

Riel's Last Interview

Entered his cell, I looked round and saw that the policeman had moved away from the grill. I bent down, told Riel I was a Leader reporter in the guise of a *prêtre*, and had come to give his last message to the world. He held out his left hand and touching it with his right said: "Tick! Tick! Tick! I hear the telegraph, *ah, ça finira.*" "Quick," I said, "have you anything to say? I have brought pencil and paper—Speak."

Riel: "When I first saw you on the trial I loved you."

"I wish to send messages to all. To Lemieux, Fitzpatrick, Greenshields. I do not forget them. They are entitled to my *reconnaissance*. Ah!" he cried, apostrophizing them, "You were right to plead insanity, for assuredly all those days in which I have badly observed the Commandments of God were passed in insanity (*passé dans la folie*). Every day in which I have neglected to prepare myself to die, was a day of mental alienation. I who believe in the power of the Catholic priests to forgive sins, I have much to confess myself according as Jesus Christ has said, 'Whose sins you remit they are remitted.'"

Here he stopped and looked in his peculiar way and said:

"Death comes right to meet one. He does not conceal himself. I have only to look straight before me in order to see him clearly. I march to the end of my days. Formerly I saw him afar. (Or rather "her" for he spoke in French.) It seems to me, however, that he walks no more slowly. He runs. He regards me. Alas! he precipitates himself upon me. My God!" he cried, "will he arrive before I am ready to present myself before you. O my God! Arrest it! By the grace, the influence, the power, the mercy divine of Jesus Christ. Conduct him in another direction in virtue of the prayers ineffable of Marie Immaculate. Separate me from death by the force the intercession of St. Joseph has the privilege to exercise upon your heart, O my God! Exempt me lovingly by Jesus, Marie and Joseph, from the violent and ignominious death of the gallows, to which I am condemned."

"Honorable Langevins, Caron, Chapleau, I want to send them a message, let them not be offended if a man condemned to death dares to address them. Whatever affairs hang on you don't forget, 'What shall it profit a man to gain the whole world and to lose his soul?'

“Honorable Messrs. Blake and Mackenzie, I want to send them a message. For fifteen years you have often named me, and you have made resound the echoes of your glorious province, in striking on my name as one strikes on a tocsin. I thank you for having contributed to give me some celebrity. Nobly take from me an advice nobody else will dare to give you. Prepare yourself each day to appear before your God.

“The Vice-Regal throne is surrounded with magnificence. He who occupies it is brilliant, and my eyes cannot fix on him without being blinded. Illustrious personages the qualities with which you are endowed are excellent. For that reason men say ‘Your Excellency.’ If the voice of a man condemned to death will not appear impertinent to you; it vibrates at the bottom of the cells of Regina to say to you: Excellencies! you also, do not fail to hold yourself in readiness for death, to make a good death, prepare yourself for death!

“Sir John Macdonald! I send you a message. I have not the honour to know you personally. Permit me nevertheless to address you a useful word. Having to prepare myself for death I give myself to meditation and prayer. Excuse me Sir John. Do not leave yourself be completely carried away by the glories of power. In the midst of your great and noble occupations take every day a few moments at least, for devotion and prayer and prepare yourself for death.

“Honorable and noble friends! Laurier, Laflamme, Lachapelle, Dessjardins, Taillon, Beaubien, Trudel, Prud’homme, I bid you adieu. I demand of God to send you the visit of Death only when you shall have long time desired it, and that you may join those who have transformed death into Joy, into deliverance and triumph.

“Honorable Joseph Dubuc, Alphonse, C. Lariviere, Marc. A. Girard, Joseph Royal, Hon. John Norquay, Gov. Edgar Dewdney, Col. Irvine, Captain Deane, I would invite them to think how they would feel if they had only a week to live. Life here below is only the preparation for another. You are good Christians, think of eternity. Do not omit to prepare yourself for death.

“O my God! how is it death has become my sweetheart with the horror I feel towards her? And how can she seek me with an attention proportioned to the repugnance she inspires. O Death! the Son of God has triumphed over your terrors! O Death! I would make of thee a good death!

“Elezear de la Grinodière! Roger Goulet, and you whom I regard as a relative, Irené Kérouak, prepare yourself for death. I pray God to prolong your days. Louis Schmidt, I ask of the good God to enable you to come to a happy old age. Meanwhile prepare yourself for death. Listen to the disinterested advice of one condemned. We have been placed in this world of pain only for the purpose of probation.

And you whom I admire and respect, glorious Major General Middleton, you were kind to me, you treated me nobly. Pray see in my words the desire to be as little disagreeable as possible. Life has been smiling and fortunate for you, but alas! it will also finish for you. General, if there is one thing I have appreciated more than being your prisoner of war it is that you chose as my guard Captain Young, one of the most brave and polite officers of your army. Captain Young! Be not surprised that I send you a message through the Leader newspaper which I understand with *reconnaissance* has not called out against me, prepare yourself all your days. Death also disquiets himself about you. Do not sleep on watch. Be ever well on your guard.

“And you whom death spares and does not dare to approach and you whom I cannot forget, Ancien Preacher of Temperance, Chiniquy, your hairs are white. God who has made them white slowly, wishes to make your heart white right away (*tout d’un coup*). O be not angry at the disinterested voice of a man who has never spoken to you, to whom you have never given pain, unless it be in having abandoned regrettably the amiable religion of your fathers. The grace of Marie waits for you. Please come.”

The prisoner paused, and in the pause one heard the skirr of the spurred heel of the Mounted Policeman and the neighing of one of the horses in the stables hard by, and I said:—“ Is this all? Have you no more to say?”

“No more,” replied Riel. “Father André has been here. He has told me there is no hope, that he has a letter from my good friend Bishop Grandin. I have made my confession. I have taken the Sacraments. I am prepared. But yet the Spirit tells me, told me last night I should yet rule a vast country, the North-West, with power derived direct from heaven, look!” and he pointed to the vein in his left arm, “there the spirit speaks, ‘Riel will not die until he has accomplished his mission’ and—”

He was about to make a speech and I left him with some sympathy and no little sadness. I felt that I had been in the presence of a man of genius *manqué*, of a man who, had he been gifted with judgment might have accomplished much; of one who, had he been destitute of cruelty might even command esteem, and as I rode over the bridge and looked down on the frosty creek, and cast my eye towards the Government House where happy people were perhaps at dinner at that hour, I said to myself, “Why did he murder Scott? Why did he seek to wake the bloody and nameless horrors of an Indian massacre? Why did he seek the blood of McKay and his fellow peacemakers? Unhappy man, there is nothing for it. You must die on Monday.”

Here as I passed near the trail going north-west the well-known voice of a home-returning farmer saying “Good night” woke me from my reverie. In twenty minutes I was seated at dinner. I joined in the laugh and so passing are our most solemn impressions, so light the effect of actual tragedy. Our emotions are the penumbras of rapid transitions of circumstances and vanishing associations and like clouds we take the hue of the moment, and are shaped by the breeze that bloweth where it listeth.

Source: Nicholas Davin, *Regina Leader* (November 16, 1885).