CHAPTER 1

THE Floressas Des Esseinte, to judge by the various portraits preserved in the Château de Lourps, had originally been a family of stalwart troopers and stern cavalry men. Closely arrayed, side by side, in the old frames which their broad shoulders filled, they startled one with the fixed gaze of their eyes, their fierce moustaches and the chests whose deep curves filled the enormous shells of their cuirasses.

These were the ancestors. There were no portraits of their descendants and a wide breach existed in the series of the faces of this race. Only one painting served as a link to connect the past and present—a crafty, mysterious head with haggard and gaunt features, cheekbones punctuated with a comma of paint, the hair overspread with pearls, a painted neck rising stiffly from the fluted ruff.

In this representation of one of the most intimate friends of the Duc d'Epernon and the Marquis d'O, the ravages of a sluggish and impoverished constitution were already noticeable.

It was obvious that the decadence of this family had followed an unvarying course. The effemination of the males had continued with quickened tempo. As if to conclude the work of long years, the Des Esseintes had intermarried for two centuries, using up, in such consanguineous unions, such strength as remained.

There was only one living scion of this family which had once been so numerous that it had occupied all the territories of the Ile-de-France and La Brie. The Duc Jean was a slender, nervous young man of thirty, with hollow cheeks, cold, steel-blue eyes, a straight, thin nose and delicate hands.

By a singular, atavistic reversion, the last descendant resembled the old grandsire, from whom he had inherited the pointed, remarkably fair beard and an ambiguous expression, at once weary and cunning.
His childhood had been an unhappy one. Menaced with scrofula and afflicted with relentless fevers, he yet succeeded in crossing the breakers of adolescence, thanks to fresh air and careful attention. He grew stronger, overcame the languors of chlorosis and reached his full development.

His mother, a tall, pale, taciturn woman, died of anæmia, and his father of some uncertain malady. Des Esseintes was then seventeen years of age.

He retained but a vague memory of his parents and felt neither affection nor gratitude for them. He hardly knew his father, who usually resided in Paris. He recalled his mother as she lay motionless in a dim room of the Château de Lourps. The husband and wife would meet on rare occasions, and he remembered those lifeless interviews when his parents sat face to face in front of a round table faintly lit by a lamp with a wide, low-hanging shade, for the duchesse could not endure light or sound without being seized with a fit of nervousness. A few, halting words would be exchanged between them in the gloom and then the indifferent duc would depart to meet the first train back to Paris.

Jean's life at the Jesuit school, where he was sent to study, was more pleasant. At first the Fathers pampered the lad whose intelligence astonished them. But despite their efforts, they could not induce him to concentrate on studies requiring discipline. He nibbled at various books and was precociously brilliant in Latin. On the contrary, he was absolutely incapable of construing two Greek words, showed no aptitude for living languages and promptly proved himself a dunce when obliged to master the elements of the sciences.

His family gave him little heed. Sometimes his father visited him at school. "How are you . . . be good . . . study hard . . . "—and he was gone. The lad passed the summer vacations at the Château de Lourps, but his presence could not seduce his mother from her reveries. She scarcely noticed him; when she did, her gaze would rest on him for a moment with a sad smile—and that was all. The moment after she would again become absorbed in the artificial night with which the heavily curtained windows enshrouded the room.

The servants were old and dull. Left to himself, the boy delved into books on rainy days and roamed about the countryside on pleasant afternoons.

It was his supreme delight to wander down the little valley to Jutigny, a village planted at the foot of the hills, a tiny heap of cottages capped with thatch strewn with tufts of sengreen and clumps of moss. In the open fields, under the shadow of high ricks, he would lie, listening to the hollow splashing of the mills and inhaling the fresh breeze from Voulzie. Sometimes he went as far as the peat-bogs, to the green and black hamlet of Longueville, or climbed wind-swept hillsides affording magnificent views. There, below to one side, as far as the eye could reach, lay the Seine valley, blending in the distance with the blue sky; high up, near the horizon, on the other side, rose the churches and tower of Provins which seemed to tremble in the golden dust of the air.
Immersed in solitude, he would dream or read far into the night. By protracted contemplation of the same thoughts, his mind grew sharp, his vague, undeveloped ideas took on form. After each vacation, Jean returned to his masters more reflective and headstrong. These changes did not escape them. Subtle and observant, accustomed by their profession to plumb souls to their depths, they were fully aware of his unresponsiveness to their teachings. They knew that this student would never contribute to the glory of their order, and as his family was rich and apparently careless of his future, they soon renounced the idea of having him take up any of the professions their school offered. Although he willingly discussed with them those theological doctrines which intrigued his fancy by their subtleties and hair-splittings, they did not even think of training him for the religious orders, since, in spite of their efforts, his faith remained languid. As a last resort, through prudence and fear of the harm he might effect, they permitted him to pursue whatever studies pleased him and to neglect the others, being loath to antagonize this bold and independent spirit by the quibblings of the lay school assistants.

Thus he lived in perfect contentment, scarcely feeling the parental yoke of the priests. He continued his Latin and French studies when the whim seized him and, although theology did not figure in his schedule, he finished his apprenticeship in this science, begun at the Château de Lourps, in the library bequeathed by his grand-uncle, Dom Prosper, the old prior of the regular canons of Saint-Ruf.

But soon the time came when he must quit the Jesuit institution. He attained his majority and became master of his fortune. The Comte de Montchevel, his cousin and guardian, placed in his hands the title to his wealth. There was no intimacy between them, for there was no possible point of contact between these two men, the one young, the other old. Impelled by curiosity, idleness or politeness, Des Esseintes sometimes visited the Montchevel family and spent some dull evenings in their Rue de la Chaise mansion where the ladies, old as antiquity itself, would gossip of quarterings of the noble arms, heraldic moons and anachronistic ceremonies.

The men, gathered around whist tables, proved even more shallow and insignificant than the dowagers; these descendants of ancient, courageous knights, these last branches of feudal races, appeared to Des Esseintes as catarrhal, crazy, old men repeating inanities and time-worn phrases. A fleur de lis seemed the sole imprint on the soft pap of their brains.

The youth felt an unutterable pity for these mummies buried in their elaborate hypogeums of wainscoting and grotto work, for these tedious triflers whose eyes were forever turned towards a hazy Canaan, an imaginary Palestine.

After a few visits with such relatives, he resolved never again to set foot in their homes, regardless of invitations or reproaches.

Then he began to seek out the young men of his own age and set.

One group, educated like himself in religious institutions, preserved the special marks of this training. They attended religious services, received the sacrament on
Easter, frequented the Catholic circles and concealed as criminal their amorous escapades. For the most part, they were unintelligent, acquiescent fops, stupid bores who had tried the patience of their professors. Yet these professors were pleased to have bestowed such docile, pious creatures upon society.

The other group, educated in the state colleges or in the lycées, were less hypocritical and much more courageous, but they were neither more interesting nor less bigoted. Gay young men dazzled by operettas and races, they played lansquenet and baccarat, staked large fortunes on horses and cards, and cultivated all the pleasures enchanting to brainless fools. After a year's experience, Des Esseintes felt an overpowering weariness of this company whose debaucheries seemed to him so unrefined, facile and indiscriminate without any ardent reactions or excitement of nerves and blood.

He gradually forsook them to make the acquaintance of literary men, in whom he thought he might find more interest and feel more at ease. This, too, proved disappointing; he was revolted by their rancorous and petty judgments, their conversation as obvious as a church door, their dreary discussions in which they judged the value of a book by the number of editions it had passed and by the profits acquired. At the same time, he noticed that the free thinkers, the doctrinaires of the bourgeoisie, people who claimed every liberty that they might stifle the opinions of others, were greedy and shameless puritans whom, in education, he esteemed inferior to the corner shoemaker.

His contempt for humanity deepened. He reached the conclusion that the world, for the most part, was composed of scoundrels and imbeciles. Certainly, he could not hope to discover in others aspirations and aversions similar to his own, could not expect companionship with an intelligence exulting in a studious decrepitude, nor anticipate meeting a mind as keen as his among the writers and scholars.

Irritated, ill at ease and offended by the poverty of ideas given and received, he became like those people described by Nicole—those who are always melancholy. He would fly into a rage when he read the patriotic and social balderdash retailed daily in the newspapers, and would exaggerate the significance of the plaudits which a sovereign public always reserves for works deficient in ideas and style.

Already, he was dreaming of a refined solitude, a comfortable desert, a motionless ark in which to seek refuge from the unending deluge of human stupidity.

A single passion, woman, might have curbed his contempt, but that, too, had palled on him. He had taken to carnal repasts with the eagerness of a crotchety man affected with a depraved appetite and given to sudden hungers, whose taste is quickly dulled and surfeited. Associating with country squires, he had taken part in their lavish suppers where, at dessert, tipsy women would unfasten their clothing and strike their heads against the tables; he had haunted the green rooms, loved actresses and singers, endured, in addition to the natural stupidity he had come to expect of women, the maddening vanity of female strolling players. Finally, satiated and weary of this
monotonous extravagance and the sameness of their caresses, he had plunged into the foul depths, hoping by the contrast of squalid misery to revive his desires and stimulate his deadened senses.

Whatever he attempted proved vain; an unconquerable ennui oppressed him. Yet he persisted in his excesses and returned to the perilous embraces of accomplished mistresses. But his health failed, his nervous system collapsed, the back of his neck grew sensitive, his hand, still firm when it seized a heavy object, trembled when it held a tiny glass.

The physicians whom he consulted frightened him. It was high time to check his excesses and renounce those pursuits which were dissipating his reserve of strength! For a while he was at peace, but his brain soon became over-excited. Like those young girls who, in the grip of puberty, crave coarse and vile foods, he dreamed of and practiced perverse loves and pleasures. This was the end! As though satisfied with having exhausted everything, as though completely surrendering to fatigue, his senses fell into a lethargy and impotence threatened him.

He recovered, but he was lonely, tired, sobered, imploring an end to his life which the cowardice of his flesh prevented him from consummating.

Once more he was toying with the idea of becoming a recluse, of living in some hushed retreat where the turmoil of life would be muffled—as in those streets covered with straw to prevent any sound from reaching invalids.

It was time to make up his mind. The condition of his finances terrified him. He had spent, in acts of folly and in drinking bouts, the greater part of his patrimony, and the remainder, invested in land, produced a ridiculously small income.

He decided to sell the Château de Lourps, which he no longer visited and where he left no memory or regret behind. He liquidated his other holdings, bought government bonds and in this way drew an annual interest of fifty thousand francs; in addition, he reserved a sum of money which he meant to use in buying and furnishing the house where he proposed to enjoy a perfect repose.

Exploring the suburbs of the capital, he found a place for sale at the top of Fontenay-aux-Roses, in a secluded section near the fort, far from any neighbors. His dream was realized! In this country place so little violated by Parisians, he could be certain of seclusion. The difficulty of reaching the place, due to an unreliable railroad passing by at the end of the town, and to the little street cars which came and went at irregular intervals, reassured him. He could picture himself alone on the bluff, sufficiently far away to prevent the Parisian throngs from reaching him, and yet near enough to the capital to confirm him in his solitude. And he felt that in not entirely closing the way, there was a chance that he would not be assailed by a wish to return to society, seeing that it is only the impossible, the unachievable that arouses desire.

He put masons to work on the house he had acquired. Then, one day, informing no one of his plans, he quickly disposed of his old furniture, dismissed his servants, and left without giving the concierge any address.
CHAPTER 2

MORE than two months passed before Des Esseintes could bury himself in the silent repose of his Fontenay abode. He was obliged to go to Paris again, to comb the city in his search for the things he wanted to buy.

What care he took, what meditations he surrendered himself to, before turning over his house to the upholsterers!

He had long been a connoisseur in the sincerities and evasions of color-tones. In the days when he had entertained women at his home, he had created a boudoir where, amid daintily carved furniture of pale, Japanese camphor-wood, under a sort of pavillion of Indian rose-tinted satin, the flesh would color delicately in the borrowed lights of the silken hangings.

This room, each of whose sides was lined with mirrors that echoed each other all along the walls, reflecting, as far as the eye could reach, whole series of rose boudoirs, had been celebrated among the women who loved to immerse their nudity in this bath of warm carnation, made fragrant with the odor of mint emanating from the exotic wood of the furniture.

Aside from the sensual delights for which he had designed this chamber, this painted atmosphere which gave new color to faces grown dull and withered by the use of ceruse and by nights of dissipation, there were other, more personal and perverse pleasures which he enjoyed in these languorous surroundings,—pleasures which in some way stimulated memories of his past pains and dead ennuis.

As a souvenir of the hated days of his childhood, he had suspended from the ceiling a small silver-wired cage where a captive cricket sang as if in the ashes of the chimneys of the Château de Lourps. Listening to the sound he had so often heard before, he lived over again the silent evenings spent near his mother, the wretchedness of his suffering, repressed youth. And then, while he yielded to the voluptuousness of the woman he mechanically caressed, whose words or laughter tore him from his revery and rudely recalled him to the moment, to the boudoir, to reality, a tumult arose in his soul, a need of avenging the sad years he had endured, a mad wish to sully the recollections of his family by shameful action, a furious desire to pant on cushions of flesh, to drain to their last dregs the most violent of carnal vices.

On rainy autumnal days when melancholy oppressed him, when a hatred of his home, the muddy yellow skies, the macadam clouds assailed him, he took refuge in this retreat, set the cage lightly in motion and watched it endlessly reflected in the play of the mirrors, until it seemed to his dazed eyes that the cage no longer stirred, but that the boudoir reeled and turned, filling the house with a rose-colored waltz.

In the days when he had deemed it necessary to affect singularity, Des Esseintes had designed marvelously strange furnishings, dividing his salon into a series of alcoves hung with varied tapestries to relate by a subtle analogy, by a vague harmony of joyous or sombre, delicate or barbaric colors to the character of the Latin or French books he loved. And he would seclude himself in turn in the particular
recess whose décor seemed best to correspond with the very essence of the work his caprice of the moment induced him to read.

He had constructed, too, a lofty high room intended for the reception of his tradesmen. Here they were ushered in and seated alongside each other in church pews, while from a pulpit he preached to them a sermon on dandyism, adjuring his bootmakers and tailors implicitly to obey his briefs in the matter of style, threatening them with pecuniary excommunication if they failed to follow to the letter the instructions contained in his monitores and bulls.

He acquired the reputation of an eccentric, which he enhanced by wearing costumes of white velvet, and gold-embroidered waistcoats, by inserting, in place of a cravat, a Parma bouquet in the opening of his shirt, by giving famous dinners to men of letters, one of which, a revival of the eighteenth century, celebrating the most futile of his misadventures, was a funeral repast.

In the dining room, hung in black and opening on the transformed garden with its ash-powdered walks, its little pool now bordered with basalt and filled with ink, its clumps of cypress and pines, the dinner had been served on a table draped in black, adorned with baskets of violets and scabiouses, lit by candelabra from which green flames blazed, and by chandeliers from which wax tapers flared.

To the sound of funeral marches played by a concealed orchestra, nude negresses, wearing slippers and stockings of silver cloth with patterns of tears, served the guests. Out of black-edged plates they had drunk turtle soup and eaten Russian rye bread, ripe Turkish olives, caviar, smoked Frankfort black pudding, game with sauces that were the color of licorice and blacking, truffle gravy, chocolate cream, puddings, nectarines, grape preserves, mulberries and black-heart cherries; they had sipped, out of dark glasses, wines from Limagne, Roussillon, Tenedos, Val de Penas and Porto, and after the coffee and walnut brandy had partaken of kvass and porter and stout.

The farewell dinner to a temporarily dead virility—this was what he had written on invitation cards designed like bereavement notices.

But he was done with those extravagances in which he had once gloried. Today, he was filled with a contempt for those juvenile displays, the singular apparel, the appointments of his bizarre chambers. He contented himself with planning, for his own pleasure, and no longer for the astonishment of others, an interior that should be comfortable although embellished in a rare style; with building a curious, calm retreat to serve the needs of his future solitude.

When the Fontenay house was in readiness, fitted up by an architect according to his plans, when all that remained was to determine the color scheme, he again devoted himself to long speculations.

He desired colors whose expressiveness would be displayed in the artificial light of lamps. To him it mattered not at all if they were lifeless or crude in daylight, for it was at night that he lived, feeling more completely alone then, feeling that only under the protective covering of darkness did the mind grow really animated and active. He also
experienced a peculiar pleasure in being in a richly illuminated room, the only patch of light amid the shadow-haunted, sleeping houses. This was a form of enjoyment in which perhaps entered an element of vanity, that peculiar pleasure known to late workers when, drawing aside the window curtains, they perceive that everything about them is extinguished, silent, dead.

Slowly, one by one, he selected the colors.

Blue inclines to a false green by candle light: if it is dark, like cobalt or indigo, it turns black; if it is bright, it turns grey; if it is soft, like turquoise, it grows feeble and faded.

There could be no question of making it the dominant note of a room unless it were blended with some other color.

Iron grey always frowns and is heavy; pearl grey loses its blue and changes to a muddy white; brown is lifeless and cold; as for deep green, such as emperor or myrtle, it has the same properties as blue and merges into black. There remained, then, the paler greens, such as peacock, cinnabar or lacquer, but the light banishes their blues and brings out their yellows in tones that have a false and undecided quality.

No need to waste thought on the salmon, the maize and rose colors whose feminine associations oppose all ideas of isolation! No need to consider the violet which is completely neutralized at night; only the red in it holds its ground—and what a red! a viscous red like the lees of wine. Besides, it seemed useless to employ this color, for by using a certain amount of santonin, he could get an effect of violet on his hangings.

These colors disposed of, only three remained: red, orange, yellow.

Of these, he preferred orange, thus by his own example confirming the truth of a theory which he declared had almost mathematical correctness—the theory that a harmony exists between the sensual nature of a truly artistic individual and the color which most vividly impresses him.

Disregarding entirely the generality of men whose gross retinas are capable of perceiving neither the cadence peculiar to each color nor the mysterious charm of their nuances of light and shade; ignoring the bourgeoisie, whose eyes are insensible to the pomp and splendor of strong, vibrant tones; and devoting himself only to people with sensitive pupils, refined by literature and art, he was convinced that the eyes of those among them who dream of the ideal and demand illusions are generally caresed by blue and its derivatives, mauve, lilac and pearl grey, provided always that these colors remain soft and do not overstep the bounds where they lose their personalities by being transformed into pure violets and frank greys.

Those persons, on the contrary, who are energetic and incisive, the plethoric, red-blooded, strong males who fling themselves unthinkingly into the affair of the moment, generally delight in the bold gleams of yellows and reds, the clashing cymbals of vermilions and chromes that blind and intoxicate them.

But the eyes of enfeebled and nervous persons whose sensual appetites crave highly seasoned foods, the eyes of hectic and over-excited creatures have a predilection
toward that irritating and morbid color with its fictitious splendors, its acid fevers—orange.

Thus, there could be no question about Des Esseintes' choice, but unquestionable difficulties still arose. If red and yellow are heightened by light, the same does not always hold true of their compound, orange, which often seems to ignite and turns to nasturtium, to a flaming red.

He studied all their nuances by candlelight, discovering a shade which, it seemed to him, would not lose its dominant tone, but would stand every test required of it. These preliminaries completed, he sought to refrain from using, for his study at least, oriental stuffs and rugs which have become cheapened and ordinary, now that rich merchants can easily pick them up at auctions and shops.

He finally decided to bind his walls, like books, with coarse-grained morocco, with Cape skin, polished by strong steel plates under a powerful press.

When the wainscoting was finished, he had the moulding and high plinths painted in indigo, a lacquered indigo like that which coachmakers employ for carriage panels. The ceiling, slightly rounded, was also lined with morocco. In the center was a wide opening resembling an immense bull's eye encased in orange skin—a circle of the firmament worked out on a background of king blue silk on which were woven silver seraphim with out-stretched wings. This material had long before been embroidered by the Cologne guild of weavers for an old cope.

The setting was complete. At night the room subsided into a restful, soothing harmony. The wainscoting preserved its blue which seemed sustained and warmed by the orange. And the orange remained pure, strengthened and fanned as it was by the insistent breath of the blues.

Des Esseintes was not deeply concerned about the furniture itself. The only luxuries in the room were books and rare flowers. He limited himself to these things, intending later on to hang a few drawings or paintings on the panels which remained bare; to place shelves and book racks of ebony around the walls; to spread the pelts of wild beasts and the skins of blue fox on the floor; to install, near a massive fifteenth century counting-table, deep armchairs and an old chapel reading-desk of forged iron, one of those old lecterns on which the deacon formerly placed the antiphonary and which now supported one of the heavy folios of Du Cange's *Glossarium mediae et infimae latinitatis*.

The windows whose blue fissured panes, stippled with fragments of gold-edged bottles, intercepted the view of the country and only permitted a faint light to enter, were draped with curtains cut from old stoles of dark and reddish gold neutralized by an almost dead russet woven in the pattern.

The mantel shelf was sumptuously draped with the remnant of a Florentine dalmatica. Between two gilded copper monstrances of Byzantine style, originally brought from the old Abbaye-au-Bois de Bièvre, stood a marvelous church canon divided into three separate compartments delicately wrought like lace work. It
contained, under its glass frame, three works of Baudelaire copied on real vellum, with wonderful missal letters and splendid coloring: to the right and left, the sonnets bearing the titles of *La Mort des Amants* and *L'Ennemi*; in the center, the prose poem entitled, *Anywhere Out of the World—n'importe ou, hors du monde*. 