

WOODEN SPOIL

By VICTOR ROUSSEAU

ILLUSTRATIONS BY IRWIN MYERS

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Dupont clenched his fists. "I've sworn to kill him," he whispered. "I've held my peace. I talked with him face to face tonight, and he never knew the devil that was sitting in my throat, telling me to make an end."

"Can you keep that devil of yours silent till you have him on board?" asked Brousseau.

Dupont pulled at his tangled beard and nodded. Brousseau, watching him, knew that the madness which held him would carry him to the end. "Who are your crew?" he asked.

"Drouin, Lachance and Georges Martin."

"Two men are enough. I have two good men for you in place of them. Listen carefully, Dupont."

Marie, sleeping overhead, heard her father drive up in a sleigh that night, and there was whispering at the door. That frightened her. Another thing that alarmed her was his way of entering. Usually he would stamp into the house, as if on board; but now he came in furtively, and she could hardly hear his stealthy movements below.

She wondered what was portending. Of late he had watched her more keenly than she ever, and had been more silent. She stepped by stairs, and she could hear at dawn to hear a stealthy step outside her door. In the dim light she saw her father bending over her bed. She sat up, stretching out her arms as if to ward off something. In her confused condition, however, sleep and waking she had fancied for a moment that he held something in his hand—a knife or a revolver.

But she saw that he held nothing.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Mademoiselle," stammered the girl, "they are planning to kill him."

"Whom?"

"Monsieur Askew, who saved me from Pierre that day. Mademoiselle, I have only now learned what they say of him and me. It is not true. And they are going to murder him. I came to you to save him."

"Where is he?"

"He is going on board tonight. Perhaps he is there now. Pierre and Leblanc are waiting for him there."

"Wait here!" cried Madeline. She ran back into the Chateau, put on her coat and hat, and took the revolver which had lain for many years unused in a drawer of a cabinet. She hurried to the stable, harnessed the horse, and brought the sleigh to the door. She motioned to Marie to enter, leaped in, and took the reins, and the two girls started along the road through the forest.

It was a difficult journey through the deep snow. Often the horse floundered knee-deep in the drifts, and the way seemed endless; but near the village the snow was tramped hard, and the sleigh went like the wind. Neither of the girls spoke, but before the eyes of each was the same dreadful picture.

At last they emerged from the forest and crossed the bridge. The hum of the mill had ceased, and had been succeeded by another sound, well known to dwellers along the St. Lawrence shores when winter arrives: The string of the ice flows as the impeding storm drives them together to their long winter anchorage.

The sleigh went madly along the wharf, which groaned and creaked as the ice battered it on either side. Madeline sprang from the sleigh and ran on board the schooner, which was at ready mooring.

As Marie descended to follow her she saw that it was too late. There was an increasing space between the wharf and the deck. She hesitated, and then it was impossible to follow.

For a moment she thought she saw Madeline threading the narrow passage between the piles of lumber; then the darkness closed about her.

The pulleys creaked. The mainmast and foremast swung upward and belled in the wind. The two galleons gleamed like white birds against the night.

Then only the sails remained. They turned and shifted, disappearing and appearing again elusively, until they blended with the fog and the darkness and vanished finally.

The horse, left uncontrolled, swung round and galloped homeward, trailing the empty sleigh behind him. Marie stood shuddering at the end of the wharf. For a while she stared out in terror toward the invisible schooner, lost in the distance. She could see nothing, but she could still hear the roar of the wind in the rigging and the snapping of the great sails.

Presently, with a low cry, she turned and began running homeward. She staggered into the cottage and sank down before the stove, crouching there.

When Hillary reached the wharf it was already dark. He had been recognized by no one on the way. He went straight aboard the schooner, and found Dupont on deck.

"I shall go to the schooner," he said. "I shall be aboard till we sail this evening. If thou come to me before I sail

and tell me the name, I give thee his life, the life for another."

"What life? What other?" cried the girl wildly.

He stared into her eyes, and the life in his own was that of a man devil-haunted.

"Dost thou think I do not know," he cried, "of Monsieur Askew and thee, or that Mademoiselle has broken her betrothal with him because of thee?"

He turned toward her with a menacing gesture. "The name!" he thundered. She covered under his words, and the name now trembled upon her lips. But before she spoke it Dupont was gone.

He was gone, and she was alone in the gray of the morning, watching the gray sea heave under a brightening sky, as she had watched it all her life. And her father's appearance in her room seemed unreal as a dream.

All day she watched him from the logs on deck. All day she waited, stunned, and incapable of action, repeating over and over in her mind her father's words, whose meaning was unintelligible to her. Yet St. Boniface remained unchanged in that ruin that had come upon her. Mrs. Lachance, noisily as they strolled from their work at noon, children shouted at play; the hum of the mill was a soft undertone accompanying the horror in her heart. It seemed incredible that St. Boniface could know nothing, when the whole universe was crying out against her.

It was late in the afternoon when she saw two figures stoop toward the vessel. She recognized Pierre and Leblanc. And in a moment she understood the meaning of their appearance. Murderers were planned against Hillary, who had saved her. She watched them go on board, paralyzed with fear.

Then the power of action, returning, shattered the paralysis of will that held her. She ran bareheaded from the cottage, through the streets of St. Boniface, toward the Chateau. She must get help there; her thoughts turned instinctively thither, as St. Boniface had always turned for aid toward its seigneur.

Madeline seated in her room, with her memory of her dead, heard the door bell jangle. She went down, to see Marie in the hall. At the sight of the girl a feeling of repulsion, wild and unreasonable, stiffened her, but when she looked into her face, she spoke gently.

"What is it?" she asked.

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"Immediately," answered, expressing the captain's anxiety.

The schooner contained a tiny cabin in the fore-cabin. Between this and the lumber secured with chains, and stacked high above the sides.

"I'm going below," said Hillary, turning away. He did not want to look upon St. Boniface again.

He put his foot upon the top rung of the ladder that led down to the fore-cabin. As he did so he felt a stunning blow upon the back of the head. He staggered, slipped, and fell down the ladder into the little open space before the cabin.

Half dazed, he was barely conscious of seeing the griming faces of Pierre and Leblanc stare into his. His sword was torn from his back, his pockets emptied. He waited for the knife thrust, but only kicks followed. He was lifted and thrown into the cabin.

The outlaws ran back to assist Dupont in getting up the sails. It was not Brousseau's plan to dispatch him within hearing of the shore.

He heard the sails being hoisted, and felt the schooner moving from the wharf. Then he heard a low cry and saw Madeline upon her knees before him.

She bent her face to his, whispering that she loved him, pleading for forgiveness, and beseeching him to rise. And Hillary opened his eyes to discover that the vision was reality.

He staggered to his feet and stood swaying in the middle of the cabin, while she kept her arms about him. He began to remember. He knew where he was now. Madeline thrust the revolver into his hand.

"They have planned to murder you!" she cried. "I learned of it. I brought this. You must not die. Hillary, now that we love each other."

He broke the revolver. It was empty, and the bore so eaten away through the barrel.

A ray of moonlight, straggling through the ice, disclosed old Dupont at the wheel above the poop, and the great mainmast swaying over it—two forms that crept along the passage between the lumber piles. They started back in sudden consternation at the sight of the unexpected barricade, and Hillary's club smashed Pierre's head, descending upon the sailor's arm, which dropped limp at his side.

All the strength of his arms went into the blow. Pierre never spoke again.

With rust that to have fed it would have been more dangerous to the shooter than to his object of aim. He made the favor on the girl's face as she made the shot.

"I did not think about the cartridges," she cried. "I heard you were in danger and I seized it and came to you. What shall we do? I am going to die with you."

"We are not going to die," he answered. "But he felt a trick of fate in his eyes. He pulled himself together to face the situation, thinking with all the concentration of which his mind was capable.

He heard the sails being run up, and the creak of the cordage in the wind. Then the schooner, grinding her gears through the drifts, began to roll and pitch as the force of the gulf current struck her. And through the portholes Hillary saw the lights of St. Boniface reel into the unwrapping fog and vanish.

With Madeline's arm about him he thought of his desperate concentration. Doubtless the ruffians had gone to assist Dupont in taking the schooner out into midstream, confident that their victim was at their mercy. Once the vessel had passed the dangerous ice she could keep her on her course, and Dupont had planned his death. He remembered the hate on the old man's face; but he could not imagine the cause of it, for he did not connect it with the story about Marie.

They would return, they would discover that the revolver was useless; his life was worth that ten minutes' purchase, and of Madeline's fate he dared not think. He must fight for her and live for her. He got his shaking limbs under control.

"I'm all right," he whispered. "I've got my plan now. Keep behind me and be ready to help. The door's locked, I suppose?"

A quick attempt to open it showed him that it was. But he had a chance, if he could break down the door, for the sound might pass unheeded in the gale, with the crashing of the ice against the sides of the schooner, enabling him to pass into the hold unseen in the darkness.

He hurried himself against the cabin door, his shoulders, body, with every muscle set. He broke upon it as if it were a piece of paper. He sprang into the hold, and began running toward the stern, with a low cry, she turned and began running homeward. She staggered into the cottage and sank down before the stove, crouching there.

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crash, drove him against the great mainmast, obscuring the gibbous moon that scoured like a pale ghost among the drifting clouds, halved in the fog. Hillary could just discern the tiny light of the men, hard at work to gain the middle channel, and the lantern that hung from the mast above, dimly illuminating them.

He had seen, but had not consciously observed, till the remembrance came to him then, that a pile of lumber placed in the ship but not yet secured, lay about the center of the open space in front of the cabin. It could not shift with the rolling of the schooner, so as to destroy her equilibrium, on account of the stacks on either side. It consisted of the last load of logs which had been dropped there from the end of the time. Hillary raised two in his arms and carried them in front of the broken door. It was impossible to make his voice heard, for the ship was staggering through the churning ice floes with a noise like that of artillery, but Madeline saw his purpose, and in an instant was at work helping him. The door began to swing open. Hillary, by the side of Hillary, Hillary wedged the ends against the chains staked on either side, so that the whole would form an impenetrable barrier. He pulled furiously, for their scanty time was precious beyond value. Soon Madeline was behind the barricade, adjusting the logs that Hillary brought, and it stood the height of his waist.

It was impossible that either Dupont, Pierre or Leblanc carried a revolver; but even if they did, the door would be bullet-proof. Hillary took his rifle from the rack, the revolving was on the barrel. He raised his shoulder-high. He clambered behind it and took his station there just as the grinding of the floes ceased, and the schooner caught the clear water.

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he had, and he sense that someone meditated some treachery, but he was not prepared for what followed.

Madeline cried to him and pulled him back, just as Pierre and Leblanc leaped down from the fore-cabin roof, to seize them had climbed during Brousseau's heliograph parrying. Each had his knife ready, and they were upon Hillary together.

There was no room for maneuvering, and Hillary never knew afterward how he escaped. But he thrust his club between their feet, and then, as the men stumbled back, he struck them with full force upon Pierre's skull.

All the strength of his arms went into the blow. Pierre never spoke again.

Leblanc rushed frantically toward the barricade. Hillary was upon him before he saw Brousseau's club struck the bulwark, and as the schooner lurched, toppled into the sea. He was probably dead before he disappeared beneath the waves.

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that he reversed charge and now gone suddenly insane.

Father Lucien had just laid down his singletick when a boy brought him a letter in an unknown hand-writing. A letter was an important event in the cure's day. He put on his spectacles, sat down, opened the envelope, and began to read.

It was from the priest at St. Joseph, and stated that Naulette Bonnat had given him the full story of the adventures upon the island, together with an account of the activities of Pierre and Simeon Duvall.

Bad as Father Lucien had known conditions at St. Marie to be, he had never guessed at the revelations which Naulette had made to his confessor. His indignation split over, and he passed his study in agitation for several minutes. At last, struck with an inspiration, he took up his singletick, put on his cap, coat and snowshoes, and started off toward St. Marie.

It was about an hour later when the few loafers in Simeon's saloon looked up to see the cure standing in the doorway. Since the lumbermen had gone into camp for the winter the saloon had been a deserted place, and Simeon sat at a thriving liquor business. He saw the cure and came waddling forward, his pale blue eyes blinking with mock humility.

"Come in, father," he said suavely. "We don't often see you here. What will you have? A drop of gin? A little brandy, now? Or maybe you're looking for some of the girls to dance with?"

The men grinned and nudged each other. It is not often that one sees a cure halted.

"You're a sport, father," said Simeon. "What sort of stick do you call that with a knob each end?"

"I shall come to the saloon later," answered the cure. "Simeon, Simeon, how often have I spoken to you about the evil that you are doing here! It is a statutory offense to sell liquor without a license, but it is an offense against God to run this sort of place. Simeon, for the good of your soul, will you not close down this place and lead a different life?"

The mild words and humble attitude of the old priest were so comical that nobody could conceal his amusement any longer. A roar of laughter shook the saloon, and Simeon, who was unimpressed, said to himself: "I'll think about my soul when I'm sick."

"You may be very sick at any moment, Simeon, without expecting it. I'll take the chances of that," answered Simeon.

"Simeon, I am growing tired of speaking to you. Do you know that your house is a plague-spot in this village? Simeon, for the last time, will you close up for good, and all?"

"Ah, father, you mean all right," said Simeon. "But that's your job, I bet you're just as much a sport as anybody here, if only you let yourself go. Come on now, and get into a game with us."