

Marionette

Louis Arthur Cunningham

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MARIONETTE

By LOUIS ARTHUR CUNNINGHAM

Author of "Sign of the Burning Ship"

To her family, beautiful Bionde Lacasse, of Acadia, was a marionette, to do their bidding, to marry herself to the highest bidder, and recoup the family fortunes. When she met De Varin she knew that the puppet had the warm heart of a woman, and that heart was his. But De Varin was a poor artist and the stern Lacasses tore Bionde from him.

There seemed no escape from that parental will until the flashing steel of Bionde's miraculous ice skates brought her to the attention of the world—and of Hollywood. Happiness was within her grasp now, but then a strange mood seemed to come over De Varin, and he turned from her in coldness.

The girl went to Hollywood, and the world that saw her on the screen never knew that the glorious beauty of her skating concealed a broken heart. At last, in a moment of supreme drama, Bionde learned the meaning of De Varin's strange actions, and there was happiness in two hearts once more.

A beautiful romance of the North.

BOOKS BY

LOUIS ARTHUR CUNNINGHAM

Marionette

The Sign of the Burning Ship

Tides of the Tantramar

Fog Over Fundy

Moon Over Acadie

Valley of the Stars

Of These Three Loves

Marionette

by

LOUIS ARTHUR
CUNNINGHAM



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To
MRS. FRANK PETERS

Marionette

CHAPTER I

Bionde had just come from a long walk over the marshes. She had followed the footpaths worn deep into the top of the Shepody dikes that barred the ever-waiting tides of Fundy from the fertile meadows. The sea-wind had ruffled her yellow hair even as its cool breath toyed with the light grass, bending it in long light green swathes; the sea-wind and the sun had flushed her tanned cheeks and brought a lovelier brightness into her blue eyes. The pungent scent of the dark woods of spruce and pine in the uplands met and mingled with the salty zest of the sea, and it was a fresh world, a clean world, a young world and bright—until she passed through the gap in the leaf-bare lilac hedge, crossed the neglected lawn and paused by the tangled shrubbery outside the library window.

It became an old world then, a grim world and gray. The brightness of the late Autumn sunlight dimmed for Bionde Lacasse when she heard Tante Adrienne's dry words: "Bionde may consider herself very fortunate that Mathieu Bernard wants her. He is wealthy. He has been long in parliament — —"

"And he will be the next to be appointed to the senate," rumbled Uncle Hormidas.

"It is a good thing for the family of Lacasse," growled a new voice that Bionde knew in a moment: the Colonel Hubert Lacasse, of the Ninth Grenadiers regiment, all the way from barracks in Quebec, and with him — "It will enable her to take her rightful place in society"—his wife, Tante Aimée, once Aimée Dorion, daughter of a Quebec ship-chandler.

"It will mean an end to skimping and scraping," said Tante Adrienne. "Mathieu has intimated that he will settle on Hormidas and me an income

sufficient to enable us to maintain our house— —”

Bionde let go the twig her fingers had closed upon, and found, only then, that it was a thorn and that her finger bled. She hurried away—away across the lawn, through the break in the hedge, away over the stretching endless marshland that went to meet the sea.

So that was why Uncle Hubert and his wife had come! A family conference. When all else failed, one simply married off the daughter of the house to the most eligible man one could find—in this case, Mathieu Bernard, the Honorable Mathieu Bernard, fortyish, fat, filled with sounding periods, so that a simple “Good day” uttered by him sounded like a flourish of Gabriel’s trumpet.

Bionde shuddered. The October day was chill now, the sunlight was cold, glaring, impersonal. It shone on everyone and everything alike, the sun. It cared for no one. It did its work impartially and shed its radiance anywhere it listed. So they were going to marry her off to Mathieu Bernard! Then all their worries would be over; the house, it was her house, for it had been her father’s, would become proud and splendid again; the neglected gardens, the tumbledown buildings, the farm that had gone to seed—all would come back again to their former splendor. And she would have a great house at Cap Brulé in summer and in winter an apartment in Ottawa at the Château Laurier; mink coats, motors, trips to London and Paris—and Mathieu, who was white and doughy, who looked like something made by an eccentric baker who forgot to put it in the oven.

Bionde crossed the great marsh and walked up the winding road into the hills. She had walked miles, her brown brogues were white with dust, but she felt no fatigue. She could keep on forever, happy in the thought that each step took her further away from her guardians, further away from Mathieu Bernard. She was eighteen; only a year out of the Convent of the Gray Nuns. She had been once to Montreal, once to New York, but the Acadian marsh-country was the only land she knew, the only land she could ever love. Once the family of Lacasse had been proud and wealthy; now they were bargainners, selling their girls to the highest bidders.

Time had been, no doubt, when the women of her name would obey, unquestioning, the mandates of their elders; when, however much in their hearts they might rebel and however much their souls be torn, they would go to him who was chosen for them. But not now; certainly not with her. She was no puppet to dance when others pulled the strings, no marionette to

move at another's bidding. She had her own life to live and no other should say how she was to live it.

She stopped before a broken-down iron gateway that gave on a park even more neglected and forlorn than the one surrounding her own home. This place belonged to the De Varins, once prouder, once richer and mightier than her own family—once when along the Fundy Shore strong men built great ships and in them made voyages that garnered vast wealth.

She entered the park by swinging nimbly over the sagging gate and walked up the drive carpeted with the fallen leaves of oak and maple and elm, under the over-arching branches of the trees. This was a pilgrimage, of sorts; the visit of the last hope of one fallen house to another equally fallen.

The long drive came suddenly upon a grand sweep of lawn that was now a tangle of weeds, rank and wanton, upon a great old house that still, despite its cracked and falling shingles, its one-hinged shutters, its crumbling chimneys and rot and ruin, kept some of its pride and beauty and, like a very ancient man, toothless and almost blind, brooded upon the past that had been bright with love and laughter.

Bionde gazed upon it to-day more sadly than ever she had before. To-day its history, its sorrows, seemed more vivid to her. And she thought, it is too bad that you, old house, have not someone, as the House of Lacasse has Bionde, who can put paint upon your clapboards, glass in your windows, mortar between your bricks. But you are all forsaken, you old house of De Varins, and one will let you molder away to dust; one will never disturb the rats and the spiders that are your only tenants now — —

She stopped thinking; she stopped breathing for a moment—a moment in which she could hear her heart's quickened beat. She felt like a butterfly that has been transfixed, held down by a thumb. She forced herself to look around and her startled gaze met a pair of brown eyes in a brown face that belonged to a brown youth with jet black hair—a gypsy youth who sat on a crooked marble bench with a sketching block on his knee and who used his pencil busily, not stopping even when she discovered him.

He looked up, only briefly, with earnest eyes, then bent again to his work.

“Do not move! Do not speak! Do not do anything, dryad!”

Dryad! Her full red lips were parted in sudden, swift resentment. Her eyes darkened and her shoulders grew stiff, defiant. “What do you mean! Who are you? And what are you doing here?”

“I mean dryad—nymph, fairy! I’m an artist. I’m making a sketch of you.”

“You startled me!”

“*You startled me*—the contrast, you see—one so young, so lovely—and this—” He waved a brown hand at the ancient home of the De Varins. “But then, once it too, this house, was young, gay and bright, and there was love in it and laughter and music and the prattle of little children and the barking of dogs and—won’t you come and sit beside me and see the sketch I made of you?”

She hesitated. She looked at his old tweed jacket, his creaseless flannels, his dusty shoes, the rucksack on the bench beside him, the stick of hornbeam that leaned against a tree. But his teeth were a white crescent when he smiled and the smile was more real in his eyes than on his lips and she felt tired now and somehow very sad—oh, not because of Tante Adrienne or Uncle Hormidas or Uncle Hubert or Tante Aimée or Mathieu Bernard—but just because things grow old and fall down and decay, because laughter dies and even tears pass away.

She came over and sat beside him where he made room for her by pushing the rucksack to the ground. She looked at the sketch and liked it. The likeness was good. He had caught, with swift cunning, the expression of youth when it feels sadness, a wondering, baffled look as of one who cannot understand that life, with all its beauty, can have so much of ugliness and pain, as of one who fails to see why, amid such growth of loveliness, there should be so much decay.

“Did I seem so sad?”

“You did. And what made you sad?”

“This.” She looked at the dilapidated manor of the De Varins. “Doesn’t it sadden you?”

“Not so much as it should, perhaps.” He gazed pensively at the ruined façade. “In fact, I rather like it. Suppose you do put new paint on it, give it a new roof, furbish it all up—it won’t have the character it has now. It can never have back the things and people that made it what it was. You can’t give it a new spirit and the spirit it has now is old and weary. Better to let it go.”

Bionde looked gravely at his dark, strong profile. He turned his head quickly, smiled at her. “Does that make you think?”

“Do you believe that—it is true of all old houses; that Youth shouldn’t be sacrificed to prolong their age—houses and families?”

“Youth must never be sacrificed,” he said sternly. “Not for old houses, old causes, old loves or old hates. Age tries too often to batten off Youth, to feed off it, to use it for its selfish ends.”

“You speak with the voice of prophecy,” smiled Bionde. “Are you Jeremiah, Daniel, Joshua?”

“No. I’m only a painter. And what are you?”

“I,” said Bionde, rising, “am one who is about to be a sacrifice to Age.”

“Oh! But you’re not!”

“It’s hard to fight old things,” she said with young bitterness. “I must go now. Good-by.”

“But—” He stretched out a hand to stay her. “Please don’t—”

“I must.” She almost ran over the sodden yellow carpet of the leaves. The sun was lower in the sky now, the shadows lengthening on the shaggy lawns and all but vanished parterres of the once proud house of De Varin. But she went away happier than she had come. And it was thanks to him—to that brown-faced, gypsy fellow, that she could go home now with a free heart and brave, with the armor of Youth strong and shining about her and Youth’s straight, gleaming sword in her hand, to face the powers of Age, to defy them.

They were marshaled in the living-room, sitting, gray and faded, in the dusk, when Bionde returned. She stood in the doorway and greeted them without fear, without tremor. She walked over to kiss Tante Aimée’s cold cheek, to let her hand rest in the dry old paw of Uncle Hubert.

“Wherever have you been, Bionde?” demanded Tante Adrienne, and Uncle Hormidas grunted his question. “We expected you home hours ago.”

And I was home, she thought, and I heard what you said, how neatly you had planned my life for your own benefit, for the glory of our house. But you don’t know that.

She said, “I have been walking along the dikes and over the marshes and into the upland. I strolled through the park of the De Varins—”

“Ah!” Uncle Hormidas shook his head. It was bald and shone in the twilight as if there were a halo growing about it. “A sad ruin, that. A lesson to be read there, Bionde—of what can happen to a house, to a family if—if it is let go to seed, if it is—ah—not nurtured, given new blood and— —”

“Our own house is in danger of failing, child,” said Uncle Hubert, his hand touching the place where he wore his war-medals and not seeming to note their absence. “We were discussing that. It is for you, the—I may say the flower of the Lacasses, to keep our family strong. It rests with you, I think, whether we stand or fall.”

“But how with me?” She sat on the arm of a chair and looked from one glimmering shapeless visage to the other, aware that their old eyes could never see the defiance, the calm sureness in her own.

“By marrying—by bringing some new strong blood into the veins of our family.”

“But—but I have often heard you say, all of you, that there is no blood in Acadia now fit to mingle with ours.”

“Eh!” Uncle Hormidas stirred uneasily. “That perhaps, was a bit extreme. Times change, says the poet Horace, and we with them. There are worthy families, strong stock. To be specific: there is Mathieu Bernard, who has distinguished himself in the service of his country, and who, moreover — —”

“But his family were peasants, fishermen—” Bionde’s impish smile was lost in the gloom. “You would not have a Lacasse”—she stopped impressively—“marry a peasant’s son and breed peasants!”

“Hmm!” Uncle Hubert rather agreed with that part of it. An ancestor of the Lacasses’ had been governor of Isle Saint-Jean during the French régime: the Bernards had been building dikes at Grand Pré then.

“Eh! Yes, pride of family is a good thing, a splendid thing,” said Tante Adrienne. “But pride cannot live on itself, you know. And since you are never likely to meet one who is your equal in birth and breeding—why, then — —”

Sophie, the housemaid, spoke from the dim doorway. “Monsieur Guy de Varin.”

“De Varin!” It was a whisper that echoed from lip to lip; even Bionde found herself shaping the name, a name even more hallowed than her own.

There had been no De Varins at the old house in her memory. The last of them had gone away before she was born. For a while, she knew, some effort had been made to keep the family dwelling in decent repair, but for years now it had been neglected, left a prey to the spiders, the worms, the beetles and things that creep and crawl and batten on old houses. De Varin! She had heard so many stories of men and women who bore that name. Even the sound of it had a proud ring, a haughty over-tone. It spoke of rapiers with hilts be-diamonded, of fine silks and lacy ruffles, of minuets and moonlight.

“Please show him in, Sophie.” Tante Adrienne stood up with a lavender rustle and Uncle Hormidas switched on the dim lights so that they greeted his entry. Bionde gasped and moved back into the shadows. Guy de Varin stood tall and upright in the doorway, a smile on his brown face, grace in his posture, that marked him for what he was, let him wear baggy flannels or breeches of splendid satin. He bowed low over Tante Adrienne’s soft white hand. He greeted each of them gallantly and when he stood before Bionde, he said, “I behold the flower of your house, Mesdames et Messieurs Lacasse,” and, bending, kissed her fingers.

There was constraint, wonderment, perhaps consternation among the Lacasses. Certainly there was utter amazement in Bionde’s fast-beating heart. Guy de Varin seemed in no way disturbed. He talked of France, of Algiers, of Indo-China, of many strange and glamorous places whither his adventurous kinsmen had penetrated, and whither he had followed.

“I am the last of the De Varins, as you know,” he said easily. “Last of that illustrious family”—only Bionde saw the smile that was gone as swiftly as the grass, bent by a vagrant breeze, straightens again—“who came to Acadia two centuries ago and founded le baronnie de Menville.”

“It adjoined that of the Lacasses,” said Uncle Hormidas, “which was le baronnie de Valcour. It is a good thing to remember those ancient days, those great men.” He shook his head. “A proud thing to recall.”

“The first Baron de Menville, Paul de Varin,” said Guy most gravely, “was a pirate. A pretty high-handed fellow, too, from what I know of him. Did he not carry off his bride from her family that opposed their union? I seem to have heard — —”

The gray and white heads of the Lacasses moved in concert as old eyes stared at him harder. Truly a rash young man, this. But perhaps he did not know. These young ones cared little for tradition; this that he spoke of was

never mentioned, for the girl who had been carried off was a Lacasse and at that time there was bad blood between her house and the De Varins.

"It is a long time ago," said Tante Adrienne primly.

"I heard of it when I was a small boy." He was very much at ease, this young De Varin. Bionde, watching him sitting so carelessly, so gracefully on the faded fauteuil, could fancy claret velvet and yellow lace and gleaming buckles on his shoes, and a sword, its hilt all jeweled. "It fascinated me at the time and has always stayed with me. Her family wanted her to marry a man of many possessions and Paul de Varin turned pirate so he could acquire gold to match his rival's. Even then they objected—so he took her—and she was very happy with him."

"Sir," said Uncle Hubert, "that—that girl, though you may not know it, and I sincerely trust you do not—was one of our house. It is an incident that we— —"

De Varin stood up, bowed humbly. "Pardon! I have made a mistake that I regret very much. You will be more likely to forgive me when I tell you that the respect I have for your house is such that it would never occur to me that one of your daughters—" He stopped. Bionde saw the devil's imps dancing in his eyes—just as they came to dance in hers as she finished for him:

"—would be put up at auction, and then not knocked down to the highest bidder."

"Bionde!" Tante Adrienne glowered menacingly. "Enough of this family history, Monsieur de Varin. Will you honor us by staying to dine?" She asked it coldly, but to her chagrin, he said, "I shall be delighted, madame."

There was nothing for it but to have Hervey, who was butler, handyman and about everything else around the place, show him to a room. Bionde got away too before anything could be said to her. She lingered in her own room until after the bell had rung, until she heard De Varin's quick footsteps pass her door. Then she went down.

Mathieu Bernard was there—Mathieu, smug and soapy in black frock-coat and striped trousers. He had been addressing a meeting of the Tantrammar Farmers' Co-operative. He was still talking in sounding periods. Bionde's entry interrupted at the Great Lakes one that had started in the Rockies, swept across the prairies, demolishing Social Credit on the way, and that had been destined to end in the coal mines of Cape Breton.

"You look very pretty to-night, Bionde," he said. She colored. Her eyes met De Varin's. He was very quiet in a corner, studying some old faded

prints showing the early days of Port Royal. Why, she wondered, had he come here. Just because of the family or—The other possibility made her heart beat faster, brought to her eyes a sheen that was new, to her cheeks a deeper flush.

Tante Adrienne carefully placed her as far as possible away from Guy de Varin, with Mathieu overflowing the chair next to hers and attacking his soup with real country relish. It was a quiet meal, Mathieu doing most of the talking and enjoying himself thoroughly, firing a few patronizing questions at young De Varin, and not listening for the answers. The household of Lacasse was very silent. To them all the presence of this stranger, this De Varin, was disquieting. He was a specter—a ghost from that past that they loved—but not enough to like overmuch its menace to the present.

And he looked like a vagabond and doubtless was one. He looked like a re-incarnation of François Villon. There was in his eyes a mocking light; a pride in his aquiline face, a grace in his manner, that made everybody there, save Mathieu, very conscious of Mathieu's pudginess, his bumptiousness, the platform-manner that would not be off. Even Bionde was glad when the coffee and the brandy came and she, with her aunts, withdrew.

She took her coat from the hall, flung it cape-fashion over her shoulders and went out onto the terrace, out where there was a cool lovely night and stars calm and bright in a sky that had not all darkened, that still in the west showed a dying glow over the black undulating silhouette of the coastal hills. The bay was calm, mirroring the stars, and the tide was rising, creeping up on the land as if fed from below by a million little springs, creeping up to the dikes, the same eternal enemy, but with a flag of truce to-night.

Guy de Varin came down the steps and across the gravel and the lawn to where she stood by the hedge. He came close to her and stood, saying nothing, looking with her at the sky and the water and the hills, then looking from them at her, steadily, until she turned to him.

"Perhaps even so," he said, "in this same garden, on such a night, stood that other De Varin and that other daughter of the Lacasses."

She could not speak. She tried to answer him lightly, but words would not come. It was as if the vanished centuries held her in thrall, as if that past were all about her. She trembled.

"It is not as if you and I had just met, Bionde." His voice was earnest, low-pitched, close to her ear. "This meeting was written in the stars many, many years ago. Perhaps you are the spirit of that one—her name was Diane; perhaps I am Paul de Varin, who loved and won her."

“You are full of strange fancies, monsieur.” She kept her uneasy hands hidden beneath the folds of her coat; tried to slow the too swift and noisy beating of her heart. She felt half-angry at him, that his mere presence could do these things to her; yet there was in his nearness some wondrous magic, some charm more potent than she could ever have believed.

“You have brought these fancies to me—and the dreams that accompany them.”

“A while ago you did not know that I existed. How could all this come to you so quickly?” She tried to speak calmly, rationally, knowing that this moment was pregnant with things that could be treated neither with calm nor reason.

“To me it is as if I had always known you. As if I had been for a long time asleep, had wakened and resumed my life where it left off. Yet this too is a dream—even fairer than a dream.”

“Sometimes to-night I thought that,” she said. “I mean that I thought, what if you weren’t you, what if I just imagined you, sitting there to-day in the faded garden— —”

His arms went about her gently and drew her to him and his lips found her hair, her wide brow, her lips, and lingered there— —

“That is real,” he said.

She opened her eyes, came slowly out of that realm of ecstasy, of beauty lovelier than sunlight and flowers and stars. She looked at him and murmured, “Is it?”

He kissed her again. He said, “I cannot bid for you, Bionde; perhaps I can turn pirate and bring back gold to over-balance his.”

“I am not up for auction,” she said quietly. “I will not sacrifice myself for—them. You taught me that. You told me that Youth must not be sacrificed for old things.”

“And you have taken my teaching? Ah, Bionde, I love you—love you. It seems as if I came across the world, drawn by that love, to this spot, on this night. It is as if this were ordained long ago, that you and I should meet and love.”

She was quiet, passive in his arms, her hair against his cheek. “The world is all different now,” she whispered. “The stars, the sea, the wind. The dawn will be different, and all the days to come.”

“For me, too,” he said, gazing down into her eyes as if he would never weary of gazing, as if he must drink his fill of her beauty now. “But I am nothing, have nothing. There was some money left to me. It lasted until a little while ago. I did not need much. When it was all gone I decided to come home—to the old house that is all that remains of former glories.”

“But what will you do?” She released herself from his arms, her hands lingering on his shoulders.

He shrugged. “I can do only one thing—paint. So I shall stay here and paint my pictures.”

“But here—it is so far away from the places where people buy pictures. Here you would be lost, ignored, forgotten— —”

“I would be near you,” he countered stubbornly. “That alone would make up for being ignored. It would make up for everything.”

He touched reverently the light whorls of her hair, luminous in the dusk where the hawks swooped and the gulls’ far off bleating came with a sound plaintive and eery. She caught his hand and held it to her breast. She thought, she too, that just to be near him would be enough, that nothing else could matter greatly then.

Tante Adrienne came down the garden walk with Mathieu Bernard, whose cigar profaned the night. “It is cold to stay out here, Bionde.” She looked disapproval at Guy de Varin. “Had you better not go in?”

“Presently, *ma tante*.”

“You are staying in Sainte-Barbe, Monsieur de Varin?” Bionde could see Tante Adrienne’s lifted brows, so used was she to the way they went up with any pertinent question.

“I am staying at the inn of Ludger Laflamme, the Three Pigeons, is it not? I shall return there now, madame. I bid you good evening; and you, monsieur.”

“I suppose,” said Mathieu Bernard, “you won’t linger long in a dull place like Sainte-Barbe. Not much after Paris and New York and great cities like those.”

“There is more of beauty here,” said De Varin audaciously. “I may spend the rest of my days here.”

“And turn farmer!” Mathieu Bernard laughed raucously. “Those fine hands of yours wouldn’t fit the handles of a plow, that’s sure.”

“Oh, I don’t know.” De Varin was not ruffled. “The men of our family all had such hands—some held the sword, some the crozier, some the plow. We shall see. *Bon soir.*”

Bionde walked beside him. They went into the house so he could say good-by to Uncle Hubert and Uncle Hormidas and Tante Aimée, who were playing a solemn game of cribbage. They bade him a grave good night. At the door, he took her hand and carried it to his lips. His dark eyes shone. She felt strength like steel in his fingers, and was proud. His lips brushed hers lightly.

“Good night, Bionde. I love you. I shall dream of you. I am in a new world now, life is new, even the sun, for you are my sun—and moon and stars.”

He went down the wide, sagging stone steps, with a backward look, a wave of the hand. She heard the clash of his iron-plated heels on the gravel, heard him whistling as he strode down the drive. She lifted her face to the stars, so remote, so calm, so timeless, in the pale blue sky. She closed her eyes and felt the breeze from Fundy cool on her lids, on her cheek, and felt new life, new ecstasy, new powers awaken in her young breast and stir, like roses in the dawn.

CHAPTER II

From the ice-bound places of Belle Isle and the Labrador and Canada's frozen frontiers, the wild winter winds came rushing, sweeping the Westmoreland marshes clear of all life save that which moved muffled and swaddled warmly against the blast. Guy de Varin lived in a few rooms of the old house, an object of deepest curiosity and speculation to the marsh-dwellers, an object of great unease to the Household of Lacasse, an object of love to Bionde and uncertainty to himself. But in Bionde's heart was revolt that had come out into the open. Flatly she said, "I will not marry Mathieu Bernard."

She said that the day Tante Adrienne brought out the wedding-gown, a delicate web-like thing of silk and exquisite lace that Bionde's grandmother, Meridel Melanson, had worn and had passed to her daughter, who had married Etienne Lacasse, Bionde's father. Reverently Bionde touched the wondrous point d'Alençon and felt, as her fingertips caressed its beauty, a strange, nostalgic thrill. She thought of her mother, her grandmother, as they were on the day they dressed in this lovely thing and went to meet the men they had chosen.

Or had they chosen? Had it not perhaps been with them as the family would have it for her? Had not the men been selected for them? She would never know that. But she said, looking into Tante Adrienne's chill gray eyes, slowly drawing her hand away from the web of lace, "Ah, yes, it is lovely. It is like a dream, so fine and delicate and lovely. It would make any girl's heart glad. But if she is not wearing it for the man she loves, why then she might as well dress herself in some potato-sacks. Is it not so, *ma tante*?"

Tante Adrienne looked at her as if she had uttered some awful blasphemy. Here was something unheard of; here was revolt. Love—what had love to do with it? Mathieu Bernard was rich. He could provide everything a wife needed. The child was mad. All girls of eighteen were mad.

"What do you say?" Her mouth was set, hard. She had little white bristles at her lip corners and they stood out straight. "How can you talk this way! Here is this lovely wedding-gown handed down to you from your own grandmother. It is for you to wear when you marry Mathieu Bernard. You do not seem to understand."

"It is you, I fear, who do not understand." The blue eyes were calm, but behind their calm a storm was lurking. "I do not intend to marry M. Bernard."

"You do not intend—" Tante Adrienne's shoulders, stiff as a grenadier's at all times, were simply rigid now. "You dare to tell me that you—that you refuse to—to—"

"I do not love him."

"Bah! Love! What has love to do with a good home and plenty of money, an assured position and—"

The storm raged on and on. The others came, old, gray and dim, like figures out of a faint dream, but all able to add their quota of persuasions, recriminations, threats, cajoleries. Uncle Hormidas, sputtering, his eyes popping out like those of an astonished frog; Tante Aimée, her hand over her heart, that had been weak for almost sixty years; Colonel Hubert, fuming and swearing. Their faces circled around her, old and void of warmth, of understanding, of love. Their fingers, long and gnarled, pointed at her, their words were a thousand little scourges flagellating her, making her soft soul quiver. Better, better perhaps to do as they bade her, to cease fighting against the weight of their old desires, the massive load of their selfishness. Let her be sacrificed to their peace of mind. Perhaps—who knew?—they were right. It might be that they knew best. Would she have resisted them, had the strength to meet their onslaught and defy them if one had not said to her: "Youth must never be sacrificed. Not for old causes, old houses, old loves or old hates. Age tries too often to batten off Youth, to feed off it, to use it for its selfish ends."

She ran from them, ran blindly, left those gray shapes in the grayness of the old room. She hurried through the house and through the kitchen. In the back porch she snatched up her skates and slung them over her shoulder. In the hall she had picked up in passing her white sweater and gray fur jacket and blue beret. One could always skate, and in freedom of motion, in flying over the frozen ponds on the marsh, one could find relief. She ran almost all the way under a sky the color of lead. She could not think to-day, could not straighten out the confusion in her mind.

She had seen Guy only twice since the day of his coming. They had met in the winding, straggling street of Sainte-Barbe and he had walked with her. And he had spoken no more of love. He did not talk much. She felt in her heart that he had said all that she need ever hear. She knew he was poor, that he had nothing. And that would hold him back. But there was love between

them. It had come between them even before he kissed her. And there was misery in his soul. She knew that: he was so quiet, so withdrawn. What did he do there in that old tumbledown mansion? How could one paint amid such surroundings? How could one so young, so strong as he, go on hoping, go on seeing a splendid future, when he was lost, tucked away in a forgotten village on the rim of the great marshes, lost in their endless monotony, their awful loneliness, dwarfed by their immensity?

She thought of him as she put on her skates, sitting on a log at the edge of the pond below the great dike. What if he had not come here? Would she have let herself be persecuted into this marriage with Mathieu Bernard? Perhaps yes. And what difference could his presence make? There was nothing for him and her—nothing. No hope of any kind. Oh, perhaps he might sell some of his pictures for a great price and then he would come to her and tell her again of his love, and they would be married— —

She stood up, stepped lightly onto the mirror surface of the pond and almost at once forgot the misery in her heart, the troubled thing her life had become. She could skate. Like all the children in Sainte-Barbe, she had learned to skate as soon as she could walk. Her strokes were strong and sure and free, her movements like an exquisite poem, a marvel of rhythm and coördination. She had not learned in Sainte-Barbe all the complicated figures, the dazzling pirouettes and lightning-swift maneuvers that she went through now. There was a Danish farmer, Tor Gustavssen, who had settled in Sainte-Barbe. He had seen her skate one day and some joy that had all but died was born again in his blue eyes. And he had taught her to skate. He had told her a little, a very little, of his own daughter whom he had taught before her, who had died when she was very young. And it was Tor who had given her, shyly, the silvery skates with their high-laced white boots that she wore now.

She was lost in the ecstasy of movement, in the swiftness of passage, the glorious symmetry of motion, as the true musician or artist loses himself in the work of creation. She was composing a symphony, writing a poem, painting a picture in the motions of her strong, slender, youthful body. All else was forgotten. Free and happy, intoxicated with the satisfaction that came to her, she moved over the ice with a speed, a grace, a rapt sureness that seemed to Guy, who watched her, a little more than human.

When finally she stopped, poised on the toe of one skate, her arms outflung, her yellow hair flying, he came down to the rim of the pond and stared at her. She seemed to awaken then. She came to him in one long curving stroke of tremendous power, and smiled up into his eyes.

"I did not see you," she said. "How long have you been here?"

"A long time," he replied. "You saw no one. Where in the name of heaven did you learn to skate like that? And what were you trying to say in those wild, wonderful motions of your body? I—I have never seen anything like it."

She laughed. "I wasn't trying to say anything—not anything that I can name. It's just that I love to skate. If I feel unhappy or upset, if things are dark for me, I can put on my skates and in a little while forget everything except how lovely it is to be free—free to move unhampered and unchecked. Tor Gustavssen taught me the figures and most of what I know. He is a Dane who lives on the edge of the marsh near Sainte-Barbe."

"He taught you well, Bionde." De Varin looked thin and tired. "Were you unhappy to-day that you needed to skate like that? As I watched you it came to me that you fled at that terrific speed from some ugly, hateful thing."

She nodded. "That must be it. I didn't think of it that way, but I see now that it was flight. And for a while I found relief in that running away. But here I am"—she shrugged sadly—"right back where I started. Perhaps I shall never get away."

He stared at the frozen ground. "Is it—the same thing?"

"Yes. Only more so. To-day Tante Adrienne brought out the wedding-gown that my grandmother and my mother wore. It is, she told me, the one I shall wear when I—"

"You don't want to wear it. You can't—" She saw misery in his brown eyes when he looked up at her, misery and defeat.

"No—no, I don't want to wear it. I told her I wouldn't wear it—I told them all. As they stood about me, all of them—it was like an awful dream. And they argued and scolded and threatened, until I could stand it no longer. Then I came here. When I go back it will begin again. They are too much for me, too strong, too quick with the answers to all my objections. And they have forgotten what love is, if they ever knew."

"You know what it is then?"

She looked down at the white toe-cap of her boot. Her face was grave, her voice soft: "I know what it is not."

"Bionde—" He came close to her and took her gloved hand in both his own. She looked up at him then with something shy and almost frightened in

her eyes, and at once looked away. "I spoke to you of love," he said, "the first day, almost the first hour, I saw you. I could not help it."

"I listened."

"I could not help myself. It—it all seemed so easy then. Now that I am with you again, close to you, it again seems easy, and not the impossible thing that cold reflection made it look like."

"You were afraid?"

"Not for myself; for you and for what life can do to such a love as mine for you. There are so many things."

"Are any of them greater than love?"

"Not greater. But many are so much stronger, so much more cruel. I love you; I think you know that. And you care for me too."

"I haven't denied it—even to myself."

"And I cannot ask you even to wait. I dare not." His mouth had a bitter twist to it and he looked gloweringly at the sullen sky, at the drab world of the marshland where the brown grass held, here and there, patches of grayish snow. "I brought new heart and courage to my painting after the day I met you. There were worlds to conquer and I felt that I could conquer them."

"Can you not go on feeling like that?"

"The way seems so long. And it is so hard to wait."

"But if you go on believing, go on trying— —"

"Always with the knowledge of what failure will mean."

She looked squarely at him then and saw how young he was, how boyish, how uncertain and in her lived that ancient wisdom that is woman, who in her weakest moments knows that she is the strong one; that, in her, life seats deeper than in man the warrior and the hero: for she has mothered man.

"You will not fail," she said softly. "You cannot leave the battle before it's begun; you can't admit that you are beaten before you start."

He listened to her raptly, as if he had hungered for these things she said, as if they resolved all his doubts, answered all those questions that had come to plague him in moments of despair. Her faith and courage made the long

road seem so much easier and its roughness was smoothed by what he saw so clearly waited for him at its end.

He said, "I have painted some things in the time I have been here, some studies of life in Acadia. An old woman at her loom, a fisherman coming up from the sea. I've sent them to an art dealer I know in Montreal, Peter Crosley. He believes in my work. Perhaps they will sell. And he has others that I sent him before."

"You believe in yourself, Guy—you must believe."

"You believe in me, don't you, Bionde?"

She nodded. He drew her to him slowly and kissed her cold lips and touched with his cheek her hair that flowed in little cascades of pale gold from under the beret she had hastily donned at the end of her skating. He was afraid, awed, by the faint glimpse he had now of what her love might mean to him. In her, something told him, was fire and passion, all that man could ask; in that slender, supple body, so deceptively frail and delicate, was the strength of the world's creation. It was being offered to him. If he took it, if he had the courage and power to take it, he must look upon it as a trust sacred and inviolate.

He was trembling when he loosed her from his arms. The swift dusk was darkening the marshes, the distant houses of the village were vague in the grayness, the church spire looked small and its cross could not be seen. All about them was the vast, brooding stillness, almost palpable, of these flat regions of the earth. No bird soared above them, the wind, unresisted, sang past with a steady, monotonous rush that never varied. Their voices sounded small and lost and it seemed as if the words they spoke stayed here in this spot forever, engulfed in the hunger of its silence.

He did not go home with her. He watched her as she walked quickly toward the lights that had begun to glimmer in the winter dusk. Small and brave and gallant, she seemed to him. And he thought, standing there long after she had gone: She is stronger than I am. She is surer of her love and does not question it or fear that anything could hurt it. She would put it to the test now, to-night, if I asked her. But what do I see? Uncertainty, poverty, failure—can love ever survive these things and still keep its freshness, its beauty? And would I dare to risk her happiness, to ask her to share the nothing I have? I love her too much for that.

In Bionde's heart there was no doubt, no fear. She loved this man, this stranger, who had come out of nowhere. It was because of his coming that she had fought so hard against the plans her family had made for her. If he

had never come, if she had not read of the wonder and beauty that love might bring to her, had not seen her hope of happiness in his dark, laughing eyes, she might in time have gone to Mathieu Bernard, she might even have been, in a bovine way, content with him, never knowing, save as some vague and formless yearning, the glory she had missed. For this love was a glory, a fair and shining thing whose light transformed the whole world even as it had changed the very life within her.

They must have seen that she had found some new ally, some great resource, the old ones who waited for her return. They did not resume the attack that night nor the next day nor the next, but then they smoothly suggested that it was a long time since she had taken a holiday, that Quebec City was a lovely place in winter, that Uncle Hubert and Tante Aimée, that childless pair, were lonely and would love to show off their pretty niece. Oh, it would be just for a little while, a few weeks, a month; and it would do her so much good. She was so fond of skating, of skiing, of all winter sports: where better enjoy them than in Quebec, which was bound in a short time to outdo Chamounix or St. Moritz or any of the vaunted winter playgrounds of the world that was being destroyed?

She could not refuse. She was not sure that she wanted to, though often she had dreamed of Quebec in wintertime, picturing it as a city of light with gleaming towers and battlements looking down on a world all white. Yet something warned her not to go, that that was a trap, that they were scheming to separate her and Guy, and that this, so subtly broached, was the opening of the campaign.

They had even bought her ticket. Uncle Hubert and Tante Aimée had to return at once. They would take no refusal. She must go. It was a veiled command. “And, *mon Dieu*,” said the old soldier, “how my officers have need to look on such a pretty face as yours, Bionde! It is true the women of Quebec have not the same loveliness of you Acadians. You will be the toast of the garrison, my child.”

I would rather, she thought, be the wife of Guy, there in his few cold rooms, I would rather starve with him, freeze with him, if he would only ask me. Where he is, I can find all I’ll ever want.

But Guy said, “By all means go, Bionde.” He was adept at hiding the things that gnawed at his deep heart. “It will be good for you. This place is so dull and you are so young. Here your youth would be quickly stifled. There’s no light laughter here. Surely you do not hesitate — —”

“But you—” The hurt, the bewilderment, showed in the deep blue of her eyes, in the tremor of her voice. “What will you do? Will you not— —”

“Miss you? Yes, as I’d miss the sun and the stars. But I shall work harder, I shall never rest. And you—you will not forget me?”

She came into his arms and cried a little against his shoulder. “I would not go, if I thought that anything there could make me different, could make me forget even a moment of the time I have had with you. Do you believe me? You must believe me. You must tell me that it’s the same with you and me, that our love does not suffer, that it will always be the same.”

“I can tell you that,” he said earnestly. “And I will always believe.”

He was skating with her on the pond that day. She was like some feathery thing on his arm, so airy light, so swift, so elusive. He marveled that such speed and grace could dwell in one small body. He said, “You will not skate away from me, there in Quebec? I think that I should put shackles of gold, heavy ones, on those winged feet of yours. I seem clumsy and helpless to hold you. It is as if you soared away from me, as if I tried to hold a bird in my hand, a bird whose wings are strong, whose heart is stronger.”

“But love too has wings,” she said slowly, with that sweet grave way of hers that he had come to worship, “and you could fly after, could you not? And you would be swift to overtake me.”

There was fear, a deep anxiety, in her heart. She knew she had here a precious thing and life would not offer it again, were she to lose it now.

He laughed then. “Yes, it is so. Swiftly as you might fly my love should go after you and catch up with you. It would not let you escape me ever.”

But he was not at the little station that day of snow and roaring wind when the sleigh drew up to the platform and she and Uncle Hubert and Tante Aimée were assisted by Hervey from the heap of buffalo robes. He had said his good-by. He could not bear to come there. Indeed, it would be hard for him to find his way through that shifting world of fine white stinging powder. Always after she remembered the bitterness of the day, the jingle of the bells clear in the icy air, the creak of the harness, the steam that rose from the sweating horses, the acrid smell of it. Then the long train, snow-covered, its mighty engine hissing angrily, drew in, cutting off her view of the marshes with their awful lonely fascination. Then she was in the warmth and privacy of the drawing-room and the train was slowly, surely, gathering speed.

She felt a wild desire to get off, to go back, to lose herself in the storm that raged across the Westmoreland fenlands, knowing surely that somewhere in that storm she would find him, would find her love and all her hope of happiness. Too late for that now, perhaps forever too late. The long frozen miles lengthened between her and him and it seemed too that with the augmenting distance their lives drew apart. And she was afraid and lost and wanted to cry.

She heard Colonel Lacasse say as he shrugged out of his fur-lined coat and let the porter hang it with his jaunty cap of black Persian lamb. “*Seigneur!* It is good to get away from that accursed marshland. Yes, I know I was born there and it may sound like treason to you, Bionde, for me to say this. But it always got me down. It depressed me in summer and frightened me in winter. A sort of melancholy madness seems to hang over it and to affect the people who dwell there.”

She seemed only then to awaken, to realize what he had said. She looked up into his great ruddy face and protruding eyes. She shook her head. “I love it,” she said softly. “Always when I’ve been away from it, I’ve wanted to go back. It’s lonely, yes, and awful, but it gives you room to breathe, a place to think, to dream your dreams.”

“Oh, child!” Tante Aimée’s cold fingers touched her cheek. “What way is that for you to talk! You are too young to be so serious, so morbid. You should be laughing most of the time, not mooning over a lot of bogs. What is there for you?”

All that I’ll ever love, thought Bionde—all the happiness I may ever know. But she made no answer.

“After a few of the gay parties, the splendid balls in Quebec, you will forget all about that abomination of desolation. It has always puzzled me why people stick in gloomy places in this world that has so many bright ones unoccupied.”

Bionde could not argue with her. She knew that all joy, all true happiness resided within one, deep in the heart of one. Place and time had little to do with it. She thought of Guy in the bare old rooms of the De Varin place, trying to keep warm by the huge open hearth, trying to paint with fingers made numb by the cold. She felt the tears flooding to her eyes. She fought them back; tears would help neither of them. Hope and courage and trust—these were the things they must have. Only with these aids would their love survive.

“And I will hope,” she told herself. “And I’ll have courage, and faith in him. But it is cruel, this going away. I hate myself now for ever having yielded to them. I will soon go back—soon.”

So she promised herself, young Bionde of the yellow gold hair and eyes of the blue of the summer sky above her beloved marshland. So she assured herself as the long train roared through the winter day and the bitter night, across the frozen reaches of Eastern Canada toward the gloomy rock that is Quebec; but many long days and weeks and months, many thousands of miles still lay between her and the day of her returning. She whispered his name that night as she prayed before she slept, and she wondered if that faint whisper would live in the howling winds long enough to reach his ears where he sat lonely and discouraged in the ruined house of his fathers.

She saw Quebec next morning, its towers and pinnacles, its high-flung bastions and strong old walls touched with beauty by the brassy glintings of the winter sun. Her loneliness still persisted, yet she loved the life about her here, the narrow tortuous streets, the ancient houses, the forgotten echoes of gay laughter lingering down the centuries. Not hard for her to picture the notorious Intendant, François Bigot, and his wild companions, the Sieur de Cadet and Hugues de Péan; the lovely Angélique de Meloises, who was De Péan’s wife, the beloved of many, called La Pompadour of New France; not hard, as she walked that night under the stars, cut so cleanly in the blue black sky, to fancy that she heard the strains of some stately minuet of Lully, to which danced lovely women with gorgeous hair and gowns of gleamy silk, and men in knee-breeches and white-powdered perukes. The old city put its spell upon her, the spell of its ancient glories, and for a while she could forget the wild, wind-swept land of her birth, where thundered the mighty tides of Fundy.

Here was gay life and laughter light and airy. Here the mad toboggan shot with terrific speed down the icy slopes and the hills re-echoed with the shouts of the skiers and snow-shoers. She had brought her skates but she had no heart for skating; and for a while no time. It seemed that one, at least in the circle where her aunt and uncle moved, had very little time for anything.

The day after her arrival Tante Aimée took her shopping. There were gowns and shoes to buy. For members of a house whose fortunes were failing, the Hubert Lacasses, it struck Bionde, did not seem to care how much money they spent or, at least, put themselves in for. Tante Aimée insisted on buying for her a rose-velvet evening-gown which was lovelier

than anything she had ever dreamed of. When she protested, Tante Aimée said, "It is the wish of Hormidas and Adrienne, as well as Hubert's and my own, that you shall have lovely things to wear and that you shall have a good time and learn thus how fine a thing life can be. You must get away from the insane idea of burying yourself in the mud of the marshes when your birthright entitles you to know the high places."

She was frank about it all. Bionde saw the deep-laid plan now in all its cunning detail. They were going to teach her new lessons, give her a taste for caviar and champagne so that she would learn to despise the *poutine râpée* and good strong tea of her own people. They were going to make her need the things that money alone could buy—and need them so much that she would even marry Mathieu Bernard in order to get them.

It was easy, too, she soon discovered, to learn to like these things—elegant apartments, fine motors, rich furs and dresses from *la rue de la Paix*. It was lovely to dance in the magnificence of the Château Frontenac with some handsome young soldier who made you feel as if death were a mere bagatelle and the only thing precious in life was to have the privilege of gazing in your eyes. Good to have maids to wait upon you, to have your every wish anticipated.

Weeks of this, enough of gayety and music and luxury to turn the head and eat into the heart of most young girls, yet no night passed, no matter how late the hour, that she did not go to the window of her room after she had put out the lights, and gaze off at the distant stars and think, They shine over him to-night. He sees them, even as I can see them. Perhaps he looks at them and thinks that they shine on me. And the stars were a link between her and Guy. Those far, far stars seemed the only thing in all the world that brought them closer together.

And she could see the white vastness of the marshes under the moon and stars and, holding her breath, almost feel the great stillness of the nights in her own beloved land. She felt like a stranger here, among these people of her own race and tongue; she knew she never could be one of them.

There was no letter from Guy, though she had written to him the day she arrived. Letters from Tante Adrienne did not mention his name and Uncle Hubert and Tante Aimée pretended to have forgotten that there ever was such a person and to be utterly ignorant of the fact that she had been interested in him. So they pretended, but she knew better. She knew it was because of Guy more than her refusal to marry Mathieu Bernard, that they had brought her here.

She began to talk of returning home, feeling as she spoke how ungrateful she must seem, but knowing too that she could not go much longer without seeing Guy. She wrote again, but no answer came. Perhaps, she thought, wild panic and sick fear in her heart, he has gone away from Sainte-Barbe, left the place as suddenly as he came. Perhaps he is the gypsy I took him for the first day I saw him when he was drawing my picture. Perhaps I shall never see him again.

And she knew that if that were so something would die in her. Some part of her that had been warm and living would grow cold and perish.

But the days that had moved so swiftly at first dragged now and offered nothing that appealed to her. She knew that she was the subject of anxious conferences between her aunt and uncle, and probably, too, of a voluminous correspondence between them and her guardians in Sainte-Barbe.

She did not care. She was sorry for them, knowing how they would feel when they realized their plan had fallen flat. But they had underestimated her strength—rather, the strength of her love. Not all that they could give was powerful enough to vanquish that; not all the gorgeous colors in the world could make her forget the honest brown of his eyes, nor all the symphonies drown out the deep tone of his voice, nor anything take from her the love she had for him.

Lonely and heartsick she would go for a walk after the evening-meal, with Tante Aimée's great wolf-hound Natascha stepping majestically beside her. She moved among the crowds and was never one of them. She thought sadly that even on her solitary rambles along the tops of the dikes she had never been so lost, so alone, as she was here. Sometimes she searched the faces of the crowd for that one loved face, knowing as she did so how empty was the hope.

It was the ancient sorrow of her race that fell upon her now; the fate of the women of her people to be separated from the men they had chosen. She thought of Evangeline ruthlessly torn from Gabriel whom she loved, condemned to go all her life without him, wanting him, only in death to meet. She was so young to know such sorrow. Perhaps he would never come to her.

Then, one night, as she rode with her aunt and uncle to a dance at the Château, she saw him. He was passing the brightly lighted window of a bake-shop. Guy! She almost cried out his name. He looked as shabby, but as gallant as ever. He wore no overcoat, though the night was bitter. There was

a gay habitant scarf, blue and gold, tied around his neck, and a felt hat was pulled low over his eyes. Still she knew him in a moment.

The car stopped at the upraised hand of a traffic policeman and in an instant, heedless of her aunt's restraining hand, of her uncle's startled snortings, she had wrenched open the door and was out on the slippery cobbles, forgetful of the rose-velvet that trailed the ground, of the golden slippers, of the white fur evening-wrap and the blue flowers in her hair. Across the frozen, treacherous street, among the wildly hooting motors, she ran on winged feet.

The evening crowd in the street made way for her, turned wonderingly to watch her, to wonder what it was that made her hasten so. Some of them knew, those who had seen the starshine in her eyes, and the young ones envied her and the old ones sighed. It is good to be young and to be in love; good to forget that there is ever gray in the skies or shadows upon the earth.

He turned as she caught up with him. She saw his eyes fly wide, his lips part, saw a momentary struggle between pride and love, and then the swift surrender of pride.

"Bionde!"

She was in his arms, tightly, tightly in his arms and his lips were warm on hers.

"Oh, Guy! Why did you not—"

"*Ma mie!*" His lips stopped her words. "My sweet! A moment ago I was hating you. I saw you pass in that car. I thought you had forgotten me."

"But I wrote you—"

"I received no letter. I wrote you."

"But I—" Her nostrils flared a little. "The letters I wrote were left with others to be mailed, and yours came with the colonel's mail—It is clear now. They held our letters. The fools! Did they think that would stop us, that anything would stop us!"

"But it might have. I—I was going away to-night. I just came to-day." He grinned. "And I would have been back to-morrow."

"You would have gone away without speaking to me? Without even letting me know you were here? How could you do that? How could you forget the things we said, the promises we made?"

He looked at her contritely. "Because—I thought—I was fool enough to think, that you had forgotten them. They were said long ago, it seems, in another world than this. There were only you and I in that world. I thought you had stepped out of it. I feared that when no answer came to my letters. To-night, when I saw you pass, so like a queen, like some *grande dame*, I was sure of it."

"If you had gone away you would have forgotten me."

"I would have tried, Bionde, but I should never have been able to forget you."

"But what shall we do?"

"Do!" He stared at her. "Why, we shall be married, of course. Oh, I forgot, I did not tell you. Crosley sold a number of my pictures. And there will be more. And I have money now. And if you will—if you're not—"

They were on Sainte-Ursule Street in a spot that had seen many a lovely episode in many a gay romance, but never here nor elsewhere had man kissed maid or maid kissed man as they kissed now. Light was her laughter that night as they sat for hours in a little café drinking coffee they did not want. She had advised her uncle's house that she was all right and would be home later.

"Ah, but they will be angry," she said. "Angrier than ever they were before. I cannot help it." She looked, laughing, into his eyes. "It was you who said once, Guy, that our love was written in the stars, and who are little people, for even the Lacasses are but little people, to fight the stars!"

"Who indeed!" echoed Guy.

And neither of them in their young ecstasy thought that there are stars and stars, good ones and malignant ones, in the lives of all men and women, and that always we are fighting some of them, even when we think they all are for us.

To-night the stars of heaven were all for them and spelled out brightly in the dark sky the words of their love, and proclaimed its glory for all the world to see.

"Tell me of Sainte-Barbe," commanded Bionde, round chin on hand that never lost the golden hue of the summer's giving. "I have thought so much of home. Every night I would stand at my window and look across the hills of Levis and try to see, hundreds of miles away, the old house where you lived and all the places I loved so much."

“You were not happy?”

“Never really happy—until now. Oh, it is gay here and one laughs easily and there is much music and the lights are bright, but home there is the brightness of the Northern Lights over the Tantramar and if you listen you can hear the music the stars make.”

“But you hear that to-night?” He laid his hand on hers, his fingers entwining with hers.

“Yes,” she said, looking at him through lowered lashes. “To-night I hear it, very sweet and clear.”

They talked of what life would be for them, life together. “We shall live in a garret, of course,” said Guy. “That is in the tradition of the painter. Modern painting is not what it should be, simply because there are no longer very many first-rate garrets.”

“With leaky roofs and rags to stuff the breaks in the window-panes? Ah, but I shall love it.”

“Yes.” He nodded gravely. “And there I shall paint all day long and you shall be my model. I’ll paint you in a thousand different poses and still there will be new ones. Your hair alone, *chérie*, has a million lights in it. How shall one brush, one palette, hope to reproduce them all! Ah, I shall grow old painting you.”

“And I, being painted. But we shall never notice that we grow old. We shall be always young.”

CHAPTER III

*"Yes; 'tis a garret—let him know't who will—
There was my bed—full hard it was and small;
My table there—and I decipher still
Half a lame couplet charcoaled on the wall."*

How happy one can be in a garret when one is twenty. Guy de Varin was thinking of the words of Beranger the next morning as he set up his easel in the attic apartment on Sainte-Ursule Street hard by the spot where Bionde had found him and right above the café where last night they sat until the benevolent but weary proprietor had ostentatiously wound his watch and put his two cats down into the cellar with a hearty "*Bon soir, mes amis.*"

Laughing then, and making him share their youthful laughter, they had gone, and in spite of the bitter cold and the high-heeled golden slippers and the costume designed for the ball, Bionde had insisted on walking all the way back to the house of Colonel Lacasse.

"A taxi," she said, "would shorten by minutes the time I have with you. We shall walk if you have to carry me, *mon bijou!*"

So they walked slowly along the narrow streets between the tall old buildings; and the stars were very bright and there was a moon above the city. The Château with its hundreds of lighted windows, high above the Lower Town, looked like some enchanted palace. Sleighs with jingling bells passed them in the street, and crowds of young men and girls carrying skis and snow-shoes.

The air was frosty, keen, and breathed deeply in, went tingling to one's very toes and fingertips. Icicles glistened like pendent jewels from the eaves of houses and the snow crunched hard underfoot. Words and laughter carried far and clear, and no laughter farther or clearer than theirs.

There were none so happy as they. None in all the world so gay. They had found each other. It was bliss merely to think of that. The future was too beautiful to contemplate. They would be always together now. Nothing would ever separate them for a moment.

"I shall keep the place I have for a while," he said, "if it suits you. It is a garret on Sainte-Ursule Street, up over the café where we were to-night. Oh,

don't think I chose it for romantic reasons: merely because it was the only place I saw that suited both my taste and my pocket-book. But it really has a good north light and there is a tiny bath and a tinier kitchen. You will come and see it to-morrow, eh?"

"I shall come in the morning. If I do not appear you will know I have been locked up in the citadel or in one of those secret dungeons which rumor says are still to be found here and there in the city."

"I shall rescue you, Bionde, from whatever dungeon, whatever dark oubliette they put you in. Let us see; in the stories, one finds one's beloved by means of a song. So if you are in a dungeon or in a tower you will sing the Song of Ronsard. And I, looking for you, will sing it too. Is it agreed?"

"It is agreed. And you will really do it? If I don't appear you will roam the streets of Quebec singing the Song of Ronsard?"

"I will indeed. I will even carry a rose in my teeth if you ask me."

With such badinage they used many of the precious minutes saved from the taxi, but there was at the end the solemn, the sweetly solemn moment when he held her again in his arms. All the banter dropped from him then, the laughter fled from his eyes giving place to an earnest light and his voice was a little unsteady when he said, "Good night, Bionde. I feel as if I had been dead and had found life again. You are lovelier than I ever dreamed. You are far more than Guy de Varin ever dared hope for or ever could deserve. But if a man by trying can make himself worthy of any woman, then I shall hope to become worthy of you."

Her answer was a kiss, a light, quick kiss on his lips, then she was gone, swallowed up in the darkness of the old house of Colonel Hubert Lacasse. What awaited her there he did not know. He felt sure it would not be pleasant, but he knew too that they could do nothing to change her. They had done their utmost, used all their ancient cunning, yet she had come running over the ice and snow of the crowded streets to find the man she loved.

The thought of that warmed him, brought to his spirit a great joy and an abiding happiness to his heart. He despised himself for ever having doubted her, for having believed, even momentarily, that she would have her head turned by the glittering things with which they sought to tempt her. She was not that kind, he knew. Light might be her laughter and she could be as gay as the breeze in summer meadows, but deep in her was some strength, some hard core of pure goodness, some sinew of soul, that they could never reach, that nothing could ever vitiate.

That was the strong heritage handed down to her from those grand gentlemen of France, the Breton and Norman adventurers who had ventured across the sea and braved the wilderness and all its perils unknown, to clear the land and rear their houses and build great dikes to drive back the fury of the Fundy tides. In her spirit there were dikes too; but one had opened now its floodgates for him alone. And forth came tumbling the full tide of her passion.

He was thinking of that now as in the morning sunlight in his garret he set up his easel and prepared the tools of his craft. There was work to do. The art dealer had liked his studies of Acadian life; had written, "You have something there, my friend, that is really worthwhile. It has always puzzled me why our artists go around painting snow and barns and fishing boats when the real history of our country is written in the faces of the people. Give us more. Give us the miner coming up from the pit, the farmer guiding the plow, the old peasant woman planting potatoes, the boy leading the cow that doesn't want to be led."

Life looked good to De Varin this December morning. He had never been so happy, not even during his student days in Montmartre. He had only dreamed then of the loves he would have, the things he would do, the pictures he would paint; now—and, dear God, how sweet it was!—he was doing the things he wanted to do, he was about to marry the woman he loved, he had his work ahead of him and he had the skill to do it. One day his pictures would be great, his name renowned. He sang, to a tune of his own making—

"'Dans un grenier qu' on est bien a vingt ans.'"

"'How happy one can be in a garret when one is twenty.'"

And outside his door he heard a sweet voice singing the Ballad of Ronsard:

*"You say, 'When I was fair and young,
A poet sang to me!'"*

He ran to the door and opened it and she came into his arms and lifted her face to his kiss. He looked down, studying the long dark lashes, the deep blue eyes, the wide sweet mouth and firmly rounded chin. He knew the proud Norman blood that made pulse that little vein in her temple, that brought that rose pink flush to her cheeks.

"No dungeon?" he said. "No lonely room in a tower with a mere slit for a window? No chance for me to sing my song?"

"Alas, none." She shook her head as he led her into the apartment. "But had it been a few centuries ago—! *Mon dieu! Mon dieu!* How they stormed, my good aunt and uncle. It seems I have set all Quebec talking, merely because I walked through a traffic jam in my ball dress with my golden slippers to find the man I love. I have forever disgraced them. I am, they told me, like all the Acadians, a half-savage who should never have been brought to this so civilized city but left to roam the lonely woods and barren marshes of my own land. I am to be shipped home at once, or in a very few days. If I marry you—if I marry you!—they wash their hands of me even more completely than they have already done. So now, my friend, they shall have very clean hands indeed."

"But yes!" He touched her hair, from which she had removed the little black hat with its gay cock's feather. "We shall have a special license. We shall be married in a few days if not at once. And will you be happy in my garret?"

She looked around her gravely, she explored the rooms, gazed out at the little dormer windows, touched the green painted walls.

"It is a veritable palace of a garret," she said. "I shall love it. Here, by this window I'll sit with my knitting and watch you becoming famous. Here, when you have built your great château in the Laurentians and bought your yacht and have become the envy of the Royal Academy, will we return and say, 'It was here that we began long ago, one winter's day. It was here we first—'"

She ceased to jest. She came to him and pressed close to him and he felt the trembling of her body. He smoothed her hair, held her close; soothed her as one would soothe a frightened child.

"Do not be afraid," he said. "It is all right now. It will always be all right for you and me, Bionde."

"It is not fear." Her voice was muffled against his lapel. "It is happiness that makes me tremble. It came so quickly, so unexpectedly. Ah, I seemed brave when I told you to keep faith in yourself, to have courage, to fight; but in my heart I was the coward, I was afraid. I know it now."

"You were never afraid. You could not have been, for it was from you that I drew my courage. It was the thought of you that gave me the strength to go on. Those nights in the old house down there at Sainte-Barbe—the nights after you had gone, with the wind roaring and howling across the marshes and the sea thundering and the house itself shaking as if it would

fall down— And I worked, those nights—worked hard until I could hardly lift my arm, scarcely keep my eyes open. That strength I drew from you.”

She released herself from his arms. “*Bien!* Very well, then, I shall now draw strength from you. I have done so. I feel much better. Do you know, not since I came here have I put on my skates—not even once, though often I have watched the crowds at the rink and envied them. I had no heart for it. I knew the medicine would not work here; it had too great an ill to cure. But to-day perhaps I shall skate, if I do not find my boxes and all my things sitting out on the doorstep of Uncle Hubert’s house.”

“How I should love to skate with you!” He frowned at his easel. “But I have work to do. A half-finished picture that I told Crosley about in my letter and which he wired me to rush to completion.” He sighed. “And that was days ago. Am I not becoming very serious—for an artist?”

“And I for an artist’s wife-to-be? Get to your work, monsieur! Do not loiter. Do not let skating interfere with art.”

“Ah, but I should like to see you skate again, Bionde. It has the same effect on me as when I read a great poem or hear a wonderful piece of music.”

“You shall have all your life to watch me, my good Guy. I will not let you yield to temptation. To-night I shall phone you, to-morrow I shall come again. Good luck with your painting.”

“Good luck with your skating.”

He watched her go down the narrow stairs, smiled at her as she stopped on the landing and turned to blow him a kiss. Her uplifted face was a picture more beautiful to him than any he ever hoped to paint. He listened to the clatter of her heels after he could no longer see her, then went slowly back to his room where the faint perfume of her presence lingered. All day as he worked he could sense that elusive fragrance—light and sweet and alluring, that had no name, that was of her, of Bionde.

Easy to work now, easy to bend every faculty of his mind and body to the task he was doing. There was magic in his brush to-day. For her, he thought—it is for her. In this love and faith I can do all things. To keep this happiness in her heart and mine, no effort, no sacrifice, can be too great. Let there be new worlds to conquer: for her I can subdue them.

In the late afternoon he went to see about their marriage license and to make arrangements for the wedding. It might not be so easy after all. She was a minor. The consent of her guardians must be obtained. The laws were

strict here. Of course, when one loved as they loved, one could get around any amount of laws. He was not afraid. He knew nothing could stop them—nothing. He was singing the Ballad of Ronsard to himself as he walked along in the fading light of afternoon—

*“Old tales are told, old songs are sung,
Old days come back to memory.”*

That was the afternoon an accumulation of ice and snow slid like a small avalanche from the roof of a building in Buade Street, killing one and injuring three others. Guy de Varin was one of the injured. But Bionde, gliding lightly over the open-air rink with Peter Van Alen, one of the world's greatest figure-skaters, who had humbly asked her for the favor, knew nothing of that. A great crowd stood around the rink; in it many who were experts and many more who were connoisseurs, and none of them, they quietly agreed, had ever seen a performance that could surpass hers.

“Lady!” said Van Alen. “Where, oh, where have you been! You make the others look like little pigs on ice. Why, you have a fortune in those lovely legs and those twinkling feet of yours. Don’t ever waste it!”

“A fortune! From skating! Why, it is fun to skate. It is the best fun I know.” She turned wide eyes up at him. He had never before met any girl so unspoiled, so forthright, so honestly full of the joy of life. Probably in love, he thought regretfully; it’s always like that.

“Sure it’s fun,” he said. “But it is also big business now. Fellows with piles of money are looking for pretty girls who can skate like you. See how the crowd here stares and admires you. Well, people pay money to see far poorer exhibitions than the one you are giving right now. Who taught you to skate like that?”

“Tor taught me.” She smiled, thinking of the bitter, glassy winter days when Tor had drilled into her these things that now were second nature. “Tor Gustavssen. He lives in the Tantrammar country where I come from. He had a daughter once who would have been a great skater. She died.”

“Oh, I have heard of him.” Van Alen was impressed. “You were lucky. He could have made lots of money teaching, but he preferred to hang up his skates and lose himself from the world.”

“He gave me these skates I am wearing,” said Bionde proudly. “He was always good to me.”

“That shouldn’t be hard.” Van Alen looked at her gravely. “You’re very lovely.”

“And you, monsieur, are very kind.”

She called Guy’s apartment when she returned home that night, but got no answer. She thought little of it. No doubt he had had to go out on some errand. She would see him in the morning. So great was her happiness that nothing, it seemed, dare come to spoil it. But Guy lay on a hospital bed and two of the best surgeons in the city were standing with grave faces above him. He knew nothing of it. He had not regained consciousness. And they did not know his name or where he came from or anything about him.

Bionde hurried to the garret in Sainte-Ursule Street next morning. Coupled with the joy that the prospect of seeing him again had brought to her was the excitement of the news she had to tell him. He would be glad, she knew. He loved to see her skate. He would be proud to know that others too had loved watching her, that she was, in a measure, famous.

At breakfast, the frowning silence of Uncle Hubert had been suddenly dissipated, routed by a great grunt of satisfaction and a smile like a sunburst. He looked up from his newspaper and beamed at her.

“Little gamin!” he said. “Why did you not tell us about this? Here all Quebec is admiring you! Here is your picture along with that of Peter Van Alen. Here is another with Lord Danvers and the Honorable Sybil Carrington admiring you—and they are in the background. Why, I did not even know you could skate and here the paper says that a finer exhibition of fancy skating has never been seen on the Château rink. They say you must represent Quebec in the figure-skating championships that are to be held next week. What is all this? How dare you keep it all a secret from your aunt and uncle?”

His voice was stern, but his delight showed in his face. It was a great thing for him to have his niece hold the spotlight, to occupy the center of the stage. All Quebec was talking about her. In a little while she would be famous. For the moment he forgot about that wretched artist-fellow with whom she thought herself in love. This, anyway, would soon make her forget him. Let her get a taste of fame, of the real thing, and she would never be satisfied with a starved existence in a garret.

“And they want you to represent Quebec in the figure-skating championships—you, a complete stranger. They’re going to have you.” Bionde felt a strange, exultant thrill. She was glad she had at last done something to please them, to make them forget how angry they were at her and, she thought, How pleased Guy will be and how proud. I hope he has seen it. I must go to him at once.

"I love to skate," she told the very much impressed Colonel Hubert and the fluttering Tante Aimée. "I've always loved to skate. And I had a great teacher, Tor Gustavssen. He was one of the best in Denmark. Each winter, for years, he taught me. It was Tor who gave me the lovely skates."

"Well," said Colonel Lacasse, "it will be Aimée and I who will give you the loveliest costume to go with them. We are very proud of you, my dear—very proud indeed. If only we can make you see the light on that other matter, make you understand that all we care for is your own happiness and well-being and that we doubt very much your chances for any happiness with—with— But there! We will not talk of it now. Here you have your foot on the first rung of the ladder to fame." He laughed in advance as a joke occurred to him. "Rather, I should say, your skate."

"It might be hard to climb on skates," said Bionde, and for a moment felt a twinge of doubt, of fear; for a moment wished she had not yielded to her desire to skate or that she had found some place where none could see her. Perhaps this would take her away from Guy, do some harm to their love. But that was nonsense. How could it? Guy would be happy about it all.

Colonel Lacasse was summoned to the telephone. He returned flushed and jubilant. He put his hand on Bionde's shoulder and bent down to kiss her hair. "It is so! They lost no time. That was Raoul Pichette, head of the skating association. They want you—they have to have you—in the figure-skating championships. The poor man could hardly talk, he was so excited. So, my child, you will have your great chance. You will do us honor, all of us. You will bring fame to our family."

"But I don't know—" She was really afraid now. She saw things beginning to shape her life, things outside her that she had never wanted, never bargained for. She had always steered her own course, now she was being swept into the swift flowing current. "Perhaps I had better wait—"

"Nonsense!" The colonel puffed out his cheeks and his eyes popped alarmingly. "What in heaven's name could cause you to hesitate about skating for Quebec? Surely that has nothing to do with—hah—love! Come, Bionde, be a sensible, good little girl. You are a great skater—well, skate. Anyway, I told Pichette you would. It will be a wonderful thing for you."

She wanted to skate. She had to admit it to herself. It had been somehow sweet to watch the silent, wide-eyed crowd around the rink yesterday, to hear afterwards the comments, to receive the congratulations of utter strangers, to have Peter Van Alen ask her to be his partner. She smiled, thinking of the lovely lonely hours on the pond below the great dike, of

Tor's patient teaching, of his gruff scolding, his grudging approval. Tor would be proud. Oh, he would be very proud to see her doing what he had hoped his own child, Kristie, would do one day, to have the world admire the skill he had taught her. If only Tor could be there to see her skate! But Tor, she knew, would never leave his farm, never try to reawaken the dream that had died.

Well, she must tell Guy. She felt timid about telling him. Her heart beat anxiously, flutteringly, as she hurried to his house. How would he feel about it? Or would he let her know how he felt? Perhaps he wouldn't like it. But why not? It would be unreasonable for him to object. He wouldn't want her to refuse to skate. He would be glad that they had asked her.

Timidly she knocked at the door of the garret studio, but no answer came, and she could tell in a moment that he was not there to answer. She tried the knob, the door was locked. She asked the landlady, on the floor below, if he had gone out. The old Frenchwoman said that, as far as she knew, he had not come in at all last night. She had heard no sound abovestairs. Perhaps he had gone away. He was always changing his mind. Artists were like that. Never the same for two days on end.

"But he—but he would not—" Bionde walked blindly down the narrow stairs and out into the street. She could not think. She felt lost, terribly afraid. She did not know which way to turn. She had no one to help her. If she asked Uncle Hubert he would say, "What did you expect? Fellows like that! You can never rely on them, never tell what they'll do next."

Guy wasn't like that. He was an artist, yes, but he loved her. His love was true, constant. He could not, as he had done, talk of their future together, plan their lives, the things they would do, and then —

All that day she haunted the streets where he might be. She returned a dozen times to the door, that blank, hateful door, of the garret. Its panels, after a while, seemed to stare at her. She knew every scratch, every crack, every knot-hole in it. Eagerly, each time she would climb the long stairs, hope beating high in her heart, and in sick despair she would come down, to gaze up and down the street, to watch the passers-by, to say, "He will be the next one to turn the corner—the next one—he will be among the next ten."

But he never was. He did not come. Toward evening she went wearily home. The Lacasses saw at once that something had happened, that she was deeply troubled, but they knew it wasn't about the skating, which they had so happily discussed all day, and if it wasn't about the skating then it was about that confounded De Varin. If she had lost him, if they had quarreled

and separated, so much the better. He would be just the kind to object to her skating, to sneer at it, to tell her she was selling herself to the crowd.

That night, long after the household had retired, she sat at her window gazing out at the bright stars above the city, looking down at the quiet street, her heart leaping at the approach of each shadowy figure, then resuming slowly its normal beat as each one passed. Her ears strained into the darkness, listening for the sound of telephone or doorbell.

“He must come! He must!” She told herself, thinking that, if she willed it strongly enough, her desire must bring him to her. “He would not go away and leave me. He could not do this to me. Perhaps he is home now in his attic-room. Something delayed him and it was too late for him to see me, but in the morning early he will call me, he will come to me.”

The old clock in the hall had chimed its three long strokes before she closed her eyes. She dreamed then of Guy and he was walking steadily away from her beseeching, outstretched hands. He was walking into a pit of blackness that he did not seem to know was there in front of him. She screamed to call him back, but he did not hear her.

Cold and trembling she awoke in the gray of the winter dawn and lay there watching the darkness recede and the slow light enter into her room. When she came downstairs she looked so wan and tired, her eyes so large in the pallor of her face, that Tante Aimée spoke of calling the doctor.

“The child will make herself ill, Hubert,” she told the colonel. “What is one to do? It is all over this artist-fellow, De Varin.”

“I hope,” said the good colonel to his good wife, “the damned pup has broken his neck.”

It was not so bad as that, but it was a terrible concussion. It had the doctors baffled for a long while. Forty-eight hours had passed—forty-eight hours in which he lived in blackness, before he opened his eyes and looked about him and whispered at last: “Bionde? Where is Bionde?”

Shortly after that the hospital telephoned to Colonel Lacasse’s home and asked for her and told her what had happened. They heard a long drawn “O-o-o-oh,” in which relief at learning his whereabouts overcame the shock of knowing that he had been hurt. Then: “Tell Guy I will be there at once—at once!”

The taxi seemed to crawl over the icy streets and the time it took to traverse that short distance was, to her, interminable. He had been hurt badly, that was sure. She recalled now reading in the same paper that had

held the account of her triumph, the headlines about the accident on Buade Street. She had not even read the account of it. She had been too much taken up with reading all the nice things they said about her, too intent on looking at the pictures. And perhaps at the very moment when she was pleasing the spectators at the Château rink and receiving their homage, Guy was being taken, terribly injured, to the hospital, there to lie friendless and unknown until he should awaken and speak her name.

He looked pale and his eyes seemed tired and his head was heavily bandaged. Still his smile was the same gay, cheery welcome she knew and loved. He held out his hand. She knelt by the bed and kissed him and cried a little and laughed when he said, "Here lies the bridegroom, smitten down in the very act of going to obtain a license. Oh, Bionde, what must you have thought of me! What did you think? What did you do?"

"I haunted your door. I went there a dozen times and more. I walked miles and miles of streets, looking for you, praying I'd find you. And I thought I'd die. I thought it was more punishment than I was ever made to endure. But I did not give up. I knew I would find you sometime, somewhere. Are you badly hurt? Tell me, what do they say?"

"They say I must have the thickest skull in Christendom. No—no, I'm not badly hurt. I'll be out of here in less than a week, maybe in a few days." He stared at his fingers that plucked nervously at the coverlet. The late afternoon sunlight was without warmth. It had the frigid brightness of the winter. "Did you sing the Ballad of Ronsard, Bionde, as you searched the streets for me?"

"Yes—in my heart. You could not hear me."

"I'll always hear you—always."

She looked at him, hurt, puzzled. There was something about him that was different, something that held him aloof from her. She took his hand in both hers and held it strongly. She made him look at her. "You are sure, quite sure, that you are not badly hurt? You must tell me the truth. You must!"

"I told you the truth. I'm all right. A ton of ice on the head could never hurt me. I'll be out in a few days."

"But there's something — —"

"Oh, forget about it! Tell me all about your triumphal debut as a skater."

She dropped his hand. Her eyes darkened. So that was it. He had heard, and he didn't like what he had heard. This was what she had feared. He was

jealous of her. He didn't want her to skate for the crowd; only for him.

"How did you know about it, Guy?"

"When I told them to telephone you, the nurse and doctor both looked startled and the doctor said, 'Is that the girl who has created such a sensation by her figure-skating? All Quebec is talking about the performance she gave at the Château rink.' He told me that everyone agrees they have never seen anything to equal you. I was not surprised, Bionde. I was properly impressed. I knew you were good. I wouldn't admit, even to myself, just how good you were. I guess I wanted you all to myself; I didn't want to give you to the world."

"And that—that is why you are different, why you have drawn away from me, why you seem cold to me—just because my skating pleases others?"

His face was partly averted, but she saw his brows twitch, his mouth thin. "If you like," he said. "Oh, don't let it bother you. I have no right to be like this. It's just—well, you remember what I told you the last day we skated together down there in Sainte-Barbe—I was afraid you'd skate away from me, go far beyond me. I said I should put golden shackles on those winged feet of yours. Now I know I was right."

"I will not skate again," she said softly. "I will not, if you do not wish me to. The skating means little; you mean everything to me."

But as she spoke she felt a wistfulness, a regret that it had to be like this. She had secretly looked forward to pitting her skill against that of all those other girls. She had wanted to learn just how much she had got from old Tor, and she had hoped to make him proud.

"You can't do that." Guy's voice was harsh. "You're entered in the fancy-skating tournament, aren't you? The doctor told me that. He told me also that Quebec looks on you to win. You can't back down. I want you to skate as you have never skated before. I want you to win."

"You are just saying that. You are not happy about it."

"But I am, Bionde." His voice had softened. "I hope in my heart that it will be the beginning of great things for you — —"

"The beginning of great things for me"—her lips quivered—"was the day I met you, the day I saw you sitting on the bench sketching me. Great things, Guy—your kiss, your telling me that you loved me, your coming

here, your—our—the future we planned. Don't talk to me of other things and call them great."

For moments he did not answer. Somewhere a deep-toned bell struck the hour of five. There was a strange hush over the city and in that room a silence like the eternal silence of the marshlands.

"Why are you silent?" she said at last. "You—you believe in these things even as I believe in them, don't you?"

He turned a little on his elbow. He seemed to force himself to look at her, steel himself to say the things that must be said. "Listen, Bionde." He spoke earnestly. "You must listen and try to understand that I am thinking only of you and always of you. Here is opportunity for you. Here is your chance. You have a skill that it would be wrong to keep hidden. If you refused to go on you would be like a—a great artist who will not paint, a great writer who will not write, a master musician who will not play. Not I, not anyone, have the right to keep you from doing what you are so well able to do. You can please and delight thousands, you can make them feel better for just having watched you skate, you can make youth see how wonderful and godlike the human body is. You must go on."

"I—I want to go on. But—not if it means that things will be any different between you and me." There was fear in her eyes. "Will there be a difference?" Her voice was urgent, almost pleading. "Will there? Is that what you're trying to tell me—is it? You asked me to marry you. Before—before I went skating you intended to marry me. Before this happened, before people saw my skating and liked it, nothing could have kept us apart."

"I did not say we would be apart."

"But I feel it. I know it." She drew her hand wearily across her eyes. "I do not understand."

"Do you have to understand?"

"You ask me that! You know how much I—" She could not go on. "Oh, Guy, what is it? What has happened? You are not yourself. I do not know what to do. You know I love you—love you more than anything else in the world. What is it you want of me? What would you have me do?"

"I want you to go ahead and show them—show them all—how good you are."

"I will do that. What else?"

“I want you”—he hesitated, stopped for a moment and stared out at the blue gray dusk that was falling upon the city. His voice was lower when he resumed: “I want you to believe, no matter what happens, no matter what may come, that I love you and have loved you from the moment I saw you and that it will be so until the day I die. I want you to believe that—that — —”

He could not go on.

“You mean,” she said, “that you think this will lead me to what they call fame. And that I will grow away from you so that—so that your life and mine cannot go together. That will never be. I’ll never let it—never. You will be greater than I could ever hope to be. To perform a few motions on skates—what is that? Anyone with practice and a little aptitude can learn that. But who could with practice and a little aptitude ever acquire the godlike power to paint great pictures?”

“My pictures will never be great.” His mouth had a tired, almost sullen droop. “Never.”

“They are! They will be!” she said fiercely. “I know they will. Long after I have hung up the silly skates forever, your skill will grow, your pictures become better and better. Don’t talk like this to me. Don’t do this to me. You don’t know what you are doing.”

“I know better than you—much better. You will soon leave me behind.” He spoke out of darkness now and into darkness, for swiftly her bright dreams that all this time had been growing dim, lost their last brightness. Something was happening, here in this quiet room—something that she could not grasp. Something was slipping away from her and she had no power to hold it, not even love could hold it.

A voice at the door told her she must go. She went without a word; she could speak none.

CHAPTER IV

After Bionde had gone and the nurse had finished with her duties he switched off the light and lay there in the darkness that was no darker than his thoughts. She was gone. She had not even said good-by. And it was his fault, all his fault. He had treated her cruelly, made her suffer; yet every harsh word he said to her had thrust and twisted the knife deeper in his own heart.

Queer how misfortune such as this altered a man's thinking, showed colors and shades undreamed of, in the pattern of his life. Gone now was the high courage, the unquestioning fearlessness with which he had stepped upon the road that he and Bionde were to travel.

Now he knew fear, discouragement, uncertainty—all too great for him, all too inimical to those fine dreams and splendid visions. Love in a garret was after all merely poverty, insecurity. Easy enough at first to laugh at it, to make a game of being poor, to pretend that a crust was a banquet. But they would know the sickness of heart that comes from hope deferred, the bitterness of abortive effort, of work thought good that goes unrewarded. Could he ask one he really loved to face a life like that? In time love would go or would become a lifeless thing. There would be discord, doubt—

Oh, it was all too impossible. It had always been so, but now it was reduced to absurdity. A great chance was given to her and who was he to expect her to reject it, to cast in her lot with his, to share the path that he must walk, through darkness and despair. And still his love for her mocked at all these dreary thoughts and he suffered in his soul at the mad idea of renunciation.

"I can't let her go," he muttered. "I can't. How could I go on without her! Yet it is as I said; it is true what I told her: I would be a drag on her—worse. Perhaps it will be best to let it end here. The break seems clean now. She thinks I do not care. She will go on to great things, she will climb to the heights. I know that as surely as I know that I—"

His mouth was twisted and he could feel the bitterness of defeat and failure already in his soul. Nothing ahead for him. How had he been so sure, anyway, that his work was good? It passed, certainly. But then, so did the work of thousands of others, mediocrities, second-raters, little fellows with

big opinions of themselves, ignoring the fustian they turned out while they talked of the tapestries they could weave.

It had all seemed so easy, so inevitably sure. He would paint his pictures, they would be good and the world would be quick to see their worth. Money and fame would come his way. No thought of the toil-filled days and nights, of the time when the hand falters and the eye grows dim and the winds of doubt find crannies in the strong armor of youth, through which to blow their breath of destruction. From the shining heights he had plunged now into the lowest depths of defeatism. No love could be great enough to make a man ignore these things. They were there, starkly real. All his life would be a gamble and now the cards were stacked against him.

He fought the tide of self-pity that had begun to engulf him. He must not let these black thoughts conquer him, turn him bitter. He must not let the certainty of failure get him down. Why, a man was never a failure until he admitted it to himself. And he was so young. He would make out some way. But in the meantime, she, on her silver skates, would travel with the speed of light toward the shining goal of her success. He could vision it. He knew that she could not, realized that it meant little to her, that she would give it all up if he said the word.

"May my tongue drop out," he muttered, "if ever I say anything to discourage or dissuade her. May the ice always be smooth for her and her skates sharp and the music good. I shall be happy in watching her success. I shall know she would gladly share it with me. I shall know that she does not understand, that if she did she would love me more."

But he thought of the brief times they had been together in Sainte-Barbe, lived each moment over lingeringly, each word she had said, each smile she had given him. He wished now that they had never left the marsh-country. Had they stayed there, they might in time have found the solid happiness they looked for. Now, soon now, she would be taken away from him. She had been taken already. She would belong to the world that exploits such youth and beauty and skill as hers. It might even be, he thought, that they will spoil her, make her their very own—hard, metallic, without heart or warmth. No. No—she could never be, deep inside her, different from what she is. Always Bionde. She will be always the girl I knew.

He could not know the pain, the bitterness, that she carried with her out of that room, through the busy streets where she walked alone among the hurrying crowds, seeing no one, paying no attention to those who jostled her

and stared after her, this girl whose eyes were fixed on something far, far off, who moved as one in a dream, taking no count of where she was going.

It was the first real disillusionment that she had ever known. She could not grasp its significance, could not see any valid reasons for its happening to her. What had she done? What had occurred to do this to their love? It had seemed, only a few days ago, so strong, so splendid a thing that nothing could ever injure it. Now it seemed to have vanished. It was as if it had never been. She had loved so much to share his plans, his dreams, to picture their life together.

But it had seemed, in that quiet room where he lay, that she had talked to another than man Guy de Varin. The same dark face, the same glow of eyes, the same quiet strength. All there, yet something was gone, something that had been dear and precious. It was as if the voice that had spoken so close, so softly in her ear that night in an Acadian garden, spoke now from afar off and was only faintly heard. He had moved away from her.

She thought of the dream in which he had walked away from her asking hands, from her restraining voice, walked heedlessly toward the dark abyss. It had been symbolic. It was like that now: he was going away from her and she could not bring him back. Yet he loved her still. It was not in him to love lightly, to give up easily a thing he had so prized.

That he should be jealous of any success she might have and think that he had no place in it was a thought monstrous and unreal.

“He is not like that,” she told herself. “Oh, he is not! Even if—even if I should have success, does he not know it would mean nothing if I could not share it with him? How can he be jealous, bitter, about something that may never happen? He wants me to go on, yet he makes it clear that if I do go on, I lose him. I wish I had never come here, never seen this place. I was so happy just loving him and knowing that he cared for me— —”

Someone touched her arm. She started. Slowly her eyes focused on Peter Van Alen’s gaunt, handsome face and mechanically she returned his smile. From the little she had seen of him, she liked him. He was sandy-haired, freckled. He loved skating, lived for it.

“I’ve been trying to get you,” he said. “What about putting on the skates to-night? First, what about having a spot of dinner with me?”

She had not the will or initiative to refuse. She did not want to face her aunt and uncle right now. Van Alen was a stranger, yet they had the kinship in the sport they loved. And he was kind and understanding.

“Sure you will,” he said, tucking her arm in his. “You look as if you needed something. I called to you twice and I’m sure you didn’t even hear me.”

“I didn’t. I was thinking— —”

He shook his head. “Deep thoughts—too deep for one so young. If I were you I’d give all my thoughts to my skating. Believe me, there’s some satisfaction in that. It’s not like love; it won’t let you down or if it does”—he grinned—“you land on the cushioned part and can get up again without much harm being done. Love can play hob with some people’s lives. I’ve always kept it out of mine. It’s strictly business with Pete. Now here’s a good place to have dinner.”

He was good to her; gentle, understanding. He bought her a Martini and saw that she drank it. He ordered her dinner for her and seemed to know without hesitating the things she liked best. And he made her eat them.

“You’re my skating-partner, you know, and I can’t have you dying of malnutrition in the middle of the show. I’ve been thinking of you ever since the other day. Phenomenon is a frightening word, but you are really a marvel. I’ve seen ’em all, but you have something none of the rest of them ever seems able to get. You can skate. You can drop all the fancy stuff and skate. You had a great teacher.”

“He was good, Tor. He was always so quiet and aloof. He never skated and no one dreamed that in his own country he had been famous. Then one day he walked along the dike when I was skating. He stopped to watch me. He said, ‘I will teach you.’”

Van Alen nodded. “He knew what he was doing. He was a wizard before he dropped out of the picture. He used to run a school in Copenhagen. He made some stars. Didn’t he ever tell you how good you were?”

“When he gave me my skates, he said, ‘That’s all I can give you now; the rest is up to you.’”

“That was your diploma, Bionde. I’m going to call you Bionde, if you don’t mind. I’m dying to see the faces of some of these beauties who will skate against you next Saturday. What a lot of nose you’re going to put out of joint. With most of them, skating is an artificial thing and they never really get their heart into it. They took it up, as they say, in order to be accomplished or to make money or just because it seemed the smart thing to do. That’s why their performances fall short. With you, it is clearly a work of

love and always will be, and you far outshine any of them. You can skate them to a standstill.”

She shielded her eyes with her hand. “I don’t want to,” she said. “I skated because I loved to skate. I let Tor teach me these things because it made me happy to do them. I never thought — ”

“That’s why you are so good. You weren’t straining to be a world beater, and now you’ll never need to. All you have to do is skate and never worry about the outcome. You know beforehand what it will be.”

“That is what bothers me,” she said wearily. “I think I know what it will be.”

Pete’s brows drew down. He saw that she was troubled about something the nature of which he could only surmise. He had learned a little about her and her family, but no one in Quebec knew Guy de Varin. He had heard the story of their meeting in Sainte-Ursule Street. That had been the chief topic of gossip for several days.

“You sound as if you had an idea you will lose more than you gain.”

“That’s it.”

“But that’s nonsense. You aren’t telling me that anyone in the world is so unreasonable as not to want you to — — ”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, please forget it. Believe me, when you land on top of the heap, as you’re pretty sure to do, a lot of things that seem important now won’t look to be so much. Don’t let anything stop you. To-night we’re going to the rink, and we’re going to give ’em all a treat.”

She tried to object, but there was a breezy assurance about Peter Van Alen that overcame all her scruples. Perhaps it would be good to skate. It might help her to think this thing out, to decide what to do, to understand what was troubling Guy.

Peter got his car and drove her home and waited while she changed into her skating costume. She told her aunt and uncle where she was going and never before in her life had she seen two elderly people move so fast. They occupied the back seat of Peter’s convertible sedan. They were as eager as children to see her skate. All the way to the rink they questioned Pete Van Alen and listened avidly to his glowing descriptions of their niece’s skill.

She wished that he might be a little more reserved in his comments, a whit less lavish with his praise. He was filling the good colonel and his lady with such stuff as would brim over and drown swiftly any protestations that she might make, forbid any withdrawal from the plans laid out for her. He was giving them, all unwittingly it might be, strong ammunition to use against the bright battlements of her love for Guy de Varin, where something else, something dark and insidious as a Fifth Column, was sapping at the foundations.

“Bionde,” he assured them, “is truly a great skater. In no time she will prove that she is at the top of her class.”

“It is gratifying,” rumbled Colonel Lacasse. “Most gratifying. And we are glad to hear it from one like you, monsieur; who most certainly knows what he is talking about.”

“I trust,” said Tante Aimée, “that Bionde will listen to what you tell her and take advantage of the advice you can give her. She is young and untried and all this is so new to her.”

“I am sure it will not turn her head.” Van Alen glanced at her and smiled. “She seems to attach very little importance to it. I am afraid,” he said, “that Bionde is in love.”

“All young girls are in love,” retorted Tante Aimée. “Or fancy that they are. It may be that you can skate it out of your system. Eh, Bionde?”

“*Mon Dieu*, that’s a thought.” The colonel’s laughter was heavy. “That might be a most excellent cure for such a malady. At least, it is a novel remedy.”

Bionde sat silent, staring at the little lights on the dashboard, the skates, the beloved skates that Tor had given her, on her lap, her hands clutching them. What golden hours they had brought to her, what carefree joy, what tired happiness! Where were they taking her now, those swift graceful things of gleaming steel?

“You can go far on them,” old Tor had said, the day he proudly unwrapped them, lovingly as if they were swaddled in dreams, and handed them to her. “Or you can spend all your days skating on a pond. I do not know which is better. All I know is that to skate is a good thing. I hope they will bring you happiness. They were bought for Kristie, but she did not live to wear them.”

Bionde was thinking of that now, picturing that blonde little Danish girl whom Tor had so loved, to whom he had given all his life’s devotion. She,

had she lived, would have worn these skates and Tor knew well that she would have shown the world such skating as it had never before seen. Was it something like that he hoped for me, she wondered. Was that why he gave them to me?

The word went round that Peter Van Alen had brought the blonde Lacasse with him. As soon as she stepped upon the ice, her hand lightly in his, the skaters melted away. For a moment she was frightened and unnerved, then she saw his sharp blue eyes smiling at her, heard him whisper, "You don't even have to try, Blonde!"

And that was so. She didn't even have to try. Those shining skates obeyed every single thing she asked of them. Presently she forgot to ask; she let them do what they would. She had forgotten time and place and circumstance. The rows of pallid faces, ghastly in the floodlight's glare, around the rink; the lights, the music—she was conscious of none of them. She knew only the wonder, the glory, of speed and motion. Even Pete Van Alen, after a little while, skated to the edge of the rink and stood watching her. She wasn't trying to steal the show. He was the last one in the world who would have permitted it. She skated this way; that was all there was to it. And how she could skate!

She was back on her own beloved marshes, on the wide smooth sheet of ice below the dike. She was alone in all the world. She could skate as she willed. She could surrender to this rapture. Even Tor—white-haired, stolid-visaged Tor—was not there to watch her. In the exhilaration of speed, the poetry of motion, her troubled spirit found relief. She soared away on wings, away from the carking fears, the gnawing uneasiness that had beset her since her visit to Guy. Here now if she thought of them, they seemed petty, unimportant things, and what had been between her and Guy was still wondrous and intact. If only he could share these moments with her, be lifted with her high on the rushing wind, he would never doubt, never know fear.

Only the burst of wild applause awakened her, brought her from her toe-tips to her blades and sent her like an arrow to the shelter of Pete's strong hand-clasp. She wanted to cry. She wished now that she were in reality back on the frozen surface of the marshland pond under the moon. This rapture was hers. She could never share it. They could never understand what it meant to her. For a little while, listlessly, she skated with Pete. Then she said, "I must go home now. It has been good. You have been kind to me."

"You're a funny kid," he said. "You've got something that's worth a million. You're always yourself and by just being yourself you're better than the best actress in the world." He snapped his fingers, as some thought struck him. "Well, I'll take you home now. And, listen, I heard a story about you dashing through traffic in dance-slippers one slippery night—don't ever do that again! Why, you might have broken your ankle! You might have wrecked yourself."

"Perhaps I did," she said dully. "Oh, I don't know—I don't know."

"You're very young, aren't you?" said Pete gently. "Of course I know it hurts cruelly. You think that if you don't get what you want, school will cease to keep and the world will end. But it isn't really like that." He smiled with a twist of his mouth, sardonic, half-regretful. "I'm not sure that I can tell you just how it is, but I'm certain you wouldn't believe me if you could."

"You don't understand— —"

"Perhaps not. But I know you're not happy and it does something to me. I don't like to see you like this. Sure there's nothing I can do?"

"Nothing more than you are doing. And you are being good to me and I'm not repaying you as I should. I'm sorry if I mope."

"Oh, you'll soon smile again, my child. The emotions of youth, thank God, are not brittle. They're very plastic things. Time, when you're young, is a swift healer. I don't know what your trouble is about, except that it springs from that ancient malady of the heart which you French call 'l'amour, toujours l'amour.' But I'll wager you will be cured of it soon. And will contract it again."

"Then you are rash, my friend. And most surely you would lose."

She scarcely heard the fervently enthusiastic remarks of the colonel and his lady. She sat as silent as on the trip down, beside Pete, the skates in her lap, her gloved fingertip moving up and down the blades. She was in a strange world, lost, bewildered, miserable. She felt as if great forces, against which she had no power to fight, were tugging at her, pulling her now this way, now that. And Guy—Guy lay in that silent room where he could hear the bell ring out the lonely hours.

In the gloom of the car she cried quietly for Guy. Still she fondled the silvery skates, loving the cold clean feel of them, cherishing them as once she had cherished her dolls. They had meant so much to her, so much of happiness. Strange that they should ever mean misery.

Yet she could not, would not, blame them for this present grief. To do that was absurd. What was it that had made Guy talk the way he had, act the way he had acted? Surely not her skating. He loved her skating. Oh, she thought, I'll go to him to-morrow. It will be all right to-morrow. I'm not angry at him. I never could be. And to-morrow he will be different. He will be the one I knew, the one I loved. He will talk of—of when we are married, of when we can go back home. We shall be so happy back in Sainte-Barbe.

Just thinking like that made her feel better. Pete Van Alen came in with them to have a cup of coffee, to talk for a while in front of the fire, to prophesy to the delighted ears of the elder Lacasses a wondrous future for Bionde.

“Skating—the kind of skating Bionde can do—is big business now,” he told them. “This is an age when great art becomes big business. And, believe me, the girl is a Pavlowa on ice. Most of the fancy skating you see is as cold as the ice and as mechanical as the freezing plant. There's no life in it, no attempt at interpreting anything. You have only to watch her to realize that with her it is something real and vital.”

“It is a splendid thing,” said Colonel Lacasse. “Splendid. It makes us very happy to see a good future opening up for our little niece. Life, for young girls like her can be so dull. Is it not so, Bionde? The country where she comes from is flat and monotonous, the Acadian marshes, which are the vastest in all the world. Oh, a veritable Sahara of bogs and dikelands. That and a few years in the convent, which is a Sahara of another sort—” he laughed hugely—“that has been her life. Now she will have a chance to taste of the real thing. It is most fortunate.”

“Yes,” agreed Van Alen. “It can lead to a great deal. These are the days of speed, even the ascent to fame can be an overnight business. Of course, I do not like to prophesy, but with such talent—”

Bionde was not listening. He stopped talking and watched her. She was looking into the glowing coals on the hearth and what she was seeing there he could not guess. She was troubled, he knew, and it was easy for him to believe that some man was the trouble. Well, it was none of his business. He had never in his swift, easy life tried the rôle of fixer, and he wasn't going to begin now. She was very young. She would get over it. Once let her get a real taste of this business, he thought, and she will live for it.

He said to her when he was leaving, “Don't forget, Saturday is only a few days away. Take it easy, won't you? I'll see that you get a few workouts,

but, for the love of all that's holy, stop mooning over—over whatever it is that's bothering you. Put it aside for a few days anyway.”

“If I can't— —”

“But you can. You have a job to do. Say it was wished on you, and I know it was, you still want to make a go of it, don't you? There's nothing in this world that can't wait. You'll find that out. After a while you will laugh at yourself for taking anything so seriously. The world still goes on.”

“You don't know, *mon ami*,” she said gently, almost pityingly, as if he were a very young and simple boy. “You do not realize.”

He stared at her, incredulous, tempted to laugh and then suddenly unable to laugh. Here was no little schoolgirl, smitten with calf love, mooning over some callow boy, dizzy with dreams and drowned in pale pink mists, living on poetry and airy fancies. Here was a woman and, if he knew anything of her kind, one who really loved. How should he know what was in her heart? How presume to sound its depths? It might well be that he, in his easy life, had dipped only into the shallows. Maybe it was not given to him to know deep feeling when he met it in another.

He looked puzzled then, as if for the first time he had met something that was beyond him. “That's a thought too.” He whistled two little up and down notes. “Perhaps I don't understand. Perhaps I'm a doctor trying to diagnose a brand new disease that he knows nothing about. Maybe I'm prescribing liver pills for a broken heart.”

She smiled then and pushed him lightly on his way. “No,” she said. “You're a good doctor: you must blame the patient. Good night.”

“Good night,” he said slowly, looking down at her thoughtfully. And he stood for a moment on the steps outside under the stars and walked half a block before he remembered that his car was parked in front of her door.

“An admirable young man,” said Tante Aimée when Bionde returned to the living-room. “You are lucky to have made such a friend.” Privately, Tante Aimée thought the whole family shared that luck. She was of the snobs snobbish and never could pass the faded sign on the narrow street in the Lower Town, that said Philibert Dorion, Marchand, without a wincing of the spirit that she should have come from things so lowly, that her upbringing had depended on the tallow and oakum and ship's stores that Philibert sold.

“A very rich young man,” reflected the colonel. “But not by any means of that reprehensible class that one calls ‘playboy.’ He is, this Van Alen, a

very serious youth. He is already fond of you, Bionde.”

They knew she was paying very little attention to what they said. All evening Tante Aimée had desired urgently to shake her and the good colonel had bitten his lip with vexation that she should hand out such cavalier treatment to a young man of Peter Van Alen’s position. To their shrewd Norman minds, calculating and seeking ever the main chance, it was utterly incomprehensible that one of their own flesh and blood should not have, as they, the faculty of knowing a good thing when she saw it. With Mathieu Bernard it had been different. They could, perhaps, understand her unwillingness to give her affection to that Demosthenes of the Acadian bogs, but this good looking young American would stir any girl’s heart, even without his money.

For the time, however, they gave up and said good night. To-morrow they would return to the siege.

She went to the hospital next morning, sure that everything between her and Guy would be as it had been before. She went gayly. She told herself there never had been any real misunderstanding; it had been one of those silly lovers’ quarrels that signified nothing. To-day they would read in each other’s eyes what they had always read before—love and trust and understanding.

Her hopes, burning so high when she ran up the hospital steps, were quickly dashed. M. de Varin, they told her regretfully, was seeing no one. It was best that he should have absolute quiet. No, his condition had not changed for the worse, but concussion was a serious thing and one had to be careful. Yes, they would tell him that she had called. They would give him the message she hastily wrote on borrowed paper and sealed in a borrowed envelope:

I love you, Guy. Don’t let anything but that matter to you, since only your love is important to me. I’m sorry I left you as I did yesterday, but I was not able to say good-by. I felt as if the world had ended. I know better now. I know that the world you and I have made for ourselves—a world of our own—will never end. I shall not be happy until I see you. B.

She felt a little better, after writing that, but her steps were slow as she walked along the snow-cruised streets after leaving the hospital. Snow had fallen during the night and still was falling, softly, steadily, building up its

rich carpet of white, hiding the soot and smoke of the city. Little flakes of it were captured in her hair and lingered there for a moment like white gems in a blonde queen's diadem.

They had told her, with very little assurance however, that she might be permitted to see him to-morrow. I must see him to-morrow, she told herself—I must. The day after to-morrow I have to skate. I should like to talk to him before that. I should like him to know that it is not by my own desire that I am going into this thing, that I never really sought it. I'll make him understand that it meant more to me to skate with him, just the two of us, down there in Sainte-Barbe, on the marsh pond by the dike. He will understand that. I'll make him understand.

But the next day came and she returned to the hospital and still they would not let her see De Varin. They looked at her pityingly, the kindly nuns, sorry for her in their gentle hearts, touched by the look in her blue eyes—a baffled, puzzled look as in the eyes of a child who has been rebuffed for no reason it can know. They could not tell her that it was the patient's expressed wish that no one be allowed to see him. They knew it would be too cruel to tell her that.

“But he got my note, did he not?”

Yes, he had received her note. There was no more to it. He had not answered. They saw a look in her eyes that made one of the two who talked to her, little Sister Joanna of the Cross, lay a light hand on her arm and say, “Do not fret. It will all come right. Do not feel badly. Such things hurt, I know, when one is young. But to-morrow comes, *ma petite*, and it is different. You will see. Time is the cure, and always the great trust in the goodness of God.”

Bionde turned away. She did not want them to see her cry. She went hurriedly, blindly, a mist covering her eyes. She knew it now; he did not want to see her—that was it. If he were very ill, he could have given an answer, even verbal, to her message. But there had been no answer. He was telling her as bluntly as a man could to stay away from him.

“I'll stay away then. I'll never go back to him. If he is so sure I am drawing away from him, then, to give him the satisfaction of knowing how right he was, I will do the things he said I would. Perhaps his own vindication means more to him than my happiness. Perhaps he will like some day to say, ‘I told you so.’ *Eh b'en!* Let it be like that!”

She skated, on Saturday, before the watching thousands, as she had never skated before. Before the magic symmetry of her movements, the

breathless speed and unearthly grace, fell one by one the vaunted queens of the curved runners. Margot Paine, one of England's best; the Norwegian wonder, Helga Maersk; even the great Tanya Ulrich, who had skated from the screen into the hearts of millions. An awful lot of nose, as Pete Van Alen reiterated, was put out of joint that day.

Among the mighty crowd was a squarely-built, ruddy-faced man with snow-white hair and eyes of glacier blue, whose great hands had stayed clasped tightly all the time she skated. He came to her when it was done. She saw him standing shyly at the far edge of the crowd surrounding her and she called out to him and skated into his arms and cried against the shoulder of his shabby blue overcoat. "Tor!" she said. "Oh, Tor, how do you come here? And why did you not let me know?"

"I fly," he said. "I see it in the paper. And I see you. It is enough. I must come here—for Kristie. You are much like her. Ah, you have done so well. You have made me proud. I can feel better now. Not so sad any more. I was wrong to say God unkind. He showed that to me to-day."

"Oh, I am so glad, so happy that you were here to see me! Believe me, I thought of you when I stepped on the ice to-day. I tried to think of all the things you had taught me."

He smiled his slow, stolid smile. "Ah, no, you did not need to think of what I have taught. You have learned. Those things now you do without thinking of them any more. It is good. Life is good. You will become famous now."

She shook her head. "I am not anxious for that."

"It is good to do the best, to do what you know how to do. You are a great skater."

"I had a great teacher."

He spread his hands and said, "The potter must have the good clay."

"I never thought you would leave Sainte-Barbe—even for a day, even to see me skate."

"Something—I do not know—made me to come here. Now I know it was good to come. Now I go back feeling better. I have done something."

Quebec, that day, was a sports writer's dream of heaven. Pete Van Alen knew the story of Tor Gustavssen, of what he had given up when young Kristie died, of how he had buried himself in a Tantramar farm, of how he

had found Bionde and taught her with all his great skill, with all the love and effort he would have lavished on his Kristie.

But Tor would not stay in Quebec. Nor would he talk to the insistent reporters. They gave way before the rock of his reticence and even their hard-boiled hearts could feel what this day meant to him.

He was going back by train and his train left in half an hour. He had barely time to catch it. "You have not need of me," he told her with slow half-smile, his hard, unwinking stare. "What you do now, you must do yourself."

"But what am I to do?"

So many things confronted her. Pete Van Alen's wire to New York had brought Sig Marks, visiting there from Hollywood, reluctantly to Quebec. But Sig was right at her elbow with a fountain-pen when the meet was over. They wanted her. They needed her. They had to have her.

"Better keep Tor," advised Pete. "Or arrange with him to go to Hollywood with you. He'd be a good one to have."

"I'm not going to Hollywood. And Tor is gone." She was bewildered. She needed someone—one who understood that all this was beyond her. That she needed time to think, that she must talk to Guy. Pete didn't understand. He wanted her to seize the shining hour. But Tor had said, "She is tired now. You let her rest. To-morrow you can talk."

She had thanked him with her eyes. All this was wonderful. She would not deny the thrill of it, the heady intoxication of the crowd's applause. She had had her dreams, but in none of them had she stood on the ice among admiring thousands, the center of all their adulation. Never had she worn a royal blue skating costume with white fur trim, a dream of a costume that made her look like some queen of fairyland. This wasn't she, this wasn't little Bionde Lacasse who had trotted off to convent-school a few short years ago, who since then had found her greatest pleasure in solitary walks along the dikes in summer, in skating on the frozen marsh in winter.

Even the scene about her was unreal: the vast turreted bulk of the Château Frontenac rising above her, the sun-gilded towers and steeples of the old city, the bells ringing out into the still, frost-keen air. Guy—her heart cried out for Guy. If he were here it would all be different. If he could share this moment with her, she would love it and all that went with it. Now she felt only an emptiness, a lonely bereft sensation, as if no one really cared for Bionde Lacasse but only for a girl who could do clever things on skates.

Pete Van Alen took her home, and he did not bother her by much talking. He knew that she was not physically tired but he could see that her emotions were strained to breaking. "Take it easy," he advised. "This is a lot of stuff for one little girl in one afternoon. You're not seasoned yet. If some of the others had won you'd have had an object lesson in how to grab the spotlight and hold it. You don't seem to care."

"But I do. I won't lie—I liked it. I was happy when the judges told me I had won. What girl wouldn't be?"

"None that I know," said Pete gravely. "Say, who is this chap you're so much up in the air about? And what is he? And what's wrong with him? I know it's none of my business, but— —"

"You're kind, Pete." She touched his hand on the wheel, quite unaware of what that slight warm contact did to Pete Van Alen of the cold heart and icy nerves, Pete the woman-proof. "But this is a matter where none can help. It—it is between him and me."

"But if I could see him— —"

"Please, no. It will be all right."

"You sound as if you didn't really believe it would. There!" He saw her mouth move tremulously, that soft red curving mouth that he had found himself often of late gazing at with longing. "All you need is to be left alone. Don't bother with the newspaper reporters or anyone—not even Sig Marks. I'll take care of him."

"It was you that brought him here?"

He nodded. "I thought of it the other night when I was saying you're a great actress without having to act. I hope you don't mind. When a girl is good at her work, as you are, I think it's the rottenest thing in the world to see a lot of tramps doing their stuff while she sits on the sidelines. That's why I called Sig. He loves me for it now."

"You are too good to me, Pete."

"It's easy to be good to you, youngster. I'm with you all the way. Take things as they come, is my advice to you. And don't let anybody kid you that fame and money and success are not worth fighting for. That's the fairy-tale the great mass of failures concoct to console themselves. Old Aesop wrote a fable about it ages ago—The Fox and the Grapes. It's still a good story."

"But what would I do with those things? I have never wanted to be rich and never in my life did I dream of fame. I—I had all I wanted from life. I

thought I had it, now I do not know, I am not sure.”

“What you will have, what is yours for the taking, my little ice-swallow, will more than make up for anything you may lose. And does it ever occur to you that quite possibly anything so easily lost is not worth the keeping? The sea is large, you must remember, and there are an awful lot of fish in it.”

She hardly listened to him. As soon as she was in the house she called the hospital and asked for Guy. Now she must see him, now in this hour when it seemed to her that he alone could advise her. These golden gifts that were being held out to her—should she take them or refuse them? What would he want her to do? She must know that. For what he wanted her to do, that she would do.

“M. de Varin went home this afternoon.”

She could scarcely thank that crisp, machine-like voice at the other end of the wire. She dropped the instrument and ran to the door, brushing past her aunt and uncle with a few unintelligible words, flagging their chauffeur before he could pull away from the curb, telling him to go as fast as he could to Sainte-Ursule Street.

What would she find when she got there? The long low room empty forever of his presence? His books, his easel, his pictures, packed and gone? She felt that if he went away now she would never find him. She might hunt the wide world over for him but his ears would be closed to the Ballad of Ronsard, to that song he would be always deaf.

Dusk now, blue gray winter dusk, making a pale glimmer above the snow. Lights blooming out here and there in the city, shining over the frozen face of the great St. Lawrence wrapped in its icy slumber. The Angelus bells filling the winter air with their brazen, dulcet clangor, great waves of sound shivering across the river, shattering themselves against the height of Levis, even as in the days when from those heights Wolfe’s cannon blasted destruction at the City on the Rock.

Sainte-Ursule Street at last. The little café where she and Guy had sat that first happy night, where the fat proprietor had two fat black tabbies who kept the cellar clear of mice. The narrow staircase of happy and wretched memory. She all but flew up it this time. She did not knock at the familiar door, but turned the knob and went in and stood there in the gloom, trying to distinguish the objects about her, not speaking, not daring to call his name, for fear there should be no answer.

Then she saw the white of the bandage around his head, over by the window where he sat in an old leather chair. She walked over to him and reached down and touched his shoulder. In the gray glimmer of light from the dormer window she could see now the blur that was his face. But he did not move for a moment, did not speak. She touched his cheek with her cold fingers and he took them then in his hand and pressed them to his lips. She put her arm about his neck and bent and kissed his mouth, his cheek.

“Why—why did you do those things to me?” she said in a whisper, sitting on the arm of his chair. “Why did you punish me so, refuse to see me, not answer my note, have them lie to me—? Oh, I will not ask those things. I don’t care. I’m with you now, here alone with you and that is all that matters.”

“I told you the other night,” he said, “that—that you must try to make it cease to matter to you. There was good reason for it then. There is all the more reason for it now.”

She drew away from him. She could not believe that anything could be so cruel, so unkind. Here was no Guy de Varin, but some harsh, boorish fellow, some dark changeling.

“You—but you didn’t mean that. You don’t mean it.”

“You heard me, Bionde.”

“I cannot believe what I heard. I will not.”

“I tell you you must.”

“But why? Why?”

“You reached the top even faster than I thought you would. You did it in one jump. Sky-rocketed, the Americans say. Yes, that is it—you sky-rocketed. You are up among the stars.”

“I am the girl you saw one autumn day in a faded garden.” Her voice was far-off, filled with an infinite wistfulness. “Surely you remember? I was standing, gazing at an old ruin of a house and suddenly I felt that someone watched me. I saw you there sitting on a bench. You were sketching me. There was an old rucksack beside you and you had a stick and—you called me a dryad. I was that girl, but you—what has come to you?”

“Nothing—nothing. But fame has come to you. Oh, you must try to understand—try! I could have hoped to make that girl happy. She would share what little I made, what little I had—a crust, a garret, hardship, cold. What matter? We would have the misery, as we had the joy, together. But

you now”—he laughed. “I have a little radio in my room here. I heard all about you this afternoon. They want you to go to Hollywood. You will travel a road where it is best to travel alone or with one who goes as swiftly, as brilliantly as yourself. That is not Guy de Varin—you know that.”

“How can you say these things to me! Do you think all this means anything to me compared with— —”

“Perhaps not now, but if you gave it all up or if I tagged along, to spoil it for you, in time— —”

“I cannot listen to you. I will not. You are not yourself. You do not know what you are saying, what you are doing to me.”

“But I do. I never saw my way marked out so clearly. I never saw a finger point so steadily at the path I should follow.”

“Tell me—are you trying to destroy my love for you, are you trying to put a finish to it? Don’t you care for me any more?”

He did not answer. He reached up and turned on the light beside the chair. He looked up at her and his eyes were tormented, but there was a hard, determined light in their brown depths.

“Suppose we say it’s that, Bionde. Why don’t you leave me? Forget me?”

“Is it what you really want?”

He nodded.

“And you will not tell me why?”

“I have told you why.”

“Because of my—of my skating! Surely you do not begrudge me that! I thought you would be happy over it all. I was so glad when I saw old Tor there in the crowd— —”

“Oh, I would have gone too, but I didn’t feel up to it. I’m glad, Bionde, that it turned out as it did. It—it makes everything fine for you now.”

“It ruins everything.” Her voice was flat, discouraged. “It’s taken from me all I ever wanted.”

“But it will bring you so many more things to make up— —”

“Not all it could bring me would make up for some few brief moments that I have known.”

“You feel that way now. In time — —”

“I’ll feel that way always,” she said. She turned toward the door. “I’d better go now.” She hesitated. “It’s good-by this time, I suppose.”

He was looking down at his clenched fist, standing by the easel with its almost finished picture. “Yes,” he said, “I think good-by is best—for both of us.”

She walked through a mist of tears and never after could recall opening that door or groping her way down the steep stairs. But she remembered the ride home through the early winter dusk, the lights gleaming on the snow. She remembered how dreadfully alone she felt, how cold and lost and utterly forsaken.

Often and often in the days ahead she thought of that darkest hour and how cold the stars looked in the pale sky and how aloof they were and how uncaring.

Back in her room she picked up the silvery blades on which she had skated to victory and looked at them sadly and put them away, not caring if she never wore them again. They had taken her away from all she loved.

CHAPTER V

The evening after that strange, sad parting in the gloom of the old garret on Sainte-Ursule Street, Colonel and Madame Lacasse gave a dinner in honor of their niece. Not in a great many years had the family fortunes looked so flourishing, not in the colonel's memory had any of the breed basked in such rosy light. He had sent long telegrams and verbose letters to his brother Hormidas and Tante Adrienne. He had even called Hormidas long distance late one night and talked for almost ten minutes. He had not spent so much on a phone call since their brother Leon was killed in a motor accident at Chambly five years before. He rather regretted the call, for he lisped slightly and Hormidas was a bit deaf.

Mathieu Bernard, that eloquent and ponderous little Caesar of the Westmoreland marshes, if alluded to at all, was spoken of very patronizingly as "a worthy fellow, but hardly the husband for Bionde." Mathieu, who only a short while ago had been a combination of god-painter-carpenter-bricklayer-glazier, inasmuch as he was the one who would supply money, put paint on the new shingles and point the chimneys, after restoring all the broken panes of glass in the family mansion.

Away with Mathieu! Let him marry some farmer-wench from Pré d'en haut or Memramcook, Painsec or Scoudouc! Bionde was not the mate for him. "Here in Quebec," wrote Colonel Hubert, who never did things in a mean way, "Bionde could have her pick of a hundred better than the worthy Bernard. Young Peter Van Alen, a wealthy American, whose great love is figure-skating, tries to monopolize her and, if I am not mistaken, is making some headway. Something has gone very much awry between her and the artist-fellow, De Varin. Perhaps she has begun to see how hopeless a husband he would prove, though it may be that he is the one who has seen this first. I do not like to give him credit for so much intelligence. However, a bit of ice fell from a roof on top of his head and it may have knocked some sense into him. There is no place in Bionde's life for him."

There was a place, but Guy chose not to take it. He chose rather to sit hours on end in that silent, low-ceilinged garret room, staring straight ahead of him, glancing now and then at the unfinished picture on the easel. It was a study of Clovis Gendreau, the blacksmith at Sainte-Barbe, a man who was

the artist's conception of Vulcan, huge, black-bearded, hairy, who swung the great sledge and plied the giant tools of his trade as easily as if they were made of papier maché.

The picture was all but finished; a few more strokes of the brush and it would be completed. But brush and palette lay neglected, gathering dust, and Guy sat there idly, the frown on his face an index to the darkness of his thoughts.

He had neither the will nor the power to paint. He knew for the first time in his life a sense of utter futility. What was the use of striving, of struggling? There had been times when he had felt inadequate, known the sense of deficiency that comes to every man who creates, moments when he sees clearly how much smaller he is than the work he does, when he lets the clay in him assert itself over the bit of godhead he is endowed withal. But this was the real thing, this was so near defeat that he had all but lost sight of victory. He walked about the city a little more each day, but he always chose the quiet time and the streets where he was least likely to meet her.

He had no means of knowing what he would do if he should meet her face to face, if, turning some corner, she should run into his arms, if he should see again the hurt pleading of her eyes, the uncertainty of her smile. He should, he knew, go quickly away from Quebec. There was no good in his lingering here. Why did he stay? What did he hope for? Better to go where he would never see her again, where his loneliness and pain would not be intensified by the nearness of her.

She would soon forget. For a little while she would feel a hurt like his, worse perhaps, because she could not know the truth or really understand why this sorrow was inflicted on her. But she would make new friends and there would be many bright and glittering things given her to amuse and distract and make her forget in time that there had ever been a foolish fellow named De Varin, who had spoken to her of love once in a twilight garden.

Each day there was some item in the paper about her. His landlady, Madame Geoffrion, who was the aunt of Charlebois Hudon, proprietor of the downstairs café where Guy ate his meals, always told him the news. She had seen Bionde's picture in the papers and identified it with the pretty girl who had come so often looking for her strange lodger, M. de Varin.

"Now," she confided to the stout Charlebois, "she comes no more. It is of great sadness that it is so. Whose fault it may be, I cannot tell you, my old one, but it would appear that since she has become famous and all men admire her and rich ones want to marry her and others want to make a star of

the cinema out of her, she does not care for this poor young artist. She spurns his love now, where, a short while ago, it was a matter of life and death for her to find him.”

To support this romantic thesis she told Charlebois that the young De Varin no longer bothered with his painting, that the fine portrait of the blacksmith, that looked so much like Elzear Jean Paul Coquillard, the smith in their own native village of Saint Philemon de Bas Berthierville, still stood unfinished on the easel, that not since the poor young gentleman had come back from the hospital had he touched his brush.

“Often I allude to the so charming Mademoiselle Lacasse, but he merely looks glum and shrugs and says, ‘How interesting!’ Ah, it is a great pity that such love as theirs should perish.”

“A great pity indeed,” agreed Charlebois. “I remember well the first night they came into my café. Happy as little children they were, laughing and making jokes and sitting until all hours, and the young lady in a magnificent gown of rose-velvet and slippers of gold and he looking as he always does in spite of his clothes, so distinguished. An hour after closing time I waited for them and, though I could hardly stay awake, I hated to see them go. And they liked Victor Hugo and Roncevalle, those two good cats.”

But they came no more together to the café of the good Charlebois. Guy ate his frugal meals in solitude and seemed so disinclined to talk that the curious restaurant-keeper respected his desire to be left alone, and hid his bursting curiosity and deep sympathy under a broad and moon-like smile. When one is young and in love and love has not treated one well—why then a man wants to be left alone, he wants to suffer in silence.

But this, mused Charlebois sadly—he was a great follower of the cinema, where he went regularly, sat in the back row and wept copiously at all the sad parts—was a cruel thing that the heartless lovely one had done to him who adored her. She had yielded to the allurements of wealth, the blandishments of fame; for the tinsel and show these things could give she had made her heart cold and shut out the voice of love. Ah, but women could be fickle! A man never knew where he stood with one of that sex. Here was this poor young artist pining away, scarcely touching the good food served with extra care, that was put before him, scarcely heeding what one said to him. How that girl deserved to suffer!

To all those of the good bourgeois of the ancient city who frequented the café, Charlebois told the sad story and with each telling it grew in detail and embellishment, until Bionde became a symbol of all that is treacherous,

fickle and hard-hearted and De Varin an object of deep compassion. But of all this, Guy knew nothing. He did not for a moment dream that his affairs had become of great importance to the fat Hudon and the good, if slightly acid, Madame Geoffrion. In his world there had been only Bionde and himself. Now he was alone.

He walked past Colonel Lacasse's house the night of the dinner-party. Madame Geoffrion had told him it was to take place. She had said, "You are perhaps among *les invités*?" And had nodded sorrowfully when he shook his head.

It was clear and cold that night and his coat was thin. Still he did not mind the cold. He looked up at the stars and to-night they were only feeble little pinpoints of light and wrote no message of hope across the heavens. The wavering streamers of the Northern Lights ribboned across the sky in shifting, shimmering bands of brightness. The gray stone walls of the city threw bluish shadows on the snow and in the houses beyond the warmly lighted windows was comfort and cheer that made worse the ache, the emptiness he knew. He seemed shut out from it all, doomed to wander alone and unwanted.

He looked up at the lighted windows of *la maison Lacasse*. The dinner was over. They were dancing now. He could see the moving couples swing past the windows. He could see her there in some other man's arms, laughing and looking up into his eyes, beginning to forget, if she had not already forgotten, that there was a youth named De Varin who had been all her world once.

True, it was by his own choice that he had put himself out of her world, that he had chosen to walk alone in these cold alleys of solitude. Gladly, he knew, would she have walked them with him and gladly shared all the hardships, the miseries that might come. Still, he could not help resenting the thought that she could dance and laugh and be gay. He could not help but feel hurt at the idea that she could forget him.

"For she will forget," he told himself savagely. "Of course she will! It is in the nature of a young girl to forget. And she will have so much to help her, so many things that are new and wonderful. For a little while it will hurt perhaps—and may it be only for a very little while. For if it does to her what it is doing to me— —"

He kicked angrily at a lump of ice, shrugged deeper into his old blue trench-coat and trudged away. He should not have come here. He had punished himself enough. He had to forget her. He had been trying his best

to put the thought of her out of his mind, to arrange for himself a future of which she was not the heart and center. For so the future had to be.

“My God,” he muttered, “what shall I do? Even what little I had has been taken from me. I must think. I must apply myself as I never did before. And I must do it all alone.”

There was the bitterest part. To have to fight alone. To have to deny himself the ineffable solace and stimulus of a woman, the one woman, by his side. It is hard to go it alone. For him, who had seen the veil of the future parted, disclosing the bright road that they would walk together, it seemed at times more than he could bear, to travel the dark road alone. But he had courage to go on, to fight, to persevere as long as life was in him.

So he went back to his garret-room, to the worn old chair and the unfinished picture on his easel. Somehow—was it because he had been near her, because he had looked at the place where she lived?—he felt better to-night. He lit his pipe, that had so long been neglected. The tobacco tasted good. Life could always be good. Why, a man was less than a man to despair, to want to give up, to look for a hole into which to crawl and perish there like some abject thing. The stars were always up there no matter how dark the sky or how storm-filled; the sun would always rise and there were good books for a man to read and great thoughts for him to think and spring always came treading hard on the receding heels of winter.

And there would always be new roads to travel and rivers to wander by; there would be inns along the way where one could find cheer and laughter. Somewhere there would be a quiet village at the foot of a steep road and he would come upon it just at dusk of an autumn evening and look down upon it from a hilltop and would know one of those rare moments of beauty that come to him who has the eyes of the spirit. “Lift up your heart,” said the voice within him. “Lift it to the stars; the only sin is to despair.”

He had, too, the memories, albeit short ones, of hours that were gay and bright. Nothing could ever take these from him—the memory of her as he had seen her first in the tangled garden, of her as he had held her in his arms, gazed down into her eyes, read all the meaning of life in their mystery. Ah, bitter-sweet to remember those times, yet better far than never to have known them. Like a miser, all through life, he would hoard their sweetness, savoring it drop by drop. I shall remember, he thought, and not be sad. I shall remember and be strong.

So he thought these good thoughts and saw pleasant things in the blue smoke from his pipe and in the bright flames in the fireplace. He saw her

image in the smoke. She was on skates and she wore a blue-velvet costume trimmed with white fur, tight waisted, with a little skirt that billowed out like a blue poppy as she moved on swift-flying feet. She skated for him alone to-night. She came down out of the smoke cloud and danced on a round mirror-tray that was on the little table at his side. She was a tiny skating marionette on this mirror-rink.

Marionette! What strange and vivid fancies came to him with that word! Pictures of puppets dancing, going through their mimic play; little men and little women going through their paces as the puppet-master pulled the strings. Marionette—is not each one of us just that, and are not the motions we perform in the play of living directed by strings strong and invisible? Who shall say which way he will go and be sure that the Grand Puppeteer, from his vantage point above, does not smile quietly and pull the guiding strings?

He sat up, his pipe gripped tightly in fingers tensed with excitement. To-night his mind worked smoothly, miraculously. It worked like a thing, a wondrous, beautiful, living thing, apart from the poor body in which it dwelt. The Grand Showman was good to him to-night, giving him a part he could live. He could sit there and marvel at the workings of his mind, at the things it did, the way it moved in its own fashion, smoothly, beautifully, creating beauty.

“I’ll do it!” he said. “I’ll do it! Then I’ll have her always with me. I’ll go about it at once.”

That night as he worked, he found himself singing his old song from Beranger—“How happy one can be in a garret when one is twenty!” Yes, one could be happy anywhere. Oh, he knew the dark moods weren’t gone forever, that days would come when they would return darker than ever; that Despair would come again to perch like the grim raven on the back of his chair and croak its dismal warnings in his ear, that life would show a false emptiness again, that he would ask himself, “What’s the use? Why go on? Why keep on trying? What can there ever be for you?”

But not to-night, not for some time to come. He had work to do now—something that he knew how to do and loved to contemplate. With wood and wax and cloth and paste and scissors and needle and thread he would work. And he laughed aloud as he thought of the things he would make.

Pete Van Alen was at the colonel’s house for dinner, and Sig Marks and many more. It was Bionde’s party. It was for her, and she tried to do what

they expected of her. She tried to laugh and be happy and give them all the impression that this was one of the great times of her life. She sparkled, because she had learned many new lessons since coming to Quebec. She had learned to talk brightly of things that mattered little, to laugh politely at jests that weren't really funny. She did these things to-night, but the whole business, for her, was funereal and she prayed for the time when it would end. Her thoughts were still in the gloom of that garret, still in the keeping of that dark fellow who sat brooding in the old chair in the gray light from the dormer window.

Pete Van Alen, alone of all the company, knew what she was feeling, knew that only in body was she with them. He asked her to dance and for a while guided her light steps in silence. She could feel his gaze upon her face. She knew she was not fooling him, and she was at once glad that he understood her so well, and resentful that any man other than Guy should be able so readily to see into her heart.

"Still suffering from the same mysterious malady, Bionde?" He spoke lightly, but underneath the kindly smile, the banter, he was in deadly earnest. "I've been trying, ever since the other night, to diagnose it."

"Yes? And have you made some headway?"

He frowned, pursed his lips, shook his head doubtfully. "We-l-l, a very little. It looks to me like a disease I never believed really existed. It has no name in the medical-books. Perhaps I shall be the one to christen it."

"And what will you call it?"

"Incipient heart-break."

She looked up at him, no mirth in her eyes. She found to her wonderment, that there was none in his; only sympathy, tenderness, understanding.

"Yes, it may be that you have found the ailment. I have never tried to give it a name. There are some things too great to be named, there is too much to them for one word to cover it all. Ah, I do not make myself clear — —"

"But you do. Very clear. You are so young and you feel so deeply and you can be hurt so easily; since, when you give, you give unreservedly, and when you trust, your trust is entire. You have not learned the lessons of deceit, camouflage, hypocrisy. You have to have those lessons before you can be graduated into the world."

“So?” She looked at him wide-eyed. “You mean one must know these things. But one does not have to practice them.”

He smiled then. “You never could. There is no meanness in you.”

“Oh, là-là!” She shook her head. “You are wrong there. I can be very mean and wicked if I choose to be. It is just that I have never had any great occasion. I could hate as much as I could love.”

“And that is a lot?”

“A great deal.”

“I can believe it.”

They danced for a while in silence, he wondering about this man who filled her thoughts. Once, Colonel Lacasse had made some slight reference to an artist who came from her own village in Acadia. Some flighty fellow, no doubt. Damn it, why were women always getting tangled up with the least dependable of men! And usually, too, the best of women. This girl was a wonder, quite apart from the fact that on skates no one in the world could touch her.

“You’re going to sign up with Sig Marks, aren’t you?”

“I think so. I haven’t yet. He gives me no rest, but he says the offer will stay open. I promised him I would go with no one else.”

“Better sign. I have an idea you’re chasing a will o’ the wisp. When you have a Hollywood contract you have something you can lock up in a safe-deposit box. You can’t do that with love, you know.”

“I know that.” She nodded pensively. “I thought I had it safely locked up in my heart, but when I went to look for it, it wasn’t there.”

“Poor kid! If only— —”

“Don’t feel sorry for me. Perhaps it’s a lesson I had to learn. But how could he be so unkind— —”

“Is there—another girl?”

She shook her head vehemently. “That, I could understand. I could face it better than I can this. He—well, he is an artist and he is poor and he thinks that if we were married he would be a drag on me.”

Privately, Pete thought the artist, for an artist, displayed an amazing amount of common-sense. But diplomatically he said, “Well, men have a queer pride, you know. They like to think they are the dominant ones. They

like to rule and lead. Sometimes it isn't much fun being the husband of a celebrity. Maybe he doesn't want to be alluded to, if alluded to at all, as 'Madame's husband—I believe he paints.'"

"It would not be like that. I told him if he wanted me to give up all this, I would gladly do it."

"You little idiot!"

"Idiot?" She shrugged. "To give up something I have never had, know nothing about, for what has brought me the greatest happiness of my life! I see nothing idiotic in that, Monsieur Pete."

"No—no, you wouldn't, I suppose. Of course, he wouldn't hear of your giving up your chance."

"He wouldn't."

"Naturally. If he let you do it, you'd both be reproaching yourselves all your lives. He'd be sore because he'd feel that you sometimes regretted what you had given up for him, even if you never did regret. But, my dear, you sometimes would. Being the wife of a not too successful artist is no fun; even in books when they try to make it look like fun, the thing falls flat. When I read about such dreamy unions I always hear the incidental music of the wolf-pack outside the door and the patter of their little pawsy-wawsys on the stairs."

"But you are hard!"

"I'm not really. It's just that I've seen so many facts that fancy doesn't have much weight with me. I don't dream a great deal. At least, I didn't until—until of late."

He glanced down at her, but she hadn't even heard him. They had stopped by a window and she was staring into the street where a lamp shed bright light on the snow, on a shadowy figure of a man walking by. Forgetting all else, she gazed after him, and slowly rapture dawned in her eyes. She became aware then of Pete's interested study of her face.

"It was—" She stopped, the color rushing to her cheeks.

"I passed by your window," said Pete. "Well, that's a symptom that I, as a love doctor, can easily recognize. If he can't stay away from you—"

"It was Guy," she said. "I would know him anywhere. But I did not hear the Song of Ronsard—not even in my heart. Do you think—"?"

“Hey, what is this?” Pete pretended alarm. “Where does the old ballad-monger, Pierre de Ronsard, figure in this?”

“Oh, it is just something we had—” She was gay now. She felt better. She liked the party now. He had come to look up at the place where she was. He had stood out there in the icy, wind-swept street, to gaze at the windows—and to see her dancing by. And what did he think? That she was quick to forget perhaps? That she was putting the thought of him away from her? That she was finding happiness in dancing with another man’s arm around her?

You must know better, Guy, she thought. You will never let yourself think that. You will remember the garden, where we met, the first night when we stood under the stars, when we knew—

When the party had ended and the guests gone, she said a hasty good night to her aunt and uncle and hurried to her room. There she waited until she heard the door of their own apartment close for the night. She slipped into her fur coat then and put a bright blue scarf over her head, tying it under her chin. On tiptoe she went down the deep carpeted stairs and out into the bitter cold of the night.

The city was sleeping. Only rarely did she see the vague figure of some late traveler, some policeman stamping along on his chilly rounds. A clock struck two long clear strokes that seemed to hang in the dry icy air under the myriad stars. She breathed deeply of its freshness, its clean tingling cold. She walked to Sainte-Ursule Street and looked up at the attic window. His light still burned, but even as she watched it darkness blotted it out.

She didn’t mind. She had not intended to go up there to-night. She hadn’t the courage for that. But she had needed the solace of being even this near to him. She stood there for a moment looking at the slate covered dormer high above her. If I should go to him now, she thought, and all her body seemed to glow and her heart-beat was loud. Would he let me in? Would he take me in his arms and keep me always and never let me go?

Perhaps that unadmitted thought had been hers when she decided to come here. Perhaps where he was concerned she was losing all pride, all restraint and all the good teaching of her convent years. But no—no, I would not go to him like that. And he would not have me come like that.

But it would have been heaven, she knew, to have his arms about her, his lips on hers, to feel his face in the softness of her hair, to hold each other close and forget all else.

“Good night,” she said softly to the window up among the stars. “I will come again. Once more. This time you will not drive me away. If you do, I will not go.”

It was easy, there in the silent night, in the deserted street, to make that vow, to feel sure that she could keep it. She had only the stars to witness it. As she walked quickly homeward, thinking only now of the lateness of the hour, she kept telling herself that it was only pride that could keep her away from him. Yet her cheeks felt hot and her spirit winced at the prospect of another rebuff. He had tried his best to make it clear to her that he thought it better for them to go their separate ways. He had been very final about it all; yet to-night he had come to her house, drawn there by something stronger than whatever it was that tried to persuade him to deny their love.

“If I let this go,” she thought, “I shall feel sorry all my life. I shall always remember it as a precious thing. If I leave it, I’ll take bitterness away in its stead, and all my life I will regret. I know I will. I must fight for it now. What if he hurts me, humiliates me—I know that in his heart he does not mean it, that only some crazy notion makes him want to sacrifice himself.”

Yet she was afraid. He had made himself in a short while so much alone. He had quickly built strong walls about himself and designed them for the one purpose of keeping her away from him. Soon, if she did not do something, he would have completed his redoubts, there would be no place for her to enter. No way, she thought dismally, for her who loved him so, to enter into his life.

She went quietly into the sleeping house and up the stairs. No light burned, but as she reached the landing a switch clicked and the sudden brightness dazzled her so that it was moments before she could see her uncle standing in the hall, his hand still on the switch. His own astonishment equaled hers. He had not taken time to put on a dressing-gown. He wore a blue and white flannel nightshirt that came almost to his heels; his eyes protruded, puffy with sleep, his droopy white mustache seemed to bristle.

Bionde felt a mad impulse to laugh. He looked so funny standing there in the draughty hall. All he needs, she thought impishly, is a candle and a blunderbuss and we could caption the picture, “Where have you been, you brazen hussy?”

For moments thus they stood and stared at each other, the colonel groping for words that would sear and devastate, Bionde, with no sense of guilt, careless of what he might say. As they were thus stalemated, the clock

struck three. The echoing mellow strokes, shivering in the stillness of the house, dying in slow undulations, broke the spell.

“Where have you been?” The parade-ground manner went ill with the undress uniform. “Where have you been until this hour of the night?”

“Out walking.” She was conscious of the utter inadequacy of her answer, but it was really all she could say.

“Come!” The colonel was on the warpath. “You do not stand there and tell me you have been walking the streets of Quebec at three o’clock in the morning!”

“It is the truth. If you will recall—or perhaps you don’t—it was about two when I went to my room.”

“You have been to see that—that fellow, that De Varin. Is it not so?”

“I wish it were,” she said honestly. “But it is not. I saw the light in his window, but as I watched, it went out.”

“You—you mean to say you actually were — —”

She shrugged. “Oh, I don’t know. It is so difficult to know.” She looked at him almost sullenly, with sudden resentment against him and all he stood for; against all his snobbishness, his tinsel ideas and fumings and stampings.

“You are beyond my comprehension. I had begun to think that you were all over that nonsense, that you were beginning to—to see reason. And here I find you in the dead of night coming back from some rendezvous — —”

“I told you I did not see him, uncle.” She felt very tired now. She walked toward her door. “There!” With swift revulsion she was sorry for this fat old man who breathed so stertorously, who set so much store on a world on which he had so faint a hold. “I am sorry, uncle, if I have upset you. It may be all over between him and me. I do not give up easily, when it is something I want very much. But do not be angry at me. You have been very kind and I have been ungrateful. I am sorry.”

He was somewhat mollified. He grunted and becoming for the first time aware of his nightshirt, he coughed and said hastily, “Go to bed then! Go at once. And while you are here, do not again go out so late.”

Demurely she said good night and went into her room. She was too tired now to care how the old man felt or what he thought. He was keen enough, she knew, to believe the truth when he heard it. It didn’t matter to her what he believed. It was all his doing and through the combined scheming of him

and Uncle Hormidas and her aunts that she was here, that she had to wander the streets at night to get a glimpse of Guy's window. We would have been all right, she thought, if they'd let us alone.

"First it was Mathieu Bernard, poor old fat Mathieu—nothing would do but Bionde must marry him—'Bionde should consider herself fortunate—'" She mimicked Tante Adrienne's prim tones. "I was to be Madame Bernard, and all would be well. Now Mathieu is forgotten. They see better things for me, and for them. Ah, *sapristi*, what a dog's life! I wish I was back in convent and the bell would ring at six and I'd have nothing to worry about—there would be someone to tell me everything I should do!"

With this youthful cynicism she lulled herself to sleep, but no convent bell rang for her at six o'clock. It was past ten when she awakened and a wild storm was howling around the housetops and steeples of Quebec. Snow, driven by a northerly blast, beat against the windows with a swish and a rattle that threatened to break the panes. She got out of bed and looked down into the street where the drifts already in some places were three feet deep.

She stretched. The room was warm, the deep green carpet good on her bare feet. She thought of the frigid bedroom that she had left in Sainte-Barbe. You would need a knife to scrape the frost off its window a morning like this. It was good to have such comfort.

"Eh! I am becoming soft, I'm afraid. I hope Uncle Hubert does not choose to-day to put me out in the street with my bags and the silver cup I won. I should have to go to Guy's attic and he might not take me in."

But the colonel made no allusion whatever to what had happened the previous night. He was quite amiable all during breakfast. He trusted Bionde. After all, she was a Lacasse, one of a hard-headed breed. She wouldn't, when it came down to the fine point, make such a fool of herself as to marry this De Varin. She was young and romantic. She would, left to herself, get over it. The colonel prided himself on his knowledge of human nature. No use trying to push a person with any stubbornness in her make-up—and his niece, he was well aware, had plenty in her. One had to go easy.

"Our friend, Mr. Marks," he said casually, "told me last night that he must return to New York this evening. He spoke, too, about the splendid contract he was offering you and which you have not as yet signed. Now, my dear, as your guardian pro tem I have something to say in that matter. I am wondering if you have yet made up your mind. I cannot for a moment

imagine that you would be so foolhardy as to refuse this offer and lose this splendid opportunity. What do you say?"

Cornered! What could she say? She stared down at her plate. The colonel and Tante Aimée were watching her. She could give them no reason for refusing, none, at least, that would not sound absurd. She could not say, "I want to ask the man I love. I want to have him tell me what it will mean to him. I want the truth from him, which so far I have not been able to get."

"Think, child," urged Tante Aimée, her hand on her heart. "Here is something that every girl in the world wants, that anyone would give—well, give her right hand to have. You—why, you owe it to yourself, and yes, to us, to your family, to take it and go on to great things."

"But I—I am not sure that I want to take it." They could see, but could not understand, the unhappiness in her eyes. "I thought my life would be different. This—it all came so quickly."

"That," said the colonel, "is the way of fortune." He tried to recall the bit of Shakespeare beginning, "There is a tide in the affairs of man"—but he couldn't get it straight. "You may never have this chance again. It's quite certain you will not."

"But Mr. Marks said the offer would remain open —"

"Oh, yes, Mr. Marks said that, but to-morrow it may be a different thing. Changes are swift and frequent in the world of the cinema. To-day skaters like yourself are all the vogue; to-morrow it may be—well, tight-rope walkers or something. You must make up your mind."

"Very well then," she said with sudden decision. "I'll let him know my answer before he goes."

"But—but what —?"

"What will it be?" She laughed. "I do not know. You see, my good aunt and uncle, I am not making this decision. I do not feel that I am capable of making it. I do not want to make it myself and then have only myself to reproach. I am something of a coward, perhaps. Who shall say?"

Colonel Hubert was dumfounded. "But who, then, is to decide for you?"

"The man I love. Surely what I do should mean as much to him as to me."

"You are telling us that you will accept or refuse Mr. Marks' offer on the mere say-so of this out-at-elbows young De Varin? It is he you allude to,

isn't it?"

"No other. And yes, I'll hear from him what he wants me to do. Now if you will excuse me — —"

She left them sitting there, silent, outraged. Here was something they would never understand. Why, the girl was out of her mind! Suppose, just suppose, De Varin should tell her not to accept. Suppose she should run off with him and get married. She was stubborn enough and headstrong, to do that very thing.

"Hubert!" Tante Aimée looked at her spouse with urgent eyes. She was sure her heart would not much longer stand this strain. "You had better do something."

"But—but what in the world — —"

"You had better go to this—this artist and talk to him and try to make him see what he is doing. Make him see what he should do. And you had better get there before she does."

"Sacred name!" growled the colonel, glowering out at the storm. "How does one travel this morning! To me it looks as if only a dog sled could get through the accursed snow. Why do girls pick such mornings as this to be willful and stubborn? Now when I was young — —"

"Do not start to tell me about when you were young. You must go to that young man and try to reason with him. Show him what Bionde is in danger of losing if she persists in this insane idea of marriage with him. Tell him it is a wicked thing he does. I wish my heart would permit me to go myself, but this morning I do not feel well. I could not stand the strain. Do hurry, Hubert!"

"Perhaps I'd better. I'd like to horse-whip that fellow, but maybe a good talking to — —"

"Yes, talk to him. Tell him he's ruining her life, tell him we'll do anything, we'll give him money — —"

"But we can't do that!"

"Well, tell him something." She fluttered her hands. "You will know how to deal with him."

"By gad, I do know, but I dare not. I'll go at once."

He picked a good time to call on Guy de Varin. The attic on Sainte-Ursule Street was draughty and chill that morning, the work that Guy had

started the night before seemed to be a silly, futile thing now. "Pipe-dream," he told himself bitterly, "I've been seeing things in the smoke. But then—they looked so lovely in the smoke. Perhaps I should trust my dreams. I've always believed that dreams were the things that made the brightest reality and that if only a man followed his dreams he would find satisfaction for his spirit. It seemed that way last night. It all seemed clean-cut and sure of fulfillment. If only I had her, if only I could tell her—everything."

He stared at his hands, smiling a forlorn smile at the work he was doing. He felt utterly lonely. He knew the need of her as never had he known need in all his life. If she came now, he thought, I couldn't be strong any longer. I couldn't play the hero's rôle. I think I must have been cut out for the clown's part. If I could only tell her again that I love her, if I could only bring again that brightness into her eyes.

Dolefully he looked at the snow that lashed against the little window-panes. He drove himself to work, but he could not seem to put much into it. He could not capture again the fire that had warmed his will last night. The cold that gripped the city had crept into the very fiber of his heart. What was the use of all this? What good in eating your very soul out when only bitterness could be your lot? Work and sweat and toil and strive and worry; and frustration in the end. Only that.

He glared at the picture of the village Vulcan, dusty on its easel. With sudden fury he got up and kicked at the easel and sent it and the picture in rickety ruin to the floor.

"Maybe you were stopping me," he muttered, "maybe I can get on now with what I'm doing." And with a bitter effort he went again at his work, singing the old song of Beranger in a mournful minor key.

It was thus that Colonel Hubert Lacasse, puffing and looking as near an apoplectic-stroke as a man can look without having one, found him when he opened the door at Guy's eager command.

"Young man—!" he gasped, leaning on his stick.

"Oh!" Guy stood up, at once on the defensive. "Good day, monsieur."

The colonel gaped at him, at what he held in his hand. The good soldier's eyes lost whatever of lids they possessed. "My God, man!" he said. "What are those things you have there?"

"Dolls," said De Varin.

CHAPTER VI

Some little time elapsed, marked by the rattling of the ancient window-sashes, the swish-swish of the driven snow, the hiss of the logs in the fireplace, before the colonel could say anything at all. Guy was smiling, but there wasn't any mirth in his smile. He was pretty sure he knew the reason for this visit. And, in a way, he thought it well-timed. Now what precisely, he wondered, can this pompous old fellow have to say to me?

It would, of course, concern Bionde. The moment, then, was well chosen. He had been weak a while ago. His strong purpose had begun to fail, his will to waver a little. Had it been she who came to him this morning he could no longer have kept up this harrowing deceit. Like a very young boy, miserable and forlorn, he would have cast away his pride, his stubbornness, his sense of the rightness of things, and poured out all the grief and misery that was his. Now again he felt strong, sure of what he had to do. If this gasping old warhorse had come to tell him to leave Bionde alone, his errand would be a success. He looked down at the little figure in his hands and smiled wickedly.

"Dolls," said the colonel. "Yes, I can see they are dolls. But what the devil— —!"

"They are not, strictly speaking, dolls," said De Varin. "They are marionettes, puppets. You know, monsieur"—he was enjoying his own irony, that the colonel sublimely missed—"little figures controlled by strings. The puppet-master pulls the strings and they obey. He can make them do his will. I am going to make myself a puppet-show. In Paris once, I had a friend, Gaston Brideau, who was one of the greatest puppeteers in France. Gaston's puppets were, you can believe me, more real than living persons. I used to help him and I always enjoyed it. I came to know and like the little creatures whose every move was controlled by invisible strings, yet who seemed to manage, in some way, to give the illusion that they did just the things they wanted to do. But there! I bore you with all this. You are not concerned."

"On the contrary." The colonel brushed his mustache, still wet from the snow and sleet. "You can guess perhaps why I came here— —"

De Varin inclined his dark head. "Perhaps."

“So then it concerns me greatly that the man who seems to have gained such an ascendancy over my niece should spend his time fooling with a lot of silly marionettes.”

De Varin smiled down at the grinning face of one of the puppets, a jolly little hunchback who seemed to wink an impish wink at him and to be enjoying the whole thing hugely. “I do not find them silly. Far from it. In many ways, they are more likeable than humans, who will never admit, even if they realize it, that they too are pulled by strings invisible, just as surely as the marionettes are; and that God is the Grand Puppeteer.”

“Blasphemous!” grunted Colonel Hubert. People who discussed God always made him nervous. God belonged in church. He looked at the overturned easel, the picture of the village Vulcan staring with rather an astonished look at the cracked ceiling of the garret. “That contradicts free will. I should like to see anyone pull strings and make me do what I didn’t want to. By gad, I should! I thought you were a painter.”

“I thought so too,” said Guy. “It would seem that I have wearied of painting.”

The colonel scowled. He had a remote idea that he was being made game of. He found himself—he who had come to settle this insolent young nobody, somehow on the defensive. The fellow was so damnably cool and unconcerned. Far from feeling abashed, he seemed rather to be enjoying himself.

That was the worst of these artistic fellows. You never knew where to have them. They always seemed to be talking a different language. Still, it was only reasonable to expect queerness from a fellow who stuck himself away in a loft and spent his time making dolls. There was, to the colonel, something immoral about it. He rather thought there should be a law or something and thought fleetingly that if ever it was his luck to be appointed to the senate he would do something drastic about it. These artists should be segregated, sent to Ungava or Baffin Land the same way as the Russians sent their undesirables to Siberia. A touch of the knout would be good too.

“You impress me,” he said, “as the sort of young man who would weary of almost anything. How do you know that you would not weary of my niece?”

De Varin’s shoulders stiffened for a moment; then he shrugged. After all, it was very much to his purpose not to argue with this man. Colonel Lacasse, unknowingly, was doing the very thing Guy wanted done. “It would seem to follow. How do you know that I—that I have not already wearied of her?”

“Sir!” The colonel took a step toward him. De Varin held up a hand in a tired gesture.

“There!” he said shortly. “Let us waste no more time. What is it, *Monsieur le colonel*, that you have to say to me?”

“Since you would be brief: I want you to leave my niece alone.”

“That I will do.”

The colonel started. It was as if one of his cannons had fired from the wrong end. He opened and closed his lips several times before he could say, “You mean that?”

“I mean it.”

“You will give me your word that you will put an end to this preposterous business—love-affair, I suppose you would call it?”

“I did call it that—once. Yes, my good sir, I will give you my word that I will put an end to this preposterous business. I will make no effort to see your niece again.”

Here indeed was something utterly strange and unexpected. The old soldier was never prepared for things like that. He always figured in advance just how matters should go and when they didn’t go that way he became demoralized: that was why he always quarreled with Aimée when they played bridge. He was suspicious now and wary. He had to think hard to meet such tactics as these. Here was an enemy, believed strong and stubborn, capitulating suddenly and completely. Ah, there must be a catch in it somewhere.

“And if she comes to see you?” he demanded cannily. “What then, eh?”

Bionde’s soft voice, deeper now and strangely controlled, interrupted them as she pushed open the door that the colonel had left ajar. “She will not come again, Uncle Hubert.” For one brief moment she looked at Guy, then turned away. “I have taken a lot of punishment—too much. I’ll take no more.” She spoke to De Varin, but she was turned toward the door, her hand urgently on the colonel’s sleeve. “We have said good-by several times, *monsieur*. It is not necessary to repeat it. You have made yourself too clear. Please come, uncle.”

The colonel gave De Varin a bewildered look. This victory had been too easy. He did not understand it. He had come prepared for a fight, ready to bluster, threaten, plead perhaps. When Bionde came he looked for tears and

the confusion that a woman can throw into such delicate negotiations as these. And there had been no need for threats and she had shed no tears.

Something was going on here, something he did not know about. Clearly they were in love, these two, yet swiftly each had renounced the other. De Varin seemed mockingly indifferent; Bionde was cold, but there was bitterness in her and a deep hurt. The whole campaign, this wicked winter's morning, had gone askew. He had, apparently, gained his objective and won a complete victory but he felt just about as victorious as Napoleon leaving Moscow. He didn't like it at all.

He nodded briefly to Guy and followed her out of the garret and down the stairs. For some reason unknown to himself he felt sorry for her. All the spirit seemed to have ebbed from her. She moved like an automaton, like—by gad!—one of the queer fellow's marionettes. What was all that stuff he had said about human beings having invisible strings tied to them and being made to do just what the Grand Puppeteer chose for them? Preposterous. Yet he felt that what was happening to Bionde was produced in some such way as the fellow visioned.

"Nonsense!" he muttered. "What folly!"

In the car going home he tried to console her. "You will understand," he said, "that I had to go to see that young man. It was my duty to see him. Had I dreamed that matters had progressed so far between you two, I should have gone long ago."

"You went to convince him that it would be out of the question for us to marry?"

"Quite so. Out of the question."

"And you expected opposition on his part?"

"To be frank, yes."

"And you found none."

"None. It amazes me."

"He—he had told me before—as good as told me—that he did not want me—"

"He had the effrontery to tell you that—you, a Lacasse, a—"

The brashness of this fellow amazed him. What sort of game was he playing anyway? Here he was, seemingly turning his back upon a girl who would one day be rich and famous. The man was a worse fool even than one

would expect of a painter. Reasonably, one would expect such a hungry breed to be looking out for the main chance, for a girl with money.

“You do not understand. He seemed to think he would be standing in the way of what he pleased to think of as my career.” She smiled wanly. “It is not my career. The one I had chosen was quieter, lovelier. It was like an evening on the great dike when the sea is calm under the stars. I won’t have that now.”

“He is making puppets,” said the colonel for want of something more pertinent. “Amusing himself with ridiculous little marionettes; said he thought more of them than he did of humans.”

Bionde smiled. It sounded so much like Guy.

“Kicked over his easel,” continued the colonel, “I do believe. Said he was weary of painting. What would you do with a man like that, Bionde? No stability, no stick-at-it-ness. In no time you would be thoroughly miserable.”

“Perhaps. But in the first place I’d be thoroughly happy, so happy that I might store up some of the happiness to tide me over the times when I should be miserable.”

“It would not work. Believe me, it never would.”

“We’ll never know now.” She looked out at the drifts through which the big car wallowed. “Never.”

“You will sign that agreement with Marks now?”

“Anything,” she said wearily. “I’ll sign anything. It doesn’t seem to matter. Nothing matters.”

So, too, thought Guy, standing in the draughty garret in the same place where he had stood when they left him, looking down at the grinning little hunchback in his hand, returning his leer with a sad travesty of a smile.

“There, my friend,” he said, “goes something that comes to few men and to no man more than once. There goes part of Guy de Varin and the last of his youth.” He shook his head. “It was so fair, so good, so lovely, so bright with promise. But come, we have no time for repining, for feeling sorry for ourselves, *hein?* You and I must go to work. I have your confreres yet to make. And a little theater for you to act in. Oh, we shall be a jolly company, you and I and the rest. And when we have all become skilled we shall invite the élite to see our show and one day we shall have a motor-van and we shall travel all through this old province from Coaticook to Mistassini and from Temiskaming to the Gaspé. Guy de Varin the puppet-master and his

little friends, his jolly marionettes. You will like that? Ah, yes, I can see you will like it: you have a roguish eye.”

Indeed, Pitou, the little hunchback, seemed to think he would enjoy it very much. He had looked sneeringly at the colonel and tenderly at Bionde. He seemed to grin fraternally at his master and to promise many things, as who should say, “Do not worry, *mon ami*, all will be well, I shall be always with you and we shall have brave times together. Jolly times. We’ll find inns where the pots hold more and places where the girls are the prettiest ever. We’ll roam through flowery meads, you and I, and what if love has gone; love will come again. Anyway we can be merry. Let’s get to our business at once. It is wicked winter now, cruel cold, but the spring must come again. It always does. Be of good cheer.”

So De Varin flung himself into his work, that day and in the days that followed, and gradually a gay and motley company grew about him—an artist in a smock and flowing tie, a portly soldier who looked strangely like Colonel Hubert Lacasse, a pudgy fellow in silk hat, morning coat and striped trousers who carried a bag of money, a blonde skater in blue-velvet trimmed with white fur, who was so lovely that Pitou, the hunchback, could scarcely tear his eyes away from her, an abbé in long cassock and sugar-loaf hat —

“*Mon dieu!*” said Madame Geoffrion to her nephew, the portly and tender hearted Hudon. “They are so much like real persons that almost I have said good morning to them. I swear they smile at each other and talk among themselves. There is one—*un bossu*, a hunchback—who is a veritable devil of a man. A fiend. Pitou, he is called. I am afraid of him. He has the evil eye.”

“What has come to that young man?” demanded Charlebois. “I swear there is some witch’s spell upon him.”

“Ah, no.” Madame Geoffrion shook her head sagely. “It is not, my jewel, what has come to him, it is what has gone from him.”

“You mean the lovely one?”

“None other. I have read in the paper that she goes now to Hollywood, there to skate in the pictures and make of herself a famous actress. But all her life, be sure, Charlebois, she will be haunted by the cruel thing she has done to him.”

“It is of a great misery,” said Charlebois. “But”—he brightened —“maybe Pitou the Hunchback will become an actor of renown and bring fame to his master.”

“That one!” Madame Geoffrion scowled. “That devil’s imp. He is an agent of the Evil One. To me it seems that he is the fiend who has come between them. After she had gone that last time, the day Colonel Lacasse came here, I happened to be outside his door and I heard him talking to Pitou.”

“And did Pitou answer?”

“How should I know that? I was afraid he would. I fled.”

The little Pitou, so much feared and hated by Madame Geoffrion, at whom he was wont to leer most benignly whenever she entered the garret, held the place of honor on the window sill there and beamed approval or glowered disdain, as the spirit moved him, at his comrades. But he liked the lovely marionette who could pirouette and poise herself on her shining little skates. He was tender toward her.

“Ah, you love her, Pitou,” said Guy. “I can see that, even as Quasimodo adored l’Esmeralda, you worship this little lovely one whom we shall call Mimi. It is your sad fate to love her, *mon Pitou*, and for such as you to dream of one so fair brings only misery. Still you will grin and caper, though your spirit is in hell.”

He had gone through his own private hell, and the end was not yet. He had known many dark hours. Never before had he hated the winter, but now he felt like snarling back at the roaring winds, like flinging defiance in the teeth of the gale. The winter was a prison enclosing him, pressing him in. He longed for the warmth, the blue sky, the soft winds of summer. Ah, but the stars were cold, they were of ice, hard and brittle. They were unkind.

Still he worked. He could lose himself in his work and, busy with brain and hand, forget for a while the dreams he had lost. Only timidly did he dare to dream new ones, and these he held in check. He had his little friends, his mimic world around him. He could escape into it.

One day he could not work. It was the day the good Madame Geoffrion told him that Mlle. Lacasse, as reported in the journals, had left for Hollywood, accompanied by her aunt and Peter Van Alen, who also, it appeared, acted in the cinema and would, no doubt, skate with the lovely young Canadienne, who had climbed so swiftly to fame.

“She is gone, Pitou,” Guy said that day. “Gone!” And the word seemed to have a death-like sound in the shadowy stillness of the garret. “It is the end of dreaming.” He picked up the figure of Mimi—Mimi of the silken blonde hair, the great blue, dark-lashed eyes and graceful legs. He looked at

her sadly. He pulled a tiny hook to which the string would be attached, and a little panel in Mimi's light blue-velvet bodice opened and there was her heart, which he could take out. A little heart of steel made to look like ice.

"See, Pitou—this is what you will find out about your beloved: her heart is hard, made of steel. We'll call it ice. It was not so with Bionde. This is only for the play, Pitou. Her heart was warm and gentle and loving. It will be always so. But your Mimi's heart is hard and cold. See, all of you, how her heart is hard as ice. You little fools, you will not know it—you will all love her and weep when she dies."

Soon the puppet-show was ready in all its fine detail. There were, even, little trunks for those, like Mimi, who had extensive wardrobes. Pitou had a minute cigar-box for his effects. A young relative of Madame Geoffrion, a little gargoyle of a fellow named Elphege Plourde, became assistant stage-manager. He loved the marionettes. He and Pitou were comrades from the moment he shook Pitou's claw-like hand. Indeed they resembled each other.

There was a little hall available at no great cost and here one bright winter's night The Jolly Marionettes made their debut. There had been posters and advertisements announcing the great spectacle, but Guy was in no way prepared for the crowd that flocked to the première. The little hall was packed and so many waited that he was forced to repeat the show five times. He did not dream of the excellent publicity-experts he had in Madame Geoffrion and Charlebois Hudon. He did not know that half the population knew what they thought was the true story of his unrequited love for Bionde Lacasse—as related by his landlady and Charlebois. But some wept when the skating marionette's heart turned out to be made of ice.

Here was something they could understand and, understanding, love. They could feel in their warm hearts a great sympathy for this poor young man and a great contempt for the girl who had, as they believed, turned from him when fame and wealth beckoned. "But it is a sad and beautiful thing," one said, "that he should make this little image of her that is so real, so lifelike. How his heart must break each night as he makes her skate on her little rink! How symbolic that her heart should turn out to be made of ice! In the end it is only Pitou who remains true and faithful to that cold-hearted one. Ah, the brave Pitou!"

Pitou was, in fact, by way of becoming a national hero. Replicas of Pitou, made by the woodcarvers, of whom there are many in Quebec, began to make their appearance in the shops, and each one sold brought to Guy a few cents of royalty, so that Pitou rose to a place in his estimation even

higher than he had occupied before. "You are now a capitalist, Pitou," he said one day when there came a small check, royalties on a few gross of little wooden Pitoux sold to a great store in Montreal. "You are becoming as noted as the great Monsieur Charles McCarthy. You have made a good place for yourself in the kind hearts of the Quebecois. Your sad, unrequited love for the fair Mimi is known far and wide. One weeps for you and sympathizes with you."

Guy did not for a moment dream that the sympathy was more for Pitou's creator than for the grinning little hunchback. The kindness of the people, their interest in his show, their steady patronage and good wishes, touched him deeply. Ah, but they were good and kind! The children flocked to watch Pitou as though without the Pied Piper's music he possessed all that gentleman's mystic charm. They applauded him. They shrieked with laughter at his antics and fell solemnly silent when he was sad. They paid their pennies eagerly and saved more and came back to pay them again.

"*Eh, bien!*" said Guy. "One lives anyway. One eats and Madame Geoffrion and the good Charlebois Hudon are happy to have such a distinguished impresario sheltering in their house and eating in their café. It is well."

The easel and the picture of Clovis Gendreau had been rescued from the floor and placed in a corner by the cupboard where reposed his paints and brushes, unused now save when Pitou needed a bit of red for his nose or blue for his wicked eyes or Mimi required a touch of carmine for her lips or pale rose for her cheeks.

At such times Guy, looking at the brush, would shrug and say, "I do not regret too much. I shall never know what I have lost—if I have lost anything. Perhaps I should never have produced anything better than poor daubs. But I do know what I have gained—all these good friends who are my players, who have given joy to so many and much happiness to myself."

To Bionde, settled now in Hollywood, with Tante Aimée for duenna, with Pete Van Alen exerting all his charm to try to rid her of the loneliness, the bewilderment, that he knew was in her heart, Colonel Hubert wrote:

"De Varin seems to have forsaken his painting entirely. He is now a sort of glorified mountebank whose puppet-show is very much the vogue among the people. One of his marionettes, the hunchback Pitou, a droll little wretch, has become famous and, it

seems, is bringing some prosperity to his master. At least, he will be able to make a living for himself, but you can see more readily now how utterly impossible would have been a union between you and this little showman. In summer he will travel through the country, it is reported, with a caravan and give performances in the villages and townships of the province. Can you picture yourself, a Lacasse, going through the country like a gypsy, a wife of a master of marionettes, living a hand-to-mouth existence, dependent for the very food you would eat on the antics of a set of dolls? How thankful you must be that you have gained such a fine place, that fame and success have come your way!"

Bionde cried over that letter. She had been hungry for news of Guy, yet now she wished that the blundering old colonel had not mentioned his name. She thought, secretly, that it would be rather wonderful to travel through Quebec in Guy's caravan, to play the gypsy and live the carefree life that could be theirs. True, it was lovely here and people, after their fashion, were kind. But she found no glitter to what they called success and fame's beckoning had never bothered her. In the picture they were making she skated as she had always skated and found some happiness in that part of her work. But she hated the artificiality of it all, the paint, the make-up, the silly lines she had to speak. She hated to have Pete Van Alen take her in his arms and speak to her of love, but it was in the script and it was what she was paid for.

Those love scenes were not a success and nothing the director or any of the rest could do, seemed to improve them. Pete tried. He said, "Can't you even pretend that you love me, Bionde? Is it so hard?"

"But I cannot. No one can pretend love. I do what Monsieur Kalimann tells me to do. I look in your eyes, I put my arms about your neck, I say, 'I love you, Nick—I have always loved you.' What more can I do?"

"No more, apparently." They were sitting in the garden of the bungalow Tante Aimée had selected. "No more unless—" he took her hand and toyed with the small smooth fingers—"unless you could learn to care—actually to care for me."

She looked at him, startled, but did not withdraw her hand: his holding it meant so little to her. It was the first time such a thing had occurred to her. She liked Pete. He was thoughtful, kind, generous. She had not dreamed that there was anything behind his constant attention to her every wish.

She shook her head. "Oh, Pete, I am so sorry. But you—surely you do not mean—"

"But I do. I always boasted to you that women had no place in my life. And they had none—until you came. I fought against that. I told myself you were just a kid and I liked you and I was being sort of a father to you. I was only fooling myself. I have it badly. I have it so badly that it doesn't matter how you feel about it or what you say, I'm going to go on loving you just the same."

"Please—"

"Oh, no, you can't stop me! I won't annoy you. I won't speak about it again—until I think a time has come when you will listen. But the fire will go on burning. It won't go out."

"I wish you had never told me this. I was happy with you, thinking of you as my friend. Please don't talk to me of love." *Parlez-moi d'amour*—the words, the music of the sentimental song came to her. But she did not want him to talk to her of love. Not in this garden, not anywhere. In another garden far away she had first heard soft words spoken, first known the rising tide of passion. Then it had become a great sea that engulfed her. But where was it now? Where was the one who had spoken of it, his lips against her hair?

"I had to tell you," he said earnestly. "And what are you eating your heart out for? I understood it was all over between you and the artist."

"All over?" She smiled. "But you are not consistent, *mon Pierre*! You say the fire that burns you will go on burning. Do you think then that the fires of others are not so strong, that they are easily extinguished?"

"But you never hear from him, do you?"

"Does that matter so much?"

"I should think so. What do you intend to do? Go on waiting all your life? You are losing so much—so many things that I should like to give you. Can't you care for me a little?"

"Oh, very much." She looked full at him, liking the honest candor of his gaze, thrilling a little to its quiet worship. "I'll always like you—"

"Don't say 'as a brother,' my darling, or I shall strangle you."

"But—"

“I can wait, my very little cabbage. The Van Alens were all great waiters and who is Peter, of that ilk, to mind hanging around for forty or fifty years until you decide that first love is over? And believe me, while they say first loves are best, it’s not really true.”

“Oh, Pete, you are foolish to worry about me. You told me once you did not care for love. You said you were proof against women.”

“That was my Imaginot Line, chérie. I just thought it was there. You cracked it without even trying. Now tell me, what has your artist lover that I haven’t? And where is he anyway? He’s turned puppeteer now, hasn’t he? I saw a Canadian weekly with a story about him and his marionettes. Are you still in love with him?”

“I—I don’t know.”

“Of course you know. But you’ll get over it in time, if you’ll give yourself a chance to get over it. If you’ll step out with me once in a while, and dance and play around a bit and have fun. You’re too young to hide yourself in your ivory tower or whatever it is, like the one the Lady of Shalott lived in, watching the world go by in a mirror. Life, love and laughter—those are the things for you.”

“Do I matter so much to you, Pete? I’ll try to—as you say—snap out of it.”

“Fine! Let’s start to-night. Dinner and dance and a spot of mirth. Let yourself go. You’ll feel better for it, believe me.”

“Still being the doctor!”

“Still the love-wizard, the heart-surgeon. Leave it to old Doc Van Alen. In the end you’ll find he’s cured everyone’s heart-trouble but his own.”

“Oh, Pete, I hope it won’t be like that.”

“So do I,” he said gravely. “But—what is it you say in French?—*ce que j’aime ne m’aime pas*—that which I love loves me not; that which I love not loves me. And there it is. Perhaps time will remedy matters. One can only hope.”

She could give him no hope. Once in her own land long ago—so long ago, it seemed, that it was in another existence, she had looked into the dark brown gypsy eyes of Guy de Varin and under the early stars she had listened to his soft voice telling her of love—of their love that was a timeless thing.

How soon he had forgotten, she thought now with no rancor, no bitterness, only regret; so little it took to make him forget. He believed our love was strong yet he feared to put it to the test. He was afraid that this they call my success would make things different. It is only an interlude, it will pass, as it would have passed for us both, but what was between us would still have endured. I could not make him see that.

She would never understand, she knew, that a man could so quickly change; that one day all could be serene and bright and the next day storm-filled and dark. It contradicted all the things she had believed, and it bewildered her. So swiftly he had turned from her, so quickly sought to cut himself loose. Where, she wondered, was her pride that it could permit her to go on caring for a man who made little of love, who forgot all the sacred promises he had made to her?

Here she saw laughter taken lightly, a most casual thing. She could not understand. To her it was holy, a sacrament. It far transcended the desire of the heart. It was a force potent and unending. You could not put it on, throw it off, as you did a bright garment. If it was real, it stayed with you and you would wear its mantle as long as life endured.

Somehow, she could not make herself believe that it was otherwise with Guy de Varin. He was of her own people, strong, confirmed in the ancient traditions of their race. And he had chosen her. He might put her out of his life, but he could never destroy the feeling he once had for her. He could never uproot that from his heart. It would last with him as it did with her.

He must still think of me, she told herself. He must still take out those dreams we shared together and look at them and remember many things. And they must make him sad, they do that to me. And it must be lonely there in the old garret. How I should like to have a magic carpet that would take me to his window some evening, so that I could look in at him and see him at his work!

She wanted, more than anything else, to see his puppet-show, to know the marionettes he had for his comrades now. She knew him well enough to realize that there was method in this seeming madness of his. Still, his desire to do a thing was sufficient justification for his doing it, and if he chose to turn to puppet-shows instead of painting, it was certain that to him it was the logical procedure.

Well, one day she would see his show. She looked forward to that more than to her own première, thought more of a puppet show than of many a starred feature. Perhaps it would make her laugh and clap her hands; perhaps

it would make her cry, for she might see in it what no other could see; she might be able to follow the controlling strings to the hands of the puppet-master and from his hands go into his heart and see why he maneuvered them as he did.

She went out with Peter Van Alen that night. She rode with him in his great smooth car over magic roads under stars that here seemed brighter from the radiance of the city of light they shone upon. The night air was warm, balmy, and the voice of the great ocean was murmurous and soft. In her own far-off land the marshes would lie sheeted in white, gripped in the iron clutch of the frost, the stars would be sparkling bright and glistening like little bits of ice; the wind would be cruel as it raked across the miles and miles of frozen dikeland. In the rivers the ice cakes would be piled up in crazy mountains as if the giants had used them for playthings, and the voice of Fundy would be loud and sullen, its waters dark under the winter sky. Yet to-night she would rather be there, walking along the village street, hearing the stiff crunch of the hard-packed snow under her heels.

To please Peter she tried to be gay. With him, on such a night, it was hard to be unhappy. He could make her laugh. He spoke of the picture they were making—"On Winged Feet"—and prophesied its success in spite of the unconvincingness of the love-episodes.

"They will have to go as they are, I'm afraid, but it won't make much difference. Once the people see how you can skate they will forget everything else—even the fact that you make love like a—like a marionette."

She sat up against the red oak leather and looked at him, startled, in the starry gloom, in the light of oncoming cars. "Is it like that?" she said. "But yes, I can believe it is."

"There's no heart in it, Bionde."

"I cannot, I fear, put heart into it. Do not misunderstand me, Pete. I like you so much—"

"I know. I'd rather you hated me, felt something toward me that came from deep in you. You don't know what you do to me, what just being near you—near where I can touch you— But there, I promised I wouldn't annoy you, and I won't."

"You don't annoy me. You make me feel sorry that I—that I do such things to you. I don't want it to be like that."

“No more did I, *chérie*. But that is one of the queer things about this most common and least understood of diseases, love—one cannot cure it by any set remedy. I am near to you, I suffer; I stay away from you—and I’ve tried that, too—and I am in hell. And the sad feature of it is, I’m sure, that you feel the same way—but about someone else.”

“Yes, I think that is so. I try so hard to forget it all. I tell myself it is all over. I say, ‘You are *folle*, Bionde. You are nothing but a little fool. It is all over. There will be no more. It was never real. In time you will see that it was no more true than what you once thought about your dolls, and you’ll laugh at yourself.’ But, somehow, I cannot make myself believe that. Somehow, the only reality in my life is a few short hours, a few brief times—once in a garden, once in a garret, once in a little café on Sainte-Ursule Street in Quebec, where the restaurateur was fat and jolly and had two fine black cats named Victor Hugo and Roncevalle, who caught mice in his cellar.”

“I see,” said Pete gently. “You live in those memories— —”

“Yes.” Her voice was eager. “And there is that Song of Ronsard that we loved, that we used to say one of us had only to sing and somehow the other would hear. Strange, the things one says and does and believes when one loves.”

“Strange,” agreed Van Alen, his eyes intent on the road. “And strangely sweet. Do you listen for that song?”

“Always.”

“Do you think you’ll hear it some day?”

“I do not know. But I sing it too—and perhaps he will hear.”

“Do you think it’s a good thing to care so much? To love like that?”

“I cannot help it,” she said simply. “It is here, inside me. It is part of me. I think it will always be here. He tried to destroy it. Tried every way. I don’t know what else he could do. I’m not sure that there is anything he could do that would put an end to it.”

Pete Van Alen was not so sure. He had seen loves come and go, flourish and die. Perhaps they were not so deeply rooted in such virgin soil as this, but some of them had been strong, had seemed made to last forever.

“I shall try to cure you,” he said when he brought her home. “This is merely the beginning of the treatment. There is much more.”

"It is a pleasant treatment. The medicine is so easy to take; the doctor so nice. But I am not sure that I wish to be cured."

"Child, you do not know what is good for you."

"Perhaps not."

"Certainly not. So I shall cure you in spite of yourself. I cannot have you wasting your life. One must face the facts, be rational about these things. You are French. You are supposed to be hard-headed even about love."

"*Sapree!* That is something you read in a book, my Pierrot. No woman, French, Chinese or Eskimo, is hard-headed about love. If she is hard-headed, you may be sure she is not in love."

"Ah, the patient is now teaching the doctor." Pete laughed. "Well, one can always learn. But such young lips to speak with such old wisdom!"

"One knows such things."

"And knows not why one knows them."

"It is so. Good night, Pete. It has been good, being with you."

"You have to get used to it. Perhaps I can make you so used to being with me, that in time you will miss me if I'm not around. You know—like a favorite pair of slippers or a pup you're attached to."

"I would not like it to be that way. I could never take you for granted. It was sort of a miracle the way you came into my life and took me by the hand and led me to—to all this."

"Yes." He nodded slowly. "But, do you know, I've often wondered if it wouldn't have been better had I left you alone. I mean to say, wouldn't you have been happier if your skill with the blades had gone unnoticed and you'd married De Varin and settled down to raise one of those large families for which you Canadian French are so famous?"

"Who can tell?"

"That's it. No one can. Either way, you'd miss a great deal. I know you enjoy being here, for a while anyway. It's a change for you and you'll never, I hope, have occasion to learn that the whole setup is as phony as the cardboard houses and that the biggest make-believe never gets on the screen."

"I have seen much. But it is like every place else. There are real people, fine people, and there are the others. It is not hard to tell those who are

worthwhile. I do not worry. I always have you to turn to if I need advice. Peter—that means rock. I remember it from my Latin lessons—*Petrus es*, thou art Peter. And you are like a rock to me, steady in the swift-running stream.”

“May it always be like that, Bionde. You are the kind of girl to make a man thank God for the little bit of good that’s in him and wish that it might be very much more.”

“You are greedy then, if you think you need much more.”

He held her hand briefly, but there was that in his eyes that made her look away. She watched him as he ran down the path to his car, waved in answer to his upflung hand as he drove away. She lingered on the veranda. She could see Tante Aimée moving about in the living-room, probably waiting to question her about where she had been, what she had done, what Pete had said and what she had answered. Tante Aimée devoted all her energies, considerable despite her weak heart, to promoting a match between Pete and Bionde. She would question and probe tirelessly, hoping for encouraging symptoms.

And to-night, thought Bionde, I do not feel like talking. Pete tried so hard to cure me of my loneliness, my *nostalgie*, but it has returned to me worse than ever. He would say I’ve had a relapse. I wish I was far from here, I wish I was in the garret on Sainte-Ursule Street with Guy, sitting there watching him while he showed me his marionettes.

She lingered so long there in the shadows that her aunt came looking for her.

“Ah, there you are! I heard the car drive away some time ago. What are you doing?”

“Thinking.”

“Of what?”

“Of times when I have been happy. I’m trying to figure out why I was so happy.”

“Rather an idle occupation. And it is turning cool now.”

“Cool! You, who come from Quebec, talk about its being cool! Very well.” She linked her arm with Tante Aimée’s. “We shall go in now.”

“Hubert has sent some papers. In the weekly edition of one of them you will see some pictures that may—interest you.”

“Yes!” Bionde’s eyes brightened. “Oh, let me see — —”

“Here you are.” Tante Aimée handed her a rotogravure magazine, opened at the center page. At first she thought it was one of the many pictures they had taken of her. It was so like, only beneath the trim figure in blue-velvet skating costume with white fur trim was the caption “Mimi the Marionette.” And there too was a picture of Guy, with Pitou perched on one shoulder and the Chinaman he had christened Mun Kee See on the other.

Bionde’s eyes devoured them. She laughed with glee. “Ah, *que c’est beau!* How lovely! How charming these little people! And how real they look! Why, one would swear that *petit bossu*, that little hunchback, could talk and say the naughtiest things. Oh, Guy — —”

“You are not angry that he has made his Mimi so much like yourself?”

“Angry! I am flattered. Is she really so much like me? Am I so lovely? Ah, it was kind of him to remember me that much and to make his leading lady in my image. He would not take the reality, this is next best.”

“I think it is in very poor taste.” Tante Aimée’s mouth was prim. “Very poor taste indeed.”

“Why so? It shows, at least, that he thinks of Bionde. Every time she skates on her little rink he must think of me. Every time he addresses her he speaks to me. I wonder”—her blue eyes had a dreamy, far-off look, as if she would see into the garret-room and learn what went on and hear what Guy said—“I wonder if he ever tells her things that I would like to hear.”

“What things?”

“Oh, that he loves her, that she is all he lives for, that — —”

“You have not yet got over that folly!”

“Not yet,” said Bionde, looking at his picture, at his dark and smiling face in which, despite the smile, there was a shadow of sadness. “Perhaps not ever.”

CHAPTER VII

The long cold months of January and February dragged their glacier-like length into the bleak and windy days of March and the half-smiling days of April and “suddenly then the wind blew soft and Spring was here again!” All winter long Guy’s marionettes had held the faithful and drawn new admirers before their tiny stage. Pitou grimaced and strutted and stole the show from even the beauteous Mimi. Tirelessly the elfin actors went through their parts and with them the impresario had neither temperament nor salary-troubles to worry about. Real troupers, they seemed to know that the show must go on, even though the stage-manager himself suffered from the migraine and sometimes Elphege Plourde had a throat-cold that made Mimi talk in a hoarse tenor instead of the silvery soprano that one expected from her. And steadily the constant little stream of nickels and dimes flowed into the puppetmaster’s treasury so that, come Spring, and with it the desire to take his players farther afield, he was able to purchase a neat red van, load his company into it, sit Elphege in the driver’s seat, take his place beside him, say a temporary good-bye to the old attic he had come to love, to Madame Geoffrion and Charlebois, and set forth along the vernal highways of the ancient province.

Before his departure from Quebec, the great skating-star, Bionde Lacasse, had made her debut in the super ice-opera, “On Winged Feet.” Madame Geoffrion had seen it, so had Charlebois, so had Elphege.

“Ah, Monsieur de Varin,” piped Elphege, who had no hoarseness that day, “it was a spectacle beautiful to behold. To see that lovely one, that Mlle. Lacasse! *Sapree mon Dieu!* She was almost as pretty as our own Mimi and certainly far more graceful on her skates than even that wondrous one of ours. She seemed scarcely to touch the ice. It was as if most of the time the air itself sustained her, like a feather in the wind.”

“I can believe she was all that you say, Elphege. Yes and more.” They were driving out of Quebec by way of the St. Louis Gate that day, the van gay and resplendent in its bright red paint, an image of Pitou perched for ornament on the radiator-cap, the good motor singing underneath its hood. “To see her skate was like beholding the incarnation of beauty. Like a great picture, a lovely poem, a grand concerto.”

“So it was!” Elphege struck the wheel with his clenched fist. “Now I know it. There have been a few moments in my life when I felt the same thing. So indeed it was! Now that is just the way it seemed to me, but I could not put it in such words. I knew well what it did to me, but I did not understand why. I tell you it made me feel good, as if God had forgiven me all my sins. Breathless I sat there, seeing only her with her yellow hair flying in the wind as like a swan she floated along.”

“I recall so well the first time I saw her skate.” He could talk about her now, to Elphege anyway, with freedom, with a warmth that did him good. He loved again to speak her name, loved to feel that in spirit, at least, he could be near to her. “I could scarcely believe my eyes. I stood on the edge of the pond—this was in the Tantramar district of Acadia where her family and mine belonged—and I was fascinated, held spellbound. She has magic in those twinkling feet of hers. She has naturally the poetry of motion and the power to express beauty by her movements.”

“But yes,” agreed Elphege. “It was like witchcraft. I could not take my eyes from her. I seemed to float high on the clouds when I watched her and there was no ugliness or meanness in the world.”

“And everyone else felt the way you did?” Guy’s voice was wistful. “On them all her skating had the same effect?”

“I think, on them all.” The little Elphege, who looked like Pitou’s elder brother sans hump, nodded gravely. “Yes, one would not err in saying they all fell beneath her spell. Who could resist such beauty as hers, even if she could not skate a stroke? But there are, of course, a great many in Quebec who are not in sympathy with her.”

Guy, turning his head as if it were jerked by one of his own puppet-strings, stared so hard at his assistant that De Varin’s Jolly Marionettes, car and all, were almost overturned in a deep ditch when Elphege stared back at him. “Name of a name, my good friend and understudy, what are you talking about? Who is not in sympathy with Mlle. Lacasse, and why?”

Elphege was uneasy. He blinked his little eyes. He squirmed in his seat and wished devoutly he had held his tongue. This master of his was a queer one. Those dark eyes could cloud or brighten and give off sparks, and he could be as sullen as a thundercloud or merry as a linnet. It would not be well to anger him. And right now he did not look too pleased. Elphege smiled feebly. He said, “This, Monsieur Guy, is a joyous day of Spring—a day fit for two like us to embark on our adventures with all our little friends

riding comfortably behind us. Ah, we are like brave adventurers going forth to see what the wide world has to offer. Like — —”

“Elphege!” Guy’s voice was stern. “Do not try to avoid my questions. Just what are you talking about when you say — —”

“When I say what, Monsieur? I babble on so, half the time I do not know what I am saying and, even if I do, I forget it a few seconds afterwards. Right now I cannot recall — —”

“Do not lie to me, *mon vieux!* You are well aware that I am asking you what you meant when you spoke about some not being in sympathy with Blonde Lacasse. What folly is this?”

“Ah, it is nothing. Some think — —”

“Yes! Yes! Some think what?”

“That the blonde Lacasse was cruel to you,” blurted Elphege, and cowered away before the wild look in De Varin’s eyes, the thinning of his lips. Ah, he could terrify one, this creator of Pitou.

Guy’s hand gripped Elphege’s skinny arm. “What could ever give them that idea? Why have I not heard of this before? Speak then. Tell me more!”

“Why, is it not true that you—that you were in love with her and she with you?”

“What then?”

“And when fame came to her, she no longer loved you because you were a poor artist in the garret of my good aunt, Madame Geoffrion, in Sainte-Ursule Street? And because you lost her love, because she forsook you, it was no longer possible for you to paint the pictures, which is why we have the puppet-show — —”

Guy bade him stop the truck. He put his elbow on the window ledge, his chin in his hand, and stared at his assistant as if seeing him for the first time. He took off the dark glasses he wore, wiped them and put them on again. He muttered words that Elphege could not understand. They might have been prayers. Then he said slowly, “How long have people felt like that?”

“Oh, ever since the Jolly Marionettes first made their appearance. Did you not realize, monsieur, that the good Quebecois wept for you?”

Guy’s lips parted and closed twice then opened to let him say, “For me! They wept for me? Not for the sorrows of Pitou?”

“Oh, for both no doubt. But mostly for you.”

“What folly! What utter nonsense! We must correct this, Elphege—correct this wrong idea. Why, there is no truth in it—not an ounce of truth.”

It was Elphege’s turn to goggle. He did it to perfection. “No truth? It is not true that out of your broken heart you made these wondrous creations—Pitou, Mimi, the Miller, Mun Kee See— —”

“I made them solely that I might eat and have money to pay your good aunt for the garret where I slept. And Charlebois Hudon for the food I ate. And I thought it was they, the little puppets, that the people loved, while all the time— —”

“Oh, but the people loved them!” Elphege was really distressed. He adored the puppets. They were real folk to him, to be treated with deference. It was absurd to think that there could be anyone who would not like them. “You will see that, you will more readily understand it when we reach those outlying townships where the story has not yet penetrated. You will witness the grand ovations we receive.”

“If there are any places where this wretched tale has not penetrated. Lies spread very fast indeed,” said Guy. “Everyone in Quebec has relatives in the province. Heaven knows how many have written to Cousin Jean or Cousin Marie telling them to be on the watch for the sad puppeteer whose heart was broken by— It is miserable. I have it in me to run the whole show into the river.”

“They would say then,” observed Elphege sagely, “that you drowned yourself and the rest of us because of what she did to you. They would blame her for it all.”

Guy’s breath whistled through his teeth. “Listen, my friend, Mlle. Lacasse had nothing—nothing whatever to do with this. Get that into your thick though kindly skull. She is all that is good and lovely.”

Elphege’s sharp chin moved up and down in violent affirmation. “It was indeed hard,” said he, “to believe that she was a snake.”

“A snake! Who— —?”

“Madame Geoffrion said she was that—a cruel snake.”

“Drive on!” said Guy. “It is hopeless. I suppose now it has gone so far, this monstrous lie has become so generally believed, that the more we protest against it and try to make them believe the truth, the more they will credit the falsehood.”

“Of course,” said Elphege. “They will say you love her so much that your love will even cause you to lie just to save her.”

And so it is, thought Guy with that same darkening of his spirit, of his hopes, that always came to him when he thought of her, of all that had been between them, of all that never could be. And so it was, though not in the way you and the good Quebecois think, friend Elphege, and in no way that she knows. She could never believe that I’d lie to her, no matter how splendid the lie might be.

But he said no more to Elphege, who, he felt quite sure, still held fast to his romantic, erroneous idea about his employer and her he called “The lovely blonde one.” Probably nothing would ever shake the little fellow’s belief that his master was an injured and heart-broken lover and that the girl had spurned him because he was poor and unknown.

Indeed, Elphege was thinking this very thing, only much more intensely and with far greater faith in its truth than Guy could ever guess. He, thought Elphege, is being noble, generous and kind. Such is his nature. He is trying now to spare her feelings, seeking to make us think well of this heartless jade. But it will not work. She moves now among the rich and great and diamonds sparkle in her hair and when she skates in her pictures she glitters like gold. The world applauds her because it does not know the true story, but here is monsieur wandering through the province with his puppet-show, making a meager living for the two of us, and his great work, his painting, is utterly neglected and it may be that he will never again touch brush to canvas. And what may be Canada’s loss from this giving up of his art, only the good God can tell, but one knows, all Quebec knows, that it was she, this Lacasse, who caused him to smash his easel and vow never to paint again.

That story was so much believed in Quebec, and so great was the sympathy felt by the people for the dark, sad-eyed young puppet-master that, at the showing of Bionde’s picture in the city, there had been boos and catcalls for her—though this Elphege would never have told his master—no, let mad dogs rend him and wild horses try to drag the story from him. But no one had applauded her and a good many had derided. Why had not Monsieur Guy gone himself to see the picture if not because his heart was broken and in his eyes a sadness which would not permit him to look upon her who had forsaken him?

So Madame Geoffrion’s stern, Sybillic dictum still stood, and Mlle. Lacasse, rich, famous, beautiful as she was, still merited the name of cruel snake. One’s heart still bled for the poor artist, and would continue to bleed.

In silence now they drove along country roads beginning to brighten with the brightness of Spring, the young green beauty of buds bursting, turning into little gay leaf pennons, the magic song of birds newly returned from their sojourn in the south, the myriad voices of the waters released. The mighty St. Lawrence itself flowing onward to the sea, the yellow golden sunlight, warm on their faces. Through many an ancient town and many a storied village they passed, stopping for an hour or so here and there to edify the wide-eyed populace with the music of Elphege's concertina, prelude to the gargoyle antics of Pitou, whose progress through these townships was one long series of triumphs. Mimi now had discarded her high-laced white boots and gleaming skates, her pretty poppy-like dress of blue-velvet with trim of elegant white fur. She wore the shoes of a ballet dancer now and a white dress all frills and ruffles, but Pitou still adored her, still allowed his poor heart to be broken and anguished by her coldness.

The days went swiftly, busily, now, and life had a new zest for Guy de Varin. So close together were the little villages that clustered around their tall-spired churches, and so well-received were the puppet-showman and his Jolly Marionettes, that word of the excellence of the performance often spread five or six leagues ahead of the progress of the gay red van and in the smallest hamlets a delegation waited to demand that a performance be given. And a performance was given.

Spring blossomed into summer—long warm golden days, gardens rainbow-hued and fragrant with the flowers—bright faces of boys and girls, tiny Jacques and little Yvonne, whose eyes were wondrous good to see as they watched the antics of Pitou, the swift pirouettes of the gorgeous Mimi, their small grubby hands half upraised, ready to applaud, to be the first to acclaim these little people who could dance and leap and suffer and rejoice.

Thus by many short and pleasant stages the red van with its master, its driver and its company of merry puppets, came one night late in the month of July to the village of Saint-Jovite de la Haute Montagne, high in the Laurentians, and rolled into the inn-yard of The Good King Dagobert, who beamed in his majesty from the wooden signboard down at the derisive countenance of Pitou, perched on the radiator-cap.

Many tourists were at the inn, many of the villageois waited eagerly for the arrival of the marionette show, of whose outstanding excellence they had heard from friends and relatives in the villages down the mountain. The great barn of the inn was already prepared for the show and seats were at a premium.

"A vast crowd to-night, Monsieur Guy," announced Elphege, coming into the bedroom where Guy sat, head on hands, staring moodily at the homely handwrought pattern of the hooked-rug. "A mighty throng."

"So?" Guy knew that any number of people over a hundred was a multitude to Elphege. "It is a pity. To-night I should like to cancel the show. I— —"

"You are not well! I can see it." The little fellow's frogface showed deep concern. "All day I have felt that you were not well."

"I shall be all right." There was no conviction in his tone. He closed his eyes and Elphege saw the little lines about them deepen, as did those that stretched from nose to lip-corner, lines that should never have been in the face of one so young. And in Elphege's tiny orbs was a great pity and sadness and anger.

"I will direct the play myself!" he announced as if it were Hamlet that would be played with a re-incarnation of Sarah Bernhardt in the rôle of Ophelia. "By myself I can do it."

Guy looked doubtful. He shook his head. But now, into Elphege's eyes had come a light of determination, of cunning resolve. Guy knew, too, that the little fellow was an expert showman and could, with a bit of camouflage, readily double for him and carry off the performance with a sure and steady hand.

"Very well then," he said, lying back in his chair, his hand covering his eyes. "I fear, anyway, I wouldn't be of much help to you to-night. I shall stay here and rest, but if you feel you need me, if things do not go well— —"

Elphege spread his hands, long, quick, sensitive hands. "What should go wrong, maestro? You know as well as I do that the little people, from Pitou to the Dusty Miller, know and love me, because I understand them. True, they cannot give of their best for anyone but you; still I am not afraid that any of them will fail me."

Guy waved a hand. "Go then, and good luck to you. There are many people here at The King Dagobert. You will have a large crowd of spectators."

"The barn will be filled. That is assured. There are hundreds; many American cars are parked in the inn-yard." He looked again sharply at Guy but saw no reaction to the gentle feeler he had thrown out. He would say no more, say nothing certainly of the long gray convertible coupé with the California license plates nor of the girl who drove it, she of the silken blonde

hair, the great blue eyes, whom he had seen enter the barn among the very first of the laughing crowd whom Pitou, with outstretched hand, welcomed at the door. Ah, it would be a pleasure to play for that one, to make the little actors go through their parts, to show her something of herself perhaps.

Here, thought Elphege with vindictive glee, with the joy of the avenger, is the chance to make that one feel something of the pain she has caused; here is a chance to hold up to her the mirror in which she will see her perfidy, her heartlessness and shame. It was the will of the good God that to-night De Varin should be ill. It would never be in his heart to punish her. She had bewitched him, for her he would suffer gladly, he would let her walk upon him with those dainty feet of hers, yes, he would even die for her. Where she was concerned he was even worse than Pitou. Pah! But a pretty face and a mop of blonde hair could make an imbecile out of a man!

She was brazen, this Lacasse. How dared she present herself at the puppet-show? How dared she come so near to him she had scorned and betrayed. She had come to sneer, no doubt; to laugh at his poor efforts, to have a little fun at his expense. *Bien!* She should have her fun, and maybe more than she looked for. Her heart was hard, but it could be touched. It could be pierced and hurt. He, Elphege Plourde, would be the one to make her suffer.

He hurried downstairs and shortly afterwards Guy heard the music of his concertina. He played the serenade from *Les Millions d'Harlequin*, which Guy had never heard him play before. It had an ineffable wistfulness about it, heard thus afar off, floating through the still warm air of the summer evening, and, long after he had ceased playing, its strains seemed to linger in that room where the twilight slowly settled, where the curtains of white muslin blew softly in the breeze, where De Varin sat alone with his thoughts.

Dark they were to-night—dark, as not in many weeks had they been. The sun had been hot and glaring all day, the roads dusty, the journey long. But something more than all that had come to disturb and depress him, and what it was he could not tell. He had been prepared for the times when despair, the sense of futility, the fear of defeat and failure, would come again to plague him. Yet to-night it was hard to fight them, hard to keep his spirit calm and sustain the high courage in his heart.

To-morrow it will pass, he told himself. It will go away. It may never return again. I must think of that. So far, everything has been well worth the doing—everything. If I were faced to-morrow with the same choice I would choose again as I did before. Ah, but would I? It is so hard, so bitterly hard,

to go on alone, always alone, when I know in my heart that one word of mine would bring her to me. Where is she now? To-night? At this hour? And does she perhaps think of me?

She sat in the very front of the crowd that packed the great barn of The Good King Dagobert. She was lovely in a green silk knitted suit, a gypsy scarf of green covering her hair, knotted under her chin. She was alone, for she had come here alone, and in all the crowd that thronged the inn and flocked to the show of the Jolly Marionettes, only Elphege had recognized her, had seen in this quiet, retiring girl, the great skating-star who had shot so swiftly to fame. Only Elphege, who believed with a belief unshakable the story that had originated with his Aunt Geoffrion, that Quebec had learned to take as gospel. Oh, yes, in spite of all that Guy had said, Elphege believed that story and because he loved his master, suffered when he suffered, rejoiced when he was glad, and hated anyone who injured him, he burned to-night with a cold hatred against that lovely one who sat so tensely there to watch what she must think of as the pitiful puppets that Guy had made.

Thus it was that the adorable Mimi, instead of appearing as the ravishing ballet dancer in golden slippers and crisp white ruffles, burst upon the stage in the blue-velvet skating costume, and pirouetted on her silver blades.

A salvo of applause greeted her appearance, though many wondered why the program had been changed, and the blonde girl sat up straighter in her seat and her eyes were big, big in the pallor of her face that the flickering oil-lamps made more ghastly.

What was this that she was about to see? Something cold struck deep into her heart like a lance tipped with ice. This horrible, lovely marionette with the fixed smile, the pale gold curls—this was she. Ah, yes, it was intended to be she. Only his hand could have made it. Only he could have known so well just how she looked and acted. And he had known it because he once had loved her. What of this mimic play now? Was she going to see herself as he saw her? Would she learn from this the secret of what had come between them? Wide-eyed she followed the marionette with a frightened, tremulous fascination. She had the sensation of standing off from herself and watching as if she watched a stranger. He had managed, in some magic way, to create an awful illusion of reality.

Ah, but Mimi excelled herself to-night. Elphege always thought of the marionettes as living things, as real people acting in real life and always subconsciously he had labored to create this illusion for those who watched. To-night, this night of all nights, it was easy. To-night, Mimi seemed really

to live and Elphege, studying the faces out in front, studying especially the face of that one girl, saw that he had captured his audience, that Mimi, Pitou and all the rest were as real people to those who watched, that their joys, their sufferings, their meannesses, their noble qualities were what those people knew were in their own hearts, in their own lives.

It was a triumph—a wondrous triumph, but only the little showman knew just how great it was. He saw her start from her seat at the climax of the play when Pitou, with sad, distorted face, the little hunchback Pitou, held the skater's heart in his hand and found that it was as hard, as cold as the ice on which she had cut her magic capers. Now, now, the lovely one was punished for what she had done. She settled back in her seat, but when the curtain went down he saw her go like a storm through the noisy crowd that jostled and pushed out of the barn.

“Now perhaps,” muttered Elphege, “you will know what your coldness, your cruelty, have done to him. Now you will realize that he could see into your heart and know what it is made of. You will feel shame for what you have done.” But the face of Mimi wore a sad look now, the play ended; and even Pitou looked grim. It was as if they all knew that something had been going on this night, that another show was going on, another act being written to their own.

“You have done well, *mes braves*,” said Elphege, putting them safely away in the red caravan that he had backed into the barn. “You have this night done a noble thing and have properly avenged your master. You have caused one to suffer, let us hope, who richly deserves to suffer. Ah, but rage burned in her, the rage of the wicked and the shame of the traitress.”

But the girl who walked across the inn-yard under the stars in the soft blue sky felt no shame, unless it was for him who had done this thing, this ugly thing, to her. Slowly the furious seething tumult that had risen in her as she followed the heartless, selfish career of the skating marionette had ebbed. It was followed by a slow-burning anger that left all her body cold. Yes, she thought, even my heart is cold now, cold for him who always had its warmest beat, cold as the heart of his skating doll. How could he ever think that of me? Or do such a thing to me? All I did was love him, but he would not have that. He tried to destroy love, to drive it away. With me he did not succeed. With the tactics he used before, he never would have succeeded, but this way he has chosen now will do his work as he apparently wants it done.

She went to her car and sat there for a little while. She was not staying at the inn, but at the Château de Mornay, a Laurentian summer-hotel ten miles away. Tante Aimée was there with her, but when she had heard that Guy de Varin's puppet-show was playing at Saint-Jovite she had quietly slipped away, bent on finding out what he was doing, eager, too, deep in the lonely heart of her, to see him again, to hear his voice, to touch his hand. Perhaps, she thought, if I sang the Ballard of Ronsard, he would come to me. Perhaps now, after these months of loneliness, he would hear it. But no, I will go to him.

So she had driven over to Saint-Jovite, determined to see the puppet-show and to come once more face-to-face with the showman. What she felt for him swept away all her pride, all the sense of hurt she had known that bitter winter's morning when she had stood on the landing outside his garret room and heard him tell Uncle Hubert that he was through with her. Yes, even that had ceased to hurt.

She had come to Saint-Jovite with hope springing high again in her heart. She would see him and in one glorious moment all would become as it had been before and these months of absence, of loneliness, would be only a vague dream to be swiftly forgotten.

That hope was destroyed now. Mimi had wrecked it with a toss of her head, a wave of her hand, a saucy pirouette. Mimi had punished her cruelly for a crime she had never committed. He had chosen this Mimi to be the instrument of revenge for some wrong he must fancy she had done him. How had he ever got this monstrously wrong conception of her? How could he ever have believed that the girl he had known could turn into the heartless, self-seeking jade he had depicted in his play?

She raged at him now. She burned to tell him what was in her heart. I should not go to him, she thought. I should not even let him know I have seen his cruel play, but I must—I must. I want him to know how excellent is his show, how much better than any I could put on. Perhaps he can sell it to Hollywood and they will ask me to play the lead. Ah, that would be good, that would be sublime.

She went to the inn. Elphege, finished with the work of putting Pitou and Mimi and the rest of the unwearied cast to bed in the red caravan, saw her cross the lobby of the inn and speak to the dark mustached little Frenchman at the desk. Elphege thought it wise then to go for a walk under the stars. For the first time he felt a little uneasy about what he had done. Of course, it had all been for Monsieur Guy's own good, to bring home to this hard-hearted

one a sense of her own coldness and treachery. But it might be that his employer would not see eye-to-eye with him. It might be, he thought with a shiver, that De Varin would wring his neck.

Bionde marched up the narrow stairs of the inn to the second floor, to the room at the left end of the corridor where, the curious but self-restrained young man at the desk had told her, she would most likely find M. de Varin. Her mouth was set, her eyes filled with an icy determination, yet she paused before that door, stood quietly listening, thinking of the many times she had faced those blank panels of the door of the garret in Sainte-Ursule Street, of how differently she had felt then, of how much dearer the welcome she expected when that door would open to her.

What would it be like now? No more of love between them. Nothing left of all that tenderness they had felt for each other. Nothing of youth's high hope, its fair bright promise. Harsh words now and coldness of eyes, bitter reproaches. The corpse of love lying between him and her, to be trampled upon by everything they said and did, every cruel, cutting, hateful thing.

At last, she lifted her clenched hand and knocked sharply on the panel. For a moment there was silence, then a light clicked on: she saw its radiance through the jamb of the ill-fitting door. His voice—strange that it still had power to stir her—calling, "*Oui! Entrez!*"

She turned the knob slowly and went in. He was sitting at the window under the green shaded lamp that he had just lighted. His back was turned to her, he had evidently been looking out at the night and the stars. She could see only the back of his dark, proud head, the slim strength of his shoulders. A stranger now. One she did not know.

"Well, Elphege," he said, "how did the show go? But I do not need to ask. I could hear the brave applause that greeted your efforts. I could hear the kindly words that were said as people crossed the yard below my window. Soon you will outdo me, if you have not already. Soon Pitou will have eyes for only you. And De Varin will be forgotten."

"Perhaps," she said softly, "Pitou has not a heart of ice. Perhaps he is not cold, cruel, callous —"

He swung around so hard that the rickety old chair creaked in agonized protest and shuddered in its every rung and joint. He could only stare at her, his lips parted, his hands gripping the arms of the chair. Then slowly he stood up, tall, dark and slender, as she had always remembered him.

"Bionde!" he said softly. "It is Bionde."

“It is, perhaps better, only Mimi of the cold heart. I saw your performance, monsieur”—her voice did not break, but never in any scene she had played had so much effort been required to keep it level—“I must congratulate you upon it. Superb is the word. The skater is the image of a girl who used to skate on a pond on the Tantramar Marshes, oh, many years ago, a ghost of a girl you met in a faded garden and lied to under the stars. I came to tell you that perhaps now the image you made of her is a true one, perhaps the heart that was once so warm for you, and before God, I tell you it was warm, is cold as ice now and will be always cold. It is enough.”

She turned quickly and ran, closing the door behind her. She heard him call; thought she heard, but knew it was only a lie, something like agony in his voice. “Bionde! Bionde!”

She did not heed him. Careless of curious stares, she ran across the lobby and out to her car. The starter whirled, the motor roared, the long gray car shot away into the hole its headlamps made in the darkness.

Elphege, who had seen her go, crossed himself reverently and went to sleep in the van with the marionettes, and even Pitou, always so well-disposed toward him, glowered and scowled darkly at him to-night.

“*Misère!*” he muttered. “What have I done! I have released a tempest. My life is in danger when he finds out. I was born and have lived under an evil star which to-night is in the ascendant.”

CHAPTER VIII

With fear in his heart and wobbly weakness in his pipestems of legs, Elphege Plourde awaited the morning and his encounter with his master. Pitou, grinning evilly at him in the early light of day, seemed to say, "Ah, my friend, you will catch it to-day. You will be torn limb from limb, and I have no sympathy for you." Even Mimi, the light, the gay and laughing, looked wan and haggard to-day. Elphege clawed his mouse-colored hair and groaned with apprehension.

But Guy said nothing about last night's proceedings when Elphege met him in the inn-yard on his way to breakfast. He said only, "Good morning, Elphege. It is a brave day for traveling. I have already breakfasted. As soon as you have finished we shall take the road."

Still Elphege had no great appetite for the good *crêpes de chez nous*—the good home-made pancakes—for which The King Dagobert was rightly renowned. It might be that M. de Varin was only postponing his punishment until they were in some secluded country lane, when he would turn upon his wretched helper and rend him.

Yes, thought Elphege, pale he looks and tired, as if he had not slept, and if I could have seen behind those dark glasses he wears I would have read misery and anguish in his eyes, and a great rage against me. I wish I had minded my own business. I have turned even Pitou's friendship into bitter scorn and contempt.

Not until they were several miles from Saint-Jovite de la Haute Montagne, rolling along a dusty mountain road, did Guy say anything about the business that was tormenting Elphege's very soul. He said then, "I believe you had a great success last night, my old one; that you staged the finest performance the Jolly Marionettes have so far given."

"I—I have reason to think so, monsieur," returned Elphege with due modesty.

"So have I," said Guy. "Good reason. Why did you change the program? Why did the lovely Mimi skate when her elegant ballet dancing would have been far more suitable for the month of July?"

“More suitable perhaps,” muttered Elphege, staring at the road that wound ahead. “But hardly more apropos for — —”

“Ah, then, you had a good reason?”

“Forgive me, Monsieur Guy,” said the little fellow miserably. “It seemed so to me. I just had to do it. I saw you suffering, in pain, unhappy, discouraged; I saw her who was the cause of it all — —”

“As you believed. And you took it on yourself to punish her. Did you not think that you would be punishing me too? You say it is my love for her that makes me suffer, well then do you not realize it would pain me to see her hurt?”

“And she was hurt, monsieur?”

“You know it, I think. You designed to hurt her and you succeeded well.”

“I am sorry now. Ever since the show I have felt guilty, miserable. Even Pitou looks at me as if I were Judas; and like Judas I have felt that I should go procure a rope and hang myself.”

“Ah, no.” Guy smiled sadly and shook his head. “Unlike Judas, you received no thirty pieces of silver. You did it, I think, because you loved me.”

Elphege’s mouth quivered. His tiny eyes blinked fast. “Only because of that, monsieur. And I did wrong.”

“Do not mind, good friend. Perhaps it was for the best that she should take it the way you intended, that she should feel as she did and go as she went — never to return.”

“Never!”

“I think never.”

“Then I have driven her away from you!”

“It was done before. Sometime you will know the truth and understand things better.” He smiled with grim mirth. “There is a veil over the truth, Elphege, which only I can remove.”

“Why not then remove it?”

“That is too hard to answer. I have the reason but I shall never give it, I think.”

“She came to you last night?”

“And she was lovely—lovelier than I have ever seen her or even dreamed her. She knocked at my door as I sat there in the darkness. I turned on the light and told her to come in. I did not see who it was and I addressed her as if it was you I spoke to. She had come to congratulate me on the excellence of our show.”

“Only that, monsieur?”

“What more would you? Did you not try to excel yourself?”

“Yes, but — —”

“Your work was appreciated.”

“Oh, I do not know what it was I tried to do, but you must believe me when I say I thought I was doing it for you. Had I dreamed that it would hurt you so much— —”

“Forget about it.”

“But you—will not forget.”

“One can forget anything in time, so they say; but no one has ever stipulated the time. Perhaps they meant a lifetime. Yes, I think that must be so. *Eh bien!* One goes on, Elphege. One can do no more than carry on as one best knows how, eh?”

“That is brave, Monsieur Guy.”

“That is the way it shall be.”

So the red caravan traveled from village to village and the little people gave performances without number and made friends beyond counting, but Mimi did not wear again the blue-velvet dress with its pretty white fur. Sometimes Guy opened the little trunk that bore her name and picked up the dainty costume and looked at it and held it tightly in his fingers, but what he thought at such times Elphege did not know.

Bionde left the Château de Mornay with Tante Aimée the day following her trip to the puppet-show at Saint-Jovite. They had planned to remain longer, but she would not stay. She had to go. Her aunt noticed her agitation, her pallor, the dark thoughtfulness of her eyes. She could not guess the reason for these things. Only yesterday Bionde had seemed so gay. She had been singing in her room before she went off on that mysterious excursion which, Tante Aimée thought privately, had much to do with this sudden change in her plans. She had sung an old Acadian song which said— —

*“Stay single, my poor Marie.
Yup! Yup! Yup! La-ri-ra
You are not a prize in a lottery;
Yup! Yup! Yup! La-ri-ra.”*

But in the morning she did not sing. She looked as if she had not slept and her breakfast she hardly touched. She said, “We shall leave for Quebec to-day, if you please, *ma tante*.”

“To-day!” Tante Aimée put down her coffee-cup. “But I thought we were to stay here at the Château for three days more!”

“If you please, Tante Aimée. There is a telegram from Pete Van Alen. He is in Quebec.”

That was true. The telegram had come only a half-hour ago and Bionde had welcomed it as a message sent straight from heaven. She needed now, as never before, Pete’s cool common-sense, his devotion, his loyalty. Perhaps, she had thought, holding the yellow message that ended with “all my love”—perhaps that was what love really meant: loyalty, devotion, understanding. What had pain and heartache and denial to do with a thing so sweet as love? Perhaps she had been blind to the true worth of what Pete had offered her.

Tante Aimée did not mind going, now that she knew Peter Van Alen had entered into the picture. It was the dream of her heart that Peter and Bionde should marry. Always she had hoped and striven toward that end. It might be that the child was acquiring some sense at last. Still, Madame Lacasse was shrewd enough to know that the decision to go to Quebec had been made before the telegram came.

“Well, we shall go then. After all, there is little time. You must soon return to Hollywood, you know. There is another picture to make.”

“I know.”

“But you do not seem to care.”

“I do not.”

“Does all this mean so little to you—the success you have attained, the place you have made for yourself, the friends— —”

“It all means much to me— Oh, I do not know. I am a fool, I guess. I am a great one for what Pete calls ‘sticking out my neck.’ Perhaps I am all over it now. I hope so.”

"What happened? Something occurred last night that upset you very much. I can tell when you are troubled. I could see this morning that you had not slept."

"It was nothing. Please, we will not talk about it."

They drove away before noon. In the mountains toward evening they passed the long red van that carried the Jolly Marionettes. It was parked in front of a village inn, but there was no one in the driver's seat.

"Here would be a good place to stop," suggested Tante Aimée, who liked her meals on time. "I know this village of Saint Placide. The inn is excellent."

"A little further, if you please, aunt," said Bionde, her eyes intent on the road. "I promise you it will not be long."

Tante Aimée's keen eyes had read the black letters on the side of the van

—THE JOLLY MARIONETTES—

She drew a deep breath and looked sharply at her niece, who pretended to notice nothing. So that was it. She had seen the fellow, De Varin. She had come away unhappy, angry, from the meeting. Because of him they had been forced to leave the excellent accommodation and most fascinating gossip and plentiful bridge of the Château de Mornay. Tante Aimée resented Guy de Varin as she never had in her life before.

"I see it now," she said. "One runs away."

"But I do not — —"

"You do not for a moment deceive me, my girl," said Tante Aimée acidly. "I know why you would not stop in Saint Placide but insisted on taking me on to the next village, Saint Isaure, which is nothing but a hog-wallow. Also, I understand now why we had to cut short our stay at the Château de Mornay. It was because of M. de Varin. That was the silly caravan which carries his wretched puppet-show from place to place, parked in front of the inn back there."

"What then?"

"You saw him last night," said Tante Aimée accusingly. "You no doubt witnessed the de luxe performance of the marionettes."

"I was in it."

"You were in — —"

Bionde laughed. "But yes! I was the star of the performance. Oh, my name was Mimi and there were points of difference, but it was Bionde, nonetheless, who charmed the multitude in the big barn of The Good King Dagobert."

"Where, if you please, was this?"

"At Saint-Jovite de la Haute Montagne."

"You heard he was there; you thought so little of yourself that you went to see him, to humiliate yourself for the sake of this traveling mountebank!"

"It is quite true, what you say. I thought so little of myself and thought still so much of him, that like a silly convent-girl I went chasing after him."

"I am ashamed of you."

"I'm a little ashamed of myself. Well, I suffered for my folly."

"You talked to him?"

"I did indeed. I told him many things that needed to be told. I think I played the part better than any I have done in Hollywood. You need not worry now. There will be no more of this."

"I think you said as much before—to your Uncle Hubert, in Quebec, the day he was talking to De Varin and you came to the place."

"I did, but I forgot. It is easy for me to forget things like that. But this is an ugly thing; this I will not forget."

"He had you in his puppet-show! He ridiculed you!"

"Oh, no. It may be that he has immortalized me; more so than the pictures in which I act. There is something about his Mimi that makes one love and hate her, pity and despise her all at once. I could tell that from the faces of the crowd. It was a strange experience, one I do not wish to have again—to see yourself as another sees you and to know how wrong, how cruelly wrong, his seeing is. Yet the puzzling thing about it all, the one that baffles me, is that this Mimi, this doll of wood and wax and straw, pulled and directed by little strings, seemed to me more like myself than the girls I portrayed on the screen."

"Folly!"

Bionde did not heed her. "Can it be," she continued dreamily, "that more of heart, a deeper feeling went into the making of Mimi, than into those whom I sought to create? Can it be that he knew better—"

“Anything can be!” snapped Tante Aimée. “But I am weary and hungry and at the best of times have no patience with such foolish things as this.”

“My heart is not made of ice.” Bionde seemed still to be addressing her own thoughts.

“Of marshmallow, rather,” muttered Tante Aimée, “if you can still give a thought to this gypsy when a man like Peter Van Alen loves you.”

“Oh, yes, Peter. Well, to-morrow we shall see Peter.” She tried to think of how pleasant that would be, of how happy would be their reunion. It was some months since she had seen him. After their picture was finished he had gone to Mexico. “Not,” he had said, “to try to forget you, but just that I may look forward to the day when we meet again. And I shall hope that in the time you are away from me, something will happen to make you care.”

Something had happened. Was it enough? Would she give Peter the same answer if again he spoke to her of love? Or would he, whose eyes were sharp, whose feelings—his hunches, he called them—most sensitive where she was concerned, guess that now was the time he had waited for, the time to speak again of what he felt for her?

Still her thoughts winged back to the red caravan parked in front of the inn, to Guy and the strange, bitter little goblin who worked for him, who had come forward to acknowledge the plaudits of the crowd last night and whose eyes seemed to glow with baleful fire when they rested on her. To-night, no doubt, the marionettes would play again. Mimi would skate. Pitou would hop about, swinging his long arms, grinning and mowing like a fiend.

So busy was she with her thoughts that she all but shot by the inn at Saint Isaure. Tante Aimée’s, “Stop here or I shall perish!” aroused her and she turned into the inn-yard with a humble apology: “I am so sorry, *ma tante*. I was thinking.”

“I am a fool, at my age, to risk my neck with girls who insist on thinking,” grumbled the colonel’s lady. “After supper—if we are fortunate enough to get any in this benighted place—you will please pack yourself off to bed. And there, I suppose, you will dream of marionettes dancing on the dresser.”

The accommodation at the inn was all that Tante Aimée had feared, and a bit worse. “One should have christened this place ‘The Famished Cat,’” she told Bionde as she presented to a scrawny-looking tabby the tough steak that had been served to her. “Oh, well, with the grace of God, we shall be in Quebec to-morrow. This gypsy life may be all right for those that like it; I

prefer my own home and my own cook and my own bed. To-night we shall be on the rack.”

But morning came to “The Famished Cat” even as it comes to the grandest of hostelries, and they both found that, despite the hardness of the bed, they had slept surprisingly well and could eat their breakfasts and start more cheerfully upon their way.

They were in Quebec that night. Bionde drove down Sainte-Ursule Street, though there really was no need for it, and gazed up at the windows of the garret, silvered by the moon, and in at the café of Charlebois Hudon, he of the two black cats, and the kindly heart. Blessed memory! How often had she thought of this old street and pictured it in her dreams—the little coffee-shop, the tall old house sandwiched between two just as tall, the garret with its quaint dormers and scarred door, the sharp-nosed, sharp-eyed landlady.

Who had the garret now, she wondered. Had Guy kept it on perhaps? Or had he packed his few possessions into the caravan and said an unregretful good-by to it? She did not like to think so. To her it was like a shrine, like a station along the road of their love, the winding, troubled road. They had dreamed there, so sweetly, so briefly.

Tante Aimée sniffed and said, “Can’t you go a little faster? And what in heaven’s name are you gaping up at the rooftops for?”

Bionde did not answer. Perhaps, late to-night, she thought, making a little face at her duenna, I shall come here again—and gape in peace. What do you know of love, my good aunt, married to Uncle Hubert, who wheezes and wears flannel nightshirts?

On a theater marquee she saw her name and the announcement that “On Winged Feet” was playing there. Tante Aimée spied it too and was vastly delighted to see the name of Lacasse in lights in her native city.

“Hubert will be pleased,” she said smugly. “It is doubtless the first time the name of Lacasse has appeared in lights.”

“I think not,” murmured Bionde. “Uncle Gerard kept a tavern in Montreal not so long ago.”

“You are utterly lacking in family pride, Bionde. I shall have to speak to Hubert about you. After all, there are some traditions in the family.”

Of snobbery and ill-founded pride, thought Bionde. The first of the tribe were good farmers and worked hard and had no notions of the greatness of

their house. Ah, well — —

“I wonder if the Quebecois will like the picture,” she said. “It is not as if I am one of them. After all, I am only a little savage from Acadia.”

“Sometimes I can believe that without the least effort, my child. Still, I think the people here will like the picture. After all you belong to French-Canada. You are of the Canadian race. One will be proud of that. It is nice to see our daughters making a place for themselves. It is heartbreaking to see them making fools of themselves running after Punch-and-Judy shows.”

With this final broadside the stately dame got out of the car, which had stopped in front of the family residence, and hurried to embrace the colonel, whom, despite his wheezes and his flannels, she loved very dearly. “I am home, Hubert,” she announced, “and home I am going to stay. My heart, you know, has always been weak. I have told Bionde we shall find a good lady to accompany her back to Hollywood.”

The colonel’s welcome was warm indeed. He looked a little older. His breath was a trifle shorter, his eyes the least bit more protuberant. “Ah, Bionde,” he said, embracing his niece, “it is good you are here. The young Van Alen has haunted the place, looking for news of you. There, if ever I saw one, is a young man in love.”

“She has been going to puppet-shows,” said Tante Aimée, leading the way into the house, speaking over her shoulder.

“Puppet-shows!” The colonel’s gasp was audible in the dim cool stillness of the hall. “What— Not surely that young man, De Varin—not his puppet-show!”

“I believe he has a monopoly of the marionette industry in Quebec,” fired back Tante Aimée, drawing off her gloves and removing her hat with veil, the motoring headgear of her youth and still, to her, the best.

“But I put an end to that affair,” announced Colonel Hubert. “It is all over. Yes, most certainly it is all over.” He looked with troubled eyes at his niece. “You said — —”

“Don’t worry, uncle.” She squeezed his arm. “Nothing has happened. I am as far from him and he from me, as we were that day in the garret. I went to see the little show through—through curiosity. I was cured of the desire ever to see it or him again.”

“I am glad—glad indeed. The young man seems to be quite content with the vagabond life he leads. He has done very well. A good many of the

people idolize him and have made sort of a hero out of him.”

“A hero?” Bionde looked up at him. “Why a hero?”

“Oh, you know how people are,” muttered the colonel vaguely. “Kind to the underdog. Thought it very brave of him to make his marionettes and start up as a showman—all that.”

“Oh!” Bionde was not quite satisfied; there was more to this than the old soldier was telling her.

More—yes, there was much more, thought Colonel Lacasse unhappily. He could not tell Bionde that all the world, loving a lover, resents the girl who, they think, jilted him because he was poor. He did not want her to know how closely still her name was linked with De Varin’s; how was told still the story of her running through the rows of cars over the icy cobbles to throw herself in his arms—so many silly stories were going the rounds. Well, they need not touch her now. Why should she, from her high place, look down on this little showman, this petty mountebank, this defeated artist, who had, moreover, said clearly enough that he wanted none of her?

Peter Van Alen came that night, summoned, though Bionde did not know it, by a surreptitious phone call from Tante Aimée. The same old smiling Pete, who held her hands tightly and looked searchingly into her eyes as if seeking to read in their blue depths all that had happened since their last farewell at the little bungalow in Hollywood.

“Well, doctor?” She looked challengingly back at him. “What do you see there? Has the patient fully recovered from—from whatever malady she had?”

“Hmm!” He loosed one hand and stroked his long jaw. “I shall need a little time—a little time. Offhand, I should say there has been a slight improvement. I should prescribe a few hours under the stars, late though the hour is; after which I can pronounce.”

But the hours under the stars were passed in quiet talk, of this and that, of the picture they had made, the one they were going back to work on. He did not speak of love. Something told him that this was not the time. And Bionde thought, Had this been two nights ago, he could have spoken and I would have listened, if not with my heart, then with my mind. I would have said, “You are kind and good, Pete, and why should I deny your love for one that is cruel and strange and indifferent?”

But to-night it was not like that. She was back in Quebec now, in the city she had learned to love because in it she had found both beauty and pain.

Guy seemed near to her to-night. She fancied that if she walked along Sainte-Ursule Street she would see his light burning in the attic window and if she climbed the stairs and knocked at the door, he would open it to her.

“Have you gone to see our picture here in Quebec?” she asked Pete, as they passed the theater where the marquee lights were just blinking out.

He glanced quickly at her; then looked away. “Yes,” he said, “I went to see it. They’re getting packed houses all the time. This is its second run here, you know.”

“They like it?”

“Of course they like it,” he said almost crossly. “How could they help but like it?”

“I do not know. I think I shall go to see it. Fun to slip in among the crowd, all unknown, and see yourself on the screen and laugh a little to think that the ones sitting next to you have no idea that you are the girl they watch.”

“Pretty dull,” said Pete shortly. “Why not stay away? As a matter of fact, I have so many things planned for us to do, you and I, that I don’t think you’ll have a chance to gratify your vanity. You won’t have time even to see your own picture.”

“You have become quite a tyrant, monsieur.”

“Oh, I can be very harsh where you are concerned, my very little cabbage. And,” he added gravely, “very solicitous for your welfare.”

“I know.”

“I wonder if you do. You’ve never given me a chance to show you how much you, everything you do, everything that happens to you, means to me.”

“You want that chance so much?”

“So very much, Bionde. It is still not the time to tell you again what I feel for you, how much I care — —”

“Maybe the time will come.”

“And may it be soon!”

He was waiting for her outside the Théâtre Orléans early the next evening, stretching his neck this way and that to find her among the crowd

that streamed out after the first show. At last he spied her and he knew at once what had happened.

“Damn them!” he muttered. “Them and their stupid cruelty and the ones who started this lying story. If they could see what they have done to her.”

He pushed his way through the crowd, careless of whom he elbowed, deaf to angry protests, seeing none of them—seeing only the white-faced girl, small and hurt and frightened, looking like a hunted thing, looking for one who would comfort her.

“Bionde!” He caught her elbow and steered her out of the crowd. “I told you not to go there. Why did you?”

“Pete!” It was only a whisper. “They—they hissed me. They hated me. I sat there. I could not believe. I looked around to see if it was not something else. But no, it was all for me. And I heard someone say that I was nothing but a cheap gold-digger, that I’d thrown over the man I— Oh, Pete!”

“Come on!” he said roughly. “Let’s get out of here. My car is down the block. You’ve had enough. You never deserved such punishment. Believe me, it is only a few, only the ignorant ones— —”

“But Pete, it was—it was he who did not want me. I all but went on my knees— —”

“More fool, you! If he is party to this story—and certainly he’s done nothing to stop it, I’d like to smash him.”

“Pete! He couldn’t. He would never— —”

“I don’t know. I only know you shouldn’t have to take this. I’d like to have the chance to protect you from it, to show you what love can be.”

She had quieted somewhat. She sat back against the cushions as they drove toward l’ancienne Lorette under the stars and the gibbous moon. “Very well,” she said. “You shall have the chance.”

He stopped the car. He put an arm about her shoulders, his cheek against hers and held her close. “You mean it. You’ll marry me?”

“After the picture is made, I’ll marry you.”

“I’ll wait. I’ll wait forever, Bionde. But I want you to love me, I want to show you how much I care for you.”

“I know how much.”

“Can’t you trust your own heart?” he asked.

“I’m afraid. It lied to me once.”

“I don’t think it lied. But someone lied to you.”

“Yes—yes, he lied to me.”

“It is a miserable business,” said Pete savagely. “I knew what was going on. I heard the damndest yarns here in Quebec. They have everything upside down and are quite sure you have broken the poor fellow’s heart and blighted his life. And once these Quebecois get anything into their heads, especially anything that appeals to them, there’s no hope of ever getting it out. How can we make the truth known? No way that I know. Someone has broken a feather bed in a high wind—just try to collect the feathers and put them back. But you should worry, my dear. Such lies cannot touch you.”

“But they hurt—they hurt so much.”

CHAPTER IX

She stood again in the garden of the old house of the De Varins. Because time was precious and she must be back to the coast within the week, she had flown to Moncton and come by train to Sainte-Barbe. How old and faded had seemed Tante Adrienne and Uncle Hormidas! How grim and dingy the home of her childhood! She had sent them a great part of her earnings but little had been expended on the house. "There are only the two of us," explained Tante Adrienne. "You may never come back here. If you do the money will be there in the bank and you can make the place over. For us, now, it is good enough."

She had left them as soon as she decently could and had taken the path through the lilac hedge, green now, and across the tangled garden, all bright with roses growing wild. With long free steps she made for the marshes and the pathway her own feet had helped to wear in the top of the great dike. And she loved the warm sweetness of the wind, that here never ceases to blow; loved the salty zest of the sea, the way the tall grass bent and straightened, bent and straightened, at the will of the wind.

Here was home, and all the old dear things. Here were the places, the people, the paths she loved and would always love. The kindly folk of Sainte-Barbe, the village church, the school, and the great abiding peace of the Tantramar. She stood on the edge of the pond where in winter she used to skate. She could close her eyes and picture that young girl lively as a gull who used to skim across the smooth hard surface. She could hear in fancy Tor Gustavssen's gruff, restrained voice, as he told her what to do, now scolding volubly, now meagerly praising. And she remembered the day, remembered it so well, when she and Guy had skated here—"was it a year or lives ago?"

She walked slowly toward the uplands, toward that place, which, like the garret in Quebec, was a shrine, a station along the road of their love. Easier now to go between the sagging stone gateposts, for the gates had rusted and crumbled to worse ruin since last she passed that way.

Here too the long-untended garden was a kaleidoscope of color—roses red and white and pink, scarlet poppies, honeysuckle, and hollyhock of a hundred different hues. The air was richly fragrant with the mingled scent of the flowers, and the great bees droned and buzzed among the nodding

blossoms. Here and there still lay some of last year's fallen leaves, and as the winding driveway debouched upon the sweep of lawn that had become a hayfield now, the old house showed its still proud but scarred and ruined façade. There, untenanted now, was the bench where Guy had sat, where she had first seen him in his shabby clothes, with the stick of hornbeam and the ancient rucksack beside him—"Was it a year or lives ago?"

Oh, not yet a year even. And it seemed to her that she had lived a long age, that it had been another girl who stood in this tangled garden, who crossed timidly over to that bench and sat beside the brown-eyed, laughing gypsy fellow and said, "Did I look so solemn?"

She lingered there, sat for a while on the old stone bench and many and crowded were the thoughts that came to her. She thought of the dream she had so cherished, so fought for, so irrevocably lost. She thought how little mattered any of the glittering things that had been given her in its stead. Gladly she would have traded them all for another hour of that dreaming. It seemed, she thought, that what began here in this garden was too beautiful ever to die. It seemed to be not of time, but of eternity. "He was the one who said our love was written in the stars. What then? What?"

Always that question returned to plague her. Oh, perhaps he had been right in wanting to go his own free, independent way. Perhaps her work would have come between them in time and he would have felt that he had no real place in her life. Perhaps it was a man's way to be so practical about things, even about love. She did not know. She did not understand. She understood only what her heart told her and then only by instinct, but not for that the less surely.

Still, when she thought of that night in Quebec she felt again the pain, the blind hurt and bewilderment she had known when, seated in the crowded theater, she had first realized it was she whom they were hissing. Something dark and frightening had come into her heart then, something that terrified her. She wanted to get up and run away and keep on running until she reached a place where she would be forever alone, yet all the time she knew there was no such place; that, go where she would, the world with all its hates, its meannesses, its tears and its brief laughter would still be with her, because we carry our own heaven or hell right with us, and there is no getting away from ourselves while life lasts.

Pete Van Alen had helped. Pete, in that hour of her deepest need, had been a tower of strength to her, a tall beacon rearing above the sea of doubt and disillusionment. He had brought her back to herself, made her look at

things calmly, reasonably. He had said before he left her that night, “You know in your own heart, child, that you have done nothing mean or unkind. I know that doesn’t help a great deal if people have taken it into their heads that you have. You must be strong then. It’s cruelly hard to be misunderstood, to be accused of things you never did and to be, as you are, incapable of defending yourself or of setting these people right. All one can do is grin and bear it, but you are big enough and fortunately successful enough, to rise above such a little thing as this.”

“But I cannot bear to have people hate me, to have them thinking the wrong things about me— —”

“They always will. People are like that. As long as you are doing the right thing, why should you care what they think? And after all, it is only a few people and probably the simplest, the most ignorant. You have to develop some armor against the barbs and shafts that such people can loose at you.”

“Yes,” she said wisely, “and the armor will do the same work of protection against kindness and honesty, until in time it will become so that you are all hard, that you trust no one and nothing—not even the truth. I have learned that much in Hollywood. I don’t want to grow a shell around me.”

Pete shrugged. He knew she was right. It was a hideous thing to destroy such faith, such wide-eyed, starry faith as she possessed. It was like cutting down some beautiful flower and trampling it into the dust. But as long as she held to that blind faith, the world was going to hurt her and hurt her cruelly. The world has a way of sticking sharp points into the trusting and the simple of heart. Or was he wrong there? Were they not better, stronger, if they survived the thrusts and still saw, even dimly, the shining truth beyond the veil of lies?

So he had said, “Go on believing in what you have always believed, Bionde. The advice I can give you is too much of the world to which I belong. You were the first one to teach me blind faith and to bring home to me the fact that there are times when a man can trust his heart. At first I wondered about you—wondered that anyone, man or woman, could be so free from guile, from deceit, from selfishness. I watched and watched for a crack in your white armor, but there was none. So cling hard to what you have and believe that your own heart will speak to you and tell you what is right. I can only teach you what the world has taught me and there have been times when I thought it taught me ill.”

She remembered those words now as she sat in the old garden and looked at the falling ruin of the house where Guy had lived for that little while in which he worked so hard at his painting. He had been working for her, for an ideal, a dream, and he had worked well. Yes, though his hands were numb with cold and he could not know whether the pictures he painted were good or bad, he had fought blindly, bravely on.

Then the dream had faded, died— —

She got up wearily and without a backward glance, quitted the garden where, she knew, she had left, that far-off day, something of her fresh, young heart, where now something of her youth stayed behind her. Perhaps in the stillness of the moonlight their spirits would come there again to sit side by side on the mossy stone slab of the bench; perhaps we are only creatures of the dreams we dream and our only reality is in our visions.

She did not know. The sun was getting lower now, making for itself a bed of crimson clouds above the black hills across the valley. From the church of Sainte-Barbe she heard the Angelus ring out—a clear, peaceful, pastoral sound in the evening stillness. And she would leave all this peace, this slow serenity, to go again into the mart, into the struggle, the whirling mill that went round and round yet never moved far between those two fixed points of birth and death.

Old thoughts for her young head. She knew there was laughter yet for her and high hills for her to scale, from one of which she would see, perhaps, the beauty that is the hope of all mankind. So she would go on. Pete Van Alen was waiting for her in Chicago. One day soon she would marry Pete. He had said he would make her happy, and she believed him. In his steadfast loyalty and quiet devotion she had, she knew, something worthwhile, a rock to which she could always cling, a refuge that never would be closed to her.

She had dinner with her aunt and uncle, with Mathieu Bernard, newly appointed to the senate, as a special treat. She did not mind Mathieu. It came to her now that she had never really minded him, but only the thought of marrying him. He had added new dignity to the tremendous structure of that silly commodity he already possessed before a grateful government threw over him the senatorial toga. He made it clear, in an involved allegory, that while he had dreamed pleasantly of making her Madame Bernard, there were still some things to live for—notably a widow in Hull whose husband had owned a brewery. He talked patronizingly of Quebec, Hollywood, Hitler

and the Central Banking system with a slight dissertation on the importance of the Tantrammar farmers putting in a larger crop of mangel-wurzels.

She rather enjoyed Mathieu. He had a splendid trait of getting down to earth at the end of even his longest periods. Thus he traced the causes and courses of all the wars since the Boer uprising and ended with the greatness of the boon that commercial fertilizers had conferred on the men who wrested their livelihood from the fields.

After he had gone she sat for a while with Uncle Hormidas, who nodded over his pipe, and Tante Adrienne, who dozed over her knitting. There was so strangely little to say to these two who had been the only parents she had ever known. She had never been close to them and in the short time of her absence she had grown so very far away. She went out on the terrace for a little while and walked there, but she began to cry, and she had had enough of crying. So presently, drying her eyes, she returned to the house, kissed the old people good night and went up to the little room that had sheltered her so many years. There she stood for a while looking out at the dim reaches of the marshland over which countless little fireflies carried their fairy lanterns. She heard the frogs' deep chorus in the swamp below the orchard, the whirring swoop of the hawk, the chirp of some sleepy bird. She undressed in the dark and went to bed. She slept.

She knew, when the early light touched her eyelids and awakened her, such peace of heart as had not been hers in many a long day; perhaps not, she thought, since she had left the shelter of this roof. Through the open window she could see the green level marshes, ribbed by the dikes, cut by the silver serpent of the river, stretching mile on mile to the sea; the distant wooded uplands, dark against the soft blue sky of morning, the little white farmhouses with their great barns and the orchards whose trees marched in orderly ranks, their boughs already bent with the ripening fruit.

She wished quietly that she might never have to leave it, yet she knew that she must go. There was a compulsion on her greater even than the love of this place. She had work to do, if work it could be called. Certainly it was the thing she could do best. And it was not easy. From the start of a picture until the finish there was no rest for her, no rest for any of those engaged in it. Hard, grinding hours until she felt that she could stand it no longer; then hours more.

But some day, she told herself, lying back on the pillow, staring at the well-remembered cracks in the ancient ceiling, the place where once the plaster had fallen, where an unskilled workman had done his worst—some

day I shall come back here, never to leave it. This is my own place, where I belong. I can never lose the love of it.

Yet there were no tears at leaving. Hervey drove her to the train in the rattly old dog-cart. Tor Gustavssen, quietly proud, rode with her. A handful of the villagers were there to see her off. Many of them had never seen a motion picture and none attached much importance to her success. They came because she was Bionde Lacasse, because her people had lived longer in Sainte-Barbe than any other family, and were respected by all.

She waved to them from the observation platform of the Maritime Express, watched them and the familiar landmarks of her native village until all had faded from view. Her aunt and uncle had not come to the train to see her off. They were old and tired. Partings meant little to them now, who must soon part with life itself.

At Moncton she took the plane for Montreal, stayed there briefly, then flew to Chicago where Pete Van Alen and a squad of newspaper photographers awaited her. She did not think of them. It was Pete's smiling face, his outstretched hands. Then she was in his arms, close in his arms, and all about them the shutters clicked dryly. She loosed herself quickly then.

Pete said, "It's all right, boys. We're engaged. Do you mind, darling?"

Strangely, ungratefully, guiltily, she did mind. She hadn't thought much about what being engaged to a celebrity like Pete Van Alen would mean, for apart from his skill as skater and actor, he was a very wealthy member of a prominent family. Now he helped her fight off the news-hounds, but every newspaper, next day, carried long stories and astounding interviews and gave many facts about her life which she had never known herself.

"You'll have to get used to it," consoled Pete as the plane winged westward. "It's all a bit bewildering at first, but after a while it won't hurt so much."

"It's like waking up in the morning to find the walls and roof have been taken away during the night," she said solemnly. "And they seem to know everything about me."

Too much, thought Pete, who had carefully kept from her the paper that carried the story with the Quebec date-line, that told the same unfounded tale of the way she had treated Guy de Varin. The story was skillfully handled and for that very reason was all the more poisonous. It made her out ruthless, calculating, bent on the main chance, and triumphant now because she had captured one of the most eligible bachelors in America. It told of De

Varin and his puppet-show, of how, when he had lost her love, when she had deserted him for fame and fortune, he had made an image of her, a marionette called Mimi, who played the lead in all his performances. It made one's heart ache for De Varin; about her it said nothing kind.

He knew it was no use to fight the thing and point out that it was only a romantic fable. It was too good a story to contradict and any rebuttal of his would be tucked away between the Marine Intelligence and Animal Stories for Tiny Tots. All he could do was let it ride and trust that in time it would die a natural death. It was his job now to safeguard her from the sting of unkind things like this, to ward off from her all the poisoned darts that would come her way.

I wish, he thought furiously, that I had hunted out this puppet-showman, this little squirt who rides around the country in his dinky van and never says a word that would help to kill this rotten slander. I cannot understand how she ever could have cared for such a man. Still, women go for some queer specimens. I'd like to wring his neck.

Guy, still playing the remote parts of Quebec, with his little troupe and the tireless Elphege, knew nothing of this story, but one day he found on his table a paper, carefully folded and placed there by his understudy, with the picture of Bionde in Pete Van Alen's arms. "Romance on Ice" it was captioned, and there was the announcement of Mlle. Lacasse's engagement to Peter Luytens Van Alen.

He stared at the paper a long, long time. He felt something that burned and twisted and tortured, deep inside him, deeper than any physical pain could go. Somehow he had never thought of this, of Bionde in another man's arms, her soft, slender body, so boyishly, beautifully symmetrical, pressed close to his, her lips on his —

He flung down the paper and ground his heel upon it, tearing it. He looked about him, eyes wild, as if seeking for something to destroy; then, finding nothing, he flung himself into his chair and stared moodily at the wrecked and ruined paper. Why had he ever seen the thing? Why had that little fiend Elphege put it there where he could not fail to find it? The answer to that was easy: Elphege was trying to justify himself for what he had done at Saint-Jovite. He was trying to show his master that the Quebecois had been right in their appraisal of Bionde Lacasse.

"I suppose it had to be like that," muttered Guy. "She could not go on alone—always alone. She is so young, so lovely. This fellow—he must be

good. He must be a fine fellow or she would not love him. Eh, well, thus passes the love of Guy de Varin.” His face was contorted, his lips pressed tightly together, his jaw grim, the skin stretched taut. “No,” he said softly then, “it does not pass. Love does not pass. Not such as mine has been. If it is love, as love has seemed to me, nothing on earth, in heaven or in hell can destroy it. Even death is not so strong.”

Sorry now for the outburst that had made him crush the paper underfoot, he picked it up and sought to smooth it out. That could not be done, so he put it in the fireplace among the waste-paper there and burned it. He would not have Elphege’s keen eyes spy the imprint of his heel on the paper. Were Elphege to see that, the story would be announced from the rooftops of Quebec to bear out the truth of all the other lies that had been told.

“She will be happy,” he assured himself. “It will be as I told her: she will forget me and the little that was between us or if she ever remembers, it will be only to laugh, to think how silly she was. She will forget the Song of Ronsard, forget that a poet sang to her or an artist painted for her, or a crazy puppet-maker fabricated a doll called Mimi, that had a heart of ice. Surely she will forget. Women can all forget.”

Yet, someone had said, “Women remember the first kiss when men have forgotten the last.” That was not so. That was only a pretty fancy. Bionde’s life would be so filled with brightness, her road so strewn with flowers all the way, that there would be no room for any regrets, no place for weeping. And it is well, he thought, that it should be so; in mine there is darkness enough, darkness that leads only to a deeper darkness. She will hear no more of me. Soon I will be only a name, to be swiftly forgotten. Even Pitou will be better remembered.

This was in the village of Nicolette, a pretty, sleepy little place in the Laurentian foothills. There were many more stops they had planned before their itinerary should finally bring them back to Quebec, but not even to deny Elphege the satisfaction of seeing the effect of the newspaper story could Guy continue as they had planned. He had no heart for any more of this endless tour. He was weary of it all, weary even of his little friends who had done so well for him and Elphege that their financial problems, for long months to come, would cause them little worry.

I will go back to my garret, mused Guy, and the very memory of it pleased him and in the warmth of the August day he forgot how draughty the attic could be and remembered only its quiet privacy, its excellence as a place in which to work. He smiled, thinking of the long, lonely hours spent

there when he tried so hard, and in good part succeeded, to kill the loneliness with work. Why, there Mimi had been born, and Pitou and Mun Kee See and the Dusty Miller—and there love had died.

“Oh, well,” he assured himself, “it will be good to go there now and rest for a while, and think of things to do. And Elphege, no doubt, will be glad to return to his family. There is no girl in his life except Mimi. Perhaps I should make him a present of Mimi. He most certainly loves her.”

Elphege heard without moving an eye-lash the announcement that the tour was canceled. He had, in fact, expected as much. Guy had an urgent desire to shake him, coupled with one, equally urgent, to embrace him—queer little fellow with heart of gold.

“You do not mind, Elphege, I hope,” he said. “With your share of the money our friends have made— —”

Elphege waved an airy hand. “Mind? I do not at all mind, Monsieur Guy. You are tired and, after all, you have received a terrible blow.”

“You allude of course to what was in *le Soleil*, which you inadvertently left on my table folded by sheer chance at a place which would insure my seeing just what you wished me to see?”

“Ah, I feared you would see that.”

“You schemer!”

Elphege shrugged. “Better to learn it that way, quietly from a—from a friend—it is permitted to call you such?”

“Yes, my friend. It is permitted.”

Elphege bowed—“than to hear it from some rude source when the hearing might be less pleasant.”

Guy nodded. “You are kind, Elphege. I think, my old one, if you gave poison to your grandmother it would be only out of the kindness of your heart.”

Elphege smiled, acknowledging the compliment. “So then we return to Quebec, monsieur?”

“At once. The players, as well as the stage-managers, need a rest. We shall place the van in the garage of your Aunt Geoffrion and we—well I, at least, will sit down for a while and think of new ventures.”

“For us?” Elphege’s voice was timid yet eager. “For both of us, monsieur?”

“Always for both of us, Elphege. You may be sure of that. I need you, my comrade of many a long mile, far more than you need me, and the time may come when my need will be greater yet. So you see, I am selfish. If I do not forsake you, it’s because I know, if such a time comes, you will not forsake me.”

“I do not know what you speak of,” said Elphege earnestly, “but I will never leave you. Only snakes do that.”

He went hastily, a sly gleam in his eye, when he saw Guy’s hand grope for a cushion to hurl at him. He was nobody’s fool, Elphege—unless to be loyal and kind and true is to be a fool.

They made all speed toward Quebec that day and toward midnight, just as Charlebois Hudon was about to close his café and Madame Geoffrion was putting her hair in curlers, the red van drew up with a flourish at the curb and Elphege leaped out as if, after a long voyage, he coveted the honor of being the first one ashore.

It was a triumphal return. Charlebois closed the coffee-shop in front but left the back door open and when the red van was safely housed in the garage in the rear, Guy and Elphege came in to find Madame Geoffrion, flanked by those two phenomenal cats, Victor Hugo and Roncevalle, waiting for them at the head of a well-laden board over which Charlebois hovered.

“Welcome home, Monsieur de Varin,” said the old dame with due deference. “Welcome home, nephew. We do not need to ask of your tour, to inquire about its success. From various relatives in the province—I am one of a family of twenty-three, Monsieur de Varin—I have heard of your triumphal progress. No jeers or hisses greeted the efforts of your players. Take care of your feet, young Elphege, you kicked me that time.”

“Yes,” said Elphege.

“Oh!” said Madame Geoffrion. “Well, you must be very hungry and very weary. After you have refreshed yourself, Monsieur de Varin, your studio is ready and waiting for you.”

“I am so glad to hear that, Madame—so glad. It is my home, that cozy garret of yours—the only home I have except the caravan and an ancient ruin in Acadia where I shall never go again. The poet Beranger said, ‘How happy one can be in a garret when one is twenty.’ I think there is no age limit; it is just a matter of one’s definition of happiness.”

“And what is yours, monsieur?” ventured Charlebois, all this time listening avidly. “May one ask?”

“One may. It is to harm no one and to feel that no one has really meant to harm you.”

“Well,” Charlebois scratched his head. “I dare say there are worse definitions than that.”

“If there are,” said Madame Geoffrion, “I have not yet heard them.”

CHAPTER X

Winter came again to Quebec, whitening the hills and the frozen river, capping with beauty the towers and rooftops of the ancient capital of New France. Once more the sleigh-bells jingled merrily in the narrow streets and the skiers, the skaters and snow-shoers in their gay reds, blues and greens and the marvelous woven colors of *la ceinture flechée*, the arrow marked sash, traditional with the habitants, filled the streets with merry laughter and the dark hills in the moonlight re-echoed with their shouts.

Winter came, bringing with it good fortune, swift and breathtaking, for Guy de Varin. So undreamt of was it, so strangely simple in its origin, that sometimes, thinking of the great sums of money that came to him, he would laugh, and at others feel just the least bit frightened. And it was to Mimi—Mimi of the wide blue eyes, the corn-yellow hair, the grace and swiftness of Pavlowa, that he owed all this that the papers called “story-book success.” Offers came to put Mimi and Pitou in the animated cartoons on the screen. Picture-books for little ones were made, telling of their adventures. Their creator, the puppet-showman, the maker of marionettes, became famous far beyond the bounds of Quebec. Pitou was beloved in every land.

But Guy still stayed in his garret and in the quiet ways of his life there was no change. He had retired to this refuge, like, Madame Geoffrion confided to Charlebois and Elphege, a hermit to his cell, just as soon as the party of welcome in the café was over. “For days,” good Madame Geoffrion announced, “one saw next to nothing of him. He would come downstairs to eat, then walk a little, then go back to his lonely room.” It was no life for any man, certainly not for him in whose life was a great sadness. Perhaps he was brooding. There was the omnipresent danger of his becoming morbid, melancholy and deranged.

What did he do there? He sat and smoked his pipe a great deal and thought a great deal and talked to Pitou and to Mimi, who sat both of them, legs dangling, on the mantelpiece. And always as he sat there the round table with its mirror top was beside him and in it, when he viewed it at certain angles, he saw the graceful form of Mimi, just as in dreams he saw the living form of that other he had loved, as she skimmed, light and airy, over the frozen pond on the distant Acadian marshes.

And, closing his eyes, he could fancy the round mirror was a little pond and Mimi was skating on it, a tiny, flitting, fascinating figure in a tight bodiced costume of blue-velvet trimmed with lovely white fur, in high-laced white boots with skates bright as the mirror. For him alone she skated, pirouetted, cut many lovely magic figures on the little mirror rink and it was strangely satisfying to his soul just to sit there and watch this fair figment of his dreams.

Then one day he sat up quickly, seized with a joyous exultation, just as on that night when the idea of making the Jolly Marionettes had come to him, and he said, "Why not? Why not?"

Thus was born The Skating Marionette, Mimi—the electric toy that captured the world that winter. The mirror gave place to an electrified plate of polished metal in whose whorls and grooves the little skates ran and Mimi, in fashion most lifelike, went through her act, swift and graceful and unerring. The eyes of young and old lighted as they watched the tiny figure swoop and circle, like a bird of wondrous beauty.

The first model was made in a toy-maker's tiny shop in the Lower Town, with Elphege standing proudly by, and with the assistance of one Raoul Perron who was a wizard with electricity and, like most wizards, always poor. Soon he was no longer poor; the lovely little Mimi skated her way into the hearts of the world. In shop windows on the great streets of America she performed in front of admiring thousands. She swept the country. The fame of great skating-stars of the screen, even of the renowned Mlle. Bionde Lacasse, whom she so much resembled, was secondary to hers.

And a great share of the earnings of the skating doll poured into the pockets of Guy de Varin, who spent his time in the old garret in the house of Madame Geoffrion; who thought little of the golden stream and would not for a moment dream of swimming in it.

He had found some little peace. When he had dreamed of his toy, he had thought only, It will perhaps make a little money for Elphege and me, to tide us over the winter, until we can again take our show on tour. And he found joy in the making of it and delight as patent as that of any of the children who saw it, in watching its swift, lifelike maneuvers.

The way the thing mushroomed, grew in so short a space from a tiny marionette to a colossal figure whose graceful legs straddled the hemispheres, who towered far, far above the pygmy who invented her and the pygmies who loved her, did not at all impress him. The business end he handed over to Elphege, who was very shrewd in such matters and whose

system was to offer half of any price quoted him and to double any price he quoted.

The Skating Marionette came to Hollywood. Pete Van Alen brought one to Bionde, back in the same little bungalow with a pleasant Frenchwoman, Madame Des Grieux, for companion. He plugged the little toy in at a wall socket before Bionde came into the room. He stood back from it, watching its effect on her when she entered.

He saw her stop in the doorway, saw her eyes widen, grow bright. Her hands came up. She clapped them. She laughed. She ran over to the tiny skater swooping around her little rink and stared down at her with the rapt look of a child with its first sleeping, talking doll.

“Mon Dieu! Que c’est merveilleux!” But it is lovely, lovely. Where did you get this? Who has made it? It is so real, so lifelike.”

“It was invented by Guy de Varin,” said Pete quietly. “Perhaps that is why it’s so real and lifelike.”

“Ah!” She continued to watch the marionette, her bright head moving with its graceful motions, in her eyes a look that made a funny choking come in Pete Van Alen’s throat and a yearning that was almost pain in his heart. He was watching a little girl with a toy. But here was the toy her lover had made for her. Here was so much that he did not understand, that he could never know.

“It has made him a fortune,” he said dryly. “The toys are selling like wildfire. The studios are angling for the play rights to his puppet-show. It’s another success-story like Disney’s. He’s a big shot now. No need for him to worry about being a drag on your career. You’re only one skater. He can make a million of these.”

She did not seem to be listening. She said, proving that she had heard some of it, “He would not care about a fortune. It would mean very little to him. He wanted to make something that would please people, so he went ahead and made it. Now he will turn to something else. You do not know him.”

“No,” muttered Pete, “I don’t know him. But he must be quite a lad.” He came to her and put his hands on her shoulders. “What say you and I fly down to Yuma and get married? The picture is finished. There is no need to wait any longer.”

He moved closer to her, drawing her to him, and his toe caught the cord that was connected with the marionette and pulled the plug so that she

ceased to skate and only stood there looking somehow forlorn and lonely and little. And some of the brightness died from the eyes that had been watching. It was as if she too, Bionde, had come out of a magic world down to the hard, practical earth. Out of a world of dream into a world of reality.

“All right, Pete. I shall go whenever you say.”

“Then I say let’s go to-day. You can be ready in a few hours?”

“Oh, yes. It will be easy to get ready.”

“Good! Then I’ll call back for you.” He put his hand under her chin and tilted it and looked down into her eyes, hard and earnestly. He did not smile. He kissed her lightly and let her go. She walked to the door with him and after he had driven away she returned to the room where Mimi waited on her little pond. She touched the marionette almost timidly, shyly. Then she connected the cord and stood watching the little figure as it whirled and circled and swooped.

“There I am,” she said softly. “Only I do not go so well. One pulls the strings for me. It will be always like that. I try to fight but I cannot find the strength. The strings are not easy to break. One string made me go to Quebec, another made me skate, another pulled me away from Guy, another carried me into Pete’s arms, this last one will bind me to him. It will be the end. Oh, Guy was right to make his Mimi in my likeness. My heart has had as little to do with the ordering of this life I lead, as if it were a marionette’s heart, which is none at all. But not of ice, not cold—oh never that!”

She sat down by the skating doll and rested her head on her arms outflung on the table. Her shoulders shook. The sunlight touched the silken blondness of her hair, lightly, tenderly. The marionette skated on and on and on, a fixed smile on her pretty painted face.

The story was, of course, in the Quebec papers, and Elphege, with due subtlety, had pointed it out to him, had announced, “Mlle. Lacasse has flown with Monsieur Van Alen to a place called Yuma, where they will be married. One sees them getting on the airplane, waving good-by. She is smiling as all those actresses smile, with such teeth as never grew out of human gums. Not,” he amended hastily, “that I for a moment think her—”

“There, Elphege, it is enough. It is the end of it all. Perhaps you are happy now. Perhaps you will leave me.”

Elphege went with venom in his heart, dark hatred against this girl who had made an emptiness in Guy de Varin's life that nothing else could fill. It must be sad, mused Elphege, to love like that, the way he does, and not be loved in return. She goes off and marries another. Why should he still want the love of a girl like that? Why should something, some bright thing go from his face when I point out to him, for his own good, that now his last hope, if there was any hope left to him, has been taken away?

He could find no satisfactory answer to these questions. Guy could have given him the answers, but they were sealed up in his heart. Soon now, perhaps, he would tell Elphege the truth, let the whole world know the truth and cause those who despised her and called her heartless to kneel at her feet. Soon the whole dark story could be told and one would see the actors in their true parts and find a certain nobility in them both.

He could not picture Bionde as another man's wife. He tried not to think of it, just as he had fought hard to forget that picture of her, with Pete Van Alen's arms about her. In his heart, he knew she was his, and always would be his. What they had felt for each other, could never exist again—not between her and another man, any more than between another girl and himself. It was a bond that held our hearts, our souls together, he thought, one that could never be destroyed. She is still mine, though I shall never have her. But may she find happiness with this man she has chosen now. If she remembers me and all the things that were between us, may she remember kindly and may it cause no pain.

He went out more now, sometimes alone, most often accompanied by the little Elphege, on whom he seemed to lean. Sometimes they went skiing in the hills beyond the city. Sometimes, Elphege thought, there was something queer going on, something that had been there for a long time and he had not seen—he who prided himself on missing nothing, on having the sharpest eyes in all Quebec.

"I wish," he said to Madame Geoffrion, who had a great respect for his sagacity, "that I could tell what goes on in his mind. I thought I knew all about him. You know how gifted I am when it comes to finding out about people; and I have lived with him so long. I could have sworn I knew him and could read him as easily as I read a book. Now I do not know. I have a suspicion he is laughing at me, laughing in a queer way, mind you; that he has the laugh on everyone, even the lovely blonde one who deserted him. And it is a laugh that he does not enjoy. If only I could know, if only I could figure it out — —"

“Can you not question him, you who are so adept at asking questions?”

Elphege shook his head. “You know as well as I, my good aunt,” he said with a touch of rebuke, “that Monsieur Guy is not one to be questioned, even as diplomatically as I should question.”

“That is so,” agreed Madame Geoffrion.

“To-day he has gone skiing by himself,” Elphege frowned. “I should have gone with him. Indeed I wanted to, but he told me to stay at home. He is most skillful on the runners, yet there are times when he slows up, stops, creeps his way almost as if he were a— a blind— My God, madame!”

At the frantic note in his voice, the wildness of his eyes, as he leapt to his feet, Madame Geoffrion turned pale and moved her chair back from him as if she feared he had suddenly gone mad.

“What is it? Speak, Elphege! What is this mystery?”

Elphege seemed to speak only to himself: “He only glanced at papers. He did not go even to see her on the cinema. He refused to touch the wheel of the car. He always wore those accursed glasses— —”

Like one of the marionettes he loved gone suddenly berserk, he flung himself out of the room and clattered down the stairs. “Blind—half-blind, sometimes blind,” he kept muttering. “We were the blind ones; we had eyes to see and did not see. *Eh, mon Dieu*, what he must have endured! And what courage, what foolhardy courage, to go out on the hills alone never knowing when the darkness will fall! Oh, God help me to find him!”

De Varin coasted down a gentle slope of virgin white, marked here and there by tall spruce trees of beautiful shape. His eyes felt good to-day. He could see better, through the dark glasses, than he had since the day in the hospital when he was recovering from the concussion, when the doctor said, “There will be times when you will find it hard to see, times even when you may be almost totally blind. And, I hate to tell you this, but sooner or later — —”

Guy had stared at him that day, at his sympathetic face, his kindly eyes—Guy who was counting the hours until he could find Bionde to marry her, whose work and whose livelihood depended on his eyes. “You mean that—that there is no hope— —”

The doctor had shrugged. “I would do wrong to give you any. It may be that some new discovery, some — —”

Guy had seen his face only as a blurred thing in a dark vaporous cloud. Blind—groping—helpless—Oh, God! Not that—not that!

But that was what he had had to face. And alone, always alone. He could not ask her now to take his hand and guide him along the path of their love. The way lay straight for her. He would not mar her success. He would not ever run the risk of seeing love turn to loyalty and finally to resignation. No, through the darkness he would grope toward the deeper darkness. So he had denied his love, denied hers, suffered a quiet crucifixion that no one else might share his misery.

Now, as he coasted down the long slope up which a party of skiers climbed, he thought, How bright is the sun and how good it is to see the world and know— —

And then the blackness was upon him. The snow, the hills, the dark trees, all were blacked out as if a great hand had reached to the sun and killed its light as one kills the light of a taper. Blackness all about him. He cried out. He was moving fast now. He threw away the ski-poles, stretched out his hands like a blind man, to fend away the things that might strike and hurt him.

He seemed to have no power to think, but recklessly he flung himself into the snow and lay there for a while, his eyes tight shut. Slowly he got to his feet after kicking off the harness, and stood there. His hands outstretched, he moved a step, two steps. He heard voices near him. He touched the soft wool of a sweater, found an arm and clung to it.

“Please,” he said. “Please, I cannot see. I was hurt once. They told me I might one day be blind. I— —”

He felt the arm he clung to stiffen and begin to tremble. He said, “Do not be afraid. It will pass. There is a great doctor I saw only yesterday. He said it would pass and he can fix it so it will never come again Could you—take me home—I live in Sainte-Ursule Street— —”

“Yes, yes, I know. In a garret on Sainte-Ursule Street where you lied to the woman you loved.”

“Bionde!”

It was all part of this terrible darkness. Even his mind played tricks now. But his hand came up and traced the contours of her face, touched the wetness on her cheek. Then he felt her lips on his. Heard her whisper with those lips still close, “It’s all right now. It will be always all right.”

“But you are married now — —”

“Oh, no. Pete asked me one question in Yuma. It was, ‘Do you love me?’ And because I could not say yes—well, that is why I came here—to find the man I do love. I tried to forget, to put you out of my life. I could not. Why did you lie to me?”

“It seemed right to lie.”

“I’d never have left you, whether it was light or darkness—never. You should have known that.”

“I did know it.”

She was at his side when they took him back to the city, to the hospital. He could hear the Song of Ronsard now. It was in all the air about him; it was in her presence, her nearness. And with it was a prayer, more fervent, more heart-meant than any other he had thought or spoken. Come light for him, or come darkness, whichever it might be, she would be always with him now. “But, oh God,” he prayed, “let it be light for her and me. It has been dark so long.”

With high heart, unfearing, he faced the darkness, for her hand was in his. In that same hospital where, in the steel gray of a winter dusk—so long ago it seemed, ages gone, lives ago—he had denied his love, she stood above his bed when the bandages were taken from his eyes. Hers was the first face he saw, so dear, so loved. Even in darkness he would have seen it so, but the light was sweet.

There was a little doctor, Renault, who said, “You need not worry now, *mon vieux*. You may gaze upon the sun, if you so desire.”

“There are things brighter, fairer, than the sun, *monsieur le docteur*,” said Guy.

And the little man, looking from him to Bionde, saw in her eyes that it was so. It is wonderful, love, he mused, leaving them, almost unnoticed: they have so little need of vision, those two.

And the winter dusk came again, creeping gray and silent into that room, doing nothing to lessen the brightness that was there, closing softly around them. Then the great bells of the city filled all the air with sound and the small stars came, bright points in the frigid sky. And for them both, in that moment, there was a great peace and a wondrous promise.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled 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.

[The end of *Marionette* by Louis Arthur Cunningham]