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THE BLACK FEATHER

From "**Mackinac And Lake Stories**", 1899

By **Mary Hartwell Catherwood**

Over a hundred voyageurs were sorting furs in the American Fur Company's yard, under the supervision of the clerks. And though it was hard labor, lasting from five in the morning until sunset, they thought lightly of it as fatigue duty after their eleven months of toil and privation in the wilderness. Fort Mackinac was glittering white on the heights above them, and half-way up a paved ascent leading to the sally-port sauntered 'Tite Laboise. All the voyageurs saw her; and strict as was the discipline of the yard, they directly expected trouble.

The packing, however, went on with vigor. Every beaver, marten, mink, musk-rat, raccoon, lynx, wild-cat, fox, wolverine, otter, badger, or other skin had to be beaten, graded, counted, tallied in the company's book, put into press, and marked for shipment to John Jacob Astor in New York. As there were twelve grades of sable, and eight even of deer, the grading, which fell to the clerks, was no light task. Heads of brigades that had brought these furs from the wilderness stood by to challenge any mistake in the count. It was the height of the fur season, and Mackinac Island was the front of the world to the two or three thousand men gathered in for its brief summer.

Axe strokes reverberated from Bois Blanc, on the opposite side of the strait, and passed echoes from island to island to the shutting down of the horizon. Choppers detailed to cut wood were getting boatloads ready for the leachers, who had hulled corn to prepare for winter rations. One pint of lyed corn with from two to four ounces of tallow was the daily allowance of a voyageur, and the endurance which this food gave him passes belief.

Étienne St. Martin grumbled at it when he came fresh from Canada and pork eating. "Mange'-du-lard," his companions called him, especially Charle' Charette, who was the giant and the wearer of the black feather in his brigade of a dozen boats. Huge and innocent primitive man was Charle' Charette. He could sleep under snow-drifts like a baby, carry double packs of furs, pull oars all day without tiring, and dance all night after hardships which caused some men to desire to lie down and die. The summer before, at nineteen years of age, this light-haired, light-hearted voyageur had been married to 'Tite Laboise. Their wedding festivities lasted the whole month of the Mackinac season. His was the Wabash and Illinois River outfit, almost the last to leave the island; for the Lake Superior, Upper and Lower Mississippi, Lake of the Woods, and other outfits were obliged to seek Indian hunting-grounds at the earliest breath of autumn.

When the Illinois brigade returned, his wife, who had stood weeping in the cheering crowd while his companions made islands ring with the boat-song at departure, refused to see him. He went to the house of her aunt Laboise, where she lived. Mademoiselle Laboise, her half-breed cousin, met him. This educated

young lady, daughter of a French father and Chippewa mother, was dignified as a nun in her dress of blue broadcloth embroidered with porcupine quills. She was always called Mademoiselle Laboise, while the French girl was called merely 'Tite. Because 'Tite was married, no one considered her name changed to Madame Charette. To her husband himself she was 'Tite Laboise, the most aggravating, delicious, unaccountable creature in the Northwest.

"She says she will not see you, Charle'," said Mademoiselle Laboise, color like sunset vermilion showing in the delicate aboriginal face.

"What have I done?" gasped the voyageur.

Mademoiselle lifted French shoulders with her father's gesture. She did not know.

"Did I expect to be treated this way?" shouted the injured husband.

"Who can ever tell what 'Tite will do next?"

That was the truth. No one could tell. Yet her flightiest moods were her most alluring moods. If she had not been so pretty and so adroit at dodging whippings when a child, 'Tite Laboise might not have set Mackinac by the ears as often as she did. But her husband could not comfort himself with this thought as he turned to the shop of madame her aunt, who was also a trader.

It had surprised the Indian widow, who betrothed her own daughter to the commandant of the fort, that her husband's niece would have nobody but that big voyageur Charle' Charette. Though in those days of the young century a man might become anything; for the West was before him, an empire, and woodcraft was better than learning. Madame Laboise accepted her niece's husband with kindness. Her house was among the most hospitable in Mackinac, and she was chagrined at the reception the young man had met.

He sat down on her counter, whirling his cap and caressing the black feather in it. The gentle Chippewa woman could see that his childish pride in this trophy was almost as great as his trouble. What had 'Tite lacked? he wanted to know. Had he not good credit at the stores? Tonnerre!—if madame would pardon him—was not his entire year's wage at the girl's service? Had he spent money on himself, except for tobacco and necessary buckskins? Madame knew a voyageur was allowed to carry scarce twenty pounds of baggage in the boats.

Did 'Tite want a better man? Let madame look at the black feather in his cap. The crow did not fly that could furnish a quill he could not take from any man in his brigade. Charle' threw out the arch of his beautiful torso. And he loved her. Madame knew what tears he had shed, what serenades he had played on his fiddle under 'Tite's window, and how he had outdanced her other partners. He dropped his head on his breast and picked at the crow's feather.

The widow Laboise pitied him. But who could account for 'Tite's whims? "When she heard the boats were in sight she was frantic with joy. I myself," asserted madame, "saw her clapping her hands when we could catch the song of the returning voyageurs. It was then 'Oh, my Charle'! my Charle'!' But scarce have the men leaped on the dock when off she goes and locks the door of her bedroom. It is 'Tite. I can say no more."

"What offended her?"

"I know of nothing. You have been as good a husband as a voyageur could be. And Mackinac is so dull in winter she can amuse herself but little. It was hard for her to wait your return. Now she will not look at you. It is very silly."

What would Madame Laboise advise him to do?

Madame would advise him to wait as if nothing had occurred. The curé would admonish 'Tite if she continued her sulking. In the mean time he must content himself with tenting or lodging among his fellow-voyageurs.

Of the two or three thousand voyageurs and clerks, one hundred lived in the agency house, five hundred were accommodated in barracks, but the majority found shelter in tents and in the houses of the villagers. Every night of the fur-trading month there was a ball in Mackinac, given either by the householders or their guests; and it often happened that a man spent in one month all he had earned by his year of tremendous and far-reaching toil. But he had society, and what was to him the cream of existence, while it lasted. He fitted himself out with new shirts and buckskins, sashes, caps, neips, and moccasins, and when he was not on duty showed himself like a hero, knife in sheath, a weather-browned and sinewy figure. To dance, sing, drink, and play the violin, and have the scant dozen white women, the half-breeds, and squaws of Mackinac admire him, was a voyageur's heaven—its brief duration being its charm. For he was a born woodsman and loved his life.

Charle' Charette did not care where he lodged. Neither had he any heart to dance, until he looked through the door of the house where festivities began that season and saw 'Tite Laboise footing it with Étienne St. Martin. Parbleu! With Étienne St. Martin, the squab little lard-eater whose brother, Alexis St. Martin, had been put into doctors' books on account of having his stomach partly shot away, and a valve forming over the rent so that his digestion could be watched. It was disgusting. 'Tite would not speak to her own husband, but she would come out before all Mackinac and dance with any other voyageurs who crowded about her. Charle' sprang into the house himself, and without looking at his wife, hilariously led other women to the best places, and danced with every sinuous and graceful curve of his body. 'Tite did not look at him. From the corner of his eye he noted how perfect she was, the fiend! and how well she had dressed herself on his money. All the brigades knew his trouble by that time, and an easy breath was drawn by his entertainers when he left the house with knife still sheathed. In the wilderness the will of a brigade commander was law; but when the voyageur was out of the Fur Company's yard in Mackinac his own will was law.

One of the cautious clerks suggested that Charle' and Étienne be separated in their work, since it was likely the husband might quarrel with 'Tite Laboise's dancing partner.

"Turn 'em in together, man," chuckled the Scotch agent, Robert Stuart, who had charge of the outside work. "Let 'em fight. Man Gurdon, I havena had any sport with these wild lads since the boats came in."

But the combatants he hoped to see worked steadily until afternoon without coming to the grip. They had no brute Anglo-Saxon antagonism, and being occupied with different bales, did not face each other.

The triple row of Indian lodges basked on the incurved beach, where a thousand Indians had gathered to celebrate that vivid month. Night and day the thump of their drums and the monotonous chant of their dances could be heard above the rush and whisper of blue water breaking on pebbles.

Lake Michigan was a deep sapphire color, and from where she stood below the sally-port 'Tite Laboise could see the mainland's rim of beach and slopes of forest near and distinct in transparent light. And she could hear the farthest shaking of echoes from island to island like a throb of some sublime wind instrument. The whitewashed blockhouse at the west angle of the fort shone a marble turret. There was a low meadow between the Fur Company's yard and pine heights. Though no salt tang came in the wind, it blew sweet, refreshing the men at their dog-day labor. And all the spell of that island, which since it rose from the water it has held, lay around them.

Étienne St. Martin picked up a beaver-skin, and in the sight of 'Tite Laboise her husband laid hold of it.

"Release that, Mange'-du-lard," he said.

"Eh bien!" responded Étienne, knowing that he was challenged and the eyes of the whole yard were on him. "This fine crow he claims all Mackinac because he carries a black feather in his cap. There are black feathers in other brigades."

"But you never wore one in any brigade."

They dropped the skin and faced each other, feeling the fastenings of their belts. Old Robert Stuart slipped up a window in the office and grinned slyly out at the men surging towards that side of the yard. He would not usually permit a breach of discipline. But the winter had been so long!

"Myself I have no need of black feathers."

Étienne gave an insolent cast of the eye to the height where 'Tite Laboise stood.

Charle', magnificent of inches, scorned his less-developed antagonist.

"Eh, man Gurdon," softly called old Robert Stuart from his window, "set them to it, will ye? The lads will be jawing till the morn's morn."

This equivocal order had little effect on the ordained course of a voyageur's quarrel.

"These St. Martins without stomachs, how is a man to hit them?—pouf!" said Charle', and Etienne felt on his tender spot the cruel allusion to his brother Alexis, whose stomach had been made public property. He began to shed tears of wrath.

"I will take your scalp for that! As for the black feather, I trample it under my foot!"

"Let me see you trample it. And my head is not so easily scalped as your brother's stomach."

All the time they were dancing around each other in graceful and menacing feints. But now they clinched, and Charle' Charette, when the struggle had lasted two or three minutes, took his antagonist like a puppy and flung him revolving to the ground. He hitched his belt and glanced up towards the sally-port as he stood back laughing.

Étienne was on foot with a tiger's bound. He had no chance with the wearer of the black feather, as everybody in the yard knew, and usually a beaten antagonist was ready to shake hands after a few trials of strength. But he seized one of the knives used in opening packs and struck at the victor's side. As soon as he had struck and the bloody knife came back in his hand he crouched and rolled his eyes around in apology. No man was afraid of shedding blood in those days, but he felt he had gone too far—that his quarrel was not sufficiently grounded. He heard a woman's scream, and the sharp checking exclamation of his master, and felt himself seized on each side. There was much confusion in his mind and in the yard, but he knew 'Tite Laboise flew through the gate and past him, and he tried to propitiate her by a look.

"Pig!" she projected at him like a missile, and he sat down on the ground between the guards who were trying to hold him up and wept copiously.

"I didn't want to have trouble with that Charle' Charette and that 'Tite Laboise," explained Étienne. "And I don't want any black feather. It was my brother's stomach. On account of my brother's stomach I have to fight. If they do not let my brother's stomach alone, I will have to kill the whole brigade."

But Charle' Charette walked into the Fur Company's building feeling nothing but disdain for the puny stock of St. Martin, as he held out his arm and let the blood drip from a little wound that stained his calico shirt-sleeve. The very neips around his ankles seemed to tingle with desire to kick poor Étienne.

It was not necessary to send for the surgeon of the fort. Robert Stuart dressed the wound, salving it with the rebukes which he knew discipline demanded, and making them as strong as his own enjoyment had been. He promised to break the head of every voyageur in the yard with a board if another quarrel occurred. And he pretended not to see the culprit's trembling wife, that little besom whose caprices had set the men by the ears ever since she was old enough to know the figures of a dance, yet for whom he and Mrs. Stuart had a warm corner in their hearts. She had caused the first fracas of the season, moreover. He went out and slammed the office door, ordering the men away from it.

"Bring me yon Étienne St. Martin," commanded Mr. Stuart, preparing his arsenal of strong language. "I'll have a word with yon carl for this."

The noise of the one-sided conflict could be heard in the office, but 'Tite remained as if she heard nothing, with her head and arms on the desk. Her husband took up the cap with the black feather, which he had thrown off in the presence of his superior. He rested it against his side, his elbow pointing a triangle, and waited aggressively for her to speak. The back of her pretty neck and fine tendrils of curly hair ruffled above it were very moving; but his heart swelled indignantly.

"'Tite Laboise, why did you shut the door in my face when I came back to you after a year's absence?"

She answered faintly, "Me, I don't know."

"And dance with Étienne St. Martin until I am obliged to whip him?"

"Me, I don't know."

"Yes, you do know. You have concealments," he accused, and she made no defence. "This is the case: you

run to the dock to see the boats come in; you are joyful until you watch me step ashore; I look for 'Tite; her back is disappearing at the corner of the street. Eh bien! I say, she would rather meet me in the house. I fly to the house. My wife refuses to see me."

"Tite made no answer.

"What have I done?" Charle' spread his hands. "My commandant has no complaint to make of me. It is Charle' Charette who leads on the trail or breaks a road where there is none, and carries the heaviest pack of furs, and pulls men out of the water when they are drowning; it is Charle' Charette who can best endure fasting when the rations run low, and can hunt and bring in meat when other voyageurs lie exhausted about the camp-fire. I am no little lard-eater from Canada, brother to a man with a stomach having no lid. Look at that." Charle' shook the decorated cap at her. "I wear the black feather of my brigade. That means that I am the best man in it."

His wife reared her head. She was like the wild sweet-brier roses which crowded alluvial strips of the island, fragrant and pink and bristling. "Yes, monsieur, that black feather—regard it. Me, I am sick of that black feather. You say I have concealments. I have. All winter I go lonely. The ice is massed on the lake; the snow is so deep, the wind is keener than a knife; I weep for my husband away in the wilderness, believing he thinks of me. Eh bien! he comes back to Mackinac. It is as you say: I fly to meet him, my breath chokes me. But my husband, what does he do?" She looked him up and down with wrathful eyes. "He does not see 'Tite. He sees nothing but that black feather in his cap that he must take off and show to Monsieur Ramsay Crooks and Monsieur Stuart—while his wife suffocates."

Charle' shrunk from his height, and his mouth opened like a fish's. "But I thought you would be proud of it."

"Me, what do I care how many men you have thrown down? You do not like me any better because you have thrown down all the men in your brigade."

"She is jealous—jealous of a feather!"

Humbled as he was by her tongue, the young voyageur felt delighted at giving his wife so trivial a rival.

He settled his belt and approached her and bowed. "Madame, permit me to offer you this black quill, which I have won for your sake, and which I boasted of to my masters that they might know you have not thrown yourself away on the poorest creature in Mackinac. Destroy it, madame. It was only the poor token of my love for you."

Graceful and polite as all the voyageurs were, Charle' Charette was the prince of them with his big sweet presence as he bent. 'Tite flew at him and flung her arms around his neck. After the manner of Latin peoples, they instantly shed tears upon each other, and the black feather was crushed between their breasts.

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