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ROSALBA:

OR,

FAITHFUL TO TWO LOVES.

An Episode of the Rebellion of 1837-38.

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[Written for the Canadian Illustrated News.]

INTRODUCTION.

AT GIANELLI'S.

The coldest spot in Montreal is Place d'Armes. In summer, when all the other streets are steaming like furnaces, that pretty square is as fresh and breezy as a country lane. Its little garden is a bower, made sweet by the shadows of small trees and the spray of a central fountain, while its southern outlet, St. Sulpice street, reminds one of a Colorado canon, through which the high winds rush from the mountain to the river, with the force of a torrent. In winter, the garden becomes transformed into a species of Arctic cairn. The trees are not only stripped of their leaves, but their branches are broken short, and even the bark seems to crackle. The snow, piled high above the iron railings, gleams with peculiar ghastliness against the cold, blank surfaces of the stone edifices by which it is surrounded. Montreal bank looks like a stately charnel-house where the stark nivalds are entombed. The turrets of the French Church, glittering like glaciers in the crystal atmosphere, cast their white shadows across the square, freezing the ineffectual sun rays. All that area seems desolate and uninhabitable.

Late one afternoon, in January, 1867, two gentlemen turned from Notre Dame street into Place d'Armes. One was a stout-built, athletic man, who seemed to bound along the pavement as if buoyed up by the keen air, and he held his head erect, in defiance of the storm. The other was a tall, spare figure, but almost double in his efforts to make headway against the blinding snow.

"Where are we?" gasped the latter, "I am almost blown off my feet."

"In Place d'Armes," answered his companion, with a ringing voice. "Here, of all places, you can have a test of a Canadian winter."

"It is frightful. I cannot cross the square."

"The *Hall* is only a few yards off."

"No matter. My breath is nearly gone. Is there no shelter nearer?"

"Oh yes," answered the stout man, with a laugh. "Here is the *Cosmopolitan*."

"Then, let us go in."

A few steps more, and the green-flannel doors swung upon their hinges. A draught of warm air flowed down from the lighted interior which expanded the feeble chest of the exhausted pedestrian.

"Ah!" said he, drawing a long breath, "heat is life, cold is death. How do you Canadians manage to live in such a climate?"

"We thrive in it, my friend. Look at me."

"I should die here."

"Not a bit of it. If you have weak lungs, our sharp air is the very thing to strengthen them. Damp is what kills delicate people. A dry atmosphere exhilarates and invigorates them, and ours is the driest atmosphere in the world. Canada is a far healthier climate for consumptives than Florida, and doctors are beginning to recognize that fact."

"A new argument in favour of annexation," said the first speaker, who had now fully recovered his spirits.

The two companions walked up to the bar, evidently quite amused at this last remark. Why they were amused will be understood when the reader is informed that the Canadian was a rabid anti-annexationist, and his companion an American who had come to Montreal purposely to study the history and condition of the country.

"What shall we have?" asked the American.

"Why, *Tonico Reale*, of course."

"*Tonico Reale*? What is that?"

"Did you never hear of Gianneli's Bitters?"

"Never."

"Well, what Tortoni was to Paris, what Delmonico is to New York, that Gianneli's is to Montreal."

"Oh! I see. One of those Italian caterers whose names are conspicuous in every capital of Europe, from London to Constantinople."

"And he has imported a bitter called the *Royal Tonic* which is all the rage here just now. With a drop of brandy it is superb."

"Well, let us try it. The brandy, especially, will be just the thing after the chill I have had."

An intelligent bar-tender is the life of a restaurant. Gianneli had one of these, a ruddy-faced, bright-eyed, quick-eared young man, who understood several languages. He had overheard a part of the foregoing conversation, and, in the twinkling of an eye, spun out two

wine-glasses on the marble counter, filled them to within a line of the brim with an aromatic golden liquor, then added to each a bead or two of *Martell*—just a *larme*, as the French would say.

The Canadian sipped his glass, with the dainty leisure of a Parisian, as if to savour the sweetness of every toothful. The American, on the contrary, after the fashion of his countrymen, tossed his off, at one draught, and smacking his lips loudly, exclaimed:

"Capital! With such an appetizer as that, I think we can indulge in an oyster supper. Have you Canadians any national variety of the mollusk?"

"Yes, the *Carraquette*, a small oyster, rather salt, but very succulent."

"Well, let us have a dish of them."

The two Canadians were shown into an upper room, where they were soon busily engaged in enjoying the luxury of their repast. The sharp air which he had breathed, and the sparkling glass of bitters had edged the appetite of the American, who found his oysters so delicious that he called for a second plate. His spirits, too, were with the comfort which his warm meal produced. He could not help comparing his present sense of luxury with the deadening chill which he had experienced only half an hour before. He looked at the thick velvety carpets, the heavy, green damasks hanging at the window, the soft, scintillating gasolier, the lambent heat pleasantly reflected on the mica plates of the central stove, and he felt a delightful sensation of well-being creep over his whole person, as he lay lounging diffusely in his arm-chair.

"I enjoy this immensely," said he to his companion.

"I am glad to know it," was the polite answer.

"Yes, I have something of the artist's eye for contrasts. To me they are the poetry of life, as to graver thinkers they are its philosophy. I enjoy this warmth, because I think of the storm outside."

"Our Canadian life is full of contrasts, and I am, therefore, certain you will like it," said the stout man, who seemed to drift naturally into the current of his friend's thoughts. "Our life is very much like our climate—a rough cold exterior, but warm happy homes."

The American turned his chair, as if to listen more attentively.

"We seem a retrograde people, yet we have all the elements of progress. This must have struck you, as it does all your countrymen who come here."

The American was too courteous to make a definite reply.

"Then, we have much ignorance among us; the literary vocation is not encouraged, although we have a world of native talent."

The American listened with increased interest.

"Next, we are a timorous, shame-faced people, inclined to exaggerate our littleness and to magnify the prosperity and resources of our neighbours."

"I have noticed something of this already," said the American.

"The remark applies particularly to the French population, who are the original holders of the soil. Many of them are backward, unambitious, and seemingly doomed to perpetual inertness. One of our former governors had the impudence to brand them as an 'inferior race.' The insult has rankled, but it has not had the result of stimulating the great majority. There is a large class of French Canadians who look upon their English fellow-citizens as their betters. They hanker after inter-marriage with them; affect their manners; speak their language to the neglect of their own beautiful tongue."

The American smiled, and answered that he was acquainted with this species of folly. He had seen examples of it, at home, among the Irish and Germans, where the young brood, for some nameless cause, get ashamed of their fathers and nationality to palm themselves off for *notice Americans*.

"It is a disgusting hallucination," said he.

"Especially," resumed the Canadian, "where there is so little reason for it, as in our case. For—and here please mark the contrast which I intend to enforce—the French colonized this country, civilized it, fought heroically for it, dutifully obeyed the new domination forced upon it by the capitulation of Quebec, and ever since—that is, for a hundred years—have held their own, spite of every physical and moral obstacle. They have reason to be ashamed neither of their ancestors, nor of themselves. Their existence to-day in the new world, after two centuries and a half of hardship, is a phenomenon."

"A phenomenon to be proud of," said the American.

"Their history, from the days of Champlain to our own, is a romance."

"I know that Quebec is the historic Province of the Dominion; Nova Scotia comes next, but her most pathetic annals are dated from the days of the valorous Acadians. I have come to study that history, and should be pleased to do so, with the guidance of such a philosophic spirit as yours."

"Thank you," replied the Canadian. "I presume to know less the history of my country than the social and domestic character of my countrymen. This I have studied deeply,

with the many opportunities which have been exceptionally my lot. I should be most happy to assist you with any experience of mine in this special study."

The American inquired particularly into the rebellion of 1837. With its political results he was sufficiently well acquainted, but he seemed anxious to know whether the movement had had any marked effect on the internal condition of the people.

"The rebellion you refer to," replied the Canadian, "marks an era in our history. It is an event to date from. To men of my generation it is a starting point, but that is because it is the era of our Union. Outside of this fact, I can trace no direct influence it has had on the Canadian people. The rebellion was crushed before it became a revolution, and it is only revolutions, you know, that can materially alter a national character, one way or the other. Hence the Canadian people, barring always their steady advance with the wave of universal progress, have remained since the rebellion pretty much what they were before it. Still, there are numerous episodes connected with that event—scraps of the legendary and ballad literature of our village firesides, most of them still unwritten—which, while they give us a deeper insight into the details of the rebellion, testify to some of the personal virtues and vices of the French Canadian people in a period of unusual anxiety and danger. Many of these I am acquainted with—having heard them related by the old folks in my boyhood. One especially I have written out in full, because the personages included in it belonged to my own family. If you desire it, I shall take pleasure in handing you the manuscript."

"At once, if it is convenient," exclaimed the American, with the eagerness of the student who finds himself suddenly on the threshold of a new field of information.

The Canadian looked at his watch.

"Very well. It is now seven o'clock. We have had our supper. The whole evening is before us. So, we shall light a cigar and proceed directly to my residence. Are you equal to a walk up to St. Catherine street?"

"That north wind!" replied the American, shaking his head dubiously. "I think we had better take a cutter."

"Sleigh, sir? Sleigh, sir?" was the hoarse cry that greeted the two companions as they stepped out of the *Cosmopolitan*. The Canadian carter is a peculiar but very uniform type. His winter aspect is an awkwardly muffled figure, with worn beaver cap drawn down over the eyes, red sash at the waist, thick moccasins, whip stiffly adjusted in the curvature of the thumb and forefinger, red nose, cheeks tanned by all weathers, sleety beard and lashes, and voice harshly resonant with the inspiration of a thousand snow-storms. The two gentlemen soon made a choice, for they threw themselves into the nearest sleigh, and rolling under the robes, away they flew over the icy streets. In five minutes they had reached their destination.

The Canadian introduced his friend into a cosy cabinet, showed him to an easy chair, and taking out of the library a roll of manuscript, laid it on the table beside him.

"Read," said he, "what a Canadian girl can do."

Accordingly, while he pored over *Les Anciens Canadiens* of De Gaspé, the American read what follows.

CHAPTER I.

THE ICE-SHOVE.

There is nothing lost in this world. In the moral as well as in the material universe, there is a recuperative force, a vitality that not only shrinks from annihilation, but ultimately triumphs over it. There was a germ of profound truth in the Pythagorean theory of Metempsychosis. A perfect transference and transformation of elements is going on around us, operating new effects and producing unlooked-for results. Not a tear is shed, not a sigh is heard, not a pang is endured in this passionate world of ours, that does not, sooner or later, far or near, secretly or publicly, work out its influences.

The traveller, descending the St. Lawrence from Montreal to Quebec, is struck with the picturesque site of the village of Varennes, perched on a high bank, within easy view of the Royal Mountain. It is one of the most ancient settlements of Lower Canada, bears the name of an honoured French house, and is mostly peopled by the descendants of those who, with the Bouchervilles, the Longuevilles and the Contrecoeurs, figured in the wild, ungracious warfare which culminated the early annals of New France. Varennes wears the quiet look of all Canadian villages, where nothing hardly ever occurs to disturb the routine and uniformity of a simple virtuous life which has few wants beyond the boundaries of the household. If now and then, something unusual ruffles the serenity of its atmosphere, gossip runs high for a while—for this people are very talkative—then suddenly subsides with the even current of nursery tales. April 5th, 1837, was one of these remarkable days in the memory of the inhabitants of Varennes. The winter had been unusually severe, and the ice of the St. Lawrence held out longer than it had done for several previous

years. The ice-shove or *débauche* is always an event—sometimes a critical one—in Lower Canada, and this year, it was looked forward to with unusual foreboding. Rumours had come from Montreal that the current was rapidly swelling, and that ice-banks were forming on the eastern end of St. Helen's island. Ominous rumblings were heard opposite Longueuil and in the vicinity of Boucherville islands. If, as some hoped, the ice sank enough at those points to make the tide rush over it, all would be well, and an easy rupture would take place in the Varennes channel. But the older inhabitants, who had studied the freaks of the great river, feared that the ice would resist all the more, for the partial openings above, and massing-in cliffs along the Varennes highlands, would present there a tremendous breakwater. In that case, the northern bank of the river would surely be flooded, and the ice might create havoc even on the more elevated southern side.

April 5th was a day of portents. The sun rose bright and shone resplendent for two or three hours, then gradually receded behind a curtain of vapour. All that remained of him was a dull purplish ball, which oscillated slightly in the nebulous atmosphere, like one of those semaphores set upon rocky ledges in the sea, or at the head of mountain viaducts to signal danger or distress. Old farmers pointed with trembling finger to that sign. Clouds upon clouds of mist arose from the direction of the city, like the smoke of battle or of a great conflagration, shooting up rapidly in straight lines, or slowly in languid spirals, till reaching a higher stratum of air, they banked in compact terraces over the broad surface of the river. The horizon was hazy and indistinct, now streaked with bars of pearly whiteness, then dimmed with masses of floating shadow. At times, the sounds of bells, the cries of men and animals could be heard from one bank to the other; then, as some sudden atmospheric change took place, all sounds were deadened, and the silence was painful. Evidently, there was the shock of currents and counter-currents on the face of the river, and the mysterious gyrations of some cosmic force down in its hidden depths. All physical science is merely empiric. We note signs, but we cannot investigate causes, and it is as well that it should be so, for, if the elements were unveiled to us, even in a glimpse, we should be appalled from all further research.

The forenoon passed thus. The farmers said that if no change took place at meridian, the day would go on darkening, and there would be a crisis of some kind before nightfall. There was no change at noon. The sun dashed a little, once or twice, then disappeared completely. The wind rose gradually, first brushing the light snow from the surface of the ice, then reaching to the upper layers of vapour, tore them in shreds and drove them helter-skelter along the sky. Fool-hardy pedestrians crossing from one bank to the other, looked like muffled giants stalking on the edges of the horizon. Such apparitions—due to refraction—are frequent in boreal climates and give rise to many superstitions. The travellers themselves were as frightened as those on shore, for the ice cracked everywhere under their feet, undulated at times like a molten mass, and the water, gurgling under the numerous air-holes, seemed ever about to burst through and overflow.

Evening came at last, and with it a sudden lull in the storm. The Angelus bells from the turret of Varennes church answered, across the ice, the silver peal of the Pointe-aux-Trembles chimés. This was the signal for the crowd that lined the highlands during the day, to return to their homes. Some hoped that the weather would moderate, but the more knowing shook their heads and predicted that the present calm was the forerunner of a more furious storm. For that reason, many prepared to continue their look-out, rather than go in to supper.

An hour later, while the inhabitants of Varennes were quietly seated around their tables or near their firesides—many of them, perhaps, quite forgetful of the portents of the day—they were suddenly startled by a terrible sound that seemed to rock the foundations of their houses. It was not like the dull roar of thunder, nor like the sonorous explosion of cannon, but rather a sharp, harsh clash, as if a Plutonian rock were hurled on some great metallic shield. Men and women started to their feet, children awoke in their cradles. "*La débauche!*" was the universal cry.

In a moment, the hill-side and the edge of the bank below were crowded with people. And what a spectacle met their eyes! The night, which was pitchy dark before, was illuminated by crepuscular gleams. It was the ghastly irradiation of the ice, piled up now in all kinds of fantastic ledges and blocks, here in the shape of a pyramid, there in the form of a Gothic castle or Cathedral, and yonder in an incongruous heap of phosphorescent fragments, suggestive of an earthquake or a wreck. The water roared and hissed as it struck against a solid barrier or struggled through a narrow aperture. Now it boomed like a cataract, as it toppled over some gigantic crag, then, murmured like a brook, when it crept over the open spaces. The wind blew a hurricane. It seemed as if an array of blasts and currents, ice-bound during the winter, had