



LA TRISTESSE

By MARJORIE L. C. PICKTHALL



THIS is not really the story of a child, though it began when Hypolite caught the measles at a dancing class. And when he was getting better, his uncle, who kept a business-like eye upon his health and his manners, sent him to Madame Dulac at Saint Jacques de Kilkenny, to grow strong in the air of the hills.

Hypolite was a little boy at the time, quiet and brown, with eyes like bronze-purple pansies. It was not his fault that his surname was Gibbs. Even at that age, he preferred to have it ignored. Madame called him "M'sieur Hypolite," or "le petit sieur." But then, Madame had served and loved his mother when that mother was Genevieve de Lempiere, before she married Anthony Gibbs, and before Hypolite was born, or Madame herself took in boarders. To Hypolite, two white shafts in a cemetery outside Montreal represented that ill-assorted father and mother. But before he had been a week in the village, his French began to return to him.

"It is yours by right," said Madame, who would hear nothing of the Gibbses. "What wouldst thou for thy dinner, mon ange?"



Madame fed him royally and made a baby of him, and told him stories of the long-ago days, and spoke to him of his mother. In a little while, the Gibbs part seemed to have dropped out of his life. He loved Madame, and Telephore who chopped the wood, and Andre who worked in the garden. But most of all he loved Felice.

Felice was Madame's help in the kitchen, a girl who belonged to nobody, for whom nobody cared. Perhaps the incipient artist in Hypolite first rejoiced in her; she made an impression on him never effaced. His canvas in last year's Salon, that canvas full of brown and gold, was a far-off memory of her.

"She was Dian," I have heard Hypolite say, "Dian; not the stately goddess, queen of Nature, but the ever-young Artemis, slender as her own white crescent."

Hypolite ran about the straggling village and made friends with the children; and climbed the little hill beyond the Calvary, and looked at the great river running to the sea, wishing he might follow it.

"There are many nice things here," he said, invading the kitchen for cake, "and nice people. Andre is nice and Telephore is nice, and so is m'sieur le cure. But Maxime is nicest. I went to-day to see him. He lives in a little cabin all covered with vines, and he has two fields covered with mustard and flowers. He is tall and he has blue eyes. I picked some of his flowers and he came out and talked to me, and told me his name and I told him mine. Then his dog came out, his big black dog he calls Sorrow,—La Tristesse. Why does he call it La Tristesse? It is a nice dog, and licked my hands."

Madame looked up from her cake and crossed herself, with wide eyes. "Hast thou made friends with Sorrow, mon petit?" she asked, gazing at him strangely. "I am grieved. Maxime and La Tristesse are not for thee."

"It was a very nice dog," said Hypolite, in the gruff tone that was his sole heritage from the Gibbses. Felice was beating eggs at the table. Her long grey eyes turned lazily towards the child, and then were bent upon her bowl again. Her wrists fascinated Hypolite as she whipped the froth, they were so small and strong and firm, sunburned to a creamy brown. He watched them while he ate the cake, and wondered what her cold eyes had tried to tell him.

"Why am I not to make friends with Maxime's La Tristesse?" he demanded of old Telephore.

Telephore stared at him as Madame had done, and made the little sign against evil. "La Tristesse?" he said. "La Tristesse? If you make friends with Sorrow, Sorrow will abide with you."

"But she has not abided with me," put in Hypolite patiently, "she abides with Maxime."

Telephore crossed his scarred, knotted hands upon the haft of the axe and leaned his chin upon them. "Not always," he said in a low voice, "ah! not always. Henri L'Ecosais, he was a strong man last Michaelmas. He stopped to speak with Maxime at his door, and patted on the head that La Tristesse, brute of ill name and ill omen. And she, that La Tristesse, she follows him home, beating with her tail and begging him to look at her, as some dogs will. And he laughs, and gives her bones, and she sleeps a night in his stable. In the morning she goes home, drifting like a black ghost down the road. And Henri, little monsieur, what of Henri? In three days, look you, he is seized with a chill and a weariness, and in a week he is dead,—mon Dieu! dead! And that is not all. If I

had my will, Maxime and La Tristesse should be—eh! sent from here."

Telephore's face was as superstitious and cruel as the faces of some of Millet's peasants, and he muttered to himself as the bright blade of his axe fell upon the wood, and the sweet white chips flew in showers like a tiny snowstorm.

"But that is all foolishness," said the round-eyed Hypolite, in the lordly tone Saint Jacques de Kilkenny had taught him. "La Tristesse is a nice dog, though she is so long and black and cries with her eyes. Once I had a little guinea-pig, un cochon d'Inde, black as Sorrow; but it died of an indigestion."

"Foolishness, is it?" muttered Telephore. "Then, little monsieur, there are many fools in Saint Jacques. As for the cochon d'Inde, that was different. Gabrielle has a black sucking-pig, and no one is troubled by it, though it visited every house in Saint Jacques. But this Sorrow of Maxime's—Foolishness, is it? Eh, well! Pray the good saints you may not be taught its wisdom."

Telephore was cross and would not talk any more. Andre professed to have no opinion at all about La Tristesse. So, as was his way, Hypolite decided to go to headquarters for information.

He crossed one of Maxime's thriftless fields, and went up the path to the cabin. Once the path led through a garden of flowers, but now garden and fields were all one, overrun with blossoms grown small and hardy and wild, which could not be found elsewhere in Saint Jacques. La Tristesse was lying in the door, in the sun, licking a long red scratch on her side. She put her lank paws on Hypolite's shoulders and thrust her melancholy nose against his cheek.

"Are you come for more flowers?" asked Maxime, rising from among the wild raspberry canes. "There are pretty flowers in the field beyond the patch of barley. I shall grow oats there next year, they are prettier than the barley, but the flowers are best. My grandfather brought the seeds of some of them from the other side of the world, and a few braved our snows and frosts. Pick all you want, little monsieur." He laughed at Hypolite, showing his white teeth, and yawned and stretched himself. He was tall and strong, with a fine tanned face and eyes of Breton blue softened by many dreams, and he was shabby to the point of rags.

"Thank you," said Hypolite politely, "but I did not come for flowers to-day. I came to ask you why you call your dog Sorrow? Pardon, m'sieur, if I am too curious."



Maxime bowed, ready laughter in his eyes. "I am honored with monsieur's interest," said he. "I call her Sorrow because she has the look of it, as any but these—ganders of Saint Jacques would understand. I found her in the woods, starved, all over of a tremble. I took her home and fed her. That is all there is about her. She would harm no one. Yet, because of her color and her melancholy, she is a witch and a loup-garou and I know not what besides." He laughed angrily, and touched Sorrow's side gently. "Look you here!" he cried. "This was done last night. It is the mark of a bullet,—of a silver bullet, perhaps, they are such fools." Hypolite touched the scratch too, with fingers light and tender, and Maxime's face softened. "We have no friends, La Tristesse and I," he said sadly. "I suppose it is because we do not work or go to church. But those stuffy saints—And why should I work? I have no one to work for but myself."

"I'm not very fond of work," confessed Hypolite. "My uncle says I must go into an engineer's office when I leave college, but I do not want to. I would rather paint pictures full of pretty colors."

"And I," said Maxime, "I also love pretty colors. When I want them, I look at the fields and the skies and the hills, and I am content." They smiled at each other with perfect understanding.

"And I am a friend to you and La Tristesse if you will have me," said Hypolite.

"Monsieur honors us," said Maxime simply, "but Loneliness and Sorrow are an ill pair of friends."

Hypolite dined with Maxime and La Tristesse, under the vines, with leaves for plates; dined off bread and baked potatoes and little trout from the brook, and wild raspberries. "It is poor fare," said Maxime shyly, "but the air and the sun make it sweet."

"It is lovely," answered Hypolite ecstatically. "I should like to bake potatoes in a little oven and catch little fish for my dinner always. Oh, always."

"The bread is soft and white," went on Maxime, "feast-day bread, such as you are used to eating."

"It is the same as Madame Dulac's," said Hypolite with his mouth full.

"It is the same as Madame's," repeated Maxime, laughing.

Madame scolded Hypolite for the first time when she heard where he had been. "It is an ill place," she cried, "and those who dwell in it have an evil name. That black thing, called a dog, ran and barked at one of Gabrielle's cows yesterday, and already the cow has sickened. Go not near that La Tristesse, I beg of you, child, nor near her master."

"La Tristesse is a very nice dog," repeated Hypolite in the voice of the Gibbses, presenting so stony a front to her shrill vexation that Madame broke into tears and flounced away. When she had gone, Felice slipped over to the child and, without any change in her small, cold, beautiful face, kissed him. He gasped; feeling as if he had been kissed by a flower, so cool and soft were her lips.

Gabrielle's cow died, and the whispers against La Tristesse changed to silence, which was a bad sign. Hypolite did not know that there were few people in Saint Jacques who would have gone to Maxime's door after dark.

And then the rumors began again, but this time they came from the woods. In the village there was silence and listening. But from the woods there dawned a new dread,—a dread of night and loneliness and the sickness that strikes therein. Telephore first put it into words.

"It is said," he told Andre in a whisper, "that far to the north there is a deserted village. When that village was full of people, there came to their doors a black dog, long and gaunt and wretched. They took pity on that dog-thing, and fed it for three days, and then it went away. But it had left a gift for those people. La Picotte struck them, coming silently as is her wont. They died like flies, those people that fed the black dog, and the few that were left ran away."

Andre stared, his face going grey with horror. He was slower than Telephore.

"If I were you, said Telephore, with a sort of frightened sneer, "I would change the name of Maxime's La Tristesse. Maybe she is only biding her time."

Two or three days afterward, Hypolite went to see Maxime. It was early evening, and he moved through a golden world. "I have never forgotten anything of that evening," he said long afterward. "The sky was golden, the air was golden, and everywhere about the fields was the golden glow of the mustard. But in front of Maxime's cabin there was a black little crowd of people, and in the road stood Maxime, facing them fiercely, his hand upon Sorrow's head. There were boys there, throwing stones, and one or two of the shouting men had old shotguns."

"I ran to them, and I think I was screaming with anger. But Telephore was in the crowd, and he caught me in his arms gently, and made me keep still; though I kicked, and bit his hands, and my teeth were as sharp as a squirrel's. When they saw me, the men who had the guns lowered them as if ashamed, and the boys stopped throwing stones."

"Josef, Gabrielle's husband, was speaking. 'We will not harm you,' he said, 'but if you would stay among us, you must shoot that black brute you call your dog, there under your hand.'

"I will not shoot her for any of you cowards of Saint Jacques," cried Maxime at that. The crowd growled threateningly.

"Then go!" cried Josef, "you and your dog-thing!"

"I shall never forget how Maxime looked, his head thrown back and his eyes like points of blue fire, facing the men who were casting him out of his home. I thought he was going to fight them all. But he looked down at Sorrow, cowering beside him and trusting him, and I think he yielded for her sake. He laughed, very bitterly."

"I will go," he said, and they shrank from his eyes. "Sorrow has been my comrade and my friend, she has shared my food and my fire, and with Sorrow will I go. She is more faithful than any other."



"And then a girl pushed suddenly through the crowd, and stood in front of Maxime. It was Madame's Felice, and she was laughing aloud. I had never heard her laugh before. 'If you go, I will go with you,' she said."

"Maxime's face was suddenly strange and wild at the sight of her. 'You—you—you?' he cried. 'You—you, O heart of my life, star of my dreams?'

I think he forgot all about the angry crowd in an instant."

"Yes, I," laughed Felice. "I have seen your heart in your eyes, Maxime, and now you may see my heart in mine. What is the need of words? If you go, I go with you."

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