

THE CANADIAN EXILES OF 1838

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ON the 28th day of July, 1838, H. M. Sloop-of-War *Vestal*, having sailed from Quebec twenty-one days before, arrived at the Bermudas with eight Canadians whom Lord Durham had, in an unhappy hour and without adequate authority, banished to those remote but beautiful islands for their rebellion against the Government of Canada. Their names were:—Wolfred Nelson, Bonaventure Viger, Henri Alphonse Gauvin, Rodolphe Des Rivieres, Robert Shore Bouchette, Simeon Marchessault, Toussaint Goddu and Luc Hayacinthe Masson.

Had the great but unfortunate Durham wished to furnish the subjects of his authority with a salve for their wounded feelings, he could scarcely have hit upon a better method than a summer voyage to that romantic and lovely archipelago, described by the poet Moore during his sojourn there as

A heaven for love to sigh in,
For bards to live and saints to die in.

The resulting contrasts would alone serve to keep their minds from their trouble. They went from a land of wide and silent spaces and vast natural features to a collection of islands which may be traversed on foot in a single day. They had exchanged the crisp air of the North for the languorous breezes of a land where "it seemeth always afternoon." Instead of the turbulence and excitement of the recent past, they found themselves in a community which, during the three hundred years of its history, has not known a popular agitation, of whose leisureliness Mark Twain has said that even sudden deaths are unknown.

Regarding this disposal of the leaders of the Rebellion, Lord Durham said that the Constitution of Canada was suspended and that his power was absolute. There can be no doubt, however, that whatever authority he possessed in Canada, that authority did not extend to the forcing of State prisoners upon a country over which he possessed no jurisdiction. It was a matter which caused quite a stir in the Imperial Parliament, and was the subject of a full-dress debate. The Attorney-General held that the ordinance under which Durham punished the eight delinquents was legal in every respect except that of transportation to Bermuda.

The Lord Chief Justice considered the ordinance illegal in every respect except that one, and on that he had doubts. It was, therefore, solely by grace of the Governor of Bermuda, Sir S. R. Chapman, and his Council, which was specially convened to consider the case, that the exiles were permitted to land.

Governor Chapman was, in fact, in a difficult position, since he possessed no power to detain the visitors, and must have been an unwilling host to unwelcome guests. He could have sent them packing back to Canada and might, indeed, have done so, but the threat of being hanged if they returned awaited them, and Durham was a man of his word. The Governor adopted the wisest course and put the exiles on their parole of honour, limiting their movements, however, to a part of the main Island.

Official opinion in a Crown-colony is generally sympathetically reflected by the press, and the prisoners were reminded by one of the leading papers that they had much to be thankful for in the singular leniency of the Government of Bermuda, as well as the great privilege of a summer domicile in such a beautiful spot. The New York *Albion*, a newspaper which frequently commented on the rebellion in Canada, sententiously observed that public sympathy for the gentlemen sent to Bermuda for a few weeks, to drink their wine in a thirsty climate, was misplaced. It also drew attention to the contrast with the hard lot of the offenders from Upper Canada who were "sent to a penal colony, there to suffer all the hardships and degradation of convicts, while others equally guilty in the lower provinces were only sent on a party of pleasure to the Island immortalized by Shakespeare." After being detained on board ship while the Governor and Council consumed two days in getting together and ten minutes in discussing the strange predicament of themselves and their visitors, they were permitted to land.

Whether it was the intention of the ill-fated Durham to make the banishment of these gentlemen "a party of pleasure" or not, they proceeded without delay, in so far as they were able, to make it one for themselves. They rented a cottage on the top of a hill overlooking the town and harbour of Hamilton. This cottage, like the majority of houses in Bermuda, is built of the coral stone out of which the Islands themselves are formed, and is to-day in use as a dwelling house. It has long borne the significant and touching name of "Exile Cottage."

Three of the party, Nelson, Gauvin and Viger, were medical doctors. Strangely enough, they received no subsistence either from the Government that banished them or from the one that held them prisoners. They were, indeed, allowed to follow their vocations,

and the doctors of the party found immediate employment. This, however, proved more constant than remunerative, and the kindness and skill with which they treated their patients, especially those of the poorer classes, soon brought them into favour with the people. Among many stories of their sojourn which are not sufficiently corroborated to permit of publication, the tradition of their kindness to the poor and the sick remains undenied and lasting. Their medical skill, however, was not their only source of interest. It seems that they all possessed some knowledge of music, and were able to perform with skill on the flute, violin and harp. By this means they not only entertained themselves, but made their cottage a centre of attraction. Many a night the plaintive *chansons*, with which their fellow countrymen were accustomed to lighten the labours of rapid and portage, floated out into the unfamiliar brilliance of the southern night and were listened to by crowds of music-loving natives. The intense and almost feverish loyalty of the Bermudian, dependent for his national spirit upon English connection, showed itself in a feeling of hostility to the strangers, so that the doors of the official class and their imitators were closed to them. One of these, however, remarked that though his loyalty compelled him to shut his doors to their persons, he could not shut his windows to their charming music.

Other more independent citizens were very hospitable to the visitors, so that they obtained in time the entrée to the homes of many prominent civilians where, owing to their conversational and musical gifts, they always found themselves welcome. Stories of their fondness for music and the dance, and of the gay and spirited life they enjoyed are preserved, though with considerable apocryphal detail. Tender sentiments penned under the spell of such occasions in their fair friends' albums are still in existence, and are treasured with great care by the descendants of those whose charms they celebrate.

They felt most at home, however, in the family of a certain Professor Grisset, a gentleman who was induced to change France for Bermuda in order to teach the French language in a school which flourished in the colony for several years. Under his hospitable roof they felt free to unburden their minds to those whose political principles resembled their own, and freely expressed the opinions and indulged the feelings which, for expediency's sake, they concealed in the presence of others. A son of this foreigner, a gentle and courteous old man who bears in face and manner the impress of a day long past, remembers well the frequent visits of the Canadians to his father's house. Often they would sit far into the night, and over their wine and pipes speak bitterly

of their failure to awaken a successful revolution in the Great Dominion.

Meanwhile, news of the unusual punishment had reached England, and at once became the subject of an acrimonious debate in the House of Commons where Durham had few friends and many enemies. The discussion centred about the famous ordinance under which the exiles had been banished. So forcibly was this document assailed and so clearly was its illegality exposed, that it was immediately disallowed. Upon receipt of the official despatch containing this information, Durham resigned and returned heart-broken to England to die in two years—a sad but significant reminder that Englishmen and Frenchmen are as well able to govern themselves in America as they are in Europe. News of the disallowance of the ordinance was welcomed by the impatient exiles, with feelings far different from those with which it was received by the Canadian Governor, and they immediately made ready to return to their native land.

In that day departure from Bermuda was a very different problem from what it is to-day, when departing visitors fill the Hamilton shipping offices with hideous clamour. Small brigs and schooners, engaged in the provision trade with the Virginias, afforded the usual means of travel. These came and went at uncertain intervals, with an easy disregard for time-tables. It chanced, however, that shortly after the exiles found themselves at liberty to leave, a schooner named the *Persevere* cleared at Hamilton for Alexandria, Virginia, and the happy wanderers, after some difficulty, secured passage in her. The Governor released them from their parole on the 30th of October, and the following day they bade farewell for ever to the little garden of their summer exile,—the scene of as strange and dubious a punishment as ever men received.

A large church, uplifting its towers to the clear tropical sky, proudly overtops the tiny cottage which sheltered the banished patriots. But the heart of the Canadian turns not unmoved to contemplate the home of men who risked their lives for those principles of government which he cherishes with deep and quiet pride.