

Lighted Windows

by

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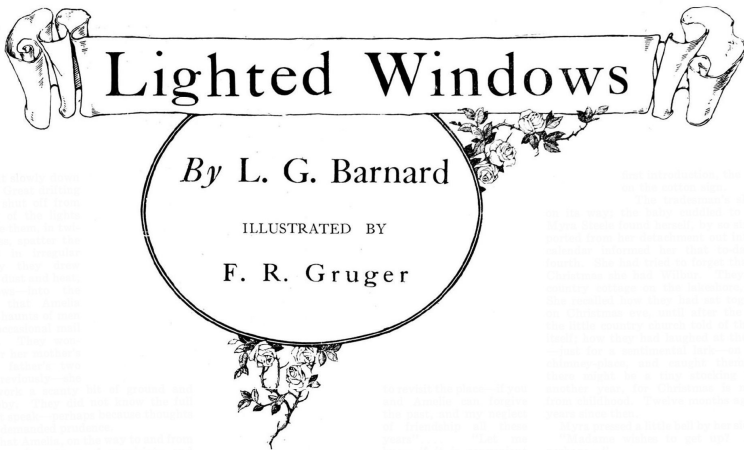
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The woman went slowly down into the valley. Great drifting flakes of white shut off from her to-night the lure of the lights below. She liked to see them, in twilight, dusk or darkness, spatter the gloom-hidden hamlet in irregular constellation. Daily they drew her—through summer dust and heat, through winter snows—into the village. Men said that Amelie Dufresne came to the haunts of men for supplies and the occasional mail from the post office. They wondered much that, after her mother's death—following the father's two years or more previously—she should continue to work a scanty bit of ground and contrive to live thereby. They did not know the full truth, for Jules did not speak—perhaps because thoughts of Josephine, his wife, demanded prudence.

Nor did men know that Amelie, on the way to and from the village with her scanty stores of provisions and supplies, would stand for moments outside some cosy home, watching the windows—lighted windows. Windows glowing with the ruby lights of shaded lamps; windows through which might be glimpsed at times domestic scenes—lovers, parents, children, unaware that out in the night a woman had crept up close to peer upon them with hot, moist eyes, and a silent, passionate anguish.

To-night, as she descended and approached the clustering homes, the glow from within touched, through delicately frosted panes, the newly-fallen snow—so late this year men shook their heads over the prospect of a green Christmas with its poor trade—touching it with beauty. She knew it to be beauty because it hurt her, like sunset in flaming benediction upon a day of loneliness, or sunrise upon a day that, for her, would mean no dawn of hope.

“Bon soir, Amelie!”

From out the drifting snow the big figure of Jules Leblanc—Jules coming out of the white flurry like an apparition upon her thoughts.

“By morning, Amelie, the sleighing will be good, and already the children are wild with delight. See, I have a little sled for René. It was to have been a gift at the New Year, but how should he wait? What a boy he is for his two years—and I ought to know after raising a brood!”

He passed on, radiant with anticipation, quickening his step.

She watched him go, then turned away. How youthful he looked—just like a boy yet! Her own mirror held revelations of age rather than youth. And yet she was a year younger than Jules. It seemed that, for her, youth and hope—inseparable companions—were dying together.

Jules was going homeward. She had passed the brightly lighted windows of his cottage not long since—the nearest to the sharp hill that led up to her own desolate place. Six children already! A fine family to keep one young! *M’sieu le Curé* was right in declaring, as she had heard him do, that Josephine had made Jules a good wife. . . .

She went on down to the village stores. Already the coming of the tardy snow had brought out the good folk from the surrounding countryside, and the main street was gay with freshly painted cutters and the sound of jingling sleigh-bells. The post office was crowded. Amelie hesitated at facing so many people to-night, but some urge took her in. Was there not always the chance. . . .?

“A letter, *mademoiselle*,” said the postmaster, “for your good mother. From Montreal. As even the Curé himself—having hold on the future life—could not forward it, it is right you should have it!”

Amelie, shaking a little, retired to a corner, and wrestled with the rather curiously phrased French. And then, as she read, insight was granted her that made the sentences leap out glowingly. “Is the old double-room still available after—how many years, madame?—ten?—eleven?” “A strong desire has come to me to revisit the place—if you and Amelie can forgive the past, and my neglect of friendship all these years” “Let me know if it is convenient and agreeable that I should have the room for a few days over Christmas.”

Eleven years!

The double-room was still there, unused yet carefully kept. But could he come now that her mother was no longer there? People would talk. . . .

Let them talk! Was he not coming back after all these years—and repentant for his neglect? Perhaps he would take her again to the midnight mass on Christmas eve, and they would drive home again in the cold crisp air to the sound of bells across the snow. And he would tell her again, in that frank way he had, wherein his religion differed from hers, and where it agreed, and once more she would not understand, but be content to have him there beside her, to hear his voice.

Perhaps it would be better to ask the married sister of Jules to come up. Well, she could decide that later; her heart just now cried out for him alone. She mailed a brief note that night, involving no mention of her mother. Her homeward way was through a night suddenly filled with music. And each lighted window, with its cheery glow, seemed like a separate sunrise promising a new day.

Christmastide drew on apace, with deepening snows to set the shopkeepers in town and country rubbing their hands.

In the city, where the slopes of Mount Royal were white in the burial of winter, a young woman lay in one of the great houses near the lesser summit. From where she lay in the sunroom, surrounded by every comfort, her gaze could sweep far, far across the whitened countryside. Sunshine on sparkling snow, carrying the eye past the clustering houses and spires of the lower level, beyond the river sheeted now with ice, to the horizon.

Everywhere life moving on! Just down the slope a little some children careened joyously on sleds; a man and a girl, ruddy with health and the out-of-doors, passed by in skiing costume, laughing. An old man, gathering his scarf more closely about him under his overcoat, leaned on his stick to watch the children, and passed on with the renewal of youth in his step. Everywhere life went on as usual, and with more joy than sorrow in it.

Myra Steele lay in detachment from it all.

Life for her was not without, but here inside the little room, golden with December sunshine. Life, in a little bundle by her side: stirring, vigorous life, for the baby awoke just now and cried lustily. She sat up on the couch, dancing the tiny mite on her lap, pressing it to her breast, crooning over it, kissing it.

A tradesman's sleigh went by, gay with a new set of bells. On the side was stretched a cotton sign, whereon was a familiar face smiling from painted lips and eyes. In the sleigh were evergreens—trees big and little.

“See, baby, there's Santa Claus!”

The baby cowered, as if really recognizing, on this first introduction, the merry old gentleman on the cotton sign.

The tradesman's sleigh passed jingling on its way; the baby cuddled to its mother's breast. Myra Steele found herself, by so simple a means, transported from her detachment out into life again. A wall calendar informed her that to-day was the twenty-fourth. She had tried to forget that all morning. Last Christmas she had Wilbur. They had opened up the country cottage on the lakeshore, and spent it there. She recalled how they had sat together in the firelight on Christmas eve, until after the midnight peal from the little country church told of the coming of the day itself; how they had laughed at their stockings hanging—just for a sentimental lark—on each side the stone chimney-place, and caught themselves wishing that there might be a tiny stocking to hang with them another year, for Christmas is not Christmas apart from childhood. Twelve months ago! It seemed twelve years since then.



Myra pressed a little bell by her side. A maid appeared.

“Madame wishes to get up? But it is not wise, perhaps—”

“Nonsense, Marie, it is ridiculous my lying here! I'm quite able to be about, instead of being pampered all these weeks. And—Marie!”

“Yes, madame?”

“'Phone Dr. Derry, and tell him I wish to see him at once!”

“But, madame, I am afraid the mistress—”

“Do as I say!”

“Yes, madame!”—doubtfully.

Myra dressed with Marie's aid, impatient and a trifle querulous over the seeming clumsiness of the maid. For this she was penitent, but the moments now seemed so precious. She awaited, with growing anxiety lest he fail her, the coming of Wilbur's friend, Dr. Derry.

He hurried over from a hasty lunch at the club.

"You sent for me, Mrs. Steele? Not professionally, I hope?"

She liked his smile; it had helped many a patient.

"No—it's about Wilbur."

"I thought as much. That's why I dared brave the dragon. You'll forgive my sobriquet for your respected step-mother."

Myra smiled, but the smile died.

"Dr. Derry," she said, "I believe you know as well as anyone the unhappy circumstances of my married life. And yet I think you feel harshly towards me, and I would like to—explain. Mother never liked Wilbur. She threw, as you know, every obstacle in the path of our engagement, and finally refused to attend the wedding. Father is—pliable—and when he sided with her it nearly broke my heart. We had to do it quickly, and Wilbur had not much money. He had to travel a lot, and when father demanded that I stay at home after my marriage until he was able to support me in a style that mother thought proper, I gave in. It was a mistake, Dr. Derry. Whenever Wilbur was home he was a storm centre. Things got worse and worse and then—then the story came out."

"The story, Mrs. Steele?"

"About that—that awful St. Berdette affair."

Dr. Derry went over and looked out of the window. Then he turned suddenly.

"I never heard in so many words, Mrs. Steele, what it was came between you two. I suspected it might be that, but I fancied the matter had been hushed up. Wilbur did not tell me. He was bitter, and refused to speak of it. He seemed to think even to mention it involved your honor."

"I was bitter, too, doctor. Wilbur demanded that I should make a complete break with his detractors, and cut myself off from my family. I tried to tell him he should clear himself in their eyes. None of us knew the real story except mother. How she got it I don't know. What she told us

concerned years ago, of course. I think Wilbur thought I was doubting him. Oh, doctor, I wasn't really! But he accused me of it. I have my own pride. He went from me. The pride that makes him send me money regularly from wherever his travels take him, is the same kind of pride that prevents me from using it. It's put aside for the—boy. I—I think we're a pair of young fools, Dr. Derry, and there's"—she hesitated, went on impulsively—"there's nothing in the St. Berdette story, is there? Doctor, when Wilbur left he said if I ever needed anything and couldn't reach him to see you. You were his chum in those days, weren't you? I want you to tell me, frankly, all there is to tell."

The big man settled himself back in the depths of a chair.

"May I smoke? Thanks. I'm a bit slow of speech unless the pipe is drawing well. At that, there's not such a lot to tell, Mrs. Steele. It's just a cross-section of life.

"It must be all of ten or eleven years ago now. Wilbur had just graduated in science, and I in medicine. We were both at a loose end getting started, and were lucky to hear of a summer's job on construction work. An out-of-the-way bit of railway line it was. I pulled a medical job of sorts, with a little undignified clerical work to help out, and Wilbur hit his own line.

Rather a pretty little place, St. Berdette, but in those days far off the beaten track. It was getting back to nature and the primitive with a vengeance, for city-bred men. We both gloried in it. For quite a deal of the time we managed to billet ourselves at a backwoods farmhouse within easy distance of our main camp, and Madame Dufresne was nothing if not a good cook. Also she had a daughter.



Though Amelie could find her way unerringly through the bush, she was lost when it came to any understanding of the complexities of social life.

“Amelie—well, Amelie was an attractive girl—a big, hearty, ingenuous creature, quite as primitive as her surroundings. Amelie knew the woods and the woods knew Amelie. But though she could find her way unerringly through the bush, she was lost when it came to any understanding of the complexities of social life as we know it. You may imagine that to us, shut off from the society of other women, the presence of this daughter of the house was not displeasing. I, with my slow, rather more serious nature, fell behind quickly. Amelie was nice to me, but I soon saw that she worshipped Wilbur—Wilbur of the merry quip, and laugh and the magnetism I did not have. Well, a great time they had; his off-duty hours were mostly spent in her company, roaming the bush, fishing and learning the secrets of woodcraft, with her as teacher, or sitting together in the house poring over mutual lessons in language. Many a time I worried over the progress of the affair, seeing what I was convinced he, in his happy-go-lucky manner, did not—that the girl was madly in love with him.

“‘Tommyrot!’ he laughed, when I ventured to speak of it. ‘She knows I don’t mean anything by it. She’s going to marry Jules Leblanc down in the village one of these days. Don’t be ridiculous, old spoil sport!’

“That was the best I could do with him.

We took our departure, I remember, on a glorious day in early October, a day of autumn colorings, and autumn sunshine, and the nip of frost in the air. Amelie was very quiet, and I was nervous about the parting. I liked Amelie, and I could not bear to look upon her then. Wilbur still was blind. He was bubbling over with sheer joy of life, and the beauty of the day.

“I think Madame Dufresne sensed her daughter’s silence, and came to her aid with the question: ‘You will come back again, m’sieu?’ She looked straight at Wilbur; I might not have existed.

“‘Rather!’ cried Wilbur, and then, with a merry twinkle in his eye, ‘Do you think, Madame, I could stay away for long from Amelie here?’ He put a hand lightly on the girl’s shoulder, and I caught the rapture of her eyes. He added, in that impulsive way of his, jokingly of course: ‘Better let me take her along to the city, eh, Madame?’

“‘But no, m’sieu,’ cried Madame, half uncertain whether to treat this as a jest or not, ‘how should she go with no trousseau? See, her box is but half-filled. Show it to the m’sieu’s, Amelie!’ At which Amelie, shyly, took us to a stout cedar chest that stood in a dark corner, and we beheld within it layer on layer of garments and household requirements, made with fingers little used to the needle, and rather pitiful in their crudity.

“‘Good for you, Amelie!’ laughed Wilbur. ‘And very nice, too. Then, I suppose, Madame, I’ll have to let it go this time, and come back again for her, to steal her from under the very nose of Jules, eh, Madame?’

“The rig came to the door for us then, and as I clambered in I chanced to see the girl alone for a moment with him. Her face was held up to him, as frankly as a child might do it. Wilbur seemed to hesitate, then smiled and kissed her lightly.

“Afterwards I took him to task about it. “‘I couldn’t very well get out of it,’ he retorted. ‘She’s such an unsophisticated child of nature, and it’s the least I could do for her after her making my summer pleasant.’

Igave him up then. Wasn’t it just like Wilbur, in his breezy, thoughtless, boyish way? He sang most of the way on the long drive to the station— for then direct connection was not established. Occasionally he broke into rambling monologues of delight at getting back into civilization again. As for me, I drove in silence through miles of cedar-lined roads, for there was

present with me the memory of a girl of uncouth beauty, standing starry-eyed, staring after us, with her hand pressed to the cheek which he had kissed so lightly. . . .

“It was just about ten weeks later that Wilbur descended upon me in my office one day.

“‘Derry,’ he asked, ‘what are you going to do over Christmas?’

“‘Whatever you want,’ I told him, for I had nothing particularly to claim me.

“‘Then we’re going down to St. Berdette,’ he cried.

“Something bade me dissuade him, but it was in vain. He was set on going, and I determined to go with him. We planned to return by a late train on Christmas Day. At the nearest railway point we chartered a sleigh. The long drive through the crisp winter air was exhilarating; we arrived at dusk, with a cheery glow of lights to greet us, and Amelie herself, more shy now than before, but radiant at our coming.

“‘Amelie,’ laughed Madame Dufresne, knowingly, ‘Amelie—little witch that she is—said you would be coming for Christmas! Two nights now she has had lights in all the windows to welcome you, and such a quantity of our wood swallowed up on the hearth!’

Crisp, sunshiny weather marked our two days. Amelie claimed most of Wilbur’s time, with long drives, and even a tramp or two on snowshoes through the woods, for that year the December snows were heavy. On Christmas eve they went to the village to attend midnight mass—for Wilbur was curious to witness the celebration—and my heart misgave me at the sight of the girl when they returned, nor did I think it was religious fervor that put heaven in her eyes. I had been sitting up gossiping with Madame Dufresne, and reading, but was glad enough to turn in now. Wilbur followed gaily to our room, and the mystery of his two suitcases was solved. One was full to the brim of dainty feminine and household articles that might well delight the eyes of even a city girl.

“‘Wilbur!’ I cried.

“He grinned, and said: ‘Now cut the lecture, old man. I know it isn’t done in our own highly-civilized circles, but I confess that hope chest of Amelie’s kind of got me where I live. I figured I could put it across at Christmas. Of course New Year’s really their gift time, but we can’t help that. I don’t think the old lady will trouble over the propriety of it. When the

poor kid goes to her Jules, she'll not go unprovided for. Boy—that's some trousseau or my name isn't Wilbur Steele!

“He was so happy over it, I hadn't the heart to speak my mind. I even accompanied him, on tiptoe, to put the chest in position by the fireplace, and watched him filling it with his treasures, and decorating it with Christmas tags, and seals and ribbons.

“I shall never forget that Christmas Day. We were up early and on hand when Amelie came tripping from her room to bid us, in carefully self-tutored English, ‘A Merry Christmas, M'sieu's!’—and saw the chest, gay with seals and ribbons, standing before the chimney-place. She just stood for a moment with her hands to her breasts, then with a little inarticulate cry ran forward, and threw it open.

“‘Oh, m'sieu!’ she cried. ‘Oh, m'sieu!’

“Whereupon she wept with the joy of the thing, and Wilbur, suddenly embarrassed, said gruffly: ‘Come for a walk, Doc.’ Even then, with misgivings anew in my heart, I could not bring myself to spoil his happiness over the thing he had done with such kindly intent.

In the afternoon I made a trip to the village to look up a curious old local practitioner, whose acquaintance I had made during the summer. On my return I found Wilbur pacing the ground in front of the house, regardless of the fact that it was almost zero weather and he had no overcoat on. He gripped my arm.

“‘Old fellow,’ he said, ‘here's the deuce of a mess!’ He jerked his head towards the house. ‘They've got the—the wires all crossed! Amelie's got it into her head I've come to take her away as my wife.’ He worried his pipe-stem with his teeth. ‘Let's get our stuff chucked into our bags, Doc.—I've got to get action or I'll go crazy. Doc.—she—she's thrown over Jules because of me. That's how I got to know. How will I tell her, Doc.—how'll I tell her? It's damnable!’

“We arranged with old Marcel, quietly, to drive us to the train. I was already in the cutter, waiting, when Wilbur came from the doing of the thing. Amelie did not appear, but I caught sight of Madame Dufresne for a moment in the doorway, and the look on her face was not good to see.

“Marcel, the man who drove us, was deaf and ignorant too of English. I waited for Wilbur to speak. After a time he laughed nervously. He said: ‘The

old woman would have gladly murdered me, I think. She's trying to put the worst construction on things!' He stopped.

"I said, at last: 'And—Amelie?'"

"'Good God!' he groaned. 'Don't ever speak of it to me again!'"

"I turned as we dipped downward into the valley. Dusk had gathered about us, and I remembered the welcome of the brightly lighted windows as we came three days ago. Now, where the house stood all was darkness. So, in silence for the balance of the time, we drove to the station."

Dr. Derry paused. Myra asked quietly: "Is that—all?"

All of Wilbur's story. There's just the sequel. The mother was stricken with a serious illness some time later. Old Dr. Desforges, the local man, knowing my interest, had me out. We could not move her, but I arranged for a trained nurse. Before the poor Madame died, the nurse was a sharer in the story of Wilbur's escapade—with the worst construction on it. It had preyed on the woman's mind; the nurse came to me with a vivid tale of the girl's ruin. I hushed it up, but I saw my assurances were not accepted. I spoke sharply to the nurse then, enjoining professional secrecy. She has never liked me since. I think I know now the source from which the story came to make trouble for you. She was married a year ago, and gave up nursing, and, I fancy with it, her professional secrets. She was that kind."

"And—Amelie, Doctor?"

"Amelie remained in the old place. Jules married another. Men say at St. Berdette that Amelie is a man-hater. I know otherwise. The girl still nourishes an obsession that Wilbur is hers by some appointment of destiny, and will some day return for her."

"Does—does Wilbur know?"

"Wilbur knows nothing unless he has learned it apart from me. He was away at the time of Madame Dufresne's death, and I did not revive old sorrows by telling him. I have respected his wish never to speak of Amelie. It would serve no good purpose. The thing is past and over for him."

Myra rose.

"Thank you, Dr. Derry," she said. "You've made me to know my husband and understand him as I did not before." She went over and drew aside the curtains, watching the sparkle of sunlight on snow, the children at

their afternoon play. She turned at last to regard him with an odd little smile. "Don't you think, Dr. Derry—don't you think a little boy's daddy should be with him on his very first Christmas?"

The big man read aright the appeal in her eyes. He said quickly: "Wilbur was in town a day or two ago—probably is still. I met him on the street. He was uncertain about his Christmas plans. I think he is very, very lonely, Mrs. Steele. If you wish it, I could try and locate him."

"Please—Dr. Derry!"

"Myra!"

They turned like conspirators caught in a guilty act. A stoutish woman, rather severely tailored, stood in the doorway. Myra showed sudden stiff defiance. The Doctor shrugged his big shoulders; his eyes regarding her steadily held a suggestion of dangerous languor.

"I hope, Myra," said the woman uncompromisingly, "that you are not allowing your heart to run away with your reason! I could not help overhearing, Dr. Derry—"

"Madam," interrupted the Doctor, bowing slightly, "few eavesdroppers can! As a matter of fact I should be very happy if you had overheard all that has been said. You will forgive my being rude—I have a reputation for bluntness, and I might as well deserve the name.

"I have long desired, madam, to speak quite—quite plainly to you. Since you were interested in the—other story—let me tell you a brief tale. There was a woman who desired for her step-daughter a match of her own making—in which money and social position might compensate her for having as a husband a weak-chinned nincompoop! When the daughter chose to forsake the flesh-pots for love, and attendant precarious financing, this woman stormed, and finding storms of no avail, fell back upon the subtle undercurrents of intrigue. The marriage being consummated, against her wish, she knew herself to be somewhat of a laughing-stock. No one likes to be that, madam! The girl was then urged to remain at home, while her husband was travelling, and this imperfect separation was gradually developed into a noisome gulf—with the man's good name stolen from him, and the affections of two young people blasted by the breath of scandal.

o—hear me further, madam! It was all very quietly done, so that no defense might be made by his friends. A very clever intrigue, madam, and the manner in which the woman ran across and smelled out that old affair at St. Berdette, an amazing bit of persistence. I congratulate you on your cleverness, if nothing else. I have just been telling Mrs. Steele the truth about that affair. It is a tragedy—but a tragedy based on innocence, and part of a dead and gone past!”

Dr. Derry picked up his hat and cane.

“Good-afternoon, Mrs. Steele! I will hope to have news for you by nightfall at the latest.”

Dr. Derry bowed again, courteously, to the younger woman, stiffly to the intruder, whose features betrayed triumph rather than any trace of discomposure.

“Just a moment, Dr. Derry,” she said, with a slightly mocking lift of her brows, “I believe you and Wilbur Steele were at college together, and it is a tradition for men like that to stand by one another. I have no doubt—although I did not overhear your story just now—that you have whitewashed the affair with great—unction. Perhaps you will now be able to explain to Mrs. Steele and myself—if the affair with this girl Amelie is of the dead and gone past—why it is that, to my certain and verified knowledge, Wilbur Steele has within the last hour or so taken a train for St. Berdette?”

Christmas eve at St. Berdette. The roads white and hard-packed under the runners of the sleighs that merrily jingled their way into the village.

It was hardly dusk yet and Amelie, watching from the window of the now dilapidated but one-time prosperous cottage of Dufresne, could make out the comings and goings. Paul Lafronde and his family, the youngsters sticking out of unexpected places in a box-sleigh, straw-warmed. Hermisdas Martin and his bride, but a week united by the Curé and showing it. A large farm conveyance, filled with singing young people. From now until after the New Year had been appropriately ushered in with celebration and the giving of gifts, the village would be full of joyous life. On other years, of late, she had pulled the curtains that she might not be tempted to watch and be mocked by the joy of others. But now. . . .

Before a plaster image of a patron saint of her dead father’s, and to which she gave simple and hereditary allegiance, she knelt in prayer. Long vigils had she kept thus, and always the burden of the petition was the same.

And now he was coming! The day of miracles was not past!

Another miracle greeted her in her mirror. Before the dawning of new hope—to which she clung as certainty now—youth had flung a challenge to premature age. The bloom of her cheeks, long pallid; the light in her eyes, long dimmed; the careful arrangement of neglected hair; the finery taken from a sacred hiding-place in the cedar chest of poignant memory—these were the outward and visible symbols.

The Montreal train would arrive at seven. She would meet him, old Marcel—deaf as ever—driving, and so they would return and she would have him to herself! Later, if need be, she could fetch the married sister of Jules, who would be willing to spend the night here in accordance with the proprieties. But first she would have him—alone! Then it might be, if he cared to throw conventions to the winds—conventions which she despised because, to her primitive mind, they were folly—she would be content! Her heart fluttered. . . .



The time at last! Old Marcel knocking at the door, his squeaky voice inquiring if she was ready, as if she would be late at such a time! The swift rush of the cutter over white roadways, so hard with frost the snow rang hollowly under the runners.

Lights in the valley! Familiar lighted windows, before whose cheery domestic glow she had often paused, to watch with eyes grown strangely hot. Homes! Windows just now marked with prim wreaths of holly and evergreen, ribbon-tied in red. Past the church, itself alight to mark the coming of the feast of Noel.

“We are early,” grumbled Marcel. “And it is cold! Also it will be colder at the depot! We will pull up for a time here.”

He brought the mare to a halt outside the ramshackle hotel. There was sound of much conviviality within. Old Marcel’s rheumy eyes brightened. He tied the animal to a post, threw a blanket over her, and left her sheltered somewhat from the wind by a great touring car standing by the curb.

Marcel was not to be dissuaded. A drink, he declared pipingly, would save his aged form from the piercing cold that would undoubtedly be the death of him. Amelie capitulated.

“I will wait in the ladies’ parlor, Marcel. Make haste now.”

Amelie was glad enough of the warmth. The tiny, musty-smelling parlor was occupied only by a veiled woman, holding an infant. Old Marcel entered presently to say, zestfully, that the train was all of half an hour late.

How tired he would be with so long a journey! One had to come by an indirect route with a change to this branch line.

Amelie saw that the woman with the child started at the information.

“You also expect someone by the train?” asked Amelie, her heart so full she felt she must find expression by speaking to someone.

The woman smiled and nodded. She lifted her veil at this overture of friendliness, and Amelie beheld delicate beauty such as she had never looked on before. A modern madonna with her child, like the one in the church, only less wax-like, more alive.

“It is hard to wait!” ventured Amelie. “It is hard to wait when the one you love comes. Perhaps you are also waiting—that way?”

Once more the woman smiled and nodded.

“I have motored a long way to meet someone,” she said, in passable French.

“It is the child’s father, madame?”

“Yes.”

“May I—could I see the little one?”

The woman unwrapped the silk shawls that swathed the sleeping child. Amelie beheld a dream-child, chubby, pink-and-white, whose clenched little fists now rubbed open eyes of blue like skies on a cloudless day of spring. The baby smiled at her, cooed its way to her heart. The mother must have interpreted Amelie’s look of longing, for she let her hold the babe to her breast.

“Mademoiselle!”

Old Marcel in the doorway.

“It is time to go, Marcel? I will come at once.” She kissed the child impulsively, and gave it to its mother. She went out into the smoke-filled corridor, raptly, praying that some day to her. . . .

“Why—Amelie Dufresne!”

“M’sieu Derry!” Could it be possible? Yet assuredly he was here in the flesh before her. Pleasure at seeing him was swallowed up in quick resentment at his presence just now. “Why have you come? He is not with you?”

“You are expecting him then, Amelie?”

“Yes!” rather sullenly. Intuition found in his glance disapproval. She challenged suddenly: “Have you come to interfere? You must not. He is mine—mine, I tell you! I am going now to meet him.”

The Doctor sighed and laid a hand on her shoulder gently.

“Amelie,” he said, “I would not hurt you, God knows, for worlds! You have suffered enough. But in curing ills the surgeon often has to cut deeply. There is something I must tell you.” Very briefly he told her his story. “She was determined to come to him because she wished to prove her family wrong, and confirm her own faith—and also that it is Christmas, the first Christmas since the child came. I could do nothing but agree to bring her. You have it in your power, Amelie, to bring great happiness to others!”

Amelie was silent for a moment. “Is it the woman with the child?”

“Yes, Amelie!”

“His wife and his—child?”

“Yes!”

She was silent again under the intolerable hurt of it. Then she said, passionately: “She must know, m’sieu, that he has come to see me! How shall you prove otherwise to her than that he loves me, and for this reason comes?” She paused. “M’sieu, I have seen the child, and held it to my breast. I have talked with the woman. I will help—if *he still loves her!* Let me meet him at the depot alone, and I will tell him that she is here. Then he must choose between us—and one or other of us will know that he indeed loves us best. M’sieu,”—her voice broke a little—“you do not know me if you think I will give him up without this chance to prove it. It is that or”—she shrugged her shoulders, and a little flare lit her eyes—“I will make

trouble! If I should say the story is true as my mother said. . . . Quick, m'sieu, the train will be in soon!”

The man's keen eyes searched her. Then he nodded.

“I am helpless, Amelie—and I trust Wilbur. But—play fair!”

She went out hastily: Marcel, waiting impatiently now, drove her to the station. The rush of the cold, keen air was grateful. Her pulses throbbed intolerably. When he stepped off she would greet him—and tell him—and then she would know her fate. What did it matter that he was bound by law to another woman? Amelie cared little for the law, and knew enough of the world to know that men did irregular things. As for herself, what mattered the breath of scandal—if love should come? But she must play fair as the doctor said. She must play fair. . . .

The rush of a monster from out the night, streaking fire across the heavens! A clattering jar of brakes, the hiss of steam! A figure alighting, familiar after years. He was glancing around—she caught his eager, boyish recognition. He ran forward.

“Amelie!”

“M'sieu!”

“You have forgiven me, then—that you have come yourself to meet me?”

Her hand closed tightly upon his; her pulses raced. She could not, would not, tell him here—now. Presently he was beside her under the old fur robe, just as they used to drive in the old days. She was very conscious of his presence, her shoulder touching his. Marcel whipped up the mare; they glided off across the snow. She must speak quickly! The hotel gleamed up; summoning every atom of will-power, she leaned forward desperately, shouted weakly: “Marcel!” But the old man's deafness turned the scale. The hotel was past—the hotel in which the woman waited with the child. Amelie fancied she caught sight of Dr. Derry's big form in the doorway, but, as the cutter swept merrily along the way, past the glow of village homes and so into the starlit semi-darkness beyond, she forgot everything but that he was here—the man made for her, for whose coming she had waited bitter years.

“Your mother, Amelie—how is she?”

So M'sieu did not know of that, as she had surmised from his letter. What devil prompted the answer?—“It is well with my mother!”

She had left lights burning, more than she had lit for years: the windows glowed with welcome for the one who had returned at last. In a few moments now they would be there, alone together. They entered, dismissing Marcel. Amelie hastened to set before him a simple meal prepared with infinite care against his coming; showed him his room, scarce changed in the years, tended by loving hands. Her woman's wiles were exerted towards him by a thousand little intimate attentions.

"Why—why did you come, m'sieu?" She had to ask it.

He looked up with a grave smile.

"Ah, Amelie—because I wanted to get away from myself—to be a boy again. You helped me to be that before. It is not a very happy Christmas for me, Amelie. And then—I wished to see, after the neglect of all these years—how things fared with—Amelie! I wondered if you and Jules—"

She shook her head, and hurried off to see to some bacon frying for herself in the pan, for she had served him first after the fashion of her kind. . . . pronging the pieces viciously with her fork. She knew now—knew if this Christmas he was specially unhappy he still cared for that other who waited. But was it not true that when men were unhappy over one, another might console, and so bind them by new chains in their weakness?

"Your mother?" questioned M'sieu, after a time.

"She will not be in until late," said the devil through Amelie. "M'sieu is tired, and would like to retire before then?"

"I am, Amelie, to tell the truth. The long journey and your country air —"

She heard him in his room, preparing to retire.

Amelie sat long by a hearth in which the fire burned low. The clock struck ten in cracked tones—half past. Seven—eight hours till dawn, and then who would believe that he had not come to her?

Eleven! . . . and on through the minutes, tick-tock, in the deathly silence.

The woman and the child! Why did they seem to stare at her wistfully from every darkened corner of the room? Somewhere in the night a dog gave tongue mournfully; for Amelie it was transformed into the wail of an infant, untended by a woman weeping. What blue eyes the child had; how he had come to her breast, clung to her—trustingly. . . .

She could yet awaken M'sieu and tell him! But she dared not trust herself to face him again, to feel his presence near. She set herself instead to the unaccustomed task of composition—a letter to the woman who belonged to the man asleep in there. It was clumsily phrased, but stamped with genuineness. It was renunciation. She sealed it, and with a wistful little smile took from a hiding-place a Christmas seal, sold in a city store eleven years ago. Her Christmas gift should go fittingly adorned, as once her cedar chest had been. . . .

Fumbling fingers to fasten on her outer wraps! Out at last into the night air—clear, cold, starlight. Down the hill in the semi-darkness, past lighted windows marked with wreaths of evergreen and holly. And so to the hotel, with a request that it be delivered at once to Dr. Derry, that he might take it to the woman.

The village street was deserted, but from the parish church a gleaming radiance shone, touching the snow with glory. The little edifice was crowded to the doors; the sound of chanting came to her ears. She would wait outside now—they would not be long, then she could return with the married sister of Jules, and in the morning she would accept the position Jules, who was doing well at the store, had offered her to help care for the growing family . . . little René with his sled, and the others.

It thrilled her curiously to think of caring for chubby little bodies, washing them, tending them. . . .

How cold it was outside here waiting!

But the sound of Christmas music was sweet. And, lifting her eyes, she beheld in the lighted gothic window the crude representation of a woman with a child. To her it was beautiful. As she looked, it seemed to her that the blue eyes of the Babe of Bethlehem were smiling upon her, and that the arms were outstretched, as if the child leaped from his mother's arms to bring comfort to the watcher in the snow.

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.

Illustrations have been relocated due to using a non-page layout.

A cover was created for this ebook which is placed in the public domain.

[The end of *Lighted Windows* by Leslie Gordon Barnard]