

THE CURÉ'S LOVE STORY

A Tale of the Miracles of St. Anne de Beaupré

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It is known that Mademoiselle Rose Eva Tremblay—who was called by courtesy Madame—spent two hours of mortal agony on behalf of Monsieur Sebastian Fiset, Curé of the parish of St. Jean, on the lower St. Lawrence. There were two parishioners in the post office—Paul Duhamel, the discreet man, and Charles Bonnat, a fisherman. The "Arethusa" had arrived two hours before schedule time, to take advantage of the tide, and a host of tourists, who were returning to Montreal after having made the Saguenay trip, were strolling through St. Jean.

While Madame Rose Eva was pretending to sort the mail, a feat which she was incapable of performing, owing to the condition of her eyes, a gray-haired lady, who had been on the steamship, came into the kitchen, which adjoined His Majesty's post office.

"Can you tell me whether Monsieur Fiset, your curé, is to be found?" she asked of Madame Rose Eva.

Madame Rose Eva put down her letters and came out of the post office. Charles Bonnat, who was upon the porch, and Paul Duhamel, the discreet man, who was putting plaster upon a wall, heard the inquiry and did not go beyond the range of hearing. All three looked at one another, and their impulse was to say that the curé was away. They did not like strangers to speak with Monsieur Sebastian; they were always afraid that he would be kidnapped and made into a bishop.

The gray-haired lady smiled and continued:

"It must be more than forty years since I knew Monsieur Fiset at Ste. Anne de Beaupré. I have only two hours to spend here, and I am sure this must be the same Monsieur Fiset who was so kind to little Jean Durant ever so long ago."

"Mon Dieu!" muttered Madame Rose Eva, and dropped a registered letter which she had been hugging tightly. The discreet man, Paul Duhamel, picked it up, and Madame Rose Eva snatched it out of his hands.

"Monsieur le Curé has gone to St. Boniface," said the postmistress. "He will not return until to-morrow."

The gray-haired lady looked unhappy. "I should have liked to meet him," she replied, and went out of the house. Charles and Paul went to the door and watched her go up the street toward the curé's house.

"What if she should meet him?" Charles asked.

"I tell you Monsieur le Curé has gone to St. Boniface," repeated Madame Rose Eva obstinately.

"I saw him in the village five minutes ago—" began the fisherman, and stopped short, seeing Duhamel look at him warningly. At that moment the curé came into the house.

"Bonjour, Madame Rose Eva," he began heartily. "So the 'Arethusa' is ahead of her time. I have seldom known that to occur." He laughed and looked into the post office. "The mails are not yet sorted?" he inquired.

"Monsieur," said the postmistress, "I hear that Marie Duvergne is expected to die this evening. The boy was waiting here for you."

"Marie!" exclaimed the curé in astonishment. "Why, I thought she was recovering quickly."

"He said that you should go there the moment you returned," said the postmistress.

"Then I must get my satchel at once!" exclaimed Monsieur Fiset, and started up the street toward his house. The postmistress stared after him in consternation.

"Ah, you should have left it to me, Madame," said Paul Duhamel, reprovingly. "I could have invented a true story which would have sent him the other way. Now he has gone home to get the oil and communion wafer, and he will meet her."

Madame Rose Eva put her old head down on her arms and began weeping noisily, while Charles Bonnat stood about foolishly, and Paul Duhamel went back to his plastering.

In the seventies of the last century the third Sanctuary of Ste. Anne, at Beaupré, was falling into decay, after almost two hundred years of service. The great and noble Basilica, that now stands in its beautiful parvis, among trees and flowers, had not yet been built, but for two centuries the afflicted had gone to the old Sanctuary to pray, and to be healed of ailments which it was beyond the skill of physicians to alleviate. Thither John Durant had taken his daughter Jean. John Durant was a merchant in Halifax, and a rich man, as wealth was counted in those days. He was of no particular belief, but his wife had been a devout Catholic; Jean had been educated in the faith, and before her mother died she begged her husband to take the crippled girl to Ste. Anne's.

John Durant brought his daughter there in a wheeled chair. For nearly six years she had been unable to walk. For three successive summers he brought her there, and

for three years her prayers and his own aspirations had remained unanswered.

Sebastian Fiset was then a youth in his early twenties. From boyhood he had shown evidences of a serious mind; what was more natural than that he should have been designated for the priestly office? All over Quebec Province young men who show a natural aptitude and zeal are sought for by the religious organizations and the charitably disposed, to be educated as priests. The struggle for poor men is hard, but their success is a proof of character. Sebastian Fiset was studying in the Juvenile of the Redemptorist Fathers, who occupy the monastery at Beaupré, teach young men who desire to enter the priesthood, and are now the custodians of the shrine. Sebastian had nearly finished his course at Beaupré, and was to be admitted to the Seminary at Quebec, from which he would afterward be ordained.

The young man saw the processions of the afflicted who come to Beaupré to kiss the relic of the Saint. He watched the crippled, the blind, the mute, and the deaf kneel down before the altar. Most of them departed as they came, but sometimes there occurred one of those miracles which sceptics ascribe to the will instead of faith, and the crippled man would leave his crutches at the altar and walk out, amazed and thankful, into a strange world. John Durant had no faith, and his daughter was filled with it, but nothing came of their pilgrimage. They had taken lodgings in Beaupré, which had not then been vulgarized by cheap restaurants and vendors of souvenirs and un-

pitied Sebastian, doomed to spend his life in the priesthood.

"You are too promising a lad to spend your life among these ignorant people," he blurted out one morning, as they strolled together among the flowers. And all the pent-up disappointment of his heart found vent. He told him of his wife's death, of her last hours, when she begged him to be confirmed in the Catholic Church; of his conscientious refusal and the embitterment of those last moments; of his daughter's injury which had paralyzed the spinal nerves and was incurable, the greatest doctors claimed.

"And I have to pretend I believe she can be cured by this mummery," he cried, extending his arm in the direction of the Sanctuary. "But I shall not bring her here again." He paused and looked keenly at the young man. "What future is there for you among these imbeciles?" he demanded. "Come back to Halifax with me and I will promise you more money in five years, if you make good, than you could make here in twenty-five. You cannot believe in this."

Sebastian answered gravely: "Monsieur Durant, I believe in God and His Church with all my heart and soul."

The merchant was touched by the young man's fervour, and somewhat ashamed of his outburst. He did not renew his offer, but they had many talks together beside Jean Durant's chair, as she lay in the sunlight of the parvis. Sometimes a priest or member of the community would look curiously at Sebastian, but he inspired such universal confidence that nothing was ever said to him concerning his acquaintance with the girl.

He was already a man in character and strength of spirit, but he was still a boy in experience. He did not know that pity and love are akin. On the morning before the merchant's departure, the young student and the crippled girl were left alone for a few moments, and nobody else was within the parvis. The sense of his loneliness suddenly struck Sebastian like a blow. He glanced at Jean with a feeling of mistrust that mystified him. He was embarrassed in a woman's presence for the first time.

"This is my last day in Beaupré," she said, "and I do not think that we shall ever come here again."

Sebastian saw that her eyes were filled with tears. And then he understood the meaning of those doubts that had distressed him. He loved this crippled girl, and pity was only a minute part of the mighty emotion that filled his heart. He could not speak. His throat was choked. He rose up, looked at her, looked hard at her, and strode away toward the Sanctuary. The next day the visitors departed.

Sebastian Fiset's trial had come, and that year was one of awful battle. Only a priest could understand its meaning. Life had suddenly become something more precious than Sebastian had ever conceived. Temptation assailed him in a hundred guises. He could give up his studies and go back to the world without committing sin. There was no clean-cut case of duty to be done, and of dishonour to be fought down. Many youths found that they had been mistaken in their aims and left the colleges and the Seminary, too, every year. All that winter the struggle continued, and in early spring Sebastian received a letter from John Durant.

The merchant had been more taken with the young man than he knew at the time of their last meeting. He renewed his offer, but in more guarded language, saying that if Monsieur Fiset concluded that he had not chosen wisely there would be an opportunity for him in his business. And after this there followed a communication so earnest, and wrung from such depths of anguish, that it brought to Sebastian Fiset the cure his soul was seeking.

All through his later life the curé had the habit of influencing people quite disproportionately to his intentions. A chance phrase, a crisp sentence had been known to effect a permanent change in character. It was the sincerity of the man more than his eloquence. So now, for the simple profession of faith which the young fellow had made, without argument, on the occasion of the merchant's last visit, had impressed him profoundly; and ever since John Durant had returned to Halifax he had been wrestling with his old longing for the faith in which his wife had lived and died. He bore the cross of intellectual freedom heavily indeed.

"Do you remember, my dear Sebastian, how we discussed your religion last summer?" wrote John Durant. "I spoke hastily and rudely, but this has troubled me a thousandfold more than it could trouble you. Since then I have longed to believe, with all my heart and soul. And I have thought perhaps it was because of my unbelief that no miracle occurred to cure my Jean; for that such miracles do occur no reasonable person doubts, though some ascribe a different reason to the cure. I have been a lonely man since my wife's death, and my love for Jean has embittered me against

(Continued on page 52)



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authorized purveyors of rosaries. Day after day Jean Durant was wheeled into the Sanctuary, and night after night she was wheeled home again.

John Durant grew very bitter when the third summer was nearly gone. He had come to know the eager, keen-eyed young man who sauntered in the parvis, generally alone, watching the pilgrims, his heart filled with joy of his future vocation. All men who are to be priests, cutting themselves off from the world that they may understand the world, fight out the battle between the spirit and the flesh alone. But Sebastian Fiset had no battle to fight. Since his earliest boyhood he had wanted to dedicate himself to the service of God and the Church.

HE was stirred to the depths by the sight of the crippled girl. John Durant often spoke to him, veiling the irony of his thoughts under kindly phrases, until at last his disappointment broke out in a strange way. He, too, pitied; he