

Crowned by the French Academy: The Confessions of A Child of

Alfred de Musset

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Immortals Crowned by the French Academy: The Confessions of A Child of a Century, v2

Alfred de Musset

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- PART III

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PART III

CHAPTER I. DEATH, THE INEVITABLE

My father lived in the country some distance from Paris. When I arrived I found a physician in the house, who said to me:

"You are too late; your father expressed a desire to see you before he died."

I entered, and saw my father dead. "Sir," I said to the physician, "please have everyone retire that I may be alone here; my father had something to say to me, and he will say it."

In obedience to my order the servants left the room. I approached the bed and raised the shroud which covered the face. But when my eyes fell on that countenance, I stooped to kiss it and lost consciousness.

When I recovered, I heard some one say:

"If he requests it, you must refuse him on some pretext or other."

I understood that they wanted to get me away from the bed of death, and so I feigned that I had heard nothing. When they saw that I was resting quietly, they left me. I waited until the house was quiet, and then took a candle and made my way to my father's room. I found there a young priest seated near the bed.

"Sir," I said, "to dispute with an orphan the last vigil at a father's side is a bold enterprise. I do not know what your orders may be. You may remain in the adjoining room; if anything happens, I alone am responsible."

He retired. A single candle on the table shone on the bed. I sat down in the chair the priest had just left, and again uncovered those features I was to see for the last time.

"What do you wish to say to me, father?" I asked. "What was your last thought concerning your child?"

My father had a book in which he was accustomed to write from day to day the record of his life. That book lay on the table, and I saw that it was open; I kneeled before it; on the page were these words and no more:

"Adieu, my son, I love you and I die."

I did not shed a tear, not a sob came from my lips; my throat was swollen and my mouth sealed; I looked at my father without moving.

He knew my life, and my irregularities had caused him much sorrow and anxiety. He did not refer to my future, to my youth and my follies. His advice had often saved me from some evil course, and had influenced my entire life, for his life had been one of singular virtue and kindness. I supposed that before dying he wished to see me to try once more to turn me from the path of error; but death had come too swiftly; he felt that he could express all he had to say in one word, and he wrote in his book that he loved me.

CHAPTER II. THE BALM OF SOLITUDE

A little wooden railing surrounded my father's grave. According to his expressed wish, he was buried in the village cemetery. Every day I visited his tomb and passed part of the day on a little bench in the interior of the vault. The rest of the time I lived alone in the house in which he died, and kept with me only one servant.

Whatever sorrows the passions may cause, the woes of life are not to be compared with those of death. My first thought as I sat beside my father's bedside was that I was a helpless child, knowing nothing, understanding nothing; I can not say that my heart felt physical pain, but I sometimes bent over and wrung my hands, as one who awakens from a long sleep.

During the first months of my life in the country I had no thought either of the past or of the future. It did not seem to be I who had lived up to that time; what I felt was not despair, and in no way resembled the terrible griefs I had experienced in the past; there was a sort of languor in every action, a sense of disgust with life, a poignant bitterness that was eating out my heart. I held a book in my hand all day long, but I did not read; I did not even know what I dreamed about. I had no thoughts; within, all was silence; I had received such a violent blow, and yet one that was so prolonged in its effects, that I remained a purely passive being and there seemed to be no reaction.

My servant, Larive by name, had been much attached to my father; he was, after my father himself, probably the best man I had ever known. He was of the same height, and wore the clothes my father had left him, having no livery.

He was of about the same age that is, his hair was turning gray, and during the twenty years he had lived with my father, he had learned some of his ways. While I was pacing up and down the room after dinner, I heard him doing the same in the hall; although the door was open he did not enter, and not a word was spoken; but from time to time we would look at each other and weep. The entire evening would pass thus, and it would be late in the night before I would ask for a light, or get one myself.

Everything about the house was left unchanged, not a piece of paper was moved. The great leather armchair in which my father used to sit stood near the fire; his table and his books were just as he left them; I respected even the dust on these articles, which in life he never liked to see disturbed. The walls of that solitary house, accustomed to silence and a most tranquil life, seemed to look down on me in pity as I sat in my father's chair, enveloped in his dressing-gown. A feeble voice seemed to whisper: "Where is the father? It is plain to see that this is an orphan."

I received several letters from Paris, and replied to each that I desired to pass the summer alone in the country, as my father was accustomed to do. I began to realize that in all evil there is some good, and that sorrow, whatever else may be said of it, is a means of repose. Whatever the message brought by those who are sent by God, they always accomplish the happy result of awakening us from the sleep of the world, and when they speak, all are silent. Passing sorrows blaspheme and accuse heaven; great sorrows neither accuse nor blaspheme they listen.

In the morning I passed entire hours in the contemplation of nature. My windows overlooked a valley, in the midst of which arose a village steeple; all was plain and calm. Spring, with its budding leaves and flowers, did not produce on me the sinister effect of which the poets speak, who find in the contrasts of life the mockery of death. I looked upon the frivolous idea, if it was serious and not a simple antithesis made in pleasantry, as the conceit of a heart that has known no real experience. The gambler who leaves the table at break of day, his eyes burning and hands empty, may feel that he is at war with nature, like the torch at some hideous vigil; but what can the budding leaves say to a child who mourns a lost father? The tears of his eyes are sisters of the rose; the leaves of the willow are themselves tears. It is when I look at the sky, the woods and the prairies, that I understand men who seek consolation.

Larive had no more desire to console me than to console himself. At the time of my father's death he feared I would sell the property and take him to Paris. I did not know what he had learned of my past life, but I had noticed his anxiety, and, when he saw me settle down in the old home, he gave me a glance that went to my heart. One day I had a large portrait of my father sent from Paris, and placed it in the dining-room. When Larive entered the room to serve me, he saw it; he hesitated, looked at the portrait and then at me; in his eyes there shone a melancholy joy that I could not fail to understand. It seemed to say: "What happiness! We are to suffer here in peace!"

I gave him my hand, which he covered with tears and kisses.

He looked upon my grief as the mistress of his own. When I visited my father's tomb in the morning I found him there watering the flowers; when he saw me he went away and returned home. He followed me in my rambles; when I was on my horse I did not expect him to follow me, but when I saw him trudging down the valley, wiping the sweat from his brow, I bought a small horse from a peasant and gave it to him; thus we rode through the woods together.

In the village were some people of our acquaintance who frequently visited us. My door was closed to them, although I regretted it; but I could not see any one with patience. Some time, when sure to be free from interruption, I hoped to examine my father's papers. Finally Larive brought them to me, and untying the package with trembling hand, spread them before me.

Upon reading the first pages I felt in my heart that vivifying freshness that characterizes the air near a lake of cool water; the sweet serenity of my father's soul exhaled as a perfume from the dusty leaves I was unfolding. The journal of his life lay open before me; I could count the diurnal throbbings of that noble heart. I began to yield to the influence of a dream that was both sweet and profound, and in spite of the serious firmness of his character, I discovered an ineffable grace, the flower of kindness. While I read, the recollection of his death mingled with the narrative of his life, I can not tell with what sadness I followed that limpid stream until its waters mingled with those of the ocean.

"Oh! just man," I cried, "fearless and stainless! what candor in thy experience! Thy devotion to thy friends, thy admiration for nature, thy sublime love of God, this is thy life, there is no place in thy heart for anything else. The spotless snow on the mountain's summit is not more pure than thy saintly old age; thy white hair resembles it. Oh! father, father! Give thy snowy locks to me, they are younger than my blond head. Let me live and die as thou hast lived and died. I wish to plant in the soil over your grave the green branch of my young life; I will water it with my tears, and the God of orphans will protect that sacred twig nourished by the grief of youth and the memory of age."

After examining these precious papers, I classified them and arranged them in order. I formed a resolution to write a journal myself. I had one made just like that of my father's, and, carefully searching out the minor details of his life, I tried to conform my life to his. Thus, whenever I heard the clock strike the hour, tears came to my eyes: "This," said I, "is what my father did at this hour," and whether it was reading, walking, or eating, I never failed to follow his example. Thus I accustomed myself to a calm and regular life; there was an indefinable charm about this orderly conduct that did me good. I went to bed with a sense of comfort and happiness such as I had not known for a long time. My father spent much of his time about the garden; the rest of the day was devoted to walking and study, a nice adjustment of bodily and mental exercise.

At the same time I followed his example in doing little acts of benevolence among the unfortunate. I began to search for those who were in need of my assistance, and there were many of them in the valley. I soon became known among the poor; my message to them was: "When the heart is good, sorrow is sacred!" For the first time in my life I was happy; God blessed my tears and sorrow taught me virtue.

CHAPTER III. BRIGITTE

One evening, as I was walking under a row of lindens at the entrance to the village, I saw a young woman come from a house some distance from the road. She was dressed simply and veiled so that I could not see her face; but her form and her carriage seemed so charming that I followed her with my eyes for some time. As she was crossing a field, a white goat, straying at liberty through the grass, ran to her side; she caressed it softly, and looked about as if searching for some favorite plants to feed to it. I saw near me some wild mulberry; I plucked a branch and stepped up to her holding it in my hand. The goat watched my approach with apprehension; he was afraid to take the branch from my hand. His mistress made him a sign as if to encourage him, but he looked at her with an air of anxiety; she then took the branch from my hand, and the goat promptly accepted it from hers. I bowed, and she passed on her way.

On my return home I asked Larive if he knew who lived in the house I described to him; it was a small house, modest in appearance, with a garden. He recognized it; there were but two people in the house, an old woman who was very religious, and a young woman whose name was Madame Pierson. It was she I had seen. I asked him who she was, and if she ever came to see my father. He replied that she was a widow, that she led a retired life, and that she had visited my father, but rarely. When I had learned all he knew, I returned to the lindens and sat down on a bench.

I do not know what feeling of sadness came over me as I saw the goat approaching me. I arose from my seat, and, for distraction, I followed the path I had seen Madame Pierson take, a path that led to the mountains.

It was nearly eleven in the evening before I thought of returning; as I had walked some distance, I directed my steps toward a farmhouse, intending to ask for some milk and bread. Drops of rain began to splash at my feet, announcing a thunder-shower which I was anxious to escape. Although there was a light in the place, and I could hear the sound of feet going and coming through the house, no one responded to my knock, and I walked around to one of the windows to ascertain if there was any one within.

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I saw a bright fire burning in the lower hall; the farmer, whom I knew, was sitting near his bed; I knocked on the window-pane and called to him. Just then the door opened, and I was surprised to see Madame Pierson, who inquired who was there.

I waited a moment in order to conceal my astonishment. I then entered the house, and asked permission to remain until the storm should pass. I could not imagine what she was doing at such an hour in this deserted spot; suddenly I heard a plaintive voice from the bed, and turning my head I saw the farmer's wife lying there with the seal of death on her face.

Madame Pierson, who had followed me, sat down before the old man who was bowed with sorrow; she made me a sign to make no noise as the sick woman was sleeping. I took a chair and sat in a corner until the storm passed.

While I sat there I saw her rise from time to time and whisper something to the farmer. One of the children, whom I took upon my knee, said that she had been coming every night since the mother's illness. She performed the duties of a sister of charity; there was no one else in the country who could do it; there was but one physician, and he was densely ignorant.

"That is Brigitte la Rose," said the child; "don't you know her?"

"No," I replied in a low voice. "Why do you call her by such a name?"

He replied that he did not know, unless it was because she had been rosy and the name had clung to her.

As Madame Pierson had laid aside her veil I could see her face; when the child left me I raised my head. She was standing near the bed, holding in her hand a cup, which she was offering the sick woman who had awakened. She appeared to be pale and thin; her hair was ashen blond. Her beauty was not of the regular type. How shall I express it? Her large dark eyes were fixed on those of her patient, and those eyes that shone with approaching death returned her gaze. There was in that simple exchange of kindness and gratitude a beauty that can not be described.

The rain was falling in torrents; a heavy darkness settled over the lonely mountain-side, pierced by occasional flashes of lightning. The noise of the storm, the roaring of the wind, the wrath of the unchained elements made a deep contrast with the religious calm which prevailed in the little cottage. I looked at the wretched bed, at the broken windows, the puffs of smoke forced from the fire by the tempest; I observed the helpless despair of the farmer, the superstitious terror of the children, the fury of the elements besieging the bed of death; and in the midst of all, seeing that gentle, pale-faced woman going and coming, bravely meeting the duties of the moment, regardless of the tempest and of our presence, it seemed to me there was in that calm performance something more serene than the most cloudless sky, something, indeed, superhuman about this woman who, surrounded by such horrors, did not for an instant lose her faith in God.

What kind of woman is this, I wondered; whence comes she, and how long has she been here? A long time, since they remember when her cheeks were rosy. How is it I have never heard of her? She comes to this spot alone and at this hour? Yes. She has traversed these mountains and valleys through storm and fair weather, she goes hither and thither bearing life and hope wherever they fail, holding in her hand that fragile cup, caressing her goat as she passes. And this is what has been going on in this valley while I have been dining and gambling; she was probably born here, and will be buried in a corner of the cemetery, by the side of her father. Thus will that obscure woman die, a woman of whom no one speaks and of whom the children say: "Don't you know her?"

I can not express what I experienced; I sat quietly in my corner scarcely breathing, and it seemed to me that if I had tried to assist her, if I had reached out my hand to spare her a single step, I should have been guilty of sacrilege, I should have touched sacred vessels.

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The storm lasted two hours. When it subsided the sick woman sat up in her bed and said that she felt better, that the medicine she had taken had done her good. The children ran to the bedside, looking up into their mother's face with great eyes that expressed both surprise and joy.

"I am very sure you are better," said the husband, who had not stirred from his seat, "for we have had a mass celebrated, and it cost us a large sum."

At that coarse and stupid expression I glanced at Madame Pierson; her swollen eyes, her pallor, her attitude, all clearly expressed fatigue and the exhaustion of long vigils.

"Ah! my poor man!" said the farmer's wife, "may God reward you!"

I could hardly contain myself, I was so angered by the stupidity of these brutes who were capable of crediting the work of charity to the avarice of a cure.

I was about to reproach them for their ingratitude and treat them as they deserved, when Madame Pierson took one of the children in her arms and said, with a smile:

"You may kiss your mother, for she is saved."

I stopped when I heard these words.

Never was the simple contentment of a happy and benevolent heart painted in such beauty on so sweet a face. Fatigue and pallor seemed to vanish, she became radiant with joy.

A few minutes later Madame Pierson told the children to call the farmer's boy to conduct her home. I advanced to offer my services; I told her that it was useless to awaken the boy as I was going in the same direction, and that she would do me an honor by accepting my offer. She asked me if I was not Octave de T .

I replied that I was, and that she doubtless remembered my father. It struck me as strange that she should smile at that question; she cheerfully accepted my arm and we set out on our return.

We walked along in silence; the wind was going down; the trees quivered gently, shaking the rain from the boughs. Some distant flashes of lightning could still be seen; the perfume of humid verdure filled the warm air. The sky soon cleared and the moon illumined the mountain.

I could not help thinking of the whimsicalness of chance, which had seen fit to make me the solitary companion of a woman of whose existence I knew nothing a few hours before. She had accepted me as her escort on account of the name I bore, and leaned on my arm with quiet confidence. In spite of her distraught air it seemed to me that this confidence was either very bold or very simple; and she must needs be either the one or the other, for at each step I felt my heart becoming at once proud and innocent.

We spoke of the sick woman she had just quitted, of the scenes along the route; it did not occur to us to ask the questions incident to a new acquaintance. She spoke to me of my father, and always in the same tone I had noted when I first revealed my name that is, cheerfully, almost gayly. By degrees I thought I understood why she did this, observing that she spoke thus of all, both living and dead, of life and of suffering and death. It was because human sorrows had taught her nothing that could accuse God, and I felt the piety of her smile.

I told her of the solitary life I was leading. Her aunt, she said, had seen more of my father than she, as they had sometimes played cards together after dinner. She urged me to visit them, assuring me a welcome.

When about half way home she complained of fatigue and sat down to rest on a bench that the heavy foliage had protected from the rain. I stood before her and watched the pale light of the moon playing on her face. After a moment's silence she arose and, in a constrained manner, observed:

"Of what are you thinking? It is time for us to think of returning."

"I was wondering," I replied, "why God created you, and I was saying to myself that it was for the sake of those who suffer."

"That is an expression that, coming from you, I can not look upon except as a compliment."

"Why?" I asked.

"Because you appear to be very young."

"It sometimes happens," I said, "that one is older than the face would seem to indicate."

"Yes," she replied, smiling, "and it sometimes happens that one is younger than his words would seem to indicate."

"Have you no faith in experience?"

"I know that it is the name most young men give to their follies and their disappointments; what can one know at your age?"

"Madame, a man of twenty may know more than a woman of thirty. The liberty which men enjoy enables them to see more of life and its experiences than women; they go wherever they please, and no barrier restrains them; they test life in all its phases. When inspired by hope, they press forward to achievement; what they will they accomplish. When they have reached the end, they return; hope has been lost on the route, and happiness has broken its word."

As I was speaking we reached the summit of a little hill which sloped down to the valley; Madame Pierson, yielding to the downward tendency, began to trip lightly down the incline. Without knowing why, I did the same, and we ran down the hill, arm in arm, the long grass under our feet retarded our progress. Finally, like two birds, spent with flight, we reached the foot of the mountain.

"Behold!" cried Madame Pierson, "just a short time ago I was tired, but now I am rested. And, believe me," she added, with a charming smile, "you should treat your experience as I have treated my fatigue. We have made good time, and shall enjoy supper the more on that account."

CHAPTER IV. RIPENING ACQUAINTANCE

I went to see her in the morning. I found her at the piano, her old aunt at the window sewing, the little room filled with flowers, the sunlight streaming through the blinds, a large bird-cage at her side.

I expected to find her something of a religieuse, at least one of those women of the provinces who know nothing of what happens two leagues away, and who live in a certain narrow circle from which they never escape. I confess that such isolated life, which is found here and there in small towns, under a thousand unknown roofs, had always had on me the effect of stagnant pools of water; the air does not seem respirable: in everything on earth that is forgotten, there is something of death.

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On Madame Pierson's table were some papers and new books; they appeared as if they had not been more than touched. In spite of the simplicity of everything around her, of furniture and dress, it was easy to recognize mode, that is to say, life; she did not live for this alone, but that goes without saying. What struck me in her taste was that there was nothing bizarre, everything breathed of youth and pleasantness.

Her conversation indicated a finished education; there was no subject on which she could not speak well and with ease. While admitting that she was naive, it was evident that she was at the same time profound in thought and fertile in resource; an intelligence at once broad and free soared gently over a simple heart and over the habits of a retired life. The sea-swallow, whirling through the azure heavens, soars thus over the blade of grass that marks its nest.

We talked of literature, music, and even politics. She had visited Paris during the winter; from time to time she dipped into the world; what she saw there served as a basis for what she divined.

But her distinguishing trait was gayety, a cheerfulness that, while not exactly joy itself, was constant and unalterable; it might be said that she was born a flower, and that her perfume was gayety.

Her pallor, her large dark eyes, her manner at certain moments, all led me to believe that she had suffered. I know not what it was that seemed to say that the sweet serenity of her brow was not of this world but had come from God, and that she would return it to Him spotless in spite of man; and there were times when she reminded one of the careful housewife, who, when the wind blows, holds her hand before the candle.

After I had been in the house half an hour I could not help saying what was in my heart. I thought of my past life, of my disappointment and my ennui; I walked to and fro, breathing the fragrance of the flowers and looking at the sun. I asked her to sing, and she did so with good grace. In the mean time I leaned on the window-sill and watched the birds flitting about the garden. A saying of Montaigne's came into my head: "I neither love nor esteem sadness, although the world has invested it, at a given price, with the honor of its particular favor. They dress up in it wisdom, virtue, conscience. Stupid and absurd adornment."

"What happiness!" I cried, in spite of myself. "What repose! What joy! What forgetfulness of self!"

The good aunt raised her head and looked at me with an air of astonishment; Madame Pierson stopped short. I became red as fire when conscious of my folly, and sat down without a word.

We went out into the garden. The white goat I had seen the evening before was lying in the grass; it came up to her and followed us about the garden.

When we reached the end of the garden walk, a large young man with a pale face, clad in a kind of black cassock, suddenly appeared at the railing. He entered without knocking and bowed to Madame Pierson; it seemed to me that his face, which I considered a bad omen, darkened a little when he saw me. He was a priest I had often seen in the village, and his name was Mercanson; he came from St. Sulpice and was related to the cure of the parish.

He was large and at the same time pale, a thing which always displeases me and which is, in fact, unpleasant; it impresses me as a sort of diseased healthfulness. Moreover, he had the slow yet jerky way of speaking that characterizes the pedant. Even his manner of walking, which was not that of youth and health, repelled me; as for his glance, it might be said that he had none. I do not know what to think of a man whose eyes have nothing to say. These are the signs which led me to an unfavorable opinion of Mercanson, an opinion which was unfortunately correct.

He sat down on a bench and began to talk about Paris, which he called the modern Babylon. He had been there, he knew every one; he knew Madame de B , who was an angel; he had preached sermons in her salon and was

listened to on bended knee. (The worst of this was that it was true.) One of his friends, who had introduced him there, had been expelled from school for having seduced a girl; a terrible thing to do, very sad. He paid Madame Pierson a thousand compliments for her charitable deeds throughout the country; he had heard of her benefactions, her care for the sick, her vigils at the bed of suffering and of death. It was very beautiful and noble; he would not fail to speak of it at St. Sulpice. Did he not seem to say that he would not fail to speak of it to God?

Wearied by this harangue, in order to conceal my rising disgust, I sat down on the grass and began to play with the goat. Mercanson turned on me his dull and lifeless eye:

"The celebrated Vergniaud," said he, "was afflicted with the habit of sitting on the ground and playing with animals."

"It is a habit that is innocent enough," I replied. "If there were none worse the world would get along very well, without so much meddling on the part of others."

My reply did not please him; he frowned and changed the subject. He was charged with a commission; his uncle the cure had spoken to him of a poor devil who was unable to earn his daily bread. He lived in such and such a place; he had been there himself and was interested in him; he hoped that Madame Pierson

I was looking at her while he was speaking, wondering what reply she would make and hoping she would say something in order to efface the memory of the priest's voice with her gentle tones. She merely bowed and he retired.

When he had gone our gayety returned. We entered a greenhouse in the rear of the garden.

Madame Pierson treated her flowers as she did her birds and her peasants: everything about her must be well cared for, each flower must have its drop of water and ray of sunlight in order that it might be gay and happy as an angel; so nothing could be in better condition than her little greenhouse. When we had made the round of the building, she said:

"This is my little world; you have seen all I possess, and my domain ends here."

"Madame," I said, "as my father's name has secured for me the favor of admittance here, permit me to return, and I will believe that happiness has not entirely forgotten me."

She extended her hand and I touched it with respect, not daring to raise it to my lips.

I returned home, closed my door and retired. There danced before my eyes a little white house; I saw myself walking through the village and knocking at the garden gate. "Oh, my poor heart!" I cried. "God be praised, you are still young, you are still capable of life and of love!"

One evening I was with Madame Pierson. More than three months had passed, during which I had seen her almost every day; and what can I say of that time except that I saw her? "To be with those we love," said Bruyere, "suffices; to dream, to talk to them, not to talk to them, to think of them, to think of the most indifferent things, but to be near them, that is all."

I loved. During the three months we had taken many long walks; I was initiated into the mysteries of her modest charities; we passed through dark streets, she on her pony, I on foot, a small stick in my hand; thus half conversing, half dreaming, we went from cottage to cottage. There was a little bench near the edge of the wood where I was accustomed to rest after dinner; we met here regularly, as though by chance. In the morning, music, reading; in the evening, cards with the aunt as in the days of my father; and she always there, smiling, her

presence filling my heart. By what road, O Providence! have you led me? What irrevocable destiny am I to accomplish? What! a life so free, an intimacy so charming, so much repose, such buoyant hope! O God! Of what do men complain? What is there sweeter than love?

To live, yes, to feel intensely, profoundly, that one exists, that one is a sentient man, created by God, that is the first, the greatest gift of love. We can not deny, however, that love is a mystery, inexplicable, profound. With all the chains, with all the pains, and I may even say, with all the disgust with which the world has surrounded it, buried as it is under a mountain of prejudices which distort and deprave it, in spite of all the ordure through which it has been dragged, love, eternal and fatal love, is none the less a celestial law as powerful and as incomprehensible as that which suspends the sun in the heavens.

What is this mysterious bond, stronger and more durable than iron, that can neither be seen nor touched? What is there in meeting a woman, in looking at her, in speaking one word to her, and then never forgetting her? Why this one rather than that one? Invoke the aid of reason, of habit, of the senses, the head, the heart, and explain it if you can. You will find nothing but two bodies, one here, the other there, and between them, what? Air, space, immensity. O blind fools! who fondly imagine yourselves men, and who reason of love! Have you talked with it? No, you have felt it. You have exchanged a glance with a passing stranger, and suddenly there flies out from you something that can not be defined, that has no name known to man. You have taken root in the ground like the seed concealed in the turf which feels the life within it, and which is on its way to maturity.

We were alone, the window was open, the murmur of a little fountain came to us from the garden. O God! would that I could count, drop by drop, all the water that fell while we were sitting there, while she was talking and I was answering. It was there that I became intoxicated with her to the point of madness.

It is said that there is nothing so rapid as a feeling of antipathy, but I believe that the road to love is more swiftly traversed. How priceless the slightest words! What signifies the conversation, when you listen for the heart to answer? What sweetness in the glance of a woman who begins to attract you! At first it seems as though everything that passes between you is timid and tentative, but soon there is born a strange joy, an echo answers you; you know a dual life. What a touch! What a strange attraction! And when love is sure of itself and knows response in the object beloved, what serenity in the soul! Words die on the lips, for each one knows what the other is about to say before utterance has shaped the thought. Souls expand, lips are silent. Oh! what silence! What forgetfulness of all!

Although my love began the first day and had since grown to ardor, the respect I felt for Madame Pierson sealed my lips. If she had been less frank in permitting me to become her friend, perhaps I should have been more bold, for she had made such a strong impression on me, that I never quitted her without transports of love. But there was something in the frankness and the confidence she placed in me that checked me; moreover, it was in my father's name that I had been treated as a friend. That consideration rendered me still more respectful, and I resolved to prove worthy of that name.

To talk of love, they say, is to make love. We rarely spoke of it. Every time I happened to touch the subject Madame Pierson led the conversation to some other topic. I did not discern her motive, but it was not prudery; it seemed to me that at such times her face took on a stern aspect, and a wave of feeling, even of suffering, passed over it. As I had never questioned her about her past life and was unwilling to do so, I respected her obvious wishes.

Sunday there was dancing in the village; she was almost always there. On those occasions her toilet, although quite simple, was more elegant than usual; there was a flower in her hair, a bright ribbon, or some such bagatelle; but there was something youthful and fresh about her. The dance, which she loved for itself as an amusing exercise, seemed to inspire her with a frolicsome gayety. Once launched on the floor it seemed to me she allowed herself more liberty than usual, that there was an unusual familiarity. I did not dance, being still in mourning, but I

managed to keep near her, and seeing her in such good humor, I was often tempted to confess my love.

But for some strange reason, whenever I thought of it, I was seized with an irresistible feeling of fear; the idea of an avowal was enough to render me serious in the midst of gayety. I conceived the idea of writing to her, but burned the letters before they were half finished.

That evening I dined with her, and looked about me at the many evidences of a tranquil life; I thought of the quiet life that I was leading, of my happiness since I had known her, and said to myself: "Why ask for more? Does not this suffice? Who knows, perhaps God has nothing more for you? If I should tell her that I love her, what would happen? Perhaps she would forbid me the pleasure of seeing her. Would I, in speaking the words, make her happier than she is to-day? Would I be happier myself?"

I was leaning on the piano, and as I indulged in these reflections sadness took possession of me. Night was coming on and she lighted a candle; while returning to her seat she noticed a tear in my eye.

"What is the matter?" she asked.

I turned aside my head.

I sought an excuse, but could find none; I was afraid to meet her glance. I arose and stepped to the window. The air was balmy, the moon was rising beyond those lindens where I had first met her. I fell into a profound reverie; I even forgot that she was present and, extending my arms toward heaven, a sob welled up from my heart.

She arose and stood behind me.

"What is it?" she again asked.

I replied that the sight of that valley stretching out beneath us had recalled my father's death; I took leave of her and went out.

Why I decided to silence my love I can not say. Nevertheless, instead of returning home, I began to wander about the woods like a fool. Whenever I found a bench I sat down only to rise precipitately. Toward midnight I approached Madame Pierson's house; she was at the window. Seeing her there I began to tremble and tried to retrace my steps, but I was fascinated; I advanced gently and sadly and sat down beneath her window.

I do not know whether she recognized me; I had been there some time when I heard her sweet, fresh voice singing the refrain of a romance, and at the same instant a flower fell on my shoulder. It was a rose she had worn that evening on her bosom; I picked it up and pressed it to my lips.

"Who is there at this hour? Is it you?"

She called me by name. The gate leading into the garden was open; I arose without replying and entered it, I stopped before a plot of grass in the centre of the garden; I was walking like a somnambulist, without knowing what I was doing.

Suddenly I saw her at the door opening into the garden; she seemed to be undecided and looked attentively at the rays of the moon. She made a few steps toward me and I advanced to meet her. I could not speak, I fell on my knees before her and seized her hand.

"Listen to me," she said; "I know all; but if it has come to that, Octave, you must go away. You come here every day and you are always welcome, are you not? Is not that enough.? What more can I do for you? My friendship

you have won; I wish you had been able to keep yours a little longer."

When Madame Pierson had spoken these words she waited in silence as though expecting a reply. As I remained overwhelmed with sadness, she gently withdrew her hand, stepped back, waited a moment longer and then reentered the house.

I remained kneeling on the grass. I had been expecting what she said; my resolution was soon taken, and I decided to go away. I arose, my heart bleeding but firm. I looked at the house, at her window; I opened the garden-gate and placed my lips on the lock as I passed out.

When I reached home I told Larive to make what preparations were necessary, as I would set out in the morning. The poor fellow was astonished, but I made him a sign to obey and ask no questions. He brought a large trunk and busied himself with preparations for departure.

It was five o'clock in the morning and day was beginning to break when I asked myself where I was going. At that thought, which had not occurred to me before, I experienced a profound feeling of discouragement. I cast my eyes over the country, scanning the horizon. A sense of weakness took possession of me; I was exhausted with fatigue. I sat down in a chair and my ideas became confused; I bore my hand to my forehead and found it bathed in sweat. A violent fever made my limbs tremble; I could hardly reach my bed with Larive's assistance. My thoughts were so confused that I had no recollection of what had happened. The day passed; toward evening I heard the sound of instruments. It was the Sunday dance, and I asked Larive to go and see if Madame Pierson was there. He did not find her; I sent him to her house. The blinds were closed, and a servant informed him that Madame Pierson and her aunt had gone to spend some days with a relative who lived at N , a small town some distance north. He handed me a letter that had been given him. It was couched in the following terms:

"I have known you three months, and for one month have noticed that you feel for me what at your age is called love. I thought I detected on your part a resolution to conceal this from me and conquer yourself. I already esteemed you, this enhanced my respect. I do not reproach you for the past, nor for the weakness of your will.

"What you take for love is nothing more than desire. I am well aware that many women seek to arouse it; it would be better if they did not feel the necessity of pleasing those who approach them. Such a feeling is a dangerous thing, and I have done wrong in entertaining it with you.

"I am some years older than you, and ask you not to try to see me again. It would be vain for you to try to forget the weakness of a moment; what has passed between us can neither be repeated nor forgotten.

"I do not take leave of you without sorrow; I expect to be absent some time; if, when I return, I find that you have gone away, I shall appreciate your action as the final evidence of your friendship and esteem.

"BRIGITTE PIERSON."

CHAPTER V. AN INTERVIEW

The fever kept me in bed a week. When I was able to write I assured Madame Pierson that she should be obeyed, and that I would go away. I wrote in good faith, without any intention to deceive, but I was very far from keeping my promise. Before I had gone ten leagues I ordered the driver to stop, and stepped out of the carriage. I began to walk along the road. I could not resist the temptation to look back at the village which was still visible in the

distance. Finally, after a period of frightful irresolution, I felt that it was impossible for me to continue on my route, and rather than get into the carriage again, I would have died on the spot. I told the driver to turn around, and, instead of going to Paris as I had intended, I made straight for N , whither Madame Pierson had gone.

I arrived at ten in the night. As soon as I reached the inn I had a boy direct me to the house of her relatives, and, without reflecting what I was doing, at once made my way to the spot. A servant opened the door. I asked if Madame Pierson was there, and directed him to tell her that some one wished to speak to her on the part of M. Desprez. That was the name of our village cure.

While the servant was executing my order I remained alone in a sombre little court; as it was raining, I entered the hall and stood at the foot of the stairway, which was not lighted. Madame Pierson soon arrived, preceding the servant; she descended rapidly, and did not see me in the darkness; I stepped up to her and touched her arm. She recoiled with terror and cried out:

"What do you wish of me?"

Her voice trembled so painfully and, when the servant appeared with a light, her face was so pale, that I did not know what to think. Was it possible that my unexpected appearance could disturb her in such a manner? That reflection occurred to me, but I decided that it was merely a feeling of fright natural to a woman who is suddenly touched.

Nevertheless, she repeated her question in a firmer tone.

"You must permit me to see you once more," I replied. "I will go away, I will leave the country. You shall be obeyed, I swear it, and that beyond your real desire, for I will sell my father's house and go abroad; but that is only on condition that I am permitted to see you once more; otherwise I remain; you need fear nothing from me, but I am resolved on that."

She frowned and cast her eyes about her in a strange manner; then she replied, almost graciously:

"Come to-morrow during the day and I will see you." Then she left me.

The next day at noon I presented myself. I was introduced into a room with old hangings and antique furniture. I found her alone, seated on a sofa. I sat down before her.

"Madame," I began, "I come neither to speak of what I suffer, nor to deny that I love you. You have written me that what has passed between us can not be forgotten, and that is true; but you say that on that account we can not meet on the same footing as heretofore, and you are mistaken. I love you, but I have not offended you; nothing is changed in our relations since you do not love me. If I am permitted to see you, responsibility rests with me, and as far as your responsibility is concerned, my love for you should be sufficient guarantee."

She tried to interrupt me.

"Kindly allow me to finish what I have to say. No one knows better than I that in spite of the respect I feel for you, and in spite of all the protestations by which I might bind myself, love is the stronger. I repeat I do not intend to deny what is in my heart; but you do not learn of that love to-day for the first time, and I ask you what has prevented me from declaring it up to the present time? The fear of losing you; I was afraid I would not be permitted to see you, and that is what has happened. Make a condition that the first word I shall speak, the first thought or gesture that shall seem to be inconsistent with the most profound respect, shall be the signal for the closing of your door; as I have been silent in the past, I will be silent in the future, You think that I have loved you for a month, when in fact I have loved you from the first day I met you. When you discovered it, you did not

refuse to see me on that account. If you had at that time enough esteem for me to believe me incapable of offending you, why have you lost that esteem?

"That is what I have come to ask you. What have I done? I have bent my knee, but I have not said a word. What have I told you? What you already knew. I have been weak because I have suffered. It is true, Madame, that I am twenty years of age and what I have seen of life has only disgusted me (I could use a stronger word); it is true that there is not at this hour on earth, either in the society of men or in solitude, a place, however small and insignificant, that I care to occupy.

"The space enclosed within the four walls of your garden is the only spot in the world where I live; you are the only human being who has made me love God. I had renounced everything before I knew you; why deprive me of the only ray of light that Providence has spared me? If it is on account of fear, what have I done to inspire it? If it is on account of dislike, in what respect am I culpable? If it is on account of pity and because I suffer, you are mistaken in supposing that I can cure myself; it might have been done, perhaps, two months ago; but I preferred to see you and to suffer, and I do not repent, whatever may come of it. The only misfortune that can reach me is to lose you. Put me to the proof. If I ever feel that there is too much suffering for me in our bargain I will go away; and you may be sure of it, since you send me away to-day, and I am ready to go. What risk do you run in giving me a month or two of the only happiness I shall ever know?"

I waited her reply. She suddenly rose from her seat, and then sat down again. Then a moment of silence ensued.

"Rest assured," she said, "it is not so."

I thought she was searching for words that would not appear too severe, and that she was anxious to avoid hurting me.

"One word," I said, rising, "one word, nothing more. I know who you are and if there is any compassion for me in your heart, I thank you; speak but one word, this moment decides my life."

She shook her head; I saw that she was hesitating.

"You think I can be cured?" I cried. "May God grant you that solace if you send me away "

I looked out of the window at the horizon, and felt in my soul such a frightful sensation of loneliness at the idea of going away that my blood froze in my veins. She saw me standing before her, my eyes fixed on her, awaiting her reply; all my life was hanging in suspense upon her lips.

"Very well," she said, "listen to me. This move of yours in coming to see me was an act of great imprudence; however, it is not necessary to assume that you have come here to see me; accept a commission that I will give you for a friend of my family. If you find that it is a little far, let it be the occasion of an absence which shall last as long as you choose, but which must not be too short. Although you said a moment ago," she added with a smile, "that a short trip would calm you. You will stop in the Vosges and you will go as far as Strasburg. Then in a month, or, better, in two months, you will return and report to me; I will see you again and give you further instructions."

CHAPTER VI. THE RUGGED PATH OF LOVE

That evening I received from Madame Pierson a letter addressed to M. R. D., at Strasburg. Three weeks later my mission had been accomplished and I returned. During my absence I had thought of nothing but her, and I despaired of ever forgetting her. Nevertheless I determined to restrain my feelings in her presence; I had suffered

too cruelly at the prospect of losing her to run any further risks. My esteem for her rendered it impossible for me to suspect her sincerity, and I did not see, in her plan of getting me to leave the country, anything that resembled hypocrisy. In a word, I was firmly convinced that at the first word of love her door would be closed to me. Upon my return I found her thin and changed. Her habitual smile seemed to languish on her discolored lips. She told me that she had been suffering. We did not speak of the past. She did not appear to wish to recall it, and I had no desire to refer to it. We resumed our old relations of neighbors; yet there was something of constraint between us, a sort of conventional familiarity. It was as if we had agreed: "It was thus before, let it still be thus." She granted me her confidence, a concession that was not without its charms for me; but our conversation was colder, for the reason that our eyes expressed as much as our tongues. In all that we said there was more to be surmised than was actually spoken. We no longer endeavored to fathom each other's minds; there was not the same interest attaching to each word, to each sentiment; that curious analysis that characterized our past intercourse; she treated me with kindness, but I distrusted even that kindness; I walked with her in the garden, but no longer accompanied her outside of the premises; we no longer wandered through the woods and valleys; she opened the piano when we were alone; the sound of her voice no longer awakened in my heart those transports of joy which are like sobs that are inspired by hope. When I took leave of her, she gave me her hand, but I was conscious of the fact that it was lifeless; there was much effort in our familiar ease, many reflections in our lightest remarks, much sadness at the bottom of it all. We felt that there was a third party between us: it was my love for her. My actions never betrayed it, but it appeared in my face. I lost my cheerfulness, my energy, and the color of health that once shone in my cheeks. At the end of one month I no longer resembled my old self. And yet in all our conversations I insisted on my disgust with the world, on my aversion to returning to it. I tried to make Madame Pierson feel that she had no reason to reproach herself for allowing me to see her; I depicted my past life in the most sombre colors, and gave her to understand that if she should refuse to allow me to see her, she would condemn me to a loneliness worse than death. I told her that I held society in abhorrence and the story of my life, as I recited it, proved my sincerity. So I affected a cheerfulness that I was far from feeling, in order to show her that in permitting me to see her, she had saved me from the most frightful misfortune; I thanked her almost every time I went to see her, that I might return in the evening or the following morning. "All my dreams of happiness," said I, "all my hopes, all my ambitions, are enclosed in the little corner of the earth where you dwell; outside of the air that you breathe there is no life for me."

She saw that I was suffering and could not help pitying me. My courage was pathetic, and her every word and gesture shed a sort of tender light over my devotion. She saw the struggle that was going on in me; my obedience flattered her pride, while my pallor awakened her charitable instinct. At times she appeared to be irritated, almost coquettish; she would say in a tone that was almost rebellious: "I shall not be here to-morrow, do not come on such and such a day." Then, as I was going away sad, but resigned, she sweetened the cup of bitterness by adding: "I am not sure of it, come whenever you please;" or her adieu was more friendly than usual, her glance more tender.

"Rest assured that Providence has led me to you," I said. "If I had not met you, I might have relapsed into the irregular life I was leading before I knew you."

God has sent you as an angel of light to draw me from the abyss. He has confided a sacred mission to you; who knows, if I should lose you, whither the sorrow that consumes me might lead me, because of the sad experience I have been through, the terrible combat between my youth and my ennui?"

That thought, sincere enough on my part, had great weight with a woman of lofty devotion whose soul was as pious as it was ardent. It was probably the only consideration that induced Madame Pierson to permit me to see her.

I was preparing to visit her one day when some one knocked at my door, and I saw Mercanson enter, that priest I had met in the garden on the occasion of my first visit. He began to make excuses that were as tiresome as himself for presuming to call on me without having made my acquaintance; I told him that I knew him very well as the

nephew of our cure, and asked what I could do for him.

He turned uneasily from one side to the other with an air of constraint, searching for phrases and fingering everything on the table before him as if at a loss what to say. Finally he informed me that Madame Pierson was ill and that she had sent word to me by him that she would not be able to see me that day.

"Is she ill? Why, I left her late yesterday afternoon, and she was very well at that time!"

He bowed.

"But," I continued, "if she is ill why send word to me by a third person? She does not live so far away that a useless call would harm me."

The same response from Mercanson. I could not understand what this peculiar manner signified, much less why she had entrusted her mission to him.

"Very well," I said, "I shall see her to-morrow and she will explain what this means."

His hesitation continued.

"Madame Pierson has also told me that I should inform you in fact, I am requested to "

"Well, what is it?" I cried, impatiently.

"Sir, you are becoming violent! I think Madame Pierson is seriously ill; she will not be able to see you this week."

Another bow, and he retired.

It was clear that his visit concealed some mystery: either Madame Pierson did not wish to see me, and I could not explain why; or Mercanson had interfered on his own responsibility.

I waited until the following day and then presented myself at her door; the servant who met me said that her mistress was indeed very ill and could not see me; she refused to accept the money I offered her, and would not answer my questions.

As I was passing through the village on my return, I saw Mercanson; he was surrounded by a number of schoolchildren, his uncle's pupils. I stopped him in the midst of his harangue and asked if I could have a word with him.

He followed me aside; but now it was my turn to hesitate, for I was at a loss how to proceed to draw his secret from him.

"Sir," I finally said, "will you kindly inform me if what you told me yesterday was the truth, or was there some motive behind it? Moreover, as there is not a physician in the neighborhood who can be called in, in case of necessity, it is important that I should know whether her condition is serious."

He protested that Madame Pierson was ill, but that he knew nothing more, except that she had sent for him and asked him to notify me as he had done. While talking we had walked down the road some distance and had now reached a deserted spot. Seeing that neither strategy nor entreaty would serve my purpose, I suddenly turned and seized him by the arms.

"What does this mean, Monsieur? You intend to resort to violence?" he cried.

"No, but I intend to make you tell me what you know."

"Monsieur, I am afraid of no one, and I have told you what you ought to know."

"You have told me what you think I ought to know, but not what you know. Madame Pierson is not sick; I am sure of it."

"How do you know?"

"The servant told me so. Why has she closed her door against me, and why did she send you to tell me of it?"

Mercanson saw a peasant passing.

"Pierre!" he cried, calling him by name, "wait a moment, I wish to speak with you."

The peasant approached; that was all he wanted, thinking I would not dare use violence in the presence of a third person. I released him, but so roughly that he staggered back and fell against a tree. He clenched his fist and turned away without a word.

For three weeks I suffered terribly. Three times a day I called at Madame Pierson's and each time was refused admittance. I received one letter from her; she said that my assiduity was causing talk in the village, and begged me to call less frequently. Not a word about Mercanson or her illness.

This precaution on her part was so unnatural, and contrasted so strongly with her former proud indifference in matters of this kind, that at first I could hardly believe it. Not knowing what else to say, I replied that there was no desire in my heart but obedience to her wishes. But in spite of me, the words I used did not conceal the bitterness I felt.

I purposely delayed going to see her even when permitted to do so, and no longer sent to inquire about her condition, as I wished to have her know that I did not believe in her illness. I did not know why she kept me at a distance; but I was so miserably unhappy that, at times, I thought seriously of putting an end to a life that had become insupportable. I was accustomed to spend entire days in the woods, and one day I happened to encounter her there.

I hardly had the courage to ask for an explanation; she did not reply frankly, and I did not recur to the subject; I could only count the days I was obliged to pass without seeing her, and live in the hope of a visit. All the time I was sorely tempted to throw myself at her feet, and tell her of my despair. I knew that she would not be insensible to it, and that she would at least express her pity; but her severity and the abrupt manner of her departure recalled me to my senses; I trembled lest I should lose her, and I would rather die than expose myself to that danger.

Thus denied the solace of confessing my sorrow, my health began to give way. My feet lagged on the way to her house; I felt that I was exhausting the source of tears, and each visit cost me added sorrow; I was torn with the thought that I ought not to see her.

On her part there was neither the same tone nor the same ease as of old; she spoke of going away on a tour; she pretended to confess to me her longing to get away, leaving me more dead than alive after her cruel words. If surprised by a natural impulse of sympathy, she immediately checked herself and relapsed into her accustomed coldness. Upon one occasion I could not restrain my tears. I saw her turn pale. As I was going, she said to me at the door:

"To-morrow I am going to Sainte-Luce (a neighboring village), and it is too far to go on foot. Be here with your horse early in the morning, if you have nothing to do, and go with me."

I was on hand promptly, as may readily be imagined. I had slept over that word with transports of joy; but, upon leaving my house, I experienced a feeling of deep dejection. In restoring me to the privilege I had formerly enjoyed of accompanying her on her missions about the country, she had clearly been guilty of a cruel caprice if she did not love me. She knew how I was suffering; why abuse my courage unless she had changed her mind?

This reflection had a strange influence on me. When she mounted her horse my heart beat violently as I took her foot; I do not know whether it was from desire or anger. "If she is touched," I said to myself, "why this reserve? If she is a coquette, why so much liberty?"

Such are men. At my first word she saw that a change had taken place in me. I did not speak to her, but kept to the other side of the road. When we reached the valley she appeared at ease, and only turned her head from time to time to see if I was following her; but when we came to the forest and our horses' hoofs resounded against the rocks that lined the road, I saw that she was trembling. She stopped as though to wait for me, as I was some distance in the rear; when I had overtaken her she set out at a gallop. We soon reached the foot of the mountain and were compelled to slacken our pace. I then made my way to her side; our heads were bowed; the time had come, I took her hand.

"Brigitte," I said, "are you weary of my complaints? Since I have been reinstated in your favor, since I have been allowed to see you every day and every evening, I have asked myself if I have been importunate. During the last two months, while strength and hope have been failing me, have I said a word of that fatal love which is consuming me? Raise your head and answer me. Do you not see that I suffer and that my nights are given to weeping? Have you not met in the forest an unfortunate wretch sitting in solitary dejection with his hands pressed to his forehead? Have you not seen tears on these bushes? Look at me, look at these mountains; do you realize that I love you? They know it, they are my witnesses; these rocks and these trees know my secret. Why lead me before them? Am I not wretched enough? Do I fail in courage? Have I obeyed you? To what tests, what tortures am I subjected, and for what crime? If you do not love me, what are you doing here?"

"Let us return," she said, "let us retrace our steps."

I seized her horse's bridle.

"No," I replied, "for I have spoken. If we return, I lose you, I realize it; I know in advance what you will say. You have been pleased to try my patience, you have set my sorrow at defiance, perhaps that you might have the right to drive me from your presence; you have become tired of that sorrowful lover who suffered without complaint and who drank with resignation the bitter chalice of your disdain! You knew that, alone with you in the presence of these trees, in the midst of this solitude where my love had its birth, I could not be silent! You wish to be offended. Very well, Madame, I lose you! I have wept and I have suffered, I have too long nourished in my heart a pitiless love that devours me. You have been cruel!"

As she was about to leap from her saddle, I seized her in my arms and pressed my lips to hers. She turned pale, her eyes closed, her bridle slipped from her hand and she fell to the ground.

"God be praised!" I cried, "she loves me!" She had returned my kiss.

I leaped to the ground and hastened to her side. She was extended on the ground. I raised her, she opened her eyes, and shuddered with terror; she pushed my arm aside, and burst into tears.

I stood near the roadside; I looked at her as she leaned against a tree, as beautiful as the day, her long hair falling over her shoulders, her hands twitching and trembling, her cheeks suffused with crimson, whereon shone pearly tears.

"Do not come near me!" she cried, "not a step!"

"Oh, my love!" I said, "fear nothing; if I have offended you, you know how to punish me. I was angry and I gave way to my grief; treat me as you choose; you may go away now, you may send me away! I know that you love me, Brigitte, and you are safer here than a king in his palace."

As I spoke these words, Madame Pierson fixed her humid eyes on mine; I saw the happiness of my life come to me in the flash of those orbs. I crossed the road and knelt before her. How little he loves who can recall the words he uses when he confesses that love!

CHAPTER VII. THE VENUSBERG AGAIN

If I were a jeweler and had in stock a pearl necklace that I wished to give a friend, it seems to me I should take great pleasure in placing it about her neck with my own hands; but were I that friend, I would rather die than snatch the necklace from the jeweler's hand. I have seen many men hasten to give themselves to the woman they love, but I have always done the contrary, not through calculation, but through natural instinct. The woman who loves a little and resists does not love enough, and she who loves enough and resists knows that she is not sincerely loved.

Madame Pierson gave evidence of more confidence in me, confessing that she loved me when she had never shown it in her actions. The respect I felt for her inspired me with such joy that her face looked to me like a budding rose. At times she would abandon herself to an impulse of sudden gaiety, then she would suddenly check herself; treating me like a child, and then look at me with eyes filled with tears; indulging in a thousand pleasantries as a pretext for a more familiar word or caress, she would suddenly leave me, go aside and abandon herself to reverie. Was ever a more beautiful sight? When she returned she would find me waiting for her in the same spot where I had remained watching her.

"Oh! my friend!" I said, "Heaven itself rejoices to see how you are loved."

Yet I could conceal neither the violence of my desires nor the pain I endured struggling against them. One evening I told her that I had just learned of the loss of an important case, which would involve a considerable change in my affairs.

"How is it," she asked, "that you make this announcement and smile at the same time?"

"There is a certain maxim of a Persian poet," I replied: "He who is loved by a beautiful woman is sheltered from every blow."

Madame Pierson made no reply; all that evening she was even more cheerful than usual. When we played cards with her aunt and I lost she was merciless in her scorn, saying that I knew nothing of the game, and she bet against me with so much success that she won all I had in my purse. When the old lady retired, she stepped out on the balcony and I followed her in silence.

The night was beautiful; the moon was setting and the stars shone brightly in a field of deep azure. Not a breath of wind stirred the trees; the air was warm and freighted with the perfume of spring.

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She was leaning on her elbow, her eyes in the heavens; I leaned over her and watched her as she dreamed. Then I raised my own eyes; a voluptuous melancholy seized us both. We breathed together the warm perfume wafted to us from the garden; we followed, in its lingering course, the pale light of the moon which glinted through the chestnut-trees. I thought of a certain day when I had looked up at the broad expanse of heaven with despair; I trembled at the recollection of that hour; life was so rich now! I felt a hymn of praise welling up in my heart. Around the form of my dear mistress I slipped my arm; she gently turned her head; her eyes were bathed in tears. Her body yielded as does the rose, her open lips fell on mine, and the universe was forgotten.

Eternal angel of happy nights, who shall interpret thy silence? Mysterious vintage that flows from lips that meet as from a stainless chalice! Intoxication of the senses! O, supremest joy! Yes, like God, thou art immortal! Sublime exaltation of the creature, universal communion of beings, thrice sacred pleasure, what have they sung who have celebrated thy praise? They have called thee transitory, O thou who dost create! And they have said that thy passing beams have illumined their fugitive life. Words that are as feeble as the dying breath! Words of a sensual brute who is astonished that he should live for an hour, and who mistakes the rays of the eternal lamp for the spark which is struck from the flint!

O love! thou principle of life! Precious flame over which all nature, like a careful vestal, incessantly watches in the temple of God! Centre of all, by whom all exists, the spirit of destruction would itself die, blowing at thy flame! I am not astonished that thy name should be blasphemed, for they do not know who thou art, they who think they have seen thy face because they have opened their eyes; and when thou findest thy true prophets, united on earth with a kiss, thou closest their eyes lest they look upon the face of perfect joy.

But you, O rapturous delights, languishing smiles, and first caressing, stammering utterance of love, you who can be seen, who are you? Are you less in God's sight than all the rest, beautiful cherubim who soar in the alcove and who bring to this world man awakened from the dream divine! Ah! dear children of pleasure, how your mother loves you! It is you, curious prattlers, who behold the first mysteries, touches, trembling yet chaste, glances that are already insatiable, who begin to trace on the heart, as a tentative sketch, the ineffaceable image of cherished beauty! O royalty! O conquest! It is you who make lovers. And thou, true diadem, serenity of happiness! The first true concept of man's life, and first return of happiness in the many little things of life which are seen only through the medium of joy, first steps made by nature in the direction of the well-beloved! Who will paint you? What human word will ever express thy slightest caress?

He who, in the freshness of youth, has taken leave of an adored mistress; he who has walked through the streets without hearing the voices of those who speak to him; he who has sat in a lonely spot, laughing and weeping without knowing why; he who has placed his hands to his face in order to breathe the perfume that still clings to them; he who has suddenly forgotten what he had been doing on earth; he who has spoken to the trees along the route and to the birds in their flight; finally, he who, in the midst of men, has acted the madman, and then has fallen on his knees and thanked God for it; let him die without complaint: he has known the joy of love.

PART IV

CHAPTER I. THE THORNS OF LOVE

I have now to recount what happened to my love, and the change that took place in me. What reason can I give for it? None, except as I repeat the story and as I say: "It is the truth." For two days, neither more nor less, I was Madame Pierson's lover. One fine night I set out and traversed the road that led to her house. I was feeling so well in body and soul that I leaped for joy and extended my arms to heaven. I found her at the top of the stairway leaning on the railing, a lighted candle beside her. She was waiting for me, and when she saw me ran to meet me.

She showed me how she had changed her coiffure which had displeased me, and told me how she had passed the

day arranging her hair to suit my taste; how she had taken down a villainous black picture—frame that had offended my eye; how she had renewed the flowers; she recounted all she had done since she had known me, how she had seen me suffer and how she had suffered herself; how she had thought of leaving the country, of fleeing from her love; how she had employed every precaution against me; how she had sought advice from her aunt, from Mercanson and from the cure; how she had vowed to herself that she would die rather than yield, and how all that had been dissipated by a single word of mine, a glance, an incident; and with every confession a kiss.

She said that whatever I saw in her room that pleased my taste, whatever bagatelle on her table attracted my attention, she would give me; that whatever she did in the future, in the morning, in the evening, at any hour, I should regulate as I pleased; that the judgments of the world did not concern her; that if she had appeared to care for them, it was only to send me away; but that she wished to be happy and close her ears, that she was thirty years of age and had not long to be loved by me. "And you will love me a long time? Are those fine words, with which you have beguiled me, true?" And then loving reproaches because I had been late in coming to her; that she had put on her slippers in order that I might see her foot, but that she was no longer beautiful; that she could wish she were; that she had been at fifteen. She went here and there, silly with love, rosy with joy; and she did not know what to imagine, what to say or do, in order to give herself and all that she had.

I was lying on the sofa; I felt, at every word she spoke, a bad hour of my past life slipping away from me. I watched the star of love rising in my sky, and it seemed to me I was like a tree filled with sap that shakes off its dry leaves in order to attire itself in new foliage. She sat down at the piano and told me she was going to play an air by Stradella. More than all else I love sacred music, and that morceau which she had sung for me a number of times gave me great pleasure.

"Yes," she said when she had finished, "but you are very much mistaken, the air is mine, and I have made you believe it was Stradella's."

"It is yours?"

"Yes, and I told you it was by Stradella in order to see what you would say of it. I never play my own music when I happen to compose any; but I wanted to try it with you, and you see it has succeeded since you were deceived."

What a monstrous machine is man! What could be more innocent? A bright child might have adopted that ruse to surprise his teacher. She laughed heartily the while, but I felt a strange coldness as if a dark cloud had settled on me; my countenance changed:

"What is the matter?" she asked. "Are you ill?"

"It is nothing; play that air again."

While she was playing I walked up and down the room; I passed my hand over my forehead as if to brush away the fog; I stamped my foot, shrugged my shoulders at my own madness; finally I sat down on a cushion which had fallen to the floor; she came to me. The more I struggled with the spirit of darkness which had seized me, the thicker the night that gathered around my head.

"Verily," I said, "you lie so well? What! that air is yours? Is it possible you can lie so fluently?"

She looked at me with an air of astonishment.

"What is it?" she asked.

Unspeaking anxiety was depicted on her face. Surely she could not believe me fool enough to reproach her for such a harmless bit of pleasantry; she did not see anything serious in that sadness which I felt; but the more trifling the cause, the greater the surprise. At first she thought I, too, must be joking; but when she saw me growing paler every moment as if about to faint, she stood with open lips and bent body, looking like a statue.

"God of Heaven!" she cried, "is it possible?"

You smile, perhaps, reader, at this page; I who write it still shudder as I think of it. Misfortunes have their symptoms as well as diseases, and there is nothing so terrible at sea as a little black point on the horizon.

However, my dear Brigitte drew a little round table into the centre of the room and brought out some supper. She had prepared it herself, and I did not drink a drop that was not first borne to her lips. The blue light of day, piercing through the curtains, illumined her charming face and tender eyes; she was tired and allowed her head to fall on my shoulder with a thousand terms of endearment.

I could not struggle against such charming abandon, and my heart expanded with joy; I believed I had rid myself of the bad dream that had just tormented me, and I begged her pardon for giving way to a sudden impulse which I myself did not understand.

"My friend," I said, from the bottom of my heart, "I am very sorry that I unjustly reproached you for a piece of innocent badinage; but if you love me, never lie to me, even in the smallest matter, for a lie is an abomination to me and I can not endure it."

I told her I would remain until she was asleep. I saw her close her beautiful eyes and heard her murmur something in her sleep as I bent over and kissed her adieu. Then I went away with a tranquil heart, promising myself that I would henceforth enjoy my happiness and allow nothing to disturb it.

But the next day Brigitte said to me, as if quite by chance:

"I have a large book in which I have written my thoughts, everything that has occurred to my mind, and I want you to see what I said of you the first day I met you."

We read together what concerned me, to which we added a hundred foolish comments, after which I began to turn the leaves in a mechanical way. A phrase written in capital letters caught my eye on one of the pages I was turning; I distinctly saw some words that were insignificant enough, and I was about to read the rest when Brigitte stopped me and said:

"Do not read that."

I threw the book on the table.

"Why, certainly not," I said, "I did not think what I was doing."

"Do you still take things seriously?" she asked, smiling, doubtless seeing my malady coming on again; "take the book, I want you to read it."

The book lay on the table within easy reach and I did not take my eyes from it. I seemed to hear a voice whispering in my ear, and I thought I saw, grimacing before me, with his glacial smile and dry face, Desgenais. "What are you doing here, Desgenais?" I asked as if I really saw him. He looked as he did that evening, when he leaned over my table and unfolded to me his catechism of vice.

I kept my eyes on the book and I felt vaguely stirring in my memory some forgotten words of the past. The spirit of doubt hanging over my head had injected into my veins a drop of poison; the vapor mounted to my head and I staggered like a drunken man. What secret was Brigitte concealing from me? I knew very well that I had only to bend over and open the book; but at what place? How could I recognize the leaf on which my eye had chanced to fall?

My pride, moreover, would not permit me to take the book; was it indeed pride? "O God!" I said to myself with a frightful sense of sadness, "is the past a spectre? and can it come out of its tomb? Ah! wretch that I am, can I never love?"

All my ideas of contempt for women, all the phrases of mocking fatuity which I had repeated as a schoolboy his lesson, suddenly came to my mind; and strange to say, while formerly I did not believe in making a parade of them, now it seemed that they were real, or at least that they had been.

I had known Madame Pierson four months, but I knew nothing of her past life and had never questioned her about it. I had yielded to my love for her with confidence and without reservation. I found a sort of pleasure in taking her just as she was, for just what she seemed, while suspicion and jealousy are so foreign to my nature that I was more surprised at feeling them toward Brigitte than she was in discovering them in me. Never in my first love nor in the affairs of daily life have I been distrustful, but on the contrary bold and frank, suspecting nothing. I had to see my mistress betray me before my eyes before I would believe that she could deceive me. Desgenais himself, while preaching to me after his manner, joked me about the ease with which I could be duped. The story of my life was an incontestable proof that I was credulous rather than suspicious; and when the words in that book suddenly struck me, it seemed to me I felt a new being within me, a sort of unknown self; my reason revolted against the feeling, and I did not dare ask whither all this was leading me.

But the suffering I had endured, the memory of the perfidy that I had witnessed, the frightful cure I had imposed on myself, the opinions of my friends, the corrupt life I had led, the sad truths I had learned, as well as those that I had unconsciously surmised during my sad experience, ending in debauchery, contempt of love, abuse of everything, that is what I had in my heart although I did not suspect it; and at the moment when life and hope were again being born within me, all these furies that were being atrophied by time seized me by the throat and cried that they were yet alive.

I bent over and opened the book, then immediately closed it and threw it on the table. Brigitte was looking at me; in her beautiful eyes was neither wounded pride nor anger; nothing but tender solicitude, as if I were ill.

"Do you think I have secrets?" she asked, embracing me.

"No," I replied, "I know nothing except that you are beautiful and that I would die loving you."

When I returned home to dinner I said to Larive:

"Who is Madame Pierson?"

He looked at me in astonishment.

"You have lived here many years," I continued; "you ought to know better than I. What do they say of her here? What do they think of her in the village? What kind of life did she lead before I knew her? Whom did she receive as her friends?"

"In faith, sir, I have never seen her do otherwise than she does every day, that is to say, walk in the valley, play picquet with her aunt, and visit the poor. The peasants call her Brigitte la Rose; I have never heard a word against

her except that she goes through the woods alone at all hours of the day and night; but that is when engaged in charitable work. She is the ministering angel in the valley. As for those she receives, there are only the cure and Monsieur de Dalens during vacation."

"Who is this Monsieur de Dalens?"

"He owns the chateau at the foot of the mountain on the other side; he only comes here for the chase."

"Is he young?"

"Yes."

"Is he related to Madame Pierson?"

"No, he was a friend of her husband."

"Has her husband been dead long?"

"Five years on All-Saints' day. He was a worthy man."

"And has this Monsieur de Dalens paid court?"

"To the widow? In faith to tell the truth " he stopped, embarrassed.

"Well, will you answer me?"

"Some say so and some do not I know nothing and have seen nothing."

"And you just told me that they do not talk about her in the country?"

"That is all they have said, and I supposed you knew that."

"In a word, yes or no?"

"Yes, sir, I think so, at least."

I arose from the table and walked down the road; Mercanson was there. I expected he would try to avoid me; on the contrary he approached me.

"Sir," he said, "you exhibited signs of anger which it does not become a man of my character to resent. I wish to express my regret that I was charged to communicate a message which appeared so unwelcome."

I returned his compliment, supposing he would leave me at once; but he walked along at my side.

"Dalens! Dalens!" I repeated between my teeth, "who will tell me about Dalens?" For Larive had told me nothing except what a valet might learn. From whom had he learned it? From some servant or peasant. I must have some witness who had seen Dalens with Madame Pierson and who knew all about their relations. I could not get that Dalens out of my head, and not being able to talk to any one else, I asked Mercanson about him.

If Mercanson was not a bad man, he was either a fool or very shrewd, I have never known which. It is certain that he had reason to hate me and that he treated me as meanly as possible. Madame Pierson, who had the greatest

friendship for the cure, had almost come to think equally well of the nephew. He was proud of it, and consequently jealous. It is not love alone that inspires jealousy; a favor, a kind word, a smile from a beautiful mouth, may arouse some people to jealous rage.

Mercanson appeared to be astonished. I was somewhat astonished myself; but who knows his own mind?

At his first words I saw that the priest understood what I wanted to know and had decided not to satisfy me.

"How does it happen that you have known Madame Pierson so long and so intimately (I think so, at least) and have not met Monsieur de Dalens? But, doubtless, you have some reason unknown to me for inquiring about him to-day. All I can say is that as far as I know, he is an honest man, kind and charitable; he was, like you, very intimate with Madame Pierson; he is fond of hunting and entertains handsomely. He and Madame Pierson were accustomed to devote much of their time to music. He punctually attended to his works of charity and, when in the country, accompanied that lady on her rounds, just as you do. His family enjoys an excellent reputation at Paris; I used to find him with Madame Pierson whenever I called; his manners were excellent. As for the rest, I speak truly and frankly, as becomes me when it concerns persons of his merit. I believe that he only comes here for the chase; he was a friend of her husband; he is said to be rich and very generous; but I know nothing about it except that "

With what tortured phrases was this dull tormentor teasing me. I was ashamed to listen to him, yet not daring to ask a single question or interrupt his vile insinuations. I was alone on the promenade; the poisoned arrow of suspicion had entered my heart. I did not know whether I felt more of anger or of sorrow. The confidence with which I had abandoned myself to my love for Brigitte had been so sweet and so natural that I could not bring myself to believe that so much happiness had been built upon an illusion. That sentiment of credulity which had attracted me to her seemed a proof that she was worthy. Was it possible that these four months of happiness were but a dream?

But after all, I thought, that woman has yielded too easily. Was there not deception in that pretended anxiety to have me leave the country? Is she not just like all the rest? Yes, that is the way they all do; they attempt to escape in order to experience the happiness of being pursued: it is the feminine instinct. Was it not she who confessed her love by her own act, at the very moment I had decided that she would never be mine? Did she not accept my arm the first day I met her? If Dalens has been her lover, he probably is still; there is a certain sort of liaison that has neither beginning nor end; when chance ordains a meeting, it is resumed; when parted, it is forgotten.

If that man comes here this summer, she will probably see him without breaking with me. Who is this aunt, what mysterious life is this that has charity for its cloak, this liberty that cares nothing for opinion? May they not be adventurers, these two women with their little house, their prudence, and their caution, which enable them to impose on people so easily? Assuredly, for all I know, I have fallen into an affair of gallantry when I thought I was engaged in a romance. But what can I do? There is no one here who can help me except the priest, who does not care to tell me what he knows, and his uncle, who will say still less. Who will save me? How can I learn the truth?

Thus spoke jealousy; thus, forgetting so many tears and all that I had suffered, I had come at the end of two days to a point where I was tormenting myself with the idea that Brigitte had yielded too easily. Thus, like all who doubt, I brushed aside sentiment and reason to dispute with facts, to attach myself to the letter and dissect my love.

While absorbed in these reflections I was slowly approaching Madame Pierson's.

I found the gate open, and as I entered the garden I saw a light in the kitchen. I thought of questioning the servant, I stepped to the window.

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A feeling of horror rooted me to the spot. The servant was an old woman, thin and wrinkled and bent, a common deformity in people who have worked in the fields. I found her shaking a cooking utensil over a filthy sink. A dirty candle fluttered in her trembling hand; about her were pots, kettles, and dishes, the remains of dinner that a dog sniffed at, from time to time, as though ashamed; a warm, nauseating odor emanated from the reeking walls. When the old woman caught sight of me, she smiled in a confidential way; she had seen me take leave of her mistress.

I shuddered as I thought what I had come to seek in a spot so well suited to my ignoble purpose. I fled from that old woman as from jealousy personified, and as if the stench of her cooking had come from my heart.

Brigitte was at the window watering her well-beloved flowers; a child of one of her neighbors was lying in a cradle at her side, and she was gently rocking the cradle with her disengaged hand; the child's mouth was full of bonbons, and in gurgling eloquence it was addressing an incomprehensible apostrophe to its nurse. I sat down near her and kissed the child on its fat cheeks, as if to imbibe some of its innocence. Brigitte accorded me a timid greeting; she could see her troubled image in my eyes. For my part I avoided her glance; the more I admired her beauty and her air of candor, the more I was convinced that such a woman was either an angel or a monster of perfidy; I forced myself to recall each one of Mercanson's words, and I confronted, so to speak, the man's insinuations with her presence and her face. "She is very beautiful," I said to myself, "and very dangerous if she knows how, to deceive; but I will fathom her and I will sound her heart; and she shall know who I am."

"My dear," I said after a long silence, "I have just given a piece of advice to a friend who consulted me. He is an honest young man, and he writes me that a woman he loves has another lover. He asks me what he ought to do."

"What reply did you make?"

"Two questions: Is she pretty? Do you love her? If you love her, forget her; if she is pretty and you do not love her, keep her for your pleasure; there will always be time to quit her, if it is merely a matter of beauty, and one is worth as much as another."

Hearing me speak thus, Brigitte put down the child she was holding and sat down at the other end of the room. There was no light in the room; the moon, which was shining on the spot where she had been standing, threw a shadow over the sofa on which she was now seated. The words I had uttered were so heartless, so cruel, that I was dazed myself, and my heart was filled with bitterness. The child in its cradle began to cry. Then all three of us were silent while a cloud passed over the moon.

A servant entered the room with a light and carried the child away. I arose, Brigitte also; but she suddenly placed her hand on her heart and fell to the floor.

I hastened to her side; she had not lost consciousness and begged me not to call any one. She explained that she was subject to violent palpitation of the heart and had been troubled by fainting spells from her youth; that there was no danger and no remedy. I kneeled beside her; she sweetly opened her arms; I raised her head and placed it on my shoulder.

"Ah! my friend," she said, "I pity you."

"Listen to me," I whispered in her ear, "I am a wretched fool, but I can keep nothing on my heart. Who is this Monsieur de Dalens who lives on the mountain and comes to see you?"

She appeared astonished to hear me mention that name.

"Dalens?" she replied. "He was my husband's friend."

She looked at me as if to inquire: "Why do you ask?" It seemed to me that her face wore a grieved expression. I bit my lips. "If she wants to deceive me," I thought, "I was foolish to question her."

Brigitte rose with difficulty; she took her fan and began to walk up and down the room.

She was breathing hard; I had wounded her. She was absorbed in thought and we exchanged two or three glances that were almost cold. She stepped to her desk, opened it, drew out a package of letters tied together with a ribbon, and threw it at my feet without a word.

But I was looking neither at her nor her letters; I had just thrown a stone into the abyss and was listening to the echoes. For the first time offended pride was depicted on Brigitte's face. There was no longer either anxiety or pity in her eyes, and, just as I had come to feel myself other than I had ever been, so I saw in her a woman I did not know.

"Read that," she said, finally. I stepped up to her and took her hand.

"Read that, read that!" she repeated in freezing tones.

I took the letters. At that moment I felt so persuaded of her innocence that I was seized with remorse.

"You remind me," she said, "that I owe you the story of my life; sit down and you shall learn it. You will open these drawers, and you will read all that I have written and all that has been written to me."

She sat down and motioned me to a chair. I saw that she found it difficult to speak. She was pale as death, her voice constrained, her throat swollen.

"Brigitte! Brigitte!" I cried, "in the name of heaven, do not speak! God is my witness I was not born such as you see me; during my life I have been neither suspicious nor distrustful. I have been undone, my heart has been seared by the treachery of others. A frightful experience has led me to the very brink of the precipice, and for a year I have seen nothing but evil here below. God is my witness that, up to this day, I did not believe myself capable of playing the ignoble role I have assumed, the meanest role of all, that of a jealous lover. God is my witness that I love you and that you are the only one in the world who can cure me of the past.

"I have had to do, up to this time, with women who deceived me, or who were unworthy of love. I have led the life of a libertine; I bear on my heart certain marks that will never be effaced. Is it my fault if calumny, and base suggestion, to-day planted in a heart whose fibres were still trembling with pain and ready to assimilate all that resembles sorrow, have driven me to despair? I have just heard the name of a man I have never met, of whose existence I was ignorant; I have been given to understand that there has been between you and him a certain intimacy, which proves nothing. I do not intend to question you; I have suffered from it, I have confessed to you, and I have done you an irreparable wrong. But rather than consent to what you propose, I will throw it all in the fire. Ah! my friend, do not degrade me; do not attempt to justify yourself, do not punish me for suffering. How could I, in the bottom of my heart, suspect you of deceiving me?. No, you are beautiful and you are true; a single glance; of yours, Brigitte, tells me more than words could utter; and I am content. If you knew what horrors, what monstrous deceit, the man who stands before you has seen! If you knew how he has been treated, how they have mocked at all that is good, how they have taken pains to teach him all that leads to doubt, to jealousy, to despair!

"Alas! alas! my dear mistress, if you knew whom you love! Do not reproach me, but rather pity me; I must forget that other beings than you exist. Who can know through what frightful trials, through what pitiless suffering I have passed! I did not expect this, I did not anticipate this moment. Since you have become mine, I realize what I have done; I have felt, in kissing you, that my lips were not, like yours, unsullied. In the name of heaven, help me

live! God made me a better man than the one you see before you."

Brigitte held out her hands and caressed me tenderly. She begged me to tell her all that had led to this sad scene. I spoke of what I had learned from Larive, but did not dare confess that I had interviewed Mercanson. She insisted that I listen to her explanation. M. de Dalens had loved her; but he was a man of frivolous disposition, dissipated and inconstant; she had given him to understand that, not wishing to remarry, she could only request that he drop the role of suitor, and he had yielded to her wishes with good grace; but his visits had become more rare since that time, until now they had ceased altogether. She drew from the bundle a certain letter which she showed me, the date of which was recent; I could not help blushing as I found in it the confirmation of all she had said; she assured me that she pardoned me, and exacted a promise that in the future I would promptly tell her of any cause I might have to suspect her. Our treaty was sealed with a kiss, and when I left her we had both forgotten that M. de Dalens ever existed.

CHAPTER II. UNCERTAINTY

A kind of stagnant inertia, tempered with bitter joy, is characteristic of debauchery. It is the sequence of a life of caprice, where nothing is regulated according to the needs of the body, but everything according to the fantasy of the mind, and one must be always ready to obey the behests of the other. Youth and will can resist excess; but nature silently avenges herself, and the day when she decides to repair her forces, the will struggles to retard her work and abuses her anew.

Finding about him then all the objects that were able to tempt him the evening before, the man who is incapable of enjoying them looks down at them with a smile of disgust. At the same time the objects which excite his desire are never attained with sang-froid; all that the debauches loves, he seizes; his life is a fever; his organs, in order to search the depths of joy, are forced to avail themselves of the stimulant of fermented liquors and sleepless nights; in the days of ennui and of idleness he feels more keenly than other men the disparity between his impotence and his temptations, and, in order to resist the latter, pride must come to his aid and make him believe that he disdains them. It is thus he spits on all the feasts and pleasures of his life, and so, between an ardent thirst and a profound satiety, a feeling of tranquil vanity leads him to his death.

Although I was no longer a debauches, it came to pass that my body suddenly remembered that it had been. It is easy to understand why I had not felt the effects of it sooner. While mourning my father's death every other thought was crowded from my mind. Then a passionate love succeeded; while I was alone, ennui had nothing to struggle for. Sad or gay, fair or foul, what matters it to him who is alone?

As zinc, rarely found unmixed, drawn from the vein where it lies sleeping, attracts to itself a ray of light when placed near green leather, thus Brigitte's kisses gradually awakened in my heart what had been buried there. At her side I perceived what I really was.

There were days when I felt such a strange sensation in the mornings that it is impossible for me to define it. I awakened without a motive, feeling like a man who has spent the night in eating and drinking to the point of exhaustion. All external sensations caused me insupportable fatigue, all well-known objects of daily life repelled and annoyed me; if I spoke it was in ridicule of what others thought or of what I thought myself. Then, extended on the bed, as if incapable of any motion, I dismissed any thought of undertaking whatever had been agreed upon the evening before; I recalled all the tender and loving things I had said to my mistress during my better moments, and was not satisfied until I had spoiled and poisoned those memories of happy days. "Can you not forget all that?" Brigitte would sadly inquire, "if there are two different men in you, can you not, when the bad rouses himself, forget the good?"

The patience with which Brigitte opposed these vagaries only served to excite my sinister gayety. Strange that the

man who suffers wishes to make her whom he loves suffer! To lose control of one's self, is that not the worst of evils? Is there anything more cruel for a woman than to hear a man turn to derision all that is sacred and mysterious? Yet she did not flee from me; she remained at my side, while in my savage humor I insulted love and allowed insane ravings to escape from lips that were still moist with her kisses.

On such days, contrary to my usual inclination, I liked to talk of Paris and speak of my life of debauchery as the most commendable thing in the world. "You are nothing but a saint," I would laughingly observe; "you do not understand what I say. There is nothing like those careless ones who make love without believing in it." Was that not the same as saying that I did not believe in it?

"Very well," Brigitte replied, "teach me how to please you always. I am perhaps as pretty as those mistresses whom you mourn; if I have not their skill to divert you, I beg that you will instruct me. Act as if you did not love me, and let me love you without saying anything about it. If I am devoted to religion, I am also devoted to love. What can I do to make you believe it?"

Then she would stand before the mirror arraying herself as if for a soiree, affecting a coquetry that she was far from feeling, trying to adopt my tone, laughing and skipping about the room. "Am I to your taste?" she would ask. "Which one of your mistresses do I resemble? Am I beautiful, enough to make you forget that any one can believe in love? Have I a sufficiently careless air to suit you?" Then, in the midst of that factitious joy, she would turn her back and I could see her shudder until the flowers she had placed in her hair trembled. I threw myself at her feet.

"Stop!" I cried, "you resemble only too closely that which you try to imitate, that which my mouth has been so vile as to conjure up before you. Lay aside those flowers and that dress. Let us wash away such mimicry with a sincere tear; do not remind me that I am but a prodigal son; I remember the past too well."

But even this repentance was cruel, as it proved to her that the phantoms in my heart were full of reality. In yielding to an impulse of horror I merely gave her to understand that her resignation and her desire to please me only served to call up an impure image.

And it was true; I reached her side transported with joy, swearing that I would regret my past life; on my knees I protested my respect for her; then a gesture, a word, a trick of turning as she approached me, recalled to my mind the fact that such and such a woman had made that gesture, had used that word, had that same trick of turning.

Poor devoted soul! What didst thou suffer in seeing me turn pale before thee, in seeing my arms fall as though lifeless at my side! When the kiss died on my lips, and the full glance of love, that pure ray of God's light, fled from my eyes like an arrow turned by the wind! Ah! Brigitte! what diamonds trickled from thine eyes! What treasures of charity didst thou exhaust with patient hand! How pitiful thy love!

For a long time good and bad days succeeded each other almost regularly; I showed myself alternately cruel and scornful, tender and devoted, insensible and haughty, repentant and submissive. The face of Desgenais, which had at first appeared to me as though to warn me whither I was drifting, was now constantly before me. On my days of doubt and coldness, I conversed, so to speak, with him; often when I had offended Brigitte by some cruel mockery I said to myself "If he were in my place he would do as I do!"

And then at other times, when putting on my hat to visit Brigitte, I would look in my glass and say: "What is there so terrible about it, anyway? I have, after all, a pretty mistress; she has given herself to a libertine, let her take me for what I am." I reached her side with a smile on my lips, I sank into a chair with an air of deliberate insolence; then I saw Brigitte approach, her large eyes filled with tenderness and anxiety; I seized her little hands in mine and lost myself in an infinite dream.

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How name a thing that is nameless? Was I good or bad? Was I distrustful or a fool? It is useless to reflect on it; it happened thus.

One of our neighbors was a young woman whose name was Madame Daniel. She possessed some beauty, and still more coquetry; she was poor, but tried to pass for rich; she would come to see us after dinner and always played a heavy game against us, although her losses embarrassed her; she sang, but had no voice. In the solitude of that unknown village, where an unkind fate had buried her, she was consumed with an uncontrollable passion for pleasure. She talked of nothing but Paris, which she visited two or three times a year. She pretended to keep up with the fashions, and my dear Brigitte assisted her as best she could, while smiling with pity. Her husband was employed by the government; once a year he would take her to the house of the chief of his department, where, attired in her best, the little woman danced to her heart's content. She would return with shining eyes and tired body; she would come to us to tell of her prowess, and her success in assaulting the masculine heart. The rest of the time she read novels, never taking the trouble to look after her household affairs, which were not always in the best condition.

Whenever I saw her, I laughed at her, finding nothing so ridiculous as the high life she thought she was leading. I would interrupt her description of a ball to inquire about her husband and her father-in-law, both of whom she detested, the one because he was her husband, and the other because he was only a peasant; in short, we were always disputing on some subject.

In my evil moments I thought of paying court to her just for the sake of annoying Brigitte.

"You see," I said, "how perfectly Madame Daniel understands life! In her present sprightly humor could one desire a more charming mistress?"

I then paid her the most extravagant compliments; her senseless chatting I described as unrestraint tempered by finesse, her pretentious exaggerations as a natural desire to please; was it her fault that she was poor? At least she thought of nothing but pleasure and confessed it freely; she did not preach sermons herself, nor did she listen to them from others; I went so far as to tell Brigitte that she ought to adopt her as a model, and that she was just the kind of woman to please me.

Poor Madame Daniel discovered signs of melancholy in Brigitte's eyes. She was a strange creature, as good and sincere when you could get finery out of her head as she was stupid when absorbed in such frivolous affairs. On occasion she could be both good and stupid. One fine day, when they were walking together, she threw herself into Brigitte's arms, and told her that she had noticed I was beginning to pay court to her, and that I had made certain proposals to her, the meaning of which was not doubtful; but she knew that I was another's lover, and as for her, whatever might happen, she would die rather than destroy the happiness of a friend. Brigitte thanked her, and Madame Daniel, having set her conscience at ease, considered it no sin to render me desolate by languishing glances.

In the evening, when she had gone, Brigitte, in a severe tone, told me what had happened; she begged me to spare her such affronts in the future.

"Not that I attach any importance to such pleasantries," she said, "but if you have any love for me, it seems to me it is useless to inform a third party that there are times when you have not."

"Is it possible," I replied with a smile, "that it is important? You see very well that I was only joking, and that I did it only to pass away the time."

"Ah! my friend, my friend," said Brigitte, "it is a pity that you must seek pastimes."

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A few days later I proposed that we go to the prefecture to see Madame Daniel dance; she unwillingly consented. While she was arranging her toilette, I sat near the window and reproached her for losing her former cheerfulness.

"What is the matter with you?" I asked. (I knew as well as she.) "Why that morose air that never leaves you? In truth, you make our life quite sad. I have known you when you were more joyous, more free and more open; I am not flattered by the thought that I am responsible for the change. But you have a cloistral disposition; you were born to live in a convent."

It was Sunday; as we were driving down the road Brigitte ordered the carriage to stop in order to say good-evening to some friends, fresh and vigorous country girls, who were going to dance at Tilleuls. When they had gone on, Brigitte followed them with, longing eyes; her little rustic dance was very dear to her; she dried her eyes with her handkerchief.

We found Madame Daniel at the prefecture in high feather. I danced with her so often that it excited comment; I paid her a thousand compliments and she replied as best she could.

Brigitte was near us, and her eyes never left us. I can hardly describe what I felt; it was both pleasure and pain. I clearly saw that she was jealous; but instead of being moved by it I did all I could to increase her suffering.

On the return I expected to hear her reproaches; she made none, but remained silent for three days. When I came to see her she would greet me kindly; then we would sit down facing each other, both of us preoccupied, hardly exchanging a word. The third day she spoke, overwhelmed me with bitter reproaches, told me that my conduct was unreasonable, that she could not account for it except on the supposition that I had ceased to love her; but she could not endure this life and would resort to anything rather than submit to my caprices and coldness. Her eyes were full of tears, and I was about to ask her pardon when some words escaped her that were so bitter that my pride revolted. I replied in the same tone, and our quarrel became violent.

I told her that it was absurd to suppose that I could not inspire enough confidence in my mistress to escape the necessity of explaining my every action; that Madame Daniel was only a pretext; that she very well knew I did not think of that woman seriously; that her pretended jealousy was nothing but the expression of her desire for despotic power, and that, moreover, if she had tired of this life, it was easy enough to put an end to it.

"Very well," she replied; "it is true that I do not recognize you as the same man I first knew; you doubtless performed a little comedy to persuade me that you loved me; you are tired of your role and can think of nothing but abuse. You suspect me of deceiving you upon the first word, and I am under no obligation to submit to your insults. You are no longer the man I loved."

"I know what your sufferings are," I replied. "I can not make a step without exciting your alarm. Soon I shall not be permitted to address a word to any one but you. You pretend that you have been abused in order that you may be justified in offering insult; you accuse me of tyranny in order that I may become your slave. Since I trouble your repose, I leave you in peace; you will never see me again."

We parted in anger, and I passed an entire day without seeing her. The next night, toward midnight, I was seized by a feeling of melancholy that I could not resist. I shed a torrent of tears; I overwhelmed myself with reproaches that I richly deserved. I told myself that I was nothing but a fool, and a cowardly fool at that, to make the noblest, the best of creatures, suffer in this way. I ran to her to throw myself at her feet.

Entering the garden, I saw that her room was lighted and a flash of suspicion crossed my mind. "She does not expect me at this hour," I said to myself; "who knows what she may be doing. I left her in tears yesterday; I may find her ready to sing to-day and caring no more for me than if I never existed. I must enter gently, in order to surprise her."

I advanced on tiptoe, and the door being open, I could see Brigitte without being seen.

She was seated at her table and was writing in that same book that had aroused my suspicions. She held in her left hand a little box of white wood which she looked at from time to time and trembled. There was something sinister in the quiet that reigned in the room. Her secretary was open and several bundles of papers were carefully ranged in order.

I made some noise at the door. She rose, went to the secretary, closed it, then came to me with a smile:

"Octave," she said, "we are two children. If you had not come here, I should have gone to you. Pardon me, I was wrong. Madame Daniel comes to dinner to-morrow; make me repent, if you choose, of what you call my despotism. If you but love me I am happy; let us forget what is past and let us not spoil our happiness."

CHAPTER III. EXPLANATIONS

But quarrel had been, so to speak, less sad than our reconciliation; it was attended, on Brigitte's part, by a mystery which frightened me at first and then planted in my soul the seeds of constant dread.

There developed in me, in spite of my struggles, the two elements of misfortune which the past had bequeathed me: at times furious jealousy attended by reproaches and insults; at other times a cruel gayety, an affected cheerfulness, that mockingly outraged whatever I held most dear. Thus the inexorable spectres of the past pursued me without respite; thus Brigitte, seeing herself treated alternately as a faithless mistress and a shameless woman, fell into a condition of melancholy that clouded our entire life; and worst of all, that sadness even, the cause of which I knew, was not the most burdensome of our sorrows. I was young and I loved pleasure; that daily association with a woman older than I, who suffered and languished, that face, more and more serious, which was always before me, all this repelled my youth and aroused within me bitter regrets for the liberty I had lost.

One night we were passing through the forest in the beautiful light of the moon, and both experienced a profound melancholy. Brigitte looked at me in pity. We sat down on a rock near a wild gorge and passed two entire hours there; her half-veiled eyes plunged into my soul, crossing a glance from mine; then wandered to nature, to the heavens and the valley.

"Ah! my dear child," she said, "how I pity you! You do not love me."

To reach that rock we had to travel two leagues; two more in returning makes four. Brigitte was afraid of neither fatigue nor darkness. We set out at eleven at night, expecting to reach home some time in the morning. When we went on long tramps she always dressed in a blue blouse and the apparel of a man, saying that skirts were not made for bushes. She walked before me in the sand with a firm step and such a charming mingling of feminine delicacy and childlike innocence, that I stopped every few moments to look at her. It seemed that, once started, she had to accomplish a difficult but sacred task; she walked in front like a soldier, her arms swinging, her voice ringing through the woods in song; suddenly she would turn, come to me and kiss me. This was on the outward journey; on the return she leaned on my arm; then more songs, confidences, tender avowals in low tones, although we were alone, two leagues from anywhere. I do not recall a single word spoken on the return that was not of love or friendship.

Another night we struck out through the woods, leaving the road which led to the rock. Brigitte was tramping along so stoutly and her little velvet cap on her light hair made her look so much like a resolute youth, that I forgot she was a woman when there were no obstacles in our path. More than once she was obliged to call me to her aid when I, without thinking of her, had pushed on ahead. I can not describe the effect produced on me in the clear night air, in the midst of the forest, by that voice of hers, half-joyous and half-plaintive, coming, as it were,

from that little schoolboy body wedged in between roots and trunks of trees, unable to advance. I took her in my arms.

"Come, Madame," I cried, laughing, "you are a pretty little mountaineer, but you are blistering your white hands, and in spite of your hobnailed shoes, your stick and your martial air, I see that you must be carried."

We arrived at the rock breathless; about my body was strapped a leather belt to which was attached a wicker bottle. When we were seated on the rock, my dear Brigitte asked for the bottle; I had lost it, as well as a tinder-box which served another purpose: that was to read the inscriptions on the guide-posts when we went astray, which occurred frequently. At such times I would climb the posts, and read the half-effaced inscription by the light of the tinder-box; all this in play, like the children that we were. At a crossroad we would have to examine not one guide-post but five or six until the right one was found. But this time we had lost our baggage on the way.

"Very well," said Brigitte, "we will pass the night here, as I am rather tired. This rock will make a hard bed, but we can cover it with dry leaves. Let us sit down and make the best of it."

The night was superb; the moon was rising behind us; I looked at it over my left shoulder. Brigitte was watching the lines of the wooded hills as they began to outline themselves against the background of sky. As the light flooded the copse and threw its halo over sleeping nature, Brigitte's song became more gentle and more melancholy. Then she bent over, and, throwing her arms around my neck, said:

"Do not think that I do not understand your heart or that I would reproach you for what you make me suffer. It is not your fault, my friend, if you have not the power to forget your past life; you have loved me in good faith and I shall never regret, although I should die for it, the day I gave myself to you. You thought you were entering upon a new life, and that with me you would forget the women who had deceived you. Alas! Octave, I used to smile at that precocious experience which you said you had been through, and of which I heard you boast like a child who knows nothing of life. I thought I had but to will it, and all that there was that was good in your heart would come to your lips with my first kiss. You, too, believed it, but we were both mistaken.

"Oh, my child! You have in your heart a plague that can not be cured; that woman who deceived you, how you must have loved her! Yes, more than you love me, alas! much more, since with all my poor love I can not efface her image; she must have deceived you most cruelly, since it is in vain that I am faithful!

And the others, those wretches who then poisoned your youth! The pleasures they sold must have been terrible since you ask me to imitate them! You remember them with me! Alas! my dear child, that is too cruel. I like you better when you are unjust and furious, when you reproach me for imaginary crimes and avenge on me the wrong done you by others, than when you are under the influence of that frightful gayety, when you assume that air of hideous mockery, when that mask of scorn affronts my eyes.

"Tell me, Octave, why that? Why those moments when you speak of love with contempt and rail at the most sacred mysteries of love? What frightful power over your irritable nerves has that life you have led, that such insults should mount to your lips in spite of you? Yes, in spite of you; for your heart is noble, you blush at your own blasphemy; you love me too much, not to suffer when you see me suffer. Ah! I know you now. The first time I saw you thus, I was seized with a feeling of terror of which I can give you no idea. I thought you were only a rouse, that you had deliberately deceived me by feigning a love you did not feel, and that I saw you such as you really were. O my friend! I thought it was time to die; what a night I passed! You do not know my life; you do not know that I who speak to you have had an experience as terrible as yours. Alas! life is sweet only to those who do not know life.

"You are not, my dear Octave, the only man I have loved. There is hidden in my heart a fatal story that I wish you to know. My father destined me, when I was quite young, for the only son of an old friend. They were neighbors and each owned a little domain of almost equal value. The two families saw each other every day, and lived, so to speak, together. My father died; my mother had been dead some time. I lived with the aunt whom you know. A journey she was compelled to take forced her to confide me to the care of my future father-in-law. He called me his daughter, and it was so well known about the country that I was to marry his son that we were allowed the greatest liberty together.

"That young man, whose name you need not know, appeared to love me. What had been friendship from infancy became love in time. He began to tell me of the happiness that awaited us; he spoke of his impatience, I was only one year younger than he; but he had made the acquaintance of a man of dissipated habits who lived in the vicinity, a sort of adventurer, and had listened to his evil suggestions. While I was yielding to his caresses with the confidence of a child, he resolved to deceive his father, and to abandon me after he had ruined me.

"His father called us into his room one evening and, in the presence of the family, set the day of our wedding. The very evening before that day he had met me in the garden and had spoken to me of love with more force than usual; he said that since the time was set, we were just the same as married, and for that matter had been in the eyes of God, ever since our birth. I have no other excuse to offer than my youth, my ignorance, and my confidence in him. I gave myself to him before becoming his wife, and eight days afterward he left his father's house. He fled with a woman his new friend had introduced to him; he wrote that he had gone to Germany and that we should never see him again.

"That is, in a word, the story of my life; my husband knew it as you now know it. I am proud, my child, and I have sworn that no man shall ever make me again suffer what I suffered then. I saw you and forgot my oath, but not my sorrow. You must treat me gently; if you are sick, I am also; we must care for each other. You see, Octave, I, too, know what it is to call up memories of the past. It inspires me at times with cruel terror; I should have more courage than you, for perhaps I have suffered more. It is my place to begin; my heart is not sure of itself, I am still very feeble; my life in this village was so tranquil before you came! I had promised myself that it should never change! All this makes me exacting.

"Ah! well, it does not matter, I am yours. You have told me, in your better moments, that Providence appointed me to watch over you as a mother. Yes, when you make me suffer I do not look upon you as a lover, but as a sick child, fretful and rebellious, that I must care for and cure in order that I may always keep him and love him. May God give me that power!" she added looking up to heaven. "May God who sees me, who hears us, may the God of mothers and of lovers permit me to accomplish that task! When I feel as if I should sink under it, when my pride rebels, when my heart is breaking, when all my life "

She could not finish; her tears choked her. Oh, God! I saw her there on her knees, her hands clasped on the rock; she swayed in the breeze as did the bushes about us. Frail and sublime creature! she prayed for her love. I raised her in my arms.

"Oh! my only friend," I cried, "oh! my mistress, my mother, and my sister! Pray also for me that I may be able to love you as you deserve. Pray that I may have the courage to live; that my heart may be cleansed in your tears; that it may become a holy offering before God and that we may share it together."

All was silent about us; above our heads spread the heavens resplendent with stars.

"Do you remember," I said, "do you remember the first day?"

From that night we never returned to that spot. That rock was an altar which has retained its purity; it is one of the visions of my life, and it still passes before my eyes wreathed in spotless white.

CHAPTER IV. BRIGITTE'S LOSS

As I was crossing the public square one evening I saw two men standing together; one of them said:

"It appears to me that he has ill-treated her."

"It is her fault," replied the other; "why choose such a man? He has known only public women; she is paying the price of her folly."

I advanced in the darkness to see who was speaking thus, and to hear more if possible; but they passed on as soon as they spied me.

I found Brigitte much disturbed; her aunt was seriously ill; she had time for only a few words with me. I did not see her for an entire week; I knew that she had summoned a physician from Paris; finally she sent for me.

"My aunt is dead," she said; "I lose the only one left me on earth, I am now alone in the world, and I am going to leave the country."

"Am I, then, nothing to you?"

"Yes, my friend; you know that I love you, and I often believe that you love me. But how can I count on you? I am your mistress, alas! but you are not my lover. It is for you that Shakespeare has written these sad words: 'Make thy doublet of changeable taffeta, for thy mind is a very opal.' And I, Octave," she added, pointing to her mourning costume, "I am reduced to a single color, and I shall not change it for a long time."

"Leave the country if you choose; I will either kill myself or I will follow you. Ah! Brigitte," I continued, throwing myself on my knees before her, "you thought you were alone when your aunt died! That is the most cruel punishment you could inflict on me; never have I so keenly felt the misery of my love for you. You must retract those terrible words; I deserve them, but they will kill me. Oh, God! can it be true that I count for nothing in your life, or that I am an influence in your life only because of the evil I have done you!"

"I do not know," she said, "who is busying himself in our affairs; certain insinuations, mixed with idle gossip, have been set afloat in the village and in the neighboring country. Some say that I have been ruined; others accuse me of imprudence and folly; others represent you as a cruel and dangerous man. Some one has spied into our most secret thoughts; things that I thought no one else knew, events in your life and sad scenes to which they have led, are known to others; my poor aunt spoke to me about it not long ago, and she knew it some time before speaking to me. Who knows but that that has hastened her death?"

"When I meet my old friends in the street, they either treat me coldly, or turn aside. Even my dear peasant girls, those good girls who love me so much, shrug their shoulders when they see my place empty at the Sunday afternoon balls. How has that come about? I do not know, nor do you, I suppose; but I must go away, I can not endure it. And my aunt's death, so sudden, so unexpected, above all, this solitude! this empty room! Courage fails me; my friend, my friend, do not abandon me!"

She wept; in an adjoining room I saw her household goods in disorder, a trunk on the floor, everything indicating preparations for departure. It was evident that, at the time of her aunt's death, Brigitte had tried to go away without seeing me, but could not. She was so overwhelmed with emotion that she could hardly speak; her condition was pitiful, and it was I who had brought her to it. Not only was she unhappy, but she was insulted in public, and the man who ought to be her support and her consolation in such an hour was the cause of all her troubles.

I felt the wrong I had done her so keenly that I was overcome with shame. After so many promises, so much useless exaltation, so many plans and hopes, what had I, in fact, accomplished in three months? I thought I had a treasure in my heart, and out of it came nothing but malice, the shadow of a dream, and the misfortune of a woman I adored. For the first time I found myself really face to face with myself. Brigitte reproached me for nothing; she had tried to go away and could not; she was ready to suffer still. I suddenly asked myself whether I ought not to leave her, whether it was not my duty to flee from her and rid her of the scourge of my presence.

I arose, and, passing into the next room, sat down on Brigitte's trunk. There I leaned my head on my hand and sat motionless. I looked about me at the confused piles of goods. Alas! I knew them all; my heart was not so hardened that it could not be moved by the memories which they awakened. I began to calculate all the harm I had done; I saw my dear Brigitte walking under the lindens with her goat beside her.

"O man!" I mused, "and by what right? how dared you come to this house, and lay hands on this woman? Who has ordained that she should suffer for you? You array yourself in fine linen, and set out, sleek and happy, for the home where your mistress languishes; you throw yourself upon the cushions where she has just knelt in prayer, for you and for her, and you gently stroke those delicate hands that still tremble. You think it no evil to inflame a poor heart, and you perorate as warmly in your deliriums of love as the wretched lawyer who comes with red eyes from a suit he has lost. You play the infant prodigy in making sport of suffering; you find it amusing to occupy your leisure moments in committing murder by means of little pin pricks.

"What will you say to the living God, when your work is finished? What will become of the woman who loves you? Where will you fall while she leans on you for support? With what face will you one day bury your pale and wretched creature, just as she buried the last man who protected her? Yes, yes, you will doubtless have to bury her, for your love kills and consumes; you have devoted her to the Furies and it is she who appeases them. If you follow that woman you will be the cause of her death. Take care! her guardian angel hesitates; he has just knocked at the door of this house, in order to frighten away a fatal and shameful passion! He inspired Brigitte with the idea of flight; at this moment he may be whispering in her ear his final warning. O assassin! O murderer! Beware! it is a matter of life and death."

Thus I communed with myself; then on the sofa I caught sight of a little gingham dress, folded and ready to be packed in the trunk. It had been a witness of our happy days. I took it up and examined it.

"Must I leave you?" I said to it; "Must I lose you? O little dress, would you go away without me?"

No, I can not abandon Brigitte; in these circumstances it would be cowardly. She has just lost her aunt, and is all alone; she is exposed to the power of I know not what enemy. Can it be Mercanson? He may have spoken of my conversation with him, and, seeing that I was jealous of Dalens, may have guessed the rest. Assuredly he is the snake who has been hissing about my well-beloved flower. I must punish him, and I must repair the wrong I have done Brigitte. Fool that I am! I think of leaving her, when I ought to consecrate my life to her, to the expiation of my sins, to rendering her happy after the tears I have drawn from her eyes—when I am her only support in the world, her only friend, her only protector! when I ought to follow her to the end of the world, to shelter her with my body, to console her for having loved me, for having given herself to me!

"Brigitte!" I cried, returning to her room, "wait an hour for me, and I will return."

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"Wait for me," I replied, "do not set out without me. Remember the words of Ruth: 'Whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge; thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God; where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried.'"

I left her precipitately, and rushed out to find Mercanson. I was told that he had gone out, and I entered his house to wait for him.

I sat in the corner of the room on a priest's chair before a dirty black table. I was becoming impatient when I recalled my duel on account of my first mistress.

"I received a wound from a bullet and am still a fool," I said to myself. "What have I come to do here? This priest will not fight; if I seek a quarrel with him, he will say that his priestly robes forbid, and he will continue his vile gossip when I have gone. Moreover, for what can I hold him responsible? What is it that has disturbed Brigitte? They say that her reputation has been sullied, that I ill-treat her, and that she ought not to submit to it. What stupidity! That concerns no one; there is nothing to do but allow them to talk; in such a case, to notice an insult is to give it importance.

"Is it possible to prevent provincials from talking about their neighbors? Can any one prevent a gossip from maligning a woman who loves? What measures can be taken to stop a public rumor? If they say that I ill-treat her, it is for me to prove the contrary by my conduct with her, and not by violence. It would be as ridiculous to seek a quarrel with Mercanson as to leave the country on account of gossip. No, we must not leave the country; that would be a bad move; that would be to say to all the world that there is truth in its idle rumors, and to give excuse to the gossips. We must neither go away nor take any notice of such things."

I returned to Brigitte. A half hour had passed, and I had changed my mind three times. I dissuaded her from her plans; I told her what I had just done and why I had not carried out my first impulse. She listened resignedly, yet she wished to go away; the house where her aunt had died had become odious to her. Much effort and persuasion on my part were required to get her to consent to remain; finally I accomplished it. We repeated that we would despise the world, that we would yield nothing, that we would not change our manner of life. I swore that my love should console her for all her sorrows, and she pretended to hope for the best. I told her that this circumstance had so enlightened me in the matter of the wrongs I had done her, that my conduct would prove my repentance, that I would drive from me as a phantom all the evil that remained in my heart; that hence forth she should not be offended either by my pride or by my caprices; and thus, sad and patient, her arms around my neck, she yielded obedience to the pure caprice that I myself mistook for a flash of reason.

One day I saw a little chamber she called her oratory; there was no furniture except a prie-dieu and a little altar with a cross and some vases of flowers. As for the rest, the walls and curtains were as white as snow. She shut herself up in that room at times, but rarely since I had known her.

I stepped to the door and saw Brigitte seated on the floor in the middle of the room, surrounded by the flowers she was throwing here and there. She held in her hand a little wreath that appeared to be made of dried grass, and she was breaking it in pieces.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

She trembled and stood up.

"It is nothing but a child's plaything," she said; "it is a rose wreath that has faded here in the oratory; I have come here to change my flowers, as I have not attended to them for some time."

Her voice trembled, and she appeared to be about to faint. I recalled that name of Brigitte la Rose that I had heard given her. I asked her whether it was not her crown of roses that she had just broken thus.

"No," she replied, turning pale.

"Yes," I cried, "yes, on my life! Give me the pieces."

I gathered them up and placed them on the altar, then I was silent, my eyes fixed on the offering.

"Was I not right," she asked, "if it was my crown, to take it from the wall where it has hung so long?"

Of what use are these remains? Brigitte la Rose is no more, nor the flowers that baptized her." She went out. I heard her sobs, and the door closed on me; I fell on my knees and wept bitterly. When I returned to her room, I found her waiting for me; dinner was ready. I took my place in silence, and not a word was said of what was in our hearts.

CHAPTER V. A TORTURED SOUL

It was Mercanson who had repeated in the village and in the chateau my conversation with him about Dalens and the suspicions that, in spite of myself, I had allowed him clearly to see. Every one knows how bad news travels in the provinces, flying from mouth to mouth and growing as it flies; that is what had happened in this case.

Brigitte and I found ourselves face to face with each other in a new position. However feebly she may have tried to flee, she had nevertheless made the attempt. It was on account of my prayers that she remained; there was an obligation implied. I was under oath not to grieve her either by my jealousy or my levity; every thoughtless or mocking word that escaped me was a sin, every sorrowful glance from her was a reproach acknowledged and merited.

Her simple good-nature gave a charm even to solitude; she could see me now at all hours without resorting to any precaution. Perhaps she consented to this arrangement in order to prove to me that she valued her love more highly than her reputation; she seemed to regret having shown that she cared for the representations of malice. At any rate, instead of making any attempt to disarm criticism or thwart curiosity, we lived the freest kind of life, more regardless of public opinion than ever.

For some time I kept my word, and not a cloud troubled our life. These were happy days, but it is not of these that I would speak.

It was said everywhere about the country that Brigitte was living publicly with a libertine from Paris; that her lover ill-treated her, that they spent their time quarrelling, and that she would come to a bad end. As they had praised Brigitte for her conduct in the past, so they blamed her now. There was nothing in her past life, even, that was not picked to pieces and misrepresented. Her lonely tramps over the mountains, when engaged in works of charity, suddenly became the subject of quibbles and of raillery. They spoke of her as of a woman who had lost all human respect and who deserved the frightful misfortunes she was drawing down on her head.

I had told Brigitte that it was best to let them talk and pay no attention to them; but the truth is, it became insupportable to me. I sometimes tried to catch a word that could be construed as an insult and to demand an explanation. I listened to whispered conversations in a salon where I was visiting, but could hear nothing; in order to do us better justice they waited until I had gone. I returned to Brigitte and told her that all these stories were mere nonsense; that it was foolish to notice them; that they could talk about us as much as they pleased and we would care nothing about it.

Was I not terribly mistaken? If Brigitte was imprudent, was it not my place to be cautious and ward off danger? On the contrary, I took, so to speak, the part of the world against her.

I began by indifference; I was soon to grow malignant.

"It is true," I said, "that they speak evil of your nocturnal excursions. Are you sure that they are wrong? Has nothing happened in those romantic grottoes and by-paths in the forest? Have you never accepted the arm of an unknown as you accepted mine? Was it merely charity that served as your divinity in that beautiful temple of verdure that you visited so bravely?"

Brigitte's glance when I adopted this tone I shall never forget; I shuddered at it myself. "But, bah!" I thought, "she would do the same thing that my other mistress did she would point me out as a ridiculous fool, and I should pay for it all in the eyes of the public."

Between the man who doubts and the man who denies there is only a step. All philosophy is akin to atheism. Having told Brigitte that I suspected her past conduct, I began to regard it with real suspicion.

I came to imagine that Brigitte was deceiving me, she who never left me at any hour of the day; I sometimes planned long absences in order to test her, as I supposed; but in truth it was only to give myself some excuse for suspicion and mockery. And then I took pleasure in observing that I had outgrown my foolish jealousy, which was the same as saying that I no longer esteemed her highly enough to be jealous of her.

At first I kept such thoughts to myself, but soon found pleasure in revealing them to Brigitte. We had gone out for a walk:

"That dress is pretty," I said, "such and such a girl, belonging to one of my friends, has one like it."

We were now seated at table.

"Come, my dear, my former mistress used to sing for me at dessert; you promised, you know, to imitate her."

She sat down at the piano.

"Ah! pardon me, but will you play that waltz that was so popular last winter? That will remind me of happy times."

Reader, this lasted six months: for six long months Brigitte, scandalized, exposed to the insults of the world, had to endure from me all the wrongs that a wrathful and cruel libertine can inflict on woman.

After these distressing scenes, in which my own spirit exhausted itself in suffering and in painful contemplation of the past; after recovering from that frenzy, a strange access of love, an extreme exaltation, led me to treat my mistress like an idol, or a divinity. A quarter of an hour after insulting her I was on my knees before her; when I was not accusing her of some crime, I was begging her pardon; when I was not mocking, I was weeping. Then, seized by a delirium of joy, I almost lost my reason in the violence of my transports; I did not know what to do, what to say, what to think, in order to repair the evil I had done. I took Brigitte in my arms, and made her repeat a hundred times that she loved me and that she pardoned me. I threatened to expiate my evil deeds by blowing out my brains if I ever ill-treated her again. These periods of exaltation sometimes lasted several hours, during which time I exhausted myself in foolish expressions of love and esteem. Then morning came; day appeared; I fell asleep from sheer exhaustion, and I awakened with a smile on my lips, mocking at everything, believing in nothing.

During these terrible hours, Brigitte appeared to forget that there was a man in me other than the one she saw. When I asked her pardon she shrugged her shoulders as if to answer: "Do you not know that I pardon you?" She would not complain as long as a spark of love remained in my heart; she assured me that all was good and sweet coming from me, insults as well as tears.

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And yet as time passed my evil grew worse, my moments of malignity and irony became more sombre and intractable. A real physical fever attended my outbursts of passion; I awakened trembling in every limb and covered with cold sweat. Brigitte, too, although she did not complain of it, began to fail in health. When I started to abuse her she would leave me without a word and lock herself in her room. Thank God, I never raised my hand against her; in my most violent moments I would rather have died than touched her.

One evening the rain was driving against the windows; we were alone, the curtains were closed.

"I am in happy humor this evening," I said to Brigitte, "and yet the horrible weather saddens me. Let us seek some diversion in spite of the storm."

I arose and lighted all the candles I could find. The room was small and the illumination brilliant. At the same time a bright fire threw out a stifling heat:

"Come," I said, "what shall we do while waiting for supper?"

I happened to remember that it was carnival time in Paris I seemed to see the carriages filled with masks crossing the boulevards. I heard the shouts of the crowds before the theatres; I saw the lascivious dances, the gay costumes, the wine and the folly; all my youth bounded in my heart.

"Let us disguise ourselves," I said to Brigitte. "It will be for our own amusement, but what does that matter? If you have no costumes we can make them, and pass away the time agreeably."

We searched in the closet for dresses, cloaks, and artificial flowers; Brigitte, as usual, was patient and cheerful. We both arranged a sort of travesty; she wished to dress my hair herself; we painted and powdered ourselves freely; all that we lacked was found in an old chest that had belonged, I believe, to the aunt. In an hour we could not recognize each other. The evening passed in singing, in a thousand follies; toward one o'clock in the morning it was time for supper.

We had ransacked all the closets; there was one near me that remained open. While sitting down at the table, I perceived on a shelf the book of which I have already spoken, the one in which Brigitte was accustomed to write.

"Is it not a collection of your thoughts?" I asked, stretching out my hand and taking the book down. "If I may, allow me to look at it."

I opened the book, although Brigitte made a gesture as if to prevent me; on the first page I read these words:

"This is my last will and testament."

Everything was written in a firm hand; I found first a faithful recital of all that Brigitte had suffered on my account since she had been my mistress. She announced her firm determination to endure everything, so long as I loved her, and to die when I left her. Her daily life was recorded there; what she had lost, what she had hoped, the isolation she experienced even in my presence, the barrier that was growing up between us; the cruelties I subjected her to in return for her love and her resignation. All this was written down without a complaint; on the contrary she undertook to justify me. Then followed personal details, the disposition of her effects. She would end her life by poison, she wrote. She would die by her own hand and expressly forbade that her death should be charged to me. "Pray for him!" were her last words.

I found in the closet on the same shelf a little box that I remembered I had seen before, filled with a fine bluish powder resembling salt.

"What is this?" I asked of Brigitte, raising the box to my lips. She gave vent to a scream of terror and threw herself upon me.

"Brigitte," I said, "bid me farewell. I shall carry this box away with me; you will forget me, and you will live if you wish to save me from becoming a murderer. I shall set out this very night; you will agree with me that God demands it. Give me a last kiss."

I bent over her and kissed her forehead.

"Not yet!" she cried, in anguish. But I repulsed her and left the room.

Three hours later I was ready to set out, and the horses were at the door. It was still raining when I entered the carriage. At the moment the carriage was starting, I felt two arms about my body and a sob which spent itself on my lips.

It was Brigitte. I did all I could to persuade her to remain; I ordered the driver to stop; I even told her that I would return to her when time should have effaced the memory of the wrongs I had done her. I forced myself to prove to her that yesterday was the same as to-day, to-day as yesterday; I repeated that I could only render her unhappy, that to attach herself to me was but to make an assassin of me. I resorted to prayers, to vows, to threats even; her only reply was: "You are going away; take me, let us take leave of the country, let us take leave of the past. We can not live here; let us go elsewhere, wherever you please; let us go and die together in some remote corner of the world. We must be happy, I by you, you by me."

I kissed her with such passion that I feared my heart would burst.

"Drive on!" I cried to the coachman. We threw ourselves into each other's arms, and the horses set out at a gallop.