

brush it away. Timidly he asked about other details: Was the old apple tree still there, next the barn? Was some of the orchard left? And Maman filled in the picture for him, lifelike and touching. Upon her face her memories were like birds in full flight.

The Well of Dunrea

HIS STRANGE life, so beautiful upon occasion, yet so hard and exacting, my father kept locked from our curiosity. He never said much about it, either to my mother or to me, even less to our neighbors. But he did talk about it to Agnès, on the syllables of whose name his voice lingered lovingly. Why and at what moment did he unburden so much of his heart to this young daughter of his, who was already oversensitive? She long kept as her own secret what my father had certainly told her not without considerable reticence. One evening she began repeating it to us. . . . Perhaps it was because we had just been complaining that Papa was none too companionable. "He was, indeed . . . he was. . . . Oh! if only you knew!" protested Agnès. And it was another strange thing that, while he was still alive, we spoke of my father in the past tense, perhaps thinking of another aspect of his personality, long since disappeared.

At the time in question, Papa was especially well pleased with the colony of White Russians or Ruthenians established at Dunrea. For a reason unknown to us he called them his "Little Ruthenians." Of all the groups he had settled, this one prospered best. It had not yet been established for a full decade; a short enough time in which to build a happy settlement out of a handful of suspicious and illiterate immigrants, let alone clear the land, build houses, and even make God feel at home with icons and votive candles. Yet all this and much more had the Little Ruthenians accomplished. They were not a people absorbed in vexations, like the Dukhobors. Agnès seemed to remember that they, likewise, were Slavs, probably from Bucovina. Certainly the past counted for something in their lives – a past deeply wretched – but it was in the future, a wonderful and well-founded future, that the Little Ruthenians above all had faith when they came to Canada. And that was the sort of settler Papa liked: people facing forward, and not everlastingly whining over what they had had to leave behind.

Agnès told us that Papa had described his Dunrea settlement

as a sort of paradise, and that was precisely the word he used - a paradise.

He had to traverse ten miles of scrub, of swamp, of bad lands, constantly swept by the wind, to reach Dunrea. And suddenly there came into view well-shaped trees - aspens, poplars, willows - grouped in such a way that they seemed to constitute an oasis in the bareness of the plain. A little before arriving at this clump of greenery you could already hear, my father said, water flowing and gurgling. For among trees, so verdant and so healthy, almost hidden beneath them, ran a shallow little stream called the "Lost River." Could it indeed have been Papa - so close-mouthed and sad - who had furnished Agnès with all these details? And why her? No one but her? "Is it surprising that Papa so deeply loved this Lost River?" said Agnès. "Just think: he himself had created it, in a sense."

One day he had chanced to miss his way in the course of his rounds and had stumbled on the dried-up bed of this river; polished pebbles along its bottom and the placement of a few trees showed that here there had been water. And Papa fell in love with this nook of ground, once grassy and certainly charming, which with little care would recapture its former loveliness. He promised himself to settle some hard-working colonists here, good colonists, intelligent enough to glimpse what they could make of it with patience and a little imagination. Now the Little Ruthenians, when he brought them and showed them the bed of the Lost River, grasped at once what Papa liked about it, what he so clearly saw; they decided to remain there. And when Papa urged them to plant many trees near the Lost River, so as to hold the dampness in the soil, his Little Ruthenians had followed his suggestion. Thus from year to year the river yielded more water, and in places reached a depth of six feet. Thereafter, of their own accord, all sorts of other little trees began to grow along its shores and interlaced their branches and created a kind of tunnel of verdure through which flowed and sang the Lost River. For, even when rediscovered, it continued to be called the Lost River.

And it seems Papa told Agnès that what he liked best for his settlements was water. In that Saskatchewan, so lacking moisture, the resurrection of a river was a major business. "Fire," he had said, "and drought are my settlers' worst enemies; running water their greatest friend."

The Little Ruthenians, having placed their confidence in Papa's prediction that water would return here, had built their

houses along the dry stream bed, to such good effect that ten years later, all their houses lay within the soft and murmurous protection of the trees and the water.

Papa, when he clambered out of his wagonette and hitched his mare Dolly to the edge of the well of Dunrea, beheld a ravishing landscape: scattered in the greenery lay a score of half-hidden little white houses with thatched roofs; there were as many outbuildings, equally clean, whitewashed every spring; and besides all this, beehives, dovecoats, lean-tos of leaves and branches where in the heat of day the cows came for shelter; throughout the village there wandered freely flocks of white geese which filled it with their amusing clatter. And yet, Papa said, the houses were not really white; you realized that their gleaming color was softened by an extremely delicate tint, almost indiscernible, and due to the Ruthenian woman's covering their walls with a thin lime wash to which they had added a dose of bluing. In the windows, which were small and low, they had red geraniums in pots. And Papa said that after having jogged for miles through a dismal countryside of stiff grass and wild vegetation, nothing could be more attractive - yet more surprising, too - than Dunrea. Each time he saw it, he had to rub his eyes before he could credit them and thank God.

Maybe, also, when he set foot in Dunrea, Papa felt the great joy of having been right on that day when the future of this small corner of earth had revealed itself to him; and maybe his joy sprang even more from the fact that his Little Ruthenians had so well fulfilled his dream.

The moment he stepped down from his rig, Papa found himself surrounded with children; he patted their cheeks, tweaked their ears . . . a strange thing, for with his own children Papa never did such things. Yet perhaps those children, more than we, had confidence in Papa; after all, we often enough saw how tired and disappointed Papa looked; we knew he did not always succeed in his efforts; whereas these people believed him endowed with an almost supernatural power. Who can ever know what peace of mind, what certitude Papa felt among his Little Ruthenians? Isolated, far from any other village, not yet even speaking their neighbors' language, they must have relied wholly upon Papa, and the trust between them was total.

The geese, the hens, the young turkeys scattered in front of him as Papa walked along through the mass of flowers. He always said that when settlers planted flowers, it was a sure sign

of success, of happiness. And among his Little Ruthenians sweet peas clambered on the fences, rows of tall sunflowers slowly turned their enormous faces; pale poppies spilled their smooth petals to be scattered by the wind. The women even set out flowers along the paths that led from the houses to the little privies; and it seems that Papa had laughed at this excess of adornment.

Papa, however, was a serious man, and his first concern was to look after the crops. Now for miles around the village it was always uniformly beautiful; the lands of the Little Ruthenians were free of weeds and well tilled; wheat, the various grains, alfalfa, lucerne, clover - all did splendidly. In their methods, too, the Little Ruthenians had followed Papa's ideas: he had advised them not to overburden the soil by trying for continuous heavy crops, but to rotate, to be patient, and they had heeded him. And maybe that is why he called his Dunrea settlement paradise. Was he not obeyed there as God had once been in His Eden? He was confident and had never yet been mistaken in all the things he had ordained for his Little Ruthenians. Yet these Little Ruthenians, Agnès elaborated, were not at all small; on the contrary, they were almost all of average stature, some of them even very tall and sturdy. Papa called them the Little Ruthenians for a reason unconnected with their size, but Agnès could not remember precisely what it was. Though, said she, it seems that in their intensely blue eyes there lingered something of childhood.

Papa made the rounds of the kitchen gardens, for he was interested in the rare vegetables the women raised there; there were garlic, cabbages, and turnips, as in all such gardens, but also dill, very large, succulent black beans, cucumbers, Papa said, as sweet as nuts, and a great many other things - melons, for instance; the Little Ruthenians were very fond of melons. Papa went here and there surrounded by an activity which hummed from every direction and yet remained invisible. He would go into one house, then another. On each threshold, the women came to kiss his hand, but Papa pulled it back; he was embarrassed by this gesture of submission. Followed by his interpreter, then, he was among his own. "For I forgot to explain," Agnès added, "Papa had had time only to learn a score or so of words in their dialect, and their English was not much better. Despite this, how well they understood each other! How they trusted the interpreter when he said: 'The gentleman sent by the government informs you that such and such measures

should be taken . . . or else, 'Boris Masaliuk respectfully inquires whether . . .'"

Then the meal was ready. While the men talked business, the women had prepared the food in so great a silence that, each time, Papa was startled to hear soft words spoken near his ear: "if you please, Mr. Government, do us the great honor of coming to our table. . . ."

The men sat down; not the women, whose role now was to remain standing behind hosts and guests, attentive to pass them the various dishes. Was Papa sorry for them, was he fond of them, these silent, shy women, who hid their lovely tresses beneath kerchiefs and murmured, as they served the men, "if you please. . . .?"

He had told Agnès that Ruthenian women's voices were the same as a murmuring of water and of silence. It is certain, though, that he would have preferred to see them seated at the same time as the men at their own table. This was the only fault he found with his Little Ruthenians - that they were absolute masters in their own families. Several times he was tempted to speak to them about this, to invite the women also to sit down at table. . . . but he was not entirely at home.

Papa often spent a night at Dunrea. There he slept like a child. The women's voices were never high or screeching. They seemed happy. "But what does that prove?" Papa wondered. "The slaves of other days were certainly happier than their masters. Contentment is not necessarily the servant of justice." So the lot of the women at Dunrea was the only thing that upset him. He listened to them humming their babies to sleep. . . . and soon he himself slipped into slumber as into a whole and deep submission. When he awoke, it was to the good smell of strong coffee which the women were preparing for him downstairs.

All that was too beautiful to last, my father would have said.

How did it happen that here alone peace and plenty reigned? Everywhere else his settlers encountered obstacles. Look how it was with his Dukhobors! Among them the Devil's malice borrowed the very teaching of Christ the better to sow confusion. Indeed, in their effort always to act as Christ would have done in our epoch, to fathom the meaning of His acts, of His parables, the Dukhobors committed folly after folly. Had they not decided, on the eve of winter, to set free all their domestic animals, because, said they, "Did not our God create all creatures free, beasts as well as men?"

But how were we to know what God wished us to do with the so many little lives committed to our care? thought Papa, and he had said this to his Dukhobors, that one must not too greatly rack one's brain over this subject, that the important thing was not to mistreat any animal. None the less, the Dukhobors remained tortured by the idea that they must not infringe any of God's wishes . . . and they set free their flocks; and meant that they had to drive them out of their stables and pens.

The poor animals, upset and troubled, wanted to return to their captivity. But they were prevented. The snow came. The animals found nothing to eat; they almost all perished; in the spring only a handful - and they no more than fearful skeletons - came back toward the dwellings of men. Thus among the Dukhobors the young children suffered a series of illnesses for lack of milk. Among the Mennonites it was folly of another sort. Many were the misfortunes in Saskatchewan in those days . . . and almost always through excess of good will, through eagerness to understand God perfectly.

And why was Dunrea alone spared? The men there were well behaved, true enough; they believed in God. Perhaps, even, they believed that God loved them better than He loved the Dukhobors and the Mennonites; this notion apart, they seemed to dwell in wisdom.

And Papa himself began to wonder why God seemed to love the Little Ruthenians better than the others. He was careful not to confuse their simple, naive minds; he did not too severely try their good will. And from then on Papa felt a kind of anxiety. He blamed himself for having certainly been too proud of Dunrea.

Whenever influential government people, top men from the Ministry of Colonization, asked to visit settlements, Papa always took them to Dunrea. And Dunrea helped his career, earned him consideration. The railroad companies sent photographers to make pictures of the Lost River; and the Canadian Pacific Railway produced a large number of Dunrea photos, sending them to places all over the world, to Poland, to Romania, to attract immigrants. For the C.P.R. made a great deal of money from the transportation of immigrants. My father one day met a poor Czech who confided to him that he had come to Canada only because he had seen a very tempting poster: a river, golden wheat, houses "just like those at home . . ." and now this Czech was working in a mine.

When Agnès told us this, we understood why Papa hated all

lies, and even lies by admission; why he suffered so much because Maman dressed things up a bit; but that is another story. . . . At Dunrea, despite Papa's fears, the wheat continued to grow, the fine cattle to multiply. And since they prospered, the Little Ruthenians believed themselves better and better loved by God. They thanked Him for rains that came when they were needed, for sunshine in due season. They had no least expectation that God's gentle hand would ever weigh heavily upon them.

II

Delicate and sweethearted as she was, how could Agnès have kept to herself so long the spectacle she at last described to us? In those days, Papa had told her, prairie fires were always smoldering somewhere in Saskatchewan. This province, so lacking in rainfall and so windy, was truly the land of fire. So dry was it that the sun alone, playing on straw or a bottle shard, could set the prairie aflame! And if the slightest active breath of air should then make known its presence, at once the fire began to run like the wind itself. Now the wind in this part of the world was already a furious, mad thing, which beat the harvests to the ground, uprooted trees, and sometimes tore the roofs from buildings. Yet satanic as it was, it still left behind it the grasses cropped close to the soil, some living thing. But behind the fire, there remained nothing save the carcasses of young fawns, of rabbits pursued by the flames, overtaken by them, sometimes fallen dead in full flight. . . . And for a long time these carcasses poisoned the air, for in the place where fire had passed, even the birds of prey took care not to come to eat the eyes of the dead animals. This was a not uncommon sight in many areas of Saskatchewan, and a man's heart could little bear to see a ruin so complete.

The Little Ruthenians had always been very careful of fire; when, from time to time, they had to burn stumps or weeds, they waited for a very calm day; and once the fire had done its work, they put it out by scattering the coals and then covering them with moist earth. Moreover, in their ever-damp oasis, within earshot of the murmuring Lost River, how could they truly have feared fire?

Now that particular summer was burning dry. Even in the Lost River the water level went down several feet. And a fire started, probably ignited by nothing more than the sun, twenty

miles north of Dunrea. At first the wind drove it in another direction. My father was camping eighteen miles farther on, in a region he was looking over with a party of surveyors. During the night he awoke. The wind had changed. It was stronger and laden with an acrid smoke which hurt eyes and throat. A little later a messenger arrived on horseback. He said the fire was moving toward Dunrea. My father jumped into the wagonette; he made no attempt to follow the road, which was far from straight in that part of the country; as much as possible he took short cuts through the brambles and small, dried-up swamps. Dolly obeyed him faithfully, even though she was wounded by the sharp point of the briars. Behind him, as he crossed these gloomy stretches of scrub, my father saw the fire following him from afar, and he heard its rumble. He prayed for the Lost River. He hoped for another change in the wind, which would sweep the fire elsewhere, no matter in what direction save toward Dunrea. This sort of prayer, he admitted, was perhaps not a good prayer. Indeed, why pray for his Ruthenians rather than for the poor, lonely farms along the Lost River road? Is the misfortune that strikes those one loves greater, my father asked himself, than that which strikes those unknown to us?

Arriving at Dunrea, he ordered the men to take their horses and plows and quickly to turn under a wide belt around the village. He set other men to digging ditches. The sky had become bright red . . . and that helped along the work, since one could see by it as though it were broad daylight. But how strange a daylight! What a dreadful glow silhouetted the terrified animals, the running men, each gesture and attitude of every moving shadow, but without disclosing their features, so that all these living beings looked like black cutouts against the horizon! Then the fire grew more intense; it divided and came from two directions at once toward the settlement. Papa ordered the women to leave, taking with them the children and old people. "The fewest things possible," he cried out to them. "Quick! . . . Leave your furniture . . . leave everything. . . ."

How astounded he now was at these women he had believed to be so docile! At first they did not want to leave the trenches they were digging alongside their men. Papa ran from one to the other, even grasping a few of them by the shoulders and shaking them a little.

Oh, those stubborn women! Once in their houses, they began collecting a hundred useless articles: mattresses, quilts, sauce-

pan. "Is this the time to think of such things?" Papa angrily called out to them.

But they kept going back into their houses, one to collect her coffeepot, another a fine porcelain cup.

The farm wagons, the small two-wheeled carts, the buggies were piled high with domestic goods; upon these were perched the children, torn from their sleep, and now crying miserably, and hens that kept flying off, and young pigs. Women were hitching cows to the wagon tails. Never, so long as there remained a single movable object, would these insubordinate women have agreed to go. Papa ran about, whipping the horses at the head of the caravan. Terrified, they rushed toward the gap to the south, between the columns of fire which little by little were closing in on each other. Then Papa had the idea of setting fire to the crops to the north of the village. In this way fire would advance toward fire, and perhaps it would burn itself out. Such tactics had already succeeded on other occasions. He called Jan Sibulesky, one of the Little Ruthenians in whom he had always placed the greatest confidence, a man of judgment, quick to grasp what was sensible and make a rational choice.

"Quick," said my father to Jan Sibulesky, "take with you three or four men and, as soon as you can, set fire to the corners of all the wheat fields."

This was the moment when the Little Ruthenians gave every semblance of no longer understanding Papa. Jan as much as the others! Oh, the obstinate, greedy, silly men! In their own country they had possessed nothing - or so very little: a skimpy acre or two on the arid slopes of the Carpathians to feed an entire family; and they had left that behind them without too great pain. But now that they had all sorts of things - hay, sugar beets, wonderful wheat, full barns, really everything - they would not part with the least trifle.

"But if you want to keep everything, you'll lose everything," Papa told them.

And my father turned into something like a madman. He waved his arms, he shouted insults, thinking perhaps that the Little Ruthenians would at least understand those words. But the foolish wretches through all the thick smoke madly concentrated on pushing their plows around the settlement. Others carried water from the river to the houses to wet down the walls; still others drew pailfuls from the communal well, in the center of the village, which was deep and almost icy. Did they think that this water, so cold it clouded the outside of the pail.

would serve better to cool the atmosphere than the water from the river? Then Papa tried to go by himself to set fire to the harvest, but the Little Ruthenians forcibly prevented him. Thus Papa realized that they had perfectly well understood his orders, that henceforth he was alone among his own people, as they were on their own against him. This loneliness in the face of danger made him despair. The heat was increasing. Occasional brands of fire flew over the village. A powerful roar filled the air. And everything was in fearful disorder; no longer was there anyone in charge, any obedience. Each man was wearing himself out in individual effort; a few simply awaited the fire, ax in hand. Then the flames at a single bound cleared one of the trenches; they took hold of a thatched roof; in an instant the house glowed with inner light. All was lost.

"Go, go!" Papa cried to the men. "You've only enough time to save yourselves!"

I have often envisioned Papa as he must have appeared that night, very tall with his arms stretched toward the sky, which outlined him also in black. What a terrible silhouette!

But now the Little Ruthenians were trying to save the burning house. So Papa moved toward them threateningly. He raised his hand, showed them the glowing heavens, and, in their own tongue, he asked them: "Don't you know what that means?"

All equally bewildered, they raised their heads toward the nightmare glow above them. Papa said that they looked like stupid birds turning their heads in unison toward an incomprehensible sign. And in their own tongue Papa told them what the sign meant: "The wrath of God! Do you understand? It is God's wrath!"

Then there took place something infinitely cruel. Understanding at last, all the men made ready to go — all except that Jan Sibulesky whom father had loved and often singled out as an example because of his never-failing judgment. Abruptly Jan rushed toward the chapel and emerged from it holding an icon of the Virgin. His icon in front of him like a shield, he walked toward the burning house. Papa at once understood what Jan was going to do. The flames illumined his face, his mouth, his forehead hardened in unshakable purpose, his blond beard, his blue eyes; in the full light big Jan marched forward, utterly visible; just as visible was the icon he carried, the icon of a Madonna with tender, childlike features. Thus brilliantly lighted, the eyes of the image shone as though they were alive.

"Stop, you idiot!" my father cried out to Jan.

But it was now a long while since anyone had obeyed him. His great mistake obviously, had been to speak of God's wrath. All his life my father believed that there had lain his crime: to have interpreted God, in a sense to have judged Him, Jan continued toward the flames, singing a hymn and holding the holy image just below his harsh face.

"You're going to die," Papa told him. "Stop him! Stop the poor fool!" he begged the others.

But they all stood like spectators, in a living hedgerow, and probably at that moment they were very curious about God and about Jan; so avid with curiosity that they were stripped of all other thoughts. The words of the canticle resounded for another moment above the crackling of the flames; then suddenly they changed into an appalling cry. Never could Papa erase this from his memory, right upon the heels of the tones of prayer, this roar of horror. A blazing beam had tumbled upon Jan Sibulesky. The men who had been so intense upon miracles at last made up their minds to leave — and in a stampede. They sprang astride their horses, urging them on with sharp cries; they clambered onto the seats of the two-wheeled traps; they dashed out of the village, jostling each other. Papa begged them, as they passed him, to call out their names, for he could no longer recognize faces in the smoke, and he wanted to reassure himself that none of the Little Ruthenians would be left behind. "Get south," he yelled at each outfit as it passed by. In that direction, between the walls of fire, there was still a gap which, minute by minute, was visibly closing.

At last Papa jumped into his wagonette and, by the sound of the galloping horses, he tried to follow the caravan now hidden in the smoke. His vehicle, however, was too heavy to make enough speed over the stones and clods of earth. Papa at a bound put himself astride Dolly; then he got out his penknife and began to slash at the leather traces that attached the wagonette to the mare, reducing her speed. The traces were tough and hard to sever, but at last one came free, and then the other. Dolly went faster. The fire, though, was already raging here and there on the only route still open. Papa saw that Dolly by herself could get through quickly enough not to be burned, but that, burdened with a man, she certainly could not. From far up ahead one of the Ruthenians cried out to him to hurry. Papa called back that he needn't worry, he was coming. That was the last human voice he heard that night. Standing beside Dolly he gave her his orders: "Go . . . go . . . As for me, I still have the

well of Dunrea; there - if I can get back to it - I'll be safe. . . . And I'm too tired, really too tired to go much farther. . . . The well will give me a bit of rest. . . ."

But that night no one was to obey him, not even his gentle, his obedient Dolly, for whom Papa, whenever he left Winnipeg on the way to his settlement, always took with him titbits and lump sugar.

So he raised his whip and struck Dolly a blow, on her most sensitive part, over the eyes. She went off neighing with pain and reproach. And, running, bending double to avoid the flames, Papa regained the center of Dunrea. His hair, his beard, his eyebrows were singed from the heat. He breathed as little as possible, holding a damp handkerchief over his mouth. He reached the edge of the well. Grasping the rope used to haul up the pails of water, Papa slid down into the deep, cool interior. He lowered himself to the level of the water. Almost at once the roar of the flames surrounded everything. All around the well the grass was afire. The rope likewise began to burn; Papa saw it come apart, strand by strand, in little spirals of ash. Quickly he pried out bricks, which were only loosely imbedded in the lining of the well; he dug himself a sort of niche, where he succeeded in finding a certain support. Then he cut the rope as high as he could. At just that moment he saw a shadow over the well opening, in perfect outline. He was greeted by a long-drawn-out neigh. "Oh Dolly!" cried my father, "Go. . . Go!" He ripped free a brick which he hurled at Dolly's head. Papa said that she leaned in to see whence came the furious voice and projectile. Then she reared and raised herself to a great height, head and mane erect. Papa began to smell the odor of burned flesh.

And he told how the inside of the well became broiling hot, the air so unbreathable that he had to go lower yet. He did it with the help of the rope, which he had tied to a stone projecting from the inner wall. He slipped into the water up to his knees, then to his waist. Half his body was freezing and numbed, while upon his head rained sparks of fire. . . . and he thought that the end had really come. Papa said that he had been sure he was dead because suddenly nothing mattered to him any more. This was what gave him the deepest anguish when he thought back afterward: that everything, in the depth of the well, had become so dismal, so smothered, so extraordinarily silent. He had not thought of us; all he felt was quiet, so great a quiet that it was beyond resisting. These were his own words: "Neither regrets, nor hope, nor desires: a state of com-

plete quiet." At the bottom of the well he barely could succeed in remembering life, having been alive. And how could he have the least taste for any return from so deep an indifference! Papa, believing himself dead, was a trifle astonished that death should be so gloomy, glacial, empty. . . . and so reposing. . . . that in death there should no longer be any affection possible. With in him there was a desert, just as above his head - in Dunrea - there was also a desert.

Papa said that then, in this absence of life, he had seen Agnès, come to wait for him as she always came to meet the tram that brought our father back from Winnipeg. He said that he had seen her at the trolley stop, at the end of our short Rue Deschambault, and that close to her stood our old collie dog, which always accompanied Agnès. Such was the vision that in the end had penetrated so far to find Papa, in his quiet; regret at seeing the child and her dog futilely waiting day after day, for weeks and months - here was what brought his dead soul back to life. He had rediscovered the language of other days, faraway words. "Go home, you and the dog - back to the house!" he had tried to tell Agnès. And this word "house," which his lips pronounced, none the less only awakened an extreme astonishment in the depths of his brain. "The house! Whose house? Why houses? . . ." And again he tried to persuade the stubborn child, standing at the street corner, despite a cold wind, and shivering, to go home. "There's no use waiting for me; I'm already dead. Don't you understand? To be dead is to have no more love - at last!" But Agnès answered Papa in the bottom of the well: "You'll come back; I know it. . . . maybe even in this next tram. . . ."

And Papa had been startled at hearing himself speak; the sound of his voice had made him understand that he was not dead. Because of the child at the end of the street, he made an enormous effort to fasten himself with the rope to the wall of the well. He had fainted.

The next morning the Little Ruthenians found him in the well.

When Papa opened his eyes on the desolation that was now the Lost River, he believed in Hell. Curiously, it was not with the furnace of the night before, with the outcries, with the unfollowed orders, that he was to associate Hell, but with this - a thick silence, almost inviolable, a dismal land, black everywhere, a dreadful death.

Raising himself up on the charred soil where they had laid

him, Papa tried to give courage to his Little Ruthenians; since they had not lost their lives, they had not lost the essential thing. Neither he himself, however, nor the Little Ruthenians, had much further use for this essential thing. They said that they had, all the same, lost their lives, at least ten years of their lives. . . . And Papa remembered to ask about the women: "Are they all safe?" "Yes," the Little Ruthenians replied, "they are all safe, but weeping for their dear houses, their oaken chests, their chests full of fine linen. . . ."

Papa returned among us . . . and yet did he ever return? Appalled at his appearance, Maman asked him, "Has something happened to you, Edouard? What on earth has happened to you?"

But Papa merely put her off with an inconsequential account of what had taken place, how he had lost a settlement. For a long time that was all he ever admitted. Only to Agnès, when one evening she came and sat close beside him and looked at him tenderly - she was not afraid, never was afraid of his half-burned eyebrows - only to Agnès did he tell how he had once meddled with the business of explaining God to men; perhaps it was a day when he regretted not having remained in the depths of the well. . . . When Lazarus emerged from the grave, we have no knowledge that he was ever gay.

Still, there remained this most curious thing: Papa, become, as it were, a stranger to joy, so far removed from it that he was almost unable to recognize it in a human countenance, was nevertheless, sensitive to suffering.

Oh, here indeed was something that troubled us: when we laughed, when on occasion we succeeded in being happy, Papa was astounded! But let a misfortune, a sorrow strike one of us, then we saw Papa come alive . . . return to us . . . suffer all the more!

Alicia

I MUST TELL the story of Alicia; certainly it left the greatest mark upon my life; but how dearly it costs me!

Our Alicia with her huge dark blue eyes! And the so-strange contrast in her between those eyes and her coal-black hair! From Maman she had inherited also the loveliest eyebrows I remember ever to have seen, so roundly arched, so high and sharply delineated that they gave her glance an expression of amazement, of pain at the spectacle of life. She was still herself, with her pale, slender face; yet no, it was no longer Alicia. For already she no longer recognized those she so deeply loved; me alone, at times, she still knew. Her strange eyes would come back from so far way that to see them return filled me with dread; then she would look at me, smile at me as before; maybe she would even kiss me in the joy of rediscovering me; but she clung to me too tightly; and of her, of Alicia, I now was frightened! Then she would go back to where she had come from; her eyes would lose us all, relatives, friends, little sister. There would be no one but herself imprisoned within her queer look. Even then I could imagine how terrible it must be to be all alone within oneself.

"Whatever is the matter with Alicia?" I would go ask Maman.

At home we were always very reluctant to cry where anyone could see us. But how very often, at that time, when I went into the kitchen and found Maman alone, I caught her wiping her eyes with the corner of her apron! And she would hastily become a person with a great deal to do, who cannot be bothered. I would insist, "What's the matter with Alicia?"

They - I mean the grownups - were protecting me from the truth. They told me Alicia had nothing the matter with her. Is this what constitutes childhood: by means of lies, to be kept in a world apart? But they could not prevent my seeking; and seeking by myself alone, without help, kept bringing me back into their world.

It was summer. A hotter, more brilliant summer I do not think there ever was on Rue Deschambault. We were as though