

## The Horror in the Chestnut Tree

I was dead. If the French soldiers caught up to me, I was dead. If I couldn't stop the bleeding in my foot—a gift from a St. Francis Indian's bayonet—I was dead. If I didn't find food soon, I was dead. Simply put, if things continued as they were, I was a dead man. It was October 1759, and the weather was bad, even by Quebec standards. And everything was made worse by the rain. Rain when you marched—rain when you stopped to relieve yourself—rain and fog and a cold wind when you curled up in your soaked blanket to try to sleep.

Our unit, part of the British Army, had been ordered to stop the incessant kidnappings and killings in the wilder territories by Algonquin Indians from St. Francis, who were spurred on by the French Army to raid our colonies. We did our job, and then crouched around the glowing fires to eat and warm ourselves before the long march back home. The Abenaki are fearsome warriors and had left several of my unit with Abenaki tomahawks newly embedded in their backbones, lying scalpless in a pile. We had time to dispose of our dead in a truly large bonfire, but their dead remained where they fell. The French had their own camp nearby, and we had not yet seen them.

The next morning, those of us who remained, along with the liberated white slaves, gathered on the south side of the river opposite the destroyed camp, having taken the newly

liberated Assagunticook-style canoes for the crossing and then breaking them up for firewood on the other side. The celebrations were kept short since we knew the French Army would soon be upon us. We ate of roast pig and potatoes, and some sort of cornbread with roasted onions—all taken from the village we had just destroyed.

Our stomachs full, we started our long march back to the colonies with full bellies and warm moccasins. But we had awakened the sleepy French army by wiping out their allies, the St. Francis Indians, and by taking back the British hostages the French so coveted. As we started our march back toward the King's colonies, we could often hear their marching song in the far distance—faint words between the pattering of the raindrops on the leaves above our heads. One refrain will stick in my head forever, as it seemed to be the stanza most sung, and with the most vigor.

*J'aime l'oignon frit à l'huile,*

*J'aime l'oignon car il est bon.*

*J'aime l'oignon frit à l'huile,*

*J'aime l'oignon, j'aime l'oignon.*

I guess they must really like fried onions in France. But, if the French were having the same weather and luck as we were having, they would be wishing hard for those onions very soon. Out in the woods, escaping the French, there were no onions, and there was no game either. We would all starve without meat to be found. perhaps because of the oppressive rain and fog, or perhaps because of the dozens of stumbling Englishmen trying to make it home before the snow set in—not that you could keep the powder in your musket dry enough to get off a shot if you saw a deer or a beaver or a rabbit, or a Frenchman, come to it.

After a week on the run, two of our group had died from their wounds, and even more had simply disappeared in the night. The two dozen of us that remained alive and together decided to take our bearings for our respective homes and split up, so as to give the French army too many choices to be worth following us any further. Our moccasins had become mush from the rain, and we hoped that the French troops were having similar luck.

And so, leaving my comrades and slightly slowed down by the bayoneted foot, I marched south and east toward my beloved Arundel, the finest town in Maine, where my mother and father and sister Anne and, of course, my beloved Sarah, were waiting for me in our family inn on the Kennebec River, wondering if I was alive or dead and rotting into worm food in a French and Indian camp. My sister, Anne, made the most delectable baked beans in all of Maine. I could almost smell them wafting through the soaked landscape even as I heard *J'aime l'oignon, j'aime l'oignon* off in the distance. Sometimes the French got pretty close, but never close enough for me to hear their footsteps over the rain.

I could hear the French marching songs behind me again, and I seriously wondered if splitting up had been a costly mistake. The onion song again. Always singing about onions, day and night. *I love the onion fried in oil. I love the onion because it's good. I love the onion fried in oil. I like the onion. I like the onion.* Good Lord in Heaven—what I would have given for an onion after so many days in the wilderness with only the meager supplies we had liberated from St. Francis. My foot worried me awfully, as the blood seeped into my moccasin with every step. I left oddly tormented bloody footprints behind me—all too easy for the French to follow.

With the French so close behind and my foot not healing, I decided to march through the night and sleep during the day to avoid them until I got to civilized—that is, *British*—country. I'd been walking three or four days since splitting up with my fellow soldiers. The weather

remained awful, with a cold drizzle and fog that cut down how far one could see into the forest. Marching at night had its own hazards. Cougars were on the prowl. Finding good footing was very difficult by moonlight, and I tripped on roots and getting stuck in underbrush. But it's better being stuck in underbrush than ending up stuck on the end of a French bayonet.

After a few days without finding game, I started looking quite earnestly for anything to eat—anything at all. I am bad at foraging. Back home, I am known as a good hunter of game and not bad in a garden, but foraging is a skill I sadly lack. I did find some strange mushrooms under a tree and ate them. I threw them up immediately and continued to vomit for the rest of the night. I even hallucinated a very bright shooting star had landed in the woods ahead with a magnificent fireball and thunder. The time I lost to sickness turned out to be nothing so much as an inconvenience, for I never heard the French soldiers sing again. They must have realized that we had split up and that there was no game to be had, so turned back.

Toward the break of dawn, I felt a little better. I decided during the night to start marching home during the day now that the French menace seemed to be gone. I got to my feet and made my way toward where I felt sure south and east must lie. The sun peeked through the swirling fog for a moment, and I realized I had been going the wrong way. I set my course again and started off. I only made it about a mile before the overwhelming fatigue and hunger and my aching foot sent me down beside a very large hemlock tree.

This hemlock tree had been hollowed out by some ferocious animal. The hole made in the tree was more than large enough for a man to use as a shelter, and woodchips—as from a beaver the size of which I'd never seen—were strewn about and had collected into a pile that would take multiple farm wagons to carry away. I peeked into the darkness but could see nothing—perhaps the beast wasn't home. The tree took up an area as big around as a small

cottage, so I didn't dare go into the hollow of the tree, not knowing anything about the animal except that it must be quite large and powerful, and have very sharp teeth, indeed. Instead, I found a flat area not too far from the chip pile that was mostly covered in fallen leaves and covered myself up with the wood chips against the cold and fog. I quickly warmed, and the smell of the fresh hemlock chips comforted me to my core. My injured foot throbbed, but I fell asleep quickly, the top layers of wood already soaking from the unstoppable rain.

I awoke as the sun—as much as I could see of it—slunk down below the horizon, and I was stiff and sore from head to toe. My stabbed foot ached and oozed blood. St. Francis seemed so far away and so long ago—eating ox stew around a campfire with my fellow soldiers and having warm buckskins and dry moccasins. I contemplated my situation as I lay in the warm wood chips. I still had my musket, but no ball or powder. There was no game to shoot anyway. I had been several days without food, but water drizzled everywhere off of every surface. It could be had without too much trouble. We had destroyed the marauders at St. Francis—they would no longer be raiding English settlements and stealing English women and children to be their slaves.

The French seemed to have given up on me. But at least two weeks' march kept me from any friendly English colonists, and then maybe another week or more of marching to get home unless I could hitch a ride on a ship to Arundel.

I got up out of the chips and walked around the hemlock a bit to see if I could find anything to eat. There was nothing at all. The sun was setting again, there were no French soldiers, no game, no way to tell which way was home. I decided to lie back down and sleep and try to make a new start at daybreak. I made myself a nice bed in the wood chips, moving closer to the tree for comfort, but not so close to the opening where the unknown beast might return. It wasn't a bad little camp. I could look up into the treetops, and the wood chips kept me out of the

mud. They also provided warmth, something that my faded and muddy blanket could not do when wet.

I slept soundly for several hours, then I found myself in a dream. I was at home in my inn in Arundel, and I could smell my sister's baked beans bubbling away in the kitchen. I could hear crackling from the fire and my mother humming in her rocking chair as she knitted away with some coarse stuff she'd found in Portsmouth. It smelled of baking bread and beans and maybe a little onion on the fire. It was warm and nice and home. But it wasn't a long dream.

I awoke feeling weak but with a strange warmth coursing through my body. My back ached with stiffness from sleeping on the ground, so I tried rolling over on my side. My ankle was caught on something. I tried to tug it free but to no avail. The pain from my injured foot, quite immoderate, made my brain sore, especially as I struggled. I felt a pulsating warmth in my ankle that continued to sweep over my whole body. I knew that the tree beast had somehow grabbed me, and I tried to fight and make an escape. The feeling of warm, wet, blood at my ankle panicked me and I tried to stay awake but was ineluctably hastened off to slumber by some poison the beast had inflicted me with.

And so, I entered a dream again. And again, I dreamed of home. I walked around a lake with my dog, It was sunny and warm and dragonflies buzzed past us and landed on the weeds by the lake. I was carrying a gun loaded with birdshot. Bug and I were hunting partridges, and Bug, a smart and sturdy fellow, was going along to collect the birds for me. Bug is a clever fellow and, though a mongrel, a gorgeous animal. His smooth and black coat reminded one of a fancy ladies' fur coat, and his tail curled up and wagged with joy whenever we adventured. We walked and walked. But unlike an ordinary dream, the walking didn't seem to have a purpose or an end. We just kept walking. It was pleasant but seemingly never-ending. I admit to getting a little bored

with it. The hunger pangs in my dream mirrored the awake ones, and I wished to shoot a bird or just be home with a plate of beans. But our hunger was not to be satiated.

I awoke to the sound of a large bird in the distance and the now familiar feeling of overwhelming cold and stiffness. I had forgotten about my foot while I had slept and sat up awkwardly. Dazed, I sat upright and took stock of my situation. I tried to slip out from under the chips, but try as I might, the foot wouldn't move.

In a panic, I swept the chips away from my leg and ankle to find some sort of snake-like thing wrapped around my ankle. The "snake" body led off under the chips and into the cavity in the tree. I was horrified! A massive snake had certain hold of my ankle, who had every intent of bleeding me dry as I lay under his tree in woodchips. I'd escaped the Abenaki musket balls, their knives at my throat and their tomahawks removing my scalp in one piece, only to be a snack for an oversized snake in a tree. But snakes certainly can't hollow out trees, and that stuck in my brain like a hot ember.

Terror took over. I relived a memory from when I was a child. I had gone out to collect eggs from our hens and found one of them making itself comfortable on the top of a huge, coiled snake. The snake had eaten all the eggs in the nest and had curled itself up waiting for more. It was the kind of surprise to scar a young child whose only intent was to collect some eggs.

I peeked into the opening in the tree. This time I could see a glimpse of the beast. It was as big as a horse is big, but shaped like an octopus, with a large body on top and tentacles below. It had one dark eye the size of a dinner plate that looked at me thoughtfully. I felt pressure on my leg as I tried to lean in for a better look. I could see the body, now mottled with colorful patches, red and blue and green. I could see one tentacle leading out and to my ankle.

I looked at the tentacle in horror. I tried to pull it off my ankle, but I hadn't eaten in so long, I simply had no energy to pull. In the space of a moment, I felt a warm sensation first in my ankle, then into my leg, then into my body. Poison! Again, I was dead, and I was quickly lost to a disturbed slumber as I fell back onto the fragrant wood chips.

The dream this time was very vivid. It started out with snakes attacking and chasing me and Bug through the woods, but they were quickly replaced by the vision of us and the lake and the gun. In my confusion, I pointed the gun at my ankle, meaning to shoot the snake off, but there was no snake in the dream. In fact, a covey of partridges shot out of some underbrush. My gun followed them up and after the roar of the gun, three birds fell from the sky. In my dream, I started a small fire and cleaned the birds with the knife on my belt, and Bug and I waited while they roasted. I knew it was a dream, but my hunger was as real in my dream as in real life. Thankfully, at least in the dream, the pheasants were plump and meaty, and I shared bites with Bug.

The partridges finished, the dream ended.

I awoke to find a rare break in the rain with the stars coming out. I tried to move my leg, but complete paralysis had set in. I sat up and put all my energy into pulling the tentacle off. In the dim light of dusk, I could make out the form of the tentacle, at least where it came away from my ankle and led off into the tree. It was warm to the touch and damp. The grey flesh was smooth and though the tentacle was very much like one from a giant octopus, I could not feel the underside for any suckers. I stared and stared into the hole in the tree to get a glimpse of the horrifying beast, but could see nothing, though I fancied the leaves of the tree moved a bit in a non-existent wind. I covered my leg up with wood chips so I couldn't see it.



The terror of what could be in the tree struck me the way a tomahawk strikes a man in the spine when properly thrown. I wanted to pray to God but realized I couldn't think of any prayers.

I really ought to be dead by now. It had been many, many days since my last food of any kind, and with some sort of snake or creature draining me of my blood, I could not believe that I would see another morning. Instantly, I felt the sensation of laudanum coursing through my veins and of slipping consciousness. My last thought was "why would an octopus tentacle be warm?" then I slept deeply.

I slid right into the very realistic dream of me and Bug and the lake and the gun. This time we could smell baked beans far off in the distance. I looked at Bug, and he, always agreeable, led the way toward the beans. I thought I saw smoke above the tree line—or maybe I just smelled it. But Bug and I thought that maybe a cabin could be just in the distance. We walked and walked.

Unlike the last dream, we actually made quick progress through the woods and eventually found a tiny log cabin. It had a front door and a chimney and porch along the front. Bug and I climbed the stairs and knocked and a woman answered. At first, I thought her to be my Sarah, but when she spoke, I knew it wasn't she. She was similar in size and proportion to my Sarah, and dressed in one of Sarah's simple frocks, with her hair up and out of the way for cooking. Her skin showed that she was no stranger to the sun and her hands no stranger to hard work.

"Hello, Samuel, would you like something to eat?" she said. *How did she know my name?*

"We are starving and thrilled to find your cabin. Would you be so kind as to tell me where we are?" I asked.

“You’re in the woods lying down next to a tree,” she said, “but you know that. Ask me something you don’t know.”

This took a bit of drowsy thoughtfulness. I had to try to think outside of the dream. That’s a bit like rowing from outside of a boat—it’s hard to get your mind on.

“The creature in the tree, is that you? What kind of creature are you, as I have never seen anything like *your kind*,” I said.

“Yes,” the creature answered, “but I can’t tell you much more. *Your kind* does not handle such things well. Have some beans.”

And, with this last, she scooped some baked beans onto tin plates, one for each of us—even Bug. We ate in silence, but I had so much to ask. I licked my plate clean. When I turned to thank the woman, I realized she had gone to the stove where there was cornbread. Bug and I moved our chairs closer to the fire to warm ourselves.

“How can an octopus be the tree?” I asked.

“It can’t,” she replied.

“But if you’re sucking my blood, how am I still alive?” I asked, taking a bite of the warm cornbread.

“I can mostly answer that,” she said, taking a bite of her cornbread, “I was hurt too. Your arrival saved us both. I am able to use some of your life essence and give you some of mine in return. That way, we both live,” she explained. “In fact, I am repaired enough to leave now, so this will be the last you’ll see of me. Your foot has been healed.

I thought about this and finished my cornbread, then looked up to ask her where she had come from, but she was gone. I “halloed” as loudly as I could and searched the cabin inside and out but could find no one.

After having gorged ourselves on the baked beans and cornbread, Bug and I curled up on a rope mattress we found in the only other room and decided to nap. We fell into a very deep sleep. My awareness of Bug or of anything else for that matter, faded to black, and there was just peaceful nothingness. I have no idea how long we were like this—it could have been days, or even a week—but we did eventually wake.

When I awoke, Bug had gone, and I reclined under the tree. I felt pretty good for not having eaten in a very long time, and an experimental flexing of the joints proved that I was no longer attached to the creature. I looked at my foot. There was swelling and a ghastly purple cast as well as two puncture marks that certainly hadn't been there before, but it was free. The wound on my foot had closed up, leaving a scar that would make for a great story. My moccasins were still a pulpy mess and unusable, but the weather wasn't so bad now. I cut off a bit of my leggings and created, not shoes, but something that would at least protect my feet a little. I stood a bit shakily, but stand I did. I poked my head inside the tree, but nothing was in there—just a hollowed-out cavity.

I wasn't dead from a French bayonet or starvation, so it was time to continue. I mean, there really wasn't much else to do. The sun was rising, and I could tell its direction through the trees. That was East, and East was the way I needed to go.

THE END