

Undated Sheet

The best thing would be to write down everything that happens from day to day. To keep a diary in order to understand. To neglect no nuances or little details, even if they seem unimportant, and above all to classify them. I must say how I see this table, the street, people, my packet of tobacco, since *these* are the things which have changed. I must fix the exact extent and nature of this change.

For example, there is a cardboard box which contains my bottle of ink. I ought to try to say how I saw it *before* and how I —^{*} it now. Well, it's a parallelepiped rectangle standing out against – that's silly, there's nothing I can say about it. That's what I must avoid: I mustn't put strangeness where there's nothing. I think that is the danger of keeping a diary: you exaggerate everything, you are on the look-out, and you continually stretch the truth. On the other hand, it is certain that from one moment to the next – and precisely in connexion with this box or any other object – I may recapture this impression of the day before yesterday. I must always be prepared, or else it might slip through my fingers again. I must never —[†] anything but note down carefully and in the greatest detail everything that happens.

Naturally I can no longer write anything definite about that business on Saturday and the day before yesterday – I am already too far away from it; all that I can say is that in neither case was there anything people would ordinarily call an event. On Saturday

* A word is missing here.

† A word has been crossed out here (possibly 'force' or 'forge'), and another word has been written above it which is illegible.

the children were playing ducks and drakes, and I wanted to throw a pebble into the sea like them. At that moment I stopped, dropped the pebble and walked away. I imagine I must have looked rather bewildered, because the children laughed behind my back.

So much for the exterior. What happened inside me didn't leave any clear traces. There was something which I saw and which disgusted me, but I no longer know whether I was looking at the sea or at the pebble. It was a flat pebble, completely dry on one side, wet and muddy on the other. I held it by the edges, with my fingers wide apart to avoid getting them dirty.

The day before yesterday, it was much more complicated. There was also that series of coincidences and misunderstandings which I can't explain to myself. But I'm not going to amuse myself by putting all that down on paper. Anyhow, it's certain that I was frightened or experienced some other feeling of that sort. If only I knew what I was frightened of, I should already have made considerable progress.

The odd thing is that I am not at all prepared to consider myself insane, and indeed I can see quite clearly that I am not: all these changes concern objects. At least, that is what I'd like to be sure about.

10.30*

Perhaps it was a slight attack of insanity after all. There is no longer any trace of it left. The peculiar feelings I had the other week strike me as quite ridiculous today: I can no longer enter into them. This evening I am quite at ease, with my feet firmly on the ground. This is my room, which faces north-east. Down below is the rue des Mutilés and the shunting yard of the new station. From my window I can see the red and white flame of the Rendez-vous des

* Obviously in the evening. The following paragraph is much later than the preceding ones. We are inclined to think that it was written the following day at the earliest.

Cheminots at the corner of the boulevard Victor-Noir. The Paris train has just come in. People are coming out of the old station and dispersing in the streets. I can hear footsteps and voices. A lot of people are waiting for the last tram. They must make a sad little group around the gas lamp just under my window. Well, they will have to wait a few minutes more: the tram won't come before a quarter to eleven. I only hope no commercial travellers are going to come tonight: I do so want to sleep and have so much sleep to catch up on. One good night, just one, and all this business would be swept away.

A quarter to eleven: there's nothing more to fear – if they were coming, they would be here already. Unless it's the day for the gentleman from Rouen. He comes every week, and they keep No. 2 for him, the first-floor room with a bidet. He may still turn up; he often drinks a beer at the Rendez-vous des Cheminots before going to bed. He doesn't make too much noise. He is quite short and very neat, with a waxed black moustache and a wig. Here he is now.

Well, when I heard him coming upstairs, it gave me quite a thrill, it was so reassuring: what is there to fear from such a regular world? I think I am cured.

And here comes tram No. 7, *Abattoirs – Grands Bassins*. It arrives with a great clanking noise. It moves off again. Now, loaded with suitcases and sleeping children, it's heading towards the Grands Bassins, towards the factories in the black east. It's the last tram but one; the last one will go by in an hour.

I'm going to bed. I'm cured, and I'm going to give up writing down my impressions, like a little girl, in a nice new notebook.

There's only one case in which it might be interesting to keep a diary: that would be if*

* The text of the undated sheet ends here.

Diary

Monday, 29 January 1932

Something has happened to me: I can't doubt that any more. It came as an illness does, not like an ordinary certainty, not like anything obvious. It installed itself cunningly, little by little; I felt a little strange, a little awkward, and that was all. Once it was established, it didn't move any more, it lay low and I was able to persuade myself that there was nothing wrong with me, that it was a false alarm. And now it has started blossoming.

I don't think the profession of historian fits a man for psychological analysis. In our work, we have to deal only with simple feelings to which we give generic names such as Ambition and Interest. Yet if I had an iota of self-knowledge, now is the time when I ought to use it.

There is something new, for example, about my hands, a certain way of picking up my pipe or my fork. Or else it is the fork which now has a certain way of getting itself picked up, I don't know. Just now, when I was on the point of coming into my room, I stopped short because I felt in my hand a cold object which attracted my attention by means of a sort of personality. I opened my hand and looked: I was simply holding the doorknob. This morning, at the library, when the Autodidact* came to say good-morning to me, it took me ten seconds to recognize him. I saw an unknown face which was barely a face. And then there was his hand, like a fat maggot in my hand. I let go of it straight away and the arm fell back limply.

* Ogier P—, who will often be mentioned in this diary. He was a bailiff's clerk. Roquentin had made his acquaintance in 1930 at the Bouville library.

In the streets too there are a great many suspicious noises to be heard.

So a change *has* taken place in the course of these last few weeks. But where? It's an abstract change which settles on nothing. Is it I who has changed? If it isn't I, then it's this room, this town, this nature; I must choose.

I think it's I who has changed: that's the simplest solution, also the most unpleasant. But I have to admit that I am subject to these sudden transformations. The thing is that I very rarely think; consequently a host of little metamorphoses accumulate in me without my noticing it, and then, one fine day, a positive revolution takes place. That is what has given my life this halting, incoherent aspect. When I left France, for example, there were a lot of people who said I had gone off on a sudden impulse. And when I returned unexpectedly after six years of travelling, they might well have spoken of a sudden impulse once more. I can see myself again with Mercier in the office of that French official who resigned last year after the Pétrou business. Mercier was going to Bengal with an archaeological expedition. I had always wanted to go to Bengal, and he urged me to go with him. At present, I wonder why. I imagine that he didn't feel too sure of Portal and that he was counting on me to keep an eye on him. I could see no reason to refuse. And even if, at the time, I had guessed at that little scheme with regard to Portal, that would have been another reason for accepting enthusiastically. Well, I was paralysed, I couldn't say a word. I was staring at a little Khmer statuette on a card-table next to a telephone. I felt as if I were full of lymph or warm milk.

With an angelic patience which concealed a slight irritation, Mercier was saying to me:

'You see, I have to be certain from the official point of view. I know that you'll end up by saying yes, so you might as well accept straight away.'

He has a reddish-black beard, heavily scented. At every movement of his head I got a whiff of perfume. And then, all of a sudden, I awoke from a sleep which had lasted six years.

The statue struck me as stupid and unattractive and I felt that I was terribly bored. I couldn't understand why I was in Indo-China. What was I doing there? Why was I talking to those people? Why was I dressed so oddly? My passion was dead. For years it had submerged me and swept me along; now I felt empty. But that wasn't the worst of it: installed in front of me with a sort of indolence there was a voluminous, insipid idea. I don't know exactly what it was, but it sickened me so much that I couldn't look at it. All that was mixed up for me with the perfume of Mercier's beard.

I pulled myself together, convulsed with anger against him, and answered curtly:

'Thank you, but I think I've done enough travelling: I must go back to France now.'

Two days later I took the boat for Marseille.

If I am not mistaken, and if all the signs which are piling up are indications of a fresh upheaval in my life, well then, I am frightened. It isn't that my life is rich or weighty or precious, but I'm afraid of what is going to be born and take hold of me and carry me off – I wonder where? Shall I have to go away again, leaving everything behind – my research, my book? Shall I awake in a few months, a few years, exhausted, disappointed, in the midst of fresh ruins? I should like to understand myself properly before it is too late.

Tuesday, 30 January

Nothing new.

I worked from nine till one in the library. I organized Chapter XII and everything concerning Rollebon's stay in Russia up to the death of Paul I. That is all finished now. I shan't touch it again until the final revision.

It is half past one. I am at the Café Mably, eating a sandwich, and everything is more or less normal. In any case, everything is always normal in cafés and especially in the Café Mably, because of the

manager, Monsieur Fasquelle, who has a vulgar expression in his eyes which is very straightforward and reassuring. It will soon be time for his afternoon nap and his eyes are already pink, but his manner is still lively and decisive. He is walking around among the tables and speaking confidentially to the customers:

‘Is everything all right, Monsieur?’

I smile at seeing him so lively: when his establishment empties, his head empties too. Between two and four the café is deserted, and then Monsieur Fasquelle takes a few dazed steps, the waiters turn out the lights, and he slips into unconsciousness: when this man is alone, he falls asleep.

There are still about a score of customers left, bachelors, small-time engineers, and office workers. They lunch hurriedly in boarding houses which they call their ‘messes’, and, since they need a little luxury, they come here after their meal, to drink a cup of coffee and play poker dice; they make a little noise, but a vague noise which doesn’t bother me. In order to exist, they too have to join with others.

I for my part live alone, entirely alone. I never speak to anybody, I receive nothing, I give nothing. The Autodidact doesn’t count. Admittedly there is Françoise, the woman who runs the Rendez-vous des Cheminots. But do I speak to her? Sometimes, after dinner, when she brings me a beer, I ask her:

‘Have you got time this evening?’

She never says no and I follow her into one of the big bedrooms on the first floor, which she rents by the hour or by the day. I don’t pay her: we make love on an *au pair* basis. She enjoys it (she has to have a man a day and she has many more besides me) and I purge myself in this way of a certain melancholy whose cause I know only too well. But we barely exchange a few words. What would be the use? Every man for himself; besides, as far as she’s concerned, I remain first and foremost a customer in her café. Taking off her dress, she says to me:

‘I say, have you ever heard of an apéritif called Bricot? Because there are two customers who’ve asked for it this week. The girl didn’t know it and she came to ask me. They were commercial

travellers, and they must have drunk it in Paris. But I don't like to buy anything without knowing it. If you don't mind, I'll keep my stockings on.'

In the past – even long after she had left me – I used to think about Anny. Now, I don't think about anybody any more; I don't even bother to look for words. It flows through me, more or less quickly, and I don't fix anything, I just let it go. Most of the time, because of their failure to fasten on to words, my thoughts remain misty and nebulous. They assume vague, amusing shapes and are then swallowed up: I promptly forget them.

These young people amaze me; drinking their coffee, they tell clear, plausible stories. If you ask them what they did yesterday, they don't get flustered; they tell you all about it in a few words. If I were in their place, I'd start stammering. It's true that for a long time now nobody has bothered how I spend my time. When you live alone, you even forget what it is to tell a story: plausibility disappears at the same time as friends. You let events flow by too: you suddenly see people appear who speak and then go away; you plunge into stories of which you can't make head or tail: you'd make a terrible witness. But on the other hand, everything improbable, everything which nobody would ever believe in a café, comes your way. For example, on Saturday, about four in the afternoon, on the short wooden pavement of the station yard, a little woman in sky-blue was running backwards, laughing and waving a handkerchief. At the same time, a Negro in a cream-coloured raincoat, with yellow shoes and a green hat, was turning the corner of the street, whistling. Still going backwards, the woman bumped into him, underneath a lantern which hangs from the fence and which is lit at night. So there, at one and the same time, you had that fence which smells so strongly of wet wood, that lantern, and that little blonde in a Negro's arms, under a fiery-coloured sky. If there had been four or five of us, I suppose we would have noticed the collision, all those soft colours, the beautiful blue coat which looked like an eiderdown, the light-coloured raincoat, and the red panes of the lantern; we would have laughed at the stupefaction which appeared on those two childlike faces.

It is unusual for a man on his own to feel like laughing: the whole scene came alive for me with a significance which was strong and even fierce, but pure. Then it broke up, and nothing remained but the lantern, the fence, and the sky: it was still quite beautiful. An hour later, the lantern was lit, the wind was blowing, the sky was dark: nothing at all was left.

There is nothing very new about all that; I have never rejected these harmless emotions; far from it. In order to feel them, it is sufficient to be a little isolated, just enough to get rid of plausibility at the right moment. But I remained close to people, on the surface of solitude, quite determined, in case of emergency, to take refuge in their midst: so far I was an amateur at heart.

Now, there are objects everywhere like this glass of beer, here on the table. When I see it, I feel like saying: 'Pax, I'm not playing any more.' I realize perfectly well that I have gone too far. I don't suppose you can 'make allowances' for solitude. That doesn't mean that I look under my bed before going to sleep or that I'm afraid of seeing the door of my room open suddenly in the middle of the night. All the same, I am ill at ease: for half an hour I have been avoiding *looking* at this glass of beer. I look above, below, right and left: but the glass *itself* I don't want to see. And I know very well that all the bachelors around me can't help me in any way: it is too late, and I can no longer take refuge among them. They would come and slap me on the back and say to me: 'Well, what's special about that glass of beer? It's just like all the others. It's bevelled, and it has a handle and a little coat of arms with a spade on it, and on the coat of arms is written *Spatenbräu*.' I know all that, but I know that there's something else. Almost nothing. But I can no longer explain what I see. To anybody. There it is: I am gently slipping into the water's depths, towards fear.

I am alone in the midst of these happy, reasonable voices. All these characters spend their time explaining themselves, and happily recognizing that they hold the same opinions. Good God, how important they consider it to think the same things all together. It's enough to see their expressions when one of those fishy-eyed men who look as if they are turned in upon themselves and with whom

no agreement is possible passes among them. When I was eight years old and used to play in the Luxembourg Gardens, there was one who came and sat in a sentry-box, against the railing which runs along the rue Auguste-Comte. He didn't speak, but every now and then he would stretch his leg out and look at his foot with a terrified expression. This foot wore a boot, but the other foot was in a slipper. The keeper told my uncle that the man was a former schoolmaster. He had been retired because he had turned up to read out the marks at the end of term dressed as an academician. We were terribly afraid of him because we sensed that he was alone. One day he smiled at Robert, holding his arms out to him from a distance: Robert nearly fainted. It wasn't the fellow's poverty-stricken appearance which frightened us, nor the tumour he had on his neck which rubbed against the edge of his collar: but we felt that he was shaping crab-like or lobster-like thoughts in his head. And it terrified us to think that somebody could have lobster-like thoughts about the sentry-box, about our hoops, about the bushes.

Is it that which awaits me then? For the first time it disturbs me to be alone. I should like to talk to somebody about what is happening to me before it is too late, before I start frightening little boys. I wish Anny were here.

It's odd: I have just filled up ten pages and I haven't told the truth, at least, not the whole truth. When I wrote under the date: 'Nothing new', it was with a bad conscience: as a matter of fact there was a little incident, with nothing shameful or extraordinary about it, which refused to come out. 'Nothing new'. I admire the way we can lie, putting reason on our side. Obviously, nothing new has happened in a manner of speaking. This morning, at a quarter past eight, as I was leaving the Hôtel Printania to go to the library, I tried to pick up a piece of paper lying on the ground and didn't succeed. That's all, and it isn't even an event. Yes, but, to tell the whole truth, it made a profound impression on me: it occurred to me that I was no longer free. At the library, I tried unsuccessfully to get rid of that idea. I attempted to escape from it at the Café Mably. I hoped

that it would disappear in the bright light. But it stayed there inside me, heavy and painful. It is that idea which has dictated the preceding pages to me.

Why didn't I mention it? It must have been out of pride, and then, too, a little out of awkwardness. I am not accustomed to telling myself what happens to me, so I find it hard to remember the exact succession of events, and I can't make out what is important. But now that's over and done with: I have re-read what I wrote in the Café Mably and it made me feel ashamed; I want no secrets, no spiritual condition, nothing ineffable; I am neither a virgin nor a priest, to play at having an inner life.

There's nothing much to say: I couldn't manage to pick up the piece of paper, that's all.

I am very fond of picking up chestnuts, old rags, and especially pieces of paper. I find it pleasant to pick them up, to close my hand over them; for two pins I would put them to my mouth as children do, Anny used to fly into a rage when I picked up by one corner pieces of paper which were heavy and rich-looking but probably soiled with excrement. In summer or early autumn, you can find in gardens pieces of newspapers baked by the sun, as dry and brittle as dead leaves, and so yellow you might think they had been dipped in picric acid. Other pieces of paper, in winter, are pulped, crumpled, stained; they return to the earth. Others which are new and even shiny, white and palpitating, are as sedate as swans, but the earth has already ensnared them from below. They twist and tear themselves away from the mud, but only to fall a little further on, this time for good. All these pieces of paper are worth picking up. Sometimes I simply feel them, looking at them closely; at other times I tear them to hear the long crackling noise they make, or else, if they are very wet, I set fire to them, something which is not easy to do; then I wipe the muddy palms of my hands on a wall or a tree trunk.

So, today, I was looking at the fawn-coloured boots of a cavalry officer who was coming out of the barracks. As I followed them with my eyes, I saw a piece of paper lying beside a puddle. I thought that the officer was going to crush the paper into the mud

with his heel, but no: with a single step he strode over paper and puddle. I went up to it: it was a lined page, probably torn out of a school notebook. The rain had drenched and twisted it, and it was covered with blisters and swellings, like a burnt hand. The red line of the margin had blurred into a pink smear; the ink had run in places. The bottom of the page was hidden by a crust of mud. I bent down, already looking forward to touching this fresh and tender pulp which would roll into grey balls in my fingers . . . I couldn't do it.

I stayed in a bent position for a moment, I read: 'Dictation: The White Owl', then I straightened up, empty-handed. I am no longer free, I can no longer do what I want.

Objects ought not to *touch*, since they are not alive. You use them, you put them back in place, you live among them: they are useful, nothing more. But they touch me, it's unbearable. I am afraid of entering in contact with them, just as if they were living animals.

Now I see; I remember better what I felt the other day on the sea-shore when I was holding that pebble. It was a sort of sweet disgust. How unpleasant it was! And it came from the pebble, I'm sure of that, it passed from the pebble into my hands. Yes, that's it, that's exactly it: a sort of nausea in the hands.

Thursday morning, at the library

Earlier this morning, coming down the hotel stairs, I heard Lucie complaining for the hundredth time to the *patronne*, while polishing the steps. The *patronne* was speaking with difficulty and in short sentences, because she hadn't put her false teeth in yet; she was almost naked, in a pink dressing-gown and Turkish slippers. Lucie was dirty as usual; every now and then she stopped rubbing and sat back on her heels to look at the *patronne*. She spoke without pausing, with a serious expression.

'I'd be much happier if he went with other women,' she said; 'it wouldn't make any difference to me, so long as it didn't do him any harm.'