

## XXII

### THE HAUNTED SPINNING WHEEL.

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A Legend of St. Jean's Eve.

“**M**AD,” impetuous Anthony Wayne first flung in triumph the Stars and Stripes over the fair City of the Straits. It was a gladsome beacon to many Americans to come and seek a home beneath its protecting folds. The Marietta colony in Ohio sent Cass, Sibley, Woodbridge and others to weave in history their distinguished talents with the city of their adoption. Many dashing Kentuckians, followers of Wayne, having conquered the English oppressors were themselves vanquished by the dark-eyed, piquante Canadian demoiselles.

Many intermarriages took place between the

French habitants\* and the new comers. In the families of these descendants are still preserved the quaint traditions of the French, also some of the physical traits, particularly the shapely foot and hand, and to-day the sale of shoes from the so-called Créole last, follows the line of French posts from Detroit, Monroe, Fort Wayne, Vincennes, and St. Louis down to New Orleans. It is from one of these old families that the incidents embodied in the following story are gathered.

In 1795 Didier Duchêne lived with his wife and little daughter Fanchette on the banks of the Rouge. His aged mother resided with him, a venerable dame who lingered seemingly forgotten, beyond her time. But not so, thought Fanchette, who would steal from her play to sit beside grandmère, nestle her curly head against her knee, and listen with flushed cheeks and eyes glowing with wonderment to the marvelous tales she told. There is something beautiful in the witchery which a pious, serene old age exercises over impressionable childhood. There seems to be a perfect union between them,

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\*Habitants. A word whose meaning has been singularly perverted. It meant formerly the permanent settlers who came to "habiter le pays" (inhabit the country), in contradistinction to the military and civil functionaries who were transient. The richest merchant might be an habitant, that is, a permanent settler.

a mystic tie which as we advance in youth and towards middle age appears gradually to weaken. Perhaps the spontaneous reverence which lisping childhood pays to the aged, arises from the shadow of the mystery of its own existence which still envelops it, and the subtle instincts of companionship which nature instills in those standing on the confines of unknown worlds. It is the unconscious tribute of the mystery of the cradle to that of the grave. Childhood and old age have no present; one lives in the past, the other in the future.

One day grandmère died, and Fanchette felt that the sunshine had all crept out of her heart and left a great void. It was Fanchette's first contact with death and she felt its awe-striking influence, and wandered about listlessly questioning everything why all was so changed? She would sob herself to sleep, and in dreamland would hear again the sweet, faltering accents of grandmère. One evening she awoke her parents by a ringing shriek; they hastened to her, and found her excitedly exclaiming: "Grandmère, grandmère; don't you hear her?" To soothe her they remained quiet a moment and distinctly heard the hum of the old dame's spinning wheel in the adjoining room. Terror seized them, and it was only at the earnest pleading of the child

“to see grandmère” that they regained sufficient courage to open the door. But instantly the noise ceased ; the room was quiet and nothing disturbed.

Night after night the same occurrence took place. To Fanchette the phantom hum of the spinning wheel was a sweet lullaby, and an assurance that the dear grandmère was near. But the parents who had always laughed at the old lady’s superstitions, felt it a warning for their incredulity. The “Bon Père” was consulted, and after hearing the story, asked if they had left any promise unfulfilled to the dead. “Ah! Mon Dieu,” cried Didier, conscience-stricken, “I promised fifty masses for the repose of her soul and to distribute some things among the poor.” The promise was soon after fulfilled, and the spinning wheel no longer sent forth its weird music on the midnight air.

Years rolled on until Fanchette counted 16, the marriageable age among the maidens of that day. Her mother favored the suit of a little Canadian, but the girl’s heart inclined toward a brave Kentuckian. It was a severe struggle for that docile girl, between her obedience to her mother and her affection for her lover. The great Canadian festival of St. Jean Baptiste, or Midsummer Day, as the English called it, was nigh.

Towards nightfall the great bonfire (*feu de joie*),

was kindled. It was an octagonal pyramid about eight or ten feet high, erected opposite the church on the beach, and was covered with branches of fir stuck in the interstices of the logs of cedar of which it was built. The lighted taper was applied to each little heap of straw placed at each of the eight corners of the verdant cone. The flames arose sparkling and scintillating amidst hurrahs, cheers and deafening volleys of guns. The custom was of Norman origin, and commemorated the time when the bonfire was the only medium of communication for those living on opposite shores, and especially in winter, when they were shut off from each other. Thus fire became a language and they who knew its alphabet could read in the swaying flames the message of death, sickness or joyful tidings. On the eve of the festival great bonfires were built along the beach of the Detroit and all kept the vigil, as it was thought if any one slept his soul would leave the body and wander to find the place where death was to overtake him. At sunrise if close watch was kept one might see the sun dance three times.

Fanchette had come to the fort to visit friends but her principal interest in the day was centered on a trial which she had decided to make as to whom she should choose for a husband. At the hour of twelve everything was quiet in the house.

She cautiously made her way to the garden surrounded by its high cedar pickets, and taking a handful of wild hemp seed, she scattered it on the ground saying,

“Hemp I sow, hemp I hoe,  
Who is my love come after me now.”

To her intense joy, a vague resemblance of the Kentuckian arose and stalked across the garden.

Then hastily plucking a few sprigs of vervain, a plant so useful in warding off goblins and possessing wonderful powers, she carefully picked a rose de France, which she felt would keep fresh until marriage time at Christmas, and returned to her room to watch with the others, and muse on her happiness in store.

The same belief and traditions repeat themselves in other lands as is seen in the oft quoted

#### POEM OF ST. JOHN'S WORT.

The young maid stole through the cottage door,  
And blushed as she saw the plant of power;  
“Thou silver moon glow, oh lend me thy light,  
I must gather the mystic St. John's wort to-night,  
The wonderful herb whose leaf will decide  
If the coming year will make me a bride!”

And the glow-worm came  
With its silvery flame,  
And sparkled and shone  
Through the night of St. John,  
And soon has the maid her love-knot tied.

With noiseless tread  
To her chamber she sped,  
Where the spectral moon her white beams shed;  
Bloom here, bloom there, thou plant of power,  
To deck the young bride in her bridal hour;  
But it drooped its head, that plant of power,  
And died the mute death of the voiceless flower.

And a withered wreath on the ground it lay,  
More meet for a burial than a bridal day;  
And when a year was passed away  
All pale on her bier the young maid lay.

And the glow-worm came  
With its silvery flame,  
And sparkled and shone  
Through the night of St. John,  
As they closed the cold grave on the maid's cold clay.

When Christmas came little Fanchette decked as a bride stood by the side of her gallant Kentuckian, and said the words which made her his "for weal or for woe." She told him afterwards the story of St. Jean's eve, and transformed him into a fervent believer in grandmère's superstitions. A few years later a group of merry children might have been seen in the Duchêne orchard burning bundles of straw under the trees, whilst they chanted :

Taupes, chenilles, et mulots  
Sortez sortez de vos clos  
Ou, je vous brule la barbe et les os  
Arbres, arbrisseaux  
Donnez moi des pommes a minot.

Translated into English the rhyme means :

Caterpillars, mice and moles  
On this instant leave your holes,  
Crawl forth from under bark and stones  
Or I will burn your beard and bones,  
And may the trees both great and small  
Be loaded down with apples all.