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# THE STORY OF THE LITTLE MAMSELL

**By Charlotte Niese**

**Translated from the German by Miss E. C. Emerson**

"Have you got something good? Then put the basket down and go along home!" This was one usual greeting from old Mahlmann when we brought him provisions. He was very old, and rarely out of his bed, only now and then on warm summer days he sat on the bench before his tiny cottage and basked in the sun. If a painter had ever strayed to our uninteresting little town he would certainly have put old Mahlmann's characteristic head on his canvas. He had a clever old face with a firm mouth and glittering eyes whose expression was so sombre and at the same time observant that we children imagined old Mahlmann was different from other people. And indeed so he was. To begin with he never thanked anyone for bringing him food; in fact he criticized freely the benefits he received. If one brought what was not to his liking, he would say: "Go home and tell your mother old Mahlmann is not a waste-tub where you throw what's not fit to eat. You needn't come again either!"

In this manner he got himself into disfavor with many a good housewife, who would protest by all that was holy that never would she send the hoary old sinner anything again. But Mahlmann never cared. His needs were few and there was always some one to satisfy them.

For me the old man with the sombre eyes had a peculiar fascination; I think from the fact that he once told me a wonderful ghost-story. There were at least half a dozen witches and a whole dozen ghosts in this tale, and for many nights after I went to bed in tears, and only on condition some one sat with me till I fell asleep. Still the spell of these horrors was so strong upon me that I visited Mahlmann all the more» and often bought him something out of my own slender pocket-money to induce him to tell stories. I was not always successful, for the old man had morose moods, when he spoke little. At other times he would tell us his own experiences, and his life had not lacked variety. He had been in Paris at the time of the Revolution, as servant to a Danish officer of high rank, and his description "how the fine gentlemen all rode in an old butcher's cart to have their heads chopped off," left nothing to the imagination. "My Baron was once near going himself to the 'Gartine,' or whatever they call it," he told me one day when he was especially talkative; "but he got well out of it. He was one that could turn the heads of the women, and it was a woman got him safely out of the city."

Mahlmann sat on the bench before the door and stretched his skinny hands to the sun. About his shoulders he had a ragged coat which had once been red, but was now a coat of many colors. It was so hot that I took

shelter in the shadow of the doorway, but the chilly old man was shivering. I had brought him a great piece of cake and now offered it to him. He slowly reached for it, and slowly ate it up.

"That's like what I used to get in Paris. Dear me! My Baron was a handsome man, and for my age, I must have been about fifteen, I was a sharp lad—only I couldn't rightly understand their French lingo, which put me out. But I understood the affair of the little Mamsell well enough. She lived opposite; her father was a grocer and she helped in the shop. At first we didn't buy anything there, till a long-legged Englishman told my Baron that this grocer kept a fine Hungarian wine. It was out of the King's wine-cellar and he wasn't drinking any more wine because he had gone to the 'Gartine/ And a few sensible people had divided the wine, which was only right, and it was to be had very cheap. Then I went over and bought some. Mamsell Manon was in the shop, and laughed till she cried over my way of speaking. Then I got angry, and when I brought my Baron the wine I said that I wasn't going again to that stupid Mamsell who couldn't even understand German. The next day my master was for sending me again, but I rebelled. 'Herr Baron,' I said, 'you can give me the whip because I'm only a servant, but I won't go again to that silly girl opposite, and if you make me I'll accuse you to the authorities of being an aristocrat. We're all free and equal now, I can understand that much French, and I'll be sorry if you have to go to the "Gartine," but I won't be ill-treated!"

"My Baron looked at me queerly, but he listened to reason, and I didn't have to go to the Mamsell again because he went himself. And then he made friends with Mamsell Manon, and she came over and brought the King's wine herself. When I knew her better she wasn't bad; she laughed a good deal, and sang all the time like a little bird, but one can't go against nature. And she was a good girl too, for once when my Baron put his arm around her and tried to kiss her, she boxed his ears. I never knew my master could look such a fool. The fine gentlemen don't always get their way."

Mahlmann nodded once or twice and ate some crumbs of cake before he went on.

"No, they don't always get their way," he continued. "My Baron wanted to stay longer in Paris, though many of his noble friends lay already in the lime-pit with their heads off. He didn't want to go away, and sat half the day in the shop with Mamsell Manon, and said a Dane wasn't afraid of the French—they'd not do anything to him! Things never turn out as one expects, and one evening my Baron was fetched away by a couple of long soldiers. That was unpleasant I can tell you. My master had been at me sometimes with the whip, and I didn't care specially about him; but to be all alone in such a crazy town where there's not a Christian that understands a word you say, it's enough to give you the horrors. Then the next morning Mamsell Manon came and talked to me, and cried dreadfully, and stroked my cheeks, and I understood her all right in spite of that jabbering French. Mamsell thought a cousin of hers had got the Baron put in prison, because he was jealous. I don't know what more she said, but I soon found out what she wanted, and my hair stood on end. She wanted to borrow my confirmation suit that I had only had on three times; once at the confirmation, then for communion, and then when I came to the Baron to apply for the place. It was lying in my trunk because I had always worn livery, and when the French wouldn't have liveries any more, the Baron gave me an old gray suit of his. When Mamsell insisted upon having my best clothes I naturally said, 'nong, nong,' and shook my head till I was dizzy, but Manon patted me and coaxed me, and sure as the world she got her way, as women always do. All at once I had got my trunk unlocked and she ran away with my confirmation coat and all the rest of the tilings. And I was still looking after her with my mouth open, when she came back dressed like a man!"

Mahlmann was silent for a moment and wrapped himself with a shiver in his red coat.

"Dear me! how cold it always is now; it used to be warm in July. Things never turn out as one expects. The little Mamseli had promised me faithfully I should have my good clothes back—yes, indeed—bless you! But I must say she looked downright pretty in my best black suit, and I saw why she hadn't worn clothes of the Baron's, or of her own father's. He was short and fat, and the Baron was tall and broad-shouldered, and the little one would not have looked well in their things. Now she looked like a real boy, and like two boys we ran to one of the many prisons where the aristocrats were, I With a basket and she with a basket, with bread and writing-paper, and we took them to the wife of one of the gaolers who earned a lot of money by selling them. The aristocrats were always writing letters, which shows what do-nothings they were; for an honest man has a tongue to talk with, and doesn't need to make marks on paper to kill time. We went to the great prison two or three times; I stayed outside because I was afraid, but Mamseli Manon went in and talked with the gaolers. What more she did I don't know; I waited outside and thought of my confirmation suit, for the little Mamseli wasn't very careful of it. She had had it three days and took it home with her, and I never knew where it was when she was in the shop with her ordinary clothes on. It was always dark when we went out, then she'd come for me and we'd start\* I must say she always brought me some\* thing, a drop of wine or a bit of cake. The evening of the fourth day when I was waiting for her at the gate of the prison, someone seized hold of my shoulder and said in German, 'Forward!' It was my Baron who stood before me all at once and was in a devil of a hurry to get away. 'Franz!' he said to me, 'be quick or I am lost!' 'Where is the little Mamsell?' I asked, 'and where is my confirmation suit?' Then he grabbed me by the arm and dragged me through the streets till I was out of breath. 'She will come,' he said half to himself, 'to-morrow the mistake will be cleared up, when I am out of the city. Her father will save her.' But though he was still pulling me along, I stopped short. 'Herr Baron,' I said, 'the little Mamsell has got on my best black suit, and the trousers were made out of the Herr Pastor's own, and I tell you if I don't get my suit that I was confirmed in, I'll go to the gentlemen of the head-chopping company and tell them you've broken out of prison, which they certainly won't like. For by rights all the aristocrats ought to go to the "Gartine," or whatever you call it, so that we can have "égalité" and liberty, and we poor fellows can amuse ourselves instead of having all the good times used up by the great gentlemen!' Then he looked at me as if he would like to kill me, but he couldn't do that, so he tried to talk me round with promises. Dear me! what didn't the man promise me! A bag full of money, and a pig every year, and every year a black suit, if I would only go quietly home with him. And he put on my finger on the spot a ring with a red stone that I had always fancied, so I went along quietly with him to his apartment that I had the key of. The Baron slept in my attic room, and I had to lie on the sofa in his best room to look as if I was trying to play the gentleman. The next day the Baron went out twice in a blue blouse with a cap on his head, and the second morning we both went on foot out of the city, in clothes that I wouldn't have liked to touch

with a pair of tongs!"

Mahlmann stopped and rubbed his left knee. "What rheumatism I do have! And in the month of July! Well, well, it's always the way when you begin to get old; I suppose I must be about ninety. My grandfather's aunt, though, was more than a hundred and only died then from eating too much at a pig-killing!" He sighed and nodded. "We've all got to be put under ground some day, but it's queer just the same what a difference there is about dying. I'm old now, and that time when I went through Paris in the early morning with a rag-bag on my back, and my Baron with just such another one, was the first time in my life that I ever thought of death, and it isn't a thought for a boy. It was because the carts were passing us with the aristocrats who were going to have their heads chopped off. I'd seen those old carts often enough and naturally thought nothing of it, because it was a good thing that the fine *Monsieurs* and *Madames* were got rid off; but this time it startled me, for the little Mamsell was in one of the ramshackle old wagons too. And the strangest of all was she still had on my confirmation suit that made her look like a pretty boy. She had folded her hands and looked as if she was going to communion. There weren't many people in the street, it was so early, and I was just about to open my mouth and cry out that Mamsell had on my black suit and I wanted her to give it back, when my Baron clapped his hand over my mouth and I nearly choked. 'Donner-wetter' how he gripped me! But only a minute, for suddenly his strength gave out and he stood stock-still and began to tremble. He had looked at Manon and she at him. Such a smile came over her face and she bowed her head, and then the cart drove quickly on. My master stood in one spot for as much as a quarter of an hour, and big tears rolled down his cheeks. 'A horrible mistake!' he murmured, 'she told me she was in no danger, that her father would get her free the next day—he could not have found her! Heavenly Father, couldst thou not have pity on her youth and beauty?' He said much more and I got impatient when he wouldn't go on, and said, 'Herr Baron, the little Mamsell is gone for good and all, I suppose, and my black suit too, so there's no chance of my ever seeing that again, but if we stay here much longer they'll take us to the "Gartine" too, and the little Mamsell wouldn't wish that, or why should she have made all this fuss about my suit. And by this time she's certainly in heaven, and that's a very good place they say!'

"I talked like this to my Baron, till he began to walk, and went faster and faster, out through the city gates, and never looked back for me till we came to some houses where English lived in a village a few miles from Paris, where the French didn't make such a time as in the city itself. The English were going back to their own country, as all this was rather uncomfortable, and we traveled with them by slow stages to the coast, and then in a small boat to England, where they eat their beef too red for my taste; In other ways they live well enough, and I would have had nothing to complain of if my Baron had been a little more cheerful. He had forgotten how to laugh, had grown pale and silent, and nights instead of sleeping he lay groaning and muttering in French and Danish to himself. In his dreams he was always calling for Manon, a senseless thing to do since she couldn't come!"

The old man looked thoughtfully toward the setting sun. "When I thought over the whole affair I felt dreadfully sorry about little Mam-sell. She was such a pretty little thing with short brown hair, and such laughing eyes as if there were no trouble or sorrow in the world. I was only a green lad then, and knew nothing about women, but the memory of her smile as she sat in the cart stayed by me. Afterward I once saw a baby lying in its coffin, that looked as content as Mamsell Manon did that day, going to lay her white neck on the block, I grew more reasonable as time went on and forgot my vexation over my black suit. The Baron treated me very decently, I can't complain. Later on, though, he decided we had better part, for I had grown too free in my manners in Paris, He gave me a good present and if I hadn't had all sorts of bad luck I might be a rich man now. But it's always so, there's no 'égalité' in this country, and if we don't have a good revolution it will never be any different. Though it doesn't always turn out well for everyone even then, The French grocer who did such a good business with the King's wine was one of those who could never get enough aristocrats killed; and finally his own flesh and blood went to her death for the sake of one of them. If misfortune is bound to come there's no getting out of it, and it came to me the time they said I belonged to that band of thieves there was such a talk about. I defended myself well, but all the same I was put in gaol in Gluckstadt, and there's no knowing how long I might have stayed there if it hadn't been for a lucky chance that brought the Danish king to see the prison, along with a lot of fine gentlemen. All of us convicts had to stand in rank and file while old Friedrich inspected us. And who should be behind the King but my Baron, with white hair and bent back, and a great star on his breast. They were going slowly past us, when I coughed, and he started and came close to me. 'Do I not know you?' he said, and I laughed a little. 'Herr Baron, do you remember the story of my best black suit?' He looked rather queer and drew his hand across his forehead as if he were wiping something off, and passed on. The next day one of the wardens took me to the Baron's house, and he asked why I was in prison. When he had heard all about it, he sighed and spoke softly to himself and then sighed again. At last he got up and put his hand on my arm. 'You knew her, Franz, and because you knew her——' he could get no further and I was taken away, and soon after pardoned out. So I saw that the Baron remembered my confirmation suit; and ten years after I saw him again in Kiel, in a bath-chair, for he couldn't walk. I went to see him and he sent me ten thalers, and his servant told me he had great trouble with his sons. He is long dead, which is a pity, for he often sent me something. Everything comes to an end, everything. In the morning when I lie in bed and can't sleep, I often think of little Manon who died in my black suit in the midst of the aristocrats, where she didn't belong, and my black suit didn't belong there either. Things never turn out as one expects, never!"

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