Derborence

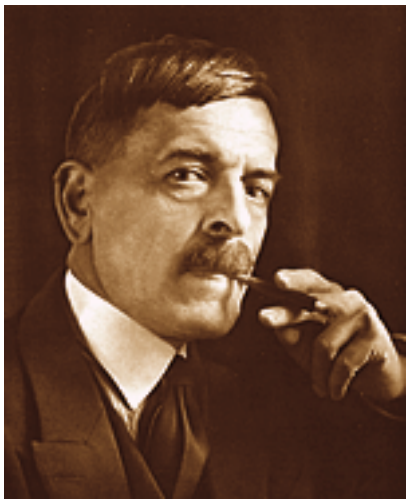
by C. F. Ramuz

Descending towards Derborence in awkward weather (1984), looking southwest from below the Col de Sanetsch. Derborence lies just behind the modern dam at Godey (center). The Pas de Cheville lies to the upper right; the valley of the Rhône lies sharply down the left behind the Godey dam.

Derborence, by Ramuz

when the mountain fell

translated by D. C. Peck with assistance from Petit Robert



Charles Ferdinand Ramuz was born in Lausanne in 1878, hung out in Paris with the artsy Big Boys from 1903 to 1914, then gratefully came home and never left again. He is doubtless the premier Swiss French writer, and in the course of his long career – he died in 1947 in Pully, near Lausanne – he created a very large body of extraordinary works. In my own non-expert view, his most outstanding achievement was his creation of a melding of an "artless" Swiss mountain peasant way of thought and expression with a structural idiom based upon the sophisticated mindset of Greek drama and the force of expressionist French poetry. I've not read all of his books, and I don't read French as a native might, but my favorites are definitely ***Derborence*** (1934) and ***Le grande peur dans la montagne*** (1926), both of which brilliantly capture pre-modern high-mountain life in almost a post-modern idiom.

Derborence is still a wonderful place (though we found that the chef of the low-cost lodgings there, in Godey, seems frequently to fall off the back porch drunk, leaving the desperate waitress to offer lodgers only salads and the cheese fondue). Situated at about 1450 meters in a vast hollow behind the massif of the Diablerets, the "mountain of the devils" (3208m), but looking squintingly out southward through a really vicious gorge towards Sion and the valley of the Rhône, Derborence has been a high mountain pasturage since Roman times, used in summer by the peasants of the villages high above Sion in the canton of Valais. The Pas de Chevilles, however, leads steeply up westward over towards Bex in the canton of Vaud [map below], and the Col de Sanetsch leads northwards over towards Gsteig and Gstaad in the canton of Bern.

In the 18th century, extremely large pieces of the Diablerets and its glaciers broke off and descended upon Derborence, to everyone's instant regret. There, every summer, grazers brought up their cows and sheep and lived in teeny rustic little huts, shoving the animals around and living on bread and cheese inexorably hardening and wishing TV had been invented. Moms, and kids, and all the old dads and grandmoms stayed back in the villages down below. The back half of the mountain collapsed and squooshed people, cows, sheep, trees, shrubs, in fact, everything. It was recorded at the time that, months later, a sole survivor wriggled his way out of the rocks and slabs and went home. ***This is the simple record upon which Ramuz built his superb story.***

In ***Derborence***, Ramuz created an astonishing fake peasant form of speech, at once authentically peasanty-sounding and at the same time highly poetic and artificial – distant, removed, observational, repetitive when necessary, but of course extremely emotive and even sentimental at times. Well, in fact, VERY sentimental at times. That's okay with me, I reckon he's earned the sentimentality by virtue of the stark realism of the peasant way of life. (Don't give me T. S. Eliot's "objective correlative" at this point, I'm trying to be serious!)

And the ***narrative voice*** is sometimes astonishing - in a single sentence, the narrator's voice can observe a person, then become the person observing something else, then observe the person observing something else and responding to it, with no confusion or delay for the reader, only a perfect sense of suitability and rightness and a small flash of insight, as the story carries on without a hitch. And the frequent use of the second-person, telling you the reader what you can see and hear -- it's almost cinematic. The hard, minute observational character of some of the narration reminds one often of Alain Robbe-Grillet, an apparently-emotionless attention to physical detail which in fact evokes great emotion.

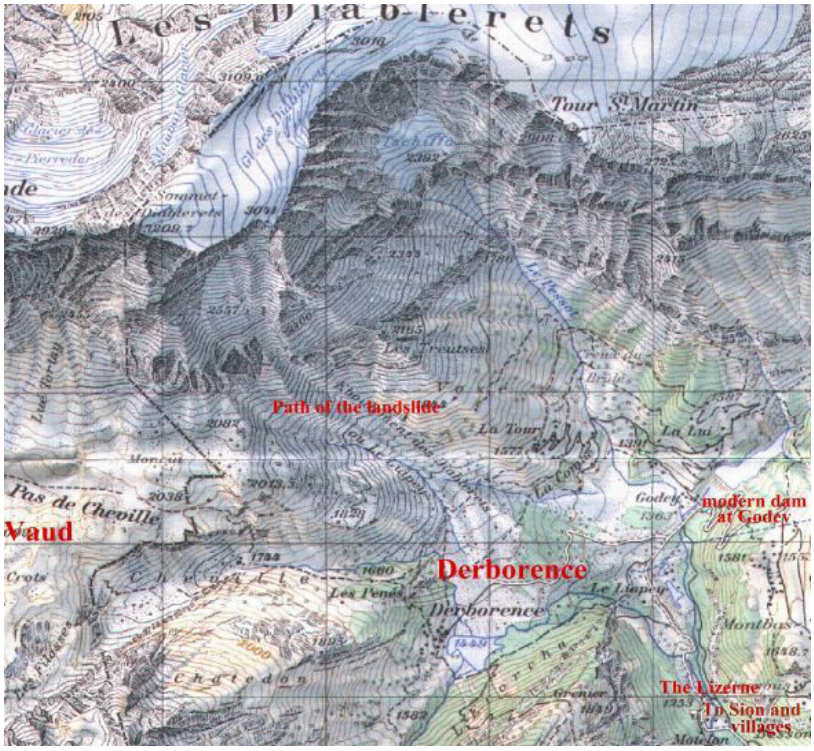
But for me, the most devastating narrative technique is Ramuz's use of **repetition**, drawn from Greek drama I suppose, which creates a sense of inevitability, of fate: "it was the 22nd of June", "it was 9 o'clock, the 22nd of June" -- it reminds you of the knocking on the door in MacBeth -- you are in the hands of an artist, and you have only to follow where he leads you.

Ramuz first published ***Derborence*** in 1934, with the good offices of his friend the publisher Mermod in Lausanne, and then sat in Lausanne cafés scribbling changes in the margins of every new reprinting of the story between 1936 and 1947. An English translation by **Sarah Fisher Scott** was published in 1947 by Pantheon Books, then a distinguished independent publisher but now probably owned by Disney or AOL or Coca-Cola or Hyundai Motors, under the title ***When the Mountain Fell***. Ms Scott's translation is competent, but it was based only upon the first edition, without the benefit of C.-F.'s compulsive café afterthoughts and inspired whims in his later corrections. More importantly, it's also a misguided effort to retell the story in a colloquial and natural kind of American English, which reads well enough in its own way, but in the case of Ramuz's incantatory prose, it's a **big big mistake**.

The present translation was made in the early 1980s for a girlfriend long departed and takes cognizance of all of Ramuz's additions and corrections in all subsequent reprintings (though a handful have been rejected as not helpful). The original intention was to publish this new translation with superb photos of the scene, but somewhere I lost both the photos and the energy to pursue it. All the Derborence photos I can find now have got either me or my semi-friends in them or lots of telephone wires or the concrete dam at Godey, so perhaps one needs to go back there soon and do the job properly. So here's just the stunning low-key poetry of Ramuz (anglicized and dwighticized) -- the photos may be coming along later.

Les Diablerets and higher meadows above Derborence, from Godey, June 2000 (Photo: D. Peck)

Rights and permissions. I haven't got any . . . but don't sue me, I haven't got any money either, and you'd just be wasting your time. Ramuz's original copyright has expired, but in the early 1980s a Swiss film director, Francis Reusser, made a wonderful film of the story, with Bruno Cremer and Isabel Otero in it, Switzerland's entry in the Cannes film festival in 1985, and because I figured that this guy who made the film must have bought up some of the rights, somehow I never got round to sorting out the legal side of things and seeking a publisher. And – in the meantime – I moved house a dizaine of times and lost the photos I'd taken to illustrate the splendid tale.



Derborence, pronounced Dair-bor-ANSSE (1450m altitude) at the bottom of a bowl.

A path leads from the west over and down from Solalex, Anziendaz, and the Pas de Cheville in the canton de Vaud (chapters 2, 3, 7). The landslide described in this story (shown as Eboulement des Diablerets on the map) came from top center.The road shown across the cone of the landslide is modern, leading to a mountain inn and some vacation chalets at the little lake (marked 1449m), which was created by the landslide. The men from Col de Sanetsch, in the canton of Berne, came from the upper right descending near Godey, as in the photo above (chapter 7). The path from the villages above Sion and the Rhône leads up from the extreme lower right, following high up on the gorge of the Lizerne -- the paved road, which requires a long succession of galleries and tunnels, has been put in in the 1960s.

Derborence

Chapter 1

...A herdsman, who had
disappeared, and whom they
believed dead, had passed
several months entombed in
a chalet, supporting himself
on bread and cheese...
Dictionnaire geographique

He was holding in his right hand a kind of long blackened stick, thrusting the end of it from time to time into the fire; the other hand rested on his left thigh.

It was the 22nd of June, around nine o'clock in the evening.

He made some sparks rise from the fire with his stick; they remained hanging on the soot-covered wall, where they shone like the stars in a black heaven. You could see him better then, Séraphin, for an instant, while he held his poker still: you could see better, too, across from him, another man who was much younger, and he too was leaning with his arms on his knees, his head bent forward.

"Well," said Séraphin, the older one, "I see it... You are bored."

He looked at Antoine, then began to smile in his little white beard:

"Yet it hasn't been so long since we came up."

They had come up into the mountains around the 15th of June with the others from Aïre, and one or two families from the neighboring village called Premier: that didn't make very many days, in fact.

Séraphin began again to poke the embers where he had thrown one or two pine branches; and the pine branches caught fire, so that you could see the two men perfectly, sitting across from each other on either side of the hearth, each on the end of his bench: the one already old, dry, rather big, with small bright eyes buried in their sockets without eyebrows, under an old felt hat; the other much younger, twenty or twenty-five years old, who wore a white shirt and a brown jacket, with a small black moustache and short, black hair.

"Come, come," said Séraphin. "As if you were at the other end of the world.... As if you were going to be separated from her forever."

He shook his head and was silent.

Antoine had only been married for two months; and it's important to observe at once that the marriage had not been arranged without difficulty. Orphaned of his father and mother, he had been placed at thirteen years old as a domestic with a family of the village, while she whom he loved had been well off. And for a long time her mother refused to hear any talk of a son-in-law who would not be able to furnish the household with its accustomed portion. For a long time old Philomène had shaken her head, saying: "No!", then "No!", and again "No!" What would have happened if Séraphin had not been there? -- that is, exactly in the place where he was needed and important in that place; for he was the brother of Philomène, Maye's widow, and, being unmarried himself, it was he who conducted his

sister's affairs. Well, Séraphin had taken Antoine's side, and he had got the upper hand. The wedding had taken place in April. Now Séraphin and Antoine were in the mountains.

The custom of the people of Aïre is to come up with their animals around the 15th of June, into the high pastures, some of which were those of Derborence, precisely where they were, the two of them, that evening, Séraphin having taken Antoine with him in order to teach him the ways, because he himself was beginning to get old. He was lame, he had a stiff leg. And the rheumatism having turned up a little while ago in his left shoulder, this too began to refuse him its services -- whence came all kinds of inconveniences, seeing that the work doesn't long wait in the mountain chalets, where you have to milk the animals twice a day and, every day, make the butter or the cheese. So Séraphin had brought Antoine with him in the hope that Antoine would soon be prepared to replace him; well, he saw that Antoine didn't seem ready to bite (as they say) at this work, which was new to him, and that he was languishing far from his wife.

"Come, now," he went on, "isn't it getting better? Is it such a terrible thing to have me for a companion?"

He wasn't thinking of himself, he thought only of Antoine.

It was to Antoine that Séraphin addressed himself again before the fire, that evening of the 22nd of June, towards nine o'clock; and as the flames began again to fall, he fed them anew and revived them with some pine branches.

"Oh! Of course not," Antoine said.

That was all; he had fallen silent. And, at that moment, Séraphin was silent as well; they felt growing around them something completely inhuman and, over a long time, unbearable -- the silence. The silence of the high mountains, the silence of the places uninhabited by men, where men are present only temporarily, provisionally; then, if ever so little one should be silent himself, he cocks an ear in vain, he hears only that he hears nothing. It was as if nothing existed anywhere, from us to the other end of the world, from us to the bottom of heaven. Nothing, nothingness, a void, the perfection of a void; a total cessation of being, as if the world had not yet been created, or was no more, as if one were before the beginning of the world or after the end of it. And the ache lodges itself in your breast where it's like a hand that closes round the heart.

Happily, the fire begins again to crackle, or it's a drop of water that falls, or a little wind that trails across the roof. And the least little noise is like a large noise. The waterdrop falls resounding. The branch bitten by the flames cracks like a rifle shot; the sighing of the wind fills up the capacity of the space for him who is alone. All kinds of little sounds that are big, and they return; he becomes alive himself because they themselves are alive.

"Come, come," Séraphin had begun again.

The fire crackles again.

"Besides, if you want to go down on Saturday.... And you could stay two or three days in the village and spend Sunday with her...."

"And you?"

"Oh, me... Me," said Séraphin, "I'm used to being alone. Don't trouble yourself about me."

He began to smile in his beard that was almost white, while his moustache remained black--it was about nine o'clock in the evening, the 22nd of June, at Derborence, in the chalet of Philomène, where the two men were sitting before the fire.

Something cracked from time to time in the roofing. You could hear Séraphin continue:

"You come back when you want to; me, I'll always get along. Besides," he said, "when you return, you won't be all alone here."

He smiled in his white beard, holding his little grey eyes calmly upon Antoine:

"Unless I don't count?"

"Oh!" said Antoine.

Something cracks again in the roofing, made of beams and big flat stones which rose obliquely above them and had only one side, the chalet being leant back against a projection of rock that stood for its rear wall.

"Well, it's arranged for Saturday.... It's only going to be three days...."

Something cracks in the roofing; the slabs of slate, exposed during the day to the heat of the sun, are much expanded by it, and then, the evening and the cold coming on, they contract again, making movements sudden and far apart, as if someone were pacing on the roof. A step that one takes cautiously up there, then stops, as when the careful thief, having ventured himself a bit farther, assures himself that he has not been heard. It cracked, it cracked no more; and they, under the roof in silence again, they saw each other, then saw each other no more. It was the flame rising, the flame falling once more.

But Antoine had raised his head again; a new kind of sound had just made itself heard. It was no longer the roof that cracked; it was a sound much more hollow, rumbling, and it came from the background of space. One would have said a rolling of thunder, which had been preceded by a sharp detonation; and now, though continuing, it was broken up by the shocks themselves prolonged by their own echoes.

"Ah!" said Séraphin, "there they begin again...."

"Who does?"

"Eh? You have heard nothing, these nights past? So much the better for you, it's because you sleep so well. And it's also," Séraphin went on, "because you're not yet familiar with our neighborhood. Well, up there... You have only to remember what the mountain is called... Yes, the arête where the glacier is... Les Diâblerets...."

The sound died away little by little, becoming very soft, almost imperceptible, as when a little wind moves the leaves of the trees.

"Nonetheless, you know very well what they say. Well, that He lives up there, on the glacier, with his wife and his children."

The sound had ceased completely.

"Sometimes it happens that he grows bored and he says to his little devils: 'Take up the quoits.' It's there where there is the Quille, the Ninepin, you know, rightly called the Quille of the Devil. It'a a game they play. They take aim at the ninepin with their quoits. Ah! the beautiful quoits, I tell you, the quoits of precious stone... some blue, some green, some transparent.... Only it happens sometimes that the quoits miss the ninepin, and you can guess where they go. Over the edge of the glacier, no? Nothing else, it's the hole. The quoits have nothing else to do but fall. And you see them falling sometimes when there's a full moon, and it is precisely now that there is a full moon...."

He said:

"Do you want to come and see?"

Was Antoine uneasy? You can't say, but he was curious; and, as Séraphin had risen, he too rose. Séraphin went before, Séraphin opened the door. You saw that there was, in fact, a beautiful full moon that stood out white and brilliant on the floor of beaten earth behind them.

It was a bed of grass, a flat bed with a few chalets. It was a kind of plain, but narrowly closed off, because of the rocks that you could see, all about you, rising upward. For, first turning towards the south, the two men saw where the moon had emerged from behind many horns of rock there, at the foot of which they stood; then, turning towards where the moon was setting, they saw that the walls began there, though still not very high, and continued in a half-circle to the north and east.

Séraphin raises his arm. You can see his hand in the clear night, you see that he holds his forefinger outstretched; it's almost above his head. You must raise your head in the same direction. Séraphin points to something above, some fifteen hundred meters above you.

And it's easy to see that on this side as well, that is, on the north side, you are completely closed in, and to the east the same, where the opening there is hidden by the first row of the mountains. Séraphin raises his arm, there is born before us a new wall, higher still than the others; and you see that on all sides you are at the bottom of a hole; that this grand wall, however, is riven from top to bottom by narrow gorges in which little cascades are hanging in motion. The gaze follows it; then there is the finger held up by Séraphin that obliges the gaze to stop.

It was straight up, just at the edge of the walls, just on the crest. It overhung mightily, surmounted all along the edge of the void by the thickness of the glacier. And something there shone out softly, a luminous fringe, dimly transparent, with green and blue reflections and a glimmer as of phosphorus: it was the fracture of the ice up there, but it was at this hour, it too, full of a grand silence and a grand peace. Nothing moved anywhere under the impalpable ash that was the light of the moon; one saw it float softly in the air or be laid down in a thin layer upon everything, everywhere it could find to lie down.

"Up there...."

Still Séraphin held the raised arm. He said:

"Yes, there where it overhangs. But it seems to be finished for the evening."

His voice was loud in the silence.

"Oh!" he said, "it's that that always falls, from as far back as one can remember."

He had lowered his arm.

"The old people spoke of it in their times. And they, when they were still young, they had already heard the old people speak of it.... Only, there it is, it is capricious.... Too bad."

They heard from time to time the tinkling of the neckbell of a goat somewhere nearby. The chalets were spread out on all sides. They were huts of dry stone. One of the slopes of their roofs was as if snow-covered by the moon's light: the other was lost in the shadow it cast upon the ground. And the two men were still waiting to see whether something would happen, but still nothing happened.

From time to time, at the most, a breath of air brought to your ear the distant whispering of a cascade. The puff of air itself was like when one passes a hand over a piece of fabric, because it ran close to the earth. Everything slept among the men, everything slept among the beasts. And up there....

Up there, where they still watched, there was only in the light of the moon that thin fringe of ice, so fine, so slender that it seemed at times that you saw it stir like a thread that is lifted by a little breeze. And Antoine believed that he had seen it stir, he was even about to tell Séraphin, when the old man began to shake his hed:

"I think the devil has gone to his bed, so perhaps we should do the same?"

Antoine therefore had said nothing. The two men went back into the chalet and drew the door shut behind them.

They lay themselves down on the straw mattresses placed on the boards fixed to the wall, which made two levels, so that they slept one above the other as in a ship.

Antoine lay on the upper level.

They hung their shoes by the laces from a peg on account of the rats.

Antoine had climbed up to his level.

"Good night," Séraphin had said to him.

He had replied:

"Good night."

* * *

And she, all of a sudden she had been there, in his dreams, after Antoine had rolled himself up in his brown wool bedcover and turned himself to face the wall. Why isn't it all right? It is Thérèse.

She returned, and she was there in person and in the fields, having found room for herself and for them in the little space between Antoine and the wall. He said hello to her, she said hello to him. He said to her: "Well, what?"; she said, "Well, it's like this." They had been obliged to make their meetings far from the village, because there are always the curious. There are always the curious, there are always those who interfere with those who don't care about them. She had a rake on her shoulder; he saw how, with the teeth of the rake, she caught the clouds in passing. The clouds fell upon his head. Why is he sitting higher than she is on the slope? He sees her only from the back and she is bending forward, thus showing, between the bun in her hair and her shawl, a little of her brown skin. "Is anything the matter?"--"Oh!" she said, "it's not me."--"Oh! Then what is it?"--"Oh!" she said. "It's my mother."

It wasn't going well in those days.

She began to slide. He said, "Wait for me." She slid still faster on her rear end, without however making the least movement herself. It was as if the ground disappeared beneath her; and she fled still more rapidly before him; but he followed, and thus the distance that separated them remained the same, so that he could speak to her, she could reply to him. They went quickly. He spoke to her, he said: "Only, you know, watch out for the Rhone!" Because at the bottom of the slope there was the Rhone, and it's not winter, he thought. "My mother says that we won't have enough to live on, if we have children."

Watch out!

There had been a shock; is he still sleeping?

The strange noise he believed he had heard continues to be heard.

Is it in his head? There is a noise of water in his ears; he sleeps, is he sleeping? He turns over, he sees that the door of the chalet is opening; someone cautiously puts his head

forward in the moonlight, which stops just in the middle of his back, making a perfectly straight line.

Where is she?

"Ah!" he says to himself, "it has all been arranged since then, let's see... sure, of course, now we are married, it's done; that was in the old days...."

He thinks: "Saturday...."

He reopens his eyes; he sees that someone has gone out of the chalet, and the square of moonlight behind the door is empty, like a painter's canvas that hasn't yet had paint.

He has gone back to sleep; has he gone back to sleep?

But suddenly the roof fell in, and one of the beams that sustained it, cast down on its end, came crashing into the wooden planks where Antoine lay upon his mattress.

Chapter 2

Derborence," the word sings sweetly; it sings sweetly to you and a little sadly in the head. It begins a bit hard and marked, then hesitates and subsides, as one sings it still, "Derborence," and ends in emptiness, as if one wanted to signify by that the ruin, the loneliness, the oblivion.

For desolation lies now on the places that the word designates; no more do the herds go up there, the men themselves have turned away from it. It is five or six hours from the plain, when one comes from the west, that is, from the Pays de Vaud. Derborence, where is it? They tell you: "It's back over there." You must ascend for a long while against a stream of beautiful water that is like the air above the stones of its bed, so clear is it. Derborence, it lies between two long, irregular arêtes that you must first ascend for a great while; they are like two knifeblades the backs of which have been fixed in the earth and the notched edges show their steel, shining out in some places and in others eaten up with rust. And, on the right and on the left, they increase in height, these arêtes; as you rise, they themselves rise; and the name continues to sing sweetly to you in your head as you pass by the beautiful chalets at the bottom, which are long, well-plastered in white, with roofs made of shingles like fish scales. There are sheds for the animals, there are copious fountains.

You ascend still; the grade becomes steeper. You have arrived now in the great pastures, intersected by the rock projections that cut them into successive levels. You pass from one of these levels to the next. Already you are not far from Derborence; you are no longer very far from the region of the glaciers, because by ascending you arrive at last at a place that is a col, formed by a contraction of the arêtes just above the pastures and chalets of Anzeindaz, which makes like a little village there, well above the highest of the trees and a little before the grass itself ceases.

Derborence, it is there, quite near. You have only to carry on straight ahead.

And, suddenly, the ground disappears beneath your feet.

Suddenly, the line of pasturage, which sinks in the middle, begins to trace its deep curve into nothingness. And you see that you have arrived because an immense hole opens abruptly in front of you, in the shape of an oval, like a vast basket with vertical walls, on top of which you must bend over, because you are yourself standing at nearly two thousand meters and it is five or six hundred meters down to the bottom.

You bend, you thrust your head a little forward.

Derborence, it seems a bit of winter you have come upon in full summer, because of the shadow that dwells there nearly all the day, making its sojourn there even when the sun is at its highest point in the heavens. And you see that there is nothing more than rocks there, and more rocks, and still more rocks.

The walls fall away steeply on all sides, more or less high, more or less smooth, while the path slips away down the one that is beneath you, writhing upon itself like a worm; and, wherever you cast your eyes, across from you as well as to the left and to the right, there is, standing upright or lying flat, hanging in the air or fallen, there is, thrusting forward in spurs or withdrawn behind, or still forming the creases which are the narrow gorges -- there is everywhere the rock, nothing but the rock, everywhere the same desolation.

The sun above partially colors it in diverse fashions, because each of the arêtes projects its shadow on the other and the arête in the middle projects its shadow on the one to the north; and one sees the top of the heights, yellow like a ripe grape, or pink like a rose.

But the shadow is rising already, it rises more and more; it ascends in little thrusts, irresistibly, like water in the basin of a fountain; and even as it ascends, everything diminishes, everything grows cold, everything falls silent, everything fades away and dies; while one sad color, one bluish shade is diffused like a thin fog below you; across from you you see two gloomy little lakes gleam still a little, then cease to gleam, laid flat in this jumble as of zinc roofs.

For there is the bottom again, but look closely: nothing moves there. You can watch for a long time, and attentively: everything there is stillness. Look: from the high walls on the north to those on the south, nowhere is there any more place for life. On the contrary, everything is covered up again, except a giant obstacle.

For there is something that stands everywhere between you and what is living. It seems at first like a gravel pile, the cone of which is half-attached at its smaller end to the northern wall; and from there, spread out everywhere, like dice spilled out of a dice-box, it is in effect like dice, dice of all sizes, a block that is square, another block that is square, the superposition of blocks, then a succession of blocks, small and large, covering all the bottom to the limit of one's view.

* * *

In other times, however, they came up there in great numbers, to Derborence; they even say that there were nearly fifty who came up, some years.

They came up there by the gorge that opens out at the other end to the Rhône; they came from Aïre and from Premier, the Valaisan villages perched high up on the northern side of the valley of the Rhone.

They moved up towards the middle of June with their little brown cows and their goats, having built for their use up there many little chalets of dry stone, covered with slate leaves, where they remained for two or three months.

These bottoms in those times were from the month of May painted a beautiful green, for up there it is the month of May that holds the paintbrush.

Up there (one says "up there" when one comes from the Valais, but when one comes from Anziendaz one says "down there" or "there at the bottom"), the snow, when withdrawing, made big cushions; they uncovered on their edges, in the black moisture that the old grass has badly covered with a kind of dull felt, all kinds of little flowers opening to the extreme limit of the fringe of ice thinner than a pane of glass. All kinds of little flowers of the mountains, with their extraordinary brightness, their extraordinary purity, their extraordinary colors--whiter than the snow, bluer than the sky, or sprightly orange, or violet -- crocuses, anemones, the primroses of the pharmacists. They made from afar, among the grey spots of snow that were growing smaller, much brighter spots. As on a silk scarf, one of those scarves that the girls buy in town, when they come down for the fair, to the fairs of Saint-Pierre or Saint-Joseph. Then it's the essence of the fabric itself that changes: the grey and the white going away, the green bursting out everywhere; it is the sap that returns, it's the grass that shows itself anew; it's as if the paint had been let fall from the brush in drops of the color green, and then they all joined together.

Ah! Derborence, you were beautiful, in those times, beautiful and pleasant and welcoming, holding yourself ready from the beginning of June for the men who were going to come. They only waited for your sign. One afternoon, the diffuse and monotone sound of the stream in the gorge was pierced and broken up instead by the tinkling of a cowbell. One saw the first animal appear, then ten, then fifteen, until there were a hundred.

The little goatherd blew upon his horn.

They lit the fires in the chalets; everywhere above from the chimneys or through the holes of the doors, pretty little blue plumes of smoke wavered softly in the absence of any currents of air.

The columns of smoke grew larger, they flattened out, they found themselves mingled in their upper parts, making like a transparent ceiling, like a spider's web, held flat halfway up the walls above you.

And, below, life resumed, and life continued, with these roofs placed not far from one another like little books on a green carpet, all these roofs bound in grey; with two or three little streams that gleamed in places as when one raises a sabre; with round specks and oval specks that moved about a little everywhere, the round specks being the men, the oval specks the cows.

When Derborence was still inhabited, that is, before the mountain fell upon it.

But now it has just fallen.

Chapter 3

The people of Anziendaz said: "It began with a salvo of artillery; the six pieces of the battery had been fired off at the same time."

"Then," they said, "there was a blast of wind."

"Then there was a fusillade, with explosions, cracklings, discharges, coming from all sides, as if someone were firing on us from above; the whole mountain was in an uproar."

"The wind had blown the door wide open, like a blow with the knee. The ashes from the hearth fell all over us as if it were snowing in the chalet...."

"Us, eh? On the col, we're not very far below the place where the landslide broke away, though a little more to the side and behind; and the first noise was caused by the cracking of the overhang when it came down; after that it was a war between one arête and the other, between one height and the other; it was like thunderclaps around each of the summits that follow one another in a semi-circle, from the Argentine to the Dents-de-Morcles, from the Rochers-du-Vent to Saint-Martin."

They were already up and about. There were three of them. They couldn't find their tinderbox.

The animals that they'd brought in for the night, but which hadn't been tied up, were making a great disturbance in the shed, where they threatened to overturn everything.

The men had first of all to go and put some order into the herd.

They had a horn lantern but they didn't need it, on account of the beautiful full moon that was out that night; but soon they were astonished to see the moon rapidly grow darker, fade away, become sorrowful as when there is an eclipse, while the gleam of the lantern became more clear, making a circle on the short grass before their feet.

And it was then that they had seen that great pale cloud rise up before them. The silence returned little by little; the cloud, the cloud grew larger, more and more, behind the ridge that still hid them from the depths of Derborence, rising there like a wall that rose above another wall. It was like a great cloud of smoke, but flat, without billows; it was like a fog, but slower, heavier; and the mass of those vapors spread upward from itself, like dough rising, as when the baker puts the dough in his kneading-trough, and it swells in the trough, and it overflows the trough.

It was the mountain that had fallen.

The men coughed, they sneezed, they bent their heads forward, trying to shelter behind the brims of their hats.

But it was a fine powder, an impalpable dust, which being suspended everywhere, penetrated everything; and they were obliged to plunge on into it all the same, for now it came upon them. They took a few steps into it, then a few more steps into it, then they stopped; they said to one another:

"Is it safe to go any farther?"

They said:

"Is it solid ground there? We're not going to be able to see."

Only they were pushed forward by their self-respect; they were pushed forward by curiosity.

Besides, the noises became more and more infrequent, more and more spaced out, hollower, more and more internal, like the beginning of a long digestion; they came now from underneath you and as if from within the earth; so that the three men were easily able to advance up to the edge of the void, there where the col is.

They saw nothing. They saw only that boiling white mass. They were soon deprived of all view; soon again, by a fault or fissure that appeared in the vapors, they perceived the vapors themselves, but the vapors hid everything. They hid not only the bottom of the combe, they hid also the walls that encircled it; and thus they could not tell from where the landslide had broken away, nor could they see the landslide itself -- they could still distinguish nothing but the billows themselves, as when one looks into a washtub; they could distinguish only the confusion itself, faintly lit by the moon, and reddened by the moon, which was reddish in the heavens, then disappeared in the heavens, then reappeared still one more time.

The lantern alongside the men grew dim, then regathered its force, then grew dim once again; they were lying flat on the ground, no higher than the height of their faces, that is, the forehead and the eyes.

And one of them said:

"How many do you think there were?"

"My God!"

The third said:

"Need to know if they had already all come up or not.... Fifteen, twenty...."

Accustomed a little now to the lack of air, though still coughing from time to time, they remained there, having begun a conversation in low voices; and it grumbled hollowly under them all the while; and, because they lay with their chests against the mountain, they heard with their chests the sounds of the mountain, which rose up through their bodies to their senses.

* * *

The men from Sanetsch had likewise come running, that is, those who were from the northeast side at the other end of the big walls; they were still above the passage of the Porteur-de-Bois which plunges straight down towards these bottoms by the rock chimneys. Those men, they spoke to one another in their own language, a language that you can't understand, because it's the German gravel; they spoke to one another while making gestures, seen by no one, not even seen by themselves. To come there, they had had to traverse a whole stretch of the *lapiez*, the rocks which have long ago been worked by the rain water, so that they look like a frozen sea, having a succession of crests, of folds, of overhangs, all pierced by round holes where the water eddies. And they too were examining the depths, from which ascended only, by way of response, the inexplicable rumblings, the grumblings destitute of any meaning: from which ascended only these tongues and these whirlpools of dust.

They were taken within it, with the taste of powdered slate in their mouths; they were taken in a thickness, then into a new thickness: enveloped, then less enveloped, then enveloped once again.

* * *

As for the men of Zamperon, they stayed clutching their mattresses until the day appeared. There are three or four chalets, where the men come up from Premier, a

village in the neighborhood of Aïre. Zamperon, its three or four chalets just a little below Derborence, at the head of the gorge that descends to the Rhone. Its inhabitants thus found themselves just in the blast of air when it came, tearing away the stones of their roofs, even blowing the roofs off of two or three little haylofts, carrying them far off like straw hats, demolishing a stretch of young trees on a projection of the mountain; and, passing through the holes in their unplastered walls, it had struck the men on their mattresses as with the point of a stick, pushing them down in their beds.

They heard the cheese tubs toppling over, they heard the benches falling to earth; the doors were shaken as if they had been taken in two hands. At the same time it heaves and it rumbles; at the same time it cracks, at the same time it whistles; it was passing all at once in the air, at the surface of the earth and under the earth, in a confusion of all the elements where one could no longer distinguish what was noise from what was movement, neither what these noises signified, nor from where they came, nor where they were going, as if it had been the end of the world. So that having seized the frames of their beds to keep from being thrown to the ground, the men of Zamperon held on there, lying flat, more dead than alive. Unmoving, without cries, their mouths open in fear, but their mouths full of silence, shaken by trembling, their limbs emptied of life, they hadn't dared move for a long time. Then, little by little they heard no more of the hollow displacements and the remote slidings; still they said nothing, they did not call to one another.

They had to wait until day appeared, which in that season fortunately comes early. As early as 3:30, something pale and uncertain moves and vacillates already, normally making the stars fall one by one, like the fruits from the tree when they are ripe. That day, there had not been the mountain, there had not been the crests, neither had there been the sun. The day came late and spread itself out tardily and with difficulty, but a little everywhere at the same time, without appearing first at any one point in the heavens. One saw that the space was entirely occupied by a yellow fog, at which the first man who left his chalet was astonished, and where he was astonished to find himself--then there was another thing that astonished him without his knowing yet what it was.

He was called Biollaz, from Premier.

Sitting up on his mattress, when finally he could see, he had called to his colleague; he had said:

"Are you coming?"

No response. He called again:

"Loutre! Hey! Loutre!" (No response.) "Or are you dead?"

He saw the sky through a hole in the roof that had been made by the blast of wind during the night; the hole was just above him, large enough to let a man pass through it. And, as there was still no response, he thrust a leg out from beneath his cover, a leg still trousered because he lay fully dressed; he lay there listening. And nothing, and still nothing, and he thrust out the other leg.

"Loutre?"

There, Loutre had stirred.

Biollaz saw Loutre looking at him, lying on his bed.

"You're not coming with me?"

The other shook his head.

"Well! Too bad, I'm going just the same."

Biollaz stands up. It's full day now in the room, thanks to the hole in the roof, so that Biollaz moves without difficulty; everything in the chalet is on the ground, the things that had been hung from pegs or placed on shelves have left their pegs and their shelves, the milk tubs have been overturned.

After putting on his shoes, Biollaz makes his way over the puddles towards the door.

He tries to open it; the door opens no more. A sagging in the wall there has set off the frame.

He had to pass through the hole in the roof.

Loutre pushed him up from below and supported him by the legs; he gets through the opening then, from which he stoops holding Loutre's hands; and, having leapt from the roof to the ground, he is astonished at the fog, astonished at the same time at the grandeur of the silence that surrounds him.

For something is missing, something that was there is there no more; it's the sound of the stream that has ceased to be heard, though this is the time of the year when it is most full of water.

"Loutre, Loutre, where are you?"

Loutre:

"Here."

"Loutre, do you hear?... The Lizerne...."

Then Loutre said:

"I'm coming."

They found themselves outside, the two together. They make their way on the path strewn with leaves of slate that the wind has blown there, which were split in the middle in falling, having fibers like wood.

Men come out of the other houses.

They can hardly see one another at a distance, then, having come nearer, they still don't recognize one another, causing fear in one another, because of their ashen faces. They scarcely speak to one another; they sigh, they look at one another, they shake their heads for a long time. They come to the house of the Donneloyes; the door opens abruptly. And a young boy comes out and looks at them, but has he seen them? Because all of a sudden he sets off running down the path to the valley. They call to him:

"Hey! Dsozet!"

He doesn't hear them. They call him, but he has already disappeared, swallowed up by the opacity of the air which opens and closes, like a heavy curtain without folds.

They continue to advance up the path that leads to Derborence. They had hardly a quarter of an hour to walk. They continued struggling through a kind of fog that was like leaves of dirty cotton wool, placed one before another with pockets of air between, like the pages of a book joined at the top by the binding and, at the bottom, separated one from another. The pages became ever more frayed at the edges; they were more and more penetrated by the light; at last the men were able to see. That is, having stopped on the path, they saw that the path was barred. They saw that it was like a great wall across the path, and, across the path, it was like the front of fortifications, with a glacis, the defilading, the battlements, the loopholes. The wall stood before them and it had fallen there during the night; fallen from where? They still couldn't see. But it was there, forming a dam, with big blocks and little

ones, of sand, of gravel, of rubble, while the bed of the stream coming out of it was dried up, showing naked to the bottom of its bed, where some pools remained trapped.

"Stop!"

"Who is calling?"

It was old Plan, who keeps his sheep in the high ravines of the Derbonère.

On the left before them, on the southwest side, there opens in the thickness of the chain a kind of steep couloir, so rocky and arid that only the sheep frequent it.

They see the flock tumbling down in the rubble, looking itself like a rockfall.

They see it in the bottom of a hollow like a little lake with troubled waters when a little wind passes above it.

They see it wandering on the slopes where it seems a shadow of a cloud.

They saw it, and before them, there was old Plan:

"Stop!"

He was perched on top of a block of rock, where he held out his hand towards them:

"Don't go any farther!"

He shook his head in his white beard. He wore a long overcoat. It was rust-colored, moss-colored, his overcoat, the color of bark, the color of stone; it had the color of the things of nature, having long known the bright sun, the downpours, the snow, the cold, the heat, the wind, the outbursts and the tranquillity of the air, the long succession of days and nights.

"Don't go any farther! D... I...."

He was laughing:

"D... I... A.... You understand?"

And as he spoke thus, something moves below, among the rocks; someone was coming or trying to come up.

They see that it is a man, but scarcely was this man still standing upright, taking a step: obliged to cling with both hands to the nearest rock before making for the next, which he risked nonetheless; and then fell from it.

They look, they look more closely.

"Hey!" they said, "It's Barthélemy!"

And they ran to meet him while one heard old Plan, who cried out:

"Watch out! No farther... Stop! Stop!"

Chapter 4

Thérèse, the previous evening, had installed herself on the bench before their house. She had sat herself there in her brown dress with lots of folds, out of which came the sleeves of her rough linen shirt. She had sat herself there, she had let herself lean forward, arms on her knees; she looked vaguely below her, above the little trees of the orchard, all the way to the bottom of the big slope, where it disappears suddenly from view; the bottom of the valley and the plain, that is, a large plain, smooth as a sheet of paper, where the Rhône flows.

Ah! this you endure, ah! it creeps along. Eight days since Antoine has gone and eight days, it's like eight months!

She had let her head fall forward: it's the Rhône that she saw on the flat green bottom. The Rhône was grey and white and had much too large a bed, because its current carries along the sand and rocks that encroach upon its banks (which is why they have since corrected it).

It was marked there like a route on a map, that is its bed, singularly tortuous and capricious with its borders of grey silt; whereas the river itself ran in the middle and you saw it moving in the middle, a brighter grey and almost white, creeping on its belly like a snake.

There also it endures, there neither does anything change; ah! one knows it well, the Rhône, one knows it only too well!

Since all that time, she thought, since all that time it tells you its old story, always the same (that anyone can hear by lending an ear, that you can hear still better at night).

Possibly though Antoine will return on Sunday -- but he will have to go up again. Hardly joined together, thus we are separated; hardly married, unmarried, hardly brought together, put apart again; if only Antoine could return in earnest! And me, I am gazing at the Rhône; should it be so, when you are two, that you have so much time to occupy yourself?

I am bored, I am tiresome to myself.

She heard footsteps on the other side of the house, because the people were returning home to have their soup.

The day was ended; it began at four o'clock in the morning, it ended at eight in the evening.

They returned home; one heard the sound of their tread, sometimes dull, sometimes grating, dull on account of the mud, grating on account of the big flat stones that had been placed in it here and there, as in the ford of a stream.

From this side of the village, the houses had façades of two colors, white on the bottom, brown above; from the other, their rears lower down dominate the narrow passage that opens between them and the next row of buildings, which are also black and white from the front, looking from the front well placed and arranged, like beehives in a garden; from the back, all black, set there higgledy-piggledy, casting the always dirty passage into shadow.

And in front of the houses there was no one, but behind, in the alley, people came and went constantly, the women with their rakes on their shoulders, the young girls with their buckets of water, and only one or two men -- for it is the village of summer, from which nearly all those who are old enough or strong enough have gone up into the mountains, and where there remain only the infirm, the aged, the very poor, the imbecile.

The weather was fine. She saw between her feet the little red ants that carry their eggs in single files to the bottom of a narrow groove that they've dug out in the dust--a kind of alley, too, for the ants, as with us, she told herself; the ants with their eggs bigger than themselves, it's like us with our bales of hay that are also bigger than we are.... [filards de foin, Valaisan term for net of cords for carrying hay]

Her whole body felt hot; a rush of blood made a noise in her ears. She was having trouble breathing, though she stood up; she was all red, she became pale, she became all red once again.

What's wrong? she asks herself; and then an idea enters her mind: after all, she is married, and married for two months.

Ah! could it be?

Again she changes color; ah! surely that's what it is, she tells herself; if not, what could it be? because she was in excellent health.

Surely that's what it is! At that she changes color still another time, she begins to smile, her lips are again as red as her shawl--having turned her head, having leant her head against the wall, and the thickness of the bun in her hair made it soft behind her head.

She feels good, she doesn't stir. "Because, if it's that.... If it's that, I won't be alone anymore. And there will be two of us while he's gone, and when he comes down again, there will be three...."

The mountains are in front of her, just at the level of her eyes. Not just one, or two, or ten, but hundreds; they are ranged in a semi-circle like a garland of flowers suspended at the base of the heavens.

They are higher than the forests, higher than the pastures, higher than the rocks; floating there, all that snow, all those colored ices, that are strangely detached from those below them, that have become strangers to their bases already blackened by the shadow. And the more the shadow rose below them, the more they became lighter, the more also their brightness increased, made of all the pinks, all the reds, all the tones of gold and silver.

It made a softness round her heart. In April, when they were married, the peach trees were in bloom. They begin to blossom again, it is a promise. She ran her eye over the whole range of mountains one more time: it's like when the peach tree blossoms, in effect, like when the eglantine opens, like when the quince tree, more uncertain, more timid, tardier, shows the last of its bouquets; for the mountains at this moment have begun to grow pale, to pass away; they were fading, they were becoming grey; but what difference does that make? she thought, because tomorrow they will blossom once again.

They were walking no longer in the alley. The women were calling their children. They came to their doorsteps, crying out a name two or three times, then again crying out a name. And Thérèse saw that she had forgotten herself. Her mother would be waiting for her, because she ate at her mother's house since Antoine was no longer with her.

She began running. She passed through the gardens so as not to meet anyone, for otherwise she would be stopped and would lose still more time. She sees the open door, a bright red square at the top of the outside staircase, which she climbs, holding onto the railing because her head is spinning a little.

Someone said to her: "Well! Just in time.... Where have you been?"

You could see Philomène all in black before the hearth, where the cooking pot hung from the hook. Philomène turned her head towards her when she came in, then said to her: "Come on, come on, hurry up and light the lamp."

Thérèse takes up a larch twig -- the evening of the 22nd of June, around 8:30 perhaps, while Séraphin and Antoine were sitting before the fire at Derborence; they were before the fire, Séraphin and Antoine, and the stars were appearing one after another, the moon was just beginning to rise. In the big black kitchen, there is one bright place, it is the fire, her mother is in front of it; Thérèse takes up a twig and with the twig draws near the fire -- the 22nd of June. She returns, holding in her hands, which are bright within, a little trembling flame, which she brings near the wick of the lamp, hanging at the end of its little chain from one of the beams of the ceiling.

You can see that on the polished walnut table there are two tin plates set across from one another.

And Philomène arrived with the cooking pot, which she placed on a pinewood ring made especially for it, then she sat and took her place without saying anything more.

Philomène began to eat her soup; it is the 22nd of June, while six hundred meters lower down, at the bottom of the plain, the Rhône continues to creep along on its belly and rubs itself against the stones, making a light displacement in the air like when one walks in dry leaves. Suddenly Philomène stopped eating, holding her big round tin spoon midway between her plate and her mouth; she had been looking at her daughter:

"What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing."

"Then why aren't you eating?"

"I don't know," said Thérèse. "I'm not hungry."

Philomène shrugs her shoulders.

"Oh! I see, it's because he's not here.... Come, come, my poor girl. It's not only to you that these things happen.... Me too, I was married.... And me too, your poor father, when he went up into the mountains, he left me alone the whole summer...."

She spoke without mildness on account of a residue of resentment that she felt without suspecting it; she continues:

"And then it is you who has chosen him, your husband, isn't it? But you know very well the customs of the country, eh, seeing that you were born here; you should know that one is a widow at least two months of the year round here...."

But Thérèse shakes her head.

"It's not that."

"Ah! then what is it?"

"I don't know...."

The 22nd of June, around nine o'clock in the evening, under an oil lamp with its little yellow flame that has the shape of an upsidedown heart.

"You don't know?"

"I feel sick...."

"Sick?"

"Yes, and my head is spinning."

"Ah!" said Philomène, "for how long?"

"Just today."

"It was your month?"

"Yes."

Thérèse was worn out. And you could see that Philomène was beginning to smile, something that had not happened since her daughter's marriage; looking at her daughter, then:

"Oh!" said she, "if it's that, it's a good illness; it's one of those illnesses to which you make a bow when they come to find you...."

Meanwhile Thérèse felt all her blood rise once again to her face, making like a hot cloth under her skin, then it went away:

"It's surely that," said Philomène.... "Oh! it's a good illness. It should not make you afraid, and it's not necessary to force yourself. If you're not hungry, don't eat.... I'm going to make you a cup of camomille and then you're going to lie down...."

She went on:

"He knows nothing about it, him, of course? Oh well! it's all right to give him a nice surprise."

* * *

Thérèse had gone to bed.

It was in their own house, a house that had been renovated expressly for them. The bed was a big one of larchwood, a square bed, that is, as long as it was wide, and which, fixed to the wall by some bolts, rose almost to the ceiling on its high feet.

I can lie across it when he's not with me.

But he will be coming down soon, he will be coming down from the mountain; and there, I will say to him: "My lord, come into the bed."

She amused herself by thinking of him, because there were two places. She would say to him: "You smell of the mountain, you smell of the smoke and the goat... It makes no difference, my lord," said she, "come next to me all the same, because I am alone and I am cold."

Why is it that they made us a bed so wide, if there were not to be two of us here? "I can lie here lengthwise, you see, but I can lie here crosswise if I want to, it bores me; come quickly near me," she would say.

She would say to him: "Put yourself there, but I forbid you to touch me.... I must speak to you first; it is a secret.... Promise that you won't repeat it to anyone... Do you promise?"

I'll hold his hands still, if necessary. I will say to him: "Don't touch me.... My lord, oh! my good lord, what you are doing is forbidden."

And him, he will say: "A little kiss, only one...."

She would say: "Where?"--"On the eyelid."--No, she would say, "because first I have something to tell you. Turn your face to the air, me, I put my head flat, so that you won't prick me with your beard. And that way I will have your ear up next to my mouth, it's on account of the secret, Antoine...."

She turned over again in the great bed and the hours of the night began to pass. Possibly she dozed off.

There must have been a little storm.

He said: "This secret, what is it? Is it money? Is it a visit?"

She said: "Guess!"

It continued to make a storm. The sound, which had begun in her dream, slid very softly into reality. She opens her eyes, she hears it still. It is a rolling of thunder. It lengthens and rumbles above the mountains to the north; next she hears it coming, with some jolts, like a wagon heavily laden with pine logs that are dashing against one another; it passes above her; at last, it crashes against itself, on the other side of the valley, in the mountains to the south which send it back.

It returns backward, crashing against itself.

The shutters bang, one hears a ladder fall; the windows of Thérèse's chamber, which had been badly closed, throw themselves wide open.

She is cold in her nightshirt as she goes quickly to close them, but then she sees also that there is no lightning at all, despite the fact that the thunder continues, making noises above the roof like eddies mixed with loud cracklings.

She sees that the night is fine, and, in a bath of moonlight, the trees are writhing weirdly, again, raising their arms with their leaves all sticking out like hair; then, falling again, are motionless, and begin again to be round, under this soft bright rain of moonlight that drips on their surfaces as on well-polished feathers.

What is happening?

She hears someone speaking in the street, the kitchen has a window that opens onto that side; she goes quickly to the kitchen, she is naked under her nightshirt, her feet are bare. The thunder is dying away little by little.

There were some crackings again, like in the wooden partitions in a room when the temperature changes: then everything has become tranquil again, it seems, except that, everywhere in the village, the windows and doors are opening. Heads appear at the windows; in front of the doors whole people appear, who say: "What is it?"

The people turn to one another. One raises his head; one sees that the stars are in their ordinary places: a big red one, a green one, a little one that is white between the roofs. Some tiny points, some round, the ones that move, the others that don't move. Someone said:

"That's not a storm."

She, she doesn't dare to show herself.

The men have put on their trousers, the women have put a dress over their shirts; one hears a woman's voice saying:

"Eh! How do you know?"

She doesn't dare to show herself, her nightshirt fits badly and keeps sliding off her shoulder.

"Does one ever know?... There are some storms that are cut in two by the mountain. It can be good weather here and foul among the Germans...."

The people look at the mountain, which only appeared here and there to the north between the houses; everything is calm, even up on the summits.

"Do you think so? We would see the flashes."

"Flashes of what?"

"Of lightning...."

"Or else they are exploding mines," someone said.

"You're crazy. Me, I say it's an earthquake. My bed was shaking under my back."

"Mine, too."

"Me," said one of the Carrupts, for they are nearly all Carrupts in Aïre, "there was a cask that I didn't wedge properly. It rolled up against the door of the cellar."

The men are white and black in the moonlight; the women are black spots that almost fill up the openings of the little lighted windows where they are standing.

"But the noise?"

"Oh!" said another, "the noise, it always makes noise, an earthquake."

"And the wind?"

"It makes a wind."

"You think so?"

"I know so."

"And then what?"

"Well, then it's over."

"Well, we go back to bed?"

Someone asked again:

"What time is it?"

Another said:

"Two-thirty."

It is now the 23rd of June.

Thérèse listens still, but the doors are closing one after another, the windows are closing as well; everything has become perfectly peaceful not only in the heavens, but also on the earth, and all about her in the village, where there is only the babbling of a fountain which has once again begun to make itself heard and will not be silent again until morning.

Chapter 5

Only Maurice Nendaz had guessed what had happened; he was a lame man who walked with a cane.

He had once broken his leg while cutting wood in the forest, the left thigh; and, as it had been badly set, it made an angle with itself, so that it was shorter than the other one.

With each step, he lurched to the side.

He still made his way a little farther up the alley, while the windows were shutting up and the doors were making noise in falling shut again; then, withdrawing himself behind the corner of a hayloft, he called out in a low voice:

"Hey! Justin."

It was one of his neighbors, a young man of fifteen or sixteen years, who hadn't yet gone in.

"Are you sleepy?" Nendaz said to him. "No?... Well, go put on a jacket and come with me."

"Where are you going?"

"You'll see."

Justin put on his jacket; as for Nendaz, he was already ready to leave, his hat on his head, his stick in his hand.

"You didn't say anything to anyone?... Good! That's good. We must let them sleep peacefully for a little while longer."

You can hear the sound he makes with his stick on the stones; you could hear the sound he made with his bad leg that thumped louder than the other when he stepped up.

As soon as you leave the village, the path that leads to Derborence begins to ascend, taking the flank of the mountain where there are little layers of rock piled on top of one another, between which only a few thorny bushes and some stunted pine trees with red trunks are pushing out. By day you can see plainly the oblique line the path makes there; it is straight as if one had traced it with a ruler; you follow it with the eye its whole length as far as a cut in the rocks, two hundred meters higher, where suddenly it disappears. But at that hour, and as the moon began to hide itself, it was all they could do to distinguish the irregularities in the surface, which were large and rather troublesome, for the two men had no lantern at all. There are round stones that slip away beneath the soles, there are leaves of schist that rock to and fro; there are pebbles that make sudden rushes and where the point of the foot stumbles. That's why they were going slowly and why Nendaz went first, having also to make his bad leg obey, which was not always easy. Nendaz said nothing. You dimly saw him lean to the side, right himself, lean to the side, while his right hand took support on the tip of his walking-stick. One heard him panting because he was having trouble. From time to time he paused for a moment without turning round, and Justin made a halt in his turn, having before him, in the shadow, only a kind of blacker shadow, which was without a head, because Nendaz was holding it bent forward.

But a little bit of white was mixed in the air as when, in a pot of somber colors, one lets fall a little bright color and stirs it in.

They approached the far end of the straight line that the path made on the slope, and then there was no more path. By that time, the air which was black had begun to become

grey, the grey itself became more and more transparent and light about them, where things regained their proper colors little by little. The pines became green, their trunks red; the flowers were white and pink on the branches of the dogrose. It became day, it began to be broad daylight; you could use your eyes once again, and you looked; you saw that the rocks stood erect before you, barring the path. But you saw also that there was a cleft in these rocks.

Maurice Nendaz had stopped abruptly; he listens; he says to Justin:

"You hear?"

He is leaning out over the void; Justin who has rejoined him leans out just as he does; and what one hears is nothing, that is, nothing anymore.

The harsh voice that speaks there, five hundred meters below you, at the bottom of the gorge, it has died. Or at least was becoming silent, already feeble and cut by silences as when one squeezes someone by the throat, and he cries out less and less strongly, less and less.

It is that narrow fissure there, that sabre slash that has been made into the mountain.

The water has for a long time sawed through the rock from top to bottom, as when the sawyers raise and lower their long-toothed blades in the trunk of an oak, one of them standing above it, the other below.

It has thus been opened in the course of the ages (ah! what patient and minute work!), a narrow channel between vertical walls, which are almost touching in the places where they overhang; at the bottom of which it flows, unseen, but ordinarily making heard a kind of long continuous sigh, which rises and amplifies itself from echo to echo.

Well, it is this sound of water that was heard no more; and Nendaz listens and Nendaz said:

"It's just what I thought."

"La Lizerne?" said Justin.

"Yes."

"What then, is it blocked up?"

Nendaz shakes his head, he stands upright; and, as the day continues to come on, you could see that the path was not interrupted, that it took abruptly the side behind the cleft, following a right angle in the gorge where it ascended again.

It went almost flat now along the flank of the rocks; it stretched out ahead for a fairly long way, going parallel to the torrent; it traversed here and there some fallen rocks; then it made a turn and ceased to be seen.

And Nendaz, having shaken his head again, resumed their journey; he carried on as far as the turning, from which the view extended freely far to the north; then he points to something up there, in the air, something that begins to appear above the farthest wooded hill; something yellowish, something that shines in the morning light, something flat like a pine board, the top of which already extends above the surrounding peaks.

"You see?"

Justin gestured that he did.

"You know what that is?"

Justin said that he didn't.

"You think it is a mist, no? or smoke? or that it's a rising fog? Look well. Because smoke curls upward, doesn't it? and fog is in shavings like when a carpenter pushes his plane along a plank. No, you see, it rises straight up, it is smooth. You can't guess?..."

Justin didn't have time to say whether he had guessed or not: someone was coming down the path. Some rocks had been set rolling, otherwise they wouldn't have seen anyone yet, then they saw. It was a young boy of about fourteen years, that is, a little younger than Justin. He was brown and grey on account of trousers that stopped above his shoes and a dirty shirt. He was running, he walked for a few steps, he began running again. He came straight at the two men, he didn't even seem to have seen them. But they, they had seen him and they saw also that he must have a hole in his head or a wound in his hair, from which the blood had flowed on his cheek and had dried on his cheek, mingling there with his tears; for he was crying, then he stopped crying, then a great sob came again from his breast and he began to run still faster while swallowing it down.

"You know him?"

"Yes," said Justin.... "It's a Donneloye from Premier.... His name is Dsozet. He must be coming from Zamperon."

Then Nendaz opens his arms wide, blocking the path; but can it be that the other only suspects the presence of Nendaz, his eyes obscured by his tears? He came on, he didn't stop, he ran straight at Nendaz; and Justin in his surprise didn't even make a gesture, whereas Nendaz turns aside, afraid of being knocked over on account of the cliff that began just at the side of the path.

The other passes.

And the other has got away already; then Nendaz to Justin:

"Hurry! Run after him, catch up with him! You must get to the village before him. And go to the president, do you hear? And tell the president to come and join me here with two or three men...."

Justin had already set off; Nendaz began to cry out:

"Tell him that it's at Derborence. Yes, the noise we heard last night, the blast of wind. And the smoke... The Diâblerets...."

He cried out still:

"The Diâblerets has come down...."

* * *

It was an hour later that the stretcher appeared.

Sometimes they bring down an injured goat on a stretcher, the men of the high chalets, when a goat has, for example, torn out a horn while fighting or has broken a hoof. They fasten it onto the stretcher, they cover it with an old cheese cloth. One of the men seizes the stretcher in the front, the other in the back.

You meet them sometimes thus on the mountain paths, and they descend slowly, advancing the right foot at the same time, advancing at the same time the left foot, in order to keep their balance.

You see them coming from far off. You ask yourself: "What are they carrying?" Then a gust of wind lifts the edge of the cloth, or it's the animal itself, raising its head, that turns it aside; then you're reassured, because you see its little beard, you see the kind of pompom

it has under its chin, its big eyes quick and startled; while its little muzzle, open to its pink tongue, lets out a rasping and trembling cry.

They were carrying a stretcher that morning, and it was well covered with a cheese cloth, but it was not a goat that was lying on it. Something heavier. Something larger. It was someone, it was a person and one who was even too long for the stretcher, so that part of him went beyond it and hung in front of it. You saw that there were two legs. And, at the back of the stretcher, they had arranged a red and white checked saddlecloth stuffed with hay as a pillow for the head, for it was a man they were carrying, that morning, and carrying with great difficulty.

There were four of them carrying it; they were taking turns, two by two. Four of the men of Zamperon, including Biollaz and Loutre; and the two who carried the stretcher went before, the other two following, their hands empty.

At a given moment, the two who carried the stretcher lay it down on the path; the others then came to take their place.

They walked on thus, each time, for four or five minutes, in turns, on the narrow and difficult path; they had been at it for four or five good hours, for it was also a long path. They had to descend the gorge from one end to the other, under a ribbon of sky hardly any larger and no less tortuous than the path: and they went there turn by turn, two by two, their arms stiff, their shoulders drawn down, their necks held forward with the veins standing out as thick as their thumbs, taking care to place their feet at the same time on the earth -- five or six minutes, turn by turn, and then they stopped.

They stood then all four about the stretcher; they said:

"Hey! Barthélemy."

They shook their heads, they said:

"He doesn't hear."

One of them tore up a clump of grass from beside the path and, bending over the injured man, with awkward gestures he wiped away the froth that came out from the corners of the lips, making him a red beard on top of his own, full of bubbles as when with a pipe one blows in soapy water.

The man made no resistance. He said nothing, he didn't move. He looked into space with empty, vaporous eyes. His eyes were wide open but they were grey, as if their gaze were turned within. He had a red beard above his short black beard; he had a large face that had been brown, that had been cheered by good color, animated by the fresh air; that was now grey and green like a stone that has rolled in the moss, that has been worn away, then polished, for the skin, dusty elsewhere, was shining in places where it was stretched by the bone. And suddenly Barthélemy's breathing became shorter, more hurried, pushing out a new thickness of froth; his chest had been crushed; and they were bringing him down quickly to the village in order to try to save him.

The men having put him down on the path called to him, shaking their heads, under the narrow sky, in the gorge that stayed dark even in the brightest sun; they said, "Barthélemy, do you want to drink?", one of them having in his pocket a horn flask that he refilled at a trickle of water that flowed beside the path, then he bent down; but the water ran out onto Barthélemy's chin, the water spread out around his mouth that doesn't understand anymore, that refuses it, that says no.

They set out again; they saw Nendaz, who was coming to meet them.

He had carried on making his way up the gorge with his bad leg and his walking-stick, having made thus a part of the distance; they had made the other part.

The two men who were carrying nothing then took the lead. Nendaz said to them:

"It is the mountain?"

The two men nodded.

Nendaz said:

"Me, I understood.... Last night.... So," he said, pointing to the stretcher, "is that all that's left?"

The two men nodded.

"Of all those who had gone up?"

They said:

"Yes."

"And at Zamperon?"

"There is one with a broken arm; he'll be along in a moment, they've made him a bandage."

Nendaz takes off his hat and crosses himself; the two others did the same.

Then they said:

"Down there, do they know?"

"No, they thought it was a storm."

"Ah! they don't know?"

"Oh! by now," said Nendaz, "they should know, because there was a young boy from among you who passed a few moments ago, and me, I've sent Justin to warn them."

The men with the stretcher came up.

Nendaz said:

"Who is it?"

They told him:

"Barthélemy."

"Ah!" said Nendaz. "Barthélemy...."

He had his hat in his hand, he came near.

"Barthélemy, Barthélemy, it's me. It's me, Maurice Nendaz.... Do you hear me? Hey! Barthélemy...."

Chapter 6

Philomène had been awakened at an early hour by the feeling that something had happened to her the previous evening, something agreeable; and, in fact, it is something agreeable, for she saw that it was this promise of a baby, while a little ash-grey light slipped into the chamber through half-open shutters. The idea that one is going to be a grandmother is an agreeable thing. A baby arrives and settles everything.

Everything was arranged or she continued to arrange it, little by little, in her head, while she dressed. She said to herself: "At last, since the moment this marriage was made...." She said to herself: "And then, it turns out for the better." For when a baby is going to come, it turns out for the better. They were going to need her, and for an old woman that is to enter back into life, which she thought about also, very happy and warm, on this side of the windows, while on the other side the day continued to come on.

And, all the while, she continued to reflect and there! she said to herself, thinking of Thérèse: "I shouldn't have let her go to bed at her house last night. What was I thinking of? I should have kept her here, because one is always a little nervous, the first time."

But she said to herself: "Oh well! I'll quickly make some soup and then I'll bring her some, good and hot under a cloth, so that she can eat it in bed.... It will be better for her to remain lying down."

The door of a shed opens, it's the goat that someone is about to milk. There are hardly any cows in the village in summer and, what's more, hardly any healthy men either: it's a village of goats, of women, of children and of the aged. You hear someone draw back a rusty bolt that throws out a great cry like when they bleed a pig, and one drives a knife into the great vein in its neck. Someone coughs. The fountain is made of a tree trunk that they've sawed down the middle and then hollowed out -- it's old Jean Carrupt who is coughing. So bearded with moss, the fountain, that from so far off one can hardly distinguish it from the grass-covered bank against which it is set, having for a pipe only a simple wooden gutter that is all split, so that half the water is lost before it reaches the basin.

Old Jean Carrupt always rises early, and he's always thirsty; they are nearly all Carrupts in the village, moreover, having in order to recognize one from another only their forenames or their nicknames.

Jean Carrupt had been to drink at the fountain; he comes back shuffling his feet.

Philomène had lit a fire, she had hung the cooking pot from its hook: they began to come and go under the windows in a pretty pink color that was first of all in the sky to the east, then trickling down upon us from above.

Old Carrupt's coat was pink upon his back, an old coat he had not been out of for more than twenty years.

He turns his back to you, turns himself toward the slope that dominates the village.

Time passes.

Suddenly old Carrupt growled something.

A woman said to him:

"What is it, Father Jean?"

Again he growls something.

"Eh! well, that's true.... Hey! Marie.... Don't you see? On the path."

"Who is it?"

"I don't know."

"What are they doing?"

"Oh! when they are young, they amuse themselves...."

It was in fact on the path, as when the children play "couratte" (which is the name they give to the game), and it was the two boys. The one was running, the other was running. Dsozet was ahead, Justin just behind. When the one who was behind ran faster, the one ahead did the same, so as not to let himself be caught. The game is that someone tries to catch you, and he who catches you has won.

The women were watching:

"Where are they going?"

"Why are they running?"

And you saw that Dsozet's lead, however much he tried to keep it and however much effort he made, was diminishing more and more; there, in fact, the other forces his pace and the other comes even with him; but a surprise, for he doesn't tap him on the back, he doesn't leap upon him, as you thought he would: he simply passed by his side without saying anything to him, without even looking at him.

"It's Justin. Where is he coming from like that?... But he was here last night...."

"Of course, I saw him."

Thus it is that calamity advances on two legs, or on twice two legs, but you don't know who it is; thus it is that bad news comes and goes rapidly, but you still don't suspect it -- and the women are calling Justin now, because he's very near:

"Hey! Justin!"

He doesn't answer. He leaves the path to take off through the gardens as if he wants to avoid being questioned as he passed. As for little Dsozet, he had been quickly lost from view, having taken the route that leads to Premier without entering the village.

Philomène, hearing the voices of the women, came to her doorstep. She sees them hurrying between the houses to try to see where Justin is going and to whose house. It's easy to guess, in fact, that he is seeking someone. At last, he stops before the house of the president, who is at the other end of the village, just next to the place where Rebord serves drink in a chamber on the first floor, where one ascends by a wooden staircase as steep as a ladder.

Justin enters the president's house, he has reappeared with the president. Then the calamity has come upon us. For Justin reappeared. Justin comes out of the president's house, he raises his arm, he points toward the north. Justin makes gestures with both arms, then, using only one, he points again in the direction of the mountains. The president shakes his head. The president looks about him, he comes forward. He is a little old man, who has a white moustache; he is called Crettenand. He puts his hand to his white moustache, he smoothes it; he shrugs his shoulders in a brusque movement, they remain for an instant raised to the level of his ears. And there is everywhere a great silence, and you hear again the cry of a cock, who sings out full of derision; then you hear Rebord come running down his stairs.

He makes a noise like the rolling of a drum.

A man's voice said:

"It's not true!..."

And a woman's voice:

"Ah!... Ah!... Ah!..."

A long cry that comes thrice, each time still more piercing, then breaks off at its finest point like a reed under a blast of wind.

And everyone began to stir in the village, as they ran to the meeting between Justin and the president.

"The mountain?"

"Yes."

"And then what?... On Derborence?... It's not possible, come on, what are you telling us?"

"You remember the noise that was made last night?..."

One weeps, the women call, the children cry out; they come pushing forward, and they push forward and they jostle each other in the alley: it is the calamity that has come upon us, and they understand finally that it has come upon us, because four or five men surround the president.

There were some women who laughed, saying:

"Come on, come on, it's only a story...."

The president said:

"I know nothing, I know nothing, leave me be, we must go and see...."

Philomène had come forward also; she slipped between the women, she made a path between those raised arms, those heads which were shaking:

"Well," she said, "well, president?..."

He steps forward, he said:

"I know nothing, ask Justin."

"Well," she said to Justin, "and Seraphin?"

"I don't know."

"And Antoine?"

"I don't know."

* * *

She began to run towards Thérèse's house, where nothing seemed to have stirred yet, because the house is rather removed from the place where the noise was being made. She saw that the front door was not locked.

She knocked on the door of the chamber.

"Is that you, mother?"

She says: "It's me."

She enters; she said: "You've left the windows open, you are going to take cold...."

She quickly closed the windows.

"You must be careful, you know, in your condition.... Have you slept well?... Ah! it is me who has awakened you.... Too bad. I wasn't calm about your condition, that's why I have come."

One hears almost nothing through the windows ornamented with the bottoms of glass bottles.

For a while she straightens the little curtains that the wind disturbed last night; she says:

"You must stay in bed this morning; it's more prudent. I'm going to bring you some soup."

She still hasn't turned round; she hears Thérèse say:

"Oh! no, I'm going to get up."

"Well, you're feeling better?"

"Oh! yes," said Thérèse: "I feel completely well."

But suddenly a cry is heard, piercing the walls and the thickness of the glass, people come running by in front of the house:

"What's that noise?"

"Oh! it's nothing," said Philomène.

"But you, mother, what's the matter with you?"

Because Philomène had had to turn round at last, and she shows a face the color of dirty paper, while she holds her hands one upon the other at the level of her waist in order to prevent them from trembling.

And, despite the darkness where she is standing, Thérèse stares at her because one can't prevent the truth from showing.

"Nothing's the matter."

Thérèse said:

"That's funny."

She is sitting on the bed.

Someone knocks on the front door.

Thérèse hears her mother speaking and another woman's voice speaking low in the kitchen; she can't understand what the women are saying. The sound nevertheless increases outside, coming still nearer; Thérèse asked again: "What is it?"

The two women have come in; the second is her mother's sister, Catherine.

"Oh!" said Catherine, "pay no attention, it is Barthélemy's wife, she is grieving.... Her little one is not going to...."

They'd stopped, the two of them, standing beside the door, obviously upset and seeking to appear calm, held back there and wanting to advance, seeing that they must say something and not finding anything to say; Philomène's hands moved still more uncontrollably on her striped apron.

"Wait," said Thérèse, "I'm coming, I'm getting up."

"No," said Catherine, "it's better for you to stay there...."

But at that moment a tolling of the bell is heard, then another; then still another.

It is Barthélemy who has just died; the bearers saw that he was dead because his mouth opened in his beard.

They had almost arrived in the village. They set the stretcher on the path; then, heads bare, they gathered round him, those four, and Nendaz, and then all the others who came,

having ascended to meet them (that's why the noise had gone by): that is, the president, Justin, Rebord, the men, the women, the children.

The women fell to their knees while someone set off running to the chapel.

Another tolling of the bell.

Thérèse said:

"Who has died?"

"Oh!" said Catherine (and she could no longer find her words), "it is the little one of Barthélemy's wife, my God! Of course, it's surely him.... Ah! the poor woman!"

Another tolling. Thérèse said:

"He wasn't sick yesterday."

"Yes, the little one of Barthélemy's wife... She said that he had the croup... It took him last night...."

Another tolling.

"She ran through the houses like a madwoman.... As if we could do anything...."

Another tolling. The kneeling women rise again. The bearers take up their burden again, placed at each end. They've have drawn the cheese cloth over the face of death.

There is a great peace on the mountains that you can see ranged high in the air in a semi-circle about you. From the place the dead man is leaving, you dominate still the whole village; you see, above the roofs, the emptiness that makes the valley this morning to be filled with a soft haze where the color of the sun is alongside the color of the shadow, the two colors stitched together like the stripes on a flag. Then, still higher, it brightens, and it brightens still more the more the eye is raised; it shines with tranquility, these towers, these horns, these needles, all in gold or all in silver, and they move a little, like the flame of a candle when one passes by it.

Everything is tranquil in the mountains, everything is at rest; for me there will never again be rest.

Barthélemy leaves his place. They made him leave his place, he doesn't say no, he lets them move him. He descends yet a little farther. And the others come along behind. They no longer dare to cry out so much, they no longer dare even to say anything, they silenced their tears which now flowed noiselessly.

And rest. But, for me, there will never again be rest, no, never again, in this life.

For her mother and her aunt have tried to hold her back, but they didn't have enough strength. Thérèse runs across the room, she puts herself at the window and sees. It is at first sight Barthélemy being carried; one man is at his feet, one man is at his head and he is lying out flat. They are upright, he is stretched out; they are walking, he is motionless under his cloth, he offers no resistance; first his feet hanging off the stretcher, then the swelling where his head lies on its pillow.

Tranquility, rest. And he comes like that, and then comes everyone else.

Old Carrupt goes to meet them; he doesn't understand very well what is happening, letting out at times a little groan.

"Ah!" she said, "that's nice, it is a misfortune and you hide it from me."

Her mother and her aunt try to pull her back; but now, it is Barthélemy's wife who comes with her six children.

The bell continues to sound; one tolling, then another, then another. Another tolling, and Barthélemy's wife holds the littlest child against her, giving her hand to another who is just beginning to walk, and there are two more holding to her skirt behind.

She has six children.

There is Nendaz with his walking-stick, and Thérèse recognizes Nendaz.

He comes.

He is a face among all these faces a little above the ground and at the height of the little low windows in a row in the walls of brown wood -- with beards or without beards, with hair all tangled or close shorn, or quite long among the women and knotted up in buns, brown or black or even blond....

"Ah! That's nice!"

Then to Nendaz:

"Come, come, what is it?"

Because Barthélemy is under the window, where he lies flat, he has his face covered, he is seen from above in all his length, you can see that he's not moving; then his wife began to sob again, letting her tears flow down her face into her mouth. They make black stains on the front of her grey jacket.

There are the arms raised up, the hands held flat on either side of the head; the men, on the contrary, let their hands hang down, the president, Justin, Rebord, Nendaz, the others--hardly numerous, and for a long time to come, alas! hardly numerous, because of all the dead men up there; it's a little village, a little village of ghosts, of women, of children, of the aged; meanwhile, they come, they're now below Thérèse; then she said:

"What has happened?"

She speaks still of Barthélemy; she said:

"I think he's dead. Is it true, Maurice Nendaz?"

Nendaz passes with his walking-stick.

"Why doesn't he answer me? Ah! it's funny," said she, "what's the matter with them? Justin!"

Justin seemed not to have heard, he passes her also, he has already passed.

Then a women looks up at Thérèse.

"You don't know? You don't know yet?.... My God!..."

She fell silent without finishing her sentence.

It is as if she had already forgotten Thérèse. The bell sounds a tolling.

"Don't stay like that at the window, you'll take cold," said Philomène. "We will explain it to you...."

And Thérèse:

"Explain what to me?"

But the explanation had already come, because another woman said:

"The mountain has fallen."

"What mountain?"

"The Diâblerets."

"And where has it fallen?"

"On Derborence."
Then Thérèse said:
"And them?"
But she begins to laugh:
"The mountain!"
She laughed again:
"It can't fall like that, all the same, a mountain!"
Then all of a sudden:
"And Antoine, where is he?"
"Oh! Antoine, my husband! Antoine, my husband!"

Chapter 7

They calculated later that the collapse had been of more than a hundred and fifty million cubic feet; that makes a noise, a hundred and fifty million cubic feet, when it comes down. It made a great noise and had been heard through the whole valley, though it's one or two leagues wide and at least fifteen long. Only they didn't know right away what the noise signified.

Now they were going to know, because the news went, going very fast, though they had then neither telegraph, nor telephone, nor automobiles. It was soon spoken. They said: "The mountain has fallen."

The news had arrived almost as promptly at Premier as at Aïre, on account of little Dsozet. He was standing by the fountain as they washed the blood off his face; and, from his mouth, the news ran from house to house.

The sun moves always white and shining above you in the sky that's a little curved and falls to meet you like the vault of a cellar; beneath it the news travels on.

First it followed the path, then it left the path.

It ran straight down, leaping over the hedges.

A man who is repairing the *bisse* raises his head: "What is it?" "It is the mountain...." "What mountain?"

And then the lizards that are warming themselves in the sun, stretched out among the stones, go back in to hide themselves in their holes.

"Derborence...."

The news passes and goes still farther, proceeding towards the great valley that hollows out suddenly there, in two colors among the pines; the news tumbles down across the steep side and the vines as far as the Rhône, which strikes you suddenly full in the face with its white fire.

There, there is a small village, where a doctor mounts his horse about eleven o'clock, having fixed the satchel with his instruments behind him on his saddle.

And, before noon, the news arrives in the chief town (Sion), where the government is, creating a great tumult of voices in the cafes.

They are drinking there the fine muscat of the region:

"Derborence!"

A wine almost so brown that it's golden; a wine that is warm under the palate with a harsh taste, while its bouquet rises in the nose behind the mouth.

They said:

"It appears that not one of them survived!"

"And the animals?"

"Not one!"

They came to the doorsteps, raising their heads; but the place where they were here relative to the mountains made it so that they could see nothing. Nothing at all. Only, way up there, towards the west, a kind of little greyish cloud, transparent like muslin, stretched flat on the sky behind the crags.

* * *

Until about six o'clock in the evening, there had hardly been anyone up in the mountains except the inhabitants of Zamperon, at least those who were left, that is, very few, for they were now only five or six, of which one was a woman. They had put their animals to graze in the fields right round the chalets in order not to have to watch over them; and straightaway they had taken up, one a hammer, another a pickaxe, trying to free a jammed door or nail down the laths of the roofs again.

It was then that the men of Anzeindaz had appeared; they had made a long detour over the heights to avoid having to pass near the landslide.

They came. They didn't say anything at first. They came and they said nothing. They stared at the people of Zamperon, who didn't say anything either; then they shook their heads.

And they said:

"Well?"

The people of Zamperon said: "Yes," and they shook their heads.

"Ah!" said the men of Anzeindaz, "it is a great calamity. Was there anyone able to escape?"

"One."

"One?"

"Only one! And the state he's in! They've just taken him down."

They understood one another only with difficulty, because they didn't speak entirely the same dialect; nevertheless the men of Anzeindaz continued:

"We came to see if you needed a hand. We could send you a work team."

But the people of Zamperon:

"Oh! for us, you can see, no thank you.... We will get out of this difficulty alone, we will...."

They pointed then to the hollow of Derborence: "And as for them, there...."

They let their hands fall again; they said:

"They don't need anybody."

And they sat for a moment all together on the end of a wall in the sun, where they began to drink the eau-de-vie that the men of Anzeindaz had brought with some clothing in a sack; meanwhile, the Germans from Sanetsch were descending also for the news. They were hanging one above another as on a rope ladder in the chimneys of the Porteur-de-Bois, where they were seen and then seen no more, where they were seen again, as the white cloud that floated still against the walls discovered them, or closed itself upon them again.

They arrived; and, them, they tried to make themselves understood by gestures, as they spoke only German: thus there were the men of three countries united for a moment, drinking the eau-de-vie together, because Derborence is the point where the frontiers of three countries meet: those of Anzeindaz coming from the west, those from Sanetsch from the northeast.

Sitting beside one another, they passed the cup, gazing before them at the other side of the stream, on the projection of the mountain; the forest of young pines had been torn up, and they saw that all the trees had been knocked down in the same direction, that is, in the direction away from the blast of wind, some torn out at the level of the ground, others

broken in the middle, as when someone has tried to cut the wheat with a bad scythe in dry weather.

They said something each one in his own tongue.

They passed the cup, they gazed at the stream, they saw that the big stones that ornamented the bottom of its bed had by now become dry, leaving among them the puddles full of silence, and the puddles shone like eyeglasses. The great voice of the water was dead, which they tried instinctively to find again with their ears there where it should have been and in the air where it was no more, wondering at the new silence at the same time that they yielded to it.

For they fell silent too one after another, after which the men of Sanetsch, like those of Anzeindaz, turned towards their homes.

But Aïre was full of people. Immediately they had ascended from Premier where the parish church is, the vicar and many of the inhabitants.

In his turn, a little after noon, the doctor had arrived on his horse white with foam.

There had also been the broken arm: it was a young man of twenty years named Placide Fellay; he was sitting in a kitchen, while the doctor, having procured some small boards and some strips of cloth, set the fracture.

Two men were holding him by the shoulders and by the legs.

The dead man, him, one saw only that he was good and dead: the 23rd of June. People kept arriving; the doctor bent over the bed where they had laid Barthélemy to listen to his heart: there where there should have been the beatings of a heart, there was no longer anything but silence.

They brought a mirror, they held it before Barthélemy's mouth; the surface of the mirror remained as brilliant as it had been (because they had rubbed it on a knee beforehand).

The doctor stood up, he shook his head. And:

"Haa...."

A long wail broke out three times, then another three times, and it's heard as far as the street, where they stop:

"It's Barthélemy's wife."

Meanwhile the justice had just arrived, while the doctor, with two or three men and a mule loaded with provisions, prepared to set out for Derborence.

And then they questioned Biollaz, but he said:

"You will see...."

Biollaz and Loutre who had been with him, and Biollaz:

"The rocks, the rocks that are bigger than...."

He pointed to the houses of the village:

"Two or three times bigger than our buildings and they've blocked up the stream... The Lizerne... They have covered up all the pastures.... What else do you want me to say?..."

Someone said:

"And Barthélemy?"

"Oh! him," said Biollaz, "his chalet was a little to the side and a little above the others.... What's more, he had been caught under it, him too, you see. Even so it would have been better for him, poor man, if he had been killed with the first blow...."

They said to him:

"That makes how many?"

He said:

"That makes nineteen... fifteen from Aïre and four from Premier...."

"And how many cows?"

"Lord," he said, "at least a hundred and fifty.... And then the goats...."

But, as the mule was ready, the men of the expedition set off without delaying any longer.

* * *

And it's in this house, in that one. It is here, and here again, and there, and still farther away. Over there, someone laughs. People say that it's the wife of the dead man who laughs, because she has gone mad.

It happens now all the time, the people unknown to you in front of your house; they stop, they look, they shake their heads.

Old Jean Carrupt, who doesn't understand very well what has happened, continues his walk. From time to time, he stops too and growls something.

In ten or twelve houses, the calamity, here and here again and over there, while people stop and look, and they hear voices, cries, wailings, nothing more; they hear laughing and crying at the same time.

The landslide of Derborence, a 23rd of June -- only ten days after they had gone up there.

"Ah!" said someone, "if they had only waited a little...."

"What do you want? It was the time. They went up as usual."

"Me," she said, "I don't believe it, your stories."

They had made Thérèse lie down; her mother and her aunt were near her.

Every few minutes, someone knocked on the door.

"Oh!" said Catherine to whomever was knocking, "oh! don't come in, please, don't come in... It's better to leave her in peace."

And the people who pass in front of the house:

"There also.... Yes, there were two.... A brother and a husband... the brother of the mother, the husband of the daughter...."

"Antoine Pont."

"And Séraphin Carrupt as well."

Thus the dead were named by their names and one by one they were counted; while you saw at the top of the stairs, when you opened the door, the reflection of a big fire that burned on the hearth of the kitchen.

It seemed that she was expecting a child.

You saw that the water boiled in the cooking pot suspended from the hook; and, she, in her bed:

"Come now, how can it fall like that, a mountain?... You make me laugh...."

She was upset. As they thought that she was becoming feverish, they'd put a compress of cool water on her forehead. "If the mountains fall just like that, what are we going to do? We're not short of mountains here...."

She said:

"Take away this compress."

Then Philomène, swallowing back her tears:

"Oh! please, Thérèse, please!"

And Thérèse:

"Leave me in peace. I'll be all right...."

"Oh! it's not only for you that we are distressed."

"For whom?"

She doesn't move, she ponders.

Suddenly she asks:

"What is that noise?"

"It's the people."

She said:

"What people?"

"The people who've come for news."

"Oh! then," she said, "it's true.... It's true, since there are all those people.... The mountain.... Oh!" she said to her mother, "and you, do you believe that he's dead?"

"They don't know yet. We must wait. They don't know anything; they've just gone to see."

"Who?"

"The doctor and the justice."

"Ah!" she said, "we must wait? We must wait until when?"

"Until tomorrow or the day after. I promise we'll tell you everything."

"Oh!" she said, "it's not worth it."

She said:

"Why are they troubling themselves?"

She says:

"And me, can't I go up with them?"

She sat up in bed, while the two women rushed over, each taking her by a shoulder and forcing her to lie back down.

"And what could you do up there, my poor daughter? One can only wait, you see. Do like us. For what could we do, I ask you, ah! yes, what could we do, we women, my poor daughter?"

Among the tears that are flowing down her cheeks:

"And you must think also of him."

"Who?"

"Him, the little one who's going to come."

"All right."

She made no more resistance, she let herself be pushed back, she is once again completely tranquil on her pillow. She crossed her hands on the bedcover. The mountains will soon become pink. The mountains fall upon us from above. They are beautiful to see, but they are evil.

She said:

"And if I have a baby? If I have Antoine's little baby? Him, I know very well that he's not coming back. But then, the little baby, he will be an orphan, he will be an orphan before he's even born?... Ah!" she said, "it would have made him happy nevertheless, Antoine. I would have told him the secret in his ear.... Well! I will tell him nothing. He will never know, never. It's funny."

Suddenly she cried out:

"Well! I don't want it... I don't want it. A baby who won't have a father, is that still a baby? Oh! take it away from me," she said, "take it away from me, take it away from me!..."

Part II

Chapter 1

He sticks out his head....

It's two months, or nearly so, after the landslide; they had had plenty of time to calculate it, having rolled out for this purpose their tape of gummed cloth, with the measurements indicated by black arrows, stretching it flat against the surface of the rocks, first lengthwise, then across. Then one of the men had climbed to the top of one of the blocks of rock that seemed the highest, trying thus to ascertain the thickness of the mass, one of the employees of the surveyor; for they too had ascended to Derborence, following the doctors, the representatives of the justice, the curious.

A hundred and fifty million cubic feet.

They had calculated the consequences of the fall, so as to modify the plans of the commune and replace on the pages of the register what had been inscribed as pasturage and fertile land with the notation: *unusable land*.

It's a rather long job, but the men who had undertaken it had plenty of time to do it well. Nothing came to disturb them in their work, for the curious became every day fewer; and nature, she left them alone, having returned to her repose, having returned to her immobility, having descended again into indifference. In the end the men from the city had come, had ascended up onto the glacier, and they had walked over its whole length, in order to be certain that no new crevasse had shown up, behind the point of rupture, more or less future risks, if not the imminence of a new danger. But everything had seemed to be properly in its place on the beautiful linen sheet, smooth and white, unbroken, that covered again the flat fields of ice that lay behind the crest.

The clouds of dust having now lifted little by little above the walls, the bottoms of Derborence had become visible again from everywhere about. The opacity of the air had given place at last to a perfect clarity. All those who had pushed up that far had been able to verify, just by raising their heads, at the extreme frontier of the heavens, the point from which the landslide had broken free. It was a place where formerly the wall had made a projection and overhung under its burden of ice, all bristling with seracs: one saw that this which had stood out was now a hollow, that this which had been convex had become concave. The projection of rock had been replaced by a vast couloir, very steep, the contents of which had been turned out in one stroke on the pasturage, making it cease to be a pasturage, on those who lived there, who had ceased to live there, on those who had life and who had been deprived of life. Now there was nothing anywhere but the immobility and the tranquility of death, the only thing that still made any movement being up there in the couloir a sort of muddy mass, a kind of river of sand, earth, and water, that continued to descend; but, well contained in its banks and channelled by them, it came to end by spreading out noiselessly on the cone of debris at the bottom of the descent. It is silent, it hardly moves, a progress so imperceptible that you must watch for a long time to see that it's progressing.

They had taken up a collection in the country, which had permitted them to indemnify in part those who had right by the loss of their livestock. To replace what they had lost at Derborence, moreover, they'd assigned them some new parts of the commune's pasturage elsewhere.

For the rest, there was only a little correction to make on the map, only an annotation to enter on the pages of the survey. It will be necessary also to examine if it won't possibly be a good occasion to draw the map anew, because it is presently colored in green.

And green signifies grass, and grass signifies life.

* * *

Nothing more up there but old Plan with his flock of sheep, and the flock wandered in the ravines like the shadow of a cloud.

It's obliged to keep moving all the time. Nothing grows, in fact, in these solitudes, but a little thin grass through the crannies in the rocks, as in a paved court between the paving stones; the flock had to beg from blade of grass to blade of grass. So it advances, and it grazes as it advances. From morning to evening it is moving. It's square, it's pointed, it's in the form of a triangle, in the form of a rectangle, and, sometimes on the slopes, sometimes in the bottom of the combe, it resembles the shadow of a cloud that the wind is continually modifying above you. It advances, it is bent round in passing over a knob, it is bent round in the other direction in plunging down into a hollow. It becomes convex, it becomes concave; it makes the sound of rain with its hooves. It makes with its teeth a sound as when the waves, in gentle weather, return in little blows to knock the pebbles upon the beach.

He stood planted in the earth along the hillside like an old larch tree touched by winter.

Planted there, bolt upright, immobile in his overcoat, nodding up there in his overcoat, his beard white under his old hat with its frayed brim:

"D... D... I...."

He laughed.

"Nobody left.... Nobody left? Ah! you think so...."

He said:

"The surveyors have gone, they have done well.... But that is not a reason, just because they have gone...."

He resumed:

"D... I... DIA... B...."

At that moment, a stone, detaching itself above from the flow of mud, came down to batter itself on the rocks, making a noise like a laugh.

"I see," he said, "you understand me, you do."

Then the great wall begins everywhere to laugh because of the echoes sent right and left, which soon made only a single clamor; the whole mountain bursts out laughing, him, he answers the mountain:

"I see very well, I don't need to go on, you know your name...."

It falls silent little by little. It becomes little by little more quiet, he allows it to quieten down:

"You, you know what happens, you are up on things.... Me, I know; and you, you know," he said to the mountain. "You, you do things by just letting them happen. But he who puts you up to it, you know him well, no? D... I... A... B... And you hear them as I do, at night, the poor ones, those he holds prisoners there. At night, when I'm in my stone hut and you, you are up there: that's what they say, no? Now they lament and they despair, having found no

rest. Having a bodily form, but nothing within, and they are empty shells; only they make noises at night, and one sees them, isn't that true?..."

The mountain begins to laugh, still again.

Then also, that head stuck out; but one couldn't see it because of the projecting rocks that surrounded it, hiding it completely.

Chapter 2

He sticks out his head.

It was nearly two months after the landslide.

It would have been necessary, in order to see him, to have the eye and the wings of the eagle that turns in circles in the heights of the air, from which he directs his piercing and meticulous gaze upon us, distinguishing immediately that which lives from that which does not, that which moves from that which does not, that which is animated from that which is not; being above things with its little grey eye for which distance is nothing, but the least movement, the least change in the disposition of objects or beings, as when the hare gambols about, as when the baby marmot leaves its hole....

Him, nobody saw him, because he was too little, too lost in the middle of this great desert of rocks.

Only the eagle would have seen him, because his head moved, and the rocks all about it did not move. When the eagle turns slowly in a circle on his great motionless wings, only inclining them more or less according to the direction of the wind and the pressure of the air, as barks do with their sails; then it turns and turns again, it goes, it comes back, dominating from on high the immense hollow where the blocks of stone lie now like scattered gravel.

That's where this head showed itself. There, in the full sun which, more than two hours earlier, had risen above the arête; in a little stain of shadow like a drop of ink fallen on a grey blotter.

You could have seen it from far above, but it is only from far above that you could have seen it, when he stuck out his head and his head was at first all that showed.

You would have to be able to say to the eagle: "Lower your flight a little, come down in order to see better. Leave these great heights where you now remain, quickly, and fall."

But then, suspending its fall, it would hesitate, for man is not its prey, and it is afraid of man. Even a poor man who sticks out from beneath the ground, a poor man who appeared in the middle of an empty space that the blocks leave between them in their hazardous superposition--stuck out of the shadow, stuck out of the depths, stuck out of the darkness; who strives towards the light.

He makes a brighter patch in the semi-obscurity that surrounds him; he is white of skin with white shoulders; he sticks out his head, he raises his head.

But he can see nothing from where he is.

Nothing but the blue of the sky, when he looks above him; a sky smooth and flat, cut in a circle, stretched taut, like the paper cover on a pot of jam.

He must raise himself a little more on his hands and knees on the inside of the fault, which runs wider from bottom to top; you can't see him completely, because he's in the shadow; then his head comes to the edge of the sunlight.

The sun strikes him on the head.

He stops again.

You can see that he has long hair, it falls to the nape of his neck.

You can see his two hands, first he spreads them before his eyes, throwing them from one to the other side of his head, over his ears, where they stick like wet linen.

His eyelids fluttering, he closes his eyes, he reopens them, he recloses them.

He sits with his head in the sun to which he is no longer accustomed, and he must reaccustom himself to it; for it's beautiful, but it does harm, and it is good, but it burns you.

It's like when you give little infants too much wine; the bloods sings to him in his ears; he doesn't know anymore if the buzzing is inside or outside, having lost the habit of hearing, lost the habit of seeing, lost the good habit of telling colors, lost his taste, lost the sense of smell, lost the faculty of recognizing shapes and judging distances.

He closes his eyes, he reopens his eyes; he puts his fingers in his ears, he shakes his head like a dog coming out of the water. Then, little by little, the sweetness of life began all the same to make itself felt again all about him, speaking to him very softly with its sun, its colors, all its good things, and it was like he had warm clothing all over his body.

He breathes deeply as if taking a drink.

The air enters, it has a taste and an aroma, it descends through his body, it flows to his stomach, it circulates in his belly, restores his strength; then he raises himself again a little between two big blocks of stone half-covered with debris until he has reached the edges, from which the view extends out on all sides.

There, he stretched out on a slab of rock.

His body entirely surrounded by the sun now, entirely under its influence: ah! he has enough room, finally, he has even more room than he needs.

He stretches out his legs and yawns. He raises his arms above his head; he extends them out on each side of his body. He touches nothing. He touches only the air that is soft, that is elastic, that gives way immediately, then comes back.

Ah! that's good; he says to himself: "Ah! it's good!"; he yawns. He scratches his head, his neck, his back, his thighs; he is seen, he is seen entirely, he has the color of turnips; you can see that he has now only the remnants of shoes from which his toes are sticking out. One of the legs of his trousers stops at the knee; the other is split up the side. He feels good, he yawns yet again, he stretches out on his other elbow. He has a kind of jacket torn in the back up to his shoulders; and, wide open in the front, it exposes his chest, which is hollow, and he has a tough beard on his chin.

He is entirely, from the bottom of his feet to the top of his head, of one and the same color, which is changing rapidly now, becoming more and more clear: the leather, the material, the cloth, his own skin, his own hair, all of it has been repainted in a kind of grey becoming white.

And you see that he has found in his pocket an old crust of black bread that he must have slipped there on purpose; then, holding the crust in two hands before him, he makes a noise with his teeth that you can hear.

The flies become more and more numerous; the butterflies also, the little white butterflies, and some others delicately grey and blue, rising and descending, softly balancing in the air like a piece of torn paper. He eats greedily, swallowing with his saliva, in a little black cloud of flies that turns about him.

Now, he looks, he sees. Objects place themselves for him one before another; objects once again have distances between them. The space organizes itself round him in height and depth. The sun aids him. The sun wanted to hinder him, it did not succeed. Man forces the sun to aid him; if you don't want to, you see, I force you; and that, it's a stone, that is a stone. He sees the shattered rocks, the edges of which are sparkling in the light: blue with white

veins, violet like the periwinkle, brown like the chestnut, other colors like clover blossoms or like soot; ah! stones, as many as one wants, as he sees, and, superposed or juxtaposed, they seem unreal; but there is the sun above, and the sun is something that exists.

It exists; me, I exist, he says to himself; but then where am I?

He sees that he's in the middle of a great desert of rocks; he searches as hard as he can to put it in order in his head.

And from the other side of a long night (but have I stayed in the same place or have I changed my abode, moving thus under the ground, and perhaps I've passed under the whole mountain, for how long has it been?), from the other side of a long night, he finds again the same sun, but he sees that when the same sun shone then, it was a beautiful field of green grass, all a rich pasture where the cows were scattered about, where the men carried the manure, spreading it over the fields. Everything was alive, the bells tinkled on the necks of the animals, the men called back and forth between them -- silence! He looks: no more men, no more animals, no more grass, no more chalets; he sees the rocks and then more rocks, and then more rocks. He sees everywhere an enormous field of rocks that descends in a gentle slope to the other mountains, those that stand on the south side, and he recognizes them, while something shines at their feet and at first he doesn't recognize what it is; it's water, it is two little lakes.

They weren't there before; where am I? He scratches his head again.

With each movement he makes, the flies that cover him fly off with a noise like a plucked violin cord -- he's at Derborence all the same: that's what he tells himself. I'm there, I can see very well that I'm there. For the bottoms are changed, but the high places that rise up all about are not changed. Down here everything is different, up there everything remains the same. He names the summits one by one, for the names also come back to his memory: Cheville up there, and here is the point of Peigne, down there is the gorge, there is Zamperon, there on the left is the Porteur-de-Bois; then, turning a little, he twists his head up behind -- then he begins to laugh.

Because now he understands.

He turns all the way about towards the north: it is something like fifteen hundred meters above you, under Saint-Martin; there's the edge of the glacier; he sees the place where it has broken off, and the break shines still fresh.

He understands, he says to himself: "I see."

He shakes his head: "There it is, I understand, the mountain has fallen."

It has fallen on us from above, I remember the noise there was and the roof knocked flat on one of its sides against the ground.

You see very well the route it has followed, my God! Ah! it's come down nicely, and from high up; you can see the route from where it has come, straight down and exactly upon us, as if it had aimed right at us; and not a house, of course -- casting his eyes then over the immensity of debris, because he himself is almost in the middle -- not a trace of grass, not a trace of animals either, nor any trace of men.

He says to himself: "Where are they?" He says to himself: "They must have escaped."

He says to himself: "Me, I was caught."

He says to himself: "But there, I am uncaught, and it took some time, but I am uncaught all the same."

Then he is happy, he sees only one thing: that he is alive. He has eyes that serve him to see, a mouth that breathes, a body (and he touches it) to go as he wants, where he wants, as much as he wants.

He sees that he has a voice also that comes back to him, because the words he is thinking now are forming themselves on his tongue; a voice that goes faster than he does and which runs ahead of him to announce him as a dog would.

He elaborates in his throat a sound that he pushes out and which is still harsh and inarticulate; but he hears, he hears himself; he proves to himself that he exists, pushing out thus a first cry, which is sent back to him by the echo:

"Oh!"

Someone answers: "Oh!"

And then, he said:

"It's me."

"It's you?"

"Yes, it's me, Antoine Pont."

He says his name, he repeats it, he said:

"The mountain has come down."

He says:

"The mountain has come down on me, do you understand, but I have come out of the mountain."

He laughs aloud. Something laughs.

He says:

"Ah! it amuses you?... It amuses me, too. Where are you?"

He stands up.

It was now a little before ten o'clock, for the sun was already rather high in the sky. It shows itself only rather late here, however, above the arête to the east, having first to make a long voyage behind it and to approach by patient steps, from slope to slope, to the summit.

The sun shone white and round a good distance above the comb of rocks that shut off the view to the eastern side; it had become hot and even burning.

Antoine looks again to the right and left: then turning himself towards the opening of the gorge, he heads in that direction over the blocks of stone.

They were more or less big and very unequally distributed, often being found wedged between two other blocks already in place. Some of them stood completely upright, dominating the herd of other rocks like a herdsman his sheep. There were some that were angular and pointed; there were some that were round, some that were slender, all mixed with gravel and sand; some of them made in places a sort of continuous plank, while others left holes or large crevices between them.

He set off on his route cautiously, but he laughed with pleasure. Sometimes he let himself slide on his rear end, sometimes, on account of his torn shoes, he progressed on foot only after having chosen carefully the place he was going to step.

It wasn't very far to the bottom of the landslide and to the level of one of the little lakes that had been formed behind the dam; the water now escaped at the end, making a cascade, then disappeared immediately between the blocks of stone.

He looks at the water, he wonders at it, because it makes a hole where in reflection the mountain returned carrying on its summit, that is to say in its depths, a scrap of blue sky like a bit of cloth left behind on washing day.

He laughs, he laughs aloud; he says: "And then what? Ah!" he says to himself, "there is no one.... Hola! Hohé!"

He gives the cry of the mountains between his hands, held as a megaphone about his mouth: "Hohé!..." but there was only a dull noise that rose vaguely, far behind him, in the rocks.

"Hey," he said, "what? Are you so far away now!... Hey! listen, it's me.... Do you hear me? Antoine Pont! Hohé! Antoine...."

Nothing.

He began to laugh:

"They're not waiting for me anymore."

He cries out again in a loud voice:

"Yes, of course, it's me.... The mountain came down on me, but I got myself out all the same. Don't you believe me?"

Nothing.

"Good," he cries; "all right then! I'm coming."

Then he sets off among the largest of the blocks, those that have rolled the farthest; the grass continues to grow up in the gaps between them. It grows there beautifully green, serving as a paving for these alleys. For they really are alleys. They're tortuous, they intersect; some of them end in an impasse, others are half-obstructed in the middle; you quickly loses your orientation in the diversity and confusion of passages.

It took time to find his way there, but his good humour served him well.

He appears suddenly at the place where the path began again, the impression of the mules' shoes and the marks of hobnailed boots remained printed in the mud; the old path of the men, ah! he recognized it.

It's at the bank of the torrent, which has found its old bed.

Ah! he knows where he is now. The same water, the same quantity of water, its same color, the same skipping among the same rocks.

He sees the old path, the path of former times marked out before him; he has only to follow it. There it is! And nothing impedes his progress anymore, as the first barberry bushes and the first pine trees appear, ornamenting there the edge of the path, and here, to the right and left, the steep sides of the mountain. He's there! He begins to sing, he raises his arms, he speaks aloud all by himself. In less than a quarter of an hour he will be at Zamperon.

A little girl who was grazing a white goat near the path turned round, let go of its cord, then ran away crying out.

He laughed louder than ever.

"What's the matter with her?... Hey! Little one...."

She disappeared round a turn of the path.

The goat too ran off, bounding up from tier to tier of the slope, trailing its cord behind it.

"You too!... Eh! what's wrong with you? Eh! the little thing," he said.

But meanwhile, round the bend, three or four chalets appeared; in one of them the door is open and from the chimney, with its cover raised, rises in the air above it a fine plume of white smoke like the tassel on a reed.

Someone is making a fire with wet wood.

A woman comes to the doorstep; the cries of the little girl begin again to be heard. The woman turns towards him.

She disappears immediately into the interior of the house.

There, she reappears already, holding in her arms the little one whose head she has covered with a corner of her apron; she is followed by a boy of fourteen or fifteen years. And the boy stops a moment motionless before the door, while the woman runs off; then he too runs off.

* * *

But, him, he said:

"Good morning to all who are here, and good morning to all who are not here."

He entered into the great groundfloor chamber where it is dark, and the fire on the hearth is dark because it has been covered.

"This is the Donneloye's house here?" he said.... "Ah!" he said, "is there no one here?"

There is no one, in fact. But what is there for him to do? He sees that there is something good to eat hanging from a peg in the ceiling. There is butter and fresh bread on a shelf. He breaks the loaf over his knee, he scoops up the butter with his finger. There is milk in a pot. So what if they've run away? He unhooks the piece of viande séchée which is narrow and long, not much thicker than a sausage and with a hole in the end through which a string has been passed; he bites into it. He drinks, he eats; he eats and he drinks pell-mell. He makes a great noise with his jaws without seeing anything, nor hearing anything, closed off to everything except to the good taste and to the warmth that descends through his whole body. He makes a noise with his mouth, he makes a noise with his stomach: after so many days and days where he has been with dry bread and water! How many days was it? he wonders. Like being in prison, only much worse, because in prison there's light to see by, or nearly enough....

He doesn't move. He is content. He remains sitting on the bench, he remains leaning on the table. Ah! good. Then he says to himself: "And now then...." He has forgotten where he is; he's forgotten where he's coming from.

Ah! he says, well, it's the mountain. The mountain? Yes, you remember. Ah! yes, then you must go. Ah! he says: "It's true, the mountain has fallen."

Suddenly he was afraid because it is still very near.

If it should fall on you again, if it should begin again to fall.

"There's no one here?... Well then, thank you."

The fire smokes white behind him on the hearth, having been covered over with wet pine needles.

Thank you.

His head is spinning. He sees the path before him. He sees from whence he has come, and it's to the right. So I must take the left.

And the birds begin to be numerous and become more and more so, while there seem to be two torrents, one which flows below him, the other of birds above his head.

There are woodpeckers, there are jays, there are woodpigeons, there are little hedge-birds, more and more numerous, more and more clamorous: "Yes," he said, "it's me; but you shut up!"

Then as his fatigue came over him, he let himself fall to the side of the slope on the moss.

Chapter 3

That evening Thérèse had ascended as far as a little garden her mother owned a little above the village, not far from the path that leads to Derborence.

For despite everything she had continued to live, and the little one also lived inside her. She continued to live; she was up, she went, she came, she had even begun to work again.

Now there are eight widows and thirty-five orphans in the village, but they continue to live, them too; that's the way it is. The tree that you chop in the middle grows over the scar. The cherry tree that is wounded produces a white gum to cover over the wound.

She was only a little drawn and thin, and, dressed all in black, a little pale under her tan.

She bent down, she stood up again; when she leant forward, she felt her baby press up against her chest. "My God!" she thought, "luckily he is there, him, and he, at least, hasn't left me; him, he has stayed faithful to me."

The infant kept her company, and she consoled herself with him in her solitude; but suddenly the thought came to her that he was not going to have a father. "What's going to become of us?"

She tired quickly; a few strokes with the hoe, though she was strong, sufficed to put her out of breath. It will be only me to bring him up, me who am alone, me who am a woman....

Night began to fall. You could see that it was going to come earlier than usual, because the weather was stormy.

Fatigue had obliged Thérèse to stand up, and, her hands on the shaft of her hoe, she saw across from her, above the great mountains, that the sky was becoming black, just where the sun had gone down a moment before, extinguishing its fine colors, as when you thrust a flaming torch into the sand.

Then a man passes below her on the path, and a woman passes, hurrying to get home; then there is no one, while the air darkens more and more about Thérèse, as when you dissolve some dyes in water.

The bushes across the slope seemed to melt down like butter on the fire.

It was time to return, her too, but she hadn't the spirit. She hadn't enough to make up her mind about anything, not even enough to move, remaining there, half-leaning over, without a movement, under the black sky. And it was then that she thought she saw something, something pale that had moved, a little in front of her, behind the bushes.

Only, in her condition, it often happens that you think you see things that are only in your head. There is a little disorder in your ideas. You have longings, you have a taste for things that is false, you can't always distinguish anymore between what is real and what you invent for yourself.

She looks again, she looks more closely.

It was something white that moved again behind the bushes, about fifty meters in front of her.

Who knows where it had come from? It seemed suspended in the air, because the branches were hiding the lower part. She tried to reason with herself; she said: "What is it?" She said: "It's one of the neighbors"; but the neighbors wear hobnailed boots that make

noise; the shape over there was perfectly silent. It slips sideways, that's all; it moves, then is motionless. It was like the top of one of those scarecrows made of four branches and an old shirt that they put in the garden to scare away the sparrows. Only this white thing continued to stir, making from time to time a movement upward. And there, little by little wonder gives place in Thérèse to disquiet and disquiet to fear, because at the same time that she watched, it seemed to sense that she was watching; that was the feeling she had, and it grew stronger and stronger; she let go of the handle of her hoe, which fell among the clods. She didn't call out, having no more voice in her mouth. Her heart made a sound like someone knocking on a door with his finger, and the door doesn't open, so he knocks still louder. And she stays like that until the moment when a rasping voice came, but was it only one voice?

"Hey!... Hey!..."

A kind of cough, from which at last something like words came out; and it seemed to her that someone was saying: "Is it you, Thérèse?" But already she could hear nothing more, because she had taken off running.

Lightning begins to flash. She was illuminated, she runs. She runs still, she is illuminated. The path is like a white thread in grass which becomes very green; then there is no more grass, no more path.

She continues to run; someone was saying to her:

"My God, what's the matter?"

She sees that she has mounted the stairs; suddenly the fire glows in front of her on the kitchen hearth.

"What is it now, Thérèse?"

She dropped onto the bench without answering, holding her hands together between her clasped knees.

You can hear from far off the rolling of thunder.

"And your basket, and your hoe?"

The lightning continued; there was a bright window across from her in the kitchen wall, then it was gone.

A blazing white window that appears, disappears, appears again; she, she is illuminated, then is not, then is once again.

"Oh!"

You can see her, she is holding her head forward, then you see her no more.

"Oh! he'll get wet," she said all of a sudden.

She said:

"If it's him...."

She said:

"It is him and it's not him... Oh!" she said, "they can't really get wet.... The rain passes through them, the poor things, they don't feel the rain...."

Then you can see Philomène raise her arms and let them fall, for she is illuminated, she too.

The whole kitchen is illuminated, the whole kitchen is in the dark; the fire has time to become red before it disappears again.

"What are you talking about?"

"Oh! yes," says she, "you know very well...."

She didn't seem to notice the storm, neither even to hear it, though it had burst open now in a great downpour that beat upon the roof like dancers' feet on the boards of a dance floor.

"Yes, that's what they say...."

Because she raised her voice as the rain redoubled its force:

"Who?"

"The people of Zamperon, what they say of Plan, the shepherd...."

Philomène shrugs her shoulders.

"Oh! he knows things, Plan," said Thérèse, "and then, he is very old. Well, he says that he hears them at night. Because they are alive and they are not alive; they are on the earth and they are not of the earth."

"Come now," says Philomène, "and all the masses we have had said.... One every Sunday for your poor husband and for Seraphin...."

"Oh!" said Thérèse, "maybe that's not enough, because they haven't been buried.... Maybe they must make their purgatory, in the same place where they died, since they died without sacraments. So they come here to complain to us, to complain to me...."

She was speaking calmly; the storm was moving away already, having passed behind the mountain.

The great rain had ceased, giving way to a fine little rain; the fire had become red again, the lamp once again began to give light:

"They come out because they need us.... Maybe they see us and recognize us, though they themselves are only a little air.... Maybe there is one who misses me...."

"What are you saying?"

"Oh!" says she, "I don't know, only I was afraid because he doesn't weigh anything anymore."

The lightning had become less frequent, it had changed color. It's going away, does everything go away? And the storm passes, but everything passes. He had a body and he has one no more.

"Listen," says Philomène, "suppose I went to find Maurice Nendaz?"

You could see that she was beginning, she too, to be afraid.

"We are only two women here," she says. "He will give us his advice."

She blows her nose. She goes to find her cape and covers her head and shoulders.

Thérèse hasn't said anything.

And Philomène goes out; she, she remains leaning, her arms on her knees. You can hear the sound of the little rain that comes fine and soft on the roof like many birds' feet.

You hear nothing more. You hear the sound of a walking-stick. You hear that someone is mounting the stairs with an uneven step.

She didn't move.

Then a man's voice said to her:

"Come now, Thérèse...."

"Oh!" she said, her head between her hands, shaking her head slowly, "nonetheless I saw...."

"What did you see?"

"Him."

Maurice Nendaz said:

"Where was that?"

"I was in the garden, it was white, it didn't weigh anything. You know very well what they say, you know very well what Plan says. What do you think, Maurice Nendaz? What, suppose they do come back after all! And they don't touch the ground, because they have no more weight. They make no sound at all, it is like smoke, it's like a little cloud that moves about as it wants...."

"Listen," says Maurice Nendaz, "I'll have to go and see. You say it was...."

"Yes," says she, "just near the path...."

"Listen," says Maurice Nendaz, "you mustn't torment yourself.... It may just be your condition, and that's all. All you have to do is shut up the house well.... And me, listen, well, I'm going to go and see. And if I see something, well, I'll come back and tell you... if I see nothing, I won't return."

He said:

"All right?"

"Oh! of course," said Philomène. "That way, we will be calm...."

She, she hadn't answered, she hadn't changed position.

You could hear the sound of the walking-stick as it went away into the night....

Chapter 4

He awakened toward the end of the afternoon. He had slept five hours at a stretch.

He doesn't know where he is anymore. It's Antoine.

He looks about him, he sees that evening is coming on, but why he is there, all alone, and why he's in the bottom of the gorge, he can't recall anymore.

He was sitting in the moss; he began to feel cold, because the sun had left him in its course over the mountains, which were now between himself and the sun; he touches himself again over his whole body, applying his hands to his legs, to his chest, wondering: "Who is it?" and then he says to himself: "It's me."

He's happy. He stands up.

He doesn't know very well anymore where he's going; neither does he know very well where he's coming from, on account of a great disorder in his head; but the birds have come back, and they are coming in still greater numbers, showing him the right direction.

Besides, there is the stream that you can see when you lean over.

Antoine goes along where the stream flows, along where the birds tell him to go, which are growing in numbers ceaselessly. And no longer only the great sad birds of the high mountains that soar solitary above the precipices, like the eagle; no longer only the kite that watches from on high for its prey cowering among the rocks; no longer only the choucas that one sees turning and fluttering, black with yellow beaks, around a fissure where they have their nests in the sides of the walls.

Smaller birds, less wild, the birds you see when you descend; when you leave the rocks for the pastures, the pastures for the forest: the scolding jays, the pigeons that coo softly, and then all the hedge birds, green, grey, brown, spotted with yellow, red, blue; those that have a collar; those that have a little colored feather at the tail, in addition to the black and white magpies; and they rose in ever greater numbers before him, showing him the path.

Antoine was delighted to see them and they were delighted to see him, though timorously, giving out little startled cries, the blackbird, or interrupting the song they had begun; and him: "Stop! wait for me, don't run off! Where are you going?", saluting them with a laugh, because it's lower ground that they are announcing, the good warmth, the bread and wine in abundance, a house, a real bed: "Hello!... Hey! stop there. Don't be afraid, it's me...."

He sweeps aside his hair that prevents him from seeing; the memory partly comes back to him all of a sudden. "Ah! it's true, ah! it's me." He repeated it: "The mountain has fallen, but I've saved myself all the same."

Then he sets off running, but he must soon stop again, because the shreds of the shoes he had on had hardened again under the effect of the dryness, and injure him; he sits down, he sees that he has bloody feet; they are grey like the earth with brown stains. He pulls off what's left of his shoes and throws them into the gorge.

In this place the gorge is vertical to a height of at least two hundred meters; the path, cut into the rock, is suspended on one of its sides.

Now he can walk more easily, but he must be careful on account of the pointed and sharp stones; the birds continue to fly off before him, because the bushes are beginning again, more and more numerous, as he descends.

"And then it's true, I have a wife."

He says to himself: “Only is she waiting for me?...”

He shook his head as he walked.

“And the others?” he said.

He walked along shaking his head.

“How long has it been since....?”

That he doesn’t know, nor the other things either. He sees that he doesn’t know anything. He sees only that he is a man named Antoine Pont, who had been captive under the landslide, who has got out of it; then....

Then what?

Then he descends.

He reasons to himself. He descends where? He descends home. Home, that is to say, in a house, and in this house there is a wife.

In the house where I’m going, there is my wife. What’s her name?

He sees that he must learn it again and learn the entire world again, the sky, the trees, the birds: “But, wait,” says he, “here’s one I recognize.... It’s easy, it moves its tail. Little one!”

Seeing a wagtail in somber dress at the end of a branch, and which in fact moves its tail in little shakes; but the birds are beginning to go to bed, because the night is coming on and the gorge opens out still more onto the sky, which is becoming black.

Then he continues on his way as fast as he can: “Ah! it’s you,” he said to the trees, “ah! you’re coming. Ah! there you are,” he said to the birds and to the trees; “and, me, it’s me. Me, it’s Antoine. The mountain fell down on me.”

And thus he progresses still to the place where the path leaves the gorge, discovering to your eyes the great valley where the Rhône is.

He sees the Rhône, he says: “The mountain has fallen.”

To whom is he speaking? To the Rhône. For the Rhône is there and he sees it. It was still light enough for one to see it marked in white and twisting tortuously like a serpent among the rocks, under the mountains that are burdened with clouds. You could still see well enough for him to have recognized it; he said: “That’s it, so now I take a left.”

High up on the slope, he turned parallel to the river’s course, heading upstream.

It was still light enough for him to distinguish the shapes of the trees, the apple trees that are low and round, the pear trees that are pointed, the apple trees like balls, the pear trees longer and higher... then it is to the left, it’s no longer very far; while casting his looks over the slope he perceives the village, with its low roofs, stony, packed together, which make in a hollow of the slope a place that looks like a quarry (for quarrying is the work of hollowing the earth out deeply in order to put above that which was below).

He runs, he stops; he leaves the path.

It feels strong and warm, it feels like the earth has been cured under the sun, the dry grass, the thyme and the mint, because he walks on it, and it’s soft under his feet; the warm stone (on this side where he is standing), the grain about to ripen, the promise of grapes.

He left the path, he made his way across the bushes and the pines; it was then that he saw her or thought he saw her, all in black before him, a woman. And this is the garden, isn’t it? Of course! our garden. She bends down, she stands up again, she is motionless.

Is it her or not? But yes, it’s her.

He wanted to call out, but he is astonished at the sound his voice makes, so harsh, difficult to push out, and there are like prickles in it that scratch in his throat in passing, so that the words he wanted to pronounce remain unsaid.

He says:

"Hey! Hey!"

That's all.

He cries:

"Hey! Wife."

Suddenly there is nothing more to be seen.

* * *

I saw nothing," said Maurice Nendaz, "nothing at all."

It was the next morning.

"Oh!" he said, "I came last night already, because the poor woman claimed that she had seen it."

He had risen early.

He was with Rebord, and with his walking-stick. He had been to search out Rebord. Rebord had descended his wooden stairs.

A fine rain had been falling all night and had only just ceased, the sky being at this hour, above you, like a somber grey stone slab solidly fixed halfway up the mountains.

They raised their heads, the two men, in vain. Nendaz said: "We must go up still a little farther; she swears it was on the other side of the garden that it appeared."

"Oh!" says Rebord, "with the rain we had last night!"

He didn't seem to have much desire to push on farther; he was a stout man.

Nendaz was small and thin, Nendaz was leaning over his stick.

And Rebord said: "It's only a silly tale."

And Nendaz said: "Of course, but you understand, she is a woman. I promised her that I would go and see."

Meanwhile the lights came on behind them in the windows, one here, another further off, another again, making red points in the confused crowd of houses, like the embers of cigars. And you could see as well that, at the far eastern end of the valley, someone introduced the end of a crowbar between the arête of the mountains and the sky.

Someone pushed down on the crowbar; the stone slab of fog raised a little from the mountain.

Someone pushes down, it raises a bit; it falls again; the sky raises again; then a welcome light slipped through the chink, a welcome light streams down upon us.

It's as if someone were raising the slab of a tomb. Life returns. Life touches the dead, and they start at its touch. A horizontal flash, as when an arm thrusts out, comes and says: "Rise up!" The roofs of the village are seen with their chimneys, some of which are smoking in the paleness--while you have one bright cheek and one still in shadow.

Nendaz had one bright cheek, Rebord had one bright cheek.

"Get up," it said, "come out of your sleep, come out of death...."

Indeed, they came out of death, they came out of death everywhere, and you could hear all kinds of sounds, as you could see all kinds of signs. The lights had become more numerous at the same time that they paled. Someone coughs, someone blows his nose, someone calls, a door opens.

And once again over there, in the east, someone pushed down on the end of the crowbar; then the slab of fog was lifted entirely from the mountain, splitting open in the middle, so that the light now comes on you, not only from the side but from above, and you can see one another, you can see everything, reconstructed, brought back to life again.

"Well," said Rebord, "do you see anything?"

"Well," said Nendaz, "well, no, I see nothing."

From where they were, they could see nonetheless the whole side, where the path ascended that leads to Derborence. There were the gardens before them, in a semi-circle, two or three of them; then the slope rose more steeply and rose up to the sky, having regained its colors, grey, reddish brown, blackish, with bands of green, on account of the rock, the pines, the bushes.

"So?..." said Rebord.

"So what?" said Nendaz.

"We should go home now," said Rebord....

He still didn't seem very reassured, and, as Nendaz didn't move, continuing to cast the brightness of his gaze in all directions:

"It's the fault of that old man.... Yes, old Plan, the shepherd.... He has turned the heads of the people of Zamperon. As if we hadn't done all we could. All the holy offices, all the masses.... It's the least they could do to remain still, what do you think?"

Nendaz shakes his head; that's all.

Just in front of them there was a little hayloft that had been built at the edge of the meadow and the woods. It belonged to a man named Dionis Udry, whom they could see at that moment leaving his house and setting off in their direction. It's a hundred meters or so at the most. They see Dionis open the door of the hayloft; it's not even locked. He pulls it toward him; but then, instead of going in, they see him take a step backward, then he leans his head to the side, sticking it into the opening of the door.

All of a sudden he turns towards Nendaz, whom he must have seen as he passed; he raises his arm, he makes a sign for Nendaz to come.

Nendaz put forward a leg and at the same time put forward his walking-stick.

"You're going?" said Rebord.

"Of course I'm going."

Nendaz goes, and Rebord hesitates, then decides to follow him, but at a distance, two meters behind him, then three meters, while Dionis hasn't moved. And, as Nendaz approached, Dionis said:

"Come see this.... Someone has been lying here, last night, come quick and see.... I haven't touched anything."

Nendaz arrives, he looks through the opening of the door as well. The loft is three quarters full of hay, which makes a slope from the door to the roof on the opposite side. And on this slope, in the swelling, elsewhere all bristly and crisscrossed by straws in all directions, there

is a smooth place, a place where the hay is like felt, a place like clay in which a body has been molded.

"Well?" said Dionis, "what is it?"

Nendaz scratches behind his ear.

"Don't know."

"But it is someone?"

"Yes."

"Who's been there, then?"

Suddenly, then, one hears Rebord:

"My goodness, me, you never know.... Me, I'm going to go get my rifle."

It is he who raised the alarm in the village, because as he passed he said to people:

"Be careful, there's a thief around."

He doesn't want to hear anything, he ascends his wooden stairs; he reappears with an old stone-rifle, a powder-flask, a bag of balls.

The neighbors could see him as he loaded his weapon, pouring in the powder, tamping it, pushing the rod down the barrel, sitting on one of the steps of his stairs, as his wife leans towards him from above:

"Don't go.... Rebord, stay here; Rebord, you hear me? Don't go!...."

Some of the neighbors are there, and they watch him without understanding.

It came on full day; it even seemed that it was going to be fair. The sky was full of cracks like dry earth; at the same time, it was rising, slipping upward along the slope of the mountains. You could see a long way before you and already far above you in the clear and clean air like a freshly washed pane of glass, where what was left of last night's rain, in round drops on the leaves of the trees, threw a thousand little sparkles in all colors. A cock crows again, opening its beak wide. And him then, it is him who appeared above as if the crowing of the cock had brought him out; and Nendaz saw him first, then Dionis, but they don't know what they are seeing.

It is three or four hundred meters from them, it is white. It came out from behind a bush, in the direction of Thérèse's garden: it appeared, it disappeared, it reappeared. It was as if it were trying to hide itself, and at the same time it were trying to see; the white spot disappears once again.

Then there it is again, nearer them.

Then Dionis in his turn draws back, as if, in proportion as it came down towards them, he felt less safe; Dionis draws back, Nendaz draws back -- the sun shines on the mountain, then the sun too hides itself; and you see that the whole village is there now, reaching the hedge at the limit of the houses; all the people of the village are there, who look, who don't see anything, who see something or who thought they saw something, while Nendaz and Dionis have rejoined them.

"Eh! You see it?"

"No."

"There."

"No."

"It's not there anymore."

Another voice:

"Yes.... Lower down now... behind the burned pine tree."

"Nevertheless," said Dionis, "someone lay in my hayloft last night...."

Then there is a woman's cry.

"Oh! I know very well, I know very well, me; it's...."

They ask the woman:

"Who is it?"

"It's the dead.... They're coming back, you can't stop them."

Someone leads her away.

But that's how the idea circulates rapidly from head to head, and the idea enters into the heads, and the fear enters into the heads; because if it is the dead, in fact, what can be done to stop them from approaching and entering our houses next, those who care nothing for doors nor for locks?

One man seizes a pitchfork, another takes up a stick, still another goes to get his flail--being only a few, these men, because of those who were killed and of those who are up in the mountain huts. It is a village of summer, that is to say, lots of women and children and a few old men.

You can see nothing more for a moment; suddenly, you perceive that the white thing is coming right down towards you, having been hidden for an instant because it had crossed through a woods.

Several of the women ran off, several of the women made it to the bottom of their stairs or the openings of their doors, in order to get easily into shelter in case of need.

And then one hears a rifle shot.

It's Rebord, firing into the air.

The white thing disappeared.

They pounced on Rebord, they said to him:

"Come on, you are crazy! Do we even know who it is or what it is? You'll make a disaster."

He shook his head: "It was only in the air."

He said:

"It's my business."

He was already reloading his weapon, no matter what they could say to stop him, and, raising his head:

"You see, it's gone...."

Pointing to the slope before him:

"There's nothing there now, there's no one there anymore."

Maurice Nendaz (who was a man of sense) then made a sign to Justin. He took him a little apart. He said something to him in a low voice.

Justin took off running towards the village of Premier, where the parish church is.

While all the others gestured to one another, while the women led away the children who had been frightened by the shot, while they pointed as well to the slope where nothing more was moving, where there was no longer any living person: only is living the right

word? is living what we should say? What is it made of, do we know? Is it a being that weighs something? Is it perhaps only a little air? It is perhaps a form that exists only to the eyes, which is, which is no more, which appears, which disappears; but then a woman's voice was heard.

The voice said:

"Where is he?"

The voice said again:

"Who fired that shot?... Oh!" said the voice, "you've frightened him.... Oh! now he won't come back...."

It was Thérèse.

"Because it's him, I'm sure of it, it is him, and last night I wasn't sure because the darkness can fool you, but if he reappears in broad daylight now, if you have seen him.... Where is he?"

Nendaz took her by one arm, Dionis by the other.

"Where is he? I want to go and find him."

Philomène was there, too, standing behind her daughter; there was a man to the right, a man to the left of Thérèse; she was a little in front of everyone, she said:

"Let me go!"

They said to her:

"No, stay here, one doesn't know. And besides, you see," said Nendaz, "there's nothing there now, it's no longer there."

She doesn't move, she seems to be completely calmed down; they look, there is nothing there now.

There had been a little still pale sun that brightened the slope for a moment with its pretty colors, where it made the trunks of the pine trees all red, where it made certain rocks gleam like panes of glass: it hides.

Then someone said: "Oh!"

Thérèse had made an abrupt movement with her shoulders and found herself free. She began to run straight before her then, while Nendaz runs after her, but he can't overtake her on account of his bad leg. And she runs as far as the end of the garden, at the bottom of the slope where the rocks begin; there she suddenly stops.

She calls:

"Antoine! Antoine, it's me...."

She says:

"Antoine! Is it you?..."

Then, above, three hundred meters from her, those who were watching saw the white thing reappear, rising from behind a bush where it had been hidden since the rifle shot.

Someone who has the body of a man, but no longer the appearance of a man, as she sees better now from where she is; who looks at her, hesitates.

She hesitates, she too. She tries to recognize him, she does not succeed. You can see that he is a man or a kind of man, who has a beard, and no eyes. He has a mouth, but does he have a voice in his mouth? Something black hangs from the top of his form; he is nearly

naked with a body the color of the rock, a body that is like the body of a dead man.... She draws back a little.

Him, he still doesn't move.

And Nendaz saw her draw back, then Nendaz approaches with his walking-stick:

"Wait, Thérèse, wait.... We still don't know, we'll know in a few moments...."

But the bell in the chapel had begun to toll.

It's a shepherd who was caught under the landslide of Derborence. He remained imprisoned for nearly two months under the debris. He reappeared; no one could believe it. But now at this moment the bell in the chapel tolls, because they have here only a chapel where the curate of Premier comes to say mass once a week. A very little bell, with a clear voice like the voice of an infant; it comes, it has been heard, it rises, it enlarges more and more its flight; then, as when the wave beats upon the shore and then draws back, it strikes the hillside and is sent back to you.

It returns: it turns above you making circles like the sparrowhawk, called the good-luck bird.

And the curate of Premier, whom Justin had been to find, appears then between the houses.

He is white and black. He holds Our Lord before him and it gleams. A choirboy in red and black carries the cross.

He passes near the fountain, they all kneel down. They're not afraid anymore. He comes forward, he is behind the cross; the cross goes before.

He comes near Thérèse; Thérèse kneels down. At first she lowers her head; she raises it again and stays on her knees, turned towards where the cross and Our Lord are going. If it's him, one is going to know. Whether it's him or only his shadow; whether he is in the body or only in spirit; whether he really exists or is only a vain appearance, while Our Lord and the cross are advancing still to the place where the slope suddenly steepens.

She clasps her hands.

And him...

Him, he takes a step forward, he stops. He has come out from behind a bush, he takes another step forward, then a step sideways like a drunken man, then stops.

Are you a man? Are you a Christian? Are you a real being? He wants to answer, they can see that very well; he can't, he can't yet, he takes a step, he is motionless, he takes a step.

"Is it you, Antoine Pont?"

Come, because we're waiting, if it is really you. Our Lord awaits you, and the instrument of his torment. The cross of wood held in the air with two hands is before you. Is it really you, Antoine Pont, husband of Thérèse Maye, Christian and son of a Christian?

The bell is still tolling.

The man up there began to come forward, he hesitated no more, he came still faster; and is it him? yes, it's really him, because he came right up to the cross. And the cross began to shine in a burst of sunlight that came over the mountains.

The bell was still tolling.

Him, he bent down, he lowered his head and neck; then, all bent forward, he tumbled over on his knees.

Chapter 5

She looked at him from a distance. She said:

"Oh! Antoine, is it really you?"

And, him, he looked at her as well:

"And you, is it really you?"

Then he began to laugh and turned his back on her.

She'd thought he would be dancing for joy. She had thought that he would approach her and take her by the head and never let her go. Oh! they were going to say things to one another, so many things; they would be standing, or sitting. Oh! they would be standing up first, but he would say to her: "Sit down"; and for a long time then, feeling the warmth of one another, they would speak softly, then they would speak no more, because they would have no need to speak.

And here he began to laugh.

The kitchen was still full of the steam of the hot water and the smell of soap. He has been washing. They had brought him a new set of clothes. Rebord, one of whose trades it was, besides that of selling drink, had shaved him carefully after having cut his hair.

Antoine looked at himself in the mirror.

"Ah! what a little face I have!"

He looked at himself again in the mirror:

"Not much bigger than my fist.... And," he said, "an awful look to it. It's not surprising. You understand, two months in the cellar.... Well," he said, "this Rebord, he wanted to shoot me up there.... Oh! he's a former soldier...."

"Antoine!"

But him, he said:

"That, that's a book.... It's your prayer book, or what?"

And, she, still watching him carefully, though from a distance, as if she didn't dare approach him:

"Oh! Antoine, is it you?"

"Just touch me, it's skin, it's flesh, and now that I've passed under the cross.... Just touch," he said, "you'll see, it's not imaginary, it's solid, it endures, it's me...."

"Oh!" she said, "is it possible?"

"That...."

He was continuing to make an inventory of the objects he found in the room; he made a tour of the room, naming them one by one.

"Ah!" he said, "that, that's the brooch I gave you."

There were a lot of people standing before the house, but they didn't venture to enter. Old Philom}ne was putting the kitchen into order. She went out with a tub full of soapy water, which she emptied at the foot of the wall.

They said to her:

"Well, what? Is it really him?"

They said to her:

"How is he feeling?"

But then he opened the window abruptly, under which a whole crowd of children were assembled; he frightened the children with his white face, thrusting it out at them with a loud cry. And the children scattered in all directions, as when one fires a rifle at a flock of starlings that has set upon the vines.

He pulled his head back into the chamber laughing; then suddenly he resumed casting his eyes about the walls, because he said: "I must relearn everything."

She would have wanted at last to go to him, to hold out her arms to him, to clasp him against her; she didn't dare.

She would have had many things to say to him, she found nothing to say to him: the astonishment she felt of him made her forget it all.

She would have wanted to say to him: "Listen, there is a surprise for you, and it's a good surprise"; but him:

"Well! A chair.... Ah! it looks comfortable...."

He tried it, and then he laughed; why was he laughing? He laughed, he began again:

"Well, a pin cushion! So, you're still sewing?"

All of a sudden he asked:

"What a month is it now?"

He said:

"And what day is it?"

He said:

"And the date?"

"I have lived seven weeks less than everybody else, less than you. Only," he said, "now that the good times have come back, I'm going to have to catch up."

Someone knocked on the door of the kitchen. It was the president.

"Can Antoine come out?" The curate wanted to speak with him.

He was ready. He had only to put on his hat. Everyone was standing in the street and along the side of the house. He opened the door. They were astonished at seeing him, they didn't recognize him. "Oh! he is much smaller than he was," they said. "Is it true? Oh! is it really true? Oh! he is thinner and more gaunt!"

Nonetheless they came forward to grasp his hand, the women, the neighbor women, the neighbor men, even the children, though timidly and mistrustfully. He didn't say anything, he laughed at everybody. The president walked alongside him. The weather was fine, with a little northern breeze that felt cool on one's cheek.

He walked beside the president, the others were obliged to follow along behind because of the narrowness of the street. He wasn't very steady on his legs. And to see him in broad daylight, he seemed such a stranger to the sun, with his color that had the appearance of the plants that have grown up under dead leaves or those vegetables that one whitens in the cellar. He laughed as he turned round towards everybody, he said to the president: "It's not very easy for me, I have been under the rocks, you understand...."

"It will go easier," said the president, "and anyway we're here now...."

"It's just that I'm no longer under the rocks...."

And he breathed the air deeply once again eagerly: "Ah! it's good!"

He turned round, he said: “It’s good, but it makes my head swim.”

He stayed shut up with the curate and the president for nearly an hour.

Now it was in front of the town hall that the people were standing. They were arriving already from Premier, where the news had been quickly carried, and these soon made a greater proportion of trousers among the dresses. Someone asked: “What is he doing?”--”Oh!” they said, “they’re questioning him.”

And him, when he came out, he said: “I must go and find my wife, I’ve hardly seen her yet....”, but they said to him: “Come on! what about us?...”

They said to him:

“Her, she’ll have plenty of time to see you later; as for us, we have only a short time here....”

It was the men of Premier who stood themselves before him: “Salut! Hello!”

They said:

“Is it you? If it is you, you’ve certainly got smaller....”

And there were those who, seeing him a little nearer, turned away fearfully, or went to hide behind others who were already there, gazing from a distance at Antoine’s face, his hands, his legs, what remained of his body under clothes that were too big for him (like a scarecrow, in fact, that you put in the garden to frighten away the birds); gazing from a distance at the two holes in place of his cheeks under his cheekbones, his cracked lips, his yellow teeth that stuck out--very like a dead man among the living.

“It’s not possible, ah!”

They’d needed to assure themselves that he was there, not only with their eyes, but with their ears and their hands, making him speak, passing a hand over his clothes; then they said:

“Now, come on!”

Rebord took him under one arm, Dionis took him under the other.

They led him to Rebord’s house because they said: “We’re going to have a drink to this.”

They helped him ascend the wooden staircase, making a great clatter on the steps. Will it hold under the blows, the staircase? for it cracks and you can feel that it’s bending under the weight, but they enter, all those at least who could find space in the drinking room, and the others remained under the windows or went to drink in the houses roundabout.

Him, they sat him down facing the light at a table in the back; they said to him: “Do you want anything to eat?”

They said to Rebord: “Bring some cheese and some dried meat.... You owe him that much....”

They said to Rebord: “Where have you put your rifle, you old fool? Have you hidden it well? It won’t be necessary for you to play us another bad trick....”

They said to Antoine: “To your health!”

They put down their glasses and then looked at him.

All the while more people came mounting the staircase, and before entering they examined Antoine through the open window.

They didn't say anything; some of them went back down the stairs without making any noise. But the others, on the contrary, couldn't restrain themselves:

"Pont!..."

He raised his head; he turned his vague eyes on them, as if they were hurt by the sunlight.

"Pont! it's you. It can't be true.... Where have you come from?"

They said to him:

"How did you manage to get out from under there?"

The village made a noise like a disturbed beehive.

Chapter 6

Wait!" he said, "I haven't got my ideas sorted out yet.... Where am I? Ah! yes, I've come out from under the earth; and there you are, you, and here I am, me. Good!"

"To your health!"

"It's funny, because they've already questioned me at the town hall.... Well! I don't know anymore. It goes, it comes again."

"Health, Antoine!"

"Only, if you're finishing the harvest now, you must explain to me, because you hadn't begun the hay when.... Yes, you hadn't begun it. Oh! I remember.... What day is it? what date? I already asked my wife that. What did you say? What? The 17th of August? the 17th of August of what year? It's just that I've been living for a long time outside of years, outside of weeks, outside of days...."

They answered him.

"Someone must count it up; me, I can't. You count," he said to Nendaz. "How long does that make?"

"That makes seven weeks and even a little more than seven weeks. It makes nearly eight weeks."

"It can't be true!"

Sitting at his table, surrounded by everyone, a glass in front of him.

"It's just that one no longer has the habit of days.... One saw the day only from time to time above oneself; it was there, then it wasn't there.... A great distance above me, between the rocks.... The mountain fell down."

They came in from the air outside. Wasps came in, and bees; flies came in. All kinds of flies came in; some were blue or green, the black ones made a fog all about you. The black ones made around your head like one of those muslin things they wrap about them when they go to take honey out of the hives. He was in the cloud; he raised to meet you two pale sunken eyes that struck you without seeing you.

People came in, went out; they said to other people: "You, be quiet"; but him, without noticing anyone, he continued to follow behind his eyes, with a gaze as if turned inward, the movement of things that were passing there, that is, one thing, then suddenly another thing:

"Wait, it's coming back.... The mountain has fallen down."

He asked:

"Did it make a noise as far as here, the mountain, when it fell down?"

"Oh! of course," said Nendaz, "but we didn't know what it was. We would have thought it was a storm, if the weather hadn't been so fine."

"Ah! the weather was fine?"

"Lord, stars like we've never seen and not a cloud in the sky. Then, we had gone to bed.... It was only me; ask Justin. Because I said to myself: 'Maybe it's something else'; and me, I had an idea."

"Me," said Antoine, "I didn't hear a thing. For me," said he, "it was not a sound, it was too great for the ears. It's like if a knee had pressed me down; and I tumbled off the wall

with the plank and the mattress. The plank, the mattress, and me, there we are, all three of us on the ground...."

"Listen, listen," someone said. "Be quiet, you!"

The man with the broken arm had arrived.

"As for me," began the man with the broken arm, "a beam struck me on the shoulder.... They repaired my arm with two little boards...."

But him, without interrupting himself:

"The mountain fell down, the mountain fell down on me, then I remained on the ground without moving, because I just didn't know whether I could move, and anyway I didn't want to move. How long? Who could say?... And then, there was someone...."

As if he had in fact heard someone, inside himself:

"And this someone was calling me.... Yes...."

But it seems that he has already forgotten what he was saying, and who is it? One doesn't know. Him, he had passed on to something else:

"That's how one is," he said. "Because I was only occupied with not moving and didn't go to see, you understand, wondering if I still had my arms and legs. I could also have broken my spine in two, couldn't I? It said to me: 'Where are you?' I said: 'Here.' And then that's all. Then I began to stir a little bit, the ends of the fingers of my right hand, and then the hand, and then the arm up to the elbow, and then the whole arm...."

"Salut, Antoine!" someone said.

It was still more of the men of Premier who had come in; but him:

"I thought: 'I have at least one of them, that's good; now let's see about the other one'; and with my right arm I paid a visit to the left one...."

Someone said to him: "You're not drinking?"

He said:

"I'm drinking, I'm fine. And at the same time, I raise my left arm...."

He was laughing, everyone had raised their arms, too.

"Only, there were both my legs still, and meanwhile I asked myself: 'Did someone call me?'; in any case, no one called anymore. I saw that I had my knee, that made one, and the other knee, that made two. And both of them in good condition, as I also saw, making movements with my knees like a little baby being taken out of its diapers."

They spoke to him, they asked him questions, he didn't listen to them.

He was led from within by his recollections, as they came into his mind, and they came in disorder; he was carried ahead of himself by them, then led back by them.

"Finally I was sitting up and I could see that I wasn't missing anything, that is, that I had two arms, two legs, and a body, not to mention my head; only, you know, that's when I raised my arm, then I could raise it; see, I raise it; well, there was a kind of ceiling three inches above my head; it was the mountain that had fallen, it was a big piece of mountain making an inclined plane. And me, I was trapped beneath it, caught in the angle and as much as to say buried alive, as I saw.... The 23rd of June, you say? Well! yes, the 23rd of June, towards two o'clock in the morning nearly, that's about right. And I began to yell with all my strength, as if anyone could have heard me...."

He took up his glass; it is he who said:

"Health!... Health to you, too, Placide, ah! you're there, ah! you got a broken arm!.... And the others?"

No one answered him. Already he was thinking no longer of his question.

"Ah! it's just that one is foolish in such moments, you see. And first of all I yelled as loud as I could; then I thought: 'I must economize the air'; that's what made me shut up. I told myself that I might not have much more of it for a long time, and I shortened my breath as much as I could, closing my mouth, sealing my lips, breathing only with my nose, in little breaths, like this...."

He made a gesture of pinching his nostrils.

"Because, think of it, if the air had run short, not only the space and the light, but the air...."

"And the bread?" someone said.

He said:

"Wait."

"And the water?"

But him:

"You're going too fast, because the air is the beginning for us, or what? it's more important even than bread and water; and then, then I was content, seeing that the air at least had not deserted me, on account of the empty spaces everywhere among the rocks that were piled one on top of another, making a great thickness, but full of fissures through which the air could enter. So that I had to creep about on hands and knees, not being able to stand upright; and thus I realized my luck, the chalet having held solid on all the part behind, that is, where it was backed up against the rock...."

He said:

"We had already made two cheeses, and we had brought up enough bread for six weeks. Well, picture that the cheese and the bread had been stored on the good side, that is, against the rock, on a plank, and going with my hand along the rock...."

Everyone said: "Ah!...." And Antoine: "You understand?.... And even my mattress was left to me...."

They understood. He went on still.

You have to picture that the mass of the landslide was pierced by holes that went in all directions, as in a sponge; unfortunately, these holes didn't communicate with one another. There's one that ends here, and there is, of course, another that begins again over there, but between the end of the first and the beginning of the second, there is nothing to do, it's barred. A separation without much thickness, perhaps, but more solid than a wall, being made of the same mass, made of compacted rock, of rock of a single piece, and he would have needed to blow it up with a mine to move it. You see, the time lost! Just count it! Seven weeks.

He followed a fissure flat on his chest for as long as he could, then he passed into another flat on his chest, then he was on his knees and the rock below him began to rise.... He spoke still: "I was encouraged when it rose, because the daylight, it's up above; but there! I began to descend again, then I was discouraged."

"It took time," he said; "it took one day, two days, maybe three or even four; how could I know? But you can guess, no? because I had nothing to drink.... My mouth began to dry

up, my lips were all cracked, my tongue was like a piece of leather and had got too large for my mouth; and I returned to stretch out on my mattress, telling myself: 'Stay calm'; if only I could have had a utensil to urinate in; you remember what they say of travellers lost in the desert who survive only by redrinking it.... Ah! you have the luck, you others, under the open sky, with your clocks to tell the time with; and I said to myself: 'With their fountains, their beautiful fountains! the springs above the ground' -- nothing but a tiny little bead of water from time to time that oozes from the end of a sprig of moss!..."

Cloc.

What was that?

They are at Rebord's, the drinking room is full; he raises a finger: "Cloc...."

Like a pendulum that beats, slowly at first, then faster, faster still: "Cloc... cloc... cloc...."

He got up from his mattress, he crept forward holding out his hands. And suddenly he raises his head: the water streams down onto his face, he has only to open his mouth.

"It was the runoff from the glacier that had at first been stopped up in its passage, and which percolated once again between the rocks, having diverted one of its streams towards me; it made like a thin cord that I felt moving between my hands, coming from the roof to the ground. I felt it move between my hands as if alive, when I raised them vertically and it was alive there, and me, I was going to live by it; then I went quickly to search out a bucket, which I placed beneath it, thinking: 'If ever it stopped....' And there it is! I was saved! Because now I had everything, you understand, everything that we need to stay alive, something to eat, something to drink, something to breathe, someplace to sleep; having only now to pass the time, of which I had also plenty before me, what do you think? As for time, I was going to have as much as I needed, one sees that now, eh? seven weeks, and even more than seven weeks...."

The whole afternoon, like that, at Rebord's house.

He was interrupted in his discourse by the people who came in or by the questions that they posed, or because they drank to his health, and of course he had to respond.

But each time he set forth again in his explanation:

"It was like the drains that are under the roads. It was so narrow that I slid myself along rubbing on both sides. I made marks in order to know how to return, in the places where there was light; in the places with no light, I made the same journey many times in both directions, until I had learned the route by heart.... I went for a long time in one direction, and then nothing more, it was barred; I had to go back.... Sometimes it was just above me that there appeared between the rocks a kind of slender attic window; I tried to go straight up towards it, like a chimneysweep in a chimney, I ascended, I ascended; all of a sudden, I see: a slab projects into the passage, I was forced to go back down. Then the daylight appeared on my left and once again I went towards the daylight like the sprout of a plant, thinner and more flexible than a thread, stronger than an iron bar; but me, I didn't have its abilities, nor its strength, being thus called all the time from one side or the other by a hope that was mistaken. Seven weeks of time," he said, "and it required perseverance and prudence, because it turned out often that the fault was obstructed by debris; and it was cautiously, with the tips of the fingers, with great slowness, that I worked to clear it. You understand the time that takes."

He repeated:

"Seven weeks!"

The evening was beginning to fall.

"Finally," someone said, "then here you are."

They looked at him attentively, they said to him:

"And you already have a better look to you, you look like you're feeling better...."

In the evening light, facing the window, they gaze at him and see that he has a bit of pink in his cheeks:

"It's the wine, you've been drinking too much water! Hey! Rebord, another glass.... Yes, there, on the edge of the cheekbones.... To your health. To your good health!"

But him, this time, he didn't drink; they see that he is reflecting, his hand around his glass resting still on the table.

Suddenly, he said:

"How many were there?"

"Where's that?"

"Up there."

There was a silence, then someone said:

"Let's see, perhaps twenty or so...."

"Eighteen," someone said.

Then Antoine said:

"And there were how many who came back?"

They heard the cries of the birds in the trees.

At last they said:

"Well, there's you."

Someone said:

"And then there's Barthelemy."

But Antoine:

"And him, where is he?"

"Listen," said Nendaz, "you're tired.... We'll talk of this another time, if you'd rather...."

But Antoine:

"Where is he?"

"Well," said Nendaz, "the poor man.... Yes, it's a disaster," said Nendaz; "he was caught under the rocks."

"Then?" said Antoine.

"Then?" said Nendaz.... "Well, yes...."

"Oh!" said Antoine, "I understand. I was up there, I know what it is. It comes down on you, it carries everything away. And I understand: the others, all the others, Jean-Baptiste and his sons, the two Mayes, all the Carrupts, Defayes, Bruchezs.... I understand, but...."

He bangs his fist on the table:

"But there is one who is not dead.... Ah!" he said, "I had forgotten.... Him, he's alive, I tell you.... When the mountain fell... Ah!" he said, "it's my fault, it had slipped my mind."

He said:

"Séraphin."

They heard again the cries of the birds in the trees.

And Antoine sees him; Antoine says nothing more, because he sees him. Antoine keeps silent still, staring fixedly before him. What he sees is a man already old, dry, with bright little eyes buried in their sockets without eyebrows. They are sitting together in front of the fire, around nine o'clock. And then....

Antoine bangs his fist on the table.

"He's alive, I tell you; he is alive, because he called out to me. I was on the ground with the mattress. He's a friend, you understand. More than a friend, a father...."

The people all about him remained silent:

"Without him, I wouldn't be married, I couldn't have.... Well! he's alive," he said.... "He called to me, I was on the ground.... He said: 'Hey! Antoine.' I wanted to answer, I had no voice left. 'Hey! Antoine, are you there?' I wanted to say yes, nothing came out.... I must have lost consciousness. But he's up there, he's alive.... Yes, Séraphin."

They remain silent; then he said:

"I must go and search for him."

* * *

All day the women had been at Thérèse's house. All the time people were knocking, because they came for news or they were neighbors who expected to find Antoine at home. She had to say to them:

"He is not here."

"No," she said, "he's gone to the town hall with the president and the curate."

Then, as the afternoon advanced:

"No, he has not come back yet. I think you'll find him at Rebord's. He's with his friends, he has been drinking...."

It's funny, because I am his wife.

Philomène, she was seated before the fire; Philomène shook her head; she said: "It's a good fortune...."

"Ah! what luck, indeed," someone said. "To regain like that a son-in-law and a husband after seven weeks!"

"Oh! yes," said Philomène, "it's a good fortune. Only," said Philomène, "it's a great misfortune as well. Because he was not alone up there, and he has come back alone. There were two. My poor brother!"

She crossed herself.

"My poor brother!... And he is dead for the second time...."

It was now eight o'clock in the evening. The people had withdrawn little by little; Philomène, the last, had returned to her house; him, he was still not there. Has he forgotten his wife? Has he even forgotten that he is married? "And he has noticed nothing," she said to herself; "even though it's nearly three months along...."

She set herself in front of the mirror where she put herself in profile, so that the lamp would illuminate the front of her body; and looking at herself from the side: "But yes, it shows," she said, "and especially when I've put on my new dress, because it's tighter in the waist.... Well, he has noticed nothing...."

She waited a moment longer in the chamber where the bed was made and where the lamp shone softly, while the evening meal was prepared on the kitchen table; still he didn't come.

"I'm going to go look for him."

She goes to the door and opens it, and she sees that the stars are already in the heavens; she didn't dare go any farther, on account of the people.

They would laugh at her. There she is, running after her husband, no? Leave him be. He has found his friends, it's only natural. Let them drink a glass together. He'll come home in his own good time.

That's what people would say; weren't they right? "Well," she said to herself, "he will come when he wants to; me, at least, I will be here. I'm going to sit down in the kitchen so that he'll find me straightaway when he returns, still faithful, the first thing."

She didn't move again, her hands in the hollow of her skirt.

Then there were voices in the distance; one heard them very distinctly, because the village had become completely silent. It's the men, several men, many men.

The voices are approaching, she hears:

"Now we'll let you go."

She hears the voice of Nendaz:

"Good night, Antoine."

She hears a third voice:

"See you soon, no?"

Then:

"Good night.... Watch out, there's a step.... Okay? Well, good night...."

The step approaches. The step mounts the stairs where it stumbles on each stair. It stops before the door for a moment.

She hears that a hand is searching for the latch and having difficulty finding it.

And, she, she had risen, so that he would have her before him immediately, the first thing, as she wanted; but he said:

"Ah!"

He said:

"Ah! it's true, little one!... It's you.... Ah!" said he, "I have a wife...."

Then he passes his hand over his face:

"That's not all!"

She said:

"Antoine!"

"Your name is Thérèse; you see, I remember.... And of course one is married, only, it is necessary... before...."

"Antoine," said she, "Antoine!..."

"Where are my weekday clothes? It's because he's alive.... Them, at Rebord's, they didn't believe me.... I must go and search for him."

He had come forward, he looks all about him, he stops; he is like a plant the stalk of which doesn't hold anymore, like a tree that has been sawn across the base. He is obliged to hang onto the doorframe before entering the chamber to lie down:

"No, he's not dead, it's just as I told them. He is not dead, since he called to me.... He can't get out, that's all there is to it. He's still captive under the rocks...."

She can't answer anything. And the lamp softly lights the big bed with its bedcovers turned down; but him:

"Are they in the closet?"

"Antoine! Listen, Antoine, I have something to tell you."

But he fell over like a man who has got a blow on the head.

He fell half onto the bed, and the upper part of his body is flat on the bedcovers, but his legs are trailing across the floor.

You could see that he was asleep immediately, and now nothing could drag him from his sleep, as she sees, for she took off his shoes and his jacket, she lay him out on his back, she put up his legs; he felt nothing, he made no objection, supple and docile like a dead man still warm.

He slept with his arms crossed, his mouth half open. And from his mouth at regular intervals came a loud noise like that of a wood saw, such that, in his condition, Thérèse didn't have the courage to lie by his side, as was her duty as his wife.

She passed the night at her mother's house.

Chapter 7

Thus it is that, the next morning, the neighbors saw her coming and the neighbors said to her:

"Well, there you are already!"

They were surprised that she had not spent the night with her husband; but seeing the thing was already done:

"You come too early, come on!... You must let him sleep. These men, when they are tired, you've seen them sleep for three days.... Yes, three days and three nights straight through."

It was already late, however, it was nearly nine o'clock.

And, as Thérèse hesitated to enter:

"Oh! go on in," the neighbors said to her. "Either he is still sleeping and you won't disturb him, or he's up now and it hardly matters if you disturb him anyway...."

They laughed. They were laughing as she entered. And they didn't see her anymore, then she reappeared:

"My God! My God!"

"What's the matter?"

"You haven't seen him?"

"Who?

"Antoine."

"No."

"Ah! my God, he's not there!"

They told her:

"Ah! that's nothing! You frightened us. Well! he's just gone out; you only have to go look for him, he's surely in the village."

But she, she shook her head, she shook it again and again:

"Oh! no," she said, "me, I know; he has gone again."

"Gone again where?"

"Up there."

Just then a representative of the justice and a gendarme had arrived from the valley to collect Antoine's declarations. They had asked where he lived; someone had shown them the house. They approach; they see a woman making movements with her head and great gestures with her arms upward from the stairs. And she, seeing them coming, begins to laugh with a false laughter.

"Ah! there you are, you.... Ah! it's just the moment! it's just the moment to come...."

Then changing her tone:

"Oh! please, go up quickly!... If he is up there... Oh! please.... Who knows what might happen?"

* * *

He was up there, in fact.

Having left before daylight, in his folly, he had made the whole journey in the opposite direction; and, wearing his white shirt and his new clothes, he appears at Biollaz's house, a little before the place where the big rocks appear that the moss today has painted in gold, in bright yellow, or grey upon grey, or dark green; a little before the landslide where the biggest of the blocks, the ones like houses, nourish in their fissures all species of plants, the myrtle, the whortleberry, the thorny-barberry with its woody fruits, its hard leaves.

He puts his head in the opening of the door:

"Is anyone there?"

He asks:

"You don't recognize me?"

"My Lord, no!" said Biollaz.

"Antoine."

"Antoine who? There are lots of Antoines around here."

"Antoine.... Look at me better.... Come on.... Antoine Pont, from Aïre."

"Not true!"

Biollaz steps back.

Then with his eyes still fastened on this face that he sees entirely now because Antoine has taken off his hat, he supplies with his imagination his good coloring and his former shape; he rounded him out, he colored him in.

"Oh! wait.... But of course! it's really you! Where did you come from?"

Antoine said:

"From under the rocks."

He pointed his arm towards where it was, and it was very near.

"I was taken like the others; only, me, I've got out."

"Not true!" said Biollaz.

And Biollaz said again:

"How did you do it?"

"On my belly, on my hands and knees.... Seven weeks...."

"And where are you coming from now?"

"From the village."

"Loutre!"

It's Biollaz who's calling:

"Loutre, hey!"

Loutre is working nearby. Loutre comes:

"You know who this is?"

Loutre stayed some distance off, distrustfully.

"No."

"Nevertheless you know him well. You must have seen his brand.... A.P."

"My Lord, in any case," said Loutre, "he's not wanting loose skin on his neck."

"Take it off."

"And he needs a little stuffing under his cheeks."

"Restuff them."

"Pont!"

"That's it, Loutre. You see, you can come closer, you're not risking anything...."

Loutre approached, and Loutre too said:

"Where have you come from?"

Antoine once again stretched out his arm towards the north where the walls are, and where you could see the base of the heap of rocks; then he began his story again, while Biollaz asked him:

"When is that?"

"Yesterday... no, the day before yesterday."

Biollaz calls again:

"Hey! Marie."

It's the wife of Donneloye who lives in one of the neighboring chalets. She appears on the doorstep and stops. Biollaz speaks to her from a distance:

"Hey! Marie, you remember, the day before yesterday, the phantom.... Yes, when you ran away. It had an appetite, you remember, it had a good stomach. Well! here's your phantom."

"Ah!" she said. "Who?"

"Pont, Antoine."

And Dsozet appeared beside her, sticking out his head to see better.

"It's true," said Antoine, "but I was hungry, you can imagine, seven weeks! And, it's true, I mustn't have been very pretty to look at.... But it's me, yes I promise you that; it's me," he said, addressing himself to Donneloye's wife, "and I'm going to pay you what I owe you, of course."

Donneloye's wife took one or two steps out of her house.

"Well," said Antoine, "I went down to the village and in the end they had to recognize me, because at the beginning, yes, they had been like you.... They even fired on me. They took me for an apparition.... We drank together," said Antoine.... "They made the curate come," said Antoine, "and then we drank together."

Dsozet, him too, had approached.

"Only, you see," he continued, "there's one who remains up there; it's on account of him that I'm going back up. You haven't seen anyone, have you? I got up before daylight, because otherwise, I'm sure, they would have prevented me from setting out; they would have said: 'There is no one'.... Well! I say there is someone."

There were now several men who surrounded Antoine without understanding very well what he was saying; and him:

"Because he's not dead.... Séraphin, you remember him.... Séraphin, Séraphin Carrupt; rather old; yes, him, that's him. The brother of my mother-in-law, and, if I am married at last, it's thanks to him, because my mother-in-law didn't want me for a son-in-law. You understand, an old friend, more than a friend...."

He continued:

"Well! him, he's still there...."

"Where?"

"Up there.... We were together in the chalet when the mountain fell. Oh! I recall it well, now.... He was sitting before the fire. He said to me: 'You're bored?' He said to me: 'And then, don't I count?' Much more than a friend, a father; I'm an orphan, me. Well! me, I got myself out, but he's still up there, yes, under the rocks. I've told them in the village, but they won't believe me; that's why I've come back up. And I'm alone, but you're going to help me. How many are you? At least ten. He's alive, I tell you, I remember well, I was on the ground, he spoke to me, he said: 'Where are you, Antoine?...' Only he hasn't known how to find the right passage out."

"You think so?" they said, "you think so, after all this time?"

"And me?... I was there for seven weeks. Him, it's been hardly two days more.... Listen, are you coming?... Oh! of course you'll come. We'll try to call him; or it may be better to have a rifle and fire off a couple of shots. That will make him find the right direction...."

He was speaking more and more abandonedly, faster and faster and in great disorder, posing his questions without waiting for an answer. The others all about him, the others shook their heads. Then two of them, Biollaz and Loutre, left with Antoine just the same.

* * *

The three men took the right side of the stonefall, so as to get above it quickly. They ascended the steep slope, and they made the stonefall descend past them as if being lowered on a rope. Being arched in the middle, it flattened out above; the big blocks became more like gravel, and littler ones more like sand.

First of all you had before you an elevation, a ridge like a wave, and the slope behind the ridge was hidden; the slope appears, it lies open, it falls away; this was the last slope.

"Oh!" said Antoine.

"Yes," said the men, "and you should have seen it when it was smoking!"

"It was smoking?"

"God, all that dust! For three whole days you couldn't see anything."

But now you could see everything, you could see everything better and better; now you could hear everything. It was only when the hobnailed shoes of the three men bit into the rock, making a noise like a dog chewing on a bone, that the silence was a little disturbed. Then it was no longer disturbed at all, because the three men had arrived on a kind of landing where they stop, while Antoine looks all about below him, then shakes his head:

"To think that I got out of that alive!"

He said:

"But, since I got out of it alive, he will get out alive, him too."

He considers once again below him the enormous disaster that it is, this kind of frozen sea, all this immensity of death where no one remains; Antoine says:

"He is there."

Everything is dead; nonetheless Antoine says:

"He is alive."

And they had a good look, nothing moved in any part of these spaces, neither on the gleaming surfaces of the rocks, nor in the holes that made dull spots among them, nor above

the surface: not a bird, this morning, turning in the heavens on its big wings or fluttering with cries before a fissure in the walls. Everything was dead, but, him, he said: "He is alive." He stretches out an arm, he says:

"See there, those two big blocks, do you see them? Well! that's where I came out. And the chalet," he said, "the chalet must be a little lower, but where? Ah!" he said, "it's hard to find yourself again in all this rubbish.... It's necessary first to orient yourself, it's not easy. Where is the north? Ah! there it is! Well," he said, "that's good: here's the slope of debris. Because we were backed up against a bank of rock and the little rocks passed above.... He should be there. Séraphin...."

He calls:

"Séraphin!"

He calls with all his force. He put his hands over his mouth like a megaphone, pushing out with all his force the three syllables that make three notes one after another, and seem at first to be lost, because for a long moment one hears nothing more; then they come back to you, having been dashed against the walls on the other side of the combe. The name comes back to you the first time almost intact, it comes back the second time muffled and worn down in the angles of the rocks; the third time, it is only a rustling as when light coattails trail behind you on the ground.

"We should have had a rifle, and fired off a shot," says Antoine.

He said:

"But you must have a pickaxe and a shovel to lend me...."

Chapter 8

Towards evening, little Dsozet arrived in Aïre, he said:

"Yes, he's up there, but...."

He touched his forehead.

"And Dionis with the gendarme?"

For they too had set off that morning towards Derborence:

"Of course!" said Dsozet, "they're there, too; that's who sent me."

"They sent you? Why?"

"Because Antoine won't come down. He says he won't come down without Séraphin...."

"What is he doing?"

Little Dsozet, with the top of his finger, touched his forehead once again.

But, she, something stirred in her heart; she said: "I have to go there."

"Oh!" said Dsozet, "you think so? He's taken a pickaxe and a shovel, because he says that Séraphin is under the rocks and that he's alive. He says that he heard Séraphin calling him. The men wanted to accompany him, but the men returned."

"Why did they return?"

"Because they were afraid."

"Who were they afraid of?"

"The herdsman."

"What herdsman?"

"The herdsman with the sheep."

"Ah! Plan."

"Yes, the one in the Derbonère. Well! he comes down with his sheep. He sits himself on a rock. He tells you: 'Don't go any farther.'"

They shake their heads:

"Oh! that one, he knows things, that one!"

"Yes, exactly, and when you want to pass, he cries out to you: 'No farther...' and you don't dare go any farther."

"And Antoine?"

"Oh! him, he went on all the same.... It seems as if he is risking nothing."

They shook their heads.

"Plan says that he's false."

They said:

"Who?"

And Dsozet:

"Antoine. Plan says that he isn't real.... Yes, that he is a spirit. Yes, that you can see him, but that he's not like us, that he has no body at all.... And that he has come to lure us away, because they are unhappy and jealous of us and they are bored under the rocks...."

"Well!" someone said, "what should we do?"

But a voice made itself heard inside her, and the voice said: "Thérèse, go find him."

The voice said to her: "You foolish woman, did you tell him in good time what you had to tell him, in time to be useful, at the time when you should have? If only you had tried to restrain him, staying by your husband during the night hours, which are the worst counsellors. The cross had shown you that it was really him, but you didn't believe it? Have you forgotten that he is your flesh, too, woman without memory?"

The men took little Dsozet for a drink at Rebord's, though he was scarcely old enough, and, to her, the voice spoke: "Repair your error now, you negligent woman; go up there, woman, go to him. Go, find the words that are necessary; find as many as you must, so that he will understand, so that he will come home.... Wake him up, for he is in a daze. Go to him with your secret; go, say to him: 'There are going to be three of us. For there is a little one who is going to come, and he's going to need you.'"

They took little Dsozet for a drink at Rebord's; they said to him: "You must sleep here tonight, and then tomorrow morning we'll see what there is to do."

She, she called her mother who was weeping in the kitchen. She says:

"I'm going to go."

"Where?"

"Up there."

"Oh!" said Philomène, "Oh! Thérèse...."

But she:

"Please, go bring a basket. Put a white cloth and two bottles of old wine in it. Then put in it everything one needs to make a good meal, because it's for him, and he mustn't have much to eat with him, up there. Some ham, some fresh bread, mother.... It's so that the little one will have a father."

At the same time she prepared herself to leave; but she didn't get very far that evening.

The people had not yet gone to bed; they were discussing things amongst themselves, in little groups before their doors. They fell silent when they saw Thérèse coming. She followed the alley where it began to become dark. There was a big red spot that was an open door, in which a black head made a movement, or you could see the shape of a shoulder that was leaning a little to the side and forward. They were silent, she said good evening, they said good evening to her.

She continued her journey as far as Rebord's house.

She goes up the steep wooden staircase. She makes a noise on the steps, but it's a noise they don't hear, so loudly are they talking in the drinking room. She knows very well what she's doing, for it's not the custom among us that the women enter the cafés. She doesn't enter. She looks through the window near the door; and the windows gives on the staircase, so that when you're standing upright on the steps, only the top of your person (that is, the forehead and the eyes) are above it, which is convenient because you can see in without being seen.

She sees. She sees that he is there; she had guessed rightly; it's Nendaz.

He is there with little Dsozet whom they are getting a drink, though he's scarcely old enough, and Rebord, then the president, then the men of Premier.

She remains standing on the step, she calls.

You can see only the top of her head and her eyes; she's in the dark and not well lit; her hair is black, her forehead is white, her eyes are black; she says: "Nendaz! Nendaz!" He doesn't hear her immediately because of the noise and because his back is turned; he turns round suddenly.

And the noise in the drinking room falls off until there is no more at all, as when one of these piles of firewood, which one provides for the winter under the eaves, falls to the earth:

"Listen, Nendaz, can you come for a moment?"

They look in her direction, but she has already disappeared.

Nendaz gets up, Nendaz leans on his walking-stick, he goes out on the steps, he descends the staircase.

"Nendaz, won't you come with me?"

"Where?"

"Up there...."

"To do what?"

"To look for him...."

"Oh brother," said Nendaz.

Perhaps he sees that she is going to go, whatever he does; then he is embarrassed. One doesn't let a woman go alone on the paths, especially a path like that one, which is solitary, which is dangerous, which never ends.

He scratches behind his ear; he says:

"Okay, when?"

"First thing in the morning."

Chapter 9

There were already some men in the fields, because the rye had to be got in quickly. The men had the base of the stalks at the level of their sickles, the ground was so steep.

Elsewhere you could see the loose sheaves standing upright three by three, leaning one against another and tied together at the top; from a distance, in the day not yet well begun, they looked like little women making small talk.

She was with Nendaz and Dsozet, who was taking advantage of their company to ascend again to Zamperon.

It was hazy and calm; the air had the color of ripe wheat. That same color filled the whole valley, opening out on their left and just beside them falling away into a void where they could see nothing. But from those depths which still remained hidden, a message came to you all the same, that is to say a voice, telling endlessly an old story that never ended and maybe never began: it was the Rhône that you couldn't see, the Rhône that you heard.

Because since forever it has been there, and immemorially it murmurs there, raising its voice when the night comes, letting it fall and weaken as the day increases.

She walked quickly, and Dsozet briskly as well, being in his young years; but Nendaz followed only with difficulty, making the iron tip of his stick grate against the stones.

She, something is carrying her forward. You could see her, she had her basket in her arms. You could see her from afar now, for the kind of wheat-colored haze that was all about them (was it the light mist of mornings of fine weather, or could it be that autumn is already approaching?), the haze was dissipating, drifting off without the least breath of air, and it was neither rising nor separating; it settled rather, like when there is a fine powder in solution in a liquid--and the powder goes to the bottom.

She, she was pushed forward. They said nothing, she said nothing. You could see Nendaz leaning on his walking-stick. You could see the great mountains that began to shine in the heights of the air now returned to their clarity. Then all of a sudden it became somber, it became cold, it became dark and sorrowful, as if you had jumped ahead three months in the year.

The gorge is a saber cut that has been struck all across the mountain, and the cut is so deep that the sun enters it for only a few minutes, at the moment when it passes just above.

From time to time, Thérèse stopped to let Nendaz catch up with her. Little Dsozet walked alongside Nendaz. She heard Nendaz say:

"How're you doing?"

Little Dsozet said:

"I'm doing fine."

"And that hole in your head?"

"It wasn't a hole, it was only a scratch."

"Well, has it healed?"

"Oh!" says he, "a long time ago...."

Thérèse had gone on. She heard nothing more. Then, again, little Dsozet said to Nendaz:

"You don't believe me?"

"Of course not, you're too little."

"You won't ask Rebord for me?"

"You wouldn't even know how to use it."

"Me!"

Love pushed her on. She stopped, she set off again. And Dsozet:

"Me!... You believe that! There is one among us also, in Premier.... It's a rifle that belongs to Cattagnoud, the old soldier. Cattagnoud lends it to me when I bring him the wood for his fire.... Oh! I know very well how to make sparks with the flint; only you can't fire Cattagnoud's rifle because the barrel is bent.... Well, if Rebord lent me his.... Oh! I would know how to pour in the powder and then tamp it, put the ball in and then tamp that...."

You could hear Nendaz, who said:

"And the recoil?"

"What's that?"

"When the shot is fired, the shock you get in the shoulder."

"Oh!"

"Oh! indeed, you'd fall on your rear end, that's all there is to it. How old are you?"

"Fourteen."

"Well, wait till you're twenty."

They had made a stop for a moment to catch their breath, sitting all three against the slope that bordered the path; Thérèse said nothing, for she had nothing to say. It was little Dsozet who continued to speak:

"It's not fair."

"Why isn't it fair?"

"Because Cattagnoud, when I do him a favor.... Well, me, I've done you a favor."

"Well, wait a bit, we'll see about it...."

And, as they set off again:

"Oh!" said Dsozet, "they're there, up there in the rocks, and I've seen them. They have their holes among the rocks, those marmots. They're shrewd," he said, "but me!... There's one that sits in front of the others to watch over everything that happens. When it sees you coming, it whistles...."

He whistled between his fingers.

"But me, I'm shrewder still than they are; I know what I'm going to do. There are the rocks, I'm going to hide behind them. I'm clever, when I want to be, you know, and nimble. I can creep a long ways on my stomach, I can...."

"Yes, but with a rifle.... It's heavy, you know, and it's very long.... It's longer than you are...."

It was already growing brighter. They had rejoined the stream that at first flowed in the depths below; but it rises towards you little by little and in the end it is at your level. They walked thus for a long time, then they saw the first chalet. It had been built to the right of the path in the middle of a square of meadow that is dominated by the forest, itself dominated by the rocks. They advance yet a little farther, and a second chalet appears, then a third, then a fourth, equally poor and tiny.

Love has carried her this far. They are three. Biollaz is in front of his chalet. Biollaz saw them coming from afar.

"Ah!" he said, "you come, too?"

Thérèse said:

"Where is he?"

"Ah! my poor woman!" says Biollaz.

He says:

"You see, I'm afraid that he hasn't got his head anymore.... It's on account of Séraphin, that's your uncle, yes? Well, Antoine, him, he claims that he is alive.... He borrowed a pickaxe and a shovel from us. We did our best, but we couldn't stop him from going to search for him."

"And you?" says she.

"Us, we don't dare."

"Why not?"

"Oh! that's just the way it is...."

She says:

"I must go there."

"Oh!" says Biollaz, "that's not wise."

At that moment, you could see Dionis and the gendarme coming to meet them; they too said:

"There's nothing to do! He claims he hears his voice."

"The voice of Séraphin."

"Where?"

"Under the rocks."

She said:

"We must go and look for him."

"Oh!" said the gendarme, "it would be better for you to wait until he comes back, when he can't do anymore.... Me, I have to go back down. But you, you have only to stay here; when he returns, you speak with him...."

She goes forward. She shakes her head without answering, she goes forward.

Donneloye's wife came out of her house:

"Ah!" she said, "you at last, Dsozet, where did you spend the night? Oh!" she said, "Thérèse, Madame Thérèse, don't go any farther, stay with me, it's better."

Thérèse didn't seem to hear her.

And Donneloye's wife calls to her son:

"Dsozet! Dsozet! come here.... Dsozet, I forbid you to go any farther."

She placed herself in the middle of the path, barring the passage to him, so that Dsozet had to obey.

But she, she passes.

And Nendaz and Dionis and Biollaz go with her.

You follow the stream still, you turn to the left. And there, the other times, when she had come, oh! she remembers it well, it was a beautiful flat bottom that had presented itself, fresh to see, richly peopled with men and animals -- now, it's one big rock, another big rock, a third big rock. It's all a wall of big rocks, like the façades of houses that are there, where she is looking, telling you: "Don't go any farther."

They left between them only narrow tortuous passages, like shadowed alleys, where she was going to have to go; because above those that were in front, higher than her and behind, you perceive the grey bulge of the mass of the landslide looming up, hiding by its elevation even the expanse that comes behind it.

And all these things tell you: "Stop!"

But they said to Thérèse: "Go anyway."

* * *

Then he appeared in his great overcoat, with his curved staff that came almost to his shoulder.

He appeared to the left of Thérèse, on top of a rock; and he was up there like on a pedestal, for he moved almost not at all, only shaking his head under his great hat, and his white beard.

To the left of Thérèse and the three men, a little above them, there where the ravine of the Derbonère comes out by a pocket at the edge of these bottoms.

"Stop!" he said.

And he said:

"Who are you?"

"Ah!" he said, "I see, it's Antoine's wife.... Well! Only do you know, woman," said he, "whether he that you're seeking is still the same as him that you knew?"

He said:

"They fool you with their appearance.... They still haven't found rest. And they wander under the rocks, jealous of you, envious of you."

Nendez, Dionis, and Biollaz stop. She, she continues forward....

"Woman," said Plan, "woman, be careful.... They have the appearance of bodies, but there is nothing under that appearance.... Just come pass one night with me in my hut under the cliff, if you want to hear them and if you want to see them. I have heard them and seen them, me: they're white, they wander about, they moan; they make a sound like when the wind strikes the edge of a rock, like when a stone rolls in the bottom of the stream."

Meanwhile, she too stopped; and him, raising his hand:

"You know what it's called, up there?... Yes, you see well, the arête and the crack in it.... D... I... A... He won his shot, this time...."

He shook his head.

"And as for him that you're seeking, listen to me, he is also false like the others. He's only bolder than them, that's why he came down."

Plan said:

"Don't go. Because you will be cursed as well. Don't go where he is trying to lure you. It's full of holes in the rocks, it's full of rocks that are teetering; it's all in creases, all in fissures.... Don't go, Thérèse, don't go!"

She said to the men:
"Are you coming?"
Nendaz said:
"You want to go there?"
He went on:
"Then maybe it would be better if you went there alone."
"All right," she said, "I'll go alone."

Chapter 10

To ascend to Derborence, you reckon seven or eight hours, when you're coming from the Pays de Vaud. You go against the flow of a pretty stream, skirting along the banks. The water confined within its banks is like many heads and shoulders pushing ahead of one another to go faster. With great cries, with laughs, with voices that call out, as when the children come out of the school and the door is too narrow to let them pass all at the same time.

You leave behind the lovely chalets, low and long, with roofs carefully covered with polished shingles against the rain, that shine like silver. The fountains have spouts as big as arms; they make the churns turn.

And then, nothing more, nothing more but the cold air.

Nothing more but a little bit of winter that breathes upon your face when you lean out over the void, nothing more than the enormous hole full of shadow--where he was again, him, but would you be able to see him, there, all the way down to the bottom?

Oh! he's much too little.

At six hundred meters below you, he would be only a miniscule white dot, imperceptible to the naked eye, among the immensity of those wastes where the rocks, in the shadow, are bluish when wet, or a sorrowful grey with black spots like those you see on the faces of the dead.

He's too little for you to see him, all the same suddenly the rocks awaken, it seems that they begin to dry out, they brighten, they come to life again for an instant; and above the arête the sun, leaping suddenly, has come upon them; but he is no bigger than an ant at the foot of those heaps of rock.

He didn't raise his pickaxe any the less for that; then he seized the shovel, searching for him who was no more, and that's poor Séraphin.

He wasn't right in his head, that's why he raised his pickaxe in the sun; then, bending down, seized the flat shovel by the handle, digging out a trench, scarcely evident yet anyway in the debris of black schist, all intermixed with stones, against which the iron of the tool clanged sometimes, making a clear sound.

She, she had only to listen for where the sound came from, though at first completely lost in the narrow passages that the biggest blocks left between them on their fronts, more complicated still and more tangled than the alleyways of a village; for where are you now? where should you go? in which direction? She could just see a little sky like a blue skein half-unravelled above her; where is the south? where is the north? -- completely lost at first, then the sound of the iron striking a hard and resonant material came to her, said to her: "Here."

He raises the pickaxe and lets it fall; it speaks to you from a distance.

She stops; she has only to listen for where the sound comes from, she goes on. She edges again round this block of stone and then another; then the blocks become smaller, more crowded together, at the same time that they are piled up higher, making the steps of a staircase where she climbs -- in these wastes where a woman would never dare to venture herself alone, but she isn't alone, because there is love, and love comes with her and love pushes her forward.

He raises his pickaxe in both hands, having taken off his jacket and his vest.

He turns his back to Thérèse.

He has kept on his fine white shirt, his new trousers; he is there, he's very small, for before him all the great pile of stones raises up its mass; nevertheless he raises his pickaxe and lets it fall; and he raises his pickaxe again.

She leaps from one block to the next one, from one mass of rock to another mass of rock; he doesn't hear, he's making too much noise himself. Then he stops swinging the pick and takes up the shovel.

The voice had said to Thérèse: "Go closer."

The voice had said to Thérèse: "Keep going, don't be afraid, don't let him go again; if he runs away, run after him...." She calls him, he doesn't hear.

And again:

"Antoine!"

He heard, this time; he turns. He saw her, but he begins to shake his head; he shakes it several more times to say no, and again no, and again no.

She starts forward again; she sees that he's saying something; she doesn't understand what he's saying to her. Then he lets the pickaxe fall; he turns round yet once again, sees her coming; and suddenly he begins to run straight ahead of him towards the heights of the rockfall.

Them, they watched from down below; at first they saw nothing. They saw the stones.

That is to say, Nendaz, Dionis, Biollaz; that is to say, in all, five men who were come from Zamperon.

They saw nothing, they had ended by sitting down. "What should we do?"

"Oh! there's nothing to do.... We'll wait for her, she'll come back all right."

"And him?"

"Oh! him...."

The sun had descended upon them in the meantime; they had been right in the middle of one of those indentations that the sun cuts out in the band of shadow, while to their right it projected a point far before them and to their left was in sawteeth, on account of the irregularities of the mountain chain behind which the sun was passing.

The southern chain, right behind them.

It lifted towards the heights of the air its battlements, its square towers, its pointed roofs, its steeples; then the sun, when it comes, slips in between their gaps, stretching down towards you, and then it withdraws.

They saw the little lakes shining, a little ahead of them, to their right; and melancholy, they were no longer melancholy, on account of a little movement that was made on their surface, as if the sun in passing had stirred a finger in the water.

The water, which was black, became more blue than the sky; there was like a fine silver net thrown on it; through the holes in the mesh, you saw a tiny white cloud that advances, leaves the bank, like a bark over the one lake, then passes into the other.

"Hey! Look!"

It's Carrupt. He stands up at the same time as he raises his arm.

"Don't you see him?"

"Who?"

"Antoine, of course!..."

"Where?"

"Beyond the big rocks, on the slope, among the little ones...."

"Ah! yes, I see him."

And the others:

"Ah! me, too."

On account of the distance, Antoine was already no more than a white point up there, the color of his trousers lost among the dark spots between the rocks. Nothing but the little white spot of his shirt, but fortunately it was moving and constantly changing its place, the other colors on the rockfall being motionless. Him, he was changing his place; they could follow him with the eye: it's upward that he was moving, towards the top and the farthest part of the rockfall, in the side of the great walls.

"Where is he going?"

"Oh! fine, he's running away."

"Damn!" say the men, "he won't be coming back."

And then they said:

"And her?"

"Oh! her," said Nendaz, "surely she's going to come down; what do you expect her to do, if he doesn't want to hear her?"

But at that same moment there was a brown spot that began to move a little below the white one; as that one ascended, it ascended, as that one moved farther off, it moved farther off.

Had love been asleep? But now love has awakened.

You could see them very well, both of them, in the sun, on that slope that seemed from below almost uniform, almost smooth, but in reality and from closer was all knobs and hollows, fissured, pierced with holes. He went before, she had great difficulty following, but she went, because love sustained her. From time to time, to advance, she had to help herself with hands and knees on account of a great leaning block in her way; sometimes also you saw her slide back as the stones slid away under her weight.

They said:

"She is lost, if she goes on."

They said to Nendaz:

"Call her, you know her better than we do."

"It's too far," said Nendaz.

They said:

"Ah! but.... It's just that...."

They didn't know what to say anymore.

Besides, at that moment they could no longer see Antoine; a moment later they could no longer see Thérèse. Both of them, they had disappeared behind the height of the escarpment.

* * *

This is the story of a herdsman who was captured under the rocks, and here he is returning to the rocks as if he could not do without them.

This is the story of a herdsman who disappeared for two months, and he reappeared, and he disappeared again; and, now, there's his wife about to disappear with him.

They were still there, the five of them, and behind them, on the rock, old Plan also was still there; but, before them, there was no longer anything but rocks and still more rocks, nothing more that was alive, nothing more that moved in the sunlight.

Then one of the men began to say things in a very low voice:

"Maybe old Plan is right, how do we know?"

Someone answered: "My God!" in a low voice.

"If it was really a man, would he have gone back up again?"

"My God!"

"And maybe it's only a spirit, and came down to fetch her."

Still they stood there motionless. The sun slid to the side, and thus the sun left them, but it was still close to them with its triangle of light. Strangely, the indentations were moving across the space; the little lakes had become grey again like zinc foil.

It's a game that is played by the sun and the shadow in the spaces that lie between the teeth of the arête or through the interstices that separate the different links; and, them, having received yet once more one of the rays on the neck, they had turned to the side from which it came....

They're astonished then, and it's at old Plan that they are astonished, because they see him shrug his shoulders, and then he shrugs them again. Old Plan holds his head raised towards the height of the rockfall; suddenly, he turns away and makes a movement with his curved staff.

And they did not yet understand what was happening, but they saw that old Plan was leaving, having made a half-turn and his flock with him.

It was then that having turned their heads round again, and having also raised them, they too saw something moving up there in the rockfall; and it's Thérèse up there, isn't it? and it is she, and she is leading him.

It's not possible!... But yes! it is she and they are two.

It's a man and a woman.

The five who were there had in front of them the great mountain with its ramparts and its towers; and it is evil, it is all-powerful, but there! a weak woman rose up against it, and she has beaten it, because she loved, because she dared.

She will find the words that she has to say, she will come with her secret; having life inside her, she was there where there was no more life; she leads him who is alive in the midst of those who are dead.

"Hohé!"

They shout between their hands the cry of the mountains; they hear their cry coming back to them, and it is from up above that someone has answered them.

A man's voice, a woman's voice.

And it was she, and it was he; now they saw that the man was helping the woman in the difficult places; there where the rock made a wall, he jumped down first, he took her in his arms.

And, on the fine summit of the wall, the edge of the glacier reddened in the light like a gleam of honey; but, behind them who came, and even as they came, the combe entered into silence, into cold and into death.

"Hohé."

* * *

Derborence, the word sings sadly and sweetly in the head as you lean over the emptiness, where there is nothing more, and you see that there is nothing more.

It is winter below you, it's the season of death all the year long. And as far as the eye carries, there are only the rocks, and the rocks, and still the rocks.

For nearly two hundred years.

Only, sometimes, a flock of sheep appear in these solitudes, on account of a little grass that grows there, there where the rocks leave them room to pierce through; it wanders about for a long time like the shadow of a cloud.

It makes a sound like a sudden rainshower when it moves about.

It makes, when it grazes, a sound like that of very small waves that come, the evenings of fine weather, in rapid beating and rebeating, knocking on the bank.

The moss, with a slow and meticulous paintbrush, paints in lively yellow, in grey upon grey, in all sorts of green, the biggest of the blocks of stone; they nourish in their fissures several species of plants and bushes, whortleberry, myrtle, thorny barberry, with the hard leaves, with the woody fruits, that tinkle softly in the wind like little bells.