

Bliss Carman

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The Vengeance of Noel Brassard A Tale of the Acadian Expulsion

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A Tale of the Acadian Expulsion

To J. H. B. and E. W. R.

When I was very young and small,
You held me in your arms;
Before that I could walk at all,
I learned your gentlest charms.

When I was just a little chap,
And couldn't say a thing,
You used to take me in your lap
And talk to me and sing.

Now I can make up my own songs
And go about alone,
And hear strange tales in foreign tongues
Of people not my own;

Yet all the new alluring strains,
Wherever I may go,
Are blended with the old refrains
That sound of long ago.

You say we English like to boast
Of our fair play and British pluck.
Well, here's a tale for you who toast
Your toes and wish your friends good luck,
This snowy Christmas time.

You take our soft Acadian land
In summer for your thoroughfare;
One of the gardens from God's hand,

Orchard and dike, it greets you there –
A dream of the world's prime.

But winter, when the snow comes down
From the red edges of the fall,
To cover babbling stream and town
With velvet silence like a pall,
Can you guess what it means?

The rivers sleep; the sun is lost;
And in the deep woods now and then
Some great tree, riving in the frost,
Cracks, and the stillness falls again
Among the evergreens.

But one man learned too well who prowls
Those wintry barrens choked with snow,
And guessed what manner of thing cowl
Its empty visage from man so,
Seeing that face too near.

The Shadow Hunter, whose long stride
Mortal has yet to tire or tame,
Like moonbeam over mountain side
Following round the world – whose name
Men hold their breath to hear.

And yet, they say, he has a word
Sweeter than any save the sea,
To summon those who once have heard
Beyond the bourns of misery.
Though one man doubted, I must think.

Noel Brassard, named Beausoleil,
That lovely fall... It was the year
The English traitor did betray
His king and honor; far and near
He made his hapless province drink

The dregs of sorrow; blood and bone,
 He ground them into dust between
 The upper and the nether stone,
 The French and English. Wide and green
 The farms lay in the sun;

The apples hung in scarlet ropes
 And golden clusters; the ripe grain
 Went billowing up the mountain slopes;
 And over running dike and plain
 The thousand cattle one by one.

Trailed their long shadows by the sea.
 Grand Pré, Port Royal, Tantramar,
 Minas and Shubenacadie,
 Cobequid, Beausejour, Canard,
 Melanson, Aulac, and Pereau.

What easier than, simple folk
 Fearing the majesty of law,
 To scatter them as the slow smoke
 Is scattered on a windy flaw,
 From Beaubassin to Gaspereau?

Pluck them and set them down the world –
 A second St. Bartholomew –
 Leaving the land whence they are hurled
 For Lawrence and his pirate crew,
 Which we enjoy to-day!

Noel Brassard stood by his door,
 And there was haste. The last to flee,
 When brand was set to granary floor,
 House, barn, and church, in Chipoudy,
 That fall, must for a moment stay,

Loading his cart to climb the crest

The sun at Michaelmas just clears.
 His wife with her tenth child at breast,
 His mother with her ninety years –
 Safe now and half-way up the hill.

And there they halted; the red sun
 Crimsoned the fir-tops over them;
 Below they saw the great tide run
 Between the grassy dikes that hem
 The meadows, when the rivers fill

From Fundy like a sluice. They saw
 Their windows in the sunset glare,
 Then the first smoke of burning straw
 Steal from a rick and burst and flare.
 But soft! What ails you, mother Brassard?

What fancy shakes your age? « My son,
 I shall not go with you, for I
 Am dying, and my strength is done;
 And by your father I shall lie,
 Where the white crosses are,

This night. » They listened. She was dead.
 (The record is La Guerne's, the priest
 Who buried her.) And as she said,
 It happened; the first soul released
 Upon that march with Death!

At night two figures, digging late
 For safety, had brought to a close
 Their pious work; the graveyard gate
 Creaked on its hinges; the moon rose;
 And the white valley held its breath.

Ah, Beausoleil, before you now
 The wilderness; and by your side
 The shadowy Walker of the Snow,

To journey with you, stride for stride,
On many a drifted valley floor!

Behind you, worse than Death can do!
As dust upon the stream is spilled,
The wreckage of your kin shall strew
The shores of the world. The land they tilled,
A politician's prize of war.

Small choice, Brassard! Your folk are sown
To the four winds; to men henceforth
From Baton Rouge to Blomidon,
Labrador and the unpeopled North,
« Acadian » is an exile's name.

He chose the wildernees. Be sure
There is a record of that trail
From sounding Fundy to Chaleur,
In the great map that does not fail!
Yet now we only read, he came

To the blue Restigouche with spring.
Under their ice-floors did he hear
Tobique and Napadogan sing,
And Mamozekel whisper clear
Secrets not good to know?

By Villebon's fort did he press on,
Where dwell the unwarlike Melecites
By the great route of the St. John,
In boreal colds and summer heats,
From Nerepis to Cabineau?

Or was his way by the North Shore,
Far up to lonely Tracadie,
Where the sand islands hear the roar
Of the great gulf, and Miramichi
Slows to meet the tide?

Did the Sevogle see him flit,
A gray and haggard shape of woe? –
Or the headlong Nepisiguit,
Where the Basque sailor long ago
Wedded his Mohawk bride?

He saw in the long solemn night
The giant lanterns of the sky
Streaming about the pole, to light
His haunted trail. Nay, Beausoleil,
Dark was your sunshine then!

And always at the dusk of day,
Out of the brushwood, pace for pace,
Would come to join them on the way
The One whose snowshoes left no trace,
They knew not whence nor when.

Mother and children, one by one,
He bade the strangers stay with him;
And they stayed. Beausoleil went on,
With reeling mind and senses dim,
One – three – five – nine –

He saw them smile and close their eyes,
As the tall Spectre of the cold
Detained them by some wooded rise.
Then sink to sleep within the fold
Of moonlit drift and shine.

In the first breaking-up of spring,
To the blue Restigouche there came,
With two pale children following
Upon his heels, his eyes like flame,
In the gaunt semblance of a man,

Noel Brassard. Say, rather, one

Who had looked horror in the face,
And the bleak goblin had undone
The latches of his soul. Yet trace
Of hunter's skill to scheme and plan

Was left, – the mind to hunt and hound
His persecutors from the land.
A frenzy at the very sound
Of English names would twitch his hand
To let the flintlock's hammer fall.

Before he died on D'Anjac's roll,
By thronged stockade and lonely hut
He marked them; never missed a soul;
And nicked them on his musket butt
Twenty and eight in all.

That is the story straight and plain.
Because one Englishman could pawn
His country's honor for mere gain,
More need we English should not fawn
On Truth to cloak his crime.

Too simple your Acadian heart,
My Noel, and too late you strove!
Not in the world was your fit part.
Yet peace! The world moves on to love,
This snowy Christmas time.

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