

Chapter XII

1873

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We arrived at the Head of the Lake (North Temiscaming) a few days before Christmas and stopped at Angus McBride's holding was known as the Point of Departure. McBride's father was once in charge of Fort Temiscaming under the North West Company. When the amalgamation was made with the Hudson's Bay Company he well-nigh broke his heart. At the time when I was there Angus McBride was the head centre of a large band of Indians and a few half-breeds; and what he said was law.

We pitched our camp and began to make our preparations for the start very soon after Christmas Day. My Christmas ~~dinner~~ dinner was fried salt pork—not more than usually rancid—and a composite substitute for plum pudding in which raisins were rare and citron peel and spice absent altogether; but the good appetite evolved out of health, youth and hard work made it palatable.

In those days although spirituous liquors were not altogether unknown, they were rare and seldom reached beyond the Head of the Longes Saults (Long Rapids). A thirsty member of our party determined to try his luck at obtaining a Christmas drink for himself—he did not trouble about the rest of his ~~fellow~~ fellows—and fortune favoured him in this wise.

McBride had a horse of a shaggy breed which had lately for some unaccountable reason become lame. He depended on the horse to draw ^{up} wood ~~up~~ for the house and he wanted it cured of its lameness. Poor old McBride knew more about catching rabbits than the handling of horses. In his anxiety

he paid a visit to our hut and asked if there was anyone among our number who understood veterinary work. The thirsty one promptly answered that he knew all about horses and could cure the animal provided he had the proper medicine.

"What is the kind of medicine you want?" asked McBride thinking of the patent drugs the Hudson's Bay Company dispensed to its customers; he had a plentiful supply of them on the premises.

The amateur horse doctor refused to say what it was before all of us. With a knowing wink he replied;

"If you will let me come into the house, I'll tell you. It is a great secret given me by a friend and I promised never to give it away. I must be alone and keep the door ~~shut~~ of the stable shut."

He came back after an interval and retired into the stable, shutting himself in. We noticed that he bore a mysterious bottle under his arm. No sound came forth from the building but an occasional "Whoa! whoa!". Even that ceased at last. We wondered at the length of time it took to effect the cure. The minutes grew to an hour and still there was no sign of man nor horse.

Then some boys belonging to the establishment climbed on to the roof of the building and managed to find a peep-hole through the chinks in the rafters. They brought us their report, which was to the effect that the uncertified vet was lying by the side of the horse sleeping soundly. He was grasping an empty flask.

The mystery was solved. The medicine he had succeeded in extracting from the unsuspecting McBride was a flask of "high wines", a spirit which if pure runs cent per cent over proof.

The door was forced open and the vet presently staggered out muttering incoherently that he had not been allowed time enough to carry out his treatment; and how, in Hades, could a man be expected to cure a horse when he was thus interrupted.

The horse got over its lareness, for it drew up some ~~heavy~~ ^{heavy} stuff soon after; but the cure was effected by the Hand of Providence and not by the hand and veterinary skill of the bibulous volunteer.

On Christmas night there was a dance. It was the first time that I had come into contact with the pure Indian when he was off duty and enjoying himself and I was interested. If a man could not speak Indian he was not in it. At that time I knew nothing of the language. I ought therefore to have taken a backseat and looked on; but I rushed in where others might have feared to tread.

I was wearing a pair of long boots for the excellent reason that I had not brought up any others into the bush. I tried to do the light fantastic in them and take my part in the dance. Of course I made a mess of it, and pretty soon realised the fact. My partner danced round me while I went plo-pety-plop, plo-pety-plop with my heavy boots. There were several pretty half-breed girls present, and they openly laughed at my efforts to show them to the best of my ability how the thing was done in the best circles in England; and ^{they} made uncomplimentary remarks in their mother tongue. I understood the laugh though I did not understand the language.

Their dance was a kind of jig with a mixture of Scotch, Irish and Indian movement in it. It might very well have raised a laugh ^{as my efforts had done} if it had been attempted out of their own social circle. In any isolated spot in the Ontario and Quebec Provinces ^{beyond the} ~~out-of~~ reach of civilisation, the same kind

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of thing may still be seen. These Indian dances had the tomahawk in them. I saw old men kick up their heels and yell as if they thought they were sailing on air. It was a revelation to me, who had hitherto only associated the Indian with canoeing and hunting.

The half-breeds were the aristocrats. The more humble pure-bloods dropped into the background when the proud possessors of a drop of white blood wished to "take the floor."

The Indian as seen in his native bush is a very different being from the miserable drunken specimens to be met with nearer to civilisation. When in the bush and not under the influence of liquor there is a certain appearance of dignity and independence about him which suggests the old ideal. Drink has been the bane of his existence. Well may the Indian who takes pride in his race dread this, his greatest enemy! He calls it "~~XXXXXXXXXX~~" "Isheetocaboo", firewater. There is nothing that has contributed ^{more} so much to the thinning of the ranks of the peaceful tribes of the Ontario and Quebec Provinces than whiskey. It is helping to exterminate the red man entirely.

It was a benefit to the Indian that liquor ~~XXXXXXXXXX~~ did not then penetrate beyond the Long Rapids as a rule. It was not altogether excluded. It managed to reach the Indians through the petty traders, who, if they had any conscience in the matter, salved it with the thought that if they ceased from purveying liquor, others would sell it in their place. The traders had their families to support. In this stingy world everyone must think of himself and his belongings before all others, was their excuse if they ever had any qualms on the subject.

This sop to conscience would not have mattered so much if only

white men had been concerned. In this case it was the simple child-like Indian who had no moral strength to stand against temptation. I have heard them say openly that they were afraid of liquor and would prefer to have it put out of their reach. Yet their weakness was so great that those very men would go through anything to obtain it.

Such is the strength of desire with the red skin and the feebleness of his purpose.

I have ^{seen} them under the influence of liquor and have known of many fatalities by which the Indians have lost their lives through it. Only the year following the ~~25~~ Christmas I spent at McBride's there was an instance when two men might easily have ~~lost their lives.~~ *died but for timely help.*

I was in the Hudson's Bay Company by that time and I was making a trip in the winter to bring in furs. My route was through an almost unexplored piece of country on one of the tributaries of the Kippewa. It was bitterly cold, and ~~never~~ ^{it was} all that I could do to keep myself warm by walking quickly. As I proceeded on my journey I noticed snow-shoe trails which could only have been made by a couple of men under the influence of liquor. They led in the direction I was going, and I followed them up. At first I saw nothing but the zigzag tracks. The increasing irregularity of the trail made it obvious that the wearers of the snow shoes were becoming more intoxicated as they walked on.

Presently I came across a woolen mitt lying on the snow; next a pipe; then a sash and indispensable articles of winter wear. The way was literally strewn with things dropped and left behind by the drunken pair in front of me.

I arrived at the portage where I intended to sleep the night. I

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had hardly made my bed of balsam brush (branches of larch), and put my tea kettle on a fire to boil when I heard an unmistakable human groan. It came from the bush.

I was startled; but warned by what I had seen on the way, I concluded that it must come from one of the men whose tracks I had followed. I started off on a search and had not gone far when I discovered a man stretched at full length in the snow. I could just make out in the fast fading light that he ^{was} an Indian. A little beyond him lay a second Indian in the same incapable condition. They were both dead drunk, and unable through cold and liquor to sit up. One of them seemed to be in great pain from the way he groaned every now and then.

I soon had a roaring fire and some brush piled close to it. I lifted them out of the snow and placed them side by side on the brush, covering them up with a blanket of my own that I ^{could} ill spare.

The next morning though stiff and sick they managed to travel home to their camp where I saw them safe and left them. Had these men slept the night where they had fallen, deprived as they were of their warm clothing, they could not have escaped being frozen to death. Surely their deaths would have lain at the door of the man who, for the sake of a few dollars, sold them the liquor. They were two fine healthy young men, good specimens of their race but without the moral strength to resist a temptation fraught with danger.

While on the subject of the red man I will describe my first visit paid out of curiosity to an Indian chief in his camp. After I joined the Hudson Bay Company I paid many visits to the Indians. I had definite

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business with them then and the conversation never got away from fur
its prices and the supply.

At the entrance of the wigwam I was met and greeted by an ugly
brute of a dog that barked fiercely and threatened me with its teeth
till it was called off. The chief was sitting in his tent surrounded by
women and children and more dogs. The atmosphere of the tent was not
pleasant. I knew a few words of the Indian language by that time and I
used them. My efforts in that direction were cut short by the chief him-
self who said simply;

"Can't you speak English?" On my assenting he continued; "Then why
don't you?"

I wondered if he was another Scotchman like Johnny of the car
in our first survey expedition. Accordingly I continued my conversation
in my own tongue. I spoke of what the Government was doing and was not
doing for the Indian. I hoped that if he had any grievance that he would
take the opportunity of airing it. I wanted to see the inner workings of
the red man's mind. He mused awhile without speaking. Then, turning to me
he said;

"Is the Government as you call it the reason of there being
so few ducks this year?"

I hesitated; but answered "yes"; for I thought if the Government
was held to be responsible for the hard times at that period it might
with equal reason be held responsible for the decrease in the number of
young ducks. At this the Indian, for he appeared to be really of pure blood,
lapsed into imperturbable silence which continued for some time. Suddenly
he asked;

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"What you want with Indian?"

I explained that their cause might be represented to Government and possibly they might obtain benefits thereby. He asked if it was something to eat.

"No;" I replied shortly.

"Then what you come for? You priest?"

"No;" I again answered.

"You trader?"

"No;"

"Hunter?"

"No; I only wished to talk of the present position of the Indian and whether it can be bettered by Government."

"Indian no want those things," the old man replied passively.

"Indian only want Government to give him grease and flour, or mill to grind his wheat. Mr Government great man; but he steal Indian's beaver and no pay him."

I did not wait to hear more for the air was thick and warm and unsavoury from the presence of a pot of fish heads and other odorous substances that would have been better outside. It was of no use talking politics, since each argument had to be backed by a promise of bags of flour and kegs of grease.

He asked me for some tobacco saying that he did not mind if it was for chewing or smoking; either would be equally welcome. With a parting gift of the coveted weed I left the chieftan's wigwam, and was seen ~~xxx~~ out of the camping ground by a pack of unfriendly suspicious curs.

And now to go back to McBride's and the survey party