

THE BACHELORESS

PART ONE

I

Monique Lerbier rang.

“Marianne,” she said to the chambermaid, “my coat...”

“Which one, Mademoiselle?”

“The blue one. And my new hat.”

“Shall I bring them to Mademoiselle?”

“No, lay them out in my room...”

Alone, Monique sighed. What a chore this sale would be, even if she did find Lucien there! It was so nice in the small drawing room. She laid her head on the cushions of the sofa again, and resumed her reverie...

She is five years old. She is eating dinner in her room, at the little table where “Mademoiselle,” the regent of her life, serves her and supervises her every day. This evening, however, Mademoiselle is on leave. Aunt Sylvestre is replacing her.

Monique adores Aunt Sylvestre. For one thing, the two of them are not like the others. The others are women. Even Mademoiselle! Maman has given her that name. “Even though you’re a widow, because a governess must always be called Mademoiselle.”

Aunt Sylvestre and Monique, by contrast, are girls. She is a little girl, although she thinks that she is already grown up, and the Aunt an old girl...very old! The proof is that she has wrinkled skin and three hairs in her chin, on a wart like a chick-pea.

Then again, Aunt Sylvestre always brings black nougat, almonds and burnt honey every time she comes from Hyères. Monique doesn’t know exactly where Hyères is, or what it is. Hyères is like Yesterday¹—a long way away. Only today counts, and today is a celebration. Papa and Maman have gone to the Opéra, and before then they have been invited to the restaurant.

The Opéra is a palace where fairies dance to music, and the restaurant a place where one eats oysters. It’s reserved for grown-ups, Aunt Sylvestre says.

But here comes a fairy...no, it’s Maman, appearing in a low-cut dress. She has white feathers on her head, and she looks as if she is dressed entirely in pearls. Monique touches the fabric, ecstatically. Yes, tiny, very tiny pearls, truly! She would like to have a necklace of them.

She caresses Maman’s neck as she leans over to say *au revoir*. “No, no kiss, because of my lipstick! And as the small hand moves up toward the velvet of her cheeks, the impatient voice orders: “Don’t touch! You’ll smudge my make-up.”

Behind her is Papa, all in black, with a big white V emerging from his waistcoat. It’s a funny shirt, in shiny cardboard. Maman tells Aunt Sylvestre, who smiles as she listens, a long story, but Papa taps his foot and says: “With your mania for spending three hours putting black on your eyelashes and pink on your fingernails, we’ll miss the overture!”

What opening? The oysters?² No. As soon as Maman and Papa have gone, without kissing her—Monique is disappointed—Aunt Sylvestre explains that it’s the overture of the music. Music opens, then?

¹ In French, Hyères is far more like *Hier* [Yesterday] than it seems to be in English. It is a commune in the Var, in the far south of France, the oldest resort on the Riviera.

² *Ouverture* [overture] also means “opening,” hence the error.

Thoughtfully, Monique asks: “What is it, then?” and Aunt Sylvestre who has taken her onto her knee, explains: “Music is the song that comes from everything...from oneself, when one is happy...from the wind when it blows over the forest or the sea. It’s also the concert of instruments, which recalls all that. And the overture is like opening a big window to the sky, so that the music comes in and you can hear it. Do you understand?”

Monique looks at Aunt Sylvestre tenderly, and nods her head.

Monique is eight. She has been coughing for a long time. She often coughs. So, when she goes for a walk by the sea, Mademoiselle—who is no longer the widow but a Luxembourgeoise whom she doesn’t like, with cheeks like red balloons—has orders not to let her play bare-legged in the rock-pools where the shrimp wriggle, and not even to let her run away from the tide over the sand that hardens as it gets wet. She can’t pick up the fresh seaweed that smells of the ocean, or the seashells whose nacreous ears contain the sound of the waves. “What do you want to do with those dirty things? Throw it away!” Maman declared, once and for all.

Monique can no longer read whenever she wants to—because of her headaches. On the other hand, she has to do an hour of scales regularly; it does no good to say that it drives her mad; it appears that it’s a discipline for the fingers. Well, if this is a holiday, Trouville is more tedious than Paris!

Besides which, she sees much less of her parents. Maman is always in the automobile, with friends. And in the evening, when she has dinner—which is rare—she leaves immediately afterwards to change her clothes and go dancing at the Casino until very late...so, in the morning she sleeps. Papa? He only comes on Saturday, by the husbands’ train. And on Sunday he stays with Messieurs for his business.

The biggest bore is when Maman “goes to the beach.” They watch the lines going back and forth on the boardwalk. One would think it were a linen shop. The mannequins show themselves off, all the same, in packed rows. The people who form circles, sitting around near wicker huts or tents, exchange greetings with the people walking. When they arrive at the end of the boardwalk they turn round and come back. What are they following? Monique doesn’t know. Another mystery. The world is full of them, if she can believe the replies given to her incessant questions...

For the moment, she is amusing herself, not far from the maternal hut with little Morin and a comrade whose name she doesn’t know. They have baptized her Toupie because she is always twirling on one foot, singing. Crouched under the distracted gaze of the Luxembourgeoise, all three of them are building a sandcastle with towers and a moat. In the middle stands a curly-haired little body named Mouton with his spade over his shoulder. They have put him there in order to stand still, telling him: “You’re the garrison.”

The rule of the game is that when the castle is finished, the garrison will be free, and in his place they will lock up, as a prisoner, whichever of the three of them allows herself to be caught. But the castle isn’t finished. Mouton stamps his feet and, without waiting for its completion, carries out a vigorous sortie. Toupie and little Morin flee. Monique, who relies on her faith in treaties, hasn’t budged—with the result that when Mouton wants to imprison her, she resists. He shoves her...blows and cries...

The Luxembourgeoise, who comes running, receives her share of blows. Then the Mamans come running. They separate the combatants and, without listening to the confused explanations, which are contradictory in any case, they shake them. Mouton, who proves stubborn, receives a slap. At the same time, Monique feels a hand that strikes her on the wing: *click! clack!* “That’ll teach you!” Her face smarts.

Flabbergasted, she looks at the enemy who has just abused her strength. The enemy, satisfied to have equilibrated the misdeeds and the punishments...is her mother! Is it possible? Rage and amazement divide Monique’s soul. She has made the acquaintance of injustice. And she suffers from it, like a woman.

Monique is ten. She is grown up. Or rather, her mother declares, shrugging her shoulders, she is an intolerable child, with her fantasies, her vapors and her nerves.

For a start, she does nothing like everyone else! Hasn’t she torn her lace dress and caught cold last Sunday playing hide and seek in the grounds of Madame Jacquet’s house, with Michelle and young

scapegraces? Old Mechlin—a real bargain at 175 francs a meter. And yesterday, at the pastry shop, didn't she take it into her head to take a large brioche, nearly a kilo, from the display to give it—outside, on the sidewalk—to a little girl in rags who was devouring it with her eyes? Instead of good bread!

She had tried in vain to pay for it out of her savings: it wasn't charity, it was extravagance; and even, fundamentally, false generosity. It was necessary not to give the unfortunate a taste, and in consequence a regret, for what they couldn't have...

Monique is pained by that reasoning. She would like the whole world to be fortunate. She is also chagrined; the members of her own family don't understand her. It isn't her fault if she has a character that doesn't resemble those she sees around her! And it isn't her fault either, if, because of her hollow cheeks and stooped back, she doesn't do honor to her parents. "You're growing up like a weed!" she hears repeated, incessantly...

If this goes on, she'll end up falling ill; they've promised her that! She accepts the idea with resignation, almost with pleasure. To die? That wouldn't be any great misfortune. Who loves her? No one.

Except Aunt Sylvestre.

In the Easter vacation, when, after a bad bout of bronchitis and three weeks in bed, Monique awoke so weak that she could no longer stand up, the aunt was there! And when the doctor declared: "This child needs to live in the country for a long time, in the Midi if possible, by the sea—the climate and life in Paris are no good for her..." the aunt cried: "I'll take her with me! I'll take her, Hyères is excellent, isn't it, Doctor?"

"Perfect—the ideal place..."

It was immediately agreed. And Monique has so much joy in thinking that she will be transplanted into the sun, to be with her true mother, that she doesn't think of being saddened by the fact that her father and mother don't manifest any regret.

Monique is twelve. She has the plaits and check dresses of a schoolgirl. She is the top pupil in her class, in Aunt Sylvestre's school. Instead of gray, foggy streets, the garden extends, rising up the slope of the hill. The sun dresses everything with a splendid lightness. It shines over the Chamaerops palms, like giant ferns, and over the spiny rackets of the cacti, over the blue-tinted or yellow-edged aloes, which look like enormous bouquets of zinc. The sea is the same deep blue as the sky; they fuse together in the distance.

Easter has come around again, flowery Easter! Jesus advances on his little donkey, through the swaying green branches. The ground is like a single carpet, bright and multicolored, of roses, narcissi, carnations and anemones.

Tomorrow Monique will be all in white, like a little bride. Tomorrow! The celebration of her spiritual wedding! The good Curé Macahire—she cannot pronounce his name seriously³—will admit her, with her companions of the catechism, to Holy Communion.

She has tried to penetrate the beautiful legends of the Testaments; she has succeeded all the better because she has had as a tutor her great friend Elisabeth Meere...Zabeth, who is a Protestant, made her first communion four years ago, and her fervent rigor adds a singular exaltation to the mystical fever with which Monique is burning. Both of them, in the adoration of the Savior, are discovering love, obscurely.

Monique's is all confidence, abandonment and purity. She goes forth with an ingenuous intoxication on the open wings of her dreams. She only has one puerile anxiety: that of not profaning, by biting into the snowy host in passing, the invisible but present body of the Divine Spouse.

It is also necessary, Abbé Macahire has firmly recommended, that she confess her bad thoughts in advance. She has had two of them that she has tried to drive away. The vile flies settle unceasingly on the lily of her expectation. Her pretty dress! Vanity. And the eggs—the Easter eggs! Gluttony. First of all the big one, in chocolate, that she received from Paris, and then the medium-sized and small ones, in sugar of

³ Because it is similar to that of the stock villain of melodrama, Robert Macaire.

all colors, and even one real egg, hard-boiled in hot water, for which it is so amusing to search through the bushes and flower-beds of the garden.

It is a big occasion for Aunt Sylvestre, who has been preparing treats and surprises for a week, for the whole school. It's also her fashion of communion. At least, that's what Abbé Macahire complains, adding: "What a pity that such a worthy woman is a miscreant!"

It is necessary to believe that that is not a very grave sin, since Monsieur le Curé seems to pardon her for it. It would annoy Monique a great deal to go to Paradise while Aunt Sylvestre went to Hell! But all those ideas make her head ache...

She is happy, and the weather is fine.

Monique is fourteen. She does not remember having been a sickly child. She is as robust as a young plant that has found its soil and is growing thickly.

She is at the marvelous age of reading, in which the imaginary world reveals itself, and when youth envelopes the real world with its magic veil. She has no notion of evil, so vigilantly has her educator weeded that naturally healthy soul. She has, instead, a sentiment of and appetite for good.

Not a dreamer, but a believer—no longer in God, however, for in that matter she has disengaged herself from the contradictory concepts of Abbé Macahire and Elisabeth Meere. She has gradually converted herself to the reasoned materialism of Aunt Sylvestre, while retaining, like her, a spiritual imprint. But she also manifests—the ferment of her double and initial mysticism—a tendency to the absolute. Thus, she has a horror of lying, and a religious adoration of justice.

She still has Elisabeth Meere as a great friend. The latter has changed her religion, from Lutheranism to Zionism. For three years she has been infatuated with Monique, all the more so because she has desired her hopelessly. She is due to leave school soon, and her hypocrisy recoils before the adolescent's evident purity. Her kisses would like to be emphatic, but dare not.

Monique, whose has a sentimental crush on the art teacher—a former Prix de Rome resembling Alfred de Musset—is as far from suspecting Zabeth's inclinations as the similarly-hidden salacity of Monsieur Rabbe, the fake Alfred.

It is a June day. Night is falling. It is still so warm in the garden that they have moist skin under their dresses. After dinner, Monique and Zabeth follow the lavender path that rises up to the big red rock, which overlooks the salterns and the sea beyond. In the distance, the Monts des Maures are visible, blue against the green sky. Out at sea there is a little orange sail, and in the sky, heavy coppery clouds.

"It's stifling," says Zabeth. Nervously, she plucks a perfumed leaf from a fruiting orange tree and bites into it.

They breathe in the odor of the tall eucalyptus; it mingles, in waves, with those of argeles and cystopteris ferns: all the intoxication of the Provençal soil.

Monique loosens her bodice and then raises her bare arms, searching in vain for a cool breeze. "*Zut!* Now my shoulder-strap's broken. The chemise slips down, revealing her breasts. They lift up their small but perfect roundness. On her blonde skin, veined with blue, the pink nipples are erect.

Zabeth sighs. "Another night when we'll sleep badly, even going to bed in the nude. Do you know that your breasts are getting as big as mine?"

"No?" says Monique, delighted.

"Yes, look! Only yours are apples and mine are pears..."

Zabeth rapidly bares her gilded bosom, in which the heavier fruits are displayed in tacit offering. She compares the elongated forms and brown, hard nipples with the satiny elegance of Monique's breasts. Her hand cups them and caresses them softly.

Monique smiles at the agreeable sensation without analyzing it and without understanding...but as Zabeth's fingers clench she says: "Stop it! What's got into you?"

Zabeth blushes and stammers: "I don't know...it's the storm!"

For the first time, Monique experiences a strange disturbance. Swiftly, she closes her bodice. At the same time, a distant voice rings out. It's Aunt Sylvestre, calling: "Monique! Zabeth!"

Zabeth buttons herself up, embarrassed.

“Hello!” Monique replies.
The voice forms an echo, coming closer.
The storm has passed.

Monique is seventeen. She counts: one...two...three years the war has lasted, already. Is it possible? The third long vacation since Hyères has come, like a big hospital in which the wounded are reborn.

She is pursued by the haggard eyes that the sun causes to blink, on emergence from their eternal night of fear. She does not understand how those who fight can accustom themselves to the frightful death that is their lives. She does not understand either how those who put on a semblance of fighting a little—so little!—and those who do not fight at all accept the suffering and carnage of others.

The idea that one part of humanity is bleeding while the other amuses and enriches itself upsets her. The big words agitated over all of it like flags—Order, Right, Justice—complete the fortification within her of her nascent revolt against the social lie.

She has passed the final examinations of her studies brilliantly, having pursued them between her incessant and ingenious means of devotion—not only on behalf of the convalescents of the Hyères but also the obscure crowd which is prey to all the evils in the fetid bed of the trenches.

Now, a new existence is beginning: Paris; courses at the Sorbonne. Monique has returned to the family home. She has said goodbye to Aunt Sylvestre, the boarding school, the garden, to everything that has made her an alert young woman with a bold and pure gaze and fresh cheeks. Adieu to the gentle past, where, in acquiring health, she has also acquired a soul.

Her old bedroom in the Avenue Henri-Martin, nicely prepared, has caused her a real pleasure. She has been touched by the welcome of her father and mother. She feels that she counts, now, in the eyes of her parents; she does them honor... Aunt Sylvestre has sown; they will harvest. Happy herself, she no longer holds their detachment or their egotism against them. She loves them on principle...

For the first time since 1914 they have gone to stay in Trouville. Monique devotes her month of August to serving as a voluntary nurse at the auxiliary hospital, number 37. She is so absorbed during the day by her occupations, and in the evening by her books, that she pays no heed to others. Those she observes the least are the ones closest to her: her mother, always running around, her father, always absent. The Lerbier factory is doing war work and, it seems, making millions manufacturing explosives. And to think that in the meantime, under cover, refugees and spectators are tranquilly and frenetically painting the town red, coupling and dancing the tango, dancing the tango and coupling, in Deauville!

Monique is nineteen. The nightmare has come to an end. Such an expansive force, such a need for blossoming, is within her, that, since the armistice, she has almost forgotten the war.

Self-contained more than ever, and increasingly less involved in the existence of her parents, she is following courses in literature and philosophy, actively practicing sports—tennis and golf—and amusing herself the rest of the time making artificial flowers, using her own method.

The social group of which she is reluctantly a part declares her to be an eccentric, not to say a poseur, because she does not like either flirting or dancing. Monique, conversely, judges her friends to be more or less unconscious fools, and profoundly depraved. Dig like Michelle Jacquet into the trouser pockets of her boyfriends? Or, like Ginette Morin, lock herself away in every corner with her girl friends? No thank you.

If she were to love, Monique would only love on a grand scale, giving herself to it entirely. She has not yet encountered that. Among all the men that her mother mentions to her—having decided to marry her off as soon as possible—there is really only one name: Lucien Vigneret, the industrialist; but although she has taken pleasure in distinguishing him on several occasions, he has not even noticed her...

Lying on her divan, therefore, Monique dreams. In superimposed visions, her life files past on the mysterious screen: hallucinatory precisions detached by memory from the backcloth of forgetfulness, and reincarnated...

She thinks about those vanished doubles of herself. Today, she is twenty, and she is in love.

She is in love, and she is going to be married. In a fortnight, she will be Madame Vigneret. The dream is being realized. She closes her eyes and smiles. She thinks, emotionally, still confused, about the Mairie and her official celebration, and the mind-numbing tra-la-la of the lunch at which, with lewd innuendos, a crowd of people will congratulate her, doing nothing to her happiness.

Ingenuously, she has allowed herself to be taken, has given everything, two days ago, to the one who is everything to her...a hasty, painful embrace, but of which she retains a proud joy. Her Lucien, her faith, her life! She is going to see him again in a little while, at the sale. Her entire being reaches out toward the sweet moment.

She has acted, since she loves him, as he desired. She is happy and proud to be, from now on, his “wife,” to have demonstrated confidence by that supreme proof of abandonment. Wait? Refuse herself until the calculated evening of consecration? Why? What creates the value of unions is not the legal sanction but the determination of choice. As for *propriety*...a week sooner, a week later...!

Propriety! She smiles, with a malicious blush, on imagining the peremptory word sounding in her mother’s mouth. If she knew!

Monique shivered; the door opened. Madame Lerbier appeared, her hat on her head.

“Not ready? You’re mad! The auto is here. Have you forgotten that I’m dropping you at half past two at Foreign Affairs?”

“There, Maman—I only have to put my coat on.”

Madame Lerbier raised her eyes to the heavens and moaned: “I’m going to be late for my meeting!”