

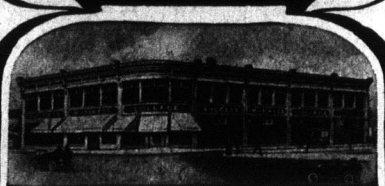
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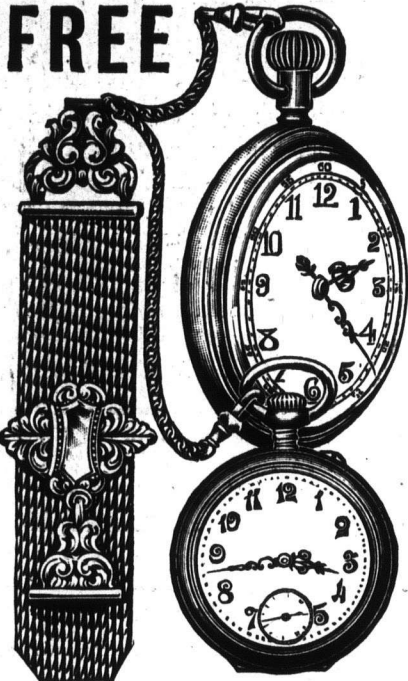
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Bringing the War to the Northland

By Francis J. Dickie

"THE Great White Father and his people are at war; already in their land there are many empty lodges and, because of this, I have summoned you here to-day," Hector Frazer, the Big Company's factor at Fort Chipewyan, paused. His eyes swept the congregated chiefs and braves sitting cross-legged and silent in a semi-circle about him; and by the very tenderness of their stoical calm realized how deep was their interest.

"When the white men go to war," he continued, after a minute, "it is bad for we of this great northland. My Company and all the traders of Canada are now without money. The furs of last year lie piled high in the storehouses of the land, for there is no market. The white men fight among themselves, and they who would have bought from the companies of this land are no longer friends, and the peaceful trade of yesterday is gone. To-day the red fire speaks from the mouth of great guns, and there are many widows in the land beyond the shores of Kichegame (the sea). Kichamunito, the great merciful spirit, who looks down upon us all in times of peace, has turned his face away. Michemunito, the great evil spirit rules men's hearts in the world outside. And so I must give you, my brothers, a message that Attilaw, whom you all saw arrive from the Landing this morning, has brought to me."

Appreciating the deep love of display innate in the Indian, Frazer reached slowly into his breast pocket, bringing forth a long official manilla envelope. Holding it in his half upraised hand, he continued: "The Company, because there is no money coming into the land, and their furs lie piled high in the storehouses to which no buyers come, have commanded me to no longer allow a 'debt.' And even to you, my people who have come for these many years to this post and paid off your debts without fail, a new one cannot be given."

As the Factor ceased speaking, a low murmuring wail came from the gathering. Too well they knew the pinch of empty bellies. And now, with the knowledge that no new debt of food, of powder and ball, would be forthcoming, there came a terrible dread of winter. Robbed of this life-long privilege, they stood empty handed, unprepared, with nothing to contend against it.

For a long moment they sat still. The Factor disappeared within the door of the post. Then, rising, they walked back slowly to their encampment a half mile away on the shores of Lake Athabasca.

With heavy heart, the Factor entered the little living room that adjoined the store. Going over to his bookcase, on which rested a few scant volumes, he picked out one. Sitting down at a nearby table he turned over the well-thumbed pages. Almost instantly reaching the passage he sought. It was Tolstoi's "Pre-vision." Again he read over the passage:

"This is a revelation of events of universal character which must shortly come to pass. Their spiritual outlines are now before my eyes. I see floating upon the surface of the sea of human fate a huge silhouette of a nude woman. She is— with her beauty, her poise, her smile, her jewels—a super-Venus."

"Nations rush madly after her, each of them eager to attract her especially."

"But she, like an eternal courtesan, flirts with all. In her hair, in ornaments of diamonds and rubies, is engraved her name 'Commercialism.' As alluring, as bewitching as she seems, much destruction and agony follow in her wake. Her breath reeking of sordid transactions, her voice of metallic character like gold, and her look of greed are so much poison to the nations that fall victim to her charms."

Now, with the reading, the trader realized dully how true the words were. At the bottom of the page, long months ago, he had written in his own scrawling hand: "Surely, out of this commercialism will come a great war—and when it does there will be hard times in the northland."

Presently he closed the book. Sat

staring straight ahead at the white-washed log wall, his whole being troubled with the thought of those red men gathered on the shores of the lake. A child of deeply religious parents and with fifty-five years of wilderness dwelling stretching behind him—a dwelling which had only made deeper the teachings of his childhood—the Factor was now confronted with a great problem.

Thirty years he had served the Big Company, but during those years had assumed another duty, one apart, different from any his position necessitated.

When he had taken over the post, the Indians around, like those of neighboring ones, were fast becoming depleted in numbers. Swayed by his religious feelings, he had come to look upon the red men about him as his own personal charges. Too, lacking children or kin to love, he had given over to those wilderness people the empty places of his heart. So he had watched over his own little band of Indians, until they, weak, unthinking, eternally improvident, had in recent years increased in numbers, become fairly prosperous, according to Indian standards. The Factor had come to view with growing complacency the successful result of his labors on their behalf. For this reason the carrying out of this official order received to-day was a bitter task.

Only two days ago the band had arrived to secure their yearly outfit; and preparatory to leaving for the winter trapping grounds had camped on the shores of the lake. In two more days they would have been on their way. In view of this, Attilaw's untimely arrival with the Company order was the more to be deplored.

But to Frazer, master of his own domain and upon whose goods no outside check had ever been made, came the thought to make the usual advance in defiance of the Company's order. For, despite his love for his charges, his desire for their welfare, thirty years in the Company's service had made obedience a thing of second nature. Now that the instructions had arrived there was only one thing to do—obey.

Again Frazer brought out the new orders, read them slowly. As he came to the words, "Not one 'debt' shall be given the Indians," a wave of honest anger swept over him—came realization of how true were Tolstoi's words of commercialism. How little, after all, did those men out in the big world care whether famine or death came and visited these children of the wild.

Deep in thought the Factor did not hear the store door open. Not until a soft tap sounded at his own portal did he rouse. Turning, he saw before him Opapamotao, chief of the band.

"We have held council among ourselves, Okosapuhchegac," the chief said, addressing the Factor by his Cree name, which meant "He-who-sees-ahead." Long ago the tribe had given Frazer a name and honorable place amongst them. "And," the chief went on, "the braves wait outside. There are many words to be spoken." Finishing, Opapamotao retreated, closing the door softly behind him.

Contrary to general belief, the Indian likes to talk; but when he does he makes an occasion of it. Aware of this, Frazer arose with a little sigh. He felt little in the mood to listen to long speeches.

Outside, around the door, the braves sat as they had that morning in a semi-circle, cross-legged and silent. Frazer sat down on the step of the post. The long pipe passed around the gathering. When the last man had taken it from his lips, Opapamotao arose. Dropping his blanket from his shoulders, he stood up straight and tall. His eyes swept once over the gathering, then he turned and addressed Frazer.

"To-day, Okosapuhchegac, you have received word from the Great Company that no debt can be given to us this winter. All day we have talked in council of this order of the white men. The Great Company are very wealthy. In their storehouse lie thousands of pounds of flour and bacon and all things that are necessary to us of this land. God

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