

Cruel Cupid

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On either side the river lie long mud flats that stretch for miles and miles, almost to the breaking point. The river itself is noted for its mud; and if you take off your shoes and walk along its banks, you will leave behind you footprints that would have sent Longfellow into ecstasies.

On the left-hand side going down, squats the town of X——. It is a farming town, a mining town, or any kind of a town you wish to call it. That depends on the way you look at it. You might even call it an historical town, for it has a history.

X——was really founded by the Loyalists from New England. But they were just plain Loyalists. All the "hardy Loyalist stock" had landed at Saint John.

Originally Germans from Brunswick, they had remained Loyalists and Germans all through the Revolutionary War. When the war was over, these miserable people suffered many indignities at the hands and feet of the Americans who were beginning to show signs of national expression. But they endured all these hardships—they had to. Finally, to spite George the third, the Americans passed a law against sauer-kraut. This was too much. They picked up and came to settle along the river. There they prospered and there till this day their descendants are still making sauer-kraut and buck-wheat pancakes.

An Irishman here and an Englishman there and you have it all. But no Scotch——.

Legend has it that Archie MacKenzie settled there with his wife and bagpipes. When he had tilled some soil, he planted some oats. Being made hungry by the exertion, he ate a hearty meal of gruel and, whistling in Gaelic, went out to play skirls on the bagpipes.

It wasn't long before a delegation headed by Jean Francois Etienne de Baptiste, came from across the river to complain that he was driving away all the fresh fish. Hard upon that two of the Loyalists died of lockjaw. In a panic they immediately passed a law against all bagpipes.

Archie straightway pulled up his tent pegs and marched away to Antigonish where he was warmly welcomed with open arms and Gaelic.

There hasn't been a set of bagpipes in X——since. So you see what kind of a town X—— was.

It was there early in spring that things came to a head. This head belonged to Abe Lappoy, a young man somewhere on the disillusioned side of twenty-nine. He had not always lived in X——; on the contrary he had arrived there but five months previously. Born on a farm five miles from the town, he had shown signs of much promise. But unfortunately when he was barely twenty-one his parents died, leaving him an orphan, and nothing else.

Being an ambitious young man he had always tried to hitch his wagon to a star. But fortune was against him. Time and again he got a half-hitch on one only to find it was shooting.

Except Jane! Ah, she was no shooting star—steady, loyal, dependable, Jane. Abe had met her shortly after he had come to Murphy's boarding-house.

He could never forget how they had met! She dropped her father's mail as she came out of the post-office. What mattered that it was a furniture company warning him to pay the last installment on the new armchair? It was her father's mail. Gallantly he had rushed and retrieved it. They smiled. They spoke. Need more be said?

In the evenings he would put on his new blue tie and whistle along to the little white cottage. There they used to sit by the fire reading "The Family Herald," or she would play to him till ten-thirty reminded him that he must go home. On Sundays he was always invited to dinner where they made merry over sauer-kraut, turnip greens and buckwheat pancakes. For Jane, being of Loyalist descent, had mastered the art of making pancakes.

Things had progressed happily all the long winter. At Christmas they had exchanged gifts. Jane received a blue necklace, and Abe was delighted with a pair of pink arm-bands. But still, when winter was over nothing had really been settled between them, except the sofa springs.

Abe worked here and there whenever there was need of a man. Often in the evenings, they two would stroll down to the rink to watch the skating and the hockey games, for Jane liked to listen to the band. The young man proudly dropped his two nickels into the tin cup at the door, as she smiled at her friends, her little hand resting confidently on his sleeve.

By the first of March he got a job in a saw mill.

"I got the chance of a month's work" he told Jane.

"What doing?"

"In a sawmill down the country. I'll be going tomorrow."

"Oh, I wish you had work here."

"I'll only be fer a month."

So he worked in the mill. When he returned at the end of the month he bought himself a new hat and Jane a pound of maple buds. She greeted him at the door with a little cry of joy. Her honest face was flushed, her color heightened by P and G. Abe was buoyant, flowing over with good spirits as he hung his hat in the hall, and entered the dining-room.

"Oh, Abe, you shouldn't waste your money on candy," said she, "Gosh they're good."

"Oh, that's nothing. Soon as spring opens up there'll be plenty work on the roads with the elections comin' off this summer. I'll not be stuck for a job."

"Do you think they'll give you a job?"

"Sure they will. They know what I done fer the party at our poll."

Though he was unusually attentive during the next week, Jane seemed troubled. Instead of looks of tender love, there was a shade of anxiety in those greenish-blue eyes.

"What can be the matter?" Abe asked himself. Then it struck him in a flash. No wonder she was pensive.

The next evening he asked her to share his lot in life. He was nervous. The beating of his heart frightened him: he was afraid it would knock all the brass off his new collar buttons.

Twice he tried to speak, but couldn't. Finally he uttered the words.

There, it was done! He leaned back waiting for her reply. He knew what it would be.

A deep flush had overspread her cheeks. She turned on him a pair of eyes filled with a mixture of love and deepest sorrow. Then tremulously she began to speak.

"Abe, I love you, but I can't marry you. Oh, if you knew how this poor heart is tortured." She spoke these terrible words.

This was something unexpected to the young man; his face flared with anger. Refused! Rejected! She

had played with his heart, leading him on with pancakes and sweet words.

He picked up his hat to go. "Why can't you marry me?"

"Oh Abe, I can't tell you. Go 'way and forget you ever saw me."

"Never, I can't ever forget you——now." The door closed and he was gone.

He walked to the boarding-house in a daze. In his room, he paced the floor in a frenzy, but all to no avail. Pulling his cot out from the wall, he walked round it in a circle, but still couldn't figure it out.

"Oh Gosh, I wish I had more schoolin' so I could think."

The rejected young man went to the glass where he looked himself over; but he could see nothing wrong. He was tall and straight; his upper lip carried a little red mustache. He put on his new derby hat and once more scrutinized himself.

"It fits good an it's becomin' too."

His teeth too were alright. His lower ones, perhaps, were a trifle stained; but his upper teeth were smooth and even. He took them out and brushed them with the palm of his hand. Satisfied, he put them back in again.

"Can't be myself, whatever it is." If only he had some one to advise him!

Suddenly he came to a decision. He would visit his aunt, the only living relative he had in the world. She lived alone several miles from the town. "Poor old dear," Abe often remarked, "She may be carried off at any minute." But so far she had never been carried off.

Early the next morning he was busy preparing for the journey. As he would have to walk he was travelling light. Besides his small valise, he took nothing but a bundle containing gifts for his aunt.

Before he left, he gave one long sad look in the direction of the little white cottage and sighed. From his breast pocket he took a small packet wrapped in cellophane. It was his souvenirs. Restoring these to his pocket he turned resolutely away.

When he returned two weeks later, things looked no brighter. For his aunt had not been able to give him much helpful advice. At first she had produced a bundle of

clippings from Dorothy Dix—but they found nothing to cover his case. But he was resolute.

When he came over the hill in sight of the town, he sat down on his valise. The rink, he could see, was all ablaze. Light poured from every crack in the wall.

"There'll be rink tonight," he mused.

When he came nearer he could hear the shouting of a large crowd. Suddenly the band burst into music. The wild strains of "Coming Thro' the Rye" were borne on the breeze.

Abe stood stricken. A great wave of emotion swept over him. That was the last tune Jane had learned on the mouth-organ. He listened in a daze till the band had finished. Then he picked up his valise and determinedly pressed on.

Twenty minutes later, he was on his way back to the rink. As he propelled himself along the poorly lighted streets, he was aware of an unusually large number of beaver hats flitting past. At first he attributed this to a revival meeting in one of the local churches. But then, they sounded rather boisterous for revivalists.

Slightly puzzled he arrived at the rink. When he passed through the door his face suddenly turned a ghastly white. Then it slowly turned the color of a Shediak herring. He stood still in an agony of horror. Everywhere he looked were hats, brown hats, black hats, derbies of all description, worn by every rink-rat and school-boy of the town. All turned to Abe as he entered and they smiled.

He backed out the door, threw his hat in a snow-bank, and ran for his boarding house.

One of the commercial travellers explained what had happened. "They had a sale at Green's. Sold all his old hats. The boys made a rush for them like Hitler after a Rabbi. In two days every kid in the school was wearing one."

"Well, I'll never wear mine again."

The next day Abe was restless. He tried to read but he couldn't. The strains of "Coming Thro' the Rye" kept passing through his mind; and his heart filled with longing to hear Jane play the other twin of the tune.

Finally he gave in and started for the little white cottage.

The door was opened by Jane herself. "Abe, is it you?"

"Yes, Jane."

Worry and fatigue were but thinly disguised on her face. The look of sadness faded and in its place returned the old tender expression.

"I suppose you haven't changed your mind since our last talk?" he ventured, after a time.

"Yes, Abe, I'll marry you to-day if you say so."

"Jane!" The surprise took his breath away. Then he clasped her in his arms.

"Do you really mean that? You ain't foolin' me? Why did you refuse me before?"

"Abe, I hate to tell you. It was on account of that terrible derby hat. You made me think of the undertaker. I didn't dare tell you; you are so spirited."

He tightened his grasp on her, looking fiercely into her eyes. Then gently he released her.

"I'll admit I'm a bit spirited, but I'm not unreasonable."

Abe was moved. He was going through his pockets in a fruitless search for something.

"I put the damn thing here—oh, here it is." He produced a cigarette butt. A few puffs and he was himself again.

Ten minutes later they were sitting on the sofa, hand in hand. The mouth-organ had fallen unnoticed on the floor. Abe's long arms semi-circled her trim waist. They were planning—

"I'll get that job on the road."

He gathered her into his arms and planted one long kiss on her forehead—their first kiss.

