

PART ONE: THE GOLD-SEEKERS OF COMMINGES

I. Malvina's Confession

Perhaps everything that happened subsequently, that folly of desire, the dancing flame that ran hither and yon, the force that parted the clouds in order to display an imaginary sun, all obtained its commencement on that winter evening.

The great winds that accumulate in the stone corridors and fir woods of the Pyrenees had never blown with such force.

Oh, if they could only carry me far away, to a place where there are no more men, thought Malvina, on the narrow path. And with the folds of her shawl she tightened her black tresses with golden glints, which the wind had undone, against her torso.

Was she not lost in a darkness that had never been seen as thick on earth? But no! She was still between the poplars, which, with their low courbettes and their strange signs, ought to take her all the way to the church of the Borromées. She had been walking for an hour. There, at least she would find a place sanctified by a great soul. She knew that in drawing closer to a veritable saint one draws closer to salvation.

Was the former bishop Nestor Borromée a veritable saint? Perhaps. First of all, was there even one veritable saint in the entire world? In casting a glance backwards at her life, she saw that she had only encountered wicked souls, creatures devoured by desire. The desire for her, above all, the desire for her beauty. Only the ailing old man gave her the health of the soul when she approached him. She perceived his purity around him, like an atmosphere—and that so sensibly, for her, that she rediscovered that purity in the places where he lived, in his garden, around his house, and especially in the chapel that was part of his house and where he was the only one to say mass. And it was because of that influence that this evening, more tortured than usual, in spite of the rain and the tempest, she had slipped out of her house silently in order to go and pray before the altar that was Nestor Borromée's.

Pray! She would have liked to be able to do that with a sincere heart, but she was not sure that she believed. Too many misfortunes had struck her. There was too great a drama in her life. She had been born with incoherent forces in her, of which she understood neither the meaning nor the extent: a force of pleasure, a love of life, an appetite for immediate realization.

Suddenly, she stopped. The rain had just diminished. She listened. Had her father not followed her? Was there not a sound of footsteps behind her?

But no. Her father was too violent to follow her for an hour without running, shouting insults, attempting to bring her back by force. She looked in the direction of Mauléon, at the side of the mountain at the foot of which the Château de Noussoulens stood. In a clear interval in the sky she could only glimpse a somber mass. There was no sound of footsteps. She resumed walking under a further squall of rain.

And as distances are falsified in the darkness, it turned out that she had arrived when she thought that she was still far away, along the long row of poplars. She suddenly heard the noise that the Garonne made on its bed of cold stones, which she had not distinguished from that of the wind. To the left, she perceived the shadow that the abode of the Borromées made. The chapel was in front of her.

Malvina knew what it was necessary to do to get into it. On a nearby fence the key was hanging on a nail. In principle, it was there to serve a few local people susceptible of coming to pray, if the desire came to them, but no one made use of it except Nestor Borromée. Malvina took a few steps in order to pick up the key, but she stifled a cry of surprise.

The door was ajar, and she could even distinguish a vague light coming out of it. It was, however, impossible that anyone could be in the solitary chapel at this late hour of the night. The perpetually-

suffering Nestor Borromée went up to his room as soon as the meal was over and did not come out before morning. It could not be old Catherine, his maidservant. To be sure, two of his nephews were there at the moment. Sulpice was pious, but not enough to pray in the middle of the night. As for Bernard, the strong mind, he did not even go to mass and was proud of being anticlerical and evolutionary.

Malvina suddenly remembered that on two occasions, old Catherine had bought a large candle with her savings and had lighted it when her master was ill. She even claimed that each time, a sensible improvement had coincided with the last flicker of the candle. Doubtless that light was coming from one of Catherine's ex-votos. She had lit the candle and forgotten to lock the door with the key. The wind had opened it...

Malvina advanced slowly as far as the threshold. No noise. *The chapel is deserted*, she thought. She had on her lips the first prayer that she counted on formulating in the place that she judged sacred; instinctively, she tied back her wet hair behind her head. She pushed the door and went in.

A light turned and illuminated her face. A large silhouette loomed up a few paces away. She did not have time to be surprised or frightened. It was only a man who was wearing a long shepherd's cloak, to which he had added a goatskin cape. It was bishop Nestor. Doubtless he had only come in a few moments before, because he still had his hood up.

Malvina did not attempt to see his features. She fell to her knees before him immediately, murmuring: "Since you're here, it's God who has guided me."

But who can tell where God guides them?

The lamp rose and fell twice. There was an absolute silence. Outside, the squall stopped, and one might have thought that the forces were attentive behind the walls of the church, as if they had been stopped by the redemptive power of the holy place. Two or three drops made a noise on the flagstones. They were not tears, but water dripping from the rain-soaked shawl.

Malvina started to speak very rapidly. She felt that a chance was being offered to her and that it was necessary not to let it escape. Everything that happened had been determined for her, somewhere in another world. The night and the storm were accomplices. A chance had arrived for her soul, perhaps the first in her life.

"Monseigneur," she said, raising her head slightly, "hear my confession."

She glimpsed a movement of recoil, a quiver of the lamp. She feared being put off until tomorrow. She knew that there was no confessional in the ancient chapel, devastated sixty years before. She extended her arms forward. "I beg you!" she cried, and immediately, she began to speak. She felt possessed by a strange facility of confession, a spirit of sincerity that abruptly illuminated her past with a light that surprised her. She saw herself in a perspective of misery and fatality and it seemed to her that all her sins were reduced to negligibility by the story that she was about to tell.

"I've always been very unfortunate," she said. "Monseigneur, you've known my father better than anyone. I ask you to judge what his daughter has been able to endure. I don't reproach him for anything, but you'll understand if I tell you that he has diverted to me the rancor that my mother had inspired in him. Perhaps the first cause of my misfortune was resembling my mother, having her face, her form, her soul—especially her soul. Oh, Monseigneur, I've never been able to understand that. The sons are punished for the sins of fathers, it says in the Bible. Why? Why? What is that heritage of beauty, sickness and sin? It was inscribed, engraved in my flesh, like an indelible seal.

"When you came to Noussoulens you must have seen, in the large drawing room, near the door, a medallion of a ten-year-old girl. All the visitors—there were still visitors then—believed that it was a pastel representing me. 'What a good likeness!' they said. It was my mother. I can say it on this stone, on my knees before you. I resemble her. I've inherited her face, her character, and her vices. Yes, Monseigneur, may she pardon me for speaking thus. There is something in me that doesn't belong to me, an interior force that burns me, that makes me act, that is foreign to me...

"How can I tell you? I dare not speak, to tell all; I'm ashamed. And yet, since you're here, this evening, where I expected to be addressing God alone, it's you who ought to hear everything, to whom I

ought to tell everything, even what other women hide with so much care when they're possessed, like me."

Malvina's voice had risen in order to compete with the sound of the wind outside. She raised her head to move away the trickle of her hair, which was running on to her bosom, and she saw that the lamp was no longer in the bishop's hand, but that he had placed it on the holy water stoup. She interpreted that gesture as a consent to hear her. She straightened up on her knees, and crossed her hands in front of her; her thin neck emerged from her shawl and she thought, without wanting to, that in that pose she resembled exactly a stone angel that an ancient artist had sculpted as a support for the stoup, which had resisted the effects of time.

It was in a low voice that she continued.

"Is it God who gives us these instincts, these evil forces, or is it us who draw them from our substance and delight in developing them? Sometimes I accuse myself, but at other times I feel that I'm not responsible. Since my childhood I've experienced the desire of men upon me, but I was also drawn toward them. What can one do when one is born thus? One begins by not knowing that it's a sin. And then it's too late. Certainly, my father guarded me well. But there was the example of my mother. I've never dared say that. But it's necessary that I explain...it's not to excuse myself...the true cause was in me. It's me who appealed, with a gaze, a movement of the shoulder. And then, I thought, I thought about men..."

Malvina no longer had to fear not being heard. The tall form with its hood, which made a shadow before her, was now leaning toward her. A keen attention enveloped her. "Go on," she heard.

"I'm sure that many women are like me, but they never say so, even at confession. Then again, perhaps you've heard worse...no, not worse than me. At fifteen, in summer, at night, I met a young man from Saint-Gaudens in the park. Then there was another one with whom I spent three entire days and three nights when my father went to Bordeaux for my mother's heritage. But that's nothing. There was a curse upon me. Yes, Monseigneur, something harassed those I went near, and me. I'm getting to the great drama of my existence. It was last year. There's a death in my story. Oh, not a crime, don't think that...but a misfortune..."

Malvina then had the sentiment that the bishop had taken a step backwards and raised his hand to pick up the lamp from the stoup. She raised her head, throwing back her hair. Her headscarf had slipped. She sensed that she had a face resplendent with temptation, a beauty that the evocation of the past must give her, and which was not appropriate to the moment. She fixed her gaze on the oval shadow framed by the hood. The arm extended toward the lamp fell back slowly.

"Go on," murmured a toneless voice, which gave the impression of coming from very far away.

"Perhaps you remember a man who arrived in Saint-Gaudens last year, and about whom there's talk at present. He'd reserved an entire floor in the Hôtel de France in Saint-Gaudens and hired a carriage with a coachman. He was a handsome fellow—too handsome. He said his family was Portuguese and he had a letter of recommendation for my father. In the vicinity they called him the magnetizer because he had given a public séance of magnetism, but his name was Maximo Avila. My father made his acquaintance and invited him to Noussoulens.

"I'll spare you the details. In brief, he became my lover, the first real one. You can't understand the distinction that a woman can make. And yet, there was something that distanced me from him. At night he climbed over the wall of the park, I opened my window and he came to join me in my room. I'd poisoned the guard dog Black, although he was a dog I adored. I've never been able to explain to myself how I was able to do that, but I did it, and this is what happened.

"No one ever heard mention of the Portuguese magnetizer again. He disappeared abruptly. But that was the moment of the revolution. People were only occupied with politics: the King, Napoléon, the Republic...what do I know? No one worried much about what had become of a foreigner. The hirer of the carriage took his rig back at the end of the month, and his trunk must still be on sufferance at the Hôtel de France. The Portuguese magnetizer is lying in our garden, at the foot of a beech. It was my father and me who buried him. He was dead in a second, in my room, in my arms. I didn't know that you could die so quickly."

Malvina stopped, for the time necessary to get her breath back. But the person who was listening must have been keenly interested by what she was saying, because he could not support that interruption. Malvina heard his voice, still stifled but becoming imperious: "Well, go on! Tell me everything. Yes, everything."

She was not thinking of hiding anything, for the breath of liberation was swelling her bosom. She was ridding herself of a heavy burden.

"He had come as usual, climbing up to my window. Nothing could lead me to think...I ought to say that he seemed to love me passionately."

"And you?"

Malvina would have been astonished by the tone of those two syllables if she had not feared herself putting too much realism into her story."

"Me? I don't know. Perhaps that's what people call love? I loved him, in a certain fashion..."

"How?"

"No, it wasn't loving. Don't oblige me, Monseigneur, to...he exercised a certain physical attraction on me. Perhaps it was magnetism. That evening, he didn't say two words to me. He was a brutal man. I'd put out the lamp and closed, or thought I'd closed, the window. He was very handsome and the room was illuminated by the moonlight.

"I've always wondered whether the death might have been caused by certain practices of occultism. He had told me that he held séances of evocation and that he obtained extraordinary, even terrible, results. I thought that he wanted to scare me, but it was true. He wanted to do experiments on me. I'd refused, but I would have ended up giving in eventually. He was lying beside me. I'd turned to the window and I said to him: 'Look. There's no wind, but the window is opening of its own accord.'

"It had just opened, as if someone had pushed it slowly. He didn't reply to me. I put my hand on his shoulder. I shook him. I called to him several times. At first I thought he'd fainted. But there's something mysterious about death that makes one aware of its presence. Suddenly, I understood, and was overwhelmed by fear. The window added to that fear. What could I do? I told myself that my father might kill me. I was running the risk of that. I put a mantle over my shoulders and went to wake him up. I had to shout, because he was sleeping very deeply. The servants sleep on the other side of the house, a long way off, and they couldn't hear.

"My father didn't throw himself upon me. He said: 'It's necessary to take care of him. Go fetch what's necessary.' I could only find his razor. But when we arrived in the room he understood that it was futile. Only then did he take me by the throat, and he took off everything I was wearing. He said that for my punishment he wanted me to go to fetch the gendarmes from Mauléon without any clothes, in the dark, and he dragged me as far as the garden. I stayed on the doorstep for I don't know long. I was weeping. I was scarcely conscious..."

"Then I heard a low voice calling to me through the window. I found him sitting beside the dead man, his head in his hands. He let me get dressed. He said: 'I've reflected. They'll say that I killed him. I know the people around here. We're going to bury him here. No one will know anything. We're not responsible. His heart must have stopped. It happens.'

"We took the body downstairs together. It had gone stiff and cold. There was no longer a moon. I went to look for the tools. My father dug a ditch in a place where no one ever goes, under a beech where I used to play with my doll when I was little. He dug. It took a long time. I replaced him when he couldn't do any more. It was endless. He spent part of the night leveling the soil. I daren't go back up to my room. I waited until daylight in the drawing room.

"At about six o'clock I was dozing...I was woken up by my father's voice. I saw him outside with his rifle. He said to the gardener, very calmly: 'If Monsieur Maximo comes today, tell him that I've gone out hunting bears on the Cagire. I won't be back for four or five days.'

"A man is very little, if he's alone, if he has no family, like Maximo Avila. I don't think there was even an enquiry into his disappearance. People were only occupied then with politics..."

At that moment the wind blew a little more forcefully. A bird flew in through a place where there had once been a stained glass window, traversed the chapel and alighted somewhere in the shadows. That

prevented Malvina from hearing a halting respiration above her. The bishop had drawn closer to her, his arms extended.

“I haven’t finished, Monseigneur. Listen to me, I beg you! I have something more to tell you.”

She had thought that she noticed signs of impatience in the bishop. Perhaps she had taken too long. She pressed her arms against her breasts as if to concentrate the thoughts she had to express and which were the most difficult to translate into words. That prevented her from raising her head.

If she had done so she would have glimpsed a young and ardent face, distressed by evil, and the frightful form that desire takes when it is exasperated by jealousy. It was certainly not the noble and sad face of Nestor Borromée, a man of wisdom and meditation. It was that of a young man who was clicking his teeth with rage and who, in spite of the majesty that dresses any confession, in spite of the remorse of the usurped authority, was hesitating as to whether to throw himself upon that woman and possess her by force on the cold flagstones.

Long after, he repented bitterly of not having done so.

But the action required a decision of which he was perhaps not capable. He gazed intently at the woman, whom the evoked image of the dead man surrounded with a carnal corruption. He imagined the scenes that she had just recounted and those that she had not described. The unknown by which they were enveloped rendered them even more horrible.

The bird that had penetrated into the chapel flapped its wings three times, as if it were about to fly away, and three times it resumed its immobility.

“I have something more to tell you,” Malvina repeated, in a low voice.