An excerpt from

That Girl of Pierre's

by Robert Davis

I. WAYFARERS WITH A TWO-WHEEL CART

EMPTY 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 Arsac-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. Philomene."

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 Arsac-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, 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 Arsac-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 women could, almost, look upon the village with the eyes of strangers. How gracefully the slender spire rose up from the midst of those houses and pierced the sky!

In another moment the cart was rattling down the homeward slope of its own weight, and Danielle had to restrain rather than push it. Along the road were the rows of grapevines and patches of plowland which furnished the food for the small community. But these fields, once tidy under crops of oats, potatoes, and sunflowers, were now waist-high with weeds. Vivid plumes of pine seedlings, of broom and of gorse, like battle flags, flaunted nature's reconquest of the soil man had abandoned. Only traceries of green upon the parched turf marked the stubborn remnants of vines which had not yet surrendered.

Mathilde's mood changed at the sight of the desolation. "Oh my beautiful vines! Does war kill vines as it kills vineyardmen? Could no one raise a hand to save them? Never did I think to see them so forlorn." The old woman's grief was as personal as though she had lost human friends. "Never did I think to say what I now say. I rejoice that my Jules is not alive to witness this misery upon his land. The generations of men who labored to make it fruitful, now all their work gone for nothing! It was Jules' pride to keep the alleys between the vines neat like the top of a table. And I worked beside him, as proud as he." Tears muffled her voice.

Danielle was silent. She was equally moved, and if she herself were given to words these would be the same feelings that she'd express. And so her grandmother's voice was, for the time, as her own.

"You hear men say, 'This land belongs to us,' but it is not so. We belong to the land. Men are born, are here for a day and are gone, but the land remains. It is forever here, willing to feed us if we do our part. But if man does not obey the law of the land he starves." Mathilde raised her arms and let them fall helplessly, the immensity of her thought dwarfing her powers of expression.

"But what would you, Grandmère?" Danielle tried to reason. "I feel as you do, but who has been at fault? For more than three years here, there have been no men, no horses, to do the plowing. No sulphur, no lime or copperas, to prevent mildew. No hands to prune away deadwood, to hoe and burn the witchgrass from the roots. None to cut the suckers that steal the blood of the plant. Isn't it wonderful enough, then, that the brave old things still show a spark of green?"

It was quite a speech, and she felt almost as if she were addressing the dead and dying vineyards of the valley, reassuring them that help was now on the way. "We are only two, Grandmère, but that's at least two. Soon Jeannot will he big enough to help, and we shall be three—until the others return . . ." She stopped talking as they approached the village.

Quivers of heat swam upward. Canvas curtains hung limply in the doorways. The good people of the bourg, protected by their masonry walls and their solid shutters, were still at their mid-day slumber. In fact, Jeannot too was still drowsing in the cart.

What a small grey town to have seemed so warm in their memories! Shabby now, neglected, disorderly. The wood of the doors and the windows showed grey beneath flaking paint. Roofs grey under crusted lichens. Gardens grey under undisturbed dust. Dust on thistles and ragweed. Dust, dust. And greyness.

Mathilde and Danielle, in mute agreement, sank to the ground in the shade of the plane trees. Here they were, in the triangular Place de la République, the center of their Arsac-le-Petit. But this desolation made them loth to go too directly to their own house and see its ruin, or seek out too soon the townfolk, those who might be here. So they felt torn by conflicting emotions. Of course it was good to be home, and yet the village as they found it somehow affronted them. It was as though Arsac had deceived them. During their travels they had held up their heads, had even boasted a little, as befitted citizens of no mean neighborhood. But now returning from wide travels, and having had an experience of imposing cities, the paltriness and untidiness of Arsac became something like an insult. The Place de la République, why, it was no more than the intersection of three rutted roads. Not more than a dozen of the thirty dwellings (come to think of it, now) had a third room. Only two houses had a second story. And, look, how the awning over the Cafe des Trois Moulins hung in rags, its outdoor tables paintless, its windows grimy!

Jeannot, waking at last, sat up in the cart. "Is this Arsac-le-Petit?"

"Yes, little cabbage." Danielle tried to cushion the shock. "You're home at last."

"Huh, it's little and dirty. I guess they're pretty poor around here."

"But it's our home," the old woman said sternly. "I was born here and so were you both. It's ours, small as it is and shabby, it's ours."

"And we love it," said Danielle sharply in self-reproof for her own disparaging judgment of the moment before. Then, almost as a reward, the modest beauty of the church of Ste. Philomene, to which her back had been turned, met her glance. Its sculptured porch invited one to rest from the world's sorely traveled roads and to know grace. Yes, the church-side of the Place was still

lovely, just as their memories had treasured it: the tower the loftiest in the canton, and its bell, if anyone were still here to ring it, the most sonorous in tone. And Father Ambrose the best-loved priest in the department. Was he still alive? Ah, in a short while, when the few people who might now be in Arsac would awake, they would learn everything. Meanwhile, this brief glance at Ste. Philomene had renewed their courage to face the worst, if they must.
She roused her tired muscles, knowing how much wearier was the grandmother. "Come, Grandmère," she said, lifting her gently by the elbow, "we shall see what we shall see."

"Yes, enough woolgathering," agreed the old woman. "We're going home."

The boy and dog had set off upon explorations of their own around the Place, but now came hurrying back. "Everybody's gone or is still asleep," Jeannot said wonderingly. "Is it always like this?"

"No, little brother," Danielle said, running her hand through his sunburned hair, "there is much life here."

As they walked on, passing house after house, the two women named in their minds and sometimes aloud the inhabitants of each, mimicking their accents and peculiarities. Here, within a few feet of them, might be sleeping the carpenter, there the storekeeper, yonder the lawyer and the priest. There was the house of Agathe Bracessac, Marc's grandmother. One glance at its disrepair, and they knew that he had not yet returned. They clasped each other's hands the tighter and braced their shoulders a little more. There was the house of Odette Bosc, robe and mantle-maker. In the next lived Marisma, Mathilde's life-long friend. And over there was the home of Vivette, who had been like Danielle's twin to her. She, her mother, and grandfather had taken flight on the same panicky morning as Mathilde and her grandchildren had. But Vivette had gone south, not east. Maybe by now they had returned; the house looked open. Danielle curbed an impulse to run over and see. Home came first.

Their own house, when they at last pushed the cart up to it, was still closed. Clearly, Pierre and Jeanne had not returned.

"Where are our father and mother?" the boy asked, staring about in dismay.

"We've beaten them home, Jeannot," said Danielle, trying to keep the disappointment out of her own voice.

Beside the door a huge sunflower, sown by the wind and watered by the drip from the eaves, stood silent sentinel with its golden face. A banksia rose bush, which I had been a pet of Danielle's since childhood, had pushed its tendrils across the front of the cottage, as though to seal it from strangers.

"Jeannot," the grandmother commanded, to snatch him from grieving, "fetch our key from the woodshed. What, you've forgotten? It will be hanging on a nail under the big bench. Make haste."

When Jeannot returned with the key, Danielle found she had to bend the branches of the rose bush aside in order to get the key into the lock. "One good old friend at least," she said gaily, "is here to hand us a bouquet at the threshold. A good sign!" She pressed a fragrant cluster against her cheek.

The two-wheel cart was home from its travels.