

THE WAR-TRAIL!

CHAPTER XCIV.

A SPY IN THE COUNCIL.

Yes, there was my betrothed—within sight, within hearing, almost within reach of my hands; I dared not touch, I dared not speak, I scarce dared look upon her. My fingers trembled among the leaves; my heart rose and fell; I could feel within my breast its strokes rapid and irregular; I could hear its sonorous vibration.

It was not at the first glance I saw Isolina. On looking through the leaves the coup d'œil was a scene that quite astonished me, and for a while occupied my attention. Since I had last gazed upon the great fire, the grouping around it had undergone an entire change. A new tableau was presented, that for the moment held me under a spell of surprise.

The fire no longer blazed, or only slightly and when stirred. The logs had burned into coals, and now yielded a fainter light, but one more red and garish. It was steady nevertheless, and the position of the pile rendered it strong enough to illumine the camp around to its utmost limits.

The fire was still encircled by savages, but no longer standing nor grouped irregularly, as I had before observed them. On the contrary, they were seated, or rather squatted, at equal distances from each other, and forming a ring that girdled the huge mound of embers.

There were about twenty of these men—I did not count them—but I observed that all were in their native costume—leggings, and breech-cloth to the waist, nothing above, save the armlets and shell ornaments of the nose, ears and neck. All were profusely painted with chalk, ochre and vermilion. Beyond doubt I was looking upon the "council."

The other Indians—they in "fancy dresses"—were still upon the ground, but they stood behind, retired a pace or two from the circle, in groups of two, three or four, talking in low mutterings. Others were moving about, still at a greater distance from the fire.

My observation of all these features of the scene, did not occupy ten seconds of time—just so long as my eyes were getting accustomed to the light. At the end of that interval my glance rested upon Isolina, and there became fixed.

In the chain of Indians that encircled the fire there was a break—an interval of ten or a dozen feet. It was directly in front of the lodge, and above the fire—for the ground gently sloped from the tent towards the stream. In this plot the captive was seated. Her position was exactly between the lodge and the fire, and a little retired behind the circle of the council. The tent intervening between her and my position had prevented me from seeing her at first.

She was half-seated, half-reclining upon a robe of wolf skins. I saw her arms were free. I saw that her limbs were bound. Her back was to the tent—her face turned towards the council I could not see it.

To recognize my betrothed, I did not need to look upon her face. Her matchless form, outlined against the red embers, was easily identified. The full round curve of the neck; the oval lines of the head; the majestic sweep of the shoulders; the arms smooth and symmetrical; all these were familiar to my eyes, for oft had they dwelt on them in admiration. I could not be mistaken. The form before me was that graven upon my heart; it was Isolina's.

There was another salient point in this singular tableau, that would not escape observation. Beyond the fire and directly opposite to where Isolina was placed, I saw another well-known object—the white steed! He was not staked there, but haltered and held in hand by one of the Indians. He must have been lately brought upon the ground; for, from neither of my former points of observation, had I noted him. He, like his mistress, was to be put on trial—his ownership was also matter of dispute.

There was in sight one more object that interested me. Not with friendly interest did I regard it, but with disgust and indignation.

Not seated in the council-ring, not standing among the idle groups, but apart from all, I beheld Hissoc-rozo, the renegade. Savage as were the red warriors, fiend-like as they appeared with their paint-smeared visages, not one looked so savage or fiend-like as he.

The features of this man was naturally bad; but the paint—for he had adopted this with every other vile custom of barbarian life—rendered their expression positively ferocious. The device upon his forehead was a death's head and crossbones, done in white chalk, and upon this appeared the well-imitated semblance of a bleeding scalp—the appropriate symbols of a cruel disposition.

There was something unnatural in a white skin thus disfigured—for the natural complexion was not hidden. Here and there it could be perceived forming the ground of the motley elaboration—its pallid hue in strange contrast with the deeper colors that daubed it. It was not the canvas for such a picture. Yet there the picture was in red and yellow, black, white and blue; there stood the deep-dyed villain.

I saw not his rival. I looked for him, but saw him not. Perhaps he was one of those who stood around. Perhaps he had not yet come up. He was the son of the great chief—per-

haps he was inside the lodge. The last was the most probable conjecture. The great calumet was brought forward, and lit by the fire. It was passed around the circle, from mouth to mouth, each savage satisfying himself with a single draw from the tube. I knew that this was the inauguration of the council. The trial was about to proceed.

TO BE CONTINUED.



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L. B. ARCHIBALD, Superintendent Railway Office, Charlottetown, Nov 29, 1881

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