

Stirring Tales of Canada's Early Days

Bluff Old Governor Drove Gallant Officer Into Years of Exile.

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Through the events mentioned in this sketch occurred in Newfoundland, the characters are prominent in Canadian story. The youthful Baron de Lahontan had been serving as an officer of regulars for ten years in Canada. His experience had been varied. He had taken part in several campaigns against the ferocious Iroquois, had hunted far and wide with the Huron and Algonquin allies of the French, and thus acquired a thorough knowledge of Indian life, of Canadian game large and small, and of the Indian methods of hunting and trapping. He had commanded a desolate outpost at the outlet of Lake Huron and had gone exploring in the far west. He had lived with the great Earl Frontenac in the Chateau St. Louis on the Rock at Quebec, and had participated in the gaiety of the court there, as well as undergone more than one strange experience there and elsewhere in the vast new country. While he was thus employed abroad his deceased father's creditors had by devious methods seized his hereditary estates at home in the south of France, and he found himself powerless to regain them and consequently penniless.

In 1692 the Earl Frontenac, who liked the Baron for his wit and insouciant repartee and pitied the misfortunes of a brother aristocrat, sent him home to France to present to the Court the proposals for a guardian flotilla on the Great Lakes, which he, Lahontan, had worked out. On the way over Lahontan's ship put in at Placentia on the southern coast of Newfoundland, just in time to find the place besieged by a British fleet. In the subsequent fighting Lahontan's energy and ability showed to distinct advantage. The British were driven off with loss. The Governor of the French settlement, de Brouillon, gave the Baron special mention in his despatches to the Minister in France.

At Versailles Lahontan found the authorities apathetic concerning his proposals for the defence of the Great Lakes, and found himself without sufficient influence to obtain redress in his personal affairs. He was, however, commended for his conduct at the siege of Placentia, and, quite unexpectedly and without solicitation, was forthwith appointed the King's Lieutenant at that same Placentia. It was a promotion certainly, but so out of the beaten path of advancement and in such a wild and barren spot that it amounted to an exile rather than an honour. There was nothing for it, however, but to accept and obey. On June 20th, 1693, he landed again at Placentia, called on the Governor, M. de Brouillon, and presented his credentials.

M. de Brouillon, an old officer who for twenty years had served with credit in the regular infantry, had come to Newfoundland two years before and had started in at once with the most appalling avidity in the approved manner of the French colonial official, to pile up a private fortune by speculation. He sequestered his soldiers' pay, sold large quantities of the commissariat supplies, pocketing the proceeds, and endeavored to seize for himself the control of the trade in codfish and in furs. Further, he was intent on gathering his family about him to share the loot. His nephew was already in the garrison, and he had been using all his influence to have his brother appointed to the post to which Lahontan, much against his will, had been assigned. One can easily imagine that the Baron was not welcome. The Governor was not exactly a polished gentleman, and moreover, he had the most imperfect command of a very violent temper. When the suave young officer appeared he could not contain his wrath. Instead of answering with civility the courteous address of his new second-in-command, he burst out in a series of harsh reproaches. He charged Lahontan with having gone over his head in obtaining this position, of concealing his purpose from him when he had been at Placentia the year previous, and of having put forward sham proposals concerning the defence of the Great Lakes merely as a cloak to his design.

Lahontan answered most truthfully and earnestly that such was not the case. He could have added that Newfoundland was the last spot in the world in which he wanted to be, but for once he was politic enough to res-

train his keen-edged tongue. He saw, however, how matters stood, and the prospect was not a pleasant one for him. Nevertheless, he landed his effects and started immediately to have a house built for himself. For this purpose the captains of the various French fishing vessels at the moment in the harbour lent him their ships' carpenters free of charge, for he seems, on account of his gay nonchalant manner and of his social rank, to have been very popular with these people.

The Governor evidently determined to drive Lahontan from the place, if possible. He proceeded to make his life miserable. Day by day the Lieutenant of the King was subjected to a series of petty annoyances, mortifications, infringements of his rank and dignity. The high-spirited Baron was not the man to submit tamely to such treatment, but his situation was difficult, for under the stern rules of military life then in force—not so greatly changed even yet—the subordinate was always in the wrong, and it was well-nigh impossible for him to get past his superior officer to higher authority unless he had the strongest influence at Court. There were stormy scenes between the two, and at times Lahontan would refuse to go near the Governor for days. All the while, however, de Brouillon was keeping a detailed list of all petty infractions of discipline to which he was driving his assistant, and every now and then would send the dossier in a plaintive, injured, innocent sort of despatch to the Minister.

After a summer of this treatment, seeing no possibility of legal redress, Lahontan, embittered, began to regard his position as hopeless. His mercurial Gascon temperament, however, must have some outlet, and he found his satisfaction and heart's ease in the savage delight of writing anonymous satirical ballads upon the subject of his chief. They seem to have been very clever, very funny, and probably no names were mentioned. Nevertheless, the whole population, who hated the Governor for his temper, his injustice, his avaricious misgovernment, and sympathized with Lahontan smarting under his injuries, knew instantly who was meant and what were the incidents referred to. The ballads were taken up with alacrity and sung with gusto by fishermen, sailors and soldiers in the taverns, to the great joy of all. In so small a settlement—a few fishing villages on the southern coast of the Island; the English occupied the East coast—it was not long before to the Governor himself came rumours of these songs, and finally he managed to secure copies. In apoplectic fury he read them. He knew at once who had composed them. There was only one man in Newfoundland who could do it, but how, without openly demeaning his dignity, was he to bring the accusation home to him? There was one means and one only of which he could think and that was covert force.

One night in November 1693 the Baron was entertaining some of the principal inhabitants in his comfortably built, comfortably furnished house. He always did himself extremely well when at all possible. The company had become genially mellow and were probably singing some of their host's latest and most brilliant minstrel efforts, when suddenly there came an appalling crash of glass, and through the wrecked windows sprang a crowd of armed, masked men. Among them the keen eye of Lahontan detected the figure of the Governor himself. They seized tables and overturned them, sending plates, dishes, glasses and bottles smashing to the floor; they upset all the furniture, upturned the sideboard swept out the cupboards, and even cleaned out the drawers in the chests into the general pell-mell confusion heaped in the middle of the room. The Baron sprang into his bedroom to get his pistols, but before he could get one of them loaded and get out again the vicious intruders had departed by the gaping windows as they had come. Lahontan was in the act of springing out after them when some of his guests, also having recognized the Governor, caught him and dragged him back.

The Baron was almost beside himself with fury at this outrage. But there was more to come. Next morning the servants of the Governor way-laid his servants in the street and as-

saulted them with clubs, beating them till they barely escaped with their lives. Lahontan began to lay his plans for revenge but the Recollet Fathers, who were bent on acting as peacemakers, after considerable effort, dissuaded him. The end was not yet, however. It was the custom for the senior officers of the garrison to employ soldiers from time to time as labourers. The King's Lieutenant had a right to do this, and he sent two of his men to reap some hay in the meadows not far away. They were absent from quarters two nights, and the Governor ordered out a search-party which arrested them as deserters—a palpable injustice. It would have gone hard with these two innocent men, for the Governor intended to proceed to extremities, had not the Recollet Fathers interceded and saved them from the capital penalty.

The Recollets then urged Lahontan, for the good of the King's service, to call on the Governor to pacify him. Much against his inclinations Lahontan agreed. Alone with his assistant, de Brouillon poured out such a torrent of abuse, demanding satisfaction for the insults he said he had received, that Lahontan, restraining himself with unwonted care, left him talking, shut himself up permanently in his house and read his books, for he had a classical library with him, probably the only library then in Newfoundland.

Again the Recollets intervened. Both they and the Baron were unaware that the Governor had been scheming to get rid of his assistant in another way if he should fail to drive him out. He had sent memoranda to the Minister enlarging upon the deplorable state of the little islands of St. Pierre and Miquelon on the edge of the Grand Banks of Newfoundland, explaining how important they were as harbours of refuge and refitting stations to the French codfishermen, how exposed they were to attack, and how insolent and independent were the handful of inhabitants there with practically no government. He suggested fortification, and recommended that Lahontan be appointed Governor, inasmuch as he understood that the Baron had been applying for this position. That Lahontan had ever thought of such a thing is incredible. The two little islands are mere wind-swept, treeless rocks, and the lively young man would as soon have applied for a prison term in the Bastille as for the governorship of St. Pierre and Miquelon.

The Recollets were successful. Lahontan visited the Governor again. There was a reconciliation. De Brouillon dissembled his enmity while awaiting the results of his poisonous reports at Court. The two embraced each other and outwardly the government of the colony was unity once more.

Meanwhile, the Governor was preparing his final dossier on the King's Lieutenant, which he had good reason to believe would ruin his career when it arrived at Versailles. Fortunately this document has survived and we can delineate the Governor's malevolence and his duplicity. By some chance the Recollet fathers saw it and gave Lahontan warning. Thereupon the latter managed in some way to get hold of the papers, and read them himself. He was appalled. If these accusations ever came to the notice of the Minister he was done for. In all probability he would not even be heard. He saw the gates of the Bastille opening for him, that terrible prison into which so many entered never to appear again, not even for trial. He did not know, as we do now, nor did de Brouillon, that the year before the Minister had commissioned some naval officers to make a report upon de Placentia himself, that this report was sufficiently damning, and that the Minister even then had it in his hands.

Lahontan saw only one course, instant flight. True, that would put him forever out of court and exile him, for he would be committing the crown military offence, that of an officer deserting his post. But he could imagine no chance of presenting his case, and it is difficult even now to conceive of there being any. The Governor got wind of his intention, for Lahontan was by no means suffering silently. By the last mail of the autumn he wrote the Governors of the seaports of the west coast of France to arrest the Baron de Lahontan if he should land there. He also wrote the Minister what he had heard of Lahontan's intention, and his attitude was, "I told you so; I knew he was that kind of man." Lahontan heard that these letters were going. There was no time for wavering now. The Governor had left no loophole, had decided his course for him. It was the 14th of December. There was one little fishing vessel in the harbour, the last. He bargained for a passage. The captain mulcted him a thousand crowns, an outrageous sum. On that very day he sailed. He was forced to leave furniture, his library and most of his personal effects behind, escaping with his life and freedom alone.

After a terrible, storm-harried passage, during which the vessel was twice chased by pirates, it approached the coast of France. Lahontan was obliged to add three hundred pistoles as a bribe to avoid that coast and proceeded directly to Portugal. There he disembarked at Viana on January 31st, 1694, broken in purse and in his career. From Portugal he proceeded with a passport from the Dutch Minister to Holland, "there to wait until M. de Pontchartrain (the King's chief Minister) should be pleased to set out for Paradise."

Lahontan moved heaven and earth to get back to France, but the King was inflexible. He would allow no hearing of a junior officer against his superior. Lahontan remained an exile for the remainder of his days. Holland was full of French political exiles. Lahontan did not much like their company and moved to Germany, then successively to Denmark, Spain and England. When reduced to penury he



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The first English edition, of 1703, was dedicated “to His Grace, William Duke of Devonshire,” ancestor of the recent Governor-General of Canada. Lahontan died in exile in 1715, aged only forty-nine.

De Brouillon, successful in removing the objectionable second-in-command who stood in the way of his speculations, successful also in retaining his position in spite of the damning evidence against him in the pigeonholes of the offices of Government, and notwithstanding the yearly complaints of the inhabitants, plundered his troops and the French King's subjects in Newfoundland for eight years more. In 1701 he was promoted to be Governor of Acadia with headquarters at Port Royal, the modern Annapolis Royal in Nova Scotia. For four years he plundered then the troops and inhabitants of Acadia, despite the bitter complaints of the latter, until they were relieved by his death at sea in 1702.

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