

# **Bitterness of Women**

Mary Austin

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LOUIS CHABOT was sitting under the fig tree in her father's garden at Tres Pinos when he told Marguerita Dupre that he could not love her. This sort of thing happened so often to Louis that he did it very well and rather enjoyed it, for he was one of those before whom women bloomed instinctively and preened themselves, and that Marguerita loved him very much was known not only to Louis, but to all Tres Pinos.

It was bright mid-afternoon and there was no sound in Dupre's garden louder than the dropping of ripe figs and the drip of the hydrant under the Castilian roses. A mile out of town Chabot's flock dozed on their feet with their heads under one another's bellies, and his herders dozed on the ground with their heads under the plaited tops of the sage. Old Dupre sat out in front of his own front yard, with a handkerchief over his face, and slept very soundly. Chabot finished his claret to the last drop—it was excellent claret, this of Dupre's—turned the tumbler upside down, sat back in his chair, and explained to Marguerita point by point why he did not love her.

Marguerita leaned her fat arms on the table, wrapped in her blue reboza; it was light blue and she was too dark for it, but it was such a pretty color; she leaned forward, looking steadily and quietly at Louis, because she was afraid if she so much as let her lids droop the tears would come and if she smiled her lips would quiver. Marguerita felt that she had not invited this, neither had she known how to avoid it.

She would have given anything to have told Louis to his face that he need not concern himself so much on her account, as she was not the least interested in him; she had called on all her pride to that end, but nothing came.

She was a good girl, Louis told her, such as, if she had pleased him, he would gladly have married. She was a very good girl and she understood about sheep. Tres bien! Old Dupre had taught her that; but she lacked a trifle a nuance—but everything where love is concerned, l'art d'etre desire, explained the little Frenchman; for, though he was only a sheep-herder of Lost Borders, if he had been a boulevardier he could not have been more of a Frenchman or less of a cad. He leaned back in his chair with the air of having delivered himself very well.

"Salty Bill loves me," ventured Marguerita.

"Eh, Bill!" Louis looked hurt; for, though he frequently disposed of his ladies in this negligent fashion, he did not care to have them snapped up so quickly. Marguerita felt convicted of lese-majeste by the look and hastened to reassure him that she cared nothing whatever for Salty Bill. It was a false move and she knew it as soon as it was done, but she could not bear to have Louis look at her like that and Marguerita had never in her life learned the good of pretending. Chabot poured him another glass of claret and returned to his point.

There was Suzon Moynier, he explained. Such an eye as Suzon had! There was a spark for you! And an ankle! More lovers than few had been won by an ankle. Marguerita, under cover of the table, drew her feet together beneath her skirts. Her ankles were thick and there was no disguising it.

"So it is Suzon you love?"

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"Eh," said the herder, "that is as may be. I have loved many women." Then perhaps because the particular woman did not matter so much as that there should be womanhood, and perhaps because he could no more help it than she could help being wondrously flooded by it, he threw her a look from the tail of his eye and such a smile as drew all the blood from her heart, bent above her, brushing her hair with his lips in such a lingering tenderness of farewell that, though he had just told her she was not to be loved, the poor girl was not sure but he was beginning to love her. Women suffered things like that from Louis Chabot, each being perfectly sure she was the only one, and perhaps, like Marguerita, finding it worth while to be made to suffer if it could be done so exquisitely.

Marguerita was only half French herself, old Dupre having married her mother, Senorita Carrasco, who was only half a senorita, since, in fact, most people in Tres Pinos were a little this or that, with no chance for name calling. Dupre had been a herder of sheep risen to an owner whom the desert had bitten. The natural consequence was that when he was old, instead of returning to France, he had married Marguerita's mother and settled down in Tres Pinos to live on the interest of his money.

It was a fact that his daughter had at heart all the fire and tenderness that promised in Suzon's glance; but of what use to Louis Chabot that she had a soul warm and alight if no glow of it suffused her cheek and no spark of it drew him in her eye? She was swarthy and heavy of face; she had no figure, which means she had a great deal too much of it, and there was a light shadow like a finger smudge on her upper lip. Not that the girl did not have her good points. She could cook that was the French strain in her father; she could dance that was Castilian from her mother; and such as she was Salty Bill wanted her. Bill drove an eighteen-mule team for the borax works and was seven times a better man than Chabot, but she would have no more of him than Louis would have of her. She continued to say her prayers regularly and told Tia Juna, who reproached her with losing a good marriage, that she believed yet the saints would give her the desire of her heart, whereat Tia Juna pitied her.

Chabot brought his sheep up from the spring shearing at Bakersfield each year and made three loops about Tres Pinos, so that it brought him to the town about once in three months to replenish his supplies; and the only reason there was not a new object of his attentions each time was that there were not girls enough, for Chabot's taste required them young, pretty, and possessed of the difficult art of being desired. Therefore, he had time to keep hope alive in Marguerita with the glint of his flattering eyes and the trick of his flattering lips, which was such very common coin with him that he did not quite know himself how free he was with it. And after old Dupre died and his daughter inherited his house and the interest on his money she was enough of a figure in Tres Pinos to make a little attention worth while, even though she had a smudge of black on her upper lip and no art but that of being faithful. She lived in the house under the fig tree with old Tia Juna for a companion and was much respected; she was said to have more clothes than anybody, though they never became her.

Marguerita kept a candle burning before the saints and another in her heart for the handsome little herder, who went on making love to ladies and being loved by them for three years. Then the saints took a hand in his affairs, though, of course, it did not look that way to Louis.

He was sleeping out on Black Mountain in the spring of the year with his flock. The herder whose business it was to have done that was at Tres Pinos on a two days' leave, confessing himself and getting a nice, jolly little claret drunk. Somewhere up in the blown lava holes of Black Mountain there was a bear with two cubs, who had said to them, bear fashion: "Come down to the flock with me to-night and I will show you how killing is done. There will be dogs there, and men, but do not be afraid; I will see to it that they do not hurt you."

Along about the time Orion's sword sloped down the west Chabot heard their grunted noises and the scurry of the flock. Chabot was not a coward, perhaps because he knew that in general bears are; he got up and laid about him with his staff. This he never would have done if he had known about the cubs; he trod on the foot of one in the dark and the bear mother heard it. She came lumbering up in the soft blackness and took Chabot in her arms.

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Toward four of the next afternoon the herder coming back, still very merry and very comfortable in his mind, found a maimed bleeding thing by the water-hole that moaned and babbled. One of its arms was gone to the elbow, its face was laid open, and long red gashes lay along its sides and down one thigh. After a while, when he had washed away the blood and dust, he discovered that this thing was Chabot. The herder laid it as tenderly as he could on the campo burro and took it to Tres Pinos. If there was any question of the propriety of the care of Chabot falling to Marguerita Dupre it counted for nothing against the fact that nobody was found willing to do it in her stead, and Marguerita was very discreet. Tia Juna was put in charge of the sick-room and Marguerita gave her whole soul to the cooking.

And if any question had arisen later, when Chabot began to hobble about with a crutch under his good arm and his sleeve pinned up where the other had been, he put an end to it by marrying her. He was thought to have done very well in this, since he could get no more good of himself; and since Marguerita wanted him, it was a handsome way of paying her, but there had something gone before that. Tia Juna had been careful there should be no scrap of a mirror about when Chabot began to slip his bandages, and perhaps he had not had the courage to ask for it; certainly there had been no change in Marguerita's face for any change she saw in him. And the day that he knew the thing he was he asked her to marry him. He had slipped out into the street for the first time, wearying a little of the solicitations of the two women, and come upon children playing in the open way. They broke and scuttled like young quail at sight of him; and he sat down suddenly, for he was not so strong as he had thought, and tried to be clear in his mind what this might mean. And in a little while he was quite clear; he heard the rustle and whisper behind him that advised him of shoulders hunched and fingers laid on lips over irrepressible giggles of excitement and knew that they dared each other to come on through the black sage and peek at a fearsome thing.

It was that afternoon when she came in with the soup and claret that he asked Marguerita. The poor girl put down the bowl and came and knelt by him very humble and gentle.

"Are you quite sure, Louis?" she asked, with her cheek upon his hand.

"I am sure of nothing," said he, "except that I cannot live without you."

It was very curious that no sooner had he said that than he began to discover it would be very hard to live with her, for to lose an ear and an eye and to have one's mouth drawn twisty by a scar does not make a kiss relish better if it falls not in with the natural desire.

Marguerita did not grow any prettier after she was married, but showed a tendency to take on fat; and she did not dress quite so well, because she could not afford it; though there are times, as, for instance, when he has gone out in company and seen the young married women hustled out of sight of him, that her plain face looks almost good to him. Marguerita insists on their going out a great deal to cock-fights and to bailes, where he sits in the corner with his good side carefully disposed toward the guests; and his wife has given up dancing, though she is very fond of it, to sit beside him and keep him company; though, to tell the truth, Chabot could bear very well to do without that if only he could find himself surrounded by the lightness, the laughter, the half-revealing draperies, the delicious disputed moves of the game he loves. As he will not any more, for he knows now that such as these are not given save when there is something to be got by them, and, though he is only thirty-four, poor Louis is no longer possessed of *l'art etre desire*.

For the rest of his life he will have to make the best of knowing that his wife carries his name with credit and does not cost him anything. They are not without their comfortable hours. Marguerita takes excellent care of him and she understands about sheep. If she sees the dust of a flock arising, can tuck up her skirts and away to the edge of the town, getting back with as much news of where they go, whence they came, and the conditions of the wethers as Chabot could have brought himself, and not even her husband knows the extent of her devices for keeping him surrounded with the sense and stir of life. For it was not long after his marriage that Chabot made the discovery that all the quick desire of him toward lovely women warmed in his wife's spirit toward the maimed and twisted

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thing that he is and, thwarted of the subtle play of lip and limb and eye, spends itself in offices of homely comfort.

And this is the bitterness of women, that it matters not so much that they should have passion as the power to provoke it, and, lacking the spark of a glance, the turn of an ankle, the treasures of tenderness in them wither unfulfilled. Shut behind his wife's fat commonplace exterior lies the pulse of music, the delight of motion, the swimming sense, the quick white burning fenced within his scars. Times like this he remembers what has passed between him and many women and finds his complacency sicken and die in him. Knowing what he does of the state of her heart and not being quite a cad, he does not make her an altogether bad husband; and if sometimes, looking at her with abhorring eyes the shaking bosom, the arms enormous, the shade of her upper lip no longer to be mistaken for a smudge resenting her lack of power to move him, he gives her a bad quarter of an hour, even though she has the best of him. For however unhappy he makes her, with one kiss of his crooked mouth he can set it all right again. But for Louis the lift, the exultation, the exquisite unmatched wonder of the world will not happen any more; never any more.