

**NOT UNDER
FORTY**

NOT UNDER FORTY



By
WILLA CATHER

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ABOUT AUTHOR:



Willa Sibert Cather (1873 - 1947) is an eminent author from the United States. She is perhaps best known for her depictions of U.S. life in novels such as *O Pioneers!*, *My Ántonia*, and *Death Comes for the Archbishop*.

Other Books of Willa Cather:

- *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927)
- *Pioneers!* (1913)
- *My Ántonia* (1918)
- *One of Ours* (1923)
- *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940)
- *The Song of the Lark* (1915)
- *The Professor's House* (1925)
- *The Troll Garden and Selected Stories* (1905)
- *Youth and the Bright Medusa* (1920)
- *Not Under Forty* (1936)

PART 1

A CHANCE MEETING

CHAPTER 1

My trip into the mountains was wholly successful. All the suggestions the old lady had given me proved excellent, and I felt very grateful to her. I stayed away longer than I had intended. I returned to Aix-les-Bains late one night, got up early the next morning, and went to the bank, feeling that Aix is always a good place to come back to. When I returned to the hotel for lunch, there was the old lady, sitting in a chair just outside the door, looking worn and faded. Why, since she had her car and her driver there, she had not run away from the heat, I do not know. But she had stayed through it, and gone out sketching every morning. She greeted me very cordially, asked whether I had an engagement for the evening, and suggested that we should meet in the salon after dinner.

I was dining with my friend, and after dinner we both went into the writing-room where the old lady was awaiting us. Our acquaintance seemed to have

progressed measurably in my absence, though neither of us as yet knew the other's name. Her name, I thought, would mean very little; she was what she was. No one could fail to recognize her distinction and authority; it was in the carriage of her head, in her fine hands, in her voice, in every word she uttered in any language, in her brilliant, very piercing eyes. I had no curiosity about her name; that would be an accident and could scarcely matter.

We talked very comfortably for a time. The old lady made some comment on the Soviet experiment in Russia. My friend remarked that it was fortunate for the great group of Russian writers that none of them had lived to see the Revolution; Gogol, Tolstoi, Turgeniev.

"Ah, yes," said the old lady with a sigh, "for Turgeniev, especially, all this would have been very terrible. I knew him well at one time."

I looked at her in astonishment. Yes, of course, it was possible. She was very old. I told her I had never met anyone who had known Turgeniev.

She smiled. "No? I saw him very often when I was a young girl. I was much interested in German, in the great works. I was making a translation of *Faust*, for my own pleasure, merely, and Turgeniev used to go over my translation and correct it from time to time. He was a great friend of my uncle. I was brought up in my uncle's house." She was becoming excited as she spoke, her face grew more animated, her voice warmer, something

flashed in her eyes, some strong feeling awoke in her. As she went on, her voice shook a little. "My mother died at my birth, and I was brought up in my uncle's house. He was more than father to me. My uncle also was a man of letters, Gustave Flaubert, you may perhaps know ... " She murmured the last phrase in a curious tone, as if she had said something indiscreet and were evasively dismissing it.

The meaning of her words came through to me slowly; so this must be the "Caro" of the *Lettres à sa Nièce Caroline*. There was nothing to say, certainly. The room was absolutely quiet, but there was nothing to say to this disclosure. It was like being suddenly brought up against a mountain of memories. One could not see round it; one could only stupidly realize that in this mountain which the old lady had conjured up by a phrase and a name or two lay most of one's mental past. Some moments went by. There was no word with which one could greet such a revelation. I took one of her lovely hands and kissed it, in homage to a great period, to the names that made her voice tremble.

She laughed an embarrassed laugh, and spoke hurriedly. "Oh, that is not necessary! That is not at all necessary." But the tone of distrust, the faint challenge in that "you may perhaps know ... " had disappeared. "*Vous connaissez bien les œuvres de mon oncle?*"

Who did not know them? I asked her.

Again the dry tone, with a shrug. "Oh, I almost never meet anyone who really knows them. The name, of course, its place in our literature, but not the works themselves. I never meet anyone now who cares much about them."

Great names are awkward things in conversation, when one is a chance acquaintance. One cannot be too free with them; they have too much value. The right course, I thought, was to volunteer nothing, above all to ask no questions; to let the old lady say what she would, ask what she would. She wished, it seemed, to talk about *les œuvres de mon oncle*. Her attack was uncertain; she touched here and there. It was a large subject. She told me she had edited the incomplete *Bouvard et Pécuchet* after his death, that *La Tentation de Saint Antoine* had been his own favourite among his works; she supposed I would scarcely agree with his choice?

No, I was sorry, but I could not.

"I suppose you care most for *Madame Bovary*?"

One can hardly discuss that book; it is a fact in history. One knows it too well to know it well.

"And yet," she murmured, "my uncle got only five hundred francs for it from the publisher. Of course, he did not write for money. Still, he would have been pleased ... Which one, then, do you prefer?"

I told her that a few years ago I had reread *L'Éducation sentimentale*, and felt that I had never risen to its greatness before.

She shook her head. "Ah, too long, prolix, *trop de conversation*. And Frédéric is very weak."

But there was an eagerness in her face, and I knew by something in her voice that this was like Garibaldi's proclamation to his soldiers on the retreat from Rome, when he told them he could offer them cold and hunger and sickness and misery. He offered something else, too, but the listeners must know that for themselves.

It had seemed to me when I last read *L'Éducation sentimentale* that its very faults were of a noble kind. It is too cold, certainly, to justify the subtitle, *Roman d'un jeune homme*; for youth, even when it has not generous enthusiasm, has at least fierce egotism. But I had wondered whether this cool, dispassionate, almost contemptuous presentation of Frédéric were not a protest against the overly sympathetic manner of Balzac in his stories of young men: Eugène de Rastignac, Lucien de Rubempré, Horace Bianchon, and all the others. Certainly Balzac's habit of playing up his characters, of getting into the ring and struggling and sweating with them, backing them with all his animal heat, must have been very distasteful to Flaubert. It was perhaps this quality of salesmanship in Balzac which made Flaubert say of him in a letter to this same niece Caroline: "He is as ignorant as a pot, and bourgeois to the marrow."

Of course, a story of youth, which altogether lacks that gustatory zest, that exaggerated concern for trivialities, is scarcely successful. In *L'Éducation* the trivialities are there (for life is made up of them), but not the voracious appetite which drives young people through silly and vulgar experiences. The story of Frédéric is a story of youth with the heart of youth left out; and of course it is often dull. But the latter chapters of the book justify one's journey through it. Then all the hero's young life becomes more real than it was as one followed it from year to year, and the story ends on a high plateau. From that great and quiet last scene, seated by the fire with the two middle-aged friends (who were never really friends, but who had been young together), one looks back over Frédéric's life and finds that one has it all, even the dull stretches. It is something one has lived through, not a story one has read; less diverting than a story, perhaps, but more inevitable. One is "left with it," in the same way that one is left with a weak heart after certain illnesses. A shadow has come into one's consciousness that will not go out again.

The old French lady and I talked for some time about *L'Éducation sentimentale*. She spoke with warm affection, with tenderness, of Madame Arnoux.

"Ah yes, Madame Arnoux, she is beautiful!" The moisture in her bright eyes, the flush on her cheeks, and the general softening of her face said much more. That charming and good woman of the middle classes, the wife who holds the story together (as she held Frédéric