

# Part One



Four years went by. Nelida entered the Convent of the Annonciade for her First Communion, delayed year by year because of almost continually fragile health that had caused serious concern. Supervised by the ladies of the Annonciade, she would stay at the boarding school until she reached eighteen, the age settled upon for her marriage. The Vicomtesse d'Hespel was totally ruled by conventional wisdom. To her, conjugal union was nothing more than an institution that gave social status to women. Marriage, as she saw it, was a negotiation whose merits could and should be weighed, pen in hand, only within the notary's office. Thinking rightly that Mademoiselle de la Thieullaye, who was heiress to a sizable fortune, would be pursued by the most eligible bachelors the moment she came of age, the aunt had concluded that she might very well spare herself the nuisance of accompanying Nelida to balls spanning several winter seasons, preferring as she did to go on her own account. Nelida was unaware of her aunt's strategies but, had she known, would not have minded in the least. Her temperament was sweet and docile, tending instinctively toward respect. She had not yet even fathomed an awareness of her own tastes or her own desires. So she entered the convent without protest. Quickly, without daring to admit it to herself,

she became happier there than she had been in her aunt's home.

Communal religious life holds a solemn charm that attracts and seduces fertile imaginations. All those beings joined into a single being, the hidden rule to which all incline, the silence on every lip, the obedience, quiescence of will in every heart; young women shrouded in mourning and singing funereal canticles in honeyed voices, the organ's powerful tones vibrating beneath tentative fingers; all religion's severities draped with tender grace; a certain ineffable mixture, ultimately, of joy and sadness, humility and ecstasy revealed in faces of melancholic serenity. All these things, as if by surprise, captivate the transported senses and take hold of the heart. More than others, Nelida wanted to be penetrated by this poetry of the cloister. Gifted with an exquisite sensibility, she had a trusting soul susceptible to mystical transports. The gentle child who one fine June day seemed white as the water lilies, supple as the reeds of Hespel pond, the frightened rebel who ran with a boy through the countryside without fear or shame became a calm and serious young woman of incredible beauty. But no spring roses bloomed on her cheek. Youth's confident smile didn't part her reticent lips. Her walk was listless, her voice full of tears. Slow to rise, her eyelids revealed a shattered expression, heavy with a dread that seemed to plead for mercy. One might assume that her whole being inclined toward suffering.

With the practiced eye of woman and nun, the Mother Superior of the convent took note of the extreme sensitivity of the fragile creature given to her care and became a kind of guardian to her. Rather than having her sleep in the dormitory, she had a small cell next to her own prepared, which was done with uncommon care. The mahogany bed was wrapped in muslin curtains; a strip of rug, actually quite narrow and thin for fear of scandalizing convent sisters unaccustomed to such refinements, was spread at the foot of the bed so that the young girl might kneel there morning and evening without feeling the cold flagstone too sharply.

At the head of the bed, the Mother Superior herself had hung a finely carved, ivory crucifix; across from it, a Madonna by Raphael adorned the bare wall. Unheard of in the austerity of a monastery, the nun had two pots of white heather from the garden placed beneath the holy image, as if to honor it more fully, and ordered that they be replaced when they showed signs of fading. A dressing table and mirror with two fig-wood chairs completed the room's furnishings; its single window opened onto a lime-tree bower planted in staggered rows, just then in full blossom and exhaling a sweet perfume.

When she moved Nelida into this cubbyhole, the Mother Superior handed her the key to a cabinet of about thirty books not part of the boarding school library. It was a secret treasure all too suited to the girl's dreamy tendencies by authors more fervent than they were orthodox, more beguiled than convinced, who drew out of doctrine only such nectar as could be distilled into honey, who understood the Gospel only in terms of Magdalene's perfumes or John's blond head resting on Christ's tender breast, and who spoke freely, using soft terms of endearment, about the ardors of the divine love consuming them. Nelida made full use of the freedom she had been given. The uncommon appeal of these stirring books, with their sensuous ecstasies and ravishments in God, thrust so suddenly without preparation or counterweight upon her eager imagination and youthful instincts that were just beginning to awaken, caused enormous turmoil in her mind. The dithyrambic effusions of these Therasas, Chantals, Liguoris on the breast of their bridegroom or celestial friend affected her like intoxicating music, plunging her soul and senses into voluptuous day-dreams. She was soon absorbed in these readings to the point that she viewed her regular studies and the prattle of her classmates with mortal dread. Moreover, she was not attracted to a single girl among them. Most were noble and wealthy young ladies like herself, but so arrogant, so besotted with their own nobility and money as to be of no interest. All

were unhappy to be in the convent, all chafed to leave, and all spoke, gushing vainly, of nothing but the splendors of the paternal estate and the countless pleasures that waited for them.

The Mother Superior came almost daily at the end of her duties to sit beside Nelida, already in bed, and chat with her, perhaps about the approaching First Communion, or about the dangers of the world in which the young girl would live, or about her readings, explaining symbols and hidden meanings from an unusually high-minded perspective marked by persuasiveness and eloquence. As the days went by, the nun took greater and greater interest in her pupil who, for her part, was passionately drawn to her mentor. Mother Saint Elizabeth, which was her name, had carried an illustrious name in the world. Beneath the modesty of the nun's habit and linen headband, one could still easily see in her an involuntarily aristocratic bearing, the kind that gives women a great birthright and great beauty. She was, however, no longer beautiful, although scarcely thirty years old; she had suffered too much. Her oval face might have expressed perfect purity, but grief had wasted her cheeks. Her straight and proud nose, the fine molding of her pale lips, suggested statuary's noblest forms, but her hard, dark, intense eyes sank deeply in their sockets, and her forehead was lined with wrinkles that deepened alarmingly at the slightest gathering of her thick eyebrows. Everything about her bore the traces of a violent battle of passions dominated rather than appeased. When she moved to the chancel, tall and a little bowed under her long black veils, a silver cross gleaming on her breast, she elicited a mixture of respect, amazement, curiosity, and fear; she exuded a hidden strength that both drew others to her and pushed them away. A spectator might see revealed in her a great destiny that had been shattered.

One evening, returning later than usual from a supervisory visit to the dormitories, she saw light coming from Nelida's cell. Irritated by such disobedience and abuse of privilege from the girl, she entered abruptly, a harsh word of reproach on her lips. But an unexpected scene made her

anger vanish. In her nightgown, Nelida was kneeling at the foot of the crucifix, her hands joined, eyes uplifted, face bathed in tears. Her loosened hair fell in heavy waves over her white gown; her two bare feet were just visible beneath the pristine folds that totally enveloped her. A little lamp on the floor glimmered unsteadily over her, sketching her silhouette faintly in the small cell's somber depths. She resembled a grief-stricken Mary beside the empty tomb or one of the angels—as they appeared in Florence's Church of Saint Mark to the blessed brother of Fiesole—grieving for humanity's sins. For a long time Mother Saint Elizabeth stood still and contemplated her favored child, who was so lost in intense prayer that she didn't see or hear anything around her. Then, moved by respect for the mysterious union between a soul free of blemish and the God of love, the nun also knelt. For several minutes, these two women, one who had let go of all earthly hopes, the other just setting her foot on life's threshold, sent the same prayer heavenward.

They stood up at the same time and, without a word, fell into each other's arms. "What is it?" Mother Saint Elizabeth finally asked in a kind voice, forgetting she had come to issue a reprimand. "Why are you all in tears? Do you have some heartache I don't know about? Are you hiding something from me, Nelida?"

"Nothing in the world, Holy Mother!" the girl answered with convincing honesty.

"But these tears, this prayer so late in the night?"

"I'm hurting, Holy Mother," the child answered. "I'm hurting a lot."

"Why not tell me about it sooner? Why not confide your trouble in me?"

The nun had sat down near the bed. Nelida came to sit at her feet and, taking one of the nun's hands in her own, marked it with her burning lips.

"Are you unhappy to be here?" Mother Saint Elizabeth went on, seeing that the girl maintained her silence.

"Could you even think such a thing?" Nelida asked. "On the contrary, all my fear is about leaving here too soon."

I'm afraid of the world. The thought of entering it fills me with a dread I can't explain. It seems certain to me that I'll offend God and lose my soul. I constantly hear a mournful voice inside telling me I have to die—die, or else—but I don't dare finish."

"Say it, my child," the Mother Superior answered, squeezing Nelida's hand in her own thin one.

"Or else, Holy Mother, I'll never leave you, never see the world: Wear the veil."

"Beware such madness!" cried the Mother Superior, her voice trembling.

Nelida looked at her in surprise.

"Do you think, then, Holy Mother, that I'm unworthy—"

"Child," answered Mother Saint Elizabeth, not letting her finish, "you don't know what cloistered life is!" And she created for the girl, who hung on her words, a picture of monastic life that was so dreary, so desolate, so moving, and so profoundly true—its monotony, its unpleasantness, its inevitable pettiness—that the girl shuddered, and a very simple question, which the nun no doubt had not thought of, came to her lips:

"You're that unhappy, then, Holy Mother?"

Mother Saint Elizabeth's whole body shook.

"I am what it pleases God for me to be," she answered, standing up abruptly. "It doesn't matter. But, my child, it's unthinkable to me for you to keep vigil like this: Your head's in the clouds, your body's exhausted, you're making up daydreams for yourself. Tomorrow you must see Father Aimery. Even more than in the past, you must put yourself under his direction. He's a man of great wisdom and prudence; he'll know better than I how to give you helpful advice and bring peace to your troubled soul."

Then Mother Saint Elizabeth moved toward the door, gesturing that Nelida should not follow.

Neither of them found a moment's sleep the rest of the night.