



Bernardin de Saint-Pierre

Paul
and
Virginia

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Situated on the eastern side of the mountain which rises above Port Louis, in the Mauritius, upon a piece of land bearing the marks of former cultivation, are seen the ruins of two small cottages. These ruins are not far from the centre of a valley, formed by immense rocks, and which opens only towards the north. On the left rises the mountain called the Height of Discovery, whence the eye marks the distant sail when it first touches the verge of the horizon, and whence the signal is given when a vessel approaches the island. At the foot of this mountain stands the town of Port Louis. On the right is formed the road which stretches from Port Louis to the Shaddock Grove, where the church bearing that name lifts its head, surrounded by its avenues of bamboo, in the middle of a spacious plain; and the prospect terminates in a forest extending to the furthest bounds of the island. The front view presents the bay, denominated the Bay of the Tomb; a little on the right is seen the Cape of Misfortune; and beyond rolls the expanded ocean, on the surface of which appear a few uninhabited islands; and, among others, the Point of Endeavour, which resembles a bastion built upon the flood.

At the entrance of the valley which presents these various objects, the echoes of the mountain incessantly repeat the hollow murmurs of the winds that shake the neighbouring forests, and the tumultuous dashing of the waves which break at a distance upon the cliffs; but near the ruined cottages all is calm and still, and the only objects which there meet the eye are rude steep rocks, that rise like a surrounding rampart. Large clumps of trees grow at their

base, on their rifted sides, and even on their majestic tops, where the clouds seem to repose. The showers, which their bold points attract, often paint the vivid colours of the rainbow on their green and brown declivities, and swell the sources of the little river which flows at their feet, called the river of Fan-Palms. Within this inclosure reigns the most profound silence. The waters, the air, all the elements are at peace. Scarcely does the echo repeat the whispers of the palm-trees spreading their broad leaves, the long points of which are gently agitated by the winds. A soft light illumines the bottom of this deep valley, on which the sun shines only at noon. But, even at the break of day, the rays of light are thrown on the surrounding rocks; and their sharp peaks, rising above the shadows of the mountain, appear like tints of gold and purple gleaming upon the azure sky.

To this scene I loved to resort, as I could here enjoy at once the richness of an unbounded landscape, and the charm of uninterrupted solitude. One day, when I was seated at the foot of the cottages, and contemplating their ruins, a man, advanced in years, passed near the spot. He was dressed in the ancient garb of the island, his feet were bare, and he leaned upon a staff of ebony; his hair was white, and the expression of his countenance was dignified and interesting. I bowed to him with respect; he returned the salutation; and, after looking at me with some earnestness, came and placed himself upon the hillock on which I was seated. Encouraged by this mark of confidence I thus addressed him: "Father, can you tell me to whom those cottages once belonged?"—"My son," replied the old man, "those heaps of rubbish, and that untilled land, were, twenty

years ago, the property of two families, who then found happiness in this solitude. Their history is affecting; but what European, pursuing his way to the Indies, will pause one moment to interest himself in the fate of a few obscure individuals? What European can picture happiness to his imagination amidst poverty and neglect? The curiosity of mankind is only attracted by the history of the great, and yet from that knowledge little use can be derived."—"Father," I rejoined, "from your manner and your observations, I perceive that you have acquired much experience of human life. If you have leisure, relate to me, I beseech you, the history of the ancient inhabitants of this desert; and be assured, that even the men who are most perverted by the prejudices of the world, find a soothing pleasure in contemplating that happiness which belongs to simplicity and virtue." The old man, after a short silence, during which he leaned his face upon his hands, as if he were trying to recall the images of the past, thus began his narration:—

Monsieur de la Tour, a young man who was a native of Normandy, after having in vain solicited a commission in the French army, or some support from his own family, at length determined to seek his fortune in this island, where he arrived in 1726. He brought hither a young woman, whom he loved tenderly, and by whom he was no less tenderly beloved. She belonged to a rich and ancient family of the same province: but he had married her secretly and without fortune, and in opposition to the will of her relations, who refused their consent because he was found guilty of being descended from parents who had no claims to nobility.

Monsieur de la Tour, leaving his wife at Port Louis, embarked for Madagascar, in order to purchase a few slaves, to assist him in forming a plantation on this island. He landed at Madagascar during that unhealthy season which commences about the middle of October; and soon after his arrival died of the pestilential fever, which prevails in that island six months of the year, and which will forever baffle the attempts of the European nations to form establishments on that fatal soil. His effects were seized upon by the rapacity of strangers, as commonly happens to persons dying in foreign parts; and his wife, who was pregnant, found herself a widow in a country where she had neither credit nor acquaintance, and no earthly possession, or rather support, but one negro woman. Too delicate to solicit protection or relief from any one else after the death of him whom alone she loved, misfortune armed her with courage, and she resolved to cultivate, with her slave, a little spot of ground, and procure for herself the means of subsistence.

Desert as was the island, and the ground left to the choice of the settler, she avoided those spots which were most fertile and most favorable to commerce: seeking some nook of the mountain, some secret asylum where she might live solitary and unknown, she bent her way from the town towards these rocks, where she might conceal herself from observation. All sensitive and suffering creatures, from a sort of common instinct, fly for refuge amidst their pains to haunts the most wild and desolate; as if rocks could form a rampart against misfortune—as if the calm of Nature could hush the tumults of the soul. That Providence, which lends

its support when we ask but the supply of our necessary wants, had a blessing in reserve for Madame de la Tour, which neither riches nor greatness can purchase:—this blessing was a friend.

The spot to which Madame de la Tour had fled had already been inhabited for a year by a young woman of a lively, good-natured and affectionate disposition. Margaret (for that was her name) was born in Brittany, of a family of peasants, by whom she was cherished and beloved, and with whom she might have passed through life in simple rustic happiness, if, misled by the weakness of a tender heart, she had not listened to the passion of a gentleman in the neighbourhood, who promised her marriage. He soon abandoned her, and adding inhumanity to seduction, refused to insure a provision for the child of which she was pregnant. Margaret then determined to leave forever her native village, and retire, where her fault might be concealed, to some colony distant from that country where she had lost the only portion of a poor peasant girl—her reputation. With some borrowed money she purchased an old negro slave, with whom she cultivated a little corner of this district.

Madame de la Tour, followed by her negro woman, came to this spot, where she found Margaret engaged in suckling her child. Soothed and charmed by the sight of a person in a situation somewhat similar to her own, Madame de la Tour related, in a few words, her past condition and her present wants. Margaret was deeply affected by the recital; and more anxious to merit confidence than to create esteem, she confessed without disguise, the errors of which she had

been guilty. "As for me," said she, "I deserve my fate: but you, madam—you! at once virtuous and unhappy"—and, sobbing, she offered Madame de la Tour both her hut and her friendship. That lady, affected by this tender reception, pressed her in her arms, and exclaimed,—"Ah surely Heaven has put an end to my misfortunes, since it inspires you, to whom I am a stranger, with more goodness towards me than I have ever experienced from my own relations!"

I was acquainted with Margaret: and, although my habitation is a league and a half from hence, in the woods behind that sloping mountain, I considered myself as her neighbour. In the cities of Europe, a street, even a simple wall, frequently prevents members of the same family from meeting for years; but in new colonies we consider those persons as neighbours from whom we are divided only by woods and mountains; and above all at that period, when this island had little intercourse with the Indies, vicinity alone gave a claim to friendship, and hospitality towards strangers seemed less a duty than a pleasure. No sooner was I informed that Margaret had found a companion, than I hastened to her, in the hope of being useful to my neighbour and her guest. I found Madame de la Tour possessed of all those melancholy graces which, by blending sympathy with admiration give to beauty additional power. Her countenance was interesting, expressive at once of dignity and dejection. She appeared to be in the last stage of her pregnancy. I told the two friends that for the future interests of their children, and to prevent the intrusion of any other settler, they had better divide between them the property of this wild, sequestered valley,

which is nearly twenty acres in extent. They confided that task to me, and I marked out two equal portions of land. One included the higher part of this enclosure, from the cloudy pinnacle of that rock, whence springs the river of Fan-Palms, to that precipitous cleft which you see on the summit of the mountain, and which, from its resemblance in form to the battlement of a fortress, is called the Embrasure. It is difficult to find a path along this wild portion of the enclosure, the soil of which is encumbered with fragments of rock, or worn into channels formed by torrents; yet it produces noble trees, and innumerable springs and rivulets. The other portion of land comprised the plain extending along the banks of the river of Fan-Palms, to the opening where we are now seated, whence the river takes its course between these two hills, until it falls into the sea. You may still trace the vestiges of some meadow land; and this part of the common is less rugged, but not more valuable than the other; since in the rainy season it becomes marshy, and in dry weather is so hard and unyielding, that it will almost resist the stroke of the pickaxe. When I had thus divided the property, I persuaded my neighbours to draw lots for their respective possessions. The higher portion of land, containing the source of the river of Fan-Palms, became the property of Madame de la Tour; the lower, comprising the plain on the banks of the river, was allotted to Margaret; and each seemed satisfied with her share. They entreated me to place their habitations together, that they might at all times enjoy the soothing intercourse of friendship, and the consolation of mutual kind offices. Margaret's cottage was situated near the centre of

the valley, and just on the boundary of her own plantation. Close to that spot I built another cottage for the residence of Madame de la Tour; and thus the two friends, while they possessed all the advantages of neighbourhood lived on their own property. I myself cut palisades from the mountain, and brought leaves of fan-palms from the sea-shore in order to construct those two cottages, of which you can now discern neither the entrance nor the roof. Yet, alas! there still remains but too many traces for my remembrance! Time, which so rapidly destroys the proud monuments of empires, seems in this desert to spare those of friendship, as if to perpetuate my regrets to the last hour of my existence.

As soon as the second cottage was finished, Madame de la Tour was delivered of a girl. I had been the godfather of Margaret's child, who was christened by the name of Paul. Madame de la Tour desired me to perform the same office for her child also, together with her friend, who gave her the name of Virginia. "She will be virtuous," cried Margaret, "and she will be happy. I have only known misfortune by wandering from virtue."

About the time Madame de la Tour recovered, these two little estates had already begun to yield some produce, perhaps in a small degree owing to the care which I occasionally bestowed on their improvement, but far more to the indefatigable labours of the two slaves. Margaret's slave, who was called Domingo, was still healthy and robust, though advanced in years: he possessed some knowledge, and a good natural understanding. He cultivated indiscriminately, on both plantations, the spots of ground

that seemed most fertile, and sowed whatever grain he thought most congenial to each particular soil. Where the ground was poor, he strewed maize; where it was most fruitful, he planted wheat; and rice in such spots as were marshy. He threw the seeds of gourds and cucumbers at the foot of the rocks, which they loved to climb and decorate with their luxuriant foliage. In dry spots he cultivated the sweet potatoe; the cotton-tree flourished upon the heights, and the sugar-cane grew in the clayey soil. He reared some plants of coffee on the hills, where the grain, although small, is excellent. His plantain-trees, which spread their grateful shade on the banks of the river, and encircled the cottages, yielded fruit throughout the year. And lastly, Domingo, to soothe his cares, cultivated a few plants of tobacco.

Sometimes he was employed in cutting wood for firing from the mountain, sometimes in hewing pieces of rock within the enclosure, in order to level the paths. The zeal which inspired him enabled him to perform all these labours with intelligence and activity. He was much attached to Margaret, and not less to Madame de la Tour, whose negro woman, Mary, he had married on the birth of Virginia; and he was passionately fond of his wife. Mary was born at Madagascar, and had there acquired the knowledge of some useful arts. She could weave baskets, and a sort of stuff, with long grass that grows in the woods. She was active, cleanly, and, above all, faithful. It was her care to prepare their meals, to rear the poultry, and go sometimes to Port Louis, to sell the superfluous produce of these little plantations, which was not however, very considerable. If you add to the personages already mentioned two goats, which were

brought up with the children, and a great dog, which kept watch at night, you will have a complete idea of the household, as well as of the productions of these two little farms.

Madame de la Tour and her friend were constantly employed in spinning cotton for the use of their families. Destitute of everything which their own industry could not supply, at home they went bare-footed: shoes were a convenience reserved for Sunday, on which day, at an early hour, they attended mass at the church of the Shaddock Grove, which you see yonder. That church was more distant from their homes than Port Louis; but they seldom visited the town, lest they should be treated with contempt on account of their dress, which consisted simply of the coarse blue linen of Bengal, usually worn by slaves. But is there, in that external deference which fortune commands, a compensation for domestic happiness? If these interesting women had something to suffer from the world, their homes on that very account became more dear to them. No sooner did Mary and Domingo, from this elevated spot, perceive their mistresses on the road of the Shaddock Grove, than they flew to the foot of the mountain in order to help them to ascend. They discerned in the looks of their domestics the joy which their return excited. They found in their retreat neatness, independence, all the blessings which are the recompense of toil, and they received the zealous services which spring from affection. United by the tie of similar wants, and the sympathy of similar misfortunes, they gave each other the tender names of companion, friend, sister. They had but one will, one interest, one table. All their

possessions were in common. And if sometimes a passion more ardent than friendship awakened in their hearts the pang of unavailing anguish, a pure religion, united with chaste manners, drew their affections towards another life: as the trembling flame rises towards heaven, when it no longer finds any ailment on earth.

The duties of maternity became a source of additional happiness to these affectionate mothers, whose mutual friendship gained new strength at the sight of their children, equally the offspring of an ill-fated attachment. They delighted in washing their infants together in the same bath, in putting them to rest in the same cradle, and in changing the maternal bosom at which they received nourishment. "My friend," cried Madame de la Tour, "we shall each of us have two children, and each of our children will have two mothers." As two buds which remain on different trees of the same kind, after the tempest has broken all their branches, produce more delicious fruit, if each, separated from the maternal stem, be grafted on the neighbouring tree, so these two infants, deprived of all their other relations, when thus exchanged for nourishment by those who had given them birth, imbibed feelings of affection still more tender than those of son and daughter, brother and sister. While they were yet in their cradles, their mothers talked of their marriage. They soothed their own cares by looking forward to the future happiness of their children; but this contemplation often drew forth their tears. The misfortunes of one mother had arisen from having neglected marriage; those of the other from having submitted to its laws. One had suffered by aiming to rise