

GEOFFREY WALL is a literary biographer, travel writer and translator. His biography of Flaubert was published to great acclaim in 2001. His translations of Flaubert, published by Penguin Books, include *Madame Bovary* (1992), *The Dictionary of Received Ideas* (1994), *Selected Letters* (1996) and *Sentimental Education* (2004). He is currently writing a biography of Napoleon.

GUSTAVE FLAUBERT

Three Tales

*Translated by* ROGER WHITEHOUSE  
*With an Introduction and Notes by*  
GEOFFREY WALL

PENGUIN BOOKS

## A SIMPLE HEART

### I

For half a century, Madame Aubain's housemaid Félicité was the envy of all the good ladies of Pont-l'Evêque.

For just one hundred francs a year,<sup>1</sup> she did all the cooking and the housework, she saw to the darning, the washing and the ironing, she could bridle a horse, keep the chickens well fed and churn the butter. What is more she remained faithful to her mistress, who, it must be said, was not the easiest of people to get on with.

Madame Aubain had married a handsome but impecunious young man, who had died at the beginning of 1809, leaving her with two very young children and substantial debts. Upon his death, she sold her properties, with the exception of the two farms at Toucques and Geffosses,<sup>2</sup> which between them provided her with an income of no more than five thousand francs in rent, and she moved out of her house in Saint-Melaine to live in another which was less costly to maintain, which had belonged to her family and which was situated behind the market.

This house had a slate roof and stood between an alley and a narrow street leading down to the river. Inside, the floors were at different levels, making it very easy to trip up. A narrow hallway separated the kitchen from the living room in which Madame Aubain remained all day long, sitting in a wicker armchair close to the casement window. Against the wainscoting, which was painted white, there stood a row of eight mahogany chairs. A barometer hung on the wall above an old piano, piled high with a pyramid-shaped assortment of packets and cardboard boxes. Two easy chairs upholstered in tapestry stood

on either side of a Louis-Quinze-style mantelpiece in yellow marble. The clock, in the middle, was designed to look like a Temple of Vesta,<sup>3</sup> and the whole room smelt musty, due to the fact that the floor level was lower than the garden.

On the first floor, there was 'Madame's' bedroom, a very large room, decorated with pale, flowery wallpaper and containing a picture of 'Monsieur' dressed up in the fanciful attire that was fashionable at the time. This room led directly to a smaller bedroom which housed two children's beds, each with the mattress removed. Next came the parlour, which was always kept locked and was full of furniture draped in dust-sheets. Finally, there was a corridor leading to a study; books and papers lay stacked on the shelves of a bookcase which ran around three walls of the room and surrounded a large writing-desk in dark wood. The two end panels of this bookcase were covered in line drawings, landscapes in gouache and etchings by Audran,<sup>4</sup> a reminder of better days and of more expensive tastes that were now a thing of the past. On the second floor was Félicité's bedroom, lit by a dormer window which looked out over the fields.

Félicité always rose at first light to make sure she was in time for mass, and then worked without a break until the evening. As soon as dinner was finished, the crockery cleared away and the door firmly bolted, she would cover the log fire with ashes and go to sleep in front of the fireplace, holding her rosary in her hand. No one could have been more persistent when it came to haggling over prices and, as for cleanliness, the spotless state of her saucepans was the despair of all the other serving maids in Pont-l'Évêque. She wasted nothing and ate slowly, gathering every crumb of her loaf from the table with her fingers, a twelve-pound loaf baked especially for her and which lasted her twenty days.

In all weathers she wore a printed kerchief fastened behind with a pin, a bonnet which completely covered her hair, grey stockings, a red skirt and over her jacket a bibbed apron like those worn by hospital nurses.

Her face was thin and her voice was shrill. At twenty-five, people took her to be as old as forty. After her fiftieth birthday,

it became impossible to say what age she was at all. She hardly ever spoke, and her upright stance and deliberate movements gave her the appearance of a woman made out of wood, driven as if by clockwork.

## 2

Like other girls, she had once fallen in love.

Her father, a stonemason by trade, had been killed falling from some scaffolding. Following this, her mother died and her sisters went their separate ways. A farmer took her in and, even though she was still a very young girl, he would send her out into the fields to look after the cows. She was dressed in mere rags, she shivered with cold and would lie flat on her stomach to drink water from ponds. She was regularly beaten for no reason at all and was eventually turned out of the house for having stolen thirty sous,<sup>5</sup> a theft of which she was quite innocent. She was taken on at another farm, where she looked after the poultry and, because she was well liked by her employers, her friends were jealous of her.

One evening in August (she was eighteen at the time), she was taken to the village fête at Colleville. She was instantly overcome, bewildered by the boisterous sounds of the fiddle music, the lamps in the trees, the array of brightly coloured clothes, the gold crosses and the lace, all those people moving as one in time to the tune. She was standing on her own, shyly, when a young man, fairly well off to judge by his appearance and who had been leaning against the shaft of a farm wagon smoking his pipe, approached her and asked her to dance. He bought her a glass of cider, a cup of coffee, a cake and a silk scarf and, imagining that she understood his motive, offered to accompany her back home. As they were walking along the edge of a field of oats, he thrust her to the ground. She was terrified and began to scream. He ran off.

One evening a little later, she was walking along the road leading to Beaumont and was trying to get past a large hay wagon as it lumbered slowly along. As she was edging her way round the wheels, she recognized Théodore.

He looked at her quite unabashed and said she should forgive his behaviour of the other night; he 'had just had too much to drink'.

She did not know how to answer him and wanted to run away.

He immediately began to talk about the harvest and various important people in the district and told her that his father had left Colleville and bought a farm at Les Ecots, which meant that they were now neighbours. 'Oh, are we!' she said. He said that his parents wanted him to settle down but that he was in no rush and preferred to wait until the right woman came along before he married. She lowered her eyes. He then asked her if she was thinking of marrying. She smiled and said that he was wrong to tease her. 'But I am not teasing you, I swear,' he said, and slipped his left arm around her waist. She walked on with his arm still around her. They were now walking more slowly. There was a gentle breeze, the stars were shining, the huge wagon-load of hay swayed from side to side in front of them and dust rose from the feet of the four horses as they plodded along. Then, without any word of command, the horses turned off to the right. He kissed her once more and she vanished into the darkness.

The following week, Théodore persuaded her to go out with him on several other occasions.

They would meet in a corner of some farmyard, behind a wall or beneath a solitary tree. Félicité was not naive like other young girls of her age; working with the farm animals had taught her a great deal. However, her natural discretion and an intuitive sense of honour prevented her from giving in to Théodore's demands. Théodore found this resistance so frustrating that, in order to satisfy his passion (or maybe out of sheer simple-mindedness), he proposed to her. She was not sure whether to believe him or not, but he insisted that he was serious.

He then announced something rather disturbing: a year ago his parents had paid for someone else to do his military service<sup>6</sup> but he might still be called up at any time. The prospect of serving in the army terrified him. Félicité took this cowardice as a sign of his affection for her and it made her love him all the

more. She would slip out of the house at night to meet Théodore, who assailed her with his fears and entreaties. ♦

Eventually, he declared that he would go to the Préfecture<sup>7</sup> himself and find out what the situation was. He would come back and tell Félicité the following Sunday, between eleven o'clock and midnight.

At the appointed time, Félicité ran to meet her lover.

But instead of Théodore, it was one of his friends who stood waiting to meet her.

He informed her that she would never see Théodore again. In order to make sure he could not be called up, he had married a wealthy old lady from Touques, by the name of Madame Lehoussais.

Félicité's distress was unbounded. She threw herself to the ground, weeping and wailing; she implored God to come to her aid and lay moaning, all alone in the fields, until daylight. Then she made her way back to the farm and announced that she had decided to leave. At the end of the month, having received her wages, she wrapped her few belongings in a shawl and left for Pont-l'Évêque.

Outside the inn she spoke to a woman wearing a widow's hood who, as it happened, was looking for a cook. The young girl knew precious little about cooking but she seemed so willing and so ready to oblige that Madame Aubain eventually said: 'Very well, you may work for me.'

A quarter of an hour later, Félicité was installed in her house.

At first she lived in a constant state of trepidation as a result of 'the sort of house it was' and the memory of 'Monsieur' which seemed to hover over everything! Paul and Virginie,<sup>8</sup> one aged seven and the other barely four, seemed made of some precious material; she liked to give them piggyback rides and was mortified when Madame Aubain instructed her not to keep kissing them. Even so, she was happy. Her new surroundings were very pleasant and her earlier unhappiness quickly faded.

Every Thursday, a group of Madame Aubain's friends came to play Boston.<sup>9</sup> Félicité would set out the cards and the foot-warmers in readiness. The guests always arrived punctually at eight and left as the clock struck eleven.

On Monday mornings, the secondhand dealer who had a shop at the end of the lane would spread his various bits and pieces of ironmongery out on the pavement. The town would be filled with the buzz of voices, with the sounds of horses neighing, lambs bleating, pigs grunting and carts rattling through the streets. At about midday, just when the market was at its busiest, an old peasant would present himself on Madame Aubain's front doorstep – a tall man with a hooked nose and with his hat perched on the back of his head. This was Robelin, the farmer from Geffosses. He would be followed shortly afterwards by Liébard, the farmer from Toucques, short, fat and red in the face, wearing a grey jacket and leather gaiters complete with spurs.

They would both come bearing chickens or cheeses which they hoped they might persuade their landlady to buy. But Félicité was more than a match for their banter and they always respected her for this.

Madame Aubain also received sporadic visits from the Marquis de Grémanville, an uncle of hers who had squandered his money in loose living and who now lived at Falaise on the last bit of property he could still call his own. He would always turn up at lunch time with a loathsome little poodle which left its muddy paw marks all over the furniture. Despite his efforts to behave like a gentleman, raising his hat every time he mentioned his 'late father', habit would soon get the better of him and he would pour himself glass after glass and start telling bawdy jokes. Félicité would politely show him to the door. 'I think you have had enough for today, Monsieur de Grémanville! Do come and see us again soon!' And she would close the door behind him.

But she was always delighted to welcome Monsieur Bourais, a retired solicitor. His white cravat and bald head, the flounces on his shirt-front and the generous cut of his brown frock-coat, the special way he had of bending his arm when taking snuff, indeed everything about his person prompted in Félicité the sort of agitation we always feel when in the presence of some great man.

He looked after the management of 'Madame's' properties

and would shut himself away with her for hours on end in 'Monsieur's' study. He lived in constant fear for his own reputation, had an inordinate respect for the judiciary and claimed to know some Latin.

Thinking that it would help the children to derive some enjoyment from their studies, he bought them an illustrated geography book. It depicted scenes from different parts of the world, cannibals wearing feathered head-dresses, a monkey abducting a young girl, a group of Bedouins in the desert, a whale being harpooned, and so on.

Paul carefully explained all these pictures to Félicité. In fact, this was the only time anyone ever taught her how to read a book.

The children received their lessons from Guyot, a rather pitiful character who worked at the Town Hall, who was noted for his fine handwriting and who used to sharpen his penknife on the sole of his shoe.

Whenever the weather was fine, the whole family would get up early and spend the day at the farm at Geffosses.

The farmyard there was on a slope, with the farmhouse in the middle. One could just see the sea, a little streak of grey in the distance.

Félicité would take a few slices of cold meat from her basket and they would eat in a room adjoining the dairy. This room was all that now remained of a country house which had fallen into ruin. The paper hung in strips from the wall and fluttered in the draught. Madame Aubain sat with her head bowed, absorbed in her memories, the children hardly daring to speak. 'Off you go and play,' she would say. And off they went.

Paul would climb up into the barn, catch birds, play ducks and drakes on the pond or bang the great farm barrels with a stick to make them boom like drums.

Virginie would go and feed the rabbits or run off across the fields gathering cornflowers, showing her dainty embroidered knickers as she ran.

One evening in autumn, they were coming back through the fields.

The moon, which was in its first quarter, lit up part of the

sky, and a mist drifted like a scarf over the windings of the river Toucquès. A group of cattle, lying in the middle of a field, lazily watched them go by. When they came to the third field, a few of them got to their feet and stood in a circle in front of them: 'There's nothing to be frightened of!' said Félicité and, humming a wistful little tune as she approached, she went up to the nearest of the animals and patted it on the back. It turned away and the others did the same. But no sooner had they got through the next field when they heard a terrifying bellowing. It was a bull that had been hidden by the mist. It began to come towards the two women. Madame Aubain wanted to run. 'No, no, we must not move too quickly!' said Félicité. They walked more quickly, even so, and could hear the bull's loud breathing getting nearer behind them and the pounding of its hoofs on the grass. They knew it was now galloping towards them! Félicité turned round to face it, grabbed clods of earth from the ground and flung them into the bull's face. It lowered its muzzle, shook its horns and began to shudder and bellow with rage. Madame Aubain had now reached the edge of the field with the two children and was frantically trying to find a way of getting over the hedge. Félicité was still steadily retreating before the bull, throwing lumps of turf into its eyes and calling out, 'Hurry up! Hurry up!'

Madame Aubain got down into the ditch, pushing first Virginie and then Paul in front of her. She fell several times as she tried to climb the bank and at last, by dint of sheer determination, she succeeded.

The bull had driven Félicité up against a gate and was blowing slaver into her face. A second later and it would have gored her. In the nick of time she managed to squeeze herself between two bars in the gate. The huge animal was taken completely by surprise and stopped in its tracks.

People in Pont-l'Évêque talked about this adventure for years afterwards. But Félicité never boasted about it and hardly seemed to realize that she had done anything heroic.

Virginie commanded all her attention. The frightening experience with the bull had affected her nerves and Monsieur Poupart, the doctor, recommended sea bathing at Trouville.<sup>10</sup>

In those days, very few people visited the resort. Madame Aubain made enquiries, sought the advice of Bourais and made preparations as if for a long journey.

The day before they left, the luggage was sent off in Liébard's farm wagon. The next day he returned with two horses. One of them had a woman's saddle with a velvet backrest and the other had a cloak rolled up across its back as a makeshift seat. Madame Aubain sat on this behind Liébard. Félicité looked after Virginie on the other horse and Paul rode separately on Monsieur Lechaptois's donkey, which had been lent on the clear understanding that they took great care of it.

The road was so bad that the five-mile journey took them two hours. The horses sank up to their pasterns in the mud and lurched forward in order to pull themselves free. They lost their footing in the ruts and sometimes had to jump. At certain points on the road, Liébard's mare would suddenly stop dead. Liébard would wait patiently for her to move forward again. As they rode on, he would tell them stories about the people who lived along the way, always adding a few personal comments of his own for good measure. In the town centre of Toucques, for instance, as they were passing alongside a house with nasturtiums growing around the windows, he said, with a shrug of his shoulders, 'There's a Madame Lehoussais lives there and, rather than take a young man . . .' Félicité did not hear the rest, for the horses had broken into a trot and the donkey had run on ahead. They turned down a track, a gate swung open, two young farmhands appeared and they all dismounted beside the manure-heap right outside the front door of the farmhouse.

Old Madame Liébard greeted her mistress with effusive expressions of delight. For lunch she served a sirloin of beef, along with tripe, black pudding, a fricassee of chicken, sparkling cider, a fruit tart and plums in brandy, all accompanied by a stream of compliments to Madame who seemed 'in much better health', to Mademoiselle who had grown up into such 'a fine looking young woman', to Monsieur Paul who was such a 'strapping' young man, not forgetting their dear departed grandparents whom the Liébards had known personally, having been in service to the family for several generations. The farm,

like the Liébarde themselves, had an old-world feel to it. The beams in the ceiling were pitted with woodworm, the walls blackened with smoke, the window panes grey with dust. There was an oak dresser, cluttered with all manner of implements – jugs, plates, pewter bowls, wolf-traps, shears for the sheep and a huge syringe which particularly amused the children. In the three yards outside, there was not a single tree which did not have mushrooms growing at its foot or clumps of mistletoe in its branches. Several had been blown down by the wind but had begun to grow again where the trunk had been split and all of them were bent beneath the weight of apples. The thatched roofs looked like brown velvet of unequal thickness and weathered the fiercest winds. But the shed for the carts was falling down. Madame Aubain said that she would arrange to have it repaired and asked for the horses to be reharnessed.

It took them another half-hour to reach Trouville. The little caravan had to dismount when they came to the Ecores, a cliff which jutted out over the boats below. Three minutes later they had arrived at the end of the quay and turned into the courtyard of the Golden Lamb, an inn run by old Madame David.

Virginie very quickly began to recover her strength as a result of the change of air and of bathing in the sea. She did not have a bathing costume and so she went into the water wearing a chemise. Afterwards, her maid would help her to get dressed in a customs officer's hut that was also used by the bathers.

In the afternoon, they would take the donkey and walk out beyond the Roches-Noires, towards Hennequeville. At first the path wound up between gently rolling meadows like the lawn in a park and then came to a plateau where there were grazing pastures and ploughed fields. The path was lined by holly bushes which grew amongst the tangle of brambles, and here and there the branches of a large dead tree traced their zigzag patterns against the blue of the sky.

There was one particular field in which they usually stopped to rest themselves, looking down towards Deauville to their left, Le Havre to their right and, in front of them, the open sea. It lay shimmering in the sunshine, as smooth as the surface of a mirror and so calm that they could barely hear the murmur of the

waves. Sparrows twittered from somewhere nearby and the great dome of the sky lay spread out above them. Madame Aubain would sit with her needlework, Virginie would sit beside her, plaiting rushes, Félicité gathered bunches of wild lavender and Paul, utterly bored, would always be itching to move on.

At other times they would take the ferry across the Touques and go looking for shells. At low tide, sea urchins, ormers and jellyfish were left behind on the sand. The children would chase after flecks of foam blown about by the breeze. The waves broke lazily on the sand from one end of the beach to the other. The beach stretched as far as the eye could see but was bounded on the landward side by sand dunes which separated it from the Marais, a broad meadow in the shape of a racecourse. As they walked back through it towards Trouville, which lay at the foot of the hill, the town appeared to grow bigger at every step they took and, with its motley assortment of houses, it seemed to blossom like a flower garden in colourful disarray.

When it was too hot, they kept to their room. The dazzling brightness outside cast bars of light through the slats in the window blinds. There was not a sound to be heard in the village. Not a soul ventured out into the streets. The prevailing quiet made everything seem all the more peaceful. From far away came the sound of the caulkers' hammers beating against the hull of a boat and the smell of tar was wafted to them on the listless breeze.

The most exciting event of the day was when the fishing boats came in. Once past the entrance, buoys, they would begin to tack from side to side. Their main sails would be lowered to half-mast and, with their foresail swollen like a great balloon, they would come gliding through the splashing waves right into the middle of the harbour and suddenly drop anchor. The boat would then be brought alongside the quay. The sailors would hoist their fish ashore, still live and quivering. A line of carts was ready waiting and women in cotton bonnets rushed forward to take the baskets and to kiss their menfolk.

One day one of these women came up to Félicité. A moment or two later, Félicité was back in the room at the inn, beside herself with excitement. She had found one of her lost sisters,