left—I had drunk it all; nothing seemed to count any longer: our



memories were no more real than if I had just invented them. Reality means uncertainty; what made our moments of happiness so wonderful was the victory they implied. They might not have been, and they were. But in retrospect nothing could be changed, nothing could be called in question—and that very certainty killed my joy. The verb “to conquer” can only be conjugated in the present tense. I was losing you; I had lost you already. How frightened I was! To lose the memory of happiness as well as the promise of happiness, the past as well as the future. . . . The further I went on this pilgrimage, the more I found myself alone. Your death had withdrawn you from it at every depth, had torn out all your roots in one go. I no longer recognised our life together—it all seemed alien to me. A flayed animal no longer has any identity. Imagine this exploration of familiar scenes in which one of the chief characters was missing, having been eradicated at one stroke by an army of assassins. However far and however fast I went, the murderers had forestalled me—you were not there. I was lost . . . I needed a sign. I prayed for one fervently, and when I was asleep just now I thought I heard it. I awoke with a start and found you silent. I implored you. It seemed to me impossible that you could float away without hearing me, that my appeal could fail to reach you, however far away you were. . . . I was right—you did hear me. After all those words confused with memory, I now have one that is alive, that I can go on reviving incessantly, that no one will be able to take away from me. . . . A last gold coin has fallen. I shall not spend it, I shall keep it to myself, it will be my fare for death's journey, my means of

rejoining you. Even death seems easy now.” Easy. . . . Her calmness astonished her. It seemed to her disturbing and rather inhuman. “So it's as simple as that to see someone die.” A sudden fear arose in her. This calm could not be real: it must be the calm of sleep and dreams. . . . Things became blurred—her hair seemed to merge with the grass. I must have fallen asleep again. . . . She grew alarmed. Fear took hold of her, lifted her up between its great wings like a magician rescuing a child, carried her through sleep's empty spaces. The fabric was torn away; she found herself in the real room again, in the real light, with a real anguish, a feeling of utter desolation. The dream broke in a thousand pieces, the bed loomed up in front of her like a phantom ship. It was daybreak; a greyish light came in through the windows. She looked at the bed. Kelso's face was taut and livid, like a samurai mask. The hissing sound had stopped—the factory had closed down. His hands lay on the sheet like dried-up starfish. A cry formed in Hélène's throat and burst out before she knew it: she was deafened, caught in a storm of snow and ether. Who screamed? She did not know: that cry had merely anticipated the words that were grouping themselves in her mind, had given a name to the coldness that enveloped her. There was a whirl of white shapes: the nurse, Jerry, Kelso, her own reflection in a looking glass, a beautiful girl in a light-coloured dress who was making incomprehensible signs to her through the haze. She found it difficult to keep on her feet and walk straight among these whirling shadows. Her head was aching, racked by fear. She opened her mouth and tried to speak: “Did you hear. . . .” No, of course they had

heard nothing. An idea as unbearable as death itself passed through her mind: perhaps she would *never* know whether she had been dreaming, whether Kelso had really given her that sign, whether he had died with her name in his mouth like some fruit, or if once again she had been deceiving herself, coupling herself with mirrors, masks and statues. She would *never* know the price of her nocturnal quest. She had no witness, no alibi, no tangible proof. Everything had come about without her—she herself didn't know whether she was innocent or guilty, lost or saved, whether it was worth while going on living. . . . Just as each wave becomes lost in another more powerful one when the tide is ebbing, so another thought overwhelmed her, brushing aside all other fears: Kelso was dead, all was finished, all was finished, happiness had been cut from her like a hand. . . . Madness covered her with its chloroform mask, blinded her with tears, slowly stifled her long scream, and abandoned her at last when she was lying on the bed, murmuring her name to herself, praying, and biting her broken chain.

## IV

*(Fragment of a letter from Van Helsen to Joel)*

. . . I saw Kelso dead this morning. The nurses in the hospital had dressed him and made up his face. This make-up saved him from the anonymity of corpses. Instead of turning away, one wanted to pierce the outer layer, to get through to him. In vain, of course. To attach oneself to the dead is to follow a false trail. What one sees is a replica—with doll's hair, and always a little smaller than the original—which has been put in its place during the night. While one watches, the real body is elsewhere, having been removed by thieves. One always follows a coffin full of stones.

I should like to tell you exactly what this death means to me. I can't understand why it should be so difficult, why death is at once the only certain thing and the only thing that takes us by surprise. I should like to speak to you about it simply, but in the face of death simplicity is rather bogus. And besides, what am I to say? Death is no more than the antonym of birth. The antonym of living remains to be discovered.

There is one means of making death palatable: a long illness. It makes one so ugly that death no longer seems unjust. The same goes for old age. But we belong to a generation that is used to early death. For centuries Death used to be represented by a broken, wrinkled old man, like Father Time. In our day it has come to be depicted as a beautiful young woman. A girl's death used to be as sensational as a crime; it would inspire the poets and the painters. Now when we look around us for

images of death, they're all twenty years old. Those who die young are no longer an aristocracy.

I saw a man die. I thought I died myself. I've managed to elude that fascination with death that holds the best of us in its grip. I've learnt to avoid the trap that tempts the most healthy-minded to seek the taste of death, as an absurd and irrefutable proof of life. Every act, every thought, seems to me to show how much we need to affirm ourselves. But perversion comes in when the accidental takes the place of the essential. I'm just as susceptible to the exaltation of risk as anyone else who is physically in good form: it's a very potent, very pure alcohol. But you can't build a philosophy of life on a basis of whisky. In spite of everything the idea arouses in us, courage is not an end in itself. I went through the war, and I have a dangerous trade: when one sees what brave men are capable of, one looks for fraternity elsewhere.

All this is just to explain to you that it's by no means through "despair" that Kelso's death has revived for me the atmosphere of the war. "Death is something you catch," one of my comrades used to say. For a long time I thought one should approach it hygienically, and having been vaccinated, never give it another thought. But Kelso played a rather special part in my life. He was a sort of intermediary, and in the somewhat monastic life I lived my contacts with the outside world depended more or less entirely on him. Now that he's dead,

nothing has changed between us. It isn't the first time I've lost a friend. I've merely shifted the burden, and I can support his death as I supported his life. But what was changed is the object of his intercession: now it is death that he links me with. One half of my being is withering away, but I'm putting out new roots in a territory that I had forbidden myself. You know as well as I do that there are no such things as angels, no such things as ghosts, no such things as miracles, but that the idea of angels, ghosts and miracles is a very real one. The faces vanish, but the forces remain; and the fact that these forces reside in us doesn't in the least make me doubt their reality—quite the contrary. During the war I saw a little village destroyed by artillery fire, everything except the church. "What a miracle!" said the priest. "Nonsense!" someone replied. "It's because the company commander saw to it that the gunners aimed straight." He was wrong. The miracle was there all right, but it wasn't that the angels had intervened, had carried away the shells under their arms and dropped them further off. It was that in the midst of this frenzy of destruction, a man had thought of saving the church. In the same way I realise that all that scaffolding that links me with Kelso exists wholly in my own imagination. In one sense he is gone, vanished utterly, I haven't the smallest possibility of contact with him. (The question of the marriage tie in the kingdom of heaven has often been raised, but not the bond of friendship. There is no sacrament of friendship.) There's nothing to prevent me from reducing the memory of him to dust and making a pretence of living. Nor is there anything to prevent me from throwing

myself in the river. There's nothing to prevent me from denying the existence of God. But, in the last analysis, if I drew on all that I should only be hurting myself. We've had to climb down from that consoling and obdurate idea of the value of self-analysis. Incessant self-revelation only shows the emptiness of one's ego. All the mystics are there to prove it. We exist in a world of mirrors: if we break them, we disappear at the same stroke. There is no such thing as painting—there are only pictures. There is no such thing as music—there are only melodies. . . . One could go on indefinitely like that: there is no such thing as love—there are only lovers; there are no beings—there are only actions.

All that, of course, is unjustifiable. We're all too easily inclined to confuse liberty with refusal. Liberty can *also* mean acceptance. One could almost say that acceptance is the more fertile attitude: there are a thousand ways of restricting oneself and only one way of rebelling. I'm all for what is, for me, the essential being "attached" to nothing else. But faced with Kelso's death this morning I wondered what could possibly be "attached" to anything. The question of true or false gods depends on the quality of the person who worships them. This power that makes us hold out against the absurd, against the certainty of death and the ephemeral nature of everything, isn't "attached" to anything either. It is frighteningly dispassionate. It's right that the old phrases should have become outworn. There could not be much consolation now, for a thinking man, to "die for his country", to "fight for peace", to "defend his honour". And there will always be heroes. No, the power I'm talking about has no need

to prove itself. It is quite self-sufficient. If you open your eyes you can see that life is indeed a tale full of sound and fury, told by. . . . Right. You've every reason to throw in the sponge. And yet you say "no". Just like that, of your own free will, without recourse to a system or a faith. It's merely a question of having the strength to say "no". There's no answer to it. No one can raise any objection to it—only your own indolence, and that's your affair. There is no other answer to the absurd: it can be defeated only by man's decision that things should not be like that. Call it vitality if you like—it doesn't matter: the only worthwhile people living never act otherwise.

Forgive this highly paternal letter. Death always arouses a sort of family feeling. One somehow feels the need to communicate, to perpetuate, so to speak. . . . Of all the deceptions of friendship, that is undoubtedly the worst. A writer I met here said to me: "I sometimes have the impression that I'm drying up without having said anything of what I wanted to say. Something gets in the way, deflects my words, and I write someone else's book." I also think we are born for a single word that we will take with us to the grave. I thought I heard it once, between Kelso and his girl. Somehow they got through to it. She has been terribly affected by his death. Physical loneliness is immensely distressing—in a much more serious sense than people usually regard it. But it's also the prefiguration of another kind of loneliness. . . . I suggested at the beginning of this letter that death was the only certain thing and the only thing that takes us by surprise. One might also say that understanding of other people is the only necessary thing

and the only thing that is forbidden us. And they probably mean the same thing. . . .

Jerry climbed into the Hanoi plane. He was summoned there by his newspaper work, but it was only now that he noticed that he was following Kelso's itinerary, that a week before he would have been piloted by Kelso. Up to then, Kelso's adventure had appeared to him as it were through the smoke of battle, as though he had taken the air simply in order to fight against the storm, and not to carry out his normal mission. Jerry sat down beside the pilot, shook hands with him, and at once was struck by his own ease of manner. It was as though something had been released inside him.

The sky above the airfield was white with light clouds. The sun floated invisibly there, betraying itself only by the border of light around the lowest clouds. Three birds were slowly crossing this milky plain, almost motionless against the wind, exorcising their distress with tiny, delicate wing-beats, like eyelashes.

The aircraft stopped at the end of the runway. Its dragon-like roaring scared and scattered the dust; scraps of twisted paper uncurled and blew away; invisible jets of steam distorted one's vision, took one's breath away. The pilot exchanged deaf-mute signs with a mechanic standing on the runway.

Jerry went over in his mind the events of the night, without anxiety. He was now calm and relaxed. "*Other's tears assuage me.*" The approach of sleep added to his feeling of serenity—a soft, lucid weariness that was not at all displeasing: the climax of the sleepless

night, when one has rounded every cape, from utter abandon to self-disgust. He inhaled the wind from the propellor like a drug, and the images of Kelso, of Hélène and the nurse were cleared away by the blast. He knew that they had now entered into him, that they would live there secretly for a long time, and would bear strange fruit. He lent himself with docility to this subtle alchemy. His life was no longer a tight ball flung recklessly into the midst of towns, women, ships. He was opening new doors, charging his batteries, filling his granaries. Like a healthy young animal, he fed indiscriminately off whatever he came across: joy or sorrow, he assimilated it all. Sometimes he made mistakes, bit himself, bled a little. It didn't matter. Behind the youth who argued and tried to justify himself another creature was at work, devouring experience, developing rapidly, breaking through the chrysalis. This creature learnt lessons, made plans. Yesterday unformed, taken unaware, encircled by the revelation of loss, sorrow, loneliness, he was now confounding the conspiracy, breaking down the barriers, entering into the game, developing a passionate will to link himself with others, in order to outlive them.

Hélène was left stranded. The death of someone you love fills your heart with the bitterness of missed trains, of the traveller always in a hurry, always late, who sees the lights of the convoy fade in the distance. The trains are infrequent, the connections uncertain, the railwaymen silent. You are alone and cut off in a strange land whose language you don't understand. It is riddled with

policemen who go around picking up lost children. And perhaps the dead are these lost children, cooped up in camps and all alike, like the children of ruined villages who are herded together indiscriminately. Hélène wondered whether Kelso was not still living under another name, growing up and changing. He had entered death's kingdom without any markings, with no identity disc, no memory; she might pass him by, even touch him, without recognising him. Hélène was haunted by the image of the lost children. It was in China, after a massacre. A mother who had miraculously survived was led to the place where the children had been assembled, expecting to find her own. They took her in, and immediately she burst into tears at the sight of these hundreds of children, naked, howling, monstrosly alike. Hélène pictured to herself the angels' cruel interrogation: "You're sure you had some connection with him, you say you loved him, there was some special link between you. . . . All right, go ahead and pick him out, just you pick him out!" She hesitated there, plucked at shadows, cried out, and then herself collapsed in tears. . . . She tore the thought away, like a dressing from a wound. She pressed herself against the wall of the room, caressed it gently with the flat of her hand. Here, at least, she was safe: she put her trust in this beloved prison. Or rather, it was the outside world that was the prison. The great open spaces without Kelso, the sky without Kelso, the sea without Kelso—all that was prison. In the whole world there remained only this one corner of liberty, this room four yards by four. The street noises reached her through the wall as though recorded by a seismograph. She heard them from a distance: she could not believe

that this alien world, this countryside that meant nothing to her, began less than a foot away from her, the thickness of a wall. There were impenetrable layers of stone, of sand, of concrete separating her from the world, cutting her off, protecting that tiny chapel of contentment in which she had barricaded herself, walled herself up, defying all the sieges of weakness, of pity. . . . She pressed herself against the wall with her head on her arm, like the one who is "he" in a game of hide-and-seek, murmuring mysterious figures in an incantatory voice. And when she turned round, it was again like a small girl playing hide-and-seek, finding the place deserted and setting out to look for hidden presences. She started to walk round the room, went from one object to another, from one landmark to another. For a long time past Kelso had been moving gradually into this room, his belongings had followed him in waves, and the room he had kept on in another part of the town had been emptied. He had rebuilt it here, stone by stone, like the historic castles that millionaires reconstruct in America: it had taken shape like a jigsaw puzzle, like those pictures you scratch to reveal others beneath; he brought it with him in a complicated geography of pipes, books, odds and ends he had picked up. Hélène went from one to another of these scraps of jetsam as though she were following a kind of Stations of the Cross. There was his photograph that he had dedicated to himself "With my highest esteem". There was his glass, in which a faint half-moon stain still outlined the shape of his lips. And there was a pyjama coat which he had put on jokingly the last night they had spent together, which had been thrown off violently when they made love, and

had since been forgotten. These objects were not immobile: they were dead. They had followed him to his death, as a king is followed by his wives and his slaves. They had assumed a new quality of silent presence, as though invisible ships had linked them with his breathing and now left them to sink, like broken divers' tubes. They hadn't moved, they were still in place. They had been cured of that aptitude things have for getting out of place, for being mislaid, for disappearing, that gives you a feeling of living on the deck of a ship whose crew is about to mutiny. There's nothing easier to keep in order than a dead man's room. Hélène subsided on to the bed, from which a lonely night had effaced the mark of Kelso like a new tide. She was distressed at this absence: it would have assuaged her to find the hollow left by his body, to inhabit it, to live there the life of dreams in his shell of linen, like a hermit. There again he was absent. She sought to exorcise that distance, tried to pray. God was no longer a guiding flame within her. God was now this distance to be eliminated, this vast remoteness. God was a boatman who had taken her to an island, burned the boat and then disappeared after giving her a vague rendezvous on the opposite shore. God was the objective, but he was also the journey itself. He was the opposite to solitude, but he was also solitude itself. He was Kelso, but he was also the absence of Kelso. Hélène prayed to this crowned image. On the edge of the landing-stage, she offered up her anguish to the smoke of that ship disappearing through the night. She stood at the boundary of the two realms, on the border-line where man dreams of being God. Her joy was dead. She put her trust in sorrow to accomplish

that metamorphosis that would raise her up to the level of those who die, released from worldly dominion, carrying away with them, through the noise of the sirens, the faces of martyrs.