

***LOUIS
HÉMON***



***MARIA CHAPDELAINÉ:
A TALE OF THE LAKE
ST. JOHN COUNTRY***

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Maria Chapdelaine: A Tale of the Lake St. John Country

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CHAPTER I

PERIBONKA

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Ite, missa est

The door opened, and the men of the congregation began to come out of the church at Peribonka.

A moment earlier it had seemed quite deserted, this church set by the roadside on the high bank of the Peribonka, whose icy snow-covered surface was like a winding strip of plain. The snow lay deep upon road and fields, for the April sun was powerless to send warmth through the gray clouds, and the heavy spring rains were yet to come. This chill and universal white, the humbleness of the wooden church and the wooden houses scattered along the road, the gloomy forest edging so close that it seemed to threaten, these all spoke of a harsh existence in a stern land. But as the men and boys passed through the doorway and gathered in knots on the broad steps, their cheery salutations, the chaff flung from group to group, the continual interchange of talk, merry or sober, at once disclosed the unquenchable joyousness of a people ever filled with laughter and good humour.

Cleophas Pesant, son of Thadee Pesant the blacksmith, was already in light-coloured summer garments, and sported an American coat with broad padded shoulders; though on this cold Sunday he had not ventured to discard his winter cap of black cloth with harelined ear-laps for the hard felt hat he would have preferred to wear. Beside him

Egide Simard, and others who had come a long road by sleigh, fastened their long fur coats as they left the church, drawing them in at the waist with scarlet sashes. The young folk of the village, very smart in coats with otter collars, gave deferential greeting to old Nazaire Larouche; a tall man with gray hair and huge bony shoulders who had in no wise altered for the mass his everyday garb: short jacket of brown cloth lined with sheepskin, patched trousers, and thick woollen socks under moose-hide moccasins.

"Well, Mr. Larouche, do things go pretty well across the water?"

"Not badly, my lads, not so badly."

Everyone drew his pipe from his pocket, and the pig's bladder filled with tobacco leaves cut by hand, and, after the hour and a half of restraint, began to smoke with evident satisfaction. The first puffs brought talk of the weather, the coming spring, the state of the ice on Lake St. John and the rivers, of their several doings and the parish gossip; after the manner of men who, living far apart on the worst of roads, see one another but once a week.

"The lake is solid yet," said Cleophas Pesant, "but the rivers are no longer safe. The ice went this week beside the sand-bank opposite the island, where there have been warm spring-holes all winter." Others began to discuss the chances of the crops, before the ground was even showing.

"I tell you that we shall have a lean year," asserted one old fellow, "the frost got in before the last snows fell."

At length the talk slackened and all faced the top step, where Napoleon Laliberte was making ready, in accord with his weekly custom, to announce the parish news. He stood

there motionless for a little while, awaiting quiet,—hands deep in the pockets of the heavy lynx coat, knitting his forehead and half closing his keen eyes under the fur cap pulled well over his ears; and when silence fell he began to give the news at the full pitch of his voice, in the manner of a carter who encourages his horses on a hill.

"The work on the wharf will go forward at once ... I have been sent money by the Government, and those looking for a job should see me before vespers. If you want this money to stay in the parish instead of being sent back to Quebec you had better lose no time in speaking to me."

Some moved over in his direction; others, indifferent, met his announcement with a laugh. The remark was heard in an envious undertone:—"And who will be foreman at three dollars a day? Perhaps good old Laliberte ..."

But it was said jestingly rather than in malice, and the speaker ended by adding his own laugh.

Hands still in the pockets of his big coat, straightening himself and squaring his shoulders as he stood there upon the highest step, Napoleon Laliberte proceeded in loudest tones:—"A surveyor from Roberval will be in the parish next week. If anyone wishes his land surveyed before mending his fences for the summer, this is to let him know."

The item was received without interest. Peribonka farmers are not particular about correcting their boundaries to gain or lose a few square feet, since the most enterprising among them have still two-thirds of their grants to clear,—endless acres of woodland and swamp to reclaim.

He continued:—"Two men are up here with money to buy furs. If you have any bear, mink, muskrat or fox you will find

these men at the store until Wednesday, or you can apply to François Paradis of Mistassini who is with them. They have plenty of money and will pay cash for first-class pelts." His news finished, he descended the steps. A sharp-faced little fellow took his place.

"Who wants to buy a fine young pig of my breeding?" he asked, indicating with his finger something shapeless that struggled in a bag at his feet. A great burst of laughter greeted him. They knew them well, these pigs of Hormidas' raising. No bigger than rats, and quick as squirrels to jump the fences.

"Twenty-five cents!" one young man bid chaffingly.

"Fifty cents!"

"A dollar!"

"Don't play the fool, Jean. Your wife will never let you pay a dollar for such a pig as that."

Jean stood his ground:—"A dollar, I won't go back on it."

Hormidas Berube with a disgusted look on his face awaited another bid, but only got jokes and laughter.

Meantime the women in their turn had begun to leave the church. Young or old, pretty or ugly, nearly all were well clad in fur cloaks, or in coats of heavy cloth; for, honouring the Sunday mass, sole festival of their lives, they had doffed coarse blouses and homespun petticoats, and a stranger might well have stood amazed to find them habited almost with elegance in this remote spot; still French to their fingertips in the midst of the vast lonely forest and the snow, and as tastefully dressed, these peasant women, as most of the middle-class folk in provincial France.

Cleophas Pesant waited for Louisa Tremblay who was alone, and they went off together along the wooden sidewalk in the direction of the house. Others were satisfied to exchange jocular remarks with the young girls as they passed, in the easy and familiar fashion of the country,- natural enough too where the children have grown up together from infancy.

Pite Gaudreau, looking toward the door of the church, remarked:—"Maria Chapdelaine is back from her visit to St. Prime, and there is her father come to fetch her." Many in the village scarcely knew the Chapdelaines.

"Is it Samuel Chapdelaine who has a farm in the woods on the other side of the river, above Honfleur?"

"That's the man."

"And the girl with him is his daughter? Maria ..."

"Yes, she has been spending a month at St. Prime with her mother's people. They are Bouchards, related to Wilfrid Bouchard of St. Gedeon ..."

Interested glances were directed toward the top of the steps. One of the young people paid Maria the countryman's tribute of admiration—"A fine hearty girl!" said he.

"Right you are! A fine hearty girl, and one with plenty of spirit too. A pity that she lives so far off in the woods. How are the young fellows of the village to manage an evening at their place, on the other side of the river and above the falls, more than a dozen miles away and the last of them with next to no road?"

The smiles were bold enough as they spoke of her, this inaccessible beauty; but as she came down the wooden steps with her father and passed near by, they were taken

with bashfulness and awkwardly drew back, as though something more lay between her and them than the crossing of a river and twelve miles of indifferent woodland road.

Little by little the groups before the church dissolved. Some returned to their houses, after picking up all the news that was going; others, before departing, were for spending an hour in one of the two gathering places of the village; the curé's house or the general store. Those who came from the back concessions, stretching along the very border of the forest, one by one untied their horses from the row and brought their sleighs to the foot of the steps for their women and children.

Samuel Chapdelaine and Maria had gone but a little way when a young man halted them.

"Good day to you, Mr. Chapdelaine. Good day, Miss Maria. I am in great luck at meeting you, since your farm is so high up the river and I don't often come this way myself."

His bold eyes travelled from one to the other. When he averted them it seemed by a conscious effort of politeness; swiftly they returned, and their glance, bright, keen, full of honest eagerness, was questioning and disconcerting.

"François Paradis!" exclaimed Chapdelaine.

"This is indeed a bit of luck, for I haven't seen you this long while, François. And your father dead too. Have you held on to the farm?" The young man did not answer; he was looking expectantly at Maria with a frank smile, awaiting a word from her.

"You remember François Paradis of Mistassini, Maria? He has changed very little."

"Nor have you, Mr. Chapdelaine. But your daughter, that is a different story; she is not the same, yet I should have known her at once."

They had spent the last evening at St. Michel de Mistassini-viewing everything in the full light of the afternoon: the great wooden bridge, covered in and painted red, not unlike an amazingly long Noah's ark; the high hills rising almost from the very banks of the river, the old monastery crouched between the river and the heights, the water that seethed and whitened, flinging itself in wild descent down the staircase of a giant. But to see this young man after seven years, and to hear his name spoken, aroused in Maria memories clearer and more lively than she was able to evoke of the events and sights of yesterday.

"François Paradis! ... Why surely, father, I remember François Paradis." And François, content, gave answer to the questions of a moment ago.

"No, Mr. Chapdelaine, I have not kept the farm. When the good man died I sold everything, and since then I have been nearly all the time in the woods, trapping or bartering with the Indians of Lake Mistassini and the Riviere aux Foins. I also spent a couple of years in the Labrador." His look passed once more from Samuel Chapdelaine to Maria, and her eyes fell.

"Are you going home to-day?" he asked.

"Yes; right after dinner."

"I am glad that I saw you, for I shall be passing up the river near your place in two or three weeks, when the ice goes out. I am here with some Belgians who are going to buy furs from the Indians; we shall push up so soon as the

river is clear, and if we pitch a tent above the falls close to your farm I will spend the evening with you."

"That is good, François, we will expect you."

The alders formed a thick and unbroken hedge along the river Peribonka; but the leafless stems did not shut away the steeply sloping bank, the levels of the frozen river, the dark hem of the woods crowding to the farther edge-leaving between the solitude of the great trees, thick-set and erect, and the bare desolateness of the ice only room for a few narrow fields, still for the most part uncouth with stumps, so narrow indeed that they seemed to be constrained in the grasp of an unkindly land.

To Maria Chapdelaine, glancing inattentively here and there, there was nothing in all this to make one feel lonely or afraid. Never had she known other prospect from October to May, save those still more depressing and sad, farther yet from the dwellings of man and the marks of his labour; and moreover all about her that morning had taken on a softer outline, was brighter with a new promise, by virtue of something sweet and gracious that the future had in its keeping. Perhaps the coming springtime ... perhaps another happiness that was stealing toward her, nameless and unrecognized.

Samuel Chapdelaine and Maria were to dine with their relative Azalma Larouche, at whose house they had spent the night. No one was there but the hostess, for many years a widow, and old Nazaire Larouche, her brother-in-law. Azalma was a tall, flat-chested woman with the undeveloped features of a child, who talked very quickly and almost without taking breath while she made ready the

meal in the kitchen. From time to time she halted her preparations and sat down opposite her visitors, less for the moments repose than to give some special emphasis to what she was about to say; but the washing of a dish or the setting of the table speedily claimed her attention again, and the monologue went on amid the clatter of dishes and frying-pans.

The pea-soup was soon ready and on the table. While eating, the two men talked about the condition of their farms and the state of the spring ice.

"You should be safe enough for crossing this evening," said Nazaire Larouche, "but it will be touch-and-go, and I think you will be about the last. The current is strong below the fall and already we have had three days of rain."

"Everybody says that the ice will hold for a long time yet," replied his sister-in-law. "Better sleep here again to-night, and after supper the young folks from the village will drop in and spend the evening. It is only fair that Maria should have a little more amusement before you drag her off into your woods up there."

"She has had plenty of gaiety at St. Prime; singing and games almost every night. We are greatly obliged to you, but I am going to put the horse in immediately after dinner so as to get home in good time."

Old Nazaire Larouche spoke of the morning's sermon which had struck him as well reasoned and fine; then after a spell of silence he exclaimed abruptly—"Have you baked?"

His amazed sister-in-law gaped at him for a moment before it stole upon her that this was his way of asking for

bread. A little later he attacked her with another question:—"Is your pump working well?"

Which signified that there was no water on the table. Azalma rose to get it, and behind her back the old fellow sent a sly wink in the direction of Maria. "I assault her with parables," chuckled he. "It's politer."

On the plank walls of the house were pasted old newspapers, and calendars hung there such as the manufacturers of farm implements or grain merchants scatter abroad, and also prints of a religious character; a representation in crudest colour and almost innocent of perspective of the basilica at Ste. Anne de Beaupre—, a likeness of Pope Pius X.; a chromo where the palely-smiling Virgin Mary disclosed her bleeding heart encircled with a golden nimbus.

"This is nicer than our house," thought Maria to herself. Nazaire Larouche kept directing attention to his wants with dark sayings:—"Was your pig very lean?" he demanded; or perhaps:—"Fond of maple sugar, are you? I never get enough of it ..."

And then Azalma would help him to a second slice of pork or fetch the cake of maple sugar from the cupboard. When she wearied of these strange table-manners and bade him help himself in the usual fashion, he smoothed her ruffled temper with good-humoured excuses, "Quite right. Quite right. I won't do it again; but you always loved a joke, Azalma. When you have youngsters like me at dinner you must look for a little nonsense."

Maria smiled to think how like he was to her father; both tall and broad, with grizzled hair, their faces tanned to the

colour of leather, and, shining from their eyes, the quenchless spirit of youth which keeps alive in the countryman of Quebec his imperishable simple-heartedness.

They took the road almost as soon as the meal was over. The snow, thawed on top by the early rains, and frozen anew during the cold nights, gave an icy surface that slipped away easily beneath the runners. The high blue hills on the other side of Lake St. John which closed the horizon behind them were gradually lost to view as they returned up the long bend of the river.

Passing the church, Samuel Chapdelaine said thoughtfully—"The mass is beautiful. I am often very sorry that we live so far from churches. Perhaps not being able to attend to our religion every Sunday hinders us from being just so fortunate as other people."

"It is not our fault," sighed Maria, "we are too far away."

Her father shook his head regretfully. The imposing ceremonial, the Latin chants, the lighted tapers, the solemnity of the Sunday mass never failed to fill him with exaltation. In a little he began to sing:—

J'irai la voir un jour,
M'asseoir pres de son trone,
Recevoir ma couronne
Et regner a mon tour ...

His voice was strong and true, and he used the full volume of it, singing with deep fervour; but ere long his eyes began to close and his chin to drop toward his breast. Driving always made him sleepy, and the horse, aware that

the usual drowsiness had possession of his master, slackened his pace and at length fell to a walk.

"Get up there, Charles Eugene!"

He had suddenly waked and put his hand out for the whip. Charles Eugene resigned himself and began to trot again. Many generations ago a Chapdelaine cherished a long feud with a neighbour who bore these names, and had forthwith bestowed them upon an old, tired, lame horse of his, that he might give himself the pleasure every day when passing the enemy's house of calling out very loudly:—"Charles Eugene, ill-favoured beast that you are! Wretched, badly brought up creature! Get along, Charles Eugene!" For a whole century the quarrel was dead and buried; but the Chapdelaines ever since had named their successive horses Charles Eugene.

Once again the hymn rose in clear ringing tones, intense with feeling:—

Au ciel, au ciel, au ciel,
J'irai la voir un jour . .

And again sleep was master, the voice died away, and Maria gathered up the reins dropped from her father's hand.

The icy road held alongside the frozen river. The houses on the other shore, each surrounded with its patch of cleared land, were sadly distant from one another. Behind the clearings, and on either side of them to the river's bank, it was always forest: a dark green background of cypress against which a lonely birch tree stood out here and there, its bole naked and white as the column of a ruined temple.

On the other side of the road the strip of cleared land was continuous and broader; the houses, set closer together, seemed an outpost of the village; but ever behind the bare fields marched the forest, following like a shadow, a gloomy frieze without end between white ground and gray sky.

"Charles Eugene, get on there!"

Chapdelaine woke and made his usual good-humoured feint toward the whip; but by the time the horse slowed down, after a few livelier paces, he had dropped off again, his hands lying open upon his knees showing the worn palms of the horse-hide mittens, his chin resting upon the coat's thick fur.

After a couple of miles the road climbed a steep hill and entered the unbroken woods. The houses standing at intervals in the flat country all the way from the village came abruptly to an end, and there was no longer anything for the eye to rest upon but a wilderness of bare trunks rising out of the universal whiteness. Even the incessant dark green of balsam, spruce and gray pine was rare; the few young and living trees were lost among the endless dead, either lying on the ground and buried in snow, or still erect but stripped and blackened. Twenty years before great forest fires had swept through, and the new growth was only pushing its way amid the standing skeletons and the charred down-timber. Little hills followed one upon the other, and the road was a succession of ups and downs scarcely more considerable than the slopes of an ocean swell, from trough to crest, from crest to trough.