

# **The Prisoner Dubois**

Seranus



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MISS Cecilia Maxwell was the only child of Sir Robert Maxwell, K.C.M.G., member of the Cabinet, chief orator of the Liberal party, and understudy for the part of Premier, who, although a Scotchman by birth, was a typical Canadian—free, unaffected, honest and sincere. His bushy iron-gray hair, his keen gray eyes, his healthy florid color, and the well-trimmed black moustache, which gave his face an unusually youthful appearance for a man of his age, went with a fine stalwart physique and a general bodily conformation apparently in keeping with the ideas of early rising, cold ablutions and breakfasts of oatmeal porridge that the ingenuous mind is apt to associate with Scotch descent and bringing-up. His daughter was a very beautiful girl. Born in the shadow of the pines, she had been educated successively in Edinburgh, Brussels and Munich, had been presented at Court, been through two London seasons, spent half of one winter in South America, another in Bermuda, had been ogled by lords, worshipped by artists, and loved by everybody.

Once more in Canada, she took her place in the limited yet exacting political circles of the Capital, of Toronto, and of distant Winnipeg. Life was full of duties, and she shirked none, though on days when they were put away earlier than usual she would fall to musing of the country place down river she had not seen for years, with the beautiful woods, and the simple, contented French, and the evenings on the water.

"That great, lonely river," she thought on one occasion, looking idly out of her window. "What other river in the world is like it?—and the tiny French villages with the red roofs and doors, and the sparkling spires and the queer people. Delle Lisbeth, and veuve Macleod, and Pierre—poor Pierre. I have never forgotten Pierre, with his solemn eyes and beautiful brown hair. And how he knew the flowers in the wood, and what were those songs he used to sing?" And Cecilia sang a couple of verses of

"Un Canadien errant,  
Banni de ses foyers."

When Sir Robert entered later he found her listless and pre-occupied. "You mustn't look like that to-night," he said. "Don't forget that this is your first important dinner-party: three French members and their wives, and La Colombière, the new Minister of Finance, to whom you must be as charming as possible. This North-West business is quickening as fast as it can. The Métis are really up, there's no doubt about it."

"In rebellion?" asked Cecilia breathlessly. There was an added interest in life directly to the imaginative girl.

"Ay," said her father, "there's a rascal at the bottom of it we've been after a good long time; but now, run away and look bright at dinner, like a good girl."

The small clique of Frenchmen and their wives could not but have been charmed with their reception that evening. The dinner was good, and not too heavy nor long, the wines excellent (for Sir Robert did not as yet favor the "Scott" Act), and the suavity of his manner combined with the appearance and grace of his daughter, in a delicate dress of primrose and brown, with amber in her beautiful golden plaits and round her whitest neck, left nothing to be desired. And yet on that very first night in her capacity as hostess, Cecilia found she had to learn to play a part, the part of woman, which all women who have just left off being girls find so hard to play at first. For naturally the report of the Mrevolt had spread. Sir Robert did a brave thing. He refeacuted; rred to it directly they were seated, and then everybody felt at ease. Now it could be talked about if anybody chose—and Cecilia did so choose.

"Who is this young Frenchman," she asked of La Columbière, "that is identified with this new rising? I have been away, and am ignorant of it all."

"His name is Dubois—Pierre Dubois," returned La Columbière with a gleaming smile. "He calls himself the representative of the French-Canadian party. Bah! such men!" But Cecilia's heart had given a might leap and then stopped, she almost thought, for ever.

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"Pierre—Pierre Dubois?" she reiterated in her surprise. He fan of yellow feathers dropped from her lap, and her face showed extraordinary interest for a moment.

"You know him M'lle.?" said La Colombière, returning her the fan. For an instant she was the centre of attention. Then with a flutter of the yellow feathers that subjugated the four impressionable Frenchmen completely, she resumed her usual manner.

"I know the name, certainly. There was some body of that name living at Port Joli where we go in the Summer you know."

"Oh!" said Laflamme carelessly, a little man with a bald head and a diplomatist's white moustache, "Dubois is not a new offender. He has been recognized as an agitator for three or four years. He has the eyes of the ox and the wavy hair of the sculptor. He is to be admired—vraiment—and has the gift of speech."

When the dinner was over Cecilia played for them in the drawing-room. Somehow or other, she wandered into the tender yet buoyant melody of the chanson she had hummed earlier in the day.

"Un Canadien errant,  
Banni de ses foyers."

"Hum-hum," trolled little Laflamme. "So you know our songs? Ca va bien!"

"That was taught me" said Cecilia, "once down the river at Port Joli." But she did not say who had taught her. Later on when the guests were gone and Sir Robert was preparing to go back to the office, his daughter said very quietly.

"Papa do you remember that young man at Port Joli who was staying with the curé for his health, the one who was so kind and showed me so many things, the woods, you know and the water, and who talked so beautifully?"

"I remember the one you mean, I think, but not his name. Why, dear child?"

"His name was Dubois," returned Cecilia. "Pierre Dubois!"

"Dubois? Are you sure? That is very singular" said her father. "And he talked beautifully you say? It must be this one."

"That is what I think" said Cecilia, seeing her father to the door.

Then ensued a period of hard work for Cecilia. She read the papers assiduously, going up every day to the Parliamentary reading-rooms for that purpose that she might lose no aspect of the affair. She followed every detail of the rebellion, even possessing herself of many of her father's papers bearing on the matter. Those details are well known; how the whisper ran through our peaceful land, breathing of war and battle and bloodshed; how our gallant men marched to the front in as superb a faith and as perfect a manhood as ever troops have shown in this country or the Old; how some fell by the way, and how others were reserved to be clasped again to the bosoms of wife and mother and how some met with the finest fate of all, or at least the most fitting fate for a true soldier—death on the battle-field. For a month the country was in a delirium. Then joy-bells rang, and bonfires blazed, and hands were struck in other hands for very delight that the cause of all the mischief, the rebel chief, the traitor Dubois was taken. Cecilia alone sat in her room in horror.

"What will they do with the prisoner Dubois?" she said with a vehemence that dismayed Sir Robert.

"The prisoner Dubois? Why, they will hang him of course. He has caused too much blood to be shed not to have to give some of his own." Cecilia writhed as if in extreme pain. Her beauty, her grace, her youth all seemed to leave her in a moment, and she stood faded and old before her father.

"Oh, they will not do that! Imprison him or send him away—anything, anything save that! See, they do not know him—poor Pierre, so kind, so good—they do not know him as I knew him. Father, he could not hurt a thing—he would step aside from the smallest living thing in the path when we walked together that summer, and he helped everybody that wanted help, there was nothing he could not do. And he loves his country—at least he did so then. There is that song, 'O mon cher Canada,' he used to sing, and he told me of the future of his country, and how he had prayed to be allowed to aid it and push it forward. And he does not hate the English, only how can he help loving the French more when he is one of them, and has good French blood in his veins—better than many of the so-called English! And he was born to be a leader and to bring men away from their home into battle and make war for them, and where in that does he differ from other heroes we are taught to love and admire? If

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you had ever heard him talk, and had seen the people all gathered round him when he spoke of all these things—as for his church and the Virgin, and the priests, it would be well if you and all of us thought as much about our religion, and loved and revered it as he did his!"

Cecilia broke down into incoherent sobs. Sir Robert sat aghast at this startling confession. No need to tell him that it was prompted by love.

"But what if he be insane, my dear?" he asked very quietly.

"Then it is still bad—it is worse," said Cecilia. "Will hanging an insane man bring back the others who are slain? Will it make foul fair and clean still cleaner? Will it bring peace and friendliness, and right feeling, or will it bring a fiercer fire and a sharper sword than our country has yet seen—a hand-to-hand fight between rival races, a civil war based on national distinction!"

"What would you do?" said her father, walking up and down the room. "What can I or anybody do? It is common law and common justice; if he be found guilty he must swing for it. Personal intercession——"

"Might save him!" said the girl.

"Must not be thought of!" said her father.

"You mean, you may not think of it. But others may—I may. I am a woman, free and untrammelled by either party or personal considerations or any kind. Father, let me try!"

"Cecilia, it is madness to take such a thing upon yourself. How is it possible? What are your plans?"

"I do not know. I have not thought. All is in a haze though which I see that vision of the hangman and the rope. Father, let me try!"

Sir Robert thought for a moment, then he said: "Very well, my dear, you shall try, on one condition; that first of all you have an interview with Dubois himself. In fact, for your purpose it is absolutely necessary that you should see him, in order to identify him with the other Dubois you used to know. After that interview, if you still persist in your course, I promise—rash as it certainly seems—to help you. Now hold yourself in readiness to start for the North-West at a moment's notice. I have private information that tells me Dubois will be hung and any intervention on your part or that of anybody else must be set on foot immediately, do you see?"

A few days afterwards Cecilia, unveiled, and dressed in an irreproachable walking costume of gray, was taken to the gloomy prison outside the little northern town of ——, where the prisoner Dubois was confined. There was a bit of tricolor in her hat and her cheeks were very pale. As the beautiful daughter of Sir Robert Maxwell her way was sufficiently paved with politeness as she presented her private order to see the prisoner. Her heart was beating tumultuously and the blood surged round her temples. The turnkey showed her into a small whitewashed room, opposite the cell in which Dubois spent his time and informed her that in compliance with strict orders he would have to be present during the interview, to which Cecilia bent her head in assent; she could not have spoken just then. "It is a strange thing that I am doing," she thought, "but I shall see Pierre—poor Pierre!" Approaching, footsteps were soon heard and the prisoner Dubois entered, escorted by two warders. He started when he saw his visitor, and stared.

"Madamemoiselle ——," he said, evidently trying to recall her name and failing.

"Cecile," she said, eagerly, "Ma'amselle Cecile you always called me, and I liked it so much better than Cecilia. I think I like it still—Pierre—I—."

The prisoner Dubois frowned.

"If Mdme. Dubois had ears through these walls, you had not called me 'Pierre.' But—" laying his hand on his heart and bowing low, "Pierre himself is flattered—oui, mademoiselle—by your attention—oui, vraiment—and he is rejoiced to know that his image is still cherished in that heart so fair, so Anglaise, so pure, so good. Belle enfant, Je n'ai pas oublié nos amours!"

The three men in the room suppressed a smile. Dubois stood with his head thrown back, his arms folded and his soft dark eyes fixed on Cecilia. She was still standing, indeed there was no chair in the rooms, and her eyes were fixed on him as his upon herself. It was Pierre, and yet not her Pierre. Rather an exaggerated growth—of the man she had once known. The same soft brown hair, only thicker and rougher, one drooping wave looked tangled and unkempt—the dreamy eyes with the latent sneer in them dreamier than ever and yet the sneer more visible, the thin sensitive nose thinner, the satisfied mouth more satisfied, the weak chin fatally weaker. And he was married too! Mdme. Dubois—that must be his wife! How strange it was! Cecilia's brain was in a frightful state of doubt and fever and hesitation. It was necessary for her to explain her presence there, however, for she could not

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but resent the opening speech of the prisoner Dubois. She was growing very tired of standing, moreover, but she would have died rather than have demanded a chair. At length the turnkey observed her fatigue and sent one of the warders for a chair.

"Fetch two," interposed Dubois, with a flourish of his hand. "I myself shall sit down." When the man returned, bringing only one chair on the plea that he could not find another, Cecilia, whose nerve was returning, offered it to Dubois. He accepted it calmly and sat down upon it, waiting to hear what she had to say. At this signal instance of arch selfishness Cecilia felt her heart tighten and her temples grow cold as if fillets of fire had been exchanged for ribbons of snow.

"Sir," she began, "I am sorry to find you here." Dubois smiled the smile of a great man who listens with condescension to what an inferior has to say. "I am glad you have not forgotten me, because all the time I was away, and it has been a long time, I never—it is quite true—forgot you—I mean (for Dubois smiled again) I never forgot that summer you spent near us at Port Joli, and the things you talked about, your future. When I came home I found you had gone so much further than I know you ever intended to, and have been the cause of so much trouble, and of brave men, and I was very sorry." Cecilia leant on the bare table before her, and felt that every moment as it passed brought with it a cooling of the once passionate feeling she had entertained for the Dubois of her childhood. But if the lover were gone, there remained the man, husband and father, maybe the leader, the orator, the martyr, the dear human being.

"So I thought that if it were possible at all, some step should be taken to—to prevent the law from taking its course—its final course perhaps." Cecilia felt her throat tighten as she spoke. "You have plenty of friends—you must have—all the French will help and many, many English, for it is no cause to die for, it is no cause at all! There should never have been bloodshed on either side!"

Dubois uncrossed his long legs at last and said in his loftiest tone:

"Chère enfant, the French will not let me die. I—I myself—Pierre Dubois—allowed to hang by the neck until I am dead! That will never happen. Voyez—vous donc chérie, I am their King, their prophet, their anointed, their fat priests acknowledge me, their women adore me!"

Cecilia shrank together as she listened. She had sought and she had not found, she had expected and it had been denied her. At this moment the turnkey signified that time was up. She felt her heart burning in an agony of undefined grief and disappointment in which was also mingled the relief of resignation. The prisoner Dubois bowed low with his hand on his heart and then pressing her own hand lingeringly, gave her a tenderly insinuating glance. As she turned away she heard him exchange a laugh and a jest with one of the wardens, and her cheeks flamed with indignant anger. "Were he a good or suffering man as I dreamed he was, I would have bent low and kissed his hand; as it was, I am sorry I let him take mine."

She was calm when she reached her carriage in which sat her father waiting. He divined at once that his plan had been successful. "You look tired, my dear," was all he said.

"Yes, I have been standing for some time," Cecilia returned in a peculiar voice.

"Could they not find you a chair in the establishment?"

"They found one," she said grimly, "and that was appropriated by the prisoner Dubois."

"The prisoner Dubois!" thought Sir Robert. "It is well. We shall hear no more of Pierre."

Two days before Christmas the prisoner Dubois underwent the extreme penalty of the law. Cecilia sat in her room all that day. She never quite made up her mind as to whether Pierre had been a lunatic or a fanatic, a martyr or a fiend, an inspired criminal or a perverted enthusiast. Perhaps he was a mixture of all.