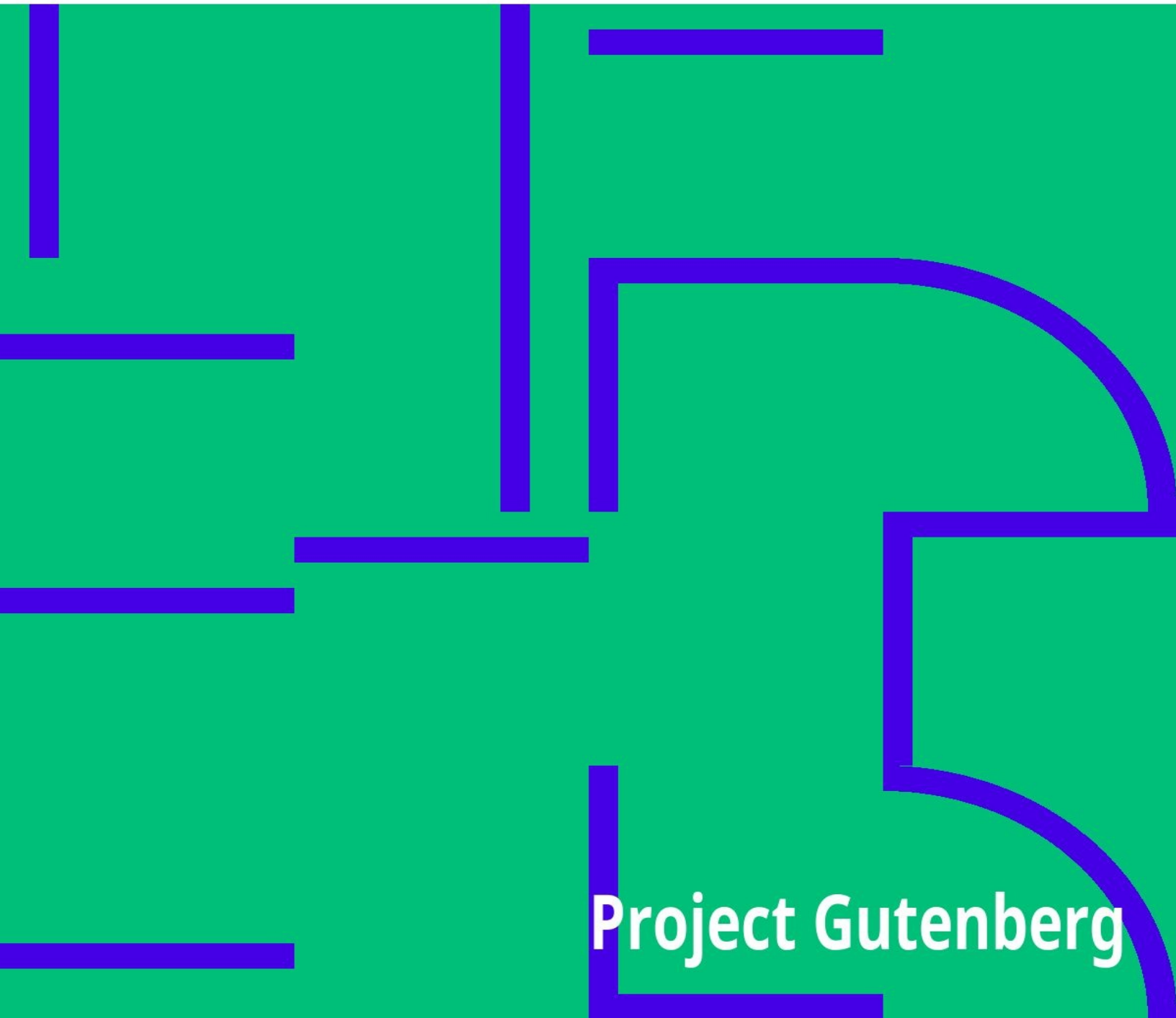
The Choice of Life

Georgette Leblanc



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THE
CHOICE OF LIFE

BY
GEORGETTE LEBLANC

TRANSLATED BY
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Women are ever divided by a miserable distrust, whereas all their weaknesses intertwined might make for their lives a crown of love and strength and beauty....

How one of them strove to deliver her unhappy friend, the words which she spoke to her, the examples which she set before her, the joys which she offered her: these are what I have tried to record in this book.

G.L.

PART THE FIRST

CHAPTER I

1

Here in the garden, close to the quiet house, I sit thinking of that strange meeting in the village. A blackbird at regular intervals sings the same refrain, which is taken up by others in the distance. The lily's chalice gleams under the blazing sun; and the humbler flowers meekly droop their heads. White butterflies are everywhere, flitting restlessly hither and thither. So fierce is the splendour of the day that I cannot raise my eyes to the summit of the trees; and my quivering lids show me the whole sky through my lashes.

Thereupon it seems to me that the emotion which bursts from my heart, like a too-brilliant light, compels me to close the shutters of my brain as well. In my mind, even as before my eyes, distances are lessened and I see stretched before me that more or less illusive goal which we would all fain reach in the desires of our finer selves.

This idea is soothing to me, for, in my eagerness to act, I am tired of demanding from my reason reasons which it cannot vouchsafe me.

Is there anything definite amid the uncertainty of these blind efforts, these unaccountable impulses, which have so often, ever since the first awakening of my unconsciousness, urged me towards other women? What have I wanted hitherto? What was it that I hoped when I stretched out my hands to them, when I looked upon their lives, when I searched their hearts, when at times I changed

the very nature of their strivings? I did not know then; and even now I do not succeed in explaining to myself the fever that makes my thoughts tingle and burn. I do not understand, I do not know. How did that dream stand firm amid the total annihilation of unprofitable illusions? Is there then an element of reality, a definite truth that encourages me, though I do not discern it?

I see myself going forward recklessly, like a traveller who knows that there is somewhere a goal and who makes for it blindly, with the same assurance as though the goal stood bright and luminous on a mountain-top.

My only apology for these continual excursions is that I lay claim to no rigidity of purpose; and I should almost be ashamed to come with principles and axioms to those whom I am carrying away. Then why alter the course of their destiny? Why appeal to their sympathy and their confidence? What better lot have I to offer them and what can I hope for even if they respond? Certainly I wish them fairer and more perfect, freed from their childish dread of criticism, armed with a prouder and more personal conception of honour than the code which is laid upon them, respectful of their life and also encompassing it with infinite indulgence and kindness. But is not that a wild ideal? In my memory, I still see them smiling at it, those radiant faces which all my sermons could not cloud, or which, vainly striving to understand them, never reflected anything but their crudest and most extravagant features!

The newcomer with the grave countenance, the new soul divined beneath a beauty that pleases me, will she at long last teach me how much is possible and realisable in the vague ideal to which I pay homage, without as yet being able to define it?

I dare not hope.

Hitherto, events have not justified me any more than my reason.

The swift walker goes alone upon his road; there is never any but his shadow to follow him.

I know how conscious we are of our weakness when we try to bring our energies into action; and I know that my pride will suffer, for I have never seen my footprint on the sand without pitying myself....

Those who are close to our soul have no need of our words to understand it; and those who are far removed from it do not hear us speak. Then for whom do we speak, alas?

The blackbird's song describes precious waves in the still air; pearls are scattered over the blue sky.

The lily's whiteness ascends like a fervent prayer; the bees make haste; the careless butterflies enjoy their little day. Near me, a tiny ant exhausts herself in a task too heavy for her strength. Lowly and excellent counsellors, does not each of them set me the example of her humble efforts?

CHAPTER II

1

It was yesterday. When I woke, the cornfield under my windows, which seemed a steadfast sea of gold, had already half disappeared. The scythes flashed in the sun; and the ripe corn fell in great unresisting masses.

The smallest details of that meeting are present in my memory; and I do not weary of living every moment of it over again. The air was cool. I still feel the caress of my sleeves, which the wind set fluttering over my arms. I drank the breeze in great gulps. It filled me, it revived me from head to foot. My skirts hampered me and I went slowly, holding my hat in both hands before my face and vaguely guided by the little patches of landscape that showed through the loose straw: a glimpse of blue sky, of swaying tree-tops, smoking chimneys and a dim horizon.

I have come to the far end of the field, where the reapers are. It is the hour of the first meal. The men have laid down their scythes, the girls have ceased to bind the sheaves and all are sitting on the slope beside the road.

Curious, I go closer still. A young woman, whom the others call "mademoiselle," is kneeling a few steps away from me, in front of the provision-basket; she has her back turned to me and is distributing slices of bread and cream-cheese to the labourers; she hands the jug filled with cider to the one nearest her, who drinks and sends it round. For one second the movement of her arm passes between the sky and my gaze, which wavers a little owing to the brilliancy of the light; and that arm dewy with heat appears to me admirably moulded, with bold, pure lines.

She is dressed like her companions, in a coarse linen skirt, whose uncouth folds disguise her hips, and a calico smock imprisoned in a black laced bodice, a sort of shapeless, barbarous cuirass. A broad-brimmed straw hat, adorned with a faded ribbon, casts its shadow on her shoulders; but, when she bends her head, I see the glint of her hair, whose tightly bound and twisted masses shine like coils of gold.

The rather powerful neck is beautifully modelled. It is delicately hollowed at the nape, where a little silver chain accentuates the gentle curve. I can see almost nothing of her figure under the clumsy clothes, but its proportions appear to me accurate and fairly slender.

I feel inclined to go away without a word; my fastidious eyes bring me misgivings. When the first taste is good, why risk a second? But one of the reapers has seen me. He bids me a friendly good-morning; and, before I have time to answer, she has turned round.

It is so rare, in our country districts, to see a beautiful woman that, for an instant, I blame the charm of the hour and accuse the friendly light of complicity. But little by little her perfection overcomes my doubts; and, the more I watch her, the lovelier I think her. The almost statuesque slowness of her movements, the vigorous line of her body, the glad colours that adorn her mouth, her cheeks and her bare arms seem to make her share in the health of the soil. The fair human sheaf is bound to nature like the golden sheaves that surround it.

Without stirring, we two stand looking at each other face to face.

2

O miracle of beauty, sovran of happiness and magnet of wandering eyes, that day it shone in the noon-day sun like a star on the forehead of that unhappy life; and it and it alone stayed my steps!

But for it, should I have dreamt, in the presence of that humble girl, of one of those quests which appeal to the hearts of us women, hearts fed on eternal illusions? But for it, should I have suspected a sorrowing soul in the depths of those limpid eyes? And, at this moment, should I be asking of my weakness the strength that constrains, of my doubts the faith that saves, of my pity the tenderness that consoles and heals?

3

I had moved to go, happy without knowing why; I hastened my steps. With my soul heavier and my feet lighter than before, I walked away, glorying in my meeting as in a victory over chance, over the thousand trifles, the thousand blind agencies that incessantly keep us from what we seek and from what unconsciously seeks us.

I could have laughed for joy; and it would have been sweet to me, when I passed into the garden, to proclaim my glee aloud. But the peace of things laid silence upon me. I slowly followed the paths, bordered with marigolds and balsam, that lead to the house; and, when I passed under the blinds, which a friend's hand had gently drawn for me, I heard my everyday voice describing my discovery and my delight in sober tones.

And yet the moment of exaltation still charged my life; it seemed to me clearer and deeper; and I thought that enthusiasm is in us like a too-full cup, which overflows at the least movement of the soul.

4

I made enquiries that same evening; and all that I learnt encourages me.

She lives at the end of our village of Sainte-Colombe. She was brought up at the convent in the town hard by and left it at the age of eighteen. Since then, she has not been happy. On Sunday she is never with the merrymaking crowd. She has never been seen at church. She neither prays nor dances.

Chapter III

1

I took the road leading to the farm at which she lives. The yard is a large one, the trees that hem it in are old and planted close together. One can hardly see the straggling, thatched buildings from the road; and I walked round the place without being able to satisfy my curiosity. She lives there, I was told, with an old woman, her godmother, about whom the people of the countryside tell stories of murder and debauchery. I have seen her sometimes. She gives a disagreeable impression. She is a tall, lean woman, with wisps of white hair straggling about her face. Her waving arms and twitching hands carry a perpetual vague menace. The black, deep-set eyes gleam evilly in her ivory face; and her hard thin mouth, which opens straight across it, often hums coarse ditties in a cracked voice.

Her curious attire completes the disorder of her appearance. Over her rough peasant's clothes, some article of cast-off apparel cuts a strange and lamentable figure: a muslin morning-wrap, once white and covered with filmy lace; long, faded ribbons, which fasten a showy Watteau pleat to the back, with ravelled ends spreading over the thick red-cotton skirt; old pink-satin slippers, with pointed heels that sink into the mud. In point of fact, I could say the exact number of times when I have seen her and why I noticed her, for the sight of her always hurt me cruelly when I met her in the sweet stillness of the country lanes.

For a long time, I wandered round the farm. I was moving away, picking flowers as I went, when suddenly, at a bend in the road, I saw the girl who filled my thoughts. She was sitting on a heap of stones; and two large pails of milk stood beside her. Her attitude betokened great weariness; and her drooping arms seemed to enjoy the rest.

I lingered a little while in front of her. Her face appeared to me lovelier than on the first occasion, though her uncovered head allowed me to see her magnificent hair plastered down so as to leave it no freedom whatever. She answered my smile with a blush; and, when I looked at her thick and awkward hands, she clasped and unclasped them with an embarrassed air.

2

Just now, at the wane of the day, I was singing in the drawing-room, with the windows open. I caught sight in the mirror of the sky ablaze with red and rose quickly from the piano to see the sun dip into the sea.... Near the garden, behind the hedge, I surprised the young girl trying to hide....

3

I had never seen her; but now, because I saw her one day, I am always seeing her.

Do we then behold only what we seek? It is a sad thought. We shall be called upon to die before we have seen everything, understood everything, loved and embraced everything. Our skirts will have brushed against joys which we shall not have felt; our streaming tresses will have passed through perfumes which we shall not have breathed; our mouth will have kissed flowers which our hands have not known how to pick; and very often our eyes will have seen without acquainting our intelligence. We shall not have been observant continually.

It is a pity that things possess no other life than that which we bestow upon them. I dislike to find that, for me, everything is subject to my observation and my knowledge. The first is great indeed, but the second is so small!...

4

A few years ago, the parish priest was on his way to the church at four o'clock one morning, to celebrate the harvest mass, when he saw a strange thing floating on the surface of the pool that washes the steps of the wayside crucifix. As he approached, he perceived that it was a woman's long hair. A moment later, they drew the body of a young and beautiful girl to the bank. With nothing on her but her night-dress, she seemed to have run straight from her bed to the pond. The gossips of the neighbourhood will never cease chattering over this incident and the shock which it gave the priest; and, though there is no other pond in the village, the poor girl will be everlastingly reproached with choosing "God's Pool" for her attempt at suicide.

Is it not enough for me to know that she is out of place amid her coarse

surroundings and that she is not happy there?

5

I have been expecting her for a week. I am wishing with all my might that she may come; I am drawing her with my eyes, with my smile, with my manner and with my will. But I say nothing to her. She must be able to take to herself all the credit of this first act of independence. Moreover, it will give me the evidence which I require of some sympathy between us.

Outwardly, I am following a strict principle. Really, I am yielding to a fear: am I not about to perform a dangerous and rather mad action, in once more taking upon myself the responsibility of another's life?

We are not always unaware of the follies which we are about to commit; but it is natural that the immediate joys should eclipse the probable misfortunes and help us to go boldly forward.

Besides, the inquisitive know no weariness. They go with outstretched hand to the assistance of events, heedless of increasing the chances of suffering, because they always find, in return, something to occupy their restlessness. Let us not blame them. In contemplating the good or evil outcome of an action, we behold but its main lines; we do not see the thousand little broken strokes that go to compose it. They make the total of our days; and they have to be lived.

CHAPTER IV

1

A broad avenue of beeches stretches in front of our garden; and at the far end is the open country. Here we have placed a seat which looks out over space.

Nothing but fields and fields, as far as the eye can reach; nothing but land and sky. We love the security of this elemental landscape, where the alternations of light succeed one another inexorably. The noontides are fierce and dazzling. The soft, opalescent mornings are fragrant with love and pleasure. But, most of all, the sunsets attract us by their unwearied variety, sometimes sober and tender, ever fainter and more ethereal, sometimes blood-red, monstrous and barbaric.

The one which I watched to-day was pale and grey; and the obedient earth humbly espoused its gentle tones. With my hands clasped in my lap, it seemed to me that I was drinking in the peace that filled my heart; and my eyes, which unconsciously fastened on my hands, held for a moment my whole life enclosed there.

Then I heard indistinctly steps approaching me. A woman sat down on the bench. The corner of her apron had brushed against my knees; I raised my head and saw the young girl sitting by my side.

She said, simply:

"Here I am."

And at this short speech my mind is in a tumult; thoughts rush wildly through my brain without my being able to follow one of them. I press her hands, I look at her, I laugh, while little cries of delight burst from my lips:

"You are here at last! I was expecting you! Do you know that you are very pretty ... and that you look sweet and kind?... Make haste and tell me all about yourself...."

But she does not answer. She stares at me with wide-open eyes; and my impulsive phrases strike with such force against her stupefaction that each one of them seems by degrees to fall back upon myself. I in my turn am left utterly dumfounded; she is so ill at ease that I myself become nervous; her astonishment embarrasses me; I secretly laugh at my own discomfiture; and I end by asking, feebly:

"What's your name?"

"Rose."

"Rose ... Roseline.... My name is...."

And I burst out laughing. We were really talking like two children trying to make friends. I threw my arm round her waist and put my lips to her cheek. I loved its milky perfume. My kiss left a little white mark which the blood soon flushed

again.

She told me that she had seen me from a distance and that she had come running up without stopping. I was careful not to ask her what she wanted to tell me, for I knew that she had obeyed my wishes rather than her own; and I led her towards the house:

"Rose, my dear Rose.... I know that you are unhappy."

She stops, gives me a quick look and then turns red and lowers her eyes. Thereupon, so as not to startle her, I ask her about her work and about the farm.

Rose answers shily, in short sentences, and we walk about in the garden. From time to time, she stops to pull up a weed; methodically, she breaks off the flowers hanging faded from their stalks; occasionally, she makes a reference, full of sound sense, to the care required by plants and vegetables. But my will passes like an obliterating line over all that we say, over all that we do; and, while Rose anxiously tries to fill the silence, I lie in wait, ready for a word, a sigh, a look that will enable me to go straight to the heart of that soul, which I am eager to grasp even as we take in our hand a mysterious object of which we are trying to discover the secret.

Alas, the darkness between us is too dense and there is only the light of her beautiful eyes, those sad, submissive eyes, to guide my pity! Our conversation is somewhat laboured; the girl evades any direct question; and any opinion which I venture to form can be only of the vaguest.

She seems to me to be lacking in spirit, of a nervous and despondent temperament, but not unintelligent. I know nothing of her mental powers. We sometimes see an active intelligence directing very inferior abilities, just as our good friend the dog is an excellent shepherd to his silly, docile flock. In her, the most ordinary ideas are so logically dovetailed that one is tempted to accept them even when one hesitates to approve them. Her mind must be free from baseness, for throughout our conversation she made no effort to please me. Would it not have needed a very quick discernment, a very uncommon shrewdness to know so soon that she would please me better like that?

That was what I said to myself by way of encouragement, so great was my haste to pour into her ears those instinctive words of hope and independence which it was natural to utter. And, let them be premature or tardy, barren or fruitful, I could not refrain from speaking them....

But suddenly she released herself: it was already past the time for milking the

cows; they must be waiting for her. Nevertheless, she gave a shrug of the shoulders which implied that she cared little whether she was late or not; and, with a "Good-bye till to-morrow!" she went off heavily, making the ground ring with the steady tramp of her wooden shoes.

For an instant I stood motionless in the orchard. Her shrill voice still sounded in my ears; and the constraint of her attitude oppressed me. The road by which she had just gone was now hardly visible. A fog rose from the sea and gradually blotted out everything. The plains, the hills, the cottages vanished one by one; and already, around me, veils of mist clung to the branches of the apple-trees. At regular intervals, the boom of the fog-horn startled the silence.

2

Those who pass through our life and who will simply play a part there take shape in successive images. The first, a fair but illusive picture, fades away as another sadly obtrudes itself; and another, paler yet, comes in its turn; and thus they all vanish, becoming less and less distinct until the end, until the day when a last, vague outline is fixed in our memory.

How different is the process in the case of those who are to remain in our existence and blend with it for all time! It is then as though the living reality at the very outset shattered the image formed by our admiration and triumphantly took its place. In point of fact, it vivifies it and, later, heightens it, colours it, ever enriching it with all the benefits which the daily round brings to healthy minds. Those beings will always remain with us, whatever happens; they will be more present in their absence than things which are actually present; and the taste, the colour, the very life itself of our life will never reach us except through them.

I thought of all this vaguely. There were two women before me: one, coarse and awkward, was obliterating the other, so beautiful amid the ripe corn. Alas, should I ever see that other again? Was she not one of those images which fade out of our remembrance, becoming ever paler and more shadowy?

I felt a little discouraged. But perhaps the sadness of the hour was influencing me? My feminine nerves must be affected by this damp, warm mist. I went back to the house, doing my utmost simply to think that I was about to undertake a "rather difficult" task.

Under the lamp, which the outside pall had caused to be lit earlier than usual,

and in the brightness of the red-and-white dining-room, decked with gorgeous flowers, I discovered another side to my interview. While I was describing it laughingly, my disappointment had seemed natural; and, my eagerness being now reinforced by pity, a new fervour inspired my curiosity.

In sensitive and therefore anxious natures, the very excess of the sensation makes the impression received subject to violent reaction. It goes up and down, down and up; and not until it slackens a little can reason intervene and bring it to its normal level.

CHAPTER V

1

I have before me one of those little exercise-books whose covers are gay with pictures of soldiers or rural scenes. It is Rose's diary. I received it this morning, I have read it and it has left me both pleased and touched.

It is a very simple and rather commonplace narrative, but one which, in my eyes, has the outstanding merit of sincerity. To me it represents the story of a real living creature, of a woman whom I saw yesterday, whom I shall see to-morrow and whose suffering is but a step removed from my happiness. The smallest details of that story have a familiar voice and aspect....

Poor girl! Would not one think that an evil genius had taken pleasure in playing with her destiny, like a child playing at ball? She was born of poor parents. Her father, a carpenter, was a drunkard and frequently out of work. He would often come home at night intoxicated, when he would beat his wife and threaten to kill her. Coarse scenes, visions of murder, screams, oaths and suppressed weeping were the first images and the first sounds that stamped themselves on Rose's memory. One's heart bleeds to think of those child-souls which open in the same hour to the light of day and to horror, gaining their knowledge of life whilst

trembling lest they should lose it. We see them caught in a hurricane of madness, like little leaves whirling in the storm; and to the end of their days they will shudder at the thought of it.

She was left an orphan at the age of six. A neighbour offered to take her, a wealthy and devout old man, who sent her to the Nuns of the Visitation at the neighbouring town.

Of those quiet, uneventful years in the convent there is nothing in particular to record. The child is perfectly happy, nor could she be otherwise, for she is naturally reasonable and she is in no danger of forgetting how kind fate has been to her. She pictures what she might have been, she sees what she is; and her soul is full of gladness.

In January 18—, Rose is seventeen. She is to pass her examinations the following summer. Her diary here gives evidence of a steadfast and wholehearted optimism; she views the future with joyous eyes, or rather she does not see it at all, which is the surest way of smiling at it cheerfully. Her eyes are still the eyes of a child, to whom the convent-garden is a world and the present hour an eternity.

Unfortunately, she had a rude awakening to life. The old man who had adopted her died after a few days' illness, without having time to make arrangements for her future. The good sisters at once wrote to her grandmother; and, the next day, Rose was packed off to Sainte-Colombe with a parcel of indulgences, a few sacred medals and a scapular round her neck. What more can a young life want to stay its uncertain steps?

2

From that moment, I see her delicate profile stand out against a background of pain and sorrow, like a lovely cameo whose dainty workmanship has been obliterated by the hand of time. Moral suffering can refine and accentuate the character of a beautiful face, is indeed nearly always kind to it. But here the mental distress was only the feeble reflection of a crushing and deadening material torture. In the evenings, when the hour of rest came at last, Rose, exhausted, accepted it dully; her whole body called for oblivion; her heavy eyelids drooped; and her submerged wretchedness had no time for tears.

How could the poor girl make any resistance? Her environment was too hostile,

her disposition too gentle and the task laid upon her too oppressive.

The very look of her diary, during those Sainte-Colombe days, tells us her story far better than the words which it contains. The first few pages are filled with wild and incoherent sentences. There are passages that can scarcely be deciphered and others blotted with tears. Her suffering is not sufficiently well-expressed for it to be understood and more or less identified, but it can be felt and divined: it is a landscape of pain, it is the sight of an inner life which has received a grievous wound and whose blood is gushing forth in torrents.

And then hope is exhausted drop by drop; and with it go anger and resistance. Everything goes under, grows still and silent. For months, Rose hardly touches her diary: here and there, scattered on pages bearing no date, are occasional melancholy reflections, the last flickers of an expiring consciousness....

It is then, no doubt, that one day she flies to death for deliverance. She is saved, but for a long time remains ill and weak. When she recovers her health, her spirit is finally broken. In silence and gloom, she drowns all feeling in work too heavy for her strength.

3

In the district they blame this young girl who, after receiving a good education, has acquiesced in this miserable existence. And yet I find a thousand reasons which explain her conduct and cannot find one for condemning it. Rose's soul is still in the chrysalis-stage. Ignorant of her own strength and qualities, how could she make use of them?

Is not this the case with most young girls? If our moral transformations could bring about physical changes, if a woman, like a butterfly, had to pass through different phases before attaining her perfect state, we should almost always see her stop at the first and die without even approaching the second.

It is difficult enough for us merely to conceive that there are other roads to follow than that laid down for us by chance or by parents too often shortsighted; and when we make the discovery, our first dreams of liberty appear so momentous and so dangerous! Is it not just then that we need time to venture upon the most lawful actions, seeing that we have no sense of their real proportion?

It is as though a wall separated the life that is forced upon us from the life which

we do not know. Little by little, slowly, by instinct as much as by volition, we withdraw from the wall and it seems to become lower. The sky above us becomes vaster, the horizon is disclosed before our eyes and we at last distinguish what is happening on the other side. Ah, what sight would compare with that, if it broke suddenly upon our vision, if we could view life as we view the spreading country beneath us, when we stand on the summit of a tower! All our senses, being equally affected, would impart to our will a motive force which is, on the contrary, dissipated by the tardiness of our feeble comprehension.

Yes, an age comes when our vision is clear and true; but often it is too late to find a way out of the circle in which we are imprisoned. That is the secret tragedy of many women's lives.

What would one not give to tell them, those women who tremble and weep, to lift their minds high enough to see beyond their wretchedness! Let them develop and strengthen themselves while still under the yoke, in order to throw it off one day like a gossamer garment which one casts aside without giving it a thought!...

CHAPTER VI

1

I am happy. Wonderful flowers lie at my feet, flowers which have been plucked and flung aside: I will pick them all up again, all of them! I will gather them in my arms and steep myself in their scent! One by one, I will tend them till they lift their heads again, I will blend them cunningly; and, when I have bound the fair sheaf, fate may do its worst!

It is no longer a question of the sanity or insanity of my experiment, or my wisdom or unwisdom. There is a just action to be accomplished; and, this time, circumstances favour my plans. In her distress, in her horror of her present life, all the possibilities of deliverance might have offered themselves to the girl: she

would not have seen them, she would even have fled from them instinctively, timid as an animal too long confined. To save her, therefore, chance must take to itself a substance and a name. Can I not be that chance?

She suffers; I will give her joy. She is tormented; I will give her peace again. She knows not liberty; through me she will know its rapture. Once already she has been snatched from death, but, on that day, while they were carrying Rose to the presbytery, her long, golden tresses wept along the wayside. But I will carry her where she pleases. She shall be free and happy; and her hair shall laugh around her face. It shall help me to light her destiny, for beauty is a beacon for benighted hearts. Many will try to steer their course towards my Roseline. It will be easy for her to choose her happiness.

True, I am aware how perilous and uncertain is my experiment. Will it be possible to efface the evil impress left on that mind and body? How much of her early grace, her early vigour shall we find? What will have become of all the forces that, at seventeen, should still be frail as promises, tender as the little green shoots of a first spring-day?

But no matter? The impulse is irresistible and nothing can stay me now. Have no misgivings, Rose: hand in hand we will go through peril and suspense. Embrace the hope which I offer you: I will bring it to pass. Let nothing astonish you: all that is happening between us to-day is natural. You will go hence because it is right that you should go; and you will go of your own free will. It is not so much my heart which will bring you comfort; it is rather your heart which will open. I shall find in you all the good that you will receive from me.

2

I send for the girl without further delay. A fortnight has elapsed since we first talked together; and I am anxious to know the result.

I look at her. A different woman is before my eyes. Is it a mistake? Is it an illusion? No, it is all quite simple; and my words had no need to be forcible or brilliant. The word that shows a glimpse of hope to the sufferer has its own power.

She says nothing and I dare not question her. The wisdom that has made her understand how serious the effect of my plans may be must also make her fear their possible flippancy.

I have brought her into the dining-room. Sitting at the window, with her hands folded in her lap and her head bowed, she remains there without moving, heedless of the sun that is scorching her neck. Her wide-eyed gaze wanders over things which it does not take in; her lips, half-parted in a smile, betray the indecision of her soul. At last, blushing all over her face, she stammers out:

"I am frightened. You have awakened my longings, my dreams. I am frightened. I would rather be as I was before I knew you, when I only wanted to die. When your message was brought to the farm, I swore that I would not come; and yet ... here I am!"

I put my arm round her neck:

"It's too late," I whispered, kissing her. "To discuss the idea of rebellion means to give way to it. Resist no longer, Roseline; let yourself go."

Her incredulous eyes remained fixed on mine; and she said, slowly:

"There is one thing that puzzles me. How am I to express it? I should like to know why you take so much interest in me: I am neither a friend nor a relation." And she added, with a knowing air, "You see, what you are doing doesn't seem quite natural!"

My heart shrank. So this peasant, this rough, simple girl knew the laws of the world! She knew that, even in the manner of doing good, there are customs to be followed, "conventions to be observed!" Ah, poor Rose, though your instinctive reason is like a broad white fabric which circumstances have not yet soiled, your character already has ugly streaks in it; the voice of the multitude spoke through your lovely mouth and, for a brief second, it became disfigured in my eyes! Alas, if I wore a queer head-dress and a veil down my back and a chaplet hanging by my side and said to you, "My child, I wish to save your soul," would you not think my insistence quite simple and natural?

Taking her poor, deformed hands in mine, I knelt down beside her:

"Rose, the happiness which I find in helping you is a sufficient motive for me; and I will offer you no others.... I give you my confidence blindly, for one can do nothing without faith. I give you my confidence and I ask for yours. Will you vouchsafe it me?"

The sun is streaming upon us; our faces are close together; my smile calls for hers; my eyes gaze into hers; and I repeat my prayer.

Then she whispers, shily:

"You see ... I have been deceived once; perhaps you don't know...."

I interrupted her:

"I know that we must have been deceived twenty times before we learn to give our confidence blindly, like a little child!... I know that we must have been perpetually deceived before we understand that nothing proves anything; that everything is unforeseen, inconsistent, and unexpected; and that we must just simply 'believe,' because it is good to believe and because it is sweet to offer to others what we ourselves are unhappy enough to lack."

She went on:

"But what do you want me to do?"

"I want you to go away from here."

"Why?"

"Because you are wretched here."

"Has any one said so?"

"What does it matter what any one has said? I have only to look at you to see that you are not happy. Oh, please don't regard this as an act of charity, I would not even dare to talk about kindness! The interest that impels me is one which you do not yet know; it looks to none for recompense; it is its own reward. It is the mere joy, the mere delight of knowledge.... Do you understand?"

She shook her head; and I began to laugh:

"I suppose I really am a little obscure!... But why do you force me to explain myself now? You learn to understand me by degrees.... I am leading you towards a goal of which I am almost as ignorant as you are; I am only the guide waving a hand towards the roads which he himself has taken and never knowing what the traveller will see or feel in the depths of his being."

She was going to speak, but I placed my hand on her lips:

"Hush! I ask nothing more of you. I shall know how to win your confidence."

I feel that she is silenced but not convinced. Hers is not a character to be thus persuaded: she will wait for deeds before judging the sincerity of words. I feel clearly that she is searching and judging me, while I myself am engaged in discovering her; and I shall have some curiosity in bending over the untroubled waters of that soul in order to see my image there, as soon as there is sufficient light to reflect my image.

CHAPTER VII

1

Rose is already almost happy. Hope is penetrating her life; and the moments of rest filter into her days of wearisome toil like the cool water trickling through the rocks.

As soon as she can get away on any excuse, she runs across to me. Flushed and laughing, she hurls herself into my arms with all the violence of a catastrophe; she crushes my cheek with a vehement kiss which waits for no response; and my hair catches in the rough hands squeezing my head. Smiling, I cannot help warding off the attack, while she pours out a torrent of incoherent words at the top of her voice....

During our early talks, I tried speaking very quietly, as a hint that she should do the same. She would shake the house with the thunder of her most intimate confidences, bellowed after the fashion of the peasants, who are accustomed to keep up a conversation from one end of a field to the other. As I obtained no result, I had to speak to her about it; and, because I did so as delicately as possible, in order not to wound her feelings, she burst into a roar of laughter which showed me that her rustic life had robbed her of all sensitiveness.

Being now authorised to admonish her at all times with regard to her gestures, her voice and her accent, I often make her repeat the same sentence; and, when I at last hear her natural voice, her original sweet and attractive voice, to which the music is beginning to return, shily and timidly, my heart overflows with joy. But, two minutes after, she is again bawling out her most trivial remarks, with a cheerful unconcern that disarms my wrath. Then I plead for silence as I would for mercy, draw her down upon my lap, take her head in my arms and nurse her as I would a child.

2

The stillness is so intense in the grove where we are sitting side by side, I am so anxious for her to feel it, that I become impatient and irritable. When I am with her, I am in a perpetual ferment. Her beauty and her coarseness hurt me, like two ill-matched colours that attract and wound the eyes. I calm myself by scattering all my thoughts over her promiscuously; and, though most of them are carried away by the wind, I imagine that I am sprinkling them on her life to make it blossom anew.

"I am nursing you in my arms to wake you, my Roseline, just as one nurses children to put them to sleep. See what poor creatures we are! As a rule, it is the conventions and constraint of our upbringing, with all its artificiality and falsehood, that divide us. To-day, it is the opposite that rises between you and me and spoils our happiness! I have often longed to meet a woman who was so simple as to be almost uncivilised; and, now that you are here, I dread your gestures and your voice, which grate upon me and annoy me!"

"But am I not simple?" Rose asks, ingenuously.

"People generally confuse simplicity with ignorance, too often also with silliness —which is not the case with you," I added, with a smile. "Real, that is to say, conscious simplicity is not even recognised; and, when it becomes active, it appears to vulgar minds a danger that must be averted. The better to attack it, they disfigure it. It is this proud and noble grace that I want you to acquire. Look, it may be compared with this diamond which I wear on my finger. The stone is absolutely simple; and yet through how many hands has it passed before becoming so! How many transformations has it undergone! How magnificent is its bare simplicity when set off by the plain gold ring! It is the same with us. For simplicity to be beautiful in us, we must have cut and polished our soul and person many times over. Above all, we must have learnt the harmony of things and become fixed in that knowledge, like the stone which you see held in these gold claws."

She asked, with an effort to modulate her voice:

"Oughtn't I to take you for my model?"

"No, Rose! You frighten me when you say that! You must not think of it. Listen to me: if ever we are permitted to imitate any one, it is only in the pains which she herself takes to improve herself. As for me, I wanted to achieve simplicity and I looked for it as one looks for a spot that is difficult to reach and easy to

miss. For a long time, I wandered beyond it. Rather than stoop to false customs, to lying conventions, I followed the strangest fancies.... Now it all makes me laugh."

"Makes you laugh?"

"Yes, past errors are dead branches that make our present life burn more brightly. But, when I see how I judge my former selves, I become suspicious as to what I may soon think of my actual self; and therefore I do not wish you to take me as an example."

Rose was still lying in my arms; and her beautiful eyes were looking up at me. I raised her head in my hands and whispered, tenderly:

"I feel that you understand me, that my words touch you, that you trust me and that you love me deep down in your heart; I feel that you also will soon be able to speak and unburden yourself freely, to be silent amid silence and peaceful amid the peace of things...."

3

The girl rose to her feet, with a glint of emotion animating her features; and, as though to escape my eyes, she took a few steps in the garden. While she was hidden by the bend of the narrow path fenced by the tall sunflowers, my heart was filled with misgiving: her step was so heavy, so clumsy! Would she ever be able to improve her walk? Judging by the ponderous rhythm of her hips, one would always think that she was carrying invisible burdens at the end of each of her drooping arms....

But she soon returned; and her fair countenance was so adorable amid the golden glory of the great flowers that I could not suppress a cry of admiration. She came towards me smiling; and, to protect herself a little from the blinding sunlight, she was holding both hands over her head. Was it simply the curve of her raised arms that thus transfigured her whole bearing, that reduced the unwieldiness of her figure and made its lines freer? It was, no doubt; but it was also the soft breeze which now blew against her and accentuated the movement of her limbs by plastering her thin cotton skirt against them. And the heavy gait now seemed stately; and the excessive stride appeared virile and bold. I watched the humble worker in the fields, the poor farm-girl; and I thought of the proud *Victory* whom my mind pictured enfolding all the beauties of the Louvre in her mighty wings!

CHAPTER VIII

1

We were lying in the long grass, looking up at the sky through the branches of the apple-trees and watching the clouds drift past.

The light was fading slowly, the leaves became dim, the birds stopped singing.

"Rose, I do nothing but think of you. Who are you? What will become of you? I should like to anticipate everything, so as to save you every pain. Had you been happy and well-cared-for, I would have wished you trouble and grief. But, strengthened as you now are by many trials, you will be able to find in sorrows avoided and only seen in the distance all the good which we usually draw from them by draining them to the dregs."

"I am not afraid, I expect to be unhappy."

"I hope that you will not be unhappy. The change will be quite simple if it is wisely brought about; you will drop out of your present life like a ripe fruit dropping from its stalk."

"How shall I prepare myself?"

"So far, your chief merit has been patience. But now rouse yourself, look around you, judge, find out your good and bad qualities."

Rose interrupted me:

"My good qualities! Have I any?"

"Indeed you have: plenty of common sense, a great power of resistance, shrewdness. By means of these, you have been able to subdue the tyranny of others: can you not escape from that of your failings? Your life has adapted itself to an evil and stupid environment; it must now adapt itself to the environment of your own self."

2

From the neighbouring farms came the plaintive, monotonous cry calling the cattle home. The drowsy sky became one universal grey, while the night dews covered the earth with a faint haze.

"I am surprised that, when you were so unhappy, solitude did not appear to you in the light of a beautiful dream."

Rose's timid and astonished voice echoed my last words:

"A beautiful dream! Then do you like solitude?"

"Oh, Rose, I owe it the greatest, the only joys of my childhood! It was to gain solitude that, later, I set myself to win my independence, knowing that, if I did not meet with the love I wished, I should yet be happier alone than among others."

"But, still, you do not live alone!"

I remained silent for a moment, stirred by that question which filled my mind with the thought of my own happiness; and then I said in a whisper, as though speaking to myself:

"Rose, my present life is the most exquisite form of independence and solitude."

And I went on:

"Ah, Rose, to know how to be alone! That is the finest conquest that a woman can make! You cannot imagine my rapture when I first found myself in a home of my own, surrounded by all the things purchased by my work. When I came in at the end of the day, my heart used to throb with gladness. No pleasure has ever seemed to equal that blessed harmony which reigned and reigns in my soul or that assured peace which no one can take from me, because it depends only on my mood."

"Teach me that joy."

"It is only a brighter light of our own consciousness, a more detached and loftier contemplation of what affects us, a truer way of seeing and understanding...."

The girl murmured:

"Shall I ever have it?"

"Later, when you have gone away."

And, in response to her anxious sigh, I went on, confidently:

"And you will go away when you want to go as badly as I did, when your object is not so much to escape unhappiness as to secure happiness; for, when you become what I hope to see you, you will look at things so differently! You will pity those about you, you will not judge them. The irksome duties laid upon you will not be a burden to you. You will understand the beauty of the country for the first time; and the thought of leaving it will reveal its sweetness to you. But, on the other hand, fortunately, new reasons for going will appeal to your conscience: first, your just pride in what you are and what you may become; the sense of your independence; and the vision of a wider and nobler existence. And, in this way, you will go not to escape annoyance or to please me, but as a duty towards yourself."

3

It was the silent hour when nature seems to be awaiting the darkness. Not a breath, not a sound, while the colours of the day vanish one by one before the life of the evening has yet begun to throb.

I turned to my companion. With a great labourer's knife in her hand, she was solemnly whittling a piece of wood. She answered my enquiring glance:

"It is to fasten to Blossom's horns; she's getting into bad ways...."

And, quickly, fearing lest she had hurt me, she added:

"I was listening, you know!"

4

Standing in the porch, we breathe the scent of the rose-trees laden with roses. It has been raining heavily. Tiny drops drip from leaf to leaf; the flowers, for a moment bowed down, raise their heads; the birds resume their singing; and, in the sunbeams that now appear, slanting and a little treacherous, the pebbles on the path glitter like precious stones.

We had taken shelter, during the storm, inside the house, where we sat eating sweets, laughing and talking without restraint. But now Rose is uneasy; she looks at me and says, abruptly:

"Do you love me?"

"I cannot tell you yet."

She insists, coaxingly:

"Do tell me!"

"Darling, I have become very chary of words like that, for I know what pain we can give if, after our lips have uttered them, they are not borne out by all our later acts. As we grow in understanding, I believe that it becomes more difficult for us to distinguish the exact value of the friendship which we bestow."

"Why?"

"For the very reason that we grow at the same time less capable of hatred, contempt and indifference. If a fellow-creature is natural, he interests us by the sole fact of the life which he represents; and, if circumstances make us meet him often, it will be hard for us to be certain whether what we are actually lavishing upon him is friendship or only interest."

She seemed to like listening to me; and I continued in the same strain:

"A moment, therefore, comes when our understanding is like a second heart, a heart that seems to anticipate and complete the other, by giving perfect security to its movements...."

A breath of wind passed and stripped the petals from a rose that hung in the doorway. And our shoulders were covered with little scented wings.

CHAPTER IX

1

Beside the house, two old cypresses make great pools of shadow in the bright,

green garden. Motionless, they keep a pious and jealous watch over the stone fountain whose basin seems to round itself into an obliging mirror for their benefit. Here, amid the cool stillness, the running water murmurs its unceasing orison.

I make Rose sit beside the fountain and slowly I begin unbinding her hair.

Oh, the beauty of the honey-coloured waves that roll down her shoulders and frame her face in their sweetness! Again and again I lifted and shook out those long-imprisoned tresses, giving them life and liberty at last. Rose, following the ancient fashion of our Norman peasant-women, does her hair into a mass of tight little plaits, twisted so cruelly as to forbid all freedom.

The better to efface the impress of their tyrannical past, I had to dip them into water. They opened out, like sea-weed.

I had brought rich materials, jewels and flowers for Rose's adornment. All her beauty, so long hidden, was at last to stand revealed. I knew its potency, I divined its splendour; but her hair was too barbarously done, her garments too coarse and rough for me to discover the character of her beauty or say what constituted its nobility.

Rose, still smiling, held her head back patiently and, with closed eyes, gave herself over to my tender mercies. Then another picture, a similar picture, but tragic and now fading into dimness, rose in my mind; and, almost in spite of myself, I said, softly:

"Your long hair must have floated like this, I expect, on the day when you wished to die. And it must have been its splendour that would not suffer such a catastrophe. I wonder, dear, that you should have wished that, you who are so faint-hearted in the presence of life!"

Her forehead, bronzed by the summer suns, turned a warmer colour, like a ripe apricot; the veins on her temples swelled a little; and she murmured:

"I don't know ... I don't know...."

I made fruitless efforts to find out the cause of her embarrassment; her face clouded; and she said nothing more. Then, after doing up her hair, I began to drape a material around her. I was thoroughly enjoying myself. Rose noticed it and asked me why I was smiling.

"Why?" I cried. "Why? Oh, of course, you are incapable at present of understanding the pleasure which I feel! And how many are there who could

distinguish its true quality? People admire the new-blown flower, they are touched by a child's first smile, they travel day and night to stand on a mountain-top and see the dawn conquering the shadows of the earth; and it is considered natural that, at such moments, our feminine hearts, always ready to be poured out, should be filled with love and incense. But it is thought strange that one of us should recognise and greet the union of all the graces in the fairest of her sisters! And yet one must be a woman to feel what I feel to-day, in unveiling and adorning your beauty. For it charms me without intoxicating me, sheds its radiance on me without dazzling me and makes my heart throb without causing my hands to tremble.... When the lover for the first time beholds the object of his love, longing clouds his eyes. Certainly, his sentiment is no less noble or less great, but it is of a very different nature! Other joys are mine, a thousand, new and glorious emotions, emotions of the heart and of the mind, the childish and girlish joys of dressing up, decorating and adorning, of creating form and colour, in a word, beauty, the stuff of which happiness is made!"

Rose interrupted me:

"Happiness? Do you think so?"

"Yes, because beauty calls for love. Does not our happiness as women lie above everything in love?"

Making one of those horrible movements with her feet, hands and shoulders of which I had done my best to correct her, Rose expressed her disgust with such violence as to undo the brooch with which I had just fastened the folds of a long white drapery to her shoulders:

"Oh," she cried, "I hate love, I hate it!"

Then she covered her face with her open hands; slowly the material slipped down to her waist; and her bust stood out against the dark trees, white and pure as that of a marble statue.

The great calm that is born of beauty compelled me to silence. Rose remained without moving, untroubled by the nudity which, at any other time, she would have refused to unveil. Did her emotion make her unconscious, or was it, on the contrary, lifting her to a plane in which false modesty had no place? Did she, in that brief minute, realise how our actions change their values in proportion to the fineness of our perception?...

I threw my cloak round her and drew aside her hands: her face was wet with tears. I cross-examined her: could she have suffered through love?

"What is the matter, Roseline? Why are you so bitter against something you have never experienced?"

She tried to smile through her tears and said, innocently:

"It's nothing.... It was like a shower: it's over now, quite over.... You are right, I really don't know why love fills me with such horror!"

And she came quietly and sat down again beside the fountain.

2

For the third time, I began to coil and uncoil her hair:

"You see, I was wrong just now," I said, "when I uncovered your neck and crowned your forehead. This is what suits you: the severe Roman style! And, though that loathing which you expressed just now seems to me unnatural, I feel almost tempted to excuse it in you, because it is so much in keeping with your impassive loveliness."

Kneeling in front of her, I tried to make the folds of the material follow the natural curves of her body. Meanwhile, Rose seemed to be watching other reflections in the water than ours. Suddenly, she leant forward and put her beautiful bronzed arms round my neck; and I felt that she was willing me to look up. Then I raised my head and, when we were gazing into each other's eyes, she said, laying a sort of grave stress on every syllable:

"Do you forgive everything, absolutely everything?"

"To answer yes is not answering half enough," I said. And, kissing her, I added, "If you had to tell me of a serious fault, I should love to give proof of my indulgence; but are you not the best of girls?"

I had an impression, for a second, that she was hesitating and that I was about to receive the solemn confession of a childish fault. But she at once replied, in a decisive little way:

"I could not be as indulgent as you, really!"

"Because you are not so happy yet, my dearest.... Come, I have my own reasons for spoiling you and coaxing you and wanting you to be beautiful. I know what good fruits are born of those flowers of joy!... But I have finished my work. Get up, Rose, come with me! Come and see yourself a goddess!"

And I carried her off to the drawing-room.

Straight and slender in the long white folds falling to her feet, the girl stands before the mirror and stares with astonishment at her glorified image. Does she grasp the importance of this hour? Does she reflect that, at this minute, one of the great secrets of her destiny has been revealed to me by this woman's game which has given me a child's pleasure? Does she know that the moment is grave, unmatched and marvellous and that, by my friendly hands, chance is to-day showing her the power which she can wield and the realm over which she can rule?

Her everyday clothes are lying at her feet: the coarse chemise, the barbarous bodice, the hat trimmed with faded ribbons. Ah, Roseline, why cannot I as easily fling far from you all that imprisons your life and fetters your soul!

"You are beautiful!" I say to her. "You are beautiful! Do you know what that means? Beauty is the source of happiness; and it is also the source of goodness, forgiveness and indulgence! Your face, if you take pleasure in looking at it, will teach you much better than I can what you must be. It will make you kind and gentle and generous, if you have the wish to be in perfect harmony with it. Thanks to your beauty, my Rose, you will be able, if you have a true conception of its dignity, to achieve one perfect moment in your life!"

Alas, she does not share my enthusiasm! I take her hand, I lead her through the house, into all the rooms which she does not know. I keep on hoping that, in a new mirror, in a different light, she will at last catch sight of herself as she is and that she will weep for joy!...

Meanwhile, she accompanies me, serene and smiling, pleased above all at my delight. In this way, we come to the last mirror; and my hopes are frustrated. But, in truth, I am too much entranced with the vision which she offers to my eyes to grieve at anything; and soon I am very much inclined to think her admirable for not feeling what I should have felt in her place. After disappointing me, the very excess of her coldness captivates my interest; and my enthusiasm does not permit me to seek commonplace or contemptible reasons for it.

When admiration fills a woman's soul, it becomes nothing but an immense cup brimming with light, a flower penetrated by the noon-day sun until the heat makes its perfume overpowering.

CHAPTER X

1

The shadows lengthen when the sun descends in the heavens; and those which, in the broad light, enhance the brilliancy of all things now overspread and gradually extinguish them. Thus do our anxieties increase when our joy lessens; and those which made us smile in the plenitude of our happiness before long make us weep....

She has lied to me! I am sure now that she has lied! What has she done? What can she be hiding from me? I can imagine nothing that could kill the interest which I take in her, but she has lied! I was certain of it yesterday, after our talk, when I remembered her blushes and her embarrassment. I wanted to write to her then and could not. Darkness has fallen suddenly between her and me; and I no longer know to whom I am speaking; I no longer know what soul hears me nor at what heart I knocked!

A friend's lie hurts us even more than it humiliates us; it tells us that we have not been understood and that we inspire distrust or fear. I remember saying to her, one day:

"I would rather know that you hate me than ever feel that you fear me. You must hide nothing from me, unless you want to wound me deeply; for the person to whom we feel obliged to lie is much more responsible for our lie than even we are."

But how can I hope that every one of my words will be remembered and understood and turned to account! I enjoy talking into the soul of this great baby as one likes singing in an unfurnished house; and I am none the less conscious of the illusion of it all. If we are to influence a fellow-creature, we do so best without aiming at it too carefully. Success comes with time, by intercourse and example.

2

We are now on the threshold of autumn and the days are already short. By seven o'clock, all the farms are sleeping....

When I left Rose yesterday, it was understood that she should sometimes come to see me in the evening, when her day's work has not been too hard. She is to come across the downs and tap at the shutters of the room where I sit every evening after dinner.

To-day, I was hoping that she would not come and I gave a start of annoyance when I heard her whisper outside the window:

"Mummy! Mummy, dear!"

It is a name which she sometimes gives me in play. Women who have no children and do not expect ever to have any lend to all their emotions an extra tenderness, an extra solicitude. It is that unemployed force in our hearts which is striving for union with others.

Still, her affection displeased me this evening and, while I was putting on a wrap, my hands trembled with irritation. Rose, thinking that I had not heard her, raised her voice a little and repeated:

"Mummy! It's your little girl!"

I go out into the moonless, starless night, with my eyes still full of the light indoors; and our hands meet blindly before exchanging a pressure. She says good-evening and I kiss her without answering. I am afraid of betraying my ill-humour; I feel that I am hard and spiteful, but I hope that the mood will pass; and my anger, because it remains unspoken, takes a form that favours forgiveness. If she confesses of her own accord, without being impelled to do so by my attitude, I know that my confidence in her will revive.

We walk in silence through the sombre avenue. The night seems darker because no sound disturbs its stillness; only the dead leaves, swept along by our skirts, drag along, utter a cry like rending silk.

Rose sighed:

"One would think the air was listening!"

I could not help exclaiming:

"That's rather fine, what you said then!"

And silence closes in again around our two little lives, both doubtless stirred by one and the same thought.

We go a little farther and sit down in the fields, where an unfinished haystack offers us a couch. We can hardly distinguish the line of the horizon between the dark earth and the dark sky. A bat flits across our faces; and Rose says, quietly:

"It's flying low. That means fine weather to-morrow. I must get in the...."

And suddenly her voice breaks and she covers her face with her hands. All is silent....

I feel myself brutally good. The certainty of the coming confession encourages me in my coldness and I remain mute, while my heart is beating with pity and excitement....

But she speaks at last and each note of that tear-filled voice, by turns faltering, violent and plaintive, brings before my eyes, staring into the darkness, every step of her soul's calvary. I listen in astonishment. And yet do we not know that every woman's existence has its secret? I see the long procession of those who have told me their story. The weakest of them had found strength to love; to yield to man's desire, the bravest had been cowardly, the truest had betrayed, the most loyal and upright had lied. Everywhen and everywhere the flame of life had found its way through rocks, thrust aside obstacles, subjugated wills. Even the woman whom nature had most jealously defended, the plain woman whom I saw imprisoned in a stunted shape and condemned to live behind an ugly mask, even she, when she told me her love-story, compelled me to believe that she had been the most beloved, perhaps, and her passion the most heroic.

Rose, following the common law, had no strength to fulfil her own will, but all strength to obey another's. Soon after arriving at Sainte-Colombe, five years ago, she came to know a young man who had since left the district. One day, when they were alone in the farmhouse kitchen, he flung his arms around her and, without a word, overcame her feeble resistance....

I could not help interrupting her story:

"Did you love him, Rose?"

"No," she said, "I did not!"

"Then, why did you yield?... Why?"

"I don't know," she sobbed. "He had such a strange, wild look, I was frightened...."

"But what did you do afterwards?"

"He asked me to go and see him; and I went whenever he asked me...."

"Then your godmother didn't know?"

"She guessed it on the first day; and, when I refused to take anything from him, she beat me and locked me up."

"Well, what then?"

"I managed to get out at night, by the roof...."

I would not let the subject drop:

"Then you were very, very happy when you were with him?"

But she exclaimed, artlessly:

"Oh, not at all! But he loved me, he said; and I thought that he would always stay here, for my sake.... He went away soon, without letting me know. When I understood that he was not coming back, I loathed myself and him ... and I tried to do away with myself...."

She burst into fresh sobs.

I should have liked to rise and lead her away. I should have liked to say:

"Come, cease these repinings; let us walk across the silent fields and forget all this for ever! Every one feels love differently and looks at it in a different light. Come, waste no time in repentance and don't go on being angry with that man! Faults that diminish our ignorance are not faults, but almost graces which chance bestows upon us. Come! And break away from the bitterness that is spoiling your beauty!"

But, with a sigh, she leant her head on my shoulder and I sat motionless and dumb: that little action on her part suddenly altered the whole course of my feelings.

At moments of deep emotion, many different voices speak in our hearts. They seem to clash, to drown and contradict one another; but really they are hesitating and waiting. Even as human voices require the striking of a chord before harmonising, so do these inner voices wait for our unhappy friend to speak a word that shall unconsciously give the note of the thoughts that will comfort and soothe him.

Rose whispered:

"Oh, you do not speak! Your silence frightens me!"

"Don't be afraid of it, dearest. Silence nearly always means that the words which will follow will be just." And, summoning all my tenderness, I added, "You see, I am trying to bind all my most diverse thoughts together. I should like to hand them to you as I would a bunch of flowers, for you to choose the one that will restore your peace of mind. I am afraid of hurting you, I understand your wound so well."

The girl presses against my breast; and our kisses meet in a spontaneous outburst of affection....

Sadly I think of all those who are weeping, weeping over like sorrows. There are other wounded hearts bleeding in mine; my memory echoes with the mournful prayers of the poor deluded victims of love. Alas, we are all subject to the cruel and exquisite law that absorbs the firmest wills in its indifferent strength!

I feel Roseline's hands quivering under my fingers, but I dare not speak. The silence of the fields and the solemn darkness awe me. Do not our least words seem to be written on the velvet of the night in precious and lasting letters?...

3

At last, I wiped away her tears and long and gently tried to rally her. But, suddenly drawing herself up, Rose cried:

"I don't understand you, I no longer understand you! What you are saying is just so much more silence and I wait for your judgment in vain! You have, you must have, an opinion on what I have done. The reason why I hesitated so long to confess my fault was because I knew instinctively that you would blame me; and now I feel you so far from me.... Please judge me, be angry with me: it will be easier for you to forgive me afterwards!..."

I do not know why this blind insistence offended me. Until then I had remained calm; but at her words there burst from the depths of my being the voice of instinct, that voice which I had tried to stifle, almost unconsciously, by force of habit and training.... Oh, that blatant, piercing voice! It seemed to me to rend the darkness, to scoff at my heart and my sweet reasonableness! It was as though I saw all my kindly dreams of tolerance and indulgence fly into a thousand splinters! Never had I so clearly realised their brittleness. My anger was all the greater because it was still trammelled by fragments of my reason.

I placed my hands on her shoulders and shouted close to her face, which my eyes could not distinguish:

"Why, why will you rouse my instinct, my nerves, all those things which should never interfere in our judgments and beyond which we should try to look if we would understand the actions of others? You give the name of silence to the words spoken by my reason and you wish to be judged by a blind and senseless power! But that idiot power mercilessly condemns all the faults committed in its name! That power, which is making me tremble now with excitement, will tell you that you could have done nothing worse! Do you understand? Nothing, nothing! And it will overwhelm you with reproaches. For it is not your action that revolts me; it is your apathy, your flabbiness, your cowardice!... You gave yourself without knowing why! You did not surrender for the sake of the joy that makes us fairer and better! You did not surrender because love had taken your heart by storm! You did not sacrifice yourself to an idea: had it been vile and base, I could still have accepted it! No, you gave yourself without knowing why! You obeyed the will of the first-comer, as the silliest and most docile of wives obeys the recognised canons and conventions ... without knowing why!... Ah, Rose, Rose! I wanted to help you to become strong and free. What a character, what a disposition you bring me! And yet I did not ask so much! I wanted your nature to have strength and flexibility, so that my hands might have taken it and moulded it. I looked forward to shaping it and giving it nobility and refinement...."

Tears choked my words. At that moment, the disappointment appeared to me complete and irreparable. Still, so as not to sadden her unduly, I murmured:

"Do not misunderstand me, my poor Rose; I am not saying that you soiled yourself by yielding to that man. I should not care much if you had; for, if the fairest forms could take birth from the mud in the gutter, you would see me plunge my hands in it without reluctance. No, what distresses me is your weakness; and I have simply likened your nature to a substance without consistency and impossible to mould."

Rose moaned and sobbed:

"To please you, I will brave everything.... Don't forsake me!... Go on loving me!..."

I divined rather than saw the body lying prone, with her head on the ground; and the paler shadow of her hair reminded me of the dear beauty of her. I grew calmer. The comfort of having said all that I had to say relieved my heart and

sent rippling through my veins, like a cool stream, a more natural indulgence than that which had animated me at first. Bending over Rose, I reflected that reason weighs heavily on a woman's breast and that it is well to thrust it aside occasionally. I tried to reassure her between my kisses:

"I am wrong to be so irritable and despondent; forgive me! I believe that your nature will never be vivid or strong; but your newly-developed conscience will save you from fresh weaknesses. Besides, in some direction we shall find what you are capable of. Destiny asks little of us when we have little to give it; and events pass us by of their own accord. Your life can be gentle and passive and still be useful and good. It is my own fault if I am disappointed: I am always more or less of a child; and I become passionately enthusiastic on the strength of a smile, or a pure outline, or a beautiful profile. I ought not to have looked in you for what existed only in my imagination...."

"Then you are no longer angry with me?"

"Why should I be?"

I kissed her tenderly. Poor child, so she had suffered through love! I pitied her; and yet the happiness of knowing her a little better swallowed up my pity. Things move quickly in those who, not believing in heaven, seek upon earth the beginning and the end of life and all that comes between. And they come to prefer to the highest joys those which foster a clearer vision and a truer comprehension.

And, trying to explain myself, I added:

"One would think that a time comes when we judge like a traveller looking out from the top of a tower. All the differences melt into unity before his eyes. He turns slowly and sees, on the one side, the forest; on the other, the sea; at his feet, the noisy town, the world; a little farther, the calm and peace of the fields; and, overhead, the infinite indifference of the skies. And, like him, we are engrossed in what we discover and we no longer see the tower by which we climbed nor feel that on which our feet stand; and we are nothing, nothing but a thinking light that settles upon some life."

4

We lay stretched in the clover that was still warm from the heat of the day; and our arms were locked and our hair intertwined. My cheek cooled hers, which her

tears had set on fire; and the sombre peace of the sky sank into us. We were both filled with the peculiar happiness that comes after a painful confession, a happiness whose source is a sense of security, a joy that seems yearning to cover us with its wings for one halcyon hour.

"Rose, darling, never forget the feeling of relief which you have now. That sense of security is infinitely precious. Let its fragrance remain with you for ever. May it become impossible for you to do without it. Seek it, insist upon it silently, even from the strangers whom you may meet. Falsehood destroys the perfume and the bloom of women: it makes them colourless and uniformly commonplace. Always have the courage to be true. A sort of secret combat is waged between any two persons who meet for the first time. Remember that, as a woman, you have always the choice of weapons; and choose them frankly. In so doing, you will gain courage and assurance and the great strength that springs from harmony, from the perfect accord of our body, our mind and our speech. I do not say that you will necessarily conquer with that weapon, but I do say that, even if defeated, you will, contrary to the general rule, feel mightier and more exultant than before!"

A star appeared, a quiver ran through the trees near by and passed over all the earth. The night was rising.

I was at my ease beside my companion; our hearts were again at one. That love-incident, however lacking in love, had brought her nearer to me.

"I do not know which path you will choose, my Rose; but we all have two roads by which to reach the goal for which we are making: to be or to seem. The real lovers of life will always choose the first. They will arrive later; perhaps they will never arrive. But, after all, what does arriving mean?"

Rose at once retorted:

"Still, why have a goal, if not to reach it?"

The girl's practical logic amused me; and our laughter rang out in unison across the fields.

"Rose, morally speaking, the goal is really the means which we employ to attain it. It is a light which we voluntarily flash in front of our footsteps. We can neither miss it nor reach it, because it moves with us. It becomes greater or smaller or is renewed, according to the evolution of our strength and our life...."

We had risen from the ground and, as we talked, were slowly following the path that skirts the orchard. Rose asked:

"Cannot you more or less describe your goal, the one you are speaking about?"

I hesitated for a moment and, almost involuntarily, murmured:

"To know a little more ... to see a little farther ... to understand a little better...."

Rose repeated, slowly and earnestly:

"To know a little more ... to see a little...."

But I laughingly stopped her, for the words sounded too serious in our young souls.

The orchard-gate closed between us. I was walking away, when Rose called to me:

"Come and kiss me again...."

I ran back to her. She leant over the hedge and I could only just distinguish her face. Then our lips met of themselves, like flowers that touch.

For a long time, in the still air, I heard her heavy footfall.

CHAPTER XI

1

Next day, Rose was with me early in the morning:

"I could not sleep," she said. "I wanted to speak to you without tears or blushes. If I have done wrong, I have atoned for it; and it is done with. All that remained of it was a sad memory; and, now that I have considered it with you, even that is gone."

I look at her. Her appearance pleases me. Her step is firm, her cheeks are pale, her eyes burning; she is living more ardently than usual. She continues, with

animation:

"You said to me once that people who believe in another life seem to sweep their sins and their remorse up to the doors of eternity. For us, you said, who have not that illusion, everything is different: we do not put off paying the bill for our sins. We can recognise their consequences; and that is our expiation." And you added, proudly, "It is cowardly to look to another for it, even if that other were God!"

We are walking in the orchard. The long grass is bending under the weight of the dew, which has decked it with a thousand glittering jewels. As we pass by a tree laden with apples, Rose pulls a branch to her and, without plucking the fruit, bites into it. I watch the lips part and the white teeth meet and disappear in the juicy pulp. For a second, the soft red mouth rounds over the fruit, which seems to match its beauty and to be questioning Rose about her pitiful love-affairs.

"Then, Rose dear, you were not really happy for a moment with your lover?"

"No."

"But he was young, I suppose, and more or less good-looking?"

She thinks for a moment and then bends her head.

"You remember it, Rose?"

The girl appears astonished and answers, hesitatingly:

"It is five years ago, I don't remember now...."

I was surprised in my turn and looked at her. What! She didn't remember! She had forgotten that! Her lips had not retained the impress of the first kiss!

My eyes closed and from the background of my life a bygone moment rose, one of those memories that linger in the hearts of women with such fidelity and vividness that they lack not a scent, a sound, a line, a word, a look, a gesture!

I was twelve years old and he fifteen. It was at the seaside. Our parents were talking a few steps away, but night was falling and a fisherman's hut hid us from their eyes. He bent over to me and our lips met in a simple kiss, simple as a flower with petals still unopened, for we were both of us innocent....

I can still see the colour and the shape of the drifting clouds. I can smell the mingled breath of the sea and of his boyish mouth. I can remember how I felt as a frightened, trembling and enraptured little girl.... A sailor was singing some way off; and the gulls that circled between sea and sky seemed to be keeping the

last rays of daylight upon their white wings.

Why, I know that boy's mouth by heart and shall always know it! We often kissed again, without even dreaming that, at this game as at all games, there might be room for progress!... And then ... and then ... that's all I remember of him.... The next is another memory, at another place and another age.... And then another again....

2

Would one not think that, in the more or less happy lives of us women, in our more or less easily traversed roads, the sensations of love are so many illuminated floral arches that mark the different stages of our accomplishment? We go up to them, we pass through them with hopes, smiles or sighs. But, whatever they may be, we come out of them fairer and better. What should we be without that, without love? The love which is rebuked, which we are supposed to hide and blush for! The love that entreats both our strength and our weakness, our patience and our fervour, our passion and our reason! The love that sets in motion our highest faculties and our lowest instincts, that makes each of us know her own power and her own poverty by the part which she allows it to play in her life!

In that moment, I saw and lived my joys in the kisses of childhood and girlhood. I travelled my road again; and the arches of light seemed higher to me and they followed hard on one another, becoming ever more radiant and decked with gayer flowers, until this very hour when the desired happiness has been found, established and kept fast....

3

My thoughts return to Rose, who has sat down under a tree; and I stretch myself beside her.

A herd of cows suddenly enters the orchard. White and brown, they plunge among the apple-trees; driven by a child, who is taking them down to the long grass, they amble heavily along in meek-eyed resignation. A smell of cow-shed at once reaches our nostrils; and, in the silence, we hear a noise of busy munching....

"Darling, you, who have always lived in the midst of nature, should have sounder and more accurate ideas on love than those of other women, while mine are a little warped by my over-cultivated nerves and feelings. If, for instance, you had said to me, yesterday, 'I gave myself because it was natural,' you would have dominated my poor reason from the pinnacle of an essential truth."

Without quite understanding what I say, Rose smiles in answer to my smile and we remain silent; our eyes gaze without seeing and our idle hands trail in the wet grass. We hear, without listening, the hoarse, fat, cooing-voluptuous voices of the doves: in the cool air of the morning, among the leaves, the flowers and the branches, it is an undercurrent of joy rising and falling, suspended for a moment and then beginning again, in unwearying repetition.

Rose murmurs:

"Why are you always saying that I cannot make progress without love? It makes me unhappy when you say that. I should have liked to have nothing in the world but your affection. You kissed me so tenderly last night, over the hedge."

"It is not the same thing, Rose darling. Certainly, there is nothing more harmonious and purer than the kiss that joins the lips of two friends like ourselves. But it is not the same thing as the kiss of love, for the value of that lies not only in what it is, but in what it promises; and it is a delight that sometimes echoes through our whole lives.... You will have to love before you understand."

The girl folded her arms around my waist as though to bind herself to me:

"But how would you have me love any one but yourself?" she asked. "Have you not given me happiness? When I am with you, I seem to be living in a fairy-tale."

Despite the pleasure which her words gave me, I made an effort to combat them.

The character of a woman who tries to be just is full of these little contradictions. In proportion as her heart is satisfied, she finds her intellect becoming clearer and stronger; and what calls for her judgment rarely leaves her heart unmoved. If Rose had not protested, I should still have spoken, from a sense of duty, but my words would have been without warmth or conviction. Now it seemed to me that her charming compliment gave added force to what I was about to utter in the interest of another's happiness.

She leant her face against my breast and my fingers played with her sunny hair, her unbound hair, which was now waving joyously, crowning her with a shimmer of amber and gold.

"No," I replied, "you must fall in love in order to develop and expand. Our women's lives are like summer days: wisdom tells us to follow their evolution. After the morning's waiting, we want the noon-day splendour and rapture. As you never had that rapture, you have not yet known love: and, at your age, is not that an absurd and miserable ignorance? Is it not right to wish for love and even to force its coming? Those who go on waiting for it in meek resignation appear to me so guilty!... Life has always seemed to me to be divided into two parts: the search for love; and love. As long as we are not in love, let us continue the search for it; let us seek stubbornly, madly, cruelly, if need be; let us be untiring and unrelenting. There are no obstacles for the woman with a resolute will. Let each of us follow that quest in her own manner, according to her strength, her means and her courage, through every danger and every pain. When we have at last found love, or rather our love, let us go towards it without fear, without false modesty; and, if we are loved, let us not wait to be entreated for what we can offer generously. Let us never be pilfered of that which it is our privilege to give!"

A tendril drops from the creeper above us and caresses our faces....

How delightful life is at this moment! The air is filled with rejoicing, with the murmur of an infinite happiness! A tremulous haze hovers over the fields, the insatiate doves reiterate their glad refrain. Around us, here and there, a slender blade of grass shakes beneath the light weight of a butterfly. But is not everything lovely in the eyes of a woman who is talking of love? It is as though happiness were the harbinger of her glance, flying ahead and settling upon things.

Rose, all attention and curiosity, now questioned me:

"But you, what did you do?"

"In my case," I said, "when I knew that he loved me too, I went to his country to find him. I can still see us walking in a meadow all bright with flowers. On the horizon, the blue sky met the sea; and, behind us, the red roofs, the church-steeples and the tiny white houses of a Dutch village slowly vanished from sight. He gave me his arm; and it was a joy to me to let him feel the gladness in my heart by the motion of my hip, on which he leant slightly. Then he said, 'You walk like a queen for whom her subjects wait.' And I knew from his words that he was still waiting for me, though I was by his side, and they suddenly told me what a blissful kingdom I had to offer him!"

"Did you seek long before that day came?"

"No, once I was free, I found happiness after a few months of trouble and difficulty; but you see, dear, I would have gone to the other end of the world to meet my love! I had no need to journey so far; and this makes me inclined to think that, in our search, we need to be attentive even more than active!"

Roseline murmured, pensively:

"The men say that a certain amount of preliminary experience in love is indispensable ... to them."

My whole soul revolted. Releasing myself from the girl's embrace, I sprang to my feet and faced her:

"But, Rose, isn't it the same with us? And is it right to expect that a woman should rivet her whole existence to the first smile, to the first look, the first word that moves her? Sensible people tell us that marriage is a lottery! By what aberration of the intellect do they come to admit that a being's whole life should be voluntarily subjected to chance? Not one of us would consent to such a degradation, if women in general were not absolutely ignorant! And that is why many, too clear-sighted to submit to a ridiculous law and lacking the courage to infringe it, die without having known the flavour and the goodness of life. Oh, what injustice! Is youth not short enough as it is? Is the circle in which our poor intelligence moves not sufficiently limited? And is it necessary, in addition, to chain us to phantom principles, which falsify nature, disfigure goodness and vilify the miracle of the kiss and the innocence of the flesh?"

I was standing against a tree, a few steps away from Rose; and my hand plucked nervously at the leaves within my reach. The blue sky seemed hypocritical to my eyes, the beauty of the flowers crafty and mocking. I continued, in a tone of conviction:

"It is right that woman should make her own experiments, it is right that she should know men to judge which of them harmonises with her.... It is by constantly encountering alien souls that she will form an idea of what her twin soul should be. Yes, I know that a natural law rejects this morality; and that is why I do not think the woman should give herself until she is quite certain of her choice. It is true that her experiments will be incomplete; the senses will have played but a small part in them, or none at all; but must we not accommodate ourselves to the inevitable? In any case, that woman will indeed be enlightened who, regardless of public opinion, lives freely in the man's company, studying him, observing him and sometimes even loving him!"

Rose listened to me without a word or a movement; only, every now and then,

her long, dark lashes, tipped with gold, would flicker for a moment and then droop discreetly on her cool, fresh cheeks. But the thought of her own frailty suggested an objection; and she asked:

"Don't you think that what you propose is difficult for the woman?"

"Oh, yes, difficult and, to many of us, impossible! Through a want of pride, through love or pity, they resign themselves to an act of which their reason does not approve and they wake up unhappy, sometimes for ever.... It is difficult, for the woman who resists appears to the man a sort of monster, abominable and detestable. Ah, there must be no desertion before possession! Because we have given him our lips, we must make him a present of our lives! Because we have consented to certain pleasures, we must, so that he may enjoy a greater, sacrifice our future to him!... In fact, he goes farther and says that woman, when she indulges in those experiments, is following the dictates of a loathsome and mean self-interest. Self-interest, when this conduct entails endless dangers and bitterness! Self-interest, when it demands of us, before all, an absolute contempt of a world to which nearly all are slaves, when it exposes us to insults and suffering and increases the number of our enemies and multiplies the obstacles in our path!... No, that woman is not selfish who, in all good faith, plunges boldly into the adventure at the risk of ruining herself, comes near to a man, thinking that she has found what she is seeking and hoping that love may result. She feels the promptings of her senses and does not resist her heart, but her reason is awake! She will not give herself unless everything that she learns confirms her expectations; she will give herself if she really believes that the happiness of both depends upon it; and the combat that is waged enables her to judge clearly of the quality of their love. She is judge and combatant in one. She lets herself be carried along so that she may have fuller knowledge; and it is not without pain, it is not without love that, at the eleventh hour, she will, if need be, refuse herself."

Rose here interrupted me:

"If she loves, if she suffers, why does she refuse herself?"

"There are a thousand degrees in love; and a woman of feeling always suffers when she inflicts suffering."

I examined my mind for a moment and, as though it were uttering its thoughts backwards, I continued, slowly:

"It is sometimes our duty to inflict suffering. The man's instinct is always more or less blinded by desire; he always, either craftily or brutally, proposes. It is for

us to dispose. We are all-powerful. Peace or discord springs from our will. He is not as well fitted to choose as we are, because he has not the same reasons for wishing to see comradeship follow upon passion, to see rapture give way to security. If we are one day to be the mother of the child, are we not first of all the mother of love? Are we not at the same time the cradle and the tabernacle of that god? In any happy couple, is love not cast in the woman's image much more than in the man's? The man has a thousand things that attract and retain him elsewhere; his temperament is more prodigal and less considerate than ours. It is in the woman that love dwells; her sensitive nature leads her to a higher knowledge in the art of loving; and the infinite details of her tenderness can make her seem perfect in her lover's eyes when they do not render her exclusive...."

Struck by this last word, Rose exclaimed:

"What! According to you, love should not be exclusive!" And, lowering her voice, she asked, "Are you not faithful?"

"We do not even think of being faithful as long as we love. We should blush to offer love the cold homage of fidelity: it is a word devoid of meaning in the presence of a genuine love. In love fidelity is like a chain disappearing under the flowers. If it is one day seen, that means that the flowers are faded."

I kneel beside her and, taking her in my arms, kiss her fondly. Through the exquisite silence of the day, the church-bell rings out the *Angelus* in notes of gold. The garden is flooded with sunshine; and the marigolds, the phlox, the jasmines, the scabious and the mallows push their heads above their white railing. Each eager heart turns towards the light.

"You see, my Roseline: just as the great sun shines in his glory and governs the realm of flowers, so love must be king in the lives of us women! He reigns and is independent of any but himself. Only," I added, laughing, "though we accept him as king, we must not make a tyrant of him. Poor love! I wonder what wretched transformation he must have undergone through the ages for us to have managed to invest him with the most selfish of human sentiments, the sense of property! So far from that, we ought mutually to respect the life that goes with ours and never seek to restrain it."

There is a pause; and Rose, with her face pressed to my cheek, almost whispers:

"You are not jealous?"

I felt myself flushing and would have liked not to answer. But, alas, would she

not by degrees have discovered all the pettiness that is ill-concealed under my thin veneer of self-control and determination? I tried to reveal it all in one sentence:

"Know this, Rose, that it is in myself and in myself alone that I study the women that I would not be!"

4

I watch my great girl while she talks. This rustic beauty, in her cotton bodice, her blue print skirt and her wooden shoes, no longer shouts. She expresses herself better and does not gesticulate so violently. She is quieter in her movements and her shyness is not unattractive. Rays of light filter through the branches and cast shifting patches of light on her face and figure. I always love to observe the details of her beauty, but to-day my heart contracts for a moment as my eyes follow the curve of her chin, which is charming, but devoid of all firmness, and her whole profile, which is beautiful, but lacking in decision....

Will Rose be one of those who accomplish themselves by means of love, who exalt themselves by exalting it, who master and improve themselves the better to control it?

Love is the great test by which our values are reckoned and weighed. The fond vagaries of the body have taught the proud soul its limits; and reason has wilted under a kiss like a flower under the scorching sun. Every woman has known the exquisite luxury of forgetting herself, of losing herself so utterly that no other thing at the moment appears to her worth living for. She has heard the voice of the charmer exhorting her to abandon pride, ambition, her own personality, to become, in short, no more than an atom of happiness under a dark and splendid sky which each moment of felicity seems to adorn with a new star.

Where the weak woman goes under, her stronger sister is never lost. The lower she may have fallen, the higher she raises herself. She returns from each of her strayings more fit for life. She is more resisting, for she has known how to sway and bend without breaking; more indulgent, because she has seen herself encompassed with weakness and beset with longings. She knows how frail is the spring that regulates her strength, but also how necessary that strength is to her happiness. She has come to understand what real love means, that the union of man and woman approaches the nearer to perfection the less the two wills are fused. She has understood, above all, that, to contain, glorify and keep love, we

need all the energy of our respective personalities and all the benefit of our dissimilarity!

Rose was silent.

I lay on the grass, with my arms outstretched and my eyes fixed on the sky; and the breeze sent my hair playing over my lips. For a long while afterwards, my thoughts continued to wander amid the fairest things in the world.

Chapter XII

1

It is typical autumn weather, a dull, dark day which seems never to have fully dawned. Beneath the burden of the weary, oppressive clouds, the grass is greener and the roads more distinct. The light seems to rise to the sky instead of falling from it.

I have been in the kitchen-garden for an hour. There all the plants are beaten down by the wind and the rain; the asparagus-fronds lie across the paths like tangled hair; but the broad-bottomed cabbages are a joy to the eye, with their air of comfortable middle-class prosperity. Looking at their closely enfolded hearts, I seemed to recover the illusion of my childhood, of the days when my eyes pictured mystery in their depths....

How amazed we are when one of our senses happens to receive a sudden impression, in the same way as when we were children! We behold the same object simultaneously in the present and the past; and between those two points, identical and yet different to our eyes, our memory tries to stretch a thread that can help it to follow the thousand and one intermediate transformations which have led us from the false to the true, from the wonderful to the simple, from dreams to reality. We should, no doubt, discover here, in the subtle history of our sensations and the different ways in which we received them, the gradual forming of our character, the pathetic progress of our little knowledge, all the frail elements of our personal life; in a word, the plastic substance of our joys and sorrows....

I think of the little girl that I was, but between her and me there stands a long array of children, girls and women. And I can do nothing but inwardly repeat:

"How soon we lose our traces!..."

I smile at the memory of myself as we smile at the unknown child that brushes against us in passing; and I leave myself to return to Rose....

She is a never-failing source of satisfaction to me. My dreams glory in having discovered so much hidden virtue here, at my door; and I am surprised at the new pleasures which I am constantly finding in her.

In certain natures predisposed to happiness, such happy surprises are prolonged and constantly renewed; and this may be one of the innocent secrets of the intellect. Are there not a thousand ways of interpreting a feeling, even as there are a thousand ways of considering an object? Our mind observes it daily under a different aspect, turns and turns it again, sees it from above and below, sees it near and from afar and loves to show it off and place it in the most favourable light. The mind of every woman, especially of a woman with an artistic bias, is not without a secret harmony of colour, line and proportion. Something intentional even enters into it; and the caprices of her soul are often but an outcome of her desire to please. Her natural instinct, which is always inclined to give form to the most subtle of her sensations, enables her to find in goodness the same clinging grace which she loves in her clothes. She likes her happiness to be obvious and highly coloured, that it may rejoice the eyes of those around her; and, so as not to sadden their eyes, she paints the bitterness of her heart in neutral shades of drab and grey. By thinking herself better, she appears prettier in her own sight; and it seems to her, as she consults her mirror, that she is replying to her own destiny. The soft waves of her hair teach her how frail is her will by the side of her life. She learns to bestow her own reward on the sympathy of her heart by crowning her forehead with her two bare arms; and, when she sees the long folds of her dress winding around her body, she recognises the sinuous, slow, but determined bent of her feminine power.

I remember once being present at a meeting between two women who gave me a charming proof of our natural inclination to lend shape and substance to our thoughts and feelings. They were of different nationalities and neither of them could speak the other's language. Both were of a warm and sensitive nature, endowed with an analytical and artistic temperament; and, as soon as they came together amidst the boredom of a fashionable crowd, they sat down in a corner and, with the aid of a few ordinary words, of facial expression, of vocal intonation, but above all by means of gesticulation, they succeeded, in a few moments, in explaining themselves and knowing each other better than many do after months of intercourse.

I was interested in this strange conversation, this dialogue without a sentence,

but so vivid and expressive, in the same breath childish and profound; for they wished to show each other the inmost recesses of their souls and they had nothing to do it with but two or three elementary words. How pretty they were, the fair one dressed in red and the other, who was dark, all in white, with camellias in the dusk of her hair. They were not at all afraid of being frivolous and would linger now and then to examine the filmy muslins and laces in which they were arrayed.

The elder had already chosen her path, the younger was still seeking hers; but the characters of both were alike matured and their minds completely formed. Both of them in love and happy in their love, they tried above all to express their tastes and ideas.

To understand each other, they employed a thousand ingenious means. Their mobile faces eagerly questioned each other with the unconscious boldness of children who meet for the first time. They took each other's hands, looked at each other, read each other's features. At times, they would make use of things around them: a light here, a shadow there, people, objects. Once I saw the fair-haired one take up a Gallé cup that stood near. For a minute, she held her white arm up to the light; and through her fingers the lovely thing seemed like a flash of crystallised mist in which precious stones were shedding their last lustre.

I forget the various images, childish and subtle, by which she was able to show her friend all her sensitive soul in that fragile cup. A little later, there was some music; and the dark one sang while the fair one accompanied her on the piano. Through the sounds and harmonies I heard the perfect concord of those two lives, which had known nothing of each other an hour or two before....

It was an exquisite lesson for me, a wonderful proof that women's souls are able to love and unite more easily than men's, if they wish. And I once again regretted the unhappy distrust that severs and disunites us, whereas all our weaknesses interwoven might be garlands of strength and love crowning the life of men.

3

By a natural trend of thought, Rose appeared to me contrasted with those two rare creatures....

Rose is not sensitive and is not artistic. No doubt, when she left school, she could play the piano correctly and likewise draw those still-life studies and little

landscapes by means of which the principles of art and beauty are carefully instilled into the young mind. But she did not suspect that there could be anything else. She saw nothing beyond the ruined mill which she drew religiously in charcoal; twenty times over, she set an orange, a ball of worsted and a pair of scissors together on the window-sill without seeing any of the wonders which the garden offered her.

Later, when every Sunday she played *The Young Savoyard's Prayer* on the organ, her placid soul conceived no other harmonies. She never felt, within the convent-walls, that divine curiosity, that blessed insubordination of the artist-child which obtains its first understanding of beauty from its hatred of the ugliness around it and which turns towards pretty things as flowers and plants turn towards the light.

Ah, my poor Rose, how I should like to see you more eager and alive! In the close attention which you give me, in the absolute faith which you place in me, my least words are invested with a precision of meaning that invites me to go on speaking; but how weary I am at heart! Oh, let us pass on to other things: it is high time! Let us not sink into slumber and call it prudence: up to now I have been content to see you sitting patiently at my feet; but I no longer want you there. Enough of this! I dream of roaming with you at random in the open fields, I dream of making you laugh and cry, of feeling your young soul fresh and sensitive as your cheeks. I dream of stirring your heart and rousing your imagination. We will go far across the countryside; together we shall see the light wane and the darkness begin; and, since you love me, you must needs admire with me the rare beauty of all these things!...

CHAPTER XIII

Rose was to have a holiday the next day. We arranged that she should come with the trap from the farm, the first thing in the morning, to fetch me.

We start at six o'clock. The harness-bells tinkle gaily to the heavy trot of the big horse; and we laugh as we are jolted violently one against the other. We drive through the villages, those happy Normandy villages where everything seems eloquent of the richness of the soil. They are still asleep, the white curtains are drawn and the geraniums on the window-ledges alone are awake in all their glowing bloom. A faint haze veils the fields and imparts to things a soft warmth of tone that makes them more soothing to the eyes. The sun rises and we see the breath of earth shimmer in its first rays.

We have never yet been for a whole day's outing together; everything is new in my new pleasure. I look at Rose beside me. I had wanted her to put on her peasant clothes; and I find her beautiful in her scanty garb in the cool morning air.

We follow the long hog's-back that commands a view of the whole country round. Here and there, tiny villages float like islands of green amid the wide plains. A row of poplars lines the way on either side. Their yellow leaves quiver and rustle in the breeze. The rooks stand out harshly against the white road. And the mist, which is beginning to lift in places, reveals a deep-blue sky.

The keen air that enters my throat and makes my mouth cold as ice tells me of the smile that flickers over my face; and my pleasure is heightened by the sight of my happiness. A woman sees herself anew in everything that she beholds; life is her perpetual looking-glass. In our memory, the flowers in a hat often mingle with those along the road; and sometimes the muslin of a dress enfolds the recollection of our gravest emotions.

O femininity, sublime and ridiculous, wise and foolish! Never shall I weary of surprising its movements and variations deep down in my being! How it fascinates me in all its shades and forms! I let it play with my destiny as much from reason as from love, for we know that nothing can subdue it. I worship it in myself, I worship it in all of us! It may exhaust us in the performance of superhuman tasks, it may let us merely dally with the delight of being beautiful, it may chain us to our bodies or deliver us from their tyranny, it may adorn life or give it, enrich it or kill it: always and everywhere it arouses my eager interest. Ever unexpected and changeful, it floats in front of our woman's souls like a gracious veil that draws, unites and yet separates....

The even motion of the trap lulls my dreams and we drive on, in the midst of the

plains, the fields and the woods. We pass through a dense flock of sheep. The warm round backs, the gentle, anxious faces push and hustle, while the thousand slender legs mingle and raise clouds of dust along the roadside. The timid voices bleat through space; and a pungent scent fills our nostrils. We are now going down into the valley. The village appears, among the trees: a cluster of red and grey roofs; little narrow gardens; white clothes hung out and fluttering in the sunlight. Beyond are broad meadows dotted with peaceful cows and streaked with running brooks. There, just in the middle, a factory displays its grimy buildings. It is an eye-sore, but it leaves the mind unscathed. Does it not represent definite and deliberate activity amid the unconsciousness of nature?...

At this moment, Rose turns towards me; and I seem to read a sadness in her eyes:

"What are you thinking of?" I ask.

"I am thinking that I should like to go away altogether and that we have to be back tonight."

I kissed her and laughed.

"My darling, you must live and be happy in the present: there is plenty of room there."

We arrived at the country-house to which I was taking her. Pretty women in delicate morning-wraps were eagerly awaiting us on the steps, while some of the men, attracted by the sound of our wheels, leant out from a window to see my pretty Rose. There was a general cry of admiration:

"Why, she's magnificent!"

We stepped out of the trap and I pushed Rose towards the party, with whispered words of encouragement; but, suddenly bending forward, with her feet wide apart, her arms-swinging and her cheeks on fire, she dips here and there in a series of awkward bows....

They were kind enough not to laugh; and I led the girl through the great, cool echoing rooms, multiplied by the mirrors and filled with marvels....

2

The sun streams through the immense, wide-open windows; and the harmony of the ancient park mingles with that of the silk hangings and the old furniture. The

fallen leaves sprinkle tears of gold upon the deep green of the lawns. The soft-flowing river welcomes with a quiver the perfect beauty of the skies; rare shrubs and delicate flowers set here and there sheaves and garlands of joy; and the golden sand of the paths accentuates the variety of the colours. On the hill opposite, a wood gilded by the autumn seems to be lying down like some huge animal; in the distance, the tree-tops are so close together that one could imagine a giant hand stroking its tawny fur. On either side of the tall bow-windows, the scarlet satin of the curtains falls in long, straight folds.

Let us be in a palace or a hovel, in a museum or an hotel: is not our attention always first claimed by the window? However little it reveals, that little still means light and life, amid our admiration of the rare or our indifference to the ordinary. The windows represent all the independence, hope and strength of the little souls behind them; and I believe that I love them chiefly because they were the confidants and friends of my early years, when, as an idle, questioning little girl, I would stand with my hands clasped in front of me and my forehead glued to the panes. My childhood spent at those windows was a picture of patient waiting.

Often they come back to me, the windows of that big house in a provincial town, on one side lighted up and beautiful with the beauty of the gay garden on which their lace-veiled casements opened, on the other a little dark and lone, as though listening to the voice and the dreary illusion of the church which they enframe....

3

The current of my life, diverted for a moment, returned to the present and, as always, it swelled with the gladness that rises to our hearts whenever chance conjures up a past whose chains we have shattered.

Happier and lighter at heart, I continued with Rose my visit to the galleries, the gardens and the hot-houses. The luncheon passed off well. Rose was quite at ease and suggested in that elegant setting a stage shepherdess, whose beauty transfigured the simplest clothes. A silk kerchief with a bright pattern of flowers is folded loosely round her neck; her chemisette and skirt are freshly washed and ironed, her hands well tended and her hair gracefully knotted. She introduces a striking and very charming note into the Empire dining-room. More than once, during lunch, I congratulated myself on not having yielded to the temptation to adorn her with the thousand absurd and cunning trifles that constitute our

modern dress, for her little blunders of speech and movement found an excuse in her peasant's costume. Nevertheless, she answered intelligently the questions put to her on the treatment of cattle and the cultivation of the soil; and I had every reason to be proud of her. Her grave and reserved air charmed everybody. If she often grieves and disappoints me, is this not due more particularly to the absence of certain qualities which her beauty had wrongly led me to expect?

4

Before taking our seats in the trap, we go for a stroll through the village. As we pass in front of the baker's, a splendid young fellow, naked to the waist, comes out of the house and stands in the doorway. The flour with which his arms and his bronzed chest are sprinkled softens their modelling very prettily. His sturdy neck, on which his head, the head of a young Roman, looks almost small, his straight nose, long eyes and narrow temples form a combination rarely seen in our district. I was pointing him out to Rose, when he called to her familiarly and congratulated her on visiting at the great house. I saw no movement of foolish vanity in her; on the contrary, there was great simplicity in her story of the drive and the lunch. I was pleased at this and told her so, later, when we were back in the trap.

"The poor fellow is afraid of anything that might take me from him," she said. "He must be very unhappy just now, for he has been imploring me for the last two years to marry him."

I gave her a questioning look; and she went on:

"I did not want to. I would rather end my days in poverty than languish for ever behind a counter. Still, his love would perhaps have overcome my resistance, if I had not met you."

She leant over to kiss me. I returned her caress, though I felt a little troubled, as I always do when I receive a positive proof of the way in which I have changed the course of her life. At the same time, I realised that her nature contained a sense of pride, in which till then I had believed her entirely deficient. I remained thoughtful, but not astonished. We end by having opinions, on both men and things, which are so delicately jointed that they can constantly twist and turn without ever breaking.

Meanwhile, the horse was jogging peacefully along; we were going towards the

sea, for I wanted to finish our holiday there. The willow-edged river followed our road; and we already saw the white sheen of the cliffs at the far end of the valley.

Soon we are passing through the little old town, where a few visitors are still staying for the bathing, though it is late in the season. At the inn, where we leave our horse and trap, they seem to think us a rather odd couple. I laugh at their amused faces, but Rose is embarrassed and hurries me away. All the dark and winding little streets lead to the sea. We divine its vastness and immensity beyond the dusky lanes that give glimpses of it. In front of one of those luminous chinks, under a rounded archway, an old woman stands motionless; she is clad like the women of the Pays de Caux: a black dress gathered in thick pleats around the waist, a brown apron and a smooth, white cap flattened down over her forehead. Poor shrivelled life, whose features seem to have been harshly carved out of wood! She is like an interlude in the perfect harmony of things. I utter my admiration aloud, so that my Roseline's eyes may share it; and we pass under the archway.

We are now on the beach; the wind lashes our skirts and batters my large hat, which flaps around my face. For a more intimate enjoyment of the sea, we run to it through the glorious, exhilarating air which takes away our breath. Over yonder, a few people are gathered round a hideous building all decked out with bunting. It is the casino. We hasten in the opposite direction. On the patch of sand which the sea uncovers at low tide, some boys disturb the solitude; but they are attractive in their fresh and nervous grace, with their slender legs, their energetic gestures and their as it were beardless voices. Their frolics stand out against the pale horizon like positive words in a blissful silence.

As we sat down on the shingle, the sun facing us was still blinding; and I reflected that, when my eyes could endure its brilliancy, it would be like our human happiness, very near its end....

The excitement of the lunch at the big house has not yet passed off; and Rose laughs and is amused at everything. Has she to-day at last, by the contact of those happy, care-free lives, foreseen an approaching deliverance from hers? Of all the things that we have seen together, how much has she really observed? Has the test to which I tried to submit her to-day proved vain? As a guide to her impressions, I traced the outline of my own before her eyes. I questioned her. Then it seemed to me that, in bending my thoughts upon Rose, I saw her as we see our image in the water, with vaguer hues and less decided lines. The girl merely, from time to time, added a word expressing her contentment, a thought

of her own; and to me it was as though a little sunbeam had played straight on the water and the image through the leafy branches....

Does this mean that we see here a mere reflection, an utterly hollow soul, into which the leavings of other souls enter naturally? If it seems to me, at this moment, to borrow light and blood from me, is that a reason for thinking that it possesses neither sap nor sunshine? No, a thousand times no! True, I am the mother of her real life and she must, so to speak, pass through my soul before reaching hers. But, though we are of one mind, we are two distinct natures, two very different characters. It is a question not only of one creature attaching herself to another, but of an awakening and self-enquiring spirit, of a late and sudden development. Rose does not wish to copy me. Honestly and diligently, she spells and lisps to me something like a new language, with the aid of which she will soon be able in her turn to express herself and to feel. There are moments when she seems to understand me perfectly, even to my inmost thoughts; and I sometimes say to her:

"Where was she in the old days, the girl who understands me so well now? What did she do? Where did she live?..."

But where are all of us before the hour that reveals us to ourselves? And what manner of being would he be who had never undergone any influence or contact, who had never seen anything, felt anything? All impressions, whether of persons or things, come to us from without, but little by little and so imperceptibly that there is never a day in our lives that may be called the day of awakening. And yet it exists for all of us, shredded into decisive and fugitive minutes throughout our lives. Imagine for an instant that we could gather them, put them together and place them all in the hands of one being who, with one movement, would scatter them all around us. Would not the change in our character, in our thoughts, in our feelings be very remarkable? Would we not appear actually "possessed" by that person, who, after all, would have been but the instrument of a natural reaction of all our inert forces?

Filled with these thoughts, I said to Roseline:

"Dearest, once your life is kindled into feeling and expression, I can no longer distinguish it, for it is absorbed in mine.... I shall soon be going away; and all that I shall know of you will be your beauty, your unhappiness and the tenderness of your heart."

Her great, innocent eyes, lifted to mine, asked:

"Is not that enough?"

And, almost ashamed of my doubts, I at once added:

"You shall come where I am; whatever happens, be sure that I will not desert you."

With an abrupt gesture, she flung her arms around me; and, as we looked into each other's eyes, the same mist rose before them. Was she at last about to accompany me into the depths of my soul?

My heart burns with the fire of this new and longed-for emotion; and I feel two crystal tears, two tears of sheer delight, slowly follow the curve of my cheeks. Rose's own sensibilities have been blunted for a time by her rough life; she does not yet know how to weep for happiness; and, almost frightened, she convulsively presses her clasped hands against her breast, as though she feared lest it should burst with the throbbing of her joy.

I placed my lips to the long golden lashes, I gathered the dear, timorous tears that seemed still uncertain which path to take; and, behind the veil of my kisses, they gushed forth without fear or shame.

5

The setting sun was no more than a thin crimson streak on the dividing line of sky and sea; and the peaceful billows whispered mysteriously in the dusk that rose from every side.

It was time to go. When we were both standing, so frail and insignificant on the great empty beach, a wave of passionate gratitude overwhelmed both our hearts; and I at last believed that all nature—the sea, the meadows and the fields—had wrought its work of love and beauty in my Rose.

Chapter XIV

1

Immense black clouds scudded past in the darkness; a furious wind stripped the groaning branches of their leaves; and, when the moon suddenly pierced the night, gaunt figures appeared of almost bare trees twisted and shaken by the wind. Behind the orchards, a few cottage-windows showed a glimmer of light; and the watch-dogs howled as I passed, to the accompaniment of their dragging chains.

I walked quickly, full of misgivings and yet undaunted. I asked myself at intervals what was taking me to the farm, to probable suffering. Was it Rose's silence: I had heard nothing of her for a week? Was it the hope of saying good-bye to her, of letting her know at least that I was to go away the next day? Or was it not rather the curiosity that makes us wish to see, without being seen ourselves, the man or woman who interests us?

We always influence in some way or other the looks or the words that are addressed to us. The eye that rests on us becomes unconsciously filled with our own rest; and the longing that awakens at the sight of us is often born of the unspoken call of our soul or our blood. From the first moment when our hands meet, an exchange takes place, and we are no longer entirely ourselves, we exist in relation to the persons and the things around us. Two honest lives cannot join in falsehood; but either of them, if united to a vulgar nature, is perhaps capable of deterioration.

While thus arguing, I seek to reassure myself. True, Rose could never be at the farm, among those coarse people, what she is with me. Still, what will she be like?

I remember something she said to me at the beginning of our acquaintance:

"For the sake of peace with those about me, by degrees I made myself the same as they were. After a time, I never said what I really thought and soon I ceased to notice the difference between the two. As I thought that it was impossible for me ever to go away, it seemed to me a wise policy to adapt myself to the life I had to live. It was a lie at first; later it became second nature...."

But now? Now that all that existence is no more than a temporary unpleasantness, what is her attitude?

2

It was striking eight when I came up to the farm. As a rule, everybody is in bed by then. But to-day was the feast of the patron-saint of the village; and there must have been dancing and drinking till nightfall. At that moment, the darkness was so thick that I could hardly see anything in front of me. I found the gate locked. Clinging to the trees and pulling myself through the thorns and brambles, I climbed across the bank and dropped into the orchard. I at once called softly to the dog, so that he should recognise a friend's voice, and, as soon as I was certain of his silence, I walked quietly to the house, where there was a light in two of the windows at the back of the farm-yard. Not daring to take the path that led to the door, I made my way as best I could through the long grass. I was shivering in my dress; and my feet were frozen. Whenever the moon peeped through two clouds, I quickly flung myself against a tree and waited without moving for the darkness to return. Cows were lying here and there on the grass: at each lull in the storm, I heard the heavy breathing of the sleeping animals; and their peacefulness soothed my troubled mind.

Some thirty yards from the house, I stopped, uncertain what to do. It can be approached only by going a little higher, for it is built on a mound in the centre of the yard. The whole length of the one-storeyed, thatched buildings was without a tree or any dark corner where I could shelter.

I was still hesitating, when suddenly a shadow passed across one of the windows. I seemed to recognise Rose, and my rising curiosity made me cover in a moment the distance that separated me from her. Once there, against the window-pane, I thought of nothing else.

No, it was not fear but sorrow that oppressed me from the first glance within: Rose was laughing at the top of her voice, her mouth opened in a paroxysm of mirth. She was laughing a silly, brutish laugh, lying back in her chair, with her knees wide apart and her hands on her hips. A lamp stood near her on the long table around which the men were eating and drinking; under its torn shade the light flared unevenly, lighting up some things with ruthless clearness and leaving others in complete darkness. Of the men, I could see nothing distinctly except their heavy jaws and coarse hands and the lighter patches of their white shirts and blue smocks. I could make out very little of the large, low-ceilinged room. A rickety chair here; an old dresser there, with a few battered dishes on it. At regular intervals, a brass pendulum sends forth gleams as it catches the light; and the smouldering fire in the tall chimney-place flickers for a moment and illumines the strings of beans and onions drying round the hearth. On the floor, in the middle of the room, two little cowherds are quarrelling for the possession

of a goose, no doubt won as a prize in the village. The poor thing, lying half-dead, with its wings and legs tied up, utters piteous sounds, which are the signal for a burst of laughter and coarse jokes.

But suddenly all is silence. A door opens at the far end of the room and on the threshold stands the mistress, with a candle in her hand and some bottles under her arm. The fear inspired by the old madwoman is obvious at once. The two urchins take refuge under the table with their prey, Rose's laughter ceases abruptly and, through the window-panes, I hear the steady ticking of the clock and the clatter of the spoons in the bowls.

The old woman has sat down in the full light. She is eating, with bent back, lowered head and jerky, nervous movements, while her wicked little sunken eyes peer from under her heavy, matted brows. She speaks some curt words in *patois*, too fast for me to catch their sense; but her strident voice hurts my ears. The conversation becomes livelier by degrees and soon everybody is speaking at once....

I wait in vain for an absent look, a gesture of annoyance, an expression of pain on Rose's part. No, she seems at her ease among these people, as she was at the great house, as she is and as she will be everywhere. She follows the remarks of one and all and shows the same attention which she vouchsafes to me when I speak to her. From time to time, she says a word or two; and I recognise the shrill voice and the vulgar gestures that used to hurt me so much during our early talks.

I remained there for a long time, always waiting, always hoping. Excited by liquor, the men began to quarrel; and I heard the old woman hurl a torrent of vile insults at them. Rose took the part of one of the men and interfered, using language as coarse as theirs.

3

It was late when I went away. The clouds had dispersed, the wind had dropped; the moonbeams were making pools of silver on the ground through the trees; and, when I reached the open fields, they appeared to me cold, immense, infinite under a molten sky.

The picture which I carry away with me seems to lose its colour before my eyes: it is harder and sadder, made up of harsh lights and darker shadows, like an

etching. I see the rough hands on the white deal table, the bony faces brutally outlined by a crude light. I hear the cracked voice of the old madwoman, now raised in yells of abuse, now breaking into song ... and Rose ... my beautiful Rose....

But I have stolen this sight of a life which I was never meant to see. The dishonesty of my invisible presence makes a gulf between my actual vision and my perception; and it seems to me that, in this case, I must withhold my judgment even as we hold our breath before a flickering flame.

PART THE SECOND

CHAPTER I

1

There is in love, in friendship or in the curiosity that drives us towards a fellow-creature a period of ascendency when nothing can quench our enthusiasm. The fire that consumes us must burn itself out; until then, all that we see, all that we discover feeds it and increases it.

We are aware of a blemish, but we do not see it. We know the weakness that to-morrow perhaps will blight our joy, but we do not feel it. We hear the word that ought to deal our hopes a mortal blow; and it does not even touch them!... And our reason, which knows, sees, hears and foresees, remains dumb, as though it delighted in these games which bring into play our heart and our capacity for feeling. Besides, to us women this exercise of the emotions is something so delightful and so salutary that our will has neither the power nor the inclination to check it either in its soberest or its most extravagant manifestations. The influence of the will would always be commonplace and sordid by the side of that generous force which is created by each impulse of the heart or mind.

Upon every person or every idea that arouses our enthusiasm we have just so much to bestow, a definite sum of energy to expend, which seems, like that of our body, to have its own time and season. I have known Rose for hardly three months; her picture is still vernal in my heart; nothing can prevent its colours from being radiant with freshness, radiant with vigour, radiant with sunshine. I shall therefore go away without regret. I see the childishness of all the experiments to which I am subjecting the girl so as to know her a little better. My interest throws such a light upon her that she cannot, do what she will, shrink back into the shade.

She is to me the incarnation of one of my most cherished ideas. Until I know all, I shall suspend my judgment and my intentions will not change. I believe that every seed in the rich soil of a noble heart has to fulfil its tender, gracious work of love and kindness.

I cannot, therefore, lay upon Rose the burden of my disappointment last night; and my affection suggests a thousand good reasons for absolving her. Is this wrong? And are we to consider, with the sapient ones of the earth, that our vision is never clear until the day when we no longer have the strength to love, believe and admire? I do not think so. Setting aside the careful judgment which we exercise in the case of our companion for life, it is certain that our opinions on the others, on our chance acquaintances, are but an illusion and owe far more to our souls than to theirs. In our brief and crowded lives, we have barely time to catch a note of beauty here, to perceive a sign of truth there. If, therefore, we have to pass days and years without understanding everything and loving everything, if we have to remain under a misapprehension, why not choose that which is on the side of love and gladdens our hearts?

We should take care of the images that adorn our soul. Our women's minds would possess more graciousness if we bestowed upon them a little of the attention which we lavish on our bodies.

My beautiful Rose is kind and loving; I will deck her with my hopes as long as I can. When enthusiasm is shared, it is easy to keep it up. It weighs lightly in spite of its infinite preciousness. If I ever find it a strain, the reason will be that Rose did not really bear her share of it. It will become a burden and I shall relinquish it. All that she will have of me will be the careless charity bestowed upon the poor.

"PARIS, ... 19—

"If you knew, Rose, how I miss the lovely autumn landscapes! The weather was so bright on the day of my departure that, to enjoy it to the full, I bicycled to the railway-town. After leaving the village, I took the road through the wood and it was delightful to skim along through the dead leaves, the softly-streaming tears of autumn. Sometimes, when a gust of wind blew, I went faster; and little yellow waves seemed to rise and fall and chase one another all around me. Some of the trees, not yet bare, but only thinned, traced an exquisite russet lacework against the blue sky; and the birds warbled, cooed and whistled as in spring. I saw the noisy, crowded streets of Paris waiting for me at the end of my day; and this gave a flavour of sadness to the calm of the high roads, the pureness of the air, the dear beauty of the lanes....

"It was quite early in the morning and the fields were still bathed in a dewy radiance. I sat down for a little while on a roadside bank; an immense plain began at the level of my face and ended by rising slowly towards the sky. It was a very young field of corn, which the splendour of the day turned into pearly down. I could have looked at it for ever, at one moment letting the full glory of it burst on my dazzled eyes and then gradually lowering my lids down to the tiny threads that trembled and glittered in my breath. Then my mouth formed itself into a kiss; and I amused myself by slowly and lovingly making the cool pearls of the morning die on my warm lips...."

3

"PARIS, ... 19—

"I see you, my Rose, laying supper in the wretched kitchen, while the farm-hands gather round the hearth. I like to picture you going cautiously through the old woman's room at night, so as to write to me by the rays of the moon, without disturbing the household with an unwonted light. You come and sit on the ledge of the open window, to receive the full benefit of the moonbeams, and then you write on your knee those trembling lines which convey your emotion to me.

"I see you in the wonderful setting of the silver-flooded orchard. The golden silk of your long tresses embroiders your white night-dress. Your eyes are filled with peace; you are beautiful like that; and there is nothing so sweet as an orchard in the moonlight. The apple-trees seem to lay their even shadows softly upon the pallor of the grass; and their ordered quiet spreads a serene and simple joy over

nature's sleep....

"Rose, at the moving period that brought us together, how I would that your sweet composure had been sometimes a little ruffled! It would have appeared to me of a finer quality had I found it more variable. A woman's reason should be less rigid; and I should loathe mine if it were not a leaven of indulgence and forgiveness in my life....

"Oh, Rose, Rose, tell me that the coldness of your soul springs from its wonderful purity! Tell me that your heart is so deep that the sound of the joys which fall into it cannot be heard outside! Tell me that it is the storm of your life that has crushed the flowers of your sensibility for the time....

"I well know that our interest cannot always be active, that it must be suppressed; I know that indifference is essential to the happy equilibrium of our faculties and that, beside the exaltation of our soul, it is the untroubled lake fertilising and refreshing the earth. And you will find, Rose, how necessary it is to be on our guard against it in our judgments and how it can take possession of some natures and slowly destroy them under a hateful appearance of wisdom! I would rather discover ugly and active defects in you than that beautiful impassiveness. Besides, as I have told you many a time, the excellence that seems to me ideal has its weaknesses. It is rather a way of perfection for our poor humanity, a way that is all the better because it is adapted for our feeble and wavering steps!...

"Once, at harvest-time, I met you in the little road near the church. It was the end of the day; and you were coming back from the fields. You were standing high on a swaying mountain of hay, you were driving a great farm-horse, which disappeared under its load. Your tall figure stood out against the sky ablaze with the last rays of the sun; and I still see your look of absolute unconcern. You wore a long blue apron that came all round you and a bodice of the same colour. In that blue faded by the sun, with your hair a pale cloud in the gold of the sunset, you looked like an archangel taken from some Italian fresco.

"As you passed me, you timidly returned my smile; and I followed you for a long time with my eyes. Do you still remember the trouble you had in passing under the dark vault of the old oaks? Every now and again, a branch, longer and lower than the others, threatened your face: you caught it with a quick movement and lifted it over your head. At one time, there were so many of those branches and they were so heavy that you were obliged to lie back on the hay, holding both arms over your face to save it from being struck. Then, when the lumbering

wagon stopped in front of the farm, my archangel stepped down humbly into the mud, took the horse by the bridle and disappeared from sight....

"The reason why this memory now comes back to me is that I find in it some affinity with what I would ask of your reason: those simple movements by which you will be able to thrust aside the bad habits that disfigure you! May your reason be the beautiful archangel to guide and sway your humble life, but may it sometimes know how to descend and stoop in obedience to the necessities of chance. Even as, on the day when I saw you, you could not alter the road which you had to follow, so you cannot alter your real nature; but you must 'know the way,' you must guide and control."

4

"PARIS,... 19—

"I am longing to have you here so that I may watch carefully over the slightest details of your life and put your temperament incessantly to the test. They say that enthusiasm cannot be acquired. But how can they tell that it is not merely sleeping, unless they try to awaken it? Those around us have sometimes, quite unconsciously, an unhappy way of subduing and oppressing us.

"Even the most emotional have often to struggle lest their souls should shrink in the presence of certain people, like the flowers whose petals exposed to the light timidly hide their hearts as soon as day declines. You, whom a placid humour reserves for gentle emotions, must try not to let that very beautiful nature exceed its rights, or cast an unnecessary shadow over your feelings, or ever check your finest bursts of admiration with doubt and misgiving. Circumstances have failed to form your taste; and at first you will pass marvels by and prefer to marvel at some hideous thing. Never mind! I like to think that, after all, the best part of a noble work is the enthusiasm which it arouses and that the greatest dignity of art lies in the flame which it kindles.

"Time was when I wept in front of things that now leave me unmoved; but, in captivating my childish heart, did they not accomplish their task even as those do now which quicken the beating of my woman's heart?...

"Learn to appreciate life and to look upon all that does not enhance it as vain and wearisome. As there is nothing in this world which has not its relation to life, in loving it, my Roseline, you will understand everything and accept everything.

"I want your eyes, when presenting to your mind whatever is best in a great work, to learn the luxury of lingering on it; I want your ears to perceive the wonderful, voluptuous charm of sounds, your hands to rejoice in things soft to the touch; I want you to learn how to breathe with delight and how to eat with pleasure. Don't smile. None of all this is childish; it is made up of tiny joyous movements which the simplest existence can command when it knows how to recognise them. And yet ... and yet I feel a selfish wish to leave you still in your prison, so that your desire to escape from it may keep on growing! I love that desire, I love your actual distress, I love the wretchedness of your past, the wretchedness of your present, I love you to see difficulties in the way of your deliverance....

"Oh, if those obstacles could give you, as they do me, that sort of intoxication for which I cherish them! When at last I see the goal beyond them, my heart leaps for joy. But hardly is the goal attained when I rejoice in it only because it brings me to another, higher and more distant; and my imagination resumes its course, never looking back except to measure the road already traversed.... In this way, never satisfied and yet happy in the mere fact that I am advancing and in the knowledge that no more can be asked of a poor human will, I have the feeling that my life never stops."

5

"PARIS,... 19—

"Dearest, it is evening; it is cold and wet out of doors; but peace and gaiety shed their radiance in the great drawing-room which you will soon know, white and bare as a convent-parlour, living and bright as joy itself. Chance gave me to-day a long day of solitude, like those at Sainte-Colombe. And yet the hours passed before me and I could not make them fruitful. When such favours come to me in the midst of excitement, I am too glad of them to be able to profit by them; I can but feel them; and they control me without leaving me time to control them in my turn. I listen to my life, I contemplate it. It has too many opposing voices, too many absolutely different shapes; my consciousness is lost in it as a precious stone is swallowed up by the sea. I blush at such chaos. My soul appears to me only fit to compare with one of those wretched table-cloths which country dressmakers patch together, at the end of the year, out of the thousand scraps of the thousand different materials which they have cut during the season. But is not this the natural result of the diversity of our feminine souls?

"Antagonistic elements have long been at war in me; and the violence of their blows has sometimes torn my life asunder. I no longer have cause to complain of it now, because time and love have helped me to reconcile them. Our powers are injurious to us so long as we do not know how to use them. I have suffered, I still suffer from my creeping knowledge. I would like to increase the pace of yours. Is it impossible?

"And so I dreamed all day and, of course, I dreamed of you, the Rose whom I am always picturing. I imagined that we had arranged to see each other this evening. You walked into the drawing-room, drenched with the rain, pink-cheeked with the cold. You looked very pretty, in a frock that suited your face and your figure. You knew how to hold yourself! You knew how to walk! Your movements were graceful! After talking for a little while by the fire, we both sat down at the table, under the lamp-light, and there began our usual work. What work it was I cannot tell; but it will be easy for us to choose: we have everything to learn; and I feel that both our minds must follow the same path for some time to come. By placing the same objects before them, we shall succeed in discovering what you really feel and what you really wish. That is the only way of delivering your mind from my involuntary dominion and of distinguishing your image from mine. I have no other ideal than to feel myself actually moving, even though the movement be an inconsistent one. How could I invite you to a similarity which is nothing but a perpetual dissimilarity?

"You must cease to be an echo. I shall map out no course for you; and we do not know what will become of you. Let us first walk at random. The goal is not always visible; but very often the road travelled tells us which road to take next. It matters little what work we do, provided that it gives a sort of tone to our meetings and that it regulates our hours. The freaks of chance and the youthfulness of our minds will always furnish colour and fancy in plenty....

"Understand me, Roseline: it is not a friend that I am seeking, not one of those uncertain, light-hearted, capricious relations which encumber life without adding to it. I am dreaming like a child, of a woman who should realise the greatest possible amount of beauty in her mind and person and who should add her strength to mine in the service of the same ideals. Rose, are you that woman? Will you help me to deliver other women still who are oppressed by circumstances or people, to deliver those who are shackled by prejudice or fear, to deliver the beauty that is unable to show itself and the will that dares not act? To deliver! What a magic word! Rose, does it ring in your heart as it rings in mine?...

"But, as you see, my dreams are carrying me too far; and I blush at my audacity. When I look at you and judge myself, it often seems to me that what I have done for you is only a form of vanity, that all my generous aspirations are but vanity!... Is it true?

"And, if it were! Is it not still greater and more foolish vanity to require that all our actions should spring from pure and sublime motives? If, in contributing to your development, I am conscious that I am assisting my own, will yours be any the less complete for that? If I no longer know which is dearer, you, who represent my dreams, or my dreams, which have become embodied in yourself, will you on that account be less fondly and less nobly loved?

"And, if it be true that vanity there is, is the vanity vain that sheds happiness and joy?"

CHAPTER II

1

A long month has passed since my return to Paris. Twice Rose has written to announce her arrival: I waited for her at the station and she did not come. Poor child! We all know how difficult it is to break one's bonds, even the most detested. A thousand invisible ties keep us in the place where chance has set us; and, when we are about to rend them, they become so many unsuspected pangs. Instinct blindly resists all change, as though it were unable to distinguish what reason dimly descries beyond the trials and dangers of the moment. Rose is leaving nothing but wretchedness; in front of her is a fair and pleasant prospect. Nevertheless, she hesitates and she is unhappy.

In my present restless state, I no longer know what I wish. If she came to-morrow, should I be glad or not? I cannot tell. I can no longer tell. Those who do not suffer from this absurd mania for action escape those painful moments when we are at the mercy of a distracted will that no longer knows exactly what it ought to want. In absence, our feelings pass through so many contradictory phases! When the hour of return comes, finding it impossible to collect so many conflicting sentiments or to bring back to one point so many different desires, we surrender ourselves to the impression of the moment; and this impression often has nothing in common with what we had previously felt and hoped.

I have done my utmost to make her come. Lately, I have been sending her urgent and encouraging letters daily. Now, the hour is approaching; and my only feeling is one of anguish.

I have told her twenty times that the talk about responsibility which I hear all around me brings a smile to my lips. I have told her how, by making my conduct depend on hers, I relieved myself of all personal anxiety. And to-day my task appears to me so heavy that I can only laugh at my presumption.

2

It was foolish of me to write to her:

"What are your faults? Teach me to know you. Tell me what you are."

In reality, our faults arise from our circumstances. Events alone set us the questions to which our actions give a definite answer. Up to the present, Rose has not lived; she has been accumulating forces that are now about to come into being. What will they be? Whither will they tend? We can assume nothing in a life that is but beginning; and is it not just this that encourages us to seek and to help? Each of us has only to look back in order to know that, in the shifting soil of characters, we can fix or establish nothing. I found her acquiescing in a shameful servitude; and yet I have faith in the nobility of her soul. She was untruthful; there was no relation between her wishes and her actions, her thoughts and her words. Nevertheless, I do not doubt her essential honesty.

The atmosphere that surrounds us is so often treacherous to our pliant natures! We women are obliged to lie. So long as we have not found our "love," we look in vain for a little confidence. No one believes us, no one receives the best part of our soul. One would think that, for those who listen to us, our sincerest words are poisoned as they pass through our fairest smiles. And, when nature has made us beautiful and gifted, people take pleasure in judging us severely, as they might look at the summer days through dark-tinted window-panes.

We are always refused recognition. The first feeling which any work that we perform arouses is one of doubt. Its merit is disputed. And yet we have devoted a part of our youth to it; we have left with it a little of our freshness and our bloom. Very often, it is the ransom of our sorrow. Our love is written upon it; and it bears the imprint alike of our smiles and of our tears. Do we not know that woman, for all her culture, remains closer than man to her instinct and her "soil?" She is less purely intellectual but more sensitive than man; and, while he can create everything in the silence of his imagination, she has to live and suffer everything that she brings into the world. She conceives and realises with her flesh and with her blood.

A woman said to me, one day:

"If I had to begin life over again, I should not have the courage to avoid a single danger, pain or disappointment. In surmounting them, I have gained a power of resistance which forms the framework of my present and my future. I can see the sparkle of my happiness better when I keep in the shadow of my sad memories;

and all that I accomplish, all that I write seems to me to flow from my past tears."

To refuse recognition to a woman's work is to refuse to recognise her soul, her existence and every throb of her heart!...

Man does not know that torture which every true woman suffers when she feels that those who are listening to her do not hear her real words, that those who are looking at her do not see what she is making every effort to show. Even when she is obeying the simplest impulses of her nature, people distrust what she says and what she does; and in some women, good and kind and beautiful, we see repeated the artless miracle of the flowers that exhaust themselves in giving too much fragrance and too much blossom. How fearful and timid this moral isolation makes us! And how thrice courageous we must be in the hour of realisation! If effort sometimes seems useless to men, what about women, who see themselves ever confronted by a blank wall of scepticism?

A man is valued by the weight of the forces which he stirs up for and against himself. The forces which woman encounters are nearly all hostile.

3

I was close upon sixteen. One day, I heard some one say, speaking of some trifling thing of which I was wrongly suspected:

"She is no longer a child. She's a woman now and she's lying."

That was a cruel speech, the sort of speech that influences a whole life. My eyes were gradually opened to the dreary injustice that casts its shadow over the fairest destinies of women. Nothing around them seems clear and natural. Doubt lies in wait for them, calumny rends them. Now my hour was coming: my skirts, touching the ground for the first time, had suggested the suspicion of deceit and hypocrisy.

It was perhaps this wound, inflicted on the soul of the growing girl, that left the most serious mark on my soul as a woman. Thanks to a strange prick of conscience, to a singular need to give to others what I did not obtain, I wanted to trust and I did trust! I gave my confidence passionately, utterly, rapturously! And this made wells of such deep and impetuous joy spring up in me that I felt no bitterness when I saw my confidence marred as it passed through others, even as a clear stream is muddied in following its course.

Still, I wanted more; I sought to concentrate in one person, herself generous and confiding, the happiness which I lacked and whose infinite value I suspected. Ah, what a blessed relief when I found her! I was as one who has never seen his face save in distorting mirrors and who suddenly sees himself as he hoped to be. It seems to me that my happiness dates from that day. Before then, I suffered, I was all astray, an ill wind hovered round me; and, on the sands of other lives, there was never a trace of my footsteps where I believed that I had passed. Henceforth, another soul would read mine! Another's eyes would own the candour of my eyes!

It was little more than a child that introduced me to love and kindness. She was treated with iron severity, she was unhappy; I was alone: she became my daily companion. Alas! too early ripe, too intelligent, she was of those who cannot stay. Is it a presentiment that makes them hurry so, or is it rather their eagerness to live, their over-sharpened senses that wear out their strength?

4

She was not fifteen; but, already matured in body and mind, she attracted immediate attention. Her walk was so superb that I cannot think of her without seeing her come swiftly to me, with that dear smile of hers and with her lovely arms outstretched in greeting. Her limpid eyes obeyed the light, the light of her heart and the light of the sky, whereas her dark hair, always tangled and rebellious, bore witness to the protest of her dauntless spirit. In her company I tasted for the first time the delight of souls that join and blend and unite in mutual trust. In an ecstasy of sincerity, for hours I imagined myself baptising her whole life with my faith. I said to her, over and over again:

"I believe in you.... I believe in you.... Do you understand what that means? It is something greater and better than 'I love you:' it means that one can never be alone again!"

She died a few months later; and for years I was to seek in vain in others' hearts and eyes the pure and limpid faith which reflects everything that bends over it.

One can love people without knowing them fully; one cannot believe in them without mingling one's soul with theirs; and the moral luxury of it is so great that, when we have once known it, if only for a moment, we demand it from all with whom we come in contact.

Roseline, all that I then wished for, that charming bond of tenderness and confidence which should link women together, that difficult and precious happiness which I knew for one hour through that child-soul: that is what I am trying to offer you.

And perhaps you will have something better still, because the assistance which you receive is deliberate and has stood the test. In the place of that artless faith rushing to meet life, you find a soul that has been steeped in it. Rose, may my faith and my soul be your two mirrors. In one, you will see your forces rise even as we catch the first swell of a cornfield at dawn. In the other, they will appear to you enlarged, multiplied, transformed according to nature's laws, ripened by the dazzling suns of noon, utilised by the intellect, ready at last to nourish you and nourish others.

5

Then I met men, I met other women, without ever attaining the wish of my heart. They came and went. But, at each soul that I lost, I found my own a little more and I remember most gratefully those who were the most cruel. This man was ill and unconscious of his actions; that woman was wicked; that man too frivolous; and another was a liar....

A liar! Even to-day, among those withered attachments which it pleases me to evoke, this last arrests my thoughts. For it was he—O singular contrast!—who, by his lying and duplicity, finished the work begun by the frank confidence of the child.

He was a liar.—Lying came to him so easily and naturally that he himself did not discriminate between what he had done and what he had said, between what he had actually experienced and the life which he pretended to have lived. His was a strange nature, which, in its eagerness to seem, forgot to be, a nature which, no longer distinguishing its frontiers from another's, lost in the end its own domain! A strange example of a strayed consciousness which, knowing no dividing line, attributed the acts of others to itself, spoke from their hearts and led their existences! He walked through life as one walks through a gallery whose walls are panelled with mirrors. He could not take a step without thinking that he was taking a thousand; and his vanity enhanced his least actions to such a degree that he actually believed himself the lover of a woman if he merely kissed her hand. It was thus that he boasted of making innumerable conquests at every hour of the

day; and, to hear him talk, always tired and exhausted with love, he was a wreck at twenty, as the price of his inordinate exploits. Enamoured of his appearance, he saw nothing beyond the blankness of his little soul, or rather he made it the origin and the end of everything. Poor empty head! Wretched puppet, whose spring was the vanity which every passer-by could set in motion at will!

At a time when I myself did not know it, he had cleverly discovered what he must appear to be in order to arouse my enthusiasm, thus offering me the illusion of that faith which I aspire to awaken in you, my Roseline. Certainly, I owe him much! If an exact copy of a masterpiece can stir us as deeply as the original, the perfect impersonation of a fine intellect and a noble character can influence us very happily. How grateful I am to him for the trouble which he took to give me a representation of virtues which he did not possess! They were painted on his soul in such relief, a relief which no reality gives, as I was afterwards to learn! The artificial lilies that decorate the chapel of the church hard by have an assurance that is absent from those which will soon fade over there, on the table. The false boasts an unvarying brilliance, an imposing emphasis which we never find in the true. And, no doubt, the qualities of which he vouchsafed me the sight would never have had such value in my eyes, if his fatuousness had not displayed them to my youthful admiration as one shows an object behind a magnifying-glass.

And what does it matter to me now that they were false, those gifts with which that soul seemed laden, if for a moment I pictured them as real! After the error was dispelled, the image which I once thought true remained in me. It had determined my tastes, fixed my opinions, set my mind at rest. Subsequently, I was to try and refashion the perfection of which I had beheld the mirage and, with still greater ardour, I was to pursue in others and conquer at last the reality of the once-known happiness which I thought that I had found in him.

We are none the poorer when a sad truth takes the place of a beautiful dream. Knowledge has already filled the void which the lost illusion leaves behind it....

6

Let us seek then, Rose, let us seek even after we have found! Whether we be denied or heard, let us go on seeking! When we have lovingly performed the little things necessary that a flower may peradventure blossom, if it does not give us what we hoped for, does that prevent us from loving another exactly like it

and from tending it with all the greater skill and care?

Our ignorance must be renewed in the presence of each life that touches ours. May the quest suffice to keep our faith eternally young, that wonderful, childlike faith which alone encourages, finds and sets free.

CHAPTER III

1

It was eleven o'clock when I went to meet Rose this morning; but the day was so dark and the fog so dense that the street-lamps were still lit.

It was gloomy and depressing. Wrapped in a long cloak and huddled in a corner of the cab, I shivered with cold and nervousness. I reread her telegram, dispatched from a railway-station before daybreak; and the pathos of those few words went to my heart:

"Am starting. Ran away yesterday.

"YOUR BABY."

Yesterday? Then she had spent the night at an inn? Why?

Alas, in such circumstances, do not we women usually behave like that, blindly and illogically? We prepare everything, we look out the trains and choose the most favourable time for flight; we announce the minute of our arrival to those expecting us; everything is ready, everything is decided.... Then the appointed day arrives. The hour strikes, the hour passes and we do not stir. We have been kept by some meaningless trifle which is magnified in our excitement and acquires an importance which it never had before: a word, a look from those whom we are going to desert. We forgive them when we are on the point of leaving them for ever. We invest them with a little of our own gentleness and

kindness. Even as the colour of things blurs and fades when our eyes are dim with tears, so the hardest people do not appear so to the anxious heart of a woman. And pity gains the upper hand, time slips by and we put off to the morrow and, on the morrow, we put off again....

Then, one day, we depart all at once, for no definite reason, depart empty-handed, with an impassive face and without looking round. We perform the most energetic action almost without knowing it, for even our will shirks the too-heavy task. It dreads the preparations, it would like to be able to tell us feebly that nothing is done, that nothing is decided, that we can still go back to the past; and this is enough to hurry our steps towards the future. We go, we walk on and on, we walk till we are tired. Then does it not seem as if each minute shifted the problem of our destiny a little more? And in a few hours would it not need more courage to return than to continue our road?

But it is nearly always so, by little unforeseen acts, by fear as much as by weakness, that we perform the inaugural act of our enfranchisement. We flee bewildered, like poor beasts that have broken loose; and the first movements of our liberty echo in our hearts with a melancholy sound of dangling chains.

2

My dear Rose!... As I go through the damp, dark station, I am already picturing her fright....

The train arrives, full of passengers, who hurry towards the exit in surging black masses. How shall I recognise her in this crowd, in the fog? I do not know what she will look like. A lady? A servant? A servant, I expect, because she will have had nothing ready. I hope so; and I look out eagerly for a black knitted hood on a head of golden hair. I am afraid lest she should not see me in her excitement and nervousness. The flood of passengers separates on either side of the ticket-collector; and I keep close to him, standing desperately on tip-toe....

The crowd has passed and I have not caught sight of her. There are still a few people coming from the far end of the train; it is so dark that I can hardly see.... There is a tall figure all over feathers in the distance, but it cannot be ... And yet ... yes, yes, it is she! Gracious goodness, what a sight!... I feel that it would be better to laugh, but I can't; and I am furious with myself for keeping a grave face. It is Rose! Rose dressed like a Sainte-Colombe lady!

She comes along, calmly, smiling and self-possessed; and I am now able to distinguish the painful hues of that appalling garb: the little red-velvet hat, studded with glass stones of every imaginable colour and trimmed with green feathers of the most aggressive shade and style; the serge skirt, too short in front; the black jacket, quite simple, it is true, but so badly cut that it murders the figure of the lovely girl! She has a large basket, carefully corded, on her arm. I really suffer tortures while she kisses me effusively and says, gaily:

"You are looking very well, dearest; but you're upset: what's the matter?" And, before I have time to answer, she adds in a triumphant tone, "I have a great surprise for you. Look in the basket, look!"

I need not trouble: at that moment there comes from the basket a pandemonium of terrified quacks and flapping wings.

"Yes," Rose continues, laughing merrily, "I stole the old woman's best two ducks and that's why I'm here.... But first I must tell you, I have been looking after them for a month, fattening them for your benefit; I would not go before they were just right. And what do you think? All of a sudden, she said, at dinner, that she was going to market to-day to sell them! It gave me an awful turn. As soon as I could leave the kitchen, I flew to the poultry-yard and I took the train to —— and slept there. Luckily, I had already sent my trunk to an hotel."

I looked at Rose in stupefaction:

"Your trunk?"

She went on, with her eyes full of cunning:

"Oh, your baby was rather clever!... As the old woman never paid me during the whole of the four years, I worked out what a farm-servant gets a year and I decided that I was justified in opening an account in her name with one of our customers who keeps a big drapery-store. And so I now have a trunk and a complete outfit, as well as these pretty things which I have on. It was only fair, wasn't it?"

I turned away my head without a word. It was certainly quite fair; but I felt my cheeks flushing scarlet.

Rose gave a yawn which ended in a groan:

"I'm starving. Suppose we had some lunch; we could come back for the trunk afterwards."

I eagerly agreed and hurried her to the exit. From the top of the stairs, I saw that

the fog had lifted at last; the gas-lamps had been put out and the street lay before us in a melancholy, wan light. The pavements were covered with mud and the houses showed yellow and smoke-grimed. Then I looked at Rose and my torture suddenly became more than I could bear. I placed her in front of me and feverishly unbuttoned the clumsy jacket, which was too tight at the neck, too narrow across the shoulders and gave her no waist at all. It fell away on either side; her bust showed full and uncompressed in a light-coloured blouse; and I breathed more freely.

"Now, take off your hat."

She slowly obeyed; and the gloomy station and the wretched, grimy day were suddenly illuminated. Oh, those lovely fair curls, which had been crushed and pushed away under the hideous hat with its too narrow brim, what bliss it was to see them again full of life and laughter! There they were in their graceful, natural clusters, some drooping over her forehead, some brushing her cheeks, others kissing her neck and ears! How pretty she was! I recognised my Rose at last in her soft, golden, shimmering, impalpable, incredible tresses. I passed my fingers lightly over that silk for love's loom, while my eyes feasted on its delicate colour. No, indeed, nothing was lost. Rose was beautiful, more beautiful than ever; and the glad words came crowding to my lips. I forgave her and was angry with myself for my coldness.

Poor child, she did not know! She had thought, no doubt, that, to go to Paris, she must absolutely have a hat; and how was she to choose one in a village-shop? And I told her over and over again how fond I was of her.

Rose, a little uncomfortable, with crimson cheeks and downcast eyes, stood awkwardly turning the unfortunate object in her hands. I looked round: a few people, intent on their business, were hurrying this way and that; there was no one on the staircase. Then, bursting with laughter, I dashed the hat to the floor and, with the tip of my shoe, precipitated it into space....

"Come over to the other side," I said to Rose. "Quick!... Suppose they brought it back!"

Good-natured as always and pleased at my amusement, she laughed because I laughed; and, while we ran to the other exit, the masterpiece of Sainte-Colombe millinery rolled and rolled and hopped from stair to stair.

The bustle of the restaurant and the noise of the street outside affected me tremendously. I was nervous and excited, with a wild desire to laugh at everything and nothing. I asked Rose all sorts of questions; and, whenever any one passed:

"Look!" I said. "Do look!... You're not looking!... There, that's a pretty dress, a regular Parisienne!... And, over there, by the door: don't you see that queer woman?"

The girl looked and then turned to me and, before I could prevent her, bent down and kissed my hand. I wanted to say:

"You mustn't do that, Rose!"

But it was the first charming impulse she had shown: how could I scold her? Oh, what a miserable thing our education is; and how often should I not find myself in some ridiculous dilemma!

Besides, I wished this first day of hers to be all happiness and expectation! And, while we gaily discussed plans for the future, I tried to guess what she must be feeling, I scrutinised her movements, I interpreted her words. But it appeared too soon yet; and it was I, alas, I who had the best part of her happiness! My eyes fell on her chapped and swollen hands. She noticed it and murmured, sadly:

"It's the beetroots. You understand, it's the hard season now."

"But the beetroot-days are past, my Roseline! The bad seasons are over, over for good, over for good and all!"

And I laid stress on every syllable; and, though I was whispering in her ear, I heard the words "for good and all" bursting from my lips like a triumphant shout.

She smiled and went on eating, doing her best to eat nicely, with her elbows close to her sides and her hands by her plate. Heaven above, did she understand what I said?

4

There are some people who seem detached from themselves. They do something; and the whole flood of their life does not surge into the action! They draw near to the object of their love; and their whole soul does not fill their eyes! Their soul is not on their lips, to breathe love; it is not at their finger-tips, to seize upon happiness; it is not there to watch life, to attract all that passes, eagerly,

greedily and rapturously! Then where is it and what is it doing outside this dear, delightful earth?...

And yet woman, the creature who learns through love the admirable gift of life, knows better than man how to throw the whole of herself into fleeting moments. She lives nearer to the edge of her actions. Her mind, which rarely attaches itself to abstract things, seems to float around her in search of every sensation. Woman passes and has seen everything; she remembers and she quivers as though the caressing touch were still upon her. Her light and charming soul drinks eternity straight out of the present; and through a man's kisses she has known the art of absolute oblivion.

I am afraid that Rose is not much of a woman. Ah, were I in her place, I should be wild with excitement, out of my mind with joy, as though I were hearing my own name spoken for the first time!

5

After lunch, our shopping was a difficult matter. Rose, with her uncommon figure, could hardly find anything ready-made to suit her. I had to hunt about and to contrive with thought, for I would not wait a single day. I was careful to select the quietest and most usual things for her, so as to conceal her rusticity as far as possible. The neat dark-velvet toque could have its position altered on her head without much harm. The black veil would tone down the vividness of a complexion too long exposed to the open air; and its fine plain net would set off the admirable regularity of her features. Lastly, the deep leather belt to her tailor-made frock and the well-starched collar and cuffs would more or less hide the effort which it cost her to hold herself upright.

6

Two hours later, I introduced Rose to her new home. We climbed a dark, interminable staircase. I held a flickering candle in my hand; and, all out of breath, I explained to her the advantages of this boarding-house, a quiet place where her privacy would not be invaded and where she could make useful acquaintances if she wished....

At last, we reached the fifth floor. The daylight had faded. A sea of roofs was

beneath us; and, through the panes above our heads, a great red sky cast lurid gleams over our faces and hands. The girl gave a start of pleasure as she entered her room. It was peaceful and white; but the flaming fire and sky at that moment turned it quite rosy, smiling and aglow. From the rather high window we could see nothing but space. I had placed a writing-table underneath it, with some books and a few flowers in a dainty crystal bowl. On the walls, several photographs of Italian masterpieces disguised the ugliness of the typical boarding-house paper. The chimney-mantel was bare and the furniture very simple.

We were both happy, both talking at once, Rose exclaiming:

"It's really too lovely, too beautiful!"

And I was saying:

"I should have liked to have a room for you arranged after my own taste, but I had to keep within bounds. So I brought a few little things, as you see, and bundled the ugly pictures, the tin clock and the plush flowers into the cupboards. But come and see the best part of it."

I threw open the window; and, leaning out, we beheld a great expanse beyond the enormous gutter that edged the roof. Unfortunately, the last glow of the sunset was swiftly dying away in the mist rising from the Seine. Opposite us, on the other bank, the Louvre became a heavy, shapeless mass; on the right, Notre-Dame was nothing but a shadowy spectre; here and there, in a chance, lingering gleam, we could just distinguish a steeple, a turret, a house standing out above the rest.

"We came in too late, Rose; we can see nothing; but how wonderful it all is! The sound of the quays and bridges hardly reaches us, the city might be veiled; at this height, its activity is like a dream and I seem to be living over again those quiet moments which we used to spend side by side at Sainte-Colombe. Are you happy?"

Smiling and with her eyes still fixed on the sky, she says:

"Yes."

"Perfectly?"

"Yes."

"You are not afraid of the future?"

"Not for my sake, but I am for yours."

I question her with my eyes; and she adds:

"I am afraid that I shall never be what you want."

I put my hand on her shoulder and said:

"You will be what you are to be; and that is the main thing. It seems to me at this moment that the greatest ideas are nothing, that the fairest dreams are childish compared with the simple reality of a human being's first taste of happiness. You were hidden; and I bring you to the light. You were a prisoner; and I set you free. I see nothing to fetter you; and that is all I ask. The life of a beautiful woman should be like a star whose every beam is the source of a possible joy.... I am glad, for this is the day of your first deliverance."

Rose murmured:

"What will the second be, then?"

I hesitated for a moment. Then I replied:

"It is difficult to say, dear; you will come to know gradually. I might answer, that of your mental or moral life; but I do not wish to lay down any rule. You are about to start on life's journey; I do not wish to trace your road with words. How much more precious your smallest actions are to me!"

I closed the window and went and sat in a chair by the fire-place. Rose, standing with uplifted arms in front of the glass, took off her hat and veil, then undid her mantle and her scarf and put everything carefully away in the wardrobe. My eyes followed her quiet movements and my heart rested on each of them. I spoke her name and she came and sat at my feet, against my knees, with her soft, fair head waiting for my caress.

It was now night; the fire lit our faces, but the room was dark wherever the flames did not cast their gleams. A chrysanthemum on a longer stalk than the others bent its petals into the light. Opposite the fire-place, within the shade of the bed-curtains, stood a white figure from the Venice Accademia, an allegory representing *Truth*. We could not see the mirror which she holds nor the details that surround her. The pedestal that raises her above mankind was also invisible; only the nude body of the woman invited and retained the light.

I called Rose's attention to her:

"Look, she is more interesting like that. In the doubt which the shadow casts

around her, I see in her a more human and a truer truth."

After a moment's contemplation, Rose said, gravely:

"I will never hide one of my thoughts from you."

Her statement makes me smile; but why disappoint her? She did not yet know that those who are most sincere find it more difficult than the others to say what they think. Words, in their souls, are like climbing plants which, sown by chance in the middle of a roadway, waver and grope, send out tendrils here and there in despair and end by entangling themselves with one another. Whereas most people, just as we provide supports for flowers, bestow certainties and truths upon their words to which they cling, the sincere refuse to yield to any such illusions. They hesitate, stammer and contradict themselves without ceasing....

7

I drew her head down on my knees; and, softly, in little sentences interrupted by long pauses, we spoke of the new life that was opening before her. Soon she said nothing more. The fire went out, the room became dark and a clock outside struck six. I whispered:

"I am going, darling...."

She did not move and I saw that she was asleep. Then I gently released myself, put a pillow under her head and a wrap over her shoulders and was almost at the door, when suddenly I pictured her awakening. It would not do for her to open her eyes in the dark, to feel lost and alone in an unknown house. I lit the lamp, drew the blinds and made up the fire.

Roseline was sleeping soundly. Her breathing was hardly perceptible. At times, a deep sigh sent a quiver through her placid beauty, even as a keener breath of air ripples the surface of a pool.

What would she do if she should soon awake?... I looked around. Everything was peaceful and smiling; the flowers looked fresh and radiant in the light; the books on the table seemed to be waiting.... I searched among them for some page to charm her imagination and guide her first dreams along pleasant paths....

CHAPTER IV

1

Rose is sitting by the fire with her bare feet in slippers and a dressing-wrap flung loosely round her.

"Are you ill?"

"No," she says, smiling.

And her cool hands, pressing mine, and her gay kisses on my cheeks are no less reassuring than the actual reply.

"But why are you not dressed?"

"I don't know; time passed and I let them bring my lunch up to me."

I look round the darkened bedroom. Through the blind which I lowered yesterday, the light enters timidly, in a thousand broken little shafts; on the table, the books still lie as I placed them; on the chimney-shelf, the flowers, withered by the heat of the fire, are fading and drooping.

All these things which had been left untouched were evidence of a lethargy that hurt me. All the emotions which I had been picturing Rose as experiencing since the day before had not so much as brushed against her. One by one, they dropped back sadly upon my heart.

I rose, moved the flowers, opened the window; and the bright sunshine restored my confidence.

"Come, darling, dress and let's go out."

A thousand questions come crowding to my lips while I help her do her hair:

"Do they look after you well? Do you feel very lonely? What are the other boarders like? Are any of them interesting?"

Her answers, sensible and placid as usual, did not tell me much, except that the food was good, that she had slept well and that she was very comfortable.

I resolved to wait a few days before asking her any more.

2

Roseline throws off her wrap and begins dressing. The water trickles from the sponge which she squeezes over her shoulders, runs down, lingers here and there and disappears along the flowing lines of her body, which, in the broad daylight, looks as though it were flooded with diamonds. A cool fragrance mingles with the scent of the roses. The room is filled with beauty.

Chapter V

1

It snowed last night for the first time; then it froze; and the trees in the Tuileries are now showing the white lines of their branches against a dreary sky. The daylight seems all the duller by comparison with the glitter of the snow-covered ground.... I slowly follow the little black path made by the sweepers; I receive an impression of solitude; the streets are very still; it is as though sick people lay behind the closed windows; and the voices of the children playing as I pass seem to come to me through invisible curtains.

Rose is walking beside me. A keen wind plasters our dresses against us and raises them behind into dark, waving banners. The icy air whitens the fine pattern of our veils against our mouth.

"Where are we going?" asks Rose.

I hesitate a little before replying:

"We are going to the Louvre."

And to put her at her ease and also to guard against a probable disappointment, I hasten to add:

"It is a picture-book which we will look at together. You will turn first to what is bright and attractive to the eye; later on, you will perceive the shades in the colour, the lines in the form and the expression in the subject. And, if at first our admiration is given to what is poor and unworthy, what does it matter, so long as it is aroused at all?"

2

We had reached the foot of the stairs that lead to the *Victory of Samothrace*. After staring at it for a minute, Rose remarked, in a voice heavy with indifference:

"It's beautiful, very beautiful."

I felt that she had no other object than that of pleasing me; but her natural honesty soon prevailed when I asked her what she admired; and she answered, simply:

"I don't know."

It is in this way, by never utterly and altogether disappointing me, that she keeps her hold on me. She sees and feels nothing of what we call beautiful; on the other hand, she is cheerfully oblivious to the necessity of assuming what she does not feel; she has no idea of posing either to herself or to others; and the strange coldness of her soul makes my affection all the warmer. By not trying to appear what she is not, she constantly keeps alive in me the illusion of what she may be or of what she will become.

We walked quickly through a number of rooms and sat down in a quiet corner. I was already under the spell of that deep, reposeful life which emanates from some of the Primitives; but Roseline, who had stopped on the way in order to have a better view of various ugly things, was talking and laughing loudly.

This annoyed me; and I was on the point of telling her so. However, I restrained myself: I should have felt ashamed to be angry with her. Was she not gay and lively, as I had wished to see her? What right have we to let ourselves be swayed by the vagaries of our instinct and expect our companion to feel the same obligation of silence or speech at any given moment? Our emotion should strike

chords so strong and true that no minor dissonances of varying temperaments can make them ring false.

Rose chattered away for a long time, speaking all in the same breath of her convent days, of her terrible godmother, of the scandal which her sudden disappearance must be creating in the village. Then she stopped; and I felt her eyes resting vacantly by turns upon myself and upon the square in the ceiling which at that moment framed a patch of grey sky studded with whirling snow-flakes. At last, she raised her veil with an indolent movement, put her hand on my shoulder and, with a long yawn that revealed all the pearly freshness of her mouth, asked:

"But what *do* you see in it?"

I slipped my arm under hers and led her away through the deserted rooms. I ought to have spoken. But how empty are our most pregnant words, when we try to express one iota of our admiration!

"Why should you mind what I see, my Roseline? It is you and you alone who can discover what you like and what interests you."

We were passing in front of Titian's *Laura de' Dianti*. I was struck with the relationship that existed between her and my companion. Although Rose was different in colouring, fairer, with lighter eyes, she had the same purity of feature, the thin, straight nose, the very small mouth and, above all, the same vague look that lends itself to the most diverse interpretations. She squeezed my arm:

"Speak to me, speak to me!"

I glanced at her. Must it always be so, would she never feel anything except when my own emotion found utterance? Impressions reached her soul only after filtering through mine. Love, I thought to myself, love alone would perhaps one day set free all the raptures now jealously hidden in those too-chaste nerves. And, in spite of myself, I exclaimed:

"Don't you think that admiration in a woman is only another form of love?"

"But when she is no longer young?" Rose retorted, with a laugh.

"When she is no longer young, nature doubtless suggests other means of enthusiasm. Her heart is no longer a bond of union between her and things. Then her calmer eyes are perhaps able to look at beauty itself, without having all the joys of a woman's love-filled life to kindle their fires."

The Rubens pictures were around us, in all their brilliancy and in all their glory, uttering cries of passion and luxury with voices of flesh and blood and youth. They were another proof of what I had just said; and I confessed to my companion:

"It is not so long ago, Rose, that I used to pass unmoved through this dazzling room where the Rubens flourish in their luscious beauty. I used to look at them: now, I see them; I used to brush by them: now, I grasp them. I enter into all this riot of happiness around us, which is a thousand miles away from you, Rose; and it adds to my own joy in life...."

"But then what has come to you?" exclaimed the girl.

I could not help smiling, for, when I tried to explain myself, it seemed to me that, in the depths of my heart, I was playing with words:

"All that hurt me yesterday has become a source of admiration to me to-day. Excess appears riches and plenty, tumult becomes orderly; and I seem to see in these works the glorification of all that we are bound to hold supreme in life: health, beauty, strength, love. Is not the exaggerated splendour of these pictures a triumphant challenge, the expression of a magnificent principle?"

We stood silent for a moment; then I added:

"We never actually realise all that we have in our minds; but one would think that this man's life and work reached the farthest bounds of his visions. Or else we are unable even to catch a glimpse of what he saw."

And, musing upon that mystery, our frail feminine imagination seemed to us like a landscape fading into the mist: when the day is clear, we can distinguish the chain of blue mountains whose summits touch the sky, but our imagination, if it would not be lost in the haze, must keep to the foreground, in the avenues laid out by man.

I resumed:

"We are very far, Rose, from the parsimony of the Primitives, each of whose works contains almost a human life. In their room and in this, you will find all the contradictory and complementary instruction which one would like to give you. Over there, sobriety, patience, assiduous effort, absolute conscientiousness in the smallest detail; life bowed in all humility, but yet steadfast and fervent; imagination and beauty that do not strive to shine: if you want a proof, look at the great number that remained anonymous! Here, on the contrary, prodigality, exultant love, blood coursing triumphantly through conquered veins. Rubens is

the apostle of wholehearted happiness. The biggest things seem easy when you are in his presence. If ever you feel tired and ready to be discouraged, you should come and look at him. Oh, I wonder, yes, I wonder to what, to whom I owe this new enthusiasm? What have I seen, what have I learnt? Through what chance acquaintance, what casual word, what gesture or action, doubtless far removed from Rubens and his works, did I suddenly enter into that wonderful kingdom?"

And, in fact, that is how it had happened. An unknown treasure falls into the cup of emotion; and the level is raised. Oh, to feel the long-slumbering sensation rise within one's self; to see that which was obscure to us yesterday become crystal-clear to-day; to love more passionately, to understand a little better, to know a little more: that is, to us women, the real progress, the only progress which we must desire and seek after! But how can I hope that Rose will progress if she never feels?

3

In vain I roamed about with her for an hour, not among the pictures, whose value she could not yet appreciate, but among the dreams that were born of them, among the most moving and delectable visions; vain my emotion, vain my rapture: no answering spark lit her indifferent eyes. True, there was no question of failure or success; I was putting nothing to the test: that would have been insanity. But why this weight of oppression on my spirits? I could not get rid of disturbing memories: memories of childish raptures finding utterance by chance; memories of those first loves which fasten upon anything in their haste to live; memories of virgin hearts nurtured on dreams!

O enthusiasm, admiration, love, if you were not at first wanderers, neither seeking nor choosing, if you did not blaze fiercely and foolishly like a flame burning in the noon-day sun, will you ever be able to light the darkness with all the splendours that are awaiting your spark in order to burst into life?

O sweet eyes of my Roseline, sweet eyes that shine under your soft, fair lashes like two opals set in pure gold, will you close for all time without having gazed for a moment upon the wonders of the earth, upon the real sky of our human life? Is it true that your beams extinguish life and beauty wherever they rest?

Chapter VI

1

It is six o'clock in the evening; I am taking Rose along the boulevards, which are so interesting at this time of the year. As usual, I am astonished at everything that does not astonish her. I look at her as she walks, beautiful and impassive; I keep step with her stride; and my thoughts hover to and fro between this life of hers which refuses to take form and my ideals which are gradually fading out of existence.

Alas, the days pass over her without arousing either desire or weariness! From time to time, I suggest some simple, trifling work for her. But, whether the task be mental or material, whether the duty be light or complex, she acquiesces in the suggestion only to make it easier for her to put it aside later, gently and as a matter of course, like tired arms laying down a burden too heavy for them.

This evening, I am merciful to her indolence. Going through the hall of her boarding-house just now, I saw the long table laid, at which the boarders meet. And I think of those destinies which have been linked with Rose's during the past fortnight, while I am still unable to obtain a clear idea of any one of them from her involved and incoherent accounts.

The house, which is in the old-fashioned style, has at the back a sort of glass-covered balcony overhanging the garden of the house next door. Here the boarders take their coffee after meals, while the proprietress, a gentle, amiable creature, strives to establish some sort of intimacy among them, to create an imaginary family out of these strangers who have come from all parts of the world with varying objects and for diverse reasons.

I know from experience the surprises latent in people like these. To look at them, one would set them down as belonging to stereotyped models: invalids, travellers, globe-trotters, runaways or students, as the case may be. I call up figures from my own recollection and describe them to Rose to encourage her to tell me her impressions. Stray reminiscences marshal themselves, images rise

before my eyes, obliterating the things and people around me, and a vision appears over which my memory plays like a reflection in a sheet of water. I see a long house and its white-and-green front mirrored in a clear lake. A man and a woman arrive there at the same time; and I tell Rose the story of the two old wanderers:

"It was very curious. Imagine those two people unknown to each other, leaving the same country at about the same age and making the same journeys in opposite directions. When I met them, they were two grey-haired, wizened figures, with the same short-sighted eyes blinking behind the same kind of spectacles. It amused me from the first to look at them as one and united beforehand, at a time when they were still unacquainted. I watched them at the meals which brought them closer together daily, as it were perusing each other with the pleasure of finding themselves to be alike, as though they were two copies of the same guide-book. In their equally commonplace minds, recollections took the place of ideas. To them, life was a sort of long classification; they recognised no other duty but that of taking notes and cataloguing. I don't know if they saw some advantage one day in uniting for good, or if they began at last to think that there are other roads to follow in the world beside those which lead to lakes, cities, waterfalls and mountains. At any rate, after a few weeks, they were sharing the same room; and we learnt that in future they meant to live side by side."

"Had they got married?"

"No. And, though they performed a very natural action with the utmost simplicity, this was certainly not due to loftiness of soul or breadth of mind. But one felt that their knowledge of the manners and morals of other civilizations had simplified their moral outlook, just as their actual physical outlook had been dimmed through seeing nature under so many aspects."

Rose began to laugh:

"There is nothing of that kind at the boarding-house," she said. "For the moment, we have no old people: nothing but students, two American women, a Spanish lady...."

Then she hesitated a little and added:

"There's an artist, too, an artist who has begun to paint my portrait."

"Your portrait! And you never told me?"

I am interrupted by a violent movement from Rose. She has turned round and, in

the gathering dusk, her whirling umbrella comes down furiously on a man's hat, smashing it in and knocking it off his head. A gentleman is standing before us, very well-dressed and looking very uncomfortable. He stammers out a vague excuse and tries to escape, but the indignant girl addresses him noisily. An altercation follows; the loafers stop to listen; a crowd gathers round us; and a policeman hurries towards us from the other side of the road. Fortunately, an empty cab passes; and I just have time to jump in, followed by Rose, who continues to brandish a threatening umbrella through the window.

Then at last I obtain an explanation of the disturbance. It appears that, without my noticing it, the man had been following us for an hour; and his silent homage had ended by incensing the girl.

I kiss her at the door of the boarding-house and walk back thoughtfully through the streets, reflecting on the surprises which that uncivilised character holds in store for me.

2

Rose had perhaps insulted a man who was simply taking pleasure in admiring her, I thought to myself. What did she know of his intentions? In any case, is not a silent look enough to keep importunity at a distance?

Generally speaking, those who go after us in this way because of the swing of our hips, or the mass of hair gleaming on our neck, or a shapely shoe under a lifted skirt, are uninteresting; and among all the coarse, silly or timid admirers whom a woman can encounter in the street there are perhaps one or two at most who will leave an ineffaceable mark on her memory. But why not always admit the most charitable construction?

3

I had been wandering a long time at random. Feeling a little tired, I turned into the Parc Monceau, at the time when it was too late for the mothers and babies and too early for the lovers' invasion. I sat down by the transparent lake which so prettily reflects its diadem of arbours. A young willow drooped in gentle sadness over the face of the water; and white ducks glided past me in the evening mist. The waning blue light mingled with the pale vapour that rises over Paris at

nightfall; and all this made a mauve sky behind the dark trees. It was soft and melancholy, but not grave; and I lingered on, amid the beauty of the scene, rapt in some woman's reverie. Then a lamp was lighted behind the bench on which I sat; and on the ground before me I saw a shadow beside my own. I understood and did not turn my head.

A man had followed me. I felt his eyes resting heavily on my profile, on my cheek and on my ungloved hands. He was evidently going to speak. Annoyed at this, I took a little volume from my pocket and, to protect my solitude, began to read.

But soon I guessed that he was reading with me; and my mind thus mingling with a stranger's passed over the words without quite following them. His persistency angered me; and I closed the book.

Then he said to me:

"Yes, you are very beautiful."

The words fell into my soul with a disquieting resonance. I rose with a flushed face and then hesitated. It was certainly one of those gross and lying pieces of flattery which we all of us hear at times. Nevertheless, I resisted the instinctive impulse that would have made me move away. Is not modesty in such a case merely another stratagem of our coquetry? We flee, the man pursues and the wrong impression is confirmed.

Standing in front of him, I frankly turned my eyes on his. Then he softly repeated the same words.

Was it the exquisite modulation of his voice? Or again were the gentle, friendly words the sudden revelation of a troubled life, a sensitive soul ready to pour itself out in a single phrase and longing to crystallise itself in one unparalleled second? They surprised me, those words of his, they seemed to me new words, grave words, because I had not believed that it was possible to speak them in that way to a stranger, to speak them in a voice that asked for nothing.

My whole attitude must have betrayed my twofold astonishment. My eyes questioned his. Their expression underwent no change. He was really asking for nothing. Then I smiled and answered, simply:

"I thank you. A woman is always glad to be told that."

Taking off his hat, he rose and bowed. I moved away with a slight feeling of discomfort: would he commit the stupidity of following me? Had I made a

mistake? No, he resumed his seat. He had not blundered either.

4

When two people do not know each other and will not meet again, the words exchanged between them, if they are not mere commonplaces, become fraught with a strange significance and leave behind them a trail of melancholy like a mourning-veil; it is the surprise of those voices which speak to each other and will never be heard again, the fleeting encounter between glance and glance, the smile which knows not where to rest and yet would fain enrich the remembrance with a ray of kindness.

The essential image of a human life is contained in a moment like that. It awakens, hesitates, seeks, thinks that it has found, speaks a word and relapses into nothingness.

CHAPTER VII

1

Rose's profile stands out in relief against the dark velvet of the box. Her soft, fair hair parts into two waves that are like two streams of honey following the curve of her cheek. Her long neck is very white in the black gown that frames it; and her gloved hands rest near the fan that lies opened on her knees like a swan's wing. She is sitting straight up, with her eyes fixed in front of her. Her attitude is as dignified and cold as a circlet of brilliants on a beautiful forehead.

I am alone, at the back of the box. I prefer to listen like that, in the shadow, unseen. Is not the attention of a woman who is anything of a coquette, that slight, fitful attention, always affected a little by the thought, however unconscious, of

the effect which she is producing?

2

I am struck by the general attitude of reverence. In the great silence through which the music swells, the lives of all those present seem penetrated with harmony.

I look at them as at so many open temples, which their thoughts have deserted in order to join one another in an invisible communion. There is a kind of homage in the bent heads and lowered eyes of the men. The women are silent. The fans cease fluttering. The souls of the audience are uplifted like the silent instruments of a human symphony that mysteriously rises and rises till it mingles with the other and is absorbed in it. If some part of us exists beyond words and forms, if our thought sometimes floats in regions of pure mentality, is it not this principle deprived of consciousness which bathes in the tremulous waves of sound?

3

And Rose is also listening. But Rose listens without hearing. She, whom the most beautiful things leave unmoved, here preserves an appearance of absolute attention better than any one else in the audience. She listens in that passive manner which is characteristic of her nature. She lives a waking sleep. There is no consciousness, no effort, but neither any desire.

When the orchestra fills the house with a song of gladness, I forget my anxiety and let my imagination soar into its heights and weave romances around that strange, cold beauty; but, if the music stops, if Rose moves or speaks, then it comes to earth again with some simple little plan, quite practical and quite ordinary.

4

She leant forward and I saw glittering under the electric lamp the little silver chain which she wore round her neck on the day when I saw her first, in the Normandy cornfields, standing amid the tall golden sheaves; and, as I recalled

that first impression, the difference between then and now came like a blinding flash. In the cool morning breeze, the sickles advance with the sound and the surge of waves; and the golden expanse bows before the oncoming death. The sky is blue, the village steeple shimmers in the sunlight, a great calm reigns ... and a woman stands there, bending over the ground. What have I done? What have I done? Was not everything better so?

CHAPTER VIII

1

"It looks like snowing," says Rose.

The words falling upon an absolute silence distract me from my work.

It is a dull, drab winter's day. There is no colour, no light in the sky that shows through the muslin blinds. On the branches of the bare trees, a few dead leaves, which the wind has left behind, shiver miserably at some passing gust. There is just enough noise for us to enjoy the peace that enfolds the house. From time to time, carriage-wheels roll by and the crack of a whip cuts into our silence; then the dog wakes, sits up, looks questioningly at me and quietly puts his nose back between his paws and begins to snore again. Rose is sitting opposite him, on the other side of the fire-place. She is holding a book in her hands without reading it. Her beautiful eyes are staring dreamily at the fitful flames.

I rose and went upstairs to fetch a volume which I wanted. Both of them, the dog and she, accompanied me, yawning and stretching themselves as they went. They stood beside the book-case, like two witnesses, equally useless and equally indispensable, and watched me searching. I shivered in the cold room. Rose gave a little cough; and the dog tried to curl himself up in the folds of my skirt.

Then we all three went down again; and, when I had gone back to my place, they

docilely resumed theirs on either side of the chimney.

The dog, before settling down, turned several times on his cushion, arching his back, with his tail between his legs and his critical nose quivering with satisfaction. Rose also has seen that her armchair is as comfortable as it can be made. Now, lying back luxuriously, with her elbows on the rests and her head on a soft cushion, she is evidently not much troubled at the thought of a long day indoors.

2

In the two months since Rose left Sainte-Colombe, I have drilled her into an intermittent attempt at style which is the utmost that she will ever achieve, I fear; for her will, unhappily, is incapable of sustained effort. When she has to hold herself upright for several hours at a time, I see her gradually stooping as though invisible forces were dragging her down.

Certainly, it is no longer the Rose of Sainte-Colombe who is here beside me. How much of her remains? Her general appearance is transformed by her clothes and the way in which she wears her hair; her voice and gestures are softer; but all this minute and complex change is but the subtle effect of events, the disconcerting effect of an influence that has laid itself upon her nature without altering it in any way. And this is what really causes my uneasiness. She is changed, but she has not changed.

I take her with me wherever I have to go. She accompanies me on my walks and drives, in my shopping, to the play. Men consider her beautiful, but her indifference keeps love at a distance: love, the passion in which I placed, in which I still place the hopes that remain to me.

3

As for Rose herself, she is always pleased, without being enthusiastic, and never expresses a wish or a desire.

I sometimes laugh and say:

"You have a weatherproof soul; and your common sense is as starched as your Sunday cap used to be!"

But at heart she saddens me. To keep my interest in her alive, I find myself wishing that she had some glaring fault. And at the same time I am angry with myself for not appreciating the exclusiveness of her affection better. I am actually beginning to think that this extravagant sentiment is fatal to her. I look upon it in her heart as I look upon the great tree in my garden, which interferes with the growth of everything around it: fond as I am of that tree, I consider it something of an enemy.

CHAPTER IX

1

This afternoon, the whole atmosphere of the house is changed. There is no silence, no work. The maid fusses about, spreading out my dresses before Rose and me. We cannot settle upon anything.

"We shall have to try them on you," I say.

But at the very first our choice is made.

A cry of admiration escapes me at the sight of Rose sheathed from head to foot in a long green-velvet tunic that falls heavily around her, without ornament or jewellery. From the high velvet collar, her head rises like a flower from its calyx; and I have never beheld a richer harmony than that of her golden hair streaming over the emerald green.

While I finish dressing her, we talk:

"You are having all your friends," she says.

"Some of them, those who live in Paris at this season. I have done for you to-day what I seldom care to do: I have asked them all together. But I have made a point of insisting that the strictest isolation shall be maintained."

Rose laughed as she asked me what I meant.

"It's quite simple," I answered. "We shall throw open all the doors; and there will be no crowding permitted! No general conversation, no loud talking ..."

"In short," she exclaimed, "the exact opposite to the convent, where we were forbidden to talk in twos."

"That is to say, where you were forbidden to talk at all; for there is no real conversation with more than one. As long as you have not spoken to a person alone, can you say that you have ever seen her?"

She did not appear convinced; and I continued:

"But just think! Conversation in pairs, when two people are in sympathy—and they are nearly always in sympathy when they are face to face—can be as sincere as lonely meditations."

I felt that she shared my sentiment; but her reasonable nature makes her always steer a middle course, never leaning to either side.

2

The pale winter sun is beginning to wane, but there is still plenty of daylight in the white drawing-room. And I look at my friends, who have formed little groups in harmony with my wishes and their own. When an increased intimacy brings us all closer together, the party will gain by that earlier informality. Each life will have been given its normal pitch and will try at least to keep it. For our souls are such sensitive instruments that they can rarely strike as much as a true third.

Blanche, with the agate eyes and the cloud of chestnut hair, is a picture of autumn in the brown and red of her frock, with its bands of sable. She is listening attentively to Marcienne. The fair Marcienne herself, whom I love for her passionate pride, is sitting near the fire-place; and her wonderful profile stands out against the flames. Her mouth is a fierce red; but the figure which shows through the pale-coloured tailor-made dress is full of tender childish curves. The swansdown toque makes her black hair seem blacker still. She is talking seriously and holding out to the flames her fingers covered with rings.

The wide-open door reveals the darker bedroom, in which the lights are already turned on. A young married woman is sitting with her elbows on the table. She is

reading a poem in a low voice; and from time to time a few words, spoken more loudly, mingle with the semi-silence of the other rooms. Bending under the lamp-shade, her brown hair is bathed in the light, while her profile is veiled by her hand and the lines of her body are lost in the dark dress which melts into the shadow. Near her, leaning against the white wall, two white figures listen and dream.

I see Rose. She is standing, all emerald and gold, in the middle of the next room. Behind her, a mirror reflects the copper candelabra whose lighted branches surround her with stars. A placidly-smiling Madonna, chaste and cold, dazzling and glorious, she talks to the inseparables, Aurélie and Renée.

Renée, clad in deep mourning, is a delicious little princess of jet, with lint-white hair and flax-blue irises. Her companion, crowned with glowing tresses, knows the splendour of her green eyes and, with a cunning fan-like play of her long eyelids, amuses herself by making them appear and disappear.

My attention is recalled to the visitor by my side, a young Dutchwoman not yet quite at home in France. She is shy in speaking and she does not know my friends. I look at her. Her fair round face is quaintly framed in the smooth coils of her golden hair. Her eyes are a cloudless blue. Her nose, which is a little heavy and serious, belies the smiling mouth, with its corners that turn up so readily. The very long and very lovely neck makes one follow in thought the hollow of the nape and the slope of the shoulders vanishing in a snowy cloud of Mechlin lace. On the deliberately antiquated black-silk dress, a gold chain and a miniature set in brilliants give the finishing touch to a style classic in its chastity. Seated in a grandfather's chair in the embrasure of the window, she reminds one of Mme. de Mortsauf in Balzac's *Lys dans la vallée*.

But she is also the very embodiment of Zealand. You can picture her head covered with a lace cap and her temples adorned with gold corkscrews. Behind her you conjure up flat horizons, slow-turning wind-mills, little red-and-green houses in which the inmates seem to play at living. How charming she looks in the last rays of light, at once childish and dignified, passive and romantic ... and so different from the rest!

But has not each her particular interest, her special grace? When my eyes go from one to another, they tell a rosary of precious beads, each with its own peculiar beauty, neither greater nor less than its fellows! What a glad and wondrous thing it is to be women, to be delicate, pretty things, infinitely sensitive and infinitely varied, living works of art, matter for kisses, the realised

stuff of dreams! When you look at them like that, solely in the decorative sense, you are ready to condemn those who work, who think and who concentrate upon an aim of some sort, for these superfine creatures carry the reason for their existence within themselves, so great is the perfection which they achieve with a gesture, an attitude, a glance. And then you reflect upon what they too often are in the privacy of their lives: narrow and domineering, attached to petty, useless duties, their minds lacking dignity, their souls lacking horizon; and you are sorry that they have not grown, through the sheer consciousness of their beauty, into ways that are kindly and generous.

I let my hand rest lightly on Cecilia's hands; and in the sweetness of the gathering dusk we both dream. Like the scent of flowers, the different natures seem to find a more precise expression as their shapes fade. I explain them to Cecilia, who does not know them.

Aurélie and Renée draw my eyes with their laughter; and I begin with them. They are the careless lovers, idle for the exquisite pleasure of idleness. They live a dream-life, the life of a child that sleeps, dresses itself, goes for a walk, eats sweets and plays with its dolls. They are good-natured as well as frivolous, lissom of mind as well as of body, indulgent to others and charming in themselves. Love, resting on their young and tender lives, makes them more tender yet, like the light that lingers long and fondly upon a soft-tinted pastel.

Next comes the turn of Marcienne, who, greatly daring, has broken with her family and given up worldly luxury, to work and live freely with the man of her choice.

Beside her is Blanche, still restless and undecided, attracted by love and irritated by her sister Hermione, who pursues a vision of charity and redemption.

Here my friend's fine profile turns to the other groups; and I continue:

"The one whom we call Sister Hermione you can see in the dark bedroom, reading under the light of the lamp, with her face hidden in her hands."

"Is she good-looking?"

"Very, but tries not to seem so. That is why she is always so simply dressed."

Cecilia interrupts me:

"But her dress isn't simple!"

"You are quite right. It is made complex by a thousand superfluous fripperies. Hermione has not been slow to understand that, to counteract perfect beauty, you

must read simplicity to mean commonplace triviality."

A flutter of silk, a gleam of a silver-white skirt in the waning light, a whiff of orris-root; and Marcienne glides down to our feet with a lithe, cat-like movement. In a curt, passionate tone, she says:

"You are speaking of Hermione. Oh, do try and persuade her sister not to go the same way: is not one enough? Must more loveliness be wasted?"

Sitting on a cushion on the floor, she raises her glowing face, her eyes dark as night, her scarlet mouth, her dazzling pallor.

"I shall do nothing of the sort," I answer with a laugh, "for I rather like Hermione's folly; besides, her reason will soon conquer it! The dangers we run depend on chance; the first roads we take depend on influences. The way in which we bear those dangers and return from those roads: that is where the interest begins!"

"But, tell me," murmurs Cecilia, "what does your Hermione want?"

"Here is her story, in a couple of words," says Marcienne. "She is rich, beautiful and talented; and she belongs to an aristocratic English family. At twenty, she yielded to an impulse and went on the stage; in a few months, she was a really successful actress; then she made the acquaintance of a Hindu high-priest. He came and went; and she followed him. During the last two years, she has been his faithful disciple."

"But what does she preach?"

Marcienne made a vague gesture:

"Buddhist doctrines! She believes that she possesses the true faith and tries to hand it on to others. In the few days which she has spent in Paris, she has already made two converts, those two innocents who are hanging on her words. It would all be charming, you know, if her creed did not enjoin chastity and if, by holding those views, she did not risk the awful fate of never knowing love!"

Marcienne continued, still addressing herself to my new friend:

"Do you see those pretty creatures in white, standing close to Hermione? They are two orphans, two girls who fell in love with the same man. I don't know the details of the romance, nor can I say whether it was fancy or passion that guided the man's choice. All I know is that he loved one of them and had a child by her. A little while after, he deserted her. Thereupon their unhappy love reunited those two hearts which happy love, as always, had divided. The same devotion and

kindness made them both bend over the one cradle. Oh, the adorable pity that prompted Anne's heart on the day when, hearing her baby call her mamma for the first time, she sent for her sister Marie and, holding towards her those little outstretched arms, those eyes in which consciousness was dawning, that little fluttering life seeking a resting-place, she offered the maid, in the exquisite mystery of that first smile, the first name of love! From that time onward, the baby grew up between its two mammas as one treads a sunny path between two flowering banks."

Marcienne had a gift for pretty phrases of this kind, which she would let fall not without a certain affectation. She liked talking and I liked listening to her. I asked her what she thought of Rose. She praised her beauty highly and even said the occasional awkwardness of her movements made it more uncommon:

"For that matter," she added, "if it were not so, I should try to be blind to it. A woman must understand that she lowers herself by belittling her sisters. How immensely we increase man's ascendancy by never praising one another!"

I began to laugh:

"Alas, I would not dare to say that the wisest among us, in extolling our own sex, are not once more seeking the admiration of some man!"

And Marcienne, who has been to such pains to release herself from the worldly surroundings amid which she suffered, goes on speaking long and passionately. There is a note of pain in her voice as she says:

"Everything separates us and removes us one from the other, education even more than instinct. If woman only knew how she lessens her power by blindly respecting the petty social laws of which she is nevertheless the sole judge and dictator! Whereas she hands them down meekly, from mother to daughter, with all their wearisome restrictions, and grows indignant if some one bolder ventures to transgress them. And yet it is in this domain, which is hers, that she might extend her power by gradually overthrowing the old idols."

And she also says:

"Almost always, in defending a woman, we have occasion to strike a mortal blow at some ancient prejudice. For my part, I must confess that I take a mischievous delight in bestowing special indulgence on things which often are too severe a test for that indulgence in others; for, rather than be suspected of impugning ever so lightly some worn-out principle, they will wound and wound again the most innocent of their sisters."

3

It is almost dark. I leave my companions in order to call for the lamps and I stop near Rose as I pass through the next room. Here, all the girls are clustered round Hermione, who is telling them a story of her travels.

Anne and Marie are listening respectfully, while the two inseparables, only half-attentive, are sharing a box of sweets.

Roseline throws her arms round me and, shrugging her shoulders, says:

"All this strikes me as such utter nonsense!"

She is certainly right, with her Normandy common sense; but does she not need just a touch of this same nonsense to bring her faculties into play, her powers into action?

4

When I return to the drawing-room, Blanche calls me with a laugh of delight:

"Oh, look!" she cries. "I've found a book with a portrait of my beloved Elizabeth Browning. Look at that sweet, gentle face, surrounded with ringlets: it's just as I imagined her. I love her all the better now."

They had opened other books written by women and, leaning over the table, were comparing the frontispiece portraits of the authors, interesting or handsome, grave or smiling, young or old. Even so do certain little volumes of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries open nearly always with an engraving faded by time and representing charming faces all of the same class and often with similar expressions and features: a delicate nose, a bow-shaped, smiling mouth, intelligent eyes with no mysterious depths, dimpled cheeks, a string of pearls round the neck, a loosely-tied kerchief just revealing a swelling bosom, wanton curls dancing against a dark background in a frame of roses upheld by Cupids. And the quiver and the arrows and the flying ribbons and the turtle-doves: all this, joined to the letters, the maxims or the verses, often grave or even sad, sometimes calm and reasonable, sometimes passionate, brings before us in a few strokes the harmonious picture of woman's life.

"It is no longer the fashion in these days," murmured Blanche. "And yet is there not an intimate relation between a woman's work and her appearance?"

"That is the reason, no doubt," replied Marcienne, "why it seems, unlike man's, to grow smaller as it passes out of the present. We see the immortal pages disappear like the fallen petals of a flower. It's sad, don't you think?"

Struck with the beauty of her closing words, we listened to her in silence. She continued to turn the leaves at random and resumed:

"But, oh, the exquisite art which a woman's work can show when she is not only beautiful, but truly wise, when a lovely hand indites stately verse, when a life holds or breathes nothing but high romance ... and love! For it is love and love alone that makes a woman's brain conceive."

Cecilia, who was gradually losing her shyness, made a gesture to silence us and said, slowly:

"I'll tell you something!"

A general peal of laughter greeted this phrase with which the young Dutchwoman, according to the custom of her country, always ushers in her least words. To make yourself better understood by slow and absent minds, is it not well to give a warning? It is a sort of little spring that goes off first and arouses people's attention. Then the thought is there, ready for utterance. And sometimes, amid the silence, an announcement is made that it will be fine to-morrow, or that it is hot and that a storm is threatening.

But Cecilia is much too clever to cast aside those little mannerisms of her native race which so charmingly accentuate her special type of beauty. So she joined in our laughter with a good grace and, after repeating her warning, observed, in her hesitating language, that, by thus admitting ourselves to be the mere creatures of love, we were justifying the opinion of the men who treat us as "looking-glasses."

"Looking-glasses? Men's looking-glasses? And why not?" I exclaimed. "It is not for us women to decry that looking-glass side of us. It is serious, more serious than you think, for on the beauty of our reflection often depend our ardour, our courage, our very character and all the energies that create or affect our actions. Besides, whether men or women, we can only reflect one another and we ourselves do not become conscious of our powers until the day of the supreme love, as if, till then, we had only seen ourselves in pocket-mirrors which never reflect more than a morsel of our lives, a movement, a gesture ... and which always distort it!"

Every mouth quivered with laughter. I insisted:

"If women often have so much difficulty in learning to know their own characters, it is because most men are scornful mirrors, occupied with nothing smaller than the universe and never dreaming of reflecting women except in a grudging and imperfect fashion."

"It is true," said Marcienne, thinking of her lover, a man whose domineering temper often made him unjust to her. "Men's lives would be less serenely confident if our amiable and accommodating souls did not afford them a vision incessantly embellished by love ... and always having infinity for a background!"

And, with a satirical smile, she added:

"Let us accept the part of looking-glasses, but let us place our gods in a still higher light! They will not complain; and we shall at least have the advantage of seeing beyond them a little space and brightness."

The conversation then assumed a more personal character, each of us thinking of the well-beloved: Marcienne, ever mournful and passionate; the gentle Blanche, anxious, secretly plighted to an absent lover; and Cecilia, all absorbed in her young happiness with the husband of her choice.

5

Hermione and her cluster of girls had gradually come nearer. She dresses badly, she does her hair with uncompromising severity, but, in spite of it all, Hermione is very beautiful; and her loveliness triumphs over her commonplace clothes, even as her generous heart and the noble restlessness of her mind keep her on a plane which is loftier than the narrow dogmas of her creed.

During a moment's silence, I hear her answer a question put by Rose:

"Oh, what does it matter if I am wrong, as long as I make others happy!"

And all my friends, like a sheaf of glowing flowers, seemed to be bound together by that word of loving-kindness. Were they not all, these bestowers of joy, living in a world into which neither sin nor error entered, their lives obeying the same eternal principles of love, following the sacred law of nature which fills our hearts with tenderness and our bodies with longing?

6

They were now able to talk together. Their remarks would not be vain, ordinary or frivolous. During the first moments of isolation, each of them had pursued her own thoughts and continued her own life. Each had reached that perfect diapason at which the most antagonistic spirits are in supreme unison. Heedless of different objects or of diverse aims, the same yearning for generosity, the same thirst after graciousness and beauty united their hearts; and their minds, leaping all barriers, came to an understanding of one another in a region beyond opinions. All these young and beautiful creatures, all these forms fashioned for delight exhaled an atmosphere of love. Were they not all alike its votaries?

One alone, in a fiercer glow of enthusiasm and with a doubtless finer sensualism, one alone attempts to offer up her life to a God! The glorious folly of her! How I love to see her, vainly tormenting her beauty, seeking infinity, aspiring to bear peace across the world. I see her soul like a walled garden in which all the flowers lift themselves higher and higher, struggling to offer themselves to a moment of light. But, in a day of greater discontent and in an hour of maturity, the illusory fence will fall and the fair life will stand in open space. Then, drunk with boundless earth and boundless sky, the woman, restored to nature, will doubtless find herself more attuned to pleasure than were the others and more responsive to joy.

I looked at all those bowed heads, dark or fair, dusky or golden, those lovely forms revealed by their clinging robes, those delicate profiles bent over the portraits and writings of their sisters, far-off friends, vanished, unknown or absent, whose power of love still lives for all men and for all time ... immortal tears, petals dropped from the flower.

Then my glistening eyes turned towards my Roseline. She was there, indifferent, unmoved, perhaps secretly bored.

And my thoughts wept in my heart.

The most beautiful things cannot be given.

CHAPTER X

1

I had been out of town for a time. Returning to Paris a day sooner than I intended, I wished to give Rose the pleasure of an unexpected arrival and I went to see her that same evening. Though it was not more than ten o'clock, the lights were already out in the strictly-managed boarding-house. There was a row of brass candlesticks on the hall-table. The man-servant wanted to give me one; but I was impatient, thanked him hurriedly and ran upstairs in the dark.

I could not have told why I was so happy; for, though I should not have been willing to confess it, I had long lost all my illusions about the girl. But she was so beautiful; and her passive temperament left so much room for my fancy! I never made any headway; but at the moment it always seemed to me as if I were heard and understood. I used to write on that unresisting life as one writes on the sand; and, the easier I found it to make the impress of my will, the faster was it obliterated.

When I reached the floor on which Rose's bedroom was, I stopped in the dark passage. A narrow streak of light showed me that her door was not quite shut. Then, gathering up my skirts to deaden their sound, I felt along the wall and crept softly, on tip-toe, so as to take her by surprise. With infinite precautions, I slowly pushed the door open. I first caught sight of a corner of the empty bed, with its white curtains still closed; then of a candle-end burning on the table and of flowers and a broken vase lying on the ground. What could she be doing?

I was so far from imagining the truth that I do not know how I beheld it without betraying my presence by a movement or a sound. There was a young man in the room.

I saw his face, straight opposite me, near the guttering candle. A man in Rose's bedroom! A friend, no doubt; a lover, perhaps! But why had she never mentioned him to me? I had been away a month; and in not one of her letters had she ever spoken of him. A friend? A lover? Could she have a whole existence of which I knew nothing? Could her quiet life be feigned? But why?

At the risk of revealing my presence, I opened the door still farther; and then I saw her profile bending forward. Thus posed, it stood out against the black marble of the mantel-piece like a cameo. Rose had let down her hair, as she did every evening. Her bodice was unfastened; and the two golden tresses brought

forward over her breast meekly followed the curve of her half-exposed bosom. She was not astonished, she was not even excited. She seemed to acquiesce in the man's presence in her room; it was no doubt customary.

And suddenly, amid the thousand details that engaged my attention, a light flashed across me: was not Rose's companion one of the boarders in the house, perhaps that painter of whom she had told me, the one who made a sketch of her head which she brought to me a few days after her arrival in Paris?

His eyes never left her. He watched and followed her every movement, whereas she, in her perfect composure, did not seem even to heed his presence. And that was what struck me: Rose's impassiveness in the face of that anxious and silent prayer. Did she not see? Could she not understand? I almost longed to rush at her and cry:

"But look, open your eyes; that man is entreating you!... If you do not share his emotions, at least be touched by his suffering; if not your lips, give him a glance or a smile!"

Oh, how like her it all is! And how the anxious pleading of the wooer resembles the vain waiting of the friend! But, alas, what in my case is but a disappointment of the heart, a tiresome obstacle to the evolution of an idea, is perhaps in his case a cruel and lasting ordeal!

Suddenly, he falls on his knees before the girl. With his shaking hands, he touches her breast; then he kisses it gently. She does not repel him, but her bored and absent expression discourages any amorous action and withers the kisses at the very moment when they alight upon her flesh. Then he half-raises himself to gaze at her from head to foot; and with all his ardour he silently asks for the consenting smile and the word that gives permission.

I shall never forget his look, the superb animal look, brilliant, glowing and empty as a ball-room deserted by the dancers, the superb, outspoken look that accompanies the gift of life and seems to flee its mystery at the moment when it approaches.

He stammered a few tender words. His voice thrilled me. It was grave and clear as a bronze and silver bell. It rang true, for the most ephemeral desire is not false. I knew, by the sense of his words, that Rose had not yet given herself.

Sullenly and as though annoyed by the soft words, she brought the dark stuff of her bodice over her white bosom. To the young man it was like a cloud passing over the sky; and, whether or not because the girl's resistance exasperated him,

he suddenly pressed her to him, sought her lips and made her bend for a moment under the violence of his embrace. But, with an abrupt movement, with a sort of vindictive rage, she succeeded in releasing herself.

Then I fled from the house.

2

I did not recover myself until I was on the quay outside and felt the cold night-air against my face. My skirt was trailing on the ground; my hands made no movement to hold it up.

With my disgust and resentment there was mingled a vague feeling of remorse. Was it not I who had taught the girl the shamelessness that admits desire and the prudence that refuses to submit to it? Had I not wished for her, above all other treasures, the power of judging, appreciating, choosing?

Yes, but when I had talked of choosing, I had never imagined that the choice could be made in cold blood! So far from that, it had seemed to me that no more dangerous or painful experience could visit a woman's heart. The victory of mind over instinct and of will over desire is the price of a hideous, abnormal struggle opposed to the very law of our nature. A sad victory baptised with tears, a sacred preparation for the noble defeat that is to crown a woman's life!

Besides, it was not her refusal that revolted me, for we cannot judge an action of which we do not know the reasons; it was her demeanour, her horrible indifference. The ugliness of the scene would not have offended me, I reflected, if the woman had been in any way troubled by it; if I had seen her resist her own desire or at least deplore that which she was unable to share; if I had seen her struggle for a sentiment or suffer for an idea, however absurd or wild! But Rose had had neither tears nor compassion; and the blind instinct that always prompts us to give our lives had not tempted her.

I continued to see that face of marble. I heard those impassive words. I pictured that body which felt no thrill, that mouth which abandoned itself without giving itself. No, I had never taught her anything of that kind; for, however light the pain which we cause and whatever its nature, we are forgiven only if our own heart feels a deeper wound. I did not understand her conduct. What had prompted it? To what chains of weakness had her soul stealthily attached itself, that soul which I had jealously protected against all principles and prejudices?

What secret limits had she assigned herself despite my watchful care to give her none?

I felt grieved and disappointed; and yet ... and yet I walked along with a certain gladness in my step. The tears trembling on my lashes were not tears of helplessness, but of a too-insistent energy, for they came above all from my overwrought nerves. My mind saw clear and rent my remorse like a superfluous veil.

No, I was not responsible! Our thought, once expressed, no longer belongs to us. Whether it leave us when scarce ripe, because an accident has gathered it, or whether it fall in its season, like the leaf falling from the tree, we know nothing of what it will become; and it is at once the wretchedness and the greatness of human thought to be subjected to the infinite forms of every mind and of every existence.

I walked for a long time without heeding the hour. The sky was clear and the stars glowed in its depths like live things; in the distance, the Trocadéro decked the night with brilliants.

And, little by little, hope returned to me. I was persuaded that over there, in the little room which my care had provided for Rose, love would yet be the conqueror. She would awaken under those kisses. My Roseline should yet know passion and rapture. Love would triumph. It would do what I had been unable to do, it would breathe life into beauty! And, in the dead stillness, I kept hearing the kisses falling, falling heavily, like the first drops of a storm.

Chapter XI

1

We are talking like old friends, he and I, in the little white bedroom. Through the two curtains of the window high up in the wall a great ray of sunshine falls, a column of dancing light that dies on the table between us. I sit drumming absent-mindedly with my fingers in the shimmering motes. He looks at me and I feel no need to speak or to turn my head. The novelty of his presence makes no impression on me beyond a feeling of surprise that I do not find it strange. When by chance we do not hold the same view, the difference of opinion lasts only long enough to shift the thought which we are considering, even as one shifts an object to see its different aspects one after the other.

I came to the boarding-house this morning to see Rose. Her room was empty. I was on the point of going, when the young man passed. He recognised me, doubtless from the portraits which Rose had shown him; and he came up to me of his own accord. His greeting was frank and natural. There were breadth and spaciousness in his eyes and his smile as well as in his manner. To justify my friendly interest, I pretended to have heard about him from Rose as he himself had heard about me: that is to say, with the most circumstantial details regarding position, occupations and all the externals of life. He did not therefore enter into explanations about things of which I was ignorant and we at once began to talk without any formality.

What a strange and delightful sensation it was! I remembered all that I had noticed about him the night before; I knew his character from admiring its gentleness and patience under the supreme test of unrequited love, of desire that awakened no response. And he was now talking to me from the very depths of his soul, while I knew nothing of who or what he was, nor of what he was doing here. I was really seeing him from the inside, as we see ourselves behind the scenes of our own existence, without ever knowing exactly the spectacle which we present to others. I was observing the inner working of his life before I had seen the outward presentment.

Speaking to me of his profession, he told me, with a smile, how little importance he attached to his painting:

"It is only a favourable pretext for the life I have chosen. As you know, my greatest passion is nature; and I cannot but like the work which trained my eyes to a clearer vision and my nerves to a finer response."

He told me of the years which he had wasted in seeking in the customary amusements the joys which are ordinarily found there. He told me of the life of luxury and idleness which he had led until the day came when adverse fate reduced him to living on the income from a small estate which he owned in the country: a thrice-fortunate day, he added, for from that moment he had understood that he was made for solitude, meditation and all the quiet pleasures of nature. Then he enthusiastically described to me the peaceful charm of his little house and he employed the words of a lover to extol the charm of his willow-swept river and the wonders of his flowers and bees.

2

Then I wanted to know what he thought of Rose. He judged her not inaccurately; but, with a lover's partiality, he applied the words balance, gentleness, equanimity to qualities which one day, when the scales had fallen from his eyes, he would call lack of heart and feeling. Deep-seated differences, perhaps, but yet not of a nature to affect the very sound principles that ensured his tranquillity.

He had no illusions as to the quality of her mind. But to him, as to most men, a woman's intellectual value was but a relative factor; and he did not pause to estimate it with any attempt at accuracy, preferring to repeat:

"She will not disturb the silence of my life; and her beauty will adorn it marvellously."

He had a way of speaking which I liked. He knew how to refine his words by means of his expression. If they were very positive, his voice would hesitate; if too grave, a faint smile would lighten their sombreness. If he spoke ironically, his boyish eyes softened any touch of bitterness in the wisdom of the satirist.

I did not like to think that the success of his wooing would mean the end of his labours. Rose would never become the independent, perfect woman of my dreams, capable of preserving her personal life in the midst of love and in all circumstances. Alas, my ambition had soared too high! Henceforth, I must wish

nothing better for her than this purely ornamental fate.

"Do you love her?" I asked.

"I was taken captive at once by her beauty," he answered. "She objected that this sudden love must be an illusion; and I tried for a time to think the same. But, before long, suffering taught me the sincerity of my love. I dare not say whether it is senseless or right or usual; but, as long as a feeling gives us nothing but joy, we are unable to recognise it, we doubt it, we smile at it as a light and fleeting thing. Let anguish come, however, with tears and dread; and it is as though the seal of reality were placed on our heart. Then we believe in our love."

I repeated, pensively and happily:

"Do you really love her?"

"Yes, I can say so honestly."

He hesitated a little and, speaking very slowly, as though picking his words from amid his memories, said:

"When we are sincere, we are bound to confess that the love which encircles all the movements of our body follows the movements of its strength or its weakness equally. It has its hours of exasperation, it is sometimes a tide that rises and floods everything: the past, the present, the future, the will, the spirit, the flesh. Then all becomes peaceful; the waves subside and we think that we love no more. We do love, however, but with a more detached joy. We have stepped outside love, as it were, and we contemplate its extent."

My breath came quickly and my hands, clasped on the table, were pressed close together. My heart was bursting with gladness for my Roseline. He saw my emotion and questioned me with deeper interest.

I replied without hesitation:

"I am happy in this love which comes to Rose so simply and candidly."

He pressed my hand as he said:

"Sometimes, on reading certain passages in your letters, I used to fear that you might be opposed to my intentions...."

I began to laugh:

"Yes, you will have read fine views concerning independence; and a tirade against the women who surrender too easily; and any number of things more or less contrary to your hopes. But do you not agree with me that our principles are

at their soundest when they are least rigid and that our noblest convictions are those of which we see both sides at once? Woman even more than man must not be afraid of handling her morality a little roughly when occasion demands it, just as she sometimes ruffles her laces for the pleasure of the eyes, easily and naturally and without attaching too much importance to the matter."

3

He listens to my words as I listen to his, with surprised delight. We feel as if we were playing with the same thought, for it flashes from one life to the other without undergoing any alteration.

In point of fact, the human beings whom we see for the first time are not always new to us. True, we have never seen each other before, but our sympathies, our enthusiasms, inasmuch as they are common to both of us, have met more than once; and, now that we are talking, the form of our thoughts also corresponds, for, without intending it, we often look at the most abstract things objectively, because he is a painter and I a woman.

Oh, I know no more exquisite surprises than those chance meetings which suddenly bring you a friend at a turning in life's road! It is like a charming landscape which one has seen in a dream and which one now finds in reality, without even having hoped for it. You speak, laugh, recognise each other and above all you are astonished and go on being astonished, adorably and shamelessly, like children.

What we had to say was all interwoven, as though we were both drawing on the same memories. We were speaking of those friends of a day whom accident sometimes gives us and whom the very briefness of the emotion impresses deeply on our heart. They are there for ever, in a few clear, sharp strokes, like sketches:

"For instance, you go on a matter of business to see somebody whom you don't know. You chafe with annoyance as you cross the threshold. In spite of the material duty which you are performing, you consider that it is so much time wasted. Then, for some unknown reason, the atmosphere seems kindly. You find familiar things in the room where you are waiting: a picture which you might have chosen yourself, books which you know and like, things which look as if your own hand had arranged them. And you forget everything. With your forehead against the pane, you look at the roofs of the houses, at the streets, at all

that little scene which is the constant companion of an existence which you do not know and with which you are about to come into touch; and your heart beats very fast, for a sort of foresight tells you that a friend is going to enter the room."

"That's quite true; and sometimes even we have already met him at some house or other; but then his mind displayed itself in a special attitude, inaccessible, motionless, lifeless, like a thing in a glass case. Now, we see him before us, in his own surroundings; and everything is changed. He has a smile which is made of just the same quality of affection as our own, a look instinct with the same sort of experience, a laugh that cheerfully faces like dangers, a mind responding to the same springs. And we talk and are contented and happy; and, when the sun enters at the window or when the fire flickers merrily in the hearth, we can easily picture spending the rest of our life there, in gladness and comfort. Anything that the one says is received by the other with an exclamation of delight. Yes, we have felt and seen things in the same way; and this little fact, natural though it may seem, is so rare that it appears extraordinary!"

With an abrupt movement that must be customary with him, my companion shook his head to fling back his thick hair, which darkened his forehead whenever he leant forward:

"And very often," he said, "you don't see each other again, or at least you don't see each other like that, because time is too swift and because everybody has to go his own road."

The bright shaft of sunlight was still between us. It came now from a higher point of the little window. In the shimmering dust, I conjured up the faces of scarce-seen friends. There were some whose features had become almost obliterated; but beyond them, as one sees an image in a crystal, I clearly perceived the ideas, the life, the soul that had for a moment throbbed on exactly the same level as my own.

I replied, in a very low voice:

"We remain infinitely grateful to people who have given us such minutes as those!"

And then, certain of hearing myself echoed, I cried, delightedly:

"Egoists should always be grateful and responsive, for gratitude is nothing but happiness prolonged by thought...."

"Yes, that is the whole secret of the responsive soul: to have sufficient impetus not to stop the sensation at the place where the joy itself stops."

"To have simply, like the runner, an impetus that carries us beyond the goal...."

4

Thus were our remarks unrolled like the links of one and the same chain; and yet how different were our two existences! His was devoid of all restlessness and agitation; and mine was still in need of it. His intelligence was active, but not at all anxious to appear so. For him, meditation was the great object; and, when I expressed my admiration of a modesty impossible to my own undisciplined pride, he replied, in all simplicity:

"Do not look upon this as modesty. The over-modest are often those whose pride is too great to find room on the surface."

"If I were a man or an older woman than I am," I said, laughingly, "I would choose your destiny; but, for the time being, I feel a genuine need to satisfy my youth and to give it a few of the little pleasures that suit it."

He tried to jest, like most men who disapprove of the trouble which we take to please them by making ourselves prettier or more brilliant; but at heart he was as fond as myself of feminine cajolery and frivolity.

"You are full of pride," I exclaimed, "when you have accomplished some noble action or produced some rare work of art; then why should not women be happy at realising in their persons consummate beauty and grace? It is very probable that, if Plato or Socrates had suddenly been turned into beautiful young creatures, their destiny would have been different from what it was; it is even exceedingly probable that wisdom would have prompted them very often to lay aside their writings and come and contemplate their charms in the admiration of men!"

I quoted the words uttered by a woman who had known and loved admiration in her day:

"If life were longer, I would devote as many hours to my body as I now do to my mind; and I should be right. Unfortunately, I have to make a choice; and my very love of beauty makes me turn to that which does not fade...."

5

We should certainly have gone on talking for hours and without tiring; but suddenly we both together remembered that Rose must be waiting for me at my house and I rose to go.

As I did so, I said:

"I happen not to know your Christian name. What is it?"

"Floris."

Floris! That name, so little known in France but very frequent in Holland, surprised me; and I had some difficulty in not saying:

"Then you are not a Frenchman?"

But all that I said was:

"Floris, you shall have your Rose!"

CHAPTER XII

1

Going down the stairs, I laughed to myself and said:

"It is really one of love's miracles, that that man should be interested in Rose. And yet, to a philosopher, does not that beautiful girl offer a very unusual sense of security? From the point of view of the life which I had planned for her, she is a failure; but will she not be perfect in the eyes of a lover, of a man who expects nothing from her but an occasion for dreams and pleasure?"

Filled with gladness, I hastened my steps. Although it was the end of winter, it was still freezing; and it was pleasant to hear the sound of my feet on the hard ground. I also noticed the noises of the street: they were sharp and distinct; and in the crisp air things were all black and white, as though etched in dry-point.

For a moment, my dream vanished; then suddenly I became aware of it and I rifled a shop of its flowers and jumped into a cab in order to be with my Roseline the sooner.

2

Rose and Floris! The delicious combination filled my heart to bursting-point. Is it not always some insignificant little accident that sets our impressions overflowing? Like a child, at the last minute, I had felt a wish to know what he was called; and I was delighted to find that it was a name full of grace and colour. Now all my thoughts clustered around those harmonious syllables. Those remarkable eyes, that dark hair with its faint wave, that sensitive heart, that profound intellect, powerful and yet a little tired, like a tree bowed down with fruit: all this went through life under the name of Floris!

Then I saw once more his face, his gentleness, his profound charm; and I never doubted the girl's secret assent. In my fond hope, I went to the length of imagining that she had wished to choose her life for herself, independent of my influence; that she had at last understood that, in order to please me, she must first assert her liberty, without fear of hurting or vexing me. It was an illusion, certainly; but there are times when joy thrusts aside reason in order to burst into full blossom, even as in moments of sorrow our despair often goes beyond reality to drain itself to the last drop in one passionate outpouring.

3

Rose was sitting in the drawing-room, waiting for me. I rushed in like a mad thing, without knowing what I was doing. My laughter, my flowers, my words all came together and fell upon her like a shower of joy. In one breath I told her of my indiscretion of the night before, of those stolen sensations, of my anguish, of my life at a standstill, waiting on theirs, of my delightful talk with Floris, of the sympathy between us and lastly of my conviction that happiness was being offered to her here and now.

Then I noticed that she said nothing; and, begging her pardon for my incoherence, I tried to express in serious words the future that awaited her. But all those glad impressions had dazzled me; I was like some one who comes suddenly from the bright sunshine into a room. Shadows fell and rose before my

brain as before eyes that have looked too long at the light; and I could do nothing but kiss her and repeat:

"Believe me, happiness lies there! Seize it, seize it!"

At last she murmured, wearily:

"No, I can't do it."

I questioned her, anxiously:

"Perhaps there is some obstacle that separates you? Do you dislike him?"

"No, I know his whole life and I have nothing against him."

"Well, then ...?"

I tried in vain to obtain a definite reply. Her soul was shut, walled in, almost hostile. Was she refusing herself, as she had once given herself, without knowing why? Or else was my vague intuition correct and was a latent energy escaping from that little low, square forehead, white and pure as a camellia, a force of which she herself was unaware and which no doubt would one day reveal to me the final choice of her life?

I made her sit down and, kneeling beside her, questioned her patiently and gently as one asks a sick child to describe the pain which one is anxious to relieve. Silently, gazing vaguely into space, she let herself rest on my shoulder. The flowers fell from her listless hands. Some still hung to her dress, with tangled stalks. Red carnations, mimosa, tuberose, narcissus, hyacinths drunk with perfume, guelder-roses and white lilac wept at her feet.

I rose slowly and looked at her, my heart aching for the heedless one who dropped the joys which chance laid in her arms!

PART THE THIRD

CHAPTER I

1

The reason why we judge people better after a lapse of time is that, when we look at them from a distance, there is no confusion of detail. The main lines of their character stand out, relieved of the thousand little alterations and erasures which the scrupulous hand of truth is constantly making as it passes hither and thither, now rubbing out, now redrawing, until at last the impression is no longer a very clear one.

From the day when I separated my life completely from the life of Rose, her character appeared to me distinctly; and at the same time, now that it was free to come down to its own level, it asserted itself in its turn. Until that moment, while I had been careful to put no pressure upon her, I had nevertheless been asking her to choose her tastes and occupations on a plane that was unsuitable for her.

Her moral outlook was good, true and not at all silly, but it was limited; and, in trying to make her see life swiftly and from above, as though in a bird's-eye view, I had made it impossible for her to distinguish anything.

Her fault was that she had not been able to change, mine was that I had had too much faith in her possibilities. My optimism had wound itself around her immobility and fastened to it, even as ivy coils around a stone statue, without communicating to it the smallest portion of its sturdy and luxuriant little life.

2

And now it is six months since we parted; and I am going to-day to see her for the first time in her new existence.

I look out of the window of the railway-carriage; and my mind calls up memories which glide past with the autumn fields. First comes the departure of Floris, wearied by the incomprehensible attitude of the girl. He went away shortly after our meeting, still philosophical and cheerful, in spite of his disappointment. And the part which he played in my experiment taught me something that guided my efforts into a fresh direction: if Rose's beauty was to him sufficient compensation for her commonplace character, could not I also accept the girl as something out of which to weave romance and beauty? Does not everything lie in the mere fact of consent? Passive and silent, would she not become a rare object in my life, a precious stone?

"Woman blossoms into fullest flower by doing nothing," some one has said. "Women who do not work form the beauty of the world."

I took Rose to live with me and for weeks devoted myself exclusively to her appearance and her manners. I sought if possible to perfect the exterior. It was all in vain. This beautiful creature was so totally ignorant of what beauty meant that she was constantly deforming herself; and I at last gave up the struggle.

Sadly I remember the last pulsation of my will. It happened in the silence of my heart; and life went on for a little while longer. Would it not have been hateful to send Rose away, as one dismisses a servant? And what act, what fault had she committed to deserve such treatment? When it would have been so sweet to me to give her everything, for no reason at all, how could I find a solid reason for taking everything from her?

So I said nothing to her; we had none of those horrible explanations which set bristling spikes on the barriers—inevitable barriers, alas!—which dissimilarities in taste or character raise between people. There are certain persons who cannot bear to make any change without a preliminary explanation. They seem to carry a sort of map in their heads: on the far side of the frontier that borders the friendly territory lies the enemy; and it needs but a word, a gesture, a difference of opinion for you to find yourself in exile. Alas, have we not enough with all the limits, demarcations, laws and judgments that are perhaps necessary to the world at large? And must we lay upon ourselves still others in the intimate relations of life?

I had no right to set myself up as a judge and I could not have pronounced sentence. I waited. And, my will being no longer in the way, circumstances gradually led my companion to her true destiny better than I could have done.

She was bored. She was not really made to be a purely decorative object. In spite of her trailing silk or velvet dresses, twenty times a day I would find her in the larder, with a loaf under her arm and a knife in her hand, contentedly buttering thick slices of bread, which she would eat slowly in huge mouthfuls, looking straight before her as she did so.

She was bored; and I was powerless to cure this unfamiliar ill. I looked out some work for her in my busy life. She wrote letters, kept my accounts, hemmed the maids' aprons. Soon she was running the errands. One day she answered the front-door.

I still remember that moment when she came and told me, in her pretty, gentle way, that there was some one to see me in the drawing-room. I do not know why,

but that insignificant incident suddenly revealed the truth to me. I was ashamed of myself and turned away my head so that she should not see me blush. Poor child, she was unconsciously lowering herself more and more daily. She was becoming my property. I was making use of her.

Without saying anything, I at once began to search for something for her. I hesitated between first one thing and then another; but at last chance came to my aid. Country-bred as she was, the girl was losing her colour in the Paris air; she was ordered to leave town. She knew a family at Neufchâtel, in Normandy, who were willing to take her as a boarder for a few weeks. She went and did not come back.

3

What did she do there, how did she spend her time? She wrote to me before long that she was quite happy, that she was earning her livelihood without difficulty. There was a little linen-draper's shop, it seemed, kept by an old maid, who, having no relations of her own, had taken Rose to assist her at first and perhaps to succeed her in time.

I was not at all surprised. For that matter, when we follow the natural evolution of things, their conclusion comes so softly that we hardly notice it. It is the descent which we are approaching: it becomes less steep at every step and, when we reach it, it is only a faint depression in the ground.

4

Strange temperament! The more I think of it, the more it appears to me as an instance of the dangers of virtue, or at least of what we understand by the word. Does it not look as though, in the charts of our characters, the virtues are the ultimate goals which can be reached only by the way of our faults? Each virtue stands like a golden statue in the centre of a cross-roads. We can hardly know every side of it unless we have beheld it from the various paths that lead to it. It shines in a different manner at the end of each road.

Rose never became conscious of her good qualities, because she possessed them too naturally; and she remained poor in the midst of all the riches which she was unable to discern.

Oh, if only she had been less wise and had had that ardour, that flame which feeds on all that is thrown upon it to extinguish it; if she had had that inordinate prodigality which teaches us by making us commit a thousand acts of folly; if, in short, she had had faults, vices, impulses of curiosity, how different her fate would have been! The equilibrium of a person's character may be compared with that of a pair of scales; and it is safe to say that, by weighing more heavily upon one of these, our defects raise our good qualities to their highest level.

5

But every minute is now bringing me nearer to this life which I am at last to know; and I gaze absent-mindedly at the Bray country, that lovely country red with the gold of autumn. By force of habit, my nerves spell out a few sensations which my thoughts do not put into words. My heart is beating. Now, with no idea or purpose in my mind, I am speeding with a full heart towards the girl who was at least the inspiration of a splendid hope and above all an incentive to action.

CHAPTER II

1

I arrived at Neufchâtel at the gracious hour when the sun is paling; and I was at once charmed with the kindly aspect of this little Norman town.

The house-fronts gleaming with fresh paint, the pigeons picking their way across the streets, the grass growing between the cobble-stones, the flowers outside the windows and doors, a cleanliness that adorns the smallest details: all this is so calm and so empty that our life at once settles there as in a frame that takes with

equal ease the happy or the sad picture which we propose to fit into it.

It reminds me of Bruges, whose infinite, patient calm is a clean page on which the visitor's life is printed, happy or distressful at will, since there is nothing to define its character. It also has the silence of the little Flemish towns, with their streets without carriages or wayfarers. The gardens look as though they were artificial; and in the frame of the open windows we see interiors which are as sharp as pictures.

Leading out of the main street is a mysterious little alley, dark and badly paved. It runs upwards and ends in a clump of trees arching against the blue of the sky. There is no visible gate or doorway. I turn up it. All along a high wall hang old fire-backs, bas-reliefs of cracked, rusty-red iron, once licked by the flames, now washed by the rain.

I loiter to examine the subjects: coats of arms, trophies of weapons, or allegories and half-obliterated love-scenes. It is curious to see these homely relics thus exposed in the street, conjuring up the peaceful soul of families gathered round the hearth. From over the wall, the air reaches me laden with hallowed fragrance. I picture the box-bordered walks on the other side.

Then I climb higher; and, when I come to the trees, I find a charming surprise. The public gardens lie in front of me. In the shade of the public gardens we seem to find the very spirit of a town; it is to the gardens or to the church that our curiosity always turns in the first place. Here is the walk edged with stone benches on which old men and old women sit coughing and gossiping; here mothers bring their work, while their children run about; and in the centre, at the junction of the paths, is the platform where the regimental band plays on Sundays.

The Neufchâtel gardens are in no way elaborate: a number of avenues have been cut out of an ancient wood; and that is all. There are no shrubs; just a patch of dahlias, with a ridiculous little iron railing round them. But its whole charm lies in its picturesque situation up above the town. In between the tall trees with their interlacing boughs, one can see the slopes of the hills, the plains, the meadows, the gleaming roofs and the church with its twin spires piercing the blue of the sky. Then, in the foreground, I see, behind the houses, the little gardens whose breath reached me just now. They are there, divided into small plots of equal size, simple or pretentious, sometimes humble kitchen-gardens, but sometimes also a patchwork adorned with grottoes, arbours and glass bells.

Rose mentioned a garden which brightens her little home. Suppose it were one

of these!... A woman appears over there: she is tall and fair-haired. She stoops over a well; I cannot make out her features. She draws herself up again. Oh, no, her figure is clumsy, her hair looks dull and colourless and her clothes vulgar. Rose would never dress like that, in two colours that clash! Rose would never ...

I wander into a delicious reverie. How infinitely superior Rose is to all these people whose lives I can picture around me. Two women sit cackling beside me on the bench: they are at once guileless and bad, with their mania for eternally wagging tongues that know no rest. A little farther on, a good housewife is shaking her troublesome child; a stout, overdressed woman of the shop-keeping class is flaunting her finery down one of the walks; a priest passes and, while his lips mumble prayers, his eyes, held in leash by fear, prowl around me; one of his flock curtseys to the ground as she meets him.

A protest rises in my heart at each of the little incidents: is not Rose rid of all that? Rose long ago gave up going to mass and confession. She has lost the hypocritical sense of shame, knows neither envy nor malice and is a stranger to all ostentation.

I often used to reproach her with her extreme humility. How wrong I was! I now think that this humility can achieve the same result as pride itself. One looks too high, the other too low; but both pass by the petty vanities of life and either of them can keep us equally indifferent to those vanities.

2

I rose from my seat with a happy heart. The time had come for me to go in search of her. I would kiss her in all gratitude. Had she not enlarged my will to the extent of making it admit her little existence?

I went through the silent streets, in search of the charming, old-world name that was to tell me where the aged spinster lived. Rose had said that I should see it written over the door in blue letters and that it was opposite a place where they sold sportsmen's and anglers' requisites, a shop with a sign that would be certain to attract my attention.

I therefore walked along with a sure step and suddenly, at a street-corner, saw a great silver fish flashing to and fro in the breeze at the end of a long line. Soon I was in a quiet backwater of the town. There it was! Opposite me, the last gleams of the setting sun shed their radiance on a very bright little house covered with a

luxuriant vine. On one side, in the same golden light, the name of Isaline Coquet smiled in sky-blue letters.

The shop was white, with pearl-grey shutters; and on the ledges were bunchy plants gay with pink, starry flowers. In the window, a few starched caps looked as if they were talking scandal on their respective stands.

I walked in. The opening of the door roused the tongue of a little rusty bell, but nobody came. On a big grandfather's chair, near the counter, were a pair of spectacles and a book. Perhaps Mlle. Coquet had run away when she caught sight of me through the panes; Rose said that she was shy and a little frightened at the thought of my coming visit. And I had the pleasure of looking for my Rose as I followed the mysterious turns of a primitive passage.

The walls were spotless and the red-tiled floor shone in the half-light. I crossed a neat little kitchen, just as a cuckoo-clock was chiming five, and found myself on the threshold of a small room opening on a garden. Rose was sitting in the wide, low window.

The noise of the clock no doubt deadened the sound of my steps, for the girl did not turn her head. The room exhaled a faint perfume as of incense and musk; and I seemed to hold all her peaceful little life in my breath and in that swift glance. All that I could see of her face was one cheek and the tips of her long eyelashes. Placed as she was in front of the light, a golden haze shaded the colours of her beautiful hair; and I lingered in contemplation of the long and graceful curve of her figure bending over her work. She was sewing in the midst of floods of stiff white muslin, which formed a chain of snow-clad peaks with blue reflections around her. I looked at the low-ceilinged room with its whitewashed wall and its rows of bodices, petticoats and shiny caps hanging on lines stretched from one side to the other. A grey tom-cat lay purring on a corner of the table; and, near it, in a well-scrubbed pot, a pink geranium displayed its sombre leaves and its bright flowers.

Rose was sewing. At regular intervals, her right arm rose, drew out the thread and returned to the spot whence it started: an even and captive movement symbolical of the amount of activity permitted to women! But was she not to choose that movement among all others?

We dine in her bedroom. What a surprise her room held in store for me! Rose had arranged it herself, in harmony with the simplicity which I loved.

Brightly-painted wooden shelves make patches of colour on the white walls; the furniture is rustic; and the curtains of white muslin with mauve spots complete the frank and artless harmony of the room. How little this was to be expected from Mlle. Coquet's shop!

Then, on Rose's table, the books I gave her fill the place of honour. I dare say that she never reads them; and yet I am glad to see them here.

Rose goes to and fro between our little table and the kitchen. She looks pretty, she smiles. The slowness of her movements is no longer lethargic; it simply exhales an air of repose, a perfume of peace that suits her beauty. Her eyes have fastened on me at once and, as in the old days, never leave me.

Is it the tyranny of habit that used to prevent me from reading anything in them? Now, those eyes that ingenuously drink in my life as the flowers do the light, those eyes not veiled by any shadow, constantly bring the tears to mine. She sees this and fondly lays her head on my shoulder, whispering:

"I did nothing but expect you, darling, only I had given up hoping...."

This term of endearment, which she addresses to me for the first time, as if, being no longer subject to any effort, she were at last yielding to the sweets of friendship, this expression and my Christian name, which she utters lovingly, complete the pleasantness of the evening.

I feel happy amid it all. We who were brought up in the country never lose our appreciation of its peaceful charm. It bows down our lives as we bow our forehead in our hands to think beyond our immediate surroundings; and from its narrow circle we are better able to judge the expanse which has become necessary to us.

4

The night rises, things fade away. The sky is a deep blue in the frame of the open window. Rose brings the lamp:

"It was the first companion of my solitude," she says, reminiscently; then, laughing, "the companion of my boredom, the companion of those long, long evenings...."

"But now, dearest?..."

"Ah, now, the days are too short: I have a thousand duties to perform, my dear little old woman to look after, my customers, my flowers, my animals; then, in the evening, we often have a caller: the priest, the notary, the neighbours...."

Then, suddenly fearing that she has hurt me, she adds, in a caressing tone:

"When I am with them, I am always talking about you, so as to comfort myself for the loss of you; for that is my only sorrow."

5

An hour or two later, sitting in the garden, we watched the stars appearing one by one. Our arms were round each other; our fair tresses were intermingled. We were at the far end of the town. We heard the sounds of the country ringing in the transparent air; and the crystal voice of the frogs, that small, clear note falling steadily and marking time to our thoughts. We were quiet, like everything around us, unstirred by a breath of wind.

Rose spoke of her happiness; and I never wearied of inhaling that delicious tranquillity. I had been thinking of settling her future for her. And what an inestimable lesson I was learning from her! Rose was one of those whose road must be marked from hour to hour by a little duty of some kind or another. It is thus, by limiting themselves, that these characters arrive at knowing and asserting themselves. She said, blithely, "my room," "my garden," "my house;" and I smiled as I reflected that I had once struggled to rid that mind of all useless bonds.

6

What a mistake I had made! In order to find her life, she had had to earn it and to recognise it in the very things that now belonged to it, to mark every hour of it with humdrum tasks, to create for herself little troubles on her own level, difficulties which her good sense could easily overcome. There was nothing unexpected, nothing far-reaching in her life, never an event beyond the tinkle of the shop-bell announcing a customer, a little bell with a short, sharp, cracked ring, stopping on a single note without vibration, as though it were the very voice of the little souls which it excited.

In contrast with this humble destiny, I considered my own full of difficulty and agitation, so crowded and yet doubtless equally empty; I followed in my mind's eye the lives of my friends; and I reflected that the nature of us women, alike of the most wayward and the most direct, is too delicate and too complex for us easily to keep our balance in a state of complete liberty.

"When we achieve it," I said to Rose, "it is thanks to a close and constant observation of ourselves; for woman never has any real moral strength. Self-sacrifice and kindness alone lend us some, because our capacity for loving knows no limit: our strength is then a loan which we make to ourselves at difficult moments by a miracle of love. Once the crisis is over, we have to pay ... with interest!"

"In Paris," said Rose, "even from the very first, I had a feeling that I should never dare to move in the absolute liberty that was offered me. You are not angry with me?"

"How could I be? We were both wanderers, you and I, where circumstances led us, both of us with a passion for sincerity, both of us with the best of intentions. A cleverer mind than mine would doubtless have saved you from going out of your way. It had many unnecessary turnings. But perhaps they had their uses...."

"Yes," replied my friend, wisely, "for without them, I should not have been so certain that my choice was right...."

7

Around us the mysterious life of the night was gradually awaking. All the animals that shun the daylight were beginning to stir. A hedgehog brushed against my skirt. In the grass, two glowworms summoned love with all their fires. The smell of the garden became overpowering. Our movements and our words throbbed in a scented air. Rose leant towards me:

"There is one thought that troubles me," she said. "Have I discouraged you? Will others better equipped than I still find you ready to lend them a helping hand?"

"Why not, Roseline?" And I would have liked to put my very soul into the kiss which I gave her. "No, you have not discouraged me. The only thing that matters is to have the power to choose what suits us. Then alone is it possible for us to develop ourselves without restraint. With your limited horizon, you are freer, darling, than when you were living with me, at the mercy of all the fancies

which you did not know how to use. Everything is relative; and instinct makes no mistakes. Yours, by placing you here among the lives which I can imagine, gives you the opportunity of excelling. You felt that you needed to live under conditions in which the effort and the merit would lie in not changing, in which action would be immobility. You know, Rose, there is always some common ground in human beings; to reach it, if you do not stoop, the others will raise themselves. With your beauty which is the wonder of every one you meet, with that gentleness which wins all hearts and with your soul which no longer knows either malice or prayer, you will be a new example of life to all around you."

Rose was sitting on a higher chair than mine; and this allowed me to let my head sink into her lap. I no longer dreamt of looking at the splendour of the night, for was it not throbbing in my heart, where a star woke every moment? And I thought out loud:

"You were always asking me the object of my efforts. Do you now understand that I could not explain what I myself did not understand perfectly until you revealed it to me?"

I reflected for a moment and continued:

"We can wish nothing for others nor force anything on them: we can only help them to clear the field before and within themselves...."

She murmured:

"I understand."

And I cried:

"Ah, my dearest, how grateful I am to you! In looking for you, I have found myself a little more; and it is always so; and that, you see, is why we must love action. However tiny, however humble, it may be, it brings us at the same time the knowledge of others and of ourselves. We appear to fling ourselves stout-heartedly into the stream whose currents we cannot foresee; we are hurt, we are wounded, we struggle; but, when we return to the bank, we feel invigorated and refreshed."

Roseline stroked my forehead lightly with her hands and softly whispered:

"There was nothing lacking to my peace of mind but your approval. Now I am happy and I can begin my life without anxiety."

Chapter III

1

Rose was still asleep when I entered the drowsy bedroom to bid her good-bye. A small, heart-shaped opening in the middle of the shutters allowed the first ray of daylight to penetrate. Sleeping happily and trustfully, with streaming hair and hands out-flung, she lay strewn like the petals of a flower. I laid my lips on hers and softly went away.

As I climb the slope that leads out of Neufchâtel, I turn and look down once more on the little town that slumbers everlastingly in its rich peace. Just there, by the church, I picture the house with its grey shutters, its white front and its starched caps behind the flower-pots. Beyond, the green horizons and the blue hill-sides stand clearly marked in the dawning sun; and I gaze and gaze as far as my eyes can see, through my lashes sparkling with tears.

For all her lethargy, her slumber as of a beautiful plant, the soul of my Rose is wholesome, wholesome as those meadows, those fields, all that good Norman earth which gave her to me miserable only to take her back happy and free. Certainly, Rose has not been able to achieve the strength that makes use of liberty: in that life, still so young, the will is a dead branch through which the sap no longer flows. At any rate, what she does possess she will not lose; she is one of those who instinctively hold in their breath so as not to tarnish the pane through which a glimpse of infinity stands revealed to them. Her soul could not take in unlimited happiness, it had to feel a touch of sorrow in order to taste a little joy. There are many like her, people who perceive that the light is good when they come out of the darkness, but who are not able to recognise the light in the radiant beauty of the noon-day fields.

The sun rises as I slowly make my way up-hill; the wood along the road is still wet with the dawn. It offers me its autumnal fragrance; I breathe it in, I gaze at its golden tints, I think of Rose, of her past and her future. But, beyond my dreams, an unformed idea seems to spread like a clear sky, without outline,

without colour, without beginning or end; and I have a secret feeling that I shall try again.

2

I shall go towards other strangers. I shall seek at random among hearts and souls! Fearlessly, in spite of censure and derision, I shall lavish my confidence in order to win that of others. I shall not linger over the vain pleasure of discovering the traces of my power. We can pour out our influence boldly: it is a wine that excites no two souls in a like manner; and we are always ignorant what the nature of the intoxication will be, whether fruitful or barren, blithe or cheerless.

I shall go towards other strangers; I understand now that my sole ambition is to bring life within their reach. What matter what their thoughts, their loves, their wishes, if at least they have acquired the taste and the means of thinking, loving and wishing?

Shall I ever succeed in evolving from this passion of mine a method, a system that will make my action less blind and uncertain? I think not.

In a life that never offers us anything logical or foreseen, our moral nature must needs resemble a drapery that is folded backwards and forwards over events, souls or circumstances. Let us ask no more than that it be beautiful and soft, strong and light, submissive to the least breath and ready to be transformed at its command. Nothing but an essential principle of humanity and loving-kindness can serve as a foundation for our actions, without ever confining them.

3

On the one hand, we have effort, nearly always vain; on the other, knowledge, which is the second look that makes us discern the ordinary, the commonplace, where at first we beheld beauty and charm. Nevertheless, let us worship effort and knowledge above all things.

Let us act as simply as the little wave that lifts itself and breaks against the rock. Others come after it; and it is their light kisses which, all unseen, end by biting into the granite.

THE END

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