

Chapter 54

THE CONFESSION

Three days after the events we have just recited, a carriage covered with dust and drawn by two horses white with foam stopped about seven of the evening before the gate of the Château des Noires-Fontaines. To the great astonishment of the person who was in such haste to arrive, the gates were open, a crowd of peasants filled the courtyard, and men and women were kneeling on the portico. Then, his sense of hearing being rendered more acute by astonishment at what he had seen, he fancied he heard the ringing of a bell.

He opened the door of the chaise, sprang out, crossed the courtyard rapidly, went up the portico, and found the stairway leading to the first floor filled with people.

Up the stairs he ran as he had up the portico, and heard what seemed to him a murmured prayer from his sister's bedroom. He went to the room. The door was open. Madame de Montrevel and little Edouard were kneeling beside Amélie's pillow; Charlotte, Michel, and his son Jacques were close at hand. The curate of Sainte-Claire was administering the last sacraments; the dismal scene was lighted only by the light of the wax-tapers.

The reader has recognized Roland in the traveller whose carriage stopped at the gate. The bystanders made way for him; he entered the room with his head uncovered and knelt beside his mother.

The dying girl lay on her back, her hands clasped, her head raised on her pillows, her eyes fixed upon the sky, in a sort of ecstasy. She seemed unconscious of Roland's arrival. It was as though her soul were floating between heaven and earth, while the body still belonged to this world.

Madame de Montrevel's hand sought that of Roland, and finding it, the poor mother dropped her head on his shoulder, sobbing. The sobs passed

unnoticed by the dying girl, even as her brother's arrival had done. She lay there perfectly immovable. Only when the viaticum had been administered, when the priest's voice promised her eternal blessedness, her marble lips appeared to live again, and she murmured in a feeble but intelligible voice: "Amen!"

Then the bell rang again; the choir-boy, who was carrying it, left the room first, followed by the two acolytes who bore the tapers, then the cross-bearer, and lastly the priest with the Host. All the strangers present followed the procession, and the family and household were left alone. The house, an instant before so full of sound and life, was silent, almost deserted.

The dying girl had not moved; her lips were closed, her hands clasped, her eyes raised to heaven. After a few minutes Roland stooped to his mother's ear, and whispered: "Come out with me, mother, I must speak to you." Madame de Montrevel rose. She pushed little Edouard toward the bed, and the child stood on tiptoe to kiss his sister on the forehead. Then the mother followed him, and, leaning over, with a sob she pressed a kiss upon the same spot. Roland, with dry eyes but a breaking heart--he would have given much for tears in which to drown his sorrow--kissed his sister as his mother and little brother had done. She seemed as insensible to this kiss as to the preceding ones.

Edouard left the room, followed by Madame de Montrevel and Roland. Just as they reached the door they stopped, quivering. They had heard the name of Roland, uttered in a low but distinct tone.

Roland turned. Amélie called him a second time.

"Did you call me, Amélie?" he asked.

"Yes," replied the dying girl.

"Alone, or with my mother?"

"Alone."

That voice, devoid of emphasis, yet perfectly intelligible, had something glacial about it; it was like an echo from another world.

"Go, mother," said Roland. "You see that she wishes to be alone with me."

"O my God!" murmured Madame de Montrevel, "can there still be hope?"

Low as these words were, the dying girl heard them.

"No, mother," she said. "God has permitted me to see my brother again; but to-night I go to Him."

Madame de Montrevel groaned.

"Roland, Roland!" she said, "she is there already."

Roland signed to her to leave them alone, and she went away with little Edouard. Roland closed the door, and returned to his sister's bedside with unutterable emotion.

Her body was already stiffening in death; the breath from her lips would scarcely have dimmed a mirror; the eyes only, wide-open, were fixed and brilliant, as though the whole remaining life of the body, dead before its time, were centred, there. Roland had heard of this strange state called

ecstasy, which is nothing else than catalepsy. He saw that Amélie was a victim of that preliminary death.

"I am here, sister," he said. "What can I do for you?"

"I knew you would come," she replied, still without moving, "and I waited for you."

"How did you know that I was coming?" asked Roland.

"I saw you coming."

Roland shuddered.

"Did you know why I was coming?" he asked.

"Yes; I prayed God so earnestly in my heart that He gave me strength to rise and write to you."

"When was that?"

"Last night."

"Where is the letter?"

"Under my pillow. Take it, and read it."

Roland hesitated an instant. Was his sister delirious?

"Poor Amélie!" he murmured.

"Do not pity me," she said, "I go to join him."

"Whom?" asked Roland.

"Him whom I loved, and whom you killed."

Roland uttered a cry. This was delirium; or else--what did his sister mean?

"Amélie," said he, "I came to question you--"

"About Lord Tanlay; yes, I know," replied the young girl.

"You knew! How could you know?"

"Did I not tell you I saw you coming, and knew why you came?"

"Then answer me."

"Do not turn me from God and from him, Roland. I have written it all; read my letter."

Roland slipped his hand beneath the pillow, convinced that his sister was delirious.

To his great astonishment he felt a paper, which he drew out. It was a sealed letter; on it were written these words: "For Roland, who will come to-morrow."

He went over to the night-light in order to read the letter, which was dated the night before at eleven o'clock in the evening.

My brother, we have each a terrible thing to forgive the other.

Roland looked at his sister; she was still motionless. He continued to read:

I loved Charles de Sainte-Hermine; I did more than love him, he was my lover.

"Oh!" muttered the young man between his teeth, "he shall die."

"He is dead," said Amélie.

The young man gave a cry of astonishment. He had uttered the words to which Amélie had replied too low even to hear them himself. His eyes went back to the letter.

There was no legal marriage possible between the sister of Roland de Montrevel and the leader of the Companions of Jehu: that was the terrible secret which I bore--and it crushed me. One person alone had to know it, and I told him; that person was Sir John Tanlay. May God forever bless that noble-hearted man, who promised to break off an impossible marriage, and who

kept his word. Let his life be sacred to you, Roland; he has been my only friend in sorrow, and his tears have mingled with mine. I loved Charles de Saint-Hermine; I was his mistress; that is the terrible thing you must forgive. But, in exchange, you caused his death; that is the

terrible thing I now forgive you. Oh I come fast, Roland, for I cannot die till you are

here. To die is to see him again; to die is to be with him and never to leave him again. I am glad to die.

All was clearly and plainly written; there was no sign of delirium in the letter.

Roland read it through twice, and stood for an instant silent, motionless, palpitating, full of bitterness; then pity got the better of his anger. He went to Amélie, stretched his hand over her, and said: "Sister, I forgive you."

A slight quiver shook the dying body.

"And now," she said, "call my mother, that I may die in her arms."

Roland opened the door and called Madame de Montrevel. She was waiting and came at once.

"Is there any change?" she asked, eagerly.

"No," replied Roland, "only Amélie wishes to die in your arms."

Madame de Montrevel fell upon her knees beside her daughter's bed.

Then Amélie, as though an invisible hand had loosened the bonds that held her rigid body to the bed, rose slowly, parted the hands that were clasped upon her breast, and let one fall slowly into those of her mother.

"Mother," she said, "you gave me life and you have taken it from me; I bless you. It was a mother's act. There was no happiness possible for your daughter in this life."

Then, letting her other hand fall into that of Roland, who was kneeling on the other side of the bed, she said: "We have forgiven each other, brother?"

"Yes, dear Amélie," he replied, "and from the depths of our hearts, I hope."

"I have still one last request to make."

"What is it?"

"Do not forget that Lord Tanlay has been my best friend."

"Fear nothing," said Roland; "Lord Tanlay's life is sacred to me."

Amélie drew a long breath; then in a voice which showed her growing weakness, she said: "Farewell, mother; farewell, Roland; kiss Edouard for me."

Then with a cry from her soul, in which there was more of joy than sadness, she said: "Here I am, Charles, here I am!"

She fell back upon her bed, withdrawing her two hands as she did so, and clasping them upon her breast again.

Roland and his mother rose and leaned over her. She had resumed her first position, except that her eyelids were closed and her breath extinguished. Amélie's martyrdom was over, she was dead.