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Montlivet

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Imprint

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TO

M. C. H. AND A. E. H.

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MONTLIVET

CHAPTER I

THE KEY

The May sun was shining on Michillimackinac, and I, Armand de Montlivet, was walking the strip of beach in front of the French garrison.

I did not belong to Michillimackinac. I had come in only the day before with two canoes and four men, and I was bound for the beaver lands further west. A halt was necessary, for the trip had been severe, and remembering that it was necessity, and not idleness, that held me, I was enjoying the respite. My heart was light, and since the heart is mistress of the heels, I walked somewhat trippingly. I was on good terms with myself at the moment. My venture was going well, and I was glad to be alone, and breathe deep of the sweet spring air, and let my soul grow big with the consciousness of what it would like to do. So content was I, that I was annoyed to see La Mothe-Cadillac approach.

Yet Cadillac was important to me then. He was commandant at Michillimackinac, — the year was 1695, — and so was in control of the strategic point of western New France. The significance of all that he stood for, and all that he might accomplish, filled my thought as he swaggered toward me now, and I said to myself, somewhat complacently, that, with all his air of importance, I had a fuller conception than he of what lay in his palm.

He hailed me without preface. "Where do you find food for your laughter in this forsaken country, Montlivet? I have watched you swagger up and down with a smile on your face for the last hour. What is the jest?"

In truth, there was no jest in me by the time he finished. My own thought had just called him a swaggerer, and now he clapped the same phrase back at me.

"There are more swaggerers upon this beach than I," I cried hotly,
and
I felt my blood rise.

My tone was more insulting than my words, and Cadillac, too, grew red. I saw the veins upon his neck begin to swell, and all my childish irritation vanished.

"Come, monsieur," I hastened; "I was wrong. But I meant no harm, and surely here is a jest fit for your laughter, that two grown men should stand and swell at each other like turkeycocks, all because they are drunk with the air of a May day. Come, here is my hand."

"But you said that I" —

"And what if I did?" I interrupted. I had fallen into step, and was pacing by his side. "What is there in the term that we should hold it in slight esteem? I swagger. What does that mean, after all, but my acknowledgment of the presence of Dame Opportunity, and my admission that I would like to impress her; to draw her eye in my direction. Surely that is laudable, monsieur."

Cadillac laughed. His tempers were the ruffle of a passing breeze upon deep water. "So you think that I swagger to meet opportunity? Well, if I do, I get but little out of it. Sometimes I push myself near enough to pluck at the sleeve of the dame; oftener she passes me by."

"Yet she gave you this key to an empire," I suggested. I had been rude, and I repented it, and more than that, there was something in the man that tempted me to offer him flattery even as I desire to give sweets to an engaging child.

But this cajolery he swept away with a fling of his heavy arm. "The key to an empire!" he echoed contemptuously. "They are fine words, and the mischief is that they are true. Yet food in my stomach, and money in my pocket, would mean more to me just now. I must speak to this Indian. Will you wait for me, monsieur? I have business with you."

I bowed, and resumed my walk. "The key to an empire!" I said my own words over, and could have blushed for their tone of bombast. They were true, but they sounded false, I looked at my surroundings, and marveled that a situation that was of real dignity could wear so mean a garb. The sandy cove where I stood was on the mainland, and sheltered four settlements. Behind lay the forest; in front stretched Lake Huron, a waterway that was our only link with the men and nations we had left behind. The settlements were contiguous in body, but even my twenty-four hours' acquaintance had shown me that they were leagues apart in mind. There were a French fort, a Jesuit convent, a village of Ottawas, and, barred by the aristocracy of a palisade, a village of Hurons. The scale of precedence was plain to read. The huts of the savages were wattled, interlaced of poles and bark; the French buildings were of wood, but roofed with rough cedar; the only houses with board roofs were those of the Jesuits. In later times when I found Father Carheil hard to understand, I used to say to myself that he was not to be held too strictly to account for his contradictions, for though one learns to think great thoughts in the wilderness, it is not done easily when there is sawed lumber to shut away the sky.

Cadillac came back to me in a few moments. He had lost his swelling port, and was frowning with thought. "I saw you in the Huron camp, Montlivet," he said. "Do you understand their speech?"

Now this was a question that I thought it as well to put by. "Would you call it speech?" I demurred. "It sounded more like snarling."

"Then you do understand it?"

I kicked at the dogs at my feet. "Frowns are a common language. I could understand them, at least. The camp is restless. Are they hungry?"

Cadillac shrugged his shoulders. "Possibly. But it is not hunger that sagamité or maize cakes can reach. Would a taste of Iroquois broth put them in better condition, do you think?"

I turned away somewhat sickened. "It is a savage remedy," I broke out. "And a good cook will catch his hare before he talks of

putting it in the pot. Where is your Iroquois hare, Monsieur de la Mothe-Cadillac?"

The commandant shook his head. "My hare is still at large," he confessed. "Though just now — Come, Monsieur de Montlivet, let us to plain speech. We are talking as slantingly as savages. I have a Huron messenger at my quarters. Come with me, and interpret."

"A messenger from your own camp?"

"Is it my own camp?" he queried soberly. "I do not know. I have reason to think that many of my Hurons are ripe for English bribes, — or even for the Iroquois. It is a strange menagerie that I rule over here, and the Hurons are the foxes, — when they are not trying to be lions. You say that their camp is restless. I do not speak their language, but I can tell you more. They are in two factions. Those who follow old Kondiaronk, the Rat, are fairly loyal, but the faction under the Baron would sell us to the English for the price of a cask of rum. Truly our scalps sit lightly on our heads here in this garrison."

I hesitated. I did not like this situation, and prudence whispered that I had best cut the conversation here, and make my way as swiftly as possible to the west. But curiosity urged me to one more question. I asked it with my lips pursing to a whistle, that I might seem indifferent. "Is the messenger from the Baron?"

Cadillac nodded contentedly. "So you have decided to help me," he said, with a smile that read my indecision perfectly, and I felt, with a rush of blood to my face, much less sure of myself, and more respect for him. "I wish that I had inducements to keep you here," he went on, "for I hear from Montreal that you have wonderful command of Indian dialects. But I will take what you are willing to give, and be thankful. As to this messenger, — this is the tale. Some months ago a small band of Hurons left here for the south. Hunting, or war, or diplomacy, how shall I say what was their errand? But I mistrust them, for they are followers of the Baron. They returned this morning, and are in camp on the island. Their sending a messenger in advance looks as if they had a prisoner, and so desired to be welcomed in state. If the prisoner should be an Iroquois" — —

Now certain tales were fresh in my ears, and so I did not like the implication of the unfinished sentence, and hastened to cover it. "It is a favorable sign, monsieur, that the messenger came to you first."

"How do I know that he came to me first? He came to me—yes. But because a snake slips out of one hole, can you swear that he has not been in another? Will you go to him now?"

There was no door open for escape, and the matter was not important enough for me to be willing to force one. "If you wish," I agreed.

Cadillac looked relieved. "Good! You will find the messenger at my quarters. I shall let you go alone, for I can make nothing of the man's speech, and he smells somewhat rancid for a close acquaintance. When you are through, you will find me here."

I bowed, and made my way to his quarters. I knew as I opened his door that I might be entering more than appeared upon the surface, but the excitement of the game was worth the hazard,—even the hazard of a possible delay,—and I pushed the door wide, and went in.

The Huron was sitting in the middle of the floor, handling his calumet with some ostentation. The Hurons were but the remnant of a race, for Iroquois butchery had reduced them in numbers and in spirit, but even in their exile they preserved a splendor of carriage that made the Ottawas, who camped beside them here, seem but a poor and shuffling people. This man was a comely specimen, and he was decked to do honor to the moment. His blanket was clean, and his head freshly shaved except for a bristling ridge that ran, like a cock's comb, across his crown, and that dripped sunflower oil over his shoulders.

He handed me his calumet, and we smoked for the time required by ceremony, then he rose, and drew two beaver skins from the folds of his blanket.

"The sun has smiled upon us," he said, with a certain sedate pomposity which, like the black crest on his head, might be ludicrous in itself, but seemed fitting enough in him. "I speak for my people who are in camp upon the island. We have been upon strange rivers, and over mountains where the very name of

Frenchman is unknown. Yet we have returned, and we come to you at once, as the partridge to her young. We are glad to see a Frenchman's face again. We confirm what we have said by giving these beavers."

I smoked for a moment, then leaned over and kicked the skins into the corner. "Why these words?" I asked, with a slow shrug. "Does the leg thank the arm for its service? Does the mouth give flatteries and presents to the tongue? We of Michillimackinac are all of one body. My brother must be drunk with the bad rum of the English traders, that he should come to me in this way. No, if my brother has anything to say, let him think it aloud without ceremony, as if speaking to his own heart. Let him save his beavers till he goes to treat with strangers."

There was a long silence. The Huron wrapped his blanket closer, and looked at me, while I stared back as unwinkingly. His face was a mask, but I thought—as I have thought before and since when at the council fire—that there was amusement in the very blankness of his gaze, and that my effort to outdo him at his own mummery somewhat taxed his gravity. When he spoke at last he told his story concisely.

A half hour later, I went in search of Cadillac. He heard my step on the crunching gravel, and when I was still rods away, he laid his finger on his lips for silence. I went to him rather resentfully, for I had had no mind to shout my news in the street of the settlement, and I thought that he was acting like a child. But he took no notice of my pique, and clapped me on the shoulder as if we were pot-companions.

"Hush, man," he whispered fretfully. "Your look is fairly shouting the news abroad. No need to keep your tongue sealed, when you carry such a tell-tale face. So they have an Iroquois?"

I dropped my shoulder away from under his hand. "If that is the news that you say I shouted, no harm is done,—save to my honor. No, they have no Iroquois."

Cadillac stopped. "No Iroquois!" he echoed heavily.

"No, monsieur. They have an Englishman."

It was as if I had struck him. He stepped back, and his face grew dull red.

"A spy?"

I shook my head. I could feel my blood pumping hard, but I answered by rote. "Not by the Huron's story."

The commandant snapped his fingers. "That for his story! As idle as wind in the grass!" he snorted. "But what did he say?"

I grew as laconic as the Huron. "That they left here as a hunting party," I said categorically.

"That they soon joined a war party of Algonquins, and went with them to the English frontier. I could make little of his geography, but I infer that they went in the direction of Boston,—though not so far. There the Algonquins fell upon a village, where they scalped and burned to their fill. He says that the Hurons remained neutral, and this prisoner, he maintains, is theirs by purchase. They bought him from the Algonquins for two white dressed deerskins, and they have treated him well. They have found him a man of spirit and importance, and they ask that you make a suitable feast in honor of what they have done. The Huron is waiting for your answer."

Cadillac had listened nodding, and his reply was ready. "Tell him that they must bring the prisoner to-morrow early,—soon after daybreak. Tell him that Monsieur de la Mothe-Cadillac knows his part, and that the kettles shall be full of dog-meat, and the young men painted and ready for the dancing." He spoke rapidly, his hand on his sword, and his great shoulders lifted as if eager to meet their new burden. He turned to me with a smile that would have conquered enmity in a wolf. "This is great news, Montlivet. I could almost ask you to drink the health of the Baron, and all his scurvy, seditious crew. For, look you, even if the Englishman is a spy, and the Hurons have brought him here to make a secret treaty, why, he is in our hands, and Boston is a continent away. He will have opportunity to learn some French before he goes back to his codfish friends. What say you, monsieur?"

I laughed rather ruefully. I saw that the game was to be exciting, and I had never been backward at a sport. Yet I knew that I must turn my face from it.

"What do I say?" I repeated. "Nothing, monsieur, but that I am a trader, not a diplomat, and that to-morrow I must be on my way to the west. I will take your answer to the Huron. Monsieur, I hope you will sleep long and sweetly to-night. You will need a clear head to-morrow."

Cadillac looked at me, and wagged his head. "Good-day to you, trader," he said, with one of his noiseless laughs. "How well you must sleep who have no thought beyond your beaver skins,—even though you do carry brandy and muskets hidden in your cargo. Never mind, never mind. Keep your secrets. Only see that Father Carheil does not smell your brandy, or I may be forced to send you back to Montreal."

CHAPTER II

THE CAPTIVE

I woke the next morning, saying, "I must keep out of this," and I knew that I had said it in my slumber. It is pitiful that a man should be so infirm of will that he need cosset his resolution in this fashion, and I kicked the dogs from the door of my cabin, and went out to meet the world in a bad humor.

It was a still world in the great sky and water spaces, but a noisy one upon the shore. Early as it was—the night dusk was still lingering—the kettles were simmering, and the Indians decked for a holiday. The sense of approaching action was powder to my nostrils, and added to my spleen; so though I went down upon the beach, and joined Cadillac and his officers, I was but surly company, and soon turned my back upon them, to stare off at the lake.

It was a breezeless morning, and the lake was without ripple. It lay like one of the metal mirrors that we sell the Indians, a lustreless gray sheet that threw back twisted pictures. I looked off at the east, and thought of the dull leagues that lay behind me, and the uncounted ones before, and I realized that the morning air was cold, and that I hated the dark, secret water that led through this strange land. Yet, even as I scowled at it, the disk of the sun climbed over the island's rim, and laid a shining pathway through the gray,—a pathway that ended at my feet.

I felt my pulse quicken. After all, it was a fair world, and the air, though keen, was a cordial. I let my gaze travel up that shining, glimmering track, and while I looked it was suddenly flecked with canoes. Long and brown, they swung down toward me like strong-winged birds upheld by the path of the sunrise.

I looked back at the Indians. They, too, had seen the canoes, but they made no sound of welcome. Bedizened and wolf-eyed, they stood in formal ranks as attentive as children at a pantomime. In a moment the canoes took clearer shape, and the shine of the paddles

could be seen as the flat of the blades slanted toward the light. The men at the paddles were indistinguishable, crouching shapes, but their prisoner was standing. He stood in the foremost canoe, and as his figure was outlined against the sun I saw that he was rigid as a mummy. I turned to Cadillac. To see a white man bound! I could feel the thongs eating into my own flesh.

"They have bound the Englishman!" I protested. "Let us hope that they are not daring enough—or crazed enough—to make him sing to grace their triumph."

But he laughed at my tone. "What does it matter?" he shrugged. "These wards of mine—my happy family—must have their fête in their own fashion, or they will ask that I pay the piper. Well, whatever they do, the prisoner is in our hands, and it will be long before he escapes them. Yes, listen,—oh, the play-acting dogs!—they are making him sing now."

He had a keen ear, for, even to my forest-trained sense, the sound came but faintly. The crowd hushed its breathing, and the air was unwholesomely still. A dog yelped, and an Indian silenced it with a kick. Each paddle-stroke threw the canoes into sharper relief, and we could distinguish lank arms, and streaming hair. The prisoner's voice echoed as clear as if he were in some great playhouse, and were singing to gain the plaudits of a friendly throng.

I felt my blood tingling in my fingers' ends. It was a brave song, bravely sung. I could not understand the English words, but the sound was rollicking with defiance. It was a glove thrown in our faces; the challenge of a brave man to a cowardly foe.

"The plucky beggar!" I said half aloud, and I set my teeth hard.

But Cadillac was nudging my elbow. "You said that the prisoner was a man of importance," he accused, with a perplexed frown. "But, listen! He has the voice of a boy."

I was greedy to hear, so, with a wave of the hand, I shook Cadillac away. But, in truth, I was disturbed. The tones were certainly boyish.

The canoes came within bowshot, and the hush that held the camp suddenly broke like the release of pent waters. There were

yells and stamping, the smash of tom-toms, and a scattering salvo of musketry. It was a united roar that shut out from our consciousness the thought of the calm sky and the silent water.

The canoes had come as unswervingly as arrows, and the one that held the prisoner landed at my feet. I looked up, and met his eyes, and I swept my hat from my head.

"You are among friends," I called, not knowing that I did so.

It was a foolish speech, since the prisoner could not understand; but I suppose that my tone was kind, for it apparently gave him courage. At least, a flush that might have been the color of returning hope rose in his cheeks. I was relieved at his appearance, for he was not the little lad that his song had made me fear. He was slim and beardless, but there were sorrow and understanding in his look that could not come with childhood. For the rest, he was dark and gaunt from exposure and privation. His rough woolen suit, leather-lined, hung loosely on him, but he wore it with a jauntiness that matched the bravado of his song.

Cadillac came forward in welcome. He was always an orator that the Indians themselves envied, and now his rhetoric was as unhampered as though he thought that the prisoner was following each flowing syllable. As he unbound the stiffened arms—they were pitifully thin and small, I thought—he called all mythology to witness his deep regret that this indignity should have been offered to his brother of the white race. I followed him and listened, storing away metaphors even as I carried beads in my cargo. I should need all the eloquence at my command before the close of the summer, and my own tongue was always too direct of speech.

Cadillac felt me at his elbow, and when he saw my listening face he stopped to give me a slow wink. "Will monsieur turn pupil to learn swaggering?" he asked, with an upward cock of the eye. "I had thought him too old for a school."

I bowed, and hated myself for my lagging wits that would not furnish a retort. "Never too old to sit at your feet," I assured him, and I went away knowing that I had been slow, and that the honors were with him, but knowing, also, that somehow I liked the man,

and that I should drink his health when I opened my next tierce of canary.

I went to find my men, and it was time that I bestirred myself. License was in order, and the revel assaulted eyes, ears, and nose, till a white man was wise if he forsook his dignity, and ran like a fox to cover. The air was surfeiting with the steam of food. Dog-meat bubbled in great caldrons, and maize cakes crackled on hot stones. A bear had been brought in, and was being hacked in pieces to add to the broth. The women did this, and as I passed them they stopped, with their hands dripping red, and shook their wampum necklaces at me, and pointed meaningly toward a neighboring hut, where I had been told that rum could be bought if you were discreet in choosing your occasion. I tossed them a handful of small coins, and warned them in Huron that if they molested my men I should report them to the commandant. I felt yet more haste to see my canoes under way.

I was plunging on in this fashion when Father Carheil plucked at my sleeve. "Do you think you are running from the Iroquois?" he grumbled, and he pushed his irritable, brilliant face close to mine. It was an old face, lined and withered, and the hair above it was scanty and gray, but never have I met a look that showed more fire and unconquerable will. "The commandant wishes you," he went on. "He asked me to fetch you. I should not have complied—it is I who should ask services of him—but I wished to speak to you on my own account. Monsieur, do you know these men that you have in your employ?"

I nodded. "As well as I know my own heart. They are my habitants."

"Your habitants! Then you have a seigniory? Why do you not stay there as the king wishes?"

I shook my head at him. "We use large words in this new land, father. Yes, I have a seigniory. That is, I own some barren acres near Montreal that I can occupy only at risk of my scalp. As to the king, I think he wishes me to trade,—at least I carry his license to that effect. But what are my men doing?"