

iel, or the Half-breed

BY ROBERT A. CUMMING.

(CONTINUED.)

CHAPTER VIII. WAR AND PHILOSOPHY.

General engagement was in progress, and Selwyn resolved to send a party of rangers to the assistance of the red chief. Calling for twenty volunteers, the entire force responded, and when he had selected his men Renwick claimed the right to lead them.

"You had your share of glory the other day, Charley," he said, "and now it's my turn." Besides your presence is needed here. So saying he stepped into a canoe followed by the volunteers.

Guided by the firing and the yells of the savage combatants, he made a detour through the dense timber in order to gain the rear, and soon gained a position which revealed the fact that the Mohawks were slowly retreating, while, judging by the heavy tramp, a party of regulars was coming to the aid of the Hurons. Quickly placing his men in ambush, Renwick awaited the approach of the latter. On they came, unsuspecting danger until half their force of fifty men had passed the ambush, when the rangers opened fire.

Taken by surprise, decimated and ignorant of the number of their assailants, the Frenchmen fell into confusion. Their officers bravely endeavored to rally them, and were picked off one by one, until the panic-stricken survivors threw down their arms and fled into the forest. The Hurons, who were pressing hard upon Brant and his braves, paused when they heard the sounds of battle in their rear, while the red chief, suspecting the cause, shouted the war-cry of the Mohawks and pressed them in his turn. The Frenchmen being disposed of, Renwick advanced cautiously on the rear of the Hurons, who, instead of the assistance they expected, finding themselves between two fires, retreated in confusion.

While the Mohawks were engaged in scalping and plundering the dead, the rangers collected the arms and ammunition of the French, the muskets being furnished with bayonets which Renwick thought might be made available, and the entire force returned to the camp.

When night came the Mohawks celebrated their victory by kindling a great fire, around which they danced their war-dance and chanted their deeds of prowess until the scene resembled pandemonium.

"We have only fought their skirmish line as yet," observed Renwick, lazily reclining between the roots of a tree; "the heavy battalions are behind."

Selwyn was pacing up and down in thoughtful mood. The responsibility of his situation was greater than his experience, and while he had the fullest



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confidence in his friend and Lieutenant, Renwick, he felt that he was by no means his superior in military skill. But if Marden were by his side—

"A strange boy, that Ariel, and a fanciful name," said Renwick, breaking in upon his reverie. "Did you ever notice how shy he is and how eagerly he listened when you spoke of Marden? He seems to be devoted to him."

"Marden is a man to gain the confidence and love of all who come in contact with him," replied Selwyn. "Besides, he saved the boy's life, and he has been in his service ever since. You know that Indian gratitude is proverbial."

"He is brave as a lion, too," continued Renwick, "and as cunning as a fox or a redskin, else he would not have undertaken such long journeys through the woods with nothing to rely on but his own sagacity, or instinct, as you may choose to term it."

"Instinct is the lowest form of reason," was the reply. "It belongs to animals and not to men. It is the offspring of practical experience, sometimes aided by heredity. A mechanic does not accomplish his work by instinct, but by skill derived from practice, and if his father and grandfather were mechanics he inherits from them a mysterious aid to his ingenuity of which he is unconscious, and which we call natural transmission, as we find names for other things which we can not explain."

There being no response to these remarks, Selwyn became aware that his friend was fast asleep. Silence reigned in the camp; the fires were smoldering in their ashes, like human passions; dim shadows revealed the sentinels at their posts, watchful as the stars and as silent. Wrapped in a blanket, his back resting against a tree, Brant, the Mohawk chief, sat motionless, but not asleep. From the dense forest in the rear of the camp came the hoot of an owl. After an interval of a minute the cry was echoed at a distance on the opposite side of the stream. If any one had been watching the red chief they would scarcely have been aware that he had changed his position, so deep was the obscurity; but he was not there. Again the dismal sound tolled forth like a funeral bell, and had its echo as before; again and again and then it ceased. The sentinels were changed; Selwyn, sleepless and vigilant, inspected the posts. All was well. The red chief rested in the same place; but his eyes shone like a panther's in the darkness, and there was a fresh scalp at his belt.

The hour before dawn was the time when the sentinels were most vigilant, for it was the hour when an attack was most to be expected, but when the sun arose there was no appearance of the enemy. Brant scoured the timber in the rear of the camp and found nothing

except the carcass of a Huron minus his scalp and with a knife-out in his breast. Selwyn's anxiety was rather increased by this impressive silence, and he was impatiently awaiting the return of scouts, when a sentinel observed a canoe coming up the stream and keeping close to the opposite shore. Then it suddenly shot across the stream, and Jabe and another ranger sprang up the bank and over the breastwork. He was the bearer of a letter to Selwyn from the commander of Oswego.

The young soldier eagerly broke the seal. The dispatch was brief. After thanking Selwyn for his patriotism and energy in coming to his relief, Colonel Mercer requested him to hold his position as long as he deemed it prudent; but if threatened by a superior force, he was to fall back on the fort, which he (Mercer) was resolved to defend to the last extremity.

Observing that Jabe's face wore an unusually grave expression, Selwyn kindly inquired the reason, when the honest ranger informed him that when Ariel learned that his master was a prisoner to the enemy, he seemed for a time to be overwhelmed with grief, from which, however, he soon recovered.

"But I knew," said Jabe, "that something was working in his mind, and I wasn't surprised to hear, just before I left the fort, that he had disappeared with his canoe, and I know as well as if he told me that he's gone in search of his master—may be to Montreal."

CHAPTER IX.

MME. CHEVREUL'S PREMONITIONS.

De Barzac had no difficulty in obtaining a parole for his friend, all the officers who had served under Dieskan having interested themselves in his behalf, and he found himself surrounded by friends of both sexes, anxious to show kindness to one who had cheered their sick and wounded in the hospital and gained the love and confidence of that brave General, now no more. Especially was he welcome at the house of Mme. Chevreul, whose generous nature was touched by the manly bearing and cheerfulness of the captive. She kept open house and her rooms were crowded every night by her gay countrymen as eager for pleasure as for fame, like the troubadour of old who went forth to battle sword in hand, "with his wild harp slung behind him."

Lemourier, exasperated by General Montcalm's rebuke, and Mme. Chevreul's haughty demeanor, was still more enraged by the coldness with which the army officers regarded him. He had outraged their sense of honor by an act which even the plea of drunkenness could not excuse. He ground his teeth in impotent wrath. He could not even challenge one of the offenders without the certainty of a court martial, and while he writhed under the silent scorn of his fellows he perceived that his rival had gained by his gallantry exactly in proportion to what he had lost, and all that was base and ungenerous in his nature goaded him on to vengeance.

Mlle. Destain, in whose mind Lemourier's act had caused a strong revolution of feeling, at length decided on a step which cost her pride a severe trial, but which she felt was due to the honor of her family not less than to her own. She wrote a letter to her fiancé, declaring her resolution to cancel the marriage contract unless he should agree to certain conditions, the first of which was that he offer an ample apology to M. De Barzac for his inexcusable attack on him; and, secondly, that he endeavor to regain by honorable conduct and sober life the respect which he had forfeited by his violence.

When De Barzac and his friend called at Mme. Chevreul's house in the evening they were graciously received by that lady, who presented the latter to her niece with words of compliment which brought a flush to the cheek of the young man.

De Barzac, from a sentiment of delicacy, avoided the young lady and joined a group of officers who were talking about army affairs, and among whom was Major Chevreul.

"Hal De Barzac! Where is thy Goliath, oh son of Jesse? And why didst thou not cut off his head whilst thou wast about it?" asked one.

"Unfortunately, the provost marshal interfered at the critical moment," said another; "but he regrets it—ah, yes, he can not forgive himself for his precipitancy, and he declares that he will be more prudent in future."

"What was it all about, De Barzac?" asked another.

"Did the ogre want thee for his supper, or was he jealous of the interest thou hast excited in the bosoms of the fair ones who are ready to die for a wounded hero if he be young and handsome?"

"You are all wrong," interjected another. "Lemourier was maître de armes in past days, and he wished to give De Barzac a lesson in fence gratis and to keep himself in practice—that is all, messieurs; the mystery is explained."

Major Chevreul drew the young man aside.

"Be on your guard, my friend," he said impressively, "Lemourier dare not attack you again, but he has agents, secret and sure, among the Indians. I suspect him of many dark deeds, which, could they be brought to light, would consign him to infamy, if not to the executioner. My wife shares my anxiety and bade me caution you. Lemourier will march to-mor-

row with his force of militia and Indians. Let not this lull you to a false security. The hand that strikes again will not be his."

Marden's magnetic power of drawing friends, though unconsciously exerted, was quite conspicuous to-night. He was a good singer, and at Ninon's request he sang some French campaigning songs in a manner that elicited enthusiastic applause, and one or two English songs which were so pathetic that they brought tears into the eyes of those ladies who understood the language. It was late when the company separated, and when De Barzac approached to make his bow to Mlle. Destain, Marden remarked the quick flush that rose to her pale cheek, then faded slowly away.

"What do you think of her?" asked De Barzac, when they reached his quarters.

"If you mean Mlle. Destain, she is charming. What a broad, white forehead she has; her eyes, how dreamy in repose, then flashing with enthusiasm; and that small, red mouth which smiles so bewitchingly, but never laughs. What a volume of dark brown hair is coiled up in that imperial crown, which lends dignity to her noble stature. If, as I suspect, she is your fiancée, you are a most fortunate man."

"You have drawn her portrait well," said De Barzac; "but why do you think she is my fiancée?"

"Because she never spoke of you, but her eyes followed wherever you went." Lemourier departed for Fort Frontenac the next day with Mlle. Destain's letter in his pocket. He had not replied to it nor sought another interview. He was not a lover with a cause to plead in love's own language, but an avenger who would find means to humble this proud woman to his own terms, and to make his rival feel his power. These were the thoughts which he revolved in his mind, and, sleeping or waking, clung to him like scorpions.

Traveling in those days of narrow forest paths was slow and laborious, and the steam gird had not yet been compelled to force the unwilling bark up stream; therefore military operations over a vast territory were conducted with much delay and severe labor, to say nothing of hardship and danger. The French-Canadian peasant, dragged from his meager farm by the relentless conscription to fight in a cause which promised him nothing but death or captivity, was not an ardent soldier, and the thought of a starving wife and family at home was not likely to add buoyancy to his heart or energy to his movements.

But the indomitable spirit of General Montcalm pushed forward the lagging forces, and slowly but surely concentrated them at the points selected.

A month passed away and Marden began to feel a soldier's impatience of inaction, although his captivity was lightened by his friends. De Barzac, no longer on the sick list, was in daily expectation of marching orders, while in the intervals of duty he nursed the hope that he was gaining ground in Mlle. Destain's esteem. As to Lemourier, and the danger to be feared from his secret vengeance, they were almost forgotten.

It happened one afternoon that Mrs. Vernon, while making her daily visit to the Indian families camped upon the shore, noticed a canoe drawn up on the bank, at the bottom of which lay a figure wrapped in a blanket. Softly she

raised a corner of the covering and looked at the face of the sleeper. Then she dropped it and pressed her hand upon her bosom. She stood thus for a few moments lost in thought. Then she asked one of the squaws if she knew the stranger. She shook her head and pointed to the opposite shore.

"He came from that direction, had barely strength enough to draw his bark to shore and then he lay down to sleep." The woman spoke in the low, musical tones of her race. She, too, raised a corner of the blanket and smiled sadly for the face she saw was young and handsome, but marked by fatigue and privation. The sleeper stirred and opened his eyes. They encountered those of the lady and the two gazed at each other with mutual interest.

"Come with me," said Mrs. Vernon; "you need food and rest."

The boy arose and made a gesture with his hand.

"The Great Spirit has shut his mouth!" said the squaw.

Mrs. Vernon, believing him to be a deaf mute, motioned him to follow her. Arrived at her house, she spread a bountiful meal before him, to which he applied himself with the ardor of long abstinence, and then laying his head upon the table fell asleep. Mrs. Vernon would not disturb him, wisely judging that nature was the best restorative, but she gazed at him with a troubled expression as if some long-buried hope was struggling back to life again.

The shadows of night were beginning to creep into the room when Ariel awoke and began to recall the events of the day, the central figure in which was that beautiful woman of his own blood, yet superior to all of the race whom he had ever seen. His reverie was disturbed by the sound of voices in an adjoining room; the door of which was open, and he listened because he could not help it, but soon his interest was aroused.

Mme. Chevreul was speaking: "You know, dear friend, how rejoiced we were when Lemourier departed with his command, and yet I never lost the feeling that his hatred would find some means to reach us, especially through De Barzac, who is too proud to take precautions. But I have enlisted his friend—our friend I should say—Mr. Marden, to whom I have related every thing. He is not only brave, but prudent and sagacious, and I have his promise that he will guard his friend; and as they occupy the same apartment, I feel more assured."

"And Mme. Destain?"

"Oh, she is an enigma. She is so reserved, I can not fathom her. I sometimes think she has no heart, or that she left it in France. She is more approachable to Mr. Marden; she enjoys his conversation, she smiles at his witticisms, she is charmed with his songs of love and war. If he were a vain man, he might aspire, but he is not."

"That is the reason she likes him. She is tired of lovers."

"It may be so; but it seldom happens to young girls. Ninon therefore must be an exception. And she is so proud! I am sure that De Barzac loves her, yet he does not press his suit. She freezes him."

"M. De Barzac is wise. Some day the ice will melt."

"I hope it may be so, provided nothing dreadful occurs in the interval; but I have a premonition."

"My dear friend, you are simply nervous. See, now, Lemourier is far distant; M. De Barzac is here surrounded by friends; Mme. Destain, in the bosom of your own family, is well protected—what then?"

"Ah, yes, it is true. I know that I am weak, and yet the apprehension remains."

"Dear Mme. Chevreul, you are a Christian. Remember that there is but one protector and that by His strength we stand."

The French lady kissed the jeweled cross suspended from her neck.

"Would that I had your faith," she said.

"It has been my staff of life—the firm foundation on which my weary feet have rested through years of solitude and bereavement. Seek and ye shall find."

Mme. Chevreul arose and took her departure.

After a moment's hesitation Ariel entered the apartment and bowed deeply to Mrs. Vernon.

"How handsome he is!" was her first thought, and then unconsciously aloud, "How shall I make him understand me?"

A desk with writing materials stood on the table.

Ariel took a sheet of paper and rapidly traced some lines on it, the lady looking on with a surprised smile. The difficulty was solved. An explanation followed, Ariel giving a brief sketch of his life as far as he could remember it, but strangely enough made no allusion to his twin sister. The lady questioned him eagerly about his infantine recollections, but in vain. Beyond a certain limit he could recall nothing, and with a sigh of disappointment she relinquished the hope which had flashed out for a moment on the shadow of her life.

Ariel, having learned that his master's friend was in danger, quickly inferred that Marden was involved in it, since he had promised to watch over him, and he resolved to seek him without delay. Mrs. Vernon yielded to his request, only stipulating that he was to make his home with her, and having directed him to De Barzac's quarters, permitted him to depart.

The night was dark and cloudy, but Ariel was familiar with the ground, over which he glided as silently as a ghost, guided by the lights in the officers' quarters in front of which a sentinel was pacing back and forth. Ariel decided not to disturb him, thus avoiding the annoyance of being challenged for the countersign and subsequently escorted to the guard house; he therefore waited till the man's back was turned and glided past him.

The building was only one-story high, and the rooms were arranged on corridors. They appeared to be deserted. Ariel reflected that the officers were probably visiting at the houses of their friends in the town. He tried some of the doors but they were locked. There was no alternative but to sit down and wait. Then he heard some one speak in a low key. Guided by the sound, he reached a door. It yielded to a gentle pressure; there was a glimmer of light inside, and the voice was more distinct. When had he heard it before? Holding the door ajar he listened. The tones were those of a negro, and he was speaking in French. "You three are enough; but you must make quick work and no mistakes. You know him, Jacques; if he is alone, so much the better; but if the other is with him, sacre bleu! You know your business. Strike sure. The American is not armed. He is a prisoner of war. Come, I will let you out by a window."

Their steps approached the door, which Ariel closed gently; then he glided swiftly out into the darkness and past the sentinel. How should he find his master and warn him of the plot? For such he had no doubt it was. The moon was rising and shed a faint light through the clouds, and in the distance he saw a house more brilliantly lighted than the others, and he fled in that direction. It must be Mme. Chevreul's house; there De Barzac would be with his friend, and ever as he ran the negro's voice kept ringing in his ears with a dimly familiar tone, and as his thoughts took shape it associated itself with the phantom of a stern, dark-visaged man whom he had seen during his captivity among the Indians, previous to the battle where he was rescued by Marden. He stopped suddenly; a crowd of recollections swept across his brain. The man was Lemourier, the negro his servant. The conversation he had overheard between Mrs. Vernon and her friend supplied the connecting links between the circumstances, and he sprang forward again upon his mission of life or death. He met two or three groups of officers returning to their quarters whom he would have questioned but for his inability to use other than the sign language, which they would not understand.

At length he reached the house, he looked through a window into a lighted room in which were three gentlemen and two ladies, and his heart beat tumultuously with joy when he recognized his master. The others were unknown to him. The hall door stood open and Ariel entered. For a moment some strong emotion overwhelmed him and he leaned against the wall, his hands pressed to his heart. But quickly regaining his self-control, he threw open the drawing-room door and stood before the astonished group.

"Ariel!" cried Marden, rushing forward and clasping him in his arms. "Ariel! my friend! my brother! Whence camest thou, dear boy? How didst thou find thy master?"

Ariel gently withdrew himself from the embrace. His face was flushed, his eyes flashed through the tears that could not dim their brightness. The witnesses to this strange scene gazed silently as if they beheld an unexpected and brilliant tableau vivant at the theater, and the first to recover himself was the boy. Stepping back a pace, he waved his hand to command attention, and began to talk rapidly with his fingers while the group around him looked on with growing interest.

Marden, to whom alone the sign language was intelligible, soon became absorbed in the revelation, and Mme. Chevreul observed that the smile gave place to a grave expression which anon became stern and even fierce. She had never before seen that open cheerful face put on the "wrinkled front of war," and at once returned to her "premonitions." When Ariel concluded, Marden led Major Chevreul and De Barzac aside, and briefly explained the affair. Chevreul offered to send a guard to apprehend the assassins; but the younger men objected that the guard would not know where to look for them. "Lend me a sword, Major," said Marden; "De Barzac is armed, and being on our guard, we two are more than a match for the villains."

Chevreul declared that if they would go, he would accompany them, but De Barzac argued that the brigands would not attack if the numbers were equal. It was finally agreed that Ariel should go forward as a scout and Major Chevreul follow the young men at a discreet distance. While the major took Marden with him to select a sword, De Barzac invented a plausible story to allay the apprehensions of the ladies, and then the friends took their leave.

"But where is the boy?" asked Ninon. "He is gone on before us," replied Marden.

The guests departed and the ladies were about to question Major Chevreul as to the import of Ariel's communication, when he suddenly remembered some instructions he should have given De Barzac and hurried after them.

The ladies looked at each other with anxious faces. They were not deceived. Presently a shot rang out. Mme. Chevreul arose and looked out of the window. She thought she saw figures moving in the dim light. Then came another shot not very distant. She ran upstairs hoping to get a wider view. As she looked she became sensible of a smarting sensation in her eyes which increased momentarily. She groped her way towards the rear of the house to call a servant. A confused sound came from their apartments. She pushed a door open and a volume of smoke filled with tongues of fire rushed into the room. She recoiled with a shriek of terror. It seemed to be echoed from below. Her senses began to reel, when a hand grasped hers and led her down by a back passage into the open air, and then she fainted.

When consciousness returned she found herself surrounded by her servants and others attracted thither by the conflagration. The flames poured forth from the windows, and soon the roof fell in with a mighty crash, and a shower of sparks and cinders. The once gay and happy mansion had passed away in a whirlwind of fire and left but a heap blackened ruins.

Where was Ninon Destain? Had she perished in the flames? No one knew.

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