

## RECOLLECTIONS.

BEING PART OF A PAPER READ BEFORE L'INSTITUT CANADIEN, QUEBEC, 1877, BY THE LATE HON. P. J. O. CHAUVEAU.

[Translated by Mrs. S. A. CURZON.]

MR. PRESIDENT, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,—A dozen years ago our good city of Quebec possessed two literary publications—the *Soirées Canadiennes* and the *Foyer Canadien*. Between these two existed a mortal rivalry, so mortal, indeed, that both died of it.

My intimate friend, Mr. Charles Taché, was the head of one of the two phalanxes of collaborators which, before the establishment of the *Foyer*, had been but one. To tell the truth, he was himself the general, the advance guard, the army and reserve of the *Soirées Canadiennes*. Good reason had he, therefore, to call for help. Thus it happened that he made to me, then a Montrealer, a most touching appeal. I had been but a lukewarm friend if I had not done my best to go to his assistance at a time he was showing a courage so heroic.

Only he took it into his head to require that I should write in the language of the gods.

Now, however good one's intentions may be, one cannot even write bad verse very readily when one has charge of a Public Department with an income of a thousand pounds. I think it must be the income that is the gravest obstacle.

To please my friend, I sacrificed a few coins that I had kept in my pocket book a long time, and which ought perhaps to have stayed there; but that did not suffice at all. He wanted much more, and, as he is one of those men who stick at nothing, he sent me the outlines of some Legends of the Land, with orders that I should fill them in and put them all into rhyme within the space of a few weeks. I got to work, and remembering D'Alembert, of whom Voltaire says:

"He judged himself a fine fellow and wrote a preface,"

for better or worse, I first prepared my prologue.

I was foolish enough to inform my friend that I had done so. One is always in a hurry to boast of that sort of thing. Each week he wrote me to let him have, if not the legends, at least the prologue. Now, inspiration did not come, and I knew very well that if once I let go the prologue, I should have to continue to the end. So I delayed, and during my long and well-advised delay, the *Soirées* died. I addressed my most sincere condolences to my friend, and my yet more hearty congratulations to myself.

At a later period I found myself in circumstances more favourable to literary recreation, if not to poetic inspiration, to the pursuit of rhyme and measure and the making of verse—an amusement which serves one on a pinch as well as another. I had mislaid, it is true, the outlines of the legends, but I had still the famous prologue, which, it seemed to me, lamented its loneliness and forlorn condition. Then there recurred to me the stories I had listened to in my childhood, and, I know not why nor wherefore, those good old recollections clothed themselves in Alexandrines, a noble garb, though, perhaps, worn a little awkwardly—overrunning and mingling rhymes at haphazard as it were, and lending itself to a host of licenses more or less tolerated in modern prosody.

I diverted myself with more than the mere stories also. I saw arise again a world long departed. I imagined I saw and heard the good old little great aunt who had recited for me numberless tales, and who died, at a moment when she least expected, at the age of eighty-seven. She was so lively, so gay, so good, so pious, so charitable; she rose so readily and so briskly every morning, good weather or bad, to go to five o'clock Mass. She believed so positively all those terrible tales she had learned from her husband, or the other hunters who had held the king's posts, as she said, in the Isle of Anticosti in the midst of the Gulf of St. Lawrence, or even at Saint Amand, on the north shore, where she had passed a portion of her life. I thought also that I listened once more to my grandfather's good old serving-man, an old *voyageur* of the Far West, a man of a colossal stature, who carried me in his arms to school, and regarded me as a perfect little wonder because I could spell for him the shop-signs.

Of an evening, after my mother had read to the servants out of the "Lives of the Saints," he would tell me a story or sing me a song. In his travels he had contracted a singular habit—that of passing whole hours in the most profound silence, seated upon the step of a stair, his head bowed on his hands and his elbows on his knees. He called this *juggling*. Undoubtedly he thus recalled before his mind his journeys in the far-off regions, the dangers he had run, the privations he had endured, also the wild pleasures to which he had abandoned himself, together with his comrades. Having become a farmer and the father of a family, he nevertheless regretted the old adventurous life, for after his *jugglings* he was always morose and less good-natured than usual. Beyond this he was an excellent fellow, straightforward and religious. Every afternoon he might be seen at church on his knees close to the holy water font, a red handkerchief thrown over his head, a wide sash of a hundred tints round his waist, and telling his beads most assiduously. Only—every autumn when the hunters and raftsmen filled the city, it was impossible to hold him. He was sure to be off treating and being treated by some old acquaintance, and making a regular holiday of it.

In summer it would be upon the steps of the Petite Rue du Tresor that the fine fellow gave his audiences, and he always had plenty of listeners besides me. When I had

been very good I was allowed to stay with him and listen until eight o'clock, and I was careful to be pretty nearly always good, for they threatened that if I was not I should be sent to bed under the *Big Tree*.

This *big tree* was the elm, more than two centuries old, under which it was said Champlain had pitched his tent. Born a pagan and converted to Catholicism, it long formed a part of the garden of the good Recollet Fathers; but it is already several years since it died a good Protestant. Its contemporary, Madame de la Pellerie's ash, which still remained near to the cloister of the Ursulines in 1867, was the last survivor of the virgin forest that once covered the promontory of Stadacona.

What a splendid tree was Champlain's elm! Its roots spreading underneath the neighbouring houses, its magnificent dome of verdure rose majestically between the towers of the two cathedrals. The maples, the oaks and the lindens, with which they have endeavoured to replace it in the English churchyard, can never approach to its magnificence. One morning it was lighter than usual in our house. It was because during the night a storm had torn away half of the old tree; and thus it is sometimes that light comes in upon us at the cost of that which was our happiness! Later on neighbours over-timid or over-careful, secured the completion of the destruction the storm had begun.

With Champlain's elms have departed myriads of birds, birds that it seems to me we have seen none such since. They were of every plumage and every note, and, I used to think, of every land. I should be sorry to appear unjust towards Colonel Rhodes' little sparrows; but to me they can never replace the lovely birds of long ago.

They say that Quebec is not changed! It is an odious compliment they would pay the good old city. It is like the polite remark that two old folks pay each other who have not met for years. "Why, you are not changed at all!" And then each says to himself: "Good heavens! How he has aged! God be praised, I do not look as bad as that!"

Quebec not changed! That is well enough to say to one born yesterday, to the newly arrived, and to those who have not known Quebec these forty or fifty years. I say nothing with regard to our streets. They are there yet, God be thanked. Narrow enough to give one a little shade on a burning hot day, and to afford a shelter when the north wind of our unmistakable winter blows.

I will not remind you of the beautiful old time signs—of Neptune of the Lower Town and Jupiter of St. John's Place. Alas! where are the gods? The gods are vanished. But there still remains to us one who was a demi-god, a hero, General Wolfe. I do hope that if modern progress, which respects little, forces him down from his niche, the Institut Canadien will hasten to offer its hospitality to this excellent neighbour, and lay aside, in so doing, all national prejudice!

I give you joy of the town-gates demolished, of fortifications falling to ruin.

There still remain to us seven or eight fine old houses of the French period, some convents, monasteries, churches—venerable from their antiquity. But how many other edifices are gone! Above all, what institutions, what usages, what customs, what social traditions do we find no more!

Where are the brilliant regiments which, at four o'clock of a Sunday—we were not such Puritans then as now—paraded at the foot of the Esplanade in sight of all the population of city and suburbs? How well conducted the crowd was, how gayly dressed in the white and lively colours found too loud for the present taste?

The little lads and lasses in their prettiest dresses marshalling themselves along the platform slope, making it look from a distance like a lovely hanging-garden.

The fine bands of music, the handsome officers of the staff on their prancing steeds—their plumes waving and their fine gold epaulettes—there are no longer epaulettes save in the marine—the sappers, with grand beards, who marched in front, and, above all, the imperturbable drum-majors, who knew so cleverly how to flirt their sticks in the air and catch them so adroitly, whose uniforms and whose port were the delight of the crowd. Where shall we find all this now? And the grand mounting-guard at noon, when the band of one of the regiments—then we always had two, without counting the Artillery and the Royal Engineers—could be heard under the windows of the Chateau St. Louis while the other guards were being relieved.

This was the favourite rendezvous of the wealth and fashion of the city on a fine morning. There one first heard all the new airs—"Di Tanti Palpiti" for instance—to be repeated afterwards on every piano in the city. A god-send, too, was it for the day scholars of the Seminary, who were always to be seen there—slates and books under their arms, in thin mufflers, blue coats and sashes of many coloured rays—sashes such as one rarely sees nowadays. Merry groups they were, and got as close as possible to the magic circle formed by Her Majesty's musicians. And Oh! the penances they suffered for listening to the disciples of the Euterpe, and, perhaps, for peeping a little at the pretty nymphs and fairies that chattered with the sons of Mars! And, speaking of these scholars, how different things are with them to-day! To say nothing of the reaction, as they call it now—nor of the brilliant examinations under Mr. Holmes, how much there is to say of the seminaristes of the old time. But these ought to have an essay all to themselves.

There was almost always a students' corps, in memory, no doubt, of the students of Cap Tourmente, or of the famous *corps des écoliers*, so noted in our history. They

paraded in the great yard with wooden guns, tin sabres, flags flying and drums beating. One of their great recreations in the winter was to attend funerals in their cloaks. There used to be numerous processions that are no longer kept up. They carried the Host to the sick in very solemn state. Now we have no procession but the grand Fête Dieu. Let us hope that this at least will not be relinquished.

The black cloak was a kind of *domino*, not very graceful, I admit, and that gave to the clergy a false air, as of a community of penitents, such as take part in funeral processions in Italy and the South of France. This cloak gave a mournful aspect to our churches during the winter; but when the beautiful Easter days came—when the priests, the students, the choir boys in surplices, with white-powdered heads, made their entry, the general joy was the greater for the contrast with the sombre robes of the winter.

Despite this comfortable garment, we often enough caught cold on our funeral excursions, which was aggravated by a strong paternal remonstrance and a penance for some neglected duty. The compensation consisted in certain coppers paid us by the Board at the year's end. If one was a glutton, these straightway went to the pastry cook; if, on the contrary, a bookworm, the bookseller got his profit out of it. I know some persons who are very proud of their fine libraries, who do not dream, perhaps, that to this modest source they owe the fact that they have become bibliophiles.

There was also among the day-scholars a company of firemen. The showy costume it allowed them to put on, the racket that it permitted them to make, went much further than patriotism in the civic ardour they displayed. I remember that this company arrived second on the ground at the fire at the Castle St. Louis on the 23rd of January, 1834, and that the captain, Joseph de Blois, was rewarded in consequence. This organization had but a short existence. Masters and parents found that it involved dangers of more kinds than one: the fire was not always where it was supposed.

While we are upon the subject of fires, what a difference there is between the condition of things then and now! To-day one hears sundry strokes of the bell to tell one where the fire is, and allow one to go to sleep again, seeing it is nowhere near us. Then—first came the rattle and shrill cries of the watchmen, then the drum that beat the call to arms, or the trumpet which sounded a summons as to war, and at length the alarm bell, whose lugubrious volleys continued long after everything was over. Then—daylight or no, fair weather or foul, one had to go, and as it is only the first step that costs, one was sure to find one's-self in the thick of the fuss. A chain formed, the leather buckets were passed from hand to hand and reached the engine, as frequently empty as full; but what matter, there was lots of water to be had, just because there was no waterworks. And O! the delightful little supper after it was all over! But I will not detain you with regrets over the thousand things that might appear contemptible in the eyes of such as are blinded by the prejudices of our present civilization. I will say nothing about the splendid stone door-steps that used to encroach upon the street, sometimes reaching right across the sidewalk. Upon these it was that successive generations had gossiped, and had arranged their little affairs; that neighbour had smoked with neighbour, and the good wife had exchanged remedies with her acquaintance. Small wonder, then, at the indignation when the city fathers determined to remove these monuments, the pride of the town! What heroic resistance and what a lot of lawsuits! There still remain those whose cry is: "Our customs, our language, our doorsteps and our jolts." The steps are gone, but it is easily maintained that the jolts remain.

One of the subjects for raillery against our good town used to be the number of dogs drawing little carts that were to be seen in the streets. Even before the advent of the Society for the Protection of Animals, the canine race had obtained its freedom. Is it the happier for it? At any rate it has not reclaimed the right to work, and all the individual members of it are to-day equal before the law. They rejoice in an unparalleled laziness and live entirely at the expense of their masters. How many good folks would like to do the same?

The graceful *calèche* of the good old times is fast disappearing, driven out by vehicles more showy, but which will never have its power of rebound. One ought also to have seen the *voyageurs* and raftsmen, crowded one upon another, with their gay ribbons and their coloured shirts, driving through the city upon one of these rapid cars. It was exactly like what one sees at Naples, and Quebec then resembled the city of the tomb of Virgil. When the last *calèche* shall have wound for the last time up the side of the Lower Town, we may say good-bye to local colour. The Quebec of old will have disappeared. But where are the gay fellows of whom we have spoken, who sang so merrily through our streets, marking the time with an imaginary oar? Had they not the air of such as would say to us in the words of one of our old songs:

"Goodman, Goodman,  
Thou art not the master  
In thine own house  
When we are by."

And where also are the jolly sailors who played at leap frog in the middle of our streets, upset the market women's stalls, gave the wonder-stricken youngsters sticks of barley-sugar and doughnuts, and paid like lords for the damage done?

(To be continued.)