

On certain days when I had missed her in the Allée des Acacias I would sometimes meet her in the Allée de la Reine Marguerite, where women went who wanted to be alone, or to appear to want to be alone; she would not be alone for long, being soon overtaken by some friend, often in a grey "topper," whom I did not know, and who would talk to her for some time, while their two carriages crawled behind.

That complexity of the Bois de Boulogne which makes it an artificial place and, in the zoological or mythological sense of the word, a Garden, came to me again this year as I crossed it on my way to Trianon, on one of those mornings early in November when, in Paris, if we stay indoors, being so near and yet excluded from the transformation scene of autumn, which is drawing so rapidly to a close without our witnessing it, we feel a veritable fever of yearning for the fallen leaves that can go so far as to keep us awake at night. Into my closed room they had been drifting already for a month, summoned there by my desire to see them, slipping between my thoughts and the object, whatever it might be, upon which I was trying to concentrate them, whirling in front of me like those brown spots that sometimes, whatever we may be looking at, will seem to be dancing or swimming before our eyes. And on that morning, no longer hearing the splash of the rain as on the preceding days, seeing the smile of fine weather at the corners of my drawn curtains, as at the corners of closed lips betraying the secret of their happiness, I had felt that I might be able to look at those yellow leaves with the light shining through them, in their supreme beauty; and being no more able to re-

strain myself from going to see the trees than, in my childhood days, when the wind howled in the chimney, I had been able to resist the longing to visit the sea, I had risen and left the house to go to Trianon via the Bois de Boulogne. It was the hour and the season in which the Bois seems, perhaps, most multiform, not only because it is the most subdivided, but because it is subdivided in a different way. Even in the unwooded parts, where the horizon is large, here and there against the background of a dark and distant mass of trees, now leafless or still keeping their summer foliage unchanged, a double row of orange-red chestnuts seemed, as in a picture just begun, to be the only thing painted so far by an artist who had not yet laid any colour on the rest, and to be offering their cloister, in full daylight, for the casual exercise of the human figures that would be added to the picture later on.

Further off, at a place where the trees were still all green, one alone, small, stunted, lopped, but stubborn in its resistance, was tossing in the breeze an ugly mane of red. Elsewhere, again, might be seen the first awakening of this Maytime of the leaves, and those of an ampelopsis, a smiling miracle like a red hawthorn flowering in winter, had that very morning all "come out," so to speak, in blossom. And the Bois had the temporary, unfinished, artificial look of a nursery garden or a park in which, either for some botanic purpose or in preparation for a festival, there have been embedded among the trees of commoner growth which have not yet been transplanted elsewhere, a few rare specimens, with fantastic foliage, which seem to be clearing all round themselves an empty space, making room, giving air, diffusing light. Thus it was the time of



year at which the Bois de Boulogne displays more separate characteristics, assembles more distinct elements in a composite whole than any other. It was also the time of day. In places where the trees still kept their leaves, they seemed to have undergone an alteration of their substance from the point at which they were touched by the sun's light, still, at this hour in the morning, almost horizontal, as it would be again, a few hours later, at the moment when in the gathering dusk it flames up like a lamp, projects afar over the leaves a warm and artificial glow, and sets ablaze the few topmost boughs of a tree that itself remains unchanged, a sombre incombustible candelabrum beneath its flaming crest. At one point it thickened the leaves of the chestnut-trees as it were like bricks, and, like a piece of yellow Persian masonry patterned in blue, cemented them crudely against the sky; at another, it detached them from the sky, towards which they stretched out their curling, golden fingers. Half-way up the trunk of a tree draped with Virginia creeper, it had grafted and brought to blossom, too dazzling to be clearly distinguished, an enormous bouquet as of red flowers, perhaps a new variety of carnation. The different parts of the Bois, so easily confounded in summer in the density and monotony of their universal green, were now clearly divided. Open spaces made visible the approach to almost every one of them, or else a splendid mass of foliage stood out before it like an oriflamme. One could make out, as on a coloured map, Armenonville, the Pré Catelan, Madrid, the Race Course and the shore of the lake. Here and there would appear some meaningless erection, a sham grotto, a mill for which the trees made room by standing aside from it, or which was borne upon the soft

green platform of a grassy lawn. One sensed that the Bois was not only a wood, that it existed for a purpose alien to the life of its trees; the exhilaration that I felt was due not only to admiration of the autumn tints but to an obscure desire—wellspring of a joy which the heart feels at first without being conscious of its cause, without understanding that it results from no external impulse. Thus I gazed at the trees with an unsatisfied longing that went beyond them and, without my knowledge, directed itself towards that masterpiece of the fair walkers which the trees enshrine for a few hours each day. I walked towards the *Al-lée des Acacias*. I passed through groves in which the morning light, breaking them into new sections, lopped and trimmed the trees, united different trunks in marriage, made nosegays of their branches. It would skilfully draw towards it a pair of trees; making deft use of the sharp chisel of light and shade, it would cut away from each of them half of its trunks and branches, and, weaving together the two halves that remained, would make of them either a single pillar of shade, defined by the surrounding sunlight, or a single luminous phantom whose artificial, quivering contour was encompassed in a network of inky shadows. When a ray of sunshine gilded the highest branches, they seemed, soaked and still dripping with a sparkling moisture, to have emerged alone from the liquid, emerald-green atmosphere in which the whole grove was plunged as though beneath the sea. For the trees continued to live by their own vitality, which, when they had no longer any leaves, gleamed more brightly still on the nap of green velvet that carpeted their trunks, or in the white enamel of the globes of mistletoe that were scattered among the topmost boughs of the poplars,



rounded like the sun and moon in Michelangelo's "Creation." But, forced for so many years now, by a sort of grafting process, to share in the life of feminine humanity, they called to my mind the figure of the dryad, the fair worldling, swiftly walking, brightly coloured, whom they shelter with their branches as she passes beneath them, obliging her to acknowledge, as they themselves acknowledge, the power of the season; they recalled to me the happy days of my unquestioning youth, when I would hasten eagerly to the spots where masterpieces of female elegance would be incarnate for a few moments beneath the unconscious, accommodating boughs. But the beauty for which the firs and acacias of the Bois de Boulogne made me long, more disquieting in that respect than the chestnuts and lilacs of Trianon which I was about to see, was not fixed somewhere outside myself in the relics of an historical period, in works of art, in a little temple of love at whose door was piled an oblation of autumn leaves ribbed with gold. I reached the shore of the lake; I walked on as far as the pigeon-shooting ground. The idea of perfection which I had within me I had bestowed, in that other time, upon the height of a victoria, upon the raking thinness of those horses, frenzied and light as wasps on the wing, with bloodshot eyes like the cruel steeds of Diomed, which now, smitten by a desire to see again what I had once loved, as ardent as the desire that had driven me many years before along the same paths, I wished to see anew before my eyes at the moment when Mme Swann's enormous coachman, supervised by a groom no bigger than his fist and as infantile as St George in the picture, endeavoured to curb the ardour of the quivering steel-tipped pinions with which they

thundered over the ground. Alas! there was nothing now but motor-cars driven each by a moustached mechanic, with a tall footman towering by his side. I wished to hold before my bodily eyes, to see whether they were indeed as charming as they appeared to the eyes of memory, little women's hats, so low-crowned as to seem no more than garlands. All the hats now were immense, covered with all manner of fruits and flowers and birds. In place of the beautiful dresses in which Mme Swann walked like a queen, Graeco-Saxon tunics, pleated à la Tanagra, or sometimes in the Directoire style, accentuated Liberty chiffons sprinkled with flowers like wallpaper. On the heads of the gentlemen who might have been strolling with Mme Swann in the Allée de la Reine Marguerite, I no longer found the grey "toppers" of old, nor indeed any other kind of hat. They went out bare-headed. And seeing all these new components of the spectacle, I had no longer a belief to infuse into them to give them consistency, unity and life; they passed before me in a desultory, haphazard, meaningless fashion, containing in themselves no beauty which my eyes might have tried, as in the old days, to re-create. They were just women, in whose elegance I had no faith, and whose clothes seemed to me unimportant. But when a belief vanishes, there survives it—more and more vigorously so as to cloak the absence of the power, now lost to us, of imparting reality to new things—a fetishistic attachment to the old things which it did once animate, as if it was in them and not in ourselves that the divine spark resided, and as if our present incredulity had a contingent cause—the death of the gods.

How horrible! I exclaimed to myself. Can anyone find



these motor-cars as elegant as the old carriage-and-pair? I dare say I am too old now—but I was not intended for a world in which women shackle themselves in garments that are not even made of cloth. To what purpose shall I walk among these trees if there is nothing left now of the assembly that used to gather beneath this delicate tracery of reddening leaves, if vulgarity and folly have supplanted the exquisite thing that their branches once framed. How horrible! My consolation is to think of the women whom I knew in the past, now that there is no elegance left. But how could the people who watch these dreadful creatures hobble by beneath hats on which have been heaped the spoils of aviary or kitchen-garden, how could they even imagine the charm that there was in the sight of Mme Swann in a simple mauve bonnet or a little hat with a single iris sticking up out of it? Could I even have made them understand the emotion that I used to feel on winter mornings, when I met Mme Swann on foot, in an otter-skin coat, with a woollen cap from which stuck out two blade-like partridge-feathers, but enveloped also in the artificial warmth of her own house, which was suggested by nothing more than the bunch of violets crushed into her bosom, whose flowering, vivid and blue against the grey sky, the freezing air, the naked boughs, had the same charming effect of using the season and the weather merely as a setting, and of living actually in a human atmosphere, in the atmosphere of this woman, as had, in the vases and jardinières of her drawing-room, beside the blazing fire, in front of the silk-covered settee, the flowers that looked out through closed windows at the falling snow? But it would not have sufficed me that the costumes alone should still have been the same as those in

distant years. Because of the solidarity that binds together the different parts of a general impression that our memory keeps in a balanced whole of which we are not permitted to subtract or to decline any fraction, I should have liked to be able to pass the rest of the day with one of those women, over a cup of tea, in an apartment with dark-painted walls (as Mme Swann's were still in the year after that in which the first part of this story ends) against which would glow the orange flame, the red combustion, the pink and white flickering of her chrysanthemums in the twilight of a November evening, in moments similar to those in which (as we shall see) I had not managed to discover the pleasures for which I longed. But now, even though they had led to nothing, those moments struck me as having been charming enough in themselves. I wanted to find them again as I remembered them. Alas! there was nothing now but flats decorated in the Louis XVI style, all white, with a sprinkling of blue hydrangeas. Moreover, people did not return to Paris, now, until much later. Mme Swann would have written to me from a country house to say that she would not be in town before February, long after the chrysanthemum season, had I asked her to reconstruct for me the elements of that memory which I felt to belong to a particular distant year, a particular vintage towards which it was forbidden me to ascend again the fatal slope, the elements of that longing which had itself become as inaccessible as the pleasure that it had once vainly pursued. And I should have required also that they should be the same women, those whose costume interested me because, at the time when I still had faith, my imagination had individualised them and had provided each of them with a legend. Alas! in the



acacia-avenue—the myrtle-alley—I did see some of them again, grown old, no more now than grim spectres of what they had once been, wandering, desperately searching for heaven knew what, through the Virgilian groves. They had long since fled, and still I stood vainly questioning the deserted paths. The sun had gone. Nature was resuming its reign over the Bois, from which had vanished all trace of the idea that it was the Elysian Garden of Woman; above the gimcrack windmill the real sky was grey; the wind wrinkled the surface of the Grand Lac in little wavelets, like a real lake; large birds flew swiftly over the Bois, as over a real wood, and with shrill cries perched, one after another, on the great oaks which, beneath their Druidical crown, and with Dodonian majesty, seemed to proclaim the inhuman emptiness of this deconsecrated forest, and helped me to understand how paradoxical it is to seek in reality for the pictures that are stored in one's memory, which must inevitably lose the charm that comes to them from memory itself and from their not being apprehended by the senses. The reality that I had known no longer existed. It sufficed that Mme Swann did not appear, in the same attire and at the same moment, for the whole avenue to be altered. The places we have known do not belong only to the world of space on which we map them for our own convenience. They were only a thin slice, held between the contiguous impressions that composed our life at that time; the memory of a particular image is but regret for a particular moment; and houses, roads, avenues are as fugitive, alas, as the years.