

XIX.

THE HEROES OF THE LONG SAUT.*

IT was morning by the Long Saut, that length of boiling rapids which had barred the French expedition's farther progress up the Ottawa. The seventeen Frenchmen, four Algonquins, and forty Hurons were encamped together in an open space on the west bank of the river. Their kettles were slung for breakfast, the fires blinking pinkly in luminous morning air; their morning hymn had not long ceased to echo from the forest around the clearing. Three times the previous day these men had prayed their prayers together in three languages.

Their position at the foot of the rapids was well taken. The Iroquois must pass them. In the clear-

* Pronounced "So." The Abbé Faillon with exactness locates the engagement at the foot of the Long Saut rapids, "à huit ou dix lieues au-dessus de l'île de Montreal, et au-dessous du saut dit de la Chaudière."

ing stood a dilapidated fort, a mere stockade of sapling trunks, built the autumn before by an Algonquin war party; but Dollard's party counted upon it as their pivot for action, though with strange disregard of their own defense they had not yet strengthened it by earthworks.

Dollard stood near the brink of the river watching the rapids. His scouts had already encountered some canoes full of Iroquois coming down the Ottawa, and in a skirmish two of the enemy escaped. The main body, hastened by these refugees, must soon reach the Long Saut, unless they were determined utterly to reject and avoid the encounter, which it was scarcely in the nature of Iroquois to do.

No canoes yet appeared on the rapids, but against the river's southward sweep rode a new little craft holding two women. Having crossed the current below and hugged the western shore, this canoe shot out before Dollard's eyes as suddenly as an electric lancet unsheathed by clouds.

He blanched to his lips, and made a repellent gesture with both hands as if he could put back the woman of his love out of danger as swiftly and unaccountably as she put herself into it. But his only reasonable course was to drag up the canoe when Massawippa beached it.

The half-breed girl leaped out like a fawn and ran up the slope. Annahotaha came striding down to

meet her, and as she caught him around the body he lifted his knife as if the impulse which drove the arm of Virginius had been reborn in a savage of the New World. Massawippa showed her white teeth in rapturous smiling. So absolute was her trust in him that she waited thus whatever act his superior wisdom must dictate. That unflinching smile brought out its answer on his countenance. A copper glow seemed to fuse his features into grotesquely passionate tenderness. He turned his back towards his braves and hugged the child to his breast, smoothing her wings of black hair and uttering guttural murmurs which probably expressed that superlative nonsense mothers talk in the privacy of civilized nurseries.

But Claire, pink as a rose from sun and wind, her head covered by a parchment bonnet of birch bark instead of the cap she lost at the island, her satin tatters carefully drawn together with fibers from porcupine quills and loosened from the girdle to flow around her worn moccasins, and radiant as in her loveliest moments, stretched her hands for Dollard's help.

He lifted her out of the canoe and placed her upon the ground; he knelt before her and kissed both of her hands.

"Good-morning, monsieur!" said Claire, triumphantly. "You left no command against my following the expedition."

That palpitating presence which we call life seemed to project itself beyond their faces and to meet. Her pinkness and triumph were instantly gone in the whiter heat of spiritual passion. She began to sob, and Dollard stood up strongly holding her in his arms.

"The paving-stone where you knelt — how I kissed it — how I kissed it!"

"I have not a word, Claire; not one word," said Dollard. "I am blind and dumb and glad."

"Oh, do be blind to my rags and scratches! I would have crept on my hands and face to you, monsieur, my saint! But now I am not crying."

"How did you reach us unharmed?"

"We saw no Iroquois. Have you yet seen them?"

"Not yet."

"But there was the river. Massawippa dragged me through that. Your face looks thin, my Dollard."

"I have suffered. I did not know heaven was to descend upon me."

The Frenchmen and Indians, a stone's-throw away, unable, indeed, to penetrate this singular encounter of the commandant's, gave it scarcely a moment's attention, but turned their eager gaze up the rapids. Dollard looked also, as suggestion became certainty.

He hurried Claire to the palisade, calling his men to arm.

Upon the rapids appeared a wonderful sight. Bounding down the broken and tumultuous water came the Iroquois in canoes which seemed unnumbered. They flung themselves ashore and at the fort like a wave, and like a wave they were sent trickling back from the shock of their reception.

Massawippa sat down by Claire in the small inclosure during this first brush with the enemy.

There was no time for either Frenchmen or Indians to look with astonished eyes at these girls, so soon were all united in common peril and bonds of endurance. Men purified by the devotion of such an undertaking could accept the voluntary presence of women as they might accept the unscared alighting of birds in the midst of them.

The Iroquois next tried to parley, in order to take the allies unawares. But all their efforts were met with volleys of ammunition. So they drew off from the palisade and began to cut small trees and build a fort for themselves within the shelter of the woods, this being the Iroquois plan of besieging an enemy.

Dollard had stored all his supplies and tools within his palisade. He now set to work with his men to strengthen the position. They drove stakes inside the inclosure and filled the space between outer and inner pickets with earth and stones as high as their heads, leaving twenty loop-holes. Three men were appointed to each loop-hole.

Before the French had finished intrenching themselves the Iroquois broke up all their canoes, lighted pieces at the fires, and ran to pile them against the palisade, but were again driven back. How many attacks were made Claire did not know, for volley followed volley until the crack of muskets seemed continuous, but the Iroquois attained to a focus of howling when the principal chief of the Senecas, one of the Five Nations, fell among their dead.

Morning and noon passed in this tumult of musketry and human outcry. In the unsullied May weather such gunpowder clouds must have been strange sights to nesting birds and other shy creatures of the woods.

Claire and Massawippa looked into the supplies of the fort and set out food, but the water was soon exhausted. Dusk came. Starlight came. The first rough day of this continuous battle was over, but not the battle. For the Iroquois gave the allies no rest, harassing them through that and every succeeding night.

It was after 12 o'clock before Dollard could take Claire's hands and talk with her a few unoccupied minutes. When women intrude upon men's great labors they risk destroying their own tender ideals, but this daughter of a hundred soldiers had watched her husband all day in raptures of pride. To be near him in the little arena of his sacrifice was worth her heart-chilling vigil, worth her toilsome

journey, fully worth the supreme price she must yet pay.

Earth from the breastworks, distributed by thuds of occasional Iroquois bullets, spattered impartially both Claire and Dollard. They had no privacy. Guttural Huron and Algonquin murmurs and the nervous intonation of French voices would have broken into all ordinary conversation. But looking deeply at each other, and unconsciously breathing in the same cadences, they had their moment of talk as if standing on a peak together. There was a lonesome bird in the woods uttering three or four falling notes, which could be heard at intervals when not drowned by any rising din of the Iroquois.

"They sent a canoe down river this afternoon," said Dollard, "evidently for their reënforcements from below."

"How long do you think we can hold out?" inquired Claire.

"Until we have broken their force. We must do that."

"I was on an island at the mouth of the Ottawa when you passed, my commandant. That was purgatory to me."

"Since you reached us," said Dollard, "I have accepted you without question and without remorse. I am stupefied. I love you. But, Claire, to what a death I have brought you!"

"It is a death befitting well the daughter of the stout-hearted Constable of France. But do not leave me again, Dollard!"

"The Iroquois shall not touch you alive, Claire," he promised.

"I am ready shriven," she said, smiling. "Except of one fault. That will I now confess,—a fault committed against the delicacy of women,—and I hated the abbess and the bishop because they detected me in it. I came to New France for love of you, my soldier. Could I help following you from world to world?"

"O Claire!" trembled Dollard, taking his hat off and standing uncovered before her.

"But you should not have known this until we were old—until you had seen me Madame des Ormeaux many years, dignified and very, very discreet, so that no breath could discredit me save this mine own confession."

During four days the Iroquois constantly harassed the fort while waiting for their reënforcements, enraged more each day at their own losses and at the handful of French and Indians who stood in the way of their great raid upon New France. Hungry, thirsty, and giddy from loss of sleep, the allies in the fort stood at their loop-holes and poured out destruction. Their supplies were gone, excepting dry hominy, which they could not swallow without water.

Some of the young Frenchmen made a rush to the river, protected by the guns of the fort, and brought all the water they could thus carry. They also dug within the palisade and reached a little clayey moisture which helped to cool their mouths.

Among the Iroquois were renegade Hurons who had been adopted by the Five Nations. During these four days of trial the renegades shouted to their brethren in the fort to come over and surrender to the Iroquois. Seven or eight hundred more warriors were hurrying from the mouth of the Richelieu River, and not a blackened coal was to be left where the fort and the Frenchmen stood.

"Come over," tempted these Hurons. "The Iroquois will receive you as brothers. Will you stay there and die for the sake of a few Frenchmen?"

First one, then two more, then three at a time, the famished braves of Annahotaha slipped over the intrenchment and deserted, in spite of his rage and exhortations.

On the fifth day, an hour before dawn, a hand of auroral light spread its fingers across the sky from west to east. Betwixt these finger-rays were dark spaces having no stars, but through the pulsing medium of every gigantic finger the constellations glittered. Many signs were seen in the heavens during the colonial years of New France, but nothing like the blessed hand stretched over the Long Saut.

That day rapids and forests appeared to rock with the vibration of savage yells, for soon after daylight the expected force arrived.

La Mouche had sulked some time at the loop-hole where he was stationed with Annahotaha. Massawippa's back was towards him during all this period of distress. She never saw that he was thirsty and that his cracked lips bled. If she was solicitous for anybody except the stalwart chief, it was for that white wife of Dollard, who stood always near Dollard when not doing what could be done for the wounded.

La Mouche had no stomach for dying an unrewarded death. Dogged hatred of his false position and of his tardy suit had grown large within him. He therefore left his loop-hole while Annahotaha's gun was emptied, leaped on top of the palisade, and stretched his dark face back an instant to interrogate Massawippa's quick eye. A motion of her head might yet bring him back. But did she think that he meant to be killed like a dog to whom the bone of a good word has never been thrown?

"My father!" shouted the girl, pointing with a finger which pierced La Mouche's soul. "Shoot that coward; shoot him down!"

Annahotaha seized the long pistol from his side and discharged it at his deserting nephew. But La

Mouche in the same instant dropped outside and ran over to the Iroquois.

There remained now only the Frenchmen, Annahotaha, and the four Algonquins.

Playfully, as a cat reaches out to cuff its mouse, the army of Iroquois now approached the fort. They gamboled from side to side and uttered screeches. But the loop-holes were yet all manned by men who would not die of fatigue and physical privation, and the fire which sprung from those loop-holes astounded the enemy. Guns of large caliber carried scraps of iron and lead, and mowed like artillery.

Three days more, says the chronicle, did this fort by the Long Saut hold out. Who can tell all the story of those days? and who can hear all the story of such endurance? When acclamation cheers a man's blood and a great cloud of witnesses encompasses him, heroic courage is made easy. But here were a few doomed men in the wilderness, whose fate and whose action might be misrepresented by a surviving foe—silent fighters against odds, thinking, "This anguish and sacrifice of mine are lost on the void, and perhaps taken no account of by any intelligence, except that myself knows it, and myself demands it of me."

This is the courage which brings a man's soul up above his body like a tall flame out of an altar, and makes us credit the tale of our lineage tracing thus backward: "Which was the son of Adam, which was the son of God."

The fort could not be taken by surprise; it could not be taken by massed sallies. The Iroquois wrangled among themselves. Some were for raising the siege and going back to their own country. Their best braves lay in heaps. But others scouted the eternal disgrace of leaving unpunished so pitiful a foe.

Finally they made themselves great shields of split logs, broad as a door, and crept forward under cover of these to hew away the palisades. Mad for revenge, they used their utmost skill and caution.

It was at this time that Dollard, among his reeling and praying men—men yet able to smile with powder-blackened faces through the loop-holes—took a large musketoon, filled it with explosives, and plugged it ready to throw among the enemy. His arms had not remaining strength to fling it clear of the palisade's jagged top. It fell back and exploded in the fort, and amidst the frightful confusion the Iroquois made their first breach, to find it defended; and yet another breach, and yet another, overflowing the inclosure with all their swarms.

Smoke-clouds curled around the bride who had trod that sward and borne her part in the suffering. Half blinded by the explosion, Dollard held Claire with his left arm and fought with his sword. As firm and white as a marble face, the face of the Laval-Montmorency met her foes. The blood of man-warriors, even of Anne, the great and warlike Constable of France, throbbed steadfastly in the arm which

grasped her husband and the heart which stood by his until they were swept down by the same volley of musketry, and lay as one body among the dead. Perhaps to Claire and Dollard it was but sudden release from thirst, hunger, exhaustion, and victorious howling. For La Mouche found Massawippa pointing as if she saw through the earthwork. The half-breed's eyes glowed with expansive brightness, as a spark does just before it expires. Her childish contours were beautiful, and unbroken by pain.

"Father," said Massawippa with effort,—the chief was dead, having saved her from the Iroquois with the last stroke of his hand,—“do you see madame—and the commandant—walking there under—birches?” Her face smiled as she died, and remained set in its smile.

There are people who steadily live the lives they hate, whose common speech misrepresents their thought, who walk the world fettered. Is it better with these than with winged souls?

Fire and smoke of a great burning rose up and blinded the day beside the Long Saut. It was a mighty funeral pile. The tender grass all around, licked by flame, gave juices of the earth to that sacrifice. The wine of young lives, the spices and treasures of courageous hearts, went freely to it, and for more than two hundred and twenty-five years love and gratitude have consecrated the spot.

XX.

POSTERITY.

THREE weeks after Dollard's departure Jacques Goffinet took the boat and one Huron Indian whom Dollard had sent back with the boat and set off to Montreal to obey his master's final order.

No appearances on the river had caused alarm at St. Bernard. While record has not been made of the route taken by the Iroquois brought from the Richelieu, it is evident that they passed north of Montreal island, avoiding settlements.

Montreal was waiting in silence and anxiety for news of the expedition.

The first person whom Jacques encountered was the nuns' man Jouaneaux, watching the St. Lawrence with uneasy expectation in his eyes.