

Literature, &c.

LOUIS OLIVIER GAMACHE.

Translated from the French by a Gentleman of Chatham.

It was in the autumn of 1852, that I visited for the first time, the deserted and inhospitable shores of the Island of Anticosti. Slightly elevated, iron-bound, and frequently enveloped by dense fogs, this land is extremely dangerous for vessels entering or leaving the noble River St. Lawrence. The storms of spring and autumn, rage here with the greatest fury, and the many shipwrecks that have happened on its coast, have given a mournful celebrity to the name of the Island of Anticosti. When any vessel was dashed to pieces on this forbidding shore, those of her crew who escaped a watery grave or a more dreadful destruction upon the rocks, were doomed to perish of cold and hunger without even the hope of relief.

Disasters of this nature had become so frequent and so fatal, that the Canadian Legislature was obliged to adopt some measures to prevent, or at least, to mitigate the sufferings of the shipwrecked mariner for the time to come. Two lighthouses were accordingly erected, at a distance of thirty leagues apart; one upon the Eastern Point of the Island, the other on the Southwest; these also serve as depots for provisions intended for distribution in cases of necessity; two other depots were established for the same purpose, one at River Jupiter or Shallop Cove, midway between the two lighthouses, the other about ten leagues below the Southwest Cape, in the Bay of Gamache.

In the autumn I have mentioned, the screw-steamer Doris was employed in distributing supplies at the various stations before the commencement of the stormy weather, having as supercargo several members of the Trinity House in Quebec, whose duty it was to inspect the establishments under the control of that department. Although my mission was of a very different nature, I had obtained a passage on board the same vessel, and was treated with the greatest cordiality by these officers of the Trinity House.

The Doris had nearly completed the distribution of the supplies, having only to visit the last station on the Island, the Bay of Gamache. It was with the greatest anxiety I looked forward to my arrival there, for I had heard of the famed Gamache long years before, and ardently wished for the opportunity of seeing this celebrated personage. What pilot of the St. Lawrence, what Canadian sailor, has not heard of his fame; what village is there from Gaspe to Quebec, where the marvellous tales of Gamache are not related.

In these popular stories he is always represented as the beau ideal of a pirate, half ogre, half savage, who enjoyed the special friendship, and protection of Satan himself. "He has been seen," say some of these reports, "on the deck of his vessel, demanding from his invisible assistant, a cap-full of wind, and his schooner with a fair breeze and sails filled, would glide over the crystal sea, while all around him the other vessels remained as if spell bound, in a perfect calm. Once on arriving at Rimouski, he gave a supper to his unearthly protector, who did not appear in any fearful shape, but as a human being like himself. Alone, with invisible and mysterious confederates, he has massacred whole ships' crews, and appropriated to his own use their valuable cargoes. On one occasion, when hotly pursued by a cruiser, he disappeared with his schooner, at the moment when his capture appeared inevitable, and nothing remained upon the waters but a bluish flame."

Such tales as these were frequently related even among the English vessels, which in trading to Quebec, sometimes sailed along the coast of the Island, and one of my fellow passengers, an officer in Her Majesty's service, who was about fifteen years of age when he first arrived in this country, told of his bewilderment while listening to the tales repeated by the English sailors of the terrible Gamache, as the vessel was passing the precipitous heights of West Cape. Another passenger, a young merchant from Montreal, excited our imaginations still more, by telling us of the terrors he endured for two days in hourly dread of being stuck on a spit and devoured in the cave of this Polyphemus of Anticosti.

At length the Doris cast anchor off the Bay of Gamache, in a dense fog. About 8 A. M., the wind having cleared away the heavy banks of fog, a brilliant sun showed us at the distance of three miles, the two headlands that mark the entrance of the harbour. We doubled Point Eagle, and before us lay extended a magnificent sheet of water about five miles in circumference, completely sheltered from all winds but the South. We are in the Bay of Gamache, the only harbour in the whole Island of Anticosti.

On a rising ground at the head of the bay, a number of buildings of a brilliant whiteness, seemed to form a perfect village; but these were nothing more than the dwelling house, barns, and sheds of the lord of the place. Behind this village a stream, well stocked with trout, winds through beautiful meadows and cultivated fields, and enters the bay at a short distance from the house.

The waters of the Bay afford an abundance of amusement to the sportsman, both for fishing and shooting; while steaming along we scared large flocks of brandt, and also ducks of many varieties, while the seals at a respectful distance examined attentively and with knowing looks, the smoking hull of the Doris as she dashed the spray from her bows. They took her no doubt for some huge whale that had invaded their domains, and prudently kept beyond the sweep of its tail and the reach of its enormous jaws.

Scarcely had we set foot on shore, when a man with white hair, but hale and vigorous, came hastily forward and seized me cordially by the hand, "I must shake hands with your Reverence first," said he, "you are heartily welcome; excuse me gentlemen, but I must commence with my priest."

It was Gamache. Our host by his own account, was about 68 years of age, but still all life and activity, his voice strong and sonorous, his language firm and resolute, and when engaged in business he displayed all the energy of a young man.

"You see we live to a good old age here," he replied on our expressing surprise at his undiminished vigour, "the sea air is bracing and healthful; see my pony yonder, he does not look like dying yet, although he is by no means young, for he was six years old when I brought him here and that will soon be twenty-nine years ago."

The house, a two story building, was a perfect arsenal. In the hall I counted a dozen guns, loaded and primed, some of them double-barrelled, suspended from the beams and walls, amid swords, sabres, pikes, bayonets and pistols. Each room in the house also, contained at least two guns, and the doors and windows closed in such a manner as to be easily barricaded. With these arrangements, two or three men withing the building, could sustain a regular siege against a dozen enemies. A cannon placed in front of the house, and covering the approach from the Bay, was better calculated to inspire fear than to be of any real service in case of an attack.

The sheds kept with extraordinary neatness and care, contained long rows of buckets, puncheons and casks of all kinds. "My stables," said he, "are empty now; when my wife was alive I had generally fourteen or fifteen cows, but since her death they have all dwindled away from want of care. I shall be obliged to marry again, and if you Mons. le Curé can find for me some one in Quebec to be the third Madame Gamache, you will render to me, and perhaps to her also, a very great service."

I was not bold enough to undertake such a commission, for I had but little hope of finding any person willing to live in such complete seclusion during the greater part of the year. In summer he spent much of his time cruising in his yacht, and during winter he roved the forest in search of game. It was on his return home after an absence of two weeks on one of these hunting expeditions, that he found his second wife a frozen corpse, and shivering by her side dying of hunger, were his two little children about five or six years of age.

"This is the way you will find me some fine day. Every one has his turn. Ah! well, let us bury her." This was the only observation he made to the hunter who accompanied him, although he had always manifested the greatest kindness and affection for his wife.

The few hours we spent with Gamache, dissipated all the prejudices we had formed against him. His appearance and manners were rough, but his heart was good. He was himself the first to laugh at the measures he had adopted to acquire his dangerous reputation, and rejoiced in the security it afforded him in so lonely and perilous a situation. We gathered from his own lips some details of his life, and particularly those waggish devices that gained him such a notoriety in these quarters.

He was born at Pilet, his family originally belonged to St. Illes-la-Ville, in the diocese of Chartres. His ancestors for nearly two centuries, were settled on the Beaupré side, whence they crossed over to the south side of the St. Lawrence. The Gamache manor appears to have derived its name from a member of this family.

Louis Olivier, being of an ardent and adventurous disposition, left his home at the early age of eleven, to join an English frigate as cabin boy; his only education he received in the shrouds, under the influence of the boat-swain's cat. It may readily be imagined then, that when he returned to his native country, after many years of service in the Royal Navy, he retained all the intrepidity as well as the roughness of a British sailor. Being unsuccessful in the business he commenced in Rimouski, he left that place for the Island of Anticosti, and settled on that beautiful bay which still bears his name.

This situation was well adapted for the exercise of that love of independence which characterized him, and afforded many opportunities for the enjoyment of his favourite occupations of hunting, fishing, and sailing. With his wife, his children, and one or two servants, he passed the long six months of winter without having any communication with the rest of the

world; his nearest neighbours living equally secluded at a distance of thirty miles. In summer his bay was visited by vessels seeking shelter from the storm, and sometimes by lovers of adventure; he thought therefore of adding by a new scheme, to his means of defence, and resolved upon attaching to his name a prestige of superstitious terror.

A vein of pleasantry was usually observable in all the measures that Gamache adopted for inspiring dread. One day on arriving at Rimouski, after a long fast, he put up at a country inn, and ordered supper to be prepared for two persons in a private room. The table was set for two persons, according to orders, but on the mistress of the house enquiring who was to sup with him, "what is that to you," he replied, "you will be paid, that is enough, now leave me, and don't return till I call you." The pretended source closed the door, and after discharging successfully the duty of two good eaters, recalled the hostess, who strange to say, did not lose her consciousness on entering the room.

The door had certainly remained closed, two chairs were at the table, covers set for two, and one man could not have eaten all that was placed there. Next morning it was reported through the neighbourhood, that Gamache had passed the night with the devil; that their conversation had been overheard by persons in the house, but that no one dared to repeat it. Gamache laughed in his sleeve and said to himself—'Well, if you are such fools, I'll give you a double dose of terror.—Madam, supper again for two to-night, do you understand?' At six the supper was served, and on entering the house Gamache saw a crowd of men and women who recoiled at his approach, "Has a gentleman come here dressed all in black," he demanded of the mistress. "I have not seen such a person," replied she, trembling. "Never mind, I go to wait upon him, keep my door closed." In a few minutes the inquisitive listners were whispering near the room, when suddenly the door opened apparently without human agency. He had ingeniously contrived to do this with a stick and string inside the room. On each side men, women and children tumbled over one another in affright, and on recovering themselves, made their escape by the doors and windows. Master of the field without striking a blow, he presented himself before the hostess, who sat alone wondering what was to happen next. "Well, Madame, has the gentleman in black not arrived yet." "No, sir, I have not seen him." "It matters not, he always pays his bill, and I will sup for him and myself."

Gamache not unfrequently broke through that monopoly enjoyed by the great fur company, of trading with the Indians along the North shore of the St. Lawrence, and these voyages were attended with considerable danger, as all such traders when captured are treated with great severity. Bred in the school of the English, Gamache set his face against all monopolies, and after the example of his teachers, traded freely with the world, and trafficked openly in the very presence of the agents of the company, whose threats he despised as long as their force did not at least double his own, for he could always depend upon the assistance of the Indians who favoured this competition.

On one occasion, when the trade was going on briskly, his schooner being at anchor in the harbour of Mingan, on the north shore of the Gulf, and surrounded by canoes, a sail appeared at the entrance to the harbour. The experienced eye of the old rover at once recognized an armed vessel, from which he had many times before narrowly escaped.

"To-morrow morning early mes amis," he said to the savages, "we will return to business; don't go far away, I merely wish to make these rascals believe I have gone."

He slips his cable, and while the enemy is tacking ship to fall upon the prey, the fleet of canoes disappears, and the schooner under full sail, glides rapidly from the bay. The cruiser immediately gives chase in the vain hope of soon overhauling them, but Gamache's pilot cleverly keeps the advantage he had obtained on starting. Night closes in, and the vessels appear like two dark shades upon the water. "Now for it, stir the galley fire and let the lubbers see it clearly, we must give them a Jack-a-lantern to chase." A raft of boards with a tar barrel containing a few brands from the galley fire, is lowered to the sea. "Bon la mon garçon," says Gamache, let go the raft, and while they amuse themselves by chasing it we will make a few tacks and go back to Mingan, the fools will never think of going there to look for us."

Great was the disappointment and surprise of the crew of the frigate, when after a long chase their only prize was a small flame that seemed to burn upon the sea. The chase was continued towards the south with of course no result but that of proving to the sailors that Gamache, as well as his schooner, had escaped in the form of a Jack-a-lantern. Equally great was the surprise of the Company's officers at Mingan, when on the following morning they beheld the schooner gently rocked by the sea-swell on the spot she occupied the evening before, and surrounded as usual by Indian canoes.

Some time after this exploit, being at the Port of Quebec, with his schooner, late in the season, a Sheriff's Officer was sent on board to arrest him for debt. Gamache, suspecting he

object of the visit, told the officer, who was not acquainted with him, that Gamache had gone on shore but would return shortly, and then invited him to enter the cabin and partake of a bottle of wine. After discussing the merits of a bottle of "Fine Old Port," and spending some time in a conversation which our hero, made as interesting as possible, the Officer returned to the deck and found to his horror and dismay that the vessel had been some time under weigh, with a fair wind, and the City of Quebec already disappearing from the view, as they glided along beside the beautiful Island of Orleans. To all his threats, prayers and entreaties to be landed, Gamache lent a deaf ear, and the unfortunate myrmidon of the law was carried off an unwilling passenger to the Island of Anticosti, where he spent the winter at the residence of Gamache, by whom he was kindly treated. In the spring he returned by one of the fishing schooners that frequent the Island, to the bosom of his disconsolate family, who had long mourned him as numbered with the dead.

Although Gamache usually trusted in the good faith of the Indians as a tribe, there were occasions when he required to be on his guard with some of its individual members. Once when left entirely alone at his house, an Indian canoe which had approached under cover of the rocks, suddenly landed at the beach close by, and a gigantic savage armed to the teeth, having disembarked, advanced rapidly and with a determined air, towards the house. Gamache knew that he would not hesitate to use force in order to obtain a supply of intoxicating liquor, and being too old to risk a hand to hand fight with such a vigorous opponent, resolved to prevent his gaining an entrance into his fortress. Planting himself at the door, carbine in hand, and with two or three pistols in his belt, "Arretz—vous stop," he shouted in his gruffest tone, but without effect on the savage, who continued to approach. "One step more and I fire," the step was taken, but ere he could take a second he fell wounded in the thigh by a ball. Having disarmed his antagonist, Gamache carried him into the house, washed and dressed his wound, and laid him on a bed. His servants on their return to the house, were not a little surprised at finding such a guest there and attended by their master with so much care. When the Indian's wound was healed, Gamache hinted to him that it was time to leave, and conducting him to the beach said, "there is your canoe, and some provisions I give you, but rascal that you are, if ever you hear that Gamache is alone, do not shew yourself here, or I shall put a ball through your head, as surely as I have already put one through your black thigh." This lesson had a salutary effect, not only upon the wounded Indian, but also on the other rovers of his tribe.

This instance of rough treatment, however, was an exception to the uniform kindness with which he received strangers when he did not suspect their intentions to be of a hostile nature, but he sometimes took pleasure in inspiring a salutary dread as he termed it, in those who appeared to fear him. During a fearful gale, a young pilot was once driven in desperation as his only chance of escape, to take shelter in the Bay of Gamache. He had heard the thousand and one tales of this redoubtable person, and nothing but the certainty of destruction had he remained longer at sea, could have induced him thus to venture into the very den of the lion. After casting anchor, he would gladly have remained on board of his schooner, but Gamache making his appearance, invited him to the shore, and he thought it the best policy to affect a confidence he was far from feeling. After some delay, he landed, and with many misgivings followed Gamache to the house, where his host welcomed him, and proposed that while his wife was preparing supper his guest should entertain him with the news of what was going on in the world, which he had not heard for some time. The first look which the young man gave to the walls hung with arms from the floor to the ceiling, sent a chill to his heart; he could have wished himself again on board his schooner tossed by the wildest storm, but alas! he was snared without the possibility of escape. The supper and the evening passed with apparent gaiety, and the young pilot exerted himself to amuse his host by telling his best stories. At length after a profusion of thanks, he rose to return to the schooner for the night. "No, no! my friend," said Gamache, "you must not leave here, the sea is rough, and the night is cold and wet, and you need not go on board since you cannot leave the bay. I have a snug corner up stairs, and to-morrow you may leave if you are still alive." The last words, he muttered just loud enough to be heard, and the terrified stranger was shewn to his room. "You may sleep as long and soundly as you please; your bed is soft for it is made of the down of birds, I myself have killed. I am a good shot, I never miss my mark when I fire." The door was closed and fastened outside, so there was no escape by that quarter; the barred windows also helped to shut out hope. His prayers that night were longer than usual; he wished to remain awake that he might be prepared to defend himself in case of attack. He threw himself on the bed resolved not to close an eye, but overcome by fatigue and excitement of the day,