

## CHAPTER I

On a warm morning in the month of July, Madame Bise, the owner of the Château des Bolois, near Gaillon in the Eure, was installed in the small chalet that her late husband, Monsieur Bise, a section president of the Conseil d'Etat, had built on the edge of the lake. By her side, her sister-in-law, Madame de Jancy, sitting in a large wicker armchair, was busy with some trivial needlework.

There was a fundamental contrast between the two women. While Madame de Jancy, simple and gentle in appearance, with a bountiful expression engraved on her features, conserved a moderate, patient and tranquil demeanor in all circumstances, a noble reserve of gesture and movement attributable as much to her perfect distinction as to the dread of overstressing a weak heart, Madame Bise, on the contrary, manifested an exuberant, nervous and domineering character that penetrated her slightest attitudes.

Madame Bise was a small woman of about fifty, originally from the Midi, whose accent she was unable to lose, with a figure that was still slim and a face as dry and wrinkled as a rennet apple, in which the gray-green eyes had an extraordinary mobility. Originally Henriette de Jancy, she had married late and had not been able, in spite of legitimate efforts, to have children. Thus, she had an authoritarian attachment to her two nieces, her heirs, Madeleine de Jancy, the daughter of her late brother, and Aline Romé, who lived with her parents in a château in Les Andelys, not far away.

Every year, in summer, Madame Bise invited Madame de Jancy and Madeleine to come and spend a few months at Les Bolois. In truth, that holiday was not entirely enjoyable for her relatives, but the prospect of an inheritance imposed such a sacrifice. Madame de Jancy submitted to it in the interests of her daughter, to reestablish a fortune that her husband's follies had diminished.

While the two ladies occupied themselves variously in the cool tranquility of the lakeside dwelling, nature completed her awakening outside. The whinnying of horses, the calls of gardeners, the chirping of birds in the large trees, the squeaking of a wheelbarrow and the leap of a carp in the water—distant and vague noises, muffled echoes—manifested external life.

Through the broad doorway of the summer-house, opening on the same level as the silvery expanse of water, a clump of trees was perceptible in the distance, in a gap in the landscape, beyond which golden fields extended. Three hundred meters away, the château loomed up, with its slate-roofed turrets shining in the sun.

It was only nine o'clock in the morning, but the implacable sun, without a caress of wind, was already filling the air with heavy warmth, stupefying the great trees in the park, and eating into the grass of the lawn, which had almost disappeared in places, dead for want of water. A gray mist, the last alms of freshness that the morning gave to the heat of the day, was completing its evaporation, still tinting the woody horizon with a veil ripped by broad golden sunbeams.

Madame de Jancy raised her head, put down her work and asked her sister-in-law: "Do you know where Madeleine is?"

"Probably at the gardener's cottage," Madame Bise replied. "She must have gone to see Mahu's child. Can you understand why she's always hiding with those people?"

"Madeleine loves children," said Madame de Jancy. "Her dream is to get married, in order to have children, to care for them, to coddle them..."

"What! You're not thinking of marrying her off already! She's very young, the little darling. And then, don't you think, my dear, that she's not been very well for some time?"

"Yes...perhaps. I'm not anxious, though."

"It's necessary to look after her, the poor thing."

Madame de Jancy responded with a vague but reassuring gesture. However, and although she was familiar with the range of the illnesses that tormented her daughter, she was saddened, deep down, to see the stigmata of a nervous disorder that the child had inherited from her father reappearing, after two years of perfect health. A wrinkle of anxious reflection furrowed her brow.

She remembered Madeleine's agitated childhood, the convulsions of her infancy, the threats of meningitis, and, above all, the attacks of nerves that had arrived as soon as the woman had revealed herself within the girl, on the day of Monsieur de Jancy's death. What pain and fear she had experienced when, running in response to the fearful appeal of a chambermaid, she had found her daughter prey to contortions. She had thought her doomed, poisoned, and had wondered if she could survive a double mourning.

Fortunately, Dr. Cartaux, an old family friend, who had witnessed the end of the crisis, had hastened to reassure the poor mother, by telling her that the malady, so terrible in its appearance, was not really very dangerous, and that it was curable by a course of treatment. Indeed, careful hygiene, prolonged hydrotherapy and a calm life, exempt from worldly excitations, seemed to have reckoned with the alarming phenomena, and for two years, Madeleine had been showing all the signs of radiant health.

However, a certain nervousness of character persisted: abrupt mood changes, a sensory hyperesthesia, and sometime also an inexplicable depression that lasted for entire days. In those symptoms Dr. Cartaux recognized the latent continuation of the malady. The nervous disorder was brooding beneath the ashes, and a counter-offensive was to be feared one day or another. He had even observed abrupt attacks of catalepsy in similar patients among his clientele, whose general health had not deteriorated.

Madame de Jancy wondered what new provocative element could be stirring her daughter's soul, to cause the reappearance of those alarming symptoms, precursors of more serious disorders. She watched over her child with a vigilant tenderness, extended beneath her footsteps a carpet woven from calm and kindness, and sheltered her from exciting reading matter. She had not noticed anything in the simple routine of her family life that could have had a harmful influence on Madeleine's health.

"Yes, it's necessary to look after her," Madame Bise continued."

"I've taken her to see Dr. Cartaux again," Madame de Jancy replied. "His examination was reassuring, though."

"Bah! Dr. Cartaux is an old physician who knows nothing about it. You need a young one—a scientist, like Dr. Caresco. What do you think about her going to see Dr. Caresco?"

"I confess, Henriette, that I don't like the idea at all. I've heard so many bad things said about the surgeon in question."

"First of all, the surgeon is my friend. Then again, you're too late. I've just asked him to come and spend a few days at Les Bolois. He'll be arriving any minute. The carriage has gone to pick him up at the station."

Having made this declaration, Madame Bise fell silent, to give her sister-in-law time to digest it. She understood that she would not approve, that conflict might result from the difference of opinion. She wanted to avoid that, at a moment when, out of an obscure zeal for her niece and an enthusiasm for her doctor's science, she was about to submit Madeleine to an unwelcome investigation.

Madame de Jancy, knowing how imprudent it was to engage in a debate, held back the observations suggested to her by the personality of the young surgeon, thirty-six years old and already famous, on whose count so many various rumors were going around. She experienced a muted discontentment with Madame Bise, who had so deliberately made a decision of which she disapproved. Faithful to her system of prudence, however, she suppressed her resentment.

In any case, the noise of a carriage announced the arrival of the physician. Blossoming, Madame Bise set off in the direction of the château to meet him.

"My friend! Are you well?"

Armand Caresco leapt down from the carriage with a lithe agility. Clad in an elegant pale gray traveling costume, he bowed to the chatelaine, took her hand and kissed it. Madame Bise, radiant at that gallantry, introduced the surgeon to her sister-in-law, who arrived out of breath.

"My dear, this is the greatest surgeon in the world!"

Madame de Jancy replied by a slight nod of the head to the man's exaggerated reverence. She considered him with a slightly haughty expression. His guileful appearance made an unfavorable expression on her. There was something feline about him.

His face was handsome, but undermined by a curved nose and, above all, by a stereotypical smile, displaying two rows of perfect teeth. His eyes were dark, profound and illuminated by avid gleams; they had an ungraspable expression, not looking one in the face, seeming to retreat before investigation, as if to hide the reflection of the desires that were fermenting in a perpetually-seething brain.

All of the individual's coquetry seemed to reside in his neatly-groomed brown hair, abundant and curly, and in his evenly-distributed beard. His body was of medium height, harmonious in form and vigorous, the arms and hands very muscular. He held his thumb enclosed by the other fingers, a sign of his ancestry. The ensemble was suggestive of something powerful and shady, authoritative and fugitive, which was gripping and revolting—all fleeting impressions, which could only be concentrated in an observant mind.

Madame de Jancy thought: *That's a handsome man*, but immediately added: *I don't like him*.

The manservant brought the doctor's trunk and deposited it in the hall.

"Good, you've brought your luggage. You can stay with us for a few days?"

"With your permission, my dear Madame, I shall be very happy to stay in your château. I've been working very hard recently; I've just finished a book on liver surgery and I feel weary." His gaze became positive again, and he continued, speaking in a low voice into Madame Bise's ear: "And do we not have a young invalid to observe? It is primarily to manifest my gratitude to you by caring for her that I've come, as you know."

"Shh! Shh!" replied Madame Bise, with a suspicious glance at her sister-in-law. "Let that remain between us. Anyway, here's the child now."

A delightful creature appeared on the fine gravel path. She advanced meditatively, her head bowed and her hands behind her back, her body swaying harmoniously, in an infinitely graceful manner. She drew nearer.

Caresco, who was seeing her for the first time, could not retain an exclamation of admiration. The simple pink surah blouse enclosed the frail bosom of a young woman of eighteen, which marriage would surely bring out. The slightly short skirt, lifted up by her stride, allowed a glimpse of the stocking of a delicate and solid leg, terminating in a finely-chiseled ankle, surmounting a small foot shod in red leather.

Most impressive of all, the most dazzling aspect of that marvelous ensemble, surmounting a slender neck, was the infinitely graceful head, with the pale complexion of a Parisienne, a delicately curved mouth, small translucent ears standing out slightly from the cranium, partly buried beneath a landslide of gilded hair, cleverly pinned up, and bright blue eyes full of an azure mirage, sometimes veiled by a blink characteristic of the myopic.

Before that triumph of nature, the skeptical surgeon, accustomed by a stout mistress to the worst caresses, allowed himself to be seized by a charm. He cherished overflowing flesh, vast surfaces proportionate to his gluttonous appetites, baths of soft and flaccid matter, and yet, the young woman's delicate vigor and fine silhouette impressed him.

"How are you this morning, darling?" asked Madame Bise. "Have the vapors passed?" She turned toward Caresco. "Doctor, may I introduce my niece, Madeleine de Jancy. She'll have need of your care, alas."

Madeleine, who had not yet perceived the doctor, who was in the shadow of the vestibule, inclined her meditative head toward him. Immediately, though, a shudder ran through her. She had just been traversed by an inexplicable flash of hostility.

She had encountered the cutting edge of a sharp, cold, cruel, avid and masterful gaze. It was like something that attracted her and which she wanted to flee: an unknown force, an obscure turbulence that drew her in, and from which she would have been glad to detach herself. That powerful and fugitive gaze plowed her, and left her for a few seconds in a state of unconsciousness and moral atony.

When she pulled herself together, astonished and troubled, the strange influence of the man had quit her, and fixed on something else, but she retained a vague alarm, an imprecise suspicion that gripped her again every time she resumed contact with the surgeon.

In addition, a few minutes later, while she was studying Armand Caresco, engaged in a conversation with her aunt, she recognized the extent to which the unfavorable expression had been prepared by

Madame Bise's laudatory verbiage, and the whispered confidences of her cousin, Aline Romé. The latter, the same age as her but more knowing, more expansive by nature, raised by parents less scrupulous in the choice of their relations, had often reported remarks she had overheard regarding the surgeon to Madeleine.

She knew that he was the son of a homeopathic charlatan, an Austrian Jew, who, having arrived in the country with a diploma that the Faculté, by virtue of a customary aberration, had simply converted into a French diploma, had set up a practice in Paris, exploiting the sick with neither shame nor conscience. Armand had carried out his studies in Paris; he had also passed his internship in Paris, and as soon as his education was complete, he had thrown himself into the battle of life, setting up a house of operations at his own expense in the Avenue Hoche, where he performed surgery often and brilliantly, under the protection of Madame Bise and several other patronesses glad to pilot a famous man. Nor was a prudent and intelligent hunt for game unconnected with the surgeon's success.

Aline had also told her cousin that, in order to obtain credit with his protectresses, and to dissipate their scruples, Armand Caresco had denied the God of Israel and had loudly converted to Christianity. All means were good for his glory and his profit; to flatter the chauvinism of his clients he had had himself naturalized French, once the law no longer permitted him to be called up for military service. In that fashion, the uprooted individual had benefited from all the advantages that France offers her children, without being subject to their duties. That was a routine trick, familiar to the mind of his race, which contented the versatility of opinion and almost won him the decoration of the national Order.

What had revolted Madeleine more than anything else, however, was another confidence, more serious in her view. Did not the doctor, beneath the austere exterior of religion and work, lead a disorderly life in company with a mature mistress who was popularly known as "the beautiful Tripe-merchant"?<sup>1</sup> Aline, as a person who knew about and excused such things, had obligingly gone into extensive details regarding the courtesan in question, the luxury of her house, her carriage and her clothes.

Madeleine's puerile imagination could not conceive of anything more abominable than such a dissipated existence, and the memory of Aline's gossip confirmed the strange repulsion that she had just experienced, the sudden recoil before the disquieting, irresolute and ambiguous aspects of the gaze that had alarmed her.

Again, the shrill voice of Madame Bise rose in pitch; she was responding to further apologies on the part of her guest.

"At least we shall try to amuse you. First, tomorrow, we're having the people from Les Andelys to lunch: Monsieur Romé, my brother-in-law, his wife, and Aline, their daughter. On the following days, we'll organize excursions. Won't we, Madeleine?"

Madeleine did not reply. Her eyes directed toward the park, she was lending all her attention to the approach of a countrywoman, followed by a blond infant paled by a recent illness. It was the wife of Mahu, the gardener, who was watching her child's hesitant steps. During her sojourn at Les Bolois, Madeleine, vaguely moved by maternal instinct, had spent her idle hours in the company of the infant, who had such astonishingly bright eyes and such a charmingly innocent smile.

"There's little Mahu!" she exclaimed.

Without worrying about the puerility of her impulse, she ran to seize the child in her arms, covering him with caresses, sowing kisses on his thin cheeks and his golden head.

Madeleine's voice, her protective gestures, her teasing laughter and the entire atmosphere of love and attention with which she surrounded someone else's child astonished the surgeon's passionate soul. What a bizarre impulse toward progeniture, when so many women went out of their way to suppress their ovaries in order not to procreate!

A rapid vision of an abdomen opened by his scalpel, of a body lying on his operating table, with the face paled by chloroform and the entrails bloody, passed through his mind. That scene summarized his life, his glory and his profit.

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<sup>1</sup> The author capitalizes *Tripière* [tripe-merchant] to emphasize that what the person in question is famous for selling is access to her own entrails. The wordplay is idiosyncratic, not borrowed from commonplace argot.

He smiled.

An incident plunged him back into reality. Madeleine had put the infant down on the ground. Liberated from her tutelage, he tried to run toward Madame Mahu, who was keeping a respectful distance, but stumbled and fell. His head had hit a pebble, and a thin trickle of blood emerged from his forehead, descended in a red rill over the right eye, ran down the side of the nose and extended to the chin. It was an innocent injury, around which others hastened. The mother took her child in her arms, trying to soothe him with kisses. Madame Bise's exuberant clamors mingled with the infant's plaints.

All Caresco's attention, however, was focused on Madeleine. He saw her come running toward the vestibule, where he was standing, and then suddenly stop, immobilized by anguish, a strangulation that caused her to put her hand to her throat, as if to extract something that was choking her. At the same time, cries of revolt, inarticulate appeals, emerged from her mouth, like a violent protest against an imminent evil. Her eyes blinked; her face contracted, losing the grace of its harmonious symmetry. She had time to collapse on a chair, defending herself against a loss of consciousness.

"I'm choking! I'm choking!" she said, all the muscles of her neck striving for the air that was no longer entering into her lungs.

Madame Bise and her sister-in-law, distracted by the accident to little Mahu, came back into the vestibule hurriedly.

"Oh dear! She's ill!" cried the chatelaine, exaggerated the gravity of an attack that was hardly manifest. Turning to Madame de Jancy, who was looking sadly at her daughter without raising a finger, she said: "What! You're not going to do anything?"

"Monsieur Cartaux has instructed me not to oppose her crises, not to touch her. The fit will dissipate in a minute or two. The poor child was distressed by that injury..."

Madame Bise, however, could not reconcile herself to tranquility. Her exuberance inflated things, demanding movement and alarm. She turned despairingly to Caresco, and implored him: "Save her! Save her!"

The surgeon repressed an irony. "Don't worry," he said, "it's nothing. A slight nervous accident. Loosen her clothing and dab a little fresh water on her face, if you want to do something..."

While Madame Bise expended her vitality by running to the kitchen shouting: "Water! Water!" as if she wanted to put out a fire, the man of science contented himself with studying the various phases of the pathological manifestation.

He recognized that the crisis was dying down. The limbs tensed slightly, the upper body stiffened with the effort of respiration; then the energy of the struggle eased; the features relaxed and became animated. The eyes moved beneath the eyelids. Faint sighs vanquished the obstacle in the gullet.

Finally, Madeleine started to weep.

"Look! She's crying now!" proclaimed Madame Bise, coming back with a steaming glass of hot water.

"It's the end of the malaise," said the surgeon, restoring a smile to his guileful and hypocritical face.

Madame de Jancy knelt down, and took her daughter's head, bathed in scattered blonde hair, in her arms. She drank the poor tears that seemed to have been shed over the annihilation of the fearful moment.