原书缺页

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Victorine

by Frances Parkinson Keyes

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To

MARIE MOUTON NEHRBASS

A lady who combines all
Spiritual with all social graces
Whom I love very dearly
And who, I am proud to say,
Has adopted me as
Cousin Frances

NOTE

The early part of the work on *Victorine* was done at Compensation, the place acquired in Crowley on purpose to give me a writing center in my *mise-en-scène,* which I then thought would be used for only one book. I was the happy possessor of the house and grounds comprising this pleasant property for ten years, but sold it under the mistaken impression that my work in southwestern Louisiana was practically done; so *Blue Camellia* was finished and *Victorine* continued in near-by Lafayette, where I was fortunately able to rent a *pied-à-terre.* Less fortunately, this nice little house was sold over my head and the major part of the work on *Victorine* has been done in the slave quarters connected with Beauregard House in New Orleans, with a brief return to Lafayette and Crowley for the purpose of checking and rechecking in the interests of authenticity. The Town House Motel in Lafayette was my headquarters while this was being done.

F. P. K.

PART ONE

Spring and Summer, 1926

The Gold Slippers

ONE

WELL, thanks a million, Captain Bob. No one but you could have ferreted this out for me."

"Il n'y a pas de quoi, cher, and after all, it did not take much ferreting. You talk as if I were the hero of a *roman policier*—not just a small-town mayor whose hobby is horticulture."

"Lafayette isn't such a small town any more. And I seem to remember a piece in the paper that said you were equally at home in banking, education, politics—*and* your garden. At that, it didn't go into your war record."

"Oh, people are beginning to forget about the war—just as well, too! As for the rest, *des compliments, cher—rien que des compliments.*"

Prosper Villac laughed, but just why he could not have said. Perhaps it was because he was always amused at Bob Mouton's complete unconsciousness at switching from English to French and from French to English, when he was talking casually; it was something he always had done, and probably always would do, and it did not matter much in Lafayette, where almost everyone, except newcomers who did not count, was bilingual anyway. When he went over to Crowley on business, which he often had occasion to do, he sometimes had to stop and translate, because Crowley, with its more generally Anglo-Saxon background than any other place in the vicinity, was not predominantly bilingual. But, as it happened, Prosper Villac, who came from there, was very nearly so. His father Claude Villac had been an Acadian with a reasonably good education, and was fluent in both what was locally known as *français de l'Académie* and the more typical Cajun dialect. Prosper's mother Lavinia, who

had been graduated with honors at the Academy of the Sacred Heart in Grand Coteau, and taken special courses at the then recently founded Sophie Newcomb College in New Orleans, spoke French with a slight accent, but with complete grammatical precision. She had seen to it that both Prosper and his younger sister Anne Marie had been as thoroughly schooled as she was.

Perhaps it was on account of Anne Marie, and not on account of Captain Bob's unusual though pleasant manner of speech that Prosper was laughing now, with a sense of happy triumph. He had adored his sister from the moment that the new baby, whose tiny head was haloed with golden down, and who opened soft blue eyes to stare at him, had been cautiously put into his arms by their father, who stood watchfully by, because the three-year-old boy, who was usually up to some deviltry, could not be trusted to handle an infant with knowledgeable or tender care. But Prosper had given his father and everyone else a surprise; he not only seemed to know by instinct exactly what to do for Anne Marie, but he loved doing it; and he had gone on loving to do anything he could for her ever since: he comforted her when she cried, helped to take care of her when she was sick, taught her the first lessons she learned, petted her in and out of season, and showered her with presents, whether there was any special reason for a gift or not. It did not need to be Christmas or Easter or her birthday; if he heard her express a wish, or guessed that she had one that was unfulfilled, he hastened to see that it was granted if he possibly could. He had begun by breaking open a piggy bank to buy her a doll that bleated mah-mah if you turned a key; he had saved his allowance to give her a turquoise ring "matching her eyes" before it had occurred to anyone else that she was old enough to have a ring—as indeed her mother said she was not. He had forestalled fashions in fancy belt buckles, gold lockets and pearl beads when he became conscious that girls liked such things; and now he had succeeded, thanks to Captain Bob, in getting her a fine specimen of the so-called "Lost Camellia" for which she had been hankering.

She had, apparently, inherited her passionate love of flowers from her maternal grandmother, Mary Winslow, whose knowledge of them and skill with them were bywords throughout the countryside and beyond it. His mother regarded a well-ordered garden as an essential part of any properly run establishment; but her feeling for one did not go beyond this. It was Anne Marie who had kept digging and

weeding and watering, and refused to leave any of the work in her own special corner to the capable old yard man, Sylvestre, if she could help it; and she trespassed elsewhere on what he considered his preserve. Moreover, she was not satisfied to have the spacious grounds encircled with golden day lilies, mauve azaleas, purple iris, pink crape myrtle and white chrysanthemums; various other blooms followed each other in quick succession, so that one or the other was sure to be blossoming throughout the year, like her roses. She wanted all sorts of exotic plants in her garden as well; and, as a matter of course, she wanted every known variety of camellia. The result was that the Villacs' flower garden was now far and away the largest and most beautiful in Crowley, which was saying a great deal; and when it seemed to Prosper and to their mother that there could not possibly be anything more Anne Marie would want to add, she had started talking about this Lost Camellia.

She had read about it in some book, one of those ponderous volumes about gardens into which she was continually sticking her pretty little nose, instead of confining her reading to light novels and very few of those, like most of the girls they knew. In this tome, whatever it was, Anne Marie had read about a camellia that had been imported into the United States early in the first wave of camellia popularity, and which had since been lost, to all intents and purposes, from collectors' knowledge. Even its original designation had somehow disappeared from view and, consequently, from commerce; so now there were only references to it, no available specimens; in the references it was called the Lost Camellia. . . .

"It can't really be lost," Anne Marie had insisted. "It *was* brought into the United States—the book says so. It must be *somewhere*."

"How many kinds of camellias have you got in the garden now?" Lavinia inquired, looking up from some equally weighty tome she was reading and which, Prosper guessed, though he could not see the title, was about rice, for she felt just the same way about this that Anne Marie did about camellias.

"Only sixty. And it wouldn't matter if I had six hundred, as long as there was one I had heard about that was lost. I'd want to find it."

"To change the subject for a moment, have you telephoned Dale Fontenot yet?"

"No, not yet."

"He really wants an answer about that picnic at Cypre-

mort Point. You ought to be reasonable and give it to him. He has to make his plans."

"He's welcome to make all the plans he wants. He can have a picnic at Cypremort Point without me."

"You know that the whole idea of the picnic is to have you there."

"Yes, I know, Mother. But I keep telling Dale—"

That was Anne Marie all over. She kept telling Dale Fontenot, one of the nicest fellows that ever lived, who had a fine sugar plantation, Sapphira, on Bayou Cypremort, that she hadn't made up her mind yet. She kept saying the same thing to Didier Benoit, who was also one of the nicest fellows that ever lived, and who didn't own a sugar plantation himself, because his father was still living, but who, with his brother Maurice, would be heir to Pecan Grove, just out of Lafayette on the Broussard Road. She said the same thing to half a dozen other fellows, too. It seemed to Prosper—and he thought it seemed the same way to Lavinia—that every unattached man or boy, and some that were supposedly already firmly anchored, who looked at Anne Marie, wanted her to make up her mind to marry him. What was worse, this had been going on for years and years already. Here she was, nearly twenty-four, and she hadn't even reached her teens when Prosper and Lavinia had been obliged to start brushing boys off the porch. If she hadn't been the sweet, feminine type she was—golden haired, pink cheeked, blue eyed, with a disposition as lovely as her looks—people would inevitably have started saying it was evident she really wanted to be an old maid. But it was impossible to say that about Anne Marie. She was obviously made to love and be loved. Only she couldn't make up her mind. . . .

Prosper started to tease her about this as she sat, a pink finger still slipped in the book about camellias she had been reading, to mark the place. Then he wished he hadn't.

"You haven't made up your mind yet, either, have you?" she asked innocently. The innocence was not assumed; Prosper felt reasonably sure of that. Gossip, however slightly tinged with malice, was somehow always silenced by Anne Marie's presence; it did not belong in the same room with her. As for scandal, he doubted if she had ever connected it with anyone she knew. But, as he stole a quick glance at his mother, he saw that her mouth, normally a firm one, had tightened, which was always a bad sign. If he had been pinned down, he would have admitted she must have known that he had been going, with increasing frequency, to the dance hall

over August Scholtze's grocery store, to which August had given the highfalutin title of Salle des Tuileries; but neither Prosper's mother, nor anyone else, had pinned him down so far. He eluded such pinning rather well. However, should anything of the kind happen, he might also be cornered into admitting that the main reason he went there was not to dance, but to see Titine, the amusing and arresting girl who played the accordion, and who did not always remain with the rest of the band, but wove her way among the merrymakers when they were taking time off for a drink between dances. Sometimes she sang droll little Cajun songs, interspersed with still droller commentaries, as she wandered; and sometimes she stopped to chat for a moment or two with the patrons, at which times she was wittier still; and the way she laughed at her own sallies was very contagious. Besides, she was very good to look at, and the closer she came, the more alluring she appeared. Of course, August could not have an open bar because of that stupid Prohibition law; but there was one of sorts in a small space partitioned off behind the grocery store downstairs, and another behind the dance hall upstairs; and a few little tables were scattered in plain sight around a cleared space. It was the easiest thing in the world to secure setups and snacks, but Titine did not serve these. She always carried her accordion and it was distinctly understood that such pay as she received was for playing, and that August saw to that, as he did in the case of the other musicians. It was perhaps a little less distinctly understood that Titine was August's girl, but very few of his patrons would have been willing to take a chance on a misunderstanding about that, either. They were careful to keep their side of the badinage with Titine free from bawdiness, and though they welcomed her jovially when she stopped beside them, they never pointedly asked her to do so. She was equally discreet; she never stayed too long beside any one group, stopped too often in any one place, or leaned too close to anyone. She had not done so in Prosper's case. It was really almost as absurd to imagine that there was, or could be, anything between them, as to imagine that he and Paula Bennett, the sheriff's old maid cousin, were having an affair. To be sure, he and Paula were often alone at the Claudia Rice Mill, where he was the manager and she the secretary, when their respective duties kept them overtime; but he knew there had been gossip about that, also, and that his mother must have heard it; she was probably already dreaming up some way of seeing that at least two other employees of the rice mill would be

kept overtime whenever Paula was. Lord, Paula must be ten years older than he was—well, five anyway, and she was the one woman of his acquaintance who, as far as he knew, had never had a suitor with either honorable or dishonorable intentions. It was a pity that matters of that sort could not be more evenly proportioned—the elderly aunt, Amanda Eaton, with whom Paula lived, never had to brush boys off their porch; and Anne Marie, on the other hand, had so many applicants for her favors that she could not make up her mind—at least not about men, only about camellias. If she had been thinking of Dale or Didier or any of the others, she wouldn't have been concentrating on some lost specimen; neither would she have been asking awkward questions, which made Lavinia Villac's mouth tighten; she would have been too much absorbed in rosy dreams. . . .

"No, I haven't made up my mind, either," Prosper said rather shortly, in answer to Anne Marie's question. "Why on earth should I want to get married and leave home when I've got a sister like you?" he went on, less shortly, and then added quickly, "and a mother like ours?"

"Well, why should I want to get married when I have a brother like you and a mother like ours?" Anne Marie responded sweetly. "Haven't I everything in the world I could ask for already?"

"You don't ask for things. That isn't your way. But sometimes you want them without asking for them. Right now, you want that Lost Camellia, don't you?"

"Well, rather."

"In which case I haven't the slightest doubt Prosper will find it for you," Lavinia said rather dryly. "Have you two any idea how late it is? Since, for a wonder, we're all home and by ourselves—no visit to the Tuileries tonight, I take it, and Dale and Didier both camping beside their telephones waiting for messages they won't get—suppose we go to bed early, just this once?"

So his mother did know about Titine, Prosper told himself, tossing with unaccustomed restlessness from one side of his bed to the other. Not, he repeated mentally, that there was really anything to know—worse luck! And Anne Marie wanted that Lost Camellia—wanted it bad—and her birthday was fast approaching. She certainly had a present coming to her from her brother. It was up to him to find that camellia, without any more dares from their mother, if he were to give her anything that would have much meaning to

her.

His specialty, like his mother's, was not flowers, but rice, though he did not take his work at the smaller of the two family mills very seriously, and never would, as long as she actually managed the Claudia as well as the Monrovia, though, nominally, he was in charge of the former. He admired his sister's garden and sometimes, because he knew this would please her, offered to help her work in it; but, uncoached by her, the only varieties of camellias in it that he could have identified offhand, were Alba Plena and Pink Perfection and Governor Mouton . . . Governor Mouton. . . .

No longer restless or drowsy, but delightfully alert, Prosper sat up in bed with an exclamation of pleasure, which he did not even attempt to smother. Governor Mouton was the one which had been named for an ancestor of Captain Bob's; and Captain Bob himself—now mayor of Lafayette, and one of the most versatile and agreeable men of Prosper's acquaintance—knew almost everything in the world there was to know about camellias. The next afternoon, without waiting for the Claudia to shut down, Prosper left poor Paula still chained to her typewriter, jumped into his dilapidated Oldsmobile and chugged away, thanking his lucky stars that there was less mud than usual at this season, and hardly noticing the great emerald green stretches of the rice fields through which his road passed.

He did not even stop at City Hall when he reached Lafayette. He figured that Captain Bob would have left by then for his nursery, and he was right. The mayor, obviously unoppressed by cares of office, was walking up and down between neat rows of shrubs when Prosper first caught sight of him, and had stopped to inspect the leaves of one small bush with loving care by the time his visitor joined him. Prosper, who at the moment had only one thing on his mind, cut his host's cordial greeting short.

"Captain Bob, did you ever hear of some flower called the Lost Camellia?"

"Pourquoi pas?"

"I didn't ask you why not. I asked you if you had."

Captain Bob straightened up and looked at his caller with an expression of injured dignity. He was a rather short man, his figure comfortably rounded by good Cajun food and his color pleasantly heightened by good homemade wine, which few right-minded citizens of Lafayette had seen fit to abolish from their daily fare by anything so unworthy of notice as the Volstead Act. He wore a small mustache and altogether

was far more suggestive of a Gallic bourgeois than an upper-class American in his appearance. But, like the governor and the general who were among his progenitors, he could give an impression of importance whenever it suited him to do so. It suited him now.

"Of course I have heard of it. The merest amateur in horticulture has done so. *Et moi, je ne suis pas*—"

"Look, Captain Bob! You know my sister Anne Marie is almost as crazy about camellias as you are. She has read about this damn flower in some book, and she's hell-bent to have one in her garden. Besides, she has a birthday coming up—"

"*Et pourquoi tu n'a pas dit cela tout de suite?* Well, never mind why you didn't tell me right away instead of asking me such a question. Let me inform you, my friend, that the beautiful specimen is not lost any more; I found it myself, not so long ago."

"Where?"

"In St. Francisville. I recognized it at once, of course, from the descriptions I had read of it—probably in the same book your sister read. Just how it got to St. Francisville I am not sure yet. Perhaps no one is. But that does not matter. I found it in a neglected old garden last winter. *C'est la même chose.* Only it is not called the Lost Camellia in St. Francisville. It is called Landrethii."

"Then if I went to St. Francisville I could buy a plant, perhaps?"

Captain Bob's eyes twinkled as he stroked his chin with a plump hand adorned with a large seal ring. He had ceased to stand on his dignity. He was his usual genial self again.

"Of course you may have a plant, but you do not need to go to St. Francisville or to buy one. *Je me ferai le plaisir*—"

"You have a Lost Camellia or a Landrethii or whatever you choose to call it right here?"

Captain Bob sighed in mock distress, while his eyes continued to twinkle. "It has escaped your notice, perhaps, that I am doing everything I can to beautify the city of Lafayette with proper landscape gardening," he said with mild sarcasm. "You are a nice boy, Prosper, but I have never thought you were especially observant. *Bien sur j'en ai; j'en ai deux.* It will give me great pleasure to let you present one of these specimen plants to your sister with my compliments and your love. I should like to add my love, too, but I have purposely refrained from permitting myself to become enthralled in that quarter. Not that I do not appreciate Anne Marie. But