Anne Hébert

ANNE HEBERT was born in 1916 in Sainte-Catherine-de-Fossambault, a village near Quebec City where her cousin, the poet Hector Saint-Denys-Garneau, also spent his summers. She was an invalid as a child and was educated by her parents (her father was the noted literary critic Maurice Hébert). She is quite proud of the fact that the name Hébert is one of the oldest in the province: 'The creation of the world took place on the rock of Québec,' she has written. 'Face to the river. Adam and Eve were Louis Hébert and Marie Rollet.'

Her first collection of poetry, *Les Songes en équilibre*, was published in 1942, the year before Saint-Denys-Garneau's death. The short story '*Le Torrent*' was written in 1945 and was published in book form in France in 1950, when it won the Belgian Royal Academy's prize for the best book in French by a non-Belgian and non-French writer. *Les Invitées du procès*, a radio play, was broadcast on CBC in 1952, and from 1953-54 she worked as a scriptwriter for the National Film Board. Her first novel, *Les Chambres de bois* (1958: *The Silent Rooms*, 1974) won the Prix France-Canada. Other works include two novels—*Kamouraska* (1970, translated 1973) and *Les Enfants du sabbat* (1975: *Children of the Black Sabbath*, 1977)—and several volumes of poetry.

The theme of 'The Torrent' is François Perrault's rejection of his former, repressed existence and his attempts to gain self-knowledge, 'the deepest of human gulfs.' The political message for Quebec was apparent from the beginning. Ben-Zion Shek, in his book *Social Realism in the French Canadian Novel*, compares Hébert's story with Germaine Guèvremont's novel, *Le Survenant* (1945: *The Outlander*, 1950), and notes that it is 'a powerful allegory . . . in starkly tragic and violent images, pessimistically announcing that the breakdown of the old would not necessarily usher in a new, freer social climate.' Whether for good or ill, however, the old order was gone.

THE TORRENT

Translated by Gwendolyn Moore

AS A child, I was dispossessed of the world. By the decree of a will higher than my own, I had to renounce all possession in this life. I related to the world by fragments, only at those points which were immediately and strictly necessary, and which were removed from me as soon as their usefulness had ended. I was permitted the scribblers which I had to open, but not the table on which they lay; the corner of the stable which I was to clean, but not the hen perching on the window sill, and never, never the countryside which beckoned through the window. I could see the large hand of my mother when it was raised towards me, but I could not perceive my mother as a whole, from head to foot. I could only feel her terrible size, which chilled me.

I had no childhood. I cannot recall any time that was my own before the singular adventure of my deafness. My mother worked incessantly, and I participated in this work with her, like a tool in her hands. She rose with the sun, and the succeeding hours of her day dovetailed with an exactitude which left no possibility of digression.

Other than the lessons which she gave me until I entered secondary school, she never talked to me. She was uncommunicative by nature. For her to depart from this rule, I had to commit a sin. That is to say, she only spoke to me in reprimand, before punishing me.

As concerns my studies, there again everything was planned, calculated, with never a day's holiday and never a vacation. When she had finished a lesson, her countenance became that of a total mute, her lips tightly sealed, as if closed by a bolt from inside.

As for me, I would lower my eyes, relieved that I had no longer to follow the working of her powerful jaws and her thin lips as she pronounced each syllable of the words 'chastisement,' 'God's justice,' 'damnation,' 'discipline,' 'Hell,' 'original sin,' and, above all, that distinctive phrase which recurred like a leit-motif:

'One must master oneself utterly. We have no idea of the evil forces within us. Do you hear me, François? I will master you myself.'

At this, I would begin to shiver, and tears would fill my eyes, for I knew what would come next:

'François, look me in the eyes.'

And then the long drawn-out punishment would begin. My mother would stare at me mercilessly, and I was unable to raise my eyes to meet hers. Then she would add, as she stood up:

'Very well, François. The lesson is finished. But I shall remember your ill will, when the time and place have come . . . '

Indeed, my mother took minute note of the slightest misdemeanours, in order to bring me to account some other day, when I had almost forgotten them. Just when I thought that I had evaded her, she would pounce upon me, implacably, forgetting nothing, itemizing for each day and for each hour those things which I believed to be the most hidden.

I could never understand why she did not punish me on the spot, all the more because I felt confusedly that self-restraint was so difficult for her. Afterwards, I understood that she had acted in this way out of self-discipline, in order to 'master herself,' and also, certainly, to impress me all the more, and to establish her hold upon me as deeply as possible.

There was another reason, which I only discovered much later.

I have said that my mother worked without stopping, whether in the house, in the stable, or in the fields. To correct me, she would await a pause.

The other day, I found a little notebook that had belonged to her in the shed, on a beam behind an old lantern. In it the schedule of her days was carefully inscribed. On a certain Monday, she was to put the sheets out on the grass to bleach, and I remembered that it had suddenly started to rain. I then saw that on the same Monday this strange woman had struck out 'Bleach the sheets,' and written in the margin, 'Beat François.'

We were always alone. Although I was almost twelve years of age, I had not yet looked upon another human face, except for my own shimmering reflection when I leaned over the stream to drink. As for my mother, only the lower part of her face was familiar to me. I did not dare raise my eyes up to the angry pupils and the broad forehead, which I was later to see so atrociously ravaged.

Her chin imperious; her mouth tormented, in spite of the attitude of calm which she strove to maintain by means of silence; her

bodice black and armoured, with no tender place in which the head of a child might nestle; such was the maternal universe in which, so young, I learned hardness and rejection.

We lived too far from the village even to go to mass. But that did not prevent my passing almost the whole of a Sunday on my knees, at times, in punishment for some misdeed. This was, I believe, the maternal fashion of sanctifying the Lord's day at my expense.

I had never seen my mother pray, but I had suspected that she did sometimes, when closeted in her room. At that time I was so dependent on my mother that the least stirring within her had repercussions inside me. Oh, I did not really understand anything of the drama of this woman, but I sensed, as one senses a storm, the most subtle changes in her moods. And, on the evenings when I believed my mother to be praying, I did not dare move on my straw pallet. The silence was as heavy as death. I awaited some unknown tempest which would sweep us both away, we who were so bound together in a common and sombre destiny.

One desire grew within me daily, and weighed upon me like nostalgia—to see another human face, close up and in detail. I tried to scrutinize my mother stealthily, but almost always she turned abruptly towards me, and I would lose heart.

I resolved to go and find the face of a man, not daring to hope for that of a child, and promising myself to flee if it were that of a woman. To this end, I decided to post myself by the side of the main road. In time, someone would surely pass by.

Our house stood, remote from any line of communication, in the centre of a stretch of woods and fields and water in all its moods, from the calm of the stream to the rush of the torrent.

I went through the maple grove and across the great, stony fields which my mother persisted in ploughing, her teeth clenched, her hands gripping the handles, the shocks at times causing her to lose her hold. Our old horse, Eloi, had died of this work.

I had not thought the road was so far away and I was afraid of getting lost. What would my mother say when she returned to milk the cows and noticed my absence? I shrank beneath her blows in advance, but I continued on my way. My need was too pressing, too despairing.

After crossing the burned-over clearing where my mother and I

picked blueberries every summer, I found myself by the road. Out of breath, I stopped short, as though a hand had touched my forehead. And I wanted to cry, for the road was bare and forlorn in the sunlight. Unvarying, soulless, dead. Where were the processions I had imagined I would discover? Over this ground had passed feet other than my mother's or my own. Where were those footsteps now? In what direction had they gone? They had not left a mark. Surely the road must have died.

Not daring to walk on it, I followed the ditch. Suddenly, I stumbled over a form stretched out in the deep grass and fell headlong in the mud. I got up, dismayed at my dirty clothes. And I saw a horrible man beside me. He must have been sleeping, for he was now slowly sitting up. Glued to the spot, I was unable to move, expecting to be killed, at the least. I did not even have the strength to hide my face with my arm.

The man was filthy. Dried and fresh mud by turns covered his clothing and his face. His long hair mingled with his beard, his moustache and his eyebrows, which were so heavy they hung over his eyes. My God! what a face, full of bristling hair and spatters of mud! I saw the gummy mouth with its yellow teeth. I wanted to run away, but he seized me by the arm. Taking hold of me as he tried to get up, he made me fall head over heels.

He laughed, and his laugh was as beastly as he was, matching him perfectly. Once more I tried to escape, but he made me sit down on the edge of the ditch beside him. His foul odour mingled with the smell of the swamp. Under my breath, I muttered an act of contrition and thought of God's judgement, which I believed would follow upon the terror and disgust which this man inspired in me. He kept his coarse and dirty hand on my shoulder.

'How old are you, sonny?'

Without waiting for my reply, he added:

'Do you know any stories? No, eh? Well, I know some . . . '

He put his arm around my shoulders. I tried to squirm away, but he tightened his grip, laughing. His laughter spewed out close to my cheek. And at that moment I saw my mother in front of us. She had in her hand the large stick which she used to bring in the cows. For the first time, I saw her in her entirety—tall, strong, a clear image and more powerful than I had ever believed her to be.

'Let that child go!'

The man got to his feet with difficulty, surprised, and as much

fascinated by my mother as I was. My mother addressed me in the tone one uses for a dog, shouting:

'Go home, François!'

Slowly, my legs giving way beneath me, I started down the path towards the clearing. The man was talking to my mother. He seemed to know her. In his drawling voice, he was saying:

'Well, if it isn't beautiful Claudine! . . . And to find you here! . . . So you left the village because of the youngster, eh? . . . A fine little boy . . . yes, very fine . . . But to find you here! . . . Everybody thought you were dead . . . '

'Get out of here!' thundered my mother.

'Big Claudine! Not over-shy in those days . . . Don't be mad . . . '

'I forbid you to be familiar with me, you pig!'

Then I heard the dry crack of a blow, followed by the dull thud of something falling. I turned around. My mother was standing there at the edge of the woods, immense, the cudgel shaking in her hand; the man was stretched out at her feet. She must have used the heavy end of the stick to hit him on the head.

Big Claudine (I called her this mentally from then on) assured herself that the man was still alive, gathered up her skirts, jumped over the ditch, and set off again on the path towards our house. I preceded her, running. The echoes of my flight resounded in my ears, together with the sound of my mother's robust stride behind me.

She caught up with me by the house, and entered the kitchen dragging me by the arm. She had thrown the stick away. I was frightened and aching all over; nevertheless, I felt an inexplicable curiosity and attraction. I understood obscurely that what was to follow would be as awesome as what had just happened. My senses, dulled by a life of monotony and confinement, were awakening. I was living through an impressive and terrifying adventure.

My mother said, in a cutting voice:

'A human being is a beautiful thing, eh, François? You should be happy now that you've seen one close up, face to face. Attractive, isn't it?'

Shattered to realize that my mother had divined my inmost secret, I raised my eyes to her, having lost all self-control. The conversation went on with my wild eyes held by hers. I was paralyzed, magnetized, by big Claudine. 'The world is not beautiful François. You must not touch it; renounce it, right now, freely.

Don't lag behind. Do as you are told, without looking around you. You are my son and you are the continuation of me. You will fight against your evil instincts until you achieve perfection . . . '

Fire shot from her eyes. Standing in the middle of the room, her whole being erect, she expressed the violence she could no longer contain. I was transfixed with fear and admiration. Then, her voice softening a little, as though talking to herself, she kept repeating, 'Self-possession . . . self-mastery . . . above all, never give in to oneself . . . '

My mother stopped. Her long hands were already calm, and from them calm spread through her. Her expression was withdrawn, only her eyes retained a spark, like the remnants of a feast in a deserted house.

'François, I will go back to the village with my head high. Everyone will bow to me. And it will be my victory! My victory! I'll never let a dirty drunk slobber over me or touch my son. François, you are my son. You will overcome your evil instincts and attain perfection. You will become a priest! You will be respected! Respect! What a victory over all of them!'

A priest! The idea crushed me, above all this day when I had been so hurt in my search for a kind face. My mother had often explained to me, 'The mass is the sacrifice. The priest is both the sacrificer and the victim, like Christ. He has to immolate himself upon the altar mercilessly, with the Host.' I was so young, and I had never been happy. I broke into sobs. My mother almost threw herself upon me; then, she turned on her heel, saying in her curt voice:

'Cry-baby! Weakling! I have received a reply from the principal; you will go to the *collège* on September 4th, next Thursday. Go and get an armful of kindling, so I can light the stove for supper. Go on. Move!'

My school-books had belonged to my mother when she was young. That evening, under the pretext of preparing my things for school, I examined these books one by one, looking avidly at the name inscribed on the fly-leaf of each volume. 'Claudine Perrault' . . . Claudine; beautiful Claudine, big Claudine.

The letters of her first name danced before my eyes, twisting into fantastic shapes like flames. It had never before struck me that my mother's name was Claudine. Now it seemed strange to me,

painful. I could no longer tell whether I was reading this name or whether a voice close to my ear was pronouncing it, a railing and demoniac voice, the breath touching my cheek.

My mother came in. She neither brightened the atmosphere nor reassured me in my depression. On the contrary, her presence gave weight to the supernatural quality of the scene. The only spot of light in the dark kitchen was projected from the lamp onto the book that I was holding open. My mother's hand moved quickly within this luminous circle. She seized the book; at one moment the 'Claudine,' written in a lofty and wilful hand, seemed to draw all of the light to itself; then it disappeared and in its place, in the same haughty handwriting, was 'François,' 'François,' in fresh ink, and 'Perrault' in the old. Thus, in this narrow light, in the space of a few minutes, the long hands played, and sealed my destiny. All my books were thus dealt with. My mother's words hammered in my head: 'You are my son. You are a continuation of me.'

When this eventful day had passed, I forced myself to erase it from my mind, upon the orders of my mother. Moulded for so long by her iron rule, I succeeded well enough in rejecting any conscious memory of those scenes, and in accomplishing mechanically the work imposed on me. Deep within me, however, I experienced at times an unwonted, an inexpressible richness whose slumbering presence astonished and troubled me.

The practical effect, if one could call it that, of my first encounter with the world was to put me on my guard, and to lock up within me any spontaneous gesture of human sympathy I might naturally have had. My mother had scored a victory.

This was the state of mind with which I entered the *collège*. Shy and uncommunicative, I observed my companions. I rejected their advances, whether timid or bantering. Soon a vacuum formed around the new student. I told myself that it was better this way, that I must not become attached to anyone or anything in this world. Then, I imposed penance on myself for the unhappiness I felt in my isolation.

My mother wrote: 'I am not there to teach you. It is up to you to devise your own mortifications. Above all, fight against your principal fault—softness. Never allow yourself to become sentimental over the mirage of any particular friendship. All of them, both teachers and students, are in your life at this time only because they are necessary to your development and instruction. Take ad-

vantage of what they *must* give you, but *keep your distance.* At all costs, do not give of yourself freely, or you will be lost. Moreover, I am kept informed of everything that happens at the *collège.* You will give me an exact account during the holidays; and you will account also to God, on Judgement Day. Do not waste your time. As for recreation, I have an understanding with the principal. You will help the farmer with the stable and the fields.'

I understood farm work, and I preferred occupying myself in this way to taking recreation with the other boys. I did not know how to play or how to laugh, and I did not feel that I belonged. The teachers I considered, rightly or wrongly, to be the allies of my mother, and I was particularly on my guard with them.

All through the long years of school that followed, I studied. That is to say, my memory registered dates, names, rules, precepts, and formulae. Faithful to my mother's teaching, I wished to retain only the external symbols of my studies, and I excluded from myself that real knowledge which is an experience and a possession. Thus, on the subject of God, I attached myself with all the power of my will to the innumerable prayers recited each day, building a rampart within myself against any possible shadow of His naked face.

My marks were excellent, and I habitually took first place, as my mother demanded.

I considered the structure of a classical tragedy, or of a poem, to be a mechanism of principles and recipes bound together only by the author's will. However, once or twice, I was touched with Grace, and perceived that the tragedy or poem depended solely on its own inner necessity, a condition of any work of art.

Such revelations touched me painfully. In an instant, I could measure the emptiness of my existence. I had a presentiment of despair. Then, I would stiffen my resolve, and absorb whole pages of chemical formulae.

When the marks were read out, and especially when the prizes were given, I experienced the same feeling of profound disenchantment, which I could not overcome in spite of my efforts.

The year that I studied rhetoric, I was at the top of my class and took a large number of prizes. My arms loaded with books, and my ears buzzing with the polite applause of those same classmates for whom I had not ceased being a stranger, I went from my seat to the platform, and experienced an anguish so poignant and a despondency so great that I could barely move.

When the ceremonies were over, I stretched out on my bed. The dormitory was bustling with the coming and going of students who were getting ready to go home for the holidays.

Suddenly, I glimpsed what my life could have been, and a brutal, almost physical regret seized me, an oppressive tightening in my chest. I saw my companions leaving, singly and in groups; I could hear them laughing and singing. I had never known joy. I was unable to know it. My isolation was now more than an interdiction; what had begun as a refusal on my part had become an incapacity, a sterility. My heart was bitter, ravaged. I was seventeen years old!

There was now only one boy left in the dormitory. He seemed to be having difficulty closing his trunk. I was about to offer my help, but as I was getting up from my bed, he asked:

'Help me close my trunk, will you?'

Surprised and put out at being anticipated, I played for time.

'What did you say?'

My words echoed in the deserted room, putting my teeth on edge. My voice was curt and rasping; it was always disagreeable and irritating for me to hear it.

I lay down again, my lips tight, clenched fists grasping my pillow. My companion repeated his request. I pretended not to understand, hoping he would say it again. I counted the seconds, for the feeling reached me that he would not ask again. And I did not move, but lay there experiencing the richness of doing something irreparable.

'Thanks for nothing, and have a good holiday, you damned twerp!'

Then this classmate, whom I had secretly liked more than the others, disappeared, bowed down beneath the weight of his trunk.

My mother never came to meet me at the station, nor did she watch for me at the window. She awaited me in her own way, that is, in her every-day clothes, occupied with some task. Upon my arrival, she would interrupt her work long enough to ask me the few questions she felt necessary. Then, assigning me some chore to be done before the next meal, she would return to her work.

That day, in spite of the great heat, I found her on her knees weeding a bed of beets. When she saw me, she squatted on her heels and pushed her straw hat back on her head with a brusque gesture. Wiping her hands on her apron, she asked:

'Well, how many prizes?'

'Six books, mother; and I won the scholarship.'

'Show me.'

I held out the books. They were similar to all prize books—red, with gilt edges. How absurd, how ridiculous they seemed to me! I distrusted them. I was ashamed of them. Red, gold, false. The colours of a false glory, the emblems of my false knowledge. The insignia of my servitude.

My mother got up and went into the house. She took out her bunch of keys—a great knot of metal wherein all the keys of the world seemed to be massed together.

'Give me the money!'

I put my hand in my pocket and took out the purse. She almost snatched it from me.

'Well, give it to me! Do you think I have all day to waste? Go and get changed, and help me finish the beets before supper . . . '

Unflinching, I looked at my mother, and there entered my mind an irremediable certitude: I realized that I detested her.

She locked the money in the little writing-desk.

'Tomorrow, I will write the principal for your registration forms. Lucky that you won the prize . . . '

'I am not going back to school next year.' I enunciated this statement so clearly that it seemed to be the voice of another person. The voice of a man.

My mother flushed. I saw the colour flood her sunburned throat, her face, her forehead. For the first time, I saw her waver. Her hesitation gave me great pleasure. I repeated:

'I am not going back to school. I will never go to the seminary! You had better not count on me to gild your reputation . . . '

She sprang at me like a tigress. I was observing the scene lucidly, noting the supple strength of this tall woman, even as I recoiled towards the door. Her face was contorted, almost hideous. It occurred to me that I too would be thus disfigured, some day, by hatred and death. She was brandishing the mass of keys in the air. I heard them jingle, and glimpsed their metallic sheen as they struck me like a bolt of lightning. My mother struck me several times over the head with them. I lost consciousness.

When I opened my eyes, I found myself alone, stretched out on the floor. There was a violent pain in my head. I had gone deaf.

From that day on, a crack opened up in my oppressed life. The heavy silence of deafness possessed me, and a tendency to day-

dream appeared as a kind of accompaniment. No voice, no sound from the world outside would reach me again, of this I was certain. Neither the cry of the cricket nor the roar of the falls. But I could hear within me the existence of the torrent, of our house, and of the whole farm. I had never possessed the world, but there was a change now: part of the world possessed me. The stretch of water, mountains and secret hollows came to me with a sovereign touch.

I believed myself to be free of my mother, and I discovered a new kinship with the earth.

My eyes would dwell upon our house. The other buildings, which were in the same style, faced it; long and low, they were identified with the austere soil. The cultivated fields scarcely marred the woodlands, which unfolded to the broken rhythms of the wild surrounding mountains. And I felt, above all, the presence of water—in the freshness of the air, the various species of plants, and the song of the frogs. Streams, and the calm river; pools, clear or darkened; and, near the house, boiling through the rocky gorge, the torrent.

The torrent suddenly took on an importance that it should always have had in my existence. Or, rather, I became aware of its hold on me. I struggled against its domination. I could sense the spray mounting from the falls, floating invisibly over my clothing, my books, over the walls and the furniture, imparting to my daily life an indefinable sense of water, which seized my heart. Of all earthly vibrations, my poor, deaf head had preserved only the intermittent tumult of the waterfall beating upon my temples. And my blood flowed to the precipitous rhythm of the howling waters. At times, when I was almost calm, I did not suffer from it so much, for it became a distant murmur. But on those terrible days when I would re-examine my revolt, I felt the torrent so strong within my skull, crashing against my brain, that my mother striking me with her knot of keys had not hurt me more.

This woman never spoke another word to me after that famous scene when, for the first time, I had opposed my will to hers. The summer's labours followed their course. I knew that she was avoiding me. I, too, arranged to be alone, and abandoning the mower, the hay, the vegetables and the fruits, I would give myself over to the spirit of the countryside. I would remain for hours contemplating an insect, or the movement of the shadows over the leaves. I also spent entire days evoking those times, even the most distant, when my mother had mistreated me. Each detail was still present

to my mind. None of her words, not one of her blows, had passed out of my memory.

It was about this time that Perceval came to our farm. Although she had broken in many horses, this one, which was almost wild, would not be humbled by big Claudine. He resisted her with a shrewdness, a boldness, a perseverance that enchanted me. His black coat covered with foam, his nostrils steaming constantly, he was that being of fire and passion that I myself wished to become. I envied him. I would have liked to consult him. To live in the immediate vicinity of this undaunted fury seemed to me an honour, a source of strength.

I would get out of bed in the evening, after my mother had retired, and go out to the stable, where I would perch in the hayloft above Perceval. I was delighted, astonished, to see that he never slackened the force of his passion. Was it his pride that would not allow him to sleep while I was observing him? Or did my motionless and hidden presence irritate him? He never ceased his sonorous breathing, nor the volleys of his hooves against his stall. From my shelter, I could see his beautiful, black coat, shimmering with blue reflections. Electric currents ran up and down his spine. I could never have imagined such a feast. I savoured the real and physical presence of passion.

I would leave the stable almost maddened by the roaring and pounding inside my head and ears, like the surf in a storm, holding my head in my hands, for the shocks were so tumultuous that I feared I would die. I would resolve not to remain in the stable so long the next time. But the spectacle of Perceval's anger attracted me so much that I could bring myself to leave him only when the roar of the torrent within me prevented any other focal interest.

Then I would be drawn to the edge of the falls; I was not free to stay away. I moved towards the movement of the water; I brought to it its own song, as though I had become its unique depository. In exchange, the water showed me its compulsive writhing, its spuming foam—necessary complements to the blows beating within my head. And there was not just one great cadence, involving the total flow of the water, but a spectacle of exasperated forces, of many currents and internal movements in ferocious conflict.

The water had hollowed out the stone. The rock on which I stood jutted out over the water like a terrace. I visualized the

stream beneath, dark, opaque, fringed with foam. False peace, profound darkness. The reserves of fear.

Springs filtered in at various places. The rock was muddy. It would have been easy to slip. Several hundred feet of fall! What fodder for the gulf, which would dismember and decapitate its prey . . . mangle it . . .

When I returned to my pallet on the floor of my room, I was not really separated from the torrent. Falling asleep, I could hear its roar, which had become an integral part of my self, the image of my impetuous fever. The elements of a dream. Or of something to be undertaken? I sensed that there would soon emerge from my torment the monstrous visage of either the one or the other.

The day of school opening was approaching. My mother had steeled herself, and was only waiting for the right moment to do an about-face, her vigour stored up and enhanced by her long and apparent resignation, which was really only a victory over her vitality. Not one of my moments of idleness in the fields, of loitering at the falls or in the woods, was unknown to her.

I knew she was in full possession of her powers. Strangely enough, the continual setbacks she encountered in the breaking of Perceval left her unperturbed. She rose above everything, sure of her final triumph. It made me feel small. I knew that it would soon be impossible to avoid a confrontation with the gigantic Claudine Perrault.

I turned to Perceval.

That evening, the horse was beyond constraint. On entering the stable, I almost turned back, for he was so violent that I feared he would smash his stall. Once in the shelter of the hayloft, I watched his astonishing rage. The foam on his coat was streaked with blood. He had been cruelly hobbled, moreover; yet that did not prevent him from struggling.

I think that my first feeling was one of pity to see such a superb creature wounded and tortured. I did not realize that what I found most intolerable was that a hatred so ripened and concentrated should be so bound and confined. The horse's rage made my own hatred seem inferior and cowardly.

This captive demon, at the height of his powers, dazzled me. In both justice and homage, I owed him this much—to permit him to

be himself in the world. For what evil end did I wish to free him? Was it to unleash the evil in me?

Within my skull, the torrent suddenly roared with such force that I was filled with terror. I wanted to scream. I could no longer draw back. I remember being deafened by the howling mass that struck my head.

And then, there was a blank that since that time, I have worried over trying to fill in. And when I sense the possible approach of the dreadful light in my memory, I struggle to be free of it, and I attach myself desperately to the darkness, however troubling, however menacing it may be. The inhuman circle, the circle of my thoughts unending, the material of my eternal life.

The torrent shook me from head to foot, subjugated me, engulfed me in an eddy that almost tore me to pieces.

The impression of an abyss, an abyss of space and time, where I fell down a void, succeeded the tempest. Yet I broke through the limits of this dead space. I opened my eyes to the luminous morning. I was facing the morning, and the sight of the sky blinded me. I was unable to move. What struggle had exhausted me in this way? A struggle with water? It was impossible. Moreover, my clothes were dry. In what abyss had I been drowned? I turned my head with difficulty. I was lying on the rock, at the edge of the torrent. I saw the foam gathering into the yellow spray. Was it possible that I had returned to the torrent? What atrocious battle had consumed me? Had I fought the Angel face to face? I did not want to know. I pushed back consciousness of it with gestures that rent the air.

The horse had been set free. He had made his terrible gallop through the world. An evil passage for anyone who had been in his way. Then I saw my mother, lying flat and still. I looked at her. I measured her size as she lay outstretched.

She was immense, covered with blood and stamped with hoofprints.

I have now no point of reference. No clock marks my hours. No calendar marks my years. I am dissolved in time. Discipline, rules, rigid barriers—all have collapsed. The name of God is dry and sterile. For me, no God will ever inhabit this name. I have known only empty symbols. I have borne my chains too long, and they have had time to put down roots. They have undone me from

within. I shall never be a free man. Too late did I desire my freedom.

I walk upon the wreckage. A dead man among the ruins. Anguish alone distinguishes me from the dead symbols.

Nothing is alive except the countryside around me. Not that I regard it with a loving and aesthetic appreciation. No, my bond with it is more involved and more profound: I am identified with the landscape. Delivered over to nature. I can feel myself becoming a tree, or a clod of earth. The only thing that separates me from the tree or the clod is anguish. I am open to anguish as the earth is to the rain.

The rain, the wind, the clover, the leaves have become the elements of my life, the real limbs of my body. I belong more to them than to myself. But terror runs along the surface of my skin. I pretend not to believe it; but at times it enables me to distinguish my arm from the hay beneath my scythe. If my arm trembles, it is fear that causes it, suddenly. Grass does not live with fear, but only with the wind. I abandon myself to the wind in vain; fear alone sways me and stirs me.

I am not yet ripe for the ultimate flight, for the final commitment to the cosmic forces. I do not yet have the permanent right to say to the tree, 'My brother,' and to the falls, 'Here I am.'

What is the present? On my hands I feel the warmth and lingering freshness of the March sun. I believe in the present. I raise my eyes, and see the open door of the stable. I know of the blood there, and of the woman stretched out on the ground with the marks of rage and death upon her. These are as present to my eye as the March sun. As real as when I first saw them fifteen or twenty years ago. This dense image rots the sunlight on my hands. The limpid touch of light is forever spoiled for me.

When I return home, fear alone distinguishes my muddy steps from the mud of the path leading to the house.

In an old pine, the oldest and the highest one, a crow is perched. He must be singing of his return from the south, but I can see only his contortions. I have lost sound and singing. And speech no longer exists. It has become a mute grimace.

The torrent is silent, with the heavy silence that precedes the spring flood. My head is silence. I analyse the fragments. I reshape my unhappiness. I complete it. I clarify it. I take it up where I had left it. My investigation is both lucid and methodical. Little by

little, it corroborates what my imagination, or my instinct, had led me to suppose.

I admire my detachment; I marvel at it. Then, suddenly, I know that I am deceiving myself. I believe myself to be without self-pity, yet I am aware that I am evasive, that my currents fork to avoid reality. I am lying. What good is my self-questioning? Of what use is my self-deception? The truth lies heavy upon me. It weighs me down from within. It corrupts even the simplest of my gestures. I am in possession of this truth, and from it I know that not one of my gestures is pure.

I cannot remember ever having felt such calm . . . It disquiets me. With what increased fury will the next assault of inner tumult come upon me? Will this pause indeed bring a sweetness to my life? I do not believe in sweetness.

The desire for a woman has come back to me in the desert. No, it is not a promise of sweetness. It is as unpitying as everything else within me, a desire to possess and destroy the body and soul of a woman, and to watch the woman play her role in my own destruction. To seek her is to give her this right.

I have gone to find her. I am retracing the steps of my childhood, towards the highway: the journey of my youth's innocence, when I sought a friendly face, and was denied it.

After so many years, I rise once more to the surface of my solitude. I emerge from the dark depths of the pool. I await the lure. I know today that it is a trap. But I, too, shall overcome it and taste the sweet fodder of the pasture.

At the edge of the road, pedlars have set out their wares. On my property. Two of them, standing there like grey trees, formless, draped, and hooded. Their hands are immobile in the air above the fire, as if in ultimate benediction, coloured by the little fire made of twigs.

My muscles stiffen and my breathing grows heavy. At last, I shall measure my strength by expelling these intruders. They have cut some small trees—I can see this at a glance. They are camping on my property. As impassive as Druidic stones, they watch my approach, but do not move. Ah, my anger, gather your proven powers!

I challenge them, but they give no response whatsoever. What if I have lost the art of speech, after so many years of silence? I

shout; I roar. I do not know what words escape from my throat. Do they express my thoughts? I do not know. In any case, they reach these dolmen. There is movement beneath their cloaks. The hands leave the fire. One of the two shadows approaches me. It is a man, middle-aged, greying, sly-looking. He is rather ridiculous in his bizarre and falsely solemn clothing. It pleases me.

Before my clenched fists he dissolves in a profusion of apologetic bowing. He talks incessantly, but his babbling is lost upon me. I fell him with a single blow. He rebounds from my outstretched arm like a ball. I laugh. My laughter must have a sound, but I do not hear it.

He gets up, his cloak covered with mud and melted snow. He redoubles his greetings and apologies. It seems that he is offering me his merchandise in restitution. He gathers an armful of necklaces, rosaries, almanacs, knives, and other knick-knacks from his handcart, and puts them in my arms with gestures of false regret, a regret that is more for his bleeding cheek than for any injury he has done me. The meaning of the entire scene could be expressed very simply: 'Take anything you like, but please don't beat me up! I will leave your property as fast as I can . . . just let me get my things together . . .'

I put all the assorted trinkets on the ground, keeping only a necklace of glass beads, which please me by their naïve vulgarity. I look at the man. He signals me to keep it. Happy to get off so cheaply, he smiles; or rather he purses his lips. I offer him money, but he refuses it, shaking his head with a gloomy look.

Still advancing, I now draw near to the second figure which is crouched by the fire, the hood down over the eyes. Taking this form by the shoulders, I stand it up in front of me. It is a woman. Raising her face to mine, she laughs. Disconcerted, I draw back a little. The man also attempts to smile. They seem to be mocking me. By way of reply, I approach the woman so close that I can feel her breath on my neck. I tear off her cloak. I want to strip her of all her finery, just as I would strip the bark from a birch tree. She does not try to escape . . . she continues breathing in my neck. She is laughing into my neck. She flouts me with her dazzling teeth. I can feel her heart beating, its rhythm undisturbed by the laugh I cannot hear. She is holding her arms in an arch above her head, her hands behind her neck, as though hiding something.

Did I really speak, or did I only think these things? I wanted to

know what she was hiding. Still close to me, she removes the loose shawl she was tying around her thick hair. Her hair falls free about her shoulders—long, black hair; a mass of hair, blue-black. I draw back. Now it is she who comes towards me. Her eyes are bluish-green; her brows are dark and curved, emphasizing the perfect setting of the eyes.

I turn and cry out to the fellow, who is following the scene with a bored air:

'Is this your daughter?'

He shrugs.

Gesticulating, and attempting speech, I explain to him that the girl is the only thing that tempts me in his whole bazaar, and that if he does not let me have her I will smash his face. Still pressed against me, she laughs more softly, and I can feel the warmth of her breath on my chest. She lowers her head a little. Her scent is in my nostrils.

The man is dismayed. I throw handfuls of money to him. (I can't understand all this money in my pockets.) He retrieves it here and there from the ground, hopping excitedly. His eyes roll in ecstasy. Ingratiatingly, he bows low.

Then I put an end to the demonstrations of this tramp, signalling him to put out the fire and get out with his belongings. He hurries around, cleaning up, and when everything is piled into the hand-cart he stands there, hesitating. The woman goes over to her accomplice and speaks with him. Listening, he shakes his head. Now she is coming back to me. By her attitude, I know that I have won my prize.

The role of solitude has been reversed. Solitude is now the burden of the pedlar. I and my partner are a couple. The man goes his way alone; I do not.

The woman has put back over her head the sort of burnoose she is wearing. She goes over to the wagon and pulls out a little bundle of clothing. Her expression is withdrawn. I notice how blooming and full her mouth is when at rest. This sensation is super-imposed upon that of her laughter.

And suddenly I find myself giving her a name. I, the wild man, feel the name of a woman mounting to my lips, like a gift which I would offer. I, who have never received anything, will taste the miracle of the first gift. I call her Amica. Probably she has some

other name, but I shall never hear it, and this one I have just uttered for the first time. I heard it composing itself within me, and welling out for her to take it. She has accepted it, because she is mine now, and I have acquired the right to give her a name.

I waited then a long time after the man had disappeared down the road, trundling his hand-cart. Then I lead Amica on a circuitous route through the mountains, in order to confuse her memory forever about the path leading to my property.

I imagined that she would ply me with questions, such as: 'Where are you taking me?' 'Is it very far?' 'Are you going to keep me very long?' 'Do I really please you so much?' 'Did you get the necklace for me?'

But no, not a word. Her mouth stays closed in a sulky pout.

She walks at my side, enshrouded even more within her cowl. Her eyes are watchful. At times, her passive expression is broken as she darts towards me a glance so piercing that it makes me tremble. Too late! I am already bound to her. Nor am I awakening from an illusion; on the contrary, from the moment I saw this woman, what attracted me more than anything else was just this hint of craftiness and evil in her eye.

I continue through the bush, never retracing my steps. I will go on to the end, to the fulfilment of this evil which now belongs to me alone, and of which I knew nothing even this morning. When we are within sight of the house, and of the torrent, I shall feast my eyes upon her face. When she realizes that we are miles and miles from the nearest neighbour, I shall acquaint her with the torrent. I will initiate her to the vision of my solitude. She will shiver when she sees that of the two, I am the more to be feared ...I will pull her to me, and feel her shivering against me, my hands on her throat, her eyes pleading.

I observe her; I scrutinize her expression. Twice, I pulled back her hood, and she neither protested nor did she emerge from her apparent apathy. We enter the house, and I close the door behind us. Her expression remains unchanged; not a muscle moves on her face. Yet the feeling of this house is sinister. Dark and unkempt, it bears the imprint and odour of the dead, and of the dreadful one who is still alive. Amica, impassive, penetrates my drama, appears in my home with neither fear nor repulsion.

Amica is the devil. I have invited the devil to my house.

She laughs, putting her arms around my neck. Her arms are

beautiful and firm, yet they seem to me to be unclean, destined to play I know not what role in my downfall. I resist their enchantment. (What are these cold snakes that have entwined me?) I pull them off brusquely, but they persist, and their resistance pleases me. I twist them. Although this also pleases me, it does not reassure me. The use of physical force indicates all too well the defection of my spiritual force. Brutality—the last recourse of those who have lost their inner power.

I go outside, and am refreshed by a breath of damp air against my brow. But already I have only one desire—to return to the snare of Amica's embrace. The evening air means nothing now. I know another freshness, a new turmoil.

She is standing at one end of the room, cutting bread, when I open the door. I throw my armful of wood on the floor, and, without moving over the doorsill, I cry out to her:

'Good day, my wife!'

Facing one another, we eat our meal. The flame of the lamp is brighter, because she has cleaned the glass. Her shawl is on a chair, her mantle hangs upon a nail. What peaceful household is this which I see around me? Nothing seems to penetrate my mind any more. I see an unknown woman eating opposite a stranger, the one as secretive as the other. No, I have never lived here; nor this man, either.

I welcome the woman into my bed, and the man who accompanies her.

How long is it since I took possession of my mother's big bed? I had not had the strength to take over her whole room; but, one evening, I brought the great bed up into my attic as a replacement for the straw pallet of my childhood. Was I afraid the horror of my nights would diminish? I irritated the wound. I am it, and it is me. But what is the use of discussing the reasons for my gestures, my compulsions? I am not free.

I introduced Amica into the bewilderment of my nights. Oh, you do not know, you of the long blue hair, you of the phosphorescent pupils, you whose arms are cool and fresh, what this bed means—this bed that receives you and your deaf companion! You do not know what old insomnias lie about, what fevers and unnameable terrors. And when sleep comes it is scarcely better. A descent into

the deepest gulf of the subconscious, where I can neither play nor defend myself, even as feebly as when I am awake.

I observe this strange couple on their wedding night. I am the guest at their wedding. Amica shows an aptitude and an ease in her caresses which fill me with a dreamy astonishment. She is sleeping now. My familiar demons begin to move among the dark carvings of the bed. Oh, I will no longer be the only one so tormented! . . . But no, they spare her calm slumber. They deploy themselves around her, at a distance. She is a calm island in this bed of the damned.

Dawn is breaking. I sense the distant murmur of the torrent, on its way, within me. I must be dreaming! Why are those little shoes at the foot of the bed? And on the chair, those delicate materials? What is this sleeping head doing on my breast?

I take it in my hands, like a ball. It wearies me and embarrasses me; it disconcerts me. What am I going to do with it? Throw it away? I feel a dryness throughout my being. No desire, no voluptuous inclination. Dryness. Utter drought. Thus has an arbitrary fate always robbed me of the springs of emotion and of joy within me. Oh, my mother, I had not known the extent of your destruction within me!

I get up and lean out of the window to avoid the vision of this strange wedding-night. I move discreetly, as if I did not want the sleeping couple to perceive my frustrated presence in their nuptial chamber.

Days pass, and a kind of continuity is established. Amica occupies herself with the meals and the housework; I, with the stable. It is not yet the time for field and garden. I do not want to leave her alone in the house for one instant. I follow her unceasingly. My nerves are taut. Anything might happen.

Why did I not take her back after the first night? Already she was a burden to me. But I feared the highway. I feared the itinerant pedlar, who might have gathered a gang of idlers to come and find me; to question me, perhaps, with the intention of coming here. The idea was unbearable. I believed myself sheltered by my retreat. I had cut the bridges to the inhabited universe. And I had also cut off the trail of Amica. She had wanted to become a witness to my life. Now she will not leave it so easily.

A witness—the words grip me, obsess me. Amica is a witness. . . .

A witness of what? A witness of my home, of my existence, of myself. The idea gives me a chill, as though there were a large mirror in which my gestures and my expressions were held in ineffaceable images. At no price can I release my witness to the world.

Sometimes at night when I wake up, I see her sitting at the foot of the bed, combing her hair. I am invariably surprised at the extreme attentiveness of her eyes as she stares at me. She observes me tensely, ready to flee at the slightest warning. I can feel her watching, even when my eyelids are closed. Her gaze presses on my sleep with a strange weight. It awakens me through its concentration. It is almost like hypnotism. What is she trying to do? Must she possess me entirely? I will kill her, before that.

Once, unable to stand her exasperating insistence any longer, I made as if to strike Amica. In one movement, she leapt to the floor. The litheness of her action was such a revelation that I did not think of running after her. The deep uneasiness I felt when her eyes, too wide-open, were fixed upon me, was completed by the impression of this supple leap.

It reminded me of a certain cat.

My mother would never keep a cat. Probably because she knew that a cat is never servile. She could accept only those animals which could be tamed and made to obey, trembling, at her feet. (Ah, Perceval, who were you, then?) I have never seen a cat here, except during the last days of my mother's life. At that time, there was a cat prowling around. He would only show himself, strangely enough, when I was alone. I remember being troubled and irritated by the sensation that the animal was lying in wait for me, with his dilated pupils. He seemed to be following a latent intention forming within me, one which escaped me, and whose inevitable outcome only he could penetrate.

When I saw the cat for the last time, I was eyeing the broken body of my mother. The beast, conscious, out of reach, kept staring at me, a look fixed from time immemorial. Someone had surprised me, then? Someone had been contemplating me without interruption, untiringly? Someone had known me, at that moment when I no longer had any knowledge of myself?

Amica has the same eyes as that cat. Two great orbs, immobile in appearance, but palpitating like flames. She examines me when I

am asleep. She stares at me when I no longer see. She can discover in my dreams those gestures indicating my absence, gestures which have fled into the most obscure regions of my being, which sleep takes up again at leisure, and which leave this bitter, stale taste, just enough to nourish the torments of the day.

I never saw that cat again. I often had a very strange feeling about it. It seemed to me that this malignant beast had entered within me. It existed within me, and knew everything, bearing me down with the entire burden of its certitude.

And so, today, I find this woman, with eyes so astonishingly similar, riveted upon me. Thus I imagine my witness appearing in the light of day. My hidden witness, emerging from my conscience, facing me in all clarity. The witness tortures me! It wants me to confess. Why has this sorceress come here? I do not want her watching me! I do not want her to question me! I know very well that I shall never be able to get rid of her! . . . There was a creature who knew me at the moment of Perceval's flight. This witness now interrogates me from without, directly, without my collaboration, a separate being, like a judge. It pursues me into my most secret refuge, which was its true home. It violates me more profoundly than my conscience . . . I know nothing! I know nothing! If this creature knows something, it has nothing to do with me. No! No! Do not smile, Amica. It has nothing to do with me. As for me, I know nothing.

The shawls and skirts in which she drapes herself seem to be held only by the moving clasp of her hands, that tighten or loosen according to the whim of her movements, now lively, now relaxed. A cascade of folds slips from her hands and reappears further down in serried waves. The interplay of folds and hands; in one hand, a knot of folds clasped at the breast, the glistening silk stretched taut at the shoulders. The broken design, recreated elsewhere. The silk slips, leaving the shoulder naked, revealing the arms. Fingers so brown on the red skirt. The skirt swiftly drawn together in handfuls, now, as she mounts the stairs. The limbs perfect, the ankles fine. A knee shows. Then everything disappears. The skirt sweeps the floor, the hands are free, and the bodice unconfined.

This morning, I found Amica at the table, with the few spoons, forks, and knives in my possession set out before her. She seemed to

be considering them. When she saw me, she indicated the shabby lot with forceful gestures, and spoke with animation. I could not understand at all what she was trying to tell me. Then, for the first time, she wrote something for me on a piece of paper. 'Are they silver?'

I burst out laughing, and wrote on the paper underneath her question, 'Of course not, stupid.'

Amica bit her lips, with a furious and spiteful glance.

Odd, indeed. Why was she so anxious to know if my cutlery were made of silver?

Amica has a strange way of keeping house. She will scour—one could say, ferret—in the same corner for hours, or in the same cupboard, while there are other tasks that she never undertakes at all. She never blackleads the stove, for example, nor does she scour the pots. Watching her, I would think she was looking for something. What has she come here for? What if our meeting had not been by chance? What if, on the contrary, she had awaited me with the express purpose of inquiring here as to the living and the dead? Why did I bring this woman here? Now, I can see no way of getting rid of her. Shall I measure her capacity for suffering against my own? No. I shall have to humour her. I fear too much that she will take my secret away with her, while I am asleep.

To keep watch. To keep watch over oneself. In the end, that is what is so unrelenting. I watch myself. I live only within myself. The only voice which comes to me is from within. No lips translate those words, no intermediary gives them form. But they strike my being, as sharp as arrows. I have plunged into the depths of myself without let-up. Following upon a childhood tortured by the absolute denial of self-knowledge, I was suddenly faced with the deepest of human gulfs. I foundered in the abyss.

While still alive, I partake of the last judgement: the confrontation with my real self. It is too much for a human to bear. I am burning. Oh! I am not always lucid! The sickness in my head distorts the voices. But it is enough to know that they speak, that they accuse me. And that I accuse myself. At times, thoughts come to me which could be an alleviation, a kind of Grace; if I could believe in alleviation, and if Grace had not been refused me. Each person bears within himself an unknown crime, a draining wound, which he expiates.

When I was little, I used to go to sleep deadened by fear and

work. Sometimes it happened, for an instant, that I could feel a presence which was a kind of consolation, superior to anything that I had ever suffered. I dared not abandon myself to this bliss, which my mother called the temptation of softness. I would stiffen, conscious perhaps of killing an angel in my refusal. To justify myself, I would tell myself that it must have been a bad angel, for the good ones are the policemen of God, and they punish little children who are too tender-hearted.

The experience of God had been forbidden me. And yet they had wanted to make a priest of me! Very early, I was turned away from the possibility of tasting God.

If Grace exists, I have lost it. I have refused it. But it goes deeper than that: someone before me, whose continuation I am, refused it for me. Oh mother, I hate you! And I have not even yet explored the fields of your devastation within me! A phrase haunts my nights. 'You are my son, a continuation of myself.' I am linked to the damned. I am a part of her damnation, as she of mine... No! No! I am responsible for nothing! I am not a free being! I repeat to you that I am not free! That I have never been free! Oh, what strikes me with such fury? The torrent surges through my head. And I am not alone! This woman whom I plucked from the roadside is before me, observing me, spying upon me. She must not see me in this state. I am drawn close to the falls. I must behold my inward image. I lean over the boiling gulf. I lean over myself.

How many hours have passed? What instinct drives me to go back up the rocky gorge? The instinct of the burrow, that draws home the wounded animal? If I return, it is because the torrent is not yet my absolute domain. The household of my childhood still holds me; and perhaps Amica, as well...

I am not yet prepared for the definitive integration with the fury of the falls, nor for the even more profound abyss within me. I still seek to escape from myself. The outcome, the final flight into my despair, remains in suspense. For how many hours, or days? To consent to my destiny does not depend on my own will. The next crisis will carry me away.

The springs among the rocks are swollen with the recent rains. I am walking in the water. I am so weak that I find I have to stop at every step.

I drink at the pump and splash my head with water. Amica is

not there. I go to bed with my clothes on, my head aching. I do not yet feel uneasy that she has not come in. (I think so slowly.) Usually, I do not let her out of my sight. Moreover, she never goes far from the house. What can she be doing? It is already evening; and I have told her of the wolves on the mountain.

Amica has returned. I am too weary to question her. More sultry than usual, she seems to promise a richness of unknown caresses. She has reached her full powers. I want to send this sated woman away. Why am I so fastidious? What sort of a companion does my humiliation require?

She lays her hands upon my forehead. I cannot help but enjoy her hands, gentle against my burning. Suddenly, I have a revelation which panics me. I did not know that I had opened my mouth, but thought that I had only mentally desired to have some water. But Amica nodded assent, and helped me to drink, raising my head like that of a child. My eyes rolled in stupefaction. She is laughing.

I know now with certainty that I possess no control over my voice. I do not know whether I am speaking aloud or whether I only continue my silent thoughts. Amica can read my mind. My thoughts are open to her. I had not imagined this end of my horror! I am delivered to this slut! I bite my lips, so that not a word will escape them. Amica laughs.

I do not have the strength to rise. I exhaust myself with futile efforts. My head is bursting. I want to get rid of Amica. Since her arrival, she must have surprised me often in this way. Just what does she know? She is giving me more water to drink. Her skin has an unwonted odour. A different odour, which outrages me. For I think that I recognize this particular aroma. The odour of a human, not very young; of tobacco, old paper, and ink . . . I have smelled it before. It reminds me of the chief of police who interrogated me after my mother's death . . . I scream, but am aware of it only by the contraction of my chest, and by the way Amica starts back, and stands there, rigid and pale. Her shawl has tumbled to the ground, revealing her bare shoulders and arms. I would like to rend her proffered body with my teeth and nails.

I have now no inner shelter. The sacrilege has been committed. The most secret corner of my being has been invaded. I am naked, in the open, facing this informer. She will find out even more than necessary for a police report. She will penetrate my torment.

I am burning with fever. If I speak aloud in my delirium, I do not hear myself. And she replaces my lost hearing. She usurps my role as my own principal listener. I communicate with her instead of with myself. My soul is violated. I had been told that God alone has this right and this power. A slut will pass the final sentence! At this moment, I would like to believe in God, in his terrible righteousness and perfect grandeur. Let Him read me and absorb me in my own truth. Not this woman! This miserable nobody! Oh, the Devil, then, is very powerful. And I am his accomplice.

I smell the freshness of springtime through the window, mingled with the odour of the falls. I have the sense of smell of a dog. Since my deafness, this sense has developed and increased to a strange degree. As would a hunted animal, I feared the scent of the police on Amica. But could I be mistaken? . . . There is no hint of ink and paper . . . Ah! I believe it is the rancid odour of the pedlar! . . .

Amica tucks me in like a baby in its cradle. I struggle, and she laughs. What I would give to hear the sound of her laughter! All that I know of it is this grimace which becomes more and more ferocious . . .

She has gone downstairs. She must be ransacking everything! The way is clear. She has a free hand. She is trying to find material proof of the crime. I myself have searched for twenty years. Will she do better? There are certain parts of the house that I have forbidden her. And in the stable, a certain stall, a certain place in the musty hay, now twenty years old. A certain dulled part of my memory which is sealed up . . . To Amica, nothing is forbidden here; she will enter everywhere, even into the precincts of a scarcely hidden terror.

The coroner's verdict stands before my eyes: accidental death. Then why has this girl come to snoop around? There is nothing to find out. The itinerant pedlar will know nothing. He will not have anything at all to take to the police; nor Amica either.

The fever is freezing me; it consumes me. What is Amica doing? What can she discover? Is it possible that she will find something? I do not have the physical strength to get up, but when she returns, I will strangle her. Or better still, I shall await the return of my strength, and then I shall throw this spy into the water. For one instant, she will hang from my arms over the precipice. She will struggle. I will not hear her cries, but I shall feel the convulsions of

her terror. Then Amica will be decapitated and dismembered. The remains will be dashed down among the rocks. No! No! I do not want her dissevered head lying upon my breast. I want none of her! Nothing! And her long blue-black hair around my neck—it suffocates me.

I must have slept. It is morning. Amica has not come back. She has fled. I am certain she has fled. Does this mean, then, that she has found what she was looking for? By what clues? In what drawer? In which trunk? Oh! the rough floor of the stable, where the black blood is being absorbed!

The mountain must be encircled. The police and their dogs will be lying in wait for me. Amica has betrayed me. She is paying me back, the baggage that I bought in cash from the pedlar! I have been sold in my turn. By her, and by myself. Was I aware of the price? The price of my poor tormented body? . . . What surfeit of agony? I cannot expect any reprieve. Soon, I shall be only a burning torch.

How was I able to get up? I drag myself downstairs. Everything is in disorder, the cupboards all open and rifled. The door to my mother's room has been broken open. I stop before the presence that even the meanest objects, scattered pell-mell, reveal so potently. Everything that my mother has touched bears her imprint, and opposes itself to me.

The lock on the writing-desk has been broken. The one and only time that I dared to open this desk was on the day I acquired Amica. It was there that I had taken the money she cost me. In my impatience to be on my way, I had paid attention to a certain sealed envelope, which I had torn open after having felt it. Nevertheless, one precise detail remains in my mind. After having filled my pockets, I am sure that I replaced the envelope, still half full, in the big ledger my mother had kept, from which I had taken it in the first place.

The ledger is lying open. I leaf through it. No trace of the envelope. I do not know how to explain the curiosity which draws me to go through these pages. I do this with the greatest care, minutely, even, torn by a kind of avidity. I find that my mother's efforts at book-keeping, which were at times unorthodox, were aimed at the extinction of a debt. On the last page, I read the final

phrase inscribed in her large handwriting: 'The wages of sin are now paid.'

I stoop to pick up the torn and empty envelope. I can piece together the same words as are in the ledger: 'The wages of sin' and, in smaller letters, 'To be burned tonight.' Then follows the exact date of my mother's death.

This is what Amica had done. She has escaped with the devil's money. She will go into the world, and tell of what she found here, and that I am the offspring of sin, the son of big Claudine. The whole world will know that I was chosen by evil from the first breath of my existence.

What do I have left to renounce? Unless it be myself, and my own drama? I have never thought of the renunciation of one's self as a precondition for the purity of being. Moreover, I am unable to be pure. I shall never achieve purity. I deliver myself to my own end. I absorb myself into myself; and I am nothing. I cannot imagine my ending as outside of myself. Therein, perhaps, is my error. Who shall teach me the way? I am alone, alone within myself.

I am walking. I can take a step forwards, or a step back. Who says that I am not free? I am weak, but I am walking. I can see the torrent, but I can scarcely hear it. Oh, I would never have believed such lucidity could exist! Awakened, I play with the elements of my fever, which is now abating. The water is black; it is all whirlpools; it spits yellow foam. I can see Amica's head above the waves. That head—I don't know what to do with it. Perhaps she lives within me. Everything lives within me. I refuse absolutely to come out of myself. Her hair floats in the wind like a shadowy veil. It mingles with the water, in long coils, a turbulent blue-black, bordered with white. Her hair flows towards me in the eddies. It smells of the fresh water of the falls, and of Amica's own perfume. Her head is torn off. No! I don't want it! It spins like a ball. Oh, does anyone want to buy it? As for me, I have paid too much for it.

I weary of watching the water and the fantastic images within it. I am hanging over the brink as far as I can. I am within the spray. My lips taste its flatness.

The house, the long and dour house, born of the soil, is dissolving within me also. I can see it crumbling away in the backwash. My mother's room is turned upside down. All the objects belonging to

her life are floating out over the water. Such poor things! Oh! I see the silver mirror someone gave her. From within it, her face is contemplating me: 'François, look me in the eyes.'

I am leaning out as far as possible. I want to see down into the gulf, as far down as I can. I want to lose myself in my own adventure. My sole and fearful wealth.

Winter-Spring, 1945.