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An Indian Legend.

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May 1983

Queens University at Kingston

*My Dear Friend
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to print the same*

AN INDIAN LEGEND.

SCENE I.

TO a point on Mackinaw's fair isle
There clings a tale of deadly guile:
Of valor and heroic trial:
A tragedy of Indian maid:
The part an Indian hero played:
The plot an Indian fiend laid.

Sheer was the steep, full ten score feet:
Its woody crown a quiet retreat.
Where doves could coo and lovers meet.
And rough and craggy was the steep:
No climber could his footing keep:
And there the blast was wont to sweep
Too fierce for ivy vine to creep.
And at its base the wear of wave
Had eaten out a treacherous cave
To which full many legends clave.
On either side this tower hoar
(Oldest in geologic lore)
Rose up more easily the shore
With trees and brushwood covered o'er.
And through the clumps of beech or oak
From wigwams slowly curled the smoke:
There dwelt the high-cheeked Indian folk.
And few the leaves the woods had lost:
And few the tints from nipping frost:
And few the flocks that yet had crost
The early Autumn's golden sky
With outstretched neck and plaintive cry.
The nuts were out, and squirrels shy
Were gathering their stores.

And high

The secret spot where two had met:
Where two had watched the red sun set,
That filled them with a strange regret.

They watched the ling'ring day expire
 And 'yon thin cloud 'rest of its fire:
 They watched the twilight wane,
 And with a sense of stifed pain
 Saw hill-slopes sinking into gloom,
 And night her silent sway resume.
 And nature, with their feelings blent,
 Awoke a dread presentiment.

He rose, and going to the verge
 Where oft he'd viewed the foamy surge,
 He thought he saw a skiff emerge
 And then shoot quickly back as if
 To hide behind a petty cliff.

"And whose can be that stealthy skiff?
 Can that be scout sent here to gauge
 Our strength, ere with us they engage?
 And yet what spy would risk the rage
 If he were caught— or on so small
 An island hope that he could crawl
 And yet evade the eye of all?

No spy would show so mad a zest."

She saw his gaze, as if possessed
 Of some suspicion, and prest
 His hand in hers, and tried to find
 What sudden cause disturbed his mind.
 He said his fear was undefined;
 'Twas but a shadow he had caught,
 And in his troubled mood of thought
 Fancied a man.

He soon forgot

The darting skiff: for now a plot
 Was shaping in a glowing dream:
 He strove to weave a subtle scheme
 And snare the foe, and leave a theme
 For Indian song. He burned to earn
 A name in lore, and then return
 And wed the maid. All ease he'd spurn,
 And even love his heart was stern
 To give a secondary place,
 Till crushed the league that dared menace
 His lusted and traditioned race.

The thought of her would animate
 His toils, and flame anew his hate
 When low, and even despair elate.
 And then beyond the thrill of conquest
 He pictured years of well-won rest,
 With tribal praise and honor blest.
 And absently he stood while rapt
 In vision—the enemy entrapped—
 A life that shone in war, and capt
 With conjugal delight—thus mapped
 He out his life.

And then he peered
 Where that strange skiff had disappeared,
 And showed that while he dreamt he feared.
 Thus on the rock they stood, endeared.

SCENE II.

THE braves had heard the council-call;
 The braves had gathered, plumed and tall.
 And one by one did they extol
 Their ancient heroes, until drunk
 With pride. And yet the fiercest shrunk
 From plans. Though bold of speech, yet sunk
 Their spirits when they spoke of fray.
 The chiefs, whose heads were touched with grey,
 Who bore the scars of many a hard fought day,
 Now felt an ill-concealed dismay.
 They had a wisdom on their brows
 And force of speech that quick could rouse
 Reluctant warriors to espouse
 A cause. But now resources failed
 And now their wonted courage quailed.
 There fell a silence deep and tense
 That showed their minds were in suspense.
 Then rose a tall and well-limbed youth
 With look of sway and gesture couth,
 And with the candid air of truth.
 Though yet a youth, he kept a poise
 Of mind unbiassed by the noise
 Of raving factions: strong to plead:
 Slow to risk, yet last to recede:

The first to shoulder all the toil
 Of war, and last to claim the spoil:
 A mind inured to bloody broil:
 A mind so clear no rage could mar:
 So resolute no cause could bar:
 Yet more at home in peace than war.

He rose as with a weight of state
 Upon him, but modest and sedate,
 Beseeming one unraveling fate.
 All showy tricks his speech disdained;
 His was an argument maintained,
 An easy fluency that chained
 The ear, and e'en the vet'rans deigned
 To weigh his words.

With suavest voice
 He urged them to heroic choice;
 He warned them that the foe would overwhelm
 A yielding tribe in their own realm:
 And as he scathed a vile repose,
 And sketched with taunt their vassal woes,
 Or showed how much a hero owes
 A line of sires—they took their bows:
 And scarce he ceased when rose the group:
 When rang the echoing war-whoop:
 When thrilled the cravens prone to droop:
 When mad with ire they burned to swoop
 Upon their foes.

They danced. Around the fire

Then did the youth retire.
 His tread showed sense of empire;
 His mien revealed a noble breed:
 His voice had roused to daring deed.

But ah! few knew how deep did bleed
 His heart when urging on to strife.
 It woke a sorrow deep as life.
 Save here and there a gentle quiver
 Of voice—like ripple on a river
 That bosoms deep a barrier rock—
 His eloquence betrayed no shock,
 Nor showed that he was inly torn.

He urged the tribe to move next morn:
The morrow was his wedding day.

With agony he went away.

He left the circling dance and sought
The quiet and sequestered spot
Where waited one whose cheek was hot
But not with tears. Too deep she felt.
An iron fate no prayer could melt.
She waited lone and long, nor knelt
Before the Spirit to quiet her grief:
She felt a dread beyond relief.

Still was the hour, nor stirred a leaf;
It was the peace of Manitou.
The moon was out and full, and threw
Her silv'ry spell o'er all the view.
Far off, the dimly looming hill;
Behind, the forest dark and still
Save for the murmur of a rill:
Below, the lake, a second sky
In its quiet depth: and the shrill cry
Of hawk that winged and whirred near by.
The sylvan bower was on a bluff
Whose edge dropt sheer down—enough
To turn the head—two hundred feet
Where fretted cliff and water meet.
And there—her hand in his—they viewed
The enchanting scene: the solitude
With sense of gloom so weird imbued:
The lofty pines in dreamy mood.
I know not why their spirits fell,
Why that unrest they could not quell,
As if they heard a muffled knell—
As if they felt it was farewell!

SCENE III.

A SPY had landed on the isle
Unnoted by but one; and with guile
Had crept behind a rugged pile
Of rocks, and from this safe retreat
Had heard the call for braves to meet
Around the blaze: had seen them greet

With ominous looks, as if apprized
 Of ill. Their fear was thin disguised,
 Their hardihood was paralyzed.
 He watched the group around the fire,
 He saw their fading hopes expire,
 He saw them shirk the problem dire.
 And then he saw a hero rise,
 And with an honest tone that tries
 No showy art of speech, surprise
 The group. With mind of grasp and scope
 He viewed the field and woke new hope.
 He rallied all their force to cope
 With the exigency. *He* would not swerve,
 Though danger loom, when called to serve:
 The threat of foe but whet his nerve;
 He spoke and moulded minds.

The fiend

From broken tones their project gleaned,
 Exulting that he found where leaned
 The tribal confidence: and screened
 By bush and mound he tracked his victim.
 Anon he lost him 'long the dim
 And tortuous path: anon with grim
 And savage glee got glimpse of him:
 And with rare eye and coolness gifted,
 Had oft his bow at pauses lifted
 For aim, when his victim shifted.
 No matter: he could bide his time,
 And accomplish the splendid crime.
 To highest office he would climb
 In his own tribe, if he but thwart
 The foes' designs with crafty art.

Now see him pause, or stoop, or dart
 From tree to tree, from knoll to knoll,
 Watching his victim's devious stroll.
 Had no boughs creaked to show he stole
 With feline tread? Had no loose stone
 Rolled down the bank? Had no bird flown
 In fright from tufted nest? Nor cone
 Been trod on? Had no branch whipt the air?
 He prowled with more than wonted care,

Nor did a slip suggest a snare.
 His gathered brows hid half the glare
 And gleam of his dark eyes.

He crept

Along a mossy ledge, or leapt
 Across a chasm, and ever kept
 An eye unerring on his prey.
 He scarcely breathed lest it betray
 His presence on that winding way.

The hero reached the sylvan spot,
 And she looked up and quickly caught
 The care with which his brow was fraught,
 And yet the cause she dared not ask.
 He plumed him on his power to feign
 An air and tone of ease, and mask
 With seeming serenity a task
 That worried his burdened brain.
 No moan gave voice to mastered pain:
 Under his calm, deep care did lurk;
 No ease could lure him on to shirk
 A peril or unrequited work.
 Firmest when others' courage shook:
 The taunt of pride he would not brook.
 But ah! how meet that searching look
 How feign a mind at ease! How chase
 Away the care that left its trace
 Or every feature of his face
 And took the spring from out his pace!
 He knew that it was vain to hide
 From her who was to be his bride—
 Another morrow they must bide.
 They bowed their heads yet neither sighed.
 Somehow a vague prophetic pain
 Was haunting them, that not again
 Would they commune when evenings wane.
 Deep in their fear there lay a stain—
 A stain of blood.

Their heads were bowed,
 Though ne'er before his mind had cowed,
 He felt a glooming fate enshroud.

It was an agonizing hour;
 They felt the burning passion-power:
 They felt a dark'ning future lower.
 Out on the edge he went and stood,
 And calmer grew his fortitude.
 He felt the quiet solitude:
 He saw the grassy bank bedewed;
 The faintly spangled lake serene:
 Along the shore the pebbles clean
 And white in water crystalline:
 The shadow's shape; the misty sheen
 That lay on all: the deep forest:—
 With languid lull was all opprest.
 The moon was creeping toward the west,
 And full and cold it shone till dimmed,
 Then hid behind a cloud it rimmed
 With silver frost.

“The moon has past
 Behind the cloud, and in me cast:
 A shadow and a sense of gloom;
 Perhaps the strife shall prove my tomb:
 But why should melancholy steal
 My peace—”

An arrow made him reel.
 Unerring was the fiend's art,
 The arrow flew and pierced the heart.
 He turned about revenge to wreak,
 But fell: and then with one wild shriek
 And ere a second shaft was sped,
 She flung her from the fated peak.
 And while the startled echoes rung
 Among the rocks, the scout still clung
 To the covert: then wary crept
 Out on the edge, with stains of red
 Yet warm: but not a sound except
 The scream of hawk: 'twas sure they slept!
 And thus their plighted spirits fled,
 And thus their bitter fates were wed,
 And this their darkly tragedy unsung!

J. C. S.

February, 1889.