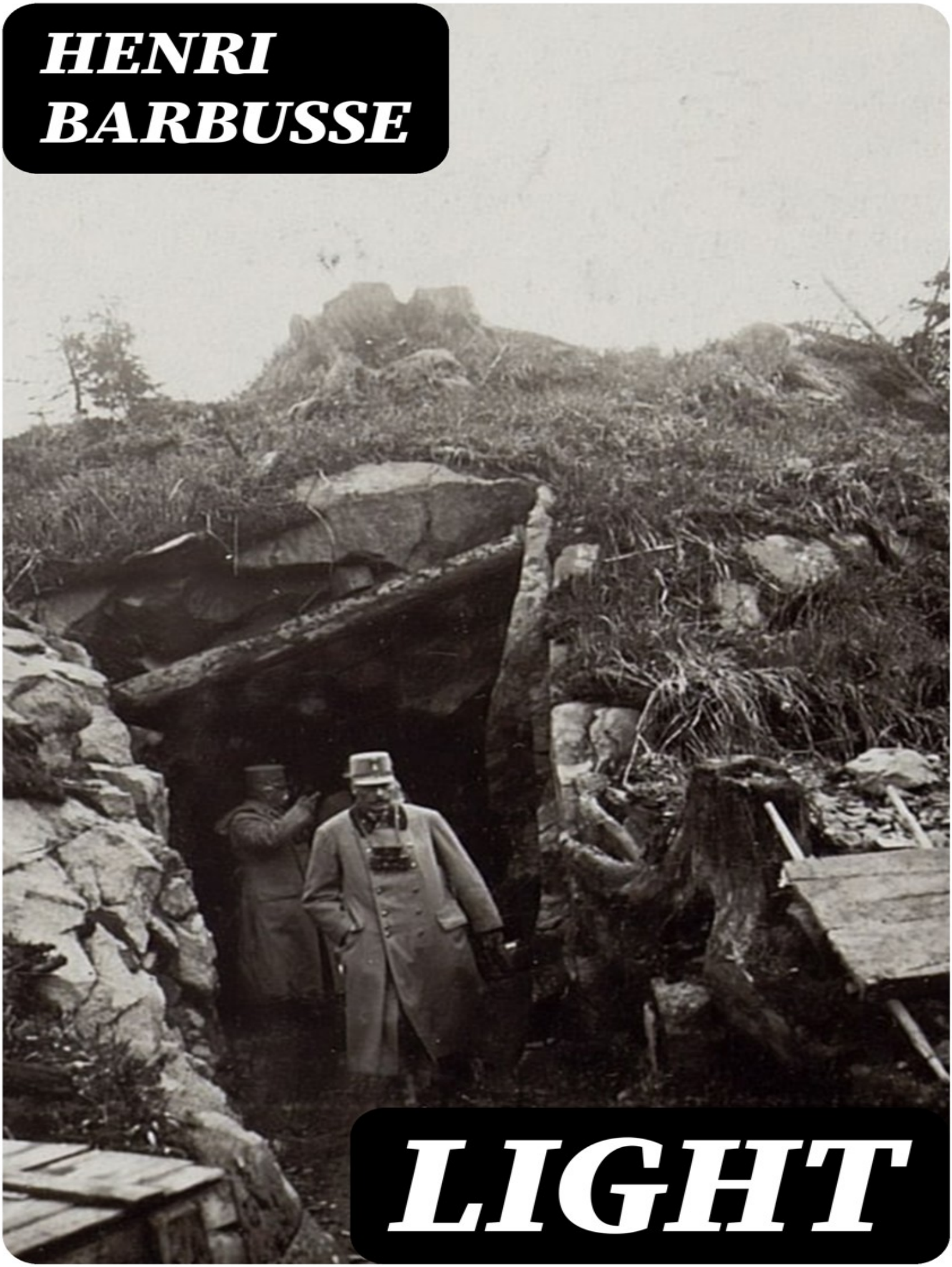
HENRI BARBUSSE



LIGHT

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CHAPTER I

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MYSELF

All the days of the week are alike, from their beginning to their end.

At seven in the evening one hears the clock strike gently, and then the instant tumult of the bell. I close the desk, wipe my pen, and put it down. I take my hat and muffler, after a glance at the mirror—a glance which shows me the regular oval of my face, my glossy hair and fine mustache. (It is obvious that I am rather more than a workman.) I put out the light and descend from my little glass-partitioned office. I cross the boiler-house, myself in the grip of the thronging, echoing peal which has set it free. From among the dark and hurrying crowd, which increases in the corridors and rolls down the stairways like a cloud, some passing voices cry to me, "Good-night, Monsieur Simon," or, with less familiarity, "Good-night, Monsieur Paulin." I answer here and there, and allow myself to be borne away by everybody else.

Outside, on the threshold of the porch which opens on the naked plain and its pallid horizons, one sees the squares and triangles of the factory, like a huge black background of the stage, and the tall extinguished chimney, whose only crown now is the cloud of falling night. Confusedly, the dark

flood carries me away. Along the wall which faces the porch, women are waiting, like a curtain of shadow, which yields glimpses of their pale and expressionless faces. With nod or word we recognize each other from the mass. Couples are formed by the quick hooking of arms. All along the ghostly avenue one's eyes follow the toilers' scrambling flight.

The avenue is a wan track cut across the open fields. Its course is marked afar by lines of puny trees, sooty as snuffed candles; by telegraph posts and their long spider-webs; by bushes or by fences, which are like the skeletons of bushes. There are a few houses. Up yonder a strip of sky still shows palely yellow above the meager suburb where creeps the muddy crowd detached from the factory. The west wind sets quivering their overalls, blue or black or khaki, excites the woolly tails that flutter from muffled necks, scatters some evil odors, attacks the sightless faces so deep-drowned beneath the sky.

There are taverns anon which catch the eye. Their doors are closed, but their windows and fanlights shine like gold. Between the taverns rise the fronts of some old houses, tenantless and hollow; others, in ruins, cut into this gloomy valley of the homes of men with notches of sky. The iron-shod feet all around me on the hard road sound like the heavy rolling of drums, and then on the paved footpath like dragged chains. It is in vain that I walk with head bent—my own footsteps are lost in the rest, and I cannot hear them.

We hurry, as we do every evening. At that spot in the inky landscape where a tall and twisted tree seems to writhe as if it had a soul, we begin suddenly to descend, our feet plunging forward. Down below we see the lights of Viviers

sparkle. These men, whose day is worn out, stride towards those earthly stars. One hope is like another in the evening, as one weariness is like another; we are all alike. I, also. I go towards my light, like all the others, as on every evening.

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When we have descended for a long time the gradient ends, the avenue flattens out like a river, and widens as it pierces the town. Through the latticed boughs of the old plane trees—still naked on this last day of March—one glimpses the workmen's houses, upright in space, hazy and fantastic chessboards, with squares of light dabbed on in places, or like vertical cliffs in which our swarming is absorbed. Scattering among the twilight colonnade of the trees, these people engulf themselves in the heaped-up lodgings and rooms; they flow together in the cavity of doors; they plunge into the houses; and there they are vaguely turned into lights.

I continue to walk, surrounded by several companions who are foremen and clerks, for I do not associate with the workmen. Then there are handshakes, and I go on alone.

Some dimly seen wayfarers disappear; the sounds of sliding locks and closing shutters are heard here and there; the houses have shut themselves up, the night-bound town becomes a desert profound. I can hear nothing now but my own footfall.

Viviers is divided into two parts—like many towns, no doubt. First, the rich town, composed of the main street, where you find the Grand Café, the elegant hotels, the sculptured houses, the church and the castle on the hill-top. The other is the lower town, which I am now entering. It is a

system of streets reached by an extension of that avenue which is flanked by the workmen's barracks and climbs to the level of the factory. Such is the way which it has been my custom to climb in the morning and to descend when the light is done, during the six years of my clerkship with Messrs. Gozlan & Co. In this quarter I am still rooted. Some day I should like to live yonder; but between the two halves of the town there is a division—a sort of frontier, which has always been and will always be.

In the Rue Verte I meet only a street lamp, and then a mouse-like little girl who emerges from the shadows and enters them again without seeing me, so intent is she on pressing to her heart, like a doll, the big loaf they have sent her to buy. Here is the Rue de l'Etape, my street. Through the semi-darkness, a luminous movement peoples the hairdresser's shop, and takes shape on the dull screen of his window. His transparent door, with its arched inscription, opens just as I pass, and under the soap-dish,[1] whose jingle summons customers, Monsieur Justin Pocard himself appears, along with a rich gust of scented light. He is seeing a customer out, and improving the occasion by the utterance of certain sentiments; and I had time to see that the customer, convinced, nodded assent, and that Monsieur Pocard, the oracle, was caressing his white and ever-new beard with his luminous hand.

[Footnote 1: The hanging sign of a French barber.—Tr.]

I turn round the cracked walls of the former tinplate works, now bowed and crumbling, whose windows are felted with grime or broken into black stars. A few steps farther I think I saw the childish shadow of little Antoinette, whose

bad eyes they don't seem to be curing; but not being certain enough to go and find her I turn into my court, as I do every evening.

Every evening I find Monsieur Crillon at the door of his shop at the end of the court, where all day long he is fiercely bent upon trivial jobs, and he rises before me like a post. At sight of me the kindly giant nods his big, shaven face, and the square cap on top, his huge nose and vast ears. He taps the leather apron that is hard as a plank. He sweeps me along to the side of the street, sets my back against the porch and says to me, in a low voice, but with heated conviction, "That Pétrarque chap, he's really a bad lot."

He takes off his cap, and while the crescendo nodding of his bristly head seems to brush the night, he adds: "I've mended him his purse. It had become percolated. I've put him a patch on that cost me thirty centimes, and I've resewn the edge with braid, and all the lot. They're expensive, them jobs. Well, when I open my mouth to talk about that matter of his sewing-machine that I'm interested in and that he can't use himself, he becomes congealed."

He recounts to me the mad claims of Trompson in the matter of his new soles, and the conduct of Monsieur Becret, who, though old enough to know better, had taken advantage of his good faith by paying for the repair of his spout with a knife "that would cut anything it sees." He goes on to detail for my benefit all the important matters in his life. Then he says, "I'm not rich, I'm not, but I'm consentious. If I'm a botcher, it's 'cos my father and my grandfather were botchers before me. There's some that's for making a big

stir in the world, there are. I don't hold with that idea. What I does, I does."

Suddenly a sonorous tramp persists and repeats itself in the roadway, and a shape of uncertain equilibrium emerges and advances towards us by fits and starts; a shape that clings to itself and is impelled by a force stronger than itself. It is Brisbille, the blacksmith, drunk, as usual.

Espying us, Brisbille utters exclamations. When he has reached us he hesitates, and then, smitten by a sudden idea, he comes to a standstill, his boots clanking on the stones, as if he were a cart. He measures the height of the curb with his eye, but clenches his fists, swallows what he wanted to say, and goes off reeling, with an odor of hatred and wine, and his face slashed with red patches.

"That anarchist!" said Crillon, in disgust; "loathsome notions, now, aren't they? Ah! who'll rid us of him and his alcoholytes?" he adds, as he offers me his hand. "Good-night. I'm always saying to the Town Council, 'You must give 'em clink,' I says, 'that gang of Bolshevists, for the slightest infractionment of the laws against drunkenness.' Yes, indeed! There's that Jean Latrouille in the Town Council, eh? They talk about keeping order, but as soon as it's a question of a-doing of it, they seem like a cold draught."

The good fellow is angry. He raises his great fist and shakes it in space like a medieval mace. Pointing where Brisbille has just plunged floundering into the night, he says, "That's what Socialists are,—the conquering people what can't stand up on their legs! I may be a botcher in life, but I'm for peace and order. Good-night, good-night. Is she well, Aunt Josephine? I'm for tranquillity and liberty and order.

That's why I've always kept clear of their crowd. A bit since, I saw her trotting past, as vivacious as a young girl,—but there, I talk and I talk!"

He enters his shop, but turns on his heel and calls me back, with a mysterious sign. "You know they've all arrived up yonder at the castle?" Respect has subdued his voice; a vision is absorbing him of the lords and ladies of the manor, and as he leaves me he bows, instinctively.

His shop is a narrow glass cage, which is added to our house, like a family relation. Within I can just make out the strong, plebeian framework of Crillon himself, upright beside a serrated heap of ruins, over which a candle is enthroned. The light which falls on his accumulated tools and on those hanging from the wall makes a decoration obscurely golden around the picture of this wise man; this soul all innocent of envious demands, turning again to his botching, as his father and grandfather botched.

I have mounted the steps and pushed our door; the gray door, whose only relief is the key. The door goes in grumblingly, and makes way for me into the dark passage, which was formerly paved, though now the traffic of soles has kneaded it with earth, and changed it into a footpath. My forehead strikes the lamp, which is hooked on the wall; it is out, oozing oil, and it stinks. One never sees that lamp, and always bangs it.

And though I had hurried so—I don't know why—to get home, at this moment of arrival I slow down. Every evening I have the same small and dull disillusion.

I go into the room which serves us as kitchen and dining-room, where my aunt is lying. This room is buried in almost

complete darkness.

"Good evening, Mame."

A sigh, and then a sob arise from the bed crammed against the pale celestial squares of the window.

Then I remember that there was a scene between my old aunt and me after our early morning coffee. Thus it is two or three times a week. This time it was about a dirty window-pane, and on this particular morning, exasperated by the continuous gush of her reproaches, I flung an offensive word, and banged the door as I went off to work. So Mame has had to weep all the day. She has fostered and ruminated her spleen, and sniffed up her tears, even while busy with household duties. Then, as the day declined, she put out the lamp and went to bed, with the object of sustaining and displaying her chagrin.

When I came in she was in the act of peeling invisible potatoes; there are potatoes scattered over the floor, everywhere. My feet kick them and send them rolling heavily among odds and ends of utensils and a soft deposit of garments that are lying about. As soon as I am there my aunt overflows with noisy tears.

Not daring to speak again, I sit down in my usual corner.

Over the bed I can make out a pointed shape, like a mounted picture, silhouetted against the curtains, which slightly blacken the window. It is as though the quilt were lifted from underneath by a stick, for my Aunt Josephine is leanness itself.

Gradually she raises her voice and begins to lament. "You've no feelings, no—you're heartless,—that dreadful word you said to me,—you said, 'You and your jawing!' Ah!

people don't know what I have to put up with—ill-natured—cart-horse!"

In silence I hear the tear-streaming words that fall and founder in the dark room from that obscure blot on the pillow which is her face.

I stand up. I sit down again. I risk saying, "Come now, come; that's all done with."

She cries: "Done with? Ah! it will never be done with!"

With the sheet that night is begriming she muzzles herself, and hides her face. She shakes her head to left and to right, violently, so as to wipe her eyes and signify dissent at the same time.

"Never! A word like that you said to me breaks the heart forever. But I must get up and get you something to eat. You must eat. I brought you up when you were a little one,"—her voice capsizes—"I've given up all for you, and you treat me as if I were an adventuress."

I hear the sound of her skinny feet as she plants them successively on the floor, like two boxes. She is seeking her things, scattered over the bed or slipped to the floor; she is swallowing sobs. Now she is upright, shapeless in the shadow, but from time to time I see her remarkable leanness outlined. She slips on a camisole and a jacket,—a spectral vision of garments which unfold themselves about her handle-like arms, and above the hollow framework of her shoulders.

She talks to herself while she dresses, and gradually all my life-history, all my past comes forth from what the poor woman says,—my only near relative on earth; as it were my mother and my servant.

She strikes a match. The lamp emerges from the dark and zigzags about the room like a portable fairy. My aunt is enclosed in a strong light. Her eyes are level with her face; she has heavy and spongy eyelids and a big mouth which stirs with ruminated sorrow. Fresh tears increase the dimensions of her eyes, make them sparkle and varnish the points of her cheeks. She comes and goes with undiminished spleen. Her wrinkles form heavy moldings on her face, and the skin of chin and neck is so folded that it looks intestinal, while the crude light tinges it all with something like blood.

Now that the lamp is alight some items become visible of the dismal super-chaos in which we are walled up,—the piece of bed-ticking fastened with two nails across the bottom of the window, because of draughts; the marble-topped chest of drawers, with its woolen cover; and the door-lock, stopped with a protruding plug of paper.

The lamp is flaring, and as Mame does not know where to stand it among the litter, she puts it on the floor and crouches to regulate the wick. There rises from the medley of the old lady, vividly variegated with vermilion and night, a jet of black smoke, which returns in parachute form. Mame sighs, but she cannot check her continual talk.

"You, my lad, you who are so genteel when you like, and earn a hundred and eighty francs a month,—you're genteel, but you're short of good manners, it's that chiefly I find fault with you about. So you spat on the window-pane; I'm certain of it. May I drop dead if you didn't. And you're nearly twenty-four! And to revenge yourself because I'd found out that you'd spat on the window, you told me to stop my jawing,

for that's what you said to me, after all. Ah, vulgar fellow that you are! The factory gentlemen are too kind to you. Your poor father was their best workman. You are more genteel than your poor father, more English; and you preferred to go into business rather than go on learning Latin, and everybody thought you quite right; but for hard work you're not much good—ah, la, la! Confess that you spat on the window.

"For your poor mother," the ghost of Mame goes on, as she crosses the room with a wooden spoon in her hand, "one must say that she had good taste in dress. That's no harm, no; but certainly they must have the wherewithal. She was always a child. I remember she was twenty-six when they carried her away. Ah, how she loved hats! But she had handsome ways, for all that, when she said, 'Come along with us, Josephine!' So I brought you up, I did, and sacrificed everything...."

Overcome by the mention of the past, Mame's speech and action both cease. She chokes and wags her head and wipes her face with her sleeve.

I risk saying, gently, "Yes, I know it well."

A sigh is my answer. She lights the fire. The coal sends out a cushion of smoke, which expands and rolls up the stove, falls back, and piles its muslin on the floor. Mame manipulates the stove with her feet in the cloudy deposit; and the hazy white hair which escapes from her black cap is also like smoke.

Then she seeks her handkerchief and pats her pockets to get the velvet coal-dust off her fingers. Now, with her back turned, she is moving casseroles about. "Monsieur Crillon's

father," she says, "old Dominic, had come from County Cher to settle down here in '66 or '67. He's a sensible man, seeing he's a town councilor. (We must tell him nicely to take his buckets away from our door.) Monsieur Bonéas is very rich, and he speaks so well, in spite of his bad neck. You must show yourself off to all these gentlemen. You're genteel, and you're already getting a hundred and eighty francs a month, and it's vexing that you haven't got some sign to show that you're on the commercial side, and not a workman, when you're going in and out of the factory."

"That can be seen easily enough."

"I'd rather you had a badge."

Breathing damply and forcefully, she sniffs harder and quicker, and looks here and there for her handkerchief; she prowls with the lamp. As my eyes follow her, the room awakens more and more. My groping gaze discovers the tiled floor, the conference of chairs backed side by side against the wall, the motionless pallor of the window in the background above the low and swollen bed, which is like a heap of earth and plaster, the clothes lying on the floor like mole-hills, the protruding edges of tables and shelves, pots, bottles, kettles and hanging clouts, and that lock with the cotton-wool in its ear.

"I like orderliness so much," says Mame as she tacks and worms her way through this accumulation of things, all covered with a downy layer of dust like the corners of pastel pictures.

According to habit, I stretch out my legs and put my feet on the stool, which long use has polished and glorified till it looks new. My face turns this way and that towards the lean

phantom of my aunt, and I lull myself with the sounds of her stirring and her endless murmur.

And now, suddenly, she has come near to me. She is wearing her jacket of gray and white stripes which hangs from her acute shoulders, she puts her arm around my neck, and trembles as she says, "You can mount high, you can, with the gifts that you have. Some day, perhaps, you will go and tell men everywhere the truth of things. That *has* happened. There have been men who were in the right, above everybody. Why shouldn't you be one of them, my lad, *you* one of these great apostles!"

And with her head gently nodding, and her face still tear-stained, she looks afar, and sees the streets attentive to my eloquence!

* * * * *

Hardly has this strange imagining in the bosom of our kitchen passed away when Mame adds, with her eyes on mine, "My lad, mind you, never look higher than yourself. You are already something of a home-bird; you have already serious and elderly habits. That's good. Never try to be different from others."

"No danger of that, Mame."

No, there is no danger of that. I should like to remain as I am. Something holds me to the surroundings of my infancy and childhood, and I should like them to be eternal. No doubt I hope for much from life. I hope, I have hopes, as every one has. I do not even know all that I hope for, but I should not like too great changes. In my heart I should not like anything which changed the position of the stove, of the

tap, of the chestnut wardrobe, nor the form of my evening rest, which faithfully returns.

* * * * * *

The fire alight, my aunt warms up the stew, stirring it with the wooden spoon. Sometimes there spurts from the stove a mournful flame, which seems to illumine her with tatters of light.

I get up to look at the stew. The thick brown gravy is purring. I can see pale bits of potato, and it is uncertainly spotted with the mucosity of onions. Mame pours it into a big white plate. "That's for you," she says; "now, what shall *I* have?"

We settle ourselves each side of the little swarthy table. Mame is fumbling in her pocket. Now her lean hand, lumpy and dark, unroots itself. She produces a bit of cheese, scrapes it with a knife which she holds by the blade, and swallows it slowly. By the rays of the lamp, which stands beside us, I see that her face is not dry. A drop of water has lingered on the cheek that each mouthful protrudes, and glitters there. Her great mouth works in all directions, and sometimes swallows the remains of tears.

So there we are, in front of our plates, of the salt which is placed on a bit of paper, of my share of jam, which is put into a mustard-pot. There we are, narrowly close, our foreheads and hands brought together by the light, and for the rest but poorly clothed by the huge gloom. Sitting in this jaded armchair, my hands on this ill-balanced table,—which, if you lean on one side of it, begins at once to limp,—I feel that I am deeply rooted where I am, in this old room,

disordered as an abandoned garden, this worn-out room, where the dust touches you softly.

After we have eaten, our remarks grow rarer. Then Mame begins again to mumble; once again she yields to emotion under the harsh flame of the lamp, and once again her eyes grow dim in her complicated Japanese mask that is crowned with cotton-wool, and something dimly shining flows from them.

The tears of the sensitive old soul plash on that lip so voluminous that it seems a sort of heart. She leans towards me, she comes so near, so near, that I feel sure she is touching me.

I have only her in the world to love me really. In spite of her humors and her lamentations I know well that she is always in the right.

I yawn, while she takes away the dirty plates and proceeds to hide them in a dark corner. She fills the big bowl from the pitcher and then carries it along to the stove for the crockery.

Antonia has given me an appointment for eight o'clock, near the Kiosk. It is ten past eight. I go out. The passage, the court,—by night all these familiar things surround me even while they hide themselves. A vague light still hovers in the sky. Crillon's prismatic shop gleams like a garnet in the bosom of the night, behind the riotous disorder of his buckets. There I can see Crillon,—he never seems to stop,—filing something, examining his work close to a candle which flutters like a butterfly ensnared, and then, reaching for the glue-pot which steams on a little stove. One can just see his face, the engrossed and heedless face of the artificer of the

good old days; the black plates of his ill-shaven cheeks; and, protruding from his cap, a vizor of stiff hair. He coughs, and the window-panes vibrate.

In the street, shadow and silence. In the distance are venturing shapes, people emerging or entering, and some light echoing sounds. Almost at once, on the corner, I see Monsieur Joseph Bonéas vanishing, stiff as a ramrod. I recognized the thick white kerchief, which consolidates the boils on his neck. As I pass the hairdresser's door it opens, just as it did a little while ago, and his agreeable voice says, "That's all there is to it, in business." "Absolutely," replies a man who is leaving. In the oven of the street one can see only his littleness—he must be a considerable personage, all the same. Monsieur Pocard is always applying himself to business and thinking of great schemes. A little farther, in the depths of a cavity, stoppered by an iron-grilled window, I divine the presence of old Eudo, the bird of ill omen, the strange old man who coughs, and has a bad eye, and whines continually. Even indoors he must wear his mournful cloak and the lamp-shade of his hood. People call him a spy, and not without reason.

Here is the Kiosk. It is waiting quite alone, with its point in the darkness. Antonia has not come, for she would have waited for me. I am impatient first, and then relieved. A good riddance.

No doubt Antonia is still tempting when she is present. There is a reddish fever in her eyes, and her slenderness sets you on fire. But I am hardly in harmony with the Italian. She is particularly engrossed in her private affairs, with which I am not concerned. Big Victorine, always ready, is

worth a hundred of her; or Madame Lacaille, the pensively vicious; though I am equally satiated of her, too. Truth to tell, I plunge unreflectingly into a heap of amorous adventures which I shortly find vulgar. But I can never resist the magic of a first temptation.

I shall not wait. I go away. I skirt the forge of the ignoble Brisbille. It is the last house in that chain of low hills which is the street. Out of the deep dark the smithy window flames with vivid orange behind its black tracery. In the middle of that square-ruled page of light I see transparently outlined the smith's eccentric silhouette, now black and sharp, now softly huge. Spectrally through the glare, and in blundering frenzy, he strives and struggles and fumbles horribly on the anvil. Swaying, he seems to rush to right and to left, like a passenger on a hell-bound ferry. The more drunk he is, the more furiously he falls upon his iron and his fire.

I return home. Just as I am about to enter a timid voice calls me—"Simon!"

It is Antonia. So much the worse for her. I hurry in, followed by the weak appeal.

I go up to my room. It is bare and always cold; always I must shiver some minutes before I shake it back to life. As I close the shutters I see the street again; the massive, slanting blackness of the roofs and their population of chimneys clear-cut against the minor blackness of space; some still waking, milk-white windows; and, at the end of a jagged and gloomy background, the blood-red stumbling apparition of the mad blacksmith. Farther still I can make out in the cavity the cross on the steeple; and again, very high and blazing with light on the hill-top, the castle, a rich

crown of masonry. In all directions the eye loses itself among the black ruins which conceal their hosts of men and of women—all so unknown and so like myself.

CHAPTER II

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OURSELVES

It is Sunday. Through my open window a living ray of April has made its way into my room. It has transformed the faded flowers of the wallpaper and restored to newness the Turkey-red stuff which covers my dressing-table.

I dress carefully, dallying to look at myself in the glass, closely and farther away, in the fresh scent of soap. I try to make out whether my eyes are little or big. They are the average, no doubt, but it really seems to me that they have a tender brightness.

Then I look outside. It would seem that the town, under its misty blankets in the hollow of the valley, is awaking later than its inhabitants.

These I can see from up here, spreading abroad in the streets, since it is Sunday. One does not recognize them all at once, so changed are they by their unusual clothes;—women, ornate with color, and more monumental than on week days; some old men, slightly straightened for the occasion; and some very lowly people, whom only their cleanness vaguely disguises.

The weak sunshine is dressing the red roofs and the blue roofs and the sidewalks, and the tiny little stone setts all

pressed together like pebbles, where polished shoes are shining and squeaking. In that old house at the corner, a house like a round lantern of shadow, gloomy old Eudo is encrusted. It forms a comical blot, as though traced on an old etching. A little further, Madame Piot's house bulges forth, glazed like pottery. By the side of these uncommon dwellings one takes no notice of the others, with their gray walls and shining curtains, although it is of these that the town is made.

Halfway up the hill, which rises from the river bank, and opposite the factory's plateau, appears the white geometry of the castle, and around its pallors a tapestry of reddish foliage, and parks. Farther away, pastures and growing crops which are part of the demesne; farther still, among the stripes and squares of brown earth or verdant, the cemetery, where every year so many stones spring up.

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We have to call at Brisbille's, my aunt and I, before Church. We are forced to tolerate him thus, so as to get our twisted key put right. I wait for Mame in the court, sitting on a tub by the shop, which is lifeless to-day, and full of the scattered leavings of toil. Mame is never ready in time. She has twice appeared on the threshold in her fine black dress and velvet cape; then, having forgotten something, she has gone back very quickly, like a mole. Finally, she must needs go up to my room, to cast a last glance over it.

At last we are off, side by side. She takes my arm proudly. From time to time she looks at me, and I at her, and her smile is an affectionate grimace amid the sunshine.

When we have gone a little way, my aunt stops, "You go on," she says;
"I'll catch you up."

She has gone up to Apolline, the street-sweeper. The good woman, as broad as she is long, was gaping on the edge of the causeway, her two parallel arms feebly rowing in the air, an exile in the Sabbath idleness, and awkwardly conscious of her absent broom.

Mame brings her along, and looking back as I walk, I hear her talking of me, hastily, as one who confides a choking secret, while Apolline follows, with her arms swinging far from her body, limping and outspread like a crab.

Says Mame, "That boy's bedroom is untidy. And then, too, he uses too many shirt-collars, and he doesn't know how to blow his nose. He stuffs handkerchiefs into his pockets, and you find them again like stones."

"All the same, he's a good young man," stammers the waddling street cleanser, brandishing her broom-bereaved hands at random, and shaking over her swollen and many-storied boots a skirt weighted round the hem by a coat-of-mail of dry mud.

These confidences with which Mame is in the habit of breaking forth before no matter whom get on my nerves. I call her with some impatience. She starts at the command, comes up, and throws me a martyr's glance.

She proceeds with her nose lowered under her black hat with green foliage, hurt that I should thus have summoned her before everybody, and profoundly irritated. So a persevering malice awakens again in the depths of her, and

she mutters, very low, "You spat on the window the other day!"

But she cannot resist hooking herself again on to another interlocutor, whose Sunday trousers are planted on the causeway, like two posts, and his blouse as stiff as a lump of iron ore. I leave them, and go alone into Brisbille's.

The smithy hearth befires a workshop which bristles with black objects. In the middle of the dark bodies of implements hanging from walls and ceiling is the metallic Brisbille, with leaden hands, his dark apron rainbowed with file-dust,—dirty on principle, because of his ideas, this being Sunday. He is sober, and his face still unkindled, but he is waiting impatiently for the church-going bell to begin, so that he may go and drink, in complete solitude.

Through an open square, in the ponderous and dirt-shaggy glazing of the smithy, one can see a portion of the street, and a sketch, in bright and airy tones, of scattered people. It is like the sharply cut field of vision in an opera-glass, in which figures are drawn and shaded, and cross each other; where one makes out, at times, a hat bound and befeathered, swaying as it goes; a little boy with sky-blue tie and buttoned boots, and tubular knickers hanging round his thin, bare calves; a couple of gossiping dames in swollen and somber petticoats, who tack hither and thither, meet, are mutually attracted and dissolve in conversation, like rolling drops of ink. In the foreground of this colored cinema which goes by and passes again, Brisbille, the sinister, is ranting away, as always. He is red and lurid, spotted with freckles, his hair greasy, his voice husky. For a moment, while he paces to and fro in his cage, dragging shapeless

and gaping shoes behind him, he speaks to me in a low voice, and close to my face, in gusts. Brisbille can shout, but not talk; there must be a definite pressure of anger before his resounding huskiness issues from his throat.

Mame comes in. She sits on a stool to get her breath again, all the while brandishing the twisted key which she clasps to the prayer-book in her hand. Then she unburdens herself and begins to speak in fits and starts of this key, of the mishap which twisted it, and of all the multiple details which overlap each other in her head. But the slipshod, gloomy smith's attention is suddenly attracted by the hole which shows the street.

"The lubber!" he roars.

It is Monsieur Fontan who is passing, the wine-merchant and café-proprietor. He is an expansive and imposing man, fat-covered, and white as a house. He never says anything and is always alone. A great personage he is; he makes money; he has amassed hundreds of thousands of francs. At noon and in the evening he is not to be seen, having dived into the room behind the shop, where he takes his meals in solitude. The rest of the time he just sits at the receipt of custom and says nothing. There is a hole in his counter where he slides the money in. His house is filling with money from morning till night.

"He's a money-trap," says Mame.

"He's rich," I say.

"And when you've said that," jeers Brisbille, "you've said all there is to say. Why, you damned snob, you're only a poor drudge, like all us chaps, but haven't you just got the snob's ideas?"

I make a sign of impatience. It is not true, and Brisbille annoys me with the hatred which he hurls at random, hit or miss; and all the more because he is himself visibly impressed by the approach of this man who is richer than the rest. The rebel opens his steely eye and relapses into silence, like the rest of us, as the big person grows bigger.

"The Bonéas are even richer," my aunt murmurs.

Monsieur Fontan passes the open door, and we can hear the breathing of the corpulent recluse. As soon as he has carried away the enormous overcoat that sheathes him, like the hide of a pachyderm, and is disappearing, Brisbille begins to roar, "What a snout! Did you see it, eh? Did you see the jaws he swings from his ears, eh? The exact likeness of a hog!"

Then he adds, in a burst of vulgar delight, "Luckily, we can expect it'll all burst before long!"

He laughs alone. Mame goes and sits apart. She detests Brisbille, who is the personification of envy, malice and coarseness. And everybody hates this marionette, too, for his drunkenness and his forward notions. All the same, when there is something you want him to do, you choose Sunday morning to call, and you linger there, knowing that you will meet others. This has become a tradition.

"They're going to cure little Antoinette," says Benoît, as he frames himself in the doorway.

Benoît is like a newspaper. He to whom nothing ever happens only lives to announce what is happening to others.

"I know," cries Mame, "they told me so this morning. Several people already knew it this morning at seven. A big,

famous doctor's coming to the castle itself, for the hunting, and he only treats just the eyes."

"Poor little angel!" sighs a woman, who has just come in.

Brisbille intervenes, rancorous and quarrelsome, "Yes, they're always going to cure the child, so they say. Bad luck to them! Who cares about her?"

"Everybody does!" reply two incensed women, in the same breath.

"And meanwhile," said Brisbille, viciously, "she's snuffing it." And he chews, once more, his customary saying—pompous and foolish as the catchword of a public meeting—"She's a victim of society!"

Monsieur Joseph Bonéas has come into Brisbille's, and he does it complacently, for he is not above mixing with the people of the neighborhood. Here, too, are Monsieur Pocard, and Crillon, new shaved, his polished skin taut and shiny, and several other people. Prominent among them one marks the wavering head of Monsieur Mielvaque, who, in his timidity and careful respect for custom, took his hat off as he crossed the threshold. He is only a copying-clerk at the factory; he wears much-used and dubious linen, and a frail and orphaned jacket which he dons for all occasions.

Monsieur Joseph Bonéas overawes me. My eyes are attracted by his delicate profile, the dull gloom of his morning attire, and the luster of his black gloves, which are holding a little black rectangle, gilt-edged.

He, too, has removed his hat. So I, in my corner discreetly remove mine, too.

He is a young man, refined and distinguished, who impresses by his innate elegance. Yet he is an invalid,

tormented by abscesses. One never sees him but his neck is swollen, or his wrists enlarged by a ghastly outcrop. But the sickly body encloses bright and sane intelligence. I admire him because he is thoughtful and full of ideas, and can express himself faultlessly. Recently he gave me a lesson in sociology, touching the links between the France of to-day and the France of tradition, a lesson on our origins whose plain perspicuity was a revelation to me. I seek his company; I strive to imitate him, and certainly he is not aware how much influence he has over me.

All are attentive while he says that he is thinking of organizing a young people's association in Viviers. Then he speaks to me, "The farther I go the more I perceive that all men are afflicted with short sight. They do not see, nor can they see, beyond the end of their noses."

"Yes," say I.

My reply seems rather scanty, and the silence which follows repeats it mercilessly. It seems so to him, too, no doubt, for he engages other interlocutors, and I feel myself redden in the darkness of Brisbille's cavern.

Crillon is arguing with Brisbille on the matter of the recent renovation of an old hat, which they keep handing to each other and examine ardently. Crillon is sitting, but he keeps his eyes on it. Heart and soul he applies himself to the debate. His humble trade as a botcher does not allow a fixed tariff, and he is all alone as he vindicates the value of his work. With his fists he hammers the gray-striped mealy cloth on his knees, and the hair, which grows thickly round his big neck, gives him the nape of a wild boar.

"That felt," he complains, "I'll tell you what was the matter with it. It was rain, heavy rain, that had drowned it. That felt, I tells you, was only like a dirty handkerchief. What does *that* represent—in ebullition of steam, in gumming, and the passage of time?"

Monsieur Justin Pocard is talking to three companions, who, hat in hand, are listening with all their ears. He is entertaining them in his sonorous language about the great financial and industrial combination which he has planned. A speculative thrill electrifies the company.

"That'll brush business up!" says Crillon, in wonder, torn for a moment from contemplation of the hat, but promptly relapsing on it.

Joseph Bonéas says to me, in an undertone,—and I am flattered,—"That Pocard is a man of no education, but he has practical sense. That's a big idea he's got,—at least if he sees things as I see them."

And I, I am thinking that if I were older or more influential in the district, perhaps I should be in the Pocard scheme, which is taking shape, and will be huge.

Meanwhile, Brisbille is scowling. An unconfessable disquiet is accumulating in his bosom. All this gathering is detaining him at home, and he is tormented by the desire for drink. He cannot conceal his vinous longing, and squints darkly at the assembly. On a week day at this hour he would already have begun to slake his thirst. He is parched, he burns, he drags himself from group to group. The wait is longer than he can stand.

Suddenly every one looks out to the street through the still open door.