

UNAWARES

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Unawares by Frances Mary Peard

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FRANCES MARY PEARD

UNAWARES

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BY

THE AUTHOR OF "THE ROSE-GARDEN."

Frances M. [unclear]

Dreams fade, deeds fail, and days depart,
And all is changed in time and place;
Thrice blessed are the pure in heart,
For only they shall see God's face.
Man's life from cradle leads to tomb:
Man's love from earth may lead to heaven:
Be thankful, therefore, thou to whom
A heart was given. — HON. ROBERT LYTON.

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UNAWARES.

CHAPTER I.

"Quaint old town of toil and traffic."

LONGFELLOW.

"YOU might tell us something, Madame Angelin, since you know so much!"

"Yes, indeed. What is the good of knowing if you keep it to yourself?" cried a younger woman, impatiently, placing, as she spoke, her basket of herbs and vegetables upon the broad stone edge of the fountain around which a little group had gathered.

"Was it a fit?"

"Has Monsieur Deshoulières gone to him?"

"Is he dead?"

"What becomes of her?"

"Holy Virgin! will the town have to bury him?"

The individual upon whom this volley of shrill questions was directed was a small, thin, pungent-faced Frenchwoman, who had just filled her pitcher at the fountain, and stood with hands clasped over

her waist, and with ineffable satisfaction in her twinkling black eyes, looking upon the excited questioners who crowded round her. It is not given to everybody to know more than their neighbors, nor, as *Veuve Angelin* shrewdly reflected, is it a privilege to be lightly parted with. There was something very enchanting in the eager attention with which her information was awaited, and she looked round upon them all with a patronizing benignity, which was, to say the least, irritating. The May sun was shining brightly over old pointed roofs; the tiny streams running out of three grim carved heads in the stone fountain danced and sparkled in its light; the horse-chestnuts stiffly standing round the little "Place" threw deep shadows on the glaring stones; from one side sounded the soft wash of an unseen river; old, dilapidated houses were jumbled together, irrespective of height and size; behind the women, the town with its clustering houses rose abruptly on the side of a steep hill, crowned by the lovely spires of the Cathedral; and before them, only hidden from sight by the buildings of a straggling suburb, stretched the monotonous plains and sunny corn-fields of the granary of France.

Veuve Angelin smiled indulgently and shook her head. "You young people think too much of gossip," she said.

"So they do, Marie, so they do," responded an old woman, pushing her yellow, wizened face through the shoulders of those in front of her. "In our day things arranged themselves differently: the world was not the magpie's nest it is now. The young minded their elders, and conducted themselves sagely, instead of chattering and idling and going — the saints know whither!"

Veuve Angelin drew herself up. She was by no means pleased with this ally. "All that may have been in your day, Nannon," she said spitefully, "but my time was very much the same as this time. Grandfather Owl always thinks the days grow darker."

"Hear her!" cried the old woman, shrilly. "Has she forgotten the cherry-trees we used to shake together, the —"

One of the younger of the group interrupted her unceremoniously, "Ta, ta, Nannon, never mind that now! Tell us, Madame Angelin, whether it is all true which they say about the poor old gentleman and the beautiful young demoiselle. *Ciel!* there is the clock striking noon, and I should have been back from market an hour ago. Quick! we all die of curiosity;" and she caught some water in the palm of her hand and sprinkled it over the drooping herbs in her basket, while the others pressed round more eagerly than ever.

But Veuve Angelin's temper had been roused by Nannon's reminiscences.

"I am going," she said crossly. "No one shall ever accuse me of gossiping. Monsieur's breakfast has to be prepared by the time he returns from the Cygne, and with this monster of a pitcher to carry up the hill, just because the *fille* who fetches the water is ill—"

"Let me carry your pitcher, Madame Angelin!"

"I will take it to the very door. *Peste*, it is hard if one can't do so much for one's friends."

"Yes, yes, Fanchon will carry it like a bird. And so Monsieur is absolutely at the hotel?"

"Bon jour, mesdames," said old Nannon, laughing shrilly. "No one cares to help me with my basket, I suppose? It is heavy, too: it contains the clean clothes of my sister's girl, Toinette, a good, hard-working girl she is, and *fille* at the Cygne, as you know. — What, Fanchon, my child, you would carry it! How admirable you are with your attentions to a poor old woman like me! I was wrong, Madame Angelin, I acknowledge it, in my estimate of your generation."

There was a hesitating movement among the women: they had forgotten Toinette, and with such a link it was possible that Nannon might be the best newsmonger after all. Veuve Angelin noticed the movement, and it filled her with dismay.

"I saw it myself, I tell you," she cried loudly, plunging at once into the heart of her subject. "I saw them come out of the *Cygne*, the old monsieur and the young lady, and walk up and down, up and down, under the trees before the door, and then just, just as they came towards me —"

She stopped. The women pressed closer. Fanchon was drawn back, and listened enthralled; old Nannon, whose temper was not so sharp as her words, chuckled under her breath, and said, "She has started at last." *Veuve Angelin* looked round and went on in triumph, nodding her little head, and throwing out her hands.

"It is as I have told you. They were close by me, those two, and turning round to enter the hotel again, when, in one second — his foot slipped, and he came down on the pavement with his head against the steps. Imagine my feelings!"

A buzz of sympathy responded to this appeal. In the character of an eye-witness, madame almost became a heroine. Fanchon timidly inquired, —

"He is old?"

"He looked half dead before."

"And he is hurt?"

"Hurt! Of what then do you conceive our skulls to be composed? of granite — iron — india-rubber? *Tenez*, I heard it crack, I tell you; and after that there is not much to be said."