

IX.

THE LADY OF ST. BERNARD.

**F**IVE evenings later a boat was beached on one of the islands above Montreal lying near the south shore of the St. Lawrence. While this island presented rocky points, it had fertile slopes basking in the glow which followed a blue and vaporous April day, and trees in that state of gray greenness which shoots into leaf at the first hot shining.

The principal object on the island was a stone house standing inclosed by strong palisades above the ascent from the beach. It appeared to be built against a mass of perpendicular rock that towered over it on the west side. This was, in fact, the strongest seigniorial mansion west of the Richelieu. There was, in addition, a small stone mill for grinding grain, apart from it on the brink of the river.

Northward, the St. Lawrence spread towards the horizon in that distension of its waters called Lake St. Louis.

Out of the palisade door came a censitaire and his wife, who, having hurried to St. Bernard for protection at an alarm of Indians, staid to guard the seignior house during Jacques Goffinet's absence with Dollard.

"This is St. Bernard," said Dollard, leading Claire up the slope. "Sometimes fog-covered, sometimes wind-swept, green as only islands can be, and stone-girdled as the St. Lawrence islands are. A cluster up-river belongs to the seignior, but this is your fortress."

"And yours," she added.

"It will seem very rude to you."

"After my life of convent luxury, monsieur?"

"After the old civilization of France. But I believe this can be made quite comfortable."

"It looks delicious and grim," said the bride. "Tragic things might happen here if there be a tragic side to life, which I cannot now believe. Yet a few months ago I said there was no happiness!"

Dollard turned his uneasy glance from her to the seignior house.

"There is scarcely such another private stronghold in the province."

"Did you build it?"

"Not I. Poor Dollard brought little here but his sword. One of my superior officers abandoned it in my favor, and took a less exposed seigniory near the Richelieu. I wish the inside appointments better befitted you. It was a grand château to me until I now compare it with its châtelaine."

"Never mind, monsieur. When you demand my fortune from France, you can make your château as grand as you desire. I hope you will get some good of my fortune, for I never have done so. Seriously, monsieur, if no house were here, and there were only that great rock to shelter us, I should feel myself a queen if you brought me to it, so great is my lot."

"You can say this to poor Adam Dollard, an obscure soldier of the province?"

"In these few days," replied the girl, laughing, and she threw the light of her topaz eyes half towards him, "the way they call your name in this new country has become to me like a title."

"You shall have more than a title," burst out Dollard. "Heaven helping me, you shall yet have a name that will not die!"

They passed through the gate of the palisade, Jacques and Louise following with the loads of the expedition. To insure its safety the boat was afterwards dragged within the palisade.

The censitaire in charge, with his wife at his shoulder, stood grinning at Jacques's approach.



"I know who you are."

"Thou got'st thyself a wife, hé, my pretty Jacques?"

"That did I, bonhomme Papillon. And a good wife, and a stout wife, and a handsome. Thou 'lt want to go to Quebec market thyself when the Indians carry off Joan."

"Let me see him go to the Quebec market!" cried Joan, shaking her knuckled fist under his ear.

"It would trouble thee little to lose sight of him, Joan. But his coming back with such freight — it is *that* would fire thee hotter than Iroquois torches. Alas, my children," Jacques said, letting down his load inside the gate, "I bring much, but I leave much behind. If I am to hold this seigniory while my commandant is away, and feed ye both and my new wife, to say naught of Mademoiselle de Granville and our great lady, I need the cattle and swine and fowls which our king gave me for dower and my seignior made me throw over my shoulder."

"But I thought," said Louise, in dismay, "that thou had'st such stores of vegetables and other provisions here."

"Have no fear, my spouse. Thou shalt see how this garrison is provisioned. But what prudent man can drop without a sigh the moiety of his wife's fortune? Here are Papillon and Joan, who hold the next island under our seignior. And here, timid Joan, is thy soldierly new neighbor Louise Goffinet, who squealed not in the dangers of the river."

"Wert thou afraid?" Joan asked Louise, kindly.

"I was until I saw Madame des Ormeaux was not. And the Indians have a wonderful skill."

"Did the commandant also marry her at the wife market?" pressed Joan, walking by Louise's side behind the men. "She is surely the fairest woman in New France. I could have crawled before her when she gave me a smile."

"My mother nursed her," said Louise, with pride.

"Did she so! And is our lady some great dame from the king's court, who heard of the commandant at Montreal?"

"Thou hast woman wit. It is exactly as thou sayest," bragged Jacques, turning towards the mummied face of Papillon's simple wife. "She is cousin to our holy bishop himself; and even that great man she left grinning and biting his nails, for he and the abbess they would make a nun of her. Thou dost not know the mightiness of her family. My Louise can charm thee with all that. But this lady was a princess in France, and voyaged here by the king's ship, being vilely sickened and tossed about; and all for my commandant. Is not the Sieur des Ormeaux known in France?" Jacques snapped his fingers high in air.

The lowest floor of the seigniori house was the rock on which it was based. Here and within the stockade were such domestic animals as belonged to the island.

A sheep rubbed against Louise, passing out as she passed in.

She looked around the darkened strong walls, unpierced by even a loophole, at the stores of provender for dumb and human inmates. Jacques had underestimated his wealth in collected food. His magazine seemed still overflowing when it was spring and seed-time, and the dearth of winter nearly past.

A stone staircase twisted itself in giving ascent to the next floor. Here were sleeping-cells for the seignior's servants, and a huge kitchen having pillars of cemented rock across its center, and a fire-place like a cave. Lancelike windows gave it light, and in the walls were loopholes which had been stopped with stone to keep out the Canadian winter.

A broader stairway of tough and well-dried wood in one corner led up to the seignior's apartment above, which was divided into several rooms. The largest one, the saloon of the mansion, had also its cavern fire-place where pieces of wood were smoldering. A brass candelabrum stood on the mantel. Rugs of fawn skin beautifully spotted, and of bear skin relieved the dark unpolished floor. The walls of all the rooms were finished with a coarse plaster glittering with river sand. Some slender-legged chairs, a high-backed cushioned bench, a couch covered by moth-eaten tapestry, and a round black table furnished this drawing-room. Some cast-off pieces of armor

hung over the mantel, and an embroidery frame stood at one side of the hearth.

There was but one window, and it swung outward on hinges, the sash being fitted with small square panes.

When Claire appeared from the private chamber where she had been taken to refresh herself with Louise to attend on her, Dollard came down the room, took her by the hands, and led her to this window. He pushed the sash open quite out of their way, and thus set the landscape in a deep frame of stone wall.

The two young lovers still met each other with shyness and reserve. From the hour of his impetuous marriage Dollard had watched his wife with passionate solicitude. But that day when his boat approached Montreal he had it brought to the dock and went ashore by himself, spending what Claire considered the best hours of the afternoon at the fort and on the streets, coming back flushed and repressed.

She felt the energetic pulses still beating in his face as he touched her forehead.

"You see now the way we came," said Dollard, indicating the St. Lawrence sweeping towards the east.

"A lovely way it was," said Claire. The river's breath came to them fresh and clean, leaving a touch of dampness on the skin. Already the wooded south shore was clothing itself in purple, but northward

the expanse of water still held to what it had received from sunset. "That was very different from the voyage on shipboard."

"Are you not tired?"

"I was tired only once—at Montreal," hinted Claire, gazing at the extremity of the island.

"Again I beg you to pardon that. I had been nearly ten days away from my command and there were serious matters to attend to. Put it out of your mind and let us be very happy this evening."

"And every following evening. That goes without saying."

"I must report at my fortress at daybreak to-morrow."

"You should have left my caskets at Montreal, monsieur," exclaimed Claire. "I could do without them here one night."

"You want to turn your back on poor St. Bernard immediately?"

"Monsieur, you do not mean to separate yourself from me?" she inquired lightly, keeping control of her trembling voice.

"I brought you here to take possession of my land," said Dollard.

"I have taken possession. The keys of the house of course I do not want. They shall in all courtesy be left with the resident châtelaine, your sister. Monsieur, where is your sister?"

Dollard glanced over his shoulder at the embroidery frame.

"She has been here or is coming. I have hardly prepared you for poor Renée. She lives in delusions of her own, and pays little regard to the courtesies of the outside world. My excellent Jacques waits on her as on a child."

"Doubtless I thought too little about her," Claire said, visibly shrinking. "She may object to me."

"She will not even see you unless I put you before her eyes."

"What ails your sister, monsieur? Is she a religious devotee?"

"Not strictly that. She is a nurser of delusions. I cannot remember when she was otherwise, though we have lived little together, for poor Renée is but my half-sister. Her father was a De Granville. You will not feel afraid of her when you have seen her; she is not unkind. She has her own chambers at the rock side of the house and lives there weeks together. I see her embroidery frame is set out, and that means we may expect her presence."

While he was speaking, Mademoiselle de Granville had opened a door at the end of the room.

Claire, with well-opened eyes, pressed backward against her husband, so moldered-looking a creature was this lady gliding on silent feet — not unlike some specter of the Des Ormeaux who had followed their

last chevalier under the New World's glaring skies. She wore a brocaded gown, the remnant of a court costume of some former reign, and her face was covered with a black silk mask. Though masks were then in common use, the eyes which looked through this one were like the eyes of a sleep-walker. She sat down by the embroidery frame as if alone in the room, but instead of a web of needlework she began to fasten in the frame one end of a priest's stole much in need of mending.

Dollard led his wife to this silent figure.

"My dear Renée," he said, taking hold of the stole and thereby establishing a nerve of communication, "let me present my beautiful wife."

The figure looked up, unsurprised but attentive.

"She was Mademoiselle Laval-Montmorency."

With deference the figure rose off its slim-legged chair and made a deep courtesy, Claire acknowledging it with one equally deep.

"Mademoiselle," petitioned the bride, "I hope my sudden coming causes you no trouble, though we return to the fort soon."

The mask gazed at her but said nothing.

"Are you never lonely here upon this island?" pursued Claire.

The mask's steady gaze made her shiver.

"She does not talk," Dollard explained. He drew his wife away from the silent woman and suggested,

"Let us walk up and down until some supper is served, to get rid of the boat's cramping."

Mademoiselle de Granville sat down and continued to arrange her darning.

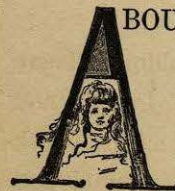
Whenever they were quite at the room's end Claire drew a free breath, but always in passing the masked presence she shrunk bodily against Dollard, for the room was narrow. He, with tense nerves and far-looking eyes, failed to notice this. The eccentricities of any man's female relatives appeal to his blindest side. Custom has used him to them, and his own blood speaks their apology.

The river air blew into the open window. There were no sounds except the footsteps of Dollard and Claire, and a stirring of the household below which was hint of sound only, so thick were the walls and floors.

In due time Jacques came up, bearing the supper. His seignior when at St. Bernard ate in the kitchen. But this was a descent unbefitting a grand bride. While Jacques was preparing the round table, Claire stole another look towards the mask which must now be removed. But by some sudden and noiseless process known to recluse women Mademoiselle de Granville had already taken herself and her embroidery frame out of the room.

## X.

## THE SEIGNIORY KITCHEN.



ABOUT 1 o'clock of the night Jacques rose from his sleeping-cell, as he was in the habit of doing, to put more wood on the kitchen fire.

The window slits let in some moonlight of a bluish quality, but the larger part of this wide space lay in shadow until Jacques sent over it the ruddiness of a revived fire. Out of uncertainty came the doors of the sleeping-cells, the rafters and dried herbs which hung from them, heavy table and benches and stools, cooking-vessels, guns, bags of stored grain, and the figures of the four Hurons, two at each side of the hearth, stretched out in their blankets with their heels to the fire—and Jacques himself, disordered from sleep and imperfectly thrust into lower garments. He lingered stupidly looking at the magician fire while it rose and crackled