

Literature, &c.

FROM SCRAPS AND SKETCHES, BY J. H. WILLIS.

A TALE—BY THE LAST OF THE VOYAGEURS.

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“The middle of summer had arrived, when the brigade to which I belonged halted for some days at an island in one of the many and distant lagoons or lakes, and which we voyageurs have to navigate in our wearisome course to the several trading posts in the Company’s territory. The purpose of our stay was to repair our damaged canoes, and to rest the men after a continuance of severe labour in getting over a number of toilsome portages. As is customary, we had with us a number of young men, junior clerks—adventurers in this sort of life; and who were under the control of one of the partners of the Company, accompanying and, of course, commanding the party. With this gentleman came another—a man about thirty-five years of age, particularly handsome and noble in its appearance, but repulsively stern, and gloomy in his manner—from pride and haughtiness, as was thought by the men of the brigade. He had no official connection with the business of the expedition, but merely, from a traveller’s curiosity, became the *compagnon de voyage* of our superintendent, and with whom, it was said, he was in some way connected by blood. It was moreover hinted, among the many other *on dits* dropped by the young clerks in the hearing of the men, that he was a man of superior fortune—and in fact the costly profusion of his outfit for the voyage, and his unsparing liberality of its *materiel* to the canoe men—however unpopular in his customary demeanor—told as much. He was reserved in manner, and rarely held familiar intercourse with any but his friend.—He was giving to much of solitary rambling wherever we were constrained to land; and I noticed he wrote a great deal, and drew a great many sketches on a large portfolio, which he usually had slung in a cover by his side. The wise ones with us said it was for a book which he would publish on returning to his native country, somewhere beyond the seas—and I think myself such was his intention, for he devoted much time and attention to it. He was clever in the chase: as our hunters said, when ever he accompanied them, which however was but seldom; and they gave him the credit of being as indefatigable in pursuit, and as good a shot as the best among themselves:

“We had been but a few days at our resting-place, when we were joined by another brigade of light canoes which had left Lachine within a week of our departure, and had made exertion to join us if possible on the route as it brought some despatches of consequence to our principal.

“Among some five or six young lads, newly articulated clerks to the Company, brought along by the arrival, there was one who excited the notice and interest of many of our people. He was a tall, slender boy of a beautiful countenance, though something tanned in its fairness, from exposure to the weather,—soft dark hair—which, though cut short and tarnished by neglect, was still glossy and silken—and large, sweet blue eyes of a melancholy expression that affected one strangely to look upon.—The impulse with us all, when we first saw him land on the island, was to pity him for his apparent incapability, from his youth and delicate frame of sustaining the fatigues and privations of our way of life—and of which, we knew, he had as yet experienced but a faint sample in his progress up to our present rendezvous—as the brigade to which he belonged was ably equipped for a particular service of expedition, and especially prepared for a ready surmounting of every obstacle.

“I was not by at the time—but was told that circumstances took place at the first interview of the young lad with the traveller of our party, which denoted some previous acquaintance between them; the recognition must have been attended by something peculiar; or it would not have been noticed by our rough spun fellows, generally so careless of every thing of the kind—however, they told me of what even to myself appeared strange—but which, in the bustle of our departure to resume our route, I quickly forgot.

“On quitting the island; we left the newly arrived brigade behind us, as they were to proceed on a different course from ourselves: but the young boy, noticed before, by some arrangement between the travelling gentleman and his friend, accompanied us, and was placed in the canoe to which I was attached. I could not account for it, but I never looked on this youth but I felt strongly interested for him.—He was so mild and gentle, and withal so sorrowful in his manner, and his voice when he spoke, so silvery sweet and musical—that I felt a degree of disgust even to think of his friends, if he had any, should have bound him to a description of life and pursuit, which I plainly saw, in despite of his quiet uncomplaining mood, was any thing but genial to his nature. I used to wonder much how he kept up, at all in the course our many perils and toils,—for he rarely took sufficient sustenance even to support his slender frame,—though I must confess that the best and most delicate of our commander and friend’s fare, were ever offered to his acceptance. There was some link of connexion, or former acquaintance—or it might have been a bond of kindred,—existing between this lad and our master’s companion, which though in seeming but coldly and distantly recognized by the latter, yet still evinced itself in an anxious display on his part for the youth’s accommodation and comfort during the voyage, as far as they could be secured from circumstances—but the acknowledgement of any previous friendly obligation here; and, strange to say, it was but rarely beyond this that any communication, at least as far I could perceive, was sought after by either party. Yes,—twice or thrice,—in landing and crossing the portage—they were thrown together in a kind of lonely contact,—and the result of this was a fearful agitation of the poor boy when he returned to us, and the effect of which would weigh upon him for hours. The conclusion generally drawn by the men from this, as well as other things that fell under our notice, was that the youth was some poor, or it might be, illegitimate, connexion of the rich stranger; and being placed in this way of life against his will, was pining away and breaking his heart for his far distant friends, and that his grief was increased to his young bosom by the cold and haughty demeanor of his contumely kinsman.

“How far this conclusion was well founded will be seen in the course of my story. As I have observed before, this delicate boy was placed in the same canoe with myself,—and it appeared to me, purposely for some reason or other, kept apart from the society of the other young men, to gratify his own wish I should think, for he seemed to prefer it,—and we were, from our being a light craft, ordered in attendance on the larger one in which our superintendent and friend sailed together.

“On the principle of some peculiar consideration, and which, it was evident to us all, was shewn to the lad from his first joining our party,—he was little if at all, troubled with occupation of any toilsome kind; and the bustling duties of his grade were placed in the performance of the other gentlemen of the brigade;—and with reason and kindness was this attention shown him for he was not competent to much of physical exertion,—and I could plainly see that even the ordinary routine of our fatiguing voyage was gradually enfeebling him.—Poor boy!—he would sit, day after day, silent and sad in the canoe, with his gaze ever fixed on the one before us containing the person of the traveller, and rarely displayed an interest in any other object.—And often, too, I noticed in the silent evening hour,—whose stillness would occasionally be broken by a merry strain from a leading canoe, and all within hearing kept a melodious chorus, as they passed swiftly on and the paddles threw the blue waves in showering sparkles behind us—and the sweet moonlight lit up our watery way, while we were yet miles from the proposed encampment of the night.—Then, I particularly remarked that the beautiful eyes of this interesting youth were bathed in tears, as he would fix them for a moment on the soft bright moon above him,—and then drop them to their customary gaze on that one form, from which, whenever in sight, were rarely removed. Perhaps the moment and the scene brought the memory of other and happier days vividly before him;—or it might have been the sense of a fearful and dreary loneliness in the wild and solitary desert we were traversing,—and to

one so young and so timidly gentle, the recollections of a happy home and affectionate kindred, must, in such a situation, have been withering in the extreme.

“A fortnight has elapsed since the time and place with which I have commenced my narration, and we were yet within a week’s progress of the post which was the ultimate object of our route. One fine evening, after a day spent in getting our canoes over a lengthy and rocky portage, we encamped at the mouth of a lovely little lake, almost immediately above the commencement of a series of dreadful Chutes or waterfalls, where its waters narrowed to the river channel and to escape which had been the object of our labours. The weather was genial and serene, and the moon shone with the pure and mellow brilliancy it sheds to night; and the scene was so tempting and lovely, that, preferring to enjoy it in a solitary ramble rather than the repose of a hard bed under an upturned canoe, I directed my steps along the wooden ridge, rising loftily behind our camp fires, in the direction of the roaring falls and whirlpools below. I had noticed, during the whole of the day, that the youthful *commis* was more than usually depressed and agitated. Our march along the portage had more than once thrown him in contact with his supposed kinsman, and it appeared to me the result of this singularly affected either party. Musing on the probable cause of this, and the strangely acknowledged connexion between these two and somewhat mysterious beings,—I wandered on till the roaring of the falls, loudly and closely echoing around me in the wood, drew my steps to the river’s bank, to view their moonlight appearance. As I approached the spot, I fancied, amid the whirling din and tumult of the raging waters, I heard a voice as if of plaint and anguish—and on emerging from the forest, my eyes rested on that which startled and surprised me much.

“Just below me was a kind of table rock, overhanging the principal cataract, which boiled and thundered furiously at a distance beneath, and where horrid and craggy breakers would be seen with their black points at times grimly and fearfully displayed through the curling foam. The place was open to the clear light of the moon; and as I hesitatingly stood concealed by the trunk of a large tree, I had a full view of the persons of the traveller and the young boy as they stood on the shelving surface of the precipice.—I could not get from the roaring of the furious flood so near, distinguish any distinct speech,—but the impassioned gestures of both indicated discussion violently animated and impressive in its nature.—The fair boy clung in a sort of agony to the stranger’s arm, with his beautiful face turned with an imploring look up to the fine but darkening and fierce features of the other.—A repulsive motion from the latter forced him rudely away; and when, whether a voluntary act or through weakness, he sank upon his knees on the flinty rock, and I plainly saw the glittering of some weapon in the traveller’s hand,—and the youth tore open his slight vest to bare his breast to the threatening doom—then, then indeed the revealed bosom told the story of this mystery at once.—It was fond and injured woman baring her bleeding but devoted heart to the last and closing cruelty of her destroyer.

“He gazed for a few moments with a kind of pitying indecision on the kneeling form of the beautiful being before him; and while he did so, I saw him relax his menaced violence of his outstretched hand, and at length cast the dagger or pistol from him in the leaping surges below. Possibly, he relented him of his fell intent; at least it seemed to me that he did so, for the instant his hand passed over the fair brow of the supplicating girl, and his eyes softened in their steady fast glance upon her loveliness;—but it was only the deception of a passing kindly and humanized impulse, for the next moment, he fiercely caught up the slight and yielding form of his victim, which seemed like an infant in a giant’s grasp, as he rushed to the edge of the rock, and furiously hurled her into the roaring and raging destruction beneath—and that wild and fearfully horrid shriek, which she gave, and I heard so distinctly above the frantic din of the tumbling flood, haunted me sleeping and waking, as did the cruel act which gave it birth, for years and years afterwards.

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