LETTER XVII

From Saint-Preux to Lord Edward

I would like to relate to you, my lord, a dangerous adventure we experienced a few days ago from which we escaped with good fortune at the cost of a little fright and fatigue. This deserves a letter by itself, and you will understand on reading it the reason for my writing.

You know that Madame de Wolmar's house is situated not far from the lake, and that she is fond of excursions on the water. Three days ago, finding ourselves with time on our hands because of her husband's absence, and feeling inspired by the beauty of the evening, we decided upon one of these excursions for the following day. We set out at daybreak in a boat equipped with nets so that we could fish, taking with us three oarsmen, a servant and provisions for our dinner. I had brought along my gun in order to shoot some sea swallows. Julie shamed me, however, for wanting to kill birds for the sheer joy of destruction, so I amused myself with catching an occasional glimpse of some of the game birds which inhabit that lake. Finally, the only shot I fired the entire day was at a grebe some distance away, and him I missed.

We went an hour or two fishing about five hundred feet from the shore. Our luck was good, but Julie made us throw all the fish back with the exception of one trout which had been hurt by an oar. The poor creatures are in pain, she said, let us rescue them; let us enjoy their happiness in escaping such danger. This was done reluctantly, and not without some protest, for it was clear that the men would have preferred to have swallowed the fish rather than the sermon which had led to their release.

We moved out into the open water, and I, with a young man's ardor,
of which it is high time I were cured, seized the master oar and steered the boat so far out into the lake that we were soon more than a league from the shore.1 There I explained to Julie all the features of the superb horizon surrounding us. I showed her in the distance the mouth of the Rhone which suddenly halts its wild descent after about a quarter of a league, as though it feared its muddy waters would sully the crystal of the lake. I pointed out to her the redans of the mountains whose correspondent and parallel angles form a bed worthy of the river it contains. As we drew further from our shore, I made her admire the rich and charming country of the Vaud where the innumerable towns, the vast throngs of people and the green sloping walls of the valley, adorned on every side, made an enchanting picture; where the earth, everywhere cultivated and everywhere fecund, offers the ploughman, the shepherd and the wine grower an assured return for his pains, undevoured by the insatiable tax collector. Then, pointing out to her the country of the Chablais on the opposite shore, a land no less favored by nature but offering the eye only a bleak picture of poverty, I made her feel the difference between two types of govern-ment regarding the prosperity, number and happiness of their people. Thus it is, I said, that the earth opens up her fertile breast and pours forth her riches upon a happy folk who cultivate her for them-selves. She seems to smile and come alive at the sight of liberty; she delights in nourishing mankind. In contrast, the miserable huts, brambles and briars that cover a half deserted countryside announce from afar that it is ruled by an absent landlord, and one can see she regrets the few gifts she grants to slaves who do not benefit from them.

1 How is this possible? The lake opposite Clarens is nowhere near two leagues in width.
While we were happily occupied in studying the neighboring shores, a wind had sprung up pushing us toward the opposite bank, and by the time we thought of turning back, it was blowing so hard our frail craft could make no headway against it. The waves soon reached terrifying proportions; we saw we would have to make for the Savoie coast and try to land at the village of Meillerie just across from us which is almost the only spot along that coast where it is possible to land. But the wind which had changed its direction kept increasing in violence so that despite all the efforts of our men we were driven further down the coast along a wall of jagged rocks which offered us no shelter.

We all set ourselves to the oars, and almost the same instant I had the sorrow of seeing Julie overcome with sea sickness, pale and collapsed by the side of the boat. Fortunately she was a good sailor and this state did not last long. Our efforts increased together with the danger till the sun, sweat and fatigue had left us all exhausted and panting for breath. This was when Julie, having found back her own courage, set out to restore ours with compassionate caresses. She wiped the sweat from our faces indiscriminately, and, mixing water with wine to prevent intoxication, she offered it in turn to those who were most exhausted. No, never has your beloved friend appeared as radiant as at that moment with her face aflame with heat and excitement. And what added the most to her charm was that one could see so clearly from the expression of tender compassion on her face that she was acting less from a concern for her own safety than out of pity for us. One single instant, when two planks were separated a bit in a shock that drenched us all, she believed the boat was split, then the tender mother within her cried out, and I distinctly heard these words:
Oh my children, must I never see you again? As for myself whose imagination always outdistances the evil of the hour, though I understood the real extent of our danger, I looked at every moment to see the boat engulfed, that touching beauty struggling amidst the waves, and the paleness of death dim the roses on her cheeks.

By hard work we finally fought our way back up the coast to Meillerie, and, after a struggle of more than an hour within ten feet of the shore, we managed to land the boat. As soon as we set foot on land our fatigues were all forgotten. Julie took upon herself to thank each man for the effort he had made, and, just as at the height of the danger she had thought only of us, it seemed to her now that she alone had been saved.

We ate with all the appetite earned by violent exercise. The trout was prepared, but Julie, although she is extremely fond of it, ate very little. I could see that she wanted to make up to the men for their sacrifice earlier in the day, and would be happier if I abstained as well. As you have said a thousand times, Milord, in little things as well as great, her generous soul always shines through.

After dinner, since the water was still rough and the boat needed repairs, I suggested a walk. Julie was reluctant because of the sun and wind, and was concerned for my fatigue. But I had my reasons and answered all her objections: I have been used to strenuous exercise since childhood, I said, and, far from damaging my health, it makes me more fit. My last voyage left me in better condition than I have ever been. As to the sun and wind, you have your straw hat, and we will soon be in the shelter of the woods. It is only a question of climbing up between a few boulders, and you, who are no lover of the plain, will
be happy for having suffered a little fatigue. She gave in, and we set out while our servants were eating their dinner.

You know that I came back to Meillerie some ten years ago, following my exile in the Valais, to await permission for my return. It was there I spent those days, at once so sad and so delightful, devoted exclusively to thinking of her. It was there I wrote a letter which caused her to relent. I have always longed to see again that solitary retreat which furnished me an asylum amidst the ice and snow, and where my heart delighted in conversing with that one dearest to it in all the world. The opportunity of visiting this beloved spot, in a happier season and in the company of her whose image had once inhabited it with me, was the secret motive of my walk. I looked forward eagerly to pointing out to her the ancient monuments of a passion at once so constant and so ill-starred.

We reached the spot after about an hour's walk along the cool and winding paths which climbed so imperceptibly among the trees and rocks that one felt little more discomfort than the length of the road. As we drew nearer, and I began to recognize familiar landmarks, I thought I was going to faint. I pulled myself together, however, concealing my agitation, and we at last arrived. This solitary place forms a refuge, wild and deserted but filled with that sort of beauty which can be felt by sensitive natures alone while to all others it appears abhorrent. A torrent formed by the melting snows flowed in a muddy stream about twenty feet from us, noisily carrying silt, sand and stones along with it. Behind us, a chain of inaccessible cliffs divided the plateau where we stood from that part of the Alps known as the Glaciers because of the enormous incessantly expanding peaks.
of ice which have covered them since the beginning of the world.¹ On our right, forests of black pine cast a melancholy shade. Across the torrent on our left stretched a large oak wood, and below us that vast water plain formed by the lake in the very center of the Alps separated us from the rich countryside of the Vaud, while the majestic peaks of the Jura crowned the picture.

In the midst of these grand and magnificent objects, the little bit of ground on which we stood seemed to radiate the charm of a smiling country landscape. A number of little brooks filtered between the rocks and overflowed onto the green turf in crystal threads. Some wild fruit trees stretched their heads over ours and the cool moist earth was covered with grass and flowers. On comparing this quiet retreat to the surrounding objects, it seemed as though it must be the refuge of two lovers who alone had escaped the cataclysm of nature.

When we had reached this place and I had contemplated it a while, I looked at Julie with tears in my eyes and said: What, does your heart say nothing to you here? Do you feel no secret emotion upon seeing a spot so filled with you? Then, without waiting for her reply, I led her to the rock and pointed out her initials carved upon it a thousand times together with verses by Tasso and Petrarch which reflected my condition at the time I copied them. On seeing them again myself after such an interval, I realized how powerfully objects can recall the violent emotions we once experienced in their company.

¹ These mountains are so high that half an hour after the sun has set their peaks are still lit by its rays, and the red glow tints their white crests a love shade of rose visible from a great distance.
I said to her with some vehemence: Oh Julie, my only and everlasting love, here is the place where the most constant lover that ever lived once sighed for you; here is the retreat where your beloved image was his whole happiness and prepared him for the one he would one day receive from you yourself. Then, there was neither fruit nor shade; no grass or flowers carpeted the turf. The paths of the little brooks ran undivided, and the singing of the birds was stilled. Only the voracious hawk, the sinister crow and the terrible eagle of the Alps made the caverns echo with their screams. Huge sheets of ice hung down from all these rocks, and wreaths of snow alone adorned the trees. Everything here breathed the hardships of winter and the horror of the frost. Only the fire burning within me could make it endurable, and all my days were spent thinking of you. Here is the rock on which I would sit and contemplate your happy dwelling from afar; on this one I wrote the letter that touched your heart, and these sharp stones served me as chisels with which to cut your name. Here I crossed the frozen stream to bring back one of your letters carried off by a gust of wind; there I came to read and kiss a thousand times the last one that you wrote me. There is the ledge where with a dark and longing eye I measured the depth of the abyss. Finally it was here I came before my sad departure to weep at the news that you were dying and to swear that I would never survive you. Maiden too constantly adored, oh you for whom I was born; must I revisit this place with you beside me and regret the time spent here alone lamenting your absence... I was about to go on; but Julie, seeing me approach the edge of the cliff, became frightened and seized my hand. She pressed it in silence, gazing at me tenderly and barely suppressing a sigh. Then suddenly she turned away, leading me by the arm. Let us return, my
friend, she said in a faltering voice, the air in this place is not good for me. I sighed and followed her without a word, and parted forever from that sad retreat, as though I were parting from Julie herself.

We made our way slowly back to the harbor with an occasional detour, and then separated. Julie wanted to be alone, and I continued my walk without much awareness of what direction I took. The boat had not yet been repaired when I returned, and, since the seas were still running high, we ate a melancholy supper with downcast eyes and distracted attention, eating little and speaking still less. After supper we sat on the beach and waited for the moment we would be able to leave. Little by little the moon rose, the water became calmer and Julie suggested that we set out. I took her hand to help her into the boat and it never occurred to me to release it after I had taken my seat beside her. We maintained a profound silence. The even rhythm of the oars threw me into a reverie. The carefree singing of the snipes, recalling the happiness of a bygone time, instead of raising my spirits only added to my sadness. Little by little I felt the melancholy that had been oppressing me begin to swell. The serene sky, the soft moonlight, the silver shimmer of the water around us, all the most delicious sensations intertwined, even the presence of that object that I held most dear, nothing could distract my heart from a thousand painful reflections.

I began by recalling another such excursion taken in that happy period of our first love. All the delightful sensations that then had

---

1 The snipe of lake Geneva is not at all the same bird known by that name in France. The livelier and more animated song of our bird on summer nights gives the lake a fresh and spirited air which makes its shores still more enchanting.
filled my soul were retraced upon it now in order to torment me. All
the adventures of our youth, our studies, our conversations, our
meetings, our joys,

E tanta fede, e si dolci memorie.

E si lungo costume!

and a host of insignificant objects awoke in me the image of my bygone
happiness; all pressing themselves upon my recollection in order to
increase my present misery. All is over, I said to myself, those
times, those happy times have vanished forever. Alas they will never
return; and we live on....! and we are together....! and our hearts
beat still as one....! It seemed to me that I could have born her
death or absence patiently, and that I had been less unhappy during
all the period of our separation. While grieving when we were apart,
the hope of seeing her again would always ease my heart; I told myself
that a single instant by her side would erase all my sorrows. At least
I could imagine the possibility of some day attaining a state less
cruel than my own. But to be beside her, but to see her, speak to her,
love her, adore her, and while almost still possessing her, to feel
her lost to me forever. This threw me into such a rage and frenzy that
little by little it brought me to despair. I soon began to formulate
sinister projects in my mind, and in a transport of rage that makes me
shudder when I think of it, I was violently tempted to throw her and
myself into the sea and there in her arms to end both my life and my
long miseries. This dreadful temptation finally became so strong that
I was obliged to let go of her hand brusquely and go to the bow of
the ship.

There my agitation began to take another course as little by
little a gentler sentiment took possession of my soul. Tenderness
overcame despair; I burst into a flood of tears, and this state com-
pared with the one I had just thrown off was not entirely unpleasant.
I wept hard and long, and I was relieved. When I had sufficiently
recovered, I returned to Julie and took her hand again. She was
holding her handkerchief and I felt that it was wet. Ah, I said
softly, I see that our hearts have never ceased to understand each
other! That is true, she answered with feeling, but let this be the
last time they speak to one another in this tone. We then began to
talk quietly together, and at the end of an hour arrived home without
further accidents. On our return I discovered by the light that her
eyes were red and swollen, and she must have found mine in little
better condition. After the fatigue of that day Julie was in sore
need of rest. She retired to her room, and I too went to bed.

Here, my friend, is the account of the day in my life in which I
experienced without exception the most intense emotions I have ever
known. I hope it will be the crisis that brings me back to myself.
What is more, I can tell you that his adventure has done more to con-
vince me of man's freedom and the merit of virtue. How many people
are but slightly tempted and succumb. As for Julie; my eyes beheld, and
my heart bears proof: she sustained on that day the most terrible
combat human soul could ever know, and she vanquished. But how was I
able to remain so far from her? Oh Edward, when you were tempted by
your mistress, and you were able to overcome both your own desires and
hers, is it possible that you nothing but a man! Without you I might
well have been lost. A hundred times on that perilous day, the memory
of your virtue restored to me my own.