

hostelry of the Oiseau Flesché, from whose basement windows used to rise a smell of cooking which rises still in my mind, now and then, in the same warm and intermittent gusts, would be to secure a contact with the Beyond more marvellously supernatural than it would be to make Golo's acquaintance and to chat with Geneviève de Brabant.

My grandfather's cousin—by courtesy my great-aunt—with whom we used to stay, was the mother of that aunt Léonie who, since her husband's (my uncle Octave's) death, had gradually declined to leave, first Combray, then her house in Combray, then her bedroom, and finally her bed, and now never "came down," but lay perpetually in a vague state of grief, physical debility, illness, obsession and piety. Her private apartment looked out over the Rue Saint-Jacques, which ran a long way further to end in the Grand-Pré (as distinct from the Petit-Pré, a green space in the centre of the town where three streets met) and which, monotonous and grey, with the three high sandstone steps before almost every one of its doors, seemed like a deep furrow carved by some sculptor of Gothic images out of the block of stone from which he might have fashioned a calvary or a crib. My aunt's life was now practically confined to two adjoining rooms, in one of which she would spend the afternoon while the other was being aired. They were rooms of that country order which—just as in certain climes whole tracts of air or ocean are illuminated or scented by myriads of protozoa which we cannot see—enchants us with the countless odours emanating from the virtues, wisdom, habits, a whole secret system of life, invisible, superabundant and profoundly moral, which their atmosphere holds in solu-

tion; smells natural enough indeed, and weather-tinted like those of the neighbouring countryside, but already humanised, domesticated, snug, an exquisite, limpid jelly skilfully blended from all the fruits of the year which have left the orchard for the store-room, smells changing with the season, but plenishing and homely, offsetting the sharpness of hoarfrost with the sweetness of warm bread, smells lazy and punctual as a village clock, roving and settled, heedless and provident, linen smells, morning smells, pious smells, rejoicing in a peace which brings only additional anxiety, and in a prosaicness which serves as a deep reservoir of poetry to the stranger who passes through their midst without having lived among them. The air of those rooms was saturated with the fine bouquet of a silence so nourishing, so succulent, that I never went into them without a sort of greedy anticipation, particularly on those first mornings, chilly still, of the Easter holidays, when I could taste it more fully because I had only just arrived in Combray: before I went in to say good morning to my aunt I would be kept waiting a moment in the outer room where the sun, wintry still, had crept in to warm itself before the fire, which was already alight between its two bricks and plastering the whole room with a smell of soot, turning it into one of those great rustic open hearths, or one of those canopied mantelpieces in country houses, beneath which one sits hoping that in the world outside it is raining or snowing, hoping almost for a catastrophic deluge to add the romance of being in winter quarters to the comfort of a snug retreat; I would pace to and fro between the prie-dieu and the stamped velvet armchairs, each one always draped in its crocheted antimacassar, while the fire, bak-

ing like dough the appetising smells with which the air of the room was thickly clotted and which the moist and sunny freshness of the morning had already "raised" and started to "set," puffed them and glazed them and fluted them and swelled them into an invisible though not impalpable country pie, an immense "turnover" to which, barely waiting to savour the crisper, more delicate, more reputable but also drier aromas of the cupboard, the chest of drawers and the patterned wall-paper, I always returned with an unconfessed gluttony to wallow in the central, glutinous, insipid, indigestible and fruity smell of the flowered bedspread.

In the next room I could hear my aunt talking quietly to herself. She never spoke except in low tones, because she believed that there was something broken inside her head and floating loose there, which she might displace by talking too loud; but she never remained for long, even when alone, without saying something, because she believed that it was good for her throat, and that by keeping the blood there in circulation it would make less frequent the chokings and the pains from which she suffered; besides, in the life of complete inertia which she led, she attached to the least of her sensations an extraordinary importance, endowed them with a Protean ubiquity which made it difficult for her to keep them to herself, and, failing a confidant to whom she might communicate them, she used to promulgate them to herself in an unceasing monologue which was her sole form of activity. Unfortunately, having formed the habit of thinking aloud, she did not always take care to see that there was no one in the adjoining room, and I would often hear her saying to herself: "I must not forget that I never slept a wink"—for

"never sleeping a wink" was her great claim to distinction, and one admitted and respected in our household vocabulary: in the morning Françoise would not "wake" her, but would simply "go in" to her; during the day, when my aunt wished to take a nap, we used to say just that she wished to "ponder" or to "rest"; and when in conversation she so far forgot herself as to say "what woke me up," or "I dreamed that," she would blush and at once correct herself.

After waiting a minute, I would go in and kiss her; Françoise would be making her tea; or, if my aunt felt agitated, she would ask instead for her tisane, and it would be my duty to shake out of the chemist's little package on to a plate the amount of lime-blossom required for infusion in boiling water. The drying of the stems had twisted them into a fantastic trellis, in the interlacings of which the pale flowers opened, as though a painter had arranged them there, grouping them in the most decorative poses. The leaves, having lost or altered their original appearance, resembled the most disparate things, the transparent wing of a fly, the blank side of a label, the petal of a rose, which had all been piled together, pounded or interwoven like the materials for a nest. A thousand trifling little details—a charming prodigality on the part of the chemist—details which would have been eliminated from an artificial preparation, gave me, like a book in which one reads with astonished delight the name of a person one knows, the pleasure of finding that these were sprigs of real lime-trees, like those I had seen, when coming from the train, in the Avenue de la Gare, altered indeed, precisely because they were not imitations but themselves, and because they had aged. And as each new character is

merely a metamorphosis from something earlier, in these little grey balls I recognised green buds plucked before their time; but beyond all else the rosy, lunar, tender gleam that lit up the blossoms among the frail forest of stems from which they hung like little golden roses—marking, as the glow upon an old wall still marks the place of a vanished fresco, the difference between those parts of the tree which had and those which had not been “in colour”—showed me that these were indeed petals which, before filling the chemist's bag with their spring fragrance, had perfumed the evening air. That rosy candleglow was still their colour, but half-extinguished and deadened in the diminished life which was now theirs, and which may be called the twilight of a flower. Presently my aunt would dip a little madeleine in the boiling infusion, whose taste of dead leaves or faded blossom she so relished, and hand me a piece when it was sufficiently soft.

At one side of her bed stood a big yellow chest of drawers of lemon-wood, and a table which served at once as dispensary and high altar, on which, beneath a statue of the Virgin and a bottle of Vichy-Célestins, might be found her prayer-books and her medical prescriptions, everything that she needed for the performance, in bed, of her duties to soul and body, to keep the proper times for pepsin and for vespers. On the other side her bed was bounded by the window: she had the street in full view, and would while away the time by reading in it from morning to night, like the Persian princes of old, the daily but immemorial chronicles of Combray, which she would discuss in detail later with Françoise.

Scarcely had I been five minutes with my aunt before

she would send me away for fear that I might tire her. She would hold out for me to kiss her sad, pale, lacklustre forehead, on which at this early hour she would not yet have arranged the false hair and through which the bones shone like the points of a crown of thorns or the beads of a rosary, and she would say to me: "Now, my poor child, off you go and get ready for mass; and if you see Françoise downstairs, tell her not to stay too long amusing herself with you; she must come up soon to see if I need anything."

Françoise, who had been for many years in my aunt's service and did not at that time suspect that she would one day be transferred entirely to ours, was a little inclined to neglect my aunt during the months which we spent there. There had been in my early childhood, before we first went to Combray, and when my aunt Léonie used still to spend the winter in Paris with her mother, a time when I knew Françoise so little that on New Year's Day, before going into my great-aunt's house, my mother would put a five-franc piece into my hand and say: "Now, be careful. Don't make any mistake. Wait until you hear me say 'Good morning, Françoise,' and tap you on the arm, before you give it to her." No sooner had we arrived in my aunt's dark hall than we saw in the gloom, beneath the frills of a snowy bonnet as stiff and fragile as if it had been made of spun sugar, the concentric ripples of a smile of anticipatory gratitude. It was Françoise, motionless and erect, framed in the small doorway of the corridor like the statue of a saint in its niche. When we had grown more accustomed to this religious darkness we could discern in her features the disinterested love of humanity, the tender respect for the gentry, which the hope

of receiving New Year bounty intensified in the nobler regions of her heart. Mamma pinched my arm sharply and said in a loud voice: "Good morning, Françoise." At this signal my fingers parted and I let fall the coin, which found a receptacle in a shy but outstretched hand. But since we had begun to go to Combray there was no one I knew better than Françoise. We were her favourites, and in the first years at least she showed for us not only the same consideration as for my aunt, but a keener relish, because we had, in addition to the prestige of belonging to "the family" (for she had for those invisible bonds which the community of blood creates between the members of a family as much respect as any Greek tragedian), the charm of not being her customary employers. And so with what joy would she welcome us, with what sorrow complain that the weather was still so bad for us, on the day of our arrival, just before Easter, when there was often an icy wind; while Mamma inquired after her daughter and her nephews, and if her grandson was a nice boy, and what they were going to do with him, and whether he took after his granny.

And later, when no one else was in the room, Mamma, who knew that Françoise was still mourning for her parents, who had been dead for years, would speak to her kindly about them, asking her endless little questions concerning their lives.

She had guessed that Françoise was not over-fond of her son-in-law, and that he spoiled the pleasure she found in visiting her daughter, with whom she could not talk so freely when he was there. And so, when Françoise was going to their house, some miles from Combray, Mamma would say to her with a smile: "Tell me, Françoise, if

Julien has had to go away, and you have Marguerite to yourself all day, you'll be very sorry, but you will make the best of it, won't you?"

And Françoise answered, laughing: "Madame knows everything; Madame is worse than the X-rays" (she pronounced the "x" with an affectation of difficulty and a self-mocking smile that someone so ignorant should employ this learned term) "that they brought here for Mme Octave, and which can see what's in your heart"—and she went off, overwhelmed that anyone should be caring about her, perhaps anxious that we should not see her in tears: Mamma was the first person who had given her the heart-warming feeling that her peasant existence, with its simple joys and sorrows, might be an object of interest, might be a source of grief or pleasure to someone other than herself.

My aunt resigned herself to doing without Françoise to some extent during our visits, knowing how much my mother appreciated the services of so active and intelligent a maid, one who looked as smart at five o'clock in the morning in her kitchen, under a bonnet whose stiff and dazzling frills seemed to be made of porcelain, as when dressed for high mass; who did everything in the right way, toiling like a horse, whether she was well or ill, but without fuss, without the appearance of doing anything; the only one of my aunt's maids who when Mamma asked for hot water or black coffee would bring them actually boiling. She was one of those servants who, in a household, seem least satisfactory at first to a stranger, doubtless because they take no pains to make a conquest of him and show him no special attention, knowing very well that they have no real need of him, that he will cease

to be invited to the house sooner than they will be dismissed from it, but who, on the other hand, are most prized by masters and mistresses who have tested and proved their real capacity, and care nothing for that superficial affability, that servile chit-chat which may impress a stranger favourably, but often conceals an incurable incompetence.

When Françoise, having seen that my parents had everything they required, first went upstairs again to give my aunt her pepsin and to find out from her what she would take for lunch, it was rare indeed for her not to be called upon to give an opinion, or to furnish an explanation, in regard to some important event.

"Just fancy, Françoise, Mme Goupil went by more than a quarter of an hour late to fetch her sister: if she loses any more time on the way I shouldn't be at all surprised if she arrived after the Elevation."

"Well, there'd be nothing wonderful in that," would be the answer.

"Françoise, if you had come in five minutes ago, you would have seen Mme Imbert go past with some asparagus twice the size of Mother Callot's: do try to find out from her cook where she got them. You know you've been serving asparagus with everything this spring; you might be able to get some like those for our visitors."

"I shouldn't be surprised if they came from the Curé's," Françoise would say.

"I'm sure you wouldn't, my poor Françoise," my aunt would reply, shrugging her shoulders. "From the Curé's, indeed! You know quite well that he never grows anything but wretched little twigs of asparagus. I tell you

these ones were as thick as my arm. Not your arm, of course, but my poor arm, which has grown so much thinner again this year . . . Françoise, didn't you hear that bell just now that nearly split my skull?"

"No, Mme Octave."

"Ah, my poor girl, your skull must be very thick; you may thank God for that. It was Maguelone come to fetch Dr Piperaud. He came out with her at once and they went off along the Rue de l'Oiseau. There must be some child ill."

"Oh, dear God!" Françoise would sigh, for she could not hear of any calamity befalling a person unknown to her, even in some distant part of the world, without beginning to lament.

"Françoise, who were they tolling the knell for just now? Oh dear, of course, it would be for Mme Rousseau. And to think that I had forgotten that she passed away the other night. Ah! it's time the good Lord called me too; I don't know what has become of my head since I lost my poor Octave. But I'm wasting your time, my good girl."

"Not at all, Mme Octave, my time is not so precious; the one who made it doesn't charge us for it. I'm just going to see if my fire's going out."

Thus Françoise and my aunt between them made a critical evaluation, in the course of these morning sessions, of the earliest events of the day. But sometimes these events assumed so mysterious or so alarming a character that my aunt felt she could not wait until it was time for Françoise to come upstairs, and then a formidable and quadruple peal would resound through the house.

"But, Mme Octave, it's not yet time for your pepsin," Françoise would begin. "Are you feeling faint?"

"No, no, Françoise," my aunt would reply, "that is to say, yes; you know quite well that there's very seldom a time when I don't feel faint; one day I shall pass away like Mme Rousseau, before I know where I am; but that's not why I rang. Would you believe that I've just seen, as plain as I can see you, Mme Goupil with a little girl I didn't know from Adam. Run and get a pennyworth of salt from Camus. It's not often that Théodore can't tell you who a person is."

"But that must be M. Pupin's daughter," Françoise would say, preferring to stick to an immediate explanation, since she had been twice already into Camus's shop that morning.

"M. Pupin's daughter! Oh, that's a likely story, my poor Françoise. Do you think I wouldn't have recognised M. Pupin's daughter!"

"But I don't mean the big one, Mme Octave; I mean the little lass, the one who goes to school at Jouy. It be-seems I've seen her once already this morning."

"Ah! that's probably it," my aunt would say. "She must have come over for the holidays. Yes, that's it. No need to ask, she will have come over for the holidays. But then we shall soon see Mme Sazerat come along and ring her sister's door-bell for lunch. That will be it! I saw the boy from Galopin's go by with a tart. You'll see that the tart was for Mme Goupil."

"Once Mme Goupil has company, Mme Octave, you won't have long to wait before you see all her folk going home to their lunch, for it's not so early as it was," Françoise would say, for she was anxious to return down-

stairs to look after our own meal, and was not sorry to leave my aunt with the prospect of such a diversion.

"Oh! not before midday," my aunt would reply in a tone of resignation, darting an anxious glance at the clock, but furtively, so as not to let it be seen that she, who had renounced all earthly joys, yet found a keen satisfaction in learning that Mme Goupil was expecting company to lunch, though, alas, she must wait a little more than an hour still before enjoying the spectacle. "And it will come in the middle of my lunch!" she would murmur to herself. Her lunch was such a distraction in itself that she did not wish for any other at the same time. "I hope you won't forget to give me my creamed eggs on one of the flat plates?" she would add. These were the only plates which had pictures on them, and my aunt used to amuse herself at every meal by reading the caption on whichever one had been sent up to her that day. She would put on her spectacles and spell out: "Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves," "Aladdin and his Wonderful Lamp," and smile, and say: "Very good, very good."

"I would have gone across to Camus . . ." Françoise would hazard, seeing that my aunt had no longer any intention of sending her there.

"No, no; it's not worth while now; it's certainly the Pupin girl. My poor Françoise, I'm sorry to have brought you upstairs for nothing."

But it was not for nothing, as my aunt well knew, that she had rung for Françoise, since at Combray a person whom one "didn't know from Adam" was as incredible a being as any mythological deity, and indeed no one could remember, on the various occasions when one of these startling apparitions had occurred in the Rue du

Saint-Esprit or in the Square, exhaustive inquiries ever having failed to reduce the fabulous monster to the proportions of a person whom one "did know," either personally or in the abstract, in his or her civil status as being more or less closely related to some family in Combray. It would turn out to be Mme Sauton's son back from military service, or the Abbé Perdreau's niece home from her convent, or the Curé's brother, a tax-collector at Châteaudun, who had just retired on a pension or had come over to Combray for the holidays. They had on first appearance aroused the exciting thought that there might be in Combray people whom one "didn't know from Adam," simply because they had not been recognised or identified at once. And yet long beforehand Mme Sauton and the Curé had given warning that they expected their "strangers." Whenever I went upstairs on returning home of an evening, to tell my aunt about our walk, if I was rash enough to say to her that we had passed, near the Pont-Vieux, a man whom my grandfather didn't know: "A man grandfather didn't know from Adam!" she would exclaim. "That's a likely story." None the less, she would be a little disturbed by the news, would wish to have it cleared up, and so my grandfather would be summoned. "Who can it have been that you passed near the Pont-Vieux, uncle? A man you didn't know from Adam?"

"Why, of course I knew him," my grandfather would answer. "It was Prosper, Mme Bouillebœuf's gardener's brother."

"Ah, good," my aunt would say, reassured but slightly flushed; shrugging her shoulders and smiling ironically, she would add: "You see, he told me that you

passed a man you didn't know from Adam!" After which I would be warned to be more circumspect in future, and not to upset my aunt so by thoughtless remarks. Everyone was so well known in Combray, animals as well as people, that if my aunt had happened to see a dog go by which she "didn't know from Adam" she never stopped thinking about it, devoting all her inductive talents and her leisure hours to this incomprehensible phenomenon.

"That will be Mme Sazerat's dog," Françoise would suggest, without any real conviction, but in the hope of appeasement, and so that my aunt should not "split her head."

"As if I didn't know Mme Sazerat's dog!" My aunt's critical mind would not be fobbed off so easily.

"Well then, it must be the new dog M. Galopin brought back from Lisieux."

"Oh, if that's what it is!"

"They say he's a very friendly animal," Françoise would go on, having got the story from Théodore, "as clever as a Christian, always in a good temper, always friendly, always well-behaved. You don't often see an animal so gentlemanly at that age. Mme Octave, I've got to leave you now; I haven't time to dilly-dally; it's nearly ten o'clock and my fire not lighted yet, and I've still got to scrape my asparagus."

"What, Françoise, more asparagus! It's a regular mania for asparagus you've got this year. You'll make our Parisians sick of it."

"No, no, Mme Octave, they like it well enough. They'll be coming back from church soon as hungry as hunters, and they won't turn their noses up at their asparagus, you'll see."

"Church! Why, they must be there now; you'd better not lose any time. Go and look after your lunch."

While my aunt was gossiping on in this way with Françoise I accompanied my parents to mass. How I loved our church, and how clearly I can see it still! The old porch by which we entered, black, and full of holes as a colander, was worn out of shape and deeply furrowed at the sides (as also was the font to which it led us) just as if the gentle friction of the cloaks of peasant-women coming into church, and of their fingers dipping into the holy water, had managed by age-long repetition to acquire a destructive force, to impress itself on the stone, to carve grooves in it like those made by cart-wheels upon stone gate-posts which they bump against every day. Its memorial stones, beneath which the noble dust of the Abbots of Combray who lay buried there furnished the choir with a sort of spiritual pavement, were themselves no longer hard and lifeless matter, for time had softened them and made them flow like honey beyond their proper margins, here oozing out in a golden stream, washing from its place a florid Gothic capital, drowning the white violets of the marble floor, and elsewhere reabsorbed into their limits, contracting still further a crabbed Latin inscription, bringing a fresh touch of fantasy into the arrangement of its curtailed characters, closing together two letters of some word of which the rest were disproportionately distended. Its windows were never so sparkling as on days when the sun scarcely shone, so that if it was dull outside you could be sure it would be fine inside the church. One of them was filled from top to bottom by a solitary figure, like the king on a playing-card, who lived up there beneath his canopy of stone, between earth and