

A Simple Heart

I

For fifty years the ladies of Pont-l'Évêque envied Madame Aubain her servant Felicity.

For a hundred francs a year she cooked, and cleaned, sewed, washed, ironed, could harness a horse, fatten up poultry, churn butter; and she remained loyal to her mistress who, all the same, was not an agreeable person.

Madame Aubain had married a fine young fellow without a fortune, who died at the beginning of 1809, leaving her two very young children, and a great number of debts. Then she sold her real estate, except the farm of Toucques, and the farm of Geffosses, whose rents amounted to five thousand francs at the outside, and she quitted the house at Saint-Milaine to settle in another one less costly, which had belonged to her ancestors, and was situated behind the market-place.

This house, covered with tiles, was set between a lane and an alley that gave on the river. Inside, its ground levels were unequal, and were the cause of frequent stumbles. A narrow vestibule separated the kitchen from the living-room, where Madame Aubain passed the whole day, seated near the window casement on a straw-bottomed chair. Against the wainscoting, painted white, were lined up eight mahogany chairs. An old piano carried, under a barometer, a heaped pyramid of wooden and cardboard boxes. Two deep arm-chairs, tapestry covered, flanked the yellow marble mantelpiece in the style of Louis XV. The clock in the middle represented a temple of Vesta - and the whole room smelled slightly musty, for the floor was lower than the garden.

On the first floor there was, first of all, 'Madame's' room, very big, hung with a wallpaper with pale flowers, and containing the portrait of 'Monsieur' in the costume of a *muscadin*. It communicated with a smaller room, where two children's couches were to be seen without their mattresses. Then came the drawing-room, always shut up, and filled with furniture covered with a sheet. Then a corridor led to a study: books and papers filled the shelves of a book-case surrounding with its three sides a large blackwood desk. The two end panels were invisible beneath pen-and-ink sketches, landscapes in body colour, and Audran's engravings, souvenirs of better times and vanished luxury. A dormer window on the second story lighted Felicity's room, looking out on the fields.

She rose with the dawn so as not to miss Mass, and worked without stopping until evening; then, dinner being finished, the dishes put away and the door fast shut, she covered the faggots with ashes, and fell asleep before the hearth, her rosary in her hand. Nobody in her marketing could show more obstinacy. As to her cleanliness, the polish on her saucepans was the despair of other servants. Thrifty, she ate slowly, and gathered up from the table with her fingers the crumbs of the loaf—a twelve-pound loaf, baked specially for her, which lasted twenty

days.

All through the year she carried a cotton handkerchief fixed at her back by a pin, a bonnet that hid her hair, grey stockings, a red skirt, and over her bodice an apron with a bib like a hospital nurse.

Her face was thin and her voice sharp. At twenty-five years of age you would have guessed her to be forty. After her fiftieth year she showed no traces of any age at all; and, always silent, upright in carriage, and measured in gesture, she seemed a woman made of wood, functioning automatically.

II

She had had, like anyone else, her love story.

Her father, a mason, had been killed in falling from a scaffolding. Then her mother died, her sisters scattered; a farmer took her in, and employed her, while still a little girl, in guarding cows in the fields. She shivered under her rags, drank flat on her stomach the water of the pools, for no pretext at all was beaten, and finally was dismissed for a theft of thirty pence which she had not committed. She took service in another farm, became hen girl there, and, as she pleased her employers, her comrades were jealous of her.

One day in the month of August (she was eighteen then) they took her with them to the fair at Colleville. Straightway she was bewildered, stupefied by the noise of the fiddlers, the lights in the trees, the motley of the costumes, the laces, the gold crosses—this mass of people who leapt simultaneously. She was keeping modestly in the background when a young man, well-to-do in appearance, smoking his pipe, with his two elbows on the pole of a small wagon, came to invite her to dance. He recompensed her with cider, with coffee, with cake, with a scarf, and offered to lead her out again. She did not know what to answer, and wanted to run away. He departed.

Another evening on the road to Beaumont she wanted to pass a big wagon of hay that was going along slowly, and as she brushed past the wheels she recognized Theodore.

At once he spoke of the harvests and the notables of the district, for his father had left Colleville for the farm of Écots, so that now they were neighbours. 'Ah', she said. He added that they wanted to set him up for himself. Yet he wasn't in a hurry; he was waiting for a wife to his taste. She hung her head. Then he asked her if she was thinking of marriage. She answered, smiling, that it wasn't right to laugh at her. 'But I'm not, I give you my word!' and with his left arm he encircled her waist: she walked on, held up by his embrace: they went more slowly. The wind was soft, the stars shone, the huge wagon-load of hay swayed before them, and the four horses, dragging their feet, raised the dust. Then, without being told,

they turned to the right. He hugged her again. She disappeared into the shadows.

Theodore, the following week, got her to promise to meet him.

They met at the far end of the courtyard, under an isolated tree. She was not innocent, in the fashion of ladies, but common sense and the instinct of honour kept her from yielding. This resistance exasperated Theodore's love so much that in order to satisfy it (or perhaps quite ingenuously) he proposed to marry her. She hesitated to believe him. He swore great oaths.

Soon he admitted something annoying; his parents last year had bought him off conscription; but any day they could take him again. The idea of serving terrified him. This cowardice was in Felicity's eyes a proof of affection; her own redoubled. She stole out at night, and when she got to the meeting place Theodore tortured her with his anxiety and his entreaties.

At last he announced that he would go himself to headquarters to get information, and that he would bring her word on the following Sunday between eleven and twelve at night.

When the moment came she ran to her lover.

In his place she found one of his friends. He told her that she would not see him again. To assure himself from conscription Theodore had married a very rich old woman, Madame Lehoussais, of Toucques.

She gave way to a burst of extravagant grief. She threw herself on the ground, cried aloud, called on the good God, and groaned, all alone in the country till sunrise. Then she went back to the farm, and declared her intention of leaving it, and at the end of a month, having received her wages, she tied all her little belongings in a handkerchief, and went to Pont-l'Évêque.

In front of the inn she asked some questions of a lady in a widow's cap, who happened at the time to be looking for a cook. The girl did not know much, but she seemed so anxious to please and to have so few unreasonable demands, that Madame Aubain finished by saying:

'All right, I'll take you.'

Felicity a quarter of an hour afterwards was settled in her house.

At first she lived there in a sort of tremor caused by the 'kind of house', and the memory of 'Monsieur' hovering over everything. Paul and Virginia, one aged seven, the other hardly four, seemed to her to be made of precious stuff; she carried them on her back like a horse, and Madame Aubain forbade her to kiss them every minute, and that mortified her. Yet she was happy. The gentleness of the environment had melted her sorrow.

Every Thursday friends came to take a hand at boston-whist. Felicity prepared in advance the cards and the footwarmers. They arrived at eight o'clock very punctually, and went away before the stroke of eleven.

Each Monday morning the second-hand dealer who lodged under the alley spread out his scrap iron on the ground. Then the town was filled with a hum of voices, in which were mingled the neighing of horses, the bleating of sheep, the grunting of pigs, and the dry rattle of traps on the road. About midday, at the height of the market, could be seen on the threshold a tall old peasant, his cap pulled down, his nose hooked, and who was Robelin, the farmer of Geffosses. A short time after it was Liébard, the farmer of Toucques, small, red, fat, wearing a grey jacket and leggings fitted with spurs.

Both of them offered their landlady fowls or cheeses. Felicity invariably baffled their tricks, and they went away full of consideration for her.

On indeterminate occasions Madame Aubain received a visit from the Marquis de Germanville, one of her uncles, ruined by debauchery, who lived at Falaise, on the last morsel of his property. He arrived always at lunch time, with a frightful little dog, whose paws dirtied all the furniture. In spite of his efforts to appear a gentleman, even going so far as to lift his hat every time he said: 'My late father', his old habits got the better of him; he poured out for himself glass after glass, and let out some rather free stories. Felicity would push him outside politely: 'You've had enough of it, Monsieur de Germanville! We'll see you another time!' And she shut the door.

She opened it with pleasure to Monsieur Bourais, an ex-solicitor. His white cravat, and his bald head, the frill of his shirt, his wide brown frockcoat, his way of taking snuff, making a circle with his arm, his whole personality produced in her the excitement into which the sight of extraordinary men throws us.

As he managed the estate of 'Madame' he shut himself up with her for hours in monsieur's study: he was always afraid of compromising himself, he had a great respect for the magistracy, and had pretensions to Latin.

To instruct the children in a pleasant fashion he made them a present of a geography with engravings. They represented different scenes in the world, cannibals with feathers in their hair, a monkey carrying off a young lady, Bedouins in the desert, a whale being harpooned, etc.

Paul explained these engravings to Felicity. This, in fact, was all her literary education.

The children's education was taken in hand by Guyot, a poor wretch employed at the Town Hall, famous for his fine handwriting, a man who sharpened his penknife on his boot.

When the weather was clear they would go early in the morning to the farm of Geffosses.

The courtyard is sloping, the house in the middle: and the sea, in the distance, appears like a grey stain.

Felicity took out of her basket slices of cold meat, and they lunched in a room

attached to the dairy. It was the only remnant of a pleasure house which had not disappeared. The wall-paper hung in rags, and trembled in the draughts. Madame Aubain leant forward, overwhelmed with memories: the children did not dare to speak. 'But go out and play', she would say. They decamped.

Paul went up into the barn, caught birds, played ducks and drakes with stones on the pond, or with a stick hit the big casks that resounded like drums.

Virginia fed the rabbits, rushed to gather cornflowers, and the swift motion of her legs showed her little embroidered drawers.

One autumn evening they came back through the meadows.

The moon in its first quarter lit up a part of the sky, and a mist was floating like a veil on the windings of the River Toucques. Oxen, stretched amid the turf, tranquilly watched those four people pass. In the third meadow some of them rose, and formed a circle before them. 'Don't be afraid,' said Felicity, and murmuring a sort of low song she patted the one who was nearest on the spine; he turned round, the others imitated him. But when the succeeding field was crossed a formidable bellowing arose. It was a bull that the fog had concealed. He advanced towards the two women. Madame Aubain was going to run. 'No, no, not so quick!' They quickened their steps all the same, and heard behind them a sonorous breathing coming nearer them. His hoofs, like hammers, beat the grass of the fields; there, he was galloping now! Felicity turned round and tore up with her two hands clods of earth which she threw in his eyes. He lowered his muzzle, shook his horns, and trembled with fury, bellowing horribly. Madame Aubain, at the end of the grass with her two children, was madly seeking how to get over the high bank. Felicity retired steadily before the bull, and continually flung bits of turf that blinded him, while she cried: 'Hurry up, hurry up!' Madame Aubain climbed over the ditch, pushed Virginia up, then Paul, fell several times in trying to climb over the slope, and by dint of courage succeeded.

The bull had driven Felicity into a corner against an opening in the hedge; his slaver sprayed on her face, a second more and he would have gored her. She had time to slip between two bars, and the big beast, quite surprised, stopped short.

This event for many years was a topic of conversation at Pont-l'Évêque. Felicity felt no pride about it, not even considering that she had done anything heroic.

Virginia took up all her time, for she suffered, as a result of her fright, from an affection of the nerves, and Monsieur Pourpart, the doctor, advised sea baths at Trouville.

In those days they were not crowded. Madame Aubain made inquiries, consulted Bourais, and made preparations as for a long journey.

Her luggage went off the night before in Liébard's cart. The next day he brought two horses, one of which had a woman's saddle fitted with a velvet backrest; and

on the croup of the second a coat, rolled up, formed a sort of seat. Madame Aubain mounted there behind him. Felicity took charge of Virginia, and Paul straddled Monsieur Lechaptois's donkey, lent on condition they would take great care of it.

The road was so bad that the eight kilometres took two hours. The horses sank up to the pasterns in the mud, and to free themselves made brusque movements with their haunches; or else they stumbled against the hedges; other times they had to jump over them. Liébard's mare, at certain spots, stopped suddenly. Liébard waited patiently until she resumed her walk, and he talked about the people whose estates bordered the road, adding moral reflections to their story. Thus, in the middle of Toucques as they passed under windows surrounded by nasturtiums, he said with a shrug of his shoulders: 'There's a Madame Lehoussais lives there, who, instead of taking a young husband—' Felicity did not hear the rest: the horses trotted, the donkey galloped; they all went in single file up a path; a gate swung round, two stable boys appeared, they got down beside the dung water on the very threshold of the door.

Mother Liébard, seeing her mistress, was prodigal in demonstrations of joy. She served them a lunch where there was roast beef, tripe, black sausage, a fricassee of chicken, sparkling cider, a fruit tart, and plums in brandy, accompanying the whole with polite observations to madame, who seemed in better health, to mademoiselle, become 'magnificent', to Mr. Paul, grown singularly 'stout'; without forgetting their late grandparents, whom the Liébarde had known, being in the service of the family for several generations. The farm had, like them, an old-time character. The beams of the roof were worm-eaten, the walls black with smoke, the tiles grey with dust. An oak dresser carried all sorts of utensils, jugs, plates, pewter, basins, wolf traps, sheep shears; an enormous syringe made the children laugh. Not a tree in the three courtyards but had mushrooms at its base, or in its branches a bunch of mistletoe. The wind had thrown down several. They had sprouted again in the middle, and all were bent under the number of their apples. The thatch roofs, like brown velvet, and all unequal in thickness, resisted the strongest gales. Yet the wagon-shed was falling in ruins. Madame Aubain said she would see about it, and bade them reharness the beasts.

They were half an hour yet before they reached Trouville. The little caravan dismounted to pass the Écores Hill; it was a rock overhanging the ships; and three minutes later, at the end of the quay, they entered the courtyard of the Golden Lamb, Mother David's inn.

Virginia, from the beginning, felt herself more robust, the result of the change of air and the action of the baths. She took them in her chemise, for lack of a bathing costume; and her maid dressed her afterwards in the shed of a customs man who looked after the bathers.

In the afternoon they would go with the donkey past the Black Rocks in the direction of Hennequeville. The path at first rose between land undulating like the

lawns of a gentleman's estate, then arrived at a plateau, where alternated pasture ground and cultivated fields. At the edge of the road, among the clusters of reeds, grew holly bushes; here and there a tall dead tree made zigzags with its branches on the blue air.

Almost always they rested in a meadow, with Deauville on their left, Havre on their right, and in front the open sea. It was brilliant in the sunshine, smooth like a mirror, so gentle that its murmur could scarcely be heard. Hidden sparrows chirped, and the immense vault of the sky formed a cover for all. Madame Aubain, seated, would work at her sewing; Virginia beside her, plaited reeds; Felicity pulled up lavender; Paul, who was bored, wanted to go away.

Other times they crossed the River Toucques in a boat, and looked for shells. The low tide left uncovered sea urchins, scallops, jellyfish; and the children ran to catch the puffs of foam that the wind carried up. The sleepy waves, falling on the sand, rolled in along the beach; they stretched as far as eye could see, but on the landward side had for limit the dunes separating it from the Marais, a wide meadow, shaped like a hippodrome. When they were coming back that way Trouville, at the foot of its sloping hillock, grew bigger at each step, and with all its different-sized houses, seemed to spread out in gay disorder.

The days on which it was too hot they did not leave their room. The dazzling brightness outside plastered bars of light between the slats of the shutters. No noise in the village. Down below on the pavement, nobody. This widespread silence increased everything's tranquillity. In the distance the hammers of the caulkers plugged the keels, and a heavy breeze brought a scent of tar.

The principal amusement was the homecoming of the ships. As soon as they had passed the buoys they began to tack. Their sails dropped to two-thirds of the masts: and the foresail swelling like a balloon they came on, gliding in the plashing of the waves, to the middle of the harbour, where the anchor suddenly fell. Then the boat drew up beside the quay. The sailors threw over the edge the quivering fish; a row of carts was waiting, and women in cotton bonnets ran forward to take the baskets and embrace their men.

One of the women one day accosted Felicity, who a little while afterwards came into the room full of joy. She had refound a sister: and Nastasie Barette, wife of Leroux, appeared, holding a baby at her breast, another child clinging to her right hand, and at her left a little fellow with his fists on his hips, and his beret over one ear.

At the end of a quarter of an hour Madame Aubain dismissed her.

They were always to be met hanging about the kitchen, or on the walks they took. The husband did not show himself.

Felicity took a liking to them. She bought them bedclothes, shirts, a cooking stove; evidently they were exploiting her. This weakness irritated Madame Aubain, who, besides, didn't like the familiarities of the nephew, for he talked to her son as to an

equal; and, as Virginia had a cough, and the weather was no longer good, she returned to Pont-l'Évêque.

Monsieur Bourais gave her advice on the choice of a school. The one at Caen was considered the best. Paul was sent there, and said good-bye stoutly, pleased to go and live in a house where he would have comrades.

Madame Aubain resigned herself to the separation from her son because it was indispensable. Virginia thought of it less and less. Felicity missed the noise he made. But an occupation came along to distract her. Starting at Christmas, she took the little girl every day to Catechism.

III

When she had made a genuflexion at the door she walked on under the high nave between the double row of chairs, opened Madame Aubain's pew, sat down, and looked all round her. The boys on the right, the girls on the left, filled the stalls of the choir; the priest stood near the lectern; on a stained-glass window in the apse the Holy Ghost hovering over the virgin; another showed her on her knees before the Infant Jesus, and behind the ciborium a group carved in wood represented Saint Michael subduing the dragon.

The priest gave them first a short account of Sacred History. She thought she saw Paradise, the deluge, the tower of Babel, cities in flames, peoples dying, idols overthrown; and she retained from this state of amazement respect for the Most High, and fear of His wrath. Then she wept, listening to the Passion. Why had they crucified Him, this One who loved the children, who fed the multitudes, who cured the blind, and had desired, in His gentleness, to be born amid the poor, on the dung of a stable? Seed time, harvest, the winepress, all the familiar things of which the Gospel speaks, existed in her life; the passage of God had sanctified them; and she loved the lambs more tenderly for love of the Lamb of God, the doves because of the Holy Ghost.

She had trouble in imagining its shape; for it was not only a bird, but besides that, a fire, and at other times a breath. Maybe it was its light that flickered at nights on the edge of the marshes, its breath that pushed the clouds, its voice that made the bells ring sweetly; and she stayed in adoration, enjoying the freshness of the walls and the tranquillity of the church.

As to the dogmas, she understood none of them, did not even try to understand them. The priest discoursed, the children recited, she finished by going to sleep; and woke up suddenly when, as they came out, their wooden shoes clattered on the flagstones.

It was in this way, by dint of hearing it, that she learned the catechism, her religious education having been neglected in her youth; and from that time she

imitated all the practices of Virginia, fasting as she did, going to confession with her. On Corpus Christi day together they erected a street altar.

She worried about the first communion in advance. She was in a flutter about the slippers, about the wreath, about the book, about the gloves. With what inner tremblings she helped her mother dress her!

All through the Mass she was in an agony. Monsieur Bourais hid a part of the choir from her; but just in front the flock of girls, wearing their white crowns over their lowered veils, formed as it were a field of snow; and she recognized from afar her dear little one by her dainty neck and contemplative attitude. The bells rang out: heads bent: there was a silence. To an outburst of organ music the choristers and the congregation began to sing the Agnus Dei; then the march past of the boys began; and after them the girls rose. Step by step, and hands joined in prayer, they went towards the altar, ablaze with candles, knelt on the first step, received in turn the wafer, and in the same order returned and knelt in their places. When it was Virginia's turn Felicity bent forward to see her, and with the imagination which true tenderness bestows, it seemed to her that she herself was this child. Virginia's face became her own, her dress clothed her; her heart beat in her breast; at the moment when she opened her mouth, shutting her eyes, she almost fainted.

Next day, early, she presented herself in the vestry so that the priest might give her communion. She received it devoutly, but did not taste the same delights.

Madame Aubain wanted to make her daughter accomplished: and as Guyot could not teach either English or music, she resolved to send her to the boarding school of the Ursulines at Honfleur.

The child made no objections. Felicity sighed, finding madame hard-hearted. Then she thought that her mistress, perhaps, was right. These matters went beyond her province.

Finally, one day, an old van stopped before the door, and from it stepped a nun, who had come to get mademoiselle. Felicity lifted the baggage on to the top, gave injunctions to the coachman, and placed under the seat six pots of jam, and a dozen pears, with a bunch of violets.

Virginia, at the last moment, was shaken by a huge sob; she embraced her mother, who kissed her on the forehead, repeating: 'Come now, courage, courage!' The steps were drawn up, the carriage set out.

Then Madame Aubain fainted: and in the evening all her friends, the Lormeau household, Madame Lechaptois, *those* ladies Rochefeuille, Monsieur de Houpeville, and Bourais put in an appearance to console her.

The loss of her daughter was at first very grievous. But three times a week she got a letter from her, the other days she wrote to her, walked in her garden, read a little, and in this way filled the emptiness of the hours.

In the morning, from habit, Felicity went into Virginia's room and looked at the walls. She missed not having her hair to comb, her boots to lace, to tuck her in her bed—and not seeing continually her pretty face, not having to hold her hand when they went out together. Not having enough work to do, she tried to make lace. Her fingers were too clumsy and broke the threads. She was good for nothing, could not sleep, to use her own expression was 'a wreck'.

To 'cheer herself up' she asked permission to have a visit from her nephew Victor.

He arrived on Sunday after mass, with rosy cheeks, his chest bare, breathing the odour of the country he had passed through. At once she set his place. They had lunch facing each other: and herself eating as little as possible to keep down the expense, she stuffed him with food to such an extent that he finished by going to sleep. At the first stroke of the bell for vespers she woke him, brushed his trousers, tied his tie, and went to church, leaning on his arm in maternal pride.

His parents charged him always to bring something home, maybe a packet of brown sugar, soap, brandy, sometimes even money. He brought his clothes to be mended, and she accepted this task, glad of the chance which forced him to come back.

In August his father took him with him on the coasting trade.

It was holiday time. The arrival of the children consoled her. But Paul had become capricious, and Virginia was no longer young enough to be spoken to as an equal, and that put a feeling of constraint, a barrier between them.

Victor went in turn to Morlaix, to Dunkirk, and to Brighton. On his return from each voyage he made her a present. The first time it was a box covered with shells; the second a coffee cup; the third a big gingerbread man. He grew handsome, with a good carriage, nice frank eyes, and a little leather cap worn well to the front like a pilot. He amused her by telling her stories mixed with nautical terms.

On Monday, 14th July 1819 (she did not forget the date), Victor announced that he was engaged for a trip and, during the night of the day after next, by the Honfleur steamer, he would go to join his schooner, which was going to sail from Havre quite soon. He would be, maybe, away for two years.

The prospect of such an absence grieved Felicity; and to say another good-bye to him on Wednesday evening, after madame's dinner, she put on her clogs and hurried down the four leagues which separated Pont-l'Évêque from Honfleur.

When she was at the crossroads before the Calvary, instead of taking the path to the left she took the one to the right, lost herself in the yards, and came back on her tracks; the people she accosted advised her to hurry. She walked right round the harbour, stumbled over ropes; then the land dropped before her, lights intersected each other, and she thought herself mad, perceiving horses in the air.

On the edge of the quay others whinnied, terrified of the sea. The tackle that lifted them set them down in a boat where travellers elbowed one another among casks

of cider, baskets of cheese, sacks of grain; you could hear hens cackling, the captain was swearing; and a boy was standing leaning on the cathead, indifferent to all that. Felicity, who had not recognized him, screamed 'Victor!' He raised his head; she rushed forward, when the gangway was suddenly pulled back.

The steamer which was towed by women, singing, left the port. Its timbers creaked, heavy waves whipped its prow. The vessel had turned, nobody was seen any longer—and, on the sea silvered by the moon, it made a black spot that steadily paled, sank, disappeared.

Felicity, passing near the Calvary, wanted to recommend to God that which she cherished most. And she prayed a long time, standing, her face bathed in tears, her eyes towards the clouds. The town slept, customs officials walked about, and the water fell without ceasing through the holes of the sluice. Two o'clock struck.

The reception room of the convent did not open before day-break. A delay, quite certainly, would annoy madame; and, in spite of her desire to embrace the other child, she returned. The servant girls at the inn were waking as she entered Pont-l'Évêque.

The poor lad was going to roll about on the waves for months. His former voyages had not frightened her. From England and Brittany people came back; but America, the Colonies, the West Indies, that was to be lost in an uncertain land, at the other end of the world.

From that time on Felicity thought exclusively of her nephew. On sunny days she tormented herself with thirst; when a storm came on she feared the thunder for him. Listening to the wind which howled in the chimney and blew off the tiles, she saw him beaten by the same tempest, at the top of a shattered mast, all his body thrown back under a sheet of foam; or else—souvenirs of the geography engravings—he was devoured by savages, captured in a wood by monkeys, was dying along a deserted seashore. And never did she speak of her anxieties.

Madame Aubain had others for her daughter. The good sisters found that she was affectionate but delicate. The slightest emotion unnerved her. The piano had to be given up.

Her mother required a regular correspondence from the convent. One morning that the postman did not come she was impatient: and she walked about the living-room from her chair to the window. It was really extraordinary! For four days no news.

So that she might find comfort in her example Felicity said to her:

'Look at me, madame: it's six months since I've had any!'

'From whom?'

The servant replied gently:

'But—from my nephew!'

‘Oh—your nephew!’ and, shrugging her shoulders, Madame Aubain went on with her walking as if to say: ‘I did not think about him! Moreover, I don’t care! a cabin boy, a beggar, a fine business—while my daughter—Think of it!’

Felicity, although brought up on rudeness, was indignant against madame, then forgot.

It seemed to her quite easy to lose one’s head about the little girl’s concerns.

The two children had an equal importance; one of her heart-strings united them, and their destinies should be the same.

The chemist told her that Victor’s boat had arrived at Havana. He had read the information in a gazette.

Because of the cigars she imagined Havana a country where nothing else was done but smoke, and Victor moving among the niggers in a cloud of tobacco. Could he ‘in case of need’ come back by land? What distance was it from Pont-l’Évêque? To learn that she asked Monsieur Bourais.

He got his atlas, then began explanations about the longitudes, and he had a fine pedant’s smile in face of Felicity’s bewilderment. At length with his pocket pencil he showed her the indentations on an oval mark, a black imperceptible point, adding: ‘That’s it’. She leaned over the map; this network of coloured lines tired her eyes, without teaching her anything; and, Bourais inviting her to say what was worrying her, she begged him to show her the house where Victor was living. Bourais raised his arms, sneezed, laughed enormously; such ingenuousness excited his joy: and Felicity did not understand the cause of it—she who was expecting, perhaps, even to see a photograph of her nephew, so limited was her intelligence.

It was a fortnight afterwards that Liébard, at the hour when the market was on, as was his custom, came into the kitchen and gave her a letter which her brother-in-law had sent. Since neither of the two know how to read, she had recourse to her mistress.

Madame Aubain, who was counting stitches in her knitting, put her work down beside her, unsealed the letter, trembled, and in a low voice with a serious look:

‘It’s bad news...you are being told of. Your nephew—’

He was dead. They told her no more.

Felicity fell on a chair, leaning her head on the wall, and shut her eyes, and her eyelids suddenly grew pink. Then, her head drooping, her eyes fixed, she repeated at intervals:

‘Poor little chap! Poor little chap!’

Liébard looked at her, emitting deep sighs. Madame Aubain was trembling slightly.

She proposed to her to go and see her sister at Trouville.

Felicity answered by a gesture that she had no need to go there.

There was a silence. Good old Liébard thought it proper to go away. Then she said:

'It's nothing to them!'

Her head sank down again; and mechanically she lifted, from time to time, the long knitting-needles on the work-table.

Some women passed in the courtyard with a barrow heaped with dripping linen.

As she saw them through the window panes she remembered her washing; she had soaked it the night before, to-day it had to be rinsed, and she left the room.

Her washboard and her tub were on the brink of the River Toucques. She flung on the bank a heap of chemises, tucked up her sleeves, took up her beating-stick; and the heavy blows she gave were heard in the other gardens alongside. The fields were empty, the wind rippled the river; at the bottom long weeds swept over like the hair of dead men floating in the water. She restrained her sorrow till evening, was very brave; but, in her room she abandoned herself to it, lying flat, face down on her mattress, her eyes in her pillow, and her fists against her temples.

Much later, from Victor's captain himself, she learnt the circumstances of his death. He had been bled too much at the hospital for yellow fever. Four doctors were looking after him at once. He died immediately, and the chief had said:

'Tut, tut, that's another one!'

His parents had always treated him barbarously. She preferred not to see them again; and they made no advances, either through forgetfulness or the callousness of the wretched poor.

Virginia grew weaker.

Shortness of breath, a cough, a continual fever, and red spots on her cheek-bones revealed some deep-seated affection. Monsieur Pourpart had advised a stay in Provence. Madame Aubain made up her mind to go there, and would have immediately recalled her daughter home except for the climate of Pont-l'Évêque.

She made an arrangement with a man who hired carriages to take her to the convent every Thursday. There is in the gardens a terrace from which you can discern the Seine. Virginia would walk there on her arm, on the fallen grape-vine leaves. Sometimes the sun, shining through the clouds, made her blink her eyelids, when she looked at the sails in the distance, and all the horizon from the château of Tancarville to the lighthouse at Havre. Then they rested in the harbour. Her mother had got a little barrel of an excellent Malaga wine; and, laughing at the idea of being drunk, she would drink two fingers of it, not more.

Her strength improved. The autumn slipped away quietly. Felicity reassured Madame Aubain. But one evening that she had been on an errand in the

neighbourhood she met before the door Monsieur Pourpart's gig: and he himself was in the vestibule. Madame Aubain was tying on her hat.

'Give me my foot warmer, my purse, my gloves: be quicker, can't you?'

Virginia had an inflammation of the lungs: it was perhaps hopeless.

'Not yet,' said the doctor, and the two of them got into the carriage under the snowflakes which eddied around. Night was about to fall. It was very cold.

Felicity rushed into the church to light a candle. Then she ran after the gig, which she rejoined an hour later, leaped lightly up behind, where she was holding on by the twisted cords, when a reflection came to her. 'The courtyard is not shut. If robbers get in?' and she got down.

Next day at sunrise she presented herself at the doctor's. He had come in, and gone out again to the country. Then she stayed in the inn, thinking that strangers would bring her a letter. At length at dawn she took the coach to Lisieux.

The convent was situated at the end of a steep lane. About the middle she heard strange sounds, a death knell. 'It's for other people,' she thought, and Felicity pulled violently at the knocker.

At the end of several minutes slippers dragged along, the door half opened, and a nun appeared.

The good sister said with an air of compunction that 'she had just passed'. At the same time the knell of Saint Leonard's redoubled its peal.

Felicity arrived at the second story.

From the threshold of the room she saw Virginia, stretched on her back, her hands joined, her mouth open, and her head thrown back under a black cross bending towards her, between motionless curtains, less white than her face. Madame Aubain, at the foot of the couch which she clasped with her hands, uttered sobs of agony. The Mother Superior was standing on the right. Three candlesticks on the chest of drawers made red splashes, and the mist whitened the windows. Nuns took away Madame Aubain.

For two nights Felicity did not leave the dead girl. She repeated the same prayers, threw holy water on the sheets, came back and sat down, and looked at her. At the end of the first watch she noticed that the face had got yellow, the lips blue, the nose pinched, the eyes sunk. She kissed them several times, and would not have felt an immense astonishment if Virginia had reopened them: for souls like hers the supernatural is quite simple. She dressed her, wrapped her in her shroud, lifted her into her coffin, placed a wreath on her, spread out her hair. Her hair was fair, of an extraordinary length for her age. Felicity cut off a thick lock, the half of which she slipped into her bosom, resolved never to part with it.

The body was carried back to Pont-l'Évêque, in obedience to the wishes of Madame Aubain, who followed the hearse in a closed carriage.

After the mass they took another three-quarters of an hour to reach the cemetery. Paul walked in front and sobbed. Monsieur Bourais was behind, then the principal inhabitants, the women covered in black mantles, and Felicity. She thought of her nephew, and not having been able to render him these honours, felt an increase of grief as if they were burying him with the other.

Madame Aubain's despair was without bounds.

First she revolted against God, finding Him unjust for having taken her daughter, she who had never done any wrong, and whose conscience was so pure. But no! she should have taken her south. Other doctors would have saved her! She accused herself, wanted to join her, cried out in distress amid her dreams. One dream, above all, obsessed her. Her husband, clad like a sailor, was coming back from a long voyage, and said to her weeping, that he had got orders to take away Virginia. Then they arranged to find a hiding place somewhere.

One day she came in from the garden completely upset. The father and daughter (she pointed out the place) had appeared to her just now, one after the other, and they did nothing; they looked at her.

For several months she remained in her room inert. Felicity lectured her gently; she must keep herself for her son, and for the other, in memory of 'her'.

'Her', took up Madame Aubain, as if awakening, 'oh, yes! yes! You do not forget her!' An allusion to the cemetery which it had been scrupulously forbidden to mention.

Felicity went there every day.

At four o'clock exactly she passed alongside the houses, climbed the slope, opened the gate, and arrived at Virginia's tomb. It was a little column of rose marble, with a flagstone at the base, and chains around, framing a little garden. The flower-beds were invisible under a coverlet of flowers. She watered their leaves, renewed the sand, knelt down the better to work the earth. Madame Aubain, when she could come there, felt some comfort, a kind of consolation.

Then years slipped by, all alike, and without other episodes than the return of the great feasts: Easter, the Assumption, All Saints. Inside happenings marked the dates which they used for reference later on. Thus in 1825 two glaziers white-washed the vestibule; in 1827 a bit of the roof, falling into the courtyard, almost killed a man. In the summer of 1828 it was madame's turn to provide the sacred bread for Mass. Bourais, about this time, absented himself mysteriously; and the old acquaintances, little by little, passed away; Guyot, Liébard, Madame Lechaptois, Robelin, Uncle Germanville, paralysed a long time ago.

One night the driver of the mail coach announced in Pont-l'Évêque the July Revolution. A new sub-prefect was appointed a few days afterwards; the Baron de Larsonnière, an ex-consul in America, who had living with him, besides his wife, his sister-in-law, with three young ladies, already pretty big. They were seen on

their lawn, dressed in floating blouses; they possessed a negro and a parrot. Madame Aubain received a visit from them, and did not fail to return it. When they appeared in the farthest distance Felicity ran to warn her. But one thing was alone capable of moving her, her son's letters.

He could not follow any career, being wrapped up in taverns. She paid his debts; he ran up others; and the sighs which Madame Aubain uttered, knitting near her window, could be heard by Felicity, turning her spinning-wheel in the kitchen.

They took walks together beside the wall where the pears grew; and talked always of Virginia, asking each other if such and such a thing would have pleased her; on such an occasion what would she probably have said?

All her little possessions occupied a press in the room with the two beds. Madame Aubain inspected them as seldom as possible. One summer day she resigned herself to it, and moths flew from the wardrobe.

Her dresses were there in a row under a shelf, on which there were three dolls, hoops, doll's furniture, the washbowl she had used. They took out as well underskirts, stockings, handkerchiefs, and spread them on the two couches before folding them up again. The sun shone on those poor objects, showing up the stains and the folds made by the body's movements. The air was hot and blue, a blackbird chirped, everything seemed alive in a deep sweetness. They found a little plush hat, with long hair, chestnut coloured; but it was all eaten by insects. Felicity claimed it for herself. Their eyes met, filled with tears; finally the mistress opened her arms, the servant flung herself into them; and they clung together, satisfying their grief in a kiss that equalized them.

It was the first time in their lives, Madame Aubain not being of an expansive nature. Felicity was grateful for it, as for a kindness, and henceforth cherished her with an animal devotion and a religious veneration.

The kindness of her heart developed.

When she heard in the street the drums of a regiment on the march she stationed herself before the door with a jug of cider, and offered the soldiers a drink. She looked after the victims of cholera. She protected the Poles; and there was even one of them who declared he wanted to marry her. But they quarrelled: for one morning, coming in from the Angelus, she found him in her kitchen, into which he had made his way, and fixed himself up a dish of meat with vinegar sauce which he was eating quietly.

After the Poles there was old Father Colmiche, an old man, who passed for having done terrible things in '93. He lived on the riverside, in the ruins of a pigsty. Urchins used to peer at him through the chinks in the wall, and threw stones which fell on the wretched bed where he lay, continually shaken by a cold, with very long hair, inflamed eyelids, and on his arm a tumour bigger than his head. She got linen for him, tried to clean out his hovel, had dreams of settling him in the washhouse, without annoying Madame. When cancer knocked him out she

bandaged him every day, sometimes brought him cake, put him in the sun on a bundle of hay; and the poor old man, drooling and trembling, thanked her in his feeble voice, fearing to lose her, stretching out his hands when he saw her going off. He died: she had a Mass said for the repose of his soul.

That day a great happiness came to her; just at dinner-time Madame de Larsonnières's negro presented himself, holding the parrot in its cage, with the stand, the chain, and the padlock. A note from the baroness announced to Madame Aubain that, her husband being raised to the prefecture, they were leaving that evening; and she begged her to accept the bird as a souvenir, and in token of her respect.

For a long time he had filled Felicity's imagination, for he came from America, and this word recalled Victor, so much so that she had made inquiries about it from the negro. Once even she had said:

'Madame would like to have it!'

The negro had repeated the remark to his mistress who, not being able to take the bird with her, had got rid of it in this way.

IV

He was called Loulou. His body was green, the tips of his wings rose, his front blue, and his throat golden.

But he had the tiresome mania of biting his stand, pulling out his feathers, spilling the water from his bath. Madame Aubain, whom he bored, gave him for good to Felicity.

She undertook to instruct him. Soon he repeated: 'Nice boy!' 'Your servant, sir!' 'Hail Mary!' He was placed beside the door, and some people were astonished that he did not answer to the name of Jacquot, since all parrots are called Jacquot. He was compared to a goose, to a blockhead: so many dagger blows for Felicity! Strange obstinacy of Loulou not speaking at the time people were looking.

Nevertheless he courted company; for on Sundays, when *those* ladies Rochefeuille, Monsieur de Houpeville, and some new friends—Onfroy the apothecary, Monsieur Varin, and Captain Mathieu—were making up their party at cards, he knocked on the window panes with his wings, and thrashed about so violently that it was impossible to hear oneself.

Bourais's face, no doubt, seemed to him very funny. As soon as he saw him he began to laugh, to laugh with all his might. The peals of his voice rebounded in the courtyard, the echoes repeated them, the neighbours came to their windows laughing too; and so as not to be seen by the parrot, Monsieur Bourais slipped

along the wall, hiding his profile with his hat, reached the river, then entered by the garden gate; and the glances he directed at the bird lacked tenderness.

The butcher's boy had snapped his fingers at Loulou, who had ventured to thrust his head into his basket; and since then he had always tried to pinch him through his shirt. Fabu threatened to wring his neck, although he was not cruel, in spite of the tattooing on his arm, and his thick whiskers. On the contrary he had rather a liking for the parrot, wanting, in a jovial mood, to teach him swear words. Felicity, who was frightened at this kind of behaviour, put him in the kitchen. His little chain was taken off, and he moved about the house.

When he came down the stairs he leaned the curve of his beak on the steps, raised his right claw, then the left, and she was afraid that such gymnastics would make him dizzy. He became ill, was not able to speak or eat. There was a growth under his tongue, as there sometimes is in hens. She cured him, tearing out the lump with her nails. Monsieur Paul one day was imprudent enough to puff the smoke of a cigar into his nostrils; another time that Madame Lormeau annoyed him with the end of her sunshade he snapped the ferule off; finally he got lost.

She had put him on the grass to let him refresh himself, went away for a moment; and when she came back, no parrot. At first she looked for him in the bushes, at the water edge, and on the roofs, without heeding her mistress who cried to her: 'Take care. You are mad!' Then she inspected all the gardens of Pont-l'Évêque: and she stopped the passers-by: 'You haven't seen anywhere, by chance, my parrot?' To those who did not know the parrot she described him. Suddenly she thought she distinguished, behind the mill, at the bottom of the slope, a green thing fluttering about. But at the top of the hill, nothing! A pedlar affirmed that he had just met it in Saint-Milaine in Mother Simon's shop. She ran there. Nobody knew what she meant. Finally she came back, worn out, her slippers in rags, death in her soul; and, seated in the centre of the garden seat, near madame, she was recounting all her adventures, when a light weight fell on her shoulder—Loulou! What the deuce had he done? Maybe he had taken a stroll in the neighbourhood.

She had trouble in recovering from it, or rather, she never did recover.

As a result of a chill she got a sore throat; a little after, an ear-ache. Three years after, she was deaf; and she spoke very loud, even in the church. Although her sins might have been broadcast to all the corners of the parish, without dishonouring her, or inconveniencing the world, the priest thought it right to receive her confession only in the vestry.

Illusory buzzings in the ear completely confused her. Often her mistress would say: 'Gracious! how stupid you are!' And she would reply: 'Yes, madame,' looking for something round her.

The little circle of her ideas narrowed still more, and the ringing of the bells, the lowing of the herds no longer existed. All creatures functioned in ghostly silence.

One noise alone now reached her ears, the voice of the parrot.

As if to amuse her, he would reproduce the tick-tack of the turnspit, the shrill cry of the fishmonger, the saw of the carpenter who lived opposite: and when the bell rang, imitated Madame Aubain: 'Felicity! the door! the door!'

They had dialogues together; he reeling off to satiety the three phrases of his repertory, and she answering by words without coherence but in which her soul unbosomed itself. Loulou, in her isolation, was almost a son, a lover. He climbed up her fingers, nibbled at her lips, hung on to her neckerchief; and as she bent her forehead, shaking her head as children's nurses do, the big wings of her bonnet and the wings of the bird shook together.

When the clouds gathered and the thunder growled, he would utter cries, recalling perhaps the deluges of his native forests.

The trickling of water excited him almost to delirium: he fluttered about madly, rose to the roof, turned over everything, and went through the window to dabble in the garden; but came back quickly to one of the andirons and, hopping about to dry his wings, showed now his tail, and now his beak.

One morning of the terrible winter of 1837, when she had put him before the hearth because of the cold, she found him dead in the middle of his cage, his head down, his claws in the wire meshing. A congestion had killed him, no doubt. She believed he had been poisoned by parsley; and, in spite of the absence of all proof, her suspicions centred on Fabu.

She wept so much that her mistress said to her: 'Well, then, have him stuffed'.

She asked advice from the chemist, who had always been good to the parrot.

He wrote to Havre. A certain Fellacher undertook the business. But, as the stage coach sometimes mislaid parcels, she resolved to carry it herself as far as Honfleur.

Apple trees bare of leaves, one after another, bordered the sides of the road. Ice covered the ditches. Dogs barked around the farms; and, her hands under her cloak, with her little black wooden shoes and her basket, she walked quickly in the centre of the road.

She crossed the forest, passed Haut Chêne, reached Saint Gatien.

Behind her, in a cloud of dust, and carried away by its own impetus on the hill, a mailcoach at a full gallop rushed on her like a whirlwind. Seeing this woman, who did not get out of the way, the driver stood up on the hood, and the postilion shouted too, while the four horses that he could not hold back went quicker than ever; the two first just grazed her; with a twist of the reins he drew them to the side of the road, but in a temper, raised his arm, and with a full swing, with his big whip, gave her such a lash from stomach to the twist of hair at the nape of her neck, that she fell on her back.

Her first gesture, when she came back to consciousness, was to open her basket. Loulou was not hurt, fortunately. She felt a burning on her right cheek: she raised her hands to it, and they were red. Blood was flowing.

She sat down on a pile of road metal, patted her face with her handkerchief, then she ate a crust of bread, put in her basket by way of precaution, and consoled herself for her wound in looking at the bird.

When she reached the heights of Ecquemauville she saw the lights of Honfleur sparkling in the night like a cluster of stars; the sea, farther off, stretched out vaguely. Then a feeling of faintness stopped her, and the wretchedness of her childhood, the disappointment of her first love, the departure of her nephew, the death of Virginia, like the waves of a tide, returning all at once, and rising to her throat, choked her.

Then she wanted to speak to the captain of the boat, and without telling him what she was sending, she gave him careful orders.

Fellacher kept the parrot a long time. He always promised it for the next week; at the end of six months he announced the shipping of a box, and there was no more question of it. She could only think that Loulou would never come back. 'They'll have stolen him from me,' she thought.

Finally he arrived—and splendid, upright on the branch of a tree, which was screwed in a mahogany base, one claw in the air, his head sideways, and biting a nut which the birdstuffer had gilded through love of the grandiose.

She shut it up in her room.

This spot, to which she admitted few people, had the look at once of a chapel and a bazaar, it contained so many religious objects and heteroclite things.

A big wardrobe was in the way when one opened the door. In front of the window, overhanging the garden, a round window looked out at the courtyard; a table near the truckle bed bore a water jug, two combs, and a cube of blue soap on a chipped plate. On the walls were seen strings of beads, medals, several Holy Virgins, a holy-water basin of coco-nut; on the chest of drawers covered with a cloth like an altar, the shellbox that Victor had given her: then a watering pot and a balloon, writing exercise books, the geography with engravings, a pair of boots; and on the nail which held up the mirror, hung by its ribbons, the little plush hat. Felicity even pushed this kind of respect so far as to keep one of monsieur's coats. All the old stuff that Madame Aubain did not want any more she took for her room. That was why there were artificial flowers at the side of the drawers, and the picture of the Count of Artois in the recess of the dormer window.

By way of shelf, Loulou was established on a part of the chimney-piece which jutted into the room. Every morning as she waked up she saw him in the light of dawn, and recalled then the days that were gone, insignificant actions, down to their least detail, without grief, full of tranquillity.

Communicating with no one, she lived in the torpor of the sleep-walker. The processions of Corpus Christi day roused her. She went to beg from the neighbours torches and straw matting to embellish the altar set up in the street.

At the church she contemplated steadily the Holy Ghost, and noticed that it had a look of the parrot. The resemblance seemed to her still more noticeable on an Épinal picture, representing the baptism of Our Lord. With its purple wings and emerald body it was really the portrait of Loulou.

Having bought it she hung it in the place of the Count of Artois, so that with the same look she could see them both. They became associated in her thoughts, the parrot becoming sanctified by this union with the Holy Ghost, which became more alive and intelligible in her eyes. The Father, to give utterance to his will, had not chosen a dove, since these beasts have no voice, but rather one of the ancestors of Loulou. And Felicity said her prayers, looking at the picture, but from time to time turned a little to the bird.

She wanted to join the Sisters of the Virgin; Madame Aubain dissuaded her.

An event of some importance took place: Paul's marriage.

After having been at first a notary clerk, then in business, in the Customs, in the Treasury, and having even taken some steps to get into the Water and Forests Department, at the age of thirty-six, suddenly, by a heaven-sent inspiration, he had discovered his real road: the Registry Office. And he had shown such high talents that an auditor had offered him his daughter, promising him his protection.

Paul, become serious minded, brought her to his mother.

She looked down on the customs of Pont-l'Évêque, behaved like a princess, hurt Felicity. Madame Aubain, when she went away, felt relieved.

The following week they learned of the death of Monsieur Bourais, in Lower Brittany, in an inn. The rumour of suicide was confirmed: doubts rose about his honesty. Madame Aubain studied her accounts, and was not long in finding the whole list of his evil deeds; embezzlement of arrears, pretended sales of wood, false receipts, etc.

These acts of baseness afflicted her greatly. In March 1853 she was seized by a pain in the chest; her tongue seemed covered with smoke; leeches did not calm the fever; and on the eighth day she died, being exactly seventy-two years old.

She was considered younger, because of her brown hair, whose folds surrounded her pale face, marked with the smallpox. Few friends mourned her, her way of living had displayed a haughtiness which kept people at a distance.

Felicity wept for her, as masters are not wept for. That madame should die before her upset her ideas, seemed to her contrary to the order of things, inadmissible and monstrous.

Ten days after (the time to rush to Besançon) the heirs arrived; the daughter-in-

law went through the drawers, chose the best of the furniture, sold the rest; then they went down to the Registry Office again.

Madame's chair, her table, her foot warmer, the eight chairs were gone. The place of the engravings was marked by yellow squares on the walls. They had taken away the two little beds, with their mattresses, and in the cupboard none of Virginia's belongings were seen any more. Felicity climbed the stairs, drunk with grief.

The next day there was a notice on the door: the apothecary shouted in her ear that the house was for sale.

She staggered and was obliged to sit down.

What distressed her most was leaving her room - so convenient for poor Loulou. Enveloping him with a look of anguish she implored the Holy Ghost, and contracted the idolatrous habit of saying her prayers on her knees before the parrot. Sometimes the sun, entering through the dormer window, fell on his glass eye, and caused it to shoot out a fine luminous beam, which put her in ecstasies.

She had an income of three hundred and eighty francs, a legacy from her mistress. The garden furnished her with vegetables. As to dresses, she possessed enough of them to clothe her to the end of her days, and she saved light by going to bed at dusk.

She hardly ever went out, so as to avoid the second-hand dealer's shop, where was displayed some of the old furniture. Since her attack of dizziness she limped in one leg, and, her strength diminishing, Mother Simon, ruined in the grocery business, came every morning to cut her wood and to pump her water.

Her eyes grew weaker. The shutters were no longer opened. Many years passed. And the house was not let, nor sold.

In terror lest she should be sent away Felicity did not ask for any repairs. The laths of the roof were rotting. During the whole of one winter, her pillow was damp. After Easter she spat blood.

Then Mother Simon had recourse to a doctor. Felicity wanted to know what was the matter with her. But, too deaf to hear, a single word reached her, 'Pneumonia!' It was one she knew, and she replied quietly: 'Ah, like madame', finding it natural to follow her mistress.

The time for setting up the street altars drew near. The first was always at the foot of the hill, the second before the posthouse, the third about the middle of the road. There were rival factions about that one; and the parishioners finally chose Madame Aubain's courtyard.

Her difficulty in breathing and fever grew worse. Felicity was wretched at doing nothing for the altar. If she had had something to put there at least! Then she thought of the parrot. It was not suitable, the neighbours objected. But the priest granted permission for it; she was so happy that she begged him to accept, when

she should be dead, Loulou, her only treasure.

From Tuesday to Saturday, the eve of Corpus Christi, she coughed more frequently. In the evening, her face drawn, her lips stuck to her gums, vomitings made their appearance; and the next day, at daybreak, feeling herself very low, she got them to call the priest.

Three old women surrounded her during the extreme unction. Then she declared that she required to speak to Fabu.

He arrived in his Sunday clothes, ill at ease in this lugubrious atmosphere.

'Forgive me,' she said, with an effort to stretch out her arm, 'I thought it was you who had killed him!'

What was the meaning of gossip like that? To suspect him of a murder, a man like him! and he was indignant, was going to make a row.

'She hasn't her wits, you can see that easily enough.'

Felicity from time to time spoke to the ghosts. The old women went away. Madame Simon had her breakfast.

A little later she took Loulou, and lifting him close to Felicity: 'Come, then! Say good-bye!'

Although he was not a corpse the worms were devouring him; one of his wings was broken, the stuffing protruded from his stomach. But blind now, she kissed him on the head, and pressed him against her cheek. Mother Simon took him, to put him on the street altar.

V

From the grass was wafted up the scent of summer; the flies buzzed; the sun glinted on the river, and warmed the roofs. Mother Simon returned to the room and slept peacefully.

Church bells woke her; people were coming out from vespers. Felicity's delirium dropped. Thinking of the procession, she saw it, just as if she were following it.

All the school children, the choristers, and the fire brigade were marching along the pavements, while in the middle of the road were advancing, first the head beadle, armed with his halberd, the under-beadle with his big cross, the teacher supervising the boys, the nun anxious for her little girls; three of the prettiest, curly-haired like angles, were throwing petals of roses into the air; the deacon with outspread arms conducted the music; and two censer swingers turned at each step to the Holy Sacrament, which, under a dais of flaming red velvet, upheld by four churchwardens, the priest in his fine chasuble was carrying. A crowd of people jostled behind, between the white cloths covering the house walls; and the

foot of the hill was reached.

A cold sweat wet Felicity's temples. Mother Simon sponged it with a towel, saying that one day we must all go that way. The murmur of the crowd grew, was very loud for a moment, died away.

A volley shook the window panes. It was the postilions saluting the Monstrance. Felicity rolled her eyeballs, and said, as loud as she could: 'Does he look all right?' tormented by the parrot.

Her death agony began. A rattle, more and more hurried, caused her sides to heave. Bubbles of foam came to the corners of her mouth, and all her body trembled.

Soon the blare of ophicleides was distinguished, the clear voices of the children, the deep voices of the men. All was still at intervals, and the tramp of feet which the flowers muffled made the noise of a flock on the turf.

The clergy appeared in the courtyard. Madame Simon climbed on a chair to reach the round window, and in this way commanded a view of the altar.

Green garlands were hanging on the altar, adorned with a flounce in English point lace. There was in the centre a little box enclosing the relics, two orange trees at the corners, and, all its length, silver candlesticks and porcelain vases, whence sprang sunflowers, lilies, peonies, foxgloves, bunches of hortensias.

This mass of dazzling colours descended in a sloping line from the table to the carpet, trailing on the paving-stones; and rare objects drew the eye. A silver-gilt sugar basin had a crown of violets, earrings in Alencon quartz gleamed in the moss, two Chinese screens displayed their landscapes. Loulou, hidden under the roses, only showed his blue front like a sheet of lapis-lazuli.

The churchwardens, the choristers, the children ranged themselves on three sides of the courtyard. The priest slowly mounted the steps, and placed on the lace his huge, glittering 'Golden Sun'. Everybody knelt. There was a great silence. And the censers, swinging in full flight, slipped on their chains.

An azure vapour rose into Felicity's room. She distended her nostrils, scenting it with a mystic sensuality: then she shut her eyes. Her lips smiled. The beats of her heart slowed one by one, more unsteady each time, more gentle like a fountain that is exhausted, like an echo that disappears; and when she breathed her last breath she thought she saw in the heavens as they opened, a gigantic parrot, flying above her head.

