

SHORT STORY AMERICA

THE INDIAN SPRING

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ONE OF the adventures of my life upon which I have since oftenest reflected, and concerning which my imagination is most inclined to dispute the dictates of my reason, happened many years ago, when, quite a young man, I made an excursion into the interior of the State of New York and passed a few days in the region whose waters flow into the east branch of the Susquehanna. My readers will easily judge for themselves whether what I am going to relate can be accounted for from natural causes. For my own part, however, so vivid is the impression it has left upon my mind, and so difficult is it with me to distinguish my recollections of it from that of the absolute realities of my life, that I find it the easier belief to ascribe it to a cause above nature.

I think I have elsewhere intimated that I have great sympathy with believers in the supernatural. Theoretically, I am as much a philosopher, and have as little of what is commonly called superstition about me, as most persons of my acquaintance, but the luxury of a little superstition in practice, the strong and active play into which it calls the imagination, the fine thrill it sends through the veins, the alternate gushes of fear and courage that come over us when under its influence, are too agreeable a relief from the dull realities of the material world to be readily given up. My own individual experience also makes me indulgent to those whose credulity in these matters exceeds my own. Is it to be wondered at that the dogmas of philosophy should not gain credit when they have the testimony of our own senses against them? You say that this evidence is often counterfeited by the tricks of fancy, the hallucinations of the nerves, and by our very dreams. You are right – but who shall in all cases distinguish the false experience from the true?

The part of the country of which I am speaking had just been invaded by the footsteps of cultivation. Openings had been made here and there in the great natural forest, log houses had been built, the farmers were gathering in their first crops of tall grass, and the still taller harvests of wheat and rye stood up by the side of the woods in the clearings. It was then the month of June, and I sallied forth from my lodgings at a paltry log tavern to ramble in the woods with a friend of mine who had come with me from New York. We set out amid the warblings of the birds, scarce waiting for the dew to be dried up from the herbage. I carried a fowling-piece on my shoulder, not that I meant to be the death of any living creature that fine morning when everything seemed so happy, but because such a visible pretext for a stroll in the woods and fields satisfies at once the curiosity of those whom you meet and saves you often a world of staring, and sometimes not a few impertinent questions. I hold it right and fair to kill game late in the autumn, when the animal has had his feast of fruits and nuts and is

left with a prospect of a long, hard, uncomfortable winter before him and the dangers of being starved to death. But to take his life in the spring, or the beginning of summer, when he has so many fine sunny months of frolic and plenty before him – it is gratuitous cruelty, and I have ever religiously abstained from it.

My companion was much more corpulent than I, and as slow a walker as I was a fast one. However, he good-naturedly exerted himself to keep up with me, and I made more than one attempt to moderate my usual speed for his accommodation. The effort worried us both. At length he fairly gave out, and bringing the butt of his fowling-piece smartly to the ground, stood still, with both hands grasping the muzzle.

“I beg,” said he, “that you will go on at your own pace. I promise faithfully not to stir from the spot till you are fairly out of sight.”

“But I am very willing to walk slower.”

“No,” rejoined my friend, “we did not set out together for the purpose of making each other uncomfortable, nor will we, if I can help it. Here we have been fretting and chafing each other for half an hour. Why, it is like yoking an ox with a race-horse. Go on, I beseech you, while I stop to recover my wind. I wish you a pleasant walk of it. I shall expect to see you back at our landlord’s at one o’clock.”

I took him at his word and proceeded. I rambled through tall old groves clear of underwood, beside rivulets broken into little pools and cascades by rocks and fallen timber, along the edges of dark, shrubby swamps, and across sunny clearings, until I was tired. At length I came to a pleasant natural glade on the slope of a hill and sat down under the shade of a tree to rest myself. It was a narrow opening in the woods, extending for some distance up the hill, and terminating in that quarter at the base of a ridge of rocks above which rose the forest. At the lower end, near which I was, a spring rose up in a little hollow and formed a streamlet which ran off under the trees. A most still, quiet nook it was, sheltered from all winds; the leaves were not waved, nor the grass bent by a breath of air, and the sun came down between the inclosing trees with so strong a heat that, except in the shade, I felt the warmth of the ground through the soles of my shoes.

As I lay with my head propped on my hand and my elbow buried in a mass of herbage, my thoughts turned involuntarily upon the ancient inhabitants of these woods. Here, said I to myself, in this very spot, some Indian doubtless fixed his cabin; or haply some little neighborhood, the branch of a larger tribe, nestled in this sylvan enclosure. That circle of mouldering timber is probably the remains of the wigwam of the last inhabitant, and that great vine which sprawls over it was probably once supported by its walls, and when they were abandoned and decaying, dragged them to the ground, as many a parasite has done by his credulous benefactor. Here the Indian woman planted her squashes and tended her maize; here the Indian father brought forth his boys to try their bows and aim their little tomahawks at the trees, teaching – for even in the solemnity of my feelings I could not forbear the pun – teaching “the young idea how to shoot.” That spring which gushes up so brightly and abundantly from the ground, yielded them, when their exercise was over, a beverage never mingled with the liquid poisons of the civilized world and gave its cresses to season the simple repast. Gradually my imagination became both awed and kindled by these reflections. I felt rebuked by the wild genius of a place familiar for centuries only with the race of red men and hunters, and I almost expected to see some Indian, with his tomahawk and bow, walk up to me and ask me what I did there.

My thoughts were diverted from this subject by my eyes falling upon an earth-newt, as red as fire, crawling lazily and with an almost imperceptible motion over the grass. I yawned by a sort of sympathy with the sluggish creature, and, oppressed with fatigue and heat, for the sun was getting high, loosened my cravat and stretched out my legs to an easier position. All at once I found myself growing drowsy, my eyelids dropping involuntarily, my eyes rolling in their sockets with a laborious attempt to keep themselves open, and the

landscape swimming and whirling before me, as if I saw it in a mirror suspended by a loose string and waving in the wind. Once or twice the scene was entirely lost for a moment to my vision, and I perceived that I had actually been asleep. It struck me that I might be better employed than in taking a nap at that time of day, and accordingly, I rose and walked across the glade until I came to the foot of the rocks at the upper end of it, when I turned to take another look at the pleasant and quiet spot. Judge of my astonishment when I actually beheld, standing by the very circle of rubbish near which I had been reposing, and which I had taken for the remains of a wigwam, an Indian – a real Indian – the very incarnation of the images that had been floating in my fancy.

I will not say that I did not spring from the ground when the figure met my eye, so sudden and startling was the shock it gave me. He was not one of that degenerate kind which I had seen in various parts of the country wearing hats, frock. coats, pantaloons, and Dutch blankets but was dressed in the original garb of his nation. A covering of skin was wrapped about his loins, a mantle of the same was flung loosely over his shoulders, and his legs were bare from the middle of the thigh down to his ornamented moccasins. A single tuft of stiff, black hair on the top of his head, from which the rest was carefully plucked, was mingled with the gaudy plumage of different birds; a bow and a bundle of arrows peeped over his shoulder; a necklace of bears' claws hung down upon his breast; his right hand carried a tomahawk, and the fingers of his left were firmly closed, like those of one whose physical vigor and resoluteness of purpose suffered not the least muscle of his frame to relax for a moment. Notwithstanding the distance at which he stood, and which might be a hundred paces at least, I saw his whole figure, even to the minutest article of dress, with what seemed to me an unnatural distinctness. His countenance had that expression which has been so often remarked upon as peculiar to the aborigines of our country – a settled look of sullenness, sadness, and suspicion, as if when moulded by nature it had been visibly stamped with the presentiment of the decline and disappearance of their race. The features were strongly marked, hard, and stern: high cheekbones, a broad forehead, an aquiline nose, garnished with an oblong piece of burnished copper; a mouth somewhat wide, between a parenthesis of furrows, and a bony and fleshless chin. But then his eyes – such eyes I have never seen! Distant as they were from me, they seemed close to my own, and to ray out an unpleasant brightness from their depths, like twin stars of evil omen. Their influence unstrung all my sinews, and a gush of sudden and almost suffocating heat came over my whole frame. I averted my look instantly and fixed it upon the feet of the savage, shod with their long moccasins and standing motionless among the thick weeds, but I could not keep it there. Again my eyes returned upward; again they encountered his, glittering in the midst of that calm, sullen face, and again that oppressive, stifling sensation came over me.

It was natural that I should feel an impulse to remove from so unpleasant a neighborhood; I therefore shouldered my fowling-piece, climbed the rock before me, and penetrated into the woods. As I proceeded, the idea took possession of me that I was followed by the Indian, and I walked pretty fast in order to shake it off; but I found this impossible. I had got into a state of fidgety, nervous excitement, and it seemed to me that I felt the rays of those bright, unnatural eyes on my shoulders, my back, my arms, and even my hands as I flung them back in walking. At length I looked back, and notwithstanding I half expected to see him, I was scarcely less surprised than at first when I beheld the same figure, just at the same distance, standing motionless as then, his bright eyes gleaming upon me between the trunks of the trees. A third time I felt that flush of dissolving heat, and a violent sweat broke out all over me. I have heard of the cold, clammy sweat of fear; mine was not of that temperature: it was as the warmest summer rain, warm and free and profuse as the current of brooks in the hottest and moistest season of dog-days.

I walked on, keeping my sight fixed on the strange apparition. It did not seem to move, and as I proceeded, gradually diminished by the natural effect of distance until I could scarcely distinguish it among the thick trunks

and boughs of the forest. Happening to avert my eyes for a moment, I saw, as I turned again to the spot, that the figure had swiftly and silently gained upon me and was now at the same distance as when I first beheld it. A clearing lay before me. I saw the sunshine and the grass between the trunks of the trees, and rushing forward, found myself under the open sky and felt relieved by a freer air. I looked back, and nothing was to be seen of my pursuer.

A small log-house stood in the open space with a well beside it and a tall, rude machine of the kind they call a well-sweep leaning over it, loaded with a bucket at one end and a heavy stone at the other. A boy of about twelve years of age was drawing water. The sight of a human habitation, and a habitation of white men, was a welcome one to me, and tormented as I was with heat and thirst, I rejoiced at the prospect of refreshing myself with a draught of the cool, pure element. Accordingly, I made for the well, and arrived at it just as the boy was pouring the contents of the bucket into a large stone pitcher. "You will give me a taste of the water?" said I to him.

"And welcome," replied the boy, "if you'll drink out of the pitcher, for the mug is broke and we haven't got any glasses."

I stooped, and raising the heavy vessel to my lips, took a copious draught from the brim, where the cold water was yet sparkling with the bubbles raised by pouring it from the bucket. "Your water is very fine," said I, when I had recovered my breath.

"Yes, but not so fine as you'll get at the Indian spring," rejoined he. "That's the best water in all the country – the clearest, the coldest, and the sweetest. Father always sends me to the Indian spring when he wants the best water – when uncle comes up from York, or the minister makes us a visit."

"What is it that you call the Indian spring?" I inquired.

"Oh, I guess you must have passed it, by the way you came. Didn't you see a spring of water, east of a ledge of rocks, in a pretty spot of ground where there were no trees?"

"I believe I saw something of the kind," said I, recollecting the glade in which I had thrown myself to rest shortly before, and its fountain.

"That was the Indian spring, and if you took notice, you must have seen some old logs and sticks lying in a heap and a few stones that look as if there had been fire on them. It was thought that an Indian family lived there before the country was settled by our people."

"Are there any Indians in this neighborhood at present?" I inquired, with some eagerness.

"Oh, no, indeed; they are gone to the west'ard, so they say, though I am not big enough to know anything about it. It was before father came into the country – long before. The only Indian I ever saw was Jemmy Sunkum, who came about last summer, selling brooms and begging cider."

"A tall, spare, strong-looking man, was he," asked I, "dressed in skins, and carrying a bow?" my thoughts naturally recurring to the figure I had just seen.

The boy grinned. "Not much taller than I am, and as fat as a wood-chuck; and as for the skins he wore, I never see any but his own through the holes of his trousers, unless it be a squirrel-skin that he carried his tobacco and loose change in. He wore an old hat with the crown torn out, and had lost one of his eyes – they say it was by drinking so much cider. Father swapped an old pair of pantaloons with him for a broom. But I must take this pitcher to father, who is at work in the corn-field yonder; so good-morning to you, sir."

The lad tripped away, whistling, and I sat down on one of the broad, flat stones by the well-side, under the shade of a young tree of the kind commonly called yellow willow, which in a year or two shoots up from a slip of the size of a man's finger into a fine, shapely, overshadowing tree. I laid my hat and gun by my side and

wiped my hot and sweaty forehead, upon which the wind that swayed to and fro the long, flexible, depending branches breathed with a luxurious coolness.

The Indian I have seen cannot be the one that the boy means, said I to myself, nor probably any other of which the inhabitants know any-thing. That fine, majestic savage is a very different being from the fat, one-eyed vagabond in the ragged trousers that the lad speaks of. It is probably some ancient inhabitant of the place, returned from the forest of the distant West to visit the scenes of his childhood. But what could he mean by following me in this manner, and why should he keep his eye fixed on me so strangely? As I said this, I looked along the forest I had just quitted, examining it carefully and with an eye sharpened by the excited state of my imagination to see if I could discover anything of my late pursuer. All was quiet and motionless. I heard the bee as he flew by heavily from the cucumber-flowers in the garden near me, and the hum of the busy wheel from the open windows of the cottage; but face or form of human being I saw not. I replaced my hat on my head and my gun on my shoulder, crossed the clearing, and entered the opposite wood, intending to return home by a kind of circuit, for I did not care again to encounter the savage, whose demeanor was so mysterious.

I had proceeded but a few rods when, a mingled sensation of uneasiness and curiosity inducing me to look over my shoulder, I started to behold the very figure whose sight I was endeavoring to avoid, just entering the forest – the same brawny shoulders clad with skins, the same sad, stern, suspicious countenance, the same bright eyes thrilling and scorching me with their light. Again I felt that indescribable sensation of discomfort and heat, and the perspiration, which had ceased to flow while I sat by the well, again gushed forth from every pore. Involuntarily I stopped short. What was this being, and why should he dog my steps in this strange manner? What were his designs, pacific or hostile? And what method should I take to rid myself of his pursuit? I had tried walking away from him without effect; should I now adopt the expedient of walking up to him and asking his business? The thought struck me that, if his designs were malevolent, this step might bring me into danger. He was well armed with a tomahawk and arrows, and who could tell the force and certainty of his aim? This fear, on reflection, I rejected as groundless and unmanly, for what cause had he to seek my life?

It was but prudent, however, to prepare myself for the worst that could happen. I therefore examined my priming, and as I had nothing but small bird-shot with me, I kicked up the dry leaves from the earth under my feet, and selecting a handful of the smallest, smoothest, and roundest pebbles from among the gravel, put two or three of them into the muzzle and lodged the rest in my pocket. As I turned, there was that face still, at the very edge of the forest, glaring steadily upon me, and watching my operations with the unchanging, stony, stoical expression of the Indian race. I replaced the piece on my shoulder, and advanced toward it.

Scarcely had I gone three paces when it suddenly disappeared behind the huge old trunk of an old buttonwood or plane tree that stood just in the edge of the clearing. I approached the tree; there was no living thing behind it or near it. I looked out into the clearing and scanned its whole extent for the object of my search, but in vain. There was the cottage -- in which the wheel was still humming and the well with its young willow waving restlessly over it. The clearing was long and narrow and widened away toward the south, where was a field of Indian corn in which I could distinguish my friend, the lad who had given me the water, in company with a man who, I suppose, was his father, diligently engaged in hoeing the corn; and at intervals I could hear the click of their hoes against the stones. Nothing else was to be seen, nothing else to be heard. I turned and searched the bushes about me; nothing was there. I looked up into the old planet tree above my head; the clean and handsomely divided branches, speckled with white, guided my eye far into the very last of their verdurous recesses, but no creature, not even a bird, was to be seen there.

Strange as it may seem, I found myself refreshed and cooled by this search, and relieved from the burning and suffocating heat that I felt while the eye of the savage rested upon me. My perplexity was, however, anything but lessened, and I resolved to pursue my way home with as little delay as possible and spell out, if I could, the mystery at my leisure. Accordingly, I plunged again into the woods, and after proceeding a little way, began to change my course in a direction which I judged must bring me to the spot where I had rested in the Indian glade near the spring, from which doubted not I could find my way home without difficulty. As I proceeded, the heat of the day seemed to grow more and more oppressive. There was shade about me and over my head -- thick shade of oak, maple, and walnut -- but it seemed to me as if beams of the hottest midsummer sun were beating upon my back and scorching the skin of my neck. I turned my head, and there again stood the Indian, with that eternal, intolerable glare of the eyes.

I stopped not, but went on with a quicker pace. My face was flushed, my brow throbbed audibly, my head ached, the veins in my hands were swollen till they looked like ropes, and the sweat dropped from my hair like rain. A fine brook crossed my way, clear as diamond, full to the very brim, and sending up a cool vapor from its surface that promised for the grateful temperature of its waters. I longed to strip off my clothes, and lay myself down in its bed at full length, and steep my burning limbs in its current. Just then I remembered the story of Tam O'Shanter, pursued by witches and saved by crossing a running stream. If there be any witchcraft in this thing, said I to myself, it will not follow me beyond this brook. I was ashamed of the thought as it crossed my mind, but I leaped the brook notwithstanding and hurried on. Turning afterward to observe the effect of my precaution, I saw the savage standing in the midst of the very current, the bright water flowing round his copper-colored ankles. The sight was as vexatious as it was singular and did not by any means diminish my haste.

A little opening, where the trees had been cut down and the ground sown with European grasses, came in my way, and I entered it. In this spot the red and white clover grew rankly and blossomed side by side with columbine and cranesbill, the natives of the soil -- flowers and verdure the more striking in their beauty for the unsightly and blackened stumps of trees standing thick among them -- a sweet, still nook, a perpetual concert of humming-birds and a thousand beautiful winged insects for which our common speech has no name, and exhaling from the herbage an almost overpowering stream of fragrance. I no longer saw my pursuer. What could this mean? Was this figure some restless shadow that could haunt only its ancient wilderness and was excluded from every spot reclaimed and cultivated by the white man?

I took advantage of this respite to wipe my face and forehead; I unbuttoned my waistcoat, took off my cravat and put it in my pocket, threw back the collar of my coat from my shoulders, fanned myself awhile with my hat, and then went on. Soon after I again entered the wood, I perceived with surprise that my tormentor had gained upon me. He was twice as near to me as when I first saw him, and the strange light that seemed to shoot from his eyes was more intense and insufferable than ever. I was in a part of the forest which was thickly strewn with the fallen trunks of trees, wrenched up, as it seemed to me, long ago by some mighty wind. I hastened on, leaping from one to another, occasionally looking back at my pursuer. The air in my face as I flew forward, seemed as if issuing from the mouth of a furnace. In leaping upon a spot where the earth was moist and soft, one of my shoes remained embedded fast in the soil. It is an old one, said I to myself; I shall be lighter and cooler without it. Immediately the low branch of a tree struck my hat from my head as I rushed onward. No matter, thought I, I will send a boy to look for it in the morning.

As I sprang from a rock my other shoe flew off and dropped on the ground before me; I caught it up without stopping and jerked it over my head with all my strength at the savage behind me. When I next looked back, I

saw that he had decked himself with my spoils. He had strung both my shoes to his necklace of bears' claws and had crowded down my hat upon his head over that tuft of long black hair mingled with feathers, the ends of which stood out under the brim in front, forming a wild, grotesque shade to those strangely bright eyes. Still I went on, and in springing upon a log covered with green moss and moist and slimy with decay, my foot slipped, and I could only keep from falling by dropping the fowling-piece I carried. I did not stop to pick it up, and the next instant it was upon the shoulder of the Indian, or demon, that chased me.

I darted forward, panting, glowing, perspiring, ready to sink to the earth with heat and fatigue, until suddenly I found myself on the edge of that ridge of rocks which rose above the Indian glade where I had thrown myself to rest under a tree in the morning, before my steps had been dogged by the savage. The whole scene lay beneath my feet – the spring, the ruins of the wigwam, the tree under which I reclined. A single desperate leap took me far down into the glade below me, and a few rapid strides brought me to the very spot where I had been reposing, and where the pressure of my form still remained on the grass. A shrill, wild shout with which the woods rang in sharp echoes rose upon the air, and instantly I perceived that my pursuer had leaped also, and was at my side and had seized me with a strong and sudden grip that shook every fibre of my frame. A strange darkness came over all visible objects, and I sank to the ground.

An interval of insensibility followed, the duration of which I have no means of computing, and from which I was at last aroused by noises near me, and by motions of my body produced by some impulse from without. I opened my eyes on the very spot where I remembered to have reclined in the morning. My hat was off, my hair and clothes were steeped in sweat, my fowling-piece and shoes lay within a few feet of me, but scattered in different directions. My friend who had accompanied me at the outset of my ramble was shaking me by the shoulder, bawling my name in my ear and asking me if I meant to lie here all day. I sat up and found that the shade of the tree under which I was had shifted many feet from its original place, and that I was lying exposed to the burning beams of the sun. My old acquaintance, the red earth-newt, had made great progress in the grass, having advanced at least a yard from the place where I remembered to have seen him when I was beginning to grow drowsy, before my adventure with the savage.

My friend complained that he had been looking for me for more than an hour, and hallooing himself hoarse without effect, and that he was sure we should be late for dinner. I said nothing to my companion about what had happened until the next day, when I ventured to relate a part of the strange series of real or imaginary circumstances connected with my ramble. He laughed at the earnestness of my manner and very promptly and flippantly said it was nothing but a dream. My readers may possibly be the same opinion, and I myself, when in a philosophical mood, incline to this way of accounting for the matter. At other times, however, when I recall to mind the various images and feelings of that time, deeply and distinctly engraved on my memory, I find nothing in them which should lead me to class them with the illusions of sleep, and nothing to distinguish them from the waking experience of my life.