

DURAS CLAIRE DURFORT

OURIKA

Claire Duras
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Содержание

INTRODUCTION	4
OURIKA	8
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	15

Claire Duras

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INTRODUCTION

A few months had elapsed since I quitted Montpellier to follow my profession as physician in Paris, when I was sent for one morning to attend a sick Nun at a convent in the Faubourg St. Jacques. Napoleon had a short time since permitted several of these convents to be re-established: the one I was going to belonged to the order of the Ursuline Sisters, and was opened for the education of young females. Part of the edifice had been destroyed during the Revolution. The cloister was laid bare on one side by the demolition of an antique chapel, of which but a few arches remained. One of the nuns led me through this cloister. As we traversed it I perceived that the broad flat stones that paved it were tombs: they all bore inscriptions half effaced; some were broken, others quite torn up. I had never yet seen the interior of a convent, and felt curious to witness a scene so new to me. My conductress led the way into the garden, where she said we should find our sick patient. I beheld her seated at a distance at one end of a bower, almost entirely enveloped in a long black veil. "Here is the physician," said her companion, and immediately left us. I approached timidly, for my heart had

sickened at the sight of the tombs; and I fancied that I should now contemplate another victim of the cloister. The prejudices of my youth had just been awakened, and a considerable interest excited in my mind from the kind of malady I had imagined for her. She turned towards me, and I was singularly surprised on beholding a black woman. Her polite address and choice of words increased my astonishment, "You are come, Sir, to visit a very sick person," said she, "and one who greatly wishes to get better, though she has not always wished it, and that perhaps has been the cause of her long sufferings." I questioned her as to the nature of them. "I feel," replied she, "continual oppression and fever, and sleep has quite forsaken me." Her emaciated appearance confirmed this account of herself. Her figure was tall, but indescribably, meagre. Her large brilliant eyes and very white teeth lit up the rest of her features. It was plain that violent and lengthened grief had worn her frame, though her soul still retained its powers. Her melancholy aspect moved me. I resolved to exert every means of saving her, and mentioned the necessity of subduing her evidently heightened imagination, and diverting her mind from what might give it pain. "I am perfectly happy!" cried she; "I have never felt so happy and so calm as I do at present." The sweet and sincere tone in which this was uttered persuaded me, though it again surprised me.

"That you have not always thought yourself happy is evident," said I; "you bear the marks of heavy sufferings." – "True; but my mind is tranquil now, though it has been long in finding repose."

– "Since it is so, then, let us try to cure the past; but can I hope for success when I know not the disease?" – "Alas! must I own my folly?" cried she, her eyes filling with tears. "You are not happy!" exclaimed I. "I am," replied she, gathering more firmness; nor would I change my present happiness for the state I once envied. I have no secret; my misfortune is the history of my whole life. My sufferings were so continual until I entered this abode that they have gradually undermined, my health. With joy did I feel myself wasting away, for I had no prospect of happiness in life. This guilty joy has been punished, for now that I desire to live, I have scarcely a hope of it left."

I soothed her apprehensions with the promise of speedy recovery; but whilst uttering the consolatory words a sad presentiment came over me, warning me that Death had marked its victim.

I continued to attend the young Nun, and she appeared not insensible to the interest I took in her fate. One day she returned of her own accord to the subject I longed to be enlightened upon. "My sorrow," said she, "would appear of so strange a nature, that I have always felt reluctant to confide it. No one can be a perfect judge of the feelings of another, and our confidants soon become accusers." – "Fear not," cried I, "can I doubt the reality of your grief, when I behold its effects upon your person?" – "Ah! real it has been, but not the less unreasonable." – "Let us even suppose it so. Does that prevent sympathy?" – "I have feared so; but if to cure the effect of my sorrows it is necessary you should

know their cause, some time hence, when we are a little better acquainted, I will confide it to you."

I renewed my visits still oftener at the convent, and the remedies I prescribed appeared to do my patient some good. In short, one morning, finding her seated alone in the same bower where I had first seen her, I renewed the subject, and she related to me the following history.

OURIKA

I was brought over from Senegal by the Governor, the Chevalier de B., when about two years old. He took compassion on me one day as he stood witnessing the embarkation of some slaves on board a negro transport ship then going to sail. I had lost my mother, and I was carried on board the vessel, in spite of my violent screams and resistance. He bought me, and on his return to France shortly after gave me to his aunt, the wife of the Marshal de B. She was the most amiable woman of her time, and united an elevated and highly refined mind to the most exemplary virtue. To save me from slavery, and choose for me such a benefactress as Madame de B., was twice bestowing life upon me. Such was my ingratitude towards Providence, that I was not made happy by it. But is happiness always the result of the development of our faculties? I think not. How often does the knowledge we acquire teach us to regret our days of ignorance! Nor does the fable tell us that Galatea received the gift of happiness with that of life.

I was not told the early circumstances of my life until long after they happened. My first recollections always bring Madame de B.'s drawing-room to my mind. I used to pass my life there, doted on by herself, praised and caressed by her friends, who loaded me with presents, and exalted to the skies my wit and graces.

The tone of her society was animated gaiety; but gaiety from which good taste had excluded all exaggeration. What deserved praise always met with it, and what deserved blame was generally excused; nay, from excessive leniency erroneous notions were often suffered to pass for right ones. Success gives courage, and every one was sure of being estimated a little above their real worth, by Madame de B.; for, without knowing it, she lent them a part of her own, and after seeing or listening to her people, fancied themselves like her.

Dressed in the Eastern fashion, and seated on a little stool at Madame de B.'s feet, I used to listen to the conversation of the first wits of the day long before I could understand it. I had no childish petulance. I was pensive ere I began to think. I was perfectly happy at being by the side of Madame de B. To love her, to listen to her, to obey her, and above all, to look at her, was all that I desired. Neither a life of luxury, nor accomplished society, could astonish me; I knew no other, but I insensibly acquired a great contempt for every other sphere than the one I lived in. Even when a child, the want of taste would shock me. I felt it ere I could define it, for habit had made it necessary.

Thus did I grow up to the age of twelve years without an idea of any other kind of happiness than that I possessed. I felt no pain at being a negress. I was continually praised and admired, and nothing ever suggested its being to my disadvantage. I seldom saw any other children; and the only one who was my friend, did not love me the less on account of my colour.

Madame de B. had two grandsons; the children of her daughter who had died young. Charles, the youngest, was about my own age. We spent our infancy together. He was my protector and my adviser in all my little faults, but he went to school when he was eight years old. I wept at parting. This was my first sorrow. He seldom came home, yet I often thought of him. Whilst he pursued his studies, I was ardently engaged in acquiring the accomplishments necessary to complete my education. Madame de B. resolved to make me perfect in every talent. My voice was thought worthy of the instruction of the first masters; a celebrated painter, one of my benefactress's friends, undertook to guide me in his art; English and Italian were familiar to me, and Madame de B. herself presided over my reading. She formed both my mind and judgment. By conversing with her, and discovering the beauties of her soul, my own grew elevated, and admiration was the first source of my own intelligence. Alas! how little I then foresaw that these delightful studies would be followed by so many bitter hours! My sole thought was how to please Madame de B., and a smile of approbation on her lips the only recompense I wished for.

However, constant reading, and, above all, the study of the poets, began to inflame my young imagination. My thoughts sometimes wandered upon my own future life; but with the confidence natural in youth, I felt assured that I should always be happy with my benefactress. Her tenderness towards me, and the bewitching life I led, contributed to confirm my error. A single

instance will show the pride she took in me. You will perhaps scarcely believe that my shape was once remarkable for its beauty and elegance. Madame de B. often boasted of my grace, and had been anxious to have me dance well. Under pretext of giving a ball for her grandchildren, she resolved to show off my talent in a quadrille, representing the four parts of the world, in which I was to perform Africa. Travellers were consulted, books of costume resorted to, and works read upon African music and dancing: at last the Comba, a national dance of my own country, was fixed upon. My partner put a crape over his face. Alas! I had no need of any to blacken mine; but this was far from my thoughts, they were wholly engrossed by the pleasures of the ball. I danced the comba with the greatest success, as might be expected, from the novelty of the spectacle, and the choice of spectators, who were all friends of my protectress, and to please her, gave way to the most enthusiastic applause. The dance was in itself sufficiently attractive, being composed of graceful attitudes and measured steps, expressing love, grief, triumph, and despair. I was totally ignorant of these violent passions; yet from instinct I guessed them, and my imitation succeeded. I was surrounded by an applauding assembly, and overwhelmed with praise. This was a pleasure that I enjoyed in the most perfect security. It was my last.

A few days after this ball had taken place, I overheard by chance a conversation, which awakened me to the truth, and at once put an end to my youth.

Madame de B. had a lacker screen in her drawing-room, which hid one of the doors, and extended beyond the window. Between the door and this window there was a table where I used frequently to draw. I sat down one morning, to work at a miniature there; my attention became so completely absorbed that I remained for some time motionless, and no doubt Madame de B. concluded that I had left the room when the Marchioness de C. was announced. This lady possessed a penetrating judgment, but her manners were trenchant, positive, and dry. She was capable of great devotion to her friends, but at the same time was inquisitive, and hard to please: in short she was the least amiable of Madame de B.'s friends. I feared her, though she had always shown a regard for me; that is, in her own way. Severity and investigation were its signs. I was too much accustomed to indulgence, not to fear her justice. "Now that we are alone, my dear," said this lady to Madame de B., "let me speak to you of Ourika. She is a charming girl; her mind is nearly formed; she possesses wit, infinite natural grace, and very superior talents; but what is to become of her? What do you intend to do with her?" "That is the very thought that distresses me," cried Madame de B. "I love her as my child: I should think no sacrifice too great to make her happy, but the longer I reflect upon her situation, the less remedy I find for it. Alas, poor Ourika! I see thee doomed to be alone – eternally alone in the world!"

It would be impossible for me to describe the effect these few words produced upon me; lightning could not have been more

prompt. I discovered the extent of my misery. I saw what I was – a black girl, a dependant, without fortune, without a being of my own kind to whom I could unite my destiny; belonging to nobody; till now, the plaything of my benefactress, but soon an outcast from a world that I was not made for. I shuddered, and my heart beat so violently, that, for a moment, I could not attend to this conversation, but I strove to master my feeling.

"I fear," continued the Marchioness, "that you will make her very miserable. What will satisfy her, now that she has passed her life with you in the intimacy of your society?" "But will she not remain with me?" said Madame de B. "Aye, as long as her childhood lasts, but she is now nearly fifteen; and who can you marry her to, with the education you have given her? Who will ever marry a negro girl? And if you should find any man who, for the sake of money, would perhaps consent to have negro children, must it not be some one of inferior condition, with whom she would be unhappy? Will a man whom she would choose ever choose her?" "Alas! this is true," cried Madame de B. "but she fortunately does not suspect it, and her attachment for me will, I hope, prevent her perceiving her situation for some time. To have made her happy, I should have made an ordinary being of her; and frankly I believe that impossible. Besides, as she has not remained in the station she was first intended for, may not her mind rise superior to the restraints of her present one?" "Never; you are forging chimeras," replied the Marchioness; "Philosophy may raise our minds above the vicissitudes of fortune, but can

never prevail against the evils which arise from having disturbed the laws of nature. Ourika has not fulfilled her destiny, she has usurped a place in society to which she had no right, and society will punish her for it." "But surely it is no fault of her's? Poor child! with what severity you decide upon her happiness." "I judge it more rationally than you have done. – I consider how it may best be secured, whilst you will be the cause of its ruin." Madame de B. answered this accusation with some warmth, and I was just becoming the cause of a quarrel between the two friends, when the arrival of a third person put an end to their discussion. I slid out at the door behind the screen, and flew to my own room, there to solace my poor heart for a moment by a flood of tears.

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