

PART ONE

*Nature does not know vice;
it is education that invented it.*
Camille Mauclair, “De l’amour physique.”¹

I

The bell at the entrance door rang.

In the redoubt that served her simultaneously as a bathroom and kitchen, while she finished pressing the large sponge to her bowed neck, Annik thought: *Paule perhaps? No, she has a key.* As she was naked, standing up in her tub, she did not go to the door, but held the sponge under the water running from the tap in the kitchen sink until it inflated, and then, tranquilly allowed it to run out again over her body.

“How good that is!”

The salubrious caress of the cold water ran like a frisson over the muscular back and chest of the young warrior woman, the abdomen protruding like an ivory shield, and then glided over the full, tapering legs, and sprinkled her arched child-like feet and the agate pink of her round toenails with a rain of droplets.

The doorbell was still ringing.

“*Zut!* Who can it be?”

She shook the brown curls of her short hair, and turned her mutinous face and gilded eyes, with the serious shadow that they took on at every passage of thought.

Still ringing!

She had decided not to disturb herself. Except for her sister, she was not expecting anyone, or anything. For a start, Sunday was not a day for consultations. Liberty, after a hard week! A desire to run and sing uplifted her: it was a beautiful day! An excursion in the auto, lunch in the countryside...she had to be ready by eleven. Pierre Lebeau would be there.

But the obstinate ringing of the doorbell and a few desperate raps on the door were succeeded by a disappointed voice:

“Annik! Annik? It’s me, Cécile—Cécile Hardy... Mérette.”

“What! Wait, darling. I’m coming.”

Amazed, but even more joyful, Annik leapt out of the tub. Instantaneously draped in a large towel, and leaving large damp patches as she ran over the worn carpet of the studio—which constituted on its own all the rooms of her apartment—she opened the door and drew into a affectionate embrace a woman whose benevolent face was radiant with pleasure. Filially and fervently, she kissed the faded cheeks with tender pecks. Then, stepping back with a burst of laughter, she recommenced: “Too bad! I’ve made you wet...”

“Let’s at least go inside,” said the unexpected visitor, also laughing. She contemplated the favorite of all her former pupils, her spiritual daughter, with the pride of her obscure life and the tenderness of her solitary devotion. “Not changed! Morally, at least. As for the rest, who cares? You’ve grown, Mademoiselle Advocate. I haven’t seen you for two years—that’s a long time!”

“You could say so.”

They filled the vestibule, so narrow that it contained not a single item of furniture.

“Go on,” said Annik, “so that I can show you my study...”

¹ “De l’amour physique” appeared in Camille Mauclair’s *Essais sur l’amour* (1912).

With an ample, mischievous gesture, she indicated the room, painted in ocher, in which a few canvases by young painter friends spaced out their bright patches.

“It’s magnificent.”

“You really think so?”

Content, she pointed to a corner alcove: the divan, the shelves laden with books. “My bedroom.” Then, between two old chairs, the black and gold lacquered wooden table, where parrot tulips displayed their indented scarlet petals in a long crystal vase: “My dining room.”

Mademoiselle Hardy, in her simplicity as a small town schoolteacher, marveled at everything—not so much because, having been poor all her life, she was unfamiliar with the research of elegance, as because everything touching Annik, and everything that Annik touched, was suddenly embellished.

The young woman had sat down on a corner of the desk—a massive modern art table in maple wood, whose top disappeared beneath heaps of files. Tightening her savage’s loincloth around her dangling legs, she said: “What a pleasure it is to see you, Mérette! Explain...”

“You know that when you left Yvelines, I was beginning to prepare for my examinations in order to qualify as a Headmistress. Well, I’ve just been appointed—at Versailles. Exactly! What do you say to that? By train, an hour from your Rue Saint-Sulpice. I amused myself with the idea of giving you that surprise.”

Annik clapped her hands. Then, moved as if by a spring, she leapt toward the woman who, when she emerged from her mourning, had welcomed her, a little lost orphan, and, in the absence of Paule—her older sister, engaged in her own struggle for existence—had served as her other, educator and friend.

Taking her in her arms, she said: “Dear, dear Mérette. You can’t possible know how pleasant it is to know you’re there now, to have you so close by.”

She had leaned her head on the shoulder that had sustained it so many times, warming with a caress her forlornness, her dreams, and all the anxious tenderness of a young soul, nascent to discoveries and disillusionments...

Today, enthusiastic and strong, armed for the struggle thanks to her “Mérette,” she read with emotion in the wrinkles of the face and her maternal eyes the corrosions of time—the time given without reserve to clear the route for young girls, the wives and mothers of tomorrow, in order to smooth their uphill path into the rude future...

Cécile Hardy had grown old—but not in spirit. Her gaze retained the same limpidity, the gush of a pure spring...

In the quick exchange of their memories, Annik revived the years of her early childhood, enclosed in the shop where everything was sold: groceries, clothing, kitchenware—*À la Confiance chez Raimbert*—a musty Limbo through which the pale vision of her widowed mother, always ill, wandered like a phantom...the abrupt deliverance that had been her entry to the school: a hatching, life, the sun revealed...

Mademoiselle Hardy, already an aging spinster, eaten away by the regret of maternity, had kept her after class one evening when the debilitated child, coughing and feverish, was causing her distress... No parents. In the house of the neighbors who had taken charge of her and Paule, for money, when Madame Raimbert had died and the shop had been sold, the two sisters slept together on a mattress in a cupboard. Nourished on scraps, in spite of the monthly payments made by the notary from the three thousand francs of the Raimbert family funds, they were, Paule at seventeen and she at thirteen, as thin as little birds fallen from the nest...

“Oh, you can boast of having acquired new plumage, my child, since the time when you were lamenting because you were all skin and bone!”

“It’s been filled in.”

“A true woman!” observed Madame Hardy, admiringly.

Annik had raised her head again, and, unwinding their embrace, while she adjusted her towel, she said: “Well, yes, Mérette! Twenty-four years old, since the day before yesterday. And now, it’s time that your daughter got dressed...your aging daughter, because, next year, Saint Catherine...”

She had gone to the Provençal wardrobe, whose shiny patina she liked, in which, underwear and garments appeared, carefully arranged.

Having a healthy mind in a healthy body, kept supple by daily gymnastic exercises, being beautiful, she had never blushed at being naked. At Yvelines, Mademoiselle Hardy had brought her up in the cult of cleanliness, the primary self-respect, and in the entire knowledge of natural functions. Thus, while at the nearby religious boarding school, the Annunciation, where her sister had spent three years, the boarders, constrained to hypocrisy, the seed of all vices, simmered in dirt, Annik had grown up innocently, like a free flower.

Without false modesty, she put on her chemise with one of those rapid, harmonious gestures in which she always remained decent.

“You’ll excuse me, darling! There’s a slight lack of screens. It’s because I never receive any visitors here, except for clients.

Mademoiselle Hardy smiled, wagging her finger. “You can’t make me believe, made as you are, that there’s not the slightest amorous individual in the wings?”

“Oh, there’s no shortage of amorous men. No...but if there were anything serious, you’d know about it. My letters have never hidden any part of my life from you.”

“Bah! You might, like all your generation, be attached to your single-life independence, but you’re still at the age of Arvers’ sonnet: *My heart has its secret, my soul...*²

“Neither secret nor mystery—or, at least, nothing as yet sufficiently precise for me to be able to talk about it. I can scarcely think about it.” She stopped and reflected. “No, that’s not true; I think about it more and more!” And, before the mute interrogation, she let herself lapse into the tenderness of thought, this time aloud: “No, nothing definitive...”

Many men, in fact, had paid court to her, but only two had pleased her, precisely because they had always maintained, in her regard, a certain reserve: Amédée Jacquemin, the socialist député, a cheerful and good comrade, for whom she had an affectionate esteem, and, most of all, Paul Lebeau, whose character often irritated her but toward whom, by virtue of one of those natural contradictions of the heart, she felt physically more attracted.

Amédée Jacquemin was free, however, and Pierre Lebeau had a long-standing liaison. A liaison, to be sure, that he was ready to break off—at least, he had recently affirmed that to her; otherwise she would not have envisaged for a moment, in her intransigent conception of sexual morality, and her thirst for honesty and reciprocal equality, the possibility of loving him. There was, however, no calculation in that way of being, even less any hidden agenda of marriage.

Annik had seen too many unhappy households attached so passionately to the reprisals of hatred or the compromises of resignation. She had decided, on principle, not to abdicate the liberties and the rights that, so long as she was not married, laws accorded to a woman and a mother: liberties almost equal to those of a man, save for the political rights that she still hoped to enjoy one day. Thus, she would remain her own mistress, and that of her children...

“I’m hesitating between two possibilities. They both have their attractions, but I’m inclining more willingly toward one of them. I’ve written to you about the help that Monsieur Lebeau has given to me in getting me into the *Appel*, first as a stenographer and subsequently as a private secretary. A stenographer in Paris hasn’t a sou! For the scant banknotes that remained of my share of the inheritance after the armistice only lasted—as you know better than anyone—for the first few months after my arrival. One needs accommodation, doesn’t one, and to dress oneself, however modestly? And the purchase of a machine...and the search for work, the refusals, the trials, the failures... It’s hard earning a living. Especially when one isn’t ugly, and wherever one goes, inside and out, whatever one attempts, one bumps into the same refrain: *Screw or starve...*

² The line from Félix Arvers’ most famous poem, “Un Secret,” is misquoted; the first phrase actually has “*âme*” [soul], not “*coeur*” [heart], and continues “*ma vie*” [my life] not “*mon âme*.” The line translates as “My soul has its secret, my life its mystery...” The poem goes on to lament, in lachrymose terms, that the object of the poet’s affection (Charles Nodier’s daughter Marie) did not deign to notice his infatuation. It was enormously popular, and endlessly quoted—to the extent, obviously, that people began to retain the significance while forgetting the precise wording.

“And with all that, the law studies, the preparation for the examinations... It takes determination not to chuck in all in. I had that, thanks to your lessons and your aid. Now, thanks to Monsieur Lebeau, I can breathe. The editor of a big newspaper, in Paris—you can’t imagine the power! Especially with his talent! It’s to him that I owe my first cases. Oh, he’s been very good!”

“Or very cunning.”

The observation was made with such a bitter hostility that Annik was nonplussed by it. A harsh expression froze Mademoiselle Hardy’s features momentarily: an impulse of bitter amity?

Without pausing, Annik continued: “I was so alone...”

“What about Paule?”

“Paule?”

Annik took the turn, glad to avoid the subject of Lebeau by changing the topic of conversation. She could not see sufficiently clearly into her own mind as of yet. “Paule has had enough trouble getting herself out of difficulty to help me. She’s has a great deal of it. I’m not criticizing her...and then, as you know, we don’t have the same nature.”

“Indeed! What’s become of her? Still a musician? Her harp?”

“Still, but only in the evenings. Lessons, concerts... By day—one has to eat—she’s a model at Mauricette’s, the big house of couture.”

“What about the famous ambition, marriage?”

“She dreams about it more than ever.”

“And in the meantime?”

“She lives with a friend, a sales assistant, also at Mauricette’s.”

“Ah!”

Annik prepared to defend her sister against the possibility of a mocking allusion, but Mademoiselle Hardy, devoid of all malevolence—and not understanding, in any case, that a woman could take pleasure in sensual perversions—had not put any malice into her exclamation. She added: “Poor Paule! She doesn’t resemble you. Another one whose education has prepared her oddly for the struggle! A woman who has no vocation but the stewpot and no métier but the harp!”

“To be fair,” Annik put in, putting on her shoes, “recognize that between her adolescence, educated in the convent, and mine, fashioned by you...and then again, there was the war! In accordance with their character, people have reacted to it differently...”

“That’s true; old people never take that upheaval sufficiently into account. By emptying hearths, and then killing millions of men, the scourge emancipated hundreds of thousands of women at a stroke...and those who didn’t have the necessary equilibrium of strength...”

Annik evoked the Terrible Years and their frenzy for life, exasperated by the proximity of death...the furnace of the factories, the promiscuity of the hospitals, the intimate whirling of the dance halls... Personally, she had escaped all of that dementia, having remained under the wing of her instructress until 1917, when, quitting the tutelary refuge, she had played her part in the labor of women and the misery of soldiers. Certified by the Red Cross, she had come to do relief work, replacing, with the ardor of a committed volunteer, some of the original nurses, wearied before the end of their second year: those for whom she had heroically cared—passing from a hospital for contagious wounded men to one for those with facial wounds—knew that the soul of a sister of charity, and an apostle also, was hidden beneath her delicate envelope.

From the child of fifteen that the war had surprised in the middle of her studies, and soon plunged into the midst of hell, a young woman, an adult, had been born, who, from the contact with human distress as well as social fury and imbecility, retained a mystical impetus toward a new order. Whereas Paule had ended up losing her balance, Annik, by virtue of the environment in which she was steeped in a quotidian vision of terrors, had been preserved and hardened. Her tenacious personal work in her hours of repose and her active appetite for sport had brought her, as a new individual, to the edge of amour.

“Paule’s like the majority,” she observed, “enslaved by prejudice. Marriage, for her, is the gilded chain, at the end of which there’s the food bowl and the kennel. How many of us are there for whom the family only exists if there’s a bond of election?”

Mademoiselle Hardy looked at her proudly. The schoolteacher saw her again, young, departing for the propagation of her faith: a world regenerated by female liberation. How many evils could be avoided without the satisfied egotism of some and the lamentable flabbiness of others! Oh, if only everyone wanted to unite, after so many horrors, against injustice and misery! Against war, above all, the source and sewer of all crimes!

“Dear girl!” Mademoiselle Hardy murmured.

Annik would be the continuer, would realize what she herself had attempted, fruitlessly, in her good will as a schoolteacher: her impotent dream, always broken against the hostile walls of a society made by men for men.

She held out her hands, which Annik squeezed tenderly.

“You’ll never know, Mérette, the extent to which I adore you. You collected me and protected me in frightful days. But for you...! That’s why, even though Paule is older than me, I often have the sentiment of being riper than she is for liberty, and that I need to look after her, as if I were the elder. You’ll see her—she’s coming. We’re going to go out, with Monsieur Lebeau, to have lunch in a quiet corner on the Oise. I say *we* because I’m taking you...no, no, no resistance! Today, it’s you who have to obey, Mérette. You can tell me afterwards what you think of him.”

She was ready, clad in a short straight dress in red crepe, with a floral pattern, a black varnished leather belt, and a large white turned-up collar, which gave her a bold appearance. Not the enticing slyness of the “Claudine”³ of yore, but a straightforward charm of pure adolescence. She placed an authoritarian hand on the gray head, coiffed in an old fur bonnet in spite of the May sky, the soft azure of which entered through the open window.

“It’s yes?”

But Mademoiselle Hardy shook her head. “It’s no.” And, abruptly making her decision, she went on: “Your Lebeau, in spite of all you’ve said about him, doesn’t signify anything worthwhile to me. You’re too young to have known the *Appel* before the war, when it was nothing but a cheap rag. The true Lebeau revealed himself nakedly there: a professional blackmailer, a soul of mud. Yes! It’s him, I assure you; it’s him who called the Republic “cow-dung” when it left him with an empty stomach...today, now that he’s rich, he has only one obsession: the Académie and Parliament; he’s changed his coat and his batteries, but fundamentally, he’s still the same man: nothing but appetites and hatreds. Intelligent, agreed—but that only makes him more despicable. Oh, people forget quickly in Paris!”

Surprised, Annik remained silent. What insect had stung the worthy Mérette?

“He’s done you a service? But you’re an incomparable secretary! He’s facilitated the first steps for you at the Palais, has he? It’s because he hopes that you’ll return the favor with others, you can be sure.”

With a hint of mockery, Annik raised her tranquil eyes. “What would be the harm? I know what I can do. I’m an adult.”

“I know your ideas!”

“They’re yours, Mérette...”

“Mine? Mine...revised and augmented!”

“What! Haven’t you always told me that, for women, a good free union is better than a bad marriage?”

“Obviously...but everything depends on the circumstances...for with our backward mores, many risk losing their livelihoods there.”

“The weak! Not me.”

“So it’s not a matter of the principle at stake. Free union? Marriage? Both of them imply the same lottery ticket: a choice. And it’s yours, my dear child, that’s worrying me.”

“Why?”

“I’ve told you.”

³ The protagonist of the early quasi-autobiographical novels of Colette, published between 1900 and 1904, originally under the pseudonym of her husband, “Willy,” which seemed slightly scandalous at the time, but now seem charming in their innocent sensuality.

“An impression! Is that sufficient for you to condemn a man you don’t know?”

“Well...” Mademoiselle Hardy hesitated.

Annik thought that she was about to raise the objection of the *ménage à trois* with the Lourdals, to which the journalist had cynically attached himself. “It’s Madame Lourdal, isn’t it?”

Mademoiselle Hardy raised a surprised gaze. “No, who’s that?”

Worthy Mérette! She was obviously a provincial! Regretfully, Annik was obliged to explain that Lebeau, in the sight and with the knowledge of Parisian society, served the famous couple as a manger.

“You’ve heard of the Lourdals! Lourdal of the Académie des Sciences Morales et Politiques, the philosopher who, after having written *Le Matérialisme Roi* and married Simone Viale, was converted to the ideas of the day: the saber and the aspergillum.

Mademoiselle Hardy went from one astonishment to another. “Simone? The one who paints all those prettily disgusting nudes—self-portraits, it appears?”

“That’s the one. The former wife and model of the caricaturist Viale. In thickening out, she’s become, like her second husband, a great thinker. She’s the art critic at the *Appel*. But Lebeau is beginning to tire of her...”

“Of the trio?”

“Oh, Lourdal isn’t inconvenient. Poor old fellow! He accepts everything. No, of the duo. And I believe that if I wanted...”

Mademoiselle Hardy had a surge of revolt: “Don’t do that. If you knew...!”

“What? Now, you no longer have the right to keep quiet. I like him.” She shrugged her shoulders. “Anyway, I’m tranquil. If you knew him...”

“You’re right; I’ve never seen him—but I’ve read enough of him to be certain that I know him better than you do. Anyway, after what you’ve just told me...listen! Do you remember Rosa, at Yvelines? A tall blonde...a simpleton, but pretty. She came to the school for a while. Yes she did! The daughter of La Blanchard, that housekeeper who had a red birthmark on her face...”

“Ah! I know...”

“Rosa was a housemaid for the Morevals.”

“The stepfather of Amédée Jacquemin, the socialist député?”

Mademoiselle Hardy made a gesture of ignorance. “All I know is that the mother presides over the Oeuvre des Asiles du Soir. The old man’s a senator, a former Minister and High-Commissioner...the whole works!”

“That’s right! Like Pierre Lebeau, Amédée Jacquemin is a good friend of mine.”

“He’s your other possibility, then?”

“Exactly.”

“Well, perhaps the stepson has generous opinions—but his parents...”

“Known! They’re redoubtable bigots. In fact, as sectarian skinflints go, there are none finer! All that, of course, under the cover of big words. Honor! And even the Légion d’honneur...for Monsieur de Moreval is some kind of *grand officier*...he was once in the diplomatic service. But I don’t see the connection...”

“Rosa was sacked, brutally, on the day when it was perceived that she was pregnant.”

“By whom?”

“There we are.”

Not for an instant did the name of Pierre Lebeau brush Annik’s credulous sentiment with a suspicion. Astonished, she said: “Amédée?”

But a sadness impregnated Mademoiselle Hardy’s compassionate features. “No: your Lebeau.”

“Him? It’s impossible! He has an embarrassment of choice! To have loved that girl!”

Mademoiselle Hardy became grave. “Who mentioned love?” By Annik’s emotion, she measured the emprise of the seduction over the young, enthusiastic and sincere soul. At the risk of a temporary suffering, the necessity of a more urgent warning became urgent.

“It’s hardly worth the trouble of having been a nurse and qualified in law if you still believe that men aren’t all the same! *Screwing*, as you put it yourself—all of them, and as much as they can. Love...that’s something else entirely.”

“Pierre Lebeau isn’t an ordinary man. Him, with that girl! What a joke! It’s just a filthy rumor.”

“You only have to ask Rosa, if it interests you.”

“Inventions! Blackmail!”

“There are accents of truth that don’t lie.”

“But in the end, how do you know, Mérette? Tell me! Yes, speak! You’d be doing me a service—yes, a great service.”

“Rosa told me. One day when she had come to bring him an urgent letter...”

“At the paper!”

“No, at his home...a letter from Madame de Moreval, about a lawsuit...”

“A lawsuit? Hang on...the Oeuvre des Asiles du Soir versus the Compagnie Laitière, perhaps?”

“Perhaps. What’s certain is that your Pierre thought Rosa pretty, told her so, and proved it. Yes, right away...just like that, in his study. Undoubtedly he’s one of those sick individuals who can’t find themselves alone with a woman without passing from sight to desire, and from desire to action.”

“Oh, I can assure you that he isn’t.”

“He must know to whom he’s addressing himself! That idiot girl was so silly, and perhaps flattered, that she let him go ahead. As she got a taste for the game, they carried on until she confessed that she thought that she was pregnant. Oh, it didn’t drag on. The result...”

“But when did she tell you all this?”

“She came back to Yvelines a fortnight ago—in what a state! Sacked by the Morevals at the first apparent sign, she’d taken her belly from house to house, and then, as no one wanted her anywhere, from sidewalk to sidewalk. In the end, exhausted and consumptive, she fell back on her mother’s house, where the money is already insufficient for one. Then I took an interest in the unfortunate...I helped her a little. I even succeeded in getting her a place, but only in exchange for board and lodging, with Monsieur Seuriot, the new butcher.”

A whirlwind of images passed through Annik’s vision: the incredible stupor...the child-mother on the streets and then discarded...the whole tragicomedy of seduction and abandonment, of feminine weakness and malevolent society. But she felt a surge of revolt.

“If you believe everything she tells you! A delinquent, as you said yourself. Pierre is an easy target.”

“No, Rosa’s stupid, but she isn’t a liar. She kept it to herself for fear of the consequences. She wanted to be married—to marry, with a crown of authentic orange blossoms, an employee of the gas company... Unfortunately, your Lebeau got there first.”

With a revolt that astonished herself, for she had often been shocked by some of the journalist’s behavior, Annik cried: “You’re always the dupe of your generosity! Monsieur Lebeau has too much taste for such caprices, and too much conscience not to act, always, as an honest man. No, no. If he had had a responsible role in this...romance, I’m certain that he would have acted differently.”

“Do you know his response to all Rosa’s appeals? That she was mad and that if she annoyed him any further—the police!”

The doorbell rang. “There he is!” said Annik, and ran to the door.

“I’ll leave,” Mademoiselle Hardy declared. “After this, I can’t see him... Oh it’s Paule...”