Owindia

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OWINDIA:
A TRUE TALE OF THE MACKENZIE RIVER INDIANS,
NORTH−WEST AMERICA.

THE STORY OF OWINDIA.

A pretty open spot on the bank of the Great Mackenzie River was the place where Owindia first saw light. One of the universal pine forests formed the back ground, while low shrubs and willows, with a pleasant, green carpet of mossy grass, were the immediate surroundings of the camp.

The banks of the Mackenzie often rise to a height of sixty feet above the river. This was the case in the spot where Michel the Hunter had pitched his tent, or “lodge” as it is called. A number of other Indians were camped near, led thither by the fish which is so abundant in our Northern rivers, and which proves a seldom failing resource when the moose or reindeer go off their usual track. The woods also skirting the river furnish large supplies of rabbits, which even the Indian children are taught to snare. Beavers too are most numerous in this district, and are excellent food, while their furs are an important article of trade with the Hudson Bay Company; bringing to the poor Indian his much prized luxury of tea or tobacco, a warm blanket or ammunition. As the Spring comes on the women of the camps will be busy making “sirop” from the birch trees, and dressing the skins of moose or deer which their husbands have killed in the chase. There are also the canoes to be made or repaired for use whenever the eight months' fetters of ice shall give way.

Thus we see the Indian camps offer a pleasant spectacle of a contented and busy people; and if they lack the refinement and luxuries of more civilized communities, they have at all events this advantage,—they have never learnt to need them.

Michel, the Indian, was a well−skilled, practised hunter. Given a windy day, a good depth of snow, and one or two moose tracks on its fair surface, and there was not much chance of the noble beast's escape from Michel's swift tread and steady aim. Such is the excitement of moose−hunting; and such the intense acuteness of the moose−deer's sense of smell and hearing, that an Indian hunter will often strip himself of every bit of clothing, and creep stealthily along on his snow−shoes, lest by the slightest sound he should betray his presence, and allow his prey to escape. And Michel was as skilled a trapper as he was hunter; from the plump little musk−rat which he caught by the river brink to the valuable marten, sable, beaver, otter, skunk, &c., &c., he knew the ways and habits of each one; he would set his steel trap with as true an intuition as if he had received notice of the coming of his prey. Many a silver fox had found himself outdone in sharpness and cunning by Michel; many a lynx or wild cat had fought for dear life, and may−be, made *one* escape from Michel's snares, leaving perhaps one of its paws in token of its fierce struggle, yet had perished after all, being allured in some opposite direction by tempting bait, or irresistible scent laid by the same skilful hand. In bear hunting also Michel was an adept, and he lacked not opportunity for this sport on the banks of the Mackenzie. Many a time would he and, perhaps, one other Indian glide down the river in his swift canoe, and suddenly the keen observant eyes would detect a bear walking stealthily along by the side of the stream! In an instant the two men would exchange signals, paddles would be lifted, and, every movement stilled, the men slowly and 'cannily' would make for shore. In spite of all, however, Bruin has heard them, he slakes his thirst no longer in the swift−running river nor feasts luxuriously on the berries growing by the shore. The woods are close at hand, and with a couple of huge strides he reaches them, and is making with increasing speed for his lair; but Michel is his match for stealth and swiftness, and when one sense fails, another is summoned to his assistance. The eye can no longer see the prey, but the ear can yet detect here and there a broken twig revealing the exact track it has taken. With gun carried low, and treading on in breathless silence and attention, the hunters follow, and soon a shot is heard, succeeded by another, and then a shout which proclaims poor Bruin's death. Alas, that gun which has done such good service for his family, which was purchased by many a month's labour, and carefully chosen with an Indian's observant eye: what misery and crime was it not to effect even in that very spot where now the little group of Indians dwelt happy and peaceful, little dreaming of the deed of violence which would soon drive them panic−stricken from their homes!

A very marked feature in the character of the Indian is jealousy. How far the white man may be answerable, if not for the first impulse of this, at all events for its development, it were perhaps better not to inquire. The schoolboy is often first taught jealousy by the undisguised partiality for his more attractive or highly gifted companion, evinced by his teachers; the Indians are at present in most respects but children, and they are keenly

sensitive to the treatment they receive from those, who, in spite of many benefits bestowed, they cannot but look upon as invaders of their soil, and intruders upon some of their prerogatives. In our Mission work we find this passion of jealousy often coming into play. It is most difficult to persuade the parents to trust us with their children, not because they doubt our care of them, but for fear of their children's affections being alienated from their own people. It is sometimes hard for the same reason to get the parents to bring their children to Holy Baptism: “You will give my boy another name, and he will not be 'like mine' any more.”

And Michel the Hunter was but an average type of the Indian character; of a fiery, ardent nature, and unschooled affections, he never forgot a wrong done him in early youth by a white man. His sweetheart was taken from him, cruelly, heartlessly, mercilessly, during his absence, without note or sign or warning, while he was working with all energy to make a home for the little black−eyed maiden, who had promised to be his bride. If Michel could but once have seen the betrayer to have given vent to his feelings of scorn, rage, and indignation! To have asked him, as he longed to ask him, if this was his Christian faith, his boasted white man's creed! To have asked if in those thousand miles he had traversed to reach the red man's home, there were no girls suited to his mind, save only the one betrothed to Indian Michel! He would have asked, too, if it were not enough to invade his country, build houses, plant his barley and potatoes, and lay claim to his moose−deer and bear, his furs and peltries, but he must needs touch, with profane hands, his home treasures, and meddle with that which “even an Indian” holds sacred? It might, perchance, have been better for Michel if he could have spoken out and unburdened himself of his deep sense of wrong and injury, which from henceforth lay like a hot iron in his heart. The Italian proverb says, “It is better to swear than to brood;” and whether this be true or not, it is certain that having to swallow his resentment, and endure his agony in silence, embittered Michel's spirit, and made him the jealous, sensitive, taciturn man he afterwards became. And among many other consequences of his youth's tragedy was an unconquerable horror of the white man; not but that, after a time, he would work for a white man, and trade with him, so long as he need not look upon him. He would send even his wife (for Michel took unto him a wife after some years) to Fort Simpson with his furs to trade, rather than trust himself in the neighbourhood of the “Tene Manula” (white man). Once, it was said, that Michel had even so far overcome his repugnance as to pitch his camp in the neighbourhood of Fort Simpson. He was a husband and a father then, and there were a number of Indians encamped in the same locality. It might be hoped that under these circumstances the past would be forgotten, and that the man would bury his resentment, and extend a friendly hand to those, not a few, among the white men who wished him well; but jealousy is the “rage of a man.” In the middle of the night Michel roused his wife and little ones, declaring that the white man was coming to do them some mischief. Bearing his canoe upon his head he soon launched it off, and in his mad haste to be away he even left a number of his chattels behind.

Only once more did Michel appear at the Fort, and that on a memorable occasion which neither he nor any who then beheld him will be likely to forget.

It was on a dark, cold night in the winter of 1880, that a dog−sleigh, laden with furs for the Company, appeared at Fort Simpson, and having discharged his load at the fur store, the sleigh−driver, who was none other than Accomba, the wife of Indian Michel, proceeded to the small “Indian house,” as it is called, to spend the rest of the night among her own people. She was a pleasing−looking young woman, with bright expressive eyes, and a rather melancholy cast of countenance. She was completely enveloped in a large green blanket, from the folds of which peeped over her shoulder an infant of a few months old, warm and comfortable in its moss−bag. A blessed institution is that of the moss−bag to the Indian infant; and scarcely less so to the mother herself. Yet, indeed, it requires no small amount of patience, skill, and labour before this Northern luxury can be made ready for its tiny occupant. Through a good part of the long winter nights has the mother worked at the fine bead−work which must adorn the whole front of the moss−bag. By a strange intuitive skill she has traced the flowers and leaves and delicate little tendrils, the whole presenting a marvellously artistic appearance, both in form and in well−combined colours. Then must the moss be fetched to completely line the bag, and to form both bed and wrapping for the little one. For miles into the woods will the Indian women hike to pick the soft moss which is only to be met with in certain localities. They will hang it out on bush and shrub to dry for weeks before it is wanted, and then trudge back again to bring it home, in cloths or blankets swung on their often already−burdened shoulders. Then comes the picking and cleaning process, and thawing the now frozen moss before their camp fires. Every leaf and twig must be removed, that nothing may hurt the little baby limbs. And now all is prepared;

the sweet downy substance is spread out as pillow for the baby head, and both couch and covering for the rest of the body. Then the bag is laced up tight, making its small tenant as warm and cozy as possible; only the little face appears—the bonnie, saucy Indian baby face, singularly fair for the first few months of life, with the black bead−like eyes, and soft silken hair, thick even in babyhood.

Accomba threw off her blanket, and swinging round her baby, she seated herself on the floor by the side of the roaring fire, on which the friendly Indians heaped billet after billet of fine dry wood, till the whole room was lighted up by the bright and cheerful blaze. It was not long before a number of other Indians entered,—most unceremoniously, as Indians are wont to do, and seated themselves in all parts of the room, for they had heard the sound of sleigh bells, and were at once curious to know the business of the new arrival. A universal hand−shaking took place, for all were friendly, being mostly of the same tribe, and more or less closely all connected. Pipes were then lighted alike by men and women, and a kettle of tea was soon singing on the fire. Accomba draws out from the recesses of her dog sleigh one or two huge ribs of dried meat, black and unsavoury to look at, but forming very good food for all that.

This is portioned out among the assembled company; a bladder of grease is added, and seized with avidity by one of the party; a portion of this was then melted down and eaten with the dried meat; while the steaming tea, sipped out of small tin cups, and taken without sugar or milk, was the “loving cup” of that dark−visaged company. And far into the morning hours they sat sipping their favourite beverage, and discussing the last tidings from the woods. Every item of news is interesting, whether from hunter's camp, or trapper's wigwam. There are births, marriages, and deaths, to be pondered over and commented upon; the Indian has his chief, to whom he owes deference and vows allegiance; he has his party badge, both in religion and politics; what wonder then that even the long winter night of the North, seemed far too short for all the important knotty points which had to be discussed and settled!

“You have had good times at the little Lake,” said Peter, a brother of Michel's, who was deliberately chewing a piece of dried meat held tight between his teeth, while with his pocketknife he severed its connection with the piece in his hand, to the imminent peril of his nose.

“I wish I were a freedman: I should soon be off to the Lake myself! I am sick of working for the Company. I did not mind it when they set me to haul meat from the hunters, or to trap furs for them, but now they make me saw wood, or help the blacksmith at his dirty forge: what has a 'Tene Jua' to do with such things as these?”

“And I am sick of starving!” said another. “This is the third winter that *something* has failed us,—first the rabbits, then the fish ran short; and now we hear that the deer are gone into a new track, and there is not a sign of one for ten miles round the Fort. And the meat is so low” added the last speaker, “that the 'big Master' says he has but fifty pounds of dried meat in the store, and if Indians don't come in by Sunday, we are to be sent off to hunt for ourselves and the wives and children are to go to Little Lake where they may live on fish.”

“We have plenty of fish, it is true,” said Accomba; “we dried a good number last Fall, besides having one net in the lake all the winter; but I would not leave the Company, Peter, if I were you,—you are better off here, man, in spite of your 'starving times!' You *do* get your game every day, come what may, and a taste of flour every week, and a little barley and potatoes. I call that living like a 'big master.'“

“I had rather be a free man and hunt for myself,” put in another speaker; “the meat does not taste half so good when another hand than your own has killed it; and as for flour and barley and potatoes, well, our forefathers got on well enough without them before the white man came into our country, I suppose we should learn to do without them again? For my part, I like a roe cake as well as any white man's bread.”

“But the times are harder than they used to be for the Tene Jua (Indian men) in the woods,” said Accomba with a sigh; “the deer and the moose go off the track more than they used to do; it is only at Fort Rae, on the Big Lake, that meat never seems to fail; for us poor Mackenzie River people there is hardly a winter that we are far from starvation.”

“But you can always pick up something at the Forts:” replied a former speaker; “the masters are not such bad men if we are really starving, and then there is the Mission: we are not often turned away from the Mission without a taste of something.”

“All very good for you,” said Michel's wife; “who like the white man and know how to take him, but my man will have nothing to say to him. The very sight of a pale face makes him feel bad, and sends him into one of his fits of rage and madness. Oh, it has been dreadful, dreadful,” continued the poor woman, while her voice melted

into a truly Indian wail, “for my children I kept alive, or else I would have thrown myself into the river many a time last year.”

“Bah,” said Peter, who being the brother of Michel, would, with true Indian pertinacity, take part with him whatever were his offences; and, moreover, looking with his native instinct upon woman as the “creature" of society, whose duty it was to endure uncomplaining, whatever her masters laid upon her. “Bah; you women are always grumbling and bewailing yourselves; for my part, if I have to starve a little, Kulu (the meat) is all the sweeter when it comes. I suppose Michel has killed enough to give you many a merry night, seated round the camp fire with some good fat ribs or a moose nose, and a fine kettle of tea; then you wrap yourself in your blanket, or light your pipe and feel like a 'big master.'“

Peter's picture of comfort and enjoyment pleased the Indians, and they laughed heartily and testified their approval, all but poor Accomba. She hung her head, and sadly fondled the baby at her breast. “You may laugh, boys,” she said at length, “and you know what starving is as well as I do, though you are pretty well off now; it is not for myself I speak, I can bear that kind of thing as well as other women, but it comes hard for the children. Before Se Tene, my man, killed his last moose, we were starving for nearly two moons; a little dried fish and a rat or two, and now and then a rabbit, was we got: even the fish failed for some time, and there was hardly a duck or partridge to be seen. We had to eat two of the dogs at last, but, poor things, they had little flesh on their bones.”

“Eh! eh! e—h!” exclaimed the Indians, who however undemonstrative under ordinary circumstances, can be full of sympathy where they can realize the affecting points of a story.

“And the children,” asked one of the party, “I suppose the neighbours helped you a little with them?”

“One of my cousins took little Tetsi for a while,” replied the poor woman, “and did what she could for him, but they were all short of game as we were, only their men went off after the deer, and plenty, of them got to the lakes for duck; but Michel,—”

“Well, what did he do? I suppose he was off with his gun the first of any of them?” said Peter. “I'll venture there shall not be a moose or deer within twenty miles, but Michel the Hunter shall smell him out.”

“Yes, he went at last,” sighed Accomba; “but my man has had one of his ugly fits upon him for all the winter; he would not hunt anywhere near the Fort, for fear of meeting a white face; and he vowed I was making friends with them, and bidding them welcome to the camp, and so he was afraid to leave it; and then at last, when I begged him to go and get food for his children, he swore at me and called me a bad name, and took up his gun to shoot me.”

“Oh, I suppose he only said that in sport,” said another of the party; and yet it was plain that Accomba's story had produced a great sensation among her auditors.

“*In sport!*” exclaimed Accomba, now fairly roused to excitement by the apparent incredulity of her listeners; “*In sport*, say you? No, no, Michel knows well what he *says*, though sometimes I think he is hardly responsible for his actions; but look you, boys, my husband vowed to shoot me once, and I stayed his arm and fell on my knees and tried to rouse him to pity; but I will do so no more, and if he threatens me again I will let him accomplish his fell purpose, and not a cry or sound shall ever escape my lips. But you, Tetsi,” continued the poor woman, who was now fairly sobbing, “you are his brother, you might speak to him and try to bring him to reason; and if I die, you must take care of my poor children,—promise me that, Tetsi and Antoine, they are your own flesh and blood, do not let them starve. 'Niotsi Cho,' the Great Spirit will give it you back again.”

There was a great silence among the Indians when Accomba had finished speaking. An Indian has great discernment, and not only can soon discover where the pathos of a story lies, but he will read as by intuition how much of it is true or false. Moreover, Michel's character was well known among them all, and his eccentricities had often excited their wonder and sometimes their censure. The poor woman's story appealed to each one of them: most of all did it appeal to the heart of Sarcelle her brother, who was another occupant of the room that evening.

“It is shocking, it is monstrous.” exclaimed he at full length. “My sister, you shall come with me. I will work for you, I will hunt for you and your children. Michel shall not threaten you again, he is a 'Nakani' man; he does not know what he says or what he does, he is a bad 'Nakani.'“

“I think some one has made medicine on him,” said another; “he is possessed, and will get worse till the spell is off him.”

This medicine making among the Northern Indians is one of the most firmly rooted of all their superstitions.

The term is by no means well chosen or descriptive of the strange ungodly rite; it is in reality a charm or spell which one man is supposed to lay upon another. It is employed for various purposes and by different means of operations. You will hear of one man 'making medicine' to ascertain what time the Company's boats may be expected, or when certain sledges of meat may come to the Fort. Another man is sick and the medicine−man is summoned, and a drum is beaten during the night with solemn monotonous 'tum, tum, tum', and certain confidential communications take place between the Doctor and his patient, during which the sick man is supposed to divulge every secret he may possess, and on the perfect sincerity of his revelation must depend his recovery.

The accompaniments of this strange scene vary according to circumstances. In some cases a basin of blood of some animal is made use of; in most instances a knife or dagger plays an important part. I have seen one of these, which, by−the−by, is most difficult to obtain, and can only be seen by special favour. It is made of bone or ivory, beautifully carved and notched at the edges, with various dots or devices upon it, and all, both dots and notches, arranged in groups of sevens! After some hours the spell may be supposed to work, the sick man feels better, the excitement of the medicine−man increases, all looks promising; yet at this moment should a white face enter the house or tent, still more, should he venture to touch either doctor or patient, the spell would be instantly broken, and the whole process must be commenced anew.

The spell has been wrought upon a poor Cree Woman at Ile la C. She is perfectly convinced as to who did her the injury, and also that it was her hands which it was intended should suffer. Accordingly each Spring, for some years past, her hands are rendered powerless by a foul−looking, scaly eruption, which comes over them. Indians have been known to climb an almost inaccessible rock, and stripping themselves of every vestige of clothing, to lie there without food or drink, singing and invoking the wonder−worker until the revelation of some secret root was made known, by which their design for good or evil might be accomplished!

A Cree Indian, a man of sound education, related once the following story:—“I was suffering in the year 18——from great distress of body, and after seeing a doctor and feeling no better, I began to think I must be the victim of some medicine−man. I thought over my adventures of the last year or two, to discover if there were any who had reason to wish me evil. Yes, there was one man, a Swampy Indian. I had quarrelled with him, and then we had had words; and I spoke, well, I spoke bitterly (which I ought not to have done, for he was the injured man) and he vowed to revenge himself upon me. This was some years since, however, and I had never given him a thought since the time of our quarrel, but now I was certain a spell was over me, and he must have wrought it,—I knew of no other enemy, and I was determined to overcome it or die. So I saddled my horse and rode across country for thirty miles till I reached the dwelling of the Swampy. The man was outside, and started when he saw me, which convinced me more than ever that I was on the right scent. I put up my horse and followed my man into the house whither he had retreated; and wasting no time, came to the point at once. Drawing my revolver and pointing it to his heart, 'Villain,' I exclaimed, 'you have made medicine on me: tell me your secret or I shall shoot you dead.' I never saw a more cowed and more wretched−looking being than my man became. I expected at least some resistance to my command; but he offered none; for without attempting to stir or even look me in the face, he smiled a ghastly smile, and muttered, 'It has done its work then—well, I am glad! Look in your horse−saddle, and never provoke me more.' I hesitated for a moment whether to loosen my hold upon the man, and to believe so improbable a story; but on the whole I deemed it better to do so. He had fulfilled his threat of revenge, and had caused me months of suffering in body and mind; he knew me well enough to be sure that I was in earnest when I told him that his life would be forfeited if the spell were not removed. So I released my hold and quitted the house. On cutting open my saddle I discovered that the whole original lining had been removed and replaced by an immense number of baneful roots and herbs, which I burnt on the spot. How this evil deed had been effected I could not even surmise, but so it was, and from that hour I was a different man—my mind recovered its equilibrium, I was no longer affected by pain and distress of body, or haunted by nightly visions. Those who smile at the medicine− man, and are sceptical as to his power, may keep to their own opinions; I believe that the Almighty has imbued many of His creatures, both animate and inanimate, with a subtle power for good or evil, and that it is given to some men to evoke that power and to bring about results which it is impossible for the uninitiated to foresee or to avert!”

But we have wandered too far from Accomba and her sad history. We must now transport the reader to that portion of the shores of the Mackenzie which was described at the opening of our story. The scene indeed should

be laid a few miles lower down the river than that at first described, but the aspect and condition of things is but little altered. A number of camps are there, pitched within some ten, twenty, and thirty yards of each other. The dark brown, smoke−tinted leather tents or lodges, have a certain air of comfort and peacefulness about them, which is in no wise diminished, by the smoke curling up from the aperture at the top, or the voices of children running in and out from the tent door. These are the tents of Mackenzie River Indians, speaking the Slave tongue, and mostly known by name to the Company's officers at the neighbouring forts or trading posts, known also to the Bishop and Clergy at the Mission stations, who have often visited these Indians and held services for them at their camps, or at the little English churches at Fort Simpson, Fort Norman, etc. etc., and those little dark−eyed children are, with but few exceptions, baptized Christians. Many of them have attended the Mission Schools for the few weeks in Spring or Fall, when their parents congregate round the forts; they can con over portions of their Syllabic Prayer−books, and find their place in the little Hymn books, for “O come, all ye faithful,” “Alleluia! sing to Jesus;” and “Glory to thee, my God, this night,” while such anthems as “I will arise,” and others are as familiar to the Slave Indians as to our English children. Yes, it is a Christian community we are looking at; and yet, sad to say, it is in one of those homes that the dark deed was committed which left five little ones motherless, and spread terror and confusion among the whole camp.

It was a lovely morning in May, 1880. The ice upon the Mackenzie River had but lately given way, having broken up with one tremendous crash. Huge blocks were first hurled some distance down the river, then piled up one above another until they reached the summit of the bank fifty or sixty feet high, and being deposited there in huge unsightly masses, were left to thaw away drop by drop, a process which it would take some five or six weeks to accomplish. Some of the men had lately returned from a bear hunt, being, however, disappointed of their prey—a matter of less consideration than usual, for Bruin, being but lately roused from his long winter sleep, was in a less prime condition than he would be a few weeks later. Michel, the hunter, had one of his “ugly fits” upon him;—this was known throughout the camps. The women only shrugged their shoulders, and kept clear of his lodge. The men paid him but little attention, even when he skulked in for awhile after dark to smoke his pipe by their camp fire. But on this morning neither Michel nor his wife had been seen outside their camp; only one or two of the children had turned out at a late hour and looked wistfully about, as if longing for someone to give them food and other attention.

Suddenly, from within the lodge a shot was heard, and a terrible muffled sound, which none heard without a shudder. Then came the shrieks of the terrified children, who ran out of the lodge towards their neighbours. By this time all the Indians were aware that something horrible had occurred in Michel's camp, and from every lodge, far and near, they hurried out with looks of dread and inquiry. The farthest lodge was not more than sixty yards from that of Michel, and the nearest was hardly a dozen yards removed, although a little further back from the edge of the bank. When the first man entered the lodge it could not have been more than a few seconds after the firing of the fatal shot, for Michel was still standing, gun in hand, and his poor wife sighing forth the last few breathings of her sad and troubled life. She had kept her word, and met her death without one cry or expostulation! It might have been heard from far, that groan of horror and dismay which sprung spontaneous from the one first witnessing the ghastly scene, and then from the whole of the assembled Indians.

“Se tue! Se tue!” “My sister, my sister!” cried the women, as one by one they gazed upon the face of the departed; then kneeling down, they took hold of the poor still warm hand, or raised the head to see if life were indeed extinct; then as they found that it was truly so, there arose within that lodge the loud, heart−piercing Indian wail, which, once heard, can never be forgotten. Far, far through the tangled wood it spread, and across the swift river; there is nothing like that wail for pathos, for strange succession of unusual tones, for expression of deep need—of the heart−sorrow of suffering humanity!

In the meantime the chief actor in that sad tragedy had let the instrument of his cruelty fall from his hand; it was immediately seized by one of the Indians and flung into the river. Michel made no resistance to this, albeit even at that moment it might have occurred to him that being deprived of his gun, he was shorn of well nigh his only means of subsistence. He turned to leave his tent, and with a scared, wild look, slowly raised the blanket which hung at its entrance; but he was not suffered to escape so easily: the men of the surrounding camps were gathered close outside, and as with one consent, they laid hold of the miserable culprit and pinned him to the spot; then ensued a fierce Babel of tongues, each one urging his own opinion as to the course of treatment befitting the occasion. The din of these many voices, mingled with the sad wail of the women in the tent, made an uproar and

confusion which it would be hard to describe. It ended, however, by one of the Indians producing a long coil of babiche, and to this another added some pieces of rope, and with these they proceeded to bind their prisoner hand and foot, and then again to bind him to one of the nearest trees. Having succeeded in doing this effectually, but one thought seemed to seize the whole community,—to flee from the spot. But one other duty remained to be performed, and this they now prepared to carry out.

The funeral rites of the North American Indian, it need hardly be remarked, are of the very simplest description; indeed, it is only of late years, and since Christianity has spread among them, that they have been persuaded to adopt the rites and ceremonies of Christian burial. Formerly, in many instances, the body of the deceased would be wrapped in its blanket, and then hoisted up on a wooden stage erected for the purpose; after which the friends of the departed would make off with the utmost speed imaginable. Sometimes even this tribute to a lost friend would not be forthcoming; the Indian has an unspeakable dread of death, and of the dead; from the moment that the heart of his best beloved has ceased to beat, he turns from the lifeless form, nor cares to look upon it again. The new blanket which, perhaps, was only worn a day or two by the departed, will now, with scrupulous care, be wrapped around his dead body; for although he were blanketless himself, no Indian could be persuaded to use that which had once been a dead man's property. Then, it may be, the corpse would be left lying in the leather lodge or tent, which would afterwards be closely fastened up; and it has sometimes devolved upon the Missionaries to spend the night outside, watching the camp and keeping a fire burning in order to ward off dogs or wolves, which would otherwise undoubtedly have broken into the tent and made short work of the lifeless body deserted by all its friends and neighbours and dearest connexions.

In the case of the wife of Michel, however, there arose a feeling among her people in the camp, which appeared to be unanimous, not to leave her poor mangled body deserted in the lodge, but at once to commit it to the earth. Accordingly the women ceased their wailing, there was a call for action, and each one bestirred himself with as much earnestness and self−restraint as possible. Two or three of the men started off to dig the grave (a work of no small labour at that time when, be it remembered, the frost was hardly out of the ground), others gathered round the women who were wrapping the deceased in her blanket, with her shawl and handkerchief, her beaded leggings, and moccasins, which were hunted out, one by one, and put on her with loving, albeit trembling hands. Then the poor lifeless form was lifted out of the tent, and carried a few yards further back from the river, to where the grave was being made ready. Here all was soon prepared; silently, reverently the body was lowered into its shallow resting place; the earth was thrown over it, then a young fir−tree was cut down, shorn of its bark, and driven upright in the ground, and a few streamers of coloured rag or ribbon, furnished by the women, tied on to the top of the pole. The task was ended, and the young mother of twenty−eight years, who awoke that morning in the full bloom of health and vigour, was left to slumber on in that long sleep, which shall be broken only on the morning of the Resurrection!

And now, indeed, there was nothing more to be done, they must flee from that desecrated spot as soon as possible. With one accord, every tent and lodge was taken down, bundles were packed, canoes were lifted into the water, and in less than two hours from the commencement of these operations, the whole work of packing and dislodging was effected, and six good−sized canoes, with three or four smaller ones, were bearing their freight of men, women, and children, to the opposite bank of the river.

In describing the events of that morning but little mention has been made of Michel's children; they were not, however, forgotten. As soon as the first shock of the discovery was over, and the women had a little expended their feelings and emotions in the tears and wail of sorrow, they began to turn their attention to the motherless little ones. And first they gave them food, which would be an Indian's preliminary step under every emergency; then, they folded kind motherly arms around them, and imprinted warm kisses on the terror− stricken faces; and by all such fond endearments they strove to make them forget their sorrow: for an Indian, passive and undemonstrative as he may be under ordinary circumstances, is full of love and tenderest offices of pity when real occasion calls them forth. It was thus, then, that the children were taken and dispersed among the various families in the rapid flight from their recent camping grounds. The canoes had started, and were being paddled at full speed across the river, when suddenly, to the dismay and amazement of every one, the figure of Michel was seen standing by the river brink! Had a spectre at that moment presented itself before them, they could hardly have been more astonished; but the poor man's actions were at all times strange and unaccountable; and that he should have released himself in so short an interval from his bonds, was only consistent with the whole character of the

man who had always proved himself equal to every emergency, and defied any attempt to thwart his designs. The language used by the miserable man on the present occasion was bitter and abusive; it related to his children, who he said were being taken away that they might be delivered to the white man; but his words fell idly upon the ears of the Indians, who only shuddered as they gazed upon his dark visage now distorted with passion; and his whole figure, to which portions of the cords which had bound him were still clinging, presenting the appearance of a man possessed, the veritable Nakani—(wild man of the woods,) in whom the Indians believe, and whom they so greatly dread.

It was not until the Indians had reached the other side of the river, which at that part may be a mile and a quarter wide, that they collected together and became aware that *one of the children was missing!* That this should be so, and that in their terror and haste to depart they had forgotten or overlooked the baby, still a nursling, who must have been crawling about outside the camp during the fatal tragedy of that morning, may seem strange. More strange still, that not one of that party should have thought of going back to seek her. But the female infant occupies an insignificant place among those uncivilized people: the birth of one of them is greeted with but a small fraction of the honours with which a male child would be welcomed.

And into the causes of the death of not a few of these girl−babies it would perhaps be painful to enquire; but many a poor Indian mother will delude herself into the belief that she has done a merciful act when the little infant of a few hours' life is buried deep under the snow, the mother's sin undiscovered, and “my baby saved from starvation.”

And so the poor Indians of our story troubled themselves but little about the missing babe, and there was certainly a bare possibility that the father might come upon it and succour it—for Michel had always been a kind father, that he might possibly find and carry the child to one of the camps not far distant, where it would, for a time at least, be cared for. The camps therefore were pitched in the new camping ground; the men of the party were soon off, laying their fish nets; the women, gathering round their camp fires, renewed their wailing and lamentations; the little ones slept, worn out with fatigue and sorrow, and ere nightfall every sound was stilled. The stars shone out on those few clustered tents,—and on that solitary grave the other side of the river. The Aurora spanned the northern sky, and played with bright and flickering light, now tremulous upon the blue ether, then heaving and expanding, spreading itself out with indescribable grace and beauty. Then it would seem to gather itself together, folding its bright rays as an angel might fold its wings: for a time it is motionless, but this is but the prelude to more wondrous movements. Soon it commences to play anew, sending its flaming streamers in new directions, and now contracting now expanding, filling the whole heavens with glory of an ever−changing hue.

But there is yet another wonder connected with this, which of all the phenomena of Nature, nearest approaches to the supernatural: it has uttered a sound—that beautiful sheaf of many tinted flames! Once, twice, we have heard it, or if it were not *that*, it was an angel's whisper! In that great solitude there is no fear of any other sound intruding to deceive our ear. There, is such deep silence over hill and dale that scarcely a leaf would dare to flutter unperceived, and the ear might start to catch the sighing of a breeze. But this faint sound, given on rare occasions by the Aurora, unlike any sound of earth, yet seems in perfect keeping with the marvellous and spiritual beauty of the phenomena, and but increases and deepens the awe with which it must ever be beheld.

But on this memorable night there was yet another sound, which from time to time broke upon the almost unearthly stillness: this was the cry of an infant, coming from the neighbourhood of Michel's camp. The little one, of whom mention has already been made, had, it seemed, been, forgotten by all, or if once thought of, there was yet no effort made to save it from the doom which, to all appearance, now awaited it,—the Indians comforting themselves with the hope that the father would look after it, and the father supposing, not unnaturally, that all his children were together taken off by their indignant friends and relatives. And so the little one, who had been but a few hours previously nestling in her mother's arms, spent that cold night of early spring unsheltered and alone on the high bank of the river whither she had crawled in the early morning hours. One could fancy its plaintive cry increasing in vehemence as the hours wore on, and cold and exhaustion overcame her, with a sense of weariness and desolation unknown, unfelt, before. There must have been a sad feeling of wonder and perplexity at the unwonted silence which reigned around her, at the absence of all familiar sounds and voices. True, her father's dogs were there, faithful watchers through the night, who had helped to keep the family in food and fuel through the long winter months, hauling the sleighs, laden with moose or deer's meat; or with good−sized fir trees, morning by morning, for their camp fires. Strong, faithful creatures they were, patient and enduring, sharing all

the hardships and privations of the Indian, with a fortitude and devotion to be met with nowhere else. It would have been hard enough to tell when those four watchers of the little one had had their last good meal; the scraps awarded to most dogs seldom could be spared for them,—the very bones, picked bare by the hungry masters, were grudged them, being carefully kept, and broken and melted down for grease (that most necessary ingredient in Northern diet.) Sometimes indeed their famished nature would assert itself, and they would steal something, it might be a rabbit caught in the snare near the camp (a most tempting bait for a hungry dog) or perchance a choice piece of dried fish hung high, yet not quite high enough to miss the spring of “Capri” or “Muskimo;” or a piece of soap lately purchased of the white man, or even a scrap of moose−skin reserved as shoe leather. All helped to assuage the pangs of hunger, yet these indulgences would be dearly purchased by the inevitable cuffs and blows which followed, till the poor brutes, scarred and bleeding, were fain to creep away and hide in some hole, until the imperative call or whistle made fresh claim for their services.

How little do we know for whom we are pleading, when, morning by morning, we beseech our dear Lord to “comfort and succour all them who in this transitory life are in trouble, sorrow, need, sickness, or any other adversity!” And still less able are we to realize the countless answers to our feeble prayers already winging their way to every portion of the inhabited globe; o'er moor and fen, o'er lake and sea and prairie, in the crowded town and in the vast wilderness. Was it in blessed England, where the sun has long past the meridian; while here in the far North−West, there are but the first faint tints of early dawn:—was it in England, or in some far distant isle of the sea, or on some outward bound ship—where the sailor finds time but for a few hurried words of daily prayer—that that heartfelt petition went up, offered in the Blessed Name, which won for the helpless infant on the river−bank the succour brought her?

A small birch−bark canoe was wending its way up the river on the morning following that on which Michel's wife had met her death. It came from Fort Little Rapids, and was proceeding to Fort Simpson, some 500 miles up the rivet. There were three men in the canoe, a Cree, or Swampy Indian, in the service of the Hudson's Bay Company, and two Slaves or Etcha−Ottine of Mackenzie River. They were paddling rapidly, having lately been ashore for breakfast, and being anxious to reach Fort Simpson as soon as possible. La V.'s custom was to take the left bank of the river going up stream; but on this occasion, for no particular reason which he could give, he agreed with his men to take the right side. They had not long past the region of the smoky banks [Footnote: “The region of the smoky banks.” These fires, called “Boucanes” by the Canadians, occur in several parts of the Mackenzie and Athabasca district. In the neighbourhood of Lake la Biche, and also along the miry bank, a number of jets of hot steam find vent through the mud, and make the waters of the river bubble. Above Fort Norman, on the Mackenzie, in several spots the banks give out smoke and occasionally flames. These fires have existed for ages, and are regarded with the greatest awe and superstition by the Indians. A little higher up the river there are hot springs and a small Solfaferra, like the larger one near Naples.], when a sound was heard which caused the three men simultaneously to stop their paddling and listen. It occurred again and yet again, at long intervals; one man pronounced it a dog, but La V. shook his head, and declared it to be the cry of an infant, and that he would put ashore and ascertain if it were not so. Very faint was that cry, and waxing, even as they listened, still more feeble; were it dog or infant, the cry was evidently from one in the very last stage of exhaustion. Soon, as they drew closer to the bank, the fir poles of the lately forsaken camp suggested the probability of the spot from whence the moans proceeded. The men drew to shore, and hauled up the canoe, while La V., whose curiosity was much excited, sprang out and proceeded to climb the bank. On the summit of the bank close to the edge lay four dogs; or rather they had lain there, but they all started up, and looked defiance, as soon as steps were heard approaching their charge. Close within the circle they had formed around her, lay a little bundle of rags, wrapping the now nearly lifeless form of a thirteen months old child. Apparently, the moans which had met the ears of the men in the canoe were her last, for on lifting her up in his arms, La V. could detect no signs of life. For how many hours had she lain there, without food or warmth, excepting that afforded by the dogs, who lay closely round her? But there was no time to speculate. Without a moment's delay the men cut down three or four young fir trees, and proceeded to make a fire; and La V., folding the little one in his “capot”—sat down and tried to bring back life and warmth into her. In a short, time, a kettle was boiling on the fire; tea was made, and, with womanly tenderness, a few drops were administered. After a little time the men had the comfort of seeing a favourable result of their efforts. A little natural warmth returned to the poor body, some action at the heart was perceptible, and the dark eyes opened and sought—the Mother!

That evening the three men and their small burden reached Fort Simpson, where the news of Michel's crime and the dispersion of the Indians was already known. There was no doubt now as to whose the rescued child might be, and it was touching to see how one and another of the Indian mothers came forward and offered to adopt it as her own. Yet it is no light charge for an Indian to undertake to rear a child not her own, at so tender an age; and it is especially hard in a country where milk is not to be procured, and where fish or rabbit soup is the only substitute for an infant's natural food. Minneha tried it, however, for a few weeks. She was cousin to poor Accomba, and spent whole nights in wailing and lamenting, saying, “My sister! my sister! why might I not die instead of you? Oh, my sister, who shall mother your little ones? Who shall work for them? Who shall hunt for them, and bring them the young sayoni skin (sheep skin) from the mountains? Who shall bring them meat when they are hungry—the fine fat ribs, the moose nose, or beaver tail, and the fine bladders of grease, which we cook with the flour from the white man's country? You were proud of your 'tezone' my sister. She had your eyes, dark as the berries of the sassiketoum, and they flashed fire like the aurora of winter nights. Your laugh was pleasant. Oh, my sister! like the waters dancing over the stones, it fell: it was good to listen to your words when we were partners in the days of our childhood. Our mothers dwelt together; they loved each other with sisters' love; they dwelt together among their own people. Etcha−Ottine were they, the finest of all Tinne−Zua (Indian men)! You laughed and sang, my sister, when we played in the woods together; when we cut the birch trees to make sirop in the spring time; when we sewed the rogans of the birch bark, or plaited the quills of the porcupine into belts, and made our father's gun−cases, or our own leather dresses for the Fall. Many a time we went out in the canoe together; we paddled among the islands when the berries were ripe; we spent the night in gathering the sweet ripe fruit—moose−berry and moss−berry, the little eye−berry, and the sassiketoum. In the summer we went to the Forts, and pitched our camps near the white man's house. We sold our furs to the 'big master,' and he gave us blankets and dress pieces, and beads to make us fine leggings; and tobacco, and tea, and shot, and ammunition. Then we went to the Praying man's house, and he kept school for us every day, and made us read in the big books; and told us of Niotsi N Dethe (Great God), and the poor, silly wife who listened to the bad Spirit, and stole the big berry, which God told her not to steal; and of the blessed Saviour, who was so good and came down from Heaven to save us, because He saw we were so helpless; and He loved the poor Indian as well as the white man, and, told the praying men to come and seek after us, and pour water on us, and say good words for us. Those were good days, my sister! Why did they not last? Why did bad Michel come and take you away in his canoe? So many wanted you; they wanted you much, and they would have been kind and good to you. Tene Sla asked the big master for you, and I think he would have got you, but for your mother, who said he was not a good hunter; and Nagaja wanted you, and Jemmy, the Loucheux boy; but your father was dead, and your mother said you must take a man who would hunt for her, and bring her meat; and so bad Michel came and took you away to the Praying man and to Yazete Koa (the church), and you became his wife. For a time he was kind and good to you, my sister, and be loved his children, and was a fine hunter. Many bears did he track in the woods: he had a hunter's eye, and could see them from far, and a hunter's ear to catch the faintest sound of their feet. He would bring you deer's meat, killed by the first shot. No one could say that Michel gave his children meat that had run long, and was heated and bad for food. He would bring rats in the spring time. When the water spread upon the ice, by the water side, he would track them: fleet−footed are they, and glide swiftly into their hole; but Michel was swifter than they. When Michel sank hooks in the lake, the fish came, fine trout from Bear Lake you have eaten; it was hard for you to lift it, my sister; its head was a meal for the little ones; the best for your tezone, the best for your tezone. But, ah! my sister, you have left it now. Oh! cruel Michel has made his children motherless! The baby looks pitiful—it looks pitiful: it stretches out its hands for its mother's breast; it longs to taste the sweet draughts of milk. Ah! Accomba, my sister, my partner, why did cruel Michel come and take you from my side?”

Another cry of sorrow was heard from Sarcelle, the brother of Accomba, that same night, and on the day following. The poor fellow was half distracted at the loss of his sister, more especially as she seemed to have anticipated her fate, and to have prepared her friends for it. Sarcelle's first impulse was to seize his gun and launch his canoe, and to sally forth in pursuit of Michel; but he was a Christian Indian, having been baptized at the little English Church at Fort Simpson, and further instructed at the Mission School. The conflict going on in his own mind between the desire to avenge his sister's death, and the higher impulses which his Christian faith suggested, were very touching. It ended in his throwing down his gun, and bowing his head on his hands while he sobbed aloud, “My sister, my sister, I would fight for you; I would avenge your cruel death, but the Praying man says we

must forgive as God forgives us. I throw down my gun; I listen to the Good Spirit speaking to my heart; but oh, it is hard, it is hard, my sister, I can see no light in this; I feel unmanly to let *him* go free, who shot my sister to the heart, who made her shed tears, and did not comfort her; who made her the mother of his children, and left them all so pitiful, with the little one lying helpless upon the river side, and only the dogs to guard her. I feel unmanly, unworthy of a 'Tene Jua,' but 'Niotsi N Dethe' make it plain to me; oh, make me see how I can be a *true man*, and yet forgive!”

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It was but a few weeks after Minneha had received the rescued infant, and promised to be a mother to it, that she discovered that she had undertaken more than she was able to fulfil. It required no very searching eye to perceive that the little one was not thriving; in truth, she was dwindling away day by day, and those who were in the habit of visiting the Camp gazed sadly at the little pinched face and shrivelled limbs, and foreboded that it would not be long before Michel's child rejoined its mother in the 'silent land.' “Owindia” was the name given by the Indians to their deceased sister's child; and in truth, Owindia, “weeping one,” was well suited to the frail creature who since that terrible night was continually uttering a feeble moan unlike an ordinary infant's cry, but which appealed to all hearts by its thrilling tones.

One day a little bundle was brought to the English Mission House at Fort Simpson, by Sinclia, daughter of Minneha. The following message accompanied the bundle, which was none other than the poor little Owindia, smaller and more fragile−looking than ever: “I am sick; I cannot work for the child; *you* take her.” And so it happened, that after all his horror of the white man, and his shrinking from intercourse with any of his kind, Michel should be destined by his own act, to have his child received into the white man's house, and to find there in all loving care and tender offices the home of which he had deprived her.

Owindia still lives, and is become a strong and active child, full of spirit and intelligence, with all the marvellous powers of observation which mark the Indian. She was baptized by the Bishop “Lucy May,” but her name “Owindia” still clings to her, a fitting memorial of the sad episode in her infant life, and of those long seventeen hours [Footnote: The Indians have a wonderful knack of measuring time by the sun and moon—“In two moons and when the sun is *there*“ (indicating a certain point in the heavens), would be an Indian's version of “two months hence at three o'clock p.m.”] when, forsaken by all her earthly friends, God sent His blessed angels to keep watch and ward around her, to guard her from perishing from the cold and hunger, from the attack of wild beasts, from falling down the steep river bank, or any other danger which threatened the little fragile life. Surely by His Providence was the timely succour brought out of its wonted course, and the relief administered which one half−hour later would in all probability have come too late!

Of the unhappy father of Owindia but little remains to be told. He wandered about the woods for some time after his merciless deed; having neither gun, nor ax, nor fish−net, he was utterly unable to provide himself food. When reduced to the very last extremity of weakness and starvation, he yet contrived to fasten a few boards together and make himself a raft: on this he paddled across the Mackenzie, and appeared one morning at Fort Simpson, such a miserable object that some of the Indians fled at the sight of him. He was put under arrest by the Hudson's Bay Company's officer in charge, who is also a magistrate; and an indictment was made out against him. He was committed for trial and sent out by the Hudson's Bay Company's fur boat in the course of the summer to Prince Albert, some 1800 miles distant, where the nearest Courts of Justice are held.

But the whole business of Michel's committal was a farce. The Indians are as yet too ignorant and uncivilized to understand the nature of an oath, and even if they did so, there is not one man among them now living who could be brought to bear witness against one of his own race and tribe. When last Michel was heard of, he was under nominal restraint, but conducting himself with propriety, and professing utter unconsciousness of the wild acts of his past life.

C. S. B.