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OUR CENTENNIAL STORY.

THE BASTONNAIS:

A TALE OF THE AMERICAN INVASION OF CANADA IN 1775-76.

By JOHN LESPERANCE.

BOOK III.

THE BURSTING OF THE TEMPEST.

XIV.

LITTLE BLANCHE—(Continued.)

"Are you not lonely here, my dear?" asked Zulma raising the child from her knees and stroking back her hair as she stood leaning against her arm.

"I am used to be alone, mademoiselle," was the reply. "I have never had any company but my grandfather who is often absent. He seeks food for both of us. He kills birds and animals in the woods. He catches fish in the river. Nobody ever came to see us except of late when my grandfather has been called away by strange men and has remained absent longer than usual. When he is here he speaks to me, he tells me stories, he teaches me to understand the pictures in some of his old books, he plays the violin for me. When he is gone, I take more time to do my work, washing clothes, cleaning the dishes, sweeping the room, mending my dresses. When this is done, if the weather is fine, I gather flowers and fruits, I sit at the foot of the Falls making wreaths for our pictures and my grandfather's crucifix. If it is dark or stormy outside, I sing canticles, repeat my catechism, and when I am tired I play with Velours. He never leaves me."

Blanche did not say all these things consecutively, but in reply to repeated questions from Zulma who led her on step by step. And not the answers themselves, but the manner in which they were made, the tone of voice, the expression of the eye and the ready gesture, all increased her interest in this strange charming little being.

"But of late," she said, "your grandfather has been away several nights together. Were you left all alone?"

"Yes, all alone, mademoiselle."

"And you were not afraid?"

Blanche smiled and there was a vacant look in her eye which reminded Zulma of Batoche.

"The night is the same as the day," she said.

"Oh, not the same my darling. At night wicked things go abroad. The wild beasts prowl, bad men frighten the innocent, and the darkness prevents help from coming so easily as in the day."

Blanche listened attentively. What she heard was evidently something new, but it did not disconcert her. She explained to Zulma that when the hour for rest came, she said all her prayers, put on the night-dress which Pauline had given her—this was always white, in all seasons—covered the fire in winter, closed the door in summer, but never locked it, and then went to sleep.

"When my grandfather is in his alcove, I hardly ever awaken, but if he is absent, I always awaken at midnight. Then I sit up and listen. Sometimes I hear the owl's cry, or the bark of the wolf. At other times, I hear the great noise of the tempest. Sometimes again there is not a sound outside, except that of the waterfall. While I am awake I see at the foot of my bed the image of my mother. She smiles on me and blesses me. Then I lie down and sleep till morning."

The above is a cold rehearsal of the words which the child uttered. There was a pathos in them beyond all words that caused Zulma to shed copious tears.

"Dear little thing," she exclaimed, clasping her to her bosom. "You shall be no longer alone. I will take care of you. You will come with me this very evening. Will your grandfather return to-night?"

"When he does not return, he tells me before-hand. When he returns, he says nothing. He said nothing this morning, therefore he will return to-night."

In the earnestness of her interview, Zulma had not noticed the flight of the hours. When she looked up at the clock it was past five and the darkness was gathering. Turning to the servant who, after attending to his horse, had entered the room and taken a seat in a corner, she ordered him to go out upon the main road and see whether any one was coming. He came back with the information that several men were going rapidly in the direction of Quebec, appearing very much excited, but that none seemed to be coming from the town.

"It may be late, Blanche," said Zulma, "before your grandfather returns, but I will wait another hour. Then we shall decide what to do."

At six o'clock it was very dark and a slight snowstorm arose. Zulma was getting anxious. She could not make up her mind to leave the child all alone, and could not take her along without first seeing Batoche. On the other hand, she must return to Charlesbourg to avoid any needless anxiety on the part of her father. She was in the height of her perplexity when she heard the shuffling of feet at the door.

"It is he," exclaimed Blanche, springing to the latch.

XV.

IN BATOCHÉ'S CABIN.

Batoche entered, supporting Cary Singleton under the arms. The latter could stand upon his feet, but it was with effort, and he needed the assistance of his companion. Zulma was thunderstruck on seeing the wounded officer. He was no less astonished at seeing her. Batoche smiled as he glanced over the room. But not a syllable was uttered, until Cary had found a resting place in the easy chair before the fire. Then a few hasty words explained the whole situation. Zulma burst into tears and lamentations, as she took a seat at Cary's side, but he soon comforted her by the assurance that he was not dangerously hurt.

"The doctor told me there was nothing broken. All I need is a few days of rest. Batoche was at my side when I fell. He took care of me and prevailed upon me to come out here with him."

Batoche smiled again while Cary spoke, then said in his turn:—

"The Captain would have preferred to go elsewhere to rest, and he consented to come with me only when I assured him that you were away from home."

"How did you know that?" asked Zulma.

"Oh, I knew it."

"You know everything, Batoche."

"I did not know that we should meet you in my humble cabin, but I thought it was not impossible. When I saw your cariole at the door, I was not at all surprised, but I did not tell the Captain of it."

"I was never more surprised and delighted in my life," said Cary.

Zulma was comforted. She totally regained her equanimity, and conversed calmly with Cary. After a time, when little Blanche began to set the table, she rose to assist and cooked the frugal supper with her own hands. Later, she helped Batoche to prepare the liniments for the young officer's bruises. Batoche was as expert as any medicine-man among the Indians, from whom indeed he had learned the virtues of the various seeds and herbs which hung in bunches from the rafters of his hut.

A couple of hours thus passed away almost unnoticed. As eight o'clock struck, Zulma arose from her seat and announced her intention of remaining with her friend till the next day when the nature of his wounds would be better known. Cary remonstrated gently, renewing the assurance that within very few days he would be in perfect possession of his limbs. On the other hand, Batoche encouraged Zulma in her resolution. He declared he would regard it as a great favor if she would accept the scant hospitality of his hut for one night. Little Blanche said nothing, but she clung to the skirt of Zulma and there was an appeal in her eye which the latter could not have resisted even if she had been so minded. In her usual decided way, she ordered her servant to drive back to Charlesbourg, inform her father why she had remained behind, and return to learn her wishes the next morning.

"If I thought," said Batoche, "that Sieur Sarpy would be too anxious, I would go with your servant, and explain everything."

"There is no need," replied Zulma. My father is convinced that I would do nothing to pain him, and I know that his high regard for Captain Singleton, and his confidence in yourself, Batoche, will make him completely approve the course which I take. The chief point is that my servant should return at once in order that my father may have no fear that I have encountered an accident on the road."

And without further delay, the servant took his departure.

Quietude then reigned in the cabin. Little Blanche recited her prayers to Zulma, and was put to bed by her, when she went to sleep directly. Her strange manners and remarkable discourse had been a source of great interest to Cary. Batoche retired to his alcove whence he did not issue for a long time. In the interval, Zulma and the disabled officer, seated before the fire, indulged in a low-voiced conversation. Cary thanked his wounds for this unexpected opportunity of pleasant repose. Going over all the circumstances, he regarded this meeting with Zulma as something providential. He had almost a suspicion that Batoche had had a secret hand in bringing it about, so impressed had he become with the wonderful resources of that singular man. Zulma was actually calm, but her heart was full of gratitude and there was a fervor in her language which showed that her sensitive nature was in harmony with the time and place in which she found herself. Never had Cary seen her more beautiful. The humbleness and poverty of her surroundings brought out into relief the wealth and lordliness of her charms. She sat like an empress in her wicker chair. The predominant thought with Cary, as he glanced at her admiringly, was this—that it was an episode to be remembered through life, an episode which he could not have expected in

his wildest dreams, and which would never recur again, to sit thus, a thousand miles away from home, in a lonely hut, in the snow-piled forests of Canada, with one of the loveliest and grandest women of God's planet. Over and over again, as he took in quietly the full significance of this fact, he closed his eyes and delivered his soul to full and uninterrupted fruition. There are brief hours of enjoyment—few and far between—which are full compensations for years of dull, commonplace existence, or even of positive suffering. Cary was very happy, and he might have sat there, before the fire, the liveliest night, without ever thinking of his own or his companion's fatigue. Zulma, while no less absorbed in her own delight, was more considerate. When ten o'clock was reached, she called Batoche from his retreat and proposed to him the arrangements for the night. After these were settled, she told her old friend that she had a favor to ask him. She wished him to play the violin. He hesitated a moment, then with a quaint smile fetched the instrument from the little room. Taking his stand in the centre of the hut, he opened with a few simple airs which only drew a smile from the lips of his listeners, but all at once, changing his mood, he plunged into a whirlpool of wild melody, now torturing, then coaxing his violin, till he seemed transported beside himself, and both Zulma and Cary fancied themselves in the presence of a possessed spirit. They exchanged glances of wonder and almost of apprehension. Neither of them was at all prepared for this exhibition of wondrous mechanical skill, and preternatural expression. Batoche closed as abruptly as he had begun. After a final sweep over the strings that sounded like a shriek, he held his bow extended in his hand for a moment, while his contracted features and fixed eye assumed an expression of listening.

"There is trouble in the air," he said quietly, as he walked back to the alcove to lay by his violin. "The day which has been so eventful shall be followed by a night of distress. We have been happy. Our friends are not so happy."

XVI.

A PAINFUL MEETING.

Deep silence followed these words. It was broken, after an interval of about ten minutes, by a great commotion outside and the rushing of Batoche to the door. Cary and Zulma remained in their seats awaiting an explanation which was soon forthcoming. Batoche entered supporting on his arm the drooping form of Pauline. M. Belmont followed, the picture of anger and despair. When Zulma saw her friend, she uttered an exclamation of pain and sprang forward to meet her. Pauline having shot a burning glance at her and at the figure sitting beside her, placed her hand upon her heart, and fell backwards in a swoon. Cary forgetting his wounds, hobbled to her assistance. The whole household was bustling around the beautiful victim, as she lay unconscious in Batoche's easy chair. But the attack was only transient. Pauline soon recovered consciousness and strength under the action of restoratives, and the company was enabled to understand what combination of strange circumstances had thus brought them so unexpectedly together. M. Belmont drew Batoche into the alcove where they had a long and loud conversation, the substance of which was that both the friends were in imminent danger, the one of his life, the other of his liberty. M. Belmont had been warned that day, through the friendly offices of Captain Bouchette, that he must not receive Batoche into his house any further. Batoche had lately been tracked in his nocturnal excursions to and from the town, the authorities had been made aware of his doings, and strict orders had been issued for his capture dead or alive. The man who was on his heels was Donald, the servant of Roderick Hardinge, who had apprised his master of the facts. Roderick through delicacy, had not ventured to mention the matter to M. Belmont, but had commissioned their mutual friend, Bouchette, to do so. The Belmont house was hereafter to be closely watched, and if Batoche or any of his companions were found there, not only would they be seized, but M. Belmont himself would be arrested and tried by court martial. This threat was bad enough, but there was worse. M. Belmont had that day received an anonymous letter in which he was told that a sentence of banishment from the town was hanging over his head. Colonel McLean, commander of the regulars, and the highest officer in the garrison after Governor Carleton, had included his name in this punishment along with several others. He had powerful friends in Lieutenant-Governor Cramahé, Captain Bouchette, and Roderick Hardinge, but the force of circumstances might render their interposition unavailable. M. Belmont did not know how much truth there was in all this. But, according as the siege progressed, spirits within the town were getting terribly excited, and he really could not tell what might happen. At all events, the letter had completely roused him and he had decided, at whatever risk, upon coming to consult Batoche. He had intended to come alone, but his daughter Pauline, guessing his intention, would not be left behind. She declared she would follow her father through every contingency. They had both contrived to escape from the town by the happiest combination of circumstances. Now that he was out of the town, he would go further than he had first intended. He would ask Batoche's opinion about staying away from it altogether, thus forestalling banishment. In the casket which his friend had hidden for him,

there were sufficient valuables in coin to answer his purposes, and fully cover all his expenses for months to come. Hitherto he had struggled hard against his fate and his feelings for the sake of his daughter. Now that he was forced to act, he would resume his liberty and he hoped Pauline would become reconciled to the change. He was not too old, and he had sufficient bodily strength to carry his principles into practice if need be.

M. Belmont poured out his story with rapid animation, being never once interrupted by Batoche. When he had concluded, he grew calmer and was in a proper state of mind to receive the advice of his friend.

Batoche's words were few and deliberate. As for himself, M. Belmont need not fear any further trouble from his goings and comings in the town. He had no dread of the wolves, only hate. He laughed at their threats. There was not an Englishman of them all cunning enough to entrap him. He would continue his visits as he pleased, but he would never come near M. Belmont's residence. As to M. Belmont's personal case, he would simply advise him to maintain his ground, and not compromise himself by flight. He knew that his friend was no coward, but flight was a cowardly act. Then, there was Pauline to consider—an all-powerful argument. All his life had been consecrated to her—let it be consecrated to the end. He had made many sacrifices in her behalf—he should not recoil before this greatest sacrifice. The dear child might acquiesce, but it would cause her many a secret tear, and such as she were too good to be made unhappy. Besides, M. Belmont should think of his compatriots. He was their foremost man. If he fled, they would all be put under the ban. If he deserted them, what would many of them do in the supreme hour of trial that was coming?

M. Belmont listened attentively, almost religiously to the words of the man whom he had of late so much learned to admire, and whose wisdom was never more apparent than on the present occasion. He thanked Batoche warmly, but failed to say that he would follow his advice. Instead of that, he took him by the hand and drew him into the apartment where the young people were seated.

They too had had an absorbing conversation. It was the sight of Cary which had so suddenly unbalanced Pauline when she first entered the cabin. From a hasty note which Batoche had smuggled into the town, she had learned of his misfortune at the Intendant's Palace. She had been feverishly anxious to hear more about his fate. This was one of the causes why she decided upon accompanying her father in his perilous journey that night. She knew she would meet Batoche and gather full particulars from him. But she had no suspicion that she would see Cary himself. And the presence of Zulma was another mystery. But after she received consciousness, as we have seen, and, seated between them, had heard the explanation of everything, not only did her spirits revive, but she forgot all the other sorrows which waited upon her. Cary, too, completely overlooked his own ailments in the joy of her presence. And Zulma, without misgiving, without afterthought, was perhaps the happiest of the three, because she partook of the pleasure which her two friends experienced in each other's society.

Thus a full hour of unalloyed enjoyment passed away, after which the conversation necessarily drifted into more serious courses. It could hardly be otherwise in view of the circumstances by which they were all surrounded. Youth and beauty and love cannot always feast upon themselves. They must perforce return to the stark realities of life. They spoke of the war and of all the miseries attendant upon it—the sufferings of the poor, the privations of the sick, the anxieties of parents, the pangs of absence, the rigors of the cold, and the terrible sacrifices which even the commonest soldier is obliged to make. The two girls listened with tears as Cary graphically recounted his experiences, which, though relieved at times by touches of humor, were profoundly sad. Then Zulma, in eloquent language and passionate gestures, gave her view of the situation. Pauline was mostly silent. Her role was to receive the confidences of others, rather than to communicate her own. At times, in the march of discourse, the veil of the future was timidly raised, but immediately dropped again, with an instinctive shrinking of the three young hearts. That far they durst not look. The present was more than sufficient for them to bear. A gentle, merciful Providence would provide for the rest.

Who can gauge the effect upon the participants of this interview, in such a place, at such an hour, and amid so many singular circumstances? It was deep, searching, and ineffaceable, and the sequel of our history will show that most of its culminating events were directly traceable to this memorable evening.

When M. Belmont stepped forward with Batoche, he at once addressed himself to Cary Singleton, asking his advice on the subject of the conference just held in the alcove. The young officer, after blushing and faltering at the suddenness of the appeal, replied in a manly fashion that, although he was an apostle of liberty with pistol and sabre, and entire devotion to the cause, even to the shedding of his heart's blood, he could not presume upon giving advice to such a man as M. Belmont. He was too young, for one thing, and, for another, he was not sufficiently acquainted with the circumstance of the case. He added, glancing