Golden Pants

Roger Lemelin

My parents were not far from poverty when they had their first child, me. And since I was the first born, I was always older than my brothers. You might take the commonplace wisdom of this remark for a great piece of nonsense, but you will understand its full significance when I tell you that my mother, when she married, did not know how to sew. Seeing the perfect proportions of her magnificent baby Lemelin, however, she decided, with my help, to start learning immediately. She studied patiently, but she never really mastered the craft.

I became the unhappy guinea pig for her experiments. And the results proved to be truly catastrophic. Trousers, coveralls, shirts, jackets—they were all slightly askew in several details which always made my friends laugh, but which seemed to my mother nothing but minor irregularities in view of the overall harmony of her creations. Just think, she had successfully made two arms, two legs, two shoulders, and a number of buttonholes; what matter if they were too long, or too narrow, or different lengths? She was a woman who was sure of herself, mother of a son who later on could boast of the same calm assurance in life, thanks to a pair of golden pants that she made for him at the height of his excruciating timidity.

Even now I shudder to think of those days of public presentation when my mother exposed me before aunts and friends imprisoned in one of her masterpieces. Naturally, when my brothers grew into sizes I had outgrown, they profited from her past errors, for it is fair to say that my mother had a certain critical sense and corrected herself on them. But as for me, since I was the oldest, it was my fate to be "the first by whom the new is tried" each time I reached one of those critical stages when my clothes required new dimensions and a new creative effort. Cutting back on expenses, no doubt, Mother chose materials for me that would not cause her too much remorse if she wasted them in her first shot at a new coat or pair of trousers. A wave of discomfort still sweeps over me when I remember a certain summer suit fashioned out of an old grey overcoat passed down from my uncle the letter carrier. I twisted and squirmed in it at my school desk like a lice-infested weathercock.

Stray horsehairs scratched my neck and tickled my armpits and I had pins and needles all over. My idea of heaven at the time was to be outfitted at Simpson's or Eaton's like the other boys. Often Mother got her supplies of material from the sacristy at the parish church. The parish priest, who saw in her an exemplary mother of a large family, would give her old cassocks, worn-out religious banners, and all sorts of church linens, all of which was immediately consumed by the maternal sewing factory.

I was clothed by the church. But one day an unexpected source of materials was opened to the inexhaustible seamstress.

Two of my uncles arrived from Detroit where they had been laid off by the Chrysler plant. It was the black days of 1931. They opened a garage at Quebec where they hoped to put to use the experience they had gained in the States. They specialized in making over interiors of high-class automobiles. One day a wealthy client brought in his 1920 Cadillac and several days later my uncle came home in triumph with a piece of heavy plush material that had covered the back seat of the car. First my mother nearly fainted; then she fixed me with a look that said, "At last! My boy your great day has come!" I couldn't believe it. That plush Cadillac upholstery was about six millimètres thick and once must have been gold- coloured. But dust and time had changed its bustre to a dowdy brown. With great gusto my mother set to beating the material. Then she brushed and rebrushed it ambitiously. The more the cloth took on its original sheen, the more my mother's face shone with pleasure. Then fate struck. Turning toward me, Mother said, "Roger, there's a fine pair of pants for you here, and they'll wear like..."
everlasting." She was in her glory. I began to
whine my disapproval: "Oh no, Mother! Every-
one'll make fun of me. I'll look like a church or-
ament." But Mother overruled me with the happy
thought that her test model was now in the same
class as the Cadillac, a gold one at that, and for a
good long time to come.

The golden pants, full and floppy, were fin-
ished at 5 p.m. on the twenty-eighth day of May
in the month of the Virgin Mary. Mother had me
try them on at once. Holy Saints, but they were
heavy and hot! I refused to leave the house. I
refused even though I heard shouts of my friends
playing ball in the back yard. At supper I had no
appetite. \1 felt as though I had my legs stuck
through a couple of feather bolsters instead of
a pair of pants. I could see what agony was in
store for me. This would be the pinnacle of my
humiliation.

Thus I reached the fourteenth Station of the
Cross in the painful career of a child who is
clothed by a mother who doesn't know how to
sew. Until then I had endured the mocking smiles
of my schoolmates as I might have put up with a
throbbing toothache. Now they would split their
sides laughing, and Henri Fontaine would laugh
louder than all the rest together.

I lurked in the house all that evening, but next
day there was nothing for it but to wear the pants
to school. Mother mounted guard at the foot of
my bed and under her watchful eye I couldn't
avoid getting into the golden pants. She was a
woman who was determined to see her own ideas
triumph, even though she was obliged to go all
the way to school with me for fear I might take
refuge in the field next door like a wounded
animal.

I went into the classroom and reached my seat,
overwhelmed by the whispers of my classmates.
My place was near the front and Fontaine, who
used to copy over my shoulder, sat behind me.
The teacher, a just, severe man, began the
catechism lesson. He often asked me tricky
questions and liked to hold my answers up as an
example for the rest of the class.

"Lemelin, when you die will you go to heaven
or hell? Stand up."

I got halfway up and stuttered out: "I don't
know. It all depends if I die in a state of mortal
sin."

A burst of laughter. Deeply shocked, the
teacher fixed me with the withering look a bishop
might use on a heretic. I had deceived the hope
he had placed in me and I knew he would hold it
against me. He went over to write on the black-
board, and as soon as he turned his back, bang! a
piece of chalk thrown full force hit him on the
neck. He turned around slowly and took us all in
with an icy stare.

"I want to know right now, who did that?"

At first a leaden silence was all the answer he
got. I almost felt like the guilty one myself. Be-
cause of my answer to his question on heaven
and hell, he couldn't help suspecting me.

"All right," he lashed out at us, "who is it?"

"Catechism basic Christian beliefs explained in
question-and-answer form
There was a movement in the class and I realized that behind me Henri Fontaine had stood up.

"I know who it was, Sir!"

"Well then, what are you waiting for? Speak out."

"It was Roger Lemelin who wants to show you his golden pants!"

I thought I would die. The class exploded in laughter but the teacher didn't even crack a smile.

"Was it you, Lemelin?"

"No...yes..."

I was completely paralyzed; my mind went blank; I didn't have the courage to deny it; he wouldn't have believed me anyway.

"Not surprising you're not so sure of going to
heaven," he burst out. "Come up here, and stand facing the blackboard."

He laid hold of a long oak ruler and set to beating me furiously on the buttocks as hard as he could. Usually one stroke of this ruler was enough to start any child howling with pain. Oh, wonderful surprise! I could hardly feel it. The ruler sank into the thick plush and thanks to the air cushion it hardly reached my skin. The teacher, unaware of this phenomenon, redoubled his efforts, flailing me like a madman.

"Ouff! Ouff! Ouff!" he gasped. "Are you going to break down or not? You hardboiled little brute! You young thug, you!"

I remained unperturbed, even glancing back at my persecutor with a look of embarrassed pity on my face which infuriated him all the more. Then I felt on my back and well-scorched backside a wave of admiration sweeping up toward me from the class.

Suddenly a voice cried out: "Stop, Sir! It wasn't Lemelin, it was Fontaine!"

The teacher, by now pale with exertion, stopped in mid-swing and looked at me with an expression of such deep apology that I will never forget it. Slowly he laid the ruler on his desk, turned me around to face the class, and ordered Fontaine who was shaking in his boots to come forward. The teacher tried to get back his breath and as for me, I didn't know whether I should try to get back to my place or not. I moved off toward my seat.

"No, wait," said the teacher. "I want to ask you another question. Do you want me to beat Fontaine?"

For the first time in my life someone implored me for mercy: my enemy.

"No, Sir."

"Apoloogize, Fontaine."

"I'm sorry, Roger."

"Now go and sit down. And let this fine gesture be an example of charity and dignity to you."

When class was over my schoolmates surrounded me like a hero and not one word was said about my golden pants, for deep down children admire courage more than fine clothes. I was famous! I had stood it without flinching, without moving a muscle. I had even been noble enough to forgive Fontaine, to save him the punishment that my posterior had unjustly suffered for his. I gloried in their admiration, but a vague feeling of guilt began to stir in my heart. Then some of the girls came over and suddenly they began to examine my pants. I broke out in a cold sweat. But I was wrong; they just started twitting with admiration.

The next day, thanks to the spell of golden plush over all the girls and thanks to its incontestable ruler-proof qualities, all the boys asked their mothers to make them golden pants like Roger Lemelin's.

Since that day I have always been sure of myself, and at the most trying moments in my life I tell myself that I have still got on a pair of golden pants.

Translated from the French by Philip Stratford