

LOOKING BACK

'Now, darlings,' said the Comtesse, 'it's bed-time.'

The three children, two girls and a boy, got up and went across to kiss their grandmother.

After that they went to say good-night to the Curé, who had been dining at the castle, as he always did on Thursdays.

The Abbé Mauduit took the two girls on his knee, put his long arms in the black-sleeved cassock round their necks and, drawing their heads towards him with a fatherly gesture, he pressed a long affectionate kiss on each forehead.

Then he put them down and the little things left the room, the boy in front and the girls behind.

'You are fond of children, M. le Curé?' said the Comtesse.

'Very fond, Madame.'

The old lady raised her eyes to the priest's face:

'And don't you ever find it hard living alone?'

'Yes, sometimes.'

He fell silent and after a pause he went on: 'But I was never made for everyday life.'

'What do you know about it?'

'Oh! I know well enough. I was made to be a priest. I have followed my vocation.'

The Comtesse was still looking at him.

'Come, M. le Curé, tell me about it; tell me how you made up your mind to renounce all that makes the rest of us love life, all that comforts and consoles us. What decided you not to follow the normal path of marriage and family life? You are neither a mystic nor a fanatic, neither a kill-joy nor a pessimist. Was it something that happened, a great sorrow, that made you take life vows?'

The Abbé Mauduit got up and went to the fire, holding out the heavy shoes of a country priest to the flames. He still seemed to hesitate about answering.

He was a tall, white-haired old man, who had been the parish

priest of Saint-Antoine-du-Rocher and the neighbourhood for twenty years. The peasants always said of him: 'He's a real good sort.'

He was a good man, kindly, good-tempered, accessible and, above all, generous. He would have divided his cloak like Saint Martin. He was ready to laugh and equally ready to cry, like a woman, which lowered his reputation a little in the eyes of the dour peasants.

The old Comtesse de Saville, who had retired to her castle at Rocher to bring up her grandchildren after the deaths in close succession of her son and daughter-in-law, was very fond of her curé and used to say of him: 'He's got a good heart.'

He came every Thursday and spent the evening at the castle, and he and the Comtesse had become close friends with the genuine, open-hearted friendship possible only to the old. They were so much of a mind that they hardly needed to put their thoughts into words, being both good souls with the simple goodness of unsophisticated kindly folk.

She insisted: 'Now, M. le Curé, it's time for *you* to make your confession to *me*.'

He repeated: 'I was not born for ordinary life. Fortunately I discovered it in time and I have very often had cause to know how right I was.'

'My parents, who were wholesale haberdashers at Verdiers and quite well off, were very ambitious for me. They sent me to a boarding-school very young. People do not realize how unhappy a boy can be at school simply from loneliness and being away from home. The routine life without affection is good for some but disastrous for others. Children are often more sensitive than people think, and, if they are shut up in this way too early away from those they love, excessive sensitiveness, which plays havoc with their nerves, may develop and become pathological and dangerous.'

'I hardly played any games; I made no friends and was violently home-sick all the time; I cried in bed at night and was always trying to recall memories of home, trivial memories of little insignificant things and happenings. I could not get out of my mind all I had

left behind me. I gradually became a nervous wreck, for whom trifling difficulties assumed the proportions of acute misery.

'The result was that I remained morose and self-centred, inhibited and friendless. The process of increasing mental strain went on subconsciously but surely. Children's nerves are easily affected; great care ought to be taken to avoid any disturbance in their lives, until they are practically mature. But who realizes that for some boys at school an undeserved imposition may cause as much mental anguish as the death of a friend will later on? Who really appreciates that something quite trivial may cause in certain immature minds an emotional upset which may in a very short time inflict incurable damage?

'This is what happened in my case; home-sickness developed in me to such an extent that my whole life became one long agony.

'I told no one and said nothing about it. My natural sensitiveness gradually increased till it became pathological and my mind was one open wound. The slightest touch produced twinges of pain and agonizing repercussions which did me permanent harm. Happy indeed are those to whom nature has given a thick skin and the armour of stoicism!

'I reached the age of sixteen. The fact that everything hurt me made me abnormally shy. Knowing that I had no defence against the blows of chance or fate, I shrank from all contacts, all advances, all the activities of school life. I was continually on the defensive, as if constantly threatened by some unknown but always anticipated misfortune. I dared not speak or act in public. I was obsessed with the idea that life was a battle, a frightful struggle, in which one received terrible blows and wounds not only painful but mortal.

'Instead of hopes of happiness for the morrow, such as normal people have, I was conscious only of an undefined terror and I wanted to hide and avoid the struggle, in which I was bound to be defeated and killed.

'When I had finished my studies, I was given six months' holiday in which to choose my career. A very simple incident suddenly enabled me to understand myself and revealed to me my unhealthy

psychological condition; I realized my danger and made up my mind to avoid it.

'Verdiers is a small town in flat country with woods all round it. My parents' house was in the main street. I now spent my time away from the home I had missed and longed for so much. I wandered over the countryside, day-dreaming, by myself, so that my dreams could develop without interruption.

'My father and mother, wrapped up in their business and anxious about my future, could talk of nothing but their sales and the careers open to me. They loved me like hard-headed practical people with their head rather than their heart. I lived in the prison of my own thoughts, never free from the terrors of anxiety.

'Well, one evening after a long day out, as I was walking fast in order not to be late home, I saw a dog running at full speed towards me. He was a sort of red spaniel, very thin, with long curly ears.

'He halted ten yards from me; I stopped too. He began to wag his tail and came slowly towards me with timid movements of his whole body, cowering down as if begging and moving his head gently from side to side. I spoke to him. Then he began to crawl towards me on his belly, looking so humble, so miserable, so appealing that tears came into my eyes. I went towards him but he ran away; he soon came back and I knelt down on one knee and spoke kindly to him, enticing him to come closer. At last he was within reach of my hand and I stroked him very gently, taking great care not to frighten him.

'He became bolder, gradually stood upright, put his paws on my shoulders and began to lick my face. He followed me home.

'This was the first living creature I had ever loved passionately, because he returned my affection. My love for the animal was, no doubt, exaggerated and ridiculous. I had a vague idea that in some way we were brothers, both lost in life, both lonely and defenceless. He never left me, slept at the foot of my bed, was fed in the dining-room in spite of my parents' protests and he came with me on my solitary walks.

'I often stopped on the edge of a ditch and sat down on the grass.

Sam immediately ran to me and lay down by my side or on my knee, nosing at my hand to make me stroke him.

'One day towards the end of June, as we were on the road to Saint-Pierre-de-Chavrol, I saw the bus from Ravereau coming. It was travelling fast with the four horses at full gallop; it had a yellow body and a black leather tilt over the seats on the top like a cap. The driver was cracking his whip and a cloud of dust rose under the wheels of the heavy vehicle and drifted away behind.

'Suddenly, just as it reached me, Sam, perhaps frightened by the noise and wanting to get to me, dashed in front of it. The hoof of one of the horses knocked him over; I saw him roll, summersault, get up and fall again amid the forest of legs; the whole bus gave two great bumps and I saw behind it something writhing in the dust. He was almost severed in two; his belly was torn open and his entrails were hanging out, spouting blood. He tried to get up and walk, but he could only move his fore legs, which scabbled at the ground; his hind quarters were already dead. And he was howling pitifully, mad with pain.

'In a minute or two he was dead. I cannot describe my feelings and how much I was affected. I could not leave my room for a month.

'One evening my father, who was furious with me for making such a fuss over such a little thing, cried: "What will you do when you have a real sorrow, if you lose a wife or children?"

'In a flash I began to understand myself. I realized why little everyday troubles assumed catastrophic proportions in my eyes; I saw that I was so constituted that I felt everything over-keenly and was hyper-susceptible to painful impressions, which were intensified by my abnormal sensitiveness; and a paralysing fear of life gripped me.

'I was without physical desires or ambition; so I decided to sacrifice the possibility of happiness to the certainty of suffering. "Life is short; I will devote myself to the service of others; I will soothe their sorrows and rejoice in their happiness," I said to myself. "As I shall not feel either myself directly, I shall experience these emotions only with diminished intensity."

'And if you only knew how suffering still tortures me and wrings my heart! But what would have been intolerable agony in my own case has been sublimated into sympathy and pity.

'I could never have endured the sorrow with which I come into contact every day had it been my own. I could not have seen a child of my own die without dying myself. And, in spite of everything I still have such an undefined, subconscious fear of something happening, that the sight of the postman coming to my door sends a shiver down my spine, though now I have nothing to fear.'

The Abbé Mauduit fell silent. He was looking into the fire in the great fireplace, as if seeking to read there all the mysteries and secrets of the life he might have lived, if he had faced suffering more bravely. He went on in a lower voice:

'I was right; I am not made to live in this world.'

The Comtesse said nothing; at last, after a long silence, she commented:

'As for me, if I had not got my grandchildren, I don't think I should have the courage to go on living.'

The Curé got up without another word.

As the servants in the kitchen were asleep, she took him herself to the door into the garden and watched his tall, slow-moving shadow in the light of his lantern plunge into the darkness.

Then she went back and sat down by the fire, and thought of many things that do not occur to the young.