



The Silver Donkey



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The Soldier in the Trees

One cool spring morning in the woods close to the sea, two girls found a man curled up in the shade and, immediately guessing he must be dead, ran away shrieking delightedly, clutching each other's hands. As they ran, they shouted to one another all sorts of horrors and secrets: "I think his ghost is chasing us!" screamed the elder; "I'm sorry I broke your dolly's arm!" howled the smaller one.

The elder stopped, jerking her sister to a halt. “I knew it was you who broke Villette’s arm!” she cried. “You liar, you pretended you didn’t! I’ve told you not to touch my things!”

The little girl clamped her mouth shut and wished she hadn’t said anything. Her eyes glided up the slope down which they’d both just run. “The ghost might be coming!” she said hopefully.

Her sister, remembering the dead man, looked back the way they had come. The hill’s brow was covered in thin birches and fat elms, and the grass sprinkled below the trees was long and brightly green. Now she’d caught her breath and recovered from the surprise, she realized it was thrilling to have discovered a dead man. No one at her school had ever found somebody dead; her brother, Pascal, certainly never had. He

would be livid to hear of his sisters doing something so marvelous while he, the eldest child and only boy, had sat in front of the fireplace eating cinnamon toast. The older girl, whose name was Marcelle, imagined her brother's face when he heard the news. She brimmed suddenly with anticipation and glee.

. . . Although much depended, of course, on the man in the forest actually being dead. It would be embarrassing to fly home shouting that there was a dead man in the woods when the man was, in fact, only sleeping. And now she had caught her breath and begun to feel the cold, Marcelle reflected that the man had, indeed, looked equally asleep as dead.

There was nothing for it but to march back to the woods and have a closer look. The mystery must be solved. The facts must be set straight.

The smaller girl, whom everyone called Coco, squeaked when she realized where her sister was leading her. She dug her heels into the dirt. "Don't make me!" she whimpered. "I'm frightened!"


"You are not!" growled her sister, and Coco had to privately admit this was true. Nothing ever frightened her. "Besides, we must!" Marcelle commanded stoutly. "What if Pascal finds him, and pretends he found him first?"

Coco knew that this mustn't happen. Pascal always spoiled everything. She hastened up the hill after her sister. In a moment, they were racing. The wet grass grabbed their shins and slicked their boots. They slid and stumbled on slimy stones. Their breath came out in cloudy puffs. They had forgotten completely their mother's request to pick an apronful of

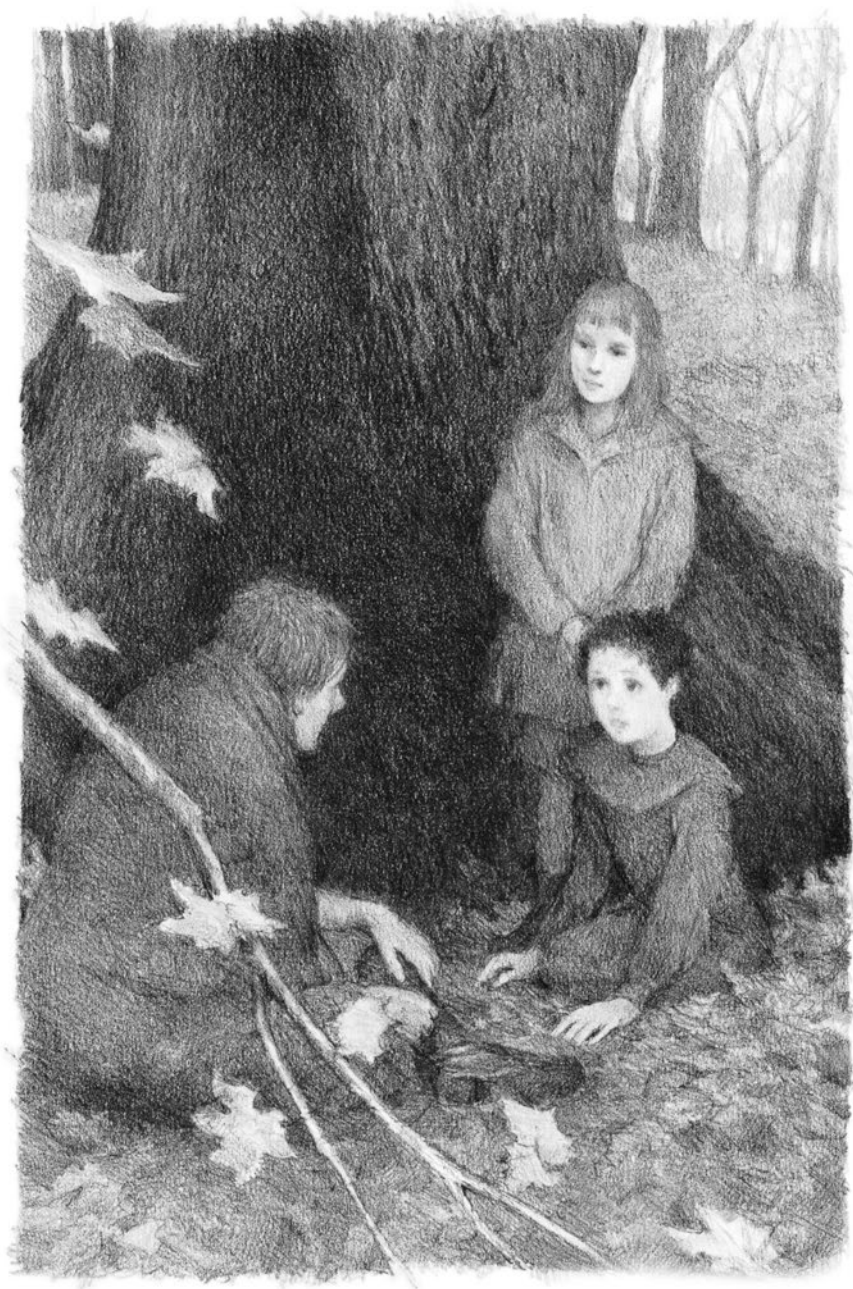
mushrooms to feed the pig. They giggled and clambered as fast as they could.

But as they reached the forest's edge, the sisters slowed from a run to a walk, and when the forest's grim shadow draped over them and the air became gray and chilly with mist, they slowed from a walk to a creep. They lowered their feet carefully, trying not to make a sound. As they approached the hollow where the man lay, they were aggrieved to spy him sitting up. Clearly he was not dead. And although they had crept as quietly as they could and kept themselves hidden behind tree trunks and weeds, the sharp-eared man must have heard—for he looked up from the fallen leaves, and stared directly at them.

Monsieur Shepard

ho's there?" cried the man, and then repeated it in a language that the sisters understood. "*Qui est là?* Who's there?"

He looked toward Marcelle and Coco and must have seen two skinny, flash-eyed little girls, wild as kittens born under stables, the taller dressed in her brother's hand-me-downs, the smaller rumped as a street urchin—but then he looked to the moldery soil and up into the trees,



and behind himself toward the distant sea. He searched about frantically, as if the sisters were fleet butterflies and could alight anywhere. He scrambled backward in the dirt, covering his knees in mud. "Who is there?" he asked again.

Marcelle and Coco stared. They had never met someone so frightened of them. They felt regretful and sorry for him. "It's just us," said Marcelle. "No one else."

The man stopped scrabbling and became very still. He gazed toward a wood pigeon that perched above Marcelle's head. "I can't see you," he said nervously. "I'm blind. Who are you?"

That the man was blind was some compensation for his not being dead: Pascal had never found or even met a blind man. The girls, emboldened, peered more closely at their discovery, stepping from the shadows like fawns.

They saw that the man had untidy brown hair and that his face was rather dirty. Coco, who had a sparrow's quick eyes, saw that he held something silver and enticing in his palm, something that twinkled and glimmered. Marcelle saw that although he wore tatty old-man's clothes, the man himself was not very old—in fact he was young, as young as some of the fishermen's sons who raced small skiffs in the bay. His blue eyes shone and his cheeks were smudged with downy whiskers that the girls' father called baby fluff. "I'm Marcelle," she told him. "I'm ten. This is my sister, Coco. She's eight. Her real name is Thérèse, but everybody calls her Coco."

"Because I have hair like a black poodle's," explained Coco.

Marcelle felt compelled to expand on this. "When I was little and Coco was a baby and she

had curly hair like a poodle's, Madame Courbet at the end of the road had a tiny black poodle named Coco, so that was the name I gave Thérèse—Coco."

"I see," said the man, huddling against a tree.

"And Coco—the poodle—got stolen," added Coco.

"Yes, she did, she got stolen. Everyone said Mademoiselle Bloom took her—Coco the poodle, I mean—because Coco disappeared exactly on the day Mademoiselle Bloom went to live in Paris, and she was always fond of Coco—the poodle, I mean—so everyone said that Mademoiselle Bloom was to blame. But that was a long time ago."

"When I was a baby," said Coco. "Coco would be old old old now—the dog."

"And now Madame Courbet doesn't have

a dog at all,” said Marcelle. “Not a poodle or a bulldog or a dachshund or anything. She says her heart is broken for Coco.”

“But everyone still calls me Coco,” Coco pointed out.

“Except when you’re naughty or when something is very serious,” her sister reminded her. “Then we call you Thérèse.”

“Yes,” admitted the little girl. “When I am in trouble, I’m Thérèse.”

The young man turned his head from one sister to the other, following the voices as if they were birds. He wondered what to say. “That’s a sad story, about the dog.”

“Yes, it is,” agreed Marcelle.

“Do you still have hair like a poodle’s, Coco?”

“Oh yes!”

The man nodded thoughtfully. "Then I know what it looks like, even though I can't see it."

Coco smiled deeply, and tugged at a ringlet. She was insufferably proud of her hair.

"What are you doing here, anyway?" asked Marcelle, wishing to change the subject.

A frown crossed the man's face. "I'm trying to go home. My brother is very ill. He is only eleven years old. His name is John. The doctors don't think he has long to live. My mother wrote saying that he wakes at night with a fever, calling out for me. She wrote that I should hurry home."

Marcelle and Coco were softhearted, and the man's words caused their hearts to pang. "Where is your home?" asked Marcelle.

The man twisted on his knees and pointed

in the direction of the sea. "Across the Channel. Up the beach. Climb a narrow path between the rocks and walk three miles down a chalky road. When you reach a five-railed gate bordered on each side by oaks as big as churches, that's my home. You can see the chimneys from the road. John's window is on the ground floor, third from the right."

Marcelle considered. She knew that the Channel was very wide and could be choppy and dangerous. She knew that three miles was a long distance to walk. "How will you get across the sea, up the path and along the chalky road?" she asked. "You're all alone. You're blind."

The man looked stricken. "Yes, I am."

"Are you a soldier?" asked Coco unexpectedly.

The man hunkered against the tree. "Why do you ask that?"

“Well, you are a bit like a soldier. You have a soldier’s blanket and soldier’s boots. And once there were soldiers who slept a night in our village and they spoke in a funny way, the same way that you do.”

“It’s called an accent,” said Marcelle with superiority.

The man was fidgeting, casting his blind gaze about. The fascinating silver thing remained closed in his hand, gleamy as a fishhook, hidden as a jewel. He said, “I am a soldier—well, I used to be. I’m not one anymore.”

“Why not? Because you’re blind?”

The soldier nodded wonkily. “That must be the reason.”

“We could help you go home, Monsieur.” Marcelle stepped a little nearer. “You must come with us to our house—we will each hold one of

your hands and guide you—and Papa will know how you can get home, I'm sure."

"No! No!" The soldier waved his arms. "You can't tell anyone about me—you mustn't!"

The sisters were startled, their eyes opened wide, but they were not afraid. Coco asked, "Why mustn't we?"

"Because . . . Why, because . . ." The soldier looked helpless; his hands dropped in his lap. "Because other people might not understand about John, and his being ill, and his calling for me feverishly at night. People might say I should go back to soldiering and forget about my brother, since he's only a boy and sickly, and since there's a war being fought."

The soldier seemed badly worried, and was chewing his lip; Marcelle, who had noticed many injustices in the world, thought he was

probably right about what other people would say. No one seemed to care about anything except the dreary war; nothing else appeared important anymore. At any rate, it suited her to keep the soldier a secret: it felt nice to know something that Pascal did not. “Did you hear, Thérèse?” She addressed her sister imperiously. “Don’t say a word to anybody. Not even to Mama or Papa.”

“I shan’t,” swore Coco regally, lifting her chin.

“Maybe you should run home,” sighed the soldier, his fingers shifting over the beguiling object in his hand: Coco craned on tiptoes but couldn’t see it properly. “Maybe it would be best if you forgot about me.”

Marcelle shook her head—there was no point having a secret if one promptly forgot

about it. Then, recalling that the soldier couldn't see, she said, "We won't tell anyone—we promise, Monsieur! We can bring you food and something to drink. We have to go to school today, but we could bring you something afterward. Bread and jam, and some cognac or wine. Would you like that?"

In the past few days, the soldier had eaten just a handful of biscuits and had drunk only dew; he was, as a result, parched and famished. The promise of a decent meal made him feel boneless and weak. "I am hungry," he admitted. "I would like something to eat."

"Then we'll bring it," said Marcelle. "Later—after school. You lie in the shade and rest, and wait for us to return."

The soldier wiped his grimy face and smiled. Already his stomach was rumbling. He leaned

against the tree trunk, bundled up against the cold. "Remember, you must not tell anybody that I'm here. Not yet. Not yet."

"We'll remember," said Marcelle.

"What's your name?" asked Coco: her eyes were still fastened on the soldier's closed hand, on the slivers of silver that were glowing between his folded fingers.

"My name is Lieutenant," the soldier answered. "Lieutenant Shepard."

Coco thought "Lieutenant" was a strange name for a person to have, even a person with an accent hiding in the woods: but her mother often said there was no accounting for some people, so Coco dismissed the thing as unaccountable. There was something more important buzzing in her mind. She asked, "What have you got in your hand?"

The soldier turned his face in the direction of her voice. He did not reply immediately, as if judging whether some things weren't best kept to himself. The girls waited, tense as cats. Then the soldier unfurled his fingers and held up the thing that had hidden in his palm. The object caught the morning light and threw it sparkling into the trees. The girls drew a breath, their hearts leaping; they trampled quickly closer, scuffing up the leaves. There, on the soldier's palm, stood a shining silver donkey. It was small as a mouse, and just as perfect. Its legs were slender as twigs; it gazed through a fringe of carved lashes. It had four sturdy hooves, two fine pointed ears, knobby knees, a scruffy mane, and a smooth, rounded muzzle. Its waggly tail was tipped with a kink of silvery hair. It seemed ready to canter across the soldier's shoulder and



away into the forest. It was the most beautiful thing that Marcelle and Coco had ever seen. “Oh!” gasped Coco. “How darling! Can I have it?”

Her sister smacked her; the soldier only smiled. “I’m sorry, Coco,” he said. “I need it, you see. It’s my good-luck charm.”

“Oh!” Coco’s eyes felt melded to the exquisite thing. “And—is it? Is it lucky, Monsieur?”

The soldier’s hand trembled as he stroked the donkey’s back, but he was still smiling. “I think so, Coco,” he replied. “I believe it is.”

The Silver Donkey


Sonya Harnett
Illustrated by Don Powers

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