

The **SECRET** *of* **TONI**

MOLLY ELLIOT SEAWELL

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“Standing there ... gnawing his mustache.”

THE SECRET OF TONI

CHAPTER I

Toni's name was Antoine Marcel, but he was never called by it but once in his life, and that was at his baptism, when he was eight days old.

He had a shock of black hair and a snub nose, and the tan and freckles on his face were an inch thick, but he had a pair of black eyes so soft and bright and appealing that they might have belonged to one of the houris of Paradise. His wide mouth was full of sharp, white teeth, and when he smiled, which was very often, his smile began with his black eyes and ended with his white teeth.

At ten years of age Toni was a complete man of the world—of his world, that is. This consisted of a gay, sunny little old garrison town, Bienville by name, in the south of France.

He had his friends, his foes, his lady-love, and also he had arranged his plan of life. He knew himself to be the most fortunate person in all Bienville. In the first place, his mother, Madame Marcel, kept the only candy shop in the town, and Toni, being the only child of his mother, and she a widow, enjoyed all the advantages of this envied position. He had no father such as other boys had—Paul Verney, for example, the advocate's son—to make him go to school when he would rather lie on his stomach in the meadow down by the river, and watch the butterflies dancing in the sun and the foolish bumblebees stumbling like drunkards among the clover blossoms.

Paul Verney was his best friend,—that is, except Jacques. Toni, owing to his exceptional position, as the only son of the house of Marcel, candy manufacturer, would have had no lack of friends among boys of his own age, but he was afraid of other boys, except Paul Verney. This was pure cowardice on Toni's part, because, although short for his age, he was well built and had as good legs and arms and was as well able to take care of himself as any boy in Bienville. Paul Verney was a pink-cheeked, clean, well set up boy two years older than Toni, and as industrious as Toni was idle, as anxious to learn as Toni was determined not to learn, as honest with his father, the lawyer, as Toni was unscrupulous with his mother about the amount of candy he consumed, and as full of quiet courage with other boys as Toni was an arrant and shameless poltroon about some things. Toni was classed as a bad boy and Paul Verney as a good boy, yet the two formed one of those strange kinships of the soul which are stronger than blood ties and last as long as life itself.

Toni, being of a shrewd and discerning mind, realized that Paul Verney would have loved him just as much if Madame Marcel had not kept a candy shop, and this differentiated him from all the other boys in Bienville, and although Paul often severely reprobated Toni, and occasionally gave him kicks and cuffs, which Toni could have resented but did not, he had no fear whatever of Paul.

Toni's other friend, Jacques, was a soldier. Jacques was about three inches high and was made of tin. He had once been a very smart soldier, with red trousers and an imposing shako, and a musket as big as himself, but the paint had been worn off the

trousers and shako long ago; and as for the musket, only the butt remained. Jacques lived in Toni's pocket and he was even more intimate with him than with Paul Verney. There were seasons when Paul Verney's kicks and cuffs caused a temporary estrangement from him on Toni's part, but there was never any estrangement between Toni and Jacques. Jacques never remonstrated with Toni, never contradicted him, never wanted any share of the candy which Toni abstracted under his mother's nose and ran down in the meadow to munch. There were some things Toni could say to Jacques that he could not say to any human being in the world, not even to Paul Verney, and Jacques never showed the least surprise or disgust. It is a great thing to have a perfectly complaisant, unvarying friend always close to one, and such was Jacques to Toni.

Toni had heard something about the war which occurred a long time ago, when the soldiers went a great way off from Bienville to a place called Russia, where it was very cold. In Toni's mind, Jacques had been to that place, and that was where he lost the red paint off his trousers, and the black paint off his shako, and the barrel of his musket. Toni had a way of talking to Jacques, and imagined that Jacques talked back to him, a notion which, when Toni repeated what Jacques had said to him, Paul Verney thought quite ridiculous. Jacques told Toni long stories about that cold place called Russia. Toni knew that there was another place, very hot, called Algeria, and Jacques had been there, too. Jacques had been everywhere that the soldiers had been, and he told Toni long tales about these places in the summer nights, when Toni was in his little bed under the roof, with the stars peeping in roguishly at the

window, and Madame Marcel's tongue and knitting needles clacking steadily down stairs at the open door of the shop. And on winter days, when Toni left home for school and changed his mind and went snow-balling instead, Jacques encouraged him by telling him that it was very like Russia.

Toni also found another use for Jacques. When he wished to say things which his mother occasionally and properly cuffed him for, he could talk it all out with Jacques. This seemed supremely absurd to Paul Verney and the other boys in the neighborhood, notably the five sons of Clery, the tailor, who jeered at Toni when they discovered his relations with Jacques. But Toni was as insensible to ridicule as to reproof. The only thing that really moved him was when his mother had rheumatism and her knees swelled. Then Toni would cry as if his heart would break, the big tears running down his dirty face as he sobbed and buried his fists in his hair, and would not be comforted, even though his mother could sit in her chair by the stove, and stir the candy kettle, and would give him the kettle to lick, after she had poured the candy out. But this was never more than once or twice a year, and the rest of the time Toni was as happy and as free from care as the birdlings in spring that sang under the linden trees in the park.

Toni had already arranged a marriage of convenience for himself, which was of the most advantageous description. Across the street from Madame Marcel's shop was the baking establishment of Mademoiselle Duval, and Denise, the niece and idol of Mademoiselle Duval, was just two years younger than Toni and as pretty as a pink and white bonbon—in fact, she looked not unlike a bonbon. She had very pink cheeks, and

very blue eyes, and a long plait of yellow hair, like the yellow candy of *mélasses* which Madame Marcel made every Saturday morning.

Denise was as correct as Toni was incorrect. She always said, "*Oui, Monsieur,*" and "*Non, Madame,*" in the sweetest little voice imaginable, with her eyes cast down and her plump hands crossed before her. Not a hair of her blond head was ever out of place, and the blue-checked apron which extended from her neck to her heels was as speckless as the white muslin frock she wore in church on Sundays. She was the most obedient of children, and Madame Marcel, when she wept and scolded Toni for his numerous misdeeds, often told him that she wished he were only half as good as Denise Duval, who had never disobeyed her aunt in her life. Toni smiled mysteriously whenever his mother said this, and chuckled inwardly at something known only to Jacques and himself, namely, that when he grew to be a man he meant to marry Denise. What could be better than the combination of a candy shop and a cook shop and bakery?

And then there were other advantages connected with the match. Many of the little girls that Toni knew had large and dangerous-looking fathers, some of them soldiers with fierce mustaches, and these fathers sometimes kicked and cuffed idle little boys who should have been at school or at home instead of lying in the meadow or loitering upon the bench under the acacia tree by Mademoiselle Duval's shop, inhaling the delicious odors of the bakery kitchen. Denise had a father who was, indeed, large and dangerous-looking and was a soldier, too; nay, a sergeant, and had the fiercest mustache Toni had

ever seen, but he only came to Bienville once a year for a few days on his annual leave, and seemed to Toni a most irrational and singular person. For although he could, if he wished, have eaten all the cakes in his sister's shop, Toni never saw him so much as look at one of them.

On this annual reappearance of Sergeant Duval, Toni kept carefully out of the way. Once when he was hiding under the counter of the shop he had overheard the sergeant asking Madame Marcel why she did not make that little rascal of hers go to school, and when Madame Marcel, a pretty, plump widow of forty, tearfully admitted that she could not, of herself, manage Toni, the sergeant promptly offered to give Toni a good thrashing as a favor to Madame Marcel. This, Madame Marcel, in a panic, declined, and then the sergeant made a proposition still more shocking to Toni's feelings.

"Then why, Madame," he said gallantly, twirling his mustache, "do you not marry again? If I were young and handsome enough I should offer myself, and then, I warrant you, I would make that young rogue of yours behave himself."

Whether this were an offer or not, Madame Marcel could not determine. She might have fancied the dashing, fierce-looking sergeant, with his five medals on his breast, but that proposition to thrash Toni robbed the proposal of all its charm. And besides that, Madame Marcel, although she praised Denise, felt a secret jealousy of the little girl's perfections. Toni, as a rule, was less afraid of soldiers than any other people, especially if they were cavalrymen, for Toni dearly loved horses and was not the least cowardly about them, and felt a

secret bond of sympathy between himself and all who had to do with the cult of the horse.

Bienville had been a place of considerable military consequence, in the old, far-off days, and still retained evidences of having had ten thousand troops quartered there in long rows of tumble-down barrack buildings. But not much remained of this former consequence except the old barracks, a hideous war monument in the public square, and a very grim old woman, the widow of a soldier in the Napoleonic Wars. Toni regarded the monument and old Marie, in her mob cap and spectacles, sitting proud and stern on a bench in the public square, as belonging to each other. All the soldiers, and even the officers, saluted old Marie as they passed—tributes which were received with proud composure.

Everything else in the town of Bienville was gay and cheerful, except the monument and old Marie. It was now garrisoned by one cavalry regiment only, and was a depot for horses and cavalry recruits. There was a big riding-school with a tan-bark floor, where the new recruits were broken in and taught to ride. It was Toni's delight to crawl in by the window or the small side door, and, hiding under a pile of horse furniture in a corner, watch the horses gallop around, their hoofs beating softly on the tan-bark, their eyes bright and glistening, their crests up, and their coats shining like satin with much currying at the hands of brawny troopers.

Toni did not know what it was to be afraid of a horse, and loved nothing better than to hang about the barracks stables and riding-school and take cheerfully the cuffs and kicks he got from the soldiers for being in the way. Especially was this true

on Sundays when he did not have Paul Verney's company, for Paul went to church obediently, while Toni, after submitting to be washed and dressed clean, was almost certain to run away, disregarding his mother's frantic cries after him, and spend the whole morning in the delightful precincts of the barracks stables. Jacques liked it, too, and told Toni it reminded him of those glorious old days when his trousers and shako were new and he carried his musket jauntily, in the long red line that set out for Russia. So Toni haunted the barracks stables to please Jacques as well as himself.

One glorious and never-to-be-forgotten day, a good-natured trooper had hoisted Toni on the back of a steady-going old charger, who knew as much about teaching recruits to ride as any soldier in the regiment. The old charger, being offended at finding the small, wriggling object upon his back, took it into his head, for the first time since his colthood, to plunge and kick violently, and ended by bolting out of the barracks yard and making straight across the edge of the town, through the meadow to the old stone bridge that spanned the river. The trooper, who had meant to oblige Toni, suddenly realized that the boy was the only son of his mother and she a widow. Jumping on another horse, he galloped after Toni, down the stony street, into the green lane and across the bridge.

The old charger, who was eighteen years old, gave out at the end of the bridge and came down to a sober trot. He had not, with all his efforts, got rid of the small, wriggling object on his back. As for Toni, he had the time of his life. It was the one full draft of riotous joy that he had tasted. It was better even than licking the candy kettle on Saturday mornings. The wild flight

through the air, as it seemed to Toni, the snorting breath of the old charger, the delicious sense of bumping up and down, lifted him into an ecstasy. When the trooper came up the horse was sedately browsing by the wayside, and Toni, with his arms clasped around the horse's neck and his black head down on his mane, was in a little Heaven of his own. The trooper, who had expected to find Toni lying by the roadside, mangled, was immensely relieved and swore at him out of pure joy, and, as a reward for not having got his neck broken, allowed Toni to ride the old charger back into the town. This was not to be compared with that wild flight through space, that glorious bumping up and down, that sense of delight in feeling the horse panting under him; but it was something.

Toni, trotting soberly home, concluded that he would not tell his mother, but he meant to tell Jacques all about it, and, putting his hand in his pocket, Jacques was not there! Oh, what agony was Toni's then! He burst into a fit of weeping, and, rushing back to the riding-school, crawled around frantically everywhere the troopers would let him go, searching for his loved and lost Jacques. The story of his ride had got out by that time and he was not kicked and cuffed when he searched, with streaming eyes and loud sobs, for his dearly loved Jacques. But Jacques could not be found, not even along the stone street, nor by the lanes, nor across the old stone bridge, and the day grew dark to Toni. He searched all day, and when he went home at night and told his mother of his loss, Madame Marcel wept, too. It was no good to promise him a whole company of tin soldiers. They were only tin soldiers, but Jacques was his friend, his confidant, his other self, his oversoul. Toni cried himself to sleep that night. It was so lonely up in the little garret without

Jacques! And Toni knew that Jacques was lonely without him. Toni pictured poor Jacques, alone and forlorn, lost in the tan-bark, or trampled under foot in the street, or floating down the darkling river, or perhaps being chewed up by the goats that browsed on the other side of the bridge. In the middle of the night Madame Marcel was awakened by Toni's groans and cries.

"Oh, mama, mama!" he cried, "how lonely Jacques must be! What is he thinking of now? He has no musket to take care of himself. Oh, mama!"—and then Toni howled again.

The next day Toni was up at dawn searching for his beloved. He searched all the morning, but he could not find the lost one. When he came home to dinner at twelve o'clock, he met Paul Verney, and Paul saw by Toni's woebegone look and tear-stained face that some calamity had befallen him. Toni had looked forward with triumphant pleasure to telling Paul about that wild ride on the old horse's back, but he could give it no thought. Paul was kind and sympathetic and understood Toni's sorrow, which was of some little comfort to the bereaved one. While the two boys sat together on the bench under the acacia tree, close to Madame Marcel's shop, up came little Denise, as neat and pink and white as ever. One of her hands was closed, and, as she approached Toni, she said, in the sweetest small voice in the world:

"Toni, is this yours? I found it in the street,"—and, opening her little hand—oh, joy!—there was Jacques, his shako a little crooked, one of his legs out of plumb, but it was Jacques. Toni, without a word of thanks, seized Jacques, and, rushing off, flew to his favorite spot for meditation—a little corner on one of the

abutments of the old stone bridge. Once there, he kissed Jacques and held him to his breast, and told him of the heart-breaking search made for him, and Jacques, as usual, was silently sympathetic and understood all that Toni had suffered.

Meanwhile Paul Verney, ashamed for Toni's want of manners in not thanking Denise and all unaware of the great wave of gratitude that was surging through Toni's whole being, went into the shop and told Madame Marcel of Toni's good fortune. Madame Marcel was so overjoyed that she not only invited Paul to help himself to whatever he wanted in the way of sweets, but ran out and, catching Denise in her arms, kissed her and brought her into the shop and invited her, as she had invited Paul Verney, to select what she wished. Denise, with characteristic modesty, took two small sticks of candy, but Madame Marcel gave her, as well as Paul, a large bag of very beautiful bonbons.

It was late in the afternoon before Toni appeared, his eyes shining like the stars that peeped in at his little window, his wide mouth showing all his white teeth. Madame Marcel took him by the hand, and they went over with state and ceremony to thank Denise for restoring the loved and lost Jacques. Toni felt indignant that Mademoiselle Duval, a tall, thin, elderly, heartless, maiden lady, should laugh at Jacques when Toni displayed him, and tell Madame Marcel she could have bought a couple of boxes of tin soldiers for one-half the bonbons she had given Denise. But Toni had known all the time that very few grown people know anything about boys, and was simply filled with contempt for Mademoiselle Duval. She was thin and ugly, too, not round and plump like his own mother, and had

the bad taste to prefer clean, well-mannered little girls to dirty and greedy boys. Up to that time, Toni's feelings toward Denise had been purely of a mercenary character, but from the day she restored Jacques a little seedling sentiment sprang up in Toni's heart; the great master of all passions had planted it there. It was something like what he felt for Paul Verney—a sense of well-being, even of protection, when Denise was near. She had acted the part of a guardian angel, she had restored Jacques to him, and she did not seem to mind his dirty face and grimy hands. She acquired a bewitching habit of dividing with Toni the stale apple tarts her aunt gave her, and, beckoning to him across the street, she would have him sit by her on the bench under the acacia tree and always give him at least two-thirds of the tarts.

A few days after the tragedy of Jacques' loss and return, Sergeant Duval, Denise's father, appeared for his annual visit to Bienville. The story of Jacques was told to him, and when he came over to pay his call of ceremony on Madame Marcel, he was so rude as to twit Toni about Jacques. Toni, much displeased at this, retired to his usual place of refuge under the counter, and concluded that when he married Denise he would contrive to be absent during Sergeant Duval's annual visit.

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