



FOR FAITH and KING

a Romance of Ville-Marie

By BLANCHE L. MACDONELL

CHAPTER XIV.—Continued.

One of those lightning flashes of intuition that thrill the consciousness showed her the tragic possibilities of fear and loss and anguish, the terrible beauty (she had before now freely acknowledged the necessity) of heroism, devotion and self-abnegation, and taught her to realize, perhaps faintly and indistinctly, but at least truly, some conception of the impulse of a Divine help, offered with a human eagerness of sympathy and God-like patience, till mortal hands should reach out and lay hold of it. A wonderful consolation, a perfect peace succeeded the fever of burning pain. Just then the peals of the Angelus broke, echoing through the mountain slopes and over the waters. It was the voice of praise, rising in jubilant triumph, soaring above all earthly passions of grief or pain.

Groups of women, with heavy eyes and careworn faces, holding their rosaries, with fingers still mechanically pressing the beads and lips moving in silent prayer, emerged from the dusky seclusion of the church where, day and night, lights had burned and unceasing prayer had been offered. The beadle of the Parish Church, in full uniform, with his mace in his hand, was narrating with much dramatic power, all the particulars of a supposed engagement to a keenly interested crowd of listeners, when the tide of his eloquence was checked by a sharp poke in the ribs that deprived him of breath, as Nanon, her face flushed like a peony, the lappets of her cap flying, swept past like a whirlwind.

"Seigneur Dieu! I would know the truth me—a canoe."

"A boat arriving—tidings—tidings," the words were repeated in a variety of keys, as moved by a common impulse the group rapidly dispersed.

Propelled by four strong arms, skimming lightly as foam over the surface of the water, leaving a faint track behind it, the frail craft advanced. The figures were dark against the light as it drifted between the eager spectators and the sun, like the phantom ship in the mariner's vision, and the citizens of Ville Marie gazed with breath quickened and heart beating, hoping—fearing—expecting, they knew not what. Le Ber gazed with the wrinkles deepening on his brow. The setting sun shone so strongly in his eyes that he put up his hand to shade them, and for a moment could see nothing.

"Le Canotier and Madouaska," Du Plessis announced hurriedly.

Then again a breathless silence settled on the crowd; not a sound was heard but the dipping of the paddles and the murmur of the waves, as they rolled upon the shore. Silently the boat came on. There was an Indian beside le Canotier, a tall, superbly built man, whose remarkably regular features might have been sculptured out of Florentine bronze. He wore a sort of mantle, with a pink and lilac border, made of caribou, which the savages alone understood the art of rendering soft and silky. His head was shaved with the exception of a tuft on the crown, which was ornamented with hawk feathers, which formed something like the crest of an antique helmet. His face was absolutely impassive in its immobility. As the canoe grated on the shore, a dozen willing hands offered aid, then a shuddering, convulsive sob ran through the assembly as a French officer, bearing, in haggard eye and ghastly pallor, traces of the fatal wound that was rapidly draining his life's blood, was tenderly lifted out.

"M. le Capitaine d'Esquegrae."

The women separated, and a lady, with three little children clinging to her gown, pushed her way to the front.

"Carry him home," she said. "At least the good God has granted us the favour of permitting him to die with me. I must have courage; he will need me beside him; let us be together while we may." For an instant she had seemed on the point of breaking out into some wild outcry for help and comfort, then she checked herself and the icy composure of voice and manner sounded almost like indifference. A nun silently detached herself from the crowd and placed herself at the side of the stricken wife. Dollier de Casson, his brown, valiant face all quivering with emotion, solemnly raised his hands in benediction over her.

"You won't grudge the sacrifice, my daughter. It is a hero willingly laying down his life for his faith and his King."

"Afterwards," she answered very quietly, "afterwards, now he needs me, I can think only of him."

The whole assembly were hanging eagerly upon the accents of le Canotier, who had brought dispatches for M. du Plessis.

"We marched to Chambly—such were our orders. The object of M. de Valrene was to let these devils of English pass, and then, by placing himself in their rear, to cut them off from their canoes. Our scouts, Misti, Tshinepek, Mushawana, soon discovered the advance of the enemy, and then we marched six or seven miles towards La Prairie, on the path by which Schuyler was retreating. The sun stood high; it was nine o'clock when our scouts met those of the foe, and then—Diantre—the woods resounded with the shrill yells of the Indians, and their war-whoops gave the alarm. All know how that part of the country is buried in forests. We take possession of a ridge of ground that crossed the way of these English sorcerers. Two enormous trees, cast low by the storm, have fallen along the crest of the acclivity, and behind these we crouch in a triple row, well hidden by bushes and thick standing trunks, like wolves ready to spring upon their prey. Believe me, Messieurs and Mesdames, I have witnessed much of forest warfare and never have I seen so hot a conflict. Like hail the balls flew—three times were we mingled together, scorching each other's shirts by the flash of our guns. The English charged like devils, and were sent reeling back by a close and deadly volley. Then, with still greater fury, they repeated the attack and dislodged us from our ambushade. It was then the veritable struggle commenced. Figure to yourself that they determined to break through our lines, and our commandant desired, above all else, to drive them back within reach of our people at La Prairie. Our muskets thirsted to kill, and there stood M. de Valrene, amidst that storm of hell fire, giving his commands, calm and smiling as at a ball. Forty dead they left behind them—these devils of English, yet they cut their way through and drove us from the path."

The prospect appeared to grow more bleak, bewildering and appalling. There had been a sharp engagement, apparently many lives lost, and who could divine which heart had been smitten, whose home rendered desolate.

"M. le Lieutenant Daumerque?" asked a feeble voice.

"Dead. Shot at my side," responded le Canotier. "I see a little officer, with hair as red as his coat, fighting like a Turk—I send him a sugar plum—v'là his legs in the air, but not before mon lieutenant has fallen at my side."

There was a faint, stifled cry, a pale young girl fell to the ground in a nerveless heap; an elderly woman, whose face was set in hard lines of stony

composure, bent anxiously over her, and Dollier de Casson, raising the slight form in his strong arms, bore her away to her home.

"It is the Demoiselle Adèle de Montigny; they were to have been married in the early days of September."

"M. de St. Rochs?" Louise was clinging to Diane's gown, trembling, shivering, half believing herself already a widow; the soft outlines and fresh bloom of earliest youth, just emerging from childhood, contrasted oddly with the pathetic trouble of her eyes.

"M. de St. Rochs was safe, Madame, when I left. I was sent away with M. mon Capitaine before the fight was fairly over."

Madame de St. Rochs rushed into Diane's arms like a little tempest, crying, sobbing and uttering inarticulate exclamations on her friend's shoulder.

Le Ber's grasp on his ward's arm tightened. Twice she tried to speak but her throat seemed to close; the words would not come from her lips, and with a sort of spasm of impossibility, physical as well as mental, it was Louise, in a frenzy of joyful triumph, who found voice for the consuming desire of the Demoiselle de Monestrol's heart.

"And M. Le Ber du Chêne—he is safe?"

"Ah, Madame, our brave young commandant. And is it any wonder that the blue-coats love their leader? He fought like all the King's troops in one, being of a valor truly marvellous."

Le Ber drew his hand across his eyes to clear away the blind, darkness that came over him, and drew his breath sharply. Diane had been watching the working of le Canotier's scarred and weather-beaten face with close and vigilant scrutiny. The sweetness of relief was almost as poignant as pain. For an instant she closed her eyes, and clung sick and faint to Le Ber's arm. With trembling thanksgiving she welcomed this gleam of hope. The Blessed Virgin had granted her prayer. The Holy Mother had a woman's heart and was touched by compassion. Though Du Chêne would never be hers yet he would live; he would move in the light of God's earth; she would be spared the supreme anguish of yielding him up to death.

Absorbed in the interest of le Canotier's recital, no one had perceived the rapid advance of another canoe. The shrill voice of a child proclaimed the fact.

"Voilà! yet another canoe. Truly. It is M. le Chevalier and the Sieur d'Ardieux, yes, and Baptiste Bras de Fer."

Le Ber withdrew his support, Diane gazing but not seeing, with Louise de St. Rochs still clinging wildly to her, like one helpless or distraught, sickened with a sense of insecurity and apprehension. She made a hasty step forward, staggering like one blind with sleep or misery, then stretching out her hands with a long, gasping cry that seemed to carry with it the anguish of those last terrible days, recovered herself by a supreme effort.

CHAPTER XV.

"Oh, blest are they who live and die like these,
Loved with such love and with such sorrow mourned."
—THE EXCURSION.

"Mademoiselle," though the Chevalier's dress and person were in the wildest disorder and his heart sore within him—he was still punctilious regarding the most formal terms of courtesy—"Mademoiselle, I have failed in my commission. believe me, through no negligence or fault of mine. I have brought back my brave and tender comrade; do me the justice to believe that I would willingly have given my own life in his stead."

He spoke with his heart swelling in his throat. In the strange and terrible excitement of the moment Diane knew that she had pity to spare for him who felt so much. Her eyes were grand; he felt their power subduing, even while they chilled. The girl's secret was revealed to him. Two great globes of moisture came into his eyes; he bowed his head reverently; the Sicilian stood awed and abashed before the revelation.

Le Ber's shock was so great that he looked piteously into Diane's eyes, as she stood with her white lips pressed together, appealing to her out of his sudden trouble. The Demoiselle de Monestrol's agitation affected her in the strangest way.