**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.