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Jacques of the Thick Head

by William Merriam Rouse

FOR more than ten years the village of Belle Rivière had called him Jacques of the Thick Head. Not to his face, certainly, for Jacques Grondin commanded respect in spite of the uncomplimentary title which his own people had given him. A man who could put a barrel of flour on his shoulder without visible effort was worthy of respect, even if he did have less common sense than any other French-Canadian between Montreal and the Gulf. At thirty Jacques had become a proverb in his own parish.

Jacques's lack of sense, by him realized fully, had troubled him more or less for a long time; but on a certain day in the middle of a cold winter it became a danger. It threatened his happiness as one of the black storms of the north threatens the white world—impenetrable, omnipotent, bringing darkness and bone-searching cold.

He stood upon the heights overlooking Belle Rivière in winter sunlight which failed to sweep the shadows out of his thoughts, and hoped against certainty for some little trick of fate to relieve him. He knew that he was going to do a thing which might easily rob him of that which he most desired.

A hundred feet below lay the village, its stone walls pink and pale-green and white, according to the fantasy of the painter and the odds and ends of paint which must be kept from waste. The roofs, buried under snow except for their dormer windows, slanted gracefully heavenward; and little trailing wreaths of smoke sauntered from broad chimneys.

Grondin loved the village almost as much as he loved the blue Laurentians at his back and the ice-locked St. Lawrence which went out toward the sea past the village and the misty heights of Cap Tourment. He was brother to the wind and snow and the keen, cold air. What misfortune to be afflicted with a disease of the spirit which repeatedly weakened him in the face of necessity—thus ran his thoughts!

"*C'est dommage!*" he muttered as he turned on his snow-shoes.

"What is a pity, my Jacques?"

The question came from behind him, and in a voice which, to his ears, had ever shamed the chimes of Ste. Anne de Beaupré. He turned quickly. Céleste Rigaud, to whom he was betrothed, was almost near enough to touch him—with a sparkle in her black eyes, and red in her cheeks, and a smile like dawn. She wore little caribou *chaussons* and a boy's mackinaw jacket instead of the flimsy moccasins and fancy coats which most of the village girls affected.

"*Mon Dieu!*" he exclaimed. "You have learned to put your feet down like feathers—or was I asleep?"

"Dreaming of your good luck, my Jacques," she suggested, moving to his side. "Is it true, as they say, that you have bought a hundred cords of pulp wood for three dollars less than the regular price?"

"Yes." He refused to meet her eyes, preferring to stare off into the blue-and-white regions south of the St. Lawrence. "Old Didace Parent was glad to sell. He made a just profit. This year it is almost impossible to get men and teams to bring wood out of the mountains—and I have them."

"What luck for us!"

"But"—Grondin drew a breath that was very nearly a groan—"there is the matter of Henri Painchaud to be considered."

"Jacques!" Her voice rang sharply. "What folly are you going to do now?"

"You see," he began, trying to get hold of a much-rehearsed explanation, "Painchaud is not young any more, and he has a very old father and mother who are so feeble that they need a hired woman to look after them. He has had bad luck, and—"

"Tell me the worst of it first!" she demanded. "Are you going to give him the wood?"

"But, no!" protested Grondin. "Not at all! I am merely going to turn over the contract to him so that he can make the profit."

"I thought no one but you had the horses and men to handle it?"

"But, you see, he can take mine—"

"*Dieu seigneur!* It is a miracle of the good God that you have a house and clothes to wear!"

"Painchaud has had bad luck this year," he repeated, "and his father and mother are very old. What could I do?"

"It is true that Heaven has given you no sense at all!" The storm he had feared was gathering. "Charity, yes! But this is more folly than I believed even you knew how to commit!"

"It will help him through a hard winter," persisted Grondin. "There are doctors' bills—"

"Jacques Grondin!" She struck his bulging chest with a tiny mitten until he looked her in the eyes. "Can he pay you back?"

"*Eh, bien!* He might."

"He might! *Mon Dieu!* Listen to me! Never after this day will I, Celeste Rigaud, speak to you, if you do this thing!"

Misery filled him like a great sickness. She was terribly angry or she would not have said it, and he knew that the anger would pass. But he also knew that she would keep to her word, even though it had been spoken when rage had made her forget their love.

He hesitated—for not to lie was a part of his madness—and as he hesitated, with blood pounding in his temples and a mist before his eyes, Celeste faded, and in her place he saw undersized Henri Painchaud, his cheeks sunken beneath a week's stubble, and his eyes with the look of a wounded rabbit.

"Painchaud is not a strong man"—Grondin licked dry lips—"and he has had bad luck!"

The mist cleared away, and he saw

Celeste again—Celeste, whose warm, red mouth had said it would not speak to him. The wrath that had darkened her face had departed, leaving a questioning, speculative look.

"I said that I, Céleste Rigaud, would never speak to you after this day—is it not true?"

"My dear!" he pleaded huskily. "Painchaud is a little fellow—"

"Scoundrel!" she cried. "I am not talking about this Painchaud! If you do not marry me to-day, how can Céleste Rigaud answer the questions at the altar? Tell me that!"

Not in all respects was Jacques Grondin without sense. He swept her up in his arms with snow-shoes dangling, careless of who might be upon the roads—her arms laced about his neck.

"Oh, my Jacques of the Thick Head!" she murmured. "It is a terrible thing to love a man like you—but I cannot help it!"

So they were married before the sun went down that day, and Belle Rivierè, which insisted upon knowing all the business of everybody, had something to talk about for months.

The gossips shook their heads. Certainly no good could come of such a helter-skelter marriage between a man with no sense and a girl whose temper was known to be that of the *chat sauvage*, even if the parents were willing.

For a time it seemed that the gossips were to be confounded, and Jacques Grondin prospered, and all went well. He and his wife wore fur coats such as few along the Côte de Beaupré could afford, and they kept a horse which was used for driving only.

It may have been that this prosperity was due to Grondin's having no opportunity to make a fool of himself for a time; anyhow, five years from his marriage he wrote his name on the back of a note for a friend and suffered as most such adventurers do. His house—and even the horse—went to made up the sum to be paid.

To the bitterness of the things which Céleste had to say he could make no reply. All through one summer night she stormed at him because of his folly; and he could do nothing save sit at the opposite side of the room and pretend to smoke.

Of course he would have given an arm, to spare her the privation and the hard work which must result, and he believed that his strength would in time win back what had been lost. But he felt now that there was something stabbing deeper into her heart than the physical loss. It was as though she had come to feel contempt for him—really to consider him such a fool as the shrewder men of the neighborhood thought.

He knew that he could not help his folly, for it was as deep-seated as a disease of the lungs, and he did not know how to explain his feelings to her.

After that long night of reproach the fortunes of the family Grondin remained stationary, or went lower, if they moved at all. *Madame* did not lose her dark and vivid beauty, and the great strength of Jacques became, if anything, better knit as he drew into the prime of manhood; but it seemed that the two of them were like horses which do not pull together. They made no progress; and into the mind of Grondin came more than once, and with sadness, the words of Céleste on their wedding day: "It is a terrible thing to love a man like you!"

At last Jacques conceived a plan, quite patterned according to the direct and simple working of his mind, which would, at least, give him a start toward his old position of independence. Two days' march back into the mountains he took a contract to cut an amount of wood which needed three men's labor during the winter. He would do this alone, and thus, by the sheer power of his back and arms and the endurance of his lungs, he would

accumulate more than three years' savings in one winter.

Without protest at leaving the village, Céleste went with him to the camp where they were to live alone, although she knew that she could not expect to go down to Belle Rivierè to mass more than two or three times during the next ten months.

Their camp was larger and more comfortable than that of the average wood-chopper. The single room was fitted with a well-built table at one end and a broad bunk at the other. Under the roof, and in lieu of a ceiling, a thick mass of evergreens had been plaited and laid upon poles so that nearly all of the heat from the stove was conserved. The logs of the walls were hewn flat on the inside and whitewashed to a satisfactory degree of cleanliness.

Cèleste seemed at least resigned to the winter, and Jacques, whose ax rang from the first break of dawn until early darkness, was of necessity occupied mainly by the needs of his body for food and sleep. One day was like another as the weeks passed, and at length, with February, the time drew near when teams would arrive to draw out the many cords of wood ranked up near the cabin. Then, when it appeared that the winter was to end tranquilly and exactly as Jacques had planned, the monotony of their life was broken.

In storm and fair weather Céleste carried a hot dinner to her husband in order that he might save a half-hour of working time. One clear, still day she came rather more hurriedly than usual, and Jacques knew, at first sight of her face, that there was news.

"After you have eaten," she said, setting his dinner-pail down upon a stump, "come with me to the north of the camp—some one has been chopping there all the morning."

"Chopping?" he echoed. "But it is full of young poplar there, and Theophile Bedard, of whom I took this contract, said he would not have any of it cut for five years more!"

"Truly!" Mme. Grondin permitted more than a touch of sarcasm to creep into her voice. "Perhaps you will refuse to believe that any one is wicked enough to steal that poplar?"

"It could be done," replied Grondin slowly. "Drawn down by the road that goes on the other side of Grande Montagne, and no one would be any the wiser."

"What are you going to do about it?"

"Stop it!" he answered with decision; and as soon as he had eaten they set out.

Before they had traveled a quarter of an hour ax-blows came ringing out of the forest, and in a few minutes more they rounded a little knoll and saw a red-shirted chopper who had already cut down a dozen of the valuable poplars. He stood half-facing toward them, and Grondin recognized a man called Pierre Gagnon, of Belle Rivierè—a man given to dealings which had several times brought him in danger of jail.

Telling Céleste to remain out of sight, Grondin walked toward him with no effort at concealment. A twig broke under one of his snow-shoes. Gagnon paused with his ax in mid air, guilt written plainly on his face. He let the ax down and stood with its head resting upon one of his *bottes sauvages.*

"*Sacre!*" he swore. "Jacques Grondin!"

"Yes," acknowledged Jacques. "How do you happen to be cutting poplar on the land of Theophile Bedard?"

"Bedard?" awkwardly. "Does this land belong to Bedard?"

"It does. What are you doing here?"

"There are three of us in a camp on the other side of Grande Montagne—we're going to cut sixty cords for a man in Ste. Anne de Beaupre." Gagnon was recovering from the effects of the surprise. "What have you got to do with Bedard's wood?"

"I've been here all winter, working for him."

"Alone?"

"Yes." He did not think it necessary to mention Céleste. Gagnon grew more and more assured.

"Name of the devil!" he exclaimed. "I don't know anything about Bedard's land—this is where we're supposed to chop, and I'm going on with it."

"You will stop now!" said Grondin quietly.

He slipped his feet out of the snow-shoe harness and advanced. Gagnon took a step backward and flung up his ax. Then Jacques, who had expected just that, leaped and caught the helve as the shining blade descended toward his head. He sent the ax flying twenty feet away, and seized Gagnon by the shoulders—had the man meant murder or had his movement been merely a threat?

For a moment he shook him until his head flopped on his shoulders. Then, almost gently, he lifted Pierre Gagnon and set him down with his face toward the direction of Grande Montagne.

"Go back to your camp," he commanded, "and if I see you or the others chopping here, I'll—I'll treat you worse than this!"

Without a word Gagnon shuffled off; while even in his own ears Grondin's words sounded foolish, like the threat of a small boy. And when he again faced Céleste, he read confirmation in her eyes.

"*Mon Dieu!*" she cried. "A man tries to kill you and you shake him! Thank Heaven he will suffer when Bedard knows of this!"

"But," protested Jacques, avoiding her gaze as they turned toward home, "Gagnon, you understand, has a dozen children. Theophile Bedard is a hard man—he would send him to prison because of the wood!"

"Prison! Certainly."

"But—"

"Jacques!" Céleste stopped and pulled at his sleeve until he faced her. "For ten years I have endured your folly! You might have been as rich as Bedard, and instead you are poor! Are you going to send word to him by the teamsters when they come?—he will undoubtedly give you a reward—or are you going to let your thick head do us another injury?"

"I don't know," he answered slowly; and for the first time he admitted his dissatisfaction with himself. "I wish I were not such a fool!"

"It is the end for us," she said bitterly. "My father is still living and I have a home!"

In silence they walked back to the camp, and, while Céleste went inside, Jacques turned to the pile of firewood and worked furiously; he had no heart to go back to his chopping and he could not remain still. For the second time in their lives there was a sharp division of their ways, and now his instinct told him there would be no surrender on the part of his wife.

It was true that she had endured much. Yet he did not see how he could have done differently, from the time when he had befriended Henri Painchaud to the present day. Even the man whose note he had signed had been in desperate need. And thus, filled with impotent regrets, the afternoon wore on to a close.

It was dusk, and Grondin had driven his ax into the chopping block preparatory to going in for his supper when the clatter of snow-shoes striking against each other caught his ear; he looked up to see a man staggering toward him from the edge of the clearing. The man was old, as evidenced by the grayness of the beard that brushed his chest; and he was either ill or hurt or starving, for he swayed at each step, his head rolled helplessly and his arms hung limp and powerless. But in spite of his condition he managed to drag, by means of a rawhide harness about the shoulders, a loaded sled.

Grondin ran toward him, and at the

first touch of his hands the old man collapsed, sinking down in a heap upon his snow-shoes. Jacques slashed away the harness and carried him into the cabin where Celeste, after the first exclamation of surprise, made ready their bunk. As Grondin put him down gently, he spoke one word, "Furs!" and then broke into a babble of delirium which had to do with the far north, and long marches, and dogs that had had to be killed after a fight with a wildcat.

"A trapper," said Jacques, after the man had been undressed and wrapped in blankets. "Many of them come down past Grande Montagne at the end of winter—it's a short route but a hard one."

"Look at his face!" Céleste touched lightly a small patch of flesh not covered by matted hair and beard. "He has fever—some kind of a sickness. And the man is half-starved!"

In the woods there is one kind of sickness which tries the souls of men more than any other. If this stranger was stricken with the dread scourge of smallpox, then those who helped him risked their lives. Jacques and Céleste looked at each other with the same fear and the same question in their eyes.

"I don't know," said Jacques, in reply to her unspoken question. "But if a red rash comes upon his body, then, God help us!"

"Whatever it is, he must be taken care of," said Celeste, as she turned to the stove where supper was cooking. "It is our luck."

Grondin remembered the sled outside, and in the growing darkness he unloaded it of two heavy bales and a canvas sack, all of which he carried into the cabin. The sack contained nothing but a meager cooking outfit and a piece of salt pork big enough to make one bite for a hungry man. But the bales, brushed free of snow and inspected in the lamp-light, set the heart of Jacques Grondin pounding.

"Céleste!" he whispered. "This man has a fortune in furs! Silver fox and mink and otter such as I never saw before!"

She gave up a vain attempt to make the sick man swallow some soup and shrugged.

"The fox skins alone are worth a fortune!" Jacques insisted. "If he lives he won't have to work any more!"

"*Eh, bien!*" she replied listlessly. "That is nothing to us!"

"No," agreed her husband, as he sat down to the supper which she carried to the table, "nor would I change places with him, for if I ever saw the mark of death it's on his face now!"

They were silent after that, Céleste sitting with her hands in her lap and making no effort to eat. As for Grondin, his great body demanded food, but he was no less miserable than his wife; more so, perhaps, for he felt that all the blame for the breach that had been made in their love belonged 1o him.

The good taste had gone out of the food quickly. He reached for his pipe—and became motionless with it half-way to his lips. Some one was lifting the latch on the cabin door. A click had caught his ear, then he saw the latch raised carefully, and even as Céleste's breathed "Jacques!" came to him the door burst open, and what seemed at first seemed like an avalanche of men swept inside.

Grondin leaped to his feet. The men—there were three of them—stood poised in the middle of the room. One was Pierre Gagnon, one was another worthless fellow of the same type named Maurice Laplante, and the third was a certain character of the St. Lawrence called Black Matthieu. A smuggler, people said, although he had never been caught. He was the first to speak.

"Where are the furs?" he demanded.

"What furs?" asked Grondin, seeking a little time.

His rifle was on the other side of the room, hung over the bunk where the stranger lay. His knife and belt were on the peg with his cap back of the stove. But each of the three

visitors had knives, and the hand of Matthieu was upon his.

"You know what furs!" he barked. "We saw the old man when he stopped here—and afterward Laplante remembered him for a trapper of Belle Rivierè. What would a trapper have but furs?"

"They're hidden under the bunk!" Gagnon shouted before Jacques could speak. "Let's get them and get out—nobody knows what disease the old fellow's got!"

At the cry from Gagnon, Black Matthieu turned his head. Only for a second did he take his eyes from Grondin, but that second was enough to give the giant his chance.

He caught Black Matthieu by the belt and the collar of his packet and swung him aloft until his back brushed the thatched ceiling. Jacques felt the knife rip harmlessly through his shirt; and then he hurled his burden straight at Maurice Laplante, whose arm was already raised to strike. The two of them hit the log wall with a thud that jarred the building and sent down a rain of dried bits from the fir branches.

At the prick of a knife-point in his flesh, Jacques whirled—to see a stick of firewood in the hands of Céleste come down upon the head of Gagnon. The man dropped face downward, and the weapon slid from his fingers.

"Céleste!" cried Grondin between hard-drawn breaths. "You saved my life!"

"Perhaps!" She sat down rather weakly, although there was no hint of weakness in her flashing eyes. "But it will have to be saved again if you don't tie those pigs up! The one who looks most like a villain is already beginning to stir!"

Black Matthieu was trying to sit up. Grondin snapped a coil of rope from the wall and bound him hand and foot. Then he tied up the others and set all three with their backs against the wall.

"*Parbleu!*" he exclaimed. "What a foolish thing for them to do!"

"Foolish?" repeated his wife. "Foolish, when there's a fortune to be had for the taking?"

To this Grondin made no reply. He sat down on the bench by the table, blowing little spirals of smoke from his pipe and watching the prisoners. Gradually they recovered full consciousness, but no one of them spoke. It was Céleste who broke the silence.

"I'll start for Belle Rivierè at daybreak," she said, "while you keep watch and take care of the sick man. I'll send back help from the first camp on the way, and we'll have these fellows in jail before the end of a week."

Jacques did not reply. Instead, he got up and gave a drink of water to the man in the bunk who, neglected through the excitement, had grown more restless in his delirium.

"They're going to jail, aren't they?" The voice of Céleste was like steel. "Tell me that!"

Grondin lifted a griddle from the stove and put a coal to his pipe. He gazed down into the scowling face of Black Matthieu.

"It seems hard to put a man in jail."

"Truly!"

At her tone Jacques wriggled. He was apologetic, miserable, but impelled by a pity which mastered him.

"Gagnon has children, as I told you," he said. "Laplante is a young fellow, and they would take the best part of his life for a thing like this. As for Black Matthieu—M*on Dieu!* He is a tough bird, but certainly he has courage!"

"Courage! So you admire the blackguard? You will invite him to try robbery, and perhaps murder, again to-morrow?"

"But, no!" Jacques puffed furiously at his pipe. "I'll go over to their cabin to see if they have a rifle. Then I'll put the old man and

his furs on the sled and we'll start. They won't dare to attack me in daylight, as I shall have at least my own rifle, and by night we'll be safe."

"Marvelous!" exclaimed Celeste. "Me, I am going to start for my father's house at dawn and leave you to your folly. For the present I'm going to sleep behind the stove!"

Gagnon laughed. Grondin got up deliberately and lifted his open hand as though to strike the prisoner across the face; then he let the arm fall and turned away.

"Hit him!" said Black Matthieu soberly. But Jacques shook his head and sat down again by the table, to smoke and watch his wife as she made a bed of blankets on the floor.

She lay down, and after a long time he knew that she slept. He got up, walking on tiptoe, and filled the stove. He gave another drink to the sick man before he went back to his seat.

In the dim light of the oil lamp, which he had turned down, Jacques saw that his prisoners were apparently dozing, their heads sunk on their chests. He resisted an impulse to loosen the ropes that bound them, telling himself sternly that he was growing to be more of a fool every day.

Certainly his wife was justified in going back to her father's home. He had lost her, just as he had failed in everything. If it were not for her safety, and the furs he would let the robbers loose—let them take what revenge they wished on him. He had neither desire for life nor courage for the future.

He looked drowsily at his big silver watch and saw that it was midnight. That was the last thing he remembered until a kind of thrill went through him—one of those silent warnings that sometimes strike mysteriously into the sleep of a man and bring him up from the depths of fatigue with every sense at the alert. So Jacques Grondin's muscles were set for action even as his ears filled with the sound of shuffling feet and quick breathing. He opened his eyes upon a battle going on almost within reach of his hand.

Black Matthieu was locked in the arms of Gagnon and Laplante, who were on him like dogs on a wounded bear. All three had got their knives again—they were treading underfoot the ropes with which they had been tied. Matthieu held the others for the moment, but blood streamed from a cut on his head, and his knife-hand was raised and helpless in the clutching fingers of Laplante. They were still for an instant straining. Then steel flashed against Matthieu's dark shirt and a blade drove deep into his side. He went backward, pulling the other two down with him.

By that time Grondin was on his feet. He reached down, and his broad, thick hands closed upon the necks of Laplante and Gagnon. He lifted the men up with their tongues lolling from opened jaws and brought their skulls together with a crack like the report of a pistol. They sprawled into a corner and lay still.

Jacques knelt, and as he lifted the head of Black Matthieu, Céleste reached his side with a tin cup of water and a bottle of whisky blanc. She began to cut away the shirts of the wounded man. His lids lifted slowly and an expression that was almost a smile softened his face.

"You're a good fellow, Grondin!" he whispered. "That's why I was—a—a fool!"

"You save my husband," said Céleste. "I woke up just as they got the knives—and saw."

"Name of a name!" swore Grondin brokenly as he lifted Matthieu and passed a bandage around his body. "You very nearly got yourself killed, my friend, and I am nearly of a mind to send those two devils to jail, after all!"

A smile sparkled about the eyes of Céleste, and the wounded man grinned in spite of his evident pain.

"Tie them up now," he advised faintly, "or you won't have a chance!"

He had just finished when Céleste called him, in a voice strangely gentle, to the bunk. The sick man lay now with the light of reason in his eyes; but upon his face was that dim grayness which is unmistakable to one who has once seen death.

"Jacques!" he breathed in a voice so low that they had to bend down to hear, Grondin brought the lamp, trying in vain to learn what former acquaintance was hidden behind that tangle of dirty gray beard and hair.

"My lungs, Jacques," said the dying man. "Not smallpox!"

"Who are you?" asked Grondin.

"Me; I am Henri Painchaud. The wood—ten years ago—"

"Henri!"

"But, yes! Always I have dreamed of doing something for you, Jacques! Keep the furs, and *le bon Dieu* bless—"

The benediction remained half-spoken, for Henri Painchaud was called to travel the dark road which Grondin himself might have taken that night but for Black Matthieu.

Jacques turned away, fumbling mechanically for his pipe. He did not see the whitewashed walls of the cabin; he scarcely felt the touch of his wife's hand upon his arm. For the first time in his life men had praised him to his face—one of whom had been about to go to the good God and who must therefore speak truth!

"My Jacques!" The words of Céleste came to him through a ringing in his ears. "Will you believe me when I say that Black Matthieu and Henri Painchaud have put light in my soul? It is my head that has been thick these many years!"