

ST. JOHN, N. B., SATURDAY, APRIL 15, 1899.

BY THE THICKNESS OF A DOOR.

BY CHARLES G. D. ROBERTS.

"Though you are only an Englishman," said Claire, contemptuously, "teasing the black and white cat with the toe of her little beaded moccasin"—"though you are only an Englishman, and such a stupid one I do think you are worth more than five livres Tournois; which is just what the Black Abbe's Mimacs will get for your scalp at Quebec if you do not go away at once."

"But, Mademoiselle," I pleaded, "I have just arrived, and there is so much—so many things I want to say—and Heaven has so far beyond my fondest expectation favored me by this opportunity, and—"

"But, Monsieur," she interrupted, with the faintest delicate mockery of my pleading inflection, "it is your absence just now that I especially covet."

"You are expecting some one?" I cried, a certain heat in my voice.

"Yes, Monsieur," she answered, her eyes still intent upon the ecstatic cat; "I am momentarily expecting a visitor."

"More welcome than I," plainly, Mademoiselle, said I, my heart sinking. "But I have come far, in the hope of a word with you; and I cannot quietly yield up this dear occasion to another man. Who is it that thrusts me from you?" I demanded with quick wrath. There was the faintest suggestion of a smile at the corners of her lips.

"I don't remember to have given you any right to ask such questions," she said thoughtfully, "Ily rather than unkindly."

"Of course not, Mademoiselle," I protested, agitated at my own presumption. "But—surely you were more gracious to me when I was here last autumn. You did not send me away so abruptly."

The broad white eyelids remained cast down; the sweet mouth grew grave; neglecting the cat for a moment, she said: "Indeed, I am not now ungracious to you, Monsieur. The visitor I am expecting is Father LaGarde, the Black Abbe himself. And he comes to see, not me, I assure you, but an English officer whom he expects to capture here this morning. He does not guess that I am warned and look for his coming."

"Then," I cried joyously, "there is a little time for me before he comes. I promise you I will make my adieu in—"

But at this she grew suddenly excited. She sprang up (greatly offending the cat), laid forth appealing little hands upon my scarlet coat sleeves, and lifted at last to my face her wonderful eyes. Such eyes,—for a year now I had been carrying their deep light in my heart of hearts,—not hazel, and not velvet, but with lurking lights of amber-green and ethereal crystal, like the water of a deep woodland pool. Now they seemed to blacken with unmistakable fear.

"Oh," she implored, "go! Go at once, if you have any care for me. Go, for my sake!" And she pushed me toward the door. "Go through the house. I have let you stay too long. I feel them coming. Go out through the sheds, and down through the spruce woods,—quick, quick!" But as I yielded to her terror,—a terror which thrilled me with joy, being a terror for me—she checked herself, her face whitened to the lips, her hands dropped to her sides.

"It is too late!" she said faintly, her glance going past my shoulder and out across the fields. "There they go, five of them, into the spruce woods."

I followed her glance with, I confess, some uneasiness, and a vast remorse for having brought this trouble upon her by my obstinacy. She turned and looked through the screen of hop vines which shaded the spacious porch.

"And here comes the Black Abbe," she whispered, her hand going up to her breast as she leaned hopelessly against the pillar.

I laid my hand on my sword, much perplexed at the snarl I had got myself into. But in a moment Claire recovered her wits.

"Right here! Right behind the door!" she exclaimed. "And I will tie it back with this old string as if it had been tied back for ages. It's the only place they won't look!"

The outer door of the hall opened back against the wing of the house, leaving a space scant enough into which I slipped. A moment more and her nimble fingers had the door tied carelessly to the wall, leaving an inch-wide crack through which I could peer forth upon the shaded porch and the sunlit world of Acadia beyond. I saw Claire reseat herself with the composure of coolest indifference in her Indian wicker chair and conulate the black-and-white cat back to her lap.

I saw the black Abbe a tall, sinister form in his shabby soutane, striding up the yellow-brown road between the baking buttercup-golden meadows. He came slowly, with a secure deliberation which seemed to say, "He is in the trap. He cannot wriggle out at any corner. There is no need to hurry."

This look of confidence on the grim priest's face was the thing that first brought home to me the gravity of my peril. For the first time I felt that here, on this fair morning of the green Acadia summer, under the roof and before the very eyes of the woman I loved, I was in truth only too likely to lose my life ingloriously to a priest and a pack of savages.

Shame, more than fear, I think, burned within me as I stood motionless in my precarious hiding-place. I had a fierce impulse to step out, with bare sword, and end

the thing swiftly, with at least the satisfaction of feeling ere I fell that I had rid the Acadia land of its greatest curse. To kill the Black Abbe would be a public service indeed. Yet,—I could not stain my sword on an unarmed priest. Further, I feared to involve Claire. I felt that she had taken the threads of fate into her own white fingers, and that it was no business of mine to snail the pattern she had set herself to weave.

All this I thought rapidly. At the same time the shivering, tender-colored world which I saw so vividly through the crack between door and wall cut itself deep into my memory, as things seem in a crisis are wont to do.

It was ridiculous to think that this throat of mine was in deadly jeopardy; that my life now hung upon the wit and resources of a girl!

"She can do it, if ever there was a woman who could," said I to myself as I watched the beautiful, firm, composed face, lighting now with a smile of courteous welcome as LaGarde's heavy step cracked an'ocratically on the platform. "Good morning, Father LaGarde!" she said civilly, rising to greet him. "My father has gone over to Pizquid, but I look for his return within the hour. Please be seated."

"I have not come to see your good father, my child," replied a peculiar rasping voice, not unkindly, but with a too scant ceremony, which made me itch to teach him manners. The next moment the owner of the harsh voice came closely into my line of view as he stepped over beside the chair wherein Claire had been sitting. He peered out between the hop vines.

With interest and repulsion I noted the strong, fanatic, bitter lines of his face, the long and deep jaw, the piercing light eyes, pinched narrowly into the root of the nose, the high-peaked, narrow skull, whose tonsure seemed to me (he had removed his hat) the mark of its struggle to climb clear of the prickly irritation of its stiff hair.

"There would be time for him to secure hiding-place," said he thoughtfully. "Tell me, my daughter, has he retired to the cellar or to the attic?" The deepening insolence of his tone maddened me.

"What do you mean, Father LaGarde?" asked Claire very coldly, seating herself on a bench that stood where it would best obstruct any chance disturbance of my hiding-place.

The Black Abbe turned and gave her a long, penetrating look, full of irony.

"I chance to know, my child," said he with dangerous smoothness, his voice softening to a marvel, "that Captain Marsh is in this house. I want him."

"You have been misinformed," answered Claire, curtly positive.

"My own eyes informed me of his coming, my daughter," continued the priest in tones now soft as silk. "And I have taken sufficient precaution that he should not get away."

"As I have already said, you are mistaken, Father LaGarde," repeated Mademoiselle, rising, and with a plain imitation in her attitude that her visitor might consider himself dismissed.

The visitor ignored both her attitude and her denial. He turned upon her, towering in dark authority. "Tell me where he is hiding," he commanded, no longer smooth of speech or accent.

But upon Mademoiselle de la Mare his air of command was wasted.

"You forget, Monsieur," she retorted scornfully, "that you are not talking to one of your flock or to a girl of the village."

The priest's eyes contracted angrily. Hitherto he had seemed to take a dramatic interest in the matter, varying his tones, and acting and speaking for the effect, and pleasing himself with the game. Now he was himself.

"I have no time to waste in parley with a bit of a girl," he snapped. "My men will find him." And, at a guttural word which I knew not, there came to my ear the light padding of moccasined feet upon the porch. Claire sprang into the doorway.

"I forbid you or your followers to enter my father's house in his absence!" she exclaimed with firmness, but with a certain tremor in her voice as if she had a fear which she could not quite control.

"Stand aside, girl," he ordered curtly. "You shall answer to my father for this, Monsieur," she cried. I noted and began to understand the cunning assumption of terror behind the brave words. "Excellent, Oh, wise and ready wit!" I murmured to myself.

"Oh, you can safely leave Monsieur de la Mare to me!" retorted the Abbe with an unpleasant laugh.

"I have told you, Monsieur, that there is no one there. There is no one there!" she repeated, and her voice was now pleading almost to tears.

"Girls have lied before this to shield their lovers!" was the brutal answer. "Come, stand aside, lest you be made to."

"How dare you!" she gasped, and slipped again into the chair where I could see her. Her face was averted from my hiding-place, but I could see one little ear and the sweet roundure of her neck. They were crimson

with shame. I had much ado to hold myself in check at this sign of distress.

In went the padding feet, and for an instant longer I heard them on the wide hall floor. But the priest failed to do as she expected he remained beside her on the porch.

"I will wait here and explain to your father when he comes."

"If you set those animals to desecrate our house," cried Claire, her teeth shutting viciously between every other word, "you would at least, if you had ever been a gentleman, go with them and see what they do!"

I saw her nervously jerking her handkerchief to and fro between her slim fingers. She was blushed and trembling.

"Don't be alarmed for your gown," sneered LaGarde, still too angry to amuse himself by affecting good humor. "It is only your lover they are after."

At this gratuitous insolence she did not seem even angry, at which I was profoundly astonished.

I had been on the point of stepping forth to whip the cur with my scabbard, but perceiving that she was no more moved than to smile coolly upon him, tapping her little white moccasins on the hop-vine trellis, I thought better of it. If she did not feel herself insulted it were mere presumption on my part to interfere. Was I to teach her she had received an insult? I quenched my wrath in wonder, wherein there lurked a sweet delight.

It was not till long afterward,—so dull was I,—I understood the matter. She had feared that I might break out, avenge the rudeness, and ruin all. Therefore she had put the curb on her gall'd pride and seemed to take no offense.

"You reassure me most marvelously, Monsieur!" she murmured, and turned upon him a glance of mirth so genuine and so inexplicable that he glared at her with unaffected wonder from beneath his shapeless narrow brows. He did not like to be puzzled. This girl, with her unaccountable variations of temper, puzzled him.

I saw him reddening a brickly color in the wrinkles of his rough-brown jaw. But he spoke not a word. He simply eyed her, seeking to disconcert her—and she—she grew but the more gayly at ease under the glance which, as I had heard, was wont to make all Acadia tremble.

Presently he shifted this unprofitable exercise of his eyes and grew intent upon the doorway whence he expected his savages to drag me with no more delay. I saw Claire give a quick glance out through the hop leaves and turn her face at once back toward her antagonist. What she had seen plainly gave her satisfaction. I looked also.

Up from the red St. Croix, striding hastily through the buttercup meadows, came the tall form of Denys de la Mare. He came with an anxious air upon his face, as if one who sees something amiss. Perhaps he had marked the savages lurking about.

Just now came the running of furtive feet from within, and LaGarde broke out with angry interrogatories in Mimac, from which I gathered, not without reason, that the savages had failed to find me. There were low replies, strange mixture of the harsh and musical, as that language is, and the priest turned sharply to Mademoiselle.

"There is one chamber locked," said he. "Give me the key."

"Pardon me, Father LaGarde," she answered very sweetly, but with a sort of exultation in her voice, "but you surely cannot ask a young girl to throw open her private chamber to such rabble. This is my own room. I took occasion to lock it some hours ago for reasons quite personal."

Having, as he imagined, his quarry now marked down where there could be no mistake, LaGarde recovered his composure and lost some haste.

"I doubt not, my daughter, that your reason is quite personal," he spoke in an indulgent tone,—"and looks well in a red coat. But, indeed, it was not some hours ago that you locked him in, since it was not one hour back that he passed up this way from the village. It was little courtesy of him to seek such a place for hiding and subject a maiden's refuge to such disclosure. But the King's service respects not ladies' chambers. Give me the key, child, or I must force the door. The game is up!"

The words were scarce out of his mouth when, with a little cry, Claire sprang forward and clutched her father's arms.

"Father!" she panted, "this base priest insults me. He says I have a man locked up in my room. And she sobbed a little. The strain had been long and terrible, and now she shifted it to her father's shoulders.

There was silence for a second, and very greatly I desired to see the face of Denys de la Mare, which was not within the scant range of my view. His voice when he spoke was stern enough.

"I beg you to explain yourself, Father LaGarde!" was all he said. But I gathered that, however intimate had been these two, they were like to be divided now.

"It is soon told my friend!" responded the Black Abbe coolly. "Less than an hour back there came to this house, presumably to see your daughter in your absence, an English officer from Halifax, one Captain Marsh." (The priest being a fanatic, with no great knowledge of human nature and no understanding of the comradeship between this father and daughter, thought to set the one against the other by his suggestion.) "My followers saw him enter the house. It has been closely surrounded ever since. There is no escape. He is within, as surely as if I now saw him there with these eyes,—which have seen the undoing of many another English dog. The outbuildings have been searched, the house has been searched, attic to cellar. In vain. One room has not been searched,—your daughter's chamber. The door is locked. She refuses me the key. I call upon you, Denys de la Mare, in the name of France and of the church, bid the girl give up the key,—deliver up the shaking wretch she hides!"

"I have given him my word of honor, Father," interrupted Claire, "that there is no man in the house. I give it now to you. Will you shame me before this low fellow, who disgraces his gown and tonsure?"

"Surely your word is enough for me, Claire," answered De la Mare. "If you say it, there is no man there. That's all. But as for you, Father LaGarde, you have presumed grossly in sending your red skin through my house without my authority. It served nothing but your own vainglorious and tyrannous pride. The King's service could safely have awaited my return from the village, if, as you say, you had your prey fairly trapped."

"Fie!" said the priest. "What I want of you now, Denys de la Mare, is that door opened. We can argue the point of ceremony afterward."

There was a weighty pause. I felt for the high-spirited Frenchman, forced to hold himself in check lest he bring peril on his child. In a second or two he answered, but not to the priest.

"Dear heart," said he tenderly, "this fellow must have his way. Thou canst not rest under his insinuation. His lie must be thrust back into his throat. Go thou with him alone, open the door, open every box and cupboard, shake out for him your cloaks and kilts. After all, he is a priest,—of a kind. But if one of his redskins goes with you I'll run that one through with my sword."

LaGarde laughed, but seemed satisfied. To get his way was enough for him.

"Go on, mistress. I follow you!" said he. And I saw that at least he lacked not courage.

For some minutes there was silence save for De la Mare's impatient drumming on the porch post and a faint rustling of moccasins in the hall, where, as I inferred, the savages awaited a signal from their leader. Then the red skins came out, descended the steps, and gathered in a solid planted group over and against a bed of blossoming phlox where I could well see them and learn to pray for deliverance from so murderous a crew.

Close after them, and heeding them just so much as if they had been a puff of dust blown before her, came Claire, seating herself once more in her wicker chair by the vines.

The picture gave me a strange sense of security, there—while my life hung on the thinnest edge of hazared, the veil between this world and the next reduced to the thickness of a painted door.

LaGarde came lingeringly, and I cursed him with unreasonable vixation because he came not where I could see his disappointed face.

"It is unbelievable!" he muttered. "The room is empty. Were it in France, now, I'd swear there was a secret cupboard wherein she'd bestowed him. But what need of such contrivances in Acadia? It looks as if he had escaped us, and by your face you're glad of it, Denys de la Mare!" He flashed out in sudden fury, "I'll search yet once more!"

I heard De la Mare spring into his doorway.

"By God," he cried, "you cross not this threshold again. You've had your way. Your insolence has gone unpunished. Now go you!"

"I go when I please,—and come when I please," retorted the priest, and in the colossal egotism of his tones there was yet a something which said he was not going to force a final quarrel, at least on the moment. "I will not search again,—not because you forbid me, but because I see it is idle. But I tell you, Denys de la Mare, I still think the cur had the dog concealed within, I'll burn your house about your ears rather than he should escape. You, and such as you, need a lesson, if Acadia would be kept true to King and Church."

De la Mare took a stride forward, and on the edge of the steps the Black Abbe turned and faced him.

"It is you who need a lesson," cried the Acadia gentleman, his voice trembling.

"My hand itches sorely to lay this scabbard at out your ears!"

"Yonder are ten reasons why you should not," retorted the priest, with a scorching calm. "And there are a score more reasons like it in the woods yonder."

My heart was hot within me for this high-spirited Frenchman, compelled to curb his righteous indignation. Had it not been for Claire, I truly believe he would of kicked the tansured bully down the steps and taken any consequences with good will. But he mightily held himself in hand.

"It is a proper way to serve your cause, surely," he said with accusing bitterness and a certain sorrow in his voice, "to drive into the arms of England the few honest gentlemen of Acadia whose hearts yet hold true to King Louis. To the English, forsooth we are compelled to turn for protection from a mad priest and a pack of redskins, who pretend to serve France. You, Francois LaGarde, well called the Black Abbe, are the curse of this land."

"Fool!" retorted LaGarde with easy contempt, "you to prate to me of taking refuge with the English. What have I to do but send the Governor a hint through my tools in Halifax, of the part you played so zealously three years ago at—"

But at this moment I foresaw complications. My mind for once worked on the instant.

"Hold!" I shouted, snapping the string and swinging the door with a mighty slam as I strode forth. "I'll hear no secrets!"

My sword was naked in my right hand. I had had it ready this long time, you may be sure. With my left I drew a pistol from my belt, and knowing that now the fat was all in the fire, I discharged it point blank at LaGarde.

That miscreant leaped, however, at the lifting of my arm, else had he sorely degraded an honest gallows; and my shot fetched down a vermillion faced savage who was happily in range. As my black frocked enemy jumped, De la Mare was at my side on the instant, his sword drawn.

"Within," he cried, "he shouted to Claire; but she, picking up my empty pistol, coolly but swiftly proceeded to reload it."

The savages were brave enough, but somewhat taken aback by my appearance and the death of their fellow. Ever sparing of their own skins, and seeing us two well armed and desperate, they nimbly withdrew out of pistol-shot to take counsel.

"They give us time, Monsieur," muttered De la Mare, his long dark face working with the fever of the fight. "The guns! The guns, Claire! They're both loaded!"

But as she sprang to obey I stayed her with my left hand. I had looked down toward the red St. Croix. I had seen something.

"No need!" said I, striving to keep the exultation from my voice. "Look! I and I strode out upon the steps where my scarlet coat shone in the sun, and waved my sword above my head and shouted at the top of my lungs:

"England! This way! This way. Double!"

Up from the waterside came a squad of English infantry on the run.

LaGarde saw, and, gathering up his soutane, ran too, with more speed than priestly decorum. He knew there was a rope at Halifax itching hotly for his neck. His followers seemed to drop into the grass, so instantly they vanished, stooping and gliding like snakes.

I turned to my astonished hosts. Claire had reseat d herself in the wicker chair,—but the black and white cat, offended by the clap of my pistol, had gone. De la Mare stood beside me, leaning on his naked sword, interrogation in his grave eyes,—and a vague apprehension which I speedily set at rest.

"I'll lead out my hand to him."

"Thank you with all my heart, Monsieur," said I with terror, "for your most loyal backing!"

"I was committed! But I have more to thank you for, Captain Marsh!"

I waved this aside.

"This is my command coming," said I. "It was high coming too late. One of my reasons for calling this morning, Monsieur, was to ask your advice as to where they had best be quartered in Pizquid. Under the circumstances—"

"Under the circumstances, I beg that they be quartered here and on my tenants," he interrupted eagerly, "unless there be any other in the country who needs your protection more. And what was your other reason, Monsieur?"

I hesitated. Should I? Could I dare at that lucky moment? I looked at Claire. Her great eyes met mine with an instant's flaming glance of imperious prohibition. I dared not.

"Not—not just now!" I stammered, suddenly disheartened. "By and by, when we have better occasion, Monsieur, I will beg you to listen to me."

"At your pleasure, Monsieur," he answered, with a courtesy which I could not but note had warmth in it.

I ventured to look again at Claire, but could not catch her eye. She had thrust forward one little foot and was very intently studying the beadwork on her moccasin. I took courage at seeing a flash slowly steal over her wonderful face.

Then I turned, my heart swelling with sudden triumph, and my squad halted before the steps. Very pleasantly their bayonets rattled as they came to attention.