

"Then there came a shadow, little Pansy; into our Elton there came a serpent man, handsome as St. Michael, evil as Lucifer."

"One day he robbed me of my joys."

"For a while I did not mind, my heart was stunned, but the days grew weary, when they did not come and I longed to hear the musical laughter of my baby-girl, to see the flash of her bright hair in the sunlight and to feel her light, smooth lips against my cheek. At dusk, in the melancholy time when the daylight grows dim and the lamps are lighted, I missed the stately woman, clad in pale blue, who used to come at that hour from the garden, bringing a bouquet of roses for my study table."

"After this I do not remember, little Pansy, I do not remember!"

The old man's words soon became an unintelligible jargon. Stupefied with drink and fatigue, his head drooped until it had touched the little kitten, which darted away suddenly, overturning the candle and extinguishing it.

The old man slept.

The moonlight came in a broad, effulgent bar of light into the room, touching the sleeping figure at the table with a downy radiance. Outside the snow-clad houses of the village lay smitten with moonlight. In the windows reddish lamps gleamed everywhere, and from the doors came the villagers, walking quietly in the direction of the church whose stained windows glowed with mellow, multi-colored light. Suddenly the chimes for midnight Mass rang out clearly in the frosty air. When these had ceased the soft peal of an organ came from the church, and then all was silent in the houses of the village where the children slept, dreaming of the Christ-child.

II.

Some time after this incident of the bar-room Laberge, who rarely received a letter, was surprised on passing the village post office to be hailed by the postmaster, a thin, pox-marked little man, as brown and wizened as the rind of a butternut.

"Look here, Laberge," said the little czar of letterdom with immense dignity. "There has been something for you lying about here two or three days; you had better come in and take it."

Pepin entered meekly, making no remark whatever. He had a well-bred method of humiliating those who affected superiority or contempt for his miserable condition of life. It was nearly always effective, as now, when the little postmaster handed him a letter with marked condescension. Pepin thanked him gallantly.

There was seated near the wood-stove a habitant, with a great cap of weasel fur and coat of gray homespun tied in the centre with a sash of red wool. His feet was encased in ponderous beef-skin moccasins or *souliers de boeuf*. He was blowing whiffs of native tobacco smoke throughout the small room.

The wood-stove with its open draughts kept up a ceaseless roaring sound of a mimic Niagara.

Pepin took a chair next the habitant and attempted to tear open the envelope of his letter. His hands were palsied with dissipation so he handed it to the habitant, who was cutting tobacco at the moment, and who silently took the letter and slit it open with his knife.

While Laberge read the letter the pronounced oscillation of his head and body was emphasized on the half-frosted window panes behind him.

When he had struggled through its contents he looked up and addressing the postmaster who was busied writing at the little wicket, said:

"Monsieur, did you receive any other letters for me?"

"Yes, mon ami, four or five; Laflamme took them to you, did he not?"

"Bien, no; but I suppose he keeps them for me!"

The sound of footsteps in the snow outside interrupted this repartee. In a moment Laflamme himself had entered and proceeded immediately to the wicket.

"Have you anything to-day for Laberge?" said he. "Tien, tien mon faiseur," chuckled Pepin from behind the stove.

Laflamme turned quickly, and when his eyes met those of the old man, he coloured slightly although a smile was on his lips.

"You have caught the fox at last," said he.

"Indeed I have caught him!"

"Well, well it was all for the best."

"What do you mean?"

"I have been arranging a wedding for you, I have been in league with Hymen as it were."

"Who would marry me, you foolish fellow?"

"An angel perhaps, perhaps a shrew."

Pepin suddenly became serious.

"Well, well," said he confusedly.

"Courage!" said Laflamme, with a merry air.

"It is courage indeed that I will need, for according to this letter my affianced arrives to-day." Laflamme in turn became serious. "Then she must be here now; the train from Montreal has passed the village an hour ago."

The repartee was interrupted by the sound (gentler sound forsooth) of feet on the sward. The door was opened nervously and a pretty, young girl entered. She was clad in a dainty garment trimmed with cheap fur. Her face was pale as the snow outside the windows.

"Monsieur le maitre de poste?" said she, gazing into the wicket in a hunted fashion.

"The same."

"Do you know of a person living in the village called Pepin Laberge?"

"He is at present in the room, mademoiselle."

Pepin had arisen at the mention of his name and turned toward the young lady who, without noticing him, went to Laflamme. The latter motioned Pepin to be seated and touched his hat gracefully to the girl.

Her face grew still paler. With quivering lips she said:

"Ah, monsieur, pardon me; I feel so bold, so contemptible—but when you have heard my story I am sure you will be charitable."

Laflamme seemed deeply moved.

He could not have even dreamed that a person coarse enough to insert a matrimonial advertisement in a newspaper could be so beautiful, so modest and apparently so well-bred as this girl was. Since the incident of Le Loup he had broken away from old associations, had become reconciled to religion and in a moment of repentance had told the Abbé Langlois the story of his jest. The good Curé to his surprise took kindly to the jest and encouraged it because, he said, repulsive though the idea of such a marriage was, it might be the means of rescuing Laberge. His first inspiration was to repair to the house of the good priest.

"Take my arm, mademoiselle," said he, "and we will go to the Curé's."

Over his shoulder he motioned Pepin to follow, and as the trio vanished, the little postmaster and the silent habitant exchanged glances of wonderment.

III.

Out into the street they went. The day was gray and humid. The atmosphere had that crystalline clarity of the humid day. Opposite the post office was one of those wooden wayside crosses of the French Canadian village, with the moist snow clinging to it. The lime-washed cottages along the street were quaint with the additional whiteness of the snow everywhere. Only the tinkle of a sleigh-bell broke the great stillness. The mountain, at whose base the village nestled, with its great blotches of white and black, its naked maples and its sinister pines, seemed to be frowning like a human thing. The trio passed the little stone church, with its tin tower and weather-vane, and entered the neat presbytery. Not a word was spoken until they were seated in the cosy parlor of the presbytery where a glaring fire of pine burned.

The Curé Langlois, a tall, thin man, with a kindly visage, greeted his visitors cordially. He saw all at a glance. Laflamme spoke first.

"Mademoiselle," said he, "it will be necessary to make an explanation to you, but first let us hear your story."

"Ah, Monsieur le Curé, and you, monsieur, had I known it would all have been so dreadful I would have suffered death by starvation rather than this humiliation. My whole life has been a strange dream. When a child my mother gave me to an Orphanage in Paris. I do not remember her. At the age of fourteen I was adopted by a childless couple who left me penniless. I had not been trained to labor, I knew nothing of the world. I came to Canada as companion to a lady who died at sea. Arriving here penniless and with no means of a livelihood, I was on the verge of despair. The poor people with whom I lived advised me to put that dreadful advertisement in the newspaper. That is all."

Here she burst into tears. "O monsieur," she said, "I am weak with shame and I wish that I were dead!"

"Have you nothing belonging to your mother by which she might be identified?" suggested the Abbé Langlois, with a slight quiver in his voice.

"How did you think of it, *mon pere*?" she answered quickly. "I have a locket with a tiny daguerrotype of her." Here she put her hand into the bosom of her dress and brought forth a tiny gold locket.

When she opened it Pepin was looking over her shoulder. The ruddiness had left his face entirely. His eyes were starting from his head.

With curious brusqueness he cried:

"*Mon Dieu*, little girl you are my daughter. That woman on the locket was once my wife. She went away from me years ago and took you with her. I cannot tell you why!"

In a moment he was upon his knees, kissing the pale hands of the girl.

Laflamme approached her and said in a lugubrious tone of voice:

"Mademoiselle, he is Pepin Laberge. We have been jesting!"

"Yes, my child," said the curé, "But it was a jest of God!"

Some time after this Laflamme and Mademoiselle Laberge were married by the Curé Langlois of St. Pys, and now the good priest who has grown feeble in the sacred ministry, finds his happiest moments in the company of grandfather Laberge, the God-fearing and temperate veteran surrounded as he always is by his daughter's beautiful children.

JOS. NEVIN DOYLE.

To St. Nicholas, to Kris Kringle, to Santa Claus has succeeded My Lady Bountiful. The business Christmas season is a period of celebration in her honor. When the shop people know it is time for her coming they procure evergreens and fancy lights in abundance and set their places in a blaze of glory and deck them in wreaths of beauty. Spain sends its choicest raisins for her; Alaska sends its richest furs. The liveryman drives to her door—he sure his cab is cosy. She wraps herself about in furs. She passes down the street and knows the jubilation is for her. A hundred eager gentlemen stand ready to lift the latch of their doors that she may enter. She carries everywhere a golden instrument of magic within a leathern covering. The cover opens and the metal clasps click as it closes again. But a good fairy has escaped and someone afar off feels the sudden thrill of an unknown joy approaching. From that purse a thousand Fairy Grandmothers fly to comfort a thousand Cinderellas. My Lady is bent upon making the world happy, and though it last but a day she will have her way about it. What multitudes of proprietors, foremen, clerks, are there waiting to do her bidding and give effect to her desires. Go to thy cot, Tommy, and sleep sound; leave thy books, frail student, and thy midnight lamp; let fall your hammers, ye who labor in the city; ye whose homes are elsewhere, see ye miss not the train; turn out the lights and draw the blinds, ye shopmen, My Lady whom ye serve has not forgotten you; put up thy horse, My Lady's coachman, thou who wert the last in her scheme of providence but the first to know its accomplishment. Out lights! Down noise! Let soft sleep come, and gently falling snow. To-morrow is the world's happy day. My Lady Bountiful has brought home her gifts.