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MARIANSON

From "Mackinac And Lake Stories", 1899

By Mary Hartwell Catherwood

When the British landed on the west side of Mackinac Island at three o'clock in the morning of July 17,1812, Canadians were ordered to transport the cannon. They had only a pair of six-pounders, but these had to be dragged across the long alluvial stretch to heights which would command the fortress, and sand, rock, bushes, trees, and fallen logs made it a dreadful portage. Voyageurs, however, were men to accomplish what regulars and Indians shirked.

All but one of the hundred and sixty Canadians hauled with a good will on the cannon ropes. The dawn was glimmering. Paradise hid in the untamed island, breathing dew and spice. The spell worked instantly upon that one young voyageur whose mind was set against the secret attack. All night his rage had been swelling. He despised the British regulars-forty-two lords of them only being in this expedition-as they in turn despised his class. They were his conquerors. He had no desire to be used as means of pushing their conquest further. These islanders he knew to be of his own race, perhaps crossed with Chippewa blood.

Seven hundred Indians, painted and horned for war, skulked along as allies in the dim morning twilight. He thought of sleeping children roused by tomahawk and scalping-knife in case the surprised fort did not immediately surrender. Even then, how were a few hundred white men to restrain nearly a thousand savages?

The young Canadian, as a rush was made with the ropes, stumbled over a log and dropped behind a bush. His nearest companions scarcely noticed the desertion in their strain, but the officer instantly detailed an Indian.

"One of you Sioux bring that fellow back or bring his scalp."

A Sioux stretched forward and leaped eagerly into the woods. All the boy's years of wilderness training were concentrated on an escape. The English officer meant to make him a lesson to the other voyageurs. And he smiled as he thought of the race he could give the Sioux. All his arms except his knife were left behind the bush; for fleet-ness was to count in this venture. The game of life or death was a pretty one, to be enjoyed as he shot from tree to tree, or like a noiseless-hoofed deer made a long stretch of covert. He was alive through every blood drop. The dewy glory of dawn had never seemed so great. Cool as the Sioux whom he dodged, his woodsman's eye gathered all aspects of the strange forest. A detached rock, tall as a tree, raised its colossal altar, surprising the eye like a single remaining temple pillar.

Old logs, scaled as in a coat of mail, testified to the humidity of this lush place. The boy trod on sweet white violets smelling of incense.

The wooded deeps unfolded in thinning dusk and revealed a line of high verdant cliffs walling his course.

He dashed through hollows where millions of ferns bathed him to the knees. As daylight grew—though it never was quite daylight there-so did his danger. He expected to hear the humming of an arrow, and perhaps to feel a shock and sting and cleaving of the bolt, and turned in recklessly to climb for the uplands, where after miles of jutting spurs the ridge stooped and pushed out in front of itself a round-topped rock. As the Canadian passed this rock a yellow flare like candle-light came through a crack at its base.

He dropped on all-fours. The Indian was not in sight. He squirmed within a low battlement of serrated stone guarding the crack, and let himself down into what appeared to be the mouth of a cave. The opening was so low as to be invisible just outside the serrated breastwork. He found himself in a room of rock, irregularly hollow above, with a candle burning on the stone floor. As he sat upright and stretched forth a hand to pinch off the flame, the image of a sleeping woman was printed on his eyeballs so that he saw every careless ring of fair hair around her head and every curve of her body for hours afterwards in the dusk.

His first thought was to place himself where his person would intercept any attack at the mouth of the cave. Knife in hand, he waited for a horned, glittering-eyed face to stoop or an arrow or hatchet to glance under that low rim, the horizon of his darkness. His chagrin at having taken to a trap and drawn danger on a woman was poignant; the candle had caught him like a moth, and a Sioux would keenly follow. Still, no lightest step betrayed the Sioux's knowledge of his whereabouts. A long time passed before he relaxed to an easy posture and turned to the interior of the cave.

The drip of a veiled water-vein at the rear made him conscious of thirst, but the sleeping woman was in the way of his creeping to take a drink. Wrapped in a fur robe, she lay breathing like an infant, white-skinned, full-throated, and vigorous, a woman older than himself.

"SHE LAY BREATHING LIKE AN INFANT"

The consequences of her waking did not threaten him as perilous. Without reasoning, he was convinced that a woman who lay down to sleep beside a burning candle in this wild place would make no outcry when she awoke and found the light had drawn instead of kept away possible cave-inhabitants. Day grew beyond the low sill and thinned obscurity around him, showing the swerve of the roof to a sloping shelf. Perspiration cooled upon him and he shivered. A fire and a breakfast would have been good things, which he had often enjoyed in danger. Rowing all night, and landing cannon at the end of it, and running a league or more for life, exhausted a man.

The woman stirred, and the young voyageur thought of dropping his knife back into its sheath. At the slight click she sat up, drawing in her breath.

He whispered: “Do not be afraid. I have not come in here to hurt you.”

She was staring at him, probably taking him for some monster of the dark.

“Have you anything here to eat?”

The woman resumed her suspended breath, and answered in the same guarded way, and in French like his: “Yes. I come to this part of the island so of ten that I have put bread and meat and candles in the cave. How did you find it? No one but myself knew about it.”

“I saw the candle-light.”

“The candle was to keep off evil spirits. It has been blown out. Where did you come from?”

“From St. Joseph Island last night with the English. They have taken the island by surprise.”

She unexpectedly laughed in a repressed gurgle, as a faun or other woods creature might have laughed at the predicaments of men.

“I am thinking of the stupid American soldiers—to lie asleep and let the British creep in upon them. But have you seen my cow? I searched everywhere, until the moon went down and I was tired to death, for my cow.”

“No, I saw no cow. I had the Sioux to watch.”

“What Sioux?”

“The Indian our commandant sent after me. Speak low. He may be listening outside.”

They themselves listened.

“If Indians have come on the island they will kill all the cattle.”

“There are the women and children and men—even poor voyageurs—for them to kill first.”

She gasped, “Is it war?”

“Yes, it is war.”

“I never have seen war. Why did you come here?”

“I did not want to, mademoiselle, and I deserted. That is why the Indian was sent after me.”

“Do not call me mademoiselle. I am Marianson Bruelle, the widow of André Chenier. Our houses will be burned, and our gardens trampled, and our boats stolen.”

“Not if the fort surrenders.”

Again they harkened to the outside world in suspense. The deserter had expected to hear cannon before sunlight so slowly crept under the cave's lip. It was as if they sat within a colossal skull, broad between the ears but narrowing towards the top, with light coming through the parted mouth. Accustomed to the soft twilight, the two could see each other, and the woman covertly put her dress in order while she talked.

More than fearlessness, even a kind of maternal passion, moved her. She searched in the back of the cave and handed her strange guest food, and gathered him a birch cup of water from the dripping rock. The touch of his fingers sent a new vital thrill through her. Two may talk together under the same roof for many years, yet never really meet; and two others at first speech are old friends. She did not know this young voyageur, yet she began to claim him.

He was so tired that the tan of his cheek turned leaden in the cave gloom. She rose from her bearskin and spread it for him, when he finished eating.

“You cannot go out now,” he whispered, when he saw her intention. “The Sioux is somewhere in the woods watching for me. The Indians came on this island for scalps. You will not be safe, even in the fort, until the fight is over, or until night comes again.”

Marianson, standing convinced by what he said, was unable to take her eyes off him. Mass seemed always irksome to her in spite of the frequent changes of posture and her conviction that it was good for her soul. She was at her happiest plunging through woods or panting up cliffs which squaws dared not scale. Yet enforced hiding with a stranger all day in the cave was assented to by this active sylvan creature. She had not a word to say against it, and the danger of going out was her last thought. The cavern's mouth was a very awkward opening to crawl through, especially if an Indian should catch one in the act. There was nothing to do but to sit down and wait.

A sigh of pleasure, as at inhaling the spirit of a flower, escaped her lips. This lad, whose presence she knew she would feel without seeing if he came into church behind her, innocent of the spell he was casting, still sat guarding the entrance, though the droop of utter weariness relaxed every posture. Marianson bade him lie down on the fur robe, and imperiously arranged her lap to hold his head.

“I am maman to you. I say to you sleep, and you shall sleep.”

The appealing and thankful eyes of the boy were closed almost as soon as he crept upon the robe and his head sunk in its comfortable pillow. Marianson braced her back against the wall and dropped her hands at her sides. Occasionally she glanced at the low rim of light. No Indian could enter without lying flat. She had little dread of the Sioux.

Every globule which fell in darkness from the rock recorded, like the sand grain of an hour-glass, some change in Marianson.

“I not care for anybody, me,” had been her boast when she tantalized soldiers on the village street. Her gurgle of laughter, and the hair blowing on her temples from under the blanket she drew around her face, worked havoc in Mackinac. To her men were merely useful objects, like cows, or houses, or gardens, or boats. She hugged the social liberty of a woman who had safely passed through matrimony and widowhood. Married to old André Chenier by her parents, that he might guard her after their death, she loathed the thought of another wearisome tie, and called it veneration of his departed spirit. He left her a house, a cow, and a boat. Accustomed to work for him, she found it much easier to work for herself when he was gone, and resented having young men hang around desiring to settle in her house. She laughed at every proposal a father or mother made her. No family on the island could get her, and all united in pointing her out as a bad pattern for young women.

A bloom like the rose flushing of early maidenhood came over Marianson with her freedom. Isolated and daring and passionless, she had no conception of the scandal she caused in the minds of those who carried the burdens of the community, but lived like a bird of the air. Wives who bore children and kept the pot boiling found it hard to see her tiptoeing over cares which swallowed them. She did not realize that maids desired to marry and she took their lovers from them.

But knowledge grew in her as she sat holding the stranger's head in her lap, though it was not a day on which to trouble one's self with knowledge. There was only the forest's voice outside, that ceaseless majestic hymn of the trees, accompanied by the shore ripple, which was such a little way off. Languors like the sweet languors of spring came over her. She was happier than she had ever been before in her life.

“It is delicious,” she thought. “I have been in the cave many times, but it will never be like this again.”

And it was a strange joy to find the touch of a human being something to delight in. There was sweet wickedness in it; penance might have to follow. What would the curé say if he saw her? To amuse one's self with soldiers and islanders was one thing; to sit tranced all day in a cave with a stranger must be another.

There was a rough innocence in his relaxed body—beautiful as the virgin softness of a girl. Under the spell of his unconscious domination, she did not care about his past. Her own past was nothing. She had arrived in the present. Time stood still. His face was turned towards her, and she studied all its curves, yet knew if he had other features he would still be the one person in the world who could so draw her. What was the power? Had women elsewhere felt it? At that thought she had a pang of anguish and rage altogether new to her.

Marianson was tender even in her amusements; her benevolence extended to dumb cattle; but in the hidden darkness of her consciousness she found herself choosing the Sioux for him, rather than a woman.

Once he half raised his head, but again let it sink to its rest. Marianson grew faint; and as the light waned at the cave mouth she remembered she had not eaten anything that day. The fast made her seem fit to say prayers, and she said all she knew over his head, like a mother brooding.

He startled her by sitting up, without warning, fully roused and alert.

“What time is it?” inquired the boy.

“Look at the door. The sun has long been behind the trees.”

“Have I slept all day?”

“Perhaps.”

“And have you heard no sound of battle?”

“It has been still as the village street during mass.”

“What, then, have they done, those English? They must have taken the fort without firing a gun. And the Sioux-you have not seen him?”

“Nothing has passed the cave door, not even a chipmunk.”

He stretched his arms upward into the hollow, standing tall and well made, his buckskin shirt turned back from his neck.

“I am again hungry.”

“I also,” said Marianson. “I have not eaten anything to-day.”

Her companion dropped on his knees before her and took out of her hands the food she had ready. His face expressed shame and compunction as he fed her himself, offering bites to her mouth with gentle persistence. She laughed the laugh peculiar to herself, and pushed his hand back to his own lips. So they ate together, and afterwards drank from the same cup. Marianson showed him where the drops came down, and he gathered them, smiling at her from the depths of the cave. They heard the evening cawing of crows, and the waters rushing with a wilder wash on the beach.

“I will bring more bread and meat when I come back,” promised Marianson—“unless the English have burned the house.”

“No. When it is dark I will leave the cave myself,” said the voyageur. “Is there any boat near by that I can take to escape in from the island?”

“There is my boat. But it is at the post.”

“How far are we from the post?”

“It is not so far if one might cross the island; but to go by the west shore, which would be safest, perhaps, in time of war, that is the greater part of the island's girth.”

They drew near together as they murmured, and at intervals he held the cup to her lips, making up for his forgetfulness when benumbed with sleep.

“One has but to follow the shore, however,” said the boy. “And where can I find the boat?”

“You cannot find it at all.”

“But,” he added, with sudden recollection, “I could never return it again.”

Marianson saw on the cave's rough wall a vision of her boat carrying him away. Her own little craft, the sail of which she knew how to trim—her bird, her flier, her food-winner—was to become her robber.

“When the war is over,” she ventured, “then you might come back.”

He began to explain difficulties like an honest lad, and she stopped him. “I do not want to know anything. I want you to take my boat.”

He put the cup down and seized her hands and kissed them. She crouched against the cave's side, her eyes closed. If he was only grateful to her for bread and shelter and means of escape, it was little enough she received, but his warm touch and his lips on her palms—for he kissed her palms—made her none the less dizzy.

“Listen to me,” said Marianson. “If I give you my boat, you must do exactly as I bid you.”

“I promise.”

“You must stay here until I bring it to you. I am going at once.”

“But you cannot go alone in the dark. You are a woman—you will be afraid.”

“Never in my life have I been afraid.”

“But there are Indians on the war-path now.”

“They will be in camp or drunk at the post. Your Sioux has left this part of the island. He may come back by morning, but he would not camp away from so much plunder. Sioux cannot be unlike our Chippewas. Do you think,” demanded Marianson, “that you will be quite, quite safe in the cave?”

Her companion laughed.

“If I find the cave unsafe I can leave it; but you in the dark alone—you must let me go with you.”

“No; the risk is too great. It is better for me to go alone. I know every rock, every bend of the shore. The pull back around the island will be hardest, if there is not enough wind.”

“I go with you,” decided the boy.

“But you gave me your promise to do exactly as I bade you. I am older than you,” said Marianson.

“I know what is best, and that is that you remain here until I come. Swear to me that you will.”

He was silent, beseeching her with his eyes to relent. Then, owning her right to dominate, he pledged her by the name of his saint to do as she required.

Their forced companionship, begun at daylight, was ending as darkness crept through the cavern's mouth.

They waited, and those last moments of silence, while they leaned to look closely at each other with the night growing between them, were a benediction on the day.

Marianson stooped to creep through the cavern's mouth, but once more she turned and looked at him, and it was she herself who stretched appealing arms. The boy's shyness and the woman's aversion to men vanished as in fire. They stood together in the hollow of the cave in one long embrace. He sought her mouth and kissed her, and, suffocating with joy, she escaped through the low door.

Indifferent to the Indian who might be dogging her, she drew her strip of home-spun around her face and ran, moccasined and deft-footed, over the stones, warm, palpitating, and laughing, full of physical hardihood. In the woods, on her left, she knew there were rocks splashed with stain black as ink and crusted with old lichens. On her right white-caps were running before the west wind and diving like ducks on the strait. She crossed the threads of a brook ravelling themselves from density. For the forest was a mask. But Marianson knew well the tricks of that brook—its pellucid shining on pebbles, its cascades, its hidings underground of all but a voice and a crystal pool. Wet to her knees, she had more than once followed it to its source amid such greenery of moss and logs as seemed a conflagration of verdure.

The many points and bays of the island sped behind her, and cliffs crowded her to the water's edge or left her a dim moving object on a lonesome beach. Sometimes she heard sounds in the woods and listened; on the other hand, she had the companionship of stars and moving water. On that glorified journey Marianson's natural fearlessness carried her past the Devil's Kitchen and quite near the post before she began to consider how it was best to approach a place which might be in the hands of an enemy. Her boat was tied at the dock. She had the half-ruined distillery yet to pass. It had stood under the cliff her lifetime. As she drew nearer, cracks of light and a hum like the droning of a beehive magically turned the old distillery into a caravansary of spirits.

Nothing in her long tramp had startled her like this. It was a relief to hear the click of metal and a strange-spoken word, and to find herself face to face with an English soldier. He made no parley, but marched her before him; and the grateful noise of squalling babies and maternal protests and Maman Pelott's night lullaby also met her as they proceeded towards the distillery.

The long dark shed had a chimney-stack and its many-coiled still in one end. Beside that great bottle-shaped thing, at the base of the chimney, was an open fireplace piled with flaming sticks, and this had made the luminous crevices. All Mackinac village was gathered within the walls, and Marian-son beheld a camp supping, putting children to bed on blankets in corners, sitting and shaking fingers at one another in wrathful council, or running about in search of lost articles. The curé was there, keeping a restraint on his people. Clothes hung on spikes like rows of suicides in the weird light. Even fiddlers and jollity were not lacking. A heavier race would have come to blows in that strait enclosure, but these French and half-breeds, in danger of scalping if the Indians proved turbulent, dried their eyes after losses, and shook their legs ready for a dance at the scraping of a violin.

Little Ignace Pelott was directly pulling at Mari-anson's petticoat to get attention.

“De Ingins kill our 'effer,” he lamented, in the mongrel speech of the quarter-breed. “Dey didn't need him; dey have plenty to eat. But dey kill our 'effer and laugh.”

“My cow, is it also killed, Ignace?”

Marianson's neighbors closed around her, unsurprised at her late arrival, filled only with the general calamity. Old men's pipe smoke mingled with odors of food; and when the English soldier had satisfied himself that she belonged to this caldron of humanity, he lifted the corners of his nose and returned to open air and guard duty.

The fort had been surrendered without a shot, to save the lives of the villagers, and they were all hurried to the distillery and put under guard. They would be obliged to take the oath of allegiance to England, or leave the island. Michael Dousman, yet held in the enemy's camp, was fiercely accused of bringing the English upon them. No, Marianson could not go to the village, or even to the dock.

Everybody offered her food. A boat she did not ask for. The high cobwebby openings of the distillery looked on a blank night sky. Marianson felt her happiness jarred as the wonderful day came to such limits. The English had the island. It might be searched for that young deserter waiting for her help, and if she failed to get a boat, what must be his fate?

She had entered the west door of the distillery. She found opportunity to slip out on the east side, for it was necessary to reach the dock and get a boat. She might risk being scalped, but a boat at any cost she would have, and one was sent her—as to the fearless and determined all their desires are sent. She heard the thump of oars in rowlocks, bringing the relief guard, and with a swish, out of the void of the lake a keel ran upon pebbles.

So easy had been the conquest of the island, the British regular found his amusement in his duty, and a boat was taken from the dock to save half a mile of easy marching. It stood empty and waiting during a lax minute, while the responsibility of guarding was shifted; but perhaps being carelessly beached, though there was no tide on the strait, it drifted away.

Marianson, who had helped it drift, lay flat on the bottom and heard the rueful oaths of her enemies, forced to march back to the post. There was no sail. She steered by a trailing oar until lighted distillery and black cliff receded and it was safe for her to fix her sculls and row with all her might.

She was so tired her heart physically ached when she slipped through dawn to a landing opposite the cave. There would be no more yesterdays, and there would be no time for farewells. The wash which drove her roughly to mooring drove with her the fact that she did not know even the name of the man she was about to give up.

Marianson turned and looked at the water he must venture upon, without a sail to help him. It was not all uncovered from the night, but a long purple current ran out, as if God had made a sudden amethyst bridge across the blue strait.

Reluctant as she was to call him from the cave, she dared not delay. The breath of the virgin woods was

overpoweringly sweet. Her hair clung to her forehead in moist rings, and her cheeks were pallid and wet with mist which rose and rose on all sides like clouds in a holy picture.

He was asleep.

She crouched down on cold hands and saw that. He had waited in the cave as he promised, and had fallen asleep. His back was towards her. Instead of lying at ease, his body was flexed. Her enlarging pupils caught a stain of red on the bear-skin, then the scarlet tonsure on his crown. He was asleep, but the Sioux had been there.

The low song of wind along that wooded ridge, and the roar of dashing lake water, repeated their monotone hour after hour. It proved as fair a day as the island had ever seen, and when it was nearly spent, Marianson Bruelle still sat on the cave floor holding the dead boy in her arms. Heart-uprooting was a numbness, like rapture. At least he could not leave her. She had his kiss, his love. She had his body, to hide in a grave as secret as a flower's. The curé could some time bless it, but the English who had slain him should never know it. As she held him to her breast, so the sweet processes of the woods should hold him, and make him part of the island.

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