

# Jeanne-Marie

By Leila Macdonald

## I

JEANNE-MARIE lived alone in the white cottage at the far end of the village street.

It was a long narrow street of tall houses, stretching each side of the white shining road, for two hundred yards or more. A street that was cool and shadeeful even in the shadeless summer days, when the sun burned most hotly, when the broad roads dazzled between their avenues of plane-tree and poplar, and the mountains disappeared from the horizon in the blue haze of heat.

From her little garden Jeanne-Marie liked to look at the mountains each morning, and, when for two or three days following they were not to be seen, she would shake her head reproachfully, as at the failing of old friends.

"My boys, Jeanne-Marie is only thirty-seven," Bourdet the innkeeper said to his companions, as they sat, one May afternoon, smoking under the chestnut-trees in front of the café. They all looked up as he spoke, and watched Jeanne-Marie, as she walked slowly past them to her cottage.

"Bourdet has been paying court," said Leguillon, the fat, red-faced

faced butcher, with a chuckle, as he puffed at his long pipe. "You see, he is anxious we should think her of an age suitable, before he tells us the betrothals are arranged."

"For my part I should give many congratulations," said the village postman and tobacconist, gruffly. "Jeanne-Marie is worth any of our girls of the village, with their bright dresses and silly giggles."

Bourdet laughed. "You shall come to the wedding, my friends," he said, with a wink and a nod of the head to the retreating figure; "and since our friend Minaud there finds the girls so distasteful, he shall wait till our babies are old enough, and be betrothed to one of them."

The postmaster laughed with the rest. "But seriously," he said, "Bourdet will pardon me if I tell him our Jeanne-Marie is a good deal past the thirties."

Laurent, the good-looking young farmer, who stood leaning against the tree round which their chairs were gathered, answered him gravely. "Wait, *beau-père*, till you see her on Sunday coming from Mass on M. Bourdet's arm; the cap that hides the grey knot of hair at the back of the head is neat and bright—oh! so bright—pink or blue for choice, and if M. Bourdet chances to compliment the colour of the stockings—he is gay, you know, always—the yellow face turns rosy and all the wrinkles go." And laughing maliciously at Bourdet, the young fellow turned away homewards.

Bourdet looked grave. "'Tis your son-in-law that speaks like that, Minaud," he said, "otherwise I would say that in my day the young fellows found it better to amuse themselves with the young girls than to mock at the old ones."

"You are right, my friend," said Minaud. "'Tis the regiment that taught Laurent this, and many other things. But it is a good

good boy, though with a sharp tongue. To these young ones it seems all foolishness to be an old girl."

And the others nodded agreement.

So they sat, chatting, and drawing at their long pipes, while the afternoon sun gleamed on the little gardens and on the closed green shutters of the houses; and the slow, large oxen lumbered through the village street, their yoked heads pressed well down, and their tails flicking unceasingly at the swarm of flies.

Jeanne-Marie stood in her garden, blinking thoughtfully at the flowers, while she shaded her eyes with her hand. On her bare head the sparse brown hair was parted severely and neatly to each side, and the deep southern eyes looked steadily out of the tanned and wrinkled face. Her light cotton bodice fell away from the thin lines of her neck and shoulders, and her sabots clicked harshly as she moved about the garden.

"At least the good God has given me a fine crab-apple bloom this year," Jeanne-Marie said, as she looked at the masses of rich blossom. On the wall the monthly roses were flowering thickly, and the Guelder roses bent their heads under the weight of their heavy bunches. "In six days I shall have the peonies, and the white rose-bush in the corner is coming soon," said Jeanne-Marie contentedly.

## II

It was four and a half years ago that Jeanne-Marie had come to the white cottage next to the mill, with the communal school opposite. Till that autumn day, when a pair of stout oxen had brought her goods to the door, she had lived with her brother, who was *métayer* to M. François, the owner of the big villa a quarter  
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of a mile beyond the village. Her father had been *métayer*; and when he died, his son Firman—a fine-looking young man, not long home from his service—had taken his place. So the change at the *métairie* had very little affected Jeanne-Marie.

But she missed her father sorely every day at mid-day, when she remembered that there was one less to cook for; that the tall, straight old figure would not come in at the door, and that the black pudding might remain uncooked for all Firman's noticing; and Jeanne-Marie would put the bouillon by the fire, and sit down and cry softly to herself.

They were very kind to her at the villa, and at night, when Firman was at the café, she would take the stockings and the linen and darn them in the kitchen, while she listened to the servants' talk, and suppressed her *patois* as much as possible, for they were from the North, and would not understand.

Two years after her father's death, Jeanne-Marie began to notice that Firman went no more to the café in the evening, and had always his shirt clean, and his best black smocked cape for the market in the town on Mondays, and for Mass on Sundays.

"It astonishes me," she had said, when she was helping M. François' cook that day the château-folk had come to *déjeuner*, unexpectedly—for Jeanne-Marie's cooking was very good indeed—"because, you understand, that is not his way at all. Now, if it were Paul Puyoo or the young André, it would be quite ordinary; but with Firman, I doubt with him it is a different thing."

And Anna had nodded her black head sagely over the *omelette aux fines herbes* as she answered: "Jeanne-Marie, Firman wishes to marry; Jeanne-Marie, for my own part, I say it's that little fat blue-eyed Suzanne from the *métairie* on the hill."

Suzanne

## III

Suzanne looked very pretty the day she came home to Mr. François' *métairie*, leaning on her husband's arm ; but Jeanne-Marie was not there to see ; she was sitting in the large chair in the kitchen of the white cottage, and she was sobbing with her head in her hands. "And indeed the blessed Virgin herself must have thought me crazy, to see me sitting sobbing there, with the house in confusion, and not a thing to cook with in the kitchen," she said, shamefacedly, to Marthe Légrand from the mill, when she came in, later, to help her. "You should have remained," Marthe answered, nodding at her pityingly. "You should have remained, Jeanne-Marie ; the old house is the old house, and the good God never meant the wedding of the young ones to drive away the old ones from the door."

Jeanne-Marie drew in her breath at the words "old ones." "But the book says I am only thirty-four!" she told herself ; and that night she looked in the old Mass-book, to be sure if it could be true ; and there was the date set down very clearly, in the handwriting of Dubois, her father's oldest friend ; for Jeanne-Marie's father himself could neither read nor write—he was, as he said with pride, of the old school, "that kissed our sweethearts, and found that better than writing them long scribbles on white paper, as the young ones do now ; and thought a chat with a friend on Sundays and holidays worth more than sitting cramped up, reading the murders and the adulteries in the newspapers." So it was Dubois who wrote down the children's births in the old Mass book. Yes, there they were. Catherine first of all ; poor Catherine, who was so bright and pretty, and died that rainy

winter when she was just twelve years old. Then "Jeanne-Marie, née le 28 Novembre 1854, à minuit," and added, in the same handwriting, "On nous raconte qu'à cette heure-là nous étions en train de gagner une grande bataille en Russie ! Que ça lui porte bonheur !" Eight years later : "Jacques Firman, né le 12 Février à midi." It all came back to Jeanne-Marie as she read ; that scene of his birth, when she was just eight years old. She was sitting alone in the kitchen, crying, for they had told her her mother was very ill, and had been ill all the night, and just as the big clock was striking twelve she heard the voice of the neighbour who had spent the night there, calling to her : "Jeanne-Marie, viens vite, ta mère veut te voir" ; and she had gone, timid and hesitating, into the darkened room. The first thing she noticed was the large fire blazing on the open hearth—she had never known her father and mother have a fire before—and she wondered much whether it was being too cold that had made her mother ill, as it had little Catherine. She looked towards the bed and saw her mother lying there, her eyes closed, and very pale—so pale that Jeanne-Marie was frightened and ran towards her father ; but he was smiling where he stood by the bed, and the child was reassured. She saw him stoop and kiss his wife on the forehead, and call her his "bonne petite femme," and taking Jeanne-Marie by the hand he showed her the *sage-femme*—the *sage-femme* who had come the night before to make her mother well—sitting near the fire with a white bundle in her arms, and thanked the good God aloud that he had sent him a fine boy at last. Old Dubois had come in gently, his *béret* in his hand, as Jeanne-Marie's father was speaking, and turning to the bed had reiterated emphatically, "Tu as bien fait, chère dame, tu as bien fait."

Jeanne-Marie sat silently going over it all in her mind. "Té," she murmured, "how quickly they all go ; the father, the mother,  
old

old Dubois, even Jeanne the *voisine*, is gone. I alone am left, and the good God knows if there will be any to cry for me when my turn comes to go." She shut the old Mass-book, and put it carefully back on the shelf, and she went to the old looking-glass and the tanned wrinkled face met its reflection very calmly and patiently. "I think it was the hard work in the fields when I was young," she said; "certainly Marthe was right. It is the face of an old woman, a face more worn than hers, though she is beyond forty and has borne so many children."

## IV

Firman had urged his sister to stay on at the *métairie* after his marriage. "You should not go, it is not natural," he said one evening a few weeks before his wedding, while they were piling the small wood in the shed. "The old house will not be the old house without you. Suzanne wishes it also. *Parbleu!* Is it the custom for the fathers to turn their sons out, when they marry? Then, why should I let the old sister go, now my time for marrying has come? Suzanne is a good girl and pretty; and has never even looked at any young fellow in the village—for I, as you know, am particular, and I like not the manners in some villages, where a girl's modesty is counted nothing—but blood is worth the most, *ma foi*, as the old father used to say; and badly must he think of me to see the old sister making room even for the little Suzanne."

But Jeanne-Marie shook her head. "I cannot well explain it, Firman," she said. "It's not that your Suzanne comes unwelcome to me—no, the good God knows it's not that—but it would be

so strange. I should see the old mother's shadow, at the table where you sat, and in the bed where you lay. I might get foolish, and angry, Firman. So let me go, and, when the little ones come, I shall be their grandmother, and Suzanne will forgive me."

That was four and a half years ago, and it was a very lonely four and a half years at the white cottage. Even the cooking, when it was for herself alone, became uninteresting, and the zest went out of it. Jeanne-Marie, in her loneliness, hungered for the animal life that had unconsciously formed a great part of her existence at the *métairie*. Every springtime she would sit, sometimes for hours, in her garden, watching the flocks of callow geese, as they wandered along the road in front of the mill, pecking at the ground as they went, and uttering all the time their little plaintive cries, that soothed her with its echo of the old home. When the boys in their *bérets*, with their long poles and their loud cries of "guà, guà," drove the cows and the oxen home from the fields at sunset, Jeanne-Marie would come out of her cottage, and watch the patient, sleek beasts, as they dawdled along. And she would think longingly of the evenings at the *métairie*, when she never missed going out to see the oxen, as they lay contentedly on their prickly bedding, moving their heavy jaws slowly up and down, too lazy even to look up as she entered.

Firman loved his oxen, for they were well trained and strong, and did good work ; but Jeanne-Marie would have laughed in those days, had she been told she loved the animals of the farm. "I remember," she said to Marthe of the mill one day, "how I said to the old father years ago : 'When the children of M. François came to the *métairie*, it is—" Oh, Jeanne-Marie, you will not kill that pretty little grey hen with the feathered legs," and "Oh ! Jeanne-Marie, you must not drown so many kittens this time" : but I say to them always : " My children, the rich have their toys  
and

and have the time and money to make toys of their animals ; but to us poor folk they are the useful creatures God has given us for food and work, and they are not playthings.” So I said then ; but now, ah, now Marthe, it is different. Do you remember how old Dubois for ever quarrelled with young Baptiste, but when they wrote from the regiment to tell him the boy was dead of fever, during the great manœuvres, do you remember how the old father mourned, and lay on his bed for a whole day, fasting ? So it always is, Marthe. The cow butts the calf with her horns, but when the calf is gone, the mother moans for it all the day.”

Firman was too busy with his farm and his new family ties to come much to see his sister, or to notice how rarely she came up to the *métairie* now. For Suzanne had never forgiven, and that was why Jeanne-Marie walked up so seldom to M. François's *métairie*.

Did not all the village say that it was Suzanne's doing that Firman's sister left the farm on his marriage ? That Suzanne's jealousy had driven Jeanne-Marie away ? And when this came to the ears of Firman's wife, and the old folks shook their heads in her presence over the strange doings of young couples now-a-days, the relief that the dreaded division of supremacy with her husband's sister was spared her, was lost in anger against Jeanne-Marie, as the cause of this village scandal. The jealousy that she had always felt for the “*chère sœur*,” whom Firman loved and respected, leapt up within her. “People say he loves his sister, and that it is I who part them ; they shall see—yes, they shall see.”

And bit by bit, with all a woman's subtle diplomacy, she drew her husband away from his sister's affection, until in a year or two their close intimacy had weakened to a gradually slackening friendship.

At night-time, when Firman's passionate southern nature lay under the thrall of his wife's beauty, she would whisper to him in her soft *patois*, "Love me well, my husband, for I have only you to love; others are jealous of my happiness, and even Jeanne-Marie is envious of your wife, and of the babe that is to come."

And the hot Spanish blood, that his mother had given him, would leap to Firman's face as he took her in his arms, and swore that all he loved, loved her; and those who angered her, he cared not for.

In the first year of their marriage, when Jeanne-Marie came almost every day, Suzanne would show her with pride all the changes and alterations in the old house. "See here, my sister," she said to her one day, only six months after the wedding, when she was taking her over the house, "this room that was yours, we have dismantled for the time; did it not seem a pity to keep an unused room all furnished, for the sun to tarnish, and the damp to spoil?" And Jeanne-Marie, as she looked round on the bare walls and the empty corners of the little room, where she and Catherine had slept together in the old days, answered quietly, "Quite true, Suzanne, quite true; it would be a great pity."

That night when she and Marthe sat together in the kitchen she told her of the incident.

"But, Jeanne-Marie," Marthe interrupted eagerly, "how was it you had left your furniture there, since it was yours?"

"How was it? But because little Catherine had slept in the old bed, and sat in the old chairs, and how could I take them away from the room?"

"Better that than let Suzanne break them up for firewood," Marthe replied shortly.

When little Henri was born, a year after the marriage, Suzanne would not let Jeanne-Marie be at the *métairie*, and she sent  
Firman

Firman down beforehand to tell her that she feared the excitement of her presence. Jeanne-Marie knew she was disliked and distrusted; but this blow fell very heavily: though she raised her head proudly and looked her brother full in the face when he stammered out his wife's wishes.

"For the sake of our name, and what they will say in the village, I am sorry for this," she said; and Firman went without a word.

But when he was gone Jeanne-Marie's pride broke down, and in the darkness of the evening she gathered her shawl round her, and crept up to the *métairie* door.

Hour after hour she sat there, not heeding the cold or the damp, her head buried in her hands, her body rocked backwards and forwards. "I pray for Firman's child," she muttered without ceasing. "O dear Virgin! O blessed Virgin! I pray for my brother's child." And when at length an infant's feeble cry pierced through the darkness, Jeanne-Marie rose and tottered home, saying to herself contentedly, "The good God himself tells me that all is well."

Perhaps the pangs of maternity quickened the capabilities for compassion in Suzanne's peasant mind. She sent for Jeanne-Marie two days later, and watched her with silent wonder, but without a sneer, as she knelt weeping and trembling before the small new bundle of humanity.

From that day little Henri was the idol of Jeanne-Marie's heart. All the sane instincts of wifeness and motherhood, shut up irrevocably within the prison of her maiden life, found vent in her devotion to her brother's child. The natural impulses, so long denied freedom, of whose existence and force she was not even aware, avenged their long suppression in this worship of Firman's boy.

To watch the growth of the childish being, the unveiling of his physical comeliness, and the gradual awakening of his perceptions, became the interest and fascination of her life. Every morning at eleven o'clock, when the cottage showed within the open door all white and shining after her energetic scrubblings, she would put on a clean bodice, and a fresh pink handkerchief for the little coil of hair at the back of her head, and sit ready and impatient, knitting away the time, till one o'clock struck, and she could start for the farm.

She would always arrive at the same hour, when the *métairie* dinner was finished, and Suzanne's fretful complaints: "Jeanne-Marie, you are so proud, you will not come for the dinner or stay for the supper," met only a smile and a deprecating shake of the head.

On her arrival, if Suzanne were in a good temper, she would surrender Henri to her, and Jeanne-Marie's hour of heaven reached her. If it were cold, she would sit in the kitchen, crooning snatches of old tunes, or chattering soft nothings in *patois* to the sleeping child. If fine, she would wander round the garden with him in her arms, sometimes as far as the road, where a chance passer's exclamation of "Oh, le beau bébé!" would flush her face with pleasure.

If Suzanne's temper chanced to be ruffled, if Firman had displeased her, or if the fitful jealousy that sprang up at times against her *belle-sœur*, happened to be roused, she would insist that little Henri was tired, and must not be moved; and Jeanne-Marie would sit for hours sadly watching the cot, in which the child lay, not daring to touch him or comfort him, even when he moaned and moved his arms restlessly in his sleep.

So her life went on till Henri was about a year old, when Suzanne's gradually increasing exasperation reached an unmanageable

able pitch. To her jealous imagination it had seemed for some time that the boy clung more to her sister than to her, and one day things reached a climax.

Jeanne-Marie had arrived with a toy bought for three sous from a travelling pedlar, and the child had screamed, and cried, because his mother, alleging that he was tired, refused to allow Jeanne-Marie to take him or show him the toy. The boy screamed louder and louder, and Jeanne-Marie sat, silent and troubled, in her corner. Even Firman, who was yoking his oxen in the yard, came in hurriedly, hearing the noise, and finding nothing wrong, pleaded with his wife. "Mais, voyons, Suzanne," he began, persuasively, "if le petit wants to see his toy, la tante may show it him, n'est ce pas?" And Suzanne, unable to bear it any longer, almost threw her child into Jeanne-Marie's lap, bursting out, "Take him, then, and draw my baby's love from me, as you please. I want no child who hates his mother." And sobbing loudly, she rushed out. Firman followed her, his handsome face puckered with perplexity, and Jeanne-Marie and the baby were left alone. She bent low down over the deep Spanish eyes that were so like her own, and, while her tears dropped on his face, she held him to her feverishly. "Adieu," she whispered, "adieu, petit Henri. La tante must not come to see him any more, and Henri must be a good boy and love his mother." And with one long look at the child's eyes fixed on her so wonderingly, Jeanne-Marie rose softly and left the farm.

From that day started the great conflict between her love and her pride. Though, to her simple nature, the jealousy of a woman who seemed to her to have in abundance everything that made life worth living, was utterly incomprehensible, she said to herself over and over as she went home, that such a scene as that should never happen again. And as she lay in her narrow bed that night,  
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and made her resolution for the future, she seemed to feel the very fibres of her heart break within her.

Firman came down next day to beg his sister to behave as if nothing had happened. "You are pale and your face is all drawn, *chère sœur*," he told her reproachfully; "but you must not take the things like that. If poor Suzanne were herself and well, she would never have spoken as she did." But Jeanne-Marie smiled at him.

"If I am pale, Firman, it is not for worrying over Suzanne. Tell her from me, I have been selfish all this time. I will not be so again. When she can spare the little Henri, she shall send him to play here with me, by Anna." Anna was Suzanne's sixteen-year-old sister, who lived almost entirely at the *métairie* since her sister's marriage. "And every Sunday afternoon I will come up, and will sit with him in the garden as I used to do. Tell this to Suzanne, with my love."

And Firman told her; and mingled with the relief that Suzanne felt, that the face and figure which had become like a nightmare to her strained nerves, would appear only once a week at the farm, was gratitude that her sister had taken things so well. "Anna shall take him every other day," she observed to Firman, "she shall see I am not jealous; it was the pain that took me suddenly yesterday, while you were speaking. For that matter, in the afternoon there is always much for me to do, and little Henri can very well go with Anna to the cottage."

And no doubt she meant to keep her promise, but she was occupied mind and body with other things. The second baby would be born in a month, and in the afternoons, when she sat, languid and tired, she liked to have her sister Anna by her, and Henri playing by her side.

And after little Catherine was born, there was much for Anna

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to do. "I could not well spare her if I would," Suzanne would say to herself; "what with two babies and me so long in getting on my feet this time."

And Jeanne-Marie put on the clean white bodice every day before her dinner, and sat in the little garden with her eyes fixed on the turning in the white road that led to M. François's *métairie*, but it was not more than one day a week that Anna would come in sight, with little Henri in her arms. The other days Jeanne-Marie would sit, shading her eyes and watching, till long after the hour when she could expect them to appear.

At first, after the quarrel, she had believed in Suzanne's reiterated assurances that "Anna would come every other day or so," and many were the wasted afternoons of disappointment that she courted in her little garden. Sometimes she would rise to her feet, and a sudden impulse to go up to the farm, not a mile away, if only to kiss *le petit* and come home again, laid hold of her; but the memory of Suzanne's cold looks of surprise, and the "Is anything wrong, Jeanne-Marie?" that would meet her, was sufficient to force her into her chair again with a little hopeless sigh. "When the calf is gone, the mother mourns for it all the day," Marthe said grimly, when she surprised her one day watching the white turning. But Jeanne-Marie answered her miserably: "Ah, but I never butt at my calf, and they have taken it from me all the same."

There was great rejoicing in the cottage the day that Anna's white blouse and large green umbrella came in sight, and the three sat in the kitchen together: Anna eating smilingly the cakes and biscuits that grateful Jeanne-Marie made specially for her, and Henri crawling happily on the floor. "He said 'Maman' to Suzanne yesterday," Anna would announce, as Jeanne-Marie hurried to meet her at the gate; or, "Firman says he heard  
him

him say 'Menou,' when the white cat ran across the yard this morning." And many were the attempts to induce Henri to make these utterances again. "Je t'aime, je t'aime," Jeanne-Marie would murmur to him, as she kissed him again and again, and the little boy would look up at her with his dark eyes, and smile encouragingly.

All too quickly the time would go, and all too soon would come Anna's glance at the clock, and the dreaded words: "Suzanne will make herself angry; we must go."

And as Jeanne-Marie watched them disappear along the white road, the clouds of her loneliness would gather round her again.

The Sunday afternoons at the farm were looked forward to through all the week. There was little Catherine to admire, and in the summer days there was the orchard, where Henri loved to play, and where he and his aunt would sit together all the afternoon. If Suzanne were in a good temper, she would bring Catherine out in her arms, and the children would tumble about together in the long grass.

And so the time wore on, and as Henri grew in mind and body, and was able to prattle and run about the fields, Jeanne-Marie hungered for him with a love more absorbing than ever.

Two years had passed since Catherine's birth, and for the last year Anna would often bring her, when she came down to Jeanne-Marie's cottage. The one day a week had dropped gradually to every ten days; it was sometimes only every fortnight that one or both children would appear, and the days that little Henri came were marked white days on the simple calendar of Jeanne-Marie's heart.

Now,

## V

Now, as Jeanne-Marie stood in her garden this hot May afternoon, and shaded her eyes, as she gazed at the broad white road, her face was troubled, and there was a drawn line of apprehension round the corners of her mouth. For lately Suzanne's jealous temper had flamed up again, and this alert jealousy boded evil days for Jeanne-Marie.

Several times within the last two months, little Henri—now going on for four years old—had come toddling down to the cottage by himself, to his aunt's unbounded amazement and delight. "Maman is at market," he explained with dignity the first time, in answer to the wondering queries. "Papa yoked the oxen to the big cart after dinner, and they went; Anna is talking all the afternoon to Pierre Puyoo in the road; and Henri was alone. So Henri came; Henri loves his aunt, and would like some biscuits." Great was the content of that hour in the cottage, when Jeanne-Marie sat in the big arm-chair, and the boy prattled and ate his biscuits on her knee. Anna's hard young smile, that scorned emotion, was always a *gêne* to this harmony of old and young; also, there was no need to glance anxiously at the clock; for the oxen take two hours to get home from the market, and who leaves the town till late in the afternoon? "Anna will miss *le petit*," Jeanne-Marie suggested the first time; but he answered proudly: "She will think *le petit* takes care of the geese in the meadow; do I not have charge of all the geese many afternoons? And when I am six years old, papa has promised I may guard the cows, and bring them home to milk at sundown, as André Puyoo and Georges Vidal do, each day.

day. Also, why cannot Henri come to see *la tante* when he likes ? ”

But nevertheless, the second and third occasions of these happy visits, always on market-days, Jeanne-Marie became uneasy. Did Suzanne know of the boy's absences ? Were those fitful jealousies she now displayed almost every Sunday, the result of her knowledge ? And if she did not know, would there not be a burst of rage when she heard ? Should Jeanne-Marie risk this joy by telling her of its existence, and asking her permission for its continuance ? How well the hard tones of Suzanne's voice, framing each plausible objection, came to her mind, as she thought. No, she could not do it. Let the child come, and go on coming every market-day, for as long as he could. She would say no word to encourage his keeping it secret from his mother ; he would tell her one day, if he had not told her already, and then, if anger there was, surely the simple words, “ May not your child visit his aunt alone ? ” must bring peace again.

So Jeanne-Marie reasoned away her fears. But now, as she stood in her garden, her lips were trembling with anxiety.

Last Sunday she had been too ill to go up to the farm. A sudden agonising breathlessness, together with great dizziness, had forced her to bed, and Marthe's boy had gone up with the message. But neither that day nor the next, which was market-day, nor any following day, had Suzanne, or Anna, or little Henri come to see her. And to-day was Saturday. And she realised wearily that to-morrow she could not get to the farm ; she felt too ill and feeble. “ My heart aches,” she said to Marthe each day, “ my heart aches.”

The afternoon waned slowly, and the little group at the café increased in numbers, as the men sauntered through the village at sundown. The women stood at their doors, laughing and chatting  
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with one another. M. le Curé passed down the street, smiling at the children. From the meadows came the cows and oxen, driven slowly along, their bells beating low harmonies as they went. The festive air of evening after a hot day touched all the tiny town. And Jeanne-Marie stood in her garden, waiting.

Suddenly, while she watched, her heart bounded within her, and a spasm of sudden pain drove the colour from her face, for she recognised the figure that was passing from the white turning into the broad road. Suzanne—Suzanne, who had not been near her cottage for a year—Suzanne, alone. She pressed her two hands under her left breast, and moved forward to the gate. She felt now she had known it for long. All the suspense of many days had given way to a dull certainty: little Henri was ill, was dying perhaps, and Suzanne had come with the news.

Jeanne-Marie had her hand on the latch to let her through; but she stood outside the gate, and said hoarsely, "I will not come in." Her face was flushed, there was no cap over her coil of brown hair, and she had on the dark dress she never wore except at the farm. All this Jeanne-Marie noticed mechanically, while that suffocating hurry at her heart seemed to eat away her energy and her power of speech.

But Suzanne was going to speak. The colour flamed into her face, and her teeth ground together, as if to force down the violence of her feeling, and then she spoke: "Jeanne-Marie, you have done your work well. We knew you loved our boy. You were careful always to show us how far greater was your love for him than ours. And as you could not well turn him against me before my eyes, you waited—*ma foi*, how well you did it!—you waited till I was well away, and then, you taught him to sneak down to see you, and sneak home again before my return. *Mon Dieu!* it was a worthy son to us you wished to make of him.

But

But it could not be, Jeanne-Marie. Your good God, you love so well, would not have it and so ;”—there came a sob in her voice that she choked down, and Jeanne-Marie’s face went a shade greyer as she listened—“it happened that I was long at the market last week, and you, knowing this would be so, because it was a big market, brought him home late, when the fever was springing from the marshes—it was Marguerite Vallée saw him and came and told me—and now these four days he has lain with fever, and the officier de santé tells us there grows something in his throat that may kill him in four days.”

The hard tones left her voice in the last phrase. A shadow of the love she persuaded herself she felt for Henri sprang up, and choked her anger. She forgot Jeanne-Marie for the moment, and saw only the little figure tossing with fever and delirium, and pity for her own sorrow filled her eyes with tears. She was surprised at the calm cruelty of her own words. Looking up curiously to see how her sister would take it, she started, for Jeanne-Marie’s face seemed suddenly to have grown old and grey. She was struggling breathlessly to speak, and when her voice came, it sounded far off, and weak like the voice of a sick child :

“You know well that in your anger you have lied to me. Henri may be ill—and dying ; it is not I who have made him so. You shall listen to me now, though I will not keep you here long ; for the hand that struck my mother suddenly through the heart, struck me while you were speaking. You have kept me all these days in suspense, and now you have given the blow. Be satisfied, Suzanne.”

She paused, and the sound of her heavy breathing struck Suzanne’s frightened senses like the knell of a doom.

“Listen to me. Henri came to me of his own will, and never did I persuade him or suggest to him to come. Never did  
did

did he go home later than four o'clock; there was nothing done in secret; neither I, nor any in the village, thought it a crime he came to visit me. Often I have seen him keeping the geese in the long grass of the meadows at six, at seven o'clock. Seek the fever there—not on the village road before the sunset. As the good God hears me, never have I stood between that boy and his mother. Gradually you took from me every privilege my affection knew; but I said nothing. Ah, I loved him dearly; I was content to wait. But all that is over. If God grants me life—but He is good, and I think He knows my suffering all these years—I swear before Him your house shall be to me a house of strangers, Henri the child of strangers, and my brother's face unknown to me. Never shall my father's daughter hear again what I have heard from you to-day. All these years you have played upon my heart. You have watched the suffering; you have known how each word seemed so innocent, but stabbed so deep. You have seen your child wind himself round my heart, and every day, every hour, you have struggled to pluck him from me. Now, I tell you I tear your children from my heart; you have killed not only my body, but my love. Go, and leave me for ever, or by my father, I will curse you where you stand."

She tottered forward, and with one horrified look at the agony of her menacing face, Suzanne turned and ran.

And Jeanne-Marie fell all her length on the garden soil.

## VI

The miller's boy saw her there, when he came past a few minutes later, and not daring to touch her, ran to the mill for help. Marthe and her husband came immediately and carried her into the cottage. At first, they thought she was dead, her face was so grey and sunken; but she came to herself, as they laid her on the bed, and shook her head faintly when Marthe suggested fetching the *officier de santé*.

As soon as she could speak she whispered: "No, Marthe, it is the illness of the heart that killed my mother. The doctor told her she might have lived to be old, with much care, and if no great trouble or excitement had come to her; but, you see, I was much troubled just now, and so it has come earlier. Do not send for any doctor; he could but call it by the long name they called it when my mother died, and trouble one with vain touches and questions."

So Marthe helped her to undress, and to get to bed quickly. The breathlessness and the pain had gone for a time, though she was very feeble, and could scarcely stand on her feet. But it was the grey look of her face that frightened Marthe, and her strained quietness. No questions could get out of her the story of the afternoon.

"Suzanne came to tell me little Henri was ill," was all she would say; but Marthe only shook her head, and made her own deductions.

Jeanne-Marie would not hear of her staying with her for the night, and leaving her young children alone, and so it was settled the miller's boy should sleep below in the kitchen, and if Jeanne-Marie

Marie felt ill in the night, she would call to him, and he would fetch Marthe immediately.

Also, Marthe promised to call at the house of M. le Curé on her way home. He would be out late, since he had started only an hour ago to take the Host to old Goupé, who lay dying four kilometres away ; but she would leave a message, and certainly, when he returned, however late, he would come round. It was nine o'clock before Marthe would leave, and even then she stopped reluctantly at the door, with a last look at the thin figure propped up on her pillows. "Let me stay, Jeanne-Marie," she said ; "you are so pale, and yet your eyes burn. I do not like to think of the long night and you sitting here."

"It is easier than when I lie down, which brings the breathlessness. Do not worry yourself, Marthe, I shall sleep perhaps, and if I need anything, I have but to call to Jean below. Good-night, and thank you, Marthe."

The little house was very quiet. Jean had been asleep on his chair this hour past, and not a sound came from the slumbering village. There was no blind to the window of the bedroom, and Jeanne-Marie watched the moon, as it escaped slowly from the unwilling clouds, and threw its light on to the foot of the narrow bed.

For a long while she lay there, without moving, while through all her troubled, confused thoughts ran like an under-current the dull pain that wrenched at her heart. It seemed to take the coherency from her thinking, and to be the one unquiet factor in the calm that had come over her. She was surprised, herself, at this strange fatigue that had swept away even her suffering. She thought of little Henri and his illness without a pang. He seemed like some far-off person she had read about, or heard of, long ago.

She

She thought to herself, vaguely, that she must be dying, since she seemed to have lost all feeling.

Bit by bit, various little scenes between her and Henri came to her mind, with an extraordinary vividness. He was sitting on her knee in the cottage, and his clear child's voice rang like a bell in the silent room—so clearly, that Jeanne-Marie started, and wondered if she were light-headed or had been dreaming. Then the voice faded away, and she saw the cool, high grass of the orchard, and there was Henri laughing at her, and rolling among the flowers. How cool and fresh it looked; and Henri was asking her to come and play: "Tante Jeanne-Marie, viens jouer avec ton petit. Tante Jeanne-Marie, tante Jeanne-Marie!" She must throw herself on the grass with him—on the cool, waving grass. And she bent forward with outstretched arms; but the movement brought her to herself, and as she lay back on her pillows, suddenly the reality of suffering rushed back upon her, with the agonising sense of separation and of loss. Little Henri was dying; was dead perhaps; never to hear his voice, or feel his warm little arms round her neck. She could do nothing for him; he must die without her. "Tante Jeanne-Marie! Tante Jeanne-Marie!" Was he calling her, from his feverish little bed? If he called, she must go to him, she could not lie here, this suffering was choking her. She must have air, and space to breathe in; this room was suffocating her. She must go to Henri. With a desperate effort she struggled to her feet, and stood supporting herself by the bed-post. The moon, that had hidden itself in the clouds, struggled out, the long, old-fashioned glass hanging on the wall opposite the bed became one streak of light, and Jeanne-Marie, gazing at herself, met the reflection of her own face, and knew that no power on earth could make her reach the farm where little Henri lay.

She

She stood, as if spell-bound, marking the sunken look of the eyes, the grey-blue colour of the cheeks, the face that was the face of an old woman.

A sudden, fierce revolt against her starved life swept through her at the sight, and conquered even the physical pain raging at her heart. Still struggling for breath, she threw up her arms and tore the cotton nightgown from her shoulders, and stood there beating her breast with her hands.

“Oh, good God! good God! see here what I am. How old and shrunken before my time! Cursed be these breasts, that no child has ever suckled; cursed be this withered body, that no man has ever embraced. I could have loved, and lived long, and been made beautiful by happiness. Ah, why am I accursed? I die, unloved and neglected by my own people. No children’s tears, no husband to close my eyes; old, worn out, before my time. A woman only in name—not wife, not mother. Despised and hideous before God and men—God and men.”

Her voice died away in a moan, her head fell forward on her breast, and she stumbled against the bed. For a long time she lay crouched there, insensible from mere exhaustion, until, just as the clocks were striking midnight, the door opened gently, and Marthe and M. le Curé came in. Jean, awakened by the sounds overhead, had run quickly for Marthe, and coming back together, they had met M. le Curé on his way.

They raised her gently, and laid her on the bed, and finding she still breathed, Marthe ran to fetch brandy, and the Curé knelt by the bed in prayer.

Presently, the eyes opened quietly, and M. le Curé saw her lips move. He bent over her, and whispered: “You are troubled, Jeanne-Marie; you wish for the absolution?”

But her voice came back to her, and she said clearly:

“To

"To die unloved, unmourned; a woman, but no wife; no mother."

She closed her eyes again. There were noises singing in her head, louder and louder; but the pain at her heart had ceased. She was conscious only of a great loneliness, as if a curtain had risen, and shut her off from the room; and again the words came, whispered from her lips: "A woman, accursed and wasted; no mother and no wife."

But some one was speaking, speaking so loudly that the sounds in her head seemed to die away. She opened her eyes, and saw M. le Curé, where he knelt, with his eyes shining on her face, and heard his voice saying: "And God said, 'Blessed be the virgins above all women; give unto them the holy places; let them be exalted and praised by My church, before all men, and before Me. Worthy are they to sit at My feet—worthy are they above all women.'"

A smile of infinite happiness and of supreme relief lit up Jeanne-Marie's face.

"Above all women," she whispered: "above all women."

And Jeanne-Marie bowed her head, and died.