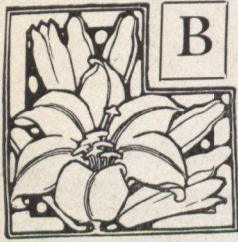


The Soul of the Child

By MARJORIE L. C. PICKTHALL



BABETTE welcomed me with open arms, and a dress of such splendour, I felt bound to remark on it. "Yes," said old Louis, nodding his white head, "that was the gift of Hypolite, our eldest. A good son is Hypolite, though he does live in Montreal. His wife chose it, and it is of material the most excellent,

and in colour cheerful as the sun on young leaves. And to talk of leaves—see, the vine leaves are almost out, and the lilies are high on the sunny side of the garden."

Later, in the grayish-golden glow of a soft spring twilight, Louis smoked on the porch, and told of the happenings of a peaceful year. "When Celeste Blanche died—though old Mere Vendangeuse came twenty miles to see her, and what she does not know of cows may go under an acorn-cup—Georges and young Louis, they put together their little savings and bought another. She is a good milker, but not so soft of the eye as our poor Celeste. And look you this pipe with a silver plate and red tassels—that is from Gaspard on my last fete. O, they are good boys, good boys, none better. Our Hypolite grows rich, and yet is not forgetful, and there is no better man on the river than our Gaspard. The mother, they adore her, and there is nothing they would not do for me." Old Louis puffed heavily upon the great pipe, his blue eyes gazing beyond his poor fields to the woods and the young spring skies and three white stars.

"They are good boys, good boys," he murmured, "and have done much for me. But not one has done as much for me as little Francois did."

"You, my friend, have not known of the little Francois? He was the first of all, a flower of a child, blooming a little like a white rose in the world, and, like a rose, dying out of it again. We were young, very young, my Babette and I, but I took it most hardly. O, I was so young! I had not learned patience, I had not learned faith. I could only suffer and rebel."

"We had been so happy, and happier still when the child came. I was happy to go in the morning, and Babette hushing me for fear I should wake him. I was happy to come home in the evening, and Babette singing to him in the dusk. This was for one summer, a little summer. With the winter he began to fail, like a rose that cannot live in the frost. There was one of these behind the lilies, a golden rose that grew one summer, and though I covered it with straw and cared for it more than any other of my flowers, it died of the cold."

"So young we were! I saw that the little Francois was not as he had been, I saw sometimes the great fear in my Babette's eyes, but I could not believe our happiness could ever pass. I grew used to the child's weakness, to the eyes that were great and strange in the white face—the white rose face—. Presently it became so that Babette was scarcely ever away from the side of the cradle, and women, old wise women, said in my hearing he would die. I feared, and with my brain I think I believed. But the heart, the too hopeful heart would not believe. I could not think that even this suspense might change to greater grief."

"I cannot tell how long this lasted. But I know it was spring, that evening when I came home, and saw through the window that there were women in the room, and that Babette had left the side of the cradle, and knelt under the little brown crucifix on the wall there. I wondered only if the child were worse. But Babette, she saw me through the window, and turned, holding out her empty hands to me with a great cry."

"So that then the too hopeful heart understood also and believed, and believing and losing hope, turned in a moment against all hope, all good, even against the good God Himself. I cannot describe to you that rage and despair that came upon me, that overwhelmed me. I could hear Babette weeping within, but I did not go and comfort her. The child was dead, and it seemed the end of all things. My friend, the kind, pitiful heavens seemed to turn into black nothing, empty of God, the pretty world was hateful, and I alone in it. The very saints seemed to jeer at me, because I had trusted Le Bon Dieu to save the little Francois. I raised this hand against the brown cross on the wall, and ran away

like a wild man into the dark, at war with Le Bon Dieu—my faith, just so!

"I ran like a madman, raging against God and His saints—yes. But even then He had a care for me. For, out in the dark, the soul of the child was waiting for me."

"I had just said to myself, 'There is no more a little Francois, and the kindness of God is a lie,' when there the child was, under the boughs that yet had no leaves, white as the blossom that would be there presently, and holding out his hands as if I should follow."

Louis says he was not at all afraid. He saw the likeness of his child who was dead as plainly as he had seen him living—his child, looking at him with clear appealing eyes and beckoning, and so followed as if he had no choice. He followed, and his grief was the greater because the child's face was sad.

"If there is a hope beyond this life for the pure, you must be happy in it, my son!" cried Louis. But the child looked sadly at him, and his voice seemed to fall back upon himself—"As a voice does when one shouts in an empty room with thick walls," said old Louis, puffing slowly at his pipe. "So I spoke no more; only followed."

"The child led me down the road there, past the houses at the end of the village. There was a light in the cure's window, and I knew he would be writing at his sermon. I, following the little Francois as if in a dream, thought to myself, 'If I went to the good man with my sorrow and my sin, he would heal me and help me,' but I put the thought aside. And it seemed as if the child looked at me sorrowfully."

Old Louis' voice was very low, and he never took his dreamy blue eyes from the silver stars above the buckwheat field. Everywhere was the colour and scent of sweet growing things, the thrill of renewed life.

"It was just such another evening as this," said old Louis, "just such another evening, darkening towards a night of the quietest, with a little sweet wind blowing, soft as feathers on my face. I could not see where my Francois really was, whether near or far, only that he was ahead of me. He paused again at my mother's house—it stood by the bridge, and was pulled down fourteen, no, sixteen years past—and I thought, 'If I went to her and laid my head on her shoulder and wept the tears that must be in my heart, as if I was little again, this hardness of soul would go.' But I would not yield to any softening, and again I seemed to see Francois look at me sadly as I hardened my heart against God."

"The trees then cut the village in two, so that the houses near the river were separated from these. The child led me through these shadowed woods, slowly and often looking round." Louis said that spring lay upon these woods like a shining dress; that every spray, every bud, held a message of resurrection. He saw the ground underfoot like a green embroidery on brown, beautiful with red fern-fronds, and little starry flowers that shone from the dusk. "The little brooks, the restless birds, the tiny life of leaf and blade of grass, all the wonderful small creatures seemed to be singing, 'Winter is only a sleep, a sleep, a sleep.' And what was death but a winter of the soul? Here, too, I had walked with Babette before we were married, and now I had left her uncomfited. Under that very tree I had touched her hand, here I had gathered her flowers, and she had put them in her bodice on Sunday. I stooped and picked a leaf from the place, and the child seemed to smile at me."

"I tell it to you, my friend, quietly, so quietly. That is because I am old and have grown to think of it so. But then, though I was not afraid, the air came cold and thin to my lungs, and my body seemed a clod that would have held me back from following the child—my child, and yet mine no more. And I would not yield him to Le Bon Dieu. He shone through the trees like a star—no, rather as a soft cloud shows in starlight—and I followed, every tree and glade so familiar, so dear, that they struck upon my hard heart until it was ready to break for the memory of past things."

"You would have thought, is it not so, that I should have been eager to touch, to clasp, to hold that likeness of Francois? Yet all the time I knew Francois, the Francois I had held and swung on my arm, was lying behind me in that sad house, and that this, though Francois still, was not for my

hands to touch. I would have laid hold of a light or an air as readily. Yet the face was the face I had known for its short life, and the eyes gazed sadly upon me."

"In the thick dark of the pine branches many little birds were sleeping, and as I passed they awoke with frightened flutters and pipings, and settled again, crooning to one another. It seemed as if someone said 'they are sleeping in the care of God and theirs, and will you not let the child who had grown tired sleep in His care also?' So plain, it was, so plain. 'Your little Francois would sleep well,' it went on, 'folded in the arms of God as the birds in the branches,' the wind seemed to move in the boughs with music, and the words were like a song,—As the birds in the branches, as the birds in the branches."

"He slept well in mine," I cried, 'he slept well in mine.' For I was jealous, you see, and would not let him go."

That is how old Louis told it, his worn face with its fierce feature and peaceful eyes, turned towards the darkening fields and the lilac skies of spring. "I was jealous and I would not let him go."

"The music that moved with the boughs beat over me in surges of dark and light, and my body seemed weighing heavily upon that which would have followed the little Francois. But I saw that the trees thinned away, and that the young white moon was giving soft light, a light that seemed to be one with the child as he turned, and, held out his hands, and passed—ah! mon Dieu! passed. And I looking where he had been, saw only the moon and the trees, the cross of the Calvary and the arms of the Compassionate."

"There Babette found me, in the chill of dawn. She laid her hand on my shoulder, and I think I said 'Our Francois is safe as the little birds in the boughs,' before I caught her hands and cried like a boy. And then,—then it was morning, and spring had told the dead lands to awake, and there was great sorrow in the world, but not despair."

So old Louis told it, half to himself and half to me. You to whom I tell it, what do you think? You may smile unbelievably, or you may say that the French-Canadian temperament has much to answer for. Louis, however, does not tell it to you. As he says, it is a matter between himself and Le Bon Dieu.

The Call of Home.

I'm the old tired woman now, for all that work is done,

I sit here in me daughter's house as any lady might;

It's "Take your ease, old woman dear," from each and every one,

And willin' hands to wait on mine from morning until night.

But I have the longing on me that is heavier than tears,

(Though themselves could never know it from any word I say).

It's half the way across the world that I would be the day

And back in me own father's house I've left these fifty years.

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And to think I left it laughin' with a true lad's hand in mine!

The lips that kissed me goin', oh, 'tis long that they've been cold!

And little was the grief I had that never gave me sign

That need of it would tear the heart the day that saw me old.

But I have the longing on me—oh, 'tis well me own time nears,

Since I'm waiting like a stranger here with those I love the best.

It's "Take your ease, old woman dear," but oh, 'tis there I'd rest—

Once back in me own father's house I've left these fifty years!

—Theodosia Garrison, in McClure's Magazine.