

CHAPTER I

A gentle but insistent brushing on the cheek drew Léonie from deep sleep. She blinked her eyes in the darkness and murmured, “Is that you, Simon?”

“Dreaming of someone else?” laughed Simon, who was sitting beside her on the bed.

Holding onto his arm, Léonie pushed off the heavy quilt and sat up. “No. I wasn’t dreaming,” she said in a sleepy voice. “When the children were little I slept so lightly. I could jump right out of bed. But now I sleep so soundly.”

Simon gently removed her fingers from his arm and got up. “Madame Lefebvre’s servant is waiting for you downstairs.”

“Is everything alright?”

“The labour has just started and is moving along quickly.”

“What time is it?”

“Four o’clock. I’ve started the bread so I’m going back downstairs.”

Used to finding his way around in the dark, Simon headed to the door of their small bedroom. Léonie got up and felt around for her clothes that she had left on a chair. As she dressed, she went over the pregnancy in her mind. It had gone smoothly except for a bit of lethargy at the end. The baby was in a good position, head down, and it was giving vigorous little kicks that knocked the wind out of its mother. Now it was time for the delivery. The labour should be quick.

Léonie picked up her midwifery bag from the corner of the room and made her way across the corridor to the room opposite. As she had done so many times over the years,

she stopped to listen for the breathing of her sleeping daughters: Cécile, thirteen and Flavie, sixteen. She was filled with conflicting emotions as she prepared to wake up the eldest so she could assist at a delivery for the first time. For a brief moment, Léonie saw herself at Flavie's age, excited and scared, as she prepared to accompany her aunt, an experienced midwife, to a birth.

Knowing they had to hurry, Léonie bent over her eldest daughter and squeezed her shoulder, "Wake up! Get dressed. We have to go."

Flavie sat up as Léonie hurried out of the bedroom. Her head fuzzy with sleep, she sat still for several minutes before realizing that she was finally going to start her apprenticeship. Since turning sixteen just a month previous, she had accompanied her mother on prenatal visits to the homes of several different ladies but she had never been present at a delivery. Suddenly the vague anxiety of the past few days transformed into real apprehension. It was for good reason that women in labour sent their older children away! Flavie was overcome by an intense desire to lie back down beside her sister and let sleep envelop her in its warm embrace.

But Flavie's curiosity for her mother's work gradually returned and her fear was overcome by excitement. For years she had been listening transfixed to Léonie's stories, bombarding her mother with questions that were sometimes even she could not answer. She had recently even persuaded her father to take out two medical treatises from the library of the *Institut canadien*. She had found them a difficult but fascinating read. And now the decisive moment had arrived; if she still fervently desired to be a midwife after attending a birth, Léonie would oversee her apprenticeship.

Flavie slid silently and cat-like out of bed, squatted over the chamber pot and quickly dressed. Running her hands along the wall, she felt her way out into the narrow corridor. A faint light from the first floor guided her to the staircase and then down the narrow, steep stairs that creaked under her weight. She entered the large kitchen where her mother, a tall slim figure, was pouring a cup of water for a man seated at the table and yawning sleepily.

Flavie reached for her bonnet on a hook near the staircase and slipped it on, covering her two long braids. Léonie ran her fingers through her long brown hair sprinkled with silver and then divided it into two strands that she rolled up into two small chignons and pinned behind her ears. She then put on her bonnet and they both covered their shoulders with long, coloured shawls.

Thirsty, Flavie grabbed the jug in the middle of the table and raised it to her lips. For once Léonie, too distracted to notice, did not object. Simon pushed open the door from the backyard and entered the kitchen with an armful of wood that he then noisily dropped on the floor beside the stove. The son of a baker, he continued the tradition by rising before sunrise one day a week to knead the bread.

“See you later!” called Léonie.

Simon was of medium height, thin as a rail but strong and energetic. His dark blue eyes and short but abundant greying hair softened his somewhat severe features. He gave his wife a light kiss on the cheek. After doing the same to Flavie, he said encouragingly to her, “*Bon courage!*”

Flavie grabbed an apple from a large bowl on the sideboard and followed her mother through the doorway into Simon’s large classroom that occupied the rest of the ground

floor of their home. School was still out for the summer and so all the desks and chairs had been stacked against the wall, freeing up space around the stove for several rocking chairs. Léonie unlocked the front door and the two of them, followed by Madame Lefebvre's servant, came out onto the veranda and walked down the short path to the wooden gate.

The sky was still black but sprinkled with stars and Flavie could see from the crescent moon low on the horizon that it was almost dawn. On this night of September 1845 the air was frosty and she wrapped her shawl tightly around her. The servant instructed them to take a seat in the wagon waiting at the curb for them. Before mounting, Flavie stroked the horse's muzzle and it bobbed its head in gratitude. A lantern perched at the top of a pole cast a feeble light over the street. They travelled eastward on St. Joseph Street toward Old Montreal, the residential and commercial heart of the city, founded some two centuries earlier. In their district of Faubourg Sainte-Anne, it was one of the few streets that had been surfaced and furnished with gutters to collect the runoff. Flavie loved the muffled sound of the horseshoes on the macadam.

The wagon set off and the horses quickly fell into a brisk pace. Flavie had never been out at such an early hour and she gazed in wonder at the wooden houses and large yards lining the street. All the shops and *ateliers* were closed: the grocer, the blacksmith, the wood lot were all quiet. The rumbling of the wagon woke up a rooster in a neighbouring yard and he gave a feeble crow. A pig sleeping on the wooden sidewalk grunted as they passed by.

"There's old Monsieur Loiselle's pig again!" grumbled Léonie. "He knows animals are not to roam the streets!"

“He never fixes his fence,” said Flavie, her quavering voice betraying intense excitement.

Occasionally some light would filter through closed shutters. Flavie imagined women preparing lunch for their husbands, then seeing them off to work in the small *ateliers* springing up around the city or at one of the nearby construction sites. Flavie crunched on the apple warming in her hands and observed her mother’s face in the gentle dawn light – her sharp, triangular chin, her thin lips and prominent nose. Fine lines now edged her almond-shaped eyes, which could be either an intense brown or green, depending on the intensity of the light reflected in them.

Catching her mother’s eye, Flavie smiled broadly. Léonie responded by gently squeezing her arm. They were crossing the northern part of Griffintown, the Irish district of Montreal. The pubs were closed at this hour but men were slumped against houses, sleeping off the previous night’s revelry. Beside well-kept houses with neat little gardens were the dilapidated shacks of poor Irish families just recently arrived in the colony, desperate to escape the potato famine ravaging their homeland. The streets were busier now; a carriage rumbled past and men with caps slanted over their eyes rushed by with long strides on their way to the docks. The workday began early for stevedores.

A few while later, the wagon emerged onto McGill Street. The street was lit by gas lamps and Flavie gazed in wonder as a man perched high on a ladder extinguished their flames. They passed by burly horses pulling wagons loaded with barrels and sacks of merchandise. Young boys, already out earning their keep, urged on dogs pulling little carts with lighter, more delicate loads. Flavie could hear the hum of activity from the

port: the creaking of ship hulls bobbing on the swaying water, the clacking of sails and the cries of sailors readying ships for departure.

“If ever you feel unwell,” said Léonie suddenly, “just let me know and then quietly leave the room. There will be lots of waters and blood, and sometimes the mother even passes her...”

“Maman!” protested Flavie in an exasperated tone. “You’ve already told me a million times!”

“I’m sorry,” said Léonie. It was certainly true that in recent weeks she had filled Flavie’s ears with birth stories, sparing her very few details. But how can one ever adequately describe birth, an event so deeply carnal, so full of powerful smells and cries?

After winding for several hundred feet through the maze of streets in Old Montreal, the wagon came to a stop in a lane behind some buildings on St. Paul Street. Mother and daughter climbed two stone steps and entered a house through a narrow door. They walked down a dark corridor and emerged into the kitchen where a corpulent woman rose to greet them.

“Bonjour Angèle!”

“Here, unwrap yourself and have a cup of fine tea,” said the cook.

They removed their shawls while Angèle served them steaming cups of tea and slices of bread. Flavie could sense that her mother was impatient to see her lady but she herself was happy to take a few moments to relax in front of the gentle warmth of the purring stove. The cook looked at the girl with curiosity, and Léonie explained in her low, melodic voice, “This is my daughter, Flavie. She wants to learn the trade.”

“That’s good!” said the servant. “We can never have too many matrons.”

After taking a sip of her tea, Léonie said gently, “There will always be women who are eager to help their sisters at times like this. You, Angèle, would you not help your mistress if there was no one else around?”

At the thought of such a horrible eventuality, the cook crossed herself and responded with great emotion, “Please God that such a calamity should never befall us! For I am still a girl and I would not know what to do!”

“But of course you would know what to do! You would give her a good strong *tisane*, walk with her when she is in *travail* and encourage her with sweet words.”

Still curious, Angèle asked Flavie how old she was.

“Sixteen. Maman promised that I would start my training when I turned sixteen.”

“Well, it must be a very long training then!” laughed Angèle mischievously. “I have never seen such a young matron.”

“Yes, most midwives are married women or widows who learn the trade much later in life,” conceded Léonie, with a serious expression of her face. “But unfortunately we don’t have schools here for learning the trade like they do in Europe. Flavie has shown great interest and I am happy to teach her. Of course, her apprenticeship will be long for it is hard for a woman who has never experienced the delivery herself to know of what it is about.”

Flavie suppressed a smile at the wide-eyed expression on Angèle’s face. The cook was clearly dumbfounded by the conversation and Flavie wondered if she had really understood everything they had said.

“I must go and see my lady,” said Léonie, rising from her chair. “Coming, Flavie? Thank you for the tea, Angèle.”

Flavie picked up her mother's bag. She loved the feel of the smooth, worn leather of its handle. She knew its contents by heart, having examined them many times at the kitchen table in the company of her younger sister Cécile. She had already tried out the scissors and clamps, and sniffed the little bags of herbs, the liquid-filled vials and the special soap.

The two women climbed the servants' staircase to the second floor. Although Flavie had already visited the house with her mother three weeks earlier, she still marvelled at the elegant varnished furniture, the soft carpets and the large paned windows framed by beautiful drapes. Monsieur Lefebvre, who owned a large shipping supply store on Commissioner Street, was clearly a man of some means.

The door to the master bedroom was wide open and they could hear the chatter of women's voices inside the room. After knocking and announcing her presence in a loud voice, Leonie entered with Flavie just behind her. The room was brightly lit by two oil lamps and a plump woman with an enormous belly was seated on a chair by a window coloured shawl made of silk, she was surrounded by three women who had obviously dressed and done their hair in a hurry. One of them had missed a button and her dress was askew, while another had tied her hair back with just a ribbon.

Intimidated by all the eyes now turned toward them, Flavie took a few steps into the room and then stood by the wall. Léonie walked lightly up to the small group.

“When did your pains start, Alice?”

“About two o'clock this morning. I have been walking all night but I'm tired now,” she answered wearily.

“She barely has time to catch her breath!” exclaimed the youngest of the group of women. “I think the baby is to come now.”

“I was the same,” added the oldest woman. “Only the first one was long. The others just tumbled out – like an apple picker falling off his ladder!”

Léonie smiled at the thin old women, who moved about with surprising agility for being so stooped.

“Good morning, Madame Thompson. It’s been years since I’ve had the pleasure of seeing you!”

A moan from Alice, left momentarily on her own, triggered agitated glances from the women. Her back ached, she panted under the force of a powerful contraction. The women pressed in around her. Her mother, Scholastique Thompson, fanned her while the others stroked her hand and whispered reassuring words. Léonie stayed several steps back, observing her lady. She noted the drops of perspiration on her brow and, despite the pain, the relaxed expression on her face. She noted how her body collapsed limply into the chair as each contraction waned.

Flavie caught sight of a small oval-shaped stone the size of a pigeon’s egg on Alice’s belly. She knew it to be an eaglestone but she had never actually seen one. She knew the legend, that the eagle searches far and wide for a special stone, which it places in its nest to protect its chicks. Apothecaries throughout Europe sold the stones and they were passed down from generation to generation in rich families, a talisman to protect their women during childbirth.

Suddenly Alice burst out wearily, “Oh that this may end! I feel so damned heavy! And I still have the flesh of the last two. Servants are wonderful but idleness cannot help me regain my figure!”

Her mother, Scholastique Thompson, made the introductions: Alice’s aunt, Louise Saint-Amand, dressed from head to toe in black except for a purple collar, and Alice’s younger sister, Azelda Lajoie, who had travelled all the way from Trois-Rivières to accompany Alice during her pains. Léonie turned and motioned to Flavie to approach. The girl finally made eye contact with the woman in labour.

“*Bonjour* Madame Lefebvre.”

“*Bienvenue*. I really did not expect you to come for my travail.”

“Is there some inconvenience?” asked Léonie. “We did talk about it on several occasions....”

Alice Lefebvre raised a hand to stop her, before abandoning herself to the next contraction. Flavie observed, wide-eyed. She had seen women in this stage of labour before, including her aunts who had paced around their kitchens in Longueuil, leaning against the wall or grabbing onto the back of a chair during a contraction. She was fascinated by this pain that seemed to spread like a wave through the body. Her mother had explained its purpose to her several times, describing how the womb pushes the baby down and how the neck of the womb widens with each push.

Léonie asked her patient to describe what she was feeling as best she could. But she was not too insistent; after all, it was Alice’s third baby and she knew how to distinguish between the false contractions of late pregnancy and real contractions, which increase in

frequency and intensity over time. Alice also knew that the animal urge to push would happen all by itself, after the contractions had sufficiently enlarged the neck of the womb.

“So it’s true.” said Scholastique quietly. ”You are indeed forming your daughter in the trade.”

Léonie, who was checking her lady’s pulse, nodded in the affirmative. Scrutinizing Flavie, the old woman continued in her slightly quavering voice, “The rumour is already making the rounds. At our last meeting of the Board of the Ladies of Charity, someone said they had run into the two of you.”

“I have visited Madame Lefebvre, your daughter, as well as two other of Maman’s ladies” declared Flavie, overcoming her timidity.

Azelda interjected stiffly, “I am astonished that your *curé* would agree to such... such... a new situation. It would be unthinkable in Trois-Rivières!”

Léonie was squatting in front of Alice, palpating her belly through her nightgown. She turned to Flavie and motioned her to come closer. Flavie placed her hands beside her mothers’. While the labouring woman took short, rapid breaths, she felt the uterine muscle harden, becoming taut and completely resistant to any pressure from her hand.

“There, Alice. This one is over. Touch here, Flavie. These are the feet. Don’t be afraid to press.”

Flavie could vaguely feel something solid but she could not tell what part of the baby’s body it was. She stood up and Scholastique asked her kindly, “Do you like this trade?”

“Yes, I think so...,” stammered Flavie. “With everything that Maman has told me...”

“Girls will refuse to marry if they see what really happens to women in childbirth!” said Louise in a disapproving tone as she wiped her niece’s forehead.

“Girls already know,” retorted Flavie without thinking.

“But a woman in the travail is completely different from a sow or a cat with litter!” protested Azelda, an expression of outrage on her face.

“But it is really not that different,” commented Léonie, as she assessed the shape of Alice’s belly, applying light pressure at the top of the belly and working downwards.

“Of course, the daughters of the common people see and hear everything,” continued Alice’s sister in a condescending tone. “This will never happen to my daughters, I assure you! They will be chaperoned right up until the day of their marriage.”

“Yes, nowadays good families lock up their girls in big mansions and convents!” said Scholastique sarcastically.

“Yes, the world has changed so much,” sighed Léonie. “When I was young, we didn’t worry so much about the virtue of our girls.”

“But the streets are so dangerous now!” said Azelda angrily. “With so many foreigners from Lord knows where...”

“You make me laugh, you and your talk of how dangerous Trois-Rivières is!” scoffed Scholastique. “Try taking a stroll in the alley ways of Faubourg Québec at night, see how dangerous that is!”

“Is it very painful, Alice?” asked Léonie. The woman was now squirming uncomfortably and panting.

“Much less than for my first!” she puffed.

Léonie went to retrieve a salve from her bag. She then kneeled in front of Alice and slipped her hands under her nightgown. Flavie guessed, from the rather blissful expression on Alice's face, that she was massaging her vulva to make the tissues more supple and able to stretch for the baby's passage.

Continuing with her massage, Léonie remarked in a pensive voice, "Gone are the days when women have to accept the suffering of childbirth, telling themselves they deserve it and that they will be recompensed in heaven. Thanks to science, it is now much easier to intervene when needed to help both mother and baby."

"Léonie, I've known you since the day you arrived in this city," declared Scholastique, somewhat pompously. "Have I told you the story?" she added, looking at her sister and daughter. They nodded vigorously in the affirmative but the old woman pretended not to notice.

"It was a terribly cold day in February. I was doing my rounds for the Ladies of Charity in the poorest parts of the city, where the immigrants spend their first winter in shacks not fit for cows and pigs. I found a woman in travail in a shack, all alone. I would not have believed it possible! So I left..."

"Not before covering her with your coat," interjected Léonie.

"I went and knocked at the house next door. But there was no one home. Finally, I found a man, a nice Irishman, who knew Léonie because his son was a student at her husband's school."

"You mean Daniel Hoyle?" asked Flavie, astonished.

"The man's name is Thomas," said Léonie.

The old woman added proudly, as if she had been personally responsible for the good turn of events, “I immediately knew that Léonie Montreuil was not like other midwives. She apprenticed under her aunt for many years. And she has read many learned treatises and taken courses offered by some of the most respected doctors in our city. And to this day I recommend to all of my friends.”

“Your support has been precious to me,” said Léonie gratefully. “It has certainly made it much easier to make a reputation for myself.” Then turning to the labouring woman: “That’s enough now, Alice. Your secrets do not need any more stretching, they are already nice and supple!”

Flavie had not known that their friend Thomas Hoyle had helped Léonie get started when she was a young midwife. She thought warmly of him and his two sons, Jeremy and Daniel, who had landed in Montreal many years earlier after a terrible voyage across the Ocean. Their first year as immigrants had been difficult but Thomas, because he could read and write, had been able to find a better job than many of his illiterate countrymen. Only Daniel had attended Simon’s school and he had become a frequent visitor at their home over the years. But it had been so long since they had seen him.

“Before the pain in my articulations got too bad,” continued Scholastique, “I would visit the poor *quartiers* every winter for the Priests of St. Sulpice. I have seen such dreadfully poor people in my long life on this Earth, but even poor people always have family or a neighbour in the village to help them. We even welcome beggars into our homes. But these newcomers from across the ocean...”

She bit her lip and leaned toward her daughter, trying to put on a more cheerful air. “But enough of these dark imaginings! We must not taint the delivery!”

Léonie turned to Flavie. “Please open the shutters. It is light now and Alice needs some fresh air.”

“Open the windows!” exclaimed Louise, who was still standing behind her niece. “But drafts are so dangerous!”

“Many still think so,” replied Léonie. “I know it is customary to give birth in a closed room. But they now say stagnant air is unhealthy. We must just make sure Alice is well covered.”

“You’re not too hot are you, Alice?” asked Louise in a worried voice, leaning toward her niece.

“Oh, I am so hot! You know me, the sweat flows unheeded! Please, do as your mother says, Flavie. I have complete confidence in her.”

The window looked out onto St. Paul Street, which bustled with activity even at this early hour. Wagons and carts rumbled by, the clapping of their wheels echoing off the cobblestones. Shopkeepers were opening the shutters on their storefronts. Flavie could make out the sign of a milliner and another of a notary. The street was narrow and lined with tall houses huddled close together, their peaked roofs silhouetted against the morning sky.

“*Bon matin, mademoiselle!*” called out a friendly voice.

Although not believing the salutation was addressed to her, Flavie looked around to see who was calling. She discovered a young man at the window just across the street from her. He had just opened the shutters of a large dormer window and was watching her, grinning broadly.

“*Bonjour, monsieur,*” said Flavie.

“And how is Madame Lefebvre this morning?” asked the young man.

Scholastique appeared beside Flavie and rested her elbows on the window sill.

“She’s in labour, young man. You will have news later.”

“Oh! Pardon me for disturbing you, my ladies. Tell her Henri wishes her Godspeed.”

Alice, who had heard everything from her chair near the window, laughed and shouted out, “Have a nice day, Henri!”

Flavie drew back from the window, leaving it open for the cool morning air to permeate the room. She sat down on the floor, with her back against the wall, and then drew up her knees and rested her chin on them. Alice’s aunt left the room with an annoyed expression while her mother sat down on a chair beside the labouring woman. Her sister stood behind the chair, moistening her forehead with a damp cloth. Léonie settled herself on a stool nearby. Alice was now gripping her mother’s hand ferociously with each contraction. Flavie was savouring the tranquility that filled the room when suddenly Alice’s aunt rushed back into the room with a look of alarm on her face.

“Alice! Do you still have the amulet?”

She immediately looked to her right thigh and with her fingers felt through her nightgown for the amulet. Her face relaxed as she murmured, “Yes, it is still there, tightly tied.”

“It was my husband who caught those snakes,” remembered Scholastique, “before I gave birth to my first. Since then, all the women in my family have used it.”

“They say snakeskin has many wonderful properties,” commented Léonie. She was looking deeply into Alice’s eyes, anchoring her as she panted through a contraction.

“Nowadays,” sighed the old woman, “there are those who mock such things, saying they are nothing but old wives’ tales.”

Focused on her patient, Léonie had so far remained apart from the general conversation. Even Azelda’s allusions to the weak morals of the working classes – comments that normally would have raised her ire – flowed over her like water. But she could not remain indifferent to what Scholastique had just alluded to: the increasing presence of doctors at the deliveries of women from the *bourgeoisie*. She had seen several ladies leave her care for that of a doctor, despite there being no good reason to do so. In Montreal, it was becoming more fashionable to have a doctor, who was seen as more knowledgeable and better equipped to deal with any problems.

With great effort, Léonie suppressed the anger welling up inside her and turned her attention to Alice, whose contractions were getting closer and closer together. The other women, now weary, moved lightly about the room, offering her drinks, fanning her and encouraging her. A servant entered with a pile of clean sheets and a basin of water, which she placed on the floor beside the wall. Léonie could hear the voices of men calling out to each other and the shouts of boisterous children playing on the sidewalks. The bells of Notre-Dame rang seven o’clock.

Léonie asked Alice if her husband would be returning from Europe that evening as planned. She answered in the affirmative.

“What a beautiful gift this is for him!” said Léonie enthusiastically.

During a particularly strong contraction, Alice felt an irresistible urge to push. Her sister and Léonie helped her move into her favourite position for giving birth – kneeling on the floor and supporting her upper body against the back of a chair. Azelda sat

backwards on the chair facing Alice and encouraged her as best she could. Léonie washed her hands with her special strong-smelling soap and placed a clean sheet underneath the labouring woman, before then taking her place on the little stool she had positioned behind Alice.

Flavie had often heard the panting and cries of women during expulsion, but she was still deeply moved by the sight of Alice, who seemed to be completely dominated by a deep animal urge. She understood that the whole of Alice's existence was dominated by this supreme muscular force that had taken possession of her body and was contracting the uterus and making her wince and moan. On the second push, there was a sharp popping sound that made Flavie jump.

"The waters have broken. It will be more intense now," said Leonie calmly. She had just slipped her hands underneath Alice's nightgown.

A warm, sweet odour filled the room. The next contraction seemed even stronger and Alice let out a long wail and arched her back. She clasped her sister's hand so tightly that the latter winced in pain.

"Don't push too hard or you'll tear. Breathe slowly, like this," said Léonie, demonstrating. "At the next contraction, follow the urge and let the little one come on its own. Don't force things."

Alice stared into her sister's eyes and tightly clasped the hands of her mother and aunt. Flavie sensed that they were anchoring her, preventing her from being swept away by the sensations surging through her.

"It burns!" cried Alice.

"The baby is almost here. Flavie, please close the shutters."

Flavie ran to the window and then quickly returned. She hesitated a brief moment and then kneeled down beside her mother. As Léonie raised the nightgown with her arms, Flavie could not resist her intense curiosity. Ignoring the outraged expression on Azelda's face, she leaned forward. She first saw Alice's pale fat legs and then the sheet beneath them, soaked by the gush of fluid several minutes earlier. Bending forward a bit more, she watched as Léonie slipped her fingers inside the vagina next to the baby's head, which was wrinkled and spotted with blood. She could see a cushion of soft brown down covering the top of its head. Fascinated, she watched as another contraction enlarged the opening of the vagina and the baby's head gradually emerged. Léonie seemed to be gently guiding it by applying light pressure.

Alice let out a loud cry and the head exited completely, accompanied by a watery, slithering sound.

"One last push for the shoulders," said Léonie in her calm, soothing voice. "There! Your baby is born. A boy."

Flavie was transfixed at the sight of the puffy, wet little face. Léonie placed the little baby dappled with mucous and blood on the warm wet sheets, laying him on his side to prevent any compression of the umbilical cord. She observed him intently as Scholastique joined her to gaze at her new grandson. He seemed to be perfectly formed. He waved an arm, then a leg. Out of the corner of her eye, Flavie saw Alice's aunt slip her hand under Alice's nightgown, untie the snakeskin amulet and remove it. It was believed the mother could succumb to a violent hemorrhage if it was not removed immediately following the expulsion.

After a few minutes, the baby opened his eyes and looked with surprise at the faces encircling him. Léonie felt a familiar rush of emotion, her heart swelling with an intense tenderness that spread like a wave through her entire being. Each new birth moved her just as deeply as had the first one so many years before.

Léonie felt caressed by the baby's completely new, pure gaze. She made a conscious effort to express on her face the immense happiness she felt in contemplating this tiny being, so fragile and vulnerable, so in need of his mother's protection. At every delivery at which she assisted, Léonie felt the same visceral sensation that had filled her to the depths of her being at the birth of her own children: a deep spontaneous bond, absolute and possessive.

Then, as always, this state of intense joy gradually faded to be replaced by a sadness that was at first diffuse and then more and more acute. For a few moments, Léonie refused with all her being to place this radiant little soul in the insensitive, clumsy hands of adults. She wanted to clasp the baby close to her breast as long as possible, to shield his tender heart from the cold brutality and indifference of the world. She wanted to protect him from the harsh words of the priests, so intent on instilling fear in his innocent heart. To shield him from his first confession, when he would be forced to invent all sorts of stories about his sins in order to appease the priests. She wanted to forbid his parents from taking him out of school and sending him off to work when he was still a boy. And she wanted to encourage him as a young man to abandon himself wholeheartedly to the joys of love and passion.

With a deep sigh, Léonie leaned her face in close to the baby and looked intently into his blinking eyes.

“Welcome to our world my little one. I wish you much joy,” she whispered.

The little baby, who was still attached to his mother by the umbilical cord, suddenly turned rosy pink and gave a sharp little cry that seemed to surprise even himself. Alice, who was now kneeling on the floor beside them, laughed with relief. As if a sign had been given, the other women hugged and congratulated her.

Flavie suddenly felt a wave of heat spread through her body. Surprised by the sensation, she remained seated for a few moments and then slowly got up. Her first few steps were hesitant and she had to support herself by holding onto the furniture. Fortunately no one noticed because of all the activity and excitement of the birth. Feeling in need of fresh air and quiet, she left the room and emerged into a corridor now faintly lit by daylight. She could hear voices downstairs, spreading news of the happy event.

Images of the birth filled her head as she flopped down into an old chair. She was amazed by how so completely the process of birth takes over the woman’s body. Despite her mother’s many descriptions, despite the many times she had seen animals give birth, she only now truly understood the deep transformation involved. She was awestruck by the solemn beauty of an act so obviously directed by nature, yet so beyond nature.

After some time had passed, Flavie was drawn back into the room by the sound of wailing. Alice was settling herself in bed, her back propped up against a great mass of pillows. Her aunt handed her the baby and Alice opened her nightgown. Flavie was suddenly afraid that the baby would never be able to take such a large nipple in his tiny mouth but, much to her relief, he latched on almost immediately and started sucking clumsily. She watched, more and more amused, as the baby clenched his little fists and opened his eyes wide at his mother, who gazed at him with loving tenderness.

A movement by the window caught Flavie's attention. A servant was mopping the floor where Alice had given birth. On a sheet nearby, Flavie saw a brown mass covered in blood vessels.

"The afterbirth." murmured Léonie, placing a hand on her daughter's shoulder. "I am going to examine it. Coming?"

Flavie shook her head and her mother watched as she went instead to admire the baby at his mother's breast. She imagined what her daughter must be feeling – wonderment, surprise, uneasiness, distaste. Suddenly she rebuked herself for having embarked on the apprenticeship. She had detected signs of genuine interest in her daughter but perhaps she was still too young, too sensitive. Simon would hold it against her for a very long time if Flavie was now marked forever, afraid to give birth herself. He had often said that the apprenticeship should be delayed until she was seventeen or eighteen. With a heavy heart, Léonie rose and asked the servant to dispose of the afterbirth. Monsieur Lefebvre would bury it in a corner of the garden next to a sapling.

Two hours later, after having downed a hearty meal, Flavie and her mother stepped out onto St. Paul Street into the hot sun of late morning. With a full stomach but heavy with fatigue, the two women set off on foot to their home in Faubourg Sainte-Anne. They walked for a long time without saying a word, crossing merchants headed to the inn for lunch, women returning from the market pushing little carts full of provisions, and children running with their little dogs in the middle of the street.

They were just arriving in Griffintown when Flavie suddenly blurted out, "It's not difficult to deliver a baby!"

“I do not deliver the baby,” said Léonie firmly. “The woman does it all by herself. I am only there to accompany her and to help if needed. Women need to be reassured and taken care of.”

“What would you have done if the baby was stuck?”

“There are several different measures I can take. But I have not the heart to speak of this now. It has been a long night and I am tired.”

“A midwife has to be ready to go at any time doesn’t she?”

“Yes, that is true,” agreed Léonie, “but it has never been such a great inconvenience to me.”

“I missed you in the morning when you weren’t there.”

“You never told me!” said Léonie, astonished.

“And at night. Sometimes I would wake up with a strange feeling...not really a nightmare but like a heavy weight pressing down on my chest. I would call Papa but he sleeps so deeply. So I would go and lie down beside him and tell him my fears...while he snored away!”

Flavie laughed at these memories but then, spotting a tall slim figure with thick black hair, she ran off to join her childhood friend, Agathe Sénéchal. Léonie stopped for a moment and looked up at the sky filled with fluffy white clouds. She had welcomed one more little baby into the world and the thought suddenly filled her with intense fear. When immersed in her work of helping a woman in childbirth, it never occurred to her that something could go terribly wrong. But afterwards, she trembled thinking about what could have happened.

Returning her gaze to the horizon, she saw her husband striding toward her. When he had reached her, she dropped her bag on the ground and clasped his two hands, barely able to contain herself from collapsing into his arms. Simon knew how fragile she felt after a birth. So he put his arm around her shoulders, drew her closely to his side and slowly led her home. He was not much taller than her, yet Léonie felt so marvellously small beside him.

CHAPTER VIII

In mid-December, a frigid cold settled over Montreal and winter arrived in earnest. The carters were relieved for this meant they could finally haul their sleighs out of storage and be finished with soggy roads. Léonie and Flavie were thankful too because it would now be easier to travel to their ladies' homes. And they could be called out in any sort of weather to assist at a delivery. Once, during a violent snowstorm, one of their ladies had given birth without Léonie, assisted only by a sister and neighbour. And the outcome had been tragic: the cord was wrapped twice around the baby's neck and the baby perished.

The first blizzard of the season had buried Montreal in snow, forcing its inhabitants into hibernation until spring. The port and canal had closed, the many construction sites had halted operations, and thousands of tradesmen and labourers had holed up in their homes to pass the long cold winter. At the Montreuil, the mood was rather sombre following the news that Flavie's brother Laurent was leaving for the United States. Even the prospects of New Years' celebrations with family in Longueuil failed to raise spirits.

Feeling melancholy and seeking solitude, Léonie spent hours working away at her loom in the bedroom. Heating pipes had been installed in November so the room was cozy and warm, unlike the other bedrooms where piles of warm blankets were needed to keep warm. Flavie occupied herself by reading and attending to household tasks, devoting extra care to the preparation of family meals and her mending. Whenever possible she took long walks around the neighbourhood, sometimes going all the way down to the St. Lawrence River. She never tired of watching the comings and goings of horse-drawn carts out on the ice. There were garbage collectors, unloading their refuse

onto the ice for it to be carried off downstream after the spring break-up. And the water carriers, now able to venture out into the middle of the river, piercing the ice and drawing their precious liquid. During the warmer months, the water close to shore was too dirty, forcing them to fill up from a fountain or one of the recently installed public faucets, or make the long journey upstream to a cleaner site.

Laurent, on the other hand, was in a cheerful mood, whistling as he prepared for his departure and went about his daily chores. He helped his father correct homework and gave special lessons to some of the students. Sometimes he and Simon would talk late into the night about American society and politics. Flavie could see that her father envied Laurent this opportunity to experience first hand the republican ideas flowering in the great country to the south of them.

Flavie and her mother hurried along St. Joseph Street in a biting wind that thrashed at their faces, leaving them gasping for air. They had wrapped great knitted scarves around their necks and over their hoods. The house of Aglaé Mandeville, the wife of a blacksmith, was fifteen minutes to the north in Faubourg Saint-Antoine. Madame Mandeville could have called upon one of the older women in the neighbourhood to help at her birth, but her first delivery had been difficult and left her bedridden for many weeks. And her husband's prosperous business accorded her an enviable social position. So she preferred to use the services of Léonie, quite willing to pay for the midwife's two routine prenatal visits.

The young pregnant woman welcomed them with a reserved smile, her little girl peaking out from behind her skirt. It was hot in the large kitchen, and the two visitors

quickly removed their coats and boots. Flavie especially liked these visits to the homes of pregnant ladies. She always felt like she was embarking on a new adventure: entering a strange house, meeting a new woman. The ladies were all so different from one another, in appearance, in personality, in mood.

“How is everything, Aglaé?” asked Léonie, looking at the woman’s big round belly of eight months. “Any pain? Discomfort?”

“It’s no better or worse than the first time.”

A reserved and melancholy woman, Aglaé used her words sparingly. She sat down on the edge of her bed, and her little girl scrambled up beside her and sat down in exactly the same way, her legs dangling. Flavie was charmed by the little girl and smiled sweetly at her.

“If you would like to raise your skirt, I will feel your belly. Here, put this over you to cover yourself.”

The baby was a good size and kicked vigorously as Léonie palpated Alice’s belly. But Léonie was worried because although the baby had descended into the pelvis, it was not yet in the head-down position. When she had finishing palpating, she let Flavie have a turn. Flavie had quickly grown used to feeling for the baby with her fingers and she was no longer afraid of hurting the mother with her firm pressing. Léonie prescribed a number of exercises for Aglaé to do; these would encourage the baby to move up in the matrix and pivot around so as to be born head first.

“Chances are good that your baby will turn, especially if you lie in this position several times a day.”

The young woman was visibly agitated by the news and so as not to worry her even more, Léonie decided not to mention that she could always attempt a manoeuvre called a “version” to turn the baby if it was still not well positioned at the beginning of labour. A baby presenting by the buttocks or feet could mean a longer and more painful birth.

Aglaé looked over at her young daughter and Flavie; the two of them were making funny faces at each other and giggling uncontrollably. Her face clouded over, as if she had just suddenly become conscious of Flavie’s presence. At their first visit a month previous, Léonie had sensed a profound discomfort in her client. She sat down beside her on the bed.

“My daughter is of great service to me during the travail and delivery. She prepares the hot water and towels. Then she observes so she can learn.”

Aglaé was silent for a moment, her eyes fixed on Flavie. Then she rose brusquely and picked up some toys lying on the floor.

“Our *curé* knows,” said Léonie.

“You mean the priest is not opposed?”

Léonie shook her head and then added mischievously, “Perhaps you have never heard, but in many regions of France, a girl holds the hand of the women during her pains, right up until the delivery. It is said the presence of a virgin is most propitious.”

Aglaé looked at her in amazement.

“I assure you! More than one old woman has recounted this to me.”

“It is not proper for a girl to be present at the delivery,” murmured the young woman, not meeting Léonie’s gaze. “She is initiated into mysteries that should only be revealed to the married.”

“Mysteries?” laughed Flavie, jostling the little girl on her knees. “I have known for a long time how babies are made and how women give birth. All girls do.”

“Birth is a completely natural act,” noted Léonie, trying hard to hide her exasperation at continually having to repeat herself. “Yes, it is linked to the act of sexual coupling, but it is also completely separate from it. You must know that we midwives are concerned only with the well-being of the mother and her baby.”

“I have already been at two births,” said Flavie, her eyes shining with excitement as she looked at Aglaé. “And Maman says it is very important that I assist at many births before starting my own practice. There is so much to learn! And not just with my head, but with my hands too. Learning the baby’s position by touching the belly takes so long!”

Delighted by her daughter’s spontaneity and the ease with which she expressed herself, Léonie smiled affectionately at her and then said in a firm voice that clearly signalled an end to the discussion, “I informed you last month that my daughter would be accompanying me throughout.”

Léonie rose and went to retrieve her coat from the rack. Flavie reluctantly put the little girl down and followed her. When they were just about to leave, Aglaé looked directly at them and said hesitantly, “My husband will come for you when my pains start.”

Mother and daughter walked along the street in the cold for several minutes before Flavie suddenly asked, “What if she forbids me to enter the house when the time comes. Will you still help her?”

“Yes, of course. But I will do everything possible to make sure you can stay with me.”

The following Sunday afternoon, Flavie sat in the rocking chair by the stove, enjoying a moment of solitude in the empty house. Her parents had gone for a short walk with Cécile, and Laurent was in the yard tending the hens. But the respite did not last long; the front door banged open and a cheerful voice called out, "Hello everyone!"

"Come in, Marie-Claire!" answered Flavie, leaping out of her rocking chair.

Entering the classroom, she was overjoyed to see Suzanne, Marie-Claire's daughter, closing the door behind them. All three embraced and Flavie said with a smile, "It's just me here but Mother will be back soon. Here, let me take your coats."

Mother and daughter unlaced their ankle boots and put on the slippers they had brought with them. They hung up their coats and followed Flavie into the kitchen. Marie-Claire chose the rocking chair while the two girls settled in straight back chairs.

"These warm days are so pleasant!" exclaimed Marie-Claire. "Suzanne and I came on foot, you know."

"What a feat!" said Flavie, bursting into laughter, thinking of how she walked everywhere.

Suzanne pulled herself up with an exaggerated air of dignity. "We could have hailed a carriage on Notre Dame Street, as proper ladies do!"

Flavie was happy to see the vivacious Suzanne that she had known when the two were students together at Simon's school. Her friend's gaiety seemed to have faded during her two years at the convent school. She was now stuffed into stylish dresses that pinched and squeezed every inch of her, her braids had been replaced by elaborate hair

styles, and her once rosy cheeks were now pale. Flavie frowned as she scrutinized her face. The pink lips and pale complexion, which ladies of the Bourgeoisie coveted so highly because they distinguished them from the working classes, had been enhanced with the subtle application of lipstick and powder.

The kitchen door suddenly burst open.

“I need the scrub brush!”

A strong odour of chicken manure wafted in as Laurent appeared in a filthy coat and woollen tuque sprinkled with bits of straw.

“Good afternoon, my ladies.” said the young man, blushing. “Pardon me!”

“No, our apologies. We arrived unannounced.”

Flavie thrust the brush into his hands and pushed him out the door. “Go on! You stink to high heaven!”

Laurent turned crimson and muttered something under his breath. Her gaze fixed on the door that had just closed behind him, Marie-Claire said, “Your Laurent is a good boy. Léonie is very proud of him. My boys, on the other hand, are so rigid in their thinking and so quick to judge.”

“All my brothers think about is getting rich and having a beautiful house,” laughed Suzanne.

“And wives who spend all her time waiting for them,” added Flavie.

“That is not for you, is it Flavie?” said Marie-Claire, smiling.

“But when you get married, children come so quickly and there is no time for anything else,” replied Flavie, after some hesitation. She still found it difficult to imagine herself married.

“But that does not mean we do not yearn for something else,” added Marie-Claire.

“You are lucky, Flavie, to have such a clear picture of your future. If I could do it all over again ... I would learn a profession.”

“What? A surveyor!” exclaimed Suzanne, rolling her eyes. “Or a journalist! Or a printer!”

Marie-Claire made an amused frown, but her emotional distress was palpable. To lighten the atmosphere, Flavie turned to Suzanne, “Please, tell me all about the convent!” You started to the other day at the bazaar...”

“No, take pity on us!” moaned Marie-Claire comically, covering her ears with her hands. “I have heard the story a dozen times already!”

“It used to be a large house in Faubourg Saint-Laurent. You know, where the notary Chambert lived. The Sisters of the Congregation of Notre Dame transformed it into a convent five years ago. There were nine of us boarding there. I didn’t mind all the studying but the lives of saints, the history of the Church, the devotions – it all took up so much of our time! And we had to prepare the patron saint celebrations for the chaplain, and decorate the chapel. We had to walk in silence, eat in silence, not show too much affection to each other, even undress at night without exposing an inch of skin, not even a tiny bit of ankle!

“Impossible!” claimed Flavie.

“First you undo a few buttons on your dress,” explained Suzanne, miming the technique with gestures, “then you put the nightgown over your head and let it fall all the way to the floor. Then you wiggle out of your dress underneath the nightgown. At first I missed home so much but then I started to like it. I made lots of friends, like Adelaide,

whose father, Monsieur Quintin, owns a factory in Faubourg Sainte-Marie. And Constance Célerier, you know, the daughter of the man who runs the ferry at Laprairie. Constance is about to make her *début*.

“Are you?”

Suzanne shot her mother a look of reproach and Flavie surmised that they were not in agreement on the issue. With affected calmness, Marie-Claire said, “Suzanne is so impatient but I think we rush our young women into marriage at too young an age. After all, isn’t that what the *début* is all about – finding a husband? I would like Suzanne to wait another year or two.”

The front door banged and Marie-Claire looked visibly relieved by the interruption. “Look, the others have returned from their walk.”

A minute later, Léonie, Simon and Cécile entered the kitchen, rosy-cheeked and laughing. After greetings and hugs, Flavie prepared hot mint tea sweetened with honey and they all sat down at the table to drink it. Simon then settled into the rocking chair with his newspaper and the three girls disappeared into the classroom.

“I have been to see our *curé* to talk about his idea of founding a new shelter, a birthing centre for destitute women,” announced Marie-Claire. “You know, he really is serious and seems to be genuinely committed to providing a place for such women to deliver.”

“One can reproach the priests and nuns for a great many things,” sighed Léonie, “but not for being indifferent to the misery around them.”

Although in this case it is easy to see that Father Chicoisneau is preoccupied with hiding “immoral” pregnancies, she thought to herself.

“For days I have been mulling over his suggestion that I oversee such an enterprise. I do not feel completely competent to take on such a responsibility but I have been thinking for some time now about resigning my seat on the Board of the Providence Asylum.

“Really?” said Léonie, astonished. “You’ve been hiding things from me. But why?”

“The priests are only too happy to have us organize charitable works, but when it comes to running these societies, they think we are incapable of doing anything on our own! We are always so closely controlled! I am fed up with the Spiritual Director and His Excellency Bishop Bourget having the ultimate say over any decision of importance.”

Marie-Claire had spent many sleepless nights, wrestling with her conscience over Father Chicoisneau’s proposal. Perhaps, she thought, this Sulpician priest would be much less particular than the Bishop about the charitable work under his patronage, even that overseen by women? After Léonie had confirmed this intuition, Marie-Claire’s confidence had grown with each passing day; she was now feeling more and more enthusiastic about the prospect of presiding over a society with such a noble cause.

“I think about how we condemn the woman more than the man – the man who seduced her – just because it is she who bears the the fruit of the sin. Is that not profoundly unjust, Léonie? A man, even a married one, can just leave and start a life elsewhere! But the woman...”

“Yes, many women who have been forced to abandon their babies have confided to me years later that they still hoped to get their child back. Our children are forever in our hearts, Marie-Claire.”

The two women were quiet as they regarded each other, intimately aware of each other's sadness. Léonie's firstborn had died at the age of five months, while Marie-Claire had lost her fourth child, a daughter, just hours after birth. The pain was still vivid for both of them. The stillness was finally broken by shouts and laughter spilling over from the classroom. Marie-Claire shook herself to recover the thread of the conversation.

"It suddenly strikes me just how unfair our world is to women," she said, passion illuminating her face with a strange glow. "Do you realize that my daughter's destiny has already been carved out for her? All that I can hope for is that she find a good man. Imagine! We place our daughters in the hands of a man, praying he will be good to her!"

Filled with indignation, Marie-Claire rose and started pacing the room, completely oblivious to Simon, who pretended to be absorbed in his paper but whose attention was riveted on the conversation. She came to an abrupt stop in front of Léonie.

"Since the beginning of time, women have been handling the finances of family businesses; now the big companies and government hire accountants, but only men! Before women could plead their case before the courts of law but now this is unthinkable!"

Without warning, Marie-Claire flopped down in her chair. She took a deep breath and said bitterly, "I am almost ashamed that it was Father Chicoisneau, a priest, who had to prod me into this project of creating a new shelter. I should had taken on the responsibility a long time ago, instead of wasting my time fussing over where to put vases in my parlour or how to make perfect ringlets in my hair!"

Simon slumped down behind his newspaper to hide his urge to laugh. Marie-Claire continued in a less emotional voice, "I have dictated my conditions to Chicoisneau. The

birthing centre will be run solely by its Board of Directors and this Board alone will hire the necessary staff. The centre will help all women, no exceptions. The midwives will also make home visits as needed in return for a small stipend.”

“As in Quebec City,” murmured Léonie, her heart racing.

“A midwife will be responsible for prenatal care and deliveries, and I would like very much, Léonie, if you would accept this responsibility.”

Léonie stared at her, open mouthed, and then a powerful feeling of exultation swept over her. Claspng Marie-Claire’s arm, she stammered, “Me? You want me to?”

“I do not want for them to force some illiterate old neighbourhood matron on us, someone who crosses herself at every turn.”

“Or a doctor,” added Léonie, brought rudely back down to earth. “Because that is often the custom in maternity homes.”

“I have made inquiries and visited the Lying-In Hospital here in Montreal. You are right, at least in theory: this shelter is overseen by a Board composed of doctors who are also professors at McGill College. But in practice, it is the midwife who decides everything, including when to call a doctor for a delicate intervention. This you know as well as I do...”

“And I too have thought a great deal about this project. I think it is a wonderful idea! But it would force me to give up my private practice.”

Out of the corner of her eye, Léonie saw Simon raise his head and glance in their direction with a questioning look.

“The Board will guarantee you a fixed salary,” said Marie-Claire reassuringly.

“Of course, the Board would not place any restrictions on the midwife’s right to have an apprentice and will require that patients accept her presence.”

“Of course.”

“So I would no longer have to bring up the matter of Flavie’s presence with every single client!” exclaimed Léonie with relief, turning excitedly to Simon.

“Your daughter will benefit from the best possible conditions for her apprenticeship,” added Marie-Claire. “We could even offer special courses to midwives and their apprentices so they can improve their skills, as they do in other places.”

Delighted at this idea, Léonie grabbed her cup and swallowed the cold tea in one gulp.

“We would have to think of a name for our shelter.”

“Do you think the ladies in Quebec City would mind if we called it ‘The Compassionate Society of Montreal’?”

“I could write and ask them. I like this name.”

“In my opinion, we should avoid words like ‘asylum’ and ‘home’ – words so dear to our clergy.”

The door from the classroom burst open and Flavie entered, a serious look on her face. “A visitor for you, Maman.”

“We are leaving,” announced Marie-Claire, quickly rising from her chair.

A few minutes later, Léonie motioned a thin young woman to take a seat at a table in the classroom. She was dressed from head to foot in a large man’s coat, which she refused to remove. From her rather proud demeanour, and her frank but vaguely insolent expression, Léonie guessed she worked at one of the new weaving or leather *ateliers* that

now each employed dozens of workers. Who could blame young women for preferring such work, as tedious and poorly paid as it was, to working as a domestic?

Léonie was regularly consulted by former clients and acquaintances for ailments related to the female reproductive organs. Although she was sometimes able to relieve them with fumigations, ointments or some other simple remedy, she was often forced to send the woman to the hospital. But despite the expertise of the Sisters at the hospitals, women were terrified of these places where the poor invariably went to die, and they would only agree to go as a last resort.

Free medical clinics were sprouting up across the city as both medical schools and doctors in private practice opened their doors to the poor. But Léonie hesitated to send her patients to such clinics for she felt that for all their supposed science these doctors really did not understand illness much better than her. And they were usually far too quick to get out their lancet for bleeding or their clyster for purging.

”You receive your clients in a classroom?” said the young woman incredulously, looking around her.

“Do you have any objection, Mademoiselle...?”

“Pauline. Just Pauline.”

“How may I help you then?”

After a short silence, during which Pauline obstinately stared at the floor, Léonie gently encouraged her by saying, as she so often had to, “If I am to help you, you must first tell me what is wrong. The organs of regeneration are like any other bodily part so you must learn to speak of them without shyness if you are to receive care.”

“I am not sick,” murmured the young woman.

Léonie glanced down at her waist, which seemed not to protrude from under her coat.

“If you are with child, you are not very far along. There are surely a number of matrons in your neighbourhood who can help you deliver. Because I charge a fee.”

Pauline stayed perfectly still, her gaze now fixed on Léonie’s hands, which she had crossed on the table in front of her.

“My sister sent me here,” she muttered. “She is a maid of all work. She heard her mistress speak of you.”

“If you tell me where you live, I can address you to...”

Pauline glanced around her to make sure the door was closed and that no one could hear them. She turned to gaze at Léonie, who could discern deep anguish beneath the mask of composure.

“I know that you provide many services other than the delivery of babies, so... I have not had my flowers since September, something is blocking it.”

“So, your last flow was...”

“At the end of the month.”

“So almost three months ago. Are you married?”

She shook her head.

“So you want your flowers to return. It would be best to consult a doctor. Late menses can be caused by a disease of languor or by an excess of water. It is frequent in young working women. You are also sick to your stomach?”

The young woman was about to deny this but then, catching Léonie’s expression, she stopped short. A faint smile crept over her face and she nodded in the affirmative.

“Doctors prescribe emetics for everything. But at least it may help for this.”

Léonie made the young woman memorize the name and address of the Montreal Dispensary and then went over the young woman’s supposed symptoms. Finally, Léonie warned her that the return of her flow could be very painful.

“If you do not heal to your satisfaction, come back and see me. I know some plants that could be most useful. But do not delay. The more mature the fruit, the more tightly it hangs on.”

As if Léonie had now given her permission to speak openly, Pauline leaned forward and said, “I cannot provide for the living of a child. And a wet nurse costs dearly.”

“Your family?”

“They are far away. I live in a room. I have been seeing this man for five months, he works as a painter. I met him when I was out walking one day, at the beginning of the summer. He promised to marry me as soon as he could and I said yes.”

“Now he no longer wants to?”

“He can barely support his old mother. A wife and a child, I’m sure he would leave me...”

The young woman stopped; she bit her lip, then rose brusquely and fled after a hasty thank you to Léonie. Closing the door, Léonie raged against this fear that prevented women from openly seeking help for an abortion. Wanting to destroy the fruit of the womb was seen as a crime. But was it not a crime to force a woman to bring a child into the world that would be neglected and malnourished? Who would be left to fend for itself at a young age? Who would remain uneducated and swell the ranks of those whose

existence was one of unending hardship? And they always held the woman responsible for such sad circumstances. It takes the seeds of two to make a baby!

Over supper that evening, Léonie explained Marie-Claire's project to Simon and her children. Laurent and Cécile soon lost interest and left the table. But Simon was full of questions and doubts, not happy about the prospect of an increase in his wife's workload.

"But the work schedule has not yet been decided," said Léonie patiently, "and I will arrange it so my shifts aren't too long."

"You will probably have to work all night."

"And so? exclaimed Flavie, looking angrily at her father. "Doesn't she already have to do this? You should be happy that Maman will have set hours! And that she will be better paid."

Léonie reflected for a moment, composing her thoughts.

"What if they offered you the position of head master? What if they offered you a school where you could decide what to teach and what teachers to hire? Wouldn't you jump at such an offer?"

Simon nodded his head, somewhat shamefaced.

"I feel that finally everything I know will be put to use."

"I envy you," murmured Simon bitterly. "No one offers me anything."

It pained Léonie deeply to realize that her husband had such original ideas that he frightened some people.

"You are not happy being a teacher?"

Simon did not answer. But Flavie, in her enthusiasm at the prospect of founding the Compassionate Society of Montreal, said fervently, “This is such a great opportunity for me! Papa, don’t you see?! I will be able to help at dozens of births without anyone complaining about it! And Marie-Claire even talked about courses. What a perfect idea! The Society could become the first real school for midwives in the province, where we learn everything that doctors who attend deliveries know.”

Léonie stared at her daughter, dumbfounded. Then she felt a shiver of excitement mixed with apprehension.

“What! A school for midwives! What next!” exclaimed Simon sarcastically.

Incensed at his disdain, Flavie retorted, “And why, in your learned opinion, should midwives not learn some of the same skills that doctors do?”

“Because... their nerves are not strong enough for them to perform surgeries?” said Simon tentatively.

“And how do you know if we aren’t even allowed to open a single medical treatise,” shot back Flavie, clearly exasperated. “I am sick to death of all these theories about the weaknesses of women! I find it absurd that we have to call a doctor as soon as we need to give medicine, or use an instrument, or perform surgery!”

Leaving them to argue, Léonie rose and started gathering up the cutlery. She was dizzy from so all these ideas swirling about in her head: the Compassionate Society and, now, The School of Midwifery. But one thing was sure: she could not let such a wonderful opportunity pass her by. From the depths of her being, she thanked the heavens for this offer from Marie-Claire, a chance to take on greater responsibilities and to use her knowledge and skills to help even more women.