

SARA WARE BASSETT



THE STORY OF
SILK

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by

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PLEASE NOTE

These books were written about 100 years ago and show the way people talked, thought, and acted back then. They tell the story of how resources like cotton, lumber, leather, and gold were developed—a process that depended on the hard work of many people. Sometimes the work was done by those who made the profits, and other times it was done by people who were not free, including enslaved individuals.

We know that some parts of these stories include ideas that we now understand to be hurtful and unfair. Our aim in republishing these books is not to support those old views but to share our history so we can all learn from it. By looking at the past, including its mistakes, we hope to learn important lessons that will help us create a kinder and fairer future.

We invite you to read these stories with an awareness of their time and to think about how far we have come—and how much work there is still to do.

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It Was A Race To Pick The Leaves



CHAPTER I

THE BRETTON FAMILY



Madame Antoinette Bretton went for the third time to the door of her tiny cottage and, shading her eyes, looked anxiously up the side of the ice-capped mountain that flanked the garden. There was still no one in sight, and with a shake of her head she returned to the coarse grey socks she was knitting.

It was late afternoon, and through the stillness she could hear the roar of the river, the tinkle of herd-bells, and the faint sound of chimes from the far-away village chapel. How quiet the house seemed without Marie and Pierre! The boy and girl had climbed to the hillside pasture to drive the goats down for milking and Hector, the great St. Bernard dog that had been the children's companion ever since they were born, had gone with them, for Hector was an expert at rounding up a herd. Although he was not a young dog he had the zeal of a puppy; with this he combined the wisdom of a sage, and it was for the latter reason that Madame Bretton never

worried about her children when Hector was with them. For to Madame Bretton the boy and the girl were still children. Neither Hector, Marie, nor Pierre had dreamed of being really grown up until the Great War had come and Monsieur Bretton, together with Uncle Jacques, had been called to the colors of France.

Throughout the valley were other boys and girls whose fathers, brothers, and uncles had left their homes behind—boys and girls who were not as old as Marie or Pierre, but who nevertheless were courageously trying to do the work of their elders. Marie was now nearly fifteen, and Pierre was sixteen; but when suddenly called upon to take their father's place, they felt much older. Yesterday they had been children with little to do but play; to-day work was ahead of them, much hard work, which seemed to have aged them in a single night and turned them from boy and girl into responsible grown up persons.

What a different village Bellerivres was with so many of its men away!

Yet how bravely its peasants had responded to the call, and how dauntlessly those left behind had risen to meet the new conditions of living!

"We who remain at home must keep things running in the customary grooves, so that our soldiers may find the town unchanged when they return," had been the cry.

And so these noble-hearted mothers and children had toiled uncomplainingly at garden, vineyard, and loom; had tended flocks of goats and cattle; and had harvested the hay and grain. For Bellerivres, walled in between the river Eisen and the snowy capped Pyrenees, was a fertile valley on which,

in spite of the tragedy of national warfare, the sun seemed ever to shine. It was a mere dot of a place, with a vine-covered chapel, a low white convent tucked away among the hills, and a scattering of houses. In the centre of the town stood La Maison de Sainte Genevieve, the home of Monsieur le Curé, the much loved parish priest, who although bent and white-haired was the friend, counselor, and teacher of both young and old. The little schoolhouse where he had been accustomed to meet the children was, however, now closed; for in these troublous war days boys and girls had far more important duties to perform than to learn lessons. There were the great vineyards that striped the hills—these must not perish for want of care; then there were the gardens and hay-fields.

But none of these things, vital as they appeared, were of first importance in the community. It was from quite a different source that the peasants of Bellerivres derived their livelihood—a source peculiar if one was unfamiliar with it, but which had been the primary interest of the valley ever since its people could remember. They raised silkworms!

Not only did the father of Marie and Pierre earn his living thus, but so also did most of the other fathers in that green valley. As long ago as the boy and girl had been old enough to walk they had toddled out into the sunshine and helped gather mulberry leaves; and they had not been much older than this before they had learned exactly what kind of leaves the tiny spinners liked best to eat. The precious grove of white mulberry trees had been planted years before by M. Bretton, and had been cherished with greatest care ever since. Each season new trees had been added and so spaced that their roots

might have room to spread. Around each tree a trench was dug to hold the moisture. Some of the trees had been raised from seed and transplanted into the mulberry grove when they were three years old; others had been rooted from slips or cuttings—a much quicker and less troublesome process. It was always necessary to have some new trees at hand that the very young silkworms might have tender leaves to feed upon.

How strange it was that out of the vast variety of vegetation these tiny creatures would eat nothing but mulberry leaves! Over and over again, M. Bretton told his children, people had experimented with the leaves of other plants—with lettuce, spinach, and various of the greens from the garden. But it was useless. The wee spinners scorned every such offering. One woman, it is true, had succeeded in raising a few worms on witch-grass; but they had not prospered, the silk from their cocoons proving poor. Mulberry leaves they craved and mulberry leaves they must have. In time the French peasants as well as the silk raisers of other nations abandoned their experiments and went to learning how to grow mulberry trees, studying with care not only which mulberry was best for their silkworms but also which of the species flourished most successfully in the soil of their particular country.

The more they investigated the more varieties of mulberries came to light. There was the Tartarica, or Tartar mulberry, found on the Volga; the Papyfera, or paper mulberry, from Japan; the Chinese mulberry; and the more common varieties of red, black, and white mulberry. To the soil of southern France the so-called white mulberry tree seemed best adapted, and therefore the French peasants began cul-

tivating it extensively, mingling with it, however, some of the rarer Chinese cuttings when these could be secured.

Many a lesson did the people learn about the mulberry tree while they were perfecting its growth! They found the leaves could be reached much more easily if the top of the tree was clipped so that it would grow low and bushy; this enabled children to harvest the leaves, and did away with expensive labor. But because of the luxuriant climate of France and Italy the trees of those countries could seldom be kept low, and usually gatherers had to use ladders to reach the leaves—a process by which many of them were injured and rendered useless. As no silkworm would touch a bruised leaf much of the crop was wasted. In China, where the trees seldom grew beyond the size of shrubs, the conditions for gathering perfect leaves were ideal; especially as the Chinese cut away much of the under part of the trees, so that the gatherers might go in beneath them. In addition to these interesting facts people discovered that if a single twig was broken from the mulberry tree several new shoots would branch out in its place. This was surely a valuable thing to know. Moreover, they learned that the leaves of the white mulberry were the most tender; that those of the red ranked next; and that the black came last in delicacy. Few French or Italian people used the black, but in the colder countries, where it flourished better than did other kinds, it was used almost entirely. Another delightful discovery of the sericulturists, as silkworm raisers are called, was that when their mulberry trees were once properly planted they would, with good care, live to a marvelous old age—some of them even reaching the dignity of two or three hundred years. But unless snails and other destructive

grubs were kept away the trees would not thrive. The finer and more carefully grafted they were the greater the damage resulting from hungry insects. In contrast the wild mulberry with its acid and bitter sap presented far less temptation and therefore lived longer than did the cultivated species.

This and many another lesson did the father of Marie and Pierre have to learn before he could successfully raise mulberry trees—to say nothing of silkworms. He must know how to prepare the mulberry seeds by crushing the fruit, covering the pulp with water, and separating the seeds from the waste part of the berry. He must know, too, how to spread the seeds upon cloth and lay them in the sun to dry, after which they were put away in covered jars, secure from air and moisture, and stored in some dark place until needed for planting.

To Marie and Pierre, brought up amid the environment of many a mulberry grove, these facts were an old story, and how fortunate it was that this was so. Now that their father and Uncle Jacques had gone to the war most of the care of the silkworms would fall to them. There was, to be sure, Josef the old gardener—he could give advice; but he was too old and crippled to do much work.

And therefore it was the two children, together with their mother, who were planning for their first harvest of cocoons, and were eagerly awaiting the unfurling of the mulberry leaves before beginning to hatch out their crop of silkworm eggs. How anxiously they had watched the trees! How eagerly scanned the swelling buds! Ah, it could not be long now. Was not the river a torrent from the melting of the winter's snows? Was not the sun warmer, the heaven bluer, the ground fragrant as if newly awake? Soon the mulberry

trees would be sending forth their leaves. Until they did, however, it would be useless to hatch the eggs so carefully laid away, for there would be no food to give the ravenous little spinners should they rouse from their long sleep.

And so Marie, and Pierre, and their mother strove to be patient, contenting themselves in the meantime with preparing the empty rooms of the silk-house, where the caterpillars were to be raised. Many a time they had not only seen this done but had assisted in the process. Every step of the work was familiar. They knew well that the labor of making the place immaculate was far from wasted, for unless the rooms were spotless the fastidious spinners would either sicken and die, or would refuse to fashion their wonderful webs.

M. Bretton, who had spent a good portion of his slender income in constructing the up-to-date shelter that housed his caterpillars, often laughingly declared that their accommodations were far more luxurious than were those where his own family lived. Nevertheless it was money well invested, he argued, since already he had got back from the sale of his cocoons many times over what the plant had cost him. So successful had he been that his example had been followed by many of his more prosperous neighbors until now Bellerivres, tiny as it was, could boast as fine equipment for sericulture as could be found in all France.

Poor M. Bretton! How proud he had been of his handiwork! How modestly exultant over his good fortune! And now that he had been forced to abandon it all and go to the Great War it was unthinkable to his wife and children that they should not take up his work and strive to carry it on. Nay, the very bread they ate depended upon their doing so.

Hence do you marvel that Marie, Pierre, and Madame Bretton labored early and late and denied themselves many things they wanted, that instead the money might be spent to further the industry that M. Bretton had cherished? And since what we work for becomes the centre of our interests it logically followed that all three of them found their task an absorbingly fascinating one. Playtime and study were cast cheerfully aside, and in place of them the boy and girl received each day the more vital compensations that come from unselfishness and hard work.

It was Marie who first detected that the buds near the ends of the mulberry branches were opening.

As she and Pierre drove the flock of goats down the steep mountain trail which led from the plateau where the pasture lay she glanced across the valley. Against the blue sky a tracery of delicate green was showing.

“Pierre!” she cried, “see! The mulberry buds are awaking! Look! Do you not catch that bit of color against the clouds? We will wait no longer. Let us tell Mother to take the silk-worm eggs out of the dark room and put them where it is light. Soon there will be plenty of new leaves. Hurrah, Pierre!”

With a rush Marie bounded past her brother and ran down the narrow path scattering the goats before her in every direction, and sending Hector racing homeward with yelps of delight.



CHAPTER II

THE SILK-HOUSE



Marie's prediction proved a true one, for within another fortnight the mulberry buds were tipped with green, and it was evident they would be in leaf with the coming of a few more days of warm sunshine.

"Our silk-growing will begin in earnest now," declared Madame Bretton, "and before it does I think we'd better take one last careful survey of the silk-house to make sure that everything is all right."

From a peg over the fireplace she took down a key, and going out, crossed the lawn to a building which stood opposite. The children danced after her, entering the silent structure with prancing steps. Once inside, however, they stopped their skipping as if automatically and instead began creeping softly about on their tiptoes. Then Pierre glanced up and laughed.

"I declare if we are not as quiet as though the silkworms were here already," said he.

His mother smiled.

"It is force of habit," she answered. "We always have to be so quiet when they are here that it is hard to remember there is no need for the precaution when the building is empty. How odd it is that their hearing should be so acute! No one who has not had the care of silkworms can realize the disastrous results of startling them."

"Father once told me he had known of a lot of silkworms that stopped eating and died because a sudden noise frightened them," observed Pierre.

"Such a calamity is not at all unusual, Pierre," returned his mother. "And more than that, if anything alarms them after they have begun to spin they will frequently snap the thread of their cocoon and refuse to spin any more; if they do continue the interruption causes a lump, or rough place, in the filament so that it is imperfect and has to be broken and tied. In consequence the silk is poorer and brings a lower price. So you see how really important it is not to jar their sensitive nerves."

"Who would think that one of those green caterpillars had any nerves!" ventured Marie. "Is it true, Mother, that a thunder-storm will check their spinning?"

"Yes. It often does if the thunder is very heavy. Your father once lost an entire crop of silkworms because of a severe thunder-storm. The little creatures died of fright. It is wonderful how delicately attuned they are."

"And their sense of smell is so keen," Marie continued thoughtfully. "I remember one day Father hurried me out of the silk-house because I had some perfume on my handkerchief. I was so cross," she added with a shamefaced little flush, "for I thought the perfume very nice and I couldn't understand why he did not like it."

“Miss Vanity!” cried Pierre. “I guess afterward you saw he was dead right. He couldn’t take the chance of losing his silkworms, and I don’t blame him, either. It is far too much work to raise them; isn’t it, Mother?”

“I rather think you will say so when you have raised your own crop,” was the quiet answer.

“Do you remember the Italian Father hired to help him once; and how he afterward sent the man away because he would smoke, and smelled of tobacco all the time?”

“Yes. That was another example of the same thing,” replied Madame Bretton. “Your father was afraid to risk keeping the man. The caterpillars might scent the tobacco and object to it.”

“I had no idea they were so fussy!” gasped Marie. “I do hope our silkworms won’t get frightened and die, or else have something make them stop spinning.”

“I don’t believe they will if we take good care of them,” was her mother’s soothing answer. “Still, we never can tell. We must heed everything Father has told us if we want to make a success of our task. To begin with there are the mulberry trees—we must not strip them of leaves too early in the season, for if we do the sap will be lost, and the strength of the tree weakened; in addition we must be careful not to waste the leaves by gathering too many at a time, or by getting the wrong kind. You know the worms will eat only freshly gathered leaves. Let us not forget that. And the young silkworms must have small and tender ones. As they grow older they will need more solid food and their development will keep pace with the advancing vegetation. It is the saccharine they take from the leaf that makes them grow; if you feed them tough leaves with little saccharine in them the poor worm has

all the labor of eating a vast quantity of material that simply takes its strength and leaves it exhausted and unnourished. Of course we have plenty of leaves to choose from and we shall not need to economize our supply of food. But where people grow silk in great quantities they calculate very closely, and plan to get the greatest number of pounds of silk from the smallest possible number of leaves. That is the way all professional silk-growers work. Paying their leaf-gatherers is quite an expense, and they do not wish this item needlessly large. They buy the leaves by weight, and the leaf purchasers soon become expert in selecting those lots that are the most nutritious; for every one wants his silkworms to grow large and strong so that they may spin fine cocoons and give out a valuable quality of silk."

"Why, Mother, just feeding them is an absolute science in itself then," sighed Pierre in dismay. "I thought if we kept them from going hungry it was all we had to do. We never shall be wise enough to work out such a problem as you have put to us."

"It is not to be expected that we shall," replied his mother kindly. "Such scientific treatment of silkworms takes both knowledge and experience. Many people raise a good crop of cocoons without knowing much more than we do—sometimes not as much. I was only telling you the possibilities of the industry if one were to pursue it on a large scale. If you and Marie and I keep our silkworms alive, clean, and well-fed, and reap a reasonable harvest of cocoons, we must be satisfied. I shall consider we have done well. Only let us not waste more leaves than we must. In time we shall learn to estimate about how many to gather at a picking. Fortunately

here in France the mulberry trees yield more leaves than they do in most countries, so I am not worried lest we fall short. In some countries the number of leaves is very limited, and the gatherers are compelled to be exceedingly careful not to waste them. I remember hearing your father say that in Persia, where the climate is very hot, the natives gather small branches of leaves, that they may be fresher than they would be if picked one at a time."

"Why don't we do that here?" inquired Marie. "I should think it would be a fine plan."

"It isn't," responded her mother. "In the first place it injures the trees to take off so many twigs and let so much sap escape; furthermore, it makes more waste to clear away. We should only be making ourselves work were we to follow such a method. The best way is to gather the single leaves just as we always have done. There will be four of us, for old Josef can help us. It is fortunate he did not go to the war, for while he helped your father he learned many things about silk-raising which will be useful to us, I am sure."

"I wish the silkworms did not eat so much," grumbled Marie.

"They must eat if they are to grow, dear," said Madame Bretton. "Every creature eats more while growing—even children," she added mischievously. "But a silkworm does all its growing in a very short space of time, and in proportion to its size grows faster than almost any other living thing. Remember, its whole life is over in a few short weeks. It must live very fast while it lives."

"If only ours *do* live," interpolated Marie dubiously.

"I see no reason to fear they won't," Madame Bretton said

once more. "But we must neglect nothing. It is the trifling carelessnesses that bring bad results—the tiny things that it seems silly to take the trouble to do. If we lose our crop of cocoons because of slighting the little details it will be our own fault, and we shall deserve failure; if, on the other hand, we do the best we know, we shall have no regrets. We must take every precaution to keep the silk-house clean and well-ventilated, for silkworms demand spotless surroundings as well as plenty of fresh air. Then we must not allow withered leaves or other refuse to collect on the shelves where the worms are feeding, for any waste matter ferments and causes disease."

"Aren't silkworms very likely to get sick anyway, Mother?" queried Pierre.

"They are susceptible to certain diseases," nodded Madame Bretton. "For example, there are epidemics which sometimes sweep away the hatching of an entire season; sometimes, too, the eggs are diseased and hatch into diseased caterpillars, which in turn lay more diseased eggs. This was the tragedy that befell France in 1847. At that time the French people could get no healthy eggs anywhere in their own country, and were forced to send to Italy for them. Afterward the infection spread to Italy. Then those from the region of the Danube, where growers had been purchasing them, also became diseased. The plague spread even to China, until in 1865 the only good eggs to be had were those from India. You can imagine what a terrible experience that was for the peasants. Not only did they lose all the eggs that they had raised and stored, but as most of them were poor they could not afford to import perfect eggs from India. Hence many

of them gave up silk-raising entirely and the price both of silkworms and of silk became enormous. Only the very rich could afford to buy either.”

“How did people ever get out of such a tangle, Mother?” questioned Marie, much interested.

“Little by little those fortunate persons who secured good eggs sold a few to those who had none, and the crop soon increased, for one silkworm-moth will lay as many as two or three hundred eggs. But even at this rate it took many years to get the industry up to where it was before. It was a terrible misfortune to the French and Italian peasants, and you may be pretty sure that as a result of the calamity every one set about being careful to prevent another such disaster. Now when silkworms are ill they are quickly isolated, just as people are who have contagious diseases. And if there is danger of wide-spread infection, and the growers think best not to take any risks, they will even kill many of the caterpillars outright. The sacrifice is sometimes great, but it is a necessary precaution. Furthermore, present day sericulturists have learned much about growing silkworms, and the importance of keeping the silk-houses clean and well aired; they have found that they must preserve an even temperature within the buildings; wash the walls down with lime to purify the atmosphere; sterilize the trays from which the worms feed; and hatch the eggs in large, airy places. The most up-to-date growers who work on a large scale use incubators. Of course, however, there are still some ignorant peasants who insist on hatching the caterpillars inside their clothing, where the warmth from their bodies will bring the eggs quickly to maturity. Fortunately there are not many who do this. They have learned better.”

“I should hope so!” ejaculated both Marie and Pierre in a breath.

There was a moment of silence; then the boy looked up into his mother’s face and said:

“I understand now why Father was so particular.”

“Your father is an intelligent man, who believes that ‘trifles make perfection and that perfection is no trifle,’” answered Madame Bretton. “He has raised some very fine silk and made a good profit by selling it. But every franc of the money was earned—it never came to him easily.”

“We’ll try to do as well as he has, won’t we, Mother?” Marie said softly.

“We must not expect to do anything as well as your father would have done it; he has been a very successful silk-grower. But we will do as well as we are able,” returned Madame Bretton with a sad, far-away glance.



CHAPTER III

PÈRE BENEDICT



hen Madame Bretton and the children returned from their inspection of the silk-house they were surprised to find Monsieur le Curé, good Father Benedict, awaiting them. The priest was sitting contentedly in the sunshine, his walking-stick in his hand, and the gentle breeze stirring his white hair. Beside him stood Hector with nose on the Curé's knee and great brown eyes looking into the kindly face of the old man.

Madame Bretton hurried forward.

"Why, Father!" she exclaimed. "Who would have thought of finding you here! Have you been waiting long?"

"But a few minutes, my dear," was the answer. "I knew well you could not have strayed far, for the house was unlocked, and the kettle steaming on the hob."

"So it was," laughed Madame Bretton. "You must stay and share our porridge with us, Father. It is just supper time, and you have had a long walk from the village. You must be

hungry. The children and I would be so glad if you would be our guest."

Marie and Pierre added their pleas.

"Do stay, Father," they cried. "Stay and tell us some stories."

Monsieur le Curé smiled into their eager faces.

"I will gladly stay if you are sure the porridge——"

"There is enough, Father, and to spare," declared Madame Bretton. "But had I known you were coming you should have had one of the hot tea cakes that you like so much."

"Ah, a tea cake—how good it is! You are a rare cook, my daughter." He glanced into Madame Bretton's face with radiant smile. "But is not hearty welcome better than a pyramid of tea cakes? If you are sure about the porridge——"

He chuckled playfully.

"There is plenty, Father—plenty," put in Marie. "I saw Mother measure it. And if there weren't you should have mine," she added as she joyously seized his baretta and stick and hurried away with them.

"You are a good child, Marie," the old priest called after her. "Now make haste to put my things away, and then you and Pierre shall come here and tell me how your silk-raising is getting on. Have you begun to hatch out your silkworms yet?"

The boy and girl nestled at his side. Had not Father Benedict brought them up; and was he not friend as well as teacher? In every home in Bellerivire his coming was hailed with delight, and his departure followed with regret. He possessed the rare attributes of sympathy and simplicity sometimes blended in great natures. None of his flock experienced a happiness too trivial for him to exult in, or a grief too personal for him to share.

Madame Bretton glanced for a second at the group on the door-step—at the white-haired man, the bright-faced children, the old dog; then she softly tiptoed into the house to make ready the evening meal.

“We haven’t hatched any of our silkworms yet, Father,” answered Marie, “but everything is prepared, and we shall begin in a day or two; perhaps to-morrow if there is warm sun.”

“That is right,” nodded the priest. “It is full time they were under way. That is one reason I came to see you. You live so far away that I feared you might not know that all through the valley the silk-raising is beginning. Already some of the peasants in the village have hatched their eggs; but I think they were a bit too hurried about it, for the trees are hardly leaved out enough yet. Sometimes it is as bad to be too early as too late. I hope you are going to have fine luck, my dears, fine luck! And indeed I don’t see why you shouldn’t.”

“We hope so too, Father. It means a great deal to us to succeed, you know,” responded Pierre gravely. “You see it is not alone that we need the money for ourselves. It is for Mother as well; and so that we may also send things to Father and Uncle Jacques.”

The priest patted the boy’s head.

“I know, I know,” he answered softly. “Well, be of good courage, my children, and do not be disheartened if you meet with failure at the start. Try a second time, and a third, and many more. The people who first raised silkworms had to try and fail many, many times before they succeeded.”

“Who did first raise silkworms, Father?” questioned Marie. “I was wondering about it the other day. Where did we get