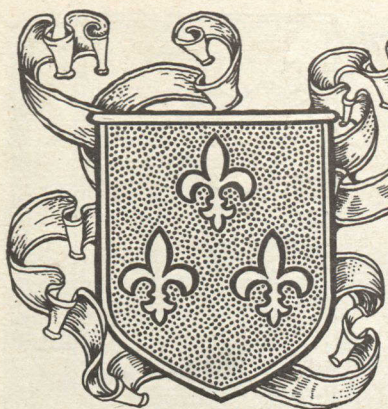




The Blossoming of the Lilies

A Story of New France

By MARJORIE L. C. PICKTHALL



"ALL the other strong places have fallen. This also shall fall, like a dry leaf from the bough."

Anne listened, striving to mould his startled young face into the serenity of those proud bronze masks before him. On his shoulders lay the

honor of France; he had put on his best suit to uphold it in the council, the last he had left; three years behind the fashion now, and cruelly tight, but still, with its amethyst velvet and ruffles of Spanish lace, fit for a commandant's wearing.

"When the lilies blossom in the grass, the wild doe shall shelter within your gates. When the lilies blossom, the buck shall trample the bones of your warriors." There was no change in the speaker's face as he broke the bowl of the council-pipe against a stone, and rose to his full height, some seven feet, counting the head-dress of otter skin.

Anne rose also with an excellent laugh, and pointed to the flag above the little fort. "Those lilies bloom forever, messieurs," he said gaily aloud. And in his heart, "The good God help me keep them there a little while!"

The inquiring faces did not change at his laughter. He felt like a child throwing pebbles in the face of a cliff. One by one the warriors rose, returned his salute, and moved down to their canoes. The last, he who had spoken, looked from Anne to the flag, plucked a leaf from the bushes, and let the wind take it from his fingers. It was eloquent.

Anne stood alone between the fort and the river, watching the departure with kindled eyes. Savages, savages, but—"nom d'un nom, what a grandeur, what magnificence! I would I had them in my company!"

"The saints forbid, little capitan!"

The old sergeant came close behind him and touched his shoulder. "What now, Monsieur le Commandant?" he asked sadly.

Anne drew a long breath and pointed to the fragments of the pipe. "War," he said briefly. Together they stood on the slope and watched the long canoes slip away into the hemlock shadows.

Sergeant Antoine nodded philosophically. "If they say they will come, they will come," he said. "I have known the Otter before, M'sieur Anne; he is a leader of the Five Nations, and the truce holds these Iroquois no more than a puff of smoke. O, yes, they will come. When?"

"Before the lilies blossom."

"So soon!" The sergeant's face set into grimmer lines. "So soon! Then—"

"Then my father will not have returned, Antoine. There is no hope of it."

"No, my dear. He will not be back by the time the lilies blossom."

The French boy struck his hands together in despair. "And I alone here! And scarce ten men fit for service!"

"As for that, the very dead crawl out of their graves to fight when the Iroquois come. 'Before the lilies blossom!' There are some lilies there, M'sieur." He pointed to the faded Bourbon flag. "Must be kept in bloom at any cost."

"At any cost, Antoine." The lad drew himself up and saluted, in his face the passionate patriotism of his race.

"They are greedy flowers, those lilies of ours. It takes blood to keep 'em alive sometimes, M'sieur. Blood and the lives of brave men."

"They shall have it, Sergeant, if need be, so only that my father finds them waving."

They went into the fort together and the gates were closed behind them.

Two months before those gates had opened for the exit of the commandant, ten men, and a score of tame Hurons who were not counted as men. It was time of peace, and Monsieur le Commandant was going on an expedition to Quebec. He was going to leave his son Anne in nominal command of the fort and the honor of France in that particular wilderness, and the old sergeant in actual charge of everything.

Anne could shut his eyes and see and feel

everything now—himself kissing his father's hand, the grizzled moustaches brushing his cheeks, the kind gruff voice, "The peace of God and his saints be with you, my child"; and then the gay string of bateaux winding away down the river, with firing of salutes, and waving of flags, and the silence afterwards.

"Peace!" It had been threatened soon enough, that peace. The council had been an end of rumors and complaints and insults. Monsieur Anne, with a garrison reduced by more than half, was facing war. When the lilies bloomed, the Iroquois would come again. He sat late that night, watching the beetles and mosquitoes flying into the flame of his smoky lamp, and thinking, thinking, thinking.

"It is quite true that they will come," said Sergeant Antoine, appearing suddenly in the doorway with a cold pasty and some cakes.

Anne looked up with a start. He had been seeing many things in the flame of the lamp. His eyes questioned the old man.

The sergeant's face was grimmer than ever as he dealt out the food, the rough dishes, the napkin with the arms on the corner, and the silver-gilt cup. "Eat," he said, "eat. There are five mouths fewer to feed."

The lad stared, and rose slowly.

"Our five Hurons have disappeared, so that shows it to be quite true."

But there was nothing else in the quiet days that followed, to show the truth of their doom. They watched the windings of the beautiful river haggardly. Men watch those waters now for sport, not for life or death as Anne and his men watched. There is even no trace of the little blockhouse, nor memory to tell where it has been. It was only one little outpost of France in the long struggle for Canada.



In those days Anne put away his suit of amethyst velvet, and wore his second one of claret colored cloth, which Antoine had patched with doeskin. You see, by the tradition of his family he liked to keep his best for dying in.

Empty were the grey-green river-reaches in the dusk, gold and empty in the dawn. Nothing came, either of Iroquois to sack and slay, or of officers of France happily returning too soon. How little Monsieur Anne prayed in his soldier fashion for that hastened return!

Somewhere, down the long, long river the tired voyagers crawling slowly home; somewhere at the headwaters the war-canoes launched and sweeping down so fast, so fast. Fast as death. The lilies budding from their root-leaves in the sunny grass, and the lilies in tarnished gold upon the flag.

"Are they in bloom yet, Antoine?"

"I saw a gleam like a flame half-quenched in the dry grass, little Captain." The old man's haggard face was very tender. "It will not be long now"—and again, a day afterwards—"Is it time yet?"

"All along by the edge of the forests the lilies are opening in the grass. They look like little cups of fire, my dear."

And in the fort men looked at one another and said "The time has come."

Anne looked to his sword and his two great clumsy pistols, with his arms in silver on the butts, and wondered what his father would say when he heard of it. He ate steadily and slept quietly, for he came of a Norman house; and the fierce, shaky old veterans of the garrison smiled upon him.

At last, one quiet dawn, he woke to the pressure of Antoine's hand upon his shoulder. "It is coming," said the old man shortly. Anne nodded, hauled the amethyst velvet suit out of the cedar chest, put it on nicely, and went to the barricades.

He could hear the breathing of his own men. But over the river and the woods nothing seemed to move or call but the night-hawks. In the grass the red lilies were dark and full of dew.

Quick voices were all about him. "Jean Francois, the powder." "Here are good slugs,

Arnaud." "See, Monsieur, over near the bushes; we should have burned that cover." "Shadows, shadows; but my old eyes are good enough to see Indians." "Pig-dogs! Stand to the loopholes." And from Anne, "Who is it, think you?"

A shadow rose from the shadows outside and leaped panther-like above the slanted timbers. "The night-hawk," said a voice in good enough French; an axe whirled up into the air and fell within. The fight was begun.

The lingering shadows of the night seemed to rise and run upon the little fort, with leaping, with cries, with laughter. "They do not laugh unless they are killing," said Antoine. And then the storm broke. It was like the breaking of a wave, of which the foam was men. That foam was swept inward, left, torn and dead, under the feet of the defenders; and in a moment was renewed from an inexhaustible sea.

Anne fired his clumsy pieces till he was burned and blinded and deafened; it was too slow and he took his sword. The noise and confusion of that fight was so great he could only tell when the blade went home by the red dripping over the hilt. Faces glared at him from the whirling darkness, hands struck at him, he was wounded with arrows, beaten to his knees. But he fought up, he fought on!

At last came silence. The wave had ebbed. Anne drew his breath heavily and gazed about him with heavy eyes. It was all utterly quiet. The broad, slow twilight of the northern dawn had broadened a little. It showed Anne a dead man crumpled at his feet, and Antoine leaning against the loophole.

"Is it over?" he said dully.

"For a little minute," said Antoine thickly. He loomed large and misty in Anne's eyes, and in this mist moved slow figures, shadows that groaned. Anne sat down and held his head; he tried to count the men that were left, and could not. But the lilies were still there.

Again the wave gathered strength, rose, and broke in death upon the little fort.

Again in that horrible eddying confusion, Anne struck and was struck, and only knew it because his blade and the ruffles of Spanish lace and the amethyst scarf dripped red together. "It is not often," thought the slow Norman boy, "that one finishes so young with such a good fight."

"Silence again, and the slow broadening of the dawn. This time, within and without the fort, nothing broke that silence. The last desperate eddy of that fight had borne Anne to the doorway of the guardhouse, and left him stranded there, at the base of the rough fir staff that carried the flag. His strength drained from a dozen hurts; with the last of it he loaded the great pistols with the arms in silver on the butts, and then lay waiting, looking up at the flag.

He waited a long time. Once a face showed through the haze that surrounded him, a dreadful face, only kept alive by hate. He aimed carefully and fired, and the face was nothing but a fluttered scalp-lock and a hawk's feather.

"One," counted Anne.

Sunlight beat upon him, and he suffered. Blessed shadow came, and another shadow that crawled towards him, a knife in the mouth. The mists cleared a little and the pistol roared like a small culverin. "Two," said Anne. "He also was a boy."

Rain came with the dusk and Anne sucked the amethyst scarf and lived again. Things came round the palisades, things that whined and flitted, but he was not afraid. He called to them, "O mes freres," for he was lonely, and they were only wolves.

With the light he loaded the pistols once more. It took him a long time. The sun was high when he had finished.

He lay at ease when the shadow came and watched blue butterflies at play above the dead. The butterflies were bright, and the lilies out in the grass were bright, but brighter still were the lilies upon the flag. They glowed like tongues of flame when the sun sank.

Anne thought that they were lilies of flame, cups of immortal fire, that flickered in the twi-

Continued from page 27