

MON PERE

(Continued from page one)

come home, for he had promised. And Pere always kept his promises.

Pere had joined the British forces. They never had heard from him again, and Maman had given him up for lost. But Marie had faith in his promise.

When France is free!

"He will come back soon!" she prayed. "Now that the Allies are expected any day. He will come when the Invasion begins—with the Americans, the British, and the others. Oh, come back soon, mon pere!"

* * *

Off in the distance the church bells of Bayeux rang. "Four o'clock," thought Marie, "almost time to get up."

Jean was awake now. She heard him coughing. He worked so long out in the mist fishing, going often in the night.

* * *

Jean suddenly rose from his bed, glanced at his watch, and, pulling on his boots, left the cellar without a word.

"Jean!" Marie ran after him. He turned around. "Jean, this is the fourth morning now you've been up an hour earlier. What is it? What's wrong?"

He said, "Marie—please. You'll soon know." With that he hurried up the stairs.

She heard the front door of the cottage bang. "You'll soon know!" echoed through her mind. "What could he mean?" she wondered.

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Pausing to pull up the twins' blanket over their shoulders she noticed their thin and drawn little faces. They hadn't been getting enough to eat. She'd have to go out and cut some greens today. Perhaps she'd find some wild strawberries. She clenched her fist when she thought of the Boches—how they had come and taken the goat, their warm clothes, and most of the food.

But she kissed the twins and lay down on her cot. "It will be time to get up in a while," she thought. "Another day! Oh, Pere, please come home," she whispered softly.

There were the poor little flowers she had picked in hopes that her father would come. The family would decorate the table and celebrate his birthday, though he was not home—so they had done for three years. They would still cry, "Bonne Fete, mon Pere" to the empty seat. Waiting, hoping, listening—for Pere.

* * *

Outside the little cellar it was still and quiet. Only the distant roar of the ocean—! There was something humming in her ears. Planes! An air raid!

She threw off the cover, sprang to her feet and ran to the door. She peered over the sandbags piled against the walls. Yes, she could hear them. In a moment the bombing would begin.

There! The searchlights were criss-crossing the skies. The sickening screams of the bombs, the crash and explosion began. The machine guns of the planes were spurting fire from above. The big guns, manned by the Boches, pounded them from below, and in the distance she heard the ceaseless waves break on the shore.

"Jean!" Marie gasped. "Where

is Jean? He might be killed!"

The door clicked behind her.

She swung around . . . maybe—Jean was standing in the doorway, muddy and smiling.

"Oh, Jean, where—?"

"It's started, Marie!"

"What?"

"The Invasion!"

"The Invasion? Oh, Jean!" She danced about him in an ecstasy of joy.

"And you, Jean? You had something to do with it, I know."

"Yes. I set off a signal to guide the planes."

"Oh, Jean, hurry! Tell Maman. Wake the twins."

And so they did. The whole family cried and laughed for joy.

"Maman," cried Marie. "Pere will be here soon! Remember what he said that night?—'I'll be home when France is free!'"

Well, soon we will be free! There—Listen! The troops are landing on the beach!"

It was lighter now. She could vaguely make out the landing barges on the shores.

Pere would soon be here. She knew he would. A strong feeling that he was near possessed her. Maybe he was coming up the path right that moment.

She would be the first to greet him. She would have to go outside to see. Pere was coming. How could she remain in the cellar?

Maman, Jean and the twins were gathered around the door, watching, their faces glad. She quickly slipped up the cellar stairs, ran through the kitchen and through the door.

The salt sea air was cool on her cheek as she stood on the hill. The noise she did not hear. The blinding flashes that illuminated her face she did not see. The confusion and pandemonium she did not notice. She only stared into the mist, searching

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eagerly amongst the surge of men—for Pere!

There! Looming out of the mist, coming towards her, charging up the hill, came one with a familiar walk. She saw his face and then, with tears of gladness and laughter in her eyes, she cried, "Mon Pere! Bonne Fete, mon Pere!"

Swiftly down the hill she ran, her arms outspread as if to embrace him. Laughing, crying, the hard, long, hungry years were forgotten; the shooting and noise around her were nothing. Joy guided her feet over the stones. Gladness overflowed her heart. Pere, dear Pere was home at last! Never again long heart-breaking days — Pere brought sunshine with him.

Quicker, faster she ran, her face exultant and beautiful with joy, her long hair streaming behind her in the wind. Her lips could shape only one word, "Mon Pere!" she shouted.

But faster than her feet, speeding, came death. And pierced her small body—so tiny was the bullet but so large the death! And gasping with pain but happy still, she lay at his feet.

He bent over her and she threw her arms around him and happily whispered, "Bonne Fete, Mon Pere!"

She knew she was the first to greet him, and so she died smiling. For he had come home at last. Pere was home.

* * *

The American soldier laid the child down gently on the sand, turned to his buddy and said, "Poor little kid. Must've thought I was somebody else!"

His buddy, heedful of the battle and danger of their hesitation, tugged at his sleeve and dashed ahead along the sands. He followed, but for a moment he hesitated on the top of the hill, looking down at the small body lying on the beach below him.

"'Bonne Fete!' Wonder what that means? 'Bonne Fete—'" Then he was gone into the mist.

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