

JOHN TALON-L'ESPERANCE.

(“LACLÈDE.”)

“The cares of day are o'er, and all alone
I wander pensive in the dreary gloaming,
And as the silent stars rise one by one,
Off to the spirit land my thoughts are roaming;
This consecrated churchyard echoing my tread,
And all my memories centred on my dead.

My dead! Ah yonder on the green hillside,
Where violet blossoms on the mounds are peeping,
And purple lilacs in rich clusters hide
The scented woodbines round their stemlets creeping,
'Tis there this lonely eve my spirit hies,
Where all I loved on earth unconscious lies.

Long has thou slept there 'neath the sheltering sprays
Torn from thy orphan baby, O my mother!
Tears, sighs and sobs through melancholy days
Here nursed the sorrow which the world would smother,
And now I kneel beside thy lowly bed
To feel thy holiest blessing on my head.”

This commencement of a poem written into his “Ephemerides” column in the *Gazette*, is part of a wondrously tender, attractive personality, which has just passed from our land into that “Silent Land” towards which his spiritual nature continually faced. He was born in the year 1836 in the Mississippi Valley, of a French Creole family, originally from Canada, and was brought up in wealth and ease. “I was worth one hundred and fifty thousand dollars in a large estate and slaves,” he told the writer, “but lost it in the war. Yet, after all,” he added, “what are our real needs in this short life?” He finished his education at the Ecole Polytechnique in Paris, and at Heidelberg and is said to have also studied for the priesthood. In the war he fought on the Southern side, and sometimes afterwards referred, with his peculiar poetical sympathy, to the bivouac life of the soldier of both sides during that period. When his cause lost he came to Canada and settled at St. Johns, Quebec, where he married, and connected himself with Canadian journalism. He at once threw in his lot with his adopted country, and soon chose as his life-aim the cultivation of a united feeling between the French and English races, comprehending the good in each and actuated by his innate love of men. After a short time with the *St. Johns News* he joined the staff of the *Montreal Gazette*, and in about a year following (1873) became editor of the *Canadian Illustrated News*, where his life-aim had full swing. Among his most spirited articles in this line was “Quebec Vindicata,” in which, in reply to an aspersion on the Province, he counted up her glorious names and exploits of the past, her heroes, missionaries and discoverers, her founders of the cities of the West and of the Mississippi, her present progress, her statesmen, her record of culture, and the future whose foundations she is now laying. He always deprecated as completely whatever existed of separatism and race prejudice among the French Canadians, and when the question of the future of their language in Quebec began to be discussed, he several times wrote frankly and publicly reasons which made plain to him that it was fated to disappear. It had been his own home-tongue also, and he had himself seen it go in Louisiana and the South. To illustrate by an incident: He had been at college with Otero the New Mexican, a Spaniard, steeped in Spanish ideas, and the representative of those ideas and their tongue in his territory. Years afterwards they met, and he found that not only he himself, the Frenchman, had changed, but Otero, too, the Spaniard, had become a thorough American.

As editor of the *Illustrated News*, he supplied that poorly paid paper with much more than the value of his meagre salary, adding to his editorials a stream of novelettes, short articles and poems, besides his serial, “The Bastonnais,” afterwards republished in book form. And here it was that his constitution seems to have been first sapped by overwork. He was at that time a man about forty, of fine, compact, athletic figure, and a bronzed countenance which suggested the sportsman. He wore a full, brown moustache; (an earlier photograph shows that he once wore a beard also). His large, loveable brown eyes were, however, the feature of his countenance, and these, with the ready, genial smile, made him a man towards whom one's heart at once warmed. There was not the shadow of dejection in those features. Always open, his expressions, whether written or spoken, and even when conveyed only by the pressure of the hand, came straight out of the soul, and revealed some measure of its spiritual springs. No

budding *litterateur* or any other person was ever saddened by contact with him. Indeed, in his passion for the pure and beautiful, his fault, if it were such, was overwillingness to take the germ from the fruition, and led him to admit to his columns too much of the efforts of young writers. It is a question, perhaps, whether, after all, he was not right in this at that time, and whether the sunshine of a nature like his does not do more to bring on the struggling slip of Canadian culture than the frosts of the whole ice-chest of critical Tooley-streeters. His literary work at this period was very unequal, often too hasty in the first forms in which it appeared, though a little of the best of it was subsequently polished with great care.

In 1880 he left the *Illustrated News*, which not very long after came to an end. In 1881 he was for some time on the staff of the *Gazette*, and subsequently on that of the *Star*. In 1882 he obtained the position of Provincial Immigration Agent at Montreal, which he retained until 1886. In 1882, moreover, he was appointed one of the original members of the Royal Society of Canada, to which he contributed papers on Canadian literature and similar subjects.

In the meantime he had established in the *Gazette* his Saturday column, entitled “Ephemerides,” which was soon looked for eagerly by a multitude of readers, and was to some the only part of the paper read by them. Put together in short paragraphs, containing scraps of history or antiquarianism, quotations, musings, sometimes poetry of his own or of others, classical references, an occasional announcement of a new book, and even a cookery recipe or two, the whole being signed “Laclède,” after Laclède Liguest, the founder of his native city, St. Louis, its attraction lay almost altogether in its unveiling of the individuality of one of the dearest, most idealistic men who ever lived or wrote. In reading, you were admitted at once into his confidence and companionship. I have before me several of the columns. One has these paragraphs:

“If anyone wants to transport himself, within about half an hour, from modern Montreal to the middle of the eighteenth century, he has only to take the Montarville, from Island wharf, at 1.30 p.m., and sail down to Pointe-aux-Trembles. There he will find the living picture of an old Norman village—the rocky, sunken road leading up the hill; the ancient little church perched on the edge of the promontory; stone houses of the last century the size of fortresses; gardens full of flowers; two dusty streets at right angles embowered in aspens (hence the name) and voluminous women, with beves of youngsters, gazing at him in courteous and smiling wonderment. He gets back to town about seven, strangely impressed with what he has seen.”

Another paragraph runs thus:

“A pleasant coincidence. I always had a weakness for the Iroquois as against the Huron, bred of my youthful reading of Fenimore Cooper and Schoolcraft. So and so, of this city, sends me the following.” [Here follow a correspondent's arguments in defence of the Iroquois in history.]

His enjoyment of a picturesque tradition is illustrated in his name. To this he added the syllable “Talon,” on being told by Abbe Tanguay, the genealogist, that such was its original form and that it marked his collateral descent from the great Intendant, a connection on which he dwelt with innocent pride. He showed more than any man how much interest can be awakened in the romance of the regions around us, and there is little doubt that he educated not a few permanently in that culture of the heart which alone makes the gentleman and gentlewoman. For myself, it was one of his desultory discussions on “What are the Four Greatest Novels?” two of which he decided to be Goethe's “Wilhelm Meister” and Jean Paul's “Titan,” that gave me the first attraction towards and pleasure in German literature. The influence of Goethe over himself shows in comparing the lines at the head of this paper with the “Dedication” of “Faust.” Though a Roman, too, in religion, he was one of those Catholics who are catholic, and looked askance at no true religionist. “L——,” he said to me once, “you ought to know Father J——. You and he would have plenty to tell each other. He's a Jesuit, but you don't mind that. Some people cannot understand a Jesuit, just as many others cannot understand a Puritan. Isn't that so? You and I may

understand them, but many cannot.”

Of the quality of his real literary work I shall say this only, that the greatest of American critics, in writing to me concerning the collection, “Songs of the Great Dominion,” remarked: “The most poetical thing in the book is L'Esperance's ‘Epicidium.’”

Besides his Fellowship of the Royal Society, he had been a member of the “Kuklos” and “Athenæum” clubs, president of the Society for Historical Studies, the first vice-president of the Society of Canadian Literature, and Professor of English Literature at Laval University.

He had written, besides “The Bastonnais,” two novels, “Fanchon” and “My Creoles,” and had put together, in characteristically neat MS., a number of poems, which, with others, he intended to shortly publish under the title of “The Book of Honour.”

In July, 1888, Mr. Desbarats established his beautiful paper, *The Dominion Illustrated*, and chose as first editor Talon-L'Esperance, who entered into the task with enthusiasm—a task which, alas, his strength was then too far undermined to bear. His friends at the Society for Historical Studies, of which he was a constant attendant, noticed his increasing fatigue. At length, in addition to some of the bitterest of griefs, his favourite daughter, a bright young girl, died, and thenceforth on towards the spring of 1889 his appearance became painful to his friends. Mr. George Murray remarked his ashen hue at one of the meetings of the society and predicted disaster. Shortly afterwards the blow fell, in an insidious paralysis attended with gentle delusions—a condition from which, especially as it seems to have had the hereditary element,—there was no prospect of any release except a speedy one by death. He was removed by his friends to private quarters at St. Jean de Dieu, until his departure on the 10th of March instant. It is pleasant to think that during his illness all his illusions, which were constant, were happy, and were mainly concerned with unbounded hospitalities and with gifts and cheques for his friends, of all of whom he retained an affectionate memory. Some days before his death it is said he recognized and accepted its approach with resignation.

“Whether is it happier,” he once exclaimed, in “Ephemerides,” “to waken or to dream! That depends upon temperaments. But there is positive bliss in reveie all the same. We may be poor, we may be abandoned, we may be wretched, and yet going about along the streets we may forget all our woes by giving free rein to our imagination. For the time being, at least, we are rich, we have companionship, we are felicitous. You remember that dear old German song “Das Stille Land,” and it has soothed and consoled thousands:—

Once more I hear thy tuneful breezes playing
O'er music-haunted streams,
Once more my spirit through thy realm is straying
O holy land of dreams.

There do the shadows of the faithful-hearted
Wave by me to and fro,
The shadows of the loved ones who departed
In the far long ago.

There is the heart that never knew another
Sorrow than for my pain,
There murmured blessings from thy lips, O mother!
Sink in my soul again.

There, too, thou art with me, O fond and tender
As thou art good and fair;
I look in thy brown eyes' unfathomed splendour,
And read “I love thee” there.

Not with that cold and measured liking only
Which here I win from thee,
But Love, for which when saddest and most lonely,
I pine so utterly.

There, from the heroes of the distant ages
The clash of armour swells,
There, with calm, thoughtful look, the ancient sages
Walk mid the asphodels.

There the old poets, themes of song and story,
On that eternal shore,
To strains of an unutterable glory
Sweep the rich chords once more.

God! how my full heart leaps up and rejoices,
As through the thrilling calm,
With grand accord of their harmonious voices
They pour the solemn psalm.”

So this child of God and brother of man has at length departed in peace. The company of his friends, standing upon this shore, send after him the adieu he loved:

VIVE ET VALE.

W. D. LIGHTHALL.