

# CHAPTER *N<sup>o</sup> 1*



*Marie-Claire* shivered in her thin nightgown. The kindling in the wood stove snapped. When the flame began to lick at the larger pieces of wood, Marie-Claire replaced the iron lid on top of the stove. Wouldn't Maman be pleased to wake up with the fire already lit? She was still so tired after Philippe's birth. Marie-Claire did not know just what had happened in her parents' room that day almost a week ago, but she'd heard enough to know that having a baby must be harder work even

than churning butter or hauling water.

Marie-Claire crossed the cold floor to where Emilie still slept, curled beneath the grey blanket. How tempting it was to crawl back into the warm bed with her sister until the heat of the wood stove took the chill from the air. But if she wanted everything to be ready before Maman awoke, she must keep moving.

She slipped on her boots and wrapped her shawl around her shoulders before crouching beside the bed and pulling from under it the chamber pot. She carried it carefully so its contents wouldn't slosh out before she got downstairs to the privy in the lane behind their house.

Already a set of footprints in the snow led to the door of the little wooden shed. Marie-Claire could hear her neighbour grunting inside.

"Hurry up, Monsieur Flaubert. It's cold out here."

The door swung open. "Mind your tongue, you sassy little girl."

Marie-Claire scowled. She wasn't a little girl.

She was ten years old. Old enough to read and write and get up first and help Maman get the family ready for church.

She dumped her sister's nighttime urine down the hole, then lifted her nightgown and sat on the wooden seat, still warm from Monsieur Flaubert's big behind.

By the time Marie-Claire had emptied her parents' chamber pot, shaken the snow from her nightgown, hung it by the wood stove to dry, and got dressed, it was time to start breakfast. Marie-Claire put another stick of wood in the stove, poured water from the bucket into the kettle and set it on top. She cut five slices of bread from the loaf, ready to make toast—one piece for Emilie, one for Maman, two for Papa, and one for herself. Her baby brother was too little yet for more than the milk and water in his bottles, and her older brother had gone away with the army to help with a fight in the west. A fight with a man whose name—Louis—was the same as his own.

From the bedroom came a sudden cry. Papa

appeared in the doorway holding Philippe awkwardly in his arms.

“Here, Marie-Claire, you take him. Maman is getting dressed and I have to pay a visit.”

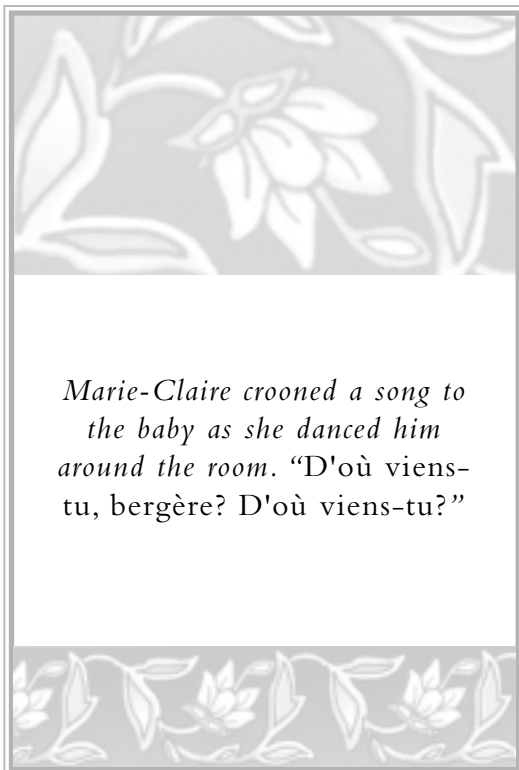
Marie-Claire crooned a song to the baby as she danced him around the room. “*D’où viens-tu, bergère? D’où viens-tu?*”

“Marie-Claire,” Maman said, “did you light the fire this morning? Such a helpful girl you are becoming. And look at this bread, already sliced. It will have to be thin ones for the rest of the day, though.”

“I am sorry, Maman. I was not thinking of later.” This being Sunday, the market, of course, would be closed.

“Never mind, *ma petite*. Let me feed Philippe while you go wake your sleepy sister. We do not want to be late for church.”





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