OUTING

VOL. XLVI APRIL, 1905 No. 1

PÈRE LACOMBE, A WILDERNESS APOSTLE OF THE NORTH

By AGNES C. LAUT

I

IN the month of September, there passed through Montreal, on the way from France to the foothills of the Rockies, a distinguished figure unique for the last three-quarters of a century in the annals of the great Northwest.

Doers of big things—men who have made history—we still have with us; but not every maker of history has by the mere lifting of a hand prevented massacres that might have wiped out the frontier of half a continent. Few leaders have rallied half a hundred men to victory against a thousand through pitchy darkness, in the confusion of what was worse than darkness,—panic. And not every hero of victory can be the hero of defeat, a hero—for instance—to the extent of standing siege by scourge, with three thousand dying and dead of the plague, men fleeing from camp pursued by a phantom death, wolves skulking past the wind-blown tent-flaps unmolested, none remaining to bury the dead but the one man whose hands are over-busy with the dying.

And not every hero is as unaware of the world's blare as a child; and as indifferent to it, Such is Père Lacombe, known to all old timers from the Mackenzie River to the Missouri.

To call him simply a priest is misleading; for in these days of sentimental religion, with the abolition of the devil and a pious turning up of the whites of one's eyes to an attenuated Deity, priesthood is sometimes associated with a sort of anæmic goodness —the man who sits in a cushioned study-chair. But Father Lacombe's goodness is of the red-blood type, that knows how to deal with men who think in terms of the clenched fist.

Two kinds of men make desolating failures in a new land. There is the one who sits moused up in a house, measuring every thing in the new country by the standards of the old; and there is the book-full man, who essays the wilds with city theories of how to do everything from handling a bucking broncho to converting a savage, only to learn that he can't keep up with the procession for the simple reason—as the French say—that one has to learn much in the woods not contained in "le curé's pet-ee cat-ee-cheesm."

To neither of these classes did Father Lacombe belong. He realized that one is up against facts in the wilderness, not theories; that to clothe those facts in our Eastern ideas of proprieties, is about as incongruous as to dress an Indian in the cast-off garments of the white man. Instead of expecting the Indian to adopt the white

Copyrighted, 1905, by the OUTING Publishing Company. All rights reserved.

man's mode of life, Father Lacombe adopted the Indian's. He rode to their buffalo hunts with them half a century ago, when the herds roamed from the Missouri to the Saskatchewan in millions; or he broke the way for the dog train over the trackless leagues of snow between the Saskatchewan and Athabasca. Twice he was a peacemaker with the great Confederacy of Blackfeet, Bloods and Piegans. Yet when honorable peace could not be won, he won another kind of peace—the peace that is a victory.

II

It was in the region of what is known as Old Man's River, south of the Saskatchewan. Here the Blackfeet Indians could pasture their numerous bands of ponies for the winter, sheltered from the north wind by the bluffs and deep ravines that cut athwart the prairie in trenches. Here, too, the buffalo herds were likely to be found browsing below the cliffs, or on the lee side of the poplar groves along the banks of rivers.

"Were the buffalo as plentiful as old timers say; or is this more of the old timer's yarns?" I asked Father Lacombe.

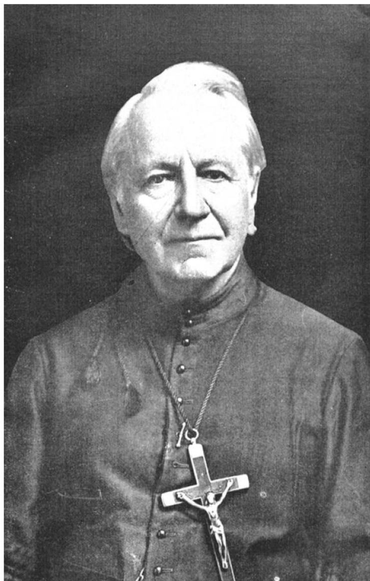
"Plentiful!" he repeated derisively. "When I first went to the West and joined the hunt of the buffalo, they were literally in millions. I should think at least a million a year must have been slaughtered by the Indians of the Northwest. Why, I have heard the old Cree and Blackfeet chiefs say that at fording time, the rush of the herds almost stopped the current of the Saskatchewan and Missouri."

But camping ground that offered such ideal conditions of shelter, ford and food, had its dangers. From days immemorial, war existed between Blackfeet and Cree. The tribe with best horses had greatest success at the buffalo hunt; and that meant security against want. From the time that Spanish horses spread north of the Missouri, the Indians of this region had only two occupations-hunting the buffalo, and raiding other tribes for horses. The Blackfeet, like the Sioux, were tigerish fighters. They were even bolder; for after sweeping down on Cree or Assiniboine or Sautaux to the east, they could drive their booty back up Old Man's River to the passes of the Rockies, where no alien tribes could follow. When leagued with their confederates, the Bloods and Piegans, they were invincible.

All through the winters of '68, '69 and '70 it was well known that an alliance of a thousand Cree, Assiniboine and Sautaux were on the war-path against the Blackfeet; but no one dreamed of the enemy invading the very center of the Blackfeet's hunting ground. The circumstances were not unlike the dangers that threatened the French settlements two hundred years before, when the Iroquois invaded the land of the Algonquins and Hurons. The different missions of the half dozen Oblates who were in the Northwest, were scattered two, three, four hundred miles apart. In case of attack, they were farther away from help than Quebec had been from France. It took six months to go from Eastern Canada to the missions west of Edmonton, two months to go from Ft. Garry (Winnipeg), where a handful of fur traders lived inside a walled fort, to the foothills of the Rockies, and three months to send word to the outside world by way of the Missouri-Benton trail to St. Paul.

Father Lacombe had already won the respect of the Blackfeet by his heroism during the small-pox scourge. He had taken up winter quarters in the lodge of the great Sun Chief of the tribe. Some forty tepees with sixty men, and their women and children were in the camp; and a short distance away were two other encampments of fifty or sixty tents. The prairie traveler learns to read the signs of the snow as an open page; and alien footprints distinctly forewarned the presence of an enemy. Father Lacombe urged Sun Chief to call all the encampments together for the general safety; but his caution was perhaps mistaken for fear; and the camps not only remained apart, but half the warriors in Sun Chief's encampment went off to hunt.

It was a bitterly cold day in December with the early dark and woolly, surcharged atmosphere that precedes storm. Tent thongs were braced taut against the howling wind. Extra wood was carried in from the bluffs and heaped on the fire in the centers of the tepees; and the four or five-hundred horses were carefully picketed in shelter, so they could not drive before the wind. Supper consisted of pemmican and tea without sugar; and those were nights when tin cup and fork almost stuck to the lips in a burn from intensity of frost. In



Père Lacombe.

Photograph by Lapres and Lavergne.

such weather, as one venerable Oblate, who has been forty years on the Mackenzie, said: "The hatchet was our Cross; for we did nothing but chop down saplings for firewood to keep from freezing to death."

The hatchet was to be another kind of Cross to Father Lacombe that night.

It must have been a unique scene-one that will never again be enacted in America, the wind howling like a demon pack of loup-garou, outside; the tawny faces crouching round the center fire inside the big tepee of Sun Chief; the leap of lambent flame to the suck of the wind at the hole in the top of the tepee; the blue smoke blinding the eyesight the minute one stood erect in the tent; the shadows on the skin walls of the tepee; the whining of the dogs to gain entrance; the whinnying of the picketed ponies, and upright in the crowded tepee above the Blackfeet stretched on buffalo robes round the fire, the figure of the weather-worn, stalwart priest leading the chant of evensong to the Great Spirit that is as much God of red man as of white.

Sun Chief and the priest must have talked late, heaping wood on the fire; for it was midnight before fires were out and Father Lacombe rolled himself in a buffalo robe with outer clothing folded as pillow. Outside, raged the storm, "the forty below and a blizzard" that Westerners know, wrenching at the tent poles, heaping drifts, lifting and falling in the shrill, whistling cry that seems to die away in the wail of a lost soul. One does not sleep on such nights, It is the same instinct that makes animals restless in storm; something primordial, below consciousness, that pricks the senses to alertness for danger. You may have reduced the whole cosmography of existence to a scientific formula, proved that "winds are currents of air in violent activity," that ghosts don't course the earth disembodied, and that fiends are only the myths of human fear; but you can't lie awake all night listening to the corsairs of northern storms screaming, hissing, shouting venomous glee with the undertone of a deathless wail, and not think a good many thoughts you don't talk out.

Suddenly, Sun Chief leaped into the air with a yell: "Assinaw! Assinaw! The Cree! The Cree!"

Nearly a thousand warriors had swooped down on the camp of half-armed Blackfeet.

III

The late fire had marked out the chief's tent for special attack. The only safety was the darkness of storm outside; but before Sun Chief could grasp his gun and slash open the tight-laced tent-flap, bullets were whizzing through the tepee walls. Two balls bounded with a spit of fire through the dark at the priest's feet. Then, the Indian chief had hurled his family out to the safety of darkness away from the marked tent; and Father Lacombe was the target for a thousand shots, one musket charge splintering two of the tent poles, bullets whistling about his head with the sing—*zizzz—sip,* that one never forgets.

It took but a trice to jerk his soutane from the pillow and slip it over his shoulders. Seizing the little metal cross in his right hand, he muttered a prayer, dashed out and was in the thick of it, shouting at the top of his voice——

"Fight! Fight! Don't run! Don't run! They'll cut you to pieces if you run! Hooray! Hooray! Fight, *mes enfants! En avant, mes braves!* Fight for your wives and children!"

* * * * *

Up to the time Father Lacombe came to talk of that famous fight, he had worn rather a wearied air. He had just landed from the Atlantic steamer and was tired. He couldn't understand why the world should wish to know about the little things he had been able to do. Other men would have done the same. Many men had done more. But as the memory of that night came back, the eyes took on a new light, the light of the war-horse that smells powder.

"'Ah," he said, unconsciously falling into that picturesque medley half English, half French, "t'at night—it was hell! It was hell! T'ere is no light but the sinister blaze of the muskets, when some one drop with the death-cry. We hear the Cree shouting the war whoop, the Blackfeet women and children lost in the dark, screaming for each other, not knowing which way to hide; the horses whinny and stampede through camp among the howling dogs; and the blaze—blaze—blaze of the guns, with the bullets spitting through the snow like hot iron!"

As Father Lacombe dashed from the tent a squaw staggered forward, shot through the upper part of her body; and the blaze of a

musket showed a child in her arms. Before lie knew it, his feet were bathed in her blood. Barely could he administer the last rites to the dying woman, when the enemy had burst into the encampment and torn the scalp from her head. Twenty-five tents were scattered to the winds; but the Blackfeet never ceased to fight nor the priest to hurrah them on! A hostile Assiniboine was in the very act of plundering Father Lacombe's possessions when a ball stretched the miscreant dead on the bed which the priest had just left. As if in instant punishment of the squaw's death, a Blackfoot sprang upon the corpse, and the Assiniboine's scalp was ripped away before the body was cold. Of all Lacombe's belongings, everything was taken but the soutane he had slipped over his shoulders, the Cross he held in his hand, and a little book of prayers—not much for a man exposed to a forty-degree-below blizzard, a thousand miles from help.

"If I failed now," he said, "I felt everything would be lost—all the years with the Blackfeet and Cree gone for nothing."

More than that, if the thousand hostiles had succeeded in exterminating the Blackfeet camp, including the priest, every mission and fur post and frontier settlement between the Missouri and Mackenzie would have been exposed to attack. It does not take much success to turn a white man's head; and it takes less to intoxicate a thousand warriors on the ramp.

The one hope was to let the assailants know the priest was among the Blackfeet; for he had befriended the Cree, too, in the small-pox scourge.

Uplifting the Cross in his right hand, with a flag flourished in the left, he rushed forward shouting: "It is I—Lacombe, your friend!" But in the confusion of storm and musketry, he could make himself neither seen nor heard.

Three times the fury of assault was driven back and assuaged, the besieged, of whom more than half already lay dead or wounded, huddling together, exposed to the storm, not knowing which way they dare retreat, when with a roar like the boom of a tidal wave, the Cree war whoop rose and they attempted to rush the camp. And three times Father Lacombe's "Hooray! Hooray! On, *mes braves!* Fight! Fight! Defend your children!"—rallied the dispirited little band to keep their stand and hurl back the assailants.

The storm that had prevented the Crees from seeing the priest, also prevented them from learning the weakness of the Blackfeet.

All night the firing never ceased; and all night the little band of Blackfeet gave way never an inch.

Then morning came—sun dawn over a bloody field with the tempest lulling like a thing tired out and the enemy's musketry spitting over the drifts from the hiding of the wooded bluffs.

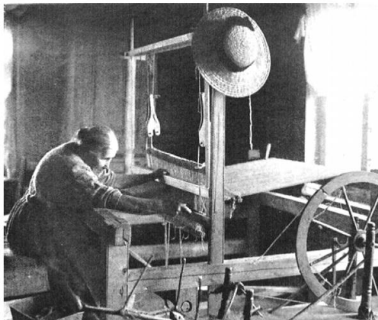
A clearer atmosphere gave Lacombe his chance. Bidding the Blackfeet stop firing and hide where the Cree shots could not reach them, Father Lacombe raised his Cross in his right hand, a flag of truce in his left, and marched straight out in the face of the firing line, shouting on the Cree to come out and parley. The Blackfeet could hardly believe their eyes when they realized what he was doing—marching straight in the face of certain death. They called to him to come back. They would fight to the end and die together; but he marched right on. Bullets fell at his feet. Two or three balls *siffed* past his ears, singeing his hair. Again the Blackfeet shouted for him to come back; but he was beyond call, and the bullets were raining around him like hail.

If the sun that rises over northern snowfields ever witnessed a more human piece of unconscious heroism than this solitary figure advancing against the firing line—I do not know of it.

Suddenly, he was seen to reel and fall, drenched in blood. A bullet had bounced from the ground, striking him in the shoulder, and glancing up grazed across his forehead. Demons could not have restrained the Blackfeet then. To the triumphant yell of the Crees, they sent back countershout that set the ravine ringing. They were no longer on the defensive. A whirlwind rush of rage carried them past all bounds of fear. They only waited to see the priest on his feet—for the force of the bullet had been broken by the shoulder wound—when, with yells of fury, they poured volley after volley into the Cree bluffs, running from hiding of snowdrift to brushwood, pressing the hostiles back and back till, before midday, the fighters were in talking distance and a Blackfoot snarled

Fort Gary (Winnipeg), as it was when Father Lacombe went West sixty years ago.

where Father Lacombe passed his childhood, who make everything for themselves from ovens to boats.


Habitant woman of Lower St. Lawrence, weaving homespun cloth.

out—"You have wounded your priest! Canaille! Have you not done enough?"

Wounded the man who had nursed them, too, through the small-pox scourge? The Crees were dumbfounded. Besides, they were beaten; and they probably reasoned that if a handful of men taken by surprise put up this kind of a fight, the same men on the aggressive with daylight to aid them and couriers scurrying to bring back the absent hunters, could coop the Cree company up in one of these ravines and exterminate the entire band. Besides, thirty of their braves were dead, fifty wounded; and retreat on horseback over deep snow with fifty wounded to carry could not be made with as great speed as the return of Blackfeet warriors might warrant.

A Cree advanced to parley.

They had not known the priest had been among the Blackfeet. The smoke had hidden the face of the man, who had advanced alone! It was enough—the Cree would retire; and retire they did with all the speed they could put into their horses.

When the battle was over, the Blackfeet turned to Lacombe. A more haughty tribe never existed among North American Indians. They had no words now to express their pent up feelings. They threw their arms about him like children, sobbing out gratitude. They prostrated themselves at his feet. They declared that he was divine, or the bullets that rained round him would surely have killed him; but he only told them that that was the way his God took care of men who would risk their lives for His sake; and no doubt the Blackfeet did what the Indians call some "long thinking."

But the heroism of real life has no time for stage effects. It was the kind of Northwest cold that doesn't just chill you. It takes hold of you with nippers. What was to be done? Two hundred of the horses had been stampeded and were even now on the way to the Cree land. Not much was left of the encampment but the tent poles, skins blown away by the wind, and the horses running wild over the prairie.

The famous Chateau de Ramezay, Montreal. This is a typical interior of a habitant's house.

"I was never in all my life so completely a pauper, as after that fight with the Cree," said Father Lacombe.

Some of the Blackfeet from the other camps arrived. They gave him buffalo robes to keep him from freezing; and the next day, in spite of the cold, all set out for a camp twenty miles distant. Needless to say that when he left this camp for a six days' journey to a fort of the mountains, in all the dangers of cold and storm he was escorted by three Blackfeet.

The most of men would have rested satisfied with that battle as one good winter's work; but Lacombe followed up his forcible object lesson in muscular goodness by going straight to the Cree encampments and teaching what it was—in Indian language —"that made a man's heart strong."

IV

One can't help wondering if the many martyrs to persecuted faith had used a little of Lacombe's muscular methods whether results would not have totaled up better. The Oblates have been in the West only three-quarters of a century; and they have civilized fifty thousand Indians. The Jesuits sacrificed life and means for two centuries among the Iroquois; and nothing remains of it. But the wilderness leader is born, not made. For a man of the purely studious temperament—no matter how zealous—to attempt running rapids, fording rivers, riding tricky bronchos, mingling in the melée of the buffalo hunt or warriors' foray—is to make himself ridiculous. To succeed in these things a man has to be born with a strain of adventure in his blood. And Father Lacombe's youth prepared him for such a life.

He was born of habitant parents on the banks of the St. Lawrence. Now, it is safe to say that there is not a single French family in the province of Quebec, seignior or peasant, that has not some strain of an ancestor who took to the woods in the early days and lived the free life of the wilderness hunter, camping under the stars. Where the English colonist farmed, the French colonist hunted, gay of heart, care-

less of to-morrow; and that hunter strain is in the blood yet. Seventy years ago, wildwood tales were in the very air that a Quebec boy breathed. There was not a hamlet on the banks of the St. Lawrence that had not sent out its hero to hunt, to explore, to fight. The French-Canadian took to the rapids like a duck to water. Nothing daunted him. He courted dangerous adventure for the fun of it. He didn't care for trade. What he liked was *la gloire;* and I'm inclined to think that men live bigger, broader lives for the sake of the huzzy who is called "La Gloire," than for dollars and cents.

In this atmosphere Father Lacombe passed his youth. Besides, the French-Canadian habitant is taught to do everything for himself. He weaves the cloth for his own clothes, he makes his own hats, he spins his own wool, he tans the leather for his boots. He even disdains a bought stove. He builds a clay or brick oven. He grows his own tobacco. He catches the fish required for his table; and fifty years ago, above the white-washed stone wall of the hearthside fireplace, on an iron rack, hung the musket that supplied the family table with fresh meat from the woods.

What better environment to prepare for the wilderness life? The city man, who essays the wilds, has had his mind fed by the college factory and his stomach by a machine-regulated market. You pay your money and men will think your thoughts for you, and put clothing on your back. The place where such a man fails is where he is suddenly and nakedly thrown on his own resources. Stripped of the adventitious, his own resources are nil; and he lies down to die. If ammunition fails the true wilderness hunter, he has the dead-fall, or some other trap. If the trap fails him, he tries snares for birds. If birds fail him, he will fish with home-made net, or home-made hook. It is only when bird, beast, and fish fail that he is at the end of his tether. And not the least important part of his equipment is that almost animal instinct of alertness to danger.

These were the things that fitted Father Lacombe for his wilderness life; but it was a kind act, whose author little foresaw the consequences, that set him on the path of his after-life. The parish priest gave him money to go on with his education. All the return asked by the priest was that the boy "be good;" and young Lacombe began casting about in his mind the best way to be practically good, not sentimentally, or as the street says, "dishwater," good. He was as muscular, strong and athletic as a young Indian. Why not consecrate his muscularity to goodness? Where would such muscularity tell best? Manifestly, the Church is not a boxing-school, though it aims to give hard knocks to the Devil; but there was the Pays d'en Haut, the Up-Country where so many young Frenchmen sought "la gloire." There was a field uninvaded by any but the fur trader from Missouri to the North Pole; and there was a field for iron strength and muscular goodness.

He at once went to the House of the Oblates, Montreal. The Oblates were preparing to capture this field. A curious old pile of unpretentious gray stone is this house of dreams, that has sent out so many brave men to heroism and death in the Northwest! It is a house of poverty and ideals as well as dreams. Perhaps they go together. Vespers were ringing as I drove up to the door; and I could not but think as I listened to the lilt of the chimes how many young mystics had dreamed of white-robed victory to the sound of those bells, only to go forth to life-long exile, to death by famine or cold, or the assassin hand, like young Fafard and Marchand at Frog Lake.

Success is such a white-robed thing to young dreamers full of ideals to their necks, and such a bloody, cruel thing all tattered at the edges and worm-eaten to the middle in real life, and yet if young mystics had not dreamed what the world calls "moonshine" to the lilt of those chimes, could Lacombe have won the Crees from a war that would have deluged the West with blood as the Sioux deluged Minnesota?

An inscription tells me that I am to ring the bell and open the door. I do so, to find myself in a chairless anteroom, with a tiny frosted window in the wall. I rap on the wicket as we are told a certain mythical pilgrim rapped at the gates of Paradise. The window swings open, and a priest-porter, with shrewd enough eyes to have been a relative of Peter's, asks me what I want. I tell him in French, that would have made anyone but that porter laugh, that I want to find out about the delayed boat that is bringing Father Lacombe from the last trip

he will ever make to the East. At the name "Lacombe," the porter's antiquity falls from him like rags. He goes off at such speed that I catch only every second word and guess the others, but gather that if I will "please to walk *au parloir*" someone will come who will tell me everything, things that Father Lacombe does not tell about himself. So I pass through another door, *au parloir,* beyond which are sacred precincts where no outsider goes. Here, Father Corneillier comes, and we talk of the long line of French-Canadian path-makers who have won the West, of Provencher, and Taché, and Grandin. Here, I presently meet Husson, who has been up on the Mackenzie for forty years, and tells me of seeing American whalers who have rounded the Horn, passed through Bering Strait and summered at Pt. Barrow, in the Arctic. Here, too, I meet Father Lacombe himself, the next day, a muscularly built, close-knit man, who looks more as if he were in the sixties than in the seventies, with hands that could take a bulldog grasp of difficulties, shoulders broad to carry the heaviest weights unbent, and on his face a kindness inexpressible.

V

Fifty years ago the Up-Country was entered either by way of the Ottawa across the Great Lakes, or up the Mississippi to St. Paul, whence the journey was continued by ox-cart and boat to Ft. Garry, now Winnipeg. Just at the international boundary westward of Red River from Pembina was the great hunting ground of the buffalo. Into the rough-and-tumble hunting camps went young Lacombe to learn the language of the Indians, and what was more important than the language—the things not taught in the curé's "pet-ee cat-ee-cheesm." The story of these buffalo hunts I have told elsewhere and shall not repeat here, except to add that the implacable hatred between the Sioux and Cree—of which this was the border land—turned many a buffalo hunt into a bloody foray. These fights are a story in themselves.

Westward of Red River, the journey was continued either by boat up the Saskatchewan, or "the plains across" for a thousand miles by horseback, ox-cart or dog-train. The Saskatchewan boats were the famous Mackinaw flat-bottom barges propelled by eight oarsmen. Boxes, bales, hardware, mattresses, heterogeneously pitched on board, loaded these craft to the water line; and anywhere he could find handhold or foothold or pillow for his head, the traveler stowed himself. Except in cases of great urgency, stop was made at night to camp *a la belle etoile.* Here, the priest held his earliest services in a temple as old as time —the vault of heaven.

Half way westward at Portage La Loche, the Red River flotilla of boats met the men of the Athabasca and Mackenzie and Saskatchewan coming out with the annual loads of furs. Cargoes were exchanged. The crews paused to rest, and one can guess that a good deal went on among the rollicking French voyageurs and Scotch clerks not according to the curé's catechism.

For some reason, there was always good-natured rivalry and chaffing between the Scotch and the French employées of the fur company. The French were most mercurial—could do big things at a rush; but the Scotch were credited with better staying powers. Among the French was one giant packer from Sorel, Quebec, who could pick any two Scotchmen up under his arms and bundle them head first through the parchment windows before their comrades could come to the rescue. One day, the Scotch clerk in the fort thought to put up a trick on Jo Paul, that would take the brag out of the French voyageurs. Barrels of sugar stood piled in one corner of the store. In one barrel, apart from the rest, the sugar had been replaced by lead.

"Jo Paul," ordered the clerk, with a wink to the men, "I wish you'd put that barrel on the counter."

Jo Paul went at the barrel as if it had been a ball of down; but, behold, "the sugar" did not budge; and Jo Paul "caught on." Mustering all his strength, with clenched teeth, he seized the barrel of lead and hurled it bang, with giant impetus, slap on the top of the counter. The clerks held their breath, then there was no laughter. The lead crashed through counter, through planks, through floor beams and all, clear to the bottom of the cellar.

"Voila, mon petit," says Jo Paul, "you can go ga'der up y' own lead."

When the journeys were by dog-train, one significant fact was often noticed of the

The Blackfeet Indian Camp.

A Dance of the Blackfeet Indians.

dog driver. Spite of danger, hunger, cold, the Indian runner would keep his courage unless one thing happened. All Westerners know that the whiskey-jack or scolding jay will follow travelers for miles to pick up the crumbs of the camp. So will wolves; but a poisoned fish settles them. But sometimes, on a long journey, when food runs short, and a driver is half blind from snow glare, sick to the very pit of his stomach from snow nausea, and dizzy from snow staggers, there will be observed following the lone courser across the snow glaze of spring thaw, black shadows—the carrion crows. When that happens, the very marrow of an Indian's courage melts.

VI

Once, on such a journey southward over interminable snows, Father Lacombe had camped with his guide on the edge of a small woods. Both men were dead tired. Their snow-shoes dragged heavily. Supper over, they spread their snow-logged garments to dry before the fire, prepared beds of spruce branches, and sat listening to that strange, unearthly silence of the snow-padded plains. The dogs crouched round asleep. The night grew black as ink, foreboding storm. An uncanny muteness fell over the two. They knew they were eighty miles from a living soul; and the cold was terrific. There was no sound but the crackle of the fire, and an occasional splinter of frost-split trees outside. Suddenly the guide pricked up his ears, with dilated eyes intent. Faint, more like a breath of storm than a voice, came a muffled wail. Then, silence again, of very death. The men looked at each other, but didn't say anything. It was the kind of silence where you can hear your breath. Half an hour passed. There is no use pretending. The ozone of northern latitudes at midnight, eighty miles from a living soul, can prick your nerves and send tickles down your spine. You become aware that solitude is positively palpable. It's like a ghost-hand touching you out of Nowhere. You feel as if your own nothingness got drowned in an Infinite Almightiness. And it came again, out of the frost-muffled woods—the long, sighing wail.

"Alex, do you hear?"

"Yes," but he didn't want to.

"What is that?"

"Hare seized by owl."

"You think—that?"

"Yes," but he thought it weakly.

"Your hare has a human voice, Alex."

But Alex, who was visibly chattering, became voluble. Of course, it was a hare. He'd often remarked the resemb—— But the words died in a gulp of fright; and the guide got himself to bed in haste with the blanket robe over his head.

"Alex, your hare has a long life, *bein?* Listen! Do you hear? Get up! Some one has need of us! I'm going to see."

In vain Alex explained to the priest that the voice would only lead him to death in the woods, that it came from the body of some brave buried among the branches of the trees in there, who was calling for the things his relatives had forgotten to place with the corpse.

"Then, I'll go alone," said Lacombe, "but you keep your gun ready; and if there is danger, I'll call you!"

And surely, from a prudent point of view, it was rash to follow a vague voice into unknown woods blanketed black with the thickness of intense frost. He would catch the sound, follow it; find nothing—wait; hear it again; again follow it; and again lose it. What was terrifying was that the groans seemed nearer than his own hands and feet—yet he could find nothing! Suddenly, he was aware of the warmth of cinders under his moccasins; and stooping, felt a voice in his very face. A human form lay wrapped in a buffalo robe across the dying camp fire.

"Speak! What are you?" he demanded,

"A woman with her child—lost. I could tramp no longer—my feet are frozen."

Calling the guide, the two men carried woman and infant to their tepee. She was little more than a child herself, and had evidently been outrageously beaten. Both feet required amputation. The priest learned that she had been cast off by her Cree husband, and had gone forth from the camp to kill both herself and the child; but at the sound of its cry, her courage failed her. She could not do the act, and marched on and on, day after day, till the frozen feet could march no farther. Then, wrapping the child in her warmest clothing, she had gathered it close in her arms, spread the buffalo robe over herself, and lain down

to die. But to this Hagar of the wilderness came also a visitant of mercy. When Father Lacombe wakened in the morning, he found that the guide had plied the woman with restoratives all night, wrapped her in robes and placed her on the dog sleigh. The guide then hitched himself with the dogs to pull. Father Lacombe fastened the steering pole behind to push; and so they took her to the mission house, hundreds of miles distant. On the way they came up with the Cree husband who had abandoned her. The man was dumb-founded at the apparition.

"What," he blustered. "I don't want this wife! You'd have done much better to have minded your own business and left her alone where she was, to die."

For just a second, the Man in Father Lacombe got the better of the Priest. I think if that Cree had waited, he would have received all he needed.

"You miserable beast!" thundered Lacombe. "You don't think as much of your child as a dog of its pups! Get into that tent this minute and hide your dishonorable head, or—! I'll find someone to take care of her!"

VII

Space fails to tell of the days when the West held its breath lest the Blackfeet should join Riel in the Metis rebellion, and Father Lacombe had the fate of the frontier in the hollow of his hand; or of the old Indian sage, who sent his son to Lacombe to learn if there were no Better Way than the Wolf Code of Brute Existence.

All night the two men sat talking, the wise man of the Indians and the wise man of the whites; comparing the wisdom of all that each knew, about a Better Way; and when the fevered eyes of the dying Indian turned to watch his last sunrise, there was on his faces the light that is neither of land nor sea. What his mystic visions had told him might be true, the white man had confirmed.

These are but a few episodes in the life of a man whom the West venerates and the Indians almost worship. A secular friend has built for him a home called "The Hermitage" among the foothills of the Rockies; and, in the shadow of the mountains of the setting sun, he has decided to pass the evening of his life.