

GLEANER TALES

BY

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Table of Contents

HEMLOCK.

ARCHANGE AND MARIE.

THE SETTLER'S FIRST GRIST.

ABNER'S DEVICE.

WHAT A SETTLER TOLD ME.

JEANIE MORISON.

LOST IN THE WOODS.

AN INCIDENT OF HUNTINGDON FAIR.

THE SUMMER OF SORROW.

A glance at the map shows the south-western extremity of the province of Quebec to be a wedge shaped bit of territory; the St. Lawrence on one side, the United States on the other. All that is related in the following pages is associated with this corner of Canada. The name of the book comes from the newspaper in which most of the tales first appeared. There is a purpose in the book. It attempts to convey in a readable form an idea of an era in the life of Canada which has passed—that of its first settlement by emigrants from the British isles—and to give an account of two striking episodes in its history, the invasion under Hampton and the year of the ship fever. These are historically correct; the briefer tales are based on actual incidents in the lives of early settlers in the old county of Huntingdon.

HEMLOCK.

CHAPTER I.

The rain of the forenoon had been followed by an outburst of heat and the sunshine beat with fierce intensity on the narrow square that formed the yard of the barracks at Montreal. There was a milkiness in the atmosphere which, conjoined with the low bank of black cloud that hung over the St Lawrence where it rolled out of sight, indicated a renewal of the downpour. The yard was deserted. Dinner was over and the men lounged and snoozed indoors until the sun abated his fervor, always excepting the sentry, who stood in the shade of the gateway, his gaze alternately wandering from the refreshing motion of the blue waters of St Mary's current to the cluster of log houses, interspersed by stone edifices with high tin roofs, which formed the Montreal of 1813. Presently the sound of hoofs was heard, and there came galloping to the gate an orderly from the general's headquarters. Passing the sentry, he pulled up at the door of that portion of the barracks where the officer of the day was quartered, and who, in another minute, was reading the despatch he had brought. It was an order for a detachment of 20 men to report without delay at headquarters. Instantly the voice of a sergeant was heard shouting the order to those who had to turn out and the barracks became a bustling scene of soldiers rubbing their accoutrements and packing their kits. In half an hour they had fallen into rank and marched to the general's residence. The

lieutenant in charge went in to report and found General de Watteville writing.

“You ready for the route? Ah, yes; very good, Morton. I will write you one order. You will escort an ammunition-train to camp La Fourche and there go under command of Major Stovin.”

“I hope, General, there is a prospect of our helping to use the cartridges when we get there?”

“I cannot say. Yankee very cautious; put his nose one, two, three time across the frontier and then run back, like rat to his hole. Maybe Hampton come; we must be ready. Here is your order. You will find the train at King’s Posts and use all expedition.”

Saluting the General, Morton withdrew and, rejoining his men, they marched down the narrow and crooked maze of St Paul street, attracting little attention, for the sight of soldiers had become familiar even to the habitant wives, who were jogging homeward in their market-carts. By the time the town was cleared, and the Lachine road gained, the sun was inclining to the west, and his rays being more endurable, the men stepped out briskly, bandying coarse jests, while the officer, some paces behind, eyed with surprised delight the foaming rapids, which he now saw for the first time. The afternoon was calm, which made the spectacle of a wide expanse of water tossed into huge billows without apparent cause, all the more singular. “Why,” said Morton inwardly, “all the rivers of the United Kingdom, with their falls and cataracts, if added to this vast river, would not perceptibly add either to its volume or its tumult.”

At the head of the rapids, where the St Lawrence expands into the lake named St Louis, stood the King’s Posts, an extensive

collection of buildings, with wharves in front, at which were moored a large number of boats. King's Posts was the depot of supplies for the country west of Montreal, and therefore a place of bustle in time of war, boats stemming the rapids and long trains of carts conveying to its storehouses daily the supplies brought by shipping from England to Montreal, to be in turn sent off as required to the numerous garrisons along the upper St Lawrence and lakes Ontario and Erie, while the troops, then being hurried to the front, here embarked. Reporting his command, Morton was informed the boat with the supplies he was to guard would not be ready to sail until late in the evening, and quarters were assigned his men and to himself an invitation to join the mess-dinner. Thus relieved, he strolled to the water's edge, and watched the shouting boatmen and the swearing soldiers as they loaded the flotilla that was in preparation, and was fortunate enough to see a bateau arrive from Montreal, poled up against the current by part of its crew while the others tugged at a tow-rope, reinforced by a yoke of oxen. Then he watched the sun, which, as it neared the horizon, dyed the waters of the majestic river with many hues. Slowly it neared the thick battalion of pines behind which it would disappear, and as Morton noted the broad crimson pathway that it seemed to stretch across the placid lake as a temptation to follow it into its chamber of glory, he thought he never beheld anything more imposing. Slowly the throbbing orb descended and was lost to sight, and, as if evoked by angel-spell, cloudlets became revealed and were transformed into plumage of scarlet and gold. The train of Morton's reverie was snapped by the tread of troops behind him. Turning he saw a file of soldiers with a manacled man between them. When they reached the head of the wharf, the order to halt was given. Morton knew what it meant. The tall thin man in his shirt-sleeves was a spy and he was going to be shot. It was supper-

time and boats and wharfs were for the time no longer the scene of activity, but the grimy bateau-men paused in their cookery, to watch the tragedy about to be enacted. Two soldiers lifted from their shoulders the rough box that was to be his coffin, and the doomed man stood beside it. Behind him was the St Lawrence, a lake of molten glass; in front the line of soldiers who were to shoot him. There was no hurry or confusion; everything being done in a calm and business-like manner. The prisoner stood undauntedly before his executioners; a man with a sinister countenance, in which low cunning was mixed with imperturbable self-possession. He waved the bugler away when he approached to tie a handkerchief over his eyes. "Guess I want ter hev the use o' my eyes as long as I ken; but say, kurnel, moughtn't you loose my arms. It's the last wish of a dyin man." The officer gave a sign with his hand, and the rope was untied. "Prisoner, are you ready?"

"Yes, kurnel."

Turning to the firing party, the officer gave the successive orders—make ready,—present,—fire! Hardly had the last word been uttered, than the prisoner, with surprising agility, gave a backward leap into the river, and the volley swept over where he stood, the bullets ricochetting on the surface of the river behind. "The Yankee scoundrel! Has he escaped? Ten pounds for him alive or dead!" shouted the officer. There was a rush to the edge of the wharf, and the soldiers fired at random amid its posts, but the American was not to be seen. "It is impossible for him to escape," the captain said to Morton, who had come to aid in the search. "He would have been hung had we had a gallows handy, and if he has escaped the bullet it is only to be drowned, for the river runs here like a mill-race and will carry him into the rapids." The soldiers jumped on the boats and scanned wharf and shore, and seeing no

trace came to the conclusion that from his backward leap he had been unable to recover himself and did not rise to the surface. Satisfied the man was drowned, the soldiers were ordered back to the guard-room and the stir and hurry in getting the flotilla ready were resumed.

Soon afterwards Morton was seated at the mess-table, which was crowded, for there were detachments of two regiments on their way from Quebec, where they had landed the week before, to Upper Canada. The company was a jovial one, composed of veteran campaigners who had learned to make the most of life's pleasures when they could be snatched, and joke and story kept the table in a roar for a couple of hours, when the colonel's servant whispered something in his ear. "Comrades," he said, rising, "I am informed the boats are ready. The best of friends must part when duty calls, and the hour we have spent this evening is a pleasant oasis in our long and toilsome journey through this wilderness. We do not know what difficulties we may have to encounter, but we who braved the sun of India and stormed the Pyrenees will not falter before the obstacles Canadian flood and forest may present, and will carry the flag of our country to victory, as we have so often done under our glorious chief, Wellington. We come to cross swords not for conquest but to repel those invaders, who, professing to be the champions of liberty, seek to bolster the falling cause of the tyrant of Europe by endeavoring to create a diversion in his favor on this western continent. We shall drive the boasters back, or else will leave our bones to be bleached by Canadian snows; and we shall do more, we shall vindicate the independence of this vast country against the ingrates who smite, in the hour of trial, the mother that reared them, and shall preserve Canada to be the home of untold millions who will perpetuate on the banks of

these great rivers and lakes the institutions and customs that have made the name of Britain renowned. Comrades, let us quit ourselves in this novel field of conflict as befits our colors, and I propose, as our parting toast, Success to the defenders of Canada, and confusion to the King's enemies."

With clank of sword and sabre each officer sprang to his feet and the toast was drank with shout and outstretched arm. Amid the outburst of enthusiasm, a broad-shouldered captain started the chorus,

"Why, soldiers, why, should we be melancholy, boys?
Why, soldiers, why, whose business 'tis to die?"

It was taken up with vigor until the roar was deafening, and then the colonel gave the signal to dismiss. From the heated room, Morton stepped out and drew his breath at the spectacle presented. The moon, full orbed, hung over the woods of La-prairie and poured a flood of light upon the rapids beneath, transforming them where shallow into long lanes of glittering network and where the huge billows tossed in endless tumult, sable and silver alternated. Above, the waters slumbered in the soft light, unconscious of the ordeal towards which they were drifting and scarcely ruffled by the light east breeze that had sprung up. Directly in front were the boats, loaded, and each having its complement of soldiers. The officers took their places among them and they cast off, until over a hundred were engaged in stemming the rapid current with aid of sail and oar. After passing between Caughnawaga and Lachine, indicated by their glancing spires, the leading boats awaited on the bosom of the lake for those that had still to overcome the river's drift. When the last laggard had arrived, the flotilla was marshalled by the naval officers who had control into three columns, some

sixty yards apart, and, the oars being shipped, and sails hoisted, moved majestically for the head of the lake. Surely, thought Morton, as he eyed the imposing scene, the far-searching lake embosomed by nodding forest, "This country is worth fighting for."

The air was balmy, the motion of the boats pleasant, the moonlight scene inspiring, so that the men forgot their fatigues, and burst into song, and chorus after chorus, joined in by the entire flotilla, broke the silence. A piper, on his way to join his regiment, broke in at intervals and the colonel ordered the fife and drum corps to strike up. The boat in which Morton sat brought up the rear, and softened by distance and that inexpressible quality which a calm stretch of water gives to music, he thought he had never heard anything finer, and he could not decide whether the singing of the men, the weird strains of the pibroch, or the martial music of the fifes and drums was to be preferred. About an hour had been spent thus, when the captain of the boat shouted to shift the sail, and putting up the helm, the little barque fell out of line and headed for an eminence on the south shore, so sharp and smooth in outline, that Morton took it to be a fortification. When their leaving was noted, the men in the long lines of boats struck up Auld Lang Syne, the fifes and drums accompanying, and when they had done, the piper succeeded. Morton listened to the strain as it came faintly from the fast receding flotilla, it was that of Lochaber no More.

As the shore was neared the boat was brought closer to the wind, and lying over somewhat deeply, the helmsman told those on the lee side to change seats. In the movement a man rubbed against Morton, and he felt that his clothes were wet. Looking sharply at him, he saw he was one of the boat's crew, when his resemblance to the spy he had seen escape the bullets of the firing-party struck

him. The more he looked the more convinced he grew that he was correct, and, improbable as it seemed, within an arm's length, almost, sat the man he saw plunge into the river and whom he, with everybody else, believed to have been swept into the deadly rapids. With all a soldier's detestation of a spy, he resolved he should not escape, yet to attempt to seize him in the boat would be to imperil all in it, for that the fellow would make a desperate struggle Morton knew. Prudently resolving to make no move until the boat neared its moorings, he slipped his hand into his breast-pocket and grasped the stock of one of his pistols.

As the boat approached the shore the sharply-cut eminence, which Morton had taken to be a fortification, resolved itself into a grassy knoll, destitute of glacis or rampart, and round the eastern extremity of which they glided into a smooth narrow channel, whose margin was fretted by the shadows cast by the trees which leant over from its banks. The sail now flapped uselessly and the order was given to get out the oars. The suspected spy rose with the other boatmen to get them into place and stood on a cross-bench as he lifted a heavy oar to its lock. It was a mere pretence. In a moment his foot was on the gunwale and he made a sudden spring towards the bank. There was the sound of a plunge, of a few brief strokes by a strong swimmer, a movement among the bushes, and then silence. Morton was intensely excited, he drew his pistol, rose and cocking it fired at random. Turning to the captain of the boat he shouted in fury, "You villain; you have assisted in the escape of a King's prisoner." With stolid countenance the captain shifted the helm to suit the windings of the channel, and answered, "Me no spik Ingleese." Feeling he was powerless, Morton resumed his seat and in a minute or two a cluster of white-washed huts came in view and the boat drew alongside a landing-stage in front

of them. Several soldiers were standing on it awaiting them, and on asking where he would find the commissariat officer, Morton was directed to one of the houses, in front of which paced a sentry. Entering he perceived it consisted of two rooms, divided by a board-partition. In the larger end was a woman, surrounded by several children, cooking at an open-fire, and in the other, the door and windows of which were open, for the evening was sultry, were four officers in dishabille, seated round a rickety table playing cards, and with a pewter-measure in the middle of it. One of them rose on seeing the stranger, while the others turned carelessly to examine him. Assuring himself he was addressing the officer of the commissariat, Morton explained his business. "Oh, that's all right; the powder-kegs must remain in the boat and in the morning I will get carts to forward them to the front. There's an empty box, Lieutenant Morton; pull it up and join us," and hospitably handed him the pewter-measure. It contained strong rum grog, of which a mouthful sufficed Morton. Not so the others, who, in listening to what he had to tell of the news of Montreal and of the movements of the troops, emptied it, and shouted to the woman to refill it, and, at the same time, she brought in the supper, consisting of fried fish and potatoes. That disposed of, the cards were reproduced and the four were evidently bent on making a night of it. On returning from seeing how his men were quartered, Morton found that the grog and the excitement of the card-playing were telling on his companions, who were noisy and quarrelsome. Asking where he should sleep, the woman pointed to the ladder that reached to a trap in the roof, and he quietly ascended. It was merely a loft, with a small window in either gable and a few buffalo robes and blankets laid on its loose flooring. The place was so stiflingly hot that Morton knew sleep was out of the question even if there had been no noise beneath, and he seated himself by the side of one of

the windows through which the wind came in puffs. The sky was now partially clouded and the growl of distant thunder was heard. Fatigue told on the young soldier and he dozed as he sat. A crash of thunder awoke him. Startled he rose and was astonished to find himself in utter darkness, save for the rays that came through the chinks of the flooring from the candle beneath, where the officers were still carousing. He leant out of the window and saw that the moon had been blotted out by thick clouds. While gazing there was a flash of lightning, revealing to him a man crouched beside the window below. In the brief instant of intense light, Morton recognized the spy, and guessed he was listening to the officers, hoping to pick up information, in their drunken talk, of use to his employers. "He cheated the provost-marshal, he cheated me, but he shall not escape again," muttered Morton, who drew his pistols, got them ready, and, grasping one in each hand, leant out of the window to await the next flash that he might take aim. It came and instantly Morton fired. The unsuspecting spy yelled, jumped to his feet, and rushed to the cover of the woods. Then all was darkness. A crash of thunder, the sweep of the coming hurricane and the pelting of rain, increased the futility of attempting to follow. "I hope I've done for him," said Morton to himself, "and that like a stricken fox he will die in cover."

The pistol-shots together with the crash of the elements had put a stop to the carousal downstairs and Morton heard them disputing as to who should go up and see what had happened. "I will not go," said one with the deliberation of a stupidly drunk man. "I am an officer of the Royal Engineers and have nothing to do with personal encounters. If you want a line of circumvallation laid down, or the plan of a mine, I am ready, but my commission says

nothing about fighting with swords or pistols. I know my office and how to maintain its dignity.”

“Yes, Hughes, and the integrity of your skin. I’d go myself (here he rose and tried to steady himself by holding on to the table) but I’ll be jiggered if I can go up such a stair-case as that. It would take a son of a sea-cook,” and with these words, losing his grip, the speaker toppled over and fell on the floor. The third officer, a mere lad, was asleep in his chair in a drunken stupor. The commissariat officer staggered to the foot of the ladder, and, after vainly attempting to ascend, shouted, “I say you there; what’s all the shooting for? Are you such a greenhorn as to be firing at mosquitoes or a bullfrog. By George, when in company of gentlemen you should behave yourself. I will report you to your shuperior officer,” and so he maundered on for a while, receiving no answer from Morton. Finally the woman of the house helped him to a corner, where he lay down and snored away the fumes of the liquor that had overcome him. Meanwhile the storm raged, and when it had passed away, and the moon again calmly came forth, and the frogs again raised their chorus, Morton was too sleepy to think of going to look for the body of the spy, and making as comfortable a bed as he could, he lay down and rested until late next morning.

CHAPTER II.

On descending from his sleeping place, Morton found the woman preparing breakfast, and, looking into the adjoining room, saw that three of its inmates were still sleeping surrounded by the litter of their night’s carousal. Stepping out of doors, he was surprised by

the beauty of the sylvan scene. The air had the freshness and the sky the deep tender-blue that follows a thunder-storm, and the sunshine glittered on the smooth surface of the river that, in all its windings, was overhung by towering trees, except where small openings had been made by the settlers, from which peeped their white shanties. The eminence which had excited his curiosity the night before, he perceived to be an island, with a largish house at its base, flanked by a wind-mill. At the landing, was the bateau, with a group of men. Approaching them, he found the captain, whose bloodshot eyes alone indicated his excess of the preceding night. "Ah, Morton," he exclaimed, "you were the only wise man among us; you have your wits about you this morning. For me, I had a few hours' pleasure I now loathe to think of and a racking headache. Come, let us have a swim and then go to breakfast."

Following him to the nook he sought, Morton told of his shot at the spy. The captain listened attentively to the story. "I hope you winged him," he said, "but he will escape. The settlers, except a few Old Countrymen, are all in sympathy with the Yankees, and will shelter and help him to get away. We cannot make a move that word is not sent to the enemy. I will warn the Indians to look out for him. Had it not been for the rain, they could trace him to his lair."

On returning to the house, they found their comrades trying to make themselves presentable and sat down to a breakfast of fried pork and sour bread, to which Morton did ample justice. The commissariat officer told him he could not start for some time, as carts were few and the rain would have filled the holes in the track called a road. He could have forwarded him more quickly by canoes, but there was a risk of wetting the powder at the rapids. It was noon before sufficient carts arrived to enable Morton to start,

when a laborious journey ensued, the soldiers being called on constantly to help the undaunted ponies to drag the cart-wheels out of the holes in which they got mired. When they had gone a few miles the carts halted and the kegs were placed in boats, which conveyed them to their destination. Camp La Fourche was found to consist of a few temporary buildings, or rather sheds, which, with the barns and shanties of the settlers near by, housed a few hundred men, of whom few were regulars. Morton's orders were to remain and time passed heavily, the only excitement being when a scout came in with reports of the movements of the American army on the frontier, which were generally exaggerated. The camp had been purposely placed at the forks of the English and Chateaugay rivers, to afford a base of operations against the invader, should he approach either by way of the town of Champlain or of Chateaugay. Morton relieved the tedium of waiting by hunting and fishing, for his proper duties were slight. At first he did not venture into the woods without a guide, but experience quickly taught one so active and keen of observation sufficient bush-lore to venture alone with his pocket-compass. The fishing, at that late season, was only tolerable, and while he enjoyed to the full the delight of skimming the glassy stretches of both rivers in a birch canoe, he preferred the more active motion and greater variety of traversing the pathless woods with his gun. He had been in camp over a week when he started for an afternoon's exploring of the woods. After an hour's tramp he struck the trail of what he believed to be a bear. Following it was such pleasant exercise of his ingenuity that he took no note of time, and he had traversed miles of swamp and ridge before prudence cried halt. The sun was sinking fast, and to retrace his track was out of the question. He resolved to strike due north, which he knew would take him to the Chateaugay where he would find shelter for the night. The flush of the sunset was dying

from the sky when he emerged from the woods on the banks of the river, which flowed dark and silent between the endless array of trees which sentinelled it on either side. Threading his way downward he, in time, came upon a clearing—a gap in the bush filled with ripening grain and tasselled corn. The shanty, a very humble one, stood at the top of the bank, with the river at its feet. Gratified at the prospect of rest, he paused before swinging himself over the rude fence. There rose in the evening air the sound of singing: it was a psalm-tune. The family were at worship. Reverently the soldier uncovered his head and listened. The psalm ended, he could hear the voice of supplication, though not the words. When Morton approached the house he saw a heavily-built man leave the door to meet him.

“Gude e’en, fren; ye’re oot late. But I see ye’re are o’ the military and your wark caas ye at a’ hours. Is there ony news o’ the Yankee army?”

Morton explained he had not been on duty but had got belated in hunting and craved the boon of shelter until morning, for which he would pay.

“Pay! say ye. A dog wearing the King’s colors wad be welcome to my best. You maun be new to this country to think the poorest settler in it wad grudge to share his bite with ony passerby. Come your ways; we are richt glad to see you.”

Entering the shanty Morton was astounded at the contrast between the homelike tidiness of the interior and the rudeness of the exterior, everything being neatly arranged and of spotless cleanliness. “Truly,” he thought, “it is not abundance that makes comfort, but the taste and ingenuity to make the best of what we

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