

The Storyteller

A CANADIAN TALE.

(Conclusion.)

THE SILHOUETTE.

"More than a month ago," said the young officer, "I left the country of the Abnakis, accompanied by my father, a soldier, and an Indian guide. We travelled along through the forest for several days without any accident, when one evening, overcome with fatigue, we lit a fire and camped for the night near an Indian cemetery. According to the custom of the savages, every corpse was wrapped in a shroud of coarse bark, and placed high above the ground on four stakes. Bows and arrows, tomahawks, and some ears of mace were hung against these rude graves, and shook and rattled as the wind passed over them. Our own savage was seated just in front of me, on the half-decayed trunk of a pine tree that had fallen to the ground, and seemed half-buried in profound meditation. The fitful flames of the fire threw a weird light over his gigantic frame. An Indian might readily have compared him to one of the superb maples of our forest, had he been able at the same time to have united with it the cunning of the serpent and the agility of the elk. His height was increased by a quantity of black, red, and white feathers tied with his hair on the top of his head. His ferocious features, piercing black eyes, his tomahawk and long knife, half concealed by the trophy of scalps which hung from his belt, gave him a wild and sanguinary appearance. The night was dark and bitter cold. The low and unequal arch formed by the interlacing branches of the trees, and illuminated by the flickering light of our pine-wood fire, seemed like a vast cavern, and the old trunks of the rotten trees, which were buried in the snow, looked like the corpses of giants strewn around. The birches, covered with their white bark, seemed like wandering phantoms in the midst of this debris, and the dull rumbling of the distant torrent and the wind moaning and whistling through the leafless branches, completed the weird, funereal aspect of the place. Anyone slightly superstitious could easily believe he heard the sighing spirits of the Indian warriors who lay buried so near us. In spite of myself, a shiver of horror ran through my veins. Here, in the midst of all this grim rubbish, where every rock and tree was transformed by the shadows into as many spectres watching his movements, our audacious savage appeared as grave and tranquil as if he had been in his own cabin.

"Comrade," said I to him, "do you think we need fear any danger still from those Iroquois whose trail we discovered yesterday?"

"Has my brother already forgotten that we found it again this morning?"

"But there were only two," said I.

"Yes, but an Iroquois can very quickly communicate with his comrades."

"But these were not on the war-path, they were hunting an elk."

"Yes, but the snow is deep, and they could soon kill him without much fatigue, and then—"

"Well!"

"And then, their hunger once satisfied—"

"Finish."

"I say they might, perhaps, amuse themselves by hunting the whiteskins."

"But the whites are at peace with the Iroquois."

"The Iroquois never bury but half of the war-hatchet, and besides, they have raised the tomahawk against the warriors of my tribe,

and if they discovered the track of an Abnakis among yours—"

"You think, then that they might pursue us. Perhaps it would be more prudent to extinguish our fire."

"Does not my brother hear the howling of the wolves? If he prefers being devoured by them to receiving the arrow of any Iroquois, he can extinguish it."

"The words of our guide were not very reassuring, but I was so overcome with fatigue that, in spite of the evident danger to which we were exposed, I fell asleep. But my sleep was filled with the wildest dreams. The dark shadow of our guide, that I saw as I went to sleep, seemed to lengthen and rise behind him, black and threatening, like a spectre. The dead in the cemetery, shaking the snow from their shrouds of bark, descended from their sepulchres, and bent towards me. I fancied I heard the gritting of their teeth as the wind rushed through the trees and the dry branches cracked and snapped. I awoke with a start. Our guide, leaning against a post of one of the graves, was still before me, and from his heavy and regular breathing I knew that he slept profoundly. I fancied I saw just above him, peeping over the grave against which he was leaning, a dark form and two fixed and flaming eyes. My imagination is excited by my fantastic dreams, thought I, and tried to compose myself to sleep again. I remained a long time with my eyes half shut, in that state of semi-somnolence, half watching, half sleeping, my stupefied faculties scarcely able to discern the objects around. And yet the dark shadow seemed to move slightly, and to lean more and more towards our savage, who was still in a deep sleep. At that moment the fire suddenly blazed up, and I saw distinctly the figure of an Indian. He held a long knife between his teeth, and, with dilated eyes fixed on his enemy, he approached still nearer to assure himself that he slept. Then a diabolical smile lit up his face, and seizing his knife, he brandished it an instant aiming a blow at the heart of his victim. The blade flashed in the firelight. At the same moment a terrible cry rang out, and the two savages rolled together in the snow. The flash of the steel, in awakening our guide, had also betrayed his enemy. Thus my horrible nightmare terminated in a more horrible reality. I had hastily seized my gun but dared not fire, lest I should kill or wound our guide. It was a death-fight between them. The snow, streaked with blood, blew up around them like a cloud of dust. A hatchet glittered in the air, then a dull, heavy sound, followed by a cracking of bones. The victory was decided. A gurgling sound escaped from the victim—it was the death-rattle! Holding in one hand a bloody scalp, the conqueror, with a smile, raised himself proudly. At that instant a shot was heard. A ball struck him in the breast, and our savage, for it was he, fell dead in front of the fire. Taking aim with my gun, and sending a ball in the direction whence the shot had come, and where I saw another shadow gliding amongst the trees, was for me the work of an instant. The Indian, with a terrible death-cry, described an arch in the air with his body, and fell dead to the ground. The tragedy was finished: our savage was avenged, but we had no longer a guide. I then thought of our conversation that evening, and how his apprehensions of the two savages whom we had tracked in the morning had been so fearfully realised.

DEATH.

'Abandoned without a guide, in the midst of interminable forests, we were in a state of extreme perplexity. We hesitated a long time whether to proceed on our route or retrace our steps. The danger of falling into the hands of the Iroquois, who infested that part of the country, decided us to continue our journey.

'The only means left for finding our way was a little compass which my father had fortunately brought along. Several days later found us still on our painful march, in the midst of a violent snow storm. It was a veritable tempest; the snow fell so thick and fast we could scarcely see two feet in advance.

'In every direction we heard the trees splitting and falling to the ground. We were in great danger of being crushed. My father was struck by a branch, which completely buried him under the snow, and we had great difficulty in extricating him. When we raised him up, he found that the chain around his neck which held the compass was broken, and the compass had disappeared. We searched long and carefully, but in vain—it could not be found. In falling, my father received a severe injury on the head. While dressing the wound, which bled freely, I could not restrain my tears, on seeing this old man, with his white hair, enduring intense suffering with so much fortitude, and displaying such calmness in the midst of an agony which he tried to conceal from me by an outward show of confidence. "My son," said he, when he saw my tears, "remember that you are a soldier. If death comes, it will find us on the roll of honor. It is well to die a martyr to duty, besides nothing happens except by the will of God. Let us submit at once with courage and resignation to whatever He pleases to send."

'We marched two days longer in an intense cold, and then my father could go no further. The cold had poisoned the wound in his head, and a violent fever came on. To crown our misfortunes, our little store of matches had become damp, and it was impossible to kindle a fire. Then all hope abandoned me, and, not having been able to kill any game for the past day or two, we had been almost entirely without food; then, in spite of all my warning and advice, the soldier who accompanied us, exhausted by fatigue and hunger, and utterly discouraged, went to sleep in the snow, and when I found him some time after, he was dead—frozen stiff! Overcome by the most inexpressible grief, I remained on my knees by the side of my dying father. Several times he besought me to abandon him and escape death. When he felt his last hour approaching, he said, handing me an "Imitation of Christ," which he held in his hand, "My son, read to me." I took the book and opened it at chance, reading between my sobs. "Make now friends near God, in order that, after leaving this life, they will receive you in the eternal tabernacles." "Conduct yourself on earth as a traveller and a stranger who has no interest in the affairs of the world. Keep your heart free and raised towards God, because here below you have no substantial dwelling-place. You should address to heaven every day your prayers, your sighs, and your tears, in order that, after this life, your soul will be able to pass happily into the bosom of our Lord."

'I replaced the book in his hand. A smile of immortal hope passed over his countenance, for these lines were a resume of his entire life. After a moment's silence, he said: "My son, when I shall be no more, take this little gold cross which hangs around my neck, and which was given to me by your mother on the day of your birth"—there was a moment's silence. A shade of pro-