

XIX

LE FEU FOLLET.

A Legend of Grosse Isle.



ABOUT fifteen miles below Detroit lies the beautiful island called Grosse Isle, it being the largest of the group between Lakes Erie and Sainte Claire.

Its wonderful fertility, the luxuriant growth of its forest trees and the beauty of its situation so wove the spell of its seductive charm around the heart of an English officer, that he resolved to resign and spend the remainder of his days in this enchanting retreat. His name was William Maccomb. He was of Scottish extraction, and he had come to Detroit with the English troops in 1760. Maccomb obtained an Indian grant for his coveted

treasure, and soon improvements arose, testifying his earnest desire to make himself comfortable in his island home. In 1808 his heirs, John, William and David, through their attorney, Solomon Sibley, and their agent, Angus McIntosh, received full acknowledgment from the American Government. Energy, enterprise and administrative ability were inseparable from the name of Macomb, one of its members, Alexander, becoming general-in-chief of the army of the United States. Grosse Isle, Belle Isle,* and large tracts of land in Detroit, belonged to this family, and if retained until the present time would have made them immensely wealthy. The lavish hospitality and unbounded extravagance which characterized all the old families during the military epoch, compelled a gradual transfer of property. But some of the descendants, though no longer bearing the family name, still preserve homesteads on Grosse Isle.

* See page 273 and page 479 Land Titles in the Michigan Territory American State Papers xvi., vol. 1, Public Lands.

Monday, December 2, 1805.

John, William and David Macomb claimed an island situated in the Strait, three miles above Detroit, called Hog Island. It contains 704 acres, was surveyed by Mr. Boyd in 1771, and purchased from the Indians of the Ottawa and Chippewa nations in council, under direction of his Majesty's commander-in-chief, and conveyed to Lt. George McDougall, whose heirs sold it to Wm. Macomb in 1793.

Cotemporary with the Macombs was the family of the Navarres. Robert 1st of the name, was fifth in descent from Antoine, Duke of Vendôme, half-brother of Henry 4th of Navarre. He came to Detroit in 1730 as sub-intendant of Louis XIV, having entire control of all the affairs of the French Government outside of the military authority, in this part of la Nouvelle France. His children and grandchildren became an honor to him, and proverbial for their great beauty and Bourbon faces. They so married and intermarried with the Macombs, that it was difficult to say where one family ended and the other began.

William Macomb, Jr., had become the humble captive of the beautiful Monique Navarre, a granddaughter of "Robert the Writer," as he was called. He had invited her with her brother Robert, to visit the island during the sultry August weather, and one morning they embarked in their little sailboat to drink in the refreshing breezes from Lake Erie. On landing before the Macomb mansion they were disappointed to learn that the family had been called to Elba Island, just below, by the death of a friend, but the "pani"* slave left in attendance assured them

*At the time referred to slavery was universal, and originally all prisoners taken in Indian wars, who were not whites, were called by the French "Pani"—spelled by the English to conform with the

they must come in and make themselves comfortable, as Master William had left word, thinking it possible that the visitors would come, that he would reach home by sunset. The aspect of the sky silenced all hesitancy, as one of those sudden storms born only on a sultry, tropical day, swept over the island.

As the vivid flashes darted across the water, Monique, who was of a nervous temperament, begged the pani slave to split off fragments of the Christmas log (usually preserved half-burnt from year to year) and to throw them on the fire, "to prevent the thunder from falling;" then, glancing at the door and seeing a branch of white thorn suspended there she became tranquil. This bush was considered a divine lightning rod, the superstition probably arising from the fact that its thorny branches crowned the Saviour's head. An old legend says that wherever drops of His precious blood fell, flowers sprang forth. A portion of this crown is still seen in the relics of the Holy Roman Empire in the government collection at Vienna.*

pronunciation, "Pawnee." The word gradually came to mean a person of mixed Indian and negro blood, and is so used in this narrative.

* Another superstition was that a piece of bread which had been blessed at three Christmas masses would preserve a house from harm.

Gradually the storm subsided, but the shadows of night crept swiftly on and still the family returned not. Suddenly a sharp, shrill whistle fell on the expectant ears, startling all to their feet. Monique, who had been gazing vaguely into the twilight, slammed the blinds together hurriedly exclaiming, "It is the feu follet dancing over the fields, and if I had not shut it out, it would have entered and strangled us. Le Bon Dieu preserve William and the others."

"A truce to your fears, ma sœur," answered Robert. "They can take care of themselves, but as it is clearing up we will soon go in search of them." Thus did he soothe the nervous girl; for himself he had no fears, and being a student at the bar, naturally felt little respect for the higher powers or the devil.

Like other scoffers of the period he thought the feu follet merely inflammable gases arising from miasmatic exhalations of swampy lands. Monique and many others thought this "an easy way of explaining it." Had they lived in our days they would have found a great number who attribute to electricity things which they can not explain.

"Tell me all about the feu follet, chère sœur," said Robert, anxious to divert her and lull her apprehensions. A glad light of pleasure

stole into her eyes, and a tender blush suffused her face, battling with that triumphant expression which every woman wears when she thinks she has won a convert to her opinions.

“*Mon frère*, the *feu follet* are not always considered dangerous. When twin lights are seen stealing along in the soft twilight they are called ‘*Castor and Pollux*,’ and this is a happy omen. But when a single intense light appears it is named ‘*Helene*,’ and he who sees it must at once throw himself on the ground covering his face, for so seductive is its fascination that it allures him to deserted bogs and steep ravines, and leaves him to die. There is a Norman tradition which exists among the habitants coming from Caen, in Normandy, that the *feu follet* are divided into two species, the male and female, and are supposed to be the souls of those who have sinned against purity. These people of the Norman race also call maidens who have fallen from grace ‘*fourolle*,’ as *fourolle Jeanne*, *fourolle Katishe*, and believe that the evil one gives them the power of divesting themselves of their body, and transforming into a bright light which runs ‘*en fourolle*,’ leading many to destruction who mistake it for some friendly signal when astray in swampy places.”

As Monique finished her explanation she rose

and insisted that they should go in search of the host and family. They started out followed by the pani, who held his blazing pine knot which threw its uncertain light on the pathway and made a weird tableau as its flickering rays alternately bathed the little procession in light, then in shadow. They made the woods resound with their shouts, but no answering call greeted their anxious ears, and the pani expressed his anxiety, as "Master William had surely promised to return, and he never knew him to fail in spite of rain or sunshine." At last, as they proceeded on their doleful journey, the ground grew miry and swampy, while the dismal croaking of frogs and the sickly miasmatic odors added to their dread forebodings. Just then, when the saddest presentiments were invading the hearts of the courageous searchers, Monique uttered one last despairing cry in which all the energy of her nature seemed centered, so anxious was she it should reach the lost one. Instantaneously the sharp report of a pistol startled from their nests the little birds which fluttered around chirping plaintively, as if seeking companionship from the invaders of their solitary and mournful abode. Following the sound of the pistol, the searchers saw in the swamp an object in the water, and soon their willing hands had made a sort of

bridge which enabled them to approach it. It proved to be the lost wanderer, hopelessly struggling in the miry embrace. He was extricated from his perilous position and the little procession went back rejoicing.

On arriving at home, seated at the hospitable table, William related his adventure. As soon as the storm subsided he had started homeward; the remainder of the family were to stay at Elba until the morning. In the darkness he had lost his way, and seeing a bright light had followed it. As he drew nearer it appeared to recede until he found himself plunged into the swamp. He cried out for help until exhausted, and his only answer was the mocking laughter of goblins. Realizing the hopelessness of his position, he commended his spirit to his Maker and calmly awaited the result. Suddenly it seemed to him as if the voice of his loved one was borne to his ears to soften the anguish of his last moments. Then other voices came so distinctly that he awoke from his lethargy, and thinking it possible that friends had heard his former cries for help, fired his pistol.

“It was the feu follet, mon ami, which led you astray. You cannot say you do not believe in it now,” said Monique, as she glanced archly at her lover.

“Anything you believe in will suit me now and for all time,” said the gallant William.

So on the next feast day they stood before the altar of Ste. Anne’s in Detroit, and were made one forever.