



THE BLESSED KATERI TEKAKWITHA

1656 – 1680

IN THE LITTLE CITY OF LA FLECHE, in Anjou, France, M. Jerome Le Royer de la Dauversiere was inspired to found a town on the Island of Montreal for the conversion of the North American Indian. At the cost of heroic efforts, he succeeded. Montreal, founded in 1642, realized its goal in 1667, when the Mission of St. Francis Xavier was established on the south bank of the St. Lawrence River, facing the French settlement. Many Indians from different groups came to settle there, among them. Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha.

Between Montreal and Quebec, some sixty miles down the St. Lawrence, since 1634, stood the habitation of Trois-Rivieres behind the walls of its fort, a challenge to Iroquois belligerency. Since Champlain had sided with the Atgonkins against the Iroquois in 1609 and 1616, not only the little colony of Three Rivers, but, also, all of New France had been forced to resist the guerilla warfare conducted against it and its Indian allies. Many were the times when the French and their friends, behind their none too strong fortifications, resisted the enemy attacks! Any pioneer or, for that matter, any Algonkin who dared to venture outside the palisades could well ask himself if he would ever come back alive.

A WEDDING

In 1653, however, an unofficial truce was agreed upon, no one knows why. During the winter, the Algonkin and Iroquois hunters went out together in search of small and big game, and despite their totally different languages, got along very well. This spirit of mutual understanding was maintained until spring and it was so strong that the Algonkins allowed several of their guests to take to wife among them: An Iroquois chief, whose name is unknown, a member of the Turtle clan, married a young Algonkin of about fifteen or sixteen years of age. This teenage girl had spent most of her life at the French post and was an out-and-out Christian. When the time came for the young chief to return to his homeland, some three hundred miles to the south, his wife bid farewell to her people and to the missionaries, who had instructed her so well. As she took her place in her husband's canoe, she felt a tug at her heartstrings at the thought that she would probably never again see the country of her birth.

The flotilla made its way up the river as far as the Richelieu, which would carry it southward. The youthful Algonkin let her eyes roam on each bank, edged with tall evergreens, white birches, tender green maples, and proud elms. Every night, the Iroquois halted, took some nourishment, and slept under the stars. Four or five days later, as the river flowed into Lake Champlain, the paddling became dangerous. At a corner of the lake, where many had already perished under the onslaught of wind and waves, they stopped and offered tobacco to the okis or supernatural beings inhabiting the depths of the water. In turn, Lake Champlain emptied into the Lake of the Blessed Sacrament, so called by the missionaries of that period. After the conquest of the country by the British, it was renamed lake George. Having reached this place, the

I am sending you a treasure...

travelers were in Iroquois country, even though their towns were some two days' distance away. The trip could have lasted two weeks.

The Iroquois Confederation was made up of five nations of the same origin: to the west of the Hudson River lived the Mohawks, then the Oneida, the Onondaga, the Cayuga, and not far from Niagara Falls, the Seneca. The Algonquin girl's husband and his men belonged to the first of the three Mohawk villages of the period, the easternmost of them all, named Ossernenon. Seven or eight years before, the Holy Martyrs, Isaac Jogues, Rene Goupil, and Jean de la Lande here shed their blood for the Faith. The inhabitants had decided to spare his life, but a few intractable Indians killed him and his companions.

Ossernenon was the smallest village of the nation. It was built on a hill, gently sloping down to the Mohawk River and offering a splendid view of the valley. To each side of the palisade were fields of maize, squash, and green beans, the "three Sisters" of the Iroquois. The Algonkin newcomer realized that she would soon be busy at cultivating the fields. Her own people as well as the nomadic Attikamegues of the St. Maurice River eked out a living by hunting and fishing; the Iroquois cantons, on the other hand, non-migrants for centuries, grew thousands of bushels of vegetables each year.

The Iroquois lodge was a surprise-packet for the new wife, accustomed to the Algonkin wigwam. It was a semi-circular arch under which twenty families could live, divided into groups of four: two persons on each side of the long house, sharing in the hearth in the middle of the corridor; and so on for each group.

Above each fire, a hole in the roof allowed the smoke to disappear and the sunlight to enter. Even so, the long house was dark and close.

As wife of the young chief, the stranger was well received. Has she been badly treated, her warrior husband would have soundly trounced the offenders. The Iroquois generally welcomed newcomers to their ranks when they did not make slaves of them.

As she familiarized herself with the Mohawk language, which was quite different from the Algonkin, and just as difficult (each noun takes more than one hundred and fifty different forms), she understood better the important role of the Iroquois women. They owned the fields, the cemeteries, the long houses, and the furniture. Their husbands exercised no authority in their homes. The mothers had every right to give orders to their daughters and even to their sons until they reached the age of twelve. In the tribe, the war chiefs were less important than the peace chiefs, and the women of the village received far more consideration than the latter. War could not be declared without the women's consent. No man could free a victim to-be from death at the stake, though any woman could do so by adopting him. Not only were the women guardians of the common land of the village, but also of the ceremonies and ancient customs of the nation. In this matrilineal society, future mothers were so much respected that the assassination of one of them had to be compensated by the death of two men.

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(to be continued)