

For sometime he stood hesitating. He knew that the skin would more than pay the debt that he and his family owed, yet the thought of what was to befall him filled him with dread. At last, summoning all his courage, he picked up the fox, hurried back to his sled, placed it carefully within the wrapper, and set out for home. All along the way fear stalked beside him. Even on his arrival he could not shake it off. So, when he had exhibited his great catch to his astonished family, he turned to At-tick, his adopted son, saying:

"At-tick, my son, the fur runner is coming soon. Tomorrow do you and the Marten take the dogs and break a two days' trail on Bear River in order to hasten his coming."

Fear of impending disaster was the real cause of his anxiety to ease the approach of the trader. So eager was he to safeguard himself against possible ill fortune, that he was willing even to sell the skin at a sacrifice.

Next morning the boys set out to break the trail. When they came on Bear River on the afternoon of the second day, they cached in the river ice some fish for the trader's dogs. They chopped a hole and, after placing the fish in, filled it up with water, which they allowed to freeze, with the tail of a single fish protruding, in order to show the trader what was cached below. To mark the spot, they planted a pole with its butt in the hole, and rigged up a tripod of sticks to support it. At the top of the pole they tied a little bag of tea and a choice piece of meat for the trader. At the bend of the river below, where he would surely pass, they erected another pole with a bunch of dried grass attached, for the purpose of attracting his attention to their tracks.

On their return home, they found Standing Wolf sorting his furs in anticipation of the trader's arrival. Before him lay the skins of the black fox and of the silver fox, turned inside out upon stretchers. On the boys entering the lodge, Standing Wolf addressed the whole family, saying:

"Do not mention the silver fox to the fur runner. Since it, at least, will bring us no harm, I intend keeping it until I go to the post, in the hope of making a better bargain there. Now sort your skins, and set aside those you wish to give in payment of your debt to the Great Company."

During the afternoon of the following day, Spencer, the fur runner for the Hudson Bay Company at Fort Determination, arrived with his dog train. He shook hands with Standing Wolf and the boys, and kissed the women and the girls, as the custom of the traders is. It being late in the day, Standing Wolf decided not to begin trading until the next morning. So they spent the evening in spinning yarns around the fire. Shortly after breakfast, strange dogs were heard. The boys looked out and saw an unknown halfbreed approaching. When the newcomer had eaten, and had joined the others in a smoke, Standing Wolf questioned him:

"My brother, you are a stranger in this country; so I have given you food and fire and tobacco in friendship. Tell me why and whence you come."

The halfbreed replied, "My brother, I come from the Border Lands, where the plains and the forests meet, and my name is Gibeault. I have come to trade regularly in the region between Fort Determination and Fort Defiance. You will do well to encourage opposition to the Great Company, and thus raise the price of furs. My brother, the white man stands apart. I am of your own kin. We are of the same blood. So I have come to remove the burden which the Great Company has laid upon my blood brothers, the Indians. I have come to show you how the white man has been robbing our people for hundreds of years. I have come to—"

Spencer, glaring across the fire, could contain himself no longer. Turning to Standing Wolf, he said: "My brother, you are a wise man. You know the difference between truth and lies, between strong men and old women. You know that I have brought goods to your camp, and traded with you for many years. You know that when your family starved, the company fed them. You know you owe the company debt. You know that it takes a strong man to beat a track, but any old woman can follow it. You know a man when you see one. My brother, we have been friends from of old."

Standing Wolf kept silence for awhile; then, with his eyes fixed upon the fire, he said, "My brother, I will not forget to look at my debt; but I am master of my other furs."

So saying, he handed to Spencer the bundles of furs which he and his family had set aside to pay their debts with. These were accepted unopened, since they were for the factor at Fort Determination. Then he drew a cross

fox skin from behind him, and threw it down, saying, "How do my brothers look at that?"

It was a challenge to the rival traders. In a few minutes they had opened their packs and spread out a conglomeration of useful and of useless goods and trinkets upon gaudy blankets on either side of the fire. The halfbreed, manifestly ignorant of the ways of his professed business, allowed the white man to outbid him from the very start, and so lost favour with the Indian, who, growing suspicious of his flowery promises, said:

"My brother, you have travelled in vain; you had better go back, unless you can give more than the white man."

Spencer handed the Indian a present of tobacco, and he continued:

"When I visit the Great Company, even if I do not trade, they give me presents of tea, flour, grease, and tobacco in order to seal our friendship. But you have not shown a generous hand; so I will still trade with the Great Company."

Without another word he threw down the beautiful black fox skin. The two traders were completely taken aback at the sight of such a prize. The bidding rose rapidly, until Gibeault had exceeded the value of his whole outfit. Knowing this, Spencer told Standing Wolf that neither of them had enough at hand to pay the proper value of the skin; but that he would agree to pay three hundred "skins," and that Standing Wolf could collect the balance from the company at any time. Although the Indian felt that he was being underpaid, his superstitious dread made him accept the offer without haggling. So all the furs, except the silver fox skin, were sold, the greater number going to the Hudson Bay Company.

Gibeault was enraged at having secured so few furs, and doubly so at having lost the black fox skin. He sat staring sullenly at the fire, and when Spencer intimated his intention of returning to the fort that afternoon, he did not answer him. About three o'clock, Spencer packed his sled, and by four had bidden the Indians farewell. He intended travelling a few hours that night by moonlight. As both had to go in the same direction, Standing Wolf was surprised that they did not travel together for companionship; and when Gibeault expressed his desire to remain with him all night, he wondered why he wished to stay. Imagine his surprise when, on his return from visiting some shares, he found Gibeault harnessing his dogs and eager to be off.

At parting, Standing Wolf shook hands with the halfbreed, but that seemed only to increase his awkwardness of demeanor.

The following evening, while the Indian was at supper, Spencer staggered into the lodge, with his face cut and bruised and smeared with blood. When the women had dressed the trader's wounds, Standing Wolf heard his story:

"During the night I was overtaken by Gibeault. Some noise he made must have roused me; for I woke from a deep sleep, to see him in the very act of going through my furs, evidently in search of the black fox skin. I got upon my feet and rushed to grapple with him, but slipped and fell. He seized a heavy stick and knocked me senseless. Fortunately he had no firearms, for we traders carry none. When I recovered consciousness, I found that he had taken not only the black fox skin, but all my other furs, and even the dogs and the sled. Worse still, he had smashed my snowshoes in order to prevent pursuit."

When he had told his story, Standing Wolf continued for a little while gazing at the fire, and smoking meditatively. Then he knocked the ashes from his pipe, and said, "My brother, this is a bad business. I will go and speak with Gibeault."

Turning to the boys he said, "My sons, I will set out at once. As I am going to travel light, you must follow with the dogs at their best speed. Be watchful, and you will read your instructions as you run."

Rising, he at once made ready for the chase. Going to the "rogan" in which he kept his valuables, he put a fresh supply of tobacco into his fire bag; then, wishing to take a last look at his silver fox skin, he reached to draw it out. It was gone. He knew at once who had taken it, and resentment filled his heart. "The dog who would be my brother has stolen it!" he cried with fury. He hung a small tea pail at his side, tightened his sash about him, slipped a little bag of tea, some bannock, and some dried caribou meat within his capote, and, gun in hand, set out in pursuit of the thief.

Already the moon had risen. Taking up the trail of the thief, he sped across Spirit Lake on his way to Bear River. The freshness of the hard packed trail made easy