



Ririro

READ ANYWHERE, ANYTIME

Little Cosette

Victor Hugo

Montfermiel was a little village in France. There were large houses there, and small houses, and shops, and a little church. It would have been a pleasant place to live, except for one thing: there was no water to be had in Montfermiel — you had to walk a long, long way and fetch it in a bucket from the spring.

In one of the very large houses — large enough for traveling peddlers to stop and sleep the night — lived little Cosette. She was only a tiny girl, but she had no mother to love her and no one to buy her food and clothes. She worked in the house in place of a maidservant. There were Madame Thénardier and Father Thénardier, and their two little girls, Éponine and Azelma, who were happy and carefree — but not one of them was kind to Cosette.

She was so thin and ragged and unhappy that they called her the Toad. All day long she ran up and down stairs, washing and sweeping and rubbing and dusting, doing all the hard work. It was Cosette's job, too, to go to the spring for water with the heavy bucket — even after dark — and no one ever said thank you. Madame Thénardier only scolded her, or struck her for not hurrying fast enough.

It was one Christmas Eve that I am going to tell you about.

Father Thénardier's large house was full of peddlers stopping for the night, and they sat around the kitchen fire smoking. Little Éponine and Azelma were playing happily with the kitten, but Cosette was not allowed to play. She sat on the crossbar of the kitchen table near the chimney corner, all in rags, her little bare feet pushed into wooden shoes. She was knitting wool stockings for Éponine and Azelma.

All at once one of the peddlers jumped up. "My horse has had no water," he said.

Little Cosette began knitting faster, but her heart jumped like a stone dropped into a well.

"My horse has not been watered," said the peddler again.

"Well," said Madame Thénardier, "where is the Toad?"

She looked down and saw Cosette trying to make herself invisible under the table.

"Are you coming?" she shrieked.

Cosette crawled out and went to get the empty bucket from the chimney corner. The bucket was nearly as large as she was.

"On your way back, Toad, you will buy a big loaf at the baker's," said Madame Thénardier. "Here is the money. Go along, now."

Cosette put the money in the little pocket of her apron, then went out, and the door closed behind her.

Across the road, the shops were bright with Christmas things. The very last one in the row was a toy shop, glittering with tinsel and glass and magnificent objects of tin. In the very front of the window stood an enormous doll, nearly two feet high. She wore a pink silk dress. She had gold wheat ears on her head, real hair, and enamel eyes. All day she had smiled out at the little girls of Montfermiel, but no mother in the whole village was rich enough to buy her.

Poor little Cosette set down her bucket and stood looking at the doll.

"She is a lady," she said softly to herself. "And the shop is her palace. The small dolls — they are the fairies. And the toy man is perhaps as kind as God."

But she heard Madame Thénardier calling from across the road. "What are you doing there? Get along, Toad, and fetch the water, or I shall be after you!"

So Cosette picked up her bucket and ran as fast as she could, until she could no longer see the lights of the toy shop and it was quite dark.



The farther she went, the darker it grew. There was no one in the streets. At last she came to the open fields, and the darkness seemed full of beasts moving in the grass and shapes drifting among the trees. She ran through the woods and found the spring. She leaned over and plunged the bucket down into the cold water and hauled it up again, full and heavy — but as she did, the bread money slipped from her pocket and went splashing down into the darkness below.

Cosette did not hear it fall. She sat down in the grass, too tired to move. Then she remembered that Madame Thénardier was waiting, and she got up and started back toward the village.

Oh, it was cold. The bucket was terribly heavy. Little Cosette walked like an old woman. The handle froze to her tiny fingers, and the cold water sloshed down onto her bare legs. No one but God saw that sad sight — and perhaps her mother, somewhere.

Then, suddenly, the bucket was lighter — for someone had taken hold of the other side of the handle. And a kind, deep voice said:

"My child, that is too heavy for you."

"Yes, sir," said little Cosette.

"Give it to me," said the man. "I will carry it. How far do you still have to go?"

"A long way yet, sir," said Cosette.

With one hand the man held Cosette's cold fingers close in his, and they walked on together. Cosette was not the least bit afraid. She told the stranger everything — how pretty Éponine and Azelma were, and all the hard work, and how she had no mother.

"And what do the little girls do all day?" asked the stranger.

"Oh," said Cosette, "they have beautiful dolls. They play from morning to night."

"And you?" he asked.

"Sometimes I play," said Cosette. "I have a little lead sword, and I wrap it up in a cloth, and I rock it to sleep when no one is looking."

Presently they passed the shops.

"Why are they all lit up?" asked the stranger.

"It's Christmas Eve," said Cosette.

When they reached the house, Madame Thénardier came out to scold Cosette for taking so long. "Where is the bread?" she cried.

Cosette had entirely forgotten the bread. She turned her pocket inside out. The money was gone. Madame Thénardier raised her hand — but the kind stranger stepped forward.

"Here is money for the bread," he said. "When I return I will stay the night at your house."

Then he went out the street door. When he opened it again, he was carrying the wonderful doll from the toy shop — pink silk dress, gold wheat ears, real hair, enamel eyes.

"Here," he said. "This is for you, little one."

Cosette crept out from under the table. Her eyes filled with tears, but they shone with joy too, like the sky at the very first moment of dawn.

"May I touch it?" she whispered. "Is the Lady mine?"

There were tears in the stranger's eyes as well. "Yes," he said. "She is yours. And tomorrow you shall come with me and be my little girl."

And he placed the doll's hand gently in Cosette's tiny cold one.

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