

MÈRE GILLETTE

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Mère Gilette by Anonymous

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ANONYMOUS

MÈRE GILLETTE

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BY THE AUTHOR OF

“AN OLD MARQUISE,” ETC., ETC.



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Dedication.

TO
LADY HERBERT OF LEA
THIS SIMPLE STORY,
THE SCENE OF WHICH IS LAID
NOT MANY MILES
FROM PEACEFUL BOURY,
IS DEDICATED:
A SLIGHT RETURN FOR MANY
ACTS OF KINDNESS.

MÈRE GILLETTE.

CHAPTER I.

It was summer in the old Norman village where Mère Gillette lived with her son Jean. Jean was nineteen years of age, and he was all that was left to her now; but if he were spared, she would say sometimes, then she would be content. She forgot, I think, that there are things worse than death.

Jean was the youngest of six. He was the only one who had lived to grow up. Little Claude-Marie had been the one who came nearest to doing so, having died on his tenth birthday, but then no one in the village had ever expected Claude to grow up. "When they are like that, the good God takes them home early," the old women had been wont to say, after watching the boy in his scarlet and lace robes, serving the Mass of Monsieur le Curé, while the sunlight fell through the stained windows on the fair young head, as the lad knelt with clasped hands, gazing up to where the

white Christ hung above the altar. Claude-Marie had served the Mass on the day he died, and then he had gone out in the fields to labour, for it was the time of harvest. And about the hour of noon, just when the Angelus was pealing from the old grey tower, the boy had fallen prone upon the ground, and in a few hours he was gone. A doctor came and spoke of sun-stroke, but Mère Gillette did not care for science. The Lord of the harvest had seen her Claude-Marie was ripe for heaven—that was all. They robed the fair white body of the boy in his acolyte's dress, and bore him away up the village street to the quiet graveyard where his father and brothers slept, and the Mère Gillette walked behind, and little Jean with her.

It was nine years and more since that bright day in the harvest-time when the sorrowful procession had gone in at the gate of God's-acre, and little Jean was little no longer, but had grown tall and strong, and, what was more, was said to be engaged to Babette Rison, the only daughter of a rich neighbouring farmer. Jean was apprenticed to the village blacksmith, and laboured away lustily all the long day through: in the evening he was content to sit on the bridge, beneath which the swift river ran, and smoke his pipe with Gaspard and François, and

the other young fellows whom he had known all his life. And when the stars were out, and lights were gleaming from under the eaves of many a little cottage, they went into the *café* and drank long draughts of simple Norman cider, and then went quietly home to bed long before the clock in the church steeple had chimed eleven.

And then there were Sundays, when, very early, long before Jean was awake, Mère Gillette would creep down the tiny staircase, and out and away to where the doors of God's house stood wide open. And there she would kneel at the sanctuary-rails, close to the spot where her Claude-Marie used to kneel in the long-gone days, and with a faithful few would receive Him whom Monsieur le Curé brought them in the golden ciborium. And by and by, when the sun was high in the heavens, she would come back again for *Grande Messe*, leaning on her Jean's strong arm; and under the grey arches of the dark old Norman church she would thank *le bon Dieu* for all His mercies, and tell herself that if her son were but spared, then would she never be sad or downcast any more. She forgot, I say, that there are things worse than death: it seemed to her that that was the great evil which threatened all her treasures. Five