

The Storyteller

A CANADIAN TALE.

Reader, have you ever been in the old church of the Riviere Ouelle? In one of its side chapels is an ex-voto which was placed there many long years ago by a stranger who was miraculously preserved from death. It is a very old picture, full of dust, and of no artistic value, but it recalls a touching story. I learned it when very young on my mother's knees, and it has remained as fresh and vivid in my memory as when I first heard it.

It was a cold winter evening, long, long ago. The snow was beating against the window-sashes, and the icy north wind howled and shrieked among the naked branches of the great elms in the garden. The whole family had assembled in the salon. Our mother, after playing several airs on the piano, allowed her fingers to wander restlessly over the keys—her thoughts were elsewhere. A shade of sadness passed over her brow. 'My dear children,' said she, after a moment's silence, 'see what a fearful night this is, perhaps many poor people will perish before morning from cold and hunger. How thankful we ought to be to God for our good food and warm comfortable beds! Let us say our rosary for the poor travellers who may be exposed to such dangers during the night.' And then she added, 'If you say it with devotion, I will tell you all a beautiful story.' Oh! how we wished that our rosary was finished! At that age the imagination is so vivid and the soul so impressionable. Childhood possesses all the charms of the golden dawn of life; enveloping every object in shade and mystery, it clothes each in a poetry unknown to any other age.

We gathered around our mother, near the glowing stove, which diffused a delicious warmth through out the apartment, and listened in a religious sort of silence to her sweet and tender voice. I almost think I hear it now. Listen with me to her story—

Toward the middle of the last century, a missionary, accompanied by several Indians, ascended the south bank of the St Lawrence River, about thirty leagues below Quebec. The missionary was one of those intrepid pioneers of faith and civilisation, whose sublime figures are thrown out from the dark background of the past, surrounded by a halo of glory and immortality. Nailed on Golgotha during the days of their bloody pilgrimage, they shine to-day on a new Tabor, and the light which radiates from their faces illuminates the present and throws itself far into the future. At their names alone, the people, seized with wonder and respect, bow low their heads, for these names recall a courage almost superhuman, a faith most admirable, and a devotedness most sublime. He whom we are following at this moment was one of those illustrious children of the Society of Jesus, whose entire life was consecrated to the conversion of the savages of Canada. He was not very tall, and stooped slightly, his beard, blanched prematurely by hardships, and his pale and attenuated features seemed to indicate a want of strength and endurance for so hard a life, but this frail body concealed one of those grand souls which draw from the energy of their will an inexhaustible strength. His large, expansive forehead suggested a proportionate intellect, and his features were an expression of incomparable sweetness and simplicity; the least shade of a melancholy smile played over his lips—in a word, his whole face seemed filled with that mysterious glory with which sanctity illumines her predestined souls.

The leader of the little band was a few steps in advance. He was an old Indian warrior, who, a long time before, had been converted to Christianity by this holy missionary, and who, from that time, became the faithful companion of all his adventurous wanderings.

The travellers advanced slowly on their 'raquettes' over a soft, thick snow. It was one of those superb December nights, whose marvellous splendor is entirely unknown to the people of the South, with which the old year embellishes its waning hours to greet the advent of the newcomer. Innumerable stars poured their light in silver tears over the blue firmament of heaven—we might say tears of joy which the glory of the Sun of Justice draws from the eyes of the blessed. The moon, ascending through the different constellations, amused itself by contemplating in the snowy mirror its resplendent disc. Toward the north luminous shafts radiated from a dark cloud which floated along the horizon. The aurora borealis announces itself first by pale, whitish jets of flame which slowly lick the surface of the sky, but soon the scene grows more animated, the colors deepen, and the light grows larger, forming an arch around an opaque cloud. It assumes the most bizarre forms. In turn appear long skeins of white silk, graceful swan plumes, or bundles of gold and silver thread, then a troop of white phantoms in transparent robes execute a fantastic dance. Now it is a rich satin fan whose summit touches the zenith, and whose edges are fringed with rose and saffron tints; finally, it is an immense organ, with pearl and ivory pipes, which only awaits a celestial musician to intone the sublime hosannah of nature to the Creator. The strange crackling sound which accompanies this brilliant phenomenon completes the illusion, for it is strangely like the sighs which escape from an organ whose pipes are filled with a powerful wind. It is the prelude of the divine concert which mortal ears are not permitted to listen to. The scene which presented itself below was not less fascinating in its savage beauty than that of the sky above.

The cold, dry atmosphere was not agitated by a single breath, nothing was heard but the dull, monotonous roaring of the gigantic river, sleeping under a coverlet of floating ice, which dotted its dark waters like the spotted skin of an immense leopard. A light white vapor rose like the breath from the nostrils of a marine monster. Toward the north, the blue crests of the Laurentides were clearly defined, from Cape Tourmente to the mouth of the Saguenay. In a southern direction the last slopes of the Alleghantes stretched along covered with pines, firs, and maples; almost the entire shore was densely wooded, for at the remote period which we describe those vast clearings along the banks covered with abundant meadows were not to be seen, nor the pretty little whitewashed houses grouped in villages along the shore so coquetishly a person could easily compare them to bands of swans sleeping on the river banks. A sea of forest covered these shores. A few scattered houses appeared here and there, but this was all.

THE APPARITION.

The travellers advanced in silence toward the middle of the wood, when suddenly the leader of the party stopped, making at the same time a sign with his hand for his companions to do likewise. 'You are mistaken, comrade,' said the missionary

to him, 'the noise which you have just heard was only a tree split by the frost.'

The Indian turned slowly toward him, an almost imperceptible smile passing over his face. 'My brother,' said he, in a low voice, 'if you saw me take your holy word, and try to read in it, you would laugh at me. I do not wish to laugh at you, for you are a black-gown, but I tell you, you do not know the voices of the forest, and the noise which we have just heard is a human voice. Follow me at a distance, while I go on to see what is happening yonder.' The travellers walked on for some time without seeing anything. The Father began to think he had not been deceived, when they came to an opening in the woods and saw the Indian stop. What was his astonishment, when, following the direction in which the savage was looking, he saw at the extreme end of the opening a very extraordinary light, apparently detached from the obscurity of the trees. In the midst of this luminous globe appeared a vague, indistinct form, elevated above the ground. Then another spectacle, that the brilliancy of the strange vision had prevented him from seeing before, was presented to his gaze.

A young man dressed in military uniform was kneeling at the foot of a tree. His hands were clasped and his eyes turned towards heaven; he seemed absorbed in the contemplation of a mysterious and invisible object. Two corpses, which were easily recognised as an officer and a soldier from their uniforms, were lying by his side in the snow. The officer, an elderly man with gray hair, was lying against a maple, in his hands was a little book, about to slip out of them. His head was leaning on his right shoulder, and his face had that ashy hue which too plainly told that death already claimed him. A bluish circle surrounded his half-closed eyes, and a last tear stood congealed on his livid cheek. A placid smile was on his face, indicating that a supreme hope, which faith alone could inspire had consoled his last moments.

The noise made by the travellers' feet in the snow caused the young man, who was still on his knees, to turn suddenly round. 'O Father, my Father!' cried he, rushing toward the missionary, 'it is Providence who has sent you here to save me. I was about to share the terrible fate of my unfortunate companions, when—a prodigy!—a miracle!—suffocated by his tears and sobs, he could say no more, but throwing himself into the arms of the missionary, he pressed him to his heart.

'Calm yourself, my dear son,' said the old man, 'for in your feeble and exhausted state such violent emotion might prove fatal.' Scarcely had he finished the words when he felt the young man's head sink heavily on his shoulder, and his body became a dead weight—he had fainted.

The travellers eagerly bestowed on him every care that his situation required and that lay in their power. His two friends, alas! were beyond reach of human succor. The savages dug their graves in the snow, and the saintly missionary, after reciting some prayers over their bodies, cut with his knife a large cross in the bark of the maple at the foot of which they had breathed their last—a simple but sublime monument of hope and love, destined to guard their earthly remains.

THE CANADIAN HOME.

See you yonder on the slope of the hill, that pretty cottage so neat and white, with its little thatched barn, so clearly defined against the caressing foliage of that beautiful copse of maples? Well, that is a Canadian home. From its high green pedestal it smiles at the great

RIDE "ANGLO SPECIAL" CYCLES.