

For
Love
of a
Rose



ANTONIA
RIDGE

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by the same author

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THE THIRTEENTH CHILD
GRANDMA WENT TO RUSSIA
FAMILY ALBUM
BY SPECIAL REQUEST

THE POPPENKAST
GALLOPING FRED
NEVER RUN FROM THE LION

with Mies Bouhuys
HURRAH FOR A DUTCH BIRTHDAY

For Love of a Rose

ANTONIA RIDGE



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With affection and gratitude to 'Pepette' and 'Memette', and all the Meilland family, who not only permitted me to write their family story but talked to me, as Papa Meilland once put it, 'as one only talks to a friend'.

A.R

en souvenir de Francis Meilland (1912-1958)

A ta chère mémoire et ton oeuvre féconde
Ce livre est dédié. Il célèbre à la ronde
Les dons et les vertus de Ceux que tu aimais
Et l'hommage fervent qu'on te doit à jamais
Pour ces royales fleurs que pour nous tu créais
O magicien des Roses!

Henri Fessel

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CHAPTER ONE

Antoine



This is not only the true story behind one of the best-loved and the most famous of all the world's roses, it is also the true story of a family; and as always happens in any real-life story, in any slice of history for that matter, it is difficult to decide just where and when and with whom one ought to begin.

However, one must make a start somewhere, and to my mind, if not to his, this family story can well begin with Papa Meilland coming into this world, protesting most lustily, or so he has been told, on a lovely June day in 1884 in the French village of Chamboeuf.

Chamboeuf is a quiet little village lost in the pleasant but not precisely breath-taking countryside some nineteen kilometres from the grimy and friendly mining town of Saint Etienne, and about fifty or so kilometres from the clean and stately city of Lyons. As far as Papa Meilland knows, nobody has ever yet been inspired to sit down and compose a few lines for any guide book, much less a poem about his village of Chamboeuf, and to be honest why on earth should they? There is nothing in the least remarkable or poetical about Chamboeuf.

Yet this is precisely why all those old songs – which one still sings in France, especially when one is feeling beautifully

Antoine

mellow and sentimental after an excellent meal to celebrate some red-letter occasion – every one of those old songs, from ‘The Voice of the Forests’ to ‘The Oxen’, makes Papa Meilland blow his nose to hide his emotion. One would swear the writer of every one of those songs must have been born in *his* village – a sentiment shared undoubtedly by millions of other Frenchmen born in villages all over France.

But Papa Meilland says this is not as crazy as it sounds, Chamboeuf being outstanding in one way only – it is so remarkably like a million other quiet, unremarkable villages up and down France. So every one of these rustic home-sweet-home ballads fits them all like a glove.

Moreover Chamboeuf hasn’t altered much since he was a child. La Place, the heart of the village, is still there, shaded by the same friendly plane trees with the same battered benches beneath them, where one can sit and gossip when one is old; and set about La Place – the church, the café, the school, and the ‘épicerie’ where, in Papa Meilland’s young days, one could buy all the necessities of life from sugar, salt, paraffin and slippers to an ancient panacea that positively fascinated him for it dated right back, or so one said, to the Battle of Agincourt, when it triumphantly healed all but the most mortal of wounds inflicted by the arquebuses and flying arrows of the invading English. And was still confidently believed to be the sovereign cure for all everyday wounds, not to mention coughs, colds and colic. One either swallowed a dose or rubbed it in, as commonsense or preference dictated.

But to come back to Chamboeuf. There too, still on La Place, is the Mairie, and many, many a time has Papa Meilland’s patriotic young self cheered himself hoarse to behold Monsieur the Mayor of their village emerge from their Mairie on July 14th, proudly wearing his red, white and blue mayoral

Antoine

sash and looking and doubtless feeling ten feet taller to represent on that glorious day the majesty of the French Republic.

Other days, shrunk down to ordinary size, Monsieur their Mayor would be hard at it, working in the fields or vineyards, just like any other inhabitant of quiet Chamboeuf.

In those days, of course, Papa Meilland went by the name of Antoine, given to him in Holy Baptism with him still bawling so lustily he all but drowned the voice of Monsieur the Curé, or so his scandalised mother used to complain.

He was one of four children and his parents had a small farm, two or three cows, a couple of fields of wheat and potatoes, an orchard, a small vineyard, a large vegetable garden every inch meticulously cultivated, any number of fowls, ducks, geese and rabbits; and like everyone in those parts in those days, a fine contented pig – Seigneur Cochon, Lord Pig, to quote his father's well-worn witticism.

But don't run away with the romantic notion that life was poetically easy on that small farm. Far from it. His parents had to toil hard all the hours God gave, and even then money was eternally tight. They ate meat only on Sundays and on special occasions; coffee was even a rarer treat relished only on truly red-letter days. But don't imagine for one moment, however, that they all half-starved. Nothing of the sort. They always tucked into the heartiest, the most wholesome of meals. Papa Meilland's mother had been a cook in a grand house before she married and she knew how to work savoury miracles with the good vegetables and fruit they grew on their small farm. Indeed, no banquet yet has ever tasted half as good to Papa Meilland as the crisp golden chips his mother used to pile high on their plates flanked with a mountain of green salad; or her steaming, thick vegetable soup helped out with a thrifty salted morsel of last year's Lord Pig.

Antoine

Nobody, by the way, was ever in the least sentimental about Lord Pig. Indeed, for every family in the village and for miles around it was one of the merriest days of the year when one's friends and neighbours came in to help kill the year's Lord Pig with merciful speed; and then set to work to make the delicious sausages, and the salted this and that which would last the family the whole year to come – with the utmost economy, of course. And as his father always solemnly pointed out on these busy merry days, not only did one appreciate every scrap of good Lord Pig from the tip of his tail to his fat pink cheeks, but his Lordship was always treated with every consideration. He was well fed, well housed, enjoyed the most care-free, the best of lives whilst it lasted, which was more than one could say of many a poor devil of a human being. He knew! None better. Had he not fought in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870? This bitter war may seem centuries ago to people today, but to Papa Meilland's father it seemed only yesterday; and many a winter evening did Papa Meilland sit there, his hair standing on end on his young head to hear his father tell all over again how he had been in Paris all through the terrible siege with the Prussian guns thundering away night and day, and the people of Paris falling dead of starvation and cold in the streets. And one is not fastidious when one is famished, said his father, so there was not a horse, a cat, a dog, a pigeon, a rat left in all the city; they were eaten, every one.

Maybe it was his father's memories of those cruel hungry days that made their small farm so regular a port of call for the Tuesday beggars. In those days, the local beggars, some of them talented professionals one has to admit, had a regular weekly round, calling at this or that village on set days of the week. Tuesday, it was always Chamboeuf; and never once, no matter how tight money was, never once at any time was