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Opening extract from

The Silver Donkey

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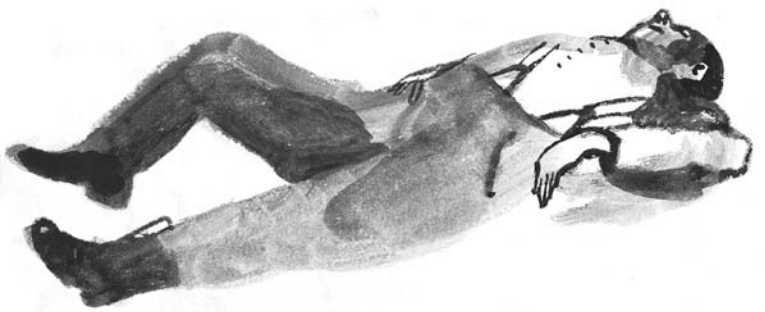
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THE SOLDIER IN THE TREES

ONE cool spring morning in the woods close to the sea, two girls found a man curled up in the shade and, immediately guessing he must be dead, ran away shrieking delightedly, clutching each other's hands. As they ran they shouted to one another all sorts of horrors and secrets: "I think his ghost is chasing us!" screamed the elder; "I'm sorry I broke your dolly's arm!" howled the smaller one.

The elder stopped, jerking her sister to a halt. "I knew it was you who broke Villette's arm!" she cried.

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"You liar, you pretended you didn't! I've told you not to touch my things!"

The little girl clamped her mouth shut and wished she hadn't said anything. Her eyes glided up the slope down which they'd both just run. "The ghost might be coming!" she said hopefully.

Her sister, remembering the dead man, looked back the way they had come. The hill's brow was covered in thin birch and fat elms, and the grass sprinkled below the trees was long and brightly green. Now she'd caught her breath and recovered from the surprise, she realized it was thrilling to have discovered a dead man. No one at her school had ever found somebody dead; her brother, Pascal, certainly never had. He would be livid to hear of his sisters doing something so marvellous while he, the eldest child and only boy, had sat in front of the fireplace eating cinnamon toast. The older girl, whose name was Marcelle, imagined her brother's face when he heard the news. She brimmed suddenly with anticipation and glee.

… Although much depended, of course, on the man in the forest actually *being* dead. It would be

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embarrassing to fly home shouting that there was a dead man in the woods when the man was, in fact, only sleeping. And now she had caught her breath and begun to feel the cold, Marcelle reflected that the man had, indeed, looked equally asleep as dead.

There was nothing for it but to march back to the woods and have a closer look. The mystery must be solved. The facts must be set straight.

The smaller girl, whom everyone called Coco, squeaked when she realized where her sister was leading her. She dug her heels into the dirt. "Don't make me!" she whimpered. "I'm frightened!"

"You are not!" growled her sister, and Coco had to privately admit this was true. Nothing ever frightened her. "Besides, we must!" Marcelle commanded stoutly. "What if Pascal finds him, and pretends he found him first?"

Coco knew that this mustn't happen. Pascal always spoiled everything. She hastened up the hill after her sister. In a moment, they were racing. The wet grass grabbed their shins and slicked their boots. They slid and stumbled on slimy stones. Their breath came out in cloudy puffs. They had forgotten completely their

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mother's request to pick an apronful of mushrooms to feed the pig. They giggled and clambered as fast as they could.

But as they reached the forest's edge, the sisters slowed from a run to a walk; and when the forest's grim shadow draped over them and the air became grey and chilly with mist, they slowed from a walk to a creep. They lowered their feet carefully, trying not to make a sound. As they approached the hollow where the man lay, they were aggrieved to spy him sitting up. Clearly he was not dead. And although they had crept as quietly as they could, and kept themselves hidden behind tree trunks and weeds, the sharp-eared man must have heard – for he looked up from the fallen leaves, and stared directly at them.



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