

like the star of Bethlehem, inviting all to adoration of the New-born Babe. *Veni adoremus.* We had barely time to put up our horses at the tavern, before the beginning of service. When we reached the church, we found it so crowded that we could not obtain a seat in the nave.

So we had to stand for a while, until the sexton, dressed in his triple-caped cloak, bordered with scarlet and bearing the wand of office, came up and, learning that we were strangers, blandly offered us seats in the organ gallery. From that station we heard and witnessed the whole of the Midnight Mass. It was a most impressive ceremony. The altar was gorgeously decorated with flowers and lights.

There was in the sanctuary a pyramidal piece of confectionery adorned with little flags of different nations. This was taken down at a certain point of the service, cut up into diminutive pieces, and distributed in baskets to the congregation. Every one, on receiving his piece, signed himself with the sign of the cross, and ate a piece of it. I confess this distribution of blessed bread, in memory of the *Agape* of the early Christians, was very pleasing to me. In a side shrine, there was a rustic imitation of the stable of Bethlehem and in the centre thereof a waxen image of the Infant Saviour lying in the manger. This shrine was richly ornamented and many votive offerings hung around it. But what impressed me most in the whole service was the chanting. For a country parish the choice of mass music and its execution was unusually good, but there was a special pathos in several of the Latin and vernacular hymns, for which at first, I was at a loss to account. The "Adeste Fideles" had a mediæval charm of its own; a Pastoral which had a smack of the Rossini School, was fraught with tender beauty, but when it came to a French hymn of simple construction and of simpler words, I found myself so rapt in admiration, that I stepped short to analyze the cause. I had not long to inquire. My eyes wandered instinctively into the choir, and fastened themselves with the keenest fascination on the singer. She was a young girl of singular beauty, tall, well formed, full of health, and her voice, without being remarkable for its compass, had a wondrous richness and romance. Who could she be? Had I not seen her before? Was not that voice, at least were not one or two notes in it, familiar to me? I was engaged for several minutes in pondering these questions, when the last strophe of the hymn was concluded and the singer turned partially towards me. I noticed, or fancied I noticed, that her eyes fell upon mine and that there was a merry twinkle of recognition in them. This, of course, increased my curiosity and perplexity, I examined her more closely. I observed—

what seemed at first only a trifling circumstance—that she had retained her travelling dress, a beautiful pelisse, trimmed with costly furs, and set off with the daintiest of ornaments. I was still in the midst of my inspection and as far as ever from determining the identity of the fair singer, when the service drew to a close. The priest gave his blessing to the congregation, the acolytes filed out of the sanctuary and the sacristan began to put out the lights of the altar. Every body was on the move, but I determined not to lose sight of the stranger. She stood for a few moments conversing with the organist, then gathering her cloak about her and drawing her hood over her head, thus making the sweetest of pictures, advanced to the little wicket which opens out of the organ loft. Elbowing my way through the crowd, I took my station at that point to see her pass. As she did so, she looked up and gave me the same knowing, tantalizing glance which she had given me in the choir. I was tempted to speak to her then and there, but the crush of the multitude and a lingering bashfulness prevented my doing so. But I followed her down the steps. When she reached the vestibule, she was met by a stoical old man, who took her around the waist, hurried her a few feet out upon the road, raised her into a sleigh, tucked the buffalo robes about her and then sprang into the seat at her side. I was standing only a few feet off, watching all these movements with the most eager curiosity. The horses giving a lurch forward, the young lady turned about, bent her head, waved her gauntlet and in a merry voice exclaimed:

Tonjours gai!

I did not answer this time, or I was utterly dumbfounded and before I had recovered myself my tormentor was out of sight.

III.

I was soon joined by my friend, who, suspecting nothing of what had occurred, was profuse in his praise of the ceremonies of the midnight mass, asking me over and over again how I had enjoyed them. When I had satisfied him on that point as well as my distracted mind would allow me, he proposed that we should go over to the inn and have luncheon. I hesitated a moment. My inclination was to roam about the village in the hope of finding the unknown beauty at one of the family gatherings, which I knew were just about to take place in all the houses, or else jump into my sleigh and pursue her until, after the Indian fashion, I had at least discovered her trail. But my friend would listen to no objection. We had ordered this luncheon, it was still quite early in the morning to enjoy it at our leisure; he was hungry, when is a French Canadian not hungry?, and I ought to be, and so we both walked off to the tavern.

The *recillon* after midnight mass is a national institution in Lower Canada. Much as the religious ceremonial is prized and faithfully observed, Christmas would be only half a holiday without this matutinal repast. There were gay lights in every window of Terrebonne as we moved down the principal street to the inn. In every house relations were gathered together, families being reunited for a few hours which had, perhaps, been separated during the whole year. Children came up to the parental knee to get the father's blessing and the mother's warmest kiss of love. Brother shook hands with brother, sister embraced sister, the little ones ran about the floor displaying the contents of their Christmas stockings, not the fancied gift of Santa Claus, as with us, but of the Infant Jesus himself. Then all collected around the board, and the feasting began. And then such feasting in the Septentrion! None of your namby pamby fruit tarts and jelly comfits, diminutive buns or diaphanous slices of ham, but mountains of golden *beignes*, huge platters of head-cheese, labyrinthine windings of blood pudding, immense sides of pork marbled with layers of frozen fat, and multitudinous delicacies, the bare sight of which would give the average American or Englishman an attack of dyspepsia for a week.

I envied these good people both their gaiety and their appetite, for I had little of either. On reaching the tavern, however, the sight of the well-lighted refectory, the cheerful fire in the stove, and the bountiful spread on the table, revived my spirits a trifle.

"Aha! let us eat," said my friend, "since we can't do any thing else."

I agreed with this sentiment, and fell to. The repast proved very agreeable. I made it a point to taste of every dish and to sip of every beverage presented to me. The consequence was that before the first half hour had elapsed, I had forgotten all about my adventure, and was vociferously employed in firing off bad puns and swelling the chorus of my companion's convivial songs. We were in the height of this uproar when my ear caught the faint tinkling of sleigh bells in front of the tavern, and, unaccountably to myself, I sobered down at once.

"It is our driver," said my companion, who noticed that I was listening. "He is getting his sleigh ready. You remember we told him we should leave at four. But never mind, we have plenty of time. Take another glass."

I poured out a drop of sherry, drained it hurriedly, and arose, assuring my friend that I was not equal to a mouthful of anything more. He promised to join me in a few minutes, so I lit my cigar and sauntered out of the room. When I reached the hall I heard the echo of music and merry-making in the adjoining parlour. I paid no particular attention at first, presuming the party to consist of the guests of the hotel, who were enjoying their Christmas. But presently all other sounds ceased, and some one played on the piano a well-known nocturne of Lefebvre-Wely. There was something in the appropriate character of the composition, but more in the delicacy of the touch, the fullness of the expression, and the evidently artistic mastery of the keys, which captivated my attention. I followed every note with the keenest delight, and when the last died away, gave vent to my feelings by loud applause. This met with a response within doors; the shape of an elegant uproar of approbation. A chorus succeeded, in which, to my amazement, I at once distinguished the voice which I had heard at the midnight mass. It was almost more than I could bear. My first impulse was to throw away my cigar, rush into the parlour, and satisfy my curiosity at the risk of being rude and intrusive. But just at that moment the stout man whom I had seen at the church door rushed up from the street, precipitated himself into the parlor, and, announcing in a loud voice that the sleighs were ready, broke up the musical party. The guests passed out pell mell from the drawing-room—a small group of ladies and gentlemen, laughing, talking, and all in the best of spirits. They soon disappeared outside, but not before I had discovered in their midst the presence of the mysterious lady.

IV.

It was resolved that she should not escape me this time; so summoning my companion from the table, where he was still immersed in a huge *tourquere*, I threw on my overcoat and sallied forth in quest of our driver. He was waiting for us. The three sleighs containing the drawing-room party were just rounding the corner of the main street of the village, when we jumped into our own and started in pursuit. They took the Montreal road, and we followed, all going at a rattling pace. I expected them to stop either at St. Vincent de Paul or at the St. Sulpice. But no. After crossing the *diviers des Prairies* they struck the high road for the city. All this time, so long as I had them in sight, I kept my curiosity well in hand; but when I saw that we were going the same way home, I ordered the driver to pass them, in the hope that I would catch another glimpse of the beautiful stranger. I was not disappointed. As we swept by her sleigh, she waved her hand again, and thus sang out:

Qui passe par ce chemin si tard,
Compagnons de la Majoraine?
Qui passe par ce chemin si tard,
To jours gai?

In a few seconds we were far ahead, but they kept up with us smartly, and it was not long before we reached the outskirts of the city. I kept a sharp look out for the sleighs should they come down any of the side streets. But to my intense satisfaction, they did nothing of the kind. They followed us down St. Lawrence Street to Craig, up Craig to St. Lambert Hill, thence to Place d'Armes, then up St. James. We stopped at the Hall; they all stopped too. We got out; they got out. I was completely nonplussed. What in the name of *Majoraine* or all his or her companions could this mean? However, there was no time for further deliberation. The party walked into the Hall, and I followed. As I passed by them, standing in a group and shaking the snow from their clothing, I overheard a little ripple of merriment, and simultaneously felt a little hand laid upon my shoulder.

"John, is it possible that you don't know me?" said the musical voice which I had heard so often that night. And the eyes that looked up at me were very fair, and the lips that smiled on me were as sweet as love. I lifted my cap, bowed deeply and answered:

"You surprise me, Madame. I have not that pleasure."

"And you really do not remember Estelle?"

"Estelle... Estelle. You cannot mean."

"Yes, I mean Estelle Gilbert."

"Cousin Estelle! Impossible."

But it was Estelle, none the less—the wild, the rollicking creole girl, lively as a bird, fair as a flower, good as an angel.

A few words soon explained all. She had arrived the previous morning in Montreal on her wedding tour. Yes, she was married, and she presented me at once to her husband, the stout man, whom I did not like at first on account of his size and his age, but whom I found out later to be a sterling good fellow. After spending the day looking about the city, a party of friends proposed that they should drive out to Terrebonne to attend midnight mass. They had inquired for me several times at the hotel, knowing that I boarded there, but were as often told that I was out. In the evening, however, when they learned from the proprietor that I had just left to get a sleigh to go to Terrebonne, she decided on going too, and enjoying a lark at my expense. Ah! *Criolla mia!* thought more of the lark than of the mass, that was just like you. On the way, they fell behind their companions, were spilled into a snow drift, and were just recovering themselves when we passed them. She avers that she recognized me at once by my broad shoulders, (I think that was a fib of Estelle's, but my shoulders, reader, are Atlantean), and sang out to me the provoking song. The rest of the adventures of the night then explained themselves to me quite intelligibly. I shall never forgive myself for not recognizing my sweet cousin, but it was five years since I had seen her, and she was then a child of thirteen.

Six years have passed since that eventful night. Last sum-

mer Estelle and her husband paid another visit to Montreal. The girl had grown into a mother; the bud had ripened into fruit. She was as lovely as ever, and as full of spirits. She laughed when I told her that I was always a *vieux garçon*, always late upon the road, but "always gay," and that I made it a religious practice, in memory of her, on every Christmas to bear the Midnight Mass.

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SOMETHING FOR CHRISTMAS.

The old man sat by his cheerful fire.
The ruddy blaze leaped higher and higher;
It filled the room with its pleasant light,
And seemed to laugh at the stormy night.
Without, the wind blew loud and long,
And filled the air with its dismal song;
While snowy flakes went eddying round,
As if loth to rest on the dark cold ground.
Swift busy feet went hurrying past,
In spite of the rude and angry blast;
There were fathers, mothers, children small,
There were eager youths, there were maidens tall;
And many a bright and fearless eye
Looked joyously up at the wintry sky;
And many a laugh and merry shout
On the chill night air were ringing out;
The street seemed full of bustle and light,
Of business and pleasure far into the night.
For the Christmas frolic and Christmas fan
With the Christmas Eve were fairly begun.
There were things to be bought, and things to be sold,
There were long kept secrets and jokes to be told,
There were paddings to stitch, and stockings to fill,
Long after the little ones' voices were still;
And many a head on its pillow that night
Was filled with visions of coming delight.

But ah! there were feet that moved slowly along.
There were hearts that knew neither merriment nor song.
There were stony eyes that had lost their light,
There were youthful cheeks grown haggard and white;
There were lips that echoed no joyous sound;
There were homes where no glad welcome was found;
The Father above us only knows
How many the griefs, how bitter the woes.
That fill the cup of life for a time,
To whose sad lot few sunbeams come.
Oh ye, with eyes and hopes so bright,
Who gather in fair homes to-night,
With mirth and song and laughter glad,
Think of the poor, the sick, the sad.
We speak of Him, the Holy Child,
The Blessed One, the Unconquered,
Who left his radiant home on high,
And stooped to earth to live and die;
Thro' whose dear hands to us are given
Our earthly joys and hopes of heaven.
Oh! while we join the angels' song
That echoed Judea's hills among
And raise the swelling notes again—
"Glory to God, good-will to men."
Let acts of thought and generous love,
Our thanks and our devotion prove.
Let other hearts be made to sing,
Let other homes with laughter ring;
So shall our living souls be saved
An offering worthy of our Lord.

The old man sat by his cheerful fire,
The ruddy blaze leaped higher and higher;
But in his shaded eyes, no light
Gave back an answering gleam to-night;
For his thoughts were wandering far away
Across the ocean wide,
To the well-loved native land which lay
In the arms of the briny tide;
To the early home of the far-off time
When first he heard the Christmas chime;
To the gentle hand on his boyish head,
The loving voice of fond words that said:
To the bright young brother and sister fair,
With soft blue eyes and sunny hair,
How quickly passed those childhood hours,
Short-lived and sweet as the fresh Spring flowers;
But the summer of life can be smiling no more,
The birds still sang, the sun still shone;
He sees again his blushing bride,
As proudly he stood that morn'g at her side,
And watched her for the low sweet tones that broke
From her trembling lips, as her vows she spoke:
Those lips were pale and silent now,
The seal of death had touched her brow;
But the old man mourned not for his love;
He knew she was safe in the home above;
And a tender light stole over his face
As he thought of all her winning grace—
The loving heart so warm and true,
So strong to suffer or to do;
And well he knew the Father's hand,
That bore her to the better land,
Had only snapped love's earthly chain,
For purer kindness and wise,
To reunite the links again
For ever in the skies.

He thought of his son, and daughters three,
Who had danced around the Christmas tree,
Growing taller and stronger as time rolled on,
Till their happy childhood and youth were gone.
"They were all Canadian born," he said,
As he tenderly thought of each curly head,
And the baby smiles that had seemed to come
To win their hearts to their new found home.
His boy, his noble and gifted boy,
Was now, as ever, his pride and joy,
And had written his name in letters of light,
On his country's annals; his daughters bright—
Young Canada had scarcely seen
More lovely girls than his had been—
The old man rose and paced the floor,
His memories were sweet, but not more;
"Poor Mary," he muttered, with hand clenched tight,
"How pale and sad she is looking to-night."
"Twas on Christmas Eve, just ten years ago,
And the air was thick with falling snow;
How lovely she looked in her robes of white,
With her starry eyes, and her tresses bright;
Ah! she was my roanest, my sweetest best,
The rest and plaything of all the rest;
How I loved to trace her features to trace
The winning look of her mother's face;
And yet on that eve she bestowed her hand
On the blackest villain in all the land;
A villain so smooth, and false, and fair,
You might think an angel of light was there;
But he gave her a thief and drunkard's name,
He made her his wife to load her with shame;
Now pale is her cheek, her bright eye dim,
And all because of her love for him,
My life-long curse let the villain take,
I'll never forgive him, for Mary's sake."

The old man sat in his easy chair,
And bowed his head with its silver hair;
The cheery fire at length burnt low,
Shedling a dim, uncertain glow;
The flickering flames crept in and out,
The lights and shadows went dancing about,
The room was chill, and still and lone,
And the wind swept by with a howl and moan;
But the old man slept in his easy chair,
And dreamed of the sister with golden hair,
Of the dark-eyed wife he had loved so long,
His grey-haired sire, his children young;
He sees fair angels with garments bright,
Who change into figures of darkest night;