

Sir Charles G.D. Roberts Memorial Prize

"fainthearted Lucy"

Sheelagh Russell

His voice boomed out at the slight figure opposite him, as his amused wonder turned to uncertain taunts. "Well, I'm almost of a mind to ask the widow Bailey, or," here he pinched her bony elbow, "or better yet, the Misses St. John. You know, any other woman would be jealous?"

Her narrow cheeks forced out the words. "Jealous? Oh yes, I will be jealous when you go and get yourself killed over in some Godforsaken country that is not even civilized?" The anger was forced, her fears were not. "Ah," she thought, "will the world never be big enough for you? This room is already too much for me!"

"Lucy, Lucy, come with me. You know I'd never go willingly without you. I've seen the snow too often alone."

She shook her dark head stiffly, her lips trembling. "In the snow they are not alone." She ran to the frost-covered window. "First come the drunken farmers, then the soldiers, and then...the wolves." As she collapsed in dry sobs, his giant arms drew her back into the warmth.

Frank had never been able to reach her, his little Lucy. Just as his great size had become a curious local topic, so had Lucy's timidity. But his hearty laugh joined the secret smiles at the incongruity of the pair.

Frank Doyle had reached his present height and weight long before his McGill medical school days, but his profession enabled him to keep the expanse covered in the most expensive and most fashionable manner Drummondville had ever seen. His appearance at any social function always afforded the residents a chance to remark at how each inch of his jaunty brown derby matched exactly each yard of his brown tweed trousers, and how each feature of the miles between, from dark-striped tie to gold watch chain, added to the effect of tasteful elegance.

The citizens also knew, though they were more likely to lick their private wounds quietly behind closed doors, that not one of them was free of Dr. Francis Doyle's acid tongue and teasing laughter. With a knowledge of human weakness as sharp as his knowledge of anatomy, he would never fail to apply the proper poison to each sore point.

Sarah St. John had blushed and scolded as he prodded her into place beside Stuart MacFetrick. "Now Stu," he counselled, "here's a little lady who's been trying to get you since you called her 'my little Sarey' at grammar school." The old farmer muttered and glared beneath coarse brows. "Oh, don't you scowl at me, you old hayshaker, or I'll tell them all, ladies or no ladies present, just what it was I treated you for that night last February. By the way, I hope you took my advice then!"

But he was never malicious, and they publicly excused his behaviour as the playful injuries caused by a well-meaning giant in a world of little, more tender people, when each remembered his gentle care during the last family illness.

Frank's profession also enabled him to make frequent ocean crossings, now to the Old Country to search gravestones for familiar names of ancestors; now to London for a conference on veterinary medicine, his hobby; now to France, a paper in his pocket bearing the names and addresses of Judge DuPerron's old school chums. Lucy never accompanied him on these journeys, but would keep to her room, seeking assurances from her sister Jemima, only leaving to visit the telegraph office, anxiously awaiting news of disaster.

It was not the sea that frightened her. She placed great faith in statistics. "Just think," she would say, "eighty-five per cent effective. But that fifteen per cent - I think it should be investigated." Or, at municipal election time, she would quite accurately calculate just who would vote for whom. Yes, and statistics gave no reason to fear a shipwreck in Frank's case. It was the unknown disaster, the unplanned-for event, which worried her. Whether it was a ship disappearing from the face of the earth, or the broken shell of her best cranberry-glass vase scattered on the floor a day after she had worn out her last broom, the unexpected annoyed Lucy and her sense of the proper way of things. But she never could discourage him from going.

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