

# romain rolland

## JEAN-CHRISTOPHE

### Excerpt (from the beginning)

FROM behind the house rises the murmuring of the river. All day long the rain has been beating against the window-panes; a stream of water trickles down the window at the corner where it is broken. The yellowish light of the day dies down. The room is dim and dull.

The new-born child stirs in his cradle. Although the old man left his sabots at the door when he entered, his foolsteps make the floor creak. The child begins to whine. The mother leans out of her bed to comfort it; and the grandfather gropes to light the lamp, so that the child shall not be frightened by the night when he awakes. The flame of the lamp lights up old Jean Michel's red face, with its rough white beard and morose expression and quick eyes. He goes near the cradle. His cloak smells wet, and as he walks he drags his large bine list slippers. Louisa signs to him not to go too near. She is fair, almost white; her features are drawn; her gentle, stupid face is marked with red in patches; her lips are pale and swollen, and they are parted in a timid smile; her eyes devour

the child and her eyes are blue and vague; the pupils are small, but there is an infinite tenderness in them.

The child wakes and cries, and his eyes are troubled. Oh! how terrible! The darkness, the sudden flash of the lamp, the hallucinations of a mind as yet hardly detached from chaos, the stifling, roaring night in which it is enveloped, the illimitable gloom from which, like blinding shafts of light, there emerge acute sensations, sorrows, phantoms those enormous faces leaning over him, those eyes that pierce through him, penetrating, are beyond his comprehension! . . . He has not the strength to cry out; terror holds him motionless, with eyes and mouth wide open and he rattles in his throat. His large-head, that seems to have swollen up, is wrinkled with the grotesque and lamentable grimaces that he makes; the skin of his face and hands is brown and purple, and spotted with yellow. . . .

"Dear God! " said the old man with conviction: "How ugly he is ! "

He put the lamp down on the table.

Louisa pouted like a scolded child. Jean Michel looked at her out of the corner of his eye and laughed.

" You don't want me to say that he is beautiful ? You would not believe it. Come, it is not your fault. They are all like that."

The child came out of the stupor and immobility into which he had been thrown by the light of the lamp and the eyes of the old man. He began to cry. Perhaps he instinctively felt in his mother's eyes a caress which made it possible for him to complain. She held out her arms for him and said:

" Give him to me."

The old man began, as usual, to air his theories:

" You ought not to give way to children when they cry. You must just let them cry."

But he came and took the child and grumbled :

" I never saw one quite so ugly."

Louisa took the child feverishly and pressed it to her bosom. She looked at it with a bashful and delighted smile.

" Oh, my poor child ! " she said shamefacedly. " How ugly you are how ugly ! and how I love you ! "

Jean Michel went back to the fireside. He began to poke the fire in protest, but a smile gave the lie to the moroseness and solemnity of his expression.

"Good girl!" he said. "Don't worry about it, lie has

plenty of time to alter. And even so, what does it matter? Only one thing is asked of him: that he should grow into an honest man."

The child was comforted by contact with his mother's warm body. He could be heard sucking her milk and gurgling and snorting. Jean Michel turned in his chair, and said once more, with some emphasis :

" There's nothing finer than an honest man."

He was silent for a moment, pondering whether it would not be proper to elaborate this thought; but he found nothing more to say, and after a silence he said irritably:

" Why isn't your husband here ? "

" I think he is at the theater," said Louisa timidly. " There is a rehearsal."

" The theater is closed. I passed it just now. One of his lies."

" Xo. Don't be always blaming him. I must have misunderstood. He must have been kept for one of his lessons."

" He ought to have come back," said the old man, not satisfied. He stopped for a moment, and then asked, in a rather lower voice and with some shame :

" Has he been . . . again ? "

" Xo, father no, father," said Louisa hurriedly.

The old man looked at her; she avoided his eyes.

" It's not true. You're lying."

She wept in silence.

"Dear God!" said the old man, kicking at the fire with his foot. The poker fell with a clatter. The mother and the child trembled.

"Father, please please!" said Louisa. "You will make him cry."

The child hesitated for a second or two whether to cry or to go on with his meal ; but not being able to do both at once, he went on with the meal.

Jean Michel continued in a lower tone, though with outbursts of anger :

"What have I done to the good God to have this drunkard for my son? What is the use of my having lived as I have lived, and of having denied myself everything all my life! But you you can't you do anything to stop it? Heavers!

That's what you ought to do. . . . You should keep him at home! . . ."

Ixniisa wept still more.

"Don't scold me! . . .I am unhappy enough as it is! I have done everything I could. If you knew how terrified I am when I am alone! Always I seem to hear his step on the stairs. Then I wait for the door to open, or I ask myself: 'O God! what will he look like?' ... It makes me 'ill to think of it!"

She was shaken by her sobs. The old man grew anxious. He went to her and laid the disheveled bedclothes about her trembling shoulders and caressed her head with his hands.

" Come, come, don't be afraid. I am here."

She calmed herself for the child's sake, and tried to smile.

" I was wrong to tell you that."

The old man shook his head as he looked at her.

" My poor child, it was not much of a present that I gave you."

" It's my own fault," she said. " He ought not to have

married me. He is sorry for what he did."

"What, do you mean that he regrets? . . ."

" You know. You were angry yourself because I became his wife."

" We won't talk about that. It is true I was vexed. A young man like that I can say so without hurting you a young man whom I had carefully brought up, a distinguished musician, a real artist might have looked higher than you, who had nothing and were of a lower class, and not even of the same trade. For more than a hundred years no Kratl't has ever married a woman who was not a musician ! But, you know, I bear you no grudge, and am fond of you, and have been ever since i learned to know you. Besides, there's no going back on a choice once it's made; there's nothing left but to do ine's duty honestly."

He went and sat down again, thought for a little, and then said, with the solemnity in which he invested all his aphorisms:

" The first thing in life is to do one's duty."

He waited for contradiction, and spat on the fire. Then, as neither mother nor child raised any objection., he was forgoing on, but relapsed into silence.