

Ah! it was painful, bitterly painful, thought he. That dog of a Placide—robbing his only sister's sweetheart. He would not work, the idle, shiftless cur, but he would steal; and this was stealing brought home to the heart with a vengeance.

A score of times had he already interposed to save Albina from the shame of Placide's disgrace, and taken money from his own pocket to do it. And this! — Felix grew wet of face to think of it. Something must be done—it should not be passed over; and between love and duty his soul sickened within him. The exposure! it would drive her from him, humiliated, hidden. Ah, that vile brother of hers! Within arm's reach he would now half-strangle the hound for his behavior. Misere! Misere! Where would it all end?

—Felix wiped his clammy brow with a silk handkerchief, and stood to his feet. He could see that the night was white without again, by the moonshine streaming in through various crevices. He would go home—there was nothing more to be done now; and who knows but that a dream might solve the difficulty. If M. le Cure sometimes received inspirations asleep, why should not he? But then the reverend father was a holy man, and the Blessed God might not speak to children of the Church as He would to a priest. But he would go home and brood the matter over on the morrow, and perhaps by that time the Evil One would have whispered slumber, and tempted him to something that, by crossing and sprinkling himself, might be turned to good account.

With sundry vague resolutions akin these, Felix passed out from the strong-smelling gloom into the mellow radiance of an August Canadian night, and turned to relock the door.

But when about to turn the key that fastened again, a sound immediately behind turned his head in that direction for a sight that gave him a shock; and his hands seemed frozen to what they were doing, in that he had to wrench them away before he could face about.

PART III.

"Mon Dieu!" said Albina Sabourin, coming closer, "it is you, Felix? Placide is not home yet, and I thought it was he. I have been sitting up with father, but he is at last asleep, and the night-air is so sweet to one from the sick-room. Pauvre, pauvre pere, how he suffers. And he was always such a dear, good man to me—so kind, so thoughtful. Ah, bon Dieu! what would I not give to share some of his pain—the anguish only his eyes betray. I fear—" But Albini stopped abruptly, and hastily brushed away the misty gathering with a corner of her apron. "But tell me—what are you doing here—alone—at this hour?"

A sudden parching ran up and down the throat of Felix that he could scarcely speak, and when he did, first wetting his lips, his voice was without depth.

"Truly, I was looking for the hames Placide borrowed of me. He forgot to return them, and to-morrow is market-day."

Albina was another woman in an instant.

"Felix" (how the one word stirred him), "it is not the truth."

Coming forward, she gently grasped each lapel of his coat, and looked straight up at him, her face close to his. Felix closed lips and teeth together hard, very hard, and did with as little breathing as possible.

"I have every trick of your voice by heart," she continued, "and this ring of it now is new. Why should you look for harness in the woodshed? You are hiding something from me. Fie, my Felix, as if you could not trust me. But I will see for myself."

Like flashing light an idea was born of the moment with Felix as, folding his arms, a backward step brought him plumb against the door, barring entrance.

"Listen, heart of my heart," said he. "As God is witness, I have done no wrong, but my honor is at stake to-night. Do my bidding as I now ask it, and M. le Cure will have his fee within a month. Bring me the stable key from the kitchen and a few matches. Then retire to the house again and pray the Mother of Jesus for my success. Quick—be quick! nor look once from the house again after giving me these things, and all goes well."

Albina gave him a look of terror from a white face, and then turning around ran fleetly towards the house. A few seconds later, and placing what he desired with a trembling hand in his, she looked appealingly up at him, but Felix only shook his head, and walked with short nervous strides to the stable, while Albina, unrequited as desired, faithfully disappeared the way she came.

Unlocking the door, Felix entered the stable, found the lantern where it always hung, lit it, and by its sickly yellow light harnessed the horse.

As busy as his hands were with straps and buckles, so was his brain with thought, for the one worked the other in Felix with a will.

If that rascally Placide, thought he, as he buckled the throat-latch, and now led the horse out, was only in bed and fast asleep—it lacked yet a quarter of twelve—the scheme was as good as carried out, but there was no knowing, as things were, when he might turn up, and that, too, perhaps, in a condition and mood that strikes first and argues afterwards.

But Felix, doggedly, took the chances of extreme risk, and seven minutes from the time the lantern was lit it was out again, the stable door locked, key pocketed, and the horse between the shafts in the woodshed.

The trying time of all was now to come, but Felix never hesitated, and immediately walked the horse out into the yard with its load. Then he also closed and locked the woodshed door, detached the key that fitted the lock from its ring, and placed it in a separate pocket; after which he very deliberately led the horse on, close by, and past the house, out through the front gate and on to the road. The gate was now closed in its turn, and taking the reins Felix seated himself on the back part of the right-hand shaft, and drove briskly off.

It was astonishing with what despatch and low result in noise all this had been accomplished; and once upon the road a slight clacking was all that was directly noticeable in sound from wheels that rolled over a level stretch of sandy, grass-grown surface.

Arrived at the field Felix dumped the onions back on the spot from whence they had been taken, and then with the shovel, his forethought had provided, speedily refilled the empty cart with as much of the light sandy loam in which the onions had been luxuriated, equal to the emptied quantity of the latter; covering the substituted load, when he had finished, with the same sacking which so exactly had concealed the onions.

Half an hour later and Felix was back again, intensely satisfied to find everything as he had left it.

Without any loss of time when seconds were so valuable, he was quickly—quietly in all—through the gate and shut it, had turned and backed the animal and its load into the woodshed—trusting to Providence that Placide would fail to observe that the still single tracks of wheels were much broader than the tires—unhitched the horse and led it out, locked the woodshed door for the last time, stalled the horse in its stable, put the harness in the adjoining manger where Placide had carelessly thrown it, locked the stable-door in its turn for the last time, crossed the yard, and having found the kitchen-door unbolted, whether Albina had left it unfastened to him or not for this single purpose he was unable to say, tip-toed in, and hung the stable-key on its accustomed nail, over the sink.

Then he gently closed both kitchen and porch doors behind him, made his way down the garden through the currant-bushes and beneath the screening apple-trees, and, as he first came, went home.

Ding-a-ling! Ding-a-ling! Ding-a-ling!

It was the bell of a rapidly-driven priest on his way to the dangerously ill or dying—usually rung by the Jesuit's driver as he drove: the former always to be seen busily engaged reading his missal, and at whose passing those by the wayside were expected to kneel and offer up short and silent prayer for the afflicted.

Placide Sabourin, on his way to the market-town, stopped his meaningless

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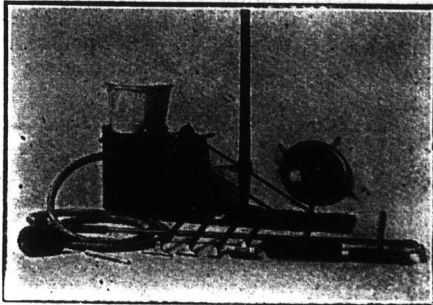
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