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HOLIDAYS OF THE FRENCH CANADIANS

One cannot mingle in French-Canadian society, either in circles which maintain the elegances of the old *régime*, or among the peasantry, without being impressed with the continual manifestation of that gay disposition—proof against the sharpest trials of fortune—which they inherit from their Gallic ancestors. Buoyancy of spirits forms an important element of their character, and has helped to sustain them under the hardships and toils of the wilderness, as well as amid the rigors and trials of their early history in *La Nouvelle France*. This felicitous temperament displays itself on all occasions, whether jovial or trying; and its influence in giving a refinement and final polish to their manners, as well as in sweetening the general current of their experiences, cannot be overestimated. They have certainly proved themselves worthy of the title of the children of gay France, and under circumstances which would have put the fortitude of their relatives in the old country (*la mère patrie*) to the severest strain. Whether on a toilsome march into the wilderness for the rude objects of the chase, facing the most repellent labors, or engaged in more perilous enterprises of war with the Indians or English colonists, their cheerfulness and lightheartedness was ever apparent. On the expeditions of the *voyageurs* and *courseurs de bois*, by many a broad river broken with fierce rapids, on the lake beset with storms as violent as ocean tempests, on the remote inland waters of the continent, or tramping over the snow-covered wilderness on snow-shoes, and drawing heavily laden toboggans, the same disposition, sunny and full of cheer, sustained them throughout their arduous course. At home, within the circle of the more peaceful village life, this spirit blossoms out in social games and pastimes, which serve to vary the monotony of the long winter nights, or give additional zest to the enjoyment of summer days. Pleasure parties at the picturesque waterfalls, fruit-gatherings in the autumn, sugar-making in the bracing spring air, with “bees” for united labor, house-raising, the clearing of land, flax-dressing and sheep-shearing, all furnish abundant occasion for the display of this cheerful temperament, which gives wings to toil, and induces, through the rendering of mutual assistance, a wide-reaching friendliness full of comfort and joy.

Their love of singing is also a national characteristic. They rarely meet in groups for work or sport without chanting some well-known songs of the

country, with charming refrain, in which every one joins. And some of those songs are indeed delightful, such as: "*Derrière chez nous ya t'un étang,*" and "*Lui ya longtemps que je t'aime,*" etc.

Above all occasions of pleasure, for both young and old, are the great religious and national festivals—Christmas, New Year's Day, Twelfth Day, and Saint John the Baptist's Day—into the celebration and enjoyment of which the race enters with all its enthusiasm and fervor.

Christmas (*le jour de Noël*) is looked forward to with peculiar delight, and no pains spared to honor it. It is observed as a holiday apart from sacred character as a *fête d'obligation*. No matter how cold or stormy the night preceding, the custom is to close the houses and repair to the churches and take part in the imposing service, known as midnight mass (*la messe de minuit*). At this time the people are moved to great fervor in their anxiety to fittingly commemorate the birth of Christ. Among the scenes pertaining to this night were formerly the little gleams of light, to be seen at intervals for miles in the lonely country districts, or throughout towns and cities, at a time when gas-lighting was unknown, indicating the progress of pious worshipers through deep snowy roads towards that grand centre of desire, the church, at whose portals the lanterns were extinguished, to be relighted after mass. If the distance were very great, they traveled in *carrioles* or *berlines*, also bearing lanterns.

The church itself presents on such nights an attractive and imposing appearance. Lighted candles and lamps arranged in a manner not only to illuminate the building, but to enhance the effect of its decorations and to arouse feelings appropriate to the hour, shine everywhere throughout the edifice. The principal object of interest is the wax figure of the infant Jesus, beside the altar, upon which all the religious art available is expended to produce the highest effect; and upon the radiant countenance brilliant lights are concentrated, to kindle the devotional sentiment of the worshipers. Artificial bouquets of varied colors, the handiwork of the daughters of the most prominent citizens, occupy conspicuous places on the altar; and the altar-cloth, which is a piece of elaborate workmanship, is also, usually, from the hands of some fair parishioner. When the service is ended the worshipers return home to partake of a collation (*réveillon*), which is generally of bountiful character. The interest of the children is aroused long before the celebration, by the promise of attending the midnight mass as a reward for good behavior, and, as an after consideration of no small moment, a share in *le réveillon*.

Of late years this service is less in vogue than formerly, many parishes dispensing with it altogether, owing to the advantage taken of the absence

of the farmers (*habitans*) by thieves, whose facilities for marauding are not a little augmented by the fact that in retired parishes the doors and windows are never fastened. And in the cities it also has been generally discontinued on account of the deeds of the riotous element on such occasions.

Many traditions and superstitions regarding supernatural events on the night preceding Christmas continue current from the foundation of the colony among the peasant class. The old French emigrants brought these from Normandy and Brittany as a part of their mental outfit, planting them in Canadian soil, which has proved every way propitious to their vigorous growth and extensive spread. Two centuries have failed to materially change their form and color, while making considerable additions to their number, amid the novel and startling conditions of the New World. But this is the history of the ignorant of every nation. Among the mysterious phenomena characterizing these sacred festivals in the popular imagination, the following are typical specimens :

On Christmas eve the entire animal creation is gifted with the faculty of speech, which is used in criticising the conduct of the human race towards it, giving praise or blame, as deserved ; resolutions are made among them to perform grudgingly or inefficiently such work as is required by unreasonable masters, and, on the other hand, to give to those kind and gentle, fidelity and devotion. It is a no less common belief that the lucky person born on Christmas will never know want. In the remote districts young girls who are eager to learn their matrimonial prospects betake themselves on Christmas eve, at midnight, to the hen-coop, and strike the door three times, when, if the cock crow, it foretells their early marriage ; but, if the response come from a disturbed hen, the bridal is to be indefinitely postponed. The pangs of disappointment or the ecstasies of delight which have followed this experiment would fill volumes.

Another superstition is, if a young girl enter a barn at midnight with a ball of wool in her hand, throws it up in the air, and suddenly turns around, placing both hands behind her, and the wool should fall into them again, then the image of her future husband will instantly appear to her. If the trial be a failure, there is much unhappiness for the rest of the year. There are, however, but few young girls, whatever their desire, who have the courage to take a midnight and midwinter stroll to a barn, even sustained by the hope of a lover's vision ; but there are a few heroic instances credibly current among the people, and the writer has been gravely assured of the complete success of several such trials.

At the same time of the year and hour of the night, the spirits of the dead are believed to visit the churches, ascend the aisles to the altar, and

deposit an offering; the person doomed to die first will be warned by the presence of his image in the procession. There are many other traditions, but lack of space prevents their being recorded here.

From time immemorial the French-Canadian race has taken advantage of the midwinter season, when the exacting labors of field, bush and barn have ceased to weary the honest *habitant*, to dispense with toil, and speed the enjoyments of life, with all the resources at command, either in his own home, or at the festive hearth of his neighbor. This season is made merry with songs, dances, games and stories, and forms memorable milestones in the path of life, lightening the arduous routine of the peasant's daily duties during the rigorous Canadian winter.

The most notable holiday of the year is New Year's day (*le Jour de l'An*), rendered specially attractive by tradition and the recollection of ancient customs, many of which are intertwined with religious and domestic observances. Free rein is given to the spirits of the people as the last night of the old year wears on, its successor being as joyously hailed as though it were the advent of a valued friend. Then comes one of the most characteristic and notable features of Canadian life. Those polite and cordial visits, beginning early in the morning of the first, and lasting some days of the new year. In the olden times, it was quite a picturesque sight to see, on a New Year's morning, some of the citizens of Quebec paying their calls carrying their hats under their arms, indifferent to a temperature of 20° below zero, with the *queues* of their wigs blown to and fro by the wintry winds.

The formula of good wishes for the New Year is, usually: "*On vous la souhaite bonne et heureuse, avec le Paradis à la fin de vos jours.*" (We wish you a prosperous and a happy New Year, and may you see Heaven after your death.) Refreshments are liberally served, often quite beyond the peasant's means. Such hospitality is not to be refused, and one must partake freely, in compliment to his successive hosts. The result is often a personal discomfort which furnishes frequent illustrations of that "killing with kindness," that has passed into a proverb. The greatest courtesy is manifested on either side, the marked friendliness often effacing the result of previous coldness or differences during the preceding year, stimulating mutual regard, and promoting even the interests of business, so largely dependent upon such feeling in a limited community. In the evening, every device which ingenious good nature can suggest is employed to beguile the hours. It is no marvel, therefore, that, after the adieus are spoken, *le jour de l'An* is esteemed the brightest spot in the year's picture, by both old and young. In a sense, also, it is regarded as marking a step towards spring,

with the increase, however slight, in the length of the days, when more visiting, the *sine quâ non* of their social enjoyment, can be done.

The visit of *Santa Claus*, with his bounties, for the youth of these Canadian homes, is an event of such interest, that around it are gathered hosts of traditions and delightful memories. His visit takes place New Year's eve, and he is known as St. Nicholas. His good will is confidently predicted in the event of filial obedience, while, on the other hand, his ill-will is foretold to wayward children, implying the omission of all his favors. As an illustration of the latter, and the reasoning of the youthful mind, may be related that on one occasion a juvenile offender who had hung up his stocking in the hope that the saint would have forgotten his small sins, found, to his grief, in the morning, only a few sweatmeats and some potatoes. The poor little fellow was mournful enough for the forenoon, but at dinner he suddenly brightened up and remarked to his mother that perhaps it would be well for the family if he were wicked all the year round, for then St. Nicholas might leave potatoes enough for the whole year.

A festive ceremony is observed on Twelfth Night (*le jour des Rois*). In town and country it is usual for young and old to assemble in the evening and perform the operation of cutting the Twelfth cake (*tirer le gâteau*). The party gather about a large table and watch the cutting with great interest, the young people especially being eager to see who will be the fortunate recipient of the slice in which the pea or bean is imbedded. The lucky ones promptly announce their discovery; every sort of jest and compliment is exchanged. The possessor of the bean is crowned queen, and of the pea, king, and they are treated for the remainder of the evening with the homage due to such exalted personages.

Easter Day (*le jour de Pâques*) is a religious festival of marked importance. After Lent, with its many abnegations, the advent of Easter is hailed with joy. The people often remain up until midnight to break their long fast with cheer. L'Abbé Casgrain, a distinguished antiquarian, describes an Easter dinner in the early days of the colony, as follows: (Translation.) "Imagine," says the Abbé, "thirty or forty good eaters of those times at table. There was little ceremony, but everything was offered in the heartiest manner, and each took the place he could find. Chairs were not in common use; on each side of the table were blocks of wood, on which boards were placed, and trunks here and there were used as seats, the guests not thus accommodated standing. On the table were leaden or common delf dishes, and if there were enough for all, it was an indication of wealth on the part of the host. The few forks were reserved for the women, and each provided his own knife. The clothing of the

men consisted of gray homespun trousers of country cloth (*étouffe du pays*), and a pair of beef moccasins (*bottes sauvages*); the *bonnets bleus*, generally worn out-of-doors, were laid aside for the nonce. Their toilette was completed by a dicky. If the latter were omitted by any one, he was not entitled to partake of pie, a favorite dish of the *habitants*. The costumes of the women consisted of a blue skirt with white stripes, and a flowered India shawl and a white cap for gala days. The preparations for this festival were something formidable, if one may judge from the following, which recalls the feast of Gargantua: In the first place, there was prepared a stew or *ragout* of pork, beef and mutton, in a thirty or forty-gallon boiler; minced pies (*tourtières et pâtés*), pork chops, prepared in a variety of ways; quarters of veal and mutton, fowl and game. Besides the viands, there were pastries of different kinds, cooked in lard or porpoise oil, and cakes now known as *croquignoles* (doughnuts). All these were simultaneously placed on the table, and each helped himself as he pleased. Those who had no plate took a piece of pastry from a *pâté* and used it as a dish. Politeness required that each should see that his neighbor lacked nothing. When it was noticed that the supply of food was becoming short before any one, he was told, 'Brother, you excite pity,' and his wants were immediately supplied. While the eatables were being partaken of, the host went round the table and poured out liquor to each in a cup or pewter goblet. The utmost gayety and cordiality prevailed. Hunting and fishing exploits were recounted, and the feast ended with songs, the choruses of which were joined in by the whole company."

According to popular tradition, on Easter morning, at an early hour, the sun may be seen to perform three somersaults in honor of the great Christian event then commemorated; and on Ascension Day, persons free from mortal sin (*en état de grâce*) may behold three suns at sunrise.

From the earliest days of the colony the French regarded St. Joseph as their patron saint, and they observed his natal anniversary, the 20th of March, with religious and appropriate ceremonies. As time wore on, however, the preference of the people appeared to incline towards St. John the Baptist, as the special patron saint of the colony. The day was generally distinguished by religious and other observances, and entertainments followed in the evening, given by the leading citizens with lavish hospitality. Some of the oldest inhabitants of the Quebec of to-day recall the grand feasts on those occasions by an eminent old philanthropist, J. F. Perault, who died generally venerated and respected in 1844, at the ripe age of ninety-one. On St. Joseph's day, all the resources of his hospitable mansion, *Asyle Champêtre*, and of the culinary art of his *chef* were

employed in producing, among other things, a monstrous pie, called in French, *pâté*. It was composed of the following substantial elements: One turkey, three pigeons, three partridges, two chickens, one dozen of snow-birds, and the tenderest and most succulent portion of two hares, the whole sandwiched between slices of pork and ham, and intermingled with highly seasoned meats finely minced. One of the difficulties of the cook would be to construct such a colossal framework of pastry as would retain its shape and withstand the weight and pressure of the mass of meats enclosed. This vast gastronomical *chef-d'œuvre*, of course, would stand as the *pièce de résistance*, in the centre of the table, and the other dishes comprising the remainder of the *menu* were placed at different portions of the board, before the guests sat down. An easy and friendly species of *etiquette* prevailed, each guest helping his neighbor to what he desired, being assisted in return, while the host dispensed to all a portion of the *pâté*, which formed the chief object of attraction. It was usual before dinner to whet the appetites of the ladies by a sip of cordial or *liqueur*, and that of the gentlemen by a glass of absinthe *frappé*, or Jamaica rum. As with us now, soup was served first, and fish was seldom partaken of; there were no *entrées* and few vegetables; but the more substantial meats were always on the table and in abundance. The desserts generally comprised fruits in season, the usual made-up dishes of to-day, and such foreign favorites as still retain their place at our tables. The beverages were claret, ale, cognac and sherry; the cognac was taken before the fruit and the sherry afterwards. To read of such *menus* makes the mortal of this latter half of the nineteenth century sigh for the appetite and vigorous health of his ancestors.

Another custom sometimes observed in villages of the district of Quebec is the erection of what is called *un mai*, a sort of may-pole, in honor of some notable or popular seigneur, or the election of the mayor of the parish. On the morning of the day when the compliment is to be paid, generally in the month of May, the recipient suddenly finds his house surrounded by a merry throng of the peasantry, bearing with them a tree with the branches lopped off, and only the top remaining. Attached to the top is sometimes a weather-vane, painted red and green. All the crowd engage in digging a hole in front of the house, and then plant the pole. The moment it is raised, they fire salutes in honor of the event. Formerly some nimble boy would climb the pole and entwine the vane with ribbons or evergreens, shouting, "*Vive le Roi; Vive le Seigneur*," and the crowd would take up the cry and repeat it with lusty good-will. A grand feast was then given by the *Seigneur*, while frequent salutes

were fired by both the Seigneur's family and the peasantry, to emphasize the important festivity, and all good feeling and joy prevailed.

But the grand national holiday of the French Canadians is St. Jean Baptiste's, the 24th of June. It is observed with imposing religious ceremonies, processions of trade, benevolent, religious, and other societies headed by bands of music, with flags and banners exhibiting national and religious emblems and patriotic mottoes, and allegorical cars of most fanciful designs. In the city of Quebec, for instance, one important feature of the procession is the Carillon flag, the old military banner which waved within the ramparts of Ticonderoga, when the English sought in vain to capture it in the time of Montcalm, by whom it was heroically defended, to the glory of himself and his French troops.

This historic emblem and patriotic relic is usually borne by the most respected man in the community, however unmartial his character or appearance. It is always an object of admiring attention, and the bearer also. In the procession there is a representation of St. Jean Baptiste, in the person of a handsome boy of ten or twelve, fancifully arrayed in a fur robe, with a profusion of long, curling hair falling over his shoulders. He reclines in an elegant carriage, decked with maple boughs, a lamb at his feet. The youthful Baptiste carries a shepherd's crook, the whole figure and surroundings making a most effective and beautiful representation of this holy messenger.

All who take part in the procession exhaust their ingenuity, if not their resources, to make a striking display in costumes and accessories, with ribbons, rosettes, flowers and maple leaves in lavish abundance. The whole city or village assumes a gala aspect, the streets being lined with young maples or evergreens, and often spanned with decorated arches, while flags float from roof and windows, and in all directions the booming of guns is heard. The evening is devoted to social festivities, with patriotic addresses and music, "The day, and all who honor it," being a toast received with wild enthusiasm. The memory of brilliant events and heroic episodes in Canadian history is cherished, the sacrifices of the pious and the patriotic being recalled with ardor. Indeed, they enter into this celebration with zeal and pride. It forms the most joyous festival during the summer months, its attractions being enhanced by the perfect days of June.

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