

coquetry and her selfish conception of beauty, but if it is also old, it is not content with ageing the original in the same way as a photograph ages its sitter, by showing her dressed in the fashions of long ago. In a portrait, it is not only the manner the woman then had of dressing that dates her, it is also the manner the artist had of painting. And this, Elstir's earliest manner, was the most devastating of birth certificates for Odette because it not only established her, as did her photographs of the same period, as the younger sister of various well-known courtesans, but made her portrait contemporary with the countless portraits that Manet or Whistler had painted of all those vanished models, models who already belonged to oblivion or to history.

It was along this train of thought, silently ruminated over by Elstir's side as I accompanied him to his door, that I was being led by the discovery that I had just made of the identity of his model, when this first discovery caused me to make a second, more disturbing still, concerning the identity of the artist. He had painted the portrait of Odette de Crécy. Could it possibly be that this man of genius, this sage, this recluse, this philosopher with his marvellous flow of conversation, who towered over everyone and everything, was the ridiculous, depraved painter who had at one time been adopted by the Verdurins? I asked him if he had known them, and whether by any chance it was he that they used to call M. Biche. He answered me in the affirmative, with no trace of embarrassment, as if my question referred to a period in his life that was already somewhat remote and he had no suspicion of the extraordinary disillusionment he was causing me. But, looking up, he read it on my face. His

own assumed an expression of annoyance. And, as we were now almost at the gate of his house, a man of less distinction of heart and mind might simply have said good-bye to me a trifle dryly and taken care to avoid seeing me again. This however was not Elstir's way with me; like the master that he was—and it was, perhaps, from the point of view of pure creativity, his one fault that he was a master in that sense of the word, for an artist, if he is to be absolutely true to the life of the spirit, must be alone, and not squander his ego, even upon disciples—from every circumstance, whether involving himself or other people, he sought to extract, for the better edification of the young, the element of truth that it contained. He chose therefore, instead of the words that might have avenged the injury to his pride, those that could prove instructive to me. "There is no man," he began, "however wise, who has not at some period of his youth said things, or lived a life, the memory of which is so unpleasant to him that he would gladly expunge it. And yet he ought not entirely to regret it, because he cannot be certain that he has indeed become a wise man—so far as it is possible for any of us to be wise—unless he has passed through all the fatuous or unwholesome incarnations by which that ultimate stage must be preceded. I know that there are young people, the sons and grandsons of distinguished men, whose masters have instilled into them nobility of mind and moral refinement from their schooldays. They may perhaps have nothing to retract from their past lives; they could publish a signed account of everything they have ever said or done; but they are poor creatures, feeble descendants of doctrinaires, and their wisdom is negative and sterile. We do not receive wisdom, we must discover

it for ourselves, after a journey through the wilderness which no one else can make for us, which no one can spare us, for our wisdom is the point of view from which we come at last to regard the world. The lives that you admire, the attitudes that seem noble to you, have not been shaped by a paterfamilias or a schoolmaster, they have sprung from very different beginnings, having been influenced by everything evil or commonplace that prevailed round about them. They represent a struggle and a victory. I can see that the picture of what we were at an earlier stage may not be recognisable and cannot, certainly, be pleasing to contemplate in later life. But we must not repudiate it, for it is a proof that we have really lived, that it is in accordance with the laws of life and of the mind that we have, from the common elements of life, of the life of studios, of artistic groups—assuming one is a painter—extracted something that transcends them.”

Meanwhile we had reached his door. I was disappointed at not having met the girls. But after all there was now the possibility of meeting them again later on; they had ceased merely to be silhouetted against a horizon where I had been ready to suppose that I should never see them reappear. Around them no longer swirled that sort of great eddy which had separated me from them, which had been merely the expression of the perpetually active desire, mobile, urgent, fed ever on fresh anxieties, which was aroused in me by their inaccessibility, their flight from me, possibly for ever. I could now set my desire for them at rest, hold it in reserve, among all those other desires the realisation of which, as soon as I knew it to be possible, I would cheerfully postpone. I took leave of Elstir; I was alone once again. Then all of a sudden,