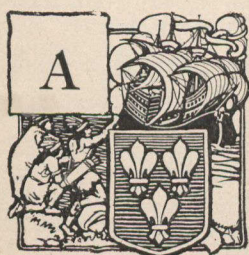




THE VOICE AND THE SHADOW

A Story of Fair Rosamond in New France

By MARJORIE L. C. PICKTHALL



As the customer left the little dusky store, carrying a tarnished silver candlestick tenderly in both hands, old Nicolas made a stealthy sign with his fingers. "He has the evil eye, ce m'sieur la," he murmured simply. "I take precautions."

At the laughter which followed he smiled indulgently. "You are young men," he said, "you have not my experience, nor that of my family. Nor did you notice his eyes, perhaps, which gave a tightness to my neck, they were of such a horror. My faith, yes. We are wise, we L'Orfevres, wise in the things of all other worlds, but simple in the things of this. Is it not so? Or else we should be rich by now. But here am I, after many generations, poorer than they were in old France. Eh, well!

"Eh, well, my children! It is said that we have won no new prosperity since my great-great-grandfather came to this country with great hope and a merry heart, and that is near two hundred years ago. What do I know? Only that here am I, very poor, very old, and the last of my name.

"A good name, my dears, an honest one, but humble. Not peasants, not roturiers, but keepers of little shops, little stalls, in little dark towns. So it was in Old France. But when Jacques L'Orfevre, Jacques the Silversmith, sought the little blood-stained settlements of New France, he came as a soldier. And in a little while, by virtue of his bravery and his appearance—for he was a very splendid young man, fine and noble as any grand seigneur of them all—he rose to be some sort of sous-officier. But what had he to do with the like of this Rosamonde?

"An old-time love-story, my dears? There is a story of a sort, but there is much beside love in it. There is Le Grand Pompon, for example.

"Just around the corner of the street there is little Annette, who loves big Pierre, and is loved in her turn by Constantin. So it goes. So it went then, two hundred years ago, in those little blockhouses, those tragic outposts, which were France in the New World.

"This Rosamonde was the niece of the commandant of the fort where Jacques was. She was a very fine lady, very beautiful, very gentle, very proud. She was so proud she never thought of being other than gentle and courteous to all. So it was, when she passed Jacques upon their narrow ramparts, fluttering in her French silks, or wrapped in her silver fox-furs with little fur-topped boots of satin—so it was 'A good day to you, monsieur the officer,' and from him it was 'Your servant, mademoiselle.' In his heart maybe it was 'God have you in his keeping, fair Rose of France, for another radiant day—un jour rayonnant.' I also have been young, and hearts beat warmly then as now. But what had he to hope of his Rose of France?

"In the story as I have made it for myself, he, the poor fool, hoped everything. He dreamed of great wars, wherein he might rise to any rank; and there came nothing but Indian skirmishes. Dreams, dreams; and at length something that ended alike dreaming and hoping.

"Their little fort was a post flung far into the wilderness. And there came word to send an expedition up the river that gave them water. The Indians were quiet, it was spring of the year. And maybe one of Jacques' radiant days when Gaspard de Laon, his captain, took to his boats amid a great flutter of banners, swaying of censers, barking of little cannon, voice of muskets. They must needs give de Laon a fair send-off, though powder was precious. So the punctilious salutes were fired, the

punctilious answer given, and the clumsy flotilla wound slowly up the dark, smooth stream. The sun took the last point of steel, the last ripple died among the young lily-leaves. And again there was nothing but the dark water and the beauty of the birches over it; despair in one heart, faint fear in another. Jacques had seen his Rose's face when de Laon waved farewell with his gauntlet; the lady had found Le Grand Pompon laughing to himself at the gate.

"Who was Le Grand Pompon? The devil, messieurs. Outwardly, a crazy old Indian, one of the many who hung about the fort, trading a little, hunting a little, watching, watching, with their terrible patient eyes—Le Grand Pompon neither traded nor hunted, for he never had to ask twice for a meal. He was so feared among his own; but the white men laughed; as you laughed just now.

"The spring passed, the summer came and went; ice bound the smooth, dark river water, and close under their palisades howled the wolves. Rosamonde watched long from the ramparts, and the commandant watched her; but not with so keen a sight as Jacques, for love gives understanding. But there was no sign of de Laon and his men.

"There were no attacks, no forays, no war-cries. Into a great quiet de Laon had gone, and the quiet had swallowed up him and his. As the long, long winter wore on, there were many watchers beside Rosamonde. The commandant at last took it philosophically, sent a letter by a priest asking for more men, whom he might hope to receive by the following fall. And Rosamonde, a little shaken by fear and loneliness and cold, took to calling Gaspard de Laon of nights.

"Every night, storm or fair, she slipped to the earthworks and called Gaspard, softly, very softly. Only two followed her. Jacques, because of his love; Le Grand Pompon because he was what he was. Every night her voice went over the river to the woods, very softly: 'O mon Gaspard, O Gaspard, a moi!'

"Night after night she called, each time a little louder, a little wilder. One clear night of desolate snows and a great multitude of stars, Le Grand Pompon rose from the shadows beside her, a tall old man in his furs and blankets, with terrible, waiting eyes.

"If you call like that,' he said in good guttural French, 'he will come.'

"Rosamonde looked at him wildly. 'If I thought that,' she cried, 'I would call forever.' For she was shaken by the waiting and the quiet, and scarce knew what she said.

"Le Grand Pompon nodded to her in the shimmer of the stars. 'You are very bold,' said he. 'If you call him again with that voice, he will come to you, so great is the power of the spirit over the spirit.'

"My great-great-grandfather was priest-trained in his boyhood, and took kindly enough to the more heathenish parts of their learning. He left it all on record, written in a little yellow book. He said that a cold sharper than any frost nipped him by the throat as his Rosamonde leaned out towards the gray woods creaking in the cold. Her voice was like the voice of all love since the world began, a wonderful, tender thing. 'Gaspard, Gaspard, a moi!' she cried, and waited again, her white hands above her heart, her face whiter than they.

"Far off a wolf howled, and the thin sound came travelling over the level to break in a thousand whining echoes upon the walls of the fort. 'There are none of them will trouble him,' said Le Grand Pompon. 'Call again.'

"Once more she called, 'Gaspard, a moi, Gaspard!' Le Grand Pompon's eyes were bright now as any hungry wolf's, and wolfishly watching the forest. His nostrils worked like a wolf's when he sniffs a tainted air.

"A third time Rosamonde called, holding out the hands of prayer to the empty snows, her wild eyes bright as the cold stars. And then—why, then the snows were empty no longer. For Gaspard de Laon came out from the edge of the woods, and towards them. All my great-great-grandfather's strength was beating in his throat like bird's wings, and of Rosamonde there seemed nothing alive but the eyes. Through some brilliance of starshine and frost or some witchery of the senses, they could see the gleam upon his gallant velvets, the hard flicker of steel, the gauntlet a-swing in his hand.

"Ha, Dieu! panted the lady. But there was little of God in that wonder, as my grandfather's little book attests. For an instant Gaspard de Laon stood beneath them, looking up and smiling, his great boots stained with much riding, a scarf about the left arm showing a little mark of old blood; and Jacques' hand flew up to salute his officer. And then—why, then again there was nothing but the starshine and the snow, and his Rose of France like a dead flower in Jacques' shaking arms.

"He was a devout lad, Jacques. He wrote it down in his little book. 'On the seventh day of the second month of this year of grace of the Saviour and Our Lady, the power of the devil was partly made manifest to me.' He wrote down also that the lady Rosamonde's hair was bound with a ribbon-net of amber velvet set with tiny golden studs. So he made use of his eyes, poor lad, that one time he had her in his arms. More than ever de Laon had, that!

"Is he dead, thou dog?" asked Jacques.

"Are the living so faithful?" answered Le Grand Pompon, and Jacques' angry eyes failed before his.

"Killed?" cried the lad again, fingering his sword. But, 'My people are quiet,' said the tall savage, 'quiet as the frozen water or the dead leaves. Very quiet in little lodges of bark among the quiet boughs. There was a call and he came. That is all.' But his eyes made a mockery of his words.

"Jacques wrote, as I have said, that on the seventh day of the second month, the power of the devil was partly made manifest to him. The full revelation did not come till later, much later. And then it is a short entry in the old book, thus: 'Raoul de Marhan, returning in command of the expedition, reported that while they were wintering with a friendly tribe of the savages, they lost by death Pierre Leblanc, Pere Josef and Gaspard de Laon, their commandant. Monsieur de Laon died strangely. He was resting in the chief lodge by the fire, having a little hurt his left arm with a fishing spear. When of a sudden he sprang to his feet, cried upon the name of a lady, and fell into Raoul's arms, quite dead. This was upon the seventh day of February in the present year. And hurriedly underneath: 'I, asking of Raoul, learned that they supposed some sudden poison of the wound touched Gaspard. But the wise man or sachem of those savages, listening at the heart and looking at the eyes of the dead, said only, 'He was called.' Which R. could in no wise understand.

"What is there to be thought, messieurs? It is all so long ago that Gaspard de Laon came at the call of his love. It is all dust and ashes, dust and ashes. What matters one poor shadow the more?

"The old book ends here with Jacques' fond hopes, save for one entry, written in the same hand but after a lapse of years. 'There died to-day,' wrote Jacques in his wild fashion, 'in her convent, Soeur Agathe, in the world Rosamonde, and my Rose of it. This time it is her Gaspard who has done the calling and she who has obeyed the voice of love. Pity not the dead; but rather the living, who find earth desolate and the ways of it strange because one face is gone from it forever, one voice stilled, one shadow fallen. Quomodo sedet sola civitas plena populo!'