

CHAPTER I

I was 17 or 18 when I started going out in society. Social life indeed had hardly resumed, since society was trying to put itself back together after the disasters of the Revolution. I had been isolated up to then, buried in the country, studying and daydreaming: serious, pious, and pure. My first communion had been very good, and during the two or three years following my religious fervor had not abated. My political beliefs were those of my family and province, the despoiled and proscribed minority. I adopted these beliefs in sorrowful and precocious meditation to seek from within my own resources the higher cause, the sense of these catastrophes which around me I heard accused as sudden accidents. It is an incalculable schooling for a sheltered child to be from birth and by the position of his immediate surroundings outside the movement of the times, not to take his first steps with the crowd in the midst of the celebration, and to approach present-day society from the sidelines with contradictory feelings that increase natural vigor and hasten maturity. Children who grow up in the thick of things, and whom all factors predispose to the reigning opinion, are consumed more quickly and for a long time mingle their first fire with the general enthusiasm. The excessive ease with which these young people figure out what will get them their way disperses and dissipates them. Resistance, on the contrary, pushes back, tries out, and makes the will say *I* early on. By the same token, in developing physical strength, it is not a matter of indifference if you are born on some beach and grow up in daily struggle with the ocean.

For me, those chaste years, which make up a veritable treasury, amassed without effort and held in surety against the corruption of life, were prolonged very far into puberty, and maintained in my soul, at the heart of a thought already strong, something simple, humble, and ingenuously puerile. When I think back on those years today,

despite the calm God has restored to me, I am almost envious. I needed so little then for the holiest happiness. Silence, regular habits, work, and prayer: a favorite walkway where I went to read and dream towards noon, where I passed (without a notion of making a descent) from Montesquieu to Rollin; a shabby little room at the top of the house where I took refuge away from visitors and whose every object in its special place reminded me of a thousand successive tasks of study and devotion; a tile roof where I eternally cast my gaze, loving the rusty moss more than the green lawns. A corner of sky, wedged in the angle of two roofs, gave me its deep azure in my moods of sorrow as well as a setting for my visions of chaste love! Discreet and docile like this, with nourishment for my growing mind, I should have been sheltered from any evil. It touches me yet, and makes me smile with delight when I remember with what personal anxiety I followed the praiseworthy heroes of ancient history, the conquerors favored by God, whenever they were pagan: Cyrus, for example, or Alexander before his debauchery. As for those who came after Jesus Christ and whose careers had variations, my interest was double. I was on pins and needles as long as they stayed pagan or as soon as they inclined to heresy. Constantine and Theodosius alarmed me exceedingly. Tertulian's false start afflicted me, and I was overjoyed to learn that Zenobia died a Christian. But the heroes to whom I was especially attached with a passionate faith, free from fear, were the missionaries to the Indies, the Jesuits of the Reductions, humble and hardy confessors of the *Edifying Missionary Letters*. They were for me what for you and the other *enfants du siècle* were the glorious and disappointing names that you have cited: Barnave, Hoche, Madame Roland and Vergniaud. Tell me today yourself, do you believe my personages less great than the greatest of yours? And weren't mine purer than the purest of yours? In view of my sedentary and settled life, I had a particular predilection for the story of Monsieur Daguesseau as it was told by his son. And on that subject, let me add that the desire to learn Greek came to me as a result of stories by Daguesseau and Rollin, and because people around me could barely do more than figure out the letters, I attacked it tenaciously, without any help, and while studying it, I lulled myself with the thought of going soon to learn Greek in Paris, the only place it could be done. For me, Paris was the place in the world where Greek would have been easiest for me. That is all I saw in it. In that beginning were moments when I tied all the ambition and happiness of my future to being able to read Aesope fluently, by myself, on gloomy days under a poor attic roof, which would be like my own on one of those deserted streets where

Descartes had immured himself for three years. Now, how in that atmosphere of such regulated tastes, frugal imagination, and wholesome discipline, did the notion of sensuality gently spring into being? Because that was when it was born, gaining ground in me little by little, by a thousand twists and turns and beneath the most deceptive guises.

The master I had for Latin until I was around 13 was a man of extreme simplicity, totally ignorant of the ways of the world, yet highly qualified for what he had to teach me. Good Monsieur Ploa, delayed by a family matter at the moment of entering Orders, had only been tonsured. In mind, manners, and knowledge, he had stopped precisely at the boundary that any complete human being must cross for the human trial to take its course. As for him, by a felicitous exception, in the years where a mere *contretemps* retained him, he remained effortlessly with the modest tastes, classroom authors, schoolboy virtues, as well as the plainsong he had not given up, and the general opinions inculcated by his masters. No doubt had ever ruffled him, no passion had ever aroused his equable disposition where only a faint stirring of a ticklish and certainly justifiable vanity could be perceived as soon as he took up a meaning in Vergil or Cicero. The Revolution, which confined him for a while to our backwater, let me profit from his instruction. Later, when things appeared to have cleared up, he left us to be a professor of rhetoric at the grammar school in the small city of O——. For my part, submissive as I liked to be and full of confidence in his opinions, I went further, however, than the excellent Monsieur Ploa, and I sometimes ventured, as a point of pride, through readings he had forbidden himself. On this matter, moreover, his candor was singular. Never having read the fourth book of the *Aeneid* up till then, by some scruple abetted by sloth, even though the *Aeneid* hardly had left his pocket or his hands for a decade, he imagined that to read this book more fittingly, he should have me explicate it to him. I managed this perfectly. He even had me memorize and recite it. In this way I translated with him Horace's voluptuous odes to Pyrrha and Lydia. I knew Ovid's *Tristia*, and since I frequently encountered certain Latin expressions that Monsieur Ploa rendered generally as "liberties," I asked one day point-blank what he meant by that. I received the answer that I would know when I was older. I was stopped short, blushing furiously. After two or three such questions that made me bite my tongue, I quit asking. But when I explicated the poets aloud for him, there were obscure and sensually suspect passages which gave me a beaded brow

in advance and I bounded over as if there were burning coals beneath my feet.

When I was around 15, I stayed for six weeks at the château of Count——, an old friend of my father's. During that time, when I was so sad and homesick, I gave in to my dangerous penchant for tenderness, hitherto restrained by my regular habits. An inexplicable ennui for my house at home took hold of me. I went to the depths of the thickets, weeping copiously and reciting the 136th Psalm *Super flumina Babylonis*: "By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down; yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion." My hours rolled by in a monotonous obliviousness, and they often had to call me for meals by shouting throughout the park. In the evening in the drawing room I sat in the circle listening to *Clarissa*, which the estimable Mademoiselle de Parkes was having her nephew read aloud, and my distraction continued comfortably through it all as if through languishing and plaintive music. When I returned home after this absence, I started reading elegaic Latin authors besides Ovid. The melancholic passages especially pleased me, and I repeated ad infinitum down my path, like a sweet tune you hum unconsciously, these four lines from Propertius: *Elegies*, book II, 16/:

Ac veluti folia arentes liquere corollas,
 Quae passim calathis strata natare vides,
 Sic nobis qui nunc magnum spiramus amantes
 Forsitan includet crastina fata dies.

I also repeated without too much comprehension, like an amorous motif of revery, the beginning of a song by Anacreon: "*Bathyle est un riant ombrage*." A new unknown world was already stirring in my heart.

However, I had no opportunity to see members of the opposite sex who were my own age or near it. I was, moreover, ferocious about such an encounter, precisely because of my budding desires. The slightest allusion to this kind of subject matter in a conversation was torture for me and like a disconcerting personal gibe. I got terribly disturbed and turned a thousand colors. In the end I had become so susceptible on this point that the fear of losing face should the conversation touch upon morality or honest sensuality continually obsessed me, and poisoned in advance chats during or after dinner. Such excessive modesty in itself already had something sick about it. This superstitious shame indicated something reprehensible. And it was true, if vis-à-vis the universe I repressed these vague and disturbing sources of emotion down to the third well of my soul, I would

return to them entirely too secretly and complacently. I listened all too curiously, spellbound to their murmurs.

From 17 to 18, when I entered upon a somewhat different routine, when I began to cultivate more, and for myself, several of my country neighbors and to do frequent errands, entailing stays of several days in the city, this *idée fixe* on the sensual aspect of things stayed with me. But in going deeper, it materialized in a strange form, completely malicious and chimerical, too singular to be explained in detail. Let me simply say that I came to the opinion one day that I was affected by a kind of ugliness which would rapidly increase and disfigure me. A chilling despair followed upon this alleged discovery. I went through the motions of animation, I still smiled and practiced my expressions and gestures, but in my heart I was no longer living. At times I was astonished that others had not already realized from my face the same alteration which I thought I felt. The glances I received seemed to me from one day to the next more curious or slightly mocking. Among the young men of my acquaintance I was continually taken up comparing the silliest of faces to my own and envying theirs. There were entire weeks when I was doubly irrational and when the fear of not being loved in time, of seeing myself cut off from all sensuality by a rapid onslaught of ugliness, gave me no respite. I was like a man who, at the beginning of a banquet, has received a secret letter announcing his dishonor and who, however, holds his own with the other guests, foreseeing with each person who enters the chance that the news will spread and unmask him. But all that, my friend, was only a particular detour, an unexpected ruse of the siren born in us. She slips in at the beginning and wants to triumph in our hearts. It was only a perfidious means of pulling me abruptly away from the simple images of ideal and chaste beauty, of bringing me more quickly to sensual attraction by showing me the prospect of deformity. It was the least suspect and quite gripping manner of renewing the eternal flattery which impells us toward our inclinations and instilling in me a air of panic without revolting my principles too much. Those debilitating bits of advice to hurry, to gather the first flower in time and to use from that very evening the passing grace of life.

The sole result of this crazed preoccupation was thus to pitch me unawares very far from the point when it found me. My gentle moral regime did not get reestablished. My wholesome habits underwent alteration. That idea of Woman, once evoked in my eyes, remained present, invaded my being and broke the train of earlier thoughts. I felt my religion pale. I told myself that for the moment it was essential to be a man, to apply somewhere (did it matter where?) my faculties

of passion, to take possession of myself and one of the objects that any youth desires. Of course I would have to repent afterwards and confess this abuse. One particular difficulty [], suddenly revealed to me by the technical readings I was doing at the time, added to my embarrassment and complicated it more than I would know how to express. I was alerted to an obscure but real obstacle at the same time that the chimeras of my imagination shouted for me to hurry. I have no fear, my friend, in letting you glimpse these shameful miseries, so that you will not despair over your own, which are perhaps no less petty, and because very often so many men who act high and mighty in the decisive moments of their destiny obey secret motivations of no more consequence. You would be dumbfounded if you could see, bared, how many such hardly mentionable circumstances have influenced morality and the first determinations of the most endowed natures. A birthmark, a club foot, a crooked torso, an unbalanced figure, a fold of the skin—and one becomes good or fatuous, mystic or libertine because of something like that. In the state of strange weakness where as a result of the disorders of our fathers and relatives, we have received our will power, such grains of sand, scattered here or there at the beginning of the road, have made us rear up or turn around. Eventually we cover over that poverty with magnificent sophisms. In my case, who knows how many hours of burning mania, at the age of intelligence and strength, I spent alone, heartsick, biting my fingernails, pressing into my flesh this imaginary grit that I thought I felt. I, who would have joyously paid then the price of my eternity for the eradicated obstacle, the easy seduction, the beauty of the hair and face, repeated with the poet that aphorism of the adulterous Trojan: "The lovable gifts of Venus cannot be rejected." When I recall how I roused myself from these idolatrous moments of cowardice by short fits and starts up to the effort of the cloister and the asperities of Calvary! I would have thus experienced in this paltry disarray of powers of the soul whatever is tossed around inside us in such monstrous contradictions, whatever is deposited by accident of the contagious and impure and from which can result our fall, Oh my God!—I no longer give so much credence to men's pompous explanations. I am not going to look very high, even in the noblest hearts, for the secret origin of these miseries that are dissimulated or exaggerated. But without insisting too much, my friend, on what would make many a forehead blush, especially without usurping its mysteries from He who alone can probe our nether regions, I shall speak to you here only about myself. To that first chimerical disorder, which no one ever suspected, were attached the principle of my errors

and the deviation in my life which lasted entirely too long. From that moment on, self-love was ashamed of docile simplicity and without undertaking a legitimate revolt, lost no opportunity to sprinkle doubts like so many capricious stones on the revered shady groves where my childhood was nurtured. Gradually political activity took the place of piety, and my personal relationships with the gentry of the neighborhood involved me in the endeavors of emigrés and princes. Thus, by a diversion, I could go about changing myself rapidly to suit my dominant motivation. And when this kind of moral hysteria, which lasted a good year altogether, had dissipated, when I recognized, with outbursts of laughter, that I had been duped by my fantasy alone, my flow of ideas was no longer the same, and the acquired impressions stayed with me.