

Petite Simunde

Arthur Beverley
Baxter

Illustrated by

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Title: Petite Simunde

Date of first publication: 1919

Author: Arthur Beverley Baxter (1891-1964)

Illustrator: E. J. Dinsmore (1885-1936)

Date first posted: July 11, 2023

Date last updated: July 11, 2023

Faded Page eBook #20230718

This eBook was produced by: John Routh & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <https://www.pgdpCanada.net>

PETITE SIMUNDE

By Arthur Beverley Baxter

*Author of "Mr. Craighouse of New York, Satirist,"
"The Man Who Scoffed," etc.*

ILLUSTRATED BY E. J. DINSMORE

Four hundred miles north of Toronto, the Cobalt mining country surrenders its daily toll of silver to the world. In that region there is mostly rock. Where woods exist, the trees are gaunt and defiant, as though resentful of the approach of man; in winter they stand like white-shrouded ghosts, and the wind howls dismally through them until in the little settlement of Ville Marie, across the lake, men draw closer to the fire, and women croon comfort to frightened children, yet half-believe, themselves, the Indian legend that another soul is on its way to the Great Unknown.

Five miles north of Cobalt the town of Haileybury straggles down a hill to the lake, on the other side of which can be seen the blue shores of Northern Quebec, where lies the sleepy little hamlet known as Ville Marie, possessed of its church, its wayside public-house, "Les Voyageurs," and a few vagabond frame buildings. The ring of the blacksmith's anvil can be heard throughout the day, for there is little else to drown the noise. But when the lumber-jacks come in from the woods, or the river-runners from their convoys of logs, there is always the sound of a noisy chorus from "Les Voyageurs," led (in the times we write of) by Pierre Generaud, who knew that singing a constant fortissimo stimulates thirst in participants and auditors alike. On Sunday there is the sound of the organ, and the villagers walk about in ill-fitting garments of respectability: a simple God-fearing community, knowing no world but their own, and finding their joy of life in mere existence.

It was gathering dusk, one summer evening in the year 1914, when the figure of a young officer wended its way towards "Les Voyageurs."

He had crossed from Haileybury on the afternoon boat, causing not a little comment by the uniform he wore. Every one in the mining country knew him as "Dug" Campbell, manager of the Curran Lake Mine—they were hardly prepared for the sudden transition from his usual costume of

riding-breeches, brown shirt, and lumberman's boots, to the trappings of a British officer. He was a young man of big stature, with broad, restless shoulders that seemed to chafe under the bondage of a tunic, and he had a long, loose-limbed stride oddly at variance with the common conception of military bearing. His eyes were light blue, his hair an unruly brown that flirted with red—and his name was Campbell. Such men do not wait for the second call when there is war.

Wherever civilization is forcing her right of way, whenever she is fighting for her existence, the descendants of Scotland will be found. When a new railroad struggles over unnamed rivers and through untrodden forests, somewhere ahead there is always a son or a grandson of old Scotia, whose eyes are a humorous blue and whose hair has more than a tinge of red. There is no part of the world to which the Scot is a stranger, but he rises to his best in a new country where waterfalls must be harnessed to give power; where great rocks must be blasted from age-old foundations; where rebellious nature in her primeval state must be taught that the world was made for man.

On that August evening in that most fateful of years, the figure of Captain Douglas Campbell, tall and somewhat rugged, like one of the northern trees, might have served as a sculptor's model for the spirit of Scotland confirming and strengthening the purpose of young Canada.

Rich in tradition as she is, what glory of her past can Scotland have that is greater than this—that, strong in the manhood which seems to spring from the soil of the country, she sent her sons to every corner of the world; and when the shadow of war fell upon her—they came back! Sons, grandsons, those to whom their Scottish blood was little more than a family legend, *they came back*.

Scotland needs no other monument than those three words.

II

Nearing "Les Voyageurs" the young officer paused at a sudden burst of sound that came from the inn. In place of the usual chorus, one voice, a slovenly but powerful one, was bellowing forth a ribald song, remarkable only for its noisy coarseness. Reaching the hostelry, Campbell hammered at the door, which was opened by mine host himself.

"Ah!" he gesticulated eloquently, "Monsieur Campbell!" (Pierre Generaud, like other French-Canadians, invariably reversed his accents on English words). "For why you come, eh?"

“My dear Generaud, must I give a reason for visiting the famous ‘Les Voyageurs’?”

“Ah! By gosh, no!” Generaud beamed welcome from every pore—then struck an attitude of despair. “You come, is it not, as an officier, perhaps no—yes?”

“Yes. I want to speak just for a minute to the men inside.”

“Oh, *mais non!*” The good host’s gesture was a masterpiece, even among a race of gesticulators. “Not to-night, monsieur.”

“And why not?”

“By Gar! Who you theenk is inside now? Listen—she sing!”

Campbell was too well acquainted with the universal French-Canadian use of the feminine pronoun to express any surprise when “she” proved to be the possessor of the aforesaid raucous, bass voice, which had broken into some song anent the passion of a sailor for a Portuguese young lady of great charm but doubtful modesty.

“Who is our friend?” he asked.

“What—you know not? She is the terrible Des Rosiers!”

“Well, I don’t like Mr. Des Rosiers’s voice.”

“You nevair hear her name, monsieur? Sometime she is call ‘Jacque Noir.’ *Mon Dieu!*—she sleep with *le diable.*”

The landlord’s eyes grew wide with horror; his shoulders contracted until they touched his ears.

“Look here, my friend,” said Campbell, with a touch of impatience, “Jacque Noir or Jacque Rouge or Jacque Blanc is not going to keep me out here.”

“But, monsieur, once she *keel* a man.”

“My dear fellow”——

“One winter, a man has insult Des Rosiers, and—*voilà!* Jacque Noir *burn* her house—*keel* her family—*Murdair* her”——

With a laugh, the newly-created officer thrust the little man aside and entered the sacred precincts of “Les Voyageurs.” A big, dirty, bearded fellow, of about thirty years of age, was leaning against the

counter, waving a mug and bellowing a song. He looked formidable enough, but hardly justified the diabolical qualities attributed to him by Pierre Generaud. In spite of his unshaven face with its bloodshot, inebriated eyes, there was something not unpleasing about the man, and when his lips parted they disclosed teeth that were gleaming white.

A group of villagers sat in open-mouthed admiration beneath the singer, for Des Rosiers's reputation had gathered velocity like a snowball rolling down the side of a hill, gaining in size every time it came into contact with the drifts of rumor, until it had become almost a legend of wickedness. His audience felt a timid pride in the event. It was almost as if his Satanic Majesty himself had condescended to appear from below and sing comic songs for their benefit.

On the entrance of the officer, the song ceased, and all eyes were turned to the new-comer.

“Hola,” said Des Rosiers, with extraordinary resonance. “You drink by me, *eh bien?*”

“No, thanks. I must only stay a minute.”

“You no drink?” roared the lumber-jack, whose hospitality was not unlike the forcefulness of the muscular Christian in ‘Androcles and the Lion.’ “You drink, or by Gar, I brak your neck.”

A hum of admiration rose from the villagers. They bore no possible malice towards the officer, but it was gratifying to find Jacque Noir living up to his reputation.

“*Messieurs,*” said Campbell, ignoring the gentleman in question, “there is a war. *La belle France* fights for her life, and Canada must help. She needs you—and you—and you.”

With their meagre knowledge of English, he was forced to a simplicity of language that depended for effect almost entirely on the personal appeal. “Come with me to the war. We pay you one dollar ten a day, and your wife and *garçons* get money too.”



"I brak your neck," he said, comfortingly.

Mr. Des Rosiers laughed, scornfully and sonorously. "I laugh," he said. "You theenk we go to war, and your English, by Gar, no leave Canada, but steal all we leave behind. The French-Canadian—he go; the English-Canadian, *non*." He roared a vile oath, and laid his hand on Campbell's shoulder. "I brak your neck," he said comfortingly.

In a moment Campbell's tunic was off and he was facing Jacque Noir. "You are a liar, Des Rosiers," he said. "You are the greatest liar and the worst singer in the Province of Quebec."

The Frenchman tore the red kerchief from his neck and hurled his mug to the floor where it broke into a hundred pieces. "By gosh, me!" he bellowed in a voice that would have terrified a bull; "I *keel* you!"

He advanced in windmill fashion, but his opponent, who had been the best boxer of his year at Toronto 'Varsity, stopped him with a blow known

technically as a “straight left to the jaw.” Des Rosiers paused to re-collect his thoughts. He was wondering whether to kick with one foot or with both, when something happened, and oblivion settled over him like the curtain on the last act of a melodrama. Campbell had stepped forward, and, putting his shoulder behind it, had delivered a blow on the lower part of the jaw with force enough to fell an ox. For Des Rosiers the rest was silence.

Concluding his recruiting speech to the dazed villagers, Campbell put on his tunic and strode quietly down the street. . . . But the fall of Mr. Pecksniff in the eyes of Tom Pinch was not more complete than the collapse of their idol, *Jacque Noir*, in the eyes of the inhabitants of *Ville Marie*.

III

A sky that was hung with stars looked down upon the shimmering rooftops of Haileybury. The streets were deserted, except the main thoroughfare, where a group of men were seated in an irregular line, their pipes glowing in the darkness. They had been there since dusk.

Midnight passed, and the shadowy line grew longer as each hour struck. Men with heavy packs; men with the mud of the northern wilderness still on their boots; men who had walked for sixty miles; men whose beardless chins bespoke the schoolboy of a year before; men whose faces would have looked coarse and cruel in any light but that of the stars; one by one or in pairs they came. For each there was a yell of welcome, a ribald jest or two—then silence once more, and the glowing pipes. The first glimmering streaks of dawn showed the queue in all its picturesque grotesqueness. The man in front was leaning against a frame store that bore the placard “Recruiting Office.”

Some three thousand miles away, a Hohenzollern Emperor had said that Great Britain would crumble into disintegration at the first sound of war. And through the forests of the north and over weary trails men were staggering on, mile after mile, fearful of only one thing—that they might be too late to answer the call which had come from across the Atlantic, speeding over forests, cities, prairies, lakes, and mountains, until echo answered from the shores of the Pacific Coast.

The early boat from *Ville Marie* discharged its half-dozen passengers. A powerfully built French-Canadian strode up the hill and stopped at the crowd of men. With a worried contraction of his heavy eyebrows he surveyed the formidable length of the line.

“Godam!” said he.

Heedless of the jests and comments of the mob, he went slowly down the line, carefully scrutinizing each man, until he stopped at a half-breed Indian. For a moment only they argued in French, then he produced a roll of dollar notes in one hand, and brandished the other hand threateningly in the half-breed's face. The combined arguments proved too much; when the enrolment of recruits took place, number eighteen was Jacque Des Rosiers, sworn to serve His Majesty the King for the duration of the war and six months afterwards—in witness whereof he had drawn an inky cross after his name.

It would be difficult to give the exact motive for his action. He probably had never heard of Belgium, but—well, take horns and tail from the devil, and what is left?

Three weeks later the company of amateur soldiers were warned to proceed to the concentration camp. Willing, but puzzled by the affliction of army discipline, they had struggled past the first pitfalls of recruitship. For the sake of Captain Douglas Campbell, their “boss,” they suppressed their grumbling and submitted to the rites and ceremonies of military routine, arguing that, inexplicable as it was, it had some connection, however remote, with the ultimate goal of warfare. The afternoon before their departure Campbell addressed them for exactly five minutes. His hair looked redder and his eyes seemed bluer than before. With his powerfully built shoulders and the rhythm of his muscles that lent a grace to his entire body, despite its ruggedness, he recalled the Athenian age of physical perfection.

“Look here, you fellows,” he said, “you signed up to fight—so did I. We will fight, too, but Kitchener can't use us until we're ready. You wonder what all this drill is about. Well, here's my idea about it. There isn't a coward in this crowd; there isn't a man who wouldn't go down a shaft after a pal, even if the chances were a hundred to one against his coming back. But you're not ready for the front. You've got the heart, but your bodies must have training and discipline. Watch me with this cigarette. In flicking the ash I burn my finger; the next time I want to touch the ash, my finger avoids it by a quarter of an inch. I laugh and try again. You all know what I mean. I am not afraid of the cigarette, but my finger is. If you've ever been kicked in the leg by a horse, the next time the horse kicks, which of your legs is drawn back first? In some strange way your body has instincts of its own, and though you might have a heart like a bull, your muscles and nerves—your body—might fail you when you need them most. As I understand

the army system, it is to train you to obey, not only mentally but physically. Eight months from now we may be lying half-dead, with the enemy's guns playing hell all around us. We may want to quit, we may be 'all in,' but, if the order comes to advance, we'll go forward, because our bodies will be disciplined to obey.

"Be patient then, men, and just smile when things go wrong. I would gladly have gone with you in the ranks, and there are lots of you chaps better able to lead than I, but a commission was given to me, and I'm out to do my best with the finest company of men in the Canadian Expeditionary Force. I'm learning all the time—as you are. You will have bad times, and so shall I; but let's help each other to grin and make the best of it, for, after all, we're just great big children playing a mighty big game. . . . And when we reach France we'll show them all that the old Cobalt gang is afraid of nothing in this world or the next."

They cheered—and the man who shouted loudest was Jacque Des Rosiers. . . . And somewhere in the speech *esprit de corps* had been born.

IV

Four winters came and went.

France lay in the warmth of a late spring evening, like a stricken deer that has thrown off its pursuers momentarily, but is bleeding from a hundred wounds. Month after month she had endured the invader, and the cycle of years, instead of freeing her, had only deepened her agony. What had she left? The next attack might see Arras and her remaining coalfields gone, the Channel ports captured, and then. . . Paris? . . . Paris?

Unperturbed, however, by any such thoughts, Petite Simunde—no one thought of her by any other name—was driving four cows home from pasture. The setting sun had shed a kindly hue on her gingham garment that was neither a frock nor an apron, yet served as both. Nor was the mellowing sunlight unkind to her face, for the racial sallowness of her cheeks, accentuated by too constant exposure to the elements, was softened and shaded into a gentle brown. Her shoes, which were far too large, were in the final stages of disrepair. About the brow her hair was braided with a simplicity that was by no means devoid of charm. Her eyes—but there she was really French. Simunde had never been farther from the village of Le Curois than the neighboring town of Avesnes Le Comte (unless one counts the momentous occasion, a year after her birth, when she was taken to Arras for exhibition before an esteemed and wealthy relative, who was so little impressed that he bequeathed his entire estate, consisting of eight thousand

francs, to a manufacturer of tombstones); but a French woman does not acquire coquetry—she is born with it. Even in church Simunde would cast such languishing yet mischievous eyes upon the curé himself, that the poor little man, who had never liked Latin at any time, used to stammer and mumble his orisons like an over-conscientious penitent at confessional.

When her two brothers went to war Simunde, who was then sixteen, assumed their tasks in addition to her own, in all of which she had the able direction of “madame” her mother. Between them they performed a day’s work that would have exhausted two husky laborers. As is the custom in most of northern France, their home was not on the farm, but in the village, for one of the first essentials of existence to a Frenchman is companionship. On the outskirts of Le Curois, just on the hill, there was a great château, beautifully, gloomily aloof; but in the one street of the village itself, pigs, cows, hens and their offspring, wallowed in mud and accumulated filth.

It is difficult to know which is the more striking: the French peasant’s stoicism in the presence of war, or his indifference to dirt.

On this particular evening in May of 1918, Simunde was frankly regretting the absence of men. Not that she had ever been in love or known the rapture of wandering in the moonlight with a man (France is almost the only civilized country remaining that has not relegated chaperons to the realm of fiction); but she wanted to use her eyes on something more susceptible than a cow or a curé. It was spring, and she felt pretty, and when a woman is conscious of her own charm she seldom wishes to prove miserly with it.

She had just run across the road to convince a cow of its loss of the sense of direction when she heard the neighing of a horse. Glancing behind her, she looked directly into the eyes of a mounted British officer, whereupon that gentleman brought his steed to a standstill.

“*Bon soir, Mademoiselle,*” said he.

“*Bon soir, monsieur,*” she answered demurely. Her eyes were lowered shyly, and her fingers played over the stick she was carrying, like a flute-player caressing his instrument. The officer bowed slightly and tried to recall his French vocabulary, though it must be admitted he was never loquacious in any tongue when conversing with a daughter of Eve. As for her, since it is a woman’s *role*, she waited. Would he speak again or would he pass on, leaving the memory of yet one more meeting with a gentleman of adventure, one more roadside drama in which the dialogue consisted only

of an exchange of salutations? Most men who have returned from France will recall for years to come how, a few kilometres back from Hell, they often caught a glimpse of two dark eyes and a tender smile. Just that and—

“*Bon soir, mademoiselle.*”

“*Bon soir, monsieur.*”

Commonplace, perhaps, in the telling, but in France it was the commonplace that became romance.

A smile crept into the officer’s eyes, which were blue and kindly, though they had a glint in them—something like metal—a look that a mother always noticed first when her son returned from the line.

“*Où est le village?*” he ventured.

“Le Curois?”

“*Oui! Le Curois.*”

“*Mais, monsieur*”—her eyes widened and her hands indicated the village dwellings—“*c’est ici Le Curois!*”

He breathed deeply and ventured again.

“*Connaissez-vous un billet pour dix officiers?*” He felt rather pleased with the sentence; it was true he had intended to get accommodation for eleven officers, but it was moderately accurate for a foreign tongue.

For answer, Simunde led him, preceded by the four cows, to her domicile. “Madame,” like all French housewives, had received billeting instructions in the first year of the war. In conjunction with her neighbors on either side, she speedily arranged accommodation for eleven officers in their cottages, and for the officers’ “domestikues” in the barns.

V

One hour later the guests of war, their battalion having come out for rest, were dining comfortably in the home of Petite Simunde, while a sow, attended by ten small pigs, snorted approvingly outside the door.



His auditors were lost in gesticulatory admiration.

Less than an hour afterwards Private Des Rosiers, acting as temporary batman to Major Douglas Campbell, was sitting on a chair in the farm-yard, in the glittering moonlight, regaling Simunde and her mother with grossly exaggerated stories of the mining country of Cobalt. He told them of his misdeeds, not in humility, but with much *braggadocio*, and his auditors listened, lost in gesticulatory admiration. Simunde was thrilled from her ill-shod feet to her braided brow. Jacque Des Rosiers was the first really wicked man she had met, and, woman-like, she was fascinated; also he had nice teeth and flashing eyes.

The picture of a young officer on horseback whose brown hair was almost red and whose humorous blue eyes had a glint in them like metal, faded as completely from her mind as the memory of the sunset that had thrown its spell upon them.

Unromantic? . . . Que voulez-vous? C'est la guerre!

Two weeks passed, during which period the placid fields about Le Curois resounded to the shouts of Canadian troops rehearsing open warfare (for rumor had it that the hour was almost at hand when Foch was to release the forces of retribution). For pastime, the troops played

baseball and held field-days of many and varied sports. Whatever they did, they shouted lustily and continuously while doing it, for they had mastered one elemental truth, that nothing can be accomplished without intensity.

Des Rosiers explained baseball to Simunde, who enjoyed the description without allowing it to interfere with her innumerable domestic and agricultural duties. It was quite true that Jacque Noir had never played the game or even mastered its rudiments, but he had the narrator's instinct that rises above mere accuracy of detail.

Every evening he accompanied Simunde to the pasture-land, and together they guided the patient cows homeward. When darkness set in and Simunde's tasks were finished for the day, he sat with her in the barn-yard and told lurid tales of Northern Canada—to all of which "madame," whose tasks were never finished, lent a delighted and adjoining ear.

He pictured to Simunde the snow—how it filled the rivers till they ran no more; how it covered the great pine-trees until, as far as eye could see, there was nothing but white; and he told of the wind that was never still. And she listened, as only a French woman can listen, with every emotion he called forth registering in her face, as clouds racing across the sun will throw their shadows on the ground.

Just before the battalion was to return to the line, the second-in-command, Major Douglas Campbell, was called to Divisional Headquarters for a prolonged conference. As a result Des Rosiers was returned to his company for duty, though he contrived to spend every free hour with the little belle of Le Curois. As the time for parting approached with cruel celerity, he talked less and took to long spells of moody silence. His heart had been melted as completely as the snow in the Northland is thawed by the sun in spring. As for her, the little artifices of gesture and the ceaseless coquetry of the eyes became less noticeable. For the first time in her life she felt the anguish of a woman's tears; Petite Simunde's guileless and innocent heart had been won by Jacque Des Rosiers, the bad man of Northern Quebec.

In a tempest of passionate ardor, but with becoming deference, he addressed his suit to the mother, who promised consideration that night and her answer on the morrow.

It was hardly twilight when he wandered back along the main road towards the fields where his battalion was bivouacked. Full of the picture of the little woman who had bewitched him, he failed to notice the approach of an exceedingly smart young staff-officer, ablaze in a glory of red and brass.

With unseeing eyes, Des Rosiers looked directly at the young gentleman, but failed to make any sign. The officer, fresh from a staff course in England, stopped him with a sharp command.

“Just a moment, my man. Don’t you know enough to salute?”

Des Rosiers awoke from his dream, came to attention, and saluted very badly.

“I no see you, sair,” he said.

“Don’t lie to me,” snapped Brass Hat (who wasn’t a bad chap on the whole); “of course you saw me. Damn it, you looked right at me. It’s fellows like you who give the corps a bad name.”

He was wrong there. It was the presence of several thousand men like Des Rosiers that had given the Canadian Corps a wonderful name—but let that pass, as Jack Point would have said.

The element of tragedy seldom enters the lists of life with a fanfare of trumpets. It steals in unobtrusively, like a poor relation. It comes in the garb of the commonplace, or masked in triviality or gaiety. One is unaware of its presence until it throws off concealment and points its yellow fingers at the throat of its victim. What dramatist would have read tragedy into the absurd tableau presented by a slouchy French-Canadian soldier and a youthful staff-officer? Yet, as inexorable as Fate, it was approaching Jacque Des Rosiers, and only a few yards away, hiding its skeleton’s grin behind the mundane countenance of Sergeant Smith, returning to the battalion after a day’s work in the orderly room.

The officer, who had just made a move to resume his walk, noticed the sergeant, and called him over.

“You are from the same battalion as this chap?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Report him to his company commander for failing to salute an officer. Impress upon him that I would not have made this complaint, but your man looked directly at me, and—well, discipline must be maintained, especially out here.”

Whereupon, feeling that he had rendered unto Cæsar the things that were Cæsar’s, the youthful captain sauntered on to the château occupied by Divisional Headquarters, and dined with extra zest. And lest it be thought

that this narrative treats him unkindly, let it be written that, three months later, he was badly wounded while performing a very gallant action. He was a professional soldier, somewhat lacking in psychology; that was all.

A little later Private Des Rosiers was arraigned before his company commander, a gentleman who was neither a soldier nor a psychologist. The heinous crime of passing an officer without acknowledgment was laid to the charge of the battle-worn and love-lorn villain from Quebec.

“What have you got to say for yourself?”

Des Rosiers said it. The officer shook his head.

“It’s not good enough,” he said. “You French-Canadians seem to think there’s one law for yourselves and one for everybody else. You throw all your comrades down by deliberately insulting an officer—a staff-officer, who reports it to the G.O.C., and there you are. We’re known as a bad battalion just because of a few slackers like you. Put him on the horse line picket for two nights, and confined to camp during the day.”

The prisoner started. “Sair,” he said, “I can no be here to-morrow night. *C’est impossible.*”

“Oh, is it emposeeble?” answered the officer, who prided himself on a gift of neat retort. Des Rosiers’s eyes protruded to their utmost.

“By Gar!” he cried, “and nex’ morning we go back to the line *encore*, yes?”

“Well? Have you any objections? If so, I am sure the divisional commander would appreciate hearing them.”

“Ah, but *monsieur l’officier*”—his hands were stretched forth in an agony of appeal—“Petite Simunde, she wait for me. I promise to come—I no come—it is terrible!”

The judge in khaki laughed.

“I am fed up with the stories of you French-Canadians and your village sweethearts—and, confound it, stop waving your hands about?”

“Standt’attenshun!” bellowed the sergeant-major.

“Consider yourself lucky to get off so lightly, my man.—That will do, sergeant-major.”

“Escor’ a’ prisoner—ri’ tuh—qui’ mawch.—Lef’ ri’, lef’ ri’—Pawty, ha’t—Report to horse line N.C.O. right away.—Escor’, dees-mi’.”

Rather late for mess, by reason of holding orderly room at an unusual hour, the company commander sat down to dinner with a glow of virtue in his bosom. He had been a lawyer-politician in a small Ontario town, and it pleased him to find that he had not lost the art of Buzfuzian browbeating.

And through it all the Fates had woven a thread of tragedy about the life of *Jacque Noir*, using in their scheme of things a non-psychological staff-officer, a non-military and non-psychological company commander, and a sergeant whose name was Smith.

“There is humor in all things,” said Jack Point. Gilbert would have been equally correct if he had substituted the word “tragedy.”

Before sundown of the next day the prisoner was reported absent, and when the battalion marched away for the line *Jacque Des Rosiers* was not with it.

VI

Four days had passed before the second-in-command rejoined his unit in the trenches. He had been held at Divisional Headquarters, and for the first time learned of *Des Rosiers*’s desertion. With a stiffening of the jaw and an ugly contraction of his shoulders, he quickly interrogated tragedy’s mummings—a sergeant named Smith and a politician-lawyer company commander. To the former he said nothing; the man had done his obvious duty. To the company commander he gave a careful hearing; then, in short staccato sentences that had an odd resemblance to a machine-gun in action, subjected him to a brief questioning.

“What is *Des Rosiers*’s conduct-sheet like?”

“Pretty bad, sir.”

“What were his crimes?”

“Oh, the usual things—dirty on C.O.’s inspection, equipment missing, late for parades, and generally slovenly. If he hadn’t had such a poor sheet, he would have been decorated.”

“In other words, his crimes are rest-billet ones. Is that correct?”

“Well—yes, sir.”

“But in the lines he earned a decoration?”

“Yes—at Vimy, he”——

“Have you known him to lie?”

“Well, you know what these French-Canadians are like.”

“You understand what I mean. Have you ever known him to lie when put on his honor?”

“Er, no.”

“When he told you that he had to see this girl, did you find out if he was speaking the truth?”

“No, sir, I”——

“Did you look for him at the girl’s place when you were coming away?”

“I sent a picket through the village.”

The blue in Campbell’s eyes became unpleasantly light. “I had Des Rosiers in my company at Ypres when the Hun sent over his first gas—you were addressing meetings in Canada at the time—and I know him for a brave chap and as faithful as a dog. It’s men like you with a sense of vision no greater than a mud-puddle that are making the French-Canadian question another Irish one. They are like children, easily swayed and true as steel to those they trust; but as long as you and your kind make a political cat’s-paw out of them, alternately yelling ‘Kamerad’ and ‘Traitor,’ according to the political exigencies of the moment, so long will Canada be without the sympathy and enriching of a wonderfully virile race.”

The junior officer’s face flushed. “I acted according to the evidence,” he persisted hotly.

“Damn the evidence,” said Campbell furiously. “Play the man, not the charge-sheet. Does Des Rosiers strike you as a chap who would deliberately insult a staff-officer? When he is caught he will be shot. It can’t be helped—discipline must be maintained; but I tell you, every few days, when I read in the adjutant-general’s orders that Private So-and-So, charged with desertion in the presence of the enemy, was apprehended in a certain village, tried by court-martial, and sentenced to be shot, sentence duly carried out at 4.16 a.m. on —— You know the ghastly rhythm of the thing as well as I do—I never read one of these things without having a bad ten minutes afterwards. I don’t question the decision of the court—a deserter must pay the penalty—but, mark my words, behind every one of these cases there is the unseen part played by some officer or N.C.O. who punished at the wrong time or failed to punish, as the case may be. There are far too many machine-made, routine-fed chaps in the army, with stars on their shoulders, who don’t know that there are times when the grip of a hand on a Tommy’s shoulder, and a

few words as man to man, free of any cursed condescension, are worth all the conduct-sheets in existence.”

“You are making a mountain out of a mole-hill, sir. I consider you are very unfair to me.”

“You do, eh? . . . What about your unfairness to Des Rosiers and his little French girl, when he faces a firing-squad in the early morning?”

With an angry gesture, Campbell left the dug-out and hurried to Battalion Headquarters. For twenty minutes he and the colonel, a gentleman and a soldier, quietly but firmly discussed the case of desertion.

“I agree with everything you say, Campbell,” said the older man, “and I shall strongly recommend mercy to the court; but I am commanding a unit made up of many personalities, and I must think of the example to all.”

“Very good, sir. By the way, colonel, I know where Des Rosiers is.”

“You do? Then send word to the A.P.M.”

“Excuse me, sir; may I go and bring him myself? I ask this as a very great favor.”

The colonel pondered for a moment. “When will you be back?” he asked.

“Before ‘Stand to’ in the morning.”

“Right—but, Campbell, my boy.”

“Whatever you have in mind, remember that your duty and mine to think of the example to the battalion.”

The blue in Campbell’s eyes deepened; then, with an imperious gesture of the head, like a horse that hears the sound of galloping hoofs a mile away, he saluted.

“I shall not forget what you say, sir.”

“Thank you, Douglas.”

With a restless impatience for delay, he left the dug-out and climbed from the trench to open land. Heedless of a machine-gun that spat at him from the enemy lines, he hurried on until he reached the brigade transport lines, where he secured a motor-car.

“Where to sir?” asked the driver.

“Le Curois,” said the major; “and drop me just before you come to the village.”

VII

In the scorching heat of a summer afternoon, Petite Simunde was washing some linen outside her cottage. The silence, like the heat, was oppressive, and seemed more so by contrast with the noisy troops who had been there a week before. An apple falling from a tree to the ground . . . the restless pounding of a horse’s hoof in its stall . . . the distant hum of an aeroplane . . . the rumble of guns, faint but ominous . . . these and the sighs of the little woman at her task, were the only signs that broke the stillness of the air.

She heard footsteps, and her heart, more than her eyes, told her that the man she dreaded had come. Her face blanched, and she caught her breath with a spasm of pain.

“Simunde”—Campbell’s voice was gentle but firm—“where is Jacque?”

She continued her work without looking up.

“Simunde”—again the quiet monotone—“where is Jacque?”

She shook her head. “No compree,” she faltered, falling into the jargon of war.

“Simunde.” There was an inflection in his voice, an almost imperceptible note of severity, that set her heart throbbing with fear. This was a new person to her, this calm, stern, blue-eyed man who showed no excitement, no anger, only a quiet, kindly severity that gave her no chance for subterfuge. She hated him for his calmness—because he was English—because he was unfair. If he had only shouted or gesticulated—but this brown-haired giant! To oppose him was like trying to stem the incoming tide. And not many miles away a German Emperor was feeling the same sensation of impotence. It is a strange world when an emperor and a French peasant girl have to share the same emotion.

She looked up suddenly, and her dripping hands were clenched in a fever of supplication. Madly, passionately, she pleaded for her lover, as a woman will only do for the man she loves or for her child. Tears ran down her cheeks, and her voice was choked with sobs.

Patiently he listened, gathering from the anguish more than from her words the story he had already guessed. In a climax of grief, she groped for

him with her hands and would have cried on his breast. But he made no move; only his eyes were very grave and tender.

“Simunde,” he reiterated in English, “where is Jacque?”

With a shrill cry of rage, she stamped her foot on the ground. This great iceberg of a man was a devil! He had come for her lover. He would take him away to be shot. With an involuntary instinct of dismay, she glanced at the barn some little distance away; then, fearful that he had read her meaning, she forced a smile with her lips, only to find that her fear was correct.

Without a word, he put her gently aside and started for the barn. He had gone ten steps before she moved, then he heard her hurried breathing and her hands were on his arm.

“Monsieur,” she cried, “Monsieur le major—Jacque—Jacque *keel* you!” she spoke in broken English, remembering one of Des Rosiers’s stories of his misdeeds. Releasing her fingers, he reached the barn in a few short paces. Opening the door, he cautiously entered and tried to accustom himself to the semi-darkness. . . and saw the barrel of a rifle from the loft, slowly aligning itself in his direction.

“Des Rosiers!” His voice rang out like a pistol-shot. “It is I—your officer!”

There was no sound for almost a full minute, then the rifle was lowered, and the unshaved, dishevelled French-Canadian stood before him.

“Why you come?” he said brokenly, “I can no shoot my officier. Why you come, eh?”

“Because you will go back with me, Des Rosiers.”

The deserter’s eyes filled with tears. “By Gar!” he said, “it is not, what you say, play fair. I say I shoot who come, and Jacque Des Rosiers, he is no afraid. But you—my boss—*mais non*. Maybe I go back with you and maybe they shoot me, yes?”

“You have deserted, and the punishment is—well, you know as well as I. If you come with me now there is a small chance of mercy.”

The man’s eyes flashed. “I no ask for mercy,” he cried. “I, Jacque Des Rosiers, want mercy? Pouf! I laugh. They tell me I no see Simunde again, when I do nottings wrong. *Très bien*—I say sometings about it too. I go; I stay; *mêm’ chose*—I am shot. Good! I stay with Simunde.”

Campbell took a step forward, and there was metal in his voice as well as his eyes. His hand fell on the other's shoulder and gripped it like a vice. "You will come back with me," he said, and again there was the strange similarity to a machine-gun; "not that you may receive mercy, but because you are a coward, and must face your punishment for desertion in the presence of the enemy."

Des Rosiers's face darkened.

"Now, at this minute," went on Campbell, "the battalion, your battalion and mine, is in the line. Because you were not there, another man is in your place, perhaps at sentry duty. He may be dead by now and why? Because he did his duty, and took the place of a man who was afraid."

The French-Canadian's breath was hot with fury. He clenched his fists, and great veins stood out on his forehead. "By gosh, me!" he yelled; "who say Jacque Noir, she is afraid?"

With apparent calm, but his muscles poised for action, the officer looked squarely, at him. "I say you are a coward," he answered. "You were afraid to go to the line with your comrades. You are afraid now to face your punishment."

He noticed that the fellow was crouching for a spring. With a shrug of his shoulders, he produced a cigarette-case and put a cigarette into his mouth.

"Well?" he said.

It was the second time he had beaten Des Rosiers. The poor fellow paused, then knelt at his feet and exhausted his passion in a sobbing explanation that would have been ludicrous but for the sincerity of anguish behind it.

A few minutes later they went together from the barn. Simunde was standing by her door. From the interior of the house the lamentations of "madame" could be heard. With a simplicity that strangely ennobled the rough fellow, Des Rosiers stopped and spoke to Simunde in French, then kissed her on the lips with a reverence that was more moving than the deepest passion. Without a word, he entered the motor-car and stared fixedly ahead at the road which climbed by the château. With a half-sob, Simunde turned to the officer. She said nothing, but her tears spoke a language that needed no words. The metal in his eyes melted into a deep compassionate

blue . . . and Petite Simunde's troubled little heart thanked God for the great, broad-shouldered man with the hair that was almost red.

The two men slept in a deserted hut that night, but an hour before daybreak they were wending their way through the communication-trenches to the front line. It was half-an-hour before "Stand to" when the major and his unkempt companion reached the last dark trench where sentries were straining their eyes at the blackness of No Man's Land. A junior officer stepped up to the major and reported, quietly, the situation during the night.

"They've got a machine-gun post," he said at the end, "somewhere over by those three trees. Can you see them, sir? They got five of our chaps last night and two the night before."

"Humph! They tried for me too, yesterday afternoon. Can't the guns do anything?"

"They've tried, sir, but the rise in the ground seems to protect them from anything except a direct hit."

Even in the darkness the young lieutenant could notice the sudden look of decision which flashed into Campbell's eyes.

The lieutenant handed him a message-pad, on which he wrote a few words.

"See that the colonel gets this," he said, "and pass word along to the other companies that Private Des Rosiers and I are going to get that machine-gun post; so if we come back don't give us too hot a reception from your sentries. Sergeant, some bombs, and let Des Rosiers have that revolver, old chap. My batman will give you one of mine. Right—thanks."

"But, sir"—the young officer was vastly troubled—"it's not up to you. I'll go, major—honestly, I want to"—

"Thanks, old man; but this is a bigger job than it looks. Not that you couldn't do it as well or better, but—well, I've set my heart on going, that's all."

He glanced at Des Rosiers, and noticed that his face was grim and set.

"But, my officer, it is not fair," began the French-Canadian, "it"—

"Not fair?" There was a rasping sound in the major's voice.

"For me, *mais oui*, but for you, *non*. Please—I do my bes'—I go alone."

Without a word, the second-in-command put out his hand and grasped that of the deserter: and Des Rosiers felt that death for the other would be

easy. Truly, as Campbell had said, war is a great big game, and men are like children. Three minutes later two figures were crawling like panthers towards the German lines.

The colonel of the battalion took the message from the runner's hands. It contained seven words:

“As an example to the battalion.

CAMPBELL.”

“What's that noise?”

“Sounds like Mills bombs,” said the adjutant.

“And revolvers,” muttered the colonel, and swore softly to himself with a lip that quivered strangely.

VIII

If you ever go to the Cobalt country, do not fail to take the boat to Ville Marie, on the blue shores of Northern Quebec.

There is an excellent hostelry at Ville Marie called “Les Voyageurs,” where a little lady, known as Petite Simunde, has worked wonders in making it the cosiest, warmest, neatest little place that ever warmed the heart of a lumber-jack or a mining-pro prospector. At night her husband leads the singing with a mighty voice that shakes the rafters; for did not the former proprietor, Pierre Generaud, say that singing encouraged thirst?

At times, when Madame Des Rosiers is away for a day, Jacque Noir will regale his old friends with tales of his past life, tales that differ with every telling, and seem to indicate that the narrator himself is beginning to doubt their accuracy. At these times, too, he has been known to sing of a sailor who loved a Portuguese maid; but at the first sound of his wife's footsteps outside Monsieur Des Rosiers is the model husband, a *role*, to be frank, which suits him quite well.

When the snow is very thick on the ground, and the wind howls mournfully over the lake, Jacque Noir talks of France and the weary years of war. He will point with pride to his artificial foot, and then to his decoration, and slowly tell how two men went out into the dark after a machine-gun post.

And when the guests are gone and the fire is low, when the wind is moaning quietly, while the snow falls thick—thick—thick, they speak to each other of the officer who will never come back of the one whose hair was brown, almost like red whose blue eyes were stern and yet so kind.

Hand-in-hand they sit close together, and the only sounds are those of the crackling logs and the wind that is never still.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

A cover was created for this ebook which is placed in the public domain.

[The end of *Petite Simunde* by Arthur Beverley Baxter]