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A Canadian Heroine, Volume 1 A Novel

Harry, Mrs. Coghill

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"Questa chiese Lucia in suo dimando,
E disse: Or ha bisogno il tuo fedele
Di te, e io a te lo raccomando."
— *Inferno. Canto II.*

"Qu'elles sont belles, nos campagnes;
En Canada qu'on vit content!
Salut ô sublimes montagnes,
Bords du superbe St. Laurent!
Habitant de cette contrée
Que nature veut embellir,
Tu peux marcher tête levée,
Ton pays doit t'enorgueillir."
— *J. Bedard.*

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A CANADIAN HEROINE.

CHAPTER I.

It was near sunset, and the season was early summer. Every tree was in full leaf, but the foliage had still the exquisite freshness of its first tints, undimmed by dust or scorching heat. The grass was, for the present, as green as English grass, but the sky overhead was more glorious than any that ever bent above an English landscape. So far away it rose overhead, where colour faded into infinite space, that the eye seemed to look up and up, towards the Gate of Heaven, and only through mortal weakness to fail in reaching it. Low down around the horizon there was no blue, but pure, pale green depths, where clouds floated, [Pg 2] magnificent in deep rosy and golden splendour. Under such skies the roughest landscape, the wildest forest, softens into beauty; such light and colour, like fairy robes, glorify the most commonplace; but here, earth lent her own charms to be decked by heaven.

Through a quiet landscape went the river—the grand silent flood which by-and-by, many miles further on its course, would make Niagara. Here it flowed calmly, reflecting the sunset, a giant with its energies untaxed and its passions unroused—a kindly St. Christopher, yet capable of being transformed into a destroying Thor. Far away, seen over a low projecting point of land, white sails gleamed now and then, as ships moved upon the lake from whence the river came; and nearer, upon the great stream itself, a few boats were idling. In the bend formed by the point, and quite near the lake, lay a small town, its wooden wharves and warehouses lining the shore for some distance. Lower down, the bank rose high, dropping precipitously to the water's edge; and nearer still, the precipice changed to a steep, but green and wooded bank, and here, on the summit of the bank, stood Mrs. Costello's cottage.

It was a charming white nest, with a broad verandah all embowered in green, so placed as to [Pg 3] look out upon the river through a screen of boughs and flowers. If you had seen Mrs. Costello and her daughter sitting upon the verandah, as they were tolerably sure to be found every day while summer lasted, you would have owned that it would be hard to find a prettier picture set in a prettier frame.

This evening they were there alone. Mrs. Costello had her worktable placed at the end nearest the river, and her rocking-chair beside it. Some knitting was in her hands, but she could not knit, for her ball of wool was being idly wound and unwound round her daughter's fingers.

Sitting on a footstool, leaning back against her mother's knee, was this daughter—a child loved (it could almost be seen at a glance) with an absorbing, passionate love. A girl of seventeen, just between child and woman, who seemed to have been a baby but yesterday, and who still, in the midst of her new womanly grace, kept her caressing baby ways. Something unusual, not only in degree but in kind, belonged to her brilliant beauty, and set it off. The marvellous blackness of hair and eyes was so soft in its depth, the tint of her skin so transparent in its duskiness, her slight [Pg 4] figure so flexible, so exquisite in its outlines, that it was impossible not to wonder what the type was which produced so perfect an example. Spanish it was said to be, but the child was Canadian by birth, and her mother English; it was clear that whatever race had bestowed Lucia's dower of beauty, it had come to her through her father.

Mother and daughter often sat as now, silent and idle both; Lucia dreaming after her girlish fashion, and Mrs. Costello content to wait and let her life be absorbed in her child's. But to-night Lucia was dreaming of England, the far-away "home" which she had never seen, but of which almost all her elder friends spoke, and where her mother's childhood and girlhood had been passed. She still leaned her head back lazily as she began to talk.

"Are English sunsets as lovely as ours, Mamma?"

Mrs. Costello smiled. "I can't tell," she said; "they are as lovely to me,—but I only see them in memory."

"You have often talked about going home, when shall it be?"

"I have talked of *your* going, not of mine — *that* will never be."

"Mamma!" Lucia raised her head. She looked [Pg 5] at her mother inquiringly, but somehow she felt that Mrs. Costello could not talk to her just then. A troubled expression crossed her own face for a moment, then she put down the ball of wool and laid her arms caressingly round her mother's waist.

But both again remained silent for many minutes, so silent that the faint wash of the river against the bank sounded plainly, and a woodpecker could be heard making his last tap-tap on a tree by the garden-gate.

By-and-by Mrs. Costello spoke again, as if there had been no interruption. "But about this picnic, Lucia; do you think it would be a great sacrifice to give it up?"

"A great sacrifice? Why, mamma, you must think me a baby to ask such a question. I stayed away from the best one last summer without breaking my heart."

"Last summer I thought you too young for large parties, but this year I have let you go — and, indeed, I do not forbid your going this time. Understand that clearly, my child. I have only fancy, not reason, to set against your wishes."

"Mother, you are not fanciful. Since you wish [Pg 6] me to stay at home, I wish it also. Forget the picnic altogether."

She sprang up, kissed her mother's forehead, and darted away to the further end of the verandah, bursting out into a gay song as she leaned over to gather a spray of pale prairie roses that climbed up the trellis-work. The pretty scentless blossoms were but just caught, when a rattling of wheels was heard on the stony lane which led from the high-road to the cottage.

"Who can be coming now? Margery is out, mamma, and the gate is fastened; I must go and open it."

She darted into the house on her errand — for the principal entrance was in the gable end of the building — but before she had had time to cross the parlour and hall to the outer door, the little garden-gate opened, and a very pretty woman in a grey cloak and straw hat

came through, and up the verandah steps with the air of a person perfectly at home.

Mrs. Costello rose to meet her with an exclamation.

"Mrs. Bellairs! We never thought of it being you. Lucia is gone to open the gate." [Pg 7]

"I found the little one open; so I left Bella to take care of Bob, and came round. In fact, I ought not to be here at all, but as I wanted to persuade you about to-morrow, I ran away the moment dinner was over, and must run back again instantly."

"Sit down, at any rate, while you *are* here."

She sat down, and taking off her hat, threw it on the floor.

"How delicious this is! I believe you don't know what heat means. I have been half dead all day, and not a moment's rest, I assure you, with the people continually coming to ask some stupid question or to borrow something. The house is half stripped now and I fully expect that before to-morrow night it will be emptied of everything movable in it."

"You are surely getting up something more elaborate than usual; do you expect to have so much pleasure?"

"Oh, I suppose the young people do. Of course, staid matrons like you and me," with a gay laugh, "cannot be quite so sanguine; but, however, they do expect great fun, and I came to *implore* you to [Pg 8] let Lucia come. I assure you I won't answer for the consequences if she does not."

"Lucia shall go if she wishes it." Mrs. Costello spoke gravely, and stopped abruptly. She resumed, "You know I never leave home; and it may be excused to a mother who sees nothing of the world, to fear it a little for her only child."

"*Such* a child, too! She is growing perfectly lovely. But, then, dear Mrs. Costello, the very idea of calling our tiny backwood's society, 'the world;' and as for Lucia, if you *will* not come with her, I promise, at any rate, to take the same care of her as I will of my Flo when she is big enough to face our great world."

She spoke laughing, but with some earnestness under the sparkle of her bright eyes; and immediately afterwards rose, saying, "I suppose Bella cannot leave Bob, and Lucia will not leave Bella, so I must go to them; and if Lucia pleases, she may come to-morrow?"

"Yes, yes; I am foolish. She shall come, I promise you for her. And, indeed, I ought to thank you also."

"No, no; I can't expect to be thanked for [Pg 9] committing a theft. Good-bye. I shall send Bella to fetch her. Good-bye."

She took up her hat, gave her friend a kiss, and ran down the steps and out again, through the wicket by which she had entered. A minute after the sound of her little carriage rolling away was heard, and Lucia came back flushed and puzzled.

"But, mamma, you have been overpersuaded. Indeed; I do not want to go."

"I think you do, darling; or will do by-and-by. I have quite changed my mind, and promised Mrs. Bellairs to send you to her in the morning; so now all you have to do is to see that your things are ready. Two toilettes to prepare! What an event for such a country girl as you! Come in and let us see."

"Mamma, you know my things are all ready. I don't want to go in. I don't want to go."

"Lucia! Are *you* changeable, also, then?"

"No, mamma. At least not without cause."

Mrs. Costello smiled, "What is the cause at present?"

Lucia moved impatiently. "Oh, it is so stupid!" she said.

"What is stupid? A picnic?" [Pg 10]

"No, people," and she laughed half shyly, half saucily, and blushed deeper still.

"What people?"

"Bella has been telling me — ;"

"Telling you what, my child? That people are stupid?"

Lucia sat down again in her old place, and pulled her mother back into hers. Then with her two elbows resting on Mrs. Costello's lap, and her red cheek hidden by her hands, she answered, with a comical sort of disdain and half-affected anger,

"Mamma, just think. At Mrs. Bellairs' to-day, at dinner, Mr. Percy was asking questions about what was going to be done to-morrow, and he did not seem to think, Bella said, that the picnic would be much fun, but he was greatly amused by the idea of dancing in a half-finished house, and wanted to know where they would find enough ladies for partners; so Mr. Bellairs said there were plenty of partners in the neighbourhood, and pretty ones, too; and Mr. Percy made some speech about being already quite convinced of the beauty of the Cacouna ladies. You know the kind of thing a man would say when Mrs. Bellairs and Bella were there. But Mr. Bellairs told him he had not yet seen a fair [Pg 11] specimen; but that there was a little half Spanish girl here who would show him what beauty meant. Mamma, was it not dreadfully stupid of him?" And Lucia, in spite of her indignation, could not restrain a laugh as she looked, half shy, half saucy, into her mother's face.

Mrs. Costello laughed too; but there was as deep a flush on her cheek as on her daughter's, and her heart throbbed painfully.

"Well," she said, "but this *rara avis* was not named?"

"Yes she was. Oh! I can't tell you all; but you know Maurice was there, and Mr. Bellairs told Mr. Percy that he ought to be the best qualified to describe her, because he saw her every day. Then Mr. Percy asked what was her name, and Mr. Bellairs told him. But when Mr. Percy asked Maurice something, he only said, 'Do you believe people *can* be described, Mr. Percy? I don't; and if I did, I should not make a catalogue of a lady's qualities for the benefit of others.'"

"Well done, Lucia, most correctly reported. Who has been telling tales?"

An unsuspected listener stepped out with these words from the dark parlour on to the verandah; [Pg 12] but Lucia, springing up at the sound of his voice, flew past him and disappeared.

He came forward, "Don't be angry, Mrs. Costello. I met Margery at the gate, and she sent me in. I assure you I did not hear more than the last sentence; yet, you see I met with a listener's fate."

"I *don't* see it at all. On the contrary, you did hear good of yourself."

"I am glad you think so. Lucia is to be with Mrs. Bellairs tomorrow?"

"Yes. She says at present that she will not, but we shall see."

"I left early, and met Mrs. Bellairs and Miss Latour on the way. They told me they had been here."

Maurice leaned against a pillar of the verandah and was silent, his eyes turned to the door through which Lucia had vanished.

The new guest was much too intimate for Mrs. Costello to dream of "making conversation." She sat quite still looking out.

By this time sunset had entirely faded from the sky, and a few stars were beginning to twinkle faintly; but the rising moon, herself invisible, threw [Pg 13] a lovely silver brightness over the river and made a flitting sail glimmer out snowy white as it went silently with a zigzag course up the stream. Between the river and the cottage every object began to be visible with that cold distinctness of outline which belongs to clear moonlight,—every rail of the garden fence, every plant that grew beyond the shadow of the building. A tall acacia-tree which stood on one side waved its graceful leaves in the faint breeze, and caught the light on its long clusters of creamy blossom.

Everything was so peaceful that there seemed, even to herself, a strange discord between the scene within and the heavy pain that sunk deep into her heart this evening—a trembling sense of dread—a passionate yet impotent desire to escape. She pressed her hand upon her heart. The motion roused her from her reverie which indeed had lasted but a minute—one of those long minutes when we in one glance seem to retrace years of the past, and to make a fruitless effort to pierce the veil of the future. She rose, and, bidding her companion "Come in," stepped into the little parlour.

A shaded lamp had been brought in and placed on the table, but the flame was turned down so as to [Pg 14] throw only a glimmering light just around it. Mrs. Costello turned it up brightly, and opening the door of the adjoining room, called Lucia, who came, slow and reluctant, at the summons. Maurice pushed forward a little chintz-covered chair into its accustomed place by the table, and looked at the wilful girl as much as to say, "Be reasonable and make friends," but she did not choose to see.

"I can't sit indoors," she said, "it is too hot;" so she went and sat down on the doorstep.

Maurice gave a little impatient sigh, and dropped into a chair which stood opposite to Mrs. Costello, but turned so that without positively looking round, he could see the soft flow of Lucia's muslin dress, and the outline of her head and shoulders.

He had brought, as usual, various odds and ends of news, scraps of European politics or gossip, and morsels of home intelligence, such as women who do not read newspapers like to be told by those who do, and he began to talk about them, but with no interest in what he said; completely preoccupied with that obstinate figure in the doorway. By-and-by, however, the figure changed its position; the head was gradually turned more towards the speakers, and Maurice's as gradually was averted [Pg 15] until the two attitudes were completely reversed; he and Mrs. Costello appeared to be engrossed in the subject of a conversation which had now grown animated, while Lucia, from her retreat, stole more and more frequent glances at the visitor. At length she rose softly, and stealing, with the shy step of a child who knows it has been naughty, to her own chair, she slipped into it. A half smile came to Maurice's lips, but he knew his old playfellow's moods too well to take the least notice of her movement, and even when she asked him a question, he simply answered it, and did not even look at her in doing so.

An hour passed. Lucia had entirely recovered from her little fit of sulkiness, and, to the great content of Maurice, was, if possible, even more sweet and winning than usual; but nothing had been said of the next day's plans. When the young man rose to leave, however, Lucia followed him out to the verandah to look at the moonlight.

"We shall have a fine day to-morrow" he said.

"Oh, Maurice," she answered, quickly, as if she had been waiting for the opportunity of speaking, "I am sure mamma does not want me to go, and I would so much rather stay at home. Will you go and tell Mrs. Bellairs in the morning for me?" [Pg 16]

"Impossible! Why Lucia, this is a mere fancy of yours."

"Indeed it is not. I am quite in earnest."

"But, my dear child, Mrs. Bellairs has your mother's promise, and I do not see how you can break a positive engagement without better reason."

She stood silent, looking down.

"Are you thinking of that foolish conversation at dinner to-day? I wonder Mrs. Bellairs should have repeated it."

"It was Bella Latour who told me."

"Ah," said Maurice, "I forgot her. Of course it was. Well, at any rate, think no more of it."

"That's very easily said," she answered dolorously "but I do think it's not right," she added with energy, the hot colour rushing into her cheeks, "to speak about one so. It is quite impertinent."

Maurice laughed. "Upon my word I believe very few young ladies would agree with you; however, I assure you it would be giving the enemy an advantage to stay away to-morrow, and I suppose, if I constitute myself your highness's body-guard, you will not be afraid of any more impertinence of the same kind." [Pg 17]

He said "Good-night," and ran down the steps. As he passed along the path under the verandah where she stood, she took one of the half-faded roses from her belt and flung it at him. He caught it and with mock gallantry pressed it to his heart; but as he turned through the wicket and along the footpath which led to his home close by, he continued twirling the flower in his fingers. Once it dropped, and without thinking he stooped, and picked it up. He carried it into the house with him, and into his own room, where he laid it down upon his writing-table and forgot it.

Meanwhile, Margery had fastened doors and windows at the cottage, and soon all was silent and dark, except the glimmer of Mrs.

Costello's lamp which often burned far into the night. Lucia had been long asleep when her mother stole into her room for that last look which it was her habit to take before she lay down. It was a little white chamber which had been fitted up twelve years before for a child's use; but the child had grown almost into a woman, and there were traces of her tastes and occupations all about. There was a little book-shelf, where Puss in Boots, and Goldsmith's History of England, still kept their places, though [Pg 18] the Princess had stepped in between them; there was a drawing of the cottage executed under Maurice's teaching; here was a little work-basket, and there a half-written note. Enough moonlight stole in through the window to show distinctly the lovely dark face resting on the pillow, and surrounded by long hair, glossy, and black as jet. Mrs. Costello stood silently by the bedside.

A kind of shudder passed over her. "She is lovely," she said to herself; "but that terrible beauty! If she had had my pale skin and hair, I should have feared less; but she has nothing of that beauty from me. Yet perhaps it is the best; the whole mental nature may be mine, as the whole physical is — —" Her hand pressed strongly upon her heart. "I have been at peace so long," she went on, "yet I always knew trouble must come again, and through *her*; but if it were only for me, it would be nothing. Now *she* must suffer. I had thought she might escape. But it is the old story, the sins of the fathers — — Can no miseries of mine be enough to free her?"

She turned away into her own room, and shut the door softly, so as not to wake her child; yet firmly, as if she would shut out even that child from all share in her solitary burden. [Pg 19]

CHAPTER II.

Maurice's prediction of a fine day proved true. At twelve o'clock the weather was as brilliant as possible; the sky blue and clear, the river blue and glittering. The *Mermaid*, a small steamer, lay in the wharf, gaily decorated with flags; and throngs of people began to gather at the landing and on the deck. Among a group of the most important guests, stood the acknowledged leader of the expedition, the 'Queen of Cacouna,' Mrs. Bellairs. She was talking fast and merrily to everybody in turn, giving an occasional glance to the provision baskets as they were carried on board, and meantime keeping an anxious look-out along the bank of the river, for the appearance of her own little carriage, [Pg 20] which ought to have been at the rendezvous long ago.

A very handsome man stood beside her. He was of a type the more striking because specimens of it so rarely found their way in to the fresh, vigorous, hard-working Colonial society. Remarkably tall, yet perfectly proportioned, the roughest backwoodsman might have envied his apparent physical strength; polished in manner to a degree which just, and only just, escaped effeminacy, the most spoiled beauty might have been proud of his homage. At present, however, he stood lazily enough, smiling a little at his hostess' vivacity, exchanging a word or two with her husband, or following the direction of her eyes along the road. At last a cloud of dust appeared. "Here they are, I believe," cried Mrs. Bellairs. "Ah! Maurice, I ought to have sent you, two girls never are to be trusted." Mr. Percy turned round. He was conscious of a little amused curiosity about this Backwoods beauty, and, at hearing this second appeal to Maurice where she was concerned, it occurred to him to look more attentively than he had done before at the person appealed to. They were standing opposite to each other, and they had [Pg 21] three attributes in common. Both were tall, both young, and both handsome. Percy was twenty-eight, and looked more than his age. Maurice was twenty-four, and looked less. Percy was fair—his features were admirable—his expression and manner had actually no other fault than that of being too still and languid. Maurice had brown hair, now a little tossed and disordered (for he had been busy all morning on board the boat), a pair of brown eyes of singular beau-

ty, clear and true, and a tolerable set of features, which, like his manner, varied considerably, according to the humour he happened to be in. Percy was a man of the world, understood and respected "les convenances," and never shocked anybody. Maurice knew nothing about the world, and having no more refined rule of conduct than the simple one of right and wrong, which is, perhaps, too lofty for every-day use, he occasionally blundered in his behaviour to people he did not like. At present, indeed, for some reason, by no means clear to himself, he returned the Englishman's glance in anything but a friendly manner.

Bob, the grey pony, trotted down the wharf with his load. Half-a-dozen idlers rushed forwards to [Pg 22] help the two girls out of the carriage, and into the boat. Bob marched off in charge of a groom; the paddles began to turn, the flags waved, the band struck up, and the boat moved quickly away down, the stream.

Mrs. Bellairs, relieved from her watch, had sunk into a chair placed on deck, and sent her husband to bring the truants. Maurice remained beside her, and when the rest of the group had a little separated, he bent down and said to her,

"Dear Mrs. Bellairs, don't scold Lucia if the delay is her fault. She had some objection to leaving her mother to-day, and even wanted me to excuse her to you."

"She is a spoiled child," was the answer. "But, however, I will forgive her this once for your sake."

Mr. Percy certainly had not *listened*, but as certainly he had heard this short dialogue. He was rather bored; he did not find Cacouna very amusing, and had not yet found even that last resource of idle men—a woman to flirt with. He was in the very mood to be tempted by anything that promised the slightest distraction, and there was undeniably something irritating in the idea of there being in the neighbourhood one sole and [Pg 23] unapproachable beauty, and of that one being given up by common consent to a boy, a mere Canadian boor! Of course he could not understand that no one else could have seen this matter in the light he did; that everybody, or nearly everybody, thought of Maurice and Lucia as near neighbours and old playfellows, and no more. So he felt a very slight stir of indignation, which, in the dearth of other sensations, was not disagreeable.