

With Gabrielle it was so. How could I know that the house and the garden were but a prison to her? And my mother was somewhat harsh with her. What a woman my mother was! She could not bear to see Gabrielle fold her hands and sit still. She scolded—ah, yes, she scolded! She said to me that the stick upon her poor little shoulders would be but fitting. My admirable mother! See you, she was old and her mind was in the cuisine and the house. There were the long winters, too, when she unpicked the beds. I think Gabrielle hated it. Once I saw the despair in her face, and I said to her: "Hold, little one; there is enough of bed-making! I drive to Soulac, and I have room for thee." Her poor little face began to be delighted, but my mother would not have it. She thought it was enough for any woman, that occupation of remaking the beds in the long winter.

His voice was as monotonous and dreamy as the lapping of water upon the sands.

'I should have had the courage to remind the excellent mother that Gabrielle was young,' he concluded with a sigh.

'Only that we Frenchmen have always obeyed our mothers,' said the Cure; 'and Madame Malahiende was not one to be disobeyed. It is, perhaps, not so wise that the mother and wife should be under one roof, as it is so often with us.'

Jean Marie was silent. He was remembering that winter when his mother's voice scolded and complained incessantly. Why, her voice had gone all day scolding and complaining! And Gabrielle had grown whiter and whiter, and her little lips had closed to a thinner line, and she had quite forgotten to be merry as she had been at first, and had gone about with lagging steps and a drooping head; and Jean Marie's heart had been sorely troubled within him, as men's hearts often have been and will be, because women cannot agree together, and the two he loved were all wrong with each other.

Then Jean Marie and his mother had driven one day to market and had come home, the old mother in high good humor, because she had sold her geese well, and there was no Gabrielle. They had searched everywhere for her, the mother's wailing giving place by degrees to silence. They had gone out through the cornfield, down through the little glen, along the plage, among the sand-dunes—everywhere, and there was no Gabrielle. Little by little the truth leaked out. She had gone away to Paris.

Jean Marie had changed much since Gabrielle had left him. He no longer quailed before his mother. Even the odious charge of being an undutiful son did not move him now, when it came to a clashing of their wills. He took her scoldings meekly, though the older she grew the more she scolded; but he was not to be moved. He grew accustomed to the shrill old voice, as one grows accustomed to the piping of the storms in winter in that country of the winds.

He took his wrongs in a curious way. Instead of feeling the shame that had come upon him as other people considered it, he waited for Gabrielle's return. Everyone knew it; and, according to his or her way of looking at it, thought him a fool or a saint. Monsieur le Cure, though he said nothing at all about it, understood when Jean Marie set up in his garden a statue of St. Anthony, who finds the thing that is lost; but he only sighed and took snuff, and rumbled his red curls, as he always did when lost in thought. Occasionally, during the long, long years in which there had been no word of Gabrielle, he had said midway of the talk or the silence:

'But he is slow in finding, the good St. Anthony!'
'Yet he will find,' Jean Marie would answer with a placid patience.

It never seemed to occur to him, as it had to the Cure, that if poor Gabrielle was alive after all those years, she might be far from being the soft-faced, innocent Gabrielle he remembered. Fourteen years had gone since that September day, when they had sold the geese at Soulac market, and had found Gabrielle missing on their return.

'See then, my friend,' said the Cure, coming in to him one day very full of a new thing. 'You must have an apprentice from the Assistance Publique. M. Charleroi, of the Osiers Farm, has received a brave boy. He will not have the habitudes of our lads here, who love too soon the spiriting and the cigarette. You shall train him up your own way, and he will be a credit to you; and it will be a good act to rescue one of the foundlings of the great city.'

Jean Marie gazed at him thoughtfully through the smoke-wreaths of his pipe—gazed beyond him to the statue of St. Anthony. He was not sure that he needed a nameless boy. He and Josephine got on very well together; and Michel the shepherd and Jacques the ploughman had been so long with him that they were like one household. The boy might be a little rascal, a disturbing element. It would be different if one had had a child of one's own.

And Josephine was old, and nearly as sour with young things as his mother had been.

He was about to answer the question in the Cure's eager face, when his eye rested on the curly head of the infant Jesus in St. Anthony's arms. Why, He was a boy once, and doubtless boys were dear to Him. Supposing it was His will—'Eh, bien, Monsieur,' he said, turning to the Cure. 'It shall be as Monsieur desires.'

It was some little while before the boy came from the Assistance Publique. But he arrived at last one bright midwinter day, with his box full of ugly, warm clothing, and the few books and writing materials which proved that he had received an education from the State.

Jean Marie had known something of these State-reared children, and the knowledge had not been of a favorable kind. So it was with a feeling of relief that his kind, innocently shrewd eyes fell upon the little chap, who was standing on the cold platform, performing a quiet little dance in order to warm himself; for Jean Marie was late, and the Paris train was already speeding on its way. It was a good fago, a little bleached, as though the boy lived too much the life of the town and within doors, but bright and eager in its expression, with a pair of brown eyes as deep and velvety as Gabrielle's were long ago. He lifted his eyes to Jean Marie with a quaint politeness. 'The little figure was in clothes miles too big for it. Jean Marie, who was fond of all young things, felt his heart go out to Pierre Martel, as the lad was called.

As they joggled homeward in the cart, which was already heaped so high with Jean Marie's marketing that it could hardly contain himself and the boy, and the boy's square painted box, Pierre's quiet excitement over the things he saw made Jean Marie smile with plesaurable amusement. He had excellent manners—as good in their way as Jean Marie's own—being eager to please and anxious not to give trouble, and very keen to do anything he could to help already.

'Thou wilt find him not so bad, Josephine,' said Jean Marie, standing by the charcoal fire in the kitchen, when the boy had clumped heavily upstairs to his bedroom in the roof. 'He is quiet as a mouse and very desirous to please.'

'I never knew the boy yet who was not a rascal,' said Josephine, sourly; 'and if he seemed not to be I should but distrust him the more for that.'

But even Josephine's grimness relaxed somewhat at the boy's timid but heartfelt praise of her cabbage soup at supper, and his delight in all he saw about him. He won her over as he won over Michel and Jacques, and Menelik, and Mimi the cat, that was a most disagreeable creature, and made war on all the world. Josephine would still give him harsh words at times, and once or twice she flung her broom at him when his feet had brought in mud on her clean tiled floor. But she acknowledged to Jean Marie that the rascal was as little of a rascal as could be expected; and in time she began to take an interest in Pierre's wardrobe, and even to knit his stockings for him—a thing which hitherto she had done only for her master and for the Cure. In fact, the boy made his place at the farm in their hearts. By the time summer came Jean Marie wondered how he had lived without Pierre.

'He becomes like a son,' he said to the Cure, who was in all his secrets.

'It is the reward of thy charity, Jean Marie,' returned the Cure. 'And it is true the boy has been well reared. He tells me he was with the Sisters of the Good Mercy in his tender childhood. They laid the foundations. Paris has done him no harm.'

By and bye Pierre went of mornings to the old, old church out in the sand-dunes to serve the Cure's Mass. There were not so many to do it in these latter days when the newspapers from Paris brought the Free Thought into those quiet places. All were equal in the sight of God, the Cure said to himself, when Pierre in his little surplice and vestment awaited him of mornings. Paris had done him no harm. The lad from the Assistance Publique was better than the children of the parents of the parish, who would hardly pull the forelock to the Cure nowadays, and thought but of saving the sous.

As time went on, Pierre grew strong and tall and willing; and even Josephine acknowledged that it had been a good day when he came to them. He was always so smiling and pleasant that he disarmed the crossness of the old woman. Long, long ago Jean Marie's heart had settled upon the foundling. Josephine in time doted upon him almost as much, though she would never acknowledge it. He was not like other boys. He was gentle with old people and those ailing, and with animals. He could do anything with the animals, like Jean Marie himself.

'What shall we do, thou and I, Josephine,' Jean Marie asked one day, 'when the boy goes for his service with the army? They will be long days in the house, and longer nights when he is not coming.'