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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE CURSED PATOIS ***

THE CURSED PATOIS

From "Mackinac And Lake Stories", 1899

By Mary Hartwell Catherwood

As his boat shot to the camp dock of beach stones, the camper thought he heard a child's voice behind the screen of brush. He leaped out and drew the boat to its landing upon a cross-piece held by two uprights in the water, and ascended the steep path worn in leaf mould.

There was not only a child, there was a woman also in the camp. And Frank Puttany, his German feet planted outward in a line, his smiling dark face unctuous with hospitality towards creatures whom he had evidently introduced, in foolish helplessness gave his partner the usual greeting:

"Veil, Prowny."

"Hello, Puttany. Visitors?"

Brown pulled off his cap to the woman. She was pretty, with eyes like a deer's, with white teeth showing between her parted scarlet lips, and much curling hair pinned up and blowing over her ears. She had the rich tint of a quarter-breed, lightened in her case by a constant suffusion which gave her steady color. She was dressed in a mixture of patches, but all were fitted to her perfect shape with a Parisian elegance sensed even by backwoodsmen. Pressed against her knee stood the dirtiest and chubbiest four-year-old child on the borders of Brevoort Lake—perhaps the dirtiest on the north shore of Michigan. The Indian mixed with his French had been improved on by the sun until he was of a brick redness and hardness of flesh; a rosy-raeated thing, like a good muskalonge. Brown suddenly remembered the pair. They were Joe La France's wife and child. Joe La France was dead. Puttany had recently told him that Joe La France left a widow and a baby without shelter, and without relations nearer than Canada.

After greeting Brown the guest resumed her seat on one of the camp-chairs, a box worn smooth by much use, having a slit cut in the top through which the hand could be thrust to lift it.

The camp, in a small clearing, consisted of two tents, both of the wedge-shaped kind. The sleeping-tent was nearly filled by the bed it contained; and this, lifted a few inches above the ground on pole supports, was of browse or brush and straw, covered with blankets. A square canopy of mosquito-netting protected it. The cooking-tent had a foundation of logs and a canvas top. The floor was of pure white sand. Boxes like lockers were stored under the eaves to hold food, and in one corner a cylindrical camp-stove with an oven thrust its pipe through a tinned hole in the roof. Plenty of iron skillets, kettles, and pans hung above the lockers on pegs in the logs; and the camp dinner service of white ware, black-handled knives and forks, and metal spoons, neatly washed, stood on a table. Jess, the Scotch collie, who was always left to guard the tents in their owners' absence, sat at her usual post within the door; and she and Brown exchanged repressed growls at the strangers. Jess, being freed from her chain, trotted at his heels when he went back to the beach to clean fish for supper. She sat and watched his deft and work-hardened hands as he dipped and washed and drew and scaled his spoil. He was a clean-skinned, blue-eyed Canadian Irishman, well made and sinewy,

bright and open of countenance. His blond hair clung in almost flaxen tendrils to his warm forehead. No ill-nature was visible about him, yet he turned like a man in fierce self-defence on his partner, who followed Jess and stood also watching him.

"Puttany, you fool! what have you brought these cursed patois into camp for?"

"Joe La France vas my old pardner," softly pleaded the German.

"Damn you, man, we can't start an orphan-asylum and widows' home! We'll get a bad name at the hotels. The real good people won't have us for guides."

"She told me in Allanville she had no place to stay. She did not know what to do. At the old voman's, where Joe put her, they have need of her bed. The old voman is too poor to keep her any more."

"I'd have done just what you did; that's what makes me so mad. How long is she going to stay?"

"I don't know," sheepishly responded his partner.

"A Dutchman ought to have more sense than to load up with a lot of cursed patois. Nothing but French and Indian! We'll have to put the precious dears in the sleeping-tent, and bunk down ourselves with blankets in the other. Did you air the blankets good this morning, Frank?"

"They vos veil aired."

"You're a soft mark, Frank! One of us will have to marry Joe La France's widow—that's what it will come to!" Brown slapped the water in violent disgust, but Puttany blushed a dark and modest red.

Men of their class rarely have vision or any kind of foresight. They live in the present and plan no farther than their horizon, being, like children, overpowered by visible things. But the Irish Canadian had lived many lives as lake sailor and lumberman, and he had a shrewd eye and quick humor. It was he who had devised the conveniences of the camp, and who delicately and skilfully prepared the meals so that the two fared like epicures; while Puttany did the scullery-work, and was superior only at deerstalking.

The perfume of coffee presently sifted abroad, and the table was brought out and set under the evening sky. Lockers gave up their store of bread and pastry made by the capable hands of the camp housekeeper. The woman, their guest, sat watching him move from cook-tent to table, and Puttany lounged on the dog-kennel, whittling a stick.

"Frank," said his partner, with sudden authority, "you take the kid down to the water and scrub him."

"All over?" whispered Puttany, in confusion.

"No—just his hands and top. Supper is ready to put on."

The docile mother heard her child yelling and blubbing under generous douches while nurse's duty was performed by one of her entertainers, and she smiled in proof that her faith was grounded on their righteousness. She was indeed a mere girl. Her short scarlet upper lip showed her teeth with piquant innocence. As much a creature of the woods as a doe, her lot had been that primitive struggle which knows nothing about the amenities and proprieties of civilization. This Brown could clearly see, and he addressed her with the same protecting patronage he would have used with the child.

"What's your kid's name?"

"Grégoire, but he call himself Gougou. Me, I am Françoise La France."

"Yes, I know that. You have had a hard time since Joe died."

"I been anxion"—she clasped her hands and looked pleadingly at him—"I been very anxion!"

"Well, you're all right now."

"You let me do de mend'? I can sew. I use' learn to sew when I have t'ing to sew on."

"Jerusalem! look at them shirts on the line! We have more clothes to sew on than any dude at the hotels. And if that isn't enough, I'll make Puttany strip and stay in the brush while you do his clothes."

Françoise widened her smile.

"I've been thinking we'll have to build you a house right over there." Her entertainer indicated the shore behind her.

"Oppos'?" exclaimed Françoise, turning with pleased interest. Even in her husband's lifetime little thought had ever been taken for her.

"Yes, directly opposite. We can fix it up snug like our winter camp at the other end of the lake."

"Have you two camp?"

"Yes—a winter camp and a summer camp. But we have stayed comfortably here in the cook-tent until the thermometer went fourteen degrees below zero. We'll sleep in it till we get your house done, and you can take the tent. If there are no parties wanting guides, we might as well begin it in the morning."

"But," faltered Françoise, "afterw'iles when de ice is t'ick, and you go to de hudder camp—"

"Oh, we'll take care of you," he promised. "You and Gougou will go with us. We couldn't leave you on this side."

"In de dark nights," shuddered Françoise.

"You needn't be afraid, any time. When we are off during the day we always leave Jess and Jim to guard the camp. Jess is a Scotch collie and Jim is a blood-hound. He's there in the kennel. Neither man nor varmint would have any chance with them."

"I been use' to live alone when my husban' is away, M'sieu' Brownee. I not 'fraid like you t'ink. But if Gougou be cold and hongry."

"Now that's enough," said Brown, with gentle severity. "Gougou will never be cold and hungry again while there's a stick of wood to be cut on the shores of this lake, or any game to bag, or a 'lunge to spear through the ice. We get about two days' lumbering a week down by St. Ignace. No use to work more than two days a week," he explained, jocosely. "That gives us enough to live on; and everybody around here owes us from fifty to a hundred dollars back pay for work, anyhow. I've bought this ground, twenty acres of it, and another year

I'm going to turn it into a garden."

"Oh, a garden, M'sieu' Brownee! Me, I love some garden! I plant honion once, salade also."

"But I want to get my fences built before I put in improvements. You know what the silver rule is, don't you?"

"No, m'sieu'," answered Françoise, vaguely. She knew little of any rule.

"The silver rule is different from the golden rule. It's 'Do your neighbors, or your neighbors will do you.' If I don't protect myself, all the loose cattle around Brevoort will graze over me. Every fellow for himself. We can't keep the golden rule. We'd never get rich if we did."

"You are rich mans?" interrogated Françoise, focussing her curiosity on that invisible power of wealth.

"Millionaires," brazenly claimed the young man, as he put an earthen-ware pitcher on the table. "Set there, you thousand-dollar dish! We don't have a yacht on the lake because we prefer small boats, and we go out as guides to have fun with the greenhorns. The cooking at the hotels is good enough for common hunters and fishermen who come here from the cities to spend their money, but it isn't good enough for me. You've come to the right place, you may make your mind easy on that."

Françoise smiled because he told her to make her mind easy, not because she understood the irony of his poverty. To have secure shelter, and such a table as he spread, and the prowess to achieve continual abundant sustenance from the world, made wealth in her eyes. She was as happy as Gougou when this strange family, gathered from three or four nations, sat down to their first meal.

The sun went low like a scarlet egg probing the mother-of-pearl lake with a long red line of shadow, until it wasted into grayness and so disappeared. Then home-returning sails became spiritualized, and moved in mist as in a dream—foggy lake and sky, as one body, seeming to push in upon the land.

Françoise slept the sleep of a healthy woman, with her child on her arm, until at dawn the closed flap of the tent yielded to a bounding shape. She opened her startled eyes to see Jim the blood-hound at the foot of the bed, jerking the mosquito-netting. He growled at the interlopers, not being able in his canine mind to reconcile their presence with his customary duty of waking his masters in that tent. A call and a whistle at the other side of the camp drew him away doubting. But in a day both he and Jess had adopted the new members of the family and walked at Gougou's heels.

Gougou existed in wonderland. He regarded the men as great and amiable powers, who could do what they pleased with the elements and with the creatures of the earth. They had a fawn, which had followed Brown home along the beach, feeding on leaves from his hand. They had built it a sylvan home of cedar boughs behind the camp, from which it wandered at will. And though at first shy of Gougou, the pretty thing was soon induced to stand upon its hind feet and dance for bits of cake. His Indian blood veined towards the fawn; but Me-thuselah, the mighty turtle, was more exciting. Methuselah lived a prisoner in one side of the bait-tank, from which he was lifted by a rope around his tail. He was so enormous that it required both Brown and Puttany to carry him up the bank, and as he hung from the pole the sudden projection of his snapping head was a danger. When he fastened his teeth into a stick, the stick was hopelessly his as long as he chose to keep it. He was like an elephant cased in mottled shell, and the serrated ridge on his tail resembled a row of huge brown teeth. Methuselah was a many-wrinkled turtle. When he contracted, imbedding head in shoulders and legs in body, revealing all his claws and showing wicked little eyes near the point of his nose, his helpless rage stirred all the Indian; he was the most deliciously devilish thing that Gougou had ever seen.

Then there was the joy of wintergreen, which both men brought to the child, and he learned to forage for it himself. The fleshy dark green leaves and red berries clustered thickly in the woods. He and his mother went in the boat when the day was to be given to bass or pickerel fishing, and he learned great lessons of water-lore from the two men. If they trusted a troll line to his baby hands, he was in a state of beatitude. His object in life was to possess a bear cub, and many a porcupine creeping along the beach he mistook for that desirable property, until taught to distinguish quills from fur. Gougou heard, and he believed, that all porcupines were old lumbermen, who never died, but simply contracted to that shape. He furtively stoned them when he could, reflecting that they were tough, and delighting to see the quills fly.

Françoise would sit in the camp like a picture of still life, glowing and silent at her appointed labor. She sewed for all of them, looking womanly and unhurried, with a pink-veined moccasin-flower in her hair; while Brown, cooking and baking, rushed from tent to wood-pile, his sleeves turned back from his white, muscular arms. He lived more intensely than any other member of the sylvan household. His blue eyes shone, and his face was vivid as he talked to her. He was a common man, blunted in the finer nature by a life of hardship, yet his shrewd spirit seized on much that less facile people like Puttany learned slowly or not at all.

Puttany and the child were often together in one long play, broken only by the man's periods of labor. They basked in a boat near rushes, waiting for pickerel to strike, or waded a bog to a trout stream at the other end of the lake, hid in a forest full of windfalls and hoary moss and tropical growths of brake and fern. Gougou had new strong clothes and buckskin shoes. For the patois had not been a week in camp before Brown went to St. Ignace and brought back denim and white and black calico, which he presented to Françoise.

"She ought to have a kind of second mourning," he explained to Puttany, who received his word on any matter as law. "Joe La France wasn't worth wearing first mourning for, but second mourning is decent for her, and it won't show in the camp like bright colors would."

The world of city-maddened people who swarmed to this lake for their annual immersion in nature did not often intrude on the camp. Yet the fact of a woman's presence there could not be concealed, and Puttany was disciplined to say to strangers, "Dot vas my sister and her little poy."

A tiny cabin was built for Françoise, with the luxuries of a puncheon floor and one glazed window. She inhabited it in primitive gladness, as a child adorns a play-house, and was careful to keep it in that trim, military state which Brown demanded. Françoise had a regard for M'sieu' Put-tanee, who was neat and ladylike in all his doings, and smiled amiably at her over her boy's head; but her veneration of M'sieu' Brownee extended beyond the reach of humor. If he had been a priest he could have had no more authority. She used to watch him secretly from her window at dawn, as he put himself through a morning drill to limber

his muscles. Some spectators might have laughed, but she heard as seriously as if they were the motions of her own soul his tactics with a stick:

“Straight out—across the shoulder—under the arm—down on the turf!”

There were days when the misty gray lake, dim and delicious, lay veiled within its irregular shores. Then the lowering sun stood on tree-tops, a pale red wraith like the ghost of an Indian. And there were days of sharp, clear shine, when Black Point seemed to approach across the water, and any moving object could be seen in the Burning—a growth of green springing where the woods had been swept by fire. The men were often away, guiding fishing parties from dawn until sunset, or hunting parties from sunset half the night. Françoise and Gou-gou dwelt in the camp, having the dogs as their protectors, though neither primitive nor civilized life menaced them there with any danger. Some evenings, when few affairs had crowded the day, Brown sat like a patriarch in the midst of his family, and took Gougou on his knee to hear bear stories. He supervised the youngster's manners like a mother, and Gougou learned to go down to the washing-place and use soap when the signs were strong for bear-dens and deer-stalking.

“I saw a bear come out on the beach once,” Brown would tell him, “when I was stalking for deer and had a doe and fawn in the lake. I smelt him, but couldn't get him to turn his eyes towards me. I killed both deer, and skinned them, and cut up one. And that bear went into the woods and howled for hours. I took all the venison I could carry, but left part of the carcasses. When we went after them in the morning, the bear had eaten all up clean.”

Bear-dens, Gougou was informed, might be found where there was a windfall. The bears stuffed cracks between the fallen trees with moss, and so made themselves a tight house in which to hibernate. If you were obliged to have bear meat that season when the game was thin, you could cut a hole into a den, stand by it with an axe, and lop off the inquiring head stuck out to investigate disturbances. Bears had very small stomachs, but whatever they ate went to fat. They walked much on their hind feet, and browsed on nuts or mast when their hunting was not successful, being able to thrive on little. Usually a father, a mother, and a cub formed one household in one den.

Brown's mind ran on the subject of households; and he sometimes talked to Françoise about his mother.

“My mother Gaelics like the Scotch,” he said. Françoise could not imagine what it was to Gaelic. People had not Gaelic-ed on the Chaudière, where she was brought up until the children were obliged to scatter from the narrow farm. But the priest had never warned her against it, and since M'sieu' Brownee's mother was addicted to the practice, it must be something excellent, perhaps even religious. She secretly invoked St. Francis, her patron saint, to obtain for her that mysterious power of Gaelic-ing of which M'sieu' Brownee spoke so tenderly.

So the summer passed, and frost was already ripening to glory the ranks on ranks of dense forest pressing to the lake borders. Brown and Puttany rowed home through an early September evening, lifted their boat to its cross-piece dock, and pulled the plug out of the bottom to let it drain. There was no sound, even of the dogs, as they flung their spoil ashore. It was the very instant of moon-rise. At first a copper rim was answered by the faintest line in the water. Then the full reddish disk stood upon a strong copper pillar, smooth and flawless in a rippleless lake, and that became denuded of its capital as the ball rose over it into the sky.

“Seems still,” remarked Brown, and he ran up the path, shaking leaf loam like dry tobacco dust from the roots of ferns he had brought to Françoise. He knew at once that she and Gougou had left the camp. He sat down on the dog-kennel with his hands on his knees, staring at the dim earth. Puttany went from tent to cabin, calling his daily playmate, unable to convince himself that some unusual thing had happened, and he hoped that Brown would contradict him when he felt compelled to announce his slow discovery.

“Dey vas gone!”

“Damn you, Puttany!” exploded his partner, “what did you bring her here for? I didn't want to get into this! I wanted to steer clear of women! You knew I was soft! You knew her black eyes, and the child that made her seem like the Virgin, would get in their work on me!”

“No, I didn't,” said Puttany, in phlegmatic consternation.

“What's the matter, Frank? Haven't we behaved white to this woman? Have you done anything, you stupid old Dutchman,” cried Brown, collaring his partner with abrupt violence, “that would drive her out of the camp without a word?”

“I sveal, Prowny,” the other gasped, as soon as he had breath for swearing, “I haf been so polite to her as my own mudder.”

The younger man sat down again, dropping lax hands across his knees. A growl inside the box reminded him that Jim the blood-hound should be brought to account for this disappearance.

“Come out here!” he commanded, and the lithe beast crept wagging and apologizing to his side. “What kind of a way is this for you to keep a camp—Jess sitting in the kitchen, and you in the box, and somebody carrying off Françoise and the boy, and every rag that would show they had ever been here—and not a sound out of your cowardly head till we come home and catch you skulking? I've a notion to take a board and beat you to death!”

Jim lay down with an abject and dismal whine.

“Where is she?”

Jim lifted his nose and sniffed hopefully, and his master rose up and dragged him by the collar to the empty cabin. It was the first time Brown had entered that little cell since its dedication to the woman for whom it was built. He rubbed Jim's muzzle against the bed, and pointed to nails in the logs where the clothes of the patois had hung.

“Now you lope out and find them—do you hear?”

Jim, crouching on his belly in acknowledgment that his apprehension had been at fault during some late encounter, slunk across the camp and took the path to the hotels.

Brown turned on Puttany following at his heels: “Frank, are you sure Joe La France is dead?”

"Oh yes, he is det."

"Did you see him die? Were you there when he was buried? Was he put underground with plenty of dirt on top of him, or did he merely drop in the water?"

"I was not there."

"Maybe the lazy hound has resurrected. I've seen these lumbermen dropped into the water and drowned too often. You can never be sure they won't be up drinking and fighting to-morrow unless you run a knife through them."

"He is a det man," affirmed Puttany.

"Then somebody else has carried her off, and I'm going to know all about it before I come back to camp. If I never come back, you may have the stuff and land. I'm in this heels over head, and I don't care how soon things end with me."

"But, Prowny, old poy, I vill help you—"

"You stay here. This is my hunt."

Jim passed the rustic guest-houses without turning aside from the trail. Brown took no thought of inquiring at their doors, for throughout the summer Françoise had not once been seen at the hotels. He did, however, hastily borrow a horse from the stable where he was privileged, and pursuing the blood-hound along the lake shore, he cantered over a causeway of logs and earth which had been raised above a swamp.

The trail was very fresh, for Jim, without swerving, followed the road where it turned at right angles from the shore and wound inland among stumps. They had nearly reached Allanville, a group of log huts beside a north-shore railroad, when Jim uttered the bay of victory.

Brown dropped from the saddle and called him sternly back. To be hunting Françoise with a blood-hound out of leash—how horrible was this!

He tied his horse to a tree and took Jim by the collar, restraining the creature's fierce joy of discovery. Françoise must be near, unless a hound whose scent was unerring had become a fool.

What if she had left camp of her own will? She was so quiet, one could not be sure of her thoughts. Brown was sure of his thoughts. He grinned in the lonely landscape, seeing himself as he had appeared on recent Sundays, in his best turtle-tail neck-tie mounted on velvet.

"I've got it bad," he confessed.

Stooping to Jim's collar while the dog whined and strained, he passed a cabin. And there Jim relaxed in the search and turned around. The moon stood high enough to make a wan fairy daylight. Gougou, like a gnome, started from the ground to meet them, and the dog at once lay down and fawned at his feet.

More slowly approaching from the cabin, Brown saw Françoise, still carrying in her hand the bundle of her belongings brought from camp. In the shadow of the house a man watched the encounter, and a sift of rank tobacco smoke hinted the pipes of fathers and sons resting from the day's labor on the cabin door-sill or the sward. Voices of children could be heard, and other dogs gave mouth, so that Brown laid severe commands on Jim before he could tremblingly speak to Françoise.

"Oh, M'sieu' Brownee, I t'ink maybe you come!"

"But, Françoise, what made you leave?"

"It is my husban's brudder. I not know what to do! He bring us to dese folks to stay all night till de cars go."

"Why didn't he show himself to us, and take you like a man?"

"Oh, M'sieu' Brownee—he say de priest hexcommunicate me—to live—so—in de camp! It is not my fault—and I t'ink about you and M'sieu' Put-tanee—and Gougou he bite his honcle, and kick and scream!"

"Damn the uncle!" swore Brown, deeply.

"Oh, I been so anxion!" sobbed Françoise.

"We must be married right off," said Brown. "I'll fix your brother-in-law. Françoise, will yon have me for your husband?"

"Me, M'sieu' Brownee?"

"Yes, you—you cursed sweet patois!"

"M'sieu' Brownee, you may call me de cursed patois. I not know anyt'ings. But when André La France take me away, oh, I t'ink I die! Let me honly be Françoise to do your mend'! I be 'appier to honly look at you dan some womans who 'ave 'usban'!"

"Françoise, kiss me—kiss me!" His voice broke with a sob. "If you loved me you would have me!"

"M'sieu' Brownee, I ado' you!"

Suddenly giving way to passionate weeping, and to all the tenderness which nature teaches even barbarians to repress, she abandoned herself to his arms.

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