

DANCE OF THE DEAD MEN

A STORY OF INDIAN LIFE IN THE FAR NORTH

By ARTHUR HEMING, Author of "Spirit Lake"

TUGGING at the weight of the frozen carcasses, Standing Wolf slowly hauled the sled in and out among the gravelike mounds of the muskeg. Now and again he slightly turned his head to listen. There were strange sounds in the night air. Sometimes he imagined for a moment that the grotesquely frozen bodies had come to life again, and were dancing on the snow. Once he paused to look around; but all he saw was two great man shadows lying on the snow, with long, outstretched legs that reached toward him and touched his feet. To him the sight was not an unusual one. Often, when the northern lights and the moon were shining, as he hurried through the muskeg or over the silent lakes, he had been pursued by monstrous figures that seemed forever trying to tread upon his heels. So on he trudged.

It was hard work. The prow of the toboggan continually overran the hummocks. When he turned to pull it aside, gnarled roots reached out to catch at his snowshoes, and willow wands stung his frost-bitten face. At last, just as he was leaving the muskeg behind and was nearing the forest that loomed ahead across a wide strip of gleaming snow, he stopped suddenly. What was that? He stood staring at the snow. Were his eyes playing him false? Could it be true? He jerked the tump line off his head and threw it back upon the sled. Then he stepped aside and knelt down to examine the tracks in the snow, while his two shadows mockingly did the same.

"Ah, Kus-ke-tie Ina-ca-sis!" exclaimed the Indian with glee. True enough, it was the track of a black fox, an animal whose skin brings a greater price than that of any other found in the northern forest. Already that winter Standing Wolf had secured a splendid silver fox. To see the trail of a black fox on his hunting grounds was an event so unusual that he could scarcely believe his sight. In his delight he examined the tracks again, lest he might have been deceived. Yes, there were the round footprints of the black fox. Well he knew that its tread makes a print more rounded in outline than that of any other fox. Next in roundness comes the footprint of the silver fox; then that of the cross fox; that of the red fox being the most elongated of all.

Cautiously rising, Standing Wolf charged his gun, and, leaving his sled behind, followed the trail of Kus-ke-tie Ina-ca-sis. There was only one more trap to examine, and the trail ran toward it. The wind was in his favour. As he moved forward, he imitated the cry of a mouse, and occasionally broke into a gentle chant; for, like all his brethren, he believed that he could in that way charm a fox. All the while he was on the alert for the slightest glimpse of any moving thing. When he had covered

about a quarter of a mile of winding trail, he found that the track circled to the left. Looking ahead, he discovered another and a smaller circle running in the same direction. Knowing that his trap lay just beyond, he went on with greater care. As he peeped round a clump of trees, he saw Kus-ke-tie Ina-ca-sis huddled there. The next instant the fox saw him too. In a frantic effort at escape it leaped into the air, but was thrown by the clanking chain violently upon its back. On the snow, within the chain's length, was recorded the story of its desperate and vain struggle for freedom.

Standing Wolf, setting his gun aside, approached slowly with a stick in his hand, and in kindly tones addressed the trembling animal. "Good day, my little brother. I am sorry, but I need your beautiful coat; so I must kill you."

He stunned the fox by a blow on the snout, and then gently pressed the toe of his moccasined foot over the creature's heart, until it stopped beating. In this manner he killed all the foxes he caught in traps, for the slightest blow upon the body would mark the skin.

Opening the jaws of the trap, he laid the fox upon the snow, and stood gazing at it with supreme satisfaction. It was the most beautiful black fox that he had ever seen. It was a perfect specimen. Its entire coat, both inner and outer, was of the deepest blue black, except for a tiny spot of white upon the breast, and a few white hairs at the tip of its magnificent brush. A bushy collar surrounded its neck. Its fore legs were covered down to the feet with silky, wavy fur that suggested heavily fringed leggings. The black fox, though not so beautiful as the silver fox, is much rarer. It commands a first price of

anywhere from one hundred to one thousand dollars, and is sometimes sold at retail for from two to three thousand dollars. But, notwithstanding its great value, it is considered to be of ill omen. Misfortune, to Indian belief, accompanies the wealth it brings.

Though Standing Wolf felt elated over his astonishing luck, he had already begun to fear the evil that must surely follow. There he stood with gloating eyes fixed upon the lifeless object at his feet, yet hesitating to carry off his prize. A faint rumble as of distant thunder fell upon his ears, and a moment later a sound as if made by the waving of whips and the swishing of silken garments. A vague sense of awe took possession of him. Looking up, he beheld the broad expanse of the heavens afire with vast arcs of moving figures arrayed in garments of light. In the unaccustomed brilliance of the northern lights he recognised another omen of ill. To have taken the life of Kus-ke-tie Ina-ca-sis while the Dance of the Dead Men was in progress must add to the evil already in store for him.



The Halfbreed struck wildly at the Indian.

Drawn by Arthur Heming.