

The Inglenook

Pierre and Little Pierre.

By A. B. Demille.

At the head of the great surging Bay of Fundy, which rolls its tawny waves between Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, lies the Tantramar Marsh. It runs inland for miles on the Isthmus of Chignecto, and is protected by dikes along its sea front.

Tantramar has a history that goes back some two hundred years to the time when the first French settlers drove back the sea from the wide mud flats and made into rich meadows tracts that had once been covered by each returning tide. Two rivers wind tortuously through the marsh—the Aulac, a corruption of the French "Eau Lac"; and the larger Tantramar. Low dikes run along each side. Twice every day the vast turbid tides brim the rivers from bank to bank; twice every day only huge trenches of red mud show where the water has been. In autumn and winter, when the storms sweep up Tantramar, and the waves thunder all along the shore as the tide comes in, it is well to know that the dikes are strong enough to guard the meadows from the hungry sea.

Pierre Lapreau, farmer, fisherman and French Canadian, stood at the door of his house on the northern uplands and gazed out across the great marsh. It was autumn, the grass had grown dark under the first frost, all the woods were aflame with scarlet and gold, and the houses on the distant hills shone warm through the mellow sunlight.

Pierre's farm lay above the marsh. From his vantage ground a fair scene was outspread before him. Opposite, the long ridge of upland ended in a round green hill situated exactly at the head of the Bay of Fundy. It was Fort Beauséjour—old and dismantled now—where some of Pierre's ancestors had fought to stay the coming of the English. Further away, dim and hazy, the mud flats of Minudie and the lofty coast of Nova Scotia ran down the bay. Immediately in front the Tantramar Marsh, dotted with weather-stained barns, and stretching from the sunlit sea to the low, spruce-crowned hills which formed the backbone of the isthmus.

Pierre Lapreau owned fields on the upland, as well as large tracts of marsh, each of which had its barn where, when the reaping was done, the fragrant hay was stowed until it could be moved to safer quarters.

All Pierre's barns were in good condition except one, which had been shaken by storm after storm and never repaired. Any fierce wind might bring it down. Pierre thought of this as he stood at his door looking across at Tantramar. The long hill ranges loomed larger than usual; that was a bad sign. Then Pierre glanced down the bay, and there, above the sunny waves, a huge cloud bank shouldered up out of the sea. It was more than the familiar fog, which is always hanging somewhere about the Bay of Fundy. Fog looks dark in the distance; but it does not rise black and solid, with clear-cut edges and faint lightnings playing about its depths. A storm was coming.

Pierre turned and went into the house. It was a large, old-fashioned building. There was a sitting-room used only upon special occasions, and a big kitchen with heavy beams across the ceiling, and a cavernous chimney built up outside. Pierre's wife (known as "Mis's Pierre" by the English settlers of the countryside, and "Madame Lapreau" by the French), sat in front of the fire, cooking.

"There's a storm coming up the bay," said Pierre, in the French-Canadian patois, which he always used to his own people. "And I go to the South Marsh to know if all is well with the dikes and cattle. Also, I must see to the fishing boat." The farmers of Tantramar combined shad fishing with their own work.

The South Marsh lay three miles away, where the Tantramar river entered the sea. Here the dike began, running from the mainland along the sea front to the mouth of the river, and then following its bank. Pierre had turned some cattle on the marsh. The old, shaky barn also stood there.

There is always a wind blowing over Tantramar; in summer from the south and west, and in winter from the bitter north, but forever sweeping the great marsh from end to end. So it was today; but, as Pierre left his house, he noticed that the wind had suddenly grown stronger, and the sinking sun had disappeared behind the vast black clouds. The air was alive with the breath of the storm.

Before Pierre had gone many steps he heard a small, imperious voice behind him. "Father! where are you going? I will come, too!"

It was his youngest son, a sturdy lad of five years, called "Little Pierre" by all who knew the stolid little figure with its dark eyes and hair.

The father turned and spoke in French.

"No, p'tit Pierre, you cannot come. I go away to the South Marsh. Be good and go into the house." He kissed the child and hastened away.

Little Pierre looked after his father with tears in his eyes. Why couldn't he go, too, and see the wonderful South Marsh, where the big white seagulls screamed as they wheeled about the fishing boats, and the big, white waves foamed in over the shoals and sometimes smote the dike itself? It was very hard, and, in a wilful mood, little Pierre stole out of the yard past the glowing hollyhocks that bowed in the wind, past the tall, yellow sunflowers that watched him go into the road. It was straight and smooth, and the child made famous progress. He trudged on and on until he came where the road dipped to the level of the marshes. The South Marsh was not far now. But the wind was roaring in with great force, the dark clouds covered the sky, and all the sunlight was gone, save a narrow streak of angry red low down on the horizon. His father was nowhere to be seen, and little Pierre began to feel lonely. He sat down on a stump by the roadside and gazed toward the South Marsh, which, with its battered old barn, was in plain sight, while, beyond, the surges of the bay crashed along the dikes as the tide came in. At last little Pierre saw some black forms moving across the marsh in the distance. With a joyful cry he jumped up and ran down the road.

Meanwhile Pierre had gathered together his cattle and was driving them to the upland. It was a tedious task. The animals seemed full of fear at the howling wind and the distant tumult of the waves. They had been huddled together under the lee of the old barn, where the full force of the tempest was broken, and were loth to leave the shelter. But the master dared not risk exposing them to a night on the South Marsh when a fierce storm and tide were rolling up the bay. If any part of the dike went under there would be small chance for the animals in the darkness.

When his cattle were out of danger, Pierre returned to see how his fishing smack was weathering the gale. He walked along behind the dike until he came to the landing place where his boat was made fast. There he climbed to the top of the dike by some rough steps, and the force of the wind met him and brought him to his knees.

He was not prepared for the sight that met him. Night had come, but a faint glow still hung in the west. He could see only a wide expanse of furious waters. The surges rolled in over shoals and shook the very walls upon which he knelt. The spray flew up and drenched him to the skin. The tide was rising, and the thunder of the sea increased. Suddenly a deep sound rose above the