

THE  
CHILDREN  
OF  
LA SALETTE



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*by*  
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To the Virgin who wept  
at La Salette,  
who is also  
Our Lady of Lourdes,  
of Fatima,  
and of all the World.



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## CHAPTER ONE



**I**T WAS eleven o'clock in the morning of Friday, September 18, 1846, but fourteen-year-old Melanie Mathieu was scarcely interested in that. At the moment she was feeling peevish. A strange shepherd boy and his dog had just crept up behind her in a most startling way as she sat watching her master's four cows on the slopes of the French Alps near the hamlet of Ablandins. And they had caught her "talking to the flowers," a game she had liked to play since she was a small child, but one which all the other young shepherds thought silly.

"Go away, boy," she said crossly. "This isn't your field."

But the newcomer, his dark eyes sparkling with mischief, only laughed. "It's all right, little girl. I'm

Maximin Giraud and this is my dog Loulou. We've come to play with you. You see, we're from Corps, too."

Melanie jumped to her feet. What if this stupid boy (whom she had seen yesterday for the first time) did come from her own town? That was no reason to startle a person or make fun of her.

"Didn't you hear me?" she exclaimed impatiently. "I want to be left alone!" Then, as Maximin did not budge, she hurried resolutely up the steep slope to find another resting place. But she had gone only a few yards when Maximin came running after her—breathless but cheerful—accompanied by the faithful Loulou.

"What's the matter?" he demanded. "My master told me to come and watch his four cows and my goat in your field."

Melanie scowled. "Your master?"

"Yes, Peter Selme. See? He's down there on the mountain mowing hay. I've been working for him since Monday because his little girl is sick and he can't find anyone else to watch the cows."

Melanie shaded her eyes from the warm September sun. Sure enough. Peter Selme, whose field adjoined that of Baptiste Pra, her own master, was busy with his scythe far down the mountainside. But surely he hadn't told this wretched boy to bother her! Like everyone else in the neighborhood, he knew that Melanie Mathieu seldom played with other children. In fact, he probably agreed with them that she was queer and was best left to herself.

“Go away, boy,” she repeated firmly. “I told you I want to be alone.” And picking up her shepherd’s staff, she sped still farther up the mountainside. Only when it seemed evident that Maximin and his dog were not going to follow did she come to a halt. Then, after a moment’s hesitation, she sat down on the grassy turf and began talking to the flowers again—pretending that they were kind people who were her friends.

However, in just a few minutes Maximin had crept up quietly behind her and seated himself a short distance away, Loulou at his feet.

“Why don’t you want to play with me?” he asked plaintively. “I promise to be very good.”

Exasperated beyond words, Melanie started up the mountainside again. Yet this time Maximin followed at her heels, pleading his cause so earnestly (he had never been a shepherd before, it seemed, and was very lonely), that Melanie finally let herself be persuaded. Yes, he might stay with her—and Loulou, too—but only on certain conditions.

“You’ll have to be very quiet.”

“Oh, yes!”

“You mustn’t make fun when I talk to the flowers.”

“Of course not.”

“All right, then. Sit down. But keep your eyes on the cows so they don’t fall down that ravine over there.”

For a while all went well. Melanie gathered daisies and other wildflowers and arranged them in colorful patterns on the grass. But when she began to talk to



“GO AWAY, BOY. I WANT TO BE ALONE.”

them as though they were real people, Maximin burst out laughing.

“Silly! Flowers haven’t any ears,” he said. “Come on—let’s play a real game.”

“Maximin! You promised to be quiet!”

“I know. But I’m tired of sitting still. Besides, I want to show you some good tricks.”

But Melanie was not interested in tricks. Or in games either, although she did agree to listen to Maximin’s account of himself: that he was eleven years old, the son of a poor man in Corps who made wheels for wagons; that his own mother had died when he was a baby, and that his stepmother was not too kind to him; that he had never been away from home before, and that only with the greatest reluctance had his father allowed him to come to Ablandins to help Peter Selme until Sunday while the latter’s little daughter was ill. In fact, he had insisted the boy take along the family dog and goat, and that he receive not only his regular wage but a goodly supply of butter and cheese as well.

“Papa thinks I’m not to be trusted,” laughed Maximin, “that I’ll forget to watch the cows, or else fall down the mountain and break my neck. That’s why he didn’t want to hire me out. But so far I’ve done all right.”

“Well, it’s not Sunday yet,” observed Melanie dryly. “Don’t brag too much.” Then, after a moment: “What’ll you do when you go back to Corps?”

“Nothing. Just amuse myself.”

“Amuse yourself! But why don’t you go to school if you live in town?”

“Oh, no! Papa sent me a few times, but I never stayed. You see, I hate books—and sitting still.”

“You go to church, though?”

“Sometimes. But I don’t like that much either. Or Catechism class with the priest.”

“You know your prayers?”

“Just the Our Father and the Hail Mary.”

Melanie stared at the boy beside her. How strange he was! How thin and small! Why, he seemed more like eight than eleven! And yet there was something appealing about him, too, despite his restlessness and mischievous ways. . . .

“Go on,” she said, with unexpected interest. “Tell me more.” But Maximin only laughed. “No, it’s your turn now. What about yourself and your own family?”

A bit hesitantly Melanie consented to tell a little about herself. Her home was also in Corps (some six miles from Ablandins), but she had spent a good deal of time away from there. In fact, from the age of ten she had cared for the sheep and cattle of various farmers in the neighborhood—first at Quet, then at Sainte-Luce, and now for Baptiste Pra at Ablandins. There were two older brothers who sometimes worked away from home, too, and several younger brothers and sisters. Since the family was poor, the absence of one or more children meant a considerable saving on food bills. Then, their wages were also a help. But she herself always returned home for the

winter, since it was too cold then to take an animal to pasture in the mountains.

“It’s September 18 now,” said Maximin. “You’ll be going back to Corps in a few weeks.”

“Yes, in November.”

“Then what?”

“Why, I suppose I’ll stay home until March.”

For a moment the boy was silent. But just as he was on the point of asking more questions, there came the melodious chime of bells from the parish church of La Salette in the valley below.

“Sssh!” said Melanie quickly. “That’s the noon Angelus. Take off your hat, Maximin, and raise your heart to God.”

The boy obediently uncovered his head and was quiet for a little while. However, his lively spirits promptly returned when Melanie invited him to share her lunch. And he was all eagerness when she brought out a small, round loaf from her knapsack. But when she took a knife and traced a cross on the loaf, then punched a tiny hole in the center of the cross, saying: “Devil, if you are in there, come out; Lord, if You are in there, stay in!”, at the same time quickly covering the hole, he burst out laughing.

“Melanie, what a silly girl you are!” he cried. “As though the Devil, or God, could be in a little loaf like that!”

Melanie was strangely silent. Nor did she argue or complain when the loaf slipped from her hands, and a mischievous kick from Maximin sent it rolling

down the grassy slopes of the mountain into a deep ravine. Instead, she produced another loaf, cut a cross on it, prayed, then offered a generous portion to her companion.

“I’ve some cheese, too,” she said, with a certain dignity.

Unabashed, and still laughing, Maximin devoured both bread and cheese with gusto. Then, at Melanie’s suggestion, he climbed a short distance up the mountain and returned with his hat filled with wild fruit and berries.

“We’ll eat these and then play a game,” he said.

But Melanie shook her head. No, they had already played and talked enough. Now they must find their eight cows and Maximin’s goat and take them to drink at the spring.