

BURIED UNDER NOTRE DAME.

During the summer of 1888, while upon the editorial staff of the *Montreal Star*, I had the task assigned to me of examining the archives of the different city cemeteries, of ransacking the vaults and tombs, and of studying the historical monuments of the place with a view to the publication of a series of articles upon the subject of Montreal's early history and inhabitants. It was not generally known that between the years of 1831 and 1841 a great number of prominent citizens had been buried in the vaults under Notre Dame church. Few had ever visited that chamber of the dead, and even those few never carried away any record of the departed; in fact, no one had ever been permitted to examine its archives. After bringing considerable influence to bear, I one day succeeded in obtaining a permit, from the Cure of Notre Dame, to visit the vaults and take extracts from the registers.

Armed with my "firman," and after telling the city editor of my intended excursion, and promising to return to the office before five o'clock to attend to some special work he had assigned to me, I found my way, at a quarter-past three in the afternoon, to the office of the church trustees, situate in rear of the vast temple of Notre Dame. There I met an elderly individual, who seemed to be the guardian of the place, and who expressed no little surprise on learning that I had an order for him to throw open the iron doors of the vault, and to hand over for my inspection the books of the parish.

The foundations of this edifice were laid in October, 1828, and during six years the work of construction progressed. On June 7, 1859, the last stone was placed upon the tower; and eight days afterward Mgr. Lartigue officially opened and consecrated the building. The plan of this immense church was conceived and carried into execution by one James O'Donnell, an architect of a very superior ability. Beneath its altar, in the catacomb of its dead, repose his remains; a beautiful monument marks the spot.

After seeing the structure in all its varied attractions from above, I suggested to my old *cicerone* to descend into the crypt, that I might read the stories of the past inscribed upon its tablets and conserved in its archives. To reach the crypt, the temple of the dead, we passed

*This being merely the account of a very peculiar adventure, I will not trouble my readers with any details of what I found in the registers or upon the tombs, beyond what is absolutely necessary to make my story intelligible.

through what poor Keats would describe as

"A thousand heraldries,
Twilight saints and dim emblazonnings."

The old man held in one hand a bunch of keys, and in the other a taper about ten inches in length. From behind the high altar he led me down a winding stone stairway, into a damp corridor with vaulted roof and huge iron doors. It would recall to mind the palace of the Doges when the "Bridge of Sighs" had been passed, or else the prison darkness of the memory-haunted Mamertine. The clang of our feet upon the stone pavement, the grating of the iron hinges, the hollow reverberations, the tablets half lost in the midst of a funereal gloom, the monument over the ashes of the dead architect—in a word, all the surroundings bespoke the presence of the departed. Yonder, in a wood-encased vault, the old man pointed out to me the musty records of many lustrums. Leaving me the candle, and telling me that I would find many marble slabs upon the sides of the great pillars away down in the gloom, he turned, and retraced his steps upward and outward.

As soon as the iron door closed and the footfall died away I took out pencil and paper and prepared to dive into the secrets of the past. I supposed that my candle would last about an hour; and I calculated that in half an hour I could take sufficient notes for one article, and then I would copy some of the inscriptions upon the tombstones before returning to the office. In disturbing those yellow volumes I felt like William of Deloraine when robbing the tomb of Michael Scott to carry off his volume of wizard lore. Standing, as it were upon the grave of 1830, and looking down into its depths, I seemed to summon up the shadowy forms that peopled the bygone, and, lo! at that mandate a solemn procession passed before my vision. The Montreal of to-day disappeared; the people that thronged its streets with life and noise vanished for a space, and I lived and spoke and moved with the past. Prelates who had carried the light of Christianity amongst savage tribes, others who had preached Christ from the pulpit in the church above; men of liberal professions, who beheld the infancy of the city; scions of families who rocked the country's cradle; they of the old *regime*, they also of the new; some who were snatched away in the dawn of light, others whose sun had reached its midday glory, and many whose years were long and plentiful in the land; a few whose names died with them; a number whose memories are green, and will remain so, even as the pines on the mountains—all these spectres seemed to emerge from the oblivion of the sepulchre and repeople the scenes of their once busy life.

After spending fully three-quarters of an hour in the wooden, shed-like structure, I closed the book, took up my half-spent candle, and went forth into the labyrinth of darkness. My steps were first arrested by some depressions of the soil; it seemed as though I were

walking over graves whose occupants had mouldered away, and left hollow spaces where their bodies once upheld the earth. Yonder a tablet of white marble, with its deep, black letters, tells that on the 2nd of February, 1830, James O'Donnell, architect, was there laid to rest. I paused to copy the inscription. Some object, small, swift and dark, shot past me and disappeared in the deep gloom beyond; it might have been a bat or rat, or again only a shadow.

On I moved from grave to grave, from pillar to pillar—the floor of the church twenty odd feet above my head, impenetrable walls on all sides; not a sound save that of my own steps, my own breathing, the flickering of my candle, or perhaps the scratching of my pencil upon the paper, for half an hour I rambled about, taking notes and becoming deeply interested in my task, anticipating my first article and its effects, enjoying the thoughts of my newly acquired wealth of information. However, my candle, now reduced to within an inch of the socket, warned me that it was time to be going, and my watch told me that it was half-past four o'clock. At once I remembered that I had an appointment at the office for five. One by one the spectres of the past sank back into the cold, dull slumber of a *quasi* oblivion; and my mission in the chambers of the dead being over, I turned away, "leaving the clay to keep the clay."

My taper burned dimly, and the subterranean dampness became more and more oppressive. I took a last glance along the sombre corridors and beneath the arched vaults, and then turned toward the iron door, through which no ray of light could ever penetrate. I moved toward the entrance with a feeling bordering on relief. I anticipated, with a peculiar sensation of joy, the transition from utter gloom and silence into daylight and noise. The procession of the dead was about to vanish, and in a few moments, with my bundle of secrets, I would emerge into the busy street, with the ebb and flow of a great world's human tide would surge around me. I reached the door, and was about to blow out my candle when I remembered that beyond that door there was a long and dark passage, which was as gloomy as the vaults within. I placed my pencil carefully in one pocket, my paper-pad in another. Looking back, I saw that the wooden door of the cabin-like structure, where the archives were deposited, was closed. I took the big brass handle of the iron portal in my left hand. I held the almost expiring candle in my right; I gave one strong pull at the ponderous door—it moved not! Thrice and four times I tugged—all in vain: the door was locked. The old guardian, absent-mindedly, had turned the key, as was his custom, and left me there—*buried under Notre Dame!*

For a moment I was so astonished, so bewildered, so perplexed, that I could not even think: but once the first surprise over, and with the realization of my situation gradually dawning upon me, my thoughts became so confused that my brain seemed to whirl and whirl in the conflicting currents of some mental maelstrom. Suddenly I was brought to my senses by the fitful flickering of the expiring candle. I knew that to shout was useless; I knew that to knock or kick or tug at the door would be a mere waste of energy; for a cannon shot could not break through those triple sheets of iron. I knew that to lose myself amidst the pillars, passages, and catacombs of the immense cellar would be my fate were I to stir away from the entrance. I knew that in the wooden structure, built to preserve the books from dampness, I would find the most comfortable and secure spot. I knew all these things, and yet I could not act, nor could I overcome an almost irresistible inclination to shout and kick and run about, and do something desperate.

My dying taper warned me that I had not a moment to spare if I desired to reach, with any degree of certainty, the archive-vault. Giving away to a certain indescribable nervous energy, I bounded, like a deer, across the first and second rows of graves, in between two of the giant columns, and up the three steps leading into the wood-constructed apartment. As I entered the low door, the candle went out and actually "left the world in darkness and to me." The small backless chair whereon I sat while taking my notes an hour before, was easily found, and, as exhausted as if I had run a mile race under a scorching sun, I sat me down to collect my thoughts, calm my nerves, and study, if possible, the *pros* and *cons* of my unenviable situation.

Alone with the dead! The darkness around me seemed to become gradually more and more dense; I thought it was growing palpable. Kaleidoscopic visions danced and whirled in fantastic irregularity before my eyes. It was half-past four o'clock when I last looked at my watch; I had not even a match; I could not see the time, but I could hear—oh, how distinctly!—the regular tick, tick, of the chronometer. After a space—it might have been five minutes, or an hour, or even two hours—I felt a peculiar calmness coming over me. As yet I had no sense of fear: it was more a mixture of surprise and disappointment that oppressed me. I did not even think that I could possibly be overcome with fear: still I had perhaps many hours before me—hours of torture, anxiety—alternate hopes and disappointments; hours of untold misery; hours—oh, the thought for once flashed across my mind!—of hunger, thirst, cold, sickness, lothargy and possibly, possibly death! No; I was as yet morally brave; I felt certain that the moment I allowed fear to take possession of me I might abandon hope.