The Stonemason of Saint-Point by Alphonse de Lamartine

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Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing

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This book first published 2015

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (10): 1-4438-7798-0
ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-7798-5

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CHAPTER ONE

I

On leaving the pretty little town of Mâcon in the direction of the mountains to the west, for several hours you follow a road between the vineyards that rises and falls with the contours of the land like a ship on the gentle swell of the sea. The slopes are dotted with many villages with red-tiled roofs and white limestone walls covered with vines over the doorways, while smoke rises from the valley bottom. Meadows surround them, watered by winding streams, marked out by lines of willows pollarded by the billhook every three years. The faintest breeze turns over the greenery of their leaves so that they seem silvered. Their shade is just long and dense enough to provide hiding places, often discovered, for the nests of nightingales and kingfishers. Heavy belfries of dressed stone, stained by the rain and covered with the greyish moss of ages, dominate the villages like elongated pyramids. The traveller's eye goes from one bell tower to the next as if calculating, left and right, the lines of a Roman road across this populous countryside. From the shadows of these pyramids the bell rings out for every inhabitant, the toll of his birth or of his death, while in the open light there mallows grow in the cemeteries. Only there do the hard-working vinedressers find rest after the sweat of wine making for sixty or eighty years in order to feed their wives and daughters. A certain gentle gaiety runs with the sun's rays over the countryside, with the dark ribbons of the streams, the white reflections of the cottages, the songs of the women, the ringing of the bells.

The skies are gentle, the earth smiles, the passer-by says, "I would like to live there", and is sad, not knowing why, to leave behind this gracious and luminous scene.

II

As you approach the mountains the vines come to an end and the villages fewer until they are replaced by scattered hamlets or groups of two or three cottages, spaced further apart, on the steep slopes of meadows or rocks clothed with box. When you reach the ridge of the mountain, called Bois Clair because the morning sun rising over the Jura and Mont

Blanc would inevitably strike with its first rays the higher branches of its oak woods, then you turn around to take a last look at the vast panorama over which the dark curtain of the mountain hangs: the Mâconnais yellow with its vines, the Saône sliding like a long silver snake between green fields, the Bresse carpeted with its crops and its willows, the dark Jura, the golden Alps. Your eyes go down a steep slope towards the former monastic town of Cluny, sheltered like an owl's nest under the bronze spires and bell towers of the abbey. But at the foot of Bois Clair the road forks. One branch goes to Cluny, through the rich and extensive meadows of the well-endowed monastery that once owned these pastures and forests. The other branch leads into the mountains of the Charolais, full of woods, ponds, sombre pastures and lowing herds of cattle.

III

For some time you follow that country road and meet only a few ragged children who herd goats and urge the cattle out from the bushes. Then, suddenly, the ridges of Bois Clair become lower on your left, revealing a little river called the Vallouze that springs from a green dell at your feet. It seems to invite you, with its sparkling and chattering over the pebbles under the willows, to enter that dell and explore the hidden turns of the valley that it reveals to you for the first time. You say to yourself, "Where does this water come from and how does such a narrow gorge produce such a murmuring current? Does it widen? Is it deep? Does it have well wooded sides and rocky pools that feed into it? Who knows? Maybe it hides at one of its bends some wide mere or meadows that empty into it, where the woods hang over it, where the mountain peaks rise above, where the rocks support a church, a village, the ruins of an ancient castle? Let us explore."

Then, with a pull of your left hand, you turn the head and feet of your horse up the sandy path beside the Vallouze that leads into the valley of Saint Point.

IV

What is most beautiful in outward beauty, as in the moral beauty of character, as in the material beauty of Creation, is what is most hidden. The mystery of the body, of the heart, or of character is the discovery of intelligence, or of the soul, or of the eyes. It seems that God has cast a shadow over what is most delicate or divine in what He has made, in order to provoke interest in it because of its secrecy and to temper its impact on

our sight, just as He has clothed the stars with night to encourage us to follow them with our eyes in their aerial ocean and to measure the magnitude and force of these little nails of light that His fingers, touching the solid clay, left imprinted on the vault. The valleys are the mysteries of the landscape. The more you explore them, the more they turn on themselves, to bury and hide themselves. Such is the impression of the valley of Saint Point, where, with each step taken by the exploring traveller, the more you discover, the more it escapes from you.

V

The valley of Saint Point is simply a great fissure made by the waters of a flood, by the subsidence of layers of earth or by the cracks caused by earthquakes between two mountains once joined together. With the weathering of ages the opposing flanks of these two mountains, running south to north, were covered with sand transported from long dried up seas. The sparse and thin soils, enriched by vegetation and the annual fall of leaves, were in turn leached by their own weight, by snowfall or winter rain into the floor of the ravine. Now woods and meadows of lush grass, like a green fleece on the ground, cover over the bones of the two parallel mountains, yet the convex and concave lines of the peaks and hilltops seem to correspond geometrically to the spaces on the opposite side, so that you seem to perceive on one side of the valley what is lacking on the other. These two mountains, like two long fortress walls dominated and upheld and marked out by their ramparts alone, leave no room on the east or the west for any transverse valley. At the south end the valley is completely shut off by a high shelf of land that permits only a view above the horizon of the sombre spires and turrets of the far-off crests of Forez. You begin by walking along the edges of narrow meadows where the stream manages to flow between the alders and under the hazels. You breathe in the moist freshness of a defile closed to the breezes of the open space. On your left hand are only sandy rockfalls of rose-coloured granite, weathered and reshaped by the passage of time. On the right are only water-loving trees, where the blackbirds take to the wing as they start at the sound of horses' hooves. In front are the ever-more complicated twistings and turnings of the path, which does not seem to know where it is leading you. Like a snake sliding through the grass, seeking a way to the sunshine, it twists with every bend and undulation of the ground.

VI

Soon, however, you breathe in more air, there seems to be more daylight for your eyes, and you can see a larger expanse of sky between the tops of the two mountains. The meadows widen, the slopes above them become gentler and the valley opens out, both sides hollow like an antique vase, to enclose more space, more light and more greenery. You pass through a little hamlet hidden in the willows called Bourg Vilain, from the name of its villein inhabitants of long ago. Originally it had only been a cluster of sheds where the cowherds and goatherds of the locality had sheltered their animals when the meadows were covered in snow. Gradually the sheds became cottages, the cottages became small houses. A country church has come to dominate them, surmounted by a large square tower, constructed in blocks of granite irregularly placed on each other. Nowadays, little gardens hedged with vivid osiers surround the cottages with greenery. The walls are neatly rendered with lime. Glass panes replace the black wooden shutters or paper frames, and shine from the little windows between the golden sprays of wallflowers. To the right of the village and some distance away a mound of red sand rises beside the water in the midst of the fields. The miller, plying his trade, has made use of this natural obstacle to make a bank across the stream and to construct a dam. The mill has, of its own volition, taken on a more scenic appearance than any that could be given to it by the capricious brush of Salvator Rosa.

Nature is a great artist when left to shape her material according to her design. I never go through this village without admiring the uncontrived conformation that makes of random construction a model of ordered picturesque. Thus, in winter, as the river overflows and floods the field, buildings had to be situated above the flooding. So the mill sits of necessity on the rock from whence it can look out and be looked at. The flow from the dam has to fall over the blades of the mill wheel in order to operate the mill. The mill house has to have one of its sides turned to the river to place the wheel in the water. The leat halfway up causes the water from it to cascade against the walls so that the greenish mosses that grow on it give to the basements an appearance of ancient green hue. The murmurings and gurglings of the water, impatient to spurt from the leat, the glittering drops of foam among the branches and the quivering leaves of the old alders: the screen of poplars and planes that have grown up by themselves with their roots in the stream, their branches of various shades crisscrossed over the red tiles of the roof like a second roof. The hollow in the side of the house from which the hub of the wheel extends towards the dam and which looks like a gloomy cave wreathed in mist: the dovecote

that had to be added to the mill because pigeons seek the fallen grain: the square tower that had to be raised a storey above the roof of the house so that the woodpigeons might see from afar their haunts above the trees; the winding path that had to be dug out with pickaxe in the side of the hill, in the yellow sand, so that donkeys and carts from neighbouring hamlets could climb up it with their sacks of grain without difficulty. The dust of winnowed grain coming out of the window, the blue smoke rising from the roof through the tops of the poplars; the goats browsing, feet planted against the north wall, which is as green with stone-loving vegetation as a meadow; the flights of doves as they descend on the yard and fight over the grain with the roosters and hens; the donkey going up or down the rock stair; the miller's wife sewing at her window, her head caught in a ray of the setting sun, reflected in a fiery glow by the pane of her upstairs room; the children laughing as they climb up towards her by means of the green ivy ladder that surrounds the window over the water. All this architecture, formed by chance or by the requirements of living, water, walls, trees. rocks, barn floor, path, well, hanging balconies, the prominent tower, the harmony of line, the light and shade, assembled as if they had been planned, yet grouped together solely for country living, displayed at various times of the day in varying colours of sombre depth or lit up from the mountain providing the backdrop—all this collection, I say, would defy the imagination of a poet or painter to vie with it in grace or rural charm. It grips the imagination by sight, the soul through its serenity. It is the thought of Theocritus expressed in rock amid meadows; it is a line of Virgil sighing beside running waters; it is a canvas of Claude Lorrain imbued with peace and vibrant with life. It is the supreme art of that architect who knows no art, this expression of beauty. It is the mill of Saint Point.

I watch from here the rising sun striking down on the tiles. From here I listen to the regular throb of its bolt, the heartbeat of the house, the pulse of the mill.

VII

After the mill, the valley opens out into a bowl that takes about a quarter of an hour to cross. In the middle of it rises a low hill crowned by an old château, flanked by squat towers and the denticulated spire of a Romanesque belfry. Meadows bordered by alders and walnut trees lie at the foot of the hill. Through the trunks of the trees you can see the walls, roofs and rustic bridge of a village built in the shadow of the castle, composed of twenty labourers' cottages, market gardeners or dealers in

country wares, all clustered around the village church. These old towers, undermined by time and cracked and split by the weight upon them, their tops deprived of the turrets that formerly rose into the sky, nowadays have no purpose other than to surround a heavy mass of stone, pierced by a spiral staircase and several vaulted rooms—there is my home.

I have sown turf, marked out sandy walks through the growth of hazel that surrounds it. I have enclosed with surrounding walks several acres of land and meadows that follow the irregular contours of the hill. I have saved from the billhook or the farmer's axe some spreading trees that have rewarded me by stretching out their branches over my lawns. I have cut several doors and several windows in the five-foot thick walls of the old manor house. I have added to the principal façade a massive balcony of carved stones modelled on the old Gothic balustrades of Oxford.

It is on this balcony that house guests stroll at sunrise or sit in the evening, in the wide shadow that the towers cast over the slopes of the meadow. Birdcages hang from nails there while the dogs lie at our feet on the warm flagstones. Tame peacocks live in the gardens. They remember that we used to give them crumbs when we were young, and perch night and day on the parapet of the balustrade, their tails shining in the sun and waving in the breeze. They adorn the balcony with a collection of living caryatids just as storks form battlements with their white plumage along the roofs of villages in Asia.

VIII

Looking along, you see stretched out the most beautiful part of the Saint Point valley, climbing up and down. First the eye glides over the steeply sloping fields that descend into a meadow levelled by the water. This meadow is bisected by the stream of the Vallouze. Great walnut trees with bronze leaves, as motionless as metal, white poplars, their trunks twisted by storms, their leaves more bushy and hoary than the head of a vigorous old man, Lombardy poplars, those cypresses of Europe, alders, birches, willows, which for twenty-five years I have forbidden the pollarder to touch with his pruning hook, all lean over both banks of the river, over the water they love and which loves them. They form with their interlaced branches over the flow a high shimmering vault, ever changing, of leaves of various hues, a veritable mosaic of growth. The least breath of a summer breeze rocks the whole moving tapestry and sets ripples in motion, a sheen of moving leaves, flights of birds and scents of verdure that excite the eye, vary the spectacle and rise in soft sounds and faint scents up to the balcony.

IX

After the river and the meadow the eye begins to look gradually at the fertile expanse of land over the high line of hills that separate the valley of Saint Point from the distant horizon of the Mâconnais, of the Bresse, of the Jura and the Alps. First there are the reddish lands with deep soil, fertile for hardy vegetation such as broad beans in flower, beetroot with large glossy leaves, tufts of lucerne over which, at dawn, white flakes of dew float; then enclosed in hedges the orchards of wild plum trees with handsome speckled cows chewing the cud beneath, whose mournful lowing echoes among the hills. Two or three little hamlets halfway up above the orchards and fields send up their smoke over the fruit trees. The eye looks across the smoke and goes beyond the lines of deep gorges dug out of the red soil; further on it sees carts loaded with manure, laboriously pulled by white cattle, being taken by a peasant to clearings higher up to enrich a little his standing oats or late barley. Other carts come down laden with beech and chestnut to heat the ovens where bread is baked. The leaves dragging behind the carts sweep the floor of the ravine, as the housewife sweeps the shining doorstep of her house.

These narrow tracks, like the entrances to caves, disappear and are lost to the eye in the folds of the spurs, in the very heart of the mountain or under the shadow of chestnut woods. You can no longer follow their path, but for the distant cry of the herdsman encouraging his beasts to climb higher. These cries, magnified by the arching chestnuts and reverberating from tree trunk to tree trunk, mingle with the neighing of colts in the meadows, with the lowing of the cattle lying in the thick grass, with the bleating of the sheep and of the goats, with the clucking of the fowls, with the songs of the birds in the bushes, with the groaning of the creaky axles of the plough in the furrows, with the tolling of the bell as it rings out the angelus at noon and in the evening for the labourers and herdsmen at their work. All this fills the bowl between the two ranges of hills with a sound like that made by the shells that you put to your ear in order to hear the endless resonance of the sea.

Further up, a clump of chestnuts and birches dots the spurs, interspersed with purple heather and the yellow flowers of furze. Then the vegetation, in the chill breezes from colder regions, becomes sparser or shrinks back into the rocks. The ridges are almost bare, crowned by a few trunks of holly and twisted thorns merging with the blue of the sky or into the mists floating across the higher peaks. These mists, as they always cover the line of the mountain between earth and sky, cause the viewer to see infinite heights where the imagination enjoys losing itself. Mist is to

the mountains as imagination is to the senses: it expands them. Such is the mystery hovering over everything about us down below, providing thought for the eyes as well as to the heart.

X

Such is the view from the balcony at Saint Point of a morning. In the evening the slopes are gentler, the clefts and spurs of the hills softer, the villages nearer and more established on levels of green turf, the woods more uniform and sombre, stretched over shallower dells. The clear-cut shadows cast by the setting sun become more velvety to the eye. The wild character gives way to the shady and pastoral aspect of the cooler valleys of the Alps. When you wish to wonder, to pray, to dream, you gaze at the mountains in the morning: when you want to hope, to yearn, to rejoice, to recollect yourself in the vision of country life, then you gaze at the mountains of an evening. The former portrays a tableau of earthly happiness, the latter is an aspiration to heaven, while each is one of the most beautiful canvasses illustrating the drama of the blessing of life that the brush of the Creator has been happy to paint.

XI

I have lived there since childhood and it is there that the current of my life, which has had its times of aridity and of renewal within me, places me or draws me back to this first scene of my industrious and busy life. I bless the springs, the summers, the autumns and even the occasional winters that I have been able to spend there for the last twenty years, among the memories and comforts of home. Alas! I have hardly been there in latter years apart from walking for a few hours, when my steps are hurried on by events, to cast a quick glance at the growth of the trees I had planted, to bury myself in their shade, as their leaves fall under the feet of those strange to them, and to pray for a moment at two graves.

XII

One morning in 1846, returning from a long journey beyond the Alps, I came alone in the month of May to see whether the passage of time had not dilapidated everything in this family nest and to order repairs. In such a way does the idle sailor from time to time during several weeks in port go aboard his inactive ship to inspect the hull and the keel, order a plank

here, a rivet there or else a bulkhead, so that he may find his floating home in good shape on the day the ship owner tells him to go to sea again.

XIII

When I walked round the garden with the old farmer who had known me all my life and whom I retained, an ancestor of the estate and the house, idle in a corner of his farm, I saw that the branches of the cedars, the larches and the firs had extended like arms, as they had grown, over the enclosing wall that separated me from a shepherd's track. As it shook them against the top of the wall, the wind had finally damaged the stonework, dislodging the mortar and making cracks in the surround. Through these small children could climb up and rob nests. I kept the trees for the birds as much as for myself. Birds are the poetry of song, the hymn of the air. If they are killed, who then in creation will sing? I know nothing sadder than finding under the church tower, under the eaves of the house on the sand or under the tree the despoiled nest of a swallow or chaffinch or a nightingale, with the shells of its little grey eggs scattered on the ground beside the down that the father and mother birds had woven throughout the spring for their young.

XIV

I addressed old Litaud (the name of this venerable old man of Homeric appearance and silvery hair, like the foam of a life that has long been driven by the winds from the hills) as "Father", for I had the filial relationship that the son of the house has with old servants who have been longer than him in the family home. So I said, "Father, we must repair this damaged wall, take the stones off and close and parget the mortar in the joints to prevent the trees from widening the cracks by the rubbing of their branches. We must replace the ridges of the tiles that were not able to prevent damage to the top of the wall with a line of cut stones, which will surmount the wall like the parapet of a bridge. The trees will then lean over easily and their branches can play freely over the flat stones, simply polishing them as water polishes boulders. But we must do this soon for the equinox winds, when they come in September, will shake these long branches hard and knock off the rest of the tiles and mortar. Get the village stonemason, whom I saw the other day working in a quarry as I was riding through the remote ruined village of La Fée. I will take measurements and work out the cost. I will arrange for him to work in the quarry at the end of the garden, and next year the birds in those lilacs will nest in peace.

XV

"Yes, Sir," Old Litaud replied hesitantly, with a certain shade of doubt and disbelief, and I saw in how his face seemed to be thinking and how he held his head bent, as if inspecting something on the grass, that the old man did not confirm the "Yes" he had uttered at first. "Isn't there a stonemason in the villages", I continued, "who could well undertake these repairs?"

"Yes, Sir, there is one", the old man replied, "and a very good workman and most willing", he added, "but I am not quite sure if he will agree to come down and work for the house".

"But why?" I replied in amazement, "Is my money not worth that of others? Won't I pay him for the slabs of cut stone at the same price as the local peasants, and even above that because of the urgency? Why won't he come if you summon him now?"

"He is a stonemason who does not work for pay."

"All right, I will give him corn, wheat, potatoes, walnut oil, baskets of apples or plums, in fact, whatever he wants."

"But he no longer works for goods, as others do".

"What does he work for?"

"For the good Lord, Sir, and for the poor of the Lord. Only for Him and for them; and since Sir is rich and the owner of woods, fields and the mansion, I fear that this man, who is gentle but as obdurate as stone in his ways, will say, 'Sir is well enough off to have his work done by day labourers and to pay a good rate for the job. If I agree to work for him I will default on poor people who have a doorway or window to be cut. Also, Sir will want to pay me at a higher rate than I get daily that just buys me my bread. I will not be able to refuse to take his money and, if I accept, I will be breaking my rule of life'. In a word, Sir, I repeat, I fear that this man will not come".

"No, no," I said, "He will not be able to refuse to come. He will fix his own rate of pay himself, since he is so upright, and if my money, which he will have well earned, weighs on his conscience as a charitable man, he can give it to those less fortunate than himself; that's it! So, send via one of your shepherds for him to come down. Tomorrow at midday I will wait for him. Even if I should not agree with him, I should be very glad to see a man who refuses money in the neighbourhood of these mountains, where love of gain is so keen that to win a copper coin or to lose it seems the main aim in life for so many rich Christian people. It will be a spring of water issuing from the rock in the midst of this dust which would drink up the clouds of heaven."

"Right, Sir, I will obey you and get him to come down. But I will go myself, since he won't listen to my shepherd. I'll reason with him better than any child would."

Saying this, with a vigorous spring in his step, old Litaud set off on the path to his farm to take off his clogs, button on his gaiters and collect his stick with the metal tip to go up the mountainside.

I went back to collect my dogs and my gun to go up into the hanging woods that evening.

CHAPTER TWO

I

The next day at noon, when I returned from hunting, I heard the barking of the dogs in the yard. I went down. There was old Litaud with the stonemason.

"This is Claude des Huttes," the old farmer told me with satisfaction in his voice conveying a feeling of triumph, indicating that he had experienced a success he had not expected the previous evening. "He agrees," he added, "to come and do this work for Sir, because Madam is good to the poor."

"Good, let us go and see the wall and calculate the number and size of the stones needed for the top."

They made their way with me to the cedars.

As we went I privately appraised the stonemason, because from the beginning this man aroused a certain respect in me. Although he was humble and diffident in his behaviour, you could see that he was in no way intimidated by my superior dress or by the impressiveness of my house, grander than those in the village. With each step and each expression he seemed greater and more exalted than me; his demeanour carried God in him. The path from the door of the house to the breach made by the cedars was a long way, so I had time to imprint his appearance on my memory.

II

Claude des Huttes was a man of about thirty-six to forty years, of medium height and slender build, a little bent forward like a working man used to bending under heavy loads. His hams lacked suppleness, as do the taut muscles of those who hunt goats in our Alps, but bent forward like those of workmen who often kneel at their work. His right shoulder was much higher, knotted and stronger than the other, as his right arm continually raised and brought down the hammer. Although his arms were thin and the veins, tendons and muscles showed clearly below his short sleeves, his hands were long, massive, knotted at the joints and rough-surfaced like pincers. The practice of moving, turning over and shaping large stones had developed and hardened in him the first tool of man, his hands. He let

them hang loose, like a pair of inert scales, which visibly embarrassed him as they had nothing to carry. The toes of his bare wide feet, solidly put down, bit into the ground, leaving prints before me in the moist sand of the path like the nails of my horse's shoes in the grass of a field on a dewy morning. He held a russet woollen cap in his hand. His thick black hair was powdered with a few grains of marble dust and hung a span's length down his neck at the back. It was square cut in thick locks by his own scissors, so it stuck out like a black fringe between his nape and his collar to protect his neck from rain and snow. He wore only a raw hempen shirt, open necked, fastened across his chest by two brass nails as pins, one of which was bent around the other to make a kind of knot to grip the cloth and clasp it to his chest. He carried his jacket over his left shoulder. For him this was only a mark of respect, carried in deference to me and not for his own needs. White woollen trousers, of the same material as his jacket, were secured round his waist by a strong leather belt with small pockets held in place by a leather thong. From these protruded the forks of his compasses and the helves of three hammers. The trousers only covered him down to his ankles. A long goatskin apron flapped and rustled against his knees at each step. He walked with the slow, measured tread of a man who thinks as he walks, whose inner being, that scale and balance of a human being, determines the movements of his body. Such was the outward appearance of the stonemason.

III

Beneath this rough exterior and the rustic clothes, on the bare head of the man there was, nevertheless, a character—I will not say merely of dignity—of divinity, in the human face. This struck the eye and removed any idea of vulgarity or of disdain from your mind. The outline of his forehead was as lofty, as upright, as free from base quirks and furrows as the outline of Plato's forehead in sculpture shining in the Attic sun. The emaciated and hollowed muscles throbbing in his eye sockets, his temples, his cheeks, his lips, his chin had, at the same time, the restfulness and impressionability of a girl convalescing from a long illness or recovering from a secret hurt. His eyelids, fringed with long lashes, opened on clear blue irises with wide open pupils, the eyes of a man used to looking tall objects up and down, and keeping them in his sight. His eyelashes cast a shade of mystery between his eyelids and his eyes. Meditation and prayer could be concealed there without interfering with his vision. His nose, straight and slightly convex in the middle, with a network of veins visible under a clear skin, met his lips by the central membrane below his nostrils,

translucent in the sunlight behind him. The folds around his mouth were supple, lacking rigidity or wrinkles. They drooped somewhat at the ends under the weight of an unconscious sadness, then turned up with the elasticity of purpose. His complexion had the healthy, even pallor of marble exposed to the air. The pronounced shadow of his black hair, waving over his cheeks with a few drops of sweat, took the pallor away. He bent his face forward a little, from the force of habitual thought rather than from his customary position at work. As you walked near this man and looked at him sideways, the sunlight concealing me while giving him a halo of sunbeams, you were conscious that you were walking beside a living soul. In that head was a world all of thinking, feeling, hoping, separate from the rustic frame that carried it. You thought you were looking at the picture of thought against the morning sun, shining in a blue sky.

I dared not speak a word for fear of upsetting the recollection of his thoughts. His voice, when he replied briefly to the old farmer, was modulated, deep and bass, like the sound of a thin, uncracked slab of marble under the polishing hammer. He did not converse: he sang. You would have said that everything from his throat was a hymn, even ‘yes’ and ‘no’.

IV

Old Litaud glanced covertly at me from time to time to tell me, “You see, that the stonemason is as I told you”. He then shook his white head as if to tell himself, “I doubt if Sir can persuade him”.

We reached the cedars. I pointed out to the stonemason the damaged top of the wall. He unfolded his fan-shaped measure marked in feet and inches to calculate the number and width of the stones I was asking for.

“It’s quite a few lengths,” he said, coming back to me.

“Sure. Make them for me as soon as possible. You have my quarry, a dozen steps from here, from which you can cut. But first, tell me how much you charge per square foot.”

“I know nothing about that”, he said with visible and touching embarrassment.

“But who will know that apart from you”, I said. “Must I make an offer on my own?”

“No, Sir,” he replied timidly with yet more embarrassment, which swelled his veins and reddened the skin of his lowered forehead. “Neither you nor I, but God will”.

“What do you mean, God will?” I exclaimed.

"Yes," he continued, "only he knows how long it will take me to cut the stones from the quarry and shape and polish them. When that is done, I will work out what I need for my food—nothing for my labour, Sir. As for the labour, it is not man but God who prescribes and pays for it. You, in your room, on your horse or with your books under the shade of these trees, will have more experience than I".

These words impressed me, uttered without affectation, flowing as naturally as breathing from his lips, spoken without defiance or superiority or insolence, with simplicity and even with gentleness. I did not try to rebuff or argue, or embark there and then on a discussion to which he would react. I showed no amazement or hurt in my expression.

"Well," I said to old Litaud, "take him to the quarry and set him to work."

I went back inside. Half an hour afterwards, I heard through my window the echoing blows of the pick and the muffled sounds of the blocks of stone as they rolled from the top of the quarry to the bottom of the ravine.

I left Saint Point that evening.

V

Three weeks later I returned there to settle in with my family for the rest of the summer. When I awoke the day after my arrival I heard no pickaxe or hammer blows from the quarry. I went there and it was empty. There was only a small heap of grey stones recently detached from the quarry side and two or three rough-hewn slabs. I ran to old Litaud to ask him why the work so quickly agreed upon had been abandoned.

"I don't know anything about it," he told me." Claude des Huttes worked for several days. One morning I did not see him. He had different ideas. I did tell you, Sir, It does not do to trust these saints. They walk with God, who overrules their walk with human beings. Perhaps he will have said to himself, 'I work for the poor. If I work for gentlemen, the poor will have no one to work for them. Winter is coming, the barns will not be repaired, the cattle sheds will not be weatherproof, the grain will be ruined, the cattle will die, children will cry in the cold of their huts. That will be my fault. God will hold me accountable. The château will always be able to find workers for pay. The work for the owner of the garden is not urgent; if the stones fall down, they will not suffer. Let's go', or something like that—how should I know? You cannot hear what a man's head says to him privately, can you? And he left with his tools. If you like, Sir, I will go up there once again and speak to him and ask him to come

down again." "No", I said to the old man, "I will go myself. Just point out to me where he lives".

He raised his arm towards the highest peak of the chain of mountains to the east and indicated almost the end of the ridge, to the right of a clump of chestnuts, on the left of a grey boulder, a spray of light mist as at the foot of a waterfall, two or three white specks in the yellow furze.

"Those are his goats, Sir," he told me. "The house is not far away, but you can't see it from here. The roof is hidden by the outline of the hilltop and the hazel branches, which are higher than the wall and grow over the thatch. You only see smoke in winter when he burns a bundle of heather to keep the young goats warm."

"Right," I said to him, "I know the mountain. I don't need directions to take me there. Didn't I look after goats when I was a boy?"

CHAPTER THREE

I

I buttoned my leather gaiters over my hobnailed boots and took the bells off my dog so he would not scare the goats or warn Claude by running in front. I took my gun, staff and badge of a hunter. I crossed the valley fields, putting up the thrushes, and began the gradual climb across country, up gentle slopes at first, then the steeper mountainside. It was a Sunday morning. I met nobody in the fields; the whole day was before me. I turned around from time to time and sat on the roots of a chestnut to take a long look at the valley, opening out more from one pause to the next before my eyes. The sun had lazily passed over half of the sky, which it seemed to be measuring as it leaned towards the opposite mountain, as I approached the ruined hamlet of Les Huttes that had doubtless given the stonemason his surname. I had not been up there since the age of twelve, when my mother had taken me from the company of the local small children to put me into the common, run of the mill, world of masters, schoolboys and books. I used to go up there with the household servants once or twice a year, in that happy time of childhood, to buy kids in the springtime and shell chestnuts in the autumn at the two or three huts comprising the hamlet.

II

I well recognised the trees, the springs below the cresses and the periwinkles, even the mosses on the grey boulders that stood out from the carpet of heather like the bones of the earth. But the huts were no longer there. From a distance I could see just a few fragments of crumbling stones where they had been; a few brambles bearing blackberries were climbing over them. An old elder, which is called a *soyar* locally, a domestic tree that attaches itself of its own accord to a human dwelling, as the mallow and the lattice of ivy attach themselves to the graves in cemeteries, studded its blossoms among the broken tiles. A magnificent holly clung with its twisted branches to the ruin of a wall broken by a window open to the sky, a sturdy and immortal tree whose sap rises under snow and whose outside is always green. Its leaves remain glossy and seem to survive the

years and to take pity on the fleeting generations of human beings who pass by and lay themselves at its feet. The sight saddened me, but I became accustomed to it. I scanned with my eye for the path descending the ravine beside a trickle of water oozing from the granite that had previously led to the third hut. I discovered it under the dry leaves of last winter that the warm winds of spring had brought down on the slopes of the ravine, I walked for a time with the murmuring of the stream, which dripped rather than poured as it came down.

III

The ravine, at first full of moisture and darkness, sometimes narrow, sometimes wider, twisted between two sides of crumbled granite that dissolved into earth of different colours, red, greyish yellow, greenish, like the dark green pebbles you find on sandy beaches in Syria. Trunks of geans, gnarled plane trees and larches, hard and cold trees, bent towards each other from the higher sides of the gorge and, overarching it, formed a lofty canopy of still leaves. Footsteps echoed as in the nave of a cathedral. A gentle shiver ran up my skin as if I walked up a mysterious avenue. Occasional blackbirds crossed the valley in alarmed flight. But it soon grew lighter, as though a lamp had been lit above the transparent leaves. You saw some small patches of blue sky through the leaves, like pieces of mosaic in a ceiling. The trees fell back and the path climbed onwards to the right, towards the edge of the gorge and up a steep slope into daylight. On my left side I passed pools of green water at the bottom of what is called an ‘abyss’, in mountain parlance. When I reached level ground, the stonemason’s home lay before me.

IV

It was an irregular hut of dry stones without mortar, backed on to a large square patch of greyish rock on which could still be seen standing the walls of the third hut of the hamlet of Les Huttes, without door or window or roof. The platform of that rock, which had been the plinth for the goatherd’s hut, was strewn with tiles broken into fragments by the hooves of animals and the stumps of joists, the end of one still attached to the wall while the other hung unsupported near the ground. Old wisps of straw from the roof eddied around in the wind. Black soot on a patch of bricks, formerly mortared, marked the hearth where the family of mountain folk had lived and loved, and come to an end. Behind the ruined walls, the rock was worn away by the bed of a torrent running from its source or from

rain, forming a sort of natural channel from which issued the little waterfall, with gentle plashing, into the ravine. On the near side the low window of the hut was open to the north face. A huge ivy, its roots in the water, used to frame that window and wall. Now it entirely filled the opening with a mass of tufted leaves and black berries, as if it had dressed itself in mourning for the ruin of the house that had nourished it. It clung to the beams, the jambs of the chimney and the doorframe. It stuck out as a cornice along the top of each wall, even over the edge of the rock, like a dog lying beside his dead master, clasping him with his paws, covering him with his body, seeming to defy anyone to remove the remains of him who had loved him.

V

Claude had not attempted to rebuild the fallen house of his family to make a refuge for himself. Nothing would have been easier while the stone, the wood and the tiles were still intact. Why he had preferred to settle at the foot of the rock in a sort of hollow, which had previously served as a stable for the goats, and lie down there like a beggar at the door, God knows! Doubtless, it was because of a secret superstition in his heart towards the roof under which he had lived and loved, or a horror of finding himself alone and feeling it so empty, after having known it so full. For it was not for laziness; he did more work for nothing than he would have needed to do to maintain his mother's cottage in good repair.

VI

Whatever the reason, his little house, or rather cave, was merely a cellar hollowed out by either the water or the collapse of part of the walls at the very edge of the rock. Since this hollow was not deep, he had added two low drystone walls, mostly triangular stones of turned granite. These were placed without design, one on the other, yet so one was inserted into the concave angle of the other, like the Cyclopean walls you see in Tuscany without knowing who built them, nature or man. These two walls extended from the rock for several feet on the pebbles of the slope, together with some clumps of box. A similar wall joined them together. It was pierced on the valley side by a low door and a dormer window, closed in on one side by a bundle of gorse still in flower. The door, made from three worm-eaten planks, evidently borrowed from the debris of the hut above, had no lock apart from a wooden latch, lifted from inside the hut by a string that hung outside in daytime and taken in at night through a little hole above it.

The part of the roof that was built into the rock jutted out a little way and was covered, not with thatch, but little bundles of furze tied together by great ropes of twisted oat straw. The rain ran down over them and across the clumps of vegetation in the walls. The rock itself formed a natural roof for the rear of the hut. You could still see at the edge of the protruding rock the remains of a balcony and one or two steps that had once been the rustic porch. The strands of ivy that I mentioned had invaded the whole of the old homestead climbed over this ruined balcony onto the roof of the present hut. A gnarled wild quince, some junipers and a huge hawthorn bush, rock-loving plants, set their roots in a natural crevice of the rock, their branches, mistletoe, fruits and flowers hanging over the roof. Practically the whole surface was covered with dead leaves, green leaves and a fragrant drift of dog rose. I was amazed to see two or three nests of small montane birds among the branches. They were still sitting on their eggs as they looked at me from a canopy of leaves and did not fly away at my approach, as if instinctively feeling trustingly secure; neither did the lizards scurry away from the wall.

VII

I pulled the string of the wooden latch and went into the hut, calling out for Claude des Huttes. The hut was empty. I looked quickly around to get an idea of the customs and habits of the man from the look of his home. At a glance I took in the way of life of this humble solitary man. The back of the hut was a few feet higher than the floor. It was a kind of bed hollowed out of the living rock, the size of a man. This bedroom had the arching rock as a ceiling. It was covered, for want of a mattress, with a litter of oat straw, mixed with hay and scented herbs from the mountains. A bunch of broom served as a pillow, while three or four black sheepskins rolled up at the foot of the bed acted as a covering in winter. At the side of this alcove a woman’s dress, laced with velvet at the seams, hung from a nail with a little gold or brass cross on its bodice, the only decoration in the hut, its household charm. A little further against the rock was a small hearth covered with a drift of white ash from the sweepings. The smoke that had blackened the greyish stone of the place escaped through a gap between two fortuitously placed blocks of granite. It was sealed with a bunch of dry herbs when the hearth was dead. The remainder of the floor of the hut was covered with a thick litter of fresh heather and green ferns. On it were imprinted the indents made by the weight of the goats and their kids in the night. As for provisions, there were rows of the previous year’s golden maize cobs hung from a roof beam, for grilling in ashes as the peasants of

the hills do. There were peeled and oven-dried chestnuts that had been cooked in milk, a few little goats' milk cheeses, as hard as the stones they resembled, and a large loaf of rye bread, broken into, on which damp spots had begun to spread a white film. A knife, a stoneware pot for boiling potatoes and a shiny leather pouch furnished with a long iron handle to dip up drinking water from the spring were the only furnishings and utensils in the hut. I looked from out of the door at my house on the horizon, shining in the sun in the valley, with its extensive walls, its roofs, its towers, its large rooms full of useful and useless pieces of furniture, housing all the servants and the necessities of a civilisation, never satisfied with its needs and with satisfying its invented needs. I looked back at the furnishings of Claude de Huttes and went out, saying, "There you have the total needs of a man".

VIII

I closed the door again and shouted outside, but only the cleft in the rock echoed the name of its tenant. Then I climbed up higher, hither and thither, to find the man and his goats. A track that only the eye of a hunter could make out, marked by a slight bending of the grass by footsteps and by occasional fronds of bracken bruised by the goats' horns, took me up behind a hill crowned with grey boulders, about a hundred steps above the waterfall. A huge rock like the one that supported the house below jutted out from the middle of the hilltop like a giant tower. Fine, soft grass like velvet grew around it. I walked slowly round this rock, whose summit seemed unscalable without a ladder, then I found a kind of crack in its side, with natural and irregular ledges allowing a way up. I climbed up to discover from above what could live on these hilltops and ravines where earth, stone and water seemed to have opened out into so many folds of ground. Reaching the summit, a gentle slope took me to the foot of the southern side of the rock that I had assumed to be inaccessible from all sides. Level with this side was a little patch of flowery turf, bounded by mossy boulders piled on top of each other like a garden patch accidentally preserved within the ruin of an old building. As I stepped onto this lawn and looked around I saw all that I was looking for.

IX

The grassy patch sloped like a thatched roof to allow the winter snows to slide off and the rain to run off. The midday sun, directly above, was reflected by gritty pinpoints of granite that lay all over the surface,

radiating the warm rays that are rare at such altitudes, high above the valleys. Spring was in the air. A cloud of insects floated and buzzed in the rays, making them tangible. You could feel that other visitors apart from man had discovered this shelter. Plants also grew in profusion at the base of the rocks. Pinks took root on the mosses of the wall and fluttered there, like cherries picked open by the birds. Their stalks, long and flexible, cast a thousand arcs of greenery, at their ends a star of five-petalled rosettes that dropped onto the grass. Though unplanted, the grass looked as if it had been combed by a rake. The hunter, discovering this place with a solitude both austere and gracious, radiant yet pensive, walled in yet flowering, would not be certain if the patch of land before his eyes was an orchard, a garden or a burial sanctuary provided with flowers by the devotions of a deserted village: it was in fact a place in which the two purposes came together , a sort of funerary garden where life and death disputed over the ground, and where you saw at the same time grass, flowers, grazing animals and singing birds—and hummocks of turf that resembled the folds in the sheets of a man's last bed. You hesitated between joy and pleasure, and finally contemplated in silence without knowing whether to be happy or sad. That was the first impression made on me by this charming retreat of sunshine, silence and restfulness.

X

Scarcely had I set foot on the grass with its blossoms to walk round it than my glance was drawn to a strange and inexplicable sight that kept my feet still. Twenty or thirty paces from me, three great worn blocks of granite stood out at the top of the lawn against the blue of the sky. One of them rose out of the ground like a standing stump of a demolished column, while another was placed over and balanced on this stump. The third rested like a cap on top of the centre of the second horizontal block, whether by accident of nature or by design of the constructor forming a massive elliptical cross. Its size and weight seemed to be beyond the strength of man. One of the stone arms of the cross leaned over on the left at such an angle that seemed to indicate in this semi-druidical monument an erratic and uncontrived quirk of the elements rather than a purposeful arrangement. Had this rude cross attracted to itself the seven or eight graves from the huts grouped around it? Had the inhabitants of former days rolled these separate blocks together to make of them the emblem of their death and the sign of their immortality? Impossible to say. The tiny white and grey scales of lichen, the dark stains of the rain, the green mosses of springtime, the accidental growth sown by the winds with the