

Spawn of the North

Written for The Western Home Monthly by Francis J. Dickie

AN ounce of mother is worth a pound of clergy." So says the old Spanish proverb. Those white men resident in the Canadian north-land during the last three centuries, ably seconded by the native women of the country, have nobly lived up to it, with the result that to-day the pure blooded Indian is practically non-existent north of parallel 53 till the Arctic Circle is reached.

So, like many another halfbreed, Johnny Mackay laid recognized though illegitimate claim to this ancient and honored Scottish name. And during the first twenty-five years of his life, the latter ten of which he spent floating down or, "tracking" up the varied waterways of Alberta and Mackenzie Land as freighter for the Hudson's Bay Company, by this name was he known. Then one day as one of the packers for a returning big game-hunting son of the English nobility he journeyed as far as the growing metropolis of Edmonton, then on the fringe of the wilderness; and through this and subsequent happenings, forever lost it.

It was during the three wonderful weeks of this first visit to civilization that Johnny, through a chance met white acquaintance learned the value of "markers."

All breeds are gamblers; and when Johnny's new found friend took his last dollar in a two handed game of stud poker, Johnny accepted the misfortune philosophically, even convinced as he was at the last that his antagonist of the paste boards had not done it fairly.

That such action was all in the game Johnny admitted. If a man could cheat you so well that you did not know how you were cheated why, that was not cheating.

So much for Johnny's philosophy.

When the game was ended he begged the stranger for his secret of success; but, being penniless was refused.

However, knowing that some of his fellow packers of the nobleman's recent retinue would willingly lend him money, Johnny requested and was granted another meeting upon the following day. During it, and on the payment of fifteen dollars, he was presented and made familiar with the workings of two packs of "markers."

Now, to the ordinary man, "markers" seem no different from common playing cards. Yet their difference is marked—double emphasis on the word. Upon their scroll work backs, plain to the one who knows is set forth the size and suit of every card.

In almost any game of chance, the manipulator of such a deck is certain of success; in the case of the game of stud poker to perhaps the greatest extent, by reason of the nature of the game.

On the return trip, starting with only the few dollars left over from his borrowings after paying for the cards, Johnny quickly was in possession of all his companions' money.

Reaching his home cabin in the settlement of Lesser Slave Lake he decided that work would never again be his until such a time as the spots should be worn off the two miracle working decks.

Within a short time, however, he annexed the bank roll of every breed resident in the little post; after which time hung heavily upon his hands. So, when Arthur Hemmingway, traveling correspondent for the New York Chronicle, dropped into Lesser Slave to pick up a crew to aid him in five months summer journey up the Peace River to the Canyon at the Continental Divide, Johnny willingly joined the party and, on account of his English was made head packer.

Arrived at the settlement of Peace River Crossing, Hemmingway laid over two days to obtain agricultural information upon the district for future articles.

And Johnny, upon new territory, lost no time in starting a stud poker game. On the second evening while the play was in progress, Hemmingway strolled over from his tent. Dropping to the ground, he seated himself cross-legged at one side of the Hudson's Bay blanket around which Johnny and three Peace River halfbreeds were gathered, and in silence watched the game proceed.

Shortly after his arrival, two of the men lost their stakes and sourly went

away. But a third, when similar luck befel him, said a few swift words in Cree to Johnny and disappeared. Noting that the winner waited, Hemmingway, too, sat on. Presently the player returned, carrying in one hand a rifle. After a careful examination of it, Johnny handed over fifteen dollars and the game continued.

Again Johnny won. Once more the losing breed hurried away. This time he returned with a heavy stock saddle, upon which Johnny advanced thirty dollars. This in turn he also quickly won, even more rapidly than he had the value of the rifle. Penniless again, his opponent sat several moments. Then for a brief space, rapid monosyllabic Cree

passed back and forth between them. Finally Johnny nodded. Upon receiving his affirmation, the vanquished man passed out of sight toward the settlement beyond. This time he was longer in returning.

The nine o'clock setting sun of the northern summer season dropped beneath the sky rim, tinging fierce red the long lined cumulus, piled one upon another into strange likeness to distant mountain ranges.

The soft, long falling twilight was slowly blurring the distant view when the halfbreed swung in sight, closely followed by a lithe young squaw of perhaps eighteen summers.

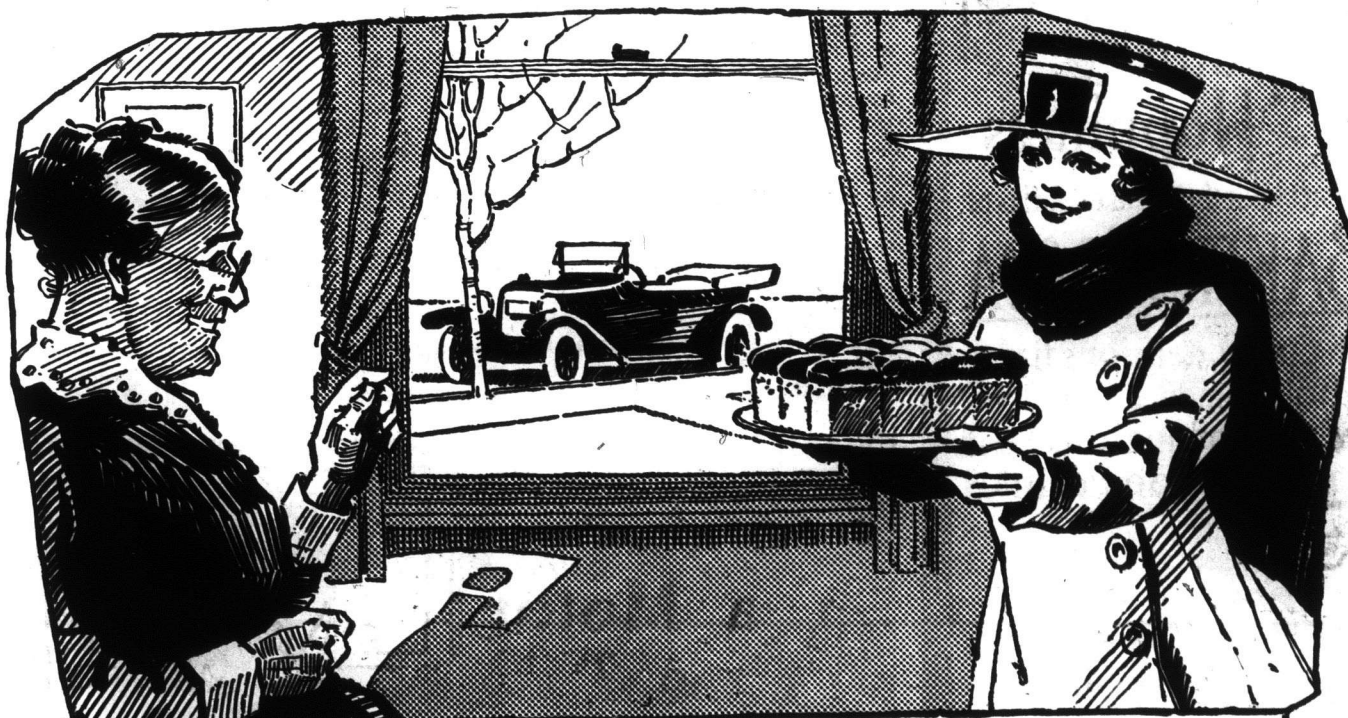
Even Hemmingway, who had hitherto scorned the idea of native beauty, was startled by the woman's physical and facial perfections. Unemotionally she squatted down beside her lord as he once

more began bargaining. For perhaps twenty minutes the players argued fiercely. At last, after giving the girl careful final survey, and still apparently reluctant, Johnny handed over sixty dollars.

Swiftly now the game proceeded. Hand followed hand in quick succession, and always Johnny won. Presently he raked in the other's last remaining dollar. For a moment the loser sat thinking; but unable to remember any possible resource he got slowly to his feet, was about to turn heavily away, when Hemmingway's voice stayed him.

"Wait a minute, my friend," he said sharply. As he spoke his one hand reached over and swept up some of the money that Johnny as yet had not time to stow away.

The departed man turned; stood staring wonderingly at this strange white man,



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