

Maskwa, the Backslider

An Indian Trapper who Tried the White Man's Religion, with Dramatic Results

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MASKWA was not like other Indians who succumbed to the persuasion of the missionaries and inherited the consequent possession of food and blankets, who lightly discarded the faith of their forebears and became Christians at least in name, if not in practice, who could be depended upon to attend service on Christmas and Easter when the welcoming warmth of the little chapel made religion easy and the anticipation of gifts was a further lure. Maskwa was not one of these! He was the soul of uprightness, his honour was impeccable and he took life in all its aspects with stern seriousness. He was highly respected among his own people and among the whites, the trader at Fort Chipewyan never refusing him a little *massina-hi-gan* (credit) when others would ask in vain; he was often called upon to mediate in affairs of a delicate nature, when the heavy hand of the law might only serve to render the situation more ticklish, and he was used as an example to many a wayward creature. Thus it was that Maskwa's conversion became a matter of no small moment to the missionaries, who rightly foresaw that with the old chief's acceptance of the faith—his earnest acceptance of it—slack devotees who were Christians in the Settlement and abandoned heathens in the bush might be won to worship with less hypocrisy and to consider their religion in a properly reverential light.

But Maskwa was steadfast; he acknowledged the Great Spirit and all the lesser gods as had his ancestors for unknown ages before him, and the old missionary of the English Church, who sleeps at rest from his labours in the little graveyard behind the chapel, died with the knowledge of his failure bitter within him. Even the Oblate Fathers pronounced Maskwa a hopeless heathen. And that says enough!

Not that he was deaf to them or that he scorned their arguments and overtures; he would sit immovable, wrapped in deepest thought after a conversation with one of the missionaries trying to pierce the fog of bewilderment and see what he was expected to see. He desired passionately to do what was right, but theology as presented from sectarian angles was too complex a subject for his simple mind, and he would not accept a thing he could not understand. The Trinity was a sore puzzle to him; the fact that the white man's God allowed the wicked to flourish and punished those He loved, was beyond Maskwa's powers of comprehension. Yet, he argued, the White God must be all-powerful, for His children have plenty while the Red Men starve. And in a dim way right and might were synonymous to the offspring of generations of braves.

In his bewilderment he turned to Sergeant Seers, the lonely North-West Mounted Policeman who represented law and the power of Her Majesty the Queen, throughout a thousand-mile territory, asking for help and advice. But Seers, apparently, was as much in the dark as he; in spite of holding so much earthly power in his hands, he was a poor enough authority in matters spiritual. Desperately, Maskwa sought out Cornwall, the trader, who by virtue of his office was a man to consult in a time of perplexity.

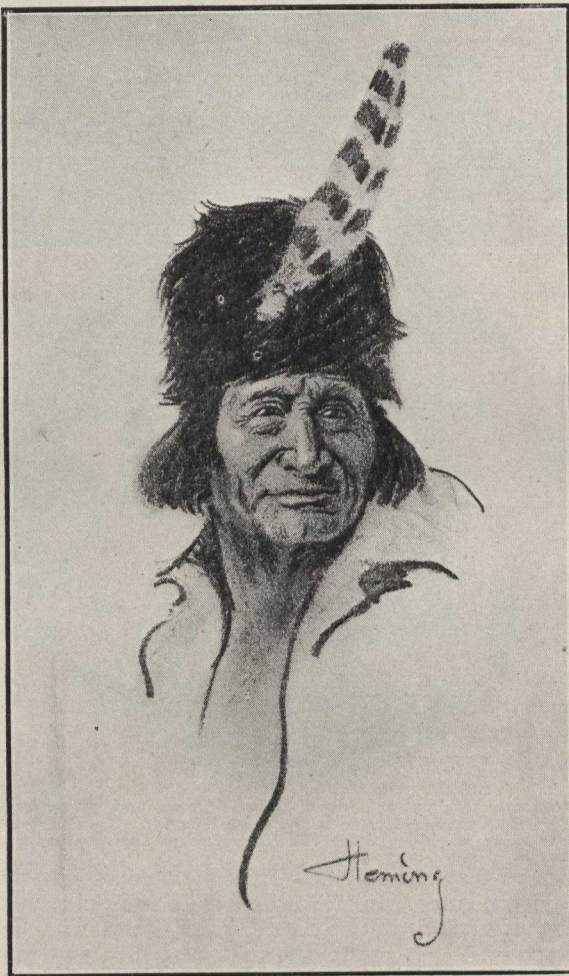
"I AM like one who has lost his sight," said the old chief, slowly, as he squatted before the trader and smoked. "I am like a man stumbling in the dark, unable to see, trying to find the trail which is hidden, and feeling his way with his feet, because his eyes will not help him! How can I decide? The Old Country Prayer Man, he says Maskwa must come to him, and after—after this life, I shall be in heaven where my fathers, my brothers, and my sisters may not go. The French Prayer Man, he says No! Worse for Maskwa, by far, to follow the Old Country Prayer Man, than the Great Spirit! What more says he? That only by walking in the trail of his church shall I and my wife and my children reach the heaven where trouble is no more. But how now, Trader?" he queried, with burning earnestness, "how now, when our own Medicine Man lifts up his right hand, and reminds Maskwa of his ancestors who have lived and died in the Great Spirit, who even now are happy in the Big Hunting Ground, where they wait for me and mine. Tell me, how can I decide?"

Cornwall smoked in silence, not knowing what to answer.

"True," the old chief spoke again, "the white man's God is great and powerful. He is good to

His children. Have they not plenty with which to feed and clothe themselves, while the Red Men go hungry and cold? Has not the White God taken from us the land which was ours and given it unto His own people, so that we must go to them for food? You know it is the truth I speak! But even so, shall Maskwa turn his back on his gods in their time of need? Is he not a coward who always chooses the winning side?"

Cornwall kept silence; while he had his own ideas about religion, and although he was usually ready to give advice upon any subject ranging from infant diseases to the trading of a sleigh dog, he realized that this was a case for diplomacy—that he traded



Maskwa.

with equal profit between the English and Roman Catholic Missions; he must not influence Maskwa.

When Maskwa and his family came back to the Settlement one summer, the old English Church missionary had died and his place was taken by a young man, burning with religious fervour and impatient to gather Maskwa, of whom he had heard much, into his fold. His way was, in a measure, made easy. The old chief fell ill. All the herbs and simples his faithful squaw administered failed to help him; even the patent medicines which he tried in rotation and which, according to their labels, were guaranteed to stamp out any sickness known to man, brought no relief. He tossed on his blankets in a delirium of fever and grew rapidly worse.

Then the young missionary, armed with the "Doctor's Book," which stays at the mission and seems to hold the powers of witchcraft between its covers, visited the tepee and prescribed anew. Daily, he sat with Maskwa praying for both his body and his soul, and as time went on and he saved the one, he bent all his energies upon the salvation of the other.

"The Book," he impressed upon the old man, "is powerless to save you without the will of God behind it. Because He loves you. He put forth His hand to save you, so that you would not die without believing in Him and His wondrous works."

There were no theological mazes in the young man's teaching; his faith was as simple and understandable as Maskwa's own. He explained the puzzling parts with a straightforwardness impossible to deny; in brief he said, that the Great White

God loved all His children—to those visited by reverses a time of joy would surely come. There was no thought of punishment or revenge or hate; there was sometimes a test of their worthiness, but young braves must pass through a trial, likewise, in order to win respect, power and distinction in their tribes. And faith, trust and love were the watch-words—no call upon Maskwa's physical strength (a thing he dreaded and feared in his weakened condition), nothing but blind, unquestioning faith and a whole-souled belief in the Power of Prayer.

THE gratitude of an Indian expresses itself largely in gifts, and day after day Maskwa wondered what he could bestow upon the Prayer Man which was of sufficient value to show how warmly his heart turned toward him. Some fine skins when the time of trapping had come, perhaps; or beaded moccasins or a moose hide. But the troublous question was what to give the Great White God in return for his life!

At last he saw his course with blinding clearness; he and his squaw and papooses must go to the chapel and follow the trail of the white Prayer Man. That would repay both the missionary and his God.

So it came about that gratitude formed the wedge by which Christianity entered the tepee of Maskwa and one day as the birds were flying south, the whole family was baptized in the little chapel at Fort Chipewyan, on Lake Athabasca, four hundred miles from the nearest telegraph pole and post office.

The beautiful, lazy Indian summer had come to an end, and winter held all the country in an icy embrace. The Red Men had gone far from the little settlement and were encamped at sufficient distance apart to avoid interfering with one another's traps. It was a cruel winter for them; the fish catch, upon which they largely depended, was unusually poor, for frost had come suddenly upon the heels of a glorious autumn, freezing the rivers in a single night with a thin crust of ice—too thin to travel upon, and following this, a heavy snow storm had acted as a blanket, preventing further freezing and therefore making the setting of nets impossible. Rabbits, generally so plentiful, had mysteriously disappeared, as they do every seven years, no man knows why or where. Caribou, which were expected to cross the country, coming from their summer quarters in the Barren Lands to heavier-wooded districts, had for some strange reason travelled by a different route, and moose, the last resort, had fled the section, probably from being hunted too much. Conditions were desperate for the Indians.

Every now and then a native, hollow-eyed and starving, would stagger into the Settlement, dragging his snowshoes and a few miserable skins behind him. These were, for the most part, musk-rat, scorned at other times and left for the women and children. But this winter necessity pressed too hard for them to be particular. The mission houses, the trader and even the Mounted Policeman did all they could to relieve the hunger which stalked through the tepees, leaving gaunt figures to face death by slow starvation. But what they could spare from their meagre supplies availed little, and the Happy Hunting Ground received many newcomers to swell its ranks.

MASKWA had fared somewhat better than the rest. He was the best hunter in a tribe of which every member excelled in hunting, and early in the autumn he had killed two moose, the flesh of which his squaw had dried and put away for future use. By the time that was consumed, he found a bear asleep in its winter bed and thus staved off actual want for another few weeks. Food was scant, of course, but there was always something. He was camped on the bank of a small creek where it entered Lake Athabasca, and felt that if he could only hold out until the thaw he would be able to supply his family with an abundance of fish—though as a matter of fact no catch worth mentioning is made in the summer, while upwards of a hundred thousand fish are brought to Chipewyan through the winter. Maskwa was a hard worker, ranging the forest daily, and praying, as the Prayer Man had taught him, for food. The little store grew smaller, however, and there was nothing to replenish it.

Spring came! Spring, the time of the year about