

The Old Fort

condition, as to almost pass belief. Whisky was the great staple article of trade, both of the Hudson Bay Company and the free traders in this district, and the horses and fur of the Indians and the gold of the miners went to purchase it. A man's life was worth a horse; and a horse was worth a pint of whisky. Tales are told of strange scenes around Edmonton, where all is so quiet now. Bands of Blackfeet, one thousand strong, howling drunk, with countless buffalo robes and hundreds of horses, crowding around a hole in the wall of the fort, where the whisky was handed out and the robes were taken in, and who would not leave until the last robe was traded.

"Of horses being bought for whisky by men in the bastions, standing beside loaded cannon, from Indians outside; and bullets now in the bastion wall hint for strong reasons for the trade being conducted in that way. Of men shot, scalped, disembodied, and cut to pieces in a drunken row within a hundred yards of the wall, of murders and massacres of men, women, and children, with the most revolting details, in full view of the people of the Fort."

Yet, in spite of this, the Company saved a hundred lives for every one they were the means of injuring, in that they supplied the Indian with a market for his furs and gave him food and clothing. They protected him against famine by allowing him his goods a year in advance of payment. They cared for the Indians' sick, fed the starving, cancelled the debts of the widow, and taught to all useful lessons of thrift, self-help, and of the dignity of labour. In truth, the company were "Cæsars with none to contradict them."

Each fort was ruled by a factor, who lived in The Big House. This was not necessarily a big house, but only meant that the big man lived therein.