

Bedtime Story

By Woodhobb

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With the exception of statements made by American soldiers, all dialog is in French.

“Gran, Gran! Tell us a story!” The three young ones demanded.

A tiny smile of contentment brightened the old woman’s face as she straightened from her work. Her desk was as neat and tidy as the rest of the room. A fresh sheet of paper was rolled into the small, portable typewriter and a stack of completed pages lay face down beside it.

“A story. Well, which one would you like?” The evening light had faded from the room. The old woman sighed contentedly; story time with the children, although it didn’t come often enough, it was always the best time of any day.

“Tell a Grandfather story!” They clamored.

The old woman smiled. A Grandfather story...she knew what the next answer would be. The children loved her stories, but she knew that tonight they would ask for their favorite.

“Oh, which Grandfather story would you like?” Gran asked, her aged yet pixie-like face was the picture of innocence.

“Oh, Gran,” said the youngest with exasperation, “you know...The Sergeant Story.”

As she’d expected, The Sergeant Story. “Oh, that old story?” she teased gently. “Not one of the new ones?”

Playing along, little Jenna responded in kind, “Oh, Gran, not a new one! Grampy’s here; he doesn’t want a new one!”

“Do you suppose that Grampy wants to hear The Sergeant Story?”

“Sure he does!” Her two older brothers nodded their agreement to Jenna’s proclamation.

With a quiet chuckle Gran conceded, “Very well. Let’s sit by the fire. Maybe Grampy will make cocoa for us.”

Gran turned and gifted her husband of many years with her warm smile. Time had turned his dark hair nearly white, but it had not touched the twinkle in his eyes. He stood as tall and straight today as he had when they first met.

“At your service, Madam,” he bowed slightly then departed for the kitchen.

“Once there was a very famous soldier who lived in France,” began Gran. “His name was Armand Bouchard. Armand studied and worked hard, and eventually became a very good soldier.

“When Armand was a young man he fought in a terrible war. He was very brave and very smart, and he was a good leader. His men loved and respected him. They would follow him into any battle because they trusted him. They knew he would watch out for them. Armand helped the generals and all of his men to win the war. Everyone was so happy then. The war was over and all of the people moved back into their houses. They all thought that there would never be another war because...”

“Because war hurts so many people and hurts the animals and everybody cries,” supplied Jenna.

“Yes, that’s true,” Gran agreed. “The young man went home for a little while to help his mother and father repair their home, but he couldn’t stay. He was a soldier, an officer now, in the French army and his duty was to protect France.”

“Before long the young man fell in love and married a pretty English girl whose name was Elizabeth.”

“And they had a little baby! Right Gran?”

“Yes, Jenna, they had a little baby boy.”

“Oh, here’s Grampy with our cocoa. Thank you, dear,” she added, loving smile touched her lips as her husband set the tray on a nearby table. The cocoa distributed, Grampy relaxed into a side chair. The children settled back with their mugs, eager for more of their story.

“Many years went by and the young officer got older. His little baby boy, whom he named Emile, grew up to be a handsome young man. Just like his father, Emile joined the French Army. He met a beautiful young woman, fell in love, and got married. Before long..”

“They had a little baby!” Jenna squealed with delight.

Gran chuckled, “Yes, they did. And do you know who that little baby was?”



“Oh, it was you, Gran!” Supplied Charles, Jenna’s older brother. Jenna’s eyes sparkled over her cocoa mug. She loved Gran’s stories and she loved babies.

“Then the dark times began. A man named Adolph Hitler decided that he wanted to be the ruler of the world. He had a country of his own to rule, Germany, but he wanted more. He had many soldiers and tanks and guns. He sent his soldiers to take over as many countries as they could. Poor little France couldn’t fight against him. The German soldiers came to our town.

They told us that France belonged to Germany now. They took our food for their soldiers. They took our guns, our wine, and everything else that they wanted. They took our Madonna statue from the church. They even took some of our people. But the one thing that they could not take was our French spirit. Many people quietly resisted the German soldiers. We would hide the food and wine and guns. When the English and other soldiers came to help us, we would help them and hide them. Many people were badly hurt and many were killed for doing this, but did it all the same.

“This was Emile’s war, and he was away from home fighting in the war. But those are other stories. This story is one of The Grandfather’s, one of Armand’s stories, and so we will continue.

“Armand was no longer a young man; in fact he had gotten quite old and could no longer fight with the army. He retired to his home in this very town, but his heart and his mind were still with the army and the defense of his beloved France. Many of his neighbors, though, were concerned only with things that were closer to home, their own problems. They had forgotten that during all of those years that he was away, Armand had fought and bled to preserve France for them. It is so sad to tell, but to many of the people of this town, Armand was simply a foolish old man.”

Gran paused in her story. Tears glistened in her eyes at the memory of a valiant soul whose sacrifices had been forgotten. After a moment she went on.

“It was a difficult time for everyone. There were many rumors of the Allies coming to liberate France. It was hard to wait for them, but that was what we must do. Wait and watch. Finally the day arrived! Somehow, Grandfather Armand knew that the American soldiers were coming. He dressed in his General’s uniform. He had not worn it in a very long time, but today was special. Today he would finally be able to help.

“In the excitement of the moment, the long-awaited liberation of France, Grandfather forgot his age. He forgot that he was no longer in the army. In his mind he was a young man once more. Dressed in his old uniform he made a grand entrance as he marched out from his home to greet the liberating American army.

“It was such a disappointment to Grandfather when just a handful of American soldiers, led by only a sergeant, entered the town. He had hoped for a battalion and at least a Colonel, but he had spent his whole life in the army; he knew how to improvise. Grandfather greeted the leader of the long-awaited American liberators in the formal French manner, a kiss on each cheek.”

The children giggled with anticipation.

“The American sergeant screwed up his face.” Gran demonstrated an exaggerated version of a long-ago event. She was rewarded with hoots of laughter from the children.

“Of course, all of this kissing is not the American way. The American sergeant was startled, and embarrassed about being kissed. It was clear from the looks on the faces of his men that they too were startled, and that they wanted to laugh at their sergeant’s discomfort.

“The sergeant’s men kept silent, but the townspeople did not. It was so very difficult to stand by and watch as they laughed and made fun of him when Grandfather behaved like the general he had been many years ago. Grandfather deserved to be remembered for his sacrifices and respected. Instead he was ridiculed by his own neighbors. Although he did not speak French, the sergeant seemed to realize what was happening. He felt compassion for the old soldier and came to Grandfather Armand’s rescue.

“‘Attention!’ he commanded his troop, and they all stood straight and tall while the General, reviewed them. The villagers thought this was quite a show and wondered what would happen next. They did not have long to wait.”

Three expectant faces turned to Gran, anticipating this most important part of their story.

With a grave nod of her head Gran continued. “Yes, in this very room the general and the sergeant met and reviewed the map, and then formulated their plan. That very map hangs on the wall right over there.” Gran pointed to a large, faded wall map that, after all these years, was still pinned in place.

“After conferring with the sergeant, Grandfather led the troop through the heart of the town and down the road in search of a place for their forward observation position.

“The sergeant had been very kind to Grandfather, but he still had a very dangerous job to do and he did not want Grandfather to get hurt. So, after they walked as far as the cemetery



he tried to thank Grandfather and send him back to the village. Grandfather was disappointed but he was also very tired and began to realize that he was no longer a young man.”

With a look of ‘you’re not getting it right’ Charles interrupted, “What about the lieutenant?”

“Oh, it’s getting late. I thought I’d just leave him out of the story this time,” Gran teased, knowing that to the children, the lieutenant was a critical part of the story.

“Gra-an! You’re ruining it!”

“Very well,” said Gran with a faux sigh of exasperation. “Well, while the men were marching down the road, who should come roaring up in a battered old jeep but their lieutenant.” In her best imitation of an impatient lieutenant Gran continued, “*Sergeant, what are you doing?*” the lieutenant demanded. *‘I thought I told you to find a place to set up an observation post.’* The lieutenant expected his sergeant to carry out the orders he gave. *‘Well, what’s taking so long?’* When the sergeant started to explain the lieutenant interrupted, *‘Oh, I was in the town. I heard about the brave and noble sergeant who was so kind to the French general.’* The grumpy lieutenant told Grandfather that he must go back to his home and let the soldiers do their job. Then without another word the lieutenant turned on his heel and strode away.

“Somewhat crestfallen, Grandfather was left standing in the middle of the dirt road as the thoroughly reprimanded sergeant led his squad away. The mission must be completed, but without the general’s help.

“They had travelled only a short way when they came to an old chateau. Hoping that it might prove to be adequate, the soldiers climbed the long stone steps to the entrance. They soon discovered that they could not see over the tall trees to the surrounding countryside; this chateau would not serve.

“As the men gathered to leave, the soldier who was on look-out duty by the gate yelled, *‘Krauts on the road!’* Tall stone walls of the courtyard surrounded them, there was no escape, so



the men scattered inside the chateau to hide.

They were barely out of sight when a convoy of German trucks rolled into the yard. German soldiers jumped from the trucks. Some began poking around the chateau to see if there was anything worth taking while others started to refuel the trucks. Oh dear! The sergeant and his men were trapped!

“Only moments before, the convoy had rumbled right past Grandfather, not giving him even a passing glance. No one is concerned with a limping old man in an ancient uniform. But perhaps they should be.

“Grandfather was an old man, yes, but a very brave and clever old man. He had a plan. He would create a diversion that just might save the lives of his American comrades. Limping along as quickly as he could, Grandfather followed the convoy into the chateau. Doffing his hat, he acted like the doddering old fool that his neighbors believed him to be. In his

raspy old voice he sang German and French songs and shuffled a little dance in the dust of the courtyard.”

Gran paused in the story, and to the children’s delight, she executed an imitation of her grandfather singing for the German soldiers.

“Curious, the German soldiers stopped poking about in the chateau and came over to watch Grandfather. Laughing and joking, the soldiers made fun of him, but Grandfather just kept up his ruse until finally the German officer called his men to climb back into their trucks. As they left, the German soldiers tossed coins into Grandfather’s hat as though he were a common street performer. Grandfather was a proud French general. Germans had occupied his beloved France for far too long; they were beneath his contempt. As the last truck drove out of sight Grandfather scornfully dumped the coins onto the ground and set his hat firmly upon his head. He called his American comrades to come out, ‘It is safe, now.’ He called.

“As you can imagine, the American sergeant and his men were very grateful. They had been caught with no way to escape and were vastly outnumbered. Grandfather saved them from a fight that would have ended badly for them. Although the good sergeant tried, it is very difficult to thank someone for saving your life, and to feel that you have done so adequately.

“‘Now,’ said Grandfather, ‘I recall that you must find a place from which to observe the area. I am reminded that the Chateau de Camine is just such a place. It is high upon a hill with an excellent view of the surrounding countryside. Show me your map. Yes, see, it is on this very road to Beaulieu, and very close. Pass the lake and walk up the hill, here.’ Grandfather pointed out the way on the sergeant’s map. Then he added, ‘I regret that I am not able to show you the way, but it has been a very busy day and I am quite tired. I shall rest here for a while and then walk home.’

“The sergeant thanked Grandfather for all of his help, saying, ‘It has been an honor to meet you, sir. I hope that we will meet again.’

“Ah, but they did meet again! And it was only minutes later.

“When the Americans went to secure the Chateau Da Camine they found that the Germans were already in position in that chateau. The Americans would have to fight to get them out. Grandfather heard the rifles and machine guns firing and knew that he must try to help his American comrades once again, for he knew this area very well. He knew that there was an old, hidden tunnel that ran underground from the chateau to the orchard near the road. Grandfather hurried up the road to find the sergeant and tell him. ‘Follow me, Sergeant.’ He said, ‘I will show you a safe way into the chateau. You will be able to capture the Germans and take the chateau.’

“The sergeant trusted him and allowed Grandfather to lead them to the tunnel entrance hidden among the trees. In through the cobwebs they all went, and then up the long, dark tunnel and into the chateau’s basement. The sergeant knew that Grandfather was very tired and that attacking the Germans would be very dangerous, so he asked Grandfather to help him by standing guard at the tunnel entrance.



"Then quietly, oh so quietly, the sergeant led his soldiers as they crept up the tall spiral staircase to the floor above. They stopped when they came to the solid oak door at the top. The sergeant tested the door, and then Wham! They burst through the door and into the room. The Germans were stunned by the sudden and completely unexpected, appearance of American soldiers in their midst. They gave up their weapons with barely a fight.

"The sergeant and his men were very pleased with their success and very proud of Grandfather. When the sergeant reported in to his grumpy lieutenant he explained how Grandfather had saved them all.

"You know, I believe that the lieutenant learned a great deal from his sergeant that day." Gran paused to consider and then continued, "He learned about compassion and respect. When it was time for the Americans to leave our town, the lieutenant, in his best military manner, marched his platoon in review down the main street, saluting Grandfather as he passed by."

Silence fell as Gran reached the end of her story. She glanced at each of the children. *"Someday this story will become almost real to each of them. I pray that it will not be a time of war."* With a silent sigh, Gran continued her prayer, *"I pray that they will never know the horror of war; but if they must learn that lesson, I pray that they remember the bravery and sacrifice of the general, the sergeant, and the lieutenant, and serve well."*

"Bed time," Grampy announced, his deep, quiet voice breaking the spell. Mugs replaced on the tray, the children thanked Gran for her story. Then each hugged Gran and Grampy in turn, and trooped off to bed.

"Bedtime for us, as well," Gran said, turning to her husband with a tired smile. Waving her hand toward the paper-stacked desk she added, "We leave for home tomorrow and I still have to pack."

"Grumpy lieutenant!" he harrumphed in mock sternness. "See if I tell you any more stories."



The End