

MISSISSIPPI'S BLACKROBE



“Marquette saw the small Tuscarora clutch desperately at a branch of a tree nearer the edge of the ravine. Then a dust cloud rolled up.” (Page 126.)

MISSISSIPPI'S BLACKROBE

A Story of Father Marquette

By

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TO
THE INSPIRING MEMORY
OF
OUR MID-AMERICAN APOSTLE,
FATHER JAMES MARQUETTE, S. J.

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Chapter One

No Flesh

DOWN THAT BROAD, undiscovered river which was to be known as the Wisconsin, two canoes crept. They carried seven white men. Five of these bronzed paddlers wore the fringed coats and skin trousers, the pudding-bag caps and gay red sashes that proclaimed the woodsmen. But he who plied the bow paddle of the first canoe was dressed differently. The faded black gown that covered his lean figure was frayed. Long and dark brown was the hair that the wide-brimmed hat hid. He did not look his thirty-six years. At his girdle hung the crucifix of his Saviour. And with every dip of his paddle, the breviary, suspended by a cord from his neck, swayed and threatened to pitch into the quiet waters.

A smile of expectancy lit up this Blackrobe's features as the canoe breasted the next pine-wooded point. This smile faded away as another stretch of the unknown river unfolded before his gaze. He called over his shoulder: "Still the Great Water eludes us, Louis."

The man in blanket coat and jaunty cap of beaver, whom he addressed, ceased his exertions, while the gentle current carried the canoe onward.

"I never believed half the old-squaws' tales those Fox and Mascouten Indians told us. It is a month since we left the beach at

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Mackinac. We have already come weary leagues beyond our calculations and always, good Father Marquette, this river opens up another stretch. It seems ——”

The Blackrobe interrupted the man. Undaunted certainty shone in his eyes.

“Louis—Louis Joliet! Where is your faith! Neither of us must lose sight of our purpose on this voyage into the unknown. You paddle towards the South Sea to seek new nations of these red children and win them for the King. I, to teach them to know our great God, of Whom they have hitherto been pitifully ignorant. Neither of us shall fail, with Mary Immaculate’s aid.”

There came into James Marquette’s countenance the tender expression of one who has heard a well-beloved name.

“And I’ll be satisfied,” mumbled the stern paddler in that canoe, “if I ever see the Mission at Mackinac again, with this still attached to my scalp.” He touched affectionately the long black hair that curled out under his beaver-skin cap.

“Ah, Jean, I heard that,” cried Father Marquette gayly. “Never fear; those precious locks of yours will grow to turn white.”

“It’s a wonder they haven’t yet, my Father,” retorted the woodsman, and he grinned.

Again the three took up their paddles and Joliet signaled the four woodsmen in the second canoe that he was crossing the current towards the other still shore.

The look of filial devotion that Mary Immaculate’s name had kindled in Marquette’s eyes yet lingered, and his thoughts, as he plied his paddle, turned back to that last Mass he had said a month ago in the little birchbark chapel of the Mission of Saint Ignace when this expedition had started to seek the Great Water.

The Blackrobe murmured again the petition he had begged that May morning of 1673.

“You know, Mary Immaculate, I do not seek the Great Water for fame. I desire that honor to be yours. But I do wish to bring

those other sheep, who live along its banks, into your Son's Fold. And you know, Mary Immaculate, my promise to you—when my eyes fall on this river, I shall name it in honor of your Immaculate Conception.”

This thought led to another consoling one. For Father Marquette recalled that it was on December 8th last, the very feast of the Immaculate Conception, that Louis Joliet, his companion explorer, had come paddling through the ice to the Mackinac shore with the long-expected permission from Superiors in distant Quebec, to sail and seek the unknown river.

The two had spent the long winter, gathering from the stray Ottawa, Illinois, and Pottawattomie bands, who came to the bleak mission, every scrap of information and rumor about the mighty stream that flowed through the unknown lands to the west.

Comforted and strengthened in the knowledge of Mary Immaculate's aid, the Blackrobe bent to his paddle, and the canoe sped down these waters, which no white man had ever yet seen.

An hour later, the woodsmen's canoe had forged ahead, and now Joliet's keen eye noted they stopped with dripping paddles across the bark sides and listened intently. He saw Peter, the bow paddle, reach back for his flint-lock musket that lay atop a bundle of gift beads.

“Look! Our men are on guard ahead,” warned Joliet. “Dip your paddles in deeper, my Father—Jean.”

Under the added urge the light birchbark canoe was lifted through the still waters till it slid alongside its mate.

As all lay on their oars, there came from beyond the curtain of dark green pines that covered the low-cliffed bank, a strange uncanny moan, such as an animal in its agony might utter.

It was very quiet in the canoes, and when a fish broke the surface nearby with a silver flash, several of the woodsmen crossed themselves devoutly.

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Then on the clear air broke the quavering opening notes of a most mournful song. The notes rose and fell, and their sound was utter sorrow.

Suddenly Father Marquette's hand went up. "I have heard that song before, my children. I have heard it when I was stationed at the abandoned Mission of the Holy Spirit on Lake Superior. It is the one the Illinois call, 'The Song to Go Above.'"

He turned to his fellow explorer and said: "Louis, let us leave the men on guard and go ashore. Some poor Illinois is far along the way when he raises his Death Chant. I am needed."

Jean, the woodsman, propelled the canoe into the slack water under the low bank. Father Marquette and Louis Joliet leapt lightly ashore.

The two light crafts were backed out into the stream, while the woodsmen laid their powder where they could reach it in a hurry.

The Blackrobe, followed by his companion, disappeared into the shadows that the thickly growing pines cast. Those on guard in the canoes heard a twig snap—a cone fall. Then silence settled on the waters once more. Again the wailing notes of that Death Song came to the alert ears of the woodsmen. It wailed away as though strength had deserted the singer.

In the meantime, breaking through the underbrush, the two moccasined voyagers had come upon a scene that made the soul-hunger gnaw at the breast of the Blackrobe.

There was a small clearing, maybe an hundred steps behind the bank of the river, and here on the southern pine wall the new green growths of mid-June were all burnt away to black, snarled wires. Marquette and Joliet halted as though struck. For there on the ground in twisted, grotesque positions, mute witnesses to the agony in which they had expired, lay one—three—four seared corpses.

On the charred branches of a tall scorched pine, hurled as one might cast mud on a wall, sprawled the blackened trunk of another

No Flesh

Indian. The charred legs and arms were outspread in a pathetic, supplicating attitude.

“In the Name of God!” exclaimed Joliet in an awed whisper, “what new deviltry of this benighted wilderness have we stumbled on, good Father Marquette?”

Before the Blackrobe could reply, from the further edge of the scorched clearing, came again the high quivering notes of the Death Song. To these now were added the mournful howl of a dog.

Noiselessly the two stepped across the charred area, around the dreadful dead, and entered the green undergrowth beyond. A few steps, and they were gazing down upon the powder-blackened body of an old Indian.

Seated on his haunches by his master’s side, with head upturned, was a lean brownish yellow hound. Seeing the two, the hound tilted his head to a steeper angle and emitted a lingering howl.

The Death Song stopped in the middle of a quavering note, and the hand of the lone singer sought and closed on a charred warclub. He lifted himself feebly to brandish the weapon in the direction of the Blackrobe.

Then it was that Joliet, with pity in his tones, whispered:

“See, my Father, the Indian’s sight has been blasted away.”

“On guard, No Flesh!” the Indian commanded in the Illinois tongue. “Wolves! Wolves! At last!”

The lean hound ceased howling and, standing with one paw on the Indian’s breast and every tooth showing, faced the two men.

“No, brother,” spoke Marquette, “not wolves, but a shepherd. What dreadful thing has happened to you and your party?”

The Indian turned to the face he could not see.

“Who is the white man that speaks to Long Fox with Illinois words?” he demanded.

Marquette smiled: “Long Fox, I am the one who prays and instructs.”

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The burnt hand dropped the warclub and, with sightless eyes, the Illinois searched the face of the Blackrobe.

“You are a Blackrobe. It is good,” replied Long Fox. “Now I know your voice. Moons ago I sat in your Prayer Cabin on the shores of the Lake of Copper [Lake Superior] and listened to your words of wisdom. I kept them in my breast. Since I lay here I have asked the Manitou, Who made heaven and earth, that the road I follow after death be the same as yours.”

“What’s he saying? What has happened?” exclaimed Joliet. “This is not the work of the Sioux, or if it is, those feathered devils have devised new torments for their enemies. Truly they are the Iroquois’ teachers.”

“Wait, Louis. I will tell you shortly.” Easing the burnt Illinois, Marquette asked questions and listened as Long Fox told his tale.

When the old Illinois had finished, the Blackrobe translated for his companion: “Long Fox says there were six Illinois in his party. They stole a powder keg from some trappers who have a cabin, that I think must have been some leagues south of the large Mascouten village where five days ago we got the two Miami guides to show us the portage to this river.

“Long Fox and his party were on their way to the Illinois country to the south. The day before yesterday they camped here, and his grandson rolled the keg too close to the camp fire. Long Fox says, suddenly the devil of the trappers came out of the keg in scorching flames.

“Then he was hurled many feet. Of his companions, only his grandson moaned for many hours. Then he also was silent like the others.

“Long Fox says it has been night since. He thought of the Prayer he had heard taught the Ottawas in the chapel at Holy Spirit Mission, and he prayed Our Blessed Lord——”

Tears had come into Marquette’s eyes and he added huskily: “Louis, tell Jean and the woodsmen to come ashore, and you bring me water.”

No Flesh

When Joliet was gone, the Blackrobe bent lower and instructed: “Long Fox, the Good Manitou, Who made heaven and earth, has surely sent me to your side. Listen, you have been through many fights with the Sioux and you realize—for you had started your Death Chant—that the rest of the journey is short. What must one do, to go to that land of delights where death and disease are forever banished?”

“Blackrobe, one must believe in the Prayer; so I heard you teach the Ottawas.”

“Well, then?”

“Then I believe, Blackrobe.”

“And one must pray.”

“Very well, I wish to pray, but I have not the sense to do so. Teach me, Blackrobe.”

Quickly Marquette instructed this well-disposed soul.

There was a crunching of burnt pine cones, and Joliet and several of the woodsmen came into view.

Joliet carried water in a dripping birchbark dish. This he gave to Father Marquette and knelt on one knee at the priest’s side.

Repeating the formula of the Sacrament, the Blackrobe poured the saving waters on the blistered brow of the old Illinois.

“It is good,” said Long Fox. “Now I am ready to go along the right trail.”

He turned to the hound, who had been sitting on his haunches, watching the party. “No Flesh, come here.”

The hound crept closer and buried his muzzle in Long Fox’s hand.

“This dog, Blackrobe, is faithful. He brought me a squirrel and kept me alive. He would have died with me. He lives and I give him to you.”

Long Fox patted the brown head. “No Flesh, Blackrobe is your master now. Go to him.”

Obediently the lean hound walked over to Father Marquette

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and sat looking up into his new owner's countenance. The tail wagged as if asking, "What orders, Master?"

Soon the woodsmen carried the Indian as gently as they could, across the charred clearing and into the gloomy pine forest. But before they came to the canoes at the bank, Long Fox struggled in their arms and they halted. They lowered the poor, burnt body to the ground. Again the Death Song of the Illinois came high and clear. There was a note of triumph in it now.

Then it quivered and broke off sharply. The hound, No Flesh, squatted back on his haunches and howled.

Marquette observed to his companion: "I gave Long Fox the name of Mary in baptism. And if I never pour the waters of salvation on another head this voyage, I feel that our expedition has been successful.

"Surely, this was a predestined one. Louis, we were almost visibly led to his side ere the end. Not in vain have I invoked Mary Immaculate. She is the leader of this expedition, and she claims her own on the way. And did you notice how she has given me a fine, faithful hound?"

The Blackrobe bent low. "Come here, No Flesh." He petted the brownish yellow head. "There is a place for you in my canoe and at my fireside."

The woodsmen left the other bodies there as they had been hurled by the exploding powder keg, but the body of this one, who had gone to God while yet the baptismal drops glistened on his forehead, they took with them.

Once more on the broad still bosom of the river, they weighted the body and in midcurrent consigned it to the waters.

As the canoes were paddled along the river that was to be known as the Wisconsin, the two in Marquette's canoe were silent, till the Blackrobe exclaimed:

"I recall that old Illinois now. Long Fox came often to my cabin at Holy Spirit Mission to look at the religious paintings I showed

and listen to the instructions I gave about them. Then one day he disappeared. I thought, in my ignorance, that the seed had fallen on hard soil. How blind even the keenest-sighted of us are! Ah, Louis, my friend, we have been witnesses to the happy death of one who tried to follow Our Master.”

“Happy, yes, but, my Father,” exclaimed Joliet, “if I had my choice of a death, it would be fighting—to go down gloriously for King——”

“Or Kingdom,” put in Marquette, “as did our blessed martyred brothers—good Fathers Jogues and Brebeuf twenty odd years ago on the Iroquois and the Huron Missions.”

The Blackrobe sighed. “But a martyr’s death is granted only to chosen souls. For us weaker ones, are left lonely deaths. Like our good Father Menard, who wore out, seeking the scattered red children of His Master to the north of us, twelve years ago, or, better yet, glorious Francis Xavier on that desolate Chinese island.”

The brown eyes glistened as he went on:

“These deaths are my models. To wear out as a shepherd should and then to die alone and abandoned, this is my ideal! And it has been, ever since I was a wee lad in my native Laon, and the Good God first put into my curly head the desire of serving Him here in the mid-American wildernesses. But how I chatter, and you paddle!”

Jean, the woodsman, drove his paddle into the water, viciously murmuring: “They can have their going down gloriously for the King in France and their lonely deaths, but if I had my way, I’d like, please God, to die in my bed.

“Heavens help us! If half the tales of those two feather-stuck and paint-daubed Miamis, who showed us the portage to this river and then refused to go any further, are true, it’s doubtful if I will ever see an honest bed again. Going—going—God knows where—in search of a great river, whose banks are lined with skulking Sioux, or worse savages. My poor scalplock! Soon you and I are liable to say good-bye forever!”

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“Shame, Jean,” chided the Blackrobe; “we paddle under the protection of her who is more powerful than all the red warriors in the New World.

“Is not that correct, No Flesh?” The Blackrobe looked down upon his dog, lying on a reed mat in the bottom of the canoe.

The brownish yellow hound wagged his tail contentedly.