

# THE BLIND FOLK SINGER

By MARIUS BARBEAU

**I**SOLATION long has invested Charlevoix in the Laurentians with a peculiar charm. The old French-Canadian villages in that mountainous district, along the St. Lawrence, north east of Quebec, are unlike anything else. Their people are quaint and 'insular' in their speech, their ways and habitations. Something about them makes one think of the Kingdom beyond the Moon of their ancient folk tales. For two hundred years they have lived by themselves, and the spell of a fairy like enchantment is not quite broken yet.

To visit them an outsider till recently had to land from a river boat with large side-wheels either at Cap-au-Diable (Devil's Cape), near the Gouffre (Whirlpool) and Baie-Saint-Paul, or at Les Eboulements, La Malbaie and Pointe-au-Pic. That was the only means of approach. And it must be done in the mild season, for the whole district was ice and snow-bound for several months every year. The winter trail over the mountains from Quebec, sixty or eighty miles long, was only fit for the Royal Mail in the sack of one of the hardest couriers in the land. Just a few beside him ever braved its hardships. A lady in the seigneur's family at Les Eboulements, who had missed the last sailing ship, is known to have perished, one late autumn, while on her way over the hills towards Cap-Tourmente. One relay, on a bleak slope two thousand feet high, broke the journey, and the snow, part of the way, reached the tree tops. Blizzards and burning winds from the Gulf and Belle-Isle raged up the hillsides and swept the wooded summits. But sunshine in the summer changed that wilderness into a paradise for flowers and wild life.

When I first landed from the wheel-boat at Les Eboulements, fifteen years ago, my secret wish was at last fulfilled. For I had heard of this place since my school days. It was like venturing into the haunts of Merlin, whose fame as a wizard was familiar like barley-bread, or of Petit-Jean, the giant-killer of ancient folk tales. I had come to collect tales and songs and had

been promised a rich reward. The Lorette folk had told me, "My dear man, there is no place like the hills beyond Cap-Tourmente for that kind of fun. The people there still gather at night to sing folk songs and tell fairy tales. And they drink good bootleg—Jamaica, curacoa. . ."

Unlike Baie-Saint-Paul, which I had seen in a deep bay at a distance, Les Eboulements sit sideways along the shoreline. Village houses dot the road down the river; cottages on a high terrace behind glittered in their whitewash under the setting sun. At the upper end of the village a peninsula jutted out, as if to meet us. The winds and the tides keep nibbling at its bluffs; they have left in their wake a sand beach that breathes the salt sea, and round dark rocks here and there, amid which seals often yelp playfully. Young folk, as we landed, watched them with their shotguns.

The narrow ribbon-like shore forms part of the mighty river, as it were. But the people climb the mountain up a broad curve two thousand feet high. Les Eboulements village is perched near the top, far away. We could see its church up there. It was ablaze, though without smoke, when we arrived. A flaming beam shot riverwards from its front gable. But it only was the rays of the setting sun playing on its windows. A road in front of us zigzagged up the terrace-like bluffs, soon to bury itself under foliage. Its name is rightly 'Cote-de-la-Misère', Misery-Hill.

The abruptness of that mountain-side and the raggedness of the peninsula at its feet reminded me of a story I had heard years before, when a schoolboy on the opposite shore, about thirty miles away. In the year of the 'Great Darkness' long ago, all of New France experienced a fabulous cataclysm. The earth for days rocked on its foundation, while the sun veiled its face in utter darkness. So we read in the *Jesuit Relations*. The ground split asunder and engulfed houses and people. Indians and white villagers, terrified, expected to hear the trumpets of the Last Judgment, and they saw ghosts riding the sky in the twilight. Les Eboulements were the worst place of all. Part of the mountain tumbled into the river, thus forming a peninsula, more than half of which in time was washed away by the tides and the equinox. Thus began, so it is believed, the very name of Les Eboulements—Landslides.

After a few days at Les Eboulements, I heard of Louis l'Aveugle (The Blind), a famous character in the old style, blind from youth, yet able to travel unaided, reading the road

in front of him with his cane of red birch. He would go with his fiddle from house to house, not as an ordinary beggar—the term would have been a gratuitous insult—but as a nomad in his birthright. With no home of his own, he owned no less than two counties, Charlevoix and Chicoutimi; and they were far from grudging him a subsistence. Always welcome, he knew that “the door is on the latch (*la porte est sur la clanche*),” as the saying goes. The fun he brought to his hosts was indeed worth a lot, for he was brimful of riddles, stories and songs. This heritage he had received from his father, whose name no one knew for sure—a Simard, so named like many others in that district. And he carried his burden lightly, for no one was happier than he under the bright sun.

No sooner did Louis ‘the Blind’ appear anywhere than the people started up and exclaimed, “*He’s arrived!*” *He* meant Louis, the jolly good fellow, the wizard. It could be no other; no one was like him. The children gathered in a circle around him, giving him no time to breathe. They wanted to hear him sing *Pyrame and Thisbé*, a ballad-like song, accompanied on his fiddle. And he would instantly humour them.

He could go anywhere, stay with whoever he pleased, but he was discriminating. He chose the best places, the best table and the finest feathered bed. And he had a good ‘stomach’ memory (*mémoire du ventre*).

The night of his arrival, the folk gathered around him, wherever he stayed, for a “*veillée*.” There he brought fresh news; he was an ambulant newspaper. And he knew everybody a hundred miles around. A child was born here, an old man had himself buried there . . . He had lived on so many years, death had almost forgotten him. And so went the news. He lavished gossip and entertainment upon all. His wits and utter candour were disarming. And the storehouse of his yarns, his tales and his songs was inexhaustible.

Like the others, I wanted to meet Louis ‘the Blind,’ that summer. But it was not easy to find out where he was. No one knew. His visits in recent years were fewer and far between. He was growing old, was seldom seen. The only clue at hand was that he was wont to come to Saint Irénée for the feast of Ste Anne, on the 26th of July.

A few days before the feast of Ste Anne, I packed my phonograph and decided to go from Les Eboulements to Saint-Irénée, on a chance of meeting him there. It was not so easy to move from one place to another in those days, even if only

ten miles away. A railway was not yet running its trains at the foot of dangerous cliffs or through tunnels, from Quebec to Murray Bay; nor were there decent summer roads over the precipitous hills, from one to two thousand feet high. But travelling by wheel-boat was picturesque. We seemed to embark upon a mossback frog that splashed about in the waters. But beware the river winds when the moment for touching the wharf arrived, or else the prow was smashed and splinters flew!

I was delighted to hear, the morning after I arrived at Saint-Irénée, below Les Eboulements, that Louis l'Aveugle had indeed just arrived for the feast of Ste Anne. Soon after I saw him slowly walking along the road, his cane feeling the walk in front of him. Though I never had seen him, I recognized him at his long white hair and unusual oval face, his vacant stare—that of a blind man, and the quiet assurance of his demeanour. He owned the place, and thoroughly enjoyed coming home after a long absence. I spoke to him. At once he seemed to know me. I was an old friend. He used the pronoun 'tu' (thou) at me, as one does to a familiar or a child.

"Come in and sit down!" he said. We stopped right there, and walked into the house. Whoever were the hosts I did not know. But he did. We sat down and began our conversation. He understood at once that I wanted folk tales and songs from him, like all the others, young and old. What else to expect! Yes, he would gladly tell me all I wanted to hear, from the time Adam and Eve partook of the apple under a tree!

—"But not just now! In a few days, or a week perhaps," he said.

—"Why not now." I wondered. I had come a long way just to hear him. Must I go back disappointed?

I was not the only one from afar, he wished me to remember. He had come all the way on foot from Mille-Vaches, on the North shore towards Labrador and that is not next door! This he did every year, for a pilgrimage. He came back to Saint-Irénée, where he was born, for the feast of Ste. Anne, to confess his sins to the priest and for communion—really a serious affair. His house-cleaning, no less! That would change him into a cherub, all white, with a nimbus around his head. But the search for his sins and the scrubbing was all that he could undertake for a few days. No songs, no tales, no fiddle meanwhile. They were worldly, if not at times a bit sinful.

I tried to coax him, offered him so much per hour for a remuneration. But money would go nowhere with him. I must

wait till the next week to really begin. But he would give me samples of what he could do, to whet my appetite—a few songs tossed overboard.

Soon he began to warm up, and might have spent the whole morning at it. But the hostess, casual as she was, brought this to an end with a cup of coffee for both of us. We parted for a few days.

As the district was new to me, I tried to find my bearings. The people were leisurely and old-fashioned. They greeted me as I went by. I could come in, if I liked it, and look at the homespun, the bedspreads and *portières boutonnées*, with lovely coloured designs—diamonds, crosses, clover leaves, flower pots and trees like candle-holders. The flannel was brightly striped with red and apple green. Country chairs, made of maple, retained their rich natural colour, but were enriched with age; or they were lacquer red or sky blue—two tuneful colours that are the preference of rural Quebec. I noticed somewhere an old Rouen inkstand, the shape of a heart, blue and white. It had come all the way from France during the French period, a rare piece! Yes, I could have it, for a trifle. I still keep it. Rouen pottery in Canada is very scarce, as it is elsewhere, except in museums and art galleries.

Where to spend the next few days was the question. Saint-Irénée is new compared with its neighbours. What is its hundred years compared with the three hundred of Baie-Saint-Paul, Isle-aux-Coudres or Tadousac! Murray Bay is the next place, with its manoir and fashionable resort. There was also a summer hotel on the beach at Saint-Irénée, where Quebec people spend the summer. And the fine Forget farm houses stood on the hill, among rows of Lombard poplars. Other places seemed preferable to me, older, with the country folk as they should remain, unspoilt.

The villagers there have friendly nicknames for each other, I soon found out. The Murray Bay people are known as 'Les Dindes', Turkeys—they raise turkeys; those of Isle-aux-Coudres, the island settlement opposite, where the discoverer Jacques Cartier landed and planted a cross, are called 'Les Marsouins,' Porpoises—they catch whole schools of porpoises for oil in their fish fences at the high tides in the spring and the autumn; the Eboulements people were 'Les Béliers,' Rams—why, I could never know. Perhaps they were stubborn, as I sometimes noticed. Most of those people bear the same names, only a few. The stock was very limited at the beginning. By name

they are either Tremblay, Bouchard, Simard. . . Edmond Tremblay, the baker where I stayed, told me that two-thirds of his customers at Eboulements were Tremblays and '*tout le tremblement*,' as he called it.

Beyond Les Eboulements to the west, there were 'Les Loups' of Baie-Saint-Paul—'The Wolves.' Why 'The Wolves'? I enquired. "Because they are thievish," was the answer, "in fact, no more thievish than the others—perhaps less." La Petite-Rivière is further up the Saint Lawrence, a few miles beyond Baie-Saint-Paul. Its people are called 'Les Têtes d'Anguilles'—Eel's-heads, because they catch eels in large quantities in their long eel fences on the mud flats.

So I had my choice between the Turkeys, the Porpoises, the Rams, the Wolves or the Eels. Or I might stay at Saint-Irénée. This was the home of the Simards, where Louis 'the Blind' was not the only singer. Boily-le-remancheur, a popular character, lived there, the man who sets bones aright when they get out of joint. Everybody believed in him, a sort of miracle-man.

The small villages inland, on the high plateau of the Laurentians, were worth an immediate visit. Ancient customs thrived there, in the total absence of strangers, at Sainte-Agnès, for instance, on a beautiful lake; at Saint-Hilarion, on the hillside; at Saint-Paschal, where lived old Mailloux, the story teller; or in the valley up Rivière-du-Gouffre (Whirlpool River), which empties into the Saint Lawrence at Baie-Saint-Paul. The only embarrassment was that of riches.

The places have such suggestive names that it is interesting to know what their people look like, at le Poste-des-Boeufs—Oxen-post; la Côte-de-Monte-à-peine—Break-neck-hill; le Rang-du-Pis-sec—Dry-udder-row; or la Descente-des-femmes—Women-go-down. Folk songs still were the fashion in those places. So I was told. People still gathered in 'veillées', and revelled at the spell-binding tales of 'Père' Mailloux, Marcel Tremblay, Jean Bouchard and others.

So I went up into the hills, to my entire satisfaction. For a week I lived there in fairyland. The diet was poor; and the beds, made of straw. But it was worth the experience. For all I heard most of the time was of enchanted kingdoms, some of them under the Red Sea, others on the Crystal Mountain, or a Thousand Leagues beyond the Sun.

The rustic folk are not rich; yet they lack nothing essential. They are certainly happier than town people. Many of them

migrated to the United States, some years ago. "There were so many people going away at one time", they said, "that the parish priest was glad to leave the place. He was heart-broken." But that time is of the past. Some of them have come back, no richer than before, perhaps less.

When the day came for my appointment with Louis 'the Blind', I wondered whether he would remember his appointment. He was there on the dot, quite the same as before, without a halo. We sat down to work, I taking his narratives in shorthand and his songs on the phonograph. Songs and tales piled up fast. One followed another in quick succession. "Hola!" he would exclaim. "*Patientez, mon ami!* Friend, wait a minute! You mistake me for a song book. You turn the page and there is the thing! But the devil is in the song (*le diable est dans la chanson!*)" And he would turn his brain inside out to find it. The whole trouble was with the first word. Once you have it, the rest goes on like clock-work.

My phonograph cylinders ran out before the end of the third day. There were 93 songs in my bag, and some of the best too. Never had I hoped for so many in so little time. As we had nothing else to do, Mme Simard, the hostess, decided to have a *veillée*. There I would hear more tales as they are told, trimmings and all.

The *veillée* began early, even before all the guests had arrived. Père Mailloux was there, the most dramatic of the folk tale tellers, a real artist. His diction was fine and his delivery unmatched. Mme Jean Bouchard, the singer of sad *complaintes* had come from Cap-aux-oies (Goose-cape); and several others were anxious as usual to vie with each other in telling yarns and share in the fun.

Now the tale was told of the Princess du Tombozo, a princess that tricked Petit-Jean out of his magic treasures, but was the worse for it in the end. He gave her plums from a fairy which made her nose grow a foot long. Thereafter her name was 'Princess with a real nose.' The next tale was John the Bear, Teur-merisier—Birch-twister, who could twist a birch between his fingers as soon as he came of age; Merlin, the hero of mediaeval literature; Red-heel (Talon-rouge); and the Dragon with Seven Heads.

The people talked so much that they grew thirsty. But there was only root beer to drink. Hm! not as in the good old days, not so long ago! The rum then, and the curacao, flowed as if from a spring. Tears almost came to the eyes of those

present who had known better times. Bootleg pure and simple, but the best, all of it so cheap, next to nothing

Yes, the people along this coast were fine sailors. They used to travel long distances, to Anticosti, Newfoundland and Saint-Pierre-et-Miquelon. They brought back barrels of fine spirits and liqueurs, which they hid in their barns. Then they passed it on to friends for a penny a drink. *Contrebandiers* (bootleggers) made quite a bit out of it, but never grew wealthy.

Fortin hid kegs of jamaica and curacoa under the hay in his barn. Then he held court, and his friends came around with empty cans. When he was asleep, one night, a neighbour went there alone and turned the tap. But the 'smell' went to his head. He dropped the candle into the hay. The hay was too dry; it flared up. The barn turned into a live torch and painted the sky red.

Poor Fortin! that broke his back. And he happened to have a weak spine. He left for the United States with his family, to work 'on the whistle' (*sur le sifflet*), in the brickyards. He should have remembered that 'the devil's money turns to bran.'

The *veillée* would not be complete without 'the peg' (*le clou*), and that meant the blind nomad, in one more of his tales. Turning to him in jest, the folk exclaimed,

"Ho hay! Louis, what are you doing there in the corner. It's no time to pull a long face. Tell us that yarn about the haunted houses. We'd like to hear more about them."

At once he began,

"Haunted houses, hm! My young friends, is that really what you are looking for? How many of them I have seen in my life, seen, yes, if possible from a distance! I don't advise you to go too near, particularly at night. They are not a bit healthy, and the racket there begins just after sunset, 'half dog and half wolf' (*entre chien et loup*), as the saying goes. But I wouldn't bother with them any more. You can find them for yourself; everybody knows them. . ."

He stopped. They gave him a bit of white whiskey.

Clearing his throat noisily—a mere habit, he said, "Now listen!"

You could not hear a breath. His audience was all ears.

"Better warn you," he resumed. "There is no fun in those infernal things, no pleasure in the telling—they are a nuisance! I would rather speak of fairies dancing about the springs, or of



sprites braiding the mane of horses. I know a lot about them, have almost fed them from my hand!

"I who speak to you have travelled much, have seen everything; but I have amassed very little. I'm poor as salt, and coarse salt at that. Rolling pebbles gather no moss.

"But that's hardly true in a way. For I travelled slowly—taking my time. Why hurry? One place is as good as the other, or no worse. For fifty years *I have been* the King's Highway—stopping at every house, chatting with everybody, and listening. I've known the people and their troubles, from the cradle up. Many things I've heard! How many I still remember! And that is my hoard. The women keep to the houses, and love to tell things. Nothing frightens them, and they like to tell tales. As to men, they keep mum. They don't like to speak of spells, of werwolves, for they are frightened of them, frightened to their marrowbones. It is their fear to look scared that hushes them. That's clear.

"I have settled at Mille-Vaches (Thousand-Cows), down the river. For I am growing old, and I like the place there—the salt sea! My parents, I must tell you, once lived in the islands nearby, for some years. But there were too many fishermen and not enough fish. So we moved to the North Shore, where the fish is caught the year round. There was no place to live in but an old barrack, which nobody had occupied for years. And *it was haunted*. But ours was not the choice; we must stay somewhere. Sea folk as we were, our daily bread was storm and peril. It's all the same, die on the sea or die on a pile of dirt. Which do you prefer? The dirt? To be honest, haunted houses meant nothing to us, at the time. Mother was a brick. She didn't mind the noise, and there was a lot of it, at night. Glad enough to own a roof, we were afraid of nothing, God or devil.

"Now I wonder how she could endure it all for so long, how she could stand the presence of those spirits, hidden and meddlesome, staying with us, year in and year out.

"Somehow haunted houses seemed natural; they were so common. You would hear only of ghosts in the closet, under the bed, or in the cellar. People spoke of nothing but, "Have you heard that, last night. . . . , at so and so's. . . . ?" or "Did you see him again, along the road, the little headless manikin. . . . !" I am not afraid of any of those damned things myself, as, I tell you, I was raised with them.

"Our house at Godbout, on the north coast, stood on a hill high enough for a good view out to sea. Behind, it was all waste and mountains—a wild place, with wolves and bears, and Indians. The creeks were like serpents in the hollows, twisting their way down, jumping down the crags. But their clear water was full of brook trout. Tall trees were scarce, but shrubs choked the paths and thrust their spurs into our sides.

"It had not always been like this. The land had been cleared at one time, and the earth, ploughed up. We could see the ruins of a dam, where the water was scooped up for a mansion; but that's long ago. The trout in those days gathered in the pond; a trap was drawn open, and the trout ran headlong into a trough, then down to the kitchen, where they were caught for the frying pan. Clever, eh?

"That mansion belonged to Bigot, yes, the notorious Bigot, Intendant of New France before the Fall. He never lived there himself, as he owned several places elsewhere, but others did, for him, his creatures; and they were not all hewn out of the Lebanon tree on Calvary hill, I tell you!

"The Indians at one time came back from the hunt, way out north, and followed the creek down to the mansion. Seeing so many brook trout in the pond, they caught strings of them. It was their right, since this was in their country. They were the lords of the forests and the streams, had always been. But Bigot understood it otherwise. He was a lordly fellow. He had the Indians arrested. For a lesson they shouldn't forget, he had them shot. And they were buried in his cellar."

The folk here protested as if something still could be done against the traitor Bigot, and they mistook this fanciful story for the whole truth. The blind story-teller went on,

Yes, they were buried there. Else, why should that house be haunted now? Why should we hear the racket at night? The ghosts of the Indians are still there, as on the first day.

"We never saw a trout in the pond at Godbout, not one! They have disappeared to the last. The Indians had taken them all away with them when they were killed, taken them into a passage underground, where their ghosts fished them for a subsistence. That was only fair, since the fish in those wild brooks never had ceased to be their own. Now we must do without them. What a pity! And that's all Bigot's fault. . ."