

A RACONTEUR OF THE LAURENTIANS

R. C. FETHERSTONHAUGH

IT is an anomaly of relations in the Dominion between Canadians of French and English descent that the literature of each race is a closed book to the masses of the other. If you ask an English-speaking Canadian to name a popular work of French-Canadian origin, it would be noteworthy if he did not instance *Maria Chapdelaine*, forgetting that Louis Hémon was not a Canadian and that *Maria Chapdelaine*, owing renown in a great degree to brilliant translation, is a book markedly less popular among Canadians of French descent than among their English-speaking brethren.

After discussing *Maria Chapdelaine*, the literary triumph of an outsider, it is not unlikely that your English-speaking Canadian would confess that the limit of his knowledge of French-Canadian literature had been reached. It would be surprising, on the contrary, if he knew, for example, of Dr. Edmond Grignon, who, under the pen-name "Vieux Doc," has written so fascinatingly of his many years as a doctor in the Laurentians. "Vieux Doc" is not a Louis Hémon; his work is not to be compared with Hémon's in artistry or literary style; he is in fact a simple story-teller, writing of the mountains where he has lived, of the lakes where he has paddled, of the streams in which he has fished, of the woods where he has camped, and, above all, of the backwoods folk whom he has tended for more than half a century.

Many a writer, when he picks up his pen to jot down reminiscences of a life-time in a remote countryside, idealizes the days that have gone, extolls the virtues of men and women departed, and deplores all that attaches to the present day. "Vieux Doc" has too much humour and humanity to err in this way. He loved the woodsmen and colonists of his native Laurentians in the old days, and he loves their descendants as his own people still, but he does not idealize them. Rather he rejoices to have found in them so much that was good and kind and gentle and devout and joyous, without failing to realize that ignorance, superstition, malice, and envy were qualities not entirely lacking in many of their characters.

In a volume published some years ago and republished recently, under the title *En Guettant les Ours*, which may be translated as *Watching for the Bears*, and which, in English, has the significance of "While waiting for the stork," Dr. Grignon has recorded some of the tales heard in lonely cabins in the long night watches while the stork, or as local idiom has it, the bears, approached with those tiny burdens. Long hours of waiting, these! Long hours with nothing to do but sit and wait and smoke and hear or tell great stories, not inappropriate sometimes, with the wind in winter moaning in the trees outside, with wolves howling not far distant, and with no knowledge whether Death, who stood at the door, would demand admittance that could not be denied, or turn away.

One can imagine, in circumstances such as these, the uneasy glances into the darkness beyond the dim light of the lamp that burned on a backwoods table as some story-teller, uneasy himself, but flattered by the obvious fear of those around, told of Bijou Bougie, the blaspheming lumber-jack on the River Ottawa. No ordinary man was Bijou, but a giant in strength, before whose hairy fists the pride of a dozen lumber camps had fallen, and under whose trampling feet some, it was whispered, had passed to rise no more. And a blasphemer!—oh, not in the ordinary way that men are said to blaspheme when they use lightly names it would be better to treat with more respect—but "Do you dare hear?"

And always the answer would be "yes," for the story never lost its fascination. So the story-teller, allowing reluctance to be overborne, would tell of the day when the logs jammed in the turbulent Ottawa, how they piled ever higher, how the river-bosses offered rewards to the man who would break the jam, and how, from among the well-nigh fearless rivermen on the bank, none could be found to face the dreadful risk that breaking of the jam would entail.

At this point, the story-teller would bring Bijou to the scene, hatchet-faced, scowling, and cursing so that even the hardened rivermen crossed themselves surreptitiously, or muttered some disavowing word of prayer. And Bijou, shouting that he feared neither man nor saint, nor the Blessed Virgin nor the angels of God, attacked the jam and for an hour, never ceasing to blaspheme, heaved at the interwoven logs, which broke at last and swept down upon him.

An ordinary man would have been killed; but Bijou, still blaspheming, as those on the river bank could hear, escaped the first rush of the broken jam and reached a stranded log far from shore. Desperate then, he sought help whence he felt he had a right to expect it, and called upon the Devil to succour him, in

exchange for his soul. For a long time he waited; then—and the story-teller's voice would drop to a whisper, and cold sweat would ooze from every pore—"then Bijou Bougie, with all hope gone, called Satan a son of a dog and sank under the pounding logs for ever."

Somewhat akin to the story of Bijou Bougie is a tale Dr. Grignon tells of William Aubé and his challenge to the dead. Aubé was the doctor's guide and the two, on a calm moonlit night, were camped in an old lumber shack beside a lovely lake. Few sounds disturbed the silver silence, only the hoot of an owl, the splash of a fish in the lake, the laugh of a loon, or, far away, the cry of a wolf, voicing hunger in the forest.

"Doctor," asked the guide, "is it true that the souls of men killed by accident haunt the place where the accident occurred? I want to know, for Charles Thibeau died here a year ago, killed by this tree whose stump lies under my hand. Is his soul here to-night, Doctor? If so, I would speak with him."

To this, "Vieux Doc" answered gently that he did not know, that it was an old belief, but he could not say whether the belief was false or true. The guide asked no further questions, but rose later and slipped away into the night, reappearing beside the stump where his fellow-woodsman died. From this spot his voice rose suddenly; the shout echoed harshly from the surrounding hills, and was followed by silence, intense and fear-ridden, as the startled creatures of the woods stopped quiveringly to listen:

"Charles Thibeau! Charles Thibeau!! Charles Thibeau!!! Come, if you dare! You stole my two hundred dollars! And I shall forgive you only if you come and ask me to! You are not coming? You will not answer! So be it, then! Stay where you are! And burn, in purgatory or in hell!!!"

Shocked by the sacrilege, "Vieux Doc" remonstrated when the guide returned, pointing out that what he had done was not a good thing, that it was not right to abuse the dead, for whom prayer was more appropriate. William was not easy to convince—the two hundred dollars rankled—but at last he admitted he had done wrong. "Vieux Doc" considered the incident closed, but William, with child-like simplicity, wished to make amends. Again, therefore, from beside the stump of the fatal tree, his voice sounded across the lake and echoed from the moon-bathed hills:

"Charles Thibeau! Charles Thibeau! Charles Thibeau! The money you owe me, I give to you. I shall not speak of it again. So rest, Charles Thibeau, rest in peace!"

An interesting character this William Aubé, in life and even in the hour of death. To his humble bedside "Vieux Doc" was

summoned one evening, to be faced with the necessity of telling the old man that the end was not far away. William heard the verdict with unconcern, but named those with whom he wished to speak while speech was possible. Hastily, all were sent for and, one by one, were admitted. The last to arrive was a neighbour, poorer, even, than all the rest. He shuffled in and stood, not knowing what to do or say. At last he stammered that he hoped William would soon be well.

"No, no, Charles," William replied, weakly but decisively, "I am going early in the morning, and if you have . . . anything . . . you . . . would like me . . . to say to . . . your . . . old father . . . speak now, and quickly."

"Well, then, Monsieur Aubé," Charles began, "since you say you are going for sure, you might tell my old father that things are not too bad at home, except that my wife . . . yes, and my cow too . . . are sick. He might ask *le bon Dieu* not to take them both away. And if he could get me a job in the woods this winter . . ." Charles paused.

"Is that all, Charles?" hinted the dying man, "or shall I speak to him . . . to your old father, Charles, about the five dollars?"

"What five dollars, Monsieur Aubé?"

"You know very well what five dollars, Charles. The five dollars he owed me . . . when he died . . . six years ago . . . and that you promised . . . in his presence . . . to pay . . . to me."

"Oh, but Monsieur Aubé, that was long ago. That debt is outlawed."

"Yes, Charles, in the sight . . . of man, my Charles, but there . . . is no such law . . . in the sight . . . of God. I shall tell . . . your old father and . . . he will be sorry . . . unless . . ."

"No! no! Monsieur Aubé, don't tell him about it. I will get the money."

So Charles hurried from the room, and came back in a few minutes with five dollars in his hand. He gave it at once to William, who took it and spoke:

"Thank you, Charles." Then, with the death spasm upon him, "Your . . . old . . . father . . . Charles . . . will . . . be . . . a . . . proud . . . man . . . to . . . mor . . . row."

Spiritually and temperamentally akin to William Aubé in the doctor's gallery of unforgettable vignettes of life stands Père Lavictoire, the dauntless old colonist, with something of rugged simplicity and unbending determination in his bearing and actions, as if his character had been moulded by the dominating mountains

and the rocky soil where he had cleared his lonely farm. To this homestead Dr. Grignon, when still a young man, was called to attend a sick child. That night he heard old Lavictoire in an adjoining room praying quite simply with his family, that the child might recover and, in a slightly louder voice, that the young doctor would realize the household was poor, realize it so forcibly that extreme moderation might govern him when it came to presenting his bill.

Père Lavictoire was poor indeed, but the day came when his faithful wife needed a better pew in the village church and sent him to get it for her. Unfortunately, there was competition, as the pews were auctioned that year. Père Lavictoire would stand aside for none, least of all or the newcomers bidding for the pew against him. Accordingly, he got what he was told to get, but at a cost that was appalling, and as he drove home, victorious but financially undone, he shuddered with foreknowledge of the tongue-thrashing that would greet him.

Sure enough, when Madame Lavictoire asked if he had got a pew for three dollars and forced from him the staggering admission that he had paid ten, recrimination descended on his submissive head. Convicted, he waited patiently for the storm to subside, but each lull was followed by further gusts, with a cow that might have been bought, but now could not be, as the monotonous theme of the storm's passage.

Submission was all very well, and meekness was no doubt a virtue, but Père Lavictoire's limit at last was reached. Suddenly, he banged his fist on the table, jolting plates and glasses to the floor:

"*Sapre mille gueux!*" he shouted, "will you have done about that cursed cow! You haven't said a word but cow! cow! cow! since noon. It wasn't a cow you wanted. *Sapre mille gueux!* it was a pew! Suppose I had bought a cow! Could you take a cow to church and sit on that?!!!"

And after that outburst, peace reigned once more.

In scores of pen-pictures, of which these are inadequate samples, "Vieux Doc" sketches life in the Laurentians as it was years ago. Bijou Bougie, William Aubé, and Père Lavictoire are in some ways his most memorable characters, but there are others, of gentler type, no less interesting, or attractive.

There are stories, too, of the doctor's student days, when body-snatching for purposes of dissection was a practice which received at least the tacit consent of medical authorities who, without the cadavers so supplied, would have had no material for

satisfactory teaching. Fortunate is the medical student in this respect to-day; if he would know how fortunate, "Vieux Doc" can tell him; has told him in fact, in the pages of *En Guettant les Ours*, in tales both grim and gay, of night adventures in which leadership brought distinction almost equivalent to the fame earned in the no more exciting and, possibly, less exacting sports that command the devotion of undergraduates to-day.