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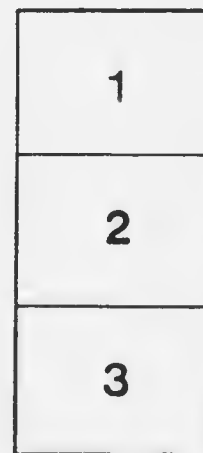
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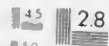
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THE

GOLDEN

POPPY

JOSEPH DEBEN



THE GOLDEN POPPY



THE GOLDEN POPPY

A NOVEL

BY

JEFFREY DEPREND

Author of "Embers"

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THE GOLDEN POPPY
JEFFREY DEPREND



The Golden Poppy

CHAPTER ONE.

She gazed through the open window of the coach and waved a small gloved hand at the two black figures standing apart on the skirt of the throng.

Conflicting emotions struggled within her.

The hour of parting had come. The rending asunder of girlhood ties. The long-awaited freedom of young womanhood.

The sisters were smiling, wistfully, she thought, and waving a timid farewell with their thin, wax-like hands. The brass crucifixes hanging from their ceintures seemed grotesquely large and the contrast between the white linen of their

stiff, starched bibs and the funereal black of their habits more pronounced.

A whistle shrieked nearby and a blinding belch of smoke, swift and ruthless, shut out the scene before her.

The train made its way over a maze of tracks and, gathering speed, passed on out through a narrow, tortuous lane, into the suburbs of the city.

She closed the window and settled back into the hot upholstered seat.

Some magazines, which she had purchased at the station news-stand, lay before her, where the porter had placed them, forgotten in the rush of unbidden emotions which assailed her.

A dove-gray parasol, edged with a heavy band of old rose, rested easily across the top of a walrus bag of dull black, beside which stood a large wicker basket of assorted fruits covered with a screen of red gauze.

There were some packages, besides, which told plainly of a recent shopping tour in the region of the great department

stores of the city. A box of bonbons lay, alluring, beside her, offering its sweets for the taking.

But, her swirling thoughts lifted her far and away from her surroundings and bore her, in dream-laden fancy, over a panorama of pleasing vistas.

It was June.

Habitants, going about their work in the fields, turned their backs upon their labors, to follow the progress of the train as it rolled gracefully over their narrow stretch of vision into the welcoming portals of the horizon.

Here and there cattle raised their thoughtful heads from their browsing, mildly interested in the passing scene. The fields lay green and golden in the warm sunlight. In the wheat fields, waving armies flashed their green spears in the blinding sheen. From the pure, unclouded blue of the sky a torrid heat beat down upon the earth, which would gladden the hearts of the reapers with abundant yields at harvest.

Now the giant wayfarer traversed yawning canons of forest. Now he emerged again among green and yellow fields and grazing herds.

Now he thundered over a shimmering riband of brook, that flashed back to him the reflection of his graceful outline. And again he rumbled past scenes of domestic happiness.

Farm houses, flanked by fruit orchards, raised their red and green roofs above the plumes of blooming trees, in stately harmony with the handiwork of nature.

The girl gave little heed to the unfolding scene. She was going home. The first long chapter in the book of her life had come to an uneventful close. With the opening of the next, all the meagre resources at her command would be needed, to guide her faltering steps over spaces unpathed and unknown.

She reclined in a dream-haze against the stuffy crimson plush of her seat; her

svelt, well moulded body swaying gently with the movement of the coach.

Hers was the face of a beautiful child, wondering, believing. Large hazel eyes surmounted by daintily arched brows and fringed with long, heavy lashes, that caressed her cheeks when she closed those lustrous orbs. A mouth that might have been done by a Rubens, curved like a hunter's bow, full-lipped and bold and of the redness of carmine. Ears of the translucency of sea shells, as delicate as rose petals. A nose Grecian in type, such as might have been Helen's. A throat, creamy and full, raising its white column from the depths of a breast already well rounded and matured. A wealth of golden hair, framing in the exquisite features of the girl, like the handiwork of a master on some rare cameo.

She was aware of her charms and revelled in her beauty.

In the convent she had left behind today, which had been her home these seven years and out of which she had passed to

take up her place among her people, the sisters had many times deplored the girl's vanity and self-complaisance, even going so far as to make prophecies of dire visitations from Heaven for her worldliness and want of Christian humility.

The subject of these remonstrances only laughed at the pious folk and admired her pretty self the more for their fears.

The train was leaving Brosseau, when a young man entered the front door of the coach on his way to the smoker.

He was of medium build and stature and of a complexion committed neither to light nor dark.

The eyes were gray; the nose merely accidental. A stubby little hedge bristled pugnaciously on his upper lip.

He was neatly attired in grays.

He surveyed the coach with cool deliberation, until his eyes met those of the girl and kindled in recognition.

In a moment he was standing before her, hat in hand.

The girl appeared mildly pleased at the meeting.

The young man smiled politely and spoke some little commonplace. It was a great pleasure, a delightful surprise, to renew, thus unexpectedly, a cherished acquaintance.

She blushed prettily and made room for him beside her.

He readily accepted the favor.

There was a moment's constraint which he broke with:

"I believe this is our first meeting since May?"

"Yes, you were at the convent to see your niece, Clotilde. The little tease had me called to the parlor. She is forever up to such tricks."

They laughed and he went on:

"Now, you must not be too hard on my niece, Miss Labelle, for, the truth is, it was I who asked her to send for you. I had seen you many times in church. Indeed, my devotions during those days

would do me little credit with St. Peter. You are going home for the summer?"

"Yes, and the winter as well."

A slight change came over her features and she gazed out at the fleeing panorama of field and forest.

"Oh, yes, I remember," he rejoined. "Clotilde told me you were in your last year."

They were silent for a space. Presently he said:

"I am spending the summer months at St. John's, with my people. We might have many pleasant hours together. Shall I call?"

"By all means, Doctor Randon; you know where we live?"

"Oh, yes, perfectly well; I have known the place since childhood—although—I had never met its most lovely tenant."

"Flatterer!"

"I mean it," he laughed. Then: "I must see to my luggage. I shall be over. Good-bye, Miss Labelle."

She put out a dainty hand: "Au revoir,

Doctor Randon," she said, with her sweetest smile.

They were at St. John's.

The next stop would be Lamartinette, on the other side of the Richelieu. And Lamartinette was home.

There would be someone at the station to meet her. Pierre, most likely.

It was but a five minutes' ride across the river.

She gazed out with a thrill of gladness upon the majestic stream, which she had watched oftentimes as a child.

It was still rushing onward to the hungry sea, never returning; still hurrying past the simple scenes, in its maddening quest for the great waters, never hoping again to kiss these fertile shores.

A white sail glimmered on the blue surface in the distance. Canoes dotted the water here and there. Men and boys squatted indolently along the shores, fishing. The church spires of the village shone like silver minarets in the blinding sunlight.

These were the scenes she had known as a child.

They seemed far removed from her now, like the faces of a half-forgotten dream.

She drew herself to her feet, perturbed.

It all seemed quite flat and tasteless, now.

The porter came for her luggage.

Mechanically, she followed him to the vestibule and down the steps to the station platform.

Village idlers stood about in little knots, gaping.

Pierre, his lean, brown face alight with welcome, was there to greet her. He was the adopted son of her mother's only brother, and had been raised with Isabelle after the death of Jules Duval.

He had donned his best suit for the occasion—a stiff, funereal garb of black, which had been pressed until the creases stood out like welts against the fabric. A ready-made cravat of vivid blue appeared to have been flattened against the

starched bosom of his shirt and pasted there. A narrow white band of collar did little to conceal the hirsute column of neck. His great, powerful hands dangled like pendulums from the too short sleeves of his coat. He wore new patent leather shoes, which seemed to increase the size of his feet.

As he strode forward to meet her, his hand went hesitatingly to his straw sailor hat, revealing a shaggy mane of blue-black hair.

He appeared at a loss for words. But his face shone with the joy of a child.

"Isabelle!" he exclaimed softly, for one of his brawn and stature. And in that word he found expression for his gladness, for he said no more; but busied himself with her luggage.

The road from the station to the home of Philippe Labelle wound lazily in a wide circle around the village. Wild clover and goldenrod mingled their white and yellow blossoms in riotous profusion along the way. The elderberry reveled

in the sun beside the choke-cherry trees and hazel bushes. Daisies nodded demurely in the meadows. In the fields, where the coming harvest was now the rich brown of bakers' loaves, bobolinks waxed garrulous, their trim bodies swaying rhythmically on the golden shafts of ripening grain. An indolent chorus of song rose dreamily from the earth, where grasshoppers lived their short day in the abundance of Summer's gifts, well content to leave to-morrow to its own device.

They had rounded a curve in the highway and were at the foot of a long, gradual slope, when the homestead flaunted its bold white-columned facade from amidst its surrounding framework of pines and maples.

The house, of stately proportions, was white, with green roof and shutters. A broad veranda circled the front and sides of the structure. The barns and stables stood off some five hundred yards in the rear of the house, mute sentinels

of the thrift and enterprise of the husbandman whose abode was here.

The girl straightened in her seat as the familiar scene revealed itself to her eyes.

"Home, Pierre,!" she sighed.

"Yes, yes, home, Isabelle," laughed the big fellow. "You are glad, eh?"

"Glad that I am home? Oh, surely, Pierre. Everyone is glad to come home. Home is the beginning and the end. Ah, there is Father. And Mamman, coming from her flower garden. Nothing has changed. Everything looks the same as when I was home last. It will seem lonely for a while. But, you will take me for many rides in the country, will you not, Pierre?"

"Well, well, I thought you were never coming," rumbled a voice close at hand and the huge form of Philippe Labelle bounded lithely from behind a fringe of willows, which bordered the driveway, to the side of the slowly moving car.

Isabelle alighted and kissed her father, who crushed the soft, pliant form rudely

to his breast and swept her exquisite mouth and cheeks with a coarse black brush of beard.

Isabelle hastened toward the house to greet her mother, who was approaching with an armful of roses.

Mrs. Labelle was a faded little woman, with thoughtful, saddened eyes and yellowish hair now streaking into gray. Her face was expressive of helpless resignation to the futility of hope, to the emptiness of human joys.

Isabelle kissed her mother and enquired about her health. Mrs. Labelle smiled a brave reply and murmured a protest against the excessive heat. The men were approaching now with the girl's luggage. Pierre opened the parasol and held it out to Isabelle.

"A storm is coming," said Philippe, pointing to the western sky, where an ominous stretch of cloud loomed blackish, threaded with dancing streaks of fire. A cool breeze rustled the grasses at their feet. Somewhere a door slammed loudly.

They moved across the lawn and passed into the house. The darkened rooms were cool and the rising wind swept grateful gusts through the open doors and windows.

Mrs. Labelle arranged her flowers on the dining-room table and set about to lay meat for the returning child, explaining that Ernestine, the maid of all work, had gone to a picnic at High Gate Springs.

She placed a cold chicken on the snow-white cloth and fetched a pitcher of cream from the dairy. A pot of coffee followed in turn, flanked by newly churned butter and an imposing round loaf of home-made bread. A deep dish of raspberries came next, their black eyes peeping through a snowfall of powdered sugar.

While these preparations were under way, Isabelle repaired to her room to change her clothing and remove the dust of travel.

She reappeared a few minutes later in a pale blue dressing-gown of crepe-like

texture, which revealed the classic column of her full, satiny throat.

Her little feet were encased in dainty slippers of black kid and her hair was done in a luxuriant coil over the back of her shapely head and neck.

She appeared refreshed from her ablutions. A soft tinge of color had stolen over the paleness of her cheeks.

She ate heartily, like the healthy creature that she was, chatting animatedly the while with her mother, who had taken a seat across the table.

The men had gone out, presumably to their work about the farm.

"It will be nice to have you home, Isabelle," said Mamman Labelle. "It has been so very lonesome of late."

There was a pause and she spoke again:

"You are going to stay at home, of course?"

"Really, mother, I have thought very little about it; but, I can understand your being lonely here."

"They say, Isabelle, that one becomes

inured to dungeons. I have read so in books. I believe it is true. I think it has been the case with me—here—all these years.”

She sighed audibly and drew her little white shawl more closely about her shoulders.

The storm broke at last and drenched the earth with a warm, beneficent rain. Then, the wind died down to a caress, swishing softly among the dripping leaves and grasses. The sun burst forth in fiery splendor, over a ragged battlement of cloud. Farmyard fowls quitted the shelter of the barns to forage in fields of plenty. Isabelle, emerging from the house, stepped down onto the smooth gravel path and followed its winding course around the house to the orchard and garden overlooking the sloping pasture lands of her father.

Far over the valley the velvet green of the earth was dotted with the red and white of grazing herds.

Isabelle surveyed the peaceful scene

before her, a prey to the surging memories of her childhood. It was here that she had lived her earlier years, in this house of cloud and shadow, grim battleground of silences, where intercourse between the parent Labelles had been limited, as far back as she could remember, to curt exchanges of words indispensable to the routine of the household.

Nearby stood the slender oak sapling which she had planted on her ninth birthday. Some future generation, now far distant, would view the grandeur of its full estate. She would have long since departed the scene. She pondered the fleeting quality of human life and shuddered inwardly at the evanescence of youth and of the charms of its short days.

Perched on a fence-post, midway between the garden and the barns, a guinea cock called to his mate, hatching her brood somewhere in the seclusion of the harvest fields. Pigeons strutted about in scattered flocks, gleaning. She saw her father, followed by Pierre, emerge from

the stables and cross over to the sheep-pens. They would soon be coming in; for the round red sun had descended to the distant hill-tops; and the day was done. She retraced her steps to the house and went to her room.

She wished to be alone.

Her mother called her for the evening meal.

But she did not go down to supper.

Instead, she drew a large, oaken rocker to the open window and watched the purpling twilight steal over the hills and down into the valleys. By and by the stars came out and a silver crescent of moon hung from the limb of a tall tree on the peak of a distant spur. From the creek, hard by, rose an exultant chorus of frogs. And on the crooning breeze were wafted in to her the mingling perfumes of the coming harvest. Isabelle heard her mother mount the stairs to her room. She heard the metallic click of the key as Mrs. Labelle locked her chamber door. From below came the loud, strident voice of the

father, in debate with the mild-mannered Pierre. They, too, would soon lumber off to their beds, to be up and doing again at blush of dawn. A feeling of revulsion swept over her. She was appalled by the loneliness of this hum-drum, workaday life.

It was late when Ernestine came home from the picnic. And it was long after the dead hush of night had settled over the house when Isabelle rose from her seat by the window and sought the solace of sleep.

She awoke to the songs of birds, bursting in joyously through the open windows of the spacious bedroom. The faint perfume of wild flowers and grasses thrilled her.

She pushed down the covers with her feet.

Her white hands met over her tumbling tresses, revealing plump, snowy arms. She lay luxuriously upon her back, her wonderful eyes fixed abstractedly on the gilt crucifix at the foot of the bed.

A dog bayed in the distance. She sat up regretfully on the edge of the bed.

Then, she crossed the room, to view the landscape.

Winding around the lane that led to the pasture, she saw a long, lagging procession of cows, urged by a shaggy dog, wending toward the barns. Pierre was letting down the bars. The patient creatures moored softly as they came within sight of their keeper. One by one they passed into the barnyard and disappeared. Pierre, taking up the milk pails, plodded after.

"Poor Pierre!" she commiserated, in an under-tone.

Then, the after-thought:

"I might have been like him. My lot would have been the same as his, had I remained here, content with the life of the farm. But no, I never liked it. The drudgery of such an existence frightened me, even as a child. I abhor it."

A little to the south, slowly detaching himself from the green framework of the

orchard, was her father's ne'er-do-well brother, her Uncle Nazaire, a scythe over his shoulder, plodding his way afield.

He was a short stoutly built man, with a purplish, bulbous nose and eyes that strained in their sockets beneath a narrow band of bulging brow. His mouth was thick-lipped and gash-like; and enormous ears stood out and away from the closely-cropped, egg-shaped head. The chin fell away abruptly, without coming to a point; and the short, fat neck gave eloquent promise of a sudden end.

Together with his wife, Philomène, he lived in a cottage on the far edge of his brother's farm. Philomène did plain sewing for the women of Lamartinette and Nazaire contributed to the ménage from the proceeds of his labors on the thriving acres of Philippe Labelle.

Isabelle, now, as many times in the past, felt an instinctive dislike for this man of her own blood.

And when Nazaire, moved by some mental process of his own, turned sud-

denly in his tracks and gazed up at her window, the girl drew the curtain hastily and retreated, strangely perturbed.

She crossed over to the ancient dresser of black walnut and stood before the long swinging mirror, the same that had revealed her child image to her, years ago.

She smiled her satisfaction at the reflection in the glass; and turned to her toilet. She had finished dressing, when her mother, thinking Isabelle was still asleep, opened the door softly and entered the room.

"Good morning, chérie," she said; "have you rested well?"

"Oh, yes, mother, I slept like a top."

"I thought I would see if you were still asleep. The men have eaten and gone; we shall breakfast together."

She turned to the open window and went on:

"What a beautiful scene! I have always admired it so: the valley, the hills, the blue, far-away land touching the sky."

The girl's arm stole about the little form.

"Mumzie," she said, "why is it that far-away things always seem more attractive—more to be desired?"

"I suppose it is because we are not near enough to see their flaws, my child. I have sometimes thought that if wives could see their husbands but once or twice each year, the great institution of marriage might be accounted an unfailing success. The women would have neither the time nor the disposition to see the flaws in their mates."

The girl laughed outright.

"But, surely you are not in earnest, Mumzie," she rejoined. "Such a life would be intolerable—to me at least. I shall want my husband with me always."

"Then, make sure you are both devoted lovers, my child, before taking the final step; for where there is mutual love the flaws are not seen."

"So much for the men, little mother;

but what of the wives: have they not flaws as well?"

"Yes, indeed, fully as many; but the average man seeks diversion away from home. He refuses to be too strongly bound; he is over-liberal in the interpretation of the marriage vow as it affects him. And society sanctions and upholds his breaches of the vow. In other words, it seems to be the common view that fidelity is a beautiful virtue—in the wives. But, come, dear, you must be hungry. I shall tell Ernestine you are up."

She laughed wryly, and by way of after-thought, added:

"As for husbands and wives, my dear child, you must not let that occupy your thoughts. Time and fate will adjust your fortunes. You, yourself, could never hope to fashion the mould of your future life. If this were possible, there would be no unhappiness in the world. And then, we would all be in Heaven before our time, thus cheating the good old St. Peter of all the surprises he holds in store for us."

"I shall treat it as a closed book, Mumzie dear," said Isabelle, "until the proper time."

And together they passed out of the room.

CHAPTER TWO.

David Randon drove over to the Labelle homestead a few days after his meeting with Isabelle.

It was Sunday. A delightful breeze cooled the ardor of the sun. The quiet of the day lay drowsily over the countryside.

Randon alighted from his car in the driveway and advanced to the veranda, where Philippe Labelle was smoking an after-dinner pipe. He bowed pleasantly and asked for Miss Labelle.

The farmer eyed Randon with a swift, sweeping glance. Mask-like, his swarthy, bearded face remained non-committal. "I shall call her," he said. "Be seated, Monsieur."

He found Isabelle in the kitchen, with her mother and Ernestine.

"There is someone to see you, Isabelle," he said. "I think it's that young Randon, from St. John's. Do you know him?"

"Yes—through his niece, at the convent. He said he was going to call."

Labelle was about to speak again; but thought better of it. Turning on his heel, he relighted his pipe and tamped the dottle. Then he strode out of the house and made his way slowly towards the barns.

Isabelle removed her apron.

"How do I look?" she asked. She was smiling. Her eyes danced with pleasurable excitement. A healthy glow flushed her cheeks to the tinge of rose petals.

The others, turning from the steaming dishes, surveyed her critically and spoke their approval. She disappeared through the swinging door and a moment later came out onto the veranda, her hands outstretched to Randon in honest welcome.

"I have been expecting you," she told him, without preamble. "Won't you come in? It is cooler inside."

She drew open the door and they passed into the parlor, a square, spacious room immediately off the front entrance. Isabelle raised the shades, relieving the semi-darkness of the apartment. Then, she seated herself before him and smiled her pleasure at his being there. He, too, was well pleased with the moment. He gazed at the young, healthy creature before him without any attempt at concealment. Randon was the first to speak.

"I have come to take you for a ride. You are at liberty?"

"Yes. It will be very nice, a drive into the country. I shall tell Mother and get a wrap."

In her room, Isabelle chose a long, loose-fitting coat of light texture. With a deft touch or two, she adjusted a rebellious wisp of hair. A glance in the mirror evoked a smile of satisfaction. She picked up a beaded reticule on the dresser, and went down to meet him. At the foot of the stairway she met her mother, emerging from the dining-room.

She took her by the arm.

"Come, Mumzie," she said. "I want you to see my beau."

She laughed softly and drew the unwilling woman gently to the parlor.

"What a child it is!" Mrs. Labelle was saying as the door opened.

Randon arose from his seat by the window as the women entered. Mrs. Labelle greeted the guest warmly and told him he must feel quite free to call "*sans cérémonie*," as long as he remained in the good graces of her Isabelle. They all laughed and Randon asked:

"Is it as bad as all that, Mrs. Labelle? Can it be the lady is fickle?"

"She used to be—with her dolls and her playthings. Oh, dear, I had such a time of it, keeping her amused! But, there, I was thinking her still a child. It seems but yesterday, you see, that she was a little thing in curls and short dresses."

Her mood passed presently; and she left them, with a parting smile and an "*au revoir*."

They were on the main road when Randon said:

"Where shall we go? To Chambly?"

"Oh, yes, Chambly by all means. I haven't been there since I was a little girl."

"That was but yesterday," he smiled.

"Yes--Mother does seem to think I am still a little girl. And yet, I can understand her. It seems so short a while to me, too, since I played with my dolls and waited longingly for Santa Claus. I wonder if we rush on so rapidly to old age?"

"More so, they say. I have heard that after you have passed the fortieth milestone, the descent seems almost perpendicular."

"Oh!" she shuddered, "how realistic! One would think you were selling toboggans."

"Now that you mention it," he rejoined, "life and toboggans are not without a degree of similarity: In both cases much effort is wasted to little end. What

a gloomy subject," he broke off, "for such a day!"

"Yes, indeed," she bantered. "Let us laugh while there is still time."

On the crest of a lonely plateau, a mile or so from the house, a tall, straight figure stood watching the car as it rolled away towards the village.

It was Pierre.

CHAPTER THREE.

They had crossed the old white bridge that spanned the Richelieu and had left St. John's far behind. The road lay beneath a thick, velvet pall of dust, that rose in a swirling cloud of gray, as they passed. The banks and ditches along the highway were massed with a profusion of wild bloom, from the shimmering gold of buttercups to the ivory white of spreading elders. Through the green lace-work of foliage they caught swift-flashing gleams of the sun-silvered Richelieu. The sky was very clear and blue. It arched high above, in a translucent dome, untouched by a wave of varying hue. Nor did it have the seeming of the abode of storms and wrath, black and frightful, which oft-times thundered over the valley when night had come.

They arrived at Chambly as the vesper bells were calling the faithful to worship.

The quaint little town nestled, cool and tranquil, in the shade of oaks and maples.

Gay little groups of habitants stood about, chatting in their gala attire of *Dimanche*.

Dimanche was a great day for these simple folk.

It was Sunday—the day of the week which called them together for spiritual uplift; and which also served to stimulate the inner man and prepare him for greater feats of wood-cutting on the morrow.

For, they were great *bucherons*—men who, with mighty strokes of their axes, hewed their way through the great forests, felling the kings of the wild. From the blush of dawn until the coppered crepuscle made aim unsure, you could hear the echoing chorus of steel on wood, broken anon by the crashing fall of a wounded monarch.

A life surely worth the living. Care-

free; and, though humble in its simplicity, yet flowing with a pride of physical prowess unknown to dwellers of the city.

A meagre line of villagers threaded slowly over the tree-arched street towards the throbbing church spire. Randon came to a stop in front of the gray wooden structure.

"Shall we go in?" he asked.

"Why, yes, if you care to," she replied, suppressing an impulse of dissent.

She was not of a devotional nature; and the symbols of creed and dogma were accepted by her with indifference, much the same as the dinner bell on her father's farm, the falling of the leaves in Autumn, or the patter of rain on the roof.

A few taper flames trembled on either side of the altar, like little tongues of fire, in the breeze from the open windows.

An old priest, in biretta and vestments, officiated, assisted by altar boys wearing surplice and cassock.

They left after the benediction and returned to Lamartinette by way of a wide

detour, reaching the Labelle homestead after dark. The night was beautiful, cool and clear and spangled with many stars. From the fields along the way rose an incessant chorus of song, where katydids and crickets chanted of their blissful hour. Frogs trilled exultantly on the banks of moon-silvered brooks; and from the boughs of friendly oaks owls croaked sagely to their brood. The witchery of night lay like a spell over the land. The earth throbbed with gladness.

Isabelle was strangely moved.

They parted at the end of the gravel path that led from the driveway to the house.

Randon promised to call again soon; and, in the twinkling of an eye, was gone.

Isabelle watched the car roll away into the darkness. Then she turned her steps towards the house.

As she mounted the steps of the veranda, Labelle's great bulk loomed black in the shadows. He had been dozing, he said. How late was it?

About ten o'clock, she told him.

"You must be careful, my girl. This is not the city. People talk. If this fellow Randon thinks well of you, it is strange he keeps you out so late. What does he want, anyhow?"

"Why, at this moment, Father, I do not know. But, if there is anything he does want, he will, in all probability, ask for it. And when that comes to pass, I shall consider it my duty to tell you, if I decide to grant his request. And now," she laughed, "I am going to bed. I know I shall sleep well, for I am tired. Good night, Father."

"Just the same, you will do well to guard your good name in Lamartinette, you hear that?"

Isabelle turned back out of the doorway to face him.

"Surely," she said, "no harm could be made of my staying out until ten o'clock with a young man."

"Maybe so. But, I am older than you. I know a few things about life, about

people. The time for you to use your head is now; not afterwards, when the tongues are wagging. If your mother had any sense, she would have told you this before tonight. Now, go to bed. I am tired, myself. But, I wanted to see you and tell you this."

He brushed past her without waiting for her to speak, and went off to his room.

Isabelle was perplexed by her father's speech. If people must talk, why, then, they would talk and nothing could stop them. But, she had certainly done nothing to cause them uneasiness. With a toss of her pretty head, she dismissed the matter from her mind, and went to bed. She was soon asleep.

CHAPTER FOUR.

Randon now became a frequent visitor at the home of Philippe Labelle.

After his warning to Isabelle, the father had lapsed into a mood of stubborn silence. Quite as suddenly as he had acquired it, he appeared to have lost interest in her good name before the little world of Lamartinette. He spoke rarely to Mrs. Labelle; and exchanged but the briefest courtesies with his daughter.

Ernestine was more favored.

A smile, a pleasant word now and then; and, if he happened to find her alone, a great brown hand laid gently upon her shoulder while his black, hungering eyes sought a responsive gleam in hers.

"Some day," he would say to himself, grimly prophetic, after such a moment

with her, "some day, if all went well. Ah, she was a woman worth while, that little Ernestine!"

The married life of the Labelles had long since gone awry.

Philippe had grown to manhood an unblemished product of his sires, coarse of speech, crafty in his dealings with men, vindictive to the point of treachery if need be.

He had seen in a union with Marie Duval an opportunity to acquire, in one stroke, the large and well stocked farm which the orphan girl had inherited from her parents.

Strangely enough, the gossips mused, the lonely maid had smiled upon his suit.

There came a day when the wedding bells rang out as gladly as ever they had pealed before.

For what recks a wedding bell of morrows?

From the village church, the blessing of the Curé still upon them, they drove out

to the farm—her farm; for the groom was thrice blessed with poverty.

Here they took up their abode, which soon became the tenement of discord.

A child was born. A daughter. Again they journeyed to the church, and named her Isabelle.

The gossips would have it that the little one must, by the nature of things, bring the young parents to a closer understanding.

But they were wrong. No human force, it seemed, could mate these two.

They ceased, by common accord, to live as man and wife.

Labelle sought and found elsewhere his "little pleasures."

His wife, a convent girl, discovered in the joys of motherhood a solace for her wounds.

A granite wall rose between them. They came and went as strangers.

There had been times, through the years, when, returning in his cups from the village, late in the night, he had mus-

tered the courage to venture across the lobby from his own room to that of his wife. Repeated knocks on the door had elicited no reply from within.

One night, however, having drunk more deeply than was his wont, he grew more bold, and, refusing further to accept her silence as a refusal, called her by name.

The gates of his promised land went wide and he beheld his wife in the doorway, pale and startled.

"What is it?" she asked.

"I have been thinking," he said, "that we should leave off this manner of living and be more like man and wife towards each other. What say you—Marie?"

And she did what he thought was a strange thing. She laughed outright in his face. It was a laugh that chilled him to the bone and stung his torpid senses to a realization of what he had done. And while he was still standing there, gaping stupidly for want of words, the door closed again and the key clicked harshly

in the lock. He went back to his room, sobered and ashamed. It was his last attempt at reconciliation. And this had been years ago.

They seldom quarreled.

They had long since receded from that stage of intimacy which would have permitted or engendered the violent outbreaks incidental in less frigid unions. What they had ever held towards each other of love or of passion was dead now, vanished and forgotten.

Tacitly it had been agreed that the mother was to have her way in the rearing of the little girl, while Philippe was to be dictator of the farm. The house was parceled off as a sort of neutral ground.

To the credit of Philippe Labelle it must be said that his stewardship had been fruitful of improvements and of profit.

Seemingly indefatigable, he labored early and late in the fields, in the barns, among the stock. He knew no hour of night or day while a task lay undone be-

fore him. He was vain of his great endurance and joyed in his lusty prowess. His were the finest barns and stables in the county, his the purest stock, his the most abundant yield of grain.

He loved the earth and toiled untiringly that she might blossom and bear fruit anew. And she rewarded him in profusion with her gifts, even as a mother does her favorite son.

CHAPTER FIVE.

The harvest moon smiled down on fields of plenty in Lamartinette.

Over the acres of Philippe Labelle rose a magic, tented city that rolled away to the verge, golden with promise.

The habitants sang lustily afield and toiled with willing brawn; for the earth had been bounteous with her gifts and they were glad with the knowledge of abundance.

Even Nazaire went about his work with something of a lighter mood; and Philomène, who was cooking for the harvesters at the home of Philippe, took on a semblance of civility towards the men.

Not that the gain of Philippe meant theirs in a like measure. But they hoped that it might reflect some degree of betterment in their condition.

Nazaire had finally succeeded, after many futile attempts, in obtaining a promise of better wages, provisional upon an increase in the yield of his brother's crops.

The frequent visits of David Randon to the Labelle homestead soon became a topic of interest in Lamartinette.

It was generally believed that the Randons of St. John's were well provided with the goods of the world. Indeed, the young David, now a graduate in medicine, was considered quite "worth while" by all who knew the chronology of the two neighboring towns.

The elder Randons had died some years ago, while David was still in the classics, leaving him and his sister, Julia, to share the estate.

Julia, a sweet-faced girl of twenty summers, had entered the sisterhood of the *Congrégation de Notre Dame* shortly after her graduation from one of the convents of that order, leaving David pretty much his own master.

Two old and trusted servants, Théophile Beaulieu and Octavie Monette, were left in charge of the Randon homestead by the family lawyer and executor, Eustache Girard, while the young Randons were at school in Montreal.

To-day, David found himself sole heir to the Randon estate—a start in life somewhat more pretentious than real, as Girard himself well knew.

It was known only to him that young Randon would inherit little beyond what he already possessed—a profession as a means of livelihood, a house to call his home and a few acres of land about the place.

Some day Girard would have a talk with the young man. A confidential, fatherly talk. It would be a painful tête-à-tête for both. But it would have to be. He wished now that he had had it over with long ago, when the son of his old friend was still a lad “en culottes.” Well, well, it was a nasty bit of work to have

staring one in the face. But, somehow, it always fell to the lot of lawyers or preachers to patch up the shortcomings of others. Was it not so? Of course it was, and, no doubt, would continue to be till the day of the last trumpet. Eh, Bon Dieu!

Isabelle had not overcome her dislike for the life of the farm. The unvarying, colorless routine of day succeeding day, the wordless, apathetic resignation of those about her to the yoke of toil, the encircling confines of their sphere of action in the world and the narrowing limitations that such a life must in time prescribe for mind and soul, filled her with an indefinable dread. There were times when she would have taken flight, had it not been for a girlish timidity, a natural fear of hidden responsibilities, which the outside world might hold in store for her. A dread of the unknown, such as men feel who walk in the dark.

She spent much of her spare time in reading books from her mother's room.

Together with Randon she rode over the long, shaded pikes, visiting strange scenes.

Sometimes her companion was Pierre, who spoke of the wild flowers and the trees and unveiled to her the mysteries of the forest.

She listened with child-like delight to the wonderful lore of the furry tribes and their feathered brothers of the trees.

In such moments she deplored the choice that Pierre had made, in her belief that in a world of action he might have become one of its great men.

As for Pierre, he never spoke of his hopes or ambitions, if such he had. Indeed, it seemed to Isabelle that he avoided, when possible, any mention of himself. He appeared greatly pleased to be with her and his strong, honest face grew sad and pensive at parting.

Pierre Thibeau had come to the home of Philippe Labelle when still quite young. Three years at the little country school-

house near the farm had been followed by a course of four years in the Marist College at Lamartinette, to which, later, he added two years in agriculture at L'Assomption.

The childhood of Pierre and Isabelle had run a happy, care-free course in the fields and woodland. The two children were inseparable. They might be seen together in the meadows, gathering wild flowers, along the banks of the clear, cool brook, speeding miniature flotillas, fashioned by their own little hands, on their way to the deep, swift waters of the majestic Richelieu; in the woods, at butter-nut time, and later, when the winds of Autumn shook the great spreading branches of the beech with mighty gusts, covering the ground with opening burrs.

Together they had braved the winter winds to build their hut of snow, without which no winter could be quite complete, and fashion a snow man at the gate, who would guard the entrance through the long, white night.

And when the sting of the north wind had given way to April's warm caress and the mountain chains of crystal white melted away and thundered off to sea, they still shared their childish joys.

For was not this the season when the sap flowed from the maples to make syrup for them and sugar forsooth?

And so it was that they journeyed off together—always together—to the sugar cabin of Philippe Labelle, where great brown cakes of maple sugar took form under their eager eyes and wonderful iron pots were kept boiling with the sap until it turned thick and golden in the glad April sun.

And there was old Jongleur, who was fond of little folk and moulded sugar hearts and stars for them and cooked fresh eggs from the farm and pork in a great panful of bubbling maple syrup, over a campfire stove.

Oh, they were golden days, swift-speeding days, running like powdered

sand through thoughtless, careless hands, burbling on to the greater stream of their life even as the reckless brook, that had hurried their child-made ships to the fretful waters of the Richelieu.

CHAPTER SIX.

The thrashers were gone. The mows and granaries were filled to overflowing.

As Labelle stood with arms folded across his chest, his feet planted squarely on the floor, surveying the fruits of his toil, a gleam of satisfaction played on his swarthy face.

There had never been such a yield. This year would long be remembered by the habitants. For the Bon Dieu had watched over their fields and their flocks and given them rains and sunshine in abundance, as he had not done before. And among those who prospered most at the hands of a kind providence was Philippe Labelle.

He turned from contemplation of the earth's gifts to the open doorway of the barn. The sun was now high above the

blue hills in the east. A grateful breeze wafted up from the green and dun slopes of the valley.

In the hollows of the leaves and grasses, the tears of the night glistened like a shower of pearls.

A plumed knight of the barnyard called his wives about him and stood by, well pleased with his prowess, while they shared the treasure trove of their lord.

As Labelle started towards the door, the bulky figure of Nazaire stepped heavily into the opening. He craned his short, thick neck to assure himself of his brother's presence; then entered.

"Salut," he said, moving over towards the other, his eyes on the ground, his brown, pudgy hands behind his back.

"Salut, Nazaire."

"A fine crop. eh, Philippe? What say you? Nom de Dieu! If this good fortune keeps up, you'll be moving to the city, running for parliament—who knows what!"

"Hush up!" growled Philippe. "You prate like a fool."

"Just the same, you have had a big crop. You will not deny it!"

"Well, they don't hang people for that. What of it?"

"Just this—where do I come in?"

"What do you mean?"

"Your promise of better wages—You have not forgotten? One year ago today we talked it over. At that time you said—"

"Ah, yes, to be sure—at that time. But you must know that things have changed vastly since then. I was just thinking, here by myself, how much better off I was with a smaller income—and less expense. Yes, sir, I was saying to myself as you stepped in: 'Philippe Labelle, you are not as well off as you were when you had less.' Besides, I am afraid I will have to hire another man. You see, Nazaire, we grow older as time runs on; and the years, as they go by, take toll of our youth and strength. You are not the man you used

to be; and I cannot consent to paying more and getting less."

"That is your answer, then?" croaked Nazaire, his flabby face going pasty white. "This is how my brother keeps his word!"

"As you will have it," said Philippe.

The two men stood for a space, irresolute, a deadly fire glinting in their eyes, their fists clenched, like savage beasts waiting to spring at each other's throat.

Then Philippe, with the sang froid that had carried him through many such scenes in his life, turned on his heel and strode out of the barn.

Nazaire, atremble with rage, watched the receding figure till the door of the kitchen had opened and closed again.

"Some day!" he exclaimed with a frightful oath, his hand raised to heaven. Then he, too, passed out of the barn.

There was fuel to be cut for the winter.

He shouldered an axe and started off towards the wood that skirted the farm.

CHAPTER SEVEN.

Summer waned, red and golden on the hill tops.

Day by day, the crisp, sere leaves fluttered over the earth, like wounded fledgelings. The lutes of the wind intoned the requiem of flower and song. The sun rose in a blanket of clinging mist. The night dews were cold and drenching. Vast, cloud-like flocks of feathered voyagers sailed by each day, on their way to the southland. The robins carolled their farewell song and winged away.

Swift, hurrying scuds of cloud raced, like black-draped chariots, across the cheerless sky. The leafless trees stretched their bare arms to heaven, in mute appeal. The rushing winds whipped and stung. Winter, white-robed, cold and pitiless, was at hand.

Isabelle was lonely.

She had hoped that time would adapt her to her surroundings, that the crudeness of the environment might take on something of charm to her eyes. She had wished many times that she might acquire the vision of life that had been given to Pierre, the satisfying philosophy that was her mother's. In these hopes she had been doomed to disappointment.

She knew by deep-rooted instinct that this was the cleaner life, the better part. But the calm serenity of the long days, the tomb-like stillness of the nights filled her, at times, with a sense of desolation that spurred her to flee, to be away from the crushing spell.

She and Randon had reached a stage of intimate camaraderie which gave her pleasure in their meetings. More than once she revealed her feelings to him. He appeared to sympathize, to understand.

Different natures, he told her, required different settings.

He himself had no thought of settling

down to practice in St. John's or Lamar-tinette. He must have a larger field of activity. Besides, it was no greater undertaking to struggle for success in a large city than in a hamlet.

One day, he spoke more clearly of his hopes. Girard had told him all. His fortune totaled something under three thousand dollars. A purchaser had been found for the homestead. He was preparing to leave St. John's. He was going to Montreal. Would she become his wife?

They were standing on the edge of the corn field, near the brook in which she had played with Pierre years ago.

Somehow she thought of him now—of Pierre the mild-mannered, the good.

Would he ever wed?

What sort of woman would he take for wife?

He was so silent about himself.

Randon was speaking.

She roused from her musing to hear him.

It would be but a short time—a bridge

to cross—and he would have a practice. He had enough to tide them over.

A great pumpkin, which she had not noticed until now, loomed, round and garish in the light of the rising moon.

She felt him reaching for her hand, under her cape. Then he drew her face around to his and gazed steadfastly into her eyes for what seemed a long while to her.

He had never kissed her.

“Will you be mine?” he said, very softly.

A feeling akin to sadness stole over her. She shuddered as from cold.

A little ship sailed by, child-made and crude. Then another; and another; a flotilla. And she and Pierre were waving them Godspeed as they took the current of the babbling stream.

Would Pierre ever marry?

“And what kind of a girl—”

“Isabelle!”

She turned back again to David. Her

face was pale in the moonlight. Her eyes stared like a frightened child's.

"Do you love me?" she asked.

"Yes, yes—with all my heart."

She rested her head upon his breast and smiled.

The round, white moon, the purling brook, the stilly, star-domed vast beheld their betrothal kiss.

CHAPTER EIGHT.

On the morrow Randon came over from St. John's to make his adieux and acquaint the parent Labelles with his engagement to their daughter.

The mother came into the parlor, her hands extended in welcome.

"I congratulate you, Doctor Randon," she smiled.

Isabelle had told her.

Oh, it would be so lonely with "her baby" gone. She was just beginning to see a bit of sunshine. And now, clouds again. What a constant rending life was! But, she braved smilingly through it and soon left the lovers alone in the room.

Presently Philippe came into the house. There was mud on his boots and he smelled strongly of the stable. Mrs. La-

belle told him briefly that Randon wished to see him in the parlor.

He passed out of the kitchen without making reply and into the room where the young people were waiting.

A protracted visit to the inn of the widow Duclos, accounted for the deep flush that reddened the tan of his face. He straightened perceptibly as his hand turned the knob of the door. He stood on the threshold with the air of an overlord.

"You wish to see me, Monsieur?" he enquired.

Randon came straight to the point.

"Yes," he said, "I am here to ask you for the hand of your daughter."

"She is willing? Isabelle is willing?"

"Yes—we are engaged—with your approval, of course."

"You are prepared to give her as good a home as she has been accustomed to?"

The farmer was enjoying the moment immensely. He had learned the true state of affairs in the Randon estate.

"I cannot say that," the young man replied. "As matters now stand, I have little beyond my profession and—a future. Isabelle knows my circumstances and is satisfied."

"Well, after all," the great man conceded, "it is for her to say. It is she who will have to live with you."

He cleared his throat, like a judge about to pronounce sentence.

"And as she makes her bed, so will she lie. You have my consent, both of you. And I hope you will make a success of your ménage."

Randon thanked him for his good wishes.

For a moment Labelle gazed from one to the other of the lovers, in silence. He felt impelled to speak, to say something worthy the occasion. But his thoughts clashed wretchedly and the words died unuttered upon his lips. He was visibly embarrassed.

He mumbled something about a sick horse requiring attention and left the

room, deeply confused. In the stable he came upon Pierre, who was pitching down hay for the stock.

"Well," said Labelle, "they're engaged to be married."

The young man straightened up from his work and gazed fixedly at the speaker.

"You mean—"

"Isabelle and Randon, of course. Who else?"

Pierre stood a long while, his strong, brown hands clasped over the fork handle, his dark eyes hazy in thought. At last he said:

"Randon is a lucky man—a very lucky man. I congratulate him."

"And how about Isabelle?" demanded the father. "Is she not to be congratulated as well?"

"That I don't know," Pierre replied, going back to his task.

CHAPTER NINE.

It was late that night when Randon took his leave of Isabelle. A crooning breeze played among the leaves of the maples. From the brook on the edge of the corn field rose a persistent chorus of song. A white disc of moon hung from the limb of a tree on the spur of a distant hill, like a silver lantern.

Isabelle stood on the veranda watching the car as it receded into the shadows. A sense of utter loneliness swept over her, now that he was gone. She went into the house and tip-toed her way to her room.

That night, arm in arm with David, she wandered over many miles of streets, meeting glad faces, viewing strange and wondrous scenes.

He was a great man and she his lady fair. The gay city smiled down upon

them. They were very happy. It seemed to her that she had slept but a few moments when Ernestine called her for breakfast. The reality of the new day closed in heavily upon her. He was gone. It would be very lonely without him. She wished that Ernestine had let her sleep. She crossed the room to the window and gazed out upon the day. Her eyes dwelt fondly upon the road below, which had led him to her so many times.

She turned to his photograph, in a silver frame on the dresser. Taking it in both her pretty hands, she gazed fixedly into the eyes of the likeness and pressed the picture to her lips in a long, fervid kiss. Then she dressed and went down to the dining-room, where her mother was waiting.

Isabelle was delighted with the prospect of dwelling in the metropolis. The beckoning mysteries of the city thrilled her young soul.

She longed for the day when she might go forth from her stifling surroundings

toward the open portals of her dream land. She would be happy then.

It had been agreed by her and David to wed in the spring. He would come to claim his bride and carry her off to their future abode.

Day by day the winds grew colder. The shortening days dragged by slowly under a leaden sky.

Letters came, at frequent intervals, from David, in which he told of his work as an interne at St. Malachi's. He had been assigned to ambulance work. He saw much misery about him. He had little time to himself. The life of an interne teemed with duties, which required his presence in the hospital both night and day.

The months that followed prescribed manifold activities for Isabelle. There was her trousseau to prepare. Letters to write. A share of the household duties, which she insisted must be performed by her. Mrs. Labelle appeared to be break-

ing. Her impaired condition required many little attentions.

Philippe now spent much of his time in the tap-room of the widow Duclos. He usually came home loud and quarrelsome. He drew many checks on the village bank, of late. In his sober hours he was morose and, for the most part, silent.

One day, in the early part of November the sun rose in a blur of blackish cloud. A piercing wind whipped the crisp, rattling leaves into little mounds along the highway and in the open spaces.

Towards noon, a stinging, powdery snow began to fall.

Soon, the faded surface of the earth was mantled with a thick covering of white. As the day wore on, the wind increased in fury, beating the snow into an endless chain of drifts. Towards night the sky cleared. The roar of the winter wind subsided to a death-room whisper among the stark, trembling trees. The moon rose over a frozen, crystal waste.

CHAPTER TEN.

Through the long, white months that followed, there was comparatively little for the men to do about the farm.

Each day the stock were fed, the cows milked, the stalls and ducts cleaned and new beds of straw laid for the patient beasts.

If the day was fine, they were turned out for a few hours in the clear, crisp air.

Labelle had taken, of late, to spending much of his time in the village, leaving the work, for the most part, to Pierre and Nazaire.

These two, though by no means unfriendly, held little communion together. They came and went their separate ways, with a nod of the head, a "bon jour," or an "au revoir."

Since the announcement of Isabelle's

engagement Pierre had turned sombre and pensive. He spent much time in his room, reading. To Isabelle he was apparently the same as ever, kindly, solicitous and thoughtful.

When the sky was clear and the sun unfurled his gray blankets of cloud to gaze about over the earth, Pierre would propose a sleigh ride in the country.

Such was always a welcome event to Isabelle, who delighted in the throbbing music of the bells, in the fleeing panorama of pine-clad hills, in the shimmering whiteness of the rolling country.

To her eyes Pierre had never changed. He was, today, the same faith-abiding, rugged child of the soil that had been her barefoot hero years ago.

She oftentimes marvelled at the gap that had opened, by slow degrees, between them.

She wondered if he, too, had sensed the widening of the little circle of their life and if he saw the whirl in the troubled waters between them. She could not

know, from his manner towards her, what poignant hungering had gnawed his heart. Nor could she tell that her going forth, another's wife, must mean the crumbling of his fondest hopes. One day, when they were children in the meadows, there had been a wedding.

Pierre was the happy groom; Isabelle the smiling bride.

Other little ones, from the neighboring farms, were the curé, the best man, bridesmaids and guests.

Mamman Labelle served the wedding feast in a shady corner of the orchard. There was a frosted cake; and lemonade; and apples; and plums. It was a great event; and was not soon forgotten.

As the years went by, the golden childhood hour of make-believe became a cherished memory in the heart of Pierre, a sacred symbol of his future happiness. Through the seven years of her absence from the homestead he waited the day of her final coming with the smiling patience of hope. It had not dawned upon him

that time is the hand-servant of oblivion, that childhood love is but a tender flower and has not long to live.

He had noted, with growing apprehension, the changing moods of her letters which became more and more infrequent as time went by.

A disconcerting queenliness of bearing, which came to her with adolescence, stayed the glad welcome on his lips and chilled his heart with doubt upon her return to Lamartinette.

Somewhere along the way of the years she had outgrown her little self of the meadows.

But Pierre, steadfast and staunch, remained a watchful worshipper, albeit the lovely tenant of his shrine had long since departed.

One day, in mid-winter, the sun shone bright over the hills, a few faithful sparrows twittered hopefully in the leafless trees and the snow turned soft and pliant to the foot.

Towards noon, Pierre came in from the

barns, his work done for the day. Nazaire would do the evening chores. Pierre had business at the Point, a little town on the edge of Lake Champlain, some eighteen miles away. The roads were in perfect condition. Would Isabelle care for the drive?

Indeed, she would be delighted to go.

And so, an hour later, they had left Lamartinette behind them and were well out in the open country.

Far as the eye could see, rolled an endless, dazzling vista of crystal white. The sleigh bells shrilled their silvery voices over the silent waste. Along the highway, farm houses rose, at long intervals, and sank again below the verge, peaceful sentinels of thrift and fireside happiness. Charlemagne, a splendid bay that Pierre had owned from birth, was in his finest fettle. His proud head high in air, his long, graceful body swinging to the rhythm of the bells, it was his holiday as much as theirs who rode behind.

Here and there a rabbit started off

across the snow, zigzagged a bit and, stopping suddenly, sat upon its haunches to crane and listen.

They reached the Point a little after three. The wind was rising now. A cold, raw wind out of the northeast. The sky was clouding over rapidly. The sun had disappeared behind a rising scud.

Pierre slung a blanket over Charlemagne and tethered him beneath the shelter of a shed.

Then, together with Isabelle, he went about the business of his journey.

An hour later, when they drove out onto the road that led to Lamartinette, a heavy snow was falling, driven by a piercing wind. It was growing dark.

As they passed the last outpost of the town, a large white structure overlooking the lake, Pierre gazed into the girl's eyes and read the question there.

"Charlemagne can do it," he replied.

She was about to speak, to assure him that she was not afraid. But the roar and

rush of the wind stopped the words on her lips.

Leaving the reins to the horse, Pierre took the great fur robe from the back of the sleigh and wrapped it securely around his companion. Then he covered her feet with the blanket and drew the front robe about them both.

They were now in the open country. The wind had a knife-like edge. The cold stung his fingers keenly. He slipped the reins over his head and buried his hands in the thick folds of the robe. Charlemagne had caught the challenge of the storm. He knew the road and his heart was brave. Too, he understood full well the task. He would not be found wanting. With the speed of a racer he plunged into the whirling maze. No tug of the reins was needed. No word of command. He had never known the smart of a whip, the sting of an unkind word.

The wind was now blowing straight from the north. A blinding onrush of snow beat into their faces, shutting out

all view. Darkness came on apace. It fell with the swiftness of a curtain. From rolling drifts the gallant horse fought on into rising billows of soft, sand-like snow. Unerringly he felt his way through the raging blizzard. Slowly, grudgingly he tired, as bank after bank rose higher in the endless road. He had weakened to a labored walk and was barely moving along over an interminable succession of snow hills.

Presently the sleigh turned out, as it seemed, with a great effort. The two travelers felt themselves lifted slowly to the crest of a mountainous drift; then lowered to the other side. The dashboard struck hard against some object, invisible in the storm, and they came to a stop. Charlemagne neighed loudly. Pierre alighted and made his way stiffly forward, his outstretched hands groping in the darkness. The snow was above his knees. He had not far to go. As he felt about him, his hand came upon what he knew to be the corner of a log structure.

"The Mourette cabin!" he shouted joyfully to Isabelle.

But the girl did not hear him, so loud was the din of the storm.

With much effort he plodded on, feeling his way, until his hands were on the bobbin of the door. With the eagerness of despair he pressed down. The latch responded readily. The door went wide, flung by the shrieking wind. He staggered in and closed the door. From an inner pocket he brought forth matches and made a light.

An oil hanging-lamp was suspended from a crossbeam. He touched the match flame to the charred circle of wick and was deeply grateful for the mellow light which it poured softly over the tenantless room.

This done, he faced the storm again. The swirl of the wind was strangling.

With awful fury it flung him back into the room as it might a leaf.

Three times he renewed the attempt, without success.

Again he went forth, this time bending low; and with a rush.

But the light in the little casement had flashed its dim message to Isabelle; and she had ventured the crossing.

As Pierre leaped across the threshold into the maw of the storm, she caught the gleam through the opening doorway and felt him sink into the snow beside her.

They struggled through the opening and shut the door.

"It's the Mourette cabin," said Pierre, when he had recovered his breath.

Isabelle nodded understanding.

She was spent from the ordeal and made no effort at speech.

There was but one room in the cabin, a square, spacious apartment, built on the scheme of a hunter's lodge.

Bear skins lay about over the floor.

A staunch, unpolished oak table took up the center of the room. Some legal volumes lay upon it.

There was a great brick fireplace in the

wall; and, beside it, an imposing pile of maple logs.

There were numerous books on shelves.

A wooden, box-like couch had been built in a corner of the room, to serve the dual purpose of chest and bed.

The blankets on the couch were disturbed, as though someone who had been sleeping might have been rudely awakened and called away.

A little door opened into a closet which had been used as a pantry.

Pierre set about to build a fire.

The draught roared up the great brick chimney.

The log of seasoned maple crackled and flamed, dispensing warmth and radiance.

Pierre drew a chair to the fireplace for the girl and announced his intention of going to the rescue of Charlemagne.

"What can you do for the poor fellow?" she asked.

"I don't know," he replied. "I'm thinking it will be largely a matter of what he can do for himself. But I have to release

him, to free him from the sleigh. As it is, he is held fast and cannot move. There is a lean-to, a shelter in the rear of the cabin. Charlemagne knows about it. That is why he turned off the road and fought his way here. You see, he and I have been here many times in the past. I knew Judge Mourette very well. He used to sit there, by the table, and smoke; and this was my seat—by the window.”

From a drawer in the table, he brought forth a large, horn-handled hunting knife. He opened it and tested the edge against his thumb. Then, the steel blade flashing in his hand, he crossed over to the door and a moment later was gone.

An hour passed before he returned. It was a long time before he could speak. He said:

“I got there just in time. I ripped off the harness and he made straight for the lean-to, as I expected he would. There is hay in the feed rack. It was getting back here that took so long. I thought I would never make it.”



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He went into the pantry and brought out tea, biscuits and canned salmon. He melted snow, with which to brew the tea. They soon had a tempting meal. They ate heartily.

It was now late.

"You will sleep there," said Pierre, pointing to the lounge.

"And you?" she rejoined.

"Oh, I will rest to-morrow. To-night, I must watch the fire. You see, there is danger in the flying sparks. And we can't let the fire die out."

So, she lay down on the couch and was soon asleep. And through the long hours of the night Pierre stood watch over the flaming log without ever a thought to the fires that smouldered in his heart.

Daybreak bellowed in upon them bleak and gray.

It was late when Isabelle awoke.

Pierre sat beside her, his chin upon his breast, his hands hanging limp.

The fireplace glowed red and warm with burning coals.

For a long while she lay upon the couch, her mind adrift.

The wind shrieked without. The swirl of the storm shut out the perspective.

She gazed upon the peaceful face before her and pondered the strange mettle of the sleeper. Certainly all men were not like him. If only he had broadened out from his narrow circle. If he had taken the eaglet's flight. How far might he not have gone? He might have been a leader of men; one of the great. How could he ever hope to attain, if he himself felt no spur to achievement? If only he had broken free of his fetters and chosen a wider range of life. As it was, his lot would be the plough, a wife, children and the grave. The glory which might be his, the fame he might win, that would live on the lips of future generations, was gone the way of the fire-fly, glimmering into darkness.

Pierre stirred in his seat and his eyes opened wide and rested upon her.

"Bon jour!" he laughed. "You have rested well?"

A soft tinge of color suffused her cheeks.

She threw aside the blankets and sat up on the edge of the bunk.

"Yes, I slept soundly," she said, averting her gaze to the window.

Her wealth of golden hair tumbled in shimmering waves over her shoulders. Her sleep-laden eyes rested abstractedly on the dreary scene without. She was perplexed by their situation. But, an innate delicacy which was hers precluded confidences to her companion. Not from any motive born of prudery. But from a higher sense of kindness, a shrinking unwillingness to offend or wound the sensibilities of others.

Pierre noted her mood. He said no more; but busied himself with the fire and the melting of snow for their morning ablutions and the breakfast tea.

He discovered a crock of salt pork in the pantry.

Isabelle fried slices of the meat in an iron skillet, while Pierre brewed the tea and made ready the table.

A plentiful supply of crackers was left.

They ate with gusto; and after breakfast Pierre filled one of the judge's pipes with tobacco from a stone jar and smoked.

After a while he told her the story of Judge Mourette and how the cabin came to be built.

Mourette had taken for wife a young habitant girl from St. Grégoire, when he was still in his twenties. The Mourettes were moneyed folk. So, the judge, then a fledgeling lawyer, took his bride to the present homestead of the family, an imposing mansion on the outskirts of Lamartinette. Within a few years he became the father of three daughters. He had risen rapidly in his profession and was apparently a man to be envied, when scandal descended upon his roof. From the day, many years ago, when Mourette returned home unexpectedly and confronted the mother of his children with

her guilt, he maintained a stony silence in his house.

He came and went as a stranger, never speaking.

It was shortly after the discovery of his wife's unfaithfulness that Mourette built the cabin they were now in.

Standing on the edge of a maple forest owned by him, the place served as a retreat from the world during the holidays and court vacations.

Here he surrounded himself with his beloved books, his favorite pipes.

In the course of time he was elevated to the bench.

His hair and sweeping beard turned snowy white.

He walked erect, proud and thoughtful, through the streets, along the country roads, always alone. The children loved him.

His daughters grew to womanhood. They were fair to look upon. But none had wed.

The old judge had shown a kindly in-

terest in Pierre who, as a youth, had made frequent visits to the cabin.

It had been a favorite pastime of the growing boy to ride in the saddle over the countryside.

Thus he had come to the cabin and thus he had known the judge.

"I never heard the story before," said Isabelle.

"It seems they all have their tragedies. Who would have thought—"

"When he died some months ago," Pierre went on, "no will was found, so little did he seem to care."

"I knew him," said Isabelle. "He would pat me on the head as I passed him on the street. He always carried a cane. A lovable character."

She turned to the window, and back to Pierre.

"What shall we do?" she asked.

"I can't say," he rejoined, and fell to thinking.

"There were snowshoes here," he said presently: "Several pairs of them."

"Oh, in that event," she exclaimed, "we could go. But," she added, by way of afterthought, "what of Charlemagne?"

"We haven't found the snowshoes yet," he smiled.

Towards noon the wind abated.

Soon the sky cleared and the sun broke forth on the hill tops.

"The storm is over," said the girl.

Pierre had swung himself aloft, onto the crossbeams, where boards had been laid as a flooring for the storage of sundry articles belonging to the late owner.

"Here they are," he cried presently. "Snowshoes and moccasins!"

"Dieu merci!" she exclaimed. "We can be home tonight."

In the chest they found a supply of thick woolen stockings, such as are used by the habitants in wintry weather. The moccasins and snowshoes were in good condition.

They were soon ready for the homeward tramp.

In the lean-to Pierre found Charle-

magne, alert and anxious to depart. He required no urging; but followed his master readily into the open. He could, thought Pierre, make his way, alone and unhampered, back to Lamartunette. The distance was, perhaps, five miles.

Dusk had settled over the silent waste when the two travelers turned off the snowbound highway and dragged their weary limbs to a halt in the doorway of the homestead.

Mrs. Labelle was overjoyed to see the returning "children," as she still called them. She laid meat and listened, with wondering eyes, to her daughter's recital of their experience. Isabelle decided to wait until she was alone with her mother to tell of passing the night in the cabin.

Philippe had gone to Lamartunette shortly after their departure for the Point; and had not yet returned.

Ernestine sat by the fire, a book in her lap, and listened attentively to the conversation.

Nazaire came in to warm himself before leaving.

The chores were done and Charlemagne, who had reached home ahead of them, was none the worse for the exposure. Where had they spent the night?

At a house along the way, Isabelle hastened to reply. They were not half-way when the storm had made it impossible to proceed further.

"I see," said Nazaire, lighting his pipe.

He pulled down his "tuque" over his ears and jerked the red sash snug about his waist.

His bulbous eyes swept furtively over the little group as he said:

"I was thinking it might be a run-away match."

Ernestine glanced quickly from Pierre to Isabelle, who remained silent.

"It would be a shame," persisted Nazaire, enjoying his own wit, "to cheat Monsieur le docteur of his bride."

He leered evilly as he spoke. But his

words went unheeded. He reddened and concluded sheepishly:

“Eh bien, I must be off. I will be over early in the morning. Bon soir.”

“Bon soir,” said Pierre, more in a spirit of thankfulness than of brotherly love.

CHAPTER ELEVEN.

The women were now at work on the trousseau.

Philomène came over in the morning, after seeing to the duties of her ménage, and remained until well along in the day, when she went home to prepare supper for Nazaire.

She was a tall, red-haired, angular woman with small, squinting eyes and straight, thin-lipped mouth.

She knew the chronology of Lamartinettes better than did the Curé himself, who had been the shepherd of the flock for more than forty years.

She reveled in the gossip of the village. She journeyed from house to house, sewing by the day, her ears ever alert, her eyes on the *qui vive*, her tongue eagerly

dispensing to the curious the latest news, the most recent scandal.

It was in the person of Philomène that her worthy lord received the stimulus of his ambition for a better living wage. She never grew weary of her denunciation of Philippe.

On the contrary, she made it the sauce of their meagre meals, the sing-song, never-ending refrain of their little lives.

She would return, weary and bitter, from her day's labor in the houses of plenty and cook the coarse fare for their evening meal.

While Nazaire, his egg-like head bent low over the plate, ate his salted pork and potatoes, and sucked cautious draughts of hot tea, Philomène regaled him with the newest morsel of gossip from the village.

The wretched squalor of their home was never forgotten; the seeming hopelessness of their advancing life.

By direct assault or by careful allusion she would drive home her points, with gathering force, until the torpid brain of

Nazaire was whipped into a blind, unreasoning rage.

"Never mind!" he would exclaim, in a thick, guttural voice. "It shall not always be so. Some day, he will pay me—the good-for-nothing!"

"But, when?" she would nag on.

"When the time comes to pay, he will pay. I am not asleep, as he thinks. My fine brother will talk to me. There will come a day when he cannot put me off. I am watching. I am no fool of his. I will open his eyes, one of these fine days."

"But, how are you going to do it?" Philomène would persist.

"How? I don't know how. If I knew, I would not be sitting here, up to my nose in debt. But, just the same, it will come. Wait and see. Wait and see, I tell you!"

It was upon her return from the home of Philippe Labelle that she would wax eloquent in her attacks. She played upon the envy of Nazaire with cunning art, never failing to accomplish her end.

"If your brother Philippe," she would

begin, "was the proper sort,—" or: "now, if Philippe had the heart of a stone—" and again: "of course there are brothers and brothers—"

"To be sure," she would concede, "his goods are his own; and we have no right to share them. But, why does he refuse to pay for honest toil? Why does he turn a deaf ear to common justice? Where could he find a man to take your place? Does he suppose we will endure it forever?"

"Listen to me, *bonne femme*," Nazaire would confide for the hundredth time, "you know why I have chosen to remain, not to go with Duquette, who has been wanting me? Because, so long as I am here I have a hold on Philippe. If I should leave, I would be less than a stranger. It would not be wise for me to make a change—until I settle my account with him."

At this he would wink an eye sagely and stare across the table at his wife, who

sought in his words some hidden promise of better days.

Thus did they barter along, bare of the world's gifts, hoping for the morrows as they came and went, their hands outstretched for the crumbs of pity.

Pierre and Isabelle spent the long winter evenings before the fireplace.

He would read aloud from a book, while Isabelle and her mother added a touch here or there to some item of the trousseau. The trousseau, that was growing more wonderful each day.

Then, laying aside the book and the garments of the bride to be, they would watch the fitful saraband of the flames.

And when the hour was late and a great stillness lay over the moon-bathed snows, they rose and went their separate ways.

Philippe Labelle had undergone a marked change of late. Since the homecoming of Isabelle, he had spent most of his leisure time in the village.

"La veuve Duclos" held open house for

all who had money and the inclination to spend it. She was impartial with her favors; but leaned to the best filled purse, the most liberal hand. She was young and buxom, with raven hair, red lips and black, flashing eyes.

She stood in the bad graces of the Curé who had more than once condemned her for leading astray otherwise good husbands and fathers of the parish.

Many were the courtiers who paid her homage. And not the least among them was Philippe Labelle.

Wild scenes were not uncommon at the little inn. There were games of chance; and bloody encounters; lewd songs; and dancing; and a loud display of vulgar wit. Loose women of the village frequented the place. Young men went there to drink and make red love. La veuve Duclos watched the piastres pouring in; and smiled. This was her chosen life. She was a success. She was happy. The Curé? Let him rant! Was he not, himself, begging alms? Was he not in busi-

ness too? Parbleu! Who could manage to live without money? And if the men, her patrons, were satisfied, what had the Curé to say about it?

So, Philippe, who found no pleasure in his house, sought it elsewhere, never questioning the price.

Night after night, he came home, long after the others had retired, and climbed the stairs unsteadily to his room.

Then, Pierre, who had been reading, would steal noiselessly out of the house and make his way to the barns, where he ministered to the neglected horse of the returning master.

He had given more thought to his vocation since he came to realize that Isabelle was not for him. His plans had gone awry. He would leave the farm. He had a great desire to flee his memories. He had turned the matter in his mind many times; always to the same conclusion: She had plighted her troth to another. He would not seek to have her break it.

He dreaded the approaching day when

she would go forth; the day that would mean so much of happiness to her.

But he did not find it in his heart to blame her.

For, she had not known the hopes that had been his.

He had not told her of his love.

The fault was his own.

But, oh, the heartache of renunciation!
The wild, unhealing loneliness that must be his through the years!

Slowly the winter passed.

In the wanton April winds the snow hills melted away, swelling brook and creek into roaring rivers. The dull dun of the fields turned a tender green. Gold flowers spangled the earth. Returning songsters carolled of bliss and love; and built their little houses in the budding trees. Spring in garlands of laughing bloom came on the wings of May.

CHAPTER TWELVE.

She stood before the ancient pier-glass and gazed upon a lovely bride.

The snowy folds of her wedding gown fell about the exquisite mould of her form with the symmetry of Grecian grace. The rise and fall of the rounded bosom, the coral tint of her cheeks told plainly that an hour was nigh of passing moment in her young life.

On her brow was a wreath of orange blossoms; and in her hand she held a bouquet of lilies-of-the-valley, symbolic of herself in the mystic purity of maidenhood.

All about her were cherished memories of her childhood. They were rushing in upon her now, pleading, caressing, tumultuous.

She was leaving all behind. Forsaking

these loved voices of the past. Abandoning the true for the untried.

Would she find a new, a greater happiness? What would it all come to mean in the end?

Through the open window the warm, scented breath of June wafted into the room, stirring the white mull curtains lazily. From a field nearby came the song of the whetstone on the scythe. Swallows twittered in the eaves above the windows. A distant cow-bell tinkled softly on the still air.

She was alone. Why had her mother gone? She felt, of a sudden, very lonely—deserted. A great wave of emotion rose about her, whelming her, crushing her down. She felt the tears damming her eyes and sought hard to stay them. There were footsteps in the hall without. She turned to the open doorway.

Pierre was standing on the threshold, his strong face alight with a strange fire.

She smiled bravely at the friend of her childhood.

"Come in, Pierre," she said.

He was dressed in a suit of black, which accentuated the pallor of his face.

"I have come to make my adieux, Isabelle," he began.

His hand went out to her, as he spoke.

She felt it grasp her own and suddenly her throat pained and her eyes swam.

"I, too, am going away," he went on, after a pause. "I am going to become a Marist."

"A Brother!"

"Yes."

For a while they gazed at each other in silence.

He smiled a little and released her hand.

"I don't understand," she said finally, with an effort at composure.

She was beginning to fear that she understood too well.

And now, with the swift impulse of youth, she spoke again.

"Then—you cared!" she said in a whisper. "You—really—cared!"

He made no reply. But she read the answer in his eyes.

"I never knew," she spoke, more to herself than to him. Then:

"You never led me to think—"

"I fear I took too much for granted. I imagined we were still the boy and girl of other days.

There was a tell-tale moistness in his eyes as he added:

"I thought you were still my golden poppy. You remember?"

"Oh, yes; as if it were but yesterday. Scarlet poppies were nodding everywhere in the wheat field. Off by itself was a great yellow flower, seemingly deserted. You plucked it and, saying it looked like me, called it a golden poppy; and carried it back to the house."

"I still have it, in one of my books. I shall always keep it."

From below came the sounds of laughter, where the guests were gathering for

the journey to the church. The voice of Philippe rang loud above the others.

On the highway, a lout shouted commands to a yoke of oxen. A crow cawed brazenly in a cornfield, nearby. Someone was mounting the stairs. Mamman Labelle, no doubt.

The woman paled perceptibly.

She extended her hand to him.

"Good-bye, Pierre."

"Adieu, Isabelle."

Their hands were still clasped when Mrs. Labelle entered the room.

"They are waiting, mes enfants," said the mother. "Doctor Randon seems a bit upset. The journey, I presume. Are you quite ready, dear child?"

"Yes, Mamman."

She stepped to the door, and, turning back, cast a long, sweeping glance over the room.

Then she was gone.

Randon was waiting at the foot of the long stairway, the guests gathered about him. His face was drawn and pale. He

wore a Prince Albert suit with a boutonnière of white geranium.

His face relaxed into a smile as Isabelle came down the stairs to meet him. He took her arm and led her out into the June day, down the gravel pathway to a black line of cars that were waiting.

On the broad parvis of the church, villagers stood in groups, awaiting the arrival of the bridal party.

The wedding of Isabelle was an event. It was a lucky groom who took to his bed so beautiful a bride. And then, Philippe Labelle, the father, was a man of means—and a shrewd one at that. *Sacré!* the young couple would not have to want for the necessities, to say the least. And, besides, the young man had a profession. He was a doctor. *Un homme instruit. Parbleu!* Some people were born with a silver spoon.

Children lined the long boardwalk that lay between the street and the church. The main door of the edifice stood open. The fluttering flames of wax tapers might

be seen about a hollow square, in which had reposed, but a few moments ago, the remains of a departed soul. The sacristan was about to remove the black wooden candelabra and the low, flat repository on which had rested the faithful servant on his way to the grave.

The man went about his work in thorough fashion, with no show of emotion; without a tear of sorrow for the dead, a smile of gladness for the living.

The same hand that had sprinkled hyasope upon the dead would soon unite the living in bonds of love.

There was a shifting of feet in the crowd when the cars came to a stop before the church.

As the cortège passed slowly up the boardwalk, silence fell over the craning throng.

Isabelle was beautiful. She was smiling happily. Randon walked beside her. There was a touch of hauteur in the poise of his head. He appeared quite at ease.

As the couple passed into the edifice,

the villagers surged through the side doors, taking seats.

The Curé St. Georges, assisted by two acolytes, stood waiting at the communion rail. The reading of the ritual consumed but a few moments. And now it was over.

The Curé was smiling.

A subdued mingling of voices came from the pews near the railing, which the children, in their eagerness to see the bride, had invaded.

Outside, in the glad, warm air of June, Isabelle looked up into her husband's face and smiled

"What a day for a wedding!" she said.

A great feast was laid when they reached home. There were stuffed turkeys; and suckling pigs; and platters of fried chicken and squab. And there were potpies, such as only the habitants can bake; and deep dishes of vegetables; and wonderful sauces. There were pies; and puddings; and French pastries; and ices; and fruits from Montreal. Red wine

gurgled merrily out of old bottles. And portly jugs of ale stood about on the tables, like jolly, fat monks, brimming with bonhomie. There were great armfuls of flowers from the garden, gathered by Mamman Labelle and arranged by her loving hands. And, over the voices, the sounds of harp and violin. There was a dance. And much merrymaking far into the night.

But there were three who had taken their departure early in the evening.

Randon and his bride were passengers on an eastbound train.

Pierre had closed the gates of the world behind him.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN.

"You see," said Philomène to Nazaire, over their soup, the day after the wedding, "your brother Philippe had plenty of money to squander on good wines and fine things to eat. Even the music was there. And la Boudreau is telling everyone who will lend an ear that he spent no less than two hundred dollars last night toasting the village at la veuve Duclos'. Plenty of money, yes. But, mark me, my man, the pighead is in a fair way to land in the ditch!"

Nazaire glanced up from his soup and their eyes met.

"I have been thinking the same, myself," he said. "He is going a devilish gait. He can't keep it up."

"And have you also thought how long it took you and how hard you had to toil

so that he could have that two hundred dollars to toss over the bar and play the grand monsieur?"

"Well said, bonne femme. Sacré, you have spoken the truth! What then? Go on!"

"That's it—what then? I can't say. But, one thing is sure, we must use our heads. Not sit here, twirling our thumbs, until it is too late. Do you know what I thought of doing?"

"No—What?"

"Well, maybe it would do no good. But, just the same, I have almost decided to see the Curé and lay the case before him. He is the shepherd of the flock. He preaches sermons telling us to be good, to be charitable, to give to the Church, to love the poor. And I thought I would ask him for his opinion of a rich man who denied his poor brother a decent wage. Maybe the Curé would not tolerate such injustice. He might take the matter in hand and bring the great man to time."

"Eh, Bon Dieu!" exclaimed Nazaire,

striking the table with his fist, "it is the wisdom of books you speak. It is marvellous to hear you. When is this to be—to-morrow—to-day? Tell me!"

Philomène drew a corner of her blue gingham apron across her thin, straight line of mouth and, picking up a tin tea spoon, played a harsh tattoo on the bare wood of the table.

Finally she spoke.

"To-morrow," she announced with cool finality.

"To-morrow?"

"Yes."

"You will go to the parish house?"

"No. Better still, the Curé will come here. He will see how we are forced to live through the meanness of the great Philippe Labelle.

"But," rejoined Nazaire, "the Curé does not make such calls. Now, if you were sick—"

"That is it: I will be sick. To-morrow he is to take the last sacrament to old Goyette. He will pass by the house.

When he is driving back from the sick call, I will be at the window and call him. The rest will be easy. I had a fainting spell. I was alone and afraid. I had seen him go by the house and knew he would be back. So, I waited at the window. Then, I will tell him what I want him to know."

"You astonish me!" gasped Nazaire.

Then, the afterthought:

"I am almost afraid of you. I believe you could send a man to the gallows if you once set out to do it."

He stared down stupidly at his pea soup, saying no more.

Presently, he dropped his spoon into the bowl and rose from the table.

"Where are you going?" asked Philomène.

"To the fields," he replied.

In the doorway he turned his face to her.

She had gone back to her soup.

"And if your plan falls through, if the Curé should refuse to act, what then?"

Her round little eyes glinted fire as she snapped:

"Are you not old enough to use your wits? If my plan goes wrong, can you not find one that will do? He is your brother; not mine. Remember that!"

On the morrow, she proceeded to the execution of her scheme, by removing to the attic such articles as might serve to modify, in the mind of the Curé, her representations of abject poverty. This done, she put the house in order for the day and sat down by the window to wait.

As the little clock on the shelf ticked off the succeeding minutes, she grew to a high state of suspense.

She would rise and peer, this way and that, down the long country road, for some sign of the expected vehicle.

Then, chagrined with each disappointment, she would pace the rude plank floor, back and forth, like one imprisoned in a cell.

The minutes dragged into hours.

She peeled the potatoes and put on the soup for Nazaire's dinner.

Then, back to the window again; and to her pacing, back and forth, back and forth.

Sometimes, she would stoop to straighten the corner of a strip of rag-carpet at her feet. Sometimes, a vivid chromo on the wall received a hurried, troubled touch.

The fire sputtered and smoked. She could not bring the water to boil. Would the Curé never come!

She piled more wood onto the smoldering fire and fetched a can of petroleum from the closet under the attic stairs. She poured the oily liquid on the green fire wood. As the stream fell into the stove, she heard the little bell announcing the approach of the Viaticum.

The Curé at last!

A great burst of fire belched up to the raftered ceiling, licking her face and singeing her hair.

The heat of the flames shut off her breath.

She staggered to the open window and fell face downward over the sill.

When she opened her eyes again, she was lying on the bed, the Curé beside her, bathing her face with oil.

Bradeau, the sacristan, his mouth agape, stood by, holding in his hand the little bell that told the habitants the Bon Dieu was passing.

Soon, Nazaire lumbered in from the fields.

"Seigneur!" he exclaimed, "our lot was not bad enough without this."

"Hush, my son," spoke the Curé. "You must not have such talk. The Bon Dieu tries those he loves best."

"Then, he must love us best of all," groaned Philomene.

"You are not badly burned," rejoined the priest. "The oil will draw the fire from the burn. In a few hours' time you will be as well as ever. You will not even require a doctor: another evidence,

mes enfants, that He watches over all. Stay with your wife, Nazaire. I shall stop on my way back from the Goyettes."

When he returned, an hour later, he came into the house alone.

It was some time, before he departed, albeit he was noted for the brevity of his visits.

As he stepped stiffly into the carriage and drove off, the lean, furrowed face was set hard and grim. He would see Philippe I abelle!

CHAPTER FOURTEEN.

The Curé decided to await the opportunity of a chance meeting with Philippe.

He reasoned that in this manner his position would be made to appear less hostile; his interference more casual.

He was no mean diplomat.

And, though quite capable of swinging the cudgel of his authority over his flock, he was averse to so doing when a milder course of action would accomplish his end.

One afternoon, a few days later, he was reading his breviary in the parish house garden, when Philippe came strutting by. Labelle was the first to speak, which fell in with the plans of the Abbé.

"Bon jour, Monsieur le Curé," greeted Philippe.

"Bon jour, Monsieur Labelle."

"It is fine weather we are having, n'est-ce pas?"

"Yes. It will mean fine crops for the habitants."

"Well," said Philippe, "if the others are in the same fix as myself, they will need the fine crops, to carry them over."

The Abbé's eyes went wide.

"I don't understand you," he rejoined. "We have every evidence of the prosperity of the habitants—that is, of those who own farms. True, I cannot say as much for the farm hands."

Already they were on the terrain of the struggle. Philippe knew at once that the shaft had been meant for him. But the Curé gave him no time to parry. He added quickly:

"I was called into the home of your brother Nazaire, some days ago. The wife had had an accident. I happened along in time to lend assistance. I was shocked at the poverty of the place. It is a disgrace to the parish; to me, the Curé, and, above all, to one of its most well-to-do

parishioners, yourself, Monsieur Labelle. I daresay your horses get more out of life than do those wretched people, who eat out of your hands. Ordinarily, I do not meddle in such matters; but, in a way, you suggested the subject yourself."

Philippe turned a deep red. He had been taken unawares. Attacked from ambush, as it were. He was at a loss for words. His thoughts clashed in panic. He wished to be away, to end the encounter. But, with good grace. It must be done with good grace. He stammered:

"I never go to my brother's house. I don't know how they conduct their ménage. But, rest assured I shall look into it. If they are in want, something must be done, of course. I shall see. I shall see. I thank you for speaking. I knew nothing of it. Au revoir, Monsieur le Curé. Au revoir."

Days passed.

In the home of Nazaire, conjecture was

rife. Far into the night the two conspirators would sit pondering the outcome of their coup. What would the Curé say to Philippe? And what defense would Philippe have to make? None, to be sure.

But, he would lie; for he could lie his way into Heaven.

And the Curé might believe him.

But, then, no; for Monsieur St. Georges had seen how they were forced to live.

Ah, that was a brilliant bit of head work—bringing the Curé to the house, where he could see for himself. How many would have thought of it? Not one in ten thousand.

They would drift into speculation on their future life, when the increased wage would permit them to live as they should.

Nazaire would have a horse and carriage. A sleigh, with fur robes and bells. They could then go about, Sundays and evenings, like other people. He had always wanted these things. People who lived in the campagne should have them. Else, why live in the country?

Already Philomène had visited the stores at Lamartinette and St. John's. She had her eye on a piece of black silk, which she had seen across the river. It was priced rather high, she would tell Nazaire; but, the more expensive goods were always the cheapest in the end.

The dress would be trimmed with white satin; and she could have special buttons made with the cuttings from the silk.

She had not found a hat to suit her in any of the stores.

It might be that she would have to go to Montreal for the hat.

You see, when one had red hair, it was not always an easy matter to pick out a hat—if one had taste.

Then, there was lingerie; shoes; gloves.

Oh, so many, many things!

And the house.

Really, the right thing to do, would be to sell off what they had and refurnish the place throughout.

They could get the furniture at Juval's

for a small cash payment and so much each month.

If anything happened, or there was sickness in the family, they never troubled one for the payments.

It was about time they were hearing from Philippe.

The Curé must have seen him long since. He was a man of action. He would not put it off.

Perhaps Philippe was studying the matter—getting ready to make his proposition.

You see, it was not a question of a slight raise; but an entirely different arrangement.

That was it; a different arrangement.

The Curé would see to that.

He was not one to do things by halves.

Then, came the long looked for day, when Philippe spoke.

Ernestine ran over to the barns, one

morning, and told Nazaire that Philippe wished to see him in the house.

Nazaire brushed his clothes with his hands, cleared his voice and followed the girl.

Philippe had risen from breakfast and was smoking his pipe in an arm-chair by the window.

A newspaper lay carelessly across his knee.

"Sit down, Nazaire," said Philippe.

And then, without preamble:

"How much am I paying you now?"

"Parbleu!" growled Nazaire, "don't you know?"

"How much do you want?"

"Enough to live on; to keep a horse and rig; to dress my wife like other women; to have something else on our table besides potatoes and salt pork and pea soup."

As he spoke, his eyes swept over the breakfast table, where lay the remains of the morning meal.

"You are making a speech," retorted

Philippe. "I asked you a question—how much do you want?"

"Twenty dollars more a month."

"Very well. You shall have it. It is agreed."

Already Nazaire regretted not having demanded more. It was so easily done. Such a simple matter.

There was a moment's silence. Presently Philippe resumed:

"Now, I have been thinking matters over; and I see where I have been running things at a loss—too loosely. So, I will have to charge you, hereafter, for whatever you take off the farm—milk, eggs, salt pork and the rest. Then, there is the cottage you are living in. I can get ten dollars a month rent for it. Bissonnette, the man who is coming to take Pierre's place, would like to have it. But, as you are now occupying the house, you may have it at that price. On the first day of each month, hereafter, we will settle our account. You will receive

whatever is due you, after I have deducted what is coming to me."

Nazaire went white as he caught the words rolling easily from the lips of his brother. For it was quite apparent to him that he had been tricked; that henceforth he would be worse off than before.

When Philippe rose abruptly and left the room, he remained in his seat, his mouth agape, his bulging eyes staring stupidly, unbelieving, at the vacant arm-chair by the window.

After a while, he rose up and lumbered heavily out of the house.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN.

Randon took his bride to an apartment on Sherbrook Street at the end of a short wedding tour through New England.

The place was furnished in good taste and met with the instant approval of Isabelle, who smilingly likened it to a robin's nest.

Soon her dainty hands were at work, putting deft feminine touches here and there, adding or toning down a color, changing the position of a *bisque*, or re-hanging a picture to suit the play of the light.

She promised herself golden hours—long chaplets of golden hours, within these precincts of her young wedded life.

She was supremely happy.

David had served his term on the ambulance.

He was now an interne at St. Malachi's, where his duties required that he spend the greater part of the time.

What leisure hours were his he whiled away in the company of Isabelle.

Sometimes they would spend an evening at the theatre, or at the home of friends.

For the young physician had not been slow to cultivate friendships in the city.

He looked upon advantageous acquaintances as essential investments, connections that would accrue in value and, in time, reflect a prestige much to be desired in his practice.

He spoke of this repeatedly to Isabelle, who, in turn, lost no opportunity to foster and cement those alliances which might lead to an enviable foothold in her husband's profession.

On fine days they would stroll through the parks and watch the children at play, or the old people basking in the sun.

Once he took her to the mountain.

From its grizzled peak they scanned the broad expanse.

The sky hung like a canopy of crystal.

They could see far away, where the blue hills rose and kissed the bending heavens.

"Over there," said David, "is Longueil. And yonder, St. Lambert; and Cocknawagga, the Indian village. And that," pointing farther out, "is Lachine; and the Rapids. And here is Nun's Island, nearer in."

They gazed at the St. Lawrence, sweeping by at their feet, as it seemed, and were awed by the grandeur of its majesty.

The city sprawled in the lap of the mountain.

They had coffee and sandwiches at a little rest-house; and went home.

Isabelle was fatigued from the arduous journey and announced, with a weary smile, that she was glad to be back in her robin's nest.

She changed her street dress for a loose-fitting gown of soft texture and slipped her feet into a pair of bronze slip-

pers, which had caught her eye in a shop window on Notre Dame Street.

Antoinette, the little house-maid, recently engaged by Randon, served a light collation; for they were too tired to do justice to a meal.

They were still at the table, discussing their afternoon on the mountain, when the door-bell rang.

A moment later, Antoinette came in to say that a Monsieur Demers was in the reception room.

"Who is he?" enquired Isabelle, when the maid had withdrawn.

"A friend. From Longueil."

"I can't meet him," she hastened to say.

"Why not?"

"This way—in negligé?"

"I don't see what difference that makes. People in the city understand one doesn't go tight-laced in one's own home."

"But, David, I'd rather not. It will take but a few minutes to dress—"

"That's the trouble," Randon rejoined

irritably. "You never will become acclimated, I'm thinking."

"Just the same," flared Isabelle, flushing deeply, "I have my own ideas of propriety, and, what is more, they are not necessarily of the country. They are the ideas of any well bred woman, anywhere."

She made to rise from the table but relaxed again in her seat, as the footsteps of the guest sounded in the library.

A moment later René Demers stood balancing himself uncertainly in the doorway of the dining-room.

He was drunk. He grinned down at the astonished pair.

"Ah, les nouveaux mariés—the honeymooners!" he exclaimed. "It is with grand delight that I salute you!"

He bowed obsequiously to Isabelle and fixed upon her a dazed, glassy grin.

Randon, perplexed, introduced the visitor to his wife. Isabelle acknowledged the formality coldly. Demers doubled into a convenient chair. He was dressed in evening clothes. Turning his face

slowly to Randon, he said, becoming of a sudden, quite serious:

“David, old boy, I was going to dinner at my little Fantine’s. I receive special invitation from her papa. I guess now I don’t go. Her papa might give me still more pressing invitation to stay away. I think I go for ride instead. Like to go for ride? My car is outside.”

Isabelle made an excuse and left the room, to the evident annoyance of Randon, who followed her with his eye until the door swung behind her. When she returned, a few moments later, Demers had gone.

Randon was in the front room, gazing out into the lamp-lighted street, where a drizzle of rain was now falling.

Isabelle stood, for a moment, by the table, waiting for him to speak. She cleared her voice to make sure that he was aware of her presence. But he said no word; nor moved an inch from his position.

She went up to him and put her arm about his waist.

He turned quickly, the pale sheen from the arc-light on his face, now distorted in anger. He opened his mouth to speak. But closed his lips again in silence. Then he broke away from the arm that held him, and, crossing over to the guests' bedroom, closed the door.

Isabelle went to bed.

Several times she was on the verge of rising and going in to him.

But her pride welled up, forbidding her the cheapening of herself. Far into the night she waked, tossing on the bed, now hoping he would relent and come to her, now feverishly reasoning the injustice of his treatment.

Cocks crowed from afar. A gray gleam steeled the eastern sky. Milk-carts rattled noisily over the street. It would soon be time to rise.

Had Antoinette mailed the letter to Pierre?

There were berries for breakfast—

It was noon and a bright sun was playing its rays on the tumbling gold of her hair, when she awoke.

There were some letters from Lamar-tinette on her dresser, put there by Antoinette.

Doctor Randon had left early for St. Malachi's.

It was his custom to pay her a hurried visit each day while the staff was at dinner in the hospital.

She knew the hour of his coming and saw to it that a tempting "diner á deux" was waiting upon his arrival.

Today the hours dragged by with crushing monotony.

The hands of the little brass clock in the library seemed glued to the dial.

She tried to read. But found no interest in the story. The author must have been a dull, conceited sort. She cast the book aside.

Six o'clock, she told herself; he would come at six.

She would greet him, in the doorway, as

he came in, putting her arms about his neck. And he would take her face in both his hands and kiss her. Then they would sit down to dinner together for a happy hour. And all would be forgotten.

At four o'clock she dismissed Antoinette for the remainder of the day and finished, herself, the preparations for dinner.

She baked a "pain de Savoie" and made the frosting. There was a chicken en casserole, nestling in green peas and savory sauce. And a wonderful salad of crisp, yellow lettuce and manzanillos and slices of red, ripe tomatoes that looked like little cart wheels. She laid a snow-white cloth and set the dishes.

When all was in readiness, she went out onto the porch to see if he was coming.

As she passed through the library she glanced eagerly at the clock. Who would have thought it was so late—twenty minutes after six! He was always here before this. A chilling fear leaped in her heart. What if he should not come—

Seigneur! the suspense of the night would be intolerable.

She gazed down the stately street, now aquiver with the animation of homing throngs and vehicles.

Men and women hurried by, their faces alight with the joy of homecoming.

Eagerly she scanned them as they came into view, approached, and passed beyond again.

Somewhere in the distance a chime told seven. Dusk was settling, now, over the city. A dull copper flare lingered where the sun had been.

With troubled heart she went in and closed the door.

A thought came to her: maybe something had happened to him. There was the telephone. She would call him at the hospital.

She was informed by a gruff voice in the office that Doctor Randon could not come to the telephone. He had been very busy since early morning in the operating room. Yes, he would give him the mes-

sage, but could not say how soon. There had been a disastrous fire in the factory district. A large number of workers had been injured.

Isabelle placed the receiver on the hook.

"Then, it is not what I feared," she said aloud, her face alight with gladness. "Mon Dieu, I am so happy!"

She cleared the table; and put away the dinner, untouched. She was not hungry, now.

Would the gruff voice in the office deliver the message? Would it be late? Surely they would not keep him in the operating room much longer.

She turned on the reading lamp in the library and picked up the discarded book of the afternoon. She would read a while. He would call her up, of course.

An hour passed. The novel was not so bad after all. Indeed, it was interesting. The hero was an audacious, dare-devil sort; while the heroine—

There was a faint flutter of the tele-

phone bell, followed by a bold, startling ring.

It was Randon.

He was in his best mood. He had been kept busy since early morning. He was very tired. He would now try to get a little sleep. Yes, surely, he would be home tomorrow for dinner. She must go to bed and get a good rest. The mountain trip had been too much for both of them, he feared—for their nerves, at least.

He laughed and she understood.

She turned again to her novel and stole a glimpse at the closing chapter. It pleased her, for she smiled approvingly.

She closed the book and went off happily to bed.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN.

On a number of occasions Isabelle had gently counseled what she termed a less extravagant living programme.

She had pointed out to Randon that if their present expenditures were not sharply retrenched their resources would have dwindled out long before he could hope to gain sustenance from his profession.

He heard her out each time without comment: but made no effort in the direction suggested by his wife.

Tomorrow was another day: and would bring its own problems. Besides, this was the method of life he had planned.

It would prove an avenue to early recognition by a desirable clientèle, to rapid advancement in his chosen work.

The first indispensable requisite was to make an impression.

The city was overrun by men of his profession who would never be heard from, because they had elected to sit and wait for a practice.

The mouse must go to the mountain.

Furthermore, there was the matter of his wife's dowery. The subject had never been mentioned by him to Philippe Labelle.

It was for the father of the bride to speak first in such cases.

Randon was giving up all he possessed for the home. Surely his father-in-law should be willing to do an equal share.

When the time came, he would make it plain to Labelle that he was nobody's fool. But, there was no need for haste. His own fairness would be all the more evident and effective after a reasonable lapse of time. And then, there was always a possibility that the old fellow might take the initiative and accede,

without prodding, to the propriety of things.

Too, there was his wife to consider. Not for worlds would he have her think that he had married for money.

As matters stood, he was by no means penniless. But, money went fast. It seemed that every time he moved some bill was due.

But, that was it: he was paying the price. He had entered into the bargain: and understood the terms. He was aiming high. It was fair enough.

Now, if he had rented a plain little house at Point St. Charles and buried himself among the mass—what then?

A long, silent struggle, meagre in reward, tardy in doubtful recognition.

No. Better by far the lot of the hab-
itant whistling behind his plough.

For, he, at least, was happy in his limitations, having no higher aim, knowing no wider bourne.

Summer fled like a dream.

And all too soon the frowning skies of Autumn lowered, cold and bleak, over the city. There was a long, gray interlude of souging winds and falling leaves, rattling into drifts in the gutters along the streets.

Then, swift and ruthless, Winter came.

One day, when Isabelle awoke, a heavy snow was falling. She stepped to the window. A thick pall of white lay over the street. The trees were like carvings of crystal.

A wonderful stillness lulled the air. A feeling of loneliness stole over her. She felt alone and unfriended. It was four days since David had come. This would make the fifth. His duties were demanding more and more of his time as the months went by. She was nigh to tears. But, she must be brave.

A bewildered sparrow, seeking food, fluttered a moment before her at the window; and was gone.

She dressed and called Antoinette. No, there was no mail. It was probably late

because of the storm. Breakfast would be ready shortly. The grocer had sent his monthly bill with the day's order. It seemed very high. She had told him as much. But, he only laughed and said it was quite correct.

It was close onto noon before the carrier finally brought the mail. There were some newspapers and periodicals; and a letter from Pierre, the second she had received from him since her marriage.

The missive came as a sunbeam slanting in upon her through the storm. She opened the envelope and, seating herself by the window, began to read.

There were eight closely written sheets.

He had taken the habit of the Little Brothers on the feast of the Assumption and, though still a novice, had been given a class of little fellows to teach.

He was very much taken up with the work and felt quite at peace with the world and himself.

Mamman Labelle came to see him

frequently; usually on Sundays, on her way home from vespers.

Philippe he had not seen. Nor the others.

He had fallen heir to some three hundred acres of farm land near St. Grégoire, through the death of Louis Beaudoin, a distant relative, who had no other kin.

There was also the sum of seven thousand dollars, belonging to the estate, which was on deposit in a bank at St John's, awaiting his call. It would have made a very nice start, had he remained in the world.

But, it did not tempt him now. Somehow, it came as an unwelcome burden; for he could make no use of it; and it would be a source of care and annoyance.

No doubt she was in love with the city; and supremely happy in her new surroundings.

She was not to forget him when she came to Lamartinette. He might, perhaps, be granted a congé, so that he could go home and spend a few hours with her.

However, the rules of the brotherhood were strict and he was not sure that he would be permitted to go. But, they would see.

Mamman Labelle was looking poorly, of late; and her kindly smile was a bit tired and wistful, he thought. She had told him, herself, that the loss of Isabelle had left a great void in her life—a void that could never be filled.

He had endeavored to cheer her; and, for a little while, she had seemed her old self again. But, somehow, after she had gone, he felt quite upset. For, it grieved him inexpressibly to see her distress. He loved her so! She was the only mother he had ever known. And her life had been such an unhappy one—barren of love and the little kindnesses that made of the home a sacred precinct for the heart.

He had a little hunchback in his class—un petit bossu. And a one-legged boy from the States.

Strange to say, these two were the

brightest of his class—but, brimming over with devilment.

He had thirty-two pupils: sixty-four bright, mischievous eyes to watch and guide and lead aright.

It was a beautiful, all-absorbing work, this grafting of early knowledge onto the ready, eager minds of the young.

It was like planting a precious seed and caring for it, day by day, until it sprouted and became a sturdy plant and, some day, burst into bloom before the wondering eyes of the gardener.

This was Thursday, the weekly holiday. He had corrected the exercises for the morrow and, being quite alone in the study, had stolen an hour's communion with his little playmate of the long ago—his golden poppy of the fields.

The letter concluded with wishes for her happiness and a request to be remembered in her prayers.

Isabelle dropped the fluttering sheets in her lap and gazed out the window at the falling snow.

She sat there a long while, weaving day dreams, that carried her back, ever so far, it seemed, to days and to scenes now clothed with a certain charm.

She was startled from her reverie by the telephone bell.

Randon was speaking. He would be home at six.

She glanced at the clock.

"Antoinette," she beamed, in the doorway of the kitchen, "dinner for two: Milord is coming!"

Then, she went to the wardrobe and chose his favorite dress.

Antoinette, at her work, caught the refrain of an old French song. She stood and listened for a moment, a smile flitting over her pretty face.

"Ah," she mused aloud, "Madame is so happy!"

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN.

After dinner Isabelle handed Pierre's letter to David. He read it carefully and laid it down without comment. He seemed thoughtful throughout the evening; and spoke but little. Isabelle laid his silence to the reaction of overwork and left him tactfully to his mood. They were about to retire when he turned to her, suddenly, and said:

"Pierre says your mother is poorly. It may be he is not telling you all he knows. Why not go home for a visit? It would cheer her up and might lead to an improvement in her condition."

Isabelle laid aside the book she was reading.

"I had thought of doing so," she said. "It is very good of you to suggest it."

So, it was agreed that she would spend

a few weeks in Lamartinette. She would leave the following Monday. Antoinette would be left in charge of the ménage during her absence.

She would be very lonesome for him. And so would he for her. But, it was the proper thing to do under the circumstances, he believed.

On Sunday, David was home the greater part of the day. Isabelle went about the preparations for her departure with a noticeable lack of spirit. More than once she expressed a wish that he were going with her. He readily agreed that if such an arrangement were possible it would, indeed, be very pleasant. But, of course, it was out of the question. However, he might get away for a day. In that event, he would surprise her.

The Tabors called in the evening.

Waldon Tabor was a tall, cadaverous man of fifty years or thereabouts.

His wife was a plump little bit of smiling affectation, some twenty years younger than her husband.

They were an oddly mated pair.

Tabor was reputed to be wealthy. He rarely discussed his affairs with friends or acquaintances, among whom there prevailed a vague impression that he was in some manner engaged in the business of stocks.

They lived in an exclusive section of the city and gave every evidence of affluence.

The pair remained but a short while. They were taking their first sleigh-ride of the season and called en passant. Isabelle must come out and spend the day upon her return to the city. The doctor could join them for dinner and they would arrange a theatre party for the evening.

Mrs. Tabor smiled sweetly.

"Good bye, my dear," she cooed, "and don't stay away too long!"

She kissed Isabelle and extended a little gloved hand to Randon:

"And you, Doctor, you must come to see us often while Mrs. Randon is away.

Make yourself one of us. Sans cérémonie, you know." And, smiling up into her husband's face: "Waldon talks so much about you two young lovers!"

Tabor grinned without speaking, his greenish eyes fixed upon Isabelle. When they had gone, the Randons finished packing the trunks.

The following day Isabelle took an early train for Lamartinette.

David escorted her to the station. He sent a large basket of fruit to Mrs. Labelle and purchased a box of bonbons and some magazines for his wife. He was very pleasant; and sought to cheer Isabelle, who was averse to the separation. The brakeman stepped into the coach and called out the various stops of the train. The bell rang on the locomotive and they became aware that they were moving. David rose hastily and kissed his wife. He felt her clinging to him in the first trembling embrace of parting. Then, he tore himself away and rushed down the aisle of the coach; and was gone.

Philippe Labelle met his daughter at the station. He came up to her slowly, his hand outstretched.

She was shocked at the transformation that had taken place in him within so short a time.

His eyes were bloodshot. His puffed face a purplish, apoplectic red.

"*Bienvenu, ma fille,*" he said; "welcome home, my daughter."

The day was cold and clear and there were many habitants in town. There was an incessant silvery chorus of sleigh-bells in the crisp air. The Richelieu was now a snow-mantled field of ice.

Labelle enquired briefly about Randon and volunteered the information that things were about the same as when she was last in Lamartinette. Her mother? Oh, she seemed well enough. She read a good deal and kept to herself, as had been her custom for years. He had engaged a new man, to take the place of Pierre. A habitant from St. Grégoire. Nazaire was growing slow and sluggish at his work.

Strangely enough, the foolish fellow felt quite important of late. He had insisted on a readjustment of their financial understanding. Philippe had generously consented and formulated a new agreement. Even that did not seem to satisfy him. It was distressing, this striving, without avail, to please your help. Indeed, if it were not for the fact that Nazaire was his own brother, he would not have him about the place.

It was true that he was paying higher wages to Bissonette, the new man, than to Nazaire. But, he did a better day's work. And, besides, farm hands were demanding more money. They refused to work at the old wage.

As they came in view of the house, Isabelle saw her mother standing in the window of her room, waving a welcome.

Her heart thrilled at the scenes of her childhood.

She thought of Pierre; and a sense of loneliness came over her.

She wished he were there to greet her.

Her father pointed out a fine bay gelding, which he had added to the stock that fall. She nodded without interest.

A moment later, the front door went wide and she was in her mother's arms.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN.

It was with effort that Isabelle settled down once more into the life of the home.

She strove hard to dispel the feeling of loneliness that threatened at times, to overcome her.

Mamman Labelle was not slow to note her daughter's recurring mood. But, with laudable tact, the elder woman refrained from any comment on the subject; and sought, at every opportunity, to make her stay in Lamartinette a pleasant one.

Mamman had been feeling poorly, of late, but was mending.

Isabelle had been home a fortnight when she received a letter from Randon, which revealed the true state of his finances and suggested in plain words, that she take steps to effect an advance on her share of the estate. It would require

at least five thousand dollars to carry them over the remaining period of his inactivity in practice. He was writing to her as a last resort. As a matter of fact, her father had been remiss in his duty to her in failing even to mention the subject of his daughter's dowery at the time of her marriage. He had realized for some time that his funds were dwindling; and, in an effort to stave off disaster, had but hastened its accomplishment by following Tabor's advice in buying wheat on a rising market. An hour after he had handed his last thousand to Tabor, who had acted for him in the transaction, he was penniless. Tabor lost fifty thousand on the same day. He had admitted it himself to David.

If she failed to secure the money, there was but one alternative—to close the home until the end of his term at St. Malachi's.

The letter concluded with assurances of affection and a promise to visit her at LamartINETTE—if possible.

Isabelle turned pale as she struggled through the chilling revelation.

Mrs. Labelle entered the room as her daughter was folding the little paper sheets.

"How is he, my dear?" she asked.

Isabelle glanced up at her mother and back again at the letter in her hand. Her pride suffered deeply in this moment. There was an interval of silence, of painful hesitation. Then, she held out the letter and replied:

"Here it is, Mumzie: read it for yourself."

When she had finished reading, the mother said:

"He is quite right, my dear. A settlement should have been made at the time of your marriage. It may be that the speculation was ill advised. No doubt it was. But, as he says, plainly enough, it was a question of sink or swim and he chose to take a chance. Life is full of just such problems, chérie. Say nothing to your father. It might prove embar-

rassing. I shall have a talk with him myself."

"Oh, if only it can be arranged!" spoke Isabelle. I would never have asked it for myself, but—"

"I understand, my child," smiled the mother. "Your husband is right. I shall see what can be done."

Late in the afternoon, a student, returning home from college, brought a note from Pierre. He had obtained permission to spend the following day, Thursday, at home.

Isabelle was delighted.

Of a sudden, and as if by magic, the clouds had been dispelled and there was sunshine.

That night, in her room, she penned a long letter to David, in which she told of her mother's promised assistance.

Pierre came on the morrow.

He was clothed in the black habit of the Little Brothers.

Over his shoulders hung a long, heavy cape. He carried a brass crucifix on his

breast. His shoes were of course leather and thick-soled. He wore a large, flat-topped cap of imitation Persian lamb and thick leather mittens lined with wool. A black, rope-like cord, with tasseled ends, was tied about his waist. A little two-piece bib of white fabric gave contrast to the black of the garb when he removed his cape.

He had straightened perceptibly and had thrown off much of his shyness. He beamed upon Isabelle and Mamman and was at once very much at home.

Philippe Labelle came in for dinner.

The farmer was in his best mood; and asked many questions about the brothers and the life they led.

In the course of the afternoon, Nazaire came into the kitchen for hot water. A sick horse, he explained, needed a bran mash.

"Pierre is home?" he asked of Ernestine.

"Yes," replied the girl. "They're in the parlor. Go right in."

He gazed down dubiously at his boots and up again at Ernestine. But, she had turned to her work and was humming an air, oblivious of his presence. He removed his cap and, holding it in both hands, stalked heavily through the passage to the open doorway of the room. Pierre rose to greet him. Nazaire was visibly embarrassed. He was very well—oui. And Philomène was very well—oui. And Pierre—he was well? He would have called at the college to see him, but didn't know what the rules were in such things. Well, he would be going. There was a sick horse. Eh, bien, he would say good day. He must be going. There was much work to do. Au revoir.

He was greatly relieved to find himself alone again in the barns.

It was late when Pierre took his leave. Philippe drove Charlemagne to the college gate, where the young man alighted. Then he turned into the street that led to the widow Duclos'.

CHAPTER NINETEEN.

The following day, Philippe had eaten breakfast and was about to rise from the table, when his wife entered the room and closed the door. It was an unusual thing for her to do and it did not escape the man's notice. He looked up at his wife with a puzzled frown. She drew a chair opposite him at the table and sat down.

"I want to speak to you," she said, "about money; about some sort of financial arrangement with Isabelle. Her husband is at the end of his resources and has another year to go before engaging in practice. Unless we do our part, the young people will be obliged to close their home for the present."

"Well!" gasped Philippe. "This is news to me. I was led to think, all along, the

fellow had means of his own. You made no mention to me of his being a pauper."

"You knew as much as I did about the young man's financial condition," rejoined Mrs. Labelle. "Furthermore, he went to you and asked for our daughter. That was the time to inform yourself on any matter that was not clear to you. As it is, he has furnished a home at his own expense and used the remainder of his funds in an effort to prepare the way for a successful career. He has run short. And as nothing in the way of a settlement was suggested by you at the time of Isabelle's marriage, I am afraid it was she, and not the young Randon, who appeared the pauper."

"And what does he expect me to do?"

"It will take five thousand dollars to see him established in practice. That is no more than Isabelle should have received on her wedding day."

"Fool!" roared Labelle, rising up from his seat, his face ablaze with fury. "You would conspire with that damned parvenu

to rob me? Am I a dotard, that you dare to talk like this to me? He wants five thousand dollars, does he? Then, let him earn it, as I do. He would wear a silk hat in the city, while I should be content to scrape manure off my boots. A convenient arrangement—for him. Tell Isabelle for me that if he cannot support her she may come home to live. That is my answer to him—and to you."

He said no more; but picked up his cap and slammed the door behind him.

Through the window she watched him from her seat by the table, strutting across the space between the house and the barns.

When he had disappeared behind the straw-stack in the barn-yard, she rose with decision.

Isabelle had not yet come down. No doubt she was still asleep. She would not call her. There was work ahead. She wished to go about it alone. She could take her choice of two courses: convey Philippe's reply to her daughter, or go to the college and lay the matter before

Pierre, with a view to securing the money from him.

She would see Pierre.

She dispatched Ernestine to the stable. Bissonette was to harness Charlemagne at once.

Then she went to her room. She was dressed when the man drove up in front of the house.

"You understand, Pierre," she said, when she had gone over in detail the subject of her visit, "I would be personally responsible to you for the money."

Pierre raised a deprecating hand:

"I am indebted to you for more than that, Mamman. You are welcome to it, I assure you. Only, say not a word about it to Isabelle. Let her believe it came from her father. I shall go to the bank during the noon recess. You may have the money any time this afternoon. Or, better still, can you meet me at the bank at twelve?"

"Yes."

"Good. Then it is settled--twelve

o'clock, at the St. John's bank. Until then, Mamman, au revoir!"

She tried to speak; to express her gratitude.

But, he would not hear her.

"My class, Mamman," he smiled. "They are waiting for me."

In a trice he was gone; and she was standing by the little table in the center of the room, staring at the open doorway through which he had passed.

It was two o'clock in the afternoon when she reached home with the money.

"Then, he did give it to you!" said Isabelle.

"Yes, my dear," replied the woman, guiltily repressive of the truth.

"But, chérie," she added, a moment later, "make no mention of this—not even to him, your father."

"Oh, no, not a word, I promise you—although it would be nice if I could thank him."

Mamman raised a finger to her lips:

"Not one word!" she enjoined.

"Not one word, Mumzie dear," echoed Isabelle.

She crossed the room to where her mother was standing and put her arms tenderly about her. She kissed the furrowed brow and said:

"You are so good, so kind! I cannot find words to thank you."

Then she mounted the stairs to her room and wrote the good news to David.

CHAPTER TWENTY.

And now life took on a rosier hue to Randon. He saw his way cleared of obstacles; his mode of living freed of enslaving restraint.

Upon receipt of his wife's letter containing the money, he wrote her that it would not be possible for him to leave his work at St. Malachi's and suggested that she might conclude her visit at an early date.

He expressed his gratification with the fruitfulness of her efforts and assured her he would be pleased to have her home again.

Isabelle sought in vain for some expression of warmth, some hidden spring of affection in the wording of the formal note.

The tone of condescending superiority

which it seemed to breathe hurt her love for him more than it offended her pride.

She waited until she was alone in the drawing-room, where a maple log burned red in the fire-place.

Then she drew the letter from her breast and dropped it regretfully in the leaping flames.

She watched the white leaves flare and blacken and curl into char.

What secret they held must be dead to all, even to her mother. She would suffer none to know that he would write in such a tone to her.

A moment later, she had decided to return to Montreal the following day.

On her way to the village station, she stopped at the college to make her adieux to Pierre. She confided to him, in her naive way, that her father had been very good and generous and had advanced her five thousand dollars of her share in the estate. Few fathers would have done as much, she added knowingly.

Pierre smiled and agreed, as did Mamman Labelle, who had come with her.

Arriving in the city, she at once called David on the telephone. She was delighted to find her husband in a happy mood. He would be home at six.

Antoinette had proved herself a perfect housekeeper. The rooms were warm and cheery. The little maid beamed an honest welcome. The clock in the library, true to its trust, swung its pendulum back and forth, back and forth, without ever a thought or care. A glad shout went up from children at play in the street. A folk song, "l'Amour et la Vie," reclined indolently against the piano, where she had left it. "Love and Life!" Words so few have understood. Black worlds of mystery. Silver mornings of promise. Elusive and fleeting, as the sands of a mirage waste.

David came in the evening. He greeted his wife affectionately and, throughout the dinner, manifested a polite interest in her laughing, garrulous account of the

voyage. He expressed himself as pleased with his good fortune in having obtained congé for the morrow, which was Sunday.

They would spend the day together, at home.

During the evening, she played and sang an old ballad of which he was fond. As the sweet voice trailed away in the last, lingering note of the air, he bent down, and, putting his arms about her, kissed her fervently upon the lips.

She thrilled under the magic of his touch and pressed him to her in a long embrace.

He had never done this before. He had appeared to her to be hampered by a natural reserve, which it was beyond his power to break down or control.

Was this, then, the awakening of the love she had craved? The intonation of their bridal hymn? The meeting of their souls in the garden of scarlet bloom?

Was it the glad, wild hour, of which she had dreamed, when he would come to her and lay claim to her gifts, not because

she was his, but for the nobler reason that his love for her was a great white flame, that could never grow cold and die?

Through the long, still night, she slept in his arms, peaceful and dreamless, like some happy child that has roamed the fields and come home to rest at eventide.

They rose late and, after breakfast, went for a stroll in the park.

The day was beautiful.

A yellow glimmer of sun played gratefully upon the crusted snow, which was thawing on the edge of the walks and dropping liquid pearls into the gullies.

Children were at play on the hillsides.

Sparrows chattered in little groups among the stark branches of the trees, elated with the kindly warmth of the sun.

David was in high spirits. He smoked numerous cigars and spoke incessantly of his career. He would be famous. He would attain the pinnacle. There would

be no half-way point in his ascent to fame. What had been done by others, he could do. Nothing was impossible—to one who possessed the ability and the will to do. The world would hear from him. Just a few years, and then—

“And then, greatness,” spoke Isabelle.

And, after a moment’s silence, wistfully:

“Let us hope, David, dear, that when greatness comes to you love will not flit away.”

“Love?” he rejoined, abstractedly.

“Yes, love, my dear. What is life without it? Is it not the source of everything worth while in life?”

“Why, yes, of course,” he agreed vacantly.

They had walked for some time when he added, sagely, taking a cigar from the case:

“Love, as I view it, is a mutual attraction between the sexes, which is an essential incentive for the propagation of the species.”

He cleared his throat and lighted the cigar.

Isabelle glanced up into her husband's face, her eyes great with wonder.

But, she said no more, though her thoughts whirled and clashed and her heart pounded madly.

They spoke but little on the way home. The Tabors came in the afternoon. Demers called while they were there. During a lull in the conversation, Tabor turned to the subject of stocks. He rubbed his long, bony hands and leered at Randon, as he said in a low, unctuous voice:

"Well, Doctor, I turned the trick, Friday, to the tune of sixty-seven thousand."

He looked slowly from one to another of the party, and back again 'at Randon. His greenish eyes fixed steadily upon the young man, he rippled into a low, deep chuckle.

"Sixty-seven thousand!" he repeated. "That's how we win, my boy: by sticking to it. You see, I now stand seventeen thousand ahead of the fifty I lost with

you. Never give up the ship, lads. Never say die!"

"Waldon is a perfect wonder," broke in Mrs. Tabor.

He raised a hand to stop her, grinning bashfully. But, she would not have it so.

"Waldon, dear," she persisted, "you know you are. You're a wizard at finance. They're all afraid of you, on the street."

"Now, what would you do with such a woman?" he asked, turning to Demers. "She insists that I am a great man—and me striving to remain unknown!"

He considered this a very good joke; for he laughed long and loudly, clapping his hands on his knees.

"I think," said Demers, "a wife should talk like that about her husband, whether it is the truth or just a little stretch of er—the imagination. It is very nice to have the admiration of your wife—very nice."

"You must be sure to pay us a visit, dearie," said Mrs. Tabor, when they were

leaving. "Now that you are home again, we shall take no excuse."

"Yes," approved Tabor, "you really must come over, some fine day."

Demers left shortly after and David returned to St. Malachi's early in the evening.

Alone with her thoughts, Isabelle went over the incidents of the day. One by one she marshalled them before her. The Tabors she did not like. She heartily wished they would tire of her indifference and discontinue their visits.

René Demers was a pleasing young fellow with good qualities. She liked him for his naturalness and aplomb. He was very human.

But, David—and as she reverted to him for the hundredth time that day, she could see him, a cigar in one hand, in the other a match, coolly delivering his dictum on love.

She had been inexpressibly shocked by his words. How could one hold such an opinion and soar above the base realities?

She could not bring herself to speak to him further on the subject. It was revolting to her. He had dragged her ideals into the mire before her eyes.

To follow his view, love was not love at all; but a mere trick of nature, designed to bring the sexes together to the end that others, imbued with the same instincts, should come into being; and so on ad infinitum. No, no, a thousand times! There was a higher aim than that in the scheme of things.

She thought of Pierre, walled away in his grim retreat.

Would he, too, have spoken thus of love?

Would he, the playmate of the meadows, have trampled under foot this exquisite flower?

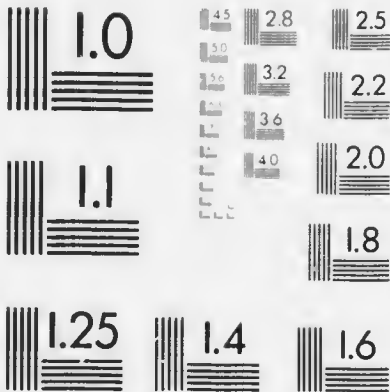
Perhaps she was wrong. But, if so, then the truth was a scathe and a blight; and she had no desire to tread its pathways.

Weary of heart, she sought the solace of sleep.



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She awoke with a violent headache. Daylight was streaming in about her.

She sat up on the edge of the bed and became conscious of a dull throbbing in the pit of her stomach. A feeling of nausea mounted to her throat. The objects in the room swam before her eyes. Her flesh crept with chill. Summoning her strength, she called Antoinette, who hurried in from the kitchen.

Her mistress had fallen backwards across the bed, in a swoon.

There was a little green bottle of aromatic salts in the medicine cabinet. With this and a cold towel, the maid revived Isabelle.

She filled hot water bottles and wrapped the patient in woolen blankets.

"Shall I call Doctor Randon?" she ventured dutifully.

"Yes, if you will, Antoinette."

She had been absent from the room but a few minutes when she returned. She appeared crestfallen.

"Monsieur le Docteur cannot come,"

she announced. "He says he is very busy. He told me to call Doctor Marsh, across the street. He says maybe he can come tomorrow, Madame."

Marsh was a practitioner of the old school. He came in without bluster and was at once at home, in a quiet, unpretentious way. He stayed but a short time.

"A touch of la grippe," he announced when he had completed the examination.

"Keep warm and don't leave your bed. We will have you as well as ever within a few days."

He wrote a prescription, which he handed to Antoinette, nodded his gray head pleasantly at the sick woman and took his leave.

Two days of crushing loneliness dragged slowly by.

Isabelle had not heard from David.

On the morning of the third day he came.

She thrilled at the sound of his footsteps.

It had been impossible for him to leave

the hospital. He had not even had the time to telephone. There had been an unusual number of operations and the medical wards were turning away fever cases.

He was visibly nervous and spoke in a tone of aloofness.

He took her pulse and temperature and asked her why she had not engaged a nurse.

For answer, Isabelle smiled and said she would be well within a day or two and that she preferred not to have officious women in blue gingham fussing around her and telling her what to do.

He glanced at his watch. He must be getting back. St. Julien was to do a trephining at noon. The patient had been at the hospital for some time, gathering strength for the operation. The theory was that the man carried a flattened bullet in the brain. An X-ray photograph had told them as much. He had been shot accidentally some three or four years ago. The man was growing quite simple and

child-like of late and complained of increasing pains in his head. Yes, he must be going. But, he would come again soon. He bent down and touched his lips to hers. A cold, unloving kiss. She must take care of herself and remain in bed, as Marsh had said. As Antoinette came in, bearing a tray, he left the room.

A moment later the front door opened and went shut behind him.

Isabelle heard the sound of the closing door. It fell upon her like the grating of the lid on the tomb of her dreams.

A great, surging grief rose up within her.

She buried her face in the pillows and gave herself up to tears.

And this was what she had done with her life!

She had pawned herself to a man who thought more of his career than of her.

He had shown himself indifferent to her suffering, insensible of the finer dictates.

She yearned for the consoling embrace

of her mother, the withered little woman in Lamartinette from whom she had never known aught but love and kindness.

Even Philippe, her father, would change expression at the sight of another's pain.

And Pierre, noble Pierre! Had she not seen tears in his great, dark eyes, as he bore tenderly in his arms a wounded lamb?

What was there in the heart of a man that caused him to wed a woman whom he loved no more than David loved her?

She would bestow kindness on a dog.

Certainly there were women he would love more than this.

She rose and crossed the room to the dresser.

She gazed at her reflection in the glass.

Her hair tumbled in a golden mass about her shoulders.

Her face was white and the eyes weary and swollen.

A cruel thought broke in upon her.

Could it be that he had turned away from her because he had found her thus

disheveled and—oh, no, she must not think of such things. It would kill her with grief to know that he was of such shallow depths.

The headache had left her. She felt weak and her head seemed to have lost weight.

But, she would not go back to bed. It was too lonely there.

She would dress and sit by the window and watch the children at play in the street and the people hurrying by.

Perhaps she would feel better.

And if he came tonight, she would sing and play his favorite song, "Venez Avec Moi Fêter le Printemps."

A gold and purple sunbeam slanted across the room. It gladdened her strangely with hope.

She looped up her wealth of hair, that shimmered like fire against the ivory paleness of her skin.

From her wardrobe she chose a loose-fitting gown of cerise, which she tied about the waist with a tasseled cordon of gold.

At her full, white throat she pinned a flying dove, jeweled with jade.

When she had done, she looked in the glass and smiled.

"He would like me now," she told herself.

Slowly the hours droned by. She could not eat; nor read; nor rest. Some great calamity hung, like a cloud, over her head. She was fraught with a sense of impending disaster. And always it was he, David, who stalked before her, the bearer of evil.

She gazed at the rushing throngs in the street. Whither were they going? What was their quest? Where the goal? Why this grim struggle of the city, this panic of souls, and stampeding, for a little to eat and something to wear? Why all this fretting and feverish haste, when the road was so short and the end so near?

She thought again of David. His ambition—that was it, ambition to become a great man—had already wedged its way between them. It was true. There could

be no mistaking it. He was drifting away on a glacier, leaving behind the shores of happiness.

And yet, she mused, the world's greatest men had loved.

A thought came to her, unbidden: They were the truly great.

For no man could be great without love.

But, she quickly shut out the suggestion, being too proud to subject him to the lens of comparison.

She crossed over to the piano and played until the shadows had deepened in the street. And when it was late and she had given up hope of his coming, she stole away to bed, like a weary child.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE.

At the close of his term at St. Malachi's, Randon set about to engage in active practice.

His work in the hospital had attracted favorable comment from the visiting physicians and surgeons.

It was with no slight degree of confidence and determination that he closed the doors of the grim, gray structure behind him and turned his face to the city.

A tour of the supply houses and office buildings convinced him that, in order to open an office on the scale which he contemplated, he would require a substantial increase in his now depleted funds.

He thought upon the matter for some time without evolving a plan of action.

Calmly he surveyed the field of his potential resources.

And in the end he was forced to the humiliating admission that they were all barely possible, no more—all but Isabelle.

Besides, he was aware that any refusal which might filter out into gossip would militate against his chances of success.

On a number of occasions he was about to broach the subject to her.

But each time his courage failed him at the crucial moment and he remained silent or spoke of something else.

And in the end it was Isabelle herself who inadvertently opened the way to the revelation of their status.

As they lingered over their after-dinner coffee, one evening, she said, quite thoughtlessly:

“When are you thinking of opening an office, my dear?”

He replied readily:

“When and where are entirely dependent on the question of funds.”

She lowered her cup slowly to the saucer and gazed at him in mute astonishment.

Unabashed, he went on:

"Surely you have learned, by this time, that it takes money to live in the city—this way. I have but a few hundred dollars in the bank. It will require five thousand to equip an office and get me going in practice.

Having said this, he felt greatly relieved. There was a decanter of brandy on the buffet. He rose and poured himself a drink of the liquor. Then, he lighted a cigar and picked up the evening paper. Isabelle followed him with wondering eyes. Surely he could not mean—

"You see," he broke in upon her thoughts, "I am peculiarly circumstanced."

He laid the paper aside and went on:

"I have staked everything on my career. It has taken every dollar of my own and five thousand of your money to put me where I am. It will take another five thousand to make me known. I have thought it all out. There is no other way."

"How are we going to get it, my dear?" asked Isabelle.

"I don't know," he replied. "I know none of whom I could ask it with any assurance of success."

After a while he added, rather lamely: "We will have to think—to plan some way out. For, it would be useless to go on without money."

She made no reply; which signified that she was thinking. He was well pleased with the effect of his words. A few moments later, he said something about a business appointment and went out.

It was characteristic of Isabelle to decide, without quibble, that he should have the money.

But, she realized that she was confronted by a task of no mean proportions. It would never do to approach her father again; especially within so short a time. Her mother might suggest a way. Or, something else might happen in the course of her quest—for it was already settled in her mind that she would do her utmost to

secure the needed funds. She arrived at no more definite conclusion at that time. It would require much thought and caution. For, one false step might bring disaster. Secrecy was paramount. It must not be permitted to leak out that David was short of funds. Only the one appealed to must know. Not once did she question his judgment, his stewardship of her money. What disposition he had made of it was right—must be right. She would leave no stone unturned in her efforts to aid him. It was plainly her duty to do so. She would see her mother and make a clean breast of it. Here was a friend she could trust.

And, perhaps—Pierre! Pierre had seven thousand dollars. He had told her so in one of his letters. But, how was she to know she would ever be able to repay it? Supposing he left the order, he would need it; and at once. And, besides, how could she ever bring herself to ask him for it? Her mother, that was different. But, Pierre—

She reverted. in the end, to her mother.

Yes, she would see Mamman and talk with her. Mamman would know. When all else failed, she could always go to her. The wonder of motherhood!

After much deliberation, she decided to go home.

She felt strangely exhilarated as she rode through the crowded thoroughfares on her way to the station, a few days later.

Somehow, the city with its deafening voices, its congested lungs, its hectic, turbid flow of life, had come to fall upon her as a dream that had run its course and turned to troubled sleep.

She reached Lamartinette at nightfall; and rode with Bisseuette to the homestead. He was a silent man, who confined his words to the weather and the crops. He chewed and spat with the gravity of a Huron.

As the gray outline of her father's house loomed in the moonlight, a chorus of welcome rose to greet her, from the brook beyond the cornfield, in which she and Pierre had been wont to wade as children. The leafless branches of the trees reached into the silvered dimness of the night like unlighted candelabra in nature's vast cathedral. Mounds of dead leaves lay along the way, like the graves of the golden summer days that were gone. Cedars tapered grimly into the darkness, mute symbols of dawnless night.

A door opened, pouring a warm, yellow light over the yard; then closed again.

And now she heard a well known voice and felt her mother's arms about her in a long, throbbing embrace. Isabelle strove to speak. But, her lips trembled on the words and she felt very close to tears.

The door went open again. Ernestine stood in the framework, peering out into the darkness.

"Bon soir, Madame Isabelle," she sang out, her voice warm with welcome.

A wonderful gladness welled in the heart of the returning child. She linked her mother's arm in her own and hastened her steps towards the abode that was home.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO.

Several days elapsed before Isabelle could bring herself to reveal the object of her visit.

Mamman Labelle listened to her daughter in sympathetic silence. But, she was plainly perplexed.

She knew it would be futile to approach Philippe a second time. And she shrank from the thought of stripping Pierre.

There were no others to whom she might appeal.

And while she was not given to censure, she could not dispel the conviction that there had been a great lack of judgment and no slight degree of extravagance in Randon's management.

However, she said naught of this to Isabelle, being mindful of her daughter's happiness above all else.

The young woman was not slow to note the other's mood.

"It's a lot of money, Mumzie dear, isn't it?" she said.

"Indeed it is, chérie," smiled the mother. "I will have to think. Just now, I don't see what can be done. But, we must not despair. Let me have a little time. We shall see."

Philippe now spent the greater part of the time in the village.

There were even nights he did not come home, sleeping at the widow Duclos', instead.

One night, a few days later, Philippe blustered in from the barns, looking for Bissonette.

The man was seated at the kitchen table, mending a trace.

"Tomorrow morning," said Labelle, "the stock buyers will be here. They have bought up all the feeders—cattle, sheep and hogs. Make sure that none of our regular stock get mixed up with the others. Nazaire will bring the feeders up

from the fields. You see that the gates of the barnyard are closed and don't let them in."

Bissonette nodded without looking up.

"Oui, Monsieur," he replied, turning the trace.

The stevedores came at noon the following day.

Within an hour the sale was completed and a long, mooing, bleating caravan climbed the ascent in the road, in the first stage of their journey to death. Shortly afterwards, Philippe drove off to the village.

About midnight, Mamman Labelle, who was waking, heard the rig turn off the road and cross the wooden culvert that bridged the ditch.

A moment later, Labelle rolled heavily out of the carriage, striving desperately to steady himself against the front wheel.

Horse and carriage went on alone to the barns.

Philippe staggered across the intervening space of yard and lurched against the

kitchen door, which opened with a loud bang and, after a long while, closed again.

Mamman listened for the sound of his steps on the stairway.

But the house remained rapt in dead silence. She grew troubled. Perhaps something had happened. She had no love for this man. The only sense he aroused in her was one of loathing. But, this was different. It was her duty to see if he was hurt, or—

She wrapped a cape about her and went down.

In the dining-room she halted and called: "Philippe, where are you?"

She received no answer; and passed on, in breathless suspense, to the doorway of the kitchen.

Philippe, seated on the edge of a chair, sprawled, face downward, upon the table.

Within reach of his hands lay a crumpled little mound of bank notes, which the drunken man had taken from his pocket to count, before falling asleep. He was breathing heavily.

Mamman called him again. But, he made no response.

A thought struck her, like the voice of a person speaking:

The money—Isabelle—why not?

It was hers. Hers as much as his.

He was squandering it in the village.

That nameless thing was getting it.

This way it would do some good. At least, it would be spent on her own.

What right had he to say yes or no, any more than she, about their common hoard?

She stole over to the table and lowered her hand to the notes.

Slowly her fingers closed and tightened on the crisp green bills.

With a furtive sweep, her hand disappeared beneath the cape.

She retraced her steps to the dining-room door.

A desire to make sure that Philippe had not awakened prompted her to halt and look back.

Her blood went cold.

In the window, peering into the room, was the face of Nazaire.

Summoning her courage, she forced herself to maintain a semblance of sang froid and stood her ground. She beckoned her brother-in-law to come in.

When he appeared, shame-faced, in the doorway, she scrutinized him closely for some facial intimation of what he might have seen.

He remained stupidly sullen under her gaze.

"Put him to bed," she said quietly; and turned to go upstairs.

"I was wondering if he got home," lied Nazaire, sheepishly, removing his cap. "I saw him in the village and feared for his safety. You see, he was showing his money to some pretty bad men at la veuve Duclos' and I thought I would look in, on my way home, to see if he was safe."

Then, he had not seen her!

For, if he had, he would not be able thus to mask his feelings.

She heaved a great sigh of relief.

In her room, she bolted the door and counted the money.

It was not enough; but it would have to do.

She was nigh to collapse from the terrific strain, as she lowered the wick in the lamp and went to bed.

Philippe was up at daylight. She heard him searching the house, muttering to himself the while.

After a time, he went out and harnessed Charlemagne.

She heard him give a quick command. Saw the horse plunge forward. And now, her heart a-flutter, she stood, screened by the mull curtain of her window, and watched the carriage roll madly over the highway to the crest of the knoll, where it sank from view.

Philippe drew rein in front of the Duclos tavern; and went in.

The widow was cleaning glasses behind the bar. She glanced up in puzzlement at Labelle. This was an unusual hour for him to be in the village.

"The money!" he gasped, rushing up to the bar. "The money I got for the feeders—it's gone, every cent of it. Where is it? What happened? Don't stare at me that way! Tell me where it is!"

"Lost—all that money!"

"No, not lost—stolen! How could I have lost it? Besides, it was in different pockets. It was stolen, I tell you. *Nom de Dieu*, I will get it back or some son of the devil will pay dearly. Come, what do you know? Where is it? It was lost in your place, you know."

"No, I did not know that," the woman replied frigidly.

She laid down the glass towel and stepped around in front of the bar to where Labelle was standing.

Her arms went akimbo and her rose-red cheeks turned the dull white of ivory as she said:

"Your money was stolen, you say?"

"Yes, very surely—it was stolen."

"And you come here and ask me where it is? Do you know that you are calling me a thief?"

"I can't help what you think. The money is gone. I lost it here, in your place, and I come here to get it back. You know who stole it. Now, that is plain truth, is it not?"

The door opened and a number of men, on their way to the potteries, trailed in.

Madame Duclos turned to the tallest, a brawny, black-haired giant with piercing eyes:

"Monsieur Choquette, you were here last night. You saw Monsieur Labelle showing fistfuls of money to all who came in?"

"Oui, Madame. He waved it under my nose until I was annoyed. But as he was in his cups, I said nothing."

"That is true," chimed others of the party. "He was showing it to all who would look."

"And is it true or not that I begged him to put his money in his pocket and go home?"

"Absolutely true. Not once; but a number of times."

"And now, he bursts in upon me and says that he was robbed of his money last night—here, in my place; and tells me to my teeth that I know the thief!"

"That is wrong," snapped Choquette, striding up to Labelle, an evil glint in his eyes. I saw you stuff the bills into your pocket just as you turned to go. I was sitting at that table, playing cards with Benoit. I was facing the door and could see. There was no one with you and you went out alone. Now, don't you ever again say that you were robbed in this place while I was here—for I would choke you like a rat. You understand?"

"Just the same, Monsieur Choquette," rejoined Labelle weakly, "you can't blame a man for coming to the only place he was in and expecting to find some trace of his money?"

"That is a very different tune from the one you sang when you found me alone," spoke Madame Duclos. "I can always be civil to any one. But, to be called a thief!"

"I did not say that, Madame Duclos. But, I must admit that I was hasty. You see, it's a lot of money, and, naturally, I was excited. Let us forget it and be good friends. I shall look elsewhere for the money. And, if it is gone, it is the fault of none but Philippe Labelle, for making such a fool of himself. Allons, a nice little drink for us all, Madame Duclos, if you please."

They clinked glasses, the potters drinking sullenly to the truce.

Philippe made no mention of his loss at home. Instead, he continued to search in nooks and corners about the house and in the barns, where he might have hidden the money.

Finally, he gave it up as lost.

Never once did he suspect his wife, so upright did he know her to be.

Nazaire said not a word of his exploit

to Philmène, who was asleep when he reached home after dragging Philippe up the stairs to his room.

He had seen his brother at the widow Duclos', maudlin drunk, his hands full of bank notes; and had followed him home afoot from the village.

It had been his intention to enter the house, when all was quiet, and take, himself, what his brother denied him as the wages of his labor.

His plan was upset by the appearance of his brother's wife in the kitchen doorway, just as he raised himself to the window and peered into the room. So, nothing was left for him to do but to put the drunken man to bed and go home, a prey to sullen rage.

"But, never mind," he had growled, in savage hate, wheeling about on the highway and shaking his clenched fist at the dim outline of his brother's house. "Never mind, Philippe Labelle, some day you will settle your account with me!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE.

Pierre, who had received a note from Isabelle, advising him of her presence in Lamartinette, drove out, one day, to the homestead.

He carried a large black leather bag, as though he might be about to go forth on a journey.

He greeted Isabelle warmly, his face beaming delight.

She wore a close-fitting gown of black velvet.

On her breast was a butterfly of black and gold; and in her shimmering hair a snow-white immortelle, from her mother's garden.

Her great hazel eyes danced with the gladness of the moment. Her red lips, parted in a smile of welcome, revealed

flawless pearls of teeth. Her bearing was that of a queen receiving a favored prince.

Never had she appeared so lovely to Pierre.

When the greetings were over, he said to Mrs. Labelle, pointing to the bag on the floor:

"I have come to spend a few days with you, Mamman. You see, it is like this: I have completed my novitiate; and as I have decided not to take my vows at this time, I obtained permission to come home for a short while."

"Ah, oui, the vows—they are the parting of the ways," spoke Mamman. "It was very wise and prudent of you to wait, if you have any doubt of your calling. Then there will be nothing to undo—no false step to regret."

In the afternoon, Pierre and Isabelle went out into the fields.

Indian summer was upon the land. It was a gold and russet day. The sun shone warm and mellow on the stubbled earth.

Here and there a belated songster flung

his farewell notes to the laughing wind and flew away.

They passed over the winding path that led to the woods.

Here they had come as children, to gather spring's earliest flowers, when the snows had thawed and the trees taken on their lace-work of tender green.

Here they watched the chipmunk store his hoard against the hoary months of winter and marvelled at the love-making of the birds and the building of their nests for the young.

They walked on until they came to the sugar cabin, in the heart of the wood. Built crudely of logs, the little structure had stood the test of time, weathering the winds and the rain, steadfast in its purpose to serve.

Above their heads, in the maples, garlands of wine-tinted leaves, still clinging to the parent twigs, crooned the death song, of their short day.

They turned from the soughing trees

and followed the cow-tracks that skirted the corn field down to the brook.

They came to a haw-tree, laden with scarlet fruit, of which they had been wont to eat in the autumn days of their childhood.

A fallen oak, humbled by the blasts of a mighty storm, lay on the edge of the peaceful stream, dreaming, perhaps, of the grandeur that had once been his.

Pierre, who carried his cape over his arm, spread it out upon the trunk. They seated themselves in silent accord.

The past surged in upon them in tumultuous waves.

Resurgent memories clamored, insistent, about them—from the purling eddies of the brook, the glistening lush grasses at their feet, the little swinging foot bridge that spanned the babbling stream.

And their toy ships, which they had builded and sent away to sea—symbols of the springtime of their lives. Where were they now? To what distant phantom shores had they sailed?

"It seems as though it were but yesterday," said Isabelle, "that we were here, a boy and a girl at play."

"Yes," Pierre replied, "our years are like the grains of sand in an hour-glass. They have soon fled. And we remain, the outer shells of what we were, nursing our sores and sipping our cup of bitterness. For, how many may say, when they have grown old, that they would not do differently, were it given them to live their lives anew?"

"Why, you frighten me, Pierre," she laughed. "You see, we are both quite young, you and I, and it will be a long time, many years, before we have gotten to be the mere shells of what we are today. Oh," she shuddered, "what an ugly thought! And, besides, I hold that old age should be both happy and beautiful. Now, for example, take me: why should I not make a lovely old lady?"

"You will," he rejoined, heartily, not sharing her jest. "But, that is *only part*

of it. I pray that you will be as happy then as now."

"I know, Pierre, that if you had it in your power you would make all the world happy. As for me, I am glad that I see the brighter side of things. I would rather think of the immortelles, that do not perish like other flowers; the pines, that are always green; the faith of loving hearts, that believes and endures through dark and bitter days."

"I sometimes think," he said, "that a kind providence arms one, at birth, for the struggles one is destined to encounter in life. Now, there is my little bossu, a hunchback for life; and "Patsy," my one-legged boy; both hopelessly crippled; unfitted for the contest, one might say. And yet, the two of them vie with each other in sunshine and sheer devilment, and, seemingly without effort, divide between them the honors of the class. On the other hand, big, strapping fellows with never a care but for their meals, do well to maintain a heroic defense of the tail

end. My thought is that there is, in reality, a well planned scheme of things. The fool, the apparently unfit may, perhaps, be essential to the general balance. This much is sure, they are happy by virtue of their limitations."

She looked up suddenly into his face and said:

"And you, Pierre—you are happy?"

A pebble rolled down the bank into the water.

A frog, disturbed in his nap on the point of a sun-kissed rock, plunged into the brook.

Overhead, a crow flew by, cawing.

Pierre gazed into her eyes without speaking—those deep, gray wells of soul, that reflected the color of dawn, the fires of the noon-day sun.

He did not speak at once. He was strangely moved. He felt the thrill of warm red wine in his veins, the dizzying surge of a great, unreasoning desire mounting to his head and blinding him to

all but her, the wonder-child of his boyhood, the lost treasure of his full estate.

With grim resolve he stayed the rising tide of his emotions, more from a feeling of shame at his weakness than from the promptings of his moral code. He felt relief at the sound of his own voice, as, presently, he replied:

"Happy? Oh, yes, very surely. I am quite happy."

A white cloud rose of out of the west and raced across the blue dome of the heavens.

Somewhere in the distance a cow-bell tinkled drowsily.

A team of oxen, driven by the young Laroche, the miller's son, swung slowly up out of the valley to the crest of the knoll in the road; and then beyond.

By and by, the fires died in the westering sun and the winds that had sung and caressed them grew sharp and chill.

She glanced at the blue hills, far away, that seemed to rise up from the bosom of the earth to greet the descending orb.

"The sun is setting, Pierre."

A great scarlet globe hung suspended over a turquoise peak, like a garish lantern.

Slowly it sank below, firing the clouds in its wake until they seemed a rolling mass of gold and copper.

Pierre turned to Isabelle.

"Shall we go?"

"Yes," she replied, wistfully, he thought.

Then, she added, taking his arm and pointing to a little path now partly hidden from view by sprawling grasses:

"Through the wheat field, Pierre, where the poppies grew."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR.

As they came around from the fields to the front of the house, Isabelle was astonished to see Randon standing with her father on the veranda.

She had no intimation from David of any intention to visit Lamartinette.

Instinctively her thoughts flew to the money, which was the object of her homecoming.

She was torn by emotions of shame on the one hand; on the other, of foreboding.

As she and Pierre neared the steps, David nodded, smiling. He stepped away from Labelle to greet his wife. He took her hand in his own and kissed her on the lips. He grasped Pierre by the hand, loosely, in a formal, perfunctory way.

And now he turned back to his father-in-law and resumed his conversation.

He was irreproachably attired. There was a harsh, jangling contrast between the immaculate elegance of the young doctor and the coarse, ill-fitting frieze of Philippe, whose long-legged boots told plainly of a recent trip to the stables.

Isabelle followed Pierre into the house and straightway sought her mother, who was directing Ernestine in the kitchen.

"Come, my child," said Manman; and led her away to her room, where she bolted the door. Going over to her dresser, she unlocked the lower drawer and, from beneath a pile of linen, brought forth a roll of bank notes, which she handed to her daughter, saying:

"Twenty-eight hundred dollars, *chérie*. It is all I could get. I hope it will do; for it will be impossible for me to secure any more. I have not brought up the subject of the money sooner, because I would have preferred not to speak of it until you were about to leave. But, now that David has come, it is imperative that I speak to you. And, while I am about it, I might as well

acquaint you with the true circumstances surrounding both transactions. Your father refused point blank to advance the first sum of five thousand. So, I went to Pierre, who let me have it gladly."

"Pierre!" exclaimed Isabelle, coloring deeply.

"Yes, my dear. It was all that was left me to do. I had your welfare in mind, of course; and your happiness. 'This,' pointing to the notes in her daughter's hand, "I took from your father, as he sprawled over the kitchen table in a drunken stupor. He does not suspect the truth. Now, my child, you know all. I hope your husband will decide to return to Montreal some time tomorrow. You see, David and your father should be kept apart. There is no telling what might transpire to make Philippe suspicious of the truth."

A wave of shame, mingled with indignation, swept over Isabelle, as the bitter words poured from her mother's lips.

Then, Pierre knew; he had known, all along, that she and David had merely bol-

stered up a semblance of success and prosperity! And it was his money that had enabled them to pose in Montreal! Why, the very dress she was wearing at this moment had been purchased with funds belonging to Pierre! The undergarments of filmy silk—the costly, embroidered hose, the delicately beautiful shoes—his, Pierre's money, had paid for them all! Oh, this was too much!

She did not find it in her heart to blame her mother, who had done everything for the best. But, oh, why had fate conspired thus to humiliate and cheapen her?

Mamman had turned to the dresser and was closing the drawer.

Isabelle left her in silence.

She went to her room and flung herself upon the bed, her face, fired with shame, buried in the pillows.

Ernestine called her for the evening meal. But she did not go down. Soon, she heard footsteps in the hall. A moment later David entered the room and closed the door. Isabelle had risen from the bed.

She was seated at the window, gazing out into the gloaming. Randon crossed over to a seat near his wife and came straight to the point:

"I came," he began, "to see about the money. You have been gone from home some time and I expected to hear from you before this."

"I wrote you a day or two after my arrival," she replied, "but received no reply from you."

"Yes, but you made no mention of the money, in your letter—that was what I wanted to know about."

"Oh!"

"Well, what I mean to say is that it was the all-important thing—for both of us, you know."

"Here it is—all I could get. All I will be able to get. My mother gave it to me a little while ago, after I came home from the fields. My father is not to be approached. He refuses to advance a dollar.

"But, the first five thousand: didn't he—"

"No. He refused. I have just learned the truth from my mother. She then went to Pierre. He let her have it."

He flattened the bills on the dresser and counted the money eagerly.

"Twenty-eight hundred dollars," he announced, when he had done. And, wheeling about to face her: "This will never do. It destroys all my plans. It swamps me!"

"It makes almost eight thousand dollars in all, David. I am sorry if it is not enough. But it is all I can do."

"If I thought I could reason with your father, I would try to show him the error of his way."

"My father is not one to be easily persuaded to part with his money. I am quite sure it would be useless, David."

He stood a moment in thought, his hands behind his back.

"Then, I will leave tonight. There is nothing to accomplish by staying here."

He looked at his watch:

"There is a train for Montreal due here at eight. That will give me just time enough to drive in. Will you tell them downstairs?"

"I will drive you to the station myself," she replied, "in the car."

She was piqued by his coldness, deeply wounded by the arrogance of his bearing towards her. She rose to her feet.

"I must see Bissonette," she said, "to make sure the car is ready."

He followed her downstairs; and remained in the dining-room, with Mamma, while his wife went out in search of the man.

At the last moment, Isabelle complained of a headache and decided not to accompany him to the station.

The parting was cold and formal. Yes, she would stay and have a nice visit while she was here. Oh, she would take good care of herself. And he must tell Antoinette to water the ferns.

She was very brave when he swept his lips over hers in a swift, fleeting kiss.

In a trice, he had climbed to the seat and the car was rolling down the driveway.

She smiled and waved her hand to him as he glanced back, at the turn in the road. The tail-light glimmered like a glow-worm in the gloom of early night; rose swiftly to the peak of the knoll; and flickered out.

Mamman and Pierre were seated in the kitchen when she went in. She lighted a lamp and bade them good-night.

"Shall we drive to the Point tomorrow, Isabelle?" said Pierre.

"Yes—I shall be glad to go, Pierre," she replied. "The scenery must be beautiful at this time."

She wanted to remain with them a while; to sit and chat and watch the flames leaping in the fireplace. But her heart was too full; too sad. Dazed by a new-born fear, she climbed the stairs to her room; and went to bed.

During the days that followed, Pierre and Isabelle spent much of the time together, roaming the fields and the wild-wood, revisiting scenes endeared to them by childhood memories, in the serene comradeship of perfect understanding.

Nazaire said to Philomène, one day, over his soup:

"It's strange is it not, *bonne femme*? They're never apart, those two. Where you see one you see the other. Now, why, I ask you, did she not marry Pierre, instead of that silk hat from the city? He struts about like a peacock. I don't like him!"

"Each one to his taste, *mon vieux*," replied his wife. "You can't account for the foolish things a young girl will do. Look at me, for example."

"Eh bien—what about it?"

"Why, you know well enough that I could have had my choice of a dozen splendid matches. And, instead of using good sense, I chose to live in poverty."

"You speak like one who is touched in the head, *bonne femme*. Pretty soon you will be needing a doctor, I'm thinking. I'm quite sure you're no worse off now than when I saw you, for the first time, peeling potatoes in the Bessette kitchen. Talk sense, *bonne femme*. Else, say nothing."

"Just the same, I have sense enough to know that I would not be playing second fiddle to a rich brother, besides adding to his wealth by my daily toil. I have sense enough to know that, my good man—understand?"

"I understand a good many things. That's not where the trouble lies. It's getting them into action after you understand them. Now, is that clear to you? You are forever holding that good-for-nothing before my eyes. You preach and

nag and scold about him until I wish you both to the devil. Now, since you are so wise, you tell me what I am to do. I am listening. Tell me!"

"Break his neck," snapped Philomène, rising to refill her bowl.

"I thought as much," rejoined Nazaire. "You preach to me, but you yourself have no remedy to offer."

There was silence for a space. Presently, Philomène turned from the soup pot to face Nazaire.

"Well," she said, "suppose Philippe did break his neck—accidentally? Suppose he fell?"

Nazaire stared at his wife in mute astonishment. At last he spoke:

"Nom de Dieu, you are a wicked woman! On my soul, I believe you would do it!"

So saying, he picked up his cap and hurried out of the house. Philomène watched him through the window until he had disappeared behind the pig-stye. Then, with

a shrug of her shoulders, she went back to her soup.

Through the long afternoon Nazaire wielded the flail in his brother's barn. With machine-like precision, the loose-hanging club swung in a deadly circle over his head and struck the rattling pea-vines at his feet. But, he gave little thought to the work in hand; and was more like a clock that tells off the hours without recking of time or tide.

He saw but the hate-driven face of his wife as she stood by the kitchen stove. He heard no sound but the rasp of her voice, cold and unyielding, pointing the way.

Philippe came into the barn towards evening.

"How much have you done?" he asked, with the jovial air which he affected at times.

"You can see," said Nazaire, with a sweep of the hand towards the sacks of peas.

"A good day's work," commended the great man.

Nazaire swung the flail aloft and struck into the rhythmic thud.

He was numbly aware of a feeling of guilt, which closed his lips in silence and lowered his eyes before his brother's gaze.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE.

Isabelle remained at Lamartinette until the middle of December.

Throughout her stay at the homestead she received occasional letters from David, which were largely of a perfunctory nature and general in tone. He had invariably omitted any reference to his progress in establishing an office; but repeatedly emphasized the drain on his resources resulting from the demands made upon him by what he termed the winning of his goal.

Reluctantly and with anguish she came to realize that those ideals which were to her the very essence of happiness passed above his head, like summer clouds, unknown and unseen.

She had builded a castle on the moun-

tain top and had entered in to await his coming.

But, he had remained below in the valley, his vision obscured by the blur of the mists.

Upon her return to Montreal, David met her at the station. They drove home.

On the way through the crowded streets, he told her that he had taken "another chance on wheat," and lost a thousand dollars. He spoke in a matter-of-fact tone, going on to explain that he had acted for the best.

"Nothing risked, nothing won," he said.

Tabor had induced him to try again; and had handled the money together with his own. He, too, had lost; and heavily.

Isabelle remained silent. She dared not trust herself to speech. Her whole being rose up in hot rebellion. It was unjust and unfair thus to gamble away the goods of another, for which he had saved and striven and toiled. It was a wanton abuse of her mother's loving trust. It would

never occur again. Not through any aid of hers.

She did not question the motives of David. But, certain it was that his hunger for show and affluence had gotten the better of his good sense. He was being led away by the false faces of appearance. But, not she. A thousand dollars! One would have thought it was water, or air—the way he referred to it. And this Tabor—how did David know what he had done with the money? No, it was not right. It was wrong, very wrong. Instinctively she shrank from the thought that she had been a party to what she considered the fleecing of her people.

“So, you are little better off than you were,” she ventured.

“I have furnished an office, purchased surgical supplies and paid off a number of bills. I now have a balance of something like six hundred dollars. Not so bad, everything considered. By the way, Demers dropped five thousand on the same day.”

"Did Tabor act for Demers—handle the money for him, too?" asked Isabelle.

"Oh, yes."

"How did Demers feel about it?"

"Pretty glum. But, he'll get over it. You see, his father has money. Why do you ask?"

"Well, it seems strange to me that Tabor is willing to take on all this responsibility for other people's money if it means no added advantage to him."

"Oh, I presume it does give him increased prestige on the Exchange, or with his brokers."

"Who are his brokers?"

"I can't say, as he prefers to work under cover; to remain unknown. In this way he enjoys more freedom of action."

"But, David, his standing, his reputation—what do you know about him? Really, it all seems very strange to me."

He forced a careless laugh.

"Suspicion of other people's motives," he rejoined, "is bucolic, countrified. It smacks of the unsophisticated. You must

believe the other fellow to be honest until he forces you to think otherwise."

Isabelle was sick at heart. She made no reply. A moment later they swung around onto Sherbrook street and were home.

One evening, a few days later, Demers and Fantine called on the Randons. David had not yet come home.

Fantine was a charming little brunette, with snowy teeth and dancing black eyes. A diminutive parcel of happiness, wreathed in smiles.

They remained but a short while. When they were leaving, Demers enquired, in a casual way, whether Isabelle had seen the Tabors since her return to the city.

No, she had not, she replied. In fact, interviews with the Tabors came a trifle too high for her means.

She had no sooner spoken than she regretted her words.

Demers colored and said:

"I have been of the same mind for some

time. I am very glad to know that I am not alone."

They were gone but a few moments when David came in. He was in high spirits.

He had met St. Julien at the clinic. The great surgeon had greeted him warmly and informed himself of his pupil's prospects. He expressed himself as feeling assured of Randon's ultimate success. But, he had told him, he must specialize. In specialization lay the secret to rapid success and recognition. He had an idea. In fact, he had been thinking of David for some time. A wealthy man, by the name of Rochette, had come to him with his little boy, who was afflicted with a congenital disease. The greatest known specialist in such cases was in Vienna. St. Julien had advised Rochette to take the little fellow abroad and place him in the hands of the Viennese professor. He had no doubt that a cure could be effected. A medical companion would be required to give the treatments and watch over the

general health of the child. The party would be abroad in the neighborhood of three years. He would receive liberal compensation for his services and furthermore would have ample time to attend the clinics in Vienna—the greatest in the world. He would return to Montreal a specialist. He could then become St. Julien's assistant; for the latter's practice was fast growing beyond him. A magnificent opportunity. Would he accept it? Would he go?

He leaned back in his chair and lighted a cigar.

"And—" urged Isabelle, in breathless suspense.

"Why, I accepted, of course. I met the Rochettes. They are fine people. The mother is going too. Our party sails early in May. Just think of it—I shall return to Canada a great man, an established specialist. It's simply wonderful. I think I shall take up St. Julien's work: orthopaedia. It has always interested me."

He rose and poured a swallow of brandy, which he tossed off.

"I will require a wardrobe," he went on. "You can't turn around without money. But, it's worth it. I'm playing for big stakes—and, I'm winning!"

He slapped his thigh and laughed nervously, at thought of his future conquest. Turning serious again, he said:

"Now, you might as well stay right here. There would be nothing to gain by closing the house. And, besides, we want our own home. It will look bigger to keep the place open during my absence. It will lend an air of substance to me. You can keep Antoinette. Well, why are you silent? What do you say about it?"

"I have been listening to you, David," replied Isabelle, striving hard to control her voice; for she was very nigh to tears.

"Oh, surely. But, now that I have told you, what do you think of it? Isn't it wonderful?"

"Yes, David; it is. It is wonderful."

"Well, but would you go?"

"You have accepted St. Julien's offer, have you not?"

"Why, yes, of course."

"Then, you must go, David. It is the opportunity of a lifetime. You are on your way to recognition—to greatness. It would be folly not to go. As to keeping the house open, I shall think it over. It will, of course, be largely a matter of adjusting myself to circumstances."

"I don't quite understand," he said.

"Neither do I," she smiled. "I presume we shall both understand later on—as conditions develop. If I see that it is the better course to remain here and keep Antoinette I shall very naturally do so. But, just at this moment, neither one of us can say what would be best. You leave in May?"

"Yes, probably the first week. By the way, Tabor has bought tickets for a box party. Would you like to go? We are to meet them at the theatre."

"No, I think not. I am very much taken

up with my novel. You go, David; and I will stay home and read."

Before leaving, he came over to her and kissed her on the lips:

"Of course, you will be lonesome when I am gone," he said. "Three years, you see, is a long time. But, then, you must think of the goal. Is it not so?"

"Surely, the goal, David. The goal is everything. Nothing else matters."

"You are very brave," he laughed, a trifle puzzled.

"I never knew that I was. But, really, I seem to be, do I not?"

"Yes, very brave, indeed. It is in moments of great stress that virtues are born. You appear to have all the elements of a good and dutiful wife. I feel quite proud of you, Isabelle."

When he had gone, she laid aside the book which she had taken up.

She was inexpressibly shocked by the grossness of his texture, the utter smallness of the man who was her mate. She felt no bitterness toward David. For she

knew that those were the attributes of his nature, over whose making he had had no control.

But, oh, the cruel heartache, the cold brutality of the revelation! Her life-dream lay shattered at her feet. She knew it well. She could never be happy in the comradeship of this man.

His very presence was a stone wall to the love she would have lavished upon him.

Dutiful! The most detestable of all words between man and wife.

And she was a "dutiful wife!"

Then, that was his conception of wedded life, of the sacred, golden links of love!

Her house lay tumbled about her. The hot blood surged madly in her veins. He did not love her! He did not love her! He was incapable of love. Utterly so. And she had never known. She had given herself to a man who could not love. And she would live with him all the years until life was at an end, knowing that there

was no love, that there could be no love in his heart for her. She would be but a chattel, bearing the seal of church and law. And thousands had gone before her, thousands were living now, the self-same way—dutiful wives.

Why had he not planned to take her with him to Vienna? It would have cost no more than to maintain the home during his absence. Not as much.

Instead of the companionship to which she was entitled, he had, without consulting her wishes, coolly decreed unspeakable misery for her. He had plainly shown that he wished to go without her. For, he spoke of Rochette taking his wife, yet made no mention of her. Her head whirled giddily.

The room was too warm. The ticking of the clock struck like hammer blows. The Venus over the books appeared grotesquely white—would she never find her arms? Her eyes wandered back to the clock. It was early yet. It was suffocat-

ing here! She must go somewhere—do something.

She picked up the evening paper and scanned the week's attractions. She ran down the list until she came to "The Lady Who Lived in the Moon." That would do. She stepped to the kitchen door.

"Antoinette," she said gaily, "you must dress quickly. We are going to the theatre—and we have but a few minutes' time!"

She called a cab and hurried away to dress.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX.

It was a memorable winter in Lamar-tinette.

Early in November the snows began to fall over the frozen, leaf-strewn earth.

Soon, the rolling country was an unbroken landscape of shimmering white.

The habitants went about their daily tasks in the barns and stables, at the wood-pile, or at chores about the house.

On fine days they drove to the village, where they held forth in weighty councils in store and tavern.

Clothed in the thick drap-de-pays, their tuques pulled down snugly over their ears, they had no fear of the biting cold, of the blasts that rode in from the north.

None the less, it was a winter such as few had known.

The flames leaped blue in the fireside

and the night winds howled like many wolves. The sun was a yellow blur. The snow cracked like a whip under the foot. Day by day the cold grew more intense. Day by day the silence fell more solemn over the wide expanse. The Jour de l'An was a bitter day.

New Year's Day among the habitants sounds the beginning of a week's carouse such as is known nowhere else beneath God's canopy. Town and campagne turn into one great abode of fêtes and merriment. "Bonne Année" flits joyfully from mouth to mouth, as good wishes for the New Year are sped upon their way. It is a great event.

The grudge is forgotten. The glasses clink. Song shouts boldly to the stinging wind. The dance holds sway. It is the feast of the habitants. All else matters not.

The night of the Jour de l'An found

Philippe Labelle in the tavern of the widow Duclos.

As the hour grew late Philippe grew drunk.

And when he made a brave attempt to sing "Le Petit Curé de St. Denis" as a parting contribution to the soirée, he crumpled up limply on the floor.

The widow was for putting him to bed. But, he would not have it so, although he had slept here many times.

So, they bundled him warmly in his sleigh and threw the reins about him.

Charlemagne pricked up his ears and started off. Charlemagne was safe. A child could drive him. And, he knew the way.

A half hour later, Nazaire heard the rig turning over the culvert and stepped to the door of the barn, lantern in hand. He was here to await Philippe's coming; for he felt quite sure that his brother would be too drunk to care for the horse. And it was far too cold a night for the doors to be left open.

He raised the lantern above his head and waited. A mellow stream of light fell across the yard. Charlemagne came on to the barns without halting at the house.

Seeing Nazaire, he stopped short. There was no one in the seat.

Nazaire looked into the sleigh and lifted the robes.

"Bon Dieu!" he exclaimed, "I don't see Philippe!"

He walked around the rig, making an inspection of horse and sleigh.

A shaft was broken. He could not drive back to look for his brother. He would go a-foot.

He put up Charlemagne and started off in quest of Philippe.

No more than a half-mile from the house he came upon him, at a point where the road turned in a short curve.

Philippe was lying back limply in the lap of a snow bank, apparently none the worse for his fall; but sound asleep.

Nazaire held the lantern to the face of the drunken man.

Bending over, he seized him by the arm.
"Come," he said gruffly, "I am here to take you home."

Philippe grunted contentedly and drew free his arm, which fell back limply on the snow.

He did not open his eyes.

He was very drunk, mused Nazaire.

He would not be able to walk.

And he was too heavy to carry.

The shaft was broken, else it would have been simple to load him into the sleigh and tumble him off at the house.

Parbleu! It was a nasty bit of work.

How to go about it was beyond him.

Ah, there was the box-sleigh! Why had he not thought of that before? No wonder Philomène said he was thick and dull.

Philomène—the name opened a train of thought in the sluggish brain.

What was it she had said to him, that day, standing by the stove, soup bowl in hand?

"Suppose he did fall—accidentally."

That was it.

That was what Philomène had said to him.

Sacré!

And there lay Philippe before him, like a beast in the mire, where he had fallen—accidentally.

Tonnerre! It was no affair of his.

He had done nothing to bring about this state of things.

No human being could live in such a night as this.

With Philippe out of the way, there would be something more in life than soup, salt pork and potatoes.

He would manage the farm for his brother's wife.

He would be consulted in matters of importance.

They could live, he and Philomène, as they wished to live, as they had a right to live.

His sister-in-law would need him.

She would pay handsomely for his services.

He straightened in his tracks.

A vision of ease and comfort flitted before him.

Philippe slept peacefully at his feet, unconscious of the cold that was slowly numbing his limbs.

Soon, it would creep up stealthily, soothingly, to his heart and he would enter the long sleep and awake no more.

Nazaire gazed down upon the sprawling form.

What did he owe this man, this brother in the flesh?

What had Philippe been to him, but a hard and unjust master?

Whose fault was it, but his own, that he was now lying there, a drunken pig, by the roadside.

For years he had suffered injustice at his hands.

If it was the will of the Bon Dieu for this good-for-nothing to die in the ditch, then let him die in the ditch!

He, Nazaire, would not interfere.

No doubt, it was a judgment from Heaven.

Soit—so be it!

He extinguished the flame in the lantern and started off down the white highway that led to his home.

Once, as he went, he thought he heard the voice of Philippe, calling him.

He halted and looked back, listening.

A great stillness lay over the moon-bathed snows.

He hurried on, conscious of a rising sense of guilt.

A twig snapped in a tree, above his head.

He broke into a run, his brain in a panic of fear.

He dashed madly from tree to tree, along the road, until the outline of his cottage rose in the moonlight before his frightened eyes.

Home, he bolted the door securely, removed his boots and stole away to bed.

Philomène was asleep. He was careful

not to wake her. She must not know.
None should ever know.

It was his secret. His and the Bon
Dieu's.

It was a bitter night.

No habitants drove over the long white
road.

Once, Philippe Labelle opened wide his
eyes to stare in silent wonder at the pale
disc of moon above him.

He did not close his eyes again.

And through the crystal night he kept
his silent vigil, wide-eyed, wondering,
waiting, as though he might have had a
loving tryst and was faithful at the ren-
dezvous.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN.

The plans of Nazaire worked out to a nicety.

The day after the funeral Mamman Labelle held a conference with her brother-in-law and his wife on the future conduct of affairs on the farm.

It was arranged that they would move into the homestead.

Philomène would do no more sewing for the women of Lamartinette. She might assist Ernestine in the work about the house sufficiently to offset the increase in the girl's labours; no more.

Philomène and Nazaire would have the room made vacant by the death of Philippe. A liberal stipend and an annual bonus were agreed upon. It was all very simple. Nazaire was amazed at his good fortune. He would be the manager. His

word would be law wherever his duties took him. And Philomène, a lady in her own home, as one might say.

Parbleu! This was a turn in the road, to be sure.

He swelled with pride at the thought of his achievement.

As a token of benevolence, he told Bissonette that he might move into "the cottage yonder," and that it would cost him nothing in rent.

"And cast about for another hand," he said. "Some strong, willing lad, looking for a good home."

"What is that you say?" asked Philomène, who had come up, unheard, behind the two men.

"I say to you, good woman," thundered Nazaire, "to go into the house and look after your own affairs!"

So saying, he walked off towards the barns, leaving her wilted in her tracks.

In the course of a few days, a young man appeared and was engaged to work about the farm.

"And your name, my good fellow?" queried Nazaire, when the youth had been hired.

"Théophile Dumoulin—from Sainte Anne."

"Ah, oui, from Sainte Anne. Eh, bien, this is Bissonette. You will work with him. And I am Monsieur Labelle—understand?"

"Oui, Monsieur Labelle."

"Trés bien. Very well."

"Monsieur Labelle!" laughed Bissonette when he found himself alone. Sacré, but some people were lacking good sense!

Isabelle was deeply shocked by the news of her father's tragic death.

She left at once for Lamartinette. David did not arrive until the morning of the funeral. He returned to Montreal in the evening.

"Stay a few days with your mother," he said to his wife. "No doubt, she needs you, now. And, besides, she will wish to consult with you on the settlement of the estate. Did your father leave a will?"

"I cannot say, David. I have never heard of one. Doret, the notary, would know; or, Mamman, perhaps."

"I see. Well, you can make enquiries and advise me by letter. You understand, of course, that it is an all-important matter to us—this question of funds. For, I cannot get started off to Europe without considerable outlay, not to speak of the expense in the home."

Isabelle made no reply.

"That is clear to you, is it not?" he urged, after a silence.

"Oh, yes, David," she replied, "it is quite clear to me. But, I am determined to make no more advances to my mother for money. If she takes the initiative, well and good. But, I shall humble myself no more to any one of my people. I have gone to them for the last time."

"Then, what shall we do?" he snapped.

"Work out our own salvation, as thousands of others have done."

His face went white. His lip curled in a sneer as he said:

"Perhaps you would like to see me in a buckboard, bumping over the country roads, doling out pills to the habitants."

She smiled wistfully as she rejoined:

"That might not be so bad, David, if only we lived within our means and stood on our own feet. However it may be," she concluded resolutely, "I shall make no more overtures to my people."

"But, it is your money, now. The law gives it to you."

"Then, my dear, is that not all the more reason why we should not show undue haste—eagerness to grasp our share? Don't you suppose Mamman has all the trouble she can bear, without annoying her about money at this time?"

There was more in her mind than she betrayed.

She was determined that not a foot of ground would be sacrificed for her.

The home would remain intact as long as her mother lived.

And Pierre would be repaid his five

thousand before she would accept a dollar from the estate.

She would have told David as much frankly. But, in the face of his anger she concluded to say no more.

"Have your way about it, then," he growled, turning to his bag.

He left in a huff. Isabelle went out into the yard to see him off.

But, he was already gone.

Chagrined and sore at heart, she re-entered the house and mounted the stairs to her mother's room.

Mother and child sat before the leaping fire and talked of the one who had died.

They spoke only of his good traits, leaving his faults in the shadow of merciful silence. It was late when Isabelle kissed Mamman and went to her room. Somehow, a load had been lifted. She was conscious of a greater freedom. Her mind was at rest. She had settled an account with her conscience. David would see that she was right. He had not

stopped to think—to realize her position. But, he would see—and understand.

And, yet, he might persist in his demands. In which event, she would refuse again. It was plainly her duty to do so. If it had not been for Tabor—there was something wrong about that man. She did not like him. He was coiling and slimy, like a snake. He purred more than spoke. And his wife—a fat little cat!

There was a tap at her door. It was Mamman.

“I am feeling nervous, my dear. I shall sleep with you tonight.”

Isabelle was glad. For it was very still in the great house; and she was lonely.

She clasped her mother in her arms.

How often had Mamman held her thus, as a babe! Mamman had always been so good! She was soon asleep.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT.

The notary Doret knew of no will; nor did Mamman Labelle. Philippe must have died intestate.

It would be six months before the affairs of the estate could be settled. Mrs. Labelle remained in charge of the property by sanction of the court. The procedure was of a purely formal nature.

There were stocks and bonds to the value of twenty thousand dollars and a bank balance of something like seven thousand. As there were no incumbrances on the farm, the outlook was one of comfort for the declining years of the widow.

It was with a feeling of keen disappointment that David learned the facts from his wife upon her return to Montreal; for she had avoided the subject in her letters

to him during the remainder of her stay at the homestead.

"But, did your mother," he said, "fail to make any mention whatever of us—of our share in the estate?"

"No, not altogether, dear," replied Isabelle. "She said that, as soon as her hands were freed, she would repay Pierre the five thousand he had loaned her for us. That, of course, will come out of my share. Then, there is the other twenty-eight hundred, which will also be charged against me."

"Well, what then?"

"Nothing more, David. I presume there is nothing to be expected before the estate is settled."

They were sitting in the library. She rose and crossed over to the piano. He stepped in front of her, his face livid.

"I wish to speak to you," he snapped. "You shan't dismiss a subject in this fashion when I am talking to you."

"Really," she rejoined, with admirable

composure. "I thought the subject was ended."

She seated herself beside the reading table and waited for him to speak. Her slippered foot tapped the rug nervously. Otherwise, she remained, outwardly, calm.

He came over and stood before her, his hands in his pockets.

"Is there to be no advance, pending the settlement?"

"Not if I am to seek it, David."

"You are quite decided on that point?"

"Yes—entirely so. You see, my dear, mother has no idea that we could have gone through the twenty-eight hundred already. And she could hardly be expected to know about your speculations. So, naturally she thinks we are still provided with at least a sufficient supply of funds to carry us through the winter. And I could not possibly bring myself to tell her the truth."

"Then, you don't care whether I go to Europe or not?"

"On the contrary," she smiled, "I shall be very sorry to see you go. It will be so lonely. But, you will be happy and—become great. Is it not so? Therefore, I shall not complain."

"But, how am I to go without funds? There is my wardrobe—a hundred different things to buy. And I must live in a manner befitting my station. Rochette will not offer me an advance. He might fear to offend me."

"My dear, you have until May. Who knows what may come to pass between now and then? Let us not borrow trouble. Perhaps Mamman will speak about it when she comes to visit us next month. Are you going out? I will change my dress and go with you. There is a new book I promised to send Mamman."

"I can't wait," he replied. "I have an appointment."

A moment later, the door opened and closed behind him.

She stood where she had risen from the

chair, amazed at the suddenness of his decision, stung to the quick by the cold brutality of his treatment.

She was beset again, in this dark hour, by the thought that love would never live within his heart; that he was of the shallow clay that loves itself alone.

She drew a long, deep sigh, her eyes far away in thought.

Life, love, happiness—what was it all about? Who might say?

A fleeting firefly in the night? The mirage of a fevered brain?

Ah, she hoped not; yearningly she hoped not.

Somewhere love lingered, alluring, red-garlanded. She knew it by the throbbing of her heart, by the hunger of her soul, by the mad surging of the tide in her veins.

She dressed and went out.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE.

It was soon noted in Lamartinette that Nazaire had undergone a great change since the taking off of his brother Philippe.

He developed haughty mannerisms of speech and bearing, which evoked humorous comment among the habitants.

They came to speak of him as "Monsieur Nazaire Labelle."

The wits and wags of the village strove to outrival one another in their sallies about him.

He would clear his throat before speaking and utter his words in a slow, sententious way.

His lumbering stride of yore gave way to a stiff, labored strut.

On Sundays, he carried a cane to church.

It was a great day in their life when he and Philomène stalked up the main aisle of the edifice, arm in arm, to the pew of the Labelles, dressed in the garb of their new station.

Philomène wore a dress of black silk—her dream of years. It was an elaborate affair, with many flounces.

Nazaire looked very solemn in a black Prince Albert, a scarlet geranium in his boutonnière. His new shoes squeaked derision. His fat, soulless face was a deep red. He was thankful when the organ pealed the Kyrie, submerging him in waves of mellow sound.

Mamman Labelle had found a pretext to remain at home. She was not feeling well. She would see to the dinner. In truth, she felt deep compassion for these two. For, Mamman was very human; and she had a noble heart.

Nazaire and Philomène excited her pity now as they had never done in the days of their poverty. She resented the spirit of ridicule that bubbled about them, wher-

ever they went. Her soul rebelled against the malice of the little minds who had found in this pair a worthy object of attack. But, she was powerless, as well she knew. For, any advice which she might offer them would surely be misconstrued by Nazaire and his wife. So, she remained discreetly silent, permitting the future to shape its own course.

One day, when Nazaire was in Lamar-tinette, he met the Curé St. Georges in front of the parish-house. The priest was in very good spirits.

"I have been waiting to have a chat with you, Nazaire," he said. "Come into the house. It is too cold to stand outside."

"Oui, Monsieur le Curé," blurted Nazaire, his brain in a whirl of panic. What did he want? Did the Curé know? Holy Virgin! What was it about?

They went into the house together, the priest leading the way.

Once, Nazaire was tempted to turn and flee.

But, what would that avail him?

Nothing, if the Curé knew.

So, he followed in.

"You are shaking," said St. Georges, when the door of the study had closed behind them. "Are you ill?"

"I am cold," replied Nazaire, turning to the fire, to avoid the enquiring gaze of the priest.

"I shall fetch you a glass of wine," spoke St. Georges.

He left the room and returned a moment later with a glass and decanter.

"Drink, Nazaire," said the priest. "Why, you tremble like a leaf! What ails you?"

Nazaire had gulped a glassful of the wine and crumpled into an arm-chair before the fireplace. He was sweating profusely.

The priest drew a chair on the other side of the hearth, facing Nazaire.

"You are perspiring. It will do you good. Only, you must not be in a hurry to go out. It might mean your death."

Nazaire started up. He half shrieked:

“Mon Dieu! What will you have of me? Why have you brought me here? Say it! I can’t stand this sort of thing much longer, I warn you. What is it, I ask you?”

“Nothing to make you carry on in this fashion, I assure you, Nazaire. I merely wished to know how you have been getting on—of late; and if you are finding yourself better pleased with life.”

Nazaire gazed into the face of the priest, a dull fire of suspicion in his eyes. Slowly the bulky form relaxed in the arm-chair. He mopped his face and neck thoughtfully for a space.

“Yes, Monsieur le Curé,” he said presently. “The Bon Dieu seems very good to me—after all these years. I had a very wicked brother, Monsieur le Curé. He was a bad man.”

“Your brother is dead, Nazaire. Judge not. Leave judgment to Him who reads our inmost thoughts, who sees our slightest acts and who holds in His hands the

scales from which no man may ever hope to escape."

"He sees all, you say? He knows our thoughts? He—reads—what is in our— hearts?"

"Yes, my son."

"My God!" exclaimed Nazaire, utterly broken, "that is terrible!"

He sprang to his feet:

"Some day I will come back. But now, I must go. I am choking for want of air. But, I will be back. I will be back, Monsieur le Curé—some day. There is something I wish to tell you. But—not now!"

He flung himself out of the house and hurried off down the village street, as though in deadly fear of pursuit.

From a window of his study, St. Georges gazed after the fleeing form in amazement.

"Who would have thought," the good man mused aloud, "that a little wine would have thus upset him!"

After a while, he lighted his pipe and sat down to read.

CHAPTER THIRTY.

Some time elapsed. Nazaire did not go back to the parish-house. On a number of occasions he resolved to make a clean breast of his connection with the death of Philippe to the priest. But, each time he had weakened as he neared the Curé's abode; and quickly found business elsewhere.

Sullen and taciturn by nature, he now grew profoundly morose. He fell into long spells of despondency, shunning all who would have converse with him and holding to himself in the barns and stables.

His customary journeys to the village were abandoned.

He lost weight; and the apoplectic flush of his face paled to a pasty, putty-like cast.

He partook of little food, going through

the motions of eating like a thing pulled by wires.

The Prince Albert hung, forgotten, on its peg in the closet. He went back to his former method of dress, much against the protestations of Philomène, who was at a loss to understand his strange behavior. He made frequent pilgrimages to the spot by the roadside where he had come upon Philippe and left him to die.

Here he would stand a long while, staring fixedly at the ground.

Then, slowly, brokenly, he would trudge off again towards the home.

The habitants would say:

"He grieves for his brother Philippe!"

One night, he did not come in to supper with the others.

Ernestine put his meal in the oven to keep warm against his return.

Late in the night Philomène awoke in her bed to find that Nazaire was not lying beside her. He had not returned.

She rose and dressed hastily.

His supper was still in the oven, where Ernestine had placed it.

There was something wrong; else he would be home. She lighted the lantern and went out. It was biting cold. She drew her cape snugly about her and started across the yard towards the barn.

A silver crescent of moon looked down peacefully upon the white-mantled earth. Many stars were in the sky. She hurried her steps, stung by a sense of fear and foreboding.

The stables threw out a grateful warmth as she pulled open the thick, heavy door. The grinding of the horses' teeth and the swish of the hay in the mangers were welcome sounds to her ears.

Holding the lantern above her head, she peered into the dimly lighted stalls. Convinced that he was not here, she went on.

He was not in the sheep-pens; nor in the barns, where the hay and the grain were stored.

Abandoning hope of finding Nazaire, she turned to retrace her steps towards the house.

As she went, a sudden thought struck her: The carriage-house! She had not tried it.

A moment later, she stood at the door, her hand in the slot that served in lieu of handle.

Here she paused, a sudden, unaccountable fear gripping her senses.

The door was ajar. She pushed against it timidly.

It swung in and struck against a strange object, that was heavy and soft. She could not see what it was.

Her head whirled in panic.

After a while, and with great effort, she called out:

"Nazaire, where are you?"

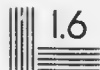
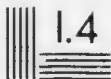
The echo of her voice chilled her to the marrow.

A window opened in the upper part of the house.



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In the square of yellow light, she discerned the form of Madame Labelle.

"What is it, Philomène? What is the matter?" asked Mamman.

Philomène shrilled back:

"Come quickly, I beg of you! Awaken the men! I fear something has happened!"

"Oh, mon Dieu, mon Dieu!" she wailed aloud.

When the men reached the scene, slightly in advance of Madame Labelle and Ernestine, Philomène pointed to the door, her face chalk-white in the lantern light.

"In there," she said. "Something tells me. I can feel it."

Dumoulin pushed back the door.

Then, he gasped and stepped back a pace.

Bissonette caught Philomène in his strong arms as she reeled in the snow.

Mamman and Ernestine clung to each other in frozen horror.

At last, someone spoke.

It was the voice of Bissonette.

"Come!" he said hoarsely to the women.

And he hurried them away from the thing that was hanging before them.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE.

One sunny day in April Madame Labelle drove to the village station with Bissonette and boarded the train for Montreal.

She arrived at the Bonaventure Station about noon and rode to the Randon home with Isabelle, who was overjoyed to have her "Mumzie" with her.

Mamman was to remain with the Randons until David's departure, which would be early in May. No further plans had been made by the two women.

The young doctor greeted his mother-in-law pleasantly, enjoining her to consider herself in her own home while here with them.

After luncheon, during which he was unusually vivacious, he took himself off, explaining, in a casual way, that there

were numerous matters requiring his attention before the date of his sailing.

He puckered his brow in studious mood, tracing a circle with his stick on the rug at his feet. A moment later he was gone.

"David will, no doubt, require funds for his undertaking, my dear," suggested Mamman, when they were alone. "I could advance him five thousand dollars of your share in the estate. You might speak to him about it. He may be in immediate need of money."

"I know that he is, Mamman. He mentioned the matter some time ago. But, I am thinking of you. Would it leave you—secure?"

"Oh, yes; there is some cash on hand. And Pierre has refused to accept the return of his loan at this time. I shall write a check during the day, which you may place on deposit in your bank, or endorse over to David."

"I thank you, Mamman," rejoined Isabelle, visibly confused.

She lowered her eyes to the empty plate

before her, a deep flush suffusing her cheeks. She was proud-spirited. These repeated acceptances of loans and gratuities galled her, stung her to the point of rebellion. She felt a grateful relief when Antoinette entered the room to clear the table.

"It will do very nicely for the present," said David, that night, to Isabelle, as he folded the check and put it in his pocket. "But, of course, there is no telling what our future needs may be. However," he smiled, "we will cross that bridge when we come to it. As a matter of fact, I had expected a settlement of the estate. It would have enabled us to see what our resources were and plan accordingly. But, as I say, this will do—for the present."

It was with great effort that Isabelle repressed the leaping fires of her indignation. But, in the end she triumphed over the hot impulse and said, simply:

"I did not ask for it, David. It was my mother who suggested the advance. I would not have asked for it. And after

this I shall accept no more from her. I shall positively refuse to impoverish her, or strip the homestead while my mother lives."

He wheeled about from the mirror to face her. There was a deadly glint in his eyes and his fists clenched tightly.

She looked curiously into his face, as though she might have discovered in the distorted outline some new and hitherto undreamed of touch. She waited for him to speak. But, he said no word; and turned back, presently, to the glass.

Shortly after, he went out, without speaking.

"Was David pleased, my dear?" asked Mamman, when he had gone.

"Oh, yes, Mumzie dear," said Isabelle, bravely. "He was delighted. Only, he has a great deal on his mind and sometimes overlooks the little amenities. He takes life quite seriously," she laughed.

And Mamman laughed too. But the veil was too thin for Madame Labelle. She had seen too much of life to be de-

ceived by her daughter's brave attempt to conceal the truth. It was plain to her that Randon's demeanor at leaving could have but one interpretation. He was disappointed. He had expected more. How much had he received already? How long would her resources last, if left to the mercy of this foolish and conceited young man? There would be no more funds advanced!

She felt a pang of pity for her child, sitting there before her, smiling away the truth.

Ah, she knew the narrow channels, the shallow, selfish motives of men's minds.

But, she, too, had a woman's heart, a woman's shrinking fear of brutal facts, of hidden sores. And so, she smiled back at Isabelle, albeit her heart was sad; and nodded understanding.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO.

The day of the sailing dawned, bright and warm. The tender green of budding leaves peeped shyly from the little brown pods that still shielded off the cold of the early spring nights. Birds flitted busily among the trees, building their nests and singing of their happiness.

David left home shortly after breakfast.

It was after four in the afternoon when he returned. He appeared tired and worn from the day's exertions. At dinner he ate sparingly.

He spoke of the Rochettes, whom he had seen during the day, of St. Julien, who had done so much for him, of the accommodations aboard the ship and the transfer of his trunks and bags to the dock.

Isabelle and Mamman followed him closely, pressing him to eat, the while.

When he went into the bedroom, before leaving, Isabelle came up to him, her arms outstretched to embrace him. He took her in his arms and kissed her on the mouth.

Her form quivered in the embrace and he thought he heard a low, suffused sob.

He pushed her back gently.

"No scene, my dear!" he said. "It is only for a short time; and, think of the prize! Come, let us go. It is getting late. The Rochettes will be waiting."

He led her out of the room. Mamman was in the library, dressed for the street. She turned, smiling, to the young couple.

"The car is here," she announced.

David made hasty adieux to Antoinette and led the way out of the house. He was visibly nervous. Arriving at the dock, he assisted the two women up the gang-plank to the deck of the ship.

The Rochettes were there, near the guard-rail, surrounded by a party of

friends and relatives. They greeted the Randons warmly and chatted about the voyage and the chances for a pleasant passage.

The deck was crowded with closely packed groups, through which stewards and deck-hands wormed laboriously, in an endeavor to perform their work. From somewhere aloft, it might have been the bridge, a whistle shrilled above the tumult of the deck.

Soon, an officer passed from group to group, announcing that all these not taking passage must leave the ship.

A long stream of people ribboned down the gangplank, slowly.

The throng on the main deck thinned to a few clinging knots in the semi-darkness.

Mrs. Rochette was laughing as she seized Isabelle by the hand.

"We shall bring him back safe and sound," she assured, in a tone which was meant to encourage.

"Yes, Madame, safe and sound," echoed Rochette himself.

Another blast from the whistle warned them.

It was short and sharp and carried a tone of finality.

Isabelle turned to David.

She felt a choking sensation in her throat.

She wished to cry out, to rebel, to go with him over the bounding sea, anywhere, to the end of the way.

Then she felt his lips upon her own, in a swift, fleeting kiss, that burned with very bitterness.

A moment later he was gone.

"Come, dear child," soothed the voice of Mamman.

They turned to the gang-plank and followed the long cortège.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE.

The house seemed very large and very empty, now, to Isabelle.

The going of David left a void in her life, which, do what she would, she might not fill.

And yet, a voice in her heart told her that her love for him was a wasted gift, a flame to whose exquisite radiance he must stumble on blind and cold. She, herself, marveled at the clinging quality, the vine-like tenderness of her devotion. The home took on a dungeon gloom. The city with its maddened throngs, whirled and smacked and tossed before her like some horrible monster in pain.

She longed to flee, to be away from the belching swirl; to visit scenes of smiling peace; to roam the meadows and the wild-wood and hear the tinkle of soft bells at

eventide; to kiss the wild flowers, wet with dew; to feel the thrall of exultation in the throated pæan of field and forest.

A great yearning came upon her for the scenes of her childhood.

Oh, to be a care-free child again and hear the bobolinks in springtime!

One day she made decision. She would go back with her mother to Lamartinette. Mamman agreed gladly to the plan. Isabelle was not only her child; but, a delightful companion as well. Antoinette would remain in charge of the home.

In the valley of the Richelieu the white and coral of apple bloom lay in gorgeous mantles over the rolling orchards.

They arrived after night had fallen. The soft, warm night of budding summer. The countryside lay bathed in moonlight.

The air was laden with the breath of many flowers that banked the ditches along the winding road.

Clear and shrill, the piping of frogs rose in a riotous medley of silver song. Great, scattering constellations stretched across the sombre vault of sky, as though some mighty sower had gone forth and showered the azure field with glittering crumbs of gold.

The young leaves rustled in the crooning breeze. In the dimness were the forms of cattle, browsing.

Isabelle thrilled with a joy she had not known before.

The homestead rose in silent majesty to greet her, its proud outline alight beneath the moon.

A door went wide and Ernestine came out, hastening across the yard to meet them.

"Home!" said Isabelle, tears welling in her eyes.

"Yes, home, chérie," echoed her mother's voice.

Through the window, as they neared the house, they glimpsed the bending form of Philomène, silhouetted against

the kitchen wall, as she went about her work at the stove. The widow of Nazaire greeted the returning women with a fleeting smile and a brief "bon jour," and proceeded to lay the dishes for the evening meal, which had been delayed against their coming.

When they had eaten, Isabelle retired to her room. The windows were open. The white curtains, blown by the warm wind, floated gracefully in the air. From below came the glad, insistent chorus of katydids. Fire-flies spangled the grasses like twinkling stars.

Isabelle lighted the lamp and drew a chair to the window.

She felt strangely perturbed. And yet, she was face to face with a great happiness.

If she had but known in time to tell him before his going, perhaps he would not have been so cold, so indifferent. Perhaps it would have drawn to the surface hidden, slumbering fires within him. Perhaps the promise of his parenthood would

have softened the strange mettle of his heart.

If only she could have looked into his eyes and heard him say that he was glad! He had gone, not knowing, not suspecting; and she would bear, alone, the anguish and the pain.

But, oh, she did not quell; nor shrink from the ordeal. Gladly she would bear the yoke. With eager hope she would wait the hour when she might clasp in fond embrace love's trusting messenger.

Her thoughts took wing. What would David say? Ah, well she knew. He would rejoice. For, men were proud of fatherhood. He might regret that he had gone without her and wish to have her with him, now. Her face clouded in thought. She must do nothing that would disturb his plans. But, he must know. He had a right to know. She must not rob him of the joy that would be his. She had received no letter from him since he had gone. But, she would not wait to hear from David. She knew his address

in Vienna—the Allgemeine Krankenhaus. He had told her.

It might take too long—to wait. She would write and tell him the glad tidings. Manman did not know. Nobody knew. She would write him first—and then—the world might know!

So, she sat in the lamp light and poured out the secret of her heart; poured out the love that burned like a flame in her breast; poured out her hopes and glad yearnings; but said not a word of her fears.

She rose early on the morrow and drove to Lamartinette, not deigning to entrust the mailing of the letter to other hands.

She crossed the bridge to St. John's and made a few purchases in the stores.

It was a bright, warm day and the bloom-scented air hung heavy in languorous waves.

She felt keenly alive to the spirit of the wanton Spring, that recked not of care or sorrow and lived her fleeting days in a song-laden bower.

White sails flecked the deep blue of the

river, like the milky wings of great hovering butterflies. Children shouted at play along the banks.

Habitants, gravely polite, drove by, bowing to Isabelle with a "bon jour, Madame."

A wonderful serenity lay upon the scene.

The soothing mysticism of the earth lulled her senses to the sweet contentment of a trusting child.

She drove by the college on her way to the homestead; but the grounds were deserted and Pierre was nowhere to be seen.

She did not alight; but went on, at a faster gait, past the outer fringe of dwellings, into the rolling country.

There was much to be done, she knew.

A great task lay ahead. A long and arduous road. But, oh, the joy that would be hers in the end! The wild rapture, the ecstasy of motherhood!

In the afternoon, she sent word to Pierre that she was home, by Dumonlin, who was going to the village.

A few days later Pierre paid a short visit to the homestead.

Isabelle noted a great change in the friend of her childhood.

He was still the Pierre of the old days, quiet and kind and thoughtful of others.

But, it seemed to her that the sterner qualities of the man had undergone a refining process, that was not unlike the tempering of steel for high purpose.

The hands were now white and free of the noble disfigurements wrought by the plough. The stoop in the shoulders had given way to a straight, almost heroic poise. The features of the man had taken on an imprint of repression and self-control, which added virile force to the face. The long, awkward stride of the farm-lad had changed to an easy, balanced walk, that had rhythm and grace.

He appeared quite unconscious of the transformation; and was perfectly at ease amid his surroundings.

He laughed and chatted pleasantly. No, he had not yet taken his vows. He was

very proud of his little men; and liked to teach. He was devoting much of his spare time to reading.

Mamman served a light iunch; and when they had eaten, they walked out into the garden where the flowers were.

It was all very peaceful and home-like.

Then, it seemed very soon, he announced that he must be going back to the college.

And when he had left, a feeling of loneliness crept into the heart of Isabelle. A feeling of sadness and sorrow, as though some one whom she loved very dearly had gone to return no more. With great effort she fought back the waves of regret that rose, clamoring loudly, in her breast.

No, no, not that, not that! She would be happy yet. But a little while and all would be well. Three years. He had said that three years would not be long flitting by. And when he came, things would be different. He would be established. He would not be worried by the little needs that wore and harried one's sou'. Yes,

that was it—he had been worried so! But, all that would be changed, when he came home again. The letter—he had by this time received her good news, their good news. She would count the days until his answer came flying across the sea to her, like a little bird, to nestle in her breast. Oh, yes, David loved her, in his way. He could not show his love. There were such people. Mamman had told her so.

But Pierre — ah, how Pierre had changed!

The thought flashed in upon her: what if he had so appeared to her before she married David—what if they were both free now?

Frightened at this mere suggestion of disloyalty, she strove to shut it out and bring her mind to dwell on other things.

But, Pierre had suddenly become a powerful magnet to her thoughts and would not be denied her contemplation.

She beheld him as the little barefoot lad, roaming the fields and the woodland,

or, standing on the edge of the scolding brook, his thoughtful eyes upon the speeding stream.

She saw him plucking wild flowers in the meadow—wild flowers for her.

And then, the cruel, widening gap of years, while she was away at convent; and the ensuing cold reserve, instilled and fostered by straight-laced misconceptions of the things worth while.

She saw, with a shudder of pain, the wounded, broken look in the proud eyes, as he entered her room, that day in June, and found her standing in her wedding gown—the bride of another.

And as she had gone to the arms of that other one, he had fled, as from a pestilence, the golden setting of his boyhood, to ponder on the ashes of his hopes.

It was a tragic, filmy network, unreal as the texture of a dream or the weaving of a tale that is told.

She saw him now, the outer husk thrown off, a man revealed in his strong attributes.

Like some tall oak, he towered above,
sturdy and true and fearless of the storm.

And she had made her choice. She had
chosen the other—

Oh, no, this was wrong! She must not
dwell upon the past. She had not meant
to do so. But the thoughts—they flooded
the very gateway of her soul. They beat,
like a maddened surf, at the walls of her
woman's heart. Oh, God, might she not
forget? Might she not put down the bars
and call the past—the past?

A-flutter with haunting fear, she fled
to her mother's room, and, like a fright-
ened child that awakes from dreams of
evil, nestled in those arms that were ever
waiting.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR.

The days chained into weeks. Isabelle watched the arrivals of the steamships, listed in the newspapers, which she received from Montreal.

One day, while scanning the news columns, she came upon an item which told briefly of the financial activities of one Waldon Tabor, "who had been swindling gullible young men of means," in the guise of a stock broker.

A warrant had been issued for the arrest of the fellow. But "the bird had flown, together with the woman supposed to be his wife."

A wave of resentment surged within her. This common thief had been permitted to fleece her people!

She clipped the item, to enclose it in her next letter to David.

She grew weary and heart-sick with disappointment.

Then, one evening, Régnault, the old postmaster, smiled and winked an eye over his gold-rimmed glasses and handed her a large, square envelope bearing the Austrian stamp.

She was at once in a flurry of excitement. Her first impulse was to open the letter and read it on the spot.

But, she thought better of it and, hurrying out of the dingy little place to the waiting car, sped down the main street of the village and over the highway that led to the homestead.

The letter was written on thin, crackling paper which was ruled off in little blue squares. There were several sheets of the welcome message.

The greater part of the letter was given over to the narrative of his voyage, to the Rochettes, to Vienna, to the clinics in the Austrian capital and his ambition to return to Canada a worthy contender for the laurels of greatness in his profession.

It was towards the end of the missive that she came upon the words that struck her cold and sick with shame and indignation.

It was with surprise and deep regret that he had learned of her unfortunate condition.

Certainly she must understand that this was no time for them to have children.

It would have been time enough later on in life.

But, now!

Had they not sufficient responsibility, without flying in the face of fate and volunteering to weight themselves down with this, the heaviest burden of all?

She must have failed to take proper care of herself. Else this would not have happened.

It would be well for her to see a specialist in obstetrics.

It might not be too late.

Something, perhaps, could be done.

He hoped so.

For, this was not his conception of mar-

ried life—to undertake at the outset, the rearing of children.

He would anxiously await news from her on this point.

The letter closed abruptly, as though the writer had suddenly become aware that he was a very busy man.

Isabelle was seated on the veranda, as she read the letter.

She groped her way through the closing paragraphs, dazed by the brutal words.

Then, she had been, all this time since her marriage, no more in his eyes, in his life, than a mere physical convenience, a purveyor of gratification to his passion! A shield to his respectability. To his social status.

It was plain that he did not love her. He had never loved her. He was incapable of love. Utterly, hopelessly so.

Mamman was sitting beside her, in pleasurable anticipation of good news.

She was not slow to note the changed expression on her daughter's face, the

trembling of her hands, the determined self-repression in her lips.

The two were silent for a while.

Presently, Isabelle looked at the older woman, with tear-dimmed eyes; and said:

“He is well, Mamman. But he—”

Her voice broke. She could say no more. She thrust the letter into her mother’s lap and fled, in utter confusion, to her room.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE.

It was not until late in August that Isabelle wrote her answer to David's letter.

Not that she had wanted in decision as to what course to follow. But, she was fearful of the injustice that might come of haste.

Too, there was the welfare of the little one to consider.

It was a leap in the dark, she knew well. But, she could see no alternative.

He had outraged her most sacred ideal. He had trampled her love with ruthless cruelty, suggesting, in its place, a makeshift union of convenience, which in her sight, was as revolting as it was unnatural.

She had struggled with the problem many times, always to the same conclusion.

He had killed her love!

Nevermore could he be what he had been to her.

Convinced of this, she was too honest with herself and with him to continue a relation which had become a mere sanctioned form of intercourse; a license, utterly repugnant to her, to live as man and wife.

And when, after many days, she wrote to David, it was with the serenity and kindness that come of bitter sorrow long repressed.

There was a preamble, in which she referred to the receipt of his letter, to the home in Montreal, and Antoinette.

She would defray all the expenses until he found himself in a position to do so.

Then, she came to the subject that had weighed so heavily upon her:

"And now," she said, "I am going to bid adieu to all I held most dear. For you and I have come to the parting of the ways. I cannot bring myself to discuss, in detail, your views as expressed in your

letter on the subject of what you termed my unfortunate condition. It will suffice for me to say that I disagree with you on every point. I hold that it is not for you or for me to say whether children should be born as a result of our union. I am aware that many hold a different view. But, they are, to my way of thinking, deluded, misguided souls, who are blind to the higher, nobler joys and the duties of wedlock. To ask one's wife to consent to any such arrangement as you suggest is, whether she realizes it or not, an insult to her womanhood and an admission, on the part of the man, that his love, if such it may be termed, is of a base and unworthy sort.

"You have misunderstood me, David.

"You have never understood me.

"If you had had the merest inkling of my nature, you would not have dared to make the odious suggestion that I refuse to bear to the end the burden that has come to you and to me as a result of our union.

"I shall go the allotted time, alone, but strong in the belief that in our little one I shall find, some day, the love that you denied me.

"Do not think I write these lines in haste or anger.

"Words would fail me utterly, were I to try to picture the anguish of heart, the cruel goading of despair that I have known.

"It is best for you and me, best for the little one, that we two part.

"And my decision is irrevocable—as is death itself.

"For, my love is dead.

"Oh, David, David, had you but granted me the merest crumbs of kindness, crumbs such as the little sparrows feed on, I would have gathered them eagerly, jealously to my starving breast and showered my burning love upon you in return.

"But, now, all that is gone, withered and dead.

"You will be great.

"It is my fondest prayer that the world may crown you with its laurels.

"But, even then—in the proudest moments of achievement, will you be happy?

"Can one surround one's heart with stone and know the pulse of gladness, the great, expansive joy of love?

"I would rather hear the cooing of the little one that is to come than the maddened plaudits of a fickle throng.

"Farewell! Since you have chosen to seek glory to the exclusion of all else, may glory wait upon you! David, farewell!"

She sealed the letter and handed it to Bissonette, who was going to the village.

Then, he picked up an infant's slip on the sewing table and studied the pattern of a little flower that was stamped in blue on the filmy fabric.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX.

Spring smiled again in the valley of the Richeieu, and the breath of apple bloom lay heavy in the air.

Pierre had come to the great decision and sealed it with his vows.

And now, he was going forth into the great Northwest, to sow the seeds of knowledge and of fortitude.

Blessed soil, that would receive his ministrations!

The hour of another parting had rung in the life of Isabelle.

She stood in the gabled window and watched the black, receding form, as slowly he climbed the ascent in the road that led to the village and to the world beyond.

Once, her heart leaped with blind hope, when Pierre, coming to the crest of the

knoll, halted and looked back over the smiling valley.

A moment later he had disappeared.

Into her heart stole the sadness of a great regret and an echo of the golden days now gone murmured, chiding, of the love that might have been.

Bravely she fought back the welling tears.

With a weary sigh she turned from the purpling vista to the babe in the cradle beside her.

And at sight of this her son, she thrilled with the gladness of hope and the promise of fulfillment.

Slowly the shadows deepened in the valley.

The stars sallied forth in a ballet of shimmering gold.

A round, red moon sat in state on the peak of a distant spur.

The tinkle of a sheep-bell floated anon over the fields.

Through the stilly watches of the night

she sat in the gabled window, keeping vigil with the stars.

Ah, the mystery of night and of life!
The mystery of love! The enigma of her own poor heart!

One by one the watchers of the sky wearied and sank to rest.

A chill wind rushed, scolding, from the valley.

Far and near cocks shrilled the matin call.

A silvered veil of dawn was unfolding in the east, when she roused from her dreaming and lowered the yellow flame of the lamp.

THE END.



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