

ROSALIE'S DOWER.

BY BLANCHE L. MACDONELL.



THE little Rosalie has lost her mistress? Without doubt, then, she seeks another place?" Pierre Chauvin, who delighted in hearing and repeating "some new thing," leaned against the fence with the deliberative air of one who has determined to enjoy himself in a leisurely manner.

Pierre was the inveterate village gossip, and he worked assiduously at his calling. He had made his property over to his children, and lived upon the allowance granted by them in return, with the avowed purpose of spending the remainder of his days in enjoyment. In his unwearying efforts to distract himself he often succeeded admirably in distracting his neighbours as well.

"This good mistress, no doubt, left the little one a remembrance?" in his most insinuating tone.

"Ah! for that I have no complaint to make. This worthy Madame Ogre was of the kindest; the little one was as the apple of her eye."

Madame Goufiel laid down her basket and, with perfect smiling effrontery, stared her interlocutor full in the face. Her nervously vivacious manner, the mischievous sparkle of the black eyes, the myriad traits of sly manner that peeped out of every line of her countenance, betrayed how deeply the little woman was interested in the subject of the conversation, for it concerned her only child. She had a short, energetic little figure, wiry black hair, so indomitably curly that it frizzled and bristled into tiny wrinkles above the shrewd, bright face, a complexion brown as a berry, sparkling dark eyes, a low brow, and broad smiling mouth, a comical little nose with a piquant upward twist. Several of the villagers had collected and were listening eagerly. Auguste Cadieux, a man of exemplary piety, who could talk upon sacred subjects almost as well as M. le Cure himself, and the fortunate possessor of three good farms, who happened to be strolling upon the *Grande Rue*, paused beside the group. For the last twenty years Mr. Cadieux had constantly been engaged in earnest attempts to marry advantageously, but, owing to a tenacious determination to get the best of the matrimonial bargain, every effort to convert the eligible bachelor into a benedict had resulted in disastrous failure. As Ma'me Goufiel glanced around the circle of curious faces, her eyes happened to alight on Cadieux. This little French-Canadian was a proud, ambitious woman, with an unappeasable taste for distinction, like a live coal, forever burning in her heart, who had been doomed to an existence of poverty and obscurity. Was it a temptation or was it an inspiration, that thrilling and bewitching thought which, like a spark of electric fire, flashed through every vein and nerve? A daring venture, a celestial vision of brilliant success floated before her dazzled eyes. A crowd of quick-coming, fantastic suggestions took away the widow's breath. Animated by this great idea, the temptation simply became unconquerable. Inspired by one of those instinctive certainties which are not capable of explanation, she was impelled to open her batteries boldly.

"Neighbours, you will all be glad to learn that my Rosalie returned to me, but no longer as a poor girl." She made this decisive utterance with dignity and composure, speaking with a modest innocence and simplicity which were beautiful to see. Then turning to Cadieux with an engaging smile and a delusive air of amiable candor, "Monsieur, it is with you I would speak. The cottage on the *Grande Rue*, is it yet for sale? I look even now for a convenient property. We would establish ourselves in comfort, the little one and I. Me, I think little of such things, but what will you? The young see with different eyes from us others. The small abode which has sheltered me will scarcely suit the tastes of Mam'zelle Rosalie."

There was a dead pause of incredulity and amazement. "Mam'zelle Rosalie!" the listeners regarded each other in unfeigned astonishment. Think of it—Ma'me Goufiel, who had toiled to support her worthless drunken husband, and who was herself assisted by her girl, in service at Quebec. The neighbours had always considered the widow addicted to unseemly airs and graces; she had even been detected in roguish tricks, but could the most limitless audacity carry her to such a length as this? She would buy property; that was something tangible. This slight confirmation of Ma'me Goufiel's story gave it a value beyond its merits, and

not only disarmed suspicion, but made it appear absurdly impossible.

"*Mon dieu!* is it then the week of the three Thursdays?" whispered one woman to another.

"She has chance, truly. Believe me, the mouth that laughs shows its teeth; for, ordinarily, Ma'me Goufiel is of the most silent; but of a reserve truly marvellous."

A new interest instantly illuminated Cadieux's lean and lantern-jawed visage. If the little Goufiel had really inherited anything considerable—though he had not the faintest intention of committing himself until he had obtained all the guiding particulars which he considered desirable—he might, perhaps, be inclined to think of her. At all events she would serve to play off against the rich *habitant's* daughter in the next parish, with whom he was just then negotiating.

Pierre's vehement curiosity could no longer be restrained.

"Ouida, and is the legacy large? But these English are of the richest, what—"

"Mind thy manners, Pierre Chauvin. Thou must have lost thine head to ask questions like that." The widow's face was scarlet, even her funny little upturned nose grew red, her eyes snapped, her curls quivered. "Tell not thy secrets in the ears of the cat. For me, I waste not my breath in talking. I, who am in despair for time. Nor would there be peace in Paradise even for the blessed saints if thou wert there with thy meddling curiosity."

This exordium produced its natural effect upon the attentive audience. Would the excited dame's spirit be so high if exaltation of fortune had not produced a corresponding elation of spirits? Pierre was not in the least disconcerted. He murmured in his most conciliatory tone.

"Bite with but one tooth, neighbour. It is but natural thy friends should felicitate thee upon thy good fortune. When it concerns not my trade, I lend but one ear—"

"Ta, ta, ta, thy trade, my fine big fellow. Is it not that of scandal-mongering? A fine profession, truly."

"Say, then, is it necessary to affront madame? See to it, Pierre Chauvin," Cadieux interfered promptly.

The moment was propitious. Triumphantly conscious that victory had remained in her hands, and that she had escaped closer inquiry, the widow took her departure. It was a hot day, and even the intoxicating excitement tingling through her veins could not decrease the heaviness of her basket. The handsome, lazy scapegrace, Jean Minot, who, aimlessly sauntering out of the tavern, had paused to hearken to his neighbour's comments, straightened himself up with a novel air of purpose and resolution. When he overtook the weary woman and courteously insisted upon relieving her of her burden, her heart expanded under the combined influence of her own ambitious hopes and his respectful consideration. On their way she discussed her plans and prospects very freely and boastfully.

"The nose of that snake of a Pierre is of sufficient length to reach the utmost limit of everybody's business, and for eyes, but he is even provided with eyes at the back of his head. Say, is it not so, my friend?"

"Most assuredly; you are of those who comprehend, I answer to you for it, madame. And I remember Mam'zelle Rosalie so well, me. It happened often that we played together as children," as he touched his hat politely at parting. Looking up into the picturesque, rich-inted face, the flattered little woman was ready to swear that the village gossips had been hard upon Gros Jean, even if he happened to be a graceless fellow with a handsome face and no particular prospects, and that he, like a more exalted personage, was not so black as he was painted.

Vanneuil was situated nearly twenty miles from the nearest railway station. Ma'me Goufiel had arranged that a cousin of her own, a staid, sober farmer, who had business at St. Petroville the day of Rosalie's arrival, should meet the girl and drive her home. All preparations had been completed. Every corner of the little house was pure and bright as loving hands could render it; the tiny garden bloomed with a gay profusion of flowers; with a delightful feeling of gratified anticipation swelling in her heart, the mother sat at her door. Suddenly the clatter of horse's hoofs broke the serenity of the evening stillness. Could it possibly be the respectable Xavier Marchand who was careering along in that extremely breakneck fashion? The

sturdy Canadian pony flew like the wind; the high caleche swayed and jolted and bumped as though it enjoyed the exercise. Could it be that the driver so proudly erect, cracking his whip with so fine a flourish was Gros Jean? and the pretty girl beside him, with gay ribbons flying, blushing and dimpling into radiant smiles, could that be Rosalie? Ma'me Goufiel's momentary annoyance was promptly dissipated by Jean's suave explanations. He had chanced to drive over to St. Petroville on an errand for his uncle, the blacksmith of St. Pie, and had found Rosalie waiting at the station; he had eagerly seized the occasion of rendering a service to a respected neighbour. As she clasped her daughter in her arms, the mother could think of nothing but her own pride, delight and satisfaction.

Mr. Cadieux had no intention of allowing the grass to grow beneath his feet concerning either business or pleasure. He made his appearance at the cottage the very next day after Rosalie's arrival, and thus was initiated an acquaintance which was speedily cemented by frequent friendly visits.

"But neat as a new *sou* and pretty as the waxen Infant Jesu of the midnight mass," was the verdict passed by the man of experience upon the widow's only daughter.

During her six years' residence in the city, the young girl had acquired an alertness which rendered her totally different from her village companions; the distinction was subtle but plainly perceptible. The little dewy face, full of clouds and sunshine, was attractive with a sentiment of youthful freshness and fragrance. She was fond of fun and frolic, mirthful, captivating, capricious, but always charming; full of innocently artful, coquettish wiles and irresponsible love of pleasure. She was quite as ready to flirt with the gaunt and awkward Cadieux as with any other of her numerous adorers, and received his clumsy tributes to her charms with gracious readiness. Besides these merely frivolous gratifications, the saintly Cadieux kept other objects steadily in view. He anxiously desired to sell his property and to find out the exact amount of Rosalie's dower; until these decorous preliminaries were settled, he had determined not to commit himself, however seductive the temptation offered. At times, Ma'me Goufiel's gallant spirit was almost quelled by the shrewd and wary glint of his eye, as it rested upon her. The hectic flush of courage was often succeeded by the dreadful chills of fear. Still Ma'me Goufiel possessed the gift of a fine imagination, and that faculty enabled her to grasp a realizing sense of that coveted sunshine of prosperity and consideration for which her soul longed. Then there was a stimulating and exhilarating excitement about these brilliant visions which was absolutely intoxicating. To lead the wary bachelor to commit himself was the widow's chief object; she firmly believed that if he were once enthralled by the girl's charms, he would be unable to cast off the spell. Cadieux was equally determined that he would not advance a step without being sure of his ground. In tact and adroitness he was no match for the wily widow. She listened patiently to his interminable legends of the saints; plentifully administered the soothing balm of flattery, skilfully employing all the ingratiating art she knew, and, with circuitous caution, cleverly avoided inconvenient explanations.

The cottage had other visitors. Pierre Chauvin haunted its precincts with such pertinacity that a rumour that the elderly widower was consumed by a violent desire to marry the voluble little widow became widely disseminated in Vanneuil. No sentimental fancy obscured the calmly inquiring intelligence of the village gossip. Pierre smoked reflectively, said very little, and listened with all his ears. In his unappeasable longing for news, he scented mystery from afar and had set his heart upon penetrating the secret. This swift change in the Goufiel's prospects formed the centre of thought for the community. Cadieux's subjugation furnished a piquant spectacle to all interested observers. Gros Jean, looking handsome, melancholy and abstracted, also, often dropped into the widow's abode, in a friendly, neighbourly fashion. Not that he received much apparent encouragement. Rosalie scorned and flouted and jeered at him so unmercifully that the mother felt it incumbent upon her to take his part. The older woman was quite willing to let the handsome youth serve as a foil, hoping to pique and stimulate the object of her schemes to a swift decision.

"Rub not the hairs of Gros Jean the wrong way, my girl," she counselled. "The poor lad has politeness for his old friends, and has the sense to appreciate good qualities when he sees them."

The possessor of the three farms, being himself of phenomenal ugliness, regarded his young rival with extreme disfavour. In his most authoritative tone, Cadieux delivered edifying homilies upon the follies and frailties of black sheep