

place her, in her unique, irreducible form, beyond and far above the rest of humanity. Deposed, expelled from her own pattern, over which she had once reigned supreme, she has become a mere woman like any other, a sometime paragon in whom all faith has been lost. In our minds, the pattern constituted by an Odette de Crécy used to consist not just in her beauty, but also in her personality, her identity, so much so that, faced with the portrait which strips her of that pattern, we are tempted to exclaim not only, "How ugly he's made her!" but, "He can't even paint a likeness!" We have difficulty in believing it is the same woman; we cannot recognize her. Despite which, we sense perfectly well the presence of someone we have already seen, but it is someone who is not Odette. Yet the face, the body, the appearance are very familiar to us. They remind us, not of this woman, who has never stood like that, whose habitual posture never traces such a strange and provocative outline, but of other women, all those whom Elstir has painted, and whom, however different they may be from one another, he has always liked to pose in full face like that, one arched foot showing under the skirt, the large round hat hanging from one hand, a symmetrical reminder, at the level of the knee it conceals, of the other full round disk of the face. A brilliant portrait not only disassembles the pattern of the woman, as her pride in her appearance and her self-centered conception of beauty had defined it, but if it is an old portrait it also ages the original in the same way photographs do, by showing her in her old-fashioned finery. In a portrait, however, it is not just a woman's style of dress that dates, it is also the painter's style of painting. And Elstir's earliest style, from his first period, gave Odette her most merciless birth certificate, not just because, like photographs of her from that time, it made her a junior among well-known courtesans, but because it showed that the painting dated from the period of the many portraits by Manet or Whistler of sitters long vanished, consigned to history, gone to oblivion.

These thoughts, which I ruminated silently as we walked back toward the villa, were inspired by the discovery I had just made about the identity of Elstir's model for "Miss Sacripant"; and they were to lead me to a second discovery, even more thought-provoking for me,

about the identity of Elstir himself. He had painted a portrait of Odette de Crécy—could such a brilliant man, a solitary, a philosopher, who had accumulated wisdom, who stood above all things, whose conversation was so enthralling, possibly be the painter, vacuous and devious, adopted long ago by the Verdurins? I asked him if he had known them, and whether they had not nicknamed him “M. Biche.” He answered, in a very simple manner, that this was indeed the case, as though speaking of a part of his life that was rather remote, as though not realizing his answer caused me an acute disappointment. Then, glancing at my expression, he did realize it; and this brought an expression of displeasure to his own face. A lesser man, a man less proficient in things of the mind and heart, now that we were nearing the house, might have just taken his leave of me without ceremony, and avoided me thereafter. However, this was not Elstir’s way: like the true master he was (and to be a master, at least in this sense of the word, may have been, from the point of view of pure creativeness, his sole defect, since an artist, if he is to live in tune with the truth of the spirit, must shun company, even that of disciples, and so avoid frittering himself away in such things), he endeavored to draw from every circumstance, whether relative to himself or to others, and for the benefit of those younger than himself, whatever element of truth it might contain. So, instead of venting hurt pride, he preferred to speak in a way that would be of some profit for me. “There is no such thing,” he said, “as a man, however clever he may be, who has never at some time in his youth uttered words, or even led a life, that he would not prefer to see expunged from memory. He should not find this absolutely a matter for regret, as he cannot be sure he would ever have become as wise as he is, if indeed getting wisdom is a possibility for any of us, had he not traversed all the silly or detestable incarnations that are bound to precede that final one. I know there are young men, sons and grandsons of distinguished men, whose tutors, since their earliest high-school years, have taught them every nobility of soul and excellent precept of morality. The lives of such men may contain nothing they would wish to abolish; they may be happy to endorse every word they have ever uttered. But they are the poor in spirit, the effete descendants of doctrinarians, whose only wisdoms are negative

and sterile. Wisdom cannot be inherited—one must discover it for oneself, but only after following a course that no one can follow in our stead; no one can spare us that experience, for wisdom is only a point of view on things. The lives of men you admire, attitudes you think are noble, haven't been laid down by their fathers or their tutors—they were preceded by very different beginnings, and were influenced by whatever surrounded them, whether it was good, bad, or indifferent. Each of them is the outcome of a struggle, each of them is a victory. I can understand that the image of what we were in an earlier time might be unrecognizable and always irksome to behold. It should not be rejected for all that, as it is testimony to the fact that we have lived, that, in accordance with the laws of life and the spirit, we have managed to derive, from the common constituents of life, from the life of the studio and artists' cliques, if we're talking of painters, something that surpasses them."⁹¹ We had reached his door. I was disappointed not to have met the girls. But at least there was now a possible opening into their lives; the days when they did nothing but pass across a horizon, when I could believe they might never appear on it again, were over. They were no longer surrounded by the great turbid swirl which kept us apart, which was nothing but the translation of the desire—perpetually ablaze, mobile, urgent, constantly fueled by worry—ignited in me by their inaccessibility, their possible disappearance from my life forever. This desire for them could now be turned down, kept in reserve, alongside so many others whose fulfillment, once I knew this was a possibility, I postponed. I left Elstir and was alone. Despite my disappointment, I could see in my mind all the unforeseeable improbability of what had taken place: that he in particular should turn out to be known to the girls; that they, who had been, only that morning, figures in a picture against a background of the sea, had now set eyes on me; that they had seen me in the company of a great painter; that he now knew of my wish to know them, and would help to bring this about. All of this had given me pleasure, but it was a pleasure that had remained hidden from me: it was one of those visitors who do not approach us till all the others have gone and we can be alone together; that is when we notice them, when we can say, "I'm all yours," and give them our full attention. Some-

times, between the moment when such pleasures have entered our mind and the moment when we too can withdraw into it, so many hours have elapsed, and we have seen so many people in the meantime, that we fear they may not have waited. But they are patient, they do not weary, and when the last visitor has gone, there they are looking at us. And sometimes it is we who are so tired out that we feel we cannot find the strength in our weary mind to entertain these memories, these impressions for which our feeble self is the only habitable place, the sole medium of their realization. But this we would regret, for almost the only interest in existence lies in those days when a pinch of magic sand is mixed with the dust of reality, when a trite incident can become the spur of romance. An entire promontory of the inaccessible world takes sudden shape, lit by a dream, and becomes part of our life, that life in which, like a sleeper awakened, we can see the people of whom we had dreamed with such longing that we had become convinced that it was only ever in dreams that we would see them.

The relief brought by the likelihood that I could come to know the girls whenever I wanted to was precious to me, especially because I would have been unable to stay on the lookout for them over the next few days, which were taken up with the preparations for Saint-Loup's departure. My grandmother wished to show my friend how much she had appreciated his many kindnesses toward us. I told her he was a great admirer of Proudhon, and gave her the idea to send for a number of letters written by the thinker, which she had bought. When they arrived, the day before his departure, Saint-Loup came to the hotel to see them. He read them eagerly, handling each page with respect and trying to memorize phrases from them. When he stood up to go, excusing himself for having stayed so long, he heard my grandmother say:

"You must take them with you. They're for you—I sent for them so that you could have them."

Saint-Loup, overjoyed, was no more able to control his reaction than if it had been a bodily state produced without the intervention of the will. He turned scarlet, like a child who has been punished; and my grandmother was much more touched by the sight of all the efforts he made, unsuccessful as they were, to contain the joy that surged through