



The Devil's Dance-Chamber

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Most storied of our New World rivers is the Hudson. Historic scenes have been enacted on its shores, and Indian, Dutchman, Briton, and American have invested it with romance. It had its source, in the red man's fancy, in a spring of eternal youth; giants and spirits dwelt in its woods and hills, and before the river-Shatemuc, king of streams, the red men called it—had broken through the highlands, those mountains were a pent for spirits who had rebelled against the Manitou. After the waters had forced a passage to the sea these evil ones sought shelter in the glens and valleys that open to right and left along its course, but in time of tempest, when they hear Manitou riding down the ravine on wings of storm, dashing thunderbolts against the cliffs, it is the fear that he will recapture them and force them into lightless caverns to expiate their revolt, that sends them huddling among the rocks and makes the hills resound with roars and howls.

At the Devil's Dance-Chamber, a slight plateau on the west bank, between Newburg and Crom Elbow, the red men performed semi-religious rites as a preface to their hunting and fishing trips or ventures on the war-path. They built a fire, painted themselves, and in that frenzy into which savages are so readily lashed, and that is so like to the action of mobs in trousers, they tumbled, leaped, danced, yelled, sang, grimaced, and gesticulated until the Manitou disclosed himself, either as a harmless animal or a beast of prey. If he came in the former shape the augury was favorable, but if he showed himself as a bear or panther, it was a warning of evil that they seldom dared to disregard.

The crew of Hudson's ship, the Half Moon, having chanced on one of these orgies, were so impressed by the fantastic spectacle that they gave the name Duyvels Dans-Kamer to the spot. Years afterwards, when Stuyvesant ascended the river, his doughty retainers were horrified, on landing below the Dans-Kamer, to discover hundreds of painted figures frisking there in the fire-light. A few surmised that they were but a new generation of savages holding a powwow, but most of the sailors fancied that the assemblage was demoniac, and that the figures were spirits of bad Indians repeating a scalp-dance and revelling in the mysterious fire-water that they had brought down from the river source in jars and skins. The spot was at least once profaned with blood, for a young Dutchman and his wife, of Albany, were captured here by an angry Indian, and although the young man succeeded in stabbing his captor to death, he was burned alive on the rock by the friends of the Indian whose wrath he had provoked. The wife, after being kept in captivity for a time, was ransomed.

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