

The Two Negroes

WHEN HE built our home, my father took as model the only other house then standing on the brief length of Rue Deschambault - still unencumbered by any sidewalk, as virginal as a country path stretching through thickets of wild roses and, in April, resonant with the music of frogs. Maman was pleased with the street, with the quiet, with the good, pure air there, for the children, but she objected to the servile copying of our neighbor's house, which was luckily not too close to ours. This neighbor, a Monsieur Guilbert, was a colleague of my father's at the Ministry of Colonization and his political enemy to boot, for Papa had remained passionately faithful to Laurier's memory, while Monsieur Guilbert, when the Conservative party came into power, had become a turncoat. Over this the two men quarreled momentarily. My father would return home after one of these set-tos chewing on his little clay pipe. He would inform my mother: "I'm through. I'll never set foot there again. The old jackass, with his Borden government!"

My mother concurred: "Certainly. You'd do far better to stay home than go looking for an argument wherever you stick your nose."

Yet no more than my father could forgo his skirmishes with Monsieur Guilbert could she forgo her own with our neighbor's wife.

This lady was from St. Hyacinth, in the Province of Quebec, and she made much of it. But above all she had a way of extolling her own children which, while lauding them, seemed to belittle Maman's. "My Lucien is almost too conscientious," she would say. "The Fathers tell me they have never seen a child work so hard."

My mother would retort: "Only yesterday the Fathers told me again that my Gervais is so intelligent everything comes to him effortlessly; and apparently that's not too good a thing, either."

My mother was most skillful in parrying what she called Madame Guilbert's "thrusts." Despite all this - or perhaps be-

cause of it — our two families could scarcely get along without each other.

Often on an evening my mother would go out on the open porch in front of our big house and say to my sister Odette, "Supper is ready. Run over and tell your father; he's still at the Guilberts'. Bring him back before any argument begins."

Odette would sally forth across the field. When she reached the Guilberts', there my father would be, his pipe clamped between his teeth, leaning against our neighbor's gate and chatting peaceably with Monsieur Guilbert about rosebushes, apple trees, and asparagus. So long as the two men were on such subjects, there was no need for alarm; and here Monsieur Guilbert was willing enough to accept my father's views, since he granted that my father knew more about gardening than he did. Then Odette would espy Gisèle's face at one of the upstairs windows. Gisèle would call out, "Wait for me, Odette; I'm coming down. I want to show you my tatting."

In those days they were both fanatically devoted to piano playing and to a sort of lacemaking that involved the use of a shuttle and was, if my memory serves me well, called tatting.

Then my mother would send my brother Gervais to see what on earth could be keeping my Father and Odette over there. At the field's edge, Gervais would encounter his classmate Lucien Guilbert, and the latter would entice my brother behind an ancient barn to smoke a cigarette; needless to say, Madame Guilbert always maintained that it was Gervais who had induced Lucien to indulge this bad habit.

Out of patience, Maman would ship me off to corral them all. But I would chance to meet the Guilberts' dog, and we would start playing in the tall grass; among us all, now at loggerheads, now so closely knit, I think that only I and the Guilbert dog were always of the same temper.

At last my mother would tear off her apron and come marching along the footpath to reprimand us. "My supper's been ready for an hour now!"

Madame Guilbert would then appear on her own porch and graciously exclaim, "Dear, dear! Do stay here for supper, seeing as you're all here anyway."

For Madame Guilbert, when you yielded her her full rights to superiority and distinction, was a most amiable person. Still, it was difficult to avoid, throughout an entire evening, the subject of Sir Wilfrid Laurier, or to settle once and for all which boy had induced the other to smoke; and the consequence was

that often enough we came home from these kindly visits quite out of humor with the Guilberts.

Such was our situation — getting along together happily enough, I avow — when the unknown quite fantastically entered our lives, and brought with it relationships more difficult, yet how vastly more interesting!

II

Neither family in those days was well off; there were times when sheer necessity made us keenly aware of its harsh grasp, and my mother had acquired the habit of saying, "We must make our minds up to rent a room. The house is so large we'll scarcely notice it." My mother, however, began to be fearful of the shady character of the humble workman who would appear every evening and come into our home filthy from his toil.

Whenever she spoke of this, she seemed so obviously to feel Madame Guilbert's disapproval weighing upon her that we all laughed a little at Maman; for, on other occasions, she was well able to hold her head high and announce that, "as for her, her conscience was clear . . ." or that "she didn't care a fig for what others might say . . ."

Her lodger was becoming more and more of an ideal being. The fellow must go to bed early, never touch hard liquor, be quiet, neither too young nor too old . . . and if possible be distinguished.

So often had she heard that adjective on Madame Guilbert's lips that my mother had no use for it, but she strove all the same to twist its meaning toward what to her constituted true distinction. Yet where would one find this exemplary being who would give us money and not cause us the least trifling annoyance — who, to suit Maman's taste, would be at once invisible and distinguished?

Whereupon, my oldest brother, Robert, arrived home one day bubbling with excitement. Like Horace, the Guilberts' first-born, he worked in Her Majesty's service, aboard the mail car on the Winnipeg-Edmonton run. He was full of life and exuberance. Madame Guilbert was constantly drawing the contrast between our Robert and her Horace, a lad with so keen an eye to the future, who saved his money and never touched a drop of Scotch. . . .

"I've found the very roomer you need," Robert told Maman. "Just perfect!"

"Really?"

"Yes, indeed."

"He doesn't drink?"

"Not a drop."

"Doesn't smoke?"

"Just one cigar at Christmas."

"Dear me!" exclaimed Maman, who paled to find fate thus taking her at her own words.

"Better still," added Robert, "this chap will occupy his room here only a day or two each week, but he'll pay for it in full. . . ."

"And the rest of the time . . . where will he be?" Maman asked.

"Now here, now there," Robert replied, laughing at Maman's expression. "Sometimes in Vancouver . . . or Edmonton . . . But don't worry; he is a most honorable employee of the Canadian Pacific."

"Therefore . . . quite presentable?"

"The looks of a president . . . and devout as well," said Robert.

"A president and devout! What's his name?"

"Jackson."

"English?"

"He is English-speaking, all right," Robert replied. . . . "But, truth to tell - and here's the one small shadow on the picture, if I may put it that way - Jackson is a Negro."

"A Negro! No, indeed! Never in the world!"

My mother had cast a glance toward the house next door. And it was so much as though she had said aloud "Whatever would Madame Guilbert think of it!" that we all deliberately and gravely looked in the same direction.

Nonetheless, my mother reconciled herself to the idea; basically, I think, her curiosity was the strongest of her feelings. Heavens, she was as curious, almost, as Madame Guilbert! Not long after, I recall, there came a brilliant June day, and all of us were stationed at the windows - I way up in the attic - to see our Negro arrive.

A little earlier, Maman had murmured, "All the same, I'd almost rather he had first arrived at night!"

In broad daylight, along our tiny and little-frequented street, and with the sun shining bright, the fact is that this large, hand-

some black man, clad wholly in black and equipped with his little porter's satchel, was highly conspicuous.

He looked happy as he drew up in front of our house; at a glance he took in the three small apple trees in bloom, the wide porch with its row of rocking chairs, the fresh look of the paint, and even my diminutive countenance staring down at him. For my benefit he rolled round the incredible whites of his eyes. I rushed headlong downstairs to see how Maman would welcome the Negro. And Maman, in her embarrassment, perhaps, at extending a Negro a proper greeting, stretched out her hand, then half withdrew it, while making a sort of reverential bow and saying to him, "Welcome, Mr. Jackson, from C.P.R., *n'est-ce pas?*"

Then she showed him to his room. A little later she came back downstairs; at last it was over with - our Negro was under our roof. We could consider and attend to other matters, as my mother put it. Yet during the whole live-long day, the Negro up there seemingly did not budge. This silence on his part constantly forced him back upon our attention. "Perhaps he's asleep. . . . one of us would suggest. Or, again, 'He's reading his Bible. . . .'" With a sigh, Agnès said, "He's lonely. . . . maybe. . . ." My mother frowned. "Still and all, we can't urge him this soon to come down into the kitchen. . . ." Occasionally my mother would take a look through a window facing their house to see what was going on at the Guilberts'. There, also, only silence.

"I do wish she'd come over!" Maman exclaimed. "I'm certain that she saw our Negro arrive, and that she's at her window wondering who he can be."

And, indeed, at about four o'clock, Madame Guilbert sedately - she would don her hat whether she were merely dropping across the field between us or were on her way to church - came to get the news. Once installed in a chair, she took her usual circuitous path toward satisfying her curiosity, carefully avoiding an ill-bred any direct question.

"So?" she remarked.

Maman knew how to keep her dangling. "My my," said she, "how hot it is already! And only the eighteenth of June! . . ."

"It surely is hot," agreed Madame Guilbert. "And speaking of that, haven't your summer guests begun to arrive? I thought I saw someone go into your house with a small suitcase. . . . I was just hanging some curtains. . . ."

"Yes, a guest of a sort," said Maman. "I made up my mind to take a lodger."

"Oh! So that's it! You know," Madame Guilbert explained, "I must have had the sun in my eyes . . . when that person . . . your lodger, I mean . . . turned in at the end of the street. . . . For a moment I thought I saw a Negro."

"Perhaps the sun was in your eyes," said my mother politely, "but you saw correctly all the same: it was, indeed, a Negro."

And then Maman took the initiative; comfortably she settled into a wholly new role. "I could have rented my room a hundred . . . two hundred times to some white person," said my mother. "There's no lack of whites in these parts. . . . But that's just it; I realized that it was more humane, more Christian - if you will - to take this poor Negro whom certain persons - you know what I mean - would refuse to treat like one of their own kind. For indeed - yes or no - " Maman asked, "has a Negro a soul?"

At first overwhelmed, Madame Guilbert finally regained her capacity to give tit for tat.

"Tsch, tsck . . ." she indicated her incredulity. "Are you going to try to make me believe that you have installed a black person in our midst out of philanthropy?"

"No . . . maybe not . . ." said my mother with a gracious smile. "But I must admit it, Madame Guilbert: now that I have a Negro, I wish I had accepted him from the outset out of pure philanthropy, as you put it, so deeply am I aware that I acted as I ought. . . ."

For the moment, Madame Guilbert gave every indication of looking upon my mother with benevolence. Then, putting her hat back on her head, she remarked offhandedly, as though without the least ulterior motive, "True enough . . . it must be a paying proposition to have a roomer one or two days a week . . . but who will pay you for all seven, I presume!"

Maman, who, in point of fact, had taken the Negro only to ease our circumstances a little, continued smiling, thoroughly pleased with herself. And she remarked for our benefit, "That a good deed should bear fruit - what is so astounding about that? It's no more than natural."

III

Dear Negro! He had the most generous soul in the world, and it was indeed thanks to him that, without their causing us too

much suffering, we survived serious money troubles that summer, which turned out hot, sluggish, and sleepy, as summer always should be.

On the evening of his second stay with us, the Negro came down from his room. He reached the bottom of the stairs, and, with his face close against the screen door, he inquired in his deep voice - we were all sitting on the porch, getting a breath of air - whether he might join us. He said that on his Vancouver train the heat had been appalling, and all he wanted was to sit on the stoop. Mother assigned him to a chair. Then from his pocket the Negro extracted the first of the many gifts he was to offer us. It was a pair of white gloves; he presented them to Agnès, the shyest and the gentlest of my sisters. We were all a trifle embarrassed; but, then, not to accept this first gift from our Negro would have hurt him too much. And besides, Agnès had every intention of keeping the gloves.

Thus it went. Each time he stayed with us, our Negro never failed to come take his place on the porch. My mother had planted stock all round, and its flowers exhaled their fullest scent at night. Through the Eau de Cologne and cheap powder of which he reeked, the Negro must have gathered a few breaths of this more delicate perfume from the living blossoms. On such evenings, rolling his big eyes, his thumbs stuck in his vest pockets, he would say happily, "Smell so goo-ood!"

He would add, "It's fine not to be rollin' across Canada." And he would pull out of his pocket a white silk scarf for my father, then white silk stockings, for Agnès again . . . almost always something white. As for me, I had become his French teacher. He would point out some object for me - a tree, a house, a chair. I would say *arbre, maison, chaise*. . . . Then the Negro would thrust his hand in his pocket and bring out a ten-cent piece which he would slip into the slot of my penny bank. I was paid for each three words. I had glimpses of the fortune I would make teaching French.

Meanwhile, the Guilberts were having serious money trouble. Monsieur Guilbert had retired because of age; the large house, so similar to our own, was mortgaged. The children who were still at school required heavy expenditures. When she realized how distracted her neighbor was, my mother tried to help without wounding Madame Guilbert's pride. One day she sent her a quantity of hare, of which she claimed to have far too great a supply, and on another occasion, when we

had received a dozen chickens from one of my country uncles, Maman insisted upon Madame Guilbert's accepting half of them, assuring her that our family could not eat them quickly enough, that they would spoil. And my father no longer reviled Monsieur Guilbert as a sellout to the Borden government or called him an old jackass, but only an impoverished fool.

One day my mother suggested to her neighbor, "Why wouldn't you take in a lodger yourself, Madame Guilbert? There's nothing dishonorable about it. . . ."

"Yes, I've thought of it," sighed Madame Guilbert, "but to bring a stranger into our homes, to mingle with our growing boys and young girls - a strange person - is a serious business, as you know. . . ."

"Yes, it's serious," Maman agreed, "but strangers are rarely as strange as one might think. . . ."

"I put an advertisement in the paper," admitted Madame Guilbert. "There was no response. . . . Times are hard, you know. . . . roomers are scarce. . . . Our little street isn't very well known. . . ."

Then she asked, "All in all, you're pleased with your Negro?"

"Pleased? I couldn't be more pleased! Just imagine, Madame Guilbert, he makes his own bed!"

"That's easily understood," Madame Guilbert remarked with some asperity. "A porter! A man who makes up other people's beds! It would be the last straw - don't you think? - if he didn't make his own!"

"Yes, but, search as I will, I can't find a thing to put to rights in his room," said my mother; "not even a necktie to pick up, or a pair of socks. . . . I assure you, Madame Guilbert, Negroes seem to me the neatest and cleanest men in the world. . . ."

"About their persons as well?" asked Madame Guilbert, with a slight tightening of her nostrils.

My mother laughed. "I'm afraid that's his one fault. He's forever taking baths. He uses up every bit of our hot water. . . ."

"But does he keep his place?"

"Keep his place? What do you mean?" Maman exclaimed. "Certainly he keeps his place. . . . just as each of us, Madame Guilbert, has his station in life - you'll agree? - not as rich as some. . . . not as poor as others. . . ."

In those days on Rue Deschambault we lived as though we were in the country. But along Rue Desmeurons, where our street ended, and which itself was none too built up, a yellow

trolley car passed by every fifteen minutes. It discharged very few passengers for Deschambault: my father most days at about six, returning from his office; or else Horace and my brother Robert, who returned together on Thursdays from their travels; and our Negro, of course, who always arrived on Fridays. But on a certain Friday it was not a single Negro who stepped down from the tram; there were two of them, clad alike in black, each with his little bag. One of the Negroes, ours, stopped at our gate; the other, after waving his hand at his companion and calling out, "So long, Buddy!" went on to the Guilberts', whistling as he walked.

It was my mother's turn to be on pins and needles; and since Madame Guilbert did not appear, she found herself obliged to go over for the news.

"Yes, indeed," Madame Guilbert told her, "my Horace has known this Negro a long while; they travel on the same train. He's a steady, quiet Negro, very well-bred. . . ."

"Like mine, exactly," said Maman.

"After all, a C.P.R. employee, just like our sons," continued Madame Guilbert.

But my mother was counting on too easy a triumph, and Madame Guilbert reminded her: "The moment there was already one Negro on our street. . . . it wasn't too serious a matter to bring in another. Once the example had been set. . . ."

Mother came home a trifle put out. "Any way," she assured us, "our Negro is infinitely superior to Madame Guilbert's; hers is less well-built, less erect in his bearing. . . ." And, as though to establish for good her neighbor's bad faith, Maman prophesied: "You'll see that now Madame Guilbert is going to claim she has a better Negro than ours! You'll see!"

Which is exactly what happened.

However, without the least shadow of doubt, the Guilberts' Negro was the less dark in color of the two. And it was precisely this - can you believe it? - that gave Madame Guilbert ground for her pride, since she would observe, "I really believe that he's no more than a mulatto!"

IV

In the meantime our Negro gave us lessons in kindness. For hours on end in the evening he would hold upon his large outstretched hands skeins of wool which Maman wound into balls. Agnès wore her white gloves even while sitting on the porch.

Maman crunched candies brought from Vancouver. My penny bank had been filled, emptied, and was in process of being filled again. They say I dogged our Negro's every footstep, penny bank in hand - but I think that was an exaggeration. In the first place, if the Negro gave me the large price of ten cents per lesson, it was because my bank was made in the style of the money containers used by trolley conductors, and allowed only dimes to pass through its slot. Besides, it could not be opened as long as it was not full. In any case, Maman was very wrong to reproach me, for when my bank was again full, she again borrowed from me all its contents - five dollars. I was the ant of the fable, save that from time to time I came to the assistance of the grasshopper. Despite these repeated loans, I ever labored to refill my bank with an eye to a purchase of my own. And then it was that my sister Odette started to be my serious competitor . . . so serious that she succeeded in distracting the Negro completely from his French lessons.

She was later to become a nun; she detested men and, before renouncing the world and herself, she had the soul of a revolutionist. The idea of injustice in the world made her tighten her lips; merely having read in a newspaper that a poor tramp had been found shivering with cold in a park aroused in Odette a smoldering anger against the whole city. Her thin-drawn nostrils were constantly pulsing with indignation. Assuredly she was not made for the world; she was lovely to look at and, having at last given up her tating, she was constantly playing a certain one of Rachmaninoff's preludes. There was a portion of this piece, in vibrant chords, that she said gave expression to the rebellion of the wretches in Siberia. I was crazy about this rebellion in music. Wherever I might be, under the apple trees or farther off at play with my little Gauthier friends, the moment I heard the rumble of the march toward Siberia, I left everything, rushed into the parlor, and squatted on the rug near the piano. I watched Odette's swelling nostrils, her tight-drawn lips. I would ask, "The rebellion's coming?" Without stopping or even looking at me, Odette would give me a nod of affirmation; then with a movement of her hips she would push the piano bench back a little so as to have a longer reach for the terrible moments to come.

Our Negro must also have felt the spell of this music. He came down the stairs gently, very gently. He stopped at about the eighth step, on the turn; he sat down; between the slats of the banister he could catch a glimpse of Odette, who in those

days had a mass of very fine blonde hair which her movements at the piano and her agitation scattered over her forehead and down her neck in golden strands. One evening Odette lifted her head; she saw the Negro, his face between the bars of the stairway. Concluding, perhaps with truth and certainly with remorse, that she had kept him shut away from her music just as were the exiles of her prelude from the kingdom of the czars, my sister, pointing to an armchair, with the utmost graciousness invited the Negro into the parlor. And in his honor she played Rachmaninoff's prelude all over again, from the beginning.

It was so clearly understood among us that Odette had no inclination toward young men, that she was not cut out for them, that no one thought of being astonished at seeing her with the Negro. Moreover, he treated her with a respect that made appear insignificant the gallantries and compliments of bachelors with an eye to marriage. And Odette, resolved as she was upon renunciation, seemed greatly to like being the object of such great concern. In the evening, after the music, she and the Negro would walk together in front of the house. They talked about Africa. Doubtless in the hope of pleasing my sister, our Negro tried to bring back old memories, vaguely handed down in the Jackson family, of slaves on the auction block, of raids by rapacious men, of poor black folk taken by surprise in their straw-hut villages. . . .

"Yes . . . Miss . . . all that must have happened once upon a time . . ." the Negro would say, shortening his stride to keep in step with Odette.

V

On these same evenings, so soft, so perfumed—for in those days along Rue Deschambault there were untouched stands of clover and wild hay, which a man sent by the city would cut down with a scythe only at summer's end - on these evenings which were summer itself, my mother would often "fetch" Madame Guilbert for a little walk. The two women strolled back and forth along the short length of road in front of Madame Guilbert's house. And everything went well enough between them, except when they chanced to speak of their Negroes; they were relentlessly determined to settle which of them had the better of the two.

"Mine," Maman would say, "has refinement, I assure you, and tact."

"However that may be, mine has enough of those qualities," Madame Guilbert would reply, "to know his place and stay there."

"Do you mean by that, Madame Guilbert," my mother would ask, "that you have the heart to condemn your poor Negro to remain in his room during this heat? . . . People who suffer so much from the heat! . . . and are so sensitive at heart! . . ."

Once while they were thus chatting as they walked, they became aware, though at a considerable distance, of a couple strolling in front of our house.

"Now," said Madame Guilbert, raising her eyes and shading them with her hand against the setting sun, "who on earth is that man out walking with Odette?"

"A man with Odette would certainly be a great surprise to me!" said Maman.

At the same time, though, my mother pushed Madame Guilbert a little with her elbow, trying to make her turn about: but since this tactic was unsuccessful, she sought to call her attention to the tallness of the wild hay, to a low-flying bird. Madame Guilbert kept marching straight toward our house. She now had a better view of our part of the street, and in horror she exclaimed, "Do you know who it is with Odette, my poor friend? Your Negro! I'm sure of it! it's not yet dark enough for me not to make out that dusky face. . . ."

"In that case, never complain of your eyesight," said Maman; "it is still better than mine."

Then, quite calmly, as though upon reflection the event was to her advantage, she said, "Indeed, it's quite possible that Odette should be out walking with the Negro; the child has such a big heart!"

"What!" exclaimed Madame Guilbert. "I tell you that your daughter is out walking with a Negro for any and all to see, and you simply say, 'Oh!'"

"That's exactly it," said my mother, "in plain sight of everyone. . . ." Then she went on, "In plain sight of very few persons, I'll have you notice, Madame Guilbert; in plain sight of just precisely the two of us."

All the same, Maman was annoyed. Cutting short her walk, she returned to rebuke Odette a little. "That you should chat with the Negro on the porch, in the parlor - well enough! But do you have to do it before the eyes of the whole neighborhood?"

"The neighborhood!" repeated my sister, tightening her lips. "What neighborhood?"

Now Madame Guilbert's Negro was a small, quiet man, formerly from Alabama, who also was attracted to music. Gisèle in those days played four-handed pieces with Odette; when she was left in the lurch by my sister, who now sought the Negro's company, she began endlessly repeating, until well into the evening, a composition by Schumann, which I seem to remember was called "The Well-Beloved." While her mother and mine sauntered in front of the Guilbert house, Gisèle played for their Negro, who in his turn, step by step, had finally achieved the parlor. Maybe Madame Guilbert suspected it, but probably she preferred to know that they were in the house rather than on the porch, in plain sight of everyone.

However this may be, when Madame Guilbert stopped sulking at Maman and came over one evening to "pick her up" for a little stroll, she would not hear of going in her own direction, preferring our end, which she suddenly said was more airy and less unsociable.

So it was in front of our house that they promenaded back and forth. At the other end of the street there likewise passed to and fro a man and a woman who seemed well matched in height and gait; dusk was falling; Maman could not make out the faces of this happy-seeming couple. Around the Guilberts' the shade of night fell sooner than it did around our house because of the heavy thickets surrounding theirs.

"So your Gisèle has a suitor?" asked Maman, with a touch of envy. For though she seemed to approve Odette's keeping young men at arm's length, actually it pained Maman, especially when she saw Gisèle's beaux going up our street with little bunches of flowers in their hands.

"She has no lack of admirers," said Madame Guilbert proudly. "I assure you, dear friend, it makes no sense; when it isn't one, it's another. . . . It's a good thing for a girl to be popular, but, as I keep telling Gisèle, 'Daughter, if you encourage too many of them, you'll set them all at each other's ears. . . .'"

"And God alone knows what might happen then. . . ." Maman continued, cheerful once again.

"What's more," said Madame Guilbert, "I find her behaviour more natural than your Odette's. Odette's rather pretty, you know; I think she'd go far if she did not feel herself obliged to chase all the men away. . . . except, of course, your Negro. . . ."

"But a Negro," said my mother mysteriously, "does not turn a girl away from a vocation . . . quite the opposite. . . . Come to think of it, though, I do believe it's the first time I've ever seen this beau of Gisèle's. . . . Can it be a new one? . . ."

"I didn't know she was expecting someone this evening," Madame Guilbert admitted. "Let's see, who could it be? . . . There's Dr. Tremblay, who's crazy about her. . . . And the notary . . ."

"This evening, however," said Maman, "I think it's the Negro. . . ."

"My Negro! With Gisèle! In plain sight! . . ."

"I haven't got my glasses," said Maman, "but from here, it looks very much like a black face - or rather, brown, since your Negro is only a mulatto. . . ."

She had no time to add anything further; Madame Guilbert was on her way toward the other end of the street, and in her haste she beat her arms a little, as though they were a pair of wings.

A little later, severed from his companion, the Guilberts' Negro came to the parlor to join forces with ours, who was singing to Odette's accompaniment. Then Gisèle appeared and sat beside my sister on the piano bench, and the two young girls supported with four hands the voices of the two Negroes, who launched into lovely improvised harmonies; one voice as deep as the night, the other no deeper than the dusk, they poured out of all our open windows, they rolled forth, mingled with the glints of the moonlight, and made the grasses quiver.

On the porch, my mother sat rocking in her chair.

Alas, it was at the very moment when our lives might have become who knows how much more interesting that our Negroes were summoned away by their sleeping cars, one to make the run between Halifax and Montreal, the other, I believe, obliged to return to Calgary.

And for a long time, for years even, Rue Deschambault missed its Negroes.

Petite Misère

SHORTLY AFTER I came into the world, my father, because I was of frail health or because he himself - then old and sick - had too great a pity for life, dubbed me "Petite Misère" - "Little Miss Misery." Even when, stroking my hair, he used the name affectionately, it annoyed me and made me unhappy, as though it foreordained me, because of him, to suffering. I bridled and said within myself, "Oh no! I am not misery. Never shall I be like you!"

But one day he hurled the hateful name at me in anger. I don't even know any longer what can have deserved such an explosion; probably some mere trifle; my father went through long periods of dark moodiness, when he lacked all patience and seemed overwhelmed with regrets - perhaps also with too heavy responsibilities. Then, from time to time, a mere peal of laughter, breaking in upon him, penetrating him in the midst of his somber thoughts, aroused in him an outburst of irritation. Later on I understood that, constantly fearing for us both the least and the worst of evils, he especially wanted to put us early on guard against too great a yearning for happiness.

His distorted features, on this particular occasion, had seemed terrifying to me. He threatened me with his upraised hand; but, powerless to make up his mind to strike me, he hurled at me as an everlasting reproach: "Oh! Why did I ever have any children!"

Parents may think that such words, well beyond the understanding of children, do them no harm; but precisely because they are only half intelligible to them, children ponder them and make of them a torture.

I fled; I ran up to my attic, where, face against the floor, I tore my nails over the rough boards and tried to dig my way into them that I might die. Pressing my nose and mouth against their wood, I attempted to prevent myself from breathing. I believed that one could stop breathing at will, and thus leave evil behind, whenever one wants to, because it is evil.

Hours passed, and I turned over on my back; my face-down position was really too uncomfortable.

And then, through the attic window, which was just in my