

# NORTHERN LIGHTS

By GILBERT PARKER

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## MARCILE

THAT day was beautiful, that the harvest of the West had been a great one, that the salmon fishing had been larger than ever before, that gold had been found in the Yukon, made no difference to Jacques Grassette, for he was in the condemned cell on Bloor's Jail, living out those days which pass so swiftly between the verdict of the jury and the last slow walk with the sheriff.

He sat with him back to the stone wall, his hands on his knees, looking straight before him. All that met his physical gaze was another stone wall, but with his mind's eye he was looking beyond it into spaces far away. His mind was seeing a little house with dormer windows, and a steep roof on which the snow could not lodge in winter time; with a narrow stoop in front where one could rest in an evening, the day's work done; the stone-and-earth oven near by on the open, where the bread for a family of twenty was baked; the wooden plough tipped against the fence, to wait the fall cultivation; the big iron mill in which the sap from the maple trees was boiled, in the days when the snow thawed and spring opened the heart of the world; the flash of the sickle and the scythe hard by; the fields of the low, narrow farm running back from the stone wall like a ribbon; and, out on the wide stream, the great rafts with their riverine population floating down to Michelin's mill yards.

For hours he had sat like this, unmoving, his gnarled red hands clasped each in the hand of the other, his steady white hair and eyes saw himself as a little lad, bare-footed, doing chores, running after the shaggy, troublesome pony which would let him catch it when no one else could, and with only a halter on, halloping back to the farmyard, to be hitched up to the cart which had once belonged to the old Seigneur. He saw himself as a young man back from the States, where he had been working in the mills, regarded as a young man, his first Communion, and in Massachusetts he had learned to wear his curly hair plastered down on his forehead, smoke bad cigars, and drink "old Bourbon," to bet and to gamble, and be a figure at horse races.

Then he saw himself, his money all gone, but the luck still with him, at Mass on the Sunday before going to the backwoods lumber camp for the winter, as boss of a hundred men. He had a way with him, and he had brains, had Jacques Grassette, and he could manage men, as Michelin, the lumber king, himself, had found in a great river town, strike, when bloodshed seemed certain. Even now the ghost of a smile played at his lips as he recalled the surprise of the old habitants and of Father Roche, when he was chosen for this responsible post, for in a great lumber camp well, hundreds of miles from civilization, where there is no visible law, no restraints of ordinary organized life, and where men, for seven months together, navigating a woman or a child, and ate pork and beans, and drank white whiskey, was a task of administration as difficult as managing a small republic new created out of violent elements of society. But Michelin was right, and the old Seigneur, Sir Henri Robitaille, who was a judge of men, was right, as right as did also Hennespin the schoolmaster, whose despair Jacques had seen, for he never worked at his lessons as a boy, and yet he absorbed Latin and mathematics by some sure but unexplainable process. "Ah, if you would but teach me, you curiaun, I would make a great man of you," Hennespin had said to him more than once; but this had made no impression on Jacques. It was more to the point that the ground-hogs and black squirrels and pigeons were plentiful in Casanov's Woods.

And so he thought as he stood at the door of the Church of St. Francis on that day before going "out back" to the lumber camp. He had reached the summit of greatness—to command men, that was more than wealth or learning, and as he spoke to the old Seigneur going in to Mass, he still thought so, for the Seigneur's big house and the servants and the great gardens had no charm for him. The horses—that was another thing; but there would be plenty of horses in the lumber camp; and, on the whole, he felt himself rather superior to the old Seigneur, who now was Lieutenant-Governor of the province in which lay Bloor's Jail.

At the door of the Church of St. Francis he had stretched himself up with good-natured pride, for he was by nature gregarious and friendly, but with a temper quick and strong, and even savage when roused; though Michelin the lumber king did not know that when he engaged him as boss, having seen him only at the one critical time when his superior brain and will saw his chance to command and had no personal interest in the strife. He had been a miracle of coolness then, and his six-foot-two of pride and muscle was taking natural tribute at the door of the Church of St. Francis, where he waited till nearly every one had entered, and Father Roche's voice could be heard in the Mass.

Then had happened the real event of his life: a black-eyed, rose-cheeked girl went by with her mother hurrying in to Mass. As she passed him their eyes met, and his blood leaped in his veins. He had never seen her before, and in a sense, he had never seen any woman before. He had danced with many a one, and kissed a few in the old days among the flux-beaters, at the harvesting, in the gateway of a wed-

ding, and also down in Massachusetts. That, however, was a different thing, which he forgot an hour after; but this was the beginning of the world for him; for he knew now, of a sudden, what life was, what home meant, why "old folks" slaved for their children, and mothers went away from home to bigger things; why in there, in at Mass, so many were praying for all the people and thinking only of one. All in a moment it came—and stayed; and he spoke to her, to Marcile, to her very night, and he spoke also to her father, Valloir the ferrier, the next morning by lamplight, before he started for the woods. He would not be grieved, nor take no for an answer, nor accept, as a reason for refusal, that she was only sixteen, and she had been away with a child, the aunt since she was three. That she had fourteen brothers and sisters who had to be fed and cared for did not seem to weigh with the ferrier. That was an affair of le bon Dieu, and enough would be provided for them all as heretofore—would make little difference; and though Jacques was a very good match, considering his prospects and his favor with the lumber king, Valloir did not easily promise his beloved Marcile, the flower of his flock, to a man of whom the priest so strongly disapproved. But it was a new sort of Jacques Grassette who, that morning, spoke to him with the simplicity and earnestness of a child; and he suddenly conceived the gift of a pony stallion, which every man in the parish envied Jacques, nor Valloir over; and Jacques went "away back" with the first timid kiss of Marcile Valloir burning on his cheek.

"Well, bagosh, you are a wonder!" said Jacques' father, when he told him the news, and saw Jacques jump into the cart and drive away.

Here in prison, this, too, Jacques saw—this scene; and then the wedding in the spring, and the tour through the parishes for days to do with; and the long journeying with them; and the new home with a bigger stoop than any other in the village, with some old, gnarled crab-apple trees and lilac bushes, and four years of happiness, and a little child that died; and all the time Jacques rising in the esteem of Michelin the lumber king, and sent on inspections, and to organize camps; for weeks, sometimes for months, away from the house behind the lilac bushes—and then the end of it all, sudden and crushing and unrelenting.

Jacques came back one night and found the house empty. Marcile had gone to try her luck with another man.

That was the end of the upward career of Jacques Grassette. He went out upon a savage hunt which brought him no quarry, for the man and the woman had disappeared as completely as the sea. And here, at last, he was waiting for the day when he must settle a bill for a human life taken in passion and rage. His big frame seemed out of place sitting in the small cell, and the watcher sitting near him, to whom he had not addressed a word since he had seen a question since the watching began, seemed an insignificant factor in the scene. Never had a prisoner been more self-contained, or rejected more completely all those ministrations of humanity which relieve the horrible isolation of the condemned cell. Grassette's isolation was complete. He lived in a dream, did what little there was to do in a dark abstraction, and sat hour after hour, as he was sitting now, piercing, with a brain at once numb and alert, at outer things and after with inward things, those realms of memory which are infinite in a life of forty years.

"Sacré!" he muttered at last, and a devil seemed to pass through him from head to foot; then an ugly and evil odor fell from his lips, which made his watcher shrink back appalled, for he also was a Catholic, and had been chosen of purpose, in the hope that he might have an influence on this revolted soul. It had, however, been the advances of Grassette had refused the advances and ministrations of the little good priest, Father Lafamme, who had come from the coast of purpose to give him the offices of the Church, silent, obdurate, stolid, he had looked the priest straight in the face, and had said, in broken English, "Non, I will say my Mass, light my own candle, go my own way. I have too much."

Now, as he sat glooming, after his outbreak of catharsis, there came a rattling noise at the door, the grinding of a key in the lock, the shooting of bolts, and a face appeared at the little wicket in the door. Then the door opened, and the Sheriff stepped inside, accompanied by a white-haired, stately old man. At a slight of this second figure—the Sheriff had come often before, and would come for one more doleful walk with him—Grassette started. His face, which had never whitened in all the dismal and terrifying doings of the capture and trial and sentence, though it had flushed with rage more than once, now turned a little pale, for it seemed as if this old man had stepped out of the visions which had just passed before his eyes.

"His Honor," the Lieutenant-Governor, Sir Henri Robitaille, has come to speak with you. Stand up!" the Sheriff added, sharply, as Grassette kept his seat.

Grassette's face flushed with anger; for the prison had not broken his spirit; then he got up slowly.

"I not stand up for you," he growled at the Sheriff; "I stand up for him." He jerked his head toward Sir Henri Robitaille. This grand Seigneur, with Michelin, had believed in him in those far-off days which he had just been seeing over again, and all his boyhood and young manhood was rushing back on him. But now it was the Governor who turned pale, seeing who the criminal was.

"Jacques Grassette!" he cried, in consternation and emotion, for up to another name the murderer had been tried and sentenced, nor had his identity been established—the case was so clear, the defense had been perfunctory, and Quebec was very far away!

"M'sieu!" was the respectful response, and Grassette's fingers twitched.

"It was my sister's son you killed, Grassette," said the Governor, in a low, strained voice.

"Nom de Dieu!" said Grassette, hoarsely.

"I did not know, Grassette," the Governor went on—"I did not know it was you."

"Why did you come, m'sieu?" "Call him 'your Honor,'" said the Sheriff, sharply.

Grassette's face hardened, and his look, turned upon the Sheriff, was savage and forbidding. "I will speak as it please me. Who are you? What do I care? To hang me—that is your business; but, for the rest, you speak to me different! Who are you? Your father keep a tavern for thieves, vous savez bien! It was true that the Sheriff's father had had no savory reputation in the West.

The Governor turned his head away in pain and trouble, for the man's rage was not a thing to see—and they both came from the little parish of St. Francis, and had passed many an hour together.

"Then to go free altogether—that would be the wish of all the world, if you save this man's life, if it can be saved. Will you not take the chance? We all have to die some time or other, Grassette, some sooner, some later; and when you go, will you not want to take to God, in your hands a life saved for a life taken? Have you forgotten God, Grassette? We used to remember Him in the Church of St. Francis down there at home."

Presently he said in a low voice: "What is his name? Who is he?"

"His name is Bignold," the Governor answered. He turned to the Sheriff inquiringly. "That is it, is it?"

"He is an Englishman; he's only been out here a few months. He's been shooting and prospecting; but he's a better shooter than a prospector. He's a stranger; that's why all the folks out here want to save him if it's possible. It's pretty hard dying in a strange land, and away from all that's yours. May'be he's got a wife waiting for him over there."

"Nom de Dieu!" said Grassette, with suppressed malice, under his breath.

"Maybe there's a wife waiting for him, and there's her to think of. The West's hospitable, and this thing has taken hold of it; the West wants to save this stranger, and it's waiting for you, Grassette, to do its work for it, the only one that knows what to do, the only one that knows the other secret way into Keeley's Gulch. Speak right out, Grassette. It's your chance for life. Speak out quick."

The last three words were uttered in the old slave-driving tone, though the earlier part of the speech had been delivered oracularly, and had brought again to Grassette's eyes the reddish, sullen look which had made them, a little while before, like those of some wounded, angered animal at bay; but it vanished slowly, and there was silence for a moment. The Sheriff's words had left no vestige of doubt in Grassette's mind. This Bignold was the man who had taken Marcile away, first to the English province, then into the States, where he had lost track of her, then over to England. Marcile—where was Marcile now?

In Keeley's Gulch was the man who could tell him, the man who had ruined his home and his life. Dead or alive, he was in Keeley's Gulch, the man who knew where Marcile was; and if he knew where Marcile was, and if he was alive, and if he was outside these prison walls, and in the Gulch, and the man was there alive before him, what would he do?

Outside these prison walls, to be out there in the sun, where life would be easier to give up, if it had to be given up! An hour ago he had

settled said, harshly, with eyes that searched the Governor's face; but they found no answering look there. The Governor, then, did not remember that tragedy of his home and hearth, and the man who had made of him an Ishmael. Still, Bignold had been almost a stranger in the parish, and it was not curious if the Governor had forgotten.

"Bignold" he repeated, but the Governor gave no response.

"Yes, Bignold" to his name, Grassette, said the Sheriff. "You took a life, and now, if you save one, that'll balance things. As the Governor says, there'll be a reprieve anyhow. It's pretty near the day, and this isn't a bad world to kick in, so long as you kick with one leg on the ground, and—"

The Governor hastily intervened upon the Sheriff's brutal remarks. "There is no time to be lost, Grassette. He has been ten days in the mine."

Grassette was not a slow brain. For a man of such physical and bodily bulk, he had more talents than are generally given. If his brain had been slower to strike, but his intelligence had been sharper, charged with hate these many years, and since the day he had been deserted it had ceased to control his actions—a passionate and reckless wilfulness had governed it. But now, after the first shock and stupefaction, it seemed to go back to where it was before Marcile was shot from him, gather up the force and intelligence it had then, and come forward again to this supreme moment, with all that life's harsh experience had done for it, with the education that misery and misleading give. Revolutions are often the work of instants, not years, and the crucial test and problem by which Grassette was now faced, had lifted him into a new atmosphere, with a new capacity alive in him. A moment ago his eyes had been bloodshot and swimming with hatred and passion; now they grew almost suddenly, hard and lurid and quiet, with a strange, penetrating force and inquiry in them.

"Bignold—where does he come from? What is he?" he asked the Sheriff.

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been drifting on a sea of apathy, and had had his fill of life. An hour ago he had had but one desire, and that was to die fighting, and he had even pictured to himself a struggle in this narrow cell, and so in any case let him escape the rope. Now he was suddenly brought face to face with the great central issue of his life, and the end, whatever that end might be, could not be the same in meaning, though it might be the same concretely. If he elected to let things be, then Bignold would die out there in the Gulch, starved, anguished, and alone. If he went, he could save his own life by saving Bignold, if Bignold was alive; or he could go—and not save Bignold's life or his own! What would he do?

"What will you do, Grassette?" he said, at last, in a low voice and with a step forward to him. "Will you not help to clear your conscience by doing this thing? You don't want to do it, spite the world by not doing it. You can make a lot of your life yet, if you are set free. Give yourself and give the world a chance. You haven't used it right. Try again."

Grassette imagined that the Governor did not remember who Bignold was, and that this was an appeal against his despair, and against revenging himself on the community which had applauded his sentence. If he went to the Gulch, no one would know or could suspect the true situation, every one would be unprepared for that moment when Bignold and he would walk together—and all that would happen then.

Where was Marcile? Only Bignold knew. Alive or dead? Only Bignold knew.

"Bien, I will do it, m'sieu," he said to the Governor. "I am to go alone—eh?"

The Sheriff shook his head. "No, two warders will go with you—and myself."

A strange look passed over Grassette's face. "Bon, I will go."

"Then there is, of course, the doctor," said the Sheriff.

"Bon!" said Grassette. "What time is it?"

"Twelve o'clock," answered the Sheriff, and made a motion to the warder to open the door of the cell. "By sundown!" Grassette said, and he turned with a determined gesture to leave the cell.

At the gate of the prison a fresh, sweet air caught his face. Involuntarily he drew in a great draught of it, and his eyes seemed to gaze out, almost wonderingly, over the grass and the trees to the boundless horizon. Then he became aware of the shouts of the crowd—shouts of welcome. This same crowd had greeted him with shouts of execration when he had left the court-house after his sentence. He stood still for a moment and looked at them, as it were only half comprehending that they were cheering him now, and that voices were saying, "Grassette! Grassette! Save him, and we'll save you!"

Cheer upon cheer, but he took no notice. He walked like one in a dream—a long, strong step. He turned neither to left nor right, not even when the friendly voice of one who had worked with him bade him "cheer up and do the trick." He was busy working out a problem which no one but himself could solve. He was only half conscious of his surroundings; he was moving in a kind of detached world of his own, and those who followed were almost abstract and unreal figures. He was living with a past which had been everlasting distant, and had now become a vivid and buffeting present. He returned no answers to the questions addressed to him and would not talk, save when for a trick he was dismounted from their horses and sat under the shade of a great ash tree for a few moments and snatched a mouthful of luncheon. Then he spoke a little and asked some questions, but lapsed into a moody silence afterwards. His life and nature were being peened through a fiery crucible. In all the years that had gone he had had an unquenchable desire to kill both Bignold and Marcile if he ever met them out of life and being. His fingers had ached for Marcile's lips, that neck in which he had laid his face so often in the transient, unforgettable days of his happiness. If she was alive now—if she was still alive!

Her story was hidden there in Keeley's Gulch with Bignold, and he was galloping hard to reach his goal. As he went, by some strange alchemy of human experience, by that new birth of his brain, the world seemed different from what it had ever been before, at least since the day when he had found an empty home and a shamed heartbroken man. He got a new feeling toward it, and life appealed to him as a thing that might have been so well worth living! But since that was not to be, then he would see what he could do to get compensation for all that he had lost, to take toll for the thing that had spoiled him, and given him a savage nature and a raging temper, which had driven him at last to kill a man who, in no real sense, had injured him.

Mile after mile they journeyed, a troop of interested people coming after: the sun and the clear, sweet air, the waving grass, the occasional clearings where settlers had driven in the last pegs of home; the forest now and then swallowing them, the mountains rising above them like a blank wall, and then suddenly opening out before them; and the rustle and scamper of squirrels and coyotes; and over their heads the whistle of birds, the slow beat of wings of great wild fowl. The tender say of youth was in this glowing and alert new world, and

by sudden contrast with the prison walls which he had just left behind, the earth seemed recreated, unfamiliar, compelling, and companionable. Strange that in all the years that had been since he had gone back to his abandoned home to find Marcile gone, the world had had no beauty, no lure for him. In the splendor of it all he had only raged and stormed, hating his fellow-men, waiting, however hopelessly, for the day when he should see Marcile and the man who had taken her from him. And yet now, under the degradation of his crime and its penalty, and the unmanly influence of being the helpless victim of the iron power of the law, rigid, ugly, and demoralizing—now with the solution of his life's great problem here before him in the hills, with the man for whom he had waited so long cowered in the earth but a hand-reach away, as it were, and he had taken a new manifestation in him, and the thing that kept crying out in him every moment was, "Where is Marcile?"

It was four o'clock when they reached the pass which only Grassette knew, the secret way into the Gulch. There was two hours' walking through the thick, primeval woods, where few had ever been, except the ancient tribes which had once lorded it here; then came a travel through a dim cave, and afterward a sheer wall of rock enclosing a ravine where the rocks on either side nearly met overhead.

Here Grassette gave the signal he had agreed on, and the voice of the Sheriff called out: "Hello, Bignold! Hello! Hello! Bignold! Are you there? Hello!" His voice rang out clear and piercing, and then came a silence—a long, anxious silence. Again the voice rang out: "Hello! Hello-o-o! Bignold! Bignold!"

They strained their ears. Grassette was flat on the ground, his ear to the earth. Suddenly his eyes glittered, his face set, his eyes glittered. "He is there beyond—I hear him," he said, pointing farther down the Gulch. "Water—he is near it."

"Sheriff," he heard nothing," said the Sheriff—"not a sound."

"I hear your sound. He is alive—I hear him—so," responded Grassette, and his face had a strange, fixed look which the others interpreted to be agitation at the thought that he had saved his own life by finding Bignold—and alive; which would put his own salvation beyond doubt.

He broke away from them and hurried down the Gulch. The others followed hard after, the Sheriff and the warders close behind; but he outstripped them.

Suddenly he stopped and stood still, looking at something on the ground. They saw him lean forward and his hands stretched out with a fierce gesture. It was the attitude of a wild animal ready to spring.

They were beside him in an instant, and saw at his feet Bignold, worn to a skeleton, with eyes starting from his head and fixed on Grassette in agony and stark fear. The Sheriff stooped to lift Bignold up, but Grassette waved them back with a fierce gesture, standing over the dying man.

"He spoll my home. He break me—I have my bill to settle here," he said, in a voice hoarse and harsh. "He is so—eh? Spik!" he said to Bignold.

"Yes," came feebly from the shriveled lips. "Water! Water! Wretched man gasped. "I'm dying!" A sudden change came over Grassette. "Water—queeck!" he said. "Water—queeck!" he said. "Water—queeck!" he said.

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