



MARIE CURIE
A Portrait Made in 1929

MADAME CURIE

BY

EVE CURIE

TRANSLATED BY VINCENT SHEEAN



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Your coffin was closed and I could see you no more. I didn't allow them to cover it with the horrible black cloth. I covered it with flowers and I sat beside it.

. . . They came to get you, a sad company; I looked at them, and did not speak to them. We took you back to Sceaux, and we saw you go down into the big deep hole. Then the dreadful procession of people. They wanted to take us away. Jacques and I resisted. We wanted to see everything to the end. They filled the grave and put sheaves of flowers on it. Everything is over, Pierre is sleeping his last sleep beneath the earth; it is the end of everything, everything, everything.

Marie had lost her companion, and the world had lost a great man. This atrocious departure, in the rain and mud, had struck the popular imagination. The newspapers of all countries described in pathetic stories, over several columns, the accident in the Rue Dauphine. Messages of sympathy accumulated in the house in the Boulevard Kellermann, with the names of kings, ministers, poets and scientists mixed with obscure names. Among these bundles of letters, articles, telegrams, are to be found some cries of true emotion:

Lord Kelvin:

Grievously distressed by terrible news of Curie death. When will funeral be? We arrive Hotel Mirabeau to-morrow morning.

Marcelin Berthelot:

. . . We have been struck by this terrible news as if by lightning. So many services already rendered to science and humanity, so many services that we expected from this discoverer of genius——! All that vanished in an instant, or already passed into the state of memory!

G. Lippmann:

It seems to me that I have lost a brother: I did not know by what bonds I was attached to your husband, but I know it to-day.

I suffer also for you, madame.

Charles Cheveneau, Pierre Curie's laboratory assistant:

Some of us had developed a true cult for him. For me he was, after my own family, one of the men I loved most; such had been the great and delicate affection with which he knew how to surround his modest collaborator. And his immense kindness extended even to his humblest servants, who adored him: I have never seen sincerer or more harrowing tears than those shed by his laboratory attendants at the news of his sudden decease.

On this occasion, as on all others, the woman who was to be known hereafter as an "illustrious widow" fled from the attacks of fame. To avoid an official ceremony, Marie advanced the date of the funeral to Saturday, April 21st. She refused processions, delegations and speeches, and asked that Pierre be buried as simply as possible in the grave where his mother rested at Sceaux. Aristide Briand, then Minister of Public Instruction, nevertheless defied orders: in a gesture of generosity he joined the relations and intimates of the Curies and accompanied Pierre's body in silence to the far-off little suburban cemetery.

Journalists, concealed behind the tombstones, watched the figure of Marie hidden under thick mourning veils:

. . . Mme Curie, on her father-in-law's arm, followed her husband's coffin to the grave hollowed out at the foot of the wall of the enclosure in the shadow of the chestnut trees. There she remained motionless for a moment, always with the same fixed, hard gaze; but when a sheaf of flowers was brought near the grave, she seized it with a sudden movement and began to detach the flowers one by one to scatter them on the coffin.

She did this slowly, composedly, and seemed to have totally forgotten the watchers, who, profoundly moved made no noise, no murmur.

The master of ceremonies, nevertheless, thought he must ask Mme Curie to receive the condolences of the persons present. Then, allowing the bouquet she held to fall to the earth, she left the cemetery without saying a word and rejoined her father-in-law.

(*Le Journal*, April 22nd, 1906.)

During the following days, eulogies of the vanished scientist were pronounced at the Sorbonne and in the French and foreign scientific societies which counted Pierre Curie among their members. Henri Poincaré exalted the memory of his friend at the Academy of Science:

All those who knew Pierre Curie know the pleasantness and steadiness of his friendship, the delicate charm which exhaled, so to speak, from his gentle modesty, his candid uprightness, and the fineness of his mind.

Who could have believed that so much gentleness concealed an uncompromising soul? He did not compromise with the generous principles upon which he had been nourished, or with the special moral ideal he had been taught to love, that ideal of absolute sincerity, too high, perhaps, for the world in which we live. He did not know the thousand little accommodations with which our weakness contents itself. He did not separate the cult of this ideal from that which he rendered to science, and he has shown us by a brilliant example what a high conception of duty can come out of the simple and pure love of truth. It matters little what god one believes in; it is the faith, and not the god, that makes miracles.

Marie's diary:

. . . The day after the burial I told Irène everything; she was at the Perrins'. . . She did not understand, at first, and let me go away without saying anything; but afterward, it seems, she wept and asked to see us. She cried a great deal at home, and then she went off to her little friends to forget. She did not ask for any detail and at first was afraid to speak of her father. She made great worried eyes over the black clothes that were brought to me. . . . Now she no longer seems to think of it at all.

Arrival of Joseph and Bronya. They are good, Irène plays with her uncles; Eve, who toddled about the house with unconscious gaiety all through these events, plays and laughs; everybody talks. And I see Pierre, Pierre on his deathbed.

. . . On the Sunday morning after your death, Pierre, I went to the laboratory with Jacques for the first time. I tried to make a measurement, for a graph on which we had each

made several points. But I felt the impossibility of going on.

In the street I walk as if hypnotised, without attending to anything. I shall not kill myself. I have not even the desire for suicide. But among all these vehicles is there not one to make me share the fate of my beloved?

Dr. Curie, his son Jacques, Joseph Sklodovski and Bronya observed with terror the movements of this icy, calm, black-robed woman, the automaton Marie had become. Even the sight of her children did not awaken feeling in her. Stiff, absent-minded, the wife who had not joined the dead seemed already to have abandoned the living.

But the living busied themselves about her and worried over that future in which she believed so little. The decease of Pierre Curie had brought up some important problems. What was to be the fate of the research work Pierre had left in suspense, and of his teaching at the Sorbonne? What was to become of Marie?

Her relatives discussed these questions in low voices, and listened to the suggestions of the representatives of the Ministry and the university, who succeeded each other at the house in the Boulevard Kellermann. On the morrow of the obsequies the government officially proposed to award the widow and children of Pierre Curie a national pension. Jacques submitted this plan to Marie, who refused flatly. "I don't want a pension," she said. "I am young enough to earn my living and that of my children."

In her suddenly strengthened voice could be heard the first faint echo of her habitual bravery.

Between the authorities and the Curie family the exchanges of views wavered somewhat. The university was disposed to keep Marie in its faculty. But with what title, and in what laboratory? Could this woman of genius be put under the orders of a chief? And where was there a professor capable of directing Pierre Curie's laboratory?

Consulted as to her own wishes, Mme Curie answered vaguely that she was not able to reflect, that she did not know. . . .

Jacques Curie and Bronya and the most faithful of Pierre's friends, Georges Gouy, felt that they must make the decisions and take the initiative in Marie's place. Jacques Curie and Georges

Gouy informed the dean of the faculty of their conviction: that Marie was the only French physicist capable of pursuing the work she and Pierre had undertaken. Marie was the only teacher worthy of succeeding Pierre. Marie was the only chief of laboratory who could replace him. Traditions and customs must be swept away so as to name Mme Curie professor at the Sorbonne.

On the strong insistence of Marcelin Berthelot, of Paul Appell and Vice-Rector Liard, the public authorities made a frank and generous gesture on this occasion. On May 13th, 1906, the council of the Faculty of Science unanimously decided to maintain the chair created for Pierre Curie and to confide it to Marie, who would take the title of *chargée de cours*.

University of France

Mme Pierre Curie, Doctor of Science, chief of research work in the Faculty of Science of the University of Paris, is charged with a course in physics in the said faculty.

Mme Curie will receive in this capacity an annual salary of ten thousand francs, dating from the first of May, 1906.

This was the first time that a position in French higher education had been given to a woman.

Marie listened distractedly, almost with indifference, to her father-in-law giving the details of the heavy mission she owed it to herself to accept. She answered in a few syllables: "I will try."

A phrase pronounced in other days by Pierre, a phrase which was a moral testament, an order, came up in her memory and formally indicated her course:

"Whatever happens, even if one has to go on like a body without a soul, one must work just the same . . ."

Marie's diary:

I am offered the post of successor to you, my Pierre: your course and the direction of your laboratory. I have accepted. I don't know whether this is good or bad. You often told me you would have liked me to give a course at the Sorbonne. And I would like at least to make an effort to continue your work.

Sometimes it seems to me that this is how it will be most easy for me to live, and at other times it seems to me that I am mad to attempt it.

May 7th, 1906:

My Pierre, I think of you without end, my head is bursting with it and my reason is troubled. I do not understand that I am to live henceforth without seeing you, without smiling at the sweet companion of my life.

For two days the trees have been in leaf and the garden is beautiful. This morning I looked at the children there. I thought you would have found them beautiful and that you would have called me to show me the periwinkles and the narcissus in bloom. Yesterday, at the cemetery, I did not succeed in understanding the words "Pierre Curie" engraved on the stone. The beauty of the countryside hurt me, and I put my veil down so as to see everything through my crêpe.

May 11th:

My Pierre, I got up after having slept rather well, relatively calm. That was only a quarter of an hour ago, and now I want to howl again—like a wild beast.

May 14th:

My little Pierre, I want to tell you that the laburnum is in flower, the wistaria, the hawthorn and the iris are beginning—you would have loved all that.

I want to tell you, too, that I have been named to your chair, and that there have been some imbeciles to congratulate me on it.

I want to tell you that I no longer love the sun or the flowers. The sight of them makes me suffer. I feel better on dark days, like the day of your death, and if I have not learned to hate fine weather it is because my children have need of it.

May 22nd:

I am working in the laboratory all day long, it is all I can do: I am better off there than anywhere else, I conceive of nothing any more that could give me personal joy, except perhaps scientific

work—and even there—— no, because if I succeeded with it, I could not endure you not to know it.

June 10th:

Everything is gloomy. The preoccupations of life do not even allow me time to think of my Pierre in peace.

Jacques Curie and Joseph Sklodovski had left Paris. Soon Bronya was to rejoin her husband at their sanatorium in Zakopane.

One evening, one of the last the two sisters passed together, Marie made a sign to her elder sister to follow her. She led Bronya into her own bedroom, where, in spite of the summer heat, a great wood fire was flaming, and locked the door behind her. Bronya, surprised, questioned the widow's face. It was even paler and more bloodless than usual. Without a word, Marie took a stiff, bulky packet, wrapped in waterproof paper, out of the cupboard. Then she sat down before the fire and signed to her sister to sit down beside her. She had a pair of strong scissors ready on the mantelpiece.

"Bronya," she murmured, "you must help me."

Slowly she undid the string and opened the paper. The flames lit up her trembling hands. A bundle appeared, carefully knotted into a cloth. Marie hesitated an instant—then she unfolded the white cloth and Bronya restrained a cry of horror: the wrapping enclosed a hideous mass of clothing, of linen, of dried mud and blackened blood. Marie had been keeping near her, for days past, the clothes Pierre had worn when the wagon struck him in the Rue Dauphine.

The silent widow took the scissors and began to cut up the dark coat. She threw the pieces one by one into the fire and watched them shrivel up, smoke, be consumed and disappear. But suddenly she stopped, struggling in vain against the tears that darkened her tired eyes. In the half-congealed folds of the cloth appeared some viscous fragments of matter: the last scraps of the brain in which, a few weeks before, noble thoughts and the discoveries of genius had been born.

Marie contemplated these corrupt remnants fixedly; she touched them and kissed them desperately until Bronya dragged the

clothing and the scissors away from her and began in her turn to cut and throw the pieces of cloth into the fire.

The task was finished at last, without a single word pronounced between the two women. The wrapping paper, the cloth, the towel with which they dried their hands, all in their turn were the prey of the flames.

"I could not have endured having this touched by indifferent hands," Marie said at last, in a strangling voice. Then, coming near Bronya:

"And now, tell me how I am going to manage to live. I know that I must, but how shall I do it? How can I do it?"

Breaking down into a horrible outburst of sobs, coughs, tears and cries, she hung upon her sister, who supported her, tried to calm her and finally undressed and put to bed this poor human creature who was at the end of her strength.

On the morrow Marie again became the icy automaton that had moved in her place since April 19th. It was this automaton that Bronya was to clasp in her arms as she got into the train for Warsaw. Bronya was to remain long obsessed by the picture of Marie motionless on the platform, in her mourning veils.

A sort of "normal life" was taken up again in that house, so impregnated with the memory of Pierre that on certain evenings, when the outside door slammed, Marie had, for the quarter of a second, the mad idea that the catastrophe was a bad dream and that Pierre Curie was about to appear. On the faces around her, young and old, could be read an expression of waiting. Projects, a plan for the future, were expected of her. This woman of thirty-eight, worn out by grief, was now the head of a family.

She made her decisions: she would stay in Paris all summer to work in the laboratory and to prepare the teaching which she was to begin in November. Her course at the Sorbonne must be worthy of Pierre Curie's. Marie got together her notes and books, and ran through the notes left by her husband. Once again she was buried in study.

During these sombre holidays her daughters skipped about in the country: Eve at St-Rémy-lès-Chevreuse with her grandfather, Irène at the seaside at Vaucottes, under the guardianship of Hela Szalay, Marie's second sister, who, to offer her affectionate

help, had come to pass the summer in France.

In the autumn, Marie, who could not bear to stay in the Boulevard Kellermann, went in search of a new dwelling-place. She chose to live at Sceaux, where Pierre had lived when she met him—and where he now rested.

When this move was proposed, Dr. Curie, intimidated perhaps for the first time in his life, approached his daughter-in-law.

"Now that Pierre is no longer here, Marie, you have no reason to go on living with an old man. I can quite easily leave you, go to live alone, or with my elder son. Decide!"

"No, you decide," Marie murmured. "If you went away it would hurt me. But you should choose what you prefer."

Her voice was troubled by anxiety. Was she also going to lose this friend and faithful companion? It would be natural for Dr. Curie to go and live with Jacques, rather than to stay with her—with a foreign woman, a Pole. . . . But the desired answer came at once:

"What I prefer, Marie, is to stay with you always."

He added the phrase, "Since you are willing," into which penetrated the emotion he did not wish to confess. And, very quickly, he turned away and went to the garden, where Irène's happy cries called him.

A widow, an old man of seventy-nine, a little girl and a baby—this was the Curie family now.

Mme Curie, widow of the illustrious scientist who died so tragically, who has been appointed to the chair occupied by her husband at the Sorbonne, will deliver her first lecture on Monday, November 5th, 1906, at half-past one in the afternoon.

Mme Curie, in this inaugural lecture, will explain the theory of ions in gases, and will treat of radioactivity.

Mme Curie will speak in a lecture hall. These halls contain about a hundred and twenty seats, most of which will be occupied by the students.⁴ The public and the Press, which also have some rights, will be obliged to share at most twenty seats between them! On this occasion, an occasion unique in the history of the Sorbonne, why could the regulations not be abandoned so as to put the great amphitheatre at Mme Curie's disposition for her first lecture only?

Such extracts from the newspapers of the time reflect the interest and impatience with which Paris watched for the first public appearance of the "celebrated widow." The reporters, society people, pretty women, artists who besieged the secretariat of the Faculty of Science and grew indignant when they were not given "invitation cards" were moved neither by compassion nor by the desire to receive instruction. They cared little indeed about the "theory of ions in gases," and Marie's suffering on this cruel day was only an added sauce for their curiosity. Even sorrow has its snobs.

For the first time a woman was about to speak at the Sorbonne—a woman who was at the same time a genius and a despairing wife. Here was enough to draw the public of theatrical *premieres*—the audience for great occasions.

At noon, at the hour when Marie, standing before the grave in the cemetery at Sceaux, was speaking in an undertone to him whose succession she assumed to-day, the crowd had already filled the little graded amphitheatre, stopped up the corridors of the Faculty of Science, and overflowed even into the square outside. In the hall, great and ignorant minds were mixed, and Marie's intimate friends were scattered among the indifferent. The worst off were the real students, who had come to listen and to take notes, but who had to cling to their seats to keep from being dislodged.

At one-twenty-five the noise of conversation grew heavy. There were whisperings and questions; necks were craned so as not to miss any part of Mme Curie's entrance. All those present had the same thought: what would be the new professor's first words—the first words of the only woman the Sorbonne had ever admitted among its masters? Would she thank the Minister, thank the university? Would she speak of Pierre Curie? Yes, undoubtedly: the custom was to begin by pronouncing a eulogy of one's predecessor. But in this case the predecessor was a husband, a working companion. What a strong situation! The moment was thrilling, unique. . . .

Half-past one. . . . The door at the back opened, and Marie Curie walked to the chair amidst a storm of applause. She inclined her head. It was a dry little movement intended as a salute. Standing, with her hands firmly holding on to the long table laden

with apparatus, Marie waited for the ovation to cease. It ceased suddenly: before this pale woman, who was trying to compose her face, an unknown emotion silenced the crowd that had come for a show.

Marie stared straight ahead of her and said:

"When one considers the progress that has been made in physics in the past ten years, one is surprised at the advance that has taken place in our ideas concerning electricity and matter . . ."

Mme Curie had resumed the course at the precise sentence where Pierre Curie had left it.

What was there so poignant in these icy words: "When one considers the progress that has been made in physics . . ."? Tears rose to the eyes and fell upon the faces there.

In the same firm, almost monotonous voice, the scientist gave her lesson that day straight to the end. She spoke of the new theories on the structure of electricity, on atomic disintegration, on radioactive substances. Having reached the end of the arid exposition without flinching, she retired by the little door as rapidly as she had come in.

PART THREE