

"Le goût exquis craint le trop on tout." These words of Fénelon's rise to one's mind in reading this story of a rare soul drawn into the abyss of the inner life, "as waters are by whirlpools suck'd and drawn," through a sort of dread of the excess, the commonness, the transitoriness of mortal happiness.

Alissa Bucolin was the child of a West Indian Creole and a Norman banker, Protestant and pious. The beautiful M<sup>rs</sup>. Bucolin never took root in the Huguenot society of Havre; she spent her days swinging in a hammock or reclining gracefully upon a couch, a shut book dropping from her idle hand; sometimes a violent "crise de nerfs" would interrupt the languid course of her existence, and alarm and arouse all the quiet, plain, provincial household; only sometimes at dusk she would awake for a moment, as it were, show a transient animation, or sit at the piano and begin some slow mazurka of Chopin; but her lovely hands would stop in the middle of a chord, her voice leave the phrase unfinished, and the sleeping beauty sink again into her incommunicable *ennui*. Alissa Bucolin drew from her mother her dark romantic beauty and a neurotic temperament, but her spiritual strain reflected the cultured Huguenots of her father's family. Born in the native town of Madeline de Soudéry (the author of the "Grand Cyrus") and of Bernardin de Saint-Pierre (the author of "Paul et Virginie"), she was akin to the great *précieuse* and to the idealist philosopher—and the likeness makes us wonder if a peculiar morbid sentimentality, a rare delicacy of emotional fibre, be usual in the inhabitants of that flourishing sea-port! Alissa had grown up in the companionship of a sister, a brother, and a young boy cousin, two years her junior—and from their childhood it had been understood that Alissa and Jérôme were one day to marry. But when the girl was sixteen years of age the mystery of Evil, and all the scars and scoria of mortal passion, were suddenly revealed to her by the conduct of her mother. A novel gaiety and laughter transfigured M<sup>rs</sup>. Bucolin, coinciding with the frequent visits of a certain young lieutenant. And one day Jérôme found Alissa weeping and praying by her bedside while from the floor below her mother's laughter pealed up—unaccustomed as a portent. "Bucolin, Bucolin," drolled the young lieutenant, "Si j'avais un mouton, sûrement je l'appellerais Bucolin!" and Alissa, weeping, murmured to her dear confidant, "Jérôme, ne raconte rien à personne... mon pauvre papa ne sait rien!"

Thus, in its very bud, the young shoot of love in her heart was infected by the sense of shame and by the longing to expiate and offer one's life as an oblation. Moreover, Juliette, three years younger than Alissa, let her fancy light on her young cousin; and the serious Alissa (to whom every preference appeared a vital passion) determined to sacrifice her dream of happiness in Juliette's favour. Her strenuous soul was naturally inclined to sacrifice, finding in privation that mysterious exaltation of the will, that constant and progressive self-mastery, which animate with an intense though secret interest the life of the ascetic. But neither her young sister nor Jérôme would accept her oblation. Juliette married very young a middle-aged wine grower in the South of France, had several children, became her husband's associate, provided an opening for her younger brother—fulfilled, in fact, the French ideal of feminine activity, importance, and devotedness, and was perfectly happy; while Alissa was left (so to speak) with her sacrifice returned unopened—left upon her hands. And Juliette's recovery from her first love, her happiness in a simple marriage of reason, contributed to discredit human passion in the mind of the fastidious Alissa.—

Ce bonheur que j'ai tant souhaité, jusqu'à offrir de lui sacrifier mon bonheur, je souffre de le voir obtenu sans peine. Juliette est heureuse; elle le dit, elle le parait; je n'ai pas le droit, pas de raison, d'en douter. D'où me vient, après elle, ce sentiment d'insatisfaction, de malaise? Peut-être à sentir cette félicité si pratique, si facilement obtenue. Ô Seigneur! Garde-moi d'un bonheur que je pourrais trop facilement atteindre!

To Alissa, as to Mary, the usefulness and occupied content of Martha appear the husks of life: *Utinam est necessarium*. Such natures need the liberty, the solitude, the rapt interminable progression, and ideal realm of the inner life. A sort of disgust of reality seizes them at the very moment when the earthly paradise they dreamed of appears, at last, within their reach. Alissa has only to stretch out her hand in order to take her happiness. After all, is it worth while? The dread of disenchantment, the sense of mortal imperfection, paralyse her—the dawn of love is surely its most delicate, delicious moment; the fruit can never improve upon that exquisite suggestion.

Enough; no more!  
'Tis not so sweet now as it was before.

Those who have imagined themselves in direct communication with that which lies behind appearances can not resume unaltered the conditions of human society. Pascal in the full glory of scientific discovery—and is there any human emotion to compare with that of the man who suddenly sees enlarged the very boundaries of Nature?—in the passion of scientific debate, knew that abrupt resolution of the mind, that withdrawal from finite things, that unique absorption in spiritual perfection which drove a Charles V. to quit the affairs of Europe for a monk's cell in Estremadura. More than once the sense of Divine things has suggested to a strong nature some cruel doctrine of voluntary martyrdom, which (according to our own bias) we may deplore as a partial alienation of the mind, or admire as evidence of eternal truth. M. Gide's Alissa is only a woman who renounces a permitted love; yet, in the same spirit, and with something of the same high strenuousness, she erases her dream and writes across the page of life:—*Hic incipit amor Dei*. "La sainteté n'est pas un choix (she tells the unfortunate Jérôme) mais une obligation."

But Alissa was not a saint. She was an artist in Mysticism, a refined and fastidious spirit "who would give all Hugo for a few sonnets by Baudelaire." Nothing in her life shows that warmth, that zeal, that desire to rush in and save which marks the saint, however visionary, however ecstatic; be she Saint Teresa, or St. Catherine, be he St. Francis of Assisi or St. Francis of Sales. In place of that simple and passionate impulse of the soul Alissa, in her self-regarding solitude, is all scruple, all a fastidious fear of doing wrong. We think of her, and, opening Fénelon's "Spiritual Letters," we read:—

Bien n'est si contraire à la simplicité que le scrupule. Il cache je ne sais quoi de double et de faux; on croit n'être en peine que par dévotion d'amour pour Dieu; mais dans le fond on est inquiet pour soi, et on est jaloux pour sa propre perfection, par un attachement naturel à soi.

And he opposes to these strenuous, self-torturing, courageous spirits, who arrive with difficulty at perfection, thanks to "une certaine force et une certaine grandeur de sentiment," the luminous peace of those quiet souls who glide, as it were, into their true haven, without a conscious effort.

Tout les surmonte selon leur sentiment; et elles surmontent tout, par un je ne sais quoi qui est en elles, sans qu'elles le sachent. Elles ne pensent point à bien souffrir; mais insensiblement chaque croix se trouve portée jusqu'au bout dans une paix simple et amère, ou elles n'ont voulu que ce que Dieu voulait. Il n'y a rien d'éclatant, rien de fort, de distinct aux yeux d'autrui, et encore moins aux yeux de la personne. Si vous lui disiez qu'elle a bien souffert, elle ne le comprendroit pas.

We read and reflect that such a friend as this was just what was lacking to Alissa Bucolin. She would doubtless have been happier as a Roman Catholic (only even then she might have chanced on a Pascal, who would have exasperated her qualities, instead of on a Fénelon, who would have tempered and allayed them to a milder perfection). A spiritual director would have turned her energies into courses of work and prayer, would have drawn her mind from the attraction of the abyss, would, perhaps, have married her (like Juliette), or, more happily, have fulfilled her vocation in some great active religious Order, where an Alissa may succour and inspire a multitude of lesser natures. Or, had the bent to contemplation proved too strong, he would have let her enter the contemplative life, but not alone. A soul marked by what Sainte-Beuve described as *la griffe de Farchange* may be seized with a vertigo, on attaining the

summits of the inner world, if on these giddy heights no staying, guiding, protecting hand be near. *Vae soli!*

But in that case Alissa would not tragically have died, leaving behind a long train of sterile regret and hopeless memories, and M. Gide would not have composed the frail and delicious spiritual story, which, in its purity and charm, reminds us, often of "Dominique," sometimes of the "Récit d'une Sœur," and more than once of the "Vita Nuova."