

The Wife of Martin Guerre

JANET LEWIS

Introduction by Kevin Haworth
Afterword by Larry McMurtry

SWALLOW PRESS — OHIO UNIVERSITY PRESS
ATHENS, OHIO

Contents

Introduction	
<i>Kevin Haworth</i>	vii
Foreword for the First Swallow Press Edition	
<i>Janet Lewis</i>	xvii
The Wife of Martin Guerre	
I. Artigues	1
II. Rieux	65
III. Toulouse	73
Afterword: The Return of Janet Lewis	
<i>Larry McMurtry</i>	99

Introduction

The Wife of Martin Guerre, Janet Lewis's most celebrated novel, emerged from the gift of a good book from husband to wife. Sometime in the 1930s the renowned poet Yvor Winters gave his wife and fellow writer Lewis an old law book, Samuel March Phillips's *Famous Cases of Circumstantial Evidence*, thinking that she might find it helpful after she mentioned that she was having trouble with one of her plots.

From that thoughtful writerly gift grew the three novels of *Cases of Circumstantial Evidence*, of which *The Wife of Martin Guerre* is by far the most famous. Already the author of one historical novel, *The Invasion*, Lewis was drawn to the story of Bertrande de Rols, married at age eleven to the young son of a powerful landowner. "One morning in January, 1539," Lewis writes, "a wedding was celebrated in the village of Artigues." From that simple opening line Lewis spins a short novel of astonishing depth and resonance, a sharply drawn historical tale that asks contemporary questions about identity and belonging, about men and women, and about an individual's capacity to act within an inflexible system.

Lewis's plot closely follows the string of events cited in Phillips's 1874 legal history. Because of a dispute with his father, ambitious Martin Guerre leaves his wife Bertrande and their young son, intending to return when he can fully claim his inheritance. He finally returns, eight years later, to a woman who has grown in maturity and in her sense of belonging to

the world around her. Or does he? The man who comes walking down the road *looks like* Martin Guerre, knows things that Martin Guerre would know. But there is something in the way he speaks to his wife, a note of kindness, in fact, that makes Bertrande wonder. Is it Martin Guerre after all?

From this question grows that most unusual of literary forms—a short novel that does its work so efficiently that it feels as substantial as a novel many pages longer. It is no surprise, then, that *The Wife of Martin Guerre* has drawn comparisons with the greatest short novels in American literature. “The 20th century’s *Billy Budd*,” the *New York Times* calls it.¹ Larry McMurtry, no stranger to novels both short and long, writes in the *New York Review of Books* that *Martin Guerre* is a “masterpiece. . . . a short novel that can run with *Billy Budd*, *The Spoils of Poynton*, *Seize the Day*, or any other.”² Every few years another writer or critic will weigh in, urging readers to “rediscover” Lewis as she has been rediscovered so many times before.

So what is it that gives *The Wife of Martin Guerre* such continuing interest? Much of it is rooted in Lewis’s portrait of Bertrande, a woman who grows steadily in confidence as the novel progresses, and who possesses a fierce moral sense that guides her actions even at great personal cost. Lewis’s portrayal of the legal system, while fascinating in its own right, also acts to amplify the moral issues at play. The law operates around questions of evidence, oftentimes incomplete or circumstantial, which nonetheless must be resolved by absolute conclusions of guilt or innocence. At the same time, the law often fails to address what is *right*, or what a woman like Bertrande knows in her heart to be true.

The strength of this conundrum has given *The Wife of Martin Guerre* a long life, extended by two popular film adaptations. The first film, a 1982 French version titled *Le Retour de Martin Guerre*, recognizes Lewis’s contribution to the story by giving her author’s credit. The second, a 1993 version titled *Sommersby*, resets the action to the American South during

the upheaval of the Reconstruction period following the Civil War. Both films devote extended screen time to their famous male leads—Gerard Depardieu in the French version, Richard Gere in the American one—thus creating a story that is as much about the husband as it is about the wife. But Lewis felt that both the specific setting of *The Wife of Martin Guerre* and the focus on Bertrande’s decision making are critical parts of the novel’s essence. The strict Catholic morality of sixteenth-century France serves both as a guiding force for Bertrande and as a prison; once she believes she has committed adultery, as Lewis notes, “her way was laid out for her.”³ At the same time, *The Wife of Martin Guerre* is much more than a simple morality play. Bertrande struggles on many levels—against the limited roles afforded to her as a woman, against her husband in both subtle and forceful ways, and finally with her own knowledge of the man standing in front of her.

This close attention to an individual’s moral choices in the face of strange circumstance links *The Wife of Martin Guerre* with the two novels that follow in the *Cases of Circumstantial Evidence* series. Though each of the novels stands on its own, they remain united by their shared origins in the history of law, discovered by Lewis in the same legal casebook where she first found the story of Bertrande de Rols and Martin Guerre. The setting shifts to seventeenth-century Denmark in *The Trial of Sören Qvist*, which focuses on a devoted parson, albeit one with a harsh temper, who is accused of killing one of his workers. Again the law closes in on a man who may or may not be guilty, and again the characters struggle as much with their own consciences and the changing times as they do with the ambiguous legal facts in front of them. In *The Ghost of Monsieur Scarron*, Lewis returns to France, this time during the reign of Louis XIV. In this longest and in some ways most complex of the three novels, a bookbinder becomes enmeshed in a political drama that spirals out of control—the king is denounced in a pamphlet, leading to criminal charges—but the real crime is

domestic, an adulterous affair that contributes to the tragedy as much as the public trial that follows.

In each case Lewis focuses her rigorous but sympathetic eye on those trapped by the circumstances, particularly the women burdened by a system that gives most of its power to men. In his retrospective on Lewis's career that appeared in the *New York Review of Books*, written the year of Lewis's death, Larry McMurtry declares, "Reading the three novels in a line, from *The Wife of Martin Guerre* to *The Ghost of Monsieur Scarron*, is a powerful experience. Though all three were based on actual cases in the law, their power is literary not legal. . . . In each the ruin of an honest person is complete, and in each there is a fully and vividly realized woman who finds herself twisting helplessly in the dilemmas posed by love and duty."⁴

Years after the initial publication of *The Wife of Martin Guerre*, Lewis continued to investigate the tragedy of Bertrande, consulting additional sources as they found their way to her. Likewise the novel itself traveled through several publishers and editions before finding a permanent home with Alan Swallow, founder of Swallow Press and longtime champion of Lewis's husband Winters and other contemporary writers. Swallow claimed that in all his years selling *The Wife of Martin Guerre* and recommending it to friends, he "never found one who didn't admire the work."⁵ As for the truth behind the lives of Bertrande and Martin, Lewis herself notes simply, "In the end, many questions remain unanswered."⁶ It is no wonder that novels of such enduring mystery could come from a woman with a long and fascinating life of her own.

The Life and Legacy of Janet Lewis

Janet Lewis was born in Chicago in 1898 and attended high school in Oak Park, where she and schoolmate Ernest Hemingway both contributed to the school literary magazine. Like Hemingway, she spent many youthful summers "up in

Michigan,” a place that figures prominently in her short stories, much as it does in his. But whereas her more famous classmate is associated with hard living, literary stardom, and an early, self-inflicted death, Janet Lewis embodies a very different path.

She attended the University of Chicago, where she majored in French, and after her graduation left for Paris (“without waiting to pick up her diploma,” one biographer notes), residing there for six months, not quite long enough to become enmeshed in the expatriate literary scene with which the city is so strongly associated.⁷ Shortly after returning home she contracted tuberculosis, the disease that felled so many artists and nearly killed her as well. (Many years later, she told an interviewer, “There was a moment, be cheerful or die. You take your choice.”)⁸

Despite the life-threatening illness in her youth, she went on to live an impressive ninety-nine years, most of those years in the same house in the hills of Northern California where she and her husband, the poet Yvor Winters, raised their two children. Her ability to balance her domestic life—by all accounts, she enjoyed a remarkably happy marriage—with decades of literary output gives her an image that is simultaneously traditional and feminist. In her book *Silences*, Tillye Olsen cites Lewis as a clear example of a talented woman writer whose literary production was inhibited by her obligations to family and to a more famous husband. Lewis acknowledged the challenges of balancing her familial responsibilities with her writing. “I do think those women who have turned out an enormous amount of work were generally not women who had children,” she allowed in an early interview.⁹ But at the same time she publicly and explicitly rejected Olsen’s characterization of her, perhaps unwilling to see her family and her writing in conflict. “Being a writer has meant nearly everything to me beyond my marriage and children,” she told an interviewer in 1983.¹⁰ The remark is Lewis distilled. She foregrounds her marriage and her family. Beyond that, everything is about her writing.

As a poet, she met early success, publishing a four-poem sequence called “Cold Hills” in *Poetry* in 1920, before she had even finished college. A couple of years later, she moved into prose as well, publishing her first story in another influential magazine, *The Bookman*. Her first book of poems, *The Indian in the Woods*, was published in 1922 by the short-lived imprint Manikin, whose entire publishing history consists of three books: one by Lewis, one by William Carlos Williams, and one by Marianne Moore. It was just the beginning of a lifetime of close association with literary greatness, both personally and professionally.

A decade after her first book of poems, a period during which she got married and she and Winters both recovered from tuberculosis, she published her first novel, *The Invasion*, her first foray into historical fiction. Subtitled *A Narrative of Events Concerning the Johnston Family of St. Mary’s*, it is set in the Great Lakes region and tells the story of an Irish immigrant who marries an Ojibway woman.

Almost ten years after that, she published her acknowledged masterpiece, *The Wife of Martin Guerre*, marrying her eye for history with the peculiarities of the legal system that would give her the platform from which to explore powerful questions of morality and personal responsibility that fuel the three *Cases of Circumstantial Evidence*.

To European critics, Lewis seems quintessentially American. To American critics, her fondness for European settings leads to comparisons as expected as Flaubert and as unusual as the Provençal writer Jean Giono. The *New York Times* compared her to Melville and to Stendhal. Another critic sees her, based on *The Invasion* and some of her short stories, as a definitive voice in Western regional writing. In some ways, Lewis’s writing remains elastic, allowing other writers to see in her a powerful reflection of their own interests. Novelists claim her novels as her best work. Poets are drawn again and again to her diverse body of poetry, which attracts new requests for reprinting in anthologies every year. In short, as with all the best

writers, her work and her decades-long career defy simple categorization or comparisons.

Despite Lewis's resistance to easy definitions, her many literary admirers, including Theodore Roethke, Wallace Stegner, and so many more, agree on two things: that her writing, particularly the poems and the historical novels, is first-class; and that she deserves a much wider readership. It is for exactly this reason that Swallow Press has created the present edition.

But if Lewis herself felt neglected as an author, there is no evidence of it. In person and in published comments, she championed graciousness. She sent thank-you notes to our publishing offices here in Ohio upon receiving her yearly royalty check. Late into her nineties, she charmed literary pilgrims who found their way to her house in Los Altos, serving them tea and apologizing for the self-described "laziness" that led her to sleep until the late hour of 8:30 in the morning, and for the periods of quiet introspection that meant she would sometimes go for many years without publishing new work, only to pick up again in startling new directions, be it in writing opera libretti (she wrote six, including adaptations of her own *Wife of Martin Guerre* and James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans*), or in poems quite different from the Imagist work with which she began her career.

Her disarming modesty, about her own character as well as her writing, is the most constant theme in interviews and profiles. This exchange, in the *Southern Review*, is characteristic:

Interviewers: Many writers and critics—Evan Connell and Donald Davie, to name a couple—admire your work greatly.

Yet, you are not widely known. What is your reaction to this?

Lewis: I think I've had as much recognition as I need and probably as much as I deserve.¹¹

She stated that her goal in writing her *Cases of Circumstantial Evidence* was equally modest: to stay as close to the

Kevin Haworth

history as possible and to let the characters and the facts speak for themselves. She demonstrated a similar sense of duty to her husband, the man who gave her the book that made these novels possible. For the thirty years that she outlived him, she kept their home in Los Altos much the way that it had been when he was alive, with his name on the mailbox and his writing shed maintained as if he might return, any moment, to use it.

It would have been impossible to predict the success of this modest professor's daughter, born at the very end of the nineteenth century. But her first poem in *Poetry*, which appeared at the height of modernism and when she was only twenty years old, seems to anticipate both her long life and the way her work stands on its own, just outside the literary canon. She writes,

I have lived so long
On the cold hills alone . . .
I loved the rock
And the lean pine trees,
Hated the life in the turfy meadow,
Hated the heavy, sensuous bees.
I have lived so long
Under the high monotony of starry skies,
I am so cased about
With the clean wind and the cold nights,
People will not let me in
To their warm gardens
Full of bees.

Swallow Press is honored to be the bearer of Lewis's literary legacy, not just the three great novels but her collection of short stories and her books of poems—a lifetime of close witness to the public and the private, and a deep appreciation for the human condition.

Kevin Haworth
Executive Editor
Swallow Press

INTRODUCTION

Notes

1. Robert McG. Thomas Jr, "Janet Lewis, 99, Poet of Spirit and Keeper of the Hearth, Dies," *New York Times*, December 5, 1998, 16.
2. Larry McMurtry, "The Return of Janet Lewis," *New York Review of Books* 45, no. 10 (1998): 24.
3. Roger Hofheins and Dan Tooker, "A Conversation with Janet Lewis," *Southern Review* 10, no. 4 (1974): 336.
4. McMurtry, 24.
5. Alan Swallow, *An Editor's Essays of Two Decades* (Seattle: Experiment Press, 1962), 334.
6. Janet Lewis, "Sources of *The Wife of Martin Guerre*," *TriQuarterly* 55 (Fall 1982): 105.
7. Charles L. Crow, *Janet Lewis* (Boise, ID: Boise State University, 1980), 9.
8. Mitzi Berger Hamovitch, "My Life I Will Not Let Thee Go Except Thou Bless Me: An Interview with Janet Lewis," *Southern Review* 18, no. 4 (1982): 307.
9. Crow, 11.
10. Marilyn Yalom, *Women Writers of the West Coast: Speaking of Their Lives and Careers* (Santa Barbara: Capra Press, 1983), 21.
11. Hofheins and Tooker, 341.

The Wife of Martin Guerre

I. Artigues

One morning in January, 1539, a wedding was celebrated in the village of Artigues. That night the two children who had been espoused to one another lay in bed in the house of the groom's father. They were Bertrande de Rols, aged eleven years, and Martin Guerre, who was no older, both offspring of rich peasant families as ancient, as feudal and as proud as any of the great seignorial houses of Gascony. The room was cold. Outside the snow lay thinly over the stony ground, or, gathered into long shallow drifts at the corners of houses, left the earth bare. But higher, it extended upward in great sheets and dunes, mantling the ridges and choking the wooded valleys, toward the peak of La Bacanère and the long ridge of Le Burat, and to the south, beyond the long valley of Luchon, the granite Maladetta stood sheathed in ice and snow. The passes to Spain were buried under whiteness. The Pyrenees had become for the winter season an impassable wall. Those Spaniards who were in French territory after the first heavy snowfall in September, remained there, and those Frenchmen, smugglers or soldiers or simple travelers who found themselves on the wrong side of the Port de Venasque were doomed to remain there until spring. Sheep in fold, cattle in the grange, faggots heaped high against the wall of the farm, the mountain villages were closed in enforced idleness and

isolation. It was a season of leisure in which weddings might well be celebrated.

Bertrande had not spoken to Martin in all her life until that morning, although she had often seen him; indeed she had not known until the evening before that a marriage had been arranged. That morning she had knelt with Martin before his father and then had walked with him across the snow, dressed bravely in a new red cape and attended by many friends and relatives and by the sound of violins, to the church of Artigues where the marriage ceremony had been completed. She had found it quite as serious an affair as first communion.

Afterwards, still to the music of the violins, which sounded thin and sharp in the cold air, she had returned to the house of her husband where a huge fire of oak logs garnished with vine-trimmings roared in the big fireplace, and where the kitchen, the principal room of the house, was set with improvised tables, long boards laid over trestles. The stone floor had been freshly strewn with broken boughs of evergreen. The sides and bottoms of the copper pans flashed redly with the reflection of the flames, and the air was rich with the good smell of roasting meat and of freshly poured wine. Underfoot the snow from the sabots melted and sank beneath the trodden evergreens. A smell of humanity and of steaming wool mingled with the odors of the food, and the room was incredibly noisy with conversation.

It was a gay, an important event. Everyone was intensely jubilant, but the small bride received very little attention. After the first embraces and compliments, she sat beside her mother at the long table and ate the food which her mother served her from the big platters. Now and again she felt her

mother's arm steal warmly about her shoulders, and felt herself pressed briefly against her mother's breast, proudly and reassuringly, but as the feast proceeded her mother's attention became more engrossed with the conversation of the curé, who sat opposite, and of the groom's father, who sat upon her other side, and Bertrande, immune from observation in the midst of all this commotion which was ostensibly in her honor, looked about the room at her ease, and fed pieces of hard bread dipped in grease to the woolly Pyrenean sheep dog with the long curly tail who nosed his head into her lap from his place beneath the table. By and by, when the dishes of soup and roast had given way to the boiled chestnuts, cheese, honey and dried fruits, she slipped from her place and began quietly to explore the room.

Behind the table where she had been sitting the beds were ranged, end to end, the curtains of yellow serge drawn close, each one an apartment in itself. The child brushed between these curtains and the stout backs of the merrymakers, moving slowly toward the nearer corner of the room, where she stood, her back against a tall cupboard, and surveyed the scene. Across from her the blackened fireplace occupied at least a third of the wall, and the brightness of the leaping flames left the corners on either side in confused semi-darkness. In the middle of the wall to the right, however, she spied a door, and toward that she gradually made her way. It proved to be the entrance to a long cold corridor, from which doors opened into store-rooms, rooms for the shepherds, and lighted only by a small window of which the wooden shutters were closed. Another person had taken refuge from the festivities in this corridor, and was intent upon undoing the bolts of the shutters. The half of the shutter folded back, a flood of sharp snowy sunlight fell

into the corridor, and in its brightness she recognized Martin. She made a step forward, uncertainly, and Martin, hearing it, turned and advanced upon her, his hands outstretched and a fearsome expression on his long, young face. He had disliked being married, and, in order to express his dislike of the affair, and also to express the power of his newly acquired sovereignty, he cuffed Bertrande soundly upon the ears, scratched her face and pulled her hair, all without a word. Her cries brought a rescuer, her mother's sister, who rebuked the bridegroom and led the bride back into the kitchen, where she remained beside her mother until the hour when she was led by her mother and her mother-in-law into the Chamber, the room on the opposite side of the kitchen, where stood the master's bed, now dedicated to the formalities of the wedding.

Bertrande was disrobed and attired in night garments and a bonnet-de-nuit. Martin was brought in and similarly attired, and the two children were put to bed together in the presence of all the company. In deference to the extreme youth of the bridal couple, however, the serge curtains were not pulled, and a torch, fastened to the wall, was left blazing.

The company remained in the room for a time, laughing at jokes of a time-honored nature, while the two children lay very still and did not look at each other. By and by the merrymakers drifted into the kitchen, and last of all the father of Martin Guerre paused in the doorway to wish his children a formal goodnight. Bertrande saw his features, exaggerated in the flare of the torch, bent in an expression of great seriousness, and the realization that henceforth her life lay beneath his jurisdiction came suddenly and overwhelmingly to the little girl. The door closed behind him. The unglazed window was also closed, but between the leaves of the shutter a draft

came which shook the flame of the torch. Otherwise the air was still and dead. The floor was bare, and the room was unfurnished save for a row of carved chests against the wall and the great bed in which she lay. She was tired and frightened. She did not know what Martin might not take it into his head to do to her. Presently she felt him stir.

"I am tired of all this business," he said, turning on his side and burrowing his head into his pillow. Soon his breathing became regular, and, without daring to move her body, Bertrande relaxed. She was safe. Her husband was asleep.

From her high pillow she watched the torch, as the flame wavered, and little particles of blazing lint detached themselves and fell, smoking, to the stone floor. One was long in falling; it clung, a blazing thread, making the flame of the torch irregular and smoky. Then it too dropped. The warmth of the flock bed began to enclose the small thin body in something like security, a feeling almost as good as that of being home again. The light of the torch seemed to go out. The child began to doze.

An hour or so later the door opened and a large figure entered, substantially clothed in ample folds of brown wool and coifed in white linen, and bearing a tray; and crossed with leisured tread to the bedside. Whether it was merely the sense of being observed, or whether the stone floor had resounded or the silver rattled a little on the tray, Bertrande awoke and, opening her eyes, looked up into the square, benevolent face and the pleasant brown eyes of a woman whom she recognized dimly as a part of the house of Guerre. But it was not the face of her mother-in-law, no, it was the face of the servant who had stood at the doorway as the bridal party had returned from the church.

“You are awake. That is well,” said the woman, smiling. “I warrant, if the boy were eight years older he would not be sound asleep at such an hour.”

She rested the tray on the bed, and, reaching across the body of Bertrande, shook Martin by the shoulder.

“Surely it is not already morning,” said Bertrande.

“No, my dear, it is réveillon. I have brought you your little midnight feast.”

“Oh,” said Bertrande, “they forgot to tell me about it.”

She sat up, looking a little dazed and worried. Without instruction she might not know what to do, she might do the wrong thing. Martin, roused, also sat up, and together they surveyed the tray.

“It is not a bad idea at all,” said Martin, his voice foggy with sleep, and, strangely enough, perfectly good-natured.

“Eat,” said the woman, beaming upon them. “You have had all the rest of the affair—you may as well enjoy now your little feast, just the two of you. I prepared it myself.”

Thus urged, the children rubbed their eyes and fell to, while the woman stood by, her hands on her well-draped hips.

“It is all kinds of an affair, this getting married,” she said as she watched the children. “Don’t overlook the custard—it is my specialty. And by and by you will appreciate all that your parents have done for you. And meanwhile what peace there is and what friendship in the village of Artigues! You are a pretty little girl, Madame, a little thin, perhaps, but with the years the limbs grow rounder. A little more flesh and you will be altogether charming. And you have a fine, bright color in your cheeks. Look at her, Martin. She is even prettier now than she was at the church, when she was so pale with emotion.”

Bertrande ate gravely, licking the yellow custard from the large silver spoon. This was more attention than she had received all day, and, moreover, it was the sort of attention that she could understand. The woman continued in a rich, comfortable voice:

“Take Martin now. He will not be a pretty man, but he will be very distinguished, like his father. There is a kind of ugliness which is very fine in a man. For the rest, I doubt not but that he will be capable of all that is required of a man.”

She smiled upon them with no intention of hurrying them, and continued:

“Also, Martin, look at your wife—she has the lucky eyes, the two-colored eyes, brown and green, and the lucky people bring luck to those they love.”

They finished everything upon the tray, even dividing amicably the last bit of pastry between them, and the servant departed with a final word of commendation. Madame Martin Guerre, born Bertrande de Rols, comforted by the inward presence of pastry and custard and by the wholesome unconcern of her husband, fell into a deep untroubled slumber. In the morning she returned to the house of her parents, there to await an age when she should be more fitted to assume her married responsibilities.

So began for the wife of Martin Guerre the estate which was to bring her so much joy and also such strange and unpredictable suffering.

For the present, life went on as usual. She had not gained in personal importance or in liberty by becoming the wife of Martin Guerre; indeed she had not expected to do so. Advantages there were, certainly, from the marriage, but for the present they were all for the two families of Guerre and de Rols; later, Martin

and Bertrande would profit from the increased dual prosperity. The solemn ceremony in the church, the recollection of awakening at night to be served royally with delicacies shining on the family plate of les Guerre, receded, overshadowed by the multiplicity of the daily tasks that were her education.

The union of the house of de Rols and that of Guerre had long been considered. It had appeared to three generations as almost inevitable, so many were the advantages for both families to be expected from such an alliance. Three generations ago the matter had been practically settled, until a remark by the great-grandfather of Bertrande de Rols upset the plans of the great-grandfather of Martin Guerre.

"I have a nice little granddaughter whom I'm keeping for you," said the ancestor of Martin to old de Rols, affably, at the close of a conversation which had covered the extent of the mutual benefits which might result from a union between the two families.

"If you wish to keep her well," said the great-grandfather of Bertrande, humorously, "if you wish to keep her very well, my friend, you have only to salt her."

The great-grandfather of Martin regarded de Rols for a moment without speaking, but he was no longer affable.

"You wish to imply then, that she will be easy to keep. You imply that the suitors will not be many. You imply that I may salt her and cover her with oil, like the carcass of a chicken, and she will keep, eh, she will keep indefinitely!"

"My friend, I imply nothing of the sort," said the other old man, patiently. "I only like to have my little joke."

"Your joke," replied Martin's great-grandfather, "your joke is an insult." And he spat in the face of Bertrande de Rols' ancestor.

The negotiations for the marriage were discontinued, and not only that, but great-grandfather Guerre and all his mesnie, that is to say, his sons and daughters and their families, his uncles and aunts and their families, and all the servants whose families had been accustomed to serve these families of the house of Guerre, conceived and maintained an intense hatred of the mesnie of the house of de Rols, which was continued until the birth of Bertrande. Then, since the house of Guerre had rejoiced in the birth of a son but a short time previous, it occurred to the descendants of the jesting and offended great-grandfathers that the best and only way to end a feud of such long standing was to affiance the infants in their cradles. This was accordingly done, and peace was restored.

One should not judge too harshly the pride of the grandfather who was insulted by so mild a jest. As head of his family, the *cap d'hostal*, he carried great responsibilities; the safety and prosperity of all his household depended largely upon the strict obedience and reverence which he could demand from his children, his wife and his servants. From great responsibility arose great pride. No one questioned his right to be offended and no one hesitated to follow his example in hating the offender—offenders, one should say, because the deed of one man became immediately the deed of his family. It is perhaps surprising, however, that the feudal structure should have been maintained so strictly and upon so large a scale by these peasants of Artigues, for these peasants were closer to the *seigneur campagnard* whom the close of the sixteenth century saw coming into prominence than they were to the average peasant of the lowlands, whose families were sprung from the emancipated serfs of the middle ages. The crags and valleys of the Pyrenees were the cause of their prosperity and of their pride.

The hot mineral baths in the valley of Luchon, it is true, were on one of the direct routes from Spain into France, and it is said that the soldiers of Caesar stopped there to soak their battle-weary limbs in the muddy sulphur pools, but the court of Navarre neglected Luchon. The Marguerite of Princesses took her entourage to Cauterets, nearer Pau. Neither was Artigues upon the direct way through the valley of Luchon to the valley of the Garonne. It stood nearer to a small tributary to the Neste in a higher fold of the mountains. It was on the way to no other village. No one visited Artigues who had not business there. And so from generation to generation, while the lowland villages were plundered and burned and their fields laid waste by the religious wars which swept southern France through the thirteenth century and down to the middle of the sixteenth, Artigues enjoyed its isolation and its lack of fame, and actual gold accumulated in the coffers of its more prosperous families. The feudal feeling maintained its value also, as strong as in the earlier centuries, although Francis the First had been for twenty-one years upon the throne of France and although Languedoc had belonged to the French crown almost three hundred years.

When she was fourteen years of age, perhaps a little earlier than might have been the case had it not been for the death of her own mother, Bertrande de Rols went to live finally with the house of Guerre. One deceptively warm autumn forenoon, attended by the servant who had brought the réveillon to the young bridal couple, she crossed the courtyard, bare-foot, dressed quite simply in her usual workaday clothes, and found herself on the threshold of the big kitchen. Her mother-in-law kissed her on both cheeks, and led her to the hearth. The wooden coffers which contained her personal

effects and the linen and silver of her dowry were carried in and set against the wall, her mother-in-law indicated to her the large bed with the curtains of yellow serge which was to be hers and Martin's, and, without too great haste, she was set to grinding meal in a big stone mortar. Martin and his father were in the fields. Her own father had ridden off to oversee the vintaging. None of the field-workers returned until night-fall. But meanwhile she had time to become familiar with the kitchen, with Martin's four sisters and the servants, with the dogs and cats and with the feathered inhabitants of the *basse-cour*. She had not visited the house since the day of her wedding, but the scene was much as she had remembered it. The big table on trestles had been removed; there remained only a square table near the hearth, for the family, and a long one beside it for the workers. The floor was strewn only with dried grass, and the walls were not garnished with evergreen; but festoons of garlic and onions, the long stems braided together, hung from the rafters, together with bunches of dried elder blossoms and linden flowers. Bunches of dried rosemary, mountain thyme, and parsley were there also; and, in the hood of the chimney, meats and sausages were freshly hung to benefit from the resinous smoke.

Not again for a long time did Bertrande enjoy as much of her mother-in-law's attention as she did that afternoon, but the leisured kindness and interest which Madame Guerre bestowed upon her son's young wife threw a long warm shadow which extended forward for many days. She showed Bertrande the farm in detail, the stables, the granary, low stone buildings roofed with tile, like the house, set to the right and left of the courtyard before the house; showed her the room used for the dairy, the storerooms with their pots of honey

and baskets of fruit, baskets of chestnuts, stone crocks of goose and chicken preserved in oil, eggs buried in bran, cheeses of goat's milk and of cow's milk, wine, oil. In the Chamber she showed her wool and flax for the distaff, the loom on which the clothing for the household would be woven. She showed her the garden, now being set in order for the early frost, the straw-thatched beehives, the sheepfold of mud and wattles, and last of all, returning to the Chamber in which the marriage bed had been dressed, Madame Guerre opened certain chests filled with bran and showed the young girl the coats of mail of the ancestors, thus preserved from rust. She did all this, as Bertrande well knew, that the young wife might understand the household which she would one day be called upon to direct. At no season of the year could she have summarized more happily all that the labors of the spring and summer were working to achieve.

The dusk came early with a chill that presaged winter. It was fully dark before the men began to assemble from the fields and pastures. The tables were set, and fresh bundles of vine trimmings were flung on the fire. The cattle were driven home and stabled, as was necessary every night in the year because of the depredations of bears. The sheep came next, their voices filling the courtyard with a high prolonged babble. The shepherd and the cowherd, entering the kitchen, brought the smell of the beasts into the room. The swineherd came next, and the men who were, turn and turn about, wagoners, vine dressers, or harvesters of grain. Last of all came the head of the family, Martin's father, squired by his son. His wife met him on the threshold with a cup of warmed wine, which he drank before he entered the house. He removed his cape and gave it to one of his daughters. He seated himself

at the head of the table. The eldest daughter brought him a bowl of water and a napkin. He washed and wiped his hands, and then, searching the room with his eyes, found Martin's wife and signaled her to approach.

"Sit here, my daughter," he said, indicating a place beside him. "Tonight you shall be waited on. Tomorrow you shall have your own share of the labors of the house."

He did not smile, but the deed and the voice were kind. Bertrande, gazing cautiously into his face as his attention was directed elsewhere, now to the conversation of the shepherd, now toward the blazing hearth, remembered the severe paternal countenance as she had seen it by torchlight from the high pillow of the marriage bed, and she thought that the torchlight had changed it. Here, in the more even glow of the fire, the face of her new father held nothing terrifying. Seamed, coarsened by exposure to rough weather, the darkened skin caught the gold reflections squarely, without compromise or evasion, admitting all the engravures of time. The beard was short, rough and grizzled, parted to show a cleft in the long chin. The mouth, not smiling, but just, had a heavy lower lip which could admit of anger. The nose was short and flattened, the cheek bones were high, the forehead was high and wide, the eyes, now gray, now black, as the light changed, were calmly interested, calm in the assurance of authority. He sat at ease in the stiff-backed rush-bottomed chair, his dark jerkin laced to the throat, his right hand resting on the edge of the table, vigilantly surveying his household, like some Homeric king, some ruler of an island commonwealth who could both plow and fight, and the hand which rested on the table was scarred as from some defensive struggle in years long gone by. Without bearing any outward symbol of his power, he was in

his own person both authority and security. He ruled, as the contemporary records say, using the verb which belongs to royalty, and the young girl seated beside him, in feeling this, felt also the great peace which his authority created for his household. It was the first of many evenings in which his presence should testify for her that the beasts were safe, that the grain was safe, that neither the wolves, whose voices could be heard on winter nights, nor marauding bands of mercenaries such as the current hearsay from the larger valleys sometimes reported, could do anything to harm the hearth beside which this man was seated. Because of him the farm was safe, and therefore Artigues, and therefore Languedoc, and therefore France, and therefore the whole world was safe and as it should be.

Martin was sufficiently kind to her, in spite of her apprehensions. He treated her with rather more affection than he did his sisters, bullying her occasionally, as he never bullied them, leaving her for the most part to her own affairs. At night they slept together in their own bed, shoulders turned away from each other, the tired young heads buried deep in the feather-stuffed pillows. Bertrande continued, day by day, her long apprenticeship for the position which she was destined to fill, that of mistress of the farm.

A year went by, during which Bertrande was aware of no other sentiment for her husband than a mild gratitude for his leaving her alone. Then, in the early autumn, Martin went bear-hunting. A cordon had been organized in the parish, according to custom, in order to check to some extent the increasing boldness of those animals which not only destroyed the young barley in the spring but also attacked cattle and sheep. It was generally maintained that there were two species

of bear in the Pyrenees, those which were vegetarians strictly and those which were carnivorous. The latter were a far greater menace than the wolves, which were not seen in summer and which were dangerous only in the winter months when stock was likely to be safe in stable or fold. Martin had heard of the cordon, and, without saying anything to anyone, had risen early and gone off to join the hunters. He was not seen all that day. When evening came, the workers returned to the farm, shepherd, swineherd, carter, vintager, but no Martin. Monsieur Guerre inquired for his son, but no one had any information to offer. According to custom, the farm workers and the household servants sat down with their master while Madame Guerre and Bertrande waited upon them. The usual talk of the day's work went on, the meal was finished, the tables were cleared away, and the hour for prayers drew near, before the door burst open and Martin entered, staggering under a load of bear-meat done up in the yet bloody hide of the bear. He was exultant. But when he saw his father's expectant eyes, his exuberance died away, and, depositing his booty before his father, he made his excuses for being absent from the farm labor, and recounted, more briefly than he had intended, the adventures of his day. His father watched him quietly. When the boy had finished, his father said,

"That is all you have to say?"

"Yes, my father."

"Very well. Kneel."

Martin dropped on his knees, and his father, leaning forward, struck him with the knuckles of his right hand full upon the left side of his jaw. Martin said nothing. Madame Guerre caught her breath but made no outcry. In a moment Martin stood up and went to spit blood into the fire.

“Prayers, my children,” said the father.

The household, upon its knees, with bowed heads, attended to the prayers which the father repeated, and then, dispersing, went off to bed. Several hours later that evening when the house was quiet and only a small gleam of firelight shone through the folds of serge which enclosed their bed, Bertrande said to Martin:

“Are you awake?”

“Certainly. My jaw aches. He has broken me two teeth.”

“It was not just,” she whispered with indignation.

“Certainly it was just. I didn’t ask him if I might go. I was afraid that he might refuse me. But it was well done, was it not, to kill a bear?”

“Oh, yes,” she replied fervently. “Martin, you are brave.”

He said nothing to that, agreeing in his heart, but as he fell asleep, later, his arm rested on her shoulder. She had sided with him against the paternal authority, however just that authority might be. They were two, a camp within a camp. As for Bertrande, to her own surprise she began to understand that Martin belonged to her and that her affection for him was even greater than her respect and admiration for his father.

In the morning Madame Guerre, examining the damage done to her son’s teeth, wept, but did not protest against her husband’s severity.

“You understand, my son, it is necessary,” she said. “If you have no obedience for your father, your son will have none for you, and then what will become of the family? Ruin. Despair.”

“Yes, my mother, I understand,” said Martin.

No one but Bertrande had hinted that the punishment was arbitrary and severe, and nothing further was said by anyone about the matter.

Thank you for your interest in this Ohio University Press title.

This book is available for purchase [online at our website](#) or through other ebooks vendors.

