



The Frozen People

By William Merriam Rouse

THE first little shadow that fell across the brightness of the existence of Mlle. Elise Courchesne was cast by the man who looked like Mephistopheles. One would not have thought it of a gentleman so magnificently dressed in the incomparable clothes of New York; but he did it, nevertheless.

She had walked down Fifth Avenue in the yellow afternoon sunlight until Washington Arch was in the foreground, and she could see how the fingers of September had begun to touch the leaves on the trees in the square. Mlle. Courchesne was warmed with the warmth of happiness, and springs lifted her feet. She stopped at an old mansion where one is permitted to occupy a furnished apartment of one room and clothes closet for six dollars a week, and took out her latchkey.

She became conscious that the man who looked like Mephistopheles—he lived there also, and of course she did not think he was really like Mephistopheles—approached behind her. With that realization she was overcome by a sudden impulse. As she stepped into the great

hallway where stood the black walnut hat rack with the long mirror, she turned and smiled and said in all modesty:

“Bon jour, monsieur!”

For one terrible instant he looked down, full into her face. She saw suspicion and a truly Mephistophelian glance in his cold eye. Through a moment which seemed to her never ending he gazed, and then his straight lips parted.

“Urf!” he said, and climbed the stairs, with his cane cracking against the banisters, as usual.

The instant she heard his door slam she fled upward, breathless and burning, and on her couch by day and bed by night she sat and stared at the blue curlicues of the wallpaper until she could think.

In Quebec he would have been polite, at least. In Quebec, where every one knows almost every one, he would not have looked at her like that—misunderstanding! *Dieu Seigneur!* What had she done? Would the others in the house know about it—the cigarette lady and Mutt, the silent gentleman and Mrs. Kugel?

In time this misery passed, and Mlle. Courchesne, being of the blood of those men who died bravely upon the Plains of Abraham, raised her face to the mirror and contemplated there an eye suddenly flashing and cheeks suddenly pink.

“Certainly there was nothing but friendliness in my heart,” she told herself. “And I am *not* lonesome!”

Mlle. Elise Courchesne guiltily brought forth the powder she had purchased the week before, brushed a little on her nose, sneezed, wiped it off, and went out of doors to her dissipation—riding on top of the monster vehicles that carry one all the length of the avenue of palaces, of resplendent shops, and of more resplendent people.

It was the sixth week of the new era in her life. M. Georges Etienne Dupont, cosmopolite and friend of her dead parents, had brought her from the walled city of Quebec and placed her in the business office of a magazine with a French name, which spread fashions and advice to all the world of women. For the truly insignificant task of reading and writing letters in French that generous magazine gave a sum greater than many a man in the Hotel du Gouvernement at home received—twenty dollars a week.

On the first day New York had dug into her box of masks, and for Mlle. Courchesne she had put on the one with the well-bred smile of welcome. Truly, it was a pleasant face. Mlle. Courchesne glowed in ecstatic sympathy. Compared to New York her own city of Quebec, she thought, was like a merely pretty girl in the presence of a beautiful and cultured woman of thirty. Elise Courchesne blushed for herself and for the place of her origin whenever she thought of the comparison.

To live each moment in joy and in

the belief of unlimited joy to come, to draw in with each breath the sense of magnificent adventure, to have one’s being permanently raised on pinions—is not this a heaven upon earth? Mlle. Elise Courchesne found it so, and at times she thrilled and trembled until her eyes grew misty with gratitude to *le bon Dieu* that He permitted her soul to bloom thus wonderfully.

All this flowed through her mind as she sat on top of the rocking bus and looked down into the upholstered interiors of limousines, with their flower filled vases and their smart women passengers. She was restored to happiness, notwithstanding that unfortunate affair at the house; and again she dared to hope that some of them, preferably and probably the cigarette lady, would speak to her.

Her wish was destined to be realized, and the realization came about that same evening, after she had eaten dinner in the French pastry shop that was kept by Italians.

Entering the house, with *Le Courier des États d’Amerique* for her hours of recreation, Mlle. Courchesne almost bumped noses with the cigarette lady, clothed in an evening wrap of silk and velvet and fur, and hurrying toward a taxicab that throbbed at the curb.

“Pardon me!” laughed the cigarette lady. “Beastly warm weather, isn’t it?”

Mlle. Elise Courchesne, surprised, confused and delighted, tumbled her words over each other. “*Vraiment!* I mean it is glorious—it makes beautiful!”

What stupidity! That she, who knew the two tongues perfectly, should think in French and speak in English! But it was at least certain that the cigarette lady had made an advance toward acquaintanceship.

This name of course, was for lack

of the true one. When Elise Courchesne had first glimpsed her, through the half open door of her furnished apartment, she had been smoking a cigarette. Mlle. Courchesne was a little—well, surprised. But as soon as she learned from Mrs. Kugel, in one of the rare moments when the ponderous housekeeper permitted herself speech, that the cigarette lady sold them for a living and had an office downtown, like a real business man, Elise realized at once that it was her provincialism and not herself that had been surprised. Many ladies in New York smoked, she was beginning to learn.

Mutt was the cigarette lady's dog; yellow and fat and turned up as to nose. Thus far he had looked at Mlle. Courchesne with a glassy eye. He made her think of the gray uniformed policeman who stood on the subway platforms. But she had hopes that he would soften.

After Mutt in importance came the silent gentleman, who was always gliding along the hall without looking to right or left. Then there was the ugly lady on the floor below—Elise had it from Mrs. Kugel's grumbling as to the ugliness—and *la vieille fille*. Mlle. Courchesne could not bring herself to translate this into the bald English words, "old maid," but it was a fact that *la vieille fille* owned a glance that was like lemon on a fresh cut and that she remained whole half-hours in the bathroom. It was more than a suspicion that she washed dishes there.

That evening, under the leaky gas jet, Mlle. Courchesne read *Le Courier des États d'Amerique* to the advertisements. She also mended two pairs of stockings, and her bedtime was long past when there came a knock at the door—a sharp, let me in kind of knock. Mrs. Kugel? Hardly.

Mlle. Elise opened the door a few inches, and flung it wide with a quick

breath of pleasure. There stood the cigarette lady, beautiful in her evening wrap. She held something in her hand. "Matches?" she asked carelessly, in a well inflected voice. "I'm all out—have a cigarette?"

In return for the box of matches she offered her silver case.

"Thank you! But I—"

However, one must not offend. Mlle. Courchesne took a cigarette and smiled, and before she could say anything more the visitor was gone. Elise smelled the cigarette and poked at it. The tobacco began to run out. Hastily she placed it in the box with her beads, and took it out again, and then replaced it. What if it did smell? It was a souvenir of friendship! That was a night of pleasant going to sleep.

The next day in this life of adventure brought another encounter with a neighbor. It happened that, for perhaps the twentieth time, the bathroom taps refused to yield water to the touch of Mlle. Courchesne. It must be, she decided, that something was wrong with the pipes, and of this Mrs. Kugel ought to know. So down to the basement she went, in all innocence, and said, in the heavy gloom of Mrs. Kugel's presence, that no water came on the second floor.

"It's her," announced the housekeeper, with, the pessimism of many years in her voice. "I got to get myself in bad again, I s'pose."

As she moved upward, with large breaths, Elise followed, not quite understanding why the shadows that normally wrapped Mrs. Kugel had so suddenly deepened. The housekeeper paused at the door of the first floor back, and as a blond head appeared she rumbled forth words that Mlle. Courchesne could not distinguish. The answer was loud and plain.

"I don't give a damn whether they get any water upstairs, or not. I'm going to get mine!"

The door slammed. Mrs. Kugel heaved around and retraced her steps downward to the basement, and as she passed Elise she emitted all there was to be said in the matter.

"She's an awful ugly lady. It don't do no good to talk."

Disheartened, Elise went up to her room. She could adjust herself to the vagaries of the water—it was the attitude of the ugly lady that bothered her.

"*Mon Dieu!*" she murmured, considering what had passed. "She swore!"

In Quebec the affair could not possibly have been conducted thus. If, by chance, the ugly lady had been guilty of drawing water to the inconvenience of others, Mrs. Kugel would have approached her and said: "*Madame*, I regret to tell you that there is not enough water on the floor above. I know, of a certainty, that it is not your intention to draw more water than is just, and I hope you will pardon me for mentioning the matter."

To this the ugly lady would have replied: "Be tranquil, *madame*. I am unhappy to know that I have given any trouble, and I assure you it will not happen again."

Of course, it might have happened again, but that was not the point. The relations of the housekeeper and the ugly lady made Mlle. Courchesne think of the grinding and the grating of the subway. She shuddered. Was this New York? No! She would not have it so. The cigarette lady was not like the rest: there must be other polite and charming people in the great American city—people with the true courtesy which comes from the heart. If there was one, there were more.

In this faith Elise went through the

days that followed, happily. Yet it seemed to her at times that there was a growing grayness in the air and that the smile on the face New York had presented to her was becoming a bit set, conventional. At the office, for instance, her status was exactly what it had been on the first day. M. Edward J. Burnside, business manager, continued to show that he was a great business man by booming his orders and steaming from place to place like an engine that is pushing freight cars. In October, when the days began to grow cold with a sting of salt dampness, Mlle. Courchesne was no better acquainted anywhere than she had been in early September.

The cigarette lady did not live up to the promise that she had given. Ofttimes she bowed in the hallway, and as often she swept past with eyes that did not see Mlle. Courchesne—with eyes that were as hard and cold as those of Mutt, following at her heels and holding his nose rigidly aloof from all invitation to be caressed.

Mlle. Courchesne interpreted all dogs in terms of her own Bijou—long since passed out of this world—who had been one perpetual waggle from his fox terrier nose to his pug dog tail. It did not seem that Mutt could possibly, if he had the heart of a true dog, continue his scorn.

He maintained steadily, however, his air of hauteur; and all progress with him and his mistress had been at a standstill for some time when, on a rain soaked morning, Elise Courchesne went to her office with a feeling which, had she been an American, she would have accepted as the blues. To her desk she went, and thence, at the summons of an office boy, into the presence of M. Edward J. Burnside. He, the great one, stared over her, past one side of her head, and out of the window.

"Print paper is sky-high," he said, "and you can't get it at that."

He said it with solemnity, but on Mlle. Courchesne it made no definite impression. He said it over again in different words and then he said more, directly to the effect that the magazine with the French name would have to get its foreign correspondence handled by a dictionary and a high school office boy. She could go. He was sorry. Finding that she remained standing in his office to think it over, he got up and steamed away. At last Mlle. Elise Courchesne understood, and she went back to her furnished apartment through a mist that was no grayer than her soul.

On her couch by day Mlle. Courchesne thought hard, turning the catastrophe over and over in her mind. Being a Quebécoise, she was frugal. There would be no problem of food nor of rent for a little time. It was uncertain when M. Georges Etienne Dupont, who had gone to France, would return. Perhaps she could get work in another place. She must get work in another place!

As for going back to Quebec, it was not to be thought of. The journey would cost a large share of her money, and, once there, she must admit failure in New York. Could she live upon the charity of her friends until they found her a niche? Not at all!

Thus she strengthened her courage until she was able to smile at the unresponsive Mrs. Kugel when next they met in the hall, and to snap her fingers, futilely, as usual, at Mutt. For a month she was able to keep on smiling, although with an increasingly conscious difficulty. Of the services of those who knew perfectly both the French and the English tongues there was no end, and of positions for them there were few.

Moreover, the offices of New York were greatly different from the *bureaux* of

the men of affairs of Quebec. Multitudinous half-grown young men and many girls with glaringly white faces. No one had time to bow or to add to conversation the extra words that make intercourse a delight.

There was another matter that stabbed her with poignard thrusts. If a French gentleman throws back his shoulders and rolls his eyes at one, it may not be agreeable—but there is no harm in the compliment. If a New York *monsieur* looks with eyes that grow a little narrow, there is a feeling such as one has in a place of death. The air grows thick in the lungs.

Not from this did Elise Courchesne judge New Yorkers. Those of the evil looks were very few. But when their number was added to those who found time only to say “no,” without explanation, the total effect was like that of the northeast wind when it comes sweeping down in winter from the coast of Labrador. So it was not to be marveled at that by the end of a month the smile of Mlle. Courchesne faded and under her eyes lay little shadows.

On a Monday, anniversary of her discharge, she prayed with no mere vain repetition of words; and with the speaking of the prayer there came to her new hope and new faith in the five million. She felt herself one of them. Certainly it must be no more than a difference in manners that made these people so strange and so oblivious to the fact that she breathed and had her being among them.

“I’ll make somebody like me!” she exclaimed in a whisper, rising. “Mutt will be the most easy to begin with—I shall do it at once!”

Inspiration carried her to the Italian French pastry shop. She hurried back to the house and down, breathless, to the basement, where she knew Mutt made his habitat were his mistress at business.

What good fortune! There stood the cigarette lady, almost regal in her tailored street suit, talking to Mrs. Kugel. Mutt sat beside her, his paunch heaving with labored breaths. The eyes of all of them turned upon Elise, with impersonal questioning. There was no gleam in answer to her smile. No word of greeting.

"For M. de Mutt!" she exclaimed, opening a pasteboard box. Then, in the silence, her voice faltered. "I—I have brought him a sweetmeat—a gift!"

"I don't allow him to have any pastry." The cigarette lady's face did not change. Evidently she was anxious to continue what she had been saying to Mrs. Kugel.

"Pardon!" Elise backed away, fumbling at the box. She waited, but no one said anything. "I am sorry!"

She turned and ran up the stairs, not stopping, until the door of her room banged shut. She dropped the pastry into the scrap basket. Then, deliberately, she walked over to the bureau and from beside her beads took that cigarette which had seemed to her a souvenir of friendship. She broke it, letting the tobacco trickle to the floor unheeded, and threw it down to keep company with the repudiated pastry.

"I am finished!" she cried, with the words hurting her as they came up in her throat. She lay down upon the couch by day and covered her face with her hands, speaking brokenly into her pillow. "They are a frozen people! All! All! Even to the little dogs! *Oh, Canada, mon pays! Mes amour!*"

In the hours that followed Elise Courchesne went far. She walked along the Rue St. Jean, over crisp snow that sparkled in the winter/sunlight. She heard the greetings of a hundred friends, spoken in the beautiful, tongue of France. It became Christmas Eve, and the sound of voices

singing *La Guignolée* filled the streets—she went to midnight mass in the Basilica.

She passed along the narrow sidewalk of the Côte du Palais; and every one made room, smiling. The angelus sounded in her ears, and each stroke of the call to prayer was pain. So many miles away! She no longer had money enough to go there.

It was dusk when Elise rose, trying to be brave. She started to light the gas, and suddenly her misery returned a hundredfold. For the moment life was agony. She sank down again upon the couch and closed her eyes in the semidarkness. Her hands fell to her sides, little fingers uncurled and palms upward in the relaxation of utter despair.

Only *le bon Dieu* knows whether those fingers had been willfully careless with the leaky gas jet—whether they had forgotten, or purposely neglected, to turn it off after having started to make a light. Certain it is that the pungent smell flowed out into the room and that death drew closer and closer to the still figure on the couch. She knew that something was happening to her, and did not care, for slowly she was drifting out of the consciousness of acute misery into a void. The Rue St. Jean faded and the towers of the Basilica grew dim.

It was to physical pain that she awoke—a throbbing in the head and lights that stabbed into the eyes mercilessly. It seemed that the words of many people were beating against her ears, like mighty waves from an ocean of sound. Something had happened; but she did not know or care to know what it was. She remembered only the frozen people and the star canopied city of the north.

Slowly the medley of words about her separated into sentences and slowly she was able to open her eyes a very little. At

first she did not believe what she heard and saw.

In the rocking chair sat Mrs. Kugel, a kind of softened groom upon her circular face and a collection of bottles and towels in her lap. Beside her stood the cigarette lady, and—miracle of miracles—crystal drops gathered in her eyes. The ugly lady, entered, with a smoking bowl in her hands

“Here’s some soup for her,” she said. “The poor kid!”

La vieille fille moved into Elise’s vision and with complete amity received the soup.

“Much obliged,” she whispered loudly. “I’ll stay up with her tonight.”

The silent gentleman, in his shirtsleeves, turned and thrust out his jaw

at the man who looked like Mephistopheles.

“This is a rotten town!” he growled. “Letting a sweet little girl like that go broke, and—oh, man, it’s a rotten town!”

“Quite right, sir! Quite right!” The man who looked like Mephistopheles coughed and turned away.

Elise Courchesne felt a wave of fierce indignation. With returning strength she strove to speak.

“It’s not!” she protested, feebly, to their startled ears. “I love New York!”

Then something cold sought her hand, and, through a mist of happiness, she saw the stumpy tail of Mutt go back and forth in an obese wag.