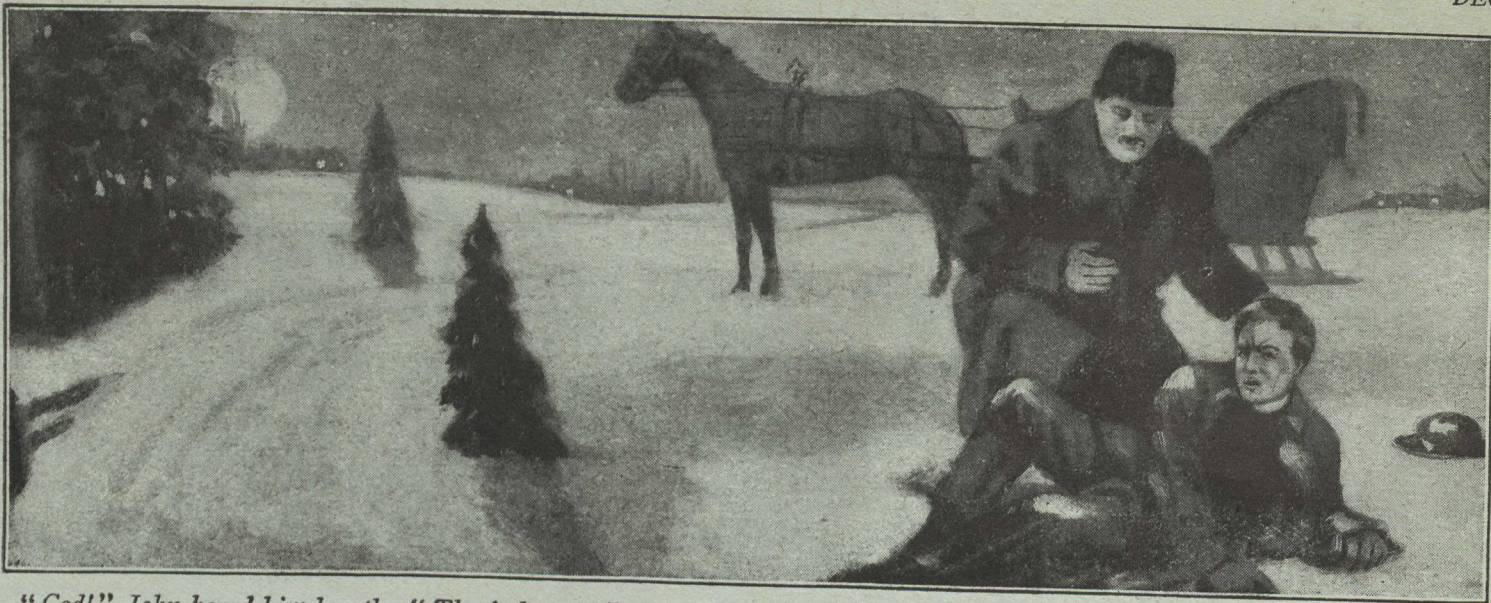




"God!" John heard him breathe, "Thy judgment!" "Are you hurt?" John asked. At the sound of the familiar voice, the minister struggled to his feet. His face was dead white. "You!" he gasped, and stepped back.

GIVING THE BEST THAT IS IN US

LITTLE JOHN'S CHRISTMAS GIFT

By GORDON ROGERS

Illustrated by HOWARD EDWARDS

LITTLE John MacLean, six feet two high and two feet six broad in his coonskin coat, pulled up his spirited black mare before the leading jeweller's shop in Farmington on Christmas Eve, and for such a "little" man stepped very nimbly from his smart red sleigh.

A pedestrian greeted him with "Merry Christmas!" and held out a friendly hand, wincing in the next moment at the grip of the strong fingers hastily unmittened by John. Another, with the same greeting, but more tact, punched "Mac" ineffectually, but none the less sincerely, in the ribs. Smiling, in his slow way, John paused before entering the shop to look into its western window, where the star dresser, Mr. Herb Midge, had displayed with much care and taste the jeweller's most alluring wares. Here was a veritable mine of precious stones set in platinum or gold, gleaming and glittering in the window's softly shaded lamps. But they showed nothing, John thought, nearer to being worthy as a Christmas gift to the "little girl" at Apple Hill than the "trinket" for which he had now come.

The proprietor—himself the Grand High Floor Walker of the Busy Season—with an ingratiating smile came forward when Little John loomed large between the plate glass doors. For Little John and his wife-to-be were not only well-off, but popular, and there would be a good deal of money spent in this shop in wedding presents for the prospective Mrs. John MacLean of Apple Hill.

"Your order is quite ready," advised the jeweller, and sent a clerk away for "the pendant for Mr. John MacLean."

"The prettiest piece of work my shop has turned out this year!" he declared, when the clerk had handed him a little satin-lined case. With a flourish he held a pear-shaped pendant of flawless pearls and diamonds daintily aloft between finger and thumb, challenging John's approval with an appraising eye.

It was certainly a pretty thing, John conceded heartily; and it would look prettier still, was his thought, at Dorothy's white throat. He nodded his satisfaction; and from a deep inner pocket of his overcoat drew a cheque book, while the jeweller very politely proffered a fountain pen. At the same moment John became aware, through the medium of an oval mirror at his elbow on the show case, that he was being quite frankly inspected by a woman who was leaning over the case a few yards away.

"Little" John MacLean, of Apple Hill; a farmer, and rich," communicated Mr. Midge softly, as he placed a tray of trinkets before the woman, and showed his gold-filled teeth in an ingratiating smile. She was a rather handsome woman of about thirty, somewhat made up, but dressed in good taste in well-fitting black, relieved by her white boa, her white gaiters, her black-stitched white gloves, and the white wings in her smart toque. She was tall, and her figure—as Mr. Midge had appraisingly noted—was decidedly good. But it was her rich, low contralto voice, somewhat out of harmony with the hardness of her black eyes, that had at once charmed Mr. Midge and made him instantly curious as to who and what she was. She had, as he mentally and somewhat shrewdly phrased it, "the professional air."

"For a farmer, 'Little John's' taste seems to be pretty good," she remarked.

"Sure thing!" smiled Mr. Midge. "Little John knows a thing or two. His house and library and horses are what you call famous around here."

"How interesting!" John had returned his cheque book to the deep inner pocket of his coonskin coat, and was slipping the jeweller's package after it; and Mr. Midge noted that John himself seemed equally interesting to the woman in black and white, even to his broad back as he buttoned up his big coat. "He is—a bachelor?" she inquired softly, using her eyes on Mr. Midge.

"Just for a while," cooed the shop's star dresser. "He's to be sacrificed on the altar of matter o' money in June."

"Oh? And the beautiful pendant is a Christmas box for the bride-to-be? Lucky girl!"

"It cost him three hundred bucks," volunteered Mr. Midge.

"And who is the lucky lady in the case?"

"Little Dorothy Snow, of Apple Hill, Madam."

"Dorothy Snow, of Apple Hill! Sounds like something cool and good to eat, don't it?" There was a little jarring note in the woman's low laugh. "And is she a beauty or an heiress, little Dorothy Snow?"

"Both. She's said to be the most beautiful girl in Farmington when she comes to town; and she's the daughter of Cyrus Snow, who is as well fixed as big Mac. Their farms adjoin."

"I see! An alliance of interests, eh? Or is it a love affair?"

"On Little John's side I guess yes. But they say—"

Mr. Midge leaned nearer to his customer and toyed with the trinkets in the tray. And the lady with the "professional air" leaned sympathetically nearer to him, and displayed marked histrionic ability in the critical inspection of a brooch. "They say that Dorothy is badly gone on the young chap who will likely marry them—the new minister at Apple Hill."

"How romantic! And how tragic, too! And he—the new minister—?"

"I've heard he's as hard hit, too. And I believe it, though he don't show it and give it away like she does, when I've seen them here together in town, and about church fairs and things at Apple Hill. He only went to sight, I guess. Of course, it's only gossip; but people will talk, you know."

"Of course. But this big man, Mr. MacLean—doesn't he know?"

MR. MIDGE shrugged, and smiled his golden smile while he held a trinket up between finger and thumb, in imitation of his employer.

"It would be pretty hard to guess or find out what Little John thinks about anything till he expresses himself," said Mr. Midge. "But it's been a sort of understood thing, ever since she was a tot, that he would marry Dot when she grew up."

"I see. He's loved her ever since she was a baby."

"That's about it, I guess," agreed Mr. Midge. "Little

John was twenty-one when Dot was born, though he wasn't any littler then than he is now. But"—Mr. Midge leaned forward again, and dropped his voice still lower—"it's odd to me that Francis Page don't—why—why. . ."

"Who—who did you say?"

"Francis Page, the Reverend Francis Page, the young new minister at Apple Hill. Do you know him, Madam?"

THE lady in black and white had quickly recovered her composure. She laughed her low laugh, but it was somehow rather unpleasant to hear this time, Mr. Midge thought.

"Oh, yes! I know him; quite well! He's a very old friend." Mr. Midge wondered. "What did you say is the name of the place where Mr. Page preaches?"

"Apple Hill."

"Ah, yes! Apple Hill. Are his sermons said to be very good?"

"Very classy, and he's very popular. Did you say that you would care for this?" Mr. Midge indicated a trinket on the tray.

"No, thank you! Yes, I think that I should like to hear Frank preach; a Christmas sermon, all about giving. Is it far from here to this Apple Hill?"

"About seven miles; an hour's drive."

"I see. I could get a driver, I suppose?"

"Why, yes. There's a very good livery in connection with the Commercial Hotel."

"I'm stopping at the Commercial. Yes, I think I would like to pay my dear Father Confessor, the Reverend Francis Page, a flying visit; and perhaps he will take me for an angel." Even Mr. Midge smiled at this, as he suspected that the attitude of mind of the strange lady toward the new minister at Apple Hill was not perhaps altogether angelic. Mr. Midge's natural curiosity was very much aroused.

"Perhaps John MacLean, who will likely be driving back to Apple Hill soon, would be glad to give you a seat," suggested Mr. Midge. He looked about the shop; but Little John's head, over all, was not to be seen.

"That is really a good idea!" approved the lady, laughing, as she adjusted her boa before a case mirror.

"He always stops at the Commercial for dinner when in town; keeps a room there, in fact, right along," said Mr. Midge, his arms upon the case again, as he more openly admired the strange woman, with his eyes. "It isn't our classiest hotel, of course. But it's the oldest house, and comfortable, and the grub is good. I feed there myself."

"Then perhaps I'll see you again—feeding! If I don't eat my Christmas dinner at Apple Hill—who knows?" She lowered her black fringed lids and gave the little clerk a "professional" look from her bold black eyes that caused his susceptible heart to suddenly beat quite fast.

"Sure thing!" he managed to whisperingly articulate. "And—say! You can 'phone Mr. Page from the hotel. The line to Apple Hill's open till eight."

"Now, that is really an inspiration, Mr. —"

"Midge," capped that gentleman promptly. "Herb Midge."

"Mr. Herb Midge. Yes, I think instead of that cold drive to Apple Hill I'll 'phone Frank to come to me. And thank you, Mr. Midge, for all the information you have given me."

"Oh, not at all, Miss—er—Mrs. —"

"Mrs. Wall." She bent over the tray of trinkets again. "Yes, I will play Santa Claus to-night. I'll take this little silver cross for Frank. He will be so surprised and pleased! How much is it?"

"Two dollars," said Mr. Midge blithely. He was already looking forward to Christmas dinner at the Commercial with Mrs. Wall. Perhaps he would learn a good deal more about Frank Page. And wouldn't the boys be surprised to see him dining with this classy dame! She

(Continued on page 20)



OF the utmost interest to parents is the article, "The Greatest Debt in the World," appearing in January. In it Canada's leading men tell you what home influences affected their lives most; and you will know if YOUR boy or girl is receiving the right kind of home influence.