A New Icaria

George Bickfod*
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George Bickford

Arch. E. '38

JEAN BETANNIER stopped work and watched his father drive into the lane and stop the buggy in the farmlot below him. The wheels creaked as the old Frenchman got down to the ground. He wished his father wouldn't come up this morning, but he knew he would. He wondered how much Old Jules knew already. Whatever it was, Jean knew it would be hard to make him understand. He leaned on his adze and gazed down at the half-finished wagon tongue he was hewing from a hickory trunk. Twice yesterday he had almost broached the subject to his father, but each time something in the old man's quiet blue eyes had made Jean wait. But he couldn't wait much longer now.

Last night Audra had said, "Jean, we will surely be married by next spring, won't we? We will have our own home in the new colony by then, won't we?"

Jean said yes, of course, by next spring. Surely sooner. They planned and laughed till it grew late, and Audra walked down the new brick walk to the front gate with him. As they leaned there on the gate Audra looked up at him and said, "Jean, will your father always dislike us Americans? Will he always object to our marrying into your colony? Is there no way to have him understand?"

For a minute Jean just looked out there in the darkness where he could barely see his horse tied, and said nothing. Finally he drew her very close and said, "I don't know, dear. But I must tell him about our plans soon. The other boys talk of a new colony every day. They are getting impatient. Frederick, Verne—all want the new colony. It is the only way out, Audra." Jean drummed lightly on the gatepost for a while with his fingers and then added, "I hope Father can see it our way—somehow.—But he is pretty old."
It had been a pleasant, cool ride home across the fields with the damp, new smell of spring all around him. Babe had wanted to gallop, but he had told her no; he wanted to think tonight. So she had willingly obeyed and picked her way carefully along the short cut across the Icarian fields, which she knew as well in the dark as in the daylight. Jean had gone over the entire evening's conversation, remembering the exact words Audra had said. He had planned, dreamed, breathed the clean night air, and had been very happy, except when he wondered what his father's reaction would be.

Jean looked at his old father now as he stood watering his driving team and carefully smoothing a snarled mane. He noticed that his hair was nearly white beneath his old blue French cap and that his broad old shoulders were beginning to stoop. Jean's mind flashed back to his dead mother's bedside when Old Jules had looked down on her still, white face and said, "Now I have only Jean." He thought of other years when the colony was not as prosperous as now. The winter when half of the Icarian stock had frozen in the blizzards and Jules had brought the colony through till spring on corn and rabbit meat. The time when the state had questioned the Icarians' legal right to the land they had held for so many years. The long months of wrangling litigation which had worn Old Jules down almost to the breaking point before he had won out. Grasshoppers. Chinchbugs. Drought. Those had been wild, trying years, and they had left their marks on Old Jules, but through it all he had stood like an oak in a storm, stern and even hard on his people at times, but always loyal, until now all Icarians loved and respected Jules Betannier as no other man. In late years the colony had prospered, and Jules was sailing calmer seas.

From the steep south hillside below the clump of log and frame buildings which constituted Icaria came the happy song and laughter of workers in the vineyard and orchard. It was an early spring, and there were dozens of men, women, and children working there in the bright morning sun. Far below, long black ribbons of plowed ground stretched across the level valley floor, and a dozen teams of oxen lumbered back and forth.
forth, so slowly that they scarcely appeared to move at all.

Jean felt suddenly very small as he saw his father turn and trudge slowly up the steep path toward the low log shop. Jules had made Icaria for his people. He had done it because he loved them. This was his life work. He had done it well and was happy at last. What right had Jean to disrupt things now? He'd better wait a while to mention it, at least. Better think it over a little more. But in the next instant he was thinking of Audra. Remembering her exact words. Seeing her again there at the gate. He knew he had to tell his father.

“Good morning, Jean.” The old man smiled.

“Good morning, Father. Where have you been driving so early this morning?”

Jules pulled a worn old pipe and a tobacco pouch from a pocket and sat down on a sawhorse. “To the south field. It is ready to plow. Our work goes well this spring, Jean. The Icarians are good workers. See how well they do in the orchard.”

THE old man moved his arm in a large sweep in the direction of the hillside and smiled proudly at Jean, showing a set of broken teeth beneath his straight, carefully-cut mustache.

“Louis is a good orchard boss,” said the old man, tucking his tobacco carefully into his pipe bowl. “But—he is old. You will be orchard boss next year, Jean. Then soon you will be field boss. And I am not so young any more.—Some day, you must take my place. A Betannier must always be president of Icaria.”

The old man drew hard at his pipe and looked down across the valley.

“I'm afraid I may not be here next year, Father.” Jean didn't look up immediately. He wondered if those deep blue eyes of his father's would be angry. Jules said nothing, and Jean wondered if he had heard. He turned and looked at his father. The old man had taken his pipe from his mouth and was still looking quietly down across the valley.

“Why not, then?” said the old man presently, looking at Jean.

Jean was surprised at his father's calmness. So Old Jules did know more than he had shown. Maybe he would only laugh at
Jean's talk of marriage.

"I'm going to marry Audra," he blurted.

Jules looked long down across the hillside, the dense smoke of his home-grown, long green tobacco rising in short puffs, far apart. "No, Jean, Icarians have never married Americans." The old man spoke with a finality which all Icarians knew well. "If they did, soon Icaria would no longer be a French colony. You must find an Icarian girl to marry. What is wrong with Marie Amiel that you used to like so well?"

The old man talked now as if Jean were a child again, but his mild eyes were troubled, and a little frightened. He knew Jean was a Betannier.

"Marie is a good girl, but I do not love her. It is Audra that I love, Father. We have planned for months to get married."

"And you didn't tell me," said the old man bitterly.

Jean was calm now, but he felt a deep pity for his old father as he sat there looking down at his pipe. He was very old and gray.

"Jean, you can not bring Audra to Icaria. I forbid it!"

"Father, I realize that we must leave the colony. But I am not the only one who feels this way. You must have certainly heard that there is discontent among the younger men. Many of the Icarian boys talk of a new colony."

Jean paused and kicked gently at the hickory chips about his feet. He wondered what to say next. Every word must only hurt his father more. "Times have changed. Once there were only French here, but now we have many American neighbors. We can not live apart from them, always. But we will buy land across the valley—the land we sold the Americans when they came here. We will build a new French colony there."

Jean did not look at his father. He was looking at the Icarian buildings about him. The workers on the hillside. The fields in the valley. He knew it all so well—had grown up a part of it. He knew every foot of Icaria's three thousand acres—knew every bee tree, every berry patch, every patch of gumbo, knew which roofs needed repairing. He loved Icaria. Yes, and what would his father do without him? Who would be Icaria's next president? The best of the young people would live in the new colony.

May, 1938
“Jean, do you know what you are saying?” The old man’s voice was quieter now. It had a note in it which Jean didn’t like—a note of defeat. It wasn’t the Betannier voice. “Do you realize the price we have paid for our colony? The trust which Icaria has put in you? The hopes your mother had for you? The hopes I had for you? Are you going to sell the colony so cheap, then?”

The old man rubbed a calloused palm hard across his mouth and then held it there, cupping the lower part of his face while he looked at the tender green fennel around the foot of the sawhorse.

Jean wished his father could see Audra, once. He might change his mind. But no, he guessed not. Not now.

“I am sorry, Father, that things are like this.”

The old man stood up, replaced his pipe in his pocket, and looked down into the valley where the oxen lumbered back and forth on the black ribbons of new-turned earth, and the gray terns swooped for worms. He looked a little more stooped, a little grayer. Jean wanted to rush to him, take his calloused old hand and say, “Please do not feel bitter, Father. Can’t you see it is inevitable? I do not wish to hurt you.”

But that was not the way a Betannier did it.

Jules turned and walked slowly down the steep path toward his waiting team. The laughter and song of the workers came up from the hillside, rising and falling on the morning breeze, and the oxen lumbered back and forth across the valley floor.

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The Wind

Arnold Stromme
Engr. '41

THE wind is ill at ease today—
It whips round corners and moans aloud,
Scattering leaves and bits of cloud
In a nervous, flighty, and human way.