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THE LITTLE BELL OF HONOR.

. . . A TALE OF PONTIAC. . . .

"Sacrez mon bapteme!"

"What did he say?" asked the little chemist, stepping from his doorway.

"He cursed his baptism," answered tall Medallion, the English auctioneer, pushing his way further into the crowd.

"Ah, the pitiful vaurien!" said the little chemist's wife, shuddering; for that was an oath not to be endured by any one who called the church mother.

The crowd that had gathered at the Four Corners were greatly disturbed, for they also felt the repulsion that possessed the little chemist's wife. They babbled, shook their heads, and waved their hands excitedly, and swayed and craned their necks to see the offender.

All at once, his voice, mad with rage, was heard above the rest, shouting frenzied a curse which was a horribly grotesque blasphemy upon the name of God. Men who had used that oath in their insane anger had been known to commit suicide out of remorse afterward.

For a moment there was a painful hush. The crowd drew back involuntarily and left a clear space, in which stood the blasphemer, a middle sized, athletic fellow, with black beard, thick, waving hair, and flashing brown eyes. His white teeth were showing now in a snarl like a dog's, his cap was on the ground, his hair was tumbled, his hands were twitching with passion, his foot was stamping with fury, and every time it struck the ground a little silver bell rang at his knee, a pretty sylvan sound, in no keeping with the scene. It heightened the distress of the fellow's blasphemy and ungovernable anger. For a man to curse his baptism was a fearful thing; but the other oath was not fit for human ears, and horror held the crowd moveless for a moment.

Then, as suddenly as the stillness came, a low, threatening mumble of voices rose, and a movement to close in on the man was made; but a figure pushed through the crowd, and, standing in front of the man, waved the people back. It was the cure, the beloved M. Fabré, whose life had been spent among them, whom they obeyed as well as they could; for they were but frail humanity, after all, crude, simple folk, touched with imagination.

"Luc Pomfrette, why have you done this? What provocation had you?"

The cure's voice was stern and cold, his usually gentle face had become severe, his soft eyes were piercing and determined.

The foot of the man still beat the ground angrily, and the little bell kept tinkling. He was gasping with passion, and he did not answer yet.

"Luc Pomfrette what have you to say?" asked the cure again. He mentioned back Ardenne, the constable of the parish, who had suddenly appeared with a rusty rifle and a more rusty pair of handcuffs.

Still the voyageur did not answer.

The cure glanced at Lajeunesse the blacksmith, who stood near.

"There was no cause—no," said Lajeunesse, sagely shaking his head. "Here stand we at the door of the Louis Quinze in very good humor. Up come the voyageurs, all laughing, and ahead of them is Luc Pomfrette, with the little bell at his knee. Luc he laugh the same as the rest, and they stand in the door, and the garcon bring out the brandy—Just a little, but just enough, too. I am talking to Henri Beauvin. I am telling him Junie Gauloir have run away with Dicey the Protestant, when all very quick Luc push between me and Henri, jump into the street, and speak like that!"

Lajeunesse looked around, as if for corroboration; Henri and others nodded, and some one said:

"That's true, that's true. There was no cause."

"Maybe it was the drink," said a little hunchbacked man, pushing his way in beside the cure "It must have been the drink; there was nothing else—no."

It was Parpon, the dwarf, the oddest, in some ways the most foolish, in others the wisest man in Pontiac.

"That is no excuse," said the cure.

"It is the only one he has, eh?" answered Parpon. His eyes were fixed meaningly on those of Pomfrette.

"It is no excuse," repeated the cure, sternly. "The blasphemy is horrible, a shame and stigma upon Pontiac forever." He looked Pomfrette in the face. "Foul-mouthed and wicked man, it is two years since you took the blessed sacrament. Last Easter day you were in a drunken sleep while high mass was being said; after the funeral of your own father you were drunk again. When you went away to the woods you never left a penny for candles, nor for masses to be said for your father's soul; yet you sold his horse and his little house, and spent the money in drink. Not a cent for a candle, but—"

"It's a lie," cried Pomfrette, shaking with rage from head to foot.

A long horror-stricken "Ah!" broke from the crowd.

"You have a bad heart," he answered, "and you give us an evil name. I command you to come to mass next Sunday to repent and to hear your penance given from the altar. For until—"

"I'll go to no mass till I'm carried to it," was the sullen, malevolent interruption.

The cure turned upon the people.

"This is a blasphemer, an evil-hearted, shameless man," he said. "Until he repents humbly and bows his vicious spirit to holy church, and his heart to the mercy of God, I command you to avoid him as you would a plague. I command that no door be open to him; that no one offer him comfort or friendship; that not even a bon jour or a bon soir pass between you. He has blasphemed against our Father in heaven; he's a leper." He turned to Pomfrette. "I pray God that you have no peace in mind or body till your evil life is changed, and your black heart is broken by sorrow and repentance."

Then to the people he said again: "I have commanded you for your souls' sake; see that you obey. Go to your homes. Let us leave the leper—alone." He waved the awed crowd back.

"Shall we take off the little bell?" asked Lajeunesse of the cure.

Pomfrette heard, and he drew himself together, his jaws shutting with ferocity, and his hand flying to the belt where his voyageur's case-knife hung. The cure did not see this. Without turning his head toward Pomfrette, he said:

"I have commanded you, my children. Leave the leper alone."

Again he waved the crowd to be gone, and they scattered, whispering to each other; for nothing like this had ever occurred in Pontiac before, nor had they ever seen the cure with this granite look in his face, nor heard his voice so bitterly hard.

He did not move until he had seen them all started homeward from the Four Corners. One person remained beside him—Parpon the dwarf.

"I will not obey you, M'sieu' le cure," said he. "I'll forgive him before he repents."

"You will share his sin," answered the cure, sternly.

"No; his punishment, m'sieu'," said the dwarf; and turning on his heel, he trotted to where Pomfrette stood alone in the middle of the road, a dark, morose figure, hatred and a wild trouble in his face.

Already banishment, isolation, seemed to possess him, to surround him with loneliness. The very effort he made to draw himself up and be defiant of his fate appeared to make him still more solitary. All at once he thrust a hand inside his red shirt, and, giving a jerk which broke a string tied around his neck, he drew forth a little pad, a flat bag of silk, called an Agnus Dei, worn as a protection and a blessing by the pious, and threw it on the ground. Another little parcel he drew from his belt, and ground it into the dirt with his heel. It contained a woman's hair. Then, muttering, his hands still twitching with savage feeling, he picked up his cap, covered with dirt, put it on, and passed away down the road toward the river, the little bell tinkling as he went. Those who heard it had a strange feeling, for already to them the man was as if he had some baleful disease, and this little bell told of the passing of a leper.

Yet some one man had worn just such a bell every year in Pontiac. It was the mark of honor conferred upon a voyageur by his fellows, the token of his prowess and his skill. This year Luc Pomfrette had won it, and that very day it had been buckled round his leg with songs and toasts.

For hours Pomfrette walked incessantly up and down the river bank, muttering and gesticulating, but at last came quietly to the cottage which he shared with Henri Beauvin. Henri had removed himself and his belongings; already the ostracizing had begun. He went to the bedroom of old Mme. Burgoyne, his cousin; she also was gone. He went to a little outhouse and called.

For reply there was a scratching at the door. He opened it, and a dog leaped out and upon him. With a fierce fondness he snatched at the dog's collar, and drew the shaggy head to his knee; then as suddenly shoved him away with a smothered oath, and going into the house, shut the door. He sat down in a chair in the middle of the room, and scarcely stirred for half an hour. At last, with a passionate jerk of the head, he got to his feet, looking about the room in a half-distracted way. Outside the dog kept running round and round the house, silent, watchful, waiting for the door to open.

As time went by, Luc became quieter, but the look of his face was more desolate. At last he almost ran to the door, threw it open, and called. The dog sprang into the room, went straight to the fireplace, lay down, and with tongue lolling out and body panting, looked at Pomfrette with blinking, uncomprehending eyes.

Pomfrette went to a cupboard, brought back a bone well covered with meat, and gave it to the dog, which snatched it and began gnawing it, now and again stopping to look up at his master, as one might look at a mountain moving, be aware of something singular, yet not grasp the significance of the phenomenon. At last, worn out, Pomfrette threw himself on the bed, and fell into a sound sleep. When he awoke it was far into the morning. He lighted a fire in the kitchen, got a "spider," fried himself a piece of pork, and made some tea. There was no milk in the cupboard, so he took a pitcher and walked down the road a few rods to the next house, where lived the village milkman. He knocked, and the door was opened by the milkman's wife. A frightened look came upon her when she saw who it was.

"Non, non," she said, and shut the door in his face.

He stared blankly at the door for a moment, and then turned round and stood looking down into the road, with the pitcher in his hand. The milkman's little boy, Maxime, came running round the corner of the house.

"Maxime," he said involuntarily and half eagerly, for he and the lad had been great friends.

Maxime's face brightened, then became clouded; he stood still an instant, and presently turning round, and looking at Pomfrette askance, ran away behind the house, saying, "Non, non."

Pomfrette drew his rough knuckles across his forehead in a dazed way; then, as the significance of the thing came home to him, he broke out with a fierce oath, and strode away down the yard and into the road. On the way to his house, he met Duclosse, the mealman, and Garotte, the lime-burner. He wondered what they would do. He could see the fat, wheezy Duclosse hesitate, but the arid, alert Garotte had determination and motion in every look. They came nearer; they were about to pass; there was no sign.

Pomfrette stopped short. "Good day, lime-burner; good day, Duclosse," he said, looking straight at them.

Garotte made no reply, but walked straight on. Pomfrette stepped swiftly in front of the mealman. There was fury in his face—fury and danger; his hair was disordered, his eyes afire.

"Good day, mealman," he said, and waited.

"Duclosse," called Garotte, warningly, "remember."

Duclosse's knees shook, and his face became mottled like a piece of soap; he pushed his fingers into the white shirt, and touched the Agnus Dei that he carried there. That and Garotte's words gave him courage. He scarcely knew what he said, but it had meaning.

"Good-bye—leper," he answered.

Pomfrette's arm flew out to throw the pitcher at the mealman's head, but Duclosse, with a grunt of terror, flung up in front of his face the small bag of meal that he carried, the contents pouring over his waistcoat from a loose corner. The picture was so ludicrous that Pomfrette laughed with a devilish humor, and flinging the pitcher at the bag, he walked away toward his own house. Duclosse, pale and frightened, stepped from among the fragments of crockery, and with backward glances toward Pomfrette joined his comrade.

"Lime-burner," he said, sitting down on the bag of meal, and mechanically twisting tight the loose, leaking corner, "the devil is in that leper."

"He was a good enough fellow once," answered Garotte, watching Pomfrette.

"I drank with him at five o'clock yesterday," said Duclosse, philosophically. "He was fit for any company then; now he's fit for none."

Garotte looked wise. "Mealman," said he, "it takes years to make folks love you; you can make them hate you in an hour. La, la! It's easier to hate than to love. Come along, M'sieu' dusty-belly."

Pomfrette's life in Pontiac went on as it began that day. Not once a day, and sometimes not once in twenty days, did any human being speak to him. The village baker would not sell him bread; his groceries he had to buy from the neighboring parishes, for the grocer's flighty wife called for the constable when he entered the shop. He had to bake his own bread, and do his own cooking, washing, cleaning, and gardening. His hair grew long and his clothes became shabbier. At last, when he needed a new suit—so torn had his others become at woodchopping and many kinds of work—he went to the village tailor, and was promptly told that nothing but Luc Pomfrette's grave clothes would be cut and made in that house.

When he walked down to the Four Corners the street emptied at once, and the lonely man with the tinkling bell of honor at his knee felt the whole world falling away from sight and touch and sound of him. Once when he went into the Louis Quinze every man stole away in silence, and the landlord himself, without a word, turned and left the bar. At that, with a hoarse laugh, Pomfrette poured out a glass of brandy, drank it off, and left a shilling on the counter. The next morning he found the shilling, wrapped in a piece of paper, just inside his door; it had been pushed underneath. On the paper was written, "It is cursed."

Presently his dog died, and the day afterward he suddenly disappeared from Pontiac, and wandered on to St. Gabrielle, Ribeaux, and Ville Bambord. But his shame had gone before him, and people shunned him everywhere, even the roughest. No one who knew him would shelter him. He slept in barns and in the woods until winter came and snow lay thick upon the ground. Thin and haggard, and with nothing left of his old self but his deep brown eyes and curling hair, and his unhappy name and fame, he turned back again to Pontiac. His spirit was sullen and hard, his heart closed against repentance. Had not the church and Pontiac and the world punished him beyond his deserts for a moment's madness brought on by a great shock?

II.

One bright, sunshiny day of early winter, he trudged through the snow-banked street of Pontiac back to his home. Men he once knew well, and had worked with, passed him in a sled on their way to the great shanty in the backwoods. They halted in their singing for a moment when they saw him; then, turning their heads from him, dashed on, caroling lustily:

"Ah, ah, Babette,
We go away;
But we will come
Again, Babette,—
Again back home,
On Easter Day,—
Back home to play
On Easter Day,
Babette! Babette!"

"Babette! Babette!" The words followed him, ringing in his ears long after the men had become a mere fading point in the white horizon behind him. This was not the same world, that he had known, not the same Pontiac. Suddenly he stopped short in the road.

"Curse them! Curse them! Curse them all!" he cried in a cracked, strange voice. A woman hurrying across the street heard him, and went the faster, shutting her ears. A little boy stood still and looked at him in wonder. Everything he saw maddened him. He turned sharp around and hurried to the Louis Quinze. Throwing open the door, he stepped inside. Half a dozen men were there with the landlord. When they saw him, they started, confused and dismayed. He stood still for a moment, looking at them with glowering brows.

"Good day," he said. "How are you?"

No one answered. A little apart from the others sat Medallion, the auctioneer. He was a Protestant, and the curse on his baptism uttered by Pomfrette was not so heinous in his sight. For the other oath, it was another matter. Still, he was sorry for the man. In any case, it was not his cue to interfere, and Luc was being punished according to his bringing up and to the standards familiar to him. Medallion had never refused to speak to him, but he had done nothing more. There was no reason why he should provoke the enmity of the parish unnecessarily; and up to this point the man had shifted for himself after a fashion, if a hard fashion.

With a bitter laugh, Pomfrette turned to the little bar.

"Brandy!" he said, "brandy, my Bourienne!"

The landlord shrugged his shoulder and looked the other way.

"Brandy," he repeated. Still there was no sign.

There was a wicked look in his face, from which the landlord shrank back—shrank so far that he carried himself among the others, and stood there, half frightened, half dumfounded.

Pomfrette pulled out a greasy dollar bill from his pocket—the last he owned in the world—and threw it on the counter. Then he reached over, caught up a brandy bottle from the shelf, knocked off the neck with a knife, and, pouring a tumblerful, drank it off at a gasp.

His head came up, his shoulders straightened out, his eyes snapped fire. He laughed aloud, a sardonic, wild, coarse laugh, and he shivered once or twice violently, in spite of the brandy he had drunk.

"You won't speak to me, eh? Won't you! Curse you! Pass me on the other side—so! Look at me. I am the worst man in the world, eh? Judas is nothing—no! Ack! What are you to turn your back on me? Listen to me! You, there, Munro, with your charcoal face, who was it walk thirty miles in the dead of winter to bring a doctor to your wife, eh? She die, but that is no matter. Who was it? It was Luc Pomfrette. You, Alphonse Durien, who was it drag you out of the bog at the Cote Chaudiere? It was Luc Pomfrette. You, Jacques Baby, who was it lied for you to the Protestant girl at Faribeau? Just Luc Pomfrette. You, too, Jean and Nicolas Marlban, who was it lent you a hundred dollars when you lost all your money at poker? Ha, ha, ha! Only that beast Luc Pomfrette! Mother of heaven! such a beast is he—eh, Limon Rouge?—such a beast that used to give your Victorine little silver things, and feed her with bread and sugar and buttermilk pop. Ah, my dear Limon Rouge, how is it all differn' now!"

He raised the bottle and drank long from the ragged neck. When he took it away from his mouth not much more than half remained in the quart bottle. Blood was dripping from his beard from a cut on his lip, and from there to the ground.

"And you, M'sieu' Bourienne!" he cried hoarsely. "Do I not remember that dear M'sieu' Bourienne, when he beg me to leave Pontiac for a little while that I do not give evidence in court against him? Eh, bien! you all walk by me now, as if I was the father of smallpox, and not Luc Pomfrette—only Luc Pomfrette, who spits at every one of you for a pack of cowards and hypocrites."

He thrust the bottle inside his coat, went to the door, flung it open with a bang, and strode out into the street, muttering as he went. As the landlord came to close the door Medallion said:

"The leper has a memory, my friends." Then he also walked out, and went to his office depressed, for the face of the man haunted him.

Pomfrette reached his deserted, cheerless house. There was not a stick of firewood in the shed, not a thing to eat or drink in cellar or cupboard. The door of the shed at the back was open, and the dog chains lay covered with frost and half embedded in mud. With a shiver of misery Pomfrette raised the brandy to his mouth, drank every drop, and threw the bottle on the floor. Then he went to the front door, opened it, and stepped outside. His foot slipped, and he tumbled headforward into the snow. Once or twice he half raised himself, but fell back again, and presently lay still. The frost caught his ears and iced them; it began to creep over his cheeks; it made his fingers white, like a leper's.

He would soon have stiffened forever had not Parpon the dwarf, passing along the road, seen the open door and the sprawling body, and come and drawn Pomfrette inside the house. He rubbed the face and hands and ears of the unconscious man with snow till the whiteness disappeared, and taking off the boots, did the same with the toes; after which he drew the body to a piece of rag carpet beside the stove, threw some blankets over it, and, hurrying out, cut up some fence rails, and soon had a fire going in the stove.

Then he trotted out of the house and away to the little chemist, who came passively with him. All that day, and for many days, they fought to save Pomfrette's life. The cure came also but Pomfrette was in fever and delirium. Yet the good M. Fabre's presence, as it ever did, gave an air of calm and comfort to the place. Parpon's hands alone cared for the house; he did all that was to be done; no woman had entered the place since old Mme. Burgoyne had left it.

When at last Pomfrette opened his eyes and saw the cure standing beside him, he turned his face to the wall, and to the exhortation addressed to him he answered nothing. At last the cure left him, and came no more, and he bade Parpon do the same as soon as Pomfrette was able to leave his bed.

But Parpon did as he willed. He had been in Pontiac only a few days since the painful business in front of the Louis Quinze. Where he had been and what doing no one asked, for he was mysterious in his movements, and always uncommunicative, and people did not care to tempt his inhospitable tongue. When Pomfrette was so far recovered that he might be left alone, Parpon said to him one evening:

"Pomfrette, you must go to mass next Sunday."

"I said I wouldn't go till I was carried there, and I mean it—that's so," was the morose reply.

"What made you curse like that—so damnable?" asked Parpon, furtively.

"That's my own business. It doesn't matter to anybody but me."

"And you said the cure lied—the good M'sieu' Fabre—him like a saint."

"I said he lied, and I'd say it again, and tell the truth."

"But if you went to mass, and took your penance, and——"

"Yes, I know; they'd forgive me, and I'd get absolution, and they'd all speak to me again, and it would be, 'Good day, Luc,' and 'Very good, Luc,' and 'What a gay heart has Luc, the bon camarade!' Ah, I know. They curse in the heart when the whole world goes wrong for them; no one hears. I curse out loud. I'm not a hypocrite, and no one thinks me fit to live. Ack! what is the good?"

Parpon did not respond at once. At last, dropping his chin in his hand and his elbow on his knee, as he squatted on the table, he said:

"But if the girl got sorry—"

For a time there was no sound save the whirring of the fire in the stove and the hard breathing of the sick man. His eyes were staring hard at Parpon. At last he said slowly and fiercely:

"What do you know?"

"What others might know if they had eyes and sense; but they haven't. What would you do if that Junie come back?"

"I would kill her!" His look was murderous.

"Bah! you would kiss her first just the same."

"What of that? I would kiss her because—because there is no face like hers in the world; and I'd kill her for her bad heart, and I hate her bad heart."

"What did she do?"

Pomfrette's hands clinched.

"What is in my own noddle, and not for anyone else," he answered sulkily.

"La, la, what a close mouth! What did she do? Who knows? What you think she do, it's this. You think she pretends to love you, and you leave all your money with her. She is to buy masses for your father's soul; she is to pay money to the cure for the good of the church; she is to buy a little here, a little there, for the house you and she are going to live in, the wedding and the dancing over. Very well, Ah, my Pomfrette, what is the end you think? She ran away with Dicey the Protestant, and take your money with her. Eh, is that so?"

For answer there came a sob, and then a terrible burst of weeping and anger and passionate denunciations—against Junie Gauloir, against Pontiac, against the world.

Parpon held his peace.

The days, weeks, and months went by, and the months stretched to three years.

In all that time Pomfrette came and went through Pontiac, shunned and unrepentant. His silent, gloomy endurance was almost an affront to Pontiac; and if the wiser ones, the cure, the avocat, the little chemist, and Medallion, were more sorry than offended, they stood aloof till the man should in some manner redeem himself, and repent of his horrid blasphemy. But one person persistently defied church and people, cure, and voyageur. Parpon openly and boldly walked with Pomfrette, talked with him, and occasionally visited his house.

Luc made hard shifts to live. He grew everything that he ate, vegetables and grains. Parpon showed him how to make his own flour in primitive fashion, for no miller in any parish near would sell him flour, now had he money to buy it, nor would any one who knew him give him work. And after his return to Pontiac he never asked for it. His mood was defiant, morbid and stern. His wood he chopped from the common known as No-Man's-Land. His clothes he made himself out of the skins of the deer that he shot; when his powder and shot gave out, he killed the deer with bow and arrow.

III.

The end came at last. Luc was taken ill. For four days, all alone, he lay burning with fever and inflammation, and when Parpon found him he was almost dead. Then began a fight for life again, in which Parpon was the only physician; for Pomfrette would not allow the little chemist or a doctor near him. Parpon at last gave up hope; but one night, when he came back from the village, he saw to his joy, old Mme. Degardy ("crazy Joan" she was called) sitting by Pomfrette's bedside. He did not disturb her, for she had no love for him, and he waited till she was gone. When he came into the room he found Pomfrette in a sweet sleep, and a jug of tincture, with a little tin cup, placed by the bed. Time and again he had sent for Mme. Degardy, but she would not come. She had answered that the dear Luc could go to the devil for all of her; he'd find better company there than in Pontiac.

But for a whim, perhaps, she had come at last without asking, and Luc returned to the world a mere bundle of bones.

It was still while he was only a bundle of bones that one Sunday morning Parpon, without a word, lifted him up in his arms and carried him out of the house. Pomfrette did not speak at first; it seemed scarcely worth while; he was so weak he did not care.

"Where are you going?" he said at last, as they came well into the village. The bell in St. Saviour's had stopped ringing for mass, and the streets were almost empty.

"I'm taking you to mass," said Parpon, puffing under his load, for Pomfrette made an ungainly burden.

"Hand of a little devil, no!" cried Pomfrette, startled. "I said I'd never go to mass again, and I never will."

"You said you'd never go to mass till you were carried; so it's all right."

Once or twice Pomfrette struggled, but Parpon held him tight, saying:

"It's no use; you must come; we've had enough. Besides—"

"Besides what?" asked Pomfrette, faintly.

"Never mind," answered Parpon.

At a word from Parpon, the shrivelled old sexton cleared a way through the aisle, making a stir, through which the silver bell at Pomfrette's knee tinkled, in answer, as it were, to the tinkling of the acolyte's bell in the sanctuary. People turned at the sound, women stopped telling their beads, some of the choir forgot their chanting. A strange feeling passed through the church, and reached and startled the cure as he recited the mass. He turned round, and saw Parpon laying Pomfrette down at the chancel steps. His voice shook a little as he intoned the sacred ritual, and as he raised the sacred elements tears rolled down his cheek.

From a distant corner of the gallery a deeply veiled woman also looked down on Pomfrette, and her hand trembled on the desk before her.

At last the cure came forward to the chancel steps.

"What is it, Parpon?" he asked gravely.

"It is Luc Pomfrette, M'sieu' le cure." Pomfrette's eyes were closed.

"He swore that he would never come to mass again," answered the good priest.

"Till he was carried, M'sieu' le cure—and I have carried him."

"Did you come of your own free will, and with a repentant heart, Luc Pomfrette?" asked the cure.

"I did not know I was coming—no." Pomfrette's big brown eyes met the priest's unflinchingly.

"You have defied God, and yet He has spared your life."

"I'd rather have died," answered the sick man, simply.

"Died, and been cast to perdition!"

"I'm used to that; I've had a bad time here in Pontiac."

His thin hands moved restlessly. His leg moved, and the little bell tinkled—the bell that had been like the bell of a leper these years past.

"But you live, and you have years yet before you in the providence of God. Luc Pomfrette, you blasphemed against your baptism, against God Himself. Luc"—his voice got softer—"I knew your mother, and she was almost too weak to hold you when you were baptized, for you made a great to-do about coming into the world. She had a face like a saint—so sweet, so patient. You were her only child, and your baptism was more to her than her marriage even, or any other thing in this world. The day after your baptism she died. What do you think were her last words?"

There was a hectic flush on Pomfrette's face, and his eyes were intense and burning as he looked up fixedly at the cure.

"I can't think any more," answered Pomfrette, slowly. "I've no head."

"What she said is for your heart, not for your head, Luc," rejoined the cure, gently. "She wandered in her mind, and at the last she raised herself up in her bed, and lifting her finger like this"—he made the gesture of benediction—"she said, 'Luc Michee, I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.' Then she whispered softly, 'God bless my dear Luc Michee! Holy Mother pray for him!' These were her last words, and I took you from her arms. What have you to say, Luc Michee?"

The woman in the gallery was weeping silently behind her thick veil, and her worn hand clutched the desk in front of her convulsively. Presently she arose, and made her way down the stair almost unnoticed.

Two or three times Luc tried to speak, but could not.

"Lift me up," he said, brokenly, at last.

Parpon and the little chemist raised him to his feet and held him, his shaking hands resting on their shoulders, his lank body tottering above and between them.

"Looking at the congregation, he said slowly: "I'll suffer till I die for cursing my baptism, and God will twist my neck in purgatory for—"

"Luc," the cure interrupted, "say that you repent."

"I'm sorry, and I ask you all to forgive me, and I'll confess to the cure, and take my penance, and—" he paused, for breathing hurt him.

At that moment the woman in black who had been in the gallery came quickly forward. Parpon saw her, frowned, and waved her back; but she came on. At the chancel steps she raised her veil, and a murmur of recognition and wonder ran through the church. Pomfrette's face was pitiful to see—drawn, staring.

"Junie Gauloir!" he said hoarsely.

Her eyes were red with weeping, her face was very pale.

"M'sieu' le cure," she said, "you must listen to me"—the cure's face had become forbidding—"sinner though, I am. You want to be just, don't you? Ah, listen! I was to be married to Luc Pomfrette, but I did not love him—then. He had loved me for years, and his father and my father wished it—as you know, M'sieu' le cure. So after a while I said I would; but I begged him that he wouldn't say anything about it till he came back from his next journey on the river. I did not love him enough—then. He left all his money with me; some to pay for masses for his father, some to buy things for our—for our home, and the rest to support me till he came back."

"Yes, yes," said Pomfrette, his eyes fixed painfully on her face; "yes, yes!"

"The day after Luc went away John Dicey the Protestant came to me. I'd always liked him; he could talk as Luc couldn't, and it sounded nice. I listened and listened. He knew about Luc and about the money and all. Then he talked to me. I was all wild in the head, and things went round and round, and oh, how I hated to marry Luc—then! So after he had talked a long while I said yes, I would go with him and marry him—a Protestant; for I loved him, I don't know why or why."

Pomfrette trembled so that Porpon and the little chemist made him sit down, and he leaned against their shoulders, while Junie went on:

"I gave him Luc's money to go and give to Uarpon here, for I was too ashamed to go myself. And I wrote a little not to Luc, and sent it with the money. I believed in John Dicey, of course. He came back, and said he had seen Parpon, and had done it all right. Then we went away to Montreal, and got married. The very first day at Montreal, I found out that he had Luc's money. It was awful; I went mad, and he got angry and left me alone, and didn't come back. A week afterward he was killed, and I did not know it for a long time. But I began to work for it, I wanted to pay back Luc's money. It was very slow, and I worked hard. Will it never be finished, I say? At last Parpon find me, and I tell him all—all except that John Dicey was dead, and I did not know that. I made him promise to tell nobody, but he knows all about my life since then. Then I find out one day that John Dicey is dead, and I get from the gover'ment a hundred dollars of the money he stole. It was found on him when he was killed. I work for six months longer, and now I come back—with Luc's money."

She drew from her pocket a packet of notes, and put it in Luc's hands. He took it dazedly, then dropped it, and the little chemist picked it up; he had no prescriptions like that in his pharmacopoeia.

"That's how I've lived," she said, and she handed a letter to the cure.

It was from a priest in Montreal, setting forth the history of her career in that city, her repentance for her elopement and the sin of marrying a Protestant, and her good life. She had wished to do her penance in Pontiac, and it remained to M'sieu' le cure to set it. The cure's face relaxed, and a rare gentleness came into it.

He read the letter aloud. Luc once more struggled to his feet, eagerly listening.

"You did not love Luc?" the cure asked Junie, meaningly.

"I did not love Luc—then," she answered, a flush going over her face.

"You loved Junie," the cure said to Pomfrette.

"I could have killed her, but I've always loved her," answered Luc. Then he raised his voice excitedly: "I love her, love her, love her—but what's the good! She'd never 've been happy with me. Look what my love drove her to! What's the good, at all!"

"She said she did not love you then, Luc Michee," said Parpon, interrupting. "Luc Michee, you're a fool as well as a sinner. Speak up, Junie."

"I used to tell him that I didn't love him. I only liked him. I was honest. Well, I am still. I love him now."

A sound of joy broke from Luc's lips, and he stretched out his arms to her, but the cure stopped that.

"Not here," he said, "your sins must first be considered. For penance—" He paused, looking at the two sad yet happy ones before him. The deep knowledge of life that was in him impelled him to continue very kindly:

"For penance you shall bear the remembrance of each other's sins. And now to God the Father—"

He turned towards the altar, and raised his hands in ascription.

As he knelt to pray before he entered the pulpit, he heard the tinkling of the little bell of honor at the knee of Luc, as Junie and Porpon helped him from the church.—Gilbert Parker, in Century.

FRONTIERS OF EUROPE.

THE BOUNDARIES OF VARIOUS COUNTRIES DESCRIBED.

Sea Lines the Best for Division—Frontiers Marked by the Sword or Agreed Upon by Treaty Sometimes Difficult and Expensive to Maintain—Some Strange Objects of Demarcation.

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It is hardly necessary to say that the best possible frontier a country can have is that which forms the hitherto impregnable bulwark of the Isle Inviolate, as Britons delight to speak of their sea-surrounded native land. Over and over again has it been conclusively proved that properly guarded ocean boundaries are impassable to all enemies save those whose relative strength is overwhelmingly superior. Next to the sea the best frontier a nation can possess is a big broad river, and next to that a range of high mountains with easily defended passes, or a desert constructed on a liberal scale.

Naturally, the very worst boundary is an arbitrary line drawn with either the pen of a treaty or the sword of war. Such a frontier is most expensive to guard and the most liable to violation. Not the least of the burdens imposed upon France by her defeat in 1871 was that laid on her by the necessity of building, arming and maintaining the chain of huge fortresses which guard the new frontier of her diminished borders from Belfort to Longwy. About a third of this is formed by the Vosges mountains, but the rest of the line is drawn through forests and along roads, across which the Teuton and the Gaul look at each other armed to the teeth.

Where the line runs through forests a broad belt is kept clear of trees and undergrowth, and along the centre of this a line of stones something like milestones marks the actual boundary. When the frontier is a road, sentries are stationed at all the crossways, and wooden posts, painted on one side with the French and on the other with the German colors, mark the exact touching points of the two countries, and, in addition to these stations, all the main roads and lines of traffic are further guarded by the jealously-watched Custom Houses, one on each side of the frontier road.

This is perhaps the most strictly guarded frontier in the world, and next to it would come the lines along which Russia adjoins Germany and Austria. These are kept in practically the same fashion, with the exception that for very considerable distances they are formed by rivers, as, for instance, the Pruth, from Galatz to Czarnowitz, the Vistula, from near Kransnik to Cracow, and the Prosna, from Peisern nearly to Czenstochowa.

It is, of course, such frontiers as these that are the scenes of the ever-recurring "incidents," some of which are important enough to make a breach of the European peace almost inevitable, and others too trivial to find their way into the newspapers. Thus, for instance, everyone will remember the Schnaebele affair, in which a French chief of police was literally kidnapped and dragged across the frontier by German spies dressed as peasants, and then arrested and carried off to durance in the fortress of Metz.

More recently than this, a French officer, while hunting deer, galloped across the frontier in the excitement of the chase, and was challenged by a German Grentzjaeger, or frontier guard, and shot dead for refusing to stand. Not very long ago, on the Austro-Russian frontier a body of Austrian cavalry out exercise, quite inadvertently crossed the sacred line. In an instant the alarm was given. The Cossacks turned out, and charged down upon the unconscious invaders, who, finding no dishonor in such a retreat, got back into their own territory as fast as their horses' legs would carry them, after which apologies and compliments were exchanged across the frontier.

No much more cheerless and monotonous occupation, falls to the lot even of the overworked, underpaid and wretchedly clad and fed Russian soldier than the task of guarding the frontier line between Russia and Germany, where it runs across the bleak plain of Masuria and Lithuania. A good deal of bad blood is aroused locally by the Russian frontier guards' efforts to improve their miserable rations at the expense of the Prussian farmers, and midnight raids on farm stock are of by no means infrequent occurrence. Sometimes, too, a Prussian goose, or hen, or pig, ignorant of international bickerings and jealousy, strolls unsuspectingly across the line, and in nine cases out of ten pays the penalty of frontier violation with its life.

During the Russian manoeuvres of 1892, the fact that frontiers do not extend up into the air was unpleasantly brought home to the Czar and his generals by a very annoying way the Germans had of going up in balloons and taking stock of everything the Russians did not want them to know. At night they took up powerful searchlights, which they threw on the fortifications, so that they could be sketched at leisure, and over towns and into camps in a most exasperating fashion.

Whether this was a violation of frontier or not, the Russians took it as such, and blazed away at the balloons, without doing them or their occupants the slightest harm. This is perhaps, the only modern instance on record of the soldiers of one nation deliberately firing on those of another in a time of perfect peace.

By far the most interesting frontier in Europe, and certainly the most rigidly guarded, is that of Wirballen, on the line from Konigsberg to St. Petersburg. The platform is divided in the middle by a high, strong, iron fence, and in this is a sliding gate, which is drawn back when a train comes in. On one side of it stand two German guards, and on the other two Russians, all with loaded rifles and fixed bayonets. On the German side, the standard gauge for the European railways ends, and on the other the broad Russian gauge begins.

Once through the gate no passenger can return on any pretense without first having his passport vised and obtaining official permission to enter or leave the Russian territory, and every article of luggage has to be passed through the grille from the German porters to the Russian, or vice versa, as the case may be, for none are allowed to go and come through. Hence there are no opportunities here for seemingly harmless diversions, such as were once found on the Lithuanian frontier by a party of German peasants, who started a snowballing match with some Russians on the other side, which came to an abrupt conclusion by the discovery by a sentry of the fact that the German snowballs were a mixture of snow and