

How well Pierre remembered that evening, the last one, with Father La Joie.

"I am so worried, mon enfant," he had confided. "Some one has twice stolen the offerings from the church."

It was little comfort that Pierre could extend the worthy Father but returning home through the meadow he had heard the faint noise as of the boring of an augur or the gnawing of mice through wood. It came from the chapel. At once the words of the priest had come back to him. He stood still. Should he call the priest? Non—it was a mere nothing. He vaulted the fence and rushed into the vestibule and there—there stood Prosper the offering box wide open. He was the thief.

"It was too much for me, mon Jacques, that he, my half-brother should be an ordinary thief and worse and I struck him grabbing from his hands the box as he fell lest any harm should come to it. But here too was my luck. Gran'mere La Pointe had spoken truth.

For through the door of the vestry walked Madeline very white of face. She looked at me with the box in my hand to Prosper half-stunned on the floor beside her. It was an ugly moment for me."

"Who—who has done this?" she asked trembling.

"Le Diable," Prosper recovering himself laughed wickedly.

"Ni moi, ni toi-toi," he added. "Only the rabble are the cowards."

Madeline looked at me, Pierre, with the box still in my hands.

"Surely this is a joke—a bad joke—you do not mean to—steal?"

She looked at me questioningly as if it were I—I Pierre—who was guilty and not Prosper himself. Almost I felt her tremble in the twilight.

"You trust your friend too much," Prosper said, slipping his arm about her as if to protect her. She was no longer the little playmate, but the woman.

"My uncle, the priest has always trusted you so—so—much!" she faltered. "I did not expect this of—you," her voice breaking with disappointment.

I was angry that Madeline should seem to trust Prosper before myself. He was no true mate for her, the frivolous, fickle fellow—but she trusted him—that was enough for me. She had the right to be happy with Prosper—if she chose.

You have seen the wounded pigeon that flutters to its nest in the loft then you will see Madeline turn to Prosper.

"Take me away, Prosper. He has always been so strong but—we are ashamed of him, are we not?"

"Let us go," Prosper said, speaking to Madeline alone.

For myself I felt that she loved Prosper and that I could bear alone the burden of Prosper's wrong if she were happy.

"You will take good care of her," I pleaded as I told them goodbye at the notary's the following day. "For myself I am going to the North Woods but you—you will be happy."

But Prosper was as thoughtless as ever. "You are taking it too hard, mon voyageur," he said laughingly. "You will find you a mate in the North."

And Pierre gritting hard his teeth had allowed him to go unharmed.

* * * * *

The fire had burned to embers in the fireplace and in the scanty light of the cabin it seemed to Jacques that the face of Pierre, always sober, was somewhat drawn as with pain. Outside the low undertone of the wind among the pines whispered the sadness of distant lonely places.

Glancing toward the uncurtained window Jacques perceived the face of a stranger pressed closely against the pane and staring into his own.

"V'la," he cried excitedly, pointing at the same time toward the window, but already the face had vanished from sight.

"Did you not see it, mon ami?" he asked. Pierre laughed. "I am sure of it," he persisted as he flung open the door.

There was no one in sight, only the footprints to and from the window in the snow.

But the stranger, whoever he was, did not reappear that evening and when the evening had passed Jacques was about to bid his host farewell.

"Cette lettre," he exclaimed, "mais oui, I had almost forgotten it," as he passed it to his host. Then bidding the latter bon soir he passed out into the forest and was gone. Turning again to his cabin after the form of Jacques had vanished Pierre studied the superscription of the letter:

M'sieur Pierre Gauvain,

Fort Du Cheyne.

Then apparently satisfied, he broke the seal and read:

"Mon cher Pierre,

Somewhere in the Great North Land this letter will reach you. You will then know that I have not forgotten you and that I would not choose to do so, mon fils. Nor am I alone. Pierre what a bungler thou art. Hast thou forgotten Madeline, non? non? and she? Only today when I asked her for news of you she blushed and quickly replied: "Why should I know, Father? He is nothing to me." The old story, mon fils. Rien, I asked. Pas du tout. Her blushes gave the lie twice over to her words. She seemed about to speak. I waited. She would ask a favor of me. She had worried much of late for Prosper had boasted of his deception and so I write. You should not have deceived her so. You were not her friend. But she begs your forgiveness and I tell her that maybe when you have become a wealthy trapper that you will come back to the old village of Ste. Anne Du Lac. You will find us still your friends.

Bien tout a vous,

Pere La Joie."

From the letter there fell the postscript, a little unmounted photograph of Madeline taken in the orchard of her father, a sunbonnet dangling by its strings from her hand, her face pensive and sweet at the apple tree in snow. "Pour toi-meme," she had written underneath.

Then to Pierre, the big-souled hunter, came in the distant North Land, the great moment of loneliness for he realized that his sacrifice had been in vain and that Madeline had not been made happy.

(Concluded in next issue.)

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