



THE PASTORAL SYMPHONY

He was a man deeply involved in a specific struggle, a specific fight, who never wrote a line which he did not think was of service to the cause he had at heart.

—François Mauriac

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TO
EAN SCHLUMBERGER

FIRST NOTEBOOK

10 February 189—

THE SNOW HAS been falling continuously for the last three days and all the roads are blocked. It has been impossible for me to go to R—, where I have been in the habit of holding a service twice a month for the last fifteen years. This morning not more than thirty of my flock were gathered together in La Brévine chapel.

I will take advantage of the leisure this enforced confinement affords me to think over the past and to set down how I came to take charge of Gertrude.

I propose to write here the whole history of her formation and development, for I seem to have called up out of the night her sweet and pious soul for no other end but adoration and love. Blessed be the Lord for having entrusted me with this task!

Two years and six months ago I had just driven back one afternoon from La Chaux-de-Fonds when a little girl who was a stranger to me came up in a

great hurry to take me to a place about five miles away where she said an old woman lay dying. My horse was still in the shafts, so I made the child get into the carriage and set off at once, after first providing myself with a lantern, as I thought it likely I should not be able to get back before dark.

I had supposed myself to be perfectly acquainted with the whole countryside in the neighborhood of my parish; but when we had passed La Saudraie farm, the child made me take a road that I had never ventured down before. About two miles farther on, however, I recognized on the left-hand side a mysterious little lake where I had sometimes been to skate as a young man. I had not seen it for fifteen years, for none of my pastoral duties take me that way; I could not have said where it lay and it had so entirely dropped out of my mind that when I suddenly recognized it in the golden enchantment of the rose-flecked evening sky, I felt as though I had seen it before only in a dream.

The road ran alongside the stream that falls out of the lake, cut across the extreme end of the forest, and then skirted a peat-bog. I had certainly never been there before.

The sun was setting and for a long time we had been driving in the shade when my young guide pointed out a cottage on the hillside which would

have seemed uninhabited but for a tiny thread of smoke that rose from the chimney, looking blue in the shade and brightening as it reached the gold of the sky. I tied the horse up to an apple tree close by and then followed the child into the dark room where the old woman had just died.

The gravity of the landscape, the silence and solemnity of the hour had struck me to the heart. A woman still in her youth was kneeling beside the bed. The child, whom I had taken to be the deceased woman's granddaughter, but who was only her servant, lighted a smoky tallow dip and then stood motionless at the foot of the bed. During our long drive I had tried to get her to talk, but had not succeeded in extracting two words from her.

The kneeling woman rose. She was not a relation as I had first supposed, but only a neighbor, a friend, whom the servant girl had brought there when she saw her mistress's strength failing, and who now offered to watch by the dead body. The old woman, she said, had passed away painlessly. We agreed together on the arrangements for the burial and the funeral service. As often before in this out-of-the-world country, it fell to me to settle everything. I was a little uneasy, I admit, at leaving the house, in spite of the poverty of its appearance, in the sole charge of this neighbor and of the little servant girl.

But it seemed very unlikely that there was any treasure hidden away in a corner of this wretched dwelling . . . and what else could I do? I inquired nevertheless whether the old woman had left any heirs.

Upon this, the woman took the candle and held it up so as to light the corner of the hearth, and I could make out crouching in the fireplace, and apparently asleep, a nondescript-looking creature, whose face was almost entirely hidden by a thick mass of hair.

"The blind girl there—she's a niece, the servant says. That's all that's left of the family, it seems. She must be sent to the poorhouse; I don't see what else can be done with her."

I was shocked to hear the poor thing's future disposed of in this way in her presence and afraid such rough words might give her pain.

"Don't wake her up," I said softly, as a hint to the woman that she should at any rate lower her voice.

"Oh, I don't think she's asleep. But she's an idiot; she can't speak or understand anything, I'm told. I have been in the room since this morning and she has hardly so much as stirred. I thought at first she was deaf; the servant thinks not, but that the old woman was deaf herself and never uttered a word to her, nor to anyone else; she hadn't opened her mouth for a long time past except to eat and drink."

"How old is she?"

"About fifteen, I suppose. But as to that, I know no more about it than you do. . . ."

It did not immediately occur to me to take charge of the poor, forlorn creature myself; but after I had prayed—or, to be more accurate, while I was still praying on my knees between the woman and the little servant girl, who were both kneeling too—it suddenly came upon me that God had set a kind of obligation in my path and that I could not shirk it without cowardice. When I rose, I had decided to take the girl away that very evening, though I had not actually asked myself what I should do with her afterward, nor into whose charge I should put her. I stayed a few moments longer gazing at the old woman's sleeping face, with its puckered mouth, looking like a miser's purse with strings tightly drawn so as to let nothing escape. Then, turning toward the blind girl, I told the neighbor of my intention.

"Yes, it is better she should not be there tomorrow when they come to take the body away," said she. And that was all.

Many things would be easily accomplished but for the imaginary objections men sometimes take a pleasure in inventing. From our childhood upwards, how often have we been prevented from doing one thing or another we should have liked to do, simply

by hearing people about us repeat: "He won't be able to . . .!"

The blind girl allowed herself to be taken away like a lifeless block. The features of her face were regular, rather fine, but utterly expressionless. I took a blanket off the mattress where she must have usually slept, in a corner under a staircase that led from the room to the loft.

The neighbor was obliging and helped me wrap her up carefully, for the night was very clear and chilly; after having lighted the carriage lamp, I started home, taking the girl with me. She sat huddled up against me—a soulless lump of flesh, with no sign of life beyond the communication of an obscure warmth. The whole way home I was thinking: "Is she asleep? And what can this black sleep be like? . . . And in what way do her waking hours differ from her sleeping? But this darkened body is surely tenanted; an immured soul is waiting there for a ray of Thy grace, O Lord, to touch it. Wilt Thou perhaps allow my love to dispel this dreadful darkness? . . ."

I have too much regard for the truth to pass over in silence the unpleasant welcome I had to encounter on my return home. My wife is a garden of virtues; and in the times of trouble we have sometimes gone

through I have never for an instant had cause to doubt the stuff of which her heart is made; but it does not do to take her natural charity by surprise. She is an orderly person, careful neither to go beyond nor to fall short of her duty. Even her charity is measured, as though love were not an inexhaustible treasure. This is the only point on which we differ. . . .

Her first thoughts when she saw me bring home the girl that evening broke from her in this exclamation:

“What kind of job have you saddled yourself with now?”

As always happens when we have to come to an understanding, I began by telling the children—who were standing round, open-mouthed and full of curiosity and surprise—to leave the room. Ah, how different this welcome was from what I could have wished! Only my dear little Charlotte began to dance and clap her hands when she understood that something new, something alive, was coming out of the carriage. But the others, who have been well trained by their mother, very soon damped the child’s pleasure and made her fall into step.

There was a moment of great confusion. And as neither my wife nor the children yet knew that they had to do with a blind person, they could not un-

derstand the extreme care with which I guided her footsteps. I myself was disconcerted by the odd moans the poor afflicted creature began to utter as soon as I let go her hand, which I had held in mine during the whole drive. There was nothing human in the sounds she made; they were more like the plaintive whines of a puppy. Torn away for the first time as she had been from the narrow round of customary sensations that had formed her universe, her knees now failed her; but when I pushed forward a chair, she sank on the floor in a heap, as if she were incapable of sitting down; I then led her up to the fireplace and she regained her calm a little as soon as she was able to crouch down in the same position in which I had first seen her beside the old woman's fire, leaning against the chimney-piece. In the carriage too, she had slipped off the seat and spent the whole drive huddled up at my feet. My wife, however, whose instinctive impulses are always the best, came to my help; it is her reflection that is constantly at odds with her heart and very often gets the better of it.

"What do you mean to do with *that*?" she asked when the girl had settled down.

I shivered in my soul at this use of the word *that*, and had some difficulty in restraining a movement of indignation. As I was still under the spell of my

long and peaceful meditation, however, I controlled myself. Turning toward the whole party, who were standing round in a circle again, I placed my hand on the blind girl's head and said as solemnly as I could:

"I have brought back the lost sheep."

But Amélie will not admit that there can be anything unreasonable or superreasonable in the teaching of the Gospel. I saw she was going to object, and it was then I made a sign to Jacques and Sarah, who, as they are accustomed to our little conjugal differences and have not much natural curiosity (not enough, I often think), led the two younger children out of the room.

Then, as my wife still remained silent and a little irritated, I thought, by the intruder's presence: "You needn't mind speaking before her," I said. "The poor child doesn't understand."

Upon this Amélie began to protest that she had absolutely nothing to say—which is her usual prelude to the lengthiest explanations—and there was nothing for her to do but to submit, as usual, to all my most unpractical vagaries, however contrary to custom and good sense they might be. I have already said that I had not in the least made up my mind what I was going to do with the child. It had not occurred to me, or only in the vaguest

way, that there was any possibility of taking her into our house permanently, and I may almost say it was Amélie herself who first suggested it to me by asking whether I didn't think there were "enough of us in the house already"? Then she declared that I always hurried on ahead without taking any thought for those who could not keep up with me, that for her part she considered five children quite enough, and that since the birth of Claude (who at that very moment set up a howl from his cradle, as if he had heard his name) she had as much as she could put up with and that she couldn't stand any more.

At the beginning of her outburst some of Christ's words rose from my heart to my lips; I kept them back, however, for I never think it becoming to allege the authority of the Holy Book as an excuse for my conduct. But when she spoke of her fatigue, I was struck with confusion, for I must admit it has more than once happened to me to let my wife suffer from the consequences of my impulsive and inconsiderate zeal. In the meantime, however, her recriminations had enlightened me as to my duty; I begged Amélie therefore, as mildly as possible, to consider whether she would not have done the same in my place and whether she could have possibly abandoned a creature who had been so obviously

left without anyone to help her; I added that I was under no illusion as to the extra fatigue the charge of this new inmate would add to the cares of the household, and that I regretted I was not more often able to help her with them. In this way I pacified her as best I could, begging her at the same time not to visit her anger on the innocent girl, who had done nothing to deserve it. Then I pointed out that Sarah was now old enough to be more of a help to her and that Jacques was no longer in need of her care. In short, God put into my mouth the right words to help her accept what I am sure she would have undertaken of her own accord if the circumstances had given her time to reflect and if I had not forestalled her decision without consulting her.

I thought the cause was almost gained, and my dear Amélie was already approaching Gertrude with the kindest intentions; but her irritation suddenly blazed up again higher than ever when, on taking up the lamp to look at the child more closely, she discovered her to be in a state of unspeakable dirt.

"Why, she's filthy!" she cried. "Go and brush yourself quickly. No, not here. Go and shake your clothes outside. Oh dear! Oh dear! The children will be covered with them. There's nothing in the world I hate so much as vermin."

It cannot be denied that the poor child was crawling with them; and I could not prevent a feeling of disgust as I thought how close I had kept her to me during our long drive.

When I came back a few minutes later, having cleaned myself as best I could, I found my wife had sunk into an armchair and with her head in her hands was giving way to a fit of sobbing.

"I did not mean to put your fortitude to such a test," I said tenderly. "In any case it is late tonight and too dark to do anything. I will sit up and keep the fire going and the child can sleep beside it. Tomorrow we will cut her hair and wash her properly. You need not attend to her until you have got over your repugnance." And I begged her not to say anything of that to the children.

It was supper time. My protégée, at whom our old Rosalie cast many a scowling glance as she waited on us, greedily devoured the plateful of soup I handed her. The meal was a silent one. I should have liked to relate my adventure, to talk to the children and touch their hearts by making them understand and feel the strangeness of such a condition of total deprivation. I should have liked to rouse their pity, their sympathy for the guest God had sent us; but I was afraid of reviving Amélie's irritation. It seemed as though the word had been

passed to take no notice of what had happened and to forget all about it, though certainly not one of us can have been thinking of anything else.

I was extremely touched when, more than an hour after everyone had gone to bed and Amélie had left me, I saw my little Charlotte steal gently through the half-open door in her nightdress and bare feet; she flung her arms round my neck and hugged me fiercely.

"I didn't say good-night to you properly," she murmured.

Then, pointing with her little forefinger to the blind girl, who was now peacefully slumbering and whom she had been curious to see again before going to sleep:

"Why didn't I kiss her too?" she whispered.

"You shall kiss her tomorrow. We must let her be now. She is asleep," I said as I went with her to the door.

Then I sat down again and worked till morning, reading or preparing my next sermon.

"Certainly," I remember thinking, "Charlotte seems much more affectionate than the elder children, but when they were her age, I believe they all got round me too. My big boy Jacques, nowadays so distant and reserved . . . One thinks them