

GEORGETTE LEBLANC

THE CHOICE OF
LIFE

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Georgette Leblanc

The Choice of Life

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....

2

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.

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?

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.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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