

The Beauharnois Manor

On that morning in February 1838, a blizzard blasts Beauharnois, a Canadien village situated on the edge of the St. Lawrence River. The northwest wind batters the houses on the shore, flattening snow against their walls, howling in their cornices and blowing above their roofs. It then sweeps in gusts across the hill behind. The Catholic church on the hilltop is a bulwark against its advance but the flurries black out the windows and fill gaps between the shivering, grey stones. On a clear day, the sound of church bells summons the faithful in the village and parish to mass. But today the north wind is the devil's plaything and the call to prayer is lost in the gale. Behind the church, the storm sails above the dead, asleep under white shrouded tombstones that stand and defy mortality. Then, the polar winds get lost in the vast open spaces and forests.

West of the village, the winds rush into the mouth of the St. Louis River, then sweep back to the crust of ice that conceals its waters cascading into the St. Lawrence River. Nearby, sheltered by cedars, pine, maple and yellow birch trees, Edward Ellice's red manor house stands as a haven of peace.

Upstream of the tributary, the miller's stone house faces the North wind, causing the white smoke to come out of the chimney horizontally. Behind the house, the flour mill has been stripped of its water-wheel for winter and looks abandoned.

St. Laurent Street, running through the village beside the river, is deserted. The winds are whirling and the drifting snow invades the space. The shops are closed and the villagers stay in bed. But St. Ange, the baker, stokes the oven for tomorrow morning's batch. Papineau, the blacksmith, also maintains the heat for cinders. The doors of the Ross' general store and the Normands' gunsmith's are locked. For Pastor Walter Roach's Prebysterian flock, Sunday is a day dedicated to God.

At the corner of Richardson street, Prévost's inn is the only place open at 10 o'clock. This beautiful, two storey, wooden building has two chimneys and a steep roof with dormer windows. The roof extends over the front of the building, protecting two large porches running its full width. The façade has large, inset windows, illuminating the dining room on the ground floor and bedrooms on the first. A few carts and sleighs are lined up at the front door, their Canadien owners inside, drinking instead of attending mass. Fortunately, they remembered to cover their horses' backs with blankets to keep them warm.

Today, many villagers won't reach their religious services. The streets are clogged with snow and the horses struggle to climb the road up St. Louis hill that leads to the church of Father Michel Quintal. He has, nevertheless, prepared a good sermon. He is a stout, prematurely white-haired man of 41, with sloping shoulders supporting a square head with ruddy, pronounced facial features that give him a sullen look. Under thick eyebrows, his black eyes are set deep, all the better to pierce souls. Deep grooves curve sadly from his nose down to the corner of his thick lips. From his cavernous mouth comes a deep, rich baritone voice.

The pastor is a bon vivant but, because he is also fastidious and headstrong, must be approached with care. Though a devoted churchman, he is not troubled by scruples to meet his goals and even makes use of his stature to intimidate his parishioners.

This morning he is furious to see so few souls in his church. Standing at the altar with his back to his flock, he mutters prayers in Latin. When reaching the Gospels, he sullenly turns to his congregation, then moves quickly to the pulpit, climbing the stairs with a heavy step.

The Bible in front of him is open to the right page. But as the text does not fit with what he wants to say, he puts his hands on the balustrade and leans forward to intimidate the faithful. He gives full vent to his anger, "I know there are no Catholic schools in the parish, but that does not give you the right to send your children to Protestant schools! If you continue to do as you please, you will not be buried in the cemetery when you die! You will be damned!"

He abruptly stops his speech, steps down from the pulpit, returns to the altar and continues the mass. The congregation murmurs.

In this community of two thousands souls, located thirty miles west of Montreal on the south shore of the St. Lawrence, a hundred English merchants, manufacturers and colonial officials dominate the local economy. They manage the manor, and also own the tannery, the weaving and potash manufacturing factories, the cooper's workshop, as well as the flour and saw mills located along the banks of the St. Louis.

They also own the general store, the gunsmith's, the butcher's and other shops found on St Lawrence Street. The wealthiest men in the community are the innkeeper, the hardware dealer, the wheelwright, the miller, the two notaries, the baker, the postmaster and the dressmaker. Their wealthy wives buy imported British goods in the shops. But there is no doctor's practice.

The Canadiennes rarely buy imported goods; they have only enough money for the necessities of life. Their daughters serve in the colonial houses and their husbands work the land. To survive the latter work in second trades as lumberjack, carpenter, sawyer, carter, builder, blacksmith, shoemaker, or handyman.

Once more, misery has struck the Canadiens. Disease decimated last year's wheat, barley, oats, buckwheat and maize crops. The winter snow covered the fields until mid-May and the seeds for this year were sown late. Everything was delayed and the crops froze in the ground before they could be harvested. Stocks of everything run short. There are no potatoes, beans, maize, peas, carrots, turnips and cabbage. Some eat their horses to survive. Money is scarce and many families' go days on empty stomachs. Ignorance prevents them from asking for help since most of them cannot read or write.

In the heart of the village, on Richardson Street, between the St. Lawrence and Ellice, the Pitre family lives an opulent life in their stone house. With its two chimneys, six dormer windows and French doors, each with a semi-circle pane of glass, people have named it the Mansion.

Rosalie is the forty-year-old widow who cooks and keeps house for François Pitre, his wife Geneviève and their four children, Judith, Jacques, Madeleine and little Louis. After her husband died, Rosalie was left childless with no dowry. She worked as a servant for the English to pay her expensive rent on the house on St. Lawrence Street, at the corner of La Beauce Road. She rented through Lawrence Brown, Lord Ellice's agent. When Geneviève offered her the job of housekeeper at the Mansion, she accepted immediately. She moved her personal belongings upstairs into a room next to the nursery. Because of the nature of her work, she cut her hair short, separating it at the top of her head and leaving it to curl down each side of her ears. The children quickly warmed to this plump, cheerful woman and she became part of the Pitre family.

François Pitre is the captain of the Beauharnois militia, as well as a parish churchwarden. Because of his dedication to the Church and his expertise as a swordmaker, he was recommended to Lawrence Brown by the priest, for colonial contracts to maintain the army's swords and bayonets. As a result of the increasing number of orders, François built a large forge beside his house. From the kitchen window he can see the façade. He has taken on an apprentice, in addition to his son. François himself was trained in the trade by his father. He also owns a farm on the La Beauce Road managed by his brother Pierre.

After supper, the storm has died down. The full moon shines brightly on the village as if in broad daylight. The snow crunches underfoot and the dry, cold air makes nostrils stick together, forcing walkers to breathe through their mouths, emitting puffs of vapour.

Geneviève is sitting at the kitchen table facing the large bay window. Her youngest son, next to her, is busy drawing farm animals on a sheet of paper. She has folded up the corner of the cotton tablecloth embroidered with wildflowers to write a grocery list, with Rosalie's help. The latter is cooking molasses beans on the wood stove, set against the wall that divides the kitchen from the master bedroom. Around the black stove, the walls feel hot to the touch. And the pine ceiling planks above show cracks caused by heat. The housekeeper lifts the lid of the cast iron pot to stir the beans and prevent them from sticking to the bottom, releasing a sweet smell that fills the kitchen. Satisfied, she wipes her hands on her apron.

"Don't forget the herbs, M'am", she says, "I need some for the pea soup."

"I like that soup a lot!" says little Louis.

To the left of the stove, logs are stacked against the wall. It is the youngest child's work to make sure there is a supply of firewood when he comes back from school at noon. He also helps his big brother to stack it up in the shed between the forge and the stable. This

keeps him busy because about forty cords a year are needed to heat the house and for cooking.

Louis loathes his other chore, which consists of emptying his chamber pot in the bucket outside before leaving for school in the morning. "You are a lucky little one", his mother tells him. "Later you will take turns emptying the buckets in the toilets."

On the back wall, next to the chimney, there is the icebox. Beside it, under a window looking out onto the courtyard, there is a counter with a cast iron water pump and a sandstone sink. Judith is doing the dishes, replaying in her mind her engagement to Richard Ross the previous Christmas after midnight Mass. Madeleine is drying the cutlery.

"I'm cold", says Madeleine. "I'm going to fetch my shawl."

"I hope you are not coming down with the flu!" her mother worries.

The young girl then puts away the every-day dishes in the cupboards on each side of the window. Dishes for special occasions go into the maple sideboard in the dining room.

Her father is seated on the other side of the table, reading *La Minerve* newspaper, which is brought to him by steamboat three times a week. He is 44 years-old, with blue eyes and chestnut hair that still shows no traces of grey. Like most Canadiens, he is tall, 5'8", and has a muscular body with squared shoulders and big hands. His wife was won over by his gentle, yet manly, face and by his generous nature. He is a determined man with boundless patience, though not talkative and partial to grumbling at times. Today he is wearing a white linen shirt, with homespun trousers held up by suspenders.

"There is a new governor in Quebec", he says with a slightly hoarse voice.

"Really?" his wife replies to show her interest. "What's his name?"

Genevieve is 39 years-old, her eyes and her shoulder-length hair are the same black colour. Her pretty face has a clear complexion and generous lips. Barely 5' tall, she is the shortest of all the women in the house, with a slender waist despite her pregnancies. She likes to wear beautiful dresses to go out, but today she is at home so she wears a white cotton blouse, buttoned to the neck, and a grey linen skirt. She is a proud and outspoken woman who dominates the household. She is also superstitious, invoking religion and performing rituals to ward off evil spirits.

"It's Colonel John Colborne, 'Old Brulot'", carries on her husband. "Do you remember last Autumn's rebellion on the bank of the Richelieu river? His army invaded the villages and burned the rebels' houses down."

"I remember like it was yesterday", Geneviève replies, continuing with her shopping list. "He threw everybody out onto the streets at the start of winter. It is terrible to treat people that way! Luckily they were able to find shelter with relatives."

“Yes! They lost everything: furniture, houses, and animals. They will have to start all over again.”

“They will never get over it.”

“That’s martial law, my dear.”

“That’s still no reason!” She retorts looking up at him, indignant.