

The Duty on a Christmas Box

By Blanche Gertrude-Robbins

of a heavy chain, the manager unfastened the collar from her neck. If he had expected her to make an instant dash for freedom, he was disappointed, for she only walked a few paces away and then stood looking at him.

"Oya," said her master, in a quiet level voice. "Come here."

She obeyed him mechanically, her attitude one of disinterested and resigned boredom.

"Lie down," she was told, and still obediently she did as she was bid.

"Good dog," said the manager, and rewarded her by fondling her head. She watched him with absolute indifference, her expression giving no hint as to her feelings.

And so through the days that followed she maintained her attitude of neutrality. To any stranger who attempted to touch her she showed her teeth at once, but to her master she gave obedience, though nothing more, remaining in everything else aloof and inscrutable. Things seemed hopeless and the mine manager had almost admitted himself beaten and decided on her destruction, when the crisis came to a head.

He had been writing letters in the house, and was suddenly roused by his wife's cry of alarm. She was standing at the door, her face white and drawn with terror.

With a couple of bounds her husband was by her side, and together they watched their two-year-old toddler out in the yard hold out her hand to the wolf dog. Oya walked up to the outstretched hand and sniffed it, though she did not show her teeth as was her wont. The atmosphere seemed surcharged with electricity. Something was about to happen, the result of pent-up energy, and what that something was neither of the two in the doorway dared to think. With the memory of the timekeeper's words in his mind, the manager moved to get his rifle, but before he could reach it he heard his wife whisper his name. With black dread in his heart he went back to the door, hardly daring to look for fear of what he should see—and there was Oya the untamable rolling on her back and the little child thumping at her with babyish delight. Then she got up and shook herself and licked the little hand offered her and then, as if in invitation to play, she rolled over on her back again.

Speechless, the two in the doorway watched the whole scene and saw the child flop down beside the big animal and bury her face among the bushy coat, little baby fingers playing with and matting themselves among the thick hair. With a strange note in his voice the manager called to her.

"Come here, Oya."

"Good dog!" he said. "Good dog! But be careful, Oya."

As if realizing that she was in favor, she put her nose into his hand and then went back to the child in the yard and they heard the baby words come back to them, "Dood dog! dood dog!"

"She's found something to love at last," the mine manager whispered to his wife, "and it seems to have altered her whole nature at once."

And so, in the end, this strange great husky, half wolf, half dog, worked out her salvation and capitulated to love.

She had known both bondage and freedom, the joy of the chase, and the restraint of man's dominion, and though she did not return from the mountains of her own accord, yet, in recognizing her master's dominion over her even in her freedom, it seemed as if her wolf ancestry became entirely submerged, its place being filled by the dog-part of her.

Having given her affection, she never wavered in her allegiance, and after the first preliminary shock, the mine manager was never afraid to trust his child in her care, though even to her master she never showed the same devotion or heart-whole affection that she did to the child.

To everyone else she remained as before, surly and silent, aloof and unapproachable—and if you ever wander B. C.-wards, you may be lucky enough to see the mine manager's child playing unafraid with what appears to be a big red wolf—who will most certainly show her teeth if you approach too close.

And in conclusion I will tell you (though you may not believe me) that the only real difference between dogs and wolves is just this—that dogs have come down out of the wilderness into bondage—and have found a god to worship.

HE was a lonely man, walking without comrades down the main street of the Connecticut village.

With a friendly greeting, he passed occasional groups of mill workers. Their hearty responses, in which respect was predominant, indicated his superior position as a "boss."

With a curious sense of elation, he understood their envy of his position. A few years before, he, too, had envied the "bosses."

But there were among those groups men whom he envied—men, whose homes and children made Christmas eve genuine.

Pausing beside one of the long, low tenement houses, Henri Vachon lighted a match and searched among the half-dozen doors for a desired number.

A French-Canadian woman answered his knock.

"Your good man, is he better?" Vachon inquired, awkwardly fumbling a huge, curiously-shaped package.

"Ah, dee boss! Mon' man, he come 'round queek. Go back to dee meels, the New Year, maybe," the woman responded.

"No, my good woman, give him time to get strong. These are a few toys for the youngsters. You'll take them, won't you? Your good man, I know, can't pay his doctor's bill and buy toys, too."

The woman took the package from Vachon. Her hands trembled and as if in relief from some great strain, she sobbed: "The blessed Mary be praised!

consider the problem of who would share it with him. He could never live there alone. Bring the little mother? Ah, no. He knew she would soon grow homesick for her Acadian home. She would feel strange in her simple kerchief thrown over her head and worn in the picturesque manner, peculiar to the French-Canadian women. True, there were many of French descent working in the New England mills. But they, like Vachon, were of a younger generation.

His sister, Margot, would not leave the Chebogne village, where lived Jean Burnette, the young farmer, to whom she was betrothed. Little sixteen-year-old Marie—the baby sister, still needed his mother's care.

There had, once been a little girl, sweetheart,—Catharine Le Bonte. Cassie had been the idol of the Acadian settlement and the admiration of the English-Canadian children.

Vachon had not seen her since he had left Acadie, yet he loved her passionately. He loved her as he remembered her, a bright, pretty, school-girl. He idealized her as, in imagination, he saw her mature into womanhood.

Once he had visited his mother and sisters and had been keenly disappointed that he had not seen Catharine. Her father had died, and her mother having married again, the family had moved to another settlement. No one in the

those dear, old hands, wrinkled by garden-work, browned through berry-picking. There would be the handkerchiefs, with his initial beautifully embroidered by his sister Margot, and the delicious maple candy, which bonny sister Marie would have made and packed in a fragrant basket of birch bark.

How he wished there was a dear friend from Acadie to share it with him!

Pausing beside the window of the small store, which also served as post office, he viewed the miniature tree, the gaudy toys and bright tinsel and gilt decorations.

A large box of candy attracted his attention. The creamy satin cover was profusely covered with violets,—just such violets had Cassie and he gathered in the deep, shady woods. How the box would delight Cassie. He noted the price, one dollar.

Smilingly, he counted the loose change in his pocket. Yes—besides the thirty cents reserved for the duty on the box in custody, there were two big, half-dollars.

Impulsively, he opened the door of the store. Then suddenly realizing the situation, he muttered despondently, "Yes, here is box and the violets, but where is Cassie?"

Symonds' wife was behind the counter selling a mechanical toy to a bright-eyed woman.

Symonds, himself, stood behind a desk, over which hung the sign, "Customs." He was holding a large package and a girl of sixteen was arguing with him in broken English.

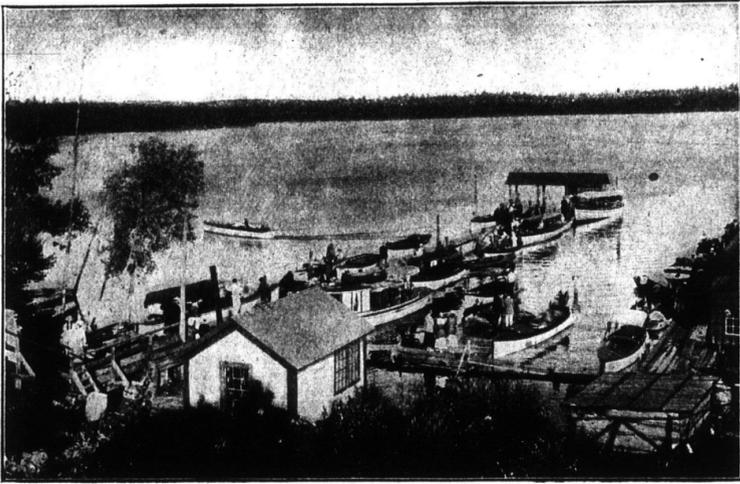
Vachon recognized the dialect of the French-Canadian and noted that the girl belonged to the class working in the mills.

"Unless you pay the dollar duty," Symonds explained angrily, "you cannot have your bundle."

"I haf no dee money—for dee leetle tax dooty—it ees our Chreemus. Dee leetle mother haf send it. I no pay. Dee long holiday take all our monies."

"I have told you," Symonds interrupted sharply, "that unless you pay the duty, it will go back to the Customs Office."

The girl's eyes filled with tears. "We no pay now—gif it me an' we pay when dee long holiday at dee meels ees gone."



Boat Landing, Minaki, Ont.

The little ones'll see Chreemus. The Virgin be kind to such as you, bon sir!"

Henri Vachon, smiling at the poor woman's happiness, turned toward the street. As he crossed the bridge, spanning the river choked with ice, he was conscious of a spark of Christmas cheer in his heart, ignited by his generous act.

At the end of the bridge, he paused again, listening to the dull throb of the mill engines. Watching the dim light of the watchman's lantern, his eyes followed the shadows thrown on the hillside.

Up there in a grove of wonderfully fragrant pine, stood his cottage. In the dim starlight he strained his eyes for a glimpse of the bungalow. He was not certain whether the grey looming out of the darkness was the silver-shingled roof, or the giant birch standing sentinel at the gateway.

Always through the long, dreary, monotonous years of hard labor in the machine shop of the mill and the tedious hours of night-school, Henri Vachon had possessed a two-fold ambition.

He had determined to attain the position of "boss." He had aimed to build himself a home on that very hillside, which had reminded him of his Provincial home.

He had come from the little Acadian settlement a mere boy, speaking broken English. Uncouth, ignorant, but energetic and quick in manipulating machinery, he had accomplished in ten years, all that he had purposed.

He had been in such haste to build and furnish the bungalow, endeavoring to have it complete for the Christmastide. Stupidly, he had not once stopped to

Chebogne village knew in which part of Acadie they now lived.

Vachon then decided that when he had been made a "boss" he would take a long vacation and search all Acadie until he had found Catharine Le Bonte.

All the time he had been building the cottage, he had thought of Cassie. They had coasted together down just such a hill, as that, in Chebogne. There had been deeply-wooded pastures like these back of the hills, where they had gathered berries and arbutus.

Remembering Cassie's gay, red cap and mittens, he had hung pretty red curtains at the windows.

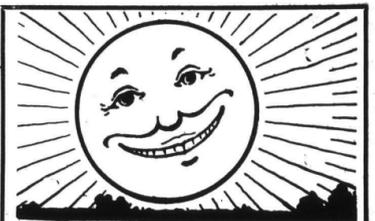
Suddenly conscious of his intense loneliness, he turned abruptly and hastened toward the village general store.

He had planned to spend the Christmastide in the bungalow. Now that all things were complete, he was not content to spend it alone. The cheer of other homes intensified his longing for comradeship.

Merry Christmas carols came through the chapel door. Vachon could see the children singing joyously about the great tree, sparkling with many tiny, but brilliant candles. Perhaps he would come here, when his errand was accomplished.

Fumbling in his pocket, he sought the card that notified him that there was in the post office a box on which was due a small duty. He smiled, for he knew that the box was from his mother. Bless her heart! she never knew that he had to pay this slight duty.

In fancy, he could see the contents of that box. There would be the usual crocheted necktie—the handwork of



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