

Dance of the Dead Men

By ARTHUR HEMING

TUGGING at the weight of the frozen carcasses, Standing Wolf slowly hauled the sled in and out among the gravelike mounds of the maskeeg. Now and again he slightly turned his head to listen. There were strange sounds in the night air. Sometimes he imagined for a moment that the grotesquely frozen bodies had come to life again, and were dancing on the snow. Once he paused to look around; but all he saw was two great man shadows lying on the snow, with long, outstretched legs that reached toward him and touched his feet. To him the sight was not an unusual one. Often, when the northern lights and the moon were shining, as he hurried through the maskeegs or over the silent lakes, he had been pursued by monstrous figures that seemed forever trying to tread upon his heels. So on he trudged.

It was hard work. The prow of the toboggan continually overran the hummocks. When he turned to pull it aside, gnarled roots reached out to catch at his snowshoes, and willow wands stung his frost bitten face. At last, just as he was leaving the maskeeg behind and was nearing the forest that loomed ahead across a wide strip of gleaming snow, he stopped suddenly. What was that? He stood staring at the snow. Were his eyes playing him false? Could it be true? He jerked the tump line off his head and threw it back upon the sled. Then he stepped aside and knelt down to examine the tracks in the snow, while his two shadows mockingly did the same.

"Ah, Kus-ke-tie Ina-ca-sis!" exclaimed the Indian with glee. True enough, it was the track of a black fox, an animal whose skin brings a greater price than that of any other found in the northern forest. Already that winter Standing Wolf had secured a splendid silver fox, which in value ranks second only to the black fox. To see the trail of a black fox on his hunting grounds was an event so unusual that he could scarcely believe his sight. In his delight he examined the tracks again, lest he might have been deceived. Yes, there were the round footprints of the black fox. Well he knew that its tread makes a print more rounded in outline than that of any other fox. Next in roundness comes the footprint of the silver fox; then that of the cross fox; that of the red fox being the most elongated of all.

Cautiously rising, Standing Wolf charged his gun, and, leaving his sled behind, followed the trail of Kus-ke-tie Ina-ca-sis. There was only one more trap to examine, and the trail ran toward it. The wind was in his favor. As he moved forward, he imitated the cry of a mouse, and occasionally broke into a gentle chant; for, like all his brethren, he believed that he could in that way charm a fox. All the while he was on the alert for the slightest glimpse of any moving thing. When he had covered about a quarter of a mile of winding trail, he found that the track circled to the left. Looking ahead, he discovered another and a smaller circle running in the same direction. Knowing that his trap lay just beyond, he went on with greater care. As he peeped round a clump of trees, he saw Kus-ke-tie Ina-ca-sis huddled there. The next instant the fox saw him too. In a frantic effort at escape it leaped into the air, but was thrown by the clanking chain violently upon its back. On the snow, within the chain's length, was recorded the story of its desperate and vain struggle for freedom.

Standing Wolf, setting his gun aside, approached slowly with a stick in his hand, and in kindly tones addressed the trembling animal. "Good day, my little brother. I am sorry, but I need your beautiful coat; so I must kill you."

He stunned the fox by a blow on the snout, and then gently pressed the toe of his moccasined foot over the creature's heart, until it stopped beating. In this manner he killed all the foxes he caught in traps, for the slightest blow upon the body would mark the skin.

Opening the jaws of the trap, he laid the fox upon the snow, and stood gazing at it with supreme satisfaction. It was the most beautiful black fox that he had ever seen. It was a perfect specimen. Its entire coat, both inner and outer, was of the deepest blue black, except for a tiny spot of white upon the breast, and a few white hairs at the tip of its magnificent brush. A bushy collar surrounded its neck. Its fore legs were covered down to the feet with silky, wavy fur that suggested heavily fringed leggings. The black fox, though not so beautiful as the silver fox, is much rarer. It commands a first price of anywhere from one hundred to one thousand dollars, and is sometimes sold at retail for from two to three thousand dollars. But,

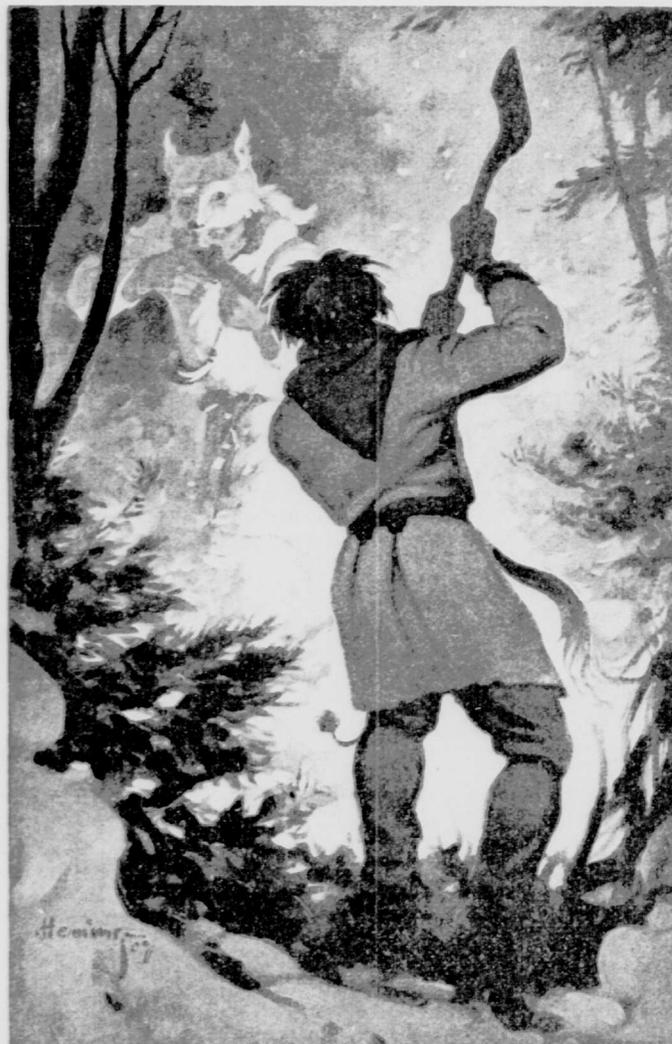
notwithstanding its great value, it is considered to be of ill omen. Misfortune, according to Indian belief, accompanies the wealth it brings.

Though Standing Wolf felt elated over his astonishing luck, he had already begun to fear the evil that must surely follow. There he stood with gloating eyes fixed upon the lifeless object at his feet, yet hesitating to carry off his prize. A faint rumble as of distant thunder fell upon his ears, and a moment later a sound as if made by the waving of whips and the swishing of silken garments. A vague sense of awe took possession of him. Looking up, he beheld the broad expanse of the heavens afire with vast arcs of moving figures arrayed in garments of light. In the unaccustomed brilliance of the northern lights he recognized another omen of ill. To have taken the life of Kus-ke-tie Ina-ca-sis while the Dance of the Dead Men was in progress must add to the evil already in store for him.

For sometime he stood hesitating. He knew that the skin would more than pay the debt that he and his family owed, yet the thought of what was to befall him filled him with dread. At last, summoning all his courage, he picked up the fox, hurried back to his sled, placed it carefully within the wrapper, and set out for home. All along the way fear stalked beside him. Even on his arrival he could not shake it off. So, when he had exhibited his great catch to his astonished family, he turned to At-tick, his adopted son, saying:

"At-tick, my son, the fur runner is coming soon. To-morrow do you and the Marten take the dogs and break a two days' trail on Bear River in order to hasten his coming."

Fear of impending disaster was the real cause of his anxiety to ease the approach of the trader. So



The Halibreed Struck Wildly at the Indian.

eager was he to safeguard himself against possible ill fortune, that he was willing even to sell the skin at a sacrifice.

Next morning the boys set out to break the trail. When they camped on Bear River on the afternoon of the second day, they cached in the river ice some fish for the trader's dogs. They chopped a hole and, after placing the fish in, filled it up with water, which they allowed to freeze, with the tail of a single fish protruding, in order to show the trader what was cached below. To mark the spot, they planted

a pole with its butt in the hole, and rigged up a tripod of sticks to support it. At the top of the pole they tied a little bag of tea and a choice piece of meat for the trader. At the bend of the river below, where he would surely pass, they erected another pole with a bunch of dried grass attached, for the purpose of attracting his attention to their tracks.

On their return home, they found Standing Wolf sorting his furs in anticipation of the trader's arrival. Before him lay the skins of the black fox and of the silver fox, turned inside out upon stretchers. On the boys entering the lodge, Standing Wolf addressed his whole family, saying:

"Do not mention the silver fox to the fur runner. Since it, at least, will bring us no harm, I intend keeping it until I go to the post, in the hope of making a better bargain there. Now sort your skins, and set aside those you wish to give in payment of your debt to the Great Company."

During the afternoon of the following day, Spencer, the fur runner for the Hudson Bay Company at Fort Determination, arrived with his dog train. He shook hands with Standing Wolf and the boys, and kissed the women and the girls, as the custom of the traders is. It being late in the day, Standing Wolf decided not to begin trading until the next morning. So they spent the evening in spinning yarns around the fire. Shortly after breakfast, strange dogs were heard. The boys looked out and saw an unknown halfbreed approaching. When the newcomer had eaten, and had joined the others in a smoke, Standing Wolf questioned him:

"My brother, you are a stranger in this country; so I have given you food and fire and tobacco in friendship. Tell me why and whence you come."

The halfbreed replied, "My brother, I come from the Border Lands, where the plains and the forests meet, and my name is Gibeault. I have come to trade regularly in the region between Fort Determination and Fort Defiance. You will do well to encourage opposition to the Great Company, and thus raise the price of furs. My brother, the white man stands apart. I am of your own kin. We are of the same blood. So I have come to remove the burden which the Great Company has laid upon my blood brothers, the Indians. I have come to show you how the white man has been robbing our people for hundreds of years. I have come to—"

Spencer, glaring across the fire, could contain himself no longer. Turning to Standing Wolf, he said, "My brother, you are a wise man. You know the difference between truth and lies, between strong men and old women. You know that I have brought goods to your camp, and traded with you for many years. You know that when your family starved, the company fed them. You know you owe the company debt. You know that it takes a strong man to beat a track, but any old woman can follow it. You know a man when you see one. My brother, we have been friends from of old."

Standing Wolf kept silence for awhile; then, with his eyes fixed upon the fire, he said, "My brother, I will not forget to look at my debt; but I am master of my other furs."

So saying, he handed to Spencer the bundles of furs which he and his family had set aside to pay their debt with. These were accepted unopened, since they were for the factor at Fort Determination. Then he drew a cross fox skin from behind him, and threw it down, saying, "How do my brothers look at that?"

It was a challenge to the rival traders. In a few minutes they had opened their packs and spread out a conglomeration of useful and of useless goods and trinkets upon gaudy blankets on either side of the fire. The halfbreed, manifestly ignorant of the ways of his professed business, allowed the white man to outbid him from the very start, and so lost favor with the Indian, who, growing suspicious of his flowery promises, said:

"My brother, you have traveled in vain; you had better go back, unless you can give more than the white man."

Spencer handed the Indian a present of tobacco, and he continued:

"When I visit the Great Company, even if I do not trade, they give me presents of tea, flour, grease, and tobacco in order to seal our friendship. But you have not shown a generous hand; so I will still trade with the Great Company."

Without another word he threw down the beautiful black fox skin. The two traders were completely taken aback at the sight of such a prize. The bidding rose rapidly, until Gibeault had exceeded the value of his whole outfit. Knowing this, Spencer told Standing Wolf that neither of