

MANGLED HANDS

Chapter One

Little Spoon

 AM TARCISIUS Tandihetsi. My father is Eustace Ahatsis-tari and he is a captain of our people. That is, he was chief, for he is no more. He has gone to God. I will tell you all. You must know we were forty in twelve canoes. We had seen wonderful things in the Great Villages of the French and we were on our way back to my country. When the sun would be overhead we should come to the mouth of the River of the Iroquois. Then the dangers would be greater. I was not afraid, for I am a Huron and we are brave people. But now like my people I kept my eyes on every wooded bank as we paddled near the silent shores of the Great River. For our enemies are like the poison snakes. They strike and then you see them. I could do this watching easier than paddling, for I am not a man yet. I am a boy of twelve and not large.

It was good to be in this canoe. We were just four and much baggage for the Mission. In the bow was Bernard Atieronhonk. He is my cousin and so are his three sons. He would paddle, paddle for hours and never say one word. I think he prays. He is holy, though he is only a catechumen and has not yet received Saving Waters.

My father, Eustace, as is right for a Huron captain, had stern paddle. He is brave as a she-bear with soft cubs. I like my tall father with his black hair furrowed and ridged as is our Huron custom.

Mangled Hands

He is the handsomest of the fighting men in my village of Te-anauystayae. Catherine, who is his squaw, says I look like Eustace when he was a boy, and if I be good I will be tall as a pine too.

Those were two in my canoe. Right behind me, paddling not as skillfully as Bernard and Eustace, was my other father. He is not Huron blood like we are. He is not even of our blood, for he comes from the land of the French across the Great Lake. I am very glad he did come many leagues to our village last year. The other French want to barter for our beaver peltries. They come with long arquebuses and they are very quick to make them speak. But not so is my other father. He has no thunder-stick, but a breviary hung about his neck and a long black gown which is much worn. He came to tell us Hurons of the land we come to when we go to God. He is a Blackrobe and we Hurons call him Ondesonk. But I call him my other father. For he it was who poured Saving Waters on my head last year and took away my pagan name of Little Spoon and gave me my Christian name, which is the name of a brave boy like me, who went to God many, many, many moons before even the palefaces came into our land.

I was the one who helped my other father to learn our language. It was easy for me to speak Huron. I always knew it even from the days when I was a beady-eyed papoose and Catherine, my father's squaw, carried me strapped to her back. That was long ago.

My other father likes me better than any of the other boys in our village. That is why he asked Eustace to let me go down to the Great Villages of the French, that they call Three Rivers and Quebec, when it was time to get the yearly supplies and provisions for the Blackrobes who are in our villages. There I learnt the name the Frenchmen call my other father. It is, in their language, Isaac Jogues. But I like still to call him in my own tongue 'my other father.' And he is. And he likes it.

I was thinking a puzzling thing that a white squaw who rules the virgin girls in the long convent at Quebec had told me. She

Little Spoon

said my other father was well named Isaac and that she prayed long prayers that when my other father's hour of God's Will came he would be willing and prepared for the sacrifice.

When I think a thing that I do not understand—and there are many things I do not understand after visiting the Great Villages of the French—I always go to my other father and he always knows the answer. He knows more than five pagan medicine men of my tribe easily! Maybe, more than all the Huron sorcerers.

Just as I was about to open my mouth and form the words of question, Eustace spoke to my other father and ordered him to draw in his paddle and rest for some minutes. You know, the Blackrobes are not like us Hurons. They want to and they try to, but they cannot paddle, paddle while the sun goes from east to west. Eustace can and Bernard can. I cannot yet, for I am a boy and I think the Blackrobes are always like boys at the paddles. They tire out and must rest before they paddle again.

So my other father pulled his paddle in and I took it gladly and laid it on the canvas bags of Mission supplies in front of me. I knew within the next minutes my other father would answer my question.

Blackrobe settled down, stretching his bare feet either side of me. You know, we never wear moccasins in the canoes, for if we did we might bring sand into the birch bark canoes and ruin them. It is not good to find leaks in your canoe when you are many-days' paddling from your villages and enemies on the war path.

When my other father was resting, I leaned back and as his custom was, he put his nice hand that was browned by wind and sun on my forehead and made the Sign down and across.

“Is my Little Spoon weary?” he asked in my tongue, stroking my forehead and drawing me back where I love to lie in the canoe, close to his breast.

“Do not, other father,” I earnestly protested.

“Do not what, little son?” asked Blackrobe, again stroking my forehead coolingly.

Mangled Hands

“Call me by my pagan name unless I am bad. You washed that name away forever when you poured Saving Waters on my head. I am no longer Little Spoon, but Tarcisius, and you are my other father. Am I not a good boy?”

“Always and ever may our Good Lord keep you so,” he replied, and his words sounded like a prayer in the Mass.

I was holding his nice hands now. My Blackrobe’s hands were long and slender and very perfect. They were brown, not copper colored. There were no hands like them in all our villages. They were not stumpy and hardened like Bernard’s and Eustace’s, who paddled for many years. It was easy to feel them and I had learnt ever since first my other father came to our villages last year I felt holier for just touching them. I liked to hold them, for I knew they had touched God Himself, and they made me a better boy. This I know always.

So holding Blackrobe’s hands while he rested, and Eustace and Bernard paddled silently and the other eleven canoes of our party kept along either side of us there by the shore of the Great River, I remembered my puzzling question about the thing the squaw in the long convent at Quebec had said.

“My other father, tell me one thing and I will be more happy.”

“If that were necessary I would gladly tell my small brave two things, would they make him happier. What troubles the mind of little Tarcisius?”

“What did that white squaw who prays all hours in the long convent mean when she said you were well named Isaac. I desire to know.”

I looked upwards into the brown bearded face of my other father and he smiled down on me. It is good to see Blackrobe smile, but he does not have time to smile often, and I was not to see him smile many more times.

“You must mean the Ursuline Superior, Mother Mary of the Incarnation.”

Little Spoon

I nodded, for that was the white squaw I meant.

“Would that I were as pleasing in the sight of the Master as she! I’ll tell you what she very likely meant.”

Then Blackrobe told me about a Captain named Abraham and his little son Isaac, whose life God wanted back in a very ancient day. I did not understand all that my other father told me, but the telling seemed to make him very happy, for his eyes shone. He is very good to look upon when his eyes shine like brown fires.

Then he said: “Your puzzling question has reminded me of another little Isaac, about whom I once wrote a poem in honor of Our Mother Mary.”

Always when Blackrobe begins that way, I know it is wise to listen.

“You will tell it to me now, will you not, my other father?” I asked him, for I know his stories are good to hear. He knows so many stories that we Christian Huron boys like to hear. Even the pagan boys of my village of Teanaustayae listen to him. His tales are so different from those the braves tell, about the cabin fires in the winter time.

“I was Isaac Jogues in those days across the Great Lakes and——”

“How long since?” I inquired, for I like to know all that I may of my Blackrobe’s boyhood. It was so strange and interesting and not like mine.

“How long since? I have almost forgotten out here on the Huron Mission. But it must have been fully twelve years ago and that would have been 1630 and I was not yet a poor priest of God.”

He fell a-wondering and finally I had to cough.

“I am satisfied,” I told him, “Now what about this other little Isaac?”

“Tarcisius will pardon me my day-dreams out here on the bosom of the Great River and I will tell him all at once. I was in my studies and I made my poem from an old legend. It seems in olden days at Constantinople—which is a village larger many times than

Mangled Hands

Teanaustayae—if there were left some Particles of the Sacred Host, it was the beautiful custom for the priest to call up the little boys and girls and give them the Particles."

"Why should the girls get any?" I wanted to know, for with us Hurons girls are only going to be squaws and keep the fires and they have no rights with boys who will be braves.

"My Little Spoon will have to ask Our Lord some bright day." He smiled down on me and I was silent, for I knew when Blackrobe called me my pagan name I had again carried the Devil in my heart.

But as our Huron custom is, I bowed my head between my knees. This means, I will not do so any more.

I held his nice hands close and my other father squeezed mine and then I knew he had forgiven me. Whenever I have been bad I have but to show I am sorry and my Blackrobe will forget all about it. I think the Good God Who made all things must be that way.

So he resumed as if I had not interrupted:

"One day a little twelve-year-old boy, whose father was a Jewish glass blower——"

I was itching to ask what that was, but I remembered in good time and listened as the gray squirrel does in the high branch when he hears a noise below.

"This son of the glass blower went up with the Christian children and received Our Lord into his heart. When he got home and his father learnt where Isaac had been and what he had done, he was so angry that he opened the door of the furnace, where the glass was melting like ice in the kettle in winter time, and he thrust his son right into the flames."

I thought I knew what happened, for many times, when I was small and Eustace and Catherine were pagans, I have seen our war captives burnt over a fire, and I have helped. I was very bad then and carried the Devil in my breast all day.

But my other father went on: "For three days the little Isaac's mother went about the village looking and looking. She thought

Little Spoon

surely her son was lost and she prayed God to help her find him. The boy had disappeared as completely as if he had been captured and taken into the Iroquois country to the south.

“Then that third evening the poor mother was praying and in her grief that her prayer was not heard she went about calling her son’s name out loud many times, ‘Isaac, Isaac, Isaac.’ At length she thought she heard him answering. But his voice came from the last place in the world you would have suspected——”

“I know, from Heaven where——” I started to tell my other father, but he corrected me:

“No, Tarcisius mine, that is not the last place, but the first. The poor mother was standing by the door of her husband’s glass house. The little Isaac’s voice was coming from the midst of the furnace.”

“I know then. I have heard captives. Their voice is not nice from the flames.”

“But Isaac’s was, and the frantic mother threw open the furnace door and saw her little son standing in the very midst of the glowing coals.”

“And not roasting?” I had to ask, for that is not the way with captives.

“Not roasting. Isaac came running to his mother’s arms and he was as healthy as a certain small Huron chief is.”

My other father stroked my head with his nice hands and I knew he did not dislike me. It made me feel so good.

“Naturally all the people in the great village of Constantinople heard of this miracle and when they questioned little Isaac he kept repeating, ‘A woman robed in blue, all beautiful, came to see me and gave me water to put out the fire around me and she brought me something to eat when I was hungry.’”

“That squaw in blue must have been God’s mother,” I told Blackrobe eagerly. “She would do that. I like her always.”

“Yes; she was the Squaw in Blue, all beautiful,” said my other father, “She always protects her little Isaacs even unto this day.”

Mangled Hands

This made me wish and I complained: "Why did you not give me that name instead of Tarcisius, when you poured Saving Waters on my head last year?"

But Blackrobe smiled as he explained: "Mother Mary's blue robe is broad and she extends it far over all small Hurons who call on her with confidence." My other father's nice hands made a circle over me, lying between his feet in the bottom of the canoe. "Remember this always, little chief."

Here Eustace, my father, asked: "Ondesonk, what did the captains of the Great Village do to the father of that little Isaac?"

"Oh, I forgot that. When the mother and boy received Saving Waters, he refused to have anything to do with them, and the captains punished him for his crime."

I thought over this and then I said: "Other father, they should have burnt him over a slow fire. I would have helped gladly and brought much wood. They should have burnt him to the waist one night and up to the head the next night. I would —"

Blackrobe pushed me from his breast and requested:

"Little Spoon, give me my paddle now for I am rested and must do my share."

I reached it to him and as I did I knew I had said something bad, so I put my lips to my other father's nice hands and pressed them.

He took the paddle and as he straightened into position to ply it, he whispered: "Keep watch on the wooded banks again, for around this bend we begin to come into a dangerous stretch, Tarcisius."

It made me feel good all over to hear my other father call me by my Christian name again. He is the best of all the Blackrobes in my country. I, Tarcisius Tandihetsi, say so.