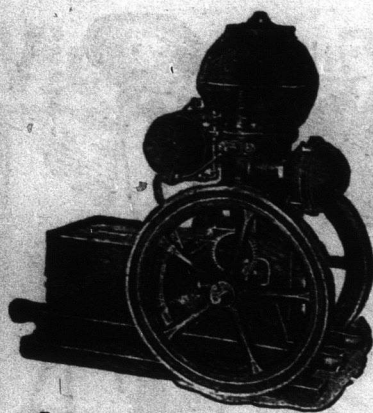




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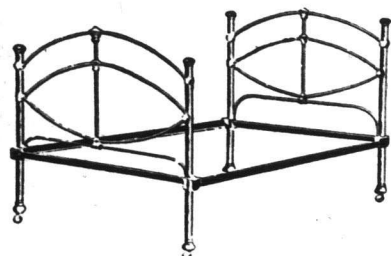
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The Onion in The Wheelrut.

By HENRY CECIL WALSH.

PART I.



FELIX DUMOUCHEL had been to the neighboring town; and departing at five in the morning gaily humming "Le rejalissement du pensee," he now returned at a suspiciously

late hour, boisterously troling "En roulant ma boule."

Diverging from the dusty main road at this point, that brought him back to St. Agapit again, he turned to the left and continued on by a short cross-road, and from thence downward on a third, paralleling the first, more private than public from infrequent use, and surface-worn by nothing except a cow-path, and what rutting wheels now and then abashedly made upon close-cropped sod adorned with mullens and sagey-looking weeds, knee high.

Midway upon this grassy, mile-long stretch between cultivated fields, stood the house of the Dumouchels, towards which Felix, thirty, good-looking and muscular, bent his steps by the light of the waning moon.

Within thirty yards of his homestead he kicked something with his foot that rolled away for a short distance and then stopped. It was white, and Felix now picked it up.

An onion! Bah! He was about to throw it away, but the thing remained in his hand, as with the other he brushed off the damp earth still adhering to it. A few feet further and Felix saved himself from falling by an effort, as his foot slipped sideways into a freshly made wheel-rut.

The rollicking pedestrian now stopped, and tried to think with a whiskey blanc brain. Immediately before him a small stream crossed the road, bridged by two logs resting lengthwise on their supports, on either side of which the ground declined to the level of each with bare, soft soil.

Felix looked about him, then at the onion, and finally down around his feet, his air, meanwhile, being that of a man who, deep in his cups, feels confronted with a problem demanding solution.

"Les Saintes!" he remarked to himself, "the onions have not been gathered hereabouts as yet, and how comes this one?"

Then he knit his brow as he poked his boot-toe in an unfamiliar rut, at which he gazed while cogitating with a mixed mind.

Two minutes from halting he took his way forward again, and proceeded past a house he should have otherwise entered, till, when two arpents beyond it, he strode with an increasing steadiness from mid-road to side—leaping the ditch—and looked over the rail fence.

"Ours are the first thrown up," he muttered, "and as for the old man carting them to the cellar before their time, misere! I would as soon expect to see apples on oaks. And for what those mischief-making women would take it upon themselves to do behind my back, that they might poke a finger at me—Ah! Tor 'ieu!"

Felix, to see, was instantly sobered, and cleared the fence with a single spring. It would have fared hard with the author of his rage could he have laid hands on him at this moment, but the former could only impotently swear and storm in a loud voice, and shake his fist as he called on the Holy Virgin to witness this wrong-doing.

Where two days ago he had completed the best half of a week exposing the onion crop to the sun prior removal to the root-house, a gap in their white quantity nearest the gate was at once apparent, even beneath a now clouded moon, and, as the blazing eyes of Felix at once perceived, sufficient had been hastily gathered to form a respectable cart-load.

Subsiding into silent wrath, Felix mechanically put both hands into his side coat pockets; drawing forth from one a short clay pipe, and from the other a handful of loose, rough cut habitant shag. Cramming the bowl full tight, he

thrust the remainder of the tabac Canadien back into a pocket, searched in three others before he found a match and produced it, scratched it on the pipe he lit, and then, carefully skirting the onion patch, becoming cautious when utter carelessness might be expected, made his way to the gate. This was found, as usual, hooked, and passing out and closing it again, he stood on the planks bridging the ditch for field and road.

The tell-tale marks of trespassing wheel and shod hoof were still plainly visible to his eye in the moonlight, leading to the field side of the gate, and, turning away, a white object at his feet beside the post claimed his attention, and stooping down he picked it up—another onion. Turning slightly he flung it back to its fellows; after which he pulled at his pipe for quick puffs, as he spent the next five minutes leaning against the gate, hard in thought. Then he roused himself, shook the top ashes from his pipe, and began retracing his steps up the road.

PART II.

At the end of a half-mile he had once more reached the cross-road, past which he continued on, this time slowly and savagely, with the air of a man who meant to verify unpleasant suspicion.

Three separate houses now to his left faced open fields, and leaving the middle of the road he approached the first of these beneath a row of soft maples, avoiding the gravel side-path, that he might noiselessly brush past the tree-trunks on turf.

Over a low, shabby picket-fence Felix placed one leg and then the other, at the furthest convenient spot from the house, and stealthily fringing by the three short fows of celery, passed on between a few currant bushes beneath several fameuse apple trees, till he was clear of all, and had reached a dilapidated, straw-thatched shed into which ran two single wheel tracks, and the brain of Felix was but fired the more to find the door securely padlocked.

Taking his pipe from his mouth, its half-consumed contents were emptied to the ground, and which he trod underfoot with a twist of his boot. Then replacing his pipe in a pocket, Felix bethought himself finding of something with which to force out one of the staples.

Ah! but, Mother of God! he used half a dozen such locks of his own every day at home. His keys! Had he his keys with him? He searched feverishly in his pockets, Le bon Dieu! here they were; and with a hand as damp as his forehead he brought them forth.

One—two—three. Diable! would none fit? He tried the fitting fourth, and with an inspiring click the lock and arm hinged apart.

Exulting as he did so, Felix had the door open in a trice, and the odor which came to him without through crack and chink-hole as he fumbled at the lock, was now strong enough to start a delicate man sneezing.

Searching through his pockets for a match, Felix next felt the band of his hat for one where he so often carried some when working coatless in the fields, but the last had been used on his pipe and the lack gave him this groping in pitchy darkness.

But he knew the place, did Felix; the woodpile was to the left, and—sacre—here he nearly fell over a block from it.

Edging thence gingerly forward over crackling chips, the twelfth of a dozen paces wedged a foot firmly between the bare ground and left shaft attached to a roughly-fashioned Scotch cart.

A sidelong stride brought him to the wheel, and, reaching over, his hand now came in contact with sacking. Thrusting this aside, and peering over as well, a glance, and sweeping feel of his hand—aside from smell—at once indicated a three-quarter load of onions blanc.

Enough—the sacking was replaced as found, and in making his way back to the door, left purposely ajar, Felix knocked up against a saw-horse and sat down to think.