

## *A Christmas Eve of Long Ago.*

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IT was the afternoon of the Christmas eve of 1892. Old Pierre Richard had never been known to be absent from midnight mass, ever since he came to La Riviere Vaseuse from La Baie Ste-Marie. Forty years ago, when he was a young married man, he would walk to church, but now, crippled by old age and hard work, he always went with his son Louis who lived with him in the old homestead, five miles from the Catholic church in Belle Alliance.

As the sun was setting over the forest in the west, he sent his son out to have a "look at the weather." Although these men were strangers to school books, yet they were well acquainted with Nature's book of experience, and so, when Louis reported that all signs pointed to a fine evening, the old man smiled and seemed quite satisfied.

A little after ten o'clock the horse was hitched to the wood-sleigh and driven to the door of the house. Louis and his wife, Marie helped the old man to walk to the sleigh for the walking near the house was treacherous and the old man's sight was defective, especially when walking out after sunset. He sat on the dry wheat straw in the bottom of the sleigh and Marie spread a few newly patched quilts about him, at the same time tucking in all loose corners and making everything neat, tidy and comfortable. When all the necessary preparations had been completed, Louis gathered in the reins gave the horse a sharp tap and immediately the lonesome travellers began their journey.

It was an excellent night for driving. Thousands of stars twinkled "in all their splendour and glory," in the same manner as on that memorable night, when the three Magi met in the desert of the far East on their way to adore the new-born Christ in the stable of Bethlehem. There were about six inches of snow packed hard by the frost and the heavy hauling of the last few weeks. Here and there were a few "pitches" but these only added excitement to the drive and kept the silent travellers from falling asleep. They were travelling at a dangerous rate and Pierre's heart beat

fast as the sleigh would occasionally slide down a "slough" or run sideways on a smooth patch of ice along the road.

After travelling for half an hour, they were joined by other pilgrims on their way to renew their yearly associations with the crib, and by the time they reached the church, one could hear as many varied jingles of bells as there were horses. It was a glorious spectacle and one not to be forgotten in a hurry—in the fore-ground, the long rows of horses and sleighs, men, women and children walking in groups or filing into the church; in the back-ground, the buildings, fences and trees thinly sprinkled with snow and frost which glistened under the full light of the moon and stars.

On opening the church doors a bright light dazzled the travellers and the heat from the red hot stoves greeted them. Father Joe, the parish priest, ever solicitous for the material and spiritual welfare of his flock, knew that most of his parishioners would have a long drive in the cold, and so he himself all day long had superintended the fires in the church and had kept them roaring, blazing and cracking. And then, as our travellers made their way to their pew, they saw him coming from the vestry with his long black soutane and white locks survey with a happy smile the large congregation and then enter the vestry to prepare for the mid-night service.

As the clock in the vestry struck twelve, the air was filled with the soft, sweet sound of the church bell, flinging its message in all directions to those hardy woodmen to come and visit the crib of the new-born Christ. An attractive little fellow, with light curly hair and rosy cheeks, dressed in a long red soutane with a spotlessly white surplice, timidly stepped up to the altar to light the candles. As the old man heard the music of the bell and beheld the preparations for the ceremony, it brought back home to him vivid recollections of days gone by when he used to light the candles like this little fellow in front of him. Yes, and it all seemed to him to have occurred only a few days ago. How the mind clings to such treasured association and seems reluctant to part with them!

At last the mid-night mass with all its impressive ceremony was about to commence. The whole congregation knelt while the priest crossed himself and began the "Introibo ad altore Dei,"



From the choir, the organ fairly shook the church with its quivering diapason and deep base. At length the anthem was taken up by the powerful voices of men mingled with those of women, but rising clear and high pitched above these could be heard the soprano voices of a dozen boys.

Music at all times has a soothing, fascinating influence and perhaps even more so when we hear music with which we are familiar, like some old fragment of songs with which our mothers used to sing us to sleep when we were mischievous youngsters. In addition, the plain chant or the Gregorian attracts the ear by a peculiarity all its own. No wonder then, that when the choir took up the "Gloria in excelsis Deo," the old man sat mute and still. The music with all its sacred associations filled his soul with a great joy. And when it was over a lonely tear trickled down his face and buried itself in his long white beard. "Glory be to God" he sighed, just as the choirs of angels, cherubim and seraphim chanted two thousand years ago. "Glory be to God" he sang, just as Nature and the whole human race were singing this evening to testify to His grandeur, dignity and sublimity. "Glory be to God," for the words in themselves were a salve to his human nature, which seemed of itself to crave for something above all earthly enjoyments. His soul filled with earnest thanksgiving and praises to his Master as his fingers slowly crept over the tiny beads of his rosary.

And when the end of the service came and Father Joe, in a short sermon on the solemn occasion, said that Christmas should mean joy, happiness and good fellow-ship to each and every individual of the Christian world, he was on the point of shouting aloud in his glee, "A Merry Christmas, Father Joe. From the bottom of my heart I wish you a Merry Christmas." No, Dickens has never painted a Scrooge who could wish a fellow-man a more cordial Christmas than old man Pierre was about to hurl at Father Joe and the rest of the congregation.

The excess of his happiness showed itself beyond the church walls. When he reached home, his first thought was to surprise "les petits" as he called them, who had been left at the house under the charge of a servant. He got some candies and apples which he placed in their stockings above the fire-place. Then

from the wood-shed he brought a hand sleigh which he had made during the past few weeks unnoticed by the children. He placed it on a shelf above the hearth so that the little ones would be sure to find it in the morning and think that it had come with the usual Christmas eve visitor.

Then tired from the day's exertions and excitement, he went to bed to sleep the sleep of the happy and contented and dream dreams of Santa Claus as he knew him in the land of Evangeline.



At Christmas-tide the open hand  
Scatters it's bounty o'er sea and land,  
And none are left to grieve alone;  
For love is heaven and claims its own.

Margaret Songster