

## [Boarding House Keeper--French]

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Miss Mary Tomasi

63 Barre St.

Montpelier, Vt. The Granite Worker

### BOARDING HOUSE KEEPER - FRENCH

[Woodbine?] shaded most of the kitchen porch. Where the sun lay in patches on the floor, leaf-shaped patterns moved silently back and forth. The French woman sat in a rocker peeling potatoes. A pail standing on a stool in front of her received the peels; she dropped the potatoes in a white-enameled pan at her right.

“You will excuse me if I go right on and peel,” Mrs. [Lachance?] said. “I have just so much time before supper, and there are so many things to be done. Potatoes! It seems I must cook mountains of them to satisfy the men. Ten of them here, and all but one are stonecutters.”

She was a middle-aged woman, plump, red-cheeked, pleasant. “I have had as many as eighteen boarding here, but with that number I have to take on an extra girl. With only ten, my daughter and myself manage. If my daughter happens to want the evening we hire a girl from next door to help with the dishes. [????]

“No, I have not always taken in boarders. It is only since my husband died nine years ago. Before that, I did not have to. He made enough for us to get along well. He was a

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letter carver. Seventeen years he'd worked at it. Most of the time in Barre, but one year in Montpelier.

"I do not take roomers, you can see the house is not big enough for that. Since two of the girls were married 2 we have given one upstairs bedroom to the family on the other side. My youngest girl graduates from high school next year. There was on older boy, he died at the time of the 'flu'. He was just a baby.

"I was born here in Barre. My husband came down from Chambly, Canada, with his folks when he was a boy. They were a farming family. He started working in the sheds when he was eighteen. Doing odd labor, but he worked up to letter carver. He made good money, but I was not happy having him in the sheds. It's bad, especially for a man with a family, and most of the French stonecutters around here have large families. I have a neighbor a few houses down the street who has had more than her share of unhappiness from her husband's work in the sheds. He died the year after my own husband. Yes, his lungs. Since then two of his boys have died from the same thing. The remaining boy and girl are far from well. The girl has been to a preventorium for six months; the boy has to take very good care of himself. He works in an office. Sometimes I think the granite isn't worth all the sorrow it brings, but it's there in the earth, it's worth money to the owners, and if a man works there, well, - he's the fool for doing it. There's no one to blame but himself. My husband used to say so, he still said so when he was flat on his back. You'd think it would have made him bitter. It didn't. He was resigned to it. He accepted it as something he had expected all along. He didn't mind talking to me about it, 3 but when his friends visited him - other stonecutters - neither he nor they would mention the sickness that takes so many of them. Perhaps they are all like that. Perhaps in their families they will discuss it, but not with others. I suppose it is like any deep misfortune or unhappiness, you will talk about it only to those who are dear to you, - or, sometimes, to a stranger you never expect to see again."

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Mrs. Lachance paused to give orders concerning the supper to her daughter who had appeared at the kitchen door. She was a small girl with her mother's red cheeks, and an abundance of black, wavy hair. Underneath the apron she wore a black-and-white checked taffeta dress. When she had disappeared into the kitchen, the mother confided in a low voice, "She's going to a dance tonight at Joe's Pond. That's why she's all dressed for going out. She goes with a French boy —" She hesitated as if undecided to continue. She rubbed a finger over a puckered forehead. She sighed. "Well, I guess I don't mind your knowing it. She goes with that boy I was telling you about, the one who lost his father and two brothers. He's a fine boy, I like him, but I can't help but wish that it was someone else. Someone strong and well. I'd hate to think of her losing her husband as I did. Usually they are sick for a long time, months of sorrow and heartache. And afterwards, to be left alone with your children. To struggle the best you can. [Oh?], yes, it is a hard life. Sometimes I have wanted to speak to her, but then I think: she knows the story as well as I do. It will do no good, she 4 will do what she wants, and it is her life to live."

The potatoes were fast piling as Mrs. Lachance spoke. She smiled. "Almost enough. .... How my other two daughters have married well. One with a French boy from Chambly. Leota met him when she was visiting her father's people. They are living there now with her grandparents. No, my father-in-law didn't like stonecutting. They went back to the farm after a few years. The other girl is married to an Italian. He sells insurance here in Barre.

"Do I like Barre? Well, I've lived here all my life. I could have moved to Quincy when I married. My husband had an offer from a shed down there. But I was satisfied with Barre. It's just large enough, the stores are good, and there's always been lively enough excitement for the children. I don't think you could find a better high school than Spaulding in the State. The only fault I find with Barre is that there are not enough jobs in town for the young people when they get out of high school. Many of them get office jobs in Montpelier, the rest have to go to larger cities. You don't see many of the high school educated boys

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going into the sheds. You can't blame them. There's nothing of a future for them there, not now.

“The big strike? I don't know much about it. I used to. My husband struck along with the rest of them. I used to hear him talk about it a lot, but it was all so long ago, you hear so little about it now that I've forgotten. I do remember my husband saying that some of the unskilled French 5 who came in to break the strike could be excused. That was quite a statement from my husband, he was as much against them as anybody. One of those strike breakers was a friend of his. They'd grown up together in Chambly, good friends. [We?] hadn't seen or heard from him for years, then all of a sudden he sees him parading through town with the rest of them. My husband was dazed, he could hardly believe it. This friend, Pete was his name, came up to the house to see my husband the next day. He'd inquired around town and found out his address. At first I thought they were coming to blows, my husband was no mild man, and he was firm in the belief that this herd of strangers was ruining the granite industry, not only the wages and the hours, but the work itself. But then Pete explained why he had come to Barre.

“Perhaps Pete's story is the same as many of those strangers' who came into Barre. I don't know. To him this opportunity for work was a godsend. He was badly in need of money. His farm, like so many other French farms that year, was not paying. The crops amounted to nothing at all. He had a wife and three children to feed. He could see no signs of work for him in Chambly. Not for months. Then this opportunity for work in Barre came to him. Work meant keeping his family together. Can you blame him for accepting it? I don't. He'd never worked in granite. Never touched it before. He'd heard, of course, of Barre and the granite workers. But he knew of them vaguely, just as he 6 knew of miners and steel workers. I mean, how hard the work was, and dangerous. But he had to be amongst the workers, live with them and do their work, before he could really appreciate the fact that they needed a strike to better their conditions. No, Pete came here from Barre absolutely ignorant of the granite business and the people in it. He came for work, for money to keep

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his family together. You can't be too hard on him. I don't blame him. I haven't seen much of him since my husband died. But I know he's a Union man now, and a good one."

Mrs. Lachance called to her daughter that the potatoes were ready. She leaned back in her chair and began to rock lazily, comfortably. "You know," she said, "the longer you live in this world the better you realize that there are always two sides to a question. And it isn't fair to judge until you know and study both sides.

..... "No, I wasn't thinking only of the strike. Of course, that is one of those two-sided questions. Right now I'm thinking of a woman who lives down the street. An Italian woman. She sells beer and wine. Hard stuff, too. She's had to pay a fine twice for selling without a license. She still sells. I don't blame her. Some of the neighbors look down on her. They don't want their children to play with hers. Her husband died a few years ago. Yes, his lungs, too. He was a stonecutter. She has six children. None of them big enough to be working. Her hip was badly crushed the year after her husband died. What was she to do? She had to find some way of feeding those children. It's hard for her to get around. There aren't many kinds of work she can do. The easiest way - so it seemed to her - was to sell liquor in her own house. That way she could be at home all the time to look after her children. .... Yes, it's illegal. But there's her side, too. She wants her children. She wants to keep them together. She's proud. She doesn't want charity. She does Italian baking, too. That brings in a little money.