La chasse-galerie (The Bewitched Canoe)

Honoré Beaugrand (1848-1906)

This narrative is founded on a popular superstition dating back to the days of the coureurs des bois, under the French régime, and perpetuated among the voyageurs in the Canadian Northwest. The shantymen of a later date have taken up the tradition, and it is in the French settlements, bordering the St. Lawrence River, that the legends of la chasse-galerie are specially well known at the present time. The writer has met many an old voyageur who affirmed most positively that he had seen bark canoes travelling in mid-air, full of men paddling and singing away, under the protection of Beelzebub, on their way from the timber camps of the Ottawa to pay a flying visit to their sweethearts at home.

It is hardly necessary to apologize for having used in the narrative expressions typical of the rude life and character of the men whose language and superstition it is the intention of the writer to portray.

I

"Well, then, since you seem to desire it so very much, I will tell you a roarin' story that ought to be a lesson to all of you. If there is among the crowd any renegade who intends to run la chasse-galerie or the loup-garou, he had better skip and go outside to see whether the owls are screeching in the storm, in converse with Old Nick himself, because I intend to begin my story by making a big sign of the cross. That will be a regular set-back to le diable, who always tries, at this time, to snatch a poor shantyman's soul by promising him all kinds of nonsense. I have had enough of that in my young days to understand his tricks."

Not a man moved. On the contrary, all gathered closer round the fireplace, where the cook had dragged the provision-chest, and upon which he had taken his seat on a camp-stool, preparatory to relating his experience under the wiles of the mauvais esprit.

It was on New Year's eve of the year 1858, in the depth of the forest, in the Ross timber camp, at the head of the Gatineau River. The winter had fairly set in, and the snow outside had already piled up to the roof of the shanty. The boss, according to custom, had ordered the distribution of the contents of a small barrel of Jamaica rum among the men, and the cook had terminated early his preparations of a succulent ragout of pig's feet and of a large tin full of glissantes for the New Year's dinner. A big kettle, half full of molasses, was already simmering on the fire, as there was to be a candy-pull to finish the evening's entertainment.

Every man had filled his pipe with good, strong Canadian tobacco, and a thick cloud of smoke darkened the interior of the shanty. A few pine-branches thrown at intervals on the fire produced a reddish glare that illuminated the rude faces of the men with curious effects of clair-obscur.

Joe, the cook, was a homely little man who laughed at his own physical defects, and who did not take offense when his comrades chaffed him on the subject, and called him le bossu, the hunchback. He had worked in the shanties for the last forty years, and his experience was only equaled by the facility with which he could relate his adventures when he had taken a glass of bonne vieille Jamaïque.

"I was telling you," said Joe, "that I was a pendard in my youth, but it is long since I mended my ways, and now I never joke about religious matters. I go to confession regularly every year, and what I am about to relate took place years and years ago, when I feared ni Dieu, ni diable. It was on a night like this, a New Year's eve, thirty-four or thirty-five years ago. Gathered round the fireplace with all the camarades, we made merry ; and if it is true, as we say in French, that 'small rivulets make large rivers' it is just as true that small drinks empty large barrels. And in those days, people drank more than to-day, and evenings of this kind generally ended in a boxing-match, outside, in the snow. The rhum was no better than it is to-night, but it was bougrement bon, I can assure you. I will be frank with you and tell you that about eleven o'clock my head began to feel dizzy, and I lay down on my buffalo-robe to take a nap, while waiting for the midnight jump that we always take over the head of a pork-barrel, from the old year into the new one. We will repeat the same thing to-night before we go to visit the neighboring camps to wish them the compliments of the season.

II

I had slept for quite a while, when I was rudely awakened by a second boss, Baptiste Durand, who said to me : 'Joe, it is past midnigh, and you are late for the barrel-jump. The camarades have gone to the other camps, and I am going to Lavaltrie to see my sweetheart. Will you come with me?'

"To Lavaltrie," said I, "are you crazy? We are three hundred miles away from there, and you could not travel the distance in two months, through the forest, when there are no roads beaten in the snow. And what about our work the day after to-morrow?"

"Imbécile! don't you understand me? We will travel in our bark canoe, and to-morrow morning at six o'clock we will be back here for breakfast."

"I understood. Baptiste Durand proposed that I should join him and run la chasse-galerie ; risk the salvation of my soul for the fun of going to give a New Year's kiss to my blonde at Lavaltrie. That was a little too much for me. It was true that I was a mauvais sujet, that I did not practise la religion, and that I took a drink too much now and then ; but between that and the fact of selling my soul to le diable there was a big difference, and I said : 'No, siree! Pas un tonnerre!'

"Oh, you are a regular old woman", answered Baptiste tauntingly. "There is no danger whatever. We can go to Lavaltrie and back in six hours. Don't you know that with la chasse-galerie we can travel 150 miles an hour, when one can handle the paddles as well as we all do. All there is to it is that we must not pronounce le nom du bon Dieu during the voyage, and that we must be careful not to touch the crosses on the steeples when we travel. That's easy enough, and, to be all right, all a man has to do is to look where he goes, think about what he says, and not touch a drop of liquor on the way. I have made the trip five times, and le diable has not got me yet. Come, mon vieux, stiffen up your courage, and in two hours we will be at Lavaltrie. Think of Liza Guimbette, and the pleasure you will have in kissing her "a happy New Year." There are already seven of us to make the trip, but we must be two, four, six, or eight, to make up the crew of the canoe."

"Yes, that's all right, but you must make an engagement with le diable, and he is not the kind of a bourgeois that I want to make any bargain with."

“A simple formality if we are careful where we go and not to drink. A man is not a child, pardieu! Come on! The camarades are waiting outside, and the canoe is already in the clearing. Come, come!”

And I was led outside of the shanty, where I saw the six men who were awaiting us, paddle in hand. The large canoe was lying on a snowbank, and before I had time to think twice about it, I was seated in the bow, awaiting the signal to go. I must saw that my mind was somewhat confused, but Baptiste Durand, who was a hard customer, – for, it was said, he had not been to confession for seven years, – gave me no time for reflection. He was standing in the stern, and exclaimed in a ringing voice:

“Are you ready?”

“Ready.”

“Repeat after me.”

And we repeated together :

“Satan! king of the infernal regions, we promise to sell you our souls, if within the following six hours we pronounce le nom du bon Dieu, your master and ours, or if we touch a cross on the voyage. On that condition you will transport us through the air, wherever we may want to go, and bring us back sound and safe to the shanty. Acabris, Acabras, Acabram! Fais nous voyager par-dessus les montagnes!”

III

The last words were hardly pronounced, when we felt the canoe rising in the air to a height of five or six hundred feet. I felt as light as a feather, and at Baptiste’s command, we commenced paddling like sorcerers that we were. At the first stroke of the paddle the canoe shot out like an arrow, and off we went under the protecting wing of le diable himself. It fairly look my breath away, and I could hear the bow of the canoe whizzing through the crisp air of the night.

We went faster than the wind, and during the first fifteen minutes we sailed over the forest without perceiving anything else than the dark heads of the great pines. Il was a beautiful night, and a full moon lighted up the sky like the midday sun. It was terribly cold though, and our mustaches were fairly frozen, while our bodies were all in a perspiration. We were paddling like demons at work in the lower regions. We soon perceived a bright, glistening belt of clear ice, that shone like a mirror. That was the Gatineau River ; and then the lights in the farm-houses, which were mostly lit up on New Year’s eve. We began passing the tin- covered steeples as quickly as telegraph-poles fly past in a railway-train, and the spires shone in the air like the bayonets of the soldiers drilling on the Champ de Mars, in Montréal. On we went like tous les diables, passing over forests, rivers, towns, villages, and leaving behind us a trail of sparks. It was Baptiste Durand, the possédé, who steered the canoe because he knew the route, and we soon came to the Ottawa River, which we followed down to the Lac des Deux montagnes!

“Look out there,” said Baptiste ; “we will just skim over Montréal and frighten some of the fellows who may be out at this hour of the night. Joe, clear your whistle and get ready to sing your best canoe-song, “Canot d’écorce,” my boy.

The excitement of the trip had braced me up, and I was ready for anything. Already we could see the lights of the great city, and with an adroit stroke of his paddle, Baptiste brought us down on a level with the summit of the towers of Notre-Dame. I cleared my throat and sang “Canot d’écorce,” while my camarades joined heartily in the chorus.

Mon père n’avait fille que moi,
Canot d’écorce qui va voler,
Et dessus la mer il m’envoie:
Canot d’écorce qui vole, qui vole,
Canot d’écorce qui va voler! etc.

IV

Although it was well on toward tho o'clock in the morning, we saw some groups of men who stopped in the middle of the street to watch us go by, but we went so fast that in a twinkle we had passed Montréal and its suburbs. We were nearing the end of our voyage, and we commenced counting the steeples, – Longue Pointe, Pointe-aux-Trembles, Repentigny, St. Sulpice, – and at last we saw the two shining spires of Lavaltrie that gleamed among the dark-green pines of the domain.

"Look out over there!" shouted Baptiste. We will land on the edge of the wood, in the field of my godfather, Jean-Jean-Gabriel. From there we will proceed on foot to go and surprise our acquaintances in some fricot or dance in the neighborhood."

We did as directed, and five minutes later our canoe lay in a snowbank, at the edge of the wood of Jean- Jean-Gabriel. It was no small job, because the snow reached to our waists and there was no trace of any kind of a road. Baptiste, who was the most daring of the crowd, went and knocked at the door of his godfather's house, where we could see a light, but there was no one there except a servant, who told us that the old folks had gone to a snaque at old man Robillard's place, and that the young people of the village – boys and girls – were across the St. Lawrence at Batissette Augé's, at the Petite Misère, below Contrecoeur, where there was a New Year's hop. "Let us go to the dance at Batissette Augé's," said Baptiste ; "we are sure to find our sweethearts over there."

"Let us go to Batissette Augé's!"

And we returned to our canoe, while cautioning one another against the great danger that there was in pronouncing certain words, in touching anything in the shape of a cross, and especially in drinking liquor of any kind. We had only four hours before us, and we must return to the shanty before six o'clock in the morning, if we wanted to escape from the clutches of Old Nick, with whom we had made such a desperate bargain. And we all knew that he was not the kind of a customer to let us off, in the event of any delay on our part.

"Acabris, Acabras, Acabram! Fais nous voyager par-dessus les montagnes!" shouted Baptiste once more.

And off we went again, paddling through the air, like renegades that we were, every one of us. We crossed the river in less time than it requires to tell it, and we descended in a snow-bank close to Batissette Augé's house, where we could hear the laughter of the dancers, and see their shadows through the bright windows.

We dragged our canoe on the riverside, to hide it among the hummocks produced by the ice-shove.

"Now," said Baptiste, in a last warning, "no nonsense! Do you hear? Dance as much as you can, but not a single glass of rum or whisky. And at the first sign, follow me out without attracting attention. We can't be too careful!"

And we went and knocked at the door.

V

Old Batissette came and opened the door himself, and we were received with open arms by the guests, who knew us all.

"Where do you come from?"

"I thought you were in the chantiers, up the Gatineau?"

"What makes you come so late?"

"Come and take a smile."

Baptiste came to the rescue by saying: "First and foremost, let us take our coats off, and give us a

chance to dance. That's what we came here for, and if you still feel curious in the morning, I will answer all your questions."

For my part, I had already spied Liza Guimbette, who was chatting away with little Boisjoli of Lanoraie. I made my révérence in due style, and at once asked for the favor of the next dance, which was a four-handed reel. She accepted with a smile that made me forget that I had risked the salvation of my soul to have the pleasure of pressing her soft white hand in mine and of cutting pigeonwings as her partner. During two hours the dancing went on without stopping, and, if I do say so myself, we shanty fellows cut a shine in the dance that made the hayseeds tired before morning. I was so busy with my partner that at first I did not notice that Baptiste was visiting the buffet rather often with some of the other boys, and once I caught him lifting his elbow in rather a suspicious manner. But I had no idea that the fellow would get tipsy, after all the lecturing he had given us on the road. When four o'clock struck, all the members of our crew began to edge out of the house without attracting attention, but I had to drag Baptiste before he would consent to go. At last we were all out, with just two hours before us to reach the camp, and three hundred miles to ride in our canoe, under the protection of Beelzebub. We had left the dance like wild Indians without saying good-by to anybody, not even to Liza Guimbette, whom I had invited for the next cotillon. I always thought that she bore me a grudge for that, because when I reached home the next summer she was Madame Boisjoli.

We found our canoe all right in the hummocks, but I need hardly tell you that we were all put out when we found that Baptiste Durand had been drinking. He was to steer the boat, and we had no time to lose in humoring the fancies of a drunken man. The moon was not quite so bright as when we started from the camp, and it was not without misgivings that I took my place in the bow of the canoe, well decided to keep a sharp lookout ahead for accidents. Before starting I said to Baptiste:

"Look out, Baptiste, old fellow! Steer straight for the mountain of Montréal, as soon as you can get a glimpse of it."

"I know my business," answered Baptiste sharply, "and you had better mind yours."

What could I do? And before I had time for further reflections:

"Acabris! Acabras! Acabram! Fais nous voyager par-dessus les montagnes!"

VI

And up we went again like lightning, steering southwest, if the wild way in which Baptiste managed our boat could be called steering. We passed over the steeple of the church at Contrecoeur, coming pretty close to it, but instead of going west Baptiste made us take a sheer toward the Richelieu River. A few minutes later we were skimming over Beloeil Mountain, and we came within ten feet of striking the big cross that the Bishop of Quebec planted there, during a temperance picnic held a few years before by the clergy of his diocese.

"To the right, Baptiste! steer to the right, or else you will send us all to le diable if you keep on going that way."

And Baptiste did instinctively turn to the right, and we steered straight for the mountain of Montréal, which we could perceive in the distance by the dim lights of the city. I must say that I was becoming frightened, because if Baptiste kept on steering as he had done, we would never reach the Gatineau alive, and le diable was probably smacking his lips, as I supposed, at the bare idea of making a New Year's mess of us. And I can tell you that the disaster was not long in coming. While we were passing over the city, Baptiste Durand uttered a yell, and, flourishing his paddle over his head, gave it a twist that sent us plunging into a snow-drift, in a clearing on the mountain-side. Luckily the snow was soft, and none of us were hurt, nor was the canoe injured in any way. But Baptiste got out and declared most emphatically that he was going down-town to have un verre. We tried to reason with him, but our efforts

proved useless, as is generally the case with les ivrognes. He would go down if le diable himself were to catch hold of him on the way. I held a moment's consultation with mes camarades, and, before Baptiste knew what we were about, we had him down in the snow, where we bound him hand and foot so as to render him incapable of interfering with our movements. We placed him in the bottom of the canoe, and gagged him so as to prevent him from speaking any words that might give us up to perdition.

And "Acabris! Acabras! Acabram!" up we went again, this time steering straight for the Gatineau. I had taken Baptiste's place in the stern. We had only a little over an hour to reach camp, and we all paddled away for dear life and eternal salvation. We followed the Ottawa River as far as the Pointe-Gatineau, and then steered due north by the polar star for our shanty. We were fairly flying in the air, and everything was going well when that rascal of a Baptiste managed to slip the ropes we had bound him with and to pull off his gag. We had been so busy paddling that, the first thing we knew, he was standing in the canoe, paddle in hand, and swearing like a pagan. I felt that our end had come if he pronounced a certain sacred word, and it was out of the question to appease him in his frenzy. We had only a few miles to go to reach camp, and we were floating over the pine forest. The position was really terrible. Baptiste was using his paddle like a shillalah and making a moulinet that threatened every moment to crush in some one's head. I was so excited that by a false movement of my own paddle I let the canoe come down on a level with the pines, and it was upset as it struck the head of a big tree. We all fell out and began dropping down from branch to branch like partridges shot from the tamarack-tops. I don't know how long I was coming down, because I fainted before we reached the snow beneath, but my last recollection was like the dream of a man who feels himself dropping down a well without ever reaching bottom.

VII

About eight o'clock the next morning, I awoke in my bunk, in the cabin, whither some of our camarades had conveyed us after having found us to our necks in a neighboring snow-bank, at the foot of a monster pine- tree. Happily, no one was seriously hurt, although we were all more or less bruised and scratched, some having secured even black eyes in our way down from the tree-top. We were all thankful that nothing worse had befallen us, and when the camarades said that they had found us sleeping away in the snow the effects of the previous night's frolic, not one of us had anything to say to the contrary. We all felt satisfied that our escapade with Old Nick remained unknown in the camp, and we preferred leaving our chums under the impression that we had taken un verre too many, to telling them of the bargain we had made to satisfy a passing fancy. So far as Baptiste Durand was concerned, there is no doubt that he had forgotten the latter part of his voyage, but he never alluded to the fact, and we followed his example. I was not till many years afterward that I related the story of our aventures, just as they happened on that memorable New Year's eve.

All I can say, my friends, is that it is not so amusing as some people might think, to travel in mid-air, in the dead of winter, under the guidance of Beelzebub, running la chasse-galerie, and especially if you have un ivrogne to steer your bark canoe. Take my advice, and don't listen to any one who would try to rope you in for such a trip. Wait until summer before you go to see your sweethearts, for it is better to run all the rapids of the Ottawa and the St. Lawrence on a raft, than to travel in partnership with le diable himself.

And Joe, the cook, dipped a ladleful of boiling molasses from the big kettle on the fire, and declared that everything was now ready for the candy-pull.

The Century Magazine, New York, vol. 44, issue 4 (Aug 1892).