



# STRAIT IS THE GATE

Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which  
leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it.

—Matthew 7:14

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TO M.A.G.



*Strive to enter in at the strait gate*

**LUKE xiii, 24**



SOME people might have made a book out of it; but the story I am going to tell is one which took all my strength to live and over which I spent all my virtue. So I shall set down my recollections quite simply, and if in places they are ragged I shall have recourse to no invention, and neither patch nor connect them; any effort I might make, to dress them up would take away the last pleasure I hope to get in telling them.

I lost my father before I was twelve years old. As there was nothing to keep my mother at Le Havre, where my father had had a practice as a doctor, she decided to go to Paris where she thought I should be better able to finish my education. She took a small apartment near the Luxembourg and Miss Ashburton came to live with us. Miss Flora Ashburton, who had no relations of her own, had begun by being my mother's governess; she afterwards became her companion and later on her friend. I spent my childhood in the society of these two women whom I remember as equally gentle and equally sad, and always dressed in mourning. One day – it was a good long time, I think, after my father's death – my mother changed the black ribbon in her morning cap for a mauve one.

'Oh, mamma!' I cried. 'That colour doesn't suit you at all.' The next morning the black ribbon was back again.

My health was delicate. My mother and Miss Ashburton had only one thought – to keep me from ailing. If I have not become an idler as a result of their solicitude it must really be that my love of work is ingrained. At the very beginning of the fine weather they both used to persuade themselves that it was time for me to leave town, that I was growing pale. About the middle of June we would start for Fongueusemare, in the neighbourhood of Le Havre, where we used to spend the summer every year at my Uncle Bucolin's.

Standing in a garden which is neither very large nor very fine,

and which has nothing special to distinguish it from a number of other Normandy gardens, the Bucolins' house, a white two-storied building, resembles a great many country houses of the century before last. A score of large windows look east on to the front of the garden; as many more on to the back; there are none at the sides. The windows have small panes; some of them, which have been recently replaced, seem too light in colour among the old ones, which look green and dull beside them. Certain others have flaws in the glass which our parents used to call 'bubbles'; a tree seen through them becomes distorted; when the postman passes he suddenly develops a hump.

The garden is rectangular and is enclosed by a wall. The part which lies in front of the house consists of a fairly large, shady lawn with a gravel path all round it. On this side the wall is lower and allows a view of the farmyard and buildings which lie round the garden; the farm is bordered, according to the custom of the country, by an avenue of beeches.

Behind the house on the west side the garden spreads more spaciouly. A walk, gay with flowers, runs along the south espalier wall and is protected from the sea winds by a thick screen of Portugal laurel and a few trees. Another walk running along the north wall disappears under a mass of branches. My cousins used to call it the 'dark walk' and would not venture along it after twilight. These two paths led to the kitchen-garden, which continues the flower-garden on a lower level, and which you reach by a small flight of steps. Then, at the bottom of the kitchen-garden, a little gate with a secret fastening leads, on the other side of the wall, to a coppice in which the beech avenue terminates right and left. As one stands on the door-step of the west front one can look over the top of this clump of trees to the plateau beyond with its admirable clothing of crops. On the horizon, at no great distance, can be seen the church of a little village and, when the air is still, the smoke rising from half a dozen houses.

Every fine summer evening after dinner we used to go down



to the 'lower garden'. We went out by the little secret gate and walked as far as a bench in the avenue from which there was a view over the country; there, near the thatched roof of a deserted marl-pit, my uncle, my mother, and Miss Ashburton would sit down; before us the little valley filled with mist, and over the distant woods we watched the sky turn golden. Afterwards we would linger for a while at the lower end of the garden where it had already grown dark. When we came in we found my aunt in the drawing-room. She hardly ever went out with us. For us children the evening ended here; but very often we were still reading in our rooms when we heard our elders go up to bed.

Almost every hour of the day which we did not spend in the garden we spent in the 'school-room', my uncle's study, in which some school desks had been placed for us. My cousin Robert and I worked side by side – behind us were Juliette and Alissa. Alissa was two years older than I, and Juliette one year younger; Robert was the youngest of us four.

I am not writing here an account of my early recollections, but only of those which refer to my story. It really begins, I may say, in the year of my father's death. Perhaps my sensibility – over-stimulated as it has been by our bereavement and if not by my own grief at any rate by the sight of my mother's – pre-disposed me at this time to new emotions. I had matured precociously, so that when we went to Fongueusemare that year, Juliette and Robert seemed to me all the younger by comparison, but when I saw Alissa I understood on a sudden that we two had ceased to be children.

Yes, it was certainly the year of my father's death; my recollection is confirmed by a conversation which, I remember, took place between my mother and Miss Ashburton immediately after our arrival. I had come unexpectedly into the room where my mother and her friend were talking together; the subject of their talk was my aunt. My mother was indignant that she had not gone into mourning or had gone out again so

soon. (To tell the truth it was as impossible for me to imagine Aunt Bucolin dressed in black as my mother in colours.) The day of our arrival Lucile Bucolin, as far as I can remember, was wearing a muslin gown. Miss Ashburton, conciliatory as ever, was trying to calm my mother.

‘After all,’ she argued timidly, ‘white is mourning too.’

‘And do you call that red shawl she has round her shoulders mourning too? Flora, I am ashamed of you,’ cried my mother.

It was only during the holidays that I saw my aunt and no doubt the warm summer weather was the reason of her wearing the transparent, low-necked bodices in which I always remember her; but still more than the brilliant colour of the scarves which she used to throw over her bare shoulders, it was my aunt’s low necks that shocked my mother.

Lucile Bucolin was very beautiful. I still have by me a little portrait of her, in which I can see her as she then was, looking so young that she might have been taken for the elder sister of her daughters, sitting sideways in an attitude which was habitual to her, her head leaning on her left hand, her little finger curved rather affectedly towards her lip. A large-meshed net confines the masses of her curly hair, which fall half-uncoiled upon her neck. In the opening of her bodice a locket of Italian mosaic hangs from a loosely tied black velvet neck ribbon. Her black velvet sash, with its wide floating bow, her broad-brimmed soft straw hat which is dangling from the back of her chair – everything adds to the childishness of her appearance. Her right hand hangs by her side, holding a shut book.

Lucile Bucolin came from a West Indian family: she had either never known her parents or lost them very early. My mother told me later that when she was left an orphan, or possibly even deserted, she was taken in by Pasteur Vautier and his wife, who at that time had no children of their own. They left Martinique soon after, taking her with them to Le Havre, where the Bucolins were settled. The Vautiers and the Bucolins used to see a good deal of each other. My uncle was at that time

employed in a bank abroad, and it was only three years later, when he came home to stay with his people, that he saw little Lucile. He fell in love with her and at once asked her to marry him, to the great grief of his parents and of my mother. Lucile was then sixteen years old. In the meantime Madame Vautier had had two children; she was beginning to be anxious as to the influence their adopted sister – whose character was developing more and more oddly every month – might have over them; the household, moreover, was in straitened circumstances. My mother told me all this in order to explain why the Vautiers accepted her brother's proposal so gladly. What I suppose for my own part is, that Miss Lucile was becoming terribly embarrassing. I am well enough acquainted with Le Havre society to imagine the kind of reception that a girl of such fascinations would meet with. Pasteur Vautier, whom I knew later on, was a gentle creature, at once circumspect and ingenuous, incapable of coping with intrigue and quite defenceless against evil – the worthy man must have been at the end of his tether. I can say nothing of Madame Vautier; she died in giving birth to a fourth child who was about my own age and who afterwards became my friend.

Lucile Bucolin took very little share in our life; she did not come downstairs from her room till after the mid-day meal was over, and then immediately stretched herself on the sofa or in a hammock and remained there till evening, when she would rise, no less languid than before. She used sometimes to raise a handkerchief to her forehead as if wiping away some imaginary moisture, though her skin was a perfection of smooth purity; this handkerchief of hers filled me with wonder because of its fineness and its scent, which seemed more like the perfume of a fruit than of a flower; sometimes she would draw from her waist a minute mirror with a sliding silver lid, which hung with various other objects from her watch-chain; she would look at herself, wet her finger at her lips and then moisten the corner

of her eyes. She used often to hold a book, but it was almost always shut; a tortoise-shell bookmark was stuck between its pages. If you came near her she did not turn from the contemplation of her dreams to look at you. Often from her careless or tired hand, from the back of the sofa or from a fold of her dress, her handkerchief would drop to the ground, or her book, or a flower, maybe, or the bookmark. One day when I picked up her book – this is a childish memory I am telling you – I blushed to see it was a book of poetry.

In the evening after dinner Lucile Bucolin did not join our family party at the table, but sat down to the piano, where she took a kind of placid pleasure in playing one or other of Chopin's slow mazurkas; sometimes she would break off in the middle of a bar and pause, suspended motionless on a chord.

I used to experience a peculiar discomfort when I was with my aunt: it was a feeling of uneasiness, of disturbance, mingled with a kind of admiration and a kind of terror. Perhaps some obscure instinct set me against her; and then I felt that she despised Flora Ashburton and my mother, and that Miss Ashburton was afraid of her, and that my mother disliked her.

Lucile Bucolin, I wish I no longer bore you malice; I wish I could forget for a moment how much harm you did . . . at any rate, I will try to speak of you without anger.

One day of that summer – or perhaps of the following, for as the place where the scene was laid never changed, my memories sometimes overlap and become confused – one day I went into the drawing-room to fetch a book; she was there. I was on the point of going away again when she called me back – she, who as a rule never seemed to see me.

'Why do you run away so fast, Jerome? Are you afraid of me?'

With a beating heart I drew near, forced myself to smile, put out my hand. She took my hand with one of hers and with the

other stroked my cheek. 'How badly your mother dresses you, you poor little thing!' she said.

At that time I used to wear a sort of sailor suit with a large collar, which my aunt began pulling about.

'Sailor collars are worn much more open,' said she, undoing a button of my shirt. 'There, see if that doesn't look better!' and taking out her little mirror, she drew my face down to hers, passed her bare arm around my neck, put her hand into my shirt, asked me laughingly if I was ticklish – went on – further. . . . I started so violently that my shirt tore across and with a flaming face I fled, as she called after me:

'Oh, the little stupid!'

I rushed away to the other end of the kitchen-garden, and there I dipped my handkerchief into a little tank, put it to my forehead – washed, scrubbed – my cheeks, my neck, every part of me the woman had touched.

There were certain days on which Lucile Bucolin had one of her 'attacks'. They would come on suddenly and the whole house was turned upside down. Miss Ashburton made haste to get the children out of the way and distract their attention; but it was impossible to stifle or to prevent their hearing the dreadful screams which came from the bedroom or the drawing-room. My uncle lost his head; we heard him rushing along the passages, fetching towels and eau de Cologne and ether; in the evening at table, where my aunt was not yet able to appear, he looked anxious and aged.

When the attack was more or less over, Lucile Bucolin used to send for her children – that is for Robert and Juliette – never for Alissa. On those melancholy days Alissa would shut herself up in her room where her father sometimes joined her, for he used often to talk to Alissa.

My aunt's attacks made a great impression upon the servants. One evening when the attack had been particularly acute and I was being kept in my mother's room, where what was going

on in the drawing-room was less noticeable, we heard the cook running along the passages calling out: 'Sir, sir, come quick! My poor lady is dying.'

My uncle had gone up to Alissa's room; my mother went out to meet him on his way down. A quarter of an hour later I heard them talking below the windows of the room where I had remained, and my mother's voice reached me.

'Do you know what I think, my dear? The whole thing is play-acting.' And she repeated the word several times over, emphasizing every syllable, '*play-acting*'.

This was towards the end of the holidays and two years after our bereavement. I was not to see my aunt much oftener. The unhappy event which shattered our family life was preceded by a little incident which occurred a short time before the final catastrophe and turned the uncertain and complex feeling I had hitherto experienced for Lucile Bucolin into pure hatred. But before relating this I must first speak of my cousin.

That Alissa Bucolin was pretty, I was incapable yet of perceiving; I was drawn and held to her by a charm other than mere beauty. No doubt she was very like her mother; but the expression of her eyes was so different that it was not till later that I became aware of this likeness. I cannot describe faces; the features escape me and even the colour of the eyes; I can only recall the expression of her smile – a smile that was already almost sad – and the line of her eyebrows, which were so extraordinarily far from her eyes, raised above the eye in a great circle. I have never seen any like them anywhere . . . stay, though! there is a Florentine statuette of the time of Dante; and I like to fancy that Beatrice as a child had eyebrows wide-arched like her. They gave her look, her whole being, an expression of inquiry which was at once anxious and confident – yes, of passionate inquiry. She was all question and expectation. You shall hear how this questioning took possession of me, became my life.

And yet Juliette might have been considered more beautiful; the brilliancy of joy and health was upon her; but this beauty of hers beside her sister's grace seemed something external, something which lay open to the whole world at the first glance. As for Robert, there was nothing particular to distinguish him. He was merely a boy of about my own age; I used to play with him and Juliette; with Alissa I used to talk. She mixed very little in our games; as far back as I can remember, I see her serious, gently smiling, reflective. What did we talk about? What can two children talk about? I will try to tell you in a moment, but let me first finish what I have to say about my aunt, so as to have done with her.

Two years after my father's death, my mother and I spent the Easter holidays at Le Havre. We did not stay with the Bucolins, who had comparatively little room in their town house, but with an elder sister of my mother's, whose house was larger. Aunt Plantier, whom I rarely had the opportunity of seeing, had long since been left a widow; I hardly knew her children, who were much older than I was and very unlike me.

The Plantiers' house was not actually in the town, but half way up the small hill called the 'Côte', which overlooks it. The Bucolins lived in the business quarter; a steep short cut led in a few minutes from one house to the other. I used to run up and down it several times a day.

On that particular day I had had lunch at my uncle's. After the meal was over he went out, and I accompanied him as far as his office and then returned home to the Plantiers' to fetch my mother. There I heard that she had gone out with my aunt and would not be back till dinner time. I immediately went down again to the town where I was very rarely free to go by myself, and found my way to the port, which was dreary that day with a sea-fog; I loitered on the quays for an hour or so, and then suddenly I was seized with the desire to go back and take Alissa by surprise, though indeed I had only just left her. I ran back through the town and rang at the Bucolins' door. I was just

darting upstairs when the maid who had let me in stopped me.

‘Don’t go up, Master Jerome. Don’t go up! Mistress is having an attack.’

But I brushed past her. It was not my aunt I had come to see. . . . Alissa’s room was on the third floor. On the first there was the drawing-room and the dining-room; on the second, my aunt’s room, from which voices were coming. The door past which I had to go was open and a flood of light came from the room and fell on the landing: afraid of being seen, I hesitated a moment and drew back into the dark; this is what I beheld to my unspeakable amazement: my aunt was lying on a sofa in the middle of the room; the curtains were drawn, and it was illuminated by the cheerful light of two candelabra full of candles; Robert and Juliette were at her feet and behind her was a strange young man in a lieutenant’s uniform. The presence of the two children seems to me today monstrous; at that time in my innocence I thought it reassuring rather than otherwise. They were laughing and looking at the stranger, who was saying in a piping voice:

‘Bucolin! Bucolin! . . . If I had a pet lamb I should certainly call it Bucolin.’

My aunt herself burst out laughing. I saw her hold out a cigarette for the young man to light, smoke a few whiffs of it and then let it fall to the floor. He rushed forward to pick it up, made as if he had caught his feet in a scarf, tripped and fell on his knees before my aunt. Thanks to this ridiculous performance, I was able to slip by without being noticed.

I found myself outside Alissa’s door. For a moment I waited. Bursts of laughter and voices came up from the floor below; perhaps they drowned the sound of my knock, for I heard no answer. I pushed the door and it opened silently. The room was so dark that I did not at once distinguish Alissa: she was on her knees by the bedside; through the window behind her came the last glimmer of expiring daylight. She turned as I came near, but without getting up, and murmured:



‘Oh, Jerome, why have you come back?’

I bent down to kiss her face; her face was bathed in tears. . . .

My whole life was decided by that moment: even to this day I cannot recall it without a pang of anguish. Doubtless I understood very imperfectly the cause of Alissa’s wretchedness, but I felt intensely that that wretchedness was far too strong for her little quivering soul, for her fragile body, shaken with sobs.

I remained standing beside her, while she remained on her knees. I could express nothing of the unfamiliar transport of my breast, but I pressed her head against my heart, and I pressed my lips to her forehead, while my whole soul came flooding through them. Drunken with love, with pity, with an indistinguishable mixture of enthusiasm, of self-sacrifice, of virtue, I appealed to God with all my strength – I offered myself up to Him, unable to conceive that existence could have any other object than to shelter this child from fear, from evil, from life. I knelt down at last, my whole being full of prayer. I gathered her to me; vaguely I heard her say:

‘Jerome! They didn’t see you, did they? Oh! go away quickly. They mustn’t see you.’

Then, lower still:

‘Jerome, don’t tell anyone. Poor papa doesn’t know about it. . . .’

I told my mother nothing therefore; but the interminable whisperings that went on between her and Aunt Plantier, the mysterious, preoccupied, distressed looks of the two women, the ‘Run along, my dear!’ with which they would get rid of me whenever I came within earshot of their confabulations, all went to show that they were not wholly unsuspecting of the Bucolin family secret.

We had no sooner returned to Paris than a telegram recalled my mother to Le Havre. My aunt had run away.

‘With anyone?’ I asked Miss Ashburton, with whom my mother had left me.