

RADIO SCRIPT: THE PRINCESS OF THE GARONNE

A Christmas Fable from the South of France

By: Harold O. Wilson

NARRATOR: It was Christmas Eve. High above the river Garonne in the South of France the sky was darkening and the snow was falling gently on the tiny French village. Mirabelle Southerland stood in the middle of the empty plaza; her arms pulled tightly across her chest. A shadow floated across her vision and was gone. Just a man in a black cloak crossing the square. She was cold, and she could feel the ghosts and the strange spirits that inhabited the stories her mother had told her about this place. She watched the three figures, almost shadows themselves, approach the strange crooked door of the bakery. Ian turned back to look for his sister.

IAN: Come on Mirabelle.

FATHER: Mirabelle... come on. We're going to be late.

MIRABELLE: I'm coming, Ian, I'm coming father. Don't worry mother, j'arrive! j'arrive! N'attends pas. I'll be right there.

NARRATOR: The three figures disappeared through the still lighted door of the bakery.

Mirabelle remained in the square. Perhaps it was because she was an impressionable thirteen year old, or perhaps it was just the twilight reflecting off the buildings surrounding the plaza, or even the snow gathering on her shoulders and shoes, but she had the feeling that she had been in this place. In another time, she had been in this place: running, like in a dream, running through the snow, across the plaza: only then it seemed an endless expanse.

Even the bakery was familiar. A long white two-story building, it occupied one entire side of the plaza. In a strange manner, it slanted precariously to Mirabelle's left and the door, still filled with light, matched the peculiar angle of the structure. It was a fairytale building.

Through the door, Mirabelle entered a small shop, its high counter overlooked standing room just wide enough to accommodate the few customers who came in for pastries, cookies, bread. She went through the shop and found her parents in an apartment where the baker and his wife lived. To the left of the apartment, was the bakery itself and through a half open door, Mirabelle could see the shining ovens.

FATHER: Mirabelle, this is Monsieur and Madam Mercaille. They've prepared a traditional Christmas dinner for us: duck with all the trimmings. Your mother and I met them when we studied in Toulouse.

Monsieur Mercaille isn't just another shopkeeper, Mirabelle, he's the village baker and he takes this responsibility seriously. No sir, Ciril provides the villagers the essence, the leaven, the defining spirit of their culture - their bread. Every morning, way before first light, even before the farmers go out to milk, Ciril takes down his pots and pans and plunges his fingers into the rich dough, kneading and mixing like French bakers have done for a thousand years.

NARRATOR: Mirabelle's father was warming to his subject now.

FATHER: Yes, Mirabelle, it is "Monsieur le Boulanger" who keeps alive the soul of their civilization. And the villagers know it too. You should hear them talk: they could do without the mayor, the town council, even the Gendarmes; and the devil with the central government too, for that matter, but no baker? Ha! It couldn't even be imagined.

NARRATOR: Cyril Mercaille, smiled at this American exaggeration and crossed his fat hairy arms over his bulging stomach. He was no fool. He had seen Pagnol's film, "The Baker's Wife," and knew it to be a farce. He couldn't imagine the village organizing to bring back his wife if he quit baking bread because she left him. But then, he couldn't imagine Cicie running off with a shepherd or a traveling salesman either for that matter. Well, to Cicie's dismay he did smoke constantly, and drank Pastis in alarming quantities. But to the degree that he neglected his health, his appearance, and the building containing his home and bakery, Monsieur le Boulanger did just the opposite with his culinary equipment. The stainless steel mixers, tables and ovens that provided the village its

daily bread were kept spotless and in excellent working order.

Mirabelle saw the baker's kitchen as strange as the cockeyed slant of the building. The dining table was a metal surface supported by a slightly rusting metal frame. None of the chairs matched, and in fact, each was peculiar in its own individual way. All rested on a floor that sloped to one corner of the room, matching the pitch of the building. "Alice in Wonderland" came to Mirabelle's mind when she took her seat at the table. Then, as the adults talked, drank their Pastis, and busied themselves with the final preparation of the meal, Mirabelle quietly slipped from her chair and slid through the half open door to the bakery. The room wasn't bright but it wasn't dark either. It had the silent closeness of a room at rest. Huge pots and pans hanging on their hooks turned toward Mirabelle. They didn't appear startled but slightly annoyed by this disturbance of their rest.

Under the pots and pans, three large ovens, side by side, drew themselves up and harrumphed at her presence. The middle oven was so shiny Mirabelle could see herself mirrored in its door. She touched her reflected

face and for some reason even she didn't understand, impulse perhaps, she reached up and pulled open the door.

There sitting in the middle of the oven, quite at home, was a tiny gray mouse. It was about as big as her father's thumb and its pointed nose and long whiskers were dusted white with flour. Even the edges of its alert round ears were frosted, and it looked at Mirabelle with small black eyes framed by snow-white eyebrows.

The mouse didn't move. Even as Mirabelle slowly lowered her hand to the floor of the oven and gently uncurled her fingers, it watched with curiosity. The pots and pans, even the ovens were still with anticipation. Then cautiously moving toward her open hand, the mouse climbed over her outstretched fingers, and sat down in her cupped palm. It met her eyes with a gaze so penetrating and so searching that Mirabelle was about to ask, "Who are you, little mouse," when her father's voice boomed through the bakery,

FATHER: Mirabelle, diner's ready. A table, mon petit.

NARRATOR: At the sudden noise, the mouse jumped down and scampered through a vent in the back of the oven.

When the meal was over, the last bit of fruit and cheese consumed and the coffee placed around the table, everyone sat back, contented, and in no hurry to move.

FATHER: Cyril, tell the story of the legend of the Garonne. You know...the fable you always tell on Christmas Eve.

CERIL: Oh what a wonderful tale. It's unique to our region, you know. Let me tell you. It was just at the finish of the Middle Ages. Francis I was king, Protestantism was gaining a foothold in Germany and Switzerland, and the Enlightenment was trickling out from Paris. But except for small currents, little rivulets, it hadn't reached here. In this region, the curtain of the dark ages was still drawn closed. Nobles and feudal lords ruled the countryside and lived in wealth while the common people suffered in wretched misery. Uneducated, illiterate, living in squalor, the peasants were considered barely superior to the animals they tended. And the Church. Ah, the Church kept

everyone under its heavy thumb with fear and superstition.

Well...it was Christmas Eve, 1536 it was, and the Count d'Anjou was having a lavish party to celebrate the season and the coming of age of his two youngest daughters, Paulette and Jaquette. His poor wife had died of the plague the year before and he needed a house full of people to take his mind off his sorrow.

It was a cold night, that Christmas Eve. A soft snow was falling, just like tonight. But the Count's big stone manor house was full of light and warmth from a hundred blazing lamps and candles. Fires danced in fifteen fireplaces. Paulette and Jaquette were waiting on the guests, helping the servants prepare the food, and delighting in the company. They didn't mind the work, and in fact wanted to make all the preparations themselves, even serve the guests as well, so the servants could spend Christmas Eve with their own families. But Nicolette, their older sister, would have none of it. She was mean spirited and cruel and if the servants had to work on Christmas Eve, well so what, that was what they were here for.

She was truly a daughter of the feudal age, this Nicolette, and her haughty, aloof manner earned her the sarcastic title of 'Princess' among the peasants. Princess of the Garonne, they called her. And even though their lives were bleak now, they could see even darker days to come when the tempering hand of 'Princess' Nicolette's father was gone.

Well, the story goes that Paulette and Jaquette were carrying plates into the kitchen when they heard a rap, rap on the door. Paulette pulled open the heavy kitchen door and there standing in the snow was an old man in a tattered black coat. It was so ragged it appeared to have a thousand holes in it. Even though he was stooped from age, they could see he was a huge man with gray hair cascading around his shoulders. His head was large even for his great size, and his close-cropped gray beard couldn't hide the bumps and warts that covered his face...and what a face.! A stroke, an accident, or perhaps just the ravages of age had caused it to sag on one side so it looked as though half his face was sliding off his head onto his chest. Paulette stepped back at the sight of the old man and put her hand to her mouth.

PAULETTE: Oh, you poor man. Come in, come in, brave soul. Here, warm yourself by the fire. Oh, brave father, Père Coureageux, come, sit, sit here at the table and have some soup.

CIRIL: So the old man stepped into the kitchen slightly dragging one foot. He lifted his head, looked around, and breathed in the wonderful aroma of baking bread, simmering stews, bubbling soups, and roasting beef, pork, duck, and chicken. All were cooking in a fireplace large enough for a person to walk around in.

Paulette guided the old man to the big wooden table near the chimney. In exhaustion he clasped his gnarled hands on the table and slowly let his head drop to his arms. Paulette placed a large bowl of stew before him.

PAULETTE: Père Courageux, eat please. Here have some bread, a thick slice from the middle of the loaf. And some wine, Father... Jaquette, please some wine.

JAQUETTE: Yes, Paulette... Here Father, mulled wine. It'll warm you inside.

PC: Oh, my children, what can I do to earn such good hospitality?

PAULETTE: What? No. Nothing Père Courageux. We want nothing from you; only your good health and your fine company, that's all.

PC: But I must do something. Look at me, I'm too old and crippled to cut wood for the fire. I can't carry water for the kitchen and I certainly can't pitch fodder for the animals or shovel out the stalls. What can I give you?

JAQUETTE: Père Courageux, you've lived so long and witnessed so many of life's wonders. Share one of your adventures with us. That will be payment enough.

PC; Ah, my children, a secret... let me tell you a secret, will that do? It will be the secret of my coat.

This old rag, this cloak filled with holes beyond count is a magic coat. It gives me the power to change lives. Can you imagine that? To change lives. If you look at it closely, let your imaginations fly, you will see that it is really a map of the heavens. Each hole is a star on its journey in the blackness of space.

CIRIL: When Paulette and Jaquette concentrated, when they let their vision penetrate the black depths of the cloak, the holes took on varying degrees of brightness and appeared to be moving very slowly away from each other. Oh, what a great universe they saw. They saw holes collect together in swirls until they became one bright spot. Then they would flair up for a moment and disappear. White pinpoints would also appear, spin in the opposite direction, and suddenly throw off uncountable points of light.

Then suddenly... it would all go away, and all the two sisters could see was a ragged cloak and its holes; that is, until they focused their minds again, and the stars journeying in the deep black space of the coat would appear once more. The sisters were captivated.

JAQUETTE: Père Courageux, if your coat is magic why don't you use its mysterious power to cure your own body of its infirmities, to restore your youth, to provide for yourself the means to live?'

PC: Oh my dear child, the cloak gives me no unnatural ability or power to affect my own

life. I am at the mercy of the universe, just like you, and I depend on others to support my life.

CIRIL: At that moment, Nicolette entered the kitchen and seeing the old man, began to shout.

NICOLETTE: What is that disgusting creature doing in my kitchen? Who let him in? Paulette, I'll bet it was you. You're such a soft touch... Get him out of here, both of you. Get him out before I throw you two out as well. You're neglecting our guests... important people. The Archbishop of Toulouse needs more wine, the Count de Lautrec just arrived from Albie and is starved, the Count and Countess de Narbonne are getting bored and need entertaining... They're in the lineage of the king you know. See to them. See to them instantly.

And you, you smelly old man, you lazy sot, out of here with you. Get to your hovel or whatever hole you came out of. You have no right to our table, or the warmth of our fire. Be gone with you now!

CIRIL: The old man rose from the table, scraping back his chair with a frightful

screeching sound. A kind and gentle look filled his disfigured face.

PC: Paulette, Jaquette, listen to me, you will both live long, full, rich lives. You will marry, have children, and fill the world with love and kindness.

As for you, my child, you Nicolette will never die. But neither will you live as a human being, to participate in life's wonder or mystery. From this day, you will travel the world a mere observer of its drama. At first you will be bitter and angry at your fate. As the years pass you will become complacent and content yourself with foraging for food and shelter. But then, a desire to take part, a desire you will not be able to control will slowly fill your heart until it consumes your every moment. You will remember joy, but never again feel its sweetness or its loss. You will remember love, but never again know its caress or its pain. You will remember desire, but never again feel its longing or the tenderness of satisfaction. You will long for the simple touch of another's hand, a kind word, a soft look. Mostly, Nicolette, you will desire to give, to give to others of yourself, the greatest act of human fulfillment.

But you may not... It will not come to you. You will remain an observer of life's theater, Nicolette, cut off from human-kind until someone, someone in the bloom of health and youth, but old enough to see their future, and sensitive enough to know what they would be giving up, will exchange their fate for yours. They will say to you,

'Nicolette, Nicolette, I know you dear,
My Nicolette.

I bring you love to conquer hate,
And in my hand hold my own fate.
For your own, I change it gladly,
That freedom come to you, my Nicolette.'

CIRIL: And pouf, just like that Nicolette was gone. Jaquette and Paulette stood with their mouths open and with their eyes wide they watched the old man pass out the door and into the snow. Neither of them noticed the small gray mouse that scurried under the table, dashed to the corner of the chimney, and hid behind the broom.

No one ever saw Nicolette again. And in the telling of the legend over the years, she became known by the peasant's title of the

Princess of the Garonne. Like I said before, we tell that tale each Christmas Eve - more to scare the children into behaving than for any other reason, I think. Now, Cici, tell us about the Sunday morning you drove the bakery truck into the ditch and the whole village rose up in arms because they didn't get their bread.

CICI: Oh, well it was like this, they all gathered in the square, didn't they?... an angry mob, some even with pitchforks. It looked like that Frankenstein movie. Only the torches were missing. And you, Monsieur le Boulanger, you were cowering behind the counter in the shop. Well, how did it happen ...

NARRATOR: As Cici began the story, Mirabelle eased off her chair and went into the bakery. She softly opened the oven door, and there was the little mouse waiting for her. Once more Mirabelle extended her hand and the mouse climbed over her fingers and settled in her palm. It searched her face, beseeching with its eyes.

MIRABELLE: I can't do this, little mouse. I'm sorry, I just can't. How sad mother and father would be if I were to go away. And what would little Ian do. He needs me to help him grow up.

Besides, I'm too young for such responsibility. Why are you doing this to me? What about my future. There are a thousand reasons I can't do this. A thousand reasons I shouldn't do this. You understand. You understand, don't you? Certainly, you understand?

NARRATOR: The little mouse didn't move.

MIRABELLE: *But you have suffered so much, so much. For hundreds of years you've been isolated, alone. And I know your heart has changed. I just know it's filled with love now*

"Nicolette, Nicolette, I know you dear...No, I can't do this..."

NARRATOR: Outside, in the square, the wind gusted, turned, rolled back upon itself, and pushed against the slanted building. The snow born on the wind, worked its way through the cracks around the windows and dusted Mirabelle's shoes. The old house groaned and leaned even further toward the river Garonne. Twilight filled the bakery and the ovens took on a strange glow in the obscurity. Pots and pans swayed on their hooks and nervously consulted each other. The mouse still didn't move. Mirabelle felt again that she had been in

this place before, that all this had happened in another time; that she was called here by some memory she didn't understand. Again, the mouse didn't move. Then...

MIRABELLE:

*Nicolette, Nicolette I know you dear
My Nicolette.
I bring you love to conquer hate,
And in my hand hold my own fate.
For your own, I change it gladly,
That freedom come to you, my
Nicolette.*

NARRATOR: Poof, just like that, the old house quieted, the snow rested content on the cobblestones in the square, the pots and pans ceased their agitation, light once again filled the bakery. And now it was Nicolette who stood before the oven door. Her silky black hair fell from beneath her bonnet and her linen party dress extended almost to the floor covering her dainty slippers. The exchange complete, she looked at the mouse sitting in her hand. Her cheeks wet with tears, Nicolette placed the mouse on the floor of the oven.

NICOLETTE: You are so brave, Mirabelle.
Thank you for this gift.

NARRATOR; And Nicolette went out the bakery door and leaving small footprints across the snowy square, disappeared among the village homes.

As Cici finished her story of the bakery truck, a zephyr of cool air from the open door made its way into the kitchen and caressed little Ian's face.

IAN: Where's Mirabelle? Mirabelle, Mirabelle, where are you?

NARRATOR: When there was no answer, the whole household began to call and search.

She was nowhere to be found in the entire house.

IAN: Maybe she was too warm, Papa, and she went into the square to see the snow.

FATHER: Everyone, outside, Mirabelle!
Mirabelle!

NARRATOR: But the square was empty...
except for an old man in a ragged black cloak.

CIRIL: Old man, have you seen a young girl,
blond curly hair, about so big?

PC: Yes,... I have seen her.

FATHER: Where? Where, old man, which way
did she go?

PC: Oh, she's here. She's right here.

NARRATOR: With that the old man swept open
his cloak. Holes without number gleamed in
the expanse and depth of its blackness, and
there Mirabelle came running, small, as though
approaching from a great distance, from the
far edges of the universe she came; running,
running across time, time without measure,
time like the wind, forever folding back upon
itself. Across the plaza she came and jumped
into the arms of her father and mother.

MIRABELLE: Thank you. Thank you, Père
Courageux. Au revoir.

NARRATOR: But the old man had already folded his cloak and vanished in the snowy night.