

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS

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# The House of Bonneau

Elvi Rhodes

## About the Book

When Madeleine Bates, ex-parlourmaid and daughter of a Yorkshire millhand, married the young French wool baron, Léon Bonneau, it seemed as though her life of turmoil was over. They knew they had struggles of a practical nature ahead of them - trying to build the bankrupt mill into a new and thriving business - but Madeleine felt that, providing everything was right between her and Léon, they could face whatever lay ahead.

But trouble and disruption were still to be part of her future - for Léon's family in France bitterly resented the Yorkshire girl who had taken their son away from them. And Hortense Murer, who had thought she would be Léon's wife, resented her even more. And over all hung the shadow of a foolish curse made by her old enemy, Sophia Parkinson - that Madeleine would never bear a son - a curse that, against all the tenets of common sense, seemed to be coming true.

## **Contents**

Cover

About the Book

Title Page

Dedication

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Nineteen

Chapter Twenty

Chapter Twenty-One

Chapter Twenty-Two

Chapter Twenty-Three  
Chapter Twenty-Four

About the Author  
Also by Elvi Rhodes  
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# The House of Bonneau

Elvi Rhodes



**CORGI BOOKS**

*For Mary Kennedy, with love*

# ONE

'OH MADELEINE,' MRS Bates said. 'Whoever invented the crinoline didn't give a thought to having to pack it!'

She was on her knees at the side of the big trunk, helping her daughter to prepare for the journey, trying to get everything in with the least possible creasing.

'All these yards of material,' she sighed. 'Must you take so many gowns?'

'I really must, Ma,' Madeleine said. 'I want to do Léon credit in front of his family. I must look my very best.'

'Well I shall be glad when this silly fashion changes,' Mrs Bates said. 'It's been in far too long.'

'Léon says we should hope for the crinoline to be in fashion for ever,' Madeleine remarked. 'It uses so much fabric - and after all, we make our living from supplying that.'

'I suppose so,' Mrs Bates conceded. 'But in the meantime how am I to get everything in?'

'Let me help you,' Madeleine offered. 'Really, love, there's no call for you to be doing my packing!'

'I like to be useful,' Mrs Bates said.

'Useful! Oh Ma, that's an understatement if ever I heard one. I don't know what me and Léon would do without you. You spoil us.'

'It pleases me,' Mrs Bates said. 'I don't know about Léon, but you didn't come in for much spoiling when you were a bairn, so I reckon you're due for a bit now. Hand me that jacket of Léon's, will you? I think your husband's clothes are going to take up nearly as much room as yours.'

Her son-in-law was a bit of a dandy – but no, that was unfair; he was just very smart, elegant as only a Frenchman could be, she thought. In Helsdon, this West Riding town where he had married her daughter and made his home, he stood out from the rest of the men. Even after – how long was it since he'd first arrived? Five years, was it? – you couldn't take him for anything but a foreigner. It was in his dark looks; in the cut of his beard and moustache which the Helsdon barber had had to learn to deal with; in his clothes, to which, though they were made in Helsdon, he somehow added the stamp of Paris.

'He likes to dress well,' Madeleine agreed. 'And you have to admit, Ma, he does look handsome in his clothes.' Her voice was warm with admiration.

'Oh yes. As they say in these parts, he pays for dressing,' Mrs Bates said. 'And so do you, love. Don't forget that I think Léon's family is going to be quite impressed by his Yorkshire wife.'

Madeleine shivered a little in spite of the August heat. Whenever she thought of what lay before her, she was nervous: and since they were leaving for France tomorrow, she thought of it most of the time.

'Are the presents well packed?' she asked anxiously. 'It would be terrible if they got broken!'

She had given a lot of thought to choosing the gifts; delicate pieces of English bone china. A cream jug and sugar basin for her mother-in-law, a trinket box for Léon's sister, Marie, for the wives of Léon's two brothers, small bon-bon dishes, and for the men, cravats. The older children would receive tins of Yorkshire toffee and the smallest ones wooden toys. She hoped they would all be acceptable. She hoped *she* would be.

'Oh Ma, do you really think they'll like me?' she asked.

She had been married to Léon for more than two years now, and in all that time she had never visited his family. At first it was the mill which had prevented it; they were



expanding so fast and there was so much which needed attention. Then last August, when the mill closed down for Helsdon Feast week, their plans to visit her in-laws had broken down because her mother was ill with the pleurisy, and couldn't be left.

'Of course they will, love! You must have asked me that a hundred times!'

'I know! I'm sorry, Ma!'

'And I always tell you the same thing, don't I? Just be yourself, no need to try anything fancy, and they'll take to you right away.'

How could anyone not take to Madeleine, Mrs Bates thought. She was guiltily aware that if she had to choose a favourite amongst her three daughters – which she wouldn't like to do – then it would have to be Madeleine. She was good to look at, with her dark curling hair and soft brown eyes, her slender, yet shapely figure, her height; and above and beyond all that, the liveliness, the sympathy, the intelligence, which shone out of her for all the world to see. Oh, who wouldn't take to her?

'That's what Léon says,' Madeleine admitted. 'Be yourself and you'll be all right.' But still she remained doubtful.

'I'd feel better if only I knew a bit more French,' she said. 'I hardly know any.'

'I thought Léon was teaching you?'

'Oh, he is, but there's never enough time. The business takes it all. That's the trouble with prosperity, it gives you responsibilities and leaves you with no time.'

'Now Madeleine! Don't let me ever hear you grumble about your position!' Mrs Bates's tone was suddenly as sharp as the north wind which blew over Helsdon moor. 'Have you forgotten what it was like, living in Priestley Street? Have you already forgotten what it was like to go hungry? If *you* have, then I haven't. No, nor never shall! You should go down on your knees and thank God for what life has brought you since then!'

It was all so recent to Mrs Bates that sometimes, still, she dreamt about it, waking in the night in a cold sweat of terror. That loveless marriage to her husband, Joseph Bates; then his death, which in one way had been a merciful release, but had left her destitute, not knowing which way to turn, how to keep food on the table and a roof over her head, until Léon Bonneau had come to the rescue and employed her as his housekeeper before he took Madeleine as his wife. No, she would never forget any of that!

‘Oh, I do,’ Madeleine said. ‘Most of all I thank God for Léon. And no, I *don’t* forget those other times.’

But in a way it was the lowliness of her upbringing which sometimes, and almost always on social occasions, caused her insecurity. Léon’s family were comfortably off. His upbringing had been quite different from hers.

She moved around the beautiful bedroom which she shared with him. Come to think of it, she had been afraid of coming to live here, as mistress of Mount Royd, where once she had been a servant. But that had worked out well enough, hadn’t it?

‘Ma,’ she said suddenly. ‘Do you remember when I went to Paris before?’

It had been to the trade exhibition of 1855 with her employer, Albert Parkinson, and his daughter, Sophia. Though both girls had been the same age, her role had been to chaperone Sophia when her father was busy. Miss Sophia had been a pig – when wasn’t she? They had quarrelled fiercely. But it was in Paris that Madeleine got to know Léon better, and that had made up for everything.

Mrs Bates rose to her feet, slowly because her joints were stiff. It was the cold, damp winters of Helsdon which caused the rheumatics which stayed with her right through the summer. Madeleine put out a hand to help her.

‘I remember all right! You wore one dress and packed one other, and that was it! Not like now! It was the green one. Your father gave you the material.’

'It was the only thing he ever gave me in my life,' Madeleine said.

'Yes, well . . . he didn't have much to give, did he?'

'He could have given me love. It costs nothing to give love!'

And there, Mrs Bates thought, Madeleine was wrong. There were times when it cost a lot to give love. Many was the time she would gladly have left her husband had it not been for the love she had for her children. But she knew what Madeleine meant, and she had a point.

'You can't give love if you don't have it in you,' she said. 'Now is there anything else at all to go in this trunk, love? I do hope not.'

'I don't think so,' Madeleine said. 'But we won't fasten it just yet in case Léon has something when he comes in.'

'Well, I'm going to pack you a nice hamper of food for the journey. You can eat it on the train.'

'Thank you very much, Ma. I'm sure we'll be glad of it.'

Madeleine was still in the bedroom when Léon arrived home. He ran up the stairs, calling her name, and when he came into the bedroom he took her in his arms.

'There, my love!' he said when he released her. 'Everything is in order at the mill, and since, after tomorrow, it will be closed down for a week, we can leave with a clear conscience. The maintenance man will be in to check the machinery, but Rob Wainwright will see to him.'

'It was a good day when you found Rob Wainwright as mill manager,' Madeleine said.

It had been totally necessary to have someone in such a position, since with the expansion of their business Léon had to travel from home more and more. Trade throughout the West Riding had grown, and was still growing, by leaps and bounds. The easing of the tariff which had existed between England and France, which had made it difficult to sell there, had created a world of difference.

And when it came to selling to France, Léon Bonneau had a head start. Not only was Bonneau's cloth top quality, it was different from the rest, in the designs and in the blend of colours. Mostly, they were Madeleine's designs, and they grew better and better, her inspiration seeming never to flag. And since Léon knew his own countrymen, knew how they thought and felt, and could converse with them in their own language, a great deal of the cloth woven in Bonneau's found its final home on the back of some smart French lady or gentleman.

'You look excited,' Madeleine observed. 'I'm sure you're glad to be going home?'

'I must admit,' Léon said, 'I am pleased at the thought of seeing my family, and even more at taking you with me. It's high time you met them.'

Madeleine smiled and said nothing. She had already said more than enough about her qualms. She was determined from now on to keep quiet about them.

'And I'm sure you are looking forward to seeing Paris?' Léon said. 'Didn't I always say that one day I would show you Paris again - though I would have preferred it to be in the spring?'

'You did, my love - and yes, I do look forward to it, very much indeed.'

'Good!'

'You know that if I had my way, I would accompany you on some of your travels,' Madeleine continued. 'Or I'd even go alone. You know that selling is something I've always wanted to do. Oh, not in France, of course, because of the language - but there are places in England where I daresay I could do quite well.'

Léon sighed. It was a subject on which they could never agree.

'My love, we've discussed all this before, and I don't doubt will again. Selling is *not* a woman's job . . .'

‘Nor is textile designing, but I do it,’ Madeleine interrupted.

‘That does not take you all over the country. How could you travel around the country alone?’

‘Well, let’s say around Yorkshire then? I could do that.’

‘You would be laughed at – and so would I for allowing it. If I were to let you do that I would be thought to be – how do you say it? – petticoat ruled. No, it is impossible!’

‘I did it once,’ Madeleine pointed out. ‘I went to Henry Garston’s in Leeds and got the first big order we ever had.’

‘I know. You did well,’ Léon conceded. ‘But it wouldn’t have happened had I not been ill, unable to keep my appointment.’

‘All the same I did it,’ Madeleine persisted. ‘Why shouldn’t other merchants take to me if he did?’

‘Well, as we now know, Henry Garston likes a pretty face – and whose face is prettier than my darling Madeleine’s?’

‘It was *not* my pretty face!’ Madeleine said. ‘I did the job well!’

‘Well, since we both hate to quarrel, my dear, and it’s a subject on which we can’t agree, let us not discuss it any further at the moment. Besides, think how valuable you are to me in your designing. How could I spare you?’

What he never says, Madeleine thought, and what I’m sure is in his heart, because it is in mine, is that by now my time should be occupied in bringing up our children. Her seeming inability to conceive a child was a deep and constant ache. After more than two years of marriage, they had almost ceased to speak of it. I am barren, she thought. I am not a real woman.

Yet in the marriage bed she was a real enough woman. They made love frequently, and with pleasure and complete satisfaction to both of them – which made it all the more heart-breaking that, though month after anxious month she hoped and prayed, there was never a sign of pregnancy.

Will he grow tired of me because I don't give him a child, she sometimes asked herself? Will he meet someone, on his travels, who will mean more to him? Oh yes, she knew they were stupid questions. He was as kind and loving as ever. But nothing could quite dismiss such thoughts from her mind. And now they were about to visit Roubaix, where both Léon's brothers had four children each, and no doubt more to come.

'Have you anything more to pack?' she asked.

'Last-minute things only - and not in the trunk.'

The following morning it was all rush. They were up before dawn to travel to Leeds for the train.

'Have you got the food hamper?' Mrs Bates asked.

'I have it here,' Madeleine said. 'Now mind you take care of yourself, Ma. Don't work too hard.'

Mrs Bates stood on the wide porch of Mount Royd and waved them off. She would miss her daughter, though it was only for a week.

'I just wish I knew more French,' Madeleine said to Léon when they were on their way. 'Everyone says "be yourself" - but how can I be myself if I must remain silent? And will your family despise me for not speaking French?'

'Of course they won't,' Léon assured her. 'And don't forget that my sister speaks fair English, and my mother a little. My brothers' wives, however, don't know a word, so it will be harder going with them. But don't worry!'

It was not the thought of her sisters-in-law which worried Madeleine; it was Léon's mother. How *could* Madame Bonneau feel well disposed towards her? She had taken her son and tied him by marriage to another country. As foreign to her as France is to me, she thought.

'But before we go to Roubaix there is Paris,' Léon reminded her. 'We will both enjoy Paris.'

And so they did. The heat of August was tempered by a breeze from the Seine, and in the Champs Elysées trees in

full leaf threw a welcome shade.

‘Everything looks better than I remember it,’ Madeleine said as they walked along arm-in-arm. ‘It’s all so . . . rich. So alive!’

‘That is partly because Monsieur Hausmann has completed more of his beautiful boulevards, but it is even more because we are married, and in love,’ Léon said. ‘Our short stay in Paris will be like another honeymoon.’

‘If it is possible,’ Madeleine said next morning as they lay in bed, ‘it is even better than our first honeymoon! Oh Léon, I do love you so much!’

But why, when their lovemaking was such perfection, did she not conceive a child? The question tore at her. When they had breakfasted – the fresh bread and strong coffee brought to their room – they dressed, and went out into the sunshine.

‘We will go by boat to Notre Dame,’ Léon said. ‘It will bring back so many memories.’

Inside the cathedral they stood and gazed at its magnificence. They had last been there with Mr Parkinson and Sophia at the service to celebrate victory in the Crimea, and on Madeleine’s part to thank God for bringing her brother Irvine safely through that war.

‘Léon,’ Madeleine whispered. ‘I would like to offer a prayer for Mr Parkinson. But for him I would never have come to Paris.’

‘He was a good man,’ Léon said. ‘The world is a poorer place without him. But don’t forget that you and I met first in Helsdon, not in Paris.’

‘I couldn’t forget.’

She would never forget that as a servant at Mount Royd, and he a visitor, she had fetched and carried for him.

Paris, though, had given her more than her husband. It had been the starting place of her Catholic faith, here in this cathedral. But perhaps both had been waiting for her since the beginning of time?

She knelt and said a short prayer for Mr Parkinson. And then, because the thought was never far away, she prayed for herself. 'Please God, I want a child! Please! Nevertheless,' she added as she had been taught, 'not my will but Thine.'

Do I mean that? she asked herself. Don't I, this time, want *my way*?

Emerging from the cathedral, they blinked against the strong sunlight. All too soon for Madeleine it was time to catch the train to Roubaix. She sat in apprehensive silence for most of the journey, in sharp contrast to Léon who, with every mile of track, grew more and more excited. She could see it in his eyes, hear it in his voice as he pointed out the landmarks.

Arriving in Roubaix, Léon called for a cab. When they reached the house it seemed to Madeleine that every member of the family was there, lined up in the entrance hall to greet them: Madame Bonneau, her two sons and their wives, Léon's sister and, playing on the tiled floor until they were called to attention, a group of children of varying ages, presumably Léon's nephews and nieces.

There was a second's silence, then everyone spoke at once - and all of them in French, including Léon.

There was no doubt of the affection with which Léon's family greeted him. Madeleine had never seen so much kissing in her life. His sisters-in-law, Simone and Charlotte, were a little less exuberant than the rest. His mother held him close for a moment, then released him, but Marie flung herself at her favourite brother and he took her in his arms and kissed her fondly.

'Oh Léon, it's so good to see you!' she cried. 'It's been so long!'

'You are prettier than ever,' Léon said. 'Don't tell me you haven't got a string of beaux because I won't believe you.'

'She has a dozen. Our sister is a little minx!' Marcel said.



Madeleine strained to make out the foreign words, and to tell from their expressions what they were all saying. It was no good. In her nervousness she understood nothing. All that came over to her, and that most strongly, was that they were a family, close and united. Shall I ever be one of them? she asked herself. Shall I ever be one of this circle? She so wanted to be, for Léon's sake as well as for her own. Then Léon turned to her, took her hand and drew her forward.

'*Maman*, allow me to present my wife, and your new daughter-in-law!'

Hearing the pride in her husband's voice, seeing the loving smile on his face as he introduced her, Madeleine felt better. In careful French she stammered the greeting she had prepared - and was mortified to hear how awful it sounded, how altogether different from the accents of her in-laws. Madame Bonneau kissed her formally, and replied in rapid, impossible French.

'My brother, Marcel, and his wife, Simone. Pierre, and his wife, Charlotte,' Léon said. 'And this is my sister, Marie.'

Madeleine was suddenly too shy to attempt to voice the few words she had intended for Léon's brothers. She would only make a mess of it. But Marie stepped forward, kissed her warmly, and spoke in English.

'Welcome, Madeleine!' she said. 'Now I shall be able to practise my English with you!'

Oh bless you, bless you! Madeleine thought. Was it possible that she had found a friend?

'That will please me very much,' she said. 'Perhaps you will teach me some words of French. I'm ashamed that I know so little.'

She resolved once again to try her very hardest to get on with the Bonneaus. They were Léon's family, and he loved them, and so would she. It would be easy enough to be fond of Marie, but of the rest she wasn't sure. She felt considerably in awe of Madame Bonneau: so upright, though

by no means tall; so much the lady. Can I possibly live up to her expectations? Madeleine asked herself.

Madame Bonneau spoke now to Léon, and he quickly translated.

'We are to have my old room,' he said, smiling. '*Maman* will show us. Not that I don't know the way, but she insists!'

Side by side with Madame Bonneau, Léon a step behind, Madeleine climbed the broad staircase.

'Well, my love,' Léon said when his mother had left them. 'Here we are at last! That wasn't so bad, was it? What did I tell you?'

He sounded so pleased that she was glad she'd managed to hide her feeling of isolation. Clearly, among all the chatter, he hadn't noticed her near-silence.

'Your sister is particularly charming,' she acknowledged.

'Marie is a friendly little thing,' Léon agreed. 'We must have her to stay with us in Helsdon, don't you think? But never mind Marie! Give me a long and loving kiss before we change for dinner!'

I would like not to go down to dinner at all, Madeleine thought. I would like to stay here in your arms; safe.

'And now take a look at my room,' Léon said. 'I've slept in this room all my life.'

'Until you came to Helsdon.'

'Of course!'

It was a plainly furnished room, with mementoes of his boyhood around. Madeleine could imagine her husband growing up in this room.

'Was it always like this?' she asked.

'More or less. I see *Maman* has put pretty new curtains at the window; in your honour, I'm sure. And, of course, moved in a double bed in place of my narrow one.'

Surely, Madeleine thought, adapting Léon's room to the both of them was a way of welcoming me into the family? Deeds speak louder than words, as her mother was fond of saying.

She began to unpack the trunk, which had already been brought up. Yes, here were the presents! She took them out carefully. They emerged from their wrappings safe and sound.

‘We’ll take them down before dinner,’ Léon said. ‘And perhaps we should get ready. *Maman* doesn’t like meals to be kept waiting.’

Well, thank heaven her clothes would be a credit to Léon. She chose a dress of palest cream interwoven with shades of deeper cream and gold, a design of her own of which she was particularly fond, and woven in the very finest worsted, as light as a feather.

‘Will this do?’ she asked Léon, holding the dress against her.

‘It is perfect,’ he said. He thought how well it enhanced the contrast of her dark hair and fair skin.

All the presents were well received. Marie and Madame Bonneau seemed particularly pleased, and both of them thanked Madeleine in English.

Dinner, though totally delicious as far as the food and the wine went, was for Madeleine not so easy. Everyone chatted to everyone else, everyone talked at once, and all spoke in French, which sounded more and more confusing as the meal went on. Though she tried her best, she understood little. Didn’t they realize this? Even Léon seemed to have forgotten that he could speak English, and gabbled away in his native tongue. Only Marie, sometimes seeing the lack of comprehension on Madeleine’s face, translated a few phrases or tried to explain a joke which had caused so much laughter among the others.

‘We are a noisy family when we are together,’ she said. ‘And everyone’s favourite pastime seems to be teasing me!’

Madame Bonneau, sitting upright at the head of the table, was quieter than the rest. From time to time Madeleine caught her mother-in-law looking in her direction. If she can speak some English, as Léon says, then why doesn’t she say

something to me? Madeleine thought unhappily. Anything! Anything at all! It would make such a difference.

It was the longest meal she had ever sat through, but at last it was over and they left the table and moved into another room. Madeleine began to wish she had an excuse for leaving the company and going to bed. She was sure they wouldn't miss her, in any case. But good manners alone, as well as the desire not to disappoint Léon, meant that she must stick it out. She quickly took a chair next to Marie so that they could at least have a little conversation.

In fact, it was Madame Bonneau herself who came to the rescue.

'Léon, I think Madeleine is looking a little tired. It is late, and it has been a long day for both of you. If you wish to retire we shall all understand.'

She spoke in French, but this time Madeleine got the gist of it, and was filled with gratitude.

'You are quite right, *Maman*,' Léon said. 'I am tired, and Madeleine must be quite worn out. If you will excuse us, we will go to bed.'

He came across to Madeleine and took her by the hand.

Pierre made what she took to be, from the look on his face and the giggles from her sisters-in-law, a ribald remark. Madame Bonneau frowned at them.

'Perhaps it is getting late for all of us,' she said. She moved towards Madeleine and kissed her good night in her formal manner.

In their own room, Madeleine was quickly in bed. She buried her face in the pillow - that horrible, hard French sausage of a pillow instead of the lovely, soft feather one she would have had at home. Oh, how she longed to be back in Helsdon! Tears sprang to her eyes.

Léon touched her on the shoulder and she turned her head.

'Oh, my little love!' he said. 'You're crying! Why? Whatever is wrong?'

‘It’s nothing,’ Madeleine said. ‘I’m being foolish – and I daresay childish. I’m sorry!’

‘Are you not happy here?’

‘Of course I am. Just for a moment, I was the teeniest bit homesick.’

‘I didn’t mean to neglect you,’ Léon said. ‘It’s just that it’s a long time since I saw my family. And as Marie said, when we’re all together we’re noisy.’

‘I do understand,’ Madeleine said. ‘And you didn’t neglect me. It’s mainly that I couldn’t understand what was being said. Everyone spoke in French all the time. And oh, Léon, I think perhaps your mother doesn’t like me! I did so want her to like me!’

‘I’m sure you are wrong,’ Léon said gently. He sat beside her on their bed, stroking her hair. ‘My mother is not an easy person to get to know. Believe it or not, she is shy, and for this reason often appears aloof. Also, her English is no better than your French. But you are mistaken when you say she doesn’t like you. I can tell that she *does*. But she needs time.’

‘We don’t have time,’ Madeleine reminded him. ‘We have only three days here.’ And oh, she would be so glad when those three days were over and they could go home. But this *was* home to Léon, she thought miserably. Perhaps in his heart he wished to stay here? The thought sent a shiver through her.

‘Oh Léon, is it possible that one day you might want to live in France?’ she asked. She had to know.

‘And what would you say if I did?’ There was a serious look in his eyes as he countered her question with his own.

What *would* she do? Could she possibly live in this alien place? But since Léon was her husband and she loved him dearly, there was only one answer.

‘If it was what you wanted, then I would do it. No matter where you chose to live, I would go with you.’

'To the ends of the earth?' he asked. 'Tell me you would go with me to the ends of the earth, Madeleine.'

'To the ends of the earth!'

'Well, have no fear, my darling. I shall not ask you to do so.'

He undressed quickly, and came to bed.

'I'm sorry I was upset,' she said. 'It was stupid of me.'

What's the matter with me? she asked herself. Why am I thinking about myself all the time? Léon spends so little time with his family, and I see mine every day, yet here I am, resenting the fact that they speak in their own language! How can I be so selfish?

'Oh Léon, I am a fool!' she said. 'Please forgive me!'

When Madeleine went down to breakfast next morning there were only the four of them, herself and Léon, Madame Bonneau and Marie.

'You slept well?' her mother-in-law asked formally, but in English.

'*Oui! Merci,*' Madeleine replied.

Madame Bonneau turned and spoke to Léon, in French.

'*Maman* is reminding me that last night I promised Marcel and Pierre I would go down to see the factory this morning,' he said to Madeleine.

'Then I will go with you,' Madeleine offered quickly. She would be interested to see what they were doing.

'I'm not sure that that would be a good idea,' Léon said doubtfully.

Madame Bonneau broke in with a stream of French, all the while looking at Madeleine. Marie quickly translated.

'*Maman* says the factory is no place for a woman. You wouldn't enjoy it. In France, she says, the women stay at home while the men go out to work.'

'You mustn't mind my mother,' Léon put in quickly. 'She's just a little old-fashioned.'

But surely Léon has told her the part I play in Bonneau's mill, she thought. That I work alongside him?

‘Please tell your mother that it is the same in England,’ Madeleine said. ‘But not every woman. And while there are no children . . .’

Léon looked uncomfortable. He would have translated his mother’s remarks more tactfully, but tact had never been Marie’s strong point. So when his mother spoke again he rushed to explain to Madeleine.

‘My mother says of course you are free to go to the factory if you wish. But she wanted you to stay behind because she would like to get to know you better. It would please me very much if you would do that, my love.’

‘Of course I will,’ Madeleine agreed.

‘And I will stay as interpreter,’ Marie offered. ‘Don’t be late back for lunch, Léon. Hortense Murer is coming.’

‘Hortense?’ Léon sounded pleased and surprised.

‘She is back in Roubaix. *Maman* thought you would be pleased to see her again.’

‘Of course,’ Léon said.

‘Who is Hortense?’ Madeleine asked.

‘A friend of the family,’ Marie replied. ‘*Especiallly* a friend of Léon’s, in the old days. But do not worry, Madeleine! It is you my brother married, and anyone can see he is in love with you!’

‘You will feel at ease with Hortense,’ Léon said. ‘She speaks excellent English. And now if I am to be back early I must go.’ He rose from the table, then bent to kiss Madeleine. ‘I shan’t be long, my love. Try to enjoy yourself.’

‘I’ll do my best,’ Madeleine promised. She really would try.

As the three women left the breakfast table, Madame Bonneau spoke to her daughter.

‘*Maman* says she does not need me,’ Marie said to Madeleine. ‘I am to give Brigitte a hand in the kitchen while *Maman* shows you the garden.’

Madeleine’s heart sank a little as Marie left them. How would she and Madame Bonneau carry on a conversation?

‘Come!’ Madame Bonneau said.

Madeleine followed a step behind her mother-in-law around the pretty garden. At first, as she had feared, little was said, then Madame Bonneau began to tell Madeleine the names of the flowers in French. Immediately, Madeleine offered the English equivalent. In no time at all it became a kind of game in which they could both take part, and it quickly eased the tension.

'Rose!' Madame Bonneau said.

'Rose,' Madeleine replied.

'*Le Lis!*'

'Lily,' Madeleine said. 'And this little one is a pansy.'

'*En Français, pensée,*' Madame Bonneau' said. 'It is for thought.'

'Pansies for thoughts,' Madeleine cried. 'Of course! Country people sometimes call it "heartsease".'

'Heartsease,' Madame Bonneau said carefully. 'I like that.'

'You have a beautiful garden, Madame,' Madeleine said. '*Très beau jardin.*'

'*Jardin,* garden,' the older woman said. 'But to say Madame is not *nécessaire*. You must say "*Belle-mère*". It is French for how you say mother-in-law. And you are my *belle-fille!*'

'Daughter-in-law?'

At the bottom of the garden they sat on an old bench, in the shade of a pear tree. Could I get to like it here, Madeleine wondered? It isn't nearly as bad as I thought.

'French is a beautiful language,' Madame Bonneau said haltingly. '*Très belle*. But if you do not understand it, perhaps not. It is the same with English, *n'est-ce pas?* - of which I know so little. But here comes Marie!'

When Marie joined them, Madame Bonneau spoke to her at length.

'My mother says you are very welcome in our house and she welcomes you as her daughter-in-law. She wishes you could stay longer. So do I, Madeleine! I really do!'



'Then you must visit us in Helsdon,' Madeleine said impulsively. 'And now will you please tell your mother that I am pleased to be her *belle-fille*, and to be part of your family. Tell her also that when I return to Helsdon I will make sure that Léon teaches me a little French every day - so that next time I come to Roubaix you won't have to translate for me all the time.'

Léon came walking up the garden path towards them as Marie was relaying this message to her mother.

'I promise to do that,' he said quickly.

'Tell your mother that we would like her to visit us in Yorkshire,' Madeleine said quickly. 'I mean it, Léon! Please tell her.'

But when Madame Bonneau replied, Léon looked uncomfortable.

'What did she say?' Madeleine asked.

'Only that she will come eventually, to see the grandchildren you will give her,' Marie put in.

Oh no, not that! A few moments ago, Madeleine thought, she had really been at ease with Madame Bonneau. Now, suddenly, she felt a failure. No matter what else she did, it wasn't enough if she couldn't conceive a child.

'Then tell your mother,' she said quietly to Léon, 'that it is my dearest wish to have a child - but it is in God's hands.'

Madame Bonneau listened to her son, then stretched out her hand and laid it, with a gentle pressure, on Madeleine's.

'I understand,' she said.

I believe you do, Madeleine thought. I really believe you do, or try to. At least you don't condemn me. And hadn't her mother-in-law's remark about visiting her grandchildren been entirely natural, exactly what an elderly lady would say?

'Thank you, *Belle-mère*,' Madeleine said.

'Marie and I must go in,' Madame Bonneau said to her son. 'We have things to do. You stay here with Madeleine and when Hortense arrives I will send her to you.'

When they had gone, Madeleine said, 'Oh Léon, I am so sorry I haven't given you any children. I know it's such a disappointment to you.'

'Not just to me,' he said. 'We share it. But for the moment we shall try not to think about it.'

'You're right, Léon. And perhaps when we get back to Helsdon, I should go to the doctor again?'

It would do no good. She had already seen the doctor. He had simply told her it was the will of God, which was exactly what Father O'Malley had said.

'Sometimes God is difficult to understand,' she'd said to Father O'Malley.

'It is not for us to understand God,' the priest replied. 'If we understood Him, we would be His equals. Our part is to accept.'

He'd spoken kindly, but she'd not been comforted. And she wouldn't accept. She just would not.

There were women who could advise about these things; she was sure of it. Women who could give you potions which would help you to get pregnant. When she'd ventured to mention this to her mother, Mrs Bates had been horrified.

'Don't you dare dabble in any such nonsense!' she'd said fiercely. 'Hocus-pocus, nothing more! All they want is your money!'

But was it hocus-pocus? Madeleine asked herself as she sat here in this French garden. And what did that matter if it worked? She was convinced, by now, that Sophia's curse that she would never have a son was taking effect - so why not the opposite? Why should she not find someone who would lift it? Once back in Helsdon, she resolved, she would seek someone out.

Mademoiselle Murer was walking along the path towards them. Oh, but she's very pretty, Madeleine thought! She was slender, dark-haired, delicately featured - and with a bright smile on her face and her hands outstretched in greeting.

‘Léon! It is so long since I saw you!’

She greeted him in French. Another conversation I’m not going to understand, Madeleine thought ruefully. And how pleased they looked to see each other.

‘So! This lovely lady is your wife,’ Hortense said. ‘I am delighted to meet you. Do you speak French?’

‘I’m sorry, Mademoiselle Murer, I don’t. I thought I did, a little, until I came here, but now it all sounds different!’

‘Then we shall all speak English,’ Hortense said. ‘It is all one to me. And you must call me Hortense and I shall call you Madeleine, which is a beautiful name and suits you. But Madame Bonneau told me to tell you that lunch is ready. We must go in at once or she will kill us! As I daresay you have discovered, in France it is permitted to keep one waiting for food, but never the other way round.’ She linked her arm through Madeleine’s and they walked side by side along the narrow path to the house.

The meal passed off well. Now everyone spoke in English, so that Madeleine began to feel sorry for Madame Bonneau, sitting beside her, who was frequently left behind, but remained patient and well-mannered. How stupid I was, earlier, to take offence, Madeleine thought. In fact, given time, she might actually get to like her mother-in-law, her *belle-mère*.

As for Hortense, she thought, observing her at the other side of the table, chattering away between mouthfuls of food, she is nothing like I feared. She is charming. She talks to me as much as to Léon. Oh, she flirts with him a bit, but then they are old friends. So why did I worry? Why am I up in the air one minute and down in the depths the next? I don’t understand myself. But now, smiling at Léon, she felt reasonably happy.

‘I liked Hortense,’ Madeleine said later to Léon when they were alone in their room.

‘Of course,’ he said. ‘Who would not?’

'I didn't expect to like her,' Madeleine confessed. 'After all, she is an old flame of yours. Were you really in love with her once?'

'Come here!' he said.

He held her in his arms.

'Yes, I was. I might even have married her if I hadn't met Mr Parkinson at the wool sales in London, if he hadn't invited me to Helsdon and I hadn't met you. But these are all "ifs", my darling. I *did* come to Helsdon, I *did* meet you. You are my wife and it's you I love!'

'We shall be back in Helsdon in two days' time,' Madeleine said. 'It hasn't been nearly as bad here as I feared. Your family has been kind. Most important of all, I've seen what it's meant to you to be with them. But you won't be offended if I say I'll be glad to be back?'

Helsdon was her own place. She belonged. She felt secure there.

'I wonder what awaits us in Helsdon,' she said.

## TWO

'I MUST SAY, it's grand to have you back,' Mrs Bates said to Madeleine. 'But I'm not sure you look all that better for your holiday. In fact, I'd say you look a bit peaky!'

'I'm all right, Ma,' Madeleine said. 'It's a long journey and as I told you, it was a rough crossing. I was seasick.'

'You've been back three days, love. You should be over that by now,' her mother said.

There was more to it than being travel-weary; Madeleine was young, strong, fit as a flea and seldom tired. But why am I kidding myself? Mrs Bates thought, I know full well what's wrong. It's that letter from Our Emerald. It had arrived while Léon and Madeleine were still in France, and Penelope, the little idiot, had blurted out the news almost the minute they'd set foot back in Mount Royd.

'Oh Madeleine, what do you think? Miss Sophia has had another baby!'

'Mrs Chester to you,' her mother corrected.

'Another son! That's their third son. Emerald says he's the most beautiful baby you ever saw and he weighs eight pounds and they're going to call him William.' The words rushed out of Penelope like a river in spate.

Stop it! Stop it! It took all Madeleine's self-control not to utter the words, not to shout at her sister. Of course she'd known Sophia was expecting, known that the baby was due at the beginning of August - Emerald, still Sophia's devoted slave, kept them abreast of the news - but she'd refused to think about it, pushed it to the back of her mind.

'It's not fair!' she cried. 'Why should Sophia Chester, who cares nothing for anyone except herself, have three sons,

and me and Léon have none? It's unbearable!

Then she'd rushed out of the room, taken herself off until she could calm down.

Now, three days later, discussing the week's menus with her mother, she was outwardly calm again, but the sadness lay like a lump inside her.

'I thought a leg of mutton tomorrow,' Mrs Bates said tentatively. 'What do you think?'

'Whatever you like, Ma! In any case, Léon has to go to Macclesfield tomorrow. He'll be away overnight, so I'll eat with you. Oh Ma, I wish you'd always eat with me and Léon, instead of you and Penelope taking your meals in the kitchen!'

'Well, we do at weekends, love.'

'But why not all the time? We're all one family.'

'I'll think about it,' Mrs Bates promised.

It wasn't that she didn't enjoy eating with her daughter and son-in-law, but there was a bit inside her which wanted to keep her independence. Of course she'd had her own sitting-room from the beginning, to which she could retreat whenever she wished.

'What I *shall* do,' she said to Madeleine, 'is see that *you* eat. You're far too thin!'

'I'm quite all right. Don't fuss, Ma!' Madeleine spoke sharply.

Mrs Bates looked keenly at her daughter. Madeleine was just not herself these days. She was touchy. You were never quite sure how far you could go with her. But I shall take the plunge, Mrs Bates decided.

'Madeleine!'

'Yes?'

'I've got something to say to you. You might not like it, but you and me have always been straight.'

'What are you saying?' Madeleine looked genuinely puzzled.