

Douglas Amanda M.

A Little Girl in Old St. Louis



Amanda Douglas

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Cities that have grown from small hamlets seldom keep register of their earlier days, except in the legends handed down in families. St. Louis has the curious anomaly of beginning over several times. For the earliest knowledge of how the little town looked I wish to express my obligations for some old maps and historical points to Mr. Frederick M. Crunden, Public Librarian, Miss Katharine I. Moody, and Colonel David Murphy.

A. M. Douglas.

CHAPTER I – RENÉE DE LONGUEVILLE

The bell had clanged and the gates of the stockade were closed. There were some houses on the outside; there was not so much fear of the Indians here, for the French had the art of winning them into friendship. Farms were cultivated, and the rich bottom lands produced fine crops. Small as the town was twenty years before the eighteenth century ended, it was the headquarters of a flourishing trade. The wisdom of Pierre Laclède had laid the foundation of a grand city. The lead mines even then were profitably worked, and supplied a large tract of the Mississippi River east and west.

Antoine Freneau stood a few moments in the door of his log hut, down by the old Mill Creek, listening with his hand to one ear. There were sounds of spring all about, but he was not heeding them. Then he turned, closed the door, which was braced on the inner side with some rough iron bands; fastened it with the hook, and let down a chain. He was seldom troubled with unexpected evening visitors.

The log hut was hidden at the back with trees enough to form a sort of grove. It had two rooms. This at the front was a sort of miscellaneous storehouse. Freneau did quite a trade with the Indians and the boatmen going up and down the river. There was no real attempt at orderly store-keeping. Articles were in heaps and piles. One had almost to stumble over them.

The back room was larger. There was a stone chimney, with a great wide fireplace, where Freneau was cooking supper. In the far corner was a bed raised on sawed rounds of logs, with skins stretched over the framework, on which was a sack of hay with a heap of Indian blankets, just as he had crawled out of it in the morning. A table and three stools manufactured by himself; a rude sort of closet, and a curious old brass-bound chest, now almost black with age, completed the furnishing. The puncheon floor, in common use at that time, was made with logs split in the middle and the rounding side laid in a sort of clay plaster that hardened and made it very durable. The top would get worn smooth presently. The walls were hung with various trophies and arms of different kinds. Two windows had battened shutters; one stood a little way open, and this was on the creek side.

The supper had a savory fragrance. He had baked a loaf of bread on a heated flat stone, spreading the dough out thin and turning it two or three times. A dish of corn stewed with salted pork, a certain kind of coffee compounded of roasted grains and crushed in the hollow of a stone, gave out a fragrance, and now he was broiling some venison on the coals.

There were sundry whispers about the old man as to smuggling. Once his place had been searched, he standing by, looking on and jibing the men so engaged, turning any apparent mystery inside out for them. Then he would be gone days at a time, but his house was securely fastened. Occasionally he had taken longer journeys, and once he had brought back from New Orleans a beautiful young wife, who died when her baby girl was born. The nurse had taken it to her home in Kaskaskia. Then it had been sent to the Sisters' School at New Orleans. She had been home all one winter and had her share in the merry making. In the spring her father took her to Canada, to the great disappointment of hosts of admirers. At Quebec she was married and went to France. That was ten years ago. He had grown queer and morose since, and turned miserly.

There was a peremptory thump at the door, and Antoine started, glancing wildly about an instant, then went through and unfastened the stout hook. The chain he did not remove: it was about a foot from the floor and well calculated to trip up any unwary intruder and send him sprawling face downward.

The night had grown dark, and a mist-like rain had set in. The trees were beating about in the rising wind.

“Open wide to us, Antoine Freneau! See what I have brought you, if you can make light enough.”

“Gaspard Denys – is it you? Why, I thought you were in the wilds of Canada. And – ”

He kicked aside the chain and peered over at the small figure beside Gaspard.

Gaspard had just stood the child down, and his arms tingled with the strain when the muscles were set loose.

“You have brought her!”

There was a sound in the voice far from welcome, almost anger.

“Yes; your messenger from New Orleans told the truth. The nurse or companion, whatever you may call her, had instructions, if no one claimed her, to place her in a convent.”

“And you – you interfered?” Freneau struck his clinched fist hard on a pile of skins.

Gaspard laughed.

“What I am to do with a child is more than I can tell,” Freneau said doggedly, almost threateningly.

“Well, you can give us something to eat. Your supper has a grand fragrance to a hungry man. Then we can discuss the other points. A bear taken away from his meal is always cross – eh, Antoine?”

Freneau turned swarthy; he was dark, and the red tinge added made him look dangerous.

“I don’t understand – ”

“Well, neither do I. You married your daughter to a French title when you knew she would have been happier here with a young fellow who loved her; and – yes, I am sure she loved me. Somewhere back, when my forebears called themselves St. Denys, there might have been a title in the family. In this New World we base our titles on our courage, ambitions, successes. Then her little daughter was born, and she pined away in the old Château de Longueville and presently died, while her husband was paying court and compliments to the ladies at the palace of Louis XVII. There are deep mutterings over in France. And De Longueville, with his half dozen titles, marries one of Marie Antoinette’s ladies in waiting. The child goes on in the old château. Two boys are born to the French inheritance, and little mademoiselle is not worth a rush. She will be sent to her grandfather somewhere in the province of Louisiana. But the nurse goes to Canada to marry her lover, expatriated for some cause. You see, I know it all. If mademoiselle had stayed in France she would have been put in a convent.”

“The best thing! the best thing!” interrupted the old man irascibly.

“Word was sent to enter her in a convent at Quebec. Well, I have brought her here. Give us some supper.”

He had been taking off the child’s cap and coat after they entered the living room. A great flaming torch stood up in one corner of the chimney, and shed a peculiar golden-red light around the room, leaving some places in deep shadow. The old man turned his meat, took up his cake of bread, and put them on the table. Then he went for plates and knives.

“This is your grandfather, Renée,” Denys said, turning the child to face him.

The girl shrank a little, and then suddenly surveyed him from his yarn stockings and doeskin breeches up to his weather-beaten and not especially attractive face, surmounted by a shock of grizzled hair. She looked steadily out of large brown eyes. She was slim, with a clear-cut face and air of dignity, a child of nine or so. Curiously enough, his eyes fell. He turned in some confusion without a word and went on with his preparations.

“Let us have some supper. It is not much. Even if I had expected a guest I could not have added to it.”

“It is a feast to a hungry man. Our dinner was not over-generous.”

Gaspard took one side of his host and placed the little girl opposite her grandfather. She evinced no surprise. She had seen a good deal of rough living since leaving old Quebec.

Antoine broke the bread in chunks and handed it to each. The dish of corn was passed and the venison steak divided.

“After this long tramp I would like to have something stronger than your home-brewed coffee, though that’s not bad. Come, be a little friendly to a returned traveller,” exclaimed the guest.

“You should have had it without the asking, Gaspard Denys, if you had given me a moment’s time. You came down the Illinois, I suppose?”

“To St. Charles. There the boat was bound to hang up for the night. But Pierre Joutel brought us down in his piroque after an endless amount of talk. There was a dance at St. Charles. So it was dark when we reached here. Lucky you are outside the stockade.”

“And you carried me,” said the child, in a clear, soft voice that had a penetrative sound.

Antoine started. Why should he hear some pleading in the same voice suddenly strike through the years?

Gaspard poured out a glass of wine. Then he offered the bottle to Antoine, who shook his head.

“How long since?” asked Gaspard mockingly.

“I do not drink at night.”

“Renée, you are not eating. This corn is good, better than with the fish. And the bread! Antoine, you could change the name of the town or the nickname. Go into the baking business.”

Freneau shrugged his shoulders.

Scarcity of flour and bread had at one time given the town the appellation of Pain Court. Now there were two bakeries, but many of the settlers made excellent bread. Freneau’s bread cake was split in the middle and buttered, at least Gaspard helped himself liberally and spread the child’s piece with the soft, sweet, half-creamy compound.

“You must eat a little of the meat, Renée. You must grow rosy and stout in this new home.”

The men ate heartily enough. Everything was strange to her, though for that matter everything had been strange since leaving the old château. The post-chaise, the day in Paris, the long journey across the ocean, the city of Quebec with its various peoples, and the other journey through lakes and over portages. Detroit, where they had stayed two days and that had appeared beautiful to her; the little towns, the sail down the Illinois River to the greater one that seemed to swallow it up.

Marie Loubet had said her rich grandfather in the new country had sent for her, and that her father did not care for her since his sons were born. Indeed, he scarcely gave her a thought until it occurred to him that her American-French grandfather was well able to provide for her. Her mother’s dot had been spent long ago. He wanted to sell the old château and its many acres of ground, for court living was high, and the trend of that time was extravagance.

“You had better place your daughter in a convent,” said the amiable stepmother, who had never seen the little girl but twice. “The boys will be all we can care for. I hope heaven will not send me any daughters. They must either have a large dot or striking beauty. And I am sure this girl of yours will not grow up into a beauty.”

Yet her mother had been beautiful the Count remembered. And he smiled when he thought of the dower he had exacted from the old trader. No doubt there was plenty of money still, and this grandchild had the best right to it. She might like it better than convent life.

Marie’s lover had emigrated two years before, and had sent her money to pay her passage. Why, it was almost a miraculous opening. So Renée de Longueville was bundled off to the new country.

And now she sat here, taking furtive glances at her grandfather, who did not want her. No one in her short life had been absolutely cross to her, and she was quite used to the sense of not being wanted until she met Gaspard Denys. Of the relationships of life she knew but little; yet her childish heart had gone out with great fervor to him when he said, “I loved your mother. I ought to have married her; then you would have been my little girl.”

“Why did you not?” she asked gravely. Then with sweet seriousness, “I should like to be your little girl.”

“You shall be.” He pressed her to his heart, and kissed down amid the silken curls.

So now she did not mind her grandfather’s objection to her; she knew with a child’s intuition he did not want her. But she could, she *did*, belong to Uncle Gaspard, and so she was safe. A better

loved child might have been crushed by the knowledge, but she was always solacing herself with the next thing. This time it was the first, the very first thing, and her little heart gave a beat of joy.

Yet she was growing tired and sleepy, child fashion. The two men were talking about the fur trade, the pelts that had come in, the Indians and hunters that were loitering about. It had been a long day to her, and the room was warm. The small head drooped lower with a nod.

There was a pile of dressed skins one side of the room, soft and silken, Freneau's own curing.

Gaspard paused suddenly, glanced at her, then rose and took her in his arms and laid her down on them tenderly. She did not stir, only the rosy lips parted as with a half smile.

"Yes, tell me what to do with her," Antoine exclaimed, as if that had been the gist of the conversation. "You see I have no one to keep house; then I am out hunting, going up and down the river, working my farm. I couldn't be bothered with womankind. I can cook and keep house and wash even. I like living alone. I could send her to New Orleans," raising his eyes furtively.

"You will do nothing of the kind," said the other peremptorily. "Antoine Freneau, you owe me this child. You know I was in love with the mother."

"You were a mere boy," retorted the old man disdainfully.

"I was man enough to love her then and always. I have never put any one in her place. And the last time we walked together over yonder by the pond, I told her I was going up north to make money for her, and that in a year I should come back. I was twenty, she just sixteen. I can see her now; I can hear her voice in the unformed melody of the child's. We made no especial promise, but we both knew. I meant to ask your consent when I came back. Seven months afterward, on my return, I found you had whisked her off and married her to the Count, who, after all, cared so little for her that her child is nothing to him. I don't know what lies you told her, but I know she would never have given me up without some persuasion near to force."

The old man knew. It had been a lie. He kept out of Gaspard's way for the next two years, and it was well for him.

"There was no force," he returned gruffly. "Do you not suppose a girl can see? He was a fine fellow and loved her, and she was ready to go with him. No one dragged her to church. Well, the priest would have had something to say. They are not wild Indians at Quebec, and know how to treat a woman."

Gaspard had never forced more than this out of him. But he was sure some trickery had won the day and duped them both.

"Well, what have you gained?" mockingly. "You might have kept your daughter here and had grandchildren growing up about you, instead of living like a lonely old hermit."

"The life suits me well enough," in a gruff tone.

"Then give me the child that should have been mine. You don't want her."

"What will you do with her?"

"Have a home some day and put her in it."

"Bah! And you are off months at a time!"

"There would be some one to look after her. I shall not lead this roving life forever. If she were less like her mother you might keep her, since you were so won by her father. And I am not a poor man, Antoine Freneau."

"She is such a child." Did Gaspard mean that some day he might want to marry her?

"That is what I want. Oh, you don't know –"

He paused abruptly. Antoine could never understand the longing that had grown upon him through these weeks to possess the child, to play at fatherhood.

"No, I shall not be likely to marry," almost as if he had suspected what was in Antoine's pause, but he did not. "And I've envied the fathers of children. They had something to work for, to hope for. And now I say I want Renée because she is such a child. I wish she could stay like this just five

years; then I'd be willing to have her grow up. But I know you, Antoine Freneau, and you won't take half care of her; you couldn't love her, it isn't in you. But you shall not crowd her out of love."

"You talk like a fool, Gaspard Denys! But if you want the child – I am an old man, and I tell you frankly that I don't know what to do with her. I would have to change my whole life."

"And I would be glad to change mine for such a cause. You must promise not to interfere in any way. We will have some writings drawn up and signed before the priest."

Antoine gave a yawn. "To-morrow, or any time you like. What are you going to do now? It is late. If you will take a shakedown in the other room – you see, I'm not prepared for visitors."

"Yes; I have slept in worse places. The child has a box of clothes at St. Charles. Hers will have to do for to-night."

He straightened out the impromptu bed and fixed the child more comfortably. He was tired and sleepy himself. Antoine lighted a bit of wick drawn through a piece of tin floating in a bowl of oily grease and took it in the storeroom, where both men soon arranged a sort of bunk.

"Good-night," said Antoine, and shut the door.

But he did not go to bed. The fire had mostly burned out, and now the torch dropped down and the room was full of shadows. He sat awhile on the edge of the bed and made it creak; then he rose and opened the shutter very softly, creeping out. Even then he listened suspiciously. Turning, he ran swiftly down to the river's edge, through the wet sedge of last year's grass. Then he gave a low whistle.

Some one answered with an oath. "We were just going away," in a hissing French voice. "What the devil kept you so?"

"I could not get away. There was a fellow," and Antoine prefaced the excuse with an oath. "He wouldn't go; I had to fix a bunk for him."

"Antoine Freneau, if you betray us –" in a threatening tone.

"Ah, bah! Would I kill the goose that lays golden eggs? Come, hurry."

They unloaded some cases from the piroque and dumped them on the soft ground.

"Now, carry them yourself. What! No barrow? You are a fool! But we must be off up the river."

There was considerable smuggling in spite of the watchfulness of the authorities. Duties were levied on so many things, and some – many, indeed – closely under government supervision.

Antoine Freneau tugged and swore. The cases of brandy were not light. He went back and forth, every time peering in the window and listening; but all was quiet. The cases he hid among the trees. He had drawn some tree branches, ostensibly for firewood, and covered the cases with this brush until he could dispose of them more securely.

Once, several years before, his house had been thoroughly ransacked in his absence. He knew he was suspected of unlawful dealings, and he had a dim misgiving that Gaspard had one end of the secret. He had more than once been very overbearing.

He came in wet and tired, and, disrobing himself, crawled into bed. Fine work, indeed, it would be to have a housekeeper and a prying child! He laughed to think Gaspard fancied that he would be unwilling to give her up.

Still he had hated Count de Longueville that he should have extorted so much dowry. But then it seemed a great thing to have titled grandsons and a daughter with the entrée of palaces, although he would never have gone to witness her state and consequence.

Every year money had grown dearer and dearer to him, though, miser like, he made no spread, never bragged, but pleaded poverty when he paid church dues at Christmas and Easter.

CHAPTER II – OLD ST. LOUIS

Soon after daylight the strong west wind drove away the rain and clouds. The air was soft and balmy, full of the indescribable odors of spring. Birds began their pipings; robin and thrush and meadow-larks and wood-pigeons went circling about on glistening wings.

Antoine found himself some dry clothes and kindled his fire. He would bake a few corn cakes; they had demolished the loaf of bread last night. There was a flitch of dried bacon and some eggs.

The door opened, and Gaspard wished his host good-morning. Renée was still asleep.

There was a little rivulet that emptied in the mill pond, and near the house Freneau had hollowed out quite a basin. Gaspard went down here for his morning ablutions. A tall, well-developed man, just turned of thirty with a strong, decisive face, clear blue eyes that could flash like steel in a moment of indignation, yet in the main were rather humorous; chestnut hair, closely cropped, and a beard trimmed in the same fashion. He soused his head now in the miniature basin and shook it like a water dog. Then he drew in long breaths of the divine morning air, and glanced about with a sort of worship in his heart, took a few steps this way and that. Antoine watched him with bated breath, he was so near the secret.

But Denys had heard nothing in the night. He was tired and had slept soundly. Suddenly he bethought himself of the little girl and went into the house. Antoine was preparing breakfast. Renée was sitting up, glancing round. She had been in so many strange places this did not disturb her.

She rose upright now, and stretched out her hands with a half-timid, half-joyous smile.

“Uncle Gaspard,” she said, “where are we?”

Old Antoine raised his head. The French was so pure, the voice had an old reminder of the one back of her mother.

“We are at St. Louis, child.”

“And where is the King?”

“Oh, my little girl, back in France. There is no king here. And we are not French any longer, but Spanish.”

“I am French.” She said it proudly.

“We keep our hearts and our language French. Some day there may be another overturn. I do not see as it matters much. The Spanish are pretty good to us.”

“Good! And with these cursed river laws!” grumbled Antoine.

“If report says true, it can’t interfere very much with you.”

“Report is a liar,” the man flung out savagely.

Gaspard Denys laughed.

After a moment he said, “Isn’t there a towel or a cloth of some kind? I dried myself in the air.”

“I told you I had not any accommodations for womenkind. You should have left her at the convent. Farther back, it is De Longueville’s business to care for her.”

“But you see he did not. You and he are her only blood kin, and you both cast her off. It is well she has found a friend.”

“The convent and the Sisters would have been better.”

“Come, man, some sort of a towel,” exclaimed Denys imperatively.

Antoine rummaged in the old chest, and presently brought forth one. Denys noted that it was soft and fine and not of home manufacture. Then he led Renée out to the little basin and, dipping the towel in, washed her face and hands.

“Oh, how good it feels!” she cried delightedly.

Gaspard had grown quite used to playing lady’s maid. He took a comb out of its case of Indian work that he carried about in his pocket, and combed out the tumbled hair. She winced now and then

at a bad tangle, and laughed on the top of it. Then he bent over and kissed her on the forehead. She caught his head in her small arms and pressed her soft cheek against his caressingly.

“I love you, Uncle Gaspard,” she exclaimed. “But I don’t love that old man in there. Are you sure he is my grandfather? I couldn’t live here. I should run away and live with the birds and the squirrels.”

“And the Indians.”

“But that Light of the Moon was sweet and pretty.”

“Yes. I should like to have brought her with us for your maid.”

“Oh, that would have been nice!” She clapped her hands. “What is over there?” nodding her head.

“That is St. Louis – the fort, the palisades, the stockade to keep out the Indians.”

“There are no Indians in France,” she said retrospectively.

“No. And I have wondered a little, Renée, if you would not rather be back there.”

“And not have you?” She clung to his arm.

He gave a little sigh.

“Oh, are you not glad to have me? Does no one want me?”

The pathos of the young voice pierced his heart.

“Yes, I want you. I had no one to care for, no brothers or sisters or – ”

“Men have wives and children.” There was a touch of almost regret in her tone, as if she were sorry for him.

“And you are my child. We will go in town to-day and find some one to look after you. And there will be children to play with.”

“Oh, I shall be so glad. Little girls?”

“Yes. I know ever so many.”

“I saw my little brothers in Paris as we came through. They were very pretty – at least their clothes were. And papa’s wife – well, I think the Queen couldn’t have had any finer gown. They were just going to the palace, and papa kissed me farewell. It was very dreary at the old château. And when the wind blew through the great trees it seemed like people crying. Old Pierre used to count his beads.”

What a strange, dreary life the little girl had had! It should all be better now. The child of the woman he had loved!

“If grandfather is rich, as Marie said, why does he live that way?”

She made a motion toward the house.

“No one knows whether he is rich or not. He trades a little with the Indians and the boats going up and down the river.”

The shrill summons to breakfast reached them.

They went in, the child holding tightly to Gaspard’s hand. It seemed as if her grandfather looked more forbidding now than he had last night. He was both sulky and surly, but the viands were appetizing, and this morning Renée felt hungry. Gaspard was glad to see her eat. The old man still eyed her furtively.

“Well?” he interrogated, as they rose from the table, looking meaningfully at Gaspard.

“We are going in the town, the child and I,” Gaspard replied briefly.

Antoine nodded.

Oh, what a morning it was! The air seemed fairly drenched with the new growth of everything; the tints were indescribable. Some shrubs and flowers had begun to bloom. Renée had seen so much that was cold and bleak, trees leafless and apparently lifeless amid the almost black green of hemlocks and firs. Streams and pools frozen over, and a coldness that seemed to penetrate one’s very soul. At Detroit it had softened a little and all along the journey since then were heralds of warmth and beauty. The child, too, expanded in it, and the changes in her face interested Gaspard intently. He was a great lover of nature himself.

Early St. Louis was all astir. From the bustle, the sound of voices, the gesticulation, and running to and fro, it appeared as if there might be thousands of people instead of six or seven hundred. Everything looked merry, everybody was busy. There was a line of boats coming, others already at the primitive landings, Indians and trappers in picturesque attire, gay feathers and red sashes; fringes down the sides of their long leggings and the top of their moccasins. Traders were there, too, sturdy brown-faced Frenchmen, many of whom had taken a tour or two up in the North Country themselves, and had the weather-beaten look that comes of much living out of doors. Children ran about, black-eyed, rosy-cheeked, shrill of voice. Small Indians, with their grave faces and straight black hair, and here and there a squaw with her papoose strapped to her back.

Gaspard Denys paused a moment to study them. He really had an artist's soul; these pictures always appealed to him.

They came in the old Rue Royale, skirting the river a short distance, then turned up to the Rue d'Eglise. Here was a low stone house, rather squat, the roof not having a high peak. A wide garden space, with fruit trees and young vegetables, some just peeping up from brown beds and a great space in front where grass might have grown if little feet had not trodden it so persistently. A broad porch had a straw-thatched roof, and here already a young girl sat spinning, while several children were playing about.

"Lisa! Lisa!" called the girl, rising. "Ah, Monsieur Denys, we are very glad to see you. You have been absent a long while. You missed the merry-making and – and we missed you," blushing.

A pretty girl, with dark eyes and hair done up in a great coil of braids; soft peachy skin with a dainty bloom on the cheek and a dimple in the broad chin. Her lips had the redness of a ripe red cherry that is so clear you almost think it filled with wine.

"And I am glad to see you, Barbe," taking her outstretched hand. "Ought I to say 'ma'm'selle' now?" glancing her all over, from the braids done up to certain indications in the attire of womanhood.

She blushed and laughed. "Oh, I hope I have not grown as much as that. I should like always to be Barbe to you."

"But some day you may be married. Then you will be madame to everybody."

"Lise thinks I have too good a home to give up lightly. I am very happy."

Madame Renaud came out of the house. She was taller and larger than her sister, but with the same dark eyes and hair. Her sleeves were rolled up above her elbows and showed a plump, pretty arm; her wide, homespun apron nearly covered her.

"Oh, Gaspard – M'sieu Denys! You are such a stranger and we have missed you much, much," with an emphasis. "We were not sure but some Quebec belle would capture you and keep you there. You will have warm welcomes. Whose is the child?"

The other children had stopped their play and were edging nearer Renée, who in turn shrank against Denys.

"I have come to talk about the child. May I not come in? Are you busy?"

"With bread and cakes. We are not so poorly off if we have a bad name," smiling with amusement. "Here is a chair, and a stool for the little one. She looks pale. Is she not well?"

"She has had a long journey. First across the ocean, then from Quebec in not the pleasantest of weather for such a tramp. But she has not been ill a day."

Denys placed his arm over the child's shoulder, and she leaned her arms on his knee.

Madame Renaud raised her eyebrows a trifle.

"You remember the daughter of Antoine Freneau?"

"Yes – a little. He took her to Canada and married her to some great person and she died in France. Poor thing! I wonder if she was happy?"

She, too, knew of the gossip that Denys had been very much in love with this girl, and she stole a little furtive glance; but the man's face was not so ready with confessions. Much hard experience had settled the lines.

“Then the Count married again. He is in the King’s service at the palace. They sent the child over to her grandfather. I went to Canada for her.”

“And this is Renée Freneau’s child. Poor thing!”

She glanced intently at the little girl, who flushed and cast down her eyes. Why was she always a poor thing?

“And that is no home for her.”

“I should think not! Home, indeed, in that old cabin, where men meet to carouse, and strange stories are told,” said madame decisively.

“I am to be her guardian and look after her. I think I shall settle down. I have tramped about enough to satisfy myself for one while. I shall go into trading, and have some one keep a house for me and take care of the child. Meanwhile I must persuade some one to give her shelter and oversight.”

“Yes, yes, m’sieu,” encouragingly.

“And so I have come to you,” looking up, with a bright laugh.

Gaspard Denys very often obtained just what he wanted without much argument. Perhaps it was not so much his way as his good judgment of others.

“And so I have come to you,” he repeated. “If you will take her in a little while, I think she will enjoy being with children. She has had a lonely life thus far.”

“Poor thing! Poor little girl, to lose her mother so soon! And you think old Antoine will make no trouble?”

“Oh, no, no! He would not know what to do with her.”

Madame Renaud laughed derisively, and gave a nod, throwing her head back, which displayed her pretty throat.

“So I shall look after her. He will never interfere. It will not be for long. And how shall I appear putting on fatherly airs?” in a tone of amusement.

“Louis is but two and thirty, and you – ”

“Have just turned thirty,” subjoined Gaspard.

“And little Louis is twelve, stout and sturdy and learning to figure as well as read under the good père. Then there are three others, and papa is as proud of them as was ever any hen with her chicks. I never heard that Chanticleer was a pattern of fatherly devotion.”

They both laughed at that.

“And, Gaspard, you should have settled upon some nice girl at the balls. You have been chosen king times enough.”

He flushed a trifle. “I have been quite a roamer in strange places, and at first had a fancy for a life of adventure. But, as I said, I think of settling down now. And if you will keep the little girl for me until I get a home – ”

“And you want a good housemaid. Gaspard, Mère Lunde has lost her son. True, he was a great burden and care, and she has spent most of her little fortune upon him. I think she would be glad – ”

“The very person. Thank you a thousand times, Madame Renaud. I should want some one settled in her ways, content to stay at home, and with a tender heart. Yes, Mère Lunde will be the very one.

“She was going to the père’s; then his niece came from Michilimackinac. They had bad work at the Mission with the Indians, and she just escaped with her life and her little boy.”

“Yes; I will see her. It is advised that you get the cage before you find the bird; but the bird may be captured elsewhere if you wait too long. The child’s box comes in from St. Charles; they would not stir a step farther last night. I must go and look after it. Then I can send it here? And Louis will not kick it out of doors when he comes?” smiling humorously.

“He will be liker to keep the little one for good and all and let you whistle,” she retorted merrily.

“Thank you a hundred times until you are better paid. And now I must be going. I expect the town will almost look strange.”

“And plain after gay Quebec; and Detroit, they say, has some grand people in it. But, bah, they are English!” with a curl of the lip.

He rose now. Madame Renaud had not been idle, but had rolled out dough fairly brown with spices and cut it in little cakes of various shapes, filling up some baking sheets of tin.

“You will leave the child? Renée – what is her name? It has slipped my mind.”

“Renée de Longueville.”

The child clung to his hand. “I want to go with you,” she said in a tone of entreaty.

“Yes, and see St. Louis? He is her king or was until she touched this Spanish soil.”

“The Spaniards have been very good to us. But we all hope to go back again some day. Renée, will you not stay and play with the children? There is Sophie, about your age or a little older, and Elise – ”

“No,” she returned with a long breath; “I want Uncle Gaspard.”

“Adopted already? Well, you will bring her in to dinner?” with a cordial intonation.

“If not, to supper.”

“You will tire her to death dragging her around.”

“Oh, heaven forefend,” in mock fear.

He paused a moment or two and glanced at Renée, half questioningly, but she still clung to him.

They took their way along the street, but from every corner they had a glimpse of the river, now flowing lazily along. The French seemed to have a fancy for building their towns on the margin of a river. Partly, perhaps, from fear of the Indians, but quite as much from innate sociability, as they preferred compactness, and did not branch out into farms until later on. But many of these squares had not more than three or four houses; some, indeed, only one, the rest devoted to a garden.

Here was the market, but there were not many customers this morning, though the stands were attractively arranged. And beyond was the old Laclede mansion. He it was who had laid out the town and named its streets. On the main street was his large store, but it was then the end of Rue Royale. He had welcomed the emigration from Fort Chartres when the English had taken possession, and set a band of workmen building log houses for them. His own house was quite roomy and imposing.

Then they went down to the levee, which presented a busy and picturesque sight. Boats were being unloaded of bales of furs and articles of merchandise. Indians with blankets around them or with really gay trappings; *coureur de bois*; Frenchmen, both jolly and stern, chaffering, buying, sending piles of skins away on barrows, paying for them in various kinds of wares, arms, ammunition, beads and trinkets, though these were mostly taken by the squaws.

Denys found his parcels and the box belonging to the child, and responded to the cordial greetings.

“Here, Noyan,” he called to a man who had just trundled his barrow down and who paused to make an awkward salutation. He had a blue cotton kerchief tied round his head, buckskin trousers, and a sort of blouse coat made of coarse woollen stuff, belted in loosely; but it held a pouch containing tobacco and his knife, and a small hatchet was suspended from it.

“M’sieu Denys! One has not seen you for an age! Were you up to the north? It is a good sight. And have you been making a fortune?”

The wide, smiling mouth showed white, even teeth.

“Not up in the fur regions. I took Canada this time.”

“Then thou hast lots of treasures that will set the dames and the maids crazy with longing. They are gay people in those old towns, and the state they keep is something like a court, I hear. Have you brought home Madame Denys? Is it not high time?”

“Past time,” returning the laugh. “But our good Pierre Laclede is content to remain a bachelor, and why not I?”

“I am afraid thou art hard to suit. Surely we have pretty maids here; and at New Orleans it is said they make a man lose his head if they do but smile on him. A dangerous place that!” and he laughed merrily.

“Are you busy?”

“Yes and no. I am to look after M. Maxent’s boat load, but it will not be in until noon. So, if I can catch a job I am ready.”

“Then you are the man for me. Come. They have piled up the freight here on the wharf. I am a lucky fellow to meet you. I feel quite strange after my long absence. I suppose the old storehouse has not burned down? It could not well be robbed,” and Monsieur Denys laughed with gay indifference.

“When a man has only the coat on his back he need not be afraid of thieves.”

“Unless he fall among Indians.”

“Ah, bah! yes,” with a comical shrug. “And sometimes they take his skin.”

There were bales strapped up, with thongs of hide over the coarse covering; some sacks made of hide; several boxes bound about with bands of iron. Noyan looked them over and considered.

“I must go twice, M’sieu Denys,” looking askance as if his employer might object.

“Very well. This box is to go to Madame Renaud’s.”

The man nodded, and began to pile on the goods, fastening them with some stout straps.

“Do you go, too?”

“Oh, yes. Here, Jaques, sit on this box and guard these two bundles, and earn a little more than your salt.”

A shock-headed boy, with a broad, stupid face, had been looking on indifferently, and now he dropped on the box like a weight of lead, with a grunt that meant assent and a grin that betokened satisfaction.

“We must retrace our steps,” said Denys to the little girl. “But it is not far.”

They passed the market again. They turned into the Rue de Rive, just beyond the Rue Royale. A building of rough stone, with a heavy doorway that looked as if it had been deserted a long while, which was true enough. A broad bar had fastened it securely, and the great lock might have guarded the treasures of Niebelungs.

Denys unlocked it with some difficulty, threw open the door and unfastened the shutter.

“Whew! What a musty old hole! It must be cleaned up. I will attend to that to-morrow. Dump the things in here, and then go for the others.”

On the western end was an addition of hewn logs, with big posts set in the corners. Denys marched around and surveyed it. There was a space of neglected ground, with two or three fine trees and a huddle of grape-vines fallen to the ground. It did not look altogether inviting. But just beyond was the Rue de la Tour that led straight out to the old fort, and only a step farther was the church and the priest’s house. Then, it would not be very far from the Renauds.

Renée was watching him as he peered about.

“It looks a dull place for a little girl!” he exclaimed.

“Are you going to live here?” with some curiosity.

“Oh, yes. But it will be fixed up. And – a flower garden,” hesitatingly.

“I don’t mind if you are here,” and she slipped her hand in his with a gesture of possession.

“And we will have a nice old woman to get our meals and make our beds and keep the house tidy. Oh, it will be all right when it is cleared up. And you will soon know some little girls. And we can take walks around.”

She started suddenly. A bird up in the tree poured forth a torrent of melody. Her eyes grew luminous, her lips quivered, her pale cheeks flushed.

“Oh, birds!” she cried. “I used to talk to them at the château and feed them with crumbs. They would come to my hand.”

“You shall tame them here. Oh, we will have nice times together,” and now he pressed her hand.

The sweetness of her little face went to his heart. Yes, she was like her mother.

Noyan came with the next load, threw off the few parcels, and took his way to Madame Renaud's. Denys locked his door again and they turned away.

"Now we will go and find Mère Lunde. It is up somewhere by the fort. That will be quite a landmark for you. And the great Indian chief, Pontiac, that I told you about at Detroit, lies buried there."

"I do not think I like Indians," she returned gravely. "Only the babies are so odd, and the little children. It is a pity they should grow up so cruel."

"We have kept very good friends with them thus far."

They had begun to build the new palisades. Yes, here was the fort, and the Guion house, and the grave that she did not care to linger over. Then they turned into the street of the Barns, *La rue des Granges*, and soon found Mère Lunde, who was cooking a savory pottage, and welcomed Gaspard Denys warmly.

A little old Frenchwoman such as artists love to paint. She was round in the shoulders, made so by much stooping over her son and her work in the tiny garden, where she raised much of her living. She was wrinkled, but her eyes were bright, and her cheeks still had a color in them. She wore the coif, her best one being white, but this a sort of faded plaid. Her skirt just came to her ankles, and to-day she had on sabots, that made a little clatter as she stepped round. Over her shoulders was pinned a small gray kerchief. She looked so cheerful and tidy, so honest and kindly, that she went to one's heart at once.

M'sieu must hear about her son, poor lad – all she had to live for. Yet, perhaps, it was well the Good Father took him before she went. And now she worked a little for the neighbors. Everybody was kind to her. And would they not partake of her simple meal? It was not much, to be sure, but it would make her very happy.

Denys admitted that he was hungry, and Renée's eyes had an assenting light in them. Over the meal he made his proposal, which Mère Lunde accepted with tears in her eyes.

"God is good," she said, crossing herself devoutly. "Father Meurin said I must have faith, and something would come. Oh, how can I thank you! Yes, I will gladly keep your house, and care for the child, and strive to please you every way. Oh, it is, indeed, the best of fortune to happen to me, when life had begun to look lone and drear."

"To-morrow, then, we will begin to clear up."

"Yes; to-morrow," she replied cheerfully.

CHAPTER III – A NEW HOME

In after years, when Renée de Longueville looked back at what seemed the real beginning of her life, everything about the old town was enveloped in a curious glamour. For it was all abloom. Such flowers, such great trees in pink and white, such fragrance everywhere, and everybody moving to and fro, as if impelled by some strange power. What were they all doing? And the children were so merry. To a little girl who had been mewed up in an old château, rather gloomy at that, and no one about but elderly servants, the transition was mysterious, quite beyond the child's depth. But she felt the new life in every limb, in every nerve, and she was full of joy.

The streets of the old town, if not wide, were comparatively straight; those running along the river the longest, those stretching up to the fort only a few squares. Nearly every homestead had its separate lot or garden, enclosed by some sort of rude fence. Outside were the fields, cultivated largely in common; woodlands and an immense prairie stretching out to the northwest. Beside the fort were several towers in which ammunition was stored, although the Spanish government had a great fancy for building these.

Gaspard Denys was very busy cleaning up his place and making some alterations. In his heart he began to feel quite like a family man. Most of the stores were kept in the residences, except those down on the levee. The people seldom suffered from depredations. Their treatment of the Indians was uniformly honorable, and they kept them as much as possible from the use of ardent spirits. The slaves were happy in their lot. Indeed, a writer in early eighteen hundred speaks of the town as arcadian in its simplicity and kindness to its dependents. Women never worked in the fields, and much of the housework was done by the slaves and Indian women. Holidays were frequent, in which all joined. In the summer, out-of-doors sports and dances often took place, very much like modern picnics, at which one frequently saw parties of Indians. There were no hostelryes; but if a stranger came in town he was sheltered and treated to the best. Hospitality was considered one of the first duties.

There was one large room in the log part of the house, but Denys resolved to build another. His little girl should have a place of her very own, and from time to time he would find adornments for it. Here she should grow to womanhood. Antoine Freneau was not a young man when he had married; and though people who did not meet with accidents lived to a good old age, he was old already. He always pleaded poverty, though he did considerable dickering in the way of trade, and it was surmised that his business dealings would not stand honest scrutiny, and his unsocial habits did not endear him to the joyous community. Still, whatever he had left would come to Renée. He, Denys, would make sure of that.

Renée soon became domesticated with the Renauds. Elise and Sophie played about most of the time, and were jolly, laughing little girls. Twice a week they went to the house of the good Father Lemoine, who taught them to read and write and gave them some knowledge of mathematics, which was quite necessary in trading. Twice a week the boys went, and on Saturday they repeated the catechism orally.

Denys called in a little help; but every man was his own builder, with some cordial neighborly assistance. So they raised the posts and studding, and fastened the cross ties – round on the outside, the smooth part, or middle, going on the inside. The interstices were filled with mortar made of tough grass and clay that hardened easily. Sometimes this was plastered on the inside, but oftener blankets were hung, which gave a bright and cheerful appearance, and warmth in winter.

The stone part was cleared up and put in order. It had a big chimney, part of which was in the adjoining room. Denys spread about quantities of sweet grass to neutralize the musty smell; though the clear, beautiful air, with its mingled perfumes, was doing that. On the shelves he spread some of his wares, implements of different sorts were ranged about the walls. Near the door was a counter; back of it two iron-bound chests, very much battered, that he had bought with the place and the small

store of goods from the family of the dead owner. These held his choicest treasures, many of which he had brought from Quebec, which were to please the ladies.

The voyages up and down the river were often tedious, and sometimes the traders were attacked by river pirates, who hid in caves along the banks and drew their boats up out of sight when not needed. Peltries and lead went down to New Orleans, wheat and corn and imported articles were returned. There were some troublesome restrictions, and about as much came overland from Detroit.

If Renée made friends with the Renaud household, they had no power to win her from Uncle Gaspard. They had insisted on his accepting their hospitality, though he devoted most of his time to the work he was hurrying forward. Now and then he came just at dusk and spent the night, but was always off early in the morning before Renée was up.

She often ran up the street, sometimes reaching the house before he started. The children were ready enough to go with her, but she liked best to be alone. She had a curious, exclusive feeling about him, young as she was.

“But he is not your true uncle,” declared Elise, one day when she had laid her claim rather strenuously. “Mamma said so. Your uncles have to be real relations.”

“But he said when we were in Quebec that he *was* my uncle – that I was to be his little girl,” was the defiant rejoinder.

“And if your gran’père had not agreed?”

“I would never have stayed there. It makes me shiver now. I would – yes, I would have run away.”

“He is not like our gran’père, who is a lovely old man, living up by the Government House. And gran’mère gives us delightful little cakes when we go there. And there are uncles and aunts, real ones. Barbe is our aunt.”

Renée’s small heart swelled with pride and a sense of desolation. She had gathered already that Grandpapa Freneau was not at all respected; and there were moments when she felt the solitariness of her life – the impression that she had in some sense been cast off.

“But my father is at the palace of the King of France. He came to see me on an elegant horse, and his clothes were splendid. And there are two little brothers. Oh, such fine people as there are in Paris.”

That extinguished the little girls. It was true that now the French had gotten over their soreness about the transfer. They never meddled with politics, but they still loved the old flag. The Spanish governors had been judicious men thus far.

So that night Renée slipped out from the supper table and sped like a little sprite along the Rue Royale, and then up the Rue de Rive. The moon was coming over the river with a pale light, as if she was not quite ready for full burning. She heard the sounds of hammering, and rushed in the open doorway.

“Well, little one! Your eyes are so bright that if you were an Indian girl I should call you Evening Star.”

“I wanted to see you so,” in a breathless fashion.

“What has happened?”

“Why, nothing. Only the day seemed so long.”

“You went to the father’s?”

“Oh, yes,” rather indifferently.

“Why didn’t you run over then? You might have taken supper with me.”

“Because – there were Elise and Sophie.”

“But there was supper enough to go round. We had some fine broiled fish. Mère Lunde is an excellent cook.”

“Oh, when can I come to stay?” Her tone was full of entreaty, and her eyes soft with emotion.

“But – you won’t have any little girls to play with.”

“I don’t want any one but you.”

He had paused from his work, and now she sprang to him and encircled him as far as she could with her small arms.

“You are not homesick?” It would be strange, indeed, since she had never had a true home.

“I don’t know. That,” giving her head a turn, “is not my real home.”

“Oh, no. But they have all been good to you. Ma’m’selle Barbe is very fond of you.”

“Oh, everybody is good and kind. Even Louis, though he teases. And Père Renaud. But not one of them is you —you.”

“My little girl!” He stooped over and hugged her, kissed her fondly. The child’s love was so innocent, so sincere, that it brought again the hopes of youth.

“And you will always keep me – always?” There was a catch in her breath like a sob.

“Why, yes. What has any one said to you?” with a slight touch of indignation.

“Sophie said you were not my own uncle. What would make you so? Can you never be?”

There was a pathos in her tone that touched him to the heart, even as he smiled at her childish ignorance, and was wild to have the past undone.

“My dear, you can hardly understand. I must have been your mother’s brother.”

“Oh, then you would have belonged to that hateful old man!” and she gave her foot a quick stamp. “No, I should not want you to.”

He laughed softly. He would have been glad enough to belong to the hateful old man years ago, and belong to the child as well.

“It doesn’t matter, little one,” he said tenderly. “I shall be your uncle all my life long. Don’t bother your head about relationships. Come, see your room. It will soon be dry, and then you shall take possession.”

It had been whitewashed, and the puncheon floor – laid in most houses, it being difficult to get flat boards – stained a pretty reddish color. The window had a curtain hung to it, some of the Canadian stuff. One corner had been partitioned off for a closet. There was a box with a curtain tacked around it, and a white cover over it, to do duty as a dressing-table. There were two rustic chairs, and some pretty Indian basket-like pouches had been hung around.

“Oh, oh!” she cried in delight. “Why, it is as pretty as Ma’m’selle Barbe’s – almost as pretty,” correcting herself. “And can I not come at once?”

“There must be a bed for you to sleep on, though we might sling a hammock.”

“And Mère Lunde?”

“Come through and see.”

In one corner of this, which was the ordinary living room, was a sort of pallet, a long box with a cover, in which Mère Lunde kept her own belongings, with a mattress on the top, spread over with a blanket, answering for a seat as well. She had despoiled her little cottage, for Gaspard Denys had said, “It is a home for all the rest of your life if you can be content,” and she had called down the blessings of the good God upon him. So, here were shelves with her dishes, some that her mother had brought over to New Orleans as a bride; china and pewter, and coarse earthenware acquired since, and queer Indian jars, and baskets stiffened with a kind of clay that hardened in the heating.

“Welcome, little one,” she exclaimed cheerfully. “The good uncle gets ready the little nest for thee. And soon we shall be a family indeed.”

She lighted a torch and stood it in the corner, and smiled upon Renée.

“Oh, I shall be so glad to come!” cried the child joyfully. “And my room is so pretty.”

She looked with eager eyes from one to the other.

“And the garden is begun. There are vines planted by ma’m’selle’s window. In a month one will not know the place. And it is near to the church and the good father’s house.”

“But I wouldn’t mind if it was a desert, so long as you both were here,” she replied enthusiastically.

“We must go back, little one. They will wonder about you. Just be patient awhile.”

“And thou hast no cap,” said Mère Lunde.

“Oh, that does not matter; the night is warm. Adieu,” taking the hard hand in her soft one. Then she danced away and caught Gaspard’s arm.

“Let us walk about a little,” she pleaded. “The moon is so beautiful.” If they went direct to the Renauds’, he would sit on the gallery and talk to Barbe.

“Which way?” pausing, looking up and down.

“Oh, toward the river. The moon makes it look like a silver road. And it is never still except at night.”

That was true enough. Business ended at the old-fashioned supper time. There was one little French tavern far up the Rue Royale, near the Locust Street of to-day; but the conviviality of friends, which was mostly social, took place at home, out on the wide porches, where cards were played for amusement. The Indians had dispersed. A few people were strolling about, and some flat boats were moored at the dock, almost indistinguishable in the shade. The river wound about with a slow, soft lapping, every little crest and wavelet throwing up a sparkling gem and then sweeping it as quickly away.

From here one could see out to both ends. The semi-circular gates terminated at the river’s edge, and at each a cannon was planted and kept in readiness for use. Now and then there would be vague rumors about the English on the opposite shore. The new stockade of logs and clay surmounted by pickets was slowly replacing the worn-out one.

Renée was fain to linger, with her childish prattle and touching gestures of devotion. How the child loved him already! That a faint tint of jealousy had been kindled would have amused him if he had suspected it.

When they turned back in the Rue Royale they met M. Renaud enjoying his pipe.

“Ah, truant!” he exclaimed; “they were beginning to feel anxious about you. Barbe declared you might stay all night. Was it not true you had threatened?”

“They would not have me,” she returned laughingly, her heart in a glow over the thought that when she did stay permanently, there would be no need of Uncle Gaspard going to the Renauds’.

“Was that it?” rather gayly. “The girls will miss thee. They are very fond of thee, Renée de Longueville.”

Then Renée’s heart relented with the quick compunction of childhood.

“M. Laclede’s fleet of keel boats will be up shortly, I heard to-day. The town must give him a hearty welcome. What a man he is! What energy and forethought! A little more than twenty years and we have grown to this, where there was nothing but a wild. Denys, there is a man for you!”

“Fort Chartres helped it along. I was but a boy when we came over. My mother is buried there, and it almost broke my father’s heart to leave her.”

“Those hated English!” said Renaud, almost under his breath. “The colonies have revolted, it is said. I should be glad to see them driven out of the country.”

“Yes, I heard the talk at Quebec and more of it as I came down the lakes. But the country is so big, why cannot each take a piece in content? Do you ever think we may be driven out to the wilderness?”

“And find the true road to India?” with a short laugh. “Strange stories are told by some of the hunters of inaccessible mountains. And what is beyond no one knows,” shrugging his shoulders.

No one knew whether the gold-fields of La Salle’s wild dreams lay in that direction or not. There were vague speculations. Parties had started and never returned. The hardy pioneers turned their steps northward for furs. And many who heard these wild dreams in their youth, half a century later crossed the well-nigh inaccessible mountains and found the gold. And before the century was much older ships were on their way to the East of dream and fable.

Barbe and Madame Renaud were out on the porch in the moonlight, and it was very bright now. Denys would not stay, and soon said good-night to them, going back to his work by a pine torch.

Renée counted the days, and every one seemed longer. But at last the joyful news came.

“We shall run over often,” declared Sophie, who had a fondness for the little girl in spite of childish tiffs.

Renée was busy enough placing her little store of articles about, discovering new treasures, running to and fro, and visiting Mère Lunde, who had a word of welcome every time she came near.

“It will be a different house, petite,” she said, with her kindly smile.

The garden could not compare with the Renauds in the glory of its gay flower-beds. Two slaves of a neighbor – they were often borrowed for a trifle – were working at it. A swing had been put up for the little lady.

But somehow, when the afternoon began to lengthen, when Uncle Gaspard had gone up to the Government House on some business, and Mère Lunde was in a sound doze over the stocking she was knitting, Renée felt strangely solitary. She missed the gay chat of Madame Renaud and her sister and the merriment of the children. There seemed none immediately about here. She strolled around to the front of the store; the door was locked, and it looked rather dreary.

She was glad to-morrow was the day for the classes to meet. Why, it was almost as lonesome as at the old château!

That evening Uncle Gaspard brought out his flute, which filled her with delight. The violin was the great musical instrument in St. Louis – the favorite in all the French settlements. But the flute had such a tender tone, such a mysterious softness, that it filled her with an indescribable joy. And there was none of the dreadful tuning that rasped her nerves and made her feel as if she must scream.

Then, it was strange to sleep alone in the room when she had been with Ma’m’selle Barbe and the two girls. They were versed in Indian traditions, and some they told over were not pleasant bedtime visions. But the comfort was that all these terrible things had happened in Michigan, or a place away off, called New England; and Sophie did not care what the Indians did to the English who had driven them out of the settlements on the Illinois. So, why should she? She was still more of a French girl, because she was born in France.

But the world looked bright and cheery the next morning, and the breakfast was delightful, sitting on the side toward Uncle Gaspard, and having Mère Lunde opposite, with her gay coif and her red plaid kerchief instead of the dull gray one. Her small, wrinkled face was a pleasant one, though her eyes were faded, for her teeth were still white and even, and her short upper lip frequently betrayed them. She poured the coffee and passed the small cakes of bread, which were quite as good as Madame Renaud’s.

The lines were not strictly drawn in those days between masters and servants. And Mère Lunde had been her own mistress for so many years that she possessed the quiet dignity of independence.

Then Renée inspected her room afresh, ran out of doors and gathered a few flowers, as she had seen Ma’m’selle Barbe do. She ventured to peep into Uncle Gaspard’s abode.

“Come in, come in!” he cried cheerily. “There is no one to buy you up, like a bale of merchandise.”

“But – you wouldn’t sell me?” Her eyes had a laughing light in them, her voice a make-believe entreaty, and altogether she looked enchanting.

“Well, it would take a great deal of something to buy you. It would have to be more valuable than money. I don’t care so much for money myself.”

He put his arm about her and hugged her up close. He was sitting at a massive old desk that he had bought with the place. It seemed crowded full of various articles.

“But you love me better than any one else?”

“Any one else? Does that mean ever so many people love you? The Renaud children, and Ma’m’selle Barbe, and – perhaps – your grandfather?”

“Oh, you know I don’t mean that!” Her cheek flushed with a dainty bit of vexation. “The others *like* me well enough, but you – how much do you love me?”

“The best of any one. Child, I do not think you will ever understand how dear you are to me. There is no measurement for such love.”

That was the confession she wanted. Her face was radiant with delight – a child’s pleasure in the present satisfaction.

She glanced around. “Do you mean to sell all these things?” she asked wonderingly.

“Oh, yes and many more. I ought to be down on the Rue Royale, where people could find me easily. But I took a fancy to this old place, and the man was in my debt; so he paid me with it. It would not be so pleasant to live down there, on the lower side, by the levee. But I shall stay here and wait till the people come to me. After all, for a few years, if we get enough to eat and a little to wear, it will suffice.”

“And what then?” with captivating eagerness.

“Why, then – ” he hesitated. Why should he think of this just now? He did not want her grown up into a charming mademoiselle, even if she resembled her mother still more strongly.

“Yes; what then? Isn’t it just the same afterward, or do people come to a time when they stop eating?” and a gleam of mischief crossed her face.

“That is at the end of life, child – sixty or eighty years.”

“No, I don’t mean that time,” with a shrug and a little curl of the lip. “Maybe – after a few years – ”

“Well?” in amused inquiry.

“You might go to New Orleans and take me. Ma’m’selle Barbe has been, and she says it is so beautiful and gay.”

“And you have been half over the world. Ma’m’selle has not been to Quebec nor Detroit.”

“Oh, that is true enough,” laughingly. “Nor to France.”

Two customers paused at the door, and he said, “Run away, dear.” So she went obediently, watched Mère Lunde at her work awhile, then strolled out to the garden spot, where two hired slaves were working. What should make them so different from white people? Where was Africa and the Guinea Coast that she heard spoken of at the Renauds’? Their lips were so thick and red and their hair so woolly. But they seemed very merry, though she could not understand a word they said; it was a queer patois.

Uncle Gaspard came out presently. “Wouldn’t you like to have a flower garden?” he asked.

“What is here?” She put out her small moccasined toe toward a rather stiff-looking plot of green plants.

“Oh, that is Mère Lunde’s garden of herbs. All manner of things for potage, and the making of sundry remedies in which she has great faith. She will look after that.”

“And must I look after mine?”

“I will come and help you.”

“Oh, then, I will have a garden!” she cried joyfully.

CHAPTER IV – THE SOWING OF A THORN

It was only a short distance to the priest's house, where the classes met. She ran off by herself. There was quite a throng of girls, though, as with most of the early Western settlers, education was not esteemed the one thing needful for girls. To make good wives was the greatest attainment they could achieve. Still, Father Lemoine labored with perseverance at the tillage of their brains on the two afternoons, and the tillage of their souls on Saturday.

After the two hours were over the restless children had a run up to the Fort. The Guions there were Madame Renaud's relatives. There was a great thicket of roses that covered the line of palings, and some ladies were having refreshments under a sort of arbor, little cakes and glasses of wine much diluted with water.

"Oh, yes, come in," exclaimed Sophie as Renée hung back. "You have been here before, you needn't feel strange."

That was true enough. Then she had been Sophie's guest. Now she had a curious hesitation.

Elise was going around courtesying to the ladies, and answering their inquiries. Sophie stooped to play with the cat. An old lady nearest Renée handed her a plate of small spiced cakes.

"You have gone to Monsieur Denys," she said in a soft tone. "He is –" raising her eyes in inquiry.

"He is my uncle." Renée made a graceful little courtesy as she said this, and thanked the lady for the cake.

"I suppose M. Denys means to settle down now," said another. "It is high time. He ought to marry. There is nothing like a good wife."

"That will come along," and another nodded with a mysterious but merry smile. "That is why he is smartening up so. And he has brought some elegant stuffs from Canada to dress her in when he gets her. Madame Aubrey was in yesterday and bought of him a gown for Genevieve. He was showing her some finery that would adorn a bride. I think we shall hear before long."

They all nodded and glanced sidewise from Elise to Sophie as if they might have something to do with it.

"I must go," exclaimed Renée, her face flushing.

"No, wait, I am not ready," said Sophie.

But Renée courtesied to them all and flashed through the rose-hung entrance. She ran swiftly down the street, turned the corner to her own home, and entered the gate. Mère Lunde sat at the doorway knitting.

"Where is Uncle Gaspard?" she cried breathlessly.

"In the shop chaffering. They have found him out, you see, and I hope the good Father of all will send him prosperity," crossing herself devoutly.

Renée dropped down on the doorstep. Her child's heart was in a tumult. Had not the house been planned for her, and the pretty room made especially? Where would he put a wife? His small place in the corner of the shop, hung about with curtains, was not fit, since the wife would be Ma'm'selle Barbe, whose pretty white bed had fringed hangings that she had learned to knot while she was in New Orleans.

"Why do you sigh so, little one?"

Renée could not contain her anxiety.

"O ma mère, do you think Uncle Gaspard will marry?" she cried with passionate vehemence. "Will he bring a wife here to live with us?"

"What has put such a thing in thy head, child? Surely the good priest would not venture to suggest that to thee!"

"It was in the Guions' garden. I went there with the girls. And some one said he had fixed the house for that, and they smiled and I knew who they meant."

She wiped some tears from her hot cheek.

“Who was it?” the dame asked simply.

“Who should it be but Ma’m’selle Barbe! Oh, I could guess who they thought would come.”

“Ma’m’selle is a pretty girl and sweet tempered. She has a dot, too,” said the placid woman.

“But then I think – ”

Renée burst into a passion of tears, and springing up stamped on the ground.

“She shall not come here!” she cried vehemently. “She shall not have Uncle Gaspard! Oh, why did he go clear to Canada for me, why did he bring me here?”

“There was your gran’père – ”

“But he doesn’t want me. No one wants me!”

“Chut! chut! little one. Do not get in such a passion. Surely a child could not help it if it was to be so. But now that I think the matter over, he said I must come, as there would be no one here to look after you, and that your gran’père’s was no place for you. Truly, it is not, if the whispers about him are well grounded. It is said the river pirates gather there. And he goes away for weeks at a time. No, I do not believe M. Denys means to marry.”

“Oh, truly? truly?” Renée flung her arms about the woman’s neck. “Say again you do not believe it.”

Every pulse was throbbing, and her breath came in tangled gasps. The woman’s tranquillity rasped her.

“Nay, he would have planned different. And Ma’m’selle Barbe has young admirers. Ah, you should have seen her at Christmas and Epiphany! She was chosen Queen, she had one of the lucky beans. She would hardly want so grave a man. All young things love pleasure, and it is right; care comes fast enough.”

And now Renée remembered that a young man had spent evenings with his violin, and they two had sat out on the gallery. But she could not divest her mind of the curious sort of suspicion that Barbe cared very much for Uncle Gaspard.

“No, no,” went on Mère Lunde. “People gossip. They often mate two who have no such intention. Dry thy eyes, petite, and laugh again. There has a robin built in the beech near thy window, and now I think there are young ones in the nest. I heard them cry for food. And the father bird goes singing about as if he wanted to tell the news. It is pleasanter than thine.”

Renée smiled then. Yes, if the young man loved, ma’m’selle. How they had laughed and talked. Perhaps – and yet she was not quite satisfied.

But she went out and glanced up at the tree. Yes, there was a nest, and a funny, peeping sound, a rustle in the branches.

The path had been packed clear down to the gate. Some garden beds were laid out, and the neglected grass trimmed up. It began to look quite pretty. If there was something to do, to keep away thoughts.

“Mère Lunde, will you teach me to knit?” she asked suddenly.

“And sew, child. A woman needs that.”

“I can sew a little. But I have nothing to sew.”

“That will be provided if you wish for it. I think your uncle will be glad. I have heard that where there are holy Sisters they teach girls, but we have none here. And now you may help me get the supper.”

That tended to divert her troubled thoughts. And then Uncle Gaspard came in with a guest and the meal was a very merry one. Afterward the two sat over the desk busy with writing and talking until she was sleepy and went to bed.

She studied Uncle Gaspard furtively the next morning. He asked about the school, and said in the afternoon they would take a walk, and this morning she had better go to market with Mère Lunde.

She found that quite an entertainment. The old market was not much, a little square with some stalls, all kept by old women, it seemed. One had cakes, the *croquecignolles*, the great favorite with everybody. A curious kind of dry candied fruit, and a sausage roll that the men and boys from the levees bought and devoured with hearty relish. Then there was a stall of meats and a portly butcher in a great white gown. Some of the stands were there only two or three days in the week. Most of the inhabitants looked out for their own stores, but there were the boatmen and the fur traders, and the *voyageurs*. There was but one bake shop, so the market stall was well patronized.

Some one called to Renée as she neared her own corner, and she turned. It was a little girl she had seen in the class at the priest's house.

"I am glad you have come here to live," she began. "Your name is Renée de Long –"

"Renée de Longueville," with a touch of formality.

"And mine is Rosalie Pichou. I live just down in the street below. I have five brothers and not one sister. How many have you?"

"None at all."

"Oh, I shouldn't like that. And I am always wishing for a sister. But one of my brothers will be married shortly, only he is not coming home to live."

"Do you like him to marry?"

"Oh, yes, we shall have a gay time and a feast. And then there will be the new house to visit. Andre is just twenty-one, Pierre is eighteen, Jules sixteen, and I am twelve. I am larger and older than you."

They had walked up to the gate. Mère Lunde stood by it. "Will you not come in and see Renée?" she asked, on the child's behalf.

"Oh, yes," was the frank answer. "I came to see the new room when M. Denys was building it. Oh, how pretty you have it!" in an almost envious tone.

"But then you can have all. At home, there are two little boys to provide for, and I think boys are always hungry. Jules gets lots of game, he is such a good shot. Oh, I have such a pretty cat and a kitten. I wonder if you would like the kitten?"

"Oh, yes," said Mère Lunde. "A cat is a comfortable creature to have about, and a kitten full of play, merci! One never tires of her pranks. You will like it, Renée?"

The child's eyes shone with delight.

"And your mother will let you bestow it?" the mère asked tentatively.

"Oh, yes. You see, there are two dogs and a tame squirrel, and Jules is always bringing home something. Ma mère scolds about it. And Jules is afraid the kitten may get at his birds. Oh, yes, you can have it without doubt. I'll run and fetch it now."

Rosalie was back before she had time to go even one way, Renée thought. A beautiful striped gray kitten, with a very cunning face. A fine black stripe went from the outer corner of the eyes to his ears, and gave him the appearance of wearing spectacles, which amused Renée very much. Then they talked about the class.

"I hate to study," declared Rosalie. "And reading is such slow work when you don't understand. But it is beginning to be the fashion, ma mère says, and presently people will be despised if they do not know how to read. I like the sums best. You can say them after the Father and not bother your brains. And that's why I don't mind the catechism. It isn't like picking the words out of a page."

"I can read quite well," said Renée, with a little pride. "And I like it."

"I can make netting and knit stockings and am learning to cook. Oh, I must go home at once and help ma mère with the dinner. She told me not to stay, and that I was to ask you to visit me. Come soon," and she made a pretty gesture of farewell.

Renée picked up the kitten. It was very tame, and made believe bite her hand. Then it gave a sudden spring.

"Oh, it will run away!" cried Renée in alarm.

But one of the men in the garden caught it and gave it back to her.

“Let us make him eat something. Then he will wash his face and stay. And he will be excellent to catch mice in the shop. They destroy the skins so.”

The kitten enjoyed a bit of meat. Then he sat down very gravely and washed his face, which made Renée laugh.

Uncle Gaspard came home and expressed himself delighted with the kitten. He was fond of cats, and had been thinking of one. They had their dinner, and he said he knew the Pichous very well, and was glad Renée had a playmate so near.

Presently they went out for their walk. Already Denys had explained to Mère Lunde the prices of some of the ordinary articles, and where the powder and shot were kept, so that she might provide for a casual customer. But being a little out of the way, trade was not likely to be very brisk.

They went up the Rue de la Place and out at the side of the fort. There were no houses save here and there a few wigwams, and Indian children playing about in the front of them. Cultivated fields stretched out. The King’s Highway marked the western limit of the municipality; all the rest was the King’s domain, to be granted to future settlers. There was the wide prairie, and to the northward the great mound. They mounted this, and then they could see up the winding of the river to the chain of rocks, and the Missouri on its way to join the greater stream and be merged in it. Farther still, vague woodlands, until all was lost in dim outlines and seemed resting against the sky.

Gaspard Denys liked this far view. Sometimes he had thought of coming out here and losing himself in the wilds, turning hunter like Blanchette Chasseur, as a famous hunting friend of Pierre Laclede’s was called. North of the Missouri he had built a log cabin for himself, where any hunter or traveller was welcome to share his hospitality. Denys himself had partaken of it.

Now he wondered a little if he had been wise to choose the child instead, and give up his freedom. Blanchette had also established a post at Les Pettites Côtes, which was the headquarters for many rovers, and became the nucleus of another city. He was fond of adventures.

But if he, Denys, had married, as he had once dreamed! Then he would have given up the wild life long ago. Then there would have been home and love.

“O Uncle Gaspard,” Renée cried, “you squeeze my hand so tight. And you walk so fast.”

He paused suddenly and gazed down in the flushed face, the eyes humid under their curling lashes.

“My little dear!” and his heart smote him. “Let us sit down here in the shade of this clump of trees and rest. You see, I never had a little girl before, and forgot that she could not stride with my long legs.”

“And I am so thirsty.”

He glanced about. “We are only going a little farther,” he said, “and then we shall find a splendid spring and something to eat. Are you very tired?”

She drew a long breath and held up her little red hand.

“Poor hand!” he said tenderly, pressing it to his lips. “Poor little hand!”

She leaned her head down on his shoulder.

“You wouldn’t like to have me go away?” she murmured plaintively.

“Go away?” in surprise. “What put such an idea in your head?”

“You wouldn’t send me?”

Strange these thoughts should find entrance in her mind when he had just asked himself that curious question so akin to it.

“What do you mean, little one?”

“If – if you married – some one – who did not want me,” in so desolate a tone that it gave him a pang.

“But I am not going to marry any one.”

“Are you very, very sure?” with an indrawn breath.

He took her face between his hands suddenly and turned it upward. It was scarlet and tears beaded the long lashes.

“Come,” he said in soft persuasion, “what is behind all this? Who has been talking to you? If it is Mère Lunde – ”

“No – she said it was not true.”

“Surely that little Pichou girl is not a mischief maker! If so, she must keep clear of us. I will not have you tormented.”

Then Renée began to cry softly and the truth came out with sobs.

He smiled, and yet he was deeply touched. The little thing was jealous. Yet was it not true that he was all she had in the world to love, and that no one had really loved her until he came into her life? How she had trusted him back there in Quebec after the first few hours!

Now he gathered her up in his arms as if she been a baby, and kissed the small hot face, tasting the salt tears.

“Little one,” he began in a tender, comforting tone, “set your heart at rest. If the good God spares us, there will be many pleasant years together, I hope. I am not going to marry any one, and Ma’m’selle Barbe has a fine young admirer. She doesn’t want an old fellow like me. You can’t understand now, but when you are older I will tell you the whole story. I loved your mother and your grandfather took her away, married her to some one else. That is why you are so dear to me.”

“Oh!” she cried, with a depth of feeling that surprised him. “Oh!” Then she dropped down on her knees and put her arms about his neck, and he could feel her heart beat against his breast. He was immeasurably impressed. Could she understand what that meant?

When he raised her face it was sweet and grave as that of an older person might have been. Then she said softly. “I shall love you my whole life long. I shall never love any one so dearly.”

How did she who had never had any one to love understand affection so well? Perhaps because it is natural to the sex to own something it can adore, and yet the little Renaud girls liked him very much, but there was no such absorption in their regard. Ah, he was her all. They had the natural ties of childhood on which to lavish their love. Barbe – he had never thought of marrying her, though he had seen her grow up to womanhood, and very charming at that. She was for some younger mate, and there were plenty of them. Pretty girls, nor scarcely any girls, went begging in the new countries. They were tempting enough without much *dot*.

And that her little heart should be torn by jealousy! He could have smiled, only it seemed pitiful. He pressed her closer, sorry any innuendoes should have been made before her.

“Come, dear,” he began tenderly, “we have not finished our walk. Or will I have to carry you?”

She sprang up lightly, her face all abloom, though her long lashes still glistened.

“Oh, no, no,” smilingly. “But you have carried me – over part of the long portage when I was so tired, and that night when it was dark. Oh, how big and strong you are. There was some one in a book in the old château – I have nearly forgotten, who was strong and brave. Uncle Gaspard, why haven’t you any books? The little ones at the Father’s are so queer, with their short sentences, and the children blunder so. I like best to know about some person. Oh, can’t we all tell that the dog barks and the kitten mews, the cock crows, without reading it in a primer! And – I would like to have a prayer book of my very own.”

“I think I have one somewhere about. But I will send to New Orleans for some books the next time the boats go down. People have not had much time for learning thus far.”

“And I had nothing to do in the old château but play and read. There was no one to play with,” sadly. “How funny that little girl was who brought me the kitten! Five brothers! Well, I have two at home, in Paris, I mean, but I never saw them only once. Rosalie! Isn’t it a pretty name? I wonder if you would like me to be called anything else?”

“No, dear. You are a queen, my little queen. I don’t want you changed in any way. I only want you to be happy and content.”

She was so thoroughly rested now that although she gave little skips occasionally and held his hand tightly, her heart seemed as light as the birds flying overhead. And now they were coming to a small Indian settlement, with a few wigwams, and long stretches of corn up high enough to make a beautiful waving green sea as the wind moved it in undulating billows. Women were cooking out of doors on little stone fireplaces. Children played about; two small papooses hung up to a tree branch were rocking to and fro. In the sun lay two braves asleep, too lazy to hunt or fish. Yet it was a pretty picture.

The tepees were in a semi-circular form. Denys passed the first one. At the second a woman sat beside the flap doing some beautiful bead and feather work. She raised her eyes and then sprang up with a glad smile, holding her work in a sort of apron.

“It is M’sieu Denys,” in broken French, that sounded soft for an Indian voice. “He has come back. He has taken a long journey to the Far East.” She glanced curiously at the stranger.

“And brought home a little girl,” smiling at the child. “She has come from the land of the great Onontio, and I am to care for her. I am not going to rove about any more, but trade with the residents and send goods up and down the river. And I shall want many articles of you, Mattawissa.”

She smiled and nodded. “I make not much for trade, but sometimes the hunters buy for their sweethearts as they return. And will you trade beads and silks? The threads we make are so troublesome to dye, and sometimes the color is rough, not pretty,” with a shrug. “I have heard it comes up from the great city down below.”

“New Orleans. Yes. But I brought it with me from Canada. They use it in the convents, where they do fine work. And the Spanish often take it home to show, and ornament their houses for the strangeness of it, and moccasins and bands, and the pretty things for real service. No one makes them quite as well as you.”

“Will not the child sit down?” She brought a bag stuffed with grass, much like the more modern hassock. Renée thanked her, and seated herself.

Mattawissa was proud of her French, and lame as it was, brought it out on every occasion when talking to the white people. Denys had a smattering of several Indian tongues, which most of the fur hunters and traders soon acquired.

Some of the little children of the forest crept up cautiously. Men they were used to seeing; white women rarely, as those at a distance seldom went into the settlements in their early youth. They were not strange to Renée, and she smiled a little, but they retained their natural gravity and evinced no disposition to make friends.

Then Renée’s attention was directed to the articles Mattawissa brought out. Beautiful strips of wampum, collars ornamented with bits of shells hanging by threads that made a soft, rhythmic sound as they were handled about, bits of deerskin that were like velvet, on which she had traced out delicate fancies that were really fascinating. Denys grew enthusiastic over them, and begged them all.

“This is for Talequah, the daughter of the Sioux who marries the son of a chief before the moon of roses ends. I cannot part with that. But I want beads, and if I could come in and choose?” inquiringly.

“Oh, yes, come in by all means,” Denys answered quickly. “I want to send down the river – in a fortnight perhaps, and will take whatever you can spare. You shall look over my store and select.”

“To-morrow if you like,” hesitatingly.

“Yes, the sooner the better.”

“I will bring these.”

“No, I will take them. It is not a heavy load,” with a pleasant smile. “And surely I am as able as you to carry the parcel. Then I am not a brave. A trapper is used to waiting on himself.”

“But – I have something for the child.”

“O Renée, you will like that. Ma’m’selle is getting her chamber furnished.”

“And you must eat.” She went in the wigwam and returned with a red earthen bowl decorated on the outside with a good deal of taste, not unlike Egyptian pottery, the yellow edge so burned in and rubbed by some process that it suggested dull gold burnished. Also a dainty boat made of birch bark embroidered and beaded, with compartments inside for trinkets, or it could be used for a work-box.

“Oh, how very pretty! Uncle Gaspard, I can keep the boat on my table, and the bowl on the little shelf you put up. And I shall fill it with flowers. Madame, I thank you with all my heart. I know it is because you like Uncle Gaspard so well, for an hour ago you did not know of me;” and she pressed the Indian woman’s hand.

“I am glad it pleases you. I may find some other article. And now be seated again. There is a long walk before you, and you must have something to eat.”

She went out to the old woman bending over her preparations, and brought for each a bowl of sagamity, a common Indian repast, oftener cooked with fish than bits of pork; and a plate of cakes made of Indian corn pounded fine in a rude mortar, or sometimes ground with one stone on top of another. For though there were mills that ground both corn and wheat, the Indians kept to their primitive methods. What did it matter so long as there were squaws to do the work?

Renée did not like the sagamity, but the cakes were good and the birch beer was fine she thought. In spite of protest she insisted on carrying her treasures home.

Then Mattawissa wove a few strands of grass together, and bringing the four ends up over the bowl knotted them into a bunch and made a kind of basket. A piece of bark was slipped under the joining and this wound around with a bit of deerskin so that it would not cut the fingers. Renée watched the process with much interest, and thought it very ingenious.

Then they started homeward quite fresh from their long rest, but at the last they had to hurry a little lest the gate at the fort should be closed.

CHAPTER V – WITH A TOUCH OF SORROW

The boats were coming up the river, a long line slow moving, and not with the usual shouts and songs. Half the town turned out to welcome them. Along the edge of the levee in the old days stretched a considerable bluff, washed and worn away long ago to the level of Market and Chestnut Streets. From here you had much of the river both up and down in clear sight.

It was thronged with men now in motley array, smoking their short pipes, exchanging a bit of badinage and telling each other what treasures they expected. For a few weeks there would be a rush of business until the boats were loaded again and everything dropped back to the olden inertia. There would be plenty of frolics too and a great warm welcome for Pierre Laclede.

A canoe was coming up swiftly, and yet there was no sign of gladness on the boats, no flags flying gayly.

“What does it all mean?” said some one perplexed.

The canoe was steered slowly, touched the rude wharf, and the cheer died in the throats of the throng.

“It is bad news we bring. Monsieur Laclede is not with us. M. Pierre Chouteau is heartbroken. Where is the colonel?” and the boat swung round.

“Here, here,” and the tall, soldierly man sprang down the steps. “What is it? What has happened to my brother?” and his tone was freighted with anxiety.

“Nothing to him but sorrow, Monsieur le Colonel. But our brave and true friend, our great man and leader in everything, M. Laclede, is lost to us forever. Monsieur, he is dead.”

The sailor bowed reverently. Colonel Chouteau clasped his hands together.

“Dead! dead! Our beloved M. Laclede.” It ran through the crowd like a knell.

A great wave of sorrow swept over St. Louis. True, the boats came in and there was bustle and business enough unloading. Some of them were to go farther up, but they paused in a reverent fashion. The merriment of welcome was hushed in reverent sadness. The little bell began to toll, the steps so eager a moment ago were slow enough now. Every one felt he had lost a friend.

“But when and how did this happen?” asked Colonel Chouteau, dazed by the unexpected sorrow, and still incredulous.

The captain of one of the boats on which indeed Pierre Laclede had taken his passage, stepped to the wharf and made a salute with his hand. Every one crowded around to hear the story.

It was melancholy enough and moved more than one to tears. M. Laclede had not been altogether well on leaving New Orleans, and was trusting to the exhilarating air of his loved town to restore him. But fever set in and he had grown rapidly worse. It was a long and tedious journey in those days, and medical lore was at a low ebb. Before they had reached the Arkansas River the brave soul had yielded up his life, still in the prime of a splendid manhood, not even attaining the privilege of sepulture in the town of his heart, for which he had worked and planned with a wisdom that was to remain long years afterward, like the fragrance of a high, unwearied soul.

They gathered in groups relating this and that to his praise. He had founded the town, his busy brain and far-reaching wisdom had seen and seized upon the points possible for a great *entrepôt* of trade. And in the years to come his wildest dreams would be more than realized, though the faint-hearted ones feared now that everything would stop.

Renée was aroused to a great interest in the tales of the intrepid explorers. Sitting in the door in the soft darkness, for now the moon did not rise until past midnight, she lingered, listening with a child’s eagerness to whom something new and wonderful is related, and Denys telling adventures that even now moved him deeply. De Soto marching with his little band across the Continent, suffering from perfidy and mutiny, resolved to find a westward passage and the gold that had rewarded other explorers in South America, and at last ill and wearied out, giving up his life, and at night pushing

off on the longer journey where friendly hands rowed out silently as if to some unknown country, and softly dropped their burden in the river, partly it is said because they did not want the Indians to know that he was mortal and could die.

Marquette and Joliet, brave heroes of a faith they wished to establish everywhere, La Salle with his indomitable courage, being deserted and with but one guide pushing through dangers, then going to France to seek aid from the great king, convinced now that the Mississippi River was not a waterway to the western coast as some had predicted, but would open up a great river route to the Gulf of Mexico. There were wild guesses in those days. But this proved true. In the name of Louis XIV. he took possession of this splendid estate, that rendered France the greatest proprietor of the new country. Not content with all this glory he must essay another dangerous trip and lose his life by a perfidious follower.

Men made histories in those days and had but little time to write them. Priests' journals and letters were to translate them later on. But stories and legends were told over, passed down in families, and treasured as sacred belongings.

Renée was deeply interested. The heroism stirred her. Nearly every story she wound in some way about Uncle Gaspard. It seemed as if he must have sailed in every boat, trudged through wildernesses, even explored the old cave with its shining walls and sides of lead that they mistook first for silver; and after getting over his disappointment how Sieur Renault opened the grand Valle mine that seems inexhaustible even to-day. Gaspard had a wonderful way of making all these old heroes live in the flesh again.

Renée was a very happy little girl now. It was quite true that Ma'm'selle Barbe had a lover, a handsome young fellow who was devoted, who came every night with his violin, and when he did not play sang charming French love songs. The Guions would much rather have had it Gaspard Denys. He was "settled." And then he was a shrewd business fellow and would be sure to make a fortune. Already he was acquiring a good trade. Alphonse Maurice had no business of his very own, and was barely twenty-one. But youthful marriages were very much in vogue in those days, and most of them were happy. Life was so much more simple.

Madame Renaud had a great leaning toward Gaspard as well. But what could one do if he would not come, would not play the lover? She would have laughed at the idea of the little Renée in any sense being a rival.

The child had settled to a happy round. She went to the classes, but she could read very well, and Gaspard had a way of explaining figures to her. There was the business, too, that she was taking a great interest in, and this amused him very much.

Her kitten grew and was a great pet. There was a flower garden, though wild flowers grew all about and there were wild berries in profusion. She often went with Mère Lunde to gather them, sometimes with parties of children. She learned little housewifely tricks as well. When she found Mère Lunde had no end of memories and legends tucked under her cap, she often made the gentle old body bring them out, when Uncle Gaspard had to spend his evenings talking to the men.

She rather liked the Saturday lesson, though she soon had it all by heart. And she was quite a devout little church-goer. She had been very much impressed when Father Gibault, the vicar general, came up and delivered a funeral oration for Monsieur Pierre Laclede.

Meanwhile the Chouteau brothers stepped into M. Laclede's business. Colonel Auguste Chouteau had been his lieutenant and right-hand man for years. He was very proud of the town, too, and resolved to improve the old Laclede house and make it quite a centre.

There was a new governor as well. Why a mild and judicious ruler like Francisco Cruzat should have been superseded by an avaricious, feeble-minded Spaniard, who was half the time incapable from drink, no one could explain.

Meanwhile some larger questions were coming to the fore that caused great uneasiness. There was war between the American colonies and the British, who had conquered a part of Canada. Spain

avowed her sympathy with the colonies. The Indians of the great northwest had affiliated with the British. Then an American, Colonel Rogers Clark, had captured the British posts at Cahokia and Kaskaskia, but afterward gone to Vincennes.

Colonel Chouteau argued that the town should be put in a state of defence. The new palisades had not been finished. This was pushed forward now, the wall strengthened with logs and clay, and in some places rebuilt. The old cannon was replaced with new, and the gates made more secure. The governor even in his sober moments laughed at these precautions.

Sometimes on a Sunday or holiday Gaspard Denys took Renée to visit her grandfather. He made no effort to claim her. Indeed, he was away a good deal, and then his cabin was locked up.

Over beyond at the southern end was the great Chouteau pond, almost a lake where the mill was situated, then a kind of creek winding about and another lovely spot, broadening out, turning around again, and ending in a long point. Young people and older ones too went out to row, taking their dinner in picnic fashion. They were always full of pleasure, these merry French.

Christmas had delighted Renée, and brought a disappointment as well. It was a great season in old St. Louis. At twelve o'clock every one who possibly could went to midnight mass and the little church was crowded. The people were already outgrowing it. Father Meurin had come up from other visitations, there was good old white-haired Father Savigne, who had been a missionary to the Indians and several times barely escaped with his life. Father Valentine taught the children and was much younger.

The altar was decorated and illuminated with candles in front of the Virgin Mother and her baby Son. The solemn yet lovely sound of the Gregorian chants made waves of music through the chapel and stirred every heart. There was the solemn consecration, the kneeling, adoring multitude, the heartfelt responses.

They might not have understood the intricate, hair-splitting truths of to-day, and many no doubt came far short of the divine precepts, but they did worship with all their hearts and souls. And when the priest rang the bell on the hour of midnight it touched them all with deep reverence; and they were glad to join in the hymn, and the benediction descended like a blessing.

Ah, how beautiful it was out of doors! There was no moon, but myriad stars gleamed and glowed, and it seemed as if they were touched with all faint, delicate colors. The ground was white with snow, the peaked roofs were spires, and the river a dark, winding valley.

Outside the church everybody shook hands and gave good wishes. Children and old people were all together. No one would have missed the mass. But now they chatted gayly and talked of the coming day, the young men loitering to capture some pretty girl and walk home with her.

Mère Lunde stirred the fire and Denys put a great log on it, and on his own in the shop. The little girl's window was hung with a fur curtain, for occasionally the wind found chinks to whistle through as it came from the great prairies beyond and brought the sound of writhing and sometimes crushed forests. But all was warmth within. Mère Lunde made a hot drink with wine and spices, and brought out her Christmas cake which she had not meant to cut until to-morrow.

"But see, it is to-morrow already," she said with her cheery laugh. She had devoted several prayers for her poor son's soul and she was quite sure he was safe with the Blessed Virgin and now understood what heavenly life was like.

"It was all so beautiful," Renée said with a long breath of delight. "And the singing! I can hear it yet in the air."

"Thou must to bed, little one, for to-morrow will be a gay day," said Gaspard, kissing her. "Mère, see that she is well tucked in, for the night is cold."

Alas! for all the precaution the little girl woke up with a strange hot feeling in her throat, and her head was heavy and seemed twice as large as ordinary. She tried to raise it, but everything in the room swam round. She gave a faint cry, but no one heard, for Mère Lunde was busy among pans and pots.

"Come, little laggard!" cried a cheery voice. "The children are here with their étrennes."

These were little cakes with dried fruit dipped in maple syrup and thus coated over. The children carried them about to each other on Christmas morning.

The only answer was a low moan. Uncle Gaspard leaned over the small bed.

“Renée, Renée, what is it?” He raised her in his arms and was startled at her flushed face, her dulled eyes, her hot hands.

“O mère,” he cried. “Come, the little one is very ill.”

They looked at her, but she did not seem to know them, and moaned pitifully. “Something must be done. She has taken cold, I think, and has a hot fever.”

Very few people called in a doctor in those days. Indeed, it would have been difficult to find him this morning. There were many excellent home-made remedies that all housewives put up in the autumn, compounded of roots and barks, some of them learned from the Indian women.

“Poor child, poor *petite*, yes, she must be attended to at once. Get thy breakfast, m’sieu, while I make some comfort and aid for her. Yes, it is a fever.”

“But what shall I do for her?”

“Get me some ears of corn, good big ones.”

“And leave her?” aghast at the thought.

“Thou wilt not cure her by staring at her. She can take no harm for a few moments.”

There was always a big kettle standing on the coals with four short legs holding it up. Mère Lunde raked out the ashes and pushed the flaming brands under it. Gaspard exhumed an armful of corn from a big box in the shop.

“Drop them in,” she said. “A dozen or so.”

“Oh, yes, I know now.” He nodded in a satisfied fashion, for he had faith in the remedy.

Soon the water bubbled up and the fragrance of the steaming corn diffused itself about the room. Mère Lunde went to the bed and put a thick blanket under the child. Then the ears were laid about her and she was rolled up like a mummy. The woman raised her head a trifle and forced a potion down her throat that almost strangled her. Spreading blankets over her, she tucked her in securely, and, patting the top one, meant for love to the child, she turned away.

“Well people must eat for strength, and Christmas day is no time for fasting. Come.”

But Gaspard Denys was in no mood for eating. He had never thought of Renée being ill. He knew of some children who had died, and there was Monsieur Laclede who looked strong enough to live to a hundred years, who had gone out of life with a fever. Oh, he could not give up his little girl!

“Is that all?” he asked presently.

Mère Lunde understood.

“There’s no use running in and out like the mill stream, for it’s the flour that is getting ground,” she said sententiously. “Wait a bit.”

He had large patience with most events of life, but here was breathless with suspense. If she had been drooping for days, but she was so merry last night.

Rosalie came to the door. The children were going to Chouteau pond to skate and slide. Would not Renée join them?

“Alas! Renée was very ill.”

“But she must get better by to-morrow,” nodding hopefully and laughing.

After that Grandpère Freneau came up, which startled Gaspard, for he had never deigned to visit his grandchild. He was sober and comparatively well dressed, and had a little gift for her, a curious inlaid box, with a trinket a girl might like. She would be well again in a few days. Children were tough and sturdy, it was the old people who had to think about ills. As for him, he was strong enough yet.

Then he made a clumsy sort of bow and retreated.

“I hope it will bring no bad luck,” exclaimed Mère Lunde. “But he has not a good name. I should throw the gift into the fire!”

“I dare say it is of no great value.” He shook the box. “Some bits of silver with which he salves his conscience.”

Mère Lunde crossed herself.

He put it away in his desk. He was not superstitious, but he wished it had not happened this morning.

It was quite late, but he unbarred his shop door. There was no trade now. The fall business had lasted longer than usual on account of the fine, open weather. When the cold once set in it often lasted steadily for three months. But there was plenty of pleasure. The regular trappers had gone off, but hunting parties often sallied out and returned laden with game.

Mère Lunde stole in to look at her patient and shook her head, threw some more ears of corn in the kettle and answered the calls that came in a joyous mood and left in sorrow. For people were very sympathetic in those days, and cares were shared in true neighborly fashion.

Presently there was a little moisture about the edge of Renée’s hair, but the watcher did not like the dull purple of her cheeks nor the labored breathing. There might be a poultice for the throat; yes, she would make that. And if the good Father came and made a prayer! But that seemed as if one must be very ill indeed.

Gaspard had no mind for pleasure. He went in and stood by the child, who most of the time lay in a heavy sort of sleep. How strange she looked with her red, swollen face, quite unlike herself!

Yes, he would go for Dr. Montcrevier, though he had not much faith in him, for he seemed to think more of strange bugs and birds and fishes than human beings. However, his search was fruitless, perhaps it was as well.

“The fever is abating,” was Mère Lunde’s greeting in a joyous tone. “Great drops have come out on her forehead. Ah, I think we shall conquer with the good corn. And she has been awake.”

There was less pressure for breath, though the rattle in the throat was not a pleasant sound. But by mid-afternoon she was in a drench of perspiration, and then Mère Lunde rubbed her dry and rolled her in a fresh blanket.

“What is the matter? I feel so queer,” exclaimed the tremulous voice.

“You are ill, poor little child,” in a tender tone.

“Is it morning? The night was so long. It seemed as if the house was burning up.”

“It was the bad fever. Oh, yes, it is day, almost another night. Oh, little one, the good God be praised!”

Mère Lunde dropped down on her knees and repeated a short prayer.

Renée raised her head.

“Oh, it still feels queer. And I am so tired.”

She dropped off to sleep again. Mère Lunde had two potions, one for the fever, one for her general strength, but she would not disturb her now. Sleep was generally a good medicine.

“She has spoken. She is better,” was the mère’s greeting as Denys entered. “But she is asleep now. Do not disturb her.”

Yes, the dreadful purple was going out of her face. He took the limp little hand. It was cooler, though the pulse still beat hard and high. Ah, how much one could come to love and hardly know it until the threat of losing appeared. And he thought of her mother. He could never get it out of his mind but that she had died in cruel neglect, alone and heartbroken. He pressed the slim fingers to his lips, he studied the brow with its soft, light rings of hair, the almost transparent eyelids and long lashes, the dainty nose that had a piquant ending not quite *retroussé* but suggestive of it, and the small mouth, the lips wide in the middle that gave it a roundness often seen in childhood. She would be a pretty young girl, though it was her soft yet deep and wondering eyes that made her resemble her mother.

When she roused again Mère Lunde administered her potions. She made a very wry face over the bitter one. The good mère put another poultice on her throat and spread it well over her chest;

rolling her up again like a mummy. She would have laughed if there had not been a great lump in her throat.

“I am like a papoose,” she said. “Uncle Gaspard, sit here and tell me some stories.”

He would not go away after she had fallen asleep, but wrapped himself in a blanket and leaned his head on the foot of her bed. Now and then she moaned a little, which gave him a pang, and after midnight she grew very restless. The fever was coming on again. Mère Lunde roused her and gave her another potion, and before daylight she had prepared the corn bath again. The fever did not seem to be as obstinate. By noon she was quite comfortable. Father Lemoine brought in the vicar general, who was going back to Ste. Genevieve. This was a great honor, and Mère Lunde brought out some wine that had come from the real vineyards of France.

Father Meurin heard the little girl’s story. He had known of Antoine Freneau, indeed, he had performed the first marriage and given the first baptism in the little town. That was in a tent, because there was no church. And the first services had been held in the fields, for the church had been built hardly ten years.

“She would be in poor hands if left to her grandfather,” he admitted. “And I hope she will be rightly brought up. If you had a wife, M. Denys.”

“I have rambled about so much I have had no time to marry,” he returned rather drily. “But now I shall settle down.”

“I hope so. It is what the towns need, steady occupancy. And you will deal rightly with the child and see that she is brought up as a daughter of the Church should be. You are quite sure her mother –” he finished the question with his eyes.

“I saw the marriage register in the cathedral at Quebec. Then her mother was taken to France, where she died,” Denys answered.

The vicar nodded, satisfied. He repeated the prayer for the recovery of the sick and gave them all a kindly blessing with his adieu.

Gaspard Denys fell into a brown study. She was not his child, to be sure. Would it make any difference any time in the future? Ought there to be some woman different from Mère Lunde – bah! it would be years before Renée was grown up. And the little one wanted no one to share his love. He was glad – that would always be an excuse to himself. He never could put any one in the place he had hoped to set Renée Freneau.

CHAPTER VI – BY THE FIRESIDE

Renée mended slowly. She had indeed been very ill. She was so weak that it tired her to sit up among the pillows in her bed. And one day when she insisted upon getting up she dropped over into Mère Lunde's arms.

"Where is all my strength gone to?" she inquired pettishly.

"*Pauvre petite*," it was queer, and the good woman had no science to explain it.

But her throat improved and her voice cleared up, the fever grew lighter every day and she began to have some appetite. Friends came in to inquire and sympathize and bring delicacies. Madame Renaud offered her services, but no one was really needed, though the cordial, smiling face did Renée good. Ma'm'selle Barbe brought the two little girls, who looked awestricken at the pale face, where the eyes seemed bigger than ever.

Uncle Gaspard made a sort of settle on which they could put some cushions and blankets so that she could be brought out to the living room and watch Mère Lunde at her work. Then he improved upon it and made it into a kind of chair with a back that could be raised and lowered by an ingenious use of notches and wooden pins. He was getting so handy that he made various useful articles, for in those days in these upper settlements there were so few pieces of furniture that could be purchased, unless some one died and left no relatives, which was very seldom. Proud enough one was of owning an article or a bit of china or a gown that was a family heirloom.

"Oh," he said one evening when she was comfortably fixed and the blaze of the great logs lighted up the room and made her pale face a little rosy, "I had almost forgotten – you have been so ill it drove most other things out of my mind. Your grandfather came up here on Christmas day and brought you a gift."

"A gift! Oh, what was it?"

"Mère Lunde had not forgotten, but she had a superstitious feeling about it. I will get it for you," Gaspard said.

He returned from the adjoining room with the box in his hand. It was very securely fastened with a twisted bit of deerskin, which was often used for cord.

"Open it," she begged languidly.

He cut the cord but did not raise the cover. She held it some seconds in her hand.

"Uncle, do you remember you told me about a girl who opened a box and let troubles out all over the world?"

"But she was bidden not to. Grandpère Antoine did not leave any such word as that," smilingly.

She raised the cover slowly. There was a bit of soft white fur in the bottom and on it lay a golden chain and a cross, with a pearl set where the arms and upright met. In the clasp was a smaller pearl. She held it up silently.

"The good saints must have touched his soul!" ejaculated Mère Lunde. "A beautiful cross! It is gold?" with a questioning glance at Denys.

Renée handed it to him.

"Oh, yes, gold of course. And your grandfather seemed quite moved with pity for you. I saw him again this morning, but he said, 'Oh, I did not think she would die.'"

Renée's eyes were wide open, with a startled light. "Did anybody think – that?" and her voice trembled.

"You may be sure I did not," exclaimed Denys with spirit, almost with joyousness. "I would not have let you go."

She held out both arms to him, and he clasped her to his heart.

"But people are compelled to sometimes," said Mère Lunde gravely.

“We were not compelled. And now you are to get well as rapidly as possible. Everybody has been having a merry time with the king’s ball, and you have missed it. But there is next year.”

How far away next year seemed! Spring, and summer, and autumn.

“How long have I been ill? It is queer, but I don’t seem to remember clearly,” trying to think, and studying the leaping blaze that seemed like a group of children playing tag, or hide and seek.

“It is almost a month. First it was pretty bad,” and he compressed his lips with a queer expression and shook his head. Now he had let his hair grow quite long, as most of the men did, and the ends fell into a sort of curl.

“And then – Mère Lunde, the things you gave me were very bad and bitter, and my head used to go round, I remember. Sometimes things stood on the ceiling in such a funny position. And then to be like a baby, hardly able to walk.”

She gave a soft, languid ripple of a laugh. Ah, what if he had lost her!

“And when can I go out?”

“Oh, not in a long while. It is bitter cold, even the river is full of ice chunks. But you may dance at the next king’s ball.”

“The king’s ball?” inquiringly.

“Not the King of France,” with a gentle smile. “When the Christ was born three kings came to do Him honor. And the feast is always kept.”

“The blessed Epiphany,” explained Mère Lunde. “Though why it should be given over to all this merry-making I can’t see.”

“Did you ever go?” asked Renée.

“Oh, yes. But not last year – I had started for Canada. And the year before I was up with the hunters.”

“Tell me about it.”

He sat down beside her. She was twisting the chain about her fingers.

“There is not much to do for the people who stay here in the winter, though New Orleans is twice as gay. So they have the balls. There are four queens, pretty young girls, and they each choose a king and open the ball with him. Then they dance. But the old people and a good many of the children go as well. And there is dancing and jollity and a feast of good things to eat, and much laughing and jesting and falling in love, with the marrying at Easter. Next year we will go.”

“I will keep my chain to wear then.” She put it back in the box. “And when I am well I will go down and thank grandfather.”

“Yes, yes, that will be the right thing to do. I will take you.”

Then they were silent awhile. “Tell me some of the stories you know,” she entreated.

“I have told you so many.”

“But you can think of one more,” in her coaxing tone. “Away up in the north and the endless fields of snow, and where does it end?”

“At the North Pole, I believe.”

“And what is that?” eagerly.

“We will have to ask Dr. Montcrevier. I have never been farther than Hudson’s Bay.”

“But people can’t live in such endless cold!”

“I think not. Only polar bears and the white and silver fox, and they come down in the winter. And then there are islands hundreds of miles away below us, where it is always summer.”

“What a queer world!” She smiled absently as if she could hardly take it in. “Have you been there?”

“Only to New Orleans. Some day we will go there, too.”

“Oh, how much there is to do. Yes, one must live a long while to do it all,” and a thoughtful expression deepened her eyes.

“And you are tired, little one. You must go to bed.”

It was strange to get so tired. She had been tired many times on the long journey from Canada, but not like this. She was very glad she had not died, however, though she had no very clear idea about death, except that it meant going to another world. Uncle Gaspard was here, and that was one reason why she wanted to stay.

Presently she began to go about and take pleasure in having the children come in and tell her about their sports. The life was so simple, the main thing seemed to be the good times. No one troubled about education and there were no “higher branches” to vex one’s soul. There was much less dissipation here than in New Orleans or even Detroit, where people from other towns were continually mingling.

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