

Earth

Emile Zola

Translated from the French by
Margaret Crosland

NEW ENGLISH LIBRARY
TIMES MIRROR

This translation first published in Great Britain as a
Four Square Classics edition 1962
Reissued as an NEL Signet Classics edition June 1968
© The New English Library Ltd., 1962

★

THIS NEL MENTOR EDITION 1975

★

Conditions of Sale: This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser

*NEL Books are published by The New English Library Limited from Baynard's Inn,
Holborn, London, E.C.1. Made and printed in Great Britain by
Hazell Watson & Viney Ltd, Aylesbury, Bucks*

450020851

PART ONE

1

JEAN was sowing that morning, with his blue seed-bag tied round his waist; at every third step he took out a handful of corn and scattered it broadcast all at once. His rough shoes sank into the heavy, clinging soil as he swung along at a steady pace, and whenever he raised his arm the two red stripes on his old army jacket gleamed through the unending cloud of yellow grain. He walked on, tall in his solitude.

This strip of land, measuring barely an acre and a quarter, lay at the place known as Les Cornailles, and was so unimportant that Monsieur Hourdequin, the owner of La Borderie farm, had not wanted to send the mechanical drill, which was being used somewhere else. As Jean went up the field from south to north he faced the farm buildings, which were just over a mile away. When he reached the end of the furrow he raised his eyes, gazing blankly ahead, resting for a moment.

The low farm walls looked like a patch of old brown slates, isolated at the edge of the Beauce, the plain which stretched towards Chartres. Beneath the vast leaden late-October sky lay ten leagues of arable land, the bare yellow squares of rich ploughland alternating with green patches of lucerne and clover; not a single hill or tree broke up the plain as it faded into the distance, dipping over the horizon which was as firm and rounded as at sea. On the west only a little wood fringed the sky with a strip of russet brown. In the middle the chalk-white road that led from Châteaudun to Orleans followed a dead-straight line for four leagues, bordered by a row of telegraph poles in geometric formation. There was nothing more to be seen, only three or four wooden windmills built on log bases, their sails motionless. Villages looked like little islands of stone and in the distance a steeple rose from some church that lay hidden among the gentle folds of this corn-rich land.

Jean turned round and swung off again southwards, his left hand holding the seed-bag open, his right hand cleaving

the air as he threw out an unending cloud of seed. Now he was facing the narrow valley of the Aigre river which lay close by and cut across the plain like a ditch; beyond it the vastness of the Beauce began again and continued as far as Orleans. The little village of Rognes was built on the slope, but only a few roof-tops could be seen by the church, below the tall grey stone steeple that was inhabited by ancient families of rooks. The chief town of the Canton, Cloyes, lay hidden two leagues away towards the east, beyond the Loir valley, and further away still the distant hills of Le Perche stood out against the sky, purple in the grey light.

Jean was going down for the last time when he caught sight of a young girl, almost a child, coming from Rognes and leading a cow by a rope, taking the path along the valley at the edge of the plain. Jean had turned his back and finished the last furrow when stifled cries and the sound of running footsteps made him look up again. The cow was rushing through a field of lucerne, followed by the girl who was desperately trying to stop her. Jean was afraid there would be an accident.

'Let her go!' he shouted.

The girl took no notice.

'Coliche!' she panted, cursing the cow in fear and fury. 'Stop it, damn you, Coliche!'

She had managed to follow the cow so far, running and jumping as fast as her short legs would allow her. Then she stumbled, fell, got up, and fell again further on. The cow became frenzied and dragged her along behind. Her body cut a passage through the lucerne and she was screaming.

'Let go, for God's sake!' shouted Jean again. 'Let her go!'

He shouted without thinking, in fear, for he had seen what was happening and now he was running too—the rope must have got knotted round the girl's wrist and every tug pulled it even tighter. Fortunately he cut across a ploughed field and headed off the cow, arriving at such speed that the stupid animal was frightened and stopped dead. Jean unfastened the rope at once and sat the girl up in the grass.

'No bones broken?'

But she had not even fainted. She stood up, felt herself and calmly lifted her skirts up to her thighs to look at her smarting knees. She was still too breathless to speak.

'Look, that's where it hurts. But it's not serious, I can

move. Oh, I was terrified: I was being cut to pieces on the road.'

She looked at the crimson ring round her strained wrist, put her lips against it and moistened it with spit.

'Coliche isn't really bad, but she's been driving us mad all morning, she's on heat . . . I'm taking her to the bull at La Borderie.'

'La Borderie?' said Jean, 'that's easy, I'm on my way back there, I'll go with you.'

He went on talking to her as though she were a child, for she was still very slim in spite of her fourteen years. She looked up and gazed seriously at this tall, brown-skinned boy, with his close-cropped chestnut hair and his full face with its regular features. He was twenty-nine, and to her he seemed an old man.

'Oh, I know who you are, you're Corporal, the carpenter who stayed on at Monsieur Hourdequin's as a farmhand.'

The young man smiled when he heard the name the country people had given him. He looked down at her, surprised to find she was almost a woman already, with her small firm breasts, oval face, deep black eyes and full lips, as fresh and rosy as ripening fruit. She wore a grey skirt, a black woollen jacket and a round cap on her head, while her skin was sunburnt to a golden brown.

'You must be Old Mouche's younger daughter,' he cried. 'I didn't recognize you. Your sister was Buteau's girl last spring when he was working with me at La Borderie.'

'Yes,' she replied simply, 'I'm Françoise. It was my sister Lise who went with our cousin Buteau, and now she's six months' gone . . . He's run away, he's near Orgères now, at La Chamade farm.'

'That's it,' agreed Jean. 'I saw them together.'

They remained silent for a moment, facing each other, he smiling at the memory of how he had surprised the two lovers behind a haystack one evening, and she still licking her injured wrist as though the moist touch of her lips could heal the smart.

The three strokes of the Angelus rang out through the lifeless air.

'Goodness, is it twelve o'clock already?' cried Jean. 'We'd better hurry!'

Then he caught sight of Coliche quietly pulling up lucerne in the field.

'Hey, your cow's doing some damage. Suppose anyone saw her . . . Just you wait, you stupid thing, I'll give you something else!'

'No, leave her alone,' said Françoise, stopping him. 'That land belongs to us. She knocked me down on our own land, damn her! All this side belongs to our family, as far as Rognes. Our piece goes from here to over there. The next piece belongs to Uncle Fouan and the one after that to my aunt, La Grande.'

They had started to walk, taking the narrow path which skirted the valley before plunging into the fields. The cow pulled on the rope as they followed her, neither of them saying any more, for they were lost again in the customary silence of peasants who can walk miles side by side without exchanging a word.

Down below, to their left, horse-drawn traps were driving rapidly along, one after the other, on their way to Cloyes, where the market did not open until one o'clock.

'I can see Uncle Fouan and Aunt Rose down there,' said Françoise, her eyes following a carriage no bigger than a walnut shell, flying along about a mile and a half away. 'They're going to see the notary.'

'Oh, yes,' replied Jean, 'I heard about that. So it's been decided then? The old man's going to divide his property between his daughter and his two sons?'

'Yes, it's been decided. They're all meeting today in Monsieur Baillehache's office.'

She was still watching the trap as it flew along the road.

'We're not worrying about it, it won't make any difference to us one way or the other. Buteau's in it, though. My sister thinks he might marry her when he's got his share.'

Jean began to laugh.

'That devil Buteau! We got on very well. He finds it easy enough to lie to the girls! But he can't do without them, and if kind words won't fetch them he turns tough.'

'He's a swine, that's what he is,' said Françoise firmly. 'You don't play that sort of dirty trick on your cousin, giving her a baby and then walking out on her.'

When they reached La Borderie, the big square farmyard, which was surrounded on three sides by cowsheds, sheep-pens, and barns, was deserted. Then a young woman came to the kitchen door; she was not tall but she had a bold pretty face.

'What's up, Jean, no dinner today?'

'Just coming, Madame Jacqueline!'

This was the daughter of Cognet, the Rognes road-mender, and she had always been called La Cognette; she had come to the farm when she was twelve to wash the dishes and had risen to the honoured rank of servant-mistress; now she insisted firmly on being treated as a lady.

'Oh, it's you, Françoise,' she went on. 'You've come for the bull. Well, you'll have to wait. The cowman's gone to Cloyes with Monsieur Hourdequin. But he'll soon be back, he should be here now.'

As Jean went into the kitchen she caught him round the waist, rubbing herself laughingly against him, unconcerned at being seen; she was a randy girl, sleeping with the master did not satisfy her, she wanted someone else as well.

Françoise was left alone and sat waiting patiently on a stone bench by the manure pit which took up a third of the yard. Half an hour later, when Jean reappeared, finishing a slice of bread and butter, she had not moved. He sat down beside her. The cow was getting restless, flicking her tail about and lowing.

'It's a nuisance the cowman hasn't come back.'

The girl shrugged her shoulders. She wasn't in a hurry. They fell silent again.

'Corporal,' she said, 'is your name just Jean?'

'No, Jean Macquart.'

'You don't come from these parts, do you?'

'No, I'm from the south, I come from a town there called Plassans.'

She raised her eyes and studied him, surprised that anyone could come from so far away.

'I left Italy eighteen months ago after Solferino,' he went on. 'I was discharged from the army and a friend brought me up here. I used to be a carpenter by trade but it didn't work out, various things happened, so I stayed on at the farm.'

'Oh,' she said simply, her big dark eyes never leaving him.

But at that moment Coliche lowed again, desperate with desire, and a hoarse snort came in answer through the closed door of the cowshed.

'Just imagine,' cried Jean, 'that devil Caesar heard her! Listen, he's talking in there. Oh, he knows his job all right,

you've only to bring a cow into the yard, he can smell her at once, he knows what's expected of him.'

He stopped short and then went on again.

'I think the cowman must have stayed with Monsieur Hourdequin. If you like I'll bring the bull out to you. We can manage it all right between us.'

'Yes, it's worth trying,' said Françoise, and she got up from the bench.

'Does your cow need tying up?' he asked, as he opened the cowshed door.

'Oh no, it's not worth it. She's quite ready, she won't budge an inch.'

Through the open door the cows could be seen in two rows against the sides of the shed; there were thirty of them, some lying in the straw and some crunching beetroot in their mangers. The bull, a black Friesian with white markings, stood in a corner, stretching his head forward, ready for his task.

As soon as he was untied Caesar came slowly out. But he immediately stopped, as though surprised by the fresh air and the daylight; he remained motionless for a moment, frozen in his tracks, his tail swinging nervously to and fro, his neck bulging, his outstretched muzzle sniffing the air. Coliche did not move, but turned her eyes towards him, lowing more softly. Then he came forward and rubbed against her, laying his head against her rump with a quick, rough movement; his tongue was hanging out, he pushed her tail aside with his snout and licked her down to her thighs; she let him do as he liked and did not move, although a shudder ran over her skin. Jean and Françoise stood by gravely, their hands hanging loosely as they waited.

When he was ready Caesar mounted Coliche, jumping on top of her so suddenly and heavily that the ground shook. She did not give way and he gripped her flanks firmly between his legs. But she came of a larger breed and she was so tall and wide that he couldn't serve her. He realized this, and tried to get higher up but couldn't manage it.

'He's too small,' said Françoise.

'Yes, just a bit,' replied Jean. 'It doesn't matter, he'll get in all the same.'

She nodded, but as she saw Caesar trying again and wearing himself out, she changed her mind.

'No, we'll have to help him. If he doesn't get right in it'll be wasted, she won't hold it.'

With an air of calm concentration, as though embarking on a serious job of work, she came forward. She was so engrossed that her face was immobile, her eyes looked darker than ever, and her lips were parted. She raised her arm firmly, took hold of the bull's member, and lifted it up. When he felt he was near the place Caesar summoned all his strength and with a single thrust he penetrated within as far as he could go. Then he withdrew. It was all over, he had driven the seed deep. The cow had remained as firm as the fecund earth when the seed is sown and she received the fertilizing sperm without moving. She had not even shuddered at the shock of encounter. The bull had come down again and the ground shook beneath his tread once more.

After removing her hand Françoise had kept her arm raised. Finally she lowered it.

'That's it, then.'

'A fine job,' replied Jean with an air of conviction, showing the satisfaction of a good worker who sees something done well and quickly.

It didn't occur to him to tell one of the coarse jokes that the farm boys usually brought out when the girls came with their cows like this. The child seemed to find it so straightforward and necessary that there was really nothing to laugh about. It was natural.

But Jacqueline had been standing at the door for a moment.

'Well,' she called out gaily, with her usual throaty, cooing laugh, 'you're handy enough! I suppose your boy friend doesn't know his way around?'

Jean burst out laughing but Françoise suddenly flushed scarlet. She tried to conceal her embarrassment and confusion, and while Caesar found his own way back to the stable and Coliche munched a tuft of oats which had grown in the manure pit, she searched in her pockets and finally brought out her handkerchief; she untied a knot and took out forty sous.

'There's the money,' she said. 'Goodbye!'

She set off with her cow and Jean, picking up his seed-bag, followed. As he caught up with her and they went along the narrow path Jacqueline called out again in her mocking voice:

'No danger of you getting lost together, is there? The girl knows the way!'

This time neither of them laughed. They walked slowly and apart from the sound of their shoes knocking against the stones there was silence. Jean could see nothing of Françoise except the little black curls which escaped from her round cap over her childlike neck.

'She shouldn't tease other girls about men,' she said after they had walked a little way. 'I could have answered her back.'

She turned to Jean and stared at him.

'It's true, isn't it? They say she behaves as though she was Monsieur Hourdequin's wife already. Perhaps you know something about it, do you?'

This upset him, and he pretended to look stupid.

'Oh well, she does as she likes, that's her business.'

Françoise had turned her back and went on walking.

'Yes, that's true. I'm joking, for you're old enough to be my father, it doesn't matter what I say. But you see, since Buteau played that filthy trick on my sister I've made a vow that I'd rather cut my arms and legs off than take a lover.'

Jean nodded his head and they fell silent. When he reached his field, he stopped.

'Goodbye, then!'

'Goodbye,' replied Françoise. 'Thank you again.'

He was suddenly afraid and called out:

'What if Coliche starts all over again? Would you like me to come all the way home with you?'

She was already a long way off; she turned round and her voice reached him calm and clear across the silent countryside:

'Oh, no, it's not necessary, there's no danger now, she's had her fill.'

Jean tied his seed-bag round his waist and began to go down the field, scattering the seed continuously; he raised his eyes and watched Françoise disappear over the fields, looking very small behind the slow-moving cow, whose large body swayed from side to side. When he went back up again he could see her no longer, but as he came down he caught sight of her again, smaller than ever, so tiny that she looked like a dandelion flower, with her slim waist and her white cap. Three times he saw her, looking smaller each time;