

3. "The Unpardonable Crime"

Only one living creature seemed to take any notice of his existence:

this was an old St. Bernard, who used to come and lay his big head with its mournful eyes on Christophe's knees when Christophe was sitting on the seat in front of the house. They would look long at each other. Christophe would not drive him away. Unlike the sick Goethe, the dog's eyes had no uneasiness for him. Unlike him, he had no desire to cry:

"Go away! . . . Thou goblin thou shalt not catch me, whatever thou doest!"

He asked nothing better than to be engrossed by the dog's suppliant sleepy eyes and to help the beast: he felt that there must be behind them an imprisoned soul imploring his aid.

In those hours when he was weak with suffering, torn alive away from life, devoid of human egoism, he saw the victims of men, the field of battle in which man triumphed in the bloody slaughter of all other creatures: and his heart was filled with pity and horror. Even in the days when he had been happy he had always loved the beasts: he had never been able to bear cruelty towards them: he had always had a detestation of sport, which he had never dared to express for fear of ridicule: but his feeling of repulsion had been the secret cause of the apparently inexplicable feeling of dislike he had had for certain men: he had never been able to admit to his friendship a man who could kill an animal for pleasure. It was not sentimentality: no one knew better than he that life is based on suffering and infinite cruelty: no man can live without making others suffer. It is no use closing our eyes and fobbing ourselves off with words. It is no use either coming to the conclusion that we must renounce life and sniveling like children. No. We must kill to live, if, at the time, there is no other means of living. But the man who kills for the sake of killing is a miscreant. An unconscious miscreant, I know. But, all the same, a miscreant. The continual endeavor of man should be to lessen the sum of suffering and cruelty: that is the first duty of humanity.

In ordinary life those ideas remained buried in Christophe's inmost heart. He refused to think of them. What was the good? What could he do? He had to be Christophe, he had to accomplish his work, live at all costs, live at the cost of the weak. ... It was not he who had made the universe. . . . Better not think of it, better not think of it. ...

But when unhappiness had dragged him down, him, too, to the level of the vanquished, he had to think of these things. Only a little while ago he had blamed Olivier for plunging into futile remorse and vain compassion for all the wretchedness that men suffer and inflict. Now he went even farther: with all the vehemence of his mighty nature he probed to the depths of the tragedy of the universe: he suffered all the sufferings of the world, and was left raw and bleeding. He could not think of the animals without shuddering in anguish. He looked into the eyes of the beasts and saw there a soul like his own, a soul which could not speak: but the eyes cried for it:

"What have I done to you? Why do you hurt me?" He could not bear to see the most ordinary sights that he had seen hundreds of times—a calf crying in a wicker pen, with its big, protruding eyes, with their bluish whites and pink lids, and white lashes, its curly white tufts on its forehead, its purple snout, its knock-kneed legs:—a lamb being carried by a peasant with its four legs tied together, hanging head down, trying to hold its head up, moaning like a child, bleating and lolling its gray tongue:—fowls huddled together in a basket:—the distant squeals of a pig being bled to death:—a fish being cleaned on the kitchen-table. . . . The nameless tortures which men inflict on such innocent creatures made his heart ache. Grant animals a ray of reason, imagine what a frightful nightmare the world is to them: a dream of cold-blooded men, blind and deaf, cutting their throats, slitting them open, gutting them, cutting them into pieces, cooking them alive, sometimes laughing at them and their contortions as they writhe in agony. Is there anything more atrocious among the cannibals of Africa? To a man whose mind is free there is something even more intolerable in the sufferings of animals than in the sufferings of men. For with the latter it is at least admitted that suffering is evil and that the man who causes it is a criminal. But thousands of animals are uselessly butchered every day without a shadow of remorse. If any man were to refer to it, he would be thought ridiculous.—And that is the unpardonable crime. That alone is the justification of all that men may suffer. It cries vengeance upon God. If there exists a good God, then even the most humble of living things must be saved. If God is good only to the strong, if there is no justice for the weak and lowly, for the poor creatures who are offered up as a sacrifice to humanity, then there is no such thing as goodness, no such thing as justice.