

MISPLACED TRUST

"The finest lot of skins I have seen in many months," said Bruce McLeod, an independent fur trader at Sagua, as he raised his eyes from a bale of pelts on the counter. His gaze wandered again to the silver fox pelt which his hand was covering. Here, indeed, was a prize such as had never before been captured in that barren land north east of the Great Slave—a prize of which all sturdy trappers of the North had dreamed, but none had attained. The fur was silky in texture, and the silver tips seemed to deepen the colour of the glossy coat.

But would the owner part with it? This was the question McLeod was turning over in his mind as he admired the prime fur and distinct markings characteristic of the king of fur bearing animals. Once more he allowed his gaze to stray from the pelt, and looked at the trapper standing before the stove. He took in every detail of this man, from the features, bespeaking a full-blood Cree to the very garments that he wore.

"One thousand dollars would be a fair price for the lot" remarked the factor as if speaking to himself.

"But I told you before that my fox skins were not for sale," the trapper replied in accents that told of an early education received in a school of the "Pale-face."

Several times during the winter the trapper had arrived at the post with a bundle of furs, but always refused to sell any of his fox skins, of which the last made a total of nine.

"Why in the name of common sense do you wish to hold them when I am offering you as high a price as you will ever get?"

"You know," replied Unacook (for this was the Cree's name) "that the United Fur Sales, at Winnipeg, are offering a five thousand dollar prize for the most perfectly matched pair of skins exhibited at their show rooms this spring. I intend to try for that prize. My chances for winning it are good. I am the only man trapping on the Polar Ridge, and, as the foxes there are not scattered by an army of trappers, I am more apt to get a matched pair out of a bundle of foxes, since they would all have the same strain of blood. That is my reason for not selling. No other man, however, will get my furs while you are here, and, after the exhibition, I will sell the foxes

to you, should I fail to get the pair, or if I succeed in getting that pair, all the rest will go to you."

McLeod stood thinking for a while and then spoke as if he had reached some decision.

"All right, Uncaook, you are the owner, not I."

After disposing of his remaining pelts, Unacook handed the fox fur to the factor saying, "Will you put this with the other pelts that you have been keeping for me?" And, upon receiving a favourable answer, he took his departure.

The friendship between the Indian and Bruce was an often discussed topic about the post. That the huge, rough, selfish grasping McLeod should endeavour to become the friend of a Cree and seek friendship in return, was a puzzle hard to solve. Unacook had arrived at the post three years before, poorly clad, hungry, and without a grubstake, or even a sled on which to carry one. Perhaps Bruce recognized him as a famous trapper from the Hudson Bayregion, or his ability to size up a man may have told him that the Indian would be the source of an increase in business. At any rate, the result was that Unacook received a stake and full equipment for the season's trapping, and always received the highest prices for his catch. He was grateful for the trust and faith which the factor seemed to place in him, and never lost an opportunity to show his gratitude. There were many hard stories told about McLeod, but Unacook paid no attention to them.

The Cree had not travelled far, after leaving the store, when he discovered the loss of his favourite hunting knife, and returned to the post to find it. On entering, he saw the factor stuffing something beneath his coat, but paid no attention to it.

"I have just finished tying up your furs," said Bruce, exhibiting a bundle wrapped in burlap. "Nine skins, all ready to be taken to Winnipeg."

The Cree recovered his knife from the bench where he had previously placed it and went towards the river where he busied himself in fitting his canoe for the long pull down the stream. Three days later he departed with his bundle of skins, wrapped as when the factor gave them to him.

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The Fur Show was over. An Indian drove his canoe

northward along the Churchill with long powerful strokes. His face was set in grim lines, and, in his eyes shone hate and disappointment—hate for the man who had used his friendship as a means of obtaining the prize so much coveted by trappers; disappointment over the outcome of the exhibition. He had been surprised when the judges had announced: "Bruce McLeod wins the five thousand dollar prize for the best matched skins, and one thousand dollars for the best lot of furs exhibited;" but his surprise became anger when he received the furs which he himself had brought in and discovered that they were not his own. He quickly recovered his composure and departed.

Everything was clear enough now. The friendship, trust and love which McLeod had bestowed upon him, and which he strove so hard to hold proved to be nothing but greed, deceit and dishonesty. The fidelity, with which he tried to show his gratitude, had turned to sullen hate for the man who had thus used the sacred bonds of friendship as the means to obtain riches and fame in the world of furs; and his impetuous nature demanded revenge. After his passion had abated he tried to think. Death would be a poor revenge for such a crime. Ruin and disgrace were more to be feared by a man of the factor's type than any bodily harm. During the trip he completed his plans, and, upon arriving at the post, gathered together his few belongings and departed. During the following months, trappers in the four corners of that barren land between Great Slave Lake and Hudson Bay were surprised by a silent Cree, in search of a pelt of the same texture of one he carried in his pack. One day the same Indian strode into the office of the United Fur Sales and demanded an interview with the president of the Company. This was granted, and after a private conference of some duration he was again on his way.

McLeod had started to move his winter's supply of furs to the outside world, but misfortune seemed to confront him. Snags, appearing in swift parts of the river where none had before been seen, ripped the bottoms of the canoes and sent their contents to destruction; his supplies seemed to vanish over night, and on the third day out he received word that his post was burned to the ground, and when he at length arrived at Winnipeg he had but a small part of his outfit.

The factor was sitting in his room in Winnipeg when a knock was heard at the door. He opened it and admitted Mr. Graves of the United Fur Sales, and a man in the uniform of the R. C. M. P. They sat for some time discussing the events on the river, when Mr. Graves abruptly asked, "By the way, McLeod, where did you trap your prize set of furs?"

"Near the Nipponi River," answered Bruce, naming a stream near the Hudson Bay and about three hundred miles southeast of the Polar Ridge.

Mr. Graves glanced at the officer who rose and said, "Bruce McLeod, I arrest you in the name of the law. You are charged with the theft of nine silver fox pelts from Unacook the trapper.

The factor, filled with shame and confusion, shivered when he was brought forward to stand his trial, and in terrible suspense awaited its outcome. He heard his own counsel telling the jury that there was no substantial evidence to convict the prisoner of theft; that the prisoner's reputation for honesty was well known, and should not be injured by the unsupported statements of a Cree. Then came the evidence that killed his hope of freedom. A reliable trapper was called to the stand by the prosecutor.

"Yes I have trapped in the vicinity of the Nipponi for twenty years and could pick out a pelt captured in that region no matter where I saw it. The prize lot was not captured there. Skins vary according to the latitude in which they are caught. Those of the Nipponi are unlike the ones exhibited by McLeod which are more thickly furred and have a more silky texture, which shows that they have been trapped farther north. I have travelled to the Ridge at the request of Unacook, and have trapped a fox whose pelt corresponds in every detail to the lot in question. Furthermore, the pelts which Unacook received from McLeod as his own and which he brought down to the Exhibition at Winnipeg are the very ones that I myself caught near the Nipponi some time before, and sold to McLeod, this I can prove by certain markings."

These statements were confirmed by several other experienced trappers, and, after a short deliberation, the jury returned with the verdict, "Guilty."

"Five years at hard labour" was the sentence pronounced by the Judge and McLeod was brought back to his cell.