

The impression became stronger when Madame Lestrade, having removed her bonnet and cape, lit the porcelain lamp. On the sombre walls, from tarnished frames, smiled ancient, venerable faces; on the mantelpiece, exactly in the middle, protected by a glass globe, a large gilt clock repeated its ticktack all day and all night, as it had done for fifty years. A large cat, comfortably rolled into a ball, was asleep on a rug of gray fur. Madame Lestrade was very fond of the old things she had brought with her from Fontaine-Vielle, the little city lost in the woods of Limousin.

Only one slight sketch of Raymond's infused a light, youthful note amid the sombre decorations. This sketch, moreover, was of springtime, and Raymond's mother loved the spring. It was a scene among the meadows, when the green things are just bursting into life, before the ardent rays of the sun have yet withered the breath of the blue field-flowers to make room for their successors, the peonies and roses.

The eyes of the old woman lingered on the faded photographs, framed in green silk, that stood on either side of the clock on the narrow mantel.

'Poor dears!' she murmured. 'Why are you not with us to-night to share in our joy?'

A tear fell upon the thin old cheek. In days of sorrow, when one thinks of the dead, it is to say, 'How good God was, although at the time we could not see it! He took them to Himself before this blow, which would have made them so unhappy, could come upon them.' But when the clouds have blown away, when Happiness once more knocks at the portal, it is hard to know that they are no longer here to rejoice with us; that the dear face smiling at us from the picture has disappeared forever; and that our poor human joys, so fleeting, are never again to be shared by those whose participation would have made them doubly dear.

Five o'clock struck from the tower of a neighboring church. Madame Lestrade began to tremble. All the afternoon she had been thinking of the little feast she was preparing for her son. 'Raymond must be so happy to-night!' And how delightful to think of their sitting together, talking of his good fortune, and enjoying their dinner in the warm dining-room!

She came and went in the kitchen, in her blue linen apron, preparing with the most minute care the modest little dinner, entirely composed of the food her son liked best. From time to time she smiled at the huge gray cat that followed her about inquisitively, as though aware that there was something unusual going on. Once she stopped and patted him on the back, saying:

'Yes, my old Prince, you shall have an extra good dinner also. And you will be glad, I am sure, to know that we are so happy.'

Happy! The word had a strange sound in her ears. For fifteen years she had not permitted herself to think of it. She had known nothing else during her childhood, girlhood, and the first years of her marriage. Then misfortunes came suddenly, one fast following the other. Unwise speculations had speedily dissipated her husband's fortune, as well as her own, which she had placed at his disposal that he might recoup his losses. She could never forget that September evening when, in trying to hide from her a letter he had been reading, he had fallen in a fit of apoplexy. She could see, whenever she recalled the dreadful picture, the poor limp head falling against her shoulder as she lifted him from the floor; Raymond calling for help through the open window overlooking the street; M. le Cure arriving in haste; the passing of the soul, the funeral, the grief of the old mother, the numbness of her own heart, the burning pain in her eyes that could not weep. And then the feeling of loneliness, of desolation that ensued, was but another step to the Calvary which she must now climb. Another week, another coffin—the mother had followed her son.

In those days she had almost forgotten Raymond, the idol and pride of his father's heart—Raymond, their only son, who had formed half her world. Suddenly she awoke to a sense of her responsibility in his regard; it was after her first burst of tears. Looking her sorrow in the face with the faith of a true Christian, she besought the God of the widow and the fatherless to forgive her despair, saying to herself: 'Yes, my life is ended; but what does my sorrow matter? I know that I shall see my beloved again. I will bury my grief in the depths of my heart and live for my boy; with him and for him I shall take up life again. I shall not only be brave but cheerful.' And she had kept her word.

After her husband's debts had been paid, there was very little left. And Raymond must finish his education. But how was it possible for him to do so? They soon realised that it was beyond their means. And Raymond had no regrets. He wished to be a painter. One of his professors had often said to him: 'My boy, you have a fortune at the tip of your pencil.'

Yes, Raymond would be a painter; and 'only' in Paris could he attain the desire of his heart. To Paris, then, they went, though all their friends opposed the step. The boy was determined to go; he was eighteen, and what could the poor mother do but follow him? For his sake she renounced her only consolation—that of living close to the graves of all she had loved; for him she bade adieu to the friends of a lifetime; for him she sold the old home with its tender associations; for him she went forth, in her early middle age, from the quiet provincial town where she had thought to spend her declining years, to the great city, the very name of which terrified her timid soul.

But Raymond knew nothing of all this; he did not even suspect it. They are nearly all alike, the poor young people! They do not mean to be egotists; they do not know that they are, their souls are so full of dreams, their hearts so occupied with their youth, their intelligence so keen for the things that seem to them the noblest, the most beautiful—the things to be desired. They are absorbed in what belongs to their age and in one another. How can they take time to study the souls that surround them; above all, the soul of a woman, sad, oppressed, no longer young, without great intellect or great aspirations—a soul bordered by the petty horizon of a house and family! And yet it is among souls like these that the greatest heroism is frequently to be found—those who suffer silently, yet go about their duties cheerfully day after day.

Those ten years in Paris had been long and arduous. There was no doubt that Raymond worked hard, and at first success seemed to smile upon him. He was admitted to the Ecole des Beaux-Arts; his masters esteemed and encouraged him. But soon disappointments began to follow each other in his path. It was the same old story: his pictures refused for the Salon one after another; the anguish of the artist, not a confirmed egotist, who begins to doubt his own talents, to realise that he lacks the most essential requisites to the perfection of his art.

Oh, that sad evening—she remembered it so well!—Raymond, returning from the atelier, which he shared with several others, said to his mother:

'I shall never become a great painter. My talent is quite mediocre, mother. I have style, I have taste, I have color; but I have no originality—not a particle: the gift of expressing what is in me. It is there, but I cannot bring it out.'

She had not believed him, she did not believe it yet. Others had 'arrived' with far less talent than he; others, again, who had prostituted the gift with which God had endowed them—that Raymond would never do. But now it became more than ever necessary to find wherewith to live. The little capital derived from the sale of the house had about slipped through their fingers. The rent of a farm she still owned at Threuil was entirely insufficient for their needs.

Madame Lestrade would not allow her son to relinquish his art. She began to work, straining her poor eyes over fine embroidery and laces, for which she received only a trifle. But, in spite of prodigies of industry and economy, the purse was still very light.

If Raymond could but have known the privations his mother had imposed on herself when he was not there! If he could have suspected that she passed the long hours of the wintry days without fire, that he might see a cheerful blaze when he returned in the evening! If he could have seen her near the draughty window, her head bent over her work, trying to catch a little of the feeble light that struggled through the fog and smoke! If he could have beheld her hastily snatching a morsel of bread and cheese, only to receive him an hour later with an excuse like this: 'Are you not a little late, my poor boy? I was so hungry I could not wait any longer. You know old people have fixed habits; they cannot bear to change their hours. I have already taken my dinner. Eat your soup quickly or the cutlet will be cold.'

Oh, if he could only have comprehended the priceless treasures of devotion that were poured out upon him so prodigally every hour, he would have thrown away his palette and brushes; he would have folded his arms around her, as he used to do in his childhood, in order to say to her, between sobs, between kisses: 'You have worked long enough for me, mother. I will work for you henceforward. Let us go back home, where we used to be so happy, where we shall be happy once more.' But Raymond could not divine these things, and the days rolled by, filled with cares and sadness, regrets for the past, present sacrifices, and anxieties concerning the future.

At last God had pity. It is often thus. Just as the cup overflows, it is taken gently from our lips; and when we are exhausted with suffering, a ray of