A TALE OF THE PYRENEES

By PIERRE LOTI

UNIFORM VOLUMES

THE MARRIAGE OF LOTI
(Rarahu)

CONSTANTINOPLE
(Aziyadé)

THE SAHARA
(Le Roman d'un Spahi)

INDIA
(L'Inde, sans les Anglais)

MOROCCO
(Au Maroc)

JAPAN
(Madame Chrysanthème)

JERUSALEM
(Jérusalem)

MADAME PRUNE
(La Troisième Jeunesse de Madame Prune)

SIAM
(Un Pèlerin d'Angkor)

EGYPT
(La Mort de Philae)

THE PYRENEES
(Ramuntcho)

BRITTANY
(Mon Frère Yves)

THE ICELAND FISHERMAN
(Pêcheur d'Islande)

PIERRE LOTI: The Romance of a Great Writer
By EDMUND B. D'AUVERGNE

A TALE OF THE PYRENEES

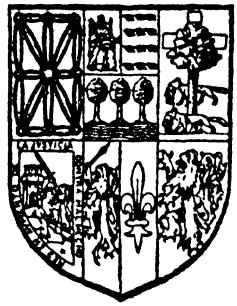
(RAMUNTCHO)

BY

PIERRE LOTI

TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH BY

W. P. BAINES



LONDON

T. WERNER LAURIE LTD.

COBHAM HOUSE

24 and 26 WATER LANE :: E.C.4

CONTENTS

PART I

CONTENTS

PART II

PART I

CHAPTER I

THE mournful curlews, heralds of autumn, have just appeared in mass, driven in a grey cloud from the high sea by threat of impending storms. At the mouth of the southern rivers, of the Adour, of the Nivelle, and of the Bidassoa which marks the boundary of Spain, they fly aimlessly above the waters which have already grown cold, skimming with their wings the mirrorlike surfaces. And their cries, at the fall of this October night, seem to tell of the yearly sleep or half-death of the exhausted vegetation.

Over this land of the Pyrenees, a land of scrub and thick woods, the melancholy of the rainy evenings of the declining year was falling slowly, enveloping everything as in a shroud, while Ramuntcho made his way on foot by a moss-grown path, without noise, shod in his cord-soled shoes, supple and silent in his mountaineer's stride.

He had come from a considerable distance, ascending from the regions which abut on the Bay of Biscay; and he was making for his home, which lay isolated above, in the shadow of the woods, near the Spanish frontier,

Around the lonely young wayfarer who climbed so quickly, with so little effort, and in his cord-soled *espadrilles* so noiselessly, the distances, growing ever deeper below him, fell away on all sides, blurred with twilight and mist.

All around are indications of autumn, of the fall of the year. The plants of the low-lying ground, so magnificently green in the spring-time, have taken on the colour of dead straw in the depths of the valleys; and on all the mountain sides the beeches and oaks are shedding their leaves. The air is almost cold; an odorous dampness is exhaled from the mossy earth, and every now and then a light shower falls from above. The season of clouds and long-continued rain is felt to be near, distressingly near—the season which comes every year with its same air of bringing the final exhaustion of the life-giving sap and death irremediable, but which passes, as all things pass, and is forgotten in the resurgence which follows.

Everywhere, in the dampness of the leaves which litter the ground, in the dampness of the long and drooping grass, there are sadnesses as of the end, mute resignations to the fecund decompositions.

But the autumn, while it achieves the end of vegetation, brings only a kind of distant premonition to man, who is a little more durable, and who, for his part, resists many winters, and many times allows himself to be deluded by the charm of the spring. But man, nevertheless, in the rainy evenings of October and November, feels the instinctive desire to take shelter in his home, to warm himself before a fire, under the

roof which the accumulated traditions of so many thousands of years have taught him to construct. And Ramuntcho was conscious in the depth of his being of the old ancestral longing for the Basque home of the countryside, the isolated home, without contact with neighbouring homes; and he increased his speed in the direction of the primitive dwelling where his mother awaited him.

These little Basque houses can be seen here and there in the distance, indistinct in the twilight, very far one from another, white or greyish spots, sometimes at the bottom of a tenebrous gorge, sometimes on the slope of a mountain the summit of which is lost in the darkling sky. They are almost negligible, these little human habitations, in the immense panorama which grows more and more confused in the gathering dusk; negligible and almost non-existent, in fact, at this hour, in the presence of the great solitudes, and before the majesty of eternal nature.

Ramuntcho was climbing rapidly now, nimble, hardy, and young, a child still, capable of playing on his way, in the manner of the little mountaineers, with a stone, a reed, or a branch plucked in passing. The air was becoming keener, the surroundings more rugged, and the cries of the curlews, those cries which recall the creaking of a rusty pulley, on the rivers below, could no longer be heard. But Ramuntcho was singing one of those plaintive songs of olden times, which are perpetuated still in the heart of the remote countryside, and his artless voice trailed away in the mist and rain, among the damp branches of the oaks, beneath the

great shroud, growing ever more sombre, of isolation, autumn, and the night.

He stopped a moment, thoughtful, to watch pass, very far below him, a bullock wagon. The driver who led this slow-moving yoke was singing also; he was descending by a strong and ill-conditioned road into a ravine bathed in a darkness which was already of the night.

And presently the wagon disappeared round a turning, hidden suddenly by the trees. It was as if it had been swallowed up in an abyss. Then Ramuntcho felt the pang of a sudden melancholy, unexplained like the most of his complex impressions; and, with a characteristic gesture, as he turned again, but less alert now, to continue his journey, he pulled down his woollen bonnet, like a visor, over his very bright and very kindly grey eyes.

Why? What could they be to him, this wagon and this singing ox-driver whom he did not even know? Clearly nothing. And yet, just from having seen them disappear thus, to seek a shelter to-night as no doubt every night, in some lonely farmhouse in a valley, the comprehension had come to him, in a more precise form, of the humble existences of these peasants, tied to the land and to the fields where they were born, of these human lives as shorn of joys as the lives of beasts of burden, but with periods of decline more prolonged and more lamentable. And at the same moment there passed through his mind the disquieting intuition that there were other places, a thousand other things that one might see and do in this world, and that would be good

to see and do; a chaos of disturbing half-thoughts, of atavistic memories, of phantoms, had disclosed itself furtively in the depths of the soul of this untaught child.

For Ramuntcho was a mixture of two very different races, of two beings separated, if one may so express it, by a gulf of many generations. Begotten by the luckless caprice of a rich idler of our crazy times, he had been described at his birth as the son of an unknown father, and he bore no other name than that of his mother. And thus he was conscious of a difference in himself from the companions of his games and healthful labours.

Silent for a time he walked more slowly now towards his home, by deserted pathways which wound upwards to the heights. In him the chaos of *other* things, of *other* places, of splendours and terrors that were unknown in his own simple life, was moving confusedly, striving to find a shape. . . . But to no purpose. It was all too intangible, too little comprehensible. It remained without a hold, without form or consequence, in the shadows. . . .

At last, dismissing it from his mind, he began again to sing his song, which told, in monotonous couplets, of the lament of a little flax-spinner whose lover, gone to a distant war, was long in returning. It was in that mysterious Eskuaran language which is apparently of incalculable age, and the origin of which remains unknown. And slowly, under the influence of the ancient melody, of the wind and the solitude, Ramuntcho became again what he had been at the outset of his journey, a simple Basque mountaineer, some

sixteen or seventeen years old, in build and stature a man, but retaining still the innocence and candour of a child.

Presently he came in sight of Etchezar, his parish, its church tower as massive as the turret of a fortress. Some few houses were grouped about the church; the others, and they were the greater number, were scattered round about, among the trees, in the ravines, or on the slopes of the mountains. Night had now fallen, prematurely this evening, on account of the dark clouds which hung over the mountains.

Around this village, above and below also, in the valleys beneath, the Basque country seemed now a confusion of gigantic dark masses. Long heavy clouds blotted out the view, the depths below had become lost, the mountains themselves seemed to be changing, to have grown larger in the nebulous phantasmagoria of the evening. The hour, it was difficult to say why, seemed strangely solemn, as if the ghost of the dead centuries was about to issue from the earth. On this great upland which is called the Pyrenees there seemed to hover something which was perhaps the dissolving soul of that race whose scant remnants still linger here, and from which Ramuntcho, on his mother's side, drew his being.

And the child, composed of two strains so diverse, who was making his way alone towards his home, through the night and the rain, began again to feel, in the depths of his dual nature, the disquiet of inexplicable memories.

He reached his home at last. It was built very high,

after the fashion of the Basque dwellings, with old wooden balconies under narrow windows, through the panes of which now the lamplight shone upon the darkness of the night without. As he approached the entrance the muffled sound of his footsteps was lessened still more in the thickness of the dead leaves—the leaves of the plane-trees fashioned in the shape of an arch, which, following the custom of the country, form a kind of porch before each dwelling.

She had recognised his footsteps from afar, the grave Franchita, pale-faced and upright in her black dress—she who once upon a time had loved and fled with the stranger, and who later, foreseeing the inevitable abandonment, had returned bravely to her native village, there to dwell alone in the dilapidated home of her dead parents. Rather than remain in the great city and become a nuisance and a beggar there, she had promptly resolved to leave, to renounce everything, and to make a simple Basque peasant of Ramuntcho, who, at his entrance into life, had been clothed in robes of white embroidered silk.

It was fifteen years since this had happened, fifteen years since she had returned, clandestinely, at the fall of just such another night as this. In the days following her return, silent and reserved before her companions of earlier days, she left her home only to visit the church, her black cloth mantilla lowered over her eyes. Later, as time went on and curiosity was appeased, she had resumed her former habits and had borne herself so bravely withal, and been so irreproachable that everyone had forgiven her.

As she welcomed and embraced her son, she smiled with pleasure and tenderness; but, silent by nature, when the door was closed upon them, they said no more to one another than there was need to say.

Ramuntcho sat down in his accustomed place to eat the soup and steaming food which his mother placed before him without speaking. The room, carefully limewashed, was made cheerful by the sudden light from the blazing branches in the tall, open fireplace, which was decorated with a festoon of white calico. In frames, hung in good order on the walls, were pictures of the First Communion, of Ramuntcho, and representations of various saints with legends in Basque; and Our Lady of Pilar, Our Lady of Sorrows, and rosary beads and blessed palms. The kitchen utensils shone in neat arrangement on shelves fixed to the walls, each shelf adorned with one of those coverings of pink paper, patterned and pierced, which are made in Spain and on which are painted usually rows of people dancing with castanets, or, sometimes, scenes from the life of the toreadors. In this white interior, before this bright, cheerful fire, there was a sense of home, of tranquil well-being, which was augmented by the notion of the wet, dark night outside, of the black gloom of the valleys, of the mountains, and the woods.

Franchita, as was her wont each night, gazed long at her son, noting how he was growing in stature and good looks; how more and more he was taking on an air of decision and strength; and how the dark moustache was thickening above his fresh lips.

When he had finished his supper and eaten, with the hearty appetite of a young mountaineer, many slices of bread and drunk two glasses of cider, he got up and said:

"I'm going to bed now, mother; we have some work before us to-night."

"Ah!" replied his mother. "And at what time do you want to be called?"

"At one o'clock—as soon as the moon has set. They will whistle under my window."

"And what is it to-night?"

"Some bales of silk and velvet."

"With whom are you going?"

"The same as usual: Arrochkoa, Florentino, and the brothers Iragola. As the other night, it is on the business of Itchoua with whom I have just engaged myself. . . . Good night, mother! We shall not be long away; and I shall be back in time for Mass for certain."

Then Franchita laid her head on the broad shoulder of her son in a curious, coaxing, childlike way, very different from her usual manner. And, her cheek against his, she remained for a long time leaning tenderly upon him, as one who should say in a confident surrender of will: "I am still a little worried about these nocturnal excursions; but on reflection, I know that what you wish is always right; I am only a dependent of yours, and you—you are everything. . . ."

Long ago, on the shoulder of the stranger, she used to lean thus, to surrender herself thus, in the days when she loved.

When Ramuntcho had retired to his little room she remained thoughtful for longer than usual before resuming her needlework. This, then, clearly was becoming his occupation, this traffic of the night with its risk of being hit by the bullet of a Spanish rifleman! He had begun it for amusement, out of a spirit of bravado, as the majority of them had done, and as, at this moment, his friend Arrochkoa was doing in the same band as himself; afterwards, little by little, he had come to need this continual adventure of the dark nights, and, for this hard calling, he was deserting more and more the open-air workshop of the carpenter, with whom she had placed him as apprentice.

And so this was what he was going to be in life, her little Ramuntcho, formerly so pampered in his white silk robe, for whom in her simplicity she had dreamt so many dreams: A smuggler! A smuggler and a tennis player! —two things, for that matter, which go well together, and are essentially Basque.

She still hesitated, however, to allow him to follow this unexpected calling. Not because she disdained smugglers. Far from that. For her own father had been one, and her two brothers also, the elder killed by a Spanish bullet at the frontier one night as he was swimming the Bidassoa, the second a fugitive in America to escape the prison of Bayonne; both alike respected for their courage and strength. No; but her Ramuntcho, the son of the stranger, he no doubt might have looked forward to the less arduous life of the dwellers in the city, if in an unthinking

moment, and a little wildly perhaps, she had not separated him from his father and brought him to this Basque mountain. For to be truthful, this father of Ramuntcho was not heartless. When, fatally, he had grown tired of her, he made some effort not to let her see it, and he would never have abandoned his child if she, in her pride, had not left him. . . . And perhaps it was her duty now, to-day, to write to him and ask him to interest himself in his child. . . .

And now the image of Gracieuse came quite naturally into her mind as it always did when she thought of the future of Ramuntcho. For she was the little sweetheart whom, for the past ten years now, she had wanted for him. (In the country, which still lags behind the fashions of the present day, it is the custom to marry quite young, and often even to pick and choose in the first years of life.) A little girl with a head of tangled gold, the daughter of a friend of her own childhood, a certain Dolores Detcharry, who had always been proud, and who had looked down upon her ever since the day of her great fault. . . .

Certainly the intervention of his father in the future of Ramuntcho would be a decisive factor in obtaining the hand of little Gracieuse—and would even enable Franchita to ask it of Dolores with a certain condescension after the long-standing rivalry. But Franchita felt a great trouble penetrating her whole being as she came to grips with the idea of approaching this man, of writing to him to-morrow, of seeing him again, perhaps, of stirring the ashes of her dead love. . . . And then she remembered the often gloomy looks of the stranger, she

recalled his vague words of infinite weariness, of incomprehensible disillusion; he seemed to be seeing always, beyond her horizon, dark and dismaying distances, and although he was not a mocker of sacred things, yet he never prayed, and she had the crowning remorse of having bound herself to a pagan for whom the heaven of her dreams must for ever remain closed. His friends, moreover, were like to him, idlers also, without faith, without prayer, exchanging among themselves, in light allusions, thoughts which to her were of the abyss. How could she bear to think that Ramuntcho in their company might become like all of them! Never to go to church, never to visit the sacraments, never to hear mass! And she called to mind the letters of her old father—who to-day was mouldering in the deep earth, under a slab of granite, against the foundations of his parish church—those letters written in the Eskuaran language which he had addressed to her after the first months of indignation and silence, in the great city where she was living in sin: "At any rate, my poor Franchita, I trust you are in a place where men are pious and go regularly to church?" They were scarcely pious, the men of the great city—the fashionable folk with whom Ramuntcho's father passed his days, no more than the humble workers in the outlying suburb where she lived hidden. All of them were being carried along by the same current, away from the hereditary dogmas, far from the ancient symbols. And Ramuntcho, in such surroundings, how could he resist?

Other reasons also, less forcible perhaps, helped to

restrain her. Her proud dignity, which, in the great city, had kept her respectable and solitary, revolted strongly from the idea of appearing before her former lover in the guise of a suppliant. And her good sense, which nothing had ever been able to mislead or dazzle, told her besides that it was too late now to alter everything; that Ramuntcho, until now ignorant and free, would not be able to attain to those dizzy heights to which the intelligence of his father was reared, but would more probably languish outclassed on a lower plane. And finally a sentiment scarcely avowed even to herself pressed very heavily in the secret places of her heart: the agonising fear of losing this son of hers, of no longer guiding him, no longer holding him, no longer seeing him. And now, in this moment of decisive reflection, after having hesitated for years, she inclined more and more to persist in her silence towards the stranger, and to allow the life of Ramuntcho to unfold near her, under the protecting eyes of the Holy Virgin and the saints. There remained the question of Gracieuse Detcharry. As to that, she should marry him notwithstanding, smuggler as he was, poor as he was going to be! With her mother's instinct, in her almost fierce love, she divined that Gracieuse was already so deeply in love with him that she could never break away; so much she had seen in the dark eyes, obstinate and grave beneath the golden nimbus of her curls, of this child of fifteen years. . . . Gracieuse marrying Ramuntcho for his own sake, against and in spite of the wishes of her mother. . . . All that there was of rancour and vindictiveness in the soul of Franchita rejoiced

even at the prospect of this great triumph over the pride of Dolores. . . .

Around the solitary house, where in the great silence of midnight she was deciding alone the future of her son, floated the spirit of her Basque ancestors, gloomy and jealous also, disdainful of the stranger, fearful of impiety, of change, of the evolutions of peoples—the spirit of the Basque ancestors, the old immutable spirit which keeps this people still with its eyes turned back to the anterior ages; the mysterious age-old spirit by which children are constrained to do as their fathers have done before them, on the side of the same mountains, in the same villages, around the same church towers.

There came now the sound of footsteps in the night outside! . . . Someone walking softly in *espadrilles*, on the thickness of the plane-tree leaves which littered the ground. Then a sound of whistling.

Already! One o'clock already!

Quite resolved now she opened the door to the leader of the smugglers, with a smile of welcome which the latter had not expected:

"Enter, Itchoua," she said, "warm yourself, while I go and wake my son."

A tall, broad man, this Itchoua, lean but with great depth of chest, shaved clean like a priest, after the fashion of the men of the old stock. Beneath his Basque bonnet which he did not remove, a colourless, inexpressive countenance, rough-hewn, as with strokes of a bill-hook, recalling those beardless personages, archaically drawn, in the missals of the fifteenth

century. Below the sunken cheeks, the squareness of the jaw, the salience of the muscles of the neck, gave an impression of immense strength. He was a typical Basque, accentuated to excess; with eyes deep-sunken under the frontal bone; with exceptionally long eyebrows, the extreme points of which, curved downwards as in the weeping madonnas, almost mingled with the hair at the temples. He might have been anywhere between thirty and fifty years of age. His real name was José Maria Gorosteguy; but, according to custom, he was known locally only by the nickname Itchoua (the blind) given him long before as a jest, on account of the keenness of his eyes, which pierced the darkness like those of a cat. For the rest a practical Christian, a church-warden of the parish, and a chorister with a voice of thunder. Famous also for his power of resisting fatigue, capable of climbing the Pyrenean slopes at a run for hours on end, with a heavy load on his back.

Presently Ramuntcho came down, rubbing his eyes still heavy with youthful slumber, and, at sight of him, the grim face of Itchoua broke into a smile. On the look-out always for strong, vigorous lads to enrol in his band, knowing how to bind them to him, despite the most meagre wage, by a kind of special point of honour, he was a shrewd judge of them in limb and shoulder, and he set great store by his new recruit.

Franchita, before letting them go, rested her head for some moments on the shoulder of her son. Then she accompanied the two men to the threshold of the

door—open on the immense darkness—and recited piously a Paternoster for them, while they disappeared into the thick night, into the rain, into the chaos of the mountains, on their way to the dark frontier.

CHAPTER II

SOME hours later, in the first blush of dawn, at the hour when shepherds and fishermen awaken, the smugglers were returning merrily, their enterprise accomplished.

They had set out on foot, with infinite precautions of silence, making their way along ravines, through woods, across dangerous river fords; and they were returning now like men who had never had anything to hide from a soul, crossing the Bidassoa in the freshness of the morning, in a boat hired at Fontarabia under the very nose of the Spanish customs officials.

The confused mass of mountains and clouds, all the gloomy chaos of the preceding night had sorted itself out almost suddenly, as at the touch of a magician's wand. The Pyrenees, restored to their real proportions, were no more now than moderate-sized mountains, with folds still bathed in the darkness of night, but with summits clearly outlined against the brightening sky. The air had become mild, soft, exquisite to breathe, as if suddenly the climate or the season had changed. For the south wind had begun to blow, the delicious south wind peculiar to this Basque country, which drives before it cold, and clouds, and mists, brightening the colour of everything, making the sky blue, giving infinite distances to the horizon, producing, even in mid-winter, an illusion of summer.

The boatman who was bringing the smugglers across to France was pushing against the bottom with his long pole, and the boat dragged, half-stranded. The Bidassoa, by which the two countries are separated, seemed, at this moment, to have dried up, and its empty bed, which is of great width, had the flat expanse of a little desert.

Day was now coming on apace, calm and with a touch of rose. It was the first day of the month of November. On the Spanish shore beyond, very far away, in a monastery, an early morning bell sounded clear, announcing the solemn religious festival of the autumn. And Ramuntcho, seated comfortably in the boat, gently rocked, and resting after the exertions of the night, inhaled this new air with an exultation in which every sense participated. With childish glee he saw a fine day assured for this feast of All Saints which was going to bring him all that he knew of the world's festivals: the sung High Mass, the game of tennis before the assembled village, and then, in the evening, the dance with Gracieuse, the fandango in the moonlight on the church square.

Little by little Ramuntcho lost consciousness of his physical life, after the long vigil of the night; a kind of torpor, infinitely soothing under the gentle breezes of the fresh morning, benumbed his young body, leaving his mind in a kind of half-dream. He knew these sensations well, for that matter, for the return journeys at daybreak, in a boat where one may sleep secure, are a common sequence of smuggling enterprises by night.

And all the details also of this estuary of the

Bidassoa were familiar to him, all its aspects, which change according to the hour, according to the monotonous and regular tide. Twice each day the flood-tide returns to fill the flat river-bed, and then, between France and Spain, there is what might be called a lake, a delightful little sea rippled with small blue waves. And the boats come out and speed quickly along; the boatmen sing their old-time songs to the accompaniment of the creaking and rhythmic bumping of the oars. But when the tide is low, as at this moment it is, there is nothing between the two countries but a kind of low-lying region, indeterminate in character, and changing in colour, where men walk with bare legs, and boats creep slowly along.

Ramuntcho and his band were now in the middle of this region, all half-asleep in the still dim light of the growing day; the colours of things were becoming distinguishable, emerging from the greyness of the night. They slid, they advanced by little jerks, sometimes amongst the yellow velvet of the sand, sometimes across a stretch of dark-coloured mud, regularly striated and dangerous to walk upon. And thousands of little puddles, left by the evening tide, reflected the growing light, shining over the soft expanse like flakes of mother-of-pearl. Through this little yellow and brown desert the boatman was following the course of a slender thread of silver which was all that was left of the Bidassoa at low-water. From time to time a fisherman crossed their path, passing quite close to them in silence, not singing as in the days when the boat can be rowed, too busy now, indeed, in pushing his boat along by means of his

pole, which, standing upright, he manipulated with movements of admirable plastic grace.

Dreaming, the smugglers draw near the French shore. And beyond, on the other side of the strange expanse over which they are travelling as in a sledge, that ancient town, showing in silhouette, from which they are slowly drawing away, is Fontarabia; those highlands, which mount into the sky with so rugged an aspect, are the Spanish Pyrenees. All of it is Spain, mountainous Spain, eternally upraised there in front of them, and for ever in their minds: the country which must needs be reached in silence by dark, moonless nights, and in the rains of winter; the country which was the perpetual goal of their dangerous adventures: the country, which, for the men of Ramuntcho's village, always seemed to close the horizon to the south-west, however its aspect might change through the seasons and through the day; the country which was the first to catch the pale light of the morning sun; the country which, like a dark screen, masked the red glory of the sunset.

Ramuntcho worshipped this Basque land of his, and this particular morning was one of those times when his love for it stirred him most profoundly. In the course of his life, during his exiles, the memory of these delightful homecomings in the dawn, after a night of smuggling, was to cause him many a pang of home-sickness, many a bitter heartache. But his love for his native land was not so simple as that of the companions with whom he adventured. For in all his sentiments, in all his sensations, there were mingled elements of

very diverse kinds. There was first the instinctive and unanalysed attachment of his maternal ancestors to their native soil. But in addition there was something more subtle, inherited from his father; an unconscious reflex from that æsthetic admiration which had caused the stranger to linger here for many months, and had first given him the notion of allying himself with a daughter of these mountains, and leaving a Basque progeny.

CHAPTER III

It is now eleven o'clock, and the church bells of France and Spain are ringing a full peal, mingling across the frontier their notes of high religious festival.

Washed, rested, and in his best attire, Ramuntcho is on his way with his mother to the High Mass of All Saints' Day. Along a pathway littered with the red autumn leaves, they descend together towards the parish church; the sun is quite warm, giving an illusion of summer.

Ramuntcho was dressed almost elegantly in the mode of the town-dwellers, save for the traditional Basque bonnet, which he wore on one side, the peak shading his young eyes. His mother, upright and proud, the head held high, the carriage strangely distinguished, wore a gown of a quite modern style. She had the air of a woman of the world, except for the mantilla of black cloth which covered her head and shoulders. In the great town long ago she had learnt how to dress—and, for that matter, in the Basque country, notwithstanding that the ancient traditions are so obstinately preserved, the women and the young girls have all acquired the habit of dressing in the fashions of the day, with an elegance unknown to the peasants of the other French provinces.

They separated, as etiquette requires, when they reached the churchyard with its great cypresses which savoured of the south and of the east. The parish church, too, from the outside, was not unlike a mosque, with its tall, grim old walls, pierced, high up only, with tiny windows, and its warm colouring which told of age and dust and sunshine.

While Franchita entered by one of the doors on the ground level, Ramuntcho ascended an old stone staircase which climbed the whole length of the exterior wall, and led to the high galleries reserved to the men.

The far end of the gloomy church was a mass of old shining gold, with a profusion of twisted columns, and complicated entablatures, and statues with exaggerated outlines, and over-elaborate draperies in the style of the Spanish Renaissance. And this magnificence of the tabernacle contrasted strangely with the simplicity of the side walls which were covered uniformly with a coating of whitewash. But an air of extreme age harmonised these things, which one felt had endured for centuries in this self-same contrast.

It was still early, and scarcely anyone had arrived yet for the High Mass. With his elbows on the ledge of the gallery Ramuntcho watched the women enter below, dark phantoms all, and all alike, the head and dress hidden beneath the black cashmere which it is the custom to wear when attending church. Silent and devout, they glided over the funereal pavement of mortuary stones where one might read still, in spite of the effacement of time, inscriptions in Basque which

recounted the names of extinct families and the dates of past centuries.

Gracieuse, for whose entry Ramuntcho was especially watching, was late in arriving. But to distract his mind for a moment a funeral procession advanced slowly up the nave: the relations and near neighbours of one who had died during the week, the men still wearing the long cape which is the prescribed wear at funerals, the women in the cloak and the traditional hood of deep mourning.

Above in the two immense galleries which stretched one above the other along the whole length of the nave, the men came one by one to take their places, serious all of them, and all with a rosary in their hand: farmers, labourers, ox-drivers, poachers, smugglers, all devout now, and prompt to kneel when the sacred bell sounded. Each one, before sitting down, hung his woollen bonnet behind him on a peg on the wall, and gradually long rows of innumerable Basque bonnets were aligned against the white background of the limewash.

Below, the little schoolgirls entered at last, in good order, escorted by the sisters of Our Lady of the Rosary. And, amongst the nuns all muffled up in black, Ramuntcho recognised Gracieuse. She, too, had her head covered in black, her golden curls, which this evening would be blown about in the whirl of the fandango, were now discreetly hidden under the austere mantilla of ceremonies. Gracieuse had ceased to attend the school for two years now, but she remained, nevertheless, the intimate friend of the nuns, her late mistresses, and was always in their company, taking

part in the litanies and novenas, and in the arrangement of the white flowers before the statues of the Blessed Virgin.

Then the priests, in their most sumptuous vestments, appeared before the magnificent golds of the tabernacle, on the high platform of the altar, and the Mass began, celebrated in this remote village with a pomp as splendid as in the largest city. There were choirs of little boys, who sang lustily and with a gusto a little unrestrained. And choirs of little girls who sang more quietly, accompanied by a nun at a harmonium, and led by the clear, pure voice of Gracieuse. And from time to time there came a roar, like the noise of a storm, from the galleries above where the men were, a formidable response which shook the old vaults, the resonant old timbers, which for centuries have re-echoed with the same chants.

To do the same things which for countless ages our forbears have done, to repeat blindly the same words of faith, this is an act of supreme wisdom, of supreme efficacy. To all these faithful who sing here the unchanging ceremony of the Mass imparts a kind of peace, a confused but soothing resignation to the impending nothingness. Living as they are, they lose a little of their ephemeral personality and become more closely united to the dead who sleep beneath the stones. And in this way they preserve better the sense of continuity, forming with those who have gone, and with their descendants yet to come, a resistant whole which endures almost indefinitely, and which men call a race.

CHAPTER IV

"ITE missa est!" The High Mass is over, and the ancient church is emptying. Outside in the churchyard the congregation disperses among the tombs. The noontide sun, shining joyously, welcomes them as they leave the dim nave where they have contemplated more or less, each according to the faculties vouchsafed him, the great mystery of life and death.

Bonneted now, all in the uniform Basque bonnet of the country, the men descend by the exterior staircase; the women, responding more slowly to the call of the blue sky, preserving still, under their veil of mourning, something of the rapt expression that characterised them in the church, issue in black groups from the doorway below, and some from among them stop beside a newly filled-in grave and weep.

The south wind, which is the great magician of the Basque country, blows gently. The autumn of yesterday has disappeared and is forgotten. Warm breezes stir the air, vivifying, more wholesome than those of May, sweet with the fragrance of hay and the perfume of flowers. Leaning against the cemetery wall, two strolling players of the great highway are intoning an old seguidilla of Spain to the accompaniment of a tambourine and a guitar. They bring to the spot the warm

and somewhat Arab gaieties of the other side of the near-lying frontier.

And in the midst of this intoxication of meridional November, more delightful in this country than the intoxication of spring, Ramuntcho, one of the first to descend, is waiting for the nuns to come out so that he may speak to Gracieuse.

And a vendor of Basque shoes has come also, to catch the crowd as they come out from Mass, displaying among the roses of the tombs his cloth footwear ornamented with woollen flowers; and the young men, attracted by the bright embroideries, crowd round him, and pick and choose from his gaily-coloured wares.

The bees and the flies are buzzing as in June. The country has become again, for a few hours, for a few days, for so long as the south wind blows, luminous and warm. Against the mountains, which have taken on tints of strong brown and dark green, and which seem to-day to have advanced so that they almost overhang the church, the houses of the village stand out very clearly, very white in their coat of whitewash—the old houses of the Pyrenees, upraised so high, with their wooden balconies and, on the walls, their old-fashioned criss-crossed beams, and, towards the south-west, that part of Spain which is visible, the bare, reddish summits of the mountain range, so familiar to the smugglers, seems quite near, upraised in the clear blue sky.

Gracieuse had not yet appeared, delayed, no doubt, with the nuns, in some attention to the altar. And Franchita, who never now mingled in the festivities of

the Sunday, after a smile of good-bye to her son, whom she would not see again until the evening, after the dancing was over, had disappeared along the road to her home, silent and reserved as usual.

Meanwhile a group of young men, amongst whom was the curate, who had scarcely had time to remove his golden vestments, had assembled on the steps of the church, and seemed to be discussing some important project. These are the leading players of the country-side, the fine flower of the active and strong. It is the tennis match of the afternoon which is the subject of debate, and they make sign to the dreaming Ramuntcho, who now comes to join them. A number of old men approach also, and gather round them, white-haired, clean shaven like monks, and Basque bonneted: the champions of times past, proud still of their triumphs of old, and sure of a respectful hearing on matters touching the national game, to which the men of these parts resort with pride, as to a field of honour. After a friendly discussion the match is arranged: it will take place immediately after vespers, and the six champions chosen, divided into two camps, will be the curate, Ramuntcho, and Arrochkoa, the brother of Gracieuse, against three well-known players of the neighbouring communes: Joachim, of Mendiazpi; Florentino, of Espelette, and Irrubeta of Hasparren.

And now the funeral procession comes from the church and passes close to them, strangely black in this feast of light, and strangely archaic in the envelopment of its capes and hoods and veils. It is eloquent of the Middle Ages, this slow-moving file of mourners, those

Middle Ages of which the Basque country still preserves the spirit. And above all, it is eloquent of death, as are also the memorial stones with which the nave is paved, and the cypresses and the tombs, and each and everything in this place where men come to pray. Death, everywhere Death. . . . But a death which is a very kindly neighbour to Life, under the protection of the old consoling symbols. . . . For Life is here too, and shows itself, almost a co-equal sovereign, in the warm rays in which the cemetery is bathed, in the eyes of the little children playing among the roses of autumn, in the smiles of the beautiful, dark-eyed maidens, who, the Mass over, are returning towards the village with steps at once indolent and supple; in the muscles of all this youth of alert and vigorous men, who soon in the game of tennis will be exercising their thighs and arms of iron. . . . And from this group of age and youth on the steps of the church, from all this mingling, so peacefully harmonious, of death and life, there emerges this high and salutary lesson: that it behoves us to enjoy while we may the strength and the love that may be vouchsafed to us, and then, without seeking unduly to prolong our existence, to submit to the universal law which decrees that all must pass and die, repeating with confidence, as do these wise simpletons, those self-same prayers by which the agonies of our forbears have been soothed. . . .

It is unbelievably radiant, the midday sun in this little graveyard. The air is exquisite and intoxicating to breathe. The Pyrenean horizon has been swept clear of clouds, of the least trace of mist; it is as if

the south wind had brought with it the clearness of Andalusia or Africa.

The guitar and the Basque tambourine accompany the seguidilla which the mendicants from Spain are singing. In this warm breeze, above the dead sleeping their long sleep below, the song seems to have in it the ghost of a mild irony. But it reminds the boys and girls of the village of the fandango of the evening, and awakens in them the desire and intoxication of the dance.

At last the nuns come out, and Ramuntcho's long wait is at an end. With them are Gracieuse and her mother, Dolores, who is still in the full mourning of widowhood, her face invisible beneath the black poke-bonnet with its hanging veil of black crêpe.

What is it that Dolores is discussing so earnestly with the Reverend Mother? Ramuntcho, who knew how little the two women loved one another, was surprised and a little disturbed in mind to see them to-day walking side by side. And see, now they stop and talk apart, so important, apparently, and so secret is the subject of their conversation. Their similar black bonnets, jutting out like the hood of a carriage, are so close together that they almost touch, and their faces are hidden beneath them: a whispering of phantoms, it might be, under the shelter of a sort of little black vault. And Ramuntcho had a presentiment that something hostile to him was being hatched there, under those wicked old bonnets. . . .

When the conversation was at an end he approached and touched his bonnet by way of salutation, awkward

and shy all at once before this Dolores whose unfriendly look he divined under her veil. This woman was the only person in the world who had the power to freeze him, and nowhere save in her presence was he conscious of the slur that lay upon him of being the child of an unknown father, of bearing no other name than that of his mother.

To-day, however, to his great surprise, she was more friendly than usual, and said "Good morning" to him in a voice that was almost kind. Then he moved close to Gracieuse and asked her with brusque anxiety:

"This evening, at eight o'clock, you will be on the square for the dance?"

For some time past now each succeeding Sunday had brought for him the same fear that he might be deprived of his dance with her in the evening. For during the week, now that he was reaching manhood, he scarcely ever saw her, and the dance on the village green, by moonlight or in the light of the stars, was the only opportunity he had of being with her for any length of time.

Ramuntcho and Gracieuse had begun to love each other five long years ago, while they were still only children. And these early loves, when by chance the awakening of the senses confirms instead of destroying them, assume in young minds a character that is sovereign and exclusive.

It had never occurred to them to speak of this thing to each other. They knew it too well. They had never even spoken to each other of the future, which, nevertheless, seemed impossible to them unless they were

together. And the isolation of this mountain village, and perhaps also the hostility of Dolores to their simple, unexpressed projects, brought them even closer together.

"This evening, at eight o'clock, you will be on the square for the dance?"

"Yes," replied the little fair-haired maiden, raising to her lover eyes that were wistfully sad, though at the same time full of tenderness.

"You are sure," persisted Ramuntcho, disturbed by those eyes.

"Yes, sure!"

Then he was easy in his mind, for this time again, knowing that what Gracieuse deliberately said might be counted on. And immediately the day seemed to him more beautiful, the amusement of the Sabbath more attractive, and life a thing of joy.

Dinner was now calling the Basques into the houses and the little hostelries, and in the somewhat mournful splendour of the midday sun, the village soon became deserted. Ramuntcho, for his part, betook himself to the cider tavern frequented by the smugglers and the tennis players. There he sat down at a table, his bonnet still hanging visorlike over his forehead, with the friends he usually found there: Arrochkoa, Florentino, two or three others of the mountain side, and Itchoua, the chief of them all.

A great feast was prepared for them of fish from the Nivelle, ham, and rabbits. In the fore part of the large and dilapidated dining-room, near the windows, were the tables and oak benches on which they sat. At the

back, in the gloom, were enormous vats filled with newly made cider.

This band to which Ramuntcho belongs, here in full strength under the penetrating eye of its chief, is animated by a spirit of emulation in audacity, and a mutual devotion as of brothers. During the nocturnal enterprises especially they stand by one another in whatever chance may fall. Leaning heavily on their elbows, relaxed in the comfort of sitting down after the fatigues of the night, and absorbed in the prospect of satisfying their healthy hunger, they remain silent at first, scarcely raising their heads to look at the girls who pass the windows. Two of them are very young, almost boys like Ramuntcho: Arrochkoa and Florentino. The others, like Itchoua, are hard-faced men, with eyes deep sunken under overhanging brows. They might be any age. But their appearance betrays a long past of arduous labour entailed in an unreasonable persistence in the smuggler's calling which to the less capable yields but the scantiest living.

Then, waking up gradually under the influence of the steaming viands and the mellow cider, they begin to talk. Soon, the conversation becomes general and words pass briskly—light, quick, resonant words spoken with an excessive rolling of r's. They talk and make merry in their mysterious language, so unknown in its origin, which, to the men of other European countries, sounds stranger than Mongolian or Sanskrit. They tell stories of the night and of the frontier, of newly invented ruses and astonishing mystifications of the Spanish riflemen. Itchoua, the chief, listens more

than he talks; only on rare occasions is his voice heard, that resonant voice which booms so loud in the responses in the church. Arrochkoa, the most elegant of the band, seems a little out of place by the side of these comrades of the mountain-side. (As a citizen his name was Jean Detcharry, but he was always known under this nickname borne from father to son by the eldest of the family for many generations.) He is a smuggler only for the fun of it, and not out of any necessity, for he is the possessor of substantial property. His face is fresh-coloured and good-looking, with a fair moustache curling up like the whiskers of a cat. There is something feline in his eyes, too, something at once caressing and evasive. A man attracted by all that succeeds, by everything that is amusing and bright, devoted to Ramuntcho on account of the latter's prowess at tennis, and very willing to give him the hand of his sister Gracieuse, but for the opposition of his mother, Dolores. And Florentino, the other great friend of Ramuntcho, on the contrary, is the humblest of the band; an athletic red-headed fellow, with a broad, low forehead, and soft, patient eyes like those of a beast of burden; without either father or mother, possessing nothing more in the world than a threadbare suit and three pink cotton shirts; withal, passionately in love with a little orphan girl of fifteen years of age, as poor as himself, and as primitive.

And now at length Itchoua deigns to speak in his turn. He relates with an air of mystery and confidence, a certain incident which happened in the days of his youth, one dark night on Spanish territory, in the

passes of Andalusia. Arrested by two carabiniers at a turning of a dark pathway, he had escaped by drawing his dagger and plunging it at hazard in the body of one of his captors; for a half-second the flesh resisted, and then, biff! the blade entered slickly, he felt a spurt of warm blood on his hand, the man fell, and he, Itchoua, made good his escape among the dark rocks. And the voice that related these things with an implacable tranquillity was identically that which, for years past, had piously sung the liturgy every Sunday in the resonant old parish church—so much so that it seemed to retain a religious and almost sacred character!

"But when one is caught, what?" added the story-teller, scrutinising them all with eyes which had once more become piercing. . . . "When one is caught, eh? . . . What is the life of a man at a time like that? You would not have hesitated either, I am sure, you here, if you had been taken."

"Not I," said Arrochkoa in a tone of childish bravado. "Not I! In a case like that, hesitate about taking the life of a carabinier! Good Lord, no!"

But the good-natured Florentino averted his eyes. He would have hesitated. He would not have killed. So much was clear from his expression.

"You would not, would you?" repeated Itchoua, turning this time to Ramuntcho in a pointed way: "You would not hesitate in a case like that?"

"Oh, no!" replied Ramuntcho, with submission. "Oh, no! Surely not!"

But his eyes, like those of Florentino, were averted. He was seized with something like terror of this man,

of this imperious and cold influence which now he so completely realised. All that was gentle and refined in his nature, awakened, took alarm, and was revolted.

Silence had fallen on the little company following the story, and Itchoua, not pleased with the effect he had produced, called for a song to change the current of their thoughts.

The material well-being that follows upon a meal, the cider they had drunk, the cigarettes they were smoking, and the songs now about to begin, quickly restored the high spirits of these simple-minded fellows. Besides, there were among the band the two brothers Iragola, Marcos and Joachim, young men from the neighbouring mountain of Mendiazpi, who were improvisators renowned throughout the country thereabouts, and it was a pleasure to hear them compose and sing their pretty verses on no matter what subject.

"Come now," said Itchoua. "You, Marcos, will be a sailor who wants to pass his life on the ocean, and seek his fortune in America; you, Joachim, will be a peasant who prefers not to leave his village and the land he knows so well. And turn and turn about, now one, now the other, you will discuss, in couplets of equal length, the relative merits of your callings to the tune of 'Iru Damacho.' Come on!"

The two brothers turned half round on the oak bench on which they were sitting and looked at one another. A moment of thoughtfulness, during which an imperceptible movement of the eyelids was the only indication of the mental effort they were making. Then, suddenly, Marcos, the elder, began, and after

that they continued without a break. With their clean-shaven cheeks, their handsome profiles, their chins thrust out a little imperiously above the powerful muscles of their necks, they recalled, in their grave immobility, the faces one sees on Roman medals. They sang in a high key with a certain effort of the throat, after the manner of the *muezzins* of the Mosques. When one had finished his couplet, the other, without a moment of hesitation or silence, replied. As they proceeded they became more animated, more excited, until they seemed inspired. A number of other Basque bonnets had grouped themselves round the table at which the smugglers were sitting, and one and all listened with admiration to the wise and witty things which the brothers contrived to say, always in rhythm and in rhyme.

After about twenty stanzas Itchoua interrupted them to tell them to rest, and ordered some more cider.

"But how did you learn this?" asked Ramuntcho of the two brothers. "How did you learn to do it?"

"Oh!" replied Marcos, "it's inherited in the first instance, as you know, of course. Our father and his grandfather before him were improvisators in great demand at all the festivals of the Basque country; our mother, too, was the daughter of a great improvisator of the village of Lesaca. And every evening, bringing in the oxen or milking the cows, or by the fireside in the winter evenings, we practise. Yes, every evening we make our rhymes on a subject chosen by one or other of us, and it is a constant pleasure to us both."

But when it came to Florentino's turn to sing, he,

knowing only the old refrains of the mountain-side, intoned in an Arab falsetto the lament of the little flax-spinner; and Ramuntcho, who had sung this same song the evening before in the autumn twilight, saw again the darkened sky of yesterday, the rain-charged clouds, the bullock-wagon making its way homewards below, deep in the melancholy valley, and disappearing in the direction of a lonely farmhouse. And suddenly the unexplained distress which he had suffered yesterday again took possession of him; the ache of living and dying thus, always in this same village, under the oppression of these same mountains; a vague consciousness and a confused desire of other and far different places, a troubling sense of unknown, unrealised distances. His eyes, expressionless and fixed, were gazing inward; for some strange minutes he felt himself an exile without knowing from what fatherland, disinherited, without knowing from what inheritance, and sad to the bottom of his soul. Between him and the men who surrounded him there had risen up suddenly ineradicable hereditary differences.

Three o'clock. It is the hour at which the chanted vespers, the last office of the day, come to an end; the hour when, with the same grave devotion as in the morning, all the mantillas of black cloth concealing the pretty hair and shapely figures of the girls of the village issue from the church; and all the woollen bonnets falling all in the same fashion over the shaven faces of the men, over eyes alert, and eyes thoughtful, deep still in the dream of olden times.

It is the hour for the commencement of the games

and the dances, the hour of tennis and fandango. All this is traditional and unchanging.

The daylight is already becoming more golden, presaging the evening. The church suddenly empty and forgotten, where persists still the perfume of the incense, is filled with silence, and the old golds of the sanctuary gleam mysteriously in the midst of a deeper gloom; silence spreads also over the immediate neighbourhood, over the tranquil enclosure of the dead, through which the congregation this time has passed without stopping, in haste now to reach the amusements of the evening.

On the tennis ground people are beginning to arrive from all parts, from the village itself and the neighbouring hamlets, and from the little huts of the shepherds and smugglers perched above on the rugged mountains. Some hundreds of Basque bonnets, all alike, are now assembled, ready to judge the strokes with the eyes of experts, to applaud or murmur in dispraise. They discuss the chances, compare the prowess of the players, and make bets amongst themselves. And young girls and young women are assembling too. They have nothing in common with the peasants of the other provinces of France. Graceful in figure, elegant, refined, they are dressed in the fashion of the present day. Some of them still wear over their head the silken scarf, rolled and arranged like a little cap. Others are bareheaded, their hair dressed in the most modern style. For the rest, the most of them are pretty, with admirable eyes and very long eyebrows. . . . This place, always rather solemn and

a little mournful, is agog this Sunday with an animated and merry crowd.

The smallest hamlet in the Basque country has its tennis ground, large, carefully tended, generally near the church, within a screen of oaks.

But here is a kind of centre, and, as it were, the nursery of the French players, of those who become celebrated, not only in the Pyrenees, but in America, and who are pitted against the champions of Spain in the great international contests. And the ground itself is particularly fine and imposing, surprising in a village so remote and small. It is paved with large flagstones, between which the grass grows, attesting its age and giving it an air of abandonment. On either side stretch, for the spectators, long rows of steps—which are of reddish granite from the neighbouring mountain, and to-day are abloom with the scabious of autumn. And at the far end rises the old monumental wall against which the balls are struck. It has a rounded frontal, which in silhouette has the appearance of a dome, and bears this inscription half-effaced by time: "Blaidka Haritzea Debakatua" (the playing of *blaid* is prohibited).

It is *blaid*, nevertheless, that is going to be played this afternoon. But the venerable inscription goes back to the days of the splendour of the national game, which has degenerated now as all things degenerate. It had been put there to preserve the tradition of *rebot*, a more difficult game, requiring greater agility and strength, which is to be met with now only in the Spanish province of Guipuzcoa.

And while the steps on either side are gradually becoming filled with spectators, the playing ground itself, flagged, grass-grown, the scene, since olden times, of so many contests in which the youth and vigour of the countryside have striven in keenest rivalry, remains empty. The kindly autumn sun, in its decline, bathes it in a warm light. Here and there, above the seated spectators, rise great old oaks, their foliage sadly thinned. Beyond is the tall old church with its cypresses, a little corner of sanctity, from which the saints and the dead seem to watch from afar, extending to the players an august patronage, taking a benevolent interest in this game which is the ruling passion of a whole people, and in a way is their distinguishing characteristic.

At length the players enter the arena, the six champions, one of whom wears a cassock : the curate of the parish church. With them are a number of others : the marker who, presently, will call out the score; the five judges, chosen from among the experts of the neighbouring villages, whose business it will be settle any questions of dispute; and several carrying shoes and a reserve supply of balls. To their right wrist the players fasten with leather straps a strange thing made of wicker which looks like a long, curved claw, and increases by half the length of the forearm. It is with this glove—made in France by a specially chosen basket-maker of the village of Ascain—that the players catch and hurl the ball, which is made of tightly bound cord covered with sheepskin, and is as hard as a ball of wood.

Now they try the balls, and choose the best; and, with a few preliminary strokes which do not count loosen the muscles of their arms and shoulders. Then they remove their jackets and entrust them to some favoured spectator. Ramuntcho hands his to Gracieuse, who is sitting in the first row, on the bottom step. And, except for the priest, who will play trammelled in his black robe, they are all now dressed for the fray, the body free in a pink cotton shirt or else sheathed in a thin woven undervest.

The spectators know the players well, and at once become very excited, acclaiming their favoured champions, shouting to them in a kind of frenzy, as the crowd does to the toreadors.

At this moment the village is animated in its entirety with the spirit of ancient times. In its love of pleasure, in its vitality, in its ardour, it is very Basque and very old—in the shadow of Gizune, the overhanging mountain, which is casting over it already a charm of twilight.

And the match begins in the melancholy evening. The ball, thrown with great force, strikes against the wall with a sharp, dry sound, and rebounds, flying through the air with the speed of a bullet.

This wall at the back, rounded like a dome against the sky, is little by little crowned with the heads of children—little Basques, little bonnets, tennis players of the future, who, presently, will rush headlong, like a flight of birds, to recover the balls which, slung too high, pass out of bounds and land in the fields beyond.

The play gets gradually faster, as arms and legs

warm to their work, until it reaches a kind of frenzy of movement and speed. Already the crowd is acclaiming Ramuntcho. And the curate also bids fair to become one of the heroes of the day. It is strange to see him, with his panther-like springs and his athletic gestures imprisoned in his priestly robe.

This is how the game is played: when a player on one side misses the ball it is a point gained to the opposing side. Ordinarily the game is of sixty points. After each point scored the marker sings out at the top of his voice, in his age-old language: "The *but*[1] has so many, the *refil*[2] has so many, gentlemen!" And his long outcry trails above the noise of the crowd, above the murmurs of approval and disapproval.

On the playing ground, the zone made golden and reddened by the sun diminishes, gradually disappears, eaten up by the shade. More and more the great screen of Gizune dominates everything, seems to confine more closely, in this little corner of the world at its foot, the very distinctive life and the ardour of these children of the mountains—who are the remains of a people mysteriously unique, without analogue among the peoples of the world. The invading shadow of evening moves on in silence, quickly becoming sovereign; and the light lingers now only on the distant mountain tops, upreared above so many darkened valleys, touching them with luminous violet and rose-colour.

Ramuntcho is playing as he had never played before

[1] The *but* is the side which, after the drawing of lots, plays first at the beginning of the game.

[2] The *refil* is the side opposed to the *but*.

in his life. He is at one of those moments when a man seems to feel his strength redoubled, when he is light as air, when to run and leap and strive is a sheer joy. But Arrochkoa is getting tired, the curate two or three times has stumbled in his black cassock; and the opposing side, outdistanced at the start, is slowly gaining ground. Then, in excitement at the game so valiantly contested, the shouting is redoubled and bonnets fly, thrown into the air by enthusiastic hands.

Now the points are equal on both sides; the marker announces thirty for each of the rival camps, and sings out the old refrain which is of immemorial tradition in such a case: "The bets stand! Pay for drinks for the judges and players." It is the signal for a few minutes' rest, while wine is brought into the arena, at the expense of the commune. The players sit down, Ramuntcho by the side of Gracieuse, who throws over his shoulders, wet with perspiration, the jacket of which she has been the guardian. And he asks his little friend to loosen the straps which fasten the glove of wood and wicker and leather to his reddened arm. Then he rests in the pride of his success, meeting now with nothing but encouraging smiles from the village maidens who catch his eye. But he sees also, beyond, on the side opposite to the wall of the playing ground, on the side from which the darkness is coming, the archaic ensemble of the Basque houses, the little village square with its whitewashed porches and old, trimmed plane-trees; and the massive tower of the church, and over-topping all, dominating and dwarfing all, the abrupt

mass of Gizune, which is the immediate cause of the premature darkness of evening descending now upon this lonely little village. . . . Truly this mountain is overwhelming this evening; it seems to imprison, to oppress. . . . And Ramuntcho, in his boyish triumph, is troubled by the consciousness of it, by that furtive, vaguely felt call of *other places* which so often mingles in his labours and his play.

The game is now resumed, and his thoughts are lost in the physical zest with which he renews the struggle. From moment to moment, like the crack of a whip, comes the sound of the impact of the ball now against the glove, now against the wall, and from its crispness one may form a notion of the force employed. "Crack! Crack!" The sound of the ball, furiously driven by young and powerful arms, will continue until the twilight. Sometimes the players with a lusty stroke, which well might strain muscles less firm than theirs, take the ball on the volley. More often, sure of themselves, they allow it to bounce, almost to stop. It seems impossible that they should be able to return it, but "crack!" it is taken, nevertheless, just in time, thanks to a marvellous precision of judgment, and is sped on its way again towards the wall, always with the velocity of a bullet. . . . When the ball strays over the the steps, over the mass of woollen bonnets and pretty chignons draped in silken scarves, all the heads and all the bodies bend down as if mown by the wind of its passage. For the ball is still in play, and may yet be returned, and must not, therefore, be touched or interfered with in any way. When it is irretrievably

lost, "dead," the distinction falls to one of the spectators to pick it up and throw it back to the players, which he does usually with a well-judged throw which lands it into their hands.

Night is slowly falling; the last golden light of day glows with a serene melancholy on the highest of the mountain tops of the Basque country. In the deserted church there must now be complete silence, and the venerable images must be keeping their vigil alone in the darkness of night. Oh! the sadness of the close of a day of festival, in remote, isolated villages, when the sun goes down! . . .

But Ramuntcho more and more is the hero of the day. And the applause and the shouting redouble his happy daring every time he scores a point. The men, standing up now on the old granite steps which surround the playing ground, acclaim him with a southern fervour.

The last point, the sixtieth. Ramuntcho scores it, and the game is won.

Then there is a sudden overflowing into the arena of all the Basque bonnets which had lined the amphitheatre of stone. They press round the players, who are stationary now, in attitudes of more or less exhaustion. And Ramuntcho unties the straps of his glove amid a crowd of expansive admirers. From all sides rough and honest hands are stretched to grasp his, or to pat him in a friendly way on the shoulder.

"Did you speak to Gracieuse about the dance this evening?" asks Arrochkoa, who at this moment would have done anything in the world for him.

"Yes, I spoke to her after Mass. She promised me."

"Ah! Good! I was afraid my mother. . . . But in any case I would have arranged it. You may trust me for that."

A hale old man, with square shoulders and square jaws, and a face clean-shaven like a monk's, for whom the crowd makes way respectfully, now approaches. This is Haramburu, a player of a past generation, who was famous, fifty years ago, in South America for his prowess at *rebot*, and made a little fortune there. Ramuntcho blushed with pleasure to hear himself complimented by a critic so shrewd as this old man. And beyond, standing up on the reddish steps which are now practically deserted, amid the long grass and the scabious of November, his little friend, on the point of departing, attended by a group of young girls, turns to smile at him and to wave him an *adios* in the Spanish manner. At this moment Ramuntcho is a young god. One is proud to know him, to be a friend of his, to find his jacket for him, to speak to him, to touch him.

Now, with the other players, he repairs to the neighbouring inn, where they are rubbed down by solicitous friends, and change into other clothing.

And, a few minutes later, the change effected, elegant now in a white shirt, his bonnet rather swaggeringly on one side, he appears at the inn door, under the arbour of the plane-trees, to taste again the sweets of success, to watch the people pass, to receive fresh compliments and smiles.

The autumn day is fast drawing to a close, and the

half-light now is the veritable half-light of evening. Bats are flying in the warm air. One after another the mountaineers of the country round take their departure. A dozen or so jaunting-cars are made ready, the horses harnessed and the lamps lit, and they move off with a tinkling of bells, to disappear along the dark little roads of the valleys, on their way to the distant hamlets of the countryside. In the limpid twilight one can distinguish the women and the maidens of the village sitting on the benches in front of their houses, under the arbours of plane-trees. They are no longer clearly distinguishable shapes; their Sunday dresses show now in the twilight only as white or pink spots—and that pale blue spot in the far distance, which Ramuntcho is watching, is the new dress of Gracieuse. . . . Towering over all, filling the sky, Gizune, immense, indistinct and dark, is, as it were, the centre and the source of the darkness which is slowly spreading over everything. And from the church now comes the sound of the pious bells, recalling to careless minds the enclosure of the tombs, the cypresses about the bell-tower, and all the mystery of heaven, and prayer, and death that no man may deny.

Oh! the sadness of the close of a day of festival, in remote, isolated villages, when the sun goes down—and in the autumn!

They know well, these good people, who just now were so eager in the humble pleasures of the day, that in the towns there are festivals more brilliant, more beautiful, and less quickly over; but this feast of theirs is a thing apart; it is the feast of their countryside, of their own native land, and for them nothing can take

the place of these few fleeting hours, to which, for so many days beforehand, they have looked forward so eagerly. Sweethearts and lovers about to depart now to their respective homes in the houses scattered on the flank of the Pyrenees, happy couples who to-morrow will resume their rough and monotonous life of every day, gaze at one another before separating, gaze at one another in the deepening twilight with wistful eyes that seem to say: "Is it all over already? Is it ended so soon?"

CHAPTER V

EIGHT o'clock in the evening. All the players, except the curate, had dined at the cider-house as the guests of Itchoua. And they had sat for some time afterwards smoking their contraband cigarettes and listening to the marvellous improvisations of the two brothers Iragola from the mountain of Mendiazpi; while, outside, in the street, the girls, in little groups arm in arm, had come to watch them through the windows, amusing themselves in making out, on the besmoked panes, the round shadows of the men's heads capped in their Basque bonnets.

Now, on the village square, the orchestra of brass sounds the first strains of the fandango, and the young lads and young girls, all those of the village, and some also of the mountain-side who had stayed behind for the dancing, come rushing up in eager groups. Some of them are dancing already in the road, so that they may miss none of it, some actually dance their way to the square.

Round and round goes the fandango in the light of the new moon, the horns of which seem to be poised above, slender and light, on the immense bulk of the mountain. The couples dancing, though they neither clasp nor touch, yet never separate from one another;

face to face and always keeping their distance, boy and girl go through their evolutions with a rhythmic grace, as if they were held together by some invisible magnet.

The crescent of the moon is hidden, swallowed up, one might say, by the gloomy mountain. And lanterns are brought out and hung on the trunks of the plane-trees. The young men are now better able to see their partners, who, facing them, move to and fro as if they continually intended to flee, but without ever moving away. They are almost all pretty, their hair elegantly dressed with a knot of foulard at the back, and they wear their modern dresses with an air of accustomed ease. The men, rather serious always, accompany the music with a snapping of their fingers in the air. Their faces are shaven and bronzed, and the labour of the fields, of the smuggling, or the sea has given them a special kind of leanness which is almost ascetic. But the thickness of their bronzed necks, and the breadth of their shoulders reveal the great strength that is in them, the strength of this old, sober, and religious people.

The fandango revolves and oscillates to the tune of an ancient waltz. All the arms, extended and raised, are waved in the air, rising and falling with graceful cadenced movements, which follow the oscillations of the body. The cord-soled *espadrilles* render the dance silent, and, as it seems, infinitely light. The only sounds are the rustling of the dresses, and that continual little dry snapping of the fingers imitating the noise of castanets. The girls, whose large sleeves spread out like wings, sway their slender corseted bodies on their

vigorous, supple hips with a grace that is quite Spanish. . . .

Facing one another, Ramuntcho and Gracieuse exchange no word at first, absorbed entirely in the childish delight of moving quickly and in time to the sound of music. This fashion of dancing, in which the bodies never touch, is, for that matter, a very chaste one.

But there are also, in the course of the evening, waltzes and quadrilles, and promenades arm in arm, which permit lovers to touch and speak.

"Ramuntcho," said Gracieuse, "you are thinking of becoming a professional tennis player, aren't you?"

They were walking now arm in arm under the leafless plane-trees, in this night of November, as warm as a night in May, some little distance away from the rest of the dancers, during an interval of silence while the musicians rested.

"Jove! Yes!" replied Ramuntcho. "Amongst us it is an occupation like another, in which one may make a good living, provided the skill is there. And from time to time one can make a tour in South America, as Irun and Gorosteguy did, you know, and bring back, as a result of one season's play, twenty or thirty thousand francs honestly earned on the playing grounds of Buenos Ayres."

"Oh! South America!" cried Gracieuse with thoughtless and joyous impetuosity. "South America, that would be splendid! I have always longed for that! To cross the great ocean and to see the countries beyond! . . . And we could go and seek your uncle,

Ignacio, and my cousins Bidegaina, who have a farm on the border of Uruguay, in the prairies. . . ."

She stopped talking, this little maid who had never left her native village which the mountains enclosed and overhung; she stopped to dream of distant countries, which haunted her young imagination, because, like the majority of the Basques, she had had emigrant ancestors —men known here as Americans or Indians, who had passed their adventurous life on the other side of the ocean, and returned to their beloved village only in old age, to die there. And while she was dreaming thus, her face upturned, her eyes gazing into the black of the clouds and the imprisoning mountains, Ramuntcho felt his blood run fast, felt his heart beat hard, in his intense joy at the words she had just so spontaneously said. And, his head bent towards her, his voice infinitely gentle and winning, he asked her, half jestingly:

"*We* could go? That is what you said, you know: *We* could go, you and I together? That means that you would be willing a little later on, when we shall be of age, to marry me?"

He perceived, in the darkness, the soft dark eyes of Gracieuse raised to his with an expression of surprise and reproach:

"What . . . you did not know that?"

"I wanted to make you say it, you see . . . I have been waiting for you to say it."

He pressed the arm of his little fiancée, and they walked on more slowly. It is true that they had never spoken of this before, partly, perhaps, because it seemed to them a thing that went without saying, but mainly

because they felt themselves checked when on the point of speaking by the fear lest, after all, they might be deceived, and that their dream might not come true. . . . But now they knew, they had no doubt. And it was borne in on them that they had just crossed the serious and solemn threshold of life. And leaning one upon the other, they almost reeled in their slow promenade, like two children, drunk with youth, and joy, and hope.

"But do you think your mother will consent?" asked Ramuntcho timidly, after a long, delicious silence.

"Ah! I wonder!" replied his little sweetheart with a sigh of uneasiness. "Arrochkoa, my brother, will be on our side, in all probability. But Mama? I wonder will she consent? But in any case it could not be immediately. You have to serve your term in the Army."

"No, if you wish it! No, I can avoid the military service! I am a Guipuzcoan, like my mother. They will not take me as a conscript unless I ask it. . . . It shall be as you decide. What you wish I will do."

"Ramuntcho, I think it would be better that I should wait a little longer for you, and that you should be naturalised, and become a soldier like the others. That is my opinion, since you wish me to give it. . . ."

"Good, that is your opinion? So much the better, for it is mine also. French or Spanish, why, what does it matter? At your will, you understand! I like one as well as the other: I am a Basque, as you are, and as all of us are; the rest is of no account. But to be a soldier somewhere, either on this side of the frontier or

the other, I like that well: in the first place evasion has a cowardly look, and secondly, to speak frankly, the idea of military service attracts me. To be a soldier and see the world are things after my own heart."

"Very well then, Ramuntcho, since it is indifferent to you, do your military service in France. So shall I be more content."

"So be it, Gatchutcha! You will see me in red trousers, then. I shall return to the village, like Bidegarry and Joachim, and visit you in uniform. And as soon as my three years are done, we shall marry, shall we not, if your mother consents?"

After a silence again, Gracieuse replied in a lower voice, solemnly this time:

"Listen, Ramuntcho. I am like you, you know; I am afraid of her . . . of my mother. . . . But listen, if she refuses us, we will do together, no matter what, anything you like, for that is the one thing in the world in which I will not obey her."

And then silence fell between them again, now that they were pledged to one another, the incomparable silence of young happiness, of new and hitherto unknown happiness, which has need of quiet and reflection for the better understanding of all its wonderful profundity.

They were walking very slowly now and, without thinking, towards the church, in the soft darkness which the lanterns no longer troubled, intoxicated merely by their innocent contact and the feeling that they were walking side by side, on this road where none had followed them.

But some little distance away, for they had wandered farther afield than usual, the sound of the brass instruments suddenly breaks out anew, in a kind of slow and rather fantastically rhythmed waltz. And the two lovers, really only children still, without consulting one another, as if it were a matter of obligation not admitting of discussion, turned their steps towards the place where the couples were dancing so that they might miss none of it. Quickly they take up their position, one facing the other, and begin the steps of the dance, always without speaking, with the same graceful movements of the arms, the same supple movements of the hips. From time to time, without losing step or distance, they sheer off together in a line as straight as an arrow's, in one direction or another. But this is only a customary variant of this particular dance, and, always in time, quickly, in the manner of people sliding, they return to their point of departure.

Gracieuse brought to the dance the same impassioned eagerness as she gave to her praying in front of the white chapels—the same eagerness as she would give later on, no doubt, to her embrace of Ramuntcho, when caresses between them should no longer be forbidden. And at intervals of every five or six bars, at the same time as her nimble and graceful partner, she made a complete turn, the body bent back with Spanish grace, the head upturned, the lips half-opened on the fresh whiteness of the teeth. A rare and distinguished grace radiated from her whole little person still so mysterious, which to Ramuntcho alone had surrendered itself a little.

Throughout this beautiful evening of November they danced thus, one facing the other, silent and charming, with intervals in which they walked alone together, still hardly speaking, and then only of childish and insignificant things—thrilled into silence, both of them, by this sweet and wonderful discovery which filled their soul.

And until the curfew sounded from the church, this little ball under the branches of autumn, these little lanterns, this little fête in this remote corner of the world, threw a little light, a little joyous music, into the dark void of the night, which the mountains ranged all round, like shadowy giants, made blacker and more obscure.

CHAPTER VI

THERE was to be a great tennis match on the following Sunday, on the feast of St Damase, in the town of Hasparitz.

Arrochkoa and Ramuntcho, constant companions in journeys about the neighbouring countryside, had travelled the whole day long in the little trap belonging to the Detcharrys for the purpose of organising the match which to them was an event of considerable importance.

First they had been to consult Marcos, the elder of the Iragola brothers. They found him seated on the stump of a chestnut-tree at the door of his house, which was almost hidden among the trees in the corner of a wood. Grave as usual, grave and sculpturesque, the eyes inspired, the gesture noble, he was in the act of feeding a little baby brother still in long clothes.

"This is the little eleventh, isn't it?" they asked him, laughing.

"Ah! nonsense," replied the big eldest brother. "The eleventh of us is already running like a rabbit in the heather. This is the twelfth! He is little Jean Baptiste, you know, the latest little arrival, who, I think, will not be the last."

And afterwards, bending low so that they should not

strike their head against the branches, they had passed through woods, through forests of oaks beneath which stretched to infinity the reddish foliage of the ferns.

And they had passed through many villages also—Basque villages, grouped all of them round the two things which are their heart, and symbolise their life: the church and the tennis ground. Here and there, they had knocked at the door of isolated houses, large, high houses, carefully whitewashed, with green shutters and wooden balconies on which strings of red pimentos were drying in the last of the autumn sun. They had parleyed long, in that language of theirs which is so closed to the foreigners of France, with famous players and accredited champions—those whose strange names appear in the newspapers of the south-west, on the posters of Biarritz and St Jean de Luz, and who, in their ordinary life, are genial landlords of the country inns, blacksmiths, smugglers.

And now that all was settled, and firm promises had been obtained, it was too late to return that night to their home in Etchezar. And so, following their roving habits, they choose, as a resting-place for the night, a village to their taste, Zitzarry by name, which they had often frequented before in the course of their smuggling adventures. At the close of day, therefore, they turn their horse's head in the direction of this village which is not far away, and close to the Spanish frontier. And on they go, always by the same little Pyrenean roads, shadowy and lonely under the old oak trees now nearly bare of leaves, between banks carpeted with moss and rusty-looking ferns. And sometimes they are

in ravines where torrents roar, and sometimes on high ground from which may be seen on all sides the great, darkening mountains.

At first it is cold, with a real cold that stings the face and strikes into the lungs. But presently they run into puffs of air astonishingly warm and impregnated with the scent of plants: it is the south wind, almost African, which has risen again, bringing with it all at once an illusion of summer. And it becomes for them a sheer delight to cleave the air so suddenly changed, to travel quickly against the warm breezes, in the music of the little bells of their horse, which gallops madly now up the hills, sensing the resting-place for the night.

Zitzarry is a smuggler's village, isolated, remote, almost on the frontier. Their inn is dilapidated and evil-looking, and, as is commonly the case, the lodging for men is directly above the black-looking stables. Arrochkoa and Ramuntcho are well-known there, and while a fire is being lighted for them, they sit down by an old-fashioned mullioned window which looks out on the square or playing ground and the church. And they watch the close of the tranquil little life of the day in this place so remote from the world.

Outside, on the square, the children are playing the national game; serious, eager, already skilful, they hurl the ball against the wall, while one of them, in a sing-song voice, and with the intonation prescribed by tradition, counts and announces the points in the mysterious ancestral language. Around, the tall houses, old and white, with warped walls and over-hanging eaves, contemplate from their green and red

windows these nimble young players who are skipping about in the twilight like young cats. And the ox-wagons return from the fields with a music of bells, bringing in loads of wood, loads of whins, and loads of dead ferns. Slowly the evening closes in, with its peace and its mournful chilliness. Then the Angelus sounds, and over all the village there descends the tranquil meditation of prayer.

And Ramuntcho, sitting silent at the window, chafes at his destiny, feels himself somehow a prisoner here, with always those same aspirations towards a vague unknown which used to trouble him at the approach of night. And his heart contracts, too, in the thought that he is alone and without standing in the world, that Gracieuse is of a station different from his, and perhaps may never be given to him.

But now Arrochkoa, very friendly this evening, in one of his good moods, slaps him on the shoulder as if he guessed the drift of his thoughts, and says to him, in a tone of gay geniality :

" Well! It seems you compared notes yesterday evening, you and my sister. She told me about it—and that you are both of one mind."

Ramuntcho looked up at him with an expression of grave and anxious interrogation, in strange contrast with the manner in which Arrochkoa opened the conversation.

" And what do you think of it? " he asked. " Of what passed between us? "

" Oh, I, my dear fellow," replied Arrochkoa, becoming serious in his turn, " on my honour, I am

very pleased! And, as I foresee there may be difficulty with my mother, if you want any help, I am ready to give it you. So there!"

And the melancholy of Ramuntcho was scattered as dust is scattered when one blows upon it. He found the supper delicious and the inn quite gay. He felt much more the betrothed of Gracieuse now that someone was in his confidence, and someone of the family who did not repulse him. He had been inclined to think that Arrochkoa would not be hostile to him, but this assistance so freely offered exceeded his fondest hopes. Poor little waif, so conscious of the humbleness of his situation, that the support of another child, a little better established in life, should suffice to give him courage and confidence!

CHAPTER VII

In the uncertain and chilly dawn, he awoke, in his little inn bedroom, with a persistent impression of his happiness of yesterday, in place of the vague feeling of distress which so often accompanied for him the return of consciousness. Outside he heard the bells of the herds setting out for the pastures, the lowing of the cows in greeting to the day, the sound of the church bells—and, already, against the wall of the playing ground, the crisp rap of the Basque tennis ball: all the sounds of a Pyrenean village resuming its customary life for a new day. And to Ramuntcho it all seemed like the morning serenade of a day of festival.

At an early hour Arrochkoa and he climbed into their little carriage, and pulling down their bonnets against the wind, set out at a gallop along roads slightly powdered with hoar frost.

At Etchezar, when they arrived at midday, the sun was shining brilliantly, and it seemed like summer.

In the little garden in front of her house, Gracieuse was sitting on the stone bench.

"I have spoken to Arrochkoa!" said Ramuntcho to her, with a happy smile, as soon as they were alone. "And he is wholeheartedly on our side!"

"Oh!" replied his little sweetheart, without losing the pensive and rather mournful air she wore this

morning. "Oh, yes! I expected that; I was sure of that. A tennis player like you, you know, that was bound to please him. For him that is the strongest recommendation one could have."

"But your mother, Gatchutcha, for some days now she has been kinder to me, I think . . . on Sunday, for example, don't you remember, when I asked you about the dance?"

"Oh! don't rely on that, Ramuntcho! You mean the day before yesterday as we came out from Mass? She had just been talking to the Mother Superior, didn't you notice? And the Mother Superior had pressed her strongly not to allow me to dance with you any more on the square; it was simply to annoy her, you know. Oh! do not rely on that, Ramuntcho!"

"Ah!" replied Ramuntcho, his happiness at once damped. "It is true that they don't get on well together."

"Get on well together, Mama and the Reverend Mother! Oh, yes, like cat and dog! Ever since it was a question of my entering the convent; don't you remember the fuss there was?"

He remembered it very well, too well, in fact, and it terrified him still. The smiling and mysterious black nuns had once tried to attract into the peace of their convent this little fair-haired maiden, so impressionable, so eager to please, and possessed by an immense need of loving and being loved.

"Gatchutcha, you are always in the convent or with the nuns. Why so often? Tell me, do you love them so much?"

"The nuns? Oh, no, Ramuntcho, those who are here now, at any rate. They are new-comers, and I scarcely know them. They are often changed, you know. . . . The nuns, no . . . and as for the Reverend Mother, I am like Mama, I cannot stand her."

"Then what is it?"

"No, but I love their canticles, their chapels, their convent, everything. . . . I cannot explain it to you. And, besides, boys would not understand."

Her little smile, as she said this, died away at once, and gave place to a contemplative expression, an expression of abstraction, of *absence*, which Ramuntcho had often noticed in her before. She was gazing attentively in front of her, where, nevertheless, there was nothing but the empty road, the leafless trees, and the brown mass of the crushing mountain; but it seemed that Gracieuse was ravished in melancholy ecstasy by things perceived in the distance, by things which the eyes of Ramuntcho could not discern. And while they were silent thus, the Angelus began to sound, throwing an even greater peace upon the tranquil village basking now in the winter sun; and, bowing their heads, they made together, simply, the sign of the cross.

Then, when the holy bell, which in the Basque villages interrupts the affairs of men as the chant of the *muezzins* does in the East, had finished its vibrations, Ramuntcho found resolution to say:

"It frightens me, Gatchutcha, to see you always in their company . . . I cannot help asking myself what is the idea you have in your mind."

Fixing upon him the deep darkness of her eyes, she replied in a tone of gentle reproach:

"Come, come! Is it you who speak to me in this way, after what passed between us on Sunday evening? If I lost you, then, perhaps, yes! Even certainly, then! But until then, oh, no! . . . Oh! don't worry, dear Ramuntcho."

For a long time he met her gaze, which gradually restored in him the old delightful confidence, and he finished by smiling the smile of a child:

"Forgive me," he asked. "I say stupid things very often, as you know."

"That is very true."

And they laughed out loud together, laughter which, in different intonations, had the same freshness and the same youth. Ramuntcho, with characteristic movements, at once brusque and graceful, threw his jacket over his shoulder, and pulled his bonnet on one side; and, without other adieu than a slight inclination of the head, they separated, for Dolores had made her appearance in the distance at the end of the road.

CHAPTER VIII

MIDNIGHT. A winter's night as black as pitch, with a wild wind and a beating rain. On the edge of the Bidassoa, across a confused expanse of treacherous ground which awakens ideas of chaos, through mud into which their feet sink deep, some men are moving, carrying boxes on their shoulders. They enter the water up to their knees and then fling themselves into a long thing blacker than the night which should be a boat—a boat suspect and without a light moored close to the bank.

It is Itchoua's band again, which this time is going to operate by river. They had slept a brief while, in their clothes, in the house of a receiver who lived near the waterside, and, at the appointed hour, Itchoua, who never closed both eyes, had roused them; and they had set out stealthily in the darkness, under the cold downpour which is favourable to their enterprise.

And they are rowing now towards Spain, the lights of which can be seen in the distance, blurred by the rain. It is a wild night; the shirts of the men are soaked already and, under the bonnets pulled down over their eyes, the wind bites their ears. Nevertheless, thanks to the strength that is in their arms, they were making way fast when suddenly in the darkness a monstrous thing

appeared which seemed to glide over the water towards them. A most unlucky business! It is the boat which takes round at night the Spanish customs men. They have to change their course hastily, to dodge, to waste precious time when they are late already.

Nevertheless, they arrive at last, without accident, before the Spanish shore, among the large fishing boats which, on stormy nights, sleep there at their moorings, alongside the quai of Fontarabia. Now is the ticklish time. Fortunately the rain is faithful to them and still falls in torrents. Crouched in their boat so as not to be seen, uttering no word, pushing against the bottom with their oars in order to make less noise, gradually, very gradually, they close in, stopping whenever they imagine they see something move in the ensemble of diffused darkness and shapeless shadows.

Now they are crouched against one of the large, empty fishing boats, almost touching the quai. And this is the agreed point, it is here that their comrades of Spain should be waiting to receive them, and to carry their boxes to the house of the receiver. But there is no sign of them! Where can they be? The first moments pass in a kind of paroxysm of expectation and watching which doubles the sense of hearing and sight. They wait with eyes dilated and ears strained, under the monotonous downpour of the rain. Where can they be, these Spanish comrades of theirs? No doubt the hour was past on account of that damnable customs boat which had driven them out of their course, and their confederates, thinking the business had failed for this night, had gone away. . . .

A few more minutes passed, in the same immobility and the same silence. Around, the large, inert fishing boats could be discerned, like the carcasses of floating beasts; and, above the water, darker than the darkness of the sky, a mass of solid blackness, the houses and the mountains of the shore. They wait without a movement or a word; like phantom boatmen outside a dead town.

Slowly the tension of their senses relaxes, a lassitude comes to them, with a desire to sleep, and they would have lain down where they were, in this heavy rain of winter, if the place had not been so dangerous.

Presently Itchoua took counsel, speaking low in Basque, with the two oldest of the band, and they decided to do a daring thing. Since the others did not come, why then, so much the worse, they would go to them, carrying their boxes of contraband to the house beyond. It was extremely risky, but having once entertained the idea, nothing would now stop them.

"You," said Itchoua to Ramuntcho, in that way he had which admitted no question, "you, my man, will be the one to guard the boat, since you do not know the road we must follow. Moor it quite close to the bank, but not too firmly, you understand, so that you may be ready to slip off without noise if the carabiniers come."

Then they went away, all the rest of the band, their shoulders bent under their heavy burdens; the scarcely perceptible sound of their footsteps on the black and deserted quai was quickly lost in the monotonous patter of the rain. And Ramuntcho, left alone, crouching in the bottom of the boat so as not to be seen, became still

once more, under the incessant downpour of the rain, which was now falling softly and steadily.

His comrades were a long time in returning, and by degrees, in this inaction and silence, an irresistible torpor gained upon him, and he fell almost asleep.

But now a long shape, darker than the darkness all about, passes him, passes very quickly—always in that same absolute silence which seems to mark in a special manner this nocturnal enterprise: one of the large Spanish fishing boats! But how can that be, he wonders, since they are all at anchor, since this particular one has neither sails nor rowers? Then he realises that it is he himself who is moving. The boat was moored too lightly, and the current, very rapid at this point, was carrying him along, and he had already travelled far towards the mouth of the Bidassoa, towards the breakers, towards the sea. . . .

He is seized with anxiety, almost with despair. What can he do? And what complicates the situation is that it is necessary to act without calling for help, without making any noise, for along the whole length of this coast, which looks like a country of dark emptiness, there are riflemen strung out in an interminable cordon, who keep guard each night over Spain as over a forbidden land. He tries, with one of the long oars, to push against the bottom, and so make way against the current; but he can no longer reach the bottom; he finds only the inconsistency of the dark, running water; he is already in the deep channel. He must row, therefore, and take his chance!

Laboriously, in the sweat of his brow, he works the

heavy boat back against the current, fearful, at each stroke, lest the creaking of the oars, which an alert ear on the bank might so easily hear, should disclose his presence. To add to his misfortunes the rain becomes heavier and blurs his vision. He can see nothing. It is dark, dark as in the bowels of the earth where the devil dwells. He is unable to recognise the place where he was moored, the place where he should be waiting for his comrades. They may be lost, taken, and he will be the cause. He hesitates, stops, his ears strained, his heart thumping, and clings, for a moment's thought, to one of the Spanish fishing boats. And now something is approaching him, gliding, as with infinite precautions, over the water, which it scarcely ripples. Something in human shape, it seems; the dark silhouette of a man standing—a smuggler, surely, to be making so little noise! They become aware of one another, and, merciful heavens! it is Arrochkoa; Arrochkoa who has unfastened a frail Spanish canoe in order to try and find him. He comes alongside, and they are probably saved, all of them, once more.

But Arrochkoa, in coming up to him, utters in a voice of suppressed rage, a voice that hisses like that of an angry cat, a stream of insults that calls for an immediate reply, and sounds like a challenge to combat. . . . It was so unexpected that stupefaction at first deprives Ramuntcho of speech, checks the flow of blood to his vivacious head. Did his friend really say that, and in such a tone of undeniable insult?

"What do you say?"

"Damnation!" replied Arrochkoa, a little

softened, nevertheless, and on his guard, observing, in the darkness, Ramuntcho's attitude. "Damnation! You have very nearly got us all taken, fool that you are!"

Meanwhile the silhouettes of the others have appeared in a neighbouring boat.

"There they are!" he went on. "Take the oars! Pull up to them!"

And Ramuntcho sat down again between the thwarts, his temples burning with anger, his hands trembling. . . . No, it must not be. Besides . . . he was Gracieuse's brother: all would be lost if he fought with him; for her sake he bowed his head and said nothing.

Now their boat is rowed rapidly away, carrying them all; the trick is done. It was none too soon; two Spanish voices are sounding on the black river-bank; two carabiniers who were sleeping in their cloaks, and whom the noise awakened. And they begin to hail the fleeing, lightless boat, not so much seen as suspected, lost immediately in the universal confusion of the night.

"Too late, my friends!" chuckled Itchoua, rowing for all he was worth. "Hail as you please now, and may the devil answer you."

The current also helps them; they draw away in the thick darkness with the speed of fishes.

Ugh! Now they are in French waters, in safety, not far, no doubt, from the mud of the shore.

"Let us stop a little and take breath," proposed Itchoua.

They raise their oars, breathless all, and saturated with perspiration and the rain. And now they are once more motionless under the cold downpour which they do not seem to feel. There is no sound in the vast silence but that of their breathing, which gradually subsides, and the little music of the raindrops as they fall and patter.

But suddenly from this boat which was so tranquil, and had no more importance than a shadow scarcely real amid so much darkness, a cry rises, shrill, terrifying; it fills the void, and trails away to harrow distant parts. It starts on those high notes which ordinarily belong only to women, but with something of hoarseness and of power which indicates rather the male savage. It has the poignancy of the cry of jackals, but keeps, nevertheless, an indefinable human quality which makes it even more disconcerting. One waits in a kind of distress until it shall finish; and it is so long drawn out that it produces a feeling almost of oppression. It had begun as a kind of high belling of agony, but it turns into, and finally ends, in a kind of laugh, sinister, burlesque, like the laughter of madmen.

Nevertheless, around the man who has just uttered this cry in the bow of the boat, none of the others shows any astonishment, or makes any move. And after a few seconds of silent peace, a new and similar cry starts in the stern, replying to the first, and passing through the same phases—which are of infinitely ancient tradition.

It is simply the *irrintzina*, the great Basque cry, which has been handed down from the dark backward of the ages to the men of our day, and constitutes one

of the strangenesses of this race whose origins are enveloped in mystery. It resembles the call of certain redskin tribes in the forests of North America; and at night it gives the notion and the unfathomable fear of primitive times, when, amid the solitudes of the old world, men used to shriek with the throats of monkeys.

One may hear this cry on days of festival, or sometimes at the fall of evening in the mountains. Especially is it used to celebrate good fortune, an unexpected stroke of luck, a successful hunt, or a good catch in the water of the rivers.

And the smugglers are amusing themselves in this ancestral game. They give voice to celebrate their successful enterprise; they cry out in the physical need to compensate themselves for their silence of a short while before.

But Ramuntcho remains silent and without a smile. This sudden savagery freezes him, although it has for long been familiar to him. It plunges him into confused and disturbing dreams.

And, moreover, he had realised again to-night how uncertain and changeable was the only support he had in the world, the support of this Arrochkoa, on whom, nevertheless, he would have need to count as on a brother. His daring and his success at tennis would, no doubt, restore him to him; but a single failure, the merest nothing, might at any time cause him to lose him again. And it seemed to Ramuntcho now that the hope of his life was without foundation, that all had vanished like an insubstantial chimera.

CHAPTER IX

It was the evening of the feast of St Sylvester.

Throughout the day the sky had remained overcast, as it so often is in the Basque country—suiting well, for that matter, the rugged mountains and the angry, roaring sea below, in the Bay of Biscay.

In the twilight of this last day of the year, at the hour when the log-fires keep men within the little homesteads scattered over the countryside, at the hour when shelter is a good and delightful thing, Ramuntcho and his mother were about to sit down to supper when someone knocked discreetly at the door.

The man who came to them out of the night, at first sight, seemed a stranger to them. It was only when he announced his name, Jose Bidegarry of Hasparitz, that they recalled the sailor who many years before had set sail for America.

"I have," he said, when he had sat down, "a message which I have been charged to bring to you. One day in Rosario in Uruguay, as I was talking at the docks to some other Basque immigrants there, a man, who might be about fifty years of age, hearing me talk of Etchezar, came up to me.

"'Do you belong to Etchezar?' he asked me.

"'No, but to the town of Hasparitz, which is not far away.'

'Then he began to question me about all your family. I told him: 'The old people are dead, the elder brother was killed in a smuggling enterprise; the second disappeared to America. There remains only Franchita with her son Ramuntcho, a strapping young fellow, who must now be about eighteen years old.'

"He was very thoughtful while I was speaking.

"'Well,' he said, by way of finishing our conversation, 'since you are returning to those parts, will you wish them good-day from Ignacio.'

"And after offering me a glass of wine he went away."

Franchita had risen, trembling, and paler even than usual. Ignacio, the most adventurous of the family, her brother who ten years before had disappeared and of whom since they had had no tidings!

"How was he? How did he look? How was he dressed? Did he seem prosperous or was he poor?"

"Oh!" replied the sailor, "he looked well still, in spite of his grey hairs. As for his dress, he seemed a man in good circumstances, with a fine gold chain at his waist."

And that was all he could say, simply that, in addition to the curious and rude good-day of which he was the bearer; of the exile himself he knew nothing, and perhaps, until the day of her death, Franchita would hear no more of this brother, who had become almost non-existent like a ghost.

Then, after he had drunk a glass of cider, this strange messenger, who was bound for his own village higher up the mountain, resumed his journey. And

mother and son took their places again at the table without speaking: the silent Franchita, distraught, with tears glistening in her eyes; Ramuntcho, troubled also, but in a different way, by the thought of this uncle of his, living a life of adventure overseas.

When Ramuntcho, as he emerged from childhood, began to play truant from school, and to want to follow the smugglers into the mountains, Franchita had often scolded him saying:

"You take after your uncle, Ignacio. You will never do any good!"

It was true that he took after his uncle, Ignacio, and that, like him, he was fascinated by everything that was dangerous, unknown, and distant.

And this evening, therefore, if she did not speak to her son about the message which had just been transmitted to them, it was because she divined the direction of his thoughts, and was afraid of his replies. And, moreover, among the people of the countryside, indeed among the common people generally, the profound and intimate little dramas of life are often played without words, with misunderstandings that are never cleared up, phrases that are conjectured merely, and obstinate silences.

But as they were finishing their meal, they heard a chorus of young, happy voices approaching, accompanied by a drum: the young lads of the village, coming to fetch Ramuntcho and take him with them in their musical procession through the village. It is a custom thus to serenade the village on the night of the feast of St Sylvester, the singers calling at each house, drinking

cider there, and singing a joyous carol to a tune of olden times.

And Ramuntcho, forgetting Uruguay and the mysterious uncle, becomes a child again in the pleasure of joining them and singing with them along the dark roadways; and what pleases him most is the thought that they will call at the house of the Detcharrys and that he will see Gracieuse.

CHAPTER X

THE changeable month of March has come, and with it the intoxication of spring, joyous to the young, melancholy to those who grow old.

And Gracieuse has begun again to sit, in the twilight of the lengthening days, on the stone bench in front of her house.

Oh! those old stone benches, about the houses, made in times long past, for the reveries of the summer evenings, and for lovers' whisperings eternally the same!

Gracieuse's house was very ancient, as are most of the houses in this Basque country, where the years change things less than elsewhere. It had two storeys; a large, overhanging and steeply sloping roof; walls like the walls of a fortress, which were limewashed every summer; very small windows in settings of carved granite, with green shutters. Above the front door, a granite lintel bore an inscription in relief, long, complicated words which, to a French eye, were like nothing known. It said: "May the Holy Virgin bless this house, built in the year 1630 by Pierre Detcharry, verger, and his wife Damasa Irribarne, of the village of Isparitz." A little garden some six feet wide, surrounded by a low wall, which permitted one to see the

passers-by, separated the house from the road. It had in it a fine, hardy rose-laurel, spreading its meridional foliage above the stone bench of the evenings; and in addition some yuccas, a palm-tree, and several large tufts of hydrangea, which grows to a great size in this country of shadows, under this warm sky so often enveloped in clouds. Finally, there was behind it an orchard, indifferently enclosed, which sloped down to a deserted lane, and was easy of access to lovers.

Oh! the radiant light of the mornings of this spring-time, and the tranquillity of the rose-coloured evenings!

There had been a week of full moon, during which the country was bathed in blue rays right up to daybreak, and Itchoua's men had perforce remained idle —so clear was their habitual domain, so illumined were the great misty backgrounds of the Pyrenees and Spain. Now, when the slim crescent had become discreet, and was rising in the morning, the smuggling recommenced with renewed zest. And, in the fine weather which now prevailed, this smuggling by night was a delightful occupation, an occupation of solitude and reverie in which the soul of these simple and very pardonable wrongdoers grew unconsciously in contemplation of the sky, of the dark depths powdered with stars; as grows the soul of the sailormen who keep the watches of the night on board ship; as grew long ago the soul of the shepherds in ancient Chaldea.

It was a favourable and tempting time also for lovers, this balmy period which followed the full moon of March, for it brought a friendly darkness about the houses, and to the tree-shaded lanes, and it made

especially dark the deserted lane, along which no one ever passed, behind the orchard of the Detcharrys.

And Gracieuse lived more and more on the bench in front of her house.

It was there she sat, as every year, to receive and watch the dancers of the carnival: those groups of young men and young women of Spain or France, who, every spring, organise themselves for some days in a touring band, and, clothed all alike in pink or white, go the round of the villages of the frontier, dancing the fandango before the houses, with castanets. . . .

Later and later into the evening she used to linger in this place which she loved, beneath the shade of the rose-laurel now nearly in blossom; and sometimes even she would creep out by the window, stealthily and without noise, after her mother had gone to bed, and remain there for a long time breathing deeply the fragrant air. And Ramuntcho knew this, and, at night, the thought of this bench troubled his sleep.

CHAPTER XI

One fine April morning Gracieuse and Ramuntcho were making their way together towards the church. With an air half-serious and half-mocking, a very comical little air, and one peculiarly her own, she was taking him to do a penance she had given him.

In the churchyard the flower-beds of the tombs were bursting into flower; and the rose-trees against the walls were in bloom. Once again the new life-giving sap was awakening above the long sleep of the dead. Together they entered the church where the old woman sacristan in her black mantle was alone, dusting the altars.

When Gracieuse had given Ramuntcho holy water, and they had made the sign of the cross, she led him across the resonant nave paved with memorial slabs up to a strange picture hanging on a wall in a dark corner, beneath the galleries reserved for the men.

It was a picture, impressed with an ancient mysticism, representing the face of Jesus, the eyes closed, the forehead bleeding, the expression lamentable and dead; the head seemed to have been cut off, separated from the body, and placed there upon a grey cloth. Below were written the long *Litanies of the Holy Face*, which were composed, as everyone knows, to be said as a penance by repentant blasphemers. The evening before, Ramuntcho, being very angry, had

sworn most villainously : a quite unimaginable stream of words, in which the sacraments and the holiest of things were mixed up with the horns of the devil and other even more frightful horrors. That is why the need for a penance had impressed itself on the mind of Gracieuse.

"Now, Ramuntcho," she said, as she turned to leave him, "don't omit anything of what must be said."

And she left him before the Holy Face, commencing to murmur the Litanies in a low voice, and joined the old housekeeper to help her to change the water of the white Easter daisies before the altar of the Virgin.

But when the languorous evening came, and Gracieuse was sitting dreaming in the darkness on her stone bench, a young human form rose suddenly before her, someone who had approached in *espadrilles*, without making more noise than the silky owls in the air, coming, no doubt, from the bottom of the garden, after climbing the wall, and who now stood there, straight and vigorous, his jacket thrown over one shoulder, none other than he to whom went out all her earthly tenderness, none other than he who was the incarnation of the ardent dream of her heart and senses.

"Ramuntcho!" she said. "Oh! how you frightened me! Where are you going at such an hour? What do you want? Why have you come?"

"Why have I come? In my turn, to give you a penance," he replied, laughing.

"No, be serious, what is the matter? What have you come for?"

"Why, to see you, simply. It is for that I have come. What do you think! We never see each other now! Your mother gets colder to me every day. I cannot live like this. We do no wrong, after all, since we are going to marry, aren't we? And, you know, I can come every evening, if you wish, and no one need be any wiser."

"Oh, no! Oh! do not do that, ever, I beg of you."

They talked for a time, very, very quietly, with more of silence than words, as if they feared to awaken the birds in their nests. They did not recognise now the sound of their voices, they were so altered, and they trembled so, as if they felt, these two, that they were committing some delicious and damnable crime by merely remaining near each other in the great caressing mystery of this night so pregnant with rising sap, with germinations, and with love.

He had not dared even to sit by her side. He remained standing, ready to hide beneath the branches at the least alarm, as if he had been a common thief.

And when he was about to depart, it was she who asked, in confusion, hesitatingly, and so that she could scarcely be heard:

"And . . . you will come to-morrow?"

He smiled to see this sudden change of mind, and replied:

"Why yes, indeed I will! To-morrow and every night. Every night on which we have not work to do in Spain . . . I will come. . . ."

CHAPTER XII

RAMUNTCHO'S lodging, just above the stable of his mother's house, was a room very neatly limewashed. He had in it his bed, always neat and clean, but nowadays his smuggling enterprises left him but few hours in which to sleep in it. Some books of travel, lent to him by the curate of the parish church, lay on the table—things rather unexpected in such a dwelling. Framed portraits of different saints ornamented the walls, and a number of tennis gloves hung from the beams of the ceiling—those long gloves of wicker and leather which look more like hunters' snares or fishing tackle.

Franchita, when she returned to her native village, had bought this house, which had belonged to her deceased parents, with a portion of the money given to her by the stranger when her son was born. The rest she had invested. And she eked out her slender subsistence by dressmaking for the womenfolk of Etchezar, and letting to some farmers of an adjacent property two of the lower rooms, with the stable in which they kept their cows and sheep.

Diverse little sounds, making a familiar music, lulled Ramuntcho in his bed. First the constant murmur of a torrent near by. Then the morning serenade of the different birds, and sometimes the songs of nightingales.

And, in the spring especially, the cows, his neighbours in the stable below, excited, no doubt, by the scent of the new grass, moved restlessly throughout the night, in uneasy dreams, with a continual tinkling of their bells.

Often, after the long expeditions of the night, he used to make up his arrears of sleep in the afternoon, stretched in some shady corner, grassy and mossy. Moreover, like the other smugglers, he scarcely ever rose early for a village lad. Often he did not waken until the sun was up and shafts of bright, cheerful light were coming through the badly joined planks of his floor from the stable below—where the door was always left wide open to the morning after the departure of the beasts for the pastures. Then he would go to his window, push open the little old shutter of massive chestnut wood painted olive colour, and, leaning on the thick wall, gaze out upon the clouds or the sunshine of the new morning.

What he saw there, all about his house, was amazingly, magnificently green. The ferns, which in autumn take on the warm colour of rust, were now, in this month of April, in the first splendour of their green freshness, and covered the mountain-side as with an immense carpet of thick, crisp wool, sprinkled everywhere with the pink flowers of the foxglove. Below, in the ravine, the torrent roared beneath the branches. Above, clumps of oaks and beeches hung on the slopes, alternating with meadowland. And, higher still, above this tranquil Eden, mounting into the sky, was the bare summit of Gizune, lord and master of the

region of the clouds. And he could see, too, a little to one side, the church and the houses—the village of Etchezar, perched high and solitary on one of the spurs of the Pyrenees, away from everything, away from the lines of communication which have disturbed and destroyed the low-lying country of the shore; sheltered from the curious, from the profanations of the foreigner, and living still its Basque life of ancient days.

The awakenings of Ramuntcho were impregnated, at this window, with peace and simple-minded serenity. And they were full of happiness, too, these lover's awakenings, now that he was sure of finding Gracieuse in the evening at the appointed trysting-place. The vague uneasiness, the undefined sadness, which formerly accompanied in him the daily return of consciousness, had disappeared for a time, driven away by the memory and the expectation of these meetings. His life was wholly changed. As soon as he opened his eyes he had the impression of an immense and mysterious enchantment, enveloping him in the midst of this verdure and these flowers of April. And this peace of spring, seen anew each morning, seemed to him each time a thing fresh and wonderful, very different from what it had been in previous years, infinitely soothing to his heart, and voluptuous to his flesh, with undercurrents unfathomable and ravishing. . . .

CHAPTER XIII

It is the evening of Easter Sunday, after the village bells have become silent, and the holy vibrations, which came from Spain and France, have ceased to mingle in the air.

Sitting on the bank of the Bidassoa, Ramuntcho and Florentino are watching for the coming of a boat. There is now absolute silence, and all the church bells are asleep. The mild twilight is prolonged, and merely to breathe is to get an impression of the coming summer.

As soon as night falls a smuggler's boat, laden with phosphorus, an article strictly prohibited, will creep out from the Spanish shore. It will not come close to the bank and, to secure the forbidden merchandise, they will have to go out on foot into the bed of the river. And they will carry long tapering rods, to give them, if by chance they are caught, the appearance of innocent fishermen.

The water of the Bidassoa on this night is a clear, motionless mirror, a little more luminous than the sky, in which are reproduced, inverted, the constellations of the firmament, and the great Spanish mountain opposite, in dark silhouette against the tranquil sky. The approach of summer becomes more and more palpable, so gentle and calm is the falling night, with such a languorous warmth has the evening imbued this little

corner of the world in which the smugglers are silently at work.

But this estuary which separates the two countries seems to Ramuntcho at this moment more melancholy than usual, more enclosed, more immured by these black mountains before him, at the foot of which here and there gleam fitfully two or three uncertain lights. And he is seized by his old desire to know what is beyond, and beyond that again. . . . Oh! to get away, to escape, at any rate for a time, from the oppression of this country which, nevertheless, he loves so well! Before he dies, to escape from the monotony of this existence which never changes, and has no issue! To try something else, to get away, to travel, to know!

And while he watches the nearer distance from which the boat will emerge, he raises his eyes from time to time towards what is passing above, in the infinite distance of the heavens; he gazes at the new moon, whose slim crescent, a mere thin line, is sinking and about to disappear; he gazes at the stars, whose slow and regular progress, like all those who follow his calling, he has watched so often in the long night hours; and the proportions and the inconceivable distances of these things trouble him in the inmost places of his being.

In his village of Etchezar, the old priest, who had formerly taught him his Catechism, interested by his young awakening intelligence, had lent him books, had continued to talk with him on a thousand subjects, and, in the matter of the stars, had given him the notion of

their movements and their immensity, had opened before his eyes the great abysms of time and space. And as time went on the innate doubts, the fears and the despairs which slumbered in his soul, all that gloomy legacy which he had inherited from his father, took black shape and grew. And under the great dome of night, his Basque faith began to fail. His soul was no longer simple enough to admit blindly the dogmas and the observances of the church, and, as all became incoherence and disorder in his young and ill-prepared head, he did not know, for want of a guiding mind, that it is wise to submit, to submit even with confidence, to the venerable and consecrated formulas, behind which is hidden perhaps all that we may glimpse of the unknowable verities.

And so the bells of Easter, which even last year had filled him with tranquil religious sentiment, this time seemed to him no more than insignificant music, rather melancholy, and almost vain. And now, when they had become silent, he listened, with undefined sadness, to the distant sound, powerful, dull, almost incessant since the beginning of time, of the breakers of the Bay of Biscay, which on calm nights may be heard far inland, even on the other side of the mountains.

But his wandering dream changes again. . . . Now the estuary, which has become quite dark, so that the mass of human habitations can no longer be distinguished, seems to him gradually to become different, and then, suddenly, strange, as if some mystery were about to be accomplished there. He sees now only the great abrupt lines which are almost eternal, and is

surprised to find himself thinking confusedly of most ancient times, of an antiquity dark and uncertain. The Spirit of the Old Ages which, on calm nights, sometimes issues from the earth in the hours when the disturbing beings of our day are asleep, the Spirit of the Old Ages is beginning, no doubt, to hover in the air around him. He did not so explain it to himself, for his sense of artist and of seer, for want of education, remained rudimentary, but he had the notion and the thrill of it. Still and always there was in his head a chaos, which was perpetually seeking to resolve itself, and as perpetually failing. Nevertheless, when the crescent of the moon, looking larger now, and reddish, sank slowly behind the black mountain, the aspect of things for an inappreciable moment became somehow forbidding and primitive; and a dying impression of the original epochs, which had remained, who shall say where, in space, became on a sudden distinct to him, and troubled him so that he shuddered. And now, involuntarily, his thoughts turn to those men of the forest who lived here "once upon a time," in a time incalculably remote and obscure, for suddenly, from a distant point on the shore, a long Basque cry rings out in the darkness in a mournful falsetto: an *irrintzina*, the one thing in this country of his with which he has never become familiar. But a great discordant and mocking noise comes now from the distance, a clatter of iron, and a shrieking of whistles: a train from Paris to Madrid which passes, behind them, in the darkness of the French shore. And the Spirit of the Old Ages folds its shadowy wings and vanishes. In vain the silence returns. After the passage of this

tion, walking heavily and clumsily. And when the little laughers questioned them, in that mocking tone which girls, when they are in force, commonly assume in talking to boys, they smiled and struck each his own chest, which gave back a sound of metal. . . . Along the mountain paths of Gizune they had returned on foot from Spain, covered and weighted with copper coins bearing the effigy of the gentle little king, Alexander XIII. Another smuggler's trick. On Itchoua's account, they had changed at a premium in Spain a large sum of money for copper coins, destined later on to be exchanged at par, at the approaching fairs, in the different villages of Landes, where Spanish coppers are common currency. And between them, they had brought back, in their pockets, in their shirts, against their skin, nearly a hundred pounds' weight in copper. They emptied it all in a rain on the ancient granite of the amphitheatre at the feet of the delighted little maidens, whom they charged to count it and take care of it. Then when they had wiped their foreheads and recovered their breath a little, they commenced to play and leap, feeling quite light now, and more nimble than usual, in their freedom from the load they had just discharged.

Except for three or four school children who darted about like young cats to recover the balls that went out of play, Gracieuse and her companions were the only spectators. They seemed almost lost, sitting in a little group at the bottom of those rows of granite steps, the old reddish stones of which were enlivened now with weeds and the little flowers of April. In their print

dresses and white and pink blouses they made all the brightness there was in this rather solemn and mournful place. By the side of Gracieuse sat Pantchika Dargaignaratz, another fair-haired girl of fifteen, who was engaged to Gracieuse's brother, Arrochkoa, and was shortly to marry him, for Arrochkoa, as the son of a widow, was exempt from military service. And, criticising the players and making little piles of coppers on the granite steps, they laughed, they chattered, in their singing voices, with always those endings in *rra* and *rik*, rolling the *r's* in such a sprightly fashion that at any moment you might think you heard the noise of sparrows' wings in their mouths.

And the players, too, began to laugh, and under pretext of resting, came frequently to sit down amongst them. So far as playing was concerned these mocking little critics embarrassed and intimidated them far more than the crowd on the great match days.

And Ramuntcho learnt there from his little sweetheart a thing for which he had not dared to hope. She had obtained permission from her mother to go to this fête at Erribiague, to see the tennis match and visit that part of the country, which she had never seen. It was arranged that she should drive over with Pantchika and Madame Dargaignaratz. And they would meet each other there; perhaps even it might be possible to contrive that they should all return together.

Since their nightly meetings began, now nearly two weeks ago, this was the first time he had had an opportunity of speaking to her during the day, and in the presence of others—and their manner towards one

another had become different, more ceremonious outwardly, with, underneath, a very pleasant mystery. It was a long time, too, since he had seen her so well, and at such close quarters, in broad daylight, and she was more beautiful than ever this spring. How beautiful she was! To him, how more than beautiful! Her young bust was becoming rounder, and her waist more slender; her carriage gained each day in graceful suppleness. She still resembled her brother, the same regular features, the same perfect oval; but the difference in their eyes was becoming more marked. Whereas those of Arrochkoa, of a blue-green colour, which in itself seemed shifty, turned away when you gazed at them, hers, on the contrary, black pupils and black eyelashes, opened wide to regard you fixedly. Ramuntcho knew no one with eyes like them. He worshipped their frank tenderness, and their anxious and profound questioning. Long before he had reached manhood and become accessible to the snares of the senses, these eyes of hers had taken possession of all that was best and purest in his child's soul. And now, around these wonderful eyes, the great Transforming Power, sovereign and enigmatical, had built this fair temple of flesh, which called irresistibly to his flesh for a supreme communion. . . .

The players were greatly distracted by this group of little women in their white and pink blouses; and they laughed themselves to find how badly they were playing. Above the little group of spectators who occupied only a little corner of the granite amphitheatre rose tier upon tier of empty and rather ruinous steps; then the houses

of Etchezar, so peacefully isolated from the rest of the world; and, above them again, the dark and obstructive mass of Gizune, filling the sky and mingling with the thick clouds asleep upon its flanks. Immobile, inoffensive clouds which held no menace of rain. Clouds of spring, dove-coloured and seeming as warm as the air of the evening. And in a break in the mountains, lower than the high summit which dominated the surrounding country, a round moon was turning silver in measure as the day declined.

They continued to play in the soft twilight, until the first bats appeared, until the flight of the ball through the air could no longer be accurately followed. Perhaps they all felt that the occasion was rare, and would not come again; and so, as much as possible, they sought to prolong it. . . .

And, to finish, they all went off together to carry to Itchoua his Spanish coppers. They had divided them into two portions, and put each portion in a large red cloth, and, boy and girl each holding an end, they marched in step, singing the air of "La Fileuse de Lin."

How long and clear and mild was this April twilight. There were roses already and all kinds of flowers against the walls of the venerable white houses with their brown and green shutters. The air was fragrant with the perfume of jasmine and honeysuckle and lime. For Gracieuse and Ramuntcho it was one of those exquisite hours, which, later on, in the sad time when illusion has left us, are recalled with a regret that is at once heart-rending and soothing.

Oh! Who will tell us why there are on earth soft spring evenings, and beautiful eyes, and maidens' smiles, and breaths of perfume that come from gardens when April nights are falling, and all this lure of life, since in the end they lead ironically to separation and decrepitude and death.

CHAPTER XV

THE next day, Friday, is the day of the departure for the village where the fête will take place on the following Sunday. It is a distant village, in a shady region, in the bend of a deep gorge, at the foot of very high mountains. Arrochkoa was born there, and passed there the first months of his life, at the time when his father lived there as chief of the French Customs; but he left there too young to retain any remembrance of it.

In the little carriage of the Detcharrys, Gracieuse, Pantchika, and, carrying a long whip, Mme Dargaignaratz, her mother, who was going to drive, set out together at the midday Angelus by the direct mountain route to Erribiague.

Ramuntcho, Arrochkoa, and Florentino, who had some smuggling matters to see to at St Jean-de-Luz, take a roundabout way, and will not reach Erribiague until night, by the little railway which runs between Bayonne and Burguetta. This morning they are all three happy and free from care; Basque bonnets never capped more cheerful faces.

Night was falling as, in this little train for Burguetta, they plunged into the tranquil inland country. The carriages were full of a very merry crowd, returning from some village fête, lasses in silk kerchiefs, lads in

woollen bonnets, all singing and laughing and kissing. In spite of the gathering darkness, one could distinguish still the hedgerows white with may, the woods white with the blossom of the acacias; and a perfume at once strong and suave, exhaled from the countryside, penetrated into the open compartments. And, amid all this white efflorescence of April, more and more effaced by the night, the passing train threw, like a trail of joy, the refrain of an old Navarrese song, repeated over and over again at the top of their voices by these young people, in the din of the wheels and the steam.

Erribiague! The name is shouted through the window, and startles all three of them. The singing crowd had got out some time ago, leaving them almost alone in the train, which had become silent. The mountains on this part of the line were higher, and made the night very dark—and they were almost asleep.

They jumped out in a flurry and found themselves in a darkness in which even their smuggler's eyes could distinguish nothing. It was only high above them that a few stars could be seen, to such an extent was the sky obscured by the overshadowing mountains.

"Where is the village?" they asked of a man who was the only one there to receive them.

"About half a mile away, in that direction, on the right."

And, in fact, they began to discern the grey trail of a road which buried itself at once in the heart of the darkness. And, in the great silence, in the humid freshness of these darksome valleys, they started to walk without speaking, their high spirits a little damped by

the black majesty of the mountains which at this point guard the frontier.

And presently they came to an old arched bridge over a torrent; then to the village, asleep now and with no light to mark it; and, finally, to the inn, backing on the mountain, on the edge of a running, noisy stream, where, in fact, a lamp was burning.

First they were shown their little rooms, which looked respectable enough and clean, in spite of their extreme age: very low pitched, very much overweighted by their enormous joists, with pictures of Our Lord, of the Blessed Virgin, and saints on all their limewashed walls.

Then they came down again and sat down to supper in the inn parlour, where two or three old men were sitting, dressed in the fashion of former days: wide waistband and short black blouse. And Arrochkoa, a little vain of his descent, could not refrain from asking them whether they had known Detcharry, who had been head of the customs there, nearly eighteen years ago.

One of the old fellows stared at him, thrusting forward his head and shading his eyes with his hand:

"Ah! You are his son, I'll wager. You are the very spit of him. Detcharry! Do I remember Detcharry! He took from me, at one time or another, more than two hundred bales of goods, as true as I'm sitting here! But that's no matter. If you are his son give me your hand!"

And the old smuggler, who was the leader of a band, without rancour, even with effusion, gripped the two hands of Arrochkoa.

CHAPTER XVI

Now, in the bright April morning, they open the shutters of their narrow windows, pierced like port-holes in the thickness of the very old wall.

And suddenly the light enters in floods, dazzling their eyes. Outside is a splendour of spring. Never had they seen before, overhanging their head, mountains so high and so close. But down the leafy slopes, down the tree-clad mountains the sun pours radiantly into the depth of this valley, on the whiteness of the village, on the white walls of the ancient green-shuttered houses.

Besides, they awaken with youth dancing in their veins, and joy singing in their heart. For this morning it is their intention to make their way to the house of Mme Dargaignaratz's cousins, to visit the two little ladies, Gracieuse and Pantchika, who should have arrived there the previous evening.

After glancing at the playing-ground to which they will return in the afternoon for practice, they set out by little pathways magnificently green which hide in the bottom of the valleys by the side of swift-running streams. The flowering foxgloves show on all sides like long pink rockets above the soft and infinite mass of the ferns.

This house of the cousins Olhagarray, is, it seems, a considerable distance away, and they stop from time to time to ask their road of casual shepherds, and sometimes knock at the door of solitary dwellings encountered here and there beneath the shelter of trees. They had never before seen dwellings so old as these Basque dwellings, nor any so primitive, in the shade of chestnut-trees so tall.

The ravines along which they pass are curiously enclosed. Higher than all the woods of oaks and beeches which hang as if suspended above, appear the wild, denuded summits, a bare and rugged zone, dark brown in colour, which points into the deep blue of the sky. But here below is a sheltered and mossy region, low-lying and green, which the sun never scorches, and where April has hidden all its magnificent fresh luxuriance.

And the two wayfarers, passing along these pathways of foxgloves and ferns, participate in the splendour of the spring.

Gradually, in their delight in their surroundings, and under the influence of this ageless place, the old instincts of the hunter and the destroyer are re-enkindled in the depth of their souls. Arrochkoa, especially, cannot contain himself; he leaps to right and left, plucking and uprooting plants and flowers; he notices everything which moves in the thick green foliage, lizards that could so easily be caught, birds that could be taken in their nests, graceful trout that swim in the clear stream. He is all eagerness; he wants a fishing-rod, a stick, a gun; in truth, he reveals himself as rather a savage

young person, in the zest of his fair-haired vigorous youth. As for Ramuntcho, his excitement quickly subsides. After he has torn down a few branches and plucked a few handfuls of flowers, he begins to reflect, to meditate, to dream. . . .

They have now reached a point where several valleys meet. It is a forlorn spot with no human habitation in sight. Around them, gloomy gorges where mighty oaks grow thick; above them, on every side, a massive grouping of mountains, reddish-coloured, scorched by the sun. And no indication anywhere of modern times. An absolute silence and a peace as of the primitive epochs. And raising their heads in the direction of the brown summits, they perceive, high up, and very far away, some peasants making their way along invisible pathways, driving before them a number of little donkeys. Tiny as insects they look at this distance, these peasants, passing silently along the flank of the giant mountain; Basques of a bygone time, almost indistinguishable, seen from here, from the brown earth out of which they have sprung—and to which, later on, they will return, after having lived, as their ancestors before them, in utter ignorance of the things of the present day, the things of *other places*.

Arrochkoa and Ramuntcho take off their bonnets to wipe their foreheads. It is so hot in these valleys, and they have run about so much that their bodies are bathed in perspiration. To be sure they have greatly enjoyed themselves; but their object after all is to reach the house where the two fair-haired little women are waiting for them. But of whom now shall they ask the

way, in this place where there seems to be no living soul.

"Ave Maria!" cries out, close to them, in the thickness of the branches, an old raucous voice.

And the voice continues in a stream of words said, in rapid decrescendo, very, very quickly: a Basque prayer rattled off breathlessly, commencing very loud and dying away at the end. And an old beggar emerges from the undergrowth, dirty, hairy, dun-coloured, bending over his stick like a wild man of the woods.

"Yes," said Arrochkoa, putting his hand in his pocket. "But you must first lead us to the Olhagarray's house before you get your alms."

"The Olhagarray's house!" replied the old beggar. "Very willingly, my good children. You are already there!"

How, indeed, had they failed to see, not more than a hundred yards farther on, its black gable-end showing through the branches of the chestnut-trees?

This house of the Olhagarrays, ancient and large, and surrounded by age-old chestnut-trees, bathes in the torrent at a point where mill-dams roar. Around, the red earth is denuded and ravined by the waters of the mountain; enormous roots, like monstrous grey serpents, twist and writhe there; and the entire place, overhung on all sides by the masses of the Pyrenees, is rude and tragical.

But two young girls are there, sitting in the shade: blonde heads and elegant little pink blouses. Astonishingly modern little fairies to find in a setting so uncouth

" What is the matter with you, Ramuntcho, that you stretch yourself as if you were a cat! "

But when for the third time Gracieuse began to bite the same place, and showed again the tip of her little tongue, he leaned towards her, overcome by an irresistible vertigo, and bit too, taking in his mouth, as if it were a rare red fruit which yet he feared to crush, the fresh lip which the mosquito had stung.

A silence of dismay and delight, during which they both trembled, she as much as he.

" You are not angry with me, are you? "

" No, Ramuntcho. . . . No, no, I am not angry. . . . "

Then he began again, quite reckless now, and, in this warm and languid air, they gave each other, for the first time in their life, the long, impassioned kisses of lovers.

CHAPTER XVII

On the next day, Sunday, they had gone religiously, all together, to hear one of the early Masses, so that they might be able to return to Etchezar the same day, immediately after the great tennis match. It was the return journey, more even than the match, which interested Gracieuse and Ramuntcho, for, if things fell out as they hoped, Pantchika and her mother would remain at Erribiague, and they would return, snuggled close together, in the very small carriage of the Detcharrys, under the indulgent and easy surveillance of Arrochkoa: a five or six hours' journey, the three of them alone, along the roads of spring, beneath the new verdure, with interesting halts in unknown villages.

Since eleven o'clock of this fine Sunday morning the approaches to the playing ground had been encumbered with mountaineers, assembling from all the mountains and all the wild hamlets of the surrounding country. The match was an international one, three French players against three Spanish players, and among the spectators the Spanish Basques predominated; one saw even some large sombreros, and jackets and gaiters of olden times.

The judges of the two nations, selected by lot, saluted one another with old-fashioned courtesy, and

the match began, in a great silence of expectancy, beneath an overpowering sun which bothered the players notwithstanding that they had pulled down their bonnets, visor-like, over their eyes.

Soon Ramuntcho, and after him Arrochkoa, were acclaimed for their fine play. And people sitting near looked at the two fair-haired little strangers, so pretty in their elegant pink blouses, who were watching the game attentively from the front row, and said to one another: "Those are the sweethearts of the two players who are doing so well." And Gracieuse, who heard this, felt very proud of her young lover.

Midday. They had been playing now for nearly an hour. The old wall, with its top rounded like a cupola, was cracking with dryness and heat, under its yellow-ocre wash.

The great Pyrenean masses, closer here than at Etchezar, higher and more overwhelming, dominated from all sides these little human groups moving about in a deep fold of their sides. And the sun poured directly down on the heavy bonnets of the men, on the uncovered heads of the women, heating the brains, increasing the enthusiasm. The excited crowd was vociferous in its applause, and the balls were flying at their swiftest when, gently, the Angelus began to toll. And then an old man, very wrinkled and very sunburnt, who had been waiting for this signal, put his bugle to his mouth—an old bugle of the African Zouaves—and sounded "To arms." And all the women, who had been sitting, stood up; and all the Basque bonnets were doffed, uncovering dark heads, fair heads, white heads;

and the entire crowd made the sign of the cross, while the players stopped at the most exciting moment of the game, and, with heads bowed, remained still. . . .

On the stroke of two o'clock, the game having ended victoriously for the French, Arrochkoa and Ramuntcho climbed into their little carriage, escorted and acclaimed by all the youth of Erribiague; and then Gracieuse took her place between them, and they set off on their long enchanting journey, their pockets filled with the money they had won, intoxicated with joy, and noise, and sun.

And Ramuntcho, on whose lips lingered still the impress of that kiss of yesterday, was tempted, as they drove away, to cry out to them all: "This little girl you see here, all beautiful as she is, is mine! Her lips are mine! I kissed them yesterday, and I am going to kiss them again to-night!"

And off they went, and suddenly found silence, in the shady valleys, between banks overgrown with foxgloves and ferns.

To travel for hours on end along the little Pyrenean roads, moving from place to place almost every day, traversing the Basque country in all directions, going from one village to another, called hither by a fête, thither by a frontier adventure, this had now become the life of Ramuntcho, a roving life in which the national game filled the day and smuggling the night.

Up hill and down dale, amid a monotonous deployment of greenery. Woods of oaks and woods of

beeches, almost virgin, remaining now as they were of old, in the peaceful ages.

When, as from time to time they did, they passed an ancient dwelling, lost in these solitudes of trees, they slackened speed and read curiously the traditional legend, written in granite over the door: "Hail Mary! In the year 1600, or in the year 1500, so-and-so, of such and such a village, built this house to live here with so-and-so, his wife."

Very far from any human habitation, in a part of the ravine which was sheltered from the breeze, and was, therefore, hotter than elsewhere, they came across a pedlar of holy pictures, who was mopping his forehead. He had put down his basket, which was filled with those golden-framed pictures, representing different saints, with Eskuaran legends, with which the Basques still love to ornament the white walls of their old rooms. And there he was, overcome with fatigue and the heat, stranded, as it were, in the ferns, at a corner of one of these little mountain roads which make their solitary way beneath the oak-trees.

Gracieuse wanted to descend and buy a picture of the Holy Virgin.

"It is for us," she said to Ramuntcho. "For our home later on, as a remembrance. . . ."

And the picture, bright in its golden frame, went with them beneath the long, green vaults. . . .

They made a detour, for they wanted to pass through a certain valley known as Cherry-tree Valley, not because they hoped to find cherries there already, in

this month of April, but because they wished Gracieuse to see this place, which was renowned throughout the whole Basque country.

It was nearly five o'clock and the sun was already low when they reached it. A shady and peaceful region, where the spring twilight descended caressingly on the magnificence of the April foliage. Mountains—especially high towards the north: it was these which made the climate so mild—surrounded it on all sides, shedding on it the melancholy mystery of enclosed Edens.

And, when the cherry-trees appeared, they saw, to their glad surprise, that they were already red, on the 20th of April!

There was not a soul in these lanes, above which the cherry-trees stretched out, like a roof, branches all pearled with coral.

Here and there only, a few summer residences, still empty, their gardens neglected, overgrown with weeds and wild roses.

Then they steadied their horse to a walk; and, each in turn, letting go the reins, and standing up in the carriage, they amused themselves by eating the cherries on the trees, as they passed and without stopping. Afterwards they picked bunches of them for their buttonholes, they plucked whole branches and attached them to the head of their horse, to the harness, to the lamp, until they looked like a little equipage decked out for some fête of youth and joy. . . .

"Now, let us hasten," begged Gracieuse, "so that it may be light enough, at any rate, when we reach

Etchezar, for everybody to see us pass, decorated as we are now!"

But Ramuntcho, as the mild twilight came on, was thinking more of the evening's rendezvous, of the kiss which he would dare to steal again, a kiss like that of yesterday, in which he would take the lips of Gracieuse between his as if they were a cherry. . . .

CHAPTER XVIII

It is the month of May! The grass grows thick, grows everywhere, like a sumptuous carpet, like a rich silk velvet, rising spontaneously from the earth.

To water this region of the Basques, which throughout the summer remains damp and green like a kind of milder Brittany, the clouds which gather on the Bay of Biscay assemble at this southern end of the gulf, come to a stop at the high Pyrenean mountains and precipitate themselves in rain. And there are heavy downpours, which are a little depressing; but after they have passed the earth gives out a scent of flowers and growing grass.

In the fields, along the lanes, the herbage is thickening apace; the sides of the pathways are, as it were, carpeted with the rich magnificence of the grasses; everywhere there is a profusion of large Easter daisies, of long-stalked batchelor's buttons, of pink ragged robin, and of very large pink mallows, such as may be seen in the springtime in Algeria.

And every evening, in the long, mild twilights, which have a colour of pale iris or of the blue of ashes, the bells of the month of Mary resound for a long time in the air, beneath the mass of the clouds which cling to the sides of the mountains.

During this month of May, accompanying the little group of black nuns, with their subdued chatter, their childish and lifeless little laughter, Gracieuse repaired almost every hour to the church. Hurrying through the frequent downpours, they crossed together the cemetery full of roses; together, always together, the little clandestine fiancée, in her bright clothes, and the hooded women, in their long robes of mourning; during the day they brought bouquets of white flowers, Easter daisies and sheafs of tall lilies; in the evening, they came to sing, in the nave more sonorous then than during the day, the serenely joyful canticles of the Virgin Mary.

"Hail, Queen of Angels! Hail, Star of the Sea!"

Oh! the whiteness of the lilies in the light of the candles, their white petals, and their yellow gold-dusted stamens. And the sweetness of their perfume in the gardens or in the church during these twilights of spring! . . .

And as soon as Gracieuse entered in the evening, when the sound of the bells was dying—quitting the pale half-light of the cemetery full of roses for the night, starlit by candles, which already reigned in the church, quitting the perfume of the fields and the roses for that of the incense and the tall cut lilies, passing from the warm living air of the world outside into this heavy and sepulchral cold which the ages have stored in the old sanctuaries—a peculiar calm at once took possession of her soul, an appeasement of all her desires, a renunciation of all her terrestrial joys. And when she knelt

down, when the first canticles had taken wing beneath the infinitely echoing vault she fell more and more into an ecstasy, into a state full of dreams, a visionary state traversed by confused white apparitions: whiteness, whiteness everywhere; lilies, myriads of sheaves of lilies, and white wings, the beating of angels' wings. . . .

Oh! to remain for ever thus, to forget everything, to feel herself pure, sanctified, immaculate, under this gaze unspeakably gentle and fascinating, under this gaze of irresistible appeal, which the Holy Virgin in her long white robes cast down from the height of the tabernacle! . . .

But when she found herself outside again, when the spring night enveloped her once more in its warmth and life-giving breezes, the remembrance of the rendezvous she had promised yesterday—yesterday, as so many previous yesterdays—drove away, as the storm wind drives away, the visions of the church. In the anticipation of the contact of Ramuntcho, in the anticipation of the savour of his hair, of the touch of his moustache, of the taste of his lips, she felt herself ready to give way, to collapse as one wounded in the arms of the strange companions who were escorting her—the peaceful and spectral little black nuns.

And, as the hour approached, in spite of her resolutions, she was there, anxious and eager, on the alert for the least sound of footsteps, her heart beating if a branch in the garden moved in the night—tortured if her well-beloved was in the least late.

And he would arrive, as always, silent-footed like a nocturnal prowler, his jacket over his shoulder, with as

many precautions and stratagems as in an affair of the frontier.

On the wet nights, so frequent during these Basque springs, she would remain in her ground-floor room, and he would sit on the ledge of the open window, not seeking to enter, not having, for that matter, permission to enter. And they would remain there, she within and he without, but with their arms entwined, their heads touching, the cheek of one pressed long against the cheek of the other.

When it was fine, she would climb out of this low window and wait for him outside, and it was on the garden bench that their long and almost wordless communing was passed. Between them now there was no longer that continual muted whispering which is usual with lovers; rather was it one long silence. In the first place they did not dare to talk for fear of being discovered, for the least murmur of voices in the night is apt to be heard. And, secondly, as long as nothing new came to menace their life as they had planned it, what need had they to talk? What was there that they well could find to say, that would have been better worth than the long pressure of their joined hands and the soft contact of head leaning against head?

The possibility of being surprised often held them on the alert in an anxiety which rendered more delightful afterwards the moments when, their confidence restored, they threw care to the winds again. There was no one of whom they were in greater dread than of Arrochkoa, himself a silent night bird, and one, too, closely associated with the comings and goings of

Ramuntcho. In spite of his indulgence towards their projects, what would he, what would Arrochkoa do, if he happened to discover them?

Oh! The old stone benches beneath the trees, in front of the doors of the isolated houses, when the mild spring evenings fall! This one of theirs was a veritable hiding-place of love. There was even music for them there every evening, for, in all the stones of the adjacent wall, dwelt little chirping tree-frogs, tiny beasts of the sun, which, as soon as night came, gave out minute by minute, a little short, quiet, comical note, a kind of blend of the note of a glass bell and of a baby's cry. One might produce something like it by touching here and there, but very lightly, and for a moment only, the keyboard of an organ in the *vox celestis*. And everywhere around there were others of these little creatures, which replied on different notes; even those beneath the bench, quite close to them, reassured by their immobility, chirped also from time to time; and this little sound, sudden and low, so near to them, startled them and made them smile. All the exquisite darkness around them seemed as if animated by this music, which was continued into the distance, in the mystery of the foliage and the stones, in the depth of all the little dark holes in the rocks and in the walls. It seemed a carillon in miniature, or rather a kind of shrill concert slightly mocking—but very, very slightly, and without any malice—conducted timidly by inoffensive gnomes. And it made the night more living and more amorous. . . .

After the reckless rapture of their first meetings,

they became more prudent, and when one of them had anything particular to say, he or she, as the case might be, would first draw the other by the hand. This meant that they must walk, very, very quietly, in the manner of marauding cats, to a little alley behind the house, where they could talk without fear.

"Where shall we live, Gracieuse?" asked Ramuntcho one night.

"Why . . . in your house, of course. That was what I thought."

"Of course! That is what I thought too, only I was afraid lest you might be lonely there, so far away from the church and the village square."

"Oh! with you, how could I be lonely anywhere?"

"Then we will turn our backs on those who live in the valley, shall we, and take the large room which looks out on the road to Hasparitz. . . ."

It was to him a joy the more, to know that his home was acceptable to Gracieuse, to be thus assured that she would bring the radiance of her presence to that old, loved dwelling, and that they would make their nest there for life. . . .

CHAPTER XIX

And now have come the long, pale twilights of June, rather overcast as were those of May, but more settled, nevertheless, and warmer. In the gardens the hardy rose-laurels, now in full bloom, have become magnificent pink bouquets. At the end of the day's toil the good people of the village assemble in little groups outside their doors and sit there, beneath the roof of the plane-trees, enjoying their well-earned rest, and watching the oncoming of the night—the night which, as it falls, darkens their little groups and blurs them. And a peaceful melancholy descends on the village during these interminable evenings.

For Ramuntcho, it is the time when smuggling becomes a calling almost without fatigue, with hours of positive delight: climbing towards the mountain-tops through springtime clouds; crossing ravines, wandering in the regions of the springs and wild fig-trees; sleeping, while waiting for the hour agreed upon with the complacent carabiniers, on beds of mint and ragged robin. . . . The wholesome fragrance of the plants impregnated his clothes, and his jacket, which he never wore, but used only as a pillow or a coverlet—and Gracieuse would sometimes say to him in the evening: "I know whither your smuggling took you last night,

for you smell of the mint of the mountain above Mendiazpi "—or perhaps, "you smell of the wormwood of the marshes of Subernoa."

But Gracieuse sighed for the month of Mary, for the services of the Virgin in the Church decked out with white flowers. On fine evenings, with the nuns and some of the seniors of the school, she would go and sit under the porch of the church, against the low wall of the cemetery, whence the view plunges into the valleys below. And there they talked, and sometimes played those simple childish games to which the nuns always lent themselves so readily.

And there were also meditations long and strange, when there was no playing, and conversation ceased, meditations to which the decline of the day, the proximity of the church, the tombs, and the flowers, gave immediately a serenity detached from mundane things, and enfranchised, as it were, from all bond of sense. In the first mystical dreams of her girlhood—inspired mainly by the pompous rites of the Church, by the voice of the organs, the white bouquets, the thousand candle-flames, the visions which appeared to her were pictures merely—very radiant pictures, it is true: altars which rested upon clouds, golden tabernacles from which came sounds of celestial music, and about which flights of angels hovered. But these visions now were giving place to ideas: she began to get glimpses of the peace and the supreme self-denial which are given by the certainty of a heavenly life which shall endure for ever; she conceived in a loftier manner than before the melancholy joy of renouncing everything

for the sake of becoming an impersonal unit of that body of white nuns, or blue, or black nuns, who, from innumerable convents throughout the world, send up towards heaven an immense and perpetual intercession for the sins of the world. . . .

Nevertheless, as soon as night had finally come the current of her thoughts returned fatally every evening to intoxicating and mortal things. The expectancy, the feverish expectancy began, and became every minute more impatient. She longed for the moment when her frigid black-gowned companions should be enclosed once more in the sepulchre of their convent, and she should be alone in her room, free at last in the slumbering house, able to open her window and listen for the soft sound of Ramuntcho's footsteps.

The lover's kiss, the kiss of lip on lip, was now a thing acquired of which they had no longer strength to deprive themselves. And they prolonged it; but neither one nor the other, in their scrupulousness and charming modesty of youth, sought for anything further.

And if the rapture in which they thus indulged had in it, perhaps, too much that was of the flesh, there was between them that tenderness, absolute, infinite, unique, by which all things are elevated and purified.

CHAPTER XX

One evening Ramuntcho came to the rendezvous earlier than usual—with more circumspection in his approach and in his climbing, for there was a risk, on these fine June evenings, of finding some of the village maidens lingering in the lanes, or some of the village lads hiding behind the hedges, bent on some amorous enterprise.

And as it happened she was already alone in her ground-floor room, gazing out of her window, but not yet expecting him.

She remarked at once something eager and even joyous in his movements, and divined some news. Not daring to approach too near, he made sign to her to step out of the window and come quickly to the dark alley where they could talk without fear of interruption. Then, as soon as she came up to him in the shadow of the trees, he put his arm round her waist, and told her eagerly the great tidings which, since the morning, had agitated his young head, and that of Franchita, his mother.

"Uncle Ignacio has written!"

"Really? Uncle Ignacio. . . ."

For she, too, knew that this adventurer uncle, this uncle in America, who had disappeared so many years ago, had up to this time troubled to send no more than a strange good-day by a passing sailor.

"Yes! . . . And he says that he has some property out there which needs much managing, large meadows, a great number of horses, that he has no children, and that if I would like to establish myself near him, with a little Basque wife married at home here, he would be pleased to adopt both of us. . . . And I think my mother would come too. . . . So, if you like . . . it might be now—we could marry at once. People marry, you know, who are no older than we are. It is permissible. . . . And seeing that I should be adopted by my uncle, and have an established position, your mother would consent, I think. And . . . and . . . so much the worse for the military service, what say you?"

They sat down on some moss-covered stones that were there, their heads swimming a little, troubled both of them by the nearness and unexpected temptation of this happiness. So then, it was no longer in the uncertain future, after he had done his turn of soldiering; it was almost at once, in two months, perhaps even in one month, that this communion of their souls and bodies, so ardently desired and to-day so forbidden, even yesterday so remote, might be accomplished without sin, a thing honest in the eyes of all, permitted and blessed. . . . They had never envisaged this from so near. . . . And they supported one against the other their foreheads heavy with too much thought, exhausted suddenly by a kind of too exquisite happiness. Around them the scent of the June flowers rose from the kindly earth, filling the night with an immense fragrance. And as if there were not perfume enough already, the

jasmine and woodbine on the walls, exhaled, every few moments, in intermittent puffs, the excess of their sweetness. It was as if unseen hands were swinging perfuming-pans silently in the darkness, for some hidden fête, for some wonderful and secret enchantment.

They are not rare, these strange, mysterious enchantments, and they happen everywhere. They are emanations of nature itself, ordained, one knows not by what sovereign will, or for what unfathomable purpose, to cheat us a little on our road to death. . . .

"You do not answer, Gracieuse. Have you nothing to say to me?"

He saw quite well that she, too, was overcome by the prospect of happiness held out to them, but he guessed also, from her long silence, that the clouds were gathering on her bright, enchanting dream.

"But," she asked at last, "your naturalisation papers? You have them already, haven't you?"

"Yes, they came last week, you remember. Why, it was you who told me to get them."

"But then you are now a Frenchman. And if you miss your military service you will be a deserter."

"Heavens! Yes. But no, not a deserter. A defaulter, I think, is what they call it. But after all, what does it matter, since we shall never return. I do not mind!"

How she was tortured now by the thought that she was the cause of this, that she herself had persuaded him to this act, which was casting so black a menace over their scarcely looked-for good fortune. Just Heaven! Her Ramuntcho a deserter! Banished, that

is to say, for ever from their dear Basque land! And all at once this departure for America became dreadfully grave and solemn, a kind of death, since there could be no possible return. What could they do?

And they both sat silent and anxious, each preferring to submit to the will of the other, and awaiting, with an equal dismay, the decision that should be taken, whether to go or stay. From the depth of their two young hearts rose gradually an identical distress, poisoning the happiness which beckoned to them from far America, the land from which there could be no return. . . . And the little nocturnal perfuming-pans of the jasmines and woodbines and limes continued more than ever to launch upon the air their exquisite and intoxicating gusts; the darkness which enveloped them seemed more than ever soft and caressing; in the silence of the village and the countryside, the little tree-frogs in the walls gave out from moment to moment their little flute-like note, which seemed a very discreet call of love, beneath the velvet of the mosses; and through the black lace-work of the foliage, in the serenity of a June sky which one might think was for ever unalterable, they saw scintillating, like a simple, gracious, phosphorescent dust, the terrifying multitude of the worlds.

And now the curfew began to sound from the church. And the clang of this bell, at night especially, represented for them something unique in the world; at this moment it was even as a voice, which should have come, in their indecision, to give its advice, its decisive and tender counsel. Silent still, they listened with a growing emotion, of an intensity hitherto unknown, the

brown head of the one resting against the fair head of the other. It said, this warning voice, this dear protecting voice: "No, do not go away for ever; the distant countries are made for the time of youth; you will have need to return to Etchezar; it is here you will want to grow old and die; nowhere in the world will you sleep so well as in the cemetery around the church, where, even when you lie beneath the ground, you will be able still to hear my voice." They yielded more and more to the voice of the bell, these two children whose souls were religious and primitive. And Ramuntcho presently felt, on his cheek, a tear of Gracieuse.

"No," he said at last, "I could not be a deserter. Do you know, I do not think I should have the courage. . . ."

"I was thinking the same thing, Ramuntcho," she said. "No, do not let us do that. . . . But I was waiting, so that you might say it."

And then she saw that he too was weeping.

The die was cast then. They would let pass the happiness which was within their reach, almost in their hand, and postpone everything to an uncertain and remote, oh! so remote, future.

And now, in the sadness, in the calm of the great decision they had taken, they discussed what seemed to them the best to do:

"You could write to your Uncle Ignacio," she said, "a nice letter. Tell him that you accept, that you will come with the greatest of pleasure as soon as you have done your military service. And you can add, if you wish, that she to whom you are betrothed joins her

thanks to yours, and will hold herself ready to accompany you, but that you could never be a deserter."

"And perhaps, Gracieuse, you might tell your mother of this, just to see what she may think of it? For you see, it is not now as it was before. I am no longer the outcast that I was."

Came the sound of light footsteps in the lane behind them. . . . And above the wall appeared the silhouette of a young man, who had approached on tiptoe, as if to spy upon them!

"Quick, Ramuntcho! Go! Until to-morrow evening!"

And in a trice they had disappeared: he crouching behind a bush, she fled to her room.

And their grave colloquy was ended. Ended until when? Until to-morrow or until the day of judgment? Over their good nights, sudden or lingering, startled or peaceful, each time, each night, hung the same uncertainty whether they would meet again. . . .

CHAPTER XXI

THE bell of Etchezar, the same dear old bell, the bell of the peaceful curfew, of the feast days, the bell that tolls for the dead, was ringing merrily in the bright June sunlight. The village was decked out everywhere in white, white cloths, white embroideries; and the white procession of Corpus Christi was passing very slowly over a green strewn with fennel and reeds cut from the marshland below.

Above this white trail of children making their way over a carpet of leaves and mown grass, appeared the mountains, near and sombre, a little forbidding in their brown and tawny tones.

All the old banners of the Church were there, brightened by the sun which they had known for centuries, but which they saw only once or twice a year, on special feast days.

The large banner of the Virgin, in white silk embroidered with faded gold, was borne by Gracieuse, who, dressed all in white, walked with eyes abstracted in a mystical dream. Behind the girls came the women, all the women of the village, coifed in black veils, amongst them Dolores and Franchita, the two enemies. Then, bringing up the rear of the procession, the men, in goodly number again, candle in hand, bonnet doffed—

but for the most part the heads were white, the heads of old men, and the expressions on the faces were vanquished and resigned.

Gracieuse, holding on high the banner of the Virgin, was become in this hour a little visionary; she imagined herself on the march, as after death, to the celestial tabernacles. And when, momentarily, the recollection of Ramuntcho's lips passed across her dream, she had the impression, amid all this whiteness, of a burning stain, delicious though it might be. And, really, as her thoughts soared day by day, what held her steadfastly to him was not so much the senses, which in her were susceptible of being repressed, but rather an ever-increasing tenderness, true and deep, such a tenderness as outlasts time and the deceptions of the flesh. And this tenderness was all the stronger in that Ramuntcho was less fortunate than she, more of an outcast in life, having had no father.

CHAPTER XXII

"WELL, Gatchutcha, have you told your mother yet about Uncle Ignacio?" asked Ramuntcho very late the same evening, in the alley in the garden, under the rays of the moon.

"Not yet. I have not dared. For, you see, I cannot very well tell her that I know all these things, when I am supposed never to speak to you, and when she has expressly forbidden me to do so. Think what it would mean if I gave her cause for suspicion! That would be fatal. Then, indeed, we should never be able to see each other again! I would rather wait until later, until you have left the country, for then it will not matter."

"That is true. Let us wait, for I am going to leave quite soon."

He was, in fact, soon going away, and their evenings together were numbered.

For now that they had definitely let slip the chance of immediate happiness, offered to them in the prairies of far America, it seemed to them better to hasten Ramuntcho's departure for the army in order that he might return the sooner. And they had decided that he should ask to be called up before his time, and that he should join the marine infantry, the only corps in which

it was possible to serve for no more than three years. And as they felt the need, so that they might be sure their courage should not fail them, of a definite date, envisaged a long time in advance, they had fixed upon the end of September, when the long series of tennis matches should be over.

They contemplated this separation for three years with an absolute confidence in the future, so sure they felt of each other and of themselves, and of their undying love.

But for all that the thought of the long waiting already made their hearts ache strangely. It threw an unlooked-for melancholy over even the most indifferent things of every day, over the flight of the days, over the least indications of the coming season, over the blowing of certain kinds of plants, over the blooming of certain kinds of flowers, over everything that told of the arrival and the rapid progress of their last summer.

CHAPTER XXIII

ALREADY the bonfires of the feast of St John have blazed, joyous and red, in a clear blue night—and on that night the Spanish mountain beyond seemed to burn like a hayrick, so many were the fires upon its flanks. And now has commenced the season of light, and heat, and storm, towards the end of which Ramuntcho must take his departure.

And the sap, which in the spring rose so rapidly, is already languishing in the complete development of the verdure, in the full-blooming of the flowers. And the sun, growing ever hotter, overheats the bonneted heads, stimulates the energies and the passions, causes to rise everywhere, in these Basque villages, ferments of noisy activity and pleasure. And while now in Spain the season of the bull-fights is beginning, here it is the time of fêtes, of tennis matches, of fandangos danced in the evening, of the languishing of lovers in the warm voluptuousness of the nights.

And soon there will be the full warm splendour of a meridional July. The Bay of Biscay has become very blue, and the Cantabrian coast has donned for a time the tawny colours of Morocco and Algeria.

With heavy thunderstorms alternate periods of gloriously fine weather which give to the air an absolute clearness. And there are days when things a little

distance away are, as it were, eaten up with light, powdered with a dust of sunshine; then, above the woods and the village of Etchezar, the high summit of Gizune becomes hazy, and seems to be higher; and in the sky, to emphasise its blueness, float tiny clouds of a golden white with a suggestion of the grey of mother-of-pearl in their shadows.

And the springs, which make their course through the thick undergrowth of ferns, become few and insignificant, and along the roads the ox-wagons, driven by men half-nude, go more slowly, surrounded by a swarm of flies.

In this season Ramuntcho, during the day, lived the restless life of a tennis player, for ever on the move, with Arrochkoa, from village to village, arranging matches or playing in them.

But in his eyes it was only the evenings that counted.

The evenings! In the warm and fragrant darkness of the garden to sit close by the side of Gracieuse, to fold his arms about her, gradually to draw her to him, and support her on his breast, holding her cuddled there; and to remain long thus without speaking, his chin resting on her hair, breathing the young and healthy fragrance of her body.

Ramuntcho was dangerously stirred by these long contacts which she did not resist. He guessed, moreover, that she was sufficiently his now, sufficiently trustful in him, to deny him nothing. But the innate modesty of youth, his respect for his little betrothed, the very excess and depth of his love, restrained him and kept their courtship unsullied.

CHAPTER XXIV

But Franchita was puzzled by the inexplicable attitude of her son, who, although, so far as she knew, he never saw Gracieuse now, yet never even spoke of her. And while she was storing in her heart the sadness of his impending departure for military service, she watched, mutely and patiently in her peasant's way.

One evening, however, one of the last evenings, as he was going out, mysterious and in haste, well before the hour of the contraband business of the night, she stood in front of him and looked into his eyes:

"Where are you going, Ramuntcho?"

And seeing him turn away his head, blushing and embarrassed, the truth impressed itself with sudden certainty on her mind.

"Good! Now I know. . . . Oh! now I know!"

She was even more moved than he, at the discovery of this great secret. The idea that it might not be Gracieuse, that it might be some other girl, never even entered her head. Her instinct was too sure for that. And her Christian scruples were awakened, her conscience was horrified at the evil they might have done together—while at the same time there rose from the depth of her heart a sentiment of which she was as ashamed as of a crime, a kind of savage joy. . . . For

if, in fact, their carnal union had been accomplished, the future that she had dreamed of for her son was assured to him. . . . She knew her Ramuntcho well enough to know that he would not change, and that Gracieuse would never be abandoned.

Nevertheless, they were silent for a long time, she still standing in front of him, barring his way:

"And what have you done together?" she brought herself to ask. "Tell me the truth, Ramuntcho. Have you done wrong?"

"Wrong? Oh! no, mother, no. No wrong, I swear to you."

He said this without any sign of irritation at the question, and his honest eyes looked straight into his mother's without flinching. It was the truth, in fact, and she believed him.

But, as she remained still in front of him, her hand on the handle of the door, he continued with rough violence:

"You are not going to prevent me going to her, now that I am leaving in three days' time!"

And before this young will in revolt, the mother, hiding within herself the tumult of her conflicting thoughts, bowed her head, and, without a word, moved away to let him pass.

CHAPTER XXV

It was their last evening together, for two days before, at the *mairie* of St Jean-de-Luz, he had, with a hand that trembled a little, signed his engagement for three years in the second battalion of the Marine Infantry, which was in garrison at a military port in the north.

It was their last evening together—and they had promised themselves that they would prolong it more than usual—until midnight, Gracieuse had decided: midnight, which in the village is an hour unconscionable and dark, an hour after which, for some indefinable reason, everything seemed to the little fiancée graver and more culpable.

In spite of the ardent desire of their senses, it did not occur to either of them that, during this last rendezvous, under the oppression of the departure, their love-making should go beyond the limit their modesty had so far set to it.

On the contrary, in the solemn moments of their leave-taking, they were more restrained than usual, so eternal was the love they bore one another.

But they were less cautious, however, since they had no to-morrows to safeguard; they dared to talk even on their lovers' bench, a thing they had never done before. They talked of the future, of a future

which was for them so remote, for at their age three years seems an infinite time.

In three years, when he returned, she would be twenty. Then, if her mother persisted in her refusal to allow the marriage, at the end of a further year of waiting she would use the right which the attainment of her majority would give her. This was a thing agreed upon and sworn between them.

The means of corresponding, during Ramuntcho's long absence, preoccupied them a great deal: their relations were so hampered by hindrances and secrets! Arrochkoa, the only possible intermediary between them, had promised his help, it was true; but he was so changeable, so little reliable! Heavens! If he should fail them! And then, would he agree to pass on unopened letters? If not, there would be no pleasure in writing. Nowadays, when communication is easy and constant, separations so complete as would soon be theirs are scarcely possible. They were going to bid one another a solemn farewell, much as did the lovers of old, those of the days when there were still countries without a post, when distance was a thing of fear. Their happy reunion seemed to them to lie far, far away, in the background of time; and yet, by reason of the faith they had, one in the other, they looked forward to it with a calm assurance, as believers look forward to a celestial life.

But the smallest things of this last evening assumed in their mind a singular significance. As the time for saying good-bye approached, everything was magnified and exaggerated for them, as it is at the approach of

death. The little noises and the aspects of the night seemed to them special, and, unknown to them, imprinted themselves for ever on their memory. The chirp of the crickets had in it something which it seemed to them had never been there before. In the silence of the night, the baying of a watchdog in some distant farmhouse disconcerted them and filled them with an unnamed fear. And Ramuntcho was going to carry with him into exile, to be preserved later on with a hopeless attachment, a little sprig of heather which he had plucked in the garden as he passed, and with which he had played mechanically all the evening.

This day marked the end of a stage in their life. The wheel of time had moved round; their childhood was over.

They had but few injunctions to exchange, so sure was each of what the other would do during their separation. They had less to say to each other than the majority of lovers, because each knew the other's most intimate thoughts. And after the first hour of conversation, they sat hand in hand and preserved a grave silence, while the last minutes inexorably passed.

At midnight she decided that he must go, as she had arranged it in her thoughtful and obstinate little head. And after a long embrace they parted, as if their separation at this precise minute was a thing inevitable and impossible to retard.

And while she returned to her room, with a sudden burst of sobbing, the sound of which reached him as he turned away, he climbed the wall and, emerging from the darkness of the foliage, found himself on the

deserted road, all bathed now in the moonlight. At this first separation he suffered less than she, because it was he who was going away, and the to-morrows that awaited him were filled with the unknown. As he went along this dusty and moonlit road, he was, as it were, insensitised by the potent charm of change and travel; with scarcely any precise or consecutive thought, he watched his shadow, sharp and dark in the moonlight, moving ahead of him. And the great Gizune dominated impassively, with a cold and spectral air, the world beneath, in this white radiance of midnight.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE day of departure. Good-byes to friends here and there; good wishes from old soldiers returned from the colours. Since the morning a kind of intoxication or fever, and, before him, all the unexpectedness of life.

Arrochkoa, very friendly on this last day, had offered, with insistence, to take him in his trap to St Jean-de-Luz, and had arranged that they should leave at sundown so as to arrive there in comfortable time to catch the night train.

And, the evening having come inexorably, Franchita accompanied her son to the village square, where this conveyance of the Detcharry's was ready waiting, and there her face, despite her efforts, was contracted with grief, while he braced himself to preserve that swaggering air which conscripts assume when they set out to join the regiment.

"Make a little room for me, Arrochkoa," she said suddenly. "I will go with you as far as the chapel of St Bitchentcho. I can return on foot."

And they departed at the setting of the sun which shed on them, as on all things, the magnificence of its golds and coppery reds.

Beyond a wood of oak-trees, they passed the chapel of St Bitchentcho, and still Franchita wanted to go on.

At one turning after another, postponing each time the great separation, she asked them to take her still farther:

"Now, mother, at the top of the hill of Issaritz, you must get out!" he said tenderly. "Do you hear, Arrochkoa? You must stop the trap where I have just said. I do not want my mother to have to walk too far."

On this slope of Issaritz the horse slackened his pace of his own accord. Mother and son, their eyes glistening with unshed tears, sat hand in hand, and they went on slowly, slowly, in an absolute silence, as if it were a solemn ascent to some calvary.

At length, at the top of the hill, Arrochkoa, who had been as silent as they, pulled gently at the reins, with a simple "Whoa, there!" uttered softly as if it had been a sad signal which he hesitated to give, and the horse stopped.

Then, without speaking, Ramuntcho jumped down into the road, helped his mother to descend, gave her one long kiss, and climbed nimbly back into his seat:

"Go, Arrochkoa! Quickly! Bustle up the horse! Let us get away!"

In a couple of seconds, in the quick descent that followed, he passed out of her sight. And her face now was wet with tears.

Franchita and her son were parted, and the distance was growing between them. In opposite directions they were making their respective ways along this road of Etchezar, in the splendour of the setting sun, through a region of purple heather and yellowing

ferns. She climbing slowly towards her dwelling, meeting on the way some isolated groups of farm-labourers, some herds driven through the golden sunlight by little bonneted herdsmen; he descending still, and very quickly, by rapidly darkening valleys, towards the low-lying country through which the railway runs.

CHAPTER XXVII

In the twilight now Franchita was returning from her farewell to her son; and as she reached the village she forced herself to resume her habitual demeanour, her air of proud indifference.

But, arrived before the home of the Detcharrys, she saw Dolores, who, about to enter the house, turned round and stood in the doorway to watch her pass. There must needs have been something new, some sudden discovery, that she should assume this attitude of aggressive defiance, this expression of provocative irony. And Franchita stopped also, and these words escaped almost involuntarily through her clenched teeth:

"What is the matter with the woman, that she stares at me in this way?"

"The lover will not come to-night!" replied the enemy.

"Ah! You know, then! You know that he used to come to see your daughter?"

She had, in fact, found it out that very morning. Gracieuse had told her, now that she had no to-morrow to care about. She had told her, in sheer weariness, after having talked to no purpose of Uncle Ignacio, of the new future that had opened before Ramuntcho, of all that might help the cause of their love.

"Ah! You know, then! You know that he used to come to see your daughter!"

And thus they spoke to one another, these two women who, for nearly twenty years, had not exchanged a word. Why they hated one another, in truth they scarcely knew. It began, as often happens, from mere nothings, from petty jealousies, from childish rivalries; and then, as time went on, as a result of seeing one another daily without speaking, of casting at one another as they passed unfriendly glances, their antagonism had grown until it became an implacable hatred. And now, there they stood, face to face, and their voices trembled with rancour, with evil passion.

"What!" replied the other. "So you knew it all along, I suppose, you shameless one! You encouraged him! One might guess, for that matter, that you would have no scruples in a matter of that kind, after what you have done in your time."

And while Franchita, by nature much more dignified, stood mute, terrified by the unseemliness of this unexpected dispute in the open street, the other went on:

"My daughter marry this penniless bastard! It shall never be!"

"And I, I think she will! She will marry him in spite of what you may do! Try, if you like, and propose one of your own choosing. Then you will see!"

Then, as one who disdained further discourse, she resumed her way, while the other continued to hurl

insults after her. She was trembling in every limb, and tottered as if her legs were giving way under her.

And when she entered her house, empty now, how mournful and sad it seemed!

The reality of this separation for three years appeared to her under an aspect devastatingly new, as if she had not been prepared for it—in the same way as, on the return from the cemetery, the absence of the dear dead is realised for the first time in all its dread significance.

And then those words of insult in the street! Those words all the more overwhelming because, deep down within her, she was cruelly conscious of the fault she had committed with the stranger! Instead of passing on her way, as she should have done, how could she have come to stop before her enemy, and, by a phrase murmured between her teeth, provoke this odious quarrel? How could she have come to descend to such a thing, to forget herself in this way, she who, during the past fifteen years, had gradually compelled the respect of everybody by her blameless and dignified bearing? Oh! to have drawn upon herself and to have suffered the contumely of this Dolores—whose past, in the main, was irreproachable, and who had, in fact, the right to despise her!

And as she thought of it now, that sort of defiance for the future, which she had been imprudent enough to utter as she turned away, dismayed her more and more. It seemed to her that she had compromised all the fond hopes of her son, in thus exasperating the hatred of this woman.

Her son! Her Ramuntcho who, at this hour, on this summer's night, was being borne away from her, borne away from her to distant places, into danger, to war! She had assumed very heavy responsibilities in directing his life according to her own ideas, to suit her own obstinacy, her own pride, her own egoism. And now she had perhaps brought unhappiness on him on the very evening on which he had departed so full of confidence in the happiness that awaited him on his return! This would, no doubt, be her supreme chastisement; she seemed to hear in the air of her empty house, as it were, the menace of this expiation; she felt its slow and sure approach.

Then she began to pray for him, with a heart in bitter revolt, because religion, as she was able to understand it, was without sweetness, without consolation, without hope or compassion. Her distress and her remorse at this moment were of a nature so gloomy that the tears which might have soothed her did not come.

And he, at this same hour, was continuing his descent, through valleys growing ever darker, into the lowlands where the trains run, bearing men away to distant places, changing and upsetting everything. For about an hour he would still be in Basque country; then it would be finished. On the road, he met some ox-wagons, lumbering slowly along, which recalled the tranquillity of olden times; and from time to time dim human shapes, which, as they passed, greeted him with the traditional good evening, the ancient "*gaou-one*,"

which to-morrow he would no longer hear. And beyond, on his left, in the background of a kind of black gulf, appeared still the outline of Spain, that Spain which, for a very long time, no doubt, would trouble his nights no more.

PART II

CHAPTER I

THREE years have quickly passed.

Franchita is alone in her house, ill and in bed, at the close of a November day. And it is the third autumn since her son went away.

In her hands, burning with fever, she holds a letter from him, a letter which ought to have given her unalloyed pleasure, for it announces his return, but which, on the contrary, fills her with agitation, for the joy of seeing him again is poisoned with grief and anxiety, a dreadful anxiety. . . .

Oh! she had had a true presentiment of the dismal future, on that evening when, returning from bidding good-bye to her son, she re-entered her lonely house in sore distress, after that kind of defiance hurled at Dolores in the open street: it was cruelly true, that, on that evening, she had for ever broken the life of her son!

Some months of waiting and apparent calm, however, had followed this scene, while Ramuntcho, far away from his native land, was making his first campaign. Then one day a rich suitor appeared on

the scene, and Gracieuse, to the common knowledge of the village, had obstinately refused him, despite the pressure of Dolores. Then suddenly both mother and daughter went away on the pretext of a visit to relations; but the visit was prolonged; a gradually increasing mystery surrounded the absence—and suddenly the news spread that Gracieuse was making her novitiate with the Sisters of St Mary of the Rosary, in a convent in Gascony, where the former Reverend Mother of Etchezar was Mother Abbess.

Dolores returned alone to her home, silent, sour-looking, and miserable. No one had ever learnt what pressure had been brought to bear on the little fair-haired girl, nor how the luminous gates of life had been closed against her, how she had come to allow herself to be immured in this tomb; but, as soon as the regulation delays were over, before even her brother had had an opportunity of seeing her again, she had taken her vows—and meanwhile, Ramuntcho, in a distant colonial war, far away from letters from France, amid the forests of a southern isle, had won his sergeant's stripes and the military medal.

Franchita had almost feared that her son would never come back. But now, here he was on the point of returning. Between her wasted and burning fingers she held a letter which said: "I am leaving the day after to-morrow, and shall arrive on Saturday evening." But what would he do, once he had returned? What occupation would he follow for the rest of his life, which fate had so sadly changed? On this point, in his letters, Ramuntcho had said nothing.

In other respects also, things had fared ill with her. The farmers, the tenants of the lower rooms, had gone from Etchezar, leaving the stable empty, and the house more lonely, and naturally her slender income was much reduced. Moreover, in an unfortunate investment, she had lost a portion of the money given to her by the stranger for her son. Truly she had been a maladroit mother, compromising in every way the happiness of her beloved son—or rather she was a mother upon whom the justice above weighed heavily now for her fault in the past. And all this had vanquished her, had hastened and aggravated the malady which the doctor, summoned too late, had been unable to check.

And now she awaited the return of her son, stretched on her bed, and burning with a high fever.

CHAPTER II

And Ramuntcho, after his three years' absence, was returning, having got his discharge from the army in that northern town in which his regiment was garrisoned. He was returning with a heart in disarray, a heart in tumult and distress.

His face was bronzed from exposure to the tropical sun; his moustache, now very long, gave him an air of haughty distinction, and on the breast of the civilian clothes, which he had just bought, he wore the ribbon of his medal.

At Bordeaux, where he had arrived after travelling through the night, he had joined, not without emotion, the train for Irun, which runs in a direct line towards the south, through the monotony of interminable barren plains. He had taken a corner seat by the window on the right in order that he might see at the first possible moment the Bay of Biscay and the outlines of the high mountains of Spain.

Later, as he drew near to Bayonne, he was thrilled by the sight, at the level crossings, of the first Basque bonnets, of the first Basque houses amid the pines and the oak trees.

And at St Jean-de-Luz at last, as he got out of the train, he felt a little as if he were intoxicated. . . .

First of all, coming from the fogs and cold which had already begun in northern France, there was here the sudden and delightful impression of a warmer climate, the sensation of entering a greenhouse. The sun was shining brilliantly; the south wind, the sweet wind from the south, was blowing gently, and the Pyrenees stood out in magnificent colours against the wide, clear sky. And then women were passing, young women whose laugh had the music of the south and of Spain, young women with the elegance and easy grace of the women of his own Basque country, who, after the heavy blondes of the north, troubled him more even than all these illusions of summer. But quickly his mood changed. Of what use was it to let himself be captivated by the charm that was here, since this rediscovered country of his was for him empty for ever? How could it alter his infinite despair, this fascinating grace of the women, all this ironic cheerfulness of the sky, of men and things?

No! Let him rather seek his home, return to his village, and embrace his mother!

As he had anticipated, the diligence which runs daily to Etchezar had left two hours before. But no whit put out, he proposed to walk the long road, so familiar to him of old, so as to reach home, nevertheless, the same evening, before the night was quite dark.

He went, therefore, and bought some *espadrilles*, the footwear of his excursions of earlier years. And stepping out rapidly as became a mountaineer, with long, swinging strides, he plunged at once into the

heart of the silent countryside, by roads which for him were full of memories.

November was drawing to a close, in the warm radiance of the sun which always lingers on these Pyrenean slopes. For some days now, over the Basque country, this same clear and luminous sky had prevailed, above the woods now half-leafless, above the mountains reddened with the ardent colour of the ferns. By the roadside grew tall grasses, as in the month of May, and large umbellar flowers which had mistaken the season. In the hedges, privet and eglantine were blooming again, to the buzzing of the last bees, and there fluttered about a few belated butterflies, to whom death had allowed a short reprieve of some weeks.

The Basque houses emerged here and there from the trees, very high, with overhanging roofs, very white in their extreme old age, with their shutters brown and green, an old and faded green. And everywhere, on their wooden balconies, golden yellow pumpkins were drying, and bunches of pink haricots; everywhere, on their walls, were strung, like pretty strings of coral beads, garlands of red pimentos: all the good things of the still fecund earth, all the good things of the old nourishing soil, stored thus, according to the usage of centuries, in provision for the dark months when the kindly warmth should be no more.

And after the mists of the northern autumn, this clearness of the air, this southern sunshine, every new familiar detail of the country, awakened in the

complex soul of Ramuntcho infinite memories, bitter sweet.

It was the season for the cutting of the ferns which form the fleece of the red hillsides. And large bullock-wagons, laden with this harvest, were rumbling peacefully, through the clear, melancholy sunshine, towards the isolated farmhouses, leaving behind them the trail of their perfume. Very slowly, along the mountain roads, went these enormous loads of ferns; very slowly, with a tinkle of little bells. Yoked oxen, indolent and strong—coifed all with the traditional tawny-coloured sheep's-skin which gave them the appearance of bisons or aurochs—hauled these heavy wagons, the wheels of which were simple discs, similar to those of the wagons of antiquity. The drivers, carrying a long stick, walked ahead, always noiselessly, in *espadrilles*, their pink cotton shirt open at the chest, their jacket thrown over the left shoulder, and the woollen bonnet pulled well down over a shaven, lean, and serious face, to which the width of the jaws and the muscles of the neck give an expression of massive solidity.

Later on, there were intervals of silence, during which there was no sound in the roads save the buzzing of the flies in the yellowing and vanishing shade of the trees.

Ramuntcho stared at the rare passers-by he met on the road, surprised a little that he should not yet have encountered any who knew him and would stop to speak. But of familiar faces there were none. No greetings from old-time friends; nothing but casual

good-days exchanged with people who turned to look after him sometimes as if they thought they had seen him before, but who, unable to remember where or when, relapsed into their humble dream of the fields. . . . And he felt that the differences between him and these labouring folk were more accentuated than ever.

Now, however, comes one of these wagons with a load so large that it brushes against the branches of the oaks as it passes. Ahead walks the driver, to judge from his look of gentle resignation a great peaceful fellow, red as the ferns, red as autumn, with a tangle of reddish fur on his bare chest. He walks with an easy and careless movement, his arms spread out in the shape of a cross along his ox-goad, which he has placed across his shoulders. In this way, no doubt, on the flank of these same mountains, his forbears had walked, labourers and ox-drivers like himself, during centuries without number.

And this one, at sight of Ramuntcho, flicks his oxen on the head, halts them with a gesture and a short cry of command, and comes forward to the traveller with outstretched hands . . . Florentino! a Florentino much changed, broader in the shoulder than ever, quite a grown man now, with an indefinable air of assurance and expansiveness.

The two friends embraced each other; then they stared at each other in silence, constrained suddenly by the flood of memories which rushed up from the depth of their souls, and which neither of them knew how to express; Ramuntcho no more than Florentino, for

though his power of expression was infinitely more formed, the depth and the mystery of his thoughts were also much more unfathomable.

And the fact that the thoughts which beset them were beyond their power to speak constrained them still more; and their embarrassed gaze turned abstractedly to the magnificent oxen standing near them:

"They are mine, you know," said Florentino. "I got married two years ago . . . my wife works also . . . and as a result . . . we are beginning to be pretty comfortably off . . . and," he added with naïve pride, "I have another pair of bullocks like these at home."

Then he fell silent, and reddened suddenly under his tan, for he had the tact which comes from the heart, which often the humblest possess by nature, but which, by way of compensation, education never gives, not even to the most cultivated men and women of the world. For remembering the desolation of Ramuntcho's return, his shattered destiny, his betrothed buried in the convent of the black nuns, his mother dying, he was afraid that he had been cruel in thus flaunting his own good fortune before him.

And there was silence between them again. For a few moments they continued to look at one another smiling amiably, but they found no words to say. In any case, between these two, the gulf of different ways of thought had widened in the three years. And Florentino, flicking his oxen again, set them moving with a little click of his tongue, and gripped hard the hand of his friend:

"We shall meet again, shall we not? We shall meet again?"

And the noise of the little bells of his yoke died away quickly in the calm of the darkening road, where now the warmth of the day was decreasing.

"And so he has been successful in life!" Ramuntcho thought lugubriously as he continued his tramp beneath the branches of autumn.

The road he follows continues to ascend. It is gullied here and there by the mountain springs, and crossed sometimes by the great roots of oak-trees.

And soon Etchezar will appear before him, and even before he has seen it, the picture of it grows clearer and clearer in his mind, recalled and quickened in his memory by the aspect of the things around him.

His pace increases, and his heart beats faster.

All this countryside, where Gracieuse is no more, is empty now, empty and as sad to wander through as a beloved home after the great Reaper has passed through it! And, nevertheless, Ramuntcho, deep within him, found courage to think that, in some little convent not very far away, beneath a nun's veil, the dear dark eyes existed still; and that he would be able, at any rate, to see them; that the taking of the veil, in fact, was not quite like death, and that the last word of fate had perhaps not yet been said. . . . For, as he thought upon it, who could have so changed the heart of Gracieuse, which before had been so absolutely his? Great external pressure must have been brought to bear upon her for a certainty. . . . And if they met face to face,

who knows? And yet how could he well hope for a thing so little reasonable and possible? In this country of his, who had ever known a nun to break her eternal vows and follow a lover? And besides, where could they live together afterwards, avoided as they would be by neighbours, shunned as renegades? To America, perhaps. And then? And how could he reach her and seize her, in the white houses of the dead, where the nuns lived for ever watched and overheard? Oh! no. It was a vain, unrealisable dream! All that was over, finished beyond recall!

Then the sadness which came to him with the thought of Gracieuse was for a time forgotten, and he felt only a great outreaching of his heart towards his mother, towards the mother who, at least, was his, and who was yonder, very near, a little agitated, no doubt, in the joyful anxiety of waiting for him.

And now, on the left of the road, he sees a humble hamlet, half-drowned in beeches and oaks, with its old chapel—and with its wall for the tennis game, amid old, old trees, at the meeting of two pathways. Immediately, in his young head, the current of his thoughts changes again; this little round-topped wall, covered with a wash of lime and ochre, awakens tumultuously in him thoughts of life and strength and joy; with the eagerness of a child, he tells himself that to-morrow he will be able to take part in this game of the Basques, which is a kind of frenzy of movement and quick dexterity. He dreams of the great matches on Sundays after vespers, of the glory of the grim struggles with the champions of Spain, of all that he has

so much missed during his years of exile, and with which now he is going to fill his future. But it was only for a moment; and his deadly despair returned to shatter his dream. His triumphs on the playing ground, what did they matter, now that Gracieuse would not be there to see? Without her, everything, even these things he loved so well, became colourless, useless and vain, and barely any more existed.

Etchezar! Etchezar is suddenly revealed beyond, at a turning of the road! . . . It glows in a ruddy light, like some picture in a magic lantern, illumined, as it might seem, especially for him, amid the great backgrounds of shadow and evening. It is the hour of sunset. Around the isolated village, surmounted by its solid old church tower, a last pencil of rays traces a halo of the colour of copper and gold, while the play of the clouds—and the great shadow cast by Gizune—darkens the clustered fields above and below, the mass of the brown hillsides, coloured by the dead ferns.

How sad is the aspect of his native place to the soldier who returns and finds not his betrothed!

Three years have passed since he went away. And three years—if, alas! later in life they are but a fugitive nothing—are to the young an abysm of time, a period which changes everything. And, after his long exile, how small this village, which yet he loves so well, seems to him, small, diminished, immured in the mountains, mournful and lost! In the depth of his boyish, uncultivated soul, begins again, to add to his suffering, the old conflict between those two

sentiments of over-civilised man, which are an inheritance from his unknown father: an almost morbid attachment to the home, to the country of his childhood, and a dread of returning to live there, in the knowledge that there exists elsewhere a world so vast and free. . . .

After the warm afternoon, the autumn now makes its presence felt in the rapid decline of the day. A freshness ascends suddenly from the valleys below, with a savour of dying leaves and herbage. And then a thousand and one details of preceding autumns in this Basque country, of Novembers of earlier times, come back to him very clearly: the cold oncoming of the night succeeding to the fine, sunny days; the melancholy mists that gather with the evening; the Pyrenees now obscured by inky-grey clouds, now outlined in black silhouette on a pale golden sky; about the houses the late-blooming garden flowers, spared here for long by the frosts of winter; and in front of all the doors the litter of the leaves of the arched plane-trees, the yellow litter which crackles beneath the feet of the good man re-entering in *espadrilles* the home where supper awaits him. . . . Oh! the sense of well-being and the careless joy of his homecomings, on evenings of old, after a day of tramping in the rude mountains! Oh! the cheerfulness, in those old days, of the first fires of winter, in the high, smoke-stained fireplace ornamented with a drapery of white calico or a trimming of patterned pink paper. In the towns, with their masses of houses and their swarming inhabitants, one no longer gets the true impression of returning home, of going to

earth at night in the primitive fashion, such as one gets here, under these Basque roofs, standing solitary in the midst of open country, with the great darkness all about, the great darkness rustling with leaves, the great changing darkness of clouds and mountains. But to-day his absence abroad, his travels and the new conceptions they have taught him, have made his little mountain home seem strangely small, have spoilt it for him. And as he thinks that his mother will not always be there, and that now Gracieuse will never be there, it seems to him that he will find it almost desolate.

He quickens his pace again, in his haste to reach his mother. To gain his house he skirts, without entering, the village, following a road which overlooks the playing ground and the church. And as he passes quickly, he sees it all with an inexpressible emotion. Peace and silence reign over this little parish of Etchezar, the heart of the French Basque country, and native place of all the famous tennis-players of the past—who now are hoary grandsires or perhaps lie in their graves. The immutable church, where his dreams of faith are buried, is surrounded, like a mosque, with the same dark cypresses. The playing ground, as he passes quickly above, is illumined still by a little sunlight, by a last expiring ray, very oblique, on the far side, near the wall surmounted by the old-time inscription—just as on the evening of his first great success, four years ago now, when Gracieuse was there, among the joyful crowd, Gracieuse in her blue frock, she who to-day has become a little black nun. . . . On the empty seats, on the granite steps

overgrown with weeds, are sitting three or four old men, who formerly were the heroes of the place, and who now foregather nightly on the scene of their triumphs, to talk in the cool of the evening, while the twilight descends from the mountains, invades the land, seems to emanate and to fall from the brown Pyrenees. Oh! the good folk who dwell here, whose lives are lived here; and the little cider tavern, the simple little shops, and the old-fashioned things—brought from the towns, from the world without—which are sold there to the mountaineers of the neighbourhood! How strange it all seems to him now, how foreign to him, how far away, as if in the backward of a primitive past! Is it really the case that he is no longer, to-day, a man of Etchezar? Is he really no longer the Ramuntcho of former days? What is there so particular in his soul that prevents him from being at ease here, as the others are? Why, in the name of heaven, is it forbidden to him and to him alone, to fulfil here the tranquil destiny of his dream, when all his friends have been able to fulfil theirs? . . .

And now his home comes in sight. And it is just as he thought to see it. As he had expected he sees along the wall the late-blooming flowers his mother loved to cultivate, the same kinds of flowers as, in the cold north from which he comes, had been killed by the frost weeks before: heliotropes, geraniums, tall dahlias, and climbing roses. And the familiar litter of leaves, which fall every autumn from the arched plane-trees, is there, too, and, as he treads it under foot, gives out the old familiar sound. In the room below, when he

enters, the light is already dim. The high fireplace, to which his gaze first turns in an instinctive recollection of the blazing logs of the evenings of old, stands, as it did, with its white drapery; but cold, full of shadow, telling of absence and death.

He ascends quickly to his mother's room. She, having recognised from her bed the footsteps of her son, had sat up, very stiff and very white in the dim light.

"Ramuntcho!" she says, in a muffled and aged voice.

She stretches out her arms to him, and, as soon as he reaches her, enfolds him and presses him to her.

"Ramuntcho!"

Then, having pronounced his name, without another word, she leans her head against his cheek, in a movement habitual to her of old in moments of affection and tenderness.. And he perceives that the face of his mother is burning against his. He feels, through the nightdress, that the arms which enfold him are wasted, feverish, and hot. And for the first time a fear seizes him. The notion that his mother is really very ill presents itself to his mind, the possibility and the sudden dread that she may die. . . .

"But are you all alone, mother? Who looks after you? Who is nursing you?"

"Nursing me?" she replied in her brusque way, her peasant instincts reawakened. "Spend money on nursing me. Why, what could anyone do? Old Doyamburu comes during the day to give me what I need, the things the doctor orders . . . anything . . .

the medicine, you know. . . . But light the lamp, Ramuntcho dear. I want to see you . . . and I haven't seen you yet."

And when the lamp was lit, with a contraband Spanish match, she continued in a tone infinitely gentle and caressing, as one might speak to an adored baby:

"Oh! Your moustache! What a great moustache you have got, my darling boy! I do not recognise my Ramuntcho now! Bring the lamp nearer, my dearest one, bring it nearer so that I may see you better."

He, too, saw her better now, in the new light of the lamp, while she gazed at him with admiration and love. And his fear grew, because his mother's cheeks were so hollow, and her hair almost white; the expression of her eyes was changed and lustreless; and on her whole face appeared the sinister and irremediable marks of time, of suffering, and of death.

And now two large tears coursed from Franchita's eyes, which grew large and bright, rejuvenated by despairing revolt and hate.

"Oh! that woman!" she said suddenly. "Oh! would you believe it! that Dolores! . . ."

And her incomplete cry expressed and resumed all the jealousy of thirty years, all her merciless rancour against this enemy of childhood, who had succeeded in spoiling the life of her son.

A silence fell between them. He had sat down, head bowed, near the bed, holding the poor feverish hand which his mother held out to him. She, breathing more quickly, seemed for some moments to be labour-

ing under the oppression of something which she hesitated to express.

"Tell me, Ramuntcho dear! . . . I want to ask you . . . what are you going to do now, my son? What are your projects for the future."

"I don't know, mother. We will think about it, we will see . . . do you want to know now, at this minute? We shall have time to talk it over, shall we not? . . . To America, perhaps!"

"Ah! yes," she said slowly, with all the dismay which had been growing in her for days past. "To America! . . . Yes, I was sure of it. . . . So that is what you are going to do. . . . I knew it, I knew it! . . ."

She ended with a groan, and joined her hands together in an attitude of prayer.

CHAPTER III

On the following morning Ramuntcho wandered about the village and its immediate neighbourhood, under a sun which had penetrated the clouds of the night, and was as radiant as the sun of yesterday. Carefully dressed, his moustache curled, his carriage proud, elegant, serious, and graceful, he was walking at random, to see and to be seen, a little of childishness mingling with his gravity, a little of grateful ease with his distress. His mother had said to him on waking:

"I am better, I assure you. It is Sunday to-day. Go for a walk, I beg of you."

And passers-by turned round to look at him, whispered to one another for a moment, and then spread the news: "Franchita's son has returned. He has grown a handsome fellow!"

An illusion of summer persisted everywhere, with, nevertheless, the ineffable melancholy of things peacefully coming to an end. Under this impassive radiance of the sun, the Pyrenean countryside had a mournful air; all its plants, all its verdure seemed to be subdued to a kind of tired surrender of life, and to be awaiting death.

The turnings of the pathways, the houses, the very trees, everything reminded Ramuntcho of the hours of

earlier days, hours which he had shared with Gracieuse. And at each reminder, at each step, was being graven and hammered into his soul, in a new form, this decree from which there could be no appeal: "It is finished; you are alone for ever; Gracieuse has been taken from you, and has been hidden away." And all that happened on the road, all he saw and heard, renewed his anguish and turned it into fresh channels. And, beneath all, as the constant base of his reflections, this other anxiety weighed heavily: his mother, his mother very ill, and perhaps in mortal danger!

Some of those he met stopped him, with smiles of welcome, and spoke to him in his dear Basque language —still so quick and resonant for all its incalculable antiquity—old Basque bonnets and old white heads eager to talk about tennis to one who was so fine a player on his return to the fold. And then, suddenly, after the first words of greeting had been spoken, the smiles died away, despite the bright sun in the blue heaven, and faces became grave as the thought recurred of Gracieuse veiled and Franchita dying.

The blood rushed suddenly to his head when, a short way off, he saw Dolores about to re-enter her house. Very decrepit, very broken she looked! She had certainly recognised him also, for she quickly turned away her hard, obstinate old head in its black mantilla. Half pitying her, seeing her so feeble, the thought occurred to him that she had struck herself with the same blow she had aimed at him, and that she would be alone now, during her old age, and until her death.

On the square he met Marcos Iragola, who told him that he was married, like Florentino—and to the little sweetheart of his boyhood, too, needless to say.

"I had no military service to do," he explained, "for we, as you know, are Guipuzcoans, immigrants to France; and that enabled me to marry earlier!"

He was twenty-one and she eighteen; and between them, Marcos and Pilar, they had not a yard of ground or a sou; but notwithstanding they had joined lots happily together, like two sparrows building their nest. And the boyish husband added smiling:

"What do you think! My father said to me, 'Marcos, my eldest son, as long as you do not marry I promise that I will give you a little brother every year.' And he would have done it, you know! There are fourteen of us already, all living!"

Oh! these simple ones, these children of Nature! These wise, these humbly happy ones! Ramuntcho left him almost hurriedly, his heart sadder for having spoken to him, although, to be sure, he sincerely wished him every happiness in this little venture of improvident birds.

Here and there, people were sitting in front of their doors, in the kind of atrium of branches which forms the approach to all the houses in this country. And these vaults of plane-trees, fashioned in the Basque manner, which in summer are so impenetrable, are now in great part open to the sky, and let fall pencils of light on the good folk who sit below. The sun shines,

playing the part rather of a mournful destroyer, on the yellow and drying leaves.

Ramuntcho, as, in his slow promenade, he renewed acquaintance with his village, felt more and more how strong, and how strangely persistent were the bonds which bound him still to this region of the earth, rugged and confined as it was, even though he should be alone here and unloved, without friends or wife or mother.

Now the bell is ringing for the High Mass! And the vibrations of this bell stir him with a strange emotion which he had not expected. Formerly its familiar call was a call of joy and festival.

He stops, he hesitates, in spite of his present disbelief, and in spite of his rancour against this Church which has ravished from him his betrothed. The bell seems to call to him to-day in a manner so personal, with such a voice of appeasement and caress: "Come, come; let thyself be comforted as thy ancestors were comforted; come, thou forsaken one, yield thyself to this sweet lure, which will make thy tears flow without bitterness, and will help thee to meet death. . . ."

Undecided, and still resisting, he is walking, nevertheless, towards the church, when Arrochkoa arrives on the scene.

Arrochkoa, whose moustache has grown much longer, and whose feline expression has become more marked, runs to him with outstretched hands, with an effusion he had not looked for, in a spirit of friendliness perhaps sincere towards this ex-sergeant who carries

himself so proudly, who wears on his breast the ribbon of his medal, and whose adventures have been talked about in the village:

"Ah! Ramuntcho, and when did you get back? Oh! if I could have prevented it. . . . What do you think of them, of my obstinate old mother, and of all these bigots of the Church? . . . Oh! I have not told you: I have a son. Two months ago. A fine little fellow, I can tell you. . . . What a lot of things we shall have to talk about, my poor fellow, what a lot of things!"

The bell continues to ring. It fills the air with its appeal, so kindly, so serious, and, in its way, so imposing too.

"You are not going in, I suppose?" asks Arrochkoa, pointing to the church.

"No! Oh! no!" replies Ramuntcho, gloomily decided.

"Very well then! Come along and taste this year's cider!"

And he leads him to the smugglers' cider tavern; and they both sit down near the open window, as in the days of old; and this place also, these old benches, these barrels aligned in the background, these pictures on the wall, the same now as three years ago, serve to recall to Ramuntcho the happy days of long ago, days bygone and finished.

The day is extraordinarily fine; the sky has a rare clearness; in the air is the peculiar savour of the autumn, the savour of the thinning woods, of the dead leaves drying on the ground in the sun. Now,

after the absolute calm of the morning, a light wind is rising, an autumnal wind, a wind of November, announcing clearly, but with a melancholy that is almost charming, that winter is at hand—a southern winter, it is true, a short-lived winter which scarcely interrupts the life of the fields. And the gardens, and all the old walls are still abloom with roses!

First of all, as they drink their cider, they talk of indifferent things, of the travels of Ramuntcho, of what has happened in the country during his absence, of marriages that have taken place or been broken off. And as they talk, these two young unbelievers who go not to church, the sounds of the Mass reach them, the sounds of the little bell, and the sounds of the organ, and the age-old hymns with which the high resonant nave is filled.

At length, Arrochkoa returns to it, to the burning question which occupies their minds:

"Oh! if you had been at home, it would never have happened. . . . And even now, if you saw her again. . . ."

Ramuntcho looked at him, startled at what he conceived to be the other's meaning.

"*Even now?* What do you mean?"

"Oh! my boy, women. . . . With women you can never tell! . . . She was very fond of you, of that I am sure, and it was very hard. . . . And nowadays, as you know, there is no law which keeps her there! . . . It wouldn't worry me, so far as I am concerned, if she threw her habit on the dust-heap!"

Ramuntcho turned away his head, his eyes on the

ground, without replying, and beat the floor with his foot. And, during the silence that followed, the impious thing which he had scarcely dared to formulate to himself, appeared to him, little by little, less chimerical, more realisable, almost easy. . . . After all, it was not really so impossible, in fact, that he should recover her. And, at need, no doubt, Arrochkoa here, her own brother, would lend his aid. And now, what a new temptation, what a fresh turmoil is in his soul!

Drily he asked:

"Where is she? Far from here?"

"Rather, yes! Near Navarre, five or six hours' drive. They have moved her twice since they got hold of her. She is now at Amezqueta, beyond the great oak plantations of Oyanzabal; you reach it by way of Mendichoco; you remember we passed by there one night together, with Itchoua."

The congregation is coming out from the High Mass. Groups of people pass: women, girls, young, pretty, graceful, and Gracieuse is no longer among them: many Basque bonnets pulled down over sunburnt faces. And all these faces turn to look at them, drinking there at the window. The wind, which is blowing rather harder now, makes dance around their table the large dead leaves of the plane-trees.

An old woman casts at them, from beneath her mantilla of black cloth, a glance that is mournful and hostile:

"Ah!" says Arrochkoa. "There is mother

passing! And she is looking at us, see! She did a pretty thing that day. She may boast of it! And she's the first to suffer for it, too, for she will end now as a lonely old woman. . . . Catherine—of Elsagarray's, you know—goes daily to help her; apart from her, she has nobody now to talk to in the evenings."

A bass voice behind them interrupts them, a Basque greeting, deep as the echo of a cave, while a large and heavy hand is laid on Ramuntcho's shoulder, as if to take possession of him: Itchoua. Itchoua who has just finished singing his liturgy! . . . He has not changed, to be sure: still the same face which might be any age, still the same colourless mask which might be that of a priest or of a robber, and the same eyes, deep-set, hidden, absent. His soul, too, doubtless remains the same, capable at one and the same time of cold-blooded murder and of fanatical devotion.

"Ah!" he said, in a tone that was meant to be genial, "so you have come back to us, Ramuntcho! And we shall work together again, eh? There is much doing now, with Spain, you know, and we have need of strong arms on the frontier. You will be one of us again, what?"

"Perhaps," replied Ramuntcho. "Yes, we can talk of it later, and come to an understanding."

For, during the last few minutes, the idea of going to America had slowly faded from his mind. . . . No! . . . Rather would he stay here, resume his former life, and think and obstinately wait. Besides, now that

he knows where *she* is, this village of Amezqueta, some five or six hours away, haunts him in a dangerous fashion, and he harbours all kinds of sacrilegious projects, which, before this day, he would scarcely have dared to conceive.

CHAPTER IV

At noon he returns to his isolated home to see how his mother is.

The feverish and rather artificial improvement of the morning has been maintained. Cared for by old Doyamburu, she assured him she felt quite well again, and, in her dread of seeing him unoccupied and brooding, bade him return to the village and take part in the tennis match of the Sunday.

The wind had become warm again, blowing once more from the south. The chilliness that was in the air a few hours before had disappeared; and now, in contrast, the sun was shining, and over the reddened woods, the rust-coloured ferns, the roads on which the sad rain of leaves continued to fall, there reigned an atmosphere of summer. But the sky was filling with heavy clouds, which came suddenly from behind the mountains, as if they had lain in ambush there, to appear together at a given signal.

The players for the tennis match had not yet been chosen, and eager groups were in close confabulation when he arrived on the ground. Quickly he was surrounded and made much of, and people named him by acclamation to take part in the game and uphold the honour of his commune. He was very reluctant, for

he had not played for three years, and was fearful lest his hand should have lost its cunning. At last he yielded, however, and began to get ready. But to whom now was he to entrust his jacket? And suddenly the image of Gracieuse reappeared to him, sitting in the foremost row, and holding out her hands to receive it. To whom could he throw his jacket to-day? It was customary to hand it to a friend, in much the same way as the toreadors do with their silk-embroidered cloak. . . . He threw it at hazard, this time, no matter where, on the granite of the old steps, abloom now with the late-flowering scabious. . . .

The game began. All at sea at first, uncertain with his strokes, he many times missed the mad, bouncing thing which it is necessary to catch in its flight.

Then he pulled himself together impetuously, found once again his old skill and recovered superbly. His muscles had gained in force what perhaps they had lost in dexterity. Once more he was acclaimed, once more he knew the physical intoxication of moving, bounding, of feeling his limbs respond as if they were strong resilient springs, of hearing around him the eager murmur of the crowd. . . .

But presently came the interval of rest which usually cuts short the long-contested rallies; the time when the players sit them down, breathless, the blood bubbling, the hands red and trembling—and when the thoughts which the game had suppressed return.

And then he found himself sorrowfully alone.

Above the assembled heads, above the woollen Basque bonnets, and the pretty scarfed heads of the

women, the stormy sky, which here the south wind always brings when it is about to finish, was growing more threatening. The air had become absolutely clear, as if it were rarefied, rarefied almost to a vacuum. The mountains seemed to have advanced extraordinarily; the Pyrenees overwhelmed the village; the Spanish summits and the French summits were there, both equally close, as if they had been clapped one on the other, their burnt browns and their dark, intense violets strongly emphasised. Large clouds, which appeared to have the consistency of terrestrial things, were spread out in the form of an arc, veiling the sun, and casting a shadow of eclipse. And, here and there, through a break in the clouds, sharply defined and edged with shining silver, appeared the deep blue of an almost African sky. All this country, the climate of which changes in the course of a single day, has become for some hours strangely southern in aspect, in temperature, and in light.

Ramuntcho breathed this suave, dry air which came from farthest south to invigorate the lungs. It was typical weather of this country, weather also that was characteristic of this lower part of the Bay of Biscay, the weather which formerly he loved the best, and which to-day filled him with physical well-being—but filled, too, his soul with vague despair, because all that it portended, all that was being prepared and amassed on high, with this air of grim menace, gave him the impression of a heaven deaf to prayer, mindless and masterless, a mere focus of fecundating storms, of blind forces of creation, re-creation, and destruction. And

during these moments of reflection, still rather breathless as he was, while men in Basque bonnets crowded round him to congratulate him, he answered nothing, heard nothing; he was conscious only of the ephemeral plenitude of the vigour that was in him, of his youth, his will, and of something in him which bade him enjoy life to the full, ruthlessly, desperately, bade him attempt, no matter what, without allowing himself to be deterred by vain scruples, in order to recover the fair-haired girl, who was the long-desired of his soul and of his body, who was for him the unique being, and his plighted bride.

The match successfully ended, he returned alone, sad but resolute—proud too, of having won, proud that he had not lost his old skill, and realising fully that it was a means of livelihood, a source of money, and a power, to be still one of the leading players of the Basque country.

Beneath the dark sky things still retained the same exaggerated colours; the horizon was still clear-cut and sombre; and the same blustering wind continued to blow from the south, warm and dry, stimulating to the muscles and the thoughts.

But the clouds were gradually getting lower, and soon this weather and these appearances of things would change and come to an end. He knew it quite well, as every countryman would know it, accustomed to read the message of the sky. It was the announcement of an autumn squall which would bring to a close the sequence of warm winds—of a decisive shaking which would complete the baring of the woods. And

immediately afterwards would come the long rains chilling everything, and the mists to render the mountains obscure and distant. And then the mournful winter would reign, arresting the sap, cooling hot-headed projects, putting a curb on passion and revolt.

Now the first drops of rain began to fall in the road, few but large, on the litter of the leaves.

As yesterday, when he entered in the dusk, his mother was alone.

Ascending noiselessly, he found her sleeping an unrefreshing sleep, restless and feverish.

Wandering about the house, he tried, with a view to make things less sinister, to light a fire of branches in the large fireplace below, but the fire went out, smoking. Outside the rain was falling in torrents. Through the windows, as through grey shrouds, the village looked blurred and dim, effaced in the winter's storm. The wind and rain beat against the walls of the lonely house, around which, once more, the vast darkness of the countryside on wet nights was thickening—the vast darkness, the vast silence to which for long Ramuntcho had been unaccustomed. And into his youthful soul there penetrated gradually a chill of solitude and forlornness; he seemed now to be losing even his energy, the consciousness of his love, his strength, his youth; all his projects of struggle and resistance seemed to be melting in the misty evening. His future, as it now appeared to him, had become miserable and unreal, his future as a tennis player, as a pitiful entertainer of crowds, at the mercy of an illness or a failure. . . . His hopes of the day vanished,

based, as they no doubt were, on unstable nothings which now had disappeared in the night. . . .

Then he felt a yearning, as formerly in the days of his childhood, towards the gentle refuge which his mother had always been to him. He ascended the stairs on tiptoe, in order to look at her, even asleep, and to remain, at any rate, near her bed while she slumbered.

And when he had lit, in the corner of the room farthest from her, a feeble-burning lamp, she appeared to him more changed by her illness even than yesterday; the possibility presented itself to his mind, with growing force, that he was going to lose her, that he would be alone, and would never, never feel again against his cheek the gentle pressure of that supported head. . . . And for the first time, too, she seemed to him to have grown old, and as he remembered the many disappointments she had suffered on his account, he felt an immense pity for her, a pity tender and infinite, at the sight of the wrinkles which he had not seen before, at the sight of the hair, grown recently white, at her temples. Oh! A desolate and a hopeless pity, for he realised bitterly that it was too late now to arrange life better. . . . And a feeling of grief, which it was impossible to resist, began to convulse his breast, contracted his youthful face; objects around him became dim to his sight; and, in an impulsive need of supplication, of asking forgiveness, he sank on his knees, and buried his face in his mother's bed, weeping at last, weeping hot tears. . . .

CHAPTER V

"AND whom did you see in the village, my boy?" she asked him, on the following morning during the rally which occurred daily in the earlier hours of the morning, when the fever had subsided.

"And whom did you see in the village, my boy?" She forced herself to assume a rather playful air, to talk of commonplace things, in her fear of touching on grave issues and provoking disturbing answers.

"I saw Arrochkoa, mother," he replied in a tone which led back at once to the burning questions.

"Arrochkoa! And how did he behave to you?"

"Oh! he spoke to me as if I had been his brother!"

"Yes, I know, I know. . . . Oh! it was not he, it was not he who drove her. . . ."

"He even told me . . ."

He did not dare to continue, at this time, and hung his head.

"And what did he tell you, my boy?"

"That . . . that it had been hard to enclose her there . . . that perhaps . . . that even now, if she saw me again, it might not be impossible. . . ."

She sat up in the commotion of what she had just divined; with her wasted hands she brushed aside her newly white hair, and her eyes became young and

bright, in an expression, almost wicked, of joy and revenged pride:

"He told you that!"

"Would you forgive me, mother . . . if I tried. . . ."

She took his two hands and they remained silent, neither of them daring, with their Catholic scruples, to utter the sacrilegious thing which was fermenting in their heads. In her eyes the wicked light died out.

"Forgive you," she said, her voice very low. "Oh! I . . . you know very well that I would. . . . But do not do that, my son, I beg of you, do not do it; it would bring unhappiness on both of you! . . . Do not think any more of it, my Ramuntcho, do not ever think of it again. . . ."

Then they became silent, for they heard the footsteps of the doctor coming up the stairs for his daily visit. And that was the last, the very last time they were to speak together of this matter in this life.

But Ramuntcho knew now that, even after death, she would not blame him for having attempted this thing, nor for having carried it out. And this forgiveness sufficed him, and, now that he was sure of obtaining it, the greatest barrier between his betrothed and him was suddenly removed.

CHAPTER VI

In the evening, with the increase of the fever, she seemed to be much more dangerously ill.

The malady had taken a violent hold on her robust constitution. It had been diagnosed too late and inadequately treated on account of her peasant's obstinacy and her incredulous disdain of doctors and their remedies.

And gradually, in Ramuntcho, the dread thought of losing her took a dominant place; during the hours of vigil which he passed at her bedside, silent and alone, he began to envisage the reality of this separation, the horror of death and burial—and all the mournful to-morrows, all the aspects of the life that lay immediately before him: the house that he would have to sell before he left the country; and then, perhaps, the desperate attempt at the convent of Amezqueta; and finally, the departure, probably alone and without desire to return, for unknown America. . . .

The idea, too, of the great secret which she would carry with her to the grave—of the secret of his birth—obsessed him more and more, from hour to hour.

Then, bending over her, and trembling violently, as

if he were going to commit a sacrilege in a church, he ventured at last to say :

" Mother! . . . Mother, will you tell me now who is my father! "

She shuddered at first under this supreme question, realising well that if he dared to interrogate her thus, it was because the end was near. Then she hesitated a moment : in her head, throbbing with fever, a struggle was taking place; her duty she could no longer clearly see; her obstinacy of so many years almost wavered, in this hour, before the sudden apparition of death. . . .

But, her mind made up now for ever, she replied presently, in the brusque tone of her bad-tempered days :

" Your father! What is the use? . . . What do you hope from him, who for more than twenty years has never given you a thought? "

No, it was settled, finished, she would not tell him. Besides, it was too late now; at the moment of separating for ever, of entering into the inert impotence of the dead, how could she risk changing so completely the life of her son which she would no longer be able to supervise, how could she deliver him to his father, who perhaps would make of him a hopeless unbeliever like himself! What a responsibility, and what a terrible dread!

Afterwards, her decision irrevocably made, she communed with herself, feeling for the first time that life was closing behind her, and joined her hands for a gloomy prayer.

As for Ramuntcho, after this attempt to learn the secret of his parentage, after this great effort which had seemed to him almost a profanation, he bowed his head before the will of his mother, and asked no further question.

CHAPTER VII

SHE became rapidly worse, alternating between withering fevers, which flushed her cheeks and pinched her nostrils, and exhausting fits of perspiration, during which the pulse almost stopped beating.

And Ramuntcho had now no other thought than of his mother; the image of Gracieuse ceased to visit him during these ominous days.

Franchita was dying; she was dying, mute and as it were indifferent, asking nothing and uttering no complaint.

Once, however, on awakening, she called him suddenly in a weak voice of anguish, and, throwing her arms around him, drew him to her and supported her head against his cheek. And, in this moment, Ramuntcho saw in her eyes the great terror—that of the flesh which feels that it is passing, that of men and that of beasts, the same for all and terrible for all. . . . She was still a believer, more or less; or rather she practised her religion, like so many of the women around her; scrupulous in regard to dogma and the observances and services of her religion, but without a clear conception of the beyond, without any luminous hope . . . Heaven and all the wonderful things promised after death. . . . Yes, perhaps. . . . But

nevertheless, the dark grave was there, near and certain, in which one would rot. . . . What was sure, what was inexorable was that never, never again would she be able to press her dead face in a real fashion against Ramuntcho's; and so, in the doubt whether she had a soul that would survive, in the horror and the misery of ceasing to be, of returning to dust and nothingness, she craved once more the kisses of her son, and she clung to him as shipwrecked mariners cling adrift in the dark, deep waters.

He understood all this, all that the poor dying eyes were saying. And the tender pity which he had already felt at the sight of his mother's wrinkles and whitening hair filled his young heart to overflowing; and he answered her appeal by clasping her close in a disconsolate embrace.

But this was of short duration. She had never, for that matter, been one of those who soften for long or, at any rate, allow themselves to appear to do so. She withdrew her arms, her head sank back, and she closed her eyes, unconscious now . . . or perhaps stoical.

And Ramuntcho, standing by the bed, not daring now to touch her, wept silently, his head turned away—while, in the distance, the bell of the parish church began to sound the curfew, proclaiming the tranquil peace of the village, filling the air with its soothing, protective vibrations, counselling good sleep to those who have still a to-morrow. . . .

The following morning, after having confessed, she

died, silent and proud to the last, having had a kind of shame of her suffering and her death-agony.

And in the evening Ramuntcho stood alone by the side of this cold recumbent thing, which for some hours longer he might keep and gaze upon, but which soon must be buried in the earth. .

CHAPTER VIII

EIGHT days later. At the fall of night, while a fierce mountain squall was twisting the branches of the trees, Ramuntcho returned to his empty house, which seemed to be filled with the greyness of death. A breath of winter had passed over the Basque country, a slight frost, searing the annual flowers, and putting an end to the illusory summer of December. Before Franchita's door the geraniums and dahlias were dead, and the front pathway, now no longer swept, had disappeared under the accumulation of yellow leaves.

For Ramuntcho this first week of mourning had been occupied by the thousand and one cares which serve to deaden grief. In his pride, for he too was proud, he had desired that everything should be done in a sumptuous manner, following the old usage of the parish. His mother had been borne away in a coffin covered with black velvet and ornamented with silver studs. And he had had requiem masses said, to which the neighbours had come, the men in their flowing capes, the women enveloped and hooded in black. And all this represented considerable expense to one who was poor.

Of the sum given, at the time of his birth, by his unknown father, there was now very little left, the

greater part having been lost at the hands of dishonest lawyers. And now it was necessary to quit the house, to sell the dear household furniture in order to realise as much as possible for the flight to America.

On this occasion he returned to his home with a special trouble in his mind, for he was going to do a thing, postponed from day to day, about which his conscience was not easy. He had already inspected, examined all that was left to him by his mother; but the box containing her papers and letters still remained intact—and to-night, perhaps, he was going to open it.

He was not very sure that death, as so many people think, gives the right to those who remain to read the letters, to penetrate the secrets, of those who have just departed. To burn without examination seemed to him more respectful, more honest. But if he did, he would destroy for ever any chance he might have of finding out whose forsaken son he was. . . . What was he to do? . . . And of whom could he take counsel, when he was without a friend in the world? . . .

He lit a fire in the tall fireplace; then went and got from the room above the disquieting box, placed it on a table near the fire, by the side of the lamp, and sat down to reflect once more. In the presence of these papers, almost sacred, almost forbidden, which he was going to touch and which death alone had been able to put into his hands, he became conscious, in a more heartrending way, of the irrevocable passing of his mother; and tears came to him and he wept, alone in the silence. . . .

Finally he opened the box. . . .

His heart beat heavily. Under the trees around the house, in the dark solitude outside, he seemed to feel that vague forms were taking shape, and pressing forward to watch him through the window-panes. He heard strange murmurs in his own breast, as if someone was breathing behind him. Shades were assembling, interested in what he was going to do. . . . The house was full of ghosts. . . .

There were many letters—preserved for more than twenty years, all in the same handwriting—one of those handwritings, at once careless and facile, which are characteristic of the educated classes, and which, in the eyes of the simple, are an indication of great social difference. And, for a moment, a vague dream of protection, of elevation and riches deflected the current of his mournful thoughts. He had no doubt as to the hand which had written these letters, and, as he held them, he trembled, not daring yet to read them, nor even to look at the name with which they were signed.

Only one of them had preserved its envelope; he read the address: "To Madame Franchita Duval" . . . Ah! yes, he remembered to have heard that his mother, when she disappeared from the Basque country, had for some time assumed that name. Then followed an indication of the street and number, which it pained him to read, he scarcely knew why, which brought a flush to his cheeks; then the name of the great city in which he was born. . . . He remained for some moments with fixed eyes, seeing nothing. And suddenly he had the horrible vision of this clandestine

establishment: in suburban apartments, his mother, young, elegant, the mistress of some rich idler or perhaps of some officer. . . . When he was with his regiment he had known many such establishments, which were no doubt all very much alike, and he himself even had met with unexpected good fortune in matters of the kind. . . . A vertigo seized him as he saw under this new aspect her whom he had so deeply reverenced; the loved past tottered behind him as if it were about to fall into an abyss of desolation. And his despair found expression in a sudden execration of him who by caprice had given him life.

Oh! burn them, burn them as quickly as possible, these luckless letters! And he began to throw them, one after the other, into the fire, where they were consumed in sudden flames.

A photograph, however, became separated from them and fell to the ground; and he could not refrain from bringing it near the lamp to examine it.

And his expression was poignant during the few seconds in which his eyes met the half-effaced eyes in the yellowed photograph! . . . *It was like him.* He recognised, with a deep dismay, something of himself in this unknown person. And instinctively he turned round, fearful lest the phantoms of the dark corners should have drawn near to look also.

This silent interview, the only one and the last, with his father had scarcely an appreciable duration. Into the fire, too, let the photograph go! With a gesture of anger and terror, he threw it among the ashes of the last letters, and of them all there was nothing left

soon but a little heap of black ashes, extinguishing the clear flame of the burning wood.

It was over now! The box was empty. He threw his bonnet, which was oppressing his head, on the ground, and stood up, perspiration on his forehead, his temples throbbing.

It was over! All these souvenirs of sin and shame were no more. And now the things of life appeared to him to resume their proper equilibrium; he recovered his affectionate veneration for his mother, whom he seemed to have purified, whose memory he seemed, in a way, to have avenged by this disdainful execution.

And now, this evening, his destiny had been fixed for ever. He would remain the Ramuntcho of earlier days, the "son of Franchita,"[2] tennis player and smuggler, free, without a tie, owing nothing and asking nothing. And he felt now serene again, without remorse, without dread either, in this house of the dead, from which the shades were disappearing, appeased now and friendly. . . .

CHAPTER IX

NEAR the frontier, in a mountain hamlet. A dark night at about one o'clock; a winter's night with a cold rain falling in torrents. At the foot of a sinister-looking dwelling, which shows no light outside, Ramuntcho is carrying on his shoulders a heavy box of contraband goods, under the streaming downpour, in the midst of a sepulchral darkness. The voice of Itchoua is giving orders spoken low—as if one should touch with the bow the low strings of a 'cello—and around him, in the unrelieved darkness, may be divined other smugglers similarly burdened, ready to set out on their adventure.

Now, more than ever, these smuggling enterprises have become the life of Ramuntcho, the life of almost every night, especially of the cloudy, moonless nights when nothing can be seen, when the Pyrenees are an immense chaos of darkness. Seeking to amass as much money as possible for his flight, he is ready for all kinds of smuggling, for those which yield a considerable reward equally with those in which the risk of death is run for a few score sous. And usually Arrochkoa accompanies him, without need in his case, out of whim rather, and by way of amusement.

Arrochkoa and Ramuntcho are, in fact, inseparable

now, and they talk freely of their projects in regard to Gracieuse—Arrochkoa attracted especially by the idea of a notable feat, by the satisfaction of snatching a nun from the Church, and upsetting the plans of his stubborn old mother; and Ramuntcho, in spite of his Christian scruples which still hold him back, hugging this dangerous project as his sole hope, his sole reason for doing and being. For some months now the attempt had been decided upon in principle, and during their conversations of these December nights, as they walked along the roads, or else in the corners of the cider taverns of the village, where they sat at a table apart, the means of carrying it out were discussed between them, as if it were an ordinary episode of the frontier. It would be necessary to act very quickly, Arrochkoa always concluded, to act in the surprise of the first interview, which for Gracieuse would be a thing very disturbing; it would be necessary to carry her off willy-nilly, without giving her time to reflect or draw back.

" Just think," he said, " what this little Convent of Amezqueta is, in which she has been placed: four old nuns with her, in an isolated house! I have a horse, you know, which travels quickly; once the nun is in the carriage with you, who will be able to overtake us, I ask you? "

And this evening they have decided to take Itchoua himself into their confidence, a man used to dubious practices, an expert in *coups de main* at night, and one who, for money, was capable of doing anything.

The place from which they are setting out this

time for their usual smuggling adventure is called Landachkoa, and is situated in France, about ten minutes' walk from Spain. The inn, solitary and old, assumes, as soon as the light fails, a cut-throat aspect. At this very moment, while the smugglers are leaving it by a side door, it is full of Spanish carabiniers, who have freely passed the frontier in order to come and amuse themselves here, and are now drinking and laughing. And the hostess, used to nocturnal tricks and evasions, had just come merrily to say in Basque to Itchoua's men:

"It's all right! They are all drunk! You can get away!"

Get away! It is a thing more easily said than done! They are drenched after the first few steps, and their feet slip in the sticky mud, despite the aid of the iron-shod sticks, on the steep slopes of the pathways. They cannot see one another; they can see nothing, neither the walls of the hamlet along which they pass, nor the trees that follow, nor the rocks; they are as blind men, feeling their way and stumbling under this deluge of rain, the sound of which deafens them.

And Ramuntcho, who has never been this way before, and has no idea of the goats' passages which they have to negotiate, knocks his load from time to time against black things which are the branches of beech-trees, and sometimes slides on both feet, stiffens himself, and saves himself at last by digging at hazard, with his only free hand, his iron-shod stick into the ground. Arrochkoa and Ramuntcho bring up the rear of the party, following the rest, by scent and hearing—

although, for that matter, the others, who lead the way, make, in their *espadrilles*, scarcely as much noise as wolves in a forest.

In all, there are fifteen smugglers, strung out over some fifty yards, in the thick darkness of the mountain, under the incessant downpour of the nocturnal storm; they are carrying boxes full of jewellery, of watches, chains, and rosary beads, and bales of Lyons silk wrapped in oil-cloth. Well ahead of them, carrying goods of less value, walk two men who are the advance guard of the party. It is they, who, if things so turn out, will draw the fire of the Spanish carabiniers and then, discarding their loads, will take to flight.

The smugglers speak, when they have cause to speak, in a low voice, for all that the drumming of the rain already deadens sound. The one who precedes Ramuntcho turns round to warn him :

" There is a torrent ahead of us " (one might have guessed it, indeed, for its roar was louder than that of the storm) " we have to cross it ! "

" Ah ! and how do we cross? Wade through it? "

" No. The water is deep. Follow us carefully. There is a tree-trunk thrown across it."

And sure enough, groping blindly, Ramuntcho finds the tree-trunk, wet, slippery, and round. And now he is on it, advancing across this monkey's bridge, still carrying his heavy burden, while below him the torrent boils. He reaches the other side, he scarcely knows how, amid this intense darkness and this roaring of water.

Now it is necessary to redouble precautions and to

become more silent than ever. Ended suddenly are the mountain pathways, the scabrous descents, the slitherings under the oppressive darkness of the trees. They have reached now a kind of sodden plain into which the feet sink. Their *espadrilles*, strapped to their sturdy limbs, make little wet clackings, little *flock*, *flocks* of trodden water. The eyes of the smugglers, their eyes of cats, more and more dilated in the darkness, perceive that there is open space around them, that the confinement and the continual vault of the branches are no more. They breathe more easily, too, and walk with a more regular movement which is restful to them. . . .

But a barking of dogs is heard in the far distance, and suddenly they all become motionless, as if petrified, in the deluge. For a quarter of an hour they wait, without speaking or moving. The perspiration trickles down their chests, mingling with the rain which enters by the collars of their shirts and descends to their belts.

In the strain of listening they hear the buzzing of their own ears, the throbbing of their own arteries.

And this tension of the senses, in the course of their avocation, is a thing they all love; it gives them a kind of almost animal joy; creatures of the past as they are, it doubles the vitality of their muscles; it is an echo of the most primitive of human impressions gained in the forests and jungles of the original epochs. . . . It will need yet centuries of regulated civilisation to stifle this taste for dangerous surprises, which impels children to

the game of hide-and-seek, and certain men to the ambushes and skirmishes of war, or to the unforeseen risks of smuggling. . . .

Now, however, the watchdogs have become silent again, reassured or else distracted, their keen sense occupied with something else. The immense silence has returned, less certain, nevertheless, liable to be broken perhaps, since now the watchdogs beyond are on the alert. And, at a whispered command from Itchoua, the men resume their march, more slowly now, and more warily, in the deep night of the plain, crouching a little all of them, their legs bent, as if by some instinct of wild beasts on the prowl.

It appears that before them now is the Nivelle; they cannot see it, for they can see nothing, but they can hear it flowing; and presently long flexible things impede their steps, are bruised and broken by the passage of human bodies: the reeds of the river-bank. The Nivelle it is which marks the frontier; and they will have to cross it by a ford, on a series of slippery rocks, leaping from one stone to another, notwithstanding the burden which encumbers their movements.

But, before crossing it, they call a halt to take stock, and rest a little. In a low voice they answer to their names; everyone is there. The boxes are set down on the grass; they make there lighter spots, almost perceptible to eyes accustomed to the night, while against the darkness of the background, the men, upright, show as long, straight lines, blacker even than

the empty plain. Passing near Ramuntcho, Itchoua whispers in his ear:

"When will you want me for the job you are going to tackle, my lad?"

"Immediately! As soon as we get back! Oh! Have no fear, Itchoua, I am counting on you!"

Now, when his chest is heaving and his muscles are in action, when all his fighting faculties are doubled and inflamed in the exercise of his calling, Ramuntcho feels no hesitation; in the present exaltation of his strength and combativeness, moral impediments, scruples exist for him no longer. This idea of Arrochkoa's of invoking the help of the gloomy Itchoua has in it now nothing which dismays him. So much the worse! He will accept the advice of this man of stratagems and violence, even if it should be necessary to go so far as abduction and house-breaking. He is, on this night, the irregular in revolt, from whom has been taken the companion of his life, the adored one, she who cannot be replaced; and he wants her, cost what it may. . . . And as he thinks of her, in the progressive relaxation of this halt, an impulse of young savagery seizes him, and he comes suddenly to desire her with his senses, in a manner unexpected and dominant.

However, they have rested now for some time, and their breathing has grown calm. And, as the men shake their dripping bonnets and pass their hands over their foreheads to wipe away the drops of rain and sweat which blur their eyes, a first sensation of cold comes to them, a damp and penetrating cold; their soaked clothing freezes them, their thoughts flag;

gradually, after the fatigues of this and preceding vigils, a kind of torpor grows upon them, almost suddenly, in the thick darkness, beneath this incessant downpour of winter.

But needless to say, they are used to that, inured to cold and damp, hardened rovers who come and go in places and at hours when other men are never seen, inaccessible to the vague terrors of the dark, capable of sleeping without shelter no matter where, on the darkest and wettest of nights, in dangerous swamps, or in forsaken ravines.

And now for the road again; they have rested long enough! It is the decisive and grave moment in which the frontier has to be crossed. Their muscles tauten, their ears are strained, their eyes dilate.

First of all, the advance guard. Then, one after another, the carriers of bales, the carriers of boxes, each with his load of some ninety pounds, borne either on the shoulders or on the head. Slipping here and there on the round stones, stumbling in the water, they all cross in safety to the farther bank. They are now on Spanish soil! There remains to traverse, without rifle shot or untoward encounter, some two hundred yards, in order to reach an isolated farmhouse which is the receiving depot of the chief of the Spanish smugglers; and then, once more, the trick will have been played!

This farmhouse, needless to say, is without a light, dark and sinister. Noiselessly still, and feeling their way, they enter one by one; then, as soon as all are inside, the enormous bolts of the door are pushed home,

and they are safe and barricaded within. And the Treasury of the Queen Regent has been defrauded, this night again, of a thousand francs!

Then a faggot is lit in the fireplace, a candle on the table; they see one another now, recognise one another, smiling at their good fortune. The security, the respite from the rain, the fire that dances and warms, the cider and brandy which fill the glasses induce in them a noisy good-humour after the obligatory silence. They talk merrily, and the old white-haired chief, who is entertaining them at this unseasonable hour, tells them he is going to present his village with a fine playing ground for tennis, estimates for which have been prepared, which will cost him ten thousand francs.

"Now tell me about your affair, my lad," insists Itchoua in Ramuntcho's ear. "Oh! I guess pretty well what it is you want to do! Gracieuse, eh? That's it, isn't it? It's a difficult business, you understand. . . . Besides, I don't like to take liberties with religion, you know. You see, I have my position as lay-clerk, which I should risk losing in an affair of this kind. Come, how much will you give me, if I carry the thing through successfully, to your full satisfaction?"

Ramuntcho had foreseen that this grim assistance would cost him dear, Itchoua being, as he was, a man of the Church, whose conscience would first of all have to be bought; and, very troubled, very red, he agreed, after discussion, to a thousand francs. Anyhow, if he was saving money, it was only with the object of

recovering Gracieuse, and as long as enough remained for the journey to America with her, nothing else mattered!

And now that his secret was known to Itchoua, now that his dear project was being elaborated in that obstinate and crafty brain, it seemed to him that a definite step had been taken towards its execution, that it had suddenly become real and imminent. And, amid the mournful dilapidation of this place, among these men who less than ever were akin to him, he dwelt apart in an immense dream of love.

They filled their glasses to the brim, and drank one last round together; then they departed, still in the dense darkness of the night, still in the incessant downpour of the rain, but this time by the main road, walking in a group, and singing. Nothing in their hands, nothing in their pockets: they are now ordinary people returning from an ordinary walk.

Bringing up the rear, some little distance from the singers in front, Itchoua, with his long, swinging hunter's stride, walked with his hand on Ramuntcho's shoulder. Interested and eager for success, now that the price satisfies him, he breathes into his ear his imperious advice. Like Arrochkoa, he wants to act with an overwhelming suddenness in the shock of a first interview which should take place in the evening, as late as the rule of the community will permit, in a dusk and twilight hour when the village, below the little ill-guarded convent, is beginning to go to bed.

"And above all, my lad," he said, "don't show yourself before the decisive hour. Don't let her

see you, do you understand, don't let her know even that you have returned to the country! . . . If you do, you will lose all the advantage of surprise. . . ."

And while Ramuntcho listens and reflects in silence, the others, who are walking ahead of them, continue to sing the same old song, keeping in step to the tune. And thus they return to the French village of Landachkoa, crossing the bridge over the Nivelle under the nose of the Spanish carabiniers.

But these carabiniers of the guard are not under any illusion about the business which has brought these rain-soaked men out at an hour so dark and unseasonable. . . .

CHAPTER X

WINTER, the veritable winter, is spreading slowly over the Basque country, ushered in by those few days of frost which had killed the annual plants, and changed the deceptive aspect of the countryside, in preparation for the renewal of the following spring.

And Ramuntcho fell quite easily into his life of loneliness. In his house, which he still occupied, without anyone to serve him, he fended for himself, as in the colonies or in barracks, having learnt the thousand and one little details of housekeeping which careful soldiers practise. He preserved his pride in his personal appearance, and dressed himself neatly and well, the ribbon of his medal on his breast, a wide crêpe band around his sleeve.

At first he appeared but rarely in the cider taverns, where the men were wont to assemble on the cold evenings. In his three years of travel, of reading, of conversation with men of one sort and another, too many new ideas had penetrated his inquiring mind; he felt himself more out of touch than before with his companions of earlier days, more detached from the thousand little things of which their life was composed.

Gradually, however, by force of being alone, by

force of passing before these drinking places—on the window-panes of which some lamp always outlined in shadow the Basque bonnets grouped about the tables—he had ended by making it a custom to enter and sit down also.

It was the time of the year when the villages of the Pyrenees, no longer overrun by the tourists whom the summer brings, wrapped now in clouds, in mists or snow, become more like what they were in olden times. In the cider taverns—the only lighted, living points in all the immense empty obscurity of the countryside—a little of the spirit of the past comes to life again in the cold winter evenings. In front of the great vats of cider ranged in the dark background, the lamp, suspended from a beam, throws its light on the pictures of saints which decorate the walls, on the groups of mountaineers who talk and smoke. Now and then someone sings a lament which has been handed down from the night of time; the beating of a tambourine makes live once more old forgotten rhythms; the thrumming of a guitar awakens a sadness of the days of the Moors. . . . And sometimes, facing one another, two men with castanets will suddenly begin to dance the fandango, balancing themselves with an antique grace.

And, from these innocent little taverns, the men used to depart at an early hour—especially on those dark, rainy nights which are so particularly favourable to smuggling, for each of them had secret business to attend to, beyond, in the direction of Spain.

It was in places such as these, in company with Arrochkoa, that Ramuntcho debated and matured his

dear, sacrilegious project; or else—on fine, moonlight nights, which did not permit of anything being attempted on the frontier—on the roads, where the two of them, in their habit of night-rovers, walked for long up and down together.

Ramuntcho was still much deterred by persistent religious scruples, although he did not admit it to himself. They were scruples that were hard to explain, seeing that he had ceased to believe. But all his boldness now, his whole will, his whole life, were concentrated and directed more and more upon this single goal.

And the injunction laid upon him by Itchoua, that he should not see Gracieuse before the great attempt, exasperated his impatient longing.

The winter, capricious as it always is in this country, was pursuing its uneven progress, with, from time to time, surprises of sunshine and warmth. There were deluges of rain, and fierce, wholesome squalls which rose from the Bay of Biscay and rushed into the valleys, bending the trees furiously. And then recurrences of the south wind, warm breaths as in summer, breezes that savoured of Africa, beneath a sky overcast but high, among mountains that were deep brown in colour. And there were bitterly cold mornings also, in which one saw, on awakening, the mountain tops white with snow.

Often the desire seized him to make the attempt at once. . . . But there was that restraining fear of not succeeding, and of having to fall back then upon himself, alone for ever, without any more hope in life.

Besides, reasonable pretexts for delay were not wanting. It was necessary, first of all, to settle up his business affairs, to arrange the sale of the house, and realise as much money as possible for the flight. It was necessary, also, to await a reply from Uncle Ignacio to whom he had announced his intended emigration, and with whom, when he arrived on the other side, he hoped still to find a home. . . .

Thus the days passed, and presently the early spring began to stir. Already in the last days of January the yellow primroses and the blue gentians, more forward here by many weeks, were flowering in the woods and by the roadside.

CHAPTER XI

THIS time they are in the cider tavern of the hamlet of Gastelugaïn, near the frontier, waiting for the moment to set out with cases of jewellery and arms.

And it is Itchoua who is speaking:

"If she hesitates, look you . . . and she will not hesitate, you may be sure of that . . . but if, in fact, she does hesitate . . . we shall have to carry her off. . . . Leave that to me. My plan is ready. It must be in the evening, do you understand? We will carry her no matter where, and shut her in a room with you. . . . But if things take a wrong turn . . . I mean, suppose that I find it necessary to quit the country, when I have carried this business through for your pleasure, then you will have to give me more than the sum agreed upon . . . at any rate, so that I may be able to go and make a living in Spain. . . ."

"In Spain! . . . What do you mean? What do you think might take you there? You don't intend to do anything desperate, do you?"

"Oh! no. Have no fear, my friend. I have no wish to murder anyone."

"Well, what do you mean? You spoke of saving yourself. . . ."

"Oh! I said that for another reason, you know.

Things have not been very prosperous for some time past. And if this affair turns out badly, as I was saying, and the police take the matter up, I would rather be out of the country, that's the truth! . . . For when these gentlemen of justice once get their nose to the scent, they have a way of finding out things that have happened in the past, and that is not the end of them. . . ."

In the depths of his eyes, which had suddenly become expressive, there had appeared crime and fear. And Ramuntcho regarded with an increasing uneasiness this man, whom he had thought to be solidly established in the country, a man of some substance, and who accepted so easily the idea of flight. What kind of a bandit was he, to stand in such fear of justice? And what could the things be that had "happened in the past"? After some moments of silence, he replied in a lower voice, in extreme distrust:

"Besides, to shut her up. . . . You say that seriously, Itchoua? And where do you think I could shut her up, if you please? I have no chateau, nor *oubliette*, in which to keep her hidden. . . ."

Then Itchoua, with a satyr's smile which one would not have looked for in him, slapping him on the shoulder, said:

"Oh! for a night only, my boy. That will be enough, you can take my word for that. . . . They are all the same, you know. . . . They make a fuss about the first step; but the second they will take of their own accord, and more quickly than you would expect. You don't imagine, do you, that she will want to return

to the good nuns after she has passed a night with you?"

A desire to strike this saturnine face passed like an electric current along the arm and hand of Ramuntcho. A long habit of respect for the old chanter of liturgies restrained him, however, and he remained silent, his face flushed, his eyes cast down. It revolted him to hear *her* spoken of in this way, and it surprised him, too, that the speaker should be this Itchoua, a man who had seemed to him closed to the things of love, whom he had always known as the tranquil spouse of a plain old woman. But for all that the impertinent phrase followed a dangerous and unforeseen course in his imagination . . . Gracieuse "in a room alone with him!" The immediate possibility of this, so bluntly presented in this gross and uncouth way, turned his head like a strong liquor.

He loved his little betrothed with too lofty a tenderness to indulge in sensual anticipations. Ordinarily, he put ideas of the kind out of his mind; but now this man, with a diabolical crudity, had thrust them under his eyes; and he felt the answering response in his blood. He trembled now as if from intense cold.

Oh! whether the adventure fell under the hand of justice or not, what did it matter, after all! He had nothing to lose! Come what might, it was all the same to him! And from this night, in the fever of a new desire, he felt himself more boldly determined to brave the rules, the laws, all the impediments, whatever they might be, which the sanctions of the world opposed to him. Besides, the sap was rising everywhere around

him, on the flank of the brown Pyrenees; the evenings now were long and warm; the pathways were bordered with violets and periwinkles. . . .

His religious scruples alone withheld him now. They remained, inexplicably, in the depth of his bewildered soul: an instinctive horror of profanation; a persistent belief in something supernatural enveloping churches and cloisters, and serving to protect them.

CHAPTER XII

WINTER is drawing to an end.

Ramuntcho—who had been sleeping for some hours a restless sleep of fatigue, in a little room in the new house of his friend, Florentino, at Ururbil—awakened now as day was breaking.

The night—a night of storm though it was, a night as wild and dark as they could wish—had been disastrous for the smugglers. Near Cape Figuier, among the rocks where they had landed with bales of silk, they had been fired at and obliged to discard their loads, losing everything; some of them had fled into the mountains; others had saved themselves by swimming through the surf to the French shore; and thus they had escaped the horror of the prisons of San Sebastian.

At about two o'clock in the morning, exhausted, wet through, and half-drowned, Ramuntcho had knocked at the door of the isolated home of the good-natured Florentino and asked for succour and shelter.

And, on his awakening, after all the nocturnal uproar of the equinoctial storm, after the torrential rain and the groaning of the twisted and broken trees, what struck him first was the great silence that

prevailed. Listening, he could no longer hear the wild roar of the west wind, nor the movement of all those things which had been tormented in the darkness. Nothing now but a distant sound, regular, powerful, continuous, and formidable: the roaring of the waters in this lower part of the Bay of Biscay which, since the beginning of time, has ever been rough and stormy; a rhythmic roaring, as if it were the monstrous respiration of the sea asleep; a succession of heavy blows, which seemed like the blows of a battering-ram, followed each time by a sound of seething as the waves broke over the strand. . . . But the air, the trees, the things round about, were motionless; the storm had died down, for no apparent reason, as it had begun, and the sea alone prolonged the plaint.

To look out upon this country, upon this part of Spain which, perhaps, he would never see again, for his departure now was imminent, he opened the window on the still pallid emptiness without, on the virgin purity of the hopeless dawn.

A grey light, emanating from a grey sky. Everywhere the same wearied and congealed immobility, with an indistinctness of aspect which still belonged to the night and to dreamland. An opaque sky, which had the appearance of consistency, and seemed to be made of an accumulation of little horizontal layers, as if it had been painted by super-imposing little daubs of dead colour. And below, the dark brown mountains; then Fontarabia, a sullen silhouette, its age-old church tower appearing darker than usual and more worn by time. At this early and freshly mysterious hour, in

which the eyes of men, for the most part, were not yet open, it seemed that one surprised things in their heart-breaking colloquy of lassitude and death, telling one another, as the day was breaking, all that of which they would be afraid to speak, when once the sun was risen. . . .

"What was the use of resisting last night's storm?" the old tower was saying, wearily and mournfully, upright in the distant background. "What was the use, since there will come other storms, eternally others, other tempests, other equinoxes, and, in the end, I shall pass away, I, whom men had upraised here as a signal of prayer, which should remain for an incalculable period of years? Already I am only a phantom, surviving from another time; I continue to ring for the ceremonies and for the illusory fêtes, but soon men will cease to respond to the call: I toll for the dead; I have tolled for so many, for so many thousands of dead whom no one any longer remembers! And I remain here, useless, under the almost eternal stress of these west winds which blow from the sea. . . ."

At the foot of the tower, the church itself, outlined in wan grey, looking very old and forlorn, confessed, also, that it was empty, that it was vain, peopled only with poor images of wood and stone, with myths that were without meaning, without power and without pity. And all the houses, which for centuries had been grouped around it, avowed that its protection was inefficacious against death, that it was a mockery and a lie. . . .

And the clouds, too, the clouds above all, and the mountains, endorsed with their immense mute attestation what the old town was murmuring below; they confirmed in silence the mournful truth: that the heavens were as empty as the churches, the background merely of the chance phantasmagoria of the seasons; and that time rolled heedless on its uninterrupted course, in which myriads of existences, as if they were so many negligible nothings, were, one after another, caught and swallowed up. . . .

A knell began to sound in the distance as Ramuntcho watched; very slowly, with measured beat, the old bell announced once more the passing of a life; on the other side of the frontier someone had died, some Spanish soul had lapsed into nothingness, in the pale morning, under the thickness of these imprisoning clouds—and very definitely one had the impression that this poor soul would follow its body into the decomposing earth. . . .

And Ramuntcho meditated and listened. At the little window of this Basque cottage, which before him had sheltered only generations of simple believers, leaning on the broad sill, which was worn with human contact, having thrown wide open the old green-painted shutter, he surveyed the mournful deployment of this corner of the world which had been his, and which he was about to quit for ever. The revelations which things had made came home to his untutored mind for the first time, and he gave them a kind of awed attention. A new phase of unbelief had suddenly taken possession of his soul, prone hereditarily to doubt and uncertainty. A new vision had come to

him, sudden, and, as it seemed, definitive, of the futility of religions, of the non-existence of the divinities to whom men pray. . . .

And then, since there was nothing, how childish it was to tremble any more before the White Virgin, the imaginary protectress of these convents in which women are entombed!

The poor passing-bell, which was labouring so foolishly beyond to sound its appeal for futile prayers, ceased at last, and, under the closed sky, the respiration of the great waters became again the only sound in the universal silence. But things continued, in the uncertain dawn, their wordless dialogue: nothing anywhere; nothing in the empty churches so long venerated, nothing in the heavens where the clouds massed . . . but always and for ever the flight of time, the exhausting and eternal renewal of life; and always and immediately, old age, death, crumbling, dust.

That was what they were saying, in the wan half-light, these mournful and worn-out things. And Ramuntcho, who had understood them only too well, despised himself for having hesitated so long for imaginary reasons. He swore to himself, with an added bitterness in his despair, that from this morning, it was decided; that he would do it, at all risks; that nothing now should stop him.

CHAPTER XIII

SOME weeks more passed in preparations, in doubts, and indecisions as to the manner of acting, in sudden changes of plans and ideas.

In the meantime the reply of Uncle Ignacio had reached Etchezar. If his nephew had spoken sooner, he wrote, he would have been pleased to take him into his home; but in view of his hesitation, he had decided to take a wife, although he was no longer young, and two months ago, a child had been born to him. There was no help to be looked for from that quarter, therefore. The exile, on arrival on the other side, would not find even a home.

The ancestral home had now been sold. Financial matters had been settled with the lawyers. All Ramuntcho's worldly possessions had been realised in hard cash, which he carried in his pocket.

And now the day of the supreme effort has arrived, the great day, and already the leaves are thick on the trees, the grass high in the meadows. It is the month of May.

In the little gig, drawn by the famous swift-moving steed, Arrochkoa and Ramuntcho are bowling along the shady mountain roads in the direction of the village of Amezqueta. They travel rapidly, burying themselves

in the heart of an infinite region of trees. And as time passes, things around them become more peaceful and wilder. The hamlets are more primitive, the Basque country more deserted.

In the shadow of the trees, on the steep banks by the side of the roads, there are pink foxgloves, silenes, ferns, almost the same flora as in Brittany; these two countries, also, resemble each other in the granite which is everywhere about, and in the habitual rain; by their insusceptibility to change, too, and by the continuity of the same religious dream.

Above these two young men on adventure bound are the familiar heavy clouds, a sky gloomy and lowering, as is so often the sky of these parts. The route they follow, in these defiles of mountains which grow higher as they proceed, is exquisitely green, sunk in deep shade, between walls of ferns.

An immobility of many centuries, an immobility alike in men and in things—that is the impression which gradually gathers strength as one penetrates farther into this country of forests and of silence. Under the veiled sky, in which the summits of the great Pyrenees are lost, isolated homesteads appear for a moment, and then disappear; and old farmhouses, and villages which become rarer and rarer—and always there is the same vault of venerable trees, of oaks and chestnuts, the twisted roots of which, like moss-grown serpents, spread to the borders of the pathways. And they are all alike, these hamlets separated from one another by a world of woodland, by a vast medley of branches, and inhabited by an ancient race, disdainful of progress

and change: the humble church, more often than not without a tower, with merely a campanile on its grey façade; and the playing ground, with its painted wall, for the traditional tennis game in which, from father to son, the men exercise their hard muscles. Everywhere the wholesome peace of rustic life, the traditions of which are more immutable in this Basque country than elsewhere.

The few woollen bonnets, which our two adventurers meet in their rapid passage, give them a little nod by way of salutation, out of common politeness in the first place, but out of recognition also, for Arrochkoa and Ramuntcho are well known as two of the famous tennis players of the country;—Ramuntcho, it is true, many people have forgotten, but the ruddy face and curled moustache of Arrochkoa are known to everyone, from Bayonne to San Sebastian, and even in the depths of the remote countryside.

Making the journey in two stages, they had slept the night at Mendichoco. And now they are pressing on quickly, so preoccupied that they scarcely think of husbanding the speed of their vigorous beast for the work that lies before them to-night.

Itchoua, however, is not with them. At the last moment Ramuntcho had been smitten with fear of this accomplice who, he felt, was capable of anything, even of killing. In sudden desperation he had refused his help, although he clung to the bridle of their horse in order to prevent them going without him; and feverishly he had thrown money to him to pay him for his advice, to buy back the liberty to act alone, the assurance, at

any rate, that this adventure, whatever might befall, should not be stained with crime. And coin by coin, to get rid of him, he had paid him half the price agreed for his assistance. Then, the horse off at a gallop, the implacable face out of sight behind a turning of the lane, he had felt his conscience appeased. . . .

"You will leave the trap to-night at Aranotz, with Burugoïty, the inn-keeper, who knows all about it," said Arrochkoa, "for you understand that I, as soon as the thing is done and my sister is free, will leave you, for I don't want to know anything more about the affair. We have, also, some business with Buruzabal's people—some horses to get across to Spain—this very evening, not far from Amezqueta, as a matter of fact, about twenty minutes' walk, and I have promised to be there before ten o'clock."

What are they going to do? How exactly will they set about it? They have no very clear idea, the two brothers-in-law. Much will depend on how things turn out. They have different projects, all bold and well thought out, according to the circumstances which may present themselves.

Two passages have been booked, one for Ramuntcho and one for Gracieuse, on a large emigrant ship which leaves Bordeaux to-morrow night for America with some hundreds of Basques. The luggage is already on board. At the little station of Aranotz, where Arrochkoa's trap will deposit the two of them, the lover and his beloved, they will take the train for Bayonne at three o'clock in the morning, and

at Bayonne afterwards, the express from Irun to Bordeaux. It will be a hurried flight, which will not leave the little fugitive time to think, to recover herself, in her stupefaction, in her terror, and no doubt too, in her exquisitely mortal happiness. . . .

A dress and a mantilla belonging to Gracieuse are all ready at the back of the carriage, to replace the bonnet and black gown: things which she had worn before taking the veil, and which Arrochkoa had procured from his mother's wardrobes. And Ramuntcho dreams that very soon, perhaps, this will be real, that perhaps she will be there, at his side, on the narrow seat, wrapped in the same travelling-rug with him, fleeing with him through the darkness, afterwards to belong to him, at once and for ever; and as he thinks of it he is seized again with trembling and vertigo.

"I am sure that she will fly with you!" repeats his friend, slapping him sharply on the thigh by way of friendly encouragement, as he sees him gloomy and wrapt in thought. "I am sure that she will fly with you! Sure of it! If she hesitates, leave it to me!"

If she hesitates they have resolved that a little force must be used—oh! very little, no more than is absolutely necessary, no more than will suffice to loosen and hold back the hands of the old nuns who may seek to retain her. Then they will carry her to the little carriage, where, infallibly, the close contact and tenderness of her lover of old will win over her young head.

How will it all happen? They do not yet know in any

precise fashion. They are relying greatly on their spirit of decision and quick wit, which has stood them in such good stead in so many dangerous contingencies. But what they do know is that their resolution will not fail. And they press forward, one encouraging the other. They seem now to be resolute unto death, firm and decided as two bandits in the hour when it is necessary to strike the decisive blow.

The country of leafy branches, which they are traversing, under the oppression of high mountains which they cannot see, is a labyrinth of deep and tortured ravines, of abysmal windings, in which torrents roar under the green night of the foliage. The oaks, the beeches, the chestnuts become more and more enormous, drawing their life through the centuries from a sap always fresh and magnificent. A copious tranquil verdure is spread over all this tormented geology; for thousands of years it has covered and appeased it under the freshness of its unchanging mantle. And this cloudy sky, almost dark, which is typical of the Basque country, adds to the impression which is given of a kind of universal contemplation in which things are plunged; a strange twilight descends from all round, descends from the trees in the first instance, descends from the thick grey veil stretched above the branches, descends from the high Pyrenees hidden behind the clouds.

And, amid this immense peace and this green night, Ramuntcho and Arrochkoa pass, like two young disturbers going to break a spell in the heart of the forest. And at all the cross-roads, old granite crosses

stand, as if in signal of alarm, to cry to them "beware!"—old crosses with this sublimely simple inscription, which here is, as it were, the device of a whole race: "O Crux, ave, spes unica!"

Soon the evening comes. And now they are silent, because it grows late, because the decisive moment is approaching, because all these crosses by the roadside begin almost to intimidate them. . . .

And the daylight fades, under this mournful veil which maintains itself in the sky. The valleys become wilder, the country more deserted. And at the corners of the roads stand the old crosses, always with the same inscription: "O Crux, ave, spes unica!"

Amezqueta, at the end of the twilight. They stop their carriage at the cross-roads of the village, outside the cider tavern. Arrochkoa, put out at arriving so late, is impatient to proceed to the convent; he fears that the door will not be opened to them, when once night has fallen. Ramuntcho, silent, allows himself to be led, surrenders himself to his companion.

The convent is above, on the slope of the mountain. It is that isolated house surmounted by a cross which can be seen yonder standing out still in white against the darker mass of the mountain. They give instructions that, as soon as the horse is rested a little, the carriage is to be brought, all ready, to a turning beyond to await them. Then the two of them enter the avenue of trees which leads to the convent. The thickness of the foliage renders the darkness almost nocturnal. Without speaking, making no noise in their *espadrilles*,

they ascend, walking freely and easily; around them the darkening countryside is impregnated with the immense melancholy of the night.

Arrochkoa knocks with his knuckles on the door of the peaceful house.

"I want to see my sister, if you please," he said to the astonished old nun who half-opened the door.

Before he had finished speaking a cry of joy came from the dark corridor, and a nun, whom one might divine to be young, for all the envelopment of her dissembling garb, ran towards him and took him by the hands. She had recognised him by his voice—but had she divined the other who remained in the background, and who had not spoken? . . .

The Mother Superior has also come forward, and now escorts them, by a dark staircase, to the parlour of the little rustic convent; then she draws up straw-bottomed chairs, and they all sit down, Arrochkoa next to his sister, Ramuntcho opposite them—and they are face to face at last, the lover and his beloved, and a silence full of the throbbing of arteries, full of the leaping of hearts, full of fevered restlessness, descends upon them.

Truly in this place there is a peace which has an indescribable charm, even though it smack a little of the tomb; and this peace envelopes from the outset the rather terrible interview. Hearts beat fast in troubled breasts, but words, the words of love or violence, die before they pass the lips. And as the minutes pass it

becomes more and more established, this peace: it is as if gradually a white winding sheet were covering everything here, calming, extinguishing.

And yet there is nothing very special in this humble parlour: four limewashed walls absolutely bare; a ceiling of unpolished wood; a floor on which one slips, so carefully has it been waxed; on a bracket, a plaster Virgin, already indistinct amid the unvaried whiteness of these backgrounds in which the May twilight is fading fast. And a curtainless window, open on the great Pyrenean horizons invaded by the night. . . . But, from this studied poverty, from this white simplicity, there is shed a sense of definitive impersonality, of irrevocable renunciation; and the finality of things accomplished begins to manifest itself to the mind of Ramuntcho, bringing him, at the same time, nevertheless, a kind of appeasement, of sudden and involuntary resignation.

The two smugglers, motionless on their chairs, appear only in silhouette, broad-shouldered shadows against the whiteness of the walls; of their shadowy features, one can scarcely distinguish more than the intenser darkness of their moustaches and their eyes. The two nuns, their contours unified by the veil, seem already to be two black ghosts.

"Wait, Sister Marie-Angélique," said the Mother Superior to the transformed young woman who used to be called Gracieuse: "Wait, Sister, while I light a lamp, so that, at any rate, you may see your brother's face! . . ."

She goes out, leaving them together, and, once more,

silence falls on this rare moment, perhaps unique, impossible to recover, in which they are alone. . . .

She returns with a little lamp, which makes the eyes of the smugglers shine, and gaily, good-humouredly, she asks, looking at Ramuntcho:

"And this one here . . . this is another brother, I suppose?"

"Oh! no," said Arrochkoa in a peculiar tone: "He is my friend only."

He was not their brother, indeed, this Ramuntcho sitting there in gloomy silence. . . . How scared the tranquil nuns would be if they knew what a hurricane had brought him! . . .

The same silence falls again, awkward, disquieting, between these people who, it would seem, should be talking simply of simple things; and the old Mother Superior remarks it, and is rather surprised. . . . But the bright eyes of Ramuntcho become motionless, are veiled as if by the fascination of some invisible conjuror. Beneath the firm envelope of his chest, which still heaves a little, a calm, an imposed calm continues to penetrate and spread. No doubt the mysterious white powers which are in the air are acting upon him; inherited religious instincts, which had been slumbering in his subconsciousness, fill him now with an unlooked-for submissiveness and respect. The ancient symbols dominate him: the crosses encountered this evening on the road, and this plaster Virgin white as immaculate snow on the spotless whiteness of the wall. . . .

"Come, come, my children, talk, talk of the things

of the country, of the things of Etchezar," says the Mother Superior to Gracieuse and her brother, "or, wait, if you wish we will leave you alone together," she adds, and makes a sign to Ramuntcho to follow her.

"Oh! no," says Arrochkoa, "he need not go! It is not he . . . who prevents us. . . ."

And the little nun, all muffled up as she was in the fashion of the Middle Ages, lowers her head still more in order to keep her eyes hidden in the shadow of her austere headdress.

The door is open, the window is open; the house and all it contains preserve an air of absolute confidence, absolute security against violation and sacrilege. And now two other nuns, who are very old, prepare a little table, lay two places, and bring supper for Arrochkoa and his friend; a loaf of bread, some cheese, some cakes, some early grapes from their vine. And they arrange these things with a kind of girlish playfulness, babbling like two children—and all this is in strange contrast with the strong passions which are present in the very room with them, but which are silent now, and are being driven back, back into the secret places of the heart, as if by the blows of some heavy weapon padded with whiteness. . . .

And in spite of themselves, the two smugglers, yielding to the pressure of the good nuns, sit down opposite each other at the table, and begin to eat distractedly the frugal fare before them, on a cloth as white as the walls. Their broad shoulders, used to heavy burdens, press against the backs of the little

chairs, and make the frail woodwork crack. Around them the nuns come and go, always with their quiet chatter and their puerile little laughter, which escape, a little stifled, from under their hoods. Sister Marie-Angélique alone remains silent and motionless. Standing beside her brother, who is seated at the table, she rests her hand on his powerful shoulder; she is so slim compared with him, she might be some saint in a primitive religious picture. Ramuntcho, thoughtful, observes them both; until now he had not been able properly to see the face of Gracieuse, it was so hidden and dissembled by the severe headdress. Brother and sister were still very much alike: in the elongated eyes, which, nevertheless, have acquired expressions more different than ever, remains still an inexplicable resemblance, burns still the same fire, that fire which has driven one to adventure and the large life of physical effort, the other to mystical dreams, to mortification, and denial of the flesh. But she has become as frail as he is robust: the black robe in which her body is concealed falls in straight lines as if it were a sheathe enclosing nothing carnal.

And now, for the first time, Gracieuse and Ramuntcho look one another in the face; their eyes meet and remain fixed. She no longer bows her head before him; but it seems that she is looking at him from an infinite distance, from behind impassable white mists, from the farther shore of the abyss, from the other side of death. Very gentle and tender though it is, her gaze seems to indicate that she is, as it were, absent, that she has gone to a peaceful and inaccessible

haven. And it is Ramuntcho's turn now, more subdued than before, to lower his eyes that burn with passion before the virgin eyes of his betrothed.

The nuns continue their chatter. They want to keep the two of them at Amezqueta for the night. It is so dark, they say, and rain is threatening. The curé, who has gone to take communion to a sick man in the mountain, will be back presently. He knew Arrochkoa of old, at Etchezar, where he was curate, and he would be very pleased to put him up for the night—and his friend, too, needless to say.

But no, Arrochkoa declines, after a glance of grave interrogation at Ramuntcho. It is impossible to remain here for the night. In fact, it is necessary for them to leave almost at once, after a few minutes more of conversation, for they are expected beyond, on a business matter, near the Spanish frontier.

She who, at the outset, in her great mortal suffering, had not dared to speak, now begins to question her brother. Sometimes in Basque, sometimes in French, she inquires about those whom she has left behind for ever:

"And mother? Is she all alone now in the house, even at night?"

"Oh! no," Arrochkoa replies. "There is always old Catherine who looks after her, and I have insisted that she shall sleep in the house."

And Arrochkoa's little child, how is he? Has he been baptised yet? What is his name? Laurent, no doubt, after his grandfather?

Etchezar is separated from Amezqueta by about

forty miles, in a country where the means of communication are as few as in past centuries:

"Oh! for all that we are so far away," said the little nun, "I sometimes get news of you all the same. Last month, for example, some of the people here met women from Etchezar at the market of Hasparren; and in that way I have learnt . . . oh! many things. . . . At Easter, you know, I hoped greatly to see you. I had been told there was to be a great tennis match at Erricaulde, and that you were going to play in it; and I said to myself that perhaps you would get as far as this to see me, and during the two days of the fête I often came to this window and looked along the road to see if you were coming. . . ."

And she points to the high window, open on the darkness of the wild countryside, from which ascends now an immense silence, broken only, from time to time, by the rustlings of the springtime, by the little intermittent music of the crickets and the tree-frogs.

Hearing her speak in this tranquil way, Ramuntcho feels bewildered before this renunciation of everything and everybody: she seems to him still more irrevocably changed and distant . . . poor little nun! . . . she used to be called Gracieuse; now she is called Sister Marie-Angélique, and has no longer any kindred; impersonal now, in this white-walled house, without earthly hope, perhaps without desire—as much as to say that she has already departed for the regions of the great oblivion of death. And, nevertheless, she is smiling, quite serene again now. She does not seem even to suffer.

Arrochkoa looks at Ramuntcho, questions him with that piercing eye which is used to probing depths of darkness, and, quelled himself by all this unexpected tranquillity, he realises clearly that the purpose of his daring comrade is failing him, that all their projects are tottering, that everything has become useless and inert before the invisible wall with which his sister is surrounded. Now and then, anxious to settle the matter one way or the other, anxious either to break the charm or else to acknowledge it and fly before it, he looks at his watch, says it is time for them to go, for their comrades will be waiting for them. . . . The nuns guess well enough who these comrades are, and why they are waiting, but they were in no way perturbed: Basques themselves, daughters and granddaughters of Basques, they have the blood of smugglers in their veins, and they look with tolerance on adventures of the kind.

At last, for the first time, Gracieuse pronounces Ramuntcho's name. Not daring, however, to address herself directly to him, she asks her brother with a calm smile:

"And so Ramuntcho is with you again now? He is back again for good? You are working together?"

There is silence for a moment. Arrochkoa looks at Ramuntcho, waiting for him to reply.

"No," Ramuntcho says, slowly and gloomily. "No . . . to-morrow I leave for America."

Each word of this reply, deliberately uttered, sounds, as it were, a note of disturbance and challenge in the midst of this strange serenity. The little nun

leans more heavily on her brother's shoulder, and Ramuntcho, conscious of the deep impression his words have made, looks at her, envelopes her with his appealing eyes, in which the boldness has revived, which have become attractive and dangerous again, in this last effort of a heart overflowing with love, of a passionate youth made for caresses and embraces. . . . And for a brief moment it seems that the little convent trembles; it seems that the white powers of the air fall back, scattered like sad, unsubstantial wraiths by this young conqueror, come to sound here the triumphant appeal of life. And the silence which follows is more oppressive than any of the silences which up till now have intervened in this kind of drama played with hints and half-words, played almost without words at all. . . .

At last Sister Marie-Angélique speaks, and speaks this time directly to Ramuntcho. It was difficult to realise that her heart had come near to breaking for a last time by the announcement of this departure, or that she had trembled in her whole virginal body under the gaze of her lover. In a voice which gradually steadied to an even calm, she said quite ordinary things, as if to a casual friend.

"Oh! yes. To Uncle Ignacio! That is so, is it not? I have always thought you would end by going to join him over there. We will all pray to the Blessed Virgin that she may accompany you on your journey."

And it is again the contrabandist who bows his head, realising now that all is over, that the little companion of his childhood is lost to him for ever;

that she has been wrapped in an inviolable shroud. The words of love and temptation which he had intended to speak, the projects which for so many months past he had turned over in his mind, all seem to him now insensate, sacrilegious, impracticable things, the mere boastings of a child. . . . And Arrochkoa, too, who watches him attentively, suffers the same irresistible, intangible subjugation; they understand each other, and, one to the other, without words, they admit that there is nothing to be done, that they will never dare. . . .

Nevertheless, a suffering that is still human comes into the eyes of Sister Marie-Angélique when Arrochkoa rises for the final leave-taking. She begs him, in a changed voice, to wait yet a little longer. And Ramuntcho is seized with an impulse to throw himself on his knees before her; to bury his face in her robes and sob out the tears that stifle him; to ask mercy of her, to ask mercy also of the Mother Superior who looks so kind; to tell them all that this betrothed of his childhood was his hope, his courage, his life; and that they must have a little pity, that they must give her back to him, for, without her, there is nothing. . . . All that his heart contains of pure goodness is exalted now in an immense need of supplication, in an impulse of prayer, and also of confidence in the goodness and pity of others. . . .

And who knows, if he had dared to formulate this prayer, this great prayer of pure affection, who knows what it might have awakened of goodness and tenderness and humanity in the hearts of these poor

daughters of the black robe? Perhaps the old Mother Superior herself, the old withered virgin with the childlike smile, and the brave, clear eyes, perhaps she would have opened her arms, as to a son, understanding all, forgiving all, in spite of rules, in spite of vows? And perhaps Gracieuse might have been restored to him, without force, without deception, forgiven and almost excused by her cloistered companions. Or, at any rate, if that was impossible, she would have bidden him a long good-bye, consoled and sweetened by a kiss of immaterial love. . . .

But he remains mute on his chair. Even this, even this prayer—he cannot speak it. And now it is time to go, definitely. Arrochkoa is standing up, restless, and making sign to him with an imperious movement of the head. And he stands up too, and picks up his bonnet to follow him. They express their thanks for the supper the good nuns have given them, and say good night in a low voice as if they were shy. In point of fact, throughout their visit they have been very correct, very respectful, almost timid, these two great fellows. And none would guess that their hope had been broken, that one of them was leaving behind him his life, to see them descending quietly the clean staircase, between the white walls, while the nuns showed them light with their little lamp.

"Come along, Sister Marie-Angélique," proposes brightly the Mother Superior in her shrill little voice. "Let us go and see them on their way as far as . . . as far as the end of our avenue, you know, at the turning into the village."

Is she some old witch sure of her power, or only a heedless simpleton, who plays unwittingly with the great devouring fire? . . . It was all over; the heart-break past; the good-bye accepted; the struggle stifled under wads of whiteness, and now, here they are, these two who adore each other, walking side by side, in the open air, in the warm spring night! . . . In the amorous enveloping night, under the cover of the young leaves, and over the growing grass, with the sap rising all about them, amid the sovereign impulse of universal life.

They walk slowly through the exquisite darkness, as if, by silent accord, they sought to make the dark pathway last as long as possible; and they are silent both, in the ardent desire and the intense terror of a contact of their clothing or a touching of their hands. Arrochkoa and the Mother Superior follow close upon them, almost on their heels, and they, too, do not speak. Nuns in their sandals, contrabandists in their cord-soled *espadrilles*, pass through the mild darkness with no more noise than phantoms, and the little party, slow-moving and strange, descends towards the carriage with the silence of a funeral procession. There is silence also around them, everywhere in the great ambient darkness, as far as the farthest of the mountains and woods. And, in the starless sky, brood the great clouds, heavy with the fecundating rain which the earth is waiting for, and which to-morrow will be shed in order to make the woods more leafy and the grass more lusty; the great clouds above their heads are preparing all that splendour of the southern summer

which so many times in their childhood has charmed them together, has troubled them together, but which now, no doubt, Ramuntcho will never see again, and which in the future Gracieuse will see only as with the eyes of the dead, without understanding it, without recognising it. . . .

There is no one about in this dark little avenue, and, below, the village seems already to be asleep. It is now quite dark; the great mystery of the night is spread all about, over the distances of this remote country, over the mountains and the wild valleys. . . . And how easy it would be now to carry out the plan upon which the two young men had resolved, in this solitude, with the carriage, no doubt, waiting there ready! . . .

Without speaking, however, without touching, the lovers reach the turning of the road where they must say their last good-bye. The carriage is there, held by a small boy; the lamp is lit and the horse impatient. The Mother Superior stops: this, it seems, is the extreme limit of the last walk they will ever take together in this world, and she has the power, this old nun, of determining it thus without appeal. In the same shrill little voice, she says, almost playfully:

"Now, Sister, you must say good-bye!"

And she says this with the assurance of a Parca whose decrees of life and death are beyond question.

As a matter of fact, none of them attempts to resist her impassively given order. The rebel, Ramuntcho, is vanquished, oh! vanquished quite by the tranquil

white powers. Trembling still from the stern combat which has just been finished within him, he bows his head, without will now, almost without thought, as if under the influence of some maleficent spell.

"Now, Sister, you must say good-bye!" she said, the old tranquil Parca. Then, seeing that Gracieuse contented herself with taking Arrochkoa's hand, she added:

"What, are you not going to embrace your brother?"

No doubt the little Sister Marie-Angélique would have asked no more than that, to embrace him with all her heart, with all her soul, to cling to this brother, to press herself to his shoulder and find protection there, in this hour of superhuman sacrifice, in which she had to let her lover go without even a word of love. . . . And yet the kiss she gave him was only a scared kind of kiss, quickly over; the kiss of a nun, a little like the kiss of one dead. . . . And now, when will she see her brother again, who, for his part, is not going to leave the Basque country? And when again will someone coming from Etchezar and passing through Amezqueta bring her news of her mother, her home, her village? . . .

To Ramuntcho she does not even dare to offer her cold little hand, which hangs by her side on her rosary beads.

"We will pray," she says again, "we will pray that the Blessed Virgin will protect you in your long voyage."

And now they have gone; slowly they are making

their way, like silent ghosts, back to the little convent with its protecting cross. And the two conquered ones, motionless where they stand, watch them go, along the dark avenue, their robes blacker than the night of the trees.

Oh! she is broken, too, she who is about to disappear above in the darkness of the shadowy avenue. But she remains, nevertheless, insensitised, as it were, by the soothing white vapours, and her suffering will quickly subside in a kind of sleep. To-morrow she will resume, to be continued until death, the course of her strangely simple existence: impersonal, given over to a series of daily duties which never change, absorbed in a reunion of almost neuter creatures who have renounced everything, she will be able to pass through life with eyes ever upturned to the sweet celestial vision. . . .

"O Crux, ave, spes unica! . . ."

To live, without change or respite, until the end, between the white walls of a little cell which is always alike, sometimes here, sometimes there, at the bidding of a stranger's will, in one or other of these humble village convents to which one has scarcely time to become attached. On this earth, to possess nothing, desire nothing; to expect nothing, hope for nothing. To accept as empty and transitory the fugitive hours of this world, and to feel oneself set free from everything, even from love, as completely as by death itself. . . . The mystery of such existences might well remain for ever unintelligible to the two young men standing there, made as they are for the daily battle of life; creatures of instinct and strength, a prey to all the

desires to which flesh is heir; created to enjoy life, and to suffer in it, to love it and propagate it. . . .

"O Crux, ave, spes unica!" They have passed out of sight now; they have re-entered their lonely little convent.

The two men have not exchanged a word about their abandoned enterprise, about the ill-defined cause which for the first time has put their courage in default. They feel, indeed, one before the other, a kind of shame of their sudden and insurmountable timidity.

For a while their heads were turned towards the disappearing figures of the two nuns. Now in the darkness they look at one another.

They are about to separate, and probably for ever. Arrochkoa hands his friend the reins of the little carriage, which, in accordance with his promise, he is lending to him:

"Well, my poor Ramuntcho!" he said, in a tone of commiseration which showed little affection.

And the unexpressed conclusion of his phrase signified clearly: "You had better go, since you have lost your chance. I, as you know, must leave you. My comrades are waiting for me."

Ramuntcho was about to embrace him warmly for a last good-bye—and in the embrace of the brother of his beloved, he would, no doubt, have wept hot tears, which, for a time, at any rate, might have brought him relief.

But no; Arrochkoa has become the Arrochkoa of the bad days, the fine player without a heart, who

cared for nothing but deeds of daring. Absently he took Ramuntcho's hand.

"Well, good-bye, then! Good luck over there!"

And, walking silently, he disappeared to join the smugglers, near the frontier, in the propitious darkness.

Then Ramuntcho, alone in the world now, starts the little mountain horse with a flick of the whip, and it speeds on with its little music of bells. . . . The train due at Aranotz, the steam-boat, which will leave Bordeaux . . . an instinct drives him still not to miss them. Mechanically he makes haste, without knowing why, as a soulless body which should continue to obey an old impulsion; and, very quickly, he who nevertheless is without aim and without hope in the world, plunges into the wild country, into the thickness of the woods, into all the profound darkness of this night of May, which the nuns, from their high window, may see around them.

He has finished with his homeland, finished with it for ever; finished also with the dear sweet dreams of his earlier years. He is a plant uprooted from the beloved Basque soil, and borne to a foreign land by the wind of adventure.

On the neck of his horse the little bells tinkle gaily in the silence of the slumbering woods; the light of the lantern, as it passes quickly, reveals to the sad fugitive the lower branches of the trees, the fresh verdure of the oaks; by the side of the road, the flowers of France; at wide intervals the walls of a familiar hamlet, of an old church—all the things which he will never see

again, unless, perhaps, in a doubtful and very distant old age. . . .

And before him is America; an exile probably without return; the immense new world full of surprises, and faced now without courage; a whole life which yet, no doubt, has very many years to go, during which his heart, torn from here, will have to suffer and grow hard in a foreign land; his vigour to be expended and exhausted, who knows where, in labour, in unknown struggles. . . .

Above, in their little convent, in their little white-walled sepulchre, the tranquil nuns are reciting their night prayers. . . .

"O Crux, ave, spes unica! . . ."

FINIS