

IN THE ACADIAN LAND.

By ELLA J. HUNTER.

In the olden days there were no grassy meadows in Acadia. Great forests of hemlock, spruce and pine covered the land. The rugged mountains were not yet shorn of their strength and made to yield up their hidden stores of mineral wealth. The rivers and lakes were teeming with salmon, while gay, speckled trout found their homes in the countless brooks, whose babbling was the music of the Acadian wood. By day the birds' notes joined the forest song; by night, there was only the rush and murmur of the water over the slippery pebbles, or the hoot of the great white owl to break the dusky silence.

The Micmacs roamed through this wide world, happy in the pursuit of deer. Here and there, log huts in a tiny clearing betokened a settlement of venturesome French or English folk. Sometimes the palisade enclosed nothing but a heap of ashes, dyed crimson perhaps with blood, telling but too plainly a tale of Indian cruelty and revenge. Such attacks as these were seldom unprovoked, and ere we rebuke our aboriginal friends, we should remember our indebtedness to them for the simple hospitality and lofty courtesy with which they treated our first settlers, until, following the example set them, they, too, resorted to deceit and treachery.

It was the night of the 24th of December. The ground was thickly covered with snow. The wind howled through the forest, making the stout branches creak and groan. The ravens and crows were half numbed with the piercing cold. The little white rabbits skipped over the snowy waste as if their one hope of salvation lay in constant motion. The squirrel cracked the hazel nuts so thriftily laid by in autumn, and viewed the outside world with the snug indifference of a landed proprietor.

At the little English settlement at Rossignol the men heaped the yule-logs on the blazing hearth, and sweet memories of the distant motherland came to the hearts of the chill creatures who shivered even in the ruddy glow. The settlers had gathered from the outlying farms to spend the morrow together. For them, no cheery church bells would ring the joyful news of Christ's birth; instead, there might be the war-whoop of the Indians—another night-fall and their homes might be desolate.

The firelight falls on the sad face of a woman, as she turns from the hearth to peer out through the gloom of the thick-growing trees. A shadow falls on the face of the man at her side as he watches her lovingly.

"It is cold for our boy to-night, Mark," she whispers.

At their feet, half sat, half reclined, an Indian boy. From his lowly place he scanned the faces of the group, even when with stolid indifference to his surroundings his eyes seemed bent on the fire. At the woman's murmur, he lifted his scarred emaciated face.

"He will again come," he said simply. "Your Spirit will bring him again to her who cares for the sick."

The woman seemed not hear him. "They might beat my boy, Mark, my own little baby-boy. The wind will chill him to-night, for the woods are so cold."

The lad's eyes were still fixed on her. "Whitehands," he said, softly, "the Spirit will again bring your papoose."

This time Martha heard. Mark's face was averted, but great tears welled down his bronzed cheeks as he drew the woman closer to his side. Somewhere, out in the great forest-world, their babe might be straying. It was thought that the Indians had found him in the wood beyond the clearing. When last seen he had been stretching his tiny height to peer into the Red-man's soup pot. This was the hollowed butt of a beech tree. In it, according to Indian custom, the forest soup had often been made. The bones or stock had been thrown in the great hollow, two or three buckets of water added, and the whole brought to a boil by dropping in red-hot stones. It was a favorite haunt of the settlers' children, and when, alarmed by an Indian hunting call, they had fled within the palisade, no one had thought of little Mark.

Martha refused to be comforted. The baby-boy was all she had. Her mind, even, seemed slightly affected, for though her hands were ever full of loving work for others, her thoughts were with the little wanderer. The older Mark was heartsore. He seemed to have lost both wife and child.

The deer-skin wigwams of the Micmacs swayed in the night wind. The Indians alone were indifferent to wind or weather; rain, snow, or sunshine they regarded alike with equanimity. There was no great beauty for them in that vast shadowy forest, half revealed by the crescent moon. The chief, Owmatiga, pointed towards the distant fort and shook his head ominously. The faces of his braves were dark and grim, their gestures stern and forbidding. Still pointing towards the ascending column of smoke, he half indicated, half spoke his intentions.

To steal into the fort at midnight, to burn the log houses, to kill or, perhaps, torture the settlers, to carry off the children.

Some of the savages frowned at this. Their anger was aroused at those white men who had so treacherously stolen young Pine-tree, their chief's son. A spy had brought the report that the lad had wasted away to a skeleton, and was dying.

The hunter's moon was full on the night they lost him. He was wearied with the chase, for the red deer were plentiful, and, in pursuit, he had

strayed far from his fellow-hunters. The young chief had been flushed with success. The rich blood had shone warmly through his dark skin. His hunting cry was the most piercing, his bow the truest. He sped before the others with feverish impatience, and he did not return. It was only through the spy that they knew he still lived.

Of a surely there should be no mercy shown here. Even the little children must die!

Owmatiga listened impassively to their remonstrances. Throwing back a skin of his wigwam, he pointed inside. On a bear skin, thrown over fresh fir boughs, lay a sixteen-haired boy, clad in Indian fashion. His face was rosy and smiling. His brown pudgy hands were clasped around a tiny bow. The arrows, vermilion-tinted, were at his side. Close at his feet lay the chief's dog, growling impatiently at the intruders.

"No," said Owmatiga, gravely. "We may bring him playmates, but we will not kill." The dark faces softened at the sight of the child. They had found him two months ago, the very day the young chief had been lost, asleep in an old camping-ground. His blue eyes had widened with the wonder of childhood, as he awakened, to find their dusky forms around him. While they considered what to do with their prize, he crept to Owmatiga, laid his head confidently against the chief's yellow moccasin, and straightway journeyed to the land of dreams.

The silver moon rose higher, shining in faint glory through the pine needles, and lighting up the tortuous forest paths, as the Micmacs stole silently under the trees. The wind had completely died. Such a still, white night. Only a faint crunch, perhaps, as the crust yielded to the snow-shoe, or the crackle of a sparkling icicle, brushed from some low bush.

A thin column of smoke still rose from within the palisade. Mark and Martha still sat before the burning embers, while the Indian lad roved about like a troubled spirit. Martha's whistful eyes were closed in sleep, and her head had found a tender pillow on Mark's breast, though his deep breathing betrayed that he, too, was lost to consciousness. The embers gleamed fitfully on the rough walls, plastered with mud and moss, on the downcast heads of the sleepers, on the scarred face of the Indian.

Mark, what was that?

Only the owl's hoot, breaking the night watch.

Again, yet again, the call! Surely the owls of the whole forest must be gathering about the fort.

The lad threw his head back, sniffing the air curiously. At the second call he drew aside the curtain and peeped furtively out of the opening that served for a window.

There, in the white moonlight, stood a savage, his tomahawk glistening in his hand. Behind each tree, beyond the clearing, lurked a foe. Over the crisp snow they glided stealthily to the chief, who now and then uttered the owl cry, in such perfect mockery, that the white rabbit scurried back to his hole to avoid this keen-eyed foe.

Not a sound within the fort. A whispered parley among the Indians—surely now the fatal war-cry would rouse the helpless sleepers to captivity, torture or death.

Pine-tree's face kindles with an almost savage joy as he glides to the door and noiselessly lets down the bars. The cold air stirs for a moment the dull fire, and Martha murmurs in her dream, "It is cold for my baby-boy, so cold."

The great door closes silently. Pine-tree bounds over the crackling snow to the enemy. Oh! the deafening sound that rises—the Indian war-whoop strangely mingled with cries of affectionate welcome. On they dash towards the fort. Frickest of all is Pine-tree, who tears himself from his father's embrace to lead the way. He has gained the fort door! Will they enter and slay? The Indian blood is up, thrilling in every vein with strong animal emotion. Pine-tree turns to the savages who crowd about him. Is he treacherously telling them the weakness of the little garrison? Listen, the war cry is hushed as the lad speaks.

Him they found cold they clothed. When the hunger came, free was their hand to give. When the scourge of the Red-man would have aisin, gentle hands and prayers to the Spirit did cure. Then, with Indian impetuosity, out in the bitter cold, with the star-crowned sky bending down in silent benediction, he told the old story of the birthday of the King.

Inside all was confusion. There was no attempt at defence. Escape was equally impossible. But what meant this lull after the opening war-whoop? Were the savages already settling the place on fire? Were the settlers to be roasted alive on their own hearthstone?

Martha still sat by the fireplace. She seemed not to heed the tumult or the frightened faces about her. The door swung slowly open. The women shrieked as the Indians filled the room. Pine-tree knelt at Martha's feet as the braves stood about, gazing at her with almost reverential awe. Then, at his signal, they quietly withdrew. Owmatiga remained an instant to caress the white hand, and then father and son set out together for their own encampment.

On the way Pine-tree told his story, how, after straying in the chase, a dizzy blindness had overtaken him, and he had fallen to the ground. How long he lay there he did not know, but, at last, Mark had found him half insensible, smitten with the small-pox, so fatal to his race. He had aise much to tell of his patient nurse, and her many midnight watches while his delirium raged, nor did he forget the wonderful story of the God-man, who still lived to hear the prayers of His people. The stolid look had vanished from both faces, and, when the tale was again repeated around the camp

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