

The Doom of Occonestoga

By William Gilmore Simms

It was a gloomy amphitheatre in the deep forests to which the assembled multitude bore the unfortunate Occonestoga. The whole scene was unique in that solemn grandeur, that sombre hue, that deep spiritual repose, in which the human imagination delights to invest the region which has been rendered remarkable for the deed of punishment or crime. A small swamp or morass hung upon one side of the wood; from the rank bosom of which, in numberless millions, the flickering firefly perpetually darted upwards, giving a brilliance and animation to the spot, which at that moment no assemblage of light or life could possibly enliven. The ancient oak, a bearded Druid, was there to contribute to the due solemnity of all associations; the green but gloomy cedar, the ghostly cypress, and here and there the overgrown pine,—all rose up in their primitive strength, and with an undergrowth around them of shrub and flower that scarcely at any time, in that sheltered and congenial habitation, had found it necessary to shrink from winter. In the centre of the area thus invested rose a high and venerable mound, the tumulus of many preceding ages, from the washed sides of which might now and then be seen protruding the bleached bones of some ancient warrior or sage. A circle of trees at a little distance hedged it in, made secure and sacred by the performance there of many of their religious rites and offices,—themselves, as they bore the broad arrow of the Yemassee, being free from all danger of overthrow or desecration by Indian hands.

Amid the confused cries of the multitude, they bore the captive to the foot of the tumulus, and bound him backward, half reclining upon a tree. A hundred warriors stood around, armed according to the manner of the nation,—each with a tomahawk and knife and bow. They stood up as for battle, but spectators simply; and took no part in a proceeding which belonged entirely to the priesthood. In a wider and denser circle gathered hundreds more: not the warriors, but the people,—the old, the young, the women and the children, all fiercely excited, and anxious to see a ceremony so awfully exciting to an Indian imagination; involving as it did not only the perpetual loss of human caste and national consideration, but the eternal doom, the degradation, the denial of and the exile from their simple forest heaven. Interspersed with this latter crowd, seemingly at regular intervals, and with an allotted labor assigned them, came a number of old women: not unmeet representatives, individually, for either of the weird sisters of the Scottish thane,

“So withered and so wild in their attire;”

and regarding their cries and actions, of whom we may safely affirm that they looked like anything but inhabitants of earth! In their hands they bore, each of them, a flaming torch of the rich and gummy pine; and these they waved over the heads of the multitude in a thousand various evolutions, accompanying each movement with a fearful cry, which at regular periods was chorused by the assembled mass. A bugle—a native instrument of sound, five feet or more in length; hollowed out from the commonest timber, the cracks and breaks of which were carefully sealed up with the resinous gum oozing from their burning torches; and which to this day, borrowed from the natives, our negroes employ on the Southern waters with a peculiar compass and variety of note—was carried by one of the party; and gave forth at intervals, timed

with much regularity, a long, protracted, single blast, adding greatly to the wild and picturesque character of the spectacle. At the articulation of these sounds, the circles continue to Contract, though slowly; until at length but a brief space lay between the armed warriors, the crowd, and the unhappy victim.

The night grew dark of a sudden; amid the sky was obscured by one of the brief tempests that usually usher in the summer, and mark the transition, in the South, of one season to another. A wild gust rushed along the wood. The loaves were whirled over the heads of the assemblage, and the trees bent downwards until they cracked and groaned again beneath the wind. A feeling of natural superstition crossed the minds of the multitude, as the hurricane, though common enough in that region, passed hurriedly along; and a spontaneous and universal voice of chanted prayer rose from the multitude, in their own wild and emphatic language, to the evil deity whose presence they beheld in its progress:—

“Thy wing, Opitchi-Manneyto,
It o’erthrows the tall trees—
Thy breath, Opitchi-Manneyto,
Makes the waters tremble—
Thou art in the hurricane,
When the wigwam tumbles—
Thou art in the arrow fire,
When the pine is shivered—
But upon the Yemassee
Be thy coming gentle—
Are they not thy well-beloved?
Bring they not a slave to thee?
Look! the slave is bound for thee,
'Tis the Yemassee that brings him.
Pass, Opitchi-Manneyto—
Pass, black spirit, pass from us—
Be thy passage gentle.”

And as the uncouth strain rose at the conclusion into a diapason of unanimous and contending voices,—of old and young, male and female, tho hii of etim, npr tempest had gone by. A shout of self-gratulation, joined with warm acknowledgments, testified the popular sense and confidence in that especial Providence, which even the most barbarous nations claim as forever working in their behalf.

At this moment, surrounded by the chiefs, and preceded by the great prophet or high-priest, Enoree-Mattee, came Sanutee, the well-beloved of the Yemassee, to preside over the destinies of his son. There was a due and becoming solemnity, but nothing of the peculiar feelings of the father, visible in his countenance. Blocks of wood were placed around as seats for the chiefs; but Sanutee and the prophet threw themselves, with more of imposing veneration in the proceeding, upon the edge of the tumulus, just where an overcharged spot, bulging out with the crowding bones of its inmates, bad formed an elevation answering the purpose of couch or seat. They sat directly looking upon the prisoner; who reclined, bound securely upon his back to a decapitated tree, at a little distance before them. A signal having been given, the women ceased their clamors; and approaching him, they waved their torches so closely above his head as to make all his features distinctly visible to the now watchful and silent multitude. He bore the examination with stern, unmoved features which the sculptor in brass or marble might have been glad to

transfer to his statue in the block. While the torches waved, one of the women now cried aloud, in a barbarous chant, above him:—

“Is not this a Yemassee?
Wherefore is he bound thus—
Wherefore with the broad arrow
On his right arm gm-owing,
Wherefore is he bound thus?
Is not this a Yemassee?”

A second woman now approached him, waving her torch in like manner, seeming closely to inspect his features, and actually passing her fingers over the emblem upon his shoulder, as if to ascertain more certainly the truth of the image. Having done this, she turned about to the crowd, and in the same barbarous sort of strain with the preceding, replied as follows:—

“It is not the Yemassee,
Butt a dog that runs away.
From his right arm take the arrow,
He is not the Yemassee.”

As these words were uttered, the crowd of women and children around cried out for the execution of the judgment thus given; and once again flamed the torches wildly, and the shoutings were general among the multitude. When they had subsided a huge Indian came forward and stonily confronted the prisoner.

This man was Malatchie, the executioner; and he looked the horrid trade which he professed. His garments were stained and smeared with blood, and covered with scalps, which, connected together by slight strings, formed a loose robe over his shoulders. In one hand he carried a torch, in the other a knife. He came forward, under the instructions of Enoree-Mattee the prophet, to claim the slave of Opitchi-Manneyto,—that is, in our language, the slave of hell. This he did in the following strain:—

“ ’Tis Opitchi-Manneyto
In Malatchie’s car that cries:—
‘This is not the Yemassee,—
And the woman’s word is true,—
He’s a dog that should be mine
I have hunted for him long.
From his master he had run,
With the stranger made his home;
Now I have him, he is mine
Hear Opitchi-Manneyto.’ ”

And as the besmeared and malignant executioner howled his fierce demand in the very ears of his victim, he hurled the knife which he carried, upwards with such dexterity into the air, that it rested point downward and sticking fast, on its descent, into the tree and just above the head of the doomed Oconestoga. With his hand, the next instant, he laid a resolute gripe upon the shoulder of the victim, as if to confirm and strengthen his claim by actual possession; while at the same time, with a sort of malignant pleasure, he thrust his besmeared and distorted visage

close into the face of his prisoner. Writhing against the ligaments which bound him fast, Oconestoga strove to turn his head aside from the disgusting and obtrusive presence; and the desperation of his effort, but that he had been too carefully secured, might have resulted in the release of some of his limbs; for the breast heaved and labored, and every muscle of his arms and legs was wrought, by his severe action, into so many ropes,—hard, full, and indicative of prodigious strength.

There was one person in that crowd who sympathized with the victim. This was Hiwassee, the maiden in whose ears he had uttered a word, which, in her thoughtless scream and subsequent declaration of the event, when she had identified him, had been the occasion of his captivity. Something of self-reproach for her share in his misfortune, and an old feeling of regard for Oconestoga,—who had once been a favorite with the young of both sexes among his people,—was at work in her bosom; and turning to Echotee, her newly accepted lover, as soon as the demand of Malatchie had been heard, she prayed him to resist the demand.

In such cases, all that a warrior had to do was simply to join issue upon the claim, and the popular will then determined the question. Echotee could not resist an application so put to him, and by one who had just listened to a prayer of his own so all-important to his own happiness; and being himself a noble youth,—one who had been a rival of the captive in his better days,—a feeling of generosity combined with the request of Hiwassee and he boldly leaped forward. Seizing the knife of Malatchie, which stuck in the tree, he drew it forth and threw it upon the ground; thus removing the sight of property which the executioner had put up in behalf of the evil deity.

“Oconestoga is the brave of the Yemassee,” exclaimed the young Echotee, while the eyes of the captive looked what his lips could not have said. “Oconestoga is a brave of Yemassee: he is no dog of Malatchie. Wherefore is the cord upon the limbs of a free warrior? Is not Oconestoga a free warrior of Yemassee? The eyes of Echotee have looked upon a warrior like Oconestoga when he took many scalps. Did not Oconestoga lead the Yemassee against the Savannahs? The eyes of Echotee saw him slay the red-eyed Suwannee, the great chief of the Savannahs. Did not Oconestoga go on the war-path with our young braves against the Edistoos,—the brown foxes that came out of the swamp? The eyes of Echotee beheld him. Oconestoga is a brave, and a hunter of Yemassee: he is not the dog of Malatchie. He knows not fear. He hath an arrow with wings, and the panther he runs down in the chase. His tread is the tread of a sly serpent, that comes so that he hears him not upon the track of the red deer, feeding down in the valley. Echotee knows the warrior; Echotee knows the hunter; he knows Oconestoga,—but he knows no dog of Opitchi-Manneyto.”

“He hath drunk of the poison drink of the palefaces; his feet are gone from the good path of the Yemassee; he would sell his people to the English for a painted bird. He is the slave of Opitchi-Manneyto,” cried Malatchie in reply. Echotee was not satisfied to yield the point so soon, and he responded accordingly.

“It is true; the feet of the voting warrior have gone away from the good paths of the Yemassee: but I see not the weakness of the chief when my eye looks back upon the great deeds of the warrior. I see nothing but the shrinking body of Suwannee under the knee—under the knife of the Yemassee. I hear nothing but the war-whoop of the Yemassee, when he broke through the camp of the brown foxes, and scalped them where they skulked in the swamp. I see this Yemassee strike the foe and take the scalp, and I know Oconestoga;—Oconestoga, the son of the well-beloved, the great chief of the Yemassee.”

“It is good; Oconestoga has thanks for Echotee; Echotee is a brave warrior!” murmured the captive to his champion, in tones of melancholy acknowledgment. The current of public feeling began to set somewhere in behalf of the victim, and an occasional whisper to that effect might be heard here and there among the multitude. Even Malatchie himself looked for a moment as if he thought it not improbable that he might be defrauded of his prey; and while a free shout from many attested the compliment which all were willing to pay to Echotee for his magnanimous defense of one who had once been a rival—and not always successful—in the general estimation, the executioner turned to the prophet and to Sanutee, as if doubtful whether or not to proceed farther in his claim. But all doubt was soon quieted, as the stern father rose before the assembly. Every sound was stilled in expectation of his words on this so momentous an occasion to himself. They waited not long. The old man had tasked all the energies of the patriot, not less than of the stoic; amid having once determined upon the necessity of the sacrifice, he had no hesitating fears or scruples palsyng his determination. He seemed not to regard the imploring glance of his son, seen and felt by all besides in the assembly; but with a voice entirely unaffected by the circumstances of his position, he spoke forth the doom of the victim in confirmation with that originally expressed.

“Echotee has spoken like a brave warrior with a tongue of truth, and a soul that has birth with the sun. But he speaks out of his own heart, and does not speak to the heart of the traitor. The Yemassee will all say for Echotee, but who can say for Oconestoga when Sanutee himself is silent? Does the Yemassee speak with a double tongue? Did not the Yemassee promise Oconestoga to Opitchi-Manneyto with the other chiefs? Where are they? They are gone into the swamp, where the sun shines not, and the eyes of Opitchi-Manneyto are upon them. He knows them for his slaves. The arrow is gone from their shoulders, and the Yemassee knows them no longer. Shall the dog escape who led the way to the English—who brought the poison drink to the chiefs, which made them dogs to the English and slaves to Opitchi-Manneyto? Shall he escape the doom the Yemassee hath put upon them? Sanutee speaks the voice of the Manneyto. Oconestoga is a dog, who would sell his father—who would make our women to carry water for the palefaces. He is not the son of Sanutee—Sanutee knows him no more. Look, Yemassees,—the Well-beloved has spoken!”

He paused, and turning away, sank down silently upon the little bank on which he had before rested; while Malatchie, without further opposition,—for the renunciation of his own son, by one so highly esteemed as Sanutee, was conclusive against the youth,—advanced to execute the terrible judgment upon his victim.

“O father, chief, Sanutee the Well-beloved!” was the cry that now, for the first time, burst convulsively from the lips of the prisoner: “hear me, father,—Oconestoga will go on the war-path with thee and with the Yemassee against the Edisto, against the Spaniard; hear, Sanutee,—he will go with thee against the English.” But the old man bent not, yielded not, and the crowd gathered nigher in the intensity of their interest.

“Wilt thou have no ear, Sanutee? It is Oconestoga, it is the son of Matiwan, that speaks to thee.” Sanutee’s head sank as the reference was made to Matiwan, but he showed no other sign of emotion. He moved not, he spoke not; and bitterly and hopelessly the youth exclaimed:—

“Oh! thou art colder than the stone house of the adder, and deafer than his ears. Father, Sanutee, wherefore wilt thou lose me, even as the tree its leaf, when the storm smites it in summer? Save me, my father.”

And his head sank in despair as he beheld the unchanging look of stern resolve with which the unbending sire regarded him. For a moment he was unmanned; until a loud shout of derision

from the crowd, as they beheld the show of his weakness, came to the support of his pride. The Indian shrinks from humiliation, where he would not shrink from death; and as the shout reached his ears, he shouted back his defiance, raised his head loftily in air, and with the most perfect composure commenced singing his song of death,—the song of many victories.

“Wherefore sings he his death song?” was the cry from many voices: “He is not to die!”

“Thou art the slave of Opitchi-Manneyto,” cried Malatchie to the captive; “thou shalt sing no lie of thy victories in the ear of Yemassee. The slave of Opitchi-Manneyto has no triumph;” and the words of the song were effectually drowned, if not silenced, in the tremendous clamor which they raised about him.

It was then that Malatchie claimed his victim. The doom had been already given, but the ceremony of expatriation and outlawry was yet to follow; and under the direction of the prophet, the various castes and classes of the nation prepared to take a final leave of one who could no longer be known among them. First of all came a band of young marriageable women, who, wheeling in a circle three times about him, sang together a wild apostrophe containing a bitter farewell, which nothing in our language could perfectly embody:—

“Go: thou hast no wife in Yemassee—thou hast given no lodge to the daughter of Yemassee—thou hast slain no meat for thy children. Thou hast no name—the women of Yemassee know thee no more. They know thee no more.”

And the final sentence was reverberated from the entire assembly:—

“They know thee no more—they know thee no more.”

Then came a number of the ancient men, the patriarchs of the nation, who surrounded him in circular mazes three several times, singing as they did so a hymn of like import:—

“Go: thou sittest not in the council of Yemassee—thou shalt not speak wisdom to the boy that comes. Thou hast no name in Yemassee—the fathers of Yemassee, they know thee no more.”

And again the whole assembly cried out, as with one voice:—

“They know thee no more—they know thee no more.”

These were followed by the young warriors, his old associates, who now in a solemn band approached him to go through a like performance. His eyes were shut as they came, his blood was chilled in his heart, and the articulated farewell of their wild chant failed seemingly to reach his ear. Nothing but the last sentence he heard:—

“Thou that wast a brother,
Thou art nothing now—
The young warriors of Yemassee,
They know thee no more,”

And the crowd cried with them:—“They know thee no more.”

“Is no hatchet sharp for Occonestoga?” moaned forth the suffering savage.

But his trials were only then begun. Enoree-Mattee now approached him with the words with which, as the representative of the good Manneyto, he renounced him—with which he denied him access to the Indian heaven, and left him a slave and an outcast, a miserable wanderer amid the shadows and the swamps, and liable to all the dooms and terrors which come with the service of Opitchi-Manneyto.

“Thou wast a child of Manneyto—

sung the high priest in a solemn chant, and with a deep—toned voice that thrilled strangely amid the silence of the scene.

“Thou wast a child of Manneyto—
He gave thee arrows and an eye;
Thou wast the strong son of Manneyto—
He gave thee feathers and a wing;
Thou wast a young brave of Manneyto—
He gave thee scalps and a war-song:
But he knows thee no more—he knows thee mm more.”

And the clustering multitude again gave back the last line in wild chorus. The prophet continued his chant:—

“That Opitchi-Manneyto!
He commands thee for his slave—
And the Yemassee must hear him,
Hear, and give thee for his slave:
They will take from thee the arrow,
The broad arrow of thy people;
Thou shalt see no blessed valley,
Where the plum-groves always bloom;
Thou shalt hear no song of valor
Front the ancient Yemassee;
Father, mother, name, and people,
Thou shalt lose with that broad arrow.
Thou art lost to the Manneyto—
He knows thee no more, he knows thee no more.”

The despair of hell was in the face of the victim, and he howled forth in a cry of agony—that for a moment silenced the wild chorus of the crowd around—the terrible consciousness in his mind of that privation which the doom entailed upon him. Every feature was convulsed with emotion; and the terrors of Opitchi-Manneyto’s dominion seemed already in strong exercise upon the muscles of his heart, when Sanutee, the father, silently approached him, and with a pause of a few moments, stood gazing upon the son from whom he was to be separated eternally—whom not even the uniting, the restoring, hand of death could possibly restore to him. And he, his once noble son,—the pride of his heart, the gleam of his hope, the triumphant warrior, who was even to increase his own glory, and transmit the endearing title of Well-beloved, which the Yemassee had given him, to a succeeding generation—he was to be lost forever! These promises were all blasted; and the father was now present to yield him up eternally—to deny him—to forfeit him, in fearful penalty, to the nation whose genius he had wronged, and whose rights he had violated. The old man stood for a moment,—rather, we may suppose, for the recovery of his resolution, than with any desire for the contemplation of the pitiable form before him. The pride of the youth came back to him—the pride of the strong mind in its desolation—as his eye caught the inflexible gaze of his unswerving father; and he exclaimed bitterly and loud:—

“Wherefore art thou come? Thou hast been my foe, not my father! Away—I would not behold thee!” and he closed his eyes after the speech, as if to relieve himself from a disgusting presence.

“Thou hast said well, Oconestoga: Sanutee is thy foe; he is not thy father. To say this in thy ears has he come. Look on him, Oconestoga—look up and hear thy doom. The young and the

old of the Yemassee, the warrior and the chief—they have all denied thee—all given thee up to Opitchi-Manneyto! Occonestoga is no name for the Yemassee. The Yemassee gives it to his dog. The prophet of Manneyto has forgotten thee; thou art unknown to those who were thy people. And I, thy father—with this speech, I yield thee to Opitchi-Manneyto. Sanutee is no longer thy father—thy father knows thee no more.”

And once more came to the ears of the victim that melancholy chorus of the multitude:—“ He knows thee no more, he knows thee no more.”

Sanutee turned quickly away as he had spoken; and as if he suffered more than he was willing to show, the old man rapidly hastened to the little mound where he had been previously sitting, his eyes averted from the further spectacle. Occonestoga, goaded to madness by these several incidents, shrieked forth the bitterest execrations, until Enoree-Mattee, preceding Malatchie, again approached. Having given some directions in an undertone to the latter, he retired, leaving the executioner alone within his victim. Malatchie then, while all was silence in the crowd,—a thick silence, in which even respiration seemed to be suspended,—proceeded to his duty: and lifting the feet of Occonestoga carefully from the ground, he placed a log under them; then addressing him, as he again bared his knife, which he stuck in the tree above his head, he sung:—

“I take from thee the earth of Yemassee—
I take from thee the water of Yemassee—
I take from thee the arrow of Yemassee—
Thou art no longer a Yemassee —
The Yemassee knows thee no more.”

“The Yemassee knows thee no more,” cried the multitude; and their universal shout was deafening upon the ear. Occonestoga said no word now; he could offer no resistance to the unnerving hands of Malatchie, who now bared the arm more completely of its covering. But his limbs were convulsed within the spasms of that dreadful terror of the future which was racking and raging in every pulse of his heart. He had full faith in the superstitions of his people. His terrors acknowledged the full horrors of their doom. A despairing agony, which no language could describe, had of his soul. Meanwhile the silence of all indicated the general anxiety; and Malatchie prepared to seize the knife and perform the operation, when a confused murmur arose from the crowd around: the mass gave way and parted; and rushing wildly into the area came Matiwan, his mother—the long black hair streaming—the features, an astonishing likeness to his own, convulsed like his; and her action that of one reckless of all things in the way of the forward progress she was making to the person of her child. She cried aloud as she came, with a voice that rang like a sudden death-bell through the ring:—

“Would you keep the mother from her boy, and he to be lost to her for ever ? Shall she have no parting with the young brave she bore in her bosom? Away, keep me not back—I will look upon, I will love him. He shall have the blessing of Matiwan, though the Yemassee and the Manneyto curse.”

The victim heard; and a momentary renovation of mental life, perhaps a renovation of hope, spoke out in the simple exclamation which fell from his lips:—

“O Matiwan—O mother!”

She rushed towards the spot where she heard his appeal; and thrusting the executioner aside, threw her arms desperately about his neck.

“Touch him not, Matiwan,” was the general cry from the crowd. “Touch him not, Matiwan: Manneyto knows him no more.”

“But Matiwan knows him; the mother knows her child, though the Manneyto denies him. O boy—O boy, boy, boy!”

And she sobbed like an infant on his neck.

“Thou art come, Matiwan, thou art come; but wherefore? To curse like the father—to curse like the Manneyto?” mournfully said the captive.

“No, no, no! Not to curse—not to curse! When did mother curse the child she bore? Not to curse but to bless thee. To bless thee and forgive.”

“Tear her away,” cried the prophet; “let Opitchi-Manneyto have his slave.”

“Tear her away, Malatchie,” cried the crowd now impatient for the execution. Malatchie approached.

“Not yet—not yet,” appealed the woman. “Shall not the mother say farewell to the child she shall see no more?” and she waved Malatchie back, and in the next instant drew hastily from the drapery of her dress a small hatchet, which she had there carefully concealed.

“What wouldst thou do, Matiwan?” asked Oconestoga, as his eye caught the glare of the weapon.

“Save thee, my boy—save thee for thy mother, Oconestoga—save thee for the happy valley.”

“Wouldst thou slay me, mother? wouldst strike the heart of thy son?” he asked, within a something of reluctance to receive death from the hands of a parent.

“I strike thee but to save thee, my son; since they cannot take the totem from thee after the life is gone. Turn away from me thy head; let me not look upon thine eyes as I strike, lest my hands grow weak and tremble. Turn thine eyes away—I will not lose thee.”

His eyes closed; and the fatal instrument, lifted above her head, was now visible in the sight of all. The executioner rushed forward to interpose, but he came too late. The tomahawk was driven deep into the skull, and but a single sentence from his lips preceded the final insensibility of the victim.

“It is good, Matiwan, it is good: thou hast saved me—the death is in my heart.” And back he sank as he spoke; while a shriek of mingled joy and horror from the lips of the mother announced the success of her effort to defeat the doom, the most dreadful in the imagination of the Yemassee.

“He is not lost—he is not lost! They may not take the child from his mother. They may not keep him from the valley of Manneyto. He is free—he is free!” And she fell back in a deep swoon into the arms of Sanutee, who by this time had approached. She had defrauded Opitchi-Manneyto of his victim, for they may not remove the badge of the nation from any but the living victim.