

[Written for the Canadian Illustrated News.]

### PRAYER TO DEATH.

(From *Tribulus*.)

Far in the stranger's land I pine—  
Dark Death, restrain thy grasping hand.  
(Regard O Death, this prayer of mine!)  
Until I reach my native land.

There is for me no mother here  
To place my ashes in the urn.  
(Ah! mournful task!) nor sister dear  
Sweet incense of the East to burn:

And with dishevelled hair to stand  
And weep beside my new-made grave—  
(Oh! till I reach my native land,  
Forbear to touch me, Death, I crave!

JOHN READER.

October 7th, 1872.

[Written for the Canadian Illustrated News.]

### BORDER COURTSHIP.

#### A Tale of the Niagara Frontier.

BY EVELYN ETHERIDGE.

There are few scenes of more calm and placid beauty than the Niagara River from Lake Ontario to Queenston Heights. The banks, in steep escarpments crowned with oak and elm and giant walnuts, or in gentle turf-clad slopes, sweep in graceful curves around the windings of the stream. In places the weeping birch trails its tresses in the waters like a wood nymph admiring her own loveliness. The comfortable farm-steals nestle amid their embowering peach and apple orchards, the very types of peace and plenty. The mighty river, after its dizzy plunge at the great cataract, and mad tumultuous rush and eddy at the rapids and whirlpool, smoothes its rugged front and restrains its impetuous stream to the semblance of a placid old age after a wild and stormy life.

The slumberous old town of Niagara has also an air of calm repose. No vulgar din of trade disturbs its quiet grass-grown streets, the dismantled fort, the broken stockade, the empty fosse, and the crumbling ramparts, where wandering sheep crop the herbage and the swallows build their nests in the mouth of the overturned and rusty cannon, are all the evidence of the long reign of an unbroken peace.

But at the period when our story opens other sights than these met the eye. On opposite sides of the river grim forts frowned defiance at each other, and guarded like stern warders the channel between them. The morning *réveille* day after day seemed the shrill challenge to mortal combat. Sullen and silent, like couchant lions, through the black embrasures the grim cannon watched the opposite shore; and not unfrequently from feverish lips, as if they could no longer hold their breath, hurried at the foe the iron death. The white tents of an army dotted the plain. The marks of recent conflict were everywhere visible, and—saddest evidence of all—was the multitude of soldiers' graves, whose silent sleepers no morning drum-beat should arouse forever. The peaceful parish-church was turned into a hospital, where instead of praise and prayer were heard the groans of wounded men. Everything in fact gave indications of military occupation and the prevalence of martial law.

At the outbreak of the war of 1812-13 Squire Lawson held the important rural position of Justice of the Peace, miller and merchant at the little hamlet which nestled beneath the wing of Fort Niagara, on the American side of the river, at its mouth. But what more concerns our story is, that he was the father of pretty Mary Lawson, a damsel of some eighteen summers, and as blithe and bonnie a lass as ever gladdened a father's heart or inspired a lover's dreams. And lovers Mary had in plenty, but the most eligible of them all, in the opinion of the village gossips, was young Ensign Roberts, attached to the American forces at the Fort.

Not so, however, thought Mary, the favoured of her heart was a smart young Canadian, who for some time had acted as clerk in her father's store, and had shortly before opened a small establishment of his own on the opposite side of the river in the thriving village of Niagara. Every Sunday young Morton crossed in his own light skiff to attend church with Mary; and on summer evenings many were the pleasant sails they had upon the shining reaches of the river, watching the sun go down in golden glory in the bosom of blue Ontario, and the silver moon bathe in its pale light the bosky foliage of the shores, beneath which dark and heavy crouched the stealthy shadows, while the river rippled calmly by.

With the outbreak of the war, however, these pleasant sails and visits ceased. It is one of the dread results of international conflict that the inhabitants of the hostile frontiers, who had previously dwelt in good fellowship and neighbourly helpfulness are often changed to deadly enemies, and even claim for their bitter hostility the sanctions of duty.

George Morton naturally espoused the cause

of his native country, with which, too, all his commercial interests were identified. This brought him at once under the ban of Mary's father, and his visits were interdicted. Ensign Roberts took advantage of the absence of his rival to press his suit, which Squire Lawson favoured as being likely, he thought, to wean Mary from her forbidden attachment to one who was now her country's foe. But he little new the depth and the strength of a woman's affection. The more her royalist lover was aspersed and maligned, the more warmly glowed her love, the more firm was her resolve to be faithful unto death.

Early in the war the British met with a great irreparable loss in the death of the gallant Brock, whose name and military skill were a tower of strength to his country. George fought as a volunteer at Queenston in the bloody conflict which avenged the fate of Canada's "darling hero," and as the minute guns of both the American and British forts boomed above his grave the gentle heart of Mary wept sympathetic tears over her country's fallen foe.

One morning in the spring of 1813—it was on the 27th of May—a brilliant but ominous spectacle greeted the eyes of the garrison and citizens of the town of Niagara. In the early light a crescent-shaped fleet of vessels lay moored on the blue bosom of the lake before the town. The roll of drums, the blast of bugles and the tramp of armed men through the streets were shortly heard. The guns of fort and fleet thundered forth challenge and defiance. The glittering sheen of burnished arms flashed in the morning sun, as barge after barge transferred the hostile force from the fleet to the shore under cover of a heavy fire.

Morton, with the militia company to which he was attached, were lying in a hollow near the shore, to check if possible the advance of the foe. A round shot from the fleet struck the ground in front of him covering him with dirt, and breaking the arm with which he was loading his musket. At the same moment a bullet from the enemy struck his nearest comrade, passing right through his body as he lay upon the ground. A slight quiver convulsed his frame and then it was at rest forever. As the foe advanced in force, driving back the British, George, unable to retreat as rapidly as the rest, was taken prisoner and with others sent across to the American fort.

Personally, George Morton received every kindness from the officer and surgeons of the American hospital; and in the gentle ministrations of Mary Lawson, which he shared with the rest of the wounded, he found a compensation for all his sufferings. Upon his partial convalescence he was released on parole and returned to Niagara to look after his disorganized and partially ruined business. By his skill and industry, aided by the fictitious prosperity caused by the presence of a numerous army, before the winter it had become again exceedingly flourishing, but only to be ruthlessly and completely destroyed.

An opportunity soon occurred for Mary to show her daring and devotion to her lover. The winter of 1813 was approaching. The British army were closing in their lines of attack in order to recover the Niagara frontier. General McClure, the American commander, prepared to evacuate the town; but before doing so he resolved to perpetrate an act of inhuman barbarity, which shall hand down his name to infamy so long as the story shall be told. In order to deprive the British troops of winter quarters he determined to burn Niagara, leaving the innocent and non-combatant inhabitants, helpless women and little children, homeless and shelterless at the very beginning of a Canadian winter.

Amid the active preparations made for the transfer of his forces and material across the river, intelligence of the atrocious design came to the knowledge of Mary Lawson, chiefly through the indignant dissent and remonstrance of some of McClure's own officers against the unsoldier-like cruelty. The intrepid girl's resolve was taken on the instant. She determined under cover of the night to give the alarm to her lover, and through him to the inhabitants, that they might, if possible, frustrate the infamous design, or at least rescue their moveable property from destruction.

It required no small courage to carry out her purpose. The winter had set in early and severe. The river was running full of ice, which rendered crossing, especially by night, exceedingly perilous. To this was added the danger of being challenged, and it might be shot, by the sentries of the American camp. But when did true love in man or woman stop to calculate chances? or hesitate to encounter danger or even death for the beloved one?

It was on the 9th of December—a bleak, cold, cloudy night—that Mary, having secured the aid of her father's faithful servant, Michael O'Brian, a jolly but rather stupid Irishman who knew no fear, escaped from the window of her room after the family had retired to rest, which was not till near midnight, and set forth on her perilous mission of mercy. In order to avoid the American sentries they attempted to cross about a mile above the camp, and in the mirky darkness fearlessly launched their little boat, steering by the lights in the town slumbering unconscious of its fate, where

some patient watcher kept her vigil beside a sick bed.

The dark water eddied and gurgled amid the ice-floes, from which a ghastly gleam was reflected, like that from the face of a corpse dimly seen amid the dark. Occasionally a huge fragment of ice would grate, and crash, and crunch against the frail ribs of the boat, as if eager to crush it and frustrate the generous purpose of its inmates. But the strong arm of O'Brian pushed a passage through the ice, while Mary sat wrapped in her cloak and in busy meditation in the bottom of the boat.

But they had not calculated on the strength of the current, and the resistance of the ice. In spite of every effort they were being rapidly born down the stream. Another danger stared them in the face. Should they be carried into the lake with the floating ice, they might before morning be drifted out of sight of land and perish miserably of cold or hunger; or be dashed upon the ice-bound shore, where they could hear the waves roar harshly, like sea-beasts howling for their prey.

But the bitter north wind, which had been such a source of discomfort, now proved their salvation from this imminent danger. Blowing fresher every moment it arrested the ice-drift, and formed a solid barrier from shore to shore and extending far up the river. But this in turn effectually prevented the progress of the little boat which had almost reached the Canadian shore; and worse still, the dim grey light of morning began to dawn.

Suddenly the sight of a black object in the middle of a white field of now dense ice, and the sound of O'Brian's oar striving to force a passage through, caught the watchful eye and ear of the sentry near whose boat they had unfortunately drifted.

"Halt!" rang out sharp and clear on the frosty air the challenge of the sentry.

"Faith, an' it's halted fast enough I am," answered Mickey.

"Who goes there?" repeated the sentry's voice.

"Sure I don't go at all, that's what's the matter," said the boatman, unconsciously anticipating a slang phrase of later times.

"Advance and give the countersign," exclaimed the enraged soldier, who in martial obedience to discipline, would challenge a drowning man before trying to save him.

"Bedad! an' it's that same I would if I could," replied the bewildered Irishman, "but I can't walk on wather, and this ice-slush isn't much better."

"Unless you answer I'll fire," shouted the sentry, to whom Mickey's manderings half drowned by the crashing ice and gusty wind, were unintelligible.

"An' that same is the very thing I want, for it's starved wid the cowl I am," said the shivering creature, who with characteristic ingenuity had failed to apprehend the meaning of the menace addressed to him. But a sudden flash and the dull thud of a bullet against the ice beside him interpreted to his sluggish brain the danger in which he stood.

"The saints be betime us an' harm," he exclaimed, devoutly crossing himself. "Oh! sure ye won't murder a body in cowl blood who's kilt entirely already. It's half-drowned and froze I am, without being riddled like a cullender wid your bullets as well."

"Why, Mick-y O'Brian," exclaimed the astonished soldier, who had by the gun flash recognized the familiar features of a quondam friend; "why in thunder didn't you tell your name, man? I might have killed you as dead as a door-nail."

"An' a purty thrick it 'ud be for ye's, too, Tommy Daily. It's not ashamed of my name I am, an' if I'd know'd it was you, I'd tould ye's before. But help us out of this an' I'll bear ye's no malice whatever."

The guard had turned out at the report of the gun, and getting such planks as were available laid them on the floating ice; but still they could not reach the boat. Tommy Daily with fertile ingenuity tying some twine to his ramrod fired it over the skill, when it was easy to send out a strong fisherman's line, which Mick tied to the thwarts, and a dozen strong arms drew the boat ashore.

The benumbed form of Mary was borne to the guard-room, and Ensign Roberts, the officer of the night, immediately sent for

"Why, Miss Lawson," he exclaimed with astonishment, "to what can we owe your presence at such a time and place as this?"

"To the inhumanity of your commander, and to my desire to rescue an innocent people from its consequences."

"I regret, Miss Lawson, that my military duty prevents my permitting you to carry out your generous purpose. You will be entertained here as comfortably as our rude accommodation will allow till the river clears, when you will be sent safely home."

"Is this your generosity to a fallen foe, Mr. Roberts?" she exclaimed; but too proud to ask a favour for her lover from his rival she relapsed into haughty silence.

With the early morning messengers were sent through the town to warn the inhabitants to leave their houses and remove their property; and the soldiers proceeded forthwith to fire the buildings. Then might be seen the women—most of the men were away with the troops—hastily gathering together their own and their children's clothing and a few trea-

sured heirlooms, and with tears and bitter lamentation leaving their sheltered roof, going forth like the patriarch, not knowing whither they went.

Late into the night burned the fires, reddening the midnight heavens with the lurid flames of comfortable homesteads, well-filled barns and stacks of grain. Herds of affrighted cattle rushed wildly over the meadow, the kine lowing piteously with distended udders for the accustomed hands of their milkers at eventide. One hundred and fifty dwellings were consumed, only two or three escaping by accident, one of which still remains; and four hundred women and children were left to wander in the snow or seek the temporary shelter of some remote farm-house or Indian wigwam in the woods. Some wandered for days in the adjacent dismal "Black Swamp," feeding on frost-bitten cranberries, or on a casual rabbit or ground hog.

But a swift and bloody revenge followed the dastardly outrage. In two days the British re-occupied the site of the smouldering town, now but a waste of blackened embers, which the Americans had evacuated—horse, foot, and artillery—not a hoof being left behind. Six days later a strong party of the British crossed the river five miles above the American fort at dead of night. Like an avenging Nemesis shod with silence the column approached the slumbering garrison. Not a word was heard, not a sabre clinked. The sentries were bayoneted before they could give the alarm; and in the early morning watch the sleepers were awakened to the fierce death-grapple with a victorious foe. A sharp stern conflict ensued. The garrison, three hundred strong, was overpowered, and immense military stores and commissariat supplies were taken. Ensign Roberts was among the slain, and Squire Lawson's property was destroyed. Then followed the burning of Lewiston, Mauchester, Black Rock and Buffalo, in terrible retaliation for the destruction of Niagara.

It is a relief to turn away from these scenes of war and bloodshed to the record of human affection and heroic self-sacrifice and devotion.

George Morton, crippled, impoverished, sick at heart, and despairing of ever claiming Mary as his bride, returned to the ashes of his ruined home to begin life over again. A partial indemnity from the Government enabled him to resume business on a modest scale, which by thrift and industry grew and increased with the gradual growth of the town. Old Squire Lawson, broken by his losses and by exposure, gradually sunk and died, Mary nursing him devotedly to the last. After years of delay the love of the no longer youthful pair found its consummation in a happy marriage, followed by a calmly tranquil wedded life.

"Although this cruel war," whispered George to his bride upon their wedding day, "has robbed us of all our own worldly wealth, has cost you your father, and has left me a cripple for life, yet it could not take from us the priceless wealth of our affection."

"Nay, dear heart," she replied, "the long trial of our love has purified it from earthly dross, and proved it the type of love immortal in the skies."

In after years to children and to children's children on his knees George used often to recount the perils of those fearful scenes of war and wasting; but no theme was more pleasing to himself and to his youthful auditory, while the comely matron in her mature beauty blushed at the praise of her own heroism, than the episode of the fair Mary Lawson's midnight adventure in the ice on the Niagara.

At a party where questions were asked and facetious if not felicitous answers were expected, a coal dealer asked what legal authority was the favourite with his trade. One answered "Coke." "Right," said the coal dealer. Another suggested "Blackstone." "Good, too," said the questioner. Then a little-headed man in the corner piped, "Littleton." Whereupon the coal dealer sat down without saying anything.

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