

The Way of a Half-Breed

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THE Canadian Government doesn't feed an Indian at Stony Mountain jail for seven years for nothing. He must have done something serious to be fed well, decorated with the iron jewellery, have a trained chaperon, and become really the exclusive ward of the nation.

If he get seven years in all probability he should have been hanged, for the Queen's agents are tolerant of these half-tamed children of the forest.

Maxepeto, a Blackfoot half-breed, had been sent to Stony Mountain for seven years. According to this tale, a white man, in his place would have been hanged.

Maxepeto was always bad. Those who knew him best said he was exclusively bad.

When an evil Indian dies,—too evil to get into the Happy Hunting Ground, he comes back reincarnated as a half-breed; and Mazapeto was unholy even for a "breed."

It was at Trapper's Landing that the thing happened—Trapper's Landing was seven miles from the Territories' North West boundary. Beyond that was a wilderness of spruce, and muskeg, and fierce running rivers stretching away to the Arctic Ocean. In the wilderness were fur animals, Indians, a few white traders, and a deficiency of the law and holy writ.

Trapper's Landing was the whiskey limit. No man might take the fire-water beyond the Territories' borders, and to that end two preventive police abode at the Landing.

With extreme diligence that liquor law was enforced, so that the Landing's soil was more or less always soaked in corn juice. A keg stopped was a keg broached, and liquor drunk was liquor destroyed.

Life at the Landing in consequence was one long jubilee of hilarious precaution; it would have been a sin to let the liquor go out amongst the benighted red-men of the North.

The Trading Company's Factor was king of this bacchanalian vale. He was magistrate in the face of the law, and arbiter of all things in the belief of the Indians. Sometimes when a petty case was on in his court room, which was the store, and it dragged a bit he would say with drunken gravity, "Oh, Shoed! Give him three years."

Then court would stand adjourned for a week, and the policeman would bring the case up again at the end of that time; the magistrate would have forgotten all about it, and probably put the culprit on to work for the Company at a dollar-and-a-half a day, under the impression that the man was a victim of somebody's malice.

There were no courts of appeal, nothing only the varying moods of the Factor Magistrate to average out justice. Some offender got ten times the possible sentence, while others got nothing who should have been hanged.

It was because of this climatic atmosphere that Maxepeto selected Trapper's Landing as his place of abode.

One morning the Factor called Maxepeto into the store and said: "Go and get Nonokasi and bring her here; I'll marry you."

There was nothing very startling in this sudden command, because they were all at Trapper's landing. If the Factor had said, "Here's a pair of new boots for you, Nichie," the half-breed would have been more surprised. That he had never thought of marrying Nonokasi, or for the matter of that any other woman, did not matter in the slightest: the factor had not consulted his wishes in the affair—didn't care a mink skin whether Maxepeto would like to have Nonokasi for squaw or not. Also what the Indian maiden might think about it was of small moment: Hudson's Bay Factors are supposed to do the thinking for the people in these districts. So he simply said: "Marsh! (Go) bring her soon."

Maxepeto rummaged among the tepees until he found Nonokasi.

"The Ogama wanting you, I think me," he said in his crook-limbed pators.

The girl brushed her black, glistening hair smooth; tied a bilious-yellow silk handkerchief, with impossible blue designs in the corners, about her neck; threw a Scotch plaid shawl over her shoulders, and silently followed the big half-breed to the Company's store. Perhaps the Factor wanted to give her a pound of tea, or an order for silk-worked moccasins.

The Factor had been enforcing the law by patriotically destroying much over-proof whiskey, so he was enthusiastically primed for the work in hand.

"Stand up there together," he said with maudlin dignity. "Hold on a bit!" and he fumbled in a drawer where much jewellery of unique design and unheard of metal was kept in disorderly abandon. He fished out a ring, with an olive coloured diamond half the size of the Koh-i-noor in it, and handing it to Maxepeto said: "Now we'll go ahead. When I shout, put it on her finger."

The marriage was more or less legally consummated, with the store assistant as witness.

"How old are you?" the Factor asked Maxepeto; the census routine becoming indefinitely mixed up with the other rite in his mind.

"Fifty summers," answered the breed.

"And you?"

"Twenty," lisped Nonokasi covering her face with the red-checked shawl, bashfully.

The Factor pulled a big sheet of brown wrapping paper toward him, made an exhaustive calculation with his pencil and said: "That averages thirty-five. Write them down as thirty-five years old," he added to the clerk.

Then, Maxepeto's reward materialized immediately.

"Give them debt for a good outfit," the Factor commanded the clerk.

The bridegroom loaded up the bride as he would a pack horse with tea, sugar, biscuit, tinned jams, fat pork, and some household furniture consisting of a looking-glass, comb, a frying pan, and several yards of gaudy print. He threw a bag of flour on his own broad shoulders, and stolidly led the way over the hill behind which nestled the smoke-tanned canvas tepees of his red-skinned friends.

"He's a damn bad lot," muttered the Factor leaning groggily against the door jamb as he watched the two figures slouch along the winding trail. "He's a bad lot, but she'll steady him, and it'll take her out of the way."

"By Goss!" muttered the breed, as he labored along under his hundred-weight of flour; "What the debbil I want get squaw me for. S'pose the Factor got some game make me marry dat gal."

Then he thought cheerfully of the pork, and the sugar, and the many plys of black tobacco, and they rose like a barrier between him and the inconvenience of having a wife. Also there was no doubt he had made a friend of the man in charge of the commissariat, the Okamous. That was as good as a pension. He even might hope to take part in some of the whiskey destroying bouts.

The marriage was the making of Maxepeto from a worldly point of view. From that time forth he was like the lilies of the field; he toiled not, yet still had raiment—not gorgeous, but shop made and of wondrous cut—still it was raiment.

Of a free choice, work is never included in the curriculum of an Indian. Maxepeto was a specific red man in his abhorrence of labor. There were many things he could do, but best of all could he steer a six-ton flat boat, carrying a hundred pieces of goods down through the treacherous rapids of the Saskatchewan River.

And this was the one thing he would do. When well loaded with liquor of unquestioned vileness his constant boast was, "I'm de bes' bloody steersman on the ribber!"

No man on all that boiling turbulent stream, with its rock-blocked rapids, could handle a boat like the big half-breed. He liked the danger of it, and the pay was big. There was little manual labor, which was the saving grace of the thing in his eyes.

Two months after his marriage he went down with the first boat of the season; he was gone three moons,