

## THE STORY OF THE OKA INDIANS.

## PRELIMINARY.

opose to tell the story of the Oka Indians with as much historical as I can command, and without either malice or imagination in dealing with the events of recent times. I think it is a story which, as Seneca says, "is often repeated till it is sufficiently learned," and while I will be responsible for the conclusions I may draw, I am not responsible for the facts which have forced those conclusions upon many minds besides my own. If my tale appear to be overdrawn, it will be the fault of the facts, not of my fancy; for truth was never stranger than fiction in the history of the red Indians of Canada, and in the vicissitudes and wrongs of the Indians of the Lake of the Two Mountains. Once the only defence of the Sulpicians, when Montreal was a small French village; now become a special mark for Sulpician persecution: once enjoying the fullest and freest right to fish, hunt and maintain themselves on and out of the lands given to the Sulpicians as their trustees; now treated as squatters and worried by law-suits for cutting wood for fuel, or for the small manufactures upon which their humble existence largely depends: once holding a balance of power which kept Sulpician fate, and doing faithfully the brave deeds which alone saved the Sulpicians from annihilation; now spurned with hate as an obstruction to the aggrandizement and political schemes, of the very people for whose protection they fought against their own flesh and blood! I am aware that I have to meet the opposing public opinion on this question in three ranks: A front rank of a wealthy corporation which has done much good, but which has left the very largest part of its work undone; which according to the highest legal opinion in England and Canada, given over thirty years before the illegal confirmation of the Seminary claims in 1840, has no valid title to the estates it got "confirmed," but which belong to the Crown by right of conquest; which has neither fulfilled fully the obligations of that title to the Island of Montreal, nor to the Lake of the Two Mountains; and which has sanctioned most miserable and cruel persecutions in Oka, perhaps thinking with Saul when he consented to the stoning of Stephen, that it was doing God service." A second rank, a lay element, led by political adventurers and a few religious bigots, who hurl forth both falsehood and vulgarity in lieu of argument and reason, and who are mentally incapacitated to look truth, in the face if it wears not the hue they wish it. A third rank, well in the rear, a sort of reserve, as ready to run when the foe comes as to rush on when the foe retreats—the time-serving class of one creed and all parties; who have brave words for the Okas when the indignation of a country is aroused and some party aim can be handled, but who pay penance for their valour in trimming when indignation has passed away; who want to be thought as Protestants of very staunch principle by Protestants, and as Protestants of very elastic principle by Catholics who to both sides show a smooth face and a yielding assent or so gentle a dissent as to be easily mistaken. They hate persecution, but they have an eye to business. They love civil and religious rights, but they hate to lose a customer. They have that sort of manhood which will let you kick it blue if you buy its wares, and that sort of hypocrisy "which is honestly indignant that you should think it hypocritical."

But there is a public opinion in Canada which will yet master these three; which will yet rise in protest against the demoralizing tendency to sink principle in party, honor, in "business," right, in expediency. If the story I have to tell wakens the people to protest against gross wrong, if it wakens more love for even Indian humanity, more of that British determination to enforce justice and right at all hazards, even for an Indian, I will feel the work not in vain.

## EARLY HISTORY.

The "Oka Indians," as they are now called have not "enjoyed" their present distinctive name more than a few years. Oka was the name of one of their old Chiefs, who died some years ago. The village where the people now live was formerly called the "Indian Village of Two Mountains." The Seminary of St. Sulpice, among its ways and means to obliterate the Indian connection dropped this name, and paid the people the left-handed compliment of the present substitute, which after all may be claimed to mean the French *Dore*, or the English "Golden Fish." Bouchette† says these Indians are descendants of a tribe that inhabited or frequented the lands bordering upon Lake Huron, and who escaped a massacre of their people, and came northward. When Bouchette wrote (1831) they were occupying the Lake of the Two Mountains, Caughnawaga, and St. Regis. I find that while the Iroquois, or Mohawks, monopolized Caughnawaga and St. Regis, the Lake of the Two Mountains contained Algonquins, Iroquois, Nippissings, and afterwards the Tete de Boule Indians, who hunted on the River St. Maurice; and that either by that sort of "adoption" which prevailed among the two former, or by migration, the two latter were lost sight of, and no tribes but the Algonquins and Iroquois recognized. The Algonquins once outnumbered the Iroquois at Oka. They were a less agricultural people; fonder of hunting, and about 300 were easily influenced by the Seminary restrictions and the willing aid it got from the Hon. Mr. Langevin when Secretary of State, to retire to the Township of Mamivaka or River Desert. The Iroquois, who now almost exclusively occupy Oka, persistently refused to accept any money or land inducement to leave. Inheriting a strong attachment to their old home and birthplace; anxious to cultivate the soil, to improve their conditions, to keep near the metropolis where they could find market for their bead-work and other industries, and strongly convinced that they had inalienable rights in the Seigniorship, they have remained from first to fixed in their determination to stay where they have lived for over a hundred and fifty years.

The earliest history of the Oka's would necessarily be that of the two tribes, the Algonquins and Iroquois, and of that part of them living north of the St. Lawrence. Four hundred and forty-two years ago, the first settler saw Hochelaga, he found here a palisaded town of birchen walls, founded by Huron Iroquois—not by Algonquins as he thought. Sixty years before Champlain could find no trace either of Hochelaga or Stadacona.

† *History of Canada*, vol. vi.  
 Appendix and Statistical Description of British Dominions in America."

In 1536, when the Jesuit missionaries established themselves on Montreal Island, they were told by the Algonquins that it had belonged to their fathers; but Colder in his history of the Five Nations says that the Iroquois claim to have been the original owners. It is certain that long before the advent of the pale-face, a war of races had existed for an unknown time; that although the Iroquois were the most courageous and the best organized, so as to be called by Europeans the Romans of the West, the Algonquins far outnumbered them, and were once supreme in Canada and parts of the adjoining districts. The Iroquois extended their territory from Lake Champlain to the end of Lake Ontario on the south side of the St. Lawrence and of the Lake; and were also in New England, Nova Scotia, the Gulf of St. Lawrence, and on the Ottawa, and some of its tributary streams. The Algonquins occupied the northern bank of the St. Lawrence, principally, when the pale-face came, but they had extended from Hudson's Bay to the Carolinas, from the Atlantic to the Mississippi.

Between their nomadic character and the onslaught of foes, frequent migrations took place, and the tribes who frequented the eastern shores of Lake Huron seemed to come northward. Champlain, writing of the chain of lakes by which he came to Lake Ontario, notes the many deserted clearings of old Indian villages along the shores—vestiges of which may still be seen. When Ville-Marie was founded by Maisonneuve (1642) a few Algonquins came within reach of the missionaries, and were "instructed"; but it is quite clear that at that time of the dainty French cooking tickled and tempted the palate of the redskin—who, though a savage, was an epicure—and the kindness of the nuns who nursed him in the hospital when sick, took care of his women and children when he went on the war-path, and won converts by presents of guns, had their weighty influence. The French made a strong effort to form an agricultural settlement of Algonquins on the island, but the Iroquois having accidentally discovered Ville-Marie, made constant havoc upon white and red skins, and in time drove the Algonquins from the St. Lawrence to the western shores of Lake Huron and the banks of the Ottawa. In 1650 the Iroquois were at the height of their power, having adopted many of the Hurons, Neutrals, Eries and Andastes, after laying waste their towns and villages—permitting the Algonquins to live upon condition of paying yearly tributes of wampum. They had attacked and beaten them from the Saguenay to the Lake of the Nipissings.

In 1626, the Seminary of St. Sulpice was founded at Montreal, as a dependency of the college of the same name in Paris. In 1647 they acquired by purchase all the proprietary rights of the first possessors of the island. In 1677 the Seminary established a special mission to the Indians at the fort on the Mountain of Montreal, which was afterwards transferred to the Sault au Recollet, or back river. During the residence of the Indians near the mountain mission, they frequently took up arms against outside members of their own tribe, and saved the Sulpicians from extermination. During the subsequent period, the Iroquois made many raids upon the Algonquins: one band in 1691 attacking them at Point aux Trembles, another at the Sault, where they captured thirty-five warriors. About the time that the Seminary purchased Montreal Island, the Iroquois were prosecuting a vigorous war against the French. About 1689, when war broke out between England and France, the Iroquois destroyed Montreal and murdered the inhabitants. In 1693 the Iroquois made overtures of peace to Frontenac, sending a deputation to the French, and another to the Algonquins at Sault au Recollet. Frontenac rejected this, and accused the Iroquois of tampering with the Sault Indians. A few weeks afterwards a deputation consisting of two chiefs of each of the Five Nations met in Quebec, where we also find present the dignitaries of the colony, priests, and the Christian chiefs of the Sault and the Mountain. When peace was finally made in 1700 at Montreal, the converts of the Sault and the Mountain were present. In fact, it is clear that this special mission of Indians was recognized by the French and the Seminary as meriting special honour and attention. They were brought to their councils in all such critical affairs, and were evidently a people for the experiment of evangelization. Upon the establishment of the Iroquois, while still maintaining their rights as an independent people, more within the material advantages as well as religious influence of the Seminary; settled in knots on different parts of the Island, and finally were brought closer together at the Sault. In 1718 the Indian mission was transferred to the Lake of the Two Mountains, and the seigniorship there obtained by the Seminary from the King of France in the sole name of and on the sole behalf of the Indians of the Sault.

In my next paper I will deal with the deeds of concession and the early settlement at the Lake—now called Oka.

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There is another evil to be avoided and that is the disposition to play the trimmer in the journey of life. All men, if they be worthy of the name, are ambitious of the respect and good opinion of their neighbours. All men wish to be popular, but too many make sad wreck in their efforts to attain this popularity. I know of few sadder spectacles than that of a man, seizing upon every ruffle of popular excitement, in the hope of sailing in upon the crest of the wave; whose anxiety to please makes him an object of discomfort to himself, an object of contempt to all who watch his efforts in that direction. Popular impulses are often misdirected and are often unjust. Too frequently they are at the services of demagogues who pay the people the disrespect of appealing to their feelings and prejudices rather than to their reason. But after all popular impulses in the long run are generally sound and true, and it is for this reason that mere popularity hunters are almost invariably doomed to final disappointment. The public respect which is worth having is that which is begotten of a popular conviction of actual worth, and the surest way to attain it is by preserving jealously one's self-respect, doing nothing which, known to the whole world, would make us blush. A spirit of sturdy independence is a good spirit to cultivate. Not the spurious article which too often passes for it. Men often get credit for independence by rushing to the front rank of their own set, in times of popular or civic commotion. That is an easy kind of independence. What is most frequently the real article, is much more difficult. Any man can sail with the wind and tide. But it is often hard to subject one's motives to misconstruction by boldly refusing either to lead or follow, with those with whom we usually act, when we think them in the wrong. It is in such cases that true independence is needed. It is in such cases that the honest devotion to truth, to our own convictions of duty, shows most conspicuously, although it is in such cases, that for the moment at any rate we are apt to get least credit for it. What is conventionally called "backbone" is, in nine cases out of ten, neither more nor less than a blatant pandering to some popular feeling of the hour. It is not independence; it is not a respectable counterfeit of independence; it is, in fact, the very opposite of independence. This honest adherence to truth is not inconsistent with the most perfect spirit of tolerance. From a lecture delivered at the New York Branch of the "Ladder of Life."