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OUR CENTENNIAL STORY.

THE BASTONNAIS :

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

By JOHN LESPERANCE.

BOOK IV.

AFTER THE STORM.

I.

THE CONFESSIONAL.

It was the eve of the New Year. The snow-storm continued in unabated violence and the weather was so grey that the lines of earth and sky were blended and utterly undistinguishable. A little after the hour of noon, Zulma Sarpy knelt in the little church of Pointe-aux-Trembles. Beside her there were only a few worshippers—some old men mumbling their rosaries and some women crouched on their heels before the shrine. A solitary lamp hung from a silver chain in the sanctuary, casting a feeble ray amid the premature gloom. An awful silence reigned throughout the aisles. Opposite the place where Zulma was stationed stood a square box through the bars of which faintly gleamed the white surplice of the parish priest who sat there awaiting the confessions of his flock. The New Year is the chief of festal days among the French, and it is always ushered in by exercises of devotion. After going through all the needful preparation, Zulma rose from her seat and approached the dread confessional. Her demeanor was full of gravity, a pallor overspread her beautiful features, her eyes were cast down, her hands joined upon her breast. The influence of prayer and of silent communion with God could never be more perceptible. She looked like a totally distinct being from the one whom we have known in the preceding pages. Zulma moved slowly, and when she reached the door of the confessional, she paused a moment. But it was not through hesitation. She was recollecting herself for a supreme act of religion. At length she disappeared behind the long green curtain, knelt on the narrow stool within, and through the lattice poured forth her soul into the bended and keenly listening ear of the pastor. What she said we may not know, for the secrets of this tribunal are inviolable, but it is allowed to believe that the lengthy whisperings consisted of something more than a mere accusation of faults. They conveyed demands of counsel for guidance in the trying circumstances amid which the girl found herself, and in response the grave voice of the priest was heard in an undertone, advising, warning and exhorting. Finally, the rite was concluded. The fair penitent bent her white forehead, the pastor signed the sign of salvation in the air, the stool was pushed back, the green curtain arose, and Zulma stepped forth to resume the place which she had at first occupied. We are dispensed from further describing her appearance. Long-fellow, in speaking of Evangeline, has put it forth in one pregnant line.

"Serenely she walked with God's benediction upon her."

An hour passed, during which Zulma knelt immovable, absorbed in prayer, and most of the other persons in the church followed her example by visiting the confessional in turns. At the end of that time, the priest, assuring himself that there were no further ministrations to be made, rose from his seat, opened the little door which held him in, and walked forward into the aisle. As he passed Zulma, he tapped her gently upon the shoulder as a sign that she should follow him. She did so at once, and the two glided noiselessly into the vestry. There the priest, after divesting himself of his surplice, turned towards the girl, and in the gentlest manner inquired after her health and that of her father. He then signified, his pleasure at her punctual discharge of her devotions, in spite of the extremely inclement weather.

"It is a great festival, but it will bring no joy this year," he said.

Zulma, whose countenance still preserved its paleness and expression of extreme gravity, replied that the times were indeed melancholy, but that she nevertheless hoped to enjoy a quiet *Jour de l'An* with her father and immediate neighbors, having made all the necessary preparations to that end.

"You have not heard then, my daughter?" said the priest.

"Heard what, sir?"

"Of the terrible events which took place this night while we were sleeping."

Zulma looked up with a movement of keen anxiety and asked:

"What has happened, sir?"

"Two great battles have been fought."

"Is it possible?"

"Many killed, wounded and prisoners."

"Who, where, how?" gasped Zulma in agony.

"Quebec was attacked in two places."

"And captured?" demanded Zulma unable to restrain herself.

"No, my daughter. Both attacks were repulsed."

Zulma clasped her hands to her forehead and would have sunk to the floor had she not been sustained by the good priest.

"Courage, my dear," he said. "Excuse me

for telling you these things, but I saw from your deportment in the church that you knew nothing of them, and I thought it would be well that I should be the first to inform you."

"Pardon my weakness, Monsieur Le Curé," was the meek reply. "I had indeed expected this, but the news is terribly sudden all the same. I entreat you to give me all the particulars which you know. I feel stronger now and can hear anything."

"I know little that is definite. In the general excitement, all sorts of rumors are aggravated when they reach us at this distance. But I am assured that General Montgomery has been killed and Colonel Arnold wounded. I knew these gentlemen. They dined several times at my table. They were fine men and I liked them well. I am distressed to hear of their misfortune."

"Have you heard of the fate of any other officers?"

"Of none by name, except that it was a certain Morgan who replaced Arnold and surrendered his army."

"Morgan!" exclaimed Zulma, and this time she was so overcome that she fell exhausted in a chair.

The priest was considerably surprised. Notwithstanding that his periodical visits to the Sarpy mansion had been interrupted during the American occupation of Pointe-aux-Trembles, he knew in a general way that Zulma had become acquainted with one or the other of the officers, which was the main reason why he judged that the early communication of the war news from his lips would be particularly interesting to Sieur Sarpy and his daughter, but he had no suspicion that Zulma's feelings went further, and had thus no idea of the effect which his words produced upon her. It was only when he saw her extreme depression and sorrow that he surmised something of the truth, with that instinct which is characteristic of men, who, themselves separated from the world by the stern law of celibacy, devote all their attention to the spiritual and temporal concerns of their flocks.

"Do not be depressed," he said, approaching Zulma's chair, and bending towards her with the kindness of a father towards his child. "Perhaps the news is exaggerated. We shall hear more towards evening, and it may turn out that the losses are not so great as represented. At least there may be no loss personal to yourself, my dear, and I trust that such will prove to be the fact. Therefore take heart. It is getting late. The snow continues falling and the roads must be blocking up. Return home and endeavor to maintain your soul in peace. Tomorrow, you will come to early mass, when I trust that we shall have better news to tell each other."

In spite of the cheering words of the pastor, Zulma drove homeward with a heavy heart. She spoke not a word to her servant. Instead of raising her face to the storm and allowing the flakes to beat upon it, as was her wont, when her spirits were high, she kept her veil down, and the handkerchief which she frequently drew from under it gave proof that she was silently weeping. It often happens, that the most boisterous, lofty women bear their grief in unostentatious quiet, thus giving it a more forcible relief from contrast. Thus was it in the present instance with Zulma. Revolving in her mind all that the priest had told her, and having full leisure during the journey to appreciate all its terrible contingencies, she was completely prostrated when she reached home. On descending from the sleigh she glided softly to her room where she locked herself in so as to be absolutely alone. She remained thus until nearly the supper hour, and after the shadows of evening had enveloped her.

II.

BLANCHE'S PROPHECY.

When Sieur Sarpy met his daughter at the table, he divined at once that something was wrong. He himself had heard nothing. The prevalence of the snow-storm had prevented any one from calling at his mansion, except the few needy neighbors who had gone early in the morning to receive their regular alms. The day had passed in solitude, and as the old gentleman had had no misgivings whatever, he spent his time most agreeably in the perusal of his favorite books. He must have happened on light and cheerful literature because, when he concluded his reading and came down to supper, he was in more than his usual enlivened mood. But the spectacle of Zulma's swollen eyes, pinched features and constrained manner, checked his flow of good humor and arrested the pleasant anecdote which his lips were about to utter. Naturally enough he did not suspect the real cause of his daughter's sorrow. He knew that she had driven down to the village church for her devotions, and of course presumed that something had happened to her there. He was once on the point of teasing her about the scolding which he supposed that the priest had adminis-

tered to her, but he immediately checked himself. With the well-bred old French gentleman deep respect formed perhaps the chief ingredient of the ardent love which he bore his daughter. He carried his consideration so far that he would not even question her. It became therefore incumbent on Zulma to break the painful silence. She detailed the narrative which the priest had given her, supplementing it largely with the comments dictated by her fears. The effect upon Sieur Sarpy was hardly less than it had been upon his daughter. He listened in profound silence, but with an anxiety and surprise which he did not attempt to conceal. For a long time he ventured to make no reply, and when at length he did so, it was in such hesitating language as showed that he was haunted by the same apprehensions which besieged his daughter. He had therefore scant consolation to offer her, and the evening meal thus passed without any break in that mental gloom which was deeper than the darkness which rolled in the exterior heavens.

Little Blanche sat at Zulma's side listening to the discourse with wide distended eyes, and that expression of vacancy which was so frequent with this singular child. Not a word had escaped her, and it was evident that the effect was as great upon her acute mind as upon that of her two companions.

"If Batoche would only come," murmured Zulma passing her hand over her weary brow. "He would tell us every thing. I wonder he is not here already."

"His absence is an additional cause for fear," replied Sieur Sarpy in a low voice.

"Still, I do not despair. He may arrive before the night is over."

"If he is alive."

"What, papa? You do not suppose that Batoche took part in the attack?"

"I do. I am sure he never quitted the side of Cary Singleton."

"I did not think of that. Alas! I fear you are right. In that case, who knows?"

"Yes, the worse may have happened to our old friend, and he may never return."

Both Zulma and her father instinctively looked at little Blanche. An angelic smile played upon her lips and her eyes were far away.

"Blanche," said Zulma, laying her hand softly on the child's shoulder.

"Yes, mademoiselle," replied the latter, waking from her trance.

"Your grandpapa, will he come again to see his little girl?"

"Oh, yes, mademoiselle. Grandpapa when he left me, two days ago, said *au revoir*. That means 'I will see you again'."

"But perhaps those bad men have killed him."

"What bad men? The Wolves?"

Zulma did not understand, but Sieur Sarpy understood very well.

"Yes, the Wolves, my dear," he said with a sad smile.

"Oh, my grandfather does not fear the Wolves. The Wolves fear him. They cannot catch him, no matter what great dangers he may be in. He may suffer, he may be wounded, but he will not die except near our cabin at the Falls, under the eye of my mother and with me at his side. He has often told me this at night as he held me on his knee, and I believe all that my grandfather says. No, mademoiselle, he is not dead and will soon arrive to console you."

Zulma could not restrain her tears as she heard the simple pathos of these childish words, and suddenly a confidence sprang up in her heart, which sacerdotal speech had been unable to infuse. She pushed her chair from the table, lifted Blanche from her seat and set her on her own knees, pillowing the little head on her bosom, and imprinting warm kisses of gratitude on the slight forehead. Sieur Sarpy looked on, and appeared pleased. No doubt a similar assurance awoke within him.

"If Batoche comes at all, he will come to-night. We know his punctuality and his readiness to do a service. The weather is bad and the roads must be in a wretched state, but this will be no obstacle to his reaching the mansion. We learn that a great many prisoners have been taken. Batoche may possibly be among them. In that case, we shall, of course, resign ourselves not to see him to-night."

Raising her head from Zulma's shoulder, Blanche said rapidly and with some animation: "No, M. Sarpy, grandpapa is not a prisoner. He has always said that the Wolves would never catch him and I believe all that he says."

Sieur Sarpy smiled, and made no reply, but he had a vague belief that perhaps the child might be right after all.

III.

THE PROPHECY FULFILLED.

She was right. The evening wore away slowly. The servant cleared the table and trimmed the fire. Sieur Sarpy, instead of retiring to his private chamber, wheeled his chair to the hearth, and resumed the reading which he had interrupted before supper. Zulma continued to hold Blanche on her knee and, sitting before the glowing fire, they both dropped off into sleep. With the child, it was genuine slumber mingled with pleasant dreams, as the smile upon her lips and the lines that played upon her brow and cheeks clearly testified. With Zulma it was not real sleep, but somnolence, or rather the torpor of dim meditations. Her eyes were closed, her head was thrown back upon the rocking chair, her limbs were somewhat extended, while an air of forced resignation or preparation for the worse was set

upon her noble features. The blue and yellow flames of the chimney flickered wantonly upon her face; the moan of the wind around the gable drummed into her ear, while the slow flight of the hours which she heeded not, yet noted distinctly from the strokes of the old clock, lapsed her soul farther and farther away into the vague spaces of oblivion. Gradually Sieur Sarpy, yielding to the influences of heat and solitude, dropped his book upon his knee, and closed his eyes for a brief respite of repose. But for the outside sounds of nature and an occasional gust in the fire place, every thing within that room was as silent as the grave. The respiration of its three living beings was barely audible, a proof that at least none of them suffered from physical pain. Every thing betokened peace and security. If the rest of the country-side was wild with war or the rumors of war, the Sarpy mansion lay in the bliss of a profound unconsciousness.

Suddenly, Zulma moved about in her seat, and rolled her head from side to side on the chair, as if a vision was flitting before her brain. A shadow stood before her and the light of the hearthstone. She slowly opened her eyes, closed them again tightly in order to strengthen their force, and opened them a second time. Ten o'clock struck. She had been resting for two hours. It was time that she should rise and retire to her room. She sat up erect and, in doing so, looked directly forward again. She could not be mistaken. There was really a shadow between her and the fire. By a rapid effort of her strong will, she acquired full consciousness and recognized Batoche. Another glance of almost aching velocity revealed to her that his brow was placid, his eye soft, and that the traces of a smile lingered at the corners of his lips. This spectacle at once reassured her. She felt that all was not as bad as it might have been or as she had fancied it was.

"Batoche," she said holding out her right hand, "you have surprised me, but it is a delicious surprise. You cannot imagine how glad I am to see you. Sit down."

Then little Blanche awoke and sprang from Zulma's knee into the arms of her grandfather. "I knew it," she sobbed. "I knew he would come."

"Yes," replied Zulma. "Blanche told us, when we feared evil had befallen you, that you would surely come. She is a dear girl and a prophetess like her grandfather."

A moment later Zulma had aroused Sieur Sarpy, and after a few preliminary words of welcome, Batoche was installed in a chair before the fire, with Blanche upon his knees, and asked to recount his story in its minutest details. Zulma had not dared to put him the single predominant question which was present in her mind, partially trusting, as we have seen, to the serenity of the old man's countenance, but he, with his usual keen insight, answered it before entering upon the course of his narration.

"It is all wrong and yet all right," he said with a swift wave of his arm.

Zulma looked at him imploringly.

"We have been beaten," continued Batoche. "The Wolves have triumphed. Many of our bravest officers were killed, but Captain Singleton was only wounded."

"Wounded again!" exclaimed Zulma.

"But not very seriously. He fell, but I raised him from the snow and he was able to stand alone, and walk."

"Did he escape?"

"He could not. I tried to induce him to follow me. He ordered me to fly, but declared that he must remain with his command."

"What then?"

"He was taken prisoner, but, be easy. He is in good hands?"

"In good hands?"

"Yes. I saw Roderick Hardinge directly in front and I am sure that he recognized him."

"Heaven be praised for that."

"He is now within the walls of Quebec, but he will be well cared for."

Batoche then took up the account from the beginning and detailed all its circumstances, both from what he had witnessed himself and from what he had afterwards heard at headquarters. The report was graphic and lucid such as might be expected from so intelligent a soldier. It was midnight before he had closed the history, and his companions listened to it with the most absorbed attention.

"And now about yourself," said Sieur Sarpy.

"How did you manage to escape?"

Both Batoche and little Blanche smiled, the child nestling more closely and lovingly in his arms.

"Have I not always told you that the Wolves could not capture me? At least they will never take me alive. Although I and my men had enlisted only as scouts, when the final attack on the town was determined upon, I resolved to be present. I wished to be associated in that great revenge if it was successful, and, if unsuccessful, I wished to share the dangers of those who fought for our liberty. Besides I could not abandon Cary Singleton, my dear friend and the friend of the kind lady who had taken my grand-daughter under her care."

Zulma accepted the compliment with a bow and the tribute of grateful tears.

At first everything appeared to be in our favor, but after Colonel Arnold was wounded, the men fell into disorder, and I knew that we should have trouble. What added to our discomfiture, was that we were confronted mainly by our own countrymen. Our own countrymen, Sieur Sarpy. There was Dumas who led them. There was Dambourges who performed prodigies of valor. There was a giant, named Charland, who sprang