

A LEGEND OF LAKE GEORGE.

BY MRS. CLARA MERWIN.

The Raymonds were old settlers upon Lake George. When the trackless wilderness was known only to the Indian and the panther, and his slender canoe alone danced upon the waters, they had ventured hither to seek a precarious livelihood. What was their history, or what the motive which could have induced them to take this hazardous step, no one could tell. But some of the Indians who were in the habit of acting as guides, occasionally, to the officers at Fort Ticonderoga, gave him a reputation for deeds of sinister hue, and many were the singular reports which were circulated respecting him.

It was said that Raymond was not the only occupant of the lone hut in which he dwelt. During the night, when the stars were quenched and the wind came whistling through the pines, shrill cries rang out upon the air, and were repeated by the echoes, until it seemed as if every tree and stunted shrub had been gifted with human voices.

Even the most savage of the Indians trembled when they passed the mysterious cabin whence these sounds proceeded, and their proudest chieftains quailed before the stern eye of the dark settler. It was also said, when he first came to dwell in that solitary spot, he was accompanied by a female whose entire figure was hidden by a robe of black, even her features being closely masked—rendering vain the least attempt at recognition.

And thus the story ran from mouth to mouth until even the officers at the fort, the privates themselves, and the sutler women who furnished them with the little luxuries of a soldier's life, were as familiar with the tale as though each had been an actor in the mystery.

On a dismal night of April a party consisting of some half dozen officers were gathered about a table in a small apartment of the fort, discussing sundry glasses of brandy and cigars whose flavor proclaimed them of foreign derivation. It was yet in the early watches of the night, but the brandy had done its work with most of the group we are describing, and one was dozing over his glass, another was preparing to take up his lodging under the table, while two who seemed less affected than the rest were endeavoring to keep each other awake by the relation of some merry jest or a fragment of some well-worn ballad.

"I'll tell you what it is, Frank," said one of these personages, starting suddenly from a reverie into which he had just fallen, "either this brandy that we are imbibing must be too strong for us or our heads tonight must be of weaker stuff than usual. What shall be done to keep ourselves awake?"

"Well?" yawned Frank, a comely individual of the middle age, "what new idea have you got now. Some madcap prank, I'll be bound. Your brain is always getting some into trouble."

"You've hit it, Frank; that's my thought, exactly. You've heard the tale of old Italy, the settler?"

"Have I not?" replied Frank; "the story's common in the fort. Nay, there's not a farmer within forty miles but knows it well."

"'Tis said that he deals in witchcraft," said Perry, musingly. "But, be that as it may, I'll lay you a wager that ere to-morrow's sun has risen I'll penetrate the mystery."

"And lose your life, perchance, for the sake of giving the neighbor something to talk about. No, Perry—I'll not take you up. There are too many perils in such an adventure."

"Perils!"—and Perry laughed contemptuously as he spoke.

"Yes, Perry, perils. In the first place you have to escape the vigilance of the sentries; and should you be detected, a motive different from the true one might be attained."

"That's true. But I can bribe one of the men, or at the worst can leap the walls."

"Raymond's cabin, Perry, is far down the lake, in the midst of the wilderness—a place frequented only by hostile red men and beasts of prey."

"I wear a sword, and am not afraid to face danger," rejoined Perry.

"The night is dark—a storm is fast coming on, and your journey will be for the most part over the lake."

"I can find a canoe," said Perry, "and am expert with the paddle. Come, Frank, oppose me no longer, for I am determined. This very night I'll penetrate Raymond's mysterious secret; perhaps, in the endeavor I may confer a benefit on some suffering fellow-being, whose groans are said to awaken the forest's echoes."

"Be it as you will, then; I oppose you no longer. For my part, however," said Frank, "I believe the story's a humbug, and so I'll leave you to enjoy your agreeable adventure."

About an hour after the conversation, a canoe containing a single figure shot swiftly out from a cove in the vicinity of the fort. It was Perry. How he had managed to elude the sentries is a mystery; at any rate he had cleared the fort, and was now fairly embarked upon his dangerous voyage. The night was fearfully dark, and everything indicated an approaching tempest, yet still the young officer held on his way, fully resolved to accomplish what, it must be confessed, appeared to him, now that fumes of liquor had somewhat subsided, a rash undertaking.

About half an hour passed. Perry's canoe flew over the lake with incredible swiftness. He was anxious to bring his adventure to a close. A light shone out upon the distance. It must be Raymond's cabin, thought Perry, and he redoubled his exertions. There was a single flash—vivid and innocuous—of lightning, succeeded by a low rumble like the distant reverberations of artillery. Then several big drops came patterning upon the young officer's uniform, and the little canoe was tossed about as if it had been a cork.

"This is a pleasant beginning," said Perry, half aloud; "I'm making a night of it with a vengeance!" The jest was scarcely uttered before a scream, a cry of mortal anguish—so shrill that it pierced to the core of Perry's heart, and congealed his blood almost to ice—broke forth the momentary pause which had followed the din of the elements. "Great God!" he ejaculated. "Upon what mysterious mission have I been sent? The tale was true, then."

Again that cry—wild and shrill, but melancholy in its tones.

It seemed to supplicate protection, and Perry shuddered inwardly when he found that the voice was a woman's. The storm had set in. Sonorous peals of thunder—sharp flashes of lightning—a drenching torrent of rain; such was Perry's welcome as he leaped on the strand, hardly to

be distinguished from the water in the intense darkness which followed. Perry approached the light, and discovered it to proceed from a low, rude constructed hut, through the crevices of which he could discern what was passing within.

He looked, and the sight rooted him to the ground with horror. In the center of the apartment stood a man some fifty years of age, of large frame, stalwart and almost gigantic. His face was somber, and wore a settled expression of malice which rendered it repulsive to look upon. Before him, on her knees, with her hands raised to him in supplication, was a woman of slender figure, entirely clothed in black. The face was concealed by a mask, but her hands were white and small—unmistakable signs that she had moved in a sphere far different to that in which destiny or compulsion had seemingly placed her. On the rough plank table was a portrait of a young man of exceeding beauty, and on the floor lay—Perry looked again—great heaven! it could not be—a scoundrel!

Raymond uttered a laugh—a laugh of scorn. "Woman!" he exclaimed, "your penance is only begun. You implore me to kill you, but my revenge is not yet gratified. It shall be your doom to live! For fourteen years we have lived thus together, and of every week I set one night apart for the observation of this ceremony. Your sufferings are great, I confess, but what have they been compared with mine?"

"Pity me—spare me!" sobbed the mask.

"You refused me when once I made this same request; it is but just that I should take my turn. Come—the portrait!"

Tremblingly she took from the table the miniature; her breast heaved, and tears fell like rain upon the hand which held it.

"Are you prepared?"

A slight quiver of the frame and a groan were the only answer returned to this singular question. The man took a cup from the table, and also a phial, from which he poured into the cup a few drops of some thick, blood-red liquid. He then handed the cup to the person whose whole frame now quivered like an aspen.

"God have mercy upon me!" she groaned.

Raymond stamped his foot impatiently.

"Come—the drink!"

"Is there no release?"

"None!" And he seized the scourge. The cup was raised, was drained, was dashed away with a scream so wild and full of anguish it seemed to have silenced the very elements. There was a heavy fall, and before Raymond could raise the senseless body from the spot where it lay, the door had burst open with a crash, and, almost ere he could turn, he was transfixed by Perry's sword, and lay writhing and gasping by the side of his victim.

"Infamous wretch!" shouted Perry, "thou at least shalt sin no more!"

"With your sword," said Raymond, averting the blow which Perry was aiming. "I would speak with you a few words ere I die. Who you are, and what chance led you to this spot, which for fourteen years has seen not a single white face save my own, I know not. Your resemblance to that miniature—tell me, do you recognize the face?"

"Perry took the portrait from the table. "My brother!" he exclaimed in amazement. "How came this miniature here, and why—I see it all!" he added, and he hid his face for a moment in his hands.

Raymond made an effort to speak—his blood was flowing freely, and it was evident that he could not long survive his wound.

"You remember your brother's recklessness—his passion for women—his heedless dissipation."

"Ah! yes—too well I remember it—poor Edward!"

He was a villain!" said Raymond, fiercely. "You recollect he had a friend—a very dear friend, whose fair fame he betrayed while that friend was absent. Your brother disappeared."

"You, then, can tell me his retreat," said Perry, eagerly.

"Would you like to know?" asked Raymond, with a strange smile.

"Heaven knows it—I would!"

"Be satisfied! I slew him!"

"Oh, monster! what doom should be yours, to trifle with so sacred a thing as life, and trifle with it thus, too!"

"Well—he deserved it! My slighted honor demanded reparation, and I have avenged it. Behold that phial, it contains his blood."

"Wretch! and this woman—"

"Drinks it; you now know all. Leave now this wretched hovel, and let me die."

"Not yet—not yet! Oh! God—this is too horrible; I would not have believed it!"

And Perry, muttering thus to himself, stooped down and, taking from the miserable creature the mask which concealed her features, strove to restore her.

But it was vain. The last effort had severed the frail tenure on which her life had depended—a few deep sighs, a slight quiver of the limbs, and she was dead.

The young officer's attention was now attracted by a groan from Raymond. He turned and found that in his abstraction Raymond had managed to get possession of his sword, and had hastened the event which could not have been much longer delayed.

That night the lone hut was burned to the ground—how or by whom is a mystery.

Perry returned to the fort, and, although he was sore pressed, he firmly persisted in preserving the secret he had purchased at so terrible a sacrifice.

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