

# A Terrible Night

By Fitz-James O'Brien

"By Jove! Dick, I'm nearly done up."

"So am I. Did any one ever see such a confounded forest, Charley?"

"I am not alone weak, but hungry. Oh for a steak of moose, with a bottle of old red wine to wash it down!"

"Charley! beware. Take care how you conjure up such visions in my mind. I am already nearly starving, and if you increase my appetite much more it will go hard with me if I don't dine off of you. You are young, and Bertha says you're tender—"

"Hearted, she meant. Well, so I am, if loving Bertha be any proof of it. Do you know, Dick, I have often wondered that you, who love your sister so passionately, were not jealous of her attachment to me."

"So I was, my dear fellow, at first—furiously jealous. But then I reflected that Bertha must one day or the other marry, and I must lose my sister, so I thought it better that she should marry my old college chum and early friend, Charley Costarre, than any one else. So you see there was a little selfishness in my calculations, Charley."

"Dick, we were friends at school, and friends at college, and I thought at both those places that nothing could shorten the link that bound us together, but I was mistaken. Since my love for, and engagement to your sister, I feel as if you were fifty times the friend that you were before. Dick, we three will never part!"

"So he married the king's daughter, and they all lived together as happy as the days are long," shouted Dick with a laugh, quoting from nursery tale.

The foregoing is a slice out the conversation with which Dick Linton and myself endeavored to beguile the way, as we tramped through one of the forests of Northern New York. Dick was an artist, and I was a sportsman, so when one fine autumn day he announced his intention going into the woods for a week to study Nature, it seemed to me an excellent opportunity for me to exercise my legs and my trigger finger at the same time. Dick had some backwoods friend who lived in a log-hut on the shores of Eckford Lake, and there we determined to take up our quarters. Dick, who said he knew the forest thoroughly, was to be the guide, and we accordingly, with our guns on our shoulders, started on foot from Root's, a tavern known to tourists, and situated on the boundaries of Essex and Warren counties. It was a desperate walk; but as we started by daybreak, and had great faith in our pedestrian qualities, we expected to reach the nearest of the Eckford lakes by nightfall. The forest through which we traveled was of the densest description. Overhead the branches of spruce and pine shut out the day, while beneath our feet lay a frightful soil, composed principally of jagged shingle, cunningly concealed by an almost impenetrable brush. As the day wore on, our hopes of reaching our destination grew fainter and fainter, and I could almost fancy, from the anxious glances that Dick cast around him, that in spite of his boasted knowledge of the woods he had lost his way. It was not, however, until night actually fell, and that we were both sinking from hunger and exhaustion, that I could get him to acknowledge it.

"We're in a nice pickle, Master Dick," said I, rather crossly, for an empty stomach does much to destroy a man's natural amiability. "Confound your assurance that led you to set up as a guide. Of all men painters are the most conceited."

“Come, Charley,” answered Dick, good-humoredly, “there’s no use in growling so loudly. You’ll bring the bears and panthers on us if you do. We must make the best of a bad job, and sleep in a tree.”

“It’s easy to talk, my good fellow. I’m not a partridge, and don’t know how to roost on a bough.”

“Well, you’ll have to learn then; for if you sleep on the ground, the chances are ten to one but you will have the wolves nibbling at your toes before daylight.”

“I’m hanged if I’ll do either!” said I, desperately. “I’m going to walk all night, and I’ll drop before I’ll lie down.”

“Come, come, Charley, don’t be a fool!”

“I was a fool only when I consented to let you assume the *rôle* of guide.”

“Well, Charley, if you are determined to go on, let it be so. We’ll go together. After all, it’s only an adventure.”

“I say, Dick, don’t you see a light?”

“By Jove, so there is! Come, you see Providence intervenes between us and wolves and hunger. That must be some squatter’s hut.”

The light to which I had so suddenly called Dick’s attention was very faint, and seemed to be about half a mile distant. It glimmered through the dark branches of the hemlock and spruce trees, and weak as the light was, I hailed it as a mariner without a compass hails the star by which he steers. We instantly set out in the direction of our beacon. In a moment it seemed as if all fatigue had vanished, and we walked as if our muscles were as tense as iron, and our joints oily as a piston-shaft.

We soon arrived at what in the dusk seemed to be a clearing of about five acres, but it may have been larger, for the tall forest rising up around it must have diminished its apparent size, giving it the appearance of a square pit rather than a farm. Toward one corner of the clearing we discerned the dusky outline of a log-hut, through whose single end window a faint light was streaming. With a sigh of relief we hastened to the door and knocked. It was opened immediately, and a man appeared on the threshold. We explained our condition, and were instantly invited to walk in and make ourselves at home. All our host said he could offer us were some cold Indian corn cakes, and a slice of dried deer’s-flesh, to all of which we were heartily welcome. These viands in our starving condition were luxuries to us, and we literally reveled in anticipation of a full meal.

The hut into which we had so unceremoniously entered was of the most poverty-stricken order. It consisted of but one room, with a rude brick fireplace at one end. Some deer-skins and old blankets stretched out by way of a bed at the other extremity of the apartment, and the only seats visible were two sections of a large pine trunk that stood close to the fire-place. There was no vestige of a table, and the rest of the furniture was embodied in a long Tennessee rifle that hung close to the rough wall.

If the hut was remarkable, its proprietor was still more so. He was, I think, the most villainous looking man I ever beheld. About six feet two inches in height, proportionately broad across the shoulders, and with a hand large enough to pick up a fifty-six pound shot, he seemed to be a combination of extraordinary strength and agility. His head was narrow, and oblong in shape. His straight Indian-like hair fell smoothly over his low forehead as if it had been plastered with soap. And his black, bead-like eyes were set obliquely, and slanted downward toward his nose, giving him a mingled expression of ferocity and cunning. As I examined his features attentively,

in which I thought I could trace almost every bad passion, I confess I experienced a certain feeling of apprehension and distrust that I could not shake off.

While he was getting us the promised food, we tried, by questioning him, to draw him into conversation. He seemed very taciturn and reserved. He said he lived entirely alone, and had cleared the spot he occupied with his own hands. He said his name was Joel; but when we hinted that he must have some other name, he pretended not to hear us, though I saw his brows knit, and his small black eyes flash angrily. My suspicions of this man were further aroused by observing a pair of shoes lying in a corner of the hut. These shoes were at least three sizes smaller than those that our gigantic host wore, and yet he had distinctly replied that he lived entirely alone. If those shoes were not his, whose were they? The more I reflected on this circumstance the more uneasy I felt, and apprehensions were still further aroused, when Joel, as he called himself, took both our fowling-pieces, and, in order to have them out of the way, as he said, hung them on crooks from the wall, at a height that neither Dick or I could reach without getting on a stool. I smiled inwardly, however, as I felt the smooth barrel of my revolver that was slung in the hollow of my back, by its leathern belt, and thought to myself, if this fellow has any bad designs, the more unprotected he thinks us the more incautious he will be, so I made no effort to retain our guns. Dick also had a revolver, and was one of those men who I knew would use it well when the time came.

My suspicions of our host grew at last to such a pitch that I determined to communicate them to Dick. Nothing would be easier than for this villainous half-breed—for I felt convinced he had Indian blood in him—nothing would be easier than, with the aid of an accomplice, to cut our throats or shoot us while we were asleep, and so get our guns, watches, and whatever money we carried. Who, in those lonely woods, would hear the shot, or hear our cries for help? What emissary of the law, however sharp, could point out our graves in those wild woods, or bring the murder home to those who committed it? Linton at first laughed; then grew serious; and gradually became a convert to my apprehensions. We hurriedly agreed that, while one slept, the other should watch, and so take it in turns through the night.

Joel had surrendered to us his couch of deer-skin and his blanket; he himself said he could sleep quite as well on the floor, near the fire. As Dick and I were both very tired, we were anxious to get our rest as soon as possible. So after a hearty meal of deer-steak and tough cakes, washed down by a good draught from our brandy flask, I, being the youngest, got the first hour's sleep, and flung myself on the couch of skins. As my eyes gradually closed, I saw a dim picture of Dick seated sternly watching by the fire, and the long shape of the half-breed stretching out like a huge shadow upon the floor.

After what I could have sworn to be only a three-minute doze, Dick woke me, and informed me that my hour was out; and turning me out of my warm nest, lay down without any ceremony, and in a few seconds was heavily snoring. I rubbed my eyes, felt for my revolver, and seating myself on one of the pine-stumps, commenced my watch. The half-breed appeared to be buried in a profound slumber, and in the half-weird light cast by the wood embers, his enormous figure seemed almost Titanic in its proportions. I confess I felt that in a struggle for life he was more than a match for Dick and myself. I then looked at the fire, and began a favorite amusement of mine—shaping forms in the embers. All sorts of figures defined themselves before me. Battles, tempests at sea, familiar faces, and above all shone, ever returning, the dear features of Bertha Linton, my affianced bride. She seemed to me to smile at me through a burning haze, and I could almost fancy I heard her say, “While you are watching in the lonely forest I am thinking of you, and praying for your safety.”

A slight movement on the part of the slumbering half-breed here recalled me from those sweet dreams. He turned on his side, lifted himself slowly on his elbow, and gazed attentively at me. I did not stir. Still retaining my stooping attitude, I half closed my eyes, and remained motionless. Doubtless he thought I was asleep, for in a moment or two he rose noiselessly, and creeping with a stealthy step across the floor, passed out of the hut. I listened—Oh, how eagerly! It seemed to me that, through the imperfectly-joined crevices of the log-walls, I could plainly hear voices whispering. I would have given worlds to have crept nearer to listen, but I was fearful of disturbing the fancied security of our host, who I now felt certain had sinister designs upon us. So I remained perfectly still. The whispering suddenly ceased. The half-breed re-entered the hut in the same stealthy way in which he had quitted it, and after giving a scrutinizing glance at me, once more stretched himself upon the floor and affected to sleep. In a few moments I pretended to awake-yawned, looked at my watch, and finding that my hour had more than expired, proceeded to wake Dick. As I turned him out of bed I whispered in his ear, “Don’t take your eyes off that fellow, Dick. He has accomplices outside; be careful!” Dick gave a meaning glance, carelessly touched his revolver, as much as to say, “Here’s something to interfere with his little arrangements,” and took his seat on the pine-stump, in such a position as to command a view of the sleeping half-breed and the doorway at the same time.

This time, though horribly tired, I could not sleep. A horrible load seemed pressing on my chest, and every five minutes I would start up to see if Dick was keeping his watch faithfully. My nerves were strung to a frightful pitch of tensivity; my heart beat at every sound, and my head seemed to throb until I thought my temples would burst. The more I reflected on the conduct of the half-breed, the more assured I was that he intended murder. Full of this idea, I took my revolver from its sling, and held it in my hand, ready to shoot him down at the first movement that appeared at all dangerous. A haze seemed now to pass across my eyes. Fatigued with long watching and excitement, I passed into that semiconscious state, in which I seemed perfectly aware of every thing that passed, although objects were dim and dull in outline, and did not appear so sharply defined as in one’s waking moments. I was apparently roused from this state by a slight crackling sound. I started, and raised myself on my elbow. My heart almost ceased to beat at what I saw. The half-breed had lit some species of dried herb, which sent out a strong aromatic odor as it burned. This herb he was holding directly under Dick’s nostrils, who I now perceived, to my horror, was wrapped in a profound slumber. The smoke of this mysterious herb appeared to deprive him of all consciousness, for he rolled gently off of the pine-log, and lay stretched upon the floor. The half-breed now stole to the door, and opened it gently. Three sinister heads peered in out of the gloom. I saw the long barrels of rifles, and the huge brawny hands that clasped them. The half-breed pointed significantly to where I lay with his long bony finger, then drawing a large, thirsty-looking knife from his breast, moved toward me. The time was come. My blood stopped—my heart ceased to beat. The half-breed was within a foot of my bed; the knife was raised; another instant and it would have been buried in my heart, when, with a hand as cold as ice, I lifted my revolver, took deadly aim, and fired!

A stunning report, a dull groan, a huge cloud of smoke curling around me, and I found myself standing upright, with a dark mass lying at my feet.

“Great God! what have you done, Sir?” cried the half-breed, rushing toward me. “You have killed him! He was just about to wake you.”

I staggered against the wall. My senses, until then immersed in sleep, suddenly recovered their activity. The frightful truth burst upon me in a flash. I had shot Dick Linton while under the influence of a night-mare! Then every thing seemed to fade away, and I remember no more.

There was a trial, I believe. The lawyers were learned, and proved by physicians that it was a case of what is called *Somnolentia*, or sleep-drunkenness; but of the proceedings I took no heed. One form haunted me, lying black and heavy on the hut floor; and one pale face was ever present—a face I saw once after the terrible catastrophe, and never saw again—the wild, despairing face of Bertha Linton, my promised bride!