

The Thief of St. Loo.

AN INCIDENT IN THE LIFE OF ANTOINE O'NEIL, HONEST MAN.

BY MAZO DE LA ROCHE.

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AN INCIDENT IN THE LIFE OF ANTOINE O'NEIL, HONEST MAN.

BY MAZO DE LA ROCHE.

There was one man in St. Loo who was admired and envied above all others, partly on account of his wealth, and partly because he had the force and the bravado which command attention. When he laughed, his was the loudest laugh in the room; when he roared with anger, who in all St. Loo dared face him? This was Remi Leduc, landlord of Le Chien Noir.

He could guide a canoe with sure and skilful strokes through the tortuous and deceptive Rivière du Diable; he could fell a tree, land a struggling maskinonge, or make love to a village maiden with a dash, a nerve, a self confidence, that were incomparable. He sold the habitants of St. Loo their whisky, their *tobac*, and their opinions. If one wished to clinch an argument in that village one said: "Remi Leduc says so, *n'est ce pas?*"

And his tavern! What could be cheerier on a fierce winter night, when the breath froze on the lips and icicles hung from the eaves of St. Loo like hoary locks about an old man's head, than the barroom of Le Chien Noir, with its smoky crimson curtains and its red hot stove hissing under the circle of wet cowhide boots that rested on its rim, and over all the haze of smoke and the aroma of steaming whisky? Here councils were held and gossip had its sway; *chansons* of the ax or the paddle were sung; and stories were told—ancient *contes* of the old *coureur de bois*, of his fights with the Indians, of his hunts and weary tramps through a snow buried land after great elk or moose or the stately caribou.

And when the conversation flagged, out came Remi with his fiddle, and merry notes squeaked from its ragged strings and danced like fairy notes through the smoke flushed air, till the men of St. Loo gaped at one another and laughed without reason. Sometimes, very seldom, a doleful wail crept from the bow, and Remi, with his back humped up and his eyes staring into space, scraped the shivering strings in a joy of discord till his hearers shifted in their chairs and kept an eye on the curtain that trembled in a draft.

It was then that little Antoine listened with all his might—Antoine O'Neil, great grandson of an Irish fur trader who had settled in Quebec

many years before and had married Nannette, the prettiest girl in St. Loo. In this way was a vagrant Irish strain let loose in conservative St. Loo. Time, the great effacer, trampled out the brogue and retouched and modified the Irish features till here was Antoine, a lost bit of Limerick, with no word of English in his head—nothing to distinguish him from the other boys of the village but a name—O’Neil—and, deep down in his heart, a something that made him just a little different.

“Look you, Napoleon, how the little O’Neil stares,” whispered Jean Batiste Ratte to his neighbor one night when Remi’s violin was shedding staccato tears. “He looks to me as though he sees the ghost of that great grandfather, eh?”

Napoleon looked at the boy, who, with his head sunk on his chest, stared with eyes that saw nothing and hugged himself in a luxury of misery.

“*Parbleu!*” sniggered Jean Batiste to Napoleon; “I would give something to stick a pin in him!”

The music stopped, and Remi came over with his swaggering gait.

“Come, tell us the joke, little Batiste,” he laughed, tilting Batiste in his chair like a child. “What for is that sly smile?”

“*Sacrédam*, Remi!” squealed Jean Batiste; “you will break me the neck! *Prenez garde*, will you? But as to the joke—I was only laughing at the young Antoine, who looks so sour. You ought to turn him out, Remi; he does not buy whisky, nor even speak. I would not have such a kill joy in my tavern, *non!*”

“None of your *chicane*, Jean Batiste,” said big Remi Leduc. “Is the landlord of Le Chien Noir to pass the hat for every tune like a street fiddler, *hein?* It is enough that Antoine likes it. He has the understanding, this boy. He knows good music when he hears it. Remi Leduc will keep him here and play to him all night if he pleases, and ask him in return—nothing! Have I made it clear?”

Batiste apologized with celerity, and peace was restored in Le Chien Noir.

“*C’était bien fait,*” said the men of St. Loo, returning to their pipes. “It is good to see that fellow Batiste set in his place sometimes. If it were not for Remi Leduc there would be no living with him in the village.”

And they ordered more whisky; and Remi’s till grew heavier all the time.

Young Antoine was a man in stature, but he carried himself with the careless stoop of the boy whose life is without purpose. He lounged with the graceless abandon of the half grown collie that is as yet unaware of its own proportions and strength. His old, half blind aunt, who had brought him up, still kept him at her side, fearful to trust him with the men in the lumber camps. So in the winter he hulked about the village doing chores for the women, and frequenting the tavern when his good aunt believed him safe in bed. But Antoine did not go to Le Chien Noir to mingle with the men or to drink; he went as the stray dog seeks human companionship, because it was light and warm and noisy, and at home it was so quiet, so dark, so lonely.

And then there was the music. How he liked that! Often when he returned home late at night he would seize the old bellows and the poker, and with his back humped up and his eyes staring into space, he would try to make music like that of Remi. He would bend and sway and scrape the iron on the unyielding wood till in the glamour of the moment he heard the singing strings and feared his aunt would hear.

A poker and a piece of wood! Poor Antoine!

But in the summer it was better. The Diable sang on its weedy way, and its banks were hung with fireplant and sword fern. Here Antoine caught suckers and catfish, and watched the dappled water snakes slide in and around the water lily stems. Often Margot went with him, and that made joy complete. Margot was his dearest friend, twelve years old, small, brown, with the eyes of a doe. She was the fairy princess; he was the mighty king. She adored him to his heart's content, and listened with believing eyes when Antoine confided to her the disjointed thoughts that were in his rough brown head. If they were not quite clear to her mind, she understood them with the greater understanding of sympathy, and never smiled. As for Antoine, he was all chivalry—the biggest catfish was hers, his best snake skin was wound about her hat, and was it not Antoine's clever fingers that had made her little snow shoes?

Margot was to be confirmed on Sunday morning; and the night when Jean Batiste Ratte was set in his place by Remi Leduc was the Saturday night before. That was why Antoine was so sad. And it was all on account of a string of beads. They were in old Pelletier's shop window. Such beauties! Thirteen on the string—Margot had counted them—and all as clear as pearls.

“Antoine,” Margot had said, “I feel it in my heart that if I might wear that dear necklace on the day of my confirmation, *le bon Dieu* would bless

me specially. I had it all in a vision last night. I saw myself standing before the abbé all in white, and around my neck those beads of old Pelletier's. Suddenly an angel appeared like a cloud above the altar and whispered, 'C'est bon, little Margot, c'est bon.' ”

Antoine regarded her with reverence—here was no common girl of St. Loo. He, too, had had visions.

“Be happy, then, Margot,” he had said impulsively, “for I will get them for you!”

And here it was Saturday night, and the beads were still on their blue card in old Pelletier's window!

Armand Michaud went; old Belanger went, with his wooden leg; Michel Foulette had to be helped home; the three Gosselins, with many *sacrés* and *maudits*, lurched out; Napoleon Poulin went, thinking ruefully of his young wife at home; only Batiste and Antoine were left with Remi. Batiste was very sleepy; his head was buried in his arms on the table where he had been playing at dice. Antoine felt stupefied with the heat and smoke.

Remi came and laid his hand on the boy's shoulder.

“Look up,” he said.

Antoine raised his face, but could not look him in the eyes.

“What's the matter?” said Remi. “Don't be afraid. Is it that you want something very badly?”

Antoine, glad to be rid of the hateful loneliness of his secret, gasped out, “It's money I want—money to buy a string of beads!”

Remi looked at him curiously.

“*Saprie*,” he laughed, “you are beginning young, *mon petit*!”

“It's not that,” said Antoine; “it's a special blessing. She had it in a vision.”

“Truly,” thought Remi, “this boy's Irish blood has gone to his head.” But he said: “And what is the price of these beads of magic, these pearls that are to charm the saints?”

“Fifty cents, *m'sieu*—thirteen beads, all as clear as milk, on a silk string, and the whole caught by a gold clasp the size of your little finger nail. They are on a blue card in Pelletier's shop window. Ah, you should see them, M'sieu Leduc. They are beautiful!”

“And you have not fifty cents?”

“Not one.”

The landlord of Le Chien Noir scratched his head and thoughtfully eyed the sleeping Jean Batiste Ratte. With his thumb he picked a little tune on the violin that was tucked under his arm. It was the air of “*Isabeau s’y Promène*.”

“*Dame!*” he cried at last, “I have solved it, I, Remi Leduc; the little Ratte shall pay for that string of beads! We shall teach him a lesson, then. Watch now and do as I say. Be sharp, or the joke will be on you.”

He briskly shook the slumbering Ratte.

“Here you, Batiste!” he shouted. “Wake up, my brave! Here is one who would have a turn at the dice with you, that little kill joy whom you scoffed at. He says he will play you for twenty five cents—we must begin modestly, Antoine—see there on the table, his money!”

Antoine and Batiste beheld the shining quarter with equal amazement.

“There, now, begin! Ah, the brave Jean Batiste Ratte is afraid, then, *hein? Non?* Play up, then!”

They picked up the dice boxes, and Jean Batiste, with drunken deliberation, placed his money on the table, shook his dice, and showed them.

“And you, Antoine.”

Antoine did as he was told.

“Yours,” said Remi, with his hearty laugh, pushing the money across to Antoine; “and once again, boy.”

“I shall beat him this time, then,” said Jean Batiste, “if you are not against me, Remi.”

“Remi Leduc is against no one,” said that worthy, his hand on Batiste’s shoulder.

They threw again, and again Antoine was the winner.

“Fifty cents for the boy. What do you think of that, Batiste? Is it enough, *hein?* Or will you play him again?”

“No more for me,” said Jean Batiste ruefully. “That was to have gone for potatoes for little Batiste and the rest. What will my wife say?”

Remi laughed. "She will say it serves you right for preferring the society of Remi Leduc to hers, and a chair in Le Chien Noir to your own fireside."

"Ah, but that won't bring back the potatoes!"

Jean Batiste fumbled his toque and prepared to go. "Good night, Antoine. Good night, Remi. I don't care about the money, mind, but you're always against me. That's why I can't win. Good night." He was gone; they heard his feet crunch the snow.

The man turned to the boy. Antoine's eyes had the light of achievement in them. He could hardly wait to thank Remi; he wanted to get outside to be alone with himself—Antoine O'Neil, owner of fifty cents, benefactor of Margot, a man at last! Had not Remi treated him as one? He reached for his toque and put it on; he put on his red woolen mittens and pulled his scarf up. Remi was poking the fire now.

"Good by, M'sieu Leduc," said Antoine. "I'm going now. You've been very good to me. Some day I—I hope——"

But Remi interrupted him. "Go, then, little gambler, and buy your necklace, or old Pelletier will be closed. And I say, tell *la jeune princesse* that next time she has a vision it must not cost more than a ten cent piece." He guffawed through a cloud of ashes. There was not much religion in Remi Leduc.

Ouf, but it was cold outside! Antoine's nostrils seemed pressed together, and the frosty air bit his cheeks. A dead sparrow lay on his path, frozen stiff. He ran lightly down the narrow street with its low roofs and snow crusted windows. Was there ever such a night! Starlight—moonlight—snowlight—everything frozen solid, from the dead sparrow to the old Diable chained up for the winter. His shadow ran before him, blue black, and perfect in every detail, even to the leather thongs that fastened his moccasins. He danced and gyrated with it; and that which was Irish in him danced too, seeking mischief. Ah, there was old Clouthier's weather cock, the defiant target of the boys of St. Loo. He had never hit it yet. He would try just once tonight while luck was with him. He packed a hard snowball as he ran, and threw it running. Biff! Off snapped the gilded rooster!

"Hooroo!" yelled Antoine in delight. "Hooroo!" And he sprang sprawling into a snowdrift. He rolled out laughing, feathered with white—up his sleeves, down his neck, in his ears. He snatched a handful and ran along eating it.

“*Brrr-ow!*” That’s the noise the wolf makes. “*Bl-are!*” That’s the yell of the elk. “*Lum-de lum-de tra-la-la!*” That is the song of the fiddle!”

He was glad he had broken that yellow rooster. He didn’t forget the day that old Clouthier had pushed him in the street and called him Irish. He would be a sorry old Clouthier when he saw his weather cock broken.

Ah, here is the shop—the house of magic pearls! Waken up, old Pelletier. Some one is knocking at your door! Waken up, I say, for Antoine O’Neil! He comes to buy!

There was a shuffling inside the door, and it opened the width of one’s foot. Old Pelletier peered out, one hand over his mouth, for he had bronchitis.

“Is it fire?” he wheezed. “Is it fire or the devil?”

“Both,” laughed the boy; “it’s Antoine O’Neil.” He shouldered his way in and closed the door. Old Pelletier hugged the stove pipe; their breath showed white even in the shop.

“Be quick, now. What do you want with an old man this bitter night? I am not afraid, mind. I have a double barreled gun under the counter.”

Antoine smiled mysteriously.

“Tomorrow is confirmation day, is it not so, M’sieu Pelletier?”

“*Mais oui*. My toes are freezing.”

“A necklace of beads—thirteen on a silk string—would they look well around the neck of Margot Paulin, do you think?”

“*Très beau. Polisson!* I shall cough all night!”

“They are in your window, M’sieu Pelletier, next the razors there. Get them, please.”

This put a new face on the matter. The beads were produced.

“Fifty cents?”

“Fifty five.”

Antoine walked to the door.

“*Bien!* Fifty, then; but I make nothing on them.” Pelletier handed them across the counter.

Antoine looked at them lovingly. He ran his mittened fingers over them; he brushed them across his lips to feel their smoothness. He was content.

“Good night, M’sieu Pelletier, and pleasant dreams!”

“Good night, M’sieu Madman!”

Out in the cold once more! Antoine’s moccasined feet made a soft crunch in the snow; the tassel on his toque bobbed up and down as he ran. Presently he perceived a narrow shaft of light leaking through the broken shutter of a cottage. It was the home of Margot.

“*Hé!*” thought Antoine. “She is making ready for tomorrow. I shall peep in at the window, and tomorrow I shall say in a solemn voice, Margot, I too, have had a vision; in it I saw you with your candle burning late at night, that you might admire your new shoes when you had better have been at your beads.” He plunged knee deep through the snow and crept to the little window.

A candle, nearly burned out, was standing on a chair, and by it knelt Margot. Her head was bowed before a Christ that hung on the wall above her, a rude wooden crucifix such as hang in the houses of the habitants of St. Loo. He could not see her face; it was covered by her hands; but he saw the soft bend of her neck with the braid of dark hair outlining it. The dull gray of her little gown melted into the gray of the walls and the deeper gray of the long shadows thrown by the feeble candle light. Her hands looked unearthly white and pure. Her attitude was one of humility and supplication.

Antoine gazed with awe. “I spied on her,” he thought, “and she is with the saints! I have a string of beads for her in my pocket; she is so pure, so white, is it fit to put about her neck?”

There was a rain barrel frozen and sprung apart by the window; he leaned against it with his face pressed to the shutter, and thought it out. A new idea loomed portentously in his mind. He remembered what the good curé had said about gambling—that that which was won was stolen in reality, just as if one put his hand in his neighbors pocket and drew it out unseen!

A stolen string of beads! Ah, Blessed Mother! Thirteen thefts about the neck of little Margot! And he, Antoine, was going to fasten them on! Surely that Irish blood must be bad, after all. A special blessing? A special curse!

He pictured the scene in the church; the holy father, the white robed, kneeling children, among them Margot with that thing around her neck. Suddenly appears the angel, like a cloud; he tears the necklace from the child’s neck and flings it at the feet of Antoine.

“Dog of an Irish thief,” he cries, “where are the potatoes of Jean Batiste Ratte?”

The sweat broke out on his forehead, the shutter trembled with the force of his sobs. He drove his heels into the snow, and had his fight out alone.

There was only one thing to be done, and that was to take the necklace back.

Waken up, old Pelletier! Some one is knocking at your door! Waken up for Antoine O’Neil! He pounded the door and shook it. Old Pelletier, grizzled like an old gray rat, flung open his door in a fury.

“M’sieu Pelletier——” began Antoine.

“Fool,” he screamed, “do you want to spend your Sunday in the jail of St. Loo? Drunken idiot of an Irish grandfather, do you want to be the death of me? Off from my doorstep, I say, or I will have you before the curé!”

“M’sieu Pelletier, I want to buy some potatoes——”

“Thousand devils! Do you think I will sell you potatoes on the Sunday morning? I have not the desire to commit that——”

He got no further. He was clutched by the collar of his flannel nightshirt and forced back into the shop. His arm struck a pail of “blackstrap” off the counter, and it trickled slowly across the floor. A cat crawled from under the stove and began lapping it. Antoine never stopped till old Pelletier’s back was against the wall of his shop, and he pinned him there among the red shirts and shawls that hung from the ceiling. The firelight danced in his frightened eyes and on the brass rings in his ears.

“Ow-ow!” gurgled old Pelletier.

“M’sieu Pelletier, will you sell me the potatoes now?”

“All I have—only let me go! You have loosened me the head! I pray you, M’sieu O’Neil!”

Antoine produced the beads on their blue card.

“It is only that I have changed my mind,” he explained. “I wish to exchange these for potatoes to the amount of fifty cents. Get them for me at once, please.”

Old Pelletier filled a bag with alacrity. Here was a madman who must be propitiated at any cost, and although it was Sunday morning he was not taking money—only a few paltry beads. So the bag was filled and slung

across the shoulder of Antoine. The old man held the candle high above his head to light him out, and watched him with the wary eyes of a weasel. One can never tell what a madman may do next. Antoine stepped in the blackstrap and tracked it across the shop; his dark figure filled the doorway for a moment like some horrid monster with a hump on its back, then was gone.

The bolts flew into place, and Pelletier was safe.

Antoine sneaked with stealthy tread to the little white cottage of the Rattes. All was dark there. The snow had drifted window high around the cabin, and on each side of the narrow path it was on a level with his shoulders. He set the bag down and drew off his mitten. The ice cold handle stuck to his fingers for a moment; then he pushed the door open softly.

There are no bolts in the cottages of St. Loo.

“*C'est fini*,” muttered Antoine, and heaved in the bag of potatoes.

Once more the latch was in its place. Antoine waved his toque with joy to the house of Ratte.

“*Voilà*, Jean Batiste Ratte,” he cried, “your potatoes! Ma’ame Ratte, your potatoes, and the potatoes of all the little Rattes! The friend of Margot is no thief, he is honest man! Honest Irish man!”

On the way home he found the frozen sparrow, stiff winged and sunken eyed. He picked it up lovingly.

“Poor little bird,” he whispered to it against his cheek, “you will sing no more, but the heart of Antoine will sing forever, because he is honest man, him!”

The bellows and the poker caught it that night, you may be sure, and Antoine made such music as he had never dreamed of before.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *The Thief of St. Loo* by Mazo de la Roche]