

Select Tale.

EUPHROSYNE.

AN OLD TALE OF THE NEW WORLD.

IN TWO CHAPTERS.—CHAPTER I.

It was a bright October evening in the year 1690, when a group of officers stood upon the topmost point of Cape Diamond, the lofty citadel of Quebec, clustered round the flagstaff, from whose summit floated proudly the national banner of France. The last rays of the setting sun kissed its silken folds as they streamed out upon the breeze, waving defiance to the invaders who threatened to pluck it from the rock on which, nearly a century before, it had been planted by the adventurous Champlain.

Over the beautiful landscape, viewed from the pinnacle of that rock, hung the blue dome of heaven, pure and cloudless; while the horizon, burning with gorgeous hues of purple and gold, shed a glory over the scene, such as is never witnessed in milder latitudes. The heads of the distant mountains that guard, like giant-sentinels, the lovely Valley of St. Charles, were already crowned with the early-falling snows of Canada; and the Isle of Orleans gleamed, in the distance, like some brilliant gem on the bosom of the broad St. Lawrence.

Opposite the frowning height, bristling with cannon, lay the precipitous shores of Point Levi, rising abruptly from the noble bay of Quebec, and terminating in a wooded promontory. Here and there, perched like an eagle's eyrie on its craggy ledges, appeared the white-washed walls of the peasant's cottage gleaming through the foliage; while its swelling hills, and the undulating surface of its many-coloured woods resting against the vivid background of the sky, gave to that point of land a picturesqueness of effect far surpassing that of the most finished productions of art.

But not to the eye alone did this ministry of beauty make its appeal; the air was full of harmonies—the whispering of leaves, the vesper-songs of birds, the humming of the insect tribes; and of odours, wafted from every woody dingle where the wild flowers still brightened the fading earth with their beauty, while, mingled with these fainter perfumes, came the rich fragrance of exotics from the stately gardens of the castle, in whose gay parterres still lingered the rarer flowers of European climes—the rose of Provence, the “Frenchman's darling” mignonette, and the balmy violets of England.

But if the heavens above were glorious in their calm beauty, and the earth beneath peaceful, radiant as a poet's dream, there were sounds abroad, marring with their dissonance the harmonies of nature. The tramp of soldiers, the rattling of arms, the hurrying to and fro of excited men, jarred harshly on the silence of the night; while over all this was cast the spell of music from the military band, which played before the castle of St. Louis the national airs of France.

But the group of officers who in the deepening twilight still remained standing on the summit of the citadel, looked not now with admiring eyes upon the scene. Danger menaced them even in their stronghold; nay, they gazed upon its very presence; and in the whole glowing landscape they saw but one object of interest—a hostile fleet, far from contemptible in force, lying in their own majestic river, under the walls of their city, its white canvases billowing in the breeze, and the ensign of England streaming from the mast-head of the admiral's vessel.

The expedition had been fitted out by the British colonists of Massachusetts, and intrusted to the command of Sir William Phipps, a man whose humble birth had not prevented from rising to the highest posts of power and honour, and whose talents and virtues had won the favour and confidence of his sovereign.

Previous to the appearance of the gallant little armament before the walls of Quebec, it had almost without opposition, captured several French posts on the shores of Newfoundland and the lower St. Lawrence, and had actually arrived at Tadoussac, on the Saguenay, before any tidings of the impending danger reached the Canadian capital. Rumors, it is true, were rife concerning its approach; and parties of observation had been sent out by its vigilant governor, Comte de Frontenac, and canoes despatched to seek for some ships laden with supplies, which were daily expected from France—their safe arrival, in the event of a siege, being all important to the garrison.

Defensive preparations had also been made, and were still going on, by order of M. de Frontenac, with unrelaxed vigor; for, although strong in natural defences, there was need to strengthen its rocky bulwarks against insidious assault, and to defend, by artificial barriers, those weak points which, in the lower parts of the city, were accessible

from the river. But the lofty crest of Cape Diamond was not at that time crowned with works of solid masonry, although the present structure had even then been commenced, and from its northern angle there extended an irregular line of bastions, crossing the promontory to the bank of the St. Charles.

The citadel, at that period, was a quadrangular fort, with flanking defences at each corner, protected by a wall on the inner side; while some rude field-works, with redoubts, strengthened the front towards the Plains of Abraham. The lower town, too, had its battery; and the narrow, precipitous passages ascending from it to the upper part of the city, were protected by loophole walls, intrenchments, and rows of *chevaux de frise*.

Speculating upon the audacity which brought this British armament before the walls of their city, the knot of officers we have mentioned remained upon the height till only the white shrouds and gleaming lights of the hostile vessels were discernible through the gathering darkness; and then one after another departed till only two remained, leaning against the broad flagstaff, and gazing down upon the illuminated windows of the castle. Suddenly a rich strain of music swelled upward from the balcony, when, turning to his companion, the elder of the two young men said, with a gay smile:

“Light and music wherever her presence beams, Louis! Is it not so? Come, let us leave this breezy height; and though with some of us, perchance, it may be our last night of life, it will be well to spend it where we may have a foretaste of the heaven that is to follow.”

“Your light tone, Gaston, is in ill keeping with my graver mood,” answered the other with a gesture of impatience: “yet go, and bask in the radiance of her beauty; but”—

“And wherefore but, St. Ours!” interrupted his friend. “What means that settled gloom, that desponding tone whenever Madame de Lavasseur is our theme!—she whom I know you love—and not in vain, if there is aught beside outward seeming in her smiles, in the conscious blush when you approach, in the tones of liquid sweetness from her lips—and such lips! Cupid be merciful! The honey of Hybla was vinegar to the dew that bathes those living roses!”

St. Ours sighed deeply, and was silent. He had not even a smile for the absurd rhapsody of his friend; in truth, he was struggling hard to subdue the emotion that well-nigh mastered him; but with all his efforts, he could not conceal it from the observation of D'Espéron, who, unable to divine the secret cause which never failed to arouse it in connection with Madame de Lavasseur's name, exclaimed, with an impetuosity which formed a part of his frank and generous nature:

“In the name of all the saints, Louis St. Ours, explain to me the mystery which drives you to despair, when love and duty stand ready, among a crowd of hapless aspirants, to crown you with triumph! Montres, D'Aubigny, De Lorme—would they not barter all their hopes of fame in these northern wars, for one little token of that favour which the fair Euphrosyne showers, without stint or measure, upon you!”

“Ah, that is it, D'Espéron! If she looked upon me coldly, I could bear to suffer; but it is a cruel destiny to know the treasure might be mine, were I permitted to possess it; and this it is which must explain to you the secret of that unhappiness whose manifestations have so often awakened your sympathy and wonder.”

“I do not yet comprehend you, Louis. Why is it that the treasure won, may not be possessed?—that in the very presence of this adored Euphrosyne, I mark your cheek grow pale, your brow become clouded, and see you steal away even from the smiles which are your life, to darkness and solitude.”

“Forgive me, Gaston,” said St. Ours. “I know I must have tried your patience sadly; but till the certainty was forced upon me that, unworthy as I am, I held the happiness of another in my keeping, I resolved to bury deep in my own breast a secret that is the haunting skeleton of my life. But from you I will no longer have any concealment. I have no formal history to relate, and only a few brief words to utter, but they are pregnant with fatal meaning, as you will believe when I tell you—I am married!”

“Married!” exclaimed D'Espéron in half-indignant astonishment. “Can I believe you, when no word of this has ever before passed your lips?—not even to me, your comrade in arms, your brother in affection, your friend and confidant—as I thought—in every joy and sorrow, since first we knew each other, years and years ago!”

“Even so, Gaston, for I trained my thoughts never to dwell upon the odious theme. Or rather, I should say, indifferent to the ties that bound me, I scarcely realised their existence, nor felt the galling bondage, till the bright vision of Euphrosyne

appeared, and awoke me to the bitter consciousness of my thralldom.”

“But how and when was this fatal marriage contracted?”

“I know her only by name. These, briefly, are the circumstances of the case:—My father and the Count de Lancey were bosom friends from my boyhood, and in the ardour of their romantic attachment, they vowed to each other that, should they in after years become parents, their first-born children, if of different sexes, should cement by marriage the union of the families. My father inherited a proud name with fallen fortunes; while the Count de Lancey, less illustrious by birth, was the possessor of immense wealth, so that the friends each derived his own advantage from the compact; and when, in the course of time, they became parents, the little Rosyne and myself were taught, among the first lessons of our childhood, to regard each other as future husband and wife. Still, had the union been delayed till we arrived at maturity, it would perhaps have never taken place; but, unfortunately, the sudden illness of the Count hastened its consummation. An injury received in the chase was pronounced fatal by his physicians; and when informed of his danger, he desired that my father and myself should be instantly summoned. We resided in a distant province, but we set out immediately on receiving the tidings, and travelled night and day. We arrived in time to see him alive, and though near his end, his faculties remained singularly clear. He expressed his satisfaction at my father's prompt compliance with his wishes, reminded him of their compact, and signified his desire to see the marriage solemnized between his daughter and myself before he breathed his last: ‘Otherwise,’ he said, ‘he must leave her in the power of those who would differently shape her destiny; and the dearest wish of his heart was, to bestow her and her wealth, with his own hand, upon the son of his earliest and truest friend.’”

“It was a strange proposal, children as we both were—the girl-bride being but twelve years old, and I only three years her senior. But absorbed in grief for her father, she had no other will than his; and to me who had always looked upon the union as a thing of course, it was a matter of perfect indifference whether it took place then and there, or was postponed for half-a-dozen years. And so we were married by the count's confessor, who was present with a lay brother from a neighboring convent.—Strangers to each other, we were united in indissoluble bonds—indifferent to the present, and regardless of the future, which by that act was rendered to one of us at least, dark and joyless for ever.”

“But a secret presentiment of coming woe crept over me when I found my fate irrevocably fixed—a deep aversion to my child-wife filled my heart; but as by the marriage stipulations, I was not to claim her till she had completed her sixteenth year, I rejoiced in the reprieve, and gave all anxious thoughts on the subject to the winds.”

“I saw her but once after we parted at the altar, and then, in compliance with my father's wishes, I accompanied him to the convent where she was placed to complete her education. She replied to my distant greeting with averted looks, and I fancied that I inspired her with uncontrollable disgust. This conviction strengthened my repugnance to her; for young as I was, I had a keen sense of the beautiful in woman; and when I looked at her undeveloped figure, her thin, childish face, and her large meaningless eyes, I passed gladly from her presence, hoping, almost resolving, never to enter it again.”

“And you have never seen her since!” questioned D'Espéron.

“Never! Two years subsequent, my father died; and having entered upon a military life, I was sent upon foreign service, and remained abroad till recalled by the appointment which transferred me to this Western world in the suite of the Comte de Frontenac.”

“And your wife?” asked D'Espéron.

“I am ignorant of everything that concerns her,” said St. Ours. “At various intervals, I heard that she always spoke with bitterness of her early marriage, denouncing it as the misfortune of her life; and this settled hate on her part fortified me in my resolution never to trouble her with a husband's claim, nor ever to intrude my unwelcome presence upon her. For aught that I know, she may now be a veiled nun in the convent where I left her; but this is not probable. I only wish it were; and then I should be absolved from the vow I made my father on his death-bed—never voluntarily to break the tie which binds me to the daughter of his friend.”

“It is indeed a forlorn hope, I fear,” said D'Espéron. “Had such an event taken place, you would have heard of it through a hundred channels before now.”

“True: it does offer even a straw to the drowning man's grasp, and I have only to bear my doom with such patience as I can; and it would have been an easy task, this quiet submission to an iron destiny, had my heart remained untouched by another. But to long with all the ardour of passion, to know myself beloved by the most enchanting of women—O it is often more than my manhood can endure!”

“But this child to whom you were wedded, St. Ours, has, with the lapse of years, become a woman. How know you that she has not blossomed into an angel, who would fill your whole soul with the ecstatic sense of her loveliness?”

“It could not be. You would not think so had you seen her. Besides, she is not Euphrosyne, and so could win no love of mine. Still, though I have wished to be forgotten by her—to be thought of, if remembered at all, as one dead—should she demand of me the protection of a husband, I would yield it, in fulfillment of my vow made to her, and of the promise to my father on his dying bed, never to rupture my marriage-tie. But I have little fear that she will claim from me any frigid duty, and I gladly interpret her unbroken silence into a repugnance as unconquerable as my own.”

Louis drew his cloak around him as he ceased speaking, for the night air blew chill and damp from the river, and leaning against the flag-staff, remained for a few minutes lost in silent thought; then suddenly addressing his friend, he said with emotion:

“This is her birth-night, Gaston, and we but ill honour it by loitering here. Let us go and mingle with the crowd of her worshippers, it may be, as you say, for the last time; but the brief hours of life which, perchance, remain for some of us, I at least would wing with brightness such as her presence only can bestow.”

Arm in arm, the two friends descended from the rock, and bent their steps toward the castle, from whence came the sounds of music and laughter, sinking to the aching heart of St. Ours, but exhilarating to the light spirits of his companion, who with quickened steps, pressed on, eager to share the revelry so congenial to his buoyant nature. They entered the vestibule; and D'Espéron had bounded half-way up the broad illuminated staircase, when he paused to look back for his more tardy companion, who was slowly ascending step by step, his fine face still bearing the overshadowing trace of his emotion.

“Courage, Louis! courage and hope! Remember your family motto, and wear your heart as bravely as you do your sword,” said D'Espéron gaily.

St. Ours answered his friend's sally by a faint smile; and springing up to the landing on which he stood, they passed on together to the grand saloon, crowded, on this the birth-night of the governor's favorite niece, the beautiful Madame de Lavasseur, with a brilliant assemblage of the most distinguished residents, civil & military, of the place.

M. de Fontenac would not permit the threatening aspect of public affairs to interfere with the arrangements made for the occasion; and the festivities at the castle presented a scene of magnificence which would have been in better keeping with an eve of festal victory, than with one which was probably to precede the deadly encounter of enemies.

Yet who could think of impending danger, in the midst of so much gaiety, and in the presence of the night's radiant queen, the charming Euphrosyne, the cynosure of all eyes, eclipsing, by her sweet simplicity, her exquisite grace, and a beauty more touching even than it was dazzling, the showy women who, in the imposing splendour of rich robes and jewels of countless value, lent eclat to the scene! She moved among the glittering throng, beautiful in her unadorned simplicity, a few natural flowers wreathed among the rich folds of her shining hair, and arrayed in robes of the purest white; for her weeds, if she had ever worn them for a husband who possessed not her affections, were long ago cast aside; and on this her twentieth birth-night, she resembled rather a youthful bride than a widow.

With a calm step but a throbbing heart Louis St. Ours passed through the brilliant crowd. Not daring by one furtive glance to single out the object who filled his every thought, he made his way to the upper end of the saloon, where, surrounded by a group of officers, M. de Fontenac stood discussing the great topic of interest—the arrival of the hostile fleet in their waters.

St. Ours was becoming an attentive auditor to the circle, when, by a sudden evolution of the dancers, he caught a glimpse of Euphrosyne; then her sweet silver laugh rung upon his ear; and forgetting all things else in the thought of her, he drank eagerly in the low musical tones of her voice, as they came to him mingled with the general hum, yet separated to his ear from all other sounds, her lightest tone penetrating like some divine harmony into the secret recesses of his soul.