

The Founders of the Mission

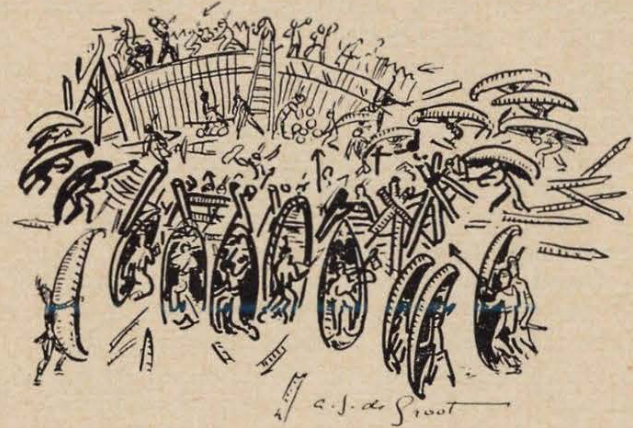
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One by one the Erie forts were carried. Gentaïeton, the only other Erie town whose name has come down to us (precisely because of our protagonist), was also destroyed. Among the survivors of this internecine struggle, which ended in 1656 with the annihilation of the People-of-the-Panthers as such, Gandeaktewa and her mother found themselves dragged off to slavery among the abhorred Oneida.

Fortunately for both and for the other Cats whose lives were spared, the slavery was at times softened to a quasi-adoption by the tribe. In such cases, after sufficient probation, each new member replaced a lost husband, wife, son or daughter. In the eyes of the recently acquired relatives, Gandeaktewa and her mother too, whether they liked it or not, had become to all purposes Iroquois. By devious ways and byways, their misfortune proved to be their good luck. God, in His infinite love, was nurturing the two newcomers for Christianity without their suspecting it.

Humanly speaking, such a proposition may seem paradoxical. The Dutchman's gin from Fort Orange raised to a white heat the reigning paganism. How, in such circumstances, did Gandeaktewa live a life unsullied by serious sin? The "aunt" who had adopted her, an alien, may have been a kindly soul and allowed her to disappear during the drinking carnivals. Her mother, living in the same town, certainly set her a good example. Above all, God's grace drew around her an invulnerable rampart of strength and from its limits she refused to budge.

Imperial Rome prided itself on its vestals. Before the white man's passion for beaver and racoon pelts threw the pall of drunkenness over the Eastern Indians,



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chastity was held by them in high esteem. Even as late as April 1779, General James Clinton, in a letter to Colonel Van Schaick, paid them the following tribute: "... They never violate the chastity of any woman, their prisoner." For all that, Gandeaktewa, had she wished, could have succumbed to the prevalent corruption before receiving the sacred waters of baptism. That the days of her youth ran by, crystal-clear, as the waters of the birch-fringed brooks of the Oneida countryside, is nothing less than admirable.

In her new home, Gandeaktewa soon won the hearts, not only of her "relatives", but of everybody who knew her. She obeyed her masters always and dressed as the Iroquois girls. She obeyed them too, when she was old enough to marry, not much later than 1656, the year of Venerable Kateri Tekakwitha's birth at Mohawk Ossernenon.

Christian Hurons, recently Iroquoised, for the most part faithful to their religion, were sprinkled through the Five Cantons. In 1656, from Quebec, many went to live among the Mohawk and Onondaga. There