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978-1-108-05004-3 - Memoirs of Lieutenant Joseph René Bellot: With His Journal of a Voyage in the Polar Seas in Search of Sir John Franklin: Volume 1

Joseph René Bellot

Excerpt

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MEMOIR  
OF  
JOSEPH RENÉ BELLOT.

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“In promise I have rarely seen his equal, and never his superior.”—COLONEL SABINE.

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CHAPTER I.

THE more I have studied the life of Bellot, and the more thorough the insight I have obtained into the nature of his mind, his character, and his heart, by the perusal of his journals and his familiar letters, and by the personal recollections of those who were more or less intimately associated with him in life, the better have I come to understand

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the enthusiasm which his noble devotedness excited in England, the keenness of those regrets which his loss had caused, and the warm testimonies of sympathy which his family has received and is still daily receiving.

Bellot, indeed, as will plainly appear to the reader of this memoir, was not only a courageous and accomplished officer, exalted to heroism by his passion for science and love of glory; he was a choice specimen of nature's workmanship; a being in whom it seems that Providence had been pleased to unite the highest qualities of intellect, the noblest sentiments of the heart, and the most admirable virtues—virtues become, alas! so rare in this age, which abounds more in great talents than in great consciences. Endowed with a tender heart, which made him love, before all things, what is good; with an ardent imagination, which prompted him to admire, with enthusiasm, what is beautiful; with a right reason, which could appreciate what is just; and with that sublime faith,

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which has its source in feeling, and derives light from science and reason; Bellot, in his lifetime of seven and twenty years, so brief, and yet so full, accomplished his task as a man in such a manner as to deserve that he should be held up as an example to all the youth of his own day, and likewise to posterity. Truly, as he himself has said in many of his letters, he has left his brother (and many others besides) a good example to follow. "Put aside," he says, in a letter to his family, written 29th May, 1851, on his departure for his first expedition to the Polar seas, "put aside all the English journals in which I shall be mentioned; they will be my patents of nobility; they will defray the education of our Alphonse. In lieu of money I will try to give him a good example."

Joseph René Bellot was born in Paris, on the 18th of March, 1826, a circumstance which did not hinder him from always calling himself a Rochefort man, though he did not begin to reside in that city until the age of five years, in 1831, when his family estab-

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lished themselves there. Rochefort was for him, indeed, an adoptive mother, kind and beneficent; and if Paris had claimed him, the spirit of his reply would have been, "It is not the city in which I first saw the light, but that which has seen me grow up, which has reared and instructed me, that is indeed my true native place." It is thus he would certainly have spoken, inspired by that gratitude he always manifested towards Rochefort, and proofs of which I have found twenty times in his journal and his letters, in his scattered notes, and in the very nature of the reception he gave me when we first met, solely upon the ground of my being a Rochefort man. Gratitude is only the sense of what is just, and with that sense was Bellot animated from his tenderest years. Even on the form of the school where he learned to write, he gave signal proofs of that goodness which begins in the child with filial and fraternal affection, to become in the man charity towards his fellow-creatures, and devoted zeal for humanity. With what

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delightful emotion have I heard his mother and sisters recount to me, with tearful eyes, their recollections of his early years—those charming episodes of a past, so dear to the memory of the family; but the evocation of which is now so painful to their hearts! How plain was the promise he then gave of what he was one day to be—the most devoted of sons, the most affectionate of brothers, the best of men! And how religiously his youth kept the promises of his childhood!

Thus did the mother and sisters express themselves, who cannot, and will not, be comforted, because he is no more, as Scripture says; thus did they speak with the eloquence which belongs to keen and profound sorrows, as they culled before me the most fragrant flowers of their recollections. I am afraid that the recital of those thousand little trivial things, by which the heart of a child reveals itself, would lose, in passing under my pen, all the grace with which they came from the lips of the bereaved mother and

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sisters. Of all such traits of goodness, I will cite only that one which struck me most forcibly.

After Bellot had gone through his elementary course of instruction, at a school for children, his teacher, M. Richer, made such a favourable report of his capacity and progress, that the municipality thought proper to interest itself in the child, and afford his father, a plain artizan (smith and farrier), and burthened with a numerous family, some assistance towards procuring for him an education capable of developing faculties of such fair promise. At the instance of the mayor, there was granted to him a demiburse at the College of Rochefort. The city has never had reason but to congratulate itself on this first favour, since thereby it has been enabled to count for something in the education of a superior man, and has won the right of self-distinction by securing it for one of its children; but it was a favour which entailed pecuniary sacrifices on the Bellot family, since it obliged them to pinch

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in order to defray the complement of the college charges. Inconsiderable as was the sum to be furnished every year, it was still a heavy tax on the resources of M. Bellot, who was already the father of four children. His son was aware of this, and was incessantly seeking opportunities and pretexts for testifying his lively gratitude to his parents. Ardent and assiduous in study, he soon distinguished himself among his fellows, and at the close of every year he repaid the sacrifices of the municipality and of his family by an ample harvest of honorary prizes. During his third collegiate year, there occurred a special circumstance, a little characteristic fact, to prove that the boy's heart was at least on a par with his intellect.

The father of one of his fellow-students, distressed at the incurable idleness of his son, bethought himself one day of trying upon him a new system of emulation. He thought that if he placed by his son's side an industrious and intelligent lad to be his companion in study, it might be the means of

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stimulating the vanity of the apathetic and indolent collegian. Accordingly, he inquired of the provost of the college if he knew in his establishment a youth who was fit to serve as a model and a spur for his indocile son, and who would consent to undertake that office. The provost immediately thought of Bellot, and promised to propose to his family an arrangement which could not fail to be accepted. The consequence was, that every day for two or three months Joseph Bellot spent at the house of the student in question the hours intervening between the morning and the evening classes. This system produced to a certain extent the result that had been expected from it. Stimulated by the example of the studious boy, the lazy one made up his mind to work, to learn his lessons, and perform his themes and his versions, and the father had reason to congratulate himself on the result of his ingenious plan. When the holidays came, he wished, before he left Rochefort for the country, to testify his gratitude to the indus-



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trious condisciple who had rendered himself and his son so great a service. He thanked him, kissed him on both cheeks, and put a packet of bon-bons into his hand. Little Joseph, enchanted with the present, warmly thanked his benefactor, and then, without waiting to open the packet, ran home as fast as his legs could carry him, to give it just as it was to his mamma. "Won't I make the hussies laugh!" he cried gaily, as he skipped into the house; "look here, mamma, see what good M. X—— has given me!" The children immediately gathered round the table, and began to disembowel the packet, in order to proceed afterwards to a division of its contents, when behold, to their great surprise, the first bon-bon that fell out was a five-franc piece. "How jolly!" cried Joseph; "here's something to buy pretty ribands for my good little sisters!" The bon-bons then fell out one by one, and were taken up as each one's turn came, with merry noise and laughter. The last one, which lay at the bottom, was

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wrapped up in paper. “What is this?” they all cried. Bellot unfolded it and found a piece of gold—twenty francs: a little fortune for a boy twelve years old. Bellot gazed on the coin for a moment with grave emotion, then, suddenly starting up, he ran to the workshop, threw himself into his father’s arms, and putting the money into his hand, “Here, papa,” said he, “take this for your journey to Paris.” For some months past he had often heard his father say, “I want very much to go to Paris on business; we must put money by for the journey.”

I know not whether I have succeeded in presenting this incident as it strikes myself; but I can aver that when I heard it from the lips of Madame Bellot, I experienced the liveliest emotion: to me it was a complete revelation of a noble and disinterested soul. I am passionately fond of those children of whom their parents say, that *they have nothing they call their own*. It is good that the fair qualities of the heart should take precedence of those of the intellect, and I