

The two boys stay near the stove. **The younger one** has brown hair, a skin almost too fine and a tiny mouth, wicked and proud. **His** friend, a big heavy-set boy with the shadow of a moustache, touched **his** elbow and murmured a few words. **The little brown haired boy** did not answer, but **he** gave an imperceptible smile, full of arrogance and self-sufficiency. Then both of **them** nonchalantly chose a dictionary from one of the shelves and went over to **The Self Taught Man** who was staring wearily at **them**. **They** seemed to ignore **his** existence, but **they** sat down right next to **him**, **the brown haired boy** on **his** left and **the thickset one** on the left of **the brown haired boy**. **They** began looking through the dictionary. **The Self Taught Man's** look wandered over the room, then returned to **his** reading. Never had a library offered such a reassuring spectacle: **I Jean** heard no sound, except the short breathing of **the fat woman**, **I he** only saw heads bent over books. Yet, at that moment, **I he** had the feeling that something unpleasant was going to happen. All these people who lowered their eyes with such a studious look seemed to be playing a comedy: a few instants before **I he** felt something like a breath of cruelty pass over **us them**.

I Jean had finished reading but had not decided to leave: **I he** was waiting, pretending to read **my his** newspaper. What increased **my his** curiosity and annoyance was that the others were waiting too. It seemed as though **my his** neighbour was turning the pages of **her** book more rapidly. A few minutes passed, then **I Jean** heard whispering. **I he** cautiously raised **my his** head. **Both boys** had closed **their** dictionaries. **The brown haired one** was not talking, **his** face, stamped with deference and interest, was turned to the right. Half hidden behind **his** shoulder, **the blond** was listening and laughing silently. Who's talking? **I Jean** thought.

It was **the Self Taught Man**. **He** was bent over **his** young neighbour, eye to eye, smiling at **him**; **I Jean** saw **his** lips move and, from time to time, **his** long eyelashes palpitate. **I Jean** did not recognize this look of youthfulness; **he the man** was almost charming. But, from time to time, **he** interrupted **himself** and looked anxiously behind **him**. **The boy** seemed to drink **his** words. There was nothing extraordinary about this little scene and **I Jean** was going to go back to **my his** reading when **I he** saw **the boy** slowly slide **his** hand behind **his** back on the edge of the table. Thus hidden from **the Self Taught Man's** eyes it went on its way for a moment, and began to feel around, then, finding the arm of **the bigger boy**, pinched it violently. **The other**, too absorbed in silent enjoyment of **the Self Taught Man's** words, had not seen it coming. **He** jumped up and **his** mouth opened widely in surprise and admiration. **The brown haired boy** had kept **his** look of respectful interest. One might have doubted that this mischievous hand belonged to **him**. What are **they** going to do to **him**? **I Jean** thought. **I he** knew that something bad was going to happen, and **I he** saw too that there was still time to keep it from happening. But **I he** could not guess what there was to prevent. For a second, **I Jean** had the idea of getting up, slapping **the Self Taught Man** on the shoulder and starting a conversation with **him**. But just at that moment **he the man** caught **my his** look. **He** stopped speaking and pinched **his** lips together with an air of irritation. Discouraged, **I**

Jean quickly lowered my his eyes and made a show of reading my his paper. However, the fat woman had set down her book and raised her head. She seemed hypnotized. I Jean felt sure the woman was going to burst: they all *wanted* something to burst. What could I he do? I Jean glanced at the Corsican: he wasn't looking out of the window any more, he had turned half way towards us them.

Fifteen minutes passed. The Self Taught Man had begun his whispering again. I Jean did not dare look at him any more, but I he could well imagine his young and tender air and those heavy looks which weighed on him without his knowing it. Once I Jean heard his laugh, a fluted, childish little laugh. It gripped my his heart: it seemed as though the two kids were going to drown a cat. Then the whispers stopped suddenly. This silence seemed tragic to me Jean: it was the end, the deathblow. I he bowed my his head over my his newspaper and pretended to read; but I he was not reading: I he raised my his eyes as high as I he could, trying to catch what was happening in this silence across from me him. By turning my his head slightly, I Jean could see something out of the corner of my his eye: it was a hand, the small white hand which slid along the table a little while ago. Now it was resting on its back, relaxed, soft and sensual, it had the indolent nudity of a woman sunning herself after bathing. A brown hairy object approached it, hesitant. It was a thick finger, yellowed by tobacco; inside this hand it had all the grossness of a male sex organ. It stopped for an instant, rigid, pointing at the fragile palm, then suddenly, it timidly began to stroke it. I Jean was not surprised, I he was only furious at the Self Taught Man; couldn't he hold himself back, the fool, didn't he realize the risk he was running? He still had a chance, a small chance: if he were to put both hands on the table, on either side of the book, if he stayed absolutely still, perhaps he might be able to escape his destiny this time. But I Jean knew he the man was going to miss his chance: the finger passed slowly, humbly, over the inert flesh, barely grazing it, without daring to put any weight on it: you might have thought it was conscious of its ugliness. I Jean raised my his head brusquely, I he could not stand this obstinate little back-and-forth movement any more: I he tried to catch the Self Taught Man's eye and I he coughed loudly to warn him. But he the man closed his eyes, he was smiling. His other hand had disappeared under the table. The boys were not laughing any more, they had both turned pale. The brown haired one pinched his lips, he was afraid, he looked as though what was happening had gone beyond his control. But he did not draw his hand away, he left it on the table, motionless, a little curled. His friend's mouth was open in a stupid, horrified look.

Then the Corsican began to shout. He had come up without anyone hearing him and placed himself behind the Self Taught Man's chair. He was crimson and looked as though he were going to laugh, but his eyes were flashing. I Jean started up from my his chair, but I he felt almost relieved: the waiting was too unbearable. I he wanted it to be over as soon as possible. I he wanted them to throw him out if they wanted, but get it over with. The two boys, white as sheets, seized their satchels and disappeared.