



FOR FAITH and KING

a Romance of Ville-Marie

BY BLANCHE L. MACDONELL

CHAPTER X.—Continued.

As a host, brilliant, imposing, stately, the Governor-General was at his best. The winning grace, the delicate condescension of his breeding that tempered his strenuous and determined will, charmed his guests.

"A last toast. To the glory of our arms. Help yourselves, gentlemen, and here's to you," carrying to his lips a golden goblet, engraved with his family arms, "To the glory of our arms."

The guests bowed ceremoniously, raising their goblets and repeating, "To the glory of our arms."

The room to which the company adjourned was a long drawing-room, with curtains of the finest turkey red, embossed with a damask pattern, the high carved mantel piece painted white. There were rich faceteuils and sofas, buhl-cabinets and spindle-legged chairs. On rosewood cabinets, inlaid with ivory, stood Japanese jars filled with dried rose leaves and spices. The gathering was as brilliant as beauty and wit could make it. The individuality and fascination which has made of French women a power and rendered them an inspiration to the men of their race, stamped on all around them the impress of their aptitudes, their grace, their charm. In this charmed circle Madame la Marquise reigned like an empress. Card tables were ranged, the older guests played at *lasquet*, *homme* and *brélan*, the younger members of the party revelled in charades and *bout rimés* or listened charmed to the soft strains of the *théobé*. Diane had never looked so beautiful, a lovely, persuasive creature, strangely in touch with the spirit of her surroundings. A noble figure, from the white brocade of her robe, haughtily rose the regal head and neck; beneath the powdered masses of her hair, her eyes burned deeply like violet stars.

"The fairest favourite of Versailles cannot compare with this peerless flower of New France. She has that in her face that would send men to death as to a banquet," the Governor, who was a connoisseur in feminine charms, had declared.

"Mademoiselle, will you permit an old man, whom your freshness makes young again, to pay his devoirs," making a low bow, his palms steadying his sword while his spurs clanked and his plumed hat in his right hand swept the ground. He spoke the language of gallantry, the strained courtesies of the Court and high society, but the homage offered was sincere and palpable and carried with it a subtle flattery.

The Chevalier de Crisasi held his place at Mademoiselle de Monestrol's side. The Chevalier was owned, body and soul, by this girl; there was a pathetic dignity in his very hopelessness. Even to hint at his preference was so glaring a departure from French precedence that the courtly gentleman would have shrunk from it. He could, however, express many varying meanings with his eyes while the rest of his face remained blandly inexpressive; the most rigid propriety could not deny him that privilege. The soft, southern orbs discomfited so eloquently, their look of reverential homage melted so marvellously into a glance of burning tenderness, even the slow veiling of his eyes was like a silent salutation. Lydia, looking like a pale, blush rose, childishly engrossed with all about her, always exercised that peculiar charm of careless spontaneity, of purposeless yet inspiring loveliness.

"But she is a Circe, the Demoiselle de Monestrol, superb, a magnificent creature, whose spells are irresistible, but, alas! without heart or soul," sighed d'Ardieux, who found himself secluded from the circle that surrounded Diane, and whose views of matters in general were somewhat bitter in consequence.

"Ah, softly, my friend, but what a comparison." Du Chêne laughed with easy frankness. "Women of the Circe type to me offer no attraction. I prefer something simple and natural."

"Simple and natural, truly, and who could be more simple and natural than our Diane," sharply interrupted Le Ber's niece, Madame de St. Rochs. Wife and mother at thirteen, the young lady wore her matronly dignity with exaggerated demureness, or sometimes, in the wild exhilaration of youthful spirits, forget it altogether. Now, with her brown, mutinous, piquant face, she looked, in her rich costume, like some pretty, mischievous child, masquerading in the stately robes of a grown woman.

"Sainte Dame! who so good to the little ones as Diane? who so patient with the old and the sick? When my baby—"

"When that baby's mother," mischievously interrupted Du Chêne, his eyes twinkling with fun, "heartlessly abandoned it to go coasting with the children, Diane, doubtless, took the marmot under her protection. Say then, is it not so, cousin?"

"Not at all, cousin. I went only to see that no harm befell the little ones."

"And were tempted to join in the amusement. What a situation for a matron of experience," provokingly, "and the doll, Louise, that was so long hidden in the oak chest that Armand, believing it a secret, concealed from him, became wildly jealous. When the baby was ill, St. Rochs cradled the little one on one knee and his wife on the other, singing lullabies to the two babies at once. Was it not so, Louise?"

Madame de St. Rochs flushed angrily, tears of vexation sprang to her eyes, though she made a determined effort to control herself. It was the Demoiselle de Monestrol who came to her aid.

"Say, then, Louise, have you heard of the Indian witch who is camped at the foot of the mountain. She is said to have attained a marvellous age and to be possessed of extraordinary powers."

"She foretold the disasters of the Sieur La Salle," said Crisasi.

Regarding the Chevalier with attention, Diane, by aid of that new intuition that vitalizes all her faculties, perceives a change. Is it the misery of sleepless nights and weary days, the sick craving of a heart at variance with itself? A swift thrill of misgiving crossed her mind.

"Let us organize a promenade to visit her," urged Madame de St. Rochs. "Baptiste Bras de Fer can tell us all about her. A genuine witch—*ciel*—let us go."

"Oh, fie, then Louise, such vagaries are unfitting a dignified matron. Your destiny is already settled," the glimmer of laughter was already shining in Du Chêne's eyes.

"Rest tranquil, cousin, it is about your fate I would concern myself. And, oh! I would know if Armand is soon to rise in the army; we have, indeed, need of a larger income. And Diane! the Chevalier and the Sieur d'Ardieux. I would know all." Madame de St. Rochs would not include Lydia, whose beauty and tractability had never won her favour, and against whom she had conceived a bitter and inveterate prejudice.

"I could tell you all that myself, Louise, would you have a glance into futurity?" Diane's eyes sparkle and scintillate with a glance of audacious mischief. "Lydia will become a nun of the Congregation of Notre Dame, Louise will be a great grandmother before she is forty, the Chevalier will receive a command, the Sieur d'Ardieux will regain his rights."

"And my cousin, Du Chêne?"

"Du Chêne will be Governor of New France,"

with a momentary stirring of impatience, quick and vital.

As the party came out into the street the flambeaux of the servants, picking their way as best they could through the mire, by lights of a chance lantern or a still open shop, flared wildly against the solemn evening sky.

"It is against the rules of the Church—this expedition," hazarded Lydia, raising the most beautiful of anxious eyes.

"Then risk it not," urged Madame de St. Rochs sharply. "For us that promenade takes place tomorrow. We will do ample penance, Father Denys is not severe."

"There is but evil to be found with the Witch of the Woods, I answer to you for it, Mesdames and Messieurs." Bras de Fer removed his pipe from his mouth and gazed around reflectively at the circle of eager faces that surrounded him. "Trust to the experience of a *coureur de bois*, to whom the silence of the desert has taught much that is not found in books. I could tell you tales of the most exciting of the Lady of the Iris, whom the Redskins call Matshi Skonéon."

"Tell us, then, pray thee, good Baptiste," implored Madame de St. Rochs.

"The Matshi Skonéon is in alliance with the Spirit of Evil. Her green eyes possess the power of fascination like those of a snake. On her head she wears a crown of iris flowers; she is surrounded by flames of fire. She never appears in the light of day. At midnight she descends upon a ray of moonlight and appears in the foam of waterfalls, the shadow of dark rocks, on the silent sand of the seashore or amidst the mists, rising from the valley. Her favourite hour is when all Nature reposes—the time when fire-flies dance over the rank marshes, when bats beat the air with their wings and cling with their slim nails to the rocks, when the silence is only broken by the croaking of frogs and the *hou-hou* of night birds, it is then that the Matshi Skonéon descends to gather the iris with which she crowns herself, and to invoke the Great Manitou." "Children," say the old people, "never go near the river by moonlight. Hidden behind the rushes the Lady of the Iris watches for her prey and her voice entralls the senses. Woe to him who falls into her power."

Far in the heart of the forest stood the solitary wigwam of the Witch of the Woods. The witch was a tiny old woman, wrinkled and shrivelled like a mummy; it seemed as though the whole force of a vigorous vitality had gathered in her luminous, dark eyes. Displaying no surprise at the late hour which her visitors had chosen for their visit, she received them with cringing servility, and her chief characteristic appeared to be a sort of animal cunning, inspired by instinct and not by reason. When the merry party found themselves brought into direct contact with the consequences of their indiscretion, all the fun of the enterprise faded away, and only the undefined sense of terror and mystery remained. Superstition bound intelligence with restraints both potent and stringent in those days, and existence was so environed with encroaching dangers of many kinds that it did not require any effort of a specially vivid imagination to create phantoms of solicitude and dread. Amidst the silence of the impenetrable forest a vague sound made itself heard; at first scarcely perceptible, then approaching and becoming more distinct, prolonged in waves of tender harmony, only to recede and die faintly away. These mysterious sounds seemed to proceed from different directions.

"Ah, well, Mesdames and Messieurs, will you now believe the word of a man who has not gained his knowledge from books? Midnight, the first night of the new moon. *Voilà*."

"Bah! that is a seal on the rocks, far in the distance," responded Du Chêne promptly.

"Mon Dieu! I fear I dare not." Madame de St. Rochs turned her troubled, childish face, the brown eyes moist with tears, towards her companions when informed that those who would penetrate the mysteries of futurity must, one by one, accompany the witch into still deeper recesses of the forest, and Du Chêne assured her that, as matron of the party, it was absolutely essential that she should set an example of courage and dignity.