


THE RIEL QUESTION

LETTER

BY THE

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THE RIEL QUESTION

GENTLEMEN,

At this moment, over the province of Quebec, there is blowing a storm of revolt which threatens to upset, in its passage, if it is not allayed, the Conservative party and the ministry. Would to God that the disaster might stop there, and that the nationality to which we belong might not be irretrievably injured thereby. A political party can soon reorganize itself; a ministry is soon forgotten, and is replaced even more easily than it is forgotten. But the wounds which a nationality receives bleed for a long time, and are never completely healed. The more I respect the national sentiment which has given rise to the present movement, the more I deplore the cause of this rising, the more do I grieve over the sad consequences which may result from it. The best proof that the movement is bad is that a spirit of injustice seems to control it. Old and faithful servants of the country are suspected, accused, and condemned without being heard, ay even before they have spoken.

During the eighteen years for which I have been your representative, the sincerity of my patriotism and my devotion to the people has never been placed in doubt. With a confidence that has never faltered, I have worked with this people, from whom I have sprung and to whom I owe everything. I have often been accused of exaggerated predilection for the French-Canadian cause, because I exerted all my efforts to afford the Province of Quebec the means

of developing its immense resources as rapidly as possible under the impulse of a powerful current of French influence. I have no cause to regret my efforts. I was acting within my right, because I did not attack the interest of our fellow-citizens of British origin. Stimulated by their spirit of enterprise, I wished to see my people press forward, side by side with them, on the road of material prosperity. When they accuse me to-day of being wanting in this great national sentiment, or of being false to it, there is an injury which I resent profoundly, which I do not deserve, and in regard to which I have a right to feel wounded.

They reproach me with being wanting in honor, because I remained at my post, after the Federal Cabinet refused to commute to imprisonment for life the capital sentence passed on Louis Riel by the Court, and they treat my refusal of the request of a large number of friends to tender my resignation, as a terrible fault for which I would be, later on, the severest sufferer. I would not have spoken here of this affair, had not one of the leaders of the Opposition, Mr. Mercier, declared to the meeting on the Champ de Mars, at Montreal, that he had written to me that he would be ready to march with his friends under my leadership if I would but tender my resignation as a member of the Federal Government. Yes, I acknowledge it. I have been pressed and solicited by my devoted friends and political enemies to take the lead in this popular movement. These offers were very flattering to me. The vista they opened before me was very attractive.

I saw myself accepted as the recognized defender of my race, honored and applauded by all my compatriots, the interpreter of their sentiments and of their aspirations. In this role, to which I was summoned by everybody, there was a brilliant reparation for the indescribable opprobrium which certain men have sought to heap upon me for the last three years. But, between this seductive role and myself, I saw rise up, like an unarmountable barrier, the oath which I have taken to fulfil my duty at the risk of losing friends and honors, the inward prompting, the immovable conviction that what they asked of me was contrary to justice and to the rightly conceived interests of our province. I saw as a logical consequence of the movement the isolation of my race creating antagonism, provok-

ing reprisals, struggles and disasters. I felt that there was more courage in stemming the current than in allowing myself to be carried away by it, and I have allowed to pass unheeded the cries of traitor and coward which have been hurled at me. What does my personality matter? In the grave crisis which come to a nation men are nothing; the safety of the people is everything. The responsibility of power imposes on those upon whom it rests the obligation to see beyond the interests of the moment, and to study well if, in yielding to the popular impulse of the moment, they do not jeopardize a sacred cause for years to come.

Let us examine for a moment the facts which directed my conduct and that of my colleagues.

Louis Riel last year left the United States, where he had become a naturalized citizen, in order to fight against the Canadian institutions, laws and authority. He raised the standard of rebellion in our Canada, so tranquil and so happy in her unruffled peace.

You have been told, in an attempt to justify the revolt of Riel, that the Half-breeds had grievances which the Government did not wish to redress. I will leave Father André himself to reply to this statement. At the trial of Riel, he declared that—

“ The claims of the Half-breeds have often changed shape since the arrival of Riel. Before his arrival they wanted patents for their land, and afterwards scrips, giving them the right of transfer on their lands as had been given to the Half-breeds of Manitoba. Besides, the lands given along the river (river surveys) and exemption from the wood tax. The Government replied to their petition, conceding them river surveys. This was a very important concession. The only question which remained to settle was that of the patents and of the right to cut wood, and that was in a fair way of being settled. Towards the 4th of March, a telegram was received announcing that the Government had made these concessions.”

Therefore, according to Father André, the principal claims were already settled, and the others were in a fair way of being so. As early as 1883, the Government had decided to send the Surveyor General of the Interior department, Mr. Lindsay Russell, to settle

these claims, but an accident happened, and that officer was prevented from setting out. In the following year, the Government instituted an enquiry as to the best method of satisfying the Half-breeds, whether by a grant of non-transferable lands, by scrip as in Manitoba, or by scrip equivalent to a certain sum of money. On the 26th of January, 1885, the Government passed an order in council appointing a Commission charged with settling all the claims of the Half-breeds. On the 6th of February last, a telegram was sent to the North West to make known the appointment of the commission, and, several days later, circulars were addressed to the postmasters and to the priests of these districts, informing them of the approaching arrival of the Commission. As you well know, the Commission was composed of Messrs. Street, Forget and Goulet, and it has settled the greater part of these claims.

Riel, who was very well informed on all that was taking place, hastened to precipitate events in order to hinder a settlement that would have upset all his plans and calculations. It is evident that his pride and his ambition did not approve of a solution so simple and so practical, and one which would have saved the Half-breeds from ruination and the country the loss of hundreds of lives, and of many millions of money, a portion of which expenditure you, with the rest of the nation, have now to bear.

He, however, but repeated what he did in 1870. At that time Mgr. Taché was hastening from Rome to endeavor to pacify his diocese, which was in insurrection. Arrived at Great Forks, an unfortunate accident happened him, but in spite of his extreme suffering, the Bishop continued his way to Fort Garry. Riel was informed of it, and, feeling that his reign was about to end, he did not hesitate to throw a dead body between his brother Half-breeds and the conciliation which the holy missionary was bringing with him. Scott was sacrificed and his blood was hurled as a defiance against all efforts at reconciliation.

It is no use saying that this rebel had a noble object; that he came to aid his brothers to vindicate their rights. In saying this they attribute to him sentiments which he never possessed. They clothe him with a borrowed disguise to hide the sinister role which

he has played in the drama of the insurrection in the North-West. If he had been moved by an enlightened patriotism, he would have followed another course, he would have taken other means, he would have sought and been guided by other counsels than those of his ambition. He knew where to go; he had not far to go. He knew the tenderness and zeal of him who had brought him up, protected him always and once already saved him. But no! "An unbridled ambition, which poisoned his intelligence and drove him almost to insanity, an unquenchable thirst of power, an insensate pride which has led him to apostacy, have been his controlling motives." That is what the greatest prelate of the North-West has said of him. A still darker motive of a sordid character impelled him, if one may believe the testimony of the most trustworthy people. Father André, whose sympathy for Louis Riel no one will doubt, declared on oath, at the trial at Regina, that this pretended defender of the rights of the Half-breeds had begged him repeatedly to use his influence with the Federal Government to obtain for him a hundred thousand dollars, and had declared that in return he would bind himself to leave Manitoba, and go wherever it pleased the Federal Government to send him. When Father André remarked to him on the enormity of this demand, he did not hesitate to say that he would be content with very much less. As to the claims of the Half-breeds Riel contented himself with saying, "I am myself the half-breed question; if I am satisfied the Half-breeds will be."

I do not believe that my compatriots, so punctilious on a point of honor, so disinterested in their patriotism, will pardon this act of venality. And it cannot be said that this was an idle conversation of Riel. On the contrary, it is true that he followed up his venial proposition.

Last winter's was not Riel's debut in this course of high treason. His revolt of 1869 will be remembered—the useless murder of Scott, whom he had caused to be executed when that poor unfortunate was in a position where it was impossible for him to injure his captor. It will be remembered that he bound himself some time after these unfortunate events, on receiving a sum of money from the Canadian Government, never more to return to

Canada to raise an agitation. In spite of his promise he comes back to Canada in the autumn of 1884, and sets himself secretly, with consummate skill, to prepare a new rebellion. To ensure success he commences first by undermining and ruining the influence of the priests with the Half-breeds, and when he has blinded these latter he pushes them on to their destruction. After the last battle he has not the courage to follow Dumont in his flight; he prefers to allow himself to be arrested, believing that the province of Quebec, which had saved him once, would save him again, even after a second rebellion. He made a mistake in his calculations. Guilty of high treason for a second time, he had no more claim to the indulgence which it has been the habit to accord to political offenders.

But that is not the most revolting part of his crime. No one denies that it was he who raised the Indian tribes of the North-West, and that he has been the direct cause of the frightful massacre of a number of persons, among whom two Catholic missionaries have perished, victims to savage barbarity. Ask all the priests, all the Half-breeds of the North-West, who is the murderer of Fathers Fafard and Lemarchand, and they will all reply "Riel." He alone had been able to persuade the Indian tribes to rise, and he is directly responsible for the murders which the rising has caused. For to cause the Indians to rise is regarded by every government which has them under its control, as a crime which deserves death, for it is a crime against all the laws of humanity, Indian warfare being a war of extermination, without quarter, without mercy for defenceless people, for women and children. It is the greatest possible outrage on civilization, and a crime which falls outside the class of political offences.

Before the execution of Riel those who wished to save him made capital out of the pretence that he was insane, and therefore not responsible for his acts. They demanded from the Government at the last moment that an investigation should be held as to his mental condition. This investigation took place, and Riel was found sane enough to have full knowledge of his crime, and more recent facts have confirmed this finding. In fact, since his execu-

tion they have not treated him as an insane person. They place him in the ranks of heroes, patriots and martyrs. They go even so far as to demand that he should be interred under the monument of the noble victims of 1837-38. What would Cardinal, Duquet, De Lorimier and Chénier say if they proposed to them to share their glory with a man who wished to barter his cause for money, who terrorized the nuns and the priests, who called upon the savages to massacre the whites, and who caused the slaughter of the holy missionaries.

He died repenting the crimes of which he had been the cause, but it would be an outrage to make him share the glorious *aureola* of the great patriots who died for liberty in 1838, and to put him on a par with the victims of those heroic days.

The venerable Bishop of Saint Albert, Mgr. Grandin, has said that the conduct of Riel, while he directed the insurrection, was odious and monstrous, that he had systematically persecuted the Church. If that is the hero whom they wish to make us venerate, I, for one, will not be among his admirers.

They wish to-day to make Riel pass for a saint. That he died at a peace with God, I hope. God alone is the judge of that. However we have not to consider how he died, but how he lived. On this last question there is no necessity for me to pronounce my opinion. I have only to cite the testimony of the missionaries of North-West, who, being on the spot, knew him well and were able to judge of his acts, of his principles, of his piety and of his virtue, and, assuredly they do not hold him up as a saint. Besides the citations which I have already made, there is a joint letter from the missionaries in the district of Prince Albert, dated the 12th June, 1885. This important document, seems to have been overlooked, although it was published everywhere :

PRINCE ALBERT, June 12, 1885.

“ We, the priests of the districts most particularly affected by the rebellion, to-wit, St. Laurent, St. Antoine, Grandin, Duck Lake and Batoche, since it was there, in the midst of our people, that Louis “ David ” Riel had established his headquarters, desire to

draw the attention of our fellow-countrymen in Canada to these facts :

“ This mecreant, Louis “ David ” Riel does not merit the sympathies of the Roman Catholic Church or the members of that Church, having usurped our mission as priests, and robbed our people of the benefits and consolations it was our duty to render them. He has done all this in his purely personal interest.

Signed, PÈRE ANDRÉ,
“ TOUSE,
“ MOULIN,
“ FOURMOND,
“ VEGREVILLE,
“ LECOQ.

And Father Fourmond, the parish priest of Batoche, writes as follows : “ I have been very near death, for if I escaped the bullets and madness of the insurrectionists, war, apostacy, treason, persecution, everything seemed to have been let loose upon us ; one might have thought that the end of the world had come. Already we had our antichrist in the person of this famous Riel, against whom we were obliged to fight at the peril of our lives, in order to destroy the sinister influence he had secured over our poor people.

“ My God ! what a man ! what hypocrisy and what impiety combined ! It is for this he ruined our christian families by pillage and fire. It is by a horrible consequence of his diabolical plans that was shed the blood of the white man and of our beloved and zealous confrères who were massacred by the Indians by his own orders.”

These testimonials, so strong and so crushingly convicting, will suffice to enlighten all men of good sense as to the character and the conduct of the man who dragged his brothers, the Half breeds, into the direst misfortunes.

To condemn our conduct they rest on the principle that, in our days, it is no longer the custom to inflict capital punishment for

the crime of high treason. It is a new maxim, as strange as it is dangerous, against which justice, the protector of peace and the security of society, revolts. To proclaim that high treason, which carries with it murder, pillage, the ruin of populations, ought not to be punished with death is to appeal to the worst passions of the ambitious and provoke rebellion by guaranteeing it impunity. To pretend seriously that a man once guilty of high treason and murder, pardoned once and again taken after a second offence, ought to count on having his life saved, is to hold out an assurance that Riel himself has never had. For in quitting Montana he declared that his head would be the price of the step he had undertaken. This doctrine of mercy in favor of political criminals could not apply to him who had, in cold blood, let loose on his compatriots hordes of savage tribes.

Let it not be advanced in justification of him that he had faith in his mission and that his intention was not criminal, because his conscience, guided by his judgment, did not reproach him for the frightful acts which he had committed and had caused to be committed. But when came into vogue this strange doctrine, that one should not be punished for faults of the intelligence? Faults of the intelligence are even more criminal than those of the heart. An evil passion had vitiated the intelligence of this great criminal. Before God and before men, he was guilty of having falsified in his brain the eternal conception of justice and injustice, of truth and of falsity, of obedience and insubordination. This first wrong-doing deprived him of every excuse for all the criminal actions that flowed therefrom. No, there was only one possible excuse in his favor, and that was the plea of insanity. It was a charge he denied himself, and in his last moments he gloried in the assertion that he was perfectly free of will, fully conscious of all his acts, and he was therefore responsible for his crimes.

To the men who can think and reason, the conduct of Riel does not merit any serious sympathy? And for this reason it has been said on every side, "It is not for him that we rise, we have on sympathy for his crimes, but we would like that the penalty should be commuted because all French-Canadians demand that he should not suffer the infamous penalty of death on the

scaffold." I admit that I have been profoundly moved by the unanimous wail of pity and sorrow which rose up for this great criminal, and has reached even to the foot of the throne. But in this outburst of generous sympathy from a whole people, the important fact has been lost sight of that the crime was committed in a far off region, far more exposed than our own to surprises, robberies and Indian risings. Those who would advocate clemency have forgotten that the only security for life and for the property of citizens in those new countries lies in the rigorous administration of the law. They have forgotten that the murderous Indians of Frog Lake could not be allowed to escape the consequence of their crimes, without placing the entire white population at the mercy of those savage tribes, and, on the other hand, it was impossible to deliver those murderers into the hands of the hangman, and permit him, who had been the cause of their digging up the war hatchet to go unpunished. They have forgotten the anguish into which the whole population had been plunged for long months. They have forgotten the grief, the despair of the victims of this horrible rebellion ; they have forgotten that the blood of the peaceable colonists and the holy missionaries, and of the soldiers who fell under the blows of the rebels, cries for vengeance and that justice had to make a signal example if we did not wish that the heart-rending wail issuing from every part of that immense region should change into a cry of despair and hatred. They have forgotten to ask themselves if, in this grave question of the rigor or the mercy of the law, those who have suffered, those whose fathers, whose sons or brothers have perished by the crime of this rebel, and whose future might again be threatened, have not as much right to be heard as those whose easy pity has not to look to a reparation for the past, nor to fear any danger for the future. The promoters of this agitation have forgotten that in Manitoba and in the North-West Territories we have compatriots settled sparsely in the midst of the vast district, and they have forgotten that the brave pioneers of the peaceful colonies which we are establishing may feel the evil results of such an agitation in our province. For the inhabitants of Quebec it is a question of sentiment ; for the inhabitants of the North-West it is a question of security—an affair of life or death.

As a minister of Her Majesty, it has been my duty to think of all these things ; to weigh all these reasons ; to calculate calmly the conclusion of all these facts, and under the responsibility of the solemn oath which I have taken to do my duty, to defend the Crown and to uphold our laws. Responsible before my conscience and before God for each of my decisions, I have not been able to find a justification, nor a valid excuse for the crime of the condemned man. His lawyers themselves have declared that his trial was conducted in an impartial manner, the question of his insanity was laid aside and despite the demand for pardon, the Government did not feel themselves justified in advising Her Majesty, through her representative, that the law should be prevented from taking its course. We have yielded in this decision neither to appeals nor intimidation from any sect nor faction, as the enemies of the Government are pleased to insinuate. We have considered only the supreme interest of society and the greatest good of the country in the tranquility so desirable for the development of those immense regions of the North-West, and, for my part, I can say with all sincerity, the greatest good of the Province and of the compatriots which are so dear to me.

The esteem, the affection and the support of our compatriots are precious to us in the execution of the public duties which are imposed upon us. It is our desire, as much as our interest, to preserve them intact, and if, from the elevated position which we occupy, with a most extended knowledge of the wants of society and the dangers to guard against, we have been obliged to come to a decision which is as painful to us as to you, from a humane point of view, we have a right to ask you to give us the benefit of the confidence which you have always reposed in us, and which our devotion and our conduct had earned for us in the past. In exposing ourselves to the risk of incurring your censure, we imperiled our future. We were assured that the Ministry would be overthrown if we consented to the execution of the sentence of the court. We have put aside our desire for popularity and the fear of your resentment, to remain faithful to our duty. Is not that presumptive proof of our uprightness and of our good faith? The sentiment of race and of nationality are invoked to accuse us of febleness and of treason. To do otherwise than we have done would have been to violate our oath,

without benefit to the condemned person, who would have been executed even although all the French Canadian ministers had resigned, without benefit to the country, without benefit to our province, and with the frightful risk of compromising forever our dearest interests. My conscience tells me that I have not, in this crisis, been derelict in my duty either to God, to my Sovereign nor to my compatriots, and the courage which enabled me to do my duty without faltering, will not forsake me in the painful tribulations with which I am menaced. I have served you for eighteen years with joy and with pride, and I will continue to the end only on one condition—that of preserving my liberty, my honor and due respect for my dignity.

J. A. CHAPLEAU.

Ottawa, November 28th, 1885.

SAINT-JEROME
101-112-THIAS