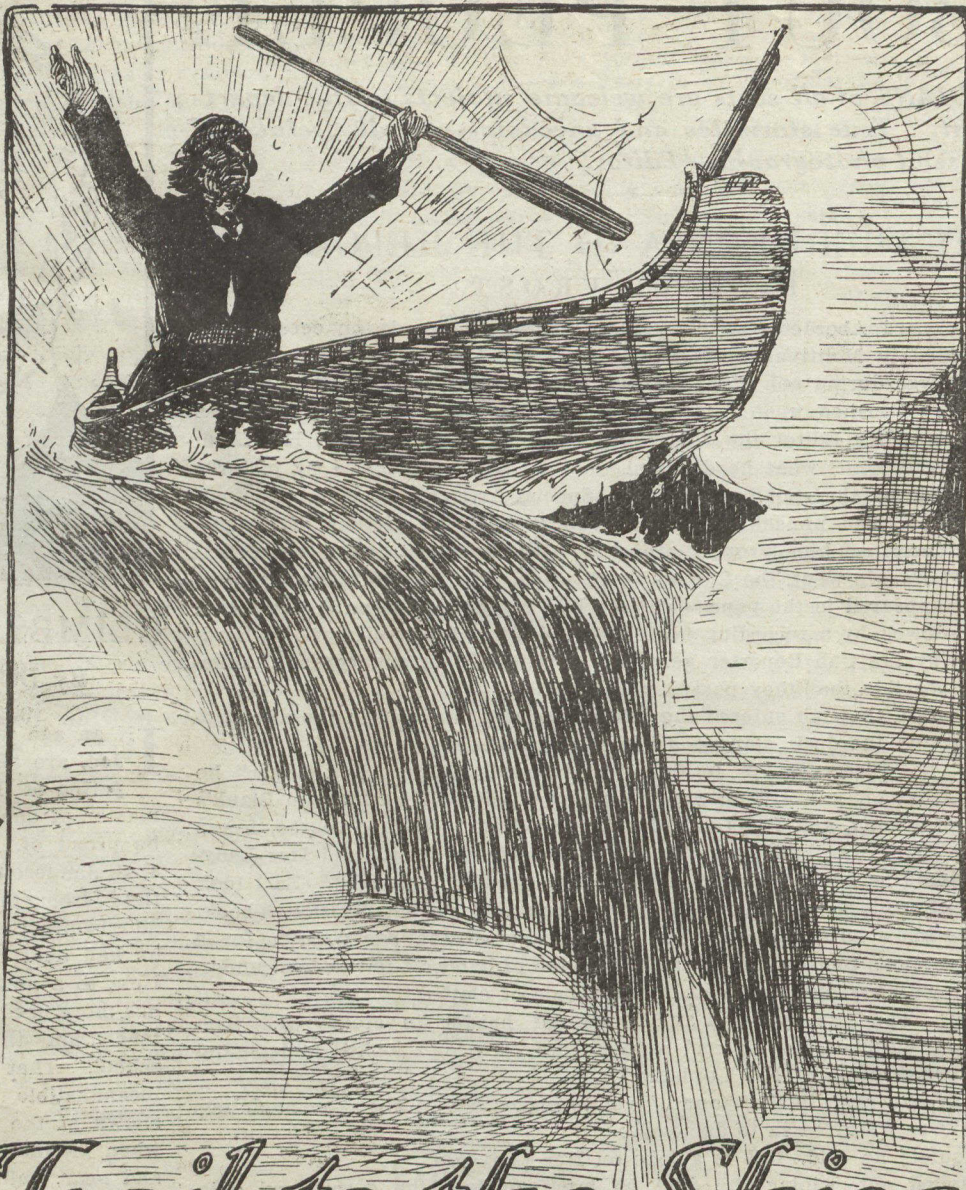


OLD MACHOVA knew this mighty river of the north. It had carried him bravely in the spring-time of life. The river was his friend, the great river with its rapids above, its cataract and the whirlpool below. Then—The Trail.

Drawing by
T. W. McLean

by
**Charles C.
Jenkins**



The Trail to the Skies

OLD man can't get up trails this winter," Tom Tall Cat argued. "Old man maybe die. Old man no good anyway; for hunt or trap. Just sit and croak like frog on blanket all day. Better old man stay here."

"Un-n-n," agreed Tom Tall Cat's squaw. "Old Man Owl stay. Better."

"We say nothing to old man of it. Better," cautioned Tom Tall Cat. "Maybe get mad and make Wintigo. Better just leave him. Children stay with him; one one week, one next. Maybe soon die."

"Un-n-n," came the crooning assent of the squaw again. "Maybe soon die."

Old Man Owl just without the shack door gave utterance to an expletive in English for which there is no Objibwa synonym. "Dirty rats!" he muttered. "They would leave old Machova that they call the Owl on the reservation while they go trap and chase moose. Take kids, take dogs, but leave old chief to die. Dirty rats!"

Old Man Owl squatted upon a dirty blanket to the south side of the reservation shack, puffing meditatively at a straight wooden pipe and absorbing the morning warmth. A colored H. B. blanket was wrapped about his shoulders, for he was very old—so old none could tell his years. Old Man Owl could not see the glory of the Northern sun nor the faded yellow the early frosts had put upon the muskegs that patched the valley below him. A bullet from a rash white hunter's rifle had once passed too close to his eyes and carried away their sight; hence the name his people had since called him by.

But if time had made his blood thin and another's carelessness had robbed him of his sight, his fiery spirit was as of old; the lure of the wild, silent wastes was strong as ever. He had come upon evil times, this proud old red man who had known better days.

Once in all the North there was not a hunter so mighty as Machova, chief of the Objibwas, whose majestic title after the Brown Bear, as well as his chiefship, was stripped from him with the loss of his sight. White hunters from the city now no longer sought him for guide and new factors at the

trading posts, who knew nothing, and cared less, about his past glory, ordered him from their doorways. He had to be led about in the open by his grandchildren.

Old Man Owl knew things would have been different if his oldest son, Peter Chief, were home. But Peter Chief was away to the Great War across the big waters, and Peter Chief's squaw now lived apart in style on his assigned pay. She would have none of the pauper, Old Man Owl.

To-day it dawned on Old Man Owl with three-fold bitterness that he was a nobody in the village. The deeds of his youth and strength counted for nothing now. The world had taken all of what he had to give and when he was no longer useful was about to toss him aside as so much human garbage; its people were impatiently waiting for him to die so that they could put him out of their way. Peter Chief, who now and then sent part of his soldier's pay to buy him tobacco and warm clothes, was not there to offer comfort. He was useless, despised and alone. The others tolerated him only because they feared he would make of his spirit a Wintigo to bring vengeance upon them.

The old hunter listened to the preparations for departure with a heavy heart. It was the first season since away back into his dim boyhood past that he would not go up the trails. Stoic though he appeared without, the shock of it, the strain of the bitter tumult within seemed about to snap his reason.

A WAVE of strange, savage abandon swept upon Old Man Owl. He sprang to his feet. Straight and tall he stood as in his robust days, his blind eyes to the sun. He opened his mouth and burst into song.

Guttural, with a weird sweetness of tone, was the song; now savage, triumphant, now low and dolorous like the North wind in the pines. They who listened, even had they no knowledge of the Objibwa tongue, might have interpreted from it the story of a young strength that had known no fear in the deepest wilderness or before the gravest danger, might have

pictured from it lonely lakes and racing rivers where stalked the mighty moose and the nimble caribou—bearded mountain ranges where the black bear lumbered and the gaunt, grey wolf padded silently. Always it began with tributes to the picturesque and the beauties of nature, swelled in its descriptions of the might of man, grieved over his oncoming infirmities and swooned to a wail that told of death and the despair of despair.

Tom Tall Cat's household stood without the shack and listened in silence till the old man had finished and again taken up his pipe.

"Old Man Owl sings," said Tom Tall Cat. "He is well?"

"Old Man Owl is well," answered the other. "He asks nothing but to live here till he dies."

"Un-n-n," chorused Tom Tall Cat's female household, "Old Man Owl will live here till he dies."

THE day following their departure, Old Man Owl appeared at the agent's office, led by little Joe, his grandson. He produced a bit of inner birch bark about the size of a postcard, on which was depicted with colored basket stains the figure of a man walking in stars and clouds. He indicated for the agent to write his name at the bottom of it.

"Maybe send to Peter Chief at Big War for old man?" he requested. He smiled, his blind eyes turned trustingly to the white man.

"But what the thunderation does that funny picture mean?" asked the puzzled agent.

"Oh, just letter from old man," was the unenlightening reply. "Peter Chief he know."

"Oh, all right, then," and the agent stuck the bit of bark in an envelope and threw it on his desk.

At the door the aged blind man turned. "Maybe won't forget to send old man's letter to Peter Chief?" he pleaded.

"No, I'll not forget."

The next morning Old Man Owl called little Joe at sunrise.

"Must get ready," he announced. "Long walk. Take canoe, take gun, take packsack and meat for many days. Long walk."

Little Joe asked no questions. They went without the shack, where the old man flung his arm to the North.

"See long big hill against sky?" he asked. The boy affirmed he did. "See many little hills running to big hill other side of muskeg? Un-n-n? Trail there. Old man go to big hill; little Joe lead way."

And so they set out, the boy in the lead tumping the packsack and Old Man Owl's ancient carbine, and the old Indian behind packing the canoe. To the ordinary eye, in the deceptive Northern light, the height of land indicated as his objective would appear but a few miles away. As a matter of fact, it was twenty.

Three days they trudged over an old, long-disused trail, on hills of rattling shale, through springy, thigh-wearying muskegs, across windfall labyrinths and over weird, burnt-over wastes. Nights they camped in the open before a tended fire, rolled in their blankets. No fancied dangers such as haunt the white traveler in the woods interfered with the slumbers of these children of the wild.

The fourth day they passed over the tip of the height of land. An hour later they descended to the shores of a mighty river, seldom visited nowadays by Indians and as yet practically unknown to the white man.

The canoe was dropped into its element. In its bow were placed the old man's rifle and an odd collection of belongings Old Man Owl fished from the packsack, rusty old traps, his hunting knife and a few old trinkets included.

The Indian lad's eyes were glistening as he said farewell and the old man pushed his canoe well a-stream. But old Machova—he was no longer Old Man Owl—was happy, happier than he had ever been since Peter Chief had gone.

He knew this stream—knew its every twist and obstruction, though it had been many years since he had skimmed its surface by night as well as

(Concluded on page 34.)