

Molesworth Mrs.

The Little Old Portrait



Mrs. Molesworth

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Introduction

Nearly a hundred years ago this beautiful country of France, where I am now writing, was in a most sad and troubled state, – a state which we, whose lives have been passed in quiet and peaceful times, can scarcely picture to ourselves. For many, many years – hundreds of years – the causes which led to the terrible outbreak of the people against the ruling classes, known in history as “the Great French Revolution,” had been slowly but surely growing and gathering till at last the storm broke all bounds, and the unhappy country was given over to the rage and fury of the mob. Yet, cruel as were the leaders of this revolt, frightful as were the deeds they committed, it is impossible, and it would be altogether unjust, to blame them and their followers alone. In national as in family quarrels, the adage of “faults on both sides” is almost always found to be true, and certainly the misdeeds which were at the bottom of this most terrible of quarrels were far more on the side of the upper classes than of the lower. For generations they had been growing more and more indifferent to the sufferings of those whom they should have protected and helped. They seemed to think that the poor and the humble only existed to be their slaves. They seemed to forget that those beneath them had hearts and feelings, – almost to forget that they were human beings. The beautiful teaching of Jesus Christ was trampled and cast underfoot, even by those who still called themselves His followers. The rich lived in the greatest luxury, squandering money which had been ground out of the sore toil and labour of the poor. And the poor hated and abhorred the rich, till at last all classes, alike but in one thing – that they listened only to their own evil passions, caring nothing for the voice of God in their consciences, till that voice, so long disregarded, grew silent, and the good angels of the unhappy country seemed to fly away in mournful despair – were plunged into a sea of horror and bloodshed.

The king and queen were put to death, and so were hundreds, nay thousands, of the nobles and gentry of the country, for the leaders of the Revolution, seeing how badly things had gone under a *bad* government, foolishly thought, like children escaping from the rule of too harsh a schoolmaster, that the only way to be truly free and happy was to have no regular government at all, but for every one to do just what he pleased, with no regard for others, no respect for the eternal laws of right and wrong – a state of things which *could* not but become the worst of tyrannies, for it was the tyranny of the many instead of the few.

What was the end of this dreadful state of things – “the Reign of Terror,” as it is often called – can be read in the many histories that have been written of this time. It did not last long – it could not have done so, for “Order is Heaven’s first law.” Disorder and confusion soon wear themselves out. But the story of the Great French Revolution will never be forgotten while history exists. It stands there as a terrible warning of the fate of a nation whose rulers neither themselves regard, nor teach to those below them, the Divine laws of justice and mercy and love to all mankind.

Good has come out of evil, as sooner or later it always must, in the history of France as in all other histories. But it would be a mistake to suppose that even during that dark time there was no brighter side to things. The very greatness of the evil brought out nobleness that in other times might have never been called forth. Among the many who suffered the horrors of the dungeon and the guillotine were numbers of pure and good and benevolent people, who, though belonging to the rich upper classes, had never treated their poorer neighbours unjustly or unkindly, but had done their utmost to make them happier. These met death with calmness and courage beautiful to see, though their hearts were wrung with sorrow for the misery of their country. And among the people there were many instances of faithful devotion at the greatest risk to themselves, of compassion even for

some of those who had little deserved at their hands. The simple story I am going to tell you will show you this, I hope – will show that even in the darkest pages of our poor old world's much troubled history, bright lines stand out like rays of sunshine through a cloudy sky, telling of noble courage and self-sacrifice for others, of faithfulness till death – of trust in God through the most awful trials.

Chapter One

There was great rejoicing among the children in the farmhouse of Belle Prairie, one of the most flourishing farms in the beautiful part of Touraine where it was situated. To-morrow would be their mother's birthday, and for as long back as any of the small people could remember "mother's birthday" had always been a holiday. For it fell in June, the loveliest month of the year, and the fun began the day before, when, as soon as they were released from school, they, and some chosen ones among their companions, came racing down the village street on their way to what was still called the "château," – although the house had long since disappeared – there, in the grounds now left to run wild, to gather to their hearts' content honey-suckle and roses, which had not always been "wild," bunches of forget-me-nots and trailing branches of ivy, with which to adorn the sitting-room at the farm which was considered peculiarly their mother's. It was what in an English farmhouse used to be called "the best parlour," and very proud of it were the boys and girls of Farmer Marcel, the owner of Belle Prairie. For it was not by any means every farmhouse that had a best parlour at all, and none possessed one so pretty as that of Madame Marcel, the farmer's wife.

The old gates of the château were still standing, as massive as ever, though only a few moss-covered stones marked the place where the mansion had once been. And the villagers were too used to the sight of them, and the still distinct traces of a carriage-drive leading to nowhere, to be struck with their strangeness and melancholy, as occasional visitors often were.

"It was burnt down in the great Revolution, like many another," they would reply with a shrug of their shoulders. "But what of that? Those old times are past. We are happy and prosperous in our village of Valmont-les-Roses, and the lands of the de Valmonts have long been divided among those who make a better use of them than the old owners – though, to be sure," some of the older among them would add, "they were not bad masters after all, those Counts of Valmont."

And so the village children played unchecked within the ancient gates, and gathered flowers as many as they wished, with none to say them nay.

Flushed and breathless, but eager and triumphant, the Marcel children hastened home with their spoils.

"Out of the way, little stupid!" cried Pierre, the eldest boy, nearly knocking over his tiny brother of three, in his hurry to get to his mother in the kitchen, where she was busied in some mysterious way which he pretended not to observe – Madame Marcel on her side handing him the key of the best parlour in the most innocent manner possible.

"Come quickly, Edmée," he called out as he hurried back again, this time nearly tumbling over his sister as well, for she was employed in comforting little Roger, whose feelings had been much wounded.

"Pierre shan't call you 'little stupid!'" she said. "See, you have made him cry, poor dear: and he was so clever; he gathered such a lot of flowers all himself for the dear mother's birthday."

"Pierre was only in fun; Roger mustn't cry," said the big, elder brother, good-naturedly picking up the tiny one. "Where are Marie and Joseph? Come quick, all of you, we shall only have time to put up the wreaths before father comes in to supper."

In another minute the five children were collected in the parlour, Pierre carefully locking the door inside when they had entered to secure against surprises. It was always with a certain awe that the young Marcells crossed the threshold of this room. They spoke in softer voices – they carefully wiped their thick shoes on the mat at the door – they would as soon have thought of romping or jumping in church as in here. And yet they themselves could hardly have explained why they felt so. The room, though pretty in a rather stiff way, was, after all, very simple. The wooden floor, to be sure, was polished like a mirror, and there were little lace curtains in the windows, which were never torn or soiled, for Madame Marcel took the greatest care of them, washing and getting them up

twice a year with her own best caps, and never allowing Susette, the servant, to lay a finger on them. The brass handles of the old marble-topped chest of drawers were as bright as the copper pans in the kitchen, and so was the heavy old brass fender, behind which were the iron bars for the logs of wood which, on very rare occasions, such as New Year's Day, or a marriage or christening feast, should it fall in winter, made a cheerful blaze up the old chimney. But the stiff hard sofa backed up against the wall, and the stiff hard chairs and arm-chairs standing round in a row, were no longer white as in the days of their long past youth, and the old-fashioned tapestry with which their seats and backs were covered had little colour left, and here and there a careful darning was plainly to be seen.

The children stood still and looked round them, as they always somehow did on first entering the room, as if they expected to discover something they had never seen before. Then said Pierre:

"How shall we do it? The same as last year – a wreath on the chimney-piece, and two smaller ones round the mirror and the little old portrait? Yes, I think that is the best."

For there was a small, queerly-shaped mirror in a heavy, now dull, gilt frame on one side of the fire-place, and on the other, matching it, the object which the children regarded with more interest than anything in the room, "the little old portrait," they called it among themselves, and "some day," their father had promised them, they should be told its history. But all they knew at present was that it had been many, many years – not far off a hundred – in the best room of the old farmhouse.

It was the portrait of a little girl – a very little girl. She did not seem more than four or five years old: one dimpled shoulder had escaped from the little white frock, the fair hair brushed back from the forehead was tied with a plain white ribbon – nothing could be simpler. But there was a great charm about it: the eyes were so bright and happy-looking, the rosy mouth seemed so ready to kiss you – it looked what it was, the picture of a creature who had never known sorrow or fear.

"How pretty she is!" said Edmée, as she twisted the ivy-leaves round the frame, and a ray of sunshine fell on the little face. "I think she gets prettier and prettier – don't you, Marie? I wonder when father and mother will tell us the story about her."

Pierre stopped short in his part of the business, which was that of arranging the garland over the mantelpiece, to listen to what his sisters were saying.

"Suppose we ask to hear it to-morrow," he said, "for a treat? Mother is always ready to give us a treat on her birthday."

"Not instead of the creams and the cake," put in Joseph, who was rather a greedy little boy. "I wouldn't like that. Stories aren't as nice as cake."

"Little glutton!" exclaimed Pierre: "you deserve to have none. All the same I know what I know. One has but to step inside the kitchen and to sniff a little to see that mother forgets nothing."

"Indeed!" said Joseph, with satisfaction. "Yes, truly, I could almost fancy I smelt it even in here. That comes of having an oven of one's own. There is no other house at Valmont with an oven like ours. When I am a man, if I cannot afford an oven of my own in my kitchen, I shall –"

"What?" asked Marie.

"I shall be a baker," said Joseph, solemnly. "I always stop before the door of Bernard, the baker, to smell the bread, especially on Saturdays, when he is baking the Sunday cakes and his Reverence's pie. Ah, how it smells!"

"A baker!" said Pierre with disdain. "Not for worlds! To see Bernard stewing away in his bakehouse till he can scarcely breathe is enough to make one hate the thoughts of cakes. A baker indeed! Ah, no – the open air and the fields for me! I shall be a farmer, like my father and my grandfathers and my great-grandfathers. We have always been plain, honest farmers, we Marcells – and my mother's people, the Laurents, too!"

"Some one told me once," said Edmée, who, her work finished, was standing thoughtfully contemplating the effect of the pretty wreath round the little face, "some one told me once, or I dreamt it, that the little old portrait was that of a great-grandmother of ours. I wonder if it is true? If

all our people have always been farmers I don't see how it can be, for that little girl doesn't look like a farmer's daughter – and besides, they wouldn't have made a grand picture of her in that case."

"Mother must know," said Marie.

"I asked her once if it was true," said Edmée, "but she said I was to wait till I was older, and she would tell us the story. I would *so* like to hear it. She is so sweet, that dear little girl. I wonder if she lived to grow old. How strange to think of *her*, that little baby-face, growing into an old woman, with grey hair."

"And little wrinkles all over her face, and her eyes screwed up, and red patches on her cheeks, like old Mother Mathurine, down in the village," said Joseph. "They do say, you know, that old Mathurine is nearly a thousand years old," and Joseph nodded his head sagaciously.

"Joseph!" exclaimed Marie, "how can you tell such stories? *Nobody* is a thousand!"

"Well, then, it is a hundred, – I meant to say a hundred," said Joseph. "I always forget which is the most – a thousand or a hundred," for poor Joseph was only seven.

"What things she must remember!" said Edmée. "Fancy, Pierre, a hundred years ago! Perhaps she remembers the little girl. Oh, Pierre, do let us ask mother to tell us the story to-morrow!"

"Yes," Pierre agreed, "I should very much like to hear it. We'll ask her to-night, Edmée."

And just then the sound of their father's voice, as he crossed the farmyard on his way into the house, made them hasten to pick up the stray leaves and flowers which had fallen from the wreaths, and to put the chairs and all back in their places, so as to leave the room in perfect order for to-morrow.

That evening, when the little ones were in bed, Pierre, Edmée, and Marie lingered a moment when they were going to say good-night to their parents.

"What is it, my dears?" said their mother, for she saw there was something they wanted to ask.

"Mother," said Pierre, "you know you are always very good to us on your birthday; we want to ask you a favour. Will you to-morrow tell us the story of the little picture in the parlour?"

"You said you would when we were older," said Edmée, persuasively.

"What do you think?" said Madame Marcel, turning to her husband.

The farmer shrugged his shoulders good-naturedly.

"I have no objection," he said. "They are sensible children, and not likely to get foolish notions in their heads. On the contrary, they are old enough to learn good lessons from the story of these troubles of long ago. I am quite pleased that they should hear it, and I should like to hear it again myself, for I am not so good a scholar as you. I have sometimes looked into the papers, but I find the writing difficult."

"I think I almost know it by heart," said his wife. "My mother liked me to read it to her. Well, then, my children, to-morrow evening, when the little ones are asleep, you shall hear the story of the little old portrait."

Chapter Two

The Marcel children were up betimes the next morning – not that they were ever late, in summer especially, for, young as they were, there were plenty of ways in which they already helped their busy father and mother. And as everybody knows, there is no time so busy in a farm in summer as the early morning. In general they were all, except little Roger, due at school at eight o'clock, but to-day, as I have explained, was a holiday, and the mere feeling of not having to go to school seemed to make them wish to get up even earlier than usual.

Then there was the treat of coffee for breakfast, instead of the soup – a very homely kind of soup made with dripping, which English children would not, I fancy, think very good – which was their usual fare, and not coffee, but white bread and *butter*! Joseph smacked his lips at this, you may be sure. After breakfast they all went into the parlour for a few minutes, there to present to Madame Marcel the little gifts they had prepared for her, with which she was of course greatly pleased, as well as with the decorations of the room.

“Now go, my children,” she said, “and amuse yourselves well till dinner-time. It is a most lovely day. If you can find a nice basketful of wood strawberries they will not come in badly for the dessert.”

“No, indeed,” said Joseph, “there is nothing better than strawberries with cream. You will give us a little of that beautiful thick cream you make the little cheeses for market with, won't you, mother? For a *very* great treat.”

And Madame Marcel could not help laughing at the pathetic air with which he said it, even though she told him she feared he was growing too fond of nice things to eat.

The strawberry hunt was very successful, and the children came home in good spirits, and quite ready to do justice to the birthday dinner, to which had been invited the clergyman of the village, or curé, as he was called, and Farmer Marcel's widowed sister, with her two children.

Later in the day the young people all played games in the orchard; then, too hot and tired to romp more, they sat on the grass playing with their pet kitten, till mother called them in. Their aunt and her little boys and the old curé soon after went away, and then, when Joseph and Roger were safely in bed, the three elder ones reminded their mother of her promise.

“I have not forgotten it,” she said. “Your father is coming in a moment. I must let you sit up an hour later than usual this evening; but if there is not time to read all the story, we can finish it on Sunday evening, perhaps.”

And then she led the way back to the parlour, which seemed the most suitable place for reading the story in, besides being cooler than the kitchen, for the evening was very hot.

In a few minutes the farmer made his appearance. He seated himself in one of the two largest and most comfortable of the arm-chairs, while Madame Marcel took the other, drawing it near enough to the window to have a good light; for the sheaf of papers which she held in her hand was yellow with age, and the ink of the writing, from the same cause, had become pale and not very easy to read. And the children's eyes watched with eagerness, not unmixed with awe, the pages, which were tied together with a faded blue ribbon, as their mother smoothed them out and placed them ready.

“Before I begin,” she said, “I must tell you, children, who wrote this little story, and why. It was written by my mother; you cannot remember your dear grandmother, children; she died when you, even, Pierre, were a very little boy, and Edmée still a baby. It was a great sorrow to me. I had hoped she would have lived to help me to bring you up, and to educate you as she educated me, though I fear I have now forgotten much of what she taught me.”

“There is no one in the village as clever as you, mother,” said Pierre and Edmée. “Every one says so. Who can write so nicely, as you, mother, or keep accounts so beautifully?”

“Yes, indeed,” said the farmer. “Many a compliment I have had about my accounts, and very proud I am to say it is my good wife who makes them out.”

“So you see, mother!” said the children.

“Well, well,” said Madame Marcel. “But the little I can do is nothing to what my dear mother knew and could do. And she, again, used to say she felt ashamed of her ignorance in comparison with *her* mother’s superiority. And this brings me to the story, or rather, in the first place, to the picture. That dear little girl up there, children, is my grandmother, your great-grandmother, whose maiden name was Edmée de Valmont.”

“Edmée de Valmont,” repeated the children, as if they could scarcely believe it. “You don’t mean – not de Valmont of Valmont-les-Roses, not one of *them*?” said Pierre eagerly.

“Yes, dear. My grandmother was the last of the old name. And how she came to be so, and how in the end she changed it for a much humbler one, and never repented having done so – that is the story here written out by her wish, and under her superintendence, by her daughter, my mother.”

The children looked at their mother bewilderedly.

“I don’t think I quite understand,” said Edmée. “Whom did she marry? Was it our grandfather Marcel?”

“Oh dear no, my child,” replied her mother, laughing. “That would have made very funny relationships,” and Farmer Marcel smiled as he said —

“It is not to my side of the house, but to little mother’s, that you owe your noble descent.”

And Madame Marcel went on to explain.

“My grandmother, Edmée de Valmont, married Pierre Germain. They had but one child, my mother, also Edmée, and she in turn married Joseph Laurent, my father. I, again, was an only child, so it has always been by Edméés that the de Valmonts have been remembered, till now, when my little Roger has revived the old Valmont name. There was always a Roger de Valmont in the old days.”

“Ah yes,” exclaimed Pierre, “I know that by the old inscriptions in the church. Mother, why did you not call me, the eldest, Roger? I should have been proud of the name.”

His mother looked at him with a rather anxious expression; he was a handsome boy, and before now some of the old people in the village had whispered to her that the Valmont blood was to be seen in the little farmer, though she had begged them always to put no nonsense in her boy’s head.

“My boy,” she said seriously, almost solemnly, “when you have heard this little story, you will, I think, agree with me that no one could be otherwise than proud to bear the name of my dear and honoured grandfather, Pierre Germain. I do not wish to speak with anything but respect of my grandmother’s ancestors, especially as I am happy to think many of them deserved to be so thought of. They did their best, and strove to be just and benevolent at a time when there were few to show the example, and for that let us honour them. But the ancestors *I* am the most proud of, and I know your father agrees with me, are not the de Valmonts.”

Pierre slipped his hand into his mother’s.

“I should like to think the same as you and father,” he said gently. And then Madame Marcel, having the papers smoothed out, and sitting in a good clear light began to read as follows: —

“Belle Prairie Farm, —

“Valmont-les-Roses, —

“Touraine.

“*1st June, in the year of our Lord 1822.*

“I, Edmée Germain, the only child of Pierre Germain and Edmée his wife (born Edmée de Valmont), by the wish of my mother, am going to endeavour to write the story of her life, that her descendants may know the true facts, and above all, may learn to honour the memory of my dear father, Pierre Germain, who ended his good and faithful life on the 12th of last April. My dear mother and I have felt dreadfully sad since his death, and the idea of writing this simple narrative is the first thing which has at all consoled us. I fear I shall not do it very well, for though my mother has educated me carefully, I am not by nature as clever as she, and I feel that I have not well repaid the trouble she has taken with me. But it is her wish that I should write it rather than she herself; so I shall do my

best, and if it should ever be read by children or grandchildren of mine, I am sure they will judge it gently, and not be severe on my blunders. When it is completed, mother is going to ask our kind curé to read it through, and to put his name to it as a sign that all is truly stated, and without exaggeration. My mother and I wish that these papers should be always kept in the top drawer of the handsome chest of drawers in the best parlour at Belle Prairie Farm, so long, that is to say, as the farm continues in the hands of our descendants, which we hope will be for very, very long. And as the children of the family grow old enough to feel an interest in its history, we wish that what I am about to write should be read aloud to them.”

Madame Marcel stopped a moment. All eyes were fixed on her, all ears were eagerly listening. So she went on again. There was no other title or heading to the manuscript.

“It is nearly forty years ago that one day a little girl – a very little girl – was playing with a boy a few years older than herself on the terrace in front of the château of Valmont-les-Roses. The château was very old; many generations of Valmonts had played on the same old terrace – had grown to be men and women, and found there were many things besides playing to be done in the world – had passed through the busy noontime of life, and gradually down the hill to old age and peaceful death. For they had been in general kindly and gentle, loving to live quietly on their lands, and make those about them happy, so that they were respected and trusted by their dependants; and even in troubled times of widely-spread discontent and threatened revolt, the talk of these things passed quietly by our peaceful village, and no one paid much heed to it.

“The little girl who was racing up and down the terrace, her companion pretending to try to catch her, and letting her slip past so that she might fancy she was quicker than he, was Edmée, only child of the Count de Valmont, and the boy was Pierre Germain, her favourite playfellow, though only the son of her father’s head forester.

“Edmée had no brothers or sisters, and Pierre’s mother had been for some time her nurse when she was a tiny baby. The kind woman had left her own little boy to come to the château to take care of the Countess’s baby, who was so delicate that no one thought she would live, and by her devotion Madame Germain had helped to make her the bright, healthy little girl that she now, at five years old, had become. So, as one always loves those to whom one has been of great service, Madame Germain loved little Edmée dearly, and Edmée loved her. There was nowhere in the village she so much liked to go as to the Germain’s little cottage, and no child she cared to play with as much as Pierre, who was only four years older than she, but so gentle and careful with her that no one felt any anxiety when they knew that the little lady, ‘Mademoiselle,’ as she was called, was with Pierre Germain.

“Tired with running and laughing, Edmée called to Pierre to help her down the steep stone steps at one end of the terrace, and the two children settled themselves comfortably under the shade of a wide-spreading beech tree.

”Now Pierrot, good pretty Pierrot,’ said Edmée coaxingly, ‘tell Edmée a story – a pretty story.’

”What about? My little lady has heard all the stories I know, so often,’ said Pierre, gently stroking the pretty fair hair tumbling over his arm, as she leant her head against him.

”Never mind, I like them again – only *not* about Red Riding Hood,’ said Edmée; ‘that frightens me so, Pierre; I fancy I am little Red Riding Hood, only then I always think my Pierrot would come running, running *so* fast, so that the naughty wolf *shouldn’t* eat me. Wouldn’t my Pierrot do that? He *wouldn’t* let the naughty wolf eat poor little Edmée?’

”No, indeed —*indeed!* I wouldn’t,’ said Pierre eagerly.

”I’d get the old sword – you know it, Edmée: father has it hanging up over the door in our cottage; it’s rather rusty, but it would be good enough for a wolf – and I’d run at him with it before he could touch you. If he *had* to eat up somebody, I’d let him eat me first.’

”Oh, don’t! don’t, Pierrot,’ said Edmée, trembling and clinging to him, ‘I don’t say that; don’t let us speak about things like that! There are no wolves here, are there? and don’t you think, Pierrot

dear, if people were very, very kind to all the wolves, and never hunted them, or anything like that – don't you think perhaps the wolves would get kind?' Pierre smiled.

"I'm afraid not,' he said, 'but there are no wolves about here.'

"No, no,' repeated Edmée, 'no wolves and no naughty people at Valmont. Don't you wish there were no naughty people anywhere, Pierrot?'

"Indeed, I do,' said the boy, and then he sat silent. 'What makes you talk about naughty people, Edmée?'

"I don't know,' said Edmée; 'sometimes I hear things, Pierrot, that frighten me. I hear the servants talking – they say that some lords like papa are so naughty and unkind. Is it true, Pierrot?'

"I'm afraid all rich men are not so kind as the Count,' said Pierre. 'But don't trouble yourself about it, dear; we won't let naughty unkind people come here.'

"Somehow Edmée had grown silent; she sat there quite still, leaning her little head on the boy's shoulder. And he did not talk either; Edmée's innocent words had reminded him of things he too had heard – of talk between his father and mother, which, young as he was, he already understood a good deal of. Even to quiet Valmont growlings of the yet distant storm, which ere long was to overwhelm the country, had begun to penetrate. Now and then peasants from other villages would make their way to this peaceful corner, with tales of cruelties and indignities from which they were suffering, which could not but rouse the sympathy of their more fortunate compatriots. And more than once Pierre had seen his quiet and serious father strangely excited.

"It cannot go on for ever,' he would say to his wife; 'we may not live to see, but our children will, some terrible retribution on this unhappy land. Ah, if all masters were like ours! But I fear there are but few, even in his own family, think of the difference.'

"But when Pierre eagerly asked what he meant, he would say no more – he would say nothing to sow prejudice in the child's heart. But from others the boy learnt something of what his father was thinking of, and as he grew older and understand still more, his heart ached sometimes with vague fear and anxiety, though not for himself.

"It would be a bad day for us all – a bad day for our poor mistress and the dear little lady – if the good Count were taken from us,' he heard now and then, and the words always struck a cold chill to his heart; for the Count was by no means in good health – he had always been somewhat delicate, unable to take part much in field sports, and such amusement as absorbed the time of most of his country neighbours. He read much and thought much, and in many ways he was different from those among whom he lived. And though somewhat cold in manner, it was evident he was not so in heart, for all the little children in the village loved him as well as his beautiful and loveable young wife, and their dear little daughter, and beyond the limits even of his own domain he was spoken of as the good Count of Valmont.

"Suddenly, as the two children sat there in silence, a voice was heard calling —

"Mademoiselle! Mademoiselle! wherever can the child have hidden herself? Mademoiselle, you are wanted at once in the drawing-room.'

"And as Edmée rose slowly, and perhaps rather unwillingly, to her feet, she saw coming along the terrace her mother's new maid Victorine, to whom, it must be confessed, she was not partial.

"I am not hidden, Victorine,' she said; 'it is easy to see if one looks.'

"If one looks in proper places,' said the maid pertly, 'I never before saw a young lady always playing with a clodhopper!' and she came forward as if about to take Edmée by the hand and lead her away. But she reckoned without her host."

Chapter Three

Edmée drew herself away.

”Naughty Victorine!” she said. “You shall not call my Pierrot ugly names. Come away, Pierrot; we won’t go with her.”

”But you *must* come, Mademoiselle Edmée; your lady mamma has sent for you,” said Victorine, by no means pleased, but a little afraid of getting into some trouble with this determined young lady.

”Mamma has sent for me? Oh, then I will come. Come, Pierrot, mamma wants us in the drawing-room. You need not wait, Victorine; Pierre will bring me.”

“Victorine’s face grew very red.

”Nobody wants *him*,” she said. “However, do as you please. Thank goodness, I am not that child’s nurse,” she muttered as she walked off with her head in the air. She was in hopes that Pierre, and perhaps Edmée too, would get a good scolding if the boy made his appearance with her in the drawing-room; but she was much mistaken. The children entered the house together, crossing the large cool hall, paved with black and white marble, and then making their way down a side passage of red tiles. Here Pierre stopped: it was the way to the Countess’s own rooms, which opened into the large drawing-room by a side door.

”I will wait here,” he said; “if my lady wants me you will come and tell me, will you not, Mademoiselle?”

“For it was not often that Pierre returned to the village without some message for his mother from the Countess, who considered her as one of her best and truest friends.

“Edmée ran into her mother’s room – there was no one there, but the doors, one at each side of a tiny anteroom, which led into the big drawing-room, were both open, and voices, those of her father and mother and of another person, reached her ears. She ran gaily in.

”Here you are at last, my pet!” said her mother. “How long you have been! This gentleman has been waiting to see you; he has come all the way from Tours on purpose to – can Edmée guess what he has come for?”

“Edmée looked up in the stranger’s face with a half-puzzled, half-roguish expression, very pretty to see.

”All!” exclaimed the young man, hastily; “excuse me, Madame – if the young lady could but be taken as she is now, it would be admirable.”

”All in disorder!” exclaimed the countess, laughing. “Why I was just going to send her to have her hair brushed, and to have a clean white, frock put on; she is all tossed and tumbled.”

”All the better – nothing could be better,” said the artist, for such he was, and the Count agreed with him. But it was not so easily done as said. Edmée could not at all see why she was to sit still on a stiff-backed chair when she so much preferred running about, and though she had jerked one dimpled shoulder out of the strap of her frock, she had by no means intended to keep it there, as the stranger insisted. Furthermore, she objected to looking up at him as he desired, and was on the point of telling him that he was not pretty enough to look at so much, when happily another idea struck her.

”Let Pierrot come in,” she said; “Pierrot can come and tell me a story, and then I’ll sit still. Edmée always sits still when Pierrot tells her stories.”

”But how are we to get hold of him?” said the Count, whose patience was rather tried by her fidgetiness. “There is not time to send to the village, the light will be failing” – for it was already advanced in the afternoon – “and Mr Denis is so anxious to make the first sketch to-day.”

”Pierrot is not in the village; he is here at the door. Send for him and tell him to come in, and then Edmée will be so good – oh so good, and will sit so still!”

“The Countess rang a little bell which stood on a side table; an old man servant soon came to see what was wanted.

“Is Pierre Germain still here?” she said; ‘if so, tell him to come in.’

“In a moment Pierre made his appearance. His boots were thick and clumsy, and clattered on the shining polished floor; he held his cap in both hands, and stayed an instant at the door to make his bow and to wait the lady’s pleasure. But, country boy though he was, he neither looked nor felt foolish or awkward, and the young artist, taking his eyes for a moment from his refractory little sitter, was struck by his bright face and fearless bearing.

“I would like to sketch him,’ he said to himself. ‘It is not often one sees peasants of his type now-a-days among the half-starved, wolfish, and yet cowed-looking creatures they are becoming,’ he added, though not so as to be heard by any one else, turning to the Count, who stood beside him.

“No, indeed,’ replied the gentleman, and a look of anxiety crossed his pale, serious face.

“Come forward, my boy,’ said Edmée’s mother. ‘Why did you not come to see me before? You know you are always welcome.’

“I thought as Mademoiselle was sent for, perhaps there was company,’ said Pierre smiling, while his sunburnt face grew ruddier.

“It was that naughty Victorine?” said Edmée, pouting; ‘she called my Pierrot a clodhopper. I don’t like Victorine!’

“A clodhopper?” said the Countess; ‘no, indeed, she should not have said so; that comes of having a maid from Paris, I suppose. I think I shall keep to our own good Touraine girls for the future, even though they are not so clever. Now, Pierre, my boy, you are to help us to get Edmée to keep still; Mr Denis is going to paint her, just as she is now.’

“Pierre’s quick wits soon understood what was wanted. He sat down on a stool by Edmée, and began telling her in a low voice one of her favourite stories, which soon drew all her attention. And it was thus that the portrait which is now hanging in the parlour at Belle Prairie Farm, and which will, I hope, always hang there, came to be taken. If one looks closely at one corner, one will see the date, ‘July 15th 1783,’ and the painter’s initials, ‘R.D.’

“This little scene which I have described is one of the first clearly impressed on my mother’s memory. She has often told it to me. Perhaps the reason that she remembers it so well is that that summer was the last of the unbroken happiness of the Château de Valmont. The good Count my grandfather, though always delicate, had hitherto been well enough to enjoy the quiet home life, which was what he preferred, and to attend himself to the care of his property and of his people, but the winter following this bright summer, which had seen my mother’s fifth birthday, was a severe one. My grandfather unfortunately caught cold one day from having been exposed to a snowstorm on his way home from a visit to his wife’s brother, the Marquis de Sarinet, whose château was about two days’ journey from Valmont-les-Roses. And this illness of my grandfather’s was the beginning of troubles – not for himself and his family alone, but for scores of others whom he had always wished and endeavoured to protect and to make happy, so far as he could; though for him, and the few like him, it was more difficult than could now-a-days be believed to behave with kindness, even with any approach to justice, to those in their power. For these few good and truly wise men stood alone against the blind obstinacy of the many, bent, though they knew it not, on their own destruction.

“A glimpse of life in another and less favoured village than Valmont may perhaps give to those who in future days will, I hope, read this story, a better idea of the state of things than I could otherwise ensure them. I have heard all about it so often from my mother, and even more from my father, who had seen more of the peasant life of the time than she, that it often seems to me as if I had myself been an eye-witness of the scenes I have heard described. And some knowledge of the things which were passing at but a short distance from my mother’s peaceful home will enable her grandchildren and great-grandchildren better to understand the events I have to tell.

“We need travel no further than Sarinet, the place I have spoken of as the home of my grandmother’s family – the wife of the good Count. She had married young, fortunately for her, for Sarinet would not have been a happy home for her. It was in the possession of her half-brother,

the proud Marquis de Sarinet, who lived there a great part of the year with his wife and one child, Edmond, a boy about the age of Pierre Germain.

“It is winter – that same cruelly severe winter which laid the seeds of the good Count’s fatal illness. Heavy snow is on the ground, and the air is bitter and cutting. The village of Sarinet seems asleep; there is hardly any one moving about. It is so cold – so cold that the poor inhabitants, such as are not obliged to be away at their daily work, are trying to keep some little warmth in them by staying indoors. And yet indoors it is scarcely warmer; in many of the cottages there is no fire to be seen, in some but a few wretched embers on the great open chimney, down which blows the wintry wind as if angry that any one should attempt to get warm. The well, or fountain, as they call it, whence they all draw water, has been frozen for some days; when the men come home at night they have to break the ice away with hatchets. There are few children to be seen – one is almost glad to think so – and yet the absence of the little creatures has brought sad sorrow to many hearts. For not many months ago the village and some others in the neighbourhood had been visited by a wasting fever, the result of bad food, overwork, and general wretchedness, and scarcely a family but had lost some of its members – above all, among the children.

“At the door of one of the miserable cottages stands a young girl of about fifteen, crying bitterly. Cold though it is, she scarcely seems to feel it. She looks up and down the road as if watching for some one, then she re-enters the cottage, which is bare and miserable beyond description, and tries to coax into flame a little heap of twigs and withered leaves which are all the fuel she possesses. Her clothing is desperately poor – one could scarcely see that it had ever had any colour or shape – and yet there is an attempt at neatness about her, and she is or rather she would have been had she had a fair amount of food and decent clothing, a pretty, sweet-looking girl.

“As she stands again in her restless misery at the door of the cottage, an old woman comes out from the next door.

”“What is the matter, Marguerite?” she says; ‘is your brother ill again?’

”“Oh, Madelon,’ she exclaims, ‘I think it would be better if he were dead! My poor boy!’ and she burst out sobbing again.

”“What is it? Anything new? Come in here and tell me,’ said the woman, and she drew Marguerite inside her own dwelling, which was, perhaps, a shade less wretched than its neighbour, though in one corner, on a pallet bed hardly worth calling such – it was in reality but a bag of coarse sacking filled with straw – a man, looking more like a corpse than a human being, was lying, apparently in a state of half-unconsciousness.

”“He is getting better, they say,’ observed the woman nodding her head in his direction. ‘The doctor looked in yesterday – he had been up at the Château to see the little lord. Yes, he says Jean is getting better, and with good food he might be fit for something again,’ she added in a hard, indifferent tone, as if she did not much care.

”“And will they not send some to *him*– they – up at the Château?’ said Marguerite, indignantly. ‘They know how the accident happened; it was in saving my lord’s haystacks; but for him every one says they would all have been burnt.’

“The woman gave a short, bitter laugh.

”“On the other hand, as the bailiff says,’ she replied, ‘we should be overwhelmed with gratitude that Jean has not been accused of setting fire to them. You know what *that* would have meant,’ and she passed her hand round her neck with an expressive gesture, for in those days a much smaller crime than that of incendiarism – or even, alas! in most cases, the *suspicion* of such a crime – was too surely punished by hanging, and hanging sometimes preceded by tortures too frightful to tell you of, and followed by hideous insult to the poor, dead body, adding untold horror to the misery of the victim’s friends, even after he could no longer suffer. ‘There is one cause for thankfulness,’ Jean’s wife went on, – I have called her an old woman, but she was, in reality, barely forty, though you would

have taken her for fully twenty years more – ‘and that is that he and I are now alone to bear it. The fever has been our best friend after all.’

”‘Yes,’ said Marguerite simply, ‘your children with my mother and little Angèle – they are all at rest and happy in heaven.’

”‘But how can there be a heaven – how can there be a God, if He lets us suffer so horribly? Suffer till there is no *good*, no gentleness, no pity left in us, my girl. There are times when I feel as if the devil were in me, when I would enjoy the sight of *their* suffering, they who treat us worse than their dogs – dogs indeed! see my lady’s little pampered poodles! if we were treated like their dogs we need not complain – when I would not have a drop of pity in my heart, however I saw them tortured,’ and Madelon’s face, in its thin misery, took an expression which made Marguerite shiver, so that the elder woman, thinking it was from cold, drew her nearer to the fire, which she stirred with her foot.

”‘I should not talk so to you, poor child. Now tell me your troubles. Is it about Louis?’

”‘Partly, and about everything. Last night, Madelon, quite late, that horrible Martin, the bailiff’s son, came down again, sent by his father about the rent. He said if we had not yet got it ready, Louis must either pay the fine or do extra work. You know we have not got it ready – how could we? And then – I think he had been drinking – he began teasing me. He said I was a pretty girl, in spite of my rags; – they are poor enough, Madelon, but they are not rags; I do my best to mend them.’

”‘Ah, that you do,’ replied the neighbour.

”‘And,’ pursued Marguerite, ‘he pulled me to him and tried to kiss me, and said if I would be amiable he would get me a new silk kerchief, and would persuade his father not to be harsh with us for the rent. Put I tried to push him away – and Louis, he got so angry – my poor Louis! – he seized a stick and hit him.’

”‘Hit Martin, the bailiff’s son!’ exclaimed Madelon, an expression of fear and anxiety replacing the sort of hard indifference on her face. ‘My poor child – he must have been mad!’

”‘He did not hurt him much,’ continued Marguerite, ‘but Martin was furious. He went out vowing vengeance, and with an evil smile on his face. And not half-an-hour after he left, one of the bailiff’s men came down, late as it was, to order Louis to be there at five this morning. Louis, so delicate as he is, and so cold and dark and miserable as it was! But that is not the worst; the man – it was André Michaud – was sorry for us, and warned us that Louis is to be terribly punished. The bailiff swore he would put him in harness – the roads are so bad for the horses in this weather; he laughed and said it would give one of them a rest. Oh, Madelon, you know how dreadful it is – and Louis so weak as he is still – it will kill him! I have been all the morning running to the door, thinking he would be coming back, or that perhaps they would be carrying him back, all torn and bleeding, like Félix – you remember Félix, when they put him in the horse’s place, and he broke a blood vessel?’

”‘Madelon turned away – ah, yes, she remembered but too well, but what could she say? It was true what Marguerite had described, and there was no use in complaining. The lords, such as were cruel enough to do so, were allowed by law to drive the peasants in their employ, in the place of horses or oxen, and even if lashed or goaded till they dropped, the wretched sufferers could claim no redress.

”‘Warm yourself, my child,’ she said at last to the weeping girl. ‘Keep up your heart, for Louis’ sake, as well as you can. Have you a bit of fire in there?’

”‘Marguerite shook her head. Madelon went to a corner of the cottage, and came back with some twigs.

”‘I will try to make it up for you,’ she said; ‘come back with me. This wood is dry.’

”‘But, Madelon, you have so little for yourself,’ said Marguerite. ‘I had meant to try to find some this morning, though there is scarcely any now, but my fears for Louis, have stopped my doing anything.’

”‘They had coaxed the miserable fire into a more promising condition when the sound of voices on the road made Marguerite start nervously, and rush to the door. At first she thought that her worst fears were fulfilled. Two men were carrying *something* on a plank, while beside walked a boy – a

boy of about ten or eleven, whom she did not know by sight, who from time to time as they came along stooped over the plank and looked anxiously at the motionless figure extended on it. With a fearful scream Marguerite rushed out.

”My Louis! my Louis!” she cried. “Is he dead?”

“The two men tramped on into the cottage stolidly, and laid down the plank.

”Dead? – I know not,” said one, with a sort of indifference that was not heartlessness. “Would you wish him alive, you foolish child?”

“But the little boy touched her gently.

”He is not dead,” he said softly; “he has only fainted,” and he drew a small bottle out of the inside of his jacket.

”I have a little wine here,” he said, “mother gave it me before I left home. He is opening his eyes – give him a spoonful.”

“The girl did as he said. Poor Louis swallowed with difficulty, and a very little colour came into his face. He tried to sit up, but sank back again, murmuring —

”My back – oh, my back!”

”He has strained it,” said the second man. “No wonder. He must lie down; have you no mattress?”

“Marguerite gazed round her stupidly. Madelon touched her.

”Rouse yourself, my girl,” she said; “he looks nothing like as bad as Jean when they brought him home,” and Marguerite turned to drag out of its corner the heap of straw on which, covered with what had once been a woman’s skirt, Louis spent the night. The little boy darted forward to help her.

”Who are you?” she said, looking at him with the quick suspicion with which these poor creatures looked at every new face. “I don’t know you – you don’t belong here.”

”No,” said he; “I come from Valmont. I came in the carriage that has been sent to fetch my lord, who has been staying here with my lady’s brother. The coachman brought me to help him, as the groom who generally comes is ill.”

”And how did you – how came you to see Louis?”

”I was strolling about the woods when I met them *driving* him,” said the boy, in a low voice of distress and horror. “I saw him fall – and I was so sorry for him,” he added simply, “I thought I would come to see how he was. But I must not stay; the Count is returning home to-day – I must not stay. But see here,” and from his pocket he drew a little bag containing a few copper coins and one small silver piece.

”These are my own – my very own. It is all I have, but take it, to get some food for poor Louis.”

“Marguerite seized his hand and kissed it.

”Tell me your name, that I may pray for you.”

”I am Pierre – Pierre Germain, the son of the forester at Valmont,” he said, as he ran off.

“It was in very different circumstances that these two met again.”

Chapter Four

That was a terrible journey back from Sarinet to Valmont-les-Roses. Little Pierre Germain never forgot it. The first day they got on well enough, and perched up on his seat beside the coachman, the boy enjoyed the driving along the wintry roads, where the snow had hardened sufficiently to enable them to make their way with great difficulty. They stopped for the night at a village midway between châteaux, and despite some warnings, started again the next morning, for the Count was eager to get home, feeling sure that any delay would make the Countess very anxious. But long before they reached Valmont the snow came on again, more heavily than it had yet fallen that winter. For many hours it was absolutely impossible to go on, and they were thankful even for the refuge of a miserable cabin, inhabited by an old road mender and his wife, two poor creatures looking a hundred at least, whom they found cowering over a wretched fire, and who were at first too frightened at the sight of them to let them in. The name of the Count de Valmont reassured them, and they did their best to find shelter, both for the human beings and the horses, though their best was miserably insufficient. And the night in that poor hovel laid the seeds of the severe illness with which Edmée's father was prostrated but a few hours after reaching home.

“For some weeks he was so ill that the doctors scarcely hoped he would live through the winter. The pretty young Countess grew thin and careworn with sorrow and anxiety and nursing, for she scarcely ever left his bedside, day or night. It was little Edmée's first meeting with trouble. The Marquis de Sarinet deferred going to Paris till he saw how his brother-in-law's illness was to end, and he came two or three times to Valmont. For if he had a tender spot in his cold selfish heart it was love for the young sister who had when but a child been confided to his care, and though he scarcely understood it he pitied her distress. Madame, his wife, the Marquise, did *not* come, and I do not think her absence was regretted. She must, by all accounts, have been a most unloveable woman, as cold and proud to the full as her husband, and with no thought but her own amusement and adornment. As to their only child, Edmond, you will hear more as I proceed with my narrative of events.

“To the delight, almost to the amazement, of all about him, the Count by degrees began to show signs of improvement. As at last the cold gave way to the milder days of spring, his strength slowly returned, and he would now and then allude to the possibility of recovering his health to a certain extent. It had been a most trying winter for many besides the invalid. Exceedingly rigorous weather is always a terrible aggravation of the sufferings of the poor, and even at Valmont, in so many ways an unusually happy and prosperous village, many had suffered; and some perhaps more than was suspected, for now that the Count and Countess were unable to go amongst their people as usual, and to see for themselves where their help was called for, a natural feeling of pride prevented many from complaining until actually forced to do so, though the Countess did her best. She intrusted Pierre's mother with many a kindly mission, and whenever the weather was fit for so tender a creature to face it, little Edmée might have been seen, trotting along by the kind woman, often herself carrying a basket with gifts for some little child or old person whom they had heard of as ill or suffering in some way.

“‘I don't like winter now,’ she said one day, when, with Pierre on one side and his mother on the other, she was on her way to a poor family a little out of the village. ‘I used to think it was so pretty to see the snow and to slide on the ice. Put I don't like it now. It made dear papa ill, and the poor people are so cold, and I think they're so much happier in summer.’

“‘Yes,’ said Madame Germain. ‘Hunger is bad to bear, but I fear cold is still worse. It has been a sad winter,’ and the kind woman sighed.

“‘And if sad here in Valmont, what must it have been in other places?’ said Pierre, his thoughts returning to what he had seen at Sarinet.

”At those places where the lords are not kind to the poor people, do you mean?” said Edmée, eagerly. The subject always seemed to have a fascination for her, though her parents, and the Germaines too, had taken care to tell her nothing to distress her sensitive feelings.

”Yes, of course that makes it worse,” said Madame Germain.

”Is my uncle Sarinet kind to his poor people?” asked Edmée, in a low voice, though there was no one to overhear her.

”Why do you ask that, my child?” said Madame Germain. “No one has ever spoken against the Marquis to you?”

”N-no,” said Edmée, “but he has not a kind face, mamma Germain. He smiles at me, but still it is not a real smile. And before Victorine went away – oh, I am so glad she has gone to be my aunt’s maid instead of little mamma’s! – before she went away she said she was glad she was going where there would be no nonsense of spoiling the common people like here. At Sarinet they are well punished, she said, if they are naughty. How do they punish them, mamma Germain?”

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