

EPILOGUE : PENSION SEGUIN By KATHERINE
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THE servant who opened the door was twin sister to that efficient and hideous creature bearing a soup tureen into the *First French Picture*. Her round red face shone like freshly washed china. She had a pair of immense bare arms to match, and a quantity of mottled hair arranged in a sort of bow. I stammered in a ridiculous, breathless fashion, as though a pack of Russian wolves were behind me rather than five flights of beautifully polished French stairs. "Have you a room?" The servant girl did not know. She would ask Madame. Madame was at dinner. "Will you come in, please?" Through the dark hall, guarded by a large black stove that had the appearance of a headless cat with one red all-seeing eye in the middle of its stomach, I followed her into the salon. "Please to sit down," said the servant girl, closing the door behind her. I heard her list slippers shuffle along the corridor, the sound of another door opening—a little clamour—instantly suppressed. Silence followed. The salon was long and narrow, with a yellow floor dotted with white mats. White muslin curtains hid the windows : the walls were white, decorated with pictures of pale ladies drifting down cypress avenues to forsaken temples, and moons rising over boundless oceans. You would have thought that all the long years of Madame's virginity had been devoted to the making of white mats—that her childish voice had lisped its numbers in crochet work stitches. I did not dare to begin counting them. They rained upon me from every possible place, like impossible snowflakes. Even the piano stool was buttoned into one embroidered with *P. F.* I had been looking for a resting place all the morning. At the start I flew up innumerable stairs as though they were major scales—the most cheerful things in the world—but after repeated failures the scales had resolved into the minor, and my heart which was quite cast down by this time, leapt up again at these signs and tokens of virtue and sobriety. "A woman with such sober passions," thought I, "is bound to be quiet and

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clean, with few babies and a much absent husband. Mats are not the sort of things that lend themselves in their making to cheerful singing. Mats are essentially the fruits of pious solitude. I shall certainly take a room here." And I began to dream of unpacking my clothes in a little white room, and getting into a kimono and lying on a white bed, watching the curtains float out from the window in the delicious autumn air that smelled of apples and honey . . . until the door opened and a tall thin woman in a lilac pinafore came in, smiling in a vague fashion. "Madame Seguin?" "Yes, Madame." I repeated the familiar story. A quiet room. Removed from any church bells, or crowing cocks, or little boys' schools, or railway stations. "There are none of such things anywhere near here," said Madame, looking very surprised. "I have a very beautiful room to let, and quite unexpectedly. It has been occupied by a young gentleman from Buenos Ayres whose father died, unfortunately, and implored him to return home immediately. Quite natural, indeed." "Oh, very!" said I, hoping that the Hamlet-like apparition was at rest again and would not invade my solitude to make certain of his son's obedience. "If Madame will follow me." Down a dark corridor, round a corner I felt my way. I wanted to ask Madame if this was where Buenos Ayres père appeared unto his son, but I did not dare to. "Here—you see. Quite away from everything," said Madame.

I have always viewed with a proper amount of respect and abhorrence those penetrating spirits who are not susceptible to appearances. What is there to believe in except appearances? I have nearly always found that they are the only things worth enjoying at all, and if ever an innocent child lays its head upon my knee and begs for the truth of the matter, I shall tell it the story of my one and only nurse, who, knowing my horror of gooseberry jam, spread a coating of apricot over the top of the jam jar. As long as I believed it apricot I was happy, and learning wisdom, I contrived to eat the apricot and leave the gooseberry behind. "So, you see, my little innocent creature," I shall end, "the great thing

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to learn in this life is to be content with appearances, and shun the vulgarities of the grocer and the philosopher.”

Bright sunlight streamed through the windows of the delightful room. There was an alcove for the bed, a writing table was placed against the window, a couch against the wall. And outside the window I looked down upon an avenue of gold and red trees and up at a range of mountains white with fresh fallen snow. “ One hundred and eighty francs a month,” murmured Madame, smiling at nothing, but seeming to imply by her manner “ of course this has nothing to do with the matter.” I said, “ That is too much. I cannot afford more than one hundred and fifty francs.” “ But,” explained Madame, “ the size ! the alcove. And the extreme rarity of being overlooked by so many mountains.” “ Yes,” I said. “ And then the food. There are four meals a day, and breakfast in your room if you wish it.” “ Yes,” I said, more feebly. “ And my husband a professor at the Conservatoire—that again is so rare.” Courage is like a disobedient dog. Once it starts running away, it flies all the faster for your attempts to recall it. “ One hundred and sixty,” I said. “ If you agree to take it for two months I will accept,” said Madame very quickly. I agreed.

Marie helped to unstrap my boxes. She knelt on the floor, grinning and scratching her big red arms.

“ Ah, how glad I am Madame has come,” she said. “ Now we shall have some life again. Monsieur Arthur, who lived in this room—he was a gay one. Singing all day, and sometimes dancing. Many a time Mademoiselle Ambatielos would be playing and he’d dance for an hour without stopping.” “ Who is Mademoiselle Ambatielos ? ” I asked. “ A young lady, studying at the Conservatoire,” said Marie, sniffing in a very friendly fashion. “ But she gives lessons, too. Ah, mon Dieu, sometimes when I’m dusting her room I think her fingers will drop off. She plays all day long. But I like that—that’s life, noise is. That’s what I say. You’ll hear her soon. Up and down she goes ! ” said Marie, with extreme heartiness. “ But,” I cried, loathing Marie, “ how many other

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people are staying here ? ” Marie shrugged. “ Nobody to speak of. There’s the Russian gentleman, a priest he is, and Madame’s three children—and that’s all. The children are lively enough,” she said, filling the washstand pitcher, “ but then, there’s the baby—the boy! Ah, you’ll know about him, poor little one, soon enough ! ” She was so detestable, I would not ask her anything further.

I waited until she had gone, and leaned against the window-sill, watching the sun deepen in the trees until they seemed full and trembling with gold, and wondering what was the matter with the mysterious baby.

All through the afternoon Mademoiselle Ambatielos and the piano warred with the Appassionata Sonata. They shattered it to bits and remade it to their heart’s desire—they unpicked it—and tried it in various styles. They added a little touch—caught up something. Finally they decided that the only thing of importance was the loud pedal. The mysterious baby, hidden behind Heaven knows how many doors, cried with such curious persistence that I had to strain my ears, wondering if it was a baby or an engine or a far-off whistle. At dusk Marie, accompanied by the two little girls, brought me a lamp. My appearance disturbed these charming children to such an extent that they rushed up and down the corridor in a frenzied state for half an hour afterwards, bumping themselves against the walls, and shrieking with derisive laughter. At eight the gong sounded for supper. I was hungry. The corridor was filled with the warm, strong smell of cooked meat. “ Well,” I thought, “ at any rate, judging by the smell the food must be good.” And feeling very frightened I entered the dining room.

Two rows of faces turned to watch me. M. Seguin introduced me, rapped on the table with the soup spoon, and the two little girls, impudent and scornful, cried “ Bon soir, Madame,” while the baby, half washed away by his afternoon performance, emptied his cup of milk over his head while Madame Seguin showed me my seat. In the confusion caused by this last episode, and by his being

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carried away by Marie, screaming and spitting with rage, I sat down next to the Russian priest and opposite Mademoiselle Ambatielos. M. Seguin took a loaf of bread from a three-legged basket at his elbow and carved it against his chest. Soup was served—with vermicelli letters of the alphabet floating in it. These were last straws to the little Seguins' table manners.

“ Maman, Yvonne's got more letters than me.” “ Maman, Hélène keeps taking my letters out with her spoon.” “ Children ! Children ! Quiet, quiet ! ” said Madame Seguin gently. “ No, don't do it.” Hélène seized Yvonne's plate and pulled it towards her. “ Stop,” said M. Seguin, who was like a rat, with spectacles all misted over with soup steam. “ Hélène, leave the table. Go to Marie.” Exit Hélène, with her apron over her head.

Soup was followed by chestnuts and brussels sprouts. All the time the Russian priest, who wore a pale blue tie with a buttoned frock coat and a moustache fierce as a Gogol novel, kept up a flow of conversation with Mademoiselle Ambatielos. She looked very young. She was stout, with a high firm bust decorated with a spray of artificial roses. She never ceased touching the roses or her blouse or hair, or looking at her hands—with a smile trembling on her mouth and her blue eyes wide and staring. She seemed half intoxicated with her fresh young body.

“ I saw you this morning when you didn't see me,” said the priest. “ You didn't.” “ I did.” “ He didn't, did he, Madame ? ” Madame Seguin smiled, and carried away the chestnuts, bringing back a dish of pears.

“ I hope you will come into the salon after dinner,” she said to me. “ We always chat a little—we are such a small family party.” I smiled, wondering why pears should follow chestnuts.

“ I must apologise for baby,” she went on. “ He is so nervous. But he spends his day in a room at the other end of the appartement to you. You will not be troubled. Only think of it. He passes whole days banging his little head against the floors and walls. The doctors cannot understand it at all.” M. Seguin pushed back

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his chair, said grace. I followed desperately into the salon. “ I expect you have been admiring my mats,” said Madame Seguin, with more animation than she had hitherto shown. “ People always imagine they are the product of my industry. But alas, no ! They are all made by my friend Madame Kummer, who has the pension on the first floor.”