

RED SNOW ON GRAND PRÉ

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II.¹

The Night Attack

THAT Fortune, the fickle goddess, aids the daring, was a proverb even in the time of the Romans, and once more it proved true. At the very blackest hour, the French had an unexpected stroke of marvellous luck. Their coming struck terror to the village of Gasper-eau. The sudden apparition of three hundred fighting men, in mid-winter, at night, in the fierce storm, without a word of warning, as if they had dropped from the clouds, was a portent. The gaunt, unshaven, cold-pinched faces, the feathers and war-paint of the savages, their wild attire, were terrifying. Particularly disturbing was their arrival at Melançons, where a wedding feast was in progress. The music and dancing ceased on the instant, but the revellers were soon reassured by the familiar accents of their own speech. When they learned the reason for the invasion, they gave their deliverers a royal welcome.

Roaring fires were built in the open hearths before which the half-frozen men warmed themselves and dried their wet clothing. The *habitants* fed the soldiers. Zédore Gould, as an old man, remembered the Melançon girls handing round black bread and cheese, and hard cider, a satisfying ration for exhausted men. Two hogsheads of cider laid down in the fall were emptied that night.

But still better was the luck of Coulon and his braves. Amongst the wedding guests were several men from Grand Pré itself, who volunteered to act as guides. They knew exactly where every section of Noble's force was lodged, where the officers were quartered, and where the men. Coulon assembled all his officers at his quarters to mature the plan of attack. No doubt some rough sketch of Grand Pré was drafted and eagerly studied, as they questioned the homespun *habitants* from the village. Obviously it was impossible to attack all the twenty-four houses at once, though that would be the ideal plan, if the French were in adequate force. The alternative was to assault the strong points where the Baston-

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nais officers lay, and that was the plan adopted. Every French officer knew definitely what house he was to attack before the ten sections set out in the darkness with their guides. They had reached Gaspereau at nine o'clock; they did not move until half-past two.

Before they started, there was a brief impressive ceremony. By command, all rallied round the regimental colours before their general's quarters, and there in the darkness and the driving snow the almoner, Père Germain, pronounced the general absolution, as given to men in immediate peril of death:

Absolvo vos de peccatis vestris, in nomine Patris, Filii et sancti Spiritus, Amen.

Then Coulon with his guides, his tiny staff and his fifty men, their bayonets fixed, muskets primed and loaded, led off on the trail to Grand Pré. The vanguard was to attack the Stone House (*maison de pierres*) where the English had their cannon. It was a large building, capable of taking in three hundred and fifty men, and probably an ordnance store not far from the *Vieux Logis*, or Old Fort by the water-side where the two vessels were laid up.

The Stone House had been Noble's headquarters, until just the night before, when, in an evil hour for himself, he shifted into the house next door. This vanished building was the centre of the struggle just about to begin.

A night attack is always chancy. In spite of all forethought and planning, some confusion occurred at the very outset. Although the Acadian guide assured Coulon he knew the road well, he led the vanguard not to the Stone House, but to the one which Lotbinière was to attack. The sentry was on the alert. In the thick darkness and the driving snow, he discerned a vague mass and challenged: "Who goes there? To arms!"

The guard were also on the alert and turned out promptly, showing themselves in the light of the opened door. Without a sound, the French threw themselves face downward in the snow, unperceived, though only thirty paces away. The guard treated it as a false alarm, and Coulon's band rose up again to attack the Stone House. But the wide-awake and now suspicious sentry again challenged:

"Who goes there? To arms!"

Again the door opened, and the French saw men arming in all haste. Coulon hesitated. Beaujeu at his elbow touched him, and Coulon communicated his hesitation to his second in command, who whispered back that there was no passing now. Without

reply, Coulon dashed at the open door, sword in hand, and "we followed." The guard stood ready, their volley crashed, and three bullets found their billet. Coulon fell. Beaujeu ran the sentry through. He saw his leader fall, dead, as he thought, but he dragged himself out of the mellay. Before the guard could reload, the French were upon them, and in six or seven minutes they were masters of the first post. Twenty-one English lay dead, and three were prisoners. But Coulon's left arm was terribly shattered; he died of the effects three years later, in spite of a voyage to France for treatment. Young Lusignan was shot through the right shoulder and the left thigh. The bone was shattered, and he was a cripple for life.

The command of the party fell to Beaujeu. He detailed men to carry the two wounded officers back to Gaspereau, which must have been a sore journey for the bearers and their suffering burdens. Then Lotbinière came up with his party, according to plan. The two bands joined and moved towards the nearest flashes and reports. By this time the alarm must have been general throughout Grand Pré. The crackle of musketry, the war-whoops of the Indians, the crash of axes on wooden doors sounded above the storm. Doomed men were roused from their deepest sleep to encounter hostile faces and deadly weapons.

Beaujeu and Lotbinière found Marin in the dark. He and his Indians had been repulsed from the house they attacked, with a loss of one killed and three wounded, and now the red men hung back. In hurried conference with his brother officers, Beaujeu proposed setting the place on fire; but the hazard was too great. The guard was strong and had time to barricade the doors, which stood up against all the blows of the French axes, and the English were firing smartly from the second storey. This was too hard a nut to crack.

Meanwhile La Corne and his forty attacked Noble's headquarters. The sentry was killed and the door broken down. Noble sprang from his bed in his shirt, seized sword and pistol, and rushed at his foes. He received two flesh wounds. The French offered him quarter, as his soldier servant testified, but he would not listen. A musket bullet through the brain stretched him dead. He went down, as many an Ulsterman has died, fighting to the last against hopeless odds. "No surrender" is a war-cry well known in the Black North, and Noble was true to it. As a leader, his failure to take all precautions brought death and disaster to his command, but he fell like a soldier. "Died Abner as a fool dieth?"

Over his body the French rushed, killing Ensign Francis Noble, and severely wounding the Commissary How. This house La Corne held to the end. The Stone House was not attacked at all.

Somewhere outside in the darkness, Beaujeu, Marin and Lotbinière were trying to decide what to do next. Their Acadian guides had vanished. Vague bodies of men were dimly seen in motion, but whether friend or foe could not be determined. Most of the French had lost their snow-shoes. The storm had lasted thirty hours, and the light snow was nearly four feet deep. Progress in any direction was well nigh impossible. What was their best course?

Some one suggested attacking *Vieux Logis* where the two English vessels were, to capture them, or reinforce the detachments of de la Colombière and Boishèbert, in case they were not successful in their attack on this point. Slowly, miserably, Beaujeu and Lotbinière led their men through the deep snow to *Vieux Logis*. By this time it was broad daylight. Rejoining de la Colombière and Boishèbert, they had the satisfaction of learning that both these officers had carried the houses assigned to them, with a total loss of only three wounded. The four united detachments soon overcame the guard placed over the two vessels. There were only ten English all told, chiefly officers; the French were eight or nine to one, and the fight, if there was a fight, did not last long. With a touch of humor, Beaujeu notes, "As this capture was extremely interesting for the enemy, we thought surely that we would be attacked."

Beaujeu estimated rightly the importance of carrying this point. It was the deciding move in what might otherwise have been a drawn game. For these two vessels contained not only the frames of the block-houses, which should have been in place and were not, but also large reserves of ammunition, 800 pounds of powder, and the same amount of ball. Of even greater value were the hundreds of pairs of snow-shoes which had not been unpacked. But most of the provisions had been unloaded. The French consolidated their position, and made ready for two contingencies, to resist an attack, or, if overwhelmed by superior numbers, to burn the vessels and all that they contained. Cut off at *Vieux Logis*, these detachments knew nothing about what was happening elsewhere in the field. They did not know whether they had won or lost. Therefore Beaujeu detached Marin to find the Chevalier de La Corne, to report what they had done and await further orders. Marin was now without a command. His Indians and Bailleul's had plundered the slain, and vanished on the trail to their villages laden with spoil.

Two hours later the indefatigable Marin was back with cheering news. The English survivors were concentrated in the Stone House, but La Corne was holding them in check,—“blocked”—from the nearest strong-point. The detachments of Villemonde, Gaspè, Bailleul and Repentigny had all been successful in carrying the houses assigned to them. Indeed Repentigny had attacked three houses and taken two. Now they were all reinforcing La Corne. Beaujeu's orders were to rejoin his commander with his detachment, along with Lotbinière's, leaving de la Colombière and Boishèbert to guard the vessels and their prisoners.

Beaujeu started at once with the two parties. As he plodded back through the snow, he had time to reflect that, in order to reach his commanding officer, he and his men would have to pass the strongly held Stone House in broad daylight at close range. He was, in fact, briskly fusilladed, but none of the 200 shots got home; he won past, and brought up his reinforcements as ordered.

As yet the issue was uncertain; the battle was not decided. The French held two points, Noble's headquarters and *Vieux Logis*, but their numbers were much reduced. The fifty savages had disappeared. There were twenty-two dead and wounded. It is doubtful if La Corne had two hundred effectives with him in the house. He believed that he held the English “blocked,” but he could not storm the Stone House, or burn it or besiege it. If the English merely held out, the French were bound to retreat, and a retreat might mean disaster. La Corne's policy was watchful waiting.

The situation of the Bastonnais was also difficult. Seven of their lodgings had been taken, but three had beaten off their assailants, and ten had not even been attacked. On Noble's death, the command had devolved on Captain Benjamin Goldthwaite, who had been his subordinate at the siege of Louisbourg. Either by his orders, or by natural instinct, the different detachments throughout the straggling village had found their way to the Stone House, unmolested by the French. The English garrison amounted to three hundred and fifty officers and men. Bitter must have been Goldthwaite's reflections that winter morning. If the block-houses had been set up,—if the guns had been mounted,—if the kegs of powder and ball had been landed from the vessels,—if the snow-shoes had been issued,—if the *habitants'* warning had been heeded that the French would surely come—if—if—

Some time in the morning of the eleventh, Goldthwaite did attempt a feeble counter-stroke. Two hundred New Englanders sallied from the Stone House, but they did not get far. The light snow

was up to their arm-pits. They could not use their weapons; they could hardly move. There were only eighteen pairs of snowshoes for the entire force. The others, alas! were in the vessels at *Vieux Logis*. So they went back into the Stone House. Goldthwaite apparently had no other plan. At all events, he made no further hostile gesture.

Desultory firing between the two houses lasted all morning, and then came a lull in hostilities. But the British flag still flew in the snow-storm over the Stone House.

In La Corne's crowded quarters was Commissary Edward How, sorely wounded in the arm, and bleeding to death for lack of surgical aid. The French were notably humane to their prisoners and wounded foes, and they liked How. Beaujeu calls him a resolute man (*homme ferme*), but he was growing weak from loss of blood. Surgeon Jus was busy with his own wounded at Gaspereau, and How asked La Corne to allow the English surgeon next door to come to his aid. After consulting his officers, the French commander agreed. How was able to write a note which Marin took over with a white flag. He was met before the door of the Stone House where his eyes were bandaged. At once Goldthwaite sent over his senior surgeon, retaining Marin as a hostage. After or during the treatment which saved How's life, for the time being, though he was to die by Indian treachery on the banks of the Missaquash five years later, Captain Preble asked for a suspension of arms. Goldthwaite, in his very brief and unsatisfactory account of the affair, says that the French asked for the armistice. That is the truth, but not the whole truth. Beaujeu, recording events as they happened, from day to day, says that La Corne would not undertake the responsibility of granting the armistice, and sent a written dispatch to his sorely wounded superior officer at Gaspereau. Coulon's reply was that in his condition he could not give his mind to any business, but as La Corne had good officers, he could trust them to decide what course would most befit the honour of the service. Meanwhile, the New England envoy was politely kept waiting, in order that he might reflect on the ease or difficulty of obtaining terms. The Canadians were near the breaking point. Three days of marching on empty stomachs, with all the hard fighting at the end, made the council-of-war willing enough to meet the Bastonnais half way. But they were too astute to let their eagerness appear. They agreed to continue the truce until nine o'clock next morning, though they would sleep on their arms to prevent a surprise. But the fighting was over. After the storm came the lull.

III.

Aftermath.

In all war, great or small, tenacity of purpose counts for much; it is often the deciding factor in the struggle. More than once the flag has been hauled down over the fort just as the head of the relieving column came in sight. If Goldthwaite had only known how small was the force opposed to him and how dire were La Corne's straits, he might have even now turned defeat into victory. He might have made paths through the snow, and smothered him with numbers in a night attack. If his powder and ball were running low, he might have bombed out La Corne with hand-grenades. He had a huge quantity of them. Or simply by tightening their belts and doggedly holding on, just a little longer, the New Englanders might have forced the Canadians to withdraw in a disastrous retreat. It is easy for the arm-chair strategist to be wise two centuries after the event.

On the morning of the twelfth, the New Englanders were observed to be taking advantage of the truce to strengthen their position, to bring in provisions and to round up the villagers' cattle. La Corne sent out Mercier with a sharp message to the English commander. He was breaking the terms; the period agreed on for suspension of hostilities had expired; each side therefore was now free to take whatever measures seemed best to each. As for La Corne, he knew what he proposed to do. Immediately Preble came back with Mercier and another officer, as interpreter, under a flag of truce, to assure La Corne that the men had gone out merely to get water from the brook near by. Preble proposed terms of capitulation. They seemed vague to La Corne, who more than hinted that matters of such moment were worth the trouble of putting in writing. Whereupon Preble produced a paper proposing: first, that the prisoners of war and the two vessels be restored; second, that all plunder be given back; third, the New Englanders were to be free to proceed to Annapolis Royal with the honours of war, with a pound of powder and ball per man, and six days rations in their haversacks, leaving all artillery, munitions of war, provisions, etc. to the victors.

Once more, La Corne would not assume responsibility. Once more he had to consult his superior officer, and he sent Montigny to Coulon at Gaspereau three-quarters of a league away with the terms and a written statement of what had happened. And he asked for orders. Coulon sent back Montigny with a verbal

message; he would approve whatever action La Corne decided to take. Whereupon La Corne called his officers together for counsel. The New Englanders' terms were revised, and expanded from three articles to six. They may be found set out with French precision in the pages of Murdoch. La Corne refused to give up the two vessels or the prisoners of war. Nor could the private pillage be returned, because the Indians had made off with it. Only the savages had been guilty of plundering. The sick and wounded of the Bastonnais were to be treated at River des Canards until they were cured and fit to be transferred to Annapolis Royal. While recovering, they were to have the services of an English surgeon. Honours of war were granted. The only condition felt to be severe was the promise not to bear arms up the Bay for six months from date. It was severe, because the New Englanders' plan was to move on Beauséjour in the spring. Grand Pré was their advanced base. Then, as soon as all the officers signed the articles of capitulation, French and English became, to all appearance, the best of friends.

Goldthwaite asked for carts to carry off the dead to burial, a request which La Corne instantly granted. He also detailed twelve men and two sergeants to act as a guard to the burial party. The afternoon of the twelfth was spent in the grim task of collecting the bloody, frozen corpses from the different houses or from the red, trampled snow outside, and interring them in a common trench. Hard and long must have been the toil of clearing away the snow, and of delving into the frozen ground. And there were many to bury. Beaujeu went over the figures with Commissary How. According to his report, the New England strength at Grand Pré when the fight began was 525, officers and men, exclusive of the party of twenty-five under Phillips and Goreham. When the English passed out of the Stone House, two by two, Beaujeu and the rest counted the files, and the total was 175, or 350 men all told. This seems to make his estimate of the English losses fairly correct; he sets them at 130 killed, 15 wounded, and 50 prisoners, which represents roughly the difference between 525 and 350. This was the bloodiest battle that ever took place in Acadie. The New Englanders lost more than thirty-seven per cent of their force, and out of the total number of fighting men engaged on both sides more than twenty-six per cent were put *hors de combat*. The military object of the expedition was accomplished; the Bastonnais were forced out of Grand Pré.

Beaujeu has fair excuse for preening himself on the Canadians' success. The Noble brothers were buried by themselves between two apple trees; the Canadians accorded full military honours, and

fired the customary volleys over their grave. Its place is still pointed out to the curious traveller.

On the stormy thirteenth of February, the New Englanders offered to evacuate the Stone House; but this was not practicable. To redistribute them in their old disordered billets for a few hours was not worth while, and the Canadians must have been very busy equipping and furnishing their late enemies with what was needful for their march back to Annapolis Royal. For one thing, they must have unpacked the New Englanders' snow-shoes in the vessels and served them out. Otherwise, no march through that thirty hour snow-fall were possible. Probably the Bastonnais made up their own packets of six days rations per man, and the regulation one pound issue of powder and ball.

And now that vanished Stone House was the scene of the strangest episode in all its history. The good feeling, which Beaujeu noted as manifesting itself as soon as the capitulation was signed, took this remarkable shape. Captain Goldthwaite and his officers composed a formal and courteous invitation to the Chevalier de La Corne and officers of His Most Christian Majesty's forces at Grand Pré, requesting the pleasure of their company to dinner in order to make their acquaintance over a bowl of punch, (*en buvant le ponche*). And the invitation was as courteously accepted. It must have been a busy morning for cooks and officers' servants. Luxuries were few, but no doubt the New Englanders offered their best to their strange guests, and even coarse food is more palatable if washed down with good drink. The basis of the punch was doubtless Medford rum, the only tippie of the New England Puritans. Lime juice might be substituted for lemons; sugar was no doubt available, and possibly nutmegs to give the requisite spicy flavor. Hot water would not be a problem; but the question arises—Did the Bastonnais carry a regular punch-bowl with them into the wilderness? Perhaps a camp-kettle did duty for the orthodox china dish. It must surely have been of ample size to meet the needs of twenty-nine fighting men fraternizing after such a fight.

Imagination would fain linger over that remarkable feast. The rough mess-room, the rude table, the roaring fire of logs in the huge fireplace, were ready for the strange guests by mid-day. No doubt the Canadians came as a body, shaved and spruced up, with their weather-worn uniforms and equipment made as smart as possible. No doubt the New Englanders met them as a body, and no doubt there were formal presentations, with graceful French reverences and less courtly New England bows. Broken French and broken English were made intelligible by good will on both sides.

It seems hardly possible that, in the Age of Ceremony, etiquette and precedence were disregarded. One pictures Goldthwaite taking the head of the table, and seating La Corne in the place of honour at his right, and the late enemies sandwiched in together in strict accordance with their military rank. As the dinner proceeded and the punch circulated, good understanding prevailed over differences in race, speech, religion, national antagonisms, aims and interests. The Bastonnais learned much about their guests. Hitherto they had believed that Canadians were only another breed of wild Indians, with hardly any sentiment of humanity. They were surprised to find their late enemies should treat them so politely after the action, and they were particularly taken with the Canadians' care to soften, as much as possible, the lot of the prisoners. There were forty sick and wounded among them, and they had been the subject of a special article in the terms of capitulation. The Canadians' polished manners also impressed the New Englanders. The main theme of conversation must have been well-nigh inexhaustible. New Englanders' native curiosity must have prompted endless questions as to how it was done. How was it possible for such a force to conquer the wilderness and effect such a surprise? There must have been a babble of enquiry and explanation in broken English and broken French, while the punch circulated and was brewed again and again. The Bastonnais paid their foes many compliments, (*force compliments*), notes Beaujeu, on their skill in making war. Surely they were well deserved. It was a most successful dinner-party.

An unforeseen interruption to the festivities was the arrival of the deputies from all the parishes of Minas to congratulate La Corne and his officers on their victory. The scene would engage an historical painter, this visit of the "most ancient" men, the home-spun Acadian farmers in the mess-room where friend and foe were mingled. The deputies recalled recent boastings of the New Englanders, how they would thrash (*étriller*) the Canadians, who might count themselves very lucky if they escaped their blows. Boasting is distasteful to the gods, and it is sure to be punished. Here is a measure of poetic justice much relished by Beaujeu. Let us hope that the New Englanders did not understand the deputies' French too well.

Once more, Captain Goldthwaite's party was a pronounced success. No one wished to leave. Dinner and *le ponche* were prolonged throughout the afternoon and onward, until supper time. And guests and hosts supped together. There is no mention made of when the party broke up, but, at last, the Canadians took their

ceremonious leave, no doubt with many thanks and *force compliments* for their entertainment.

This was not the last such dinner-party in Acadie. When Monckton and his red-coats took Beauséjour on June 16, 1755, the stuttering commandant Duchambon de Vergor entertained the victors at supper. He was the son of the Duchambon who lost Louisbourg to the Bastonnais in '45; he was a special friend of polite, little, pimply-faced Intendant Bigot; and it was he whom Wolfe's soldiers surprised at the top of the cliff on the fateful thirteenth of September, 1759, and shot in the heel. Details of his supper party in the battered fort of Beauséjour have not been handed down, but round his hospitable board met two men who had been together at Captain Goldthwaite's dinner eight years before, Major Preble, suffering from a slight wound in the shoulder, and Pierre Canut de Bailleul, who had distinguished himself greatly in the siege, and thereby won his promotion.

St. Valentine's Day saw the final scene.

At eight o'clock in the morning, Beaujeu reported to Villemonde with one hundred men, whom he formed in two "hedges" (*haies*) outside the main door of the Stone House for the final ceremony. He informed Captain Goldthwaite that he was ready to take possession. To Beaujeu the New England commissary turned over all the munitions and stores, after which the commandant ordered the flag to be hauled down and handed over to the Canadians. The order to march was given, and through the doorway, two by two, came the survivors of Noble's command, along the lane made by the two blue-coated "hedges", with shouldered arms. Each of the New Englanders carried his pound of powder and ball as well as his arms, and six days provisions in his haversack. Including officers, they numbered three hundred and fifty. The Chevalier de La Corne was naturally present as the French chief officer commanding. As Goldthwaite, Preble and two other officers passed him, they asked for some breakfast, which was granted gaily (*ce qui se fit d'une facon fort guay*). La Corne also detached Marin and Mercier to go with the New Englanders as escort as far as River Canard, in order to make sure they would get what they needed from the *habitants*.

So the three hundred and fifty, defeated, but not cast down, by the fortune of war, plodded off on their snow-shoes through a white world between North Mountain and South, along the well worn trail to Annapolis Royal.