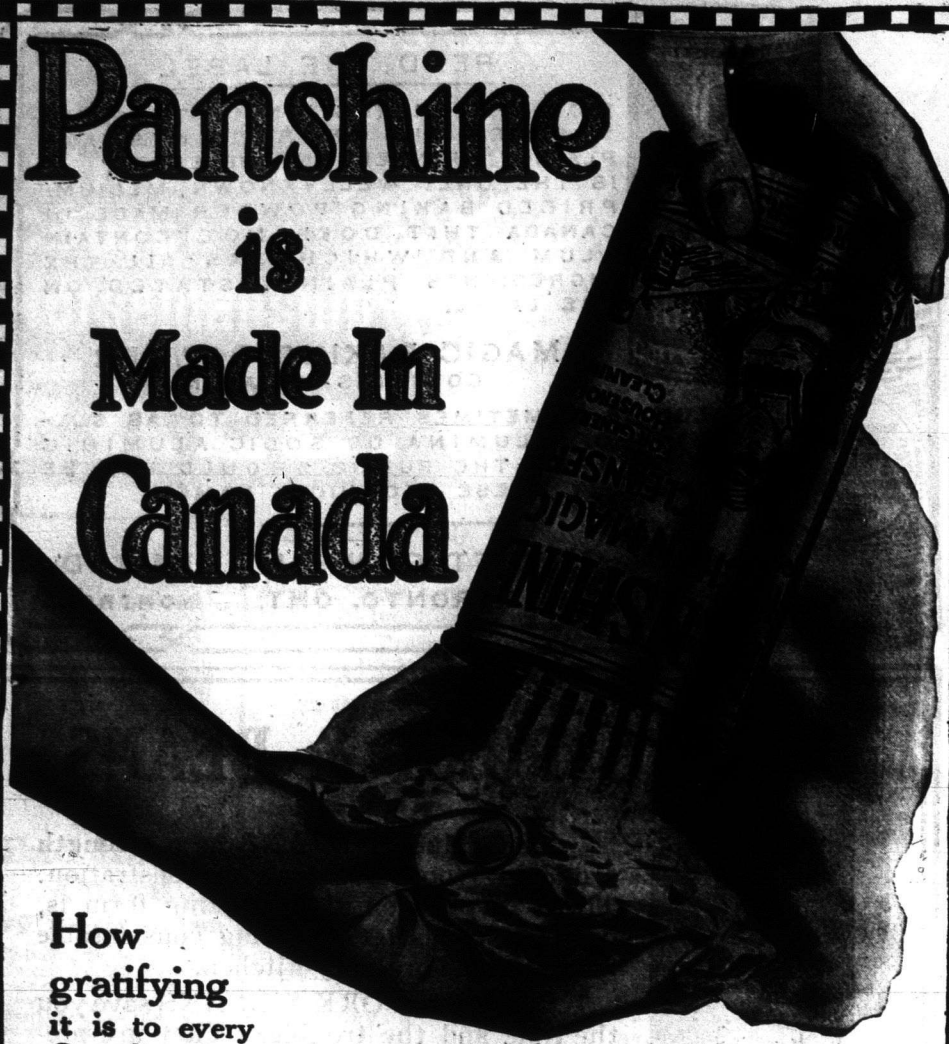


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The Atonement

Written for The Western Home Monthly, by E. Fern Rear, Kamsack, Sask.

IT WAS growing dark in the Mission house. Outside, the twilight still lingered, and the rim of dark hills that skirted the river valley were bathed in rosy light; but in Miss Cuthbert's cozy sitting room it was quite dusk.

The little missionary folded her sewing with a sigh that was more of weariness, than of a sense of satisfaction in work completed, for the heat had been very oppressive and her little Indian pupils had been more tiring than usual. She arose and went to the door.

It was a wonderful evening, charged with beauty and peace unutterable. The panorama that opened before her view was the fairest that nature, with all her extravagance of color, could produce. Before, behind, on either side, lay great green stretches of rolling prairie, generously dotted with pretty bluffs, which were just in the act of exchanging their robes of emerald green for those of pale yellow, crimson, gold and brown. And, nestling here and there in the foliage, was a tent, a teepee, or a little whitewashed cabin, and an occasional camp fire, sending up to heaven a column of blue-grey smoke. Away to the north lay the great pine forest, deep, dark, unfathomable. To the left, the pretty Qu'Appelle, darting swiftly on its way between precipitous banks, hedged on either side by maple, and willow, and tall majestic spruce trees, which reminded one of stolid, unbending sentinels, guarding and maintaining the beauty of one of the prettiest Saskatchewan rivers. And, over all, was a glorious sunset—a gorgeous background of crimson and turquoise and gold.

"And evening lingers in the west
More beautiful than dreams
And whispers of the Spirit-Land,
Its wilderness and streams,"

breathed Miss Cuthbert, as she gazed upon the lovely scene and felt the spell of it stirring in her heart. This, was the land of the Indian; the nursery of Mystery; the luxuriant arena of Magic things. Miss Cuthbert could feel the strange intangible spell of the men of Magic, which the superstitious tribes declare they can see, enfold her in its meshes. She could almost have believed that she were living in the old dear days of long ago, when Romance walked the earth in royal robes and Magic was the standard the people bore.

On a grassy plat before the door sat an Indian mother, with her child. Her glossy black hair was smoothed back from her brown forehead and braided tightly down her back; and around her shoulders was drawn a brightly colored blanket, one of the gorgeous specimens from the Hudson's Bay post up the valley. Her head was bent over the soft buckskin moccasin she held in her lap and which she was embroidering with colored glass beads; while she was in earnest conversation with the little boy at her side. He was a very tiny boy, this laddie, although the registration book up at the fort showed him to be eight years old. A pair of crutches, lying on the ground beside him, told a part of the sad story of his little life; and the lines of pain in his dusky face told the rest. He was watching, with fascinated eyes, the dexterous movements of the shining little needle, as it went in and out, in and out, of the toe of the beautiful smoke-scented moccasin.

"Some day," he was saying, smilingly, as the missionary came toward them, "I'm going to be a warrior brave, and go to battle, like the man in the legend did, only I won't stay away from my sweetheart as he did, but will come back to her again and live happily ever afterward."

It is curious how that happy denouement of all fairy tales finds its way into the vocabulary of the children of all climes, and in all ages.

"Who is talking of fighting?" said Miss Cuthbert, sitting down on one end of the child's blanket. "Surely, you would not exchange these times of peace for the poverty and pain and blood-shed which comes with war!"

"Ah! but we are bondsmen, Miss Cuthbert," returned the Indian mother, "What would we not suffer, I wonder, to obtain our freedom?"

"Miss Cuthbert," asked the child, eagerly, "why don't our people go out and fight and conquer and rule this land just as

they did long, long ago? It would be nice, I think, if we could do as we like instead of having to do what other people tell us."

The missionary bowed her head, and a wave of something like shame rolled over her and dyed her face. Like a flush, the heart of the red man was revealed to her, with all its burden of shame and disgrace and ignominy, and worst of all the total lack of self-respect which the hapless Indian bears, always, under the stony hardness of his stoicism. Those touching lines of the Indian poetess came to her, now, with new meaning:

"They but forget we Indians owned the land
From ocean unto ocean; that they stand
Upon a soil, that centuries ago
Was our sole Kingdom, and our right alone.
They never think how they would feel to-day,
If some great nation came from far away,
Wresting their country from their hapless braves,
Giving what they gave us, but wars and graves.
Though starved, crushed, plundered, lies our nation low,
Perhaps the white man's God has willed it so."

"What made you think of it, Billy?" she asked, after a long silence.

"It was the legend, Miss Cuthbert, the legend of the Qu'Appelle, you know. We have just been talking about it, and I couldn't help thinking of those things. Why aren't there any legends made, nowadays, teacher?"

The Indian mother turned toward her. "Have you ever heard the story, the strange tale?" she asked, almost whisperingly.

Miss Cuthbert shook her head. Much as she desired to hear the legend of the Qu'Appelle, she knew better than to ask a single question. It is always a crucial moment with the Indian when his voice lowers, and he asks if you know things. You must be diplomatic and never question him in turn. If you do his lips close in unbreakable silence.

SOUND SLEEP

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"I have been a coffee drinker, more or less, ever since I can remember, until a few months ago I became more and more nervous and irritable, and finally I could not sleep at night for I was horribly disturbed by dreams of all sorts and a species of distressing nightmare." (The effects on the system of tea and coffee drinking are very similar, because they each contain the drug, caffeine.)

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