Chapter Three
1906 to 1916
The Turning Point

He felt that she was one of those women who, when they give themselves, give everything without counting: the love of their body and their heart, the strength of their arms in everyday tasks, the total devotion of a mind without artifice.

*Louis Hémon*,
Maria Chapdelaine, Editions Fides, pages 88 and 89
Regular Meetings with Marie-Louise

Father Roy maintains close ties with the families in Hanmer through his regular parish visits. But he seems to maintain a closer tie with the Labelle family since in the years following his arrival in Hanmer he bought five lots in the Hanmer and Capreol counties, making him one of the most important landowners in the township. And it so happens that from 1911 to 1913 Napoléon Labelle, Marie-Louise’s father, is one of Hanmer’s four local councillors and it is the local council that normally holds the register of the township land sales and purchases.

Thus Father Roy goes to the Labelle’s home to discuss the necessary land transactions with Napoléon, and also to chat with him about this and that. The two men have a lot in common. They have both known pioneer life and share some personality traits. Fiercely independent, they both like to be master of their own decisions and they are both gifted in organizing communities. But their tempers differ greatly: Napoléon is impetuous, and Joseph is gentle. Napoléon expresses himself with a fiery discourse whereas Joseph has learned the art of listening.

It is surely during these visits that Father Roy and Marie-Louise discover the undeniable pleasure of seeing and talking with one another. The priest appreciates Marie-Louise’s quick wit and her playful banter. He is sensitive to the admiration she feels for him and that she can’t dissemble. Moreover, Marie-Louise is turning into a beautiful woman. The family photo taken around 1908 and reprinted in Valley East reveals a young woman of about 17 or 18 dressed in a lace blouse with a high collar and a long skirt. She has put up her hair in a chignon. Her beautiful forehead thus freed accentuates the oval of her face. Her big eyes reflect a patient expression. But her shapely lips hardly show a shadow of a smile and betray a firm inner determination. Just as the great river near which she first saw light, she gives an impression of calm inner strength and, like that water, she possesses a powerful underlying current that can sweep everything away.
In 1912, Father Roy is 54 years old. He has spent most of his life in the rough environment of the colonies. Since he has hardly known the comforts of urban presbyteries, he probably appreciates the gentility of evenings spent at the Labelle’s, where Marie-Louise serves him tea and sweets accompanied by a smile and a nice word. When I met Marie-Louise’s niece in Hanmer, she had the same interpretation of the facts:

… That is MY vision of her, not my mother’s vision. 
… He arrives in 1906, and there were probably 20 to 30 farmers. These were large families. They lived miserable lives, in terrible conditions, and houses that weren’t very good. And he had a house. He needed someone. And, all of a sudden, this young girl arrives, she is a little delicate, she likes nice things. And for him, it is like a breath of fresh air arriving in the

The Labelle family: Marie-Louise is to the right of her adoptive father Napoléon. Georgianne, Marie-Louise’s mother, is standing. Circa 1907. 
(Courtesy of the Greater Sudbury Library)
midst of all these farmers. ... And I know that my aunt loved to drink tea. And I can almost see her ... when she served the priest his tea: “Come, sit down, have a cup of tea.” With all of her gentleness. That is my version.²

The priest’s visits amuse Marie-Louise. They say he liked to talk about his adventures out West. His stories open a window on a whole new world that gives the young woman the desire to travel. She would love to explore new places. She begins to realize to what extent she is confined in this little house, harnessed to the routine of daily chores. Her only outings are the visits to church on Sundays. Because she was entrusted with many responsibilities since her childhood, she is very mature for a young woman of her age. It is therefore not surprising that she can develop a friendship with Father Roy, even though he is thirty-three years her senior.

**PRESBYTERY MAID?**

How did Marie-Louise end up becoming the maid in Hanmer’s presbytery around 1912? Only knowledge of the mentality and conventions of the day allow me to infer the unfolding of events. The priest and Marie-Louise feel, without admitting it, an increasing desire to see each other more often. The abbot rationalizes his inclination by telling himself that he would really need help with the presbytery. Marie-Louise would be an ideal candidate for the job. He knows her well; he has seen in what impeccable manner she keeps house and has tasted her cooking during his visits to the Labelle household. Custom would warrant that he first ask Napoléon and Georigne if their daughter could come work days at the presbytery. Marie-Louise’s parents would never consider refusing such a service to the parish priest. On the contrary! It is an honour for them that he chooses to entrust their daughter with
the responsibility of taking care of his home. And besides, Claire, Marie-Louise’s little sister, has grown up and can take on many of the routine chores. They consult Marie-Louise, who accepts with deference, all the while repressing an outburst of secret joy.

An unmarried 21-year-old woman working for a member of the clergy could cause tongues to wag. Since the late sixteenth century in Europe, tradition would have it that priests hire as servants only women in their thirties or forties, in order to avoid “temptations” and to prevent gossip in prudish society. A woman who wishes to work in a presbytery “must, to be hired, be advanced in years (40 years old), not lend herself to unfavourable gossip, and not allow in the least that the priest’s reputation be put into question because of her presence.” But circumstances sometimes dictate exceptions to this rule. Marie-Louise’s reputation is without blemish and her talents as a homemaker are well known and justify her selection. And the folks in Hanmer are aware that the Father knows Napoléon very well. Marie-Louise’s presence in the presbytery thus does not endanger the priest’s reputation.

Details of the inception of their secret love life went to the grave with them. One can only imagine how their passion saw the light of day. Marie-Louise and Joseph are happy to be working side by side. For her, it is a change of scenery and a variation in her daily tasks. For him, it is a feminine presence by his side, an expert hand to care for his house and a discreet individual to whom he can confide certain thoughts. At first, they do their best to speak only of topics concerning the presbytery maintenance. But soon, as with all individuals who see each other regularly, they come to share impressions, memories and dreams. The days and months pass, bringing them closer and closer. They laugh together, but their laugh now betrays a feverish love that they struggle to contain.

The historical documents that I consulted indicated that Father J.A. Roy served in Saint Jacques’ Parish in Hanmer until
29 September 1913, and that he was then assigned to Cache Bay on the shores of Lake Nipissing sixty miles (100 kilometres) from Hanmer. Cache Bay was a small, mainly francophone town on the outskirts of Sturgeon Falls. When Father Roy arrives, its economy depends mostly on the prosperity of the sawmill, George Gordon Lumber, which milled the logs floated down the Sturgeon River.

I was unable to find data about Marie-Louise and Joseph’s relations between October 1913 and April 1917. But the events that enfolded demonstrate that Father Roy’s transfer to Cache Bay did not end their relationship, and allow us to infer the nature of their bond. Since they worked side by side for the entire previous year, Marie-Louise feels a lot of sadness to see him move away from Hanmer. Furthermore, his departure implies that she will have to return to the drudgery of housework, confined to her father’s home. For his part, Joseph might not mind serving in a new parish but he is unhappy about leaving Marie-Louise. It does not take him long to come up with a plan for seeing her on a regular basis. Using as a pretext that he will need help to set up and maintain order in the Cache Bay presbytery, he asks Marie-Louise’s parents if they would mind her coming by train to Cache Bay from time to time to give him a hand. Since 1883, the Canadian Pacific serves cities between North Bay and Sudbury. Napoléon could bring her to the Sudbury station and Father Roy would pick her up at the Sturgeon Falls station. However, since the train does not run daily, this new arrangement would require that Marie-Louise sleep over in Cache Bay for a night or two. But Napoléon and Georgianne would never question the good intentions of this priest whom they have known for seven years and received frequently in their home.

Marie-Louise and Joseph’s periodic co-habitation in the Cache Bay presbytery only serves to exacerbate the love fever that they felt in Hanmer. Here they find themselves in a new presbytery, far from the proper supervision of Marie-Louise’s family and of the people of Hanmer. Marie-Louise’s short stays probably go
unnoticed by the parishioners of Cache Bay. Father Roy conducts his ministry in church while Marie-Louise works discreetly to make the new presbytery comfortable. In the evening, they share an intimate diner. The long nights of dialoguing stretch out and soon their desire conquers all: doubts, social conventions and religious convictions.

In reality, what transpires in their hearts may be less simple and romantic than I like to imagine. Joseph undoubtedly feels mixed emotions, a secret battle between his religious convictions and the inescapable rise of the physical desire that gets the better of him and to which he surrenders with delight. Gertrude, Marie-Louise’s daughter, is more realistic than I am. With the humour and the wisdom of a mature woman, she tells me, “His mid-life crisis got him.”

And it is certainly true! Joseph is probably very confused by the intense happiness that he feels. Does he really not have the makings of a priest after all? He would have chosen the wrong vocation since he feels no regrets. He can’t believe that such a shared happiness could be a sin.

As for Marie-Louise, the fact that this educated, mature man loves her fills her with joy and pride. She would like to shout it from the rooftops and show their love to everyone in the community. But she stays silent and resolutely hides her happiness to preserve her chances of seeing her fondest dream materialize, her dream of one day living openly with him. She can imagine their life as a couple in a city where, incognito, they would go about their affairs without fear of gossip. Hanmer is stifling her! During all her childhood years, she has seen the women around her harnessed to their daily tasks with the only recognition that of being called “Queen of the household” by their husbands or by the priest in his sermons. She does not want such a thankless, dead-end future. She wants to get out of her hamlet. She wants to live elsewhere and especially elsewhere with Joseph.
In spite of the strong emotions clawing at their heart, their love strengthens with the passing days. The illicit nature of their relationship only brings them closer together. They are well aware of contravening all social and religious codes of conduct. In this era, a woman who took the liberty of having sexual relations outside of marriage came in for social reproof. In this instance, it is additionally with a priest, and a priest who is thirty-three years older than
her at that! It would be a monumental scandal if the affair would be found out! Thus, Marie-Louise and Joseph hide their love like happy children acting in collusion.

Do they take precautions to avoid Marie-Louise getting pregnant? What does she know about sexuality and birth control? Probably very little. Between 1869 and 1916, works have been published recommending “periodic abstention” but Marie-Louise can hardly read or write. Besides, most of these publications are in English. There is one manual about sexuality written by a French doctor, Dr. Auguste de Bey, but “the Church makes every effort to keep information about sexuality and contraception far away for the faithful.” Thus it is highly improbable that these publications were circulating in Hanmer. As for Joseph, he surely knows more than her in these matters. But since sexuality is a taboo subject in those days, he may not feel comfortable talking openly about it with her, even in intimate moments. What’s more, his religious education always taught him that sex is only acceptable if its goal is procreation. This precept might even hold him back from curbing his lovemaking and incline him instead to simply let nature run its course. It is also possible that physical pleasure temporarily hides from his mind the consequences that the arrival of a child could have.

The fact remains that, in August 1916, Marie-Louise, who is still living with her parents in Hanmer, discovers that she is pregnant. She is fraught with questions. Who can she turn to? Should she confide this terrible secret to her parents? Will they renounce her forever? Will they become the shame of Hanmer? And what will her lover say? She decides not to tell her parents right away for fear that they will not let her return to Cache Bay. She anxiously awaits her next trip while imagining all kinds of scenarios in which she announces to Joseph that he is about to become a father.

No doubt, the news arouses a surge of thoughts and emotions in this 58-year-old priest. He has never known a life other than that of a man of the cloth. At the same time, he does not doubt

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his love for Marie-Louise. Until now, he has managed to devote himself to both the Church and his love. But now the imminent arrival of this child forces him to choose between the two. The new emotion of knowing he will be a father and the deep sense of responsibility that he feels towards this young 25-year-old woman soon stifle any doubts he might have felt at the thought of leaving his ministry. He takes action.

**Flight**

Marie-Louise’s pregnancy and the enormity of the scandal it would cause if their affair should be discovered explain why they escape from Cache Bay without Joseph requesting a dispensation from the Catholic Church. Historical documents lead one to believe that Joseph had for some time contemplated leaving the priesthood, for he had begun in 1911 to resell some of the land he had bought during his early years in Hanmer. When one examines carefully the legal documents of purchases and sales of his lands, one notices that on the purchase documents, he was identified as “Joseph A. Roy, Catholic priest.” Yet, on the sales documents of 15 April 1911 and of 19 May 1913, after Marie-Louise had begun working for him at the presbytery, he is identified as “Joseph A. Roy, an unmarried man.” I would be unable to determine if this choice of words is that of Father Roy or of the notary who drew up the papers but they reflect, voluntarily or not, a change in Father Roy’s status.

**Impact of Their Departure**

When I inquire in Hanmer about the impact of the lovers’ departure, the answers I receive mention only the repercussions on the family. Marie-Louise’s niece tells me, “Napoléon was furious and hurt.” And she adds, “They say he was so angry that he wanted to go down to Ottawa and kill him.”

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Marie-Louise’s other niece confirms this story:

And he went to Ottawa with a gun to kill him but he never found him. … My mother told me that and said, “I always thanked God that he never found him, because he had brought a gun with him.”

Fact or fiction? Knowing Napoléon’s fiery temper, such a story seems plausible but we have no way to verify its truthfulness.

One thing is sure: Napoléon loves his daughter and, as Gertrude confirms to me, this departure afflicts him terribly.

He was very upset and her mother felt a deep sadness that affected her naturally. And besides, they relied so much on her to take care of the house, you know, and of the young children, her sisters and brothers. So I can understand that he was very angry.

Georgianne, like any mother who sees her daughter leave, undoubtedly experiences mixed emotions about her daughter’s love escapade. On one hand, she can understand her husband’s anger because he feels so betrayed by Father Roy whom he had treated like a friend. But on the other hand, she is secretly delighted at Marie-Louise’s happiness. Good for her if she can escape this life of exhausting labour and the stifling mentality of this small village where everyone spies and gossips on the life of everyone else! More power to her if she can live a romantic love instead of simply accepting to marry for practical reasons. May God bless her!

During my interviews in Hanmer, no one mentions that a scandal occurred in the village after Marie-Louise’s departure. I deduce from this that Napoléon and Georgianne probably did everything in their power to avoid the story being spread. Fearing to lose face...
in Hanmer, they would have explained Marie-Louise’s absence by saying that she had found work in Ottawa.

But Napoléon finds himself in a very delicate situation in the community because, at the time of the lovers’ departure, he is still one of the four municipal councillors in Hanmer. Upon careful examination of documents in the archives, I notice that the following year his name does not appear anymore on the list of councillors. Maybe it is simply because his term is over. After all, he has been holding this function since 1911. But it may also be because he prefers to leave this position, to keep a lower profile in the community. This way, he can avoid meetings during which he could be asked friendly questions about his daughter.