

THE GHOST OF THE MARIE LOUISE

In which the Real and the Imaginary are Curiously Interwoven

By CAMERON NELLES WILSON

"THAT finishes game and rubber! Now for some supper!" Mrs. Stephen Weldon pushed her chair aside and made her way to a small table whereon stood a chafing-dish and other accessories of an informal and belated repast. The rest of the house-party of eight drew closer to the wide-mouthed fireplace. The Weldon's hunting lodge was perched on a small hill overlooking the Baie de Chaleur, surrounded by fragrant spruce forests, shadowy lakes, and velvety caribou plains. Within, all was cosily attractive—the beamed living-room with its numerous trophies of wood and stream, its quaint furnishings and general air of old-time comfort.

"And to think of having to go back to the city to-morrow! It is simply tragic. I'd love to stay here until the place is buried in snow-drifts—no beastly dinners, no theatre, nothing but these glorious hills and forests." Fritzie Edgar, who was a butterfly to the core of her shallow little heart, clasped her slender hands with a sigh of resignation but none dreamed of taking her seriously.

"I dare you to stay until the *Marie Louise* sails up the bay," laughed her hostess as she spooned some sherry into the chafing-dish.

"The *Marie Louise*? Is she the last boat to come in before the ice closes the channel?" Captain Henderson lighted a cigarette and threw a fresh log upon the fire.

"Surely I have told you of the *Marie Louise*, Jim. She's the boat—a schooner—that was burned to the water's edge about fifteen years ago, quite near the shore, but nothing could be done to save her. Of course, if it should happen to-day we should just put out in the launch and save the bunch—"

"Let me help you." The Captain sprang to the assistance of her hostess and the small table was drawn within the magic circle.

"But finish about the schooner, Emma. I can't eat a bite until you've told us," drawled Miss Edgar, whose limpid eyes were fixed hungrily upon the savoury dish.

"Well, every year—just about this time—the ghost of the *Marie Louise* sails up the bay—in flames, you know—and the whole scene is re-enacted. The sailors climb into the rigging, wave their arms for help, drop one by one into the fire or the water."

"A sort of fire-water plunge, eh?" ventured the Captain irrelevantly.

"Jim! Shame on you. It is all very terrible. You should hear my maid on the subject. She's

a native, and to hear her describe that sizzling mass sinking deeper and deeper into the drink would make your blood run cold."

"How interesting, Emma, dear," purred Cissie Cadwalader, "but why can't you regulate the coming of this phantom ship? It would add greatly to the charms of your hospitality. No, give me a glass of ale, please, Toby. And do the natives of this simple spot believe all this?"

"With heart and soul. Julie swears that she and her two brothers saw it only last year—a week after we'd left."

"Silly bosh, Emma. It must have been some barn afire on the Gaspé side. Perhaps Tracadie Gasch is becoming an active volcano instead of a respectable, law-abiding mountain."

"Oh, well, pull my story to pieces." Mrs. Weldon shrugged her shoulders and critically tasted her lobster. "Not quite enough sherry, is there, Bob? Sybil, have another toasted biscuit. Ugh! How that wind howls." A chill blast swept about the house and a sudden shower of sparks shot into the chimney's blackness.

The hall door opened and a white-faced girl of the pure French-Canadian type, stood for a moment in the entrance and then stumbled in terror to the laughing circle about the fire.

"Madam, it is de *Marie Louise*! Mere de Dieu! See out de window." Speeding to the casement the girl drew aside the green hangings and a glare of light flashed through the small panes. In a moment all were on their feet, surprise, horror, incredulity limned on their faces. The Captain laughed nervously and rubbed his eyes hard with one brown hand. "Good heavens, Emma, the night is bewitched. This is too opportune by half."

Julie was weeping quietly and Fritzie Edgar was strangely white and still.

"Bring the glasses, Bob, quickly." Weldon fell over a bear-skin rug in a hasty endeavour to comply with his wife's wishes. With trembling hands she adjusted them to her own clear vision and focused them upon the burning schooner. One long, satisfying look and she held them out to her husband, who gave a quick glance before passing them on to Fritzie Edgar. As is a dream the girl held them in cold fingers before transferring them, without a look, to Captain Henderson.

"Damn it all, Bob, there are men clinging to the rigging." The glasses fell to the floor and in a silence broken only by the moans of the terrified Julie, they watched the phantom vessel as it burned nearer to the water's edge. Small black spots

shifted about and one by one disappeared into the lurid mass of flames. Lapping sheets of fire quivered about the tall masts and, after a particularly brilliant outburst, the boat leaned slowly towards the shore, poised uncertainly on the black waters, then sank in a cloud of steam and trailing sparks.

Miss Edgar had dropped, wide-eyed, into a chair and her restless hands were tightly clasped upon her neat hunting-skirt. The French girl was weeping softly and the rest of the party drew to the indoor, cheerfulness with mingled feelings of superstition and unbelief.

"That's the weirdest thing I ever saw in my life," coughed the Captain, with an easy indifference that he was far from feeling.

"Well, Fritzie, I hope you've had the worth of your money this time. Bob, pour me a glass of wine. This has quite unsettled my nerves. What a strangely, unaccountable thing!"

They huddled closer to the warm circle about the hearth, and Julie slipped noiselessly from the room. For a long time they sat in absolute silence. Even the Captain ceased his scoffing and gazed seriously at the crimson-hearted logs. Time dragged on but all were evidently reluctant to separate for the night. There was an unusual solace in the quiet companionship.

It was towards midnight when Mrs. Weldon turned with a frightened glance at her husband. A slow, shuffling step sounded on the verandah, followed by the gasping of some fagged creature. A heavy body lurched against the door, the latch lifted, and a water-soaked figure stumbled in upon the floor.

A moment of confusion followed as Bob Weldon dragged the man towards the centre of warmth. He was blue with exposure and cold, his teeth chattered and with difficulty a few spoonfuls of brandy were poured down his throat. They drew the spent figure closer to the fire and little wreaths of steam began to exude from his clothing and thick brown hair. His dark eyes wandered questioningly from one to another and then a sudden crimsoning of his drawn cheeks made him a less ghostly figure. He raised himself upon his elbow, then sank back, his face buried in his wet sleeve.

"My God," he gasped, "to think—to think of going down with help so near—it would have been easy—so easy." His words ended in a despairing whisper and Weldon leaned tenderly over the trembling form.

"Then," he said, with a quick feeling of shame and criminal neglect, "it wasn't the ghost of the *Marie Louise*?"

The man looked at him steadily for a few minutes.

"No," he replied simply, "it was La Belle Rosalie—and I—and I was her captain. The rest are gone."

His last words came brokenly and his eyes closed with an exquisite sense of bodily comfort and mental relaxation. Weldon bent over him anxiously and after a few moments felt the limp hand and wrist.

"The man is dead," he murmured as he rose from his knees.

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