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Lo, The Poor Acadian!

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The approach of the season for American tourists reminds the Nova Scotian once more of the perennial sorrows of the Acadians. As it is some time since the story has been aired in any except a commercial form, a somewhat different presentation of it may not be unwelcome. It does not pretend to be a discussion of the old, old question, "Was it justifiable?" but is simply a summary of the two opposing views commonly held, and a review of some historical facts which are, perhaps, in danger of being forgotten.

As everyone knows, the poet Longfellow is responsible for the popular version of the Acadian tragedy. After Raynal, Garneau, Bancroft, Halliburton, and other historians had drawn the outlines of the picture, it was completed by the vivid and subtle coloring of Longfellow's imagination. The history alone might have been read dry-eyed: combined with poetry, it opened a perpetual fountain.

The picture is indeed a moving one. Acadia was Acadia, and the Acadians a people representing a social and political status whose counterpart was not to be found outside of Paradise. They lived on the best lands in the province. They paid no taxes, governed themselves as they saw fit, and so were enabled to enjoy to the full the benefits of their labor. Ease and abundance prevailed, while colonists elsewhere in America were fighting for the necessities of life. Misery and want did not exist, because "misfortune was relieved, as it were, before it could be felt;" and every individual seemed only to hold his property in trust for the public good. While the Canadian colonists were grumbling at their enforced payment of tithes to the priests, the Acadians gave voluntarily even more than was required. Vice, of course, was unknown. Fear, lust, envy, impiety, jealousy, slander, back-biting, and other ills that infest ordinary communities, had no place in the minds and hearts of these simple, innocent people. Love to God and man was the key-note of their lives; and so, blessed by God, and unmolested by man, they thrived and multiplied apace.

Into the midst of this harmony and felicity came the English, like a hungry wolf on the fold. The country changed hands, and the Acadians found themselves in a most trying and humiliating position. Sincerely attached to their own government and religion, they now were ordered, on pain of exile and forfeiture of their goods, to swear allegiance to a sovereign of a hated race and faith, and to bear arms, it might be, against the king to whom they were already bound by an indissoluble oath of fealty. The attitude of neutrality which they then assumed, and which they ever after faithfully maintained, was the only one consistent with the character of a true-hearted and loyal people. Again and again they refused the oath, and though the English colonists—jail-birds of the blackest feather—only awaited the opportunity to swoop down upon their lands, it was not until over forty long years had passed that the Government felt itself in a position strong enough to carry out its iniquitous design. Once more the already doomed Acadians were called upon to take the oath in its well known detested form. Once more they refused, and asked leave to sell their lands and abandon the peninsula for other homes. The Governor would give them no choice. They could neither leave nor sell their effects. "It is for me to command, and for you to obey," said the haughty potentate, and as he now had the power to enforce his unjust demands, the wretched people were "subjected to the most merciless severities."

Says an anonymous writer in Chamber's Journal: "In their extremity they covered before their masters, hoping forbearance; not unwilling to take an oath of fealty, yet in their single-mindedness and sincerity still refusing to bear arms against the land from which they sprung. The English were masters of the sea, were undisputed lords of the country, and could have exercised clemency without the slightest apprehension. But the men in power showed no disposition for acts of generosity or conciliation. Indignant at the obstinate consistency of the people, they sought to reduce them to a humiliating dependence, and, in the plenitude of their tyranny, resorted to a project which the judgment of humanity must denounce as treacherous and dastardly." The details of that project are familiar to all. The cunningly-

worded proclamation by which the unsuspecting men were lured into the church; the distress of their families; the heart-rending scenes on the shore, when husbands and wives, parents and children, were torn asunder forever; the burning villages; the crowded, fever-infected transports, and the miserable wanderings of the outcasts in foreign and unfriendly lands,—these were the lamentable results of an act which "all good men have agreed to condemn," and which can find no justification whatever in any real or supposed necessities of British colonial administration.

The other side of this picture is equally moving, though in a different sense. It is the production of so-called reason, and has but few advocates. These, however, speak with emphasis.

According to their view the Acadians were an idle, thriftless people, fond at times of wandering away from their farms and living dissolute lives in the woods. In forty or fifty years, in spite of their growing numbers, they had not increased the area of cultivated land; and their houses, far from being the comfortable residences depicted by the poet, were "dirty wooden boxes," in which they lived anything but model lives. The list of their virtues sounds well in poetry, but had no foundation in fact. They were greedy, miserly, envious, quarrelsome, and extremely insolent to their superiors—occasionally even to the dear kind priests whose holy precepts and example should have taught them better. Their superstition amounted almost to infatuation, and was as senseless as it was degrading. They were treacherous, deceitful and cowardly. In fact, the only vice of which they were not accused was that of debauchery,—probably because their home-brewed ale and cider were considered mild in comparison with the New England rum that flowed so freely among the other colonists. Finally, ingratitude, that monster-vice, was their most distinguishing characteristic, causing them, like the fabled viper, to sting the very bosom that warmed and cherished them.

For the English were their truest friends. While their own priests and French neighbors were trying to lure them away from their farms into the barren island of Cape Breton, or the unknown wildernesses of Canada, the English were offering them full possession of their property, the free exercise of their religion, freedom from taxation—more rights and privileges even than were enjoyed by any other class of British subjects;—all on the natural and easy condition of an oath of allegiance to their lawful sovereign. Ordinary common sense, if gratitude were absent, should have dictated compliance.

Yet, for over forty years did these obstinate, ungrateful people set at naught the invitations, remonstrances, and commands of their rulers, on the idle pretext of loyalty to a king who had never lifted a finger to help them, and who used them, as he used his other subjects, as tools for his own base and selfish designs. For over forty years did the British commander at Annapolis play the part of a kind, indulgent father, ready at any time to overlook the faults of his disobedient children, but unwilling to proceed to measures of severity. The time came, however, when punishment was inevitable, and the sorrowing parent reluctantly undertook its infliction. Once more the children, sulky and insolent, were summoned before him.

"My dear children, you have been very naughty indeed; but I feel so sorry that you know no better, that I am willing to forgive you, if you will promise to be good in the future."

The children had not come prepared to make any promises.

"Very well, then, you may go into the closet and think it over."

But long-continued indulgence had produced its natural result. One and all they refused the oath, and no course was left open but to deprive them of the rights of children and subjects.

The plans for sending them away were carried out with all possible consideration. The innocent rule practised at Mines for capturing the men probably prevented a repetition of the miseries consequent upon attempted escapes at other places. They were fed upon the king's rations—an honor next to that of being entertained at his table—and as a further mark of consideration they were allowed to visit their families in regular squads of tens and twenties. Those who consider the English wanting

in feeling in this affair should study the following passage from Governor Lawrence's directions to Colonel Winslow:

"I hope By this time the Provisions I Sent you by Capt. Nichols are Safe Arrived. You Must send to Col. Monckton for the Ammunition you Want, as also for Molasses to the People. Which I think are in Every Respect Preferable to Rum."

They were also given leave to take with them their money—of which there was reason to think they had good store—and as many of their household goods as could be carried. Orders were given that families, and even villages, should not be separated; and as the transports remained in the river for days and days before sailing, it must have been due to their own stupidity if they could not keep together. When all was over, about seven thousand people found themselves scattered in various British colonies, north and south, where, as was natural, they were regarded indifferently by those of a different tongue, and where they were given work when they would take it, and charity when they would not. The same circumstances have befallen many other thousands of foreigners, who have turned them to good account. Nearly two-thirds of the Acadians, moreover, found their way back to the country where they had been so summarily dealt with, and were glad and thankful to give their whole allegiance to the British sovereign. "On the whole," says Hannay, "those who examine the matter impartially, in the light of all the facts, will come to the conclusion that it would have been a real cause for shame had the Acadians been permitted longer to misuse the clemency of the Government, to plot against British power, and to obstruct the settlement of the Province by loyal subjects."

What, then, are we to believe? To accept either of the two views presented is to do violence to one half of our nature. We cannot pity as we should without being illogical: we cannot be reasonable except at the expense of our sympathies. It is difficult even to present the bare facts without bias; but when this is attempted, it will at least be clear that the real responsibility belongs in a quarter which has hitherto escaped much of the blame. The following review is based upon English evidence which has never been denied, French evidence unwittingly given, and points upon which both English and French writers of the time agree.

The matter of the oath of allegiance is of the first importance. Its history begins with the treaty of Utrecht in 1713. The 12th clause of that treaty stipulated "that the subject of the King of France may have liberty to remove themselves within a year to any other place, with all their movable effects. But those who are willing to remain, and to become subject to the King of Great Britain, are to enjoy the free exercise of their religion according to the usages of the Church of Rome, as far as the laws of Britain do allow the same." Though there is no mention here of the lands of the Acadians, another clause cedes to the King of England all the rights which the French King or any of his subjects had enjoyed therein,—a clear transference of all property rights in the country. Two months after the treaty was signed, a letter from Queen Anne to Nicholson added a fourth privilege. Those who chose to become British subjects were to retain their lands, or sell them if they preferred to leave. The period within which the choice was to be made was regulated by the treaty, and the letter cancelled nothing therein stipulated. The Acadians, then, found themselves confronted by two clearly-defined alternatives, dependent upon two conditions, equally clear and explicit:—to stay where they were, in the enjoyment of their property and religion, provided they would become the Queen's subjects; or, to sell their lands and leave the country, provided they did so within the year. It followed that if the conditions were violated, the provisions of the article and letter became null and void.

The next year commissioners were appointed by the French government to make arrangements with Nicholson in respect to carrying out the provisions of the treaty. The Acadians were summoned, and the proposals of the King of France laid before them. Transports, to carry them to Isle Royale (Cape Breton); lands to be held from the Crown and not from seigneurs, as in Nova Scotia; provisions for one year, and exemption from taxes for ten,—these were tempting offers; and the joyful Acadians, renewing in the presence of Nicholson and the Commissioners their protestations of eternal fidelity