



The Story of Laura Secord

1813

BY S. A. CURZON

PUBLISHED UNDER THE AUSPICES OF
THE LUNDY'S LANE HISTORICAL SOCIETY,
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The Story of Laura Secord

ON the 17th October, 1868, at the pretty village of Chippawa, where she had lived for fifty years as wife and widow, died, at the age of ninety-three, "one of the most patriotic and courageous women of any age or country."*

Born in 1775, in Massachusetts, the very foremost of the revolting colonies, Laura Secord, *nee* Ingersoll, came to the then unopened west of Canada, the infant of her father's family.

Thomas Ingersoll was a wealthy man, of good social position in Massachusetts, and his wife was Sarah, daughter of General John Whiting, of Great Barrington, Co. Berks, Mass., therefore Laura Ingersoll was born to affluence and station. But the Ingersoll blood was loyal, and could not brook the forswearing of oaths of allegiance and the compulsory terms of the new doctrines of a new liberty. Therefore, on the invitation of his old friend, John Graves Simcoe, who, as "Commander of the Queen's Rangers, a Royalist corps which had been raised in the revolted colonies, and had there done loyal service for the Crown,"† Mr. Ingersoll sought Canada, the home of the United Empire Loyalists, and, in accordance with Simcoe's views of the future of the country, sought to make his domicile, together with eighty or ninety families who came with him, in what is now Oxford County, on the banks of the Thames. Certain drastic measures on the part of a sub-

* NOTE—See "The Battle of the Beechwoods," page 1, by Capt. Ernest Cruikshank.

† NOTE—"Illustrated Toronto," by G. Mercer Adam (1891).

sequent Government seriously interfered with the welfare of the little settlement, and Mr. Ingersoll himself removed to the newly set off County of York, eventually settling in the Township of Etobicoke.

In the meantime the infant daughter was growing up, sharing hardships of which the present generation know nothing, laboring with her hands in concert with her mother and sisters for the comfort of the father and brothers whose lives had to be spent battling with nature, and in laying the foundations, deep and wide, of that civil and religious liberty we now, perhaps too complacently, enjoy. In those days the means of education were small. Mothers and fathers whose learning and polish had been received at Harvard, William and Mary, and the numerous seminaries founded by the munificence of the English Government, and the liberal tastes of wealthy colonists, saw with pain their own advantages denied to their children; but like brave men and true, they made the best of things, and, while imparting to their children such knowledge as they were able in the midst of sterner labors, never omitted to avail for them of every opportunity that came in their way, whether it were the occasional visit of some university graduate on the search for a site of refuge, some civil officer whose duties placed him among them for a brief period, some clergyman whose widespread parish called him to periodical visits of Christian consolation and religious office, or some school, reached at a great expense of means, time, and labor, set on foot at an important centre, as at York, Kingston, or Newark. Of such intermittent, though, it may truly be said, thorough education, the heroine of the future partook a share; and as she developed into youth and beauty, she was fain to shine at the official functions and entertainments of her father's old and faithful friend, Major-General Simcoe, who was fittingly chosen, on the setting off, in 1791, of the western region of Canada into a separate province, as first Lieutenant-Governor of Upper Canada.

At that period one of the most important families settled in the Niagara district were the Secords. United Empire Loyalists of the strictest type, they had espoused the King's cause with might and main,

and, as a consequence, the five brothers, with their families, had to fly early in the struggle, leaving their estates, chiefly located in New Rochelle,* Westchester County, New York, and reaching Kingston and Niagara by way of New Brunswick as best they could. It is said that James Secord, who married Laura Ingersoll, thus giving her the name Laura Secord, by which she is best known and will ever be commemorated, when only a child three years old had accompanied his mother in her flight through the wilderness, with four other homeless women and many children, to escape the fury of a band of ruffians who called themselves the "Sons of Liberty." After enduring frightful hardships for nearly a month, they finally arrived at Fort Niagara almost naked and starving.†

Such terrible experiences were by no means uncommon. In numerous well-authenticated cases, the men of the Loyal families had to fly for their lives, leaving their wives and children, goods and chattels, estates and money, the latter in all instances a forfeit to the new Government, the former to enter an unknown wilderness, themselves and their little ones alike unprotected and unsupported, save by that deep faith in God and love to King and country which, with their personal devotion to their husbands, made of them heroines whose story of unparalleled devotion, hardships patiently borne, motherhood honorably sustained, industry and thrift perseveringly followed, enterprise successfully prosecuted, principle unwaveringly upheld, and tenderness never surpassed, has yet to be written, and whose share in the making of this nation remains to be equally honored with that of the men who bled and fought for its liberties.

Of enterprising temperaments and of large experience in the commerce of the time, the Secords set on foot lumber and grist mills, together with the accompanying trade at Newark, Queenston, and St. David's, and were soon counted among the successful men of the province. But they were more; they were Loyalists, and as such placed themselves upon the militia roll as defenders of Canada. As soldiers, each generation

* NOTE--Named by the first emigrants of the name, the De Secors, a noble Huguenot family, who fled hither by way of England, at the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes, from their family home, La Rochelle, France.

NOTE—"The Battle of the Beechwoods," by Ernest Cruikshank, page 13.

left a noble record to their children, and established a claim upon the gratitude of their country.

Captain Ernest Cruikshank is doing good service to Canadian history in, among much other similar research, collating and editing "Some Papers of an Early Settler," appearing in the *Welland Tribune*, in which the Secords are prominently mentioned. From these papers we learn that, as Rangers in the Indian Department, may be found the names of John Secord, sr., John Secord, jr., David, Peter, Silas, Stephen, and Solomon Secord, in a letter to Sir Guy Carlton from Col. John Butler, dated from Fort Niagara, 15th June, 1777; and also in the following year the same names are to be found on the muster-roll of Captain Walter Butler's company, being the first organized company of the celebrated partisan corps of Butler's Rangers.

That the Secords were settlers in the true sense of the term, and not merely freebooting adventurers, as has been most unjustly said of the men of Butler's Rangers, is shown by the fact that immediately on the close of the Revolutionary struggle two brothers, Peter and James Secord, applied to Governor Haldimand, through Col. Butler, for the ironwork and stones necessary to the furnishing of a saw and grist mill, to be built close to the Barracks at Niagara. These furnishings they intended to buy in Lower Canada, but were informed that "the mill could not be run as a private property,* but that the materials would be sent up, and the Secords allowed a fair profit for managing it."

"It is almost certain," says Capt. Cruikshank, "that this was the first mill in the Province of Upper Canada, and it was beyond question the first built in the Niagara district." Moreover, these same brothers appear in the list of farmers to whom wheat for sowing was to be supplied by the Government.

Early in 1789 Major David Secord, whose military record is as remarkable for "hairbreadth 'scapes" as for heroic action, applied for and received a grant of "a single lot in the township of No. 1 (Niagara), in

NOTE—The country then being necessarily under military rule, private ventures of the kind were forbidden, lest the claims for indemnity on war losses should become unduly heavy, or form a source of temptation to recklessness.

the district of Nassau," and later another grant of six hundred acres near the present village of St. David's, which probably received its name from him. During the war of 1812 he lost all he had by the pillaging of the American soldiery at Queenston, in which loss others of his family and his neighbors suffered, and by the burning of St. David's, where mills, houses, cattle, horses, and securities for loans, all perished in the conflagration. To these were added other losses at Toronto and other places during the course of the war.

During the war of 1812, the Secords, a numerous family, were active defenders of their country. The present writer has seen on various regimental rolls in the Archives at Ottawa the names of Major David Secord, Lieutenant Courtland Secord, Quarter-Master Daniel Secord, Capt. Elijah Secord, Lieutenant John Secord, Sergeant James Secord (this was undoubtedly Laura Secord's husband. Under date of 29th June, 1812, he is enrolled as Sergeant in Capt. Geo. Law's Company, 1st Lincoln Militia). To these may be added others of the family, viz.: Abraham Secord, Edwin Secord, John Secord (age given in the company roll, 19), Joseph Secord, Solomon Secord, Stephen Secord—a list of loyal and patriotic men in one family it would be hard to match.

Nor was the Ingersoll family, so soon to be united by a marriage with the Secords, less distinguished for military ardor. In *Vol. 15, M. G. Dominion Archives* may be found the entry, dated 5th September, 1805, "Thomas Ingersoll, Captain of the Militia of Oxford, London District." This militia consisted of one captain (Thos. Ingersoll), one ensign, three sergeants, three corporals, and twenty-five rank and file, 4th June, 1805; but in 1804 the composition of said militia is stated as: one lieutenant, one ensign, three corporals, one drummer, and forty-five rank and file.

Henceforward, so far as available records go, the history of both the Secords and Ingersolls is absorbed in the history of *the War of 1812*.

Not long was it to remain so! The strife that proved to the full the patience and heroism of Canadian men, brought to the surface the devotion and courage of Canadian women. Loyalty is a principle, not an epithet.

The first year of the war was past, and the invaders had gained nothing. Irritated by the want of success of their arms, the American people, always excepting the saving few, rated the Government, and the Government replied by throwing into the field all the money and forces it could raise. By land and water the struggle was continued, and during the first portion of the campaign of 1813 the Americans scored several important successes. In June they held Fort George, and it had become the headquarters of their general, who, irritated at finding he had picked up a shell with nothing in it, inflicted on the inhabitants within his limits, which covered Queenston and reached on towards Burlington, many unnecessary restrictions. Every male from the age of the boy to that of the octogenarian was put on parole, and forbidden to leave his immediate home on any pretence whatever.

General Vincent had retreated before the invading force to Burlington Heights, and the situation looked very unpromising, mainly owing to the absence of necessary reinforcements, when a brave man, Col. Harvey, turned the scale of events in some measure by a successful night sortie upon the enemy, on the 5th of June, at Stoney Creek. Seeing that the Loyalists, though cast down, were by no means destroyed, Dearborn thought to crush them in another quarter, and in some measure retrieve the *prestige* lost at Stoney Creek; and it seemed a very easy thing to do. At the cross-roads at Beaver Dams, by which only could Vincent receive supplies or reinforcements, was posted, in Decau's (or DeCew's) stone house, Lieutenant Fitzgibbon with a picked company of thirty men, volunteers from the 49th—Brock's old regiment—in charge of certain stores. To take this post was to open up the whole peninsula, and for this errand Col. Boerstler, a gallant officer who had already distinguished himself, was ordered to prepare himself. He was in command of the 14th United States Infantry, one twelve and one six-pounder field guns, with ammunition, wagons, etc., a few cavalry, and volunteers; in all, six hundred and seventy-three men—a mountain to crush a mouse! But so confident were the Americans of their ultimate success in annexing Canada, "the people" indeed regarding it for some time as a mere walk-

over, that they were heedless of certain precautions in an enemy's country, *and talked*—among themselves, to be sure ; but the old proverb that says “stone walls have ears” was exemplified on this occasion ; for hints of the intended night surprise fell from the lips of certain of the American soldiers in the house of James Secord, where, by the right of might, the invaders were wont to make themselves free of such comforts as it afforded.

James Secord had been desperately wounded at the Battle of Queenston Heights, and was at home under parole. But Lieutenant Fitzgibbon must be warned ; his chance against the force that was to surprise him was *nil*. Moreover, the country must be saved. And who could do it ? The dilemma was soon settled ; the loyal heart of the devoted wife was touched to the core at the peril of the time, and Laura Secord, rising to the occasion, essayed a task from which strong men might justly shrink.

Whoever now should travel from Queenston to Beaver Dams would find a fine stone road to traverse all the way. Skirting the lovely and fertile vale of St. David's, he would be filled with admiration, not more of the natural scenery than of the fine agricultural district dotted with substantial homes that would greet his eye on every hand. On the north-west, as he advanced, another fertile valley of great extent would come into view. At three points within the valley the spires and tall chimneys of manufacturing villages would meet his vision, while on the shores of the blue waters of Lake Ontario, stretching away in the distance, two considerable port towns would be distinguishable. At the back of the valley the traveller's eye would rest upon high bluffs, richly wooded, curving south-westerly, and losing themselves in the high plateau on which he was advancing. He would also observe with much admiration the stupendous piece of engineering that crosses the valley from the high land at his feet to the lake shore, the Locks of the Welland Canal ; and travelling a little further, until the canal itself crosses his path, he would be stopped by a magnificent cantilever bridge. Turning to the

left of the bridge, about fifty yards from the river bank, he would see a fine memorial stone to the memory of the killed at Beaver Dams.

Not such was the valley nor such the road in 1812, when Laura Secord essayed her journey of patriotism and mercy. The whole of the valley was a black swamp traversed by innumerable creeks, full of wild creatures, and across which no path led. The road was a quagmire, and, moreover, was not open to peaceful travel. To have pursued a direct route to Fitzgibbon at DeCew's would have been a trying and toilsome journey indeed, but the delicate woman, the mother of four little children, was forbidden even that. The enemy's pickets were out on all the roads; she would have to travel through the swamp, climb the heights at Twelve-Mile Creek, push her way through the beech woods, and reach DeCew's from the back. The distance involved was the smallest item of the terrible journey. The thickets of the swamp, with its dense underbrush, the lurking-places of the wolf, the wild-cat, the bear, and the rattlesnake; the pathless wilderness with its oozy bottom, its solitude, its terror, these were the real hardships. Even the mountain, its steep sides, its brawling stream, its dark mantle of virgin forest, was not so terrible, for, once upon it, she might meet a British picket; she did not count on Indians, a sufficient terror in themselves if come upon unawares.

But duty had to be done, and Laura Secord did it. Leaving her home, her sick husband and young children—not without many a scalding tear, we may be sure, though all signs of agitation had to be concealed—the brave woman set forward on her journey, all unprepared for it indeed, for she did not dare alter her usual early morning attire by one iota, and had to circumvent three American sentries before she reached St. David's, one at her own gate, where the pretence of a strayed cow sufficed, the others by the true story of a sick brother at St. David's.

At St. David's she entered the swamp, through which she guided herself by those signs of the points of the compass known to most settlers in those times. But she lost herself more than once, and the moon was

rising as she reached the further end. All that long, hot summer's day, from daybreak to moonlight, on the 23rd of June, she had traversed the haunted depths of an impenetrable swamp, alone, hungry, faint, and, for the most part of the way, ragged and shoeless. Even to-day we can judge how long it would take to destroy every article of attire in a thicket full of thorns and briars, of branches and fallen trees, of water and bog. Wild creatures alarmed her, for the rattlesnake often strikes as he springs his alarm, and the wild-cat drops from the high branch without warning, or pursues his prey perseveringly until he is sure of his aim. Once only she faltered, and it was at the dread cry of wolves; but they passed her by, and she went on trusting more than ever to the Hand that guides the world.

Crossing by means of a fallen tree the Twelve-Mile Creek, then a swollen and considerable stream, for rains had been heavy for days previous, the heroine climbed slowly and painfully the steep sides of "the mountain," and on the ridge encountered a British sentry. O, joyful sight! A friend once more! By him she is directed to Fitzgibbon, still, however, some miles distant. Her heart is lighter, for she is within British lines. But oh, how heavy are her feet! She enters at length upon a little clearing, the trees have been felled, and their twigs and branches strew the ground: they crackle beneath her tread. Suddenly she is surrounded by ambushed Indians, and the chief throws up his tomahawk to strike, regarding the intruder as a spy. Only by her courage in springing to his arm is the woman saved, and an opportunity snatched to assure him of her loyalty. Moved by pity and admiration, the chief gives her a guide, and at length she reaches Fitzgibbon, delivers and verifies her message, *and faints*.

It is a wonderful story. To-day, when we are lost in admiration of the pluck of a Stanley, a Jephson, and a Stairs, with their bands of men diving into the heart of Africa, we may reasonably ask ourselves which was the greater, theirs or Laura Secord's. The distinction is only a difference of climatic conditions; the end was the same, the unity and glory of the British Empire, and the heroism is surely equal.

Fitzgibbon's prompt action, his success, and his promotion for it, are matters of history. To Mrs. Secord he was ever grateful, and never failed to show it on occasion. Promotion came to him, but there was no reward for Laura Secord, whose self-denying devotion to her king and country led to it. Nor did she look for reward, save that achieved by the success of her errand. But to-day, when we are gradually awakening to a better appreciation of the heroes who gave us, by preserving to us, our liberties, we know that Laura Secord ought to find a place among them. We have been less susceptible to greatness than the ancients, in whose Pantheon the deities were not all gods. Nevertheless, we have not been wholly unmindful; we have contemplated doing the memory of Laura Secord some honor; we have approached our Provincial Legislature for a grant to be expended on marking her last resting-place, in Drummondville Cemetery, with a memorial stone somewhat worthy of her and of us. We are ready to open a subscription list on the part of the men and women of Ontario, if so be it should be desirable to supplement such grant as we may obtain, in order to carry out to the full our sense of the heroine's deserts.

Within the last decade a great awakening of interest in the details of our history has been remarked in our literature, and it is not to be wondered at that the romantic story of Laura Secord's heroism has touched the imagination of our poets. Mair, Machar, Jakeway, and others, have sung of her in harmonious strains, while many a green leaf has been laid on her lowly tomb by others. Mrs. Chamberlain, of Ottawa, whose first husband was Col. Fitzgibbon, writes: "I had heard so often from Col. Fitzgibbon all about Mrs. Secord. In my eyes she was more of a heroine than is generally known, for, like the Lady Godiva, her journey was performed, not exactly without any clothing, but next to nothing, being only a flannel petticoat, and what old-fashioned people call a bed-gown; in fact, a short night-dress worn over the petticoat. I am not positive about this last, but I rather think she had neither stockings nor shoes on. If fully and properly dressed, she never could

have passed the sentries, and really appeared, as she likely did every morning, in search of her cow."

But Mrs. Harriet Smith, the third child of Laura Secord, and who is still living, said to the writer: "I remember seeing my mother leave the house on that fateful morning, but neither I nor my sisters knew exactly on what errand she was bent. She had on house slippers and a flowered print gown; I think it was brown, with orange flowers; at least a yellow tint is connected in my mind with that particular morning."

Mrs. Edgar, whose fine book, "Ten Years of Peace and War," forms so valuable an addition to our historical records, in telling Mrs. Secord's story, says: "As to Laura Secord's reward, it has come to her in the fame that rests on her name whenever the story of 1812 is told.

"The heroine lived until the year 1868, and sleeps now in that old cemetery at Drummondville, where lie so many of our brave soldiers. There is no 'Decoration Day' in Canada; but if there were, surely this woman is entitled to the laurel wreath."

And in writing on a matter less directly dealing with the story of woman's heroism, Mrs. Herbert says: "It gave Gen. Herbert and myself the greatest pleasure and interest, last week, to visit Niagara and its ever-memorable surroundings, especially the field of Lundy's Lane. I trust the spot where Laura Secord rests will be marked by a monument worthy of the brave and noble spirit we all must honor."

As sings Charles Sangster:—

"The hero deed can not expire,
The dead still play their part.

Raise high the monumental stone!
A nation's fealty is theirs,
And we are the rejoicing heirs,
The honored sons of sires whose cares
We take upon us unawares,
As freely as our own."

S. A. C.

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