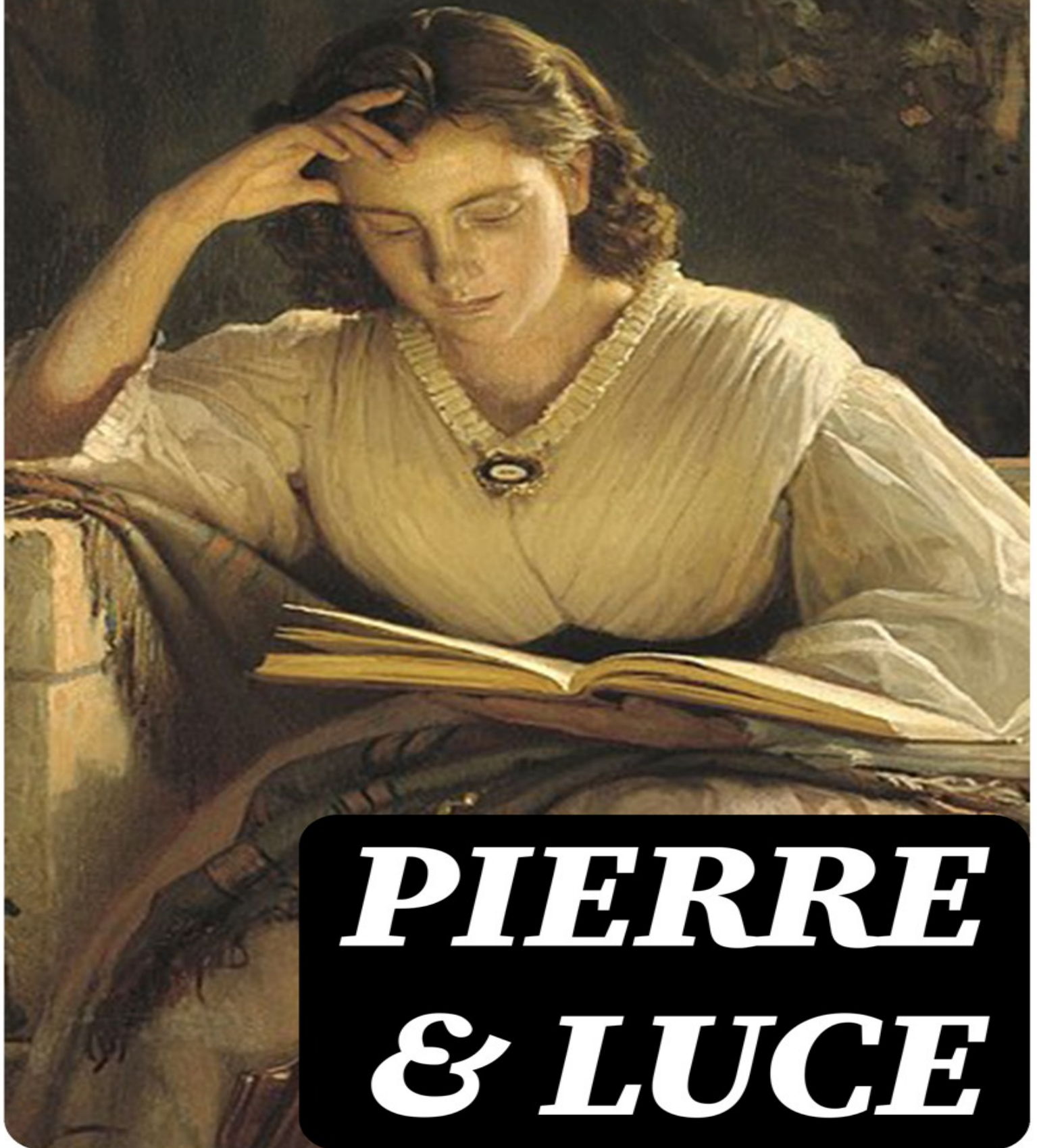


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THE ISLE OF CALMS

"Just as the Gulf Stream embraces the Sargasso Sea into which gradually drift the odds and ends that are carried away by the marine currents into the regions of calm, so does our aerial current surround a region where the air is still. It is called The Isle of Calms."

Duration of the Story
From Wednesday evening, January 30, to Good Friday,
May 29, 1918.

Chapter I

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Pierre plunged into the subway. A feverish, a brutal crowd. On his feet near the door, closely pressed in a bank of human bodies and sharing the heavy atmosphere passing in and out of their mouths, he stared without seeing them at the black and rumbling vaults over which flickered the shining eyes of the train. The same heavy shadows lay in his mind, the same gleams, hard and tremulous. Suffocating in the raised collar of his overcoat, his arms jammed against his sides and his lips compressed, his forehead damp with perspiration momentarily cooled by a current from outside when the door opened, he tried hard not to see, he tried not to breathe, he tried not to live. The heart of this young fellow of eighteen, still almost a child, was full of a dull despair. Above his head, above the shadows of these long vaulted ways, of this rat-run through which the monster of metal whirled, all swarming with human masks—was Paris, the snow, the cold January darkness, the nightmare of life and of death—the war.

The war! Four years ago it was, the war had come to stay. It had weighed heavily on his adolescent years. It had caught him by surprise in that morally critical period when the growing boy, disquieted by the awakening of his feelings, discovers with a shock the existence of blind, bestial, crushing forces in life whose prey he is and that without having asked to live at all. And if he happens to be delicate in character, tender of heart and frail as to body in

the way Pierre was, he experiences a disgust and horror which he does not dare confide to others for all these brutalities, these nastinesses, all this nonsense of fruitful and devouring nature—this breeding sow that gobbles up her litter of pigs.

In every growing youth between sixteen and eighteen there is a bit of the soul of Hamlet. Don't ask him to understand the war! (All right for you men, who have had your fill!) He has all he can do to understand life and forgive its existence. As a rule he digs himself in with his dream and with the arts, until the time comes when he has got used to his incarnation, and the grub has achieved its agonizing passage from larva to winged insect. What a need he has for peace and meditation during these April days so full of the trouble of maturing life! But they come after him to the bottom of his burrow, look him up, drag him from the dark while still so tender in his new-made skin. They toss him into the raw air amongst the hard human race whose follies and hatreds he is expected at the very first moment to accept without understanding them and, not understanding, to atone for them.

Pierre had been called to military service along with those of his own class, boys of sixteen to eighteen. Within six months his country would be needing his flesh. The war claimed him. Six months of respite. Six months! Oh, if one could only stop thinking at all from this time to that! Just to stay in this underground tunnel! Never see cruel daylight any more! . . .

He plunged deeper into his gloom along with the flying train and closed his eyes. . . .

When he opened them again—a few steps away, but separated by the bodies of two strangers, stood a young girl who had just entered. At first all he saw of her was a delicate profile under the shadow of her hat, one blonde curl on a somewhat thin cheek, a highlight perched upon the smooth cheekbone, the fine line of nose and lifted upper lip, and her mouth, slightly parted, still quivering a little from her sudden rush into the car. Through the portals of his eyes into his heart she entered, she entered all complete; and the door closed. Noises from without fell to nothing. Silence. Peace. She was there.

She did not look at him. In fact she did not even know as yet of his existence. And yet she was there inside him. He held her image there, speechless, crushed in his arms, and he dared not breathe for fear that his breath might ruffle her.

A jostling at the next station. Noisily talking, the crowd threw themselves into the already packed carriage. Pierre found himself shoved and carried along by the human wave. Above the tunnel vault, in the city up there, certain dull reports. The train started up again. At that moment a man quite out of his senses, who covered up his face with his hands, came running down the stairway of the station and rolled down on the floor at the bottom. There was just enough time to catch sight of the blood that trickled through his fingers. . . . Then the tunnel and darkness again. In the car frightened outcries: "The Gothas are at it again!" During the general excitement which fused these closely packed bodies into one, his hand had seized the hand that touched him. And when he raised his eyes he saw it was She.

She did not pull her hand away. At the pressure of his fingers hers replied in a sympathy of emotion, drawing together a bit, and then letting themselves go, soft and burning, without budging. Thus the two remained in the protective darkness, their hands like two birds hid in the same nest; and the blood from their hearts ran in a single flood through the warmth of their palms. They said no word to one another. His mouth almost touched the curl on her cheek and the tip of her ear. They did not make a gesture. She did not look at him. Two stations beyond, she loosed her hand from his, which did not keep her, slipped between the bodies and left without having looked at him.

When she had vanished it occurred to him to follow . . . Too late. The train was in motion. At the next stop he ran up to the surface. There he found the nocturnal cold, the unseen touches of some flakes of snow and the City, frightened and amused at its fright; above it very high in the air circled the warlike birds. But he saw only her, the one who was within him; and he reached home holding the hand of the unknown girl.