

# **OURIKA**

This is to be alone, this, this, is solitude!

Lord Byron

## INTRODUCTION

I had come from the town of Montpellier a few months before, and I was practicing medicine in Paris when, one morning, I was summoned to a convent in the Faubourg Saint Jacques on the Left Bank, to visit a young nun who was ill. The emperor Napoleon had recently allowed a few of these convents to reopen: the one where I was going was devoted to the education of young girls and belonged to the Ursuline order. The revolution had destroyed part of the building. The cloister had one side without walls as the ancient church adjacent to it had been destroyed; the only remnants were a few arches. A nun let me in this cloister, and we walked on large flagstones which provided a path in the galleries. I realized these were tombs because they were all marked by inscriptions which had been, for the most part, blurred by the abrasion of time. A few of these stones had been broken during the revolution: the nun pointed them out to me, saying that they had not yet had time to repair them. I had never been inside a convent before: this spectacle was a novelty for me. From the cloister we went into the garden, where the nun told me they had carried the sister who was ill: indeed, I could see her at the end of a long path shaded by a bower. She was seated, and her long black veil covered her entirely. "Here is the doctor," said the nun as she left. I came forward with some apprehension; the sight of these tombs had wrung my heart, and I thought I was to behold yet another victim of the cloisters. The prejudices of my youth had awakened, and my interest in the woman whom I had come to visit was doubled by the misfortune that I attributed to her.

She turned toward me, and I was strangely surprised when I saw a Negress. My surprise became greater because of the politeness with which she greeted me and the kinds of expressions she used. "You are visiting a person who is quite ill," she said to me, "now I want to get well; but I did not always wish it so, and this perhaps is what did me so much damage." I asked her a few questions about her illness. "I feel," she said, "a constant oppression, I cannot sleep, and I have an unrelenting fever." Her appearance only confirmed this sad description of her state of health: she was excessively thin, her large and shiny eyes, her brilliant white teeth were the only light in her face. Her soul was still alive, but her body was destroyed, and she showed all the marks of a long and acute grief. Touched beyond words, I decided to do everything that was possible to save her. I began by mentioning the necessity to calm her imagination, to think of other things, to avoid painful feelings. "I am happy," she said, "I have never felt such serenity." Her tone of voice was sincere; this soft voice could not deceive; but my surprise increased at every moment. "You haven't always thought so," I told her, "and you bear the trace of a very long lasting grief." "It is true," she said, "My heart found peace quite late, but now I am happy." "Well, if this is the case," I went on, "it is the past that we must cure; let us hope that we shall overcome it: but I cannot cure this past without knowing what it is." "Alas," she answered, "this is foolishness!" When she said these words, her eyes moistened. "Ah, you say that you are happy!" I cried out. "Yes, I am," she added firmly, "and I would not exchange my happiness for the destiny which I used to so desire. I have no secret: the story of my whole life is my misfortune. I suffered so much until I entered this house, that, little by little, my health was destroyed. I welcomed the decline of my health because I saw no hope in the future. This was a guilty thought! As you can see, I have been punished for it; and when at last I wish to live, I may no longer be able to do so."

I reassured her; I gave her hope that she would recover soon, but when I said these consoling words, when I promised her that she would live, a sad sense of foreboding warned me that it was too late and that death had marked its victim.

I saw this young nun again several times; the interest that I showed her seemed to touch her. One day, she came back of her own to the subject to which I wanted to lead her. "The sorrows that I have felt," she said, "must seem so strange that I have always been quite reluctant to share them: One cannot judge other people's afflictions, and confidants are almost always accusers." "Do not fear this from me," I said, "I can see well enough the havoc that sorrow has wreaked in you not to believe it is sincere." "You will find it sincere," she said, "but you will find it unreasonable." "Still, granting what you say," I resumed, "does it exclude sympathy?" "Almost always," she replied, "however, if, in order to cure me, you need to know the sorrows that destroyed my health, I shall confide in you when we are better acquainted."

I visited the convent more and more often; the treatment which I proposed seem to have an effect. Finally, one day last summer, I found her alone in the same arbor, on the same bench where I had seen her for the first time; we resumed the same conversation, and she told me what follows:

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I was brought back from Senegal, at the age of two, by monsieur le chevalier de B., the governor of that colony. He took pity on me one day when he saw slaves being taken aboard a slave ship which was about to leave the harbor: my mother was dead, and they were taking me away despite my cries. M. de B. bought me, and, upon his arrival in France, gave me to his aunt Mme la maréchale de B., the most amiable person of her time, and the person who was able to combine the most elevated qualities with the most touching kindness.

My rescue from slavery, my being given Mme de B. as benefactress, were like two gifts of life: I was ungrateful to Providence by not being happy; and, yet, does happiness always result from the gifts of intelligence? I tend to believe the contrary: one must pay for the gift of knowledge by wishing not to know, and legend does not say whether Galatea found happiness after receiving life.

I did not learn the story of the first days of my childhood until much later. My earliest memories take me back only as far as Mme de B.'s salon; I spent all my time there, loved by her, cherished, pampered by all her friends, showered with presents, praised, exalted as the wittiest and the most amiable child.

The tone of that society was enthusiastic; yet good taste did exclude from this enthusiasm anything that resembled exaggeration: everything that lent itself to praise was praised, everything that lent itself to blame was excused, and frequently, with an even more amiable tactfulness, weaknesses themselves were turned into qualities. Success gives courage; with Mme de B. people were worth as much as they could be worth, and perhaps a little more, since she lent some of her own qualities to her friends without being aware of it: seeing her, or listening to her, led them to think that they resembled her.

Dressed in Oriental attire, I would sit at Mme de B.'s feet and listen to the conversation of the most distinguished men of that time without understanding it yet. I was not boisterous like most children; I was thoughtful before I could reflect; I was happy by Mme de B.'s side: love, to me, meant being there, hearing her, obeying her, and, above all, watching her. I wanted nothing more. Living in luxury, being surrounded only by the wittiest and the most amiable people, could not surprise me: I knew nothing else; yet, unbeknownst to me, I was beginning to disdain everything that was not part of the world where I was spending my life. Good taste is to the mind what a good ear is to sounds. When I was still a young child, tastelessness would offend me; I intuitively knew what good taste was before I could even define it, and habit had made it almost a necessity for me. Had I had a future, this inclination would have been dangerous; but I had no future, and I did not know it.

When I reached the age of twelve, it still had not occurred to me that there could be a different way of being happy. Being a Negress did not bother me. People told me I was charming; besides, nothing warned me that my color was a disadvantage. I hardly saw any other children; only one was my friend, and my blackness did not keep him from loving me.

My benefactress had two grandsons, the children of a daughter who had died young. Charles, the younger grandson, was about my age. Brought up with me, he was my protector, my guide, and my supporter in all my little faults. At the age of seven, he went to school. I cried when he left; this was my first sorrow. I often thought about him, but I hardly ever saw him. He was studying, and for my part, I was learning, in order to please Mme de B., everything required for a perfect education. She wanted me to have every talent: I had a good voice, the most skilled masters trained it; I had a disposition for painting, and a famous painter, a friend of Mme de B., undertook to direct my efforts; I learned English, Italian, and Mme de B. herself supervised my readings. She was guiding my mind, forming my judgement. By talking with her, by discovering all the treasures of her soul, I felt mine rise, and it was admiration that opened my mind to intelligence. Alas! I could not foresee that those sweet hours of instruction would be followed by such bitter days; I thought only of pleasing Mme de B.; a smile of approbation on her face was all my future.

In the meantime, repeated readings, poets especially, were beginning to occupy my young imagination; but, without a goal, without a plan, my thoughts wandered aimlessly, and, with the confidence of my young age, I thought that Mme de B. would know how to make me happy. Her affection for me, the life I was leading, everything aggravated my error and justified my blindness. Let me give you an example of the care and attention of which I was the object.

You will perhaps find it hard to believe, when you see me today, that I was renowned for the elegance and beauty of my figure. Mme de B. often praised what she called my grace, and she had wanted me to become a perfect dancer. To allow this talent of mine to shine, my benefactress gave a ball, supposedly for her grandsons, but actually to show me at my best in a quadrille of the four parts of the world, in which I was to represent Africa. We consulted travelers, pored over books on costumes, read erudite works on African music, and finally we chose a comba, the national dance of my country. My partner put a veil on his face. Alas! I did not need one on mine; yet, at that time I did not have this thought. Completely captivated by the pleasure of the ball, I danced the Comba and had all the success that could be expected from the novelty of the show and the choice of the audience, mostly friends of Mme de B.'s who were infatuated with me and who wanted to please her by letting this exuberance show. The dance, as a matter of fact, was striking; it consisted of a mixture of gestures and measured steps; love, pain, triumph, and despair were depicted. I was not yet aware of all these violent movements of the soul; yet some instinct made me guess them, and I succeeded. I received applause, attention, and much praise: my pleasure was unalloyed; nothing then troubled my security. It was only a few days after the ball that a conversation, overheard by chance, opened my eyes and ended my youth.

There was a large lacquered screen in Mme de B.'s salon. This screen hid a door; it also extended near a window, and between the screen and the window stood a table at which I sometimes sat to draw. One day, I was carefully finishing a miniature; absorbed by my work, I had remained still for a long time, and Mme de B. probably thought that I had left, when one of her friends was announced, the Marquise de --. The marquise was a person of cold reason, peremptory, rational to the point of being harsh; her friendship was of the same nature: sacrifices cost her nothing for the good and the benefit of her friends; but the price that she exacted for this great attachment was high. Inquisitive and rough, as demanding as she was devoted, she was the least amiable of

Mme de B.'s friends. I feared her even though she was good to me; she treated me well in her way: for her, to scrutinize, even sternly, was a sign of interest. Alas! I was so accustomed to benevolence, that justice always seemed threatening to me. "While we are alone," Mme de -- told Mme de B., "I want to speak to you about Ourika: She is becoming delightful; her mind is quite formed; her conversation will be as witty as yours. She is very talented; she is piquant, natural; but what will become of her? and in the end what will you do with her?" "Alas!" Mme de B. said, "this thought is often on my mind, and, I must admit, always painfully so: I love her as if she were my own daughter; I would do anything to make her happy; and yet, when I think of her situation, I cannot find a remedy. Poor Ourika! I see her alone, forever alone in life!"

I could not possibly recount to you the effect that these few words produced in me. It was as swift as thunder; I saw it all; I saw myself a Negress, dependent, despised, without fortune, without support, without a human being of my own kind with whom I could join my destiny; until then I had been but a toy, an amusement for my benefactress, and I was soon to be cast out of a world in which I could not be admitted. A dreadful palpitation overtook me, my eyes grew dim, the pounding of my heart was so loud that I could not hear; eventually, I recovered enough to hear the rest of the conversation.

"I fear," Mme de -- was saying, "that you will make her unhappy. What could satisfy her, now that she has spent her life in your inner circle?" "But she will stay with me," Mme de B. said. "She will," continued Mme de --, "as long as she is a child: but she is fifteen years old; to whom will you marry her, with her intelligence and the education you have given her? Who will ever want to marry a Negress? Even if you can find a man who, for a large dowry, will consent to be the father of Negro children, this man will be of a lower condition, and she will be unhappy. She can only want those men who cannot want her." "All this is true," Mme de B. said; "but fortunately, she is not aware of it yet, and she has for me an attachment which, I do hope, will keep her from judging her situation for a long time. To make her happy, I would have had to have made her a common person: I sincerely believe this was impossible. Well! Perhaps she will be distinguished enough to rise above her position, since she could not stay below it." "This is mere fantasy on your part," Mme de -- said: "philosophy puts us above the evils of destiny, but it is powerless against the evils that stem from breaching the natural order of things. Ourika did not fulfill her destiny; she has entered society without its permission; society will have its revenge." "Assuredly," Mme de B. said, "she is innocent of this crime; but you are judging the poor child so severely." "I want to do her more good than you do," Mme de -- continued; "I want her happiness, and you are ruining her." Mme de B. answered with impatience, and I was about to be the cause of a quarrel between the two friends, when another visitor was announced: I slipped behind the screen; I escaped; I ran to my room where a flood of tears temporarily soothed my wretched heart.

This loss of the prestige that had surrounded me until then was such a great change in my life! Some illusions are like daylight; when you lose them, everything else disappears with them. In the confusion of the new ideas which assailed me, I could not find anything that had occupied me until then: this was an abyss with all its terrors. The contempt which pursued me; the society in which I was out of place; the man who, for a large dowry, would perhaps consent to his children being Negroes! All these thoughts arose successively like ghosts and attached themselves to me like furies: isolation especially; the conviction that I was alone, forever alone in life, as Mme de

B. had said. And at every moment I repeated to myself, alone! forever alone! Until the day before, what did it matter to me to be alone? I was not aware of being alone; I could not feel it. I needed those I loved, it did not occur to me that those I loved did not need me. But now my eyes were open, and misfortune had already let mistrust enter my soul.

When I came back to Mme de B.'s, everybody was struck by the change in me; I was questioned: I said that I was ill; I was believed. Mme de B. sent for Barthez, who examined me carefully, felt my pulse, and said abruptly that there was nothing wrong with me. Mme de B. felt reassured and tried to divert and entertain me. I dare not say how ungrateful I was for the care given by my benefactress. It was as if my soul had closed in on itself. Only the favors that the heart can repay are sweet to accept: My heart was filled with too much bitterness to open up. Infinite combinations of the same thoughts occupied all my time; they kept coming back under a thousand different forms: my imagination gave them the gloomiest colors; I often spent my entire nights in tears. I could pity only myself; my face filled me with horror; I no longer dared look at myself in a mirror; when I looked at my black hands, I thought they were those of a monkey; I exaggerated my ugliness, and this color seemed to me the sign of my reprobation. Only my color separated me from those of my kind, only my color condemned me to be alone, forever alone! "Never loved! Some man, for a large dowry, would perhaps consent to his children being Negroes!" This thought made all my being tremble with indignation. For a moment, I thought of asking Mme de B. to send me back to my country; but there again, I would have been isolated: who would have heard me, who would have understood me? Alas! I no longer belonged to anybody; I was a stranger to the entire human race!

I did not understand the possibility of submitting to such a fate until much later. Mme de B. was not religious. I owed the few religious feelings I had to a respectable priest who had instructed me for my first communion. These feelings were as sincere as my entire character; I did not know, however, that to be beneficial, piety needs to be associated to all the deeds of one's life. My piety had occupied a few moments of my days, but it had remained separate from everything else. My confessor was a saintly old man whose heart harbored few suspicions; I saw him once or twice a year, and since I did not imagine that sorrows could be sins, I did not tell him of my torments. These considerably altered my health; yet the strange thing is that they perfected my mind! A wise man from Orient once said: "What does he know, He who has not suffered?" I saw that before my misfortune I knew nothing; my impressions were all mere feelings. I did not judge. I lived. My heart enjoyed or did not enjoy discussions, actions, people. Now, my mind had emptied itself of these involuntary movements: sorrow is like distance, it makes you judge objects in their entirety. Since I had been feeling estranged from everything, I had become more particular, and scrutinized almost everything I had been enjoying until then.

This disposition could not escape Mme de B.; I never learned whether she guessed its cause. She may have feared to deepen my sorrow by allowing me to confide in her. She nonetheless talked to me without any reserve, and, to divert me from my sorrows, occupied me with her own. She judged my heart well; my ties to life could only be restored through thinking that I could be necessary or at least useful to my benefactress. The thought that haunted me the most was that I was alone on earth, and that I could die without being missed in anyone's heart. I was unfair to Mme de B.; she loved me, and had sufficiently proved it; but, she had other interests that were

much more important than I was. I did not envy her tenderness for her grandsons, especially Charles; yet I would have liked to be able to call her "my mother" as they did!

Family ties, especially, made me look back on myself with much pain, I who was never to be the sister, the wife, the mother of anyone! I imagined in these ties more tenderness than they may actually have, and because I could not partake of them, I neglected those that I was allowed to have. No one was my friend, no one had my trust. What I felt for Mme de B. was closer to worship than to affection; but, I think that I felt for Charles everything one feels for a brother.

Charles was still in school, but was soon to leave and start his travels. He was leaving with his elder brother and his tutor; they were to visit Germany, England, and Italy. Their absence was to last two years. Charles was delighted to go; and for my part, I was not distressed until the last moment; for I was always very happy to see him pleased. I had told him nothing about all the ideas that had been occupying me. I never saw him alone, and I would have needed a long time to explain my sorrow: I am sure that back then he would have understood me. Yet, with all his gentle and serious manner, he tended to be sarcastic, which made me shy: it is true that he used sarcasm only on the ridiculous ways of affectation; all that was sincere disarmed him. I told him nothing anyhow. Besides, his leaving was a distraction, and I think that it was doing me good to grieve over something that was not my usual grief.

Shortly after Charles's departure, the revolution took a more serious turn: I heard people speak all day long, in Mme de B.'s salon, about nothing but the great moral and political interests that the revolution shook to their very roots; these interests were related to everything that had occupied superior minds of all times. Nothing was more capable of extending and forming my ideas than the sight of that arena where, everyday, distinguished people questioned everything that could have been considered settled until then. They would thoroughly study every subject, go back to the origins of every institution, but, too often, to unsettle and destroy everything.

Would you believe that, young as I was, a stranger to all interests of society, nursing my secret wound in solitude, the revolution brought a great change in my ideas, gave rise to a few hopes in my heart, and suspended my griefs for a moment? One is so quick to seek consolation! I thus foresaw that, in that great chaos, I could find my place; that all the fortunes overthrown, all the distinctions of ranks dissolved, all the prejudices having vanished, would perhaps bring a state of things in which I would be less of a stranger; and that, if I had some superiority of mind, some hidden quality, it would be appreciated when my color would no longer isolate me in the middle of the world, as had been the case so far. But, these very qualities that I could find in myself soon opposed my illusion: I soon had to give up the desire of a great evil for a little personal good. Moreover, I saw how ridiculous these persons who wanted to control events were; I judged the pettiness of their character; I guessed their secret goals. Soon their false philanthropy stopped deceiving me, and I abandoned hope when I saw that there would still be enough contempt left against me amidst such adversity. Still, I always took an interest in these lively discussions; but, they soon lost their greatest charm. Gone was the time when one only thought of being charming, and when forgetting one's proud accomplishments was the foremost condition to please: when the revolution stopped being an attractive theory and interfered with the intimate interests of each and every one, conversations degenerated into quarrels, and bitterness, sourness, and personalities took the place of reason. Sometimes, despite my sadness, I was amused by all these

violent opinions, which were, in the end, almost always nothing but pretensions, affectations, or fears: but, the joy that comes from observing ridicule does no good; there is too much malice in this joy to cheer the heart that only enjoys innocent pleasures. One may feel this mocking gaiety, without ceasing to be unhappy; perhaps unhappiness even makes one more likely to feel this pleasure, for the bitterness on which the soul feeds is the usual food of this sad pleasure.

The promptly ruined hope which the revolution had given me had not changed the state of my soul; I was still dissatisfied with my fate, and my sorrows were only softened by Mme de B.'s trust and kindness. Sometimes, in the midst of those sour political conversations which she could not seem to sweeten, she looked at me sadly; this look was a balm to my heart; it seemed to say: Ourika, only you can understand me.

People were beginning to talk about freedom for Negroes: it was impossible for me not to be deeply affected by this question; it was an illusion that I still liked to cherish, that elsewhere, at least, there were people like me: Because they were unhappy, I thought them to be good, and I became interested in their condition. Alas! I promptly discovered my mistake! The Santo Domingo massacres caused me a new, excruciating pain: Until then, I had been distressed at belonging to a proscribed race; now I was ashamed of belonging to a race of barbarians and murderers.

Meanwhile, the revolution was making rapid progress; people were frightened to see the most violent men take over all places. It soon appeared that these men were determined to respect nothing: during the dreadful days of June 20 and August 10, people had to prepare themselves for any eventuality. What was left of Mme de B.'s society scattered at that time: some fled from persecutions to foreign countries; the others went into hiding or retired into the country. Mme de B. neither fled nor retired; she was bound to her home by the constant preoccupation of her heart; she stayed there with a memory and near a tomb.

We had been living in seclusion for a few months when, at the end of 1792, the decree seizing émigré property was issued. In the midst of this general disaster, Mme de B. would not have minded the loss of her fortune, had it not belonged to her grandsons; but, according to family arrangements, she only had the trust of that fortune. She thus decided to have the younger of her two grandsons, Charles, come back, and to send the elder, who was almost twenty, to join Condé's army. The two brothers were in Italy at that time, finishing the long journey undertaken two years before under very different circumstances. Charles arrived in Paris at the beginning of February 1793, a short time after the king's death.

This heinous crime had caused Mme de B. the most violent grief; she gave way completely to it, and her soul was strong enough to proportion the horror she felt for the crime to its very immensity. Great sorrows, in old people, have something striking: they have the authority of reason. Mme de B. was suffering with all the energy of her character; her health was affected, but I could not imagine anyone trying to comfort or even divert her. I cried, I joined in her feelings; I tried to elevate my soul to bring it closer to hers, to suffer with her and at least as much as she did.

I almost did not think about my sorrows as long as the Terror lasted; I would have been ashamed to find myself unhappy in the presence of those great misfortunes: as a matter of fact, I no longer felt isolated since everybody was unhappy. Opinion is like a mother-country; it is something that people enjoy together; people are united as a family to support and defend it. I sometimes said to myself that I, a poor Negress, nonetheless was like all elevated souls, and had in common with them the need for justice: the day when virtue and truth would triumph would be a day of triumph for me as well as for them: but, alas! that day was far ahead.

As soon as Charles arrived, Mme de B. left for the country. All her friends were hiding or fleeing; her society was almost reduced to an old priest whom I had heard mocking religion everyday for ten years, and who now was angry that the property of the clergy had been sold, because it would deprive him of an income of twenty thousand francs. This priest went to Saint Germain with us. His company was sweet, or rather, it was quiet: for his calmness had nothing sweet; it came from the turn of his mind rather than from the peace of his heart.

All her life, Mme de B. had been in the position of doing many favors: being a close friend of M. de Choiseul had enabled her, during his long ministership, to be useful to many people. Two of the most influential men during the Terror had obligations towards Mme de B.; they remembered these and showed gratitude. They constantly watched her, and did not allow her to be harmed. They risked their lives several times to conceal her from revolution's fury: one must admit that in those gloomy days even the leaders of the most violent parties could not do any good without putting themselves in danger. It seemed that, on this desolated earth, one could only reign by evil, because only evil could give and take power. Mme de B. did not go to prison; she was put under house arrest with the excuse of her poor health. Charles, the priest, and I stayed by her side and gave her all our care.

Nothing could depict the state of anxiety and terror of the days that we spent then, reading every night, in the newspapers, about the condemnation and the death of Mme de B.'s friends, and fearing at every moment that her protectors would no longer have the power to protect her from sharing such a fate. And, indeed, we learned that she was about to perish, when Robespierre's death put an end to such horror. We could breathe again; the guards left Mme de B.'s house. We remained, all four of us in the same solitude, as people find themselves, I suppose, after a great calamity from which they have escaped together. It seemed as if misfortune had made these ties stronger: I had felt that there, at least, I was no stranger.

If I have known a few happy moments in my life, since the loss of the illusions of my childhood, it is during the time that followed these disastrous days. Mme de B. possessed, to a supreme degree, what makes domestic life so attractive: she had an indulgent and easy disposition. You could say anything in front of her; she could guess what you meant. Never would a severe or inaccurate interpretation chill the trust between her and her friends. Thoughts were taken for what they were worth; one was responsible for nothing. This quality alone would have made Mme de B.'s friends happy, had it been her only quality. Still, she had so many other charms! One never felt any gaps or dull moments when she talked; everything was matter for her conversation. The interest that one takes in small things, which is vanity in ordinary people, is the source of a thousand pleasures in a distinguished person; it is characteristic of superior minds

to make something out of nothing. The most ordinary idea became fecund, through Mme de B.'s mouth; her spirit and her mind knew how to dress an idea with a thousand new colors.

Charles's character was closely related to Mme de B.'s, and his mind too was similar to hers, that is to say that it was what Mme de B.'s must have been, just, firm, extensive, but with no modifications. Young people ignore such modifications: to them, everything is right or wrong, whereas the danger of old age is often to find that nothing is quite right, and nothing quite wrong. Charles had the two passions of his age, justice and truth. I have said that he hated even the shadow of affectation; he had the defect of sometimes seeing affectation where there was none. He was habitually reserved and his trust, when he gave it, was flattering; it was the result of his regard, not the inclination of his character: all that he granted had a value, for almost nothing in him was involuntary, and yet everything was natural. He counted so much on me, that he did not have a thought that he would not immediately tell me. At night, sitting around a table, conversations were limitless: our old priest had his place; he had built such a chain of false ideas, and he maintained them with such good faith, that he was an inexhaustible source of amusement for Mme de B., whose just and brilliant mind admirably brought out the absurdities of the poor priest, who was never angry. She thrust into his order of ideas great strokes of good sense that we compared to the parries of Roland or Charlemagne.

Mme de B. liked to walk: every morning she took a walk in the Saint Germain woods, on the arm of the abbé. Charles and I would follow her at a distance. It was then that he would tell me about everything that concerned him, his plans, his hopes, but mostly his ideas about mankind, about the world. He kept nothing hidden from me; yet he did not realize that he was telling me anything. He had counted on me for such a long time that for him my friendship was like his life; he enjoyed it without being aware of it. He did not ask for my interest or my attention; he knew quite well that when he spoke to me about himself he was speaking about me, and that I was more he than he himself. Ah! the charm of such a trust can replace everything; it can even replace happiness.

I never thought of talking to Charles about what had caused me so much suffering! I would listen to him, and these conversations had some kind of magical effect on me that led me to forget my sorrows. If he had asked questions he would have made me remember. Then, I would have told him everything; but he could not imagine that I also had a secret. People were accustomed to seeing me unwell, and Mme de B. did so much for my happiness that she must have fancied I was happy. I should have been happy; I often told myself I should have been. I blamed myself for being ungrateful and deranged; I do not know if I would have dared to admit how wretched the incurable ill of my color made me. There is something humiliating about not being able to submit to necessity: thus, when it dominates your soul, this grief has all the characteristics of despair. What intimidated me also about Charles was the somewhat rigid turn of his ideas. One evening the conversation had settled on the subject of pity, and we were wondering if sorrows draw our interest more through their results than through their causes. Charles thought it was their causes; he thought all sorrows had to be reasonable. But who can tell what reason is? Is it the same for everybody? Does every heart need the same thing? Is unhappiness not the lack of what your heart needs? It was rare, however, that our evening conversations would turn my mind back to myself. I endeavored to think of myself as little as I could. I had removed all the mirrors from my bedroom. I always wore gloves, my attire hid my neck and my arms, and to go out I

donned a large hat with a veil that I often even wore inside. Alas! I was deceiving myself: like a child, I would close my eyes and hope nobody would see me.

Near the end of the year 1795, the Terror came to an end. People started to regroup; the remains of Mme's de B.'s society gathered around her, and with sadness I watched the circle of her friends widen. My position in the world was so false that the more society returned to its natural order, the more excluded I felt. Every time I saw new people join Mme de B., I felt a new pang of torment. The expression of surprise mixed with disdain that I could see on their countenances began to trouble me. I was sure to be the subject of a whispered comment or of a private conversation by a window: they had to be told how a Negress could be admitted to the circle of Mme de B.'s close friends. I suffered martyrdom during these explanations: I wished I had been transported to my barbarous fatherland, amid the savages who live there, a place less fearful for me than this cruel society which held me responsible for the harm it itself had done. I was haunted, for days in a row, by the memory of these faces full of disdain; I saw them in my dreams; I saw them at every moment. They would appear before me like my own image. Alas! I allowed myself to be obsessed with the face of chimeras! You had not yet taught me, O Lord, to ward off these ghosts. I did not know that you are the only haven.

Then, it was in Charles's heart that I was looking for a haven. I was proud of his friendship, and even more so of his virtues. I admired him as the most perfect being on this earth. Before, I had thought that I loved Charles like a brother, but since my health had deteriorated, I felt older, and it seemed that my affection for him was more like a mother's affection. Only a mother, indeed, could feel such a passionate desire for his happiness, for his success. I would have willingly given my life to spare him a moment of grief. I saw well before he did the impression he made on others. He was happy enough not to care about it. It was quite simple: he had nothing to fear; nothing had given him the constant worry that I felt about what others might think. In his lot, everything was harmony; in mine, everything was discord.

One morning, an old friend of Mme de B. came to visit; he was entrusted with a marriage proposal for Charles. Mlle de Thémynes had become, quite cruelly so, a rich heiress; she had lost her entire family to the scaffold on the same day. She only had a great-aunt left, a former nun who, now that she was the guardian of Mlle de Thémynes, considered it her duty to have her marry. She wanted to hurry because she was over 80 years old, and she feared that she would die and leave her niece alone and without protection in the world. Mlle de Thémynes had all the advantages of birth, fortune, and education. She was 16. She was beautiful as daylight. It was impossible to hesitate. Mme de B. spoke to Charles, who, at first, was a little frightened by the idea of marrying so young. Soon he agreed to see Mlle de Thémynes; they met and then he no longer hesitated. Anais de Thémynes had everything to please Charles: she was pretty but did not know it; she had such a quiet modesty that this charming virtue seemed quite natural. Mme de Thémynes gave Charles permission to visit, and he fell passionately in love. He described to me the progress of his feelings. I was impatient to see the beautiful Anais who was destined to make Charles happy. At last she came to Saint Germain. Charles had told her about me; I did not have to endure from her the disdainful and scrutinizing glance that always hurt me so: she looked like an angel of kindness. I promised her that she would be happy with Charles; I reassured her about his young age. I told her that at 21 he had the solid reason of a much more mature person. I answered all her questions. She asked many because she knew that I had known Charles since

childhood; and I so enjoyed telling her about his qualities that I never tired of speaking about them.

Financial matters delayed the conclusion of the wedding for a few weeks. Charles kept going to Mme de Thémines's, and he often stayed in Paris two or three days in a row: these absences saddened me, and I was displeased with myself when I realized that I preferred my happiness to Charles's. This was not the way I was accustomed to love. The days when he came back were like holidays; he would tell me what he had done, and whether he had made some progress in Anais's heart. I felt happy for him. One day, however, he told me about the way he wanted to live with her: "I want her to trust me completely," he told me, "and give her all my trust. I shall not hide anything from her; she will know my every thought; she will know all the secret movements of my heart; I want the trust between her and me to be like ours, Ourika." Like ours! This word hurt me terribly. It reminded me that Charles did not know the only secret in my life, and I lost any desire to tell him. Little by little Charles's absences became more prolonged; he was in Saint Germain only very briefly. He would make his journey on horseback to come more quickly and return to Paris after dinner, so that all our evenings were spent without him. Mme de B. often made light of these long absences; I wished I too had been able to take them lightly.

One day, we were walking in the forest. Charles had been gone almost all week; all of a sudden I saw him at the end of the path where we were walking; he was riding his horse, very fast. When he approached the spot where we were, he dismounted and proceeded to walk with us. After a few minutes of general conversation, he stayed behind with me, and we started to talk as before. I remarked on it. "As before!" he exclaimed; "ah, what a difference. Did I have anything to say at that time? It seems that I only started to live two months ago. Ourika, I shall never be able to tell you what I feel for her! Sometimes, I feel as if my whole soul were about to fuse into hers. When she looks at me, I stop breathing. When she blushes, I would lie at her feet to adore her. To think that I shall be the protector of this angel, that she entrusts me with her life, her destiny! Ah, how proud I am of mine! Ah, how happy I shall make her! I shall be for her the father, the mother that she has lost; but I shall also be her husband, her lover! She will give me her first love; her whole heart will pour out unto mine. We shall partake of the same life; during the course of our long life, I do not want her to be able to say she was unhappy for a single hour. What a delight, Ourika, to think that she will be the mother of my children, that they will draw their life at Anais's bosom! Ah, they will be sweet and beautiful like her. Ah, Lord, what have I done to deserve such happiness!"

Alas! At that moment I was asking heaven the opposite question! For a few moments, I had been listening to these passionate declarations with an indefinable feeling. Lord! You are witness that I was happy for Charles's happiness: but why did you give life to poor Ourika? Why did she not die on the slave ship from which she was torn, or in her mother's arms? A few grains of Africa's sand would have covered her body, and this burden would have been very light! What importance for the world that Ourika lived? Why was she condemned to live? Was it to live alone, always alone, never loved! O Lord, do not allow this to be! Remove poor Ourika from the earth! No one needs her: is she not alone in life? This terrible thought assailed me with more violence than it had hitherto done. I felt that my legs were giving way, I sank to my knees, my eyes closed, and I thought I was going to die.

As the poor nun uttered these words, her oppression seemed to increase, her voice faltered, and a few tears ran down her wrinkled cheeks. I urged her to stop her story; she refused. "It is nothing," she said, "sorrow no longer lasts in my heart; its root has been severed. God took pity on me; he himself removed me from the abyss where I fell for lack of knowing and loving him. Do not forget that I am happy; but, alas," she added, "then, I was not."

Until the time I have just mentioned, I could bear my sorrows; they had impaired my health, but I had kept my sanity and some sort of control. My grief, like a canker eating up a fruit, had started with my heart; I carried within me the germ of destruction while outwardly I was still full of life. I liked to converse; discussions animated me. I had even kept a sort of lightheartedness; but I had lost the joys of the heart. Finally, until the time I have just mentioned, I was stronger than my sorrows. Now I felt that my sorrows would be stronger than I.

Charles carried me home in his arms; there, I was attended to, and I recovered my recollection. When I opened my eyes, I saw Mme de B. by my bed. Charles held my hand; they had tended me themselves, and I saw on their faces a mixture of anxiety and pain which touched me profoundly. I felt life coming back to me. I began to cry. Mme de B. wiped my tears gently; she did not say anything; she did not ask any questions. Charles asked many. I do not know what I replied; I said that my accident had been caused by the heat, the length of the walk. He believed me, and I was overwhelmed by bitterness when I saw that he did. My tears stopped; I told myself that it was quite easy to deceive those whose interest lay elsewhere. I withdrew the hand he still held, and I tried to look composed. Charles left, as usual, at five o'clock. I was hurt. I wished that he had worried about me; I was suffering so much! He would have left just the same. I would have made him leave; but I would have told myself that he owed me the happiness of his evening, and this thought would have cheered me. I refrained from showing Charles this movement of my heart. Delicate feelings have a kind of modesty; if they are not shared, they are incomplete. It is as if they require two persons to be felt.

Charles had hardly left when a soaring fever overtook me. The fever worsened during the next two days. Mme de B. took care of me with her usual kindness; she despaired of my condition and of the impossibility of having me carried to Paris, where she had to go the following day for Charles's wedding. The doctors told Mme de B. that I would live if she left me in Saint Germain. She resolved to do so, and she showed me such a tender affection when she left that for a moment she calmed my feelings. But, after her departure, the complete, real isolation in which I found myself for the first time in my life threw me in a deep despair. I could see the situation that my imagination had so often pictured coming true: I died far away from those I loved and my anguished moanings did not even reach their ears. Alas, my sufferings would have troubled their joy. I could see them succumbing to the rapture of happiness, far from the dying Ourika. They were the only presence in Ourika's life; but they did not need Ourika. Nobody needed her! This horrible feeling of the uselessness of life is what stabs the heart the most cruelly: it gave me such a distaste for life that I sincerely wished to die of the illness which had attacked me. I did not speak. I gave almost no sign of consciousness, and one thought only was quite distinct in me: "I want to die." At other times, I was more agitated. I remembered every word of the last conversation I had had with Charles in the forest; I saw him in the middle of the sea of joys he had pictured for me. Why was I dying, alone in death as in life? This idea tormented me even more still than pain. I imagined new chimeras to satisfy this new feeling. I imagined Charles

arriving in Saint Germain; he was told "she is dead." If you can believe it, I enjoyed his grief; it was my revenge. Revenge for what, O Lord? For his having been the guardian angel of my life? This horrible feeling soon filled me with horror: I saw that if grief was not a sin, to indulge in it as I did could be a crime. My ideas took another course: I endeavored to conquer myself, to find within me the strength to fight the feelings that troubled me. But I did not look for this strength where it was. I berated myself for being ungrateful. I shall die, I said to myself. I want to die; but I do not want to let hatred near my heart. Ourika is a disinherited child; but her innocence remains. I shall not let it wither through ungratefulness. I shall pass over the earth like a shadow; but in the tomb, I shall have peace. O Lord! They already have much happiness: let them have still Ourika's share, and let her die as the leaf falls in autumn. Have I not suffered enough already?

I came out of the illness which had put my life in danger only to fall into a languorous state in which grief played a large part. Mme de B. settled in Saint Germain after Charles's wedding; he went there often with Anais, never without her. I always suffered more when they were present. I do not know if the image of happiness made me more aware of my own misfortune or if Charles's presence awakened the memory of our former friendship. I sometimes endeavored to find him again, and I no longer recognized him. He, however, told me almost everything he had told me before; but his present friendship resembled his past friendship like an artificial flower resembles a real flower: it is the same, but it has no life or scent.

Charles attributed the change in my disposition to my declining health; I think that Mme de B. knew the sad state of my soul better, that she guessed my secret torments and that she was quite grieved. But the time when I could console others was gone; the only pity I had left was for myself.

Anais was with child, and we went back to Paris. My sadness increased daily. This domestic happiness so peaceful, these family ties so sweet, this innocent love, always so tender, passionate, what a sight for an unfortunate woman destined to spend her life in isolation and to die without having been loved, without having known other ties besides that of dependency and pity! Thus days, months, went by; I did not take part in any conversation; I had abandoned all my accomplishments. If I could bear to do some reading, it was reading the books in which I thought I would find the imperfect depiction of the grief that devoured me. I turned my reading into a new poison. I became inebriated with my own tears, and, alone in my room for hours on end, I would succumb to my grief.

The birth of a son crowned Charles's happiness; he rushed to tell me, and in the movements of his joy, I recognized some of the accents of his former trust. How this hurt me! Alas! it was the voice of the friend I no longer had! And all the past, when I heard his voice, would tear my wound open.

Charles's child was as beautiful as Anais; the picture of this young mother with her son moved everyone. I alone, through a strange twist of fate, was condemned to see him with bitterness. My heart devoured this image of a happiness that would always be foreign to me, and envy, like a vulture, fed in my breast. What had I done to those who thought they were saving me by bringing me to this island of exile? Why did they not let me follow my fate? So what if I had been the

negress slave of some rich colonist; burnt by the sun, I would have farmed the land for another, but I would have had my own humble hut to go to at night. I would have had a companion to share my life and children of my color who would have called me "Mother!" They would press their little lips on my forehead without disgust; they would rest their head on my shoulder, and they would fall asleep in my arms! What have I done to be condemned to never feel the only affections for which my heart was meant! O Lord! Remove me from this world; I feel I can no longer bear to live.

I was on my knees in my room, addressing this blasphemous prayer to the creator when I heard the door open: it was Mme de B.'s friend, the Marquise de --, who had recently returned from England where she had spent several years. With terror, I saw her approach me. Seeing her always reminded me that she had been the first to apprise me of my fate, that she had opened this well of sorrows from which I had drawn so much. Since her return to Paris, I only saw her with a feeling of uneasiness. "I have come to see you and to speak with you, my dear Ourika," she said. "You know how much I have cared for you since you were a child, and I cannot see the melancholy in which you are sinking without sincere grief. With a mind like yours, is it possible that you cannot face your situation better?" "The mind, Madam," I answered, "only serves to increase real ills; it makes you see them under so many varied forms!" "But," she resumed, "when ills are without remedy, is it not foolish to refuse to accept them, and to fight thus against necessity? For, in the end, we are not the strongest." "This may be true," I said, "but it seems to me that, in this case, necessity is one more ill." "You will admit, however, Ourika, that reason advises to submit and to seek diversions." "Yes, Madam, but to have diversions, one must see hope in another direction." "You could at least develop new tastes and occupations to fill your time." "Ah, Madam, the tastes that one creates are an effort, not a pleasure." "But," she added, "you have many talents." "For talents to be a resource, Madam," I answered, "one needs a purpose; my talents would be like the flower of the English poet, which lost its scent in the desert." "You forget your friends who will enjoy them." "I do not have any friends, Madam, I have protectors, and that is quite a different matter." "Ourika," she said, "you are making yourself quite unhappy, and quite unnecessarily so." "Everything is useless in my life, Madam, even my grief." "How can you utter such bitter words? You, Ourika, whose attendance on Mme de B. was so exemplary when you were the only one left for her during the Terror!" "Alas! Madam, I am like the evil genie who is powerful only during times of calamities and whom happiness scares off." "Tell me your secret, my dear Ourika, open up your heart to me, nobody is more interested in you than I am, and perhaps I shall do you some good." "I do not have any secret, Madam," I answered, "my position and my color are my only ills, as you know." "Come," she replied, "can you deny that you harbor in your innermost soul a great sorrow? One only needs to behold you for an instant to be convinced of it." I persisted in telling her what I had already said. She became impatient, raised her voice; I saw that the storm was going to burst. "Is this your good faith?" said she, "the truthfulness for which you are known? Ourika, beware; sometimes reserve leads to duplicity." "But what could I tell you, Madam," I said, "to you especially who foresaw a long time ago how unhappy my situation would be? To you, of all people, I have nothing new to say on this topic." "You will never convince me of that," she replied, "but since you refuse to give me your trust and you claim that you have no secret, well, Ourika, I shall take upon myself to inform you that you do have a secret. Yes, Ourika, all your regrets, all your sorrows stem only from an unfortunate, irrational passion, and if you were not beside yourself with love for Charles, you would readily accept being a Negress. Adieu, Ourika,

I am leaving and, I must tell you, with much less interest in you than I had when I arrived here." She departed uttering these words. I was stunned. What had she revealed to me! What terrible light had she thrown on the abyss of my sorrows! O Lord, it was like the light that once reached the bottom of hell and made its unfortunate inhabitants wish for darkness. What! I harbored a criminal passion! That is what, until now, had devoured my heart! This desire to hold my place in the chain of beings, this need for nature's affections, this grief of loneliness, these were the regrets of a guilty love! And when I thought I envied the image of happiness, it was happiness itself that was the object of my blasphemous wish. But what had I done that would have made people think I suffered from this hopeless passion! Is it impossible to love more than one's life with innocence? The mother who threw herself in the lion's mouth to save her child, what feeling moved her? The brothers and sisters who wished to die together on the scaffold, and who prayed to God before climbing the steps, was it a culpable affection that thus united them? Does not humanity alone produce acts of sublime devotion daily? Why could I not in this way love Charles, my childhood companion, the protector of my youth? And yet, a faint voice cries, from the bottom of my soul, that they are right, and that I am a criminal. O Lord! I shall also receive remorse in my distressed heart! Ourika must know every kind of bitterness, she must exhaust all pain. What! Henceforth my tears will be guilty! I will be forbidden to think of him! What! I will no longer dare suffer!

These terrible thoughts threw me in a state of prostration which resembled death. The same night fever overtook me and, in less than three days, it was believed I would not live. The doctor declared that if they wanted to perform the last offices, it should be done immediately. My confessor was sent for, but he had died a few days before. Then Mme de B. had a priest from the parish notified. He came and gave me extreme unction, for I was not in a state to receive the last sacrament. I had lost all consciousness, and I was expected to die at any moment. It must have been then that God took pity on me: He began by saving my life; against all hope, my strength held up. I struggled thus for about a fortnight, then recovered myself. Mme de B. never left my side, and Charles seemed to have regained his former affection for me. The priest continued to visit me every day, because he wanted to take advantage of the first possible moment to confess me. I wished to do so myself; I know not what movement carried me toward God and gave me the urge to throw myself into His arms and find peace. The priest received the confession of my sins; he was not frightened by the state of my soul. Like an old sailor, he knew every storm. He began by reassuring me about the passion of which I was accused: "Your heart is pure," said he, "it is only yourself that you have hurt, but you are guilty nonetheless. God will ask you for an account of your own happiness, which he had entrusted to you. What did you do with it? This happiness was in your hands, for it consists in the doing of our duties. Did you even know what they were? God is the goal of Mankind: what was yours? But do not lose heart. Pray to God, Ourika. He is here; He is holding out his arms to you. For Him, there are no Negroes and no whites; all hearts are equal before Him, and yours deserves to become worthy of Him." This is how that respectable man encouraged poor Ourika. These simple words brought to my soul a kind of peace that I had never known; I thought about them all the time, and, like from a rich source, I would always draw some new reflection. I saw that indeed I had not known my duties: God has assigned them to those who are alone as to those who have ties to the world. He may have deprived them of the ties of kindred, but he gave them the whole of humanity for a family. The sister of charity, I reflected, is not alone in life, even though she has renounced everything. She has created a family for herself; she is the mother of all the orphans, the daughter of all the

poor old people, the sister of all the wretched. Have not men of the world often sought isolation of their own accord? They wanted to be alone with God; they renounced all pleasures to worship, in solitude, the pure source of all good and all happiness. In the recesses of their thoughts, they worked to make their souls ready to appear before the Lord. It is for you, my Lord, that it is sweet to adorn one's heart in this way, to embellish it, as for a holiday, with all the virtues that please You. Alas! What had I done? The foolish plaything of the involuntary movements of my soul, I had searched after the joys of life and I had neglected its happiness. But it is not too late yet; when throwing me on this foreign land, God may have wanted to claim me for Himself. He tore me away from barbarity and ignorance. Through a miracle of His goodness, He rescued me from the vices of slavery and let me know His Law: this Law shows me what all my duties are; it shows me my way: I shall follow it, O Lord; I shall not use Your gifts to offend You; I shall no longer accuse You of my sins.

This new light in which I considered my position restored tranquillity to my heart. I was surprised by the peace that came after so many storms. An outlet from the stream that wreaked havoc on its banks had been opened, and now it carried its appeased waters into a tranquil sea.

I decided to enter the convent. I mentioned it to Mme de B.; she was grieved but she said "I did you so much harm while meaning to do you good that I do not feel I have the right to oppose your decision." Charles was stronger in his resistance; he entreated me, he beseeched me to stay. I told him "Let me go, Charles, to the only place where I may think of you constantly."

At this point, the young nun abruptly ended her story. I kept on giving her medical care; unfortunately, it was useless. She died at the end of October; she fell with the last leaves of Autumn.