

The Image-Breaker of L'Ange Gardien

A Story of Habitant Love and Superstition

By J. E. LeROSSIGNOL

It was not that Theophile Beaurepaire was rich, nor that he was tall and strong, nor that he was gay, nor that at times a wicked gleam lit up his black eyes, so that the young men called him a "devil of a fellow," and the young women smiled and blushed at the mention of his name. It was for none of these reasons that the good people of L'Ange Gardien, the ancients and the sober middle-aged people, looked askance at Theophile, crossed themselves and whispered "infidel," "atheist," "sacrilegious one," as he passed by.

It was because the people of L'Ange Gardien, dwelling in peace as their fathers had done for a hundred and fifty years, beneath the shadow of mountains which they never wished to climb, besides the flow of a mighty stream on whose waters they never cared to sail, desired to continue in the ancient ways, and bitterly resisted the efforts of one who strove to awaken them from their long repose.

The ancestral customs, the time-honoured usages, were as nothing to that young man, descendant of seven generations of peaceful *habitants*, but heir to the restless spirit of some remote ancestor, some Breton pirate or some Norman viking. For he had departed from the trodden paths, removed the old landmarks, despised the tradition of the fathers, and, to those who loved to think of former days, he was a profane person, a breaker of images, a setter up of strange gods.

Let us tell of some of the changes that Theophile sought to bring into the parish of L'Ange Gardien.

The ancient hay-cart, dear to the memory of young and old, with its stout wheels, its strong shafts, its rack and roller, he had set aside in favour of a four-wheeled monster that two horses could hardly draw.

Finding the Canadian horses, the finest in the world, unequal to the task, he replaced them with Clydesdales, slow-moving, ponderous, with feet like an elephant's and stomachs insatiable.

Discovering that the barn doors were too low and narrow for the great waggon and its enormous load, he tore down the venerable roof, with its graceful curving eaves, raising in its place a huge and hideous structure of the Mansard type, French it might be, but Canadian, never.

But the guardian angel himself must have shed tears as he beheld the consolidation of five beautiful farms, each three arpents wide and two miles long, extending from the river to the forest slope of the northern mountains. The old boundaries were removed and three new farms created, unlovely blocks of land, almost as broad as long, while, from the fences that were torn up, Theophile obtained a vast quantity of fire wood, which he sold in Quebec for money enough to build a new barn on each of the more distant farms. These farms, too, he sold at a price sufficient to pay the cost of all three, and this to strangers from a distant parish, who, though they were good Catholics, had little in common with the long-established families of L'Ange Gardien.

And what of the little farm-houses, close to the main road, where five prosperous *habitant* families for many years had lived? Alas! These good families were gone, and in their place, for three months of the year, were rich people from Quebec, aliens, who came to spend the summer in the country, while during the long winter the little homes were desolate, forsaken, half buried in drifts of snow.

Nor was this all. It was said that Theophile had friends among Protestants at Quebec, and it was whispered that his new stone house, with its spacious piazza, its flower garden, and its gravel walks, bordered with large white pebbles, was being prepared to receive the red-haired daughter of a Scotch farmer of Ste. Foye. Ah! What treachery! Was it not an unpardonable affront to all the marriageable girls of the parish? Of course, they had never thought of being married to Theophile. Certainly not. But the offence existed just the same, toward every one, particularly the little Philomene Duhamel, for whom Theophile had, until recently, shown a decided preference. Indeed, he had often been seen at her home, and every Sunday, after mass, would walk beside her as far as her father's door. But the old man, because of Theophile's evil ways, had forbidden her ever to speak to him again. Little Philomene had wept and Theophile had looked sad for many days. But now there was that heretic at Ste. Foye. Theophile was cheerful and Philomene proud. They did not meet. Meanwhile the stone

house was finished and Theophile went often to Quebec.

II.

ONE fine morning about the middle of July Theophile drove up the road toward Montmorency, Beauport and Quebec. The sun was rising above the Island of Orleans and the gleam on the waters of the North Channel was like the sparkle of diamonds. The dew glistened on purpling fields of hay and the scent of clover-blossoms filled the air. It was good to live, to breathe the fresh morning air and to be driving rapidly toward the shining roofs and spires of the fair city of Quebec.

Yet the muttered maledictions of the neighbours followed him as he drove by. Surely, too, the bones of the fathers must have turned in their graves as the gaily painted buggy rattled past the quiet churchyard, where nothing more frivolous than a Norman cart had ever been seen before. But the freshness of morning was in the heart of Theophile and the glow of sunrise in his eyes. Why then should he concern himself with the harmless dust of former generations? So without a pause he drove on and rapidly disappeared in the distance.

Toward evening he returned with less speed but more noise, dragging behind his buggy an infernal machine that made an fearful din, alarming the passers-by and causing the horses to bolt in sheer terror.

"*Mon Dieu!* Theophile," said Isidore Gagnon, "What will you do with that? Is it for scaring the crows or is it a rattle for the baby? But, pardon me, there is not yet need for that."

Theophile laughed and good-naturedly described the new mowing machine. "Take a good look at it, Isidore. It is the first of the kind in the parish, but surely not the last. We shall see changes in L'Ange Gardien. I can tell you, it will do the work of ten men, and I have a rake, also, which will save much time and expense. Truly, in three days you will see me cut all my hay and in three more it will be in my new barn. Get one of these machines, Isidore, you will pay for it in one week. If you like I will lend you mine for trial. What do you say?"

But Isidore shrugged his shoulders. "It may be as you say, but what would the neighbours think? For me, I think it is all right. The world must move, no doubt, but it is a bad thing to offend the neighbours, like that pig-headed Ignace Corbeau, or that old miser Bonhomme Duhamel. Besides, Theophile, I will tell you, in confidence, that I have a mind to marry the little Philomene, and it will be necessary to please the old man, for a time, at least."

With that Isidore went away to tell the neighbours that it was high time to put a stop to some things, or there would soon be a veritable revolution in the peaceful parish of L'Ange Gardien.

There was much indignation and excitement in the parish, but nothing would have been done had it not been for the arrival of the hay-makers on the very next day. They came with scythes, grindstones and frying-pans, from the lower parishes, from Ste. Tite des Caps, Les Eboulements, Baie St. Paul and places still more remote, where the harvest was several weeks later than at L'Ange Gardien. They came in bands of ten and twenty, singing as they trooped along, cheerfully swinging their weapons of industrial war.

"Ah, good morning, M'sieu' Beaurepaire," said the leader of the first contingent, "you remember me, do you not, Damase Tremblay from Malbaie there below? I worked for you last year, did I not? Glad to cut your hay this year also, if it please you." And Damase grinned as he thought of the thirty dollars he had earned in less than two weeks, hoping once more to make as good a bargain for himself and his associates.

"Very sorry, Damase," said Theophile, "but I have a machine that will do all the work I need, with the help of myself and the regular hands. You will find plenty of work farther on. Bonhomme Duhamel has a large crop this year. So have all the rest."

But Damase was not content, and passed on grumbling about the "damnable inventions" that took the bread out of the poor man's mouth and out of the mouth of his wife and children. Later comers were even less pleased and went so far as to threaten the "cursed heretic."

But the Canadian *habitant*, though sufficiently

courageous, is just and peace-loving, preferring the methods of conciliation to the fury and violence of open war. Therefore it was not a mob breathing vengeance that came after sunset to the house of Theophile Beaurepaire, but a simple deputation of three persons, consisting of the respected *cure*, M. Perrault, the influential *habitant*, Bonhomme Duhamel, and the leader of the haymakers, Damase Tremblay.

"My son," said the *cure*, "we are here to ask you, on behalf of your friends and neighbours, to refrain from using the new machine which you have brought into the parish. Believe me, it is not so much the machine that I fear as the spirit of change that animates you and bids you depart from the ancient ways. It is with profound sorrow that I have seen you abandon, little by little, the hallowed usages of many generations, until you are ready, it would seem, to trample upon everything that your fathers have held dear, perhaps even the blessed religion itself, the Holy Church, the Sacred Heart of Christ. Return, my son, into the beaten path, trod by the feet of many generations. Unite with us, and let us make this quiet country parish a sacred retreat, far from the trouble and evil of the world, protected by a holy angel, calm under the shadow of Mount Ste. Anne, pure besides the clear flowing St. Lawrence River."

"Father Perrault," said the young man, "I cannot share your fears, and your thought of a happy country parish does not appeal to me. Satan would come even into a Garden of Eden. But, truly, I am not an atheist, nor even a Protestant, I believe and hope in God, and that is why I do not fear the new gifts that come from Him. Our Fathers, surely, must have desired change, or they would not have come to the parish of L'Ange Gardien."

"You talk nonsense, Theophile," broke in Bonhomme Duhamel. "Our ancestors, it is true, came to L'Ange Gardien, but they brought with them customs as old as the hills, and it is for us to preserve them while we live. Ah, how I remember the good old times! The thought of them brings tears to the eyes. Then were cherished the ancient solid virtues—reverence for the Church, respect for the priest, obedience to the seigneur, love for the neighbour, no discontent, no unrest, all calm, peaceful, quiet, like the river at high tide. Theophile, we want no changes at L'Ange Gardien. As our fathers have lived so will we live and our children forever. Besides, my friend, with these new inventions you are bringing ruin upon yourself and all these poor labourers who have come so far expecting work."

"That's just it," said Damase Tremblay, the third member of the deputation. "Here's I have come all the way from Malbaie, seventy miles over the hills. Ah, what hills! And there is my wife and the children, six of them, all little, not able to work. But they can eat. *Mon Dieu*, M'sieu' Beaurepaire, but you should see them eat: potatoes, bread, soup, fish, it is astonishing! Also they must have clothes, not in summer, perhaps, but when the cold weather comes it is absolutely necessary. They will be looking for me when haying is over, and when they see me coming along the road they will run to meet me. But what shall I say to them when I come with empty hands—no money, no warm clothes, nothing good to eat? Ah, M'sieu', you will think of us. You will not use that machine. You will give work to ten, fifteen good habitants, and they will bless you and pray for you, they and their families. Think of it, M'sieu' Beaurepaire, the prayers of so many poor people, they will be good for you."

"It is true, Damase," said Theophile, rising as he spoke, "but the workmen who made the mowing-machine and the rake, shall I not have the benefit of their prayers? Besides, if I save money I will spend it in building a new barn or a saw-mill, and other people will bless me for that. Also yourself, Damase, if you will leave your little stony farm at Malbaie and come to L'Ange Gardien you shall work for me all the year. I will give you a house and high wages and you shall see that farming by the new method is good for everybody."

"It is not only this, my dear friends, but something within me that compels me to do these things. I go to Quebec and I find that the world moves. I come back to L'Ange Gardien and am no longer the same man. I must have new barns. I must cut my hay with the new mower and rake it with the new