

THE SEIGNEURIE OF ST. MEDARD.

"From a death of despair and ennui, Holy Virgin, deliver us."

The needle was actually growing rusty in the hot little hand, and the thread was possessed by a perverse inclination to entangle itself. A sigh broke from Fleurette's troubled breast. The girl's movement of impatience caught the quick eye of Madame de Brie, who was ever on the alert for manifestations of that iniquity which she conceived to be inherent in youth. The dullness was nothing to them—these old people: Aunt de Brie, who ruled with a rod of iron, the veriest old autocrat in Christendom; Aunt Henri, who dreamed only of her past pleasures and triumphs; Jean Louis, who, at twenty-eight, was the oldest of them all. Certainly, Aunt de Brie was endowed with a preternaturally acute sense of observation. Jean Louis never cast a surreptitious glance at his pretty cousin but the hard, black eyes, interpreted its meaning; the sharp tongue mercilessly exposed the enormity of those coquettish wiles, which were intended as snares and pitfalls for the soul's destruction. Fleurette shrugged her pretty shoulders and smiled disdainfully at the absurdity. Jean Louis, indeed, whose conversation always related to the farms and the cattle, who permitted the aunts to domineer over him, who blushed and stammered at a glance from the girl's brown eyes. Poor Jean Louis! If he could only have found the voice that never was his, save in the recesses of his heart, where a restless fire burnt, that made a sweet agony of life, he would have been a poet. As it was, he appeared only a heavy, sullen boor.

"It is celle-là," austere remarked Madame de Brie to her nephew. "It is celle-là who turns the girl's brain with vain fancies."

"Thine aunt's severity is crushing the life of that child," suavely observed Madame Henri. "We must admit thine aunt's range of thought is sadly limited."

Jean Louis was never tempted to divulge his ideas on the subject. It was undeniable that the young man possessed the gift of silence.

"My little cabbage—pretty as a little heart is the child. Chut! little chance has she among them all. Still things arrange themselves," concluded old Jeanne blithely. Jeanne, with her long nose and double chin, her low forehead, which she was continually diminishing by drawing it up into wrinkles when she made grimaces of protest and astonishment; with her busy brain, warm heart and sharp tongue, was like a ray of broad, strong sunshine in the gloomy house in which she had spent thirty years of faithful service. It was a hazardous task steering between the exacting jealousy of Madame de Brie and the plaintive self-compassion of her sister-in-law.

"I place celle-là before myself. She eats my bread, she is clothed by the labour of my hands. I toil, she responds; I save, she spends. As for gratitude, that I expect not."

"But a dependent, and, of necessity, the last to be considered," lamented Madame Henri. "There is no question of obligation. I accept as I would give."

For long years the two had never held any direct communication.

"Tell celle-là that I desire it should be thus," Madame de Brie would command imperiously.

"It's of no consequence; but you might remind your aunt that I require so-and so," Madame Henri would insinuate gently.

Madame de Brie was a woman whose thoughts and feelings all turned inward around some master disposition of her own selfishness. She had a sort of vehement force of individuality which exalted caprice into a principle and imparted audacity to intellectual littleness. Though she reigned in sovereign supremacy at the Manor House of St. Médard, the Mordecai at her gates assumed the form of a little phlegmatic oyster of a woman with the plaintive voice of one who lived in a chronic state of compassion for her own troubles. Madame Henri's husband had been a prodigal younger son. But in her day Claude de Brie had been counted a beauty, and she had never succeeded in divesting herself of the idea that there was something charmingly fascinating about her own frailties and weaknesses. Madame de Brie had brought a handsome dowry to the family treasury, her thrift and energy had increased the value of the seigneurie fourfold. But there had been some wants in her life, and, with a sharp, prevailing inclination, intensified into action, the grudge which she found herself unable to vent upon Providence, she paid out liberally to her dependents, and always with a salutary conviction, to which she yielded herself with edifying serenity, that in rendering existence grim and unlovely, she was engaged in the righteous performance of a duty. The whole cramped affection of Claude de Brie's heart centred on her nephew. Her jealous, exacting fondness held the young man in bonds strong as iron. Hating the restraint, he was patient and made no effort to elude the obligation.

"For the present we have finished conjugating the verb *s'ennuyer* in all its moods and tenses," joyfully proclaimed Fleurette.

"I detest change," suddenly responded Jean Louis. "He is English—this new cousin. His ways are not as ours."

"Already I have learned all that concerns him." Fleurette was animated by a coquettish desire to tease Jean Louis. "His mother was a Demoiselle Chastel de Brie, and he has but lately arrived from England. He is charged with the construction of the new railway, for he is a great engineer, our cousin Eldred."

"What need of railways? Are we not well at present?"

"But I am charmed to see the new cousin," persisted Fleurette childishly.

The great *salon*, with its old-fashioned mirrors and spindle-legged furniture, was thrown open. Madame de Brie rushed frantically after her maids. Fleurette was incessantly occupied in sewing and contriving under the direction of Madame Henri.

"Dame! Is it the young alone who have no preparations to make?" ventured Fleurette timidly.

"What would you, then?" Madame Henri paused amidst her ancient satins, brocades and laces. "It is the duty of thine aunt to arrange you in a manner worthy of a Demoiselle de Brie. Juste ciel!" reflectively, drifting into the egotistical, retrospective monologue in which her soul delighted. "When I recall the preparations that were made for my entrance into the world."

"Celle-là has been teaching thee vanity. Let her supply thee from her stores. Nourish the serpent and prepare to receive the sting. Foolish one! It were better to think of thy prayers."

So it happened that Fleurette met the new relative in a quaint, old-fashioned white gown, that caused her to look absurdly childlike, a bunch of crimson roses, fresh and fair as the girl herself, glowing in her corsage. Eldred Anstruther was not impressionable, but the sight of this youthful, gracious presence, amidst such oddly incongruous surroundings, captivated his imagination.

The Seigneurie of St. Médard was situated in one of the most primitive regions in the Province of Quebec. The people cling to the customs and traditions of their fathers without any desire for change or improvement. The whirl of the spinning-wheel was heard in almost every house; the women, sallow and dark-eyed, chattered volubly; the plump, brown children, gambolled with an abandonment unknown to the Saxon race. Leaving behind him the prosaic routine of modern life, the Englishman seemed to have dropped into a French château of the 17th century. Madame was a typical *châtelaine* of the *ancien régime*—her homely figure was distinguished by a loftiness which was yet inexpressibly easy; and this wild rose, with a face fresh, fair and coquettish, that would have delighted a Greuze, resembled the pretty, airy Watteau pictures one sees on French fans. On an occasion of this kind Madame Henri's star was in the ascendant. An elderly butterfly, galvanized by a momentary ray of sunshine into a feeble imitation of past brilliancy, she displayed her airs and graces for the stranger's benefit. The new arrival was tall and fair and stalwart. Anstruther had often been considered cold and stern and abrupt. It seemed to Fleurette that he wore a delightful air of supremacy. How simple and friendly and cordial he was. Were there then such kings among men? She had thought they were all awkward and uncouth and gloomy like Jean Louis.

"How do you amuse yourself?" Anstruther inquired.

Fleurette raised shy eyes full of startled protest.

"Amusement! But of amusement there is none."

With her demure quaintness and innocent coquetry, this little creature was really interesting. To bring some sort of colour and brightness into this child's gloomy existence might prove a congenial task.

"We shall have to make pleasure for ourselves," he smiled. "You must show me the prettiest walks. Any fishing? You ride, of course? No habit," with a glance at Madame Henri. "Your aunt will easily arrange that."

Aunt de Brie's frown was sufficient to make the firmest nerves thrill and the stoutest heart quail. Even her silence was a critical, irritating, inarticulate expression of disapproval; but Anstruther ignored that as well as Jean Louis' sudden pallor. Such temerity deprived Fleurette of breath; but as no catastrophe resulted, she took courage and demurely permitted herself to be entertained.

"What will it be like here in the winter?" Anstruther asked as the two rode together beside the river.

Fleurette shivered as though in the hot August sunshine she had been smitten by a sudden chill. Then she laughed lightly—winter was so very far away.

"But of a desolation. Last winter was the first I have passed in the world. Aunt de Brie makes her prayers, Aunt Henri weeps, Jean Louis is silent. There is only the good Jeanne who is cheerful."

Anstruther refused to accept the hospitality of the Manor House. He lodged at a farm house in order to be near his work. Jean Louis watched events with a fierceness so dangerously still that it assumed the semblance of patience.

"Tiens, the little one is becoming really pretty." Madame Henri examined her niece with critical deliberation.

"When the cousin has departed then shall we begin the annual inspection of the linen," announced Madame de Brie.

A pang like the agony of death touched Claude's heart. Sick and faint she cowered beneath the steady gaze of Jean Louis.

That evening Anstruther paid his farewell visit to the Manor House. A subtle change had come over Fleurette. The restless glow and sparkle of the girl fascinated the Englishman. Her face flushed into radiant, laughing beauty. Madame de Brie snarled, Madame Henri languidly displayed her faded airs and graces, Jean Louis scowled beneath his heavy black brows; but the discouraging atmosphere had no effect in depressing the girl's brilliant spirits.

"Fleurette will make a charming woman. Poor little flower, ruthlessly encompassed by thorns," Anstruther thought as he walked away, and then dismissed the subject from his mind.

Before the September morning had fairly dawned Jeanne aroused Jean Louis.

"The chamber of the little one is empty." Is it the trouble of walking in her sleep that has again overtaken her? It's to thee, my fine, big fellow, to protect the child. Hasten then before the awakening of Madame."

"Where the treasure is there shall the heart be." Jeanne's steps turned instinctively toward the village. A wild confusion of thoughts chased through Jean Louis's mind, but his steps never faltered as he followed closely.

The grey mist that shrouded the landscape became tinged with golden light. With a despairing gesture Jeanne stopped short. A groan, which seemed wrung from some dark depths of pain, broke from de Brie's labouring breast. Across the threshold of the farm house at which Anstruther lodged, motionless as one dead, lay the slender form of a woman. She stirred and her eyes unclosed with a wild expression of terror. Just at that moment the door opened and Anstruther—fresh, cool and unconcerned—appeared. A dread of something that she dared not acknowledge, even to herself, curdled the blood in Fleurette's veins. She had had no experience of tragic possibilities; but this lurid light, which suddenly illumined all things, was like a revelation. With a low moaning cry she turned to her cousin, stretching out her hands as though blinded. Jean Louis represented peace, security and the old serene order of things, as Anstruther did the hideous suspicion of pain, shame and terror. A strong shudder, like a convulsion, shook her from head to foot, and all the gracious freshness of her youth seemed to dry up within her.

At the sight of Anstruther's expression of complete mystification, a cruel suspicion perished in de Brie's breast. The Englishman glanced silently from one to another. The tears still glistened on Jeanne's withered cheeks. Jean Louis's heavy face was transformed by a glow of deep and earnest feeling. The girl was wrapped in the folds of a heavy cloak. Her head was bare, and in the cool blueness of the early dawn, the light just touches the ripples of golden brown hair. What could this child know of passion and suffering? And yet that awful look in her eyes. His heart awakened with a throb and swelled responsive to a new spring of impassioned emotion.

"Mademoiselle, my cousin, has the misfortune to be a somnambulist, and has been followed by the good Jeanne. My cousin, my affianced wife."

Jean Louis was certainly master of the situation. There was no trace of bashfulness in his voice; the awkward, slouching form, had acquired an unfamiliar dignity. Anstruther's keen glance rested upon Fleurette. All the soft youthfulness of her face had settled into a stern gravity; her whole figure was full of resolution—a kind of inspiration that imparted character to every motion.

"This is a surprise. I congratulate you," he said, holding the girl's passive hand in his firm, warm grasp.

With scared faces the two looked at each other. It seemed as if across a great space—as if between them flowed the seas.

In midwinter Eldred Anstruther paid a visit to the seigneurie, a farewell before his departure for England. The old Manor House, half buried in snowdrifts, seemed more weird and gloomy than ever. Fleurette had grown thin and there were dark circles beneath her eyes, but she was in the highest spirits, and her sparkling brilliancy jarred inexplicably upon the young man's mood.

That night, as he thoughtfully smoked a last cigar before retiring, Jean Louis entered. Anstruther smoked and chatted with an effort to make himself agreeable to his host. De Brie neither smoked nor talked. The large apartment was lighted by tall, silver lamps, which cast a soft glimmer of illumination in their own immediate vicinity, while beyond the room was shrouded in dusky, wavering shadows. Jean Louis sat in the gloom. His eyes were remote, immovable points of darkness beneath heavy, restless brows; the stern, shadowed face, was rigid; the broad, bowed shoulders; the gaunt frame, from which the coat fell away in loose folds; the nervous hands clasping and unclasping upon his knees,—all impressed Anstruther unpleasantly. There had been little intimacy between the two men. Their relations had been characterized by courtesy rather than mutual interest. The careless, jesting words died away on the Englishman's lips. A strange constraint possessed him.

"I must be up early to catch my train. I must plead guilty of feeling rather tired."

"Hold! Not yet!" The restless hands were gripped tightly together. A sudden energy stirred the huge figure. "I have, all my life, loved the little Fleurette, me." The words were flung out without explanation or comment. "Figure to yourself what life is like here, and I, a boy, coming home from college—the Jesuits—where all my youth had been spent. Dull, silent, reserved, but young, above all, remember, young. The gloom, the silence, the isolation appal me—crush the life of the soul. I have wild plans. I will deliver myself from the bondage. The world stretches wide before me. Then the little one comes from her convent." There is a pause. Anstruther, listening with an attention almost painful in its eagerness, is conscious that for the first time his cousin has assumed a definite personality, clearly and distinctly marked. "In the college we had no knowledge of women. I had indifference, nay, more, even disdain, for these creatures of whom I knew nothing. The aunts were yet more indifferent than I, and the little one—she had but lost her mother—was desolate, but of a desolation to pierce the heart. She was like a little, wounded, fluttering bird. It was the good Jeanne who, in pity to us both, engaged me to interest