

AIMEE.

SOMEWHERE in the middle of Normandy, off the high road, and at a distance from any centre of business or pleasure, there is a small manufacturing town with two or three high chimneys and a few hundreds of work-people. The country round it is flat and uninteresting, the straight roads are bordered here and there by poplars; a slow, sluggish stream flows between its low green banks without a single wind or curve; the one long street with its uneven pavement is narrow and dirty; the limes which surround the tiny *place* look stunted and unhealthy; the churchyard is overgrown and neglected; the church itself has no pretensions to beauty or even to antiquity. Few people visit Pont-Avize; there is nothing to attract them. Few people live there who can afford to live elsewhere.

Yet Pont-Avize, too, has its society, its cliques; its ambitions, its aristocracy. M. Jules Dubois, *avocat*, has his name on a bright brass plate on the door of a red brick house at the corner of the principal street; the doctor and the curé live side by side in two whitewashed houses behind the church, and the private houses of the owners of the two large factories stand in their own gardens on the outskirts of the town.

M. Blanchard is the principal inhabitant of Pont-Avize. M. Laval, who lives nearly opposite, is of less consequence in the eyes of his neighbors. His factory is smaller; his house has no carriage drive up to it. M. Blanchard has conservatories, a fountain in the middle of his lawn, and some bright flower beds round its edge. M. Laval has only two Etruscan vases on the steps which lead to his door, filled with nasturtiums. His flower beds are weedy, his walks are overgrown; his modern white house, with its green shutters all closed, is overshadowed by trees, and has a melancholy, dull look as of a young person who has grown prematurely old.

When Madame Laval died (bidding farewell without regret to a world in which the poor woman had found but little pleasure) she left an infant daughter of a few weeks old behind her. That was nearly nineteen years ago, but M. Laval is still a widower, and the little Aimée has known no other care than that bestowed upon her in a dutiful rather than a loving spirit by Mademoiselle Stéphanie, M. Laval's unmarried sister. Like a plant which springs up wherever it can find the least depth of earth in the crevice of the hard rock, and blossoms alike in rain and sunshine, so the child has turned darkness to light, and for her, as yet, life has no sadness even in its dull uniformity.

Aimée was eighteen on her last birthday, another is near at hand, and she is beginning to be conscious of unsatisfied needs and unfulfilled desires. She has a world of her own inside the narrow world of Pont-Avize.

It is evening, and she has pushed back the Venetian shutters, and is standing by the window looking down the street. The church clock has just struck five and her father will soon be coming home. M. Blanchard has left his office, and after standing on the step a moment talking to his clerk, he comes down the road to his own

great iron gates. Before turning into them he looks up at the window and takes off his hat with a gallant wave. M. Blanchard is the greatest man in Pont-Avize; he is nearly forty, but he is still a bachelor. He has a white waistcoat and yellow gloves, and a rose in his button hole; but though Aimée returns his bow politely she does not look after him. On the contrary, she turns away again rather quickly.

"What do you see? Is anything passing?" asks Mademoiselle Stéphanie rather crossly.

"I am watching for papa," says the girl gently. "There is nothing else to look for." There is no complaint, but just a touch of resignation in her voice.

M. Laval is at this moment coming down the road opening his white umbrella, for the sun has not lost its power. He has just taken off his hat with an absent air to the doctor as he drives past, when all at once his attention appears to be arrested. He stops short, stares along the dusty road, and adjusts his double eye-glass.

Aimée, who was about to withdraw from the window, leans her pretty head forward with a little gasp of astonishment.

For down the straight road leading only to the town which no tourist ever visits, a stranger is coming; a tall young man with blue eyes and a sunburnt face.

"You see something; what is it?" her aunt repeats.

"He is speaking to papa. He has stopped. What can he want here? It is—yes, it is an Englishman."

"An Englishman! Impossible. They never visit our quiet town," says Mademoiselle Stéphanie, coming to look over the girl's shoulder.

"It is true no one visits Pont-Avize," says Aimée with a faint smile. "Nevertheless he is speaking to papa. He is coming to the garden door." Her heart is beating fast with timidity and pleasure.

"And you have been staring at him out of the window, Seat yourself and resume your work."

Aimée obeys in silence. But the voices are coming nearer and there are steps on the uncarpeted stairs.

"Permit me to present you to my sister, my daughter," says M. Laval, preceding his unexpected guest into the room and indicating first one and then the other.

"This gentleman is the young Mr Horace Dallas," he says, addressing himself to his sister. "You will remember the grandmamma of my poor Henriette was of the same name. I have often, have I not, spoken of our English relations? Mr. Dallas is traveling in Normandy for the first time. Join your entreaties to mine that we may persuade him to pass a few days here."

Mademoiselle Stéphanie dislikes strangers and hates Englishmen, but she stiffly expresses a hope that Mr. Dallas will not find Pont-Avize too secluded to be agreeable. He notices her grim smile, he sees M. Laval's little shrewd eyes fixed upon him; he glances round the bare yet gaudy little drawing-room, and he hesitates. He turns to where Aimée sits bending her little dark head and flushed cheeks over her work, and he hesitates no longer.

It is quite unconsciously that she looks up at Mr.