

The Chief

Alphonse Campbell

"Say, Frank, that's a hefty medal you have on your neck," said the older of the two engineers, as they climbed from the refreshing pool, shaking the water from their eyes and ears. "Let me see it will you?"

The younger man passed over a much-worn lead medal, more than an inch in diameter. On the face was a miniature engraving of the Blessed Virgin appearing to the peasant girl; "Notre Dame de Lourdes" encircled the margin.

As his friend curiously examined the medal, the younger engineer meditatively dug his heel in the sand.

"That was given to me many years ago by an old friend—an Indian chief," he explained, "and when I say a chief, I don't mean one of these fellows with feathers, ceremonious gestures and all that. On the contrary, it was sometime before I knew him to be a chief; for he was just a plainly, rather poorly dressed Indian.

"A small reserve across the river was his home, where he lived in the summer, making a poor job of cultivating his small piece of land. But in the winter he always crossed the river to live. Just as regularly as the leaves fell he moved into his snug little shack that snuggled in close to the shelter of the thick spruce woods. Why he spent his winters there I could only guess; for I never enquired. Perhaps it was because he loved those forest-covered hills where he could ramble as he pleased and the old worked-out mines that spread out all about him—rough wastes surrounded by dense forest. But, I believe, most of all it was a natural thirst for wandering that drew the chief from the uneventful life on the reserve; as if he were protesting against the dull state of civilization. In the summer it could be endured; but the winter offered an opportunity for his real life of wandering in the woods, snaring rabbits or shooting game—the life of an Indian hunter.

"The first place I saw him was at Mass. Quite frequently, if not regularly, I noticed him kneeling in a back pew, a tall deeply-tanned man past middle age. One thing, that seemed strangely out of place in his makeup, was his large red nose which contrasted sharply with his

dark copper-colored face. He had a noticeable stoop of the shoulders caused probably by his habit of walking with both hands clasped behind his back.

"Sometimes he was accompanied by his wife, a fat pleasant looking lady who must have been a good ten years younger than her husband.

"One Sunday Father, who always had a love for strange characters, fell into conversation with him as they walked home from Mass. When he extended an invitation to dinner, the chief graciously accepted. Father was delighted with his guest; while I could only stare at the strange visitor.

"He spoke English with a peculiar half-French accent, acquired at a boarding school conducted by some French Brothers. His courteous 'merci, merci, Madame' to mother was another token of that early training.

"After that Sunday the chief was a frequent visitor. Often, when he went to town for supplies, he dropped in to chat for hours. He was never in a hurry; he did everything leisurely. Perhaps you would be right if you said he had no ambition; but I am glad he had not, for hustling and hurrying would have destroyed that simple humor which was so natural in him. It would have checked that great spontaneous laugh which came from the bottom of his heart.

"Sometimes there would be trifling gifts. Once he brought a large portion of moose steak. 'Bought too much beef; yes, too much beef.' He cocked his head to one side, with the air of a man enjoying a huge joke. 'Good fresh beef.'

"That spring a joyous event took place. His wife gave birth to a son. The tiny mite completed the chief's happiness. For his only son, two years before, had been killed in the mines. The chief had expected that son to succeed him. It was a great blow to lose him, but the chief had become resigned. If he had not the faith to move mountains, at least mountains could not move his faith. But you can imagine his joy in this son, and the fuss he made over him.

"One day, when I was puzzling over Cicero, trying unsuccessfully to translate him, the chief put in his appearance. After being thumped on the back, and congratulated by all, he practically petrified me by saying; 'Francois,

(he always called me Francois), we want you to be his God-father.'

" 'Me ? ' I was terrified by the very thought. But when I looked at the chief, who was smiling as if he were the father of a thousand potential chiefs, I could not refuse. So it was decided. The boy was christened 'Joseph.'

"For the next five or six years our friends stayed on the reserve most of the time. The chief did visit us several times, however, to report that Joseph was growing to be a 'fine big boy.'

"One day, on returning from school, I heard a familiar voice. I rushed into the house to find the chief, his wife and Joseph.

" 'Francois, you big boy now,' the chief greeted me, in his own boisterous manner. They were as delighted to see us as we were them. After I had spoken to the chief and his wife, I turned to Joseph.

" 'And this is my boy, Joseph.' I lifted him in my arms. He was a shy little lad of six now, well-proportioned, and as active as a young moose. I thought that they had too many clothes on him—it might have been my imagination. One thing he did have, and that was the prettiest pair of eyes I have ever seen.

The chief was chuckling and nodding his head from me to Joseph as though there were some great joke among us. He spoke a few words in Micmac, and the boy, leaving me, ran to him and climbed upon his knee. The chief's wife was one beaming smile. Most of her visit was consumed in relating, with gushes of laughter, the various funny things Joseph had said.

" 'I have something for you, Francois,' said the chief after dinner. 'It's from Joseph to his God-father.' He handed me that medal, evidently obtained from the French Brothers who lived near the reserve. There was also a large red rosary from his wife; but this went to pieces the first time I sat on it.

"Next fall they appeared at the old shack again.

"Joseph was nearing seven years of age, and was soon to go to school. In the meantime his father took care of his education. He was led through the woods, over the hills, now setting snares, again tracking deer over frozen swamps, or frightening squirrels with arrows from a harmless bow. They were a happy pair.

"Late in the winter an epidemic of influenza broke out. The chief and his wife escaped but Joseph fell victim. The old chief called one day to tell us despondently that Joseph had caught pneumonia.

" 'Pneumonia ? Very serious ? ' we asked.

" 'Yes, bad, very bad.'

" 'He'll be all right; I assured him. 'Joseph is strong. Don't worry so much.'

"But the chief's fears were only too well founded. In two days Joseph died, and his death brought all the chief's hopes tumbling about his feet.

"My father and I went over to the camp. There we found the two alone. The chief received us with that sincerity and gentleness that were so much a part of him. His wife sat by the stove weeping quietly.

" 'I am so sorry for you,' was all I could say.

" 'Yes, yes. We thought we keep this boy anyway. Oh, well, Joseph is better off now—happy.'

"I knelt by the little white casket and prayed—not only for Joseph, but for his parents, who would be so lonely.

"Over and over again the mother told us how, at first, Joseph seemed to be getting better until pneumonia set in, how she cared for him, and how patient and good he had been.

"Father and the chief sat by the stove smoking their pipes and talking. About eleven o'clock we said the beads. The chief led in his own Micmac tongue while his wife responded in her sweet, high pitched tone. It seemed so strange to me to be repeating the "Hail Marys" after the chief with his deep, mysterious voice. The litany followed the Rosary. The voices rose and fell rhythmically in a long unbroken chant. When the prayers were finished, I remained near the stove. The chief sat opposite me, swaying gently back and forth, his legs crossed under him, his long brown fingers clasped in his lap. His face was a pale copper color under the light of the oil lamp. Then he began to sing.

"He sang hymns, I think. I don't know, for he sang in his language and I do not know a word of that. I leaned back and closed my eyes to better hear that deep, rich voice rising and falling so majestically. It was only in his singing that I understood the sorrow that filled his heart. He was carried far away, to sing of four hundred

years of poverty and of loneliness, of courage and of faith.

"He ceased singing and there followed a short silence. Then he began to sing in Latin.

" 'Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine.' He was unconscious of his audience; he was talking with his God. 'Et lux perpetua luceat eis !'

"The next morning the choir at our church sang the Requiem Mass, but that voice was silent. The chief knelt in the back row, bowed head clasped in his hands.

"I saw him frequently during the remainder of the winter. There was an attempt at the old cheerful manner; but I could see a change. There was a half-hearted ring to that laugh; the shoulders grew more stooped and the step, always so steady, was beginning to lag. The chief was tired.

That winter was the last time I saw them. In the spring they departed for the reserve. Later in the summer, when I began my engineering course, the family moved into town so we could all be together.

"I often wondered how my old friend was, but never heard from him. One day, about a year later, I made inquiries of an Indian selling blue-berries. Yes, he knew the chief and his wife; they were both dead.

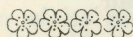
" 'Both dead,' I exclaimed. 'When did they die ?'

"He told me they had died during that winter within two weeks of each other."

The young engineer stopped speaking.

"That was the end for your strange friend ?"

"Yes poor chap, but he is happier now, and probably is still singing."



Know then this truth, enough for man to know,
Virtue alone is happiness below.

—Pope.

Not to advance in the way of salvation is to go back.

—St. Bernard.

It is vanity to wish for a long life, and to take little care of leading a good life.—*Thomas a Kempis.*