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CATHERINE / UNE VIE SANS JOIE (1924)

In the small town of Varance in southern France, Catherine Ferrand (Catherine Hessling), an orphan, has worked for years in the home of a deputy, Georges Mallet (Louis Gauthier) and his haughty wife Edith (Mme. Maud Richard). The girl seems to have been destined for a life of hard work and suffering.

Provincial life is very routine. Every Sunday night, the Sub-Prefect (Jean Renoir) holds a reception. This evening the guests include Mme. Mallet, her brother, the petty, ambitious Gédéon Grave (Georges Térof) and his family, and the well-meaning but pathetically ridiculous Madame Laisné (Eugénie Nau), who is obsessed with finding a wife for her sickly, brooding son Maurice (Albert Dieudonné). Her persistence is continually unrewarded. While the Sub-Prefect courts Edith Mallet, her serious, conscientious husband remains at home, working in his study. He sends the naïve Catherine to the party on an errand; she disrupts the tedious performance of a singer and embarrasses Mme. Mallet. Catherine, upset, is comforted by Mr. Mallet, who is as fond of her as a father. They are discovered by a very indignant Mme. Mallet, who immediately misinterprets the situation and proceeds to make Catherine's already hard life unbearable. Mr. Mallet, taking pity on Catherine, asks his sister, Mme. Laisné, to take her on.

Due to Maurice's poor and declining health, the Laisnés and Catherine journey to Nice. In the midst of the Carnival's gaiety, Catherine remains at the hotel reading, while Maurice, surrounded by revelers, has once again been stood up. Despondent and ill, he returns, and makes advances upon Catherine. At first she recoils, but she takes pity upon the suffering man. Together they watch the Carnival festivities, and get caught up in the romantic exuberance of it all and waltz. But, to Catherine's horror, Maurice suddenly collapses and dies. The next morning, Mme. Laisné's relatives take matters in hand. Mme. Mallet is particularly adamant, and orders that the girl leave immediately.

Catherine roams the city streets alone, looking for a job. She is spotted by "le bel Adolphe" (Pierre Philippe), a shady bookmaker and loan shark, who approaches her and offers her shelter. While he is conducting the innocent girl to his hotel, the Grave family, who just happen to be passing by in their carriage, see the two and immediately jump to conclusions. They return to Varance, where their suppositions about Catherine's character are relayed by the sanctimonious town gossips.

The truth of the matter is that Catherine's benefactor Adolphe seemingly takes pity on her, and allows her to stay without compromising her, offering her his protection. She stays on in the seedy hotel in the sinister quarter, but eventually her rent is in arrears. One night, during a brawl in the café downstairs, in which Adolphe subdues a man he has found cheating on a slot machine, Catherine manages to elude both Adolphe and her landlady. She runs away, heading for Varance. En route, she stops at the small hilltop cemetery of St. Paul, where she places flowers on the grave of Maurice Laisné.

Back in Varance, bourgeois country life continues as usual. The men still meet at the Hôtel du Cheval Blanc to play pool, drink, and discuss politics. Some society women, headed by Mme. Mallet, have started a youth aid society, "Le Secours de la Jeunesse". When Catherine appears looking for work, she is summarily dismissed by Mme. Mallet, who tells her that there is room for only honest, chaste girls. That night, Catherine, alone and dejected, is recognized by Mr. Mallet, on his way home from the Cheval Blanc, who stops and questions her. He learns the true story of why she had left his sister's employ and what had happened that afternoon at the aid society. He kindly takes her home.

Mme. Mallet, outraged, loudly tells her friends that she can no longer endure living under the same roof with "that" girl. She announces she will go home to mother. We see her meet her "mother"--the Sub-Prefect. The two surreptitiously go on a vacation together.

Mallet, who is standing for reelection, is the subject of much malicious gossip and social ostracism due to his championing and harboring of the unfortunate Catherine. At the Cheval Blanc, the perfidious Gédéon Grave, his own brother-in-law, takes advantage of the situation, proposing himself as a possible candi-

date, citing his own moral integrity. A vicious campaign ensues, in which Grave harps upon the moral issues, painting Mallet as a Tartuffe with a scandalous private life, while Mallet himself courageously faces his constituents and discusses the real political and social issues. Grave proves himself a poor public speaker and an all-around ineffectual candidate. He offers to withdraw if Mallet will take his wife, Grave's sister, back, and dismiss "that little intriguer", Catherine, who is now his secretary. The Sub-Prefect and another politician are overheard delivering this ultimatum to Mallet by Catherine, who leaves, sacrificing her own happiness to protect the integrity and the political career of the man to whom she owes so much. She does not hear Mallet's refusal and dismissal of the two men.

Mallet, frantic, goes out in search of Catherine. A heavy downpour causes Catherine to take refuge in an empty streetcar overnight. Mallet, due to the weather, postpones his search until morning. With the dawn, the road construction workers' day resumes. The streetcar rail switch has been changed to allow the workers to dump refuse off the edge of a cliff, into a gorge traversed by an aqueduct, which is the normal route for the streetcar. Catherine accepts her fate when two vagabonds set the streetcar in which she is hiding into motion, rolling out of control. The streetcar picks up speed; the hand brake is broken; Catherine's fate seems inevitable. In an exciting chase, Mallet manages to save her at the last moment. An epilogue depicts the final happiness of the couple. They are shown in a train compartment, presumably on their honeymoon, on their way to living "happily ever after".