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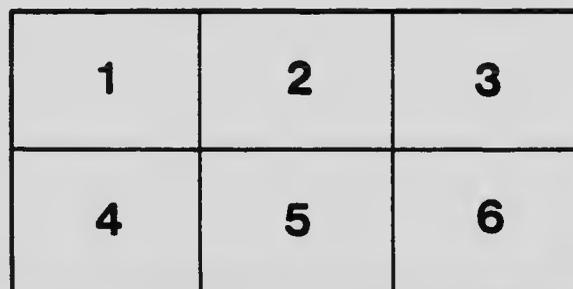
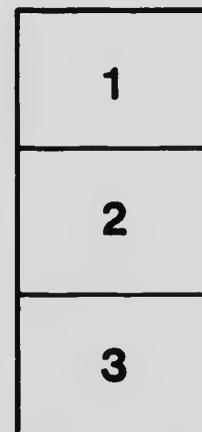
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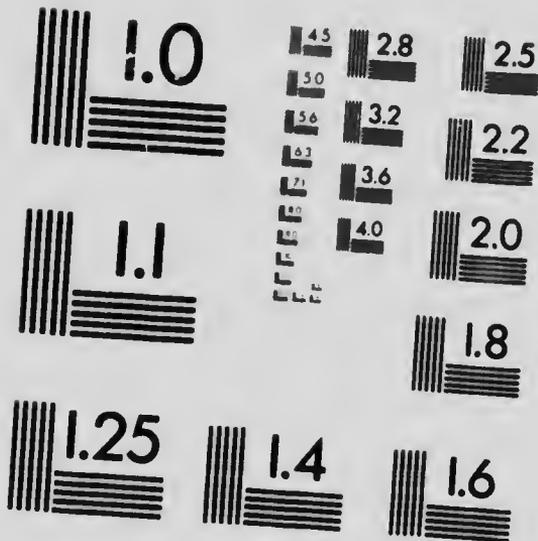
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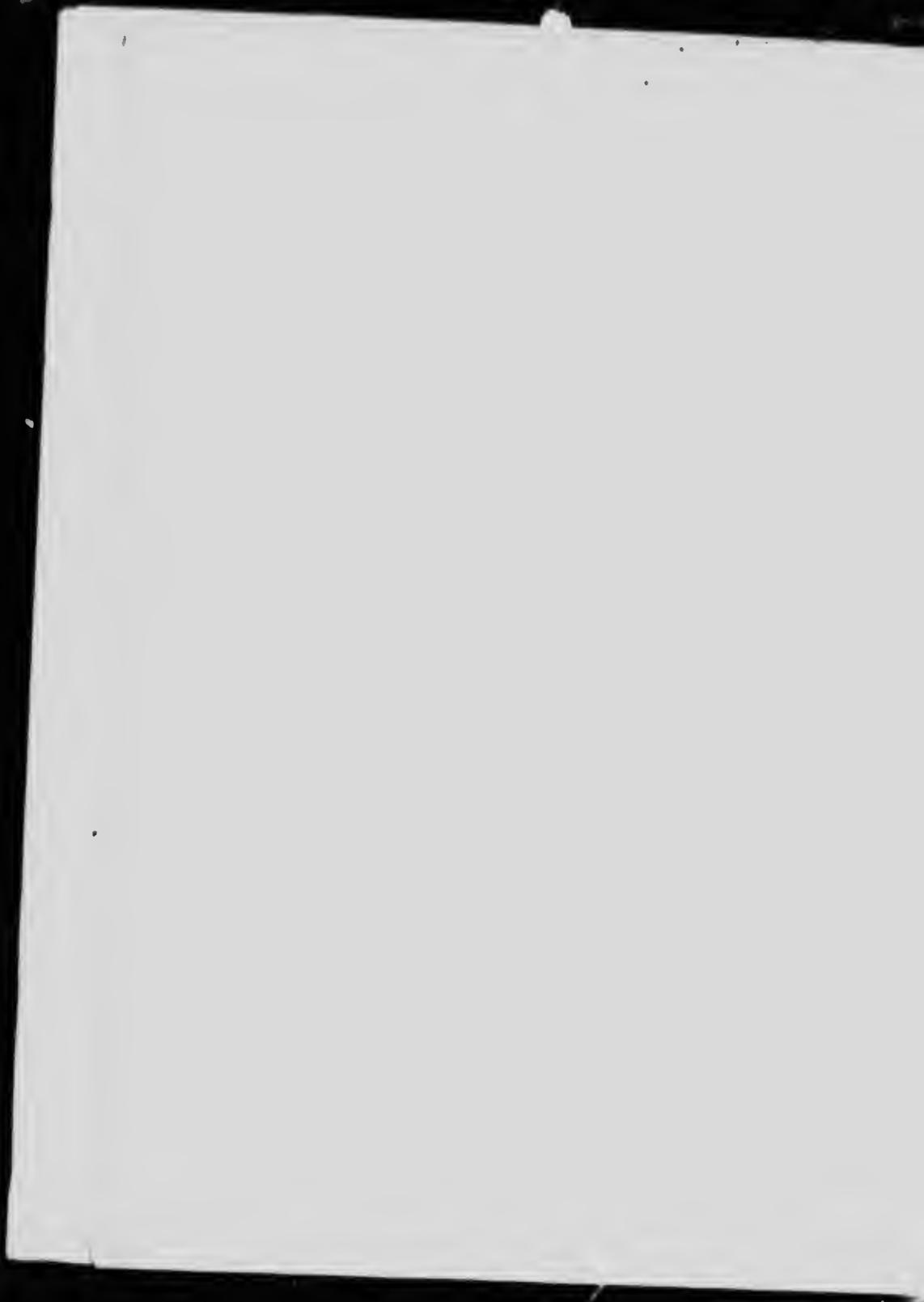
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MADAME JANVIER'S CHURCH





MADAME JANVIER'S
CHURCH

BY
MARY E. HICKSON

(M. E. Hickson)



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MADAME JANVIER'S CHURCH.

MADAME JANVIER,
erect and tall, stood
with clasped hands at the edge
of Guillaume Dubé's newly
completed verandah, her eyes
riveted on the farthest turn of
the dusty high-road.

Around her all was still,
with the intense stillness which
extreme heat imparts to a sunny
landscape. It was the beginning

MADAME JANVIER'S CHURCH

of September ; but even heavy dews could not counteract the effect of a month's drought. The bushes which skirted the roadside opposite hung thick-coated with dust ; while beyond them the scorched fields stretched brown and parched to the river-side, where successive strata of sun-baked mud told their tale of receding waters. Only the river held some suggestion of coolness in the deep brown of its still pools, and in the network of reflected

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green mirrored beneath the farther bank ; for the drought, had, as yet, left unharmed the shade of the thick forest ; and, save for a splash of autumn colour here and there upon the hill-side, the eye might roam at will across a canopy of untarnished green.

But to Madame, gazing fixedly down the road, the interest of the whole scene was momentarily centred upon an approaching, and ever increasing, cloud of dust. No

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horse that she knew was capable of such lightning speed ; no carriage, not even Henri Brebais's new buckboard, could envelop itself in such a grey whirlwind.

Speculation gave place to certainty, and now she turned, and on her old features there rested a comical expression of wonder mingled with dismay.

"Pauline," she called, "quick, quick, it comes !"

A woman appeared in the doorway behind her. Though

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still young, her face had lost the fresh comeliness of youth ; her figure, hidden beneath a loose pink overall, looked ungainly and shapeless. Short strands of fair hair escaped from the tightly fastened knob which surmounted her head, and hung in wisps at either side of her face. In her arms she held a small boy of five or six years old—they were strong arms, bare to the elbow, dark brown from much exposure. The child was Narcisse, fourth

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of Guillaume Dubé's seven children, a cripple and ailing from birth.

The three stood grouped together, watching this oncoming monster ; they could hear it now, puffing and snorting, like the mad thing it appeared to them.

“ Mon Dieu ! if they meet Guillaume, and he has gone to the village ! ” exclaimed Pauline. “ Jacques is a good horse, but—Oh ! la la, we are shot ! Misère !— ” She

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stumbled backwards into the house, Narcisse crying with terror, as a loud report burst upon them, and, through dispersing clouds of dust, they caught a glimpse of the motor, stationary, at their own gate.

Madame Janvier's supposition was correct—Mr. Geraldson, from the lake, was introducing his motor car to the astonished inhabitants of Ste. Rosalie. What she had not surmised, and what was to prove of more lasting conse-

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quence, was the unexpected popping of a tire, as the motor approached the Dubé potato patch.

Ste. Rosalie, leading its peaceful backwoods existence for the last half century, was far removed from the meteoric flights of advancing science. Ten years before, its inhabitants had watched with amazement the first train puffing its adventurous passage through the bush ; now, at occasional intervals, they journeyed up

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and down the line, within measurably safe distance of their homes. But this year a new impetus had been given to slumbering enterprise; American invasion had penetrated to the borders of Lake Coté, ten miles north of the village. Mr. Geraldson, of New York, had been pleased to erect for himself a summer "camp," comprising a modern cottage, with stabling, garage, and boat house. His fame, or, more justly speaking, that of his

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launch and motor, was par-
amount throughout the district.

Madame Dubé stared fear-
fully, from a strategic position
within doors, as the chauffeur
dismounted, preparatory to
repairing the injury. Not so
Madame Janvier—she belonged
to an older and more courteous
generation. Advancing towards
the narrow gateway, and resting
one hand upon its red paling,
she called in a shrill voice,
still somewhat tremulous from
recent excitement :

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“ Bonjour, Madame,—will you not come in? Madame and Monsieur are welcome.”

Heat reigned everywhere—Mr. Geraldson was forced to a choice of evils, sunstroke on the road, or suffocation within the Dubé dwelling.

“ If you like, if you like ! ” he exclaimed impatiently, as his wife turned to him, and a moment later found them confronting the amazed Pauline at the threshold of her kitchen.

On low wooden rocking

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chairs they sat, discoursing of the weather.

“Très chaud, bien chaud,”
—Madame Janvier nodded her head as she spoke, while Pauline, heavy-footed, set about preparing refreshments. Mr. Geraldson mopped his forehead, swearing meanwhile under his breath. His wife's eyes, wandering around the bare room, fell upon a strange object, enveloped in a white cover, which occupied the far corner. Her expression changed

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suddenly, from one of stimulated enjoyment to genuine interest.

“Why, Philip,” she exclaimed, addressing her husband, “I do believe this must be the old woman they told us of—the woman with the church—I wonder—What was her name?—Janice—Jangier—Janvier—yes, that was it.”

“That is my name, Madame.” Madame Janvier had caught the last word. She smiled as she spoke, for the face turned to hers was full of sympathy.

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“Then may we see your church?—I have heard so much about it.”

“With pleasure, Madame,—” there was a ring of pride in the old voice—“it is here—voilà!”

Crossing to the corner, she removed the white cloth from its resting place; beneath it, on a low table, stood the model of a church, painted white—three feet long by two in breadth, complete to the veriest detail. Shingled roof, steeple, chimes, carven figures, windows

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with their stained-glass panes—nothing was forgotten. Within, a goodly congregation knelt at prayer—for the artist's cunning had not spent itself upon the exterior alone; confessionals were there, side altars, and stations of the Cross; priest and acolyte kneeling before the High Altar, with its offering of flowers at the Madonna's feet. Organ loft and choir, the communion rail, statues of the saints, and little swinging lamps to light the faithful at

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early matins, or the hour of Benediction, were here too ; crude, if you will—yet, in the very effort itself, in the outpouring of love and labour which had fashioned them, must have dwelt something of the soul of genius.

Mrs. Geraldson gave a low exclamation of surprise ; then, as the significance of the work grew upon her, she remained silent, gazing with curious awe at the little church and its owner.

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“ You did this, all this ? ”
she stammered.

“ Yes, Madame.” The speaker stooped, as she answered, to brush a speck of dust from the statue of St. Anthony above the entrance. “ Does Madame like it ? ” A pathetic eagerness sounded in the question ; her knarled hand trembled as it caressed the shingled roof.

“ It is wonderful, simply wonderful. But, Madame, I don't understand — it must

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have taken you years to do !”

“ A long time, yes, yes— that is true. As for years, I do not remember. I never count, and now the time is all one. When we love, Madame, the days are short ; and when we grow old, they are long, very long, and we forget little things that do not matter. A year, a day—it is all one to me !”

The other looked at her inquiringly, not certain that she understood.

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Madame Janvier smiled,—
“It is like this,” she continued
—“we are poor, but we are
very happy, my husband and
I, and I never mind that we
must work hard. But when
the little Jean is born, we see
that there is nothing we can
do for him—we have no money.
So we talk very much about
everything, and then I remem-
ber what I have seen in the
Convent, and I say to my
husband—‘Never mind, Pierre,
we will give the little one

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something, you and I, and when he is big he can help too. And he will have it, Pierre, when he is a big man, and his children will have it, when we are old man and woman, and no good for any more work.' So I commence to make the church, and Pierre help, and by-and-by little Jean help, and I teach them both." She paused.

"And Pierre, your husband?"

"He is dead, Madame. He is drowned in the river, when

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the little Jean is six years old, and I have just finished the statue." She pointed to St. Anthony.

"And little Jean?" The voice was low, hesitating.

For a moment Madame Janvier remained silent; folding the white cloth in her hand, she laid it carefully upon a stool beside her,—when she looked again her wrinkled cheeks were wet.

"He is gone, too, Madame, he could not stay here. No,

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my Jean was not like us. Ah ! you should see how he could work—I, his old mother, taught him ! But no, he would not carve—‘ That is for you, ma mère,’ he would say. ‘ As for me, I will be a great painter some day !’ There was nothing in the parish that he could not put on paper—ah ! my little Jean, mon garçon—” her voice quavered and broke. With a quick impulse, Mrs. Geraldson caught one of the trembling hands between her own. After

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a minute the old woman proceeded.

“And so, Madame, one day he went; for it was the will of le bon Dieu, who had made him so much greater than his poor mother. That was a sad day, Madame—we cried that day, he and I. He was so young to go, only fifteen. We stood together, looking at the church—that day I had commenced the side altar to St. Joseph—and he flung his arms round me. Mon Dieu, how

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he sobbed, my poor boy ! It broke his heart to go, but he could not stay. ' Promise me, ma mère, you will finish the church,' he cried. ' You will finish it for when I come back—when I am a great man, and can come back to you again.' That is a long time ago, Madame, the church is finished, he has not come back. I hear once, twice, the first year, then no more. But he will come back—mon Dieu, yes, he will come"—her voice grew vehe-

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ment in its intensity—"for he is alive! I, who have prayed for him every hour, who have loved so much, could he die and I not feel, Madame? Would not my good Pierre himself pray the blessed Virgin to send me a sign. Bah! non, he is not dead, and he will come. And the church will be here for him, mon cher garçon, and for his children, when they have laid his old mother in the churchyard over there. But it is a long way,

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Madame, and I grow old." She stopped abruptly.

"Where did your boy go, Madame Janvier?" asked Mrs. Geraldson, after a moment's pause.

"To France, Madame, to Paris, he said. He had read—he had big dreams, Jean. He was not like us." She sighed as she spoke.

"But you have your daughter, Madame."

"My daughter? Ah, it is Pauline you mean—she is not

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my daughter, Madame, she is my niece — a good girl.” Madame Janvier’s eyes dwelt affectionately on the young woman, as she advanced, bearing a tray of wine and biscuits.

Mrs. Geraldson turned to her husband, who had risen from his chair and was surveying the church critically.

“Isn’t it wonderful, Philip?” she asked.

“Cute piece of work, quite uncommon, I should think. I’d like to get hold of it—just

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the thing for the camp. Ask her how much she wants for it, Helen."

His wife started,—“ But, Philip, you don't understand, it is not for sale. She has been telling me all about it—I would insult her by such a question.”

Mr. Geraldson's French had been neglected in his youth ; what he did understand, and what seemed infinitely more important in his estimation, was the value of a good bargain.

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He wanted the church. For him the desirability of this purchase lay in the fact of its uniqueness. No one in his immediate circle of friends could boast of so rare a structure. As an object of Canadian handicraft, it would command a high price, and this price he was prepared to pay.

“I don't care beans for what she's been telling you, Helen. The old lady won't refuse hard cash—not if I know her. I'll ask her myself, if you won't.

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Combieng, Madame, com-
bieng ? ”

Madame Janvier shook her head. She did not understand ; the idea of such an offer would have seemed incredible to her—besides, her thoughts were busy with the past. But Pauline, quick to grasp all practical issues, answered for her—

“ Impossible, Monsieur, she would not sell ! ”

Mr. Geraldson uttered an exclamation, reflecting upon

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the crass stupidity of the Habitant. His wife turned away, refusing to be partaker in this scene of profanation; she watched from the doorway, as Madame Janvier placed the covering once more over her church. Then she heard her husband commence anew—

“Deux cents dollars,” he repeated, “deux cents dollars.”

Pauline's face quivered—this time she averted her eyes, looking across the room as she answered.

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“It is no good, Monsieur. It is impossible.” Her husband had entered from the kitchen, and as she met his glance, she shook her head violently, as though protesting against some hidden suggestion. “Non, non—it would kill her.”

Mr. Geraldson waived Pauline aside; he had no faith in the business instincts of the average woman, but with Guillaume he could deal on a rational basis—as man to man. He made the further

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gratifying discovery that this fellow could speak English.

“I'll give two hundred dollars for it, cash down. Think, my man, what you could get with that money! Why, what's the matter with that boy, there?” pointing to Narcisse.

Guillaume muttered something, and Mr. Geraldson continued—“Spinal trouble? I'll undertake to say that six weeks at a good hospital would put him right. I'm not saying

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I'd keep tight to the cent either, if it was a question of a few dollars more."

"Philip, it's a wicked thing! I'll not have the church in the house!" cried his wife vehemently.

Guillaume did not speak. His habitual expression of lazy good nature was supplanted by a hard, almost cunning look; he kept his eyes fixed upon the floor. It had been a hard year, and his new verandah had added a needless item to

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the heavy bill of expenditure. Pauline caught little Narcisse to her breast, and held him tightly—her lips quivered!

Wholly unconscious of the momentous issue at stake, Madame Janvier, waking from her reverie, crossed to the door, and laying her hand lightly on Mrs. Geraldson's arm, spoke once again with her accustomed brightness.

“Madame will accept some flowers, a souvenir of her visit?”

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"Car's ready, Ma'am!" called the chauffeur from the garden.

"Philip, let us go. Leave them in peace," urged his wife.

"Nonsense, Helen."—Then to Guillaume once again. "Look here, my man, think it over, there's no real hurry about the thing. I'll be at the lake till the end of next month, come up some time, and have a talk."

They entered the tiny garden, and Madame would fain have

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had them pause, while the last white stocks fell victims to her courtesy, but Mrs. Geraldson hurried on.

“Another day, Madame, we will come again,” and the old woman, smiling, accepted her excuse.

They watched them depart—she, Pauline, and Guillaume, standing at the gate until the motor disappeared from sight.

“A fine visit!” Madame Janvier exclaimed. “She is very good, and is she not beautiful?”

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Pauline answered nothing, she was thinking of other matters. That night Guillaume woke her from heavy slumber, he was muttering under his breath—

“Two hundred dollars, a large sum,—oui, Monsieur.” He moved restlessly at her side, so that she put out her hand and touched him. He was asleep.

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II.

One cold afternoon, late in November, the down train puffed into Ste. Rosalie station, and drew up noisily, in answer to the station-master's signal, as though protesting against an unlooked for and irritating delay.

From one of the first class carriages emerged Madame Dubé, leading a rosy-cheeked sturdy Narcisse, and followed by Madame Janvier grasping

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many bundles, her old face radiant with thoughts of home.

“ Ah ! voilà, the good Guillaume,” she called, “ see thy father, Narcisse ! Look, Guillaume, he can walk as well as the others.”

Guillaume stooped to the child, and catching him in his arms held him high above his head.

“ Mon dieu, but thou art grown fat like a little pig, Narcisse—too heavy for thy father now ! There, run to

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Marie and Joe, they will not know thee."

Pauline was silent. She felt glad that Narcisse was well, glad that they had reached home safely—but in her heart of hearts she was afraid, and that fear lay like a shadow across her joy.

It was not so with Madame Janvier. Almost two months ago, Guillaume had announced the good news that Narcisse was to be made well; that Mr. Geraldson had given

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money for the purpose, and that she and Pauline must journey with the little one to the hospital at Quebec, and remain there until the cure was accomplished. It had been a sacrifice to go ; and since then her old brain had received many strange impressions — many hours of weariness had beset her. But at length she was at home again ; near to her beloved church, within calling distance of the Curé, and with the children to gather

MADAME JANVIER'S CHURCH

about her. Could anything be needed to complete contentment ?

They started down the road, Narcisse running ahead with the children, Guillaume bringing up the rear, bearing their light box upon his shoulder. Despite her years, and the fatigues of the journey, Madame Janvier stepped out briskly ; and her thoughts travelled yet farther in advance — Her church ! She would see it again in five minutes ! This

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evening she would devote to dusting it, while the little ones played. If Jean had come while she was absent, and had found it uncared for, how sad that would have been ! And with no one but Guillaume to welcome him ! Her steps quickened, she was in advance of Pauline when they reached the gate. The latter laid a detaining hand upon her arm, —spoke to her, but she did not heed ; only, at the open door of the house, she stopped

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suddenly,—her eyes had sought the far corner with its familiar cover. It was empty,—save for a wooden chair, which stood stiff-backed against the wall.

A violent trembling seized her. She called to Guillaume, who stood in the garden below—

“ My church, Guillaume, where is my church ? ”

The man did not answer ; a sulky look crept into his face. On the pathway behind waited Pauline, guilty and confused.

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It was Marie, their eldest daughter who answered—

“The church is sold, Grand'tante. They took it the day after you left.”

Then Guillaume found his voice. He was not intentionally cruel, only a weak man smitten with an overpowering sense of the injustice of his position.

“Yes, it is sold,” he reiterated. “I sold it to save Narcisse. What do you think, Grand'tante,—must I feed you all these years for nothing? Sapré, it is hard

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enough for a poor man to live himself—without that. It is gone, sold—do you hear? You will never see it again!”

“Sold!” she cried, swaying suddenly to and fro as she spoke. “Who sold it? It was mine—my work! Oh, my poor boy! Oh, mon Dieu, mon Dieu! Sold! Gone! I will never see it again!”

A terrible darkness surrounded her, seeming to press upon her, so that she raised her arms instinctively to ward

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it off. Then with a low cry she fell forward across the threshold.

The clock on the shelf beside the chimney pointed to midnight ; its loud ticking sounded distinct, almost uncanny, breaking in, as it did, upon the quiet of the silent house — Christmas Eve, and upstairs the little ones were asleep ! Madame Janvier sat beside the stove, a red shawl thrown over her bent shoulders ; the others had left her so, half

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an hour before, when they set out for Mass ; the first midnight Mass which she had ever missed. But years and sorrow had laid their heavy hands upon her during the past weeks. Strange shadows came and went before her vision, and figures, half familiar, beckoned to her with averted faces, upon which she might not gaze.

She sat very still, taking no account of time, her eyes fixed vacantly upon the corner, where the church had been wont to

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stand. She knew the story of the sale now, and who had really paid the expense of those long weeks in hospital. She did not grudge Narcisse his health, so miraculously given, but she had lost interest in life. Day after day, she sat by the stove, seeing nothing, hearing nothing, bent and aged,—frail as a withered leaf in late autumn. With the loss of her church, she had given up all hope of her son's return; it was a sign, she thought—Jean

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was dead, or had forgotten.

For a space she remained sitting, lost in thought or vague dreams. Then stooping, she drew from the pocket of her skirt a collection of quaint images. They lay upon her lap, and her hands caressed them tenderly. There were no tears in her eyes—her sorrow was mute, uncomplaining. These were the little images for the Crèche — the tiny Crèche which she had been wont to place with all reverence

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in her church, each Christmas time. And Jean had carved them: for a child she had thought this task the most appropriate. They had been completed just the day when the church should stand ready to receive them. Since then, no Christmas had failed to see them placed therein, until to-night. To-night, her church would stand forlorn, uncared for, in the empty house by the lake side.

She moaned a little, rocking

MADAME JANVIER'S CHURCH

slowly to and fro. Suddenly she stopped, sitting upright, as though an electric current had sent a wave of rekindling life through her aged form, her face working with a strange excitement. It was ten miles to the lake, but the road was good. Her glance travelled to the clock—she had an hour yet, before Pauline's return. She rose trembling, her eyes shone with the old hope, forgotten youth had returned, the spirit of high adventure was

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upon her. The church would not stand empty to-night, Jean's images would rest in their accustomed place.

Half-an-hour later, the low box sleigh, drawn by the "good Jacques," passed out of the farm yard, and turning in the opposite direction from the village, jogged northward towards the lake.

The night was bitterly cold, Overhead, the heavens shone with myriad stars ; quivering curtains of light swept the

MADAME JANVIER'S CHURCH

northern sky, mauves and pale green, pink and white, trembled and died, and drove onwards again like the ragged edge of an advancing wave. She had not stayed to protect herself sufficiently against the cold, and now the keen wind stung her face, and sent a chill piercing to her heart's blood. Gathering the fur cloak more tightly about her, and leaving the reins loose, she sat with arms hugged against her thin breast, facing the long drive,

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alone, half frozen, but undaunted. Time and distance existed not for her that night, her mind outsoared them. She was bound upon a mission, and in her heart awoke the certainty of an approaching end—to-night would see the last touch given to a life's effort. Presently, half from cold, half from fatigue, her mind wandered a little; through the weary miles Pierre and Jean sat beside her, and their talk was merry as in old days.

MADAME JANVIER'S CHURCH

A light in the house, shining directly across the road as she drew near, called her mind back to itself. She had counted upon the caretaker being absent at Mass, and now her courage began to fail. She stopped Jacques, and, dismounting, stumbled through the snow, towards the window. The room was empty, a solitary lamp burned upon the table; but she could hear no sound of life about the house. She tried the door, and found that

M'ADAME JANVIER'S CHURCH

the latch yielded to her touch—in another moment she was standing within. It was the kitchen she had entered, and now the tread of footsteps echoed distinctly overhead. A door at the farther side of the room was open, she crossed towards it, trembling so violently that she almost fell. The lamp cast a glimmer of light into the gloom beyond, and where its rays fell, gleaming white amidst the darkness, stood her church. Fear and discretion vanished,

MADAME JANVIER'S CHURCH

as with a cry of joy she ran to it, and falling on her knees, clasped it to her, pressing her lips against the shingled roof. All the torrent of love within her heart, memories of her youth and womanhood, the labour and patience of a life-time, were consummated for her in this supreme moment of restoration.

She sobbed aloud, and the tears rained freely. Then recollecting the object of her visit, she fumbled amongst the

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folded her gown for the little figures. Suddenly her heart seemed to stand still, and she clung dizzily to the church for support. What had happened? Her hand plunged through a ripped seam—the pocket was empty!

At that instant, Madame Janvier's soul bridged the gulf between supreme joy and keenest suffering. She knelt, with clasped hands, upon the bare floor, unable to rise, her whole being in the clutch of a mute anguish.

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A man's shadow crossed the doorway, he raised the lamp and looked in, then with an exclamation of surprise, started forward in time to catch the fainting body as it fell.

Very carefully he lifted the limp form, and bore it to a couch in the room above. Bending over her, he chafed the cold hands, and forced brandy between her white lips. Still she did not move. He knelt, and with quivering face caught her to his breast.

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“Ma mère, ma mère,” he sobbed, “speak to thy son, thy Jean !” There was no word.

“I have come back,” he cried, “to thee, and to our church, speak to me, ma mère !”

She opened her eyes—wide open, and gazed at him fearfully.

“Mother,” he whispered, “Mother, it is thy son, Jean, thy little boy.”

She shook her head.

“He is dead,” she muttered, “Jean is dead, and the Crèche

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is lost—they have sold the church.”

“Mother, look at me! Look into my eyes—see it is Jean. Put your hand here, so, on my head—they are Jean’s curls. I have come back.”

She gazed at him long, searchingly, then slowly the light of recognition grew in her dim eyes.

“It is Jean,” she cried joyously, “it is my boy!” and her old arms opened wide to receive him.

MADAME JANVIER'S CHURCH

Presently, when the first happiness of greeting had quieted a little, and Madame Janvier lay resting once again amongst the cushions, the look of bewilderment crept back into her face, and she gazed at him doubtfully.

“ But, Jean, how hast thou come here—in this house, to-night ? ”

He drew a photograph from his pocket, holding it before her, and, after a moment, she nodded, smiling.

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"It is Madame Geraldson's picture."

"Listen, ma mère. In Rome, six weeks ago, I was asked to paint that lady's portrait. She told me of the church, and its owner. Alas, I have not deserved such love, I have been a wicked son! But I am a rich man now, and the church is thine again. I came straight here. I would have brought it home to-morrow."

She failed to grasp his meaning.

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“No, no, my poor Jean, it is not ours—it was sold to pay for Narcisse.”

“But it has been sold again, dear one, I have bought it, and no one can take it away—it is thine and mine.”

“Thine and mine,” she whispered, “say that again, Jean. Ah ! mon garçon, it is good to hear.”

He repeated the words.

“But, Jean,” he bent nearer to her ; the voice was weak,—for the first time he saw that

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the rally could not last, "Jean, a terrible thing has happened I have lost thy little figures the Crèche is gone."

"No, ma mère, they are not lost. See, they are safe here. I found them scattered upon the floor, in the kitchen where they fell."

The radiance of a great peace transformed her countenance.

"It is as I planned," she murmured to herself, "for so long a time. He will put

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them there himself. It is le bon Dieu I am a wicked old woman."

She was growing visibly weaker, her voice was scarcely audible. He would fain have left her, to seek help and stimulant, but she would not have it.

"No, Jean, there is nothing that I want. Ah! it is good to be so happy. And tomorrow we will go home. C'est le bon Dieu"

Yes, she would go home.

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Already her face was turned homewards, and her feet were entering upon a pathway whither he might not follow. For, even as she spoke, the most mysterious of all those messengers that beckon Man's soul towards the Infinite bent near to her, and laid his hand upon her brow.

As the grey dawn of Christmas morning crept through the uncurtained windows, Jean stole softly downstairs, taking

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with him the tiny images for the Crèche. Reverently, he set them in their accustomed places — these little child-wrought figures, which had awaited, through so many seasons, the touch of the hand that fashioned them.

THE END.



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