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## OUR CENTENNIAL STORY.

## THE BASTONNAIS.

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

By JOHN LESPERANCE.

## BOOK I.

## THE GATHERING OF THE STORM.

## VIII.

## THE HERMIT OF MONTMORENCI.

His name was Baptiste, but he went by the more familiar appellation of Batoche. His residence was a hut near the Falls of Montmorenci, and there he led the life of a hermit. His only companions were a little girl called Blanche, and a large black cat which bore the appropriate title of Velours, for though the brute was ugly and its eyes

"Had all the seeming  
Of a demon's that is dreaming,"

its coat was soft and glossy as silken velvet. The interior of the hut denoted poverty, but not indigence. There was a larder in one corner; a small oven wrought into the chimney to the right of the fire-place; faggots and logs of wood were piled up near the hearth, and diverse kitchen utensils and other comforts hung brightly on the wall. In the angle of the solitary room furthest from the door, and always lying in shadow, was a curtained alcove, and in this a low bedstead over which a magnificent bear-skin was thrown, with the head of the animal lying on the pillow, and its eyes, bulging out in red flannel, turned to the rafters above. Directly behind the door stood a wooden sofa which could sit two or three persons during the day, but which, at night, served as the couch of little Blanche. A shallow circular cavity in the large blue flag of the hearth was the resting place of Velours. On two hooks within easy reach of his hand, rested a long heavy carbine, well worn, but still in good order and with which, so long as he could carry it, Batoche needed never pass a day without a meal, for the game was abundant almost to his very door. From the beams was suspended an array of little bags of seeds, paper cornets of dried wild flowers and bunches of medicinal herbs, the acrid, pungent odor of which pervaded the whole room and was the first thing which struck a stranger upon entering the hut.

The habitation of Batoche was fully a mile from any other dwelling. Indeed, at that period, the country in the immediate vicinity of the Falls of Montmorenci was very sparsely settled. The nearest village, in the direction of Quebec, was Beauport, and even there the inhabitants were comparatively few. The hut of the hermit was also removed from the high road, standing about midway between it and the St. Lawrence, on the right side of the Falls as one went toward the river, and just in a line with the spot where they plunge their full tide of waters into the rocky basin below. From his solitary little window Batoche could see these Falls at all times, and under all circumstances—in day time, and in night time; glistening like diamonds in the sunlight, flashing like silver in the moonbeams, and breaking through the shadow of the deepest darkness with the coruscations of their foam. Their music, too, was ever in his ears, forming a part of his being. It ran like a web through his work and his thoughts during the day; it lulled him to sleep at night with the last ember on the hearth, and it always awoke him at the first peep of dawn. The seasons for him were marked by the variation of these sounds—the thunderous roar when the spring freshets or the autumn rain-falls came, the gentle purring when the summer droughts parched the stream to a narrow thread, and the plaintive moan, as of electric wires, when the ice-bound cascade was touched upon by certain winter winds.

Batoche's devotion to this cataract may have been exaggerated, although only in keeping, as we shall see, with his whole character, but really the Falls of Montmorenci are among the most beautiful works of Nature on this continent. We all make it a point to visit Niagara once in our lives, but except in the breadth of its fall, Niagara has no advantage over Montmorenci. In altitude it is far inferior, Montmorenci being nearly one hundred feet higher. The greater volume of Niagara increases the roar of the descent and the quantity of mist from below, but the thunder of Montmorenci is also heard from a great distance, and its column of vapor is a fine spectacle in a strong sunlight or in a storm of thunder and lightning. Its accessories of scenery are certainly superior to those of Niagara in that they are much wilder. The country around is rough, rocky and woody. In front is the broad expanse of the St. Lawrence, and beyond lies the beautiful Isle of Orleans which is nothing less than a picturesque garden. But it is particularly in winter that the Falls of Montmorenci are worthy of being seen. They present a spectacle

unique in the world. Canadian winters are proverbial for their severity, and nearly every year, for a few days at least, the mercury touches twenty-five and thirty degrees below zero. When this happens the headlong waters of Montmorenci are arrested in their course, and their ice-bound appearance is that of a white lace veil thrown over the brow of the cliff, and hanging there immovably. Before the freezing process is completed, however, another singular phenomenon is produced. At the foot of the Falls, where the water seeths and mounts, both in the form of vapor and liquid globules, an eminence is gradually formed, rising constantly in tapering shape, until it reaches a considerable altitude, sometimes one-fourth or one-third the height of the Fall itself. This is known as the Cone. The French people call it more poetically *Le Pain de Sucre*, or sugar-loaf. On a bright day in January, when the white light of the sun plays caressingly on this pyramid of crystal, illuminating its veins of emerald and sending a refracted ray into its circular air-holes, the prismatic effect is enchanting. Thousands of persons visit Montmorenci every winter for no other object than that of enjoying this sight. It is needless to add that the youthful generation visit the Cone for the more prosaic purpose of tobogganing or sledding from its summit away down to the middle of the St. Lawrence.

## IX.

## THE WOLF'S CRY.

It was an hour after sunset, and the evening was already very dark. Batoche had stirred the fire and prepared the little table, setting two pewter plates upon it, with knife and fork. He produced a huge jack-knife from his pocket, opened it, and laid that too on the table. He then went to the cupboard and brought from it a loaf of brown bread which he laid beside one of the plates. Having seemingly completed his preparations for supper, he stood still in the middle of the floor, as if listening:

"'Tis strange," he muttered, "she never is so late."

He walked to the door, which was flung open into his face by the force of the wind, and looked long and intently to the right and to the left.

"The snow is deep," he said, "the path to the high road is blocked up. Perhaps she has lost her way. But, no. She has never lost her way yet."

He closed the door, walked absently over the room, and after gazing up and around for a second or two, threw himself into a low, leather-strapped chair before the fire. As he sits there, let us take the opportunity of sketching the singular being. His face was an impressive one. The chin was long and pointed, the jaw firm. The lips were set as those of a taciturn man, but not grimly, and their corners bore two lines as of old smiles that had buried their joys there forever. A long and rather heavy nose, sensitive at the nostrils. High cheek bones. A good forehead, but rather too flattened at the temples. Long, thin meshes of white hair escaping through the border of the high fox-skin cap. The complexion was bronze and the face beardless. This last feature is said to be characteristic of low vitality, but it is also frequently distinctive of eccentricity, and Batoche was clearly eccentric, as the expression of his eyes showed. They were cold grey eyes, but filled with wild intermittent illuminations. The reflection of the fire-light gave them a weird appearance.

Batoche sat for fully half an hour in front of the fire, his long thin hands thrust into his pockets, his fox-skin cap dashed to one side of his head and his eyes steadily fixed upon the flames. Although immovable, he was evidently a prey to profound emotions for the lurid light, playing upon his face, revealed the going and coming of painful thoughts. Now and then he muttered something in a half articulate voice which the black cat seemed to understand, for it purred awhile in its circular nest, then rising, rounded its back, and looked up at its master with tender inquiry in its green eyes. But Batoche had no thought for Velours to-night. His mind was entirely occupied with little Blanche who, having gone into Quebec upon some errands, as was her wont, had not yet returned.

The wind moaned dismally around the little hut, at times giving it a wrench as if it would topple it from its foundations. The spruces and firs in the neighborhood creaked and tossed in the breath of the tempest, and there was a dull, heavy roar from the head of the Falls. Suddenly, amid all these sounds, the solitary old man's quick ear caught a peculiar cry coming from the direction of the road. It was a sharp, shrill bark, followed by a low whine. He sat up, bent his head and listened again. Velours' fur stood on end, and her whisker bristled like wire. The sound was heard again, made clearer and more striking by a sudden rush of wind.

"A wolf, a wolf!" exclaimed Batoche, as he sprang from his seat, seized his gun from its hooks and rushed out of the house. He did not hesitate one moment as to the direction which he should take, but bent his steps straight to the main road.

"Never. Oh, it can never be," he gasped, as he hurried along. "God would never throw her into the wolf's embrace."

He reached the road at last, and paused on its border to listen. He was not disappointed, for within one hundred or two hundred yards of him he heard for the third time the ominous yelp of the wolf. Then all the hunter showed itself in Batoche. He became, at once, a new man. The bent form straightened, the languid limbs became nerved, the sinister eyes shot fire, as if lighting the way before them, and the blank melancholy features were turned and hardened into one single expression—watch. In a moment he had determined the exact direction of the sound. Cautiously he advanced from tree to tree, with inaudible footfall and bated breath, until he reached the outskirts of a thicket. There he expected to bring the wolf to bay. He peered long and attentively through the branches.

"It is a den of wolves," he whispered to himself. "Not one pair of eyes, but four or five pairs are glancing through the dark. I must make quick work of the vermin. They must not be allowed to build their residence for the winter so near my cabin."

Saying which he raised his carbine to his shoulder and pointed. His finger was upon the trigger and was about to let go, when he felt the barrel of his gun bent from its position and quietly but firmly deflected towards the ground.

"Don't be a fool, Batoche. Keep your ammunition for other wolves than these. You will soon need it all," said a voice in a low tone.

The hunter immediately recognized Barbin, a farmer of Beauport.

"What are you doing here?"

"No time for questions to-night. You will know later."

"And who are those in the thicket yonder?"

"My friends and yours."

Batoche shook his head dubiously, and muttered something about going forward to satisfy himself by personal inspection. He was an enemy of prowlers of all sorts, and must know with whom he had to deal before abandoning the search.

A low whistle was heard and the thicket was instantaneously cleared.

Barbin tried to detain him, but the old man's temper rose and he snatched himself away.

"Don't be a fool, I say to you again, Batoche. You know who I am and you must understand that I would not be out in such a place and on such a night without necessary cause. These are my friends. For sufficient reasons, they must not be known at present. Believe me, and don't advance further. Besides they are now invisible."

"But why these strange cries?"

"The bark of the wolf is our rallying cry."

"The wolf!"

"Do you understand now?"

The old man passed his hand rapidly over his forehead and his eyes, then grounding his musket, and seizing Barbin by the collar, he exclaimed:

"You don't mean it: I knew it would come, but did not expect it so soon. The wolf, you said? Ah! sixteen years is a long time, but it passes, Barbin. We are old now, yet not broken—"

He would have continued in this strain, but his interlocutor suddenly stopped him.

"Yes, yes, Batoche, it is thus. Make yourself ready, as we are doing. But I must go. My companions are waiting for me. We have important work to do to-night."

"And I?" asked the old man reproachfully.

"Your work Batoche is not now, but later, not here but elsewhere. Be quiet; you have not been forgotten."

Barbin then disappeared in the wood, while Batoche slowly returned toward the road, shaking his head, and saying to himself:

"The wolf! I knew it would come, but who would have thought it? Will my violin sing the old song to me to night? Will Clara glide under the waterfall?"

## X.

## THE CASKET.

Little Blanche had not been forgotten all this time. The old man, when he reached the road, looked in the direction of Quebec for a moment, as if hesitating whether to turn his steps in that direction. But he apparently changed his mind, for he deliberately walked across the road, and plunged into the narrow path leading to his cabin. When he arrived there, he saw a horse and sleigh standing a little away from it under the trees. He paid no attention to them, however, and walked up to the door, which was opened for him by little Blanche. Bending down, he kissed her on the forehead, laid his hand upon her hair, and said:

"It is well, child, but why so late?"

"I could not return earlier, grand-papa."

"Who detained you?"

She pointed to a muffled figure seated in a shaded angle of the room. Still trailing his carbine in his left hand, Batoche walked up to it. The figure rose, extended its hand and smiled sadly.

"You don't know me, Batoche?"

The old man looked into the face of the stranger for a long time, then the light of recognition came and he exclaimed:

"I must be mistaken. It cannot be."

"Yes, it is I—"

"M. Belmont!"

"Yes, Batoche, we remember each other, though we have not met for some years. You live the life of an anchorite here, never coming to the city, and I remain in retirement, scarcely ever going from the city. We are almost strangers, and yet we are friends. We must be friends now, even if we were not before."

The old man did not reply, but asked his visitor to sit down, while he having hung up his weapon, and drawn a chair to the fire-place, took a seat beside him. The fire had burned low and both were seated in deep shadow. Blanche had offered to light a candle, but the men having refused by a sign, the child sat down on the other side of the hearth with the black cat circled on her lap.

"I brought back the child to you," said M. Belmont, by way of opening the conversation. "She was in good hands with Pauline, her god-mother, but we knew that she never spent a night out of your hermitage, and that you would be anxious if she did not return."

"Oh, Blanche is like her old grandfather. She knows every path in the forest, every sign of the heavens, and no weather could prevent her from finding her home. I have no fear that man or beast would hurt the little creature. Indeed, she has the mark of Providence upon her and no harm will come to her until she has closed my eyes in death. There is a spirit in the waterfall yonder, M. Belmont, which watches over her and the protection is inviolable. But I thank you, sir, and your daughter for having taken care of her."

"I kept her for another reason, Batoche," and M. Belmont looked furtively at his companion, who returned his glance in the same dubious fashion.

"It gave me the opportunity of paying you a visit which, for special reasons, is of the greatest importance to me."

Batoche seemed to divine the secret thought of his guest, and put him immediately at his ease by saying:

"I am a poor solitary being, M. Belmont, severed from all the world, cut off from the present, living only in the past, and hoping for nothing in the future except the welfare of this little orphan girl. No body cares for me and I have cared for nobody, but I am ready to do you any service in my power. I have learned a secret to-night, and—who knows?—perhaps life has changed for me during the last hour."

M. Belmont listened attentively to these words. He knew in the presence of what strange being he was, and that the language which he heard had perhaps a deeper meaning than appeared upon the surface. But the manner of Batoche was quiet in its earnestness, his eye had none of its strange fire and there was no wild incoherent gesture of his to indicate that he was speaking outside of his most rational mood. M. Belmont therefore contented himself with thanking the hermit for his good will. A lull then ensued in the conversation, when suddenly a low howl was heard in the forest beyond the high road. By a simultaneous impulse, both men sprang to their feet and glared at each other. Little Blanche's head had fallen on her shoulder and she was sweetly sleeping unconscious of all harm, while Velours, though, she stirred once or twice, would not abandon her warm bed on her mistress' knees.

"Wolf!" muttered Batoche.

"Wolf!" replied M. Belmont.

And the two men fell into each other's embrace.

"We are brothers once more," said M. Belmont, pressing the hand of the old man, while the tears flowed down his cheeks.

"Yes, and in the holiest of causes," responded Batoche.

"There is no more mystery between us now," resumed M. Belmont. "That call was for me. I must be away at once. I have delayed too long already. What I came to you particularly for, Batoche, was this."

And he produced, from the interior of his huge wild-cat overcoat, a small casket bound with clasps of silver.

"In this small casket, Batoche, are all my family relics and treasures. For my money I care nothing; for this I care so much that I would give my life rather than that it should perish. You are the man to hide it for me. You know of secret places which no mortal can penetrate. I confide it to you. This has been a dark day for me; what to-morrow has in store I almost fear to guess. The times will probably go hard with all of us, including you, Batoche. For ourselves the loss will be nothing. We are old and useless. But Pauline and little Blanche! They must survive the ruin. Should I perish, this casket is to go to my daughter, and should you too come to grief, entrust the secret of its hiding place to Blanche that she may deliver it. Take it, and good night. I must go."

Without waiting for a word of reply, M. Belmont embraced the old man on the cheek, stooped to imprint a kiss on the forehead of the sleeping child, rushed out of the cabin, threw himself into his cariole and drove away.

As he disappeared, the same low cry of the wolf was borne plaintively from the forest.

(To be continued.)