

 RODERICK STEWART

# LAURIER

Wilfrid



A PLEDGE FOR CANADA



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Artist: Francine Anger

Wilfrid Laurier, 1841-1919.

*Wilfrid Laurier*



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Wilfrid LAURIER



A PLEDGE FOR CANADA



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# Prologue

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## The Pledge



The short, sharp jerk of the railway car roused him from his reverie. The engine was pulling out of the station. Sir Wilfrid Laurier sat upright in his chair and glanced toward the door. Within moments, his companions would bring him the election returns from most of the provinces.

The train had stopped briefly to exchange passengers, and his companions had dashed out to collect telegrams they were expecting at the railway station. It was a rare moment of solitude and silence. Sir Wilfrid stretched, and then eased his shoulders into the soft leather cushion of his armchair. Sliding his hands lightly through his flowing white hair, he linked them behind his head and leaned back.

If only he could close his eyes, fall asleep, and escape from the demons that pursued him – the grinding schedule that punished his body, the fears and doubts that attacked his will to keep on fighting for what he believed in.

But no, he wouldn't allow himself to sleep. Too much had happened, too much was at stake to think of rest. The train was on its way again; in a few moments his companions would return, and then he would know.

It was just after ten o'clock in the evening. Since eight o'clock that Monday morning, December 17, 1917, Canadians had been going to the polls to vote in a federal election, the first to be held in wartime. The choice for most voters was between a Unionist party candidate and his Liberal party opponent. There was only one issue. Voters who chose the Unionists, led by Prime Minister Robert Borden, believed that the government had the right to make able-bodied Canadian men join the armed services to fight, and possibly die for their country in the war against the German Empire. Voters who favoured the Liberals, led by Sir Wilfrid Laurier, opposed forcing any man to go to war.

His travelling companions re-entered the car and Laurier held out his hand for the telegrams. He felt a sharp pang of doubt, and for a moment, he hesitated, holding the telegrams. Then he read the first, and the hurt thrust deep. Ontario, the province with the largest number of seats in Parliament had gone in a landslide to the Unionists. Numbly, he read on. He had swept Quebec, and had done better than expected in the Maritimes, but the news couldn't console him. Though he wouldn't know the final results from the West till morning, he felt in his heart that the voters there would reject him, too.

Laurier buried his feelings, as he had learned to do long ago as a boy, but when his companion

left him to try to get some sleep, he remained wide awake. Propped upright in his sleeping berth, he stared out the window at mile after mile of snow-shrouded forests looming like ghosts in the darkness.

He was facing his greatest fear, the fear that his beloved Canada might be pulled apart by political factions. Never had anything been so threatening to Canadian unity as this issue about wartime conscription. And now his worst nightmare had become reality: the election results had slashed Canada into two separate, hostile sections.

In one brief day, the work of his lifetime had been destroyed. Questions echoed in his mind to the rattle of the train's wheels on the rails. Had it all been a wasted effort? Should he have stayed out of politics?

The train neared a crossing and let out a long, shrill whistle that cut through the stillness of the night. Sir Wilfrid turned his head restlessly against the pillow and closed his eyes. No! It had been his duty – his passion – to struggle to keep that pledge he had made for Canada so long ago...

National Archives of Canada/PA-039141. Photo by J.W. Michaud.



“I do not intend to forget my origins...” Laurier was born in this house and lived here until he was ten. Located in the village of Saint-Lin, Quebec, it was built by Wilfrid’s father Carolus.

## Canadien Roots



Wilfrid Laurier was a seventh-generation Canadien. Like his ancestors, he grew up speaking the French language and believing in the Roman Catholic religion.

Laurier's Canadien roots reached back almost two centuries to the early years of the colony of New France. One of his ancestors, Augustin Hébert, was among the tiny group of adventurous French people led by Paul de Chomedey de Maisonneuve, who founded Montreal in 1642. A native of Laon in northern France, Hébert eventually lost his life in a skirmish with Iroquois warriors in 1662.

Three years later, Francois Cotineau-Champlaurier arrived in Montreal, from Saint-Claud in southern France. He was a soldier in the famous Carignan-Salières regiment, which had come to New France to protect the inhabitants during the continuing struggle with the Iroquois.

Before Cotineau-Champlaurier completed his military service, he married Madelaine Milot, the granddaughter of Augustin Hébert. Their sons and the succeeding generations of Cotineau-Lauriers, as they called themselves, prospered. They eventually moved from the island of Montreal to the mainland in their search for even more productive soil. On the banks of the Achigan River northwest of Montreal, at the edge of the rolling Laurentian hills, they found what they were looking for.

In 1815, Wilfrid's father, Carolus, was born. Because his own father had decided to drop the name Cotineau, he was baptized simply Laurier. Shortly after his marriage to Marcelle Martineau, he and his bride built a house in the village of Saint-Lin. Though Carolus continued to work the land inherited from his father, he spent much of his time practising his profession as a land surveyor.

On November 20, 1841, Marcelle gave birth to a son, Henry-Charles-Wilfrid. Marcelle, who was a dedicated reader, probably named her son after one of her literary heroes, Wilfrid, in Sir Walter Scott's novel, *Ivanhoe*. She loved music and art as well as books, and she always encouraged young Wilfrid to read. She was delighted too, to find out that he had a fine singing voice. Unfortunately she also probably passed on to him the physical weakness that plagued him throughout his life: unhealthy lungs. But this she would never know because seven years after Wilfrid's birth she herself died from tuberculosis at the age of thirty-three.

All his life, Wilfrid would cherish his few warm memories of Marcelle: how they would walk hand-in-hand along forest paths to find a spot where she could sit and paint; the way she gently stroked his hair while reading to him at bedtime, then kissed him on the forehead and blew out the lamp.

After Marcelle's death, Carolus found it difficult to care for a young son and a sickly daughter, Malvina, who, like her mother, had weak lungs. He soon proposed to Adeline Ethier, and she accepted. For several years, Adeline had helped Marcelle with the housework, and during her final months had been her nurse. Both Wilfrid and Malvina liked Adeline, and she fitted easily into their lives. She was a kind, affectionate person, who treated Wilfrid and Malvina with the same love she showed the children she later bore Carolus. Wilfrid returned her love and always remained devoted to his stepmother.

His father, though, had more influence in shaping his life. Wilfrid loved and respected Carolus. A handsome man with a relaxed and friendly manner, his father was well liked and trusted in the community. For several years he was mayor of Saint-Lin. Carolus was intelligent and wide-ranging in his interests, and he could express himself clearly and forcefully on many subjects. And while he remained a faithful Catholic and attended Mass regularly, he was always quick to oppose any attempt by the Church to step into the world of politics. Often, with young Wilfrid in tow, he would meet the local priest on the main street of St-Lin and stop to talk.

"Good day, Monsieur Carolus," the priest greeted him one morning. "And what plans, if I may ask, does the mayor have today to improve Heaven and earth?" he quipped.

Smiling broadly, Carolus tipped his hat. "Ah Father," he replied, "you give me far too much credit. I can barely handle my own part. I'm afraid I'll have to leave Heaven to you."

With a respectful nod of his head, Carolus moved on. As he did, he winked at Wilfrid and squeezed his hand. Wilfrid returned the squeeze, and marched proudly along at his father's side, his shoulders back as far as they would go.

Carolus had a gift for arguing without anger or spite in his voice and manner, a characteristic Wilfrid adopted. Later in life this gift would often allow Wilfrid to keep friends even when he and they disagreed about a subject.

Another of Laurier's personal traits may also have come from his father as a result of Carolus's experience as a surveyor. Watching him settle disputes over boundaries, Wilfrid came to believe that most arguments have at least two sides and that compromise is often necessary. The idea stuck with him.

Even more important was Carolus's faith in education. He was convinced that if Wilfrid were to succeed in life he would have to learn far more than the basic skills that most people of the time thought were necessary. There was no boys' school in Saint-Lin, so Wilfrid's parents taught him until he was ten years old. At that point, Carolus decided it was time for his son to begin his formal education, but not in French, his native tongue, nor even in his native village. In Canada at that time all the important businesses were in the hands of *les anglais*. For that reason, Carolus decided that Wilfrid must become bilingual.

The village of New Glasgow lay twelve kilometres to the west of Saint-Lin, an hour's ride by calèche along the road that followed the Achigan. Apart from a few French-speaking Canadian families, most of its eight hundred inhabitants were English-speaking descendants of Irish and Scottish immigrants. Parents who wanted their children to get an education sent them to the Fort Ross School. Perched high on a hill looking down on the Achigan River, the school was open to both boys and girls, and Catholics as well as Protestants. The single teacher, who taught all the grades and all the subjects, was Sandy Maclean, a Protestant Scot.

Carolus was able to arrange for Wilfrid to board in the village with an Irish Catholic family, the

Kirkes, and to spend a few hours a week working in the tailor shop of John Murray, another Scot. ~~must have been a shock for a ten-year-old boy to be separated from his family.~~ Young Wilfrid would only return home for a few brief visits and at Christmas and Easter. Yet somehow he managed to bottle up his misery and loneliness. School, after all, was his father's wish, so Wilfrid tried to appear cheerful and to accept his new surroundings. In the end, his two years in New Glasgow were happy ones.

Wilfrid learned English unusually quickly with the help of Sandy Maclean and John Murray. His teacher taught him grammar and introduced him to some of the classic works of the English language. This was the start of a lifelong fascination with English literature. The tailor introduced him to the Bible in English, the King James or Protestant version. Wilfrid was curious and had an open mind. Above all, he had a passion to learn English. Although he was a Catholic, he chose to attend Protestant religious classes in school, and listened eagerly when John Murray read the Bible aloud. Wilfrid came to love the beauty of its language, and continued to read it from time to time for the rest of his life.

In September 1854, at age thirteen, Wilfrid was ready to enter the Collège de L'Assomption, a Roman Catholic boys' school, which prepared students for the priesthood and the professions. Located in the village of L'Assomption, thirty-three kilometres to the east of Saint-Lin, it was dramatically different from Fort Rose School. Life at the Collège meant discipline and rules, study and prayer. Every morning during the school term, for seven years, Wilfrid had to climb out of bed in his boarding house, dress, and run down the street to the Collège to be in his seat in the chapel by 5:45. After prayers, he and his classmates went to the study room for an hour before returning to the chapel for mass at 7:00. At the end of mass, he raced to the boarding house for a quick breakfast. Then from 8:00 until 11:45, with only a fifteen-minute break, he attended class. After lunch, he returned at 1:00 for five hours of lessons and study, broken only by a twenty-five-minute recreation period. At 6:00 there was a half-hour of religious reading, then dinner at 6:30 at the boarding house. Back in the chapel at 8:00 for prayers, he made his final return to the boarding house and bed by 9:00.

It was a demanding schedule. In addition, school regulations on attendance were rigid. Without exception, including holidays, every boy had to remain at the Collège from September to July. But Wilfrid was already used to living away from his family, and besides, he was able to see them during their brief visits at Christmas and Easter. As before, he hid any regrets or loneliness he felt and tried to fit in. Gradually his self-reliance increased as he learned to make some decisions without parental advice. He was growing up quickly.

And school wasn't all work. Thursday was usually a holiday, and Wilfrid's schoolmates often played games or went on hikes. Sometimes Wilfrid joined them. More often, though, talking about everything and nothing, he and his friends preferred to ramble along the edge of a stream that meandered through the forest.

Wilfrid liked games, but even before his arrival at L'Assomption, he had learned he could not take part in any activity that involved running and jumping. After a short time, he always ended up out of breath, and coughing. If he didn't stop, he would find himself bent over in a powerful spasm of coughing that often lasted for several minutes. At L'Assomption, when Wilfrid was seventeen, his condition reached a new stage.

He had been fighting a cold, but he could not bear to miss the Thursday outing with his friends. It was a frigid winter's day, and he and a classmate, Oscar Archambault, were walking along the bank of their favourite stream. Suddenly, he felt a violently sharp pain in his chest. Then began a series of wracking coughs that made his whole body tremble and his head shake back and forth. Instinctively

he pressed his gloved hands to his mouth. But he was unable to stop the repeating surges of pain that came with each cough. On the verge of panic, and eager to be alone, he left his companion, who had stood helplessly watching in horror, and ran the short distance into the woods.

He was too weak to go far. Out of breath and weakened by the convulsions, he collapsed in the snow. Gradually the coughing eased off, and as he rose to his knees, he felt something warm and sticky in his mouth. He looked at his gloves and saw that they were covered with blood. Shocked by the sight, he began to spit out the blood. Then he hurriedly dug his hands into the snow and washed his face, his blood-spattered gloves, and jacket.

By this time, Oscar had recovered from his shock and came running to Wilfrid's side. Together the two made their way out of the woods and back to the boarding house, where Wilfrid was put to bed.

He recovered after several days of bed rest. In the future, whenever he felt the symptoms of a cold, he had to take to his bed. But the bleeding returned again and again for many years. These attacks left him not only weak, but frightened and depressed. It was a nightmare he had to live with.

Fortunately, none of the boys thought the less of him for not joining in rough and tumble sports. Wilfrid was well liked at L'Assomption.

Languages formed the core of the subjects taught at the Collège: French, Latin, English, and some Greek. There were courses in history, mathematics, and philosophy too. Wilfrid did well at everything, but above all, he loved words. He loved them whether they were French, English, or Latin. In later years, he would take books of Latin poetry with him on holidays, and at home on Sundays, he would spend hours reading many from the thousands of books of French and English literature that filled the shelves of his constantly growing library. At critical moments of his life, no matter how busy he was or how much pressure he was under, he was able to shut out the outside world and escape by reading a book.

At L'Assomption he turned his love of words into a new skill – debating. He discovered that he revelled in preparing an argument for a debate. He learned to trust his amazing memory, too. The next year, and for the rest of his career, he spoke only from notes. The drama of debating appealed to him just as much as the words. To rise to your feet with all eyes on you, to argue your point, to carry your listeners along with you... This was heady stuff for young Wilfrid, a way to show that despite his disability, he was strong and capable. Everyone listened in silence when he spoke. In part, it was his voice, a pleasing, silvery-toned, yet strong voice that carried his words to every corner of a room. He was sincere and held himself well, and he had taught himself to avoid distracting gestures. But above all, he convinced listeners by the way he wove his words in a logically constructed argument. He became one of the best debaters and public speakers at L'Assomption.

Soon his love of debating led him to the local courthouse to watch lawyers arguing their cases. In his third year, he started attending court sessions. The lawyer who impressed him most was Joseph Papin. A graduate of L'Assomption, Papin belonged to a political group called the Rouges, which most of the priests detested. Wilfrid first heard Papin making a speech on politics, and he was electrified. Never before had words sounded so convincing. After that, whenever Papin was appearing in court, nothing could keep him away.

But Wilfrid had to pay for this enjoyment. During one of the first times he was watching Papin perform in the courthouse, he suddenly realized that unless he left immediately he would be late for class. He knew the punishment for lateness and for skipping. What to do? His decision came quickly. He was far too involved in the case to leave.

Some time later he returned to the Collège and, knocking gently on the door, entered his classroom. The priest, who was standing at the front of the class, lowered the book he was holding and turned to face Wilfrid. The scowl was unmistakable, the tone of his voice ice-edged.

“Well, Laurier,” he said, “You are familiar with the rules. Take your position, at once.”

Without comment, Wilfrid walked to the opposite side of the room. Facing his classmates, he knelt on the wooden floor. He straightened his back, brought his arms closely to his sides, and looked directly ahead.

There was absolute silence in the room, until the priest spoke again.

“Considering the time of your arrival, Laurier, you will stay in that position without movement for at least one hour. Only then will I decide whether I feel you have had enough time to see clearly the error of your conduct.”

He obviously had not. During the next four years, whenever the court was in session, Wilfrid would again be late and submit to this form of punishment. Before he left L'Assomption, he had made up his mind to become a lawyer himself. And Papin had influenced him in another way, too. Though Wilfrid's interest in politics had not developed as far as his interest in law, he was now eager to learn more of the Rouges.

Wilfrid graduated from L'Assomption in the spring of 1861, only a few months short of his twentieth birthday. He had grown up tall – 1.85 metres or just over six feet – and broad shouldered with thick, curly brown hair, a long, narrow nose, and a well-cut mouth. But he was thin, and sometimes pale and tired looking from the sickness that clung to him like his shadow. Would he do young? His sister Malvina had. His mother too. Despite these doubts, he felt a growing confidence, and awareness of his abilities. Wilfrid Laurier was about to enter the adult world.



National Archives of Canada/C-001897.

As a student at McGill University, Laurier made his commitment: “I pledge my honour that I will give the whole of my life to the cause of conciliation, harmony and concord among the different elements of this country of ours.”

## *The Secret of the Future*



In 1861 Laurier's choice of law as a profession led him to Montreal and McGill University, the only institution where he could study both French and English law. To be truly successful, he had to know both the two legal systems. And Laurier was determined to be successful. He would need all the ambition he could muster to adjust to such a dramatically different way of life. It was a huge leap from the tiny hamlet of Saint-Lin to Montreal, Canada's largest city, with its population of 90,000. The hustle and bustle of the big city was far more exciting than anything Laurier had ever known.

Student life was also far different than at L'Assomption. At McGill there were no priests, no rigid regulations, and few classes. Every afternoon, Laurier hurried over to Burnside Hall, the building where between 4:00 and 6:00 p.m. he attended the daily lecture given by one of the law professors.

From 8:00 a.m. until 3:30 p.m., when he started the walk to Burnside Hall, Laurier worked in the law office of Rodolphe Laflamme. He had met Laflamme, a highly respected Montreal lawyer and professor in the Faculty of Law, when he arrived at McGill. Impressed with Laurier, Laflamme offered the young man the chance of articling for him. By articling, Laurier would work every day in Laflamme's office and gain practical experience. In return, Laflamme would pay Laurier's tuition fees at McGill.

After the daily lecture, Laurier spent most evenings studying, or completing legal work he had taken home. Then he usually turned to books borrowed from the library. Never had he seen so many books! His introduction to English literature in New Glasgow, and French literature at L'Assomption had given him an appetite that he now joyfully indulged. His favourites were Shakespeare, Burns, Milton, and Macaulay. To increase his knowledge of French and English, he translated various passages in the books he was reading from one language into the other. To improve his English pronunciation, he often read aloud.

Debating took much of his time too. Building on his experience at L'Assomption, he grew more skilled. He learned how to sharpen his own arguments and improved his ability to detect flaws in those of his opponents. As a result, he became one of the most highly respected debaters in the university.

During his three years at McGill, Laurier also got involved in politics. This resulted, in part, from articling for Laflamme, who was an important member of the Rouge or Liberal party. His law office was a gathering place for leading party members. Laurier found he had much in common with the Rouges. Like them, he was convinced that progress could come about only by change. He too believed

in freedom of thought and speech, of the press, and of worship. The Rouges, he also learned, deep resented the habit of the Roman Catholic Church of telling its followers how to vote. The Church warned that liberals wanted to destroy Catholicism. Any Catholic who supported liberalism ran the risk of being excommunicated.

Many faithful Roman Catholics toed the line. They believed that the Church and its head, the Pope in Rome, should be more powerful than any elected government. These Catholics were called ultramontanes. They were willing to accept the Pope's rulings on any subject, because they believed he spoke for God.

The threat of excommunication did not frighten Laurier, but he did begin to understand how influential the Roman Catholic Church was in politics. Before the end of his three years at McGill, Laurier had come to be as passionate about politics as he was about the law. He revealed how he felt on the day he graduated from university.

Convocation Day at McGill was Wednesday May 4, 1864, a warm, sunny spring day. The graduation exercises were held in recently built Molson Hall, perched on the slopes of Mount Royal overlooking the city below. Parents and friends of the nearly two hundred graduates filled the auditorium. Among them was Wilfrid's father, Carolus.

After the graduates received their diplomas, Laurier rose from his seat and stepped forward to the lectern. Though his classmates had chosen him as the valedictorian, he appeared less than impressive. Unable to afford more suitable clothing, he was dressed in an old coat and a badly creased pair of pants. Nervously he fingered his notes, coughed twice, and after a pause, began. Speaking in French he focussed first on the meaning of justice and then on the responsibilities of a lawyer. Then he turned to politics. "It is to our glory," he said, "that racial conflicts on our Canadian soil have ended. Now there is no other family but the human family. It is not important what language they speak or at what altars they kneel... There is glory in this brotherhood of which Canada can never be proud enough. Powerful nations might, indeed, come here to seek a lesson in justice and humanity..."

"The mission of the man of law in Canada," he continued, "embraces justice... patriotism... and the union between the peoples, the secret of the future." Then, turning his gaze on his classmates, Laurier concluded: "Now, gentlemen, we see the goal. It is up to us to make certain that our efforts are worth the cost of it."

It was Laurier's personal goal as well. In a later address to the Undergraduate Society of the McGill Faculty of Law, he made his intention plain when he stated: "I pledge my honour that I will give the whole of my life to the cause of conciliation, harmony and concord among the different elements of this country of ours."

It was a pledge he never forgot.



Laurier's immediate goal, though, was less noble but absolutely necessary. He had to earn a living as a lawyer. However, his career began badly; neither of the partnerships he entered during the first two years after graduation was successful. He worked long hours, began to lose weight, and grew weaker. Eventually his health broke down. In October 1866, after coughing uncontrollably until he began to spit up blood, he collapsed in his office. While he lay in bed under the care of a doctor, Antoine-Aimé Dorion, the leader of the Rouge party, approached him with a suggestion that he hoped might benefit both of them. He had met Laurier in Laflamme's office. Until his recent death, Dorion's brother had

published a small newspaper, *Le Défricheur*, in the village of L'Avenir in the Eastern Townships. ~~was the only newspaper in the area and the party counted on it to carry the Rouge message to readers there.~~

Laurier was a Rouge; he knew the party program; he could write. Would he take over the paper? was only a small weekly, and he could easily find time to start a law practice in the area. The slow pace of life and the unpolluted air of the countryside would be good for his lungs. Full of hope Laurier accepted. In November 1866, he opened an office in the small town of L'Avenir.

Unfortunately, no one seemed interested in either his legal or his journalistic talents, and his health did not improve. Despite its name, he decided that L'Avenir held no future for him. After a month, he moved north to the village of Victoriaville.

Here things became much worse. Unknown to him, he was walking into a trap prepared by the ultramontane Monseigneur Laflèche, soon to become Bishop of Trois-Rivières. The moment Laurier arrived in Victoriaville at the beginning of January 1867, there was an all-out attack on *Le Défricheur* and on him personally. Every priest in the region denounced him as a dangerous monster, a liberal who was bent on destroying the Church and all the values that it taught. The campaign against Laurier continued without a break for three months. Every Sunday, from the pulpits in their churches, the priests warned the faithful that it was a mortal sin to buy *Le Défricheur*. Any Roman Catholic who read the paper might lose the chance of going to Heaven.

Laurier fought back in the pages of *Le Défricheur*. In issue after issue, he denied the charges of attacking the Church and countered with his explanation of Rouge beliefs. These, he pointed out, did not include closing the churches and ending the worship of God.

It was an unequal fight. Frightened by the priests' threats, many Roman Catholics feared the possibility of going to eternal damnation. Most stopped buying the paper. Sales declined and Laurier fell quickly into debt. In addition, the curse of liberalism damned Laurier, the lawyer, as well as Laurier the journalist. His law practice was a flop.

As had so often happened in the past when he had been working hard and was under pressure, his health suffered. Floundering in debt, physically weakened, and frustrated by his inability to cope with the enemy, Laurier had no choice. He declared bankruptcy and announced the end of *Le Défricheur*. The first battle of the war between the Roman Catholic Church and Wifrid Laurier came to an end.

His crushing defeat taught him a painful lesson. Until he could earn an income, he simply could not afford to take part in political campaigns. However, to achieve success as a lawyer, he had to find the right community. He liked the area around Victoriaville, and fortunately only a short distance away was the town of Arthabaska. Set in a pretty valley at the junction of two rivers, and close to the Allegheny Mountains, Arthabaska had a freshness that appealed to Laurier. It also was the site of the county court, a good place for a lawyer to be. Looking for somewhere to stay, he met Dr. Médéric Poisson and his wife, who had a room to rent. The bright, sunny, sitting room was large enough for the shelves he needed to hold his beloved books. And nearby was a vacant office. In September 1867 he moved to Arthabaska and started his fifth law practice.



National Archives of Canada/PA-026528. Photo by W.J. Topley.

Pictured here in her late thirties, Zoë spent much of her time in various Roman Catholic charitable and social organizations in Arthabaska.

## Time to Take a Chance



Throughout his seven years at L'Assomption, Laurier had concentrated on his studies, reading, and debating. There had been little time for outside interests. Certainly none for romance. L'Assomption had a very small population, and the school was for boys only. Wilfrid Laurier had never had a girlfriend.

But things changed during his first year at McGill. He was renting a room from Dr. Séraphin Gauthier and his wife Phoebé. Among their other boarders were a Mme. Lafontaine and her daughter Zoë. Zoë taught piano, and also played extremely well. Many guests came Sunday afternoons to hear her play and to eat, talk, dance, and sing. Zoë, who was a few months older than Laurier, was rather shy, of slight build, with large hazel eyes and thick brown hair parted primly down the middle. It was her eyes that first attracted Laurier, and after a while, he found himself watching Zoë while she played and other guests gathered around her. One day when she was playing alone, she smiled at him. Summoning his nerve, Laurier went over and began to accompany her in his excellent singing voice. That was the beginning. Soon they sat together whenever Zoë was not playing the piano, or they escaped for long walks together. Laurier and Zoë had fallen in love.

She opened a whole new world of experience to him, and they came to care deeply for each other. As the months passed Laurier was happy in a way he had never been before and was content to go along as they were indefinitely.

But Zoë wanted more.

Wanting to be alone, they had slipped away from the Gauthiers' Sunday afternoon social gathering and strolled to a nearby park. Holding Laurier's arm, Zoë guided them to a bench.

She had been talking animatedly, but now she became silent. Worried, Laurier eased his arm from hers and turned to face her. "What is it Zoë?" he asked.

There was a long pause. Then, clasping his hands, she gazed into his eyes. "I... I love you Wilfrid," she faltered. "There will be no one else in my life. You know that – I know you do! And believe that you love me too." She blushed and dropped her eyes for a moment before she struggled on. "So why, oh why, have you never mentioned the word *marriage*?"

She could feel his fingers tighten. "But Zoë," he stammered, "surely you know why." Mutely, she shook her head. "What future would you have with me?" he went on. "There's a good chance I have tuberculosis. That's what took my mother's life, and my sister's, too. You know I have weak lungs and

that I can't walk very far without stopping to rest. You've been with me when I've gone through one of my coughing bouts. At least, thank heavens you've been spared from seeing me hemorrhage. Believe me, dear Zoë, I really have no idea how long I'm going to live."

She opened her lips to protest, but he reached over and with one forefinger lightly touched her cheek. "Wait, there's more. It will be years before I make a good income, and a lawyer has no regular pay. Whenever I do open my own law office, I'll have to wait and hope that clients come to me. Maybe someday in the distant future, I'll be successful, but I can't promise. That's not enough to start a marriage on."

"I know all that!" Zoë burst out. "But your health may improve as you age, Wilfrid. And of course we need money, but I believe in you. I just know you'll attract clients! Anyway, I can help a little by teaching piano."

She leaned forward and squeezed his hands. "What matters is that we love each other. Can't we love find a way?" she pleaded,

But Laurier was stubborn. Despite his love for Zoë, he for once could not see the other side of the question. Perhaps he feared that family cares would stand between him and his ambition. He refused to budge, and finally they stopped discussing the matter, for they realized it would lead only to bad feelings. Little by little, their relationship began to cool.

Laurier then left Montreal for L'Avenir. While he was getting settled in his new surroundings, he and Zoë wrote to each other, but their letters lacked feeling. Soon, Laurier knew he had a rival. He was Pierre Valois, a medical student who had met Zoë at the Gauthiers' and quickly fallen in love with her. For some time, Zoë did not encourage Valois; she was hoping for a sign from Laurier that he had changed his mind.

But none came. He was living through disastrous times in L'Avenir and in Victoriaville and had lost in turn, his newspaper, his law practice, and his health. Even after he settled in Arthabaska and clients started to appear in his office, Laurier still feared the worst. Oh, he loved Zoë; that was not the question. But, compared to Valois, what did he have to offer her?

A year passed. During that time, they met during the few visits Laurier made to Montreal, and they wrote each other occasionally, but he remained stubbornly silent on the subject of marriage. Meanwhile, Pierre Valois was healthy and certain of success. He wanted Zoë as his wife. He was waiting impatiently for her positive reply. At last, Zoë gave in. She agreed to marry Valois in May, 1868.

In January, she wrote to Laurier to tell him the news. Though he was half expecting it, he was shocked. Gloomily, he told himself he must deaden his feelings by work. Though she was the only woman he had held in his arms and kissed, the only woman he had loved, well, after all, he was only twenty-six. He would meet someone else... perhaps.

So he worked harder than ever. His name became better known and he was kept busy during the winter and early spring. In the late afternoon of May 12, he was working on a brief he would have to present in court in two days, when a telegram from Montreal arrived. The message was brief: "Come at once. A matter of urgent importance." It had been sent by Dr. Séraphin Gauthier.

Laurier was puzzled. Surely there could be only one reason for Séraphin's request. It had to do with Zoë. Her health? Not likely; if she had been sick, Séraphin would have said so. So what was the point of going to Montreal? Her wedding with Valois was only weeks away. He decided to ignore the telegram.

But he couldn't forget it. For several hours he tried to work, but his thoughts fluttered back and forth. Should he...? Shouldn't he...? Then a second telegram urging him to come arrived. At last Laurier decided. He couldn't get Zoë out of his mind and heart. He had to go. There was just enough time to catch the midnight train.

After a sleepless night, exhausted, needing a shave, his clothes rumpled, he stumbled out of the train just before 8:00 a.m. Dr. Gauthier was waiting and whisked Laurier off to his office.

"Take off your shirt," he ordered, "and get up on the examining table. I want to look at your chest."

Laurier followed instructions during the examination. Then, as he began to button his shirt, Dr. Gauthier looked him directly in the eye.

"Wilfrid, I've examined you before, and what I see today makes me repeat what I've already told you. I can make a mistake, any doctor can, but I'm convinced you don't have tuberculosis. Of course, as we both know, you do have weak lungs. These have caused you trouble, and I believe they will again. But they're not going to kill you. What you do have is chronic bronchitis, and it can be controlled. I can't promise you won't have attacks in the future, but if you follow my advice, I'm sure you'll live as long a life as the average person."

Always gloomy about his health, Laurier found some comfort in what Dr. Gauthier had said. But he was also annoyed. Why this examination now? Why drag him to Montreal? Then Dr. Gauthier explained the reason for the telegram. Yes, of course, it was Zoë. She was badly upset – had been for several weeks. She could hardly sleep; when she did, she would burst into tears on waking. Séraphin and Phoebé were powerless to comfort her. Clearly Zoë did not want to go through with her marriage to Pierre Valois.

"And why, my dear Wilfrid?" Dr. Gauthier grasped Laurier's shoulders with both hands. "Because she and she made this absolutely clear, she is hopelessly in love with you. So I have only one question to ask. If you're in love with her, what are you going to do about it?" He stepped back and waited for Laurier's reaction.

Laurier felt a sudden surge of joy, and all his doubts fell away. However brief his life with her might be, she loved him, and he loved her. It was time to take a chance. Though he said nothing, his face telegraphed his feelings to Dr. Gauthier. "Then, don't waste another second, Wilfrid," he urged. "Go to her. By now Phoebé has told her you're here. She'll be up."

He led Laurier down the hall to the parlour. A few seconds later, a slightly bewildered Zoë appeared. They stared at one another, both hesitating. Then Zoë's eyes filled and brimmed over. Laurier took her in his arms. As he held her close, with her head pressed against his chest, tears flowed silently down her cheeks.

At last, Laurier gently raised Zoë's head and looked into her eyes. "If it's not too late to make the proposal, I would like you to be my wife. Would you...?" Before he could finish, she reached up, brought his head closer, and pressed her lips against his.

The kiss was her answer. Then, sensing that she had the advantage, she wasted no time. The marriage must take place that very day, she declared. For a second, Laurier was speechless, then a wide smile covered his face, and he chuckled. "Yes, my dear Zoë," he agreed. "It will be today. We will not wait one day more."

Could it be done in such a short time? It could, with the help of the faithful Gauthiers. In a flurry of activity, all the arrangements were made. By 8:00 that evening, Zoë and Laurier were standing

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