

Oxley James Macdonald

In Paths of Peril: A Boy's Adventures in Nova Scotia



James Oxley

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Adventures in Nova Scotia**

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CHAPTER I

FROM THE OLD WORLD TO THE NEW

The defence of the city of La Rochelle by the Huguenots, when for more than a year they defied the whole power of France under the leadership of Cardinal Richelieu, must ever remain one of the most heroic and soul-stirring chapters in history.

For the sake of their faith these noble people endured the pangs of hunger, the perils of battle, and the blight of pestilence, until at last, their fighting men being reduced to a mere handful, with broken hearts they were compelled to surrender. It was a terrible time for the weak and the young. Nearly one-half of the population of the city died during the siege, and those who survived formed a gaunt, haggard, miserable band, more like scarecrows than human beings.

Among them were a maiden of twenty and a boy of twelve years of age, whose fortunes we shall follow in these pages. She was Constance de Bernon, the only daughter of one of the most important families, and he, Raoul de Bernon, her nephew, now an orphan, both his parents having perished in the dreadful days of the siege.

Not all the horrors she had witnessed, nor the sufferings she had borne, in the least degree shook Constance's fidelity to her faith. She was of the stuff which makes martyrs, and would have died at the stake rather than renounce her religion. Right glad, therefore, was she when her parents succeeded in effecting their escape from old France, where only persecution awaited Protestants, and making their way across the Atlantic Ocean to the new France, where it was possible to be true to one's belief without having to suffer for it.

The de Bernons settled in what was then known as Acadia, now the Province of Nova Scotia, and began life again amid the wildness of the land which the Micmac and Melecite Indians had hitherto held as their hunting-ground. Raoul accompanied them. Since the loss of his parents his whole heart had gone out to Constance. Never was aunt more beloved by nephew. It might indeed with truth be said that he fairly worshipped her, and found in her companionship the chief solace for his great bereavement.

While to the older people the change from the comfort and security of their former life at La Rochelle to the crude and hard conditions of their new home could not help being a very trying one, Raoul, on the contrary, was rather pleased with it. There was no going to school, nor learning of lessons, except when his aunt could now and then spare an hour to spend with him over the few books they had been able to bring. He lived out-of-doors for the most part, and had no difficulty in finding plenty to occupy his time.

He was a sturdy lad, with a bright, strong countenance, which gave good promise for the future if only he kept in the right path; and he made many friends, not only among the settlers, but also among the Indians, some of whose camps were always near at hand.

"It seems to me you do not miss La Rochelle very much, Raoul," said Constance to him as they sat at the door of the house in the quiet of the evening, when all the work of the day was over. "You are quite happy here, are you not?"

The colour came into the boy's face at his aunt's words, for although she did not so mean it, her question seemed to imply that he was forgetting his former home and the dear ones he had lost.

"I do like it here," he replied, lifting his big brown eyes to hers. "It is very different from La Rochelle, I know, but – " and here he hesitated so long that Constance with a smile took up the sentence.

"But you'd rather live in the woods than in the city – that's it, isn't it, Raoul? I quite understand, and I don't blame you in the least. You're fond of adventure, and you're glad to be where there's apt to be plenty of it. How would you like to go with me to Cape Sable?"

"I'm ready to go with you anywhere, Aunt Constance!" was the prompt and hearty response. "But why are you going to Cape Sable?"

It was now Constance's turn to blush, and very charming she looked as she answered in a low tone with her face turned away:

"I am to be married soon, Raoul, to Monsieur La Tour, and he is going to take me to Cape Sable, where he has his fort."

Raoul sprang to his feet excitedly. The idea of his beloved aunt belonging to somebody else hurt him cruelly. It filled his heart with jealousy, and he exclaimed in a tone of passion:

"You're going to be married, Aunt Constance, and to leave us all! What is that for? Why couldn't you stay with us? We are so happy here."

Constance smiled with pleasure at the vigour of his speech, and putting her arm about his neck affectionately, said:

"You surely would not have me live and die an old maid, would you, Raoul? And Monsieur La Tour will make such a good husband for me!"

Raoul sighed as he warmly returned his aunt's caress. His protest was foolish, of course, and, after all, if she was going to take him with her to her new home, what would be the difference?

"Oh, yes, I suppose so," he answered. "But I didn't know. Please tell me all about it."

So Constance went into particulars, Raoul listening with profound interest.

Charles de la Tour, who was also a Huguenot, had now been for a number of years in Acadia, carrying on an extensive business in fishing and fur-trading, and had just built a strong fort at Cape Sable, which he called Fort St. Louis. Of this establishment he had invited Constance to become the mistress, and she had given her consent. Yet, although she loved de la Tour, who was a handsome, genial, daring man such as easily win a woman's heart, she did not want to part with her nephew, and de la Tour made no objection to his accompanying her, especially as he himself must needs be often absent from the fort on business expeditions for months at a time, and Raoul would then be good company for his wife.

So in due time it all came about as was arranged, and Raoul found himself settled at Fort St. Louis with his new uncle, whom he greatly admired and respected. This fort, placed at the extreme south-east point of what is now Nova Scotia, looked out over the restless waters of the Atlantic, and kept an eye upon the ships passing by to the Bay of Fundy or to the New England ports. It was very strongly built of stone, and mounted many cannon which Raoul longed to see in use. A snug harbour lay to the east, where de la Tour's vessels could anchor in safety from any storm, and inland stretched vast forests, which fairly swarmed with game, from the lively rabbit to the gigantic moose. What with fishing, trapping and hunting, rowing, sailing and swimming to his heart's content, Raoul was in no danger of finding the time hang heavy on his hands.

CHAPTER II

THE GREAT BEAR HUNT

There were many tribes of Indians scattered over Acadia – Abenakes, Etechemins, Micmacs, Openagos, and so forth, in whom Constance de la Tour took a very deep interest. She was full of zeal to teach them the Christian religion, and how to improve their way of living; and she went about from village to village, and from wigwam to wigwam, with wonderful patience striving to reach the hearts of the pagans, and help them to better things; so winning their love that she came to be esteemed as the guardian angel of their children.

Raoul usually accompanied her on these journeys, and strange enough were many of the places they visited. Now it would be a mere huddle of huts that looked like inverted wash-tubs, or again what seemed a cluster of large-sized hen-coops, or perhaps a big shed a hundred feet long with sleeping stalls below, and a loft above for the children, having neither windows nor chimney, and inclosed by a heavy oak stockade.

Whether big or little, these odd dwellings swarmed with squaws and children, and while his aunt was speaking to the elder folk, Raoul would always find amusement with the youngsters.

Many useful things did Madame de la Tour teach her dusky pupils – the way to bake bread, how to raise corn, pumpkins, and melons, the mode of preserving the fruit that was so plentiful in the autumn, and the art of making maple-sugar, all of which helped to benefit them, no less than the Gospel message she never failed to give also. She was the first missionary to these wild children of the forest in Acadia, and her memory is still enduring and fragrant because of the good she wrought amongst them. Raoul, vastly as he admired his aunt's devotion, could not of course be expected to share in it to any great extent, but since his idea of life was to have as good a time as possible – and he much preferred going on these expeditions to being cooped up in the fort – it suited him all right that she should be so zealous as she was.

Tramping through the vast green forests, or paddling in birch canoes over the clear water of smooth-running streams, there was always something new to be seen, and at any time an adventure might happen. In the autumn after their coming to Fort St. Louis, a great bear hunt was arranged to take place at the Tusket River, and Raoul was full of excitement about it. The plan was certainly as daring as it was novel, for the bears were not to be killed when found, but driven with clubs and switches towards the village, where arrows and spears and sharp appetites awaited them.

"I do hope there'll be plenty of bears," exclaimed Raoul to his aunt the evening before the hunt. "Won't it be exciting when they get them started, and they try to escape? I think I'll go out after the bears, and not wait at the village for them to come – that will be too tiresome."

"Whatever you do, Raoul, take good care of yourself," said Madame, patting him upon the shoulder. "You are my boy, you know, and I should be very sorry if anything were to happen to you."

Raoul smiled confidently as he drew himself up to his full height.

"Oh, there's no fear of me. I've had too much to do with bears to let any of them hurt me."

Madame smiled fondly back at him as she responded:

"You certainly look as if you ought to be able to take care of yourself. You are a fine big fellow, Raoul, and I pray God your life may be a long and happy and useful one."

The bear hunt was well organized under the direction of Madame, who had a genius for command. Raoul preferred going into the forest with the beaters to remaining at the village, and set off in high glee, the party being chiefly composed of the young men of the tribe.

It was the season of grapes, and the vines, which climbed in wild profusion to the very tree-tops, were laden with the luscious fruit which Bruin dearly loved. The hunters, therefore, were in no doubt as to where to seek their prey. Armed only with light clubs and supple switches, they dashed

into the forest, darting this way and that, each one eager to be the first to find a victim. Raoul joined forces with an Indian lad of his own age named Outan, and it was understood that they were to stand by each other. Beside his club Raoul had a good hunting-knife in his belt, but he carried no fire-arms.

Pressing forward with reckless haste, they came to a place where the grape-vines fairly smothered the trees which supported them.

"Ah-ha!" exclaimed Outan exultantly. "Plenty bear here, for sure!" and the words had but left his lips when he gave a cry of joy and pointed excitedly to a tree, whose leaves were shaking, although there was not a breath of wind.

Raoul gazed in the direction indicated, and his heart gave a bound when he caught sight of a dark body that the leaves only half concealed.

"There he is! I see him!" he cried; "a great big fellow, and he's coming down!"

Running to the foot of the tree, the boys began to shout up to the bear, calling him names, and daring him to come down.

But, instead of obeying them, the big black fellow, one of the largest of his kind and in superb condition, turned about, and proceeded to climb higher.

"Hullo! that won't do," said Raoul in a tone of disappointment. "We'll never get him down that way. Let us throw stones up at him."

Accordingly they began to bombard the animal with stones, Raoul, who was a capital shot, succeeding in hitting him more than once. Yet this did not help matters at all. On the contrary the bear only climbed the higher. Then Outan proposed to climb an adjoining tree, taking some stones with him, and then to drive the creature down. Raoul thought the idea an excellent one, and took up his station at the foot of the tree with his club in readiness for immediate use. Outan went up the tree with the ease of a monkey, and gaining a good position above the bear shouted fiercely at him, while he threw the stones with accurate aim. Thus assailed from this unexpected quarter, the bear was panic-stricken, and started down the tree at utmost speed.

"Look out! bear's coming!" yelled Outan, and Raoul, with every nerve quivering, and his muscles as tense as bow-strings, grasped his club until his knuckles went white.

Tail foremost, the heavy animal shuffled down the tree-trunk with astonishing agility, and, reaching the ground on all fours, turned to face Raoul.

CHAPTER III

SETTING A BAD EXAMPLE

Up to this moment Raoul, carried away by the excitement of the hunt, had not stopped to consider what he should do if the bear happened to show fight instead of running away, but now he found himself face to face with the creature, which was evidently in no very good humour at having been so rudely disturbed while feasting on the grapes.

Growling fiercely the bear charged at Raoul, who darted off, shouting:

"Quick, Outan, quick! Come, help me!"

By dodging in and out among the trees he could keep out of the bear's clutches; but this complete change of programme was not at all what he had counted upon, and it was with great relief that presently he saw not only Outan, but several other Indians coming to his aid. Shouting and swinging their clubs they attracted the animal's attention from Raoul, who was fast losing his breath, and from being the pursuer the bear now became the pursued.

He was wise enough to see that the odds were against him, and made off at a shambling gallop which the hunters found it difficult to keep up with. Their object being to drive the bear towards the village they must needs keep him going in that direction, and this they found no easy task. It would almost seem as if he suspected their purpose, so hard did he try to go off at a tangent instead of straight ahead; and more than once Raoul well-nigh despaired of their succeeding in their object, and regretted that he had not brought his musket with him. But the Indians were not to be fooled. The bear was too fine a specimen to lose, and they spared neither their lungs nor their muscles as they kept up the pursuit with unflagging zeal. It certainly was a curious way of hunting bears, and if Bruin had only known how powerless his persecutors really were, he would, no doubt, have freed himself from them in short order. He was too badly frightened, however, to perceive the truth, and did his best to keep out of range of the menacing cudgels, while all the time the village drew nearer, where his fate awaited him.

Raoul would have liked very much to reach the village ahead of the bear, but although he ran his very best, he was left well in the rear, and when he came up the big black creature had already been dispatched.

"You poor fellow!" said Raoul as he passed his hand over the rich, glossy black fur, a qualm of pity succeeding the lust of the chase now that the excitement was over. "You did your best to get away from us, but we were too many for you. It was not just a fair fight, was it?"

Several other bears had been secured, and when the hunt was over, and the Indians had all gathered again, some strange ceremonies took place. Into the mouths of the slain bears smoke from an Indian pipe was blown by the hunters, and at the same time each lifeless creature was begged not to hold any hard feelings because of what they had suffered. Then the bears' heads, painted and decorated, were set on high, and the savages sang the praise of the Acadian king of beasts, after which the well-cooked bodies were divided amongst the hungry people, who feasted upon them greedily. Madame and Raoul had their share of bear-steak, and then the former took advantage of the quiet which followed the feast, to talk to these heathens about the Great Spirit whom she was so anxious they should learn to love. She was listened to with great attention by the Indians, because she had won their hearts, not only by her lovely character, but also by her many generous deeds and gifts.

But they were, for the most part, slow learners of the new and better way. The grizzled old chief, to whom Madame with infinite patience was teaching the Lord's Prayer, made a quaint objection.

"If I ask for nothing but bread," said he, "I shall have no more moose nor sweet cakes," referring to some toothsome cake that Madame had herself baked as a present for him.

After Madame had spoken, the young folks fell to sky-larking, while the elders smoked their pipes, and Outan, who was fond of teasing, raised a big laugh at Raoul's expense by telling how the bear had dropped from the tree and put him to flight, and he mimicked Raoul dodging around the tree-trunk. This angered Raoul, and when his orders to Outan to "shut up" passed unnoticed, he rushed at him and struck him in the face.

Now, although Outan looked upon both Madame de la Tour and Raoul as superior beings, and would have endured a great deal at their hands rather than displease them, still he had his own share of temper and pride, and this sudden blow from Raoul, given in the presence of his companions, filled him with fury. He struck back with all his might, and the next instant the two boys were rolling upon the ground in a mad grapple. At once they were surrounded by an eager circle of spectators, who keenly relished what promised to be a lively fight, and with excited cries urged on the youthful combatants.

So close were Raoul and Outan locked in each other's arms that they could not use their fists, and the struggle was therefore in reality not more than a wrestling-match.

But the more they strove the fiercer burned their rage, and the moment that one or the other did succeed in getting a hand free, cruel use would certainly be made of it.

While this was taking place Madame had been talking with some of the women, little imagining how Raoul was engaged, and she might have continued in her ignorance had not Outan's little sister run up to them, sobbing out something which her mother at once understood, and darted off with an exclamation of alarm.

This attracted Madame's attention, and more out of concern lest some accident should have happened than from curiosity, she followed the Indian woman. When they reached the crowd that surrounded the fighters, so densely packed was it that at first they could not get within sight of what was going on. But presently some of the men made space for Madame in rather a shamefaced way, until she was quite close to the struggling boys.

For a moment she thought it was only an innocent trial of strength, but a second look at their inflamed faces and furious eyes told her the truth, and in a horror-stricken voice she called out:

"Raoul! Raoul! what's the meaning of this? Stop it at once. I command you."

But Raoul was in too wild a fury to hear or heed, and, realizing this, Madame, the grace of whose form concealed an unusual degree of strength in a woman, laid hold of the boys and tore them apart.

CHAPTER IV

OFF TO THE WOODS

Raoul rose sullenly to his feet, and faced his aunt, who fixed upon him a look of stern displeasure mingled with sorrow.

"Oh, my nephew," she said in a tone of profound reproach, "are you not ashamed of yourself to be engaged in such an unseemly brawl? What an example to set those whom we are striving to teach better things! Come away, that I may have some talk with you in private."

Raoul, his anger now having in large part given place to shame, obeyed her bidding without a word, and they passed through the crowd into the forest. Here Raoul found his tongue, and explained how the thing had occurred. Madame heard him with attention and sympathy.

"You certainly had good reason to be provoked, my boy," she said as she tenderly patted his cheek. "But you must not forget that these poor people are heathens, and we are Christians, and that if we would win them over to be Christians also, we must do very differently from what they would do themselves. Now you must confess that you did not act in a Christian way, and I am very sorry. Let us pray to God to give us such self-control that we shall not fall into errors of this kind."

So they kneeled together upon the turf, and Raoul's heart was melted by the fervent prayer that came from his aunt's lips for the help of God in right living, and in the conversion of the Indians. Then, without delay, he sought out Outan, and, to the great surprise of the lad, expressed his regret for his hasty blow and begged his forgiveness.

To Outan the situation was so utterly novel that he was bewildered what to do, but obeying the impulse of his heart, he smiled broadly and gave Raoul a hearty hug, which showed in the clearest way that all ill-feeling had vanished from him.

The bear hunt having been successfully carried out, Madame and Raoul returned to Fort St. Louis, where they found Monsieur La Tour, who had got back from one of his trading expeditions, awaiting them in high spirits, because his business operations had been very successful.

Charles La Tour thought more of wealth and power than anything else in the world. Not even his beautiful, devoted wife was dearer to him. Yet he loved her after his own fashion, was very proud of her, and had not the slightest objection to her missionary zeal, so long as it did not cross any of his plans or ambitions. In regard to Raoul, of whom he was quite fond, he did think it rather a pity that he should be filled with his aunt's religious notions, because it might spoil him for the rough business of life; yet he made no protest against it, although he did now and then let drop a cynical speech that touched the boy's sensitive nature.

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