

CHOISEL LITERATURE.

"AT DAWN O' DAY."

A long dun stretch of land, a darkening, ominous autumn sky; a chill misty wind blowing up from the mighty Atlantic.

And two persons, a man and a woman, walking slowly along the beach—he a great, awkward, muscular fellow, clad in the rough homespun garb of the Canadian peasantry; she a slender, fragile little creature, more child than woman. A scarlet woollen shawl, part of which formed a hood for her bent head, enveloped her.

One bare hand drew the folds together beneath her chin; the other was slipped through her companion's arm and rested in his firm hold.

"Don't you mind any stories you may hear about me, Marjorie," he was saying with a suspicious airiness of manner; "don't! I'm not much of a church-going chap, to be sure, and I like to have a bit of fun, now and then, with the boys up at the Point; but I pay my dues regularly at Christmas and Easter, and—don't you mind them, Marjorie! I suppose," with a quick, sidelong glance, "Pierre Lechesne has been spreading false rumours about me."

Something he saw in the grave face beside him impelled him to continue:

"We used to be good friends—he and I—when we were both boys together. But now—now there is nothing he would not do to injure me—nothing! You know why, dear."

Her silence answered him.

"They are growing wealthy rapidly, the Lechesnes. It is said that Pierre is to build a new house in the spring. Already his sisters wear dresses of silk, and go to gay Ottawa in the winter time. I'm afraid," with a savage laugh, "you've made a bad bargain, Marjorie. You too could have worn grand gowns. You too might have been as fine a lady as any of them, had you so chosen."

"Don't," she protested softly.

"It's a mean place, anyhow, this God-for-gotten corner of creation!" he went on, his strong, black brows knitting in a frown. "I wish I could take you away from here—I will soon. There are no happy memories to bid you stay."

"No," she answered. And then as though his last words had struck a chord hitherto silent, "You knew my mother well, Leon?"

"Yes I was but a clumsy lad when she and your father come here, and you—ah, what a pretty wee one you were! With the money which they had brought with them from England they bought a farm. I have heard the neighbours talk much about them. They were young, full of hope, and they would be rich, by-and-by, they said. They made a staunch fight, but the winter, the work, the unaccustomed hardships conquered. He died of fever, and she—"

He broke off abruptly.

"Go on!" she said quietly.

"I don't know, of course, Marjorie but—they—say—"

"Oh, go on!" she cried, with sudden bitterness. "I know! Speak it out! I though those around should be ashamed to breathe the word—she of starvation?"

"Mignon! they didn't think she was so poor. She had concealed the fact. She was always very proud. Every one spoke well of her, regretted her—"

She stopped him with a gesture.

"I think," she said sadly, "that even at the cost of being less tender to the dead, we should be more gentle to the living."

He smiled down at her curiously.

"That's one of your queer notions, Marjorie. But you mustn't be too hard on the folks, dear. They had Pere Michaud sing mass for her soul, and they put a tall white cross above her grave. They were very kind afterward—"

She lifted to his, blue eyes bright with scorn.

"Yes," she repeated, "afterwards!"

The wind had increased in volume. As they turned, it blew against them so fiercely that Leon Pellitier flung his arm about his companion to sustain her.

On the horizon a mighty host of black scudding clouds were pitching their tents for battle. The greenish waters of the Gulf were capped with foam.

"It's coming up!" he said; "we're going to have a big storm."

She clutched his sleeve in sudden, nervous fashion.

"On, no! A storm!—I am afraid, Leon!"

He laughed indulgently.

"That's you, Marjorie! You're too delicate a flower to blossom up here, petite. You're not like the rest of them. You've got a lower voice, and softer ways, and, as I said before, queerish notions. And now you're afraid of a storm!"

He laughed again—a good, mellow, resonant laugh.

"Not for myself, Leon," she whispered tremulously; "I do not fear for myself, I—I was thinking of that other storm about a month ago, when the White Swan went down, and they said—"

"Stop!" he cried, his voice breaking hoarsely in on the panting words, "what do you know about such—such things? The vessel was out of repair, quite unable to stand a high sea. There! I didn't mean to be harsh just now. Come up the cliffs. Steady—so! the rocks are slippery. Now, my darling, give me your sweetest kiss. I'm off for awhile."

"Where?"

"Oh, just up to the point for an hour or two. If the storm catches me, I may stay till morning. Goodnight."

With a swift terrified motion she flung her arms around his neck, and pressing her pale face against his breast broke down in convulsive sobbing.

"Don't go, Leon—don't go to-night, dear. Something may happen—the tide along the beach—the storm—something. Don't go!"

"Why, Marjorie! why, little one, how nervous you are," he cried cheerily. "What can harm me? I'm used to rough weather. I've been knocking 'round in storms ever

since I was able to stand alone; and I know every step along the shore as well as the path through your garden."

He was stroking her soft hair with one broad, loving hand.

"As I was saying, Marjorie, this place doesn't suit you, and as soon as the first May flowers blossom in the forest I am going to take you up to Monsieur Le Cure's house and I shall say to him: 'Mon pere, this is she whom I desire to make my dear wife.' And when he has married us we shall go away together over the wide Atlantic. We shall turn our backs forever on this northern country, where the winters are so long, the skies so bleak, the blast so cold. In your mother's land, where the air is sunny and young hearts are young, we shall make our happy home."

She lifted up a face transfigured.

"Is it true?" she whispered. "Oh, Leon, is it true?"

"Don't you know it is, Marjorie?"

"I only know I love you!" she cried, with a queer, wild rapture. "My creed is, I love you. My future—I love you!"

He bent and kissed her. A moment more and he was scrambling down the steep cliffs, sure-footed as a chamois.

He looked up. She was still in the same spot where he had left her, her scarlet shawl a vivid dash of colour against the sombre sky.

"Au revoir," he shouted. "I'll be back, sweetheart, at dawn o' day."

She turned and walked slowly homeward. She paused before a long, low building surmounted by a rude cross—the village church. It stood some distance in from the road, and was partly surrounded by a grave-yard, which latter its tombstones rendered pallidly conspicuous.

She pushed open the wooden gate and went up the path, and entered the church, that strange, smiling radiance still lingering in her eyes. It was a feast day, and within benediction had but lately been pronounced, for the air was heavy with the clouds and sweet with the perfume of incense.

The moments slipped by. The dim fragrance of the incense grew fainter. Dusk draped the unattractive roses, the bare branches—all the rigid and pathetic poverty of the little place with gentle fingers. Brighter through the shadows gleamed the star of gold.

It was quite dark when Marjorie Grant emerged. She stood a brief space, as though in indecision. To her right lay a field, across which the villagers had worn a path. Yes, it would be shorter than the road.

Walking swiftly on, her head bent in opposition to the wind, she became conscious of a figure striding before her. At a narrow gate leading out of the enclosure they both paused in order that two men approaching from an opposite direction might pass through.

They were talking, and Marjorie instantly recognized their voices as those of young farmers of the town, neither of whom had any reputation to spare—such individuals as are generally suspected, even when not definitely accused.

"Yes," announced one, evidently under the influence of liquor, "he'll not fail us. He'll be at the Cape to-night—Leon Pellitier."

"Shut up, you fool!" commanded the other, with an oath.

Then they had passed through. The girl caught her breath gaspingly. Leon—to-night—at the Cape!

The man before her turned, and so, for the first time, caught sight of her.

"What!" he cried, "is it you, Marjorie?"

She fell back a step. Instinctively her hand sought her heart. Had he also heard?

"Yes," she answered, "it is I."

"So Pelltier is going up to the Cape to-night? Rather rash on his part," with grim insinuation.

"Let me pass, Monsieur Lechesne."

"I'll be up a bit of the road with you," carelessly. "I'm going your way."

She walked rapidly on, he keeping step beside her.

"It isn't so long since the White Swan went down. I should think Leon would be more prudent. It is very soon for him to be at his old tricks again."

"Be careful," she said, quietly. "You may go too far, Pierre Lechesne."

She could barely discern the dark outline of his figure. The wind was tearing her shawl from her shoulders and whirling it about in fantastic frolic.

He laughed. But just as they reached the farm-house gate he caught her by the arm and forced her to face him.

"Look here, Marjorie," he said brusquely, "Where is the use of trying to deceive me? You're afraid that vagabond lover of yours is in a scrape; you know you are! You're trembling like a leaf this moment. Give him his congé. I'm a rich man, and, what's more, an honest man, and I'll marry you to-morrow if you'll only say the word. Why don't you throw him over?"

"Because I love him."

His tense grasp on her arm relaxed. He did not speak for a little while. When he did it was in a tone strangely subdued and humble.

"And I love you well enough to help you to the throne of your happiness even at the cost of my own. Listen, Marjorie! You know what you fear. I will avert it. I shall saddle Napoleon and ride up to the Cape. I shall find him and warn him, and tell him you need him. If you will only trust me I will do all this without faintest hope of reward. Will you?"

Her panting breathing alone broke the silence.

"Will you?" he repeated.

He might save him yet if—if there was need of salvation! Was it not possible that he was more generous than they had ever given him credit for being? And no other chance remained.

"I—trust you."

"Good! There is no time to be lost. If I tell him you require his presence he may not believe me. Prejudice has hardened him against the friend of his youth. Give me the ring you usually wear to show him as proof that I came from you."

"Oh, no! he gave it to me. I cannot part with it—no!"

"Quick! it grows late—perhaps too late!"

She tore the trinket from her finger—a tiny circlet, devoid of intrinsic value, but to her priceless.

He took it and strode away into the night.

She turned and went wearily up the path. A rosy-cheeked old dame looked up from her task of preparing the evening meal as she came into the tin sparkling kitchen.

"Mere de Dieu!" she shrieked, "but we shall have a storm! And if the wreckers are out to-night—"

Horror left the sentenced unfinished.

Within a quarter of an hour from the time he had parted from Marjorie Grant, Pierre Lechesne entered the village post-office and hastily scribbled a line to the authorities of a neighbouring town. A moment more and it flashed over the wires:

"Wreckers and smugglers at the Cape!"

All Canadians know the Cape—a bare, narrow strip of land, crowned with a light-house, which juts out into the Gulf of St. Lawrence.

The battle began. The cannon of the thunder crashed and roared; the spray rained against the rocks like shot; the gleaming blades of lightning outleaped and gashed the black night with wounds of flame. A few men, clustered together in a cranny of the cliffs, muttered to one another as the fierce fray went on.

"There is no danger—now," urged a voice.

"Curse you, keep cool!"

"I say, Pelltier, what would Ma'mselle Marjorie think if she saw you—"

"Sacre! hold your peace. I am a desperate man. This is my first cruise—and my last. It must be—it is the only avenue to prosperity. But don't mention her, Jacques Le Blanc—don't dare to!"

"Hark!" cried the first speaker, as a faint peculiar whistle pierced the air. "That's Jean's signal. All's well! Come!"

They crept from their covert and up the shore like river rats. Some stationed themselves at the entrance, some scaled the stair. A cry arose.

"They come—the constables! Voila! let us fly! Ah, Sainte Marie! too late!"

A terrible struggle there in the night and the storm. Shrieks, blows, oaths, mad resistance. Finally, the "click-click" of handcuffs.

A man holding a lantern flashed its light full on the face of the foremost prisoner. He started back in feigned dismay.

"You! Leon Pelltier!"

The other looked at him despairingly, their enmity for the time forgotten.

"Marjorie!" he murmured.

Lechesne lifted his disengaged left hand, so that the glimmer from the lantern clearly revealed the ring which adorned his little finger.

"Oh, I'll take care of Marjorie!" he laughed significantly.

Pelltier's cheeks crimsoned. A curse crashed between his clenched teeth. He strove frantically to free his hands from their iron fetters. Again Lechesne laughed, but he also moved away.

With the first chill light of morning Marjorie Grant was down on the cliffs. She descried in the distance the figure of a man running fleetly up the winding, sandy path.

"Oh, God be thanked! Leon!"

But it was not Leon.

"Pierre—Pierre Lechesne!" she cried as he came nearer.

"What news? You found him; he is coming home? he was not there at all? it was all a mistake?" in timorous joy;

"a cruel mistake, and—"

"There was no mistake—none! The wreckers of the White Swan made another attempt last night to extinguish the light. This time they were unsuccessful. They were watched and captured—every man of them. They had been doing some smuggling, too, I believe. They are mostly young fellows from Cocagne, Point du Chene and Shediac. The constables have marched the whole crowd to Westmoreland gaol."

"But he was not among them. Ah, say he was not among them—Leon!"

She was leaning eagerly forward, her quivering lips apart. He hesitated, then he spoke with pained reluctance:

"He was the first man arrested."

"You did not warn him—save him! And you promised—"

"I trusted you—"

"I did my best, but—I was too late!"

"Too late?"

She stood and stared at him a moment, the salt spray beating in her face like hail. Then she put both hands to her head in dull, bewildered fashion; and, turning, walked away. But the next day she was down on the cliffs at dawn, and the next and the next, and for many weary days and weeks and months after that.

Accounts few, vague, unsatisfactory, of a trial and conviction at Fredericton drifted to the desolate French hamlet.

"We always knew he was a scamp," nodded the old gossips, speaking of Leon Pelltier. "None of our daughters were ever good enough for his lordship. He must choose for his fiancée that little, yellow-haired English girl. Bien! Chacun a son gout!" And they would shrug their shoulders disdainfully.

"Marjorie is a fool!" declared others younger. "Losing her good looks and chance of a husband for the sake of a man who may not see daylight with free eyes for half a dozen years yet."

"Ah, if the foreign mam'selle had not such strange notions in her pretty head!" sighed more than one admiring swain.

May came, and the May flowers were in bloom. Marjorie went into the woods and gathered a cluster. When she went down to the beach next morning she wore the sweet, pink things in her bosom.

That day the curé sent for her. She went up to the presbytery in obedience to the summons. He spoke to her seriously, but gently, too. "My child," he said, "he to whom you had given your heart has proved most unworthy of your love. He is parted from you by his own sin. It is but just. The grief which now controls your every action is