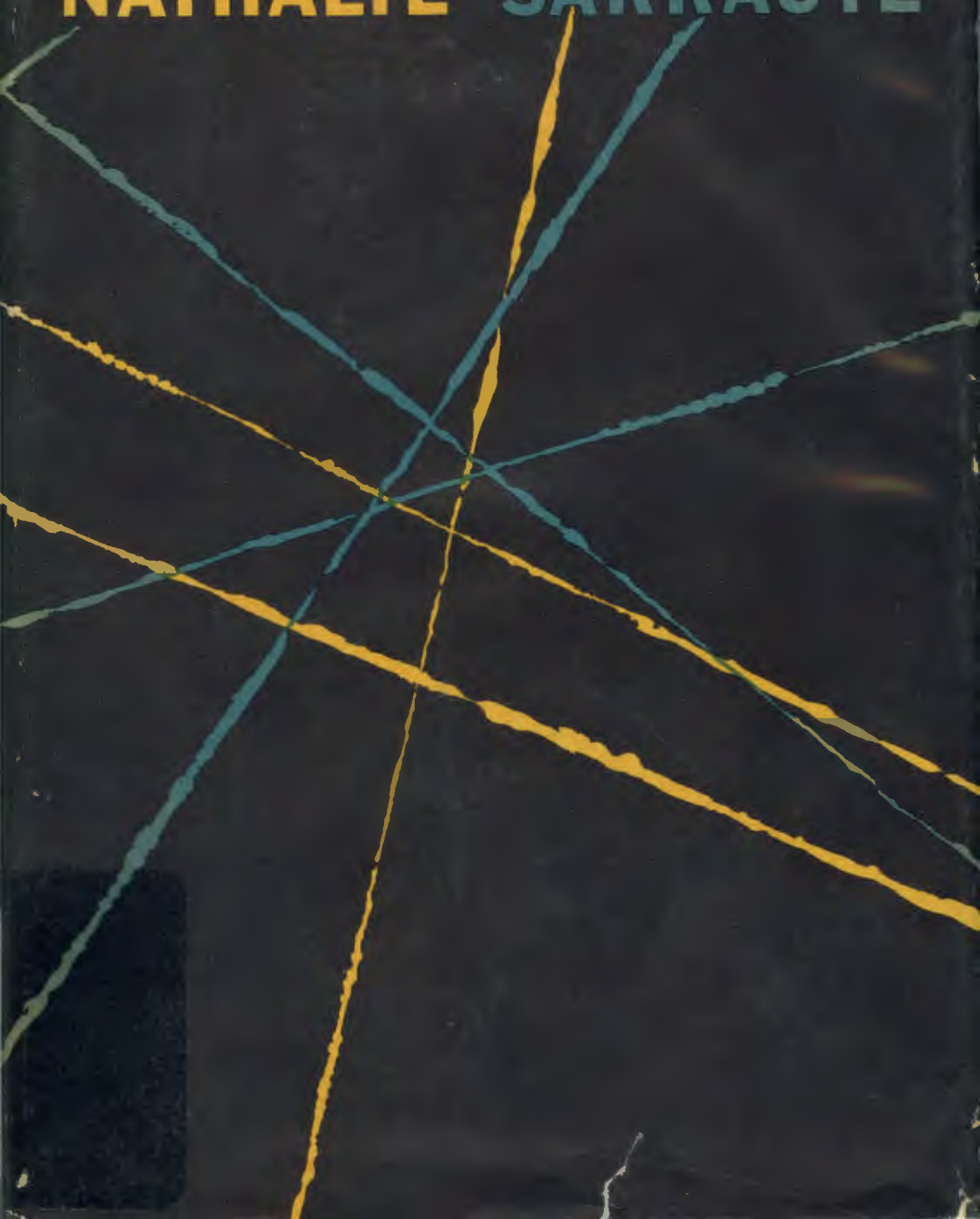


# MARTEREAU

*a novel by*

**NATHALIE SARRAUTE**



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**NATHALIE SARRAUTE**

*translated by Maria Jolas*

**GEORGE BRAZILLER, INC.**

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nothing more to lose. That would be, to let myself go completely, to give up everything, release all my brakes, and shout at them that I am no fool, either, that I see through their cowardly little game . . . cowardly and cruel . . . I don't earn my living, I don't, and I feel uncomfortable about it, which they well know . . . incapable of getting rid of them, or of escaping . . . caught in their toils, cornered, ill, and they take advantage of that fact . . . I'm ill, I'd shout that at her, I can't live in an unheated studio and you know that perfectly well, I can't sit up all night. . . . That's why I'm stagnating here, listening to your stupid twaddle, taking part in your dubious amusements, people amuse themselves as best they can, don't they? You know where my weak spot is and you hit me there, in order to humiliate and annihilate me—you always do it—that picks you up for a while, gives you confidence, excites you . . .

But I shall never dare. Nobody ever dares to do such a thing. They know that, and can therefore rest easy. They don't run the slightest risk. If ever some madman, in a moment of fury, should dare, out of a blue sky, to indulge in such an indecent outburst as that, we know very well what would happen to him. He would see them suddenly leave, withdraw, as they know how to do, far away, at immense distances, setting between them and him all their sad amazement, their incomprehension, their innocence, their unawareness; he would be alone, abandoned by everybody, in a desert, with no other partner, no other adversary, than himself; scratching, biting, embracing nobody but



pretty product . . . for that matter, it runs in his family, his mother before him never could do anything with her two hands, she couldn't darn a pair of socks, or cook an egg, married badly to that alcoholic who was always half-seas over, but she was so infatuated with him . . . later, as usual, he was the one who had to pay the damage . . . delightful, the nephew, "my nephew," at one time he had been proud of him, he thought something might be made of him, he talked about him to his customers, to his competitors: "my nephew is working for me, he will take my place one day . . ." but what the devil, they're good for nothing the entire family, a lot of nit-wits, ne'er-do-wells . . . All that, and a lot more still, expressed not in so many words, of course, as I am obliged to do now for lack of other means, not with real words like the ones we articulate distinctly out loud or in our thoughts, but suggested rather by certain sorts of very rapid signs that contain all that, summing it up—like a short formula topping a long algebraic construction, that expresses a series of complicated chemical combinations—signs so brief and which slip so quickly through him and through me that I could never succeed in really understanding or seizing them, I can only recover them in bits and snatches and translate them awkwardly by the words these signs represent, fleeting impressions, thoughts, feelings, often forgotten, that have been piling up for years and that now, assembled like a large and powerful army behind its banners, are regrouping, getting under way, about to roll forward . . . I cower, I duck my head, he leans towards us, hate in his eye, hissing . . .

Family scenes

"'You' have a way of staring at people . . ." We remain motionless for a moment, huddled up close to one another, all grey, little sparrows lined up on a wire, a trembling bunch of sickly monkeys, and then, in her, something that had lain dormant—the very thing that had frightened me so, the reason why I had so weakly lined up on her side, against him—something inside her begins to stretch, to deploy, to rise up . . . the envelope in which the charm had enclosed her crackles, splits, now he too is afraid, I know it, a scatterbrained little fox-terrier that has imprudently stuck its nose in a snake's hole—she appears, hard, icy, pitiless, she examines him from an immense distance . . . the lady with the unicorn, the costly statuette, the far-away princess . . . "I didn't take so much as that with me, you hear me, when I went away . . . I left everything, from one day to the next" . . . she was lying on her bed, her cheek in her hand, reading a novel, he was walking up and down, endlessly talking, shouting, everywhere they went he collected crowds with his continual scenes of jealousy, his reproaches, his shouts, he called her every known name, a whore, she was nothing but that, a dirty little whore . . . so that was life together, their life? that was what people called life together! it had been hell from the start, he had always known it from the start, all she wanted was his money . . . why didn't she leave, she could go to the devil, into the gutter . . . where she belonged . . . she needn't count on him to go after her . . . he left, slamming the door, he came back . . . already, on their wedding trip in Syria, when he had caught the fever . . . such cold-hearted-

ness, such callousness on the part of a mere girl . . . not an atom of affection or sympathy, less than for the chauffeur, less than for her dog . . . but why doesn't she speak, why doesn't she answer, he came towards her clenching his fists, grabbed her book from her hands, why doesn't she say something . . . she remained unmoved, her face set, her eyes lowered, pretending to read . . . he was sobbing, his head leaning against the door-frame, he was alone, done for, he wouldn't be able to stand it . . . just one word, never an affectionate or fond word, not even his first name the way his mother used to call him . . . but she had never been able to call him by his first name . . . she should say what she wanted, anything she wanted, they had been together ten years, their child . . . everything was ready, the taxi was waiting downstairs, she had passed erect in her traveling suit, with veil lowered and gloves fastened, the chauffeur carrying her valise . . . I felt I wanted to implore her, to protect him, she should forgive him, she shouldn't pay any attention to him, he's so kind, only awkward, nervous, flares up easily . . . She stares at him for a long time without speaking and he looks away. Her lip curls as she turns on him a "look of disdain": "What's got into you, anyway?"

But it's not always like that. Sometimes, despite threatening signs of warning, she is caught unawares: doubtless she has not been alert enough, has remained too attached to her character of the moment, grown too soft, a little too inclined to give way for good to a sort of infantile insouciance, to a somewhat weak-minded cheerfulness, for her to



be able to react at once. And that only frightens me all the more. Words that have humiliated us, if at times we haven't the force, rapidity of reflex, cunning and courage needed to retort, are like projectiles that we have not been able, or have neglected, to extract right away from our flesh, they remain imbedded in us, become encysted and risk forming tumors, or abscesses in which, little by little, hatred gathers. He won't lose anything by waiting, that I know. One fine day, at the most unexpected moment for him, and for her too, probably, the hatred that has gathered in her will crop out, it will spurt right into his eyes.

For the moment, she doesn't budge, or hardly. She blushes a bit; we exchange smiles, shrug our shoulders slightly, we are surprised, almost amused, forbearing, we take up good-naturedly where we had left off as though nothing had happened, in voices that are just a bit less self-assured, and taking pains not to look at him: "There, now, she has turned round, did you see that hat? This year's styles . . . unless you're as thin as a rail . . . but for women like that, imagine" . . . innocent little pigs dancing before the very eyes of the big, bad wolf; butterflies that a rustic has tried to seize between two coarse fingers: their wings barely crumpled, they resume their flight.

They walk through meadows, with one step they cross over brooks. Below their caps, the backs of their necks show the same hard sinews. Slung across their right shoulders

they wear the same leather strap from which hangs a case containing a silver goblet. Their low-haunched backs move with the same undulating gait. I could follow them to the end of the world. In the restaurant, I can't take my eyes off the man's hands, with their large spatulate nails bordered by a roll of flesh, cutting the meat on the young boy's plate. I follow them to the mineral spring in order to watch them gargle in chorus, inhale together the sulphur vapors, stick the little funnel first in one nostril and then in the other.

I experience real delight as I watch them. In them I re-discover ourselves, I recognize us. This is our picture, our portrait such as a talented artist might have drawn it. They have what is lacking in us, shapeless models that we are, chaos in which a thousand possibilities clash—they have style, a revealing extravagance, simplicity, bold sharpness of feature.

We walk through meadows. With one step we cross over brooks. We trample on violets and daisies, we never stop to look at the hawthorn in bloom, we stare at the hills on the horizon, at the clouds and pine forests, without seeing them, he holds my nose and I swallow while he does the talking, with him you've never finished talking . . . corporations; boards of directors; profit and loss; inflation, deflation, stagnation on the Stock Exchange; war risks; gilt-edged securities; falling markets in Morocco; rise in real-estate values in Argentina; passports; visas; reservations for trains and steamships; dismissing the chauffeur . . . the amount of gasoline stolen from him every month, or



the excess mileage he has discovered on his meter; his secretary's carelessness; a typist who has to be replaced—an irreparable loss, a "real pearl," she understood him almost before he spoke; buying apartments, houses; renting places for the summer; sickness, medicines, doctors; livers, lights, kidneys, lungs . . . inside him an endless trickle, it seeps through to the outside, overflows, covers me entirely, covers everything round us—no matter where we are—mountains, rivers, fields, seas, skies and suns, with a layer of soot, of ashes, with a layer of mud.

Sometimes—but it's so unlike me, so little in my line, so remote from the kind of thing I usually do that I can hardly believe I could have taken such a risk, it seems to me that I must have seen somebody else do it or even have dreamed it, while I walked along beside him, swallowing docilely—sometimes in a moment of sudden intrepidity or oblivion, I stop suddenly, and there, right in the middle of the meadow, beside the brook, dilating my nostrils, I make so bold as to breathe in the odor of new-mown hay, look at the distant hills and the pine woods and say . . . "Listen to that . . . those tinkling bells . . . the brook . . . Look over there at the line of those woods . . . that little hut . . ." The respite afforded me by this act of bravura is a very brief one. He turns his head, half-closes his eyes, casts an impatient, furious glance at the little brook, says nothing: a thick, heavy silence that quickly crushes the tinkle of bells and the ripple of the brook. Calling my entire strength into play, I probe his silence. My hearing—as well-trained and sharp as that of a trapper who, laying his ear

to the ground, can catch the far-off gallop of horses—detects in it certain disquieting movements. Soon his silence becomes more deafening than the din of the most violent upbraiding and shouting. In my stupid unawareness, in my mad temerity, I have touched upon something very dangerous, something absolutely forbidden; I have committed the greatest offense. I have dared to give him a lesson, I have taunted him. Nature-lover, eh? The little blue flower? Purity? . . . All those dreamers and failures who go walking through meadows breathing in the perfume of flowers, pressing plants and pasting them in an album, chasing after butterflies . . . The countless idiots and good-for-nothings in whose stead people like himself do all the thinking, all the struggling, and they have the nerve—such dirty work as that, I should say not—to scorn the firm, hard world in which real men fight their battles for them, for the entire incompetent, lazy, irritable, fastidious, "esthetic" lot of them . . . he knows them . . . each one a bundle of self-conceit and vanity . . . wearing his wretched little feelings tenderly, gingerly, in a sling . . . and they're the ones who would like to teach him how to live, who want to set him an example of purity and unworldliness, no, really, it's enough to make you die laughing . . .

But I sense, as we walk along side by side in silence, that little by little the uproar inside him is calming down. I venture to take a look at him from the side: it seems to me that he is a bit crestfallen, that he has slumped a little into himself, he has a piteous, destitute, forlorn look that makes me think of an aging woman whose makeup has been re-



moved by brusquely passing a sponge over her face. I am filled with remorse. It was I who had dragged him out of his shell, out of the carapace in which he had been secure, in which he felt everywhere at home, in which he betook himself, unafraid, from one end of the world to the other . . . But it's not only that, that's nothing. I did even worse: it was from me myself that I tore him away. I repulsed and rejected him at the moment when he was trying to hold on to me, to clasp me to him closely, huddled against each other, well protected inside the shelter he had built for himself, and which he never stopped reinforcing, very near, snug and warm, I myself somewhat wedged in, crushed by him . . . I blew it all up at once . . . I suddenly got out from under, and left him alone, naked, all at sea, clumsy, done for . . . a defenseless prey now to the sly threat, the unbearable distress that creeps over him along with the too calm, too soft evening air, the tinkle of little bells and the dubious, rather saccharine odor of the meadow.

I try to make up for it, I should like to be forgiven. I resume our conversation in a slightly uneasy voice, I begin to ask questions . . . "Those stocks, those Moroccan mines you were telling me about . . . how do you explain their having fallen so much lower than they were? . . ." He has to be wheedled, he is sulking a bit, but only as a matter of form: he asks nothing better than to forget, to take up everything again at the same point, as though nothing had happened. Soon he softens entirely, he begins to liven up . . . everything is all right again. The little cyclone, the

tiny typhoon, the tempest in a teapot, has calmed down. We start again.

But that, as I said before, is an unusual experience. It's more like a dream, a flight of fancy. For I rarely put a spoke in his wheel like that. I usually do my best to make things easy for him.

I even sometimes take the lead, and, curiously enough, just at those moments when I feel gorged to the point of nausea, when I feel the greatest desire to break away, to flee. I have often wondered what devil eggs me on at those moments . . . Some might say, a love of suffering . . . a morbid need to be humiliated, a vague desire to see that thing that has remained dangerously live under the ashes, finally burst into flame and devour me, or perhaps a childish hope that I might succeed in resembling him, in order to feel at ease with him, in order to be encouraged and accepted, to be, like him, in a safe spot, huddled up to him snugly in his concrete shelter, or else a mad hope of commanding his respect, of beating him with his own weapons, on his own ground? . . . all that at the same time, undoubtedly, then all at once, occasionally, at the most unexpected moments for me, I go up to him, with a begging look, my hand outstretched, and ask him humbly—when I don't really need it and know perfectly what to expect—his opinion, his advice, I tell him stories, I unbosom myself, I confide my secrets, I brag . . . "By the way . . . I wanted to ask you . . . you know that exhibit I took part in with my friend, or rather . . . my associate . . . yes you do, you



know . . . that exhibit of work by young artists; I designed a table and a sofa for it . . ." His face is motionless, sagging, his eyes immediately assume the vague, drowsy, bored expression that, at such moments, he feels obliged to wear. I was expecting it, but all the same my voice falters a bit . . . "Well, believe it or not, there's a decorator . . . he's still a young man, not very well known, but very talented, very promising, well, you know, he was very much interested in my work, I don't mean in that alone, everything we do interests him . . . he came to see us . . . he made us a proposal to work with him, to found a sort of association . . . he is better known than we are, in fact, he is already quite a favorite in certain circles . . . We thought that, under certain conditions, that is, by pooling everything . . . We are rather tempted, but we asked to be allowed to think it over . . . naturally we don't want to be done in, so I thought that you . . ." He turns sharply towards me as though he has just waked up and looks at me hard: "Who? What decorator? How's that? What house? Don't know. How much capital has he got? What does he propose exactly? What? I don't understand. On what basis? And what terms? . . ." He doesn't listen to the confused explanation I give him, spluttering the while. He has something else to do. He's too busy getting ready. The opportunity is really a golden one. Eager for sacrifice, reeling already with the heady joy of the martyr, the victim has come voluntarily, quivering and naked, to surrender to his will. No need to hurry. He takes his time. We are alone, shut in together, doors closed, all exits barred. No possible help

between us, I play the game till the end. Because it's a game between us, nothing more. A sham. A bull-fight minus the kill. If I stopped playing, if I were to take him seriously, as I have seen happen, to my great embarrassment and discomfiture, in the case of certain uninitiated persons, among others, my associate who, one day, after a similar dissertation, innocently proposed to release me from our contract and advised me to go work with someone having more experience, he scowled, he was ill at ease, furious—the game had turned out badly, his opponent had dropped out at the most exciting point—with a crestfallen expression he said, in a changed, toneless, slightly hoarse voice: "Oh! you know, things like that can't be decided in one minute, it's not so simple as all that, we'll have to see about it. We'll see about it later. After we've thought it over, we'll talk about it again."

And people have told me—but if they hadn't told me, I should have guessed it—that he shows his friends clippings he cut out at the time of the exhibit, with photographs of our models . . . "Look, what do you say about my nephew? He's a talented youngster, not bad at all . . . What do you think?"

That, for me, as regards them, is the worst thing: my incapacity to make up my mind about them. Whether to like them once and for all, or to hate them. Put them in the stocks and hang a number round their necks so as to know what they're really like. Everybody (if they didn't, how could people live?) succeeds in doing this, without effort, and with a rapidity and sureness that each time

baffles me. People take their stand in front of you, at a proper distance, and look you over: what is he like? What did he say to me? What has he done? Should he be allowed to come closer? Or should he be kept at a distance? Thus their instinct for self-preservation, which is always strong, makes it possible for them to form an opinion and to dare, when it suits them, keep their own distance. Indeed, it is thanks to that, to this instinct for self-preservation, to their self-respect—as they call it—and which I so envy them, that their lines of conduct are so well laid down, so clearly, so purely drawn. I've tried countless times to imitate them. But it's useless. I can't do it. Here, between us, it can't be done.

Her slender, heavily-ringed fingers are holding the menu; with smartly puckered lids and mouth drooping in a captious, fastidious pout, she scans the menu while he, leaning across the table, proffers, offers, himself included, she must order, it's all hers, anything she wants, she has only to say the word, anything whatsoever can be prepared, can be sent for, a sign from her and he will have unrolled before her a flying carpet covered with delicious foods, he snaps his fingers . . . psst! . . . the waiters come running . . . "Is your lobster really good today, unusually good? . . . You see, it couldn't be any fresher, boiled immediately, straight from their beds; believe me, that will whet your appetite, only without mayonnaise, mayonnaise



or seated side by side, their little notebooks and pencils in hand, watching the latest fashion shows, they lean towards each other: "You know, at times he makes me anxious . . . Really . . . To-day we had a little talk, I asked him what he expected to do, how his plans were coming on . . . he began to splutter and seemed quite bewildered . . . When you consider how old he is . . . Just think . . . After all, can you imagine a man like your father, at his age . . ."

Nothing more commonplace, when all is said and done—I recognize that—nothing more usual, than entertainment of this kind. Everybody, more or less, shares with us the need we feel, from time to time—and even rather frequently—to throw a bone to gnaw on at this person or the other, in order to cheat our own hunger, a rattle to chew on, in order to calm our dull irritation, our itching. Moralists and satirists have often described it, often joked about it, psychologists have not neglected the study of what they call the need for disparagement: the remedy used most frequently, according to them, by those who suffer, who seek relief, from an inferiority complex, the supreme tonic for depressed persons. Only, compared to our games, these current and, on the whole, rather harmless pastimes, are as polite parlor games to the blood-letting games of the arena. It is rare that one or the other of us doesn't come out of them—and especially myself, I believe—if not maimed for life, at least considerably battered. And yet I

to teach anybody how to ward them off; I who fish in troubled waters, who disturb calm waters by my reflection in them, by my very breath; who see in the air the invisible trajectory of Lord knows what stones that nobody has thrown at me, and who bring back what nobody expects; I who am always rousing what would like to remain dormant, who excite, incite, heed, plead, I the impure.

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aren't well, or lose weight: it's touching to see. That's because they like you so much, they're so fond of you." At once—and Martereau, too, feels the way my words clothe my sentiment like a perfectly fitted sheath, without a fold, without the slightest wrinkle—I reply: "I know that. I too, Monsieur Martereau, I am very fond of them." I have the impression that we are as far down as we can go, in the treasure chamber: there where, as in the armored cellars of the Bank of France, where they keep the gold that guarantees and gives value to our currency, are to be found the deep, the real sentiments (all the rest here between us: so much counterfeit money that is nowhere negotiable, paper bills that children make for fun, frivolous, puerile forms of amusement, the whims of spoiled children, crack-brained notions, shimmerings, reflected images), the deep perfectly simple sentiments that give value and significance to the only things that count: our acts. "Yes, your uncle has often told me that you were like a son to him. In fact, the other day I had to console him. He was worrying a bit about your future. He would have liked to see you succeed in life the way he has done. He would have liked to push you; he said how sorry he was that you hadn't continued to work with him a while. He's afraid you haven't found your real vocation, that interior decorating doesn't quite suit you. He's afraid you're wasting your time. I told him: just let him alone. All these young people must be left to shift for themselves. Understand me, he didn't say no, he agreed with me. I told him: You'll see, when his health is better, and he'll be in better spirits, he'll regain confidence in him-

me . . . "I like that, that's something new . . . On the contrary, you are the one who'll be here the most, I hope, on account of your health . . . It's principally for you, all that. You need the country more than we do . . ."

The caretaker is still leading us on. It's getting dark and colder. She shivers . . . "Brr, I'm beginning to freeze . . ." My uncle looks out the window at the mist . . . "What's that over there, at the other end of the meadow, a lake? a pond? Ah! a pond . . . that's fine . . . he laughs derisively . . . now you can give water parties, everything's all set . . ." His acid jet penetrates us, pursues its course inside her, inside me, corroding our sensitive tissues . . . She laughs her pointed laughter . . . "Indeed . . . huh, and you, during that time, you'll be dreaming all alone in the moonlight, on the terrace, huh, . . ." Shut in here all together, caught together in the same trap . . . The emanations envelop us, we are clasping one another, scratching one another . . . we must tear ourselves from it right away, escape to the out-of-doors, into the open air . . . the caretaker wants to show us the workings of the luggage lift, of the dumb-waiter, he wants us to go down to the basement to inspect the kitchens, the wine-cellars. Impossible. We must leave. Night is coming on. Behind the windows, all round us, like a dark, hostile sea, flat wind-swept country, fields as far as one can see, and we here, lost, having come nobody knows why . . . we must make an effort, break the spell, there's still time, we just went a little too far for prudence, we carried the joke too far . . . out there the lifeboat is waiting for us, we'll be saved,



grinding away . . . I would re-make a plan fifty times, I would read up on things, I was investigating . . .”

That's his force. The force of all his kind, as I said before. They feel that nothing will ever happen to them. They are certain of their impunity. Well protected. Sheltered behind their words. Nobody could succeed in getting a hold on the smooth ramparts of their speeches and accede to them there where they crouch in their cowardly way, spying on us, from where, safe behind their ramparts, they sprinkle us with pitch and boiling oil. It amuses me when I see my aunt, who forces herself (the way I myself used to do) to hurdle the rampart and get at him, to my fright, to my joy. Not at the moment of course, that would be too risky, it would be certain to fail; but afterwards, gently (it's that mania they have of inspecting every nook and cranny in order to remove all impurities, to try to remove all the spots; she would brave all blows, urged on as she is by this instinct—their duty, that's what they call it) . . . I'm amused, although I'm a bit afraid, when with her obstinacy of an ant recommencing work that has been destroyed, she takes him on—at first, insidiously, even gently, for the occasion . . . “You know, dear, yesterday with Martereau, I wonder if you were right . . .” He gives a start, immediately on his guard, turns aside . . . “So what, with Martereau . . .” She advances a bit: “I don't know, myself, it's perhaps just an idea, but I was a little uncomfortable, I wonder if you didn't make a mistake . . .” He becomes suddenly brutish: “A mistake? A mistake with Martereau? What are you driving at? What's the matter now?” She fidgets and

head towards her daughter, she laughed her youthful laughter—girl-friend or elder sister . . . everyone said it . . . and she far and away the better looking, a young bird, a bee flitting about among the flowers, gathering honey . . . “Darling, you should have seen, at Jacques Barelli’s, there were some little Scotch wool jackets . . . one adorable one . . . but as for the price . . .” You could feel him marking time impatiently, he would have liked to break loose, run to her, stretch out his hands . . . “What is the price? But what does that matter? That’s ridiculous. Go ahead, buy them. I’ll make you a present of them. Get several, if they are that pretty.” It was touching to see him making every effort, sidling up, trying his best—but he was held firmly in place—to come as near as possible to her, he looked at his daughter—“He’s all the rage, Barelli, just now? Are his things nice? Do you like them?” His daughter, ill-at-ease, splutters: “Oh! yes, certainly . . .” while her mother’s icy, somewhat surprised look pitilessly forces him to retreat.

I believe that I know their secret code so well, I am so accustomed to deciphering the real meaning of their reactions, that, with them, I put no trust in appearances. Occasionally, perhaps, not enough. My excessive mistrust must even at times lead me astray. Today, the abrupt change in his attitude, the way, all of a sudden, after several days of shy attempts at reconciliation, each time rejected, he has now taken on the look of a lonely, broken old man, of an abandoned Samson, appears to me to be merely a new means—all the others having failed—of dis-



obliged to go away for a few days, so he asked me, that is, he told us . . . In fact, you know about it. He spoke to you on the subject . . . It has to do with that house . . . You know, the villa you advised him to buy . . ." Martereau raises his hand: "Oh, 'advised' . . . if you want. Your father asked me to let him know if I heard of anything . . ." She interrupts him: "Yes, yes, naturally . . . I mean that you agreed it was a good buy . . .—Oh! as for that, the house is in very good condition. It's well built. It's worth the price.—Exactly. So then, Papa thought it would be a good investment. Only, he's worried about certain matters just now, he told you . . . so he sent us to ask a great favour of you . . . he told us that he had mentioned it to you the other day and that you had agreed, that you were willing to buy the house in your name so that he wouldn't have to declare it to the income tax office . . . But you surely understand it all better than I do . . . So, here . . . he gave us the money . . ." Martereau listens attentively. He nods gravely: "Yes, I did tell him that: it's an agreement. If he decides to take it, I'll do that for him, I promised to help him out." I take the heavy envelope tied up with a string out of my inside jacket pocket and hand it to him. His thick, deft fingers skillfully untie the knot, take out the packets of bills . . . "As a matter of form . . . you don't mind?" . . . count them rapidly. We remain silent. The only sound to be heard is the crackle of the paper . . . "That's right: two million, eight hundred thousand francs." He gathers the packets together, gives them a tap to even them up, puts them back in the envelope, re-ties the string around

*I*t was to be expected (I've already said that we function like vessels connected by "U" tubes), it was enough for him when he came into the house—he had been gone for nearly six weeks—it was enough, when he set foot in the entrance, for him to see how lively and excited we were, our retriever dog's shining eyes, (sometimes it seems to me that he senses it, before he even sees us, that the air displaced by our mounting joy weighs upon him) for his level immediately to become lower: he throws out to us in passing a quick, cold: "Everything all right?" and goes straight to his study where he shuts himself in.

But we're not discouraged by little things like that. The



most excruciatingly painful experiences will not keep us in such moments, when our own level is so high, from acting like normal persons: everything's fine and we're on the right side, the side he's on too, thank heavens, except for occasional rare moments. On the side of what's reliable. The side of what's true.

As soon as we hear him open his door, we dash off. Of the two of us, his daughter is the more excited. "You know, Papa, you'll be pleased, everything went off very well, Monsieur Martereau accepted right away, as he had promised you he would. We gave him the money and he said that he would get in touch with the owner the next day. You should go to see him." He turns on us a hard, penetrating look: "The owner? What owner? Oh! yes, of the house. You gave him the money?" He is speaking to me, to show, according to all accepted rules of the game, that she is unworthy: "Did you ask him for a receipt?"

The cards that have just been dealt him are so good, his luck is so great, that I might almost be tempted to rejoice for him. But above all, I admire him. I admire the unerringness of his blows. "I know, as he says, with whom I have to deal." A brief acquaintance, a quick diagram, a few broad lines . . . are enough for him. He's a good workman who, in order to do good work, does not need very complicated tools. Now, all at once, he has discovered in us the point, the joint into which he has inserted the fuse of the infernal machine that will reduce us to a powder. But which infernal machine? Why, the most every-day, the most ordinary implement, the one that every man of parts

to lie awake, lucky devil that you are," and he had laughed that indefinable laughter of his, admiring and contemptuous: a robust fellow, good old Martereau . . . and Martereau had nodded, he had had a nice good-natured smile: "Oh! that depends, occasionally I too am unable to sleep, when I'm worried or very anxious about things, but I must say, it's very rare . . . Usually, I can't complain, I sleep well . . ." His eyes had retained all their limpidity, he hadn't seemed to flinch, but I had sensed the way he shrank from that nice big friendly slap: a very slight gesture of recoil, a hardly perceptible movement, the kind we perceive frequently without the help of any sort of exterior sign, without the help of a single word, a single look; it's as though an invisible wave emanated from the other person and ran through you, a vibration in the other that you record like a very sensitive apparatus, is transmitted to you, you vibrate in unison, sometimes even more intensely . . . I had repeated within myself the movement he had outlined in order to withdraw, I had felt his annoyance, his repugnance, I had seen what he saw: that portrait of himself . . . ah! good old Martereau, nothing nervous about that fellow, nothing on his mind, not the least bit complicated, nothing deep about him, no need to wrack your brain . . . A good old nag, sturdy and easy-going . . . He would have liked to slap the hand that held this crude mask crammed down on his face, but he had restrained himself, he had fallen in with the game . . .

A while ago, when he saw me—I recognize it, I'm sure of it, it was the same reaction, only strong this time, very



you; no long-drawn-out musings: come down to earth; behave yourself—they say that to me. She's back: "Come on, they're going to take you right away. Hurry up."

So Martereau has accomplished that extraordinary feat: he has seized us in his firm grip and dragged us out into the open air, out of our stagnant pond. So they can take place among us too—genuine, expansive reactions. Not our usual unnameable, barely discernible quakings, our pale mirrorings, but something strong, clear-cut, perfectly visible: a real act. Something that everybody recognizes right away and calls by name: adultery . . .

But for me, unaccustomed as I am to the open air and to light, it still seems to me all the time that it hasn't really happened to us: I'm like those sophisticated travelers in distant lands who, when they see for the first time Esquimos in their igloos, or Arab street crowds, almost too picturesque for their taste, the veiled women, the men with their turbans and burnouses, the public story-tellers, the water-carriers, the snake-charmers, have the impression of watching a performance at the Opera, or at the Chatelet. It had seemed to me that day, at the nursing home, that it wasn't quite real, that appearance of my aunt and Martereau in the gate-way: a bit too stagey.

And since then, it's still the same. It's really as though we were at the theatre. We are actors playing in a play.