New Fables by Skookum Chuck

(R. D. Cumming)

JOHNNY'S DIPLOMACY

Johnny Peter couldn't have recourse to the law, so he had recourse to his own strategy and invoked the aid of an exotic power to crush the one who had wrecked his home.

Johnny had no legal protection in the courts of the land because no legal strings bound him to the mother of his papooses. He had no claim other than that possession is nine-tenths of the law, and the affiliation of a small family that resulted from the loose union. So he called upon the Ko-cha Kookpi (God) to visit a curse on the bad Indian who had taken possession of his morally legal klootchman.

Johnny's agony was all the more intense owing to the great primitive love he had for the woman, and also owing to the assurance on which he rested that Minnie was true, would be true, and that she loved him with no less a passion.

But it came to pass, nevertheless, that Minnie had seen one she liked far better, or imagined she liked far better, no matter how much she may at one time or another have thought of Johnny. And it was perhaps not so much fickleness as a natural instinct over which human flesh has little or no control.

When Johnny Peter came home from the ranch after having driven some stock to the railway station, he found his cabin empty. One of the papooses was there, it is true, but Mrs. Johnny was nowhere to be found, and supper wasn't ready. The papoose told papa that Mosquito had been there and that mamma had gone away with him. All the kids had accompanied them to Mosquitoe's cabin, but one had returned to tell the tale.

Johnny's wrath equalled that of Achilles, but the sulks didn't render him inactive like Homer's hero.

There is a certain honor among Indians, but it does not reach the length of suffering in silence when you fall in love with another man's wife, or woman, or whatever the case may be. You simply go and take her if she is willing and still live in the same village. It was on such logic that Mosquito appropriated Minnie.

Johnny, indeed, thought of the rifle and the shot gun as a medium of revenge, but he had a cringing fear of the White Man's law and an icy dread of the hangman's noose. He remembered the fate of Paul Spint-lum. There was just one other route by which he might reach Mosquito in his thirst for vengence; so he went up to the summit of the highest mountain in the district, to be as near the Happy Hunting Grounds as possible, fired his rifle several times out into blank space to attract the Ko-cha's attention, and then yelled the appeal at the top of his voice in the awful bitterness of his tum-tum and the pain that gripped his soul.

And the Sachalie Tyee heard him.

Johnny Peter had enough Indian philosophy in his constitution to know that he could get his klootch-man back were Mosquito once dead. She would be another man's leavings, it is true; but then, an Indian is not so sensitive in this respect as a white man may be. Johnny wanted Minnie; he wanted her badly; he wanted her because he loved her with all his aboriginal heart. No matter how bad, how unfaithful she might be, she was still the one klootchman in the whole rancherie for him, and he wanted her. Mosquito must die!

Mosquito had hypnotized Minnie, his wife and mother of his three children, or surely she never would have nibbled and grabbed at his bait. Was it his smooth tongue? His cheery voice? Or was it the material things he possessed—horses, saddles, bridles, new cabin? There was some medium for evil that must be removed, and so Johnny Peter called upon the Ko-cha Kookpi to strike Mosquito dead.

And the Sachalie Tyee heard him.

Johnny descended from the mountain with a guarantee written on his heart that his prayer would be fruitful of results, and sat down in his cabin to await developments.