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Books: Notebook on Life

CLAUDE—Genevieve Fauconnier—Mac-, millan (\$2.50).

When a French author is looking for a thoroughly sombre background he is apt to pick that part of France—better known as the provinces—which is not Paris. Claude starts off with as much gloomy naturalism as the drabdest of them, and for the first 50 pages a normally cheerful reader may turn up his coat collar, wish it would stop raining. But if he perseveres beyond this chilling introduction he will soon feel such warming rays as will make his coat unnecessary. By book's end he will have been acclimatized to the varied weather of a whole human day.

The story opens with a double funeral in the little French town of Javrezac. Mme Gerfaut has died in childbirth; Mme Devereux's longed-for infant son also. Because the two families are old friends and because one has a plethora of daughters, the other of sons. Mme Devereux becomes foster mother to little Philippe. Claude, youngest of the Devereux girls, and Philippe are brought up like brother & sister.

Twenty years later Claude has settled down as the wife of a farmer. Husband Ernest, though he leads a peasant's hard life, is no peasant. He dreams only of making enough money to buy back the family chateau, restore its ruins. As farm & family chores rub the bloom off Claude's romance, she takes to her memories for consolation, in spare moments begins to scribble in a copy book. By the time she has joined the past to the present she has filled and destroyed three little books, has lost the desire to fill any more. As the fragments of Claude's reminiscences slowly piece together, her story emerges, at first as apparently inconsequential as the procession of days but proving to have the classic qualities of beginning, middle and fated end.

While Claude has settled down to live out her life on a farm, the children she grew up with have gone much further afield. All her sisters have married, all of them much better than Claude. Of the Gerfaut boys, Mark has become an imminently famous writer, Ivan an explorer; Philippe, her special chum, a sculptor. Three months after she married Ernest the World War took him, deposited him in a German prison camp for four years. The Russian Revolution swept away her dowry savings, invested in Russian bonds. When peace came and Ernest was released, things looked brighter; then the post-War slump and a series of bad harvests put them hopelessly behind. It was no longer a question of buying the family chateau but of saving their own roof and patching the leaks.

Philippe, tired of gallivanting about the world, came to spend a holiday near the farm. Claude was glad to have him there but they had little to say to each other but "Do you remember—?" When Claude went back to Javrezac to a family reunion, found herself the only undoubted poor relation, she returned to the farm convinced her life was an unhappy failure, but resigned to spending the rest of it as a disillusioned wife and overworked mother. One day she realized that she and Philippe were in love. But nothing came of it. Philippe went away, leaving Claude and her aging husband "as if leaning upon each other, yoked together—and digging the same furrow."

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