

# AN OLD QUEBEC MANOR HOUSE

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IT is a wise old saying that a man can be fairly well judged by the company that he keeps, and consequently the books with which he stocks his library will inevitably reveal a great deal to us concerning his tastes, ideals and aspirations. From the shelves of a library the wise and learned, the great and good of the past speak to us and enable us to enjoy the society of "the goodliest company whereof the world holds record". An old library casts its own peculiar spell upon us, and breathes its own atmosphere of fascinating charm.

French Quebec has about it a glamour of romance that comparatively few people outside that province fully realize. The spirit of the old French régime lingers in the valleys of the St. Lawrence and of the Richelieu, so that from time to time we are permitted to get a glimpse of the fading light that illuminated Quebec in the past and is now fast disappearing from the picture. Professor Call in his charming book, *The Spell of French Canada*, has done much to preserve the tints of that light, and to give it fixity on the canvas of his work before it has quite passed away. It was therefore with real enthusiasm and eager anticipation that I improved the opportunity of exploring an old manor house library in Quebec a few years ago.

The family that built up this library and profited by its rare accumulation of thought and influence is an old one, tracing its ancestry back to Aichelberg, Germany, in 1550, when the head of the family at that time was married to Anna Luther, a sister of Martin Luther. A member of the family who was born in Wurtemberg in 1760 came to Canada, and married a Dutch woman who lived at Ticonderoga. Her family remained loyal to British connections, their property was confiscated after the American Revolutionary war, and they came to Canada. The seigniories of "De Guire" and "Bourg Marie" were acquired near the St. Lawrence, and only a few miles from Fort William Henry at the mouth of the Richelieu river. A considerable amount of money had been accumulated through successful commercial operations in Quebec city, and consequently the family was in possession of sufficient means to equip the newly acquired seigniorial home with everything that went to the making up of a prosperous little community in

those old seigniorial days. Of course there was the manor house, the mill, the cottages for tenants, the stately equipage in which the seignior journeyed to participate in social functions in Montreal, while the grounds were converted into a veritable park in which could be found all the features of rural life at that time, from the outdoor oven to the old cannon with which the royal salute was fired on national holidays. The country is level, the soil rich, and on every side the primeval forest stretched away across the plains that border the St. Lawrence river on the south. In this setting, surrounded on all sides by a solid French Canadian peasantry, our library was gradually built up.

As I approached the twenty-six cases in which the books were packed and asked each case to tell me its portion of the story of the past, many voices seemed to speak to me of the appreciation which they had received from those who had been so constantly in their company. One is not surprised to learn that in the old seigniorial days this family was well and widely known for its ripe scholarship, wide culture, and the dignity and grace of its members. One realizes the comparative isolation of such a family in the first quarter of the last century; one contrasts its social opportunities and cultural advantages with those which we are supposed to enjoy to-day, and one wonders to what extent sustained study and reading and a general grasp of world literature and politics were considered possible or essential in those pioneer days of Canada. Well, these cases of books tell an eloquent story.

No sooner is the first case open than one begins to realize the range and variety of the collection. The books had evidently been taken at random from their old home on the shelves, and piled promiscuously into cases without any regard for sets; consequently they are mixed together, and what a mixture! School and college text books that cover the classics, mathematics and science, with an especially wide range in modern languages! Excellent lexicons of Greek, Latin, Italian, Spanish and German are there, and beautiful old sets in solid leather of Corneille, Molière, Madame de Sevigné, Beaumarchais, Racine and Lesage, as well as Italian, German and Spanish classics. There are the works of Hippolyte Taine, the hundredth anniversary of whose birth is being celebrated in France this year and whose critical work on *The History of English Literature* was so widely read and almost universally extolled. One wonders just how the people in this old manor house regarded his rather depreciating views on Milton, his under-rating of Dickens, and his estimate that Tennyson's *In Memoriam* is a mechanical and artificial expression of grief. In any case the book is there, and

well worn from study. After the representatives of English literature had been gathered together, it was seen that they covered an amazingly wide range. First among them let us place the 1824 edition of Samuel Johnson's works edited by Murphy, and the ninth edition of Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, published in 1822. Laurence Sterne's complete works (1802) in seven volumes are there, as well as four dainty little volumes entitled *The Spirit of the British Essayists* which give us the cream of the works of Addison, Steele, Goldsmith, Hawkesworth and others. Modern British essayists are represented by Carlyle, Macaulay, Jeffrey and others, while Dryden, Pope, Shakespeare and other poets are found in the collection. In history we have Rolland, Smollett, Gibbon and Macaulay, while there are whole libraries of books on travel.

The stream of time seems to flow by us as we pour out the treasures with which these cases are filled. Here are bound volumes of *Harper's Magazine* and Littell's *Living Age* continuously covering many years of publication, while bound volumes of Canadian publications, one of which was edited by a member of the family for several years, enrich the collection. Canadian history is told by Christie and others; rare old steel engravings picture historic places, and the whole collection breathes a taste for the highest and best available. American reprints of the current literature that was appearing in England during this period nestle alongside their neighbours, while music and art are represented by the masters of that time. What perhaps strikes the explorer as forcibly as anything else in the collection is the considerable number of works on social customs, deportment and conventions. A beautiful four-volume set of Lord Chesterfield's *Letters to his Son*, with an American edition adapting the advice of these in a smaller volume, and many other such works reveal to us the eagerness of the best people of those rare days to conform to the highest standards of genteel deportment in society. In coming across these wonderful volumes, one cannot but feel that one has tapped a rich vein of ambition that is in danger of being lost to-day. Students of such books as they come from the atmosphere of dignity, modesty and reserve which pervade these works could not but be shocked by the rowdyism, jazz, raucous laughter, boisterous familiarity and ungraceful deportment of many even in the better classes of society to-day. What a contrast is suggested! Does the picture of easy grace, dignity, modesty and reserve which such books call up reveal nothing to us of what we are in danger of losing in modern social life? Dinner parties with elbows on the table, cigarette ashes scattered on the mahogany and rugs, ball rooms from which modesty and grace have been

banished, and a form of address from which even such terms as "Mr." and "Miss" have almost disappeared! Truly "Familiarity breeds contempt", and the atmosphere of to-day is in such contrast with that of the past that contempt seems to be almost brazenly declared for the gentility and grace which these books suggest.

But we have not done when we have reviewed the contents of the library in the departments of literature, art, music, history, travel, etc., for here is a whole collection of books telling us of an absorbing interest in spiritual things, and of the way in which religion bulked large in this old Quebec manor house. There are several volumes for Sunday reading such as *The Sunday at Home*, with a collection of religious books by such divines as Paley, Tillotson, Blair, Caird and Mountain, and a rare old copy of Light-foot's *The Temple*, printed in 1650, stands out among the treasures. It is hardly necessary to enter into a more detailed description of this library, or to enumerate any more of the works which filled the twenty-six cases before us. Let us take a look into that old library on some evening about the middle of the last century, when the head of the house and his good wife, who was a member of the Campbell clan, are spending their evening. An octogenarian daughter of the manor house has drawn the curtain a little bit for me, and reveals in her father a student, a lover and a reader of books. He is remembered as a typical gentleman with fragile figure, giving the appearance of height and a fine intellectual face. As he sits in the drawing-room of the old seigniorial home, beside his round mahogany table laden with books lit up by a pair of candles in tall brass candle-sticks, his wife plays a musical instrument and sings to him while he joins in the music with his violin, for he was an accomplished musician. Only one candle has been burning for the musical portion of the evening, and then comes the luxury of lighting a second candle by means of which he reads aloud to his wife and any other member of the family who wishes to listen while she is occupied with some form of the continuous needle-work so necessary in those old days. One is not at all surprised, as he follows the career of the members of the family that was privileged to live in the atmosphere suggested by these old books. It is almost inevitable that we should find its members shining as they do at the bar, in parliament, on the bench, in the Speaker's chair of a legislative assembly, in engineering, in teaching and in the sacred ministry. It is not surprising either that the daughters of the manor house should have been the veritable embodiments of that grace and modesty, that dignity and charm which these books suggest to us.

One would love to dwell upon the life that centred around this old manor house, and the influence of its culture upon all sorts and conditions of people who came under its spell. A charming story has been told of the marriage of the overseer and head gardener who had served his time in the British Army, and who could not speak a word of French, to a French Canadian serving-maid by the name of Constance who spoke no English! It was accompanied by all the usual festivities at a French Canadian wedding, over which the lord of the manor presided with a dignity that can easily be imagined. Then one thinks of the gathering of the tenants for a midnight celebration on New Year's Eve. They assemble from all quarters of the snow-clad countryside, raise the flag on a tall flag pole, fire a salute on the old cannon, join in a chorus of Happy New Year greetings, and disperse only after refreshments consisting of gingerbread, doughnuts, raspberry vinegar, coffee and buns have been served. Understanding of a high order existed between the lord of the manor and his tenants; the French Canadian peasantry felt under no restraint, but found full scope for all that natural merriment and simple pleasure which still characterizes them as they join in the chorus of their old folk songs or listen to a *conteur* reciting the folk tales which stirred their wonder sense and fired their imagination. Is it an overstatement that the strength, solidarity and stability of the old province of Quebec is due largely to what we find so fully represented in this old manor house library? Here we find a blending of the culture and thought of many races. On the side of the mistress of the manor house in these days of which we are thinking stands the sturdy Scotch stock which was such a factor in the development along the St. Lawrence during the last century. To-day numerous families bearing Scottish names such as Fraser, Stuart, Ross, Campbell and Macdonald, who speak only French, are to be found scattered throughout the province of Quebec, but more particularly along the Lower St. Lawrence. They are thorough French Canadians,—a splendid people who combine the physical and mental attributes of two great races:

For there is something strong and something true  
In the wind where the sprig of heather is blown;  
And something great in the blood so blue,  
That makes him stand, like a man, alone.

Yea, give him the road and loose him free,  
He sets his teeth to the fiercest blast;  
For there's never a toil in a far countrie,  
But a Scotsman tackles it hard and fast.

As the old library gathers from every quarter of human thought and culture, so the Scot and the Teuton, the English and the Celt are blended in the stock of old Quebec to-day. Our old library helps us to realize this fact.

Another fact presses upon me for consideration here, and it has to do with the contrast that exists between the homes of our well-to-do Canadian people to-day and the manor house of which we have been thinking. In the average home of this class to-day, libraries are not being built up. One finds few of the standard works in such departments as we discovered in our old library; and while in the old days there were standard magazines that were considered worth binding and preserving, there are few to-day that one does not feel should be handled only with rubber gloves and put out of sight when the children come into the room. In contrast with the dignified culture and informing literature of the past stands the hectic and salacious literature that is pouring in a demoralizing stream from the presses of to-day. All this is due to the fact that the pleasures of reading are unknown to the present generation, and that a book is no longer generally regarded as a precious treasure, a boon companion and a friend. Canadian authors are driven to United States publishers simply because no market can be found for their works in their own country. In his recent book, entitled *Experiences of a Literary Man*, Mr Stephen Gwynn says of Ireland and the Irish:—"So far as concerns the purchase of books, we are a nation of abstainers with a few drunkards; and the trait follows our people to America, where they are comparatively well off and furnish their houses with everything—except books." These words are not unfitting when applied to the people of Canada, and our Canadian Authors Association will labour in vain to create a demand for the product of Canadian authorship unless we can first revive a love for the companionship that can be found only in a library and a greater appetite for the pleasures of reading and study. An age that is in such a hurry that it has time only to cut a few of the leaves of a new book, smell the paper knife, and then form a sufficient opinion of the book to be able to exchange comments upon it over the teacups is in a rather pathetic position.

The task suggested by our old manor house library may devolve largely upon our universities and superior schools. Too often the courses laid down in the curricula of these institutions are calculated to develop a distaste for literature rather than an appreciation of the art of reading and the great satisfaction to be derived therefrom. Stereotyped courses stand for decades in the curriculum

of the university, without any anxious thought or research being given as to the attitude of the students to these courses and their effect upon their tastes and inclinations. It is a terrible abuse of the works of an author which, as Carlyle once said, "lead us to the verge of the infinite and bid us to gaze for a time into that", to wrest a small portion from its context, hurl it at the confused head of a student, and expect him to acquire therefrom some appreciation of literature or some sense of the value of sustained, consecutive reading.

As we turn from the treasures that crowded the shelves of our old manor house library, we seem to hear their voices calling to us to beware of many tendencies in our modern intellectual and social life, and to seek for older paths wherein may be found a better way, in order that we may gain a deeper satisfaction from communing with the great minds of the past and profit much more by the great heritage of wealth and beauty that is available in every well stocked library.