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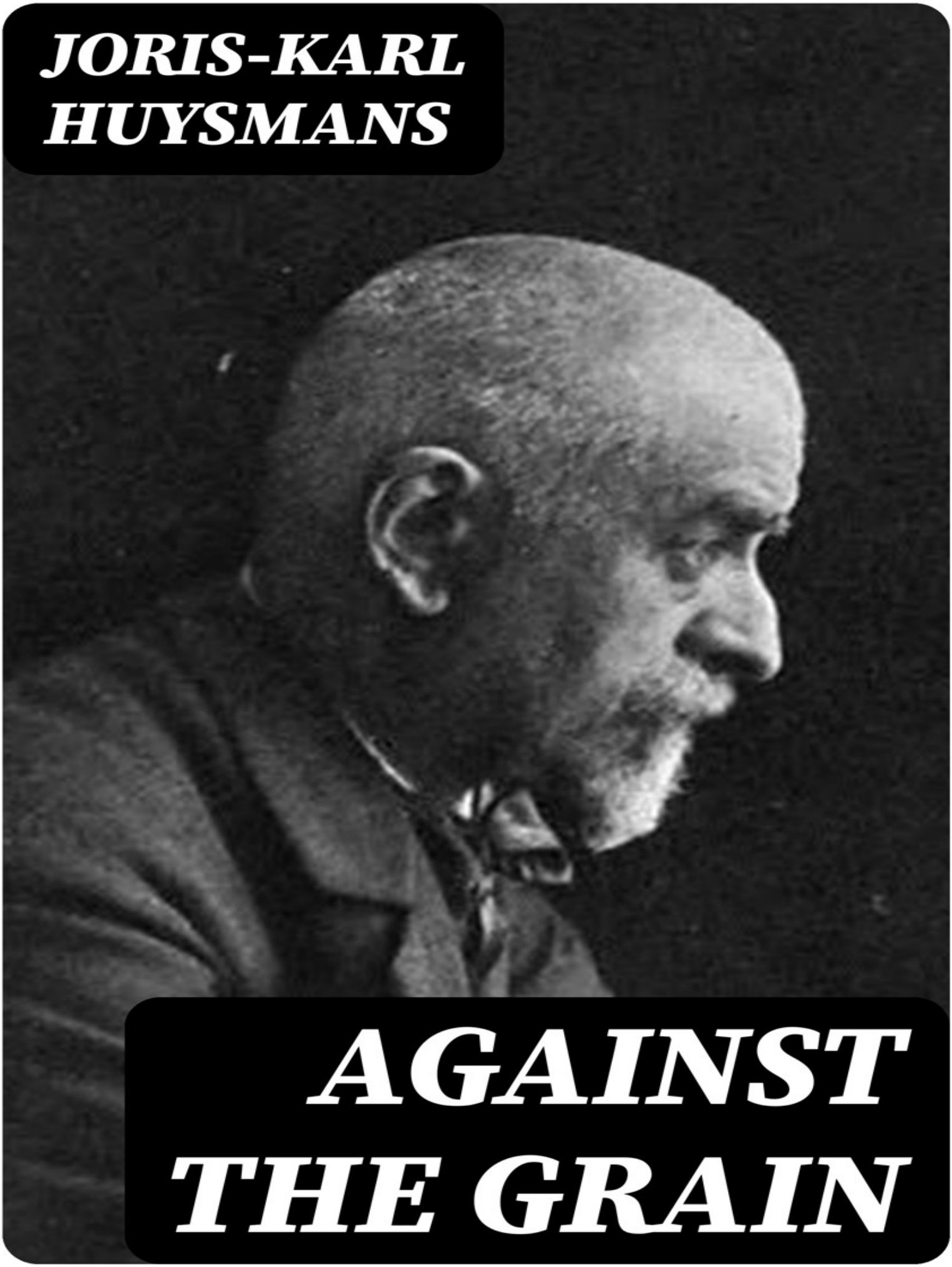
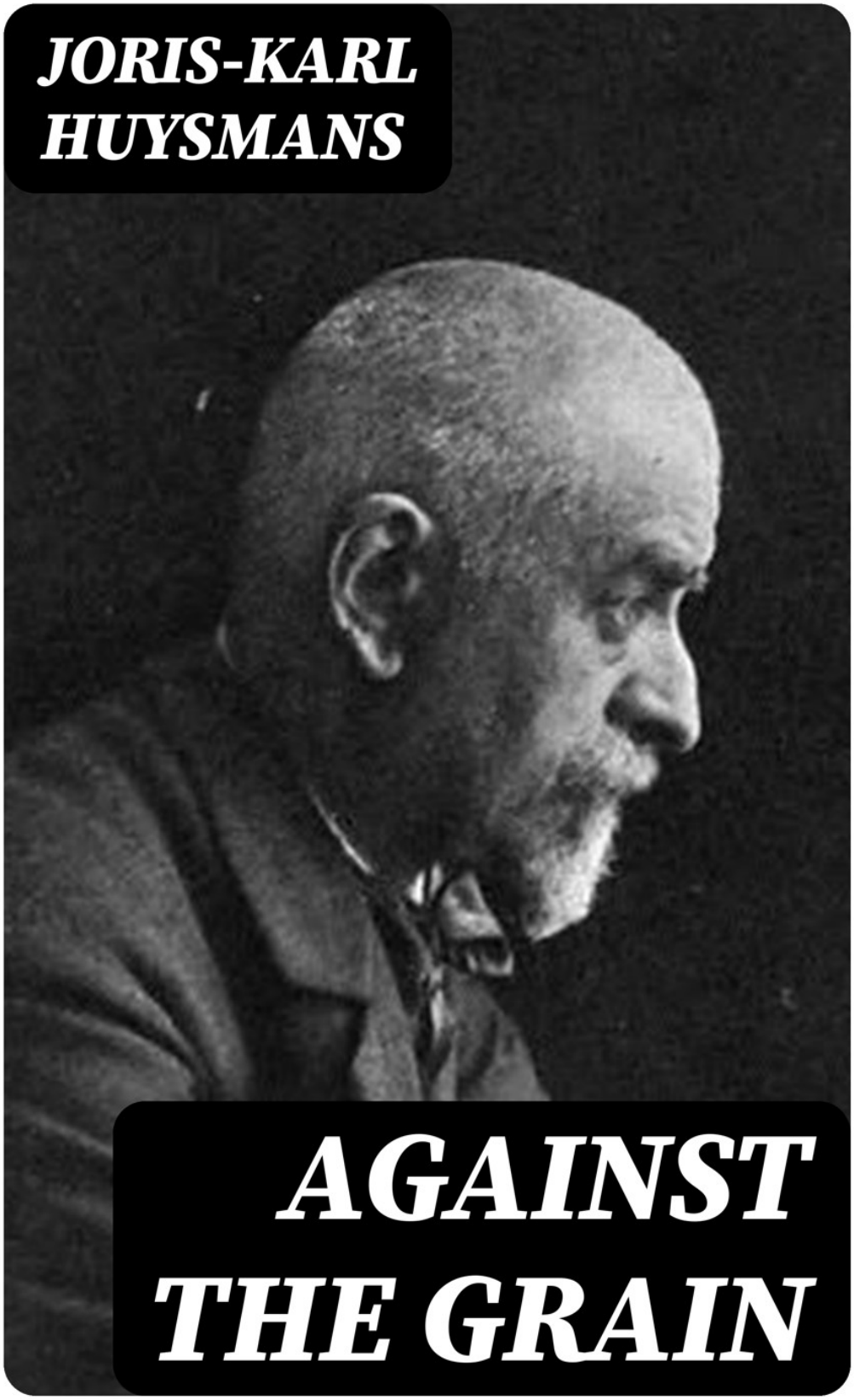


AGAINST THE GRAIN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Against the Grain

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To judge by such family portraits as were preserved in the Château de Lourps, the race of the Floressas des Esseintes had been composed in olden days of stalwart veterans of the wars, grim knights with scowling visages. Imprisoned in the old-fashioned picture frames that seemed all too narrow to contain their broad shoulders, they glared out alarmingly at the spectator, who was equally impressed by the fixed stare in the eyes, the martial curl of the moustaches and the noble development of the chests encased in enormous steel cuirasses.

These were ancestral portraits; those representing subsequent generations were conspicuous by their absence. There was a gap in the series, a gap which one face alone served to fill and so connect the past and present,—a mysterious, world-weary countenance. The features were heavy and drawn, the prominent cheekbones touched with a spot of rouge, the hair plastered to the head and entwined with a string of pearls, the slender neck rising from amid the pleatings of a stiff ruff.

Already in this picture of one of the most intimate friends of the Duc d'Epernon and the Marquis d'O, the vitiation of an exhausted race, the excess of lymph in the blood, were plainly to be traced.

No doubt the gradual degeneration of this ancient house had followed a regular and unbroken course; the progressive effemination of the men had gone on continuously from bad to worse. Moreover, to complete the deteriorating effect of

time, the Des Esseintes had for centuries been in the habit of intermarrying among themselves, thus wasting the small remains of their original vigour and energy. Sole surviving descendant of this family, once so numerous that it covered nearly all the domains of the Ile-de-France and of La Brie, was the Duc Jean des Esseintes, a frail young man of thirty, anaemic and nervous, with hollow cheeks, eyes of a cold, steely blue, a small but still straight nose, and long, slender hands.

By a curious accident of heredity, this last scion of a race bore a strong resemblance to the far-off ancestor, the mignon of Princes, from whom he had got the pointed beard of the very palest possible blonde and the ambiguous look of the eyes, at once languid and energetic in expression, which marked the portrait.

His childhood had been beset with perils. Threatened with scrofulous affections, worn out with persistent attacks of fever, he had nevertheless successfully weathered the breakers of puberty, after which critical period his nerves had recovered the mastery, vanquished the languors and depressions of chlorosis and permitted the constitution to reach its full and complete development. The mother, a tall, silent, white-faced woman, died of general debility; then the father succumbed to a vague and mysterious malady. At the time Des Esseintes was approaching his seventeenth birthday.

The only recollection he retained of his parents was one of fear rather than of anything resembling gratitude or affection. His father, who generally resided in Paris, was almost a total stranger; his mother he only remembered as

a chronic invalid, who never left the precincts of a shuttered bedroom in the Château de Lourps. It was only on rare occasions that husband and wife met, and of these meetings all he recalled was the drab, colourless dulness,—his father and mother seated on either side of a table lighted only by a deeply shaded lamp, for the Duchess could not endure light and noise without suffering from nervous attacks. In the semi-darkness, they would exchange two or three sentences at most; then the Duke would slip away with a yawn and take his departure by the first available train.

At the Jesuits' College to which Jean was sent to be educated, his life proved pleasanter and less trying. The Fathers made much of the lad, whose intelligence amazed them; yet. in spite of all their efforts, they entirely failed to induce him to pursue any definite and disciplined course of study. He, devoted himself eagerly to certain tasks, acquired a precocious mastery of the Latin tongue; but on the other hand, he was absolutely incapable of construing three words of Greek, displayed no aptitude whatever for living languages and showed himself a perfect fool directly any attempt was made to teach him the merest rudiments of the physical sciences.

His family pretty much washed their hands of him; occasionally his father would pay him a visit at the College, but, "Good day, good evening, be a good boy and work hard," was about all he ever said to him. His summer holidays he used to spend at the Château de Lourps, where his presence quite failed to rouse his mother from her reveries; she hardly seemed to see him or, if she did, would

gaze at him for a few moments with a painful smile, then sink back again into the artificial night in which the heavy curtains drawn across the windows wrapped the apartment.

The domestics were old and tiresome. The boy, left to himself, would turn over the books in the library on wet days, or on fine afternoons take long walks in the country.

It was his great delight to make his way down into the valley to Jutigny, a village standing at the foot of the hills,—a little cluster of cottages with thatched roofs tufted with moss. He would lie out in the meadows under the lee of the tall hayricks, listening to the dull rumble of the water-mills, filling his lungs with the fresh air of the Voulzie. Sometimes he would wander as far as the peat-workings, to the hamlet of Longueville with its hovels painted green and black; at another time climb the wind-swept hills and gaze out over the vast prospect. There he had below him on one side the valley of the Seine, losing itself in immensity and melting into the blue haze of the far distance; on the other, high on the horizon line, the churches and Castle keep of Provins that seemed to shake and shiver in a sunlit dust-cloud.

He spent the hours in reading or dreaming, drinking his fill of solitude till nightfall. By dint of constantly brooding over the same thoughts, his mind gained concentration and his still undeveloped ideas ripened towards maturity. After each vacation, he went back more thoughtful and more stubborn to his masters. These changes did not escape their notice, clearsighted and shrewd, taught by their profession to sound the deepest depths of the human soul, they were well aware of the qualities and limitations of this alert but indocile intelligence; they realized that this pupil of theirs

would never enhance the fame of the House, and as his family was wealthy and appeared to take little interest in his future, they soon abandoned all idea of directing his energies towards any of the lucrative careers open to the successful student. Though he was ready enough to enter with them into those theological disputations that attracted him by their subtleties and casuistical distinctions, they never even thought of preparing him for Holy Orders, for despite their efforts, his faith remained feeble. In the last resort, out of prudence and a fear of the unknown, they left him to himself to work at such studies as he chose and neglect the rest, unwilling to alienate this independent spirit by petty restrictions such as lay ushers are so fond of imposing.

So he lived a perfectly contented life, scarcely conscious of the priests' fatherly yoke. He pursued his Latin and French studies after his own fashion, and, albeit Theology found no place in the curriculum of his classes, he completed the apprenticeship to that science which he had begun at the Château de Lourps in the library of books left by his great great-uncle Dom Prosper, erstwhile Prior of the Canons Regular of Saint-Ruf.

The time, however, arrived when he must quit the Jesuit College; he was coming of age and would be master of his fortune; his cousin and guardian, the Comte de Montchevrel, gave him an account of his stewardship. The intimacy thus established was of short duration, for what point of contact could there be between the two, one of whom was an old man, the other a young one? Out of curiosity, lack of occupation, courtesy, Des Esseintes kept up relations with

this family, and on several occasions, at his hotel in the Rue da la Chaise, endured evenings of a deadly dulness at which good ladies of his kin, as ancient as the hills, conversed about quarterings of nobility, heraldic scutcheons and ceremonial observances of years gone-by.

Even more than these worthy dowagers, the men, gathered round a whist-table, betrayed their hopeless nullity; these descendants of the old preux chevaliers, last scions of the feudal houses, appeared to Des Esseintes under the guise of a parcel of snuffling, grotesque greybeards, repeating ad nauseam a wearisome string of insipid outworn platitudes. Just as when you cut the stalk of a fern, you can see the mark of a lily, really a fleur-de-lis seemed to be the one and only impress left on the softened pulp that took the place of brains in these poor old heads.

The young man was filled with an ineffable pity for these mummies buried in their rococo catafalques; for these crusty dandies who lived with eyes for ever fixed on a vaguely defined Land of Promise, an imaginary Canaan of good hope. After a few experiences of the kind, he firmly resolved, in spite of all invitations and reproaches, never again to set foot in this society.

Thereupon he began to spend his days among young men of his own age and rank. Some of these, who had been brought up like himself at religious seminaries, had retained from this training a special character of their own. They attended church, communicated at Easter, frequented Catholic clubs and dropping their eyes in mock modesty, hid from each other, as if they had been crimes, their enterprises with women. For the most part they were witless

fellows, with a sufficiency of good looks, but without a spark of mind or spirit; prime dunces who had exhausted their masters' patience, but had nevertheless fulfilled the latters' ambition to send out into the world obedient and pious sons of the Church.

Others, reared in the Colleges of the State or at Lycées, were more outspoken and less of hypocrites, but they were neither more interesting nor less narrow-minded. These were men of pleasure, devotees of operettas and races, playing lansquenet and baccarat, stalking fortunes on horses and cards,—all the diversions in fact that empty-headed folks love. After a year's trial of this life an enormous weariness resulted; he was sick and tired of these people whose indulgences struck him as paltry and commonplace, carried out without discrimination, without excitement, without any real stirring of blood or stimulation of nerves.

Little by little, he left off frequenting their society, and approached the men of letters, with whom his mind must surely find more points of sympathy and feel itself more at ease in their company. It was a fresh disappointment; he was revolted by their spiteful and petty judgments, their conversation that was as hackneyed as a church-door, their nauseous discussions invariably appraising the merit of a work solely according to the number of editions and the amount of profit on the sales. At the same time, he discovered the apostles of freedom, the wiseacres of the bourgeoisie, the thinkers who clamoured for entire liberty,—liberty to strangle the opinions of other people,—to be a set

of greedy, shameless hypocrites, whom as men of education he rated below the level of the village cobbler.

His scorn of humanity grew by what it fed on; he realized in fact that the world is mostly made up of solemn humbugs and silly idiots. There was no room for doubt; he could entertain no hope of discovering in another the same aspirations and the same antipathies, no hope of joining forces with a mind that, like his own, should find its satisfaction in a life of studious idleness; no hope of uniting a keen and doctrinaire spirit such as his, with that of a writer and a man of learning.

His nerves were on edge, he was ill at ease; disgusted at the triviality of the ideas exchanged and received, he was growing to be like the men Nicole speaks of, who are unhappy everywhere; he was continually being chafed almost beyond endurance by the patriotic and social exaggerations he read every morning in the papers, overrating the importance of the triumphs which an all-powerful public reserves always and under all circumstances for works equally devoid of ideas and of style.

Already he was dreaming of a refined Thebaïd, a desert hermitage combined with modern comfort, an ark on dry land and nicely warmed, whither he could fly for refuge from the incessant deluge of human folly.

One passion and one only, woman, might have arrested him in this universal disdain that was rising within him; but this too was exhausted. He had tasted the sweets of the flesh with the appetite of a sick man, an invalid debilitated andfull of whimsies, whose palate quickly loses savour. In the days when he had consorted with the coarse and carnal-

minded men of pleasure, he had participated like the rest in some of those unconventional supper parties where tipsy women bare their bosoms at dessert and beat the table with dishevelled heads; he had been a visitor likewise behind the scenes, had had relations with actresses and popular singers, had endured, added to the natural and innate folly of the sex, the frantic vanity of women of the stage; then he had kept mistresses already famous for their gallantry and contributed to swell the exchequer of those agencies that supply, for a price, highly dubious gratifications; last of all, sick and satiated with this pretence of pleasure, of these stale caresses that are all alike, he had plunged into the nether depths, hoping to revive his flagging passions by sheer force of contrast, thinking to stimulate his exhausted senses by the very foulness of the filth and beastliness of low-bred vice.

Try what he would, an overpowering sense of ennui weighed him down. But still he persisted, and presently had recourse to the perilous caresses of the experts in amorousness. But his health was unable to bear the strain and his nerves gave way; the back of the neck began to prick and the hands were tremulous,—steady enough still when a heavy object had to be lifted, but uncertain if they held anything quite light such as a wineglass.

The physicians he consulted terrified him. It was indeed high time to change his way of life, to abandon these practices that were draining away his vitality. For a while, he led a quiet existence; but before long his passions awoke again and once more piped to arms. Like young girls who, under the stress of poverty, crave after highly spiced or

even repulsive foods, he began to ponder and presently to practise abnormal indulgences, unnatural pleasures. This was the end; as if all possible delights of the flesh were exhausted, he felt sated, worn out with weariness; his senses fell into a lethargy, impotence was not far off.

So he found himself stranded, a lonely, disillusioned, sobered man, utterly and abominably tired, beseeching an end of it—an end the cowardice of his flesh forbade his winning.

His projects of finding some retreat far from his fellows, of burying himself in a hermit's cell, deadening, as they do the noise of the traffic for sick people by laying down straw in the streets, the inexorable turmoil of life, these projects more and more attracted him.

Besides, it was quite time to come to some definite decision for other reasons; he reckoned up the state of his finances and was appalled at the result. In reckless follies and riotous living generally, he had squandered the major part of his patrimony, while the balance, invested in land, brought him in only an insignificant revenue.

He determined to sell the Château de Lourps, which he never visited and where he would leave behind him no tender memories, no fond regrets; by this means he paid off all claims on the rest of his property, bought Government annuities and so secured himself an annual income of fifty thousand francs, while reserving, over and above, a round sum to buy and furnish the little house where he proposed to steep himself in a peace and quiet that should last his lifetime.

He searched the outer suburbs of the capital and presently discovered a cottage for sale, above Fontenay-aux-Roses, in a remote spot, far from all neighbours, near the Fort. His dream was fulfilled; in this district, still unspoilt by intruders from Paris, he was secure against all harassment; the very difficulties of communication—the place was wretchedly served by a grotesquely inefficient railway at the far end of the little town and a rustic tramway that went and came according to a self-appointed time table—were a comfort to him.

As he thought over the new existence he meant to make for himself, he experienced a lively sense of relief, seeing himself just far enough withdrawn for the flood of Paris activity not to touch his retreat, yet near enough for the proximity of the metropolis to add a spice to his solitariness. Indeed, in view of the well-known fact that for a man to find himself in a situation where it is impossible for him to visit a particular spot is of itself quite enough to fill him with an instant wish to go there, he was really guarding himself, by thus not entirely barring the road, from any craving to renew intercourse with the world or any regret for having abandoned it.

He set the masons to work on the house he had bought; then suddenly one day, without telling a soul of his plans, he got rid of his furniture, dismissed his servants and disappeared without leaving any address with the concierge.

Chapter I

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MORE than two months slipped by before the time came when Des Esseintes found it feasible to immerse himself definitely in the peace and silence of his house at Fontenay; purchases of all kinds still kept him perambulating the Paris streets, tramping the town from end to end.

And yet, what endless inquiries had he not instituted, what lengthy lucubrations had he not indulged in, before finally entrusting his new home to the hands of the upholsterers! He had long been an expert in the right and wrong combinations and contrasts of tints. In other days, when he was still in the habit of inviting women to his house, he had fitted up a boudoir where, amid dainty carved furniture of the light-yellow camphor-wood of Japan, under a sort of tent of pink Indian satin, the flesh tints borrowed a soft, warm glow from the artfully disposed lights sifting down through the rich material.

This room, where mirrors hung on every wall, reflecting backwards and forwards from one to another an infinite succession of pink boudoirs, had enjoyed a great renown among his various mistresses, who loved to bathe their nakedness in this flood of warm crimson amid the aromatic odours given off by the Oriental wood of the furniture.

But, quite apart from the miracles wrought by this artificial atmosphere in the way of transfusing, or so it seemed, a new blood into tired veins and freshening up complexions tarnished and worn by the habitual use of cosmetics and too frequent nights of love, he also tasted in

his own person, in this luxurious retreat, special and peculiar satisfactions, pleasures exaggerated and rendered in a way more entrancing by the recollections of evil days overpast and vexations now outlived.

So, in a spirit of hate and scorn of his unhappy boyhood, he had suspended from the ceiling of the room we speak of, a little cage of silver wire in which a cricket was kept prisoner to chirp as they had been used to do in old days among the cinders in the great fireplaces at the Château de Lourps. Whenever he heard this sound, which he had so often listened to on many an evening of constraint and silence in his mother's chamber, all the miseries of a wretched and neglected childhood would come crowding before the eye of memory. At such times, roused from his reveries by the movements of the woman he was fondling mechanically at the moment and whose words and laughter interrupted his thoughts of the past and recalled him to reality, there as he lay in the pink boudoir, a sudden commotion would shake his soul, a longing for revenge on dreary hours endured in former times, a mad craving to befoul with base and carnal acts his recollections of bygone family life, an overmastering temptation to assuage his lustful propensities on the soft cushion of a woman's body, to drain the cup of sensuality to its last and bitterest dregs.

Other times again, when despondency weighed heavy on his spirit, when on rainy Autumn days he felt a sick aversion for everything,—for the streets, for his own house, for the dingy mud-coloured sky, for the stony-looking clouds, he would fly to this refuge, set the cricket's cage swinging gently to and fro and watch its movement repeated ad

infinitum in the surrounding mirrors, till at last his eyes would grow dazed and he seemed to see the cage itself at rest, but all the room tossing and turning, filling the whole apartment with a dizzy whirl of pink walls.

Then, in the days when Des Esseintes still deemed it incumbent on him to play the eccentric, he had also installed strange and elaborate dispositions of furniture and fittings, partitioning off his salon into a series of niches, each differently hung and carpeted, and each harmonizing in a subtle likeness by a more or less vague similarity of tints, gay or sombre, refined or barbaric, with the special character of the Latin and French books he loved. He would then settle himself down to read in whichever of these recesses displayed in its scheme of decoration the closest correspondence with the intimate essence of the particular book his caprice of the moment led him to peruse.

Last fancy of all, he had prepared a lofty hall in which to receive his tradesmen. These would march in, take seats side by side in a row of church stalls; then he would mount an imposing pulpit and preach them a sermon on dandyism, adjuring his bookmakers and tailors to conform with the most scrupulous fidelity to his commandments in the matter of cut and fashion, threatening them with the penalty of pecuniary excommunication if they failed to follow out to the letter the instructions embodied in his monitories and bulls.

He won a great reputation as an eccentric,—a reputation he crowned by adopting a costume of black velvet worn with a gold-fringed waistcoat and sticking by way of cravat a bunch of Parma violets in the opening of a very low-necked

shirt. Then he would invite parties of literary friends to dinners that set all the world talking. In one instance in particular, modelling the entertainment on a banquet of the eighteenth century, he had organized a funeral feast in celebration of the most unmentionable of minor personal calamities. The dining-room was hung with black and looked out on a strangely metamorphosed garden, the walks being strewn with charcoal, the little basin in the middle of the lawn bordered with a rim of black basalt and filled with ink; and the ordinary shrubs superseded by cypresses and pines. The dinner itself was served on a black cloth, decorated with baskets of violets and scabiosae and illuminated by candelabra in which tall tapers flared.

While a concealed orchestra played funeral marches, the guests were waited on by naked negresses wearing shoes and stockings of cloth of silver besprinkled with tears.

The viands were served on black-bordered plates,—turtle soup, Russian black bread, ripe olives from Turkey, caviar, mule steaks, Frankfurt smoked sausages, game dished up in sauces coloured to resemble liquorice water and boot-blacking, truffles in jelly, chocolate-tinted creams, puddings, nectarines, fruit preserves, mulberries and cherries. The wines were drunk from dark-tinted glasses, - wines of the Limagne and Roussillon vintages, wines of Tenedos, the Val de Penas and Oporto. After the coffee and walnuts came other unusual beverages, kwas, porter and stout.

The invitations, which purported to be for a dinner in pious memory of the host's (temporarily) lost virility, were couched in the regulation phraseology of letters summoning relatives to attend the obsequies of a defunct kinsman.

But these extravagances, that had once been his boast, had died a natural death; nowadays his only feeling was one of self-contempt to remember these puerile and out-of-date displays of eccentricity,—the extraordinary clothes he had donned and the grotesque decorations he had lavished on his house. His only thought henceforth was to arrange, for his personal gratification only and no longer in order to startle other people, a home that should be comfortable, yet at the same time rich and rare in its appointments, to contrive himself a peaceful and exquisitely organized abode, specially adapted to meet the exigencies of the solitary life he proposed to lead.

When at length the new house at Fontenay was ready and fitted up in accordance with his wishes and intentions by the architect he had engaged; when nothing else was left save to settle the scheme of furniture and decoration, once again he passed in review, carefully and methodically, the whole series of available tints.

What he wanted was colours the effect of which was confirmed and strengthened under artificial light; little he cared even if by daylight they should appear insipid or crude, for he lived practically his whole life at night, holding that then a man was more truly at home, more himself and his own master, and that the mind found its only real excitant and effective stimulation in contact with the shades of evening; moreover, he reaped a special and peculiar satisfaction from finding himself in a room brilliantly lighted up, the only place alive and awake among surrounding houses all buried in sleep and darkness,—a sort of enjoyment that is not free from a touch of vanity, a selfish

mode of gratification familiar enough to belated workers when, drawing aside the window curtains, they note how all about them the world lies inert, dumb and dead.

Slowly, one by one, he sifted out the different tones.

Blue, by candle light, assumes an artificial green tinge; if deep blue, like cobalt or indigo, it becomes black; if light, it changes to grey; it may be as true and soft of hue as a turquoise, yet it looks dull and cold. Yes, it could only be employed as a supplement to help out some other colour; there could be no question of making blue the dominating note of a whole room.

On the other hand, the iron greys are even more sullen and heavy; the pearl greys lose their azure tinge and are metamorphosed into a dirty white; as for the deep greens, such as emperor green and myrtle green, these suffer the same fate as the blues and become indistinguishable from black. Only the pale greens therefore remained, peacock green for instance, or the cinnabars and lacquer greens, but then in their case lamplight extracts the blue in them, leaving only the yellow, which for its part shows only a poor false tone and dull, broken sheen.

Nor was it any use thinking of such tints as salmon-pink, maize, rose; their effeminate note would go dead against all his ideas of self-isolation; nor again were the violets worth considering, for they shed all their brightness by candle light; only red survives undimmed at night,—but then what a red! a sticky red, like wine-lees, a base, ignoble tint! Moreover, it struck him as quite superfluous to resort to this colour, inasmuch as after imbibing a certain small dose of santonin, a man sees violet, and it becomes the easiest

thing in the world to change about at will and without ever altering the actual tint of his wall hangings.

All these colours being rejected, three only were left, viz. red, orange, yellow.

Of these three, he preferred orange, so confirming by his own example the truth of a theory he used to declare was almost mathematically exact in its correspondence with the reality, to wit: that a harmony is always to be found existing between the sensual constitution of any individual of a genuinely artistic temperament and whatever colour his eyes see in the most pronounced and vivid way.

In fact, if we leave out of account the common run of men whose coarse retinas perceive neither the proper cadence peculiar to each of the colours nor the subtle charm of their various modifications and shades; similarly leaving on one side those bourgeois eyes that are insensible to the pomp and splendour of the strong, vibrating colours; regarding therefore only persons of delicate, refined visual organs, well trained in appreciation by the lessons of literature and art, it appeared to him to be an undoubted fact that the eye of that man amongst them who has visions of the ideal, who demands illusions to satisfy his aspirations, who craves veils to hide the nakedness of reality, is generally soothed and satisfied by blue and its cognate tints, such as mauve, lilac, pearl-grey, provided always they remain tender and do not overpass the border where they lose their individuality and change into pure violets and unmixed greys.

The blustering, swaggering type of men, on the contrary, the plethoric, the sanguine, the stalwart go-ahead fellows

who scorn compromises and by-roads to their goal, and rush straight at their object whatever it is, losing their heads at the first go-off, these for the most part delight in the startling tones of the reds and yellows, in the clash and clang of vermilions and chromes that blind their eyes and surfeit their senses.

Last comes the class of persons, of nervous organization and enfeebled vigour, whose sensual appetite craves highly seasoned dishes, men of a hectic, over-stimulated constitution. Their eyes almost invariably hanker after that most irritating and morbid of colours, with its artificial splendours and feverish acrid gleams,—orange.

What Des Esseintes' final choice then would be hardly admitted of a doubt; but indubitable difficulties still remained unsolved. If red and yellow are accentuated under artificial light, this is not always the case with their composite, orange, which is a hot-headed fellow and often blazes out into a crimson or a fire red.

He studied carefully by candle light all its different shades, and finally discovered one he thought should not lose equilibrium or refuse to fulfil the offices he claimed of it.

These preliminaries disposed of, he made a point of eschewing, so far as possible, at any rate in his study, the use of Oriental stuffs and rugs, which in these days, when rich tradesmen can buy them in the fancy shops at a discount, have become so common and so much a mark of vulgar ostentation.

Eventually he made up his mind to have his walls bound like his books in large-grained crushed morocco, of the best

Cape skins, surfaced by means of heavy steel plates under a powerful press.

The panelling once completed, he had the mouldings and tall plinths painted a deep indigo, a blue lacquer like what the coach-builders use for carriage bodies, while the ceiling, which was slightly coved, was also covered in morocco, displaying, like a magnified oeil-de-boeuf, framed in the orange leather, a circle of sky, as it were, of a rich blue, wherein soared silver angels, figures of seraphim embroidered long ago by the Weavers' Guild of Cologne for an ancient cope.

After the whole was arranged and finished, all these several tints fell into accord at night and did not clash at all; the blue of the woodwork struck a stable note that was pleasing and satisfying to the eye, supported and warmed, so to say, by the surrounding shades of orange, which for their part shone out with a pure, unsullied gorgeousness, itself backed up and in a way heightened by the near presence of the blue.

As to furniture, Des Esseintes had no long or laborious searches to undertake, inasmuch as the one and only luxury of the apartment was to be books and rare flowers; while reserving himself the right later on to adorn the naked walls with drawings and pictures, he confined himself for the present to fitting up almost all round the room a series of bookshelves and bookcases of ebony, scattering tiger skins and blue-foxes' pelts about the floor: and installing beside a massive money-changer's table of the fifteenth century, several deep-seated, high-backed armchairs, together with an old church lectern of wrought iron, one of those antique

service-desks whereon the deacon of the day used once to lay the Antiphonary, and which now supported one of the ponderous volumes of du Cange's Glossarium medaie et infimae Latinitatis.

The windows, the glass of which was coarse and semiopaque, bluish in tinge and with many of the panes filled with the bottoms of bottles, the protuberances picked out with gilt, allowed no view of the outside world and admitted only a faint dim "religious" light. They were further darkened by curtains made out of old priestly stoles, the dull dead gold of whose embroideries faded off into a background of a subdued, almost toneless red.

To complete the general effect, above the fireplace, the screen of which was likewise cut from the sumptuous silk of a Florentine dalmatic, midway between two monstrances of gilded copper in the Byzantine style which had come originally from the Abbaye-aux-Bois at Bièvre, stood a marvellously wrought triptych, each of the three separate panels carved with a lacelike delicacy of workmanship; this now contained, guarded under glass let into the triple frame, copied on real vellum in beautiful missal lettering and adorned with exquisite illuminations, three pieces of Baudelaire's: right and left, the sonnets called "The Lovers' Death" and "The Enemy," in the middle, the prose poem that goes by the English title of "Anywhere out of the World."

Chapter II

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AFTER the sale of his household goods, Des Esseintes kept on the two old servants who had looked after his invalid mother and between them had filled the double office of general factotum and hall-porter at the Château de Lourps. The latter had, up to the date of its being put up for sale, remained empty and untenanted.

He took with him to Fontenay this pair of domestics broken in to play the part of sick-nurses, trained to the methodical habits of wardsmen at a hospital, accustomed to administer at stated hours spoonfuls of physic and doses of medicinal draughts, subdued to the rigid quietude of cloistered monks, shut off from all communication with the outer world, content to spend their lives in close rooms with doors and windows always shut.

The husband's duty was to keep the rooms clean and fetch the provisions, the wife's to attend to the cooking. Their master gave up the first floor of the house for their accommodation, made them wear thick felt shoes, had double doors installed with well-oiled hinges and covered the floors with heavy carpeting so as to prevent his hearing the faintest sound of their footsteps overhead.

Then he arranged with them a code of signals, fixing the precise significance of different rings on his bell, few or many, long or short, and appointed a particular spot on his writingdesk where each month the account books were to be left; in fact, made every possible disposition so as to

avoid the obligation of seeing them or speaking to them more often than was absolutely indispensable.

More than this, as the woman must needs pass along the front of the house occasionally on her way to an outhouse where the wood was stored and he was resolved not to suffer the annoyance of seeing her commonplace exterior, he had a costume made for her of Flemish grogram, with a white mutch and a great black hood to muffle face and head, such as the Béguines still wear to this day at Ghent. The shadow of this mediaeval coif gliding by in the dusk gave him a conventual feeling, reminding him of those peaceful, pious settlements, those abodes of silence and solitude buried out of sight in a corner of the bustling, busy city.

He fixed the hours of meals, too, in accordance with a never varying schedule; indeed his table was of the plainest and simplest, the feebleness of his digestion no longer permitting him to indulge in heavy or elaborate repasts.

At five o'clock in winter, after dusk had closed in, he ate an abstemious breakfast of two boiled eggs, toast and tea; then came dinner at eleven; he used to drink coffee, sometimes tea or wine, during the night, and finally played with a bit of supper about five in the morning, before turning in.

These meals, the details and menu of which were settled once for all at the beginning of each season of the year, he took on a table placed in the middle of a small room communicating with his study by a padded corridor, hermetically closed and allowing neither smell nor sound to

penetrate from one to the other of the two apartments it served to connect.

The dining-room in question resembled a ship's cabin with its wooden ceiling of arched beams, its bulkheads and flooring of pitch-pine, its tiny window-opening cut through the woodwork as a porthole is in a vessel's side.

Like those Japanese boxes that fit one inside the other, this room was inserted within a larger one,—the real dining-room as designed by the architect.

This latter apartment was provided with two windows; one of these was now invisible, being hidden by the bulkhead or partition wall, which could however be dropped by touching a spring, so that fresh air might be admitted to circulate freely around and within the pitch-pine enclosure; the other was visible, being situated right opposite the porthole contrived in the woodwork, but was masked in a peculiar way, a large aquarium filling in the whole space intervening between the porthole and the real window in the real house-wall. Thus the daylight that penetrated into the cabin had first to pass through the outer window, the panes of which had been replaced by a single sheet of plain mirror glass, then through the water and last of all through the glazing of the porthole, which was permanently fixed in its place.

At the hour when the steaming samovar stood on the table, the moment when in Autumn the sun would be setting in the west, the water in the aquarium, dull and opaque by daylight, would redden and throw out fiery flashes as if from a glowing furnace over the light-coloured walls.