

The Saturday Reader.

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CANADIAN BRIGANDS.

A THRILLING NARRATIVE

Of the exploits of the
NOTORIOUS GANG OF ROBBERS

Who infested

Q U E B E C

In 1831 and 1835.

Translated for the SATURDAY READER from a
French pamphlet published in 1837

CAMBRAY AND HIS ACCOMPLICES.

CHAPTER XIV.

Life within the prison. The patriarch of thieves, or
Captain Dumas—several attempts at escape—the
German baron Van Kœing—the jailer.

Cambray and Waterworth, several days after their arrest, were taken out of the lockup and placed in a room with about a dozen other scoundrels in accordance with the deplorable custom adopted in our prisons; there they met Mathieu and Gagnou and several other villains alike distinguished in the annals of vice. With these they entered into criminal compacts and fresh conspiracies against society. It is difficult to imagine, and far more to portray the diabolical manners that reigned in that lawless circle. To give a faint idea of it, however, we shall again adopt the language of the King's evidence Waterworth, from whom the greater part of our information has been derived.

"Whilst in the lock-up and loaded with chains, our condition became so frightful to me that I believe I could not have endured it much longer, but as good luck would have it we were soon taken out and placed in a room where we met several of our old acquaintances. From this day the prison by no means appeared so horrible a place; and had it not been for our natural yearnings for liberty, a sentiment common to all mankind and a subject of deep despair to the inmates, we would have been rather happy than otherwise. We had nothing to do all day but to relate our former prowess and invent schemes of escape and future depredations. Our ancient friends told us of all their tricks, their adventures, their insight into the constructions of the wealthiest houses and the projects in which they expected to engage on their re-entrance into the world. In this way we encouraged each other in vice, and the least experienced among us soon acquired a wondrous knowledge of our art. We had amongst us a singular character in the profession, one Dumas, an extremely expert and cautious thief, who though he had never incurred the risk of dancing in the air, he nevertheless had passed the greater part of his life in prison. By his companions, this man was called Captain Dumas, who looked up to him as their patriarch and instructor. This original character had kept a journal of his exploits and those of his little band for ten years, and also undertook the task of teaching the young the secret of his trickery, and of initiating the inexperienced into the details of criminal attempts past and future. At the approach of the criminal term, he nominated himself president of an Amateur Court, before which each of the prisoners pleaded his cause, to each he gave the substance of his defence, wrote speeches for them, addressed the jury, administered a paternal reprimand to the guilty, and laughingly pronounced sentence upon all. Thus the inmates mutually instructed each other in their little industrial vocations, and became familiar with the penalties imposed by the law on their misdemeanours.

Among us was a man of herculean strength, who amused us by playing at hanging; this he did by suspending himself by the chin on a silk handkerchief and imitating the contortions of the body, while on the gibbet. We were not always idle, however; for while Mathieu busied himself in making false keys of wood to carry out our projects of escape, Cambray and I had made arrangements with a coiner, named K——y, and in concert with him we worked at an apparatus, intended on our discharge, to convert our virgin silver into American half dollars.

One dark and rainy night, just such a one as invites the drowsy sentinels to a nap in his box, while it favours the enterprise of crime, we all set to work in right good earnest, to effect our escape. In a short time eight doors had been opened, a ceiling pierced, a wall broken through, a rope ladder hung; all that was wanted to complete our liberation was the signal "are you ready," when the ill-omened voice of alarm sounded through the jail, and we were discovered.

Immediately a picket of soldiers invested the place, and we all rushed to our beds to escape the punishment consequent upon the attempt. It is astonishing that it is almost impossible to enter into any conspiracy without a rumor of it reaching the ears of the jailer; there are too many people in the same apartment, there is always some traitor to be found among them, who to gain favour is ready to sacrifice the lives of his companions, but we well knew how to punish these treasonable disclosures and carefully watched the suspected spy, making him pay dearly for any little favours he obtained. Cambray above all was inexorable in his persecution, till at last the jailer was compelled to remove some of his victims, who till that time had lived in perpetual martyrdom.

During the time I remained in prison, there were several attempts of this nature, the most daring of which was perhaps that of Cambray.

One day whilst we were all in the yard the door was opened to permit the entrance of a load of wood. Cambray, seizing the opportunity, rushed through the gate into the street, overturning a cart in his violence, together with a sentry, who stood on guard, but his precipitation was checked by the vehicle, and he was retaken by some soldiers who had arrived in time to prevent his escape. But the best concerted plan took place shortly after this event.

One of the prisoners—and it was Mathieu, we believed, who had taken this liberty—had made wooden keys for every door of the jail not excepting even that of the entrance. Every arrangement had been made for a general sortie, and the conspirators were completely sheltered from suspicion. Provost, who was at the head of this movement, was to have opened the doors of every room during the night time, gathered the prisoners in the passage, descended quietly and opened the outer door, given the signal to leave, got the whole band admissibly into the passage, armed the most determined with the guns of the guard, and led them all into the street, with the full determination to assassinate the sentinels had he offered to oppose their exit. This plan was partly carried into effect, and whilst the little army was arranged in the passage, awaiting impatiently the signal of Provost, who was a criminal condemned to transportation and who had descended to open the doors, he, in order to have his sentence commuted, informed the jailer and thus made a merit of his treason, and obtained great favour for having done so, while the least guilty in the affair were thrown into the cells. This Provost is a man of the very worst character; he fully merits transportation, and I heartily hope it may come to pass before long.

Our companions in this abode of crime were men entirely lost to decency and character; but sometimes hatred or prejudice or blind suspicion threw the innocent or the young in with the rest. It was horrible to listen to the sarcasm and jesting of which these simpletons, for so we called them, were made the subjects; and if the new comers were not proof against every thing in the shape of vice, the contagion of evil in every form, they were sure to fall into the ways of those by whom they were surrounded.

There is a man there at present of high birth and great honesty. I am convinced that he was reduced to the greatest misery by a series of misfortunes, and by deplorable accident he was finally thrown into this den of infamy. He was an inhabitant of St Jean Port Joly, a Canadian peasant. He was known in his parish as the German Baron, a local corruption of Van Kœing, which in the German signifies son of the King. He told me his history: it is one of great interest, even romantic in its details. His father was an officer in an English regiment, which was stationed in Canada about sixty years ago; he was of German parentage, being the only son of Baron Van Kœing, one of the most noble and wealthiest Barons of Germany. His father placed him in the English army until such time as his age warranted his appearance among the dignitaries of his native Empire. Unfortunately this young officer, amiable, wealthy and with every prospect of fame before him, was naturally of a thoughtless disposition, preferring a life of contented retirement to the labour and anxiety attendant upon a distinguished position. Having wandered over the greater part of Canada, he at last fixed his residence at "Riviera Ouelle" where he became acquainted with a beautiful peasant girl, the daughter of a farmer in that vicinity, whom he afterwards married.

For some time he lived in plenty and never dreamed of returning to Germany, but his resources soon began to fail, his family to increase, his pledges of affection, to double, and this son of the king saw the moment of indigence rapidly approaching. At last his father's death occurred and the succession became vacant; too poor and too idle to reclaim his estates in person, the German Baron employed a Canadian lawyer in his stead, giving him power to dispose of his domains and dignities. The collateral inheritors, who, in the absence of the heir, had succeeded to the immense property, to disencumber themselves of the legitimate claimant gave his agent a sum of several thousand florins, quite sufficient to render the Canadian family of Van Kœing perfectly independent, but which was completely squandered at the end of twenty years. The son of this Baron destined by birth to revel in luxury, to hold dominion over his fellow creatures, to form the foremost ranks of society in Europe, found himself at more than thirty years of age, poor, ignorant, humble in appearance as the peasantry with whom he had been brought up, and to crown all, the inmate of a prison. Where then is the superiority of birth and rank?—raise the democrat, the man of the people, and lower the monarch, and not one of nature's laws will be broken not a principle violated.

You are aware that last winter the inhabitants of the various parishes of the county of Rimouski and Kamouraska were reduced to great want by the failure of their crops. St John Port Joly suffered considerably in the general dearth, and among the rest the German Baron found himself, his wife and children, on the verge of starvation.

One fearfully cold evening, when the thermometer stood at fifty degrees below zero, and the wind beat furiously over the village and against the frozen woods in the vicinity, there