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# *That Girl of Pierre's*



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*To*

JOY

NOELLE

KATHLEEN

ELISABETH

*four girls of Arzac-le-Petit*

*who made it easier to understand*

*DANIELLE*



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## 1. *Wayfarers with a Two-wheel Cart*

**E**MPTY of all other travelers, the limestone ribbon of highway unwound behind and before the handcart. Danielle, hardened from months of this wandering, pushed the cart with quick, light steps: they were nearing home. Her little brother, with his hand touching hers on

the handle, was trotting to keep pace, and the sheep dog under the cart strained in her harness as she too sensed the long journey's end. In the cart, birdlike old Grandmother Mathilde was perched on the roll of bedding, her eyes intent upon the horizon.

"It will be along in here, Grandmère, that we'll see the steeple," Danielle encouraged. "I remember our last sight of it was from here in the woods of Cantemerle, a little after we crossed the Lorina."

She wondered whether Jeannot remembered how during that troubled flight from the enemy they hastily took a farewell glance at their beloved village of Arzac-le-Petit. "The steeple will be sticking up like a needle, thin and black, Jeannot, remember?"

The small boy shook his head.

His grandmother tried to help him: "Yes, like a needle out of a pincushion made of plane trees—it looks like that, Jeannot, remember?"

Again he shook his head and turned up his playful smile. Still playful, thought Danielle, and braver than he knew. He'd been game all the time. Maybe it was just as well he didn't remember the horror and sadness of that long-ago day.

"Danielle, let him come into the cart," Grandmère suggested softly. "Come, my Jeannot, stand up here and let your eyes be the first to see the steeple of Ste. Philomène."

He leapt upon the cart and stood as high as he could. His eyes suddenly widened. "There it is!" he cried shrilly, pointing. "There! And just like a stick, over that cornfield."

The hands of the two women groped for and gripped each other, and their eyes were moist.

"Now I can believe we are to see our home again," Grandmère said.

“And stay a long time?” Jeannot asked.

“Yes, little one,” said Danielle, “and not sleep in barns and haystacks.”

The sun was high, not quite noon, but they had been on the march since five o’clock, and accustomed though they were to holding their hunger, and eager to be there at last, she didn’t consider it a wise plan to enter Arzac-le-Petit without having eaten something beforehand. There was no telling what ruins and sorrow they might need strength to face when they’d get there. “Let’s eat here,” she said, and guided the cart into a cluster of acacias, where an amber thread of water entered a culvert.

She spread a square of canvas on the ground, lifted the old woman down, and took a loaf of bread and a round of cheese from a cloth wrapping. “As for you, Jeannot, fill the bottle at the stream, but do it before you stir the mud with your feet. I will not untie Bergère until you have finished.” The tongue in the dog’s wide-open mouth was already curling to taste the water.

The grandmother drew a clasp knife from her pocket, and hugging against her bosom the loaf of bread, long and solid



as a small log, she turned it round and round as she cut off slices. "Eat to your hunger, my children. Our last meal as homeless wanderers. Today we need not economize. Home again in Arsac, we will not skimp on food, not with the good credit we have at the store." Her voice was comfortable and comforting.

She settled her back against a tree. "These last two weeks of vagabondage I thought would never end," she sighed. "And it has been wearing on you, my Danielle. You are a brave girl. God is kind to have given me such a granddaughter. But these hardships have made you as flat as a cracker. I want to see my granddaughter look more like a woman, rounder. Thin as you are, you have much beauty, with your black hair and your quiet eyes, so serious for your young age. But I don't think those at home will be glad to see you so thin."

Those at home! There had been no definite news of the girl's mother and father for three appalling years. But Danielle refused to believe them dead. Surely some man of Arsac, some returning prisoner or demobilized soldier, might have news of them. The war had been full of coincidences; and now on every hand you heard of people drifting into contact with friends, persons who had been reported dead reappearing alive as ever, families reuniting. Was there any good reason for not thinking the Dufours wouldn't have their turn too? . . . And Marc. Never for an instant through all the troubles she had experienced had her feeling for him wavered. But she had schooled herself not to let her missing him burden her mind. It had been necessary for each of the three, she and Grandmère Mathilde and little Jeannot, to keep up a brave front, one for the other, so that even now she could, ever so softly, hold Marc back from her thoughts.

“Not tonight, but surely tomorrow night,” Grandmère said, patting her hand, “I will have a thick, nourishing soup for you. And what a soup! It will be my masterpiece. It will have onions, cabbage, and carrots, a spoonful of fresh fat, and if they can be found, green peppers and tomatoes.”

The sun filtered warmly through the foliage as they ate their road rations. Danielle stretched her tired muscles, slipped off her sandals, and rubbed the hot soles of her feet, which at once felt soothed from having a little shady air around them. Things could feel good: surely there was good awaiting them at home. Bergère, dripping from her wallow in the stream, retreated a distance and took to biting at her hard chunk of bread as though it were a soup bone. Insects droned overhead.

First the brother, then the grandmother yawned, nodded, pillowed their heads on their arms; they dozed comfortably, with the ease of long practice. Leaving them to their nap, Danielle went down the slope and let her feet luxuriate in the brook. The foamy feel of the current and the rustling noises of the water and the trees seemed like promises of clean new strength for the tasks ahead. And she would need strength, trying to take her parents' place.

Her father had joined the army at the very first of the war. The following spring her mother had heard a rumor that he was in a prison hospital near the Luxembourg frontier, and had set out to find him. She had become caught in the whirlpool of invasion, had been put into a labor battalion, and later shipped to the east. After that, no news. That was all.

Danielle let her eyelids close, to shut out the brilliance of the sky, she told herself; but it was also the pain of her recollections. In a little while they would be back in Arsac.

But who would be there to greet them? Neither her missing parents, nor Marc, nor Ovide, Marc's father. Curly-haired Ovide, her father's oldest friend, always ready for a frolic with the children—he'd been killed the first month.

She remembered a day like this one, a blue, windless day four years before, when the two fathers had gone rabbit hunting and taken her and Marc along to hold the dogs. After lunch they were all lying on the ground, the men smoking, she rubbing Bergère's ears, Marc untangling burdocks from Lion's fluffy tail—when the fathers had brought up the matter casually, without premeditation. But their words had made a new universe for Danielle and Marc.

"They look well together," her father had said.

And Ovide had mused, "A likely couple."

Then both men had nodded soberly.

"She will have the Dowry Field," her father had added.

"And he will have forty rows of vines, a yoke of oxen, and farming implements."

Thereupon both fathers, Ovide and Pierre, had agreed that Marc and Danielle should make out well enough with that to start them out in life together. And she now remembered how Marc and she had looked at each other then, smiling, both surprised and glad, overhearing so splendid a gift being planned for them. They had played together as far back as they could remember, probably even when they'd been infants in the crawling stage, before they'd even learned how to talk. And on that blue-sky day four years ago, it had seemed that their good, reliable fathers had promised them they'd go on playing together forever. She had been barely thirteen at the time. Neither Marc nor she was much of a talker, but each knew wholly how the other felt. There was a warm contentment in being near each other. They two,

out of all the world, belonged together.

How soon after that both fathers had gone into the army, together, departing by the same train. Now Ovide was dead, Pierre's whereabouts unknown. And where, where was Marc? Perhaps she should have tried to keep him from enlisting, but when the father had been killed, the son had insisted upon taking the older man's place. Marc was well grown and had easily lied about his age. No stopping him.

She sat up, rubbing her eyes. "What a stupid one I am to be dreaming like this, wasting time so nearly home!" She scrambled up the slope, repacked the cart with its homeward load, and called the sleepers as she briskly wheeled it into the road.

With the lively cheerfulness of elderly people when they are doing exactly what they wish, the grandmother was instantly astir, clapping her hands; but Jeannot was still dreamy-drowsy, and his big sister had to lift him upon the bed roll. "Finish your nap in peace, little one," she laughed.

Over the highroad she trundled her passengers, and a mile beyond the Lorina brook, they came to a height of land from which there was another view of Arzac-le-Petit. But this glimpse was so intimate and real that they had to stop and let a prayer of thanks well up from their hearts while their eyes took in the forgotten beauty of the scene.

Grandmother Mathilde sighed contentedly. "Many a time, my child, I doubted my old feet would ever stand again upon the Hill of Windmills and see this. There is no place like one's own."

At the foot of an undulating slope lay a huddle of russet roofs, each one the shelter of a lifelong neighbor. Yet now, after long absence and suffering in strange places, the