"THE LEAN MAN."

A Sketch of Life in the Canadian North-west.

CHAPTER I.

When "The Lean Man" entered his lodge at nightfall, and saw his young squaw adorning her cheeks with vermilion, and braiding her straight black hair in tails after the enlightened manner of the Palefaces; when she had made him a robe for his comfort at night of the skins of over 200 rabbits; when she welcomed him at the door of his tent with good things earned or stolen from the white men: no wonder that the young husband felt that the Great Spirits had been good to him in giving "medicine" to ward off evil times, and to provide for his modest wants during the long winters.

He didn't say much about it however; but, relieved of a great anxiety after the risky perpetration of early marriage, settled down to a life of honorable theft and genteel idleness, leaving "Turkey Legs" to manage his worldly affairs in the shape of a daily meal, which that lady never failed to produce in good season.

"The Lean Man" used to spend much of his time in admiring his red blanket, for which he had wisely traded something that did not belong to him; and in meditating upon the obtuseness of the "Shermogonish" in arresting "the party of the second part" in that transaction instead of himself. For that ingenuous youth, "The-Man-Who-Bites-His-Nails," had been arrested on the information of the Indian agent at "Big Child's" reserve; and was now in the guard room at the barracks, and like to be tried for larceny. Our friend was a Sioux, and had come from Montana to the far Saskatchewan after an escapade on the part of his tribe that did not meet with the approval of the United States authorities. This was the glorious victory of "Sitting Bull" over "The Sun Child," Gen. Custer, who, with some hundreds of American soldiers, had been slain in a coulee by only about 1400 Sioux. They had then come to the land of the Great Mother, where the white Okemow told them, to their great surprise, that their conduct was wicked and disreputable; though, even after the usual largesse of tea and tobacco, they still retained some scepticism about the peculiar views of the white men. Gradually this little band had drifted to the Saskatchewan; and, providing the Great Mother didn't bother them about reserves and treaty—even with the loss of flour and other emoluments—they were fairly content. True, it was a great shame that they couldn't get "treaty payments," like the Crees, without being corralled on a reserve; but they were better off than when badgered and hunted in the south because of their natural proclivities for lifting the wandering cattle on the prairie, such as they had eaten from time immemorial, and which were their rightful prey.

And even if these poor wanderers could not overthrow the hosts of Pharaoh, as they had tried to do last year, they could at least have the satisfaction of spoiling individual Egyptians, and so gain a precarious but honest livelihood in default of larger game.

And so it was that our hero went out to take the air one fine morning, and walked down the main trail on the river bank with his blanket held about him with inimitable grace, while he fanned himself with the bedraggled old wing of a crane in great peace and dignity. For in truth it was a hot day, and the sun burned down on the dusty road. He wore his great hat, the abandoned top-hat of a departed Jesuit missionary, from which he had cut the crown, and after cutting battlements out of the raw edge, adorned it with a feather and three brass nails. His leggings were of embroidered beaded work, beautifully designed by his squaw. He had also well-fitting moccasins and a pipe-tomahawk. Altogether, despite that he felt it was foolish to expose himself to such a hot sun, he was delighted to feel that he looked his best, and that his new "fire bag" showed to perfection. He saw a white man cursing a team in one of the adjoining fields, and felt that his Race was able to look with superior calmness upon the irritable and too talkative whites.

But as he strolled down the trail and was nearing the Hudson Bay Company's Post, he saw a cloud of dust beyond and the glitter of helmets above it. "By the great horn spoon of the pale-faces," he soliloquized, "here comes the Shermogonish," and he went and hid himself. When The Lean Man had effaced himself he continued to gaze at the approaching horsemen from a secluded corner. And presently there came up the trail a gallant troop of Mounted Police, their accoutrement and scarlet tunics, their white helmets and rifles across the saddle, resplendent in the sunlight. First came videttes, then twenty mounted men, followed by the rumbling transport. The wagons, loaded with provisions and bedding, carried each three men; and as the trot sent clouds of dust to leeward. Then came the rear guard of mounted men; and the commanding officer, the sergeant-major and the bugler rode beside them. It was a stirring sight to see these splendid horses, the hardy sensitive broncho of Alberta, with their sun-burnt young riders; and all the eclat of military usage, and all the power of good rule over the great land-oceans of the far west.

The Indian followed the party with wistful eyes; these proud careless masters of the plains—these robbers of his people's heritage, who had driven away the buffalo, and sent disease among the tribes, to slowly blight his kindred until they were all dead.

And they went on through the Mission, and out on the rolling prairie beyond, to patrol the country that last year burnt the seats of war—when the restless wandering peoples had made one last useless stand against the tide that was overwhelming them. Their leader, Louis Riel, who had seemed their only friend, had turned out but a self-seeking adventurer, and a traitor to them; and now he was dead, and the whites were more powerful than ever.

But "The Lean Man" was not a politician or a sociologist, but only a poor Sioux who, not knowing the meaning of events, was moderately happy. He went to the barracks, where he knew that the troop, having broken up camp must have left many treasures, in the shape of brass buttons, scarlet cloth and old boot-legs, among the refuse. But by the time he arrived at the barracks the camp had been cleared by a fatigue party, and he had to resort to the ash heaps. He was not challenged, save by a half-kindly, half-disdainful, "A wuss nitchie—get away out of this," from the cook; and in the evening he returned homewards laden with spoil. Now it happened that Const. Anstaye, being on pass that evening, was proceeding up town to see her, when he remembered that his washing was not contracted for. He therefore turned into a tepee by the way-side and sat down. He knew four words of the language, and pronounced two of these wrongly but had little difficulty in making himself understood, and presently left the tent. So The Lean Man saw from the distance a young soldier coming out of his tent, and with his boots flashing in the sunlight, and his forage cap balanced on the traditional three hairs, and his white gauntlets and switch and other finery, proceed gaily towards the Mission. Then The Lean Man's heart was filled with bad t Whien he came to the tent he disregarded the vacuous broad smiles of welcome that greeted him, and said to himself that these were full of guile (although they certainly did not look it), and he sat on the robes and sulked.

Later in the evening he crossed the river to where a bright fire burned amid the tents under the pine trees; and the usual pow-wow made the evening hideous, and continued with the gayest of howling and the most festive treatment of the tom-tom until a late hour. But there were speeches besides the music that night: the young Chief "Four Sky" made an oration, in which he said he would go to Carrot River—to the land of rabbits, and stray cattle, and hen roosts, and settlers, and every other kind of game—to the land of good water, and lots of fish, and all kinds of idleness. Then "The Lean Man" made a long and very stupid speech in which he said he would go too. Upon which the ancient and venerable big Chief "Stick-in-the-Mud," aided and abetted by "Resting Bird," the mother of "The Lean Man" made deprecations, and platitudes, and objections—all of which were overruled by the young men. "The Resting Bird," a few days after, retired in great gloom to a meadow some six miles up the river, with her brave and some other fogies.

Upon the morrow "Four Sky," with "The Lean Man," "Little Egg" with his son "Would-not-go-out," "Wandering Mule" and "Sat On" with their horses, their squaws, their dogs, their children, their dignity, and all that they had, went down to Carrot River to sojourn.

A short time afterwards "Would-not-go-out," the son of "Little Egg," was returning from an unsuccessful hunt after a lost *cayuse*, when he was overtaken by a settler driving an empty wagon, and asked for a lift. The white man grumbled out a surly refusal, which so far incensed the lad that he climbed up into the wagon from behind, and carried out the traditions of his name by refusing to climb out again. Thereupon the settler, greatly to the annoyance of his passenger, lashed out behind him with the whip, and "Would-not-go-out" became very angry, and pointed his "shooting stick at the enemy. Happening to remember that the old flintlock gun was not loaded, he relented, and proceeded to have satisfaction with a threat. He told the white man that he wouldn't trouble to kill him now, "Because we are going to kill all you whites in a few days anyhow." Having delivered himself of this very silly remark, and perceiving that he was now close to the tents, he jumped out of the wagon and walked home. But the settler went about with information "on the very best authority" that there was to be a general massacre of the whole settlement, and so much alarmed were the neighbors that a deputation was sent to beg for a detachment of Police.

The little group of lodges was placed among the aspens by a lake, in a sheltered, shadowy hollow in the plain. The wide rolling prairie whose yellow grass, starred with flowers, melted towards the greys and softest azures that lay against the sky; the beautiful still waters where the young ducks swam; the delicate shimmering popiars; the smoke shaded lodges, and ponies grazing in the meadow—this was the lovely scene where the Red Men dwelt, the happy abundant plain that the Good Spirit had given them.

In due course there came to the settlement a sergeant and four constables of the Mounted Police, bringing with them a tent or two in the wagon, and a general impression that they had come to stay. The people had seldom had the soldiers among them, and there was some idea among the women that they were queer animals with red coats and bad habits. The "Riders of the Plains," however, used, even as recently as that, to travel like bandits, often indeed being mistaken for horse-thieves; and soon won the hearts of the good wives by their liberal purchase of milk, eggs and butter, by their quiet good humor and tendency towards a chat. To any one tired of the prosaic life of the cities of the East the very sight of these men would have been refreshment, picturesque, liberal, unconventional, often highly educated, the Shermogonish have no flavor of the old tiresome life of tine umbrella and the table-cloth, and I wish no man a better medicine than their company. Of course an early and rigorous examination was made into the causes that had given rise to such uneasiness among the people. Sergeant Monmouth had a chat with "Four Sky," whose people were found busy skinning rabbits; but there was some delay in producing the settler who had raised the alarm, he having gone to Fort a la Corne, from whence he could not be expected for a day or two. In the meantime nothing could be done, and there was no pressing necessity for action because everything was quiet.

Upon the third day some of the police were sitting in the little general store having a comfortable growl for want of something better to do. Steen having lit a very bad cigar, sat down on a barrel, and with his broad slouch hat jammed down on the back of his head, opened a discussion.

"Oh! it's all right," he said in reply to a general observation on the part of the storekeeper concerning the state of the country, "it's all right, if it wasn't for them miserable 'nitchies'—who are no use anyhow—running the whole shebang, with their confounded monkey business, 'sif thar wasn't enough drills and fatigues to keep the whole darned outfit on the keen jump without their fooling around the country stealing horses, and killing cattle, and raising rackets from one year's end to another, and now there's that damn fool Garnett robbing the mails, and he'll give enough trouble by the time he's hanged to keep half the troop busy hunting him. I——" He was interrupted by Sergt. Monmouth: "Look here, I'll bet anyone a month's pay that there'll be a mounted escort for every mail in the country within this month—you jest see if there ain't!"

Constable Mercer took up the growl at this point, and made out a very bad case against the Canadian Government "for running a poor —— of a buck policeman 'aif he was a nigger or suthin' worse."

Here Le Soeur broke in: "There was—wot you say—General Ordaire? Yes, Genaral Ordaire, jest befor' we come away—er——"

Sergt. Monmouth: "O, give us a rest, 'nitchie'—go away back to your reserve, man!"

At this moment Constable Anstaye burst into the store with a joke that could not be kept back a minute, but in a sad dilemma that he had not breath to tell it. The substance of his tale was gathered in the course of a few minutes, and was to the effect that he had been in one of the tepees talking to a squaw when a "nitchie" came in, and, when he saw him, looked as black as thunder and went out. Presently he heard a racket outside, and found the same Indian unmercifully thrashing a boy; but was interrupted by "Four Sky" and another, who dragged him off and looked about as cheerful as a blizzard on a cold day.

"But which 'tepee' were you in—and what were you up to?"

"Oh, I dunno, it was the one next the trail, and the chap that raised the row was that lanky young cuss in a red blanket, and a top hat with the crown out."

Monmouth strolled down to the camp, but on his return said that everything was quiet enough there. No further notice was taken of the affair, and the next day it was forgotten; but Anstaye noticed that whenever he went down to the camp the Indian with the red blanket scowled upon him.

In course of time the man Brown, who had raised the alarm, returned from Fort a la Corne; and was taken by Sergt. Monmouth to the Indian camp. He felt uncomfortable about the result of his assertions; and being a mean man determined that instead of an open confession that he had been needlessly scared, he would justify himself at all costs. Unfortunately it happened that "Would-Not-Go-Out" was absent; and when all the braves in the little band were brought before him, and he was asked to produce the blood-thirsty savage who had, as he said, attempted to murder him, the white man hesitated, and tried to excuse himself, and make light of it all in the most generous manner, saying that he would be very sorry to get the poor fellow into trouble.

"Come on—no fooling!" said Monmouth. Brown asked in Sioux whether all the band were there; and the Chief replied that they were all there except a lad who was not even full grown, and could scare nobody with any spirit.

Monmouth: "Well, which was it?"

Brown, "Oh, I don't want to get a poor miserable nitchie in jail!"

Monmouth: "Well you're a pretty specimen, getting us sent pretty near 200 miles to take the man who was going to kill you. You say that he attempted murder—by Jove, I'll arrest you if you don't take care, for trying to screen a murderer!"

Brown was now thoroughly cowed, and felt that he must do a dirty crime to save himself from public contempt. Pointing to a tall, surly-looking young man in a red blanket he said: "That one."

Monmouth asked the Chief what character the accused bore; and the reply was sorrowfully expressed that of late the evil spirit had been upon "The Lean Man," for only two days ago he had wantonly attacked and thrashed a lad in the camp, named "Would-not-go-out," for no cause.

And so it came about that the detachment returned to Headquarters, and carried away "The Lean Man" a prisoner.

CHAPTER II.

It was a pleasant sight to see a party of Mounted Police ride in from some command, bronzed, dusty and travel-stained, their harness rusted with the rough usages of the camp, their eyes bright with the reflected breadth and freedom of the plains, while the horses pricked their ears to hear the whinny of a colt in the corrall, as they foresaw the quietude of the dim stables, or the sunny upland where the herd was grazing. Thus came home the party from Carrot River, and drew up sharp before the Guard House. The prisoner was sent into his allotted cell, the wagon unloaded at the Quartermaster's Store, the horses led to water, the bedding taken to the Barrack Rooms, the cook urged to be ready with his provisions. The arrivals shed their prairie dress, while a rapid discussion took place on the current news, and a Guard was told off, and having got into uniform its members made their way to the Guard House, growling not a little that a single prisoner should cause so much extra work. Until then the "Picquet" had gone on solitary night rounds with his lantern, and dozed away the spare hours in the Guard Room; but this was only a pleasant reminiscence now. But the Indian, the restless unthinking child of the plain, had come to the weariness of an imprisoned spirit, and sank into the heavy lethargy of despair. The log walls of his prison, the iron bars of the door, the soldier sitting at the little table beyond, and what might be seen through a loop-hole in the wall, were now exchanged for the glorious horizon, with all the sweet sounds and sights of nature that peopled the broad tens of day. That loop-hole, pierced during the war, was now his only consolation, and he would sit for hours before it looking out upon the world. The sadness of his spirit seemed to weigh the atmosphere, for the air was dense for days with the smoke of prairie fires; and once at night he saw the sharp lines of flames coming down over the hills into the river flat, and hoped against hope that these would come down to release him.

"The Lean Man" was examined by the officer in command, but he was found so sullen and intractable that no evidence of his innocence could be come at: so he was committed for trial. One thing he said to the interpreter was beyond that gentleman's powers of translation, but was several times repeated among the men on the detachment in the words in which it was rendered: "The Good Spirit gave me the prairie for a bed, the trees to shelter me—but you Shermogonish have given me cold boards." And afterwards he said to Sergeant Monmouth, "You are going to kill me because I fought against you; be quick—kill me now—I am tired of waiting to die." He thought of the past—when he had gone through the tortures of the Sun Dance, to come forth from the ordeal a warrior; he thought of all the excitement of the war, how he had seen the red flames of Fort Carlton leap up against the night, and how he had fought in the rifle pits of Batoche under Gabriel Dumont; he thought of his short happy married life before the dark cloud settled down upon him; and he brooded over what the Interpreter had said to him: "You will be tried next month."

Weeks passed outside the Guard House: and Change set as usual on the wints of Time. The Mission people had ever since the war been as prompt in the matter of alarms as a fire brigade; and the Carrot River "scare," added to contemporary fictions about the Indians, had caused a general feeling of alarm. This was by no means mitigated by the departure of the Troop for the south by forced marches, to meet a great dignitary in the neighborhood of Long Lake; and by the rumored outbreak of an Indian war at Wood Mountain.

The band of "Four Sky" returned from Carrot River bringing the bereaved "Turkey Legs," who would sit for hours on the ground outside the Guard House waiting for a casual glimpse of her lord; and comforted him much by her silent sympathy.

In due course the great dignitary returned to the East; and the Troop came home again, to the infinite regret of the little garrison, who by no means yearned for drill and discipline. The summer was ended, the harvest was gathered in, the winter began to send forth scouts to feel the way, and the full ripe year was waning to its close. And still "The Lean Man" knelt at the loop-hole, or made his little daily excuses for access to the free air of heaven. He lay through the long nights wondering what would be done to him after the trial, and feeling in his numbed sensibilities only the one terror—Disgrace. And he said within his heart, and whispered it to himself, and heard the winds whistle the words at night: "I will not be tried!"

Three days after he arrived at this determination some of the men were spending a spare hour in the large barrack room engaged in "bed fatigue," and between the whiffs of a quiet smoke carrying on a desultory conversation. Burk, who was on guard that day, a tall, handsome, good-natured Englishman sat on the edge of his bed fumbling in a kit-bag underneath for some tobacco, having permission to leave the Guard House for a few minutes.

"Well, Geometry," said Anstaye, "has the Nitchie been up to any of his games to-day?"

Burk: "I should just think he was! Why, I was just taking him over to the kitchen for the guard dinner as noon, when he made a break and got clean away past the Hospital."

Sergeant Monmouth said: "Well, I hope you shot the——"

"Oh, it was no use shooting him; I just hollared out to the others and skinned after him."

"That is, you made use of your compasses, Geometry I"

Oh shut up, Tribulation," said Burk; "Well I caught up close to the Riding School and nabbed him. And then I ran him off to the kitchen and made him lay hold of the big tea pot without any more fooling."

"And did he buck?"

"I say buck! No, you bet he was as quiet as—as—er—death. That's the third bolt he's made to-day; he must have a pretty bad conscience."

Indeed, "The Lean Man" had made several attempts to escape, but his escorts had each time seized him, and taken no extra precautions other than to show him the butt of a revolver or set forth some counsel. That evening, however, before he was sent with an escort for the supper he was shackled with a "ball and chain," an instrument intended to restrain the most volatile of captives should he become too retiring. It must not be imagined that the prisoner was treated harshly, for if there is one virtue possessed by the rough soldiery of the prairies, it is their invariable kindness to the criminals committed to their charge.

"The Lean Man," thwarted in his attempts to escape, brought to the humiliation of chains, and filled with the darkest forebodings of evil, came to the black shadows of utter despair: and then, as a man can do in the immediate presence of death, transcended his poor life as the day transcends night; he forgot the degradation of his people, and fought with all the magnificent courage and haughty endurance of his barbaric forefathers. He stood in the door of his cell when the time came that it was to be locked for the night, and, with his eyes aflame, his body trembling with the excitement, fought with the fury and the strength of madness for liberty. The whole guard hardly sufficed to cope with him, and it was only after a long and furious struggle that the Indian, overwhelmed with weight of numbers, fell back into the cell utterly exhausted. He had cast aside the dress that had come over the Indian character from ruinous contact with the ruling race; he had asserted for once the inalienable rights of hereditry, the greater and manlier past. The change in him was interpreted by the authorities as insanity.

Night deepened down upon the world, and the dim after-light waned through long hours into the north. The air was misty with smoke from the prairies; and, chilled in the shadowy, dry night of Indian summer, all the valley lay in mysterious silence.

The Indian sat long brooding in the intense stillness. Through the barred aperture in the door a stream of golden light poured into the cell; and under the lamp in the Guard Room the Sergeant of the Guard sat at the table writing. The two men off duty lay asleep on the sloping dais at the other side of the room, still in complete uniform, and wearing their heavy side-arms as they took their brief, uneasy hours of rest. There was no sound save their breathing, and the steady scratching of the Sergeant's pen, as he proceeded with his letters. Presently the "picquet" came in for the stable keys, saying that "the buckskin mare and Bulkeley's horse broke loose in the long stables—I can manage all right." Then he went out, and the prisoner watched him through the loophole as he went swinging his lantern towards the "corralls."

"The Lean Man" slowly unbound the sash from his waist, and knotted the ends together—he thrust the knot through the loop-hole—he drew the sash sharply back, catching the knot against the sides of a narrow gap between two logs, he pulled hard to make sure that the knot would hold. Then he sat a few moments in silence, and covered his face with his hands. He looked about him—the Sergeant of the Guard had taken a book and lay on the trestle bed beside his table reading, and the night around was infinitely still. Holding the loops of the sash the prisoner looked up towards heaven and prayed; then he placed his head within the loop and crouched down, leaning heavily with his throat against the sash. The Sergeant of the Guard was still reading—the two men were breathing quietly in their sleep—the "picquet" came out from the stables and went and stood on the bank of the river near by—the mist lay over the valley, and all was still.

The cold autumn day broke upon the world, and Reveille echoed from the wooded sides of the little valley and rang melodiously against the banks of the broad river; the sun rose triumphant over the mists and the waters were resplendent before his slanting rays—but the Indian had gone to the place of his fathers, and his sad stern eyes were closed forever in sleep. The man had dared the long agonies of torture in utter silence, had crushed with determined hands the life within him and had gone down to the grave triumphant, without one sound to tell the watchful soldier, who was actually in the same room with him, that the last tragedy was being transacted in a lingering anguish of suffocation.

They buried him on the bank of the river, and one of the soldiers made two laths into a cross during an idle moment and set it over the grave. The Indian lay under the prairie flowers in the shadow of the cross; on the one side of him Humanity rattled down the long dusty trail, and on the other lay the still expanses of silver, the broad, silent waters of the great Saskatchewan.

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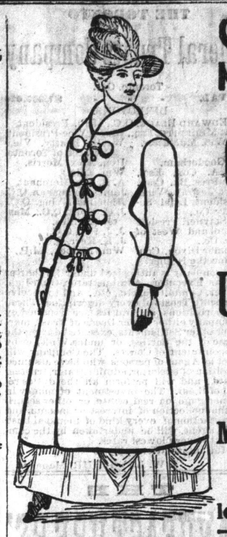

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