

# The Strange Guests

By Anonymous

Many years ago there lived, near the borders of Lake Superior, a noted hunter, who had a wife and one child. His lodge stood in a remote part of the forest, several days' journey from that of any other person. He spent his days in hunting, and his evenings in relating to his wife the incidents that had befallen him in the chase. As game was very abundant, he seldom failed to bring home in the evening an ample store of meat to last them until the succeeding evening; and while they were seated by the fire in his lodge partaking the fruits of his day's labour, he entertained his wife with conversation, or by occasionally relating those tales, or enforcing those precepts, which every good Indian esteems necessary for the instruction of his wife and children. Thus, far removed from all sources of disquiet, surrounded by all they deemed necessary to their comfort, and happy in one another's society, their lives passed away in cheerful solitude and sweet contentment. The breast of the hunter had never felt the compunctions of remorse, for he was a just man in all his dealings. He had never violated the laws of his tribe by encroaching upon the hunting-grounds of his neighbours, by taking that which did not belong to him, or by any act calculated to displease the village chiefs or offend the Great Spirit. His chief ambition was to support his family with a sufficiency of food and skins by his own unaided exertions, and to share their happiness around his cheerful fire at night. The white man had not yet taught them that blankets and clothes were necessary to their comfort, or that guns could be used in the killing of game.

The life of the Chippewa hunter peacefully glided away.

One evening during the winter season, it chanced that he remained out later than usual, and his wife sat lonely in the lodge, and began to be agitated with fears lest some accident had be- 3 fallen him. Darkness had already fallen. She listened attentively to hear the sound of coming footsteps; but nothing could be heard but the wind mournfully whistling around the sides of the lodge. Time passed away while she remained in this state of suspense, every moment augmenting her fears and adding to her disappointment.

Suddenly she heard the sound of approaching footsteps upon the frozen surface of the snow. Not doubting that it was her husband, she quickly unfastened the loop which held, by an inner fastening, the skin door of the lodge, and throwing it open she saw two strange women standing before it. Courtesy left the hunter's wife no time for deliberation. She invited the strangers to enter and warm themselves, thinking, from the distance to the nearest neighbours, they must have walked a considerable way. When they were entered she invited them to remain. They seemed to be total strangers to that part of the country, and the more closely she observed them the more curious the hunter's wife became respecting her guests.

No efforts could induce them to come near the fire. They took their seats in a remote part of the lodge, and drew their garments about them in such a manner as to almost completely hide their faces. They seemed shy and reserved, and when a glimpse could be had of their faces they appeared pale, even of a deathly hue. Their eyes were bright but sunken: their cheekbones were prominent, and their persons slender and emaciated.

Seeing that her guests avoided conversation as well as observation, the woman forbore to question them, and sat in silence until her husband entered. He had been led further than usual in

the pursuit of game, but had returned with the carcass of a large and fat deer. The moment he entered the lodge, the mysterious women exclaimed:

“Behold! what a fine and fat animal!” and they immediately ran and pulled off pieces of the whitest fat, which they ate with avidity.

Such conduct appeared very strange to the hunter, but supposing the strangers had been a long time without food, he made no remark; and his wife, taking example from her husband, likewise restrained herself.

On the following evening the same scene was repeated. The hunter brought home the best portions of the game he had killed, and while he was laying it down before his wife, according to custom, the two strange women came quickly up, tore off large pieces of fat, and ate them with greediness. Such behaviour might well have aroused the hunter’s displeasure; but the deference due to strange guests induced him to pass it over in silence.

Observing the parts to which the strangers were most partial, the hunter resolved the next day to anticipate their wants by cutting off and tying up a portion of the fat for each. This he did: and having placed the two portions of fat upon the top of his burden, as soon as he entered the lodge he gave to each stranger the part that was hers. Still the guests appeared to be dissatisfied, and took more from the carcass lying before the wife.

Except for this remarkable behaviour, the conduct of the guests was unexceptionable, although marked by some peculiarities. They were quiet, modest, and discreet. They maintained a cautious silence during the day, neither uttering a word nor moving from the lodge. At night they would get up, and, taking those implements which were then used in breaking and preparing wood, repair to the forest. Here they would busy themselves in seeking dry branches and pieces of trees blown down by the wind. When a sufficient quantity had been gathered to last until the succeeding night they carried it home upon their shoulders. Then carefully putting everything in its place within the lodge, they resumed their seats and their studied silence. They were always careful to return from their labours before the dawn of day, and were never known to stay out beyond that hour. In this manner they repaid, in some measure, the kindness of the hunter, and relieved his wife from one of her most laborious duties.

Thus nearly the whole year passed away, every day leading to some new development of character which served to endear the parties to each other. The visitors began to assume a more hale and healthy aspect; their faces daily lost something of that deathly hue which had at first marked them, and they visibly improved in strength, and threw off some of that cold reserve and forbidding austerity which had kept the hunter so long in ignorance of their true character.

One evening the hunter returned very late after having spent the day in toilsome exertion, and having laid the produce of his hunt at his wife’s feet, the silent women seized it and began to tear off the fat in such an unceremonious manner that the wife could no longer control her feelings of disgust, and said to herself:

“This is really too bad. How can I bear it any longer?”

She did not, however, put her thought into words, but an immediate change was observed in the two visitors. They became unusually reserved, and showed evident signs of being uneasy in their situation. The good hunter immediately perceived this change, and, fearful that they had taken offence, as soon as they had retired demanded of his wife whether any harsh expression had escaped her lips during the day. She replied that she had uttered nothing to give the least offence. The hunter tried to compose himself to sleep, but he felt restive and uneasy, for he could hear the sighs and lamentations of the two strangers. Every moment added to his conviction that

his guests had taken some deep offence; and, as he could not banish this idea from his mind, he arose, and, going to the strangers, thus addressed them:

“Tell me, ye women, what is it that causes you pain of mind, and makes you utter these unceasing sighs? Has my wife given you any cause of offence during the day while I was absent in the chase? My fears persuade me that, in some unguarded moment, she has forgotten what is due to the rights of hospitality, and used expressions ill-befitting the mysterious character you sustain. Tell me, ye strangers from a strange country, ye women who appear not to be of this world, what it is that causes you pain of mind, and makes you utter these unceasing sighs.”

They replied that no unkind expression had ever been used towards them during their residence in the lodge, that they had received all the affectionate attention they could reasonably expect.

“It is not for ourselves,” they continued, “it is not for ourselves that we weep. We are weeping for the fate of mankind; we are weeping for the fate of mortals whom Death awaits at every stage of their existence. Proud mortals, whom disease attacks in youth and in age. Vain men, whom hunger pinches, cold benumbs, and poverty emaciates. Weak beings, who are born in tears, who are nurtured in tears, and whose whole course is marked upon the thirsty sands of life in a broad line of tears. It is for these we weep.

“You have spoken truly, brother; we are not of this world. We are spirits from the land of the dead, sent upon the earth to try the sincerity of the living. It is not for the dead but for the living that we mourn. It was by no means necessary that your wife should express her thoughts to us. We knew them as soon as they were formed. We saw that for once displeasure had arisen in her heart. It is enough. Our mission is ended. We came but to try you, and we knew before we came that you were a kind husband, an affectionate father, and a good friend. Still, you have the weaknesses of a mortal, and your wife is wanting in our eyes; but it is not alone for you we weep, it is for the fate of mankind.

“Often, very often, has the widower exclaimed, ‘O Death, how cruel, how relentless thou art to take away my beloved friend in the spring of her youth, in the pride of her strength, and in the bloom of her beauty! If thou wilt permit her once more to return to my abode, my gratitude shall never cease; I will raise up my voice continually to thank the Master of Life for so excellent a boon. I will devote my time to study how I can best promote her happiness while she is permitted to remain; and our lives shall roll away like a pleasant stream through a flowing valley!’ Thus also has the father prayed for his son, the mother for her daughter, the wife for her husband, the sister for her brother, the lover for his mistress, the friend for his bosom companion, until the sounds of mourning and the cries of the living have pierced the very recesses of the dead.

“The Great Spirit has at length consented to make a trial of the sincerity of these prayers by sending us upon the earth. He has done this to see how we should be received—coming as strangers, no one knowing from where. Three moons were allotted to us to make the trial, and if, during that time, no impatience had been evinced, no angry passions excited at the place where we took up our abode, all those in the land of spirits, whom their relatives had desired to return, would have been restored. More than two moons have already passed, and as soon as the leaves began to bud our mission would have been successfully terminated. It is now too late. Our trial is finished, and we are called to the pleasant fields whence we came.

“Brother, it is proper that one man should die to make room for another. Otherwise, the world would be filled to overflowing. It is just that the goods gathered by one should be left to be divided among others; for in the land of spirits there is no want, there is neither sorrow nor hunger, pain nor death. Pleasant fields, filled with game spread before the eye, with birds of beautiful form. Every stream has good fish in it, and every hill is crowned with groves of fruit-

trees, sweet and pleasant to the taste. It is not here, brother, but there that men begin truly to live. It is not for those who rejoice in those pleasant groves but for you that are left behind that we weep.

“Brother, take our thanks for your hospitable treatment. Regret not our departure. Fear not evil. Thy luck shall still be good in the chase, and there shall ever be a bright sky over thy lodge. Mourn not for us, for no corn will spring up from tears.”

The spirits ceased, but the hunter had no power over his voice to reply. As they had proceeded in their address he saw a light gradually beaming from their faces, and a blue vapour filled the lodge with an unnatural light. As soon as they ceased, darkness gradually closed around. The hunter listened, but the sobs of the spirits had ceased. He heard the door of his tent open and shut, but he never saw more of his mysterious visitors.

The success promised him was his. He became a celebrated hunter, and never wanted for anything necessary to his ease. He became the father of many boys, all of whom grew up to manhood, and health, peace, and long life were the rewards of his hospitality.