W. H. Blake

Louis Hémon, *Maria Chapdelaine*, trad. par W. H. Blake

SPECIAL INTRODUCTION

Louis Hémon was born at Brest on the 12th of October, 1880, and received his education in Paris, where he took his degree in modern Oriental languages. He lies buried at Chapleau, Ontario, near which place he was run down and killed by a train on the 8th of July, 1913.

Of an inquiring and eager cast of mind, he loved the open road, and particularly delighted in studying the speech, manners, and customs of those amongst whom he sojourned.

By 1904 he had learned the craft of the pen and was writing stories which gained recognition and won him prizes. He was also a regular contributor to Parisian journals on subjects connected with literature and sport. A long visit to England in 1908 taught him the language, and there he found the stage and characters for a novel–*Lizzie Blakeston*–which was admired both as a faithful portrait of English life and for its style.

Anxious to wander yet further afield, and to learn how it fared with the little band of his fellow-countrymen who crossed the sea centuries before are multiplied a hundredfold, he came to Quebec in 1912 and drifted thence to the Lake St. John region where he spent many months–at Roberval, St. Gédéon, and especially at Péribonka–sharing the lives and labours of the people and quietly reaping a harvest of observations for the book that was taking form in his mind. *Maria Chapdelaine* was written at Montreal, dispatched to France, and published in Paris as a serial–six months after his death. Even had Hémon lived, fame and reward would have loitered on their way, for neither the serial nor the first edition of the book (Montreal, 1914) made any great stir. Not until 1921 was it that fresh editions of the book in France and translations of it into other languages carried his name around the world.

It is only the truth to say that this little volume gives an incomparably true and beautiful picture of the French-Canadian peasant, and excels in distinction of style any other prose which has been written on Canadian soil. But the attentive reader will discover some things to be curious at as well as many to admire, and may find interest in considering Hémon's manner of conceiving and executing his masterpiece.

Like every author, he brought to the task his own eyes and mind, but we may go a

little further and assert that he chose, of deliberation, to reflect his subject against the patterned surface of his own conventions rather than to transmit it through an impartial medium into a literal, colourless record. While his scenes are depicted with the utmost faithfulness–with so much of simplicity and naïve charm that some are found to say they outdo nature–the sentiments and reflections are tinctured in passage. Sir Wilfrid Laurier gently questions whether his joyous and contented countrymen are not painted with too dark a brush, and, if it be so, is not the reason that this self-exiled Parisian, cast up on the edge of the habitable world, and sad-spirited at the loneliness and the harshness of the life he was contemplating, looked into his own heart, and wrote? This note of haunting melancholy is not false, not even over-sounded, but it dominates a chord where happier keys are touched with a lighter hand. Truth is there, and nothing but the truth, if not all the truth; and yet it may well be that the part which Hémon has made so vividly alive is greater than any whole within the genius of man.

We must return later to this explicative comment, but a word should first be said as to the idiom which Louis Hémon used. His characters suggest rather than speak the vernacular. Had he allowed them the full scope of their native speech and intonation those equipped only with modern French would often find themselves at a loss. The doubter can test his eye and ear upon such a book as *Marie Calumet*. Some disparage this old tongue as a *patois*, with as much or as little justice as a Londoner might so treat certain English dialects. You will find that those who know their own language best are the readiest to admit that this is French in the backbone, though archaic and sprinkled with English words, and are amazed, not at the changes and corruptions it has suffered, but at the essential purity it has maintained. They will also be aware that the dialect is yet alive in that corner of France whence these peasants came, where the man from Quebec would still find himself at home. It is interesting also to note (though the subject may only be spared a glance) that excellent French words like *patates* and *fiable* (trustworthy) linger in Quebec though they have oddly drifted out of the main current of the mother tongue. For convenience, of necessity indeed, a number of English words have been absorbed, and not a few examples will be found in *Maria Chapdelaine*.

Hémon, then, did not think it wise to put the undiluted dialect into the mouths of his peasant-folk, and we can hardly get forward without having some genera idea of the middle course which he adopted. Let us first, and very briefly, consider the question of pronunciation.

I has often been said that the *habitant* chants rather than talks. This peculiarity of intonation, so apparent to the ear, can scarcely be conveyed to the eye. The remark must suffice that his words lack detachment and precision and are delivered in a sing-song fashion. Perhaps he might retort that the same defects mar the speaking of English on this continent, and our best reply would be that the same atmospheric causes are at work in both cases.

Passing to the vowels (which, speaking broadly, retain of values from which modern French has diverged) Hémon indicates the sound of "ai" in *Anglais* and *vais* with his *Anglâs* and *vas*, but does not do so with such other words as *français, fais, mauvais, raison, maison*, etc., etc. In like manner he shows the broad "oi" in *ouais* (oui), *moué, toué, cré*, but not in *dois, roi, soif, vois, paroisse,* etc., etc. The broad "a" (of "awe"), found in *va, ça, char, tabac, part,* etc., etc., he does not suggest at all; nor the flat "a" in *méchant, cran, disant,* etc., etc.; and from his writing of *verge, cherche, perdre* (with other words of the class) one would not suspect that these come from the lips as *varge, charche, pardre*.

Putting aside words of English origin (which explain themselves) we find that Hémon illustrates the dialect with *pire* for *trop mal, à ras* for *tout proche à, icitte* for *ici, mouille* for *pleut, siau* for *seau, à cette heure (à c't'heure)* for *maintenant, un temps* for *une fois, c'est-y* for *est-ce, dret* for *droit, fret* for *froid, gran homme* for *homme grand.* The women-folk are *créatures. Règne* might be defined as "career"–involving the idea of being master or mistress of one's way of life. *Chousse* is a transposition of *souche* (this occurs also in *chesser* for *sécher* and *chesseresse* for *sécheresse*, but Hémon does not record it). *Cran* signifies an outcrop of country rock. *Gaudriole* is miexed grain planted for feed. *Ennuyé de* is used in the sense of "lonely without" or "wearying for". *Misère* covers all possible untoward things from the very extremity of hardship to the least of everyday inconveniences and annoyances. *Virer* is applied to horses as well as to boats, and has a secondary meaning of going to such and such a point before turning homeward. The word (with *embarquer* and *débarquer*, used

of vehicles instead of *monter* and *descendre*) was brought over by these sea-faring folk.

If Hémon had chosen to plunge a little deeper into the peasant speech, Eutrope Gagnon would have linked together the phrases of his long story with *puis* (pronounced *pis*), nor could he have escaped the ungainly *ianque (il n'y a que)* and *'tet'-ben* or even *she-ben* for *peut être bien*, and *quasiment* would have been *quagiment*; Maria's attempt to compute distances would have been in *lieux*, not in *milles*; her father would have said *cinq arpents* and not *trois cents verges*–as *lieux*, *arpents*, and *pas* are the land measures still used in the remote districts; Chapdelaine's threat would have been to deny the doctor *un sou*, not *une cent*; Hémon would have named the sleigh the *berlot*, for the *traîneau* is the roughest kind of sled and the *carriole* has too high runners for country roads; he would have written *bottes sauvages* for *bottes indiens (indien* not being in use there either as noun or adjective) and for *gobelet d'étain* we should have had *tasse de fer blanc; crier* would have replaced *quérir*; the first word of the chorus of *Claire Fontaine* would have been rendered *Lui y a* and not *Il y a.* It seems that in *écarré* his ear failed to catch the locally familiar *écore* (from the same root as our escarp) meaning a cut-bank.

Hémon fully recognizes the dislike of the decent countryman to the use of bad language. Even the forgivable *Mon Dieu* is softened to *Mon Dou*; Légaré's *Blasphème!* is very mild, and his *Ciboire!* has no more sense or vice in it than our "By the Great Horn spoon!" Chapdelaine's *maudit* (under severest provocation) is as near blasphemy as the well-conditioned *habitant* is like to come. *Batêche!* (like *Bateau!* or *Bâtiment*) is nonsensical, and an avoidance of *baptême*, for these people regard a slighting reference to baptism as no light thing. *Sacré!* disapears in *sapri!* and *sapristi!*

A trained observer like Hémon, with language for a hobby, might easily have made an obstacle race of his pages, but with evident intention he chose not to do so, and we are left to applaud the art with which he conveyed a clear impression of this old speech without over-trying the reader's patience. Sometimes he seems almost indifferent as to points of detail and the proper words of description. Instances have been given; a few more may help to an understanding of the book.

To the French Canadian the mosquito is the *maringouin* and the black fly the

moustique; *mouche noire* is an alternative name for the latter, and *mouche*, while covering the whole tribe of flies, is commonly the black fly to the woodsman. Hémon confuses them. It may well be that he intended to introduce the third of the usual trinity of tormentors–the sand fly (*brûlot*)–or even to make up a *partie carrée* with the *frappe à bord* (horsefly). There is a little evidence for this in the fact that he speaks of the *bourdonnement* of the *mouche noire*, whereas we all know that the black fly goes about his fell work in perfect silence.

As Hémon has slipped into other trifling errors, it seems fair to suggest that a pump and a sink would scarcely be found in a house buried deep in the woods. Living in a village (though a tiny one) he would be more familiar with what was continually before his eyes than with the yet simpler furnishings of a dwelling that bordered the forest. On the other hand, the inevitable patch of tobacco, cultivated by every *habitant* for his own use, escapes description, and one may add that it would be an unusual *veillée* where a fiddle (very likely home-made) did not appear from some quarter to furnish music for square dance or jig, broom-dance or garter-dance.

The pleasant custom of kissing of New Year's day certainly exists, but manners require you to begin with the grandmother and end with the baby–the girls are incidental!

The scene must linger in memory where Maria sits dreaming on the door step while the bread is baking–watching the quivering, dying flame. A little better knowledge of the process need not hurt the beauty of the passage. The clay oven, sheltered from the weather by a roof of boards, has but the one chamber and the one door. A fire is built within and kept blazing until the clay is heated through and through; then the coals and ashes are swept out, the loaves slipped in, the door tightly closed, and the heat stored in the thick floor, walls and roof bakes the bread. Thus the tending of the fire is all of the writer's imagining.

It may seem ungracious to harp on trifles, but it is surely important to be aware that Hémon's pen was no machine for the dull recording of what ear heard and eye witnessed. He was busy with matters of higher consequence–things of the spirit–and troubled himself not greatly with trivialities outside the intent of his theme. We think no less of Shakespeare because he gave a seacoast to Bohemia where his convenience required it!

There is one further point which should detain you a moment longer from the book's

perusal. It cannot be doubted that Hémon knew more about the country and the people than he was minded to write, and that is picking and choosing was of definite purpose. Not only did he reject whatever seemed immaterial but he selected with careful deliberation only those things which would color his background most fittingly and harmoniously. Perhaps the idea I would convey is best illustrated by drawing attention to some of his omissions.

Of the *sombre bois* which Hémon holds continually before us in menace he gives only a few of the many trees which go to compose it. Three of these deserve a passing mention: there are several kinds of *épinette* (spruce), and the so-called *épinette rouge*, not of the family, is the tamarack of larch; the name *merisier* (cherry birch) covers more than one variety; as did we with "partridge", "robin", etc., the French in early days took the nearest old name for a new thing with *cyprès* which we, adopting the error, translated "cypress" (although the tree does not grow with us), but nowadays, and more properly, we say "Banksian pine", "jack pine", "gray pine", or "panskin".

We know the woods are not so empty of life as Hémon represents them; had it served his purpose to do so. Hémon might have tenanted them with moose and caribou, wolf, wolverine, and beaver, and a host of small fur-bearing animals. In *Maria Chapdelaine* we hear the foxes bark but do not catch even a glimpse of a chipmunk!

He might have added many wild berries to his list–had he been compiling one.

The lakes, the rivers, and the streams of this country abound in fish, but to Hémon they are barren.

He does not bid us lift our eyes to the broad wedges of geese, or the flocks of migrating ducks that darken the sky. From golden eagle to tiny ruby-throat one bird alone does he bring upon the scene; the morning and evening concerts of thrush and sparrow we are not invited to attend; only does the owl make the night more solitary.

The single flower he names–the *bois de charme* (hornbeam)–is not present in the land either in name or fact, and only his lovely description reveals to us that he is writing of the laurel. Forgotten are the *fleur de mai* (arbutus), the *fleur des savanes* (swamp laurel), the *sabot de la Sainte Vierge* (moccasin flower), the fire-weed crimsoning a whole mountain-side, or the twin-flower perfuming a glade with its carpet of pink bells–all that gracious

procession from May till September blooming before him in wood and marshland and making a garden of the roadside.

Hémon's springtime is no sooner come than gone, and yet there never fails a fortnight when the Indian pear and the wild cherry, white with warm and scented snow, are murmurous of bees.

It passes thinking that all this, of which I have given so dull and hurried and inventory, escaped senses of such keenness or slipped from so retentive a mind. Must we not believe that Hémon, with a true artist's instinct, set himself to create a wide and empty desolateness as the setting for his tale, and sternly pushed aside whatever might distract attention from the austere design? Adding no false stroke, he took full leave to select and compose, and rejected with unsparing hand everything that might blur to severe lines of his picture. Without thought of questioning that the painter, the sculptor, the writer, must thus approach a labor of true creation, it can scarcely be amiss to invite the readers' admiration for what *Maria Chapdelaine* is, lest he should lose sight of this in some confusion about what it does not pretend to be.

Venturing a last monition, I would like to hint that in every translation lies a double task: easy it is to turn a book out of French; to clothe the living spirit in the garment of another language is difficult indeed, but *labor ipse voluptas.*

Source : Louis Hémon, *Maria Chapdelaine*, trad. par W. H. Blake, Toronto, St. Martin's Classics, 1934, p. 1-11.