**A Mother’s Life**

By Frederic Fahey

**1926**

**Chapter 1**

She prayed it wouldn’t be one of those nights. Tonight, her babies would sleep, she hoped. Helene left the door cracked so some light would seep in. Patrice and Marie were finally starting to settle down. She hummed a tune her sisters taught her when she was a girl, an old French tune. She didn’t remember all the words but still found the melody soothing, and so used it as a makeshift lullaby. She stood by the door and took one last look. After only a few minutes, the girls were asleep. A sigh escaped her lips.

Her watch told her it was almost 9:00, and her husband, Henri, wasn’t home yet. He knew the whereabouts of the few speakeasies in Sanford and other small towns in this part of Maine. The federal prohibition of the sale of alcohol made it more difficult to find these spots, but only slightly. The police tolerated the speakeasies’ existence, until there was trouble. That place would then be shut down, at least for a while, but the action would shift to a new location. Maybe he’d be home soon since he had work tomorrow. Maybe he’d be in that mood and want her to do things or to do things to her. Things that scared her. She shook her head to clear these thoughts and returned her focus to her little ones.

Patrice was seventeen months and on the verge of stringing words together. She’d been saying “Mama” for several months. When Helene first heard her utter it, it stopped her cold. Of course, she knew that she was a mother. Patrice was nearly a year old at the time, and she was almost due with Marie. But when those engaging brown eyes gazed up at her, and she said “Mama” as clear as day, it was as if the universe now recognized the fact. Excitedly, she tried to relate to Henri how these first words made her feel, but he didn’t understand. When, the next morning, Patrice again said “Mama,” Helene pointed it out to him. He just ruffled his newspaper and said it was nothing more than the mumbles of an infant. He went back to his paper, the *Sanford News*, and grumbled that Babe Ruth had hit yet another home run for those darn Yankees. “Maybe he’ll hit fifty again this year,” he snorted. She turned back towards Patrice and beamed. She couldn’t wait to tell her sisters.

The little one, Marie, was just five months old, and already a shining presence in her life. Patrice had been a colicky infant, always in a bit of pain. Marie, on the other hand, was joyful practically all the time with an ever-present smile and an endless supply of giggles. No matter how difficult the day might be, Helene only had to glance at Marie’s glowing face, and all was good.

One last peek. She couldn’t help but smile. She was nineteen years old and was blessed with her two *petits anges*, her little angels. They were both fast asleep.

“*C’est bon*,” she muttered softly.

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The door flew open.

“Helene? Hello?” Henri’s slurring spluttered forth. “You still awake?”

She’d dozed on the couch in the living room while looking through one of her movie magazines. She rubbed her eyes and glanced at her watch. It was just after midnight.

“I’m in the living room,” she answered in a loud whisper. “Could you keep it down? The little ones are sleeping.”

“Anything to eat? I’m starving!” Henri tried to speak quietly but when tipsy, his whisper was louder than most folks’ speaking voices.

“I made beef stew. I’ll heat it up for you. And I got a nice loaf of bread today from Papa’s market.” Helene headed to the kitchen. Henri staggered after her. He plopped himself down on one of the caned, ladder-backed kitchen chairs.

“What ya mean ‘heat it up’? I wanna eat now!” Henri could be impatient when drunk and hungry.

“I made it a while ago. It’ll just take a few minutes. Have some bread and butter while you wait.” She placed a wicker basket with the bread in front of him along with the butter dish. He snatched the dish from the table and hurled it against the wall. Shattered glass flew everywhere while the butter slithered down the wall.

“I don’t want any damn bread!”

“Shh! The babies are sleeping,” she pleaded as calmly and quietly as she could. She retreated a step and started to reach for the dish cloth by the side of the sink to start cleaning up the mess.

From the other room, Marie let out a startled shriek. “Mama!” Patrice bellowed in response.

“*Mon Dieu!* I thought you said they were asleep!” Henri squawked. His chair went flying as he rose from the table and stormed towards the girls’ room. Helene hurried after him at a safe distance.

Henri banged the bedroom door open with his forearm.

“Quiet you two! Get back to sleep!” he roared at the two terrified faces. “Daddy has to work in the morning!”

“Honey, I’ll see to the girls.” She tried to calm him.

Marie was screeching with fright. Patrice was standing in her crib. “Mama!”

“Quiet, I said!” He grabbed the railing of Marie’s crib. She was now wailing, her tiny face contorted and aflame. Henri shook the infant’s crib, firmly at first but then violently. Marie’s tiny body bounced toward the headboard. Helene flew across the room.

“Henri! Stop!” She tried to force herself between her husband and the crib. He swung viciously. She raised her arm to absorb the impact of the blow, but its brute force sent her slender body careening into the wall. Smacking her head, she fell to the floor with a thud. He turned from the crib with balled fists. His teeth were clenched like a sprung bear trap. He loomed over her as she lay dazed.

For just a moment, everything appeared to stop. This was the hardest he’d ever struck her. Helene tried to gather herself. The two girls were frozen for a heartbeat, eyes wide as it seemed they were both between screams. Helene gazed up at her husband. He appeared befuddled with a look as if to say to her, “How’d you end up on the floor?” but then snapped from his bewilderment when the babies’ wailing recommenced. He wiped his brow, took a deep breath, grunted something, and lumbered out of the room.

Helene pushed against the wall to get to her feet. After her first, shaky steps towards Marie’s crib, the urgency of the moment seized her. She hurried across the room and swept Marie into her arms. Tears were streaming from the infant’s eyes. Although terror stricken, Marie appeared to be all right. She then went to Patrice, still standing in her crib, and snatched her up in her other arm. Patrice seized her mother’s neck. “Mama! Mama!”

Helene gently bounced as she stood, clutching her daughters.

“Everything’s all right,” she whispered softly. “Mama’s here. Mama’s here.”

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It took some time, but Helene finally calmed the girls and placed them back in their cribs. Marie was already asleep, but Patrice was still in a delicate state. When slumber would start to catch her, her breath would hitch, and she’d let out a soulful whimper. Helene knew she would stir for a while. She always did when Henri was like this. Helene had found that darkening the room helped Patrice eventually sleep. She left the door slightly cracked, so when she checked back in a few minutes, she could do so quietly.

She peered into the bedroom she shared with her husband. Henri was sprawled across the bed, still in his clothes although he’d managed somehow to kick off his shoes. Helene knew it’d be a while before she’d be ready for sleep. She couldn’t imagine sharing a bed with him on this night. She’d likely sleep on the couch.

Helene let out a sigh as she surveyed the kitchen. After straightening the fallen chair, she swept up the broken glass from the butter dish. She went over the floor several times as Patrice often ran in the kitchen in her bare feet. She scrubbed butter from the wall and floor and put the stew back in the ice box. While the door was still open, she chipped off a piece of ice, wrapped it in a dish towel and placed it against the bump starting to rise on the back of her head.

She warmed herself some milk. It often helped calm her down on nights like this. However, there’d never quite been a night like this. She went to the bathroom to splash some water on her face. When she saw herself in the mirror, the face looking back at her was hardly recognizable. Where was the young girl who just a couple of years ago would dance and laugh with her sisters, who would sing for her little brothers? That girl was all but gone and replaced by the visage before her, sad and frightened. Even to herself, she looked older than her nineteen years. What had happened? Where’d she gone?

The warm milk indeed calmed her, but when she passed the girls’ room on her way to the couch and snuck another peek, Patrice was still weeping softly even though it had been over a half an hour. Helene sank to the floor. Her heart fell. What was she to do? Perhaps she could tolerate her husband staying out late or the snickers of the neighborhood girl who might have been in Henri’s company the night before. She might even learn to avoid him or protect herself from his blows. At least, she told herself that.

But what about her daughters? Could she protect them? When Henri swung at her, she’d barely been able to deflect his punch. But she’d hit her head and gone to the floor numbed while her enraged husband still hovered over Marie’s crib.

What impact were these nights having on her daughters’ spirits? Patrice was still mostly without words, but she lay in her bed crying close to an hour after the violence had subsided. This ripped at Helene’s insides. And what of the wonderous joy of *petite* Marie? Would someday the smiles and giggles be gone? What was Helene to do? What could she do?

Her watch told her it was just past 5:00 in the morning. She’d sat crumpled on the floor outside the girls’ room for a long while. Her head throbbed, shoulder was sore and her spirit shaken. Peering in again, she saw that Patrice was now asleep, but Marie was starting to rustle and would probably need to be fed and changed soon. She looked in on Henri. He was fast asleep and would likely be so for several hours. Again, he’d be late for work. However, he worked for his own father who was more tolerant of his tardiness than most bosses would be. She stared at her husband for several minutes. Right then and there, Helene knew what she would do.

She quickly grabbed a warmer sweater. The dress she was wearing from the previous night would suit fine. She decided to leave quickly and worry about the rest of her clothes later. Her sister, Anne, could lend her something to wear in the meantime. She drew the curtains more tightly so the rising sun would remain outside and Henri wouldn't wake for hours. She tiptoed to the girls’ room and hastily changed and dressed them. She placed some of their clothing, diapers, and other supplies in a bag.

“Come my little ones.” Helene lifted a daughter in each arm and headed to the foyer. She placed the girls in a baby carriage with the bag of supplies at their feet and spread the two blankets from their cribs across them. Marie started to fuss. No doubt she was getting hungry.

“Hush, darling,” Helene whispered as she caressed her daughter’s cheek. She grabbed her wool coat from the rack by the door.

“Helene!” she heard her husband grumble from the bedroom. With one arm fishing for a coat sleeve in the faint light of dawn, she stood petrified. Then, Henri let out a long, gasping snore, and she realized he was just calling in his sleep.

Once she finished buttoning her coat, she pushed the carriage out the door onto the stoop and quietly closed the door. After maneuvering the carriage down the few stairs to the sidewalk, Helene breathed an anxious sigh. She took one last look. She was indeed leaving her husband.