

The Jesuit's Well

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THE JESUIT'S WELL.

BY

WILLIAM WILFRED CAMPBELL.

Massey's Magazine, February 1897

I.

In the early seventies, when I was a clerk in the Civil Service at Ottawa, where I had charge of the old Upper Canada Official Papers, my fellow-clerk, an eccentric old Frenchman named Lombard, died suddenly, leaving me, as a legacy, a package containing a memorandum, which read as follows:

“For John Bertram: Read papers in package tied with red tape in section 38. Open French, English inside. Marry the girl. Pierre Lombard.”

When opened, it also disclosed an exquisite miniature painting on ivory of a very beautiful young woman of a past century, and on the back of the miniature was written in faded ink: “My great-grandmother, the Countess of Lombardy. P. Lombard.”

I searched in section 38, and found the French papers, and on my opening them out fell a small bundle of letters. They were in English, and were written by one, John Gillis, manager of a branch of the old Canada Bank at a place called Northampton, on Lake Huron. They were, for the most part, on business matters, relating to monies, land, patents, etc.; but, examining them carefully, I came to a short one addressed to “Donald Gillis, Ayr, Scotland.” It was the strangest letter I had ever seen, and contained the following meaningless jumble of words: “Left drawer in bottom first chart well get in Jesuit's ring the sunset the the pull a over half league boat west take dead from landing alternate back. J. Gillis.”

After studying it for the whole night, I had a sudden inspiration that the last two words were a direction to be followed, and reading the rest backwards and alternating the words, got the following: "From landing take boat dead west, half a league over the sunset. Pull the ring in the Jesuit's Well. First get chart in left bottom drawer."

All was clear so far. This was a clue to a secret, no doubt, which I intended to fathom. I next found Northampton on the map, and went to bed to dream of buried treasure and a beautiful face that looked at me from an ivory portrait, and to study out, sleeping or waking, for evermore, the mystery of the Jesuit's Well.

Three days afterwards I arrived in Northampton. Next morning I stepped out in front of the tumble-down hotel and found the great sweep of lake and drifted beaches before my gaze, and I made up my mind that if a secret were hidden anywhere, it was here it would keep its history inviolate.

The whole atmosphere of haze-wrapped lake, sky and drifted sand shores, with these storm-blown battered buildings, seemed to belong to a remote past.

Upon enquiring as to the whereabouts of the former residence of Gillis, the bank, I discovered, had been closed for some years, and the residence, sold for a rectory, was now vacant.

The church clerk, a garrulous little man, accompanied me to the house, and then left me to my ruminations, after having informed me that at the top of the house were some articles belonging to the former owner.

I trod some rickety stairs and entered an old garret dimly lighted, and there in front of me, with its dust-covered, time-stained drawers partly open, stood the desk that my hopes were builded upon.

Trembling with excitement, I opened the left-hand lower drawer, only to find emptiness and much dust. I could have cried out in my angry disappointment. I had feared that the desk might be gone, but never dreamed the papers could be missing.

I took out my package and studied it anew. Undoubtedly this was the right desk, but there it stood with the important left-hand drawer empty. My chagrin was complete. Was the whole thing a dream of Lombard's?

I laid the ivory portrait on the desk. Was this also a part of his dream?

"It is remarkable," I ejaculated, aloud.

“It is, indeed!” chuckled a voice behind me, which caused me to start. I turned and caught the ghoulish little church clerk peering over my shoulder, with evident amazement, at the ivory portrait.

“What is remarkable?” I demanded, annoyed at the start he had given me and at his espionage of my actions.

“Don’t be angry,” he answered; “you were so absorbed in that old desk that my curiosity overcame me; but I will answer your question if you will tell me what you expected to find.”

“Some old documents,” I answered, in more conciliatory terms.

“You are mistaken,” he said; “I was the first person to overhaul these things, and there were no papers in that desk. Gillis was a peculiar man, and he burnt all his papers before he died. He had one eccentricity: he was always looking for something. I guess it was buried gold. Many have come here on the same hunt. Lately, an old Frenchman came and stayed a week. He was very close Until he got drunk, then it came out what he was after. He was the first to ask for Gillis. The others just went over and dug by the old fort.”

“Where is that?” I asked.

“On White Sand Island, out there about two miles.”

“Did they ever find anything?” I asked.

“No,” he answered; “it’s all nonsense. I think Gillis was a little crazy, or, at least, I did until I saw that picture.”

“What do you mean?”

“If you can row, I will show you,” he returned.

“Certainly I can. But was there nothing in that desk?”

“No papers, I am certain; for all I did find was there,” pointing to the lower left-hand drawer.

“What was it?” I questioned, eagerly.

“Nothing, only a life of Captain Kidd,” he returned.

“Was there nothing in it?”

“No,” he answered; “I have read it a number of times; but I will send it to you this evening.”

Soon we were rowing towards a small island, where a tall, stone lighthouse loomed against the horizon. Before us a long, low island lay like a line of smoke across the western horizon.

“That’s the place,” said the clerk; “you can see the fort from here. A lot of Frenchmen were murdered there once by the Indians. It has a bad name.”

A sudden conviction came to me that here was the place where I should find the Jesuit’s Well with its remarkable secret.

Before long I was following my guide through some shrubbery to the lightkeeper’s house. He knocked loudly. The door opened, and a young girl about seventeen years old, but the very image of the woman in the ivory portrait, stood before my astonished gaze.

II.

All that day the problem of the mysterious girl, the haunted island, the old fort and the dead Frenchman whirled through my brain, and I eagerly waited for evening.

About dusk the book arrived. It was a small volume, bound in cheap board covers, containing a history of the life and death of Captain Kidd, but, though I searched carefully from cover to cover, found that it contained nothing more than the plain narrative.

I made another diligent search, but without avail. I was about to throw the book down in disgust, when I noticed something that made my heart beat quicker. The last flyleaf had been carefully glued to the cover. Turning to the front I discovered that the same had been done there. Procuring some hot water, and having soaked the book, I soon separated the leaves, and drying the flyleaf by the lamp, read as follows: “Cart to find Jes Well.” The rest was obliterated, but this was enough; it was part of a map. The second flyleaf would not come off as the other had done, so I could only make out a small portion, evidently the rest of the map, but I deciphered some writing in one corner. It ran: “Can not find Jes. Well; got there. Can’t get right angle for fort. Find child.” This was all; but something to work on.

Next morning, with a spade, pickaxe, a boat and sufficient provisions, I started early, steering straight for the fort.

As I rowed out past the island lighthouse in the hazy morning light, I saw, on a spit of white sand, a quarter of a mile away, the figure of a young girl, watching something intently out on the lake. It was Laeta Merton, for such, the little clerk had told me, was her name, the heroine of my dreams.

I noticed that she was looking at a point away at the north end of the island, toward which I was going.

After half an hour's hard rowing I reached the island. I have been in lonely places, but this was the loneliest I ever was in. Even in the middle morning it gave me that eerie sensation some places impress upon one at night, and an idea possessed me that I was in a place where some awful crime had been committed, and that the presence of the guilty dead still lingered.

It was a long, low, sandy spit, about half a mile in length, out of which jutted at the north end a huge rock shelf, that rose up and projected into the lake. Midway in the island stood the old fort. It was nothing now but ruined walls, with a great chimney at one end, and a huge, rugged doorway that looked lonesomely landward, and could be seen for miles.

For fully an hour, I examined every crevice, chink and wall in the old ruin, sounded its grass-grown floors for under-ground hiding-places, and satisfied myself that nothing was to be discovered here. I saw that others had been before me, for the whole place had been ransacked. Stones were pried up and holes dug, but whether the mysterious dog had kept faithful guard, or they had been successful, I could not tell.

It was patent that this kind of searching would not discover the Jesuit's Well. I must find the landing mentioned in the description, and take a line dead west. Taking out a small pocket compass, I began to make calculations. I took several points on the shore for the supposed landing, but none of them would lie dead east of the fort. I had to construct an angle, and working backwards, find the landing if possible. With compass, paper and pencil, I set to work. Taking the backbone of the island as a base, I found to my astonishment, that the line of its centre ran direct to the spit where the young girl had stood as I passed. A light flashed upon me; I had, or fancied I had, two points of the triangle, and the third was somewhere on land, and there would be the old landing. Without being a professional surveyor, I had some slight knowledge in that line, so with two poles at right angles, and the aid of my chart, I drew a rough diagram by which I got the point on shore, the lost corner of the triangle. But a line drawn due west from this point, I found, did not touch the fort at all, but ran across the centre of the great rock

shelf at the north end of the island. This was a great surprise. My calculations were right, and Gillis was wrong in looking about the old fort where people would naturally search for treasure.

With pickaxe and spade I started towards the grim rock shelf that rose grey and gruesome out of the white drifted sand.

After climbing from plateau to plateau of rock, keeping the backbone of the island well in mind, I came out on top near the north end, and there in a slight indentation of the surface, lay an innocent looking slab of slate, covered partially by some drifted sand that never had come there by natural causes. Throwing my spade on the ground, and wedging my pickaxe under the slab, I turned it over to one side and revealed a ragged funnel, like a chimney that went on down and ended in an open cave. There was light below, and I could hear the ripple and fall of water, and knew that I had found the Jesuit's Well.

With a strange feeling of uncanny dread, I made up my mind to descend. As the walls were jagged, this was not hard to do, so, after tossing down my pickaxe, I climbed down about twenty feet, and found myself in a small, open cave, whose rock floor was thickly filled on the inside with fine, white sand, and which opened on the outside onto the open lake, but a few feet below the place where I stood. I went to the edge and leaned over, but started back, for I realized with amazement, that the waters from their inky blackness were of immense depth. Turning around, I heard a sound of bubbling water, and going forward, saw against the inner wall in the corner, a clear spring of water that bubbled from the sand and fell with a musical sound into a curiously moulded iron pot, from whence it flowed into the lake below.

Here, indeed, was the well, and here the pot, but where was the ring to pull? With a rapidly beating heart, I examined the sides of the cave, but found nothing. Then I took the pickaxe, and began to probe the sand floor. I was much excited and worked hard, but was getting discouraged, when my axe-point struck something hard. Hastily brushing the sand aside, I found an old rusted iron ring. Inserting the axe-point, with a wrench and pull, up came a small square of wood like the hatch of an old boat, which revealed an opening in which was another iron pot filled with something that scintillated in the afternoon sunlight that now slanted into the cave. Wrenching up the pot by its rusted handle, a sight met my eyes that I had never dreamed in my wildest moments. It was filled to the brim with jewels of wonderful beauty, and doubtless of inestimable value.

I sat down in a dream and emptied its contents out on the sand, and counted nearly fifty necklaces and bracelets of pure gems strung together in a fine setting of antique gold.

They were of but three kinds, rubies, emeralds, and opals, but all apparently of the purest water. There was no clue of any kind to explain the mystery of their presence, but there they gleamed red, green and violet in the lonesome sunlight, and my mind began to conjure up the old-time beauties whom they had once adorned, until a sense of their great value grew upon me, and of the responsibility of the vast wealth that had come into my possession.

Just then a movement of my foot overturned the hatch, and there, attached to it, face downward, where it had evidently kept silent watch during all those years, was a hideous grinning skull.

Then a horror of the place and jewels overcame me. The gems seemed to move as if touched by unseen hands. Suddenly, an eerie laugh sounded through the cave, and with a cry of terror, I sprang to the chimney and climbed rapidly up, and fell shaking and exhausted out into the upper sunlight.

Even out there, with the lake and sky all about me, it took some time for my nerves to recover from the horrible sensation that that skull and those jewels had conjured up; but that laugh, it could hardly be mere fancy. Cursing myself for my cowardice, I climbed down once more. The spring and the pot were as before, but the gems and the skull had vanished, and the place was as silent and empty as the tomb.

For a moment I stood in amazement, while my terror returned; again that laugh rang out, but nearer, and I turned to retreat, but started back in wonder and astonishment, for before me appeared a most remarkable and beautiful sight. Between me and the opening where the afternoon sunlight and the blue lake shone in, stood Laeta Merton, her beautiful dark face wearing a half mocking, half playful smile, and her splendid arms, head, breast and neck literally gleaming with the magical radiance of those mysterious jewels. It seemed as if by heredity, something subtle in those old gems had passed into her simple girlish nature, transforming her; for she looked, standing there, like some magnificent reincarnation of old days.

Intoxicated, carried out of myself by her strange, fatal beauty, I sprang forward, with a cry of passion and wonder.

“Laeta,” I cried. But her face on the instant changed as I have never seen face change before or since. In it there grew infinite scorn and defiance, and

as if to escape, she stepped quickly back, when her foot slipped, and in an instant with a quick cry she sank into the inky waters outside.

With a shout of horror, I sprang forward and leaned over the edge, but saw only the inky deeps that blinked at me from below. She and the jewels, between which and herself, was such a strange, mysterious association, by some mystic fate had sunk forever, taking with them the secret that enshrouded them.

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Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *The Jesuit's Well* by William Wilfred Campbell]