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CONFESSION OF A CHILD OF THE CENTURY
(Confession d'un Enfant du Siecle)

By ALFRED DE MUSSET

BOOK 3.

PART V

CHAPTER I

SWEET ANTICIPATIONS

Having decided on a long tour, we went first to Paris; the necessary preparations required time, and we took a furnished apartment for one month. The decision to leave France had changed everything: joy, hope, confidence, all returned; no more sorrow, no more grief over approaching separation. We had now nothing but dreams of happiness and vows of eternal love; I wished, once for all, to make my dear mistress forget all the suffering I had caused her. How had I been able to resist such proof of tender affection and courageous resignation? Not only did Brigitte pardon me, but she was willing to make a still greater sacrifice and leave everything for me. As I felt myself unworthy of the devotion she exhibited, I wished to requite her by my love; at last my good angel had triumphed, and admiration and love resumed their sway in my heart. Brigitte and I examined a map to determine where we should go and bury ourselves from the world. We had not yet decided, and we found pleasure in that very uncertainty; while glancing over the map we said "Where shall we go? What shall we do? Where shall we begin life anew?" How shall I tell how deeply I repented my cruelty when I looked upon her smiling face, a face that laughed at the future, although still pale from the sorrows of the past! Blissful projects of future joy, you are perhaps the only true happiness known to man! For eight days we spent our time making purchases and preparing for our departure; then a young man presented himself at our apartments: he brought letters to Brigitte.

After their interview I found her sad and distraught; but I could not guess the cause unless the letters were from N------, that village where I had confessed my love and where Brigitte's only relatives lived. Nevertheless, our preparations progressed rapidly and I became impatient to get away; at the same time I was so happy that I could hardly rest. When I arose in the morning and the sun was shining through our windows, I experienced such transports of joy that I was almost intoxicated with happiness. So anxious was I to prove the sincerity of my love for Brigitte that I hardly dared kiss the hem of her skirt. Her lightest words made me tremble as if her voice were strange to me; I alternated between tears and laughter, and I never spoke of the past except with horror and disgust. Our room was full of personal effects scattered about in disorder--albums, pictures, books, and the dear map we loved so much. We went to and fro about the little apartment; at brief intervals I would stop and kneel before Brigitte who would call me an idler, saying that she had to do all the work, and that I was good for nothing; and all sorts of projects flitted through our minds. Sicily was far away, but the winters are so delightful there! Genoa is very pretty with its painted houses, its green gardens, and the Apennines in the background! But what noise! What crowds! Among every three men on the street, one is a monk and another a soldier. Florence is sad, it is the Middle Ages living in the midst of modern life. How can any one endure those grilled windows and that horrible brown color with which all the houses are tinted?

What could we do at Rome? We were not travelling in order to forget ourselves, much less for the sake of instruction. To the Rhine? But the season was over, and although we did not care for the world of fashion, still it is sad to visit its haunts when it has fled. But Spain? Too many restrictions there; one travels like an army on the march, and may expect everything except repose. Switzerland? Too many people go there, and most of them are deceived as to the nature of its attractions; but in that land are unfolded the three most beautiful colors on God's earth: the azure of the sky, the verdure of the plains, and the whiteness of the snows on the summits of glaciers.

"Let us go, let us go!" cried Brigitte, "let us fly away like two birds. Let us pretend, my dear Octave, that we met each other only yesterday. You met me at a ball, I pleased you and I love you; you tell me that some leagues distant, in a certain little town, you loved a certain Madame Pierson; what passed between you and her I do not know. You will not tell me the story of your love for another! And I will whisper to you that not long since I loved a terrible fellow who made me very unhappy; you will reprove me and close my mouth, and we will agree never to speak of such things."

When Brigitte spoke thus I experienced a feeling that resembled avarice; I caught her in my arms and cried:

"Oh, God! I know not whether it is with joy or with fear that I tremble. I am about to carry off my treasure. Die, my youth; die, all memories of the past; die, all cares and regrets! Oh, my, good, my brave Brigitte! You have made a man out of a child. If I lose you now, I shall never

love again. Perhaps, before I knew you, another woman might have cured me; but now you alone, of all the world, have power to destroy me or to save me, for I bear in my heart the wound of all the evil I have done you. I have been an ingrate, blind and cruel. God be praised! You love me still. If you ever return to that home under whose lindens I first met you, look carefully about that deserted house; you will find a phantom there, for the man who left it, and went away with you, is not the man who entered it."

"Is it true?" said Brigitte, and her face, all radiant with love, was raised to heaven; "is it true that I am yours? Yes, far from this odious world in which you have grown old before your time, yes, my child, you shall really love. I shall have you as you are, and, wherever we go you will make me forget the possibility of a day when you will no longer love me. My mission will have been accomplished, and I shall always be thankful for it."

Finally we decided to go to Geneva and then choose some resting place in the Alps. Brigitte was enthusiastic about the lake; I thought I could already breathe the air which floats over its surface, and the odor of the verdure-clad valley; already I beheld Lausanne, Vevey, Oberland, and in the distance the summits of Monte Rosa and the immense plain of Lombardy. Already oblivion, repose, travel, all the delights of happy solitude invited us; already, when in the evening with joined hands, we looked at each other in silence, we felt rising within us that sentiment of strange grandeur which takes possession of the heart on the eve of a long journey, the mysterious and indescribable vertigo which has in it something of the terrors of exile and the hopes of pilgrimage. Are there not in the human mind wings that flutter and sonorous chords that vibrate? How shall I describe it? Is there not a world of meaning in the simple words: "All is ready, we are about to go"?

Suddenly Brigitte became languid; she bowed her head in silence. When I asked her whether she was in pain, she said "No!" in a voice that was scarcely audible; when I spoke of our departure, she arose, cold and resigned, and continued her preparations; when I swore to her that she was going to be happy, and that I would consecrate my life to her, she shut herself up in her room and wept; when I kissed her she turned pale, and averted her eyes as my lips approached hers; when I told her that nothing had yet been done, that it was not too late to renounce our plans, she frowned severely; when I begged her to open her heart to me and told her I would die rather than cause her one regret, she threw her arms about my neck, then stopped and repulsed me as if involuntarily. Finally, I entered her room holding in my hand a ticket on which our places were marked for the carriage to Besancon. I approached her and placed it in her lap; she stretched out her hand, screamed, and fell unconscious at my feet.

CHAPTER II

THE DEMON OF DOUBT

All my efforts to divine the cause of so unexpected a change were as vain as the questions I had first asked. Brigitte was ill, and remained obstinately silent. After an entire day passed in supplication and conjecture, I went out without knowing where I was going. Passing the Opera, I entered it from mere force of habit.

I could pay no attention to what was going on in the theatre, I was so overwhelmed with grief, so stupefied, that I did not live, so to speak, except in myself, and exterior objects made no impression on my senses. All my powers were centred on a single thought, and the more I turned it over in my head, the less clearly could I distinguish its meaning.

What obstacle was this that had so suddenly come between us and the realization of our fondest hopes? If it was merely some ordinary event or even an actual misfortune, such as an accident or the loss of a friend, why that obstinate silence? After all that Brigitte had done, when our dreams seemed about to be realized, what could be the nature of a secret that destroyed our happiness and could not be confided to me? What! to conceal it from me! And yet I could not find it in my heart to suspect her. The appearance of suspicion revolted me and filled me with horror. On the other hand, how could I conceive of inconstancy or of caprice in that woman, as I knew her? I was lost in an abyss of doubt, and I could not discover a gleam of light, the smallest point, on which to base conjecture.

In front of me in the gallery sat a young man whose face was not unknown to me. As often happens when one is preoccupied, I looked at him without thinking of him as a personal identity or trying to fit a name on him. Suddenly I recognized him: it was he who had brought letters to Brigitte from N------. I arose and started to accost him without thinking what I was doing. He occupied a place that I could not reach without disturbing a large number of spectators, and I was forced to await the entr'acte.

My first thought was that if any one could enlighten me it was this young man. He had had several interviews with Madame Pierson in the last few days, and I recalled the fact that she was always much depressed after his visits. He had seen her the morning of the day she was taken ill.

The letters he brought Brigitte had not been shown me; it was possible that he knew the reason why our departure was delayed. Perhaps he did not know all the circumstances, but he could doubtless enlighten me as to the contents of those letters, and there was no reason why I should hesitate to question him. When the curtain fell, I followed him to the foyer; I do not know that he saw me coming, but he hastened away and entered a box. I determined to wait until he should come out, and stood looking at the box for fifteen minutes. At last he appeared. I bowed and approached him. He hesitated a moment, then turned and disappeared down a stairway.

My desire to speak to him had been too evident to admit of any other explanation than deliberate intention on his part to avoid me. He surely

knew my face, and, whether he knew it or not, a man who sees another approaching him ought, at least, to wait for him. We were the only persons in the corridor at the time, and there could be no doubt he did not wish to speak to me. I did not dream of such impertinent treatment from a man whom I had cordially received at my apartments; why should he insult me? He could have no other excuse than a desire to avoid an awkward interview, during which questions might be asked which he did not care to answer. But why? This second mystery troubled me almost as much as the first. Although I tried to drive the thought from my head, that young man's action in avoiding me seemed to have some connection with Brigitte's obstinate silence.

Of all torments uncertainty is the most difficult to endure, and during my life I have exposed myself to many dangers because I could not wait patiently. When I returned to my apartments I found Brigitte reading those same fateful letters from N------. I told her that I could not remain longer in suspense, and that I wished to be relieved from it at any cost; that I desired to know the cause of the sudden change which had taken place in her, and that, if she refused to speak, I should look upon her silence as a positive refusal to go abroad with me and an order for me to leave her forever.

She reluctantly handed me the letters she was reading. Her relatives had written her that her departure had disgraced them, that every one knew the circumstances, and that they felt it their duty to warn her of the consequences; that she was living openly as my mistress, and that, although she was a widow and free to do as she chose, she ought to think of the name she bore; that neither they nor her old friends would ever see her again if she persisted in her course; finally, by all sorts of threats and entreaties, they urged her to return.

The tone of the letter angered me, and at first I took it as an insult.

"And that young man who brings you these remonstrances," I cried, "doubtless has orders to deliver them personally, and does not fail to do his own part to the best of his ability. Am I not right?"

Brigitte's dejection made me reflect and calm my wrath.

"You will do as you wish, and achieve my ruin," she said. "My fate rests with you; you have been for a long time my master. Avenge as you please the last effort my old friends have made to recall me to reason, to the world that I formerly respected, to the honor that I have lost. I have not a word to say, and if you wish to dictate my reply, I will obey you."

"I care to know nothing," I replied, "but your intentions; it is for me to comply with your wishes, and I assure you I am ready to do it. Tell me, do you desire to remain, to go away, or shall I go alone?"

"Why that question?" asked Brigitte; "have I said that I had changed my mind? I am suffering, and can not travel in my present condition, but when I recover we will go to Geneva as we have planned."

We separated at these words, and the coldness with which she had expressed her resolution saddened me more than usual. It was not the first time our liaison had been threatened by her relatives; but up to this time whatever letters Brigitte had received she had never taken them so much to heart. How could I bring myself to believe that Brigitte had been so affected by protests which in less happy moments had had no effect on her? Could it be merely the weakness of a woman who recoils from an act of final significance? "I will do as you please," she had said. No, it does not please me to demand patience, and rather than look at that sorrowful face even a week longer, unless she speaks I will set out alone.

Fool that I was! Had I the strength to do it? I did not close my eyes that night, and the next morning I resolved to call on that young man I had seen at the opera. I do not know whether it was wrath or curiosity that impelled me to this course, nor did I know just what I desired to learn of him; but I reflected that he could not avoid me this time, and that was all I desired.

As I did not know his address, I asked Brigitte for it, pretending that I felt under an obligation to call on him after all the visits he had made us; I had not said a word about my experience at the opera. Brigitte's eyes betrayed signs of tears. When I entered her room she held out her hand and said:

"What do you wish?"

Her voice was sad but tender. We exchanged a few kind words, and I set out less unhappy.

The name of the young man I was going to see was Smith; he was living near us. When I knocked at his door, I experienced a strange sensation of uneasiness; I was dazed as though by a sudden flash of light. His first gesture froze my blood. He was in bed, and with the same accent Brigitte had employed, with a face as pale and haggard as hers, he held out his hand and said:

"What do you wish?"

Say what you please, there are things in a man's life which reason can not explain. I sat as still as if awakened from a dream, and began to repeat his questions. Why, in fact, had I come to see him? How could I tell him what had brought me there? Even if he had anything to tell me, how did I know he would speak? He had brought letters from N------, and knew those who had written them. But it cost me an effort to question him, and I feared he would suspect what was in my mind. Our first words were polite and insignificant. I thanked him for his kindness in bringing letters to Madame Pierson; I told him that upon leaving France we would ask him to do the same favor for us; and then we were silent, surprised to find ourselves vis-a-vis.

I looked about me in embarrassment. His room was on the fourth floor; everything indicated honest and industrious poverty. Some books, musical

instruments, papers, a table and a few chairs, that was all, but everything was well cared for and presented an agreeable ensemble.

As for him, his frank and animated face predisposed me in his favor. On the mantel I observed a picture of an old lady. I stepped up to look at it, and he said it was his mother.

I then recalled that Brigitte had often spoken of him; she had known him since childhood. Before I came to the country she used to see him occasionally at N------, but at the time of her last visit there he was away. It was, therefore, only by chance that I had learned some particulars of his life, which now came to mind. He had an honest employment that enabled him to support his mother and sister.

His treatment of these two women deserved the highest praise; he deprived himself of everything for them, and although he possessed musical talents that would have enabled him to make a fortune, the immediate needs of those dependent on him, and an extreme reserve, had always led him to prefer an assured income to the uncertain chances of success in larger ventures.

In a word, he belonged to that small class who live quietly, and who are worth more to the world than those who do not appreciate them. I had learned of certain traits in his character which will serve to paint the man he had fallen in love with a beautiful girl in the neighborhood, and, after a year of devotion to her, had secured her parents' consent to their union. She was as poor as he. The contract was ready to be signed, the preparations for the wedding were complete, when his mother said:

"And your sister? Who will marry her?"

That simple remark made him understand that if he married he would spend all his money in the household expenses and his sister would have no dowry. He broke off the engagement, bravely renouncing his happy prospects; he then came to Paris.

When I heard that story I wished to see the hero. That simple, unassuming act of devotion seemed to me more admirable than all the glories of war.

The more I examined that young man, the less I felt inclined to broach the subject nearest my heart. The idea which had first occurred to me, that he would harm me in Brigitte's eyes, vanished at once. Gradually my thoughts took another course; I looked at him attentively, and it seemed to me that he was also examining me with curiosity.

We were both twenty-one years of age, but what a difference between us! He, accustomed to an existence regulated by the graduated tick of the clock; never having seen anything of life, except that part of it which lies between an obscure room on the fourth floor and a dingy government office; sending his mother all his savings, that farthing of human joy which the hand of toil clasps so greedily; having no thought except for

the happiness of others, and that since his childhood, since he had been a babe in arms! And I, during that precious time, so swift, so inexorable, during the time that with him had been a round of toil, what had I done? Was I a man? Which of us had lived?

What I have said in a page can be comprehended in a moment. He spoke to me of our journey and the countries we were going to visit.

"When do you go?" he asked.

"I do not know; Madame Pierson is indisposed, and has been confined to her bed for three days."

"For three days!" he repeated, in surprise.

"Yes; why are you astonished?"

He arose and threw himself on me, his arms extended, his eyes fixed. He was trembling violently.

"Are you ill?" I asked, taking him by the hand. He pressed his hand to his head and burst into tears. When he had recovered sufficiently to speak, he said:

"Pardon me; be good enough to leave me. I fear I am not well; when I have sufficiently recovered I will return your visit."

CHAPTER III

THE QUESTION OF SMITH

Brigitte was better. She had told me that she desired to go away as soon as she was well enough to travel. But I insisted that she ought to rest at least fifteen days before undertaking a long journey.

Whenever I attempted to persuade her to speak frankly, she assured me that the letter was the only cause of her melancholy, and begged me to say nothing more about it. Then I tried in vain to guess what was passing in her heart. We went to the theatre every night in order to avoid embarrassing interviews. There we sometimes pressed each other's hands at some fine bit of acting or beautiful strain of music, or exchanged, perhaps, a friendly glance, but going and returning we were mute, absorbed in our thoughts.

Smith came almost every day. Although his presence in the house had been the cause of all my sorrow, and although my visit to him had left singular suspicions in my mind, still his apparent good faith and his simplicity reassured me. I had spoken to him of the letters he had brought, and he did not appear offended, but saddened. He was ignorant of the contents, and his friendship for Brigitte led him to censure them

severely. He would have refused to carry them, he said, had he known what they contained. On account of Brigitte's tone of reserve in his presence, I did not think he was in her confidence.

I therefore welcomed him with pleasure, although there was always a sort of awkward embarrassment in our meeting. He was asked to act as intermediary between Brigitte and her relatives after our departure. When we three were together he noticed a certain coldness and restraint which he endeavored to banish by cheerful good-humor. If he spoke of our liaison it was with respect and as a man who looks upon love as a sacred bond; in fact, he was a kind friend, and inspired me with full confidence.

But despite all this, despite all his efforts, he was sad, and I could not get rid of strange thoughts that came to my mind. The tears I had seen that young man shed, his illness coming on at the same time as Brigitte's, I know not what melancholy sympathy I thought I discovered between them, troubled and disquieted me. Not over a month ago I would have become violently jealous; but now, of what could I suspect Brigitte? Whatever the secret she was concealing from me, was she not going away with me? Even were it possible that Smith could share some secret of which I knew nothing, what could be the nature of the mystery? What was there to be censured in their sadness and in their friendship?

She had known him as a child; she met him again after long years just as she was about to leave France; she chanced to be in an unfortunate situation, and fate decreed that he should be the instrument of adding to her sorrow. Was it not natural that they should exchange sorrowful glances, that the sight of this young man should awaken memories and regrets? Could he, on the other hand, see her start off on a long journey, proscribed and almost abandoned, without grave apprehensions? I felt this that must be the explanation, and that it was my duty to assure them that I was capable of protecting the one from all dangers, and of requiting the other for the services he had rendered. And yet a deadly chill oppressed me, and I could not determine what course to pursue.

When Smith left us in the evening, we either were silent or talked of him. I do not know what fatal attraction led me to ask about him continually. She, however, told me just what I have told my reader; Smith's life had never been other than it was now--poor, obscure, and honest. I made her repeat the story of his life a number of times, without knowing why I took such an interest in it.

There was in my heart a secret cause of sorrow which I would not confess. If that young man had arrived at the time of our greatest happiness, had he brought an insignificant letter to Brigitte, had he pressed her hand while assisting her into the carriage, would I have paid the least attention to it? Had he recognized me at the opera or had he not--had he shed tears for some unknown reason, what would it matter so long as I was happy? But while unable to divine the cause of Brigitte's sorrow, I saw that my past conduct, whatever she might say of it, had something to do with her present state. If I had been what I ought to have been for the

last six months that we had lived together, nothing in the world, I was persuaded, could have troubled our love.

Smith was only an ordinary man, but he was good and devoted; his simple and modest qualities resembled the large, pure lines which the eye seizes at the first glance; one could know him in a quarter of an hour, and he inspired confidence if not admiration. I could not help thinking that if he were Brigitte's lover, she would cheerfully go with him to the ends of the earth.

I had deferred our departure purposely, but now I began to regret it. Brigitte, too, at times urged me to hasten the day.

"Why do you wait?" she asked. "Here I am recovered and everything is ready."

Why did we wait, indeed? I do not know.

Seated near the fire, my eyes wandered from Smith to my loved one. I saw that they were both pale, serious, silent. I did not know why, and I could not help thinking that there was but one cause, or one secret to learn. This was not one of those vague, sickly suspicions, such as had formerly tormented me, but an instinct, persistent and fatal. What strange creatures are we! It pleased me to leave them alone before the fire, and to go out on the quay to dream, leaning on the parapet and looking at the water. When they spoke of their life at N------, and when Brigitte, almost cheerful, assumed a motherly air to recall some incident of their childhood days, it seemed to me that I suffered, and yet took pleasure in it. I asked questions; I spoke to Smith of his mother, of his plans and his prospects; I gave him an opportunity to show himself in a favorable light, and forced his modesty to reveal his merit.

"You love your sister very much, do you not?" I asked. "When do you expect to marry her off?"

He blushed, and replied that his expenses were rather heavy and that it would probably be within two years, perhaps sooner, if his health would permit him to do some extra work which would bring in enough to provide her dowry; that there was a well-to-do family in the country, whose eldest son was her sweetheart; that they were almost agreed on it, and that fortune would one day come, like sleep, without thinking of it; that he had set aside for his sister a part of the money left by their father; that their mother was opposed to it, but that he would insist on it; that a young man can live from hand to mouth, but that the fate of a young girl is fixed on the day of her marriage. Thus, little by little, he expressed what was in his heart, and I watched Brigitte listening to him. Then, when he arose to leave us, I accompanied him to the door, and stood there, pensively listening to the sound of his footsteps on the stairs.

Upon examining our trunks we found that there were still a few things needed before we could start; Smith was asked to purchase them. He was remarkably active, and enjoyed attending to matters of this kind. When I returned to my apartments, I found him on the floor, strapping a trunk.

Brigitte was at the piano we had rented by the week during our stay. She was playing one of those old airs into which she put so much expression, and which were so dear to us. I stopped in the hall; every note reached my ear distinctly; never had she sung so sadly, so divinely.

Smith was listening with pleasure; he was on his knees holding the buckle of the strap in his hands. He fastened it, then looked about the room at the other goods he had packed and covered with a linen cloth. Satisfied with his work, he still remained kneeling in the same spot; Brigitte, her hands on the keys, was looking out at the horizon. For the second time I saw tears fall from the young man's eyes; I was ready to shed tears myself, and not knowing what was passing in me, I held out my hand to him.

"Were you there?" asked Brigitte. She trembled and seemed surprised.

"Yes, I was there," I replied. "Sing, my dear, I beg of you. Let me hear your sweet voice."

She continued her song without a word; she noticed my emotion as well as Smith's; her voice faltered. With the last notes she arose, and came to me and kissed me.

On another occasion I had brought an album containing views of Switzerland. We were looking at them, all three of us, and when Brigitte found a scene that pleased her, she would stop to examine it. There was one view that seemed to attract her more than the others; it was a certain spot in the canton of Vaud, some distance from Brigues; some trees with cows grazing in the shade; in the distance a village consisting of some dozen houses, scattered here and there. In the foreground a young girl with a large straw hat, seated under a tree, and a farmer's boy standing before her, apparently pointing out, with his iron-tipped stick, the route over which he had come; he was directing her attention to a winding path that led to the mountain. Above them were the Alps, and the picture was crowned by three snow-capped summits. Nothing could be more simple or more beautiful than this landscape. The valley resembled a lake of verdure, and the eye followed its contour with delight.

"Shall we go there?" I asked Brigitte. I took a pencil and traced some figures on the picture.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"I am trying to see if I can not change that face slightly and make it resemble yours. The pretty hat would become you, and can I not, if I am skilful, give that fine mountaineer some resemblance to me?"

The whim seemed to please her and she set about rubbing out the two faces. When I had painted her portrait, she wished to try mine. The faces were very small, hence not very difficult; it was agreed that the likenesses were striking. While we were laughing at it, the door opened and I was called away by the servant.

When I returned, Smith was leaning on the table and looking at the picture with interest. He was absorbed in a profound revery, and was not aware of my presence; I sat down near the fire, and it was not until I spoke to Brigitte that he raised his head. He looked at us a moment, then hastily took his leave and, as he approached the door, I saw him strike his forehead with his hand.

When I saw these signs of grief, I said to myself "What does it mean?" Then I clasped my hands to plead with--whom? I do not know; perhaps my good angel, perhaps my evil fate.

CHAPTER IV

IN THE FURNACE

My heart yearned to set out and yet I delayed; some secret influence rooted me to the spot.

When Smith came I knew no repose from the time he entered the room. How is it that sometimes we seem to enjoy unhappiness?

One day a word, a flush, a glance, made me shudder; another day, another glance, another word, threw me into uncertainty. Why were they both so sad? Why was I as motionless as a statue where I had formerly been violent? Every evening in bed I said to myself: "Let me see; let me think that over." Then I would spring up, crying: "Impossible!" The next day I did the same thing.

In Smith's presence, Brigitte treated me with more tenderness than when we were alone. It happened one evening that some hard words escaped us; when she heard his voice in the hall she came and sat on my knees. As for him, it seemed to me he was always making an effort to control himself. His gestures were carefully regulated; he spoke slowly and prudently, so that his occasional moments of forgetfulness seemed all the more striking.

Was it curiosity that tormented me? I remember that one day I saw a man drowning near the Pont Royal. It was midsummer and we were rowing on the river; some thirty boats were crowded together under the bridge, when suddenly one of the occupants of a boat near mine threw up his hands and fell overboard. We immediately began diving for him, but in vain; some hours later the body was found under a raft.

I shall never forget my experience as I was diving for that man. I opened my eyes under the water and searched painfully here and there in the dark corners about the pier; then I returned to the surface for breath, then resumed my horrible search. I was filled with hope and terror; the thought that I might feel myself seized by convulsive arms allured me, and at the same time thrilled me with horror; when I was

exhausted with fatigue, I climbed back into my boat.

Unless a man is brutalized by debauchery, eager curiosity is one of his marked traits. I have already remarked that I felt it on the occasion of my first visit to Desgenais. I will explain my meaning.

The truth, that skeleton of appearances, ordains that every man, whatsoever he be, shall come, in his day and hour, to touch the bones that lie forever at the bottom of some chance experience. It is called "knowing the world," and experience is purchased at that price. Some recoil in terror before that test; others, feeble and affrighted, vacillate. like shadows. Some, the best perhaps, die at once. The large number forget, and thus all float on to death.

But there are some men, who, at the fell stroke of chance, neither die nor forget; when it comes their turn to touch misfortune, otherwise called truth, they approach it with a firm step and outstretched hand, and, horrible to say! they mistake love for the livid corpse they have found at the bottom of the river. They seize it, feel it, clasp it in their arms; they are drunk with the desire to know; they no longer look with interest upon things, except to see them pass; they do nothing except doubt and test; they ransack the world as though they were God’s spies; they sharpen their thoughts into arrows, and give birth to a monster.

Roues, more than all others, are exposed to that fury, and the reason is very simple: ordinary life is the limpid surface, that of the roue is the rapid current swirling over and over, and at times touching the bottom. Coming from a ball, for instance, where they have danced with a modest girl, they seek the company of bad characters, and spend the night in riotous feasting. The last words they addressed to a beautiful and virtuous woman are still on their lips; they repeat them and burst into laughter. Shall I say it? Do they not raise, for some pieces of silver, the vesture of chastity, that robe so full of mystery, which respects the being it embellishes and engirds her without touching? What idea can they have of the world? They are like comedians in the greenroom. Who, more than they, is skilled in that delving to the bottom of things, in that groping at once profound and impious? See how they speak of everything; always in terms the most barren, crude, and abject; such words appear true to them; the rest is only parade, convention, prejudice. Let them tell a story, let them recount some experience, they will always use the same dirty and material expressions. They do not say "That woman loved me;" they say: "I betrayed that woman;" they do not say: "I love;" they say, "I desire;" they never say: "If God wills;" they say: "If I will." I do not know what they think of themselves and of such monologues as these.

Hence, of a necessity, either from idleness or curiosity, while they strive to find evil in everything, they do not comprehend that others still believe in the good. Therefore they have to be so nonchalant as to stop their ears, lest the hum of the busy world should suddenly startle them from sleep. The father allows his son to go where so many others go, where Cato himself went; he says that youth is but fleeting.

But when he returns, the youth looks upon his sister; and see what has taken place in him during an hour passed in the society of brutal reality! He says to himself: "My sister is not like that creature I have just left!" And from that day he is disturbed and uneasy.

Sinful curiosity is a vile malady born of impure contact. It is the prowling instinct of phantoms who raise the lids of tombs; it is an inexplicable torture with which God punishes those who have sinned; they wish to believe that all sin as they have done, and would be disappointed perhaps to find that it was not so. But they inquire, they search, they dispute; they wag their heads from side to side as does an architect who adjusts a column, and thus strive to find what they desire to find. Given proof of evil, they laugh at it; doubtful of evil, they swear that it exists; the good they refuse to recognize. "Who knows?" Behold the grand formula, the first words that Satan spoke when he saw heaven closing against him. Alas! for how many evils are those words responsible? How many disasters and deaths, how many strokes of fateful scythes in the ripening harvest of humanity! How many hearts, how many families where there is naught but ruin, since that word was first heard! "Who knows! Who knows!" Loathsome words! Rather than pronounce them one should be as sheep who graze about the slaughter-house and know it not. That is better than to be called a strong spirit, and to read La Rochefoucauld.

What better illustration could I present than the one I have just given? My mistress was ready to set out and I had but to say the word. Why did I delay? What would have been the result if I had started at once on our trip? Nothing but a moment of apprehension that would have been forgotten after travelling three days. When with me, she had no thought but of me; why should I care to solve a mystery that did not threaten my happiness?

She would have consented, and that would have been the end of it. A kiss on her lips and all would be well; instead of that, see what I did.

One evening when Smith had dined with us, I retired at an early hour and left them together. As I closed my door I heard Brigitte order some tea. In the morning I happened to approach her table, and, sitting beside the teapot, I saw but one cup. No one had been in that room before me that morning, so the servant could not have carried away anything that had been used the night before. I searched everywhere for a second cup but could find none.

"Did Smith stay late?" I asked of Brigitte.

"He left about midnight."

"Did you retire alone or did you call some one to assist you?"

"I retired alone; every one in the house was asleep."

I continued my search and my hands trembled. In what burlesque comedy is there a jealous lover so stupid as to inquire what has become of a cup?

Why seek to discover whether Smith and Madame Pierson had drunk from the same cup? What a brilliant idea that!

Nevertheless I found the cup and I burst into laughter, and threw it on the floor with such violence that it broke into a thousand pieces. I ground the pieces under my feet.

Brigitte looked at me without saying a word. During the two succeeding days she treated me with a coldness that had something of contempt in it, and I saw that she treated Smith with more deference and kindness than usual. She called him Henri and smiled on him sweetly.

"I feel that the air would do me good," she said after dinner; "shall we go to the opera, Octave? I would enjoy walking that far."

"No, I will stay here; go without me." She took Smith's arm and went out. I remained alone all evening; I had paper before me, and was trying to collect my thoughts in order to write, but in vain.

As a lonely lover draws from his bosom a letter from his mistress, and loses himself in delightful revery, thus I shut myself up in solitude and yielded to the sweet allurement of doubt. Before me were the two empty seats which Brigitte and Smith had just occupied; I scrutinized them anxiously as if they could tell me something. I revolved in my mind all the things I had heard and seen; from time to time I went to the door and cast my eyes over our trunks which had been piled against the wall for a month; I opened them and examined the contents so carefully packed away by those delicate little hands; I listened to the sound of passing carriages; the slightest noise made me tremble. I spread out on the table our map of Europe, and there, in the very presence of all my hopes, in that room where I had conceived and had so nearly realized them, I abandoned myself to the most frightful presentiments.

But, strange as it may seem, I felt neither anger nor jealousy, but a terrible sense of sorrow and foreboding. I did not suspect, and yet I doubted. The mind of man is so strangely formed that, with what he sees and in spite of what he sees, he can conjure up a hundred objects of woe. In truth his brain resembles the dungeons of the Inquisition, where the walls are covered with so many instruments of torture that one is dazed, and asks whether these horrible contrivances he sees before him are pincers or playthings. Tell me, I say, what difference is there in saying to my mistress: "All women deceive," or, "You deceive me?"

What passed through my mind was perhaps as subtle as the finest sophistry; it was a sort of dialogue between the mind and the conscience. "If I should lose Brigitte?" I said to the mind." She departs with you," said the conscience." If she deceives me?"--"How can she deceive you? Has she not made out her will asking for prayers for you?"--"If Smith loves her?"--"Fool! What does it matter so long as you know that she loves you?"--"If she loves me why is she sad?"--"That is her secret, respect it."--"If I take her away with me, will she be happy?"--"Love her and she will be."--" Why, when that man looks at her, does she seem to fear to meet his glance?"--" Because she is a woman and he is young."--

"Why does that young man turn pale when she looks at him?"--"Because he is a man and she is beautiful."--"Why, when I went to see him did he throw himself into my arms, and why did he weep and beat his head with his hands?"--"Do not seek to know what you must remain ignorant of."--"Why can I not know these things?"--" Because you are miserable and weak, and all mystery is of God."

"But why is it that I suffer? Why is it that my soul recoils in terror?" --"Think of your father and do good."--"But why am I unable to do as he did? Why does evil attract me to itself?"--"Get down on your knees and confess; if you believe in evil it is because your ways have been evil." --"If my ways were evil, was it my fault? Why did the good betray me?"--"Because you are in the shadow, would you deny the existence of light? If there are traitors, why are you one of them?"--"Because I am afraid of becoming the dupe."--"Why do you spend your nights in watching? Why are you alone now?"--"Because I think, I doubt, and I fear."--"When will you offer your prayer?"--"When I believe. Why have they lied to me?"--"Why do you lie, coward! at this very moment? Why not die if you can not suffer?"

Thus spoke and groaned within me two voices, voices that were defiant and terrible; and then a third voice cried out! "Alas! Alas! my innocence! Alas! Alas! the days that were!"

CHAPTER V

TRUTH AT LAST

What a frightful weapon is human thought! It is our defense and our safeguard, the most precious gift that God has made us. It is ours and it obeys us; we may launch it forth into space, but, once outside of our feeble brains, it is gone; we can no longer control it.

While I was deferring the time of our departure from day to day I was gradually losing strength, and, although I did not perceive it, my vital forces were slowly wasting away. When I sat at table I experienced a violent distaste for food; at night two pale faces, those of Brigitte and Smith, pursued me through frightful dreams. When they went to the theatre in the evening I refused to go with them; then I went alone, concealed myself in the parquet, and watched them. I pretended that I had some business to attend to in a neighboring room and sat there an hour and listened to them. The idea occurred to me to seek a quarrel with Smith and force him to fight with me; I turned my back on him while he was talking; then he came to me with a look of surprise on his face, holding out his hand. When I was alone in the night and every one slept, I felt a strong desire to go to Brigitte’s desk and take from it her papers. On one occasion I was obliged to go out of the house in order to resist the temptation. One day I felt like arming myself with a knife and threatening to kill them if they did not tell me why they were so sad; another day I turned all this fury against myself. With what shame

do I write it! And if any one should ask me why I acted thus, I could not reply.

To see, to doubt, to search, to torture myself and make myself miserable, to pass entire days with my ear at the keyhole, and the night in a flood of tears, to repeat over and over that I should die of sorrow, to feel isolation and feebleness uprooting hope in my heart, to imagine that I was spying when I was only listening to the feverish beating of my own pulse; to con over stupid phrases, such as: "Life is a dream, there is nothing stable here below;" to curse and blaspheme God through misery and through caprice: that was my joy, the precious occupation for which I renounced love, the air of heaven, and liberty!

Eternal God, liberty! Yes, there were certain moments when, in spite of all, I still thought of it. In the midst of my madness, eccentricity, and stupidity, there were within me certain impulses that at times brought me to myself. It was a breath of air which struck my face as I came from my dungeon; it was a page of a book I read when, in my bitter days, I happened to read something besides those modern sycophants called pamphleteers, who, out of regard for the public health, ought to be prevented from indulging in their crude philosophizings. Since I have referred to these good moments, let me mention one of them, they were so rare. One evening I was reading the Memoirs of Constant; I came to the following lines:

"Salsdorf, a Saxon surgeon attached to Prince Christian, had his leg broken by a shell in the battle of Wagram. He lay almost lifeless on the dusty field. Fifteen paces distant, Amedee of Kerbourg, aide-de-camp (I have forgotten to whom), wounded in the breast by a bullet, fell to the ground vomiting blood. Salsdorf saw that if that young man was not cared for he would die of suffusion; summoning all his powers, he painfully dragged himself to the side of the wounded man, attended to him and saved his life. Salsdorf himself died four days later from the effects of amputation."

When I read these words I threw down my book, and melted into tears.

I do not regret those tears, for they were such as I could shed only when my heart was right; I do not speak merely of Salsdorf, and do not care for that particular instance. I am sure, however, that I did not suspect any one that day. Poor dreamer! Ought I to remember that I have been other than I am? What good will it do me as I stretch out my arms in anguish to heaven and wait for the bolt that will deliver me forever? Alas! it was only a gleam that flashed across the night of my life.

Like those dervish fanatics who find ecstasy in vertigo, so thought, turning on itself, exhausted by the stress of introspection and tired of vain effort, falls terror-stricken. So it would seem that man must be a void and that by dint of delving unto himself he reaches the last turn of a spiral. There, as on the summits of mountains and at the bottom of mines, air fails, and God forbids man to go farther. Then, struck with a mortal chill, the heart, as if impaired by oblivion, seeks to escape into a new birth; it demands life of that which environs it, it eagerly drinks

in the air; but it finds round about only its own chimeras, which have exhausted its failing powers and which, self-created, surround it like pitiless spectres.

This could not last long. Tired of uncertainty, I resolved to resort to a test that would discover the truth.

I ordered post-horses for ten in the evening. We had hired a caleche and I gave directions that all should be ready at the hour indicated. At the same time I asked that nothing be said to Madame Pierson. Smith came to dinner; at the table I affected unusual cheerfulness, and without a word about my plans, I turned the conversation to our journey. I would renounce all idea of going away, I said, if I thought Brigitte did not care to go; I was so well satisfied with Paris that I asked nothing better than to remain as long as she pleased. I made much of all the pleasures of the city; I spoke of the balls, the theatres, of the many opportunities for diversion on every hand. In short, since we were happy I did not see why we should make a change; and I did not think of going away at present.

I was expecting her to insist that we carry out our plan of going to Geneva, and was not disappointed. However, she insisted but feebly; but, after a few words, I pretended to yield, and then changing the subject I spoke of other things, as though it was all settled.

"And why will not Smith go with us?" I asked. "It is very true that he has duties here, but can he not obtain leave of absence? Moreover, will not the talents he possesses and which he is unwilling to use, assure him an honorable living anywhere? Let him come along with us; the carriage is large and we offer him a place in it. A young man should see the world, and there is nothing so irksome for a man of his age as confinement in an office and restriction to a narrow circle. Is it not true?" I asked, turning to Brigitte. "Come, my dear, let your wiles obtain from him what he might refuse me; urge him to give us six weeks of his time. We will travel together, and after a tour of Switzerland he will return to his duties with new life."

Brigitte joined her entreaties to mine, although she knew it was only a joke on my part. Smith could not leave Paris without danger of losing his position, and replied that he regretted being obliged to deny himself the pleasure of accompanying us. Nevertheless I continued to press him, and, ordering another bottle of wine, I repeated my invitation. After dinner I went out to assure myself that my orders were carried out; then I returned in high spirits, and seating myself at the piano I proposed some music.

"Let us pass the evening here," I said; "believe me, it is better than going to the theatre; I can not take part myself, but I can listen. We will make Smith play if he tires of our company, and the time will pass pleasantly."

Brigitte consented with good grace and began singing for us; Smith accompanied her on the violoncello. The materials for a bowl of punch

were brought and the flame of burning rum soon cheered us with varied lights. The piano was abandoned for the table; then we had cards; everything passed off as I wished and we succeeded in diverting ourselves to my heart's content.

I had my eyes fixed on the clock and waited impatiently for the hands to mark the hour of ten. I was tormented with anxiety, but allowed them to see nothing. Finally the hour arrived; I heard the postilion's whip as the horses entered the court. Brigitte was seated near me; I took her by the hand and asked her if she was ready to depart. She looked at me with surprise, doubtless wondering if I was not joking. I told her that at dinner she had appeared so anxious to go that I had felt justified in sending for the horses, and that I went out for that purpose when I left the table.

"Are you serious?" asked Brigitte; "do you wish to set out to-night?"

"Why not?" I replied, "since we have agreed that we ought to leave Paris?"

"What! now? At this very moment?"

"Certainly; have we not been ready for a month? You see there is nothing to do but load our trunks on the carriage; as we have decided to go, ought we not go at once? I believe it is better to go now and put off nothing until tomorrow. You are in the humor to travel to-night and I hasten to profit by it. Why wait longer and continue to put it off? I can not endure this life. You wish to go, do you not? Very well, let us go and be done with it."

Profound silence ensued. Brigitte stepped to the window and satisfied herself that the carriage was there. Moreover, the tone in which I spoke would admit of no doubt, and, however hasty my action may appear to her, it was due to her own expressed desire. She could not deny her own words, nor find any pretext for further delay. Her decision was made promptly; she asked a few questions as though to assure herself that all the preparations had been made; seeing that nothing had been omitted, she began to search here and there. She found her hat and shawl, then continued her search.

"I am ready," she said; "shall we go? We are really going?"

She took a light, went to my room, to her own, opened lockers and closets. She asked for the key to her secretary which she said she had lost. Where could that key be? She had it in her possession not an hour ago.

"Come, come! I am ready," she repeated in extreme agitation; "let us go, Octave, let us set out at once."

While speaking she continued her search and then came and sat down near us.

I was seated on the sofa watching Smith, who stood before me. He had not changed countenance and seemed neither troubled nor surprised; but two drops of sweat trickled down his forehead, and I heard an ivory counter crack between his fingers, the pieces falling to the floor. He held out both hands to us.

"Bon voyage, my friends!" he said.

Again silence; I was still watching him, waiting for him to add a word. "If there is some secret here," thought I, "when shall I learn it, if not now? It must be on the lips of both of them. Let it but come out into the light and I will seize it."

"My dear Octave," said Brigitte, "where are we to stop? You will write to us, Henri, will you not? You will not forget my relatives and will do what you can for me?" He replied in a voice that trembled slightly that he would do all in his power to serve her.

"I can answer for nothing," he said, "and, judging from the letters you have received, there is not much hope. But it will not be my fault if I do not send you good news. Count on me, I am devoted to you."

After a few more kind words he made ready to take his departure. I arose and left the room before him; I wished to leave them together a moment for the last time and, as soon as I had closed the door behind me, in a perfect rage of jealousy, I pressed my ear to the keyhole.

"When shall I see you again?" he asked.

"Never," replied Brigitte; "adieu, Henri." She held out her hand. He bent over it, pressed it to his lips and I had barely time to slip into a corner as he passed out without seeing me.

Alone with Brigitte, my heart sank within me. She was waiting for me, her shawl on her arm, and emotion plainly marked on her face. She had found the key she had been looking for and her desk was open. I returned and sat down near the fire. "Listen to me," I said, without daring to look at her; "I have been so culpable in my treatment of you that I ought to wait and suffer without a word of complaint. The change which has taken place in you has thrown me into such despair that I have not been able to refrain from asking you the cause; but to-day I ask nothing more. Does it cost you an effort to depart? Tell me, and if so I am resigned."

"Let us go, let us go!" she replied.

"As you please, but be frank; whatever blow I may receive, I ought not to ask whence it comes; I should submit without a murmur. But if I lose you, do not speak to me of hope, for God knows I will not survive the loss."

She turned on me like a flash.

"Speak to me of your love," she said, "not of your grief."

"Very well, I love you more than life. Beside my love, my grief is but a dream. Come with me to the end of the world, I will die or I will live with you."

With these words I advanced toward her; she turned pale and recoiled. She made a vain effort to force a smile on her contracted lips, and sitting down before her desk she said:

"One moment; I have some papers here I want to burn."

She showed me the letters from N------, tore them up and threw them into the fire; she then took out other papers which she reread and then spread out on the table. They were bills of purchases she had made and some of them were still unpaid. While examining them she began to talk rapidly, while her cheeks burned as if with fever. Then she begged my pardon for her obstinate silence and her conduct since our arrival.

She gave evidence of more tenderness, more confidence than ever. She clapped her hands gleefully at the prospect of a happy journey; in short, she was all love, or at least apparently all love. I can not tell how I suffered at the sight of that factitious joy; there was in that grief which crazed her something more sad than tears and more bitter than reproaches. I would have preferred to have her cold and indifferent rather than thus excited; it seemed to me a parody of our happiest moments. There were the same words, the same woman, the same caresses; and that which, fifteen days before would have intoxicated me with love and happiness, repeated thus, filled me with horror.

"Brigitte," I suddenly inquired, "what secret are you concealing from me? If you love me, what horrible comedy is this you are enacting before me?"

"I!" said she, almost offended. "What makes you think I am acting?"

"What makes me think so? Tell me, my dear, that you have death in your soul and that you are suffering martyrdom. Behold my arms are ready to receive you; lean your head on me and weep. Then I will take you away, perhaps; but in truth, not thus."

"Let us go, let us go!" she again repeated.

"No, on my soul! No, not at present; no, not while there is between us a lie or a mask. I like unhappiness better than such cheerfulness as yours."

She was silent, astonished to see that I had not been deceived by her words and manner and that I saw through them both.

"Why should we delude ourselves?" I continued.

"Have I fallen so low in your esteem that you can dissimulate before me? That unfortunate journey, you think you are condemned to it, do you? Am I a tyrant, an absolute master? Am I an executioner who drags you to

punishment? How much do you fear my wrath when you come before me with such mimicry? What terror impels you to lie thus?"

"You are wrong," she replied; "I beg of you, not a word more."

"Why so little sincerity? If I am not your confidant, may I not at least be your friend? If I am denied all knowledge of the source of your tears, may I not at least see them flow? Have you not enough confidence in me to believe that I will respect your sorrow? What have I done that I should be ignorant of it? Might not the remedy lie right there?"

"No," she replied, "you are wrong; you will achieve your own unhappiness as well as mine if you press me farther. Is it not enough that we are going away?"

"And do you expect me to drag you away against your will? Is it not evident that you have consented reluctantly, and that you already begin to repent? Great God! What is it you are concealing from me? What is the use of playing with words when your thoughts are as clear as that glass before which you stand? Should I not be the meanest of men to accept at your hands what is yielded with so much regret? And yet how can I refuse it? What can I do if you refuse to speak?"

"No, I do not oppose you, you are mistaken; I love you, Octave; cease tormenting me thus."

She threw so much tenderness into these words that I fell down on my knees before her. Who could resist her glance and her voice?

"My God!" I cried, "you love me, Brigitte? My dear mistress, you love me?"

"Yes, I love you; yes. I belong to you; do with me what you will. I will follow you, let us go away together; come, Octave, the carriage is waiting."

She pressed my hand in hers, and kissed my forehead.

"Yes, it must be," she murmured, "it must be."

"It must be," I repeated to myself. I arose.

On the table there remained only one piece of paper that Brigitte was examining. She picked it up, then allowed it to drop to the floor.

"Is that all?" I asked.

"Yes, that is all."

When I ordered the horses I had no idea that we would really go, I wished merely to make a trial, but circumstances bid fair to force me to carry my plans farther than I at first intended. I opened the door.

"It must be!" I said to myself. "It must be!" I repeated aloud.

"What do you mean by that, Brigitte? What is there in those words that I do not understand? Explain yourself, or I will not go. Why must you love me?"

She fell on the sofa and wrung her hands in grief.

"Ah! Unhappy man!" she cried, "you will never know how to love!"

"Yes, I think you are right, but, before God, I know how to suffer. You must love me, must you not? Very well, then you must answer me. Were I to lose you forever, were these walls to crumble over my head, I will not leave this spot until I have solved the mystery that has been torturing me for more than a month. Speak, or I will leave you. I may be a fool who destroys his own happiness; I may be demanding something that is not for me to possess; it may be that an explanation will separate us and raise before me an insurmountable barrier, which will render our tour, on which I have set my heart, impossible; whatever it may cost you and me, you shall speak or I will renounce everything."

"No, I will not speak."

"You will speak! Do you fondly imagine I am the dupe of your lies? When I see you change between morning and evening until you differ more from your natural self than does night from day, do you think I am deceived? When you give me as a cause some letters that are not worth the trouble of reading, do you imagine that I am to be put off with the first pretext that comes to hand because you do not choose to seek another? Is your face made of plaster, that it is difficult to see what is passing in your heart? What is your opinion of me? I do not deceive myself as much as you suppose, and take care lest in default of words your silence discloses what you so obstinately conceal."

"What do you imagine I am concealing?"

"What do I imagine? You ask me that! Is it to brave me you ask such a question! Do you think to make me desperate and thus get rid of me? Yes, I admit it, offended pride is capable of driving me to extremes. If I should explain myself freely, you would have at your service all feminine hypocrisy; you hope that I will accuse you, so that you can reply that such a woman as you does not stoop to justify herself. How skilfully the most guilty and treacherous of your sex contrive to use proud disdain as a shield! Your great weapon is silence; I did not learn that yesterday. You wish to be insulted and you hold your tongue until it comes to that. Come, struggle against my heart--where yours beats you will find it; but do not struggle against my head, it is harder than iron, and it has served me as long as yours!"

"Poor boy!" murmured Brigitte; "you do not want to go?"

"No, I shall not go except with my beloved, and you are not that now. I have struggled, I have suffered, I have eaten my own heart long enough.

It is time for day to break, I have loved long enough in the night. Yes or no, will you answer me?"

"No."

"As you please; I will wait."

I sat down on the other side of the room, determined not to rise until I had learned what I wished to know. She appeared to be reflecting, and walked back and forth before me.

I followed her with an eager eye, while her silence gradually increased my anger. I was unwilling to have her perceive it and was undecided what to do. I opened the window.

"You may drive off," I called to those below, "and I will see that you are paid. I shall not start to-night."

"Poor boy!" repeated Brigitte. I quietly closed the window and sat down as if I had not heard her; but I was so furious with rage that I could hardly restrain myself. That cold silence, that negative force, exasperated me to the last point. Had I been really deceived and convinced of the guilt of a woman I loved I could not have suffered more. As I had condemned myself to remain in Paris, I reflected that I must compel Brigitte to speak at any price. In vain I tried to think of some means of forcing her to enlighten me; for such power I would have given all I possessed. What could I do or say? She sat there calm and unruffled, looking at me with sadness. I heard the sound of the horses' hoofs on the paving as the carriage drew out of the court. I had merely to turn my hand to call them back, but it seemed to me that there was something irrevocable about their departure. I slipped the bolt on the door; something whispered in my ear: "You are face to face with the woman who must give you life or death."

While thus buried in thought I tried to invent some expedient that would lead to the truth. I recalled one of Diderot's romances in which a woman, jealous of her lover, resorted to a novel plan, for the purpose of clearing away her doubts. She told him that she no longer loved him and that she wished to leave him. The Marquis des Arcis (the name of the lover) falls into the trap, and confesses that he himself has tired of the liaison. That piece of strategy, which I had read at too early an age, had struck me as being very skilful, and the recollection of it at this moment made me smile. "Who knows?" said I to myself. "If I should try this with Brigitte, she might be deceived and tell me her secret."

My anger had become furious when the idea of resorting to such trickery occurred to me. Was it so difficult to make a woman speak in spite of herself? This woman was my mistress; I must be very weak if I could not gain my point. I turned over on the sofa with an air of indifference.

"Very well, my dear," said I, gayly, "this is not a time for confidences, then?"

She looked at me in astonishment.

"And yet," I continued, "we must some day come to the truth. Now I believe it would be well to begin at once; that will make you confiding, and there is nothing like an understanding between friends."

Doubtless my face betrayed me as I spoke these words; Brigitte did not appear to understand and kept on walking up and down.

"Do you know," I resumed, "that we have been together now six months? The life we are leading together is not one to be laughed at. You are young, I also; if this kind of life should become distasteful to you, are you the woman to tell me of it? In truth, if it were so, I would confess it to you frankly. And why not? Is it a crime to love? If not, it is not a crime to love less or to cease to love at all. Would it be astonishing if at our age we should feel the need of change?"

She stopped me.

"At our age!" said she. "Are you addressing me? What comedy are you now playing, yourself?"

Blood mounted to my face. I seized her hand. "Sit down here," I said, "and listen to me."

"What is the use? It is not you who speak."

I felt ashamed of my own strategy and abandoned it.

"Listen to me," I repeated, "and come, I beg of you, sit down near me. If you wish to remain silent yourself, at least hear what I have to say."

"I am listening, what have you to say to me?"

"If some one should say to me: 'You are a coward!' I, who am twenty-two years of age and have fought on the field of honor, would throw the taunt back in the teeth of my accuser. Have I not within me the consciousness of what I am? It would be necessary for me to meet my accuser on the field, and play my life against his; why? In order to prove that I am not a coward; otherwise the world would believe it. That single word demands that reply every time it is spoken, and it matters not by whom."

"It is true; what is your meaning?"

"Women do not fight; but as society is constituted there is no being, of whatever sex, who ought to submit to the indignity involved in an aspersion on all his or her past life, be that life regulated as by a pendulum. Reflect; who escapes that law? There are some, I admit; but what happens? If it is a man, dishonor; if it is a woman, what? Forgiveness? Every one who loves ought to give some evidence of life, some proof of existence. There is, then, for woman as well as for man, a time when an attack must be resented. If she is brave, she rises, announces that she is present and sits down again. A stroke of the sword

is not for her. She must not only avenge herself, but she must forge her own arms. Someone suspects her; who? An outsider? She may hold him in contempt--her lover whom she loves? If so, it is her life that is in question, and she may not despise him."

"Her only recourse is silence."

"You are wrong; the lover who suspects her casts an aspersion on her entire life. I know it. Her plea is in her tears, her past life, her devotion and her patience. What will happen if she remains silent? Her lover will lose her by her own act and time will justify her. Is not that your thought?"

"Perhaps; silence before all."

"Perhaps, you say? Assuredly I will lose you if you do not speak; my resolution is made: I am going away alone."

"But, Octave--"

"But," I cried, "time will justify you! Let us put an end to it; yes or no?"

"Yes, I hope so."

"You hope so! Will you answer me definitely? This is doubtless the last time you will have the opportunity. You tell me that you love me, and I believe it. I suspect you; is it your intention to allow me to go away and rely on time to justify you?"

"Of what do you suspect me?"

"I do not choose to say, for I see that it would be useless. But, after all, misery for misery, at your leisure; I am as well pleased. You deceive me, you love another; that is your secret and mine."

"Who is it?" she asked.

"Smith."

She placed her hand on her lips and turned aside. I could say no more; we were both pensive, our eyes fixed on the floor.

"Listen to me," she began with an effort, "I have suffered much. I call heaven to bear me witness that I would give my life for you. So long as the faintest gleam of hope remains, I am ready to suffer anything; but, although I may rouse your anger in saying to you that I am a woman, I am nevertheless a woman, my friend. We can not go beyond the limits of human endurance. Beyond a certain point I will not answer for the consequences. All I can do at this moment is to get down on my knees before you and beseech you not to go away."

She knelt down as she spoke. I arose.

"Fool that I am!" I muttered, bitterly; "fool, to try to get the truth from a woman! He who undertakes such a task will earn naught but derision and will deserve it! Truth! Only he who consorts with chambermaids knows it, only he who steals to their pillow and listens to the unconscious utterance of a dream, hears it. He alone knows it who makes a woman of himself, and initiates himself into the secrets of her cult of inconstancy! But man, who asks for it openly, he who opens a loyal hand to receive that frightful alms, he will never obtain it! They are on guard with him; for reply he receives a shrug of the shoulders, and, if he rouses himself in his impatience, they rise in righteous indignation like an outraged vestal, while there falls from their lips the great feminine oracle that suspicion destroys love, and they refuse to pardon an accusation which they are unable to meet. Ah! just God! How weary I am! When will all this cease?"

"Whenever you please," said she, coldly; "I am as tired of it as you."

"At this very moment; I leave you forever, and may time justify you! Time! Time! Oh! what a cold lover! Remember this adieu. Time! and thy beauty, and thy love, and thy happiness, where will they be? Is it thus, without regret, you allow me to go? Ah! the day when the jealous lover will know that he has been unjust, the day when he shall see proofs, he will understand what a heart he has wounded, is it not so? He will bewail his shame, he will know neither joy nor sleep; he will live only in the memory of the time when he might have been happy. But, on that day, his proud mistress will turn pale as she sees herself avenged; she will say to herself: 'If I had only done it sooner!' And believe me, if she loves him, pride will not console her."

I tried to be calm, but I was no longer master of myself, and I began to pace the floor as she had done. There are certain glances that resemble the clashing of drawn swords; such glances Brigitte and I exchanged at that moment. I looked at her as the prisoner looks on her at the door of his dungeon. In order to break her sealed lips and force her to speak I would give my life and hers.

"What do you mean?" she asked. "What do you wish me to tell you?"

"What you have on your heart. Are you cruel enough to make me repeat it?"

"And you, you," she cried, "are you not a hundred times more cruel? Ah! fool, as you say, who would know the truth! Fool that I should be if I expected you to believe it! You would know my secret, and my secret is that I love you. Fool that I am! you will seek another. That pallor of which you are the cause, you accuse it, you question it. Like a fool, I have tried to suffer in silence, to consecrate to you my resignation; I have tried to conceal my tears; you have played the spy, and you have counted them as witnesses against me. Fool that I am! I have thought of crossing seas, of exiling myself from France with you, of dying far from all who have loved me, leaning for sole support on a heart that doubts me. Fool that I am! I thought that truth had a glance, an accent, that

could not be mistaken, that would be respected! Ah! when I think of it, tears choke me. Why, if it must ever be thus, induce me to take a step that will forever destroy my peace? My head is confused, I do not know where I am!"

She leaned on me weeping. "Fool! Fool!" she repeated, in a heartrending voice.

"And what is it you ask?" she continued, "what can I do to meet those suspicions that are ever born anew, that alter with your moods? I must justify myself, you say! For what? For loving, for dying, for despairing? And if I assume a forced cheerfulness, even that cheerfulness offends you. I sacrifice everything to follow you and you have not gone a league before you look back. Always, everywhere, whatever I may do, insults and anger!"

"Ah! dear child, if you knew what a mortal chill comes over me, what suffering I endure in seeing my simplest words this taken up and hurled back at me with suspicion and sarcasm! By that course you deprive yourself of the only happiness there is in the world--perfect love. You kill all delicate and lofty sentiment in the hearts of those who love you; soon you will believe in nothing except the material and the gross; of love there will remain for you only that which is visible and can be touched with the finger. You are young, Octave, and you have still a long life before you; you will have other mistresses. Yes, as you say, pride is a little thing and it is not to it I look for consolation; but God wills that your tears shall one day pay me for those which I now shed for you!"

She arose.

"Must it be said? Must you know that for six months I have not sought repose without repeating to myself that it was all in vain, that you would never be cured; that I have never risen in the morning without saying that another effort must be made; that after every word you have spoken I have felt that I ought to leave you, and that you have not given me a caress that I would rather die than endure; that, day by day, minute by minute, hesitating between hope and fear, I have vainly tried to conquer either my love or my grief; that, when I opened my heart to you, you pierced it with a mocking glance, and that, when I closed it, it seemed to me I felt within it a treasure that none but you could dispense? Shall I speak of all the frailty and all the mysteries which seem puerile to those who do not respect them? Shall I tell you that when you left me in anger I shut myself up to read your first letters; that there is a favorite waltz that I never played in vain when I felt too keenly the suffering caused by your presence? Ah! wretch that I am! How dearly all these unnumbered tears, all these follies, so sweet to the feeble, are purchased! Weep now; not even this punishment, this sorrow, will avail you."

I tried to interrupt her.

"Allow me to continue," she said; "the time has come when I must speak.

Let us see, why do you doubt me? For six months, in thought, in body, and in soul, I have belonged to no one but you. Of what do you dare suspect me? Do you wish to set out for Switzerland? I am ready, as you see. Do you think you have a rival? Send him a letter that I will sign and you will direct. What are we doing? Where are we going? Let us decide. Are we not always together? Very well then, why would you leave me? I can not be near you and separated from you at the same moment. It is necessary to have confidence in those we love. Love is either good or bad: if good, we must believe in it; if evil, we must cure ourselves of it. All this, you see, is a game we are playing; but our hearts and our lives are the stakes, and it is horrible! Do you wish to die? That would perhaps be better. Who am I that you should doubt me?"

She stopped before the glass.

"Who am I?" she repeated, "who am I? Think of it. Look at this face of mine."

"Doubt thee!" she cried, addressing her own image; "poor, pale face, thou art suspected! poor, thin cheeks, poor, tired eyes, thou and thy tears are in disgrace. Very well, put an end to thy suffering; let those kisses that have wasted thee close thy lids! Descend into the cold earth, poor trembling body that can no longer support its own weight. When thou art there, perchance thou wilt be believed, if doubt believes in death. O sorrowful spectre! On the banks of what stream wilt thou wander and groan? What fires devour thee? Thou dreamest of a long journey and thou hast one foot in the grave!

"Die! God is thy witness that thou hast tried to love. Ah! what wealth of love has been awakened in thy heart! Ah! what dreams thou hast had, what poisons thou hast drunk! What evil hast thou committed that there should be placed in thy breast a fever that consumes! What fury animates that blind creature who pushes thee into the grave with his foot, while his lips speak to thee of love? What will become of you if you live? Is it not time to end it all? Is it not enough? What proof canst thou give that will satisfy when thou, poor, living proof, art not believed? To what torture canst thou submit that thou hast not already endured? By what torments, what sacrifices, wilt thou appease insatiable love? Thou wilt be only an object of ridicule, a thing to excite laughter; thou wilt vainly seek a deserted street to avoid the finger of scorn. Thou wilt lose all shame and even that appearance of virtue which has been so dear to you; and the man for whom you have disgraced yourself will be the first to punish you. He will reproach you for living for him alone, for braving the world for him, and while your friends are whispering about you, he will listen to assure himself that no word of pity is spoken; he will accuse you of deceiving him if another hand even then presses yours, and if, in the desert of life, you find some one who can spare you a word of pity in passing.

"O God! dost thou remember a day when a wreath of roses was placed on my head? Was it this brow on which that crown rested? Ah! the hand that hung it on the wall of the oratory has now fallen, like it, to dust! Oh, my native valley! Oh, my old aunt, who now sleeps in peace! Oh, my

lindens, my little white goat, my dear peasants who loved me so much! You remember when I was happy, proud, and respected? Who threw in my path that stranger who took me away from all this? Who gave him the right to enter my life? Ah! wretch! why didst thou turn the first day he followed you? Why didst thou receive him as a brother? Why didst thou open thy door, and why didst thou hold out thy hand? Octave, Octave, why have you loved me if all is to end thus?"

She was about to faint as I led her to a chair where she sank down and her head fell on my shoulder. The terrible effort she had made in speaking to me so bitterly had broken her down. Instead of an outraged woman I found now only a suffering child. Her eyes closed and she was motionless.

When she regained consciousness she complained of extreme languor, and begged to be left alone that she might rest. She could hardly walk; I carried her gently to her room and placed her on the bed. There was no mark of suffering on her face: she was resting from her sorrow as from great fatigue, and seemed not even to remember it. Her feeble and delicate body yielded without a struggle; the strain had been too great. She held my hand in hers; I kissed her; our lips met in loving union, and after the cruel scene through which she had passed, she slept smilingly on my heart as on the first day.

CHAPTER VI

SELF-SACRIFICE THE SOLUTION

Brigitte slept. Silent, motionless, I sat near her. As a husbandman, when the storm has passed, counts the sheaves that remain in his devastated field, thus I began to estimate the evil I had done.

The more I thought of it, the more irreparable I felt it to be. Certain sorrows, by their very excess, warn us of their limits, and the more shame and remorse I experienced, the more I felt that after such a scene, nothing remained for us to do but to say adieu. Whatever courage Brigitte had shown, she had drunk to the dregs the bitter cup of her sad love; unless I wished to see her die, I must give her repose. She had often addressed cruel reproaches to me, and had, perhaps, on certain other occasions shown more anger than in this scene; but what she had said this time was not dictated by offended pride; it was the truth, which, hidden closely in her heart, had broken it in escaping.

Our present relations, and the fact that I had refused to go away with her, destroyed all hope; she desired to pardon me, but she had not the power. This slumber even, this deathlike sleep of one who could suffer no more, was conclusive evidence; this sudden silence, the tenderness she had shown in the final moments, that pale face, and that kiss, confirmed me in the belief that all was over, and that I had broken forever whatever bond had united us. As surely as she slept now, as soon as I

gave her cause for further suffering she would sleep in eternal rest. The clock struck and I felt that the last hour had carried away my life with hers.

Unwilling to call any one, I lighted Brigitte's lamp; I watched its feeble flame and my thoughts seemed to flicker in the darkness like its uncertain rays.

Whatever I had said or done, the idea of losing Brigitte had never occurred to me up to this time. A hundred times I wished to leave her, but who has loved and is ready to say just what is in his heart? That was in times of despair or of anger. So long as I knew that she loved me, I was sure of loving her; stern necessity had just arisen between us for the first time. I experienced a dull languor and could distinguish nothing clearly. What my mind understood, my soul recoiled from accepting. "Come," I said to myself, "I have desired it and I have done it; there is not the slightest hope that we can live together; I am unwilling to kill this woman, so I have no alternative but to leave her. It is all over; I shall go away tomorrow."

And all the while I was thinking neither of my responsibility, nor of the past, nor future; I thought neither of Smith nor his connection with the affair; I could not say who had led me there, or what I had done during the last hour. I looked at the walls of the room and thought that all I had to do was to wait until to-morrow and decide what carriage I would take.

I remained for a long time in this strange calm, just as the man who receives a thrust from a poignard feels at first only the cold steel and can often travel some distance ere he becomes weak, and his eyes start from their sockets and he realizes what has happened. But drop by drop the blood flows, the ground under his feet becomes red, death comes; the man, at its approach, shudders with horror and falls as though struck by a thunderbolt. Thus, apparently calm, I awaited the coming of misfortune; I repeated in a low voice what Brigitte had said, and I placed near her all that I supposed she would need for the night; then I looked at her, then went to the window and pressed my forehead against the pane peering out at a sombre and lowering sky; then I returned to the bedside. That I was going away tomorrow was the only thought in my mind, and little by little the word "depart" became intelligible to me. "Ah! God!" I suddenly cried, "my poor mistress, I am about to lose you, and I have not known how to love you!"

I trembled at these words as if it had been another who had pronounced them; they resounded through all my being as resounds the string of the harp that has been plucked to the point of breaking. In an instant two years of suffering again racked my breast, and after them as their consequence and as their last expression, the present seized me. How shall I describe such woe? By a single word, perhaps, for those who have loved. I had taken Brigitte's hand, and, in a dream, doubtless, she had pronounced my name.

I arose and went to my room; a torrent of tears flowed from my eyes.

I held out my arms as if to seize the past which was escaping me. "Is it possible," I repeated, "that I am going to lose you? I can love no one but you. What! you are going away? And forever? What! you, my life, my adored mistress, you flee me, I shall never see you more? Never! never!" I said aloud; and, addressing myself to the slumbering Brigitte as if she could hear me, I added: "Never, never; do not think of it; I will never consent to it. And why so much pride? Are there no means of atoning for the offense I have committed? I beg of you, let us seek some expiation. Have you not pardoned me a thousand times? But you love me, you will not be able to go, for courage will fail you. What shall we do?"

A horrible madness seized me; I began to run here and there in search of some instrument of death. At last I fell on my knees and beat my head against the bed. Brigitte stirred, and I remained quiet, fearing I should waken her.

"Let her sleep until to-morrow," I said to myself; "I have all night to watch her."

I resumed my place; I was so frightened at the idea of waking Brigitte, that I scarcely dared breathe. Gradually I became more calm and less bitter tears began to course gently down my cheeks. Tenderness succeeded fury. I leaned over Brigitte and looked at her as if, for the last time, my better angel were urging me to grave on my soul the lines of that dear face!

How pale she was! Her large eyes, surrounded by a bluish circle, were moist with tears; her form, once so lithe, was bent as if beneath a burden; her cheek, wasted and leaden, rested on a hand that was spare and feeble; her brow seemed to bear the marks of that crown of thorns which is the diadem of resignation. I thought of the cottage. How young she was six months ago! How cheerful, how free, how careless! What had I done with all that? It seemed to me that a strange voice repeated an old romance that I had long since forgotten:

> Altra volta gieri biele,
> Blanch' e rossa com' un flore,
> Ma ora no. Non son piu biele
> Consumatis dal' amore.

My sorrow was too great; I sprang to my feet and once more began to walk the floor. "Yes," I continued, "look at her; think of those who are consumed by a grief that is not shared with another. The evils you endure others have suffered, and nothing is singular or peculiar to you. Think of those who have no mother, no relatives, no friends; of those who seek and do not find, of those who love in vain, of those who die and are forgotten."

"Before thee, there on that bed, lies a being that nature, perchance, formed for thee. From the highest circles of intelligence to the deepest and most impenetrable mysteries of matter and of form, that soul and that body are thy affinities; for six months thy mouth has not spoken, thy

heart has not beat, without a responsive word and heart-beat from her; and that woman, whom God has sent thee as He sends the rose to the field, is about to glide from thy heart. While rejoicing in each other's presence, while the angels of eternal love were singing before you, you were farther apart than two exiles at the two ends of the earth. Look at her, but be silent. Thou hast still one night to see her, if thy sobs do not awaken her."

Little by little, my thoughts mounted and became more sombre, until I recoiled in terror.

"To do evil! Such was the role imposed upon me by Providence. I, to do evil! I, to whom my conscience, even in the midst of my wildest follies, said that I was good! I, whom a pitiless destiny was dragging swiftly toward the abyss and whom a secret horror unceasingly warned of the awful fate to come! I, who, if I had shed blood with these hands, could yet repeat that my heart was not guilty; that I was deceived, that it was not I who did it, but my destiny, my evil genius, some unknown being who dwelt within me, but who was not born there!

"I do evil! For six months I had been engaged in that task, not a day had passed that I had not worked at that impious occupation, and I had at that moment the proof before my eyes. The man who had loved Brigitte, who had offended her, then insulted her, then abandoned her only to take her back again, trembling with fear, beset with suspicion, finally thrown on that bed of sorrow, where she now lay extended, was I!"

I beat my breast, and, although looking at her, I could not believe it. I touched her as if to assure myself that it was not a dream. My face, as I saw it in the glass, regarded me with astonishment. Who was that creature who appeared before me bearing my features? Who was that pitiless man who blasphemed with my mouth and tortured with my hands? Was it he whom my mother called Octave? Was it he who, at fifteen, leaning over the crystal waters of a fountain, had a heart not less pure than they? I closed my eyes and thought of my childhood days. As a ray of light pierces a cloud, a gleam from the past pierced my heart.

"No," I mused, "I did not do that. These things are but an absurd dream."

I recalled the time when I was ignorant of life, when I was taking my first steps in experience. I remembered an old beggar who used to sit on a stone bench before the farm gate, to whom I was sometimes sent with the remains of our morning meal. Holding out his feeble, wrinkled hands he would bless me as he smiled upon me. I felt the morning wind blowing on my brow and a freshness as of the rose descending from heaven into my soul. Then I opened my eyes and, by the light of the lamp, saw the reality before me.

"And you do not believe yourself guilty?" I demanded, with horror. "O novice of yesterday, how corrupt art thou today! Because you weep, you fondly imagine yourself innocent? What you consider the evidence of your conscience is only remorse; and what murderer does not experience

it? If your virtue cries out, is it not because it feels the approach of death? O wretch! those far-off voices that you hear groaning in your heart, do you think they are sobs? They are perhaps only the cry of the sea-mew, that funereal bird of the tempest, whose presence portends shipwreck. Who has ever told the story of the childhood of those who have died stained with human blood? They, also, have been good in their day; they sometimes bury their faces in their hands and think of those happy days. You do evil, and you repent? Nero did the same when he killed his mother. Who has told you that tears can wash away the stains of guilt?

"And even if it were true that a part of your soul is not devoted to evil forever, what will you do with the other part that is not yours? You will touch with your left hand the wounds that you inflict with your right; you will make a shroud of your virtue in which to bury your crimes; you will strike, and like Brutus you will engrave on your sword the prattle of Plato! Into the heart of the being who opens her arms to you, you will plunge that blood-stained but repentant arm; you will follow to the cemetery the victim of your passion, and you will plant on her grave the sterile flower of your pity. You will say to those who see you 'What could you expect? I have learned how to kill, and observe that I already, weep; learn that God made me better than you see me.' You will speak of your youth, and you will persuade yourself that heaven ought to pardon you, that your misfortunes are involuntary, and you will implore sleepless nights to grant you a little repose.

"But who knows? You are still young. The more you trust in your heart, the farther astray you will be led by your pride. To-day you stand before the first ruin you are going to leave on your route. If Brigitte dies to-morrow you will weep on her tomb; where will you go when you leave her? You will go away for three months perhaps, and you will travel in Italy; you will wrap your cloak about you like a splenetic Englishman, and you will say some beautiful morning, sitting in your inn with your glasses before you, that it is time to forget in order to live again.

"You who weep too late, take care lest you weep more than one day. Who knows? When the present which makes you shudder shall have become the past, an old story, a confused memory, may it not happen some night of debauchery that you will overturn your chair and recount, with a smile on your lips, what you witnessed with tears in your eyes? It is thus that one drinks away shame. You have begun by being good, you will become weak, and you will become a monster.

"My poor friend," said I, from the bottom of my heart, "I have a word of advice for you, and it is this: I believe that you must die. While there is still some virtue left, profit by it in order that you may not become altogether bad; while a woman you love lies there dying on that bed, and while you have a horror of yourself, strike the decisive blow; she still lives; that is enough; do not attend her funeral obsequies for fear that on the morrow you will not be consoled; turn the poignard against your own heart while that heart yet loves the God who made it. Is it your youth that gives you pause? And would you spare those youthful locks?

Never allow them to whiten if they are not white to-night.

"And then what would you do in the world? If you go away, where will you go? What can you hope for if you remain? Ah! in looking at that woman you seem to have a treasure buried in your heart. It is not merely that you lose her; it is less what has been than what might have been. When the hands of the clock indicated such and such an hour, you might have been happy. If you suffer why do you not open your heart? If you love, why do you not say so? Why do you die of hunger, clasping a priceless treasure in your hands? You have closed the door, you miser; you debate with yourself behind locks and bolts. Shake them, for it was your hand that forged them.

"O fool! who desired and have possessed your desire, you have not thought of God! You play with happiness as a child plays with a rattle, and you do not reflect how rare and fragile a thing you hold in your hands; you treat it with disdain, you smile at it and you continue to amuse yourself with it, forgetting how many prayers it has cost your good angel to preserve for you that shadow of daylight! Ah! if there is in heaven one who watches over you, what is he doing at this moment? He is seated before an organ; his wings are half-folded, his hands extended over the ivory keys; he begins an eternal hymn; the hymn of love and immortal rest, but his wings droop, his head falls over the keys; the angel of death has touched him on the shoulder, he disappears into the Nirvana.

"And you, at the age of twenty-two, when a noble and exalted passion, when the strength of youth might perhaps have made something of you when after so many sorrows and bitter disappointments, a youth so dissipated, you saw a better time shining in the future; when your life, consecrated to the object of your adoration, gave promise of new strength, at that moment the abyss yawns before you! You no longer experience vague desires, but real regrets; your heart is no longer hungry, it is broken! And you hesitate? What do you expect? Since she no longer cares for your life, it counts for nothing! Since she abandons you, abandon yourself!

"Let those who have loved you in your youth weep for you! They are not many. If you would live, you must not only forget love, but you must deny that it exists; not only deny what there has been of good in you, but kill all that may be good in the future; for what will you do if you remember? Life for you would be one ceaseless regret. No, no, you must choose between your soul and your body; you must kill one or the other. The memory of the good drives you to the evil, make a corpse of yourself unless you wish to become your own spectre. O child, child! die while you can! May tears be shed over your grave!"

I threw myself on the foot of the bed in such a frightful state of despair that my reason fled and I no longer knew where I was or what I was doing. Brigitte sighed.

My senses stirred within me. Was it grief or despair? I do not know. Suddenly a horrible idea occurred to me.

"What!" I muttered, "leave that for another! Die, descend into the ground, while that bosom heaves with the air of heaven? Just God! another hand than mine on that fine, transparent skin! Another mouth on those lips, another love in that heart! Brigitte happy, loving, adored, and I in a corner of the cemetery, crumbling into dust in a ditch! How long will it take her to forget me if I cease to exist to-morrow? How many tears will she shed? None, perhaps! Not a friend who speaks to her but will say that my death was a good thing, who will not hasten to console her, who will not urge her to forget me! If she weeps, they will seek to distract her attention from her loss; if memory haunts her, they will take her away; if her love for me survives me, they will seek to cure her as if she had been poisoned; and she herself, who will perhaps at first say that she desires to follow me, will a month later turn aside to avoid the weeping-willow planted over my grave!

"How could it be otherwise? Who, as beautiful as she, wastes life in idle regrets? If she should think of dying of grief, that beautiful bosom would urge her to live, and her mirror would persuade her; and the day when her exhausted tears give place to the first smile, who will not congratulate her on her recovery? When, after eight days of silence, she consents to hear my name pronounced in her presence, then she will speak of it herself as if to say: 'Console me;' then little by little she will no longer refuse to think of the past but will speak of it, and she will open her window some beautiful spring morning when the birds are singing in the garden; she will become pensive and say: 'I have loved!' Who will be there at her side? Who will dare to tell her that she must continue to love?

"Ah! then I shall be no more! You will listen to him, faithless one! You will blush as does the budding rose, and the blood of youth will mount to your face. While saying that your heart is sealed, you will allow it to escape through that fresh aureole of beauty, each ray of which allures a kiss. How much they desire to be loved who say they love no more! And why should that astonish you? You are a woman; that body, that spotless bosom, you know what they are worth; when you conceal them under your dress you do not believe, as do the virgins, that all are alike, and you know the price of your modesty. How can a woman who has been praised resolve to be praised no more? Does she think she is living when she remains in the shadow and there is silence round about her beauty? Her beauty itself is the admiring glance of her lover. No, no, there can be no doubt of it; she who has loved, can not live without love; she who has seen death clings to life. Brigitte loves me and will perhaps die of love; I will kill myself and another will have her.

"Another, another!" I repeated, bending over her until my head touched her shoulder. "Is she not a widow? Has she not already seen death? Have not these little hands prepared the dead for burial? Her tears for the second will not flow as long as those shed for the first. Ah! God forgive me! While she sleeps why should I not kill her? If I should awaken her now and tell her that her hour had come, and that we were going to die with a last kiss, she would consent. What does it matter? Is it certain that all does not end with that?"

I found a knife on the table and I picked it up.

"Fear, cowardice, superstition! What do they know about it who talk of something else beyond? It is for the ignorant common people that a future life has been invented, but who really believes in it? What watcher in the cemetery has seen Death leave his tomb and hold consultation with a priest? In olden times there were phantoms; they are interdicted by the police in civilized cities, and no cries are now heard issuing from the earth except from those buried in haste. Who has silenced death, if it has ever spoken? Because funeral processions are no longer permitted to encumber our streets, does the celestial spirit languish?

"To die, that is the final purpose, the end. God has established it, man discusses it; but over every door is written: 'Do what thou wilt, thou shalt die.' What will be said if I kill Brigitte? Neither of us will hear. In to-morrow's journal would appear the intelligence that Octave de T----- had killed his mistress, and the day after no one would speak of it. Who would follow us to the grave? No one who, upon returning to his home, could not enjoy a hearty dinner; and when we were extended side by side in our narrow, bed, the world could walk over our graves without disturbing us.

"Is it not true, my well-beloved, is it not true that it would be well with us? It is a soft bed, that bed of earth; no suffering can reach us there; the occupants of the neighboring tombs will not gossip about us; our bones will embrace in peace and without pride, for death is solace, and that which binds does not also separate. Why should annihilation frighten thee, poor body, destined to corruption? Every hour that strikes drags thee on to thy doom, every step breaks the round on which thou hast just rested; thou art nourished by the dead; the air of heaven weighs upon and crushes thee, the earth on which thou treadest attracts thee by the soles of thy feet.

"Down with thee! Why art thou affrighted? Dost thou tremble at a word? Merely say: 'We will not live.' Is not life a burden that we long to lay down? Why hesitate when it is merely a question of a little sooner or a little later? Matter is indestructible, and the physicists, we are told, grind to infinity the smallest speck of dust without being able to annihilate it. If matter is the property of chance, what harm can it do to change its form since it can not cease to be matter? Why should God care what form I have received and with what livery I invest my grief? Suffering lives in my brain; it belongs to me, I kill it; but my bones do not belong to me and I return them to Him who lent them to me: may some poet make a cup of my skull from which to drink his new wine!

"What reproach can I incur and what harm can that reproach do me? What stern judge will tell me that I have done wrong? What does he know about it?

"Was he such as I? If every creature has his task to perform, and if it is a crime to shirk it, what culprits are the babes who die on the nurse's breast! Why should they be spared? Who will be instructed by

the lessons which are taught after death? Must heaven be a desert in order that man may be punished for having lived? Is it not enough to have lived? I do not know who asked that question, unless it were Voltaire on his death-bed; it is a cry of despair worthy of the helpless old atheist.

"But to what purpose? Why so many struggles? Who is there above us who delights in so much agony? Who amuses himself and wiles away an idle hour watching this spectacle of creation, always renewed and always dying, seeing the work of man's hands rising, the grass growing; looking upon the planting of the seed and the fall of the thunderbolt; beholding man walking about upon his earth until he meets the beckoning finger of death; counting tears and watching them dry upon the cheek of pain; noting the pure profile of love and the wrinkled face of age; seeing hands stretched up to him in supplication, bodies prostrate before him, and not a blade of wheat more in the harvest!

"Who is it, then, that has made so much for the pleasure of knowing that it all amounts to nothing! The earth is dying--Herschel says it is of cold; who holds in his hand the drop of condensed vapor and watches it as it dries up, as a fisher watches a grain of sand in his hand? That mighty law of attraction that suspends the world in space, torments it--and consumes it in endless desire--every planet that carries its load of misery and groans on its axle--calls to each other across the abyss, and each wonders which will stop first. God controls them; they accomplish assiduously and eternally their appointed and useless task; they whirl about, they suffer, they burn, they become extinct and they light up with new flame; they descend and they reascend, they follow and yet they avoid one another, they interlace like rings; they carry on their surface thousands of beings who are ceaselessly renewed; the beings move about, cross one another's paths, clasp one another for an hour, and then fall, and others rise in their place.

"Where life fails, life hastens to the spot; where air is wanting, air rushes; no disorder, everything is regulated, marked out, written down in lines of gold and parables of fire; everything keeps step with the celestial music along the pitiless paths of life; and all for nothing! And we, poor nameless dreams, pale and sorrowful apparitions, helpless ephemera, we who are animated by the breath of a second in order that death may exist, we exhaust ourselves with fatigue in order to prove that we are living for a purpose, and that something indefinable is stirring within us.

"We hesitate to turn against our breasts a little piece of steel, or to blow out our brains with a little instrument no larger than our hands; it seems to us that chaos would return again; we have written and revised the laws both human and divine, and we are afraid of our catechisms; we suffer thirty years without murmuring and imagine that we are struggling; finally suffering becomes the stronger, we send a pinch of powder into the sanctuary of intelligence, and a flower pierces the soil above our grave."

As I finished these words I directed the knife I held in my hand against

Brigitte's bosom. I was no longer master of myself, and in my delirious condition I know not what might have happened; I threw back the bed-clothing to uncover the heart, when I discovered on her white bosom a little ebony crucifix.

I recoiled, seized with sudden fear; my hand relaxed, my weapon fell to the floor. It was Brigitte's aunt who had given her that little crucifix on her deathbed. I did not remember ever having seen it before; doubtless, at the moment of setting out, she had suspended it about her neck as a preserving charm against the dangers of the journey. Suddenly I joined my hands and knelt on the floor.

"O Lord, my God," I said, in trembling tones, "Lord, my God, thou art there!"

Let those who do not believe in Christ read this page; I no longer believed in Him. Neither as a child, nor at school, nor as a man, have I frequented churches; my religion, if I had any, had neither rite nor symbol, and I believed in a God without form, without a cult, and without revelation. Poisoned, from youth, by all the writings of the last century, I had sucked, at an early hour, the sterile milk of impiety. Human pride, that God of the egoist, closed my mouth against prayer, while my affrighted soul took refuge in the hope of nothingness. I was as if drunken or insensate when I saw that effigy of Christ on Brigitte's bosom; while not believing in Him myself, I recoiled, knowing that she believed in Him.

It was not vain terror that arrested my hand. Who saw me? I was alone and it was night. Was it prejudice? What prevented me from hurling out of my sight that little piece of black wood? I could have thrown it into the fire, but it was my weapon I threw there. Ah! what an experience that was and still is for my soul! What miserable wretches are men who mock at that which can save a human being! What matters the name, the form, the belief? Is not all that is good sacred? How dare any one touch God?

As at a glance from the sun the snows descend the mountains, and the glaciers that threatened heaven melt into streams in the valley, so there descended into my heart a stream that overflowed its banks. Repentance is a pure incense; it exhaled from all my suffering. Although I had almost committed a crime when my hand was arrested, I felt that my heart was innocent. In an instant, calm, self-possession, reason returned; I again approached the bed; I leaned over my idol and kissed the crucifix.

"Sleep in peace," I said to her, "God watches over you! While your lips were parting in a smile, you were in greater danger than you have ever known before. But the hand that threatened you will harm no one; I swear by the faith you profess I will not kill either you or myself! I am a fool, a madman, a child who thinks himself a man. God be praised! You are young and beautiful. You live and you will forget me. You will recover from the evil I have done you, if you can forgive me. Sleep in peace until day, Brigitte, and then decide our fate; to whatever sentence you pronounce I will submit without complaint.

"And thou, Lord, who hast saved me, grant me pardon. I was born in an impious century, and I have many crimes to expiate. Thou Son of God, whom men forget, I have not been taught to love Thee. I have never worshipped in Thy temples, but I thank heaven that where I find Thee, I tremble and bow in reverence. I have at least kissed with my lips a heart that is full of Thee. Protect that heart so long as life lasts; dwell within it, Thou Holy One; a poor unfortunate has been brave enough to defy death at the sight of Thy suffering and Thy death; though impious, Thou hast saved him from evil; if he had believed, Thou wouldst have consoled him.

"Pardon those who have made him incredulous since Thou hast made him repentant; pardon those who blaspheme! When they were in despair they did not see Thee! Human joys are a mockery; they are scornful and pitiless; O Lord! the happy of this world think they have no need of Thee! Pardon them. Although their pride may outrage Thee, they will be, sooner or later, baptized in tears; grant that they may cease to believe in any other shelter from the tempest than Thy love, and spare them the severe lessons of unhappiness. Our wisdom and scepticism are in our hands but children's toys; forgive us for dreaming that we can defy Thee, Thou who smilest at Golgotha. The worst result of all our vain misery is that it tempts us to forget Thee.

"But Thou knowest that it is all but a shadow which a glance from Thee can dissipate. Hast not Thou Thyself been a man? It was sorrow that made Thee God; sorrow is an instrument of torture by which Thou hast mounted to the very throne of God, Thy Father, and it is sorrow that leads us to Thee with our crown of thorns to kneel before Thy mercy-seat; we touch Thy bleeding feet with our bloodstained hands, for Thou hast suffered martyrdom to be loved by the unfortunate."

The first rays of dawn began to appear: man and nature were rousing themselves from sleep and the air. was filled with the confusion of distant sounds. Weak and exhausted, I was about to leave Brigitte, and seek a little repose. As I was passing out of the room, a dress thrown on a chair slipped to the floor near me, and in its folds I spied a piece of paper. I picked it up; it was a letter, and I recognized Brigitte's hand. The envelope was not sealed. I opened it and read as follows:

> 23 December, 18--
>
> "When you receive this letter I shall be far away from you, and shall perhaps never see you again. My destiny is bound up with that of a man for whom I have sacrificed everything; he can not live without me, and I am going to try to die for him. I love you; adieu, and pity us."

I turned the letter over when I had read it, and saw that it was addressed to "M. Henri Smith, N------, poste restante."

On the morrow, a clear December day, a young man and a woman who rested on his arm, passed through the garden of the Palais-Royal. They entered

a jeweler's store where they chose two similar rings which they smilingly exchanged. After a short walk they took breakfast at the Freres-Provencaux, in one of those little rooms which are, all things considered, the most beautiful spots in the world. There, when the garcon had left them, they sat near the windows hand in hand.

The young man was in travelling dress; to see the joy which shone on his face, one would have taken him for a young husband showing his young wife the beauties and pleasures of Parisian life. His happiness was calm and subdued, as true happiness always is. The experienced would have recognized in him the youth who merges into manhood. From time to time he looked up at the sky, then at his companion, and tears glittered in his eyes, but he heeded them not, but smiled as he wept. The woman was pale and thoughtful, her eyes were fixed on the man. On her face were traces of sorrow which she could not conceal, although evidently touched by the exalted joy of her companion.

When he smiled, she smiled too, but never alone; when he spoke, she replied, and she ate what he served her; but there was about her a silence which was only broken at his instance. In her languor could be clearly distinguished that gentleness of soul, that lethargy of the weaker of two beings who love, one of whom exists only in the other and responds to him as does the echo. The young man was conscious of it, and seemed proud of it and grateful for it; but it could be seen even by his pride that his happiness was new to him.

When the woman became sad and her eyes fell, he cheered her with his glance; but he could not always succeed, and seemed troubled himself. That mingling of strength and weakness, of joy and sorrow, of anxiety and serenity, could not have been understood by an indifferent spectator; at times they appeared the most happy of living creatures, and the next moment the most unhappy; but, although ignorant of their secret, one would have felt that they were suffering together, and, whatever their mysterious trouble, it could be seen that they had placed on their sorrow a seal more powerful than love itself-friendship. While their hands were clasped their glances were chaste; although they were alone they spoke in low tones. As if overcome by their feelings, they sat face to face, although their lips did not touch. They looked at each other tenderly and solemnly. When the clock struck one, the woman heaved a sigh and said:

"Octave, are you sure of yourself?"

"Yes, my friend, I am resolved. I shall suffer much, a long time, perhaps forever; but we will cure ourselves, you with time, I with God."

"Octave, Octave," repeated the woman, "are you sure you are not deceiving yourself?"

"I do not believe we can forget each other; but I believe that we can forgive, and that is what I desire even at the price of separation."

"Why could we not meet again? Why not some day--you are so young!"

Then she added, with a smile:

"We could see each other without danger."

"No, my friend, for you must know that I could never see you again without loving you. May he to whom I bequeath you be worthy of you! Smith is brave, good, and honest, but however much you may love him, you see very well that you still love me, for if I should decide to remain, or to take you away with me, you would consent."

"It is true," replied the woman.

"True! true!" repeated the young man, looking into her eyes with all his soul. "Is it true that if I wished it you would go with me?"

Then he continued, softly:

"That is the reason why I must never see you again. There are certain loves in life that overturn the head, the senses, the mind, the heart; there is among them all but one that does not disturb, that penetrates, and that dies only with the being in which it has taken root."

"But you will write to me?"

"Yes, at first, for what I have to suffer is so keen that the absence of the habitual object of my love would kill me. When I was unknown to you, I gradually approached closer and closer to you, until--but let us not go into the past. Little by little my letters will become less frequent until they cease altogether. I shall thus descend the hill that I have been climbing for the past year. When one stands before a fresh grave, over which are engraved two cherished names, one experiences a mysterious sense of grief, which causes tears to trickle down one’s cheeks; it is thus that I wish to remember having once lived."

At these words the woman threw herself on the couch and burst into tears. The young man wept with her, but he did not move and seemed anxious to appear unconscious of her emotion. When her tears ceased to flow, he approached her, took her hand in his and kissed it.

"Believe me," said he, "to be loved by you, whatever the name of the place I occupy in your heart, will give me strength and courage. Rest assured, Brigitte, no one will ever understand you better than I; another will love you more worthily, no one will love you more truly. Another will be considerate of those feelings that I offend, he will surround you with his love; you will have a better lover, you will not have a better brother. Give me your hand and let the world laugh at a sentence that it does not understand: Let us be friends, and part forever. Before we became such intimate friends there was something within that told us we were destined to mingle our lives. Let our souls never know that we have parted upon earth; let not the paltry chance of a moment undo our eternal happiness!"

He held the woman’s hand; she arose, tears streaming from her eyes, and, stepping up to the mirror with a strange smile on her face, she cut from her head a long tress of hair; then she looked at herself thus disfigured and deprived of a part of her beautiful crown, and gave it to her lover.

The clock struck again; it was time to go; when they passed out they seemed as joyful as when they entered.

"What a beautiful sun!" said the young man.

"And a beautiful day," said Brigitte, "the memory of which shall never fade."

They hastened away and disappeared in the crowd.

Some time later a carriage passed over a little hill behind Fontainebleau. The young man was the only occupant; he looked for the last time upon his native town as it disappeared in the distance, and thanked God that, of the three beings who had suffered through his fault, there remained but one of them still unhappy.

ETEXT EDITOR’S BOOKMARKS:

Because you weep, you fondly imagine yourself innocent
Cold silence, that negative force
Contrive to use proud disdain as a shield
Fool who destroys his own happiness
Funeral processions are no longer permitted
How much they desire to be loved who say they love no more
I can not be near you and separated from you at the same moment
Is it not enough to have lived?
Make a shroud of your virtue in which to bury your crimes
Reading the Memoirs of Constant
Sometimes we seem to enjoy unhappiness
Speak to me of your love, she said, "not of your grief
Suffered, and yet took pleasure in it
Suspicions that are ever born anew
"Unhappy man!" she cried, "you will never know how to love"
Who has told you that tears can wash away the stains of guilt
You play with happiness as a child plays with a rattle
Your great weapon is silence

End of this Project Gutenberg Etext of Child of a Century, v3
by Alfred de Musset

place I occupy in your heart, will give me strength and courage. Rest

assured, Brigitte, no one will ever understand you better than I; another will love you more worthily, no one will love you more truly. Another will be considerate of those feelings that I offend, he will surround you with his love; you will have a better lover, you will not have a better brother. Give me your hand and let the world laugh at a sentence that it does not understand: Let us be friends, and part forever. Before we became such intimate friends there was something within that told us we were destined to mingle our lives. Let our souls never know that we have parted upon earth; let not the paltry chance of a moment undo our eternal happiness!"

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ETEXT EDITOR'S BOOKMARKS:

Because you weep, you fondly imagine yourself innocent

Cold silence, that negative force

Contrive to use