THE GIFT

On a snowy evening, Gerard de Valois stepped from a tram near Quai Marcellis in the Belgian city of Liège. He positioned his hat more firmly, tucked his scarf tightly into the collar of his coat, and went briskly off along the row of apartment buildings opposite the quay. He relished the soft pad of snow under his feet and the spiral of snowflakes in the aura of the streetlamps. Then he saw two young men meandering next to the balustrade of the quay. One of the young men was in a whimsical mood. He talked a little too loudly—in English, Gerard thought, though Gerard did not know English well enough to be sure. The fellow made snowballs and threw them over the balustrade into the river. He elevated his arms and pirouetted like a dancer. He leaped upon the railing of the balustrade and walked, balancing himself as in a tightrope act. He turned suddenly toward the dark river, stretched out his arms, and orated in a loud voice. When he had jumped down, he bellowed a line or two from a song. The other young man, noticing that Gerard had come abreast of them on the opposite walk, struck his companion a blow on the shoulder and scolded him in a muted voice.

The whimsical fellow seemed undaunted. He strode across the street and accosted Gerard. "I thought the street was empty," he said. "I have lived where it rarely snows; this storm has sent me wild."

"Apologies aren't necessary," Gerard said congenially. "It is a fine night for carousing. However, if you are searching for a bar, you have a way to go. You must go past the new bridge to Rue Pitours. There you will find an excellent little bistro."

"Carousing isn't exactly our line," the young man said. "We've been knocking on doors hoping to talk to people. We'd like to talk with you. We have a gift we would like to leave with you."

"You are peddlers," Gerard said. "I was sure you were American soldiers on leave from Germany."

"We are missionaries," the young man said. He introduced himself as Frère Beckwith and his companion, who spoke no French, as Frère Haglund. They were Mormons from Utah.

"*Sacré* Dieu, who has ever heard of Utah?" Gerard said, because he too was capable of whimsey. "So you have created a new religion in Utah. Is it anything like Islam?"

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The missionary had never heard such a comparison. When he had finished laughing, he explained that the Mormons were the inheritors of the authentic Christianity. They also called themselves Latter-day Saints.

"You call yourselves saints!" Gerard said incredulously. He stood back to scrutinize the missionary from a better angle of light. "*Mon Dieu*, I would like to see this place called Utah. The seven deadly sins do not exist there?"

"They exist," the missionary admitted. "There are people in Utah who are not Mormons, and even many Mormons are not faithful. But most of them are truly righteous."

"I can't understand why you have come to convert Liège," Gerard said. "This city has no end of Christians. If anything, there are too many. Why don't you go to some godless place like Chicago or New York?"

"Our missionaries are in those cities too. The entire world needs what we have. We want to tell you about it. You have never heard anything like it."

"I have already been a Christian. My parents were devout Catholics when they were alive," Gerard said. "Now I am an existentialist."

"You are exactly the person we want to talk to!"

"I will tell you something. A long time ago a famous barbarian ruled this land—Clovis, king of the Franks. It was a great day for Christianity when he converted. Becoming a Christian was a natural and reasonable thing in those days; it was the progressive thing to do. But you—you are fourteen hundred years too late. You have come to convert me to a dying religion."

The missionary flung out his arms with enthusiasm. "Dying? Christianity has never been more alive. That's what we are here to tell you. It has been restored."

"You are a very amiable person," Gerard said, "and I am tempted to hear what you have to say just to know you better. But, no, when I think of it, I would be wasting your time."

"Let me be the judge of that."

Gerard shook his head. "Really, I must get on. Look how the snow has accumulated on our shoulders."

The missionary pulled a coin and a bill from his pocket. "Let's gamble. This bill is worth two hundred fifty francs. I'll flip the coin. If it comes down tails, you get the two hundred fifty francs and we'll go away peacefully. But if it comes down heads, I keep the money and you listen to our message."

"Will you risk two hundred fifty francs on a chance to convert me?" Gerard said, laughing loudly. The missionary beamed. Gerard saw that he was perhaps twenty-one; his build was sturdy, and his hair, peeking from beneath

his beret, was blond. He had a wry, affectionate smile and eyes that were simultaneously fine-humored and wistful. Already Gerard liked the young man immensely.

"Well, come along to my apartment. I will introduce you to Katrine," Gerard said. As he led the missionaries along the snowy sidewalk, he remembered what he had said about the conversion of Clovis. Incredibly, he was witness to the replication of something ancient. For a moment he could almost believe that these young men were not his contemporaries but had miraculously arrived in Liège on this very evening, blown in by the swirling mists of snow from ages and epochs long since vanished.

Gerard's apartment was on the third story of a building overlooking Quai Marcellis and the river. As he let himself and his guests into the apartment, he was startled to see his sister Marie in the living room with Katrine. An old belligerence existed between Gerard and Marie, who had not visited her brother in four or five years.

Having stared a moment from the threshold, Gerard said elaborately, "I am honored, astounded, overwhelmed."

"Please withhold your effusions," Marie said in a bored voice. She sat with her pretty dark eyes half closed, her face impassive, her hands thrust into the pockets of the raincoat which she had not taken the trouble to remove.

"I invited Marie for supper," Katrine explained. "It was to surprise you for your birthday."

"My birthday!" Gerard exclaimed with exasperation. He turned to the missionaries. "I have turned thirty today. I had entirely forgotten the painful fact. Please forgive me. It will be very awkward to have your message tonight. You will have to return some other time."

Marie stood up, stretched languorously, and took off her coat. "Why chase them away so unceremoniously?" she said. She pulled chairs from the table. "Please take off your coats and have a seat. Really, Gerard, you are brutal. Have you forgotten your manners entirely? The least you can do is to introduce us."

First he introduced Frère Beckwith and Frère Haglund; then he turned to the women. He had no problem in making his sister known to the missionaries. Marie smiled warmly and murmured her recognition. But it was not so easy in the case of Katrine. Unthinkingly, Gerard had been ready to tell the simple truth about Katrine; he would not have used the word *mistress*, but certainly he would not have lied, as he finally did, by calling her his wife. For fifteen months Gerard and Katrine had lived in this apartment on the bank of the Meuse near Pont Albert le Premier. Katrine was Flemish: a little taller than Gerard, well-shaped, blond, generally placid, though not entirely predictable in temperament. She spoke French as Gerard spoke Flemish, with a heavy accent. She could not understand Walloon and was likely to be irritated if Gerard broke into the patois of his region. Gerard had time to reflect that by calling Katrine his wife, he had given her an advantage; she sometimes said that it was time to settle down, that one should not wait forever to have children. The little lie had

to be. Having known Frère Beckwith scarcely more than ten minutes, Gerard was already hesitant to disappoint him.

"Wouldn't it be fun to share our supper with these gentlemen?" Marie said as she lighted a cigarette.

Katrine wrung her hands. "I am so sorry; I am truly desolated; I would love very much at any other time to show our hospitality, but the plain truth is I have not prepared enough."

"Forgive us," Gerard said. "We will make amends by having you back. How would it be if we think of the same night next week?"

"Don't be so niggardly," Marie said scornfully. "I will be happy to share my chop with one of them. A modest portion of food won't hurt any of us. Gerard regularly overeats."

"It isn't the chops; I have six of those," Katrine said. "It is the éclairs. I have only three. And I bought only a single bottle of wine."

"Splendid," said Marie with enthusiasm. "I never eat éclairs; we will divide mine between the missionaries."

"We don't drink wine," Frère Beckwith said. "Tap water will be fine. Or a little milk, if you have some," he added hopefully.

"Milk?" Katrine said. "Do adults drink milk where you come from? And what would the neighbors think if it were known that we served tap water to a guest? We will serve coffee to everyone and save the wine for another occasion."

"Oh, no, I insist upon tap water," the missionary said. "It is what we always drink. Unless you have a little apple juice."

Katrine shook her head. "Tea perhaps?"

"Tap water," the missionary said fervently. "Belgians really don't know how good it is."

Though at first Gerard shared Katrine's anxiety, he saw as the meal progressed that there was plenty for everyone—a braised chop apiece, a nice portion of salad, a serving of baked chickory sprouts aswim in bubbling gouda cheese, and for each a crusty roll and a two-thirds portion of chocolate éclair. Katrine was pleased by the relish with which the missionaries ate a second helping of the chicory; Frère Beckwith said he had rarely eaten anything so good. Frère Beckwith inquired a little into the lives of the three Belgians, but he was obviously pleased to respond to their questions about Utah and the American West. He assured them that in frontier times cowboys and Indians had fought and killed one another just as the movies showed. The cowboys now rode motorcycles and drove pickup trucks, and the Indians lived on reservations. Utah had been settled by Mormon pioneers who had migrated across the Great Plains by means of ox-drawn wagons or handcarts pulled by the pioneers themselves; their exodus was a saga of incredible heroism. Utah was a land of high, timbered mountains, arid, sagebrush-filled valleys, and deeply eroded canyons. Frère Haglund came from Salt Lake City, while Frère Beckwith came from a desert village called Hurricane. Frère Beckwith's eyes misted for a moment as he spoke of his valiant mother, a widow who supported her son on

his mission with a tiny grocery store, a vegetable garden, and a herd of cattle which her brother helped her maintain. She did not regard it as a sacrifice to keep her son on a mission; she shared his urgency to make known the wonderful fact that an authentic Christianity existed upon the earth. The Latter-day Saints had no less an ambition than to declare to the entire world that salvation was accessible only through the authorized rituals of this restored Christianity.

Gerard realized that the missionary had slipped without fanfare into a religious discussion. Katrine's dull, abstracted eyes showed that she had lost interest. To Gerard's surprise, however, Marie was attentive and alert. Remarkably fresh and pretty for a woman of twenty-eight, she seemed to hang upon the words of the missionary. Her face glowed with sympathetic understanding as he delineated his arguments and emphasized his points; her luminous eyes followed his gestures closely, her moistened lips moved, her brow frowned and relented.

"Do you mean," Marie interrupted, "that even now, even today, there is a living prophet on the earth?"

Gratified by the question, Frère Beckwith nodded soberly and replied, "That's exactly how it is. There is a living prophet whose counsel it is our privilege to hear and obey."

A little later she asked, "How does one know about these things? I mean, how can I know that what you are telling me is true?"

Frère Beckwith exchanged a significant glance with his companion. "You couldn't ask a more important question," he said. "You must hear the truth and think about it in your heart. You must pray sincerely and make sure your life is righteous. Then the Holy Spirit will touch your heart; your bosom will burn and you will know."

Gerard regarded Marie's radiant face with disbelief. Her interest struck him as patently artificial and theatrical. He couldn't imagine a less likely candidate for conversion. He had never known her to be interested in art or history or any other serious subject, including the Catholic religion which she had abandoned instantly upon the death of their mother ten years earlier. Marie was outspoken and uncharitable. She spent beyond her means and failed to pay back money borrowed from friends. Above all she was concupiscent. At twenty Marie had been involved in an impossible affair with a volatile Dutchman who had a wife and children in Maastricht; Gerard believed that his counsel had helped Marie break out of that corrosive entanglement. He had attempted to intervene again when she first moved into her present apartment in Rue Lesoinne, for which her secretary's salary could not begin to pay. The man involved at that moment was M. Turpin, an entrepreneur in real estate from Verviers. Marie pointed out the fact that Gerard had a mistress. Gerard admitted to the hypocrisy of his behavior; nonetheless, he insisted that there was something particularly malodorous when a woman from a recognized family misbehaved. Marie became livid. Gerard did not know that she had a capacity for such fury, and he went away chastened.

The missionary had stopped talking. He pushed back his plate and opened a tiny appointment book. "This has been just a start," he said. "There's much more to tell. May we come back in a few days?"

"What about me?" Marie interrupted. She went across the room and returned to the table with her purse, from which she withdrew her own agenda booklet. "I do not live here, as you know. Is your offer for my brother only, or would you also come to teach me in my apartment?"

With an affable smile, Frère Beckwith turned to Marie, and in a moment they had negotiated a meeting at Marie's apartment. The missionary returned his gaze to Gerard. Gerard could not make up his mind. He stroked the palms of his hands together as he glanced at Katrine, who had rolled her eyes upward in an expression of indifference. To Gerard's surprise, Frère Beckwith closed his appointment book and let it lie on the table. He said to his companion, "Come on, brother, let's pitch in." The two missionaries rose and rolled up their shirt sleeves. "We will wash the dishes," Frère Backwith announced as he began to stack plates and collect silverware.

"No, you mustn't," Katrine protested. "I will not allow it. A guest cannot wash dishes."

"You can't deprive us of it," Frère Beckwith said. "We are specialists in washing dishes; we love to wash dishes; we would walk ten kilometers anytime just for the chance to do some dishes. You can show us where to put things when we are through."

"What will you think of my messy kitchen?" Katrine cried as the missionary pushed through the kitchen door with a stack of plates.

In a stentorian voice the missionary said, "In the beginning God created heaven and earth. And the earth was without form and was void, and the kitchens of the earth were without order, being filled with clutter, mess, and mayhem. And God said, Let us send Beckwith and Haglund to clean up these kitchens, that order may reign again. And so it was."

Katrine, who had followed him into the kitchen, watched with a gaping mouth. Gerard saw her astonishment. "You have to understand that this fellow cannot resist a jest."

"Back home," the missionary went on, "we don't wash dishes; we just call in the hounds and let them lick the dishes clean."

"They offer their dishes to the dogs! Who could imagine such a dirty thing?" Katrine said.

Gerard was laughing. "I have a weakness for incongruity. Remember, Katrine, this young man loves ironies. You must not be so gullible."

As he scrubbed dishes in a pan of soapy water, Frère Beckwith told stories, which he claimed were true. One story was about an old woman in Hurricane who owned a dozen prize geese. In an adjoining barnyard, a neighbor kept a barrel of mash for his horses. One day a long rainstorm wet the mash, which the neighbor left unattended until it had soured. Then he dumped the mash into a feeding trough to dry. The woman's geese crossed through the fence,

gorged themselves on wet, fermented mash, and became drunk. When the woman came from her house, she found her geese wobbling and reeling; to her horror, they toppled over one by one, apparently dead. To soften the tragic blow to her meagre economy, she plucked the geese and put their down aside for making quilts. By evening, the naked geese had revived and milled in the woman's barnyard, honking angrily. That night the woman suffered the guilt of the damned, thinking of her poor, denuded geese and the approaching winter. In the morning she rose with resolution. She set to work with knitting needles and made a formfitting suit for each goose. During the entire winter her geese were to be seen wandering in her barnyard solemnly dressed in union suits of knitted wool.

Leaning against the kitchen counter, Gerard laughed until tears rolled down his cheeks. He put his hand on the shoulder of Katrine, who sat before him on a stool. "Would it be so bad?" he said. "We could have these young men to supper again. They could tell us whatever it is they have to say about their gospel, and then we could talk about America and perhaps learn a little English."

The missionaries came to supper on the next Wednesday evening and then again and again until the weekly visit had become an established routine. The more Gerard knew of this Frère Beckwith the more he cherished him, though he was not entirely sure why. The doctrine which the missionary preached struck Gerard as primitive and grotesque; it might have been part of a dialogue for the stage, a discourse from the theatre of the absurd. Oddly, its very absurdity appealed to Gerard. The proposition of Gerard's accepting the instruction of foreign heretics was an ultimate irony, a singular, unprecedented joke. Gerard knew that he did not strike other people as perverse. His enviable job as senior buyer in textiles at the Grand Bazaar depended upon the air of solidity and regularity he had. He was perforce civilized, polite, tolerant, good-humored. Yet inwardly he was in a state of angry resistance; it could not be otherwise for any reasonable person, who of necessity must know the horror of the times, the purposelessness of human affairs, the ultimacy of the void. Underlying existence, as the existential philosopher Sartre had emphasized, was precisely nothing. Yet, being perverse, Gerard was free for just such a whimsical adventure as becoming a catechumen to these eccentric Mormons.

With each visit, Frère Beckwith urged Gerard and Katrine to attend a sacrament meeting at the Mormon chapel on Rue de Campine. Katrine flatly refused. Gerard mulled the invitation and at last, upon learning that Marie had begun to attend services, decided to go. He arrived early at the chapel on a Sunday afternoon and saw Marie sitting alone at the back of the hall. As he took a seat beside her, Marie murmured a greeting in Walloon. He turned to her, wishing to say something light and friendly, then found himself swallowing an impulse to accuse her of perfidy. She was conspicuously out of place here. People filed into the barren hall, some of them taking seats, others clustering in the aisles; they greeted one another warmly and took up animated conversa-

tions. It was obvious that they were the kind of people who labored or kept shops. At best their clothes were merely decent; for many, a respectable shabbiness had to do. In a sense, Gerard too was out of place here. He wore fine Italian shoes with pointed toes and elevated heels and an expensive suit with tapered trousers and a coat having narrow lapels. Still, Gerard would not have imputed a sexual cast to his way of dressing. Marie's black hair brushed her shoulders in luxuriant abundance; her lipstick and eyebrow pencil were scrupulously etched; the neckline of her dress showed the barest hint of cleavage, above which hung a fine necklace with a gold chain and an enameled pendant. She was elegant and, in a subtle way, provocative.

A portly woman seated herself next to Gerard. Her aging cheeks sagged, and her white hair was strewn wispily about her head. She introduced herself as Mme. Jardins, though, as she told Gerard, people here called one another brother and sister rather than monsieur or madame. She peered at Marie. "We have had the pleasure of knowing mademoiselle here for some time; now her brother has come," she said, shifting her bulk and setting her large carpeted handbag on the floor. "Well, that is excellent."

Marie glanced at the old woman and offered her the slightest grimace of a smile.

"I am surprised," Gerard said. "This is not a large meeting place. Where have they gone—all the Belgians the Mormons have converted?"

Mme. Jardins lowered her voice. "To tell the truth, there have never been many; people are unbelieving nowadays. Of those who believe, some go to America. That is what lurks in the hearts of those girls there." She pointed to a cluster of girls, the oldest of whom might have been seventeen. "They hope for a missionary; they will go to America, marry him, never come back. Or failing to find a missionary, they fall away."

An aroma of mildew and fried liver arose from the woman's soiled coat. Gerard said, "I am curious about this name you Latter-day Saints have taken. I am told you are like the primitive church; the members live lives of perfection. Are you truly saints?"

Mme. Jardins broke into a grunting chuckle and poked her elbow into Gerard's ribs. "What a notion! Who is perfect? I will be happy for the merest corner of heaven if the good Lord will take me in."

"You are a true believer?"

"Oh, I am a believer. It is not the gospel that lets you down; it is the people." The woman drew her tongue across the scattered whiskers of her upper lip. Gerard had surely known, she said, how things were during the war.The missionaries left; local brothers took charge; people had difficulty getting to meetings. Mme. Jardins herself, who lived at that time on a farm near Flemalle-Haut, could never come, there being the additional matter of her involvement in the Resistance. Mme. Jardins paused, as if she were tempted to elaborate upon her participation in the Resistance. In a moment she went on to say that after the liberation, while things were still disorganized, her son had died. An unmarried man of twenty-five, he was irreplaceable; her husband had

died before the war and she had no other children. She went to Liège and asked the local brothers to come to the cemetery to say religious words and consecrate the grave. But no one came. There had been only the woman herself, the sexton of the cemetery, and the driver of the hearse which had transported the body from the morgue.

"There, it is the man you see," Mme. Jardins said to Gerard, making a gesture toward a baldheaded man who conferred with Frère Beckwith on the platform at the front of the chapel. "He promised to come, but he didn't, because he considered my son an apostate. So I ask you: would you call him a saint? He preaches a pretty sermon; he loves to preside. But God will judge him for abandoning a poor woman when she had to put her only child into the earth."

By now the benches of the chapel had filled. The baldheaded man stationed himself at the pulpit and looked silently over the congregation. A woman began to play solemn music upon a small pump organ. Mme. Jardins leaned toward Gerard and continued to speak in a loud whisper. "That missionary, Frère Beckwith, he is the saint. I will not hide it from you: until he came to me, hardly six months ago, I was one who had fallen away. He came to my miserable room; he found me down, dying of despair; he gave me new courage. He has conviction; he touches people. It is like a fire in the wintertime to be near him. He has converted twelve or fifteen; that may not seem so many, but you should see how few the others convert."

Then the old woman's eyes blazed with disgust. She leaned forward and gazed askance at Marie. "The pretty young things flock to the branch to see Frère Beckwith. Unluckily for them, he has only three months until his mission ends and he will return to Utah. There will be a falling away, you will see!"

Marie, who had seemed to pay no attention to the conversation, suddenly looked the old woman in the eyes. "There are also others who flock to this branch. It seems they have here an abundance of aging addlepates."

To Gerard's immense relief, the service began immediately. Mme. Jardins, furious for a while, stirred, snorted, and coughed, but gradually she became quiet and slumped into sleep. At the end of the service, many of the people remained to mingle in friendly, buzzing confusion. Children who seemed to have miraculously multiplied, ran here and there in exuberant release. A group of boys gathered on the platform. One boy stood behind the pulpit. He borrowed spectacles from another boy, hefted the large pulpit Bible, and engaged in a pantomime of preaching. Frère Beckwith strolled across the platform. He nudged the boy aside from the pulpit, cocked his mouth into a moronic grimace, pretended to gaze upon the open scripture and lifted his arm with a finger extended. The boys rushed around him, laughing, pulling, and pummelling. Then, quite suddenly, Frère Beckwith leaned among them and spoke and their noise fell away; they came down the stairs of the platform with him, unresisting and cheerful.

Gerard, standing in the aisle with Marie, had watched with his mouth slightly ajar. Shaking his head, he muttered, "Calming the waves of the angry

sea—did you see how they minded him?" Marie murmured agreeably, gazed down, and smoothed a wrinkle from her dress.

Gerard went on, unconsciously shifting into Walloon. "They worship God in a strange way."

"Not so strange," Marie said in a pointed French. "Give them the benefit of the doubt; let them do it in their own way."

"Certainly. I have no objections, whatever their whim," Gerard replied. "Nonetheless, what do you make of this hubbub, this noisy conversation among friends in the chapel, and, really, the sparse, mechanical procedure of their mass?"

Marie shrugged her shoulders. "As I say, it is their own way."

"I take it they have their internal dissensions. What a harridan that old woman is!"

"What else can an old woman be?" Marie said with disgust. "She is jealous; she imagines what she might do if she were young. But she was never anything. She is not worth thinking about."

"I find it strange," Gerard said in a softening voice, "that we who are the remnants of our family meet here in this place."

"Don't come if it bothers you," Marie said. "As for me, I like it here. For the most part these people please me; they are not complicated."

"That is true," Gerard said. "Their minds are not burdened with ideas."

"They are decent people," Marie said with a rising irritation. "Why do you pick at them? You are free to go away."

"I didn't think I was picking at them," he said. Then suddenly, speaking compulsively in Walloon, he came to the question burning in his curiosity. "Why are you here? Do you believe?"

She also spoke in Walloon. "I will tell you so you are not surprised when you learn it from others. I intend to be baptized. I am thoroughly determined. There is nothing you can do about it even if you do not like it."

Gerard released his tension in a long expiration of breath. "You have even stopped smoking?"

"Even," she said.

"*Mon Dieu!* Well, fine, excellent, I congratulate you! Why not be baptized if it pleases you?"

"Do you see that girl?" Marie said. "I should go speak to her."

"Shall I wait?" Gerard asked. "We could ride the tram down together."

"No, I do not know what my plans are; you go ahead," she said.

Gerard took a tram to Place St. Lambert, where he transferred to another which passed by Quai Marcellis. Swaying in harmony with the jolting, twisting motion of the tram, Gerard gazed abstractly out the window into the premature twilight of the rainy afternoon. The lowering, misting clouds pressed down his spirits. He could not bring himself to believe in Marie's conversion. Knowing that the universe neither reasoned nor valued, he should have been prepared for such an absurdity. Christian conversion had always implied a certain irrationality; *credo quia absurdum,* Tertullian had said—I believe because it is

absurd, the things of God being folly to the mind of man.But the prospect of Marie as a Mormon far surpassed Gerard's tolerance for the improbable. It was mindboggling. Gerard could imagine nothing that the Mormons could do for Marie or, for that matter, that Marie could do for the Mormons.

It was the same for Gerard. What could he expect from the Mormons? On this rainy evening, as he got off the tram near Quai Marcellis, Gerard recognized how severely he had been disillusioned by his visit to the chapel on Rue de Campine. The building was drab, the worship service barren, the worshippers impoverished and ignorant. It was a poor showing for a religion claiming to be a restored, authentic Christianity. The intentions of the Mormons were grand and heroic; their attempt to renovate Christianity was an epic project which even an unbeliever could appreciate and to some degree identify with. The missionaries were apparently unequal to their task. Certainly Frère Beckwith had immense personal qualities; as the old woman had said, he radiated warmth wherever he went. But Gerard now recognized a serious flaw in the missionary. He was a cultural illiterate. He knew nothing about logic, art, history, and philosophy. He scarcely knew anything about theology. Frère Beckwith had never heard of the Nicean Creed; he did not know that St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas had ever existed. After living in Liège for more than a year, Frère Beckwith knew little about the city—a fact which piqued Gerard's civic pride. For example, Frère Beckwith had not heard of Vincent de Beuren, who with a brave phalanx of Fanchimontois had resisted the invasion of Louis XI and Charles the Bold, and he had passed the church of St. Jacques many times without recognizing its distinctive architecture, which was widely considered to be the finest example of flamboyant Renaissance style in Belgium.

By the time Gerard had reached his apartment building, he had made up his mind to propose to the missionaries a tour of the cultural and historical sites of Liège. In fact, he would propose several tours. Ostensibly, the outings would be for relaxation and pleasure; in reality, they would be for the serious education of the missionaries. Climbing the stairway toward his apartment, Gerard felt something like a glow of virtue; he would help the missionaries, perhaps more than they had the capacity to appreciate.

On a cloudy Saturday afternoon, Gerard met the missionaries at the Place de la République Française for a tour of the city center. Although Frère Haglund had something on his mind and seemed unable to enjoy himself, Frère Beckwith responded enthusiastically to the notable features of the city. Gerard's pleasure rose as the tour progressed, and he decided that Frère Beckwith's ignorance was nothing more than lack of exposure—a matter of youth and of isolation in that fantastic wilderness called Utah. During the rainy afternoon, they saw the gospel book, a thousand years old and jewel encrusted, which had belonged to Notger, bishop of Liège. They viewed the Perron, the columnar statue which symbolized the liberty of Liège. They discussed the statue of Grétry standing before the opera house, which the missionaries had often passed without learning anything about the illustrious

composer. In the late afternoon, Gerard led them into the church of St. Jean to see a statue of the Virgin and Child entitled *Sedes Sapientiae–The Seat of Wisdom.* On the lap of the seated Virgin the Child sat upright; in the palm of his outstretched hand rested a jeweled sphere overtopped by a cross.

"What beauty the sculptor has achieved!" Gerard said, wiping his eyes with his handkerchief. "The Lord sits in calm dominion over all the world, as you see by the globe in his hand. And behind him, the Virgin—majestic, perfect, yet so human. I cannot see her without thinking of my own mother."

From the high dark caverns of the church's vaulted ceiling a concentrated light fell upon the statue. The thin, delicate face of the Virgin was caught in a mood of slight abstraction; the hint of an affectionate, knowing smile rested on her lips. The Child looked steadfastly outward, his face composed by simple, unquestioned authority.

Gerard waited expectantly for the missionaries to respond. But they seemed reluctant and diffident; perhaps they had been distracted by the odor of incense pervading the air of the church or by the scraping of shoes and the coughing of an old man who, across the expanse of the nave, placed a penitential candle before a small altar. Suddenly Frère Haglund, with an angry wave of his hand, said something harsh and contemptuous in English. Frère Beckwith replied in an embarrassed, coaxing voice. The younger missionary turned on his heel and strode noisily along the floor of the nave and disappeared through the doors of the church.

"He is offended. I am sorry for that," Gerard said.

"Please forgive him," Frère Beckwith said. "He has bad news from home. His brother is getting a divorce—he has not been married long—and my companion is angry about it."

"But something here also bothers him," Gerard persisted.

"Maybe you will be surprised: he has never been in a Catholic church until now. Some of the missionaries are afraid of these old churches. They think Satan is in them."

"He thinks of Satan here?"

Frère Beckwith spoke reluctantly. "That really isn't what was bothering him. It was the statue. We aren't accustomed to think of Mary in this way. She seems to displace her son."

Gerard returned his gaze to the statue. He felt stung and vicariously insulted, a fact which he noted with surprise. For the first time in years he acknowledged the hunger he felt for these venerable churches in which he had worshipped as a child. He had loved their soft darkness, the rose and amber splendor of their stained glass windows, the muted echoes of the high vaulted ceilings, the varied perspectives of columns, arches, and aisles. He yearned for the clarity of a Gregorian chant, for the pageantry of red, white, and gold vestments, for the murmuring recitative between priest and congregation, for the elevation of the Host—that moment of daring hope for the transmutation of wafer and wine into the substance of heaven. Against the Eucharist of his childhood Gerard posed the scanty, impoverished ritual he had seen at the

Mormon chapel on Rue de Campine. Two missionaries had uttered brief prayers over plates of broken bread and trays filled with tiny cups of water, which boys had distributed to the members of the church. The Mormons did not call it the mass, but simply the sacrament, as if they did not consider their other rituals to be sacraments.

"I am for you, not against you," Gerard said to Frère Beckwith. "I see the remarkable things you are doing. You have dug up this old corpse, Christianity; you have drawn the embalmer's fluid from its veins; you are attempting to pump fresh, living blood into them. But, good brother, you are not doing it correctly. It is still a corpse."

The astonished missionary shook his head in denial.

"Do you have to start at zero—like fishermen from Galilee, knowing nothing about Jerome or Boethius or Aquinas? Or this lady?" Gerard said, looking again at the serene, imperturbable face of the Virgin.

"You are still a Catholic," Frère Beckwith said.

"No, I am not a believer," Gerard said. "Yet if I consider the matter without reference to myself, I still say you are empty. I am sorry to put it so bluntly. There is nothing in your bottle, neither old wine nor new."

"You are seeking something visible, something of this world," the missionary said.

"Yes, something with color and texture and dimension," Gerard agreed. "If I were a Christian, I would insist upon things that make the abstractions of theology palpable. I would want drama in my religion."

The missionary turned toward the Virgin and her Child and said, "There is no connection between this statue and reality. Your lady is not real; she is a fiction."

"A fiction?" Gerard said. "Yes, indisputably, she is a fiction; that is why she is beautiful. The human heart has created her."

As Frère Beckwith prepared to reply, Gerard put his finger to his lips and silenced the missionary. From somewhere in the immense, cavernous building came a light, melodic tapping. "That tapping—do you hear it?" Gerard said. "In my childhood home a clock from Zurich ticked with the same decorous regularity. I am reminded again of my mother. She sat knitting by the hour; in the net of her lap, beneath the coils of yarn, were a prayer book and her beaded rosary. Wherever she was, there was impeccable order, undeviating regularity. She draped the dining table with lace from Bruges; she decorated the mantel with crystal from Val St. Lambert. She combed her hair into a discreet bun; she hid her face behind the severity of large, round spectacles. Yet she loved me and wished me to have eternal life." Gerard's eyes sparkled with tears.

"What I do not see," Gerard went on, when he had wiped his eyes, "is how you span the abyss. Haven't you ever felt the need for a mother beyond this world? Doesn't it mean something that God had a mother, that a mortal bore God in her womb? This lady is a bridge between his infinity and your disgusting insignificance."

"There is no abyss."

"No abyss! So for you, God is close, convenient, congenial; you will call at his house this evening; he will serve you cookies and Perro; you will converse on the affairs of the day or on the weather."

"Tonight I will pray to him just so," the missionary said. "You do not understand the Holy Spirit. Through the Spirit, God is always present—if you are worthy to have him."

Like Gerard, the missionary had stood these several minutes at the ambiant edge of the light falling from the ceiling. His hair, nose, and ears, his gesturing hands burned with chiaroscuro brightness against the shadows around him. An uncanny change had come across his face—a look of speculation, of weighing, of risking a hitherto untried opportunity.

"I have the testimony of the Spirit. I am telling you so that you can have it too," the missionary said in a voice strangely elevated.

"I have read about the day of Pentecost. You cannot ask me to believe in the Spirit. It violates every rule of reason and logic," Gerard said urgently. He felt suddenly compelled to parry, feint, and forestall. Inexplicably, the missionary had seized the initiative and had imposed his own premises on their dialogue.

"How can you say that?" Frère Beckwith said with an impatient gesture. "I know what I know. I have the Spirit. Do you feel it?" He stared intensely into Gerard's eyes.

"Feel it! How could I feel it? Look, here is my hand!" Gerard held out a hand, then grasped it with his other hand. "I feel my hand; it is solid, real. But the Spirit! No, I feel nothing."

"It is with us," the missionary said in a voice close to terror. "Do you feel it?"

"Nothing!"

"Take it!" the missionary cried. "This is it!"

"There is nothing here."

"I am telling you there is. Do you think I am a liar? The Spirit is with me. It will leap to you now."

Gerard was aware of the horripilation of his hair along the back of his neck. An ominous electricity seemed hung in the air; an inscrutable potency seemed to have just brushed by. Gerard was aware, too, that his breath had quickened, as had that of the missionary. Though neither of them had moved, Gerard suffered the illusion that he had been pressed to a wall.

And then, looking again at the *Sedes Sapientiae*, noting again for no conscious reason the tranquil marble smile of the Virgin, Gerard said simply, "I do not accept it."

Already the energy of the missionary seemed to diminish, like the dying down of a spinning shaft when the power to its motor has been cut off. "I wanted it for you," he said. Tears glistened on his cheeks.

"I am sorry to have denied you," Gerard said. "I am not a Christian."

Afterward, Gerard and the missionaries ate a little supper in one of the open pastry shops in an alley off Place St. Lambert. Gerard bought a slice of cheese and a basket of fine grapes in a grocery store along their way; he found crusty rolls in an adjacent bakery; and here, in the little shop where they sat on stools

before a narrow counter, he bought them sweet waffles and apple juice. A Saturday crowd still filled the square and its surrounding streets. The rain had stopped; the clouds promised to break. Frère Beckwith had recovered his composure and talked cheerfully about a letter he had received from his mother in Hurricane. She wrote that the peach trees were loaded with green fruit, and she rejoiced to think that her son would be home for the harvest. Gerard supposed that this woman could not look like a woman of the Belgian countryside, yet his mind refused to create any other image of her. There she was: a broad, sturdy woman with a bonnet, coarse dress, apron, and the wooden sabots which the Belgian countryfolk still used for garden work. Gerard saw her weeding potatoes with a hoe. Her face was not demeaned with passionate feeling; serenity filled it as serenity filled the face of the Virgin in the *Sedes Sapientiae*.

Gerard poured another round of apple juice into their glasses. A trifle remained in the bottle; he gave it to Frère Beckwith. Gerard was reassured to see that Frère Beckwith had not cast him off. Oddly, he cherished the missionary more than ever. An awe and a reconciliation had settled upon Gerard. He would attend Marie's baptism. Having felt the intensity of the missionary, he no longer doubted the miracle of her conversion. He would make no further judgments against the worship of the Mormons. He knew that Frère Beckwith was the timeless Christian. The missionary had no need for reason, for culture, for tradition; he had the Spirit. Gerard could not remember having ever met a person who was so unintimidated by a fallen world, who had such a frank and open confidence that he had pacified his God. Frère Beckwith walked with a pass of safe conduct through the warring world; the blood of the Lamb preserved him from the angels of destruction.

On another Saturday, Gerard went to the baptism of his sister. A hushed crowd had gathered in the basement beneath the chapel for the ceremony; afterward, because of the excellent spring weather, there was to be an excursion to the citadel at the head of Rue de Campine. Marie and three others, dressed in white, sat in a row at the edge of the baptismal font. Clear water sparkled and splashed against the tile of the font. Marie's black hair spread across her shoulders; she sat quietly, her hands in her lap, her lips slightly tremulous. The service began. Frère Beckwith, dressed in white pants and shirt, took Marie by the hand and led her down the steps of the font. He paused a moment while Marie struggled to force the floating hem of her robe to sink around her legs. The missionary took her wrist in one hand, raised his other arm, uttered a brief prayer, and laid her back into the water. She arose drenched and spluttering. Frère Beckwith and Marie clambered from the font and passed close by Gerard on their way to the dressing rooms, leaving behind them a trail of water. Gerard had not realized how muscular and well proportioned the missionary was. He seemed a perfect match for Marie, who despite her twenty-eight years had a splendid body; her drenched, clinging robe revealed the undercup of her breasts, her flat belly, her sinuous thighs. Yet

Gerard could detect nothing concupiscent about the way in which she leaned against the missionary's shoulder, subdued, dependent, strangely unlike herself. Like Adam and Eve before their fall, they seemed oblivious to the sensual perfection of their bodies.

Gerard had never before seen the making of a Christian in this manner. He had been prepared for disappointment, the idea of baptism by immersion having struck him as unseemly and indecent. On the contrary, the spectacle of the cleansing rush of water over his sister's body left Gerard touched and elevated; for a moment, he felt renewed and purified. Then a sense of deprivation came over him. He could not remember a time when he had been free from guilt. His inadequacies and failures were innumerable; among them were his abandonment of his parents' faith, his refusal to marry, his recurrent doubt that mankind excelled in anything other than theft, butchery, and oppression. Gerard could only envy Marie for having found a means of absolution. In his mind, he defended her before their father and mother, who would not have approved of her becoming a Mormon. He saw himself in earnest speech with each of them. If they could know how dead the old forms had become, how the old truths had lost their potency and conviction, they would understand. It was far better that Marie take on the eccentricities of this revivified Christianity than that she go on as she had been—angry, cynical, and promiscuous.

After the baptismal service, some thirty persons crowded into a tram in front of the chapel and rode to the top of Rue de Campine, where they got off and strolled along a tree-lined promenade to the citadel overlooking Liège. Seeing that no one waited to walk with Mme. Jardins, Gerard fell in beside the old white-haired woman and kept her pace, although she was so piqued by the neglect of the others that she could scarcely be polite to Gerard. In time, Gerard and Mme. Jardins overtook the others in the anterior courtyard of the citadel. Viewed from the air, the citadel of Liège gave the outline of a traditional hilltop fort, but in close perspective its colliding walls formed a confusing maze. The structure was no longer a fort. The majority of its rooms were used now as a military hospital, and at the back of the citadel the white crosses of a cemetery spread in a harmonious grid upon green, groomed lawns.

Gerard knew already the object which the people examined in the courtyard. Nonetheless he pushed with a morbid curiosity through the quiet group until he could see it. It was a wooden post, splintered and chipped until it was scarcely more than a stub. To this post the Germans had bound the best citizens of Liége and had shot them in retaliation for acts of the Resistance. Nausea crept over Gerard as he viewed the post. Each splinter and shard had been torn away by a bullet which had first passed through the body of a patriot. Dozens had died: lawyers, physicians, aldermen, men of commerce and finance—the most respectable, honorable citizens of the city, who now lay in the cemetery behind the citadel. Gerard could remember clearly one of the executed men, M. Besier, a pharmacist who with his wife had frequently visited Gerard's father and mother. Gerard pushed away from the crowding circle of people. It was an

outrage too terrible, too irremediable to think about.

The group, broken into clusters of chatting people, strolled on, coming in time to an overlook of the city. A bank of clouds burned in the setting sun. Steeples, façades, and domes glimmered above the haze of the city's exhaust and smoke. The wide Meuse threaded a silver path through the city center. An aromatic breeze stirred greening plants.

Mme. Jardins had come again to Gerard's side. He murmured a recognition of the beautiful evening, which she ignored. Peering beyond him, she grumbled, "Your sister is a troublemaker. Things would be better without her."

Gerard was startled, but he said, with an increased politeness, "That is regrettable. However, it is no affair of mine. I have nothing to do with her."

"I suppose you are right, seeing that she is twenty-two years old and therefore of age."

"Twenty-two years old!"Gerard whistled.

"It isn't true?"

"Well, certainly there's no question about it," Gerard replied hastily. "Somehow I had imagined she had already turned twenty-three, but her birthday is several months away. How did you know her age? Doubtless she told you."

"*Par bleu!* She wouldn't speak to me in any circumstance. It is marked on her papers of baptism. I saw them in Frère Haglund's lap as we sat in the service."

The people had turned back now, laughing and chatting as they made their way toward the trams on Rue de Campine. Mme. Jardins motioned with her hand: "Notice that your sister has captured Frère Beckwith." Gerard saw that the missionary and Marie walked in a straggling cluster of young people, though they were not precisely side by side. The old woman went on, "He stays too close. You watch: she is always nearby; she will not leave him alone. She is in love with him."

"*Ça m'assied!*" Gerard said. He was stunned. He wished fervently to interpret the old woman as a malicious gossip. What an eagle eye she had! "Well, what of it?" he said at last. "Such things happen. A handsome young man, a pretty young woman—no harm can come from it, I suppose."

"No harm? You don't understand things in this Mormon church. Now as for me, no, there is no harm to this missionary, whom I respect enormously. We have an understanding, he and I," she said proudly. "But the others! It is unbelievable how closely they watch the missionaries. And when tongues wag, the mission president hears; then off goes the good missionary to another city—instantly. Not so serious, you could say, but disgraceful nevertheless."

"He has only a month or two before he goes home to Utah," Gerard reminded her.

"That doesn't matter. If word gets to the president, off goes the missionary. Such a pity that one so fine should go home with a cloud over him. And when he is gone, your sister will fall away. That is how deep her conversion is."

After returning to his apartment, Gerard fell into a lassitude from which he did not recover even after the pleasant supper of ham, oiled salad, buttered

rolls, and wine which Katrine set on the table. Before going to the baptism, Gerard had talked to Katrine of a movie for the evening. Now he persuaded her to stay home. Katrine did not mind. She propped up a small easel on the table and tried her hand with a set of oil paints she had just bought. Gerard browsed in the evening paper and pretended to get into a novel but finally resigned himself to querulous thoughts. He could scarcely bear to remember his cheerful feelings at the baptismal service. He was swept by embarrassment for his romantic ideas about Marie's conversion. What a shameful exercise Marie had put herself through! Like a schoolgirl, like a calf, she had assumed this histrionic posture, giving up smoking, accommodating herself to a congregation of stolid shopkeepers and thickfingered streetworkers, performing the charade of baptism—her body clothed in white, her face painted with innocence. Passionate love—*Bon Dieu* what people wouldn't do for it! Gerard was tiring of the Mormons. He thought of Frère Beckwith with irritation. The missionary was simply a callow, naive young man with no ability to distinguish a sincere conversion from a pretension. Gerard was of half a mind to break off with the missionaries instantly rather than to wait as he had planned until the departure of Frère Beckwith.

Two weeks later, on a Monday morning, Mme. Jardins came by Gerard's office on the top floor of the Grand Bazaar. Having never accustomed herself to the telephone, she had come in person to consult him. She glared belligerently at Gerard's fellow buyer, whose contempt for the wispy-haired, soiled old woman was obvious. Gerard led her into the corridor, where he convinced her of the impossibility of his talking with her during his working hours. She left with his promise to meet her in the late afternoon. At 5:15 Gerard joined Mme. Jardins on a bench in Place St. Lambert. The square roared and clanked and rushed with arriving and departing trams and crowds of people making their way toward home. Near Gerard and the old woman, a multitude of pigeons bobbed, pecked, and pushed around the feet of a man who scattered grain to them; a pigeon balanced itself with fluttering wings upon the man's beret.

With decided firmness Mme. Jardins said, "I have come to ask that you control your sister."

"Control my sister? What on earth has she done?"

"The missionary is on the edge of disaster. If your sister were not present, it would all end well."

"Those wagging tongues, I suppose," Gerard said with a sigh. "The mission president will send him to another city for his last weeks."

"It is not as simple as that. Things have happened between them."

"*Mon Dieu,* of course!" Gerard exclaimed. "What else would you expect? Things have happened between them!" He shook his head.

"It is not so bad as it might be, But to prevent things getting worse—that is why I am here. It would be simple: you speak to your sister; she takes a vacation; or perhaps she makes herself scarce in the city."

"You do not understand things anymore," Gerard said. "One does not control his sister these days."

The old woman, reeking of onions, leaned toward Gerard and wagged a finger in his face. "There are things you also do not understand. I will say nothing about your sister; as for the young man, it will not only ruin his mission it will ruin his life. You do not know how the Mormons are. They count adultery next to murder."

Gerard laughed. "Really, the missionaries are always together. Are you telling me that the three of them are having a love affair?"

"Your sister is a contriver," Mme. Jardins protested. "I will tell you how I know. I thought I would give Frère Beckwith a tiny warning from a friend. I stopped him on the streetside before the chapel, and I told him how visible this attachment between the two of them had become. I did not expect more than that. Suddenly he wept; he made a confession; he spoke of private moments between them that would astound you—on the stairwell between the basement and the chapel, behind the stage curtains while practice for the branch drama was in progress, in the kitchen of her apartment while the unsuspecting Frère Haglund snored in the living room, thinking that his companion and your sister were busy washing dishes."

"He would tell you this?" Gerard said incredulously.

"There is a loyalty between us of which God approves even if others might not," she said. "He knows that I do not judge him, that I would not abandon him even if he fell. But if you know him, you know that he must go home honorable. That is the kind he is."

Gerard was filled with loathing for the intimate discourse of the unkempt, mildewed woman. Again he wished to believe that her gossip-honed mind had created the situation she pretended to see. Gerard set himself to doubt, he willed disbelief—and could not achieve it. The only surprise he felt was that Marie had not contrived sooner and more completely, that she had not long ago brought the vulnerable missionary to the thing she desired.

"Will you influence your sister?" the old woman asked. "If something is not done, Frère Beckwith's life is ruined; he will be excommunicated; he will live as a pariah. You do not understand how much chastity means with these Mormons."

"I prefer to have nothing to do with this matter," Gerard said.

Gerard was angry with the old woman for bearing this news to him. He was angry with Marie for being always in heat, always itchy between the legs. Most of all, he was affronted by Frère Beckwith's defection. There was no such thing as a saint. Wasn't it true that the very word *saint* had a terrifying sound? To claim such a word, to bind it seriously to one's identity was like playing ignorantly with a dangerous object. Gerard was filled with disgust for himself. His own behavior regarding these Mormons was scarcely less shameful than Marie's. The Mormons had no gift for Gerard. He must shake himself savagely awake; he must eradicate entirely his puerile intrigue with Frère Beckwith; he must deny once and for all his longing for an impossible innocence.

"Please influence your sister," Mme. Jardins repeated.

"It will be irrelevant to you, though not to me," Gerard said, "that my father was killed during the second week of the war. This post here brings it to mind." He waved toward one of the green, corrugated lamp posts which circled Place St. Lambert. "I experience sometimes the fancy that the Germans tied my father to the post we saw at the citadel and shot him, but that isn't how he died. He was second in command at Fort de Troncière heights between Namur and Charleroi. The defense of the fort was neither intelligent nor heroic. The blitzkrieg bypassed the fort; a week later a mop-up force arrived and burned out the defenders with flamethrowers."

"Everyone suffered in the war," Mme. Jardins said.

"Yes, and I have no right to complain more than any other," Gerard said. "Why should I blame the Germans? Why should I blame them even for the brutal retaliations against the innocent citizens of Liège? They practiced a standard counterinsurgency, in which they were nothing more than the agents of reality. As Sartre and Camus correctly point out, life is absolutely senseless, absolutely nauseous."

"I know nothing about Sartre and Camus," the old woman murmured.

"Why shall I be concerned if this missionary compromises himself?" Gerard went on. "It is apparent that he is spineless, to say nothing of the fact that my sister would do something drastic if I spoke to her."

Mme. Jardins sighed, sat back on the bench, and gazed abroad upon the scurrying square and the encircling streets filled with surging autos and motorcycles. "Then I must do it myself," she said. "It would be better coming from you, but I will do what has to be done."

"*Zut alors!* What do you intend to do? If you think you can persuade Frère Beckwith to change his ways, good luck to you. But I warn you not to approach my sister. She is volatile; she is worse than gasoline or dynamite!"

"I am not afraid of your sister," Mme. Jardins said. She grasped the material of Gerard's coat sleeve and tugged his arm toward her. "I will also tell a story about the war. As I once told you, I was in the Resistance. My stable loft was one of the posts for the downed aviators on their way toward the Channel. I once stood at the gate of my farmyard near Flemalle-Haut, knowing that six British flyers were in my loft, and I stared into the eyes of a German patrol leader, who stood on the road with his men. I gave him a fierce look which silently said, Come in if you dare. Luckily for him and his men, he chose to go on."

Looking into the old woman's resolute, passionate eyes, Gerard did not doubt her story. Who could explain why a poor country woman should have the nerve for such heroic action? "I am impressed by those who resisted," Gerard said. "I honor and respect you. But, honestly, I do not think you can succeed with my sister."

"I will try. A person must not become weary of good causes. I know what it is not to have a good cause; one can die simply from despair. The missionary is worth saving. I have an interest in his innocence. It belongs to the public, like

the treasures of the cathedral museum, which for a few sous you and I may go see."

Gerard found himself agreeing with the old woman. The missionary ought to be retrieved, innocence being the rare thing of a world overripe with corruption. As Mme Jardins had said, it should be Gerard who approached Marie. He had a vague notion that if he spoke to her with an immense tact she might see the point of view he and Mme. Jardins had taken. He said goodby to the old woman, warning her not to expect too much. On the next afternoon, not knowing what he should say, he took a tram to the Guillemins station, then walked along Rue Varin before turning into Rue Lesoinne, where Marie had her apartment. Along Rue Varin were a movie house offering pornographic films and a dozen or more houses of prostitution. Even at this early hour, a few women were on display behind plate glass windows; they sat in padded chairs, their hair impeccably coifed, their evening dresses well-fitted and suggestive. It was a remarkable transition to turn into Rue Lesoinne, where recently renovated apartment buildings spoke of prosperity and social elevation. Their brick was new, their woodwork freshly painted, their façades perforated here and there by broad garage doors behind which automobiles were likely to be parked.

Having offered Gerard an overstuffed chair, Marie went for a moment into her tiny kitchen and turned down a burner on the stove; on the counter were a piece of cheese and a cauliflower. When Marie had joined Gerard in the living room, she asked him whether he would take supper with her. Gerard did not believe her to be sincere; in any event, as he told her, Katrine expected him. He could not keep his legs still; he crossed them first in one way, then in another. He admired the decoration of the apartment. It was painted in the merest tint of peach pastel; satiny curtains hung at the windows; an excellent rug covered much of the waxed parquet floor. Gerard particularly admired one of the lamp shades, an import from Denmark whose quality he had the ability to judge because of his work at the Grand Bazaar. Marie shrugged off his compliments; it was an apartment like any other and not so badly priced.

"Well," Marie said, "you have come to see me, which is very nice, but there must be a reason."

Gerard came to his point, though not in a heroic way. "I think the missionary—Frère Beckwith, I mean—has only four weeks. Then he will go home to Utah."

Marie put out her hands with palms up and fingers spread, as if she wished to hear no more. "Yes, of course; sooner or later all of them go home."

"Perhaps we should let him go without complicating his life," Gerard went on. "He impresses me as a fragile person. Really, it would be easy to crush him."

"By all means, let him go. I am not aware of anything holding him here," Marie said impatiently.

"He is naive. He does not know how to take care of himself."

"I find this discussion absolutely strange!" Marie cried. "You have come to preach to me about something. Well, for God's sake, tell me what it is."

"I have come to make an appeal."

"An appeal is always in order; I have never been known to refuse an appeal," Marie said mockingly.

"These Mormon missionaries are like our priests," Gerard said. "They marry later on, but for the time that they are missionaries, they are persons apart, they are celibates."

"I don't need lectures on facts which I gathered for myself a long time ago," Marie said, rising and going to the kitchen. "Excuse me; I will get on with my supper." She picked up the knife and sliced the cauliflower into a pan.

Gerard stood in the doorway to the kitchen. "My point is that we can scarcely comprehend how difficult it would be for one of them if he should sin. It would destroy him."

Marie turned on Gerard and spoke with an exaggerated calmness. "You have two choices: you can leave my apartment now, which is what I would prefer, or you can speak out clearly what it is you think I have done."

Gerard sighed; his task might have been easier if he had known more precisely what he wanted to say. "Do you think to marry with Frère Beckwith?"

Marie opened her mouth several times but finally, puckering her lips into a scornful pout, refused to speak.

"Do you think to go to America with him, because that is what it means, isn't it?" Gerard said.

"Why should I go to America?" Marie said defiantly. "What if he were to stay in Belgium?"

"It would be like holding a rabbit under water; he would die here," Gerard said.

Marie stared intently upon the last bit of cauliflower in her hands. Tears gathered in her eyes, but she spoke indignantly. "How is it that you have your pleasure with women but come relentlessly to me with suggestions of chastity?"

Gerard felt irresistible tears forming in his own eyes. "You are in love with him," he said. "You must do something paradoxical: you must let him go. Make pretexts; give reasons for missing church services; fail to be at home when the missionaries call. It is only for four weeks."

Her tears flooded. She seemed to have sagged, to have diminished in stature. Gerard held out his arms and took her in. She spoke in Walloon. "Since Papa was killed, since Mama died, I am always lonely; I have no one."

Gerard stroked her shoulders and pressed his cheek against hers. He said, also in Walloon, "We must see each other often; we must not abandon one another."

Gerard was filled with strange, cutting emotions. He had been braced for tirades, explosions, torrents; he had no strength for Marie's tears. They posed a compelling, irrefutable argument. If one or the other in this abominable love

affair was doomed to suffer, why should it be Marie? What interest did Gerard have in the innocence of the missionary—or in the innocence of anyone, for that matter? He could not understand the passion the human animal had for penitence, self-denial, renunciation. Was the human conscience any less a genetic accident than the trunk of the elephant or the plumage of a male peacock? The missionary would have to look out for himself. If he fell and suffered, it would be no more than happened to anyone else.

Gerard left Marie apologetically and without any attempt to extract promises from her. He believed himself resolved to withdraw from the affair and let things unravel as they must. Yet before he had entered his own apartment, he was afflicted again with feelings that the missionary should be saved. He spent the evening in a confused paralysis. He did the usual things with an air of calmness while his mind looped and rotated like a wheel broken free from a speeding railway car. He ate his supper, chatted with Katrine, read the newspaper for an hour, lay on his bed, and tried to sleep. Tentative solutions coalesced and evaporated in his mind. By custom, the missionaries would come for supper on the following evening. If Gerard wished time with Frère Beckwith, he could arrange it as easily as Marie had apparently done.

Katrine had come into the bedroom. She sat on the side of the bed and undressed. She dangled her bra in Gerard's face and asked whether he was awake. She stood on the rug at the foot of the bed and did the steps of a little dance while she put on her nightgown. She turned out the light and got into bed. She snuggled close to Gerard, rubbed her hand along his chest, and nibbled at his shoulder.

"I have no spirit tonight," Gerard remonstrated.

"No spirit! Let me give you spirit," she crooned, running her hand along his thigh.

Marie was absolutely correct in accusing him of hypocrisy, Gerard was thinking; he was always wanting her to make sacrifices which he was not prepared to make.

"I have given it up," Gerard mumbled.

"But we always make love on Tuesday," Katrine protested.

"It is time we were getting married," Gerard said. "Really, this has been an indecent thing we have been up to all this time."

Katrine took up an accusing voice. "You have been with someone else. That is why you were late tonight."

"*Mon Dieu*, no!" Gerard said. "I am thirty. I think it is time for children. And a little respectability."

Katrine withdrew to her side of the bed. It seemed to Gerard that she turned and sighed and threw off the covers and pulled them up again for a long time before she went to sleep. The next morning, having apparently forgotten the incident of the previous night, Katrine agreed to Gerard's plan for the visit of the missionaries. After supper, Gerard and Frère Beckwith went onto the balcony overlooking Quai Marcellis and the river. Through the open door

Gerard heard the faint murmur of voices from the kitchen where Katrine and Frère Haglund washed dishes. The ballooning canopies of the trees on the quay caught the yellow light of the late sun.The image of puffed clouds refracted across the wake of a deep laden boat making its laborious way up the river. The captain of the shovel-prowed boat, standing at the spokes of its steering wheel, puffed calmly on a pipe; his wife took in clothes from a line stretched between the cabin and a mast; a little dog darted back and forth across the deck, barking at the city first from one side of the boat and then from the other. The missionary leaned over the balcony. He spoke of leaving Liège. He said it would be hard to go, though he had awakened in the night during these recent weeks thinking of the deserts and mountains of Utah. Gerard caught himself shrinking from his purpose; he would have to move with a predatory abruptness.

"You are in love with my sister," he said.

The missionary scrutinized Gerard's face as if he doubted what he had heard. Blood rose slowly along his neck and colored his jaws and ears. "She has the Spirit, and I am not worthy of her," he said at last. "I have shamed myself because a missionary should not fall in love though I do not know how to keep from it. She is beautiful."

"But I think you are in trouble."

Frère Beckwith did not understand.

"I mean that things have happened between you," Gerard insisted.

The missionary was silent for so long that Gerard thought that his words had been lost in the high, melodious call of a rag merchant who pushed his two-wheeled cart far down the quay: "Rags bought here and old iron too; brass, glass, nails, pails, anything at all; rags bought here and old iron too."

When the call had died away, the missionary said, "I am glad she was brave enough to tell you. Don't be angry with her. I take full responsibility. I am horribly ashamed. I did not intend to take liberties. I never dreamed about any such thing; I am astonished at my carnality; I did not know I could feel so strongly."

"Please, I am not a judge; I would rather not know about it," Gerard protested.

The missionary gestured impatiently. "Telling you is a relief. I didn't mean to deceive anyone. I should have confessed to the mission president, but I couldn't bear to do it. However, it is a matter of the past now. I do not think the Spirit has deserted me."

"The problem remains," Gerard said.

The missionary looked shamefully downward. "Yes, because I have compromised my mission. Now you will never believe."

"You are relentless; you think always of conversions," Gerard said. "I am not thinking about me. I am thinking about what will become of you."

"I will make it good to her; I will marry her," the missionary said, his voice sinking more deeply into apology. "When I get home, I will write to Marie. I

can't speak to her about it now; that would be breaking the rules again. Maybe she will come to Utah; my uncle would sponsor her immigration—that is, if she wants to come and if you don't object."

"In the meantime," Gerard said, "you are still in jeopardy. What if things continue to happen?"

"I am resolved. It will not happen again. Your sister is safe."

"It is not my sister I am thinking of," Gerard said. "What if my sister herself should contrive to give the two of you an hour, or even a half hour of unquestioned privacy? What if she let you know unmistakably that you could do with her as you wished? What if, in fact, she approached you so closely, so intimately, that the man in you had no choice?"

For an instant the missionary's face carried signs of collapse; he seemed to weave uncertainly, like a boxer whose senses have been shaken. Then his determination returned, and he spoke with a rapid belligerence, as if he meant to stave off the full recognition of what he had heard. "No, that is not the kind of person she is, no, not at all!"

A great pity welled up in Gerard. "I am trying to tell you that you are in danger."

"You are wrong," the missionary fervently insisted.

Gerard went recklessly forward. "She is not twenty-two; she is twenty-eight. There is more to be told."

The two men stared fixedly at each other through a long, entropic silence. The missionary appeared to be on the verge of surrender; helplessness, defeat, pleading emerged upon his face. Then again, in time, resistance and defiance. "That isn't true. I know her better than that!"

Anger kindled in Gerard. Strangely, it was detached from the missionary. The image of the old white-haired woman was in his mind. Gerard cursed her for having set him upon this haggling, hopeless business. He should have known by common sense that there could be no intervention in an affair such as this. He shrugged his shoulders and, in a voice whose coolness surprised him, murmured, "I apologize for what I have said. There is nothing of importance in it. Let us go inside and see whether the dishes are done."

They sat at the table with Katrine and Frère Haglund. Gerard tried not to watch the face of the suffering missionary as he delivered the scheduled lesson. The others saw nothing unusual. Katrine yawned; Frère Haglund perused a notebook. Frère Beckwith stuttered, made false starts, paused, searched for words, broke off sentences. Within twenty minutes he had concluded and with his companion went out the door. Gerard followed them into the hall, watching their figures disappear into the stairwell. Nothing had been said of another meeting.

Turning back after closing the door, Gerard bumped into Katrine, who had followed him closely. She smiled, searched his eyes, put her arms around his neck. "Sweetheart, I am so sorry about last night," she said affectionately. "I didn't listen to what you were really saying, did I? Please forgive me for pouting. If you want this little whimsey, if you think we should be chaste until

we are married, well, I am willing." She kissed him again and smiled happily into his eyes. "It would be nice to be married. And little ones would be nice, too, wouldn't they?"

Gerard resented Katrine's clinging to his neck. He had an impulse to scold her or at the very least to denounce his proposal of the previous evening as a mad irrelevancy. Before he could speak, the doorbell rang. Frère Beckwith stood alone in the hall. He beckoned Gerard out and motioned for him to close the door. Terrible recognition was in the eyes of the missionary.

"What do you have against me?" he said. "Are you afraid of losing your sister?"

"I am truly sorry I said anything about it," Gerard said.

"I will not believe it," the missionary said. "She would not lie to me."

"It is all right, whatever you do. My sister knows how to take care of herself, and you will have to learn how to take care of yourself too. I am not angry with you. If you want her, she is waiting for you."

The missionary tried to speak, found his words stifled, buried his face in his hands.

"You did not come back to tell me I am wrong," Gerard said.

"She doesn't believe," the missionary said.

"No, she doesn't believe."

The missionary wept with retching breath and heaving shoulders. Standing silently by, enduring the long minutes as best he could, his own face streaming with tears, Gerard struggled to maintain perspective on this episode between Marie and the missionary. The incident was not tragic; it was wrong to grieve. Yet Gerard was shaken, even stunned.

"She is not a Jezebel or a Salome," Gerard said at last. "She has loved you, and she has honored you by the unusual exertions she has taken to be near you. I am sorry that for her love is an explosion. A few weeks, several months—you cannot guess how quickly she would have had enough of you."

They heard the opening of the street door three stories down the stairwell. The missionary looked about in a panic. "It will be my companion," he said. "I told him I would not be long."

"This is goodby then," Gerard said, stretching his hand to the missionary. "I have admired you and I will always remember you."

The missionary took his hand and seemed ready to say more, but the sound of mounting steps pulled him away. The image of the retreating, vanquished face burned in Gerard's mind. His gift hung in the air, and Gerard lingered in the hall, unwilling to relinquish this moment of seizing it. *This little whimsey,* Katrine had called Gerard's refusal to make love to her—a parody upon true renunciation; yet Gerard was determined to marry Katrine, to give children to the world, to forgive God for not existing.