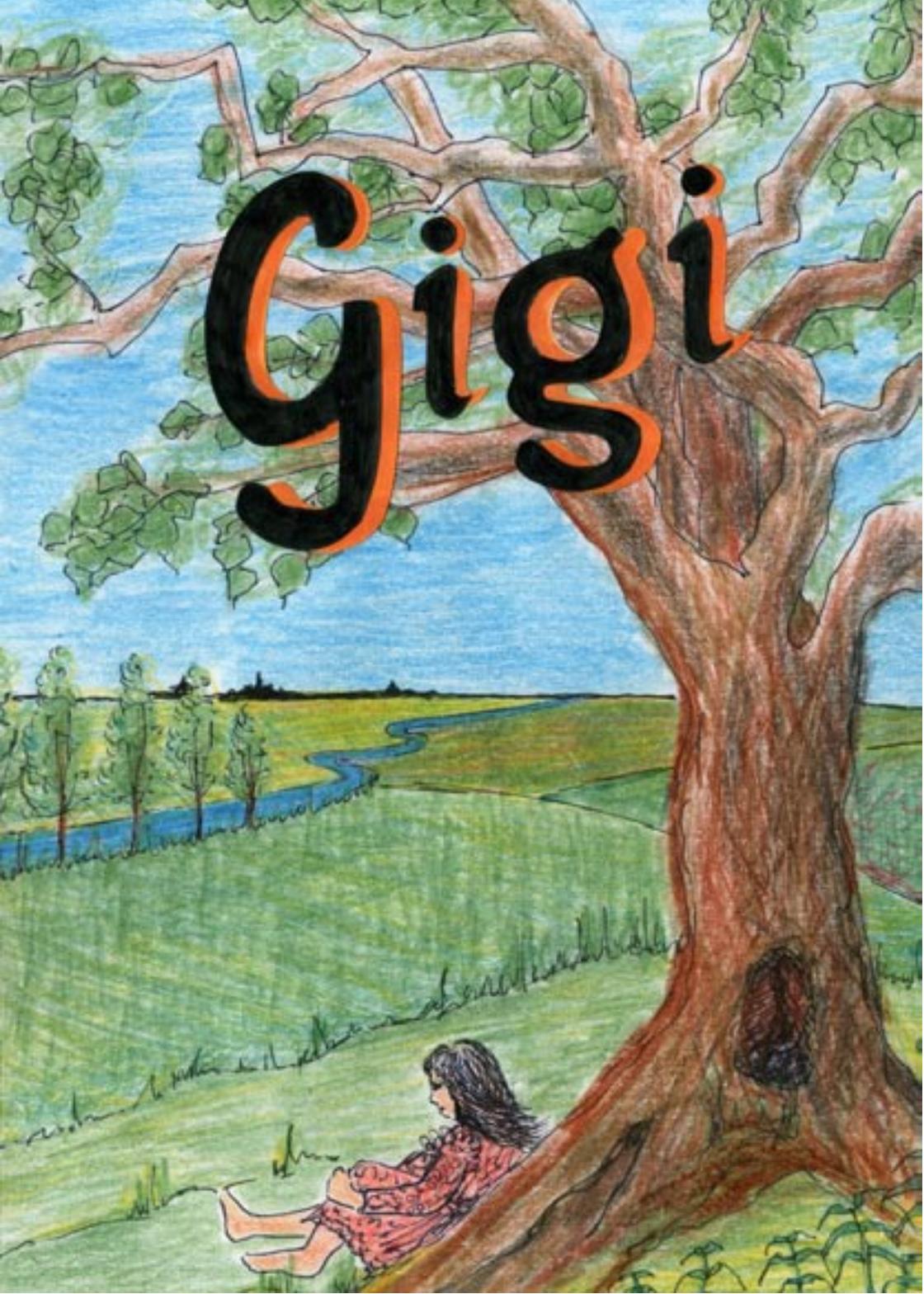


# Gigi





# Gigi

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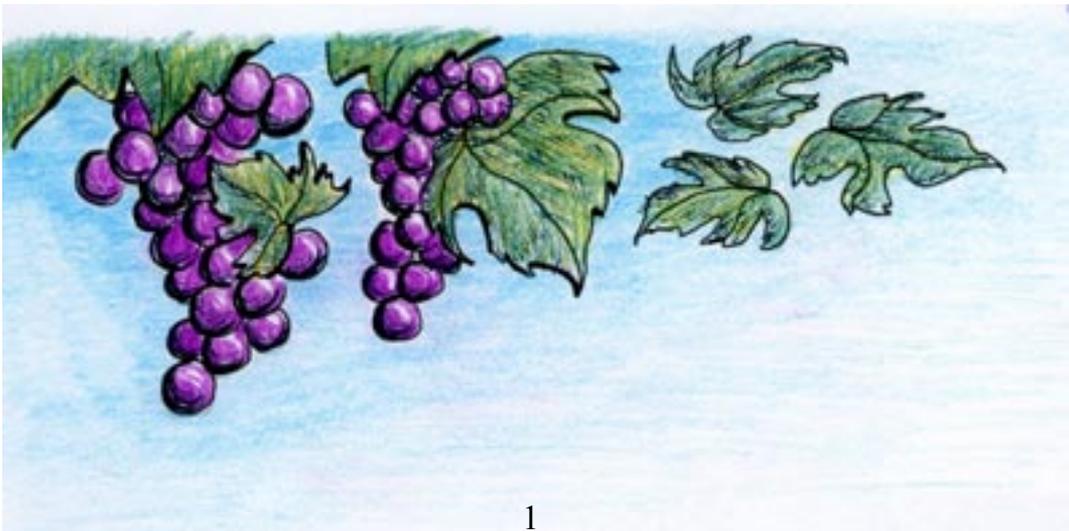


## ESCAPE

Gigi peered through the carriage window. The rumbling of the carriage wheels had lulled her baby sister and young brother to sleep but Gigi, at eight years old, was too excited to close her eyes for one second. She didn't want to miss anything. She and her family had run away from home!



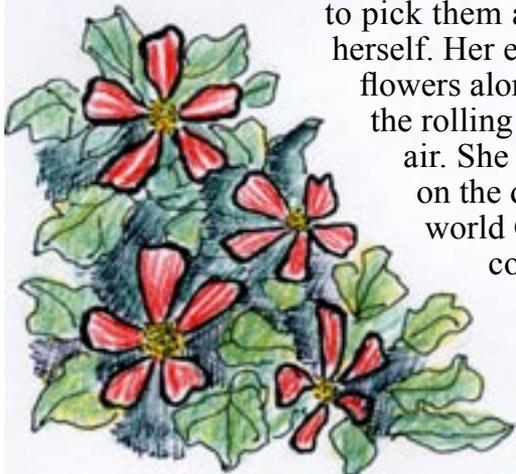
Gigi had seen the anxious looks on her mother's face and heard the tension in her father's voice as they'd been packing their belongings into the trunks and boxes. It seemed that many people in France were getting very angry and dangerous - Father called it a Revolution - and they had to run away to the country to be safe.





Gigi didn't feel any danger. How could she be afraid on this beautiful July day, as she gazed up into a deep blue sky and listened to the birds singing in the trees. The carriage was rumbling along at quite a pace. The driver must've been anxious too! But it wasn't too fast for Gigi to notice the small bunches of grapes growing on the vines which covered the countryside through which they were hurrying. "Will we be allowed

to pick them at harvest time?" she wondered to herself. Her eyes drank in the colours of the wild flowers along the road. She gazed in wonder at the rolling hills and breathed in the clear fresh air. She caught the glinting of the sunshine on the deep green fields. "What a beautiful world God has made!" she thought. "How could anyone possibly be afraid on a day like this?" Just then, she heard the desperate cry of a small animal and saw the swift movements of a distant hawk, falling out of the sky to pounce on its prey.

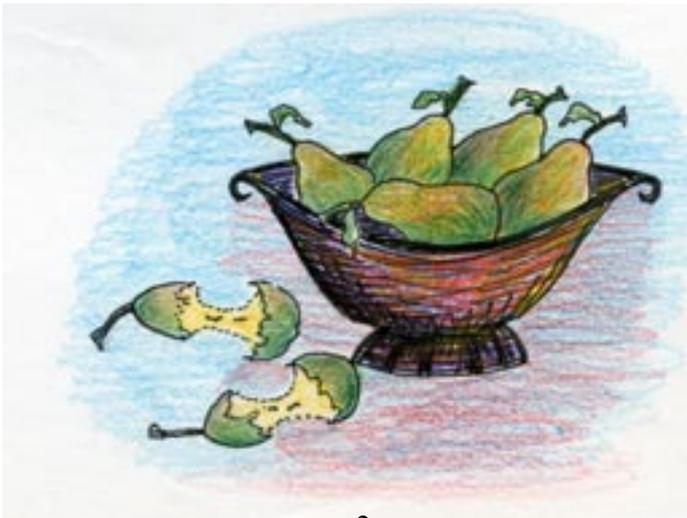


As the carriage bore Gigi and her family nearer and nearer to the farmhouse in which they were to hide from the Revolution, Gigi allowed her thoughts to return home, to the town where she was born, Chateauroux, in the centre of France. In her head, she could still hear her grandmother's voice telling her off.

“Come now, Gigi, we must punish you for cutting your lovely dress with your Mother's sewing scissors!” Grandmother's voice was strong and deep, the sort of voice you didn't argue with. But Gigi couldn't help herself, “But Grandmother, I didn't like the collar on this dress and I thought it would look much nicer like this.” She held up the offending garment. Grandmother's eyebrows shot up and her jaw dropped down: a sign of approaching doom.

“For this double insolence, child, you shall remain in the corner a full hour.” Gigi remained in the corner. Her mother, passing by with little Claude in her arms, gave her a look full of compassion and love. “You will have to learn obedience and respect, my little one,” she said with her eyes. Gigi felt sorry to have offended her mother and grandmother.

The truth of the matter was that in this corner to which she had just been banished, there was a most appealing shelf, on which was a bowl of delicious candied pears and Gigi had determined to sample some. Just as she sank her teeth into pear number two, the iron grip of Grandmother's hand clamped on her arm. She jumped and almost choked on the sweet morsel.



“So!” boomed Grandmother, as she marched Gigi into the room where Mother and Father were entertaining guests. “Ladies and gentlemen, may I present a thief!” she declared, with all the assurance of a lawyer about to win his case. Gigi’s cheeks burned with indignation.

“I don’t mind being punished for wrong-doing”, she thought,”but this is a serious case of injustice”. Looking around at all the adults, gazing at her in anticipation of tears and stammers, Gigi thrust out her chin and declared, “I don’t mind, but it’s wrong to show up people’s faults in front of everyone!”

Gigi saw Grandmother’s eyebrows shoot up once more, but she also noticed across the room, where her father was seated, a little gleam in his eyes and the corners of his mouth trying very hard not to smile. Gigi smiled to herself as she remembered that day long ago.

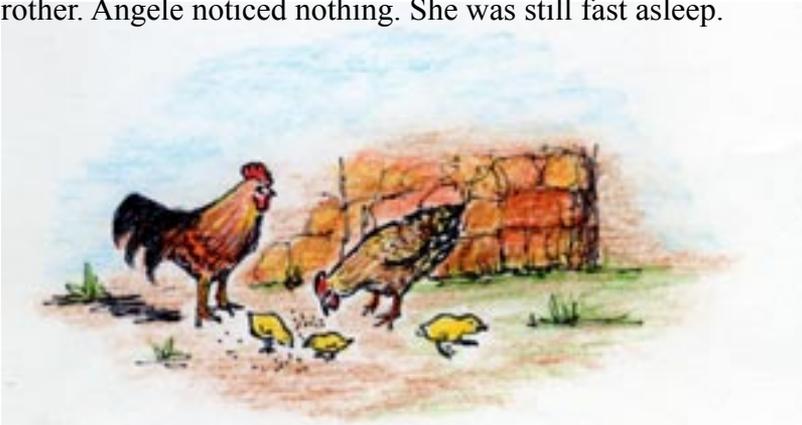
“What are you smiling at, my love?” asked her mother.

“I’m just remembering when I used to be naughty”, she said.

## ON THE FARM

The farm at which Gigi and her family arrived on that July day was a large one. A sturdy brick well stood in the courtyard. It was surrounded by low buildings, red-roofed and shuttered against the summer sunshine. Fruit trees stood against the far wall, laden with apples, and sheep grazed in a nearby field. Gigi and her brother Claude could hear the lowing of a cow and they watched the busy pecking and scratching of hens by the barn door.

Claude, who was five, stared wide-eyed at the scene before him. Gigi's mind was already racing, imagining all the games she might invent with her brother. Angele noticed nothing. She was still fast asleep.



The long summer days spent on the farm were never dull for Claude and Gigi. Claude was allowed to collect the smooth, brown eggs from the hens each morning, which Mother would then cook for breakfast. Gigi had charge of fetching water from the well. She loved peering down its long, cool darkness or dropping a small stone in and counting to see how far she got before the small splashing sound reached her ears.

In the house, too, Gigi was responsible for helping to set the table for meals and clearing away afterwards. These tasks she did gladly and cheerfully, for she loved helping her mother and imagining that she was an almost-grown-up member of the family. For after all, didn't Father call her "his little counsellor", whenever she tried to help him sort out a worry or a problem?



Her most favourite task of all was looking after Angele who, at one year old, was beginning to be more interesting and more mischievous, especially now that she was beginning to toddle about the house. Gigi loved to tell her baby sister stories, to sing her to sleep in the evenings, to play with her if she woke too early in the morning. She even cheerfully cleaned up the mess which one year olds can't help making now and then.

Life on the farm, however, wasn't all play. Lessons had to be followed as well, and for their teacher, the children had a priest called Abbe Claveau, who was also hiding from the dangers of the Revolution. He was a kind man and the children respected him and tried hard to learn. One day, Abbe Claveau was a little late arriving for the day's lessons. Gigi decided to entertain her brother in his absence, and put on a splendid mime show of the teacher, pretending to lift up the priest's long black robe as she pranced around the room and taking off

perfectly the teacher's habit of scratching his head while thinking of something. Claude was reduced to a shaking heap of laughter as Gigi became totally absorbed in her performance. Suddenly, there was silence. Gigi froze, turned and saw the figure of the teacher standing in the doorway. Claude had stopped in mid-laugh and his mouth still hung open. Gigi held her breath as she waited for the telling-off she felt sure would come. Instead, she heard Abbe Claveau clapping his hands.

“Bravo, Gigi!” he said. “I see that you have a great deal of talent. Next time I'm late I won't be so worried, for I see that you will soon be able to take the classes for me!” Gigi, still awaiting a rebuke, remained motionless. “Come then, children”, laughed the priest, “let's get to work!”

Although the family were living in hiding in the country, Gigi's parents made sure that she still received the kind of well-rounded education that was fitting for a young lady of her day. Learning all the skills necessary for running a house, learning to draw and paint, do needlework, dance and play musical instruments, were all on the timetable.



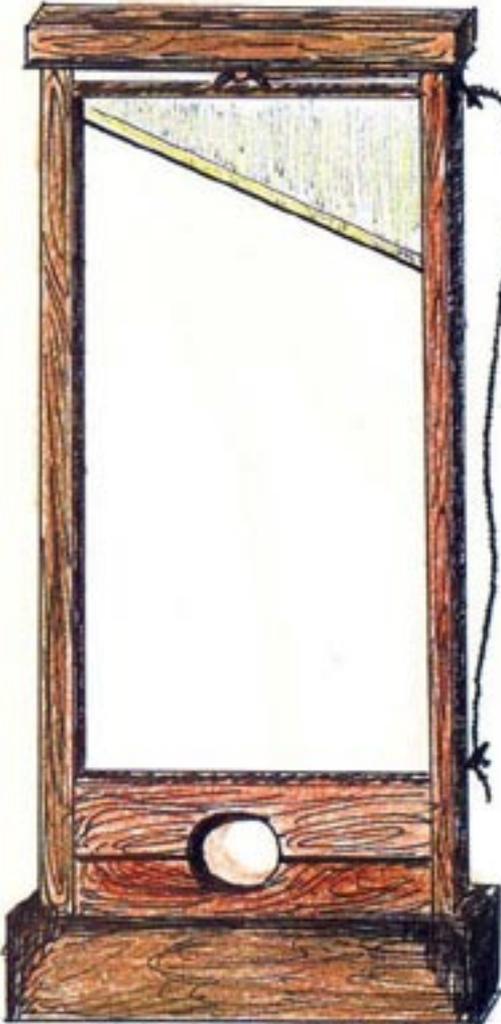
Practice time was not Gigi's favourite occupation and one day, tired from the effort of trying to play the harp, Gigi decided to give herself a little break. She was just tiptoeing past the drawing room and heading for the freedom of the farmyard, when she heard her parents' voices, sounding distressed and afraid.

"Aunt Catherine will have to come and stay with us," her mother was saying. "If the Revolutionaries have turned all the nuns out of their abbey, she will have nowhere to live."

"As for my brother Philippe's wife, Marie Madeleine, she's been thrown into prison." Father's voice was heard next. "What will become of her children?"

"My own aunt arrested and put in prison!" thought Gigi. "Then Father was right about the danger!" She felt as though her feet were glued to the floor and she could not move a muscle as her parents continued their anxious conversation. "The Revolutionaries have set up a tribunal now, you know, Marie. No one is safe any more. Anyone can be taken off and thrown into prison. They say that the Revolutionaries are sending hundreds to the guillotine to be executed."

There came a gasp from Gigi's mother and then the young girl realised that her own father was in real danger of death, just for being a nobleman.



## FATHER IS ARRESTED

It was a sunny Saturday afternoon which found Gigi hiding in the strong boughs of the apple tree by the farmyard wall. Her chores were done, her music practice finished. She was free. She loved to climb up into the branches of this tree. Claude couldn't find her here if she tucked her feet up and, by standing on the strongest branch and peering through the green leaves, she could see for miles. She liked to imagine what it would be like to be so tall that she could see above the tree tops. Her mother said that she probably would not grow very tall, but that God called each one of us to great heights inside ourselves. Gigi wondered what God would call her to become, as she gazed down the road from her leafy perch.

As her eyes peered into the distance, Gigi could see a small cloud of dust, growing larger by the second and getting nearer and nearer, even as she looked. Then her sharp ears caught the sound of horses' hooves and her eyes began to make out the red, white and blue uniforms of the riders.

Gigi scrambled down from the tree as fast as she could, tearing her white stockings in her haste. "Maman will understand," thought Gigi, "I must warn Papa of the danger."

As her feet touched the ground, the horses entered the farmyard. Claude, feeding the hens, looked up astonished at the unusual flurry of excitement on the farm. Just as Gigi was racing into the house, she bumped into her father, walking calmly out, with Mother holding his arm.

"Papa! Quickly! You must hide" began Gigi. But the soldiers of the Revolution had already dismounted and were approaching Gigi's father.

"Citizen Sylvain de Bengy, you are under arrest!"

Claude began to cry and ran to bury his face in his mother's skirts. Marie took the hand of her eldest daughter and held it firmly in her own, for she knew that Gigi, now thirteen, was quite capable of chasing after the soldiers and demanding her father back.

"Come, children," said Mother, holding up her head and turning back into the house. "We must go in now and pray for your Father's release."



“I shall pray,” thought Gigi to herself, “but my prayer is to be arrested too, so I can go to prison with my Father and be with him if he’s taken to the guillotine!”

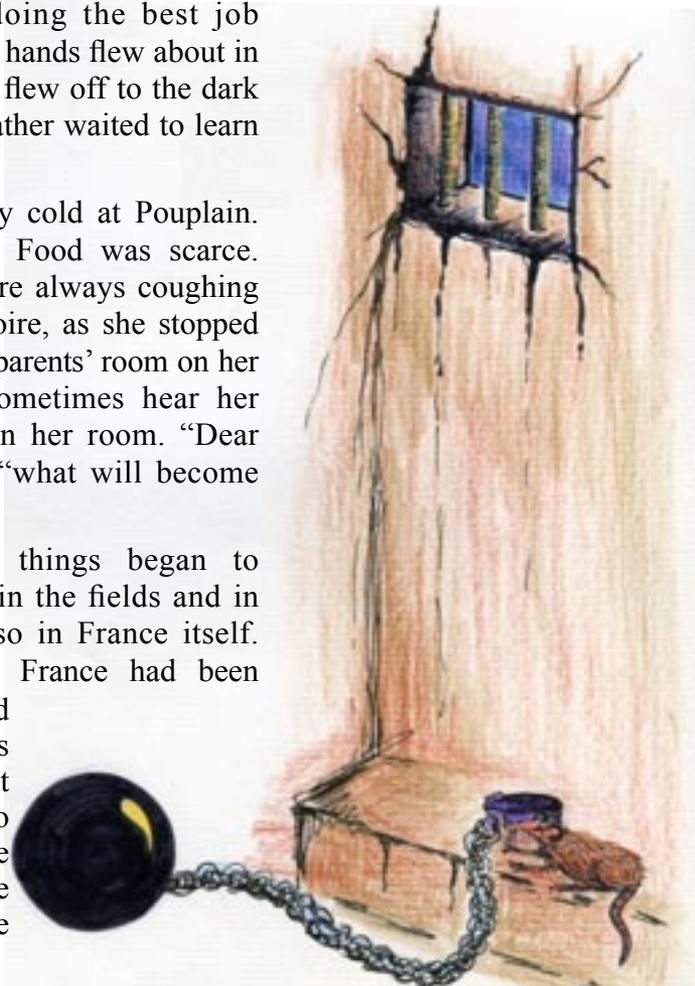
## VICTOIRE

Life on the farm was difficult without Father. Everyone had extra jobs to do and Gigi, now a teenager and using her real Christian name - Victoire - could see that her mother needed her help and support now more than ever.

Victoire's mother was anxious that her daughter would have a means of earning a living, just in case they all had to leave their home and go out to work. So Victoire was taught the skills of the laundress, which were all the washing was done by hand. It was hard and painstaking work, but Victoire put all her energy into doing the best job possible and, while her hands flew about in the soapsuds, her mind flew off to the dark prison cell where her father waited to learn his fate.

The winter was bitterly cold at Pouplain. The fields froze over. Food was scarce. Claude and Angele were always coughing and sneezing and Victoire, as she stopped outside the door of her parents' room on her way to bed, would sometimes hear her mother crying softly in her room. "Dear God," she wondered, "what will become of us?"

When Spring came, things began to brighten up, not only in the fields and in the farmhouse, but also in France itself. Since the Revolution, France had been declared a Republic and some of those prisoners who were not considered dangerous to the new Republic were set free. Sylvain de Bengy was among those released.







What a happy homecoming he had! The children danced around him excitedly, wanting to hear stories of dark dungeons, clanging chains and fearsome guards. Her mother and Victoire waited patiently until the young ones, satisfied that Father was home to stay, went off happily to play by themselves.

“Look, Papa, I’m almost as tall as you now!” said Victoire, measuring her height against her father’s. She only came up to the third button of his jacket, but she knew she was growing up and wanted Father to notice. “I know all about being a laundress now, Papa. Would you like me to take your laundry away now? I shall return it before you can wink an eye!”

“Well, well!” her father replied, reading the signs in his wife’s eyes, “When I was arrested, I had to leave behind one beautiful lady of the house. Now I see I am returning to two!”

Victoire’s eyes lit up as she acknowledged her father’s praise. Both father and daughter now turned to Marie, who was patiently waiting with her own special news to share with her husband. She was expecting their fourth child.

## FRIENDSHIP

When little Philippe came into the world, Napoleon Bonaparte was already seizing power from the Revolutionaries in France. Nicknamed “The Little General”, he was soon to declare himself Emperor and to set about re-establishing order in France.



It was no longer dangerous for the priests to carry out their duties in public or for those with important positions to continue working as usual. Sylvain and Marie decided that it was time to leave their hideaway home in the country and to move to the town of Issoudun. Here they could live a life more in keeping with their social position as a noble family.

“Oh, Maman!” cried Victoire, as they were packing up their possessions into boxes, “Shall I be able to go out to balls now, as you used to? Shall I have new gowns to wear? Will you do my hair up in curls now, like the other young ladies wear?”

“Which question would you like me to answer first?” said her mother, smiling across at her daughter.

“I shall be so excited I won’t be able to sleep,” she interrupted, as she lifted the embroidered tablecloth she was about to fold and pack. She draped it around her shoulders, imagining herself just off to a glittering ball.

“What’s Gigi doing with the tablecloth, Maman?” said Angele as she came into the kitchen in search of some attention.

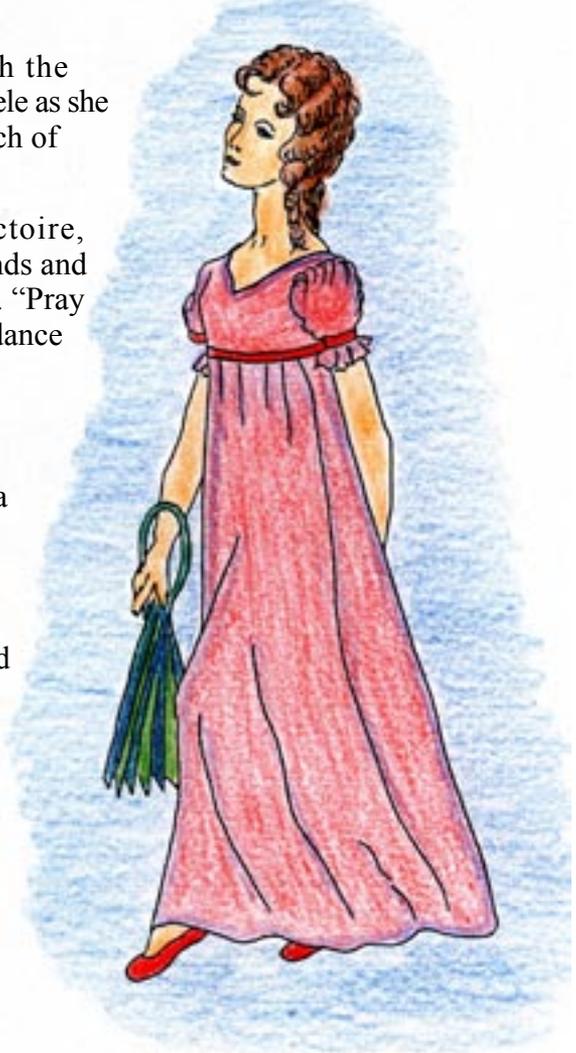
“Oh, Angele!” cried Victoire, grasping her little sister’s hands and twirling her around the room. “Pray that I won’t miss one single dance when I go to the balls, won’t you?”

At that point, Claude entered the scene, with such a sad expression on his face that all three stopped to look at him.

“What is it, my love?” said his mother.

“Who will look after my hens while we’re away?” he said, his face a mask of tragedy.

At once Victoire ran to her young brother and put her arm around his shoulders, all thoughts of balls and gowns



forgotten. “Don’t worry, Claude,” she comforted him. “Papa has arranged everything and I believe he mentioned that young Leon would care for your hens. You know how much he loves all the animals on the farm. Why - there won’t be a happier family of hens in all of France!”

At these words Claude’s face brightened and he smiled at his sister as he wiped his eyes on the back of his hand. Not for the first time, Marie sent up a silent prayer of thanks for this daughter of her’s, who could bring gaiety and laughter into the household at a moment’s notice.

While at Issoudun, Victoire made friends with a young girl called Constance. The two teenagers got along well, for they had the same interests, though Constance was gentle and quiet, where Victoire was fiery and energetic, Together they decided that, as much as they enjoyed their busy social lives, they did not only want to spend their time dressing up and going to dances. They saw many people in the streets of their town who were not so well off as they were and they determined to do something about it.

One rainy afternoon, they were hurrying along a narrow cobbled street, each with a basket on her arm. Constance carried fresh fruit and vegetables; Victoire’s basket contained clean cloths and bandages, iodine and linctus -a homemade first aid kit.

“I hope Madame Grandin’s cough is better today,” Constance thought aloud, as the two friends lifted their long skirts, to avoid the muddy puddles and piles of rotting rubbish which lined the street.

“If only her house were not so damp!” exclaimed Victoire, all her indignation rising at the thought of Madame Grandin’s house. “What she and her family need is a nice warm house to live in and fresh clean air to breathe!”

“At least we can help a little,” said Constance, as she waved to an elderly woman, seated at the door of her little home.

“Bonjour. Madame!”

“Bonjour also to you, young ladies! You bring the sunshine with you when you come to visit us.” The old woman beamed a toothless smile at Victoire and Constance as they passed by.

“If only we could do more,” said Victoire. She knocked on the door of Madame Grandin’s home to be greeted by two little children, noses running and eyes filled with sadness.

“How is your maman today, Pierre?” Victoire asked the boy. He stared down at his bare feet and studied the dirt around his toes.

“She died in the night.” His voice was a whisper. “We must leave our home now and go to stay with our aunt.”

As they looked at Pierre and his little sister, both Victoire and Constance’s eyes filled with tears. “I shall never stop doing this while there are families like the Grandin’s in Issoudun,” declared Victoire as the two friends made their way back home.

Sadly for Victoire, Constance and her family had to move away from Issoudun,

but the two friends kept in touch by writing letters. Victoire, now a young woman, had another companion with whom to spend her time. Her family had arranged for her to meet a young man who might become a suitable husband. He was the eldest of four brothers and his name was Joseph de Bonnault.

## JOSEPH AND VICTOIRE

Victoire liked this handsome young man with the laughing eyes, even if he was a whole year younger than herself! They soon became good friends and eventually a marriage was arranged. Joseph came from a noble family, like Victoire, not far from Issoudun.

“We will truly be able to celebrate at your wedding, Victoire,” her father said after dinner one evening. “Now that Napoleon is declared Emperor, our friends and family are returning from exile, so we have reason to be happy.”

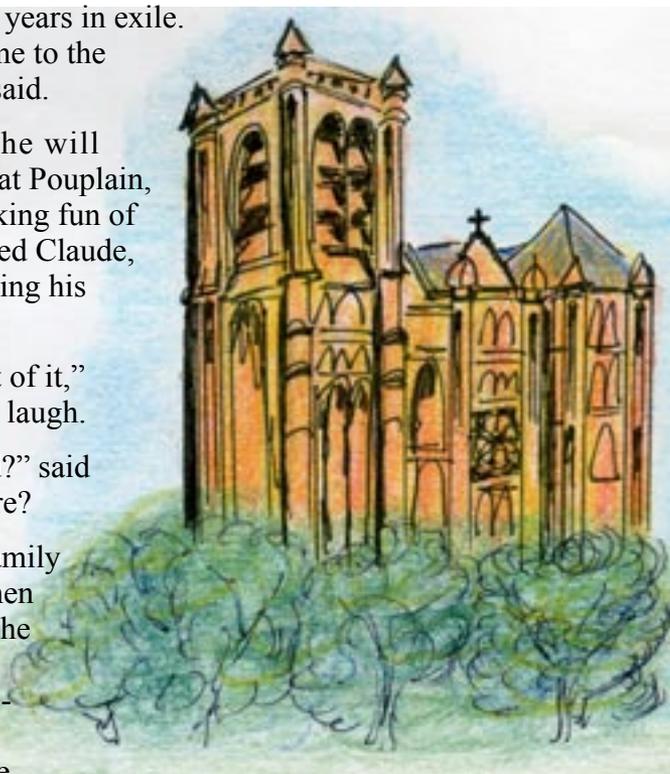
“Yes.” Victoire smiled across the table at her father, whose face had become lined by all the anxieties and difficulties that marked the survivors of the Revolution. She loved the wavy silver hair which framed his kind face, and the twinkle which was never far from his pale blue eyes. “Imagine! Abbe Claveau, our old teacher, has returned to France after twelve years in exile. He’ll be able to come to the wedding too,” she said.

“Do you think he will remember that day at Pouplain, when you were making fun of him, Victoire?” asked Claude, as he finished drinking his wine.

“I have no doubt of it,” said Victoire with a laugh.

“What happened?” said Angele. “Was I there?”

At this, all the family laughed together, then Victoire described the scene to her little sister, who sat wide-eyed and open-mouthed at the table.





The marriage of Joseph and Victoire was a grand celebration. All the townspeople came out into the streets to admire the happy couple.

“What a handsome pair they make!” said one woman to her friend.

“There’ll be no shortage of money in that household,” replied the other.

“Ah, yes, that’s true,” said the baker, who had been listening to the two women. “But you won’t find a more generous or caring couple. Only last week, my wife saw the pair of them coming out of the hospital - late, it was - she said they’d been visiting the sick all day. Catch some disease themselves, more than likely, if they’re not careful!”

As the months passed by, Joseph and Victoire grew closer and closer to each other.

They were very happy, giving time to each other and to those in need. The only cloud on Victoire’s horizon was Joseph’s health. He seemed to be unwell so often now, and Victoire would have to nurse him on many occasions. She’d always loved caring for the sick, so this was no chore for her. She was always thinking up funny stories to cheer him up and help him to feel better.



One day, as Joseph lay in bed feeling very unwell, Victoire brought him some news which she knew would make him very happy.

“Now, Joseph! You can’t be staying in that bed for ever, you know! I shall be needing a pair of helping hands soon and you’re going to be doing some nursing yourself before long!”

Joseph tried to puzzle out what his wife meant by this, but he was too tired to make the effort. “What’s this new story of yours now, Victoire? Who will I be nursing soon?”

“Why, our child, of course!” she exclaimed, smiling down at Joseph. “Oh my! I must have forgotten to mention it! So - now you know, you’ve got to get well and strong very soon, or how on earth shall I manage?”

Joseph’s eyes shone with pleasure as he took his wife’s hands into his own. “If God gives us a daughter, Victoire,” he said, “I want you to bring her up just as your mother brought you up.”

Sadly, however, Joseph was never to see his child, for he died just three months before a little boy was born. Victoire was suffering so deeply at the loss of her husband, that even letters from her old friend, Constance, failed to lift her heart.

When little Eugene was born, however, Victoire began to feel better, for she had someone to love and care for again. She knew though, that a great change was happening in her life and things would never, ever be the same again.



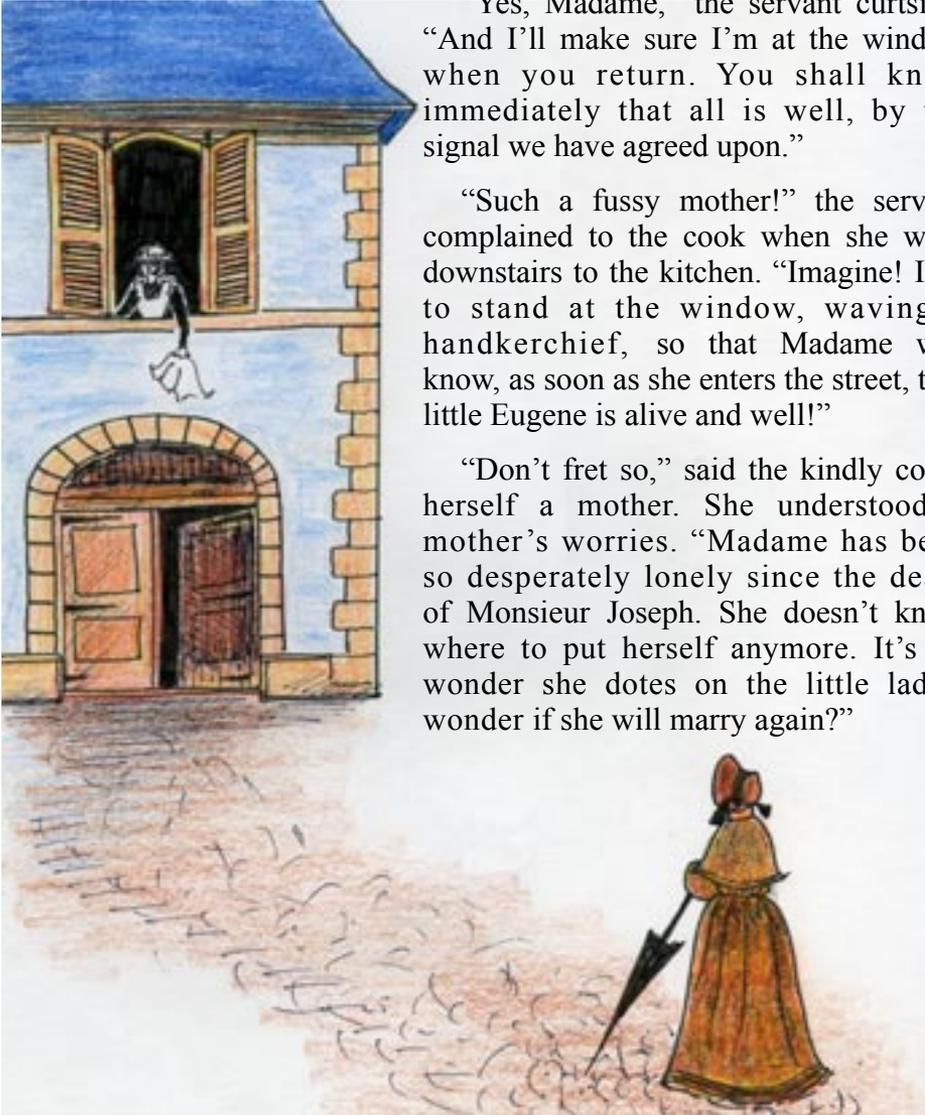
## LONELINESS

“Make sure you let me know if anything is wrong with Eugene while I’m away,” Victoire said to her maid. She was on the point of leaving the house because she had some business to do. She had to see to the running of the country houses she had inherited from her family when she married Joseph. She felt a keen responsibility for those houses.

“Yes, Madame,” the servant curtsied. “And I’ll make sure I’m at the window when you return. You shall know immediately that all is well, by the signal we have agreed upon.”

“Such a fussy mother!” the servant complained to the cook when she went downstairs to the kitchen. “Imagine! I’ve to stand at the window, waving a handkerchief, so that Madame will know, as soon as she enters the street, that little Eugene is alive and well!”

“Don’t fret so,” said the kindly cook, herself a mother. She understood a mother’s worries. “Madame has been so desperately lonely since the death of Monsieur Joseph. She doesn’t know where to put herself anymore. It’s no wonder she dotes on the little lad. I wonder if she will marry again?”



“Well, there’s been no shortage of interested young men knocking on the door!” said the servant. “But Madame doesn’t seem to be so keen on the social life any more. She’ll have to snap out of it soon, though,” the servant said, nodding her head. “She can’t live alone for the rest of her life, can she?”

The cook looked across at the servant and clicked her tongue at her. “Now, Celestine, it’s not for you to be organizing Madame’s life for her. I’m sure the good God in heaven knows what’s best and will arrange things accordingly. Now - hadn’t you better get back to work?”

Celestine was not far wrong, though, and Victoire knew that she had to start thinking seriously about the future for herself and her son. There was only one problem: it was this nagging feeling at the back of her mind that God had some kind of plan for her.

“But what could it possibly be?” she thought, “and besides, how on earth can I find out?”

Victoire had always prayed to God. From the moment she could speak, her mother had taught her to pray. She had always been aware of the love and protection of God throughout her life. She and Joseph had always prayed together. She had even taught the tenants and their families at her manor house outside the town of Bourges, whenever she went to visit them. She helped them with their worries and prayed with them in their daily struggles.

But who would help Victoire in her own struggle to discover what God wanted of her?



## THE LONG SEARCH

“Where do you want these ones, Sister? They’re half dead already!”

“Bring them into this room. There’s space on the floor, near the door.” The Sister of Charity ran a hand over her tired eyes and smiled at the men carrying their burden of wounded soldiers.

“There are so many needing help. Now we have typhus fever breaking out. I don’t know how we shall manage.”

The soldiers were Spanish - prisoners of war from fierce battles being waged by the Emperor Napoleon all over Europe. All the hospitals in Bourges were filled to overflowing and the need for help was great. Just as the Sister finished dressing the wounds of the newly-arrived soldiers a young woman, dressed in peasants’ clothing, approached and spoke in a calm, quiet voice.

“Sister, may I help with the nursing? I have experience and am willing to do anything.”

“Thank God!” said the Sister and she set the young woman to work immediately, scrubbing the floor and washing soiled bed linen.

“If Maman knew what I was doing now, she would be sorry she’d ever taught me to be a laundress!” thought Victoire. Then she rolled up her sleeves and set to work.

As the years passed by, Victoire divided her time between caring for her son, doing good works, keeping her business affairs in order and searching in prayer for what God wanted her to do. She sought the help and advice of many wise and holy priests. The trouble was, they all gave her different advice.

Some told her to forget everything and look for another husband. Others advised her to go and join a convent of nuns. Others told her to pray to God and wait for an answer. Victoire listened to them all. And she prayed. And she waited.

Meanwhile Eugene was growing up fast and in need of proper schooling. Victoire had heard that the Jesuit Fathers ran a very good school in Amiens, a town in the north of France. She decided to send Eugene there, but also to rent rooms herself in Amiens, so that she could be near her son.

When the Head of Eugene’s new school in Amiens asked him what he knew, Eugene exclaimed.”Me? Oh. I know nothing! But ask Maman, she knows everything!”

But Victoire was hoping that the priests in Amiens might be able to help her to learn -about God’s plan for her life.

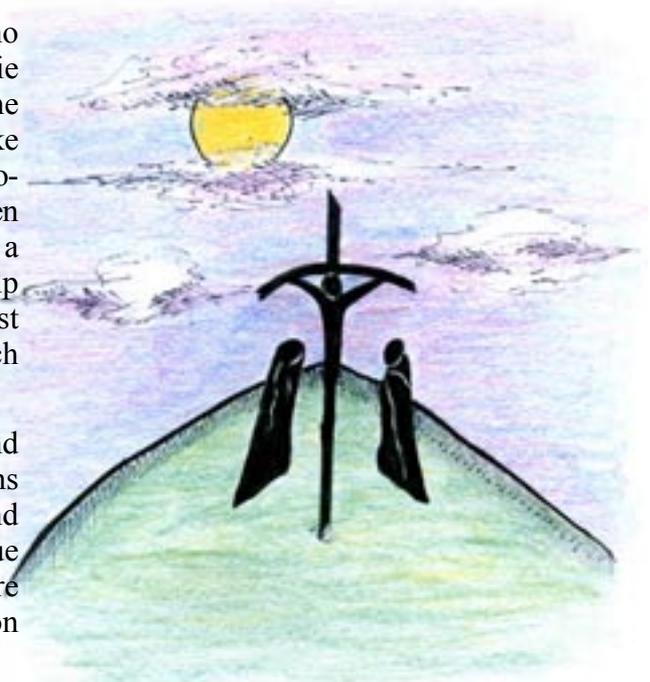
After many years of praying, searching and waiting, Victoire finally discovered the answer. One day, while she was praying and thinking about how Jesus had died on a cross, she heard the very words which Jesus had spoken when he was on that cross: “I thirst.”

She heard them spoken directly to her! Jesus didn’t just thirst once on a cross a long time ago. He was still thirsting now, today, for people with generous hearts, to give their lives to him.

“Now I understand!” she exclaimed. “God wants me to be like my patron saint, Marie Madeleine, who loved Jesus so much that she helped him with his work, looked after his needs and did not abandon him when he was on the cross, but proved to be his faithful companion. I must gather together a a group of women who will be called ‘Faithful Companions of Jesus’.”

The first women who joined Victoire (or Marie Madeleine as she became known) were widows like herself. They gathered together seven poor children in Amiens and, with a school teacher to help them, they set up their first school, in a house which Victoire had bought.

It is still there today and if you ever visit Amiens Cathedral, you can go and see the little house in Rue Dupuis, where Victoire founded the Congregation of FCJ Sisters in 1820.





## THE FAITHFUL COMPANIONS OF JESUS

Victoire founded the Congregation of Faithful Companions of Jesus over one hundred and seventy five years ago. Since then, many young women have come forward to give their lives to God in love and to serve their brothers and sisters in need, just as Victoire always did, long ago in France.

Today, you can find F.C.J. Sisters working with Native People in Canada, with Aboriginal people in Australia, with farmers in the Philippines, with all kinds of people in all kinds of need, across the world, in England, Ireland, Scotland, Wales, Belgium, Italy, Switzerland, Romania, North and South America, Indonesia and of course, France. Some teach little children, others nurse the elderly, some help adults to pray. All the Sisters are carrying on the work begun by Victoire, as she tried to live her life for God and for others.

Would you like to know more about what happened to Victoire?

Would you like to know what the Faithful Companions of Jesus are doing now?

If so, you can write to one of the Sisters at:

### **Province of the Americas**

Provincial Office FCJ  
71 Boustead Avenue  
Toronto, Ontario  
Canada M6R 1Y7

### **British Province**

The Provinciate FCJ  
24 Singleton Road  
Salford  
England M74WL

### **Province of Asia-Australia**

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