

### Their Furtive Evasion

It was evident that the unique issue out consisted in fleeing. But the problem was how to make the flight possible and safe. Nine chances out of ten were theirs to perish on the way through hardships or by being caught in their flight by the pursuing Iroquois, which would have <sup>meant</sup> a sure smashing of them all. It was in February, the snow would, by wearing their footprints, reveal their way out. How otherwise to get away! The waterways were locked up under a thick coat of ice. So circumstances were forcing them to wait for a better season...whatever risk was there for them in prolonging their stay any length of time among people in such state of mind. Now the period which succeeded that sombre date, was one of anguish for the French exiles, and at the same time of feverish activity, preparing without noise and ostentation, their outfits to render their evasion possible in due time.

The fathers, however did not grow the least remiss in their spiritual work among the Indians, continuing to apply themselves to it with the same ardor as if no degree of death had been hanging over their heads.

Now the 19th of March came, and the garrison seeing the lake clear of ice, thought that the time propitious to steal away from this land of doom. The sensational attempt was to be made the following night; everything being in readiness--two large flat-bottomed boats had been built secretly for the purpose; each with a carrying capacity of fifteen men and of sixteen hundred pounds of freight besides.

The puzzle was now how to operate the transportation of these boats together with their cargoes without noise and in strict concealment. The darkness of the night would not sufficiently guarantee the necessary secrecy. There was always some suspecting Iroquois lingering around, spying the personnel of the fort in their least movings; the least significant maneuvering would have provoked a general stir among the Indians against the whole mission.



Now the critical situation made to the inmates of the French fort at Lake Gannanthaa had reached its climax. The moment had come to execute their daring and momentous design; failure in the attempt meant a clash with the Indians, that very possibly would have resulted into many casualties, which by all means was to be avoided.

To operate a departure with so many adverse odds<sup>so</sup> involved risks hard to affront, so much that the mere attempt constituted a most unwarranted move. The state of mind of the whole community at the approach of the momentous hour, was one of mortal fluctuation between fear and hope... Every one's physic at the mission was being shaken by racking nervous shocks, every heart was beating from pressure above normal. For many weeks the exiles were recommending the affair to heaven with force prayers addressed to different heavenly intercessors. so that their hope was mainly on heaven's aid. But they could not rely only on a direct and special intervention of God by a visible miracle; beside the divine they also had to rely on human combination. But how to combine in such land and with a people who were the creator of their awful plight and the very reason of their furtive evasion. The least confidential overture to any one instead of serving might rather precipitate the redoubted catastrophe.

Through God's kindest providence, a most timely succour came to them through the intervention of a young Frenchman. This young man had been made a war captive years previously by the Iroquois, being brought to the country, he afterward became assimilated to the nation from the fact of his being adopted a son by an Iroquois chief.

This young man seeing the plight of his French compatriots at Gannanthaa volunteered to help them in their scheme of evasion. He came and declared his willingness to proclaim himself and take charge of the "festin a tout manger", an eat-all repast, which they had decided upon having the Indians partake of, in the very night of their departure; thus counting upon their absorption at eating to effectuate their departure unobserved. Now the mission group had the proper



man to make their scheme a success, by proclaiming the banquet as an Indian by <sup>birth</sup> ~~right~~, and make it a genuine Indian affair. For this purpose the Indianized young Frenchman approached in due time his Indian stepfather and said to him; "I had a dream last night which means death for me unless I entertain my friends and all the people at a banquet, a tout manger. " "Thou art my son," answered the chief, "I do not want you to die." Prepare the banquet and no one shall be missing nor any morcel left.

The preparation was hastened. Mouth provisions were as abundant as varied. The French did their own part to make it the more attractive by an addition of extra dishes of their own cooking which the Indians had never tasted--a feature of the banquet that could not fail to exercise a great attraction on their material sense of degustation. Of all the Indians found in the vicinity and a good way around, none of them failed to be at the rendez-vous at the appointed hour. To dissimulate the better their play and let no possible door open to suspicion, a certain number of French made it a point to be present as guests and protract the banquet sufficiently late in the night to suit their purpose. Manducation was kept going accompanied by the sound of musical instruments such as the drum and the violin and even a cornet entered into function to make the air resound with as much noise as possible to favor the better their secret maneuvering. To avoid a too hasty satiety and food consumption, interruptions were managed at regular intervals, during which indulgence was given to singing, dancing, to gymnastic and acrobatic feats, to <sup>or</sup> hauling and chanting, etc.

The whole sport being encouraged by the offering of prizes to those who would be foremost in screaming and racketting. Meantime, the main group of the Mission, the lay members, under the orders of the military officer, Mr. Dupuis, effect<sup>ed</sup> the transfer of their



provisory boats first, and then the baggage from their quarters to the shore of the lake, which they could do without the least sound incidental to maneuvering having any chance to reach the banqueters' ears, and free from all inquisitiveness on the part of the natives.

The night was quite far gone and the banquet was still in full swing; but when the French colonists were through with the preparatives of their sensational launching, it was also about time for the banquet to terminate. Then the music abated gradually; all the guests having had their fill, were feeling the touch of sleep weighing down their eye-lids. The moderator of the banquet raising his voice proclaimed the banquet having come to a close. "I have compassion on you, there is no need to consume all that which has been served, stop eating. The effect intended is obtained. I shall not die. Now lie down. The music will continue to play softly to induce sleep to come over you and lull you into the region of dreams until a new sun rises indicating a new day. Rise not until the mission bell calls you to prayer."

They all went effectively into sound sleep. The French guests on quitting the banquet hall, hastened back to join their companions who were awaiting them before taking a definite leave of the fort. They all went out ~~of the place by~~ a secret door opening at the rear... with a mute good-by on their lips to the dear and innocent buildings which they left empty, and walked down to the shore of the lake, in death-like silence for fear any echo reaching the ears of the sleeping Indians should awaken them. The launching took place incontinently, having for sole witness, the inhabitants of heaven and the stars of the firmament as so many flickering eyes to peep and wink gently at them. On went the disenchanted pioneers, gliding on the clear water--resuming the same journey, but inversely made--which they had travelled in coming over to lake Gannanthaa, then full of hope at the enthusiastic prospect of opening such

*of opening such*



a country as the Iroquois to Christianity and civilization.

The return of the pioneers in such season was ~~too~~ far from a pleasure trip. It was cold that 19th of March 1658, and the ice that was being formed although thin was a great hindrance to the progress of the fleeing party which was so eager to make their flight swift, on what their safety depended so much.

Once on Oswego River whose waters, rushing at times into cascades, by making their descent frightfully swift, placed them into dangers more threatening still than was the pursuit of the Iroquois to which they were still greatly exposed. However, after navigating strainously the whole day of their embarkment and ~~of~~ the whole day following, ... after a dangerous and laborious portage of four hours, the returning founders found themselves at the entrance of lake Ontario., sixty miles from their starting point. At such distance from the Iroquois, and now conscious of their security, it was with their hearts filled with gratitude that the returning pioneers gave thanks to God for safe liberation. But their being safe from the Iroquois was not a guarantee of security against the dangers of the waters which in such an early season are habitually very treacherous, especially on the St. Lawrence, on account of its waters then being high, make its rapids all the more frightful and perilous.

On Lake Ontario, the returning founders had to plough their way all along with infinite care and toil through loose icicles which afforded nothing but delay and danger of catastrophes from collisions. Though very great that hindrance, they nevertheless overcame it, but it was to find themselves at the lower end of the lake despairingly held back. A thick carapace of ice that locked the outlet into the St. Lawrence defiantly forbade them to go any further.

*deeply & despairingly + danger*



Progress could by no means be effected otherwise than by working with heavy sharp tools such as the axe and saw, etc. their way through a barrage of ice so thick as to lead canoes and other crafts between two vertical walls many a foot high to emerge out into clear water again.

*Having entered* Once on the St. Lawrence, carried down by the high waters of the season that ~~exaggerate~~ still the natural disposition of that river to swiftness, our travellers were soon engaged in the ever treacherous zone so quickly that they were caught in the head rapids in spite of them <sup>selves</sup> and with no means to draw ashore; ~~forced~~ to keep right on, they were raised on top of gigantic billows of rushing waters to plunge right after into abysses ready to engulf them all, then to be hurled again against menacing monster reefs. The danger was so eminent that they thought they should all perish. Their terror reached its climax when one of the boats struck a rock and was engulfed under water with the consequent drowning of three of its occupants, the fourth one escaped by grasping the wrecked boat and holding fast until he was happily rescued at the foot of the rapids.

It is noted in the old French text--for a solace to sympathizers, that the three drowned men had been to confession the very morning of the day the accident occurred, as if by manner of preparation to death presumably in <sup>prevision</sup> ~~view~~ of the dangers to be incurred the very same day.

On the 3rd of April, at night, our expeditioners arrived at Montreal, ice having broken up that day above the town, leaving the river free just in time to permit the ill-fated but unconquerable heroes to reach that blessed haven. On their arrival there, the great sorrow of theirs-- the irreparable breach made in their ranks by the drowning of their beloved companions, was keenly resented by



all the inhabitants of Montreal. That so painful accident cast a veil of gloom over the joy that they otherwise should have all felt had they all been safe.

Held still by the ice encumbering the lower portion of the river, the expeditionists could leave Montreal but to arrive at Three-Rivers only on the eve of Easter Sunday that happened to fall that year on the 17th of April.

On the following Tuesday they were hailed back by the inhabitants of Quebec who were as happy to see them alive as the latter were overjoyed at having gone through a series of adventures to make their hair stand on end, of hardships and situations encompassed with dangers such as could have resulted into death of all... and therefore were wondering the more at the providential ways of God in their regard.

The Onondaga mission's founders, as seen before had left all the Indians immobilized and unconscious under the magical charm of Morpheus. Let us come back for awhile to the site left behind them for the purpose of assisting at the scene presented by the Indians of the place after revelation of the emptiness of the Fort.

It was already quite late the following morning when they awoke and raised from their reclining position. The first thing that struck the natives on turning their eyes toward the Mission was the complete absence of noise with the suppression of all signs of life. Nobody was seen, as usual, entering or coming out of any of the buildings. These primitive people in their simplicity thought at first that all the inmates were immobilized into a praying mood or holding a deliberative council. But their wonderment augmented as the hours slipped by. The sun had already travelled half its course



and the death-like stillness of the French of the fort by such an hour could with difficulty be accounted for; it could no longer be ascribed to prayer or sleep--unless it were the sleep of death. The puzzle had to be solved. But there was hardly any one bold enough to attempt all alone the practical solution, so they approached the living quarters of the Missionaries in a group. One individual with timidity risked a rap at the door which was locked. A dead echo was the only answer to the rap. Seeing the dogs around and some other domestic animals-- a rooster in particular, held to the hypothesis of a momentary absence. This thought quieted their minds for the moment, and back they went to their rustic homes to resume their routine of life.

But the day drawing toward its end and no change being perceived in the appearance of the mission, it was too much for their stoic sense. Their wonderment becoming intolerable, they must come to a tangible detection of the truth. The most conspicuous for ~~their~~ bravery climbed up the windows.. nothing but stillness and emptiness met their gaze. They penetrated in by forcing the door open for a thorough inspection of the interior. From cellar to roof, no clue as to any human soul being either at prayer or asleep.

On that amazing revelation, what was at first sight a puzzle for the Indian observers took soon in their excitable imaginations so fanciful a shape as to make them attribute the fact to magical power.

What is there that those Black Robes cannot do in the matter of magic-- they started musing among themselves... With those little bags or caskets which everyone of them is carrying with<sup>him</sup> self, and those black books they are always having in their hands, and reading them...



~~books which they so often perused during the day!~~ Seeing no explicable way by which the French garrison could have gone, the mystified Indians concluded that the disappeared ones had flown through the air after self-metamorphosing into winged beings.

Here their imaginations ran wild in the realm of phantasmagory. As these French had disappeared, they began to think, they are in like manner liable to reappear, and swoop like ominous birds upon them any time of the day or night, and spread desolation and carnage all over their country, in vindication for all the wrongs suffered from them.

That fantastical idea took a so strong grasp on their imagination as to prompt them to adopt actual measure of security against its eventuality. A continuous guard was kept for a certain length of time around the cabins and the surrounding woods for fear the disappeared French had established their retreat in some recess of the forest.

#### Conclusion:-

The foundation of this famous mission notwithstanding its being long deliberated and carefully prepared, was short lived, (not quite two years),. But although of an ephemeral existence it can be said with security that it was willed by God, and on account of its beneficent effects in many points of view it may even be ascribed to Him as His own work. This foundation was beneficent in the highest sense of the word; for, many sick persons received by its medium the inappreciable gift of faith which enabled them to die Christians and thereby obtain salvation. Moreover the many children which the Missionaries baptized during the short time they had cultivated this field of apostolate, and quite a few of whom were called to Heaven by dying in infancy; and besides this immediate result, it had by the sowing of the divine word, prepared the ground to,



in years soon to come, splendid fruits for Heaven consisting in a considerable harvest of souls for the Eternal Reaper.

It was also willed by God as a part of his scheme by which he had decreed to save New-France, by affording her a truce in the destructive and incessant war carried on against her, by the indomitable Iroquois which otherwise would have resulted undoubtedly into her complete ruin.

It was the work of God in so much that without his special intervention, that affair would have never been accomplished. It is God who turned the minds of the Iroquois toward peace at that time although transitory. This turn of mind was not a mere effect of their own calculation, it was an imposition of an Omnipotent will to their wild nature never to be satiated of war. Their insistency at that epoch in asking for some Jesuits to be sent to their country and establish a mission thereon was too much of a supernatural nature to have come to them from elsewhere then from heaven.

*Finis*

*J. A. Desmar Chapdelaine S. J.*