

Cauchemar was the current top of the French Canadian charts. Both the lyrics and the tune had been written by Michel Choquette and they were sung by Robert Charlebois. That Christmas we heard the song over and over again in every single bar and café we went into.

On New Year's Eve we drove down to Richelieu, a small suburb almost in the country, on the other side of the river. It was a low, whitewashed house down by the water; plain, simple, built of wood. There was a dog and several children, but no maids. We ate abundantly and well. There was *tourtière*, a kind of minced beef and carrot pie, a delicious homemade beetroot pickle, red wine and cider, *tarte au sucre*, and conversation in French, English and Italian. Later on there was music.

*"M'en revenant de la jolie Rochelle,
"J'ai rencontré trois jolies demoiselles,
"C'est l'aviron qui nour mène, qui nous mène,
"C'est l'aviron qui nous mène en haut."*

People sang with unself-conscious freedom; the young still remembered the tunes and words to their own folk songs, many of which I recognised from France, but the words were slightly different and they had acquired an identity absolutely of their own. Many of the songs, ("*C'est l'aviron, par derrière*", "*Chez ma tante*", "*La rose en bois*,") had been used in earlier times by the French Canadians as boating songs and sung as they paddled up and down the St. Lawrence River.

There was also a strong Celtic element in their music. Ireland, Brittany, Scotland — all had made their marks, left their traces. In between dancing to ubiquitous modern records, snatches of conversation, a drink, someone started to play the spoons. Teaspoons are held back to back between the fingers and rattled rather like castanets. In Europe, the spoons are played in Ireland and in Spain. Here in Richelieu, these influences were amalgamated.

It grew late. The dog came in from the snow and wagged its tail, spreading snowflakes on the floor. It had been a simple and delightful evening. We drove back to Montreal as it was beginning to grow light. On the way home a girl in the back of the car began humming "*J'ai du bon tabac*," an old French nursery song which Tony Roman had rewritten and which Madeleine Chartrand had recorded.

Torrents of spring

The snows continued until the end of April. Sometimes there were blizzards; sometimes the skies were clear and the light beautiful. But it was a long winter and the ice did not melt from the pavements until everyone was longing for the coming of spring.

It came with a swiftness that took me quite by surprise. The snows on the mountain melted; the gutters were filled with water. For the first time I understood

the meaning of "The torrents of spring." And then the sun came out with a bursting of new life; buds turned into leaves, it seemed almost overnight — green and delicate like the hearts of young lettuces, dandelions sprang up between cracks in the cobbles. For the first time in months there was green grass in Montreal. Almost as soon as spring came it went and then there were days and days of heavy rain and storms, thunder, lightning and hail. Suddenly it was summer.

I moved from the apartment in the Rue St. Claud to downtown Montreal on the corner of Peel and Maisonneuve. The new apartment was in a high rise building within walking distance of the mountain and a stone's throw from the Place Ville Marie. The Mountain is instant country. The Place Ville Marie is a large modern pedestrian area with office blocks, fountains, banks and shopping facilities. The streets in downtown Montreal are built on a grid system like most of the towns in North America. And yet they still retain a certain quiet charm which distinguishes them from other North American cities. Interspersed between the skyscraper buildings and the glass office blocks are the older, lower buildings. Nineteenth century townhouses, tree-lined streets, old-fashioned shops which have preserved a colonial dignity — shops like Dionne's in St. Catherine street, a shop not dissimilar to a tiny version of Fortnum and Mason.

The English Canadians are possibly more English than the English are themselves.

Mythical summer

By the beginning of June the weather was perfect, like childhood memories of mythical English summers. Sunny, not too hot, no rain. The English Canadians in Montreal have their own translation of London's silly season. During the day I was working very hard. In the evenings I often went to parties given by the English Canadians up in Westmount. They were rather old-fashioned, very elegant, hospitable. One evening in Westmount was particularly delightful, given in one of those late nineteenth century family houses. The house was filled with vases of lilac blossom and the french windows opened out onto the garden. We were given a delicious light supper and a great deal of chilled champagne and afterwards were treated to a recital between flute and harpsichord. Later we continued to talk and to drink champagne, everyone merry and gently happy.

Below: Jewish Orthodox children playing on a balcony of their Montreal home.

