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A Lover in Homespun And Other Stories

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To My Mother,
WHO HAS TAKEN SUCH A WARM AND LOVING
INTEREST IN MY LITERARY ENDEAVORS,

I DEDICATE

MY BOOK OF CANADIAN STORIES.

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A Lover in Homespun.

Onesime Charest, farmer, of L'Original, was a happy man. As he drove through the quaint little French-Canadian village, on his way to the railway station, he was saluted by the villagers with much ceremony.

Everyone knew perfectly well just what it was that was taking farmer Charest to the station this beautiful hazy afternoon. Over a week had now elapsed since he received the letter from his son Zotique, in the United States, saying he would be home on September 10th.

Before the important communication had been in the village a day, it was common property, and had been read and re-read until almost every soul in the place knew it off by heart.

The wanderer's return was to be made more momentous by Madame Charest inviting a large number of guests to a party, to be given by her the evening he returned.

If these worthy people were in a joyous mood the night of the party, nature appeared equally so; for by the time the first hay-cart, with its burden of guests, drove up to the scene of the festivities, the moon, as though specially engaged to do duty on this honored occasion, stood right over farmer Charest's house, and with jovial countenance beamed into the faces of the arriving guests, and threw such a kindly light over the farmer's rough, nondescript garments as to make them look almost like good, soft broadcloth. It also paid flattering attention to Madame Charest, and so beautified her thin face and silvered her grey hair, as she stood in the door and welcomed the arrivals, as to make the neighbors affirm—and that in a manner that it would have been utterly useless to try and gainsay—that she looked far younger than she did ten years ago!

The lion of the hour, of course, was the wanderer Zotique. He stood in the main room of the house, the kitchen, near the long improvised table, with its burden of seductive viands, and shook hands with the guests without even the slightest tinge of the superiority which it was thought he would, and that justly, assume.

Notwithstanding his graciousness, however, he was looked upon with no little awe. He had grown so tall, got so broad-shouldered,

become the owner of such a soft, curling moustache, and wore such fine clothes and white linen as to quite throw in the shade his elder brother Vital, and the other men present, who wore, as was customary on all occasions—state or otherwise—the dark woollen suits and grey woollen shirts, with the long pointed, attached collars.

Had Zotique not been a sensible fellow, he would surely have had his head turned by the many flattering things said to him.

It so chanced, too, that remarks were passed about him to his parents and brother, *sotto voce*, which, strange as it may appear, managed in some unaccountable manner always to reach his ears.

"He certainly has grown good-looking, very good-looking," thought Vital, as he hovered about his younger brother. Although he was sincerely glad to see him, he could not altogether drive away the shameful wish that he had been less handsome. When he thought of what it was that gave rise to the wish, he felt ill at ease.

Vital, in every way, was different from his tall younger brother. He was slimly built, scarcely the average height, and not prone to many words. He was given to day-dreams, too, and often did such absent-minded things as to cause his father much mental perturbation, and at times to wish that he had not given him so much schooling, but had trained him for a farmer instead of a school-teacher. Still he was immensely proud of his two sons, and as he saw them standing together, he decided that they looked far superior to the other farmers' sons, who had been given little or no education.

The wanderer Zotique was only twenty-two years of age, while Vital had turned thirty.

As the minutes stole by, and the babel of tongues increased, it might have been noticed that both the brothers stole anxious glances at the door. Every time it opened they invariably turned to see who the arrival was. There must have been some weighty reasons for the frequent disappointed looks which stole across their faces.

At last the guests had nearly all arrived, and farmer Charest, his good-natured face all aglow, intimated by much hammering on the table that it was time they sat down to supper. There being no dissenting voice to this popular proposition, a general move was made to the benches ranged on both sides of the table. By a strange coin-

cidence, Zotique and Vital, instead of going to the table with the others, gravitated toward the door.

"Just thought I would have a look out; it is such a fine night," said Zotique, as he took a long breath of fresh air.

Vital looked at his robust brother in a queer, constrained manner, and said that it was indeed a beautiful evening. Now, instead of looking up at the queen of the night, as one would naturally have expected after such flattering comments, they both, as though by common consent, treated her with the most marked disrespect, not once looking toward her, but bestowing all their attention on a certain little whitewashed cottage down the road, from a window of which streamed a light.

"I think we had better go in," said Zotique, presently, in a slightly disappointed tone.

"Yes, yes, Zotique, what you say is right; there never was a finer night," answered Vital, dreamily, his eyes still fixed thoughtfully on the cottage. He was in one of his absent moods, and had not heard what his brother had said.

Zotique turned, looked sharply at him, and then broke into a hearty laugh. "You are as absent-minded as ever, Vital," he said jestingly, as he seized him by the arm and marched him into the room.

The guests were seated, but there was still room for four or five more. After jeering them both for being moon-gazers, farmer Charrest called Zotique to come and sit by his side. Vital, thus being left alone, wandered off to the foot of the table, and sat down by the side of an old farmer, where there was plenty of room. What made him go so far for a seat when there were others nearer, though not so roomy, will presently be seen. Hardly had he seated himself when he did an unaccountable thing. Sitting as close as he could get to the farmer on his right, he stealthily ran his hand along the bench till it reached his neighbor on his left. The intervening space evidently was satisfactory, for a look of content came over his face, and he turned and looked once more expectantly at the door.

Scarcely had the repast begun when the door was quickly opened, and a young woman, clad in a bewitching white dress,

burst into the room. She was out of breath, and had evidently been running.

"Do you know, Madame Charest," she said laughingly, as she advanced, "the reason I am late is — because — well, because" — the color rushed into her face as she hesitated for a few moments — "because it took me so long to dress. There, now, I have told you! Father said he would tell you all when he came just what did keep me, although I coaxed him not to. Now I have spoiled the joke he was going to have on me, and we can laugh at him."

This audacious thwarting of parental plans caused much laughter, during which Zotique sprang to his feet, and going over to where she was standing, and laughing merrily, held out his hand and said, "Have you no word of welcome for me, Katie White?"

She put her hand into the outstretched one, and looking up into his face with her bright blue eyes, told him that she was very much pleased to see him.

Vital, who had seen her the very moment the door opened, had risen with alacrity, and in the hope that she would see the vacant seat by his side, was unconsciously crushing the hapless farmer on his right into a most uncomfortable position. The hopeful, expectant look on Vital's face deserved far better recognition than it was awarded.

Despite the fact that there was but little room where Zotique was sitting, the shameless, prevaricating fellow impressed upon her that seats in that particular quarter were actually going begging.

For a few moments Katie hesitated as though she hardly knew what to do. Absent-minded Vital was still standing and looking at her, his whole heart in his eyes.

"Yes, I will sit next to you; it was very kind of you to take such interest in getting me a seat."

Poor Vital! As he heard these ominous words, saw her look up and smile at Zotique, and after great crushing sit down by his side, all the pleasure of eating left him entirely.

As the good things began to disappear and tongues were loosened, unobtrusive Vital seemed to be entirely forgotten, except by

the neighbor whom he had so cruelly crowded. Had it not been for this kindly, unvengeful soul, Vital's inner man would have been in as beggarly a condition at the conclusion of the meal as at the beginning. As it was, it received but scant attention. Seeing the poverty of his plate, without asking leave, the farmer generously filled it.

This act of kindness brought Vital's thoughts to a sudden halt, and made him feel ashamed of the interest he had been displaying in all the young woman, seated at his brother's side, had been doing and saying. With a firm determination no longer to slight his plate, he turned his attention to it, but had scarcely eaten two mouthfuls when his treacherous thoughts stole off to Katie again. Absently laying his knife and fork down, he was soon unconscious of all that was going on around him.

His friendly neighbor decided it would be a most opportune time to pass the salt, and thus give him another hint that he was losing much valuable time.

"Oh, thank you," said Vital, absently, as he took the salt and proceeded to distribute it over his meat in such reckless quantities as to completely entomb the latter. For a space the farmer looked aghast, and then, with a mystified shake of his head, turned his attention to his own affairs, and did not look at him again till the time for speech-making had arrived. Then, to his consternation, he saw Vital had not made the slightest effort to extricate the hapless meat from its strange covering. Besides the farmer, another person had witnessed the adventures of Vital's plate!

After considerable solicitation and stimulating applause, farmer Charest rose to deliver the first speech. "As dare are," he began in broken English, "a few farmer here who not spick de French lanwige, I will try for spick a few words in English. I know I not spick de lanwige vary much, but my son Zotique, who just come from de States, he spick English just so well as de English, and so he mak you spick better dan I mak."

He turned and laid his hand affectionately on Zotique's head. Zotique colored at the unexpected compliment, and looking down into Miss Katie White's bright blue eyes, smiled, and shook his head deprecatingly. She looked up, smiled, and nodded her compact

little head, as though she thought the compliment was fully deserved.

Vital, who had eyes for only one person in the room, saw the look Zotique gave her, and her apparent appreciation of it, and longed to be out in the little garden at the back of the house.

"I not mak some vary long spich," went on the orator, "as I know dat you all rather have de dance. Den I see, too, dat my friend Magloire Meloche, down dare, he look many time at de fiddle he brought and hang on de wall." This bantering allusion to the veteran fiddle-player of the district caused a hearty outburst of laughter and applause.

"All I want for say," continued the speaker, rubbing his hands briskly with gratified pride, "is dat me and my *femme* we both glad dat my son Zotique he come from de States to pay us de visit. My son he do well in de States, where dare is vary much place for work. When he write to say dat he pay us de visit, my *femme*, she say she mak dis little pleasure so dat you all see him. My son Zotique he now spick."

Had farmer Charest been a second "Mark Antony," the recognition of his oratorical ability could not have been more marked. Certain it is that that renowned orator could not have borne more becomingly the honors showered upon him.

Very handsome Zotique looked as he rose, and he spoke in English which fully justified the goodly remarks passed upon it by his father. Vital's heart beat fast with pride as he looked at his handsome brother, until it occurred to him how insignificant Katie White must think him in comparison.

Before Zotique had spoken many words, he had completely won the hearts of his hearers. Quite fluently he told them of the cities he had visited in the States, and how a grocery clerk's life was one much to be desired. He interspersed little jokes in his speech, at which he laughed just as heartily and sincerely as his listeners. More than once he was on the point of concluding, when a glance at Katie White's sweet face incited him to fresh efforts.

It was a speech remembered and spoken of for many days.

Before the dancing began, farmer Charest declared, despite the increasing and obvious restlessness of Magloire Meloche to get at the fiddle, that they must have a speech, in English, from his eldest son Vital. "And my son Vital, he has mak me a good son, if he do like to tink alone too much, and sometime do forgetful ting." Very affectionate was the look he gave Vital, who had been with him always, and for whom it was not necessary to kill the fatted calf.

If there was anything Vital was an adept at not doing, it was making a speech in English. He was considered quite clever at playing the organ in the little village church, singing the mass, teaching school, and a hundred other things, but at speaking English he was known as an arrant failure.

For a few moments he stood struggling hard to regain his composure, and ardently wishing that Katie were at his side to inspire him as she had inspired his brother. Finally, he launched forth, to the quiet amusement of the few English farmers present. Truly, he took liberties with the language seldom attempted even by French-Canadians, to whom the Saxon tongue appears to have no terrors. Yet, had he spoken in Dutch, he would have been listened to just as patiently, for all present knew and appreciated his quiet worth. After accomplishing the feat of letting them know, at least half a dozen times, that he was glad once more to see his brother with them, he got hopelessly wrecked, and gazed hard at his plate for inspiration. Finding no succor there, his thoughts again galloped off to the young woman who had come late, where they evidently delighted to linger. A peaceful smile stole over the speaker's worried face, and absently taking up his fork he began to drum contentedly on the table with it, utterly forgetful of those who were waiting anxiously for the remainder of his remarks.

With a broad smile, farmer Charest began to applaud loudly, receiving generous aid from the guests.

This unexpected appreciation caused Vital to color painfully, well intentioned though he knew the applause to be. The thought that Katie must be again contrasting him with Zotique kept the crimson hue on his face long after he sat down. The few remaining words which he spoke were in continued praise of his brother, of whose cleverness both he and his parents were very proud.

After the clapping of hands had subsided, the table was carried away to make room for the dancing.

Feeling that he had utterly disgraced himself in Katie's eyes, Vital wandered off to a quiet corner where he could see her without attracting attention. It seemed to him, once or twice, that she looked over inquiringly in his direction, but the thought that it was presumptuous of him to imagine she would think of him now, made him quickly decide that he had been mistaken as to the direction of her glances. He was also convinced now that he had made a still more serious mistake when he allowed himself to hope that she had cherished tender thoughts of the many walks they had taken along the quiet country road, and of the evenings he had spent with her.

Fearing to be thought unsocial, he rose hastily, and was soon talking to the guests with unusual eagerness. His sudden lapses into thought, however, created the impression in the minds of some of his listeners that he was laboring under suppressed excitement.

At times, when he found himself drifting unconsciously toward Katie, it was amusing to see what a hasty retreat he would beat.

As for Zotique, he had never enjoyed himself more. Scarcely for a moment did he leave Katie's side. Brightly he talked to her of their school-days and of the many pleasant parties they had met at before he went away. When, presently, he asked her about a certain little present which he had sent her a few months before, his voice grew very tender, as also indeed did his eyes. It took considerable questioning before she admitted that she had not parted with it. After this slight admission he grew more chatty than ever, and failed to notice that her manner was growing a little constrained.

Finally the floor was cleared, and Magloire Meloche, with much dignity, took down the doughty fiddle, seated himself, cast his eyes calmly over the expectant guests, and began slowly to tune up. From the expression of his face, it was quite apparent that he had a keen appreciation of the important part he had been called upon to occupy in the evening's festivities. Besides constituting the entire orchestra, he was floor manager, and called out the figures. The gusto with which he cried out, "Swing your pardner! Now tak de hand all round," etc., and beat time with his huge moccasined foot, added in no inconsiderable degree to the excitement.

It being well known that Vital did not dance, no comments were passed upon his absence. The poor fellow had tried to stay and watch the dancing, but the pain at his heart had grown so, on seeing Zotique's arm around her waist, that he really could not endure it, and so had gone out to the little garden at the back of the house, and was sitting on his favorite seat under a huge birch tree, whose thick foliage the inquisitive moon could scarcely pierce.

Through the open kitchen door there floated to him at intervals the playing of the fiddle, and the commanding tones of Magloire Meloche.

Finally the music ceased, and some of the dancers came out into the garden to view the beauty of the night. Vital was just in the act of rising, when a couple, whom he recognized as his brother and Katie White, came within a few yards of him. Where he sat, the shadows were too deep for them to see him.

Before he could escape, they paused for a few moments near the outer branches of the great birch, where the lavish moon beamed clear as noonday. Their faces were distinctly revealed. Zotique's bore an intensely eager look, while Katie's was strangely agitated. They were talking earnestly. Dreading they might think he was eaves-dropping, Vital was about to make his presence known, when they began slowly to move away, and there fell upon his ears words that bereft him of speech. It was his brother's voice, low and pleading: "Before I went away I loved you, and I have loved you ever since. I was so anxious to see you, that I came back. You are surprised at me telling you to-night; but I can only stay a few days. If you will only give me your promise, I—"

The voice died away in the distance.

The shadows where Vital stood suddenly assumed a more sombre hue, and widened and deepened and spread, until the whole garden was enveloped in a funereal pall.

The ancient garden seat groaned audibly as he sank back heavily upon it; the shock drove the gathering blackness away. Never in his life before had he been so sorely moved; his pale face had almost a ghastly hue, while his hands shook painfully. He rose mechanically and passed out into the moonlight, and looked around absently.

There was no one in sight, and all was quiet. He began to move in the direction of the house. He appeared to have forgotten all about the festivities; he was simply weary, and was going home to rest.

"Tak your pardners for de nex' waltz!" A moment of preliminary scraping, then the tune, and finally the muffled scuffling of feet fell upon his ears. Then it all came back to him, and turning hurriedly, he walked away from the house to the far end of the garden. Resting his arms on the fence, he stood bathed in the moonlight, trying to think it all out calmly, and get courage to return and act as though nothing had happened. While he stood battling with his rebellious heart, he might have noticed, had he been facing the house, a young woman, dressed in white, come to the door soon after the dance had started, and look around the garden as if searching for someone. Finally her eyes travelled to the far end of the garden, where a lonely, despondent-looking figure was standing, and then she started eagerly forward. Very lovely was the color in her cheeks as she sped toward him. As she was about to lay her hand on his arm she appeared to grow irresolute. She paused and looked back at the house as though meditating upon the advisability of returning, and actually did take a few steps towards it, but again hesitated and looked back; the pathetic droop of his shoulders affected her keenly, and she stole back to him again. Bending her little head till it was near his, she said softly: "Dreaming again, Vital?"

The foolish fellow turned and looked at her as though he had utterly abandoned all faith in the veracity of his hitherto faithful eyes: "Katie! Katie White!" he exclaimed.

She laughed outright. "Yes, Katie White. Did you think it was my ghost? Of course, if you are not glad to see me, and would rather be alone, I can go back to the house again."

Sly Katie!

It was marvellous the way the look of misery fled from his face, while the sudden growth of his friendliness was nothing less than astounding. Taking her little hand in his he shook it repeatedly, and impressed upon her, over and over again, that he had never been more surprised in his life.

Suddenly she put on a most serious look, and leaning back against the fence, looked up into his face and said gravely: "Even if you don't dance, Vital, I think it was a little rude of you to leave the house for so long, and scarcely speak to anyone the whole evening. And the way you acted, too, at dinner, Vital! I can't understand it."

In the happiness of having Katie near him, he had forgotten all about the scene he had witnessed near the great birch tree, and the dreadful words that had floated to him, and had almost stopped the beating of his heart. Of course, she was his brother's now. How foolishly he had been acting, and how painful to her must have been his extravagant joy at seeing her. The reference she had made to the dinner made his humiliation still keener to bear, for he thought she alluded to his unhappy speech.

The sudden flight of happiness from his face made her own grow grave, and she drew a little closer to him; but in his humiliation he did not notice it. He thought she was haughtily waiting for him to speak. In his quaint halting English he began to tell her that he feared he had been most discourteous. The truth was he had "not meant to stay away so long, but had got thinking of—of—"

"Thinking of what, Vital?"

Was he mistaken? Was not that a kindly ring in her voice? It was hard to keep his eyes from her face. Then he thought of his brother, and he was sure his ears had deceived him. After a painful pause, he answered that he had been thinking of many things. Not for a moment did he dream of letting her know that she had been the magnet around which all his thoughts had revolved. Then he began to explain about that speech. Hardly had he begun to apologize for his lack of oratorical ability, when a pained expression swept across Katie's face, and she was about to reproach him for thinking she would be so ungenerous as to upbraid him for such a thing, when a spirit of mischief entered her heart, and putting on a serious air she let him continue. He finally wound up by praising his brother's wonderful gift of speech.

"Oh, yes," she replied warmly, "Zotique is a great speaker, and such a dancer!" She stole a swift glance at him. His eyes were still fixed on the trees in the distance. A queer little smile stole around the corners of her mouth. He admitted, with a valiant effort to

throw a little enthusiasm into his voice, that Zotique was indeed a grand dancer. The smile, which was in no way scornful, deepened on her face.

"And he is so polite to ladies, and takes such trouble to provide them with seats at crowded tables," Katie went on reflectively.

He stole a hasty glance at her face, but quick as he was she was quicker; the smile had vanished. He saw only a deeply thoughtful expression.

To think of Katie praising Zotique for providing her with a seat! If she only knew how she was wounding him! but he was sure she did not. He wondered what she would think if she only knew that the failure of his speech had been largely due to not having had the privilege of providing her with a seat. He thought of how anxiously he had watched the door for her, and how Zotique had upset all his plans by going so fearlessly up to her and taking her to the seat at his side. He wondered she had not noticed how he had stood up all the time she had been talking to his brother, and how in that way he had tried to get her to notice the generous vacant space at his side. There was nothing to be done now but to let Katie misunderstand him: to let her know the true state of his feelings would be treachery to Zotique.

In a low voice he admitted Zotique's superiority over him also in the capacity of politeness.

It is wonderful how cruel maidens can be at times. In a tone in which there was just the slightest shade of reproach, Katie told him that she really had expected him to show her a little more attention, considering how very long they had been friends. Perhaps, however, his lack of attention had been due to his feeling unwell; she had seen how he had hardly eaten anything. Ill-health would account, too, for the tremendous covering of salt he had put over his meat.

Poor Vital! This was dreadful; she had misunderstood him in everything. She would never know that his prodigality with the salt had been due to the perversity of his heart in longing for what it would now never possess. Manfully he stuck to the thankless part he had to play, and admitted that ill-health had something to do with his strange behavior.