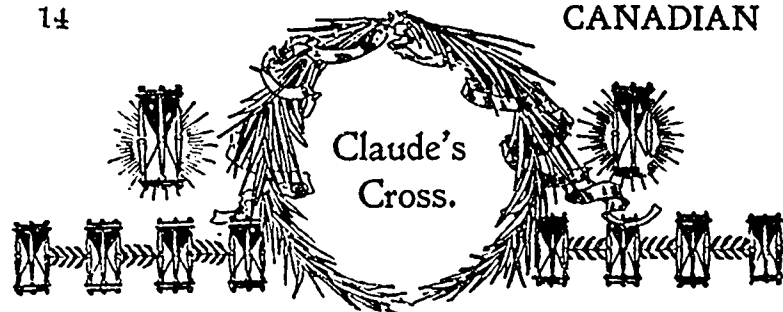




By Maud Tisdale.

CLAUDE was just six years old when he first started out to look for the Cross. The others had begun life at the early age of four, but Claude was the baby, so perhaps was somewhat spoiled.

Dick was the oldest, and had married a scavenger's daughter, whose father had taken him as partner in his profession. Then there followed half a dozen girls of all ages and sizes. Three of them had died; the other three were drifting in vice and crime. Claude brought up the rear.

Claude's mother took in washing and his father carted around the clothes. Every pay-day both parents went off on a drunk which generally lasted till the next one; so Claude, the baby, was left pretty much to his own devices; but he was quite happy and contented as long as he had a crust to chew, and enough water to stir up the sand along the roadside for mud pies. Once, for that purpose, he took a pint of beer which his father had set aside for his dinner, but as that was a sad episode in his baby life, we will say nothing more about it.

It was one day when he was making mud-pies that a lady passing spoke to Claude. There never was such a lady, "all pink and white," as she afterwards told the "old woman," his mother. The lady was a Sunday school teacher, and finally with the help of a shining big penny induced Claude to come the next Sunday to the school that was just around the corner. She said something about him dropping his penny in the plate when it was passed around—that is, if he wanted to. Claude didn't want to; but the next Sunday he started off for the school.

He liked it, so went again.

The pink-and-white lady told him "s'ange stories:—about a boy who wouldn't swear, nor tell lies, nor steal, nor punch other fellow's heads, and always took a shine to low down codgers; and when he grew to be a Man went around liftin' crosses from folks and carryin' them, until one day he was 'rested—was made to carry a big Cross for himself, and then was hung on it. But after, he went away to a fine place where he's King now and wears a crown. Also how he, Claude, must find and carry a cross for himself, then some day he'd have a crown too.

That was how Claude told the Sunday-school story to the old woman.

Claude went to Sunday-school for three Sundays in succession, then he guessed he knew all the pink and white lady knew, so started off one morning to look for his Cross. He didn't have much to begin with,—two marbles a spool-top, and a knife with a broken blade.

When he came home at the close of the first day, his mother asked him if he had found the Cross. He hadn't, he said, as he shook his queer little head, but added quickly that he had found "nough fer the hinge."

The "hinge" consisted of five marbles, a big glass alley, and a knife with a whole blade; there was a crack in the handle though.

You see as Claude went to Sunday-school only three times he had some very confused ideas about the Cross.

His little six year old head was both imaginative and shrewd; and he wove some strange fancies about the story which he had learned so imperfectly. He wouldn't have been surprised to have found a cross in some out of the way corner waiting to be carried to Calvary. Yet he

hardly expected his own cross to come to him at once. He imagined rather that he must make it, finding the material when and as he could, so the more he gained in barter out of the other boys, the nearer he drew to the object of his desire.

His religious teaching at home had certainly been very lax, indeed, the old woman had never before heard the story of the Cross; but she used to sing hymns when she was drunk.

These hymns Claude never forgot and even remembered his mother with a certain sort of affection for trilling them. He used to sing them on the street; perhaps that was why he sold his papers so much quicker than his pals did theirs. He had a really sweet voice and the most wonderful eyes,—deep blue and of a lovely shining that yet held a sparkle. And that sparkle lit them into a blaze in moments of excitement. Again his face never lost its innocence, even when he poured upon some offender a whole volley of street language. He didn't think the street language wicked—you see he was brought up to it. Then Claude's hair was very fair and wavy—that yellow hair that almost every baby has, but which so soon darkens. His hair never changed; and his eyes changed only once. We will come



to that. He used to play "gully, gully—how many?" and he never lost a marble. Perhaps he had a way of doing it. When his pockets were full to overflowing he sold his marbles, and with the pennies bought a broom. Finally he became a full-fledged crossing sweeper and the most popular boy on the street.

Yet never for a day even, did Claude lose sight of the Cross. He was always collecting for it—parts of the whole. In his quiet little way he would at times make a confidant of the old woman, telling her of the many rusty nails he had found for it, which he meant to polish some day. He didn't always go home to the old woman now; he rather preferred loafing around with other boys, spending his nights in funny out-of-the-way corners and lanes; since there wasn't much attraction for him at home. Still, whenever he had anything new to tell about the Cross he would always let his mother know. He thought somehow that she was interested in it. Perhaps she was in some durable way.

CHAPTER II.

The years has passed and Claude was eighteen. No miracle of good fortune had been wrought in

his life. He had grown up amid his sorry surroundings, a fair faced lad, imaginative as of old, passionate in temper, but kind and strangely pure in heart, and still the favorite of his vicinity.

His childish idea concerning the Cross had vanished with the years, of course. The rusty nails, hinges and bits of wood were gone. Yet there remained a vague reverence, almost a superstition about the word. He saw shining crosses on church spires. Once a florist employed him to carry a box to a house, Claude watched him pack the box, and it held a cross made of white flowers. There was a picture too—Claude saw it several times in shop windows,—of a woman holding on to a cross, in the midst of darkness and stormy water. He liked that picture, and wondered a great deal about it. Manhood was stirring in the boy, and that cross with its clinging figure had an attraction for him. But he never said anything about it—that is to anyone but the old woman, who sometimes used to joke him in maudlin way, yet always listened. Claude's father had been dead for several years, so his mother had more money for her own use, and consequently more drunks.

It was three months since he had seen his mother, so one day he went home to her.

"Hello, old woman," said Claude.

"Got that there cross yit?" asked the old woman.

"No, but I've found the side-piece," said Claude.

The old woman was tipsier than ever and she began the harsh croon

"O, Cross I'll cling to thee
I'll cling to thee
I'll cling to thee
O, Cross I'll cling to thee."

She sang it over and over.

"Isn't them words nice Claude?" she said at last, turning her pale drawn face and expressionless blood-shot eyes towards her son.

"Yes, they be, old woman; and that's the piece I've found—the clingin' piece; an' I say, old woman, she's a beauty."

The clinging piece of Claude's cross was Nellie.

Now Nellie was one of the wickedest little street-arabs in the whole city, yet Claude thought her an angel. He had never had much to do with girls in his own rank of life. He didn't care for them as a rule; they were noisy and rough, and they laughed at Claude, and preferred a bolder type of admirer.

Nellie's father was quite a respectable rag vendor, while her mother was a highly respectable char-woman. Thus Nellie had every advantage for a girl of her class. She was sent to a Sunday-school regularly for years; she had attended day school for several months. She could even write her own name, and might have been anything almost—that is, she might have been a char-woman like her mother, or else a factory-girl; or she might have learnt to sew and been a "lady."

But Nellie said she didn't want to be a lady, nor a factory girl, nor a char-woman; all she wanted was to be her own mistress, and walk the streets, and "sass" the policemen; and this she did to perfection. Nellie also enjoyed notoriety which she found several times in the police court.

She was a pretty girl and remarkably clean. Her eyes were black;

