

THE WAR-TRAIL!

CHAPTER XXII—(CONTINUED.)

I understood what was said, more from the Indian's gestures than his speech, though the words "summons," "council," and the name "Hissooroyo," helped me to comprehend his meaning.

Though I understood what was said, I was not prepared with a reply. I dared not risk the answer in Spanish, for I knew not the extent of Wakano's proficiency in the Audatusian tongue.

I felt myself in a dilemma, and the impertinent savage—no doubt some friend of Wakano himself—appeared determined to stick to me. How was I to get rid of him?

A happy idea came to my relief. Assuming an air of extreme dignity, and as though I did not wish to be disturbed in my meditations, I raised my hand and waved the man a parting salute.

The Indian accepted the *conge*, and moved off, but evidently with an air of reluctance. As I glanced back over my shoulder, I could see him starting from the spot with a hesitating step, no doubt somewhat astonished at the strange behavior of his friend Wakano.

I did not look back again, until I had placed myself under the shadow of the timber. Then I turned to reconnoitre. My friend had continued on to the fire. I saw him just entering among the crowd that circled around the great fire.

Screened from observation by the shadow, I could now pause and reflect. The trifling incident that had caused me some apprehension, had also helped me to some useful knowledge. First, I learned my own name. Second, that there was a council about to take place—and thirdly, that the renegade, Hissooroyo, had something to do with this council.

This was knowledge of importance: combined with my previous information, everything was now made clear. This council could be no other than the jury trial between the renegade and the yet nameless thief; the same that was to decide to which belonged the right of property in my betrothed.

It was about to meet—it had not assembled as yet. Then had I arrived in time; neither white savage or red savage had yet come into possession—neither had dared to lay hands on the coveted and priceless gem.

Isolina was still safe—thus singularly preserved from brutal contact. These dogs in the manger their mutual jealousy had proved her protection! I was consoled by the thought—strange source of consolation!

I was in time, but where was she? From my new position, I had a still better view of the camp, its fires, and its denizens—she was nowhere to be seen!

In the lodge then—she must certainly be there—or a new thought occurred to me—she may be kept apart from the other captives?—in the copse—she may be concealed in the copse until the sentence be pronounced?

This last conjecture brought along with it hopes and resolves. I determined to search the copse. If I should find her there my emprise would be easy indeed; at all events, easier than I had anticipated.

Though guarded by the savages, I should rescue her from their grasp. The lives of six men—perhaps twice that number—were under my belt. The odds of unarmed numbers would be nothing against the deadly bullets of my revolvers, and I saw that most of the savages had laid aside their weapons, confident in the security of their camp.

But I might find her alone, or perhaps with a single jailor. The meeting of the council favored the supposition. The men would all be there—some to take part, others interested in the result, or merely from curiosity to watch the proceedings. Yes, all of them would have an interest in the issue—too surely all. The barbarous custom of these savage brutes at that moment came to my remembrance.

I stayed no longer to reflect, but gliding into the grove, commenced my search for the captive.

The ground was favorable to my progress. There was not much underwood, and the trees grew thick. I could easily pass among them without the necessity of crouching, and without making noise. The silent thread of the moccasin was in my favor, as also the dark foliage that stretched overhead, hiding the sky from my view.

The chief timber of the copse was the pecan-hickory—almost an evergreen—and the trees were still in full leaf, only here and there, where the trunks stood far apart, did the moonbeams strike through the thick foliage.

The surface of the ground was shrouded from her light, and the narrow aisles through which I passed were as dark as if no moon had been shining.

There was still light enough to reveal some horrid scenes. O Heavens! my heart bleeds at the remembrance.

I was wrong in my conjecture. The men had not all gone to the council; the captive women were not all by the camp fires. I beheld passion in its most brutal form—red ruffians lolling in the bush beside their helpless victims—women—fair, white women, with drooping heads and lolling hair,

wounded, dishevelled, weeping! O Heaven! My heart recoils at the remembrance!

It recoiled at the sight—it burned with indignation. At every turn did it prompt me to draw knife or pistol. At every step my fingers itched to immolate a hideous painted besmeared brute—to slay a "noble" savage.

I was restrained only by my own desperate situation—by my apprehensions for the safety of Isolina—now more acute than ever. What horrid imaginings crowded into my brain—begot by the barbarous drama that was being enacted around me, shamelessly before my face—under my very eyes.

The monsters too earnestly occupied with their coarse carresses, took no heed of me; and I passed on without remark or interruption.

I threaded the pathways of the grove one after another gliding through as rapidly as the path would permit. I entered every aisle and glade. I searched everything, even to the farthest limits of the woods. I saw more men—more weeping women—more red ruffians. I saw naught of her for whom I searched. In the tent, then—she must be there.

I turned my face towards the lodge, and moving with stealthy step, soon arrived among the trees that stood in the rear. I halted near the edge, and separating the leaves with my hands peered cautiously through. I had no need to search further. Isolina was before my eyes.

TO BE CONTINUED.

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